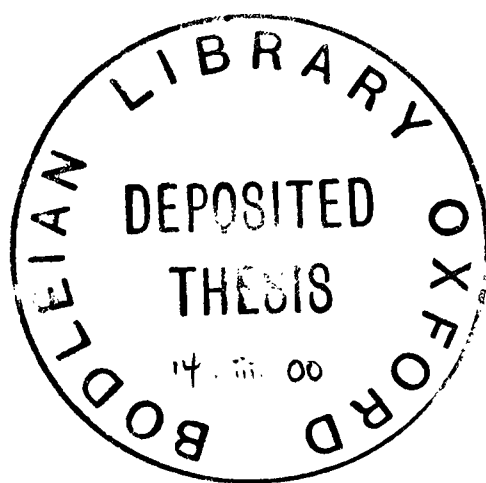


Desire and Immobility: Situating Necrophilia in Nineteenth-Century French Literature



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Short Abstract of Thesis Submitted in Candidature for the Degree of D.Phil.

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This thesis focuses on the abundance of necrophilic imagery in nineteenth-century French literary texts. Its aim is to take an aspect of the century's writing which is often overlooked, perhaps because of its disturbing nature, and to reread key texts in the light of this predominant motif. This creates a paradigm for reading mainstream literary production through the lens of perverse desire.

The first chapter situates the literary texts in a historical context, by examining briefly the morbid preoccupations of art, social theory and the psychiatric discourses in the period. Psychoanalysis is discussed, both as a product of its contemporary imaginative moment, and as a useful tool for the study of desire in literature.

The following three chapters each focus on the literary works and aesthetic theories of a single French writer, namely Théophile Gautier, Charles Baudelaire and Rachilde. By means of close textual analysis of stylistic features, form and image-content, the changing treatment of the theme of necrophilia through the century is examined.

The aesthetic theories of Gautier and Baudelaire are read at the psycho-libidinal level, alongside psychoanalytic theory, to reveal death-driven aims. The chapter on Rachilde examines issues of gender and misogyny, by focusing on a female author whose work shows evidence of necrophilic themes. I ask whether her work imitates a masculine position, or whether the necrophilic imagination may transcend questions of gender. This discussion calls into question previous critics' readings of aesthetic necrophilia as a purely misogynist trend.

In the French texts under examination, the subject's ambivalent relation to death comes into focus. By exploiting literary devices, a new way of understanding the desire for death is proposed. Textual necrophilia is read as going beyond gender positioning and individual sexual curiosity, to signal an awareness of death and destruction-seeking energies *tout court*.

Desire and Immobility: Situating Necrophilia in Nineteenth-Century French Literature

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Long Abstract of Thesis Submitted in Candidature for the Degree of D.Phil.

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This thesis takes as its focus the abundance of imagery in nineteenth-century French literary texts that could be described as necrophilic, or revelatory of a morbid sexual aesthetic. Examples of necrophilic writing are found in the works of the Frenetic Romantics of the 1830s, mid-century writers such as Baudelaire and Lautréamont, and the *fin-de-siècle* Decadents. For reasons of tractability, my study focuses on just three of the possible authors, namely Gautier, Baudelaire and Marguerite Eymery, best known under her pseudonym Rachilde. The predominance of morbidity and sexuality as themes in nineteenth-century works of European literature has been pointed out by Mario Praz in his celebrated *The Romantic Agony* (1933), which draws particular attention to the part played by French writers in this fashion. However, neither Praz nor any subsequent critic has taken the centrality of this theme as a basis for re-examining the nineteenth-century French sexual imagination in literature.

The intended contribution of this thesis to nineteenth-century French literary studies is to take an aspect of the century's writing which is often overlooked or downplayed, perhaps because of its disturbing nature, and to reread certain key texts in the light of this motif. The aim is not only to uncover a neglected aspect of the nineteenth-century imagination, but also to create a moveable paradigm for reading mainstream literary production through the lens of perverse desire.

In my introduction, I draw the reader's attention to the variety of associations around the death/sexuality pair in Western culture. I examine the major critical issues that have been raised by this nexus of representations, and briefly analyse the contribution of such volumes as Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body* (1992). According to such feminist writers as Bronfen, representations of dead female bodies by male artists are social symptoms of a patriarchal artistic tradition which betrays a dual fear of female sexual potency and death. Having stated Bronfen's position here, I

will later read against it, using as evidence Rachilde's treatment of necrophilia and the equal number of representations of dead females and males in her texts.

The first chapter provides a brief historical context for the texts under study. It examines the Marquis de Sade's influence upon the literary imagination of the period, and several 'semi-factual' accounts of encounters with dead bodies by contemporaries such as Hector Berlioz and Antoine Fontaney. I discuss the rhetoric and the Romantic nature of these writings, which idealise and sexualise the described corpses even as they set them in the context of such social realities as the 1832 cholera epidemic.

I then focus briefly upon two contiguous disciplines, sexology and degeneration theory, to examine contemporary scientific and social attitudes towards death and perverted desire. The rhetoric of both discourses is analysed to reveal a dual fear and fascination on the part of the would-be objective scientists and commentators, which is not dissimilar to the emotions revealed by Berlioz and Fontaney on personal contact with death. The role of artist is related to the role of social scientist, and I suggest that art re-personalises and de-metaphorises many of the concerns of the social commentator, expressing both fear and warning, and simultaneous vicarious pleasure.

In the second half of the first chapter, I concentrate on the inception of Freudian psychoanalysis. Despite Freud's claims for the ahistorical nature of his science, I situate it as a characteristic product of the late nineteenth-century imagination. I then go on to examine the internal working of certain of Freud's texts and evaluate his models of perversion and the death drive. A model of death-driven perversion is established by two means. Firstly, I take into account the work of Jean Laplanche, and that of other later analysts, which posit death as a central concern of Freudian analysis. Secondly, I read Freud's early text on the aetiology of desire (the first of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 1905) through the lens of later works which postulate a death instinct (mainly *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920). The model established is proposed as an imaginative paradigm which will be tested against the literary production, but also the specific techniques of literature will be examined to see how they embody desire. I will read the literary texts for their ability to articulate some of the unspoken substance of psychoanalytic theory.

The following three chapters each take as their focus the literary works and aesthetic theories of a major writer.

In the first half of Chapter Two, I focus on Gautier, examining the relation between desire and death in his early prose writing. The genre of the *conte fantastique*, popular in the 1830s in France, is discussed for its ability to present several levels of consciousness at once and to bring desire into play as an altered manifestation of the 'real'. I present a discussion of recurrent tropes and narrative outcomes which suggest the presence of necrophilic desire while refusing to name it. The figures of vampires, ghosts and animated statues suggest metaphorical renderings of the dead object of desire. The apparent coyness of much of this writing is foregrounded as providing a contrast with the insistent and repetitive nature of its subtextual obsessions.

The second half of Chapter Two examines Gautier's best known verse collection *Émaux et camées* (1852), which is traditionally read as an example of *L'Art pour L'Art*, that is as an anti-utilitarian tract on the purity of art. I read it against this grain, by considering it as a piece of libidinal exploration. Gautier's poetic techniques are analysed for their ability to manipulate desire within the constraints of versification, and the play between mobility and immobility comes under scrutiny. Several of the underlying themes of the *contes fantastiques* resurface in verse form, and such poems as the 'Étude de mains' reveal structures of fetishism and identificatory sadism on the part of the poet. It is suggested that the aesthetic theory of *L'Art pour L'Art* is itself a potentially libidinal code, since it can be read as an unconscious technique of de-vitalising an artistic object. Thus, Gautier's prose, verse and aesthetic theory, all of which have been traditionally read as only sketchily related to sexuality, are recast as elements of an artistic continuum revealing necrophilic desire.

The third chapter focuses on Baudelaire. The first half reads Baudelaire's poetic production in the light of the relation between his psychical mobility and the fixing or immobilising of the poetic object, a concept introduced by Leo Bersani in *Baudelaire and Freud* (1977). Having restated Bersani's position and briefly provided some examples of imaginative movement and fixity in Baudelaire's verse, I concentrate on three poems which have as their subject matter the murder of a woman. The

notions of fixity and movement seen elsewhere in *Les Fleurs du Mal* are shown to operate with particular complexity and force in those poems where a relation of fixing (stilling and killing) is manifest on both the thematic and the structural level. The artistic representation and the psychological structuring of the act of murder is taken as the key to understanding Baudelaire's poetico-libidinal economy.

The love-relations described in Baudelaire's poems are reread as the radical denial of the other's subjectivity by the one. In each case, erotic excitement is figured around the structural enactment of murder rather than sexual intercourse. I posit that this dynamic implies an inversion of the notion of sex as the *petite mort* and places death-giving as the central content of desire. Taking up again my reading of Freud's theory of the death-drive, I interpret Baudelaire's failed dialectic of murderous love as an echo of the primary desire for self-annihilation played out in the field of alterity. The metaphor of castration is replaced with radical self-loss.

The second half of the chapter evaluates the extent to which the structure of murder observed in *Les Fleurs du Mal* operates in Baudelaire's prose-writing and criticism. By reading samples of his prose in the light of the structures observed in the poems, I attempt to demonstrate a similar technique of annihilation of the other. For example, an essay from the *Salon de 1845*, on Delacroix's *Madeleine dans le désert* reveals many of the techniques seen in Baudelaire's poem 'Une martyre'. Firstly the subject of the painting is assumed to be dead and her appearance is repainted in terms similar to those he will use to describe the severed head in this poem. Secondly, the concise construction of the prose frames the described object just as versification and image were used to frame the 'martyre'. I suggest that both the literary object and Delacroix's intention as artist are sacrificed to Baudelaire's narcissistic libidinal economy.

In the fourth and final chapter, I read four novels by Rachilde which have as their subject matter gender inversion, murder and necrophilia. The question posed is whether she is actively attempting transgression, by imitating or assuming a masculine desirous position, or whether the nature of the perverse desire may transcend questions of gender.

The first half of the chapter undertakes a comparative reading of *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), both of which are the tales of strong female characters who subordinate and eventually destroy their male lovers. The rhetoric of gender is deconstructed, with reference to the insights of such post-structural feminist theorists as Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray. Rachilde's work appears in many ways to prefigure their notions that gender is a social construct rather than a biological reality. By inverting gender expectations, Rachilde shows up the very constructedness of these positions. Here I re-introduce the model proposed in the chapter on Baudelaire which held that desirous positions are based on failed dialectic roles of 'doer' and 'done-to', rather than 'man' and 'woman'. Rachilde foregrounds these positions in her dénouements in the most explicit and lurid way, by having her two heroines evolve into, respectively, necrophiliac and homicidal maniac. The play with gender is in fact revealed as a play with the destructive intersubjective passions.

The second half of the chapter looks at two later novels with similar themes, in which the role of predator is given to a male and that of victim to a female. I suggest that Rachilde needs to perform less textual work at the level of gender inversion in these later novels, because the notion of gender as an arbitrary signifier has already been established in her early works. Her interest in mapping diagrammatic models of desire is best shown up in *La Tour d'Amour* (1899), a tale of a necrophilic lighthouse keeper which has little action or plot development apart from the charting of internal emotional revelation and the assumption of changing desirous positions.

In my readings of Rachilde I focus on the notion that gender is an arbitrary factor in necrophilic desire. This casts doubt upon previous critics' readings of aesthetic necrophilia as a purely misogynist trend. Moreover, my conclusion posits cautiously that the desirous structures revealed in the nineteenth-century texts need not be seen as revealing anti-feminist feeling, but may be recuperated as a more equal, if destructive, model of human desire. I read the establishment of this model in the nineteenth century as indicative of a radical change in perceptions of individuality, identity and sexual subjecthood.

In the French texts under examination, the human subject's ambivalent relation to death comes into focus. By exploiting literary devices, I propose a new way of

understanding the desire for death. There is increasing evidence in the work of these imaginative writers of de-allegorisation and a rejection of metaphor and implicitness, which cannot be said about the scientific and cultural theory of the time, nor about most subsequent criticism of the work of the period. Textual necrophilia goes beyond gender positioning and individual sexual curiosity to signal a rediscovery of death and destruction-seeking energies *tout court*.

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Introduction

On Death and Sexuality in Art

homo sum; humani nil a me alienum puto

Terence, *Andria*

Throughout the history of Western thought, there have been those who believe that in the interests of scholarly discovery and understanding, nothing is too shocking to be thought and discussed. Those who work on art and literature are often faced with material of an apparently rebarbative or deviant nature. Whilst they may feel inclined to overlook such material, or to relegate it to the margins of art, there may well be rich rewards to be taken from a careful reading of that which is most dubious, in terms of morality or taste. Those who balk at the mention of necrophilia in the title of this thesis would do well to remember Terence's words.

The purpose of this thesis, then, is to draw attention to a certain strain within nineteenth-century French literature which is a part of that period's fashion for the morbid aesthetic. I am referring specifically to the frequently found but often-ignored trope of the eroticised dead body and the relation between living individuals and their dying/dead sexual partners. The figure of necrophilia in the nineteenth century can be used as a lens through which critical perceptions can be questioned, and texts by both well-known and lesser-known authors can be re-imagined.

I will discuss the nineteenth-century French necrophilic canon and define my corpus of literary and theoretical texts later in this introduction. Firstly, however, it is important that I make my reader conscious that the link between sex, desire and death, to which these texts draw attention, is as old as Western culture itself. When approaching the local textual features of nineteenth-century French literature, it will be important to bear in mind the presence of this concept in the surrounding historical map of ideas. Thus, I will attempt to demonstrate below the extent to which this nexus of associations is an essential part of our way of thinking and of appreciating art.

The sex-death thing

Love is the supreme surrender of oneself in the other, even in this most extrinsic other being of death, the death of the absolute representative of the limits of life.

Hegel¹

'Kill me', she says, and repeats it in four languages. As the knife descends to her throat she screams, evidently perceiving how final is finality. She screams and then her throat gurgles while he stabs with a turn of his wrist exactly as she instructed.

Muriel Spark, *The Driver's Seat*²

This investigation springs from a curious paradox in thinking. The idea that sexual desire and death are intimately connected and co-present remains a taboo subject, and yet it is pervasively deep-rooted and widely represented in our culture. The biological act devoted to the creation of new life, and all its attendant excitations, deviations and performative rituals, have somehow come to be associated equally with ideas of annihilation and self-loss, to the extent that this idea has taken on almost the status of a cliché today.³

Various causal relations, which appeal to different emotional and psychological mechanisms, have been posited to account for this link. The various religious prescriptions and proscriptions concerning sexual activities mean that the idea of non-procreative sexual pleasure as an illicit and punishable mortal sin is a fixed idea in the Judaeo-Christian consciousness. Even those who have consciously rejected religious faith cannot easily escape this deep-rooted association.

Pursuing different lines of enquiry, psychologists and psychoanalytic theorists starting with Freud have drawn on the very dynamics of sexual excitement in order to account for its fatal overtones: it has been pointed out that any sexual act entails the exercising and exorcising of the initial motivating desire, the temporary exhaustion of the impulse which led to the act. This dialectic character of sexual pleasure

¹*Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, 3 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), vol. iii, pp. 124-5.

²*The Driver's Seat* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 159.

³In acknowledgement of this fact, Jonathan Dollimore has recently published an ambitious tome detailing the close alliance of Eros and Thanatos throughout the history of Western literature and philosophy. In *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture* (London: Allen Lane, Penguin, 1998), Dollimore demonstrates how loss and absence have always been ideationally central to our notion of desire, meaning that for thinkers from Seneca to Heidegger, death, as radical absence, is both the character and the true object of desire.

(specifically male sexual pleasure), the fact that it carries its own negation within its structural dynamic, accounts for the equation of sexual exhaustion with the no-return of mortality. The universality of this idea is encapsulated in such linguistic phenomena as the French naming of orgasm as *la petite mort*, a phrase which has been imported wholesale into most European languages, such is its affective resonance.

Whilst the poet's task is often to celebrate the ennobling influence of love on a person's life, it is also true that death has been seen as the ideal outcome of love and sexual excitation. An idealised approach to the infinite through the loved object is the essence of the transcendental Romantic conceit beloved of such writers as Keats in the following famous lines from the 'Ode to a Nightingale':

Darkling I listen; and for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Call'd him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!⁴

As the only end to desire which both fulfils the over-determined anticipation, and prevents the continuation of desire, death is perceived as the ultimate experience, the best and the last.

Moreover, the notion of orgasmic pleasure coming through a deathly consummation has been a feature of the sexual imagination from the Classics (remember that Aphrodite, the goddess of love herself, sprang from the semen of a murdered man), through the many representations of Tristan and Isolde's *Liebestod*, to our contemporary cinematic obsession with sexual perversion culminating in ecstatic death, as seen in such extreme representations as Nagisa Oshima's Japanese film *Ai No Corrida* (1976), now a cult film in Western Europe, and Almodovar's *Matador* (Spain, 1985).

The problem of representing the human ambivalence towards sexual excitement and death has been, and remains, a central concern of art and aesthetics. For Schopenhauer, Death is the muse of philosophy. For Hegel, noting the central

⁴*The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod (Oxford: Clarendon, 1958), p. 259.

Christian image of the crucified Christ, Death is Love itself. Within Christian iconography, the links between ecstasy and desire, and a sensuous insistence upon the bodily phenomenon of agony and death are key ingredients. The figure of the ecstatic moribund Christ has had powerful resonance for subsequent representations of the body, both religious and secular. Indeed, in such famous crucifixions as Grünewald's extraordinary representations, a certain sadistic visceral appeal and the focus on a physical proximity to death, are prominent. In manifold ways, art has explicitly and allegorically drawn and redrawn sexuality in death and vice versa.

Art can be seen as the privileged site of such explorations, concerned, as it has always been, with enacting the central dramas and dilemmas of the human condition, the elemental passions, fears and emotions of our species and its societies. The emotional catharsis which was the aim of Greek tragedy was achieved by contriving a brutal encounter between watching subjects and the very stuff of their fears and desires. This human reaction appears to be independent of local cultural factors – a similar mechanism could be said to explain the twentieth-century taste for erotic thrillers and 'horror' on the page and the screen, genres which are designed to appal or terrify and to excite simultaneously.

As post-Freudians, we may talk about art as facilitating a return of the cultural repressed, that is as a collective reminder of the most disturbing and exciting aspects of our humanness, aspects which consciously we overlook or reject. Such an understanding would explain why so much of Western art has taken as its subject matter those liminal states which fascinate us while threatening our sense of individual identity: sexuality, the ultimate unknowable concept that is death, and the complex web we spin between them.

It often appears that societies, religions and artists display an enduring fascination with the task of representing, encoding and giving sense to our fearful and problematic human relation to death. Anthropologists and social scientists examine the elaborate rituals created by so-called civilised and uncivilised societies alike to deal with the dead and to re-adjust the living to the sudden absence of a life. Each culture and historical epoch has designated an appropriate way of symbolising the passage into death. These range from the water-filled limestone wells in which Maya

communities housed the dead and their decorative relics, through the mysteries that are the Egyptian pyramids, to the English Victorian cult of mourning, emblematised at its most absurd and banal by jewellery made from a lock of hair of the dear departed or enamelled brooches and rings showing an abject woman wailing over a beloved tomb.⁵

On one hand, such Western attempts to banalise and domesticate death by making it a decorative conceit, an object for contemplation, can be seen as manifestations of a universal need to tame death, to make it familiar. The notion of aestheticised death, seen in the Victorian fashion for mourning and Pre-Raphaelite images of beautiful dead women, draws upon idealised representations removed from the frightening abyssal reality of decay and decomposition. John Everett Millais's representation of the dead Ophelia (1852) as a waxy, ethereal, doll-like figure is a perfect example of this highly aestheticised fetishisation. It is an approach to something terrifying and inconceivable in the real, which is controlled by the safety-mechanism of artistic discipline and convention.⁶ On the other hand, this attempt to bring death, through symbolisation, into the centre of life, into the art gallery and the home, can reveal a very puzzling attraction to, or desire for, death. It can be seen as an attempt to represent in positive terms an absence, a void in comprehension. Thus, attraction and repulsion are balanced in a complex and delicate relation.

Whatever the truest or most primary aim, this technique of symbolising and beautifying death in art has the effect of displacing death from its role as personal fate into some other context, onto some other object. This voyeuristic conceit allows for the safe and pleasurable observation of mortality from a distance, while the unthinkable threat of annihilation is avoided.

It is here that we may notice a similarity in technique in the cultural and artistic treatment of death and sexual desire. Both sexuality and death are revealed to

⁵A good selection of mourning jewellery can be seen in the jewellery room of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Kensington, London.

⁶For an analytical overview of the semiotic status of death in artistic representation, see the introduction by Elisabeth Bronfen to *Death and Representation*, ed. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 3-25. This is a collection of essays on death and art which ranges over various aspects of the semiotics of death in literature. Bronfen's introduction offers a theory of death in art as the attempt to articulate the ineffable of experience in social discourse.

us through a relation to otherness. We desire an other and experience pleasure in and through an other; we witness the death of an other and our only experience of death in life is by proxy. Feminists have pointed out that in the Western tradition, which is a male-dominated, patriarchal tradition, otherness has conventionally been defined as femaleness. The history of representations gives multiple examples of how both sexuality and death, perceived as threats to the stability of the masculine subject, have been projected onto the figure of the woman, into the realm of the feminine. Starting with Lilith and Eve, women have been associated with a sexual desire which brings with it the threat of the fall, the annihilation of male power. Male representations of women have sexualised them using a rhetoric of metonymic displacement. Blamed for exciting men, the female body has been made into the locus of that desire, the carrier of potential male annihilation. Like death itself, women have been feared and desired.

Whilst one side of the coin of this fearful misogyny produces representations of women as the deathly seducer, the other side is characterised by the figure of woman as dead body. Representations of beautiful female corpses allow male artists to maintain death in the field of alterity: it is visited on the guilty other, while the attraction for death may be displaced and contained within the image of beautiful passive womanhood.⁷ Graves's poem *Penthesileia* recounts Achilles's necrophilic excesses on the dead body of the warrior queen :

Penthesileia, dead of profuse wounds,
Was despoiled of her arms by Prince Achilles,
Who, for love of that fierce white naked corpse,
Necrophily on her committed
In the public view.⁸

In this poem, a woman who has excited by her appetite and capacity for killing is finally enjoyed in her own death. In 'despoiling her of her arms', Achilles completes the process of feminisation which death has begun.

The *femme fatale* in art, then, both gives death in return for male sexual

⁷See Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). Here he argues that at the end of the nineteenth century, sick and dying women are promoted as idols of virtuous femininity. He sees this as a tactic to ensure continued social oppression of women.

⁸Robert Graves, *Complete Poems*, ed. Beryl Graves & Dunstan Ward, 2 vols (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), vol. i, p. 221.

weakness and receives death as the punishment for her wantonness. This aspect of patriarchy's artistic practice is the subject of a full-length study by Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body* (1992). In this book, she reads representations of dead women as social symptoms, that is as the failed repression of cultural obsessions which are then relocated in a symbol:

[R]epresentations are symptoms that visualise even as they conceal what is too dangerous to articulate openly but too fascinating to repress successfully. They repress by localising death away from the self, at the body of a beautiful woman, at the same time that this representation lets the repressed return, albeit in a disguised manner.⁹

According to Bronfen and other feminists, death, sexuality and otherness are almost always located in the female signifying body. It is thus that they are simultaneously kept at bay, and vicariously enjoyed.

While Bronfen's work provides a convincing argument to account for the prevalence of this artistic feature in the early-modern period to the present, it is important to keep in sight the fact that some representations of beautiful male corpses also exist (one thinks immediately of Henry Wallis's *Death of Chatterton* [1856]), suggesting at least a sub-culture of homo-erotic necrophilic representations. More importantly, we may notice that with increasing female participation in the artistic and literary sphere, various erotic explorations of death and fetishisation of corpses, both male and female, have been undertaken by female artists. The question suggests itself whether there are many representations of dead women in culture because male artists particularly privilege the image of their dead other, or whether the fact that there have always been more male artists than female ones accounts for the fact that there are more representations by men of dead women than by women of dead men. If mid-nineteenth-century society had allowed for a female Edgar Poe, how can we know if she would have written that the most poetic subject is the death of a beautiful man?¹⁰ After all, our individual relation to death as mortal human beings, if not the manner in which we present our symptoms culturally, is a genderless issue. Both men and

⁹Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), preface, p. xi.

¹⁰My reading of Rachilde's novels in Chapter Four of this thesis will attempt to answer this question. It is not inconceivable that Rachilde, who is the nearest thing we have, perhaps, to a French female Poe, would have agreed with this statement.

women can and will die. To what extent they experience and artistically represent their fear and desire for this *differently* will be one of the questions I bear in mind throughout this thesis.

Whatever the sex of the artist, necrophilia suggests an interesting paradigm of representation. The myth of Pygmalion has meant that artistic production and life-giving have been famously linked. The traditionally male role of the artist has been deconstructed by several feminists as the masculine equivalent of the female reproductive capacity, so that works of art spring from the male cerebrum just as Athena sprang from Pallas's head. Rita Felski's book undertakes a particularly thorough and searing deconstruction of male history's 'seminal' works and the jealous refusal on the part of the male to attribute cerebral creative strength to women.¹¹

The Pygmalion myth of creativity receives an interesting twist if we examine representations of death, killings and dead bodies. Rather than giving birth to a healthy artistic child, the modern imagination seems to spawn at least as many still-born objects, to give death while giving birth, suggesting a pathological or negative equivalent to the 'healthy' creative drive. Necrophilia locates the (usually male) artist as both creator and murderer in relation to his artistic object. The creation of a necrophilic representation is both an act of creation and an act of destruction, and the artist's position in relation to the created corpse is a complex and changing one, requiring close reading. This is why necrophilia appears to be one of the most interesting and fruitful artistic faces of the sex-death dynamic, and why, alongside the image that often facilitates it, that of sexual murder, it is to be the privileged trope of the current study.

Although they have made frequent appearances throughout the history of representation, the death-desire couple and the necrophilic body have inhabited different guises and received diverse treatments according to the tastes and the conventions of a given epoch or country. While it is important to bear in mind the vast history and geography associated with these ideas, and the extent to which they are an important constitutive part of our collective psyche, it is by examining local

¹¹Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989).

examples of these phenomena in close detail that we can best hope to understand the complexity suggested by the recurrent symbols and ideas.

The course of the nineteenth century in France is one such period at which there is evidence of a concentration of artistic interest in portraying the dead/dying body and in exploring the relation between fear and desire with regard to death and sexuality. The period 1830 to the *fin de siècle* provides a localised, contextualised nexus of representations of necrophilic desire, and it is on this period that the present study will focus.

Critical perceptions of the French nineteenth century

The nineteenth century in France has traditionally been seen as an epoch of great social and scientific progress, optimism and growth. It saw the rise of colonial expansion, the celebration of the glory of French engineering in the great exhibitions, and a general spirit of *élan vital*. It is therefore to be expected that French literature of the period will contain evidence of this flourishing society and will echo its optimistic spirit. Balzac's conception of the *comédie humaine*, which attempts to describe and analyse all of human life and Zola's pseudo-scientific school of Naturalism are just two examples of the literary imagination embodying the same scope and breadth as contemporary socio-economic projects.

Yet there is a different and quite contrary face of the nineteenth-century imagination in France, one which is overlooked if we concentrate only on the larger picture of social expansion. In the political sphere, this is characterised by repeated periods of civil unrest and governmental instability and change, giving rise to an atmosphere of discontent and division. On the socio-economic level, the mortality rate was high for much of the century and several epidemics raged through newly-industrial France, breeding and killing in the claustrophobic intensity of crowded tenement buildings. If the pioneering spirit of the age has its creative echo in Balzac and Zola, this counter-current is also amply reflected in art.

Several artistic innovations of the period are characterised by an insidious morbidity which may be seen to reveal the underside of the century's visible

optimism. In literature, waning Romanticism spawns the delirious Gothic hyperbole of the Frenetic Romantics; classical music adopts the mortuary aesthetic with such works as Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (1830), while pictorial art focuses on death-haunted subjects, including the battle scenes of Géricault and the epic-scale murder and sadism of Delacroix.

Moreover, where there are signs of decay and death, there are frequently signs of aestheticised eroticism and pleasure. Deathbed scenes become favoured loci of libidinal expression, as in *Madame Bovary*, where Emma's horrible death is dwelt on with loving attention and sensuous appeal, and Zola's *Nana*, where the eponymous heroine embodies an excessive sexuality which is seen to lead inexorably to her own dramatic demise. The deathbed is traditionally a place heavy with religious associations, and indeed in *Madame Bovary*, the sensuous and hypocritically pious Emma takes ostentatious pains to receive her last rites, and religious and erotic descriptions of her body and soul are found occupying the same space.

This blasphemous blending of the religious and the erotic in the description of the dying/dead body can be read in the general context of religious satire in the works of Flaubert, Baudelaire and their contemporaries. It points towards a change in consciousness that takes place in the century, whereby the voice of Christianity, with its vested interest in issuing prescriptions and proscriptions with regard to sexual desire and behaviour, begins to ring less loudly in the public ear.

This decline of papal influence is equalled by a rise within the scientific sphere of clinic-based psychological sciences which articulate the presence of proscribed sexual desire such as non-reproductive desire, same-sex desire and perverted desire, all the while safely labelling it with the stigma of sickness. It may at first appear that psychology and religion have very different agendas, yet in one sense, sexological survey merely takes over a function that for centuries has been served by the church: that of naming and controlling acceptable and unacceptable desire. Examples of this are such medieval phenomena as the witch-hunt, which can be seen as a pretext on the part of the male religious establishment to limit the unauthorised expression of female sexuality. Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's celebrated *Montaillou* (1975) details a similarly manipulative project on the part of a thirteenth-

century French church. It tells how a survey of the personal life of the parishioners was instigated, nominally in the fight against Catharism, but resulting in the minute exploration and cataloguing of people's sexual habits and preferences, not at all unlike the sex surveys of modernity.

The powerful province of the church in medieval times, then, becomes the province of medicine in modernity. Charcot and others brought desire and disease into the public eye, encapsulated in the *maladie du siècle*, hysteria. The ostentatious exhibitions of women's bodies crippled with hysterical symptoms is a central image of the nineteenth century, suggesting a fashion for, and interest in, the sick body. Art sought to respond to this trend in science with the well-known painting of the *Leçon de Charcot à la Salpêtrière* (1887) by Pierre-André Brouillet.

Sexuality and death, then, captured the artistic imagination of the period in an almost unprecedented way. This perverse aspect of the century's literary imagination was first taken into account by Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony* (1933). This work treats the nineteenth century in Europe as a whole as characterised by a taste for darkness and destructive sexual excess over and against the more usual picture of European economic and industrial expansion. His study is also groundbreaking in that it treats the question of the content of perverse sexual fantasy as a highly important gauge of the unconscious emotional state of a whole continent. This study of the sadistic imagination did more than change the way in which hundreds of university students and academics thought about the content of Romantic and post-Romantic literature – it suggested a paradigm for reading the status of social and individual subjectivity through the lens of the sexual imagination.

In nineteenth-century French literature, there is a wealth of representations of death and decay tinged with morbid delectation, of the kind that Praz draws to our attention. The present study will look even more specifically at a certain type of morbid sexual writing, centring not on all available representations of death, but on a small collection of texts by three writers which represent a certain sort of aesthetic, what I will call for the purposes of this thesis, the *necrophilic canon*. Distinct from Géricault's death-ridden images of war, or the protracted Naturalist portrayals of disease, defecation and decay, within these texts we can read the mainspring of

creative energy as coming out of, and centring on, a vision of a sexualised aesthetic that is characterised by its proximity to death. An appreciation of beauty and the suggestion of sexual excitement in the contemplation of murder, a dead body or a deathlike pose suggest a specific dynamic which mediates destructiveness, creativeness and a relation to the self and the other.

When one thinks of necrophilia, one immediately thinks of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49). Poe's now (in)famous assertion that 'the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world',¹² can be shown to epitomise not only one man's unconscious obsessions, but the content of the nineteenth-century libidinal imagination. Yet, with some notable exceptions, few critics have taken the centrality of this idea and the images it produces as an important lens through which we may read cultural and textual production. Much critical reading has tended rather to sanitise literary production and appears to be blinkered to the possibility of reading images of necrophilia at the literal level. It has been fashionable to talk about poetic representations of death and murder in, for example, the poetry of Baudelaire as allegories for the difficulty of the writerly task. Structuralism gave an excuse to those critics with a taste for avoiding the close details of a work of art's imaginative content, and therefore removed a whole series of layers of understanding and appreciation, relegating reading practice to the bare bones of prosody and form.

However, there are exceptions to this rule. Georges Blin's book on Baudelaire's sadism is one early attempt to get to grips with the very stuff of Baudelairean desire woven into his text.¹³ Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body* is a polemical feminist account of the necrophilic imagination in art. Mario Praz's study reads as an exhaustive encyclopaedic account of the erotic imagination of the nineteenth century and it is a valuable source of quotations and anecdotes concerning the sadistic and necrophilic imaginings of the literature of the period. Yet since Praz does not analyse or account for the presence of the material which he uncovers, much theoretical work on these issues remains to be done.

What none of the recent works on death and desire undertake is a localised,

¹²Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Philosophy of Composition', *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), p. 19.

¹³Georges Blin, *Le sadisme de Baudelaire* (Paris: Corti, 1948).

contextualised reading, taking account of literary genre and the texture of the written work itself, in an immediate historical context. It falls to a literary scholar to undertake these tasks and to attempt to reveal the significance of the presence of necrophilia in writing.

The nineteenth-century French necrophilic canon

When establishing the composition of the nineteenth-century French necrophilic canon, one is struck by the sheer number of authors and texts that could be included. The influence of writers of fantastic morbid literature like Jacques Cazotte (1719-92) and Charles Nodier (1780-1844) is strongly felt early in the nineteenth century. Coming out of this tradition, Jules Janin (1804-74) mixes terror, humour and cynicism in such works as *L'Âne mort et la femme guillotinée* (1829), which presents an early example of necrophilia in the horror mode. The strain of literature known as Frenetic Romanticism, popular in the 1830s, carries on this tradition. This school of literature produced work on such themes as suicide, murder and the reappearance of the dead in life. Necrophilia is a staple ingredient of these works, and a particularly suitable candidate for the necrophilic canon is Pétrus Borel (1809-59). Borel's *Champavert: contes immoraux* (1833) includes elements of murder and dissection, Gothic horror and the myth of the werewolf, recounted in a hyperbolic prose style.

Later in the century, Baudelaire's translations of Poe's short stories brought mainstream 'high-cultural' necrophilic prose to the French reading public. Mallarmé's translation of such poems as 'The Raven', in 1875, did the same for poetry. Also in the poetic line, Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror* (1868-9) immediately suggests itself as a relevant excursion into destructive eroticism. The poem aims to 'peindre les délices de la cruauté', and its depiction of a homicidal prowler and his dead male victims could provide insight into a strain of the necrophilic imagination.

The *fin-de-siècle* taste for Decadence is another rich source of necrophilic imagery. The name of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (1838-89) suggests itself, particularly for the *Contes cruels* of 1883. One story in this collection, 'Véra', a tale of a dead beloved, tells of a husband's desire to have his wife alive again, and the counter-

desire to unite with her dead body, which is presented as a forbidden and unspoken fetish object. Also, *L'Ève future* (1886) is an experiment in science fiction writing in which the figure of a female automaton provides a lifeless object of sexual desire – perhaps the first example of cyber-necrophilia? Another necrophilic decadent is Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917). *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899) recounts the initiation of a young woman into the delights of torture, killing and erotic stimulation brought about by the contemplation of death. The question of murder for pleasure, the *acte gratuit*, is the subject of 'Divagations sur le meurtre' in Mirbeau's *Contes cruels* (1898-99).

Georges Rodenbach (1855-98) is responsible for Belgium's best-known contribution to Francophone necrophilic literature, with *Bruges-la-morte* (1892). This novel unites the Poësque theme of sexual love for a dead wife with a desolate depiction of the city of Bruges. Because of the heavy insistence on loss, mourning and a deathly aesthetic, Bachelard described the novel as an illustration of the 'Ophelia complex'.

While I hope to have shown that there are many nineteenth-century French writers who would serve to illustrate the necrophilic literary imagination, I shall limit the close readings within this thesis to three authors whom I have not yet discussed in detail. They are Théophile Gautier (1811-72), Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) and Rachilde (Marguerite Eymery) (1860-1953).

The careers of the three writers I have chosen are significant because they plot moments within the nineteenth century when the fashion for morbid writing differs slightly according to the tastes of particular schools. Gautier represents Frenetic Romanticism in his early *contes*, while the later *Emaux et Camées* exemplifies the cold austerity of Parnassian anti-utilitarianism. Baudelaire not so much represents as *announces* the mid-century moment of modernity and its attendant subjective crisis, which even today is indistinguishable from Baudelairean *spleen* and *ennui*. The case of Baudelaire requires particular attention, as his artistic and philosophical sensibility has become synonymous with the mid-century in French literature, but no study exists which looks uniquely at Baudelaire's poetics through the lens of his destructive erotic

themes and treatments. Lastly, Rachilde represents the *fin-de-siècle* decadent aesthetic, and also she represents the desirous voice of the female artist who has struggled to be heard throughout the century. Few writers play so tirelessly and imaginatively with models of desire as Rachilde in her sixty novels.

Yet beyond their particular places within a given literary school or tradition, the works of the writers that I shall discuss are linked primarily by their privileging of certain repetitive tropes, images and ideas. The motif of the dead body and the descriptions of murderous sexuality within the works indicate a common pre-occupation and the writers gesture, by means of shared cultural references and intertextual allusions, to a wider surrounding canon.

This thesis, then, is not a survey of the whole of nineteenth-century French necrophilia, even though the wealth of available material in France, as evidenced by Praz's study and by the brief inventory of names and titles I have just given, would make this possible. Rather, the thesis will look closely at the way in which three key authors' texts work as literary and imaginative models, and it will suggest new strategies for reading based on these analyses.

This detailed study of the work of three authors, concentrating closely on textual devices and on narrative and poetic technique to examine the treatment of necrophilic themes, may at first appear a modest or limited task. Yet my treatment of these particular texts will impact upon the way in which neighbouring texts and authors may be approached. My reading of the nineteenth-century French necrophilic imagination may suggest a paradigm for reading perverse desire in literary language which bears relevance for the literature of other epochs and nationalities.

Methodological and theoretical tools

What does the representation of necrophilic subject matter in the literature of the last century suggest about that period's conception of the emotional human relation to death and desire? It is important to bear in mind that the texts I have chosen for study span the whole of the nineteenth century, from 1830 to the beginning of the twentieth century. This coincides with a period of immense change and development in the fields of psychology and the social sciences. The cross-influences

of literature and such discourses should not be under-estimated. In the case of the earlier texts, echoes of Romanticism are clearly visible. Even though there is a reaction against Romanticism in the arts later in the century, the influence of this current can be seen in *fin-de-siècle* theoretical writings, such as Freud's work on dreams. It is also to be noted that Charcot's pioneering work on hysteria and the earliest sexual surveys by the German sexologists are co-existent with Baudelaire's writing career. Moreover, in the case of Rachilde, her work is co-present with the hey-day of sexology and the inception of psychoanalysis, and we may suspect that some awareness of these discourses filters into the pathologies she describes.

The issues at work in the texts, then, can be seen as running parallel to this growth of scientific interest in the formation of human subjectivity. A study of this particular phenomenon in the history of European erotic sensibility may contribute to our understanding of the conceptualisation of sexuality, from nineteenth-century psychiatry to the modern debates on genetics and identity politics.

Much has been written on the problematic and seductive coupling of psychoanalytic and literary theory. My thesis will add to the body of work which deals with these theoretical questions, as it will take this relation as a central one in the attempt to understand and theorise the concept which forms the subject of my enquiries. Psychoanalysis will play two roles in this thesis. Firstly, it will be viewed as a historically relevant theoretical discourse which set out to analyse similar questions of human desire as those posed in the literary texts. Freudian psychoanalytic works will be discussed and their rhetoric analysed as texts in their own right. Secondly, the paradigms of desire offered by psychoanalysis will be evaluated for their ability to describe and account for the phenomena under study. Where appropriate, psychoanalysis will be used as a tool or methodology for excavating the roots of desire within language and literature, namely within texts by my selected authors.

As a literary and cultural critical method, psychoanalysis offers rich resources for examining the latent motivations beneath the processes of writing and reading. Since the early days of the discipline, emphasis has been placed on the potential of art and literature to reveal and demonstrate unconscious desires and psychical defences

and mechanisms. Freud's well-known essay *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's 'Gradiva'* (1907 [1906]) and Lacan's 'Séminaire sur "La Lettre Volée"' (1955), are obvious proto-types of the exercise of psychoanalytic critical reading, as is, with relevance to the present work, Marie Bonaparte's work on the necrophilic imagination of Edgar Poe.¹⁴

However, the texts offered for discussion by this thesis have been largely ignored as texts for psychoanalytic investigation.¹⁵ Certainly little has been written on them as a specific historical and thematic corpus, as a *necrophilic canon*. One of the ways in which my approach will differ from Marie Bonaparte's study of Poe is in its attitude to biographical information. The traditional psychocritical questions regarding such elements as an author's attitude to her or his parents, for example, will not play a significant role in my analyses. The studies of my three authors are not pathographies, but close examinations of the imagery and structuring devices privileged by the writers in the creation of their texts. By reading closely, I shall attempt to chart the mapping of desire onto form and language.

As well as reading literary texts in this light, I shall, wherever possible, focus on the aesthetic theory and critical writing of the three authors in question. My aim will be to examine the extent to which the death and desire visible in their literature carries over on a thematic or structural level into their appreciation of the task of an artist and of other artists' texts. The nature of the relationship between necrophilic desire and writing will be an underlying concern of this thesis and the conclusion will attempt to suggest various theoretical ways in which we may formulate and understand an intrinsic link.

¹⁴Marie Bonaparte, *Edgar Poe: Sa vie, son œuvre: étude analytique*, 3 vols (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1958).

¹⁵With the exception, perhaps, of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*. See, for example Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire and Freud* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) and René Laforgue, *L'Échec de Baudelaire: étude psychanalytique sur la névrose de Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Denoël & Steele, 1931). Also, recent American feminist studies of Rachilde have tended to take a psychoanalytic approach to the traditional feminist questions of sexuality, femininity, and attitudes to the mother as raised in her most famous novel, *Monsieur Vénus*.

Chapter One

Historical and Theoretical Contexts

Before beginning analysis of the texts of my chosen authors, it is important that I attempt to account for historical factors influencing the specificity of this production. Alongside the major literary texts to be presented and analysed, I shall make use of a range of additional textual material which will serve as background and will provide a range of contemporary voices from contiguous disciplines.

To examine the attitudes to dead bodies and the presence of necrophilia in a given epoch, one could look in a variety of places. Police reports, court documents and newspaper accounts all suggest themselves as relevant sources of historical data. A historian could doubtless produce a convincing picture of the populace's relationship to death and violence in a given epoch by working closely with such archival material.¹⁶ However, in the interests of concision and tractability, I shall limit my reading of non-literary texts to a small corpus of external sources. Bearing in mind the literariness of my focus and the close-textual nature of my approach, I shall draw only on such sources as are relevant to my key corpus of texts in a variety of ways, which I will sketch out below.

Firstly, where the key literary texts allude to or may be influenced by other textual production, for example in investigating the nineteenth-century reception of the Marquis de Sade, I shall undertake readings of contemporary comments, opinions and references to this writer in literary journals, memoirs and other publications. Secondly, where the key literary texts are themselves the subject of discursive textual production, as in the writings of the degeneration theorists, a deconstructive reading of the rhetoric of the theory will be undertaken. Finally, where discursive textual production may be seen to be treating the same concerns as the key literary texts, such as German sexological accounts which present case-studies of necrophilia as evidential material for understanding human desire, a brief comparative reading of

¹⁶ Such as the study undertaken by Richard Cobb, *Death in Paris: the Records of the Basse-Geôle de la Seine, October 1795-September 1801, Vendémiaire Year IV-Fructidor Year XI* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

rhetorical and textual devices will be attempted.

It is by placing these overlapping discourses alongside each other that I aim to build up a portrait of the libidinal imagination of the epoch, within the context of which textual necrophilia may be considered. My aim is clearly not to write a revisionist history of the whole nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist*. Rather, it is to elucidate a cluster of textual representations by Gautier, Baudelaire and Rachilde by recourse to a wider historical and theoretical corpus. What should then be possible is a process of theorisation and model-building based on a convincing comparative reading of several kinds of related textual evidence.

Section 1.1 will look at the preoccupations of art, social theory and the psychiatric discourses in the century and situate the literature in a socio-historical context. Section 1.2 will treat the inception of psychoanalysis, both as a product of its contemporary imaginative moment, and as a useful tool for the study of desire, particularly perverse desire, revealed in art and language. The rhetorical form and unconscious content of these discursive productions will be as important to my reading as their epistemology and internal systems. The aim of this opening section is to acquaint the reader with currents of thought that were both influences upon, and influenced by, the literary production that will be the focus of the rest of the thesis.

1.1

Le Siècle des ténèbres

...The literature of the nineteenth century appears as a unique, clearly distinct whole, which the various formulas such as 'romanticism', 'realism', 'decadence', & c., tend to disrupt. In no other literary period I think, has sex been so obviously the mainspring of works of imagination...

Mario Praz¹⁷

The history of necrophilic writing in the nineteenth century:

i. The Marquis de Sade: a legendary forebear

It would be expected that any study of sexual perversion in the literature of nineteenth-century France should at some point focus on the influence of the Marquis de Sade in shaping cultural and aesthetic attitudes towards prohibited or transgressive desires. Sade's name is synonymous with extreme perversion, and indeed, throughout the history of Western thought, no individual has been more encyclopaedic in her or his coverage of the possibilities open to the sexual imagination. In acknowledgement of this fact, various critical studies of the nineteenth century and of its individual authors have already treated the question of Sade as a perverse paternal literary figure.¹⁸

Rather than tracing echoes of Sade in subsequent texts, I shall briefly attempt below to ascertain the status of Sade's reputation for nineteenth-century writers. I will do this firstly by establishing the availability of the texts during the century as readily-acquired or clandestine commodities, and secondly I shall look at the legendary or mythical status of the persona of Sade in the nineteenth century, and attempt to see what it signified.

Donatien-Alphonse-François de Sade (1740-1814) is doubtless one of the first

¹⁷Mario Praz, Foreword to first edition, *The Romantic Agony*, 2nd edition, trans. by Angus Davis, ed. with foreword by Frank Kermode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. xvi.

¹⁸Praz devotes a chapter of *The Romantic Agony* to Sade's influence on the century's libidinal imaginative preoccupations. Blin's aforementioned book on Baudelaire's sadism looks at Sade's influence on this writer. Other examples include: Maurice Blanchot, *Lautréamont et Sade* (Paris: Minuit, 1963), Douglas B. Saylor, *The Sadomasochistic Homotext: Readings in Sade, Balzac and Proust* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), Scott Carpenter, *Acts of Fiction: Resistance and Resolution from Sade to Baudelaire* (University Park : Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

writers to include overt, literal necrophilia as a type of sexual behaviour in his libertine writing.¹⁹ Libertinage, which in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* is defined simply as 'l'habitude de céder à l'instinct qui nous porte aux plaisirs des sens.'²⁰ takes on a new dimension in *Les cent-vingt journées de Sodome* (written 1785, first published 1904), *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu* (1791) and *Juliette* (1797). In these texts, the essence of libertinage is destruction and murder, and the desecrated bodies of victims litter the corpus.

In *Les cent-vingt journées de Sodome*, the exhaustive catalogue of sexual pleasures runs from fairly mild flagellation, through coprophagic excesses and simulated necrophilia (live girls dressed as corpses and laid out in coffins for the libertines' pleasure), to eventual torture, murder and literal necrophilia. The form of Sade's unfinished work is that of dialogue within dialogue, so that these themes are first introduced and illustrated by the quartet of prostitutes whose job it is to entertain the four reclusive libertines, after which the *dramatis personae* will play out versions of the described perversion types.

For example, Duclos, the prostitute, recounts the following anecdote of a necrophilic client:

Vous savez que l'usage, à Paris, est d'exposer les morts aux portes des maisons. Il y avait un homme dans le monde qui me payait douze francs par chacun de ces appareils lugubres où je pouvais le conduire dans ma soirée. Toute sa volupté consistait à s'en approcher avec moi le plus près possible, au bord même du cercueil, si nous pouvions, et là, je devais le branler en sorte que son foutre éjaculât sur le cercueil. Nous en allions courir comme cela trois ou quatre dans la soirée.²¹

¹⁹However, other examples of eighteenth-century textual necrophilia do exist. In Prévost's *Histoire du chevalier des Grieux et de Manon Lescaut* (1731), the eponymous hero spends forty days in the desert with his lips pressed against those of his dead object of obsessive desire. Moreover, necrophilia is the conceit and the figure for love and desire in a poem by Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *Lettre de Dulis à son ami* (1767), in which a young man watches over the corpse of a beautiful girl whom he recognises as his former lover, betrothed to another in an arranged marriage. The moment of his passion is described with some *pudeur* :

[...] Je m'élance ... Tout fond dans la nuit du trépas

Je me lève agité, tremblant, hors de moi-même[...] (Paris: La Veuve Duchesne, 1767), p. 25.

Moreover, necrophilic intent is diminished by the fact that the beloved, Junie, awakens to find herself pregnant after this would-be posthumous violation. This also suggests, however, that Mercier wants us to be in no doubt that the sexual act took place, even if he is not prepared to describe the act itself. Thus in Mercier's poem, necrophilia is repudiated even as it is announced as the act of a delirious desire.

²⁰Quoted in Andrzej Siemek, *La Recherche morale et esthétique dans le roman de Crébillon fils* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1981), pp. 34-5.

²¹*Les cent-vingt journées de Sodome*, in Sade, *Œuvres*, ed. Michel Delon, 3 vols, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), vol. i, p. 275.

This is one of the few cases where the libertine described is content merely to masturbate over the corpse. Yet this example clearly situates the corpse as a symbol of erotic stimulation, the mere sight of which signifies erotically.

In *Justine ou les malheurs de la vertu*, one of the many sadistic libertines into whose hands Justine falls has a particular penchant for deathly games. The cellars of Roland's chateau contain the paraphernalia of the necrophilic aesthetic: 'des squelettes de toute sorte de tailles, des têtes de morts',²² as well as 'l'effigie en cire d'une femme nue' and a collection of coffins, in one of which Rolland will make Justine lie. It is in this atmospheric chamber of the necrophilic imagination that Rolland will play with Justine's mortality – buggering and strangling her and then placing a noose around her neck. If she is to evade death, she must cut the cord in the nick of time when the masturbating libertine kicks the stool from under her feet.

In the final section of the *cent-vingt journées*, Sade describes one hundred and fifty 'passions meurtrières', in which elements of sadism and necrophilia mix and the aim is the annihilation of a victim in a manner causing a particular aesthetic and sexual thrill for the protagonist. One such typical example is cited below:

Un grand partisan de culs étrangle une mère en l'enculant; quand elle est morte, il la retourne et la fout en con. En déchargeant, il tue la fille sur le sein de la mère à coup de couteau dans le sein, puis il fout la fille en cul quoique morte [...]²³

While there is relatively little actual necrophilia described in Sade, there is certainly a lot of perversion which suggests the dynamic aim of necrophilia, that is the celebration and derivation of sexual pleasure from the contemplation or achievement of the destruction of another human being. Inflicting death presents the ultimate passage to sensuous pleasure and contemplation of the corpse represents both an aesthetic and an erotic celebration.

Sade's whole theory of libertinism is one which will have far-reaching effects for philosophies to follow, including those of Kant and Nietzsche. Sade's view of exaltation in destruction draws on the notion that nothing is unnatural, as in order for an action to be able to take place, Nature must be allowing for it within her system. Furthermore, Nature herself is cruel and destructive, so the un-creation of one of her

²²Ibid., vol. ii, p. 327.

²³Ibid., vol. i, p. 373.

organic creatures is all part of the plan, and it is of no consequence whether it is achieved by natural means or by man's intervention. The transgressive pleasure comes, however, in opposing the falsely constructed social laws which are seen to be wholly in opposition to nature's intentions. The encoding of what is 'natural' in culture causes a schism between chaos and ordered revolt or anarchy. Sade's fantasies are violent attacks on the state and on the individual (female) body, both of which must be forcibly reduced to their essence – death.

That Sade is a visible influence on the nineteenth-century literary imagination is testified to by Sainte-Beuve in 1843:

[...] J'oserai affirmer, sans crainte d'être démenti, que Byron et de Sade (je demande pardon au rapprochement) ont peut-être été les deux plus grands inspireurs de nos modernes, l'un affiché et visible, l'autre clandestin – pas trop clandestin. En lisant certains de nos romanciers en vogue, si vous voulez le fond du coffre, l'escalier secret de l'alcôve, ne perdez jamais cette dernière clé.²⁴

Sainte-Beuve situates Sade at the heart of the modernist imagination and in an interesting relation of semi-secrecy. Sade's contribution is 'clandestin – pas trop clandestin'. The question is raised of just how well-known and how widely read Sade's texts themselves actually were for the nineteenth-century literary population, and to what extent his massive reputation rests on rumour, legend and hearsay.

After the revolution, Sade's texts were banned from being reprinted. This decision, taken in 1814, was upheld in French courts until as recently as 1957.²⁵ However, this does not mean of course that editions of Sade were not in limited circulation during this period of restriction, but these appear to have often been in incomplete or fragmented form. In 1839, Flaubert experienced some difficulty in getting hold of a copy, as his correspondence tells us:

Ô mon cher Ernest, à propos du marquis de Sade, si tu pouvais me trouver quelques-uns des romans de cette honnête écrivain, je te les payerais leur pesant d'or.²⁶

Apparently his search was successful, as he writes in 1841:

²⁴Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, 'Quelques vérités sur la situation en littérature', *La Revue des deux mondes*, juillet 1843, p. 14.

²⁵J.-J. Pauvert was prosecuted for having published *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*, *La Nouvelle Justine*, *Juliette* and *Les cent-vingt journées de Sodome*.

²⁶Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. J. Bruneau, 4 vols (Paris: Conard, 1910), vol. i, 1831, p. 52.

Quand on a lu le marquis de Sade et qu'on est revenue de l'éblouissement, on se prend à se demander si tout ne serait pas vrai, si la vérité n'était pas tout ce qu'il enseigne [...]²⁷

For Flaubert at least, then, a reading of Sade is not disappointing and has tremendous emotional effect (causing *l'éblouissement*) as well as the power to persuade. Flaubert describes here the feeling that Sade's philosophy may contain the truth, suggesting that the extremity of Sade's rhetoric, morbidity and system of thought speaks directly to the mid-nineteenth-century artistic imagination.

Flaubert's fascination with Sade is well documented in the Goncourts' literary journal ('c'est étonnant, ce de Sade, on le trouve à tous les bouts de Flaubert comme un horizon'²⁸). Indeed, mentions of Sade in various contexts are frequent in this great conspectus on the literary tastes of the time. (I counted thirty-eight mentions of the proper name 'Sade'). This suggests that during the nineteenth century, Sade's name is incorporated into the canon of great writers, but very much as a byword for extremity and perversion in art.

It is not clear, however, just how widely accepted this view of Sade as 'art but perverted art' was. By 1850, it was certainly possible for Jules Michelet to read Sade's *Justine* in the library:

j'allai prendre à la bibliothèque ce livre atroce du marquis de Sade et je le vomis le lendemain.²⁹

The strong and visceral language of disapproval found in Michelet's statement suggests that the stigma of dangerous immorality, which post-revolutionary fervour accorded to Sade, is maintained by the conservative fringe of nineteenth-century thinkers.

Whether read at first hand or not, and we have reason to be suspicious of many writer's claims of having read Sade at first hand,³⁰ the name of Sade is known and used by writers of the century in the service of evoking a certain image of political and sexual subjecthood, an archetype of transgression.

²⁷Gustave Flaubert, *Souvenirs, Notes*, ed. Chevally Sabatier (Paris: Buchet et Chastel, 1965), 1841, p. 70.

²⁸G. and E. de Goncourt, *Journal 1863* (avril 1860), ed. R. Ricatte (Paris: Fasquelle et Flammarion, 1959), p. 730.

²⁹*Journal 1849-60* (mars 1850), ed. Paul Viallaneix, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), vol. ii, p. 92.

³⁰For further information on this point, see Nick Harrison, *Circles of Censorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995). Here he underlines the difficulty of tracing Sade's readership in the nineteenth century and points out that since reading Sade carried a certain kudos, many may have claimed to have read him who in fact had not.

Borel's *Mme Putiphar* (1839) salutes Sade's work as a glorious anti-heroic textual corpus, which he evidently expects to be only too recognisable to his readers:

Cette gloire de la France, [...] l'illustre auteur d'un livre contre lequel vous criez tous à l'infamie et que vous avez tous dans votre poche, [...] très haut et très puissant seigneur, monsieur le comte de Sade.³¹

The double-edged nature of Sade's infamy and fame is brought to the reader's attention again. Sainte-Beuve's 'clandestin – pas trop clandestin' is echoed in the idea of the hypocritical relationship between Sade's texts and the reading public. He represents that which is publicly decried and privately, pruriently enjoyed. Both in the illicit procuring of these condemned texts for readerly enjoyment, as in the case of Flaubert, and in the suggested hypocrisy here within the *bien pensant's* relation to Sade, we see that he functioned as a kind of high-cultural repressed, a literary taboo, for the nineteenth century.

From these examples, as from many others that I could cite here, it becomes apparent that the proper name of Sade comes to stand metonymically for a certain group of associated ideas. The texts themselves take on the status of forbidden objects of desire, while the adjective 'sadique' comes into writerly currency. This is seen below in the citation from the Goncourts' Journal:

Henkey, l'anglais sadique, contait dans sa loge au bal de l'opéra à Saint-Victor, comme un beau trait, qu'un amant d'Emma Vali, prêt à crever, lui fit promettre, comme désir supreme de venir pisser sur sa tombe.³²

The Goncourts' use of 'sadique' here, in the account of a sadistic gentleman who recounts an anecdote of bizarre sexual taste, suggests the linking of narrative excess, sexual perversion and death. We can posit that the Englishman is Sade-like because of the dual presence of story-telling and death-driven perversion.

More generally, 'sadique' becomes the convenient byword for a certain artistic taste associated with the nineteenth century for cruelty and excess. It is as if the enthusiastic penchant for allusion to Sade, as much as the reading of Sade's texts themselves, marks the nineteenth century as 'sadique'. For example, Jules Lemaître speaks of 'le mysticisme sadique de M Barbey D'Aurevilly' to express that writer's often tortured and cruel poetic vision.³³

³¹Pétras Borel, *Mme Putiphar* (Paris: Régine Desforges, 1972), p. 322.

³²Goncourt, *Journal*, p. 1196.

³³J. Lemaître, *Les Contemporains* (1885) (Paris: Lécène et Oudin, 1887), p. 329.

The ambiguous status of the Sadeian text as explored above is similar to the mythical status that the figure of Sade, the man, acquires during the period. In 1835, the actor Fleury writes of Sade in his memoirs:

homme puissant, seigneur renommé, haute intelligence obscurcie par le crime,
membre d'une race illustre entre toutes celles de la France.³⁴

Fleury also wants to draw rhetorical attention to Sade's greatness. He foregrounds Sade's renown as a figure associated dually with aristocracy and crime, positing a tacit link between the two, suggesting the figure of the gentleman criminal who was a popular figure for the Romantics and for writers like Balzac. (One thinks immediately of his Vautrin.)

Notice also Flaubert's formulation 'j'aime bien à voir des hommes comme ça, comme Néron, comme le marquis de Sade.'³⁵ Here, Sade becomes a monster of equivalent stature to the monsters of history and the classics. It is a considerable triumph for Sade's posthumous career as a figure of brutality and infamy that only twenty-five years after his death he has achieved parity with Nero for a writer like Flaubert.

This popular association of Sade as a criminal demon, which is glorified and Romanticised in the nineteenth century, began with popular rumours and eighteenth-century press accounts of Sade's acts of sexual impropriety and brutality towards prostitutes, most notably the Rose Keller scandal in 1768.³⁶ *Faits divers* would make a legend of Sade, often exaggerating the extent of his acts of brutality and dwelling speculatively on his intentions. An example comes from the English *Observer* article of 1778 which made mention of Sade's habit of distributing spiked sweets to his sexual conquests:

Il avait empoisonné tous les bon bons qu'il distribuait.³⁷

In fact, the sweets were impregnated only with the aphrodisiac catharide, but we may notice that murder rather than sex is the motivation most readily attributed to the

³⁴Joseph Abraham Bénard, dit Fleury, *Mémoires*, ed. Laffite, 1835 – 1836, cited by Basil Guy, 'Sur les traces du divin marquis', *Studi Francesi*, 1970.

³⁵Flaubert, *Correspondance*, vol. i, p. 51.

³⁶On Easter Sunday 1768, Sade flagellated the beggar Rose Keller at his house in Arcueil.

³⁷Pidansat de Mairobert, *L'Observateur anglais ou correspondance secrète entre Milord All'eye et Milord All'ear* (London 1778) vol. iii, p. 67. Cited by Michel Delon in his introduction to Sade, *Œuvres*, p. xvi.

Marquis.

The linking of rapacious sexual appetite with mortal consequences is seen again in the following paranoid account of contemporary sexual mores by the conservative eighteenth-century historian Bachaumont:

Plusieurs personnes sont mortes des excès auxquels elles se sont livrées dans leur priapisme effroyable.³⁸

Such is the close association between the name of Sade and the idea of sexuality that kills, that at the end of the eighteenth century the link is made between the reading of Sade's violent pornography and the actual act of sexual murder. Pierre Jean-Baptiste Chaussard comments:

Qu'on interroge, avant de les conduire à la mort, les assassins qui, dans ce dernier temps, ont épouvanté la nature par de nouvelles cruautés. Ils vous diront sans doute que la lecture des ouvrages tels que *Justine*, *Aline* etc., que les représentations de ces pièces, dont les héros sont des brigands, ont alimenté et exalté leurs principes d'immoralité.³⁹

These are early echoes of the debate regarding the potentially dangerous effects of pornography in inciting criminal attacks. Moreover, the notion of 'copy-cat killings' raised here persists as a problematic of present-day sociological thinking.

Sade's perversions are the subject of another apocryphal and exaggerated anecdote published in the nineteenth-century memoirs of the Marquise de Créqui. She tells of workers on Sade's estate draining water from a pond where they had been forbidden to fish, only to make a shocking discovery:

[O]n vient d'y trouver le corps d'un jeune homme et celui d'une jeune fille, qui sont piqué comme des perdrix, la jeune fille avec du lard et le jeune homme avec des bouts de petits rubons nommés faveurs. Ils étaient attachés l'un à l'autre avec des nœuds de large ruban couleur rose.⁴⁰

Here we have a glimpse of the way in which the image of the desecrated body, the sexualised corpse, as well as the rumour of the pleasure of murder, become indelibly linked to Sade's name and may have served as stimuli for the specifically necrophilic representations which will be the subject of the present study. It is as much for such delirious fantasies of sexual murder associated with his name, as for his pornographic

³⁸ Louis Petit de Bachaumont, *Mémoires secrètes pour servir à l'histoire de la république des lettres*, 36 vols (Paris: Librairie des auteurs, 1866), vol. i, p. 187.

³⁹ Pierre Jean-Baptiste Chaussard, *Le Nouveau diable boîteux: tableau philosophique et moral de Paris*, 2 vols (Paris: Buisson, 1798-99), vol. ii, pp. 173-74.

⁴⁰ La Marquise de Créqui, *Souvenirs de 1710-1800* (Paris: 1840) vol. iii, pp. 111-112. Cited by Michel Delon in his introduction to Sade, *Œuvres*, p. xx.

novels and plays, that Sade becomes a key player in the nineteenth-century imagination.

Indeed, it has been suggested that the sexually motivated killing described in Sade's works is a prototype of the phenomenon of sexual murder as we know it today.⁴¹ This is easily understood when we look at such works as *Les cent-vingt jours de Sodome*, in the final section of which all the characters are killed in different ways by the four male libertines, so as to provide the ultimate orgasmic experience for the killers.

As Foucault will tell us, with characteristic gusto:

Le sadisme n'est pas un nom enfin donné à une pratique aussi vieille que l'Éros; c'est un fait culturel massif qui est apparu précisément à la fin du XVIII^e siècle, et qui constitue une des plus grandes conversions de l'imagination occidentale: la déraison devenue délire du cœur, folie du désir, dialogue insensé de l'amour et de la mort dans la présomption sans limite de l'appétit.⁴²

Here Foucault speculates on Sade's historical import. While we cannot be sure that Sade's is the first moment at which such a taste would be found, what we can know from the sources we have available is that at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth, Sade appears to serve a particular social and psychical function. That is, he is an archetypal figure in the cultural, certainly the high-cultural, imagination. He symbolises, both in the notoriety and elusiveness of his texts and the mythical status of his persona, the birth of a rupture in aesthetic morality. The notion that crime, genius, sexual desire and death are intimately linked will remain a topos of art for at least the next century.

⁴¹In their feminist sociological analysis of sexual murder, *The Lust to Kill* (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer posit that the sort of criminal phenomenon termed sexual murder, linked in aim and behaviour with necrophilia and sadism and carried out in the social sphere, only came into being, as the specific cultural phenomenon we know today, towards the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century (see p. 54). They point out the fallaciousness of giving something a name which implies a range of socio-historical codes and signs that are not meaningful in the context of the relevant century. The positing of destructive crime as bearing an aesthetic dimension and transcendental philosophical potential can be traced back to the philosophical and pornographic writings of Sade.

⁴² Michel Foucault, *Folie et déraison: histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* (Paris: Plon, 1961), p. 437.

ii. *Encountering the beyond*

The relationship between lived experience and the content of works of art is difficult to establish. We may wonder whether the many images of death and destruction in literature were partially inspired by visible signs of mortality in the environment of the writers in question.

The day-to-day experience of life in nineteenth-century France must have contained within it more *memento mori* than we perhaps appreciate today. Due to poor sanitation and diet, the death of the young was a common occurrence. Throughout the century, with very little fluctuation between years, death was an impending reality. Once a young man or woman was old enough to contemplate mortality, it would be a foreseeable event, a tangible shadow. Moreover, in his study of nineteenth-century France, Theodore Zeldin tells us that the infant mortality rate was catastrophically high in comparison with other parts of Western Europe.⁴³

Although a study of mortality rates, crime records and accounts of civil unrest may be useful tools for establishing the volume of death on the streets, there is not sufficient space to undertake this work here, nor is such detailed archival historical study the aim of the present work. Instead, we will concentrate principally on accounts written by artists themselves detailing their encounters with death in life.

Descriptions of encounters with corpses are far from rare in the journals and memoirs of the period. The image of a beautiful young corpse which arouses sexual desire is the subject of an anecdote by Hector Berlioz (1803-69) in his *Mémoires* (1865). Here he describes a Florentine *scène funèbre* which he claims to have witnessed. Having seen a funeral cortège pass by, Berlioz follows the procession to the morgue where he pays in order to be allowed to enter the resting place and view the deceased:

Une longue robe de percale blanche, nouée autour de son cou et au dessous de ses pieds, la couvraient presque entièrement. Ses noirs cheveux à demi-tressés coulaient à flots sur ses épaules, grands yeux bleus demi-clos, petite bouche, triste sourire, cou d'albatre, air noble et candide... jeune!... jeune!...morte!...⁴⁴

⁴³See Theodore Zeldin, *France 1848-1945*, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973-77), vol. ii, pp. 968-71.

⁴⁴Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires*, 2 vols (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1969), vol. i, p. 274. For the full description of the funerary scene, see vol. i, pp. 273-75.

As one of the creators of the Romantic tradition, Berlioz describes the dead body in characteristic terms. The conventions of flowing, jet-black hair and white neck, found in many literary descriptions of beautiful women, are observed to the letter. However, chillingly, they are preceded not by a meticulous description of a grand robe in the style we will often remark in Balzac, but by the mention of a body-length shroud. The fact that this type of description of a beautiful woman is immediately familiar to a reader of Romanticism means that her deadness appears almost naturalised.

Yet, the articulation of her youth and her deadness *is* expressive of agitation and excitement with its dramatic exclamation marks and sudden disjointed syntax, given by the *points de suspension*. This punctuation effectively suggests something missing, some suspension of comprehension. The mystery of death and the surprising revelation of its attractiveness are accounted for by this device.

The whole picture is one of voluptuousness and sadness mixed, reminding us of Baudelaire's assertion that beauty in a woman should leave the male spectator with the dual sentiment of sorrow and desire:

J'ai trouvé la définition du Beau, – de mon Beau. C'est quelque chose d'ardent et de triste, quelque chose d'un peu vague, laissant carrière à la conjecture. Je vais, si l'on veut, appliquer mes idées à un objet sensible, à l'objet, par exemple, le plus intéressant dans la société, à un visage de femme. Une tête séduisante et belle, une tête de femme, veux-je dire, c'est une tête qui fait rêver à la fois, – mais d'une manière confuse, – de volupté et de tristesse; qui comporte une idée de mélancolie, de lassitude, même de satiété, – soit une idée contraire, c'est-à-dire une ardeur, un désir de vivre, associé avec une amertume refluite, comme venant de privation ou de désespérance. Le mystère, le regret sont aussi des caractères du Beau.⁴⁵

Baudelaire could easily be describing Berlioz's experience before the corpse. A new notion of the sexual aesthetic is posited in both of these accounts. Here, beauty comes from something 'laissant carrière à la conjecture', something involving radical absence and the suspension of immediate understanding or classification. This signals a break with classical notions of beauty and suggests the presence of the Gothic, that is of a twisted or tainted aesthetic. The appearance of death is seen to provide the touch of ruin that kindles a wantonness in beauty, as Byron would have put it.

⁴⁵Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–76), vol. ii, p. 1255. All quotations from Baudelaire's works are taken from this edition and are subsequently marked in the text with relevant page numbers. Quotations from vol. ii are marked with 'ii' before the page number.

The idea of confusion, conjecture, the indecision of whether to mourn or whether to engage sexually, are equalled in the experience of pleasurable dizziness Berlioz goes on to describe:

La salle retentit du choc...je crus que ma poitrine se brisait à cette impie et brutale résonance... N'y tenant plus, je me jette à genoux, je saisis la main de cette beauté profanée, je la couvre de baisers expiatoires, en proie à l'une des angoisses de cœur les plus intenses que j'aie ressenties de ma vie.⁴⁶

The tone of the piece narrates the experience of individual desire before the impenetrable mystery of death. The shock in the writing can be read as the *décalage* between individual emotion or perception and the material reality of the corpse, an object beyond rationalisation. The presence of awe and the incomprehensible alongside beauty, suggest the notion of the Kantian sublime. These authors are describing more than a sexual encounter: they are dressing Romantic ideas of the infinite in the language and imagery of sexual attraction. The idea of youth in death is seen as particularly striking, suggesting that it is this juxtaposition of unlikely characteristics which provides the shock spark of desire.

Although I do not wish to engage in speculative biographical criticism, it is worth pointing out that the youthful mortality rate did not only affect the impoverished, illiterate classes. The artists of the century often experienced losses that were then romanticised as the subject of art. Nodier's young lover met with premature death, prompting Pierre-Georges Castex to remark that:

C'est pourquoi sans doute, presque toutes ses héroïnes meurent jeunes, de langueur ou de désespoir; mais souvent aussi, à l'image de leur mort est associée la pensée de l'immortalité.⁴⁷

Also, in her biography of Gautier,⁴⁸ Annie Ubersfeld emphasises the importance for his work of his childhood sweetheart, Marie or Hélène. This young girl, who is thought to have died in pre-pubescence, is proposed as the prototype of the sexually attractive young dead women who are resurrected in many of Gautier's *contes*.

Similarly, Poe's marriage to his thirteen-year-old cousin Virginia soon ended in her death due to a ruptured blood vessel. Many critics hold that his relationship to

⁴⁶Hector Berlioz, *Mémoires*, p. 275. The tone, vocabulary and style suggesting immediacy – passing from past tenses to present – in this extract resemble remarkably the experience of supernatural encounters narrated by Gautier, which are analysed in detail in Chapter Two, below.

⁴⁷ Pierre-Georges Castex, *Le Conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant* (Paris: Corti, 1951), p. 125.

⁴⁸Annie Ubersfeld, *Gautier* (Paris: Stock, 1992), p. 17.

this fragile girl was the more or less conscious inspiration for such tales as ‘Ligeia’ (1838) and such poems as ‘Annabel Lee’ (1849), which have as their conceit a dead and resurrected female beloved.⁴⁹ Poe’s resounding success amongst the French, often to the surprise of the English, may be seen to lie partly in his treatment of the themes of loss and mourning that is unrelentingly intense and melodramatic.

Yet, even if there is some discrepancy between these romanticised portrayals of dead bodies as beautifully ethereal and the social realities of disease, death clearly *was* raw subject matter for many literary figures. The period March-November 1832 saw a cholera outbreak in France, the details of which are recorded in Antoine Fontaney’s *Journal*, side by side with literary tittle-tattle from the salons. The following entry from 16 April casually juxtaposes a visit to the hospital morgue and a piano recital by Liszt:

Nous avons visité toutes les salles à peu près des hommes et des femmes, même celle du typhus. – Quelques-uns étaient bleus. – Tous ont l’air étonné et terrifié, les yeux profondément renfoncés et cerclés de noir. – Une pauvre femme avait les crampes. On la frottait cependant qu’elle criait misérablement. Une vieille femme toute violette montrait les dents. Nous avons rencontré en montant un mort qu’on descendait caché sous un drap. – On les range dans le caveau des morts dans leurs draps blancs chacun sur la terre. – On dirait des momies.

[...] Je vais chez Victor Hugo. – Liszt était au piano dans le salon. – Il nous joue une marche funèbre de Beethoven. C’était magnifique! Qu’il y aurait quelque chose de beau à faire là! Tous les morts du choléra se promenant à Notre-Dame avec leur linceuls!⁵⁰

The horrific experience of the visit is recuperated and fed into an imaginative drama which elevates the fear and horror into an aesthetic experience.

This game of imaginative *what if?* is taken up again in the next entry. In the cemetery, Fontaney sees a covered coffin: ‘c’était sans doute quelque belle et douce jeune fille...’⁵¹ As before, a real object, here the coffin of an anonymous cholera victim, gives rise to an imaginative and libidinal fantasy. Fontaney creates from this spectacle a fictional alternative to reality. He inserts the ideal object beneath the opaque covering of the shroud. The vital tension between terror and prurient delight and the play between lived experience and the libidinal edge of imaginative drama in

⁴⁹For a thorough account of mourning and the female corpse in Poe’s life and works, see Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body*, pp. 326-36 and pp. 366-67.

⁵⁰Antoine Étienne Fontaney, *Journal intime* (Paris: Presses françaises, 1925), pp. 132-33.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 134.

Fontaney's accounts are typical of what we will see in the necrophilic writing of the century.

The historian and diarist, Alphonse Rabbe, whose reflections on the nature of life and death are posthumously collected together in the *Album d'un pessimiste* (1835), draws attention to the paradox that fear should be the response to something that was not a stranger to the nineteenth century: the spectacle of death:

Pourquoi ce nom de *mort* vous épouvante-t-il? N'avez-vous pas déjà vu sans pâlir et sans trembler quelques-uns de ses ouvrages dans les cimetières et dans les batailles? La mort n'a rien d'étrange, c'est une connaissance familière, nous la voyons tous les jours.⁵²

It is perhaps not surprising that death should appear a daunting and shocking prospect to us in the late twentieth century, given our relatively sanitised relationship with it (a relationship which has, however, become more intimate and imposing since the discovery of AIDS). Yet Rabbe draws attention to the fact that however familiar one may be with it in the ordinary sense of the word, there will still be a relation of alienation and shock on contact with the idea of one's own death. There will still exist a complex system of associations which are hard to formulate and impossible to rationalise, and which constitute a relation to death that has more to do with internal emotional investment than the observation of social data.

Our relation will be marked by fear, and yet also, as he goes on to point out, by fascination and desire:

La mort, quelque effroyable qu'elle soit, a des amants puisque beaucoup de malheureux la souhaitent.

Oh! Quand pourra-t-elle m'éteindre de ses bras inflexibles et m'endormir dans le silence du cercueil!⁵³

and:

Quand nos plus proches meurent, le désir de les suivre devrait être plus sensible que le regret de les avoir perdus.⁵⁴

The vocabulary used in his musing on death suggests a concupiscence which, like the fear evoked earlier, goes beyond an immediate rational understanding. 'Amants', 'm'éteindre de ses bras' and 'le désir', coupled with the rapturous 'Oh!', suggest that the access to spectacles of death in the century allowed for a particular type of

⁵² Alphonse Rabbe, *Album d'un pessimiste* (1835) (Paris: Presses françaises, 1924), p. 71.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 73.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

emotional experience which, in the case of the writers discussed above, had its end point in art.

Necrophilia may well have been a preoccupation of the writing of the period because objects to stimulate desire for it were readily available in life. Factors such as the fashion for Romanticism, which doubtless affected the choice of the corpse as subject matter, and social factors such as the visible presence of the dead body, are not mutually exclusive. I have documented above several semi-factual accounts by nineteenth-century artists of encounters with corpses, which have much in common in terms of libidinal content and also in the choice of descriptive imagery and tone.

While it would be unwise to claim that any one century or culture had a particularly privileged or intimate relationship to death, I am positing that in nineteenth-century France there were various social factors which help to account for the documented fascination with necrophilia. Sexualised dead bodies in art are not isolated phenomena, and artistic content may be seen as a litmus paper of the fears, tastes and tendencies of a society. Those who did not have an artistic talent, or the desire to encode the meeting of desire and death in language, may well have ended up as a case-study of the medical discipline that I shall go on to discuss below.

The pathologisation of desire

The word for ‘necrophilia’ enters the French and other European languages some decades after the artistic production discussed above. In the indexes of texts such as Féré’s *La Pathologie des émotions* (1892) and Nordau’s *Entartung* (1892), necrophilia appears as one of a group of taxonomies designed to describe the aberrant sexual tastes of the modern European subject.

The vocabulary and intellectual frameworks for talking about sexuality that are today widely discussed, debated and, since Foucault, disputed in academic circles, did not come into existence until the nineteenth century. Indeed, until the turn of the century, the words ‘heterosexual’ and ‘homosexual’, and their complex associative knots of meaning around ideas of self-hood and identity, did not exist.⁵⁵

⁵⁵The two terms entered the English language with the 1892 translation of Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*.

‘Sexualwissenschaft’, translated as ‘sexology’,⁵⁶ was a branch of psychiatry that became prominent during the second half of the century with the aim of cataloguing the extensive range of sexual behavioural phenomena noted in contemporary clinical practice. As will be noted from the composition of the German word, emphasis was placed upon gaining *knowledge* of the sexual realm. The idea that sexual impulses and behaviour were open to scientific study and understanding, and therefore were controllable, is central to this discourse and a facet of late-nineteenth-century thinking. The predecessors of sexology, however, date back to experiments and theories developed earlier in the century.

In his essay,⁵⁷ Gert Hekma details how the beginning of the nineteenth century in France marked a change in attitude from the punishment of perverted activity to the desire to examine the cause of the perversion. Thus, the decriminalisation of sodomy after 1800 meant that ‘in 1843 three French doctors no longer examined the anus of a pederast’s victim, but instead studied the mental state of the pederast himself.’⁵⁸

This climate which encouraged searching within the practitioner’s being for the seeds of his act, led to Kaan’s dissertation, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1844) which posits onanism as the source of all perversions. For Kaan, perversions were points along a continuum: once a human being engaged in masturbation, same-sex intercourse, bestiality and violation of a corpse may follow.

The perception that sexual fantasy was the first step towards acting out and illness was soon to change. In 1849, Michéa published ‘Des déviations malades de l’appétit vénérien’, the starting point of which was a reported case of necrophilia. In this text he displaced perversions as products of mental over-activity and re-centred them as physiological phenomena. Perverted behaviour was thus seen as a symptom of a morbid biological condition. It is possible to understand this detour, from Kaan’s pre-psychopathological method to a re-centring on biological function, in the light of much of what is going on in other branches of medicine, philosophy and thought of the period. The section of this chapter which looks at degeneration theory (see p. 40,

⁵⁶Iwan Bloch (1872-1922) is believed to have coined the term.

⁵⁷Gert Hekma, ‘A History of Sexology: Social and Historical Aspects of Sexuality’ in *From Sappho to de Sade: Moments in the History of Sexuality*, ed. Jan Bremmer (London: Routledge, 1991), 173-93.

⁵⁸Ibid., p. 176. His source material for this assertion is Ferrus, Foville and Brierre de Boismont, ‘Attentat aux mœurs’, *Annales médico-psychologiques*, 1843, i, 289-99.

below), will put in context the tendency to view behaviour which differed from the norm as a sign of sickness.

In the writing of the sexologists, a constant tension is suggested between a focus on external behaviour and biological reality on the one hand, and psychological insight and awareness of the unconscious on the other. Similarly, the focus of sexology becomes less definite: is it the study of sexual behaviour or of sexual identity?

These dilemmas are to some extent visible within the work of the best remembered of these German sexologists, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who is responsible for inaugurating many of the techniques used by modern sexology.⁵⁹ The method of articulation of sexology's key works, from Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* to the Kinsey report, is the case study. Long descriptive passages of the erotic imagination, often in the patients' own words, characterise these works and often very little discussion or analysis follows. Where there are attempts to account for the causal relations of aberrant behaviour, they are attributed mainly to conservative hereditary explanations.

Psychopathia Sexualis comprises case studies which fall into two main categories: first-person accounts in the confessional mode, and short biographical narratives intercut with clinical observation and occasional quotation from the subject's own verbal or written accounts. The literariness, and the prevalence of the erotic imagination and fantasy, are immediately in evidence and sit somewhat uneasily beside the sparse scientific claims.

The following passages were both found in the case history of the 'lust murderer' Vincenz Verzeni. The first is Krafft-Ebing's clinical summary:

He is twenty-two years old. His cranium is of more than average size, but asymmetrical. The right frontal bone is narrower and lower than the left, the

⁵⁹See Renate Hauser, 'Krafft-Ebing's Psychological Understanding of Sexual Behaviour' in *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science*, ed. Roy Porter and M. Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 210-27. The essay undertakes a reading of the various editions of *Psychopathia Sexualis* which place increasing emphasis on the psychological aspects of clinical observation of perversions in such a way as to suggest that he is a forerunner of and influence on, rather than an opponent of, his colleague Freud.

right frontal prominence being less developed, and the right ear smaller the left (by 1 centimetre in length and 3 centimetres in breadth); both ears are defective in the inferior half of the helix; the right temporal artery is somewhat atheromatous.⁶⁰

The second is a quotation from Verzeni's confessions:

'I had an unspeakable delight in strangling women, experiencing during the act erections and real sexual pleasure. It was even a pleasure only to smell female clothing. The feeling of pleasure while strangling them was much greater than that which I experienced while masturbating. I took great delight in drinking Motta's blood. It also gave me the greatest pleasure to pull the hair-pins out of the hair of my victims.' (*PS*, 89)

This latter account, a personal recollection of pleasure, which lingers gleefully on the details of the act, is quite incongruous at the side of the long passage of physiological report. Krafft-Ebing's attempts to account for deviant fantasy and behaviour appear rather tame and ineffectual when read alongside the mystification which the murderer wants his own acts to retain. There is a suspension of analysis and understanding in 'unspeakable delight', which draws attention to the difficulty faced by sexology in its self-imposed task of gaining scientific mastery of desire.

Consider the following extract:

The story of a prelate [...] is of great interest as an example of necrophilia. From time to time he would visit a certain brothel in Paris and order a prostitute, dressed in white like a corpse, to be laid out on a bier. At the appointed hour he would appear in the room, which, in the meantime had been elaborately prepared as a room of mourning; then he would act as if reading a mass for the soul, and finally throw himself upon the girl, who, during the whole time, was compelled to play the *rôle* of a corpse. (*PS*, 92)

Though brief and, unlike the previous quotation, failing to dwell on the pleasure of the described act, the description of the case has some of the qualities of a Sadeian scenario. The drama of the erotic scene is brought into focus, with its theatrical overtones of dressing up and role-playing. The details of the necrophilic fetish objects serve as a writerly build-up to the climactic moment of consummation. Part of the problem faced by the sexologist is that in describing and engaging with the erotic imagination, his own 'objective' position is inevitably put in question and he is to some extent implicated.

Krafft-Ebing comments that the case of the prelate is 'of great interest as an example of necrophilia', but just what sort of interest is he suggesting we bring to our

⁶⁰Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, translation of the 10th German edition by F. J. Rebman (London: Rebman, 1901), p. 87. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and are marked in the text with *PS* and the relevant page number.

reading of his text? The 1901 English translation of the tenth German edition opens with the warning that this volume is only for the eyes of medical practitioners who may be instructed by it scientifically. The proscription is clearly in the interests of protecting those prurient readers who may be excited and corrupted by the material.

This seems to be suggesting two things. Firstly, it presupposes that doctors such as the author have such control over their own libidos that they are in no danger of being affected by such material. This implies the belief that knowledge brings with it the power of self-control as well as control over others. Secondly, a contradiction is revealed in the rhetoric of the work. Despite repeatedly explaining particular sexual perversions with recourse to the patients' individual medical histories and conditions, the prohibition suggests the awareness that such tendencies may be more universal and intrinsic to the human condition. To prevent the average person from reading the work is to suggest that the described acts and thoughts may actually have a power to influence the imagination of those with different physiological make-up. Implicitly, then, the *bien-pensants* of 1901 seem to consider that these apparent aberrations have wide-spread affective power.

Moreover, it is ironic that Krafft-Ebing should comment on Sade's writings in a footnote. He states that 'fortunately it is difficult to obtain copies today' (PS, 95). This suggests that despite the many claims of scientific objectivity in Krafft-Ebing's work, he fears that it may portend the same type of danger for the average reader as Sade pornographic writings were feared to do. This shows up the close relationship that literature and other discourses involved with the erotic imagination were felt to share.

In order to foil the prurient gaze of the uneducated, into whose hands a copy of his book may fall, Krafft-Ebing sometimes renders the most obscene or extreme details of the case histories in Latin:

A man, fifty years of age, uses in a Lupanar only girls who clad in white, lie motionless, feigning death. He violated the body of his own sister, *immissione mentulæ in os mortuæ usque ad ejaculationem!* This monster had also fits of fetichism for *crines pubis puellarum*, and the trimmings of their fingernails; eating them caused strong sexual emotions. (PS, 92)

This modest detour into Latin again strikes a jarring note with the acts described and the ecstasy their agents are said to experience. The word 'pleasure' occurs more times

than I could count in this work and, despite the methods he employs to sanitise the material, Krafft-Ebing does not succeed in reducing it to dry clinical observations. The form of the narratives and confessions does not allow for this, and the case histories retain emotional and erotic intensity and remain disturbing for the reader.

The discourse of sexology harnesses the rhetoric of sickness and pathology, and the authoritative weight of morality, in an attempt to tame the raw material of excessive sexual and destructive desire. Yet the tension between fascination and desire on one side, and the urge to 'tidy up', categorise and morally condemn on the other, is never fully resolved. The stuff of Sadeian narrative is never fully contained by scientific encoding, and the prurient reader is never fully distinguishable from the careful scientific commentator.

Although I have pointed to aspects of hypocrisy in Krafft-Ebing's simultaneous conservatism and prurience with regard to the material he describes, it is also true that works like *Psychopathia Sexualis* demonstrate an opening up of the world of internal desire, an externalisation of the hidden currents of mental life. Krafft-Ebing encouraged people to contribute case material, meaning that, for the first time, the pleasures of the mind and body were made articulable for ordinary people. There is something at least potentially revolutionary and forward-looking in this willingness to discuss sexuality and lay bare the erotic imagination.

Yet this potentially liberal-minded invitation to confess was always tempered by the tendency to pathologise unorthodox behaviour and interpret it as a symptom of mental illness. Deviancy was the starting point, and it was from deviant models that notions of normalcy were formed. Instances of real pathology, such as the cases of 'lust murderers', were presented as both the extremes of unacceptable perversion, and as the central focus of investigation and scientific interest. Moreover, the moral condemnation attached to murder for pleasure was implicitly attached to all forms of deviance, as if their proximity within Krafft-Ebing's exegesis revealed an inexorable link or natural progression.

Just as for Sade, the concept of nature, that which is deemed 'natural' in desire and behaviour, was the truffle after which the sexologists went sniffing. Unlike Sade, however, who strove to claim that nothing is unnatural, the sexologists classed almost

everything as pathological, with the result that the texts read as strikingly normative and limiting, even while dwelling in loving detail on the most destructive and unusual flights of fantasy. The danger is that interpretations leaning in the direction of universal human truth were derived from culturally and historically specific phenomena.

Yet it is important that we do not overlook the shifting of emphasis, however slowly it may have come, that was taking place through the work of these sexologists. The debates of the day focus on the shift from seeing sexuality in purely biologicistic terms, to the development of the psychiatric model that deals with the discrepancy between the internal world of desire and physiological reality.

Despite these rigid and pathologising tendencies, the nineteenth century saw radical changes in the range of conceptual apparatus with which to talk about sexuality. While there is evidence of a residual unease about the notion of plural sexual identities and desire structures, the case history gave ordinary people a chance to expose the extraordinary furnishings of their fantasy world. Also, through these innovations, the move was slowly made towards attributing more weight to psychological and emotional factors.

Degenerative forces

The interest in morbidity, which we have observed in the arts and psychological sciences in the nineteenth century, filtered into a new social science – degeneration theory – which was influential in France and elsewhere in Europe for much of the second half of the century. Since the theory touches on certain issues adjacent to this project, I will briefly examine some of its central tenets below.

Popularised in the 1840s in France by such medical thinkers as Bénédict Morel (1809-73) and Philippe Buchez (1796-1866), degeneration theory considered that the evolution of the species and its intertwining with culture had reached a point of impasse. Focusing on the supposedly growing phenomena of prostitution, criminality and cretinism, as well as sexual and social deviancy, the degeneration theorists had a wholly pessimistic view of their contemporary historical moment. They saw it as a point at which the species was, increasingly with every new

generation, regressing towards its atavistic roots.

There is a tendency to characterise the philosophical mood of the Western cultural Imaginary from the Enlightenment until the Second World War, as marked by the notion of advancement and of progress. Progress and growth are the lynch pin of such influential production as Darwin's theory of evolution and Bergson's treatise on the creativity which is the essential quality of humankind's continuation.⁶¹ Also, in the artistic sphere, writers like Balzac posit 'énergie vitale' as the source of the creative impulse. It is certainly true that in the nineteenth century most thinkers were working within a framework that was heavily influenced by Darwinism.⁶²

Yet, like the fascination with necrophilia, degeneration theory serves as evidence that the nineteenth century was also prone to philosophical pessimism and fear. The fear in question centred on the idea that man was regressing towards an atavistic genus which lay inherent within him, and which must be fought against and controlled from without by state and science. The central belief of degeneration theory – that the human genus must tend towards eventual decay – can be seen as an echo of the nineteenth-century discovery of the second law of thermodynamics. The law of increasing entropy holds that the available energy of any closed system will inevitably decrease over time. This idea, displaced from science as a model of human life, has had tremendous suggestive power on many subsequent thinkers. According to George Steiner, Lévi-Strauss once punned that 'our view of history is not an anthropology but an "entropology"'.⁶³

Among the first in France to speak of *dégénérescence* was Morel in his *Traité de dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales* (1857). Morel's concept of degeneration was of hereditary deviation from the norm, which was manifest in the deterioration of both physical and moral faculties. Physical signs of degenerative disease, such as hernias, scrofula and club-footedness, were inextricable from intellectual and emotional disturbances resulting from such aberrant abuses as

⁶¹Henri Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice* (1907) (Geneva: Skira, 1945).

⁶²Moll, a sexologist contemporary of Krafft-Ebing, was a strict Darwinist, and believed that the survival of the human race depended on strengthening the power of the 'Kontrektation' or relationship drive at the expense of the 'Detumeszenz' or discharge drive, and concentrating human sexuality into the framework of heterosexual married life, through which channel propagation would be a most likely issue. See Hekma, 'A History of Sexology', p. 182.

⁶³George Steiner, *On Difficulty and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 186.

alcohol, tobacco and opium, not to mention the reading of morbid or Romantic literature. The deterioration of the human species and that of civilisation were seen as linked and inevitable. The growth of urban populations and the rise of the masses were seen as noxious social symptoms, the only cure for which, according to Morel, was a 'moralisation' of the masses.

This opinion is shared by Taine, critic, theorist and writer, lauded by the Goncourts and famed for his dictum 'j'ai horreur de la foule'. In Daniel Pick's recent book on degeneration, he points out that Taine's writing during the 1870s-1890s can be seen as linked to the period's crisis in social optimism.⁶⁴

Taine's work comprises a 'psychopathology of the revolution' (*FD*, 68), taking the events of 1870 and 1871 and considering not only their immediate causes but the inheritance of degeneration which led to them. The effects of war are considered not only for those who lived through it but for future generations, so that the consequence of the human species undergoing a period of civil unrest would be a future crisis of greater magnitude.

The debate concerning heredity turned to questions of memory, which, in the writings of Taine and Théodule Ribot,⁶⁵ was seen as an imperishable entity which would not die as each generation died, but would increase in intensity with the passing of time. In this model, no event was ever truly forgotten: collective memory of violent events and atrocities provided a constant threat of the resurgence of the primitive. This is an idea picked up memorably by Zola in *La Bête humaine* (1890), which theorises the origins of the destructive masculine impulse to kill through a discussion of the atavistic history of the character of Jacques.

The term 'Entartung', meaning degeneration, was coined by Max Nordau in *Entartung* (1892). His work follows on from, and owes much to the work of, Morel, Charcot and the other French theorists discussed above. In it, he argues that civilisation had fallen prey to a terrible crisis of disease caused by the rupture between the human body and social conditions. Madness, suicide, crime and morbid or

⁶⁴See Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 67. Subsequently, quotations from this work are followed in the text by the abbreviation *FD* and the relevant page numbers.

⁶⁵Théodule Ribot (1839-1916), psychologist and philosopher, famous for *Les maladies de la mémoire* (Paris, 1881).

decadent literature were all symptoms of the modern disease:

We stand now in the midst of a severe mental epidemic; of a sort of black death of degeneration and hysteria.⁶⁶

Nordau evidently fears social change. His rhetoric is extreme and hyperbolic here, as in 'the world of civilisation is an immense hospital ward'.⁶⁷ The danger of social change is figured here by analogy with organic disease and death, so that the shadow of the dying/dead body stands in for the end of civilisation as a whole.

Reading the rhetoric of these theorists, one gains the impression that the human organism and ordered society were facing imminent demise. It is easy to see degeneration as completely split off from the language of enlightenment and progress. But to read only the law of degeneration in these texts is to concentrate too heavily on the pessimistic current in nineteenth-century thought.

In 1857, a Christian socialist, Phillippe Buchez, asked his colleagues at the Medico-Psychological society in Paris to consider the problem of just how a flourishing nation like France could contain within its population such inferior, degenerate and criminal races. As an evolutionist, he was passionately wedded to the cause of progress and in his early acknowledgements of the possibility of degeneration, had talked of it only as a non-European phenomenon.

The year of revolutions, 1848, caused Buchez, himself a political figure in the national Assembly, to take account of the breakdown of order and hierarchy in France. His articulation of horror at the uprising of the crowds, as reported in Castella's biographical work, is framed in just the metaphorical language of illness and the asylum that we have seen in Nordau: 'ce sont des scènes de la Bicêtre'.⁶⁸ Although Buchez remains a believer in progressive philosophy, his world-view is altered by the evidence of degeneration which he perceives in society. He retains the model of an evolving genus, but cannot fail to feel the tremendous weight of contemporary social pessimism. In this way, both trends of thought – evolution and degeneration – were kept in play within nineteenth-century social science.

⁶⁶Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (1892), translation of the 2nd German edition, trans. by George L. Mosse (London: Heinemann, 1895), p. 537.

⁶⁷Max Nordau, *Conventional Lies of our Civilisation*, translation of the 7th German edition, trans. by George L. Moss (London: Heinemann, 1895), p. 1.

⁶⁸Gaston Castella, *Buchez, historien: sa théorie du progrès dans la philosophie de l'histoire* (Fribourg, 1909), p. 31.

There is a sense that the theory of natural selection, without being an incorrect model, was failing to account for the poverty, social unrest, crime and discontent that people were seeing in the society around them. However, equally, it is wrong to see degeneration theory as the absolute antithesis of evolution, which would be logically a condition of stasis, an evolutionary impasse. Structurally, the theories work in exactly the same way, with one moving forwards and the other backwards. Through a twentieth-century lens, we can see the quantifiable phenomena of degeneration – the increasing racial mixture within society, the demographic centralisation that took place in the mid-century, the divergence of sexual orientation – as a sort of progress or evolution towards a liberal modern moment. In the eyes of the conservative degeneration theorists however, this interpretation would have been unthinkable.

It is possible to account for evolution and degeneration as the critical spaces in which, respectively, hope and fear could be embodied. This idea can be usefully understood in the context of Hegel's notion of the dialectic. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Hegel shows how a degenerative social climate could mark a necessary historical turning point for social progress. His discussion of the Amazonian warriors posits that in order to have reached the point of patriarchal 'civilisation' that we hold so dear, we have had to transcend the historical drama of savage matriarchy. In this model, the degeneration of the populace would exist as a necessary historical staging post, which would allow regenerative (and higher) social forces to rise in their wake. The metaphor of cyclical birth and decay can be seen to underlie the opposing philosophical tendencies of the period.

The language of degeneration, as we have seen, is full of biologicistic metaphors, and the degeneration of the individual psychiatric patient and the society as a whole, or the organic body and the body politic, can be read as echoes of each other.

The deviant behaviour of a few was seen as a reflection of the social macrocosm in the same way that the history of mankind and infantile sexual

development were seen to follow the same pattern.⁶⁹ It is perhaps at this moment that the sexual becomes actively acknowledged as a symptomatic facet of the social. As this examination of sexology and degeneration theory has shown, a strong tendency of the day is to attribute unusual or unorthodox behaviour to pathology, and any case of deviance is pessimistically assumed to be a symptom of greater social decay.

The degenerate voice of literature

In his survey of degeneration theory to which I have made frequent allusion above, Daniel Pick talks of two major moments within French history at which the trend towards degeneration theory were most prominent: the years following 1848 and the period 1880-1914. He asks ‘was there a classic age of degeneration and Decadence? If so did it begin with Baudelaire, Flaubert and Morel in the 1850’s?’ (*FD*, 14). If the psychiatric discourse of degeneration and the embryo of the decadent literary movement can be seen to have their inception at this moment, it is certainly possible to pinpoint forerunners and influences in the literary sphere at least a decade earlier.

The literary trends and movements of the early 1830s, of which Gautier, Borel and Philothée O’Neddy were a part, certainly resemble, both in the content of their literary production, and the political identities they constructed for themselves, the sort of behaviour feared by degeneration theorists. It is possible that the public disillusionment following the unsuccessful accession of Republican power in 1830, coupled with the subsequent poverty and unrest, may have led to the trend in morbid literature and art that sprung up in the early 1830s.⁷⁰

Daniel Pick claims that ‘the pathologising definitions offered by hostile social

⁶⁹The Hegelian idea of chronological primitivism, which holds that a child’s sexuality would be like a primitive man’s sexuality, is seen in Kaan’s *Psychopathia Sexualis* (Leipzig, 1844) and picked up by Krafft-Ebing in the later work of the same name. The sexologists believed that the history of mankind’s sociality and sexuality must have followed stages of social development analogous to a child’s sexual development.

⁷⁰To build up a picture of the group known variously as the *Petit Cénacle*, the *Jeunes France* and the *Bouzingos*, see Théophile Gautier, *Les Jeunes France: romans goguenards* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974) and Marcel Hervier’s introduction to Philothée O’Neddy, *Feu et Flamme* (Paris: Presses françaises, 1926), xii-l.

commentators contributed to the self definition of certain movements e.g. anarchism and literary Decadence' (FD, 41). Yet if this is true of 1848, it can be seen equally in the activities of the 1830s *Jeunes France* who pledged to fight against the philistinism associated with the new order of Louis Philippe. In stark definition to the ordered, progressive new *bourgeois* class, they cultivated an affectation of morbidity and eccentricity designed to shock. Just as later Baudelaire would 'épater les bourgeois', so the *Jeunes France* would often attempt to perturb their respectable middle-class neighbours by playing tricks on them. One such was to dress up a life-size doll in a shroud and to leave it in their yard, claiming to their neighbours that it was a corpse they had dug up. Their taste for the funerary ran to their use of skulls as drinking vessels and parts of human skeletons as household ornaments.

The group's literary aesthetic was characterised by the same hyperbole and melodrama. One particular tale by Borel, 'Don Andréa Vésalius, l'anatomiste' (1833),⁷¹ takes this fascination with using the corpse to shock and thrill to the heights of Gothic fantasy. It tells the tale of a young woman married to an elderly surgeon. The atmosphere of suspense built up by the narrative leads to the revelation that the eponymous hero is using in his experiments the bodies of victims he has murdered. In the 1922 complete works, the *conte* is prefaced by a contemporary engraving by André Hoffer, which depicts an old man, surrounded by the paraphernalia of medical experimentation, holding a scalpel above the abdomen of a beautiful naked female corpse.

While it is possible to read the morbid content of the young artists' games as artifice contrived to provoke a reaction, it is important that we do not overlook the fact that they used the physical reminders of mortality in a graphic and possibly unconsciously symbolic way. Anarchic literature may have been interpreted by the bourgeois class as a threat of political upheaval and social dissolution, but on a more personal level, it may well relate to an obsession with the idea of human mortality. The one becomes a metaphor for the other, so that the writers are using the very substance of social fear de-metaphorised and re-inscribed on a personal level. Borel's melodramatic tale of murder and human experimentation touches on the very stuff

⁷¹Pétrus Borel, *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols (Paris: La Force Française, 1922), vol. iii, 111-42.

that may later lie beneath the fear of degeneration. However, we should not ignore the fact that Borel casts the doctor as the murdering madman and situates horror within a corrupt medical sphere. This seems to be a deliberate mocking of the kind of assumptions that Krafft-Ebing would later make regarding the medical man's exemption from corruption by proximity to shocking material.

The period of the 1830s, then, may be seen as a precursor of the 1848 moment. The two periods are marked by political insurrection and show evidence of similar artistic tastes. The marked difference is that Baudelaire's Paris is famously the Paris of burgeoning modernity, when the fear of crime, sexual degeneracy and moral dissolution had reached their hey-day.

The portrayal of crime and sexual dissidence is increasingly predominant in the literature of the century in France and England alike. Balzac's realist tales of the Parisian *monde*, not the texts we would usually associate with decadent subject matter, are, in fact, intercut with allusions to the shadowy world of crime, passion and murder.⁷² Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle attempts to take the dual voice of scientist and transgressive experimenter, at once analyst of and participant in the murders of *La Bête Humaine* and Nana's fatal charms. This privileged role of the author, which allows for simultaneous scientific scrutiny and vicarious *jouissance*, can be seen as part of the reason why the degeneration theorists objected so strongly to literature of this type, even if they formulated their objections on scientific grounds. Zola, in particular, was vilified by Nordau: 'Does he think that his novels are serious documents from which science can borrow facts? What childish folly!' ⁷³

I have defined degeneration as the structural intellectual space in which fear of the future and the unknown may be articulated. To a certain extent, writers can be seen to side-step the fear of impotence manifest in the writing of the theorists. In their role as creators, they can choose what of social theory to incorporate and what to leave behind, what to comment upon and what to transform into beauty. Their

⁷²See among others, *Sarrasine* (1830), in which gender identity and heterosexuality are put into question and undermined; *Ferragus* (1833), where the two worlds meet in the figure of the ex-confidence trickster turned respectable, *La Fille aux yeux d'or* (1834-5), where incest and debauchery lead to murder, and *Le Père Goriot* (1834), with its famous figure of Vautrin, the gentleman criminal.

⁷³*Degeneration*, p. 489. For a discussion of Zola as a serious degeneration theorist, see Pick, *Faces of Degeneration*, 74-96.

creation of an alternative world is perforce affected by the intellectual and emotional currents that touch them, but the site of artistic production also provides a space for a cathartic working-through of desires and fears. Writing is thus the subject matter of theory and an alternative to it. The similarity in the fear and fascination of the individual before the spectacle of death (see my discussion of Berlioz, Fontaney and Rabbe on pp. 29-34, above), and the fear and fascination of the theorist of sexology and degeneration before the spectacle of moral decay, cannot be ignored.

The schizophrenic split voice is reminiscent of Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886). In this famous work, the idea of the degenerate seed contained within the seemingly flourishing civilised entity is fully explored. The rhetorical device we have noted throughout of taking the part for the whole, and vice versa, is nicely encapsulated in this work. The figure of Jekyll/Hyde, can be seen to stand in for the whole society cleft in two by the perceived dual attractions of sexuality and culture. Also it may emblematises the writer's role as doctor and patient, observer and observed, super ego and id. The split subject created is a both product of a sickening modernity, and a portrait of the nineteenth century's growing interest in the complex nature of identity and the role of the subject in her/his environment.

The function of necrophilia

I have examined above how writing about necrophilia in the nineteenth century may be both a way of re-encoding personal dramas of loss, bereavement and the fascination for death, and also a way of playing on the fears and social theories of the day. The alliance of the poetic persona with death is a way of demarcating, in the most extreme way, the marginal emotional and political territory which the artist maps out for her/himself in the nineteenth century. Following in the wake of Sade's libertine and Romanticism's noble criminal, the necrophilic writer elevates her/his aesthetic sensibility to the status of a cult, and we can suppose that s/he performs her/his artistic task with an equal mixture of self-purging and conscious manipulative intention.

The tendencies observed within the disciplines and theories examined above

have revealed two major currents. Firstly, sexology and degeneration theory reveal the desire to expose the internal world of sexual imagination and fantasy and to establish a body of knowledge about them that may be used to control social behaviour and stem the tide of moral degeneration. Thus, there are signs of apparent liberalism in encouraging the expression of desire, yet ultimately, the knowledge gained from such revelation would be used for the purposes of control and suppression.

Secondly, a counter-current is visible, which can in part be seen as an unintended result of the first. The rallying cry of sexology to investigate the erotic imagination of the human subject is contemporaneous with a proliferation of articulations of desire. Krafft-Ebing's scientific work and Sade's novels alike contain fantasies of a disturbing and extreme nature which are seen to touch the sensibilities of those who come into contact with them. Within the artistic community, Sade's works are re-digested and his reputation revived. He is seen to be capable of providing a vision of aesthetic and sexual rebellion with relevance for the nineteenth century. Simultaneously, death becomes the subject of imaginative fantasy, as both a sexualised object and as a facet of social reality recast in fiction.

In the light the nineteenth-century cholera plague, poverty and bloodshed, the idealisation and sexualisation of the dead body can be seen as a striving to overcome a fearful reality embodied in the social sphere. It can also be seen as the attempt to achieve the re-personalisation of death as a fantasised friend, lover or comforter, as seen in Baudelaire's lines:

C'est la Mort qui console, hélas! et qui fait vivre;
C'est le but de la vie, et c'est le seul espoir ('La Mort des Pauvres' *OC*, 126).

Almost a century later, a conceptual term is coined to express the human subject's desire for death. Freud's theory of the 'death drive', which posits, in a formula similar to Baudelaire's above, that death is 'the aim of all life', will come under discussion below.

1.2

Death and Desire in Psychoanalysis

The conflict of death and sexuality in Freud's works

*Et la bière et l'alcôve en blasphèmes fécondes
nous offrent tour à tour, comme deux bonnes sœurs,
De terribles plaisirs et d'affreuses douceurs.*

Baudelaire, (OC, 114-15)

Sexual perversion is the subject of the first of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905).⁷⁴ The promotion of perversion to first place means that it is the first encounter we have with sexuality in this work. This is perhaps appropriate, as the essay asserts that perversion is the primary mode of erotic experience for the developing human child. Yet, what is more, using perversion as a launch pad for a discussion of desire implies that Freud understands it as an adult psychical phenomenon as inevitable as 'ordinary' sexuality, just as its predominance in literature has always suggested.

It is clear that while psychoanalysis *ab initio* had much to say about perversion, this has continued to be a lively area of theorisation and debate for subsequent analysts. The current bibliography of psychoanalytic texts reveals many works on this subject, and it is the cause of much debate and controversy within the discipline.⁷⁵

While it is true that perversion is an early concern in Freud's work, the question of death, perhaps appropriately, takes precedence towards the end of his career. It is with the later writings on masochism and his controversial discovery of the 'death drive', that the focus of investigation and interest turns to questions of

⁷⁴Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, *Standard Edition*, VII, 125-245. All references to Freud's work are taken from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey, 24 vols (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1953-74). Subsequent references to this work will be marked in the text as *SE* with the relevant volume and page numbers.

⁷⁵See, among others: M. Masud R. Khan, *Alienation in Perversions* (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1979) and Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel, *Creativity and Perversion* (London: Free Association Books, 1985).

death, negativity and nihilism. Freud sets out initially to discover why humankind seeks survival, sexual satisfaction and reproduction, but eventually he finds himself turning to the tendency of the human organism to seek out its own destruction. In 1920, he will come to the pessimistic conclusion that it wants not only to die but '*to die only in its own fashion*' (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE, XVIII, 3-64, 39. Freud's italics).

Despite this strong focus on sexual perversion and death, the collusion of the two – the necrophilic phantasy – touches the conscious surface of Freud's work only occasionally, and in quite unexpected places. In the overt description and analysis of the perversions and their psychogenesis in 1905, necrophilia is barely mentioned and there are considerable theoretical gaps to be filled. Freud the theorist is always, somewhere in the rich texture of his writing, aware of the *conflict* between desire and death and also, equally, of the many forms of their mutual attraction and seductiveness, but conscious exposition and examination of these phenomena is rare.

In the short paper 'On Transience' (1916),⁷⁶ we find an allegorical address to this problem. Here, Freud recounts an anecdote of a country walk with a friend, whose distress before a beautiful landscape prompts him to reflect on the dilemma of whether a flower, or any beautiful object can really induce awe and appreciation when it is inevitably fated to die. Finally he proposes the following response:

A flower that blossoms only for a single night does not seem to us on that account less lovely. (SE, XIV, 306)

Although, on one level, Freud's response reinforces the triumph of beauty in life, in its material existence, the suggestion implicit beneath Freud's words is that impending absence may on some level be a factor in *enhancing* beauty. Doom adds that touch of piquancy which sharpens the experience of awe before beauty. This can be seen as approximating, on some level, the sentiment linked to the poetic tradition of *carpe diem*, which urges us to gather rosebuds while we may, or fêtes the beauty of a

⁷⁶I am grateful to Malcolm Bowie's book *Lacan* (London: Fontana, 1991), p. 8, where I first found reference made to this little known work by Freud.

woman even though (implicitly *because*), she is doomed to fade and die.⁷⁷

However, despite this gesture, Freud can be seen to concentrate mainly upon the *conflict* of life and death. This dualism is manifest in his psychical model of Eros and Thanatos, and in the fact that he asks which of the two is of primary, and which of secondary, importance. In this, he often overlooks the very factor to which he has drawn our attention in texts such as ‘On Transience’: their complementary nature and its attendant complexities and ambiguities. This complicity is largely unspoken and its frequent absence may be seen as the repressed content of Freud’s discourse.

However, in the course of his work, Freud moves slowly towards a model of life and death forces as intimately interdependent. The early *First Essay on the Theory of Sexuality* betrays little awareness of these issues on Freud’s part. His argument for the primacy of perversion relies more on description – an exhaustive list of the types of perverse sexuality encountered in clinical practice – than on analysis. The essay is rather reminiscent of Krafft-Ebing’s taxonomical methodology, as seen in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and it is clear that the sexologist is one of Freud’s principal influences here. This is an early moment in psychoanalytical perversion studies, characterised by a coy incertitude and a conservatism which reads as exceptionally normative.⁷⁸

In short, the First Essay does not draw our attention to that sense of complexity and conflict within perversion that will emerge through a comprehensive reading of Freud on the constitution of sexuality overall. I would argue that this is because it came at a moment prior to Freud’s postulation of the death drive. Only by approaching the later model of impulses which centres around the duality of life and

⁷⁷For a good example of a French poem expressing the sentiment of *carpe diem*, see Ronsard’s ‘A sa maistresse’ (Ode XVII) in *Œuvres complètes* ed. Gustave Cohen, 3 vols, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), vol. i, pp. 419-20:

Mignonne, allons voir si la rose
Qui ce matin avait déclose
Sa robe de pourpre au soleil,
A point perdu, cette vêprée,
Les plis de sa robe pourpée
Et son teint au vôtre pareil. [...]

See also Baudelaire’s ‘Remords Posthume’ and ‘Une Charogne’, in which the sadism implicit in this idea is given explicit expression.

⁷⁸The references to homosexuality (or *inversion*) and to female sexuality, for example, are startlingly archaic and have come under considerable criticism from later feminists and gay theorists.

death, can we begin to understand that conflictual, contradictory, suspenseful realm that is perversion. It is through the lens of Freud's concept of Thanatos that we will examine necrophilic desire as a Freudian perversion.

Beyond the Pleasure Principle is a groundbreaking text for Freud which bears witness to certain re-formulations and advances in his thinking. It is also a deeply personal and pessimistic text, revealing much of his own sadness at the aftermath of the First World War, and his frustration at his own ill health. The text sets out to de-centre previous Freudian assumptions quite radically: it overthrows the sovereignty of the pleasure principle, replaces pan-sexualism with a return to the inorganic and ultimately shifts the dualistic opposition of 'ego-instincts versus sexual-instincts' to a focus on 'life-instincts versus death-instincts'.

Freud's essay postulates the wish to return to an earlier, inorganic state as the primary and most pervasive desire of the human psyche:

We cannot escape a suspicion that we may have come upon the track of a universal attribute of instincts [...] which has not been explicitly stressed. It seems, then, that an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon...(SE, XXI, p 36).

The organism seeks death as the answer (and pre-ordained foreclosure) to the drama of life. Linked to masochism, the death instinct is in the first instance turned not towards the outside (as aggression), but towards the subject. It is, radically, not a drive to murder, but a drive to suicide.

The human subject described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is a self-obsessed creature, aiming very much to disappear whence s/he came, but still to be the object of her/his actions. S/he has the desire to embody the passive and active voice at the same time. This theory of instinctual life causes Freud to reformulate his ideas concerning primary masochism:

Clinical observations led us [...] to the view that masochism [...] must be regarded as sadism that has been turned round upon the subject's own ego. (SE, XXI, 54)

Now, however, Freud amends:

Masochism, the turning round of the instinct upon the subject's own ego, would in that case be a return to an earlier phase of the instinct's history, a regression [...] there *might* be such a thing as primary masochism. (SE, XXI, pp. 54-5)

This assertion instates a relation to self as the primary fact of human life. The ultimate

aim of the death-driven masochistic child would be the self-inflicted cessation of life at the earliest possible opportunity.

Proving the existence of a death drive is a problem for psychoanalysis, as the memories of such infantile nihilism are generally inaccessible to the adult patient. Moreover, Freud's later commentator, Jean Laplanche, points out that the unconscious of the inherently suicidal adult is incapable of conceiving of its own death. This means that the death drive is only ever visible when turned outwards in the form of aggression:

[N]ous n'accéderions à quelque pressentiment de notre propre mortalité que dans l'identification ambivalente avec la personne chère dont nous souhaitons et redoutons la mort à la fois.⁷⁹

Just as the essentially narcissistic child is forced by the impulses of survival to develop an anaclitic and later erotic dependency on the mother, so the suicidal adult must rely on the agency of the other to achieve the aims of deflecting, while still indulging, aggression. The non-ambivalent desire to return to the inorganic, which is Freud's initial definition of the death drive, is a characteristic of pre-verbal infant life only. Later, the life instinct fuses with the death instinct to make the picture more complex.

The notion of a pair of antithetic but interdependent forces is at the heart of Freud's mature formulation of sexuality and of the death drive. Laplanche explains that the original internalisation of conflict comes during the period of deferral between the genesis of sexuality in the infant, and the period of maturation at which '*la passion*' is explicable. This would mean that the death drive, embodied as aggression and frustration, is present, not as *one pole* of conflict, but as '*le conflit substantialisé*'⁸⁰:

⁷⁹Jean Laplanche, *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), p. 14.

⁸⁰Ibid., p. 208. This idea of the reflexive phase being the scene of internal conflict, later manifest as death drive, is interesting when compared with Lacan's idea of the entry of the human subject into language. This is the moment at which desire becomes expressible through words, which leads to a widening schism between speaking subject and object of desire that will never be bridged and that will lead to eternal frustration, sated only in death. Both are moments of profound internal division within and against the self.

Ce qui se défend dans cette vue freudienne, c'est l'individu en lutte pour sa survie, survie qui serait menacée par la sexualité...⁸¹

Laplanche distinguishes sexuality (the principal instinct of psychoanalysis) from Eros. Eros is a binding and cohesive principle, holding sexual energy together, cathecting an object; whilst sexuality (or Thanatos) is radicalised as ultimately unbound energy, the negative of life:

C'est que la pulsion de mort n'a pas d'énergie propre. Son énergie c'est la libido. Ou, pour mieux dire, la pulsion de mort est l'âme même, le principe constitutif, de la circulation libidinale.⁸²

The conclusion is that, ultimately, the death drive exists as the necessary concomitant of sexuality: indeed, it is the conflictual knot of unbound sexuality itself.

Psychoanalytic studies of literature usually take it as a given that texts reveal the stuff of cathected sexual desire (Eros), often with perverse content. Only occasionally do we see studies which take into account the part played by the destructive impulses in the creative process. I would suggest a need for such studies which understand the desiring (i.e. sexual) nature of Thanatos. One example of this sort of study is Peter Brooks' essay on death drive and narrative structure, in which he posits that the very nature of literary story-telling is that it is fuelled by a desire for its own end:

What operates in the text through repetition is the death instinct, the drive towards the end.⁸³

and:

Desire is the wish for the end, for fulfillment, but fulfillment must be delayed so that we can understand it in relation to its origin and to desire itself.⁸⁴

Brooks reads Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* as an exemplary tale of the relation between beginnings and endings. The desire to achieve a state of stasis is seen as the driving force that motivates the plot of any text as well as any life.

Marie Bonaparte's seminal work on Poe can be read as a pathography that takes Thanatos into account as intimately linked to the desiring sexual thrust of the text. Bonaparte examines the structures of repetition in Poe's works as revealing a

⁸¹Ibid., p. 84.

⁸²Ibid., p. 211.

⁸³ Peter Brooks, 'Freud's Masterplot' in *Reading for the Plot* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), 90-112, p. 102.

⁸⁴Ibid., p. 111.

necrophilic desire.⁸⁵ The visible manifestation of the death drive in clinical practice (and in literature) only ever comes through an eroticised tension within the sexual sphere: that is, through perversion. Usually, this is seen to be manifest as sado-masochistic phantasy and behaviour,⁸⁶ yet necrophilia provides a more literal model for the erotic content of death-driven perversion.

Defining the necrophile

*Aimez qui vous aima du berceau dans la bière;
C'est la Mort – ou la morte... Ô délice! ô tourment!*
Gérard de Nerval⁸⁷

Krafft-Ebing posited that necrophilia was a manifestation of sadism, involving a love of cruelty. His follower Moll contradicted him in 1912, by stating that since the basic property of a corpse is that it is beyond the point of feeling pain or of suffering in any way, the infliction of cruelty would be irrelevant.⁸⁸ So, although we may make certain links between the dynamic springs of necrophilia and sadism (as clinical perversions), the fact remains that the principal quality of necrophilia is that it does not just involve a subjugated object, but a dead one.

Noting the prerequisite of immobility in necrophilia, an analogy may be drawn with the dynamic model of fetishism established by Freud in his 1927 paper (*SE*, XXI, pp. 152-7). The fetish is an object, usually inanimate, which becomes invested with erotic interest and valued irrationally as a sexual object. In Freudian thought, the fetish object represents the desired phallus of the mother, split off and regained. It represents a double-edged, self-contradicting mechanism of disavowal and triumph: '*I know mother doesn't have a penis, but(because) here it is...*' In the case of necrophilia

⁸⁵ However, Marie Bonaparte's work reads Poe's necrophilia in biographical terms as a pathological reaction to infantile and subsequent trauma. This purely personal psychoanalytic portrait does not look at literary fashions and tendencies. In my introduction and the first half of the present chapter, I hope to have shown certain of the historical factors which may account for the prevalence of the necrophilic theme in the nineteenth century. It is by reading a group of writers together, as my thesis sets out to do, that one may gain an overview of the presence of perverse desire in literature and attempt to understand the universal aspects of the theme.

⁸⁶ See Hanna Segal, 'On the Clinical Usefulness of the Death Instinct', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 74, 55, 1993, 55-61.

⁸⁷ 'Artemis', *Œuvres complètes*, 3 vols, ed. Jean Guillaume & Claude Pichois, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), vol. iii, p. 648.

⁸⁸ E. Moll, *Handbuch von sexualen Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1912).

we see rather an avowal of what the unconscious cannot know: '*I cannot die, and yet here is a dead other which I recognise as being different, yet with which I identify, therefore I know that one (I) can die..*'.

Objectification is the necessary condition of necrophilia. The corpse represents the bodily, iconic proof of the abstract idea of radical absence. The perversion is Janus-faced in that it involves simultaneously a denial and an actualisation of the ambitions of the ego. If fetishism is based on the dynamic of loss and disavowal of a part-object, then necrophilia is the fetish of entire loss, of complete absence.

In *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1974), Erich Fromm takes up the character-based view of necrophilia proposed by Von Hentig,⁸⁹ and suggests a conflict within the human being between *biophilous* and *necrophilous* tendencies. Clearly, his model for this is Freud's postulation of life and death instincts, although he points out that for him the character traits do not carry equal weight, as they do for Freud. Biophilia is a 'biologically normal impulse',⁹⁰ while necrophilia is a type of pathology. Fromm describes a technique similar to fetishism (although he does not refer to it in those terms), to delineate the attitude of a necrophilous person towards his external and internal objects: they are split off, immobilised, negated.

According to Fromm, the necrophilous character is revealed in the following symptoms:

...the passionate attraction to all that is dead, decayed, putrid, sickly; it is the passion to transform that which is alive into something which is unalive; to destroy for the sake of destruction [...] It is the passion to *tear apart living structures*.⁹¹

Paradoxically, the necrophilous character reveals both an active desire for destruction (of self and other), and simultaneously, the urge to sate that desire, to return it to stasis. This tension is at the heart of psychoanalytic formulations of sexuality and of the life-death instinct struggle.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud tells us that the pleasure principle comes to serve the aims of the death instinct, contradictory though this may seem. By

⁸⁹H. Von Hentig, *Der Nekrotope Mensch* (Stuttgart: F. Enke, 1964).

⁹⁰Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1974), p. 366.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, p. 332. Fromm's italics.

this, he means that the ultimately desirable state of the nirvana principle (the radical nothingness that is the aim of death drive) is ambiguously close to the pleasure principle (the reduction of tension to zero), which is usually linked to the aims of the life instinct. Both states are constituted by the removal of internal tension and antagonism.

The paradox appears also in the dynamic of the erotic. Freud points out that in the case of sexual excitement, an initial increase in tension is pleasurable. In sex, the human being enjoys the rise of sexual excitement, but in the desire for the culmination of the pleasure in climax, he seeks to destroy, to put to rest this enjoyable tension. Since the outcome of the 'normal' sexual act is orgasm, we can assume that this latter desire, which stills (kills) the pleasurable tension, is a stronger force than the desire to maintain excitement.

From this we can observe that the very destruction of the pleasurable tension linked to Eros brings, even in normal psychology, a pleasure all of its own, linked to the fall in erotic excitement. The post-coital state of temporary satiation is more comparable to death than to life. This reveals something about the character of desire, inside and outside of the perversions. It presupposes that behaviour which appears to serve one aim may, in fact, be serving quite a different one. In speaking of female sexuality, Freud points out that a heterosexual, adult woman, who has successfully arrived at genitality, will *actively desire a passive aim*:

There is only one libido, which serves both the masculine and the feminine sexual functions [...] we must not forget that it also covers trends with a passive aim. (*Femininity*, SE, XXIII, 131)

Just as libido itself, whether in the service of 'masculine' or 'feminine' aims, is seen to be genderless, so in their combined aims, the conflictual couple of Thanatos and Eros may be synonymous. Laplanche has pointed out to us that whilst there is *libido*, there is no *destrudo*: the aims of both Thanatos and Eros are fuelled by the same force of sexual life.

This gives rise to several questions and observations. Firstly, a reading of Freud, Fromm and Laplanche provides material for several different theories of a drive for death. Death is one pole of conflict in the unconscious of the radically ambivalent adult (Freud), the very essence of unbound sexuality (Laplanche after

Freud), or a pathological character trait (Fromm). Unsatisfactory a conclusion though it may be, we can only suppose that the source of necrophilic desire and the dynamic behind its representation may be *all* of these things at different moments.

Secondly, if the death drive is capable (in sublimated forms), of producing art and literature, it is not wholly *negative* in the sense of negating all life. When Thanatos and Eros are in partnership, creativity may be the outcome. It is worth asking the question that Brooks gestures towards in his essay: is the death drive the source of an intrinsically *destructive creation*? Only in literary representation may we hope to detect the split off aim of Thanatos, which directs the course of sexuality into a destruction of the self and the object. This would be an instance of literary suspension in which the text carries its own negation in its meaning and the desire for the negation of meaning even as it strives to express.

According to the theories discussed above, in order to conceive of desire and death, the unconscious needs an *other*. We notice in formulations by Freud and Laplanche and in Fromm's description of the necrophilous character, that the essentially auto-destructive drive is always turned outwards in a symbolic destruction of the self through the agency, the proxy of an other. For writers, this other may be represented both by the dead bodies described in their literature, and also by the text itself. Below I will examine the formulation of the relation self/other in the perversions.

Freud's Thanatos may come to serve the aims of the necrophilic perversion at the moment at which the drive is turned away from the self and, cathecting an other, becomes sexual desire. The other represents the wish for a sexual object and the wish for the death of the self, in some way combined.

The status of *the other* in Freud, and then, more especially in Lacan, is very interesting, coming as it does as an intellectual inheritance from phenomenological philosophy, particularly Hegel. Death, the inconceivable other of life, is always imagined as *the death of the other*, a formulation which suggests a recognition (a misrecognition?) of the potential of the death of the self projected out into the other.

This complex interweaving of the ideas of self and other, me and not-me, is accounted for in psychoanalysis by the psychical processes of identification and

projection. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud tells us that it is impossible for the adult both to desire and to identify with the same object. He goes on to claim that this has not always been the case, and comments on a stage in the genesis of the subject:

At the very beginning, in the individual's primitive oral phase, object-cathexis and identification are no doubt indistinguishable from each other. (SE, XIX, 29)

Originally, then, the processes of desire and the need for self-recognition *are the same*. Laplanche has told us that in this remote infantile realm, the desire for sexual activity and the impossibility thereof lead the child to a surplus of aggressive, unbound energy that is the very heart of the death drive. Freud's sentence, quoted above, would suggest that originally we desire and identify with the same object, an object onto whom we focus aggressive (necrophilic) sexual feelings. A desire to return to the inorganic, which, according to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is the primary wish of the human subject, will be directed towards the undifferentiated dyad of self and other.

This observation of infantile drives would be consistent with our idea of necrophilia as the adult representation of wishes for the death of self, expressed through the agency of the other. Necrophilia, the desire for the other's death, would appear a more primary perversion than the other perversions described in literature because it plays out an underlying wish to return to what one never was, to a state of non-being. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud tells us that 'all the organic instincts [...] tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things' (SE, XXI, 37-38) and 'inanimate things existed before living ones' (38).

The very structure of necrophilia, according to our reading, is one in which identification and desire intermingle. It is a radically narcissistic type of desire, as its original object is neither mother nor father, but the self's auto-destructive death wish. Following this model, necrophilia may be read as the natural resort of the libidinal adult who retains a keen sense of the originally self-focused death-drive.

The structural model of necrophilic desire which I am proposing, using psychoanalytic theory, looks something like this:

1. Death drive = strongest impulse in pre-verbal infantile life. Inability to distinguish between self and other. (Radically a drive to suicide).	2. Formation of unconscious and awareness of others. Inability to conceive of own death, so death drive meets libido and is directed towards an object.	3. Sexual perversion = the necrophilic desire for the other's death (tempered by guilt and fear). May be sublimated or fed into literary expression.
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The implication, then, is that a deep internal need is met by the formulation ‘*the death of the other*’. The image of the dead other in literature would be the nexus of a complex relation to self and object. The libidinal desire for the death of the other, a concept arrived at by re-reading psychoanalytic theory, is one definition we might propose for the perversion of necrophilia.

Mourning

*Je suis le ténébreux, – le veuf, l'inconsolé,
Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie:
Ma seule étoile est morte – et mon luth constellé
Porte le soleil noir de la Mélancolie.*

Gérard de Nerval⁹²

One desires the death of the other. One desires the dead (fetishised) body of the other. And yet death, real or phantasised, tends to be attended by feelings of intense conscious guilt, loss and sorrow. Here, the question of mourning, or failing to mourn, comes to the foreground. Yet, as we have seen, the other is never a totally separate entity experienced as such. Through the psychical processes of projection, incorporation and object cathexis, the other becomes intimately linked to, and on some level melded with, the one.⁹³

The success of mourning relies upon the person coming to terms with the absence of the other and relinquishing libidinal attachment. Freud explains:

⁹² ‘El desdichado’, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. iii, p. 645.

⁹³The literature of my necrophilic canon is rich in the phenomenon which could be described as mourning as a perversion, or the failure to mourn leading to perversion. Examples include several of Poe’s short stories, ‘Véra’ by Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, Rodenbach’s *Bruges-la-morte* and also, from the texts that I shall study in close detail, ‘La Morte Amoureuse’, ‘La Cafetière’ and ‘Omphale’ by Gautier (see Chapter Two, below).

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachment to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition [...] This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. ('Mourning and Melancholia', *SE*, XIV, 239)

Freud's theory of mourning posits 'melancholia' as the pathological response to loss. If the withdrawal of love from the absent figure does not occur, libido turns in on the subject's ego, where it establishes an identification, sometimes a suicidal one, with the lost object. Confusion may then occur for the subject between the traumatic pain of loss and the awareness of desire. This identification with the lost object is of relevance to our study of the necrophilic impulse. It suggests an association with, or regression to, the earlier lost object that I have discussed above: that of phantasised self-annihilation.

The subject must find ways of coping with the absence of the loved object, a fact which becomes apparent not only in actual death but, within childhood, in the first occurrence of the mother's absence which is experienced as a permanent loss. Freud's first observation in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* centres on the compulsion to repeat, illustrated by the 'fort-da' incident of the child with his wooden reel. Freud proposes two interpretations of this incident: one being the instinct for mastery over the symbolic situation the child is seeking to represent: the absence of the (m)other:

At the outset he was in a *passive* situation – he was over-powered by the experience; but, by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was, as a game, he took on an *active* part. (*SE*, XXI, 16)

This attempt at mastery might be supposed to serve the interests of the pleasure principle. However, the second interpretation proposed by Freud is contrary to this aim:

Throwing away the object so that it was 'gone' might satisfy an impulse of the child's, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him. (*SE*, XXI, 16)

These observations suggest the co-presence of the urge for mastery and the sadistic tendency in the psyche's management of loss. The excess of the desire for mother's presence, that which falls outside of this comfortable formula, is the wish to make mother disappear at will, to orchestrate her absence. This can also be read as an echo of the earlier wish to make the self (now understood as self *and* mother) disappear.

Recent psychoanalytic work has much to say on the subject of mourning as a

perversion. Joseph Bierman's case study, 'Necrophilia in a Thirteen-Year-Old-Boy',⁹⁴ describes the analysis of a child who developed an obsessive preoccupation with the idea of becoming an undertaker. This obsession arose after his sister's accidental death. He turned his obsession into a game, almost like a young child 'playing at doctors'. Following Freud's 'fort-da' model, Bierman discusses this as the boy's attempt to turn the passive experience of his sister's illness, death, and funeral into an active experience which the boy could control. Through his repeated game of 'undertaker', the boy was attempting mastery of the traumatic experience and phantasising the maintaining of (posthumous) bodily contact with the other, the sister, for whom he experienced strong Oedipal feelings. I would add that through his identification with her, his own primary death wish was exacerbated, and then repeatedly played out.

In *L'Ecorce et Le Noyeau* (1987), N. Abraham and M. Török describe a type of incorporation which may occur on the death of a loved one, the psychical aim of which is to 'refuser le deuil'.⁹⁵ The concept of introjection, introduced by Ferenczi, is defined as the psychical incorporation of an object or part-object in order to enlarge the ego. Török differentiates between 'introjection' and 'incorporation' by stating that the former is equated to a 'processus' and the latter to a 'phantasme'. This means that the original model of introjection is filling the empty mouth with food, and later on, with language. Incorporation, on the other hand, is seen as a phantasy of introjection, involving de-metaphorisation and a shifting of suffering from the subject to the love object.

The chapter 'Deuil et Mélancolie' explores the way in which, in order to deny the dreadful pain of loss and mourning, the psyche phantasises having 'swallowed' that which has been lost:

La 'guérison' magique par incorporation dispense du travail douloureux du remaniement.⁹⁶

'Swallowing' the loved object itself removes the necessity to 'swallow' the loss and grief caused by their absence. No sense of pain or emptiness is experienced, as the

⁹⁴Joseph S. Bierman, 'Necrophilia in a Thirteen-Year-Old Boy', *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 31, 1962.

⁹⁵N. Abraham and M. Török, *L'Ecorce et le noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 261.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 261.

object itself fills the psychical gap of mourning. This process is described as the forming of an intrapsychic crypt. This crypt has its own, unconscious, 'vie secrète' in which the needs and desires of the incorporated objects are indulged. In dreams and slips of the tongue, these desires may be given expression.

The case of a kleptomaniac boy is cited as evidence for these formulations. In analysis, he revealed that his compulsion to steal items of lingerie was an attempt to meet the demands of his dead sister who was an incorporated object. Further analysis revealed that the boy and his sister had enjoyed an incestuous sexual relationship.

The cases described above are extreme examples of the way in which psychical energy, mobilised in the service of the other, may often be serving the self's disguised or misplaced desire. The dead incorporated objects do not only fill the gap of real loss in the mind of the bereaved relative. They also serve an identificatory and libidinal function by acting as both other and part of self. This uniquely allows the subject to phantasise and conceptualise her or his own death, in identification with the dead part of her or himself.

In *On the Nightmare* (1931), Ernest Jones claims that Oedipal guilt can be seen as one of the reasons for which mourning, leading to psychic healing, may be impossible. He also cites works from nineteenth-century German literature in order to illustrate the point made above, that the desires of the subject may be attributed to their objects.⁹⁷ In these works, the dead are capable of calling from beyond the grave to make sexual demands upon their still-living partners.

Such fantasies are analogous to dreams in which disguised desires speak through mythical or hybrid figures. Jones posits that the common *dramatis personae* of the nightmare, such as the vampire, werewolf and witch, are pathological phantasy figures for dead parents.⁹⁸ In this way, he posits the phenomenon of the nightmare as another manifestation of mourning as a perversion.

The work of Jacques Lacan reveals that absence is central to desire *per se*. The gap between my desire and the thing I want is the necessary condition of my

⁹⁷See Ernest Jones, *On The Nightmare* (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1931), p. 101 and p. 110.

⁹⁸We will come back to Jones's text and examine his insights in some depth in the course of the following analyses of individual literary texts (see pp. 76-80 and pp. 215-16, below).

continuing to desire. This ensures that any meaningful notion of fulfilment is impossible in life. The complexities of Lacan's writing on the themes of death, desire and perversion can only be sufficiently treated in a fuller account than I have space for in this thesis. On p. 237 of the conclusion, below, I will return briefly to Lacan to suggest future projects for reading a relation to death in his theoretical material.

Having examined these Freudian and post-Freudian theoretical accounts of mourning and the failure to mourn, we see that the structures of absence and presence they reveal are central to the formulation of necrophilic desire. Necrophilia mobilises psychical energy in order make a lost object return at will, but equally to enable a glimpse of self-loss in the perception of the other's death.

The denial of the desire for the dead

Hermann me dit : Je songe aux tombes entr'ouvertes!

Et je lui dis: Je pense aux tombeaux refermés!

Victor Hugo⁹⁹

Why is it that we have a wealth of literary examples of necrophilic desire and so little ready-made theorisation, even if the theorists touch upon contiguous and analogous issues with considerable frequency? This avoidance of necrophilia *tout court* can be observed in the works of the sexologists, of Freud and of later writers.

In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Krafft-Ebing writes in the most emotive terms on the subject of necrophilia. He states that it is clearly an extreme and repulsive manifestation of a pathological condition and beyond decent consideration:

Necrophilia: This horrible kind of sexual indulgence is so monstrous that the presumption of a psychotic state is, under all circumstances, justified [...] In any case, an abnormal and decidedly perverse sensuality is required to overcome the natural repugnance which man has for a corpse, and permit a feeling of pleasure to be experienced in sexual congress with a cadaver. (*PS*, 580)

The emphasis is placed upon disgust, shame and morality rather than upon the desire to understand and analyse. Moreover, in several of Krafft-Ebing's other listed perversions, to which I have already made reference (see pp. 36-40, above),

⁹⁹ 'À Quoi songeaient les deux cavaliers dans la forêt', *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. Pierre Albouy, 3 vols, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), vol. ii, pp. 655-56.

necrophilic elements are quite clearly to be found. Examples include sections on ‘Sadistic lust murder’ (*PS*, 82-85), ‘Anthropophagy’ (*PS*, 85-89), and ‘Mutilation of corpses’ (*PS* 90-95). It seems that only when it is isolated, and accorded its scientific name as a medico-legal category, can necrophilia strike such a chord of apparent terror in the sexologist.

In the first of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud openly acknowledges his debt to the sexologists, who fulfil the role of informative antecedents as well as an authority against which to argue. Freud’s obvious innovations in this area are in proposing a model of polymorphous sexuality as a universal stage of human development, and in his willingness to discuss such sexual taboos as incestuous desire in a non-moralising tone. Having said this, consider Freud’s attitude of wariness around the theorisation of necrophilia:

Nevertheless, in some of these perversions the quality of the new sexual aim is of a kind to demand special examination. Certain of them are so far removed from the normal in their content that we cannot avoid pronouncing them ‘pathological’. This is especially so where (as, for instance, in cases of licking excrement or of intercourse with dead bodies) the sexual instinct goes to astonishing lengths in successfully overriding the resistances of shame, disgust, horror or pain. But even in such cases we should not be too ready to assume that people who act in this way will necessarily turn out to be insane or subject to grave abnormalities of other kinds. Here again we cannot escape from the fact that people whose behaviour is in other respects normal can, under the domination of the most unruly of all the instincts, put themselves in the category of sick persons in the single sphere of sexual life. (*SE*, VII, 161)

The words ‘pathological’, ‘disgust’ and ‘sick persons’ make the tone of this passage from Freud hard to distinguish from Krafft-Ebing’s passage on necrophilia. Admittedly, in both cases, Freud and Krafft-Ebing are describing *manifest behaviour* rather than phantasy or literary representation. Still, for two writers who aim to push forward the study of sexuality by open discussion of the perversions, the quoted passages reveal a surprising reserve. This is all the more surprising in the case of Freud since, as I have examined above, he actually instates death right at the heart of sexuality.

In order to see if the more sexually repressed and repressive climate of the time could have influenced these coy accounts of necrophilia, I surveyed some late-twentieth-century standard psychology and sociology texts and found interesting similarities with the two *fin-de-siècle* theorists discussed above. A particularly

interesting rhetorical device was found in Kenneth Plummer's sociology text *Sexual Stigma* (1975). He wishes to show the wide range of sexual perversion visible in society, and on four different occasions he uses necrophilia as the extreme yardstick of aberration. Two examples of this device follow:

There is a world of difference between casual norm violation in bed between husband and wife consensually, and *a necrophiliac driven day after day to seek corpses, real or imaginary*, and organizing his life around this pursuit.¹⁰⁰

and

All sexual experiences become socially organized. No matter what form sexuality takes – *from marital copulation through to necrophilic murder* – a social pattern is assumed.¹⁰¹

While Plummer's assertions may well be accurate, he misses, as a careful sociologist, the implicit meanings in the *literariness* of his own text. His rhetoric points unintentionally to an intrinsic paradox: necrophilia is present as the epitome of aberration, forced to the parameters of experience. Yet its very extremity, the fact that he should so readily choose it for this role, implies that it is nonetheless a figure at the heart of perversion, endemic to it.

The most telling fact is that it is only in creating comparative binary formulations that Plummer mentions necrophilia. There is no attempt anywhere in the book to theorise, explore or explain it. It is used only to signify the 'other' of 'comprehensible' sexual perversion. In this, it becomes a meta-perversion: it is that which lies one step removed from what can be explained.

Thus, I should like to propose that in many ways, necrophilia has been, and still is, the 'Dark Continent' of perversion studies, the blind spot of theory. The tendency to mention it without supporting analysis or comment only adds to the sense of shock and mystification surrounding this concept.

What are we to make of this reluctance to admit necrophilic impulses as part of human nature? Regarding the contemporary reception of his work, Freud commented that, for scientists and public alike, his revelations concerning sexuality, particularly infantile sexuality, were met with a hostile unwillingness to accept. Freud

¹⁰⁰ Kenneth Plummer, *Sexual Stigma: an Interactionist Account* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 72. My italics

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 85. My italics. The other two examples of this rhetoric occur on p. 65 and p. 209 of *Sexual Stigma*.

interpreted this as a deep denial of what is most profound within us. Following Freud's own analysis then – that we refuse to see the things which are closest to us, which most threaten our sense of what we wish to be – we can deduce that Freud himself is reluctant to come to terms with death-desire couple. In the early works, he is obsessed with sexuality. In the later works, we see what Laplanche describes as a *Zwang* towards auto-destructivity. Yet throughout, the linking of sexuality and death remains a textual *non-dit*.

In the first of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, it is stated that the range and scope of sexual object-choice for the polymorphous infant is unlimited. It is only because of social demands for individual repression that what was once desired is shunned and becomes shameful or abhorrent:

Our study of the perversions has shown us that the sexual instinct has to struggle against certain mental forces which act as resistances, and of which shame and disgust are most prominent. It is permissible to suppose that these forces play a part in restraining that instinct within the limits that are regarded as normal; and if they develop in the individual before the sexual instinct has reached its full strength, it is no doubt that they will determine the course of its development.

(footnote added to above, 1915) On the other hand, these forces which act like dams upon sexual development – disgust, shame and morality – must also be regarded as historical precipitates of the external inhibitions to which the sexual instinct has been subjected during the psychogenesis of the human race. We can observe the way in which, in the development of individuals, they arise at the appropriate moment, as though spontaneously when upbringing and external influence give the signal. (*SE*, VII, 162).

As in the sexual development of the social being, the history of theory seems to have bowed to the same forces of shame and disgust regarding the subject of necrophilia. This widespread silence means that there have been hardly any previous attempts to delineate a perverse necrophilic Imaginary in either psychoanalytic studies or literary studies.

Whilst many theorists feel necrophilia to be beyond discussion (even if, like Freud, they have touched on its significance in an indirect manner), literature has not been so coy. The nineteenth-century French writers I shall study below embrace ideas of outrageousness, marginality and decadence in their texts. Yet one of the authors I will deal with in depth, Baudelaire, is a major name in the canon of European Literature. It seems that literary necrophilia can appeal to the psyches of its readers, that it becomes acceptable to us through its mediation in aesthetics. Even if literary

scholars have avoided talking about it, Baudelaire's very overt morbid sexuality has touched a massive reading public.

Thus, a revitalising re-interpretation of the nineteenth-century texts should open up the dichotomy of the ambivalent pathologisation of necrophilia. It aims to address its status, both as the furthest limit of human aberration, and as a persuasive textual means of expressing the human desire for both life and death. From my reading of psychoanalysis, it would seem that destructive, if not manifestly necrophilic tendencies are right at the heart of human psychical life. However, the social being does not tend to indulge *en masse* in the execution of her/his wildest impulses, for example those of murder and rape. Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) describes the implicit social contract into which the subject enters, which is built on the necessary construction of resistances on the part of the psyche (guilt and shame) to the subject's anti-social impulses. By means of this renunciation of libidinal pleasure, civilisation is maintained at the expense of total individual freedom. The expression of these forbidden tendencies is the role of dreams and, of course, of literature.

The preponderant expression of necrophilic sentiment in the nineteenth-century texts can be read as a way of 'making safe' this destructive impulse, of simultaneously containing, defusing *and* indulging the impulse. It is a deflection/sublimation, which however, in turn is capable of erotic stimulation. This echoes contemporary debates on pornography which question how far it is safe (and indeed helpful) to diffuse images and fantasies as a means of sublimating and working through sexual tension.

One view is that Baudelaire, Gautier and Rachilde serve a social function by encoding, within literary language, desires which usually go unexpressed. The eroticised idealisation of death, murder and the corpse in imaginative literature may function as a working-through of ambivalent desirous and guilty impulses. Yet also, such writing is a permanent monument to desire which is encrypted in words. Like the intra-psychic crypts described by Abraham and Török, which occur as a result of the failure of mourning, necrophilic writing is the failure to repress completely the destructive impulses. It is, to use Kristeva's terminology, the disruptive emergence of

the Semiotic in the body of the Symbolic.¹⁰² In this analysis, the power of such literature is immense.

This notion of desire in language suggests an implicit relation between psychoanalysis and literature, which works in inverse fashion to the one usually posited. Rather than just analyse literature with psychoanalysis, literature may be used to illustrate the silence on the subject of necrophilia in theory. However, psychoanalysis is not redundant here. Reading it against itself, but using its own tools, I have attempted to account for a repression and denial of what is implicitly present in the weft and warp of Freudian theory.

I must inject a final note of caution, however, before beginning a reading of the literary texts. The fact of literature's privileged relation to desire does not ensure that all the texts discussed in the course of this thesis will be equally semantically rich or over-determined. It would be foolish to suppose that necrophilic content were in itself a guarantee of literary quality. Only at its highest point of expression is this collusion of Eros and Thanatos a model of potent creativity.

Case by case, I will undertake qualitative evaluative work of the texts under study. Readings will focus on the varying levels of complexity and success with which the technical work of the text and its libidinal subject matter are brought together. An understanding of the particular creative nature of the necrophilic imagination, and of the necrophilic nature of the creative imagination, may allow for a new critical perception with which to assess literary production and re-assess existing critical opinion and prejudice.

¹⁰² See Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique: l'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), for a discussion of the disruptive and revolutionary potential of artistic form and *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), for a discussion of desire in language.

Chapter Two

Théophile Gautier and Life within Death

*C'est de nos vrais bosquets déjà tout le séjour,
Où le poète pur a pour geste humble et large
De l'interdire au rêve, ennemi de sa charge:
Afin que le matin de son repos altier,
Quand la mort ancienne et comme pour Gautier
De n'ouvrir pas les yeux sacrés et de se taire,
Surgisse, de l'allée ornement tributaire,
Le sépulcre solide où gît tout ce qui nuit,
Et l'avare silence et la massive nuit.*

Stéphane Mallarmé¹⁰³

Despite his somewhat modest critical following today, Gautier was one of the most respected and admired writers of his time. His writing career extended from the early days of the 1830s, when he formed part of the rebellious *Jeunes France*, to the days of the mid-nineteenth century when he became known as the major exponent of the anti-utilitarian aesthetic theory of *l'Art pour l'Art*.

The esteem that Gautier's contemporaries felt for him is most clearly evidenced by Baudelaire's dedication to Gautier in *Les Fleurs du Mal* where he names him a master of the poetic art. Moreover, Gautier was to feature alongside Baudelaire, Poe and Verlaine in the series of *tombeaux* poems written by Mallarmé as a tribute to great dead poets. I would suggest that at least part of this following stems from the taste for a morbid aesthetic that colours all of his writing, many traces and expansions of which can be seen in the work of writers who will succeed him. An apparent paradox is visible if we consider the chronological course of Gautier's works: the Romantic desire to give life to the phantasms of imagination, seen in the early short prose, appears to be at odds with the emergent voice of mid-century Gautier which evokes the harsh, sparkling, embalmed surfaces of words and images in *Émaux et Camées*. Yet these modes may be read as two sides of the same aesthetico-libidinal coin. The life-death dialectic preoccupies the whole of his writing career, and while his style may differ considerably between the *contes fantastiques* and *Émaux et Camées*, we will see that the themes treated reveal a constant underlying obsession.

¹⁰³Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Toast funèbre' in *Œuvres complètes*, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 54.

2.1

The Necrophilic Nature of the *Conte Fantastique*

*La résurrection de la morte aimée, la volupté vivante de la
disparue, tout cela revit dans l'œuvre de Gautier presque
page après page...*¹⁰⁴

In his work, *Le Conte fantastique en France*, Castex expresses the view that 'L'exploration du mystère n'a jamais été conduite avec autant de passion qu'aux environs de 1830.'¹⁰⁵ Gautier, writing during the 1830s in the genre of the *conte fantastique*, takes this fascination with the unknown and the unknowable to a noteworthy height of literary expression.

Many of Gautier's stories centre on the theme of the revenant, the beautiful beloved who is lost and re-found by means of ambiguous hallucinatory fantasy during some altered state of consciousness: a soporific, dreamy state in the case of 'La Cafetière' (1831), 'Omphale' (1834) and 'Le Pied de momie' (1840), an intense, rapturous, guilty sexual desire in what many consider to be his finest *conte*, 'La Morte amoureuse' (1836). It is of course ambiguous to speak of tales representing a fantasy mode and recounting encounters with revenants and vampires as truly necrophilic: the bodies in question are often presented under an aspect which is not totally dead and not totally alive. However, this mode, this suspension of absolutes, can reveal much about the disguised methods of desiring, discussed in the chapter on psychoanalysis, that may be uncovered beneath literary production.

The genre of the *conte fantastique* has come under much discussion by literary historians (Castex, 1951) and theorists (Todorov, 1970), as well as social theoreticians such as Caillois (1969), and while its relation to the unconscious, morbidity and dreams has been briefly picked up by a few (Van der Tuin, 1933; Ponnau, 1987) it has not been fully explored. The number of critics writing on the nature of the *conte fantastique* suggests that its impact upon the public of the time was considerable and

¹⁰⁴Annie Ubersfeld, *Gautier* (Paris: Stock, 1992), p. 17.

¹⁰⁵Pierre-Georges Castex, *Le Conte fantastique en France*, p. 56.

that still today it provides a rich source for any discussion of the nature of *literariness*. The fact that most of Gautier's *contes* appeared first in journals means that they received a wide general readership, and their publication helped to cement the trend for the macabre, the bizarre and the grotesque which Cazotte (1719-92), Hoffmann (1776-1822) and Nodier (1780-1844) had already initiated in France.¹⁰⁶

The literary mechanisms revealed at the heart of the *fantastique* suggest that it is a particularly apt example of the way in which writing may be revelatory of the darker, hidden recesses of human desire, the eruption of the unconscious. It addresses the questions of perception in a particular way: by adopting a double-sided mirror which sees both the internal and the external world of experience, sometimes simultaneously. Castex comments that the fantastic marks 'une incursion brutale du mystère dans le cadre de la vie réelle',¹⁰⁷ while for Caillois, *le fantastique* 'manifeste un scandale, une déchirure, une irruption insolite, presque insupportable, dans le monde réel...'¹⁰⁸ He goes on:

Le fantastique suppose la solidité du monde réel, mais c'est pour mieux la ravager.¹⁰⁹

Le réel, that which materially *is*, becomes a key notion for Gautier, celebrated in his assertion that he is a writer for whom 'Le monde extérieur existe'. But it seems that if it exists, it is only by dint of being filtered through the purely subjective. In Gautier's world the concretely 'real' is always in danger of being threatened by another dimension of 'real' and overturned. In 'La Cafetière', the rapturous, hallucinating narrator comments:

Je n'avais plus aucune idée de l'heure ni du lieu; le monde réel n'existait plus pour moi, et tous les liens qui m'y attachent étaient rompus...¹¹⁰

It would seem, then, that the fantastic is the realm in which the everyday, the

¹⁰⁶In Gary Cummiskey's *The Changing Face of Horror: A Study of the Nineteenth-Century French Fantastic Short Story* (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), a distinction is made between *contes* produced in Gautier's period (1830s and 40s), seen to be inspired by Hoffmann, and those at the end of the nineteenth century inspired by Baudelaire's translations of Poe.

¹⁰⁷Pierre-Georges Castex, *Le Conte fantastique en France*, p. 8.

¹⁰⁸R. Caillois, *Fantastique* (Paris: Club Français du Livre, 1958), p. 3.

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹¹⁰Théophile Gautier, 'La Cafetière' in *Contes fantastiques* (Paris: Corti, 1962), p. 18. All references to Gautier's *contes* are taken from this edition. Subsequently, page references will be given after the quotation in the body of my text. Original publication dates for the *contes* from which I shall quote are as follows: 'La Cafetière' (1831), 'Omphale, histoire rococo' (1834), 'La Morte amoureuse' (1836), 'Le Pied de momie' (1840), 'Arria Marcella' (1852).

banal, the representable meets with the unknown, the uncanny (*unheimlich*), the ineffable. The strangeness of the tales come from their forming a bridge across a gulf of perception and understanding. The *conteurs*, like Freud and the theorists discussed in the previous chapter, are trying to represent the unimaginable, that which cannot easily fit the grid of accepted systems of signification.

However, there is a problem with accepting this somewhat simplistic view that reality is *only* that which is everyday/external, while un-reality, as fantasy, is that which may be experienced subjectively and internally by the protagonist/writer. In the surrealist manifesto, Breton writes the following:

Ce qu'il y a d'admirable dans le fantastique, c'est qu'il n'y a plus de fantastique: il n'y a que le réel.¹¹¹

Breton is pointing out that the genre of the *fantastique* engineers an enlargement of our perception of what may be classed as reality. It may be said to focus, not on the rupture between the everyday and the unfamiliar, as Caillois would have it, but on a different definition of the real, a definition that places the realities of perception, of imagination, of screen memory and phantasy, desire and emotion at the very heart of a world of textual reality.

These two slightly different perceptions of the relation of the *fantastique* to the real are not however incompatible, and our theoretical discussion of psychoanalysis may help us to reconcile the two viewpoints. That which is emblematised by the real in the usual sense of the word - the concrete world, chronology, the laws of physics - forms only a part of our cognitive processes of experiencing, it is only what we *consciously* and rationally perceive. Yet reality can be signified equally by absences, and this is the substance of the writers' *enjeu*. The perception of absence and the mechanisms of readjustment discussed by Freud in 'Mourning and Melancholia'¹¹² are significant for a discussion of fantastic literature. The conscious realisation of loss and the foregrounding of absence are just as *real* to human experience and perception as a

¹¹¹André Breton, *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924) (Paris: Pauvert, 1962), footnote, p. 28.

¹¹²Consider the passage from Freud (already quoted above on p. 62), that concerns the psyche's process of re-adjustment to reality following bereavement: 'Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachment to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition [...] This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis.' 'Mourning and Melancholia', *SE*, XIV, p. 239.

table, a chair or a *cafetière*. Just as the psyche must re-adapt to sudden loss, a shift in consciousness to focus on the *absence* of the furnishings of everyday reality may be used to signify textual reality in the *contes*.

Moreover, the *fantastique* is the marker of a moment of uncertainty, of hesitation between the rational and irrational. Todorov comments:

Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel.¹¹³

The fantastic encounter marks a moment at which ordinary knowledge and definition are not possible. The door between the banal and the extraordinary is left gaping open. It is not surprising that this literary generic convention should be popular with those writers who wish to call into question the nature of perception and foreground the irrational realm of desire as the primary level of textual reality.

A near contemporary of Gautier, Ernest Hello, elucidates beautifully the potential for the *fantastique* to explore both types of reality, the conscious and the unconscious, the concrete or tangible and the perception of absence, and he brings into line the contrasting views that Caillois and Breton will later offer:

Le monde fantastique n'est pas un monde différent du nôtre; c'est le monde visible éclairé par le monde invisible; le voile est levé, voilà tout.¹¹⁴

Hello highlights how the *fantastique* represents the ideational content of psychical reality: potentially real events and real beings are symbolically transformed into imaginative phantasy forms.

The psychoanalytic correlative of this would be the way in which hysterical symptoms can be produced to mask underlying, repressed traumas.¹¹⁵ More saliently, a link may be found with the function of dreams, which, according to Freud, is to make manifest some desire on the part of the patient that has been repressed. The dream matter will be in some way a distorted representation of the original wish. An example is the way in which characters in dreams often appear transformed under the psychical mechanisms of displacement or condensation.

¹¹³Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 29.

¹¹⁴Ernest Hello, 'Du genre fantastique', *Revue française* XV. Nov. 1858, p. 35.

¹¹⁵See the famous clinical example of Dora's hysterical cough in *Fragment of an Analysis of a case of Hysteria*, 1905, *SE*, VII, p. 3.

Dreams and deathly desires

Dreams feature heavily in the thematic content and as structuring principles within the plots of fantastic fiction, both of Gautier and of his contemporaries. Uncontrollable phantasy is represented within the mode of the genre itself. Dream or nightmare as a symbol is present both at the level of lexical content, in the form of similes and images ('J'étais, tout éveillé, dans un état pareil à celui du cauchemar...' ['La Morte amoureuse', 84]) and as a structuring principle: waking from a dream is often presented as a possible 'logical' outcome of these forays into the supernatural.

The nature of the recurrent dream-like states which feature in the *contes fantastiques* deserves some analysis. The presence of terror is often described in terms of intense sensuous reaction:

Une angoisse effroyable me tenaillait le cœur ('La Morte amoureuse', 83)

Une terreur insurmontable s'empara de moi, mes cheveux se hérissèrent sur mon front, mes dents s'entre-choquèrent à se briser, une sueur froide inonda tout mon corps. ('La Cafetière', 13)

Here the stimuli affecting the physical and internal mental state are linked in an ambiguous psychosomatic blend, so that the notion of unity of self is preserved and the fear is registered both by the mental faculties and the body.

Similarly, alongside these descriptions of superlative terror are found, in equal numbers, passages where the experience of the fantastic brings with it lubricious longing, pleasure and desire, which envelop the senses as well as perception:

Pourtant cet état n'avait rien de pénible. J'étais inondé d'une joie ineffable et j'aurais toujours voulu demeurer ainsi... ('La Cafetière', 17)

An enduring ambivalence, a strange admixture of thrill and fear underlies these *contes*. Excitement and the momentary negation of fear often lie alongside admission of a sly terror, as if one were not possible without the other.

The description of the state of mind and sensuous perceptions of the characters in fantastic fiction is heavily suggestive of the nightmare as discussed by Ernest Jones:

[T]he prominent manifestations of Nightmare are seen to be an overmastering dread and terror of some external oppression against which all the energies of the mind appear vainly to be fighting.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶Ernest Jones, *On The Nightmare*, p. 40.

Jones describes the nightmare as a cloying, scary dizziness that seems to take possession of the physical as well as the mental faculties of the dreamer. He tells how the dream-experience which is signalled by fear and dread is often accompanied by intense sexual feeling and even emission in certain cases.

This is explained by the theory that the repressed content of the nightmare is always a sexual desire which cannot be expressed:

The association in general between the sexual instinct and the emotions of fear and dread is a very intimate one.¹¹⁷

Conflict of this fierce intensity never arises except over matters of sexuality, for on the one hand the sexual instinct is the source of our most resistant desires and impulses, and on the other no feelings are repressed with such iron rigour as are certain of those that take their origin in this instinct.¹¹⁸

The sexual is present at the heart of Gautier's *fantastique*, as it is present in the nightmare, in a disguised form and through a gradual process of externalisation. The texts are organised loosely, and with some exceptions, around a series of moves between interior and exterior locations and tableaux. It is usually when alone, in the interior setting that the protagonist's desire emerges; ('je me trouvai dans cette belle chambre, chambre à moi, à moi tout seul', 'Omphale', [68]).

The *chambre close* is well known as a symbolic signifier of the womb, of desire for sexual contact, especially with the mother. This suggests links with Jones's explanation of the frightening nature of the desire that leads to the nightmare:

*an attack of the Nightmare is an expression of a mental conflict over an incestuous desire.*¹¹⁹

The figures that appear in nightmares: the devil, vampires, ghosts and witches are read by Jones as grotesque displacements of incestuous parents. *Contes fantastiques* often use the motif of supernatural figures that come to force their enchanting but evil sexual attentions on sleeping figures.¹²⁰

The fear of diabolical intervention is seen clearly in 'La Morte amoureuse'. This uses the figure of a beautiful female vampire to account for the descent of a young priest, Romuald, into a sexual underworld, a state of ecstatic otherness which is

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 41.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 43.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 44. Jones's italics.

¹²⁰See, for example, Prosper Mérimée's 'La Vénus d'Ille' (1837), *Romans et Nouvelles* (Dijon: Pléiade, 1942), 439-466. In this short story, a bronze Pagan statue of Venus comes to life to suffocate the protagonist, a newly married young man, in her lustful and murderous embrace.

contrary to his conscious wishes and moral code:

[L]'étrangeté de l'aventure[...]prouvait clairement la présence du diable[...]
Ces idées me jetèrent dans une grande frayeur ('La Morte amoureuse', 90)

Vampires, like the beautiful Clarimonde, suggest, according to Jones's analysis, dead figures from the subject's past, revived by the interest that the living being still invests in them.¹²¹ This enduring sexual obsession beyond the grave is projected onto the dead figure who appears then to come back and vent a huge and voracious sexual appetite on the still-living partner. The mention of fear and desire being experienced against one's will suggests a desire which dare not speak its name and which can only be represented through a symbolised or sublimated form. This may be an archaic longing for the past or for death, projected into the realm of alterity, here onto the beautiful voracious body of an undead woman.

At one point, the text has Clarimonde remarking bizarrely:

Je t'aimais bien longtemps avant de t'avoir vu, mon cher Romuald, et je te
cherchais partout. Tu étais mon rêve ('La Morte amoureuse', 105)

The statement that Clarimonde *conceived* of Romuald before he ever saw her reveals an odd inversion of subject and object. By turning the formula around, the text suggests indeed (the desire for) a perverse maternal relation linked intimately to death. This is further justified by Clarimonde's demand that Romuald proclaim that he loves her more than he loves God (105). This semi-performative speech act means effectively that he allows her to take the place of his creator. However, a complex series of layers of projection and identification is at work. Clarimonde is seen as being both motherly: 'Clarimonde me regardait d'un air de complaisance maternelle' ('La Morte amoureuse' 107) and in turn she is the perverse child who sucks his blood to sustain herself.¹²² The fantastic desire for the dead other involves a multiplicity of shifting roles for both subject and object.

Yet equally, as well as suggesting Oedipal ambition, the *chambre close* may be seen to suggest a displacement of consciousness, the internal for the external. Whatever happens to the psyche of the protagonist happens to the room in which he

¹²¹The theme of the female vampire had already been popularised in Hoffmann's story, 'La Vampire', in *Les Contes des frères Sérapion*, (*Die Serapionbrüder*, 1819-21).

¹²²A similar inversion of maternal symbolism will take place in Bram Stoker's classic Gothic novel, *Dracula*, (1897), in which the vampirised woman, Mina Harker, is in turn forced to drink from an opened vein in the vampire's chest.

sleeps. In the passage below, the room appears to move, shimmer and expand as his consciousness expands:.

Les yeux de mon âme s'ouvrirent, et je vis ma chambre telle qu'elle était effectivement: j'aurais pu me croire éveillé, mais une vague perception me disait que je dormais et qu'il allait se passer quelque chose de bizarre. ('Le Pied de momie', 155)

Cet intérieur si calme parut se troubler ('Le Pied de momie', 155)

This projection outwards of an internal state of chaos situates the ambiguous admixture of desire and fear outside of the nexus of conflict that is the protagonist, and makes of the *mise-en-scène* an enveloping framework of strangeness, a signifier of the uncanny.

Whilst the figures of beautiful vampires and revenants, as described by Jones, are prominent as sexual attackers in the *contes*, the pleasurable/fearful sexual experience can be seen equally as having to do with a more amorphous desire to blend and meld with some external force. The texts often seem to locate the presence of this force within the geographical or physical decor:

Je ne pouvais plus y tenir; cet air d'alcôve m'enivrait. ('La Morte amoureuse', 97)

Here, Romuald's dizzy desire, the drunkenness of his passion, is attributed to some innate property of the bedchamber, and the risk of his loss of grip on conscious restraint is attributed to the effect of the overpowering ether. Sexual desire becomes defused into the constraining framework, as if Gautier is unwilling or unable to allow his protagonists to take responsibility for their desire.

Elsewhere, this sense of compulsion, of powerlessness is more explicitly evoked through loss of control and the sensation of swimming into the unknown:

[M]on âme, dégagée de sa prison de boue, nageait dans le vague et l'infini...('La Cafetière', 18-19)

The nightmare experience of loss of integral self is here linked to a desire to be enveloped by some larger force: 'la vague' and 'l'infini'. Reverie may be seen as a threat/promise of death, as a giving in to the beyond which promises pleasure at the price of annihilation.

In the extracts quoted above, the prospect of dissolution into the experience is not threatening at all, as below where immense joy evokes a desire for eternal prolongation:

J'étais inondé d'une joie ineffable et j'aurais toujours voulu demeurer ainsi...
(‘La Cafetière’, 17)

However, a disguised desire for death is discernible in the last five words, a death marked not by fixity, but by fluidity, an eternal mobility of desire. Contrast ‘*demeurer*’ (a temporal and spatial fixer) with ‘*inonder*’, suggesting flux, fluidity and motion. So, the ambivalent and paradoxical wish is to be frozen inside an endless and insatiable desire. Moreover, the passive construction ‘être inondé’, suggesting an image of fluid possession or penetration, implies a desire for self-loss and powerlessness.

An implied wish for simultaneous pleasure (life) and eternal fixity (death), can be seen in many forms throughout Gautier’s work.¹²³ In the *conte fantastique*, Gautier achieves this ideal to some extent, by inventing within the structure of the narratives the motif of a *double vie*, a sort of inversion of realities through an extended altered consciousness. Certain of the texts go beyond psychoanalytic explanations of sleeping/dreaming phenomena by allowing the mode of the *fantastique* to bridge the unconscious and the conscious, and to meld outside the *chambre close*.

The most striking example of this would be ‘La Morte amoureuse’, in which the priest leads an entirely separate life as the consort of the dead courtesan Clarimonde:

J’ai été pendant plus de trois ans le jouet d’une illusion singulière et diabolique. Moi, pauvre prêtre de campagne, j’ai mené en rêve toutes les nuits [...] une vie damnée (‘La Morte amoureuse’, 79)

Mon existence s’était compliquée d’une existence nocturne entièrement différente (‘La Morte amoureuse’, 79)

In ‘La Morte amoureuse’, although the motifs of the *chambre close* and dream are there, the capacity to touch the *fantastique* leaks over into the everyday. The ‘extase’ which characterises Romuald’s ordination becomes directed into a sexual frenzy that never abates through the course of the text. The desirous dream life is the flip-side of his chaste diurnal clerical life and, for most of the story, the *fantastique* is more real than reality:

¹²³Gautier’s obsession is concisely summarised in the subheadings of *La Comédie de la mort* (1838): ‘La vie dans la mort’ and ‘La mort dans la vie’, which imply the constant relation of co-presence of the two in the mind of the subject and in the work of art.

[L]orsqu'au lever de l'aube je me réveillais, il me semblait au contraire que je m'endormais et que je rêvais que j'étais prêtre. ('La Morte amoureuse', 79)

Thus the text reveals in a Jekyll-and-Hyde fashion the 'dark side' which co-exists equally with the good within the same person, the split at the heart of the desiring subject.

Yet Gautier's *contes* play principally with the unattainable. Visions of death are savoured at the expense of *la petite mort*. Satiation is seen as an impossibility, and the *dénouements* ultimately negate the fulfilment of the sexual aim. At the end of 'La Cafetière', Angéla, the ghostly girl with whom the protagonist has spent the night dancing, is revealed as the incarnation of a dead girl in a portrait. The impossibility of achieving consummation of his desire is expressed concisely in the closing words of the tale ('Je venais de comprendre qu'il n'y avait plus pour moi de bonheur sur la terre' ['La Cafetière', 21]).

At the end of 'La Morte amoureuse', the vision of the beloved vampire blurs and is lost:

Elle se dissipa dans l'air comme une fumée, et je ne la revis plus. ('La Morte amoureuse', 116)

Even after the extended affair of Romuald and the dead Clarimonde, she cannot be possessed by him ultimately, for possession would mean death, the death of desire, and the protagonists are seen as always incapable of phantasising their own deaths, of losing themselves to such an extent. Similarly, in 'Omphale', the narrator is wistful, but not too remorseful, at having lost the chance to possess the *tapisserie* that contained his supernatural concubine Omphale:

Au fond, peut-être vaut-il mieux que cela se soit passé ainsi et que j'aie gardé intact [sic] ce délicieux souvenir. On dit qu'il ne faut pas revenir sur ses premières amours ni aller voir la rose qu'on a admirée la veille. ('Omphale', 76)

Unlike Merimée's 'Vénus d'Ille', in which the statue actually kills her lover/victim, Gautier's texts play with the essential impotence at the heart of these impossible passions. Their impossibility may be read on more than one level: the doomed love of the Oedipal child for the mother or more essentially, the impossibility, if desire is truly equated with death, of succumbing to one's desire while still controlling/enjoying it.

This could explain why Gautier ultimately allows the structures of everyday

realism to impinge on the fantasies. This occurs even when one reality does not totally replace the other, as in 'Le Pied de momie' when a necklace given to the protagonist during his fantastic experience remains in 'real time' as an iconographic talisman of doubt. Knowing in advance that the all too real phenomenon of fulfilment is an impossibility within the structure of the *fantastique*, the text's revelation of necrophilic desire is a prolonged deferral of the moment at which *jouissance* is negated, leaving the spark of memory and unattainable longing.

Objects and the nature of reality

While the *enjeu* of the stories endures, Gautier's *fantastique* offers a space for experimentation which challenges notions of the real and of reality. With an emphasis on the altered nature of concrete objects inside the dream state, the texts show how the exterior and the interior worlds of the *real* may come together, how the unconscious may play with the objects of conscious reality to transform them into an internal experience which is alienating and uncanny.

The texts open up a discussion of the problem of classifying reality, as in this first moment of transformation for the hero of 'La Cafetière':

Tout à coup le feu prit un étrange degré d'activité; une lueur blafarde illumina la chambre, et je vis clairement que ce que j'avais pris pour de vaines peintures était *la réalité*...('La Cafetière', 13, my italics).

The words of the narrator imply that previously he had taken the pictures for less than reality. The very language used delineates the ambiguity of any discussion of reality, as the concrete objects that were the pictures were clearly, in the most banal sense of the word, real. Yet for the narrator in his new dimension of consciousness, to consider the images real, they must match his state, they must take on the animate form of his imaginative stirrings. So, an ordinary notion of reality is turned on its head and he perceives to exist only that which corresponds to his *internal world*. The fantastic is the realm in which imagination becomes the predominant and naturalised level of reality. The material objects that form the usual decor of reality are carried over into the altered state of Gautier's *fantastique* as a bizarre embellishment of perception.

Consider the following quotation:

Les robes de soie des femmes, froissées dans ce tourbillon dansant, rendaient des sons d'une nature particulière; on aurait dit le bruit d'ailes d'un vol de pigeons. ('La Cafetière', 15)

Here, banal objects (ladies' dresses) become distorted as markers of the new real, a real characterised by a synaesthetic insistence on odd and unlikely sensuous perceptions. There is a strong insistence upon physical sensation throughout the *contes*. When dancing with his lady, Angéla, the narrator remarks:

Jamais de la vie je n'avais éprouvé une pareille émotion; mes nerfs tressaillaient comme des ressorts d'acier, mon sang coulait dans mes artères en torrent de lave, et j'entendais battre mon cœur comme une montre accrochée à mes oreilles. ('La Cafetière', 17)

The correspondence between the external world of referents and the personal internal reality of sensation is interestingly evoked. Just as inanimate objects take living form in these *contes*, so here the experience of sensation-perception is described by allusion to external realities, signifiers outside of the immediate realm of sensation. Here, the organic, biology, is made to seem a simulacrum of material objects.

In 'Omphale', the extensive description of architectural and decorative detail sets the atmospheric tone of the piece:

Quelques pauvres fleurs étiolées penchaient languissamment la tête comme des jeunes filles poitrinaires, attendant qu'un rayon de soleil vînt sécher leurs feuilles à moitié pourries. ('Omphale', 65)

Cette pauvre ruine d'hier [...] toute ridée, tout gercée, couverte de lèpre, rongée de mousse et de salpêtre, avait l'air d'un de ces vieillards précoces, usés par de sales débauches. ('Omphale', 66)

The figurative equation works the other way round this time, as here decorative objects are compared to people in a state of physical decay.

Similarly in 'Le Pied de momie', which is a text littered with archeological curios, objects are described viscerally, one particularly effective example being 'des armoires éventrées' ('Le Pied de momie', 150). We come to see that for Gautier, the mummy's foot, which the protagonist buys at a second hand shop, represents the perfect ambiguity of realities. It is an organic part become inorganic object. Here the many metaphors and similes linking the animate and the inanimate reach a peak of expression.

At first, the narrator thinks that he has come upon a bronze statue:

[J]'aperçus un pied charmant que je pris d'abord pour un fragment de Vénus antique. ('Le Pied de momie', 151)

Il avait ces belles teintes fauves et rousses qui donnent au bronze florentin cet aspect chaud et vivace, si préférable au ton vert-de-grisé des bronzes ordinaires qu'on prendrait volontiers pour des statues en putréfaction. ('Le Pied de momie', 151-2)

Here, Gautier's game of fusing opposing realities becomes extravagant. A limb is mistaken for a statue, a dead object is de-contextualised, fetishized as a man-made artefact. Then, man-made art objects are re-invested with the character of organic matter, significantly, dead organic matter, in the wonderfully odd, poetic image of *une statue en putréfaction*.

The *fantastique* is a realm in which ideas of poetic language can be experimented with, over-turned and over-filled to the brink of explosion. Figurative language: metaphor, synecdoche and simile may be de-metaphorised to create an altered 'real', which is the manifestation of the *what if?*

This moment finds the protagonist applying the rules of one convention of reality to the newly discovered other:

Au lieu d'être immobile comme il convient à un pied embaumé depuis quatre mille ans, il s'agitait. ('Le Pied de momie', 156)

Later, he will be immersed in his internal reality and the suggestion that he traverses time and space to visit ancient Egypt with a dead princess will be received in a spirit of perfect credulity and acceptance: 'Je trouvai cette proposition toute naturelle' ('Le Pied de momie', 159)

Gautier's interest in the life/death distinction leads him into these shaded realms of ambiguity. The reason for his fascination with mummies is partially suggested by the description of the mummified creatures he encounters on his voyage into ancient Egypt with the Princess. Consider the following description of the Egyptians:

[L]eurs peuples embaumés se tenaient debout dans les poses roides et contraintes de l'art égyptien, gardant éternellement l'attitude prescrite par le codex hiéroglyphique ('Le Pied de momie', 161)

And below, the description of mummified crocodiles:

[...] les crocodiles contemporains rendus plus monstrueux encore par leur emmaillotage de bandelettes. ('Le Pied de momie', 161)

The mummy is the ideal figure for the organic form as Gautier *re-presents* it. It is fixed, decorated, disguised, objectified. The mention of art in the first quotation and the plural references to fixity, constraint and tight wrapping suggest within Gautier's writing an aesthetic and emotional code of embalming and preservation comparable to

the one he detects in Egyptian art. These influences conspire to create an aesthetic of deathliness.

Two opposing ideas battle uneasily throughout Gautier's presentation: those of *eternity* and *earthliness*, and both relate to the notion of death. The idea of opening up the gap between the two states that make up mortality, bringing the dead back into the world of the living, suggests the suspension of the absolute finitude of death. Gautier's transcendental principle is not a religious one, allowing for the afterlife in which beings are reunited in posthumous spiritual harmony but rather he concentrates on a *re-terrestrialisation* of those that have departed the Earth. Life is seen to be the eternal pole, while death's grip is mutable.

What does it mean to talk of Gautier locating death and eternity in life? His fascination with Egypt may give us a partial answer. In 'Le Pied de momie', Gautier writes: 'Le rêve de l'Égypte était l'éternité' ('Le Pied de momie', 155), and later, in the prologue of *Le Roman de la momie*, 'L'Égypte ne peut faire rien que d'éternel'.¹²⁴ The popular understanding of the Egyptians' notion of eternity is a strange, hybrid concept, half material, half spiritual. The immortality of the soul can only be ensured by the preservation of the body and of the possessions of the dead. Already in the short 1840 text we see a fascination with the preservation of dead, inanimate objects and their durability, their brilliance, that will be, in a different genre and an altered literary voice, the central conceit of *Émaux et Camées*.

Gautier's preoccupation with rituals involving death and the preservation of the body extends to the tragedy of Pompeii in 'Arria Marcella' and to the Aztec tribes as well as the Egyptians. In 'Le Pied de momie' as in *L'Orient*, Gautier makes mention of the god Witziliputzili, described by Marc Eigeldinger as:

Witziliputzili, dieu de la guerre et de la divination chez les Aztèques, dieu sanguinaire auquel on immolait des victimes¹²⁵

There are parallels to be drawn between Gautier's writing practice and the death rituals of primitive tribes described by anthropologists, for example the sacred Cenote of Chichén Itzá, water-filled limestone wells in which Maya communities housed the

¹²⁴Gautier, *Le Roman de la momie* (1857) (Paris: Charpentier, 1888), p. 22.

¹²⁵Note found in Marc Eigeldinger's edition of *Récits fantastiques* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1981), footnote, p.181.

dead and their decorative relics, some of which have been preserved and recently uncovered.¹²⁶ Both the writing and the practice of preserving the objects of the dead involve a concentration upon symbolic objects that represent by their physical durability the eternal nature of the tangible. Gautier's work brings the most primitive aspects of man's relation to death into the *salon*.

The enduring nature of the physical form, celebrated at the end of 'Le Pied de momie' by the revived Pharaoh, is an aesthetic ideal shared by Gautier:

J'assisterai au dernier jour du monde avec le corps et la figure que j'avais de mon vivant; ma fille Hermonthis durera plus qu'une statue de bronze. ('Le Pied de momie', 163)

For him, beauty is the certainty of the unchanging form. The *contes* provide a constant refusal of the realities of death and decomposition and the triumph of imagination and desire. The most confusing and disturbing aspect of writing on death for Gautier is not the manoeuvring around the many ambiguous layers of disavowal, fantasy and perception he evokes, but the truth which must be consistently refuted by the presence of the beautiful phantoms in the texts: the truth that is the unspeakable *je ne sais quoi* of mortality.¹²⁷

In 'La Morte amoureuse', the Abbé Serapion is shown to have a different vision of bodily death to the narrator's experience. Consider his words:

Je sais où Clarimonde a été enterrée; il faut que nous la déterrions et que vous voyiez dans quel état pitoyable est l'objet de votre amour; vous ne serez plus tenté de perdre votre âme pour un cadavre immonde dévoré des vers et près de tomber en poudre. ('La Morte amoureuse', p. 114)

But the *fantastique* is the primary mode of reality in the story at this point, and instead of the horrible sight predicted by the Abbé, the voluptuous vampire is revealed:

[J]'aperçus Clarimonde pâle comme un marbre, les mains jointes... ('La Morte amoureuse', 116)

For Clarimonde to rot away would be too much in keeping with the reality that

¹²⁶*Maya Treasures from the Sacred Well at Chichén Itzá*, exhibition catalogue ed. Clemency Chase Coggin and Orin C. Shane III (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1984).

¹²⁷See the eerily uncanny and enigmatic description of the excess of physical decay in the *Oraison funèbre de Henriette-Anne d'Angleterre*, by Bossuet (1627-1704), a moment at which the corpse becomes no longer capable of signification: 'Notre chair change bientôt de nature. Notre corps prend un autre nom [...] il devient un je ne sais quoi, qui n'a plus de nom en aucune langue.' *Œuvres* ed. L'Abbé Velat and Y. Champaville, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 93. Gautier and his contemporaries would probably have been familiar with this well-known and particularly morbid passage from Bossuet's funeral orations.

Gautier wants to pervert. The image of the rotting statues remarked on earlier ('des statues en putréfaction', ['Le Pied de momie', 152]) is allowed for, is considered beautiful, because it challenges the order of physical 'reality' that Gautier's *fantastique* want to throw into doubt. The transgression in the texts comes from the bizarre insistence upon the attribution of the most unlikely epithets, the constant collusion of the incongruous creating a textual coda of unnatural aesthetics, an aesthetics of denial.

Elsewhere, if the body is not preserved in an undead state and sexualised, it is instead absent, for Gautier's vision is one of abstraction, involving a denial of physicality in all its inconvenient permutations. This is seen in the tale of a revived victim of Pompeii, 'Arria Marcella'. The protagonist explores the cavernous tombs of Pompeii, where he expects to see decaying corpses:

[L]es tombeaux, au lieu d'un cadavre horrible, ne contenaient qu'une pincée de cendres, *idée abstraite de la mort* ('Arria Marcella', 221, my italics.)

Here, the readerly and voyeuristic expectations are thwarted: the taboo body-object is removed and the promised corpse is reduced to dust and ashes. So, despite the elevated fetishization of dead objects elsewhere in Gautier, if these objects threaten to enact a natural and uncontrollable change of state and appearance which lies outside of the writer's aesthetic vision, they must be negated, reduced to nothing. Change, and the fear of it, remain realities outside of what is allowed for by the writer, a meta-textual feature of the writing.

The door between

We have seen how the dead beings in Gautier's *contes* are systematically sexualised by means of tantalising descriptions of their appearance focusing on the visible signs of life and death and, more particularly, of life within death.

Angéla in 'La Cafetière', the earliest of Gautier's 'resuscitated women' *contes*, is, perhaps, the personification of the sexual desire of the necrophilic *fantastique*. From an intertextual point of view, Hoffmann's first *conte* was entitled *Angéla*, and Gautier's naming of his first dead heroine can be seen as a homage to his literary forebear. Yet also aesthetically, and by the nature of the literary presentation, the

manifestation of Angéla is both symbolical and characteristic of the nature of the genre:

Jamais, même en rêve, rien d'aussi parfait ne s'était présenté à mes yeux; une peau *d'une blancheur éblouissante*, des cheveux d'un blond cendré, de longs cils et des prunelles bleues, si claires et si *transparentes*, que je voyais son âme à travers aussi distinctement qu'un caillou au fond d'un ruisseau. ('La Cafetière', 16, my italics)

Here, in the description of the beloved woman, we have the two defining features that will become significant for an understanding of Gautierian fantastic desire, *une blancheur éblouissante* and *la transparence*.

The quality of transparency is a constant signifier of Gautier's aesthetics of desire. Clarimonde in 'La Morte amoureuse' is so startling to the priest Romuald because of the diaphanous nature of her physical and metaphysical presence. He enumerates her features in a lengthy description:

son front, d'une *blancheur bleuâtre et transparente* ('La Morte amoureuse' 82, my italics)

doigts longs et [...] d'une si idéale *transparence* qu'ils laissaient passer le jour ('La Morte amoureuse' 83, my italics)

Equally, the objects associated with her, principally her death shroud, suggest the same filmy quality of spatial and temporal division opening up, the same passage to a deferred accessibility. She is 'la gracieuse trépassée sous la *transparence* de son linceul...' ('La Morte amoureuse', 97, my italics).

A literary device comes into play by which a door is suggested, placed precariously between conscious banal reality and the fantastic sense of altered perception, and its manifestation comes metaphorically in the schism, the problematic space between life and death. Clarimonde is an object of fascination because one can see both life and death through her. This point is explicitly shown in a later passage. In the following extract, the syntax places this door, this moment of transparency which is the signifier of the *fantastique*, between signifiers of life and death:

Elle portait à la main une petite lampe de la forme de celles qu'on met dans les *tombeaux*, dont la lueur donnait à ses doigts effilés une *transparence* rose qui se prolongeait par une dégradation insensible jusque dans la *blancheur* opaque et *laiteuse* de son bras nu. ('La Morte amoureuse', 103, my italics)

And:

A mesure que je la regardais, je sentais s'ouvrir dans moi des portes qui jusqu'alors avaient été fermées [...] la vie m'apparaissait sous un aspect tout autre...('La Morte amoureuse', 83)

Here, the door, which Clarimonde symbolises, is located equally in the space her body occupies and in the priest, whose perception is opened up by his contemplation of her.

In the fantastic writing, then, Gautier opens up the door between life and death, in order to suggest a complexity, an ambiguous shaded area which is not a concrete division but a realm of imagination and desire, accessible through an altered state of consciousness. The experience described as the door to the *fantastique* stands open is one of alienation, of the sudden awareness of the division between conscious self and unconscious desire. It is the schism, the rupture between what one thinks one is and the hidden, clandestine *realities* of desire.

This division, moreover, is not a solid, closed one. It is a door that swings both ways. It is transparent, allowing both sides to be shown simultaneously. Life and death, which in reality are mutually exclusive (while in one state, no consciousness of the other is possible) are made into two sides of the same coin of experience by the fantastic mode. The ambiguity which results when the barriers between life and death, and between the organic and the inorganic, are broken down, is presented as a heady experience, heavy with sexual overtones. Having access both to life and death is, Gautier suggests, aspiring to ecstasy.

The *blancheur éblouissante*, which we have noted to be a defining characteristic of beauty for Gautier, comes, through repetition, to play an important part in suggesting the transparency of life and death when desire is in play. In ‘Omphale’, the art-image-become-woman reveals her ‘reality’ by means of exposing her white nakedness:

Omphale rejeta en arrière sa peau de lion et me fit voir des épaules et un sein
d’une forme parfaite et d’une *blancheur éblouissante* (‘Omphale’, 17, my
italics)

But just as this fleshy whiteness, signifying a leap into liveliness is capable of evoking the desiring mode of the fantastic, equally the signifier of desire can be applied to the shroud that covers Clarimonde’s corpse:

Elle était couverte d’un voile de lin d’une *blancheur éblouissante*. (‘La Morte
amoureuse’, 97, my italics)

This is metonymic substitution in its most extreme form. The *voile*, itself pale and transparent, signifies not only the undead beauty of Clarimonde, but the mode of desiring which moves like an eternal dance of the veils, masking and unmasking,

disguising and suggesting.

The descriptions of desired women always contain a play, a tension between polarities. Her beauty is piquant because it reminds him of what she is not (a statue), but in fact, in the fantastic world, this is exactly *what she might be*. The suspension of the rules of verisimilitude and realism allow for a free mobility of desire.

Statues, and women who resemble them or who become them, are a striking feature of Gautier's early prose fiction.¹²⁸ The fixing of the woman in an artistic medium reveals, in fact, the most plastic of imaginations: once the object becomes woman, the next metaphorical move is back to fixity, symbolised ultimately by death. Finally, the fixed corpse-object is accorded the qualities of eternity by Gautier's focus on the durability of its image:

[L]'on aurait pu la prendre pour une statue de bronze de Corinthe ('Le Pied de momie', 156)

On eût dit une statue d'albâtre faite par quelque sculpteur habile pour mettre sur un tombeau de reine. ('La Morte amoureuse', 97)

The suggestion of transition and mutability within the dynamic of desire is conveyed within the writing: the use of the conditional tense keeps in play the shifting notions of doubt and potentiality, paradoxically located around the motif of fixity.

Consider the extracts below:

[C]ette perfection de formes [sic], quoique purifiée et sanctifiée par l'ombre de la mort me troublaient plus voluptueusement qu'il n'aurait fallu ('La Morte amoureuse', 98)

[L]a mort chez elle semblait une coquetterie de plus. La pâleur de ses joues, le rose moins vif de ses lèvres, ses longs cils baissés et découpant leur frange brune sur cette blancheur, lui donnaient une expression de chasteté mélancolique et de souffrance pensive... ('La Morte amoureuse' 98)

Here the syntactic equipotence of life and death within the description allows for a particularly striking necrophilic charge. It is no longer a question of 'art object or woman?', but a moment of desire evoked by the ambiguous perception of a dead-living woman as Romuald watches over Clarimonde's corpse. The tension in the examples above is revealed through an incongruity that becomes the moment of

¹²⁸Gautier's novella *Spirite* (1866) effects the extreme of this idea. It tells the story of two lovers whose passion is so intense that it cannot be sustained in life. The dénouement has them metamorphosed into funerary statues, drawing attention simultaneously to the perfect, enduring quality of their love, as solid as stone, and to the morbid, deathly associations that such an imaginative model of desire suggests.

transgressive desire. If sexual charm and desire lie side by side with death, the accepted closed division between the two is ruptured and the perverse aesthetic takes over.

This same ambiguous charm/repulsion is seen to apply to the funeral chamber itself:

Cette chambre n'avait rien d'une chambre de mort. Au lieu de l'air fétide et cadavéreux que j'étais accoutumé à respirer en ces veilles funèbres, une langoureuse fumée d'essences orientales, je ne sais quelle amoureuse odeur de femme, nageait doucement dans l'air attiédi. ('La Morte amoureuse', 96)

Here, deathly odours are transformed into erotically exciting perfumes. A piece of textual and mental work is being performed to make the banal exotic, the disgusting desirable. It could be read in terms of Freud's discussion of extreme perversion, in which the psyche overcomes the prohibitions of disgust by an over-idealisation of the object, here the corpse of Clarimonde:

It is perhaps in connection precisely with the most repulsive perversions that the mental factor must be regarded as playing its largest part in the transformation of sexual instinct [...] [I]n their case a piece of mental work has been performed which [...] is the equivalent of an idealisation of the instinct. The omnipotence of love is perhaps never more strongly proved than in such aberrations as these. (*Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality* (1), SE VII, 162)

The repetitive structures of necrophilic desire at work in Gautier's text would seem to bear out Freud's formulation here.

Elsewhere, there is evidence of a textual suspension of divisiveness, a moment at which the wall between life and death crumbles completely in a wishful and desiring *jouissance*:

Omphale ressemblait au charmant fantôme de la nuit comme un mort ressemble à un vivant ('Omphale', 73)

Morte ou vivante, statue ou femme, ombre ou corps, sa beauté était toujours la même ('La Morte amoureuse', 103)

En regardant cette tête si calme et si passionnée, si froide et si ardente, si morte et si vivace, il comprit qu'il avait devant lui son premier et son dernier amour, sa coupe d'ivresse suprême... ('Arria Marcella', 241)

Death and life have ceased to signify separately here. The emotional content of desire, centred on the appearance of ambiguity and wish-fulfilment, elides such practical taxonomies and replaces banal reality with a sense of the eternal. The inability to distinguish clearly between life and death and reality and unreality in these extracts highlights perfectly Todorov's contention that *fantastique* is *per se* the mode

of hesitation and indecision. Indecision is elevated to an exquisite, rapturous state, a movement which emulates the mode of desire he is evoking. However, the specificity of the phenomenon in Gautier comes from his particular insistent blend upon thematic obsession and literary form, which, as we will see, is effective both in the *contes fantastiques* and in lyrical poetry.

Consider the following description of Clarimonde:

[E]lle était toujours de la plus parfaite immobilité ('La Morte amoureuse', 99).

The word play is telling. Clarimonde is the ideal heroine for Gautier, because, as a vampire, she can preserve the simultaneous illusion of death and erotic charm. At the point in the story where these words are found, Romuald is watching over the bier of Clarimonde. Suddenly, he discerns blood in her veins, the movement of life beneath the pallor of her skin, and the *jouissance* lies in this impossible joy of finding a sexually desiring/desirable object that is at the same time still, dead in appearance. In the *perfect*, i.e. absolute quality, of her stillness, she is the *perfect*, i.e. ultimately desirable sexual object.

The rules of the game

In the textual examples discussed above, a levelling takes place, an equalising of life and death on the same side of an equation on the other side of which is the narrator's (and the controlling artist's) desire. This desire is disguised, sewn into the fabric of the writing, and undergoes tortuous textual transmutations before revealing itself, much like the task of dream work which represents, while still safely masking, a hidden longing.

The ambiguity and ambivalence revealed by some of the textual examples are signs of a game in which Gautier tantalisingly suggests, without naming, some object of exquisite desire and excitation. This is a potentially two-edged play: on the one hand it is explicable as a form of titillation, a precious seductiveness which urges the reader further into the strangeness of the text, teasing her/him with some promise that is understood as such without its fruit ever being named. Hence desire would be eternally deferred and the mode of desiring could continue *ad infinitum*. On the other

hand, there could be a genuine coyness, a repression of the revelation of desire which suggests a holding back, a bourgeois opting out of the moment of *jouissance*.

I have shown how there are moments at which the text seems to reach out beyond the careful writer's control and threatens an explosion of sexual energy into the reader's Imaginary. Such moments are delicately balanced, reined in, but still exhilarating to the reader. The deferral that is the principal *enjeu* of the texts comes through the moments of anticipation, aftermath and the revelation of the impossibility of desire, around which the *contes* are woven. Rather than playing on the explicitly pornographic, like his forerunner Sade, or the Gothic, like his lesser-known contemporary Pétrus Borel, Gautier's textual/sexual fibre is a finely spun series of moments of temporary translucence, brief unions of opposites and an almost swooning desire for what lies beyond the physical and comprehensible realm. It is because of their elusiveness, because the texts cannot be made to account for their flirtatious games, that Gautier's phantasmatic textual necrophilia is so consistently provoking and exciting.

2.2

Towards a Poetics of Deathliness: *Émaux et Camées* and *l'Art Pour l'Art*

*L'éclair, brillant dans la nuit sombre,
Semble éclairer notre tombeau.
Le feu du brick qui coule et sombre
À nos festins sert de flambeau.*

Gautier ¹²⁹

Émaux et Camées (1852), Gautier's best known verse collection, concentrates on many of the tropes of death and desire that we have seen in the *contes*, but subjects them to the formal constraints and exigencies of versification. It is perhaps in *Émaux et Camées* that we find the most refined literary example of the notion of *l'Art pour l'Art*, the aesthetic theory beloved of Gautier and his *Petit Cénacle*, expounded in the preface of *Mlle de Maupin* (1835).

The specific nature of poetic writing can be seen as the striving to achieve something beyond a representation of perceived reality. What is conveyed is not an object or an experience, but the filtering of a perceived object or experience through the linguistic temporal and spatial grid that is the intermeshing structural relation of form and content. It is more than language, more than sound and more than rhythm. It can be read as a mental drama given verbal form, fragments and threads of unconscious erotic scenario woven into verse and into sound. Poetry can be read as the substance of articulated desire; mental drama and erotic scenario given verbal form and woven into verse. It is using this framework that we will examine the poems in question.

On reading *Émaux et Camées*, one is struck by an impression of general oddness and eccentricity, but also by the startling and enduring quality of the poetic images and effects. Many of the poems in the collection centre on tributes to beauty, and, in keeping with the history and tradition of European literature prior to Gautier, dedications to the beauty of a mistress or admired woman are numerous. The fetishism implicit in these male renderings of female bodies in verse is well

¹²⁹'L'Éclair' in *Poésies complètes de Théophile Gautier*, ed. René Jasinski, 3 vols (Paris: Nizet, 1970), vol iii, p 308.

documented. A generic example of this literary phenomenon is the *Blason du corps féminin* of the sixteenth century, poems which formulate celebratory lists of the desirable attributes of the woman's anatomy, before concluding that it is because of the sum of these parts, her totality, that she is beloved.¹³⁰

However, in Gautier's poems, a marked difference becomes apparent. The poet, having lauded the parts, seldom reaches the stage of summing up, of reuniting the unpicked segments of body and allowing the totality to signify. His poetic images concentrate on part-objects, often likened to, or metaphorised as, works of art and the collection moves through a series of aesthetic abstractions culminating perhaps in 'Symphonie en blanc majeur', where a mere *quality*, the colour white, becomes the valued, fetishised prize.

Sculpting bodies/writing desires.

A textual analysis of 'Le Poème de la femme' will shed light on Gautier's ambivalent representation of the woman's body. The idea of visual and literary art meeting in the language of poetry is a constant in *Émaux et Camées*. The poet starts by stating that the woman wishes to read 'Le poème de son beau corps':

Un jour, au doux rêveur qui l'aime,
En train de montrer ses trésors
Elle voulut lire un poème,
Le poème de son beau corps. ('Le Poème de la femme', stanza 1)¹³¹

The rhymes at the end of the first four lines suggest certain implicit links for reading the poem of the body. Gautier's privileging of art and the desirous nature of the textual body are suggested by the verb *aimer*, announcing phonically, and being echoed by 'poème'. The idea is that sexual love and desire are expressed ideally through art. Equally, in lines 2 and 4, 'trésors' and 'corps' suggest a similar equation of value between beautiful art objects and the body/corpus of the woman/poem.

This is a poem that enjoys itself, that shows off in the manner of a coquettish

¹³⁰For examples of this phenomenon, see *Poètes du XVIe Siècle*, ed. Albert-Marie Schmidt, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1953).

¹³¹Gautier, *Émaux et Camées* (1852) in *Poésies complètes de Théophile Gautier*, ed. René Jasinski, 3 vols (Paris: Nizet, 1970), vol. iii, p 7. All references to this work are taken from this edition. Subsequently, page references will be given after the quotation in the body of my text.

strip-tease. Forward-driven movement and rhythmic progression are central to the poem: it reads as a moving, undulating dance, the steps of which are deliberately and noticeably marked out by the first two or three syllables of several stanzas:

Un jour, au doux rêveur qui l'aime, (stanza 1, line 1, 7)

D'abord, superbe et triomphante, (stanza 2, line 1, 7)

Ensuite, en sa verve d'artiste, (stanza 4 line 1, 7)

The break after the two syllables speeds the pace of reading, causing the first word in stanzas 2 and 4 to be swallowed and emphasis to be placed on the liveliness of the second part of the lines. This gives the impression that the poem is moving inexorably and vitally towards some pre-destined point of realisation, as the woman executes 'avec les strophes de sa pose' increasingly complex configurations of aesthetic and sensuous effect.

In stanza 10, however, the extra syllable before the punctuation break slows the pace of the line, pre-figuring the word 'lasse' and announcing a change in the mood and flow:

Mais bientôt, lasse d'art antique, (stanza 10, 8)

The fading of the poem's verve and the impression of deceleration continue, and are intensified, in stanzas 13 and 14, by means that are both stylistic and semantic:

Et comme l'odalisque d'Ingres,
De ses reins cambrant les rondeurs,
En dépit des vertus malingres,
En dépit des maigres pudeurs! (stanza 13, 9)

Paresseuse odalisque, arrière!
Voici le tableau dans son jour,
Le diamant dans sa lumière;
Voici la beauté dans l'amour! (stanza 14, 9)

The instance of anaphora in stanza 13, where the construction is repeated twice, suggests, despite the force of the diction and the exclamatory, excited nature of the voice of the poem's persona, a waning of momentum, which is highlighted in the first word of 14, 'paresseuse'. The notion of transition is echoed in the repetition of 'voici', which has something of a revelatory timbre, imposing a feeling of a penultimate moment, a destination about to be reached.

Indeed, the journey's end extends over the next three stanzas. Stanza 15 marks the dramatic onset of the climactic movement:

Sa tête penche et se renverse;
Haletante, dressant les seins,
Au bras du rêve qui la berce,
Elle tombe sur ses coussins. (stanza 15, 9)

Ses paupières battent des ailes
Sur leurs globes d'argent bruni,
Et l'on voit monter ses prunelles
Dans la nacre de l'infini. (stanza 16, 9)

D'un linceul de point d'Angleterre
Que l'on recouvre sa beauté:
L'extase l'a prise à la terre;
Elle est morte de volupté! (stanza 17, 9)

The rapturous, breathless swoon of the woman's body is caught in the rhythmic transitions within the second line of stanza 15. The punctuation break after the three syllables of 'Haletante' makes us catch our own breath, pause before continuing the line, and the stilted hesitancy announces some change of state, here the onset of orgasmic death.

Moreover, it takes us back to the first of the only three other such examples in the poem, in stanza 10 where lassitude was first mentioned after 'mais bientôt'. The third and fourth examples come in the last stanza of the poem, after the death of the woman:

Et que mollement on la pose
Sur son lit, tombeau blanc et doux,
Où le poète, à la nuit close,
Ira prier à deux genoux. (stanza 19, 9)

Here, the emphasis changes to the poet's watchful gaze over her, and the broken up lines, conspicuous after the jaunty regularity of the phonic patterns through most of the poem, suggest a rupture of the desirous scenario. The change in tone is ambivalent: it could indicate grief or alternatively a slow, reflective satisfaction, a post-orgasmic state of stupor.

The sexual implication of the poem's content and rhythm is brought to explicit fruition in the last line of stanza 17, when an important underlying association also surfaces:

Elle est morte de volupté! (stanza 17, line 4, 9)

This line may at first take us by surprise, when we realise that the lubricious and provocative dance has led to death. However, a cluster of associations exists around the themes of death and dancing from the *danse macabre* to Salome, and sexuality is

implicit in them. Seeds of this outcome may be suggested in the rhyme-words of the stanza: the rhyme for 'volupté', two lines above was 'sa beauté', and, earlier in stanza 8, 'beauté' is rhymed with 'divine nudité'. Death is the response to the exciting collusion of mutable beauty and sexuality.

Moreover, the tension between a joyous, dazzling celebration of life and a pull towards deceleration and stasis has been suggested in the relationships of sound patterns and rhythmic groups created. Through an underlying poetic structure with built-in moments of transition, doubt and hesitation, as well as by symbolic association at the level of meaning, we see that death as the sensuous climax is always-already suggested as a potential thematic closure.

In this poem, the woman's physical being transmutes into a series of different materials before finally her chameleon-like exertions, forging herself into insentient matter, kill her and render her simultaneously human and immutable, of flesh and immobile: her aesthetic triumph is death. Gautier's conception of the most beautiful body, here in the poetry as in the earlier prose, is a fixed one. It is the corpse at the first moment of embalming: the perfection of the organic shot through with the preserving properties of the material. Where is the desire in this *writing the corpse*? It is caught in the imaginative suspension between the lines that are stages in a metamorphosis from woman to object.

This is suggested in 'Coquetterie Posthume', written in the first person and dedicated to Marie Mattéi, in which a woman contemplates the *toilette* of her own corpse:

Quand je mourrai, que l'on me mette,
Avant de clouer mon cercueil,
Un peu de rouge à la pommette,
Un peu de noir au bord de l'œil. ('Coquetterie Posthume', stanza 1, 25)

Car je veux, dans ma bière close,
Comme le soir de son aveu,
Rester éternellement rose
Avec du kh'ol sous mon œil bleu. (stanza 2, 25)

This poem evokes the theme of looking-in-death. On one level, Gautier's is very much the eye that paints the image of this corpse in words, while on the level purely of the textual game, he suggests a female persona who is obsessed with the idea of her looks in death. 'Cercueil' is rhymed with 'œil'; the eye is made up especially for the

grave: 'Avec du kh'ol sous mon œil bleu.' The suggestion seems to be that death and its appearance present some moment of vision, of recognition, or perhaps of *mis*-recognition since the masklike make-up would suggest illusion or delusion. The misrecognition comes also from the fact that one may never actually see oneself in death; one can only espy the state of death in the other, the object.

The aesthetic obsession, at the thematic level, with making oneself look dead is highlighted poetically by the emphasis put on the unlikely word in French, 'kh'ol', with its conspicuous apostrophied spelling. It is as if death is rendered palatable, indeed attractive if it is coloured with the mask of life by means of the artifice of face paint. That which is artificial is grotesque, but, like the unusual word, has a sort of exotic charm, an extravagant appeal.

This formula of appearing-alive-in-death works conversely elsewhere, as he carries his fascination with this element of art over into his cultural criticism, writing of women's habit of using pale make-up thus:

Les femmes blanchissent leur peau ... Au moyen de cette fine poussière elles font prendre à leur épiderme un mica de marbre ... ce léger voile de poussière blanche atténue la nudité en lui retirant les chaudes et provoquantes couleurs de la vie. La forme se rapproche ainsi de la statuaire; elle se spiritualise et se purifie...¹³²

Just as he posits that Marie Mattéi could bear the contemplation of her dead body if it were ruddied with the appearance of life, so women become more attractive to him if they take on an appearance that is ethereal, spiritual, and likened to a statue. The almost monotonously recurrent figure of the female statue suggests a perverse Pygmalianism, in which the artist ultimately gives death rather than life, but plays tantalisingly with the borderline between the two. 'Le Poème de la femme', with its transmutations from life to marble and finally to death, can be understood in this light.

Sight and appearance are key figures in *Émaux et Camées* and are invested with imaginative power. The surface which sparkles and scintillates is employed always to hide the putrefaction underneath. What is seen is what is valued. Often indeed, the principal verbs are ones of seeing rather than doing, as below:

¹³²Gautier, *De la mode*, cited in Natalie David-Weill, *Rêve de pierre: la quête de la femme chez Théophile Gautier* (Geneva: Droz, 1989), p. 41.

Ses paupières battent des ailes
Sur leurs globes d'argent bruni,
Et l'on *voit* monter ses prunelles
Dans la nacre de l'infini.

(‘Le Poème de la femme’, stanza 16, 9. My italics)

Here, vision is seen as the pathway to the infinite. ‘Des ailes’ and ‘ses prunelles’ are aligned to make the textual passage into death. It is with the eyes fixed forward, looking to death, that satisfaction is achieved.

The *spectacle* of the dead object, the contemplation of it, is the mode of desiring and the moment at which poetry may be aligned most of all with plastic art:

Voici le tableau dans son jour,
(‘Le Poème de la femme’, stanza 14, 9)

By his words, Gautier weaves an imaginative tapestry to be appreciated by the inner eye that is sensitive to his aesthetic obsessions and orgasmic profusion of detail.

While there is an elevation of death as a fixed image, there is a negation of any aspects that do not accord with the aesthetic perfection that evokes desire for Gautier. In ‘Bûchers et tombeaux’, rotting remains are shunned in favour of the funeral pyre and subsequent beautiful memorial monuments. Here, a fervent plea is made for the return of a bygone age, an age in which the aesthetic appreciation of death involved the replacement of rotting bodies with the perfect statue of the defunct:

Reviens, reviens, bel art antique,
De ton paros étincelant
Couvrir ce squelette gothique;
Dévore-le, bûcher brûlant! (‘Bûchers et tombeaux’, stanza 25, 75)

Si nous sommes une statue
Sculptée à l'image de Dieu,
Quand cette image est abattue,
Jetons-en les débris au feu. (stanza 26, 75)

The ardent imperatives ‘Reviens, reviens’ and ‘Dévore-le’, and the crackling, sizzling onomatopoeic assonance of ‘bûcher brûlant’, suggest by sonorous implication the means of destruction that Gautier desires, but also something else. The flames may be seen as removing the unholdable, something that Gautier does not wish to take into account. This cleansing and purifying by fire, this re-making in marble, this fervent poetic rendering may be equally a means of exorcising a desire that does not meet consciously with Gautier’s approval.

Instead of remains, the poem asks for statues. Fixing rather than slow dissolution is acceptable to the poet who, in the image above, places God in the

person of an artist sculpting the material of His desires, in His own image. The poet as God, with the power to create, destroy and then keep relics is an underlying idea that permeates the texture of the poems, an unconscious phantasy of creation.

This is seen in the extremely fetishistic 'Étude de mains', in which a sculpted marble hand and a severed, mummified one are offered up as art objects for our delectation:

Chez un sculpteur, moulée en plâtre,
J'ai vu l'autre jour une main
D'Aspasie ou de Cléopâtre,
Pur fragment d'un chef-d'œuvre humain;
(*'Impéria'*, stanza 1, 10, my italics)

In this stanza we see the characteristic notion of the link between art object and organic object. Moreover the human being is posited as both agent and subject of artistic production. The play on the rhyme-words 'humain' and 'main' shows the intimate link: the verbal object is a hand that has been made by a human hand. This notion is an uncanny one, as the idea of man reproducing parts of himself in art has undertones of a superior plastic form of 'Frankenstein-ism', with the narcissistic artist creating the perfect, curious, cathected alter-ego. This impression is intensified by the fact that in French the word 'humain' contains within it the word 'main', so that the artistic spawning seems somehow naturalised, essential. The shorter word is severed from the longer one, so that the creating of a part-object is there at the level of language as well as theme: fragmentation is shown in the linguistic play.

The perfection of beauty in the hand of Impéria is conveyed by poetic techniques representing the paradoxical characteristics that it has:

Dans l'éclat de sa pâleur mate
Elle étalait sur le velours
Son élégance délicate
Et ses doigts fins aux anneaux lourds. (stanza 3, 10.)

On one hand, the lightness, delicacy and feminine charm of the hand are highlighted by the repetition of sharp, clear combinations of sounds involving the vowels 'é' and 'i', particularly the glassy tinkling of 'élégance délicate'. On the other hand, however, a sense of solidity or opacity is suggested by the heavy, dull and elongated sounds of 'doigts fins aux anneaux lourds' and especially 'pâleur mate' with its 'â' (harking back to the impenetrable 'plâtre' and the unlikely elongated sound of 'Cléopâtre' in stanza 1). This mixture of speed and texture creates a bizarre sound-

pattern that emphasises the grotesque nature of the fetishised hand and the odd effect it suggests.

Even more odd, perhaps is the second of the two 'Études de mains', 'Lacenaire', a meditation on the severed hand of the infamous poet-murderer.¹³³ Again the poet's attitude to the hand is ambivalent, seen in the constant shifting between contradictory types of treatment the subject receives within the poem:

Pour contraste, la main coupée
De Lacenaire l'assassin,
Dans des baumes puissants trempée,
Posait auprès, sur un coussin ('Lacenaire', stanza 11, 12.)

The links between the two studies of hands, and the fact that the poems are intended to be read together, are suggested by the first line which begins abruptly and asks us to compare this object with the previous one. This suggests several things. The contrast (i.e. difference) is implied by the facts that Impéria's hand is a plaster model, Lacenaire's mummified flesh; Impéria's hand is female and delicate, Lacenaire's male, and covered in 'duvet roux'.

Yet, equally, Gautier seems to want to blur these distinctions, to throw them into doubt. A potential undermining and sly irony can be detected in the linking of association of the rhyme-words 'assassin' and 'coussin'. The potent aggressivity of the word 'assassin' with its harsh, hissing sound, as well as the meaning and associations it carries, is softened and rendered impotent by 'coussin', in the same way as by its disembodiment, its deadness. It is made into a trophy, a decoration; not only on a cushion, but *like* a cushion, an inanimate furnishing.

The process of disempowerment of the object is intensified in the mention of 'des baumes puissants'. The substance of embalming fluid is triumphant, where once the power was in the living hand. So, the powers of fixity that the 'baumes' possess make them akin to language, and to the powers of the artist to fix objects in art forms that please.

The tension between life and death in 'Lacenaire' is caught in the play with

¹³³Pierre-François Lacenaire (1800-36): a murderer who wrote his memoirs in 1836 while awaiting execution, he was a hero of the Frenetic Romantics. Maxime Du Camp claims to have been in possession of his severed hand, and it would have been at his house that Gautier encountered this object. See preface to Du Camp's edition of *Émaux et Camées* (Paris: Conquet, 1887), pp. vi-vii.

temporal signifiers, two balls that are kept in the air suggesting the past and present, and respectively, mobility and immobility. The hand is ‘coupée’, ‘trempée’ ‘momifiée’, ‘mal lavée’ four past participles which echo within the poem to fix it as belonging in the past. Time has meant that the murderer’s life, as well as his hand has been ‘coupée’, stunted, cut off.

The past and present become confused in stanzas 13 and 14:

Momifiée et toute jaune
Comme la main d’un pharaon,
Elle allonge ses doigts de faune
Crispés par la tentation. (stanza 13, 12)

Un prurit d’or et de chair vive
Semble titiller de ses doigts
L’immobilité convulsive
Et les tordre comme autrefois. (stanza 14, 12)

‘Allonger’, in the present tense, is the only active verb of which the hand is capable and, significantly, it describes reclining – inertia, rather than motion. However, stanza 14 shows the hand touched by tantalising desires from without (the poet’s projected desire? the reader’s?), for the things (money and sexual pleasure) that in the past it had enjoyed. The rhyme words in stanza 14 suggest a conflict of temporal realm and state. ‘Vive’ and ‘convulsive’ are what, perhaps, the poet wants the hand (to want) to be. Temporarily, they are the markers of a resurrection. However, the other rhyming pair blocks this *enjeu*, by stating that the ‘doigts’, the physical substance, are of ‘autrefois’, belonging in the past, just as the oxymoronic pairing ‘l’immobilité convulsive’ embodies the indecision between states, the impossibility of total freedom or total inertia.

In the closing stanzas of the poem, Gautier’s ambivalence is revealed by contrapuntally placed binary opposites. The text has moved in a circle from the description of the hand in the present in 11, 12, 13 and 14, to a nostalgic look at the distant and recent past which has marked the object in 15, 16 and 17 (‘les vices’ have ‘tracé d’affreux hiéroglyphes’ in the skin which the executioner has, more recently, ‘lus’). 18, 19 and 20 take us back to the present, to the immediate moment of the poet’s contemplation of the object:

En même temps molle et féroce
Sa forme a pour l’observateur
Je ne sais quelle grâce atroce
La grâce du gladiateur! (stanza 18, 13)

The informal, conversational tone of 'je ne sais quelle' can be seen as genuine awe on Gautier's part, but also as a poetic means of expressing a superlative, something beyond the ordinary. By saying that he cannot express the extent or type of the aesthetic and associative appeal the object has for him, he suggests that it can only accurately be placed outside of the grids of representation.

But then, immediately there is a move to counter inexpressibility, in the next line, with the extraordinary term 'grâce du gladiateur'. This striking oxymoronic formula is followed immediately by another, 'Criminelle aristocratie' in what becomes a profusion of absurd admiration and celebration of atrocity, an over-reaching attempt to express a response:

Criminelle aristocratie,
Par la varlope ou le marteau
Sa pulpe n'est pas endurcie,
Car son outil fut un couteau. (stanza 19, 13)

Stanza 19, in mentioning that 'sa pulpe n'est pas endurcie', picks up on the formula 'en même temps molle et féroce' found in stanza 18. This earlier phrase suggests again the ambiguity of the potent/impotent, mobile/immobile, masculine/feminine dichotomies that run through the work, and brings into line the temporal theme by suggesting that in the present, that unavoidable moment, the past actions of the hand and its present state of mummification have achieved a compatibility that is the collusion of opposites. Here, however, the explanation for the perfect softness of the hand is revealed: Lacenaire did not dirty his own hands, but killed with a knife.

This makes him, according to the final stanza:

Vrai meurtrier et faux poète. (stanza 20, line 3, 13)

The discernible mixture of admiration and disdain in the voice of the poetic persona suggests that Lacenaire, in killing, did in reality what the poet does only symbolically, in what one might term a sublimated form. The uncomfortable, indefinably strong reaction to the hand is here revealed as one of identification. The arrangement of the words in a kind of equation suggest a reversible formula: that the writer would be *faux meurtrier et vrai poète*. This reveals an ambivalence towards the poetic task. While the killer achieves in reality a power over other objects, the poet does it with the tools of language. His is the 'travail honnête' (rhyming, of course with 'poète'), his is the nobler task, but whether or not it is considered the more desirable is left very much in

doubt.¹³⁴

This poem reveals a disturbing voice, a poet whose wish at the level of phantasy is to use the power of language, of creativity, to still and to kill rather than to give life. The two hand poems apparently celebrate the creation and preservation of human relics and art objects. Yet, paradoxically, within their structure they carry the suggestion that un-creation, through identificatory destruction, may be the ultimately desirable and beautiful outcome.

Blanc, blanche, blancheur

From 'Le Poème de la femme' to 'Lacenaire', and regardless of differences in poetic style and technique, 'la blancheur' and its derivatives are the salient markers of Gautierian beauty and desire. Consider one of the few examples of chiasmus in the collection, found in 'Affinités secrètes':

Les marbres blancs en blanches chairs, ('Affinités secrètes', stanza 7, p5)

This rhetorical device, which suggests a profound echo inside sound-patterns, is used here to emphasise the idea of marble and flesh assimilated by whiteness.

Similarly in 'Le Poème de la femme', stanza 5 is marked by the peculiar effect the mention of whiteness creates:

Glissant de l'épaule à la hanche,
La chemise aux plis nonchalants,
Comme une tourterelle blanche
Vint s'abattre sur ses pieds blancs. ('Le Poème de la femme', stanza 5, 7)

The last words of the two last lines seem to throw a sheet of whiteness back over the whole verse. The assonance of 'an', picked out by the mention of *blanc/he*, echoes 'glissant' as well as 'hanche' and 'nonchalant'. Also there is a concentration of the consonant 'l' as a second consonant, in 'glissant', 'plis' etc, as in *blanc/he*. This creates a phonic pattern of almost glacial sharpness, suggesting a frozen, icy whiteness.

This linguistic landscape of whiteness, 'Une blanche poésie' (Impéria, stanza

¹³⁴However, it should be remembered that Lacenaire's *Mémoires* contained poetry he had written, itself in the vein of the Frenetic Romanticism of Gautier's early writing. Thus the epithet 'faux poète' may be Gautier's aesthetic judgement of Lacenaire's own work. However, we cannot but notice the odd and misplaced tone of mixed admiration and guarded envy in this last stanza.

2, p10) is a poetic ideal, realised for Gautier in its most abstract form in ‘Symphonie en blanc majeur’, in which whiteness, deathliness and ethereality (personified by a swan mutating into a woman) are exalted. This is one of the most self-conscious of Gautier’s poems, playing on all the major obsessions that run through his work. The necessity for literature to be self-referential and to appeal to a mixture of artistic media is found in the very title, suggesting simultaneously a combination of music and plastic art : the poem will try to reach beyond language to convey *colour*.

The implications of whiteness are multitudinous and shifting. The poem starts off by evoking the swan-women in the ‘contes du nord’ that can be seen :

Sur le vieux Rhin, des femmes-cyignes
Nager en chantant près du bord (‘Symphonie’, stanza 1, 22.)

The swan is a common symbol of purity in poetry, and also of fragility and impending death. Later, Mallarmé will play on these two elements of the association of the swan in ‘Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui...’ (1885).¹³⁵ Here the singing of the femmes-cyignes suggests an underlying threat of death, for it is said that the swan sings only once in its life, at the moment of death.¹³⁶ This acts as an initial note of warning that the symphonie may be a deathly one.

A hierarchy is revealed as the poem progresses (‘ces grandes batailles blanches’, stanza 6, line 1, 23), in which supremacy is measured by perfect whiteness. In comparing a woman’s whiteness to flowers and cloths, he concludes that they must fade, ‘jaunissent comme des jaloux’(stanza 6, line 4, 23), whereas the superior substance is revealed in stanza 7:

Paros au grain éblouissant, (stanza 7, line 2, 23)

Paros, white marble, is a constant motif in *Émaux et Camées*, the signifier of hard solid Gautierian perfection. It appears also in the subtitle of ‘Le Poème de la femme’, *Marbre de Paros*, suggesting that the ultimately desirable transformation the woman could make would be from mortal flesh to marble.

¹³⁵ Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 67.

¹³⁶ See the anonymous English poem, relating the death of a personified female swan (c. 1600):
The silver swan, who living had no note,
When death approached unlocked her silent throat,
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,
Thus sung her first and last, and sung no more:
Farewell all joys, O death come close mine eyes,
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise.

The consistency of the poem, its repetitious *white on white on white* is brought to a poetic climax in stanza 8, where repetition takes the form of anaphora in a series of rhetorical formulations:

De quel mica de neige vierge,
De quelle moelle de roseau,
De quelle hostie et de quel cierge
A-t-on fait le blanc de sa peau? (stanza 8, 23)

The stanza, with its three declarations of his incredulity before her perfection, evokes perfectly a religious liturgy, a prayer to beauty, by its construction and by the religious symbolism of ‘hostie’, ‘cierge’ and ‘vierge’. The inversion of vowel sounds in ‘neige vierge’ creates a soft elongated echoing, which is almost onomatopoeic, suggesting the softness of virgin snow. Yet the image works in two equally Gautierian ways: the perfection is in both the tempting, unsullied sexual potential of the virgin and the cold frigidity of the untouchable.

Whiteness, for Gautier, suggests simultaneously and paradoxically a figure by which one can balance, for poetic effect, the charges of purity and sexuality. It is capable of inspiring an awe that is close to a religious/sexual fervour: in the poem the ‘mica de neige vierge’ is offset by the striking oxymoronic corruption in ‘des débauches de blancheur’(stanza 4, line 4, 22). As we have seen in ‘Le Poème de la femme’, sexual consummation with the white object of desire is unattainable; death must always step in and provide an alternative sort of orgasm, one which stills the pounding blood and makes the moment of exquisite pleasure turn cold and become eternal.

Once we realise this, the verse reads not only as a hymn but as a funeral dirge, its repetition heavy and doom-laden. Stanzas 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15 attempt to respond to the question put in 8, and do this by means of a fluid and frenzied enumeration of white virtues, in which lauded substances, marbles, cotton, ivory, are listed, following the formula of first lines beginning with definite articles and nouns:

Le lis à la pulpe argentée

La blanche écume de la mer; (stanza 9, lines 3 & 4, 23.)

Le marbre blanc, chair froide et pâle, (stanza 10, line 1, 23)

L’ivoire, où ses mains ont des ailes, (stanza 11, line 1, 23)

L’hermine vierge de souillure, (stanza 12, line 1, 23)

Le vif-argent aux fleurs fantasques (stanza 13, line 1,24)

L'aubépine de mai qui plie (stanza 14, line 1, 24)

Le duvet blanc de la colombe, (stanza 15, line 1, 24)

This enumeration, with its repetitive insistence on the definite article at the opening of each line, suggests an attempt to speed up the tempo of the symphony, to move it towards an ineluctable climax. The repetitive charge of similar sounds and imagery in stanzas 9-17 draws the poem tightly together in terms of thematic insistence. However, this verse structure falls largely into the service of tautology. The vast wasteland of whiteness, its monotony intensified by the echoing of sound patterns, is under threat of failing to excite the reader, by lacking the variation in the texture of the writing that allows for revitalisation.

The multitude of *blancs* and *blancheurs* become impenetrable and any desire that underlies the writing is frozen in its tracks. There is a deadening quality about the poem that overwhelms; it dazzles yet does not touch us. We stand back and appreciate coldly without any emotional or imaginative response being provoked.

The effect this has upon the reader is a strange one. If this poem is numbing, deadening, frozen, is it not perhaps the most necrophilic of all his pieces? The poem could be seen as a moment at which form and content take on most convincingly the qualities of the inexpressible desire that is at their core. The hesitations, schisms and ambiguities seen elsewhere are less obvious in the central section of this monolithic, univocal poem. It seems to be wholly in the service of a rigid death-driven fixation.

Despite this, the final stanza does provide a climactic end to the poem, a sort of crescendo that is different to the stanzas that precede it:

Sous la glace où calme il repose
Oh! qui pourra fondre ce cœur!
Oh! qui pourra mettre un ton rose
Dans cette implacable blancheur! (stanza 18, 24)

The device of rhetorical exclamations has replaced rhetoric questions, suggesting a sudden and abrupt moment of fruition of the poet's meditation. The exclamations suggest affirmation, a status quo that is not understood, but accepted and lauded, regarded with awe. The mention of 'glace' is telling: the final stanza freezes the central image of the poem, fixes it in its implacability, its impenetrability. This impression is aided by the repetition of 'Oh! qui pourra...' which causes the reader to

pause, twice breaking her/his rhythm and suggesting an irrepressible rapture before monotony.

On the level of the libidinal charge within the poem, the last stanza reveals an ambivalence *vis à vis* the contemplation of disruption of the frozen images set before us. The dual desire to violate and to preserve is suggested equally by the enigmatic meditation on the nature of whiteness. It poses delicately the dilemma revealed at the heart of the type of desire being evoked: how can one desire a consummation that blurs the perfection that is the pre-requisite of the desire? There is a certain impossibility, an irreconcilable split between active desire and the fixing of the desired object in inanimate abstractions. The diminishment of difference in much of the poem, the enforcement of textual regularity to the point of poetic blockage suggests an attempt to mirror somehow the frustration of an underlying fruitless desire.

L'Art pour l'Art, pourquoi?

Émaux et Camées is often seen as a poetic exploration of the ideals of *L'Art pour l'Art*: This theory can be seen as an attempt to render the same tangibility, the same tactile potential to the text that is an inherent feature of plastic art. Gautier's work aspires to be what the Goncourts describe as 'de la peinture écrite'.¹³⁷ It is a focus on *l'objet pour l'objet*, which is to say that the artist desires that the object described and the object created, the text itself, be emptied of any transcendental meaning or signifying power other than as aesthetic objects in their own right. This act of writing for the sake of the object produced increases the gap between the text and the world and between nature and art that is always the result of an attempt to represent/reproduce the world in writing.

For Gautier, art is more beautiful than nature. He is putting into question the sovereignty of nature over art and reversing the accepted relation of authority. Often within the poems treating of death, instead of a wish to focus on the reality of dead matter, there is an over-emphasis on the plastic splendour with which life's eyes can

¹³⁷Goncourt, *Journal*, p. 1201.

fix death, and equally, which a deathly appearance may bring to life. The schism and conversely the joining between these two realms suggest a textual moment of paramount interest for play with the notions of transitional beauty and subjective desire.

It has become commonplace since *Mlle de Maupin*, to talk about *l'Art pour l'Art* in terms of its anti-utilitarianism, its apolitical insistence on aesthetic purity and artistic elitism. Yet, following the reading given above, Gautier's manipulation of the concept throws light upon a different level of underlying intention. The subject matter of these poems is often strikingly stark and self-indulgent, as is the intense concentration brought to the unmoving, fixed objects. A reading at the libidinal level would suggest a mechanism of fetishisation at work within these elaborately detailed poetic treatments. By fixing the subject matter in tight quatrains, the writer controls his text and its meaning, cuts off its liveliness. This could suggest that the theory appeals to the artist's emotional faculty, as well as his critical sense, as it fulfils a desire to control and to freeze life and movement.

There is a fascination with the paraphernalia of death, the tools of embalming the image of the dead person for the visual consumption of the living that can be seen to suggest *l'Art pour l'Art*, and in relation to this, *l'art sur l'art*. As we have seen elsewhere, Gautier's desire is to elide the absolute nature of either state and suggest the potential of the other behind it. Yet equally, as well as presenting beautiful frozen tableaux, there is often a move within the phonic and rhythmic patterns of the verse, as well as in the content, to spoil or sully what is given, to inject desire into the dead perfection.

If Gautier once touches reality behind the beautiful sparkling edifice of his words and images, the aesthetic perfection moves and is spoiled, the desirous dream of sumptuous visual splendour is over. A necrophilic pleasure of looking and a necrophilic frustration at the impossibility of possessing a frozen ideal are revealed equally in the poems of *Émaux et Camées*.

2.3

Some Concluding Remarks

While the *contes fantastiques* play freely with ideas of death and resurrection, the realities of decomposition are nicely avoided. Gautier plays with metaphorical or metonymical shifts in focus on the dead object. The actual *dead* body of the *dead* woman rarely appears in Gautier, as it does in Borel's *contes* and, later, spectacularly, in Baudelaire's poetry e.g. 'Une Martyre', 'Une Charogne' and prose poems. Rather, fetishistically, dead women are embodied in inanimate objects, (the tapestry in 'Omphale', the cafetière in the story of the same name) or evoked by part-objects (ancient mummified feet). The part suggests the whole, or else a substitution of the signifying object is made. Desire is maintained by the deferral of meaning that is the refusal to name the physical realities of mortality, and by manipulating the formula of the *conte fantastique* that places closure outside of the realms of possibility. We are consistently left with unfathomable ambiguity and tantalisingly thwarted longing.

Émaux et Camées maintains the central *enjeu* of desire and death, but experiments with its expression by means of a poetic form which is the success of Gautier's ideal of *l'Art pour l'Art*. Beauty is often conveyed by tableaux of a precise and monotone nature in strikingly regular versification, depicting a fluid transmutation of art objects into flesh. However, the contrasts and comparisons, the symbolic verbal objects and structural relations within the poems can also often betray an underlying disruptive current of desire that threatens the images of stillness and the appearance of harmony. This can be seen to reflect and describe in literary form the function of mobile desire cathected onto an immobile form.

While Gautier's early and later work has much in common at the level of thematic interest, the difference in literary genre means that the imaginative content of the pieces works in strikingly different ways. The prose medium with its constraints of character and plot movement requires a process of enlargement, of clarification that slows up the impression of a fluid, mobile, writerly desire and allows for greater explication and development of ideas. The sparseness, on the other hand, of verse syntax and structure, especially the octosyllabic quatrains of the collection, suggest a

deftness, a brevity and a speed that make the affective currents more immediately accessible. Questions, exclamations, images and phrases carry the poems along, creating a shower of immediately available meanings and impressions. Thus, versification serves to bring the latent emotional attitudes, fluctuations and hesitations underlying the movement of ideas closer to the surface of the writing.

However, in certain of Gautier's poems, 'Symphonie en blanc majeur' being the most obvious example, the flow of imagery as well as of sound and rhythm, becomes turgid. At such times it is difficult to distinguish between the desiring writer's voice and the fixed object of desire. The relation which has provided the vital play and tension of ideas, as well as the poetic movement and sparkle, in such poems as 'Lacenaire', is suspended. What may be termed an almost total identification occurs in the structural relations within the poem, so that the poem mimetically takes on the qualities of the objects described. From a reader's point of view, this is both artistically frustrating and yet, somehow, intriguing. The question suggests itself, and, I feel, remains open, whether or not the over-saturation of sameness in 'Symphonie' marks a high point of achievement in the poet's textual and meta-textual aims, is the perfect example of literature making manifest desire, or whether it merely characterises writing that falls into the trap of being over-repetitive and therefore tedious.

Chapter Three

Charles Baudelaire: *La Débauche et la Mort*

*Quel feuillage séché dans les cités sans soir
Votif pourra bénir comme elle se rasseoir
Contre le marbre vainement de Baudelaire*

*Au voile qui la ceint absente avec frissons
Celle son ombre même un poison tutélaire
Toujours à respirer si nous en périssons.*

Mallarmé¹³⁸

There is no shortage of critical work or celebratory homage devoted to Baudelaire. Indeed, he is widely accepted as one of the canonical figures of the history of literature, not only of the French nineteenth century, but of the Western world. In particular, there exists a vast array of critical titles on Baudelaire's poetics and on his artistic move from poetry to prose writing. As this study will focus on a specific element of Baudelaire's writing, namely its relation to death and desire, I will not attempt to enumerate the rich wealth of varied critical titles here, although I am aware of them and of their relevance to this discussion.

It must be stated that there is already a sizeable corpus of study focusing on the importance of death and sexual desire in Baudelaire's work, and on Baudelaire's status as a theorist of human nature. From PhD. theses to seminal works by such figures as Georges Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre, Baudelaire's production has provoked a plethora of theory and speculation on the nature of the desiring subject and the subject's desire. The appearance of psychoanalytic criticism on the stage of academic studies in literature has been of considerable significance for discussion of those writers whose work sets out purposely to explore and embody elemental passions and psychological or emotional conflicts and paradoxes. Among the best of such studies of Baudelaire are René Laforgue's *L'Échec de Baudelaire* (1931) and Leo Bersani's *Baudelaire and Freud* (1977), the second of which will make a contribution to the present discussion.

Attempts have been made to link Baudelaire's writing, with its often overtly

¹³⁸Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Le Tombeau de Charles Baudelaire' in *Œuvres complètes*, p. 70.

sadistic and morbid themes, to that of Sade.¹³⁹ Parallels can be found in the writers' treatment of violent eroticism, their pessimistic view of mankind as inherently predisposed to cruelty, and their apparent misogyny. Yet while Sade's writing is often characterised by overstatement and hyperbole, Baudelaire's preoccupation with this baroque subject matter can be traced through the very subtlety and potency of his mastery of poetic form.

¹³⁹Georges Blin's *Le Sadisme de Baudelaire* is a whole work dedicated to this element of Baudelaire's perverse persona, although it does not make use of psychoanalytic theories of sadism.

3.1

Murder and the Muse in *Les Fleurs du Mal*

*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 à Satan, ou animalité,
est une joie de descendre.*
(OC, 682-83)

*Tout enfant j'ai senti dans mon cœur deux sentiments
contradictoire, l'horreur de la vie et l'extase de la vie.*
(703)

Mobility and immobility in Baudelaire's poetry

Bersani's study of Baudelaire and Freud starts with a refutation of the poet's famous 'deux postulations' (heavenly and demonic) in favour of an understanding of the fluctuating, self-deconstructing nature of the poetic voice, whose task of writing is both fuelled by his desirous mobility and fraught with the desire to stop it, to immobilise desire. Thus, the God – Satan poles that Baudelaire gives us are rapidly overturned and the terms that replace them are those of the id and the super ego, or free, mobile, dangerous desire and the urge to still it, to fix it. This fixing, visible in the poetic structure, would be both a move towards stemming desirous or creative energies and, simultaneously, one towards satiation, in the cessation or destruction of meaning that marks a release of tension. Baudelaire consciously perceives this paradox between the pleasures of the calm and harmonious and the desire for disruption and destruction to exist in the human subject, seen when he writes of those human actions which 'n'ont d'attrait que *parce que* elles sont mauvaises, dangereuses; elles possèdent l'attrance du gouffre' (*Nouvelles notes sur Edgar Poe* [ii, 322]).

It is useful to accept Bersani's re-framing of Baudelaire's two moral poles as only apparently opposing psychical structures, which potentially serve the same aim of pleasure. Yet, relocating these drives from the metaphysical to the psychological sphere does not do away with the recognition that in the substance of Baudelaire's work there is a plethora of binarisms and a constant sense of conflict and struggle that go unresolved.

To attempt to understand the power of this Baudelairean characteristic, it is useful first to talk about the over-riding sense of paradox or contradiction in

Baudelaire's poetry, which traditional critics have accepted in Baudelaire's own terms of the seductive simultaneous pull towards the co-present binarisms of evil and beauty. I will do this first by examining the structural relations of paradox on a purely stylistic level, and then I will take the discussion onto the level of the libido.

Baudelaire's celebrated use of the oxymoron, seen in such formulations as 'fangeuse grandeur! sublime ignominie!' ('Tu mettrais l'univers entier dans ta ruelle' [28]), suggests beauty at the heart of evil and pleasure in pain. The oxymoron is a figure of transformation and transcendence, which can be as affecting a shift between mobility and immobility, tension and release, in the same poetic space.

The very title of *Les Fleurs du Mal* can be seen to enact these dichotomies. We may read the title to mean that the flowers grow *from* evil, come out of it as a result or product. This implies transforming activity and fertility: something is *born* of evil. Alternatively they may be flowers that belong *to* evil, (so the 'du' takes on a genitive sense), flowers which are unnatural and unchanging, stemming the idea of perverse growth and engendering. However, of course, the cleverness of the title allows for both interpretations to be kept in play at once, the one constantly suggesting and negating the other.

In several of Baudelaire's poems, the overriding impression, both stylistically and at the level of image content, is one of fluidity, harmony and lyrical expansion. This is most obviously seen in the first poems in the *Fleurs du Mal*, among them 'Élévation', which plays on the enjeu of the poet's spirit soaring freely in the ether, and 'Correspondances', where the poet expounds his theory of the subtle links between the concrete world of natural objects and their profound metaphysical alliances with the human spirit and emotion. The latter poem's structure is one of harmony and internal sonority. The first stanza creates a rhythmic, almost chant-like effect which emphasises journey, the harmonious movement of poetic words through the space on the page by means of nominal enumeration and anaphora:

Au-dessus des étangs, au-dessus des vallées,
Des montagnes, des bois, des nuages, des mers,
Par-delà le soleil, par-delà les éthers,
4 Par-delà les confins des sphères étoilées, (10)

The insistence upon 'par-delà' emphasises Baudelaire's intention to transcend the material and to allow the ephemeral, the spirit, to travel as lightly and freely as air.

The profusion of abstract nouns which follow – ‘agilité’, ‘l’immensité’, ‘volupté’ – conspire to remove the concrete world from the picture. These concepts speak to us and to each other but may not be pinned down. The poet wants them to remain ‘indicible’, beyond translation into solid form, difficult to contain within the substance of language. Absolute linear meaning threatens to swoon away into the seductive waves of the poetic structure, with only the formula ‘mâle volupté’ reminding us of the presence of a grounded, gendered human subject behind the words, seeking both to enjoy and transcend his sexual status.

Thus, poetic symbols and complementary verse structure suggesting fluidity and mobility are to be found in great abundance in the *Fleurs du Mal*. However, while there is one grain of the Baudelairean voice which is obsessed with harmony within movement, seen in this transcendental, liquid melting of meaning into sound and sensuous perception, there is equally evidence in *Les Fleurs du Mal* of the Baudelaire who so admires Théophile Gautier’s marbles, enamels, funerary statues and frozen art objects.

The poetic voice of the *Spleen* poems is constrained by the superabundance of inanimate and heavy objects that clutter his imaginative furnishings. In ‘J’ai plus de souvenirs que si j’avais mille ans’, the weight of the profusion of concrete nouns suffocates the attempt to express the eternal endurance of the poet’s memories:

Un gros meuble à tiroirs encombré de bilans,
De vers, de billets doux, de procès, de romances,
Avec de lourds cheveux roulés dans des quittances,
5 Cache moins de secrets que mon triste cerveau. (73)

The very stuff of evocation is rendered solid and immutable. Paper and words ‘de vers, de billets doux...’, which are the material production of thought, lie as heavily on the poet’s internal sensitive landscape as his immediate thoughts, suggesting that the monumentalising effect of writing achieves a fixity at the expense of imaginative mobility.

Indeed the poet is soon metaphorically comparing his memory to the most impenetrable of objects – monuments for the dead:

C’est une pyramide, un immense caveau,
7 Qui contient plus de morts que la fosse commune. (73)

The sheer number and weight of these dead objects leads to the next imaginative leap: that in which the man himself becomes the communal grave of the dead, which,

significantly, the ‘natural’ feature, the moon, will not illuminate: ‘Je suis un cimetière abhorré de la lune’. This graveyard is then metaphorically rendered as a chamber in which the roses have faded: organic life cedes to deadness, and the suggestion of the death of sexuality, or, equally of sexual death, is raised.

The imagery of the poem is unrelentingly pessimistic. Nouns suggesting places of impenetrability, closure and dankness – ‘pyramide’, ‘caveau’, ‘fosse’, ‘cimitière’ – are enumerated. Repetition is banal rather than in the service of phonic or grammatical patterning: the lines begin with simple articles or prepositions: ‘où’ is thrice repeated, as is the self-referential and conversational ‘je suis’ leading to direct metaphor without even poetic comparison or the suggestiveness of a simile.

Unpoetic-sounding words, such as ‘encombrés’ and ‘boiteuses’, are also included to enhance the impression of misery and ugliness. Similarly, the straightforwardly unimaginative ‘gros’ and ‘lourd’ allow the bulk and awkwardness of the images to surface in the body of the words: the solidity of objects replaces the transcendental flavour of other poems.

‘Pluviôse, irrité contre la ville entière’ and ‘Quand le ciel bas et lourd’ follow a similar pattern. In the former, rain pours from ‘son urne’ into the ‘voisin cimitière’, so that the natural element of rain is linked, like the poet’s memories, to inanimate objects and death, and the piece has an almost conversational tone and syntactic arrangement, far from the high poetic style of ‘Élévation’. In the latter poem, the sky is objectified, rendered as ‘un couvercle’, the earth is deadened into ‘un cachot humide’, and the streaks of rain are like prison-bars.

In many poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, then, the structure is dominated by closure and immobility, and the rhapsodic harmony of those poems found mainly in the earlier pages of the collection is undermined. However, poems which occupy these extreme polarised positions are less interesting than later, more schizophrenic ones. In several of the *Fleurs du Mal*, the two structures discussed above are found inhabiting the same poetic space, and the result is an ambiguous puzzle, a self-sustaining structural dichotomy.

Consider in this light ‘Je te donne ces vers...’:

Je te donne ces vers afin que si mon nom
 Aborde heureusement aux époques lointaines,
 Et fait rêver un soir les cervelles humaines,
 4 Vaisseau favorisé par un grand aquilon,

 Ta mémoire, pareille aux fables incertaines,
 Fatigue le lecteur ainsi qu'un tympanon,
 Et par un fraternel et mystique chaînon
 8 Reste comme pendue à mes rimes hautaines; (40)

 Être maudit à qui, de l'abîme profond
 Jusqu'au plus haut du ciel, rien, hors moi, ne répond!
 11 — Ô toi qui, comme une ombre à la trace éphémère,

 Foules d'un pied léger et d'un regard serein
 Les stupides mortels qui t'ont jugé amère,
 14 Statue aux yeux de jais, grand ange au front d'airain! (41)

The vessel, blown lightly by the favourable wind, in line 4, is a symbol typical of the set of poems examined first of all. The movement of the natural elements evoked (the sea and wind), are echoed in the balance of the perfect alexandrines in the first stanza. A concentration on the vastness of the ethereal or celestial (as in 'Élevation'), is found in the spiritual images of 'mystique chaînon' and 'ombre à la trace éphémère'. Also, the tracing of the world's bourne from 'L'abîme profond' to the 'plus haut du ciel' suggests movement and breadth. Yet, the rhythm and the poetic imagery seize up as the poem progresses, with the clumsy staccato of the first tercet breaking the sense of fluidity. The last line achieves an unexpected thematic closure, not only of the poem, but also of the 'toi' of the address. She is suddenly caught in the fixing image of a 'statue aux yeux de jais, grand ange au front d'airain.' The emotional and spiritual vocabulary of the poem is negated by this striking image of jet and bronze, the 'front d'airain', which contrasts ironically with the 'regard serein'. She is beautiful in her sculpted splendour, but rendered incapable of feeling her serenity. Thus, the poem offers up a forward-flung energy and desire for movement and progression which are systematically negated and stunted by the poem's internal structures.

Similarly in 'Le Beau navire', The mistress is first described in terms of the archetypal sailing boat balancing smoothly and rhythmically on the waves:

Quand tu vas balayant l'air de ta jupe large,
 Tu fais l'effet d'un beau vaisseau qui prend le large,
 Chargé de toile, et va roulant
 8 Suivant un rythme doux, et paresseux, et lent. (52)

Yet this strain of fluidity and harmony is soon broken by the distinctly odd metaphor used to describe the beloved's breast:

Ta gorge qui s'avance et qui pousse la moire,
 18 Ta gorge triomphante est une belle armoire (52)

The repetition of 'ta gorge', with its double plosive 't' and 'g', marks a transitional moment between the two lines into the fixity of the image of the 'armoire'. The second 'gorge' with its unlikely and inharmonious adjective 'triomphante' marks the poem's descent away from the rhythmic quality which has characterised the image of the 'navire'.

Even the suggested principle of marine images as signalling life and harmony is not always sustained. While in many cases we have the sea evoked as something beautiful and positive ('la mer, la vaste mer, console nos labeurs!', 'Mœsta et errabunda' [63]), elsewhere it can transmute into a symbol of bitterness. If man in 'L'Homme et la Mer' is attracted by the sea, it is because its eternal flow reflects the sorrow and the despair of the human condition:

Homme libre, toujours tu chériras la mer!
 La mer est ton miroir; tu contemples ton âme
 Dans le déroulement infini de sa lame,
 4 Et ton esprit n'est pas un gouffre moins amer. (19)

The harmonious sonorous patterns set up in lines 1-3 with their insistence upon the consonants 'l' and 'm' reflect this peaceful complicity between the forces which begin with those letters; 'la mer' and 'l'homme' and the linking conceit 'le miroir'. Yet sudden disappointment and a break with the previously idyllic tone can be read in line 4, with the jerky and disruptive plosives of 'et ton esprit n'est pas'. The rhyme word 'amer', which echoes back to 'mer', now casts a retrospective pall over it.

Similarly, where we have the sea voyage promising peace and love in 'L'Invitation au Voyage' ('Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté, / Luxe, calme et volupté.' [53]), in the last poem of the collection, 'Le Voyage' (129-134), the journey is into the unknown of death and 'Le Léthé', the river of oblivion, is evoked in the condemned poem of that name (155). This apparent contradiction on the part of Baudelaire is not just poetic indecision. The patterns of opposition and the constant urge to put imaginative and linguistic mobility to rest, suggest a poetic voice which is aware of the discord between desire and execution. Although often uncomfortable to read, the wilful disclosing of these characteristics and the disruption of harmony can bring their own poignant poetic *jouissance*.

A fairly traditional close reading of the poems discussed so far has suggested

certain strategies for approaching the relation of mobility and immobility, life and death at work within the poems (which could be further explored from the point of view of stylistic, thematic or psychological enquiry). The relative lack of difficulty here, and the feeling of having seen all this before couched in other terms, may mean that a reader feels her/himself to be lulled into a sense of already knowing what is particular about Baudelaire.¹⁴⁰

I will now move on to consider that the dynamic poetic techniques discussed thus far may reflect libidinal psychical structures in a more or less straightforward way. Several of the poems in the two collections describe imagined sexual encounters, and an attempt can be made to test the applicability of my reading method by viewing the treatment of overtly sexual imagery in Baudelaire's poems through the antithetical/complementary structures suggested by Bersani.

In a poem such as 'La Chevelure', fetishistically describing the poet's synaesthetic attachment to a woman's hair, the overriding impression is one of movement and joy:

Ô toison, moutonnant jusque sur l'encolure!
 Ô boucles! Ô parfum chargé de nonchaloir!
 Extase! Pour peupler ce soir l'alcôve obscure
 Des souvenirs dormants dans cette chevelure,
 5 Je la veux agiter dans l'air comme un mouchoir! (26)

The plural expression of vocative rapture in the 'ô' of the opening stanza, which is then echoed throughout rest of the poem, gives a sense of joy and liveliness to the poem's phonic character. This is re-enforced at the semantic level by the mention of the literal desire to overcome immobility by shaking the head of hair, thereby dispelling the ghosts of dark inertia in the poet's internal world/bedroom (enclosed space).

Yet, directly after 'La Chevelure', comes the following short, untitled poem:

¹⁴⁰See, for example, Graham Chesters, *Baudelaire and the Poetics of Craft* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Here, Chesters looks at instances of Baudelaire's deviation from and adherence to the rules and dogma of French poetic practice. He draws attention to several instances in which Baudelaire dislocates regular poetic structure for particular dramatic effect and to remind the reader of the artifice of the poetic operation.

Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûte nocturne,
 Ô vase de tristesse, ô grande taciturne,
 Et t'aime d'autant plus, belle, que tu me fuis,
 Et que tu me parais, ornement de mes nuits,
 5 Plus ironiquement accumuler les lieues
 Qui séparent mes bras des immensités bleues.

Je m'avance à l'attaque, et je grimpe aux assauts,
 Comme après un cadavre un chœur de vermisseaux,
 Et je chéris, ô bête implacable et cruelle!
 10 Jusqu'à cette froideur par où tu m'es plus belle! (27)

Of all the poems in the collection, perhaps, this one uses the most overtly necrophilic imagery.¹⁴¹ Not only is the woman described in terms of cold, inanimate objects ('vase de tristesse'), she is likened to a corpse over which the poet, in the person of a chorus of worms, will crawl. Its position after 'La Chevelure' and the similarity of the repetitive vocative structure ('Ô vase de tristesse, ô grand taciturne') suggests a certain ironic contradiction in the poet's presentation of desire, a witty and perhaps conscious debunking of any one position he may seem to take.

Yet the sheer number of examples of this phenomenon suggests also a deep-rooted or obsessive structure that goes beyond self-conscious mockery and is suggestive of a frustrated manifold attempt to re-formulate desire and its meaning through language. It is as if Baudelaire's poetic and libidinal economy requires both the coldness and stillness that is the condition of necrophilic desire and the sonorous, mobile suggestiveness that sparks the lively eroticism of 'La Chevelure'. One set of images and structures both suggests and negates the other, both forecloses desire and allows it to run on.

It seems that the process of writing itself suggests to Baudelaire these desirous structures. Artistic inspiration for Baudelaire is figured both as a cold, disdainful, deathlike muse in 'La Beauté' ('Je suis belle, ô mortels ! comme un rêve de pierre,'

¹⁴¹ A rival for that description might be the poem which starts:

Une nuit que j'étais près d'une affreuse Juive,
 Comme au long d'un cadavre un cadavre étendu, (p. 34)

Here sex is figured as death-like immobility. The repetition of 'cadavre' in the second line sounds forced and emphasises the lifeless and unsatisfactory nature of the described experience. This disturbing encounter with the 'Juive' is juxtaposed with the imagined object of desire for which the poet yearns:

Je me pris à songer près de ce corps vendu
 À la triste beauté dont mon désir se prive. (p. 34)

But note that even in the desired scenario, the mistress's beauty is defined as 'triste' rather than healthy and happy, making her no more lively than the passive Jewish prostitute.

[21]) and a strong, cruel, active *femme fatale* in ‘Hymne à la Beauté’ (‘Tu marches sur des morts, Beauté, dont tu te moques’ [24]). Baudelaire retains the traditional Muse figure of art as a beautiful woman but subjugates it almost totally to his own perceived structures of desire — in turn punished and punishing, lively and deathly, but always eroticised.

In one further poem which narrates a sexual scenario, the two structures play upon each other with a sense of chronological inevitability. ‘Les Bijoux’ describes a night spent with a dark-skinned woman who wears nothing but her jewellery during the erotic encounter in deference to the poet’s sexual tastes:

La très chère était nue, et, connaissant mon cœur,
Elle n’avait gardé que ses bijoux sonores,
Dont le riche attirail lui donnait l’air vainqueur
4 Qu’ont dans leurs jours heureux les esclaves des Mores. (158)

The play of immobility and mobility is suggested straight away by the title which draws our attention to the inanimate stones rather than the living flesh that we might imagine to be the focus of erotic attention. Yet, this is overturned by the fact that the stones, invested with libidinal energy, take on the properties of life, movement and sound. They are ‘sonores’ and in the next line the jewellery ‘jette en dansant son bruit vif et moqueur’. What is inanimate has to be re-vitalised by the Baudelairean desirous economy. There appears to be a concupiscence, as I have shown in Gautier, to focus on the transparency of things and to glimpse life through death and vice versa.

Even though the woman is figured metonymically as her jewels, and therefore the scenario is reduced in terms of one of intersubjective involvement, a lively, forward-looking desire is visible in the early stanzas of the poem as here in stanza 2:

Quand il jette en dansant son bruit vif et moqueur,
Ce monde rayonnant de métal et de pierre
Me ravit en extase, et j’aime à la fureur
8 Les choses où le son se mêle à la lumière. (158)

This liveliness is suggested by the repeated vibrant plosive ‘d’ and ‘t’ sounds of ‘Quand il jette en dansant’ and ‘ce monde rayonnant de métal et de pierre’, as well as by the choice of words ‘me ravit en extase’ and ‘à la fureur’. The cold, harshness of the metal seems to ignite by its difference the lover’s desirous ardour.

Unusually for a poem about a sexual encounter, the act itself is reported as

taking place quietly, almost casually, after the dramatic build up of poetic tension:

Elle était donc couchée et se laissait aimer,
10 Et du haut du divan elle souriait d'aise (158)

The poem then goes on to figure a moment after the sexual act when the poet's soul is removed from the bedroom scene on to a 'rocher de cristal/ Où calme et solitaire elle s'était assise'. Desire (partially) sated, the woman now appears to the poet under a new guise. Where before, in the heat of desire, her jewels were the focus of attention and given lively mobility, now her limbs receive the opposite treatment:

Et son bras et sa jambe, et sa cuisse et ses reins,
18 Polis comme de l'huile, onduleux comme un cygne, (158)

They are figured momentarily as objects, polished parts, shining like the stones. However, the fluidity of 'l'huile' and 'onduleux' suggests the failure of absolute poetic fixity, as desire partially re-animates the images.

That the poem continues to run on after the sexual act has been described, suggests the failure or inadequacy of the apparent fulfilment. The transformative and counter-transformative treatment of the woman continues as she now appears monstrous to the reclining poet:

Je croyais voir unis par un nouveau dessin
26 Les hanches de l'Antiope au buste d'un imberbe, (p 158)

The monstrousness of the image suggests alienation from the poet's own subjective desire. The transformation signals the structure of rendering immobile in a new form. To change the state/status of the poetic object alienates it from the poet's control while safely distancing it emotionally from him.

The following, final, stanza, contains lines which are ambiguous and challenging:

– Et la lampe s'étant résignée à mourir,
Comme le foyer seul illuminait la chambre,
Chaque fois qu'il poussait un flamboyant soupir,
32 Il inondait de sang cette peau couleur d'ambre ! (159)

The image contains both immobilising and mobilising implications. The dying lamp, aiming towards its own extinction, allows for a new (hence revitalised) vision of the woman, flushed with or flooded with blood. The blood could be both renewed sexual excitement or the symbol of a violently inflicted wound and impending death. The ambivalence of the poet's desirous voice and the ambiguity of the language and structure are perfectly complementary.

This sadistic move to change and to fix the object of desire comes after (partial) sexual release, the event we would perhaps have expected to mark the climactic zenith of the poem, but which failed to do so. The poem is very aware of the residues of emotion and energy in an act of creativity/sexuality. Something falls outside of the structure of desire allowed for: the orgasm should be one that renders impossible the return of desire. But poetically, psychically, practically, that is impossible and recognised as so. Hence, a mutable confusion and profusion of contradictory images, coupled with a sense of burgeoning sadism, characterise the close of the poem.

The tension exposed when we juxtapose 'Élévation' and 'Spleen'; made more obvious when we compare 'La Chevelure' and 'Je t'adore à l'égale...', is further unearthed in a particular and striking way in 'Les Bijoux'. The shifting of thematic focus onto the sexual level seems to show up more closely the relation of desire to poetic technique. Hence, a closer relation of form and content around the techniques of mobilising and immobilising is also achieved.

Yet, as a reading of 'Les Bijoux' has shown, the discussion of sexuality falls short if poetry concentrates only on the act of sexual intercourse. The poem wants to ape the structural movements of desire itself, by grafting erotic event structure onto verse. In this way it embodies a sexual economy that seems to need the immobilising of both object and desire at a radical level. When this does not occur in 'Les Bijoux', the transformative powers of the poet run on until a frenzied, sadistic conclusion is finally, tardily reached.

Below, I will read and analyse three poems from the collection which, using the dynamic of movement and stiling discussed above, embody poetically the act of murder. The close-readings will provide a springboard for a discussion of what it means to write about murder for the nineteenth-century poet and for the desirous subject.¹⁴²

¹⁴²The poems chosen for discussion are just three of many that could have been used to explore and illustrate the theme of allegorical/literal murder in Baudelaire. Other possible examples include 'Le Vin de l'assassin' (pp. 106-107), 'Sonnet d'automne' (p. 65), 'La mort des amants' (p. 126).

The poetics of the Baudelairean *Liebestod*

*Moi, je dis: la volupté unique et suprême de l'amour gît
dans la certitude de faire le mal. — Et l'homme et la femme savent de
naissance que dans le mal se trouve toute volupté.* (652)

*Ce qu'il y a d'enivrant dans le mauvais goût, c'est le plaisir
aristocratique de déplaire.* (661)

In some poems Baudelaire goes one step further than the scenarios of sublimated or suggested stilling and killing seen in 'Les Bijoux' (and in other poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal* such as 'Une Charogne' and 'Remords posthume') and translates the imposing of wishful deathly structures onto a mistress into libidinous scenarios which linguistically act out her literal murder. The murder poems have so far received no specific treatment by critics as a sub-canon of Baudelairean erotic poetry.

In one of the banned *Fleurs du Mal*, 'À celle qui est trop gaie', sadistic frustration follows a fantasy path ending in virtual, sexualised murder. The poem begins by describing a woman whose liveliness and verve touch and astonish those around her:

Ta tête, ton geste, ton air
Sont beaux comme un beau paysage;
Le rire joue en ton visage
4 Comme un vent frais dans un ciel clair.

Le passant chagrin que tu frôles
Est ébloui par la santé
Qui jaillit comme une clarté
8 De tes bras et de tes épaules.

Les retentissantes couleurs
Dont tu parsèmes tes toilettes
Jettent dans l'esprit des poètes
12 L'image d'un ballet de fleurs. (156)

A profusion of conventional similes are employed describing the woman as being like beautiful, natural features. The emphasis upon health and goodness is given by the excessive enumeration of her bright qualities and the fluid, rhythmic quality of the verses with their balanced syntax (lines 1, 4, 8) and sing-song-like stresses.

The breaking point in this unblemished picture of brightness comes at the end of the fourth stanza, with the introduction of the poetic 'I':

Folle dont je suis affolé,
16 Je te hais autant que je t'aime! (157)

The harshness of 'je te hais autant que je t'aime' is audible as well as thematic, with its dramatic aspirated 'hais' causing a pause in the reading of the line that increases the dramatic quality of the revelation.

This sudden change in the emotional texture of the poem heralds its second thematic part which places the poet's subjectivity at the centre of the poetic landscape and draws sharp contrast between his pole of darkness and hers of light:

Quelquefois dans un beau jardin
Où je traînais mon atonie,
J'ai senti comme une ironie,
20 Le soleil déchirer mon sein;

Et le printemps et la verdure
Ont tant humilié mon cœur,
Que j'ai puni sur une fleur
24 L'insolence de la Nature. (157)

These two stanzas present the poet's recounted horror before those things of which, we were told in lines 1-12, the mistress reminded him. The liveliness that she symbolises marks a jarring difference in the poet's desirous imagination which makes him both want her and want to punish her. Desire for union is created by the difference that is simultaneously the factor preventing it.

The temporal structure of the poem now moves from general reminiscence to an unspecified future (imagined) moment, set, unsurprisingly, after dark, in stark contrast to the 'soleil' which has blighted the poet's spirits. The signifier of night suggests also phantasy or the unconscious. In contrast to the open lightness of the poem's beginning we move into an interior, libidinal realm:

Ainsi je voudrais, une nuit,
Quand l'heure des voluptés sonne,
Vers les trésors de ta personne,
28 Comme un lâche, ramper sans bruit, (157)

In line 25, the mistress has ceased to signify as anything other than the things she represents emotionally for the poetic voice. She is set up in opposition to his desire as she thwarts its realisation and allows it to run on untempered. The 'ainsi' implies some logical transition from the bitterness that life fills him with to the desire for revenge that he will take on the hated and desired representative of life.

The ambience of crime is set up in stanza 7, with its atmospheric evocation of midnight 'l'heure des voluptés', intimations of hidden loot 'les trésors de ta personne'

and stealthiness 'ramper sans bruit'. The resonant rhyming of 'personne' and 'sonne' causes an echoing heaviness to fall at the end of the two lines.

Pour châtier ta chair joyeuse,
Pour meurtrir ton sein pardonné,
Et faire à ton flanc étonné
32 Une blessure large et creuse,

Et, vertigineuse douceur !
À travers ces lèvres nouvelles,
Plus éclatantes et plus belles,
36 T'infuser mon venin, ma sœur ! (157)

Stanza 8 and 9 describe the nature the revenge will take: The intensity of conviction and mounting desire are given by the repeated 'pour' which creates the effect of an excited contemplation of the martyrism of the woman's flesh. The rapidity with which the dizzy phantasy begins to run is given in the repeated 'et' at the opening of lines 31 and 33, suggesting an ongoing current of drive moving towards its own inexorable conclusion.

The 'orgasm' of the poem is a highly oxymoronic one, given in the 'vertigineuse douceur', which mixes uncomfortably the dizziness of guilty rapture, with sweetness. The shock to the senses is highlighted both by the multi-syllabic insistence of 'vertigineuse' which takes up most of the line, and by the exclamation after the oxymoronic formula.

The perverse fantasised act of 'À Celle qui est trop gaie' consists in a distortion of the act of sexual intercourse. A wound is made in the mistress's abdomen, a new sexual opening, the lips of which the poet esteems 'plus éclatantes et plus belles' than her natural vagina, into which he can ejaculate his 'venin'. The harmony of the rhyme in lines 34 and 35 'nouvelles' and 'belles' suggests that the act is fulfilling because it creates a new alternative to the sexual act which creates life. The act is a death-giving one.

The idea of sexual fulfilment enhanced and made more beautiful by murderous, deathly pleasure is embodied in the image of ejaculation, the process by which both the woman's troublesome gaiety and the poet's desire are stilled in an exchange which links and unites them in figurative, phantasised death. Compatibility is achieved between the poet and his mistress, whom he now calls his 'sœur', rhyming with 'douceur'. The complicity of death is posited as the only thing which could

bridge the gap set up in the poem between the antithetical vibrant life of the woman and the poet's bleak sickness. A figurative act of sexual murder joins them spiritually in a nirvana-like state of immobilised desire.

Among the most striking of the murder poems in *Les Fleurs du Mal* is 'À une Madone' which creates an altar in words for the object of the poet's adoration, who is figured as a living statue of the Spanish incarnation of Mary.¹⁴³

This religious edifice is constructed within the internal landscape of the poet's emotional world, suggesting that we are about to witness a drama that draws on external objects, infuses them with rich associations and fuses them with the poet's subjective reality:

Je veux bâtir pour toi, Madone, ma maîtresse,
Un autel souterrain au fond de ma détresse,
Et creuser dans le coin le plus noir de mon cœur,
Loin du désir mondain et du regard moqueur,
Une niche, d'azur et d'or tout émaillée
6 Où tu te dresseras, Statue émerveillée. (58.)

The poetic agenda of building a protective internal world to rival external, imposed reality will be fortified by the profusion of finery and precious substances evoked and the descriptive objects which the poem will enumerate to adorn the figure of the Madonna. The insistence upon the hard shiny metals that will decorate this secret alcove of the mind already suggests associations of immobility. This may remind us of the many 'émaux' and 'statues' that decorate Gautier's poetic landscape, suggesting conscious or unconscious continuity in the desirous poetic imagination of the century.

The play on inanimate, shiny substances is carried forth into the image of the poem itself being a decorative amulet in the next lines:

Avec mes Vers polis, treillis d'un pur métal
8 Savamment constellé de rimes de cristal (58)

The metal lines and 'rimes de cristal' are telling symbols: the writing wants to be sharp, icy and deadly, to render language as cold, dark and fixing as 'le coin de plus noir' of the poet's heart. Thus, poetic language should mirror desirous intention and

¹⁴³In 'Fusées', Baudelaire comments: 'L'Espagne met dans sa religion la férocité naturelle de l'amour' (p. 661).

may in some way consciously enact it.

The coldness suggested in the image of the ‘vers de cristal’ is sustained only so far: alongside the decorative images of inanimate finery and precious stones that litter the poem, vocabulary of a more violent and desirous nature is in abundance in a way that suggests a balance and indeed conspiracy between inanimate objects and active desire, and similarly a yearning for coldness and heated passion:

Je ferai pour ta tête une énorme couronne
Et dans ma jalousie, ô mortelle madone,
Je saurai te tailler un Manteau, de façon
12 Barbare, roide et lourde... (58)

Mention of the crown he will have made for her is immediately followed by the mention of jealousy, and then her ‘Manteau’ suggests the prefiguring mention of ‘barbarie’. The inanimate objects he creates from his passion read like beads of a libidinous rosary before this ‘autel souterrain’, so that each of her ornaments becomes a signifier of an emotion or desire. The overvaluation of these fetishised ornaments is given by their upper case lettering. As the poem progresses, emotions and objects become interchangeable in the strange subjective world, as his ‘Larmes’ serve as ‘Perles’ and her ‘Souliers’ are made out of his ‘Respect’.

The mounting sexual desire in the poem’s voice is left in no doubt in lines 15 and 16:

Ta Robe, ce sera mon Désir, frémissant,
16 Onduleux, mon Désir qui monte et qui descend (58)

The enjambment of the two lines and the repetition of ‘mon Désir’ serve to speed up the rhythm of the poem. This creates the effect of a compulsive idea, that of a mobile, restless desire, which rises and falls in tandem with the sound of the lines as we read them, like a quickening heart beat or the panting of rapid breaths. The punctuation in the second line places the stress on ‘mon Désir’, creating a distinct sonorous echo back to its last mention in the previous line, and centring the erotic charge as the key force in the poem, taking over from that of worship.

This pattern builds until the climactic moment in the poem which combines the antithetical ideas discussed and suggests where their associative linking may come: the poet wants to ‘mêler l’amour avec la barbarie’ and to do this he evokes the ‘sept Péchés capitaux’ out of which he will fashion seven knives. In this symbol, religious and sexual passion, and cold objects and heated desires, meet in an image of

bizarre violence and retribution.

The confused zealous passion reaches its apotheosis in the last, orgasmic, murderous lines:

Je les planterai tous dans ton Cœur pantelant,
44 Dans ton Cœur sanglotant, dans ton Cœur ruisselant ! (59)

The sense of sexual frenzy and the urgency of the act are conveyed by the hissing susseration of 'sanglotant' and 'ruisselant' as well as by the altered rhythmic patterns created in these lines which echo lines 15 and 16 (discussed above). The thrice-repeated thrust of the formula 'dans ton Cœur' suggests the delirious sexual/murderous repeated thrusting of the seven deadly phalli/knives that the poet unsheathes.

This sudden, voracious closure teeters on the borderline between a suggestion of control and mastery in producing acute poetic effect, and the suspicion of dissolution or discharge. The relaxing of formal strictness is suggested by the cascading, rhythmic rush into abrupt nothingness. After the slow, reverential build-up of the description of a static poetic landscape, an impression of fluidity gushes forth into the poetic structure, and it is an interesting paradox that in the very moment of death, images of movement should be foregrounded, where previously statue-like qualities of stillness have been emphasised.

The imaginative space of his internal, subterranean niche has been fixed by objects that both stimulated, yet prevented, the outpouring of sadistic desire. The catachretic moment of release is a uniting one. The Madonna and the poet are linked through her sacrifice by the thrice-repeated mention of her 'Cœur', which establishes an obsessive echo back to the opening lines of the poem where *his* dark heart is described as the location in which the scenario takes place. This suggests a linking of the hearts of the two persons, with the dual associations of the heart as symbol of romantic love and life-giving centre which here is penetrated and torn apart. This has the effect of linking murderer and victim by the dual-natured symbol signifying love and death.

Whilst elsewhere the live, vibrant will of the woman is stilled in imagined or enacted killing, one poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal* introduces a more complex relation of desire and poetic composition as the object in question is already dead. 'Une martyre'

treats of the reactions of a viewer standing before an unknown painting depicting a murdered woman. From the point of view of imaginative necrophilic desiring structure matching poetic structure, this is one of the most satisfying and disturbing poems in the collection. Unfortunately, few critics choose to talk about it in any depth. Georges Blin points out the strangeness of the fact that this poem was not banned along with the other condemned pieces:

[C]e poème [...] excède les bornes de l'odieux. [...] Baudelaire y a mis l'accent d'une façon *insupportable* sur le côté charnel de la scène.¹⁴⁴

My reading of 'Une martyre' will pose the question of why Baudelaire's treatment of the scenario should seem 'insupportable' to a reader, and will propose a different reason to the one given by Blin, couched as it is in the rhetoric of good taste and moral disapprobation.

It opens with a characteristic enumeration of decorative objects and polished surfaces as seen in 'À une Madone':

Au milieu des flacons, des étoffes lamées
Et des meubles voluptueux,
Des marbres, des tableaux, des robes parfumées
4 Qui traînent à plis somptueux, (111)

The imaginative space of the poem is again an enclosed setting, this time a 'chambre tiède' which itself is captured within the frame of the picture at which the poetic persona gazes. The motif of a *chambre close* is a recurrent one in the Baudelaire poems and may represent equally the internal confines of the imaginative desiring mind. We have seen this trope brought to literal fruition in 'À une Madone' where the poetic space is imaged as a corner of the poet's heart.

The lugubrious ambience of the poem and its morbid voyeuristic insistence upon the spectacle of death are announced by the description of the room:

Dans une chambre tiède où, comme en une serre,
L'air est dangereux et fatal,
Où des bouquets mourants dans leurs cercueils de verre
8 Exhalent leur soupir final, (112)

The first organic signifiers in the poem, the flowers, are seen succumbing not only to necrosis but to the constraining presence of the cold, inanimate, poetic objects, the glass vases, which serve them as a 'cercueil'. The animate is surrounded by, framed by the inanimate. This is seen also in the choice of rhyme words: the suffocating

¹⁴⁴*Le sadisme de Baudelaire*, p. 31. My italics.

‘serre’ and the icy ‘verre’ create a contradictory but equally effective sense of entrapment while ‘fatal’ and ‘final’ are unrelievedly single-minded in their associations of doom and death.

The mention of the flowers falling into death is a traditional poetic symbol for impending mortality, and announces the object of our interest which is presented to us directly in the opening line of the third stanza:

Un cadavre sans tête épanche, comme un fleuve,
Sur l’oreiller désaltéré
Un sang rouge et vivant, dont la toile s’abreuve
12 Avec l’avidité d’un pré. (112)

The symmetry and balance of the first dodecasyllabic line is broken by the displacing of the cæsura with the comma after the ninth syllable. This forces us to concentrate on the spectacle that intrigues the poet and the deferred break causes an exaggerated pause which allows us fully to savour the image. The headless corpse belongs very much to the realm of the objects, the ‘flacons’, ‘étoffes lamées’ and ‘marbres’ of the opening lines, yet, the stream of blood which flows like a river suggests a new mobility, a movement which makes the decapitated woman potentially relive in a new and altered form: Immobility allows for a re-animation on a different level.

The splitting of the object into animate flow of blood/inanimate body is taken a step further by the division of head and body that occurs. While the body with its vivid, viscous flush of red symbolises a form of ongoing vitality, the head is ‘semblable aux visions pale qu’enfante l’ombre’; it has slipped into a total inanimate state which nonetheless suggests the haunting supernatural presence of the afterlife.

The muted suggestion of shadowy spirituality in the fourth verse is overturned in the fifth, where the location of the head is prioritised. It is situated ‘sur la table de nuit’. This takes us back to the patterning of simple inanimate and inorganic objects, and the mention of the vacuous gaze, the ‘regard vague et blanc’ of the murdered head reinforces the *enjeu* of looking and being looked at, reminding us that we, along with the poet, are looking at an object that cannot look back at us.

This introduces a thematic structure describing an erotic power play and possession, and the next stanza develops this with its mention of the body’s location:

Sur le lit, le tronc nu sans scrupules étale
 Dans le plus complet abandon
 La secrète splendeur et la beauté fatale
 24 Dont la nature lui fit don; (112)

The first indicator is the mention of the bed, dual location of sex and death.¹⁴⁵ We are then told that the upper body is ‘nu’ and is stretched out in a fashion suggesting abandonment or sexual rapture. Her death is now linked, as in ‘À une Madone’ to the fatal beauty that the woman possessed in life. She was *fatale* in both senses of the word, unavoidably enticing and (therefore?) inevitably linked to death, joined by fate to her mortality.

The eroticisation of the corpse is carried on in the next stanza where the mention of her garter serves as a grotesque posthumous coquetry:

 Un bas rosâtre, orné de coins d’or, à la jambe,
 Comme un souvenir est resté;
 La jarretière, ainsi qu’un œil secret qui flambe,
 28 Darde un regard diamanté. (112)

Her inanimate leg is linked through rhyme with the burning flame of the passionate gaze, so that the tension between the frozen and the ardent, the cold and the warm is maintained. At a thematic level this suggests the constant revivification of the martyred body through the secret, silent, watching male gaze.

The enjeu of sight is picked up on in the following stanzas where spectacle shades into speculation:

 Le singulier aspect de cette solitude
 Et d’un grand portrait langoureux,
 Aux yeux provocateurs comme son attitude,
 32 Révèle un amour ténébreux,
 Une coupable joie et des fêtes étranges
 Pleines de baisers infernaux,
 Dont se réjouissait l’essaim des mauvais anges
 34 Nageant dans les plis des rideaux; (112)

A new temporal sequence is embarked upon in stanza 10, which recalls/imagines a guilty, bizarre sexual encounter which led to the killing. The expression of excitement that the onlooker feels faced by the image of the corpse leads to the backward-looking suggestion that the same desires provoked the spectacle. (In a sense this has to be so, as the poem, its language and structures, are the substance that forge into being the described phantasy which provokes desire). But realisation of this is also enacted at

¹⁴⁵This is also the case in many other poems, most notably perhaps in ‘La Mort des amants’, where the lover comments ‘nous aurons des lits pleins d’odeurs légères’ (p. 126), in which to make love and die.

the level of semantic content, as the poem undertakes to imagine the stages that lead to the tableau of un-creation.

Consider stanzas 11 and 12:

Elle est bien jeune encor! – Son âme exaspérée
Et ses sens par l'ennui mordus
S'étaient-ils entr'ouverts à la meute altérée
44 Des désirs errants et perdus?

L'homme vindicatif que tu n'as pu, vivante,
Malgré tant d'amour, assouvir,
Combla-t-il sur ta chair inerte et complaisante
48 L'immensité de son désir? (113)

The sudden explosive 'Elle est bien jeune encor!' in stanza 11 causes the newly opened temporal gap to close backwards so that momentarily the corpse lives again, suggested by the attribution of her gender in the personal pronoun and the direct address to her as 'tu'. He imagines a complicity on the part of the victim whose immense sexual desires he sees as being errant and leading to her fatality: a victim of her own nature.

Obvious identification is implied by the positing of the male killer in stanza 12. He is absent from the physical described tableau, our first poetic enclosed space. His evocation in the second space, that of the imaginative watcher's mind, allows for a total alignment of the desires of the two males evoked. The watcher calls the dead woman 'tu' in order to become her lover.

The mention of the excess of desire in last two lines of stanza 12 is telling. The suggestion is of a desire for consummation so strong that it can only end by killing its object. The murdered woman was 'inerte et complaisante' even when alive. Her perfection, figured as fatal beauty, was a source of frustration to her lover so that, libidinally, the only possible move was one into further fixity. Transformation into a corpse allowed for a new level of imaginative mobility.

Yet even if the poetic voice can identify with the killer, frustration is revealed by the question mark that follows the imagined annihilation in line 52. The dead object will not re-animate sufficiently to answer him. In stanza 13 this frustration escalates:

52

The urgency of the imperatives ‘Réponds cadavre impur!’ and ‘dis-moi, tête effrayante’ suggest the mounting sexual excitement caused by the imaginative foray into the scene. The vicarious nature of ‘te soulevant d’un bras fiévreux, [...] a-t-il sur tes dents froides/ collés les suprêmes adieux?’ intercut by the feverish demands to know, epitomises the nature of the identificatory desire. The lack of absolute proof, the overwhelming *presence of absence*, the ability to fantasise *ad infinitum* lead to this, the non-final *jouissance* of the poem. This second question mark at the end of stanza 13 marks in many ways the *élément limite* of the scenario. No more can be known but desire, as speculation, may run on.

The last two stanzas take a step backwards from the intense desirous relationship of poetic voice and corpse:

56

Something approaching resignation on the part of the poetic voice characterises stanza 14. Having exhausted the possibilities of the scene for an onlooker, he urges the reawakened phantoms of desire back to sleep, seen in the soothing repetition of 'dors en paix, dors en paix' and the alliterative and sonorous echo of 'dans ton tombeau mystérieux'.

Stanza 15 looks outwards from the frame of the picture towards the ‘real’ perpetrator of the crime, who is called ‘ton époux’. Just as the too gay mistress became ‘ma sœur’ after her punishment by sex/death, so the murderous act has married the killer and victim in a union which is seen to be eternal. The notion is that death has linked them and blurred the differences, even of doer and done to: She will be the active presence who ‘veille[s] près de lui quand il dort’, he the inanimate sleeper. Similarly, he will be loyal to her until he is the one to be dead.

Just as the murdered body takes on a form which is 'immortelle' in the final

stanza, so the creative act has fixed a poetic object in a picture and then a poem: doubly immortalised it. Yet the poet is perhaps not satisfied with the perfect, murdered body or the constraining framing. The imaginative trip through time, the life/death divide, and the complex process of identification that form the last section, give a telling account of the structural nature of the fantasies. The poem retraces its steps, to a space and a moment outside of its own genesis in a picture, to the epicentre of the imaginative poetic voice. He re-animates the corpse in order to kill her again, to undergo, through a shifting identification, the orgasmic moment of death.

Georges Blin thought 'Une martyre' to be 'insupportable' because of the prurience he espied in Baudelaire's treatment of sexual murder. It is certainly true that this poem is not easy to read and makes a strong impact on the reader. However, the strong reaction the poem evokes comes, I would suggest, not through the ghoulis subject matter *tout court*, but through the perfect embodiment of a structure of desire with a necessary excess of frustration, in appropriate and striking poetic form. The voyeurism allowed for in the poem positions the reader uncomfortably alongside the desiring poet and calls her/his own desire into question. The intricate union of necrophilic desire and poetic technique traps the reader in a drama of suffocating, unrelenting voyeurism that is as compulsive as it is disturbing.

Post mortem

*I wish we were dead together to-day,
Lost sight of, hidden away out of sight,
Clasped and clothed in the cloven clay,
Out of the world's way, out of the light,
Out of the ages of worldly weather,
Forgotten of all men altogether,
As the world's first dead, taken wholly away,
Made one with death, filled full of the night.*

Algernon Charles Swinburne¹⁴⁶

Baudelaire's writing about murder may be seen both as the artistic working through of a libidinal psycho-drama and an extreme manifestation of a general symptom of nineteenth-century aesthetic obsessions. Below I will attempt to sketch out the literary-historical and psychological implications of these writings.

Baudelaire's famous desire to 'épater les bourgeois' and to enjoy the pleasures of bad taste can be seen as partly responsible for the extreme nature of the imagery in the poems discussed. The nineteenth-century Romantic movement saw the inception of a general preoccupation with the question of what was and was not fit subject-matter for poetic art. Baudelaire and his contemporaries clearly saw it as their role to continue to enlarge the field of lexical and thematic opportunity by making nameable that which had previously been taboo, and mixing high and low registers of language to create new effects.¹⁴⁷

A good example is the way in which Baudelaire plays with the tradition of the *carpe diem* in poems such as 'Une Charogne'. Here a well-worked formula is re-vivified with violent and witty intensity by foregrounding literally the sadistic and necrophilic sentiment beneath the conventional sentiment. The rotting, stinking animal carcass to which his mistress is compared, stands as an ironic comment on the

¹⁴⁶Algernon Charles Swinburne, 'The Triumph of Time' in *Poems and Ballads, First Series* (1866) (London: Chatto & Windus, 1898), pp. 35-46.

¹⁴⁷An example is Hugo's famous 'Réponse à un acte d'accusation', in which he advocates the use of any word in the service of poetic endeavour. Rimbaud's 'Les Chercheuses de poux' and 'Le Bateau ivre' are also notable for the poeticization of unlikely words or subject matter.

supposed refinement of poetic sentiment.¹⁴⁸ The visceral imagery of ‘Une Charogne’ reinstates the excess of the corporeal at the heart of a convention which has tended coyly to use fading flowers to stand in euphemistically for bodily decomposition. Equally, blasphemous murder poems using ‘real’ daggers and drawing forth ‘real’ blood, such as the ones I have been examining, may be viewed as part of an attempt to revitalise writing and to expand the horizons of the poetic project.

Baudelaire is certainly not alone in the period in expressing an artistic fascination with murder. Thomas De Quincey, whose *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* Baudelaire translated in 1860, had published *On Murder as a Fine Art* in Blackwood’s Magazine in 1827. In his three essays, he discusses playfully the aesthetics of murder and the similarity between the creative artist and the killer.¹⁴⁹ However, while De Quincey’s portrayal of the art of murder is sometimes sadistic and vivid, and definitely aims to shock, his formula lacks the sexual element that has been seen to be so crucial in Baudelaire’s treatment.

Murder and sexual desire as a poetic combination can be seen in subtler forms in many earlier and contemporaneous works. *La petite mort* is a key image in the poetry of the Romantic period, as are the killing eyes of the beloved or the treacherous figurative murder that is infidelity (Donne’s ‘The Apparition’ is a good early example of this). Yet the stunning thing about Baudelairean sexual murder is its explicitness, its almost tabloid qualities seen in the bloodthirsty killing of the Madonna and the

¹⁴⁸— Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
 À cette horrible infection,
 Étoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
 Vous, mon ange et ma passion !

Oui ! telle vous serez, ô la reine des grâces,
 Après les derniers sacrements,
 Quand vous irez, sous l’herbe et les floraisons grasses,
 Moisir parmi les ossements.

Alors, ô ma beauté ! dites à la vermine
 Qui vous mangera de baisers,
 Que j’ai gardé la forme et l’essence divine
 De mes amours décomposés ! (p. 32)

¹⁴⁹Here is a typically humorous passage which draws the parallel: ‘Awkward disturbances will arise; people will not submit to have their throats cut quietly [...] and whilst the portrait painter often has to complain of too much torpor in his subject, the artist in our line is generally embarrassed by too much animation.’ *On Murder as a Fine Art* (1827) (London: Philip Allan, 1925), p. 40.

morbid necrophilic fantasy woven around the image of the martyr. Moreover, while it is an acceptable conventional trope to kill a mistress by making love to her (i.e. to give her pleasure so great that she dies of it) Baudelaire's structure of desire is slightly different in 'À celle qui est trop gaie' where the act of murderous wounding is made to *look like* sex (i.e. sex becomes a metaphor for murder) and in the extraordinary 'Une martyre', where the poet describes making love *by killing*. In the latter poem, the act of murder becomes the enabling factor for a sexual and spiritual unity that transcends the contingencies of life. The dead lover inhabits a timeless realm which is both unchanging and eternal, a space in which mobility and the negation thereof may be other than mutually exclusive. This is the realm that the poet so ardently evokes in 'Remords posthume'. His conception of this spiritual space apart from earthly confines (the nirvana which all romantic lovers seek) is given a visceral immediacy by the naming of the act of murder. This candidness makes his project fairly original among writers of the time.¹⁵⁰

In his notes he writes the following of love:

Ce qu'il y a d'ennuyeux dans l'amour, c'est que c'est un crime où on ne peut pas se passer d'un complice. (689)

The naming of love as a crime is not exaggerated or incidental. The poems discussed above are very much love poems, even as they kill the loved object.

The fact is emphasised by the generic form of the poems. As clearly defined tributes to mistresses, with a hint of *carpe diem*, they are an acknowledgement of the

¹⁵⁰However, see also Robert Browning's 'Porphyria's Lover': in which the adulterous lover strangles his married mistress with her own hair so that they might remain together:

That moment she was mine, mine fair
 Perfectly pure and good: I found
 A thing to do, and all her hair
 In one long yellow string I wound
 Three times her little throat around
 And strangled her. No pain felt she,
 I am quite sure she felt no pain.

[...]

And in the closing lines, the same implication of consent on the part of the victim is implicit in the narrator's insistence upon her desire to remain with him:

Porphyria's love : she guessed not how
 Her darling one wish would be heard.
 And thus we sit together now,
 And all night long we have not stirred,
 And yet God has not said a word!

'Porphyria's Lover', *Robert Browning: The Poems*, ed. John Pettigrew and T. J. Collins, 2 vols (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), vol. i, pp. 380-381.

poet's courtly heritage. Traditionally, 'Une Charogne' and 'Remords posthume' with their overtones of dark humour and wit have been seen as pastiches or sadistic jokes on Baudelaire's part. While, on one level, they are certainly this, I would also suggest that the painful repetitive insistence upon desire and foreclosure, sexuality and death, within their structures signals something at least partly serious and fervent on the poet's part. He is not just calling into question assumptions about aesthetic trends and tastes, but also assumptions about the nature of the impulses that lead to the desire for certain representations and artistic forms. Baudelaire is revealing the underside of the *memento mori*, the desire as well as the dread that produces it. Baudelaire is by no means the first writer and thinker to name love as an ambivalent emotion entailing elements of sadism and violence. However, what is unique is the very visceral way in which these poems reach out to embody, through writing, a vision of the emotion of love as destruction.

The described female object is in each case implicated in the drama as a partner as well as a victim.¹⁵¹ The necessary factor in the love-death play is the very complicity that the victims/lovers have to feel. This would suggest that Baudelaire wants to go beyond murder as a mere conventional poetic trope and instead finds therein the structural formula for a relation or imagined relation of desire that is as violent as it is irresistibly seductive.

Baudelaire's formulations suggest that in love and desirous play, the two partners take on the roles of killer and victim naturally, without effort. The desirous configuration would therefore appear to be one of Hegel's dialectic of master and slave. The interesting thing about this dialectic is that the other is incapable of giving recognition, as in 'Une martyre', where the poet's frustrated 'réponds, cadavre impur!' brings forth only silence. In the murderous play of Baudelaire's sado-masochistic couples, there is no real subjugation, only, ultimately, annihilation which

¹⁵¹'À celle qui est trop gaie' was in fact the first of the tribute poems which Baudelaire sent anonymously to Mme Sabatier in 1852. Discovering the identity of her suitor, on the publication of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Sabatier returned his affection wholeheartedly. This seems rather extraordinary. We can either assume that she understood the sadistic and murderous implication of the poem's closing lines to be no more than a literary joke, or that she was in some way flattered by or receptive to the described formulation of desire. Either way, this re-emphasises my point that these poems are love poems, in this case used actively in the service of the poet's extra-diegetic libidinal aims.

may prove as frustrating as it is exciting.

Let us look again at the relation between sexual intercourse and murder, constantly posited by the poems, most notably in 'À celle qui est trop gaie' and 'À une Madone'. Feminist critiques of male writing and pornography often posit the link between violence and the male sexual impulse, and the crude psychoanalytic interchangeable metaphors of plunging knife and thrusting phallus are obvious associations.¹⁵² However, it is interesting to examine the possible origins and ontology of the psychical relation which seems to be finding expression in Baudelaire's poetic structures.

Psychoanalysis has sexual difference – the significance, particularity and social interpretation of the two sets of genitals and their function – as the foundation of psychical development and the source of infantile phantasies. Yet an understanding of Baudelaire's described desirous structures may come from a willingness to allow Freudian psychoanalytic assumptions about the primacy of the sexual metaphorisation to take a back seat. Let us assume for a moment that the primary mechanism of desire in the masculine subject's mind were not one of celebrating the penis and fearing threats to it, but one of a more primal relation to desire and loss. In simultaneously fearing and desiring death and wishing to master the fear of it, the subject may seek to play it out on the desired other.

Baudelaire's poetry may be so striking, and the murder poems so shocking and exciting, because they reinstate the primary stuff of desire. The object around which the protagonists position themselves is not the phallus, but death. Moreover, descriptions of intersubjectivity are equally radicalised: cathexis is not the desire for sexual penetration of the loved object, but for the death of the other, libidinised and radicalised as sexual murder.

Our tendency when writing about desire is to use the 'yardstick' of heterosexual intercourse and to relate all other descriptions of pleasure-forms to repressed or perverted symbols of the 'real thing', mature genitality. In post-psychoanalytic discourses, sexuality has become the essential critical idiom and the

¹⁵²For a full-length study on this subject, see Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987).

meanings attributed to the penis and the vagina have become an entirely naturalised mythology. Often even queer or radical feminist readings use the model of heterosexual genitality as the one against which other pleasure types must define themselves in conscious attempts at transgression. Yet, let us imagine for a moment that when Baudelaire writes death and murder, he means death and murder, i.e. radical absence and radical intersubjective destruction.

Viewed in this light, Baudelaire's project would seem to have to do with the conscious recasting of myths. Baudelaire's recourse to Christian iconography and Ovidian mythic figures in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, may be seen at the thematic and structural levels as an attempt to supersede past understandings of emotional dramas. The dead heroines of 'Une martyre' and 'À une Madone' are feminised, sexualised Christ figures, sacrificed for the good of male-kind on an altar of subjective crisis. This attempt to sexualise Christian myth may, in some way, be equivalent to replacing the primacy of the desire for sexual intercourse with the desire for murder.

This awareness of death as a stilling of all tension, a potential resolution, is primary. It is both the first thing the subject is aware of, before the presence/absence of a penis is an issue, and it is figured consciously throughout life as the last thing s/he will experience. Awareness of death frames life and is mediated once the subject attempts to enter the field of alterity by the metaphorised social construction of sexual interplay with its convenient symbols of difference, loss and atrophy. Moreover, an awareness of death also frames *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The opening poem, 'Au lecteur', is forthright in its lauding of violence, murder and destruction, and the final poem, 'Le Voyage', embodies the poet's ultimate journey into death. Poems describing sexuality and erotic encounters are located between these two significant extremes.

To see something essential in the polarised difference between male and female may be, in some way, to miss the point. While difference is a necessary factor in desire, the content of the difference may be arbitrary. In 'L'Idéal', the male poetic voice declares that he is tired of the beauty of ill, dying women, the 'chloroses' that we have seen to be so fashionable in the nineteenth century, and that elsewhere he himself lauds. He declares that:

Ce qu'il faut à ce cœur profond comme un abîme,
C'est vous, Lady Macbeth, âme puissante au crime, (22)

The poet, who has previously desired the murder of beautiful women, here desires a beautiful murderess. Whilst elsewhere, he sees himself in the criminal role, here he seems here to desire to be the potential victim of the sexual coupling that equals the murder of one partner. However, perhaps due to the need for the repression of the true wish, he does not go on to describe the act of murder being done to himself.¹⁵³

Sado-masochistic rituals as well as the vocabulary of 'straight' sex are rich in the idea of two different and complementary players (sub. and dom.), whose sex is structurally unimportant. What is important is that there is recognition from, and identification with, a desired other who is different enough to be exciting and close enough to be convincing. In both cases, one partner enters or works upon the other in order make some *change of state*. The act of doing something to the other both temporarily assuages, and yet reminds the subject of, the underlying lack which obsesses her/him. Sex and sado-masochistic play increase excitement through a stimulation that is a conflation of pleasure/pain (the attack) only to still excitement in the *petite mort* of orgasm or the cathartic transcendence of a successful masochistic scene. But orgasm is too mild a conclusion for Baudelaire, the seeker after a primordial truth. Poems which tell of 'straight' (though highly fetishistic) sexual encounters, such as 'La Chevelure', are, as Leo Bersani points out, much less detailed and much more abstract than the sadistic murder poems. It is harder to tell exactly what actions and relations are being described. Baudelaire's shifting of gendered sexual interplay onto the level of attack and murder bravely radicalises the forces at play within the relation of one and other by making the orgasm into a final act of un-creation.

However, even if it taps in to an essential and primal desire, Baudelaire's positioning is clearly as the adult who has bypassed the initial stages of primary narcissism and pure death drive while still retaining these elements as key unconscious phantasies. Sexual partnership, the interaction with the other, provides a framework in which Baudelaire might experiment with a radicalised love of death,

¹⁵³Similarly, 'Le Revenant' (p. 64) and 'Les Métamorphoses du vampire' (p. 159) constitute a couple in which the described relation of gendered supernatural doer and done-to works in almost perfectly equal inverse fashion.

Thanatos libidinised. Sexuality becomes a parodied figure for playing with death. The women evoked become others with whom desirous death-driven urges may be played out and the scenarios and vocabulary of romantic and erotic literature become canvases for these experiments with the beyond.

This project is clearly radical and shocking. A further element of interest and ambiguity is the collaboration of victim and killer already described above. This collaboration may be read in several ways. It would be possible to re-appropriate it as a proto-feminist comment on the nature of the masculine-feminine dialectic of love-play in which difference, which is the condition of desire, is created primarily by the male coercion of the woman to play a role that is subordinated and passive. His definition of her function as a facilitating extension of himself, the lesser part of him that he symbolically kills/penetrates in his exploration and exertion of masculine desire, is unflinchingly exposed in Baudelaire's most powerful poetry.

However, this structure also supports my suggestion that the protagonist of the deathly drama is the poet/subject himself, and that the love-object is an internalised, highly idealised object that forms part of the poet's psyche and with which there is strong identification. Thus the woman's identity is borrowed to allow the game to be played: the poet is doing to her (the part of him that is split off as an other, as her) what he cannot do to himself. A good example of this is the poem 'L'Héautontimorouménos', in which this notion of the subject as both doer and done-to, killer and victim in one, is exposed in the penultimate stanza:

Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
Je suis les membres et la roue,
Et la victime et le bourreau! (79)

The manifest desire for a balance of antithetical roles and properties encompassed within the vociferous, declaiming 'je' of the poem, reveals the two-edged nature of the principle kind of one + other relationship that has been repeatedly revealed in the Baudelairean economy: that of the killer and the victim in one.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴The idea of being, simultaneously, the one who ends life and the one whose life is ended, is a thematic obsession which runs through Baudelaire's writing. In his 'Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe', he writes of man's 'perversité naturelle, qui fait que l'homme est sans cesse et à la fois homicide et suicide, assassin et bourreau' (ii, p. 323), and, in the notes for 'Mon Cœur mis à nu', 'Il serait peut-être doux d'être alternativement victime et bourreau' (ii, p. 676).

The essential frustration of playing with split-off parts of the self is seen in the example I have already given from 'Une martyre', where the poet's voice becomes irritated by the absence of recognition in the blank face of the corpse, its inability to speak. This can be seen to come partly from the frustration of the poet to negotiate the split-off parts of himself, to have mastery over the results of his desire. The lack of control on the part of the poetic voice is seen both by the positing of another male subject – the absent killer, absent perhaps because that active part of the poet's desire is already exhausted in phantasy by the time the poem comes into being – and the corpse's inability to respond in any way to the poet's demands.

The poetic actualisation of the desire for death carries within it the tautology that is the foreclosing of desire. If the poet remains to address his objects, the orgasm of un-creation is not one of absolute finality for the poet. Whereas in 'À celle qui est trop gaie' the fantasised death is shared by the positing of a familial bond, in the necrophilic 'Une martyre', the force of the poet's death-wish is carried into the description of the violently murdered woman. The very violence of the description and its creative power forestall the trip into nothingness. The poetic object, and finally the poem, are stilled at their end, but the poet's voice must live on to play out its destructive phantasy in further forms. There is a tension between the desire to create and the desire to express destruction. Perhaps Baudelaire comes close to expressing this tension by writing the frustration and the ongoing nature of desire which spreads outside of the poetic framework, into the syntactic and poetic substance of the work with its gaps, hesitations and jumps.

Baudelaire's contribution to the discussion of the psychological import of literature, may be seen as the radical and explicit playing out in poetic form of the simultaneous fear and desire aroused by the concept of death. He fuses sexuality and death – *la débauche et la mort* – the two tantalising taboos, in a package that is violent and affective. Gautier's tentative phantasmagorical necrophilia and his later narcissistic poetry which places poet as morbidly whimsical God, creating and destroying human forms, come to artistic fruition in Baudelaire with considerable power and intensity. If Gautier's is the initial infantile recognition of death with the omnipotent phantasy of self-destruction, Baudelaire's position straddles the

developmental leap to lie also beyond, in the field of alterity. He addresses the moment at which self-destructive urges become intersubjective, libidinised attempts at union, when Thanatos meets Eros. He figures sexual murder as the hidden truth, the underside of mature heterosexual genitality and as the logical end-point of the poetic project. In my unashamedly phenomenological reading of Baudelaire's work, he supersedes Freudian sexual theory *avant Freud* by the actualisation of desirous structures in literary form.

By taking the murder poems as central, and reading the structures and techniques of poetic mobility and immobility found throughout Baudelaire's work with and through them, we arrive at a productive method of looking awry at Baudelaire's poetry. What Bersani posits as just one element of Baudelaire's desiring persona, can in fact be seen to embody the whole of his artistic and psychical project.¹⁵⁵ A revisionist reading of Baudelaire may be one which re-construes his work as a sustained attempt to deal with a personal subjective relation to death and desire externalised into art, where it is expressed in terms of a constantly shifting dialectic. This is most powerfully and convincingly achieved in those poems which allow for a staging of murder to be articulated within the very substance of the writing, where poetry takes on the status of desirous phantasy given form.

¹⁵⁵*Baudelaire and Freud*; see chapter 7, 'Desire and Death', 67-89.

3.2

The Structures of Murderous Desire in Prose and Aesthetic Theory

Certain critics have suggested that the repetitive instance of murder in the poems relates exclusively to Baudelaire's obsession with the difficulty of the poetic task and the impossibility of rendering the perfection that is beauty in language. In such a formulation, the desirable woman metonymically denotes Beauty as an abstract concept, while murder becomes a trope for the poet's frustration at the impossibility of representation (see Chesters [1988], 104). Others feel that the libidinal level is the one on which the poetic trope should most truly be read, so that its thematic foregrounding is an indicator of the poet's (literally) necrophilic-sadistic phantasies (see Laforgue's pathography of Baudelaire [1931]).

To discount one of these levels of meaning is to halve our appreciation of the impact of the work. While Baudelaire clearly has a multivalent self-critical literary project in mind when he envisages his muse as a vile, detestable creature or as a murdered lover, this does not preclude the libidinal import of the project itself or the significance of the choice of imagery. We know by now that all writing is inextricably caught up in structures of desire, and it is important to take into account how conscious attempts to write about writing, far from being dry, didactic or overly determined texts may equally carry the impetus of desire within them.

While it seems to me reductive to say that poems about murder are 'really' about theories of the crisis in representation, let us for a time suspend our mistrust of such universalising statements and consider that Baudelaire's prose and his writing on art and aesthetics may also, in some way, be intimately involved with the same structures of desire that the murder poems explicitly show up: murder is not (only) about theory, but theory may well be principally about murder, that is about the collusion of intersubjective eroticism and the destructive impulse.

Prose poems – pro-life?

Much has been written in other contexts and under the aegis of other investigations, such as the pursuit of genre study, about Baudelaire's leap from verse to prose and what this allows him to do as a poet. Chesters's study is especially good at highlighting those moments at which subject matter – usually depictions of Parisian life – seems to exceed the limits of versification and seek to be prose. This is most obvious in those subjects which are treated both in verse and in prose, so that the seeds of the prose poems may be observed in the *Fleurs du Mal*.¹⁵⁶

Yet to argue that Baudelaire moves away from questions of the emotional and sexual life in his prose poems in favour of a concentration on observed Parisian scenes would be to miss the essence of the Baudelairean prose poem. Many of these focus on the same murderous dialectic of sexuality as the verse poems, using the additional features inherent to prose – narrative techniques, polyvocal registers and a freer use of syntax – to similar artistic and libidinal effect.

Of the many prose poems that discuss sexual perversion and murder in more or less straightforward ways, I will now analyse just one.¹⁵⁷ Symbolic murder is the conceit of the anecdotal prose poem 'Le Galant Tireur'. It was inspired by an idea Baudelaire had for a scenario while writing the critical and reflective prose fragments published posthumously as 'Fusées':

Un homme va au tir au pistolet, accompagné de sa femme. — Il ajuste une poupée, et dit à sa femme: Je me figure que c'est toi. — Il ferme les yeux et abat la poupée. — Puis il dit en baisant la main de sa compagne: Cher ange, que je te remercie de mon adresse. (660)

The published prose poem retains the last line of this scenario intact, while developing the central theme into a short but complex narrative.

The poem begins in the manner of a classic story-telling narrative, which determines action, place and event, rather reminiscent of the way a fairy tale or a fable might open:

¹⁵⁶Examples include the two versions of 'L'invitation au voyage' (p. 53 and p. 301), 'La Chevelure' (p. 26) and 'Un hémisphère dans une chevelure' (p. 300) and the two versions of 'Le Crépuscule du soir' (p. 94 and p. 311).

¹⁵⁷Two striking examples would be 'Portraits de maîtresses' (p. 345) and 'Mademoiselle Bistouri' (p. 353).

Comme la voiture traversait le bois, il la fit arrêter dans le voisinage d'un tir,
disant qu'il lui serait agréable de tirer quelques balles pour *tuer* le Temps.
(349)

The italicised 'tuer' serves two functions. Firstly it causes the reader to pause on the word, imbuing it with possible significance and ambiguity; later it will ring with irony as the dénouement is reached. Secondly, it has the effect of signalling a slight shift in the narrative voice. Breaking with the flow of narrated events, a digression occurs with the aside:

Tuer ce monstre-là, n'est-ce pas l'occupation la plus ordinaire et la plus
légitime de chacun (349)

This authorial intervention emphasises the importance of the theme of killing, by revealing it as an underlying concern both of the protagonist and the poet. Moreover, as in many of Baudelaire's poems, the concept of time is seen to lie heavy as a human burden which prompts uneasiness and thoughts of mortality, in the case of Baudelaire, often homicidal ones.

The next sentence has us back into the narrative —

— Et il offrit galamment la main à sa chère, délicieuse et exécrationnelle femme, à
cette mystérieuse femme à laquelle il doit tant de plaisirs, tant de douleurs, et
peut-être aussi une grande partie de son génie (349)

— but only just. Two things are noticeable: the mention of killing and the break into internal authorial monologue have affected the style and tone of the narrative voice. Our attention is immediately drawn to the mistress, who is described lyrically as a source of confusion and conflictual emotion for the protagonist: she is both 'délicieuse' and 'exécrationnelle', he owes to her both his 'plaisirs' and 'douleurs'. These antithetical pairs have been seen elsewhere in Baudelaire, and are characteristic of the ambivalence that underlies his poetic voice. We have the suspicion that the level of intensity Baudelaire is evoking is one at which symbolic categories such as pleasure and pain break down leaving only insatiable desire and the need to rein in its vastness.

After this dovetail into lyrical language we are sharply back to the narrative in the second paragraph:

Plusieurs balles frappèrent loin du but proposé; l'une d'elles s'enfonça même dans le plafond; et comme la charmante créature riait follement, se moquant de la maladresse de son époux, celui-ci tourna brusquement vers elle, et lui dit : 'observez cette poupée, là-bas, à droite, qui porte le nez en l'air et qui a la mine si hautaine. Eh bien! cher ange, *je me figure que c'est vous.*' (349-350)

The *tireur*'s dialogue is the first example of direct speech presented to us. The presence of italics may remind us of the first mention of 'tuer', in the previous paragraph. The italics can be seen as a device to focus the reader's attention on the key motivating elements of the prose poem's dynamic movement. More than this, however, they also serve as a transitional device which may be said to make conscious in the body of the text the unconscious drives within it. The *tireur*'s speech to his mistress articulates hidden desire and allows it to be born as intention. This works like the mention of killing, linked originally to time, but which articulation allowed to become mobile and to cathect its real intended object, the mistress. The earlier italicisation begins to grow the seed of the central conceit, which pushes through the surface of consciousness here.

The enabling function of the speech act is reflected in the next sentence:

Et il ferma ses yeux et il lâcha la détente. La poupée fut nettement décapitée.
(350)

The fact that the *tireur* closes his eyes while enacting this symbolic killing reinforces the notion of internal fantasy and external acting-out meeting in a fictional space. The repeated 'et' and the clipped, matter-of-fact style of the short sentences suggest the rapid execution of a sudden resolved course. Similarly the statement of his success is unemotional and simple in its expression: like the doll's decapitation, the narrative action is executed 'nettement'.

Consider the last paragraph:

Alors s'inclinant vers sa chère, sa délicieuse, son exécrationnelle femme, son inévitable et impitoyable Muse, et lui baisant respectueusement la main, il ajouta: 'Ah! Mon cher ange, combien je te remercie de mon adresse!' (350)

The aftermath of the suddenly enabled symbolic *acte pur* is an immediate return to the stylistic tone seen earlier in the prose poem. The long, elegant, multi-clausal sentence is in sharp contrast to those that we have just seen, and the mention of 'sa délicieuse, son exécrationnelle femme' is a direct echo of 'sa chère, délicieuse et exécrationnelle femme' in the first paragraph. Alongside this repetition we may notice the linking vowel sound 'é' in 'délicieuse et exécrationnelle'. This suggests that just as the two qualities, and the

urges they inspire, are inextricably linked for the ambivalent *tireur* (and Baudelaire), so their dual power cannot be undone by any act of symbolic redemption. The antithetical pairs, so typical of Baudelaire's verse poetry, are re-found here in a manner that suggests the balance, parallelism and resonant undercurrents of poetry. The circle has come full turn, and the effusive description of the mistress suggests that the *tireur*'s emotional pendulum has swung back to a point of equilibrium in which she is vile and delightful in equal measures once again.

His gratitude to her at the very end suggests simultaneous irony and satisfaction. On one level the symbolic act has failed: nothing has changed, he has not killed her or freed himself of the nameless irritation which is the repressed desire to do so. But, like the partial making conscious of hidden desire as seen in the italicised act of speech, it allows for a return to an earlier state. Some time has been killed, a frustrated desire has been voiced and embodied, and we have the feeling that the status quo can be resumed. This is seen both thematically and stylistically in the return to rapturous prose characterised by complex punctuation and elevated language.

In 'Le Galant Tireur', the subtle variations of emotional response to a mocking mistress, involving respect, awe, disdain and sadistic murderous impulses, are played out in the variegated language of prose, making use of a diverse and fragmented juxtaposition of narrative styles and voices. The conceit of murder by proxy is seen as a temporary means of stilling the tension and aggressive excitation evoked by the conflictual pairings of emotion within the prose.

In this reading, I hope to have shown that the same poetico-libidinal structures of mobilising and immobilising and of articulating and dissimulating the desired act are at play in Baudelaire's prose poetry as in his verse poetry. Just as I have suggested that in the *Fleurs du Mal*, murder may connote the literal desire for destruction rather than mere artistic frustration, so the literalisation of *tuer* in the prose poem may serve as a symbol for this level of Baudelairean transformation – motivating drive into poetical motif and back again.

The use of the narrative mode and the conventional story-telling opening prepare the reader for one type of literary exercise – a prose poem in the manner of a

short-story – focusing on events, a linear time structure and character development. In fact, readerly expectation both is and is not fulfilled: time passes, something happens, and yet the narrative structure is neither so simple nor so linear. The structures of negation and repetition-compulsion are suggested by the echoing of the beginning at the end and by the equivalence of the woman, the doll and the abstraction Time, which are condensed, victimised and annihilated.

The presence of death-drive is in evidence in this prose poem, even though the form of this piece of writing is apparently forward-flung and lively. Prose allows for the smooth shift from conversational tone to formal narrative, and again to introspective monologue, suggesting change, vibrancy and revivification. While the murderous *Fleur du Mal* has a more obvious match of form and content through the manipulation of verse, rhythm and other phonic elements, here there is some deception, slippage and ambiguity. And we can assume that the same may be true of the critical prose.

The ends of art (1): art criticism

Much of Baudelaire's writing on pictorial art concentrates on his conception of the conscious project of art: the transforming of ugliness into beauty:

C'est un des privilèges prodigieux de l'Art que l'horrible, artistiquement exprimé, devienne beauté. (ii, 123)

An obvious deduction following the argument of this chapter so far would be that painting or writing about murder metaphorised as love or as sex is the libidinal equivalent of transforming horror into pleasure on an artistic level. This desire to tame horror, make it palatable, while elevating the figure of the artist to the status of a god, is rather like the technique of dressing murder as consensual sexuality: the thrill is experienced while the original sense of the abyss is turned aside. Baudelaire has much to say about this notion of idealising transformation, not least in his response to two contemporary artists, Eugène Delacroix and Constantin Guys.

i. Delacroix's 'Madeleine dans le désert': identification and objectification

Baudelaire's transcendental view of art can help to explain his admiration for Delacroix, the painter whose images of carnage and riotous destruction, and interplay of the immobile and the fluid, so resemble Baudelaire's own poetic landscape. Indeed Delacroix wrote, in words that could have been Baudelaire's, in a critique of Meissanier's drawing *La Barricade*: 'peut-être manqua-t-il le je ne sais quoi qui fait *un objet d'art d'un objet odieux*' (Delacroix's italics).¹⁵⁸

Baudelaire wrote much on Delacroix's work, both in the *Salons*, and in essays devoted to the painter. I am going to focus now on Baudelaire's treatment of one particular painting: Delacroix's *La Madeleine dans le désert* (see Appendix, p. 241, below). Consider the following short evocation from the *Salon de 1845*.

C'est une tête de femme renversée dans un cadre très étroit. À droite dans le haut, un petit bout de ciel ou de rocher – quelque chose de bleu; – les yeux de la Madeleine sont fermés, la bouche est molle et languissante, les cheveux épars. Nul, à moins de la voir, ne peut imaginer ce que l'artiste a mis de poésie intime, mystérieuse et romantique dans cette simple tête. (*Salon de 1845*, ii 205)

In the last section, I analysed Baudelaire's poem 'Une martyre', which forged an imaginative, interactive experience of necrophilic voyeurism in verse form. The structure of objectification was realised by setting the poetic objects in- and outside a framed picture at which an onlooker was gazing. The piece of prose describing the Delacroix painting (above) sets up these same structures for looking at the same type of object – a woman's head – but here, the voyeur is straightforwardly the admiring Baudelaire.

The first sentence focuses on Mary Magdalen's head, decapitated, de-contextualised and fetishised by Baudelaire's tight framing of it in words, echoing the pictorial tight framing which he describes. As in the parallel drawn between the martyr's deadness (her blank gaze with its 'yeux révulsés') and her sexual appeal (the mention of her nakedness and her 'jarretière'), here Baudelaire focuses in on the eyes which are 'fermés' suggesting death and then on the wet voluptuousness of the mouth. The same imaginative blending of eroticised blasphemy and rapturous ecstasy that we

¹⁵⁸ Eugène Delacroix, *Journal 1822-1863* (1931-2), ed. André Joubin (Paris: Plon, 1980) March 5, 1849, p. 182.

have seen in 'À une Madone' is visible in Delacroix's work, but more especially in Baudelaire's treatment of it.

Baudelaire's criticism of this painting is as much a piece of imaginative writing as is 'Une martyre'. *La Madeleine dans le désert* is a famously difficult painting to ascribe a meaning and intention to, and contemporary critics were in disagreement as to Delacroix's aim and as to the 'aliveness' or deadness of the reclining woman.¹⁵⁹ Baudelaire takes from Delacroix's canvas certain elements of the image, which he carefully reconstitutes in his own map of desire. In the description of this painting, Baudelaire before me is interpreting a work of art from the perspective of perverse desire – his own. This suggests that the critical task is never a wholly impersonal or cold one, and that those elements of form and content that appear most effective and affective may mirror fundamental structures of desire shot through with the content of subjective fantasy.

Indeed, Jules Buisson, a friend of Delacroix and Baudelaire, claimed that the artist had cause to complain of the gleeful attention paid by the poet to the morbid and destructive elements of his work:

Delacroix thanked him warmly for his articles but I knew that he complained in private of the critic who saw fit to praise something sickly in his paintings, something unhealthy, an insistent melancholy, a leaden feverishness, the strange and abnormal burning fire of illness.¹⁶⁰

Perhaps Baudelaire is reading elements in Delacroix's work of which the artist is unconscious, or which he wishes to deny. Certainly, many of these paintings appear morbid to me in both subject matter and treatment. But what is most important here is Baudelaire's own treatment of Delacroix's morbidity, appropriating it for his own imaginative forays into desire.

Baudelaire's rhetoric betrays the intimate link he wants to forge between his own artistic project and Delacroix's. Where in 'Une martyre', Baudelaire describes

¹⁵⁹A. Houssaye wonders in 1845 'si c'est la figure d'une femme qui rêve, d'une femme qui dort, ou d'une femme qui vient de mourir'. P. Haussard considers it 'une admirable étude d'une jeune femme morte, que le sentiment et la chaleur n'ont pas tout-à-fait abandonnée', While J. Joseph describes Mary Magdalen's state as 'une agonie tranquillisée'. All cited in *The Paintings of Eugène Delacroix: A Critical Catalogue: 1832-63* (text), ed. Lee Johnson, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), vol. iii, pp. 217-18.

¹⁶⁰Cited (in English) with reference: Corr., ii: 997, in Lois Boe Hyslop, *Baudelaire: Man of his Time* (Yale: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 14. Unfortunately, Hyslop's references are incomplete and I can find no published volume of Buisson's correspondence in English or French.

an imagined painting in words, here in the description of *La Madeleine* (literally a painting), Baudelaire suggests that Delacroix's work contains 'de la poésie intime, mystérieuse et romantique' (*Salon de 1845*, ii 205). Elsewhere, he states of Delacroix that 'ses œuvres sont des poèmes, et de grands poèmes naïvement conçus' (*Salon de 1846*, ii, 431). On the one hand, we could read this rhetorical device as an echo of Gautier's desire for a *rapprochement* of pictorial and written art, as discussed in the last chapter (and here we mustn't forget the potentially libidinal import of such a project, as discussed in my section on *L'Art pour l'art*). On the other hand, a personal, projective identification with Delacroix's fantasy world is very much in evidence here, suggesting that for Baudelaire, the two artists *transcend* art forms in their shared aesthetic and libidinal vision.

Baudelaire's writing on this painter suggests a narcissistic concentration upon the images of his own desire, which are filtered through the visual substance of Delacroix's art, and given free imaginative rein, even in the dry task of the critical article. The dying/dead *Madeleine* is transformed into an eroticised Baudelairean corpse, and the aesthetic judgement of the work is subordinated somewhat to a different level of appreciation. A close and demystifying consideration of Baudelaire's critical acclaim of Delacroix is interesting for a re-appraisal of the famous Baudelairean notion of transformation.

ii. Constantin Guys and projections of modernity

Another painter for whom Baudelaire expressed admiration and empathy was Constantin Guys. This painter (about whom little, except Baudelaire's tribute, is remembered today) was the subject of the celebrated essay, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863). This late essay on the role of the painter in modernity is often discussed in the context of Baudelaire's own creative writing on Paris (the 'tableaux parisiens' in *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*). *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* defines the artist of modernity as a voyeur or professional watcher, particularly of the crowd. This notion of watching and the suggestion of a sexual relation thematically links this essay with poems from the two collections which discuss the poet's reaction to crowded Parisian scenes. Below, I will briefly read the

themes and structures suggested in this essay alongside ‘À une passante’ and ‘Les Foules’.

Consider the following passage from *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* in which Baudelaire discusses the modern artist’s reaction before the spectacle of the crowded city:

Il admire l’éternelle beauté et l’étonnante harmonie de la vie dans les capitales, harmonie si providentiellement maintenue dans le tumulte de la liberté humaine. (ii, 692-693)

Several paradoxical binaries are set up here, most obviously the linking of ‘harmonie’ and ‘tumulte’, and the associated notions of eternity and the transient passing of humanity. These notions, which are ideational markers of a structure of complementary mobility and immobility, are clearly Baudelairean, even as he lends them to CG. Moreover, these purely phenomenological characteristics (human experience involves both observing that which outlasts us and [thereby] comprehending our own transience) are explicitly made into structural principles for defining a notion of beauty in this essay. Beauty is ‘d’une composition double’ (ii, 685), made of both contemporary fashion and an element of permanence or transcendence. From these associated ideas, a figure emerges who is ‘le peintre de la circonstance et de tout ce qu’elle suggère d’éternel’ (ii, 687).

This notion of the city as an imaginative space in which these complementary elements are found has been evident in such verse poems as ‘À une passante’:

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d’une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l’ourlet;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son œil, ciel livide où germe l’ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue. (92)

Un éclair... puis la nuit! – Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m’a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d’ici! trop tard! *jamais* peut-être!
Car j’ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais! (93)

Here, Baudelaire presents a snap-shot of a moment in which a male observer in a crowd experiences would-be libidinal recognition in the sudden sighting of beauty.

The experience of being in the city is one of discomfort and perturbation, given in the first line by the exaggerated length of the semi-onomatopoeic word ‘assourdissante’ which takes up four of the twelve syllables, and the harshness of ‘hurlait’. The alienation of the experience is embodied in the metonymic displacing of sound from the people in the street to the street itself – from human to inanimate object – so that a de-humanised, de-personalised state is depicted. The widow who cuts into this perception is presented as possessing the opposite sort of characteristics to the street scene – the verbs associated with her suggest her elegance and ability to glide in an almost supra-human fashion through this ignoble scene (‘soulevant’, ‘balançant’). Her nobility suggests something classical and unchanging, while the semiotic value of her mourning garb is ambiguous, suggesting both the permanence of loss and also the change of state that is (the other’s) mortality.

The first line is suggestive of emotional pain and trauma, as, equally is the missed encounter with the widow, which is described disjointedly using punctuation (*points de suspension*) and a play on explosive, plosive consonantal sound: ‘Une éclair ... puis la nuit’. What is suggested here is the impossibility of bringing together the associations of the mobile and immobile and the simultaneous inability to separate them entirely. The element of shock is experienced both as unpleasure and pleasure.

In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Baudelaire goes on to suggest that the experience of encountering beauty (and implicitly that of attaching libidinal desire to an object) may always-already carry the seeds of trauma:

[T]oute pensée sublime est accompagnée d’une secousse nerveuse (ii, 690)

The modern creative genius is figured as being like a child or a convalescent (after Poe’s ‘Man of the Crowd’), whose nerves are weak and vulnerable. The experience of creativity is that of ‘l’enfance retrouvée à volonté’ (ii, 690). Just as a child, operating entirely in its own immature Imaginary, may not comprehend the adult signification and context of what it sees, so I would suggest, the Baudelairean imagination has a particular (perverse) way of relating to the objects it encounters, which I shall discuss below.

To remind ourselves of the issue at stake, then, we may ask how Baudelaire’s description of the experience of modernity links to the murderous and necrophilic

impulses we have been reading in the texts so far. In the case of Delacroix, the painter's subject matter as well as his treatment of it allowed for an almost total morbid identification between poet and artist. In the case of CG, the subject matter is no longer a beautiful dead female head, but a city-scape. However, the projected experience of desire and the structures of objectification are still explicitly shown up in the positing of shared experience.

The relation between the watcher and the crowd is discussed by Baudelaire in 'Les Foules'. As in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, an elect subject is posited who is capable of a certain type of relationship with the crowd. Of the painter of modern life, Baudelaire tells us 'sa passion et sa profession, c'est d'épouser la foule' (ii, 691). Similarly, in 'Les Foules', the privileged male (le poète) is said to 'prendre un bain de multitude' and 'jouir de la foule' (291). Thus, we see that in both cases that the type of contract implied between artist and people is a socio-sexual one (marriage) and the imagery used is strongly suggestive of sexual contact.

A tension is set up between this singular individual's usufruct of the multitudes and the notion of an 'universelle communion'(291). In a religious communion, which this image suggests and sexualises, each member of the crowd would *jouir* equally. Baudelaire describes the experience of being in the crowd as 'cette sainte prostitution de l'âme qui se donne tout entière, poésie et charité, à l'imprévu, qui se montre à l'inconnu qui passe.' (291). Here self-loss, the giving of self in a mutually beneficial sexual contract, is posited as ultimately desirable. These pleasures are favourably compared to those of 'l'égoïste' whose mind is closed to the possibility of such mass-enjoyment.

Yet the irony is not lost on the reader. The notion of a self-effacing orgiastic communion is undermined and contradicted by the privileging of the 'one' throughout the poem. Consider:

[I]l entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun. Pour lui seul, tout est vacant[...] (291)

In fact, the poet enjoys a relation of mastery to the crowd. As vacant as the dead stare of the martyr or the *Madeleine*, the sexual object, however diffused and pluralised it has become in the texts on modernity, is emptied, negated and killed by the desire of the 'one'.

Le peintre de la vie moderne, 'À une passante' and 'Les Foules' all play on images of recognition and communal sharing of identity and experience. They imply a wilful dissolution of ego in the interests of experiencing the other. Yet the true nature of this plural and polymorphous sexual enjoyment is in each case revealed as self-directed and narcissistic. The supposedly orgiastic communion is in fact revealed as a necrophilic celebration of would-be possession.

The experience of trauma alluded to by Baudelaire in the essay is, I would suggest, a hyper-sexual thrill caused by this would-be experience of appropriation and objectification. What is seen and discussed in these pieces of writing is only partially the object itself and almost entirely what the looker brings to it. The widow in 'À une passante' is a locus of associations of loss, melancholy, redemptive beauty, sexuality and death. We understand these associations in the light of our reading of the rest of Baudelaire's œuvre, as much as by way of our awareness of the general cultural semiotic content of the symbol. In this poem, Baudelaire fixes the symbol of the widow in his own meaningful structure of desire which is as objectifying in nature as is the framing of a dead beheaded victim.

'Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais' is the perhaps the ultimate example of projective phantasy in Baudelaire's œuvre. Within the terms set up by the poem, the widow could not possibly have felt the poet's love, because she does not acknowledge him, there is no mutual recognition, only the poet's annihilatory mis-recognition. The widow remains a symbol of unattainable beauty coloured by death and the overwhelming presence of absence is experienced in the shock of impotent appropriation.

This projection obtains on a deeper level, I would suggest, in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. Baudelaire reads CG's artistic method as having much in common with the would-be encounter with the widow in the poem. CG is said to recollect the mood of the experience in the street in later tranquility, so that the shadowy, sketchy tableaux he produces are the phantoms of remembered encounters, images and feelings. They are representational, but shot through with subjective emotion, experience, projection and introspection. There is a (temporal) gap between experience and art, so that illusion colours the experience and fantasy prevails, just as

in the last lines of 'À une passante'. But furthermore, moving inwards in an introspective spiral, the whole perception is Baudelaire's, and he brings the described artist's aims in line with his own in an attempt to identify CG with himself and the archetypal artist of modernity he is evoking.

When Baudelaire says that the artist is 'un *moi* insatiable du *non-moi*' (ii, 692), a self obsessed with other, he is describing his conscious artistic project and his unconscious libidinal project, as much as CG's methods. Yet the *non-moi* is 'not me' in two senses. It is, first of all, not the watching artist, the subject, and secondly, it is not a locus of subjectivity in itself, not a he/she/crowd of people/ego, because it has become only a poetic/artistic object, appropriated as artistic subject matter, coloured with the associations that the artist has chosen to attribute to it. Like the mistresses in the poems of Baudelaire that we have studied, these nameless non-mois are fixed and defined in an immobile, projective gaze. The object emptied of meaning becomes ready for re-possession by the artist's designs and imaginative strokes of the pen. The libidinal current of fixity in Baudelaire's work can be seen to extend beyond intimate portraits of mistresses towards the whole human and urban landscape that the later prose poems evoke. When Baudelaire talks of modernity as 'la prostitution' or 'une bain de multitude', the sexual nature of the images relates precisely to this joy of appropriation and possession of another that his work undertakes, and also to a sense of being swept away into the big Other, lost in a human sea in which the primary loss may be played out on a multitude of others. Here as elsewhere in Baudelaire, enjoying equals annihilating, and enjoying the thrill of potential self-annihilation.

Walter Benjamin's writing on Baudelaire focuses on the relation of the observer and the observed. He tells us that 'looking at someone carries the implicit expectation that our look will be returned.'¹⁶¹ Yet Baudelaire's poetic objects look back only with his own desire, or else, like the severed head of the 'martyre', they do not look back at all, their Medusan power is defused. The total projection onto the object that we have discussed results in the thwarting of desire which means that 'the expectation raised by the look of the human eye is not fulfilled':¹⁶²

¹⁶¹Walter Benjamin, 'On Some Motifs in Baudelaire' in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. by Harry Zohn (London: Cape, 1970), p. 190.

¹⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 191.

Benjamin goes on:

The deeper the remoteness which a glance has to overcome, the stronger will be the spell that is apt to emanate from the gaze. In eyes that look at us with a mirrorlike blankness the remoteness remains complete.¹⁶³

So, to paraphrase Nietzsche, if you gaze for long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze also into you. This is both what the artist has wanted and what frustrates him. What looks back at us from a Baudelairean poem and from a Baudelairean essay on art are the deadness with which he has infused the textual object, and equally, the desire itself, traceable in the speaking gaps of the texts. Like Medusa's head, (another myth which is usually read as being allegorically about castration but, if we examine the blind spot of this metaphorising logic, can equally be about the literal desire for, and fear of, destruction by another), the self-conscious blinding venom of desire turns to stone what his pen touches. As in 'À celle qui est trop gaie', poisonous Baudelairean jouissance kills and stills both agent and victim. They fuse, and are dead together. There is no 'other' left, only reflections of 'my' desire.

This immobile emptiness is simultaneously the condition of desire and the end of desire. This means that in its insatiability, desire can run on forever, ever unchecked and ever unfulfilled, being idealised eternally, 'fidèle et constant jusques à la mort' ('Une martyre', 113). The reader, her/himself drawn in to the multiple identifications with desiring poetic voice and stilled object can appreciate the simultaneous beauty and futility of the Baudelairean poetic economy:

The painting we look at reflects back at us that of which our eyes will never have their fill. What it contains that fulfils the original desire would be the very same stuff on which the drive continuously feeds.¹⁶⁴

Like Messaline, the figure inspiring *Sed non satiata*, wearied by the exertions of the men, but still insatiable, the poet and reader leaves the contemplation of the necrophilic poetico-libidinal economy. S/he is exhausted by it, aroused by it but ultimately unfulfilled – as Juvenal would put it, 'et lassata viris, necdem satiata recessit'.

¹⁶³Ibid., p. 192.

¹⁶⁴Ibid., p. 189.

The ends of art (2): literary criticism

In 'Fusées' as well as in the innumerable critical articles he wrote, Baudelaire talks about the nature of the literary task. The contradictions and unlikely juxtapositions in the poetic works are just as much in evidence in his writing on writing, and in the pieces of work that fall on the boundaries of the two genres.

Much of Baudelaire's writing in this capacity dwells on the importance of control for the writer, his task of effectively fixing the poetic object by exploiting the rules of versification. As an avid admirer of Poe, he agrees with the contention that the artist's greatest enemies are 'le hasard' and 'l'incompréhensible'. Poe wants his readers to believe that composition is the result of a painstaking process of scientific searching for the right phoneme, the right word, the right line and that what others call genius is the effect of skill and hard work rather than the Romantic concept of mystical inspiration. For Baudelaire, Poe's definition can be taken further so that the ability of the human brain to follow the same inherent movements and patterns of the world and to translate them into art through appropriate language is the true nature of the creative genius. In his 1859 article, he holds Gautier up as an example of one who manages this.

Ce goût inné de la forme et de la perfection dans la forme devait nécessairement faire de Théophile Gautier un auteur critique tout à fait à part.
(ii, p 122)

An obsession with order comes to the fore through such remarks as these. Chesters points out that Baudelaire's and Poe's preoccupation with work and systematisation 'relates to the metaphysical and aesthetic doctrine of eliminating randomness'.¹⁶⁵ Order as a principle is already built in to the practice of poetry-writing, given in the traditional rules of versification with their demand for strict adherence.

A concentration upon this level of the author's poetics risks forgetting the implications for the sensitive reader of the content with which a writer may choose to fill the skeletons of his structures. Edgar Poe, lover of order and control, is also the writer of some of the most necrophilic lines and short stories in the history of literature. The thematic deadening of beautiful women and the stylistic fixing precision of his poetic technique may not be coincidental. It may not be insignificant

¹⁶⁵Graham Chesters, *The Poetics of Craft*, p. 5.

that Poe writes both the lines concerning the death of a beautiful woman and the precise, pedantic essay that is 'The Poetic Principle'. This may suggest an easily over-looked consistency or continuum of desire within the writer's project. Form and content are equally about libidinal controlling whatever is other to the subject (including his own split-off desire). The dialectic interplay of form and content in Poe, like that of wit and psychological fervour in Baudelaire, is what makes the expression of morally dubious or otherwise reprehensible desire into art. The obsession with beautiful death may be realised in the relation of form and content in a way that makes the two overlap until they are indistinguishable

We have seen how the structure of Baudelaire's poetic economy never does away completely with the abrupt stops, the sudden jumps and the exclamatory pauses that make reading his work a visceral and shocking experience on the poetic as well as the ideational level. Despite his admiration for Poe's banishing of the random and Gautier's perfection, that is regularity, of form, Baudelaire does not always submit himself to the tyranny of prosody, or place the exigencies of form above idea, as Gautier claims to.¹⁶⁶ While I would want to claim that this is to do with Baudelaire's interest in actualising the stuff of extreme desirous moments in poetry, others have made the purely aesthetic claim that Baudelaire's adherence to Banville's mid-nineteenth-century poetic dogmas such as the classical alexandrine, sometimes fails in the interest of creating dramatic effect, surprise or poetic intensity.¹⁶⁷

An inherent difficulty or contradiction within this discussion appears to be that when one talks about control in the Poësque and Baudelairean sense, at the level of prosody, often one is in fact talking about movement, harmony and fluidity, which the structures of verse set out to achieve. It is true to say that an obsession with control is there, but it is at the level of *work* that it may be made manifest. Immobility, in the sense of narrowness or pedantry, produces poetic mobility, I would suggest, by acting as a kind of super-ego to rein in the chaos of desire and produce art. Yet also this may operate at a libidinal level. The fact that we have seen Baudelaire time and again

¹⁶⁶'De la forme naît l'idée.' Unnamed text of 1847, cited by Georges Matoré in his introduction to *La Préface de Mlle de Maupin* (Paris: Droz, 1946), p. lxxiii.

¹⁶⁷See Albert Cassagne, *Versification et métrique de Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Hachette, 1906), and Chesters's response to it in *The Poetics of Craft*.

come down on the side of interruption of harmony in the interest of maintaining thematic unity and promoting the jerky rhythms of desire through the poem, raises again the contradictory dilemma that the move to immobilise may reveal desire, while a sustained poetic flow and balance show only boredom (or emotional alienation, as in the first three stanzas of 'À Celle qui est trop gaie'). Moreover, Baudelaire's movement from poetry to prose to highlight fragmentation, altered voices and narrative shifts as reflective of the movement of ideas, suggests a deviation from the Baudelairean voice that lauds Poe's over-determined control.

To some extent, theories of writing may be seen as the artist's attempt to rationalise and to master what is revealed through the act of writing. We would not want to discount a poet's skill in manipulating the stuff of his phantasies into technical poetry, but equally, we must take a hard look at the structures, theories and positions lauded by the artist as providing on some level a mirror of his psychical structures. When Baudelaire talks about Delacroix and Guys, Gautier and Poe, he is picking up on elements in their work which mirror or compliment his own obsessions, obsessions which are inherently connected at the level of theme and style.¹⁶⁸ Artistic theory may be seen as a double bluff, a way of appearing to get away from a purely desirous, psychologically-driven understanding of literature while in fact revealing and emphasising the very same desires and showing up their structures. When critics talk about the paradoxical nature of Baudelairean transformation and the perfection or irregularities of his verse form, they are equally engaging with the dynamic forces of desire and absence that I have set out to discuss in this part of my thesis. Theory and criticism re-embody desire as discourse and reinforce the poet's internal driving structures by symbolising them as technique and *knowledge* in the world of text. They reify desire in language by creating mirroring, mimicking desirous texts, narcissistic tributes disguised as comments on others.

¹⁶⁸In 'Fusées' Baudelaire comments thus on 'Style': 'La note éternelle, le style éternel et cosmopolite. Chateaubriand, Alph. Rabbe, Edgar Poe' (ii, p. 661). It is surely not coincidental that the pre-Romantic author of *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, the morbid self-confessed pessimist Rabbe (for a description of his work, see pp. 33-34, above), and the famous lover of beautiful dead women comprise this list of Baudelaire's *élus*.

3.3

Some Concluding Remarks

In the move from verse to prose, in the constant shifts between mobility and immobility, stop and go, and in the insistence upon the idealising nature of art, the central current of Baudelaire's literary theory and his poetic production can be described as continually transformative and counter-transformative. It is well known that the urge to transform mud into gold is a Baudelairean ideal. Life with its mutability, its ageing, its unpredictability, is, like mud, a target for the transformative fixing strokes of Baudelaire's pen, which, in the poems we have discussed, have resulted in a celebration of un-creation which is the trope of murder.

Bersani's notion of the mobility of desire and the artistic subject's need to still it in the interest of Freud's economic model of pleasure is useful both for phenomenologists and literary critics of Baudelaire. My recasting of this dynamic as the embodied pursuit of intersubjective destruction, involving an intensely self-reflexive narcissism, has been shown to be relevant both to literature and to art criticism.

The apparent freedom of the sound-and-rhythm-driven, time-enclosed space that is the poetic act of creation is in contrast with the need to fix conclusions, decide on meaning and eliminate contingency in the choice of words. The rhythmic balance and harmony is often in sharp contrast with the writer's desire to explore themes of sterility, fixity and entropy. Freedom and the closure it inspires/implies come together both in the visible desirous structures in the writing and in the technical aspects of the project. Desire and writing are clearly inseparable for a great writer such as Baudelaire, and the elements of subjectivity he is seeking to express are the same whether they find literal form in the poems of erotic murder or descriptive structural form in the writings on art. Baudelaire's project is a single-minded one which is nonetheless stunning in its breadth and in its attempt to embody the desires that inspire, constrain and fascinate the subject of language and the poetic act.

My intention in this chapter has not been to reduce Baudelaire's œuvre to the repetitive reiteration of pathological sexual obsession. Rather, I hope to have

deepened and enlarged critical appreciation of Baudelaire by showing a previously understudied continuum in his production. My reading has attempted to account libidinally for certain aspects of the traditionally understood character of 'the Baudelairean', and to add a new perspective to the wealth of existing theorisation and criticism of this widely acclaimed writer.

Chapter Four

Rachilde: Objectifying the Male?

*Le dégoût de la femme! La haine de la force mâle! Voici
que certains cerveaux rêvent d'un être insexué. Ces imaginations sentent
la mort.*

Maurice Barrès¹⁶⁹

The works of Marguerite Eymery (1860-1953), who wrote under the pseudonym of Rachilde, are enjoying renewed critical attention today, in the light of current trends such as psychoanalytic and deconstructive theory. She is the only woman whose work comes under discussion in this thesis, largely because (perhaps with the exception of George Sand), she is the only female of her period who treats the subject of sexual desire and death with as much energy as her male predecessors Gautier and Baudelaire.¹⁷⁰

Most female writers of the nineteenth century, perhaps with the exception of Mme de Staël (1766-1817) and Baudelaire's favourite, Marceline Desbordes-Valmore (1786-1859), have been largely ignored by the critical canon. With the exception of a few recent feminist studies, the only work we have on such writers as Flora Tristan (1803-44) and Mme Tastu (1798-1885) are the studies undertaken by such contemporary conservative critics as Sainte-Beuve in his *Portraits de Femmes* (1844). Modern critical thought has pointed out that women writers face an extra difficulty in their role of artist, as they must contribute to a tradition of literature that has been defined by men. If they attempt to write away from the male canon, they risk being marginalised by the male critical establishment. Thus, women have operated in a double bind, within a system in which artistic validation comes from patriarchal authority.

It is perhaps not surprising then, that many nineteenth-century works by women focus predictably on issues of love and marriage expressed through the Sentimental rather than the realist tradition. Conventionally, this is what female

¹⁶⁹ Maurice Barrès's preface to Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus* (Paris: Flammarion, 1926), p. xx.

¹⁷⁰ However, there is at least one other example of a nineteenth-century female writer who discusses necrophilia. See Isabelle Eberhardt's short story 'Infernal: volupté sépulcrale' in *Œuvres complètes: écrits sur le sable*, 2 vols (Paris: Grasset, 1990), vol. ii, 23-27. I am grateful to Christopher Robinson for drawing my attention to this little-known work.

writers have been expected to address. Moreover, as Mme de Staël points out in *De la littérature* (1800), if society restricts the field of education for women, there will be little else that they are competent to discuss in their literature, as all other subjects fall outside of the experience allowed to them. Similarly, certain generic conventions, most obviously the confessional first-person narrative and the epistolary novel, have been associated with women's writing, as these forms seem particularly apt for representing the personal and 'trivial' subject matter that men have ascribed to women writers.

Yet, some gentle resistance can be seen in these forms. Many writers do attempt to reassess the status of women by showing up their constrained positions as creators and lovers in a male order.¹⁷¹ The fact that many of these works end in marriage and often maternity, despite gestures in the direction of revolt, suggests the immense difficulty of the task faced by females of the last century. Their social position was so rigidly defined that it was understandably hard to think outside of this containing framework. It is not altogether surprising that these attempts at setting the picture straight have been largely ignored by the (male) critical apparatus as marginal or uninteresting. If women wrote the sort of literature men expected of them, they were patronised, patted figuratively on the head and dismissed as pretty little things writing pretty little texts. But if they rebelled and attempted to strike out in a new style or a new voice, they were apt to be condemned by male critics for stepping out of place. Baudelaire's famous vilification of Sand is a good example of this.

Rachilde's work also forms part of this female continuum, tackling the issue of the female artist and her relation to the patriarchal order from a *fin-de-siècle* perspective. Yet Rachilde's task is not only to critique the social sphere. Her works are structured around models of desire which often appear extreme or pathological. It is as a model-builder of desirous subjectivity, rather than as a social critic or even a textual craftswoman, that she is of particular relevance to my current project.

In *Over her Dead Body*, Elisabeth Bronfen posits that if a woman is to challenge or transgress the masculine paradigm for portraying desire, it will either be

¹⁷¹For a good overview of the ignored female writers of the nineteenth century, see Eva Martin Sartori and Dorothy Wynne Zimmerman (eds), *French Women Writers: A Bio-Bibliographic Source Book* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska, 1991).

through self-conscious imitation or inversion. The first technique would consist in creating self-conscious pastiches of male representations of dying women, as seen in the works of some twentieth-century women artists, discussed in Bronfen's final chapter.¹⁷² The second technique would mean inverting the gender terms of the power play described, by placing strong women and sexualised male martyrs and corpses in the spotlight, as embodiments of female revenge. In fact, this latter technique is what most critics assume that Rachilde is doing.

That the male is objectified in Rachilde's work is beyond question. In *Monsieur Vénus*, Jacques Silvert is discussed in terms of an art object as well as a sexual object, placed in a *mise-en-scène* littered with flowers, antiques and *objets d'art*. While it is a convention to liken women to statues and other beautiful artificial productions, with the logical conclusion of this trope being that they are figured as dead, it is quite original to see the portrayal of a young man treated in this way.¹⁷³ Although on one level, then, gender-inversion seems to be exactly what Rachilde is doing, a close reading of the texts will show that the picture is not quite so simple.

As well as having a position in a historically unsung tradition of female artists, Rachilde's work can be appreciated in the context of the Symbolist and Decadent movements of the *fin-de-siècle*, of which she formed part. Married to Valette and co-founder of the *Mercure de France*, she was at the centre of a group of experimental writers including Verlaine and Huysmans. The aesthetic mode of Decadence played on the metaphor of organic deterioration to show that art and society, like the human organism, are prone to disease and decay. The self-determinism we will see at play in Rachilde's work obviously owes more to decadent philosophy than to her position in a long line of female artists, but it is the collusion of the two, her place in both genealogies, that makes her work so interesting.

The fantasy of destruction is central to Decadence, and is epitomised by Des Esseintes's aesthetic cult of artificiality and Laforgue's aim of racial suicide through

¹⁷²Such artists as Cindy Sherman, Susanne Hermanski and Diana Blok, and such writers as Margaret Atwood and Angela Carter. See *Over Her Dead Body*, pp. 395-435.

¹⁷³In *La Canne de Monsieur de Balzac* (1836) by Mme de Girardin (*née* Delphine Gay, 1804-55), the hero is a social outcast because he is too beautiful. The arbitrary social prejudice which said that a man should not have the status of a work of art (and equally, perhaps, a woman should not have the artist's right to create and describe him) is challenged and to some extent mocked in this play.

the refusal to reproduce. In Decadence, the external spectacle of decay prevalent in the Gothic has been turned into a highly refined and actively-sought internal experience.¹⁷⁴ It has been recuperated into the conscious mode for transgressive experimentation. The ‘libidinisation’ of these fantasies of destruction is achieved in works such as Huysmans’s *Là-bas* (1891), which dwells on the life of the paedophilic mass-murderer Gilles de Rais and Octave Mirbeau’s portrayals of sadism in *Le Jardin des Supplices* and *Contes cruels*. The sixty novels of Rachilde, four of which will come under close scrutiny here, certainly have their place in this tradition.

The first half of this chapter will take the form of a reading of two novels by Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and *La Marquise de Sade* (1887). Both novels chart the sentimental and libidinal education of female protagonists who attempt to create configurations of, respectively, sexual coupledness and death-driven sadistic domination, outside of the socially accepted roles of man and wife. How fully these destructive perversions succeed, and just what comes from the attempted abolition of ‘male’ and ‘female’ will be examined.

The second half of the chapter will examine what is often considered Rachilde’s best novel, *La Tour d’Amour* (1899), which is written from a male perspective and centres on two lighthouse keepers, one of whom is a necrophiliac.¹⁷⁵ It will also undertake a reading of *Le Grand Saigneur* (1922), the tale of an aristocrat with vampiric tastes and his mistress, a free-spirited woman artist. *Le Grand Saigneur* will be the last and the most recent literary work discussed at length in this thesis, and it will have been noted that its date extends beyond the end of the nineteenth century. My inclusion of it here is both in the interests of thematic unity and comprehensiveness, as it is wholly relevant to the subject under discussion, and to suggest some continuum between the centuries. A brief discussion of the legacy of nineteenth-century French necrophilia in the twentieth century will take place in my conclusion.

¹⁷⁴This definition of Decadence is Laurence M. Porter’s. For an excellent discussion and exposition of these points, see his ‘Decadence and the fin-de-siècle novel’ in *The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel*, ed. Timothy Unwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1997), pp. 93-108.

¹⁷⁵It was Rachilde’s own favourite of all her novels. Laurent Tailhade called it her ‘chef-d’œuvre’, according to Claude Dauphiné who shares Tailhade’s opinion of the novel’s quality. See Dauphiné’s *Rachilde* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1991), p. 96.

The aim of reading these four novels both as individual works and together, as parts of a corpus with its own, larger agenda, is to examine the Rachildean slant on perverse sexuality and gender deconstruction half a century before they come into critical currency as conceptual tools. My intention is to investigate Rachilde's treatment of the question of gendered representations of deathly desire in order to expand upon and elucidate the question of whether necrophilia goes beyond socially-designated gender positioning.

4.1

Two Female Predators : Raoule de Vénérande and Mary Barbe

*L'amour est spiritualité
Mais il faut que le sang s'enflamme avec l'esprit.*
A. Mortier

Published in Belgium in 1884, *Monsieur Vénus* caused a scandal which launched Rachilde's career as a daring writer and gained her notoriety, along with prosecution and a prohibition from entering Belgium. Maurice Barrès's naming of Rachilde as 'Mademoiselle Baudelaire' follows the publication of this work dealing with themes of androgyny, sexual ambiguity and death. His enthusiastic preface to the 1929 Flammarion edition focuses, somewhat predictably, on the extraordinary fact of a twenty-year-old girl producing a work of such perversity. He situates her work in the Decadent mode of moral lassitude, social unrest and the cult of individuality:

La maladie du siècle, qu'il faut toujours citer et dont *Monsieur Vénus* signale chez la femme une des formes les plus intéressantes, est faite en effet d'une fatigue nerveuse, excessive et d'un orgueil inconnu jusqu'alors.¹⁷⁶

Arrogance is one of the most striking features of Rachilde's textual performance, both in the audacity of her motifs and subject matter, and as a driving characteristic of her protagonists. This is seen equally in *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Marquise de Sade*. Personified in the characters of Raoule de Vénérande, an independently-spirited young aristocrat of equally independent means and Mary Barbe, an indomitable dominatrix, it is the arrogance of excessive desire which dares to shout its name page after page in a spirit of not always very subtle sexual and social revolt. Rachilde's famous denial of her own feminist position and her refusal to take a stance on the issue of women in politics, expressed in the 1928 text *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe*, finds obvious contradiction in such passages as the following from *La Marquise de Sade*:

¹⁷⁶Maurice Barrès, preface, *Monsieur Vénus*, p. xx.

Louis, je suis décidée à ne pas vous donner d'héritier [...] Je ne veux ni enlaidir ni souffrir. De plus, *je suis assez*, EN ÉTANT, et si je pouvais finir le monde avec moi, je le finirais.¹⁷⁷

If Rachilde is not a feminist, then her character clearly is. Here Mary refuses to conform to the socially-given role of woman, that of wife and childbearer, announcing her self-proclaimed autonomy to a confounded husband on their wedding night. However, while this can obviously be read as a social comment on, or rejection of, the limited role of the female in patriarchy, it is also possible to read it as revealing Rachilde's interest in the primacy of solipsistic oneness and selfhood. The typographically bizarre '*je suis assez*, EN ÉTANT' announces an audacious metaphysical position which jars with the external social perceptions described in the text, establishing Mary's subjective reality as central to a reading of this work.

The lack of textual subtlety in *La Marquise de Sade*, which has been commented upon by various critics, is characterised by such touches as the heavy-handed symbolism of 'Aimer c'est Souffrir', the motto which appears carved into the head board of Mary's bed. The words of the motto suggest the monolithic principles which Mary internalised during the formation of her character as a girl, and which she comes to live by when choosing sexual partners (she needs a lover to suffer for her). If the words are crude and unsubtle, then so is Mary's initiation into adulthood. If we read the rather obvious symbolic language of the text generously, as a tactical part of Rachilde's project, we produce a reading which emphasises the close relation between the content of the protagonist's subjectivity and desire and the structure of the novel.

***Monsieur Vénus*: the mutability of identity**

The presentation of the first meeting between Raoule de Vénérande and Jacques Silvert in *Monsieur Vénus* is rife with such features. The scene is executed in terms of a jarring series of associations linking the external environment and Raoule's inner world of thoughts and feelings in such a way as to produce in the reader a sense of shock and of looking awry, of fragmenting expected clusters of meaning.

¹⁷⁷*La Marquise de Sade* (1887) (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 214. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and page numbers are given in the text following the abbreviation *LMdS*.

Entering the florist's shop, Raoule is assaulted by a nauseous sensation: 'une odeur de pommes cuisant la prit à la gorge et l'arrêta net.'¹⁷⁸ Soon the unpleasant sensation associated with the smell of cooking apples intensifies until it threatens to overwhelm her: 'Cette odeur de pommes rissolées lui devenait insupportable'(MV, 28). Yet somewhere in the course of the encounter with Jacques, the smell is turned into a positive stimulus filtering through her conscious concentration on the young man:

M^{lle} de Vénérande s'imagina qu'elle mangerait peut-être bien une de ces pommes sans trop de révolte. (MV, 31)

This apparently banal change of sensuous response signals a sharpening of the appetite linked to a metamorphosis or an epiphanic change of association, a moment of awakening or revelation. At this moment a transformation occurs that we have seen throughout the material discussed in this thesis: repulsion becomes attraction.

This is exactly what happens on the libidinal level of the encounter. Jacques, a male, whom Raoule would expect to have all the associations of masculinity, is displaced. This is achieved firstly by the description of Raoule's initial glimpse of him, garlanded with flowers:

Autour de son torse, sur sa blouse flottante, courait en spirale une guirlande de roses, des roses fort larges de satin chair velouté de grenat, qui lui passaient entre les jambes, filaient jusqu'aux épaules et venaient s'enrouler au col. (MV, 26)

Secondly, the impression is strengthened when he announces himself as being in the place of his indisposed sister: 'pour le moment, Marie Silvert, c'est moi' (27).

Hence, we have an alternating chain of gender positioning: Raoule enters the traditionally feminine space, the florist, to find not Marie Silvert, but a young man. Yet, the young man does not suggest to her the presence of a male person: he surprises her by his feminised appearance and attitude which suggests 'quelque chose de grotesque' (27). This is a moment of gender ambiguity that has on the protagonist almost the effect of a *fantastique* episode in Gautier's early prose. She feels confused, 'mal à l'aise' and 'avait envie de s'en aller' (28).

But just as her unease is most strongly pronounced, the strange boy and the

¹⁷⁸*Monsieur Vénus* (1884) (Paris: Flammarion, 1926), pp. 25-26. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and page numbers are given in the text following the abbreviation MV.

smell of apples combining to overwhelm her senses, a change takes place in her response to the spectacle. We see Jacques, as for the first time, through Raoule's eyes:

Leurs regards se croisèrent. Raoule, comme éblouie, cligna des paupières derrière sa voilette. (MV, 28)

Il regardait, cet homme, comme implorent les chiens souffrants, avec une vague humidité sur les prunelles. Ces larmes d'animal poignent toujours d'une manière atroce. (MV, 29)

What is most striking here is that, although Jacques is feminised by the flowers and the setting, this quality is suggested most strongly by the notion of his subordination and by the assignment of the role of victim. Just as, typically, female powerlessness excites masculine desire, so here Raoule awakens sadistically to this slave who presents himself ready-cast into that role.¹⁷⁹

Jacques's assumption of this subordinate role is then carried over into the inter-subjective realm that exists between Raoule and himself. She finds herself growing attracted to him, as the associations he suggests for her transmute before her gaze (as the smell transmutes before her nose). The focus on Raoule's scopic response to Jacques is a further suggestion of her role as a (conventionally masculine) agent of desire: like a Baudelairean watcher, she fixes him with her eyes.

The appropriating gaze is then taken one step further when she touches his chest with its red downy hairs:

¹⁷⁹Literary precedents of male arousal at the sight of female weakness and suffering are numerous and range from the fairly subtle to the pornographic, à la Sade. Perhaps the most impressive example can be found in Racine's *Britannicus* (1669) in the scene describing Junie's arrival in chains at Néron's court. The Emperor's response to her bondage is described powerfully:

[...] Excité d'un désir curieux,
Cette nuit je l'ai vue arriver en ces lieux,
Triste, levant au ciel ses yeux mouillés de larmes,
Qui brillaient au travers des flambeaux et des armes,
Belle, sans ornement, dans le simple appareil
D'une beauté qu'on vient d'arracher au sommeil.
Que veux-tu ? Je ne sais si cette négligence,
Les ombres, les flambeaux, les cris et le silence,
Et le farouche aspect de ses fiers ravisseurs,
Relevaient de ses yeux les timides douceurs [...]
(Acte ii, scene ii)

Racine, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Forestier, 2 vols, Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), vol. i, p. 389.

[E]lle passa la main sur la poitrine de l'ouvrier, comme elle l'eut passée sur une bête blonde, un monstre dont la réalité ne lui semblait pas prouvée [...] Jacques tressaillit, confus. Ce que d'abord il avait cru être une caresse lui semblait maintenant un contact insultant. (*MV*, 34)

Their respective attitudes to each other here are exactly as if she were an economically powerful male and he an affronted shop-girl. Power is suggested by class (note the mention of 'ouvrier') as well as by the assumption of 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles.

Several things are going on here. Firstly, Jacques's sexual identity, what makes him exciting to Raoule as an object, is suggested by the demeaning terms 'bête' and 'monstre', as before his gaze was likened to that of a dog. Significantly 'monstre' is a classic Baudelairean term to describe the deathly muse, woman. Rachilde's character is in the presence of something uncanny and tempting, the eternal myth of the feminine, but here packaged in a new and exciting guise: the body of a young man. Secondly, the relation of power at work within the dialectic is ambiguously eroticised. The annihilation of the significance of biological sex, given by Raoule's treatment of this young man as if he were a young woman, at first arouses him and then appears to him in the full colour of its violence in the quotation given above.

The essential point for our present reading is that both Raoule and Jacques scent the possibility of escaping from their gender roles into each other's within this first encounter. They see the possibility of reaching beyond into a realm where the semantic field of gender identity may break down, offering a closer approach to the more essential roles of 'doer' and 'done-to'. Raoule offers Jacques a new identity through her feminisation of him. It is not the role of 'woman', but that of object; of a thing that can be played with and destroyed, enjoyed and annihilated at whim. Hence there is a consciousness of the possibility of erotic un-doing and un-creating inherent within the rhetoric of the encounter, played out through the metaphor of disintegrating gender roles.

As I have shown, Raoule's change of consciousness is signalled through her evolving response to the overpowering smell of apples: at first it dominates her physically, makes her sick. Eventually she masters it and feels a desire that is equal to appetite, linked to her evolving position in relation to Jacques Silvert. Her desire

intensifies as she fantasises in the carriage on the way home:

Déjà elle jouissait de cet homme, déjà elle en faisait une proie, déjà peut-être elle l'arrachait à son misérable milieu pour l'idéaliser dans les spasmes d'une possession absolue. (MV, 37)

All the rhetoric of male pursuit and wooing of the female that we know so well from the literary tradition of the West is present here in inverted gender terms. He will be the prey that she will hunt down and enjoy. Yet more than that is going on. Predatory females in earlier centuries (Mme de Merteuil, Sade's Juliette), have already turned the tables and pursued the male in his own figurative terminology of the hunt. But here, in Rachilde, the structures of that male terminology are deconstructed. This is achieved by means of the violence espied inside eroticism when she touches him, through his position as a beautiful sculpted male surrounded by flowers, through overt mention of the idealisation that we know to be a technique of fetishising objectification.

The calling into question of gender roles by collapsing expected associations becomes the mode of the novel as a whole. One significant level on which this happens is that of language. In chapter 2 of the novel, we are introduced to Raoule's maiden aunt, her guardian, who refers to Raoule as 'son neveu' (46), reinforcing our impression of Raoule's liberation from female stereotyping. This is emphasised at the social level by the numerous details of the luxurious life which Raoule lives and of her unusual economic status. She demands money from her (female) relative to become Jacques's patron.

This picture of the active young aristocrat is sharply juxtaposed with the description of Jacques at the opening of chapter 3:

Jacques Silvert, dans l'atelier, se laissa tomber sur un divan, tout ahuri. (MV, 48)

He is presented as the recipient of Raoule's wealth, the passive, status-less *ouvrier* whom she buys. The mention of 'atelier' suggests the romantic figure of the penniless artist. Whilst on one hand, we have been told of Raoule's education and her status, our picture of Jacques is one of pure sensuousness and is relegated to the interior setting, where usually we would expect to see the woman in a domestic environment and the man out in the world. Both in terms of personal self-possession and material independence, Jacques and Raoule are antithetical social poles.

Raoule's arrival at the studio wearing a 'costume presque masculin' (56) prefigures her demands for access to his body in the guise of bathing him. Her justification for gazing upon his body: 'Mais souvenez-vous donc que je suis un garçon, moi, disait-elle, un artiste que ma tante appelle son neveu' (57). Jacques's naming of Raoule 'Monsieur de Vénérande' (59) completes the attempt at performative speech rendering otherwise the sex of the couple. By appropriating names, they take on the roles they choose to play, textually transforming the nature of their interplay by confounding expectation and making language appropriate to their positions.¹⁸⁰

This game with language continues, as in the scene where Raoule confesses her love for Jacques to de Raittolbe, her would-be suitor:

– Ami , dit-elle brusquement, *je suis amoureux* .

[...]

– Sapho ! ... Allons, ajouta-t-il avec un geste ironique, je m'en doutais. Continuez, monsieur de Vénérande, continuez, *mon cher ami* !

[...]

– Vous vous trompez, monsieur de Raittolbe ; être Sapho ce serait être tout le monde ! (MV, 90)

Several things are happening here. Firstly, Raoule articulates her role of agent (masculinity) to Raittolbe, who is outside of the dialectic configuration of Raoule and Jacques. This reinforces the social status of Raoule de Vénérande, as she is promoted through Raittolbe's acceptance of her appropriation of masculine language, to a position of homosocial bonding. That is, she and Raittolbe discuss sexuality and the prey on equal ground. The difference between them has been collapsed in the interest of establishing a new code of socio-sexual division: that of 'doer' and 'done-to', agent and victim. In fact, Raittolbe will later find himself dizzy before Jacques's passive beauty despite being consciously disgusted by homosexuality. In this way Rachilde suggests that attraction is more about apparent difference, superiority or inferiority, activity or passivity, than about biological realities.

We may also note, in the passage quoted above, that Raoule rejects pre-

¹⁸⁰It should be noted that this attempt to do away with 'sexist language' can be seen to prefigure directly Monique Wittig's experiment in *Les Guérillères* (1969) to create a subject of language – 'illes' – which is a generic plural pronoun incorporating both male and female. In the post-patriarchal utopia she creates, human subjects no longer signify as 'men' and 'women'; gender itself has become redundant. The underlying annihilatory phantasy beneath the destruction of difference in this *Gedankenexperiment* cannot be ignored.

existing labels, here that of 'lesbian'. Emphasis is placed on the status of individual desire, on setting a new precedent, as Raoule will go on to explain:

Moi, si je créais une dépravation nouvelle, je serais prêtresse, tandis que mes imitateurs se traîneraient, après mon règne, dans une fange abominable... (MV, 93)

While 'lesbian' is an understood identity, Raoule claims to have discovered 'un amour tout neuf' (93). She proclaims herself as a sexual innovator, a pioneer in territories of perversion as yet uncharted.¹⁸¹

To today's readers in a post-Judith Butler age, Raoule's essentially sado-masochistic relationship involving elements of cross-dressing and cross-gender fetishisation may not seem so radical, and we may wonder whether it has the power to shock beyond its turn-of-the-century moment.¹⁸² Yet, consider the words spoken by Raoule a few pages later :

[O]n ne m'a pas donné assez de jouissances pour que mon cerveau n'ait pas eu le loisir de chercher mieux ... J'ai voulu *l'impossible*... Je le possède... C'est-à-dire non, je ne le posséderai jamais! (MV, 95)

and

[J]'aimerais Jacques comme un fiancé aime sans espoir la fiancée morte ! (MV 97)

Beyond the obvious meaning of these words – that sexual intercourse will not play a part in their relationship – we may read another level of talking about desire. It is unusual to see 'jouissances' in the plural. This has the effect of diminishing the power and pleasure of genital orgasm, rendering it banal, ten-a-penny, in short, attainable. These multiple and unimpressive orgasms are juxtaposed to the image of the dead fiancée, so that once again, the image of a dead love object appears as a figure for the impossibility of fulfilling desire.

To want the impossible is to want a desire that is pleasurable lasting yet simultaneously capable of being sated. Raoule seeks to abolish gender because the only pleasure gender difference can offer is sexual intercourse. The economy of

¹⁸¹Ironically, at Rachilde's trial for obscenity, the *ministre public* indeed accused her of having 'inventé un vice de plus' (see Dauphiné, *Rachilde*, p. 56).

¹⁸²Judith Butler is the author of *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (1993). In these works, she uses the tools of deconstruction and attempts to dismantle the essentialised polarity of gender roles, recasting them as sorts of 'performance' enforced upon male and female subjects by social construction.

sexual intercourse with its rises and falls in tension, its constant shifts in intensity, fails to correspond to the notion of an eternal, infinite desire in which one loses all sense of male or female. The multiple mentions of the annihilation of gender, the rejection of both heterosexuality *and* homosexuality, and the image of a dead fiancée as ideal object, suggest a specific configuration of death-driven desire. Despite much discussion of Rachilde's presentation of desire in recent works on her novels, her treatment of a specifically necrophilic desire has been ignored.

Yet the metaphor of gender will continue to signify: Raoule and Raittolbe will decide to call Jacques 'elle' (97), Raoule will announce herself to Jacques as 'jaloux' of his contact with Raittolbe (106), and the announcement of their marriage will state 'Mademoiselle Silvert épouse M Raoule de Vénérande' (168). The preservation of (even arbitrary) gender differences as privileged markers of the difference at stake within desire could be seen as a weakness of the text. Occasionally, too, the switched pronouns become confusing and read as rather absurd. Yet, in the very grotesqueness or clumsiness of some of this usage, the terms 'male' and 'female' gradually break down and ring hollowly, causing the perspicacious reader to suspect there may be something more at stake than genital difference.

Raoule's desire to flout social convention ultimately leads her to that structured, meaning-ridden institution of marriage, where the inversion of expected roles would have the strongest social impact:

Vers minuit, les invités [...] s'aperçurent d'un fait bien étrange: la jeune mariée était encore parmi eux, mais le jeune marié avait disparu. (MV, 201)

The 'game' of marriage is parodied by such elements as the amusing details of Jacques's 'becoming' coyness. Also, the symbols of the married state are deliberately exaggerated, such as the sumptuous marital chamber that Raoule has constructed for the couple with its statue of Eros and its elaborate decoration, a marital chamber in which the prescribed rite of married couples will never take place.

In fact, it is during the wedding night that the schism will occur in the union of Jacques and Raoule, where previously they have been 'la seule divinité de l'amour en deux personnes'(187). The nuptial bed brings demystification for Jacques, when during an embrace, Raoule's bare breasts are revealed:

– Raoule, s'écria Jacques, la face convulsée [...] tu n'es donc pas un homme ?
tu ne peux donc pas être un homme?
Et le sanglot des illusions détruites, pour toujours mortes monta de ses flancs
à sa gorge. (MV, 216)

For Jacques, the failure of the ability to suspend disbelief in this crucial moment will lead to a waning of his loyalty and a progressive promiscuity, culminating in his attempted seduction of Raittolbe, when he goes to visit him 'en costume de femme' (234).

Biological maleness retains the association of power for Jacques, suggesting that his own male sex remains the one symbol of the heterosexual order of reality that he is able to negate (a Lacanian would be amused by this rare case of having the phallus and not wanting it). Ultimately, Raoule has succeeded in creating only an inverted relation of power and gender, for Jacques is unable to recognise that he would need to be not just her 'femme' but the 'fiancée morte'. Raoule has failed in her attempt to render sex totally meaningless and to replace asymmetry with a perfect subjugation and sublation. What Rachilde has achieved, however, is a unique demonstration of the structural difficulties of such a project.

Before looking at the final outcome of the game with gender and desire in this novel, I shall examine *La Marquise de Sade* to account for parallels and developments in Rachilde's treatment of these themes.

***La Marquise de Sade* and the primal scene**

The notion of slippage of associations and the transformation of repulsion into attraction, which we read as characterising the opening of *Monsieur Vénus*, can be said to define the very structure as well as the content of *La Marquise de Sade*. The novel is framed and punctuated by deaths, and the central image is one of blood and sacrifice which take on increasingly problematic associations as the novel progresses and the protagonist grows up.

The novel opens with a scene of the young Mary walking in the countryside of Clermont with her aunt, Tulotte, whose task it is to collect blood from the abattoir for Mary's anaemic mother, Caroline, to drink. The curious Mary cannot resist peeping around the door of the abattoir to see exactly what happens inside when her aunt goes

to fetch the 'special milk' which Caroline needs to get well. The spectacle that meets Mary's eyes is powerfully recounted by Rachilde:

Brusquement le boucher leva son maillet, il tendit ses deux bras en l'air. Un nouveau coup sourd résonna sous le toit du bâtiment. Le bœuf tréssauta sur ses jambes repliées, ses yeux s'injectèrent et sortirent de leurs orbites. Une écume pourprée filtra à travers ses dents mises à nu, sa langue pendit hors de sa bouche, le long de son corps la peau se plissa, se hérissant de poils humides, la queue se dressa comme un serpent fouettant dans un dernier spasme l'horrible mouche qui attendait pour sucer la viande. (*LMdS*, 13)

The executioner raising his weapon, the innocent victim and the parasitic fly waiting to drink the blood become repetitive figures in the novel and the positions they represent will be played out in variety of configurations by the dramatis personae.

Mary's childish curiosity ('Qu'allait donc arriver à ce gros animal docile ?' [13]) becomes an ambiguous transport of fascinated horror, which is manifest on the physical as well as the emotional level, as the action appears to traverse Mary's very being in an instinctive visceral identification with the slaughtered beast:

Mary fit un geste de suprême angoisse.

Ses mains, qu'elle avait jointes à la façon des bébés indifférents, derrière son dos, elle les porta à sa nuque par un mouvement instinctif. Elle venait de ressentir là juste au nœud de tous ses nerfs, le coup formidable qui assommait le colosse. Elle eut un frisson convulsif, une sueur soudaine l'inonda, elle fut comme soulevée de terre et transportée bien loin, par-delà le sommet de ce puy de Dôme bleuâtre. (*LMdS*, 14)

Her response, like Raoule's on contact with Jacques, and like the protagonists of Gautier entering their fantastic realm, is characterised by a physical and emotional reaction which defies rational explanation. The swoon, in appearance aping death, suggests an experience that is beyond the limits of conscious endurance, something which exceeds good and evil and leaves an indelible stain on the text and the protagonist.

This indelible stain will be translated in the literal sphere in the next paragraph:

Le garçon approcha le seau de cuivre et plongea son couteau rond dans le cou épais de l'animal. un jet de sang fusa sur ses bras, sur son tablier, sur sa poitrine, et ce jet tomba, à mesure que le couteau s'enfonçait, dans le seau avec un bruit de fontaine ruisselante. (*LMdS*, 14)

At this sight, Mary faints, removing herself from the unbearable spectacle. But even with her consciousness absent from the described scene, Rachilde allows us a glimpse of the identification of the young Mary with the sacrificial victim, in the overtly eroticised image of her unconscious body :

Du même coup de massue, elle paraissait tuée, offrant sa gorge d'agneau délicat aux couteaux meurtriers de ces hommes. (*LMdS*, 15)

From this moment onwards all erotic exchanges will be viewed in terms of blood lust, as we will see from the multiple mentions of the substance and its metonymic signifier, the colour red.

Mary's identification with the animal as victim is only half of the story. The night after she witnesses the slaughter, she talks in her sleep: 'L'homme... j'ai peur de l'homme,...', which becomes 'si l'homme revient nous le tuerons... parce qu'il a tué le bœuf... le bœuf du petit Jésus...' (27-28). These words, spoken in her unconscious state, reveal the beginning of her hatred of men and her perception of them as brutal and unfeeling. Yet her revolt against them will be in the same brutal terms. She will relate to men by assuming the position of *bourreau* herself, and the eroticisation of violence will reach conscious proportions when she becomes the adult 'doer'.

The scene in the abattoir can be read as a kind of bestial primal scene. The abattoir is presented in the way that the parental bedroom is often presented: as a locus of forbidden knowledge. Mary's aunt instructs her 'ne t'approche pas de la porte' (12). This rhetoric implies that the answer to a tantalising forbidden secret, that is access to *the truth*, lies just beyond the door. The idea of abattoir/parental marital chamber as metaphorical pair is reinforced by the fact that Mary's own mother drinks the sacrificial blood. She is another passive victim of males: a hysteric whose actions are controlled by the medical profession, embodied in the novel by Mary's uncle, Dr Barbe.

On one level, Rachilde is offering us the option of thinking about Mary Barbe 'it's no wonder she turns out the way she does'. From an early age, that is from the beginning of the novel, sexuality is associated with death; men are seen as executioners and women as victims.

This is after all classic psychopathology, and Rachilde's novels are discussed in these terms by Renée A. Kingcaid, who claims that she exhibits 'the ultimate symptom of the neurotic repulsion-attraction complex of feminine sexuality [...] the conviction that sex and death are one'.¹⁸³ Yet, to envisage the 'sex-death complex' as

¹⁸³Renée A. Kingcaid, *Neurosis as Narrative: The Decadent Fiction of Proust, Lorrain, and Rachilde* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1992), p. 17.

only a neurotic expression of Mary's or Rachilde's desire is intrinsically to cut short our understanding. If this theme appears with such pervasive insistence through literature and cultural production of the nineteenth century, it is at the very least a mass or universal neurosis, and it is by entering into the rhetoric of the texts that we may reach a more thorough understanding of the concept.

Moreover, the idea of the sex-death complex assumes that death is the potential outcome of sexual intercourse, its hidden underside, and the woman's repulsion before coitus is the fear of death afterwards. In *La Marquise de Sade* this is clearly not the case. About sexual intercourse with her husband, the Baron de Caumont, the grown Mary will be nonchalant:

Mary, ravissante en ses printemps de neige, réellement vierge était une coupe pleine du plus grisant breuvage. Elle n'eut avec lui ni les pudeurs des jeunes filles, ni les goûts des prostituées, mais une nonchalance indifférente, tolérant beaucoup, jointe à la beauté d'une statue grecque (*LMdS*, 219)

The fact is that sex has no power to signify for Mary. Her adulterous sadistic exertions with her lover Paul Richard, on the other hand, will bring her a keener thrill, presumably because they operate according to her founding paradigm of executioner and victim.

We may read *La Marquise de Sade* as a straightforward study in perversion, the attempt to chart the female sexual impulse going astray from the course that society would prescribe for it. Claude Dauphiné makes this point:

Peu de critiques comprirent que *Monsieur Vénus* et plus encore *La Marquise de Sade* [...] étaient l'illustration littéraire de manuels de psycho-pathologie sexuelle.¹⁸⁴

Yet we can read these texts as attempting not only to make intelligible the formulation of perversion, but to lay bare the structures of desire that are visible in disguised and defused form in more 'ordinary' forms of sexuality. Like Freud, Rachilde is starting on the limits of sexual experience and working in towards normality, demonstrating, through admittedly baroque thematic and textual play, the problematic of lack at the heart of desire.

One striking feature of the novel is that Mary's 'perverted' perceptions are given absolute authority throughout. Her mistrust of the male as brutal is reinforced

¹⁸⁴Dauphiné, *Rachilde*, p. 53.

by numerous textual examples. Her father is an insensitive and misogynist army colonel who makes it quite clear that he would be better off without his ‘avorton de fille’ (29). At a children’s party, a young boy, Paul Marescut, injures a lamb (another symbol of innocent sacrifice) with which Mary is playing. This time, despite the fact that ‘Mary eut peut-être la vague souvenance des brebis de l’abattoir’ (40), she does not faint in a transport of sensuous confusion. Instead, she becomes the agent, ready to avenge the lamb by killing the boy, to do as the *bourreau* would do:

Tout d’un coup une révolution s’opéra dans la passivité de la petite colonelle; un cri rauque, un cri de chatte en colère sortit de sa gorge crispée; elle rejoignit Paul Marescut d’un seul bond et, tombant sur lui à l’improviste, elle le cribla d’égratignures.

Elle venait de déclarer sa première guerre au mâle. (*LMdS*, 41)

The white lamb as sacrifice is an example, perhaps, of the heavy-handedness of which some critics accuse Rachilde’s textual performance. Yet the very obviousness of this choice of image, its cliché value in religious symbolism, are not incidental. Like the slaughtered ox, the white lamb is an obvious target for Rachilde’s parody of Christian imagery.

In my discussion of Baudelaire’s ‘A une Madone’ and ‘Une martyre’ (see pp. 131-37, above), I posit that Baudelaire is playing blasphemously with the Christian story by evoking eroticised female sacrifices in the language of religious discourse. Rachilde appears to be taking this game one step further here, by creating a female Christ-figure who does not turn the other cheek, but imitates the violence used against her in her own battle with the opposite sex. The notion of the abattoir scene as a founding myth suggests the novel as an elaborate template for understanding love as sacrifice, desire as death, parallel to the Christian story, but with explicitly sexual overtones. Rachilde is appropriating the language and imagery of the male law of religion and undermining it.

The ultimate moment of identification with the agent of death comes when Mary’s mother dies in childbirth, bringing a son into the world. In the terms of Mary’s rudimentary understanding of childbirth, the mother has been murdered by the brother, the woman sacrificed for the boy. Following the code of medical ethics which values the child’s life above the mother’s, coupled with the real likelihood of death in child-birth at the turn of the century, this is, in fact, what has happened:

– Morte ! Maman !... cria la petite fille qui eut la vision sanglante du bœuf qu'elle avait vu tuer un jour, au fond d'une espèce de cave, d'un coup, pour en tirer quelques gouttes de sang. Une révolution s'opéra en elle; on avait tué sa mère comme cela, du même coup pour avoir ce petit morceau de chair. (LMdS, 84)

We may note that in the last two quotations given, the same wording is used to suggest the evolution in the attitude of Mary Barbe towards the external world and the men in it ('une révolution s'opéra en elle'). The two moments of internal uprising are both linked to a memory of the slaughter which is imposed upon the actions of the present. The executioner here at her mother's deathbed is multiply personified by Dr Barbe, Célestin the newborn son, and her father: in short, male-kind again. The word 'révolution' with its cyclical overtones suggests that Mary is in the process of changing the role she will play in this recurrent abattoir scene.

This change in her role begins to occur from this point in the text onwards. Yet how does the change – from identifying violence and death with repulsion and fear of the male, to experiencing it as active desire – come about? We will see that Rachilde weaves this change through her text by manipulating the associations of the motifs of blood and sacrifice. Just as the cooking apples go from bad to good for Raoule, so Mary will go from fearing the blood that poured from the cow and was drunk by her mother, to eroticising it.

An acceptance of the imposition of death and the way it can work in her favour comes when she has the chance to save the life of her hated little brother, trapped beneath the weight of his drunken, slumbering wet-nurse. She chooses to ignore his gasps for breath and returns to her own bed: 'toi, murmura-t-elle, tu as fini de pleurer.' (129)

The action of refusing to prevent a death is still far from the active taste for blood which Mary will develop. Throughout the novel, blood lust is set up as a male attribute. Implicitly, then, the development of such a passion by a woman, would mean the appropriation of male power, both sexually and socially. A significant stage in the revolution in Mary's attitude to blood-shedding comes with her entry into the male discourse of medicine. Orphaned of her father by the Franco-Prussian war, Mary takes up residence with her uncle, Dr Barbe. Barbe's attitude to Mary is shown to undergo its own revolution: from complete indifference to his female relative ('toujours l'éternelle passion de la famille pour les mâles' [182]), he develops an

obsessive fascination for her. This fascination dates from a time when he remarks something strange about the size of her thumb and decides to do an experiment:

Il ôta la toile qui cachait un membre humain. C'était un bras d'homme; les nerfs mis à nus saillaient sur son épiderme exsangue, les doigts, rigides, se tendaient comme dans une récente angoisse.
– C'est drôle! dit-il, prodigieusement intéressé, et il accoupla le pouce vivant au pouce mort. Celui de Mary était presque de la même longueur quoique beaucoup plus mince, et celui de l'homme se faisait déjà remarquer par une dimension anormale. (*LMdS*, 183 - 4)

Mary's progressive empowerment and her adoption of the role of agent are figured in this assimilation of her body-part to that of a man. The notion, fashionable at the turn of the century, that physical traits could reveal personality and pathology, particularly criminal pathology, is developed here with the revelation 'ce bras est celui d'un assassin qu'on a décapité hier.' (184).¹⁸⁵

The identification of Mary with a male murderer is further suggested by her sober response to her uncle's words:

– Pauvre homme! dit-elle, la voix un peu altérée... et ce fut tout son émotion.
(*LMdS*, 184)

Her uncle visibly softens towards her following his discovery of her physical proximity to a dead murderer. He both undertakes to teach her and begins to fall in love with her; two responses which apparently contradict his previously expressed view of women as contemptible and intellectually incompetent. Rachilde shows up here the gender confusion that results when a human being shows herself or himself capable of the traits ascribed to the other sex.

The dubious fact of the uncle's arousal on perceiving his niece's 'homicidal' physiological traits, suggests two things. Firstly, at the level of characterisation, it suggests the shadow of his desire for death at her hands. Secondly, in terms of textual parody, it suggests a mischievous play on Rachilde's part. The implication is that the impassive and 'professional' medical man, the authority figure, is himself prone to the most prurient sexual tastes and perversions. Moreover, the potential corruption of the medical profession is carried on as a conceit, when Mary is shown developing her knowledge to a point at which she can use it to concoct poisons with which to kill.

¹⁸⁵ Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) is largely responsible for such ideas. He was an Italian contemporary of the French degeneration theorists discussed in Chapter One (see pp. 40-45, above). He is also remembered for his portrait of the criminal female, *La donna delinquente: la prostituta e la donna normale* (1893).

Yet as well as emphasising her protagonist's abilities in traditionally male territories, Rachilde also has her developing her luminous female appearance to captivate men. But, as we may have come to expect, this is in such a way as to pervert expectations of female passivity and grace. Consider the description of Mary's attire on the night of her engagement party to the Baron de Caumont:

Mary, debout, dans la splendeur de ses dix-huit ans, portait une singulière toilette, sa création des fiançailles.

'Je veux une robe couleur de souffrance' avait-elle déclaré à la couturière stupéfiée. Cette robe incarnait parfaitement l'idée qu'elle avait eue, la cruelle fille! Sur la jupe de satin vert émeraude, arrachant les yeux, se laçait une cuirasse, mode inconvenante de l'époque, une cuirasse en velours constellé d'un paillon mordoré à multiples reflets ou pourpres ou bleus. Ce corsage était montant et cependant s'ouvrait par une échancrure inattendue entre les deux seins, qu'on s'imaginait plus roses à cause de l'intensité de ce velours vert.

La cuirasse laissait les hanches comme nues, et le long des plis de la jupe, très collante, couraient des branches de feuillage de rosiers sans fleurs, criblées de leurs épines. La perverse coquetterie de Mary avait fait explosion avec une assurance frisant le naïveté. Jamais elle ne s'était souciée de ses chiffons avant ce soir-là, et d'un seul effort elle atteignait au sublime.

Ses cheveux tordus derrière la nuque s'ornaient d'une épingle en métal nuancé, pareil aux broderies du corsage. Et la pointe passait, menaçante, tandis qu'un oiseau pourpre, qui semblait traversé, étendait sur la noirceur de ses magnifiques cheveux ses ailes implorantes de pauvre petit tué. La couturière contrariée avait avoué que si c'était original, ce n'était guère de mise pour une jeune fiancée. (*LMdS*, 196)

It would be possible to argue that Rachilde is using the conventional trick of the male writer: personifying a woman as the fatal muse by objectifying her and summing her up in her entirety using aspects of her dress. But the obvious audacity, hyperbole and humour of Rachilde's presentation convince me that she is doing something more. While Mary is presented as beautiful to behold, it is a beauty that is (literally) painful, down to the unlikely details of deflowered rose-branches tracing the shape of her legs. Rachilde has Mary manipulating the role of dress – that of conveying messages about the wearer – with her request for 'une robe couleur de souffrance'. She tries to render literally the aim of women who 'dress to kill'. Mary is revealed as someone who has understood a social prejudice and worked within its own terms to cause disruption, to pervert the understood code.

This is exactly what Luce Irigaray proposes when she talks of women's ability to subvert the social order, not by opposing it directly, but by *imitation*, that is by appearing to do what is required, with the covert aim of changing the meaning of the

convention from within.¹⁸⁶ Rachilde has Mary playing with the notion of what women's dress signifies and turning her body into a weapon of torture, an object to desire, but with the promise of suffering always-already a part of the desire. The juxtaposition of flesh and artifice, young body and sculpted metal, threaten to turn Mary into a sexualised machine of torture. The players in the template of desire, her abattoir primal scene, have changed roles again. Here, she is no longer the victim, nor even just the *bourreau*. She attempts to transcend not only her sex, but her organic status, and to become a tool of death, the instrument of sacrifice itself.

These textual features, characteristic of Decadence, suggest a prefiguring awareness of the idea central to some twentieth-century feminists: that masculine and feminine are principally social roles and that sexual desire comes as a result of an understanding of these roles. When Mary Barbe has medical knowledge, economic power and control over other human beings, her libidinal economy is wholly one of the predator, removing the metaphor of sexual difference in favour of the neutered dialectic of the murderer/victim.

Thus, Rachilde has written an apparently attractive resolution to Mary's 'primal scene' dilemma. She has inverted the power terms, which means that the males, her husband whom she slowly poisons, and her lover (his illegitimate son, mixing near-incest with murder), are the willing, eroticised victims of her position as *bourreau*. The blood, which was first made to flow by a male hand from the slaughtered animal, flows from Paul Richard, at first because of his susceptibility to nervous nosebleeds and eventually at Mary's will:

Maintenant ses hémorragies étant moins fréquentes, elle avait découvert des petits points sur sa peau, entre l'épiderme et la chair. Elle les tirait à l'aide de ses ongles formant l'amande, en laissant le sang fluer hors les trous des pores élargis. (*LMdS*, 271)

Mary's addiction to this liquid of life, which she has the power to draw from her

¹⁸⁶ In *Speculum de l'autre femme* (1974), Luce Irigaray argues that Western thought is grounded in a destructive male Imaginary which cuts women off from a positive relation to the maternal and the feminine. In *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (1984), she claims that the masculine order relegates women to the realm of the material and the bodily, while denying them access to the spiritual and intellectual. Irigaray's utopian project aims to find a way of symbolising the feminine and showing up the 'real' difference between the sexes, rather than the false, male-given categories of difference which subjugate women, while denying them their authentic identity. Imitation is one way in which women can resist the dominant image of them created by men.

victim, is likened to the addiction of the alcoholic for drink ('elle aimait le sang comme Tulotte aimait les liqueurs' [252]).

Despite the exuberance of Rachilde's presentation of Mary's changing identity, epitomised by the ironic glee with which Mary dresses as an instrument of torture, her final position is a bitter one. Contrary to Rachilde's enduring conceit of self-determination, Mary's position is fixed in terms of compulsion and adherence to an obsessive idea. Given Mary's need to destroy slowly, in the eluctable throes of her destructive libidinal play, the end point of her story can only be literal sexualised murder.

The outcome of the revolutions : Raoule, Mary and 'The End'

The failure of Raoule's experiment with sexual identity in *Monsieur Vénus* is not only the failure of Jacques's feminisation, but also, ultimately, of the structure around which Raoule builds her erotic idyll. In this structure, she is the 'one' and Jacques is the 'other', the mirror through which she sees reflected the complement to her desire. Yet Raoule's position is ultimately solipsistic, and her 'other' can give no meaningful recognition of her identity. Jacques's absolute passivity is both the condition of this false dialectic and its downfall:

Une vie étrange commença pour Raoule de Vénérande, à partir de l'instant fatal où Jacques Silvert, lui cédant sa puissance d'homme amoureux, devint sa chose, une sorte d'être inerte qui se laissait aimer parce qu'il aimait lui-même d'une façon impuissante. Car Jacques aimait Raoule avec un vrai cœur de femme. Il l'aimait par reconnaissance, par soumission, par un besoin latent de voluptés inconnues. (MV, 115)

When Jacques becomes completely her 'thing', he prefigures the only possible erotic outcome of the adventure: that of a necrophilic resolution. While alive, the tantalisingly subservient Jacques loves not only with the 'heart of a woman', but with that of the classic figure of the polymorphously perverse woman corrupted by a perverted lover.¹⁸⁷ He becomes vain, open to flirtation with others, and tempted by the promise of debauchery. The inversion of gender roles in his relationship with Raoule

¹⁸⁷I am thinking of Freud's description of 'an average uncultivated woman in whom the same polymorphously perverse disposition persists', with which feminists have since taken issue: 'If she is led on by a clever seducer she will find every sort of perversion to her taste, and will retain them as part of her own sexual activities' SE, XXI, p. 109.

has led to Jacques no longer recognising his place in the heterosexual matrix, but only his attraction to powerful agents who can afford him pleasure. Hence he desires to succumb to Raittolbe, a strong, aristocratic male, and attempts to seduce him. This leads inevitably to his death at Raoule's orders: for her creation, her thing, to reveal itself capable of betraying her is more than she can stand, and the necrophilic dialectic is carried to its radical conclusion when Jacques's corpse stands in place of his living self.

The affront to society which Raoule and Jacques's relationship has constituted is exorcised in the duel with Raittolbe. Jacques has dared to undermine phallic power by being treated as a woman by Raoule, and by attempting to seduce another man. Yet the supposed honour and chivalry of the masculine coda which demands that the two men settle their differences by a duel, is again undermined by Raoule's order to Raittolbe that he should take Jacques's life on her behalf:

– A mort ! jeta-t-elle simplement dans l'oreille de Raittolbe. (MV, 236)

Thus, the identification of Raoule with her rival (and would-be heterosexual suitor) is assured in this murder-by-proxy. While Jacques's death comes about in a socially structured way – by means of a duel – the real agent of destruction is Raoule, who awaits the completion of the 'dirty work' in order to act out the next stage of her libidinal plan.

Consider the following passage from the final pages of *Monsieur Vénus* describing the *chambre close* of the hôtel de Vénérande :

Cette chambre est toute bleue comme un ciel sans nuage. Sur la couche en forme de conque, gardée par un Eros de marbre, repose un mannequin de cire revêtu d'un épiderme de caoutchouc transparent. Les cheveux roux, les cils blonds, le duvet d'or de la poitrine sont naturels; les dents qui ornent la bouche, les ongles des mains et des pieds ont été arrachés à un cadavre. Les yeux en émail ont un adorable regard.

La chambre murée possède une porte dissimulée dans la tenture d'un cabinet de toilette.

La nuit, une femme vêtue de deuil, quelquefois un jeune homme en habit noir, ouvrent cette porte.

Ils viennent s'agenouiller près du lit, et, lorsqu'ils ont longtemps contemplé les formes merveilleuses de la statue de cire, ils l'enlacent, la baisent aux lèvres. Un ressort, disposé à l'intérieur des flancs, correspond à la bouche et l'âme.

Ce mannequin, chef-d'œuvre d'anatomie, a été fabriqué par un Allemand. (MV, 246 -7)

The figure of the corpse-doll – half-human flesh, half-machine, beautiful automaton –

is a typical image of the Decadent aesthetic, seen famously in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future* (1886). But also, it must be noted that it comes of a long tradition of such figures, back to the early years of the century with Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1809). Like the figure of the androgyne, celebrated in much nineteenth-century French fiction, from Balzac's 'Sarrasine' to Rachilde's various desirable wo/men, the automaton is a figure of titillation, promising more than it can offer, seeming to be what it is not, ripe with association and empty of definite meaning or identity. Between death and life, reality and unreality, it is a liminal site on which desire may be exercised. The doll in Jacques's image is a figure of perfect passivity with the perverse elements of a bespoke sex toy, an object of pure pleasure and indulgence for the possessor.

With her half-organic, half-mechanical corpse, Raoule has found the ultimate symbol of the ambiguity that her desirous economy seeks. The figure of the necrophilic lover is sometimes a woman in mourning and sometimes a young man: 'she' ('elle', sometimes 'il') has become 'they' ('ils'). This pluralisation of Raoule's persona suggests several things. Firstly, we may remember Abraham and Török's model of failed mourning, the intra-psychic crypt (see my description, pp. 63-64, above). Rachilde's description of Raoule's double persona suggests a novelistic version of this process of incorporation. The level on which Raoule's passion is played out has shifted: her lover, whom she has always wanted to belong to her internal reality, now does so absolutely, and their union continues in the schizoid desirous economy of the imagination.

Secondly, the deconstruction of gender positions that Raoule has attempted has its inevitable outcome in the annihilation of all resistance. The difference that is gender can be to some extent overcome, but the true aim of necrophilic desire is to overcome difference *per se*, so that the living presence of an other must be sacrificed for the satiation of the one. This allows her to experience her own identification with 'doer' and 'done-to' through the repeated game of watching over the corpse and of enjoying it sexually. In the creation of her character Raoule, with whose subjectivity the narrative is closely aligned, Rachilde has attempted to demonstrate the outcome of an attempt to obliterate gender difference. In fact, the novel can be read as a

structural map of deathly desire, in which the possibility of reproductive sexual relations is wholly replaced by a sterile and cerebrally-driven passion for possession and annihilation.

If desire is ‘successfully’ managed in the end of *Monsieur Vénus*, this is done by literally stilling the love-object. The desirous strategy of murder (which took on the symbolic manifest content of gender annihilation in life), has failed, because of the intervention of a third person (Raittolbe) who breaks the dialectic.

In *La Marquise de Sade*, literal murderousness is the outcome of a succession of partial failures of the role of *bourreau*, which Mary Barbe adopts as her identity in preference to that of ‘woman’. Her sado-masochistic affair with her husband’s illegitimate son, Paul Richard, begins when he rapes her – asserting male power over Mary, who is still biologically female, whatever her ‘philosophical’ status – and it ends when he leaves her in disgust at the murder of his father. These two factors, representing freedom of will and the desire for independent power and mastery on the part of Paul undermine Mary’s autonomous rule and teach her that (as for Raoule), the form of her desire is not sustainable, liveable, in the external social world.

The failure of her relationship with Paul reveals a deeper underlying failure: that of the relationship she dreams of which is untouched by sexual contact or sadistic violence:

Je rêve de l’amour très impossible fait de mystères enfantins et que je n’ose pas mettre en action. (*LMdS*, 232)

The prototype for this gentle, innocent love has been her childhood friendship with the gardener’s boy Sirocco who, like Mary’s mother and father, was snatched from her by death. This figure of the simple, childish boy represents the innocent part of Mary, the little girl still capable of being shocked by slaughter and seeking a companion to mirror her innocence. And yet, this desire for a pure love is not untouched by the shadow of the death drive: Mary’s innocent love would be the possession which is never fully achieved, because, as *Monsieur Vénus* shows, possession equals death in Rachilde’s *univers imaginaire*. The innocent love would be the eternal prolongation of excitement but a failure to act. This means that the two extremes – murderous sadism and impotent love – conjoin in their proximity to

nothingness, to the abyss.

Mary's resolution is an over-literalisation of this death-drive, the seeking of morbid thrills and murderous debauchery in the underground world of Paris, and this deserves brief analysis for its appropriation of the masculine imagination and revenge upon gender. Mary's real sexual blossoming in the underworld is characterised by her search for proximity to death and violence. She frequents the most louche establishments and attempts to witness the murder of prostitutes, that is to experience sights which are 'capables, en ébranlant ses nerfs, d'étancher sa soif de meurtre'(285). Rachilde's presentation of Mary's leisure pursuits is humorously hyperbolic and self-referential: it is figured as a text book case of Decadence. Amongst her sources of pleasure Rachilde lists the following:

Après la Gazette des Tribunaux, les comptes rendus des journalistes mouchards; la Morgue; les romans naturalistes; les musées de cire du boulevard; les exploits des empoisonneurs spirituels, il restait encore les brasseries de femmes dans lesquelles, par bonheur, une fois, on pouvait être témoin d'une sanglante scène de jalousie [...] (*LMdS*, 285)

The mention of Naturalist novels is particularly telling. We remember that Nordau considered this genre to be a symptom of moral decay. Rachilde's mention of it here suggests humour and parody of this kind of moralistic discourse.

Further literary and cultural references come with the mention of that favourite of the Frenetic Romantics, the murderer Lacenaire:

Où était le mâle effroyable qu'il lui fallait, à elle, femelle de la race des lions
[...] Où étaient les colères tonnantes des assassins contre la société: Lacenaire.
Papovoine, Mme Laforge? (*LMdS*, 287)

Here, Mary situates herself in a genealogy of infamous murderers and necrophiles, and Rachilde situates herself in a similar lineage of writers concerned with exposing these darker areas of erotic life. Hence she acknowledges both her decadent contemporaries and her forebears, re-creating the nineteenth century as a set of connecting histories of the perverse erotic imagination.

The importance of this intertextuality is not only that it points to an acknowledgement of a necrophilic genealogy in writing, but that it allows us to see what Rachilde is doing to make her own individual mark on the nineteenth-century literary map of desire. The description of Mary's resolution suggests what that might be.

She comes upon a bar full of transvestites and feels her journey to be at an end:

Mary était gaie parce qu'elle se sentait un but. Quand ses terribles désirs de meurtre la reprendraient, sa conscience ne lui reprocherait rien, si le choisi se trouvait un de ceux-là ! (*LMdS*, 294).

The transvestite represents gender undone, its fixed positions rendered fluid. Rachilde is replacing the tyranny of male 'doers' and female 'done-tos' seen in texts by other writers with an absolute abolition of gender difference. The killing of transvestites shows this most clearly – Mary will kill only beings who are neither male nor female. She rejects gender as a criterion for desire in favour of murder as a trope for desire.

In *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Marquise de Sade* we arrive at the desire for death-dealing as a final stage in a journey – an end point in the development of the protagonists. This move towards symbolic necrophilia for Raoule and homicidal passion for Mary can be read through the discourse of Decadence as a descent, a position of moral and psychological disintegration. It can also be read, however, as a refinement or a partial resolution of the dilemma of desire posed in the novels.

In *Monsieur Vénus*, the objectification and progressive passivity of Jacques reaches an inevitable outcome in the transformation of his body into a simulacrum of the desired corpse, enhanced by authentic organic relics. Raoule's passion has attained the 'natural' result that its structure ordains. Satisfaction could never have been possible in the married life envisaged as an ideal, for in such a relationship, the living other may vacillate, may see beyond the illusions of her/his slavery, may look elsewhere to attain the satisfaction that is curbed by marriage and the prolongation of life. In having him killed, Raoule seeks to call a halt to the eternal excess of desire that cannot be sated.

If we see *La Marquise de Sade* as a perverted off-shoot of the *Bildungsroman* or picaresque novel, the accession to adult identity and emancipation which the novel charts is achieved through the figurative sacrifice of the social impulse in the literal murder of the husband. Mary's emancipated state is characterised by the freedom to explore her desires, which are violent ones. This freedom to act or not to act on one's desire is an existential freedom. Mary fears the consequences of the law but relishes

the state of self-truth she has come to – a sort of Heideggerian position of authenticity – which is the recognition of the *élément-limite* of her desire. She formulates the most appropriate response to the problematic of desire with which she is faced.

The structure of these novels plots a reduction of tension to zero. They achieve the aim of Freud's pleasure principle, which is also the aim of the death drive (see pp.57-58, above). Social blocks and psychological repression are overcome and the divisive barriers of gender are partially dismantled, allowing desire to spring up in the subjective realm.

In slightly different ways, both novels remove sexual intercourse from the picture of desire. They do this firstly by inverting the gendered terms of 'doer' and 'done-to', making sexual intercourse precisely impossible. Attention is drawn to the death-giving nature of a passion which obliterates biological difference. Jacques claims s/he must learn to duel, reasoning 'Il faut bien qu'elle demande à tuer quelqu'un, puisque le moyen de mettre quelqu'un au monde lui est absolument refusé' (MV, 212). Mary, seeking the active part in her non-genital coupling, draws blood from her victims, as a man might deflower a virgin. Ultimately, sadism and murder are the resorts of this passion without genital difference.

First of all gender, the socio-sexual marker of difference is shown to be arbitrary. This allows desire to grow in the aporia where meaning (as phallographic sexuality) would be. In both cases, this allows for a death-driven desire which bypasses the metaphor of sexual intercourse.

4.2

Two Male Predators: Mathurin Barnabas and Yves de Pontcroix

Necrophilia as narrative: *La Tour d'Amour*

*Qui a brisé l'homme seul, si las d'être isolé?
C'est la vie, l'implacable vie.
Qui a bercé l'homme seul pour le consoler un moment
dans le repos?
C'est la mort, l'implacable mort!*

Rachilde, *La Tour d'Amour*¹⁸⁸

La Tour d'Amour opens as a young man, Jean le Malreux, disappointed in love (as his surname would suggest), takes a new job as second lighthouse keeper on the *Tour Ar-men*. The novel charts his relationship with the head lighthouse keeper, Mathurin Barnabas, who is first presented as an eccentric and bizarre figure, and slowly revealed as a practising necrophile who sates himself on the bodies of female shipwreck victims. The setting at sea and the descriptions of the work of the lighthouse keepers form a constant backdrop against which, and in tune with which, the emotional vacillations of the men are evoked. The claustrophobic atmosphere is only slightly broken by the three excursions to the mainland made by le Malreux when he goes in search of a wife.

In Dauphiné's chapter on Rachilde's technique as a novelist, he claims tantalisingly that *La Tour d'Amour* is a 'véritable exercice de style sur la nécrophilie'.¹⁸⁹ Unfortunately, he does not go on to explain what he means by this or to undertake a reading of Rachilde's best novel in this light. Such a reading, then, will be the task which falls to me in this section of the present chapter.

There is very little action or plot development in the novel, other than personal and intersubjective revelations. Rather, it reads like a surreal dream structured around chains of association and the powerful evocation of atmosphere. It is lyrical and punctuated by transports of rapturous prose which mirror the subject matter of dream,

¹⁸⁸*La Tour d'Amour* (1899) (Paris: Les maîtres du livre, 1916), p. 196. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and page numbers are given in the text following the abbreviation *LTA*.

¹⁸⁹Dauphiné, Rachilde, p. 319.

fantasy and illusion. The fact that the novel is written in the first person and that the revelations of the novel are presented from Malreux's perspective means that Rachilde's voice is less forceful in this text. Many of her observations are filtered through Malreux's consciousness and there is no direct authorial intervention.

The primary textual association, that of Mathurin Barnabas with death and femininity, is established from the outset by the plethora of images and similes linking him to a corpse, and most strikingly to a female corpse. From their first meeting, Malreux is struck by his appearance and comments on 'sa face de vieille morte' (28 - 9) and 'sa sacrée tête de moribonde' (40). Moreover, in the evenings, Barnabas wears a bizarre helmet on which are fixed two long, blond plaits of hair, and the sound of his singing is mistaken by Malreux for the voice of a woman (40).

On the level of subjective experience, the text intercuts between images of Barnabas seen and described from Malreux's viewpoint and Malreux's internal fantasy and dream world which is often intensely eroticised. Having observed Barnabas dressing up in his 'casquette', Malreux dreams of a woman:

Je rêvai des choses curieuses.
D'abord, je vis revenir de l'esplanade une belle fille qui fredonnait. Elle tenait un couteau, celui du vieux et elle me le posa tout doucement le long de la nuque. (LTA, 54)

Here an object belonging to Barnabas suggests a deadly erotic encounter, which is then lived in dream, with Malreux playing the role of the victim.

This internal state of delirium is soon projected outwards, so that the environment of the monolithic lighthouse surrounded by the sea becomes a signifier for sexual isolation, melding the internal and external into one overpowering image of vertiginous absence:

En bas, la mer se roulait, chantant son chant de mort, étendant, de places noires en places noires, ses linges blancs, tout préparés pour la dernière toilette des hommes d'équipages. Ce singulier vertige, que j'avais déjà éprouvé étant assis sur l'esplanade, me tournait encore la tête. Oui, je me sentais toujours attiré dans le vide...(LTA, 66)

As before, in the dream, where Barnabas's knife became an emblem of death and sexuality, here the sea is linked wholly with notions of loss and death. The personal sense of sexual absence (Malreux's only previous lover, a Maltese girl, has been unfaithful and he broods constantly upon her loss) and the association of sexual excitement with death here become interchangeable, metaphorically, with the sea in

which sailors lose themselves. Losing oneself (to death or rapture) is a constant motif in *La Tour d'Amour*.

A major structural feature of the text is the interchangeability or identification between characters, symbols and objects, which relies on a system of associations being established. From contemplation of the sea as the death-bed of seafarers, Malreux goes on to liken the world of his dream to the sea, and thereby to identify himself with the drowned sailors, in a collapsing of ego boundaries which characterises the novel:

J'avais la sensation d'être encore dans mon rêve, de dormir et de rouler selon le bercement des vagues ténébreuses, un bord sur l'autre, me moquant bien de la réalité. (*LTA*, 67)

The chain of collapsing connections comes full circle with the sound of Barnabas's singing, which cuts into these dream-like musings:

'C'est la tour prends garde!
'C'est la tour d'amour ... ou ... our ... our !'
La voix montait, se mêlait au vent et devenait lointaine comme celle d'une fille qu'on étranglerait sur les dunes pendant une nuit d'équinoxe. (*LTA*, 98)

Here, Barnabas's voice is firstly collapsed onto the surrounding environment – it is part of the sound of the wind. Then, it is not only like a woman's voice, but explicitly like that of a woman being killed in the evocative image of sexual murder.

By this point, the necrophilic nature of the pattern of imagery that is forming becomes overt. The figurative vocabulary of dead or fatal women, the description of Barnabas's face and voice, his behaviour and the language woven around him all point to an identification between a necrophile and his victim. Also explicit is the incorporation of Malreux into the strange erotic life of the 'tour d'amour' and the surrounding elements, seen in his dreams and the breaking down of his subjective identity in such descriptions as this one of a sea-storm:

On n'a pas d'idée de ce que c'est que la pluie en mer, et sur un phare. Ça brouille tout, ça mouille tout, ça vous fond la cervelle, ça vous dilue les moelles, on coule, on s'égoutte peu à peu, on est moins consistant qu'un nuage, n'importe quel prétexte vous serait bon pour aller rejoindre l'eau, la grande eau finale (*LTA*, 105)

The punctuation here, the images of dissolution linked and made equivalent by a series of commas, enacts the idea of boundaries breaking down and of identities losing their individuality. The 'tour d'amour' is not just the physical setting of the novel, but the symbol of a very particular kind of erotic consciousness, characterised

by colossal phallic power (the all-male atmosphere of a lighthouse watch) which is slowly eroded and beaten down by the abyssal surrounding sea. By analogy, 'healthy' heterosexual desire is slowly collapsed into a death-driven longing for eternal union with the beyond.

The first real event of the novel, which disrupts the repetitive refrains of association, mood and emotion described above, is a shipwreck. Having watched the row of male corpses float to the surface of the water, and past the lighthouse, Malreux begins to wonder why there are no female victims. Even before he has a material answer to this puzzle, his unconscious mind provides him with one:

Je rêvais qu'une morte noyée ... qui avait les cheveux du vieux, ses cheveux du soir ... (LTA, 119)

The punctuation here reveals hesitation on Malreux's part. The *points de suspension* and the unfinished sentence mark a textual encounter with the unsayable. While this may be Rachilde's attempt to convey simple coyness on Malreux's part, it is equally likely that the unspoken content of the thought is a desire which remains repressed, which fears to surface. Having fed us the textual clues of the content of Malreux's dream-life in many previous passages, Rachilde has awoken certain expectations in the reader. That which is not articulated speaks out loudly.

In fact, the dream is prophetic, and the next day, while looking for Barnabas, Malreux discovers an object which 'paraissait si blanc, si pur, si allongé en forme de fuseau et si joli'(125). It is a naked female corpse, 'jambes d'un côté, bras de l'autre' (124). The textual supplanting of Barnabas by the corpse – Malreux looks for one and finds the other – suggests again the equivalence at the textual level that Rachilde wants to imply between 'doer' and 'done-to', and also reminds us of the proximity at the psychological level of the necrophile and the victim.

The coming-to-the-surface of the female corpse signals a coming-to-the-surface of Malreux's consciousness of Barnabas's desirous identity. The white female flesh is described in terms of a disordered series of part-objects, which gain cohesion only when Malreux realises their significance: 'c'est une femme! criai-je' (125). Similarly, when he confronts Barnabas with his discovery, he finally dares to believe his suspicions. By voicing them, bringing them to the surface of discourse, he makes them real: 'nous nous étions enfin compris' (128).

The second major event of the novel is Malreux's shore leave, which follows directly on his understanding of Barnabas's position. He resolves to find himself a wife and to leave the 'tour d'amour' behind forever. The town symbolises an alternative conscious state to that of the tower. Malreux is charmed by the childish innocence of the inn-keeper's daughter and resolves to make her his wife. This section attempts to highlight the life-driven eroticism of Malreux, but it is hard for the reader to forget his dreams and the image of the girl being strangled (see p.200, above), which were associated with Barnabas, but which were attributed to Malreux's desiring consciousness. Similarly, when the Bretonne kisses Malreux, the imagery chosen by Rachilde reveals emotional ambivalence:

C'était le baiser breton, le roi de tous les baisers, celui qui enivre les fiancés chastes... ou qui les tue ! (*LTA*, 154)

The constant mention of death associated with love suggests a close liaison or proximity between the type of desire represented by Barnabas and the healthy manifestation of living sexuality to which Malreux clings.

Indeed, on return to the tower, the identification between Barnabas and Malreux will increase, despite the latter's attempts to distance himself from Barnabas by way of his project of marriage and procreative sexuality. In fact, when Malreux dreams of his fiancée on the first night back in the tower, the link is assured:

L'Amour? Peu à peu cette maigre petite fille grandissait au-dessus de la mer. Elle se dressait devant le phare, elle venait à moi, soulevant le tulle blanc de l'écume pour s'en faire des fichus neufs. Je lui donnerais des croix d'or... et du métal scintillait le long des vagues, se moirant au soleil de l'été. Elle était belle, bien plus belle que les femmes des naufrages qui sont nues, les cheveux étalés en arrière de leur corps. (*LTA*, 160)

The mention of the naked corpse (already prefigured by the emergence of the little Bretonne from a watery grave like a deathly image of Venus), instantly suggests the link between the two in Malreux's mind, even as he attempts to negate it in the last statement. In fact, the dream has a clearly revelatory quality, as Rachilde will have Malreux admit: 'le jeune fou qui aime est semblable au vieux fou qui se souvient'(161).

The notion of remembering suggests that Barnabas's necrophilia has the character of a repetitive and renewable ritual. On Malreux's return, the blond plaits have gone and the casquette is now adorned with dark tufts (grotesquely figured as

‘les deux oreilles de chien épagneul’ [158]) which he has clearly stripped from the most recent *naufragée*. The relic of hair is a sensuous symbol of remembrance, a talisman of erotic memory. Memory activated by symbols is an omnipresent feature of the text. We are told that Barnabas lost the ability to read on the night that Malreux’s predecessor died (under mysterious circumstances), suggesting the fragility of memory in the face of shock or emotional instability. The constant repetition of images in the novel, as well as the resurgence of emotional revelations and of relics being washed up to the surface of the sea, foreground this notion of remembrance and ritual.

Just what is it that Barnabas remembers with each of his fresh corpses? We, remembering Freud, may suspect that this search for new objects repeats the quest for an original object. He hints at a founding memory, the origin of his present state, and mentions two important women in his life: the dead women he keeps locked up in a hidden cupboard in the tower, and the woman to whom he was once married:

Je m’avais marié dans le temps jadis, maintenant, personne, mon gars, ne peut plus me tromper. Elles sont meilleures filles que les autres et elles parlent pas ... *c’est tout miel*. (LTA, 174)

The mention of infidelity on the part of his first love creates another link with Malreux’s own erotic history. Also, given the constant assimilation and association, the reader cannot but suspect that the two women mentioned by Barnabas may be one and the same.

This notion of the living and the dead object of affection being the same is again represented in Malreux’s musings before bedtime. He remembers a dark birthmark on his Maltese girlfriend’s throat and wonders where he has seen this combination of pallor and darkness recently: ‘La noyée! Tonnerre de sort!’ (180). The chain of connections persists in dream:

En m’endormant, je guignais la photographie de la mauresque de Malte, je pensais à ma jolie petite promise, mais ... mais ce fut la noyée qui me suça les moelles du fond d’un cauchemar atroce, ce fut la noyée du vieux qui m’eut tout entier, corps et âme.
Parce que les mystères des rêves sont les avertissements de Dieu. (LTA, 180)

Malreux is to visit his fiancée the next day, but it is of a dead woman that he dreams. We notice a progression in Malreux’s dream women, from an erotic knife-wielding *femme fatale*, to a sea-dwelling Venus who was ‘better than’ Barnabas’s corpses, to

the triumph of the necrophilic imagination seen here, where the drowned woman has the ultimate appeal. This progression may also be read as a regression, or as the surfacing of the most deeply hidden desires.

The notion of dream as a warning from God is one way of encoding the idea of dream as a revelation of the unconscious's true desires and impulses. In fact, the dream does prove to be a warning of doom. When Malreux arrives at the inn, the little girl is not waiting for him, and, in a morbid mood of introspection, he announces himself 'mort aux filles' (187).

On his second return to the tower, Malreux consciously assumes his necrophilic identity as a resolution to the dilemma of love. He has arrived at a position of understanding:

Je n'aimais pas cette petite fille de Brest plus que j'avais aimé les petites filles de Malte. J'aimais... l'Amour (*LTA*, 187)

This formula suggests a conscious foregrounding of the essence of desire on the part of Rachilde. It posits a notion of love which is always figured through projections, imagination and compensation for inner feelings of loss. It understands that desire has more to do with a relation to self than to other, and that the necessary other will always fall short of the self's expectations.

This formula figures desire as the eternal state of loss in which the subject must constantly search for a missing object. The search for the essential *something* comes to centre on Malreux's fascination with the dead woman locked in the cupboard, of which Barnabas has spoken ('Voilà que la curiosité me tourmentait d'ouvrir.' [193]). This privileged corpse, which is preserved and hidden from sight, becomes a signifier for a radical approach to desire. The unseen has the power of suspending disappointment and disillusionment and promising all riches. Malreux is aware that his curiosity is leading him dangerously close to a perhaps unbearable self-truth:

J'aurais dû persévérer dans mes bonnes résolutions de mariage. C'était ça le salut... mais quelque chose d'inexplicable s'emparait de moi. Un vertige, le délire du vent ou l'appétit du chagrin. (*LTA*, 195)

Hence, rather than pursuing the palliative of 'ordinary' sexual desire, enjoyment and subsequent disappointment, Malreux chooses to dwell close to this talismanic emblem of loss which begins to bring him the masochistic pleasure of denying himself ('Je

me sentais si malheureux, si triste, que je souhaitais l'être davantage'[195]).

Rachilde's evocation of dream once again suggests Malreux's fascination with the icon of the female corpse as symbol of nostalgic, remembered, impossible love:

Mes nuits sont affreuses, je vois des figures lamentables se coller contre la vitre de mon hublot. Des dames blanches, éplorées sous leurs cheveux noirs, me font signe de les suivre, elles me glacent de leurs yeux morts, pleins d'eau verte; dès que je me lève pour les aller chasser, elles reculent effrayées, à leur tour, de me voir, s'enfuient éperdues, leur longue chevelure battant leur dos, et je suis assez lâche pour les supplier de rester.

Ce n'est plus aux femmes vivantes que je songe. Il me faudrait des créatures plus passives, plus complaisantes, plus au-dessus des pudeurs de ce monde pour m'amuser maintenant, ou, alors de telles filles dévergondées, possédant de tels secrets d'amour! (LTA, 203-4)

In this long passage of dream-description, the symbols of life-driven eroticism that we saw earlier on have been subsumed into the outpouring of the death-driven necrophilic imagination. The notions of insatiable desire and the unattainable object are maintained in the elusiveness of the dream-corpses which 's'enfuient' to avoid Malreux's embrace. The rejection of living girls in favour of the 'secrets d'amour' possessed by the dead is a figure for the abandonment of one model of desire in favour of another. By manipulating the descriptions of his dream-women Rachilde has her protagonist grappling with the slipperiness of fantasy.

I have shown that throughout the novel, the changing content of dreams is designed to reflect an evolution of consciousness. At this point, Malreux seems close to an 'answer' or to fixing a perverted position, shown by the fact that these wholly death-driven dreams are repetitive, haunting.

When a second shipwreck occurs, Malreux is unable to act on the *étourdissement* of desire which he feels when faced with a blonde female corpse with 'un visage horriblement triste, un jeune visage de femme contemplant la mer de ses yeux pleins de larmes' (224). In fact a nervous illness ensues and he takes to his bed for eight days. This period of illness is followed by an excursion to Brest, where Malreux determines to purge himself of the desire for corpses which has taken hold of him. Yet this time, Rachilde does not draw a clear line between the town and the lighthouse and Malreux's obsessive preoccupations do not leave him. This is suggested by the fact that despite being on land, his imagination is filled with deathly images of the sea:

Des idées formidables me tenaillaient le cerveau: faire la guerre à la mer, étrangler la mer, couper sa tête. (*LTA*, 234)

The emotions of aggression and eroticised violence are mixed. The sea has become a dual signifier for the potential source of pleasure (dead women) and the eroticised object itself. The sea is boundless, deathly and traditionally feminine.

The association of sea and woman as one is brought to fruition in the *acte pur* which Malreux commits in a drunken stupor. A prostitute throws herself at him and he kills her with his knife, commenting afterwards ‘ - Ben, quoi? J’ai tué la mer!’ (237). Murder becomes the significant motif linking Barnabas and Malreux. Barnabas, now ill and on his deathbed, will confess that the corpse in his cupboard is indeed his wife’s whom he has murdered and kept as an icon of remembrance. Malreux’s act of murder suggests a re-enactment in the present of Barnabas’s act in the past, linking the two even more strongly.

All women (living and dead) become confused for Malreux, as he is unsure whether the murdered prostitute was not in fact his little Bretonne. This suggests a crime which attempts to remove the possibility of further prolongation of desire for an unattainable object. The *true* unattainable object is never of course to be found in another individual, but the creation of a talismanic corpse allows for the absence of fulfilment to have symbolic form. That these murders are born of desperate over-reaching love is suggested by the words ‘nous avons tué chacun une femme que nous aimions, étant ivres, ou d’amour ou de vin’ (253). The murdered woman becomes the original object, because she is henceforth unchanging, unchangeable and may be re-evoked in subsequent incarnations.

The dénouement is both a demystification and a re-inscription of the desirous structures instated in the text. Malreux is given access to the locked cupboard in order to bring the favoured object of desire to the dying Barnabas. Having embraced his talismanic head, he dies and Malreux throws the head into the sea. Barnabas and Malreux are presented in the closing pages of the novel in a father-son dialectic. Oedipal structures can be read in the action described. The son gains access to the object of desire (the father’s love-object and therefore the son’s original lost object) and outlives patriarchal power. However, this is clearly a perverted version of

Freud's model of familial desire, as Rachilde's aetiology of desire has necrophilic murder replacing the classic sexual content of the Oedipus complex.

The symbol of the severed female head, along with the collapsing of femininity onto the figure of the sea, suggests the presence of a fatal mother, a Medusa figure who symbolises desire and death in one. Rachilde writes the masculine myth of the castrating woman into the text, but brings the question of death rather than that of castration to the surface. She achieves this by foregrounding repetitive images, ascribed to Malreux's unconscious, in which the notion of loss is given material form.

The overwhelming feelings of social and sexual alienation, which are associated with Malreux, are given ever more concrete form as the text moves towards its end. The lighthouse and the sea transmute from material realities into symbols of fragile male sexuality and an unattainable other which threatens to overwhelm it. The impossibility of 'strangling the sea' echoes the impossibility of achieving satiation in the stark emotional economy which Rachilde depicts. The ultimate objectifying trope is that of the dead body or dead part-object, which stands in for the nature of desire itself.

In *La Tour d'Amour*, Rachilde demonstrates how necrophilia is the perfect concept with which to explore desire. Her tale of the coming-of-age of a necrophilic consciousness provides a structure and image-base around which she weaves a convincing story of alienation and self-loss.

Vampirism as desire : *Le Grand Saigneur*

La Tour d'Amour represents, then, a unique high point in Rachilde's fiction. The fact that the setting is removed from the social or public sphere has allowed for the drama of individual consciousness and desire to take the privileged place. In *Le Grand Saigneur*, Rachilde will attempt to play out the dilemma of deathly desire in the social milieu of Parisian society once again.

Certain critics, including notably Janet Beizer,¹⁹⁰ have argued that Rachilde's

¹⁹⁰*Ventriloquial Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), pp. 227-60.

work, as typified by the relatively popular *Monsieur Vénus*, uses an inversion of gender stereotyping in order to show up more clearly the positions of power which make up social relations. These relations, with their usual gendered signification, are part of the traditional fabric of writing in a patriarchal discourse and may go unnoticed. Thus, for Beizer, if Rodolphe and Emma *vont au bois* to make love, this is a naturalised part of the realist novel tradition, ‘just’ a literary conceit which we expect to see. When Raoule and Jacques are shown doing this, however, we notice the class difference and the economic power imbalance precisely because the expected class-and-gender positions are inverted.

While this is a valuable reading of the social implications of Rachilde’s texts, it appears reductive to claim that this accounts for her whole project. Such a claim underplays the significance of Rachilde’s attempt to describe and re-formulate desire using a play with gender; and moreover, this is clearly not a tactic which Rachilde finds it necessary to pursue far into her career.

A reading of *Le Grand Saigneur* will reveal an emplotted constellation of gender and class relations which are quite at odds with what we have seen in *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Marquise de Sade*. As suggested by the pun in the title, with its emphasis on aristocratic privilege and blood-letting, the male protagonist, Yves de Pontcroix, is a sexually (sadistically) dominant figure. The female protagonist, Marie Faneau, is an artist, who, despite being a much more independent and well-rounded character than the rather effete Jacques, none the less progressively reveals desires towards de Pontcroix which can be read as highly masochistic and self-destructive.

The initial presentation of Marie and Yves contains elements of the gendered role-reversal that we have seen earlier in Rachilde’s work: Yves is sitting for a portrait which Marie is painting. The notion of the male as art object has already been discussed in my analysis of *Monsieur Vénus*, and again we see here the female in the role of autonomous creator. As an artist, Marie brings the same detached and professional approach to her work as we might expect of a male artist figuring in the literature of the period:

En ce moment elle ne voit plus rien que le portrait qu'elle achève. L'homme lui est absolument indifférent.¹⁹¹

It is through art that the first link is forged between the couple. Yves feels himself to be ugly until he sees his portrait – that is until he has recognition of himself as object through the eyes of another. The objectification of the male by Marie has transformative power: he is both excited by her and confused by this act of possession.

Marie is presented as someone for whom artistic work provides a foil for libidinal ambition. She is a woman who is unaffected by love and desire, despite having already had a lover:

L'amour? Il lui a laissé un triste souvenir! S'est-elle donnée ou l'a-t-on prise? Elle a chassé l'intrus de son cœur et de ses bras. Un jour elle a appris qu'il était mort. Une paix profonde s'est abbatue sur elle, non comme un deuil, mais comme une délivrance, et elle croit ne plus rien attendre en dehors des satisfactions que lui apporte son travail acharné. (*LGS*, 32)

Here, the unsatisfactory thing about sexuality lies in the realm of volition and agency; she is unsure whether she gave herself or was taken. Sexuality appears as something wholly ambiguous, whereas art, particularly portraiture, which is Marie's speciality, defines more clearly the roles of 'doer' and 'done-to', objectifier and objectified.

This theme of ambiguous desire is extended in the incestuous sibling bond which is implied between Marie and her brother Michel, who are orphans. Michel is a neurasthenic, neurotic and somewhat effeminate figure whose attachment to Marie is both anacletic and erotic. She is 'à la fois le trésor qu'il admire, veut conserver pour lui seul et le trésorier dont il a un incessant besoin'(29). Thus, in the first two chapters of the novel, Marie is presented as an agent in the traditionally male roles of artist and financial provider to her brother. This picture of her independence is slowly called into question as her relationship with Yves develops.

Yves de Pontcroix provides an antithesis to Michel's lukewarm presence and to the half-hearted ambivalence of Marie's first love affair. After his stormy exit from Marie's house, he attempts to woo her with gifts characterised by a heavily symbolic sombreness: red roses tied with a 'ruban noir', and pearls in a black box. Also, Michel will report to Marie that Pontcroix broke the arm of a lower-class girl 'à

¹⁹¹*Le Grand Saigneur* (Paris: Flammarion, 1922), p. 16. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and page numbers are given in the text following the abbreviation *LGS*.

l'Olympia' in an exhibition of ju-jitsu. The sexual violence and morbidity of Yves's persona are from the start presented in terms of ostentatious power and excess. As in *La Marquise de Sade*, the symbolic language of this novel, with its incessant focus on red and black, is certainly not subtle.

The description of the moment when Marie's desire for Yves is awoken deserves analysis. Consider:

Il y a toujours une heure où la fleur s'épanouit inconsciente, que ce soit au soleil de midi ou au soleil de minuit et le perce-neige aussi est une rose...
(LGS, 74)

The traditional flower imagery used to denote a young woman's sexual dawning is perhaps surprising in the context of Rachilde's usual more adventurous use of symbols. Previously, we have seen males (Jacques, Paul Richard and even Barnabas) likened to the symbols of delicate, doomed-to-fade beauty that are flowers. Here Marie is likened to a traditional image of womanliness – but I would suggest that this has less to do with her sex than with the role she will play in her sexual dialectic with Yves. Throughout her work, Rachilde manipulates the traditional associations of flowers – femininity, passivity, beauty – but they are no longer synonymous with the female sex. Rather, the metaphorical and symbolic presence of flowers indicates only the identity of *victim*. By now we are so used to Rachilde's deconstructive use and appropriation of such classic images and metaphors that we understand them to suggest only the desirous position involved, with sex being arbitrary. Marie's progressive assumption of the position of victim will be reinforced throughout the text by the numerous mentions of (red) flowers that Yves will send her.

Sadism, like art, is presented as an antidote to the irksome ambiguity which has previously characterised Marie's emotional relationships. The development of Marie and Yves's emotional *liaison* is described in terms which suggest a difference from 'normal' courtship but also a close parodying of it, a perverse or ironic paralleling. See for example the following incident:

Il lui baisa les mains, appuyant à peine, selon la formule, puis il garda ses poignets, un instant, en les serrant d'une manière intolérable. (LGS, 79-80)

The conventions of romantic love are called to our attention here. They are maintained and indeed explicitly referred to ('selon la formule'), but the undertones of violence and possession, always present beneath courtly love, are immediately visible

in a way that is almost humorous.

Yet, as well as demystifying existing conventions, Rachilde injects some of her own mystery into her presentation of this bizarre romance. Pontcroix's sadism is presented as something other than that of the ordinary libidinous male:

Je suis très violent... pas dans le mauvais sens du mot. Je suis incapable de vous offenser... à la manière des hommes ordinaires. (LGS, 80)

In place of the ambiguity of incestuous desire or of female equivocation in the face of sexual surrender, we have a different level of ambiguity: that of defining the manifestation of Yves's desire. Just what would it mean to be violent in a good way? Or to cause harm in the manner of an extraordinary man? The *points de suspension*, which we have seen many times in Rachilde's work suggesting mystery or the unsayable, are once again brought into service.

On one hand, it is clear that Yves and Marie represent complementary halves of a subtle-masochistic dialectic:

Votre douceur convient à ma violence et j'aime à rencontrer en vous un équilibre qui me manque, parce que ma force est inutile et que votre santé m'est nécessaire. (LGS, 84)

This would read as the formula for a perfect, if unconventional, marriage. Yet consider also the following declaration on Yves's part:

Vous me plaisez tellement que je cherche le mot qui doit vous faire comprendre ce que je ressens pour vous...mais un autre mot...que celui qu'on prononce toujours en pareille circonstance, ce mot qui ne signifie rien et qui a la prétension de résumer tout. (LGS, 84)

The question is raised: just what emotion and act would this ideal partnership lead to? A note of unfathomability is injected into the textual representations of love by Yves's hinting at an unnameable formula that would render them unified. The word 'love' is brought to our attention here by the very fact of its absence. In this expression it has only a negative value, an incapacity to signify in the language of Pontcroix's violent excess of desire.

Soon this game of inadequate signifiers and eloquent silences finds a voice in the replacement of the word 'amour' with another. Yves's proposal of marriage is enacted in the following, quirky formula:

En devenant mienne, ma femme légitime, comme je l'entends, désormais, vous ne risquez que la mort...Acceptez-vous? (LGS, 104)

At these surprising words, Marie has a strong reaction, almost fainting with shock:

‘cet homme n’avait donc pas de cœur qu’il remplaçait le mot *amour* par le mot *mort*?’(104). The literal lexical substitution of death for love here enacts an eruption at the textual surface of the underlying conceit in the treatment of desire. Yet, unlike a moment of Kristevan semiotic, this is disruption engineered consciously by the author who places the revealing word in the mouth of one of her characters to draw attention to her own writerly aims.

Consider:

Marie, je désire votre vie, votre sang, votre admirable santé, votre adorable beauté. (LGS, 105)

Sexual desire is de-metaphorised and revealed as the approach to death, but this is re-metaphorised as belonging locally to the genre of the vampire tale in the above quotation and in the pun in the title. Pontcroix proposes a consummation which clearly announces the subjection of her life-drive to his thanatomania.

In a moment of masochistic *petite mort* which is much less metaphorical than the traditional orgasm, Marie faints in a confused transport. This is firstly because Yves has squeezed her hands until they are blue, causing her to lose consciousness, and secondly because a transformation has been wrought in her desiring consciousness. This masochistic swoon represents a rebirth, through a state resembling death, into a new position of understanding.

On recovering consciousness, Marie is convinced of her emotional affinity with Yves:

– Oui, je veux être sa femme. Je le veux. Après tout ... je ne risque rien ... La mort, mais c’est une plaisanterie, la mort, en amour...(LGS, 108)

This represents a moment of transition. The two signifiers of ‘love’ and ‘death’ are linked for Marie, and the novel can now digress by examining ways of encoding and representing this associated idea. This is attempted through a discussion of the various strands of the vampire myth.

The idea of text-within-text is explored in chapters 6 and 7 of the novel. Chapter 6 narrates the evening of the engagement celebrations, in which story-telling plays an important role. Yves and his close friend, Dr Duhat, recount the legend of Pontcroix’s ancestral haunted tower:

Il s’agissait, je crois, d’une femme infidèle qui fut condamnée, par un de mes ancêtres, à mourir de faim. (LGS, 127)

The motifs of marital love, power and death are woven into the retelling of the legend, sounding a note of warning to Marie, perhaps, but also a note of gleeful irony on Rachilde's part. Note the libidinal nature of the details of the bride's demise at the fangs of her husband's vampire, who visits her tower in the form of a bird:

Les grandes ailes mouvantes, à grands coups d'éventail, bercèrent l'agonie de la belle condamnée pendant que l'amoureux bourreau, le bec enfoui dans sa poitrine, lui buvait le sang jusqu'au cœur. (LGS, 132)

The oxymoronic ideas of 'bercèrent l'agonie' and 'amoureux bourreau', mixing tenderness and brutality, are reminiscent of the language of Baudelaire. Moreover, the insertion of the vampire legend into the text, in the mouth of Yves, has the effect of articulating, through well-known allegorical means, a version of the desire which he wants to communicate to Marie. This also suggests to the contemporary French reader a link with the Gothic tradition and the vampire tale with which they are familiar, exemplified by the tales of Hoffmann and, of course, Gautier's 'La Morte amoureuse'.

Having introduced the figure of the vampire into the field of storytelling, Yves acts upon this idea in his goodnight kiss to Marie:

[Le] marquis de Pontcroix se pencha sur son cou; là, derrière l'oreille rose, sur cette chair fine comme les pétales des fleurs de la corbeille, il mit les lèvres et, sous le baiser brutal, odieux, le sang jaillit, deux gouttelettes pourpres de l'exacte nuance du rubis de la bague des fiançailles. (LGS, 136)

The heavy insistence on the link between pain and marriage, given in the simile above (where the engagement ring and blood are linked), suggests that *Le Grand Saigneur* could be a pastiche or critique of courtship and marriage. The husband-as-vampire is a seductive rhetorical figure for social critique, and indeed, we must not underplay the importance of this idea as a potential interpretation of the novel. Yet, we cannot ignore the fact that the element which is privileged throughout is that of *desire*, an insistence which goes beyond questions of social organisation to suggest that Rachilde's primary achievement is in sketching a textual map of the unequal positions of subjects in an erotic relation. Of course, having said this, the two readings are not mutually exclusive, and the fact that society organises desire around the institution of marriage means that an interpretation on this level may support or elucidate my own approach.

Michel's commentary on the bloody kiss draws together both of the threads

discussed above:

– Au revoir, marquis... de Sade! gronda Michel. (*LGS*, 137)

The linking of Yves with the archetypal aristocratic sadist, whose name had long since taken on the proportions of a legend, suggests both the corruption of social privilege and the immediate association of perverse desire and pathological cruelty. Moreover, it adds to the insistence upon intertextuality which characterises this central section of the novel.

The intertextual, inter-discursive play is foregrounded in the following chapter. Chapter 8 steps outside the story of Yves and Marie to present a history of the vampire legend and a pseudo-scientific treatment of it. It details local historical theories of the origin of the vampire (couplings between humans and animals, the restless corpses of those possessed of too large an appetite) and it places two authorities on the vampire side-by-side. Firstly, there are long passages from the work of Augustin Calmet (1672-1757), a theologian and expert on the occult, remembered for *Dissertations sur les apparitions des anges, des démons et des esprits et sur les revenants et vampires de Hongrie, de Bohème, de Moravie et de Silésie* (1750). Rachilde quotes his definition of this creature:

Mort qui sort de son tombeau, spécialement la nuit, pour tourmenter les vivants, le plus souvent en les suçant au cou et d'autres fois en leur serrant la gorge au point de les étouffer (*LGS*, 144).

Thus, Calmet supports the supernatural explanation of the vampire as found in the unscientific discourse of mythology and superstition. Secondly, Rachilde offers the following comment as a kind of demystifying afterword to the four pages of quotations from Calmet :

On a connu des malades, douées d'une imagination trop vive, qui, frappés par une violente commotion cérébrale, ne concevaient plus l'acte d'amour que sous l'empire de l'idée fixe de voir couler du sang et devenaient des *sadiques*, malgré leur propension à la plus romanesques des pudeurs. (*LGS*, 149)

Thus, two discourses on the vampire are contained in this central chapter, on one hand that of legend, incorporating theories of the supernatural, and on the other, that of contemporary Western science, as suggested by the terminology 'malades' and 'commotion cérébrale'. The pathologising and taxonomising prose of Krafft-Ebing is echoed here, replacing the supernatural being with the modern sexual pervert.

We may again be reminded of Dauphiné's assertion that Rachilde's works

should be read as ‘l’illustration littéraire de manuels de psychopathologie sexuelle’. Yet in their self-awareness, they are clearly more than just that. Here, Rachilde is explicitly playing with this idea, suggesting perhaps that the writer may sometimes take on the voice of the scientist and pass comment on her own creation.¹⁹² In the context of this isolated section of the work, this suggests a meta-text in which the primary artistic content of the novel and incorporated voice of ‘authority’ are held up as alternative fictions or alternative reading strategies. The perspective of medicine continues in the text in the voice of Dr Duhat who will later describe Yves as a ‘cas de clinique’(239) and talk of his condition in terms that clearly suggest psychosis: ‘Il n’était pas fou, seulement privé de sensibilité’(256). The salient point is that Rachilde is attempting to foreground not only phenomena of behaviour, encoded differently by myth and science, but a structure of reading which takes account of desire plotted through certain tropes and symbols.

These self-conscious central chapters interrupt the narrative sufficiently to make the reader doubly aware of the nature of what will follow. The explicit naming of the figure of the vampire allows for one articulation of the idea of desire and death. It gives us one possible reading of the context of perversion in this novel. Consider Marie’s words:

– Michel ! Je suis hantée par la plus atroce des idées. Ça ne s’analyse pas et tu peux me faire enfermer si tu veux... Je m’imagine... ça me tourmente la nuit, obstinément, parce que je ne dors plus, je m’imagine que cet homme *est mort*. (LGS, 153-4)

This passage can be elucidated by recourse to a particular psychoanalytic theory introduced by Ernest Jones, which I have already discussed in the context of Gautier’s prose (see pp. 76-80, above). In *On the Nightmare*, he speaks of vampires and ghosts as the phantasy manifestations of sexual desire on the part of the living, which are then projected onto the dead. In the purely Jonesian reading, Yves here figures as the projection of Marie’s thwarted Oedipal desires (we remember that Marie is an orphan) and her unsatisfied incestuous feelings for her brother Michel. In my present reading,

¹⁹²It should be noted that this technique of incorporating scientific and sociological discourses into the body of works of art is very much a part of the *fin-de-siècle* fashion. Other examples include: Flaubert’s *Bouvard et Pécuchet* (1881), which plays on the idea of the generic form of the *anatomy*, Zola’s *Rougon-Macquart* cycle (1871-93), which consistently personifies the voices of art and science, and Huysmans’s *Là-bas* (1891), which quotes extensively from the (fictional) biography of the paedophilic mass-murderer Gilles de Rais.

I would interpret this structure slightly differently, so that Yves acts in fact as the complimentary embodiment of Marie's masochistic and death-driven desires, which she deals with by projecting them outwards onto him.

The difficulty for Marie of expressing this desire, and the attendant conflict it suggests, are encapsulated in the fear and vacillation which accompany desire. Having sworn her undying love for him, Marie will then cry out in despair 'non, je ne l'aime pas. J'en ai peur'(155). Rachilde builds this ambivalence into the text as a constant conflict. This denial of desire is then immediately countered in the mouth of Michel :

C'est bien ça, Marianneau. L'amour sincère c'est la peur, car on n'aime que celui qui vous domine, vous jette à genoux sans même la possibilité d'imposer son désir...(*LGS*, 155)

Here Michel, previously presented as rather a thin, insubstantial character, a weak male version of Marie, is given these rather unlikely words to speak. This is problematic. On one level, we may read the incestuous brother-sister coupling as the two sides of Marie's desire/fear. Where previously she has desired Yves and Michel has warned her against him, here Marie is paralysed with fear and her 'other half' justifies her desire and fear.

The role of Michel is in fact a complex one. He will go on to announce to Yves that Marie will only marry him if the three of them may continue to live together. Yves appears to accept this strange arrangement: 'nous serons trois, la plus étrange des trinités passionnées' (196). As in *Monsieur Vénus* where Raittolbe was a figure to break the dialectic and to suggest sexual ambiguity, here Michel plays this role. In fact, de Pontcroix knows that the dialectic of 'doer' and 'done-to' of which his system of sexual connection consists, only has room for two, and he will kill Michel in a midnight car journey to his ancestral home in Brittany.

Yet the disruptive power of *le tiers* will persist after Michel's death in several ways, sounding an ongoing note of doubt and ambivalence. A note written by Michel, prior to his murder, is found by Marie. The note states that Yves intends to kill him. This voice from beyond the grave acts in two ways. Firstly it is a final (displaced) articulation of hidden desire. If Marie and Michel are identified with each other throughout, the threat of death from Yves touches them both with fear and desire. Secondly, it works to link Marie and Michel in a bond that prevents Yves from

possessing her totally. In death, Michel is even dearer to her.

However, it is after the death of Michel that Marie gets closer to articulating the end point of desire. She calls Yves ‘Yves mon cher bourreau’, in what can be read both as a literal identification with the dead Michel and as an articulation of desire for death. Rachilde emphasises the seemingly inevitable nature of the relation in her description of the reaction of Marie’s dog to the couple:

Fanette grondait; elle regardait cet homme qui tenait sa mère par la tête
comme on tient les agneaux dont on tend le cou pour pouvoir les mieux
égorger. (LGS, 232-3)

We are back to the abattoir imagery of *La Marquise de Sade*. It is noticeable that throughout Rachilde’s fiction, the same figures (blood, the executioner, the colour red) are used to evoke the nature of desire. This could be interpreted in two ways: either as a paucity of textual variation, or as a convincing writerly technique to suggest an obsessive vision of desire, repetitively being played out. The figure of the watching dog in the quotation above suggests another innocent onlooker, this time a non-human, so that the ghost of *le tiers* is still present, breaking and interpreting the union.

The relation of sadist and masochist which we have seen problematised by Rachilde’s presentation of Michel’s relation to Marie is complicated also on Yves’s side by a conflictual emotional response:

Ah ! Je ne veux pas vous faire du mal... ne me tentez pas! Tout l’amour ou rien! Ça ne me suffirait pas, votre amour à vous. C’est trop peu. (LGS, 233)

Here we see the rather confusing articulation of Yves’s desire to ‘go all the way’: ‘Tout l’amour ou rien’. Just what is Yves talking about? I would suggest that this ultimate manifestation of desire is neither sexual intercourse nor actual murder – it is some impossible annihilation which prolongs life within death – the sort of impossible act we have been chasing through the century’s literary production. The figure of vampirism is perhaps as close as one can get to representing this shadowy idea of a death-driven passion which allows for both the acting out of murder and the survival of the victim, so that the murder can be acted out again and again.

As before (when ‘la mort’ replaced ‘l’amour’ in Yves’s declaration, causing Marie to become dizzy), near-articulation of the essence of desire causes a moment of narrative disruption – this time Yves faints. Marie’s response is one of reciprocity

and confirmation of his desire: 'ma vie vous appartient' (235) and 'qu'est -ce que c'est donc que cet homme? Je veux bien y perdre la vie' (236).

We are presented in the text with two possible understandings of Yves de Pontcroix's position: he is an undead vampire coming of a long and noble race of vampires, or as Dr Duhat puts it, he is a *cas de clinique* because he fails to understand the social principle that 'l'amour, c'est ce qui donne la vie, ce n'est pas ce qui tue' (239). But our reading thus far authorises a third option which is that Marie and Yves are embodiments of a structural principle of desire. They represent a desire which wants more than it can achieve in corporeal sexual form, which takes the spark of a long-buried atavistic drive for destruction as its source, and which seeks out the beyond of absence in the realm of the other.

Consider Yves's words regarding the marital prescription, sexual intercourse:

Et cela, pour quelques secondes de plaisir vraiment inférieur dont je ne pourrais pas me contenter, moi, dont la puissance réside dans le cerveau, c'est-à-dire est illimitée (LGS, 239)

and later:

[M]on amour, à moi, est d'une essence un peu plus rare que celui des humains, parce qu'il ne finit pas. La satiété ne le menace pas. Il n'a pas le but ridicule de la procréation. (LGS, 270)

There is a strong tone of arrogance and superiority here. If we want to take a pathologising view of the character, we can read Yves as the exemplary pervert having found his 'preferable' resolution to the problematic of lack in desire. Sexual intercourse is unsatisfactory because it is terminable and because the union of the two is potentially interrupted by a child, a third term.

It has been noted that *the third* is a constant symbol of interruption and a break of the dialectic in *Le Grand Saigneur*. Where Michel played that role in life, now Marie's nostalgic incestuous love for him will stand between the couple in the complex dénouement of the work. At certain moments, the text has been concerned with de-metaphorising desire and re-encoding it according to genre or discourse. The difficulty of the dénouement lies in knowing where the metaphor and de-metaphorisation begin and end, and the rather confused presentation of desire which Rachilde gives us suggests perhaps the difficulty or undesirability for a writer of resolving the tensions she sets up in her own work.

As Marie and Pontcroix are driven to their honeymoon destination of the ancestral castle, the wedding night has become a dreaded object of mystery and fear for Marie. Death as a finite act has reached the surface of her consciousness and she wishes it as a non-libidinal climax to their union:

[N]e valait-il pas mieux être précipités tous dans n'importe quel ravin que s'échouer dans le ténébreux abîme de la nuit nuptiale. (LGS, 259)

The 's'échouer' is particularly striking. Marie has resolved that although she loves Yves she cannot come to terms with his murder of Michel. The implication, then, is that she cannot allow herself to be mastered by her desire for Yves and must put a stop to his plan to make them one forever in a union of undead eternity.

Once in the marital bedroom, the confusion regarding what may happen to cement this desire for and beyond death escalates. Yves proposes that he has the right to exchange the husband's traditional wedding night privilege for a consummation that would be more to his taste:

[J]e vous aime assez, moi, pour ne pas vous imposer mon amour qui ne ressemble pas tout à fait à *l'autre*, mais tout de même rendez-moi cette justice, c'est que j'ai le droit pour moi. Sang pour sang ! J'ai le plein pouvoir de l'époux qui reclame celui d'une virginité (LGS, 273)

Here deflowering is used as a metaphor for what he wants to do to her, in a bold reversal of the usual metaphorical equivalence which has death as a metaphor for sex.

A further sign that these last confused pages are Rachilde's attempt at erotic demystification may be seen in Marie's impassioned outburst:

– Vous me tuerez, Yves, je n'implore plus que cette dernière grâce de votre part. (LGS, 268)

Yet Yves will not kill Marie, and Marie will not give in to his passion for slow blood-letting. A sort of stalemate is reached. That, in some ways, the experiment with desire in the novel becomes a structural *impasse* is suggested by the final narrative event: Yves's suicide, after claiming that the note from Michel was written in order to blackmail him.

This ending is rather unexpected and unconvincing in an otherwise complex novel. Yves's suicide is a semantic puzzle. Read as a refusal to consummate the desire for death with another, it can be seen as an eternal deferral of desire. The final words of the novel, which are accorded to Dr Duhat, say as much:

– Si elle peut croire cela, et c'est possible, elle l'aimera toujours. Il vient de recréer *le vampire*. (LGS, 279)

By giving Duhat the last word, and by removing the conceit of Yves's supernatural vampiric immortality through his death, Rachilde comes down on the side of science, or rather of a rational explanation of desire. The image of creating a new vampire suggests a figure for ongoing, insatiable desire: Marie will not have him, nor will she have her death at his hands. This suggests, on a libidinal level, a vampire-like state of eternal unsatisfaction.

This reading of *Le Grand Saigneur* began by asking why Rachilde may have abandoned her early dialectic of sadistic woman and emasculated man in favour of a return to the apparently conventional gender stereotypes. On the one hand, we could read this as youthful proto-feminist zeal chastened by patriarchal social authority, to which the mature writer submits. Yet to accept this account would be to play down the subtle elements of resistance to any attempt to fix gender as meaning in both *Monsieur Vénus* and *Le Grand Saigneur*. The positions of 'doer' and 'done-to', however they are meted out, never lead to perfect satisfaction in the novels, and Pontcroix is just as incapable as Raoule of possessing the other in the chosen way. While Raoule resorts to a pseudo-necrophilic consummation of desire, Yves opts for self-immolation. Moreover, I would follow Dauphiné's analysis which subordinates the importance of social obstacles to the achievement of desire in the novels to that of personal obstacles made by the protagonists in their ambitious conceptions of desire ('ce n'est pas la société qui fait obstacle au bonheur mais la cérébralité des personnages'¹⁹³).

We can better understand Rachilde's project by reading the move from *Monsieur Vénus* to *Le Grand Saigneur* as a re-posing of the same questions of desire in different forms. The fact that she reworked these themes many times, over three quarters of a century, suggests that the task of defining and describing her vision of human desire within novel form was a challenging problem which she never fully solved. However, we can posit that *Monsieur Vénus* and *La Marquise de Sade* had successfully achieved their deconstruction of gender roles, so that by the time of writing *La Tour d'Amour* and *Le Grand Saigneur*, less obvious textual work on the

¹⁹³Dauphiné, *Rachilde*, p. 305.

level of gender presentation needed to be performed in order to show up the dialectic of death-driven desire at work.

4.3

Some Concluding Remarks

As I have shown through a comparative reading of two novels involving female predators, and two novels involving male predators, Rachilde demonstrates several salient points. Firstly she demonstrates, through literature, the principle that Lacan, Irigaray and others will go on to discuss half a century later: that gender, or a complementary structure of activity and passivity, is not a biological fact but a set of socially determined constructs. Secondly she redraws for us the archetypal literary figures of the *femme fatale* and the *homme fatal*. She recasts them as equal, and on some level interchangeable, by according economic power to Raoule de Vénérande, sensual weakness to Yves de Pontcroix and a homicidal appetite to Mary Barbe. What she demonstrates mainly is that both sexes are drawn to the fatal appeal they espy in otherness, whether this be manifest as the desire for destruction of the other (Raoule, Mary, Mathurin, Yves) or the desire for self-annihilation through the other (Jacques, Paul, Marie). In each case, Rachilde shows the desire for death at work in human coupling and more explicitly the desire for the roles of killer and victim.

Only in *La Tour d'Amour* is the passive desire of the other totally removed as, by the time we join his story, Mathurin Barnabas is in the position of possessing a dead other, rather than trying to create one. However we learn that his necrophilic career began with the murder of an unfaithful woman, putting him in a rather similar position to Raoule. *La Tour d'Amour* works backwards, in the manner of a whodunnit, setting up Barnabas's desire as a mystery to which Malreux (and the reader) must find the key, and in which Malreux and the reader are implicated. In this way, it is structured like the analysis of a patient, reconstructing, through fragments of memory and repetitive images in language, a founding myth, the original object of the perversion. It functions as a demonstration of the aetiology of desire, while the other novels I have studied work forwards towards a necrophilic resolution of individual desirous quests.

In each of the novels, Rachilde decries reproduction and renders sexual intercourse obsolete for the needs of her characters. Those who cling nostalgically to

an attachment to heterosexual coupling are punished: the Baron de Caumont is poisoned by Mary and slowly dies an agonising death haunted by satyrism, while Jean Le Malreux is deceived by successive women and ends by committing the murder of a prostitute.

One critic reads this violent rejection of reproductive sexuality as revealing Rachilde's problematic relation to the figure of the mother (both her mother and 'The Mother') and the fear of maternity.¹⁹⁴ Other, more traditional critics read it as a Decadent conceit, whereby representations of extreme perversion and the cult of aestheticism replace 'normal' passion in the interests of foregrounding 'artificiality'. In fact, I would say that Rachilde is transgressing the patriarchal order and the maternal imperative for reasons that are jointly political, aesthetic and emotional. She undertakes emotional revolt through her characters in order to throw a new light on the dilemma of desire that we have seen throughout the century. If, for Mary Barbe, *aimer c'est souffrir*, then in Rachilde's desirous universe, *mourir c'est jouir*. Her novels are peopled by tortured subjects who long for the ultimate and impossible pleasure of possessing or being possessed absolutely. They refuse to be satisfied with the 'quelques secondes de plaisir vraiment inférieur' (LGS, 239) of genital sex, that all-pervasive metaphor, the mythic source of personal happiness and social stability.

My aim throughout has not been to make exaggerated claims for the literary depth and richness of Rachilde's texts, nor to place her alongside Baudelaire as a canonical European writer. Rather, I have been suggesting that the complexity of Rachilde's works can be appreciated when we read her through the lens of the necrophilic imagination. One theory to account for Rachilde's cold critical reception until recently is that in order to extract what is particularly complex from her work, we need a paradigm of reading that can interact with her own agenda as a writer. Whilst previously, I have read the whole of Gautier's production and parts of Baudelaire's non-fictional writing against the grain of their own artistic claims and stated agendas, in the case of Rachilde, a careful look at her production on its own

¹⁹⁴Maryline Lukacher, *Maternal Fictions: Stendhal, Sand, Rachilde and Bataille* (London: Duke University Press, 1994).

literal terms is particularly profitable. Psychoanalytic criticism, and such contemporary critical currents as gender and queer theory, are the conceptual tools that can best be pressed into service here. Research still needs to be done on the experimental treatment of gender by decadent writers, particularly Rachilde, as precursors of the sort of deconstructive theories of sexuality popularised in the 1970s.

My present analysis of the necrophilic imagination in literature contributes to the sort of work I have hinted at above. It is, I hope to have shown, the key with which we can unlock much of what is most daring and rich in Rachilde's work.

Conclusion

L'étrange mot d'urbanisme, qu'il vienne d'un pape Urbain ou de la Ville, il ne se préoccupera peut-être plus des morts. Les vivants se débarrasseront des cadavres, sournoisement ou non, comme on se défait d'une pensée honteuse. En les expédiant au four crématoire, le monde urbanisé se défera d'un grand secours théâtral, et peut-être du théâtre. À la place du cimetière, centre – peut-être excentrée – de la ville, vous aurez des columbariums, avec cheminée, sans cheminée, avec ou sans fumée, et les morts, calcinés comme des petits pains calcinés, serviront d'engrais pour les kolkhozes ou les kibboutzim, assez loin de la ville.

Jean Genet¹⁹⁵

As Jean Genet points out in this comment on the semiotics of topography, it is often the way that human beings contrive to relegate whatever is central to them to the very limits of their perception. The difficult relationship between the human being and death is not allowed to occupy centre-stage in our consciousness or in our social space, so that, in building crematoria on the edge of town, we are pushing away the thought of our impending mortality and its intimate hold on us. It is because this relationship is so important and so problematic, so shot through with unfathomable emotions, that we have pushed it away and find it hard to discuss.

Necrophilia is perhaps even more difficult for us to imagine and to situate, as it lies so far out on the peripheries of emotional existence and remains a strong taboo. This thesis has examined the presence and treatment of the necrophilic imagination in a group of French texts, not as an aberrant or incidental motif, but as the central image and structural pivot of literary composition. Under the lens of necrophilia, the textual material has yielded answers to various psychoanalytically-informed questions that have only rarely been asked before.

Reading psychoanalytic theory and literary production together has brought to light certain characteristics of human desire which are exemplified in the figure of necrophilia. Firstly, there is the feature of human consciousness discussed by psychoanalysis, which is the apparent inherent difficulty for the human subject of conceiving of death, particularly their own. Secondly, there is that famous quality of desire, discussed by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and embodied in

¹⁹⁵ 'L'Étrange mot d'...' *Tel Quel*, 30, Été 1967, 3-11, p. 3.

different ways in all of the texts under discussion, that is the awareness of insatiability, lack and excess at the heart of desire.

In the figure of necrophilia, the notion of death – through the jointly material and ideational symbol of death that is the corpse – is made conscious as an object of desire. Necrophilia is a radical perversion, not because it is so aberrant or so rare, but because as a figure, it gets right to the heart of the structure of human desire. Necrophilia is the only sexual perversion which concretises the idea of excess and absence, and which so obviously moves the object of desire beyond desire, and the subject of desire outside of the field of potential satiation. It makes literal the desirous relation to death which so many theorists and philosophers have posed as a central characteristic of human subjectivity. It is perhaps in art, whose task is the symbolisation of human dilemmas, rather than in the clinical case study or the theoretical text, that the concept of necrophilia demonstrates most fully its qualities of structural paradigm. Bearing this in mind, I have taken a specific extreme example of sexual desire to provide a lens through which the processes of desire *tout court* become visible in the writing of a specific period and culture.

Implications for aesthetics

As I have already said, it would be preposterous to assert that the presence of necrophilic subject matter in writing is in itself some sort of gauge of textual complexity and quality. I am similarly cautious of making any grand claim along the lines that there is some intrinsic *a priori* link between death-driven desire and the production of literature. However, from the readings undertaken in the thesis, it appears true that certain structures of psychological desire and certain aesthetic techniques are in some ways closely aligned or operating in a relation that is mimetic.

In Gautier's prose fiction and verse, and Baudelaire's verse and critical prose, the same libidinal economy has been shown to be at work, although operating differently within the strictures of different generic conventions. The power of desire-driven art lies in this very mutability, this chameleon-like quality, which, nonetheless, pursues a consistent aim. This relationship of complementary movement and fixity within the operation of desire, is translated on the textual level by the many

paradoxical and dialectic couples of immobility and mobility, death and desire, which feature in the texts. Baudelaire's art criticism and literary criticism were discussed above as an interface between the expression of desire and the discussion of aesthetics. Certain of the wider implications of this idea can be developed.

What, then, is the insight into aesthetics and the process of writing to be taken away from a reading of this necrophilic literature? It seems to be a deeper and nuanced understanding of the principles set up by Baudelaire and earlier aesthetes, that is the notion of artistic transformation. The idea of transformation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is often linked to desire: gods had to transform themselves into beasts or other forms in order to consummate their desire, and, conversely, those guilty of too much, or inappropriate desire, were subject to a change of form and being. Thus, the trope of desirous transformation has a redolent classical history.

In the texts under study, transformation has been seen on many different levels. Gautier's *contes fantastiques* play with this traditional Ovidian notion of beings changing form in order to achieve sexual pleasure. But the legacy of the Gothic, and the specific angle of the necrophilic aesthetic, are visible in Gautier. This means that these transformations take place on the very threshold between life and death, and the forms created are often supernatural figures such as the vampire, which carry a complex set of associations of death, eternity and uncreation. The notion of transforming life into death, and vice versa, for libidinal pleasure, is explored in such poems as 'Impéria' and 'Lacenaire' where imaginative transformation creates scenarios of desire around inanimate poetic objects, before fixing them again.

In an extension of his conscious project of transforming mud into gold, Baudelaire is a libidinal alchemist throughout his production. Poems such as 'À une Madone' and 'Une martyre' reveal a poetic play of fluidity and fixity, intimately interwoven with images of murder and destruction. His art criticism performs transformative elevation of the work of others by appropriating and fixing the object in Baudelairean interpretation. These dramas are mapped onto verse and prose which mirror the psychical structures of necrophilic fixing and possessing.

An analysis of Rachilde's novels showed that textual games to do with transforming gender and gender-meaning are ultimately in the service of abolishing

such differences and showing up a dialectic of destruction. The conscious project of recasting social positions reveals an underlying writerly desire to produce genderless texts, which are elaborate maps of various manifestations of necrophilic desire.

At the level of writerly work, then, it is clear in each case that the trope of transformation works as a device for suggesting artistic or imaginative innovation. Yet the presence of perverse thematic material suggests that the transformation at work in each case runs much deeper than the level of the textual surface. Freud talks of transformation of the sexual instinct as the key to understanding perversion.

It is perhaps in connection precisely with the most repulsive perversions that the mental factor must be regarded as playing its largest part in the transformation of sexual instinct [...] [I]n their case a piece of mental work has been performed which [...] is the equivalent of an idealisation of the instinct. The omnipotence of love is perhaps never more strongly proved than in such aberrations as these. (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1), SE VII, 162)

This same extract was quoted to support my reading of a passage from 'La Morte amoureuse' which described a change of emotional response from repulsion to attraction (see above, p. 91). Freud's words could be used to explain the very process by which rebarbative material becomes art. When an artist chooses to work with a particular type of material that appears initially disturbing or disgusting, s/he is entering into a conscious project of idealising transformation. As an artist, concerned with beauty, any treatment of the subject, however, 'realistic' or mimetic it may attempt to be, will always involve the search for the most apt (therefore beautiful) means of representation. We have noticed time and again how the writers in question posit fixity and deathliness as the most beautiful sort of transforming gesture they can make to their objects. Artistic or textual, as well as mental, work will idealise the subject matter and make the representation as beautiful as possible. This may be one understanding of what is meant by the notion of artistic transformation.

However, such a one-way process of transformation, in the direction of unequivocal beauty, is not wholly consistent with the necrophilic texts discussed. In the case of 'Une martyre', beauty comes in the perfect mapping of subject matter onto form, but reading this poem is not a 'pleasant' experience, and the *jouissance* it produces is as much an experience of shock as one of aesthetic satisfaction. More precisely, it is a reaction of shock at the seductive means by which the scenario is

embodied in language, even as an element of disgust or distaste lingers. Just as Freud's theory of the death drive adds a complexity and piquancy to the view of sexuality explored in the early essays, so the notion of death drive as writerly practice – or an excess of the desire to represent beyond what is beautiful – can be seen to characterise the necrophilic aesthetic.

The aestheticisation of the dead relics, corpses and acts of murder, then, is equal to a re-casting of transformative myths of desire in forms designed to shock, disturb, and please simultaneously. The aggravations of disgust, putrescence and obscenity are actively sought, and are caught within a delicate relation between sublation into 'high art' and the maintaining of their ability to disturb. The textual pervert is playfully prurient. The technique of recasting myths on various levels is prominent textual game. In Baudelaire's case, the myth of a Christ-figure is re-written in poems evoking sexualised female sacrifices, and in Rachilde's case, the vampire myth is up-dated and used as a figure for a story of death-driven perversion. What is done thematically in terms of transformative work is symptomatic of what happens at the level of structure also. I have shown, particularly in my discussion of Baudelaire and Rachilde, how the desire leading to the threat of castration is systematically removed and the desire/threat of death at the hands of another put in its place. Thus, a central Freudian myth is rewritten, and an alternative founding myth has the ultimate self-loss of death as its original object.

If a theory of aesthetics is capable of presenting a mirror to the psyche, as we assume a work of art to be, this cannot operate only on the level of an individual writer's subjectivity. Such a relation may be heavily historically dependent and may reveal insights into a local group. For a particular set of aesthetic theories (such as the deceptively libidinal *L'Art pour l'Art* or the notion of Baudelairean transformation) to be adhered to at a particular moment in literary history, a mass concern or shared cultural phenomenon must be revealed. Art and literature clearly do not inhabit a pure, non-social realm, even when the credo of the time (for example Parnassianism) states that they should. Theory-making about art is one of the principal tools that a culture has for interpreting and suggesting meaning. It makes sense to assume that the models of meaning a society or group applies to art and other cultural production

relate in some way to the internal perception and understanding the society or group has of itself. I proposed in my section on Baudelaire that his critical writing was part of a continuum of narcissistic, death-driven production, rather than an aloof and objective assessment. Here, I am suggesting that aesthetic theory may always be narcissistic or, as a Lacanian would have it, characterised by an Imaginary relation (one of projective identification in which the world is understood by reference to the self). In the case of these writers, the fashion for dead objects is anything but coincidental and betrays method or process as much as a choice of subject matter.

Frenetic Romanticism and Decadence, then, for example, must be at least partly determined in their form and content by the Imaginary of their time. The nineteenth-century fashion for necrophilia is part of the crisis of subjectivity and the rise of interest in the desiring individual that characterise the burgeoning modern moment. A set of varied ingredients peculiar to the nineteenth century, such as the fashion for taxonomy and sexology, social reform, and the growing emancipation of women, all mean that nineteenth-century necrophilia is a very particular package, shaped and constituted by these factors, yet capable of contributing to a larger picture. As well as telling us something about the collective fears and desires of an epoch, nineteenth-century literary necrophilia may provide insights into questions of theoretical model building and the perception of sexual subjecthood.

Implications for theoretical model-building

Literary language and form may offer more immediate models of the very structures described by psychoanalysis. A well-known example of this is the analogy between the psychical processes at work in dreams (condensation, displacement etc.) and their inherent manifestation in the texture of literature's metaphorical and figurative constructions. Whilst the relevant aspects of dreamwork are fairly well defined and illustrated by Freud, however, psychoanalysis has been shown to deal with necrophilia in a confused and incomplete way. Much is said that seems to relate to this manifestation of desire but the thing itself is never named. Terms like 'identification', 'projection', 'introjection' etc. can complicate rather than elucidate, as they show up the nexus of contradictions, impasses and difficulties faced by those

attempting formulation. Moreover, they often seem an inadequate response to the emotional and experiential content of desire. In the case of necrophilia, then, literary readings can be seen to perform some new explicatory work.

My corpus of texts has revealed many instances of the interchangeability of the desirous object and the subject. This is seen in Gautier's linking of a dead hand with his own poetic task; in Baudelaire's desire to be both the 'couteau' and the 'plaie'; and in Rachilde's presentation of *La Tour d'Amour*, where individual identity slowly collapses in the face of an overwhelming structure of desire, emplotted in the figure of the lighthouse and the sea.

These images of boundaries breaking down may be read psychoanalytically as the desire for identification on the part of the artistic subject with the object s/he describes, or else as a projection by the artistic subject onto the object of some quality, emotion or intention which s/he her/himself feels. In discussing the theory and clinical material relating to necrophilia in Chapter Two, it was brought to our attention that in such an economy of desire, a similar complex inter-relation of projective and identificatory techniques is at work.

In sadomasochism, a feature of the structural play is the suspension at psychical level of absolute possession of the role of 'doer' or 'done-to'. The masochist identifies with the power exercised by the sadist and receives, as it were, *jouissance* by proxy, through a displaced sadism of her or his own. The sadist enjoys the powerlessness of the victim, and vicariously fantasises that she or he is in the other's position. Freud has told us that masochism or myself-as-my-object, is the primary mode of pre-linguistic desire. Similarly, in the case of necrophilia, we have seen a narcissistic interest in the projective phantasy of self as corpse-object (as in *La Tour d'Amour*, in which Barnabas wears the relics of his dead conquests, in a fantasy adoption of their identities).

Thus, the object (the described death or dead body, and the text itself) allows for a reflection of what the subject may on some level desire *to be and to have* simultaneously. If the object of writing/art is stilled, deadened, then the perverse analogy is closer to necrophilia than to sadomasochism. Moreover, I have explored, through psychoanalysis, and through Baudelaire's formulations of intersubjectivity,

how the original and radical aim of death-driven perversion would be self-annihilation, that is, literally, to be murdered rather than to murder.

Experiments with identity and subjectivity are very much a part of the conscious artistic and theoretical project of the nineteenth century, as witnessed by such phenomena as the rise of clinic-based psychology and Hegel's phenomenology. The relations of object and subject on which I have focused throughout this thesis may be understood in terms of a treatment of Hegel's concept of the master-slave dialectic. In the texts under discussion, we have seen time and again how an approach to representing intersubjectivity has led to a radical negation of the other within the terms of the murderous dynamic of the necrophilic aesthetic.

Writing is famously about the boundaries between self and other. The writer enters into the spirit of otherness empathetically, in order to create an object that is not himself, yet endowed with artistic and libidinal investment. Yet this entering into the field of otherness can be a threatening and fearful pursuit, for it is there that our encounter with the ultimate strangeness, the ultimate uncanny that is death may be located. The failure of the dualistic possibilities of the dialectic are seen in the neurotic writing of such figures as Baudelaire, for whom, as my chapter attempted to explore, the world he perceives is wholly of the order of the Imaginary, coloured by perceptions of self. Sexual intercourse, the embodied figure for entering into otherness, is banned from Baudelaire's agenda ('Foutre, c'est aspirer à entrer dans un autre, et l'artiste ne sort jamais de lui-même'. *Mon cœur mis à nu*, [702]).

This artistic fear of self-loss, coupled with the period's fashion for morbidity, leads to texts in which the dilemma of otherness is played out repeatedly in the textual figure of sublimated or actualised murder (artistic stilling) and in the pleasurable contemplation of the created object, the corpse (corpus).

To enter into someone else's subjectivity, to become the other, a state which Baudelaire eroticises and fears, would mean self-loss which is both the longed-for erotic annihilation and the fearful encounter with the abyss. In writing, the creator is never a passive object, but a controller, a wordsmith, an agent, a doer. We may argue that the purpose of the scenarios she or he creates is to open a space in which she or he can experience (from a meta-position of controlling authority) the pleasure of both

positions – creator of a desired object, and, through that same process of identification with the text, the undone object of desire.

The question of gender is raised by this discussion of power. Socially-given gendered power positioning, as well as stereotypes regarding male aggression and female passivity, mean that more often than not, men are figured as violent agents and their victims as women. This is borne out by statistical reality: for as long as the phenomenon of mass-murder has been explicitly constructed as a social phenomenon (significantly since the nineteenth century with Jack the Ripper), the figure of the perpetrator in reality and fiction has been classically male. Cameron and Frazer (1987) argue that this is because sexual intercourse, with its clear biological poles of penetrator and recipient, is the paradigm upon which all socially-encoded models of desire, however perverse, are based. For them, murder and necrophilia are exaggerated manifestations of ‘ordinary’ masculinity in a continuum of desire. A classical Freudian reading that has fetishism (in which some other object replaces the missing phallus) as the archetypal perversion would support such a reading.

Although I have sketched throughout this thesis the skeletal model for an aetiology of desire which locates primary and genderless auto-destructive urges as the original dynamic of desire, it is clear that their socially-acceptable adult incarnation, sexual difference and intercourse, attribute meanings to male-ness and female-ness. Although we may deconstruct these meanings, it is difficult to think outside them, as they are an intrinsic part of our social conditioning and form the basis of our understanding of identity.

Nineteenth-century literature, particularly in France, is replete with examples which examine and challenge these understood polarities. This can be seen in Balzac’s tale of gender confusion, ‘Sarrasine’, which undermines the notion of phallic power by making the castrated male the object of desire. This tale could almost be a Lacanian parable *avant la lettre*, as the object of desire is a man whom the protagonist takes to be a woman. Yet he is a man who is robbed of the very thing which makes him desirable (the phallus). He is displaced from his link in the signifying chain, always-already pregnant with absence and loss. Similarly, the figure of the androgyne is a favourite in nineteenth-century literature. Gautier’s poem ‘Contralto’ plays

succinctly on the suspension of absolutes that is the essence of the not-man, not-woman:

On voit dans le musée antique,
Sur un lit de marbre sculpté
Une statue énigmatique
D'une inquiétante beauté.

Est-ce un jeune homme? est-ce une femme,
Une déesse, ou bien un dieu?
L'amour, ayant peur d'être infâme,
Hésite et suspend son aveu. (*Œuvres complètes*, vol ii, 31)

This suspension of two absolute polarised realms (male and female) is equivalent to that other suspension we have seen in Gautier – that of life and death. The division of gender, and that of life and death, are both arbitrary complications in the field of *originally undifferentiated* desire, which becomes alterity.

It is only to be expected in the climate which produced these accounts of gender disturbance and confusion that a radical upheaval of accepted norms was taking place. We have seen how Rachilde undermines the notion that agents are always male while victims are always female. In four of her configurations of domination, gender-interchangeable structures of power imbalance have been delineated as the mode of desire. The ultimate pleasure is in each case figured as inter-subjective death visited by one upon the other.

In literature, social theory and the reality of crime reports, we have evidence that males sublimate their primary auto-destructive desire into active channels (predatory sexuality, intercourse, rape, murder), while women presumably identify erotically with the readily-available representations of themselves as victims, and celebrate a passivity or masochism as their medium for such desires. Yet if we accept that both sexes are starting from the same position of desire – a death-driven relation to self – we see that the difference is an arbitrary and culturally determined one. In the nineteenth-century French fashion for necrophilic and murderous writing, there is more room than we may at first think for the positions to be interchangeable. Baudelaire fantasises identificatory annihilatory power in front of the Madonna and the martyr, but also desires his undoing at the hands of a female other in 'L'Héautontomoromenos' and 'L'Idéal'. Rachilde shows Mary Barbe and Raoule de Vénérande as female versions of the traditionally male destructive and dominant agent, while elsewhere, in *La Tour d'Amour* and *Le Grand Saigneur*, she maintains

the expected gender of such characters.

On one hand, a focus upon the death-seeking nature of desire, and particularly upon the death-giving nature of intersubjective desire, may seem a morbid, disturbing or negative current in human subjectivity and in the creative act. Indeed, in his *Death Desire and Loss in Western culture*, Jonathan Dollimore concludes by attempting to distinguish a paradigm for desire, located in gay writing, which would steer away from the destructive, lack-propelled model that has clouded Western thought. Yet I would like to propose that an understanding of human desire which takes into account our attraction towards destruction can in some ways be a liberating understanding.

Murder as a radical literary figure for the desiring relationship of the one to the other has several advantages over the more usual symbol of sexual intercourse. Firstly, as a purely structural entity, it has enormous potential for gender equality, indeed for overcoming difference. Someone of either sex can kill and someone of either sex can die. Without in any way wishing to downplay the important work done by feminist scholars such as Cameron and Frazer on the pernicious social effects of a sexuality defined by aggressivity, I would like for a moment to recuperate such a model at a philosophical level. Read in this way, these texts are effecting a pure translation of the structure of desire. Desire is about a disturbed relation to difference: it is the wish both to maintain and overcome, reify and eradicate otherness. In the figure of murder, difference is achieved as a result of desire – the corpse is the marker of desire's (partial) success. The necrophilic impulse – the radical wanting-to-be and wanting-to-have of the corpse, the created object (and similarly of the text, the fixed object born of writerly desire and sacrifice) – is what determines that desire continues beyond death, that it runs on eternally and insatiably. Death is a liminal, paradoxical figure. It is both final and infinite, fixed and ever-changing in its progression towards decay, putrefaction and disappearance.

The problem comes in the way in which society symbolises murderous desire. Cultural images of dead and violated females reinforce the social and sexual domination of women by men in a patriarchal order. Feminist studies of this problem have done important work in drawing attention to covert and more obvious forms of oppression in artistic images and representations of women, and I would not want to

claim that such studies no longer had a place or to undermine their value. If my current reading of nineteenth-century French necrophilia has been at all successful, it should point towards a possible recuperation of these images. But this recuperation can only be possible in the light of the work first done by feminists.

Navigating the self by relation the other is the task of human life, according to Hegel, and in a special way, it is the task of the artist. Freud, Lacan, Laplanche, and others have pointed to an understanding of primary desire that is caught up in an early relation to absence and loss. One way of acting upon the residual desirous phantoms of unconscious death drive is to produce affective, libidinally-invested images of dead others. (In our society, it happens that the other has historically been female. This is changing all the time as representations like those by Rachilde show). With this understanding, such representations of women as Baudelaire's Martyr and Madonna can be loosened from their purely misogynist context, and relocated within the *human* map of desire alongside Jacques Silvert. But, of course, to allow this to be possible, revisionist reading agendas incorporating the writing of such ignored women as Rachilde are necessary. This is perhaps, the most urgent and immediate ongoing task of contemporary feminist literary critics.

Aftermath

My thesis has made several temporal leaps and bridges in its progress through the literary nineteenth century. Starting with the epoch of sexology and the birth of psychoanalysis around 1900, it has worked backwards, to take into account literary precursors almost a century before, and then meandered on a literary tour through the century, towards the decadent *fin de siècle*. Part of my aim in choosing texts that spanned the century was to allow me to demonstrate staging points along a continuum, thus obviating the need to produce an exhaustive survey. Now, in the last few pages of the conclusion, it is time to look very briefly beyond the purviews of the nineteenth-century imagination towards the twentieth, in order to see where questions raised by the thesis remain pertinent. And, even more briefly, I will turn to the question of the possible futurity of such concepts as I have discussed and such theoretical examinations as I have undertaken.

Throughout this investigation, the historical dimension of psychoanalysis as a late-nineteenth-century discourse has played a role. While I have charted parallels between the morbidity that is a facet of the nineteenth-century imagination and the interest in death that is central to late Freudian psychoanalysis, it is also true to say that after Freud, death retains its important role for psychoanalytic thinkers. This is evident in such studies of Freud's work as Laplanche's *Vie et mort en psychanalyse*. It is also seen in Melanie Klein's foregrounding of aggression as a primary instinct and her insistence upon the literal murderousness of childhood drives. It is equally, though in a different form, central to the structural project of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which deals with the stuff of literature – language, gaps, presence and absence, and develops the model of death-drive as central to the processes of desiring.

While conspicuously not referring in detail to works by Lacan, the reading approach taken in this thesis has doubtless been influenced by a Lacanian critical awareness. Freud alone was studied as a major psychoanalytic thinker, firstly in order to keep the corpus of theoretical material tractable, and secondly to make clear the historical proximity of the art and theory in question. As an afterthought, I would add that Lacanian psychoanalysis is maybe closer to necrophilic substance than that of Freud, because it illustrates how both language and desire are dependant upon absence, radically figured as death. One thing shown in this thesis is the way in which the rhetoric of writing can be read to betray positions of desire, from the prurient sexologists and psychoanalysts, through artistic and literary criticism, to literature itself. When theory sets out to describe, debunk or explain away desire, its logic provides the blinkers to its own desire and desire becomes its blind-spot. In the light of this, there is much potential for reading the Lacanian theoretical project against itself as an elaborate phantasy of the necrophilic imagination. Such research would constitute a rich theoretical research project.

As psychoanalysis stands, very precariously poised on the brink of a new century, it is worth considering the possible futures of this discourse and the question of its enduring relevance as a set of tools for interpretation and meaning-giving. One aim of this thesis has been to illustrate the sort of project in which psychoanalytic

readings still have pertinence and use. Psychobiography or pathography, and certain types of psychocriticism that read characters in books straightforwardly as analytic case studies, may well have had their day. Feminist theory, gender theory and post-modern and deconstructive models of reading often succeed in making a traditional psychoanalytic theory of art and the subject appear very archaic indeed.

However, I can think of no other paradigm of critical reading which is so capable of engaging with the question of desire as Freudian and Lacanian-inspired models. The mistake would be to use psychoanalysis as dogma and apply it to literature or other texts as a sort of skeleton key. A valuable critical method should problematise psychoanalysis as a theoretical tool, and cautiously make use of the best of its concepts, those which demonstrate particular rigour, by reading them against particularly tricky or difficult phenomena in literature. The analysis of the necrophilic imagination in a particular collection of works that I have undertaken is one example of a project which takes literature and psychoanalysis as equally interesting and mutually illuminating sources of experience, theory and desire.

In attempting a discussion of the aftermath of the nineteenth-century trend for necrophilia, one may ask oneself to what extent such phenomena are still relevant to our perception of self-hood today. As the introduction set out to demonstrate, death and desire have always been and remain intimately linked in representational art forms. Today, these range from the lifelessness of virtual eroticism and cyborg sex to the cult of the serial killer in art and film.¹⁹⁶

Moreover, debates about the nature of desire are still as passionately fought out today as they were one hundred years ago, although the various psychological models of the nineteenth century have been largely eclipsed today by genetics on one hand and identity politics on the other.

Yet, however advanced and scientific our perception of ourselves as biological and social beings may become, there are still elements of our collective and individual psyches that remain dark, irrational and disturbing. The issues raised in the literature discussed in this thesis have not gone away. Indeed, they remain a central part of

¹⁹⁶For a recent collection of essays on such themes as cinematic gay mass murderers, David Cronenberg's film *Crash* and cyborg sex, see *The Body's Perilous Pleasures*, ed. Michele Aaron (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

modernity's ongoing process of reflection upon itself, even if couched in different guises. Just as psychoanalysis, if handled with sufficient critical distance and sensitivity to other models of subjectivity, still provides a useful theoretical framework, so necrophilia may have some enduring relevance as a paradigm for modern writing and thinking.

Whilst I would not claim that the literature of the period I have looked at is in any way a point of origin for such production in subsequent epochs, the methodology deployed in the present study provides a model for examining such production in other authors, periods and contexts. Moreover, comparative studies of such phenomena may prove useful. For example, parallels can be drawn between the crisis of degeneration faced at the end of the previous century in Europe, and the current *malaise* occasioned by fear of the millennium bug, the fashionable idea that the nuclear family is in danger of dissolution, and a sense of post-modern fragmentation and loss of identity.

Perhaps a study such as this one, which looks at precedents of such fears and obsessions through a particular lens, here the necrophilic, can serve as a moveable paradigm for a certain type of reading. This would be a reading which casts light on the mainstream from the perspective of the marginal and draws principles about the norm from an intimate study of the extreme.

Afterword

It seems self-evident, yet none the less important, to add here as an afterword to the previous two hundred pages of unrelenting accounts of the necrophiliac imagination, that I would not want to claim my reading of these texts as the only useful revisionist reading of desire in the French nineteenth century. The conflict of life-force and death-force has always appeared to me an incredibly seductive model for understanding the tension and excess that seems to characterise desire, and more particularly desire in writing, epitomised by the textual flamboyance of a Baudelairean murder poem. Lacan's model of desire as all that is 'paradoxal, déviant,

erratique, excentré, voire scandaleux’,¹⁹⁷ as distinct from the more banal and satiable ‘need’, has always appeared to me the ‘truest’ description of desire as it is portrayed by the great extremists of our literary history.

I have complained of those who would write necrophilia out of the history of the literary and erotic imagination by systematically ignoring its presence. Yet it would be just as naïve and one-sided of me to assert that there is no ‘happy’ sexuality anywhere in the texts, that the primariness of pleasure, such as a Deleuzian model of sexuality may yield, is not an equally valid model for reading the creative spring of such production. *La petite mort* may well remain *petite* sometimes, and lovers may well survive the throes of their passion, make children, and go on to be content.

Equally, the association made in this thesis between currents of social pessimism in nineteenth-century France and the morbid sexual production of Gautier, Baudelaire and Rachilde is just one set of connections that can be made from such rich and multivalent sources. A concentration on the material, rather than the erotic, content of pessimism and morbidity in the same and neighbouring texts, could have shone light upon equally interesting aspects of the century’s literary preoccupations, such as social discontent and economic deprivation.

My aim throughout these readings has been to act as an archaeologist of the modern imagination by opening the coffin lid on the taboo of the eroticised corpse and of death-driven desire in a selection of literary texts. The lid should now remain open, allowing readers and subsequent writers to glance either down to the dark depths within, or up to the horizon of possibilities above, or else to fix their gaze somewhere between the two, rejecting the dyadic structure of either-or. The most important thing, when all is said and done, is simply that the lid should not have stayed closed and the contents gone unexplored.

¹⁹⁷Jacques Lacan, ‘La signification du phallus’ in *Écrits* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), p. 690.

Appendix

La Madeleine dans le désert, Eugène Delacroix (1845)



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