Queer Idiosyncrasies:
Description and Deviance in the Novels of Zola and Huysmans

by

Jacob Stuart Raterman

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Abstract

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Queer Idiosyncrasies: Description and Deviance in the Novels of Zola and Huysmans proposes to complicate literary-historical narratives about the relationship between French naturalism and decadence using analytical approaches informed by sex and gender studies and queer theory. In particular, it examines the ways in which these writers' penchant for literary description and cultural moralism leads to new and surprising expressions of non-normative genders and sexualities that are at odds with their aesthetic projects. Their novels are revealed as intertexts—responding and adapting to one another—whose forms, styles, and themes are mutually shaped over the course of their authorial careers.

The first chapter consists of a comparative study of Zola's *La curée* and Huysmans's *Marthe, histoire d'une fille.* Here, I contend that *La curée*'s heterotopic style manifests early naturalism's anxieties concerning the conjugal deviance and androgyny of modern France, and that *Marthe*'s poetics of placelessness prefigures decadent tropes even in Huysmans's naturalist phase. In the following chapter, I argue that Zola's anti-clerical novel *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* in attempting to write a scientifically informed version of Genesis, unwittingly models a radical type of gender parity based on friendship. I then frame Huysmans's *En rade* as a decadent parody of *La faute* in which sterility and auto-eroticism are inextricably bound up with decadent autoreferentiality. Chapter three turns to Huysmans and Zola's late works—*Là-bas* and *Paris* respectively—to show how their individual polemics against modernity and modernism offer visions of liberated womanhood and subversive homosexuality. Finally, in the short coda that follows, I perform close readings of a third author's work, *La Marquise de Sade* by Rachilde, to affirm both the possibilities and the limits of my own methodology, and to recast Rachilde's relationship to naturalism and decadence.

For my family.

In very loving memory of Patricia Ann Elson — *Destitutus ventis, remos adhibe.*

Contents

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Introduction
Toward a Denaturalized Zola and Huysmans

> "The setter of the mass into motion, he himself, in the crowd, figures best, with whatever queer idiosyncrasies, excrescences and gaps, a being of a substance akin to our own. Taking him as we must, I repeat, for quite heroic, the interest of detail in him is the interest of his struggle at every point with his problem."[1]

> "Huysmans, the classical type of the hysterical mind without originality, who is the predestined victim of every suggestion, began his literary career as a fanatical imitator of Zola, and produced, in this first period of his development, romances and novels in which [...] he greatly surpassed his model in obscenity. Then he swerved from naturalism, by an abrupt change of disposition, which is no less genuinely hysterical, overwhelmed this tendency and Zola himself with the most violent abuse, and began to ape the Diabolists, particularly Baudelaire. A red thread unites both of his otherwise abruptly contrasted methods, viz., his lubricity. That has remained the same. He is, as a languishing 'Decadent,' quite as vulgarly obscene as when he was a bestial 'Naturalist.'"[2]

Approach, Method, and Chapter Outline

As the title and epigraphs above suggest, this is a dissertation about queer idiosyncrasies in the works of two major authors of late nineteenth-century France, Émile Zola and Joris-Karl Huysmans. It is an extended study of their individual authorial interests and obsessions, tics and techniques, politics and polemics, with particular reference to the ways in which non-normative genders and sexualities are represented in their novels. However, it is also an interrogation of the degree to which these idiosyncrasies are idiosyncratic at all. Are the writerly proclivities of Zola and Huysmans truly distinguishable enough to grant each writer the status of literary figurehead of naturalism and decadence respectively? Does Nordau's proposed lineage, which initially locates Huysmans in the naturalist school before relegating him to decadence, adequately capture the complex relationship between the two authors and their projects? One of my two core arguments will be that it does not. The three main chapters of this dissertation will complicate the standard literary-critical narratives concerning these tendencies and authors, framing their styles as dialectical rather than divergent, convergent, or parallel. Zola and Huysmans's writings, both in terms of form and theme, move in lockstep, mutually shaping one another such that their aesthetics, as well as the ways in which those aesthetics find formal expression, are virtually inverted over the course of their literary careers.

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1. Henry James, *Literary Criticism: French Writers, Other European Writers, The Prefaces to the New York Edition* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 878.

2. Max Nordau, *Degeneration* (London: William Heinemann, 1895), 302.

My second line of inquiry is inseparable from the first. To the extent that I will put into question the relationship between Zola's naturalism and Huysmans's decadence—their supposed idiosyncrasies and commonalities—I will also pose the question of their queerness. By "queer," I do not necessarily mean "homosexual" or "gender non-conforming," nor am I suggesting that Zola and Huysmans were themselves queer in any sense of the word. Instead, I am interested in developing a particular kind of queer reading practice, one that locates non- or anti-normative ways of being or knowing that become salient under the intensely prescriptive and proscriptive ideological precepts underlying their projects. Indeed, it is the ideological and normative force of these movements, informed as they are by the unyielding convictions of their proponents, that makes them so appealing for queer theory. For inasmuch as Huysmans and Zola diagnose, decry, mock, condemn, and erase non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, they textually conjure them into being, endow them with presence, force, and specificity. This is my second core argument: that the dialectic of decadence and naturalism generates queerness, both conceptually and stylistically. In continually attempting to surpass and react to one another, the two writers adopt increasingly extreme ideological positions and push further the bounds of their styles. Hence, their examination is relevant to both literary criticism and queer theory. This dissertation is not only a study of decadent and naturalist texts, but also an argument for their continuing relevance, for why and how a reader of today might engage with them from perspectives that refuse to reduce them to those of their authors. In a word, I aim to *de*naturalize what appears as natural or given in the Zola and Huysmans works. My theoretical intervention will be to demonstrate how they themselves theorize forms of embodiment, desire, and identity at odds with heteronormative patriarchy.

I will develop these two interconnected axes (literary-historical and queer-theoretical) using analytical methods that are both synchronic—historicizing texts, authors, and concepts—and diachronic—evaluating them from an ethical and epistemological position based in present day critical theory. Several frameworks will come in handy for this purpose, notably Eve Sedgwick's paranoid and reparative reading approaches and Ross Chamber's notion of oppositionality (more on these below and in the following chapters). In this way, I will skirt two possible pitfalls: on the one hand, excusing, lauding, ignoring, or reproducing the erasures of or violence against gender and sexual difference that plague naturalism and decadence; and on the other, anachronistically criticizing or denouncing Huysmans and Zola for blind spots of whose existence they were not aware. They, like readers of today, were enmeshed in social fields proper to their time and place in history. I am more interested in exploring what their works disclose in spite of themselves, which horizons of possibility are opened up even as they are foreclosed.

The bulk of my chapters will be devoted to readings that focus on a constellation of formal elements belonging to the category of spatial description. In the first quotation above, James notes Zola's attention to descriptive detail, and he certainly isn't the only critic who has examined this feature of Zola's writing. It is, and not coincidentally, a prominent feature of Huysmans's works as well. Both shared a profound anxiety, both moral and material, about the vast and rapid changes of nineteenth-century modernity. As a result, they foreground the intertwinings, blendings, and mutual influences between subjects and objects, bodies and environments, and characters and settings. This aspect of their writing, combined with its moral impetus, means that certain spatio-corporeal configurations and mobilities function as negative models in their works—metrics of social decline—while others become exemplars of progress or utopian hope. I will examine both, and in so doing, pinpoint the limits of their thought and how they are exceeded by the very acts, desires, and embodiments they attempt to nullify.

The remainder of this introduction will be dedicated to a fascinating archival case study in reparative queer reading. In order to illustrate both Sedgwick's approach and the affective stakes of my own queer theorization of naturalist and decadent description, I will consider a letter written to Zola by a young Italian homosexual. The three chapters that follow are arranged chronologically, and bear first and foremost on the ways in which Zola and Huysmans's novels figure the relationship between culture and desire. The first chapter is a comparative study of Zola's *La curée* and Huysmans's *Marthe, histoire d'une fille.* I argue that Zola's *La curée* is heterotopic in both form and content, and that it is this quality that allows for the appearance of gender transgression. *Marthe,* on the other hand, criticizes misogyny through a poetics of placelessness and prefigures many of the aesthetic concerns that define his later novels. In my second chapter, I turn to two novels written after Huysmans's public break from naturalism. Even as he distances himself from Zola and plunges into what will become his patently decadent style, his rural novel *En rade* is revealed to be a parody of his former mentor's *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* itself an anticlerical invective and a plea for human's return to the erotic unity of nature. The crystallization of their styles is accompanied by a radical rethinking of gender relations and presentations, as well as the representation of psychic auto-eroticism. Next, I shift my focus to late decadence and naturalism, when Huysmans and Zola are at their most polemical: Huysmans pens *Là-bas,* which models female spatio-sexual autonomy, while Zola turns to parody in order to excoriate symbolism and sodomy (which he sees as two sides of the same aestheticist coin), inadvertently de-essentializing sexuality and gender in a decidedly anti-naturalist move. By the end of this chain of reactions and adaptations, both writers have moved dialectically closer to one another, reversing the rhetorical strategies they once extolled, and generating queerness in attempting to quash it.

Decadence outlives naturalism, however, and one of its most notable representatives in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is Rachilde, a gender-bending *femme de lettres* whose female protagonists have a habit of subjugating—and often murdering—their male lovers. The short coda that concludes my dissertation considers her semi-autobiographical novel, *La Marquise de Sade,* and finds that despite the author's daringly ambiguous relationship to gender and sexuality, the novel's queerness does not redeem its ethical underpinnings. In this, it continues Huysmans's and Zola's legacies. We learn that it is not enough to read queerly, and that transgression for transgression's sake is insufficient. In the end, Rachilde stands as a reminder to critique our own critical apparatuses and question our own reading practices lest they lead us astray.

Ethics, Diachrony, and Queer Literary Historiography

This project is certainly not meant to be an apologia for the flaws and blind spots of naturalism and decadence, but it does acknowledge that their authors were a product of their time and seeks to develop innovative critical modes attuned to their potentially redemptive and subversive qualities. Sedgwick will be helpful for thinking about this challenge, as will Foucault and Chambers, whose reflections on power and oppositionality will allow me to grasp more clearly the relationship between spaces of otherness and alternative ways of knowing, being, and desiring. Whereas Sedgwick will prompt me to read hopefully, Foucault and Chambers will encourage me to read provisionally, glimpsing flickers of subversion in the moments of greatest constraint. After all, power, in the Foucauldian sense, is manifested through its tensions and

transgressions; it is precisely in its efforts to suppress resistance and alterity that its essential contingency is illuminated.

Two interrelated objections might be raised to this approach, both concerning what could be called the literary historiography of sexuality. The first is epistemological: in structuring my analyses of naturalist and decadent texts such that certain acts, desires, and affects are presented as either normative or non-normative, natural or unnatural, virtuous or perverse, standard or deviant, productive or destructive, fertile or sterile (to name but a few of the various dichotomies and alignments operative in Zolian, Huysmansian, and Rachildean texts), am I not falling prey to Sedgwick's "epistemology of the closet"? The difficulty here lies in the specificity of naturalism and decadence's relationship to gender and sexuality, which is far less ideologically ambiguous than the literary constellations from which they developed and that they endeavored to surpass, that is, romanticism and realism. This relationship is tightly mediated through discourses of scientific progress and civilizational degeneration. The difficulty lies first in untangling these cultural and literary discourses, then reading them against the grain as sources of potential counter-discourses.

As an illustration of this method—which I will apply in other ways, to other texts, in the remainder of this dissertation—I propose an introductory case study in reparative reading, one not anchored in present-day criticism, through the examination of archival documents contemporary to Zola. The epistemology in question is not that of the closet of homosexuality, but of nineteenth-century science filtered through the theoretical apparatus of the experimental novel. Since that apparatus is devoid of any true objectivity and serves instead as a vehicle for Zola's own pseudo-scientific moralism, what we instead confront in the *Rougon-Macquart* is a closet of Zola's own creation. Certain characters are cast as essentially deviant *a priori,* and due to the Tainian determinism underlying Zola's notion of temperament, very few (if any) ever escape that assignation. The logic of naturalism also conforms to the epistemic shift described by Foucault from sexual acts to sexual identities; in Zolian naturalism, every act is the direct result of a given character's identity (figured as temperament, itself a distillation of milieu and heredity), and every character's identity furnishes them a very limited set of acts.

We thus discern the contours of one of the organizing tautologies of Zola's work, a product of the combination of his own bourgeois heterosexual subject position, his aesthetic precepts, and his sexologically-informed presuppositions about identity. This tautology is also a paradox: human beings are reducible to circumstances both inborn and environmental, therefore, the extent to which they are normal or abnormal is entirely outside of their control; the same is true of the decisions they make, which are conditioned by the fixity of their temperamental makeup. And yet*,* by dint of their appurtenance to a *circulus social* to whose collective health they are implicitly beholden, certain temperaments, as well as the actions and desires they dictate, are more or less useful or damaging to society. Thus, naturalist "progressivism" transmutes mere deviance (the distance from a norm) into perversity (that is, morally reprehensible deviance): characters are perverse because they are deviant, and they are deviant in their perversity. The all-seeing eye of Zolian description ensures that the closet of naturalism is transparent, without exit, and condemned, in the ethical, medical, and civil sense—destined for annihilation. This type of built-in epistemological violence is not totally commensurate with that of Sedgwick's closet, yet the two are energized by historically variegated iterations of heteronormativity that produce diverse forms of perversity.

This brings me to the second theoretical complication inherent in my project, which has to do with the ethics of evaluating aesthetic objects of the past. It can be summed up thus: does

historicizing the pathological impetus of naturalist and decadent styles inure them against moral judgment by a modern critic? Does the backward glance of literary criticism permit the articulation of an ethical *prise de position* in relation to the ideological underpinnings of a body of work written over a century ago? What right does a contemporary critic have to commend or censure authors lacking the insight of hindsight? And perhaps most crucially, *why Zola*? What business does a scholar attuned to the representation of queerness have with a figure openly dedicated to the exclusionary promotion of heteronormativity?

The response has to do with the particularity of naturalism, and of Zola. Over time, and with a few exceptions, literary and cultural history have congealed their legacy into a handful of commonplaces, which we might summarize thus: 1) Naturalism is a latter-day offshoot of realism, stunted in every way except in its slavish devotion to documentary detail; therefore, Zola is but a self-aggrandizing, unsuccessful realist. 2) As his zeal grew, the quality of his works diminished; therefore, the only naturalist texts worth reading are *Thérèse Raquin* and a few of the *Rougon-Macquart*—anything written thereafter is to be avoided at all costs. 3) Aside from his mediocre attempts to bring to fruition his vision of the experimental novel, Zola's only meaningful contribution to history was "J'accuse"; however, this article was probably just another desperate ploy to remain in the public eye.[3]

Accounts such as these not only overlook the ways in which Zola anticipates certain forms of literary modernism, but also the degree to which the naturalist project was theoretically daring—perhaps more so than any style or movement that preceded it.[4] It's not that Zola was blindly optimistic (any careful study of his corpus disproves that); it's that he believed in the power of the literary thought experiment. This belief is at the core of his faith in language as a vehicle for social change, and it allows us to discern a continuity between his practice as a novelist and as a journalist: both are mobilized by a tension between loyal representation of reality through ardent, meticulous investigation on the one hand, and on the other, the exposure and analysis of the antagonistic forces plaguing that reality.

At the same time, this tension is temporal, opening up a field of possibility between a deeply critical view of the present and an essentially meliorative outlook on the future. Zola's aptitude was not merely in dreaming of utopia; more crucially, it was in *thinking otherwise,* and in doing so fervently and methodically. That this temporality of idealism is couched in a teleology of scientific and civilizational progress is what creates a critical predicament for modern scholars. These are the precise reasons that naturalist style often appears regressive, parochial, stuffy, and naïve to 21st-century readers. I nevertheless contend that an even-handed critical treatment of Zola's works would consider both his deficiencies and his strengths: they are the two sides of the wager of naturalism, and will later bleed into decadence in fascinating and unexpected ways. Moreover, recognition of their coexistence is the key to performing an analysis of his corpus that is both historicized and ethical, that considers the ideological forces that he

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3. In his essay "Narrate or describe?," Georg Lukács formulates the most famous denunciation of Zolian style, whose tendency towards description, he argues, constitutes a kind of capitalist reification by which subjects are objectified and objects (commodities) are imbued with subjecthood. See Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1970).

4. Susan Harrow opens her 2010 monograph on Zola by paraphrasing Henri Mitterand's 2001 lecture at the Institut français in London, in which he insists on the "urgency of prising Zola out of the nineteenth century and of probing the potential connections between Naturalism and the broad, hybrid seam of twentieth-century literary experimentalism." She uses this conference as a point of departure for her extended study of Zola the modernist, rather than Zola the strictly naturalist.

was working through and against. The epistemological-ethical lynchpin of my argument hinges on this tension between a typically Zolian insight, striking in its progressivism, and a critical hindsight, reproachful in its retrospective remove from the past. Simply put: because Zola—and later, Rachilde and Huysmans—demonstrated that they sometimes *could know better,* I maintain that they sometimes *should have known better.*

I am certainly not the first to respond to Zola with qualified appreciation, nor am I his first queer critic, that is, a reader both attuned to queerness in his texts and one who has, himself, a personal stake in the representation of queerness. In addition to the critical distance granted the modern literary scholar by time and history, there is also the critical distance afforded by sexual subject position vis-à-vis Zola, who, for all intents and purposes, appears to have been a resolutely heterosexual cisgender man. To contend that fiction written by non-queer authors is of no interest to scholars of sexuality is just as shortsighted and sectarian as the contention that straight critics have no place in queer theory or that queer theorists must limit themselves to the critique of non- or anti-heteronormative cultural and aesthetic objects. Such facile alignments are examples of the longstanding—but deeply pernicious and consistently denounced—discourse in academic and activist circles that has come to be known as identity politics.

Through painstaking archival work, Michael Rosenfeld has revealed that Zola had an ambivalent queer readership in his very lifetime, and that exchanges with such readers helped shape Zola's thought and works.[5] In addition to lending Paul Verlaine financial support in a time of need and publicly defending the gay Flemish novelist Georges Eekhoud (who had been accused of violating Belgian pornography laws by publishing his homoerotic novel *Escal-Vigor* in 1899), Zola received from Oscar Wilde intelligence crucial to his journalistic campaign for the exoneration of Alfred Dreyfus.[6] Most notable, though, is the case of the Italian invert. In 1889, a young Italian aristocrat wrote Zola a rambling anonymous missive expressing his admiration for the novelist's exacting eye and eloquent style, but also accusing him of being remiss in his depictions of homosexuality. Zola, unsure of how to proceed, turned to the sphere of medicine. He conferred the letters to a certain Docteur Saint-Paul (better known by his anagrammatic pseudonym "Dr. Laupts"), who had them published in his 1896 study on sexual inversion, *Tares et poisons: Perversion et perversité sexuelles.* That same year, after stumbling upon his own letters in this book, the Italian reacted to this discovery in two subsequent letters to Zola. A later edition of *Tares et poisons* contained this "suite," apparently forwarded again to the sexologist by Zola. It wasn't until 2011 that the entirety of the original correspondence became available to scholars.

While there are archival insights to be gleaned from a comparative analysis of the published letters and the manuscript letters—Saint-Paul strategically modified and redacted much of the original text—I am most interested in what Zolian representations of queerness meant to this self-professed homosexual himself. The opening paragraph of the first letter is quite laudatory: "C'est à vous, monsieur, qui êtes le plus grand romancier de notre temps, et qui, avec l'œil du savant et de l'artiste, saisissez et peignez si puissamment tous les travers, toutes les hontes, toutes les maladies qui affligent l'humanité, que j'envoie ces documents...."[7] Not only

5. Michael Rosenfeld, ed. *Confessions d'un homosexual à Émile Zola* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions Place, 2017).

6. The complicated circumstances in which this collaboration took place are detailed in an article cited by Rosenfeld in *Confessions*. See J. Robert Maguire, "Oscar Wilde and the Dreyfus Affair," *Victorian Studies* 41, no. 1 (1997): 1-29.

7. Rosenfeld, *Confessions,* 15.

does the anonymous writer respect Zola for his artistic and intellectual prowess, but also for his attention to the struggles and afflictions of the masses. Two paragraphs later, however, he identifies a major flaw in Zola's novel *La curée,* a characterization that is also a lacuna:

> Vous-même, Monsieur... n'avez fait que toucher, dans la personne de votre Baptiste, à un des plus affreux vices qui déshonorent l'humanité. Cet homme-là est ignoble, car la débauche à laquelle il se livre n'a rien à voir avec l'amour et n'est que chose absolument matérielle, une question de conformation que les médecins ont plus d'une fois observée et décrite. Tout cela est très commun et très dégoûtant et n'a rien à faire avec la confession que je vous envoie et qui pourra peut-être vous servir à quelque chose.[8]

In this account, Zola did not exactly misapprehend homosexuality, but rather failed in portraying its affective plenitude by focusing solely on its carnal (material) dimension. This mysterious correspondent then proposes to educate Zola on this matter, to provide him with the knowledge necessary for a more accurate representation of same-sex relationships between men. The way he goes about doing this is remarkable: over the course of the rest of the letter (and in the two subsequent letters), the young Italian undertakes a highly detailed examination of his own past, at every step attempting to ascertain how his ancestry, upbringing, and physical and psychic makeup have contributed to his overall temperament. In other words, he uses the descriptive-analytical protocol of Zolian naturalism to theorize his own desire. His self-analysis leads to some surprising conclusions, far more daring than any that Zola himself would have made. For example, when recounting his first great love affair with a fellow soldier, the Italian declares: "Enfin, jamais de vrais amants n'ont été si heureux et n'ont eu au cœur une passion plus grande que la nôtre."[9] Not only are homosexuals capable of love and passion, but of an ardor that exceeds the norm.

Indeed, according to the correspondent, the pleasures available to the homosexual are in fact superior to those associated with heterosexuality: "[J]'ai accompli le but de ma vie: prendre et donner un plaisir sterile—mais supérieur à tous les autres."[10] He subverts the instrumental logic of heterosexuality, revalorizing sex not as a mode of biological and social reproduction, but as an act whose value derives from its intrinsically fruitless nature; the fruit of sex thus becomes erotic pleasure itself. This formulation also prefigures certain features of both Huysmans's and Rachilde's strands of decadence, which come to associate chastity with domination of the self and others. The Italian invert indicates major defects in the way Zola thinks of identity and desire. One of these instances takes the form of a rhetorical question: "Et pourquoi aurais-je honte de ce que j'ai fait? N'est-ce pas la nature qui a fait la première faute et me condamne à une stérilité éternelle?"[11] This question, seemingly posed in self-defense, is in fact damning. At bottom, it is the ethical question of essentialist violence, one on which I have already touched above in my reflections on Zola's tautology: does the innateness of deviance inevitably entail the perversion of morals? Is it just to condemn subjects of queer desire for their congenital "abnormality"?

While the unnamed writer never questions this innateness, he does express doubt about its fundamental immutability. This is his second challenge to the naturalist conception of sexual identity: "J'ai poussé trop en noir toutes les teintes et me suis montré ce que je suis peut-être,

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8. Rosenfeld, *Confessions*, 15.
9. Rosenfeld, *Confessions,* 37.
10. Rosenfeld, *Confessions,* 97.
11. Rosenfeld, *Confessions*, 47.

mais ce que certainement je ne suis pas toujours. [...] Je veux donc completer l'étude de ma personne que je considère souvent favorisée de la nature, puisqu'elle a fait de moi un être que les plus audacieux poètes n'ont pas su créer."[12] The Italian's relationship to his own sexual otherness is complex and does not align with Zola's portrayal of inversion. Though the Italian does understand his inversion as an inborn quality, it is one among many, and is not always experienced to the same degree. Most importantly, it is not a source of shame, but of pride. It confers upon his being a singularity of experience difficult to rival or represent. According to this assessment, the homosexual is the preeminently aesthetic subject and object—*l'art pour l'art* made flesh, perceiving beauty and pleasure for their own sake—but not yet successfully captured by the *littérateurs* of the age (again, the echoes with decadent and symbolist ideals are notable). Despite all his esteem for Zola and his works, this is ultimately where he falls the shortest for the young Italian:

> À chaque nouveau roman de M. Zola, j'espérais trouver enfin un personnage qui fût la reproduction de moi-même, mais mon attente fut toujours déçue et je finis par me convaincre que le courage avait manqué à l'écrivain pour mettre en scène une aussi terrible passion. [...] Le sentiment que m'inspire ensuite mon insupportable vanité... fut celui du plaisir de me voir imprimé tout vif, quoique j'eusse de beaucoup préféré revivre dans les pages d'un roman et non pas dans un traité de science médicale.[13]

These confessional letters are valuable to this study in that they not only anticipate many of the same criticisms of Zolian representations of sexuality and gender that later (and current) scholars have made, but also, and more significantly, make clear the interest in reading him despite his myopia.

Again: why Zola? Not because he provides any nuanced or even original representation of queer subjectivity—to the contrary, we would have to refer to other nineteenth-century sources for such treatments—but because his works, as well as those of the authors that were inspired and influenced by him, are rich sources for the study of the literary production of queerness. The young Italian's letters show that there is something to be said for seeing oneself *imprimé tout vif,* a capacity that inheres in literary language and of which scientific language is devoid: an aesthetic-poetic impulse that substantializes affect and experience in form and style. We can see why Zola's correspondent would prefer to see himself appear in a novel instead of in a strictly scientific treatise, and why naturalism would appeal to him in particular. Literature had a popular cachet and widespread availability that medicine lacked, and naturalist novels paid special attention to the figure of the outcast. It is effectively naturalism's effort to perceive the *circulus social* as a complex whole that simultaneously throws figures of deviance into sharp relief—and maintains deviance as a category.

12. Rosenfeld, *Confessions,* 48-49.
13. Rosenfeld, *Confessions,* 67-71.

Chapter 1
Locating Gender in Early Naturalism

> "—Vrai, dit-il, nous en sommes là!?... Mais, bon Dieu! tu as tout, que veux-tu encore?
>
> Renée leva la tête. Elle avait dans les yeux une clarté chaude, un ardent besoin de curiosité inassouvie.
>
> —Je veux autre chose, répondit-elle à demi-voix.
>
> —Mais puisque tu as tout, reprit Maxime en riant, autre chose, ce n'est rien... Quoi, autre chose?
>
> —Quoi? répéta-t-elle..."[14]

Early Naturalism and/as Proto-Decadence

A project on the intertwining trajectories of naturalism and decadence must, before anything else, locate their points of departure. This task is anything but clear-cut, especially when the present study proposes to plot anew the vectors of these tendencies and redefine their relationship to one another. In this opening chapter, then, I confront the tricky, and perhaps even unanswerable, questions of when naturalism clove from realism, when decadence distanced itself from naturalism, and according to what criteria all of these categories might be distinguished from one another. The amorphousness of decadence further complicates the issue, since the authors habitually associated with it lived at considerable remove from one another (for instance, Baudelaire lived from 1821 to 1867 and was most productive around the mid-century, while Huysmans lived from 1848 to 1907 and is primarily remembered as a fin-de-siècle writer), traversed disparate formal domains (poetry, novels, short stories, prose poems, essays, art and literary criticism), and often had aesthetic flags planted in several different literary movements and genres (romanticism, symbolism, the fantastic, and of course, naturalism itself).

Adopting a comparative approach to naturalism and decadence, however, clarifies things significantly. No fin-de-siècle decadent had such close stylistic and affective ties to the naturalist entourage than did Huysmans. He was, after all, a member of the famous Médan group—the circle of six naturalist-oriented writers who regularly met at Zola's house in Médan and whose collaboration gave birth to the short story collection *Les Soirées de Médan* in 1880—and publicly defended Zola against the critical backlash triggered by many of his works, most notably *L'assommoir*.[15] Such is the beginning of the traditional literary-historical narrative of the relationship between Zola and Huysmans, the continuation of which might be summarized thus: despite Huysmans's initial allegiance to Zola and to Zola's literary sensibilities, Huysmans quickly grew tired of the methods of naturalism, which he came to see as dogmatic. He openly rejected naturalism and its leader, and the form of this denunciation was the novel *À rebours*: Huysmans thus established decadence as a distinctly anti-naturalist prose genre that found its "purest" form as the century waned. Thereafter, Zola criticized Huysmans, decried decadence and *l'art pour l'art,* and continued to refine the naturalist style. According to traditional

14. Émile Zola, *La curée* (Paris: Librarie générale française, 1996), 26.

15. I will return to Huysmans's praise of Zola in the final section of this chapter.

narratives, by the early years of the twentieth century, a seemingly unbridgeable gulf separated the two men and their respective aesthetics.

The focus of this chapter will be to examine the particularities of Zola's and Huysmans's work before their rupture, when they had common concerns about the form, content, and purpose of the novel. For this reason, it will not make sense to locate "early naturalism" in Zola's initial forays into the literature of the masses, for instance, in his 1867 novel *Thérèse Raquin,* despite this work's clear prefiguration of naturalist tenets. Nor will I look to *Les Soirées de Médan,* published the same year as "Le roman expérimental," as an example of early naturalism; I am more concerned in this chapter with naturalism as it expressed itself prior to its own formalization in those works, several years before the schism between Zola and Huysmans. My exemplars of early naturalism will instead be Zola's 1871 novel *La curée* (the second volume of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle) and Huysmans's first ever novel, *Marthe, histoire d'une fille,* published in 1876, eight years before the release of *À rebours.*

In addition to their chronological importance, *La curée* and *Marthe* are thematically and formally germane to the stakes of this project. Both center the shifting differentials of sex, gender, sexuality, and class in Paris during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The two works also adhere to the critical commonplace dictating that naturalism prefers description over narration. Indeed, not only do both authors rely heavily on various descriptive techniques to achieve the mimetic and didactic goals of their works, but in so doing tend to foreground setting over narrative. This is not to say that Zola and Huysmans's characters are simple or flat, nor does it mean that their novels lack plot. A sustained objective of this dissertation will be to analyze the means by which naturalism—and eventually decadence—represent and critique the historically and culturally contingent interdependencies between subjects, their physical surroundings, and the specificities of their social existence. Sex, gender, and sexuality are not ancillary to these issues, but immanent to them.

This is where the similarities stop, however. In this opening chapter, I will argue that in spite of these uniting threads, and against the grain of literary history, the aesthetic divergence between Zola and Huysmans starts far before the *À rebours* debacle. Indeed, from the very beginning, when naturalism was at its most collaborative and least dogmatic, its eventual fracture and reconstitution as a style antagonistic to decadence were already foreshadowed. The traces of their divergence become visible when viewed through the critical prism of gender and space. Accordingly, my analysis will be both comparative and theoretical in nature. After outlining significant Zola criticism both foundational and recent, I will perform a series of close readings of *La curée* informed by the Foucauldian concept of heterotopia, demonstrating how Zola's literary treatment of certain spaces unique to Second Empire Paris reflects his fears of modernity, especially in terms of the dangers of female desire. Then, I will examine certain excerpts of *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* under the rubric of what I will call a poetics of placelessness, showing how Huysmans's attention to the spatial and topographical dynamics of gender and desire goes is a feature of the aesthetics that would later distinguish his work. Each of these sections will contain a double movement, an oscillation between the paranoid/critical/historicized and the reparative/ameliorative/theoretical: my readings will both expose the heteronormative and patriarchal thinking structuring these texts as well as strive to locate the points of resistance, subversion, and self-fashioning that such thinking engenders in spite of itself.

Perhaps it is not so much a desire for something *more* that animates the unsatiated Renée in the epigraph of this chapter—nor for her lower-class analogue Marthe—but rather a desire for

something else, something unnamed and unknown because, given her social and historical circumstances, it is unnamable and unknowable to her. The struggle for that *autre chose,* that inaccessible other thing, other ways of being, knowing, and desiring, *otherness itself,* is the obverse of the naturalist and decadent story of perversion. It is that story, the story of the deviant, that I would like to begin telling here.

Repairing Representation: Approaches to Zola

Eve Sedgwick uses the expression "paranoid reading" to refer to a host of literary-critical practices that have in common a tendency to presuppose hidden, repressed, or encoded ideologies or subject positions in texts. By pivoting from what Paul Ricœur termed the "hermeneutics of suspicion" to paranoid reading, Sedgwick emphasizes the extent to which such approaches have become both intensified and de rigueur in the various iterations of contemporary literary scholarship, notably queer studies, feminist studies, psychoanalytic theory, deconstruction, Marxist criticism, and New Historicism. Though cognizant of the important contributions it has facilitated in these fields, she takes issue with paranoid reading practices for several reasons: first, it is anticipatory and therefore tautological, since its primary mode of interrogating texts relies on the assumption of some type of dissimulation or even malice, conscious or otherwise. She argues that paranoid reading is both reflexive and mimetic, risking the possibility of reifying the very inimical messages and affects it seeks to unveil. It is also "a theory of negative affects"; that is, it valorizes the recognition or inscription of ways of knowing and being that are essentially oppressive or destructive—there is no room for care of the self, for joy, in paranoid reading. Finally, Sedgwick criticizes paranoid reading practices for their dependence on exposure: they require that mechanisms of representation be negated so that some truth or motive be unearthed and subjected to the damning light of critique.

This project will certainly make use of paranoid approaches to reading Zola and Huysmans, but only as a springboard to more "reparative" approaches. It should be noted that Sedgwick does not offer paranoia and repair as mutually exclusive or even contrary models; rather, she sees them as complementary theories of reading. Both of the authors whose works form my literary corpus have undergone numerous paranoid treatments—when it comes to Zola, these have most recently been along Marxist and feminist lines.

It might at this juncture be useful to consider a few examples of paranoid readings of Zola. The extent to which many of his early works were critically reviled is well known: perhaps the most famous is the 1968 invective against *Thérèse Raquin* written for *Le Figaro* by Louis Ulbach. Ulbach—who tellingly wrote under the nom de plume "Ferragus"—recognizes Balzac as the "touchstone" for realist writing, calling him "le sublime fumier sur lequel poussent tous ces champignons-là."[16] The mushrooms in question refer to the younger generation of realists (the Goncourts, Zola, Feydeau) whose works were becoming increasingly popular. Zola himself saw his project as an extension of and improvement on Balzacian realism: the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle had an encyclopedic, historiographic impetus akin to that of *La Comédie humaine,* but with more structured, scientific underpinnings. For Ulbach, however, it was always already a failed endeavor, a counterfeit of Balzac's novelistic genius. In this view, Zolian description could only

16. Louis Ulbach, "La littérature putride," *Le Figaro,* 23 January, 1868. https://archive.wikiwix.com/cache/index2.php?url=http%3A%2F%2Ffr.wikisource.org%2Fwiki%2FTh%25C3%25A9r%25C3%25A8se_Raquin%2F33#federation=archive.wikiwix.com&tab=url.

ever be derivative, superfluous, ostentatious, and violent; naturalist writing "se croit bien malicieuse [mais] elle est bien naïve: elle n'est qu'un trompe-l'œil."[17]

Roland Barthes, on the other hand, takes him as one of the iconic authors of the "texte de plaisir," a concept he develops in his 1973 essay of the same name to describe the libidinal economy of a host of texts (primarily nineteenth- and early twentieth-century realist novels) whose aesthetic-phenomenological interest lies in the gradual and accretive unfolding of space, time, and experience through representational praxes that are largely the product of a unified subject position. Unlike modernist writing, whose "absolute novelty" derives from fragmentary, non-linear, polysemic, and polyphonic writing strategies that spurn subjective cohesion altogether and thereby constitute the "texte de jouissance," the pleasurable text always betrays its own unavowed ideological engagements:

> Nous lisons un texte (de plaisir) comme une mouche vole dans le volume d'une chambre: par des coudes brusques, faussement définitifs, affairés et inutiles: l'idéologie passe sur le texte et sa lecture comme l'empourprement sur un visage… tout écrivain de plaisir a ces empourprements imbéciles (Balzac, Zola, Flaubert, Proust…): dans le texte de plaisir, les forces contraires ne sont plus en état de refoulement, mais de devenir: rien n'est vraiment antagoniste, tout est pluriel. […] Dans *Fécondité* de Zola, l'idéologie est flagrante, particulièrement poisseuse: naturisme, familialisme, colonialisme; *il n'empêche* que je continue à lire le livre.[18]

Though Zola is here—and perhaps surprisingly—placed in the same category of writers as Balzac and Proust, he is still the victim of his place in history. While Barthes's reading is more historicizing than outright denunciatory, he nevertheless situates Zola in a time prior to the aesthetic enlightenment of literary modernism; the pleasurable text is, after all, always hobbled by its own blind spots.

More recently, Zola's works have come under the scrutiny of feminist- and queer-oriented scholarship, which has almost universally been of a paranoid order. Chantal Bertrand-Jennings, for example, has advanced several readings of Zola informed by feminist psychoanalytic frameworks that invariably follow a logic of exposure and condemnation. In a 1982 article, she makes the case for a "Victorian naturalism" in which female desire, "whatever its expressions, whether deviant or sublimated, is perceived as essentially hysterical, abnormal and pathological."[19] Much of the Zola criticism of the following decade focuses on naturalist representations of hysteria; perhaps the most sophisticated and persuasive is Janet Beizer's chapter on *Pot-Bouille,* the tenth *Rougon-Macquart* novel. Beizer argues that hysteria in Zola's work is actually a masculine-gendered realism's failed attempt to represent female desire in all its fullness; as a result, the realist novel ends up re-enacting faulty strategies of containment that mirror those imposed on desiring female subjects in nineteenth-century France.[20] Zola's later work has received extensive commentary by Andrew Counter, particularly in its treatment of non-normative sexuality. Counter astutely shows how figures of sexual alterity in Zola's novels serve as negative exemplars of the author's own political and stylistic ideals: his pronatalism, republicanism, and anti-aestheticism produce deviance in the form of the homosexual, the

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17. Ulbach, "La littérature putride."

18. Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), 45.

19. Chantal Bertrand-Jennings, "Zola's Women: The Case of a Victorian 'Naturalist'," *Atlantis* 10, no. 1 (1984): 26-37.

20. Janet L. Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

anarchist, and the dandy respectively.[21] This dissertation represents my effort to take this work a step further, teasing out the myriad forms of gender and sexual creativity that a present-day reader or critic might discern in Zola (and eventually Huysmans's and Rachilde's) sanitizing projects.

It will be crucial to view naturalist and decadent texts through a critical lens that is not solely anticipatory, negative, and revelatory. What paranoia gains through analytical acuity and the unsettling of essentialized forms of knowing and being it loses through constant recourse to the imperative of accusation, crippling any forward movement along the lines of redemption, creation, resistance, or subversion. In a word, paranoia is incompatible with hope. Sedgwick points out this fundamental lack, and suggests reparative strategies as a means for filling it:

> Hope, often a fracturing, even a traumatic thing to experience, is among the energies by which the reparatively positioned reader tries to organize the fragments and part-objects she encounters or creates. Because the reader has room to realize that the future may be different from the present, it is also possible for her to entertain such profoundly painful, profoundly relieving, ethically crucial possibilities as that the past, in turn, could have happened differently from the way it actually did.[22]

It will therefore be necessary to oscillate between critical and "additive or accretive" modes of reading the texts at hand, not only pointing out their deficiencies and ideological loyalties, but also demonstrating the kernels of defiance and transgression that they mobilize. While all readers and scholars would do well to heed Jameson's famous injunction to "always historicize," this is only half of my project's goal. There is only so much interest in reducing texts and their authors to their socio-historical coordinates, as Jameson and others have done; at the same time that this renders them dialogically legible to a contemporary reader, it also fossilizes them, binds them to the condition of contextuality. My methodology will therefore reject, at least in part, this attitude of text-as-relic, and favor modes of interrogation that not only redeem and revitalize naturalist and decadent texts, but most importantly, demonstrate the ways in which techniques of defiance are inextricable from the normative imperatives that are their socio-ontological prerequisites.

This is only one type of reparative optic, however. Others have already sought to (re)situate and (re)valorize Zola using critical frameworks that dodge the temptations of tautology, bad faith, and negative affect. One of the most monumental of the 20th-century literary critics, Erich Auerbach, groups Zola with the Goncourt brothers and Flaubert, classifying them as the second wave of French realists and "the first defenders of the rights of the fourth estate [who] almost all belonged not to it but to the bourgeoisie."[23] While this movement did entail a "concomitant coarsening of taste" that was mourned by those earlier novelists (notably Stendhal), Auerbach sees this as a natural and inevitable evolution in the function and social significant of the realist novel.[24] He neither takes the naturalist project at face value, nor relegates it to the dustbin of history as an inferior form of realism; rather, he calls Zola the

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21. Andrew Counter, "Zola's *fin-de-siècle* Reproductive Politics," *French Studies* 68, no. 2 (2014): 193-208. and "One of Them: Homosexuality and Anarchism in Wilde and Zola," *Comparative Literature* 63, no. 4 (2011): 345-365.

22. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 146.

23. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 497.

24. Auerbach, 501.

boldest of the "aesthetic realists"[25] and is one of the first to laud him for his attention to spatio-sensory detail, however quotidian or base it may be:

> The art of style has wholly renounced producing pleasing effects in the conventional sense of the term. Instead it serves unpleasant, depressing, desolate truth. But this truth is at the same time summons to action in terms of a social reform. [...] The principle of *l'art pour l'art* has outlived its usefulness. It may be pointed out that Zola too felt and exploited the sensory power of suggestion of the ugly and repulsive; it may even be held against him that his somewhat coarse-grained and powerful imagination led him to exaggerations, violent simplifications, and a far to materialistic psychology. [...] Zola took the mixing of styles really seriously; he pushed on beyond the purely aesthetic realism of the preceding generation; he is one of the very few authors of the century who created their work out of the great problems of the age. [...] If Zola exaggerated, he did so in the direction which mattered; and if he had a predilection for the ugly, he used it most fruitfully.[26]

Auerbach takes into account the properly programmatic quality of Zolian naturalism in all its didactic and political specificity. In this way, he shows that description—particularly of the members and spaces of the lower classes—is doing something new. At the same time that he distinguishes the utilitarianism of the experimental novel, he also considers the radical aestheticism that is its rhetorical motor.

Over half a century later, Jacques Rancière takes Auerbach's lead in teasing out the political and economic implications of Zola's work under the theoretical rubric of the "distribution of the sensible" (*le partage du sensible*). For Rancière, Zola was one of a handful of French realists responsible for reconfiguring the relationship between the literary and the political in the 19th century. He theorizes that the introduction of the *bas-fonds* of French society into the most prevalent textual formats of the age—to wit, novels and poetry—contributed to the unsettling of an age-old aesthetic dichotomy aligning poetry with autonomous, autotelic, aristocratic language and prose with dialogic, communicative, proletarian language. (It's worth noting that Huysmansian decadence will eventually call for a return to aristocratic autoreferentiality while conserving certain descriptive mechanisms inherited from Zolian naturalism.) When the gritty reality of the working classes undergoes various rhetorical treatments (depending on the differing styles of individual authors), those classes become realized as communities participating in new regimes of political visibility and engagement. The diagnostic imperative of Zola's writing thus hypostatizes in and as the literary the feverish convulsions of a class system negotiating the perils of modern capitalism: "C'est [cette médecine perverse] que met en œuvre la poésie de magasins et étalages du *Ventre de Paris* ou de *Au bonheur des dames*—qui ne sont plus le chaos du mélange à démêler par la lecture des signes, mais le torrent de la consommation où les bourgeoises de Paris deviennent des bacchantes, se battant pour déchirer le corps de la marchandise divinisée…"[27] The experimental novel is, then, a text capable of registering various intensities of experience of political economy in the Second Empire.

The notion of intensity is also central to Frederic Jameson's 2013 reading of the *Rougon-Macquart,* but in place of intensity as a site of political interpellation, Jameson insightfully reads Zola as a forerunner in the "codification of affect," that is, in the literary deployment of a style

25. Auerbach, 506.
26. Auerbach, 512.
27. Jacques Rancière, *Politique de la littérature* (Paris : Galilée, 2007), 34.

attentive to intensities of temporality and experience. Zola's proclivity for aestheticized description is thus the naturalist project giving phenomenological expression to the vagaries of the sensorium in modernity: "The doctrine of intensity thereby becomes an aesthetic ideology for this novelistic practice, which in retrospect looks less like an account of the destiny of anthropomorphic characters than it does an immense collection of distinct phenomenological spaces."[28] While Jameson's dialectical, affect-oriented approach to naturalism necessarily implicates embodiment as an aesthetic category, it paradoxically evacuates the social and ideological implications of various forms of embodied being, namely those of anatomical morphology (gender) and the sexual attraction (sexuality)—a lacuna I hope to fill.

Gender, at least, is not ignored in what is perhaps the most impressive attempt at a "reparative Zola," Susan Harrow's *The Body Modern: Pressures and Prospects of Representation.* This 2010 monograph, responding to a call by Henri Mitterand to look to the future of Zola studies, considers his modernity, rather than his realism, contending—through an exhaustive analysis of almost every significant aspect of Zola's writing practice—that "in its emphasis on fractured subjectivity, commodity culture and the clamorous city, Zola's representation of Paris in the Rougon-Macquart anticipates certain twentieth-century literary constructions."[29] Unlike Beizer, Harrow turns to *Pot-Bouille* illustrate how the naturalist novel is not—or not just—a site for the perpetuation of the figure of the hysteric, but one in which male recognition of that myth as a discursive production is staged.[30]

Many of these critical interventions overlap with my own interests in naturalism, but taken together, they provide only partial answers to the questions at the heart of this dissertation. If so many of the characters animating Zola and Huysmans's works fail according to the heteronormative logics of their author and era, in what ways can we see those failures as indictments of those logics and as successes in their own right? Answering this and related questions will also require examining the relationship between their aesthetics and their views on gender and sexuality.

The Inverted Domesticity of the Saccard Greenhouse

Two of the most common criticisms of Zola and of Zolian naturalism, as sketched above, relate to determinism and ideology. His protagonists are allegedly always doomed a priori by dint of their impure bloodlines and corrupt milieus, and the very criteria that govern the notions of impurity and corruption derive from Zola's own reproduction of the ideology of the scientific bourgeoisie. There is some truth in both of these accusations: inspired by Comte and Bernard, Zola was fascinated by the influence of heredity and social environment on individuals, and his characters inevitably struggle against, or fall victim to, this double bind. And indeed, Zola's ethnographic distance from the sweat and squalor of the working class is made possible by his education and his cushy position among the Parisian intelligentsia. Yet to stop our assessment of his literary acumen there is to oversimplify an misapprehend the breadth and depth of the analytical work performed in his novels.

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28. Frederic Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (New York: Verso, 2015), 76.

29. Susan Harrow, *The Body Modern: Pressures and Prospects of Representation* (London: Routledge, 2010), 1.

30. Harrow, 177.

Zolian determinism is not absolute; the author of the *Rougon-Macquart* was first and foremost a thinker of system and society. Were his characters' lives and motivations entirely regulated by their ancestry and milieu, his stories would be rather boring and terribly depressing—and to be fair, they sometimes are. But just as often as Zola portrays stasis, destiny, and ignorance (willful or otherwise), he also stages mobility, enlightenment, and transformation. He recognizes that changes in milieu can provide relief from, or enable resistance to, inborn flaws, and that certain hereditary traits might make one more or less capable of traversing the social field.

Addressing the criticism of ideology is more complex. On the one hand, even a synoptic glace at the arc of the *Rougon-Macquart* reveals a certain class consciousness on Zola's part. His depictions of the working class were as motivated by advocacy and reform as they were by the documentary imperative of the experimental novel (and let us not forget that Zola himself was neither Parisian by birth nor from the upper class). It is this same passion for systemic change that drove Zola to consider the benefits and pitfalls of socialism in *Germinal* and later pen the unfinished *Quatre Évangiles* cycle (*Fécondité, Travail, Vérité,* and *Justice*) and the infamous invective against the antisemitism of the French state, "J'accuse...!"

On the other hand, this criticism implies the possibility of a text completely devoid of ideology, totally unconditioned by the author's place in society—I would contend that such a work could not exist.[31] Rather than reducing a writer's work to a kind of apparatus for the reproduction of the ideology of the ruling class, it would be more interesting and productive, from a literary-critical perspective, to consider the aspects of a text that escape, expose, and overturn the ideological precepts that generate them. This is the kind of reparative work that forms roughly half of my methodology, and whose ambition will be to recast negative examples as positive counterexamples, to invert the normalizing, didactic violence of the original to make of it a pedagogy of novel desires. In lieu of rehashing the truism of Zola's nineteenth-century parochialism, one might instead ask oneself what the reader of *today* might do with Zola's misogyny, homophobia, and elitism, and with his investment in vitalism.[32] In what ways could *La curée* be read as both a site of oppression and resistance, of reactionary fixity and progressive mobility, particularly in terms of its striking treatment of modern manifestations of gender and sexuality?

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31. In *Politique de la littérature* (Paris: Galilée, 2007), Jacques Rancière contends literature is inherently political in that it plays a part in in deciding whose voice(s) matter, who is rendered politically visible, and who is therefore included in a given community ("mondes communs").

32. While I will reserve my study of naturalist vitalism for the second chapter, it bears mentioning here that Zola's vitalism was not that of the eighteenth- or nineteenth-century medical establishment (which attempted to identify and understand an underlying life force), although these ideas did inform his work. Nor is it the vitalism of the first half of the twentieth century, whose principles were fused with social Darwinism, white supremacy, and antisemitism to form an integral part of Nazi ideology.

Rather, Zola's works come to express an increasingly strong conviction about the relationship between life, society, and health. A healthy nation is one in which reproduction is the sole purview of healthy, married, morally-upright heterosexuals. The entire *Rougon-Macquart,* as well as the sagas that follow it, are an extended study of and warning against the dangers posed to society when "corrupt," "invalid," or "perverse" individuals propagate and infect the social body with degeneracy. It is therefore crucial to analyze and critique the categories by which individuals are designated as normal or abnormal, fit or infirm, righteous or crooked, in the goal of *de*naturalizing, historicizing, and repairing the ideological violence that they enact.

The mythology of modern France elaborated in the Rougon-Macquart often manifests metonymically and onomastically. Take, for example, the lead character of *La curée*, Renée Saccard, who experiences multiple rebirths throughout the novel: upon leaving the convent where she had been sequestered since childhood, in her fall from grace after becoming pregnant from an undisclosed rape, in her post-miscarriage ascent to the fabulous life of *nouvelle riche* married to Aristide Saccard (né Rougon), and upon the second lapse constituted by her torrid affair with her step-son, Maxime. Renée is also a symbol for the city in which she resides and whose own rebirth at the hands of Baron Haussmann is underway. Both trajectories are defined by an equivocation between progress and excess: just as Renée rises phoenix-like from the ashes of her checkered and profoundly shameful past, the new Paris—with its broadened, unbarricadable avenues and luxurious *grands magasins*—slowly rises from the rubble of a capital stained the blood of the myriad uprisings and revolutions of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the price of Renée's splendid new life is Aristide's dirty speculation—the same speculation fueling the destruction of much of Paris and the displacement of its denizens.[33]

Allegorically, then, the rebirths of *La curée*—those of Renée, of Aristide, and of Paris—are always failed or monstrous ones: it is not the phoenix but rather the chimera that best exemplifies these archetypes of Second Empire Paris. They are defined first and foremost by the hybridity, artificiality, and corruption that characterize their physical existence and moral development. That Zola is often ambivalent towards modernity becomes clear in his analyses of its various processes, which are always in tension with themselves and with the civilizational teleology to which he so desperately wished to contribute.[34] In the Rougon-Macquart, technological advancement inevitably finds its corollaries in destruction or denaturation, just as economic and moral liberalization finds its own in extreme income inequality and libidinous excess. Hence the importance, in Zola's eyes, of the diagnostically-oriented writing practice unique to the naturalist project.

Yet the novelist is equipped with a set of tools quite different from the physician's or the chemist's: allegory and symbolism, the buttresses of myth; devices of form and style, such as metonymy or personification; and more self-reflexive techniques like ekphrasis and mise en abyme. Naturalist writing, by dint of its insistence on analysis and provocation, requires that such rhetorical devices function in specific ways: they must be firmly anchored in the minutiae of quotidian phenomena. When this fine-grained attention to materiality and ecology is articulated through a literary sensibility that is simultaneously writerly, diagnostic, and didactic, the result is what I will call a poetics of heterotopia, an aesthetic practice that foregrounds stylistically the material juxtapositions, fusions, and accumulations of the age. The wager of Zolian naturalism—that it could be both impartial and corrective—is also its greatest paradox. There is always an underlying presupposition of pathology, be it at the level of the individual or

33. My analysis will focus primarily on Renée's presentation and roles in the novel; however, Aristide and Maxime's names also carry allegorical significance. "Maxime" evokes the Latin *maximus,* the superlative of *magnus,* great or large, also the root of the English "maximum." The son of a crooked financier and the sickly beauty Angèle Sicardot, he incarnates the pathological excess and congenital languor of Second Empire wealth. Aristide's self-transformation from a Rougon to a Saccard is explicitly detailed early in the novel (cf. p. 364): not only "is there money in the name," but the name also recalls the related expressions *sac d'argent, mettre à sac, saccager, saccageur.*

34. For more in-depth studies of these tensions and how they serve as motors of narrative progress, see Michael Serres, *Feux et signaux de brume* (Paris: Grasset, 1975) and Geoff Woolen, "Zola's Thermodynamic Vitalism," *Romance Studies* 3, no. 2 (1985): 48-62.

of the social. In *La curée,* this is most visible in the formal reciprocity between characters and their environment; indeed, the settings of the novel function as characters in and of themselves. An astounding number of pages are devoted to their description—but not merely as the static backdrops against which the action of the plot unfolds. Rather, Zola is highly preoccupied with the dynamic ways in which his characters are imbricated in their surroundings, how they act on them, and how their lives and decisions are shaped by them in turn. The locus of such interactions is the Hôtel Saccard, the opulent urban residence newly built by Aristide using funds acquired through illegal real estate speculation.

Before looking more closely at the heterotopic qualities of this particular site, I should note its participation in the relationship of compartmentalization both with its individual rooms and with the city more broadly. Spatially, this takes the form of a series of *emboîtements*: Aristide, Renée, and Maxime move, in circuits specific to each character, through the rooms and passages of the *hôtel,* itself located in a particular neighborhood (Batignolles-Monceau, a relatively chic neighborhood already in the grips of renovation), which has a special significance to the surrounding city. Symbolically and formally, the elements of this series are linked metonymically: each mirrors and amplifies the pathology of the former of which it is part. In this way, the story of the Saccards is also that of Paris under Napoléon III: whereas the former is slowly, arduously dissolved by the unnatural couplings of incest, the latter is demolished and remade in the speculative frenzy of Haussmanization. The ironic result of both processes is the generation of the degenerate, an overabundance of the physical by-products of greed and modern capitalism. Compare the description of the façade of the Hôtel Saccard to that of Paris in thrall to investors and developers:

> C'était un étalage, une profusion, un écrasement de richesses […]. Autour des fenêtres, le long des corniches, couraient des enroulements de rameaux et de fleurs; il y avait des balcons pareils à des corbeilles de verdure, que soutenaient de grandes femmes nues […] çà et là, étaient collés des écussons de fantaisie, des grappes, des roses, toutes les efflorescences possibles de la pierre et du marbre. […] Autour du toit, régnait une balustrade sur laquelle étaient posées […] des urnes où des flammes de pierre flambaient. Et là, entre les œils-de-bœuf des mansardes, qui s'ouvraient dans un fouillis incroyable de fruits et de feuillages, s'épanouissaient […] les frontons des pavillons, au milieu desquels reparaissaient les grandes femmes nues, jouant avec des pommes, prenant des poses, parmi des poignées de jonc.[35]

> La ville n'était plus qu'une grande débauche de millions et de femmes. Le vice, venu de haut, coulait dans les ruisseaux, s'étalait dans les bassins remontait dans les jets d'eau des jardins, pour retomber sur les toits, en pluie fine et pénétrante. Et il semblait, la nuit […] que la Seine charriât […] les ordures de la cité, miettes tombées de la table, nœuds de dentelle laissés sur les divans, chevelures oubliées dans les fiacres, billets de banque glissés des corsages, tout ce que la brutalité du désir et le contentement immédiat de l'instinct jettent à la rue, après l'avoir brisé et souillé.[36]

Here, we begin to see the thematic and rhetorical fixations that will structure the remainder of the novel: the empty ostentation of the *étalage,* the recurrent tension between the organic and the mineral as well as between the natural and the artificial, the equivocal but insidious iconization

35. Zola, *La curée*, 34.
36. Zola, *La curée,* 162.

of woman, and the immorality that manages to saturate all levels of society and that manifests in the material of civilization.

Nowhere are these concerns and strategies more in evidence than in the passages occuring in the infamous *serre* of the *hôtel.* It's no coincidence that this space, which will play a major role throughout *La curée* as the epicenter of nouveau-riche luxuriance and as the site of Renée and Maxime's torrid affair, is described immediately after the façade. Its exterior, like that of the rest of the edifice, is encumbered with a glut of discordant décor; it's "un des échantillons les plus caractéristiques du style Napoléon III, ce bâtard opulent de tous les styles."[37] The appositive here is deliciously ambiguous: at first glance, the reader could easily mistake Napoléon III himself as a *bâtard opulent,* an insult thoroughly in alignment with Zola's anti-imperial sentiments.

A parallel is also drawn between the large glass windows of the *serre* and those of "les glaces des grands magasins modernes, mises là pour étaler au-dehors le faste intérieur, ces familles de petits-bourgeois apercevaient des coins de meubles, des bouts d'étoffes, des morceaux de plafonds d'une richesse éclatante, dont la vue les clouait d'admiration et d'envie au beau milieu des allées."[38] Unlike the moneyed, titled class of the Ancien Régime, which poured its wealth into walled chateaus and velvet-curtained *hôtels particuliers,* the domicile of the Second Empire parvenu is organized according to the logic of the *étalage,* the window display. The same new technologies and materials—foremost among them, construction in glass and steel—that allowed for the rise of the department store and train station also authorized the inversion of the domestic spectacle. Now, the opulence of the interior is exposed to the masses as private life becomes a public commodity accessible to any passerby and attainable by anyone willing to try their hand at the unsavory dealings of the financial underworld.

The greater part of descriptive detail is reserved, however, for the greenhouse's interior. It is also here that the greenhouse's properly heterotopic effects are felt to the greatest degree. Though the term makes a cursory appearance in the preface to *Les mots et les choses,* Foucault does not expound on the concept until a year later, during a presentation at an architecture conference in 1967.[39] Distinct from utopias, which are fundamentally placeless ("sans lieu réel"), heterotopias are "sortes de contre-emplacements, sortes d'utopies effectivement réalisées dans lesquelles les emplacements réels [...] que l'on peut trouver à l'intérieur de la culture sont à la fois représentés, contestés, et inversés."[40] He draws on a number of different examples to both create a typology of heterotopias (including heterotopias of crisis, deviation, and time) and to outline six principles of heterotopic space (they are near-universal, multifunctional, juxtapositional, temporally heterogeneous, differentially accessible, and instrumentally linked to other real spaces). One of Foucault's many examples is the *maison close,* or brothel. Although he does not describe how a brothel mobilizes all six heterotopic principles, one might apply his "heterotopology" to that particular space. Brothels, in one form or another, have existed in most cultures throughout history (first principle).[41] Brothels generally function commercially for clients, but residentially for sex workers (second principle). Brothels as a whole are composed of a collection of juxtaposed rooms, each used by a different worker for a variety of clients, according to various erotic proclivities (third principle). Clients of brothels are granted a set

37. Zola, *La curée*, 35.
38. Zola, *La curée*, 35.
39. Michel Foucault, "Des espaces autres" in *Dits et écrits I* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 1571.
40. Foucault, "Des espaces autres," 1574.
41. This is Foucault's contention, not mine.

amount of time for a given rate, and allotted times may or may not align between clients (fourth principle). Access to brothels is often coded, tightly controlled, and dependent on prior knowledge of the brothel's very existence (fifth principle). Finally, the brothel bedroom and bed serve a function that the solitary or conjugal bed does not, despite physical identity; they are their obverse, sites of clandestine sexuality rather than legally or religiously sanctioned sexuality (sixth principle). This last principle is of particular note: a sociological study of a society's views on sexuality would remain incomplete were it to focus solely on legitimate or legitimizing forms of sexuality; the brothel bedroom would complete (or at least enrich) such a study precisely because it is a site of transgression or deviance.

Importantly, Foucault refers to heterotopias as *espaces autres,* an expression confounding in its ambiguity and polysemy. I propose to understand heterotopias as both "other spaces" and "spaces of otherness," that is, spaces that have a special meaning in relation to those that surround them ("l'espace réel") and from which they are inevitably detached, both physically and conceptually. It is precisely this intertwining of the real and that conceptual that affords heterotopias their paradoxical force as exemplars *and* counter-examples; they reflect the state of reality at a given time and place, but also refract it such that it is rendered unfamiliar and open to interpretation and contestation.

Heterotopias are in one sense static in their lived materiality, and in another dynamic in their ability to provoke fundamental shifts in our perception of the world and our place in it. Kevin Hetherington, a recent theorist of space and place, elaborates this definition by defining heterotopias as "spaces of alternate ordering... that organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them."[42] In this view, heterotopias constitute process as well as structure, that is, they are the spaces—at once physical, phenomenological, and ideological—in which the social field is crystallized, examined, and transformed. Thus, each heterotopia contains a kernel of resistance or subversion in relation to the status quo. Importantly, this resistance takes place within a field of power, opening it up for interrogation to make room for alternative ways of being and knowing. This is the principal function of heterotopia according to Didier Eribon, who has written extensively on Foucault and his legacy: "Grâce [à ces espaces autres] on échapperait, autant que faire se peut, au système de rapports de force et à l'opposition entre technologies du pouvoir et renversements tactiques, entre discours et contre-discours."[43] In this vein, I would like to revisit heterotopia, but as a literary-critical tool—one that sees literary representations as a space for the interrogation and critique of the reality they purport to describe. After all, description in naturalism is, to use Zola's terminology, provocative: the spaces of the naturalist novel do double duty as vehicles for mimesis *and* allegory. They show as well as instruct. I will argue, first, that not only do the spaces delineated in the early novels of Zola function as heterotopias, but that the formal techniques deployed to do so are heterotopic in nature.

Foucault identifies the garden as the oldest form of heterotopia due to its "pouvoir de juxtaposer en un seul lieu réel plusieurs espaces, plusieurs emplacements qui sont en eux-mêmes incompatibles."[44] The greenhouse, in its bourgeois ostentation, redoubles this juxtapositional power. Like Eastern Asian gardens (Foucault uses the term "oriental"), it is a meticulously ordered microcosm whose walkways meet in the middle at a water fountain, a "nombril du

42. Kevin Hetherington, *The Badlands of Modernity: Heterotopia and Social Ordering* (New York: Routledge, 1997), viii.

43. Didier Eribon, *Réflexions sur la question gay* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 465.

44. Foucault, "Des espaces autres," 1576.

monde." The Saccard greenhouse, however, draws its inventory of exotic flowers and poisonous plants from the farthest reaches of the French Empire:

> C'était le rut immense de la serre, de ce coin de forêt vierge où flambaient les verdures et les floraisons des tropiques. [...] D'habitude, les amants se couchaient sous le Tanghin de Madagascar, sous cet arbuste empoisonné dont la jeune femme avait mordu une feuille… Et ils étaient à mille lieues de Paris, en dehors de la vie facile du Bois et des salons officiels, dans le coin d'une forêt de l'Inde, de quelque temple monstrueux…[45]

This is clearly not the "hétérotopie heureuse et universalisante" that Foucault had in mind in his elaboration of the concept. The reader finds herself immersed in a toxic mass of vegetal life extracted via a colonial enterprise spanning numerous locales and cultures. The material artificiality of the façade, where the mineral mimicked the vegetal and the animal, is here replaced by the artificiality of incompatibility as plant species of radically different origins—in this passage, Madagascar and India—are grouped together for mere decoration. This pairing of the artificial and the superfluous finds its human analog in Maxime and Renée, whose relationship is doubly scandalous, first because of their legal and moral incompatibility as step-mother and step-son, and second because of its lack of procreative impetus. Excess begets excess, and the glittering varnish of wealth is the precondition of its most deleterious effects. Taken together, the *serre* is a sweeping condemnation of the political-economic system of the Second Empire and the moral corruption Zola saw as its base.

The greenhouse's spatial ambiguity also belies its heterotopic functioning. Even the task of translating the term that designates it—*serre*—presents problems. It is not exactly a greenhouse or a hothouse in the traditional sense: to the contrary, it lacks true utility, as all of its plants are poisonous and cultivated solely for their beauty and exoticism. "Conservatory" is closer to the original meaning, but the size and labyrinthine nature of the *serre* approximate the grand ornamental garden more than the more modest enclosed glass structures common in 19th-century aristocratic homes. Though derived from a different root, the noun *serre* also calls to mind the verb *serrer* (to squeeze, grip, or pinch) as well as the noun *serres* (talons). These associations, along with other forms of personification and metonymy that I will examine shortly, lend ballast to the notion of space as character in *La curée.* The greenhouse seems to hold the furtive lovers in its sensuously lethal embrace until they are devoured by it.

Though attached to the main *hôtel,* access to the *serre* is indirect and highly controlled. Maxime sneaks in through the garden proper while Renée enters via her *petit salon,* a chamber forbidden to her husband. In this way, they succeed in sealing off this part of the house for their private use: "Ce coin de l'hôtel, il est vrai, leur appartenait."[46] Paradoxically, this partitioning is rendered mostly useless, as their boldness encourages them to be "d'une impudence parfaite."[47] Precisely because they believe themselves secure, they take fewer precautions to remain hidden, despite knowing that the greenhouse's grand plate-glass windows place them in an almost panoptic field of visibility. These spatial contradictions recall those of the heterotopia, "[qui] suppose toujours un système d'ouverture et de fermeture qui, à la fois, les isole et les rend pénétrables. […] On croit pénétrer et on est, par le fait même qu'on entre, exclu."[48] Renée and Maxime are excluded not only from the main house, but from the libidinous economies it instantiates and reinforces. Here, she bypasses the heterosexist reproductive imperatives required

45. Zola, *La curée,* 224.
46. Zola, *La curée*, 220.
47. Zola, *La curée*, 220.
48. Foucault, "Des espaces autres," 1579.

by her marriage, normally fulfilled behind the closed doors of her husband's suite. In the *serre,* she stakes a claim to her own sexual autonomy as allowed by this intricate system of open closure that shamelessly declares independence while simultaneously dissimulating it. This allows Renée to profit from the system while also subverting it; the greenhouse is the closest she can come to escaping the impasse of patriarchy.

Zola articulates—quite explicitly—the ways in which these transgressions take place on the level of the body. It is these descriptions that best incarnate the poetics of heterotopia subtending and animating what would otherwise be mere observation. It is effectively impossible to analyze the heterotopic qualities of the *serre* as a material space without also considering how it functions as a space of representation and allegory. The most salient hallmark of heterotopic description is the thematics of hybridity, interpenetration, and symbiosis underlying the scenes of Renée and Maxime's midnight liaisons. This thematics is intricately bound up with Zola's condemnation of any embodiment or embodied act falling outside the purview of the patriarchal order: "Et c'était surtout dans la serre que Renée était l'homme... La serre aimait, brûlait avec eux. Dans l'air alourdi, dans la clarté blanchâtre de la lune, ils voyaient le monde étrange des plantes qui les entouraient se mouvoir confusément, échanger des étreintes."[49] The chain of contrasts depicting the greenhouse suggests unnatural mixing and denaturation: the invisible weightlessness of "air" is immediately deformed through the imperfect assonance and semantic opposition of *alourdi*—"made heavy" or "hanging heavy." Rather than *clarté blanche* ("white luminosity"), the moon's pure light is marred by the pejorative suffix *-âtre,* leaving us with something closer to "off-white glow" or "whitish glow." Even the juxtaposition of *confusément* ("indistinctly," from the same root as *confondre*: "to mix, combine") and *échanger* ("to exchange") is interrupted, disjointed by an intervening comma rather than by the conjunction *et*.

This is a descriptive mode in which signification itself is constantly confounded, partially undone, while remaining functional and perversely productive. The mimetic qualities of literary language—which would seek to represent the scene in psychological and material detail—subvert themselves in their enactment of transgression, which now exceeds the incestuous and spills over into gender itself. In the *serre,* Renée takes control, assuming the active, dominating role of the man rather than repeating the trauma of victimhood to male aggression. The logical result of this reversal is that Maxime must play the part of feminine complicity: "Renée était l'homme, la volonté passionnée et agissante. Maxime subissait. Cet être neutre, blond et joli, frappé dès l'enfance dans sa virilité, devenait, aux bras curieux de la jeune femme, une grande fille, avec ses membres épilés, ses maigreurs gracieuses d'éphèbe romain. […] Renée jouissait de ses dominations, elle pliait sous sa passion cette créature où le sexe hésitait toujours."[50] The lovers' relationship, catalyzed by a sexuality that can function only in excess but never with reproductive or social success, echoes and is echoed by the self-negating syntax of the *serre.* The effeminate Maxime, who until recently was more of a plaything than a potential love interest for Renée and her entourage, here finds a passive role aligned with his gender presentation. However, this is only possible because his stepmother, formerly meek and victimized due to her status as woman, casts off her mantle of feminine fragility in favor of one of masculine domination.

The couple functions as a Zolian model of perfectly perverse complementarity, of a social and erotic deviancy that has reached such intensity that it has resulted in total inversion. The

49. Zola, *La curée*, 223.
50. Zola, *La curée,* 222.

serre's word pairings, whose internal oppositions poeticized the setting of Maxime and Renée's transgression, are here correlated with the subversive union of two halves that form a sterile, unnatural whole. Spatial description prefigures moral corruption as well as queer embodiments and acts. It is not just that character and space are bound; their binding is a specifically naturalist and heterotopic strategy that rhetorically amplifies the moralistic thrust of the novel. For Zola, the insidious ecology of the Saccard greenhouse is a proxy for the sins of modern France:

> Maxime, en lui [à Renée] révélant un frisson nouveau, compléta ses toilettes folles, son luxe prodigieux, sa vie à outrance. Il mit dans sa chair la note excessive qui chantait déjà autour d'elle. Il fut l'amant assorti aux modes et aux folies de l'époque. Ce joli jeune homme, dont les vestons montraient les formes grêles, *cette fille manquée*, qui se promenait sur les boulevards, la raie au milieu de la tête, avec de petits rires et des sourires ennuyés, se trouva être, aux mains de Renée, une de ces débauches de décadence qui, à certaines heures, dans une nation pourrie, épuisent une chair et détraque une intelligence.[51]

The greenhouse, already a heterotopia, expands—through rhetorical maneuvers that are themselves heterotopic in nature—beyond its own indeterminate boundaries to become an allegory for what Zola saw as a nation fallen victim to its own progress. Analogously, Renée and Maxime are magnified beyond the specificity of their blood and circumstance to stand in as archetypes of the nouveau riche, creatures that defy the heteronormative logic of the natural world and the social order. The *serre,* mobilized by descriptive techniques that make it the vehicle for the Zolian polemic, becomes one of the novel's most potent heterotopias, a pseudo-utopia in which real force relations are, to use Foucault's language, "represented, contested, and reversed."

The unnatural mixing characteristic of the *serre* and of its furtive denizens also blurs the lines separating the vegetal, animal, and mineral. If juxtaposition (both textual and corporeal) is the primary structuring device operating across the various materialities of the greenhouse to unsettle their hierarchies and reconfigure their relationships, other figures of style appear to dissolve and reassemble these material categories into marvelous, terrifying new composites. Domination becomes predation as Renée takes her place among the monstrous figures of the *serre*:

> [Maxime] vit Renée agenouillée, penché, avec des yeux fixes, une attitude brutale qui lui fit peur. Les cheveux tombés, les épaules nues, elle s'appuyait sur ses poings, l'échine allongé, pareille à une grande chatte aux yeux phosphorescents. Le jeune homme, couché sur le dos, aperçut, au-dessus des épaules de cette adorable bête amoureuse qui le regardait, le sphinx de marbre, dont la lune éclairait les cuisses luisantes. Renée avait la pose et le sourire du monstre à tête de femme, et dans ses jupons dénoués, elle semblait la sœur blanche de ce dieu noir.[52]

The demarcations between human and beast, organic and inorganic, terrestrial and fantastical are obliterated as the lovers fade into the carnal symphony of the greenhouse. Their wild liaisons come to represent the untamable, instinctual force of life untethered from convention or duty. For Zola, this was the pinnacle of indulgence: not only are the lovers reduced to their basest drives, but entirely lost to them: "Maxime et Renée, les sens faussés, se sentaient emportés dans ces noces puissantes de la terre. […] La sève qui montait aux flancs des arbres les pénétrait, eux aussi, leur donnait des désirs fous de croissance immédiate, de reproduction gigantesque. Ils

51. Zola, *La curée,* 223 (italics added).
52. Zola, *La curée,* 222.

entraient dans le rut de la serre."[53] Their thirst for immediate growth and reproduction on a grand scale are the domestic analogue to Aristide's mad desire to multiply his ventures in speculation. Both ventures, anchored as they are in the unscrupulous egotism of unbridled consumption, ultimately prove more destructive than creative or restorative.

What first appeared as a kind of deviant symbiosis shifts into something darkly and reciprocally osmotic. As in the passage above, with the "sap rising up the tree's flanks to penetrate [Maxime et Renée], the one-way metonymic absorption of the lovers into their surroundings is mirrored by the personification of the *serre* itself, its plants assuming the sensual forms of fleshy existence:

> Autour d'eux, les Palmiers, les grands Bambous de l'Inde se haussaient, allaient dans le centre, où ils se penchaient et mêlaient leurs feuilles avec des attitudes chancelantes d'amants lassés. Plus bas, les Fougères, les Ptérides, les Alsophila étaient comme des dames vertes, qui […] attendaient l'amour. À côté d'elles, les feuilles torses, tachées de rouge, des Bégonia […] mettaient une suite vague de meurtrissures et de pâleurs, que les amants ne s'expliquaient pas, et où ils retrouvaient parfois des rondeurs de hanches et de genoux, vautres à terre, sous la brutalité de caresses sanglantes.[54]

The heteroclite nature of the greenhouse reaches maximum intensity in these passages, the poetics of heterotopia—of mixing, merging, and collapsing—reproducing rhetorically both the botanical and carnal debauchery that Zola deploys to index the decadence of the age. Subject-object relations, along with their attendant hierarchies and dynamics of influence, are blurred and inverted. After all, according to Foucault, the ideal model of the distinction between utopia and heterotopia is the mirror: in reflecting ourselves and the world around us, we are faced at the same time with both our own reality, as well as with a sort of counter-reality that serves to throw its original into sharp relief: "Le miroir fonctionne comme une hétérotopie en ce sens qu'il rend cette place que j'occupe au moment où je me regarde dans la glace, à la fois absolument réelle, en liaison avec tout l'espace qui l'entoure, et absolument irrélle, puisqu'elle est obligée, pour être perçue, de passer par ce point virtuel qui est là-bas."[55] This leveling effect, which in objectifying and defamiliarizing the subject actually ends up reconfiguring the subject's perception of itself and its situatedness, is what makes the novel such a powerful tool for cultural criticism. Here, metonymy can be seen as a heterotopic gesture to the extent that in contravening the logic of self-identity by positing an equivalence between a part and its whole, a host of distinctions (individual/collective, agent/system, passivity/activity, consumer/producer) that could otherwise obscure a more nuanced examination of the issues at stake in the novel are exposed and unsettled. Zolian description finds its critical force in treating situation and system at both the microcosmic and macrocosmic levels: the erotic dynamics of the *serre* should not—and, I would argue, cannot—be fully appreciated outside of their relationship with other much larger systems: colonialism, urbanization, industrialization, to name a few.

If metonymy serves as a vehicle for the de-hierarchization and hybridization of material and social configurations in the greenhouse passages, another technique performs a similar but distinct type of transpositioning on the level of language and concept: parataxis. Paratactic language is first and foremost a flattening device: rather than generating meaning vertically through grammatical subordination, enclosure, and antecedence (all attributes of hypotaxis), it arranges meaning on a horizontal plane according to a logic of accumulation and coextension. In

53. Zola, *La curée,* 224.
54. Zola, *La curée,* 223.
55. Foucault, "Des espaces autres," 1575.

simpler terms, description in *Les Rougon-Macquart* often favors a more list-like format over long, conjunction-heavy sentences:

> Mais, à mesure que leurs regards s'enfonçaient dans les coins de la serre, l'obscurité s'emplissait d'une débauche de feuilles et de tiges plus furieuse: ils ne distinguaient plus, sur les gradins, les Maranta douces comme du velours, les Gloxinia aux cloches violettes, les Dracena semblables à des lames de vieille laque vernie […]. Les jets souples des Vanilles, des Coques du Levant, des Quisqualus, des Bauhinia étaient les bras interminables d'amoureux qu'on ne voyait pas, et qui allongeaient éperdument leur étreinte, pour amener à eux toutes les joies éparses.[56]

Again in evidence here is the reciprocal intermingling of character and setting as the plants' tendrils are anthropomorphized into embracing arms and the lovers themselves bleed into a wild debauchery of leaves and twigs. After the first few clauses introduced by the coordinating conjunction *mais* (which, in suggesting an opposition to or development of the preceding lines, suggestions continuity rather than disjunction) and the subordinating locution *à mesure que,* we encounter the colon that acts as a floodgate for a series of nouns and their accompanying adjectival and prepositional phrases.

The links in this chain of meaning, though numerous, are also tenuous: details are not subsumed to one another in orderly progression, but heaped on top of one another, vying for an impossible primacy. The rhythmic effects of parataxis are striking in their acceleration and accumulation, the lack of internal structure generating a bombardment of fragments of equal salience. A dizzying array, to be sure, and all the more so due to the semantic opacity of the nouns at the center of each chunk. Barring horticulturists and botanists, the casual reader is left unmoored in a sea of alien terms: maranta, gloxinia, dracaena, coque du Levant, quiscalus and bauhinia. The inclusion of the genus quiscalus is particularly intriguing since it refers not to plants, but to birds (in English, the grackle). In fact, this genus and several of its subspecies had already been identified well before Zola was writing, first by Louis Jean Pierre Vieillot in 1816 then by George Robert Gray in 1840.[57] I am therefore inclined to understand this strange addition as another instance of ambiguity between the animal and the vegetal, jumbled together and ultimately merging in the feverish alterity of the *serre.*

Here the reader returns to the realm of chaotic, exotic heterogeneity: an adjacency of disparate parts never capable of reconciliation into a coherent whole, each indexing a different cross-section of material reality, yet whose incorporation into an artificial unity epitomizes the heterotopic hodgepodge of Zolian modernity. Parataxis proves to be another technique for enacting the physical and social configurations unique to Second Empire Paris, concentrated here in the erotic *entassement*—piling-up, jumbled accumulation—of the greenhouse.

Intermediacy, Indeterminacy, and Androgyny: The Case of Zola's *Entremetteuse*

Entassement also characterizes another important heterotopia in *La curée,* albeit one less central than the greenhouse: the hybrid space occupied by Sidonie Rougon, herself a kind of hybrid creature. It is Sidonie, one of Zola's most glorious archetypes of the *entremetteuse,* who

56. Zola, *La curée,* 224.

57. See Louis-Pierre Vieillot, *Analyse d'une nouvelle ornithologie élémentaire* (Paris: Deterville, 1816), 36, and George Robert Gray, *A List of the Genera of Birds: With an Indication of the Typical Species of Each Genus* (London: R. and J.E. Taylor, 1840), 41.

inculcates her brother Aristide with the idea of marrying Renée, even as his first wife, Angèle, is on her deathbed. The same type of fluid ordering that characterized the greenhouse on the level of material, gender, and language reappears in full force in the descriptive passages devoted to Sidonie's apartment and boutique. She is a procuress, a crafty, industrious, and independent businesswoman whose commercial activity relies upon her liminal social and gender status. The *entremetteuse* is not, after all, far from the *entrepreneur*: despite the difference in sex, both operate as free agents under capitalism. The *entremetteuse*—literally, the "one who puts herself between," from the verb *s'entremettre,* "to mediate, intervene, or intercede"—serves an intermediary in business transactions between private parties. Often these transactions exceed the commercial and spill over into the legal, social, and conjugal; just as Sidonie facilitates inter- and intra-class marriages, she is also a buyer and seller of miscellanea and keen manipulator of the laws governing ownership, transferal of property, and debt. As an *entremetteuse,* Sidonie has the paradoxical status of being both peripheral and central: in contrast to the *entrepreneur*—"the one who undertakes (a task, an action, a project, etc.)"—her efficacy lies not in hierarchy and incorporation but in autonomy and obliquity, in always *facilitating* shady dealings while remaining at distance from their conclusion. In this she is distinct from Aristide, who, though also operating laterally (through the labyrinthine channels of bureaucracy), is far more devoted to amassing wealth and influence on the grandest of scales. It is the thrill of the game in all its logistical and transactional complexity that drives Sidonie, rather than money or power as such: "Si Mme Sidonie ne faisait pas fortune, c'était qu'elle travaillait souvent par amour de l'art. Aimant la procédure, oubliant ses affaires pour celles des autres, elle se laissait dévorer par les huissiers, ce qui, d'ailleurs, lui procurait des jouissances que connaissent seules les gens processifs."[58] Like Renée and Maxime, the source of her "thrills" lies in the manipulation of normative systems of power and gender, into which she must first be utterly subsumed. The result is strikingly similar:

> La femme se mourait en elle; elle n'était plus qu'un agent d'affaires, un placeur battant à toute heure le pavé de Paris, ayant dans son panier légendaire les marchandises les plus équivoques […]. Petite, maigre, blafarde, vêtue de cette mince robe noire qu'on eût dit taillée dans la toge d'un plaideur, elle s'était ratatinée, et à la voir filer le long des maisons, on l'eût prise pour un saute-ruisseau déguisé en fille.[59]

Feminine agency is again coded as an equivocal femininity that is also a failed masculinity. Sidonie embodies a disconcerting androgyny that is entirely bound up with her status as *entremetteuse*: "Mme Sidonie avait trente-cinq ans; mais elle s'habillait avec une telle insouciance, elle était si peu femme dans ses allures qu'on l'eût jugée beaucoup plus vieille. À la vérité, elle n'avait pas d'âge."[60] In elevating business to art, she eschews any allegiance to standards of feminine domesticity and beauty. If Renée's monstrosity is that of the living statue turned carnal sphynx, Sidonie's is that of the vampire: she is thin, bloodless (here the term "blafarde," "pallid," recalls the "blanchâtre" of the greenhouse), dressed as if in mourning, and as preternaturally tireless and agile as a "saute-ruisseau," one of the sprightly courier-boys of the era.

Sidonie's equivocal, composite nature is also reflected in the spaces she inhabits when she is not dashing about Paris :

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58. Zola, *La curée,* 84.
59. Zola, *La curée,* 84.
60. Zola, *La curée,* 82.

> Elle habitait, rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière, un petit entresol, composé de trois pièces. Elle louait aussi la boutique du bas, située sous son appartement, une boutique étroite et mystérieuse, dans laquelle elle prétendait tenir un commerce de dentelles […] mais, à l'intérieur, on eût dit une antichambre, aux boiseries luisantes, sans la moindre apparence de marchandises. […] La boutique et l'entresol […] communiquaient par un escalier caché dans le mur.[61]

The enigma of Sidonie's residence is that it, like her, is composed almost entirely of intermediacies and artifices. On the rare occasions that she is not serving as a go-between in clandestine business dealings, she inhabits an entresol, a type of small apartment between the ground floor and first floor, literally a "between-floor." The stairway, always an intermediate space, here is doubly so, concealed as it is in another: a wall. The stairway's role has even greater importance in this strange configuration, since nothing is as it seems. While she does keep small haberdashery specializing in lace, this is primarily a front for selling other assorted large merchandise stored in her entresol, giving the ground-floor boutique "l'air discret et voilé d'une pièce d'attente, s'ouvrant sur quelque temple inconnu."[62] The adjoining apartment, then, becomes the true commercial space, with the one exception of Sidonie's bedroom. It is not just she who uses the secret stairway, but any client interested in inspecting her illicit goods. In fact, there is an elaborate system in place for distinguishing and redirecting potential customers according to their mercantile savoir-faire:

> Les clients qui venaient pour les marchandises de l'entresol, entraient et sortaient par une porte cochère que la maison avait sur la rue Papillon; il fallait être dans le mystère du petit escalier pour connaître le trafic en partie double de la marchande de dentelles. À l'entresol, elle se nommait madame Touche, du nom de son mari, tandis qu'elle n'avait mis que son prénom sur la porte du magasin, ce qui la faisait appeler généralement madame Sidonie.[63]

We also discover that due to the infrequency of customers seeking lace, Sidonie removes the doorbell entirely.[64] To summarize: we are left with two spaces—boutique and entresol—each endowed with two different functions—haberdashery/antechamber and domicile/warehouse respectively—and each accessible by a pseudo-entrance that is just as often a *porte condamnée*: a door with no bell and a concealed staircase whose existence is known only by a select few. Each business is run by the same woman under different pseudonyms, one connoting the respectability of a married *entrepreneure*, and the other suggesting the unscrupulous cunning of an autonomous *entremetteuse*. And what precisely is Madame Sidonie selling from her repurposed entresol? A little bit of everything, it turns out :

> Elle y avait vendu des objets en caoutchouc, manteaux, souliers, bretelles, etc.; puis on y vit successivement une huile nouvelle pour faire pousser les cheveux, des appareils orthopédiques, une cafetière automatique, invention brevetée, dont l'exploitation lui donna bien du mal. Lorsque son frère vint la voir, elle plaçait des pianos, son entresol était encombré de ces instruments; il y avait des pianos jusque dans sa chambre à coucher…[65]

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61. Zola, *La curée,* 81.

62. Zola, *La curée,* 81. Also notable here is the parallel between the "undiscovered temple" of Sidonie's boutique and the "monstrous temple" of the Saccard conservatory.

63. Zola, *La curée,* 82.

64. Zola, *La curée,* 81.

65. Zola, *La curée,* 81.

This "pêle-mêle" of assorted objects, related in list form, recalls the paratactic language of the *serre*, which I identified as a rhetorical translation of that space's heterotopic qualities. There, parataxis (along with the metonymic bleeding of character into setting and vice-versa) was an enactment of the material juxtaposition of incommensurable elements in a single space, which served at once to represent and contest the conditions of possibility of the greenhouse itself; it allowed Zola to both depict the decadent excess of bourgeois space—and the colonial enterprise more broadly—and critique it. Other parallels with the Hôtel Saccard suggest that Sidonie's establishment is a similar type of heterotopia: the artifice of its exterior, its highly compartmentalized layout, its coded and highly regulated system of entry, and the collapse of any meaningful distinction between public space and private space.

Sidonie also functions as one of several foils for her sister-in-law. Renée, reduced to the status of thing through the objectifying and reifying exigencies of Second Empire heteronormativity, becomes one with the glamorously alien plants of the greenhouse. Nevertheless, she reclaims a measure of agency through strategically rejecting many of the strictures limiting her social mobility; she fails in her femininity and in her conjugal duty, launching an affair with her step-son in which she plays the role of dominator. Sidonie advances further in this vein, opening up an even more expansive space for self-determination and self-fashioning. Always the intermediary, she is the middle term between Aristide—the novel's avatar of unbridled growth and accumulation—and Renée, who is just as avaricious, yet restricted by her status as a fallen woman. While Sidonie is never described sympathetically, one does detect a grudging admiration in Zola's accounts of her assiduity and passion. She works for the love of her art and according to her litigious inclinations, unlike Renée, whose greed and lust fix her on a path to financial and moral destitution.

Sidonie undergoes a metonymic treatment akin to Renée's, but rather than becoming part of the hodgepodge of her entresol-depot, she becomes its human satellite, circulating through the topographic and social fabric of the city, trading in information as well as in material goods: "Le gain le plus clair était encore les confidences qu'elle recevait partout et qui la mettaient sur la piste des bons coups et des bonnes aubaines. Vivant chez les autres, dans les affaires des autres, elle était un véritable répertoire vivant d'offres et de demandes."[66] Sidonie is endowed with a savoir-faire à la Rougon: she recognizes that knowledge is power, not unlike Aristide in his quest to exploit the information he gleaned in the bowels of the *mairie* to thrive in speculation. That, combined with her willingness to transgress the duties of her sex, make her one of the most successful, not to mention fulfilled, characters in the novel.

Rather than using seduction or feminine charm as means to win autonomy (like Renée), she renounces these altogether and assumes her vampiric form. The decision to keep her married name is one she makes only occasionally and with extreme calculation, aware that it imparts the veneer of respectability she requires in order to maintain her less reputable dealings. For the majority of her transactions, she adopts the name Madame Sidonie. This may seem an odd gesture at first, given that the use of the title *madame* followed by a first name rather than a surname is the classic formula assumed by the female managers of *maisons closes.* Indeed, Zola tells us that "il n'y avait qu'une chose qu'elle ne vendait pas, c'était elle; non qu'elle eût des scrupules, mais parce que l'idée de ce marché ne pouvait lui venir. Elle était sèche comme une facture, froide comme un protêt, indifférente et brutale au fond comme un recors."[67] Sidonie is,

66. Zola, *La curée,* 83.
67. Zola, *La curée,* 85.

at bottom, an *entremetteuse* in the truest sense: she does not bat an eye at facilitating exchanges of flesh and coin, but never deigns to become a bargaining chip herself. She is a true mistress of modern Paris in all its heterotopic multiplicity, cognizant of the new opportunities offered by this turbulent era, and entirely willing to take advantage of them. If the *serre* acted as a heterotopia throwing into sharp relief the vast inequalities and injustices occasioned by the rise of finance capitalism, Sidonie's headquarters expose those that emerged from the black markets that were its underbelly.[68]

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Placenessness and Optimism in Huysmans's Naturalism

Although naturalism as a literary movement and as an aesthetics cohered around its most vocal and prolific champion, Émile Zola, he was far from its only adherent. Naturalism also took hold—though to a far lesser degree and with different thematic loci and formal concerns—elsewhere in Europe as well as in North America. In France, however, it became most closely associated with the circle of writers that would become known as the *groupe de Médan,* named after the location of Zola's house where he and his followers would gather and eventually produce the naturalist collection of short stories *Les soirées de Médan* in 1880.[69] Among the regular attendees, two have come to occupy prominent places in French literary history: Guy de Maupassant and Joris-Karl Huysmans. Whereas Maupassant always had a somewhat loose allegiance to the tenets of naturalism (he is not, for instance, much remembered as a naturalist today), the case of Huysmans is considerably more turbulent.

Huysmans launched his literary career as a friend and acolyte of Zola. In the uproar that followed the publication of Zola's *L'assommoir* in 1877, Huysmans wrote an impassioned and strikingly laudatory defense of the novel and its author, describing him as "le plus exquis des hommes et le plus bienveillant des maîtres."[70] The final section of this article is a marvel of comparative criticism. It becomes clear that despite finding novelty and even genius in Zola's works, Huysmans finds them lacking in other respects. Just before referring to the "grandeur shakespearienne" of the Rougon-Macquart, he evokes "la simplicité douleureuse de Zola."[71] Situating him in a line of realist novelists extending back to Balzac, Huysmans argues that "Zola diffère absolument de Flaubert et des Goncourt [...] il a l'œuvre plus bon enfant qu'eux."[72] In other terms, the great naturalist, whose cause is noble and whose compassion is real, is limited by the naïveté of his methods. Huysmans explains that Zola's innovation lies instead in his in-depth treatment of secondary characters, his depictions of crowds and masses, his empathetic portraits of working-class women, and in the way that physical objects intervene in the unfolding of narrative. He contends that his fellow naturalist Zola is "moins ciseleur, moins joailleur, mais il possède une envergure, une ampleur de style, une magnificence d'images qui demeurent sans

68. For a highly detailed naturalist treatment of the rise of finance capitalism in Paris (particularly the waxing influence of the *Bourse*), see Zola's *L'argent.*

69. For an excellent chronicle of the birth, history, and afterlife of this group, see Alain Pagès, *Zola et le groupe de Médan: Histoire d'un cercle littéraire* (Paris: Perrin, 2014).

70. Joris-Karl Huysmans, "Émile Zola et *L'assommoir*," *L'Actualité* (Bruxelles: 1876): 2, http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb32267102w.

71. Huysmans, "Émile Zola et *L'assommoir*," 8.

72. Huysmans, "Émile Zola et *L'assommoir*," 9.

égales."[73] In this view, the breadth and abundance characteristic of Zolian style go hand in hand with its dearth of psychological acuity. While Médan-era Huysmans was an adherent to naturalism's motivations and themes, he was deeply skeptical of the how Zola proposed to render them formally.

One might wonder, then, what shape a Huysmansian naturalism would assume. How would he go about matching Zola's descriptive and historical scope while developing an incisive, insightful style worthy of his contemporaries, whom Huysmans considered "plus anatomists," more anatomically-oriented, more penetrating? I will consider Huysmans's first novel, *Marthe, histoire d'une fille,* in order to resolve this question. I will show that in the nascence of his writing career, Huysmans turns to naturalism to foreground aesthetic concerns and stylistic maneuvers that foreshadow the development of what will become Huysmansian decadence. Though he toes the line of Zolian naturalism in choosing to analyze the interconnected differentials of gender, class, and space, his methods differ significantly. In lieu of the elaborate, variegated figures of style of *La curée,* Huysmans opts for a sparser prose style, one less dependent on spatial description and tending more towards the topographic and the metafictional. It is this final quality, this mise en scène of textuality in and through the text itself, that will become one of the hallmarks of his later, more radically decadent works.

Published in 1876, *Marthe* recounts the difficult life of the titular character as she ricochets between the promise of domestic life with her journalist lover, Léo, and the shady underworld of the *coulisse* and *maison close,* epitomized by her unscrupulous manager-pimp, Ginginet. In typical naturalist fashion, the reader is given a rich account of Marthe's lineage and upbringing: her mother was an artisan specializing in the labor-intensive creation of artificial pearls, and her father a painter whose health, "déjà ébranlée par des amours et des labeurs excessifs," leads him to an early grave.[74] The reader learns of the strange, grueling process of manufacturing pearls from glass, ammonia, wax, and fermented fish scales—a vile and far from lucrative operation undertaken day after day in the half-light of a damp cellar. Marthe is the false pearl of the story, a figure gleaming with the promise of beauty, but constrained by the conditions of her formation: fragile, ubiquitous, and always already precluded from the authentic luxury of the upper classes. On the one hand, her identity is fixed between the artistic excess of her sickly father and the impassive determination of her mother; on the other, it is her childhood in this putrid netherworld that makes of her "une singulière fille."[75] Huysmans follows in the footsteps of Zola by identifying the two coordinates—milieu and blood—that will fix the trajectory of her destiny:

> Des ardeurs étranges, un dégoût du métier, une haine de misère, une aspiration maladive d'inconnu, une désespérance non résignée, le souvenir poignant des mauvais jours, sans pain, près de son père malade; la conviction, née des rancunes de l'artiste dédaigné, que la protection acquise, au prix de toutes les lâchetés et de toutes le vilenies, est tout ici-bas; une appétence de bien-être et d'éclat, un alanguissement morbide, une disposition à la névrose qu'elle tenait de son père, une certaine paresse instinctive qu'elle tenait de sa mère, si brave dans les moments pénibles, si lâche quand la nécessité ne la tenaillait point, fourmillaient et bouillonnaient furieusement en elle.[76]

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73. Huysmans, "Émile Zola et *L'assommoir*," 10.

74. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* (Brussels: Jean Gay, 1876), 13, http://ark.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb30631479n.

75. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 16.

76. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 16.

Marthe's struggle is not unlike that of Renée: she too is from humble origins and has known tragedy from a young age, stacking the deck against her. She is also enmeshed in systems of power that make it very difficult to subsist outside of the bonds of marriage or concubinage. Marthe and Renée are both locked in an impossible struggle against the circumstances—environmental and hereditary—of their birth, and against the vagaries of a social field that offers them precious few paths in life.

These strictures are reflected in the spaces and places described in great detail in *Marthe,* another trait that the novel shares with *La curée.* There is a certain correspondence between the female body and its surroundings that recalls that of the Saccard greenhouse. Inanimate objects are imbued with life and agency through naturalist description, and bodies in turn become things subject to examination. Such features allow Huysmans to simultaneously emphasize the objectifying dynamics of the *maison close* as a specific type of social space, and to underline its materiality as a lived environment: "Les bijoux papillotaient, les rubis et les strass arrêtaient au passage des filées de lumière et, debout devant une glace, tournant le dos à la porte une femme, les bras levés, enfonçait une épingle dans la sombre épaisseur de sa chevelure. […] Dans ce salon, tout imprégné des odeurs furieuses de l'ambre et du patchouli, c'était un vacarme, un brouhaha, un tohu-bohu!"[77] Huysmans exchanges the heterotopic extravagance of Zolian description for a more diaphanous sketch that emphasizes trace impressions rather than the overwrought metaphorics of personification and *entassement.* Here, the gesture is subtle but effective: all it takes is the elision of what would have been a clarifying comma between "la porte" and "une femme," resulting in a *dis*placement of the syntactical agent "woman." "Woman" is thus alienated from her own agency. Instead of "a woman was turning her back to the door," the reader is confronted with the rather bizarre construction "turning her back to the door a woman." The verb *to turn* is no longer conjugated according to the subject, but stripped of any grammatical subject in the form of a present participle; if it weren't for the intervening comma, it would seem as though the mirror were turning its back to the door. For a moment, "woman" is placeless, floating between a door and disembodied raised arms, another thing among things. In the next beat, though, it becomes clear that she is not a fragment, not a subject without a predicate, but an autonomous force capable of conscious movement and reconstituted as an integral body. What was at first jewelry, light, mirror, back, woman coalesces into a woman raising her arms to put a pin in her hair.

Here is where Huysmans deviates most pointedly from the formal qualities that will become the hallmark of Zolian naturalism. Where Zola used a range of literary techniques to articulate the material and sexual excesses he perceived as the root of modern corruption, Huysmans methodically demonstrates the oscillation between the placelessness of the rebellious woman and her relegation to a limited range of prescribed places: the home, the brothel, the workshop, the stage. Marthe herself makes a series of lateral movements in an attempt to gain a sense of independence, transitioning from the *ateliers* of the pearl-makers, to the theater, to prostitution, to the streets, to working-class domesticity, back to prostitution, then back to the streets. Most often, placelessness is a circumstance outside of her control, for instance, when her theater goes bankrupt and Léo's newspaper fires him: "Le poête perdait dans cette debâcle cent francs de copie, et Marthe se trouvait sur le pavé, *sans place*. Elle pleura, dit qu'elle ne voudrait pas être à sa charge…"[78] Lacking the means to find other work, she ends up moving in with him and maintaining his apartment. Later, after a series of further misfortunes and displacements, she

77. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 30-31.

78. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 56 (italics added).

becomes a prostitute employed by her former theater manager, Ginginet. Outraged that she wants to continue seeing Léo, he declares that she has "le plus beau sort qu'une femme puisse envier," and that in exchange for this "paradise," she is ruining him: "Je n'ai pas pour mon argent; c'est mal pesé, je n'ai que des os, je demande de la réjouissance!"[79] Because she refuses to bend to his will, Marthe becomes nothing but a burden, a bad return on an already paltry investment. Ginginet asserts an ultimatum: "J'exige que tu ne le reluques plus, ton poête. S'il t'agrafait à nouveau, il aurait non-seulement la femme, mais la maîtresse. La femme, passe encore, la maîtresse, non! Voilà, décide-toi, ma fille, c'est à prendre ou à laisser. —Je laisse, dit Marthe."[80] Trapped in the impossibility of her situation, Marthe exiles herself to the streets rather than remain subject to the vagaries of Ginginet's clientele. Soon after, she returns to Léo.

Renée and Sidonie perverted—in the true sense of the term, "to turn utterly"—the spaces prescribed to them as a means of negotiating what Zola saw as the monstrous hybridity of modern Paris. In so doing, they subverted normative gender roles that would have reduced them to the roles of docile high-society wife and dowager shopkeeper. The *serre* became a living, otherworldly garden seething with erotic reversals, while the boutique-entresol was revealed to be a coded puzzle box doubling as a warehouse of black-market goods and services. If Zola's descriptive strength was in showing how women could repurpose the already malleable spaces of modernity for their own ends, Huysmans's force lies in demonstrating the looming threat of placelessness that was the precondition for such transgressions. Marthe, Renée, and Sidonie all fall short in their femininity in some way or another, whether as wives, mistresses, courtesans, or in the forms of embodiment allotted to them. The social and spatial staging of these failures in early naturalism and proto-decadence not only allows for the ethical recasting of moral failing as societal and systemic injustice, but also permits a reparative reversal by which failures can be seen as acts of resistance and empowerment. It is for these reasons that I argue that *Marthe* and *La curée* can be read as both critical and theoretical texts, as sites for the exposure of oppression and for its subversion.

Huysmans also distinguishes himself from Zola in his deliberate staging and dissolving of romantic tropes of women. Léo, Marthe's lover, is first and foremost an aspiring poet, only making a living as a journalist (until his eventual dismissal). Before he and Marthe share an apartment, her main appeal to him is that of a mistress whose ideality is linguistically indexed through the recurrent imperfect subjunctive: "C'était une fantaisie monstrueuse, de poête et d'artiste: une femme qui l'*aimât*, une femme vêtue de toilettes folles, placée dans de curieux arrêts de lumière, dans de singulières attitudes de couleurs, une femme invraisemblable […] une femme insolemment fastueuse dont les yeux *brasillassent* avec cette indéfinissable expression, cette ardeur de vie presque mélancolique…"[81] Of course, this illusion is shattered when he is forced to confront the reality of cohabitation, of Marthe in her fragile and imperfect humanity: "Qu'étaient devenues les robes traînantes, les jupes falbalassées, les corsets de soie noire, tout ce factice qu'il adorait? La comédienne, la maîtresse avait disparu, il ne restait que la bonne à tout faire."[82] Even as she searches desperately for a safe haven, Marthe is rejected for failing to meet standards of feminine beauty and conduct that are, by Léo's own assessment, impossibly high. Next to Marthe's trials and tribulations, Léo's disillusionment is trite. In staging this

79. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 95-96.
80. Huysmans, *Marthe*, 96-97.
81. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 45 (italics added).
82. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 60.

disappointment, Huysmans suggests the flimsy emptiness of the romantic myth of woman and, in the same movement, the critical force of naturalism vis-à-vis gender norms.

It is in the twelfth and final chapter of *Marthe* that Huysmans most explicitly declares his literary allegiances. This declaration, however, is fundamentally undercut by the means in which he makes it; this contradiction does not appear as such because both naturalism and decadence are still in relatively embryonic stages, not yet captured and codified by their adherents or critics. I should first note that closing chapter is one of the most intensely allegorical of the novel. It opens on an everyday scene at Lariboisière Hospital: an elderly custodian dispassionately prepares the dissection room for an upcoming anatomical demonstration to be attended by many of the institution's interns. After wiping down the tables, clearing the drains, and refilling the assorted fluids used for preservation and disinfection, he overhears a conversation between two approaching interns, one of whom recognizes the bloated body slated for autopsy. The cadaver is none other than the ignoble Ginginet, who has drunk himself to death. The young doctor who recognizes him turns out to be one of the novel's minor characters whom the reader has already encountered in passing several times: the longtime friend of Léo and fellow aspiring romantic poet, Romel. Romel explains his relationship to Ginginet to the other intern by reading a letter he has recently received from Léo himself: a marriage announcement. Léo waxes nostalgic over how cynical they once were in the folly of their youth:

> C'était banal, c'était bête.—Deux individus se réunissaient, à une heure convenue, au son d'un orgue et en présence d'invités impatients d'aller se repaître de mets qui ne leur coûteraient rien, puis, au bout d'un nombre de mois déterminés [...] ils donnaient le jour à d'affreux bambins qui piaillaient, pendant des nuits entières, sous le prétexte qu'ils souffraient des dents, et alors, dans le grésillement des pipes, nous décrétions que jamais un artiste ne devait s'enjuponner sérieusement.[83]

Why settle for such a paltry existence when the enchantment of the written word—of poetry, of lyricism, of the romantic—might afford escape from the mundane and unlock the passions and mysteries that make life worth living? Precisely because the romantic ideal is exposed, by the experience of financial and physical privation, to be a literal pipe dream: "[Ma future femme] n'est même pas jolie, mais que m'importe? ce sera terre à terre que de la regarder le soir, ravauder mes chaussettes, et que de me faire assourdir par les cris de mes galopins, d'accord; mais comme malgré toutes nos theories, nous n'avons pu trouver mieux, je me contenterai de cette vie, si banale qu'elle te puisse sembler."[84] The forking paths of Romel and Léo, two former dreamers and poets, allegorize what Huysmans saw as the two potential afterlives of romanticism: on the one hand, the profound cynicism of decadence, forever disappointed in its search for an earthly ideality and resigned to the banality of the everyday, and on the other hand, the cautious optimism of naturalism, whose scientific gaze transforms even the most heinous of corpses into sources of knowledge for the betterment of a humanity.

These differences are key: naturalism, unlike romanticism and decadence, neither unduly idealizes life and society, nor does it consider their decline a foregone conclusion. Instead, it valorizes the human experience, along with its strengths and weaknesses, as one of the principal sites for collective progress. What nineteenth-century medicine sought to do on the level of the physical body is thereby extended in naturalism to the social body: if one can understand the causes and effects of decline and corruption, one may be able to correct it. That the concluding lines of the novel are decisive in their resolve but ambiguous in their findings makes sense.

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83. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 139.

84. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 142.

Huysmans, like Zola, admires and emulates the exploratory force of the anatomist's scalpel, yet recognizes that it has barely nicked the surface of the human enigma: "Mais ses camarades le poussèrent du coude pour le faire taire, et le père Briquet, décalottant d'un coup de ciseau le crâne du comédien, commença de sa vois traînante: —L'alcoolisme, Messieurs [...]"[85] This closing tableau thus allegorically recapitulates, through the mise en scène of Ginginet's medical autopsy, the literary vivisection performed on Marthe by Huysmans. The medium of the novel has allowed both author and reader to bear witness to the causes of Marthe's degeneration and proven that they originate in her blood, her upbringing, and the circumstances of her life.

Léo, once so obsessed with an ideal image of her and subsequently bitterly disappointed by her very real fallibility, shows total apathy toward her origins and her fate:

> À défaut d'affection, je n'ai même plus intérêt pour elle, sa vie ne changera guère maintenant. [...] Elle finira un jour dans une crise d'ivrognerie ou se jettera, un jour de bon sens, dans la Seine. —En vérité, ce n'est plus la peine que nous nous occupions d'elle, et puis, que peut me faire ce qu'elle deviendra? car il faut bien que je t'annonce une grande nouvelle: je me marie.[86]

Léo's egotism—already in evidence during his romantic period yet now on full display in the harsh light of his decadent disillusionment—is not only clear in his estimation that Marthe would do well to throw herself into the Seine, but also in the structure of this dismissal. He hesitates between indifference ("défaut d'affection," "plus d'intérêt," "ce n'est plus la peine," "que peut me faire...") and spite ("...se jettera, un jour de bon sens, dans la Seine..."), finally justifying his cruelty by evoking the only person that matters: himself. The topic of the letter, his marriage, is the license he needs to dispatch with any nostalgia or concern for his former lover and muse, Marthe. This "major news," in terminating the paragraph, also forecloses any kind of care he might have for Marthe and her well-being; it is brutal in its finality, in the detachment it discloses. This is the cold calculation of the bourgeoisie, a side-effect of the banality blossoming in the vacuum of fallen romantic idealism. It goes hand in hand with the bourgeois generalizations of working-class women evoked by Léo later in his letter:

> ...une dondon qui enveloppe de robes carnavalesques ses grâces de laveuse et veut faire la dame, s'imposant quand même chez les gens qui ne l'invitent pas, les forçant à la faire asseoir devant une table qu'elle devrait desservir, ça devient tout simplement odieux, car celles-là ont des ordures de ruisseau qui leur gargouillent dans la bouche et qu'elles lâchent au dessert, en même temps que les agrafes de leur corset.[87]

In Léo's estimation, women of Marthe's ilk can never compare to true ladies. At best, they can only ever be gaudy, grotesque imitations of them: at the end of the night, their intrinsic vulgarity, "the filth of the gutters burbling in their mouths," always spills out. It is not naturalism, so often accused by later critics of determinism and essentialism, that is guilty of such reductionist views of human nature, but decadence. In place of such finality, Huysmans is careful to close his novel on a non-ending: the opening of an alcoholic's skull, followed by a comma and an ellipsis—indices of an incursion into the as-yet unknown. He chooses positivistic optimism in place of decadent resignation. And rather than casting his protagonist as an archetype of her class, he undertakes a detailed study of the vagaries of her *particular* life and times; he makes good on the promise of his title, an account of Marthe, the story of *a* girl. Far from Léo's apathy and his

85. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 143.
86. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 139.
87. Huysmans, *Marthe,* 140-141.

assumption that she'll one day meet an untimely end, Huysmans refuses to divulge her fate, to draw a line of destiny from cradle to grave. He aligns himself not with Léo, but with Romel, eager to understand the etiology of illness rather than pass judgment on the ill. And as the equivocal punctuation of the novel's conclusion suggests, the former is much more difficult than the latter, precisely because the investigatory work of science (at least, in Huysmans's and Zola's view) is open-ended in a way that moralism is not.[88]

Huysmans's debut novel aligns closely with the thematic and methodological concerns of Zola's early-career works. Both authors seek to locate the roots of social degeneration through the examination of personae as they move through various milieus. Despite criticism to the contrary, neither author binds their characters to the inborn qualities of their birth, but instead analyze closely the interactions between heredity, class, and the material world. In a word, they demonstrate how individual experiences are imbricated with one another and with the lived environment. In particular, differentials of sex and gender and put into play in both *La curée* and *Marthe, histoire d'une fille*, through descriptive practices that are first and foremost spatial. Even when description performs intensely moralizing functions in these texts—marking certain non-heteronormative and anti-patriarchal forms of embodiment, intimacy, desire, and social interaction as deviant and dangerous—it also discloses, in equal measure, forms of gendered and sexual subversion, resistance, and self-fashioning. In an early installment of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, Renée and Sidonie were such figures of modern deviance and liberation, moving through, modifying, and creating spaces that allowed them to escape and disrupt the structures of matrimony and widowhood. In Huysmans's first novel, it was Marthe's haphazard trajectory through the spaces and places of the Parisian underworld that demonstrated the difficulties of female self-determination and desire in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although Marthe is not subversive in the way that Sidonie and Renée are, her story is one of equal struggle.

It is the stylistic differences between these works, however, that suggest the future aesthetic divergence between Zola and Huysmans. Whereas Zolian allegory was expressed through highly descriptive, even fantastic scenes highlighting the monstrosity of modern femininity, Huysmans opted for a subtler, metafictional approach. In place of the myriad heterotopia of *La curée, Marthe* self-consciously positioned its representation of gender in relation to other styles and tendencies, namely decadence and romanticism. Its final chapter staged a *prise de parti* on behalf of its author, who chose the sincerity of naturalism over the bad faith of decadence or the naivete of romanticism. It is precisely this self-reflexive quality that will become one of the hallmarks of Huysmans's later turn to decadence. So, inasmuch as Huysmans toes the naturalist line in his early work, he already sets the stage for his development of decadent style. The particularities of the rupture between Zola and Huysmans will be the subject of the next chapter.

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88. I do not wish to suggest that there is any true scientificity to Zolian or Huysmansian literature, nor that science is not conditioned by its own biases and ideological precepts. Of course, the scientific impetus of naturalism is imbued with a more or less latent moralism. Nevertheless, this project is first and foremost concerned with the ways in which Huysmans and Zola position their aesthetics in relation to one another in and through their works. I maintain that in *Marthe,* Huysmans presents himself as a bearer of the dispassionate torch of science, thereby distancing himself from the vacuity of romanticism and the cynicism of decadence.

Chapter 2
Naturalist Vitalism and Decadent Discontent

> "J'écoutais [Zola], pensant qu'il avait tout à la fois et raison et tort,—raison, en m'accusant de saper le naturalisme et de me barrer tout chemin,—tort, en ce sens que le roman, tel qu'il le concevait, me semblait moribond, usé par les redites, sans intérêt, qu'il le voulût ou non, pour moi."[89]

Fin-de-siècle Frenemies? On Reading Zola and Huysmans Oppositionally

If in the last chapter I sought to frame Zola and Huysmans's early works in terms of their thematic similarities and stylistic differences—redefining Huysmans's naturalism as a kind of proto-decadence—in this chapter, I will examine the rupture, at once personal and aesthetic, between the two authors. This will entail putting into relation works representative both of Zolian naturalism and Huysmansian decadence. Certain novels come to mind for this task, those that have accrued the most popular and critical cachet over the past century, such as *L'assommoir* and *À rebours.* And indeed, these texts demonstrate very well the aesthetic preoccupations of their respective authors and movements. *L'assommoir,* initially decried by critics and public alike for its descriptive and linguistic obscenity, is a case study in Zolian method applied to the Parisian working class and its problems, most notably alcoholism and domestic abuse. *À rebours,* on the other hand, recounts the lengthy musings of its decadent main character as he makes various attempts to transcend the bourgeois monotony of everyday existence. Though the last chapter was comparative in nature, in this chapter, I will shift to a properly intertextual framework of analysis. First coined in the 1960s by cultural critic Julia Kristeva, intertextuality defines a text in terms of its relation to other texts, and more specifically posits that the nature of a work is constituted by other texts.[90] Intertextuality has already been identified as one of the key characteristics of decadent literature by Matthew Potolsky, who argues that

> Works are "decadent" not because they realize a doctrine or make use of certain styles and themes but because they move within a recognizable network of canonical taboos, pervasive influences, recycled stories, erudite commentaries, and shared tastes. Each decadent text borrows from and expands the network, locating itself by reference to the names or books it evokes and leaving its own contributions behind.[91]

While Potolsky's study is rich and persuasive, it only takes into account one half of the relationship I am attempting to delineate in this project, one that is not just intertextual, but dialogic. That is, I am interested in the reciprocally intertextual *co-construction* of naturalism and decadence in and through one another. Rather than literary movements or aesthetic trends

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89. Joris-Karl Huysmans, Preface to *À rebours* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 65.

90. Roland Greene, ed., *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 716.

91. Matthew Potolsky, *The Decadent Republic of Letters* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 5.

that developed in consecutive fashion (decadence growing *out* of naturalism) or in parallel (decadence being a broader trend *encompassing* naturalism), I will propose that they arise in response to one another, continually shifting in style and theme in step with one another. I have therefore selected a different pair of texts, less canonically established than *L'assommoir* and *À rebours,* that better demonstrate the dynamic that energizes and unites Huysmans and Zola's literary output as the century wanes.

In the opening sections of this chapter, I will analyze Zola's 1875 novel, *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* the fifth installment of the *Rougon-Macquart* and by far its most anti-clerical. Next, I will focus on Huysmans's 1887 novel *En rade,* the spiritual successor to *À rebours* that has failed to garner the same acclaim. My argument in this chapter will develop that of the last chapter in several ways.

First, I will continue to emphasize that naturalism and decadence, despite being critically framed as divergent literary trends, in fact converge in fascinating and often unexpected ways. Whereas in the last chapter it was a question of showing how Huysmans prefigures his turn to decadence even in his early naturalist works, here it will be a matter of showing how Huysmans's chosen mode of literary self-definition *against* naturalism relies on a kind of identification *with* the tools and tropes of naturalism. In short, I will argue that *En rade* is a decadent parody of *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* and that the ways in which it constructs itself as a parody lay bare the central differences between naturalist and decadent myths of modernity. *La faute* and *En rade* have been compared in criticism before, notably by Pierre Cogny,[92] who discerns nothing more than a vague, crude Zolianism in Huysmans's depiction of the chateau garden, and slightly more recently by J.H. Matthews,[93] who reads Huysmans's dream sequences as examples of decadent "irrealism" and suggests that in *En rade,* "naturalistic techniques are... frequently turned back upon themselves. They function *à rebours*." While both of these observations suggest an underlying irony or inversion in Huysmans's treatment of Zola, neither goes as far as identifying *En rade* as a parody or caricature of *La faute.* Moreover, scholarship has not yet addressed the constitutive roles that gender and sexuality play in the decadent irony of *En rade.* This chapter will, I hope, fill that gap.

In this vein, the second level of my argument touches upon the precise nature of those modernist myths of progress and degeneration, namely their dependence on gendered structures of thought that are both binary and highly—but differently—heteronormative. As in my first chapter, I will again alternate between paranoid reading practices that highlight the essentially oppressive epistemologies animating the tropes of these two novels and reparative reading practices that locate the limits of those very structures of thought and recast them as codes for their own subversion. In *La faute,* this will mean showing how Zola's adaptation of Genesis both resurrects an age-old hierarchy of gender—and utterly levels it. In *En rade,* misogynistic pessimism about the institution of marriage will open the door to queer forms of auto-eroticism and metatextuality. In both novels, gender and sexuality will be shown to be immanent to aesthetics and to form; that is, the means by which naturalism and decadence shape themselves in relation to one another are woven into gendered discourses that define the novelists' respective projects and that manifest stylistically therein.

This brings us to the third aspect of my argument, which bears on description as the privileged literary technique in both Zolian naturalism and Huysmansian decadence. In the last

92. Pierre Cogny, *J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité* (Nizet: Paris, 1953).

93. J.H. Matthews, "*En Rade* and Huysmans' Departure from Naturalism," *L'Esprit Créateur* 4, no. 2 (1964): 84-93.

chapter, I asserted that on the whole, Huysmans tended much less toward description than Zola. Here, I will show that spatial description comes to dominate the writing of both authors, particularly when it comes to the representation of milieu and of its effects on desiring subjects. I will contend first that *La faute* is unique among naturalist texts in its evacuation of milieu as an aesthetic and phenomenological precept. Its pseudo-Edenic setting isolated from society and culture thus allows for new forms of desire and relationality. I will them frame *En rade* as a parody of *La faute* in which Huysmans strips his characters of the material conditions of their accustomed milieu and leaves them to their own amorous degeneration.

Before embarking upon analyses of individual novels, a note on methodology is due. The heterotopic lens I applied to Zola in the first chapter is unsuitable for an examination of *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *En rade,* both of which take place in the countryside. Rural space lacks many of the characteristics that made Paris the heterotopic city par excellence: building methods and materials that collapse the distinctions between public and private, natural and artificial, organic and mineral; the potential for rapid movement between *milieux* and their respective *lieux*; and the influx of cosmopolitan and colonial goods and sensibilities.

Spatial description nevertheless dominates the writing of both authors as they weave their protagonists into the warp and weft of their surroundings; consequently, place and space again tend to exceed their function as mere setting to become active characters in both novels. Here, though, it is not the encroaching evils of modernity or the libidinal economies of the city that are critiqued in their ambient richness, but rather the potent and malignant specter of the founding Western myth of heterosexual monogamy. Just as it is impossible to tell the story of the Genesitic fall from grace without the Garden of Eden, Zola and Huysmans's takes on that tale require a spatial substrate that is not only symbolically dense, but that is the condition of possibility of conjugal harmony or, in the case of Huysmans, conjugal discord.

What we thus will come to discern is a chain of critical reinscriptions of varying degrees and kinds: my reparative reading of Huysmans parodically adapting Zola's secular-experimental reworking of the story of Adam and Eve. Yet all of these echoes, all of these instances of measured difference-in-sameness, are being produced and disseminated within the same discursive field: literature, whether it be on the side of fiction or on that of criticism (two categories that are, after all, much more porous than at first glance). Each text produces and operates according to what Ross Chambers calls "oppositionality," a discursive practice that "seeks to shift desire from forms that enslave to forms that liberate, that is from the modes of desire that are produced by and in the interest of the structures of power to forms that represent a degree of release of that repression."[94] Chambers recognizes that any attempt to erect counterhegemonic discourse ultimately has a hypostatizing and reinforcing effect on the hegemonic discourse that it aims to resist or overturn:

> The "authority" that permits literary narrative to function oppositionally through the phenomenon of reading is not different in kind, because it is a manifestation of the same discursive system, than the effects of power that reading "opposes." It is just that power has an interest in keeping the functioning of its authority unexamined, whereas literary discourse... *foregrounds* the practice of reading that produces authority, and on which the

94. Ross Chambers, *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), xvii.

whole system depends. That is why literature can provide such fertile ground for speculation on the nature of the system itself.[95]

If we consider the literary field in this way, it becomes possible to situate works in their oppositionality to one another and to various incarnations of power. One of the rather tricky tasks of the critic invested in the analysis and transformation of this nexus is thus finding "room for maneuver" between discourse and counterdiscourse, in examining their intertwinings and reciprocally energizing dynamics. Chambers distinguishes between oppositionality and resistance; the latter seeks to delegitimate the authority underwriting a given discourse while the former, "in exploiting the narrative situation, discovers a power, not to change the essential structure of narrative situations, but to change its other... through the achievement and maintenance of authority, in ways that are potentially radical."[96] Oppositionality is not an intrinsic feature of texts, but a reading practice. Unlike resistance, which only recognizes the *force* of a given power system and thereby attempts to overturn or undermine it, oppositionality recognizes that a power system comprises both power and its discontents. Chambers takes irony as an example of a rhetorical technique that lays bare this tension though the double signification of literary language, its ability to say one thing and simultaneously mean another. I intend to analyze Zola and Huysmans's texts similarly, as emblematic of styles elaborated in opposition to one another. I will then take the prevailing norms structuring their texts and use them for other purposes: namely, to decouple them from narratives of progress and degeneration.[97] This very dissertation, then, will become an oppositional text, constructed through and against the sources it reads and rewrites. As Chambers puts it, this is an act of "transforming imposed structures, languages, codes, rules, etc., in ways that serve individual or group purposes other than those 'intended'."[98] It's one thing to dismiss naturalism or decadence on the grounds of pseudoscience, elitism, misogyny, homophobia, or colonialism. It's entirely another to acknowledge their position in discursive fields that both influenced and were influenced by them, and to use that ongoing influence oppositionally to expand other horizons of thought and desire. A strategic tradeoff is involved: what we lose in abandoning a framework of resistance—that is, the potential of working against or overthrowing the prevailing system—we oppositionally gain in making the system more livable for non-hegemonic voices and collectives.

Both *La faute* and *En rade* stage ideological clashes in several overlapping discursive fields. Zola counters the dogmatic cosmogony of militant Catholicism with a secular and purportedly positivistic interpretation of physical and psychic reality. Huysmans thereafter not only strips Zola's narrative of its scientific and civilizational utopianism, but re-encodes it as the dreary pessimism of decadent worldliness. Because these debates and critical reimaginings all take place in and through fiction, in a cycle of mythification and desacralization, they are open to resignifying practices that analyze and extend their constitutive oppositionality. I will take a such an approach in this chapter, looking for room for maneuver in and between discourses of power as it substantiated by authorial intervention. As Heather Love has reminded us, queer studies

95. Chambers, xviii.

96. Chambers, *Room for Maneuver,* 11.

97. Chambers, inspired by Michel de Certeau, illustrates oppositional reading practices through an urban metaphor: "I am a non-driver who lives, perforce, in a city whose street-grid serves the need of the automobile; I don't agitate for 'pedestrian rights,' but I do construct itineraries through the city that are *mine.*" (Chambers, 6)

98. Chambers, 6.

would do well to reject a "politics of optimism" in its approach to the suffering of queer historical subjects.[99] She notes that

> criticism serves two important functions: it lays bare the conditions of exclusion and inequality and it gestures toward alternative trajectories for the future. Both aspects are important; however, to the extent that the imaginative function of criticism is severed from its critical function—to the extent that it becomes mere optimism—it loses its purchase on the past. It is crucial to find ways of creating and sustaining political hope. But hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future.[100]

In adopting an oppositional critical framework that interweaves paranoid and reparative analyses, I aim to read hopefully, but not blindly. To the extent that I historicize the past, I also recast it in novel continuities, both identifying with subjects of queer abjection and revalorizing them from a theoretical standpoint far removed from that of Zola and Huysmans, not unlike the young Italian introvert we encountered in the introduction. Huysmans states in his 1922 preface to *À rebours* that at the time of that novel's publication, the Zolian novel was on its last legs (*moribond*), exhausted by empty repetition (*redites*). Over the course of this chapter, we will see that one of Huysmans's principal methods of rejuvenating and redefining the novel will also mean redefining repetition itself, not only duplicating the tropes of naturalism, but twisting and inverting them, imbuing them with other forms of alterity and alienation.

Devotion vs. Life: Zolian Vitalism and the Phenomenology of Desire

Zola's views on religion—particularly Catholicism, with its extensive set of rituals, vast ecclesiastical apparatus, and privileged status in European history—were well known in his lifetime. They infused his conversations and correspondence and appear in much of his journalistic writing and literary criticism. Even very early in his writing career, he penned invectives against many of the Catholic authors who later became associated with decadence. In 1864, he published a review of Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Un prêtre marié,* criticizing it, perhaps unjustly, as an equivocally pro-Catholic text: "Voici les principes monstrueux que l'on peut formuler après la lecture d'*Un prêtre marié*: la science est maudite, savoir c'est ne plus croire, l'ignorance est aimée du Ciel; les bons paient pour les méchants, l'enfant expie les fautes du père; la fatalité nous gouverne, ce monde est un monde d'épouvante livrée à la colère d'un Dieu ou aux caprices d'un démon."[101] That this list of flaws begins with the condemnation of science and the incompatibility between knowing and believing is not insignificant. For Zola, it is not simply that devotion and the devout are dangerous and ignorant, but that they are dangerous *because* they are ignorant. The positivistic logic of the experimental method as it was appropriated (or perhaps misappropriated) by naturalism sees science as much more than a means of answering questions; it represents the illumination of every human darkness and is the key to a progress whose telos is a perfect society exercising its mastery over the known universe. Any instance of blind recourse to received knowledge, dogma, *doxa,* or aestheticism is at best a waste of time and at worst an existential threat. The naturalist credo thus posits scientific

99. Heather Love, *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 29.

100. Love, *Feeling Backwards,* 29.

101. Émile Zola, "Le catholique hystérique" in *Mes haines,* ed. François-Marie Mourad (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 76.

secularism as the only moral belief system. Indeed, Zola often uses religion as a token for all forms of groupthink. In a famously inflammatory essay simply titled "Mes haines," he proclaims:

> Chaque troupeau a son dieu, son fétiche, sur l'autel duquel il immole la grande vérité humaine. […] Ils vont leur petit bonhomme de chemin, marchant avec gravité en pleine platitude, poussant des cris de désespérance dès qu'on les trouble dans leur fanatisme puérile. Vous tous qui les connaissez, mes amis, poètes et romanciers, savants et simples curieux, vous qui êtes allés frapper à la porte de ces gens graves… osez dire avec moi, tout haut, afin que la foule vous entende, qu'ils vous ont jetés hors de leur petite église, en bedeaux peureux et intolérants. […] Chaque religion a ses prêtres, chaque prêtre a ses aveugles et ses eunuques… Où sont… les hommes libres, ceux qui vivent tout haut, qui n'enferment pas leur pensée dans le cercle étroit d'un dogme et qui marchent franchement vers la lumière…?[102]

Zola's virulence toward Catholicism resonates throughout his literary corpus as well as his critical one. His early works, as well as the *Rougon-Macquart, Les trois villes,* and *Les quatre évangiles* contain numerous (usually corrupt and meddling) priest characters, as well as their devout followers: Marthe Mouret and the abbé Faujas of *La conquête de Plassans,* Angélique Rougon of *Le rêve,* the abbé Froment of *Lourdes, Rome,* and *Paris,* the curé Marles and Hermeline of *Travail.* But by far the most sustained and scathing of his attacks is *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* the fifth volume of the magisterial *Rougon-Macquart* saga, published in 1875.

Serge, the titular character and son of François and Marthe Mouret of *La conquête de Plassans,* has recently become the parish priest of the provincial village of les Artauds (not far from Plassans, a fictive town modeled after Zola's childhood home of Aix-en-Provence). Pious and aloof from a very young age, Serge takes the collar at twenty-five years old, knowing very little of the world or of himself. He is fervently fond of the Virgin Mary, to whom he prays daily, humbled and dazzled by her impossible purity. He is assisted in his duties by the irascible La Teuse and is also the guardian of his younger sister Désirée, who reigns over the squalor of her courtyard kingdom of chickens and goats. In a particularly violent moment of religious adoration (accompanied by visions of the Holy Virgin), Serge has what could best be described as faith-fueled *crise de nerfs* resulting in complete amnesia. His uncle, the wise and benevolent doctor Pascal Rougon—who has also been read as the novelistic avatar of Zola himself—has him taken to Le Paradou, an abandoned and largely ruined country estate complete with a chateau half-destroyed by fire and an immense overgrown garden. There, he is tended to by Albine, the savage but compassionate daughter of the militantly atheist groundskeeper, Jeanbernat. Though his memories initially fail to return, his mind and body are restored as a result of Albine's care. As he regains his strength, they voyage into her true domain: the Edenic chateau garden. After falling in love, they carnally consummate their devotion to one another, and shortly thereafter Serge's past life comes flooding back to him when he glimpses the neighboring village through a gap in the garden wall. He abandons Albine, and tries to reclaim his fervor and resume his duties, encouraged by the vicious and cynical Frère Archangias. Albine proceeds to venture into the village to solicit his return. His refusal drives her to commit suicide in the dilapidated chateau of Le Paradou, asphyxiated under a mass of flowers.

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102. Émile Zola, "Mes haines" in *Mes haines,* ed. François-Marie Mourad (Paris : Flammarion, 2012), 43-44.

As in *La curée, La faute*'s claim to positivist objectivity is in some ways thwarted by the allegorical, mythical, and lyrical underpinnings of the narrative. I argued in the last chapter that this failure is due to Zola's vision of the naturalist novel as a form of knowledge production on par with chemistry and comparative anatomy. There exist not merely a scientific imperative to sound the depths of the human heart, but an etiological and ethical imperative to diagnose and correct the social ills whose spread is the result of the dual mechanism of milieu and heredity; these objectives can only be attained through the stylistic forging of affective and didactic bonds with the reader. This is just as true in *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* in which milieu remains active in its role as deterministic category in the opening and closing chapters, before and after it is nullified by amnesia and prelapsarian felicity. This means that in the middle chapters, those dealing with Serge's convalescence and carnal self-discovery, represent Zola's attempt to stage a kind of degree-zero milieu, one in which socially and culturally received forms of (self-)knowledge are erased and habitus itself is rendered inoperative. Indeed, it cannot exist under such circumstances, as Zola's primary objective in rewriting the Christian creation myth is to hypothesize a relationship between man and nature untainted by what he saw as the fanatical, adulterating, and despotic doctrines of Catholicism.

However, he effects the negation of *milieu* through a series of shifts in *lieu.* Place and space are, in some ways, even more central in *La faute* than in other *Rougon-Macquart* novels, where they become sites of diverse forms of absorption and *enchâssement* unique to modernity that the naturalist attempts to describe and critique using various descriptive techniques. Here, though, change in setting is the precondition to the metaphysical wager of the novel, to wit: a man and woman, united in a primordial state of perfect innocence and ignorance, surrounded by nature's raw bounty, will not only come to exist in harmony with it and with one another, but in so doing, will discover the glorious secret of life. Knowledge—of nature, of self, of procreation—is entirely disassociated from sin, guilt, immorality, transgression, and damnation. To the contrary, knowing, in this New Eden, is simultaneously and necessarily mental and material, physical and metaphysical, conscious and embodied. *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* is thus, without a doubt, the most intensely phenomenological of the *Rougon-Macquart,* and is not only an anticlerical allegory, but also an anti-decadent manifesto. It rejects the mind-body dualism shared by both the decadent subject and the radical Catholic ascetic, in which embodied being (always prone to decay) is transcended through recourse to the mind, spirit, or soul.[103] In *La faute,* corporeality is the ultimate prerequisite to enlightenment (rather than an obstacle to it) and transcendence is figured as the transition from the present of individual being to the futurity of species-being, i.e., of life. Under decadence, as under Catholicism, the body is a site of both metaphysical insufficiency and inexorable corruption: it can only function as a conduit to higher planes of existence (whether spiritual or intellectual) separate from it, or drag the spirit (figured as soul or mind) downward, away from those ecstatic climes, by dint of its venal and organic fallibility.

In *La faute,* Zola seeks to restore the phenomenological unity of mind and body, demonstrate the social necessity of that unity, and translate a discourse of bodily sin into one of embodied joy. He again turns to spatial description to show that the dualism of devotion is essentially mediated through self-mortification, that is, the isolation and mutilation of the body

103. The senses also play an important role in both Catholic mysticism and decadence. In the former, religious ecstasy may be aided or achieved through the mortification of the senses. In the latter, it is rather the refinement of the senses, the sublimation of sense material in sensuous experience, that constitutes the transcendence of the body by the mind.

as a means of moving the spirit closer to God. Zola therefore focuses his descriptive-critical gaze on the parish church under Serge Mouret's direction, which becomes the space on and through which Zola's anti-Catholic invective is most vehemently inscribed:

> Il sembla que le soleil peuplait les bancs des poussières qui dansaient dans ses rayons. La petite église, l'étable blanchie, fut comme pleine d'une foule tiède. Au-dehors, on entendait les petits bruits du réveil heureux de la campagne, les herbes qui soupiraient d'aise, les feuilles s'essuyant avec la chaleur, les oiseaux lissant leurs plumes, donnant un premier coup d'ailes. Même la campagne entrait avec le soleil… par les fentes de la grande porte, on voyait les herbes du perron qui menaçaient d'envahir la nef. Seul, au milieu de cette vie montante, le grand Christ, resté dans l'ombre, mettait la mort, l'agonie de sa chair barbouillée d'ocre, éclaboussée de laque.[104]

The symbolic repartitioning of images and associations is already striking in these opening passages. The empty church interior is anything but: at the same time that the absence of devout followers suggests a patently Zolian progressivism concerning the waning influence of Catholicism, flesh-and-blood bodies are replaced with spectral images from without, occupying the space of the nave in the form of lukewarm splashes of sun given substance in floating dust motes, another signifier of absence. A sharp cut to the outside is accompanied by a series of personifications: a countryside rising into wakefulness, bucolically sighing grasses, leaves bathing in the ambient heat. Zolian description here first shifts animacy and life from the desolate church—made for and by people, yet abandoned by them—to the plenitude of the exterior, teeming with bestial and botanical vitality.

Moreover, that vitality is in the process of reclaiming what proves to be a failing and utterly ephemeral institution: the cyclicity of the seasons will always outlive the linearity of theological time, which locates rebirth beyond the terrestrial plane. The absoluteness of death in Catholicism thus becomes Catholic absolutism *as* death, evidenced by the only part of the church still shrouded in darkness: Christ crucified and agonizing, enacting the story of sacrifice told to believers as a guilty reminder of their inborn sin, providing them with a raison d'être that absolves them of any need for reason or critical thought. It is significant that this Christ is not bleeding and covered in bruises, but is instead "smeared with ochre" and "splattered with lacquer." Zola insists not just on the materiality of the icon, but on its essential iconicity: the Christ figure is first and foremost artificial*,* painted with pigments and sealing agents to prevent rot, and standing as a monument to bodily decay and inevitable death. The register used leans vulgar: the terms "barbouillée" and "éclaboussée" suggest not the rarefied climes of celestial grandeur, but rather the hasty, inferior craftsmanship of a decidedly terrestrial hand. Most strikingly, Christ is not "mis à mort," but is instead an active agent of death, as signaled by the active voice and imperfect indicative of "mettait la mort."

The alignment of religious space with death, darkness, ignorance, and artifice extends to its custodian, Serge himself. His seminary milieu and Rougon blood (linked to madness and hypersensitivity, as opposed to the conniving Macquart branch) have led him ineluctably to this lugubrious place, this stagnant station in life.

> Il se rappelait qu'à huit ans il pleurait d'amour dans les coins; il ne savait pas qui il aimait; il pleurait parce qu'il aimait quelqu'un, bien loin. […] Plus tard, il avait voulu être prêtre pour satisfaire ce besoin d'affection surhumaine qui faisait son seul tourment. Il ne voyait pas où aimer davantage. Il contentait là son être, ses prédispositions de race, ses

104. Émile Zola, *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1998), 67.

> rêves d'adolescent, ses premiers désirs d'homme. Si la tentation devait venir, il l'attendait avec sa sérénité de séminariste ignorant. On avait tué l'homme en lui, il le sentait, il était heureux de se savoir à part, créature châtrée, déviée, marquée de la tonsure ainsi qu'une brebis du Seigneur.[105]

In the Zolian imaginary, life goes hand in hand with desire, collective existence, and in the case of humans, love. Interpersonal bonds, whether amorous, familial, amical, or maternal, are what allow us to constitute ourselves as a society capable of reproducing itself. Serge's childhood affection and longing—due to an early separation from his parents, and aggravated by his inherited proclivity for passion and compassion—are part and parcel of such dynamics. It is the perverting nature of the Church that transformed desire into temptation and youthful naïveté into willful ignorance, and channeled the need for human affection into what Zola considered a hollow and altogether ersatz adoration for a deity whose existence is beyond the reach of scientific investigation. What presents itself as the humility of the faithful is thus revealed to be nothing more than the pride of exceptionalism, the unnaturalness of isolation from one's fellow human beings, and the self-righteousness of the clergy. The accumulated effects of self-denial, of the suppression of carnal desire, are simultaneously psychic and physiological. The vow of celibacy is coded as an act of murder, of "killing the man inside him" and rendered visible in Serge's feminine neck and pale hands: "La paysanne regardait le jeune prêtre avec hardiesse, allant de ses mains blanches à son cou de fille, jouissant, cherchant à le faire devenir tout rose."[106]

As the story unfolds, sex, gender, and sexuality accrue greater symbolic weight and assume larger roles in the naturalist allegory of creation, which is always already an allegory of procreation. This is particularly Zolian brand of vitalism—a scientific and philosophical field of inquiry into the operation and perpetuation of life—establishes a hierarchy of increasingly more "evolved" forms of organic reproduction: the vegetal, the animal, and the human.[107] Because human sentience is uniquely self-aware and imbued with historical consciousness, the main difference between human and animals is cultural: while animals may be capable of cognition and even social behavior, only mankind can found civilizations. It follows, then, that certain types of people—those who draw more on instinct than on their faculty for reason—fall closer to the bestial end of the spectrum than to the human. This is the prime differentiating factor between Serge's sister Désirée and his eventual lover, Albine, both of whom represent uncultivated humanity and raw life in the opening chapters of *La faute.* Concerning Désirée, we are told that Serge "s'était chargé d'elle, pris d'une sorte de tendresse religieuse pour sa tête faible. La chère innocente était si puérile, si petite fille qu'elle lui apparaissait avec la pureté de ces pauvres d'esprit auxquels l'évangile accorde le royaume des cieux. Cependant… elle devenait trop forte, trop saine; elle sentait trop la vie."[108] She reigns over the kingdom of her

105. Zola, *La faute,* 84.

106. Zola, *La faute,* 95.

107. During the later stages of his writing career, Zola's vitalism becomes full-blown natalism, his novels serving as platforms for the denunciation of France's declining birthrate and exhorting the repopulation of a robust French nation. Doubtless the most striking example of this is his late work *Fécondité* (1899), an extended literary polemic that argues for familial expansion, particularly in agrarian and colonial contexts.

108. Zola, *La faute,* 84.

basse-cour, living and sleeping in bestial promiscuity with her livestock companions. Despite her simplicity of mind, when it comes to mating and animal husbandry, she is anything but naïve:

> Elle trouva une satisfaction continue à sentir autour d'elle un pullulement. Des tas de fumier, des bêtes accouplées, se dégageait un flot de génération, au milieu duquel elle goûtait les joies de la fécondité. Quelque chose d'elle se contentait dans la ponte des poules; elle portait ses lapines au mâle, avec des rires de belle fille calmée; elle éprouvait des bonheurs de femme grosse à traire sa chèvre.[109]

Désirée recuperates sexuality as the chastity of maternal instinct, thereby allowing Zola to reserve his treatment of sexual desire for the relationship between Serge and Albine. The past participle from which Desirée's name derives distances her from active desire, from the agency of the desir*ing* subject, while underlining the socially, culturally, and historically unmitigated sexual instinct that she confronts and encourages daily.

For Zola, though, the notion of the "human animal" is a contradiction in terms. Though we are also motivated to a certain degree by libidinal drives, it is our ability to channel them that separates us from our animal brethren.[110] It thus falls to Albine to incarnate the shift from desire to eroticism, sexuality to sensuality. Albine's journey to carnal knowledge, unlike Désirée's, is meticulously plotted over the course of the novel. We know very little of her life before Serge's arrival, only that at a young age she came under the care of her uncle Jeanbernat, the cantankerous atheist and caretaker of the ruined Paradou. In spite of her seventeen years, she lives up to the image of the tabula rasa implied by her name, which derives from the Latin *albus,* "white." Described as both a "sauvage" and a "poupée," she is Zola's incarnation of the model young woman, untouched by society, dogma, or desire.[111] Hers is not a kingdom of animals, but of the lush vegetation of the garden:

> "Alors, tu n'as pas peur dans le Paradou, toi?" lui demanda [le docteur Pascal]. "Peur? de quoi donc?" dit-elle avec des yeux étonnés. "Les murs sont trop hauts, personne ne peut entrer… Il n'y a que moi. C'est mon jardin, à moi toute seule. Il est joliment grand. Je n'en ai pas encore trouvé le bout."[112]

Albine shares Désirée's temerity and sense of freedom but lacks her awareness of the exigencies of the flesh. Zola cannot permit her to learn the lesson of life through animals or through the experience of her own body; rather, he finds a way of strategically and spatially reintroducing culture into the "neutral" experimental space of le Paradou. In one of the bedrooms of the ravaged chateau, Serge and Albine discover a set of paintings depicting graphic love scenes:

> La femme couchée se renversait sous l'étreinte d'un faune aux pieds de bouc. On distinguait nettement les bras rejetés, le torse abandonné, la taille roulante de cette grande fille nue, surprise sur des gerbes de fleurs… On distinguait aussi l'effort du faune, sa poitrine soufflante qui s'abattait. Puis, à l'autre bout, il n'y avait plus que les deux pieds

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109. Zola, *La faute,* 121.

110. Despite Zola's emphasis on the overwhelming influence of heredity and environment—one only need think of the "human beast" Jacques Lantier of the novel of the same name—there exist several examples of thwarted determinism in the *Rougon-Macquart.* For instance, Octave Mouret of *Au bonheur des Dames* reorients his moral compass after falling in love with the wise and willful Denise Baudu. Étienne Lantier, Jacques's brother and the son of *L'assommoir*'s Gervaise Macquart and Auguste Lantier, defies the genetic *fêlure* of the Macquart line and the brutality of his upbringing to become a socialist hero in *Germinal.*

111. Zola, *La faute,* 109-110.

112. Zola, *La faute,* 110.

de la femme, lancés en l'air… Ces revenants de la volupté achevaient de leur apprendre la science d'aimer.[113]

It is the secularized, aestheticized iconography of classical antiquity that teaches the still amnesiac Serge and blissfully naïve Albine the secret of life. Not only do such images hearken back to the paganism of Ancient Greek mythology, but more crucially, they designate this period as most emblematic of Western culture and erudition. This type of sentimental education, as it were, is a calculated and direct affront to the ecclesiastical discourse of carnal union, which sees it as an eternal reenactment of the fall of man. The young couple's first encounter with the sexual act precludes any association with primitivism, bestiality, sin, or perversion, and instead presents it as both natural and learned, instinctive and beautiful. The double valence of the term *science* captures this well, insisting on the biological complexities of reproduction and framing it as a type of experiential knowledge.

Though Zola doubtless saw this as a liberatory gesture replacing what we would today call the sex-negativity of Christian fundamentalism with an ideology based in secular vitalism, both discourses are rooted in a fundamentally heteronormative concern with reproduction and marriage. There is absolutely no room for queer desire in the teleology of naturalism, whether that queerness takes the form of same-sex attraction, non-marital or non-monogamous kinship structures, non-reproductive sex, or nonbinary gender expressions or identities. Every tactical inversion of the creation myth in *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* falls into this trap: in attempting to subvert the norms and epistemological structures (to whit, ones that are cisheteronormative) inherent in one iteration of power, he supplants them with others that are just as violent, just as unyielding. It falls to us, then to read oppositionally and reparatively *between* the interplay of discursive positions structuring the novel. For as Foucault and Chambers note, overt resistance to power entails its perpetuation. At this juncture, we should also consider Foucault's famous argument against the "repressive hypothesis." The descriptions of the church interior and of Serge's feeble physique convey an image of Catholicism as a force that actively subjugates and denatures sexuality, a process laid bare to the reader by the exacting pen of the naturalist author. Yet is that same pen not part of a vast apparatus whose goal was to *faire parler le sexe,* to translate sex and sexuality into a discourse elaborated and maintained by a number of disciplinary techniques and institutions? In *La volonté de savoir,* Foucault poses this key guiding question: "Comment s'est fait ce déplacement qui, tout en prétendant nous affranchir de la nature pécheresse du sexe nous accable d'une grande faute historique qui aurait consisté justement à imaginer cette nature fautive et à tirer de cette croyance de désastreux effets?"[114] *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* represents the supplantation of the religious zealot by the sexological zealot in the guise of scientific vitalism. Both not only demand the constant *remise en discours* of human sexuality, but interrogate it through an axiological framework that presupposes the primacy of an extremely limited number of acceptable categories of desire, affect, and embodiment. Disastrous effects, indeed.

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113. Zola, *La faute,* 286-287.

114. Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 17.

Subversive Friendship and the Garter Snake's False Promise

So, how does naturalism's take on religion posit at once various forms of sexual normativity and disclose their alternatives? A return to Serge's backstory and the descriptions of his church and rectory reveals a set of traits, perspectives, and topoi that could just as easily be read as queer, particularly if we look elsewhere in the inventory of nineteenth-century characters who have traditionally been seen to destabilize, disturb, reshape, or threaten bourgeois heteronormativity. Even in the Zolian canon, a handful of other characters come to mind: Serge's frailty, celibacy, and overall *aspect maladif* recall the gender inversion, sexual deviance, and bodily alterity of such figures as *La curée*'s Maxime Saccard and his valet Baptiste, *Pot-Bouille*'s hypochondriac Théophile Vabre, and *Paris*'s dandy esthete, Hyacinthe Duvillard. Perhaps the best example of the association between priesthood and queerness in the nineteenth century is Balzac's recurrent Vautrin, who strategically used status and same-sex seduction to achieve his devious ends.[115] To cite a later example, the images of a solemn church in springtime accompanied by those of quiet, studious, hypersensitive boyhood evoke the narrator of Proust's monumental *À la recherche du temps perdu,* which has been read as a study of queer affect and relationality.[116]

Most compellingly, Serge—in his role as Father Mouret, before and after the idyllic weeks among the botanical marvels of Le Paradou—exemplifies a radical rejection of normative masculinity and of the economic, legal, and physical demands it entails. His priestly asceticism exempts him from the requirements of marriage, including the vitalist imperative of reproduction and the social imperative of conjugal dominance that would assign him the active, autonomous role while relegating his wife to passivity and dependence. Before his fit, he is able to occupy a marginal position that oscillates between the asexuality of celibacy and the masochistic submissiveness of fundamentalist fervor:

> Et, s'il avançait dans la vertu, c'était surtout par son humilité et son obéissance. Il voulait être le dernier de tous, soumis à tous, pour que la rosée divine tombât sur son cœur comme sur un sable aride… Être humble, c'est croire, c'est aimer. Il ne dépendait même plus de lui-même, aveugle, sourd, chair morte. *Il était la chose de dieu*. [117]

Catholicism is the structure, both metaphysical and institutional, that permits Serge to live freely in a state of open self-subjugation and cultivate a form of embodiment at odds with the physiological markers of non-pathological masculinity at the time: robustness, strength, and vigor.

The naturalist remedy to the pernicious effects of zealotry takes the form of a spatialized allegory. After working himself into a frenzy of adoration, Serge collapses and is taken to Le Paradou under the orders of his uncle (and Zola's diegetic mouthpiece), Pascal. There, under the care and tutelage of Albine, who acts as nursemaid and guide to the vast wilderness of Le

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115. For a shrewd, sociologically-oriented study of Lucien and Vautrin's relationship in *Illusions perdues,* see Michael Lucey's *The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Lucey does not take the homosexuality of either character as a given, showing instead how Lucien and Vautrin participate strategically in same-sex relations in exchange for wealth, influence, and status.

116. See, for instance, Leo Bersani's *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and of Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

117. Zola, *La faute,* 82 (italics added).

Paradou, he slowly starts to recover his "lost" masculinity, along with a sense of doubt: "À mesure qu'il prenait des forces, son rêve se troublait sous l'afflux de sang qui chauffait ses veines. Il avait des incertitudes."[118] If religion stifles masculine vitality and the faculty of reason, it is logical that the return of physical strength would also signal the rebirth of doubt, of the potential for skepticism that is the hallmark of critical thought. Little does Albine know that her contact with Serge has set her on a course to her own rebirth as a "true" woman, rather than a barbarian of the forest. Prior to that fatal union, however, they exist in a state of perfect parity:

> Ses membres avait repris la santé de l'adolescence, *sans que* des sensations plus conscientes *se fussent éveillées* en lui. […] Il gardait ses ignorances de gamin, son toucher, si innocent *encore* qu'il ne lui permettait pas de distinguer la robe d'Albine de l'étoffe des vieux fauteuils. Et c'était toujours un émerveillement d'yeux grands ouverts qui ne comprennent pas, une hésitation de gestes ne sachant point aller où ils veulent, un commencement d'existence purement instinctive, en dehors de la connaissance du milieu. *L'homme n'était pas né*.[119]
>
> Matinée d'enfance, polissonnerie de galopins lâchés dans le Paradou. Albine et Serge passèrent là des heures puériles d'école buissonnière, à courir, à crier, à se taper, *sans que* leurs chairs innocentes *eussent* un frisson. *Ce n'était encore* que la camaraderie de deux garnements, qui songeront peut-être plus tard à se baiser sur les joues, lorsque les arbres n'auront plus de dessert à leur donner.[120]

The distinction between childhood and adulthood is instrumental in Zola's retelling of Genesis. In most Christian framings of the original story, sin is introduced into Eden as a result of the Lapse that imparts the knowledge of good and evil to Adam and Eve. Their fall from innocence-as-ignorance into shame-as-knowledge—figured as awareness of the self and of the flesh—results in punishment for contravening divine law and yielding to temptation. It is only then that sex becomes gender, that differences in physical makeup impose differences in status, role, and behavior.[121] In lieu of partnership and parity, woman is cursed with the torment of childbirth, and man is fated to toil in the fields.[122] It would have been possible for Zola to write gender *out* of the naturalist cosmogeny, to reframe the discovery of sex and sexuality as simply another type of relationality free of the dichotomizing dynamics of hierarchy, control, and possession.

Instead, he naturalizes gender, casting the social and cultural actualization of difference as a fundamental step in the process of sexual maturation. It is not the potential for external corruption that threatens the intrepid trailblazers, but the inevitable ticking of the biological clock. The carefree harmony of childhood and early adolescence is continually shadowed by the conjunctive *sans que,* its attendant counterfactual subjunctive, and the temporality of anticipation in the pluperfect indicative and adverb *encore,* signaling the impending slide into puberty and desire. Description of the space of the garden does double duty here. It is laden with symbolic

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118. Zola, *La faute,* 204.

119. Zola, *La faute,* 210 (italics added).

120. Zola, *La faute,* 259 (italics added).

121. Because Eve is created from Adam's rib, one might see her as innately subordinate to Adam. However, most contemporary scholars agree that the Hebrew word often translated as "helper" need not imply a subordinate status. See Page 14, Footnote 18, of the fifth edition of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible,* ed. Michael D. Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

122. Gn 3:16-18 (NRSV).

touchstones whose call for interpretation interpellates both the young couple and the readers. This is part of the empirical-didactic function of naturalist description, which, while adumbrating the mechanisms of determinism according to which characters move along their respective, intersecting paths, places the reader at a critical distance from the narrative, demonstrating—often heavy-handedly—its moral significance. One exceptionally persistent motif is the recurrent appearance of the *couleuvre,* the garter snake. It is mentioned in passing no fewer than six times throughout *La faute,* particularly when the specter of desire threatens to rear its head during Serge and Albine's afternoon excursions into Le Paradou:

> On eût dit un coin de roches stériles, raviné, bossué, vêtu d'herbe rude, de lianes rampantes qui se coulaient dans chaque fente comme des couleuvres.[123]

> Et, sur les dalles des rochers, au bord des buissons maigres, des couleuvres, nouées deux à deux, sifflait avec douceur, tandis que de grands lézards couvraient leurs œuf, l'échine vibrante, d'un léger ronflement d'extase.[124]

In favoring the *couleuvre* over the *serpent,* Zola desacralizes and disarms the image of the snake-as-tempter. If any snake could potentially signify the seduction of sin, then all snakes pose a potential threat: Satan lies in wait everywhere. But the particularity of a garter snake lies precisely in its harmlessness *in spite of* its ubiquity: it could be anywhere, but poses no risk. Their juxtaposition with the mineral sterility of rocks and boulders, vegetation that approximates animal life but lacks its intelligence and mating rituals, and other living creatures—cold, reviled reptilian life rewritten in maternal ecstasy—recasts the *couleuvre* as one species among many, all participating in the elaborate, cyclical, hierarchical dance of life.

These are some of the novel's most promising moments, where the truly oppositional potential of naturalism and naturalist description are brought to bear on texts and discourses that are otherwise incredibly stifling in their ideological and epistemological force. If Zola were to stop here, at neutralizing religious moralism by using fiction to theorize a different set of relationships between men and women and between the human and the animal—ones based on parity and similitude rather than on hierarchy and difference—he would have in fact succeeded in producing a much more radical worldview than he actually does. As it is, though, he capitulates to and perpetuates the extremism of a naturalism that is intrinsically moralistic, anthropocentric, and heteronormative. The true utopianism of *La faute* does not lie in its reimagining of the Fall, but in the ethics of amicable cooperation that precedes it. Albine is anything but an outgrowth or inverted copy of Serge in the way that Eve is of Adam; he moves from utter dependence on her care to a recognition of their equality, a precondition to the joyous freedom they find in Le Paradou. This is, in many ways, a different means of achieving the attitude of openness and multiplication of pleasures—free of institutional and cultural limitations—that Foucault formulates in "De l'amitié comme mode de vie":

> Ils ont à inventer de A à Z une relation encore sans forme, et qui est l'amitié: c'est-à-dire la somme de toutes les choses à travers lesquelles, l'un à l'autre, on peut se faire plaisir. […] Imaginer un acte sexuel qui n'est pas conforme à la loi ou à la nature, ce n'est pas ça qui inquiète les gens. Mais que des individus commencent à s'aimer, voilà le problème. L'institution est prise à contre-pied; des intensités affectives la traversent, à la fois elles la font tenir et la perturbent… Les codes institutionnels ne peuvent valider ces relations aux intensités multiples, aux couleurs variables, aux mouvements imperceptibles, aux formes

123. Zola, *La faute,* 242.
124. Zola, *La faute,* 302.

> qui changent. Ces relations qui font court-circuit et qui introduisent l'amour là où il devrait y avoir la loi, la règle, ou l'habitude.[125]

Of course, Foucault was thinking *through* historically contingent disciplinary apparatuses and categories while also attempting to think *around* them using homosexuality and friendship as points of departure for reconceptualizing human relationships and social configurations. For Zola, chastity is perforce exchanged for gender, whereas for Foucault, sexuality is not essential for friendship. He instead imagines friendship—rather than love, sex, or marriage—as the ethical foundation on which various types of bonds might be formed. In evacuating history and staging a degree-zero milieu, Zola had a similar opportunity to envision new forms of connection and collaboration outside of the exigences of law, nature, and custom. As it is, though, it is not enough for the *couleuvre* to be harmless and unremarkable. It must, in alignment with the dogma of the experimental novel, call attention to its own taxonomical subjugation *in opposition to* the dogma of hardline Catholicism, whose panoptic serpent beckons to all believers.

And the snake does indeed return, no longer the harbinger of knowledge and mortality, but of the evils of the Church itself. The word *serpent* only appears once, not long after the young lovers consummate their desire. The space of the garden, including its boundaries, plays an integral role here. Shortly after Albine and Serge begin exploring Le Paradou together, Albine tells him the legend of an "arbre défendu" that she has been seeking for years. In fact, the tree's legendary status throws its proscription into doubt: why is it forbidden? By whom? "Tous les gens du pays m'ont dit que c'était défendu."[126] Again, the line between the literal and the figurative is productively, allegorically blurred: the unlocalizable tree could be the biblical tree of knowledge of good and evil (known by all, though they themselves have never seen it in person) or it could be an actual tree in the garden. As the couple penetrates deeper into the garden, they encounter a series of sites that progressively lead them away from history and civilization into the generative heart of Le Paradou: a fallen statue, a crumbling colonnade, a bounteous orchard, and finally, a sacred grove.

> Ils entrèrent enfin sous les futaies, religieusement, avec une pointe de terreur sacrée, comme on entre sous la voûte d'une église. Les troncs, droits, montait démesurément, alignaient à l'infini des enfoncements de colonnes. Au loin, des nefs se creusaient, avec leurs bas-côtés plus étouffés… Un silence religieux tombait des ogives géantes; une nudité austère donnait au sol l'usure des dalles… Et ils écoutaient la sonorité de leurs pas, pénétrés de la grandiose solitude de ce temple. C'était là certainement que devait se trouver l'arbre tant cherché, dont l'ombre procurait la félicité parfaite.[127]

Close to the sacred tree, the forest is described using the architectural language of the cathedral, with its vaults, columns, naves, side aisles, crossbeams, and paving stones. This is the exact opposite of the rhetoric of *La curée,* in which botanical, floral, vegetal, and corporeal features were transformed into the superficial artifice of the Hôtel Saccard. Here, we face the grandest, oldest, and most sacred of churches: nature itself. The Zolian image of forest-as-church is a triple affront to past iterations of the same trope. Under the vaulted canopy of Le Paradou, we bear witness to the properly biological miracle of reproduction rather than the Christian tragedy of the

125. Michel Foucault, "De l'amitié comme mode de vie" in *Dits et écrits II* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 983.

126. Zola, *La faute*, 242.

127. Zola, *La faute,* 266.

Fall of Man, the romantic site of wistful introspection,[128] or the decadent-symbolist metaphor for synesthesia and semiosis.[129]

Though they search for this mysterious place together, it is eventually Albine who finds it. Zola's retelling differs from Genesis in two key respects: first, Albine is not tricked into disobedience, unlike Eve. She continues to incarnate the savage liberty of her childhood, unrestrained by fear or convention. Second, she does not discover the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, but the other tree mentioned in Genesis, the Tree of Life. Upon stumbling upon the path to its clearing, she turns back to find Serge so that they can walk the path of discovery together:

> Les plantes, ce matin-là, avait toutes l'air de me pousser de ce côté. Les branches longues me fouettaient par-derrière, les herbes ménageait des pentes, les sentiers s'offraient d'eux-mêmes. Et je crois que les bêtes s'en mêlaient aussi, car j'ai vu un cerf qui galopait devant moi comme pour m'inviter à le suivre, tandis qu'un vol de bouvreuils allait d'arbre en arbre, m'avertissant par de petits cris, lorsque j'étais tentée de prendre une mauvaise route. […] En effet, le parc entier les poussait doucement. Derrière eux, il semblait qu'une barrière de buissons se hérissât, pour les empêcher de revenir sur leurs pas…[130]

Such instances are irreducible to the ecological symbolism of the romantic pastoral. In the world of Zolian representation, everything signifies, but equally important is the extent to which characters' surroundings exert real, material forces on them. The use of direct speech in the first citation above signals a shift from the allegorical and the figurative to the literal and the lived: the garden is a mystical entity, life incarnate, who actively leads Albine and Serge to the hidden location of its most precious secret. This is Zola's answer to doctrinal Christianity, which asserts the truth of the Bible as the Word of God. In the absence of God, the reader of the naturalist text is left with the truth of the Law of Nature, the central force leading the couple not to carnal perdition, but to vital actualization. In one of the most extravagant scenes of Zola's oeuvre, a "grande fornication" takes place in which everything, from the young lovers to the very atoms of matter themselves, copulate in one tremendous orgasmic convulsion.[131]

This is the second major turning point of the novel, after Serge's initial collapse. It marks the completion of his transformation from a effeminate, neurotic weakling perverted by the unnatural demands of priesthood—one of the most intense forms of Catholic devotion—to a fully realized man, hardy and concupiscent. It also signals Albine's utter domestication, her transition from an uncivilized, exuberant child of the forest to a sedate, doting woman, finally dependent on Serge. Desire is no longer curtailed, but hyperbolically amplified by means of spatial description to the couple's surroundings; even infinitesimal, invisible atomic bonds are charged with erotic vital energy. More importantly, this desire is fulfilled in a "frisson d'enfantement."[132] The equation of life is complete: the sensuality of terrestrial, corporeal existence is the natural prerequisite of its own perpetuation. The procreative obligation of divine law is supplanted by the reproductive obligation of biology: "Il y avait encore, dans leur

128. See, for example, Chateaubriand's "La Forêt."
129. Famously formulated in Baudelaire's "Correspondances."
130. Zola, *La faute,* 294-96.
131. Zola, *La faute,* 303.
132. Zola, *La faute,* 303.

bonheur, la certitude d'une loi accomplie, la sérénité du but logiquement trouvé."[133] Strangely, the institution of marriage is resurrected despite its irrelevance for propagation: "La fatalité de la generation les entourait. Ils cédèrent aux exigences du jardin. Ce fut l'arbre qui confia à l'oreille d'Albine ce que les mères murmurent aux épousées, le soir des noces."[134]

In renouncing Catholic discourses on sex, gender, and sexuality, Zola replaces them with those of the biological and social determinism of naturalism; he cannot think desire outside of conjugal reproduction and its concomitant set of gender roles and legal mechanisms. Zolian naturalism is both enmeshed in and a site of redeployment for what Monique Wittig calls the "straight mind," an almost universal nexus of concepts that structures our thought and disciplines according to the logic of heterosexuality.[135] The categories of this logic—which, she contends, are also the fundamental categories of contemporary science—are binary, hierarchical, oppressive, and most importantly, a priori. Until subjected to philosophical and political critique, they operate continuously and invisibly precisely because they render the world intelligible according to their own principles and processes of division and subordination. It comes as no surprise that Zola, writing long before the feminist and queer philosophers of the 20th century, would act as an agent of the straight mind. Heterosexuality is thus not just the premise of his anticlericalism, but also its result.

Albine and Serge's rebirth as two complementary halves of the same vital dynamism entails the restoration of difference and of hierarchy, beginning at the moment of carnal union, which is described using the age-old language of concession and ownership: "Albine se livra. Serge la posséda."[136] Then, there is a shift into the register of servitude, surrender, and gratitude all framed as the natural byproduct of their newly assumed genders:

> Serge disait, la reprenant dans ses bras forts: "Vois, je suis guéri; tu m'as donné toute ta santé." Albine répondait, en s'abandonnant: "Prends-moi toute, prends ma vie." Une plénitude leur mettait la vie jusqu'aux lèvres. Serge venait, dans la possession d'Albine, de trouver enfin son sexe d'homme, l'énergie de ses muscles, le courage de son cœur, la santé dernière qui avait jusque-là manqué à sa longue adolescence. Maintenant, il se sentait complet. […] Maintenant, elle était la servante. Elle renversait la tête sur son épaule, le regardant d'un air de reconnaissance inquiète.[137]

The transformation is all-encompassing: their bodies, speech, and behavior have all totally changed. Serge, as though imbued with Albine's life force, regains his strength and uses it to take possession of Albine. The expression *sexe d'homme* has a twofold meaning: Serge has rediscovered both his masculinity and, more literally, his male genitalia. Not only has he become the model of health and vitality, but he is now "complete" and in complete control of Albine. Their joy is short-lived, however. A sudden sense of shame befalls them in a surprising return to the topos of postlapsarian self-consciousness. They sense ominous eyes watching them, not the eyes of an intransigent god, but of a fanatical friar: the Frère Archangias has discovered them in their state of undress! He gained entry to Le Paradou—whose outer edge Serge and Albine had never managed to reach—through a breach in the boundary walls: "[La muraille] restait sombre,

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133. Zola, *La faute,* 304.

134. Zola, *La faute,* 303.

135. Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 27.

136. Zola, *La faute,* 304.

137. Zola, *La faute,* 305.

sans une fente sur le dehors. Puis, au bord d'un pré, elle parut subitement s'écrouler. Une brèche ouvrait sur la vallée voisine… le trou semblait avoir été agrandi par quelque main furieuse. […] Serge regardait, malgré lui, cloué au seuil de la brèche. En bas, au fond de la plaine, le soleil couchant éclairant d'une nappe d'or le village des Artaud…"[138] The hermetically sealed garden is now open to the external world, and its spell is broken. History, culture, the intricate, powerful force of the social field spill back in, along with Serge's memories. Again, an alteration in the fundamental arrangement of diegetic space triggers a reorganization of the affective relationships between characters, an axiological reshuffling of the criteria by which they make moral judgments, and a narrative displacement out of the fabular tonality associated with Le Paradou and back into the dirty reality of agrarian life in rural France. Archangias—the terrible, duplicitous Archangel—embodies the insidious, invasive arm of the Church and the iron grip of its toxic ideology. He is revealed as the true source of evil and hypocrisy, the herald of the serpent's triumph over the garter snake: "Vous avez désobéi à Dieu... C'est cette gueuse qui vous a tenté, n'est-ce pas? Ne voyez-vous pas la queue du serpent se tordre parmi les mèches de ses cheveux? Lâchez-la, ne la touchez plus, car elle est le commencement de l'enfer…"[139]

Serge, overtaken by memory and exhorted by Archangias, abandons Albine on the spot and soon resumes his duties as abbé Mouret. Albine ventures to the village once, but is unsuccessful in persuading Serge to return to Le Paradou to regain their Edenic beatitude. She commits suicide weeks later, smothered under a mass of flowers uprooted—like her—from the garden, surrounded by the very paintings that taught her how to love. The weight of the flowers materializes the impossibility of unknowing, the irretrievability of her lost innocence, a burden she must bear alone now that blind faith has abducted her true love. Pascal, upon notifying Serge of her death, also informs him that she was carrying his child. The novel closes on Désirée rejoicing at the birth of a calf, a moment of Zolian optimism at the tenacity of life even in the face of death and tragedy.

Zola goes to great lengths to insist on what he sees as the nonsensical cruelty of religious devotion. He does not recognize, however, that his vision of naturalism and of science more broadly enacts other kinds of violence. His willingness to make a martyr of one of the most unique characters of the *Rougon-Macquart,* to sacrifice her child in exchange for a final glimmer of hope, is evidence of his own polemical blind-spots. That is not to say that *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* is entirely incapable of critique. We need only to look to the middle of the novel, before the narrative scales are tipped to the other extreme of the naturalist project, to glimpse a potential for radical new forms of being, knowing, and loving.

It is not that Zola denounces heterosexuality, nor does he suggest homosexuality. The radicalism of *La faute* lies instead in the powerful, genderless simplicity of its friendship. After all, the impossibility of true friendship between adult men and women is a forgone conclusion in Western history: from Montaigne to *When Harry Met Sally,* sex has always been the determiner of amical legitimacy. For the briefest of moments, Zola thinks friendship differently. He does not rewrite the Montaignesque formula as "Parce que c'était lui, parce que c'était elle," but rather as "Parce que c'était *eux*." This is no mean feat, particularly considering the Biblical-allegorical slant of the novel. *La faute*'s conception of companionship—intimacy even—is close to the type of relation articulated by Foucault: one existing outside of institutional control, irrecuperable by the regimes of gendered, sexualized power-knowledge that normally render it unthinkable. This eminently, disruptively queer bond is produced by the very aesthetic protocol that would seek to

138. Zola, *La faute,* 308.
139. Zola, *La faute,* 313.

excise it from the social whole by reason of its essential sterility. We see, yet again, how Zolian naturalism tends to generate queerness when it most vehemently tries to suppress it.

Zola turned to the experimental novel as a means of countering what he saw as a regressive and harmful set of beliefs. How, then, did Zola's greatest detractor and literary rival go about undermining the theoretical precepts subtending the experimental novel?

Huysmans, the Anti-Naturalist

Nearly a decade after the release of *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* Joris-Karl Huysmans published *À rebours,* by far his most famous work, and the one often considered as the archetype of the decadent novel. It is also Huysmans's most definitive break from naturalism, the literary school that nourished his aesthetics and methods as he made his first forays into authorship. Huysmans affirms in the 1904 preface to *À rebours* that the novel was a calculated challenge to what he saw as the limits of naturalism:

> Il y avait beaucoup de choses que Zola ne pouvait comprendre; d'abord, ce besoin que j'éprouvais d'ouvrir les fenêtres, de fuir un milieu où j'étouffais; puis, le désir qui m'appréhendait de secouer les préjugés, de briser les limites du roman, d'y faire entrer l'art, la science, l'histoire, *de ne plus se servir, en un mot, de cette forme que comme d'un cadre pour y insérer de plus sérieux travaux*. Moi, c'était cela qui me frappait surtout à cette époque, supprimer l'intrigue traditionnelle, voire même la passion, la femme, concentrer le pinceau de lumière sur un seul personnage, faire à tout prix du neuf.[140]

By this point, what was once a close friendship and intellectual affinity had become outright animosity. In the same preface, Huysmans recounts a tumultuous encounter with Zola, who, "l'œil devenu noir," accused him of striking a terrible blow to naturalism and in so doing, checking the progress of the novel as a catalyst for social change.[141] Their ongoing quarrel is, in many ways, emblematic of the literary debates of the era. What is the proper role of the novel? Should it, as was Zola's position, be the first of the arts and letters to make the disciplinary shift to the sciences, a possibility already alluded to in the forward to Balzac's *Comédie humaine*? Or is this view itself too narrow, as Huysmans intimates? Why limit the novel to science, to traditional plot structures and character motivations, rather than use it as a crucible in which art, history, science, and literary form itself are broken down and alloyed? If Zola's notion of the literary falls closer to a kind of utopian utilitarianism, then Huysmans's positions itself almost as its diametric opposite: a non-mimetic aestheticism that will pave the way for even more extreme forms of non- and anti-representational literatures, chief among them, symbolism.

It is these differences that position Zola and Huysmans's respective projects against realism and against one another. They are both invested in undermining the mimetic impetus that drives various manifestations of realism and that makes its primary goal the depiction of physical, psychological, and social reality. For naturalism, that means exceeding representation through the analysis, diagnosis, and correction of reality by combining positivism and literary creation. For decadence, that means refusing to reduce the literary to the merely scientific, liberating it from the stipulations of narrative, and rejecting the totalizing scale of realism and naturalism. Both ambitious endeavors, to be sure. Intriguingly, their antagonism results in a number of shared traits and interests. First, the disillusionment with narrative and narration

140. Huysmans, *À rebours,* 65 (italics added).

141. Huysmans, *À rebours,* 64.

translates to a preference for description and non-essential detail, whether it take the form of Huysmans's luxurious *intérieur calfeutré* or of Zola's lush greenhouses and gardens. Second, the fixation on embodied experience leads to an abiding interest in sex, sexuality, and gender, either as biological prescriptivism in naturalism or as the privileging of male eroticism in decadence.

Clearly, Huysmans developed his particular aesthetic sensibilities at least in part as a response to naturalism. His vision of the novel poses conceptual, thematic, and formal objections to that of Zola. It would be possible to explore the interplay between the two through an examination of *À rebours* alone. After all, it references Zola and in many ways epitomizes Huysmansian decadence. It does not, however, position itself against naturalism as explicitly as the third novel of the same triptych: *En rade*, published in 1887 (the first of the series, *À vau-l'eau* [1882] is, in many respects, closer to naturalism). It's not just that *En rade* illustrates decadence from another set of perspectives and registers: rural, conjugal, and oneiric. After some brief considerations of *À rebours,* I will argue that *En rade* is one of the few cases of a decadent parody of a naturalist work.

En rade and the Dark Mirror of Decadent Irony

By early 1887, Zola had reached celebrity status, propelled in part by the controversy surrounding the publication of *L'assommoir* a decade earlier. Since then, several of his novels had been resounding successes, and many—including *L'assommoir, Nana, Le ventre de Paris,* and even *Germinal*—had been adapted for the stage. He had also recently come under fire for the publication of *L'œuvre,* which occasioned a terrible feud with Cézanne (who believed the novel's neurotic, unsuccessful protagonist to be based on him) as well as a public accusation of plagiarism by the Goncourts. This was the state of things in the year following Huysmans's return to Paris after visiting the chateau-abbey of Lourps in the countryside north of the Capital—the very estate that would inspire the setting of *En rade.* His reception of *La faute* is complex, as was his relationship to naturalism. Two years after the novel's release, Huysmans reviewed it with mitigated praise: "En dépit de cette outrance de sève qui fait craquer le tronc du livre, l'abbé Mouret contient des pages qui sont véritablement sublimes. [...] Pour mettre sur pied un livre semblable, un livre aussi nouveau, aussi original... il faut être un fier artiste et un grand poète! Pour avoir créé la Teuse... et le frère Archangias... il faut être observateur sagace et le subtil analyste que nous allons retrouver dans *La conquête de Plassans*."[142] His high opinion of Zola dissimulates a contempt for Zola's bloated style, for the "excess of sap that fills the trunk of the book to bursting." He then distanced himself further from Zola and wrote *À rebours* in 1884, rejecting the scientific utopianism of naturalism in favor of the blasé pessimism, unabashed nostalgia, and cult of the artificial that would soon come to be known as decadent style. Indeed, in the same preface to *À rebours*, he cites a lack of forward momentum as one of the death knells of the naturalist school, as well as its proclivity to measure individuals according to their adherence to the norm: "...mais cette école [...] était condamnée à se rabâcher, en piétinant sur place. Elle n'admettait guère, en théorie du moins, l'exception; elle [...] s'efforçait, sous prétexte de faire vivant, de créer des êtres qui fussent aussi semblables que possible à la bonne moyenne des gens."[143]

142. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *L'Actualité,* 1877.

143. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours* (Paris : Gallimard, 1983), 51.

Considering his explicit disavowal of Zolian naturalism, we might expect Huysmans's works to be expurgated of any mention of Zola. This is far from the case. Allusions to both Zola and naturalism litter Huysmans's mid- and late-career works, including *À rebours.* This may be less surprising if we consider the work Huysmans mentions in his initial review of *La faute. La conquête de Plassans,* which has never been a critical or commercial success, not only bears thematic similarities to *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* but also to many of Huysmans's works: the role of the clergy and the significance of spirituality in modern life, madness as both a path to transcendence and to self-dissolution, the relationship between the Church and contemporary politics, and the pleasures and hazards of provincial life. In terms of style both *La faute* and *La conquête* hearken back to the romantic pastoralism of the early decades of the nineteenth century, expressed in languorous passages depicting the halcyon charms of the countryside. Already we are coming to see what Huysmans finds of value in Zola's sprawling oeuvre: form freed from method and utility, a tension between self-discipline and self-indulgence, and most importantly, an Orphean glance of longing back to a time that cannot be grasped, whose temporal distance from the present day is concretized and idealized in that very glance. This is confirmed in the passages of *À rebours* dedicated to the exposition of Des Esseintes's favorite authors:

> Enfin, depuis son départ de Paris, il s'éloignait, de plus en plus, de la réalité et surtout du monde contemporain qu'il tenait en une croissante horreur; cette haine avait forcément agi sur ses goûts littéraires et artistiques, et il se détournait le plus possible des tableaux et des livres dont les sujets délimités se reléguaient dans la vie moderne. Aussi, perdant la faculté d'admirer indifféremment la beauté sous quelque forme qu'elle se présente, préférait-il, chez Flaubert, *La tentation de saint Antoine* à *L'éducation sentimentale*; chez de Goncourt, *La Faustin* à *Germinie Lacerteux*; chez Zola, *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* à *L'assommoir.*[144]

Des Esseintes—and by proxy, Huysmans himself—here recognizes that "chez Zola, la nostalgie des au-delà était différente," that Zola had no interest in imagining any kind of "beyond," whether celestial, symbolic, or metaphysical. His ambitions were entirely terrestrial, his dreams those of a technocratic humanist. Nevertheless, Huysmans posits that the obsessive need to flee the immediacy of the world as we know it is the very stuff of poetry ("ce besoin qui est en somme la poésie même"). According to Des Esseintes, the irresistible desire to surpass the natural forced Zola into a difficult, ironic position in relation to his long-held literary principles: it obliged him to aestheticize the phenomenal, to sublimate the senses, to mysticize and eroticize the merely organic, and to orientalize that most occidental of institutions—Catholicism:

> [Zola] s'était rué dans une idéale campagne... il avait songé à de fantastiques ruts de ciel... il avait abouti à un panthéisme gigantesque, avait à son insu peut-être, créé, avec ce milieu édénique où il plaçait son Adam et son Ève, un prodigieux poème Hindou, celebrant en un style dont les larges teintes, plaques à cru, avait comme un bizarre éclat de peinture indienne, l'hymne de la chair, la matière, animée, vivante, révélant par sa fureur de generation, à la creature humaine, le fruit défendu de l'amour, ses suffocations, ses caresses instinctives, ses naturelles poses.[145]

If we are to believe Des Esseintes, all that Zola accomplishes in his attempt to demystify reproduction is penning his *least* naturalist novel. From this perspective, *La faute* is to be praised

144. Huysmans, *À rebours,* 270.
145. Huysmans, *À rebours,* 274.

for its decadent remove from material modernity and for its exaltation of sensuous delight, all presented to the reader on an ornate platter of descriptive excess. It is not, however, a decadent novel. Des Esseintes makes clear that it is but one partial success among many failures by the same author; indeed, its failure constitutes its success.

The parallels between *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *En rade,* on the other hand, are striking not in their similarities, but in their inversions. In the novel, we meet Jacques and Louise Marles, a formerly wealthy Parisian couple who plans to seek refuge in La Brie before returning to the city for a protracted legal battle with their creditors. In place of the idyllic ancestral estate that they were expecting, they find the dilapidated, half-burned Château de Lourps and its sinister garden, both maintained by the Marles' uncouth cousins, Antoine and Norine. Louise, afflicted with a mysterious illness, spends most of her time in one of the chateau's few habitable rooms, attended to by Jacques and haunted by a ghastly barn owl. Jacques spends his days surveying the ruins of the estate and his nights dreaming of monstrously erotic creatures and landscapes. The passing of time offers very little in terms of plot; rather, we witness a slow, inexorable, triple decline: of Jacques into his erotic imaginary, which becomes ever less distinguishable from his waking impressions; of Louise further into weakness and malady; and of their conjugal bond, which is eaten away by the degenerative influence of provincial isolation. In the final passages, the weary couple prepares for their journey back to Paris.

In *En rade,* Huysmans articulates a different set of relations between life and death, aesthetics and science, sexuality and gender, and spirituality and materiality than those we saw in *La faute*. In each of these pairs, he aligns himself with the domain rejected by naturalism. There are notable differences between the two novels, both in form and content, and not all of them are reducible to a decadent counterpositioning vis-à-vis naturalism. For example, the Church and its clergy are all but absent from the story (unlike in Huysmans's later novel cycles). We will see, though, that what the novel loses in direct commentary on Catholicism as a set of doctrines and institutions, it regains in a reimagining of the literary potential of the novel to envision and represent other, broader incarnations of spirituality and the transcendence: the supernatural, the sacred, and the surreal.

Zola's solution to the quandary of religion was to erase the memory of the devout and neutralize the milieu that lead to his devotion, thereby creating what I called a degree-zero milieu in which the vector of his biological determinism is easily traced by the reader from the moment of his rebirth to the point of his vital self-discovery. While *milieu* and *lieu,* social environment and physical space, remain inseparably linked in decadent texts through description, milieu is not narratively operative in most decadent texts. That is, though most authors associated with decadence are, to some extent, concerned with class—a concern that primarily appears as nostalgia for a dying aristocracy and fascination with the grotesquerie of the poor—their writing is in no way structured by a need to explain the fatal mechanics that lead characters from their fictional point of departure to its ineluctable terminus.

Huysmans's ironic adaptation of *La faute* reconfigures the absence of milieu in a devilishly clever way. Rather than creating the conditions for two "blank" characters to find perfect love in a "neutral" space *washed* of culture and society, he forcibly strips his two protagonists—an already married couple who have known nothing but a life of wealth and leisure—of their milieu and transplants them into a "neutral" space *bereft* of culture and society, thereby setting the stage for the slow dissolution of their conjugal and amorous bond. Whereas Serge and Albine's naïveté is that of absolute ignorance and innocence, the Marles' is a naïveté of the worldly, of two people whose life of cosmopolitan luxury and blasé sensuality has made

them totally incapable of conceiving of any other state of existence. Moreover, in place of the overrun bounty of Le Paradou, showered with the gifts of the earth, they must make do with the Château de Lourps and its fallow, fetid garden.

Just as isolated as Zola's young lovers, and equally equipped with the ruins of a grand old estate, they are haunted by the memory of their glorious life in Paris and surrounded by the senescence of the soil, the other side of the coin of life. What we are left with is the mirror image of *La faute de l'abbé Mouret*: not a story of falling in love, but of falling out of it; not of a triumphant vitality embattled by the denaturing forces of the Church, but a natural morbidity whose only escape lies in the immateriality of the sensuous mind. If *La faute* can be characterized as an inherently phenomenological novel, *En rade* is an essentially neurotic one. This is captured in the novel's reworking of the celebrated Stendhalian mirror, an aesthetic metaphor understandably dear to Zola as well. Upon entering the rather ignoble space that is to become their bedroom, Jacques and Louise are distracted by the décor:

> La pièce dans laquelle il s'était introduit était très grande, tapissée sur les murs et le plafond d'un papier imitant une treille, losangé de barreaux vert cru sur fond saumâtre. Des trumeaux en bois gris surmontaient les portes et, sur la cheminée en marbre griotte, une petite glace verdâtre dont le tain coulé picotait l'eau de virgules de vif-argent, était encadrée dans des boiseries également grises. […] Il regarda Louise; elle ne semblait pas effarée par la glaciale solitude de cette pièce. Au contraire, elle l'examinait avec complaisance et souriait à la glace qui lui renvoyait son visage décoloré par l'eau verte, grêlé par les brèches de l'étamage.[146]

Superficially, this could very well be a paragraph excerpted from a work by Zola: the granular attention to spatial detail given form, weight, and texture through an adjectival proliferation that some might consider overwrought; the *enchâssement* of character into setting accompanied by the projection of setting onto character; the synthesis of organic authenticity and inanimate artificiality, all recall scenes from naturalist texts.

Just as naturalist style often produces two levels of meaning through the double-signification of materiality and allegory (the result of its simultaneously positivistic and critical self-awareness), description here signifies doubly. The difference is that decadence is almost always less allegorical than it is metafictional. Or, put another way, one of the hallmarks of decadence is its tendency to always present itself as an aesthetics; decadent allegory is, first and foremost, an allegory of literary creation itself. That is not to say that decadent representation is entirely un- or anti-mimetic or that other allegorical or symbolic modes are impossible in decadent writing; it's simply that they are usually secondary to the text's reflection on its own literariness. In this way, we might situate *En rade* in the same literary tradition as Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," in which the story's dramatic irony is figured as both architectural and familial collapse, or Baudelaire's "L'Héautontimouroménos," which considers irony as a kind of self-flagellation in which a text disrupts its own production of meaning. With perhaps the exception of *Le docteur Pascal,* none of Zola's works consider their own operation or limitations as literary texts; the burden of those ruminations is borne almost entirely by Zola's criticism and writings on aesthetics.

Here, the mirror of realist representation is broken down into its *eau* and *tain* (or *étamage*). The silvering does not return a pure, undistorted view of the world it reflects; rather, the image it bounces back is always already disfigured, bespeckled with the "commas" of

146. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *En rade* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984), 48.

language, itself always already distanced from the thought of the writing subject. As for Jacques and Louise Marles, they—in all the ugliness of their existence—are caught in the *eau verte* of the glass, discolored, distilled to the objectification of their literary representation. The spatial detail provided here does not stand in for an external ideology, but for the internal, self-referential discourse of decadence as a genre that understands itself as constitutively (self-)mediated. The raw green of the wallpaper, itself set against a deep brackish (*saumâtre*) green, is cast in the second degree through recourse to the approximative suffix *-âtre*: the green*ish* or *off*-green (*verdâtre*) mirror. Meanwhile, the displaced adjective "glacial" refers at once to the ambient temperature of the room (or perhaps to a certain affect it elicits in the characters), to the chill of the *eau verte* of the mirror fixing and reflecting them, and etymologically, to the mirror (*glace*) itself. *La faute*'s breach is recast in *En rade* as a chip in the mirror's silvering: what was for Zola an allegorical gap allowing the polluted, obsolete ideology of Catholicism into the natural vitality of the organic world is for Huysmans the falsity of realism and naturalism. In deferring to Jacques's perspective and in imbuing it with a curiosity and animacy that contrasts starkly with Louise's jejune complacency, the narration prefigures the uneven gender dynamics that will characterize the remainder of the novel.

Just as the descriptive density of *En rade* is not commensurable with that of *La faute,* its expression of gender and sexual normativity is not skewed the same. Both are nevertheless still bound up with particular notions of the human and the natural. While Zola tends to equate the two under the rubric of vitality, Huysmans emphasizes their morbidity. Consequently, the binding, regressive authoritarianism of religion in naturalism is reworked as the liberating, elevating transcendence of spirituality. And it is the language of decadence, presenting itself as both message and vehicle, that becomes the conduit for that transcendence. Take, for example, Jacques's first dream sequence, in which he escapes both the burden of his ailing, sterile wife and the desolation of his new station in life: "Çà et là, dans le désordre des frondaisons et des lianes, ces ceps fusaient, à toute volée, se rattrapant par leur vrilles à des branches qui formaient un berceau et au bout desquelles se balançaient de symboliques grenades dont les hiatus carminés d'airain caressaient la pointe des corolles phalliques jaillies du sol."[147]

We are far removed from the kind of botanical description found in Zola, which concretized the Law of Nature through use of direct speech. Jacques's oneiric exploits are recounted in a strange narrative mode that mixes the opaque distancing effects of free indirect discourse and the transparency of autoreferential language. The reader is at once immersed in the dream, confronted with these jewellike vegetal apparitions, yet also kept at a distance from it by dint of the stipulation that the low-swinging pomegranates are indeed "symbolic" and that the corollas (the male part of the plant) springing up from the ground are definitively "phallic." The dream sequence establishes and stages a tension between the literal and apparent (the crystalline botanical elements) and the symbolic and suggested (the erotic forms and movements of those same elements).

Thus we are confronted with two levels of narrative collapse: first, the story of the Marles' misery interrupted by a surreal dream sequence, and then the symbolic apparatus of the dream usurped by its own recounting. At every moment, the text refuses the seamlessness of representation, first as the linearity of plot, then as the hermeneutic tension of interpretation. The text is endowed with a double eroticism, that of signification and then of the deliberate mise en scène of its failure or refusal to signify. Barthes describes this process well in *Le plaisir du texte* :

147. Huysmans, *En rade,* 60.

> Deux bords sont tracés: un bord sage, conforme, plagiaire (il s'agit de copier la langue dans son état canonique, tel qu'il a été fixé par l'école, le bon usage, la littérature, la culture), et *un autre bord,* mobile, vide (apte à prendre n'importe quels contours), qui n'est jamais que le lieu de son effet: là où s'entrevoit la mort du langage. Ces deux bords, *le compromis qu'ils mettent en scène,* sont nécessaires. La culture ni sa destruction ne sont érotiques; c'est la faille de l'une et de l'autre qui le devient. Le plaisir du texte est semblable à cet instant intenable, impossible, purement *romanesque,* que le libertin goûte au terme d'une machination hardie, faisant couper la corde qui le pend, au moment où il jouit.[148]

Plagiarism of Zolian naturalism, plagiarism of its erotic symbolism, then détournement of Zolian naturalism, rupture of its symbolic production of meaning: herein lies the core of what Barthes might call Huysmansian *plaisir* (which also constitutes its modernism), the proffer and temptation of a language that elicits readerly *jouissance* in withholding it.

Furthermore, Barthes's metaphor of auto-erotic asphyxiation is doubly applicable, not only in the give-and-take of meaning, but in the queer displacement of the immediacy of the carnal-botanical imagery of the dream. We have abandoned the literal *grande fornication* of naturalism in favor of an oneiric remove that, in transforming the subject of desire into its own object (it is, after all, Jacques's own mind that reflexively produces and consumes its own erotic material), thereby converts all eroticism into auto-eroticism. The masturbatory quality of Jacques's dreaming, as well as the phallic imagery, shift it closer to homosexuality or even asexuality than to heterosexuality in that it not only eliminates the possibility of reproduction, but of coitus altogether. Jacques, reflecting on his miserable, sexless existence, begins to see his dreams as a direct result of his wife's inability to have sex with him: "Il en souffrait à la fin des fins de cette abstinence de la chair que la maladie de sa femme lui faisait subir!"[149] Lacking a true external object, Jacques's desire is reflected back upon itself. Sexuality—the nexus of drives that incorporates both life and death and that, in terms of procreation, requires the male and the female—is sublimated into the elsewhere of the psyche, beyond corporeality, materiality, and duality. This transcendence is only possible in the rhetoric of decadence, and is markedly queer in its turn away from marriage and heterosexuality toward an sexuality that is disembodied, solitary, monstrous (in the sense that it applies human organs to non-human organisms), and homoerotic.

Jacques is just as frightened by these nighttime visions as he is aroused by them, and recognizes that they are the direct result of his new environment, whose perverse sterility and derelict isolation exert a noxious influence upon his body and mind. This becomes clear during an afternoon walk through the chateau garden:

> Depuis combien de temps ce jardin était-il laissé à l'abandon? Çà et là, de grands chênes élancés de travers se croisaient et, morts de vieillesse, servaient d'appuis aux parasites qui s'enroulait entre eux… mais leur sève affaiblie était inerte à procréer des fruits. Toutes les fleurs cultivées des parterres étaient mortes… Cet isolement, ce bois humide, cette lumière qui se décantait violâtre et trouble sous ses voûtes, agissaient comme l'obscurité et le froid du château dont ils rappelaient la mélancolie maladive et sourde… Il tenta de s'analyser, s'avoua qu'il se trouvait dans un était désorbité d'âme, soumis contre toute volonté à des impressions externes, travaillé par des nerfs écorchés en révolte

148. Roland Barthes, *Le plaisir du texte,* 13-14.

149. Huysmans, *En rade,* 125.

> contre sa raison dont les misérables défaillances s'étaient, quand même, dissipées depuis la venue du jour… Il se hâta pour s'y soustraire, espérant que ce mal être disparaîtrait dans des lieux moins sombres.[150]

If Le Paradou was a dream come true, the garden of Lourps is a nightmare whose only escape is in dreams. In place of the utopian fantasy of prelapsarian profusion, we have the ruins of a tired world drained of life and energy. It's as though the pure negativity of their surroundings is in the process of sapping Jacques of his own vital strength. The longed-for *soustraction* suggests a kind of double negative: if only he can "draw himself out of" (*se sous-traire de*) the morbid miasma of Lourps, he will be made whole. The wording is ambiguous: the adverbial pronoun *y* could refer to either the estate as a physical space or the pathological state of mind it induces, and the "less somber places" could be either geographical ones (like Paris) or oneiric ones (the erotic gardens of his dreams).

It seems, then, that Zola and Huysmans might agree on this: that space and subjectivity—particularly sexual subjectivity—are intimately intertwined. Huysmans, however, complicates this relationship by suggesting that subjectivity is not self-limiting; it is able to exceed itself in dream. Zola simply has no patience for the supernatural, conceiving of a sensuous subject only capable of transcendence through the cohesion of the social whole in all its organic glory. Huysmans, however, sees the supernatural as the only thing that spares humans from the agony of continual decay, of the inexorable slippage of time itself: "[Jacques] demeura pensif, car l'insondable énigme du Rêve le hantait. Ces visions étaient-elles, ainsi que l'homme l'a longtemps cru, un voyage de l'âme hors du corps, un élan hors du monde, un vagabondage de l'esprit échappé de son hôtellerie charnelle et errant au hasard dans d'occultes régions, dans d'antérieurs ou futurs limbes?"[151] The words *vagabondage* and *hôtellerie,* as well as the mention of "past and future limbos" admit of a certain pitfall in the decadent rethinking of life and desire. Its ability to leave the body notwithstanding, the spirit must always return. It cannot remain a vagabond of the past or future; it is bound to recuperation by the perpetual present of the sensorium in wakefulness. There comes a point where Jacques must confront the mortal peril of he and his wife's provincial isolation: "Jacques commençait à croire que les économies réalisées à la campagne étaient un leurre et que la solitude, si séduisante à évoquer lorsqu'on réside en plein Paris, devient insupportable quand on la subit, loin de tout, sans domestique et sans voiture."[152] Not unlike Serge in the final section of *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* Jacques feels the implacable pull of his milieu, of the divertissement of Paris: the city is the vital locus of the decadent subject (even Des Esseintes must return to the Capital at the end of *À rebours*). It offers what dreams and the countryside cannot: the sensuous, affective, and intellectual distractions of civilization in all its worldly artifice. As Hannah Scott eloquently notes in her article on Huysmans and class struggle, "The fact that it is specifically for the bourgeois protagonist and through his free indirect discourse that this garden becomes an unsettling dystopia, reflects that the rural vegetation, like the urban 'animalistic' working classes, refuses bourgeois desires and domination."[153]

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150. Huysmans, *En rade,* 73-76.

151. Huysmans, *En rade,* 78-79.

152. Huysmans, *En rade,* 102.

153. Hannah Scott, "*Vert* versus *Verre*: Vegetal Violence in Huysmans's *En rade,*" *French Studies* 69*,* no. 3 (2015): 305-317.

Topography, Milieu, and the Game of Desire

My oppositional approach to Zola attempted to reveal what was gained and lost when he discursively positioned himself against the ideological violence of Catholicism. This entailed the simultaneous—and seemingly paradoxical—recognition of naturalism's built-in social and scientific progressivism and the acknowledgment of its own normative biases and epistemological foreclosures. My objective was to critically overwrite the tension between discourse and counterdiscourse in the form of an interwoven series of paranoid and reparative readings, thereby freeing up some room for maneuver between various historically imbricated regimes of power-knowledge. In pivoting to Huysmans's ironic, decadent adaptation of Zola's naturalist creation myth, I have already tried to bring to light its oppositional qualities: in countering the overt heteronormative vitalism of naturalism with an aestheticized morbidity, Huysmans creates the conditions for queer forms of pleasure and self-knowledge that exist outside of conjugal and reproductive heterosexuality, namely, Jacques's oneiric onanism. In that sense, Huysmans is much more "queer" than Zola, in whose works we only glimpsed the briefest possibility of utopian equality—as friendship. Now, I would like to examine what is lost in Huysmans's response to literary positivism and redemptive biologism. At bottom, this has everything to do with how he conceives of the relationship between the city and the countryside.

Just as Serge's rebirth was dependent upon a spatial transition from the church and its village to the garden of Le Paradou, Jacques's survival hinges on the promise of regaining the streets of Paris and the possibility of winning back his fortune. The city represents the lifeblood of the high-society gentleman; rural France and its inhabitants are relegated to the basest of existences. Take, for example, Uncle Antoine's explanation of the amorous customs of the village youth:

> — On se tritouille, on s'amuse, quoi! et l'on boit des verres—puis qu'on sort, et dame, ceux que ça leur dit, ils s'en vont vers les champs.
> — Mais alors, reprit Jacques, le village doit être plein de filles enceintes?
> — Sans doute, sans doute, mais elles se marient…
> — Et c'est ainsi dans tous les environs?
> — Ben sûr, comment donc que tu voudrais que ça soit?
> — C'est juste, répliqua Jacques un peu interloqué par cette histoire qui résumait la haine parisienne, les instincts pécuniaires et les mœurs charnelles de cette campagne.[154]

The argotic verb *se tritouiller* (to fondle), dialectal form *ben*, and nonstandard syntactical structures *puis que*, *ceux que ça leur dit,* and *comment que tu veux* index the linguistic differences—which are also class differences—between the *citadin* and the *villageois.* Premarital sex is figured as brutish, the result of the unrefined animal appetites of the peasant. The logic of decadence would suggest that the only suitable channel for sexual desire is in marriage, an institution that would allow for the legal and social perpetuation of the upper classes. However, Jacques's musing on his bachelor days in Paris suggests otherwise:

> Ce qu'il avait voulu, c'était l'éloignement des odieux détails, l'apaisement de l'office, le silence de la cuisine, l'atmosphère douillette, le milieu duveté, éteint, l'existence arrondie, sans angles pour accrocher l'attention sur des ennuis; c'était dans une bienheureuse rade, l'arche capitonné, à l'abri des vents, et puis c'était aussi la société de la femme, la jupe émouchant les inquiétudes des tracas futiles, le préservant, ainsi qu'une

154. Huysmans, *En rade,* 151.

> moustiquaire, de la piqûre des petits riens, tenant la chambre dans une température ordonnée, égale; c'était le tout sous la main, sans attentes et sans courses, amour et bouillon, linges et livres.[155]

Bourgeois marriage is figured as the death of desire, just another form of domestic *calfeutrage* that would cradle Jacques in a soft, protective cocoon of perfect comfort and control. The wife is woman dispossessed of desire, of autonomy, of any other raison d'être than the establishment and preservation of a harbor whose purpose is to shelter her husband from the stormy seas of life. That the titular *rade* is an auto-antonym is no coincidence: Jacques's vision of blissful marriage-as-harbor (*une bienheureuse rade*) is thwarted by the reality of the Marles' broken down, marooned existence (their conjugal life *en rade* in the Château de Lourps). Where Zola ultimately came to idealize sexuality as the hierarchy of gender, Huysmans desexualizes that hierarchy and requires its legitimation as marriage. Desire becomes just another reminder of the materially bound deterioration of the body, caught in the trap of life.

When desire does rear its ugly head under the aegis of conjugal cohabitation, it can only manifest as the *delusion* of desire: "Puis il savait bien que si l'homme abdique pour les tribulations intimes de la femme toute répugnance, c'est parce que, semblable à un milieu réfringent qui déforme la réalité des choses, la passion charnelle illusionne et fait du corps de la femme l'instrument de si redondantes joies que la misère de ses rebuts s'efface."[156] We have already noted, beginning in the opening scene, that the novel's thematization of conjugal discord goes hand in hand with its thematization of language, particularly literary language. Here, desire is again associated with language as a "refractive medium," an imperfect mediation never quite capable of reflecting the ideality of thought or the reality of the external world without bending it. Nevertheless, it is the always-already-ruined accomplishment of that desire that provides the *jouissance*—the illusory flash of enlightenment—of language. The function of marriage, then, is to preserve the lie of desire, thereby ensuring the recurrent compression and release of its internal mechanism through the creation of ever more elaborate games of delusion. And by analogy, the function of literature is to preserve the lie of language, thereby ensuring the recurrent climax of encoding and interpretation through the redeployment of ever more elaborate games of signification.

This is what distinguishes decadence from naturalism (and from its realist and romantic forebears): it identifies the lie *as such*, calling attention to itself as re-presentation and collapsing all the levels of its signification. The Marles' marriage therefore must also implode: its lies are exposed, irrefutable, precluded from the dissimulation of delusion. Deprived of the amenities of her upper-class urban existence, Louise grows weaker and is unable to fulfill her wifely duties. The barren tumult of life is thus laid bare to Jacques. A mutual contempt begins to fester between them that seems poised to erode their marriage entirely. The reader is never made privy to its fate upon their return to Paris.

While *La faute* ends with a vibrant, hopeful scene of life incarnate in the birth of a calf, *En rade* closes on the hasty, clumsy insemination of an indifferent cow by a reluctant bull. Jacques, at first incredulous at the rude simplicity of the act, next likens it to the overblown lyricism of certain novelists:

> Jacques commençait à croire qu'il en était de la grandeur épique du taureau comme de l'or des blés, un vieux lieu commun, une vieille panne romantique rapetassés par les rimailleurs et les romanciers de l'heure actuelle! Non, là, vraiment, il n'y avait pas de

155. Huysmans, *En rade*, 120-121.

156. Huysmans, *En rade*, 211.

> quoi s'emballer et chausser des bottes molles et sonner du cor! Ce n'était ni imposant, ni altier. En fait de lyrisme, la saillie se composait d'un amas de deux sortes de viandes qu'on battait, qu'on empilait l'une sur l'autre puis qu'on emportait, aussitôt qu'elle s'étaient touchées, en retapant dessus![157]

This paragraph bears all the hallmarks of what we can now confidently call Huysmansian decadence. Its polysemy is finely tuned to operate on several lexical and syntactic levels, and its critical force is both trenchant and wide-ranging. The adjective *romantique* hearkens to the romanticism of decades past, but the qualification *de l'heure actuelle* encompasses his much more lyrical contemporaries: doubtless Zola, among others. The word *panne* designates a type of fabric resembling coarse velvet but is also a quasi-synonym for *rade*: breakdown, dysfunction, failure. Huysmans contends that contrary to what romantic and naturalist writers believe, life is anything but noble and miraculous. These writers' true failing, though, is not their attempt at representing it, but their blindness to the impossibility of its representation. While the naturalist exhausts himself polishing the *tain* of his mirror, the decadent scoffs at its size and inaccuracy, and sings the praises of its vitreous murk. The mirror of naturalism looms large and convex over the gritty minutiae of everyday lives and loves; the mirror of decadence swoons narcissistically at the sight of itself, a supercilious mise en abyme.

Toward the Novelization of Anti-Decadence

It has become clear that just as decadence attempts most insistently to distinguish itself from naturalism formally and thematically, it succeeds in hypostatizing naturalism aesthetically and discursively. That is, the only way Huysmans is initially able to articulate a style superior to that of Zola is through reflecting and reflecting *on* the Zolian novel, inverting its plot, the trajectories of its characters, and the symbolic charge of its settings. In so doing, however, he revalorizes description as a vehicle of critique and reactivates many of the same asymmetrical dichotomies of gender and sexuality operative in Zola's works.

I have argued for the theoretical importance of *La faute de l'abbé Mouret*, whose rural setting allow Zola to formulate an experimental protocol unique to his oeuvre in its elimination of a key variable of the naturalist novel: milieu. *La faute* thus comes to constitute both a forceful invective against Catholic dogma and an effusive paean to the wonders of sexual reproduction in all its "natural" complexity. I have reframed this polemic as a double-edged sword, progressive on the one hand in its secular humanism and gender parity (figured as heterosexual friendship), yet deeply regressive on the other in its reinstitution of stratified gender roles on the basis of biological sex.

Moving oppositionally, I then focused on Huysmans's *En rade,* situating it in a line of strategic rewritings: where Zola retells the story of Eden from the pseudoscientific perspective of the experimental novel, Huysmans, I demonstrated, parodies that retelling from a position of decadent pessimism. Zola's milieu-negation becomes Huysmans's milieu-extraction; Zola's transformation of the fall from grace into a fall into love and life becomes Huysmans's fall out of love and out of life. Through my examination of a series of ironic spatio-narrative reversals characteristic of decadence, I exposed naturalist triumphalism as an empty dream. Here again, my analysis advanced along lines both paranoid and reparative, identifying the misogynistic

157. Huysmans, *En rade,* 209-210.

heteronormativity undergirding Huysmans's thematic and rhetorical particularities, while also discerning queer alternatives to them (figured as moments of oneiric-onanistic metafiction).

In the introduction to this chapter, I characterized the relationship between naturalism and decadence as one that is not merely intertextual, but dialogic. We have examined, through close readings and theoretical gestures, one side of that dialogue. In the next chapter, we will confront the other side: a Zolian response to Huysmansian decadence, in novel form.

Chapter 3
Mobilizing Gender and Sexuality at the Turn of the Century

> "The more reliable Symbolists proclaim their movement as 'a reaction against naturalism.' Such a reaction was certainly justified and necessary; for naturalism in its beginnings, as long as it was embodied in De Goncourt and Zola, was morbid, and, in its later development in the hands of their imitators, vulgar and even criminal, as will be proved further on. Nevertheless Symbolism is not in the smallest degree qualified to conquer naturalism, because it is still more morbid than the latter, and, in art, the devil cannot be driven out by Beelzebub."[158]

Paris, Synthetic City

In the present chapter, I will move forward in time to Paris at the tail end of the nineteenth century. The capital of Zola and Huysmans's late-career works no longer appears as it did. This is not because the city and its inhabitants underwent more radical or more rapid changes than they had during the writing of these novelists' earlier, more commercially successful works; after all, both the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle and *À rebours* were written and published in the Third Republic. Rather, these new takes on Paris are the result of the evolution of Huysmans and Zola's relationship to their respective aesthetics and to their shared era.

Various periodizations of Zola's corpus have been proposed, but critics generally divide it into three parts: the early, or pre-*Rougon-Macquart* Zola of *La confession de Claude* (1865) and *Thérèse Raquin* (1867); the Zola of the *Rougon-Macquart* (1871-1893) and "Le Roman expérimental" (1880), the era of what we might call "high naturalism"; and the latter Zola, architect of the *Trois villes* (1894-1898) and *Quatre évangiles* (1899-1903) cycles.[159] The temporality of naturalism, as I explained in the previous chapter, is largely proleptic: its dogged gaze remains fixed on the far-flung horizon of technocratic utopianism, on a future society made robust and prosperous under the guiding hand of science. As it sails toward that vanishing point, though, it surveys the ruinous grounds beneath it, ridded with illness and moral turpitude, all in need of diagnosis and correction. For the bulk of Zola's writing career, this literary examination is historicizing and retrospective. The entirety of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle takes place during the Second Empire, and its objects of representation are rooted in the reign of Napoléon III and the subsequent Commune.[160] The first tome of Zola's next project, the *Trois villes* cycle

158. Max Nordau, *Degeneration,* 143.

159. Henri Mitterand makes a compelling case for a four-part periodization of Zola's oeuvre, highlighting the stark differences in tone, theme, and method between the *Trois Villes* saga and the unfinished *Quatre Évangiles* quartet. See Henri Mitterand, "Le Quatrième Zola," *Œuvres et critiques* 16, no. 2 (1991): 85-98.

160. The first of this saga, *La fortune des Rougon,* is the most chronologically proximate to the era in which it unfolds: it was published in 1871, a year after the Battle of Sedan which marked the fall of the Second Empire and set the stage for the Paris Commune. The final installment of Zola's magnum opus, *Le docteur Pascal,* appeared well into the Third Republic, in 1893.

appeared in 1894, and its story takes place in more or less the same timeframe, following the skeptical priest Pierre Froment as he searches for meaning in an era of upheaval, advancement, and acceleration. This shift to contemporaneity is shared by Huysmans, though it is not as marked as in Zola's works. Huysmans's literary output may also be divided into three stages: the early naturalist Huysmans of *Marthe, histoire d'une fille* (1876) and *Sac au dos* (1880), friend and follower of Zola; the patently decadent anti-naturalist Huysmans of *À rebours* (1884) and *En rade* (1887); and the conversion-era Huysmans whose search for a "naturalisme spiritualiste" in the *Roman de Durtal* (1891-1903) would consume the rest of his career.

Huysmans's Durtal and Zola's Pierre Froment share a number of similarities: they are both embedded in a number of normally unconnected (even incommensurate) urban milieus, both have rather vexed relationships to sexuality, and both undergo profound crises of faith inextricable from their cultural and historical moment. One of the central assertions of this chapter will be that in the latter stages of Zola and Huysmans's artistic development, it is naturalism that reacts to decadence. Accordingly, I will focus on Zola's *Paris* and Huysmans's *Là-bas.*

However, because these two novels are not bound (at least, not in their entirety) by the ironic rhetoric of parody, the orientation and mechanics of their oppositional interplay is not as clear as that between *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *En rade.* This is in part due to shifts in temporality, topography, and aesthetics: the return to the urban and to the contemporary, I will contend, goes hand in hand with new literary treatments of space and place. The most famous works of Zola and Huysmans are imminently analytic and particularizing. Each of the *Rougon-Macquart* comprises an in-depth study of a specific milieu, event, institution, discourse, or technology. The unity of this *Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire* is triply constructed: politico-historically (against the backdrop of the Second Empire), patho-genetically (tracing the hereditary *fêlure* passed down the family lines), and aesthetico-experimentally (articulated through structuring devices and figures of style intended to produce literary scientificity). Not only does this determine each novel's content—whether it be the examination of finance capitalism in *L'argent,* of apartment life in *Pot-bouille,* of locomotive technology in *La bête humaine,* or of impressionist genius in *L'œuvre*, to name a few—but also each novel's form. For this piecemeal treatment of Second Empire society is only the first level of naturalist analysis. In the context of each novel, things, spaces, and psyches are broken down, subject to the atomizing processes of Zolian documentation and description. In the foregoing chapters, we saw how description in the *Rougon-Macquart* is never merely descriptive, but instead a collection of stylistic and rhetorical strategies that served—and crucially, exceeded—various didactic purposes aligned with the ethical and aesthetic tenets of naturalism.

Huysmans, whose collected works number far fewer than Zola's, nonetheless shared a penchant for description; indeed, his works were even less beholden to narrative than Zola's. And though his early- and mid-career novels lack the encyclopedic systematicity of the *Rougon-Macquart*, their focus is similarly circumscribed. Take, for example, *À rebours,* the near entirety of which is spent within the confines of Des Esseintes chateau of Fontenay-aux-Roses, whose material minutiae—books, plants, liqueurs, paintings, among others—are made to relinquish their immaterial essences through the exacting pressure of description. Thus, the protagonist's *mal du siècle* is formally sublimated into a paradoxically ecstatic readerly ennui. In *En rade,* the diegetic frame is only ever so slightly broadened to include two main characters and exterior space as well as interior space. Still, the reader is permitted access only to the inner world of one of those characters—Jacques Marles—and the spatially and temporally claustrophobic plot spans

only a month or so, limited to the Château de Lourps and its decaying garden. The formal mirroring between setting and character achieves maximum effect in large part due to this combination of narrative compression and descriptive dilation.

Huysmans's and Zola's late works, on the other hand, are the site of an acute programmatic rescaling in terms of object and method of analysis. This is particularly true in *Là-bas* and *Paris,* which demonstrate a number of shared concerns that lead both authors to break with the models that they played key roles in developing, while remaining essentially at odds with one another. In place of localized analysis, these novels are totalizing and synthetic: their authors' views on all of the great social, political, economic, technological, metaphysical, sexual, and aesthetic questions of the era are all woven into the narrative fabric of each text. Zola and Huysmans not only meditate on their respective growth as writers, but respond to the events and debates surrounding them—hence the move to Paris and to the contemporaneity of the Third Republic. For Zola, this means composing a novel whose main character, the skeptical priest Pierre Froment, is capable of moving *transversally* through any number of urban milieus in search of a new Absolute.[161] For Huysmans, this means conceiving of the character of Durtal, a world-weary biographer versed in all the great literary trends and more than ready to discover a great Beyond in the remotest niches of the moribund capital.

In both of these intensely ideological and didactic texts, an enormous swath of the urban landscape is explored in its discursive richness. What each novel gains in breadth of scope and political-aesthetic daring, it loses in granularity of detail and subtlety of exposition. Gone are most of the lengthy passages—lyrical and meticulous in Zola, hallucinatory and haunted in Huysmans—painting every architectural and decorative detail. That is not to say that they no longer theorize—textually and metatextually—the materials and spaces of modernity. Rather, the final works of Huysmans and Zola are structured around sets of spatial and topographical oppositions in which various sites, as well as the trajectories between and beyond them, attain a symbolic primacy that energize their plots, polemics, and protagonists.

Eager to surpass themselves after having attained considerable celebrity, Zola and Huysmans set extraordinarily ambitious agendas in these final works. They are imbued with a sense of urgency arising from their authors' earnest, and perhaps damaging, aspiration to exhaustiveness. I will show that Froment's divagations through Paris do not just constitute a narrative conceit on Zola's part to stage various trials of faith, but also allow for the exposition of, and participation in, a number of different fin-de-siècle discourses. Likewise, Durtal's excursions into the more rarified and occult corners of the capital are irreducible to mere biographical research on the part of the protagonist; their depiction enables Huysmans to pierce the opacity of questions plaguing him as a literary metaphysician.

This recalibration of the stakes and frame of representation also has a bearing on the role and significance of gender and sexuality in these novels. In the preceding chapters, I demonstrated how naturalist and decadent aesthetics not only depended on certain, supposedly stable, norms regulating gender and sexuality, but how those aesthetics inevitably came to subvert and "pervert" those norms. The reparative lens of my analysis reframed those instances of perversity as moments of resistance and self-fashioning. Late naturalism and decadence do not effect the same spatio-corporal entwinements as their novelistic predecessors, or at least not to

161. The language of mixing, amalgamation, and alloy pervades the text. Paris is frequently referred to as a "cuve" or "creuset," particularly in the closing pages of the novel, in which the Capital's promise derives from its tendency to blend classes, groups, and perspectives, resulting in the "fermentation" of innovation and collaboration. (Zola, *Paris,* 620, 622, 634).

the same degree. In place of the metaphor- and metonym-laden descriptive language invoking slippages between the animate and inanimate, the botanical and sentient, and the masculine and feminine, we are faced with means of articulating gender and sexual alterity that are strongly associative: for the latter Zola and Huysmans, the other is always elsewhere. In both texts, representations of gender and sexuality are powerfully inflected by French nationalism, whose influence was increasingly experienced and expressed by both authors and whose mythical dimension is therefore transposed onto almost every aspect of their late works. As a result, certain gendered acts, identities, and embodiments are selectively considered part of the here and now, while others hail from a distant there and then, according to the ideological positioning of the author. The preceding chapters provided cursory examples of deviance whose perversity was established or emphasized through references to extra-Hexagonal spaces and places, such as the colonial exoticism of the Saccard greenhouse or the "prodigieux poème Hindou" that was the Paradou. Surprisingly, in *Là-bas* and *Paris,* Frenchness is constructed primarily against occidental referents, rather than oriental ones: while Huysmans bemoans the inexorable Americanization of French society in the form of consumerism and feminism, Zola takes aim at decadence and symbolism specifically, associating them with the homosexuality as British imports.

The elucidation of these spatial-geographic logics and their impact on the formal and thematic makeup of their respective novels is another objective of this chapter. It will be equally necessary to show how these works advance the theoretical dialogue between decadence and naturalism, how their scope affects their style, and how they unavoidably subvert their own heteronormative precepts. While Zola's penultimate novel saga begins in 1894, it passes through Lourdes and Rome before returning to Paris in 1898. I will begin my analysis, then, in Huysmans's 1891 *Là-bas.* The final section of this chapter will be devoted to the examination of Zola's 1898 *Paris,* which I will read as a response to the Huysmansian vision of the capital.

Ultimately, I will show that the dangers threatening the Paris of *Là-bas*—capitalism, naturalism, satanism, and libidinous women—are topographically and geographically mediated in Huysmans's late works. There, my reparative gesture will consist in demonstrating how these specifically decadent anxieties plot an escape route *out* of the reactionary heteropatriarchy intrinsic to Huysmans's project, and all of this only to return to naturalism in the form of a novel literary mode, "le naturalisme spiritualiste." In Zola's stormy chronicle of Third-Republic Paris, he will put forth his own spatialized models of female independence, male decadence, and symbolist folly. In doing so, however, he will turn to the intertextual irony of decadence and break with one of the fundamental tenets of naturalism: the essentialism of gender and of sexuality. We will therefore come to distinguish a surprising twist in the aesthetic and epistemological arcs of the respective authorial careers of Zola and Huysmans: no longer a sexual inversion in their characters, but a dialectical inversion by which their styles, by dint of their dialogical intertwining, end up adopting and adapting the defining qualities of each other. My method will be much the same as it was in the last chapter, interweaving paranoid and reparative approaches to both works under analysis as well as underlining the constitutive—and most importantly, generative—oppositionality between the naturalist and decadent projects.

Against Naturalism: The Political Economy of Decadence

When Huysmans started working on what would become his most monumental text, the four-part *Roman de Durtal,* he was already in the throes of two related internal struggles. On the one hand, he had begun to reconsider the value of literary naturalism, the school whose scientifically and socially engaged vision he had spurned years earlier in favor of the decadent and symbolist styles that he himself helped develop. On the other, his curiosity towards all things metaphysical and transcendent was blossoming into full-fledged faith.

Following his father's death when he was eight years old and his mother's subsequent remarriage to a Protestant bookbinder, Huysmans was given a secular education and had nothing to do with the Catholic Church until middle age. After his break with naturalism in the early 1880s, he joined the coterie of Catholic idealist writers that included Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, Léon Bloy, Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, and most notably, Stéphane Mallarmé. It would appear that not only did many of his interlocutors fault him for his "empty spiritualism," but actually attempted to convert him to Catholicism. Indeed, Huysmans's idealist dilettantism was often blamed on his former ties to naturalism. Bloy, for instance, published a collection of essays on Huysmans after the latter's death in which he indicts his fellow Catholics for their praise of the late decadent: "Mon disciple fut acclamé par nos catholiques, et cela dit tout. Sa religion de bibelot et de bric-à-brac leur parut l'effet d'une intimité divine, et ils avalèrent que l'indécrottable naturaliste d'*À vau-l'eau* se comparât lui-même aux plus grands écrivains chrétiens."[162] Barbey d'Aurevilly, who reviewed Huysmans's work favorably, nevertheless intimated that he lacked the courage of his convictions and could advance farther down the path of artistic originality. Barbey d'Aurevilly wrote that he presented the same ultimatum to Huysmans that he had posed to another figure dear to the decadents and symbolists:

> ...le satanique Baudelaire, qui mourut chrétien, doit être une des admirations de M. Huysmans [...]. Et bien, un jour, je défiai l'originalité de Baudelaire de recommencer *Les Fleurs du mal* et de faire un pas de plus dans le sens épuisé du blasphème. Je serais bien capable de porter à l'auteur d'*À rebours* le même défi: "Après *Les Fleurs du mal,*—dis-je à Baudelaire—il ne vous reste plus, logiquement, que la bouche d'un pistolet ou les pieds de la croix." Baudelaire choisit les pieds de la croix. Mais l'auteur d'*À rebours* les choisira-t-il?[163]

Criticisms such as these suggest that in his rejection of the aims and objects of Zolian representation and in his reluctance to abandon the transcendent materialism of his post-naturalist works (by committing to Christianity), Huysmans was an outcast among outcasts, no longer a naturalist, yet not decadent *enough*. When he began writing *Là-bas* in the final years of that decade, after the flop of *En rade,* he was struggling with the same questions and remained torn between these two allegiances. Though he did eventually convert, it wasn't until after its publication, on the tails of several stays in the Cistercian monastery of Notre-Dame-d'Igny in the Marne. Those visits furnished the material for *En route,* the sequel to *Là-bas* that recounts the tumult of Durtal's conversion.

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162. Léon Bloy, *Sur la Tombe de Huysmans* (Paris: Curiosités littéraires, 1913), 9, https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Sur_la_tombe_de_Huysmans/Texte_entier.

163. Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, "*À rebours* par J.-K. Huysmans," *Le Constitutionnel,* July 28, 1884, http://www.huysmans.org/reviews/areboursrev/arebour1.htm.

Là-bas might therefore be considered as the site of reflection—simultaneously philosophical, aesthetic, and autobiographical—on the proper means of attaining the ideal when one is encased in a material form, surrounded by decay, and prey to one's base desires. Where before Huysmans looked to language, to the senses, and to dreams as vehicles of escape and transcendence, he here reckons with other possibilities, namely, the occult and the divine. By projecting himself in all his doubt and curiosity into the character of Durtal, he not only elaborates a potently intimate *roman à thèse,* but sets the stage for a new literary mode theorized in the novel itself: *le naturalisme spiritualiste,* a middle ground between Zolian naturalism and the Huysmansian decadence we examined in the last chapter.

The novel opens on a conversation between the protagonist, Durtal, and his friend and confidant, Des Hermies. Durtal has been traditionally read—correctly, I believe—as the diegetic avatar of Huysmans. I would contend, however, that Des Hermies is also a mouthpiece for past incarnations of the author: not the Huysmans of *Là-bas,* but the Huysmans of *À rebours* and *En rade.* This anterior version of Huysmans is staunchly opposed to naturalism, no longer according it any value as a movement or method. Such a position coheres with the lassitude of the decadent subject, weary of the crude material existence of the modern world and seeking the enlightenment of a higher ideal:

> ...ce que je reproche au naturalisme, ce n'est pas le lourd badigeon de son gros style, c'est l'immondice de ses idées; ce que je lui reproche, c'est d'avoir incarné le matérialisme dans la littérature, d'avoir glorifié la démocratie de l'art! [...] Vouloir se confiner dans les buanderies de la chair, rejeter le suprasensible, denier le rêve, ne pas même comprendre que la curiosité de l'art commence là où les sens cessent de servir![164]

Here, Des Hermies not only reiterates a formal criticism often directed at naturalism (particularly at Zolian naturalism) at that time—that its style is crude and overwrought—but also denounces it on theological and political grounds. Naturalism traffics in the stuff of the world: in bodies, things, edifices, spaces. The material that acts as fodder for its mimetic engine is not merely made *available* to all through the naturalist text; it *is* all. Zola set for himself the goal of investigating the totality of the phenomenal world, which he then fed back moralistically to his considerable readership.

Of course, to a decadent like Des Hermies-Huysmans, such a mission is anathema to the true potential of literature: to stage and carry out excursions into realms beyond the senses, into the remote climes of the essential, the timeless, the sublime. *En rade* was a perfect example of this in that it was simultaneously a dirge of material decay and a conduit to the limbo of dream and madness. In contrast to the transparency, both representational and moralistic, of *La faute,* it constructed itself through a self-referential opacity that I characterized as decadent narcissism.

Here, the hyperrealism of naturalism, and perhaps even realism itself in its earlier forms, become freighted with political significance: it's an imminently *democratic* style, decipherable even to the untrained eyes of the *bas peuple* and just as malodorously digestible as the fried onions that seem to sustain every working-class household in Zola's novels. According to Des Hermies, Zola himself, in his pseudo-medical pretentions and his pandering to the masses, "a si bien représenté les idées bourgeoises qu'il semble... issu de l'accouplement de Lisa, la charcutière du *Ventre de Paris,* et de Homais!" Real art, to the contrary, is by definition the domain of those with the wealth, education, and pedigree required to appreciate and patronize it: the aristocracy. Longing for the socio-economic order of the Ancien Régime was already an

164. Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Là-bas* (Paris: Bartillat, 2015), 23.

important feature of Huysmans's works from *À rebours* onward. Des Esseintes, Jacques Marles, and Des Hermies share the monarchist conviction—like many of Huysmans's Catholic contemporaries—that the political upheavals of the past century were bound up with the general decline of France as a world power and arbiter of culture. Even contemporaneous commentators on decadence, both social and literary, draw strong parallels between the state of French society and that of the Late Roman Empire, ravaged by civil war, weighed down by the distended appendages of conquest and self-indulgence.[165]

In *Là-bas,* though, the comparison is considerably more muddled. Absent are the wistful evocations of empires in ruin. In their place, we find two different spatiotemporal loci: France of the Middle Ages and turn-of-the-century America. Each of these geographical and historical sites has a handful of correlated scenes throughout the novel, and each comes to represent a set of ideals that Durtal will examine over the course of his Parisian wanderings. America is conjured first, as part of Des Hermies's invective against Zola:

> Puis, vois-tu, Durtal, il n'est pas qu'inexpert et obtus, il est fétide, car il a prôné cette vie moderne atroce, vanté l'américanisme nouveau des mœurs, abouti à l'éloge de la force brutale, à l'apothéose du coffre-fort. Par un prodige d'humilité, il a révéré le goût nauséeux des foules, et par cela même, il a répudié le style, rejeté toute pensée altière, tout élan vers le surnatural et l'au-delà.[166]

The charges against Zola are mounting. Again, Des Hermies accuses him of vulgarity of thought and style, but he now also attacks him on a different front, that of custom and morality. Zola's "Americanism" lies not just in his embrace of a literature for and of the masses, but in the economic and social leveling that such a project entails. The atrocity of this "modern life" derives from its democracy, its populism, and its capitalism, in which the coarsest mind, the loudest voice, and the fattest pocketbook reign in the place of nobility. America, for Huysmans, always exceeds itself as a mere place. It materlializes all that is wrong with contemporary society in terms of literature and political economy. A long enumeration of the old, alchemical properties of money—the ways it can transmute poverty into richness, chastity into lechery, humility into insolence, generosity into parsimony—segues into a diatribe against the new system, of which America is also the paragon:

> Mais où [l'argent] devient vraiment monstrueux, c'est lorsque, cachant l'éclat de son nom sous le voile noir d'un mot, il s'intitule le capital. Alors son action ne se limite plus à des incitations individuelles, à des conseils de vols et de meurtres, mais elle s'étend à l'humanité toute entière. D'un mot le capital décide les monopoles, édifie les Banques, accapare les substances, dispose de la vie, peut, s'il veut, faire mourir de faim des milliers d'êtres![167]

What begins as a critique of Zola becomes, within a matter of pages, a condemnation of all of modernity, in which naturalism, democracy, populism, capitalism, and materialism are all targeted as part of a larger epochal degeneration. The question then becomes: where is a *littérateur*—one out of synch with his current lifetime, who maintains a belief in the hierarchies of taste, class, and blood, and for whom art is a search for the ideal—to turn for enlightenment? Des Hermies puts it simply and prophetically: "Fatalement, tu devais, un jour, fuir ce territoire

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165. See, most notably, Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquinte* (Milano, 1876) and Max Nordau, *Degeneration.*

166. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 24.

167. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 34.

américain de l'art et chercher, au loin, une region plus aérée et moins plane."[168] It's the search for this ill-defined region—spatial, spiritual, and aesthetic—that will structure the rest of the novel.

Des Hermies, the representative of the secular decadence that combined a nostalgia for ancient grandeur with a phenomenology of ascetic hypersensitivity, introduces Durtal to a rare milieu where the old ways are still alive. In one of the belltowers of the Church of Saint-Sulpice in Paris, there live a man named Carhaix and his wife. Carhaix, whose face has "le teint livide, exsangue, des prisonniers au Moyen Âge, le teint maintenant ignoré," is the keeper of the Saint-Sulpice bells, charged with their maintenance, tuning, and operation, day to day, year to year, rain, shine, or snow.[169] There are several spatio-symbolic configurations in play here.

First, Carhaix's temporal distance from modernity is mirrored by his spatial distance from the streets of the city and his linguistic distance from the register of speech. He confesses that, "Au fond [...] moi, je ne peux me plaindre. Les rues d'en bas m'ennuient; ça me brouille quand je mets les pieds dehors; aussi, je ne quitte mon clocher que le matin, juste pour aller chercher des seaux d'eau au bout de la place..."[170] He prefers an elevated position on an axis of celestial verticality over the horizontal plane of the streets, even if it necessitates a restricted freedom of movement. He also employs several turns of phrase uncommon to colloquial French, even in the nineteenth century: in place of the working-class habit of dropping the particle *ne* in negative constructions, he instead forfeits the adverb *pas,* a characteristic unique to more *soigné* or literary French, and only grammatically possible with a handful of verbs (*savoir, pouvoir, cesser,* and *oser,* to name a few). His sentence-first placement of the adverb *aussi,* which here denotes causality rather than addition or similarity, in turn places *him* at a distance from informal French. Whether we are to interpret this a certain linguistic self-consciousness—that is, as a strategic use of a more *recherché* register—or as a mark of his advanced age and scholarship, the result is the same: Carhaix is a kind of relic, a symbol of a bygone age, yet still imbued with the sacred qualities of that age. Both his place of residence and manner of speaking index an idealization of a decadent anti-modernism that champions a return to nobility of thought and language.

The interior of his tower is equally revealing. This apparently simple man, charged with a single task and almost entirely isolated from his contemporaries, is in fact a savant of his vocation. He possesses a substantial library of rare books on the history and meaning of church bells, including such titles as *de Tintinnabulis* (1664) by Jérôme Magius and the anonymous *Essai sur le symbolisme de la cloche* (1849). This almost artisanal specialization is the diametric opposite of the type of modern unskilled labor proliferated by industrial capitalism. That same capitalism, the vapid system that creates a working class and keeps it poor, pays any drudge to ring the bells: "Voyez-vous [...] c'est fini, les cloches; ou plutôt c'est les sonneurs dont il n'y a plus! à l'heure qu'il est, ce sont des garçons charbonniers, des couvreurs, des maçons, d'anciens pompiers, ramassés pour un franc sur la place, qui font la manœuvre!"[171] Thanks to the breakdown of the ideals and beliefs of yesteryear, he is the last of his kind.

Yet inside the lofty dwelling of the Carhaix, peaceful domesticity reigns. In a later scene, the weary *campanier* is seated with his friends at his modest dining room table, situated slightly

168. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 37.
169. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 49.
170. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 52.
171. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 51.

closer to ground level, bemoaning the credulity of the public concerning science. His wife is only ever referred to using her husband's surname or other gendered or conjugal titles, like "la femme," "ma femme," or "la bonne maman," unlike Carhaix himself, occasionally called "Louis" by other characters. Before the meal is even served, she hovers around them nervously, worried about the quality of the meal she is serving them: "—Aimez-vous cela? dit la maman Carhaix. Pour vous changer, j'ai mis le pot-au-feu, hier, et gardé le bœuf de sorte que, ce soir, vous aurez un bouillon au vermicelli, une salade de viande froide avec des harengs saurs et du céleri, une bonne purée de pommes de terre au fromage et du dessert."[172] In typical Huysmansian fashion, this rustic, unexceptional meal is transformed, through the senses, into an essence that transcends both its ingredients and the senses that perceive them:

> —Quel fumet! s'écria Durtal, en humant l'odeur incisive du hareng. Ce que ce parfum suggère! cela m'évoque la vision d'une cheminée à hotte dans laquelle des sarments de genévrier pétillent, en un rez-de-chaussée dont la porte s'ouvre sur un grand port! Il me semble qu'il y a comme un halo de goudron et d'algues salées autour de ces ors fumés et de ces rouilles sèches. C'est exquis, reprit-il, en goûtant à cette salade.[173]

Durtal and the other *convives* are men of learning and sophistication, capable of appreciating a meal not for what it is, but for what it "suggests" and "evokes." This is not bourgeois affectation, but the finesse of the experienced and eloquent connoisseur, even more capable of discerning the quality of the cuisine than the chef herself. Indeed, all the men at the table appear to be endowed with powers of discernment, not only regarding food, but also when it comes to the production and evaluation of truth. "Quel temps biscornu!" exclaims Gévingey, a guest versed in astrology, "on ne croit plus à rien et *l'on gobe tout*. On invente, chaque matin, une science neuve; à l'heure actuelle, c'est cette La Palissade qu'on nomme la démagogie qui trône!"[174] The public, unlike these men, will believe—literally, "swallow" or "gulp down"—any old nonsense, including all these newfangled sciences and political gimmicks. The demos*,* in its naivete, is prone to manipulation; even the most absurd of truisms (a *lapalissade* or a *vérité de La Palice* is a tautology created for comedic effect) can be gulped down as an absolute truth by the people.

The domesticity of the scene functions as a model for an extinct social hierarchy, and for what can happen when those occupying its lower echelons are given the means of self-governance. Just as Madame Carhaix lacks the judgment to evaluate her own cooking, the citizenry lacks the judgement to guide its own political destiny. In Huysmans's view, they are in need of an elite who knows better than them, is more farsighted than them, capable of detecting nuance and guided by a greater ideal, whether it be the Kingdom of France or the Kingdom of Heaven—not the empty truths of positivism or the ravages of capitalism. Decadent mourning yearns for this lost past in which the lower classes produced goods, sustenance, and art according to the demands and standards of taste set by members of the well-bred ruling class, their primary consumers and patrons. The notion that just anybody could become rich through entrepreneurialism or that a lowborn man could access timeless truths through science is repugnant to the dinner guests. The microcosm of the Carhaix household, in which the head of house and his friends regale themselves with food cooked by the lady of the house, whose sole duty is to serve them well, is thus a metonymic mirror of the social macrocosm so romanticized in early Huysmansian decadence.

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172. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 290.
173. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 291.
174. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 293 (italics added).

Yet as Carhaix himself has already observed, he and his wife are among the last of their kind. Des Hermies confirms this when he encourages the old man, at that same dinner, to devote himself to the writing of an encyclopedia of hagiography. Carhaix, bewildered, asks him why. Des Hermies replies, "Mais parce que vous êtes [...] si loin de votre époque... Vous êtes, bon ami, l'homme à jamais inintelligible pour les générations qui viennent. Sonner les cloches en les adorant, et se livrer aux besognes désuètes de l'art féodal ou à des labeur monastiques de vies de Saints, ce serait complet, si bien hors de Paris, si bien dans les là-bas, si loin dans les vieux âges!"[175] Carhaix stands not only for his vocation, but for a constellation of cultural values that will soon be "unintelligible" to those living under the socio-political and economic conditions of the Third Republic. The obsolescence of feudalism isn't presented as a triumph over entrenched authoritarian traditions, but as the loss of a profoundly spiritual "art." Such a project is of little use to Durtal, though, still stuck as he is in the dual impasse of skepticism and disillusionment. He is too much a product of his time, having known and dismissed naturalism, decadence, and religion, yet still in search of an ideal, or at the very least, of a system capable of locating the ideal face with "l'ignominieux spectacle de cette fin de siècle":[176]

> [Durtal] ne croyait pas et cependant il admettait le surnaturel, car sur cette terre même, comment nier le mystère qui surgit, chez nous, à nos côtés, dans la rue, partout, quand on y songe? Il était vraiment trop facile de rejeter les relations invisibles, extrahumaines, de mettre sur le compte du hasard qui est, lui-même, d'ailleurs indéchiffrable... Des rencontres ne décidaient-elles pas souvent de toute la vie d'un homme? Qu'était l'amour, les influences incompréhensibles et pourtant formelles?[177]

It's no coincidence that love is linked to the supernatural in this passage as a formative yet obscure influence; in fact, Durtal's introduction to the world of modern mysticism is made possible through an amorous liaison. In turn, the broken promise of this great love will spur him to search for an ever greater one: divine adoration.

Elusion and Disillusion in *Là-bas*

After receiving an anonymous missive from an admirer of his novels, Durtal begins a correspondence that soon begins to drive him mad with curiosity. He eventually discovers that the avid reader is none other than Madame Chantelouve, the wife of a Catholic historian who is part of his circle of friends. In spite of himself, and despite her deceptively plain appearance and reserved manner, he finds himself captivated by the thought of seducing her. As his obsession grows—in pace with hers, it would seem—Madame Chantelouve comes to signify something much grander and more profound than sexual conquest:

> Oui, il y avait, en lui, autre chose qu'un trouble génésique, qu'une explosion des sens; c'était dévié, cette fois sur une femme, cet élan vers l'informulé, cette projection vers les là-bas qui l'avait récemment soulevé, dans l'art; c'était ce besoin d'échapper par une envolée au train-train terrestre. [...] Et il voyait juste, dans ce travail opiniâtre où il se confinait; toute l'efflorescence d'un mysticisme inconscient, laissé jusqu'alors en friche,

175. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 292.
176. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 28.
177. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 32.

> partait en désordre à la recherche d'une atmosphère nouvelle, en quête de délices ou de douleurs neuves![178]

In Huysmans's past works, women were just that: apparatuses for reproduction and for brief moments of sensory self-shattering. Des Esseintes certainly visited brothels on occasion, but the pleasures of those experiences paled in comparison to those offered by other, more phenomenologically demanding contrivances, like the famed *orgue à bouche* and perfume garden. Jacques Marles's circumstances were even more dour: in order to escape the triple dissolution of his wife, his marriage, and his country estate, he fled to the hallucinatory realms of dream and madness for erotic satisfaction.

It occurs to Durtal, on the other hand, that woman, in her absolute otherness and unknowability, could be precisely the metaphysical conduit to the Beyond that he has been seeking. This passage is laden with the language of the vector: direction and motion divested of distance and terminus. Since his dismissal of decadence and naturalism—both stagnant, trapped in the body, overdetermined by politics and materialism—he has been gripped by an "élan *vers* l'informulé," a "projection *vers* les là-bas," a "besoin d'échapper par *une envolée* au train-train terrestre... *à la recherche d*'une nouvelle atmosphère." The warm artisanal erudition of the Carhaix menage, while promising in its ideality, was a closed system, inaccessible to a modern subject in its devotion and obsolescence. Perhaps, he wonders, the modern woman, a different kind of unattainable ideal, offers a way *out*—out of the corporeal, poetic, material snares binding Durtal to his utterly quotidian existence. It is at this moment that his "unconscious mysticism" rises to the surface of thought, is avowed, and becomes a means to Durtal's otherworldly end. Consequently, Madame Chantelouve becomes an object to acquire.

This presents a bit of a paradox, however. Madame Chantelouve's modernity, that which sets her in sharp distinction to Madame Carhaix, lies in her *un*attachment. In order to reach the transcendent state he so desires, Durtal must initiate contact (breaking the seal of anonymity), court her, and seduce her. He surmises that "cette femme [est] malheureuse dans son intérieur et qu'elle n'aime pas le sacristain véreux de son mari," but that is not enough to draw the net around her.[179] Following a number of subtle and not-so-subtle maneuvers, they begin to see one another in earnest. Try as he might, though, Durtal fails to lure Madame Chantelouve to his apartment to consummate their affair. She is too mobile, too independent. When she finally agrees to rendezvous there, Durtal strategically prepares the space for maximum effect:

> Voyons, comment vais-je m'y prendre, lorsqu'elle viendra? se demanda-t-il... je la fais asseoir près du feu, dans ce fauteuil. Je m'installe, moi en face d'elle, sur cette petite chaise et, en m'avançant un peu, en touchant ses genoux, je puis lui ressaisir et lui enlace les mains, de là à la faire se pencher vers moi qui me soulèverais, il n'y a qu'un pas. J'atteins alors ses lèvres et je suis suis sauvé! [...] Ce n'est pas commode à arranger dans cette pièce qui manque de canapé ou de divan. Pour bien faire, il convient que je la renverse sur le tapis ; elle aurait, ainsi que toutes les femmes, la ressource de se replier le bras sur les yeux, de se cacher par à peu près la face; moi, j'aurai soin, avant qu'elle ne se relève, de baisser la lampe.[180]

178. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 107.
179. Huysmans, *Là-bas*, 117.
180. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 157-158.

The complex tactical choreography of Durtal's apartment stands in stark relief to the demure dance of the Carhaix tower. That scene was defined by the simple mechanics of traditional conjugal domesticity: men in the center, fixed in space around the dinner table, while the good wife orbited them anxiously, confined to the periphery in role, speech, and status. Here, we bear witness to the elaboration of a spatial configuration intended to entrap and subjugate the object of seduction. In other words, this passage describes Durtal's efforts to re-establish a hierarchy of gender in and through the material conditions of his apartment.

Extraordinarily, Madame Chantelouve thwarts Durtal's carefully laid plan. She dodges his advances, halts the choreography of seduction, but not out of a sense of propriety or an affectation of timidity. Rather, it's for an altogether unexpected reason: Madame Chantelouve is on her own search for the ideal. When pressed to explain herself, she replies:

> Écoutez, plus je réfléchis et plus je vous demande en grâce de ne pas ainsi détruire notre rêve. Et puis [...] je ne voudrais pas gâter le bonheur [...] comment dirai-je, abouti, extrême [...] que me donne notre liaison. [...] Enfin, tenez, je vous possède quand et comment il me plaît, de même que j'ai longtemps possédé Byron, Baudelaire, Gérard de Nerval, ceux que j'aime. [...] Je dis que je n'ai qu'à les desirer, qu'à vous désirer vous, maintenant, avant de m'endormir. [...] Et vous seriez inférieur à ma chimère, au Durtal que j'adore et dont les caresses rendent mes nuits folles![181]

The carnal realization of their adultery could never equal the thrill that Madame Chantelouve derives from her fantasies of romantic and decadent authors. Durtal is flabbergasted and furious. "Elle voulait une volupté d'avare," he thinks to himself, "une espèce de péché solitaire, de joie muette...."[182] Not only did she not capitulate to his demands, and not only is her interest in literature primarily erotic, but she her desire is "avaricious" and "solitary." She cannot serve as his link to the Beyond, aid him in his quest to transcend corporeal existence, since he himself can never satisfy her selfish needs. The scene is written such that the reader is made to empathize with Durtal, rather than with Madame Chantelouve. We are granted access to his thoughts and feelings, but not to hers. As a result, we are privy to his disillusionment and anger at her deception after so much time and preparation. She, to the contrary, is depicted as a perverse *allumeuse,* remorseless in her pursuit of fodder for her nocturnal flights of erotic fancy. And because Madame Chantelouve has been made to typify all modern women ("ainsi que toutes les femmes"), the thesis of Huysmans's past novels is confirmed: the female sex is more trouble than it's worth. Be she wife, mistress, or prostitute, even the most passionate lover inevitably disappoints.

I would like to propose, however, that this is the point in the novel that most clearly lays bare Huysmans's own sexual hypocrisy and, from a reparative perspective, establishes Madame Chantelouve as the queerest, most revolutionary character in the novel. Initially, she is considered as a kind of alternative to Madame Carhaix, the last exemplar of the domesticated woman well aware of her place in life. Madame Chantelouve, the autonomous woman of the late nineteenth century, unrestrained by marriage and moving freely around the city, is the next best option for a would-be mystic in search of corporeal transcendence. When she fails to fall victim to Durtal's spatio-sexual schemes, she is cast not only as useless, but as deviant and sinful—all by reason of her autonomy. Never mind that Durtal, in seeing her as a mere instrument for his own enlightenment, is just as willing to betray his friend as she is to betray her husband through her own epistolary scheming. It is at first unthinkable and then reprehensible to him that *he*

181. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 160-161.

182. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 161.

might serve as a tool of ideality for *her* gratification. And although Durtal had been an indifferent bachelor for a number of years prior to his involvement with Madame Chantelouve, the idea that she might seek solitary pleasure over carnal union astounds him. That they could be alike, equal in their sexual search for the ideal and preferring their own company to that of others, doesn't even occur to him. He even goes so far as to wonder if she has fallen prey to an incubus:

> Elle ne veut pas aboutir à l'acte même. Craint-elle, ainsi qu'elle l'affirme, la désillusion? se rend-elle compte combien les soubresauts amoureux sont grotesques? ou bien est-elle, ce que je crois, une mélancolique et terrible allumeuse qui ne songe qu'à elle? ce serait alors une sorte d'égoïsme obscène, un de ces péchés compliqués tels qu'en contient la Somme des confesseurs. Dans ce cas, elle serait une... frôleuse? Puis reste cette question de l'incubat qui vient s'enter là-dessous; elle avoue, et cela ci placidement, qu'elle cohabite à volonté, en songe, avec des êtres vivants ou morts?[183]

The mental gymnastics that Durtal performs to debase Madame Chantelouve, while remaining completely uncritical of his own acts and motives, are significant. Her obscenely selfish actions are the grotesque machinations of a melancholic tease ("frôleuse") whose preference for the autoerotic must be the result of otherworldly possession. It could never be that her fear of erotic and affective disappointment is real, and perhaps justified. He impugns both her moral rectitude and her spiritual integrity, all because she rebuffs him. Due to Durtal's status as protagonist and narrator, Madame Chantelouve is again deprived of agency. Her subjectivity is foreclosed except in dialogue, and the only facets of her life accessible to the reader are those revolving around Durtal. In a move of misogynistic retribution, Huysmans strives to subordinate *narratively* this character who *diegetically* escaped the grasp of his protagonist by recreating—on the level of the text—an asymmetrical power differential akin to that of the Carhaix interior. That is, on the level of plot, Madame Chantelouve evades Durtal. Yet because the narration focalizes Durtal's subjectivity, the reader's empathy is a priori tilted in favor of Durtal. Madame Carhaix, also a background figure, was the doting feminine satellite circling the men at the dinner table, themselves preoccupied with serious talk while she fretted over the smoked herring. Madame Chantelouve, ever in motion, uncontained, and in full libidinal control, avoids the stultifying subjugation of the Durtal interior... only to be recaptured by an authorial will that subsumes her to the subjectivity of the male protagonist.

What the text would have the reader believe is a weakness or form of madness on the part of Madame Chantelouve, however, is in fact a failing on the part of Huysmans-Durtal, who cannot or will not consider the legitimacy of female autoeroticism. I am not suggesting that such an autoeroticism is inherently queer, but that precisely because it defies the heteronormative logic undergirding Huysmans's polemic, it can and should be read as queer by contemporary readers. What for Huysmans is a vexatious, deviant queerness—female pleasure free of male intervention, of physical touch altogether, and superior to both—I propose to consider as an instance of liberation and subversion. On the one hand, this is surprising, considering Huysmans's exploration of male autoeroticism in *À rebours* and *En rade.* On the other, it is in line with his past refusals to cede any self-determination to his female characters. In casting Madame Chantelouve as the negative of Madame Carhaix—the archetype of the perverse modernity into which the natural order of the Middle Ages has tragically devolved—Huysmans inadvertently creates a model of radically liberated womanhood. In effect, Madame Chantelouve

183. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 162.

has escaped the confines of an unhappy marriage not through divorce, which could have left her financially and socially bereft, but through adultery, retaining all the privileges of her status, wealth, and mobility. Even in her extramarital affair, she refuses domination, embracing the ideality of her inner lovers in the place of inevitable letdown of their incarnations.

An actively anti-heteronormative force, Madame Chantelouve also becomes Durtal's introduction to queerness in the strong sense. For although his initial advance fails, he maintains an uneasy relationship with her in the hope that she will leverage her connection with a certain Chanoine Docre to afford them a place at one of his black mass ceremonies. The mythological significance of her first name, which Durtal refers to as "ce nom garçonnier qui lui va si bien," is revealed: Hyacinthe, the demigod loved, tutored, and mourned by Apollo, the god of the sun.[184] Both senses of the word *garçonnier* are at play here. In her gender-bending reversal of the dynamics of seduction, in which she can summon and control Durtal at will, she takes on a masculine quality that dilutes her essential femininity, moving her closer to the ephebic figure—the *garçon manqué*—of the mythological Hyacinthe. The term, when applied to an animate feminine noun (e.g., *une fille garçonnière.*), can also designate women who *frequent* many men, a usage well attested in the nineteenth century.[185] Given her horde of nightly psychic lovers, it makes sense that Huysmans refers to her this way. The contradiction between Madame Chantelouve's virility and her promiscuity is further evidence of her queerness vis-à-vis the author-narrator's straight mind (to use Wittig's term), which has difficulty conceiving of an autonomous woman with a rich erotic imaginary.

In one of the most infamous scenes of the novel, this strange hybrid creature makes good on her promise to acquaint Durtal with the debauched Chanoine Docre. Scorning the fixity and enclosure of amorous entrapment, it is she—the vector out of the domestic interior into the occult recesses of the city—who leads the protagonist to the milieu that represents his last chance for mystical awakening. Their arrival at the black sabbath is anything but simple. This climactic moment, which occurs near the end of the novel, is characterized by the same language as the beginning: "Durtal inspecta, d'un coup d'œil, les alentours; il était dans une sorte d'impasse."[186] His quest for the sublime has been fruitless: the Carhaix, in their mix of arcane knowledge and archaic domesticity were close to the mark, but superannuated, and his would-be mistress's sovereign sexuality could not be tamed. We see now that the entire plot up to this point has been a demonstration of the thesis advanced at its opening: the hermetic ideal of decadence, epitomized by the Carhaix *conjoints*, was no more viable than the modern perversity of naturalism, embodied in Hyacinthe Chantelouve, herself haunted and sustained by romanticism and decadence. At this point, Durtal has not yet found the answers he is looking for, the "region plus aérée et moins plane" that will inure him against the encroaching "territoire américain de l'art" and its insidious democratic, capitalistic ideals. Will the *messe noire,* the apotheosis of fin-de-siècle mysticism, prove illuminating?

After following Madame Chantelouve through a guarded, unmarked door in the wall, through a hidden garden, down dark alleyways, and past an eerie old woman holding a lantern, they arrive at the courtyard door of an old house and are greeted by another strange figure:

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184. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 114.

185. "garçonnier," *Trésor de la langue française informatisé*, http://stella.atilf.fr/Dendien/scripts/tlfiv5/advanced.exe?8;s=3693290715;

186. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 251.

> Un petit homme parut, s'effaça, lui demanda de ses nouvelles, d'une voix affétée et chantante. Elle passa, en le saluant, et Durtal frôla une face faisandée, des yeux liquides et en gomme, des joues plâtrées de fard, des lèvres peintes et il pensa qu'il était tombé dans un repaire de sodomites.
>
> —Vous ne m'aviez pas annoncé que je m'approcherais d'une telle compagnie, dit-il à Hyacinthe [...]
>
> —Pensiez-vous rencontrer ici des Saints? Et elle haussa les épaules et tira une porte.[187]

This does not bode well. So far, they have only encountered superficial esotericism and a gender deviance not unlike Madame Chantelouve has indulged in. Where her sexual proclivities broke the ideality of her femininity, this stranger's made-up appearance and affected speech mark him as that most perverse of degenerates, a sodomite. Her sarcastic retort and casual shrug make clear that she, at long last, has returned to her true milieu.

The black mass itself, a scene lasting half a dozen pages or so, abounds with blasphemous spectacles: a crucified, tumescent Christ; hysteric fits among the congregants; and finally, the consumption of a Eucharist "blessed" with the Chanoine's semen. As the ceremony reaches fever pitch, Durtal flees. Instead of the transcendence he so desired, all he discovers is another descent into vulgarity, excess, madness, and debauchery. He is overwhelmed with disappointment and contempt for the whole affair: "...ce sacrilège auquel il avait participé sans le vouloir, l'attrista. —Et si c'était vrai, se dit-il, si la Présence était réelle, comme Hyacinthe et comme ce misérable prêtre l'attestent! Non, décidément, je me suis par trop abreuvé d'ordures; c'est fini; l'occasion est bonne pour me fâcher avec cette creature que je n'ai depuis notre première entrevue, que tolérée, en somme, et je vais le faire!"[188] And he leaves Madame Chantelouve that very night.

By the end of the novel, Durtal has utterly failed. He has found none of the truths he was pursuing, no metaphysical refuge capable of raising him above the ruins of a cataclysmic century. The novel closes on a conversation between him, Carhaix, and Des Hermies. Carhaix opines, "Ici-bas, tout est décomposé, tout est mort, mais là-haut!"[189] Des Hermis is not so optimistic as his friend, part of the *arrière-garde catholique*: "Tout cela est fort bien [...] mais ce siècle se fiche absolument du Christ en gloire; il contamine le surnaturel et vomit l'au-delà. Alors, comment espérer en l'avenir, comment s'imaginer qu'ils seront propres, les gosses issus des fétides bourgeois de ce sale temps?" Durtal responds, "Ils feront, comme leurs pères, comme leurs mères [...] il s'empliront les tripes et ils se vidangeront l'âme par le bas-ventre!" We now come to understand the full significance of the novel's title. The story has revolved around Durtal in his search for an access route to a vague "beyond," an "over-there" whose precise coordinates—whether spatio-temporal, supernatural, spiritual or extrasensory—are unknown in relation to the "ici-bas," that is, the mundanity of terrestrial existence as it then stood. Both of these are associated, in the final line, with the *bas-ventre* through the adverbial modifier *bas*, itself etymologically and morphologically related to expressions such as *baisser, s'abaisser,* and *bassesse,* among others. The implication is clear: whether one finds oneself here in the everyday (*ici-bas*) or over there in the false beyond of the occult (*là-bas*), earthly existence is intrinsically *base.* There is no hope for modern society: the bourgeoisie will never overcome the corruption that distinguishes it from the old nobility. The new triple reign of capitalism, naturalism, and mysticism will distribute power and enlightenment to the loudest and most vulgar; where there

187. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 252.
188. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 260-61.
189. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 297.

was once a sacred, immutable, eternal, singular soul there is now a cheap trifle, something to be bought, consumed, and evacuated via the bowels (the *bas-ventre*).

But the *Roman de Durtal* does not end with *Là-bas*. Three more novels follow, completing Durtal's journey to transcendence. In the face of such all-encompassing pessimism, how is this possible? The answer is prefigured in another adverbial pair in this final passage. It turns out that Carhaix was right all along: if both *ici-bas* and *là-bas* are doomed, why not look to their opposite: *là-haut,* the celestial realm, the Christian divine. Indeed, the remainder of the saga recounts Durtal's conversion to Catholicism and culminates in his induction as an oblate into a closed monastic order. Those novels also allow Huysmans to put into practice a new style, one that he theorizes in the opening chapter of *Là-bas*: *le naturalisme spiritualiste.* Finding flaw with both naturalism and decadence, he conceives of an aesthetics that could capture their best features:

> Il faudrait, se disait-il, garder la véracité du document, la precision du détail, la langue étoffée et nerveuse du réalisme, mail il faudrait aussi se faire puisatier d'âme et ne pas vouloir expliquer le mystère par les maladies des sens; le roman, si cela se pouvait, devrait se diviser de lui-même en deux parts, néanmoins soudées ou plutôt confondues, comme ells le sont dans la vie, celle de l'âme et celle du corps, et s'occuper de leurs réactifs, de leurs conflits, de leur entente. Il faudrait, en un mot, suivre la grande voie si profondément creusée par Zola, mais il serait nécessaire de tracer en l'air un chemin parallèle, une autre route, d'atteindre les en deçà et les après, de faire, en un mot, un naturalisme spiritualiste; ce serait autrement fier, autrement complet, autrement fort![190]

This is precisely what Huysmans will do in his later novels, describing his inner transformation as well as his monastic surroundings in scrupulous detail as he reads about the lives of saints and subjects himself to the rites of asceticism. *Là-bas,* then, embodies the dialectical reckoning of the two past stages of his writing career. It signals the return of a naturalism stripped of its Zolian pretention to scientific accuracy, maintaining its documentary fervor, but charging it with the decadent striving toward corporeal transcendence. In contrast to his secular mid-career work, however, his final novel cycle contains a glimmer of hope that enlightenment is possible—through God.

The Huysmansian fin de siècle sees the sun setting on progress, on the Church, on the social order, and on *belles lettres.* This is not the same pessimism that defined his earlier works, nor is it the same hermeticism. Durtal's journey, as a work of autofiction and as an assay into the uncharted waters of spiritual naturalism, is highly experimental and demonstrates an ongoing evolution in his aesthetics that sometimes takes the form of reappropriation. In *Là-bas* and its sequels, Huysmans reclaims certain aspects of naturalism, which he had utterly foresworn in his post-Zolian period, as well as Catholic orthodoxy, which in earlier works he had abandoned as incompatible with modern life.

The dialectical self-critique and self-correction subtending his aesthetics and style do not extend to his views on gender and sexuality, however. The heterosexism of his early works only intensifies overs the course of his authorial career. The affair with Madame Chantelouve—the butch adulterous satanic literary nymphomaniac—is both its apogee, and the nail on the coffin of female representation in Huysmans's oeuvre. The remainder of his works contain very few women, all of which are either vanishingly minor characters or martyred saints. Not unlike Huysmans, who never married and had no more mistresses after the death of his oldest lover,

190. Huysmans, *Là-bas,* 26.

Anna Meunier, Durtal remains celibate from his conversion through his stint as oblate. As his misogyny grows, Huysmans devotes more narrative energy to it, taking great pains, in *Là-bas* more than anywhere else, to show precisely how far modern woman has fallen into depravity. In so doing, however, he elaborates the archetype of the subversive woman, one who has surpassed the strictures of her era and is more than capable of forging her own path in the social and spatial labyrinth of the modern city. Madame Chantelouve, in defining her own rules of amorous engagement, including the expression and fulfilment of her desire, is the Huysmansian incarnation of that archetype. She is the threat of modernity—the one he flees to secret himself away in the monastic tranquility of centuries past.

Pose, Place, and Gender in Zola's *Paris*

Émile Zola, Huysmans's one-time friend and longtime interlocuter, also tackles questions of style, politics, gender, and progress in his final works. He, unlike Huysmans, never loses faith in the righteousness and necessity of the experimental novel.[191] Across the arc of his corpus, he digs in his heels, mounting ever more ardent attacks on the dysfunction of modern society. This he has in common with Huysmans, and with similar results: Zola's late works are at once more programmatic and more encyclopedic in their effort to unify fin-de-siècle unrest into a single set of interconnected problems. Yet for him, they are always the same problems: the twin scourges of religion and demagoguery, the dangerous symbiosis of hereditary infirmity and social disease, and the dead weight of literary modes that serve no public good and even threaten to stall the march of progress.

In his *Trois villes* cycle, Zola returns to the question of Catholicism, following his protagonist, the priest Pierre Froment—the modern Peter, Zola's foil to Peter the Apostle and first Pope, as well as the wheat (*froment*) destined to become bread, the archetype of the Republican everyman who carries the future of the nation on his shoulders—to Lourdes, to Rome, and ultimately back to Paris. In Lourdes, the site of the purported apparitions of the Virgin Mary in 1858, Pierre documents subsequent pilgrimages of the pious and their paroxysms of devotion. He publishes an account of his findings, but must then travel to Rome in the second novel to defend his book against addition to the Index. Disillusioned, he returns to Third-Republic Paris. There, he finds the city teeming with political and financial corruption, assailed by anarchist bombings while the socialists of different schools fight among themselves, and the streets beleaguered with dandies, flâneurs, aesthetes, homosexuals, and other unsavory bohemians. His faith, already crumbling, is tested again and again throughout the sprawling novel, but never more than with his brother, Guillaume. A brilliant chemist who has just invented an incredibly powerful type of explosive, Guillaume rubs shoulders with the anarchist Salvat (later put to death for his role in the bombing of an aristocratic townhouse) and with a number of socialists (each of which represents a different strand of socialist thought, including Proudhonism, Saint-Simonism, Marxism, even Fourierism). The brothers' relationship is

191. In an interesting recent take on Zolian efforts at scientificity, Kristin Cook-Gailloud considers his penultimate novel cycle as the best examples of the experimental novel. In her account, the *Rougon-Macquart* is more of a continuation of the theory proposed in "Le roman expérimental" than its *mise en œuvre.* The practical application of that theory is, according to her, reserved for the *Trois Villes* cycle. See Kristin Cook-Gailloud, "Les Trois Romans expérimentaux d'Émile Zola: *Lourdes, Rome,* et *Paris*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 39, no. 1-2 (2010-2011): 131-153.

destabilized not only by Guillaume's extremist leanings, but also by the growing affection between Pierre and Marie, Guillaume's fiancée. Following Salvat's execution and Marie's avowal of her love for Pierre, Guillaume plans on using his new explosive to bomb the Sacré Cœur, the symbolic heart of the Church in new Paris. At the last moment, Pierre talks him down. The three reconcile, Pierre leaves the clergy, and the novel closes on the birth of his son Jean, who was to become the hero of Zola's unfinished final novel, *Justice.*

Paris, published seven years after *Là-bas,* does not parody it. Nevertheless, the questions they address are striking in their similarity, and the conclusions that their respective authors reach are clearly inflected by their ongoing literary dialogue, as well as by the ambient goings-on of the era. Zola also seems to make a number of direct references to *Là-bas,* particularly in his evocations of superstition, ideality, and decadence. For him, they are all of a kind, and intimately linked to the problems of capitalism, democracy, and sexuality. For he shared these concerns with Huysmans. Therein lies the cleverness of adopting a skeptical priest as his protagonist: it affords Zola a transversal view of late nineteenth-century Paris, the bellwether of French society in the wake of the Second Empire. The point of view of Pierre Froment allows the reader to occupy a variety of social, spatial, and ideological positions, compare them, and arrive at the same conclusion as Zola: that the only way forward in modern society is through secular technocratic socialism. It is the sciences—not religion—combined with a political system that extracts labor from every member of society according to her or his ability, that will make France the center of civilization. This thesis—or hypothesis, if we are to take Zola at his method—is demonstrated through the juxtaposition of two family systems, each of which is associated with a different set of *lieux* and *milieux.*

The Duvillard family embodies all the evils of modern Paris. Taken together, its members are proof that even in post-imperial France, prosperity is not universally assured and superstition still trumps rationality. As the patronym and false *particule nobiliaire* (*du*) suggest, they are pseudo-aristocrats, "of the city"; yet the suffix *-ard*—the same found in *bâtard, clochard, connard,* and *vantard,* for instance—lends it a pejorative cast. The Baron Duvillard, a prominent financier involved in the African railway scandals, is also carrying on a liaison with a prominent comedienne and courtesan, Silviane d'Aulnay. He is the Aristide Saccard of the Third Republic: "Il était le pourrisseur, le dévorateur, corrompant, engloutissant tout ce qu'il touchait; et il était le tentateur aussi, l'acheteur des consciences à vendre, ayant compris les temps nouveaux, en face de la démocratie à son tour affamée et impatiente."[192] Meanwhile, his wife, a notable socialite, is entangled in an affair with Gérard de Quinsac, a broke aristocrat who secretly wants to marry her daughter Camille (an innocent soul whose countenance is described as "à demi contrefaite") and regain financial stability.

By far the most debased of them all is the eldest Duvillard son, Hyacinthe. Again, the name—not uncommon for the period—is here marshaled to evoke the effeminacy of the decadent dandy. Given how closely Zola followed Huysmans's literary career at this point, it would not be improbable that its reappearance in in *Paris* is a direct reference to *Là-Bas.* As in that novel, it hearkens to both the fallen lover of Apollo, but also to the delicate, fragrant flower after which he is named. Hyacinthe Duvillard, a child of corruption and overindulgence, has far too much time and money; he incarnates the "spiritualisme qui rassurait la bourgeoisie."[193] In him, his father's iniquity is amplified into full-blown debauchery:

192. Zola, *Paris,* 63.
193. Zola, *Paris,* 101.

> Écolier exécrable, il avait décidé de ne rien faire, dans un mépris égal de toutes les professions; et gâté par son père, il s'intéressait à la poésie et à la musique, il vivait au milieu d'un monde extraordinaire d'artistes, de filles, de fous et de bandits, fanfaron lui-même de vices et de crimes, affectant l'horreur de la femme, professant les pires idées philosophiques et sociales, allant toujours aux plus extrêmes, tour à tour collectiviste, individualiste, anarchiste, pessimiste, symboliste, même sodomiste, sans cesser d'être catholique, par suprême bon ton. Au fond, il était simplement vide et un peu sot. En quatre générations, le sang vigoureux et affamée des Duvillard [...] tombait tout d'un coup, comme épuisé par l'assouvissement, à cet androgyne avorté, incapable même de grands attentats et des grandes débauches.[194]

Hyacinthe Duvillard's status as antagonist hinges first and foremost on his essential sterility: he has decided to *do nothing*. In some ways, he is a caricature of Des Esseintes, with dashes of Rimbaud and Wilde. The phrase *ne rien faire* is at the core of what Zola finds wrong with French society at the turn of the century: the unchecked production and consumption of superfluity in all areas of life. Thus, he is able to unite in Hyacinthe the romantic, symbolist, and decadent excess of *l'art pour l'art;* the replacement of philosophy with sophistry, of faith with fervor, and of ideology with affectation; the fetishistic ruses of finance capitalism; and the fruitless throes of homosexuality.

In typically Zolian fashion, Hyacinthe is associated with specific spaces and places whose material properties reflect and magnify his moral and corporeal perversity. The most notable of these is the ominously named *Cabinet des Horreurs* in Montmartre:

> *Le Cabinet des Horreurs* était installé dans un ancien café du boulevard Rochechouart, qui avait fait faillite. La salle, étroite, irrégulière, avec des coins perdus, s'étouffait sous un plafond bas, enfumé. [...] C'était le rut de l'immonde, l'irrésistible attirance de l'opprobre et du dégoût. Le Paris jouisseur, la bourgeoisie maîtresse de l'argent et du pouvoir, s'en écœurant à la longue, mais n'en voulant rien lâcher, n'accourait que pour recevoir à la face des obscénités et des injures. Hypnotisée par le mépris, elle avait, dans sa déchéance prochaine, le besoin qu'on le lui crachât à la face. Et quel symptôme effrayant, ces condamnés de demain se jetant d'eux-mêmes à la boue, hâtant volontairement leur décomposition, par cette soif de l'ignoble, qui asseyait là, dans le vomissement de ce bouge, des hommes réputés graves et honnêtes, des femmes frêles et divines, d'une grâce, d'un luxe qui sentait bon![195]

In both *Là-bas* and *Paris,* the latter-day bourgeoisie is a source of authorial exasperation and antipathy, yet the rationales behind Zola's and Huysmans's respective denunciations couldn't differ more. Huysmans distinguishes between the modern bourgeoisie—the product of financial, political, and intellectual leveling, slowly and inexorably diluted through the commingling with the working classes—and the fallen aristocracy, a relic dispossessed of its reliquary, left to crumble into dust in the ersatz light of the new Republic. Zola, on the other hand, perceives a continuity between the bourgeoisie of the Second Empire and that of the Third Republic, the downward spiral of a leisure class that has been allowed to grow so fat and blasé in its wealth that the only diversion left to it is utter ignominy. The transgenerational accumulation of vice and ennui has led to a willing search for self-debasement. Yet such an accumulation has been made

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194. Zola, *Paris,* 73. For an excellent study of the discourses nourishing the homophobia of Zola's late works, see Andrew Counter, "One of Them: Homosexuality and Anarchism in Wilde and Zola," *Comparative Literature* 63, no. 4 (2011): 345-365.

195. Zola, *Paris,* 308-09.

possible through the maintenance, *across* regimes, of a ruling class whose existence is contingent upon the perpetuation of an impoverished, precarious working class. The ultimate hypocrisy for Zola is that the abjection of the lower class becomes a spectacle for the bourgeoisie, a source of entertainment when all other novelties have lost their flavor.

The critical-didactic description of naturalism registers this as juxtaposition, parataxis, and repetition, not unlike the scenes we examined in the Saccard greenhouse of *La curée.* Here, the contrast is between financial bankruptcy and moral bankruptcy, between the stuffy room of a former café, with its low, smoke-stained ceiling and corners steeped in darkness, and its clientele, men of gravity and honor and women of beauty and grace, all of whom smell like luxury. It is the transposition of the latter into the space of the former that betrays falsity of the composite. The language of excess, common in Zola's novels, lies in the redundancy and *entassement* of terms designating turpitude (*rut de l'immonde, opprobre, dégoût, obscénités, injures, déchéance, condamnés, décomposition, ignoble, vomissement, bouge*) syntactically arranged not according to grammatical subordination, but instead jumbled list-like in heaps of participial and adjectival phrases (*s'en écœurant, n'en voulant pas, hâtant, se jetant, installé dans, hypnotisée par)* and appositive constructions (*le rut de l'immonde = l'irrésistible attirance de l'oppobre; le Paris jouisseur = la bourgeoisie maîtresse de l'argent*). The intended effect is achieved: the reader is left winded, dizzy, and repelled by the opulent disgrace of the bourgeoisie.

This type of spatialized rhetoric has by now become one of the most powerful implements in Zola's naturalist toolkit. It has developed in large part as an implicit response to literary styles and movements that he saw as outdated and lyrically vacuous (romanticism) or as promising but too restrained (realism, particularly that of Balzac and Flaubert). In *Paris,* though, we see for the first time, or at least the most intensely, an explicit extended polemic against other literary modes: symbolism and decadence, which Zola treats as essentially the same. The perceived threat of their increasing popularity lead him to devote an inordinate amount of narrative space to their censure. The strategy he adopts is clever in its calculation, but silly in its execution. It is constructed, unsurprisingly, around Hyacinthe, who has already been identified as the decadent dilettante par excellence. He is not alone in his admiration of what Zola considers the empty ideality plaguing the youth. Another young bourgeois bohemian, Rosemonde de Harthe, has her heart set on Hyacinthe, who himself has eyes for another. We learn all of this during a scene in Rosemonde's salon:

> Son nouveau caprice était là. Si la passion de la chimie, en elle, laissait place à un goût naissant pour la poésie décadente et symbolique, c'était qu'elle avait, un soir, en causant occultisme avec Hyacinthe, découvert en lui une extraordinaire beauté, la beauté astrale de l'âme voyageuse de Néron. Du moins, disait-elle, les signes étaient certains. [...] Hyacinthe entrait avec sa sœur Camille. Mais, dès le seuil, il venait de rencontrer l'ami pour lequel il venait, le jeune lord Elson, un éphèbe languide et pâle, à la chevelure de fille; et ce fut à peine s'il daigna remarquer l'accueil tendre de Rosemonde; car il professait que la femme était une bête impure et basse, salissante pour l'intelligence comme pour le corps.[196]

Elson, modeled on Oscar Wilde's friend and lover Alfred Douglas, is the more authentic double of Hyacinthe, the model to which he aspires and whose esteem and affections he covets.[197] In

196. Zola, *Paris,* 131.

introducing Elson, Zola is able to buttress Hyacinthe's status as poseur, frame homosexuality as a foreign import, and thereby align French identity with heterosexuality. The Parisian youth may be jaded and naive, but most of all, they are vulnerable, exposed to cosmopolitan corruption from elsewhere. Originating in figures of renown and infamy like Wilde, decadent ideals trickle down and spread, infectiously, to his confidants (Douglas-Elson), to their imitators (Hyacinthe), to their aspirants (Rosemonde). The French nation is thus, in the Zolian view, prone to internal degradation and susceptible to nefarious external discourses. Indeed, Paris is referred to several times throughout the novel as "Sodome et Gomorrhe."[198]

This scene also reinforces the associations already established between poetry, decadence, symbolism, occultism, and same-sex desire between men. New here, though, is the blatant misogyny of the effeminate aesthete. And Zola was correct in his observation that decadence was blatantly sexist. Huysmans arrived at precisely the conviction as Elson: that women are inherently inferior to men, and that modern women are both irredeemably base and irreconcilable with intellectual and physical health. The naturalist critique of decadent misogyny pivots on the fulcrum of homophobia: the real danger of hating women is that the nation's men will become hedonistic, preening pansies whose collective sterility will be the downfall of France. It is the self-indulgence of the bourgeois intelligentsia, not the artlessness of the proletariat, that constitutes the real threat, contrary to what Huysmans and his ilk would have his readers believe. To the contrary: a healthy, red-blooded male workforce is their best hope for true justice and progress. This is why Zola turns definitively to socialism in this and later novels where once he passionately endorsed republicanism.

Intertextual Naturalism and the Death of the Symbol

England is only one of the geographical specters to haunt *Paris.* Its presence is analogous to that of America, the capitalist nightmare that threatened the social order in *Là-bas.* But because Zola was more concerned with strengthening the French populace as a whole than with clinging to the old royalist hierarchies that divided it, it is logical that he would make transatlantic aestheticism the vehicle for social decay instead of American political economy. Or, more precisely, while Huysmans feared most of all the replacement of the nobleman with the entrepreneur, Zola is wary of the Fordist-style subjugation of the worker under capitalism. This is not his only means of localizing decadence elsewhere and of criticizing its feminizing effects. As we saw in chapters one and two, the machinery of naturalism is particularly apt in transmuting myth into material and vice-versa, whether it be in turning Renée Saccard into the imperious sphynx of the *serre* or rewriting Eden in the form of a lush chateau garden. In *Paris,* Zola mocks the mythical ideality of symbolism and decadence by concretizing it in a real-world place: Norway. This concretization is set up as Hyacinthe and his coterie are leaving *le Cabinet des Horreurs*:

> Rosemonde s'aperçut que la loge se vidait; et, sa curiosité satisfaite, elle songea elle-même à se faire reconduire par Hyacinthe. Celui-ci, qui avait écouté languissant, sans applaudir, causait de la Norvège avec Bergaz, lequel prétendait avoir voyagé dans le

197. In the preparatory *ébauche* of *Paris,* Zola notes of Hyacinthe: "C'est un fanfaron de vice, et surtout de pédérastie. 'Douglas.' Les femmes le dégoûtent. Et il va chez la rastaquouère [Rosemonde], pour y retrouver un jeune lord anglais." See Zola, *Paris,* 678.

198. Zola, *Paris*, 148, 157, 234.

> nord. Oh! les fjords, oh! les lacs glacés, oh! le froid pur, lilial et chaste de l'éternel hiver! Ce n'était que là, disait Hyacinthe, qu'il comprenait la femme et l'amour, le baiser de neige.[199]

At first, the link between aestheticism, sexuality, and Norway is puzzling. As the relationship between Hyacinthe and Rosemonde develops, though, the function of this geographical referent becomes clear. For she does succeed in winning him, not through seduction in the traditional sense, but by tapping into his fantasy of a pure, transcendent ideal. Rosemonde convinces Hyacinthe to join her in a marriage of sterility, in which they can both exalt in the cold, lapidary brilliance of the unadulterated symbol: "...comme ils reparlaient de la Norvège, ils avaient décidé, d'accord enfin, qu'ils partiraient le lundi pour Christiania, un voyage de noces, l'idée qu'ils iraient là-bas consommer l'intellectualité de leur union. Leur seul regret était qu'on ne fût plus au gros de l'hiver, car la froide, la blanche, la chaste neige n'était-elle pas la seule couche possible pour de telles épousailles?"[200] The allusions to Norway complete an intertextual triangle between Huysmans, Zola, and another of the great fin-de-siècle writers: Mallarmé. Despite his scorn for the tics and preoccupations of decadence, Zola here moves closer to the type of decadent parody employed by Huysmans in *En rade.*

Though he isn't mentioned by name in *Paris,* Mallarmé is listed among Des Esseintes's favorite authors in *À rebours*; indeed, Huysmans—a friend and admirer of Mallarmé—contributed to the popularization of his poetry through novels and reviews. Mallarmé's now-famous sonnet "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourdhui...," first published in the *Revue indépendante* in 1885, was already well known prior to the appearance of *Paris* in late 1897.[201] Even more damningly, Mallarmé and his circle were often accused of sympathizing with the very real anarchist bombers of the mid-1890s. At a banquet on the evening of the Chambre de députés in December 1893, at which both Zola and Mallarmé were present, a journalist asked for Mallarmé's opinion on the event. His response: "Je ne sais pas d'autre bombe, qu'un livre."[202] The same language he uses to allegorize the poetic-autotelic struggle of language to escape the confines of representation is appropriated by Zola to caricaturize the aesthetics of symbolism. The "vierge aujourd'hui," "stérile hiver," "lac dur," "blanche agonie," "pur éclat," and "songe froid" of the sonnet become, in the bastardized words of the fatuous young decadents, "les lacs glacés," "le froid pur, lilial, et chaste de l'éternel hiver" and "la froide, la blanche, la chaste neige." In Huysmans, the titular adverb *là-bas* stood in for the pure elsewhere that was at once metaphysical and aesthetic, the mind freed from the confines of the flesh and language decoupled from the strain and slop of realism and naturalism. Zola neutralizes the deictic power of the adverb, the very quality by which it can stand for everywhere and nowhere, always at a distance from the enunciator—the very quality that would have made it attractive to symbolist sensibilities.[203] Instead, in making it designate a real place—Norway—he forces it to signify, wresting it from the ether and grounding it solidly in terrestrial topography. Concomitantly, all of the transcendental symbolism of the sonnet is substantialized: the couple plans on traveling to a

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199. Zola, *Paris,* 315.

200. Zola, *Paris,* 365.

201. See the Appendix for the poem in its entirety.

202. Patrick McGuinness, "Mallarmé and the Poetics of Explosion," *MLN* 124, no. 24 (2009): 812.

203. Indeed, it is this movement toward diectic language that Dora Zhang identifies as one of the stylistic hallmarks of modernist fiction. See Dora Zhang, *Strange Likeness: Description and the Modernist Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020).

literally cold, snowy climate with *actual* frozen lakes to "consummate" their reproductively sterile union. In parodying this foundational symbolist text by an author dear to Huysmans, Zola hopes to show the double absurdity of non-instrumental language and non-procreative marriage—also in his view a double scourge on modern society.

Of course, both Hyacinthe and Rosemonde are swiftly disabused of their folly. Rosemonde's investment proves more than intellectual: "...elle avait voulu contenter son caprice, en le violentant presque comme on viole une femme. Mais, bien qu'ayant consenti à se mettre au lit près d'elle, il s'était refusé à toute laideur et à toute bassesse, malgré les coups qu'elle avait fini par lui donner, s'exaspérant jusqu'à le mordre. Ah! l'horreur, la vilenie de ce geste, la répugnante grossièreté de l'enfant qui pouvait en naître!"[204] Both the violence of her lust and the depth of his repulsion at the mere possibility of conception hyperbolically amplify the naturalist parody of decadence and symbolism. After a night of reluctant lovemaking during their Norwegian honeymoon, Rosemonde is equally disillusioned: "Au réveil, elle trouva médiocre cette sensation qu'elle était venue chercher si loin [...]. À quoi bon venir polluer le Nord vierge et divin, quand une ville déjà souillée de France aurait suffi? Et, dès le lendemain, n'étant plus assez purs, ne se sentant plus en communion avec les cygnes sur les lacs du rêve, ils reprirent le bateau."[205] Again, the reference to lakes, swans, and purity recall the ideality of the Mallarméan symbol, completely gutted of its original auto-allegorical content and recast as the futility of idealist literature itself. This is the risk faced by the bohemian dandy: the possibility of being raped by a woman stronger than him.

This Manichean logic, which seems absolute and which associates aestheticism, homosexuality, and bourgeois excess is the ironic reflection the aesthetic logic of *Là-bas,* in which the search for ideality did indeed entail the rejection of woman as sexual object or erotic agent. But just as Huysmans forged a figure queerer and more modern than he could have ever imagined, Zola also breaks the mold of his past work and models new ways of thinking sex, gender, and class. In the *Rougon-Macquart,* every aspect of a given character's identity was reducible to their inborn traits and their milieu. The influence of criminology and sexology on his representation of sex, sexuality, and gender meant that any deviation from a rigidly binary heteronormative system, whether in self-presentation or in desire, was both perverse and fixed. This is not the case in *Paris.* First of all, bourgeois excess is no longer the cause of social decay, but a symptom of it. To reprise a passage already quoted above, "Et quel symptôme effrayant, ces condamnés de demain se jetant d'eux-mêmes à la boue..."[206] This is a far cry from the greed and scheming of *La curée,* in which individual characters' forays into extravagance and debauchery were shown to be the *product* of their blood and environment.

Here, perhaps for the first time, Zola thinks in terms of *systemic* injustice. It is not enough to excise individuals or groups from the social body; rather, that body is in dire need of reorganization in order that such corruption and inequality cannot come to exist in the first place. This belief is also adopted by Pierre Froment, who by the end of the novel decides to formally renounce the Church and instead devote his energies to the advancement of socialism. Thus, the cycle that has produced these already-condemned souls, "ces condamnés de demain," will be broken, and the future will belong to the people once more.

This type of systemic conception of degeneration also extends to sexuality. Hyacinthe, the only character in all of the Zolian corpus to be explicitly associated with sodomy, is more

204. Zola, *Paris,* 365.
205. Zola, *Paris,* 428.
206. Zola, *Paris,* 308-309.

prey to trendiness than to innate perversion, "fanfaron lui-même de vices et de crimes, affectant l'horreur de la femme..."[207] Afterall, he is a "sodomiste," not a *sodomite,* invert, or a homosexual. His misogyny is pure pretension, a ploy to curry favor with the trendsetters of the age. Now, this is far from a positive depiction of homosexuality, but it is the closest Zola comes to understanding sexuality and gender as malleable sets of acts, desires, and modes of self-fashioning that can be deployed, exchanged, and adopted for social, political, and artistic ends. We might propose, then, that Hyacinthe Duvillard is the queerest character of Zola's work; indeed, he queers Zola's work, not by emblematizing true homosexuality, but by disrupting sexuality as a stable, binary, intrinsic category of identity. Hyacinthe's diegetic existence, intensely polemically motivated, ends up collapsing the essentialist logic of naturalism that understands sexuality as an inborn set of expressions, identities, and desires. In *Paris,* gender and sexuality are open to manipulation. The entire premise of naturalism is thus undermined. This marked rupture with the aesthetic and epistemological precepts of Zola's high naturalist works shifts him closer to Huysmans, whose satanic sodomite was part of the pretense of occultism in *Là-bas.* In his mockery of decadent caprice, Zola contradicts his own past views on queer masculinity: this is the fundamental difference between *Paris*'s Hyacinthe Duvillard and a past model of effeminacy, Maxime Saccard of *La curée.*

Zola's *Nouvelle femme*

If modern perversity is most concentrated in the effeminate character of Hyacinthe Duvillard, who represents the modern feminine ideal in the novel? Of course, it's Marie, Pierre's true love, the embodied, terrestrial virgin that replaces and surpasses the Virgin Mary of Pierre's lost faith. She is also the Zolian cognate to Hyacinthe Chantelouve, whose urban divagations were occasioned by adultery and satanism. While Madame Chantelouve functioned as the repository for Huysmansian spite toward modern femininity, Marie represents a new Zolian optimism in regard to changing roles for women. Marie is differently mobile, differently independent, than her decadent foil. Her modernity also lies in her departure from the domestic sphere, but unlike Madame Chantelouve, she is driven by the health of her body and by technological innovation: she is a cyclist.

> —Voyez ces grandes filles que les mères élèvent dans leurs jupons. On leur fait peur de tout, on leur défend toute initiative, on n'exerce ni leur jugement ni leur volonté, de sorte qu'elles ne savent même pas traverser une rue, paralysées par l'idée des obstacles [...]. Mettez-en une toute jeune sur une bicyclette, et lâchez-la-moi sur les routes: il faudra bien qu'elle ouvre les yeux [...]. En somme, n'y a-t-il pas là un continuel apprentissage de la volonté, une admirable leçon de conduite et de défense? [...]
>
> —Alors, l'émancipation de la femme par la bicyclette.
>
> —Mon Dieu! pourquoi pas? [...] Cela semble drôle, et pourtant voyez quel chemin parcouru déjà: la culotte qui délivre les jambes, les sorties en commun qui mêlent et égalisent les sexes, la femme et les enfants qui suivent le mari partout, les camarades comme nous deux qui peuvent s'en aller à travers champs, à travers bois, sans qu'on s'en étonne. Et là est surtout l'heureuse conquête, les bains d'air et de claret qu'on va prendre en pleine nature...[208]

207. Zola, *Paris,* 72.
208. Zola, *Paris,* 450-51.

In the novels of the *Rougon-Macquart,* Zola was primarily concerned with men and women assuming their proper roles according to their biology—as was the case in *La curée* and *La faute de l'abbé Mouret*, whose female protagonists were ultimately the victims of their own desire. In *Paris,* however, he envisions technology as a means of liberating and cultivating women, affording them a social status somewhat closer to that of men. This discourse didn't begin with Zola, but originated in the New Woman movement, a precursor to the first wave of feminism that would gain prominence in Europe and the Americas around the turn of the century. While first-wave feminism is recognized now as a social and political movement, the discourse of New Womanhood primarily foregrounded physical, intellectual, and economic autonomy.[209] Hence the central role of the bicycle, which not only allowed for freedom of movement but also encouraged women to forge their own paths and become robust of body and mind—husband optional. Given the relative affordability of the bicycle, it was largely accessible to women of all social classes. It also played a role in making clothing more egalitarian, as female cyclists were among the first to popularize the wearing of breeches in place of the cumbersome dresses that tended to become entangled in bicycle wheels. In the Zolian imaginary, the bicycle could potentially act as a literal vehicle for a "un continuel apprentissage de la volonté, une admirable leçon de conduite et de défense" for women. Even post-*Rougon-Macquart,* technology again comes to the rescue, promoting topographical and social mobility for women and, most crucially, acting as a springboard for self-determination and self-defense. His framing of female liberation as a "conquest," however, is a conspicuous break with his past models of womanhood. Woman is no longer a point in space, fixed and surrounded by forces greater than her. Here as in *Là-bas,* she operates according to the logic of the vector, always in motion, her destination undetermined. This is not a sign of social dissolution as it was there, however—it's a mark of progress.

Of course, Zola's investment in the New Woman resonates with his interest in the physical maintenance of the social body and foreshadows his imminent turn to French natalism. In a brief return to the lexical field of vitalist exaltation that we saw in *La faute de l'abbé Mouret,* both Marie and Pierre are reinvigorated by this this new form of mobility that also renews their connection to nature: "[C'est] ce retour à notre mère commune, la terre, et cette force, et cette gaieté neuves, qu'on se remet à puiser en elle! [...] et quel bon vent cela met dans nos poitrines! et comme cela vous purifie, vous calme et vous encourage!"[210] The anaphoric structure of these clauses (*notre mère commune, la terre, cette force, cette gaité, vous purifie, vous calme, et vous encourage*) not only identifies the earth as a universal mother and associates health with joy, but rhythmically evokes the forward movement and cadence of pedaling. Romantic love in all of its physical exhilaration is presented as an endeavor, even an adventure, shared equally between man and woman. Zola foregrounds the bicycle as both a technological advancement and as an advancement toward a bright future defined by equality and hope: "...on est parti pour l'horizon, pour l'infini, là-bas, qui toujours se recule. C'est l'espoir sans fin, la délivrance des liens troup lourds, à travers l'espace, Et rien n'est d'une exaltation meilleure, les cœurs bondissent en plein ciel."[211] Where Huysmans's *là-bas* stood for a dark mysticism that fell short before the divine *là-haut,* Zola aspirationally recuperates the adverb *là-bas* and the religious language *délivrance, exaltation,* and *ciel* as the dream of a civilization with nowhere to

209. See Jean V. Matthews, *The Rise of the New Woman: The Woman's Movement in America, 1875-1930* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2003), and Carolyn Christiansen Nelson, *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Articles, and Drama of the 1890s* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2000).

210. Zola, *Paris*, 451.

211. Zola, *Paris*, 451.

go but up. Zola's is not an optimism founded on male primacy, but on collaboration between the sexes—a true rarity in his corpus.

Seeds of Destruction: Queer Dialectics and Literary Modernism

In the latter stages of their writing careers, Zola and Huysmans have learned quite a bit from one another. Huysmans, despite his ever-growing pessimism and continuing heterosexism, eventually recovers some of his faith in the naturalist method, in the power of description as a tool for discovery and self-discovery. Zola, in setting out to counter the mournful vision of decadent modernity, comes to update his ideas about the innateness of desire and the proper place of women, which just so happens to be anywhere she pleases. As their literary efforts become more programmatic, more dogged, and more at odds with one another, their aesthetic trajectories take the form of a convergence. The majority of critical narratives place naturalism and decadence in opposition to one another (as literary modes with almost nothing in common), in alignment with one another (grouping them together as latter-day realisms before the dawn of literary modernisms), or as reductions of one another (categorizing naturalism under the rubric of decadence or considering decadence as an excrescence of naturalism).

We have found, however, that while none of these accounts is entirely wrong, neither are any of them complete. It might be more accurate to say that there is a kind of reciprocal heterogeneity within each style and in the aesthetic principles that inform them. This third chapter has thoroughly complicated the representation of deviance in naturalism and decadence and to have retraced their lines of influence, not as arcs meeting and departing at a given point of shared literary interest, but as a helix determined by a dialectic of literary obsession. Were it not for an ongoing fascination with and responsiveness to each other's projects and polemics, Zolian naturalism and Huysmansian decadence would not have developed as they did. Contrary to critical appraisals that portray them as static or pedantic, we have seen the extent to which they are in constant flux. Indeed, it is the alternance between *rapprochement* and *rivalité* that spurs their rhetorical innovation—primarily as various descriptive strategies—and which situates their work closer to modernist experimentalism than to the tarnished glory of realism or romanticism.

My against-the-grain reading has played on both authors' normative distance from sexual perversity to produce forms of queer and feminist subversion, while their aesthetic distance from each other sustains naturalism and decadence as distinct but interdependent styles in constant evolution. Despite the fin-de-siècle discourses of degeneration animating Zola and Huysmans's pens, the dialogue between naturalism and decadence is thus imminently generative. In rejecting the myriad forms of inversion that they saw as the seeds of destruction of French society, they themselves came to exist in a relationship of literary inversion, demonstrating the creative force of queerness.

Coda
(Anti-)Feminist Decadence

> "*Je suis assez,* EN ÉTANT, et si je pouvais finir le monde avec moi, je le finirais."[212]

The Vampiric Afterlife of Naturalism and Decadence

The core chapters of this dissertation have been devoted to the intertextual analysis of works by Zola and Huysmans. The literary-historical goal of those chapters has been to deepen and complicate critical narratives about the genesis of, and relationship between, naturalism and decadence. Parallel to and energized by what I have construed as the dialectical convergence between the aesthetics and themes of these authors is the queer aspect of their works: I have argued that Zola and Huysmans, in their novelistic—and primarily descriptive—efforts to diagnose, denounce, and correct non-normative expressions of gender and sexuality, expose the limits of their own moral frameworks and effectively hypostatize the very identities, desires, relationships, and roles that they seek to criticize.

Thus far, the scope of my argument has remained relatively narrow, focusing almost entirely on Zola and Huysmans over the greater part of their authorial careers. Lines of literary influence are rarely single and unidirectional, and narratives of progress do not always equate to movement toward acceptance, equality, equity, agency, or justice. For these reasons, this final section of my dissertation will open up onto a third author, Rachilde (born Marguerite Eymery, 1860-1953), a late contemporary of Zola and Huysmans. Rachilde is of interest to the present study not only due to her status as one of the few prominent women writers of turn-of-the-century France, but also because her own life was marked by a defiance of gender and sexual norms that imbued the entirety of her oeuvre. Rachilde's 1887 novel *La Marquise de Sade* is of particular relevance to this study in the ways that it both draws on naturalist and decadent methods and styles while also deviating from them. This partial counter-positioning extends to Rachilde's treatment of gender and sexuality, which eschews turn-of-the-century feminist discourses and instead imagines female empowerment in terms of domination, cruelty, and violence. Her relationship to naturalism and decadence, as well as the ethics and politics that inform them, is complicated.

Rachilde's literary career was impressive, spanning from the late 1870s to the late 1940s. Her most notable works—which include *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), *L'animale* (1893), *Les hors nature* (1897), and *La jongleuse* (1900)—were as controversial as they were subversive, often featuring motifs of gender inversion, romantic and familial violence, chimeras and monsters, science and medicine, and the literary and plastic arts. In addition to her novels, Rachilde (who often wrote under the anagrammatic pseudonym Jean de Chilra) penned essays and literary criticism, most notably for the avant-garde magazine *Mercure de France,* launched by her husband, Alfred Villette. Rachilde and Vallette were key figures in the artistic and literary circles of the time, maintaining ties with Maurice Barrès, Paul Verlaine, Oscar Wilde, Toulouse-Lautrec, Maurice Ravel, and Sarah Bernhardt, among many others. Like many

212. Rachilde, *La Marquise de Sade* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 230 (original typography).

of her characters, Rachilde often wore men's clothing in public, even applying for a special permit to do so legally. She allowed her sexuality, as well as her gender, to remain ambiguous, and is known to have had an affair with fellow crossdressing *femme de lettres,* Gisèle d'Estoc. Though she was associated with both symbolism (see, in particular, her symbolist play *L'araignée de cristal,* 1892) and decadence, it is primarily her relationship to decadence that I would like to examine in this final chapter.

While Rachilde's works were met with both critical praise and vitriol during her life, it was Claude Dauphiné's 1991 literary biography, *Rachilde,*[213] that rekindled academic interest in her works. Since, she has been the object of numerous monographs and articles, including Melanie Hawthorne's *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship* (2001)[214] and Diana Holmes's *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender, and the Woman Writer* (2001).[215] As these titles suggest, Rachilde's corpus has lent itself to rich examinations by scholars in feminist studies.[216] More recently, queer and trans scholarship has revisited her works. Lisa Downing was one of the first to call for a queer-oriented approach to Rachilde and to *La Marquise de Sade* explicitly, drawing from Lee Edelman and Leo Bersani's contributions to queer theory to highlight connections between Rachilde's games with gendered language and her framing of decadence as both sexually non-normative and metatextual.[217] Mathew Rickard, through readings of Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus,* has examined the ambiguous masculinity of *Monsieur Vénus* as a means of moving away from queer theoretical frameworks that reinforce binary gender ideologies.[218] Rachel Mesch has adopted an insightful post-Foucauldian approach to Rachilde, deriving from her works a methodology for "recovering the gender-creative past" without resorting to anachronistic or heteronormative analytical paradigms.[219] Spatial description in Rachilde has also received attention from feminist scholars: Melanie Hawthorn has returned to Rachilde to argue that her depictions of decomposing walls function self-referentially to complicate any easy distinction between fiction and autobiography.[220] I would like to contribute to these interventions both by recategorizing Rachilde as a post-naturalist decadent writer (much as I have done with Huysmans), and by analyzing the descriptive mechanisms at play in her work through a queer-feminist lens.

I will begin by teasing out the specifically Zolian influences that seem to play a structuring role in *La Marquise de Sade.* Like the Italian introvert of my introduction and Huysmans in the previous chapter, Rachilde applies naturalist method to her own life, painting a pseudo-autobiographical and hyperbolic picture of childhood trauma that leads inexorably to an

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213. Claude Dauphiné, *Rachilde* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1991).

214. Melanie Hawthorne, *Rachilde and French Women's Authorship* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).

215. Diana Holmes, *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender, and the Woman Writer* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

216. See also Maryline Lukacher, *Maternal Fictions: Stendhal, Sand, Rachilde, Bataille* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) and Michael Finn, *Hysteria, Hypnotism, the Spirits, and Pornography* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009).

217. Lisa Downing, "Notes on a proto-queer Rachilde: Decadence, deviance and (reverse) discourse in *La Marquise de Sade,*" *Sexualities* 15, no. 1 (2011): 16-27.

218. Mathew Rickard, "'Ça n'empêche pas d'être un homme': Requeering Masculinity in Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884)," *Dix-Neuf* 24, no. 4 (2020): 269-283.

219. Rachel Mesch, "Trans Rachilde: A Roadmap for Recovering the Gender Creative Past and Rehumanizing the Nineteenth Century," *Dix-Neuf* 25, no. 3-4 (2021): 242-259.

220. Melanie Hawthorne, "Rachilde's Deliquescent Walls: Speaking Silences," *Dix-Neuf* 21, no. 2-3 (2017): 116-128.

existence defined by solitude and depravity. Like Rachilde, the novel's protagonist, Mary Barbe, is the daughter of a military officer (himself the son of a marquis) and eccentric bourgeoise mother. The intermixing of her parent's temperaments—cold and controlling on the paternal side; neurotic, sentimental, and *poitrinaire* on the maternal—make of Mary "une étrange petite fille détraquée."[221] Even in the first chapter, Mary's strangeness is attributed to her parents' personality traits, and hereditary influence more generally is highlighted as one of the primary factors in the development of childhood temperament. She is referred to as a "petite fille née vieille"[222] who, "à l'état latent... était déjà une blasée."[223] When the family relocates and comes under the surveillance of an austere, devout landlady who attempts to "correct" Mary's oddities, it is confirmed that "la religion ne modifia guère l'étrange nature de Mary Barbe."[224] As a treatment for her nerves, Mary's mother, Caroline, is prescribed "des tasses de sang tout chaud à prendre tous les jours."[225] This "lait rouge qui guérissait"[226] reappears at the novel's conclusion, when Mary, now a full-blown Parisian decadent, hears tell of a kind of "cabaret des abattoirs où des garçons bouchers, mêlant le vin à la rouge liqueur animale, buvaient, se disant des mots brutaux" where she "tendait le gobelet comme eux, but avec une jouissance delicate qu'elle dissimula sous des aspects de poitrinaire."[227] Now, the decadent tropes of the vampiric woman and succubus, nourished by the suffering and vital fluid of man and animal alike, was nothing new in 1887. We see it in texts such as Baudelaire's "Mademoiselle Bistouri," Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Diaboliques,* and Huysmans's *Là-bas.* Two things make this instance exceptional: that it was written by a woman, and that it accrues meaning and causality over the course of the novel in specifically naturalist terms. Mary's descent into the debauchery of the urban underworld is framed as an *effect* both of her mother's infirmity—passed down to Mary—and of a traumatic childhood experience that we will examine presently. It is also worth noting that here, her mother's status as true poitrinaire is redeployed as *the disguise of* a poitrinaire, signaling a move away from innate illness towards an assumed and instrumentalized illness. Rachilde, through her novelistic avatar, rejects the fate of heredity by using it to reach her own ends.

The central chapters of the novel see the deaths of Mary's mother (in childbirth), her father (in battle), and most notably, of her newborn brother. In particularly disturbing scene, Mary—filled with antipathy for her brother, whom she blames for their mother's passing—allows her brother's wet nurse to roll onto him in her sleep, smothering him to death. Orphaned, she moves to Paris to reside with her uncle, the venerable and extremely learned Docteur Antoine-Célestin Barbe. It soon becomes clear that Mary takes after her uncle, having inherited his passion for anatomy, chemistry, and criminology. Antoine notices a remarkable similarity between the proportions of Mary's arm and those of an amputated arm on the dissection table of his personal study:

> —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

221. Rachilde, 43.
222. Rachilde, 130.
223. Rachilde, 154.
224. Rachilde, 150.
225. Rachilde, 35.
226. Rachilde, 35.
227. Rachilde, 312.

> celui de l'homme se faisait déjà remarquer par une dimension anormale. Le savant se caressait la barbe.
>
> —Curieux! mais pas flatteur! Hum!... marmottait-il. Mary n'avait pas eu un frisson...
>
> —Qu'est-ce que vous voulez dire? interrogea-t-elle.
>
> —Ah! tu n'as pas eu peur... bien... je te félicite. Ce bras est celui d'un assassin qu'on a décapité hier.[228]

This scene not only hearkens back to the murder-by-inaction that Mary has already committed and foreshadows murders yet to come; it also confirms that Mary did not *become* a killer, but rather was born one. Cruelty and indifference to human life are engrained in her very anatomy: the anatomy of an assassin.

The naturalist paradox—by which one's "nature," though inborn, may nevertheless always already be "dénaturée,"—is here resurrected. Mary's blood, one half of that famous Zolian saw of *hérédité et milieu*, makes her neurotic (via her mother), cold-blooded (via her father), and scientific (via her uncle). It seems to be a combination of these traits that prime her for calculated violence, a quality corroborated by her anatomical likeness to a deceased murderer. This does not, however, provide a full accounting of her temperament and inclinations. From the novel's opening scene, Rachilde insists on the equal importance of environment and experience. The defining moment of the first chapter comes when Mary, left unsupervised, witnesses the violent exsanguination of a bull by "[des] garçons d'abattoir... fort délurés."[229] The effect is shocking and immediate:

> 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.[230]

It is at this moment that Mary's burgeoning neuroticism takes a dark turn. The indifference of naïveté is converted into the apathy of cruelty. Her "instinctive" identification with, and compassion for, the bull at the moment of its death endows her with an understanding of mortality and desensitizes her to mortality itself. Moreover, this desensitization is figured as transcendence: this is the first time Mary transcends her own existence through bloodshed, but it certainly won't be the last. It cannot be, since from this moment on, "l'existence lui apparut la plus misérable des plaisanteries."[231] Her misery is also intimately bound up with her experience of gender. It is not enough that the "brazen boys" of the slaughterhouse allow her to bear witness to the bull's demise; she is further punished for her misbehavior upon returning home, when her father laments the fate of her sex: "—Tu es mal élevée, tu es mal débarbouillée... Ah! si tu étais un garçon, au moins! comme je te ferais rentrer dans le rang... toi!"[232] This is a frequent refrain in the first third of the novel, a constant reminder that Mary should comport herself "[en] fille militaire"[233] and that the Colonel Barbe would have been better off with a son: "Le colonel fit un geste de dépit. Oh! c'était un vrai désespoir, cela... Un garçon, il l'aurait élevé à lui tout seul,

228. Rachilde, 200.
229. Rachilde, 29.
230. Rachilde, 30.
231. Rachilde, 42.
232. Rachilde, 37.
233. Rachilde, 44.

d'une manière solide, la cravache à la main."[234] Between the malice of the slaughterhouse crew who "voulait plaisanter pour [lui] faire peur" and the spiteful regret of her father, it's not surprising that Mary spends the remainder of the novel in search of vengeance against men.[235] The nail in the coffin, so to speak, is her mother's death in childbirth:

> —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…[236]

The free indirect discourse of this passage cements the association between the bull's slaughter and the mother's passing in Mary's mind. The verb *tuer* accurately describes the earlier killing, but is then reapplied to her mother's demise, figuring it as an act of cold-blooded murder. Indeed, the resonance is so strong that the two deaths are the cause of "the same blow," and the butcher boys are grouped with her mother's killers through the ambiguously impersonal pronoun "on." Who, precisely, is to blame in Caroline's death? Her father, for impregnating his wife? Her uncle, for failing to save her mother's life? Or her brother, for taking her mother out of the world just as he enters it? What begins as an amorphous despair soon coalesces into pitiless rage directed at the infant brother, who meets his own end when Mary refuses to save him from accidental asphyxiation. This internal "revolution" could not have taken place had Mary not been privy to the bull's bloody end. This inexorable process of becoming, by which individuals are the fateful product of cause and effect, is the same undergone by most Zolian characters, subject as they are to the vagaries of their environment and upbringing. It leaves an indelible mark upon Mary's character and fuels her lifelong quest for ultimate domination over the men in her life.

Lived experience alone does not contribute to the naturalist concept of milieu. Of equal—or perhaps even greater importance, as we have seen in the preceding chapters—is lived environment. Both Zola and Huysmans surpassed the mere representation of physical spaces and places, instead making use of various descriptive techniques to criticize aspects of the society that made such spaces possible as well as to emphasize the reciprocal influences between social subjects and the material world. This is also a feature of many of Rachilde's works. Let us take, for example, the maternal bedroom of La Marquise. Draped in soft blue silks, it is her sanctuary:

> La chambre à coucher de madame Barbe était tendue de soie bleu clair, luxe que tout le regiment connaissait. [...] Caroline se plaisait dans ce bleu, et malheureusement son excessive sentimentalité en avait fait un nouveau genre de tourment pour elle. Elle se demandait, devant le colonel, devant ses officiers, devant sa bonne, devant sa cousine, devant sa fille, ce qu'il adviendrait de cette soie bleue lorsqu'elle serait morte.[237]

Caroline's sentimentality, neuroticism, and class status are materialized in this blue silk. It stands as a sign of her wealth, her frailty, and a hope for convalescence that will never be realized. After Caroline's funeral, Colonel Barbe, assisted by his sister Tulotte, refurnishes the room and moves in: "Tulotte... passa à la teinture les soieries bleu pâle et remeubla la chambre de son frère en un grenat violent sous lequel les tendresses des nuances nuptials avait à jamais disparu. Le colonel, qui n'aimait pas les souvenirs douleureux, fut content."[238] Unlike Mary, who is unable to forget the atrocity and injustice of her mother's passing, her father wipes the slate clean with a wash of

234. Rachilde, 44.
235. Rachilde, 33.
236. Rachilde, 100.
237. Rachilde, 39.
238. Rachilde, 117.

red dye. His callousness recalls that of the slaughterhouse workers, jokingly extracting—at the price of a life and painful death—"ce lait rouge qui guérissait."[239] Of course, the daily dose of fresh bull's blood prescribed by Doctor Barbe did not, in the end, save Caroline's life. The "violent garnet" of the redecorated bedroom has a triple significance: it reiterates the specifically male apathy that structures Mary's childhood, underlines the inefficacy of male expertise in a time when women had no easy access to professions in the sciences (we will return to this theme later), and makes visible the horror of Caroline's death, precisely in the location where it took place.

Beyond Sex: Rachilde's Radical Individualism

It is also in Caroline's bedroom, inscribed in red on her headboard, that we first encounter the motto that will become one of the novel's primary motifs: "Aimer, c'est souffrir!"[240] It returns in the maternal death scene, where its veracity is affirmed in Caroline's difficult labor and fatal delivery: had she not loved her husband and unborn child, she might still be alive.[241] Mary becomes convinced that love for another inevitably leads to suffering for the subject of that love. For the remainder of the novel, she will invert the motto's meaning: in every close relationship she establishes, she ensures that it is the object of her love, and not herself, who suffers—at her hands: "Elle aimait sans souffrir, car on souffrait pour elle."[242]

Her uncle's study also becomes a space of great symbolic and narrative significance. When Mary enters it for the first time, upon moving in with her uncle, she is greeted by marvelous disarray:

> Le fond de la pièce était occupé par une grande bibliothèque à colonnes torses. Les livres s'entassaient dans un désordre pittoresque, les uns ouverts, les autres posées de champ, majestueux, reliés d'or et de cuir fin. Une petite forge, installée à côté de la bibliothèque, montrait son ouverture comme un trou dont on ne doit pas voir l'issue. Puis, deux fourneaux, d'aspect compliqué, des tas de fioles aux goulots tordus, des instruments de chirurgie, des écrins en velours contenant les plus artistiques bijoux d'acier, luisants et mystérieux. Trois ou quatre consoles de marbre noir portaient encore des objets étranges: un squelette criblé de numéros comme d'une vermine, de longues peaux d'animaux avec leur nerfs détaillés, des bocaux remplis de bêtes innommables, et, dominant ce chaos, une Vénus anatomique s'étendait endormie dans l'angle d'un mur, au-dessus de la bibliothèque, reléguée là comme une poupée devenue inutile.[243]

Before long, the study becomes the site of Mary's anti-sentimental education. Her uncle initially forbids her from reading any of his books because of her sex, only to be met with open rebellion: "Eh bien! puisque je suis une femme, chassez-moi donc de chez vous, mon oncle, car c'est un crime que je ne veux plus m'entendre reprocher."[244] One tome in particular—*L'Amour physique*, an exhaustive and descriptive study of human reproduction—captivates her, "valant mieux... que

239. Rachilde, 35.
240. Rachilde, 71.
241. Rachilde, 100.
242. Rachilde, 246.
243. Rachilde, 196.
244. Rachilde, 198.

les romans dédiés aux demoiselles dans les journaux de mode."[245] The chemistry equipment will eventually explode, killing Doctor Barbe: the unavoidable result of male hubris: "Une victime de la science! dit Mary."[246]

All is not as it seems, however. The laboratory accident throws Doctor Barbe across the room but does not kill him immediately, prompting nearby houseguests to observe that, "il n'avait expire qu'un quart d'heure après sa chute et qu'en tombant il ne s'était fait aucune blessure mortelle."[247] The suggestion of a subtler, more treacherous cause of death is confirmed later in the novel. The vials contain poisons that Mary refers to as "mes poupées,"[248] the mastery of which will eventually allow her to poison her husband, the Baron de Caumont.[249] Indeed, the systematic elimination of men who would seek to control her becomes one of the structuring motifs of the novel, which thus becomes legible as a narrative of women's self-liberation, albeit through murder. This is unlike the forms of resistance and subversion we saw in the various novels of Zola and Huysmans. Far removed from the New Woman of *Paris* or even the conniving satanist of *Là-bas,* Rachilde's heroine is endowed with an indulgent ruthlessness that makes her more ethically ambiguous. The anatomical Venus, once dominant but asleep, relegated to the sidelines like a useless doll, is later endowed with a kind of macabre élan vital in the explosion scene, almost springing to life to exact revenge on the doctor who disdained her, leaping from her pedestal to land on his ruined desk. Mary's plan, formulated two chapters earlier, comes to fruition: "J'ai hâte de faire certains changements, vous savez, je transporterai son laboratoire dans les appartements d'en haut. Son cabinet sera mon boudoir."[250] The reclamation of agency through the rearrangement of physical space recalls the strange habitation of Madame Sidonie in *La curée,* but is here deployed as a reclamation of medical discourses of female hysteria and social and legal discourses of domesticity and marriage. And where Huysmans's Madame Chantelouve dodged the spatial traps of Durtal's would-be amorous conquest, Mary reconfigures space entirely. The appropriation of space in *La Marquise* is fundamentally connected with Mary's appropriation of her own destiny, particularly when it comes to love and education. She reclaims the right to learn, to love, to move through the world according to her own inclinations and desires, authorizing her own agency and rejecting the paths set for her and for most women of her time: sexless marriage, painful and perhaps lethal childbirth, a life of domesticity and subjection. It is not enough that she get rid of her meddling uncle: she turns his study into a grand intimate antechamber, and her own bedroom into a laboratory. Male-dominated scientific space is thus demoted to a space of feminine pleasure, while her private chambers are elevated to the status of scientific experimentation. The anatomical Venus is not just a symbol of Mary's journey toward self-determination; it also represents the self-discovery that enables her to move beyond the spheres of existence available to her. She refuses the bedridden life of anxiety and suffering lived by her mother, whose lack of knowledge about and control over her own body led to her death.

Instead, she seeks to understand herself and those around her through the cold logic of science and medicine, rather than through useless sentimentality. We learn of the "inexpliquables

245. Rachilde, 206.
246. Rachilde, 274.
247. Rachilde, 275.
248. Rachilde, 232.
249. Rachilde, 300.
250. Rachilde, 219.

besoins de savoir"[251] and the "positivisme déjà naissant"[252] of Mary's youth, which mature into the "positivism de l'opérateur"[253] with time and experience. Armed with expertise and self-knowledge, she is able to embrace her apathy, allowing her to excise with surgical precision any threat to her autonomy, no matter the cost. The prophesy of the assassin's arm proves true: "Vous avez la monomanie des cruautés... Ah! ce pouce, ce pouce long et mince... il est l'indice absolu... je ne l'ai pas osé croire, ce pouce!" bemoans her uncle before his untimely demise.[254] Rachilde thus stages an uneasy but unique compromise between naturalist determinism and decadent transcendence. Using the "provoked observation" of the experimental novel, she recognizes the ineluctable influences of blood and environment, but she also locates in science the tools to instrumentalize and surmount these influences: the power of analysis. Mary is her own anatomical Venus, a spectacular tool shaped by men but no longer under their control.[255] If we consider that the novel is at least in part informed by the life of its author, *La Marquise de Sade* is an experiment both *in vivo* and *in vitro*, both a reflection on Rachilde's own life and an idealist demonstration of what somebody like her could become under the right conditions. The exalted tones of the twelfth and final chapter frame Mary as a naturalist-decadent hero, unscathed by the maladies and frivolities of her age *by reason of* her capacity for scientific analysis:

> Son être d'une chair incorruptible passait au milieu des hystéries de son temps comme la salamandre au milieu des flammes; elle vivait des nerfs des autres plus encore que des siens propres, suçant les cerveau de tous avec la volupté d'un cerveau qui sait analyser à une fibre près la valeur de leurs infamies, et avoue sincèrement qu'il regrette ses cruautés parce que beaucoup de ses mets sont d'un goût douteux.[256]

While Rachilde reinvigorates Zola's scientific optimism, she reduces its societal scope and channels it into a typically Huysmansian individualism. Unlike Zola, Huysmans lost faith in the potential of any earthly pursuits—including both science and hedonism—turning instead to Catholic mysticism and monastic asceticism as modes of self-examination and self-sublimation. For Rachilde, knowledge of the natural world, of which the human body and its driving forces are part, is a means of mastery: of self and of others. It is by understanding what makes oneself and others tick, by understanding the mechanisms of desire, that one distinguishes oneself and overcomes all obstacles. It is precisely this process that motivates and satiates Mary—the process of knowing. Mary's vampirism, inherited from her mother, is elevated and comes to emblematize modes of knowing, dominating, and desiring of the most intimate kind. She understands not only the physiological workings of life on a theoretical level, but also experientially. Lust becomes lust for knowledge, which in turn becomes bloodlust. It is not enough that Mary remain chaste and surpass even her uncle in anatomical and medical brilliance. These traits are given, the logical result of her temperament and upbringing, of associating her mother's death with love and procreation, and of constantly being made aware of the inadequacy of being born a girl. What makes Mary a darkly compelling and singular protagonist is her instrumentalization of knowledge and chastity, and herein lies also the blending of naturalist and decadent themes and

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251. Rachilde, 26.

252. Rachilde, 150.

253. Rachilde, 232.

254. Rachilde, 267.

255. Pygmalionesque themes and characters recur frequently in Rachilde's works, though in slightly different incarnations. See, most notably, *Monsieur Vénus.*

256. Rachilde, 304.

styles. Mary's vampirism is one not of carnal satiety, but of intellectual enlightenment. The same objectivity that grants her a scientific view of the world also produces the moral apathy that allows her to consume it in the name of self-interest and discovery, as well as the sense of superiority that places her above her less-enlightened and far "baser" peers, men and women alike. It is no surprise then, that the little girl who "jouait à penser" and sought "des joies pouvant [la] ravir hors de sa prison de chair" grows into a young woman who turns the tables on every man who expects something of her.[257]

Rachilde is careful never to pathologize her protagonist, first inverting discourses of female hysteria by diagnosing the Baron with it ("Une attaque d'hystérie, moi j'ignorais que les messieurs en eussent," laments his mistress, the Comptesse de Liol) and then dismissing it entirely as a trend of the era: "Calmez-vous, Madame, en vérité, l'hystérie est à la mode."[258] In so doing, she calls attention to the differential application of theories of disease to women at the time and underlines the exceptionalism of her protagonist. Mary's sense of superiority is not founded on morality, but on intellectualism. Her indifference to human suffering, combined with her mental acuity and proclivity for autodidacticism, generate a sense of radical individualism that is at once the most transgressive and the most dangerous ethical position in the novel. The night of her marriage to Louis de Caumont, she spurns his advances and informs him that she has no intention of consummating their union. When he balks at this decision, she replies, "*Je suis assez,* EN ÉTANT, et si je pouvais finir le monde avec moi, je le finirais."[259] Her refusal to have sex with her husband is remarkable not just as a reclamation of reproductive autonomy, but also because it means that she will bear him no heir. In a profoundly anti-patriarchal blow, she maintains complete ownership over her body *and* breaks the convention that would perpetuate the Caumont lineage. Even more striking is Mary's rationale: her value as a human being is intrinsic, defined by her mere existence rather than her role as wife or mother.

This profound independence comes at a great cost, however. The initial claim of self-sufficiency is followed by the nihilistic apotheosis of Mary's apathy. It is not that all human life is of innate worth—just Mary's life: "En prononçant ces paroles, elle avait reculé, jetant le voile derrière elle, splendide, les yeux ardents, le sourire féroce, grandie d'une implacable haine de l'humanité."[260] What initially appears as liberatory gesture is revealed to be a fundamental misanthropy, a proto-Randian objectivism that places the individual above the common good. The egalitarianism and autonomy embodied in the novel's protagonist are undermined by an ethos of decadent individualism. This is a far cry from the collectivist promise of Zolian naturalism, which proposed to diagnose and heal lesions of the social body, as well as from late Huysmansian decadence, which came to see salvation in religious asceticism and mortification. Both posit immanently democratic epistemologies: modes of apprehending the world and our place in it through scientific examination or spiritual introspection, respectively.[261] The two authors' novelistic projects are—almost paradoxically— united by optimism, whether it be

257. Rachilde, 155.

258. Rachilde, 289.

259. Rachilde, 230 (original italics).

260. Rachilde, 230.

261. While Huysmans's earlier works advance staunchly anti-democratic views, the theologized decadence of his later novels posits a spiritual transcendence accessible to any believer willing to undertake the spiritual work and physical mortification required for salvation. It is in this sense that I call it "democratic."

Zola's dream of a "healthy" society in complete control of the natural world, or Huysmans's hope for humanity's salvation in the heavenly realm.

Rachilde flattens the horizons of possibility underlying her predecessors' aesthetics into a pessimistic vanishing point: the self. In *La Marquise,* religion appears as a bad joke and life is every woman for herself. This particular fusion of hedonism and nihilism preclude any possibility of cooperation, solidarity, or improvement of the human condition. To the contrary: the ethics of *La Marquise* are entirely antagonistic to life on the scale of collectives: if Mary could take the world out with her, she would. In this it differs even from Huysmansian decadence, which bemoaned the state of the world but ultimately proposed a means of transcending it. Rachilde's decadence, characterized only by self-interest and dispassion, is far more destructive, only capable of figuring transcendence on the level of the individual:

> Elle se serait trouvée sur un trône qu'elle aurait fait de bonnes choses, mais rouler en atome parmi tous les atomes de ce pays gangrené ne lui paraissait pas une mission... Elle se contentait de jouir du spectacle, cherchant la satisfaction de ses désirs de femme féroce sans s'inquiéter de la fin. [...] Homme, elle aurait rêvé de politique; femme, elle était trop habile et trop distinguée pour jouer un rôle absurde.[262]

To atomize humanity is to elide the social completely. This is not surprising since Mary's apathy prevents her from commiserating with others and allows her to instead enjoy the spectacle of human suffering in a diseased and rotting country with no regard to its or her own ending.

More astounding is her reasoning, which is based on the social and cultural mores of the time: as a self-proclaimed "femme féroce," she cannot imagine leading the humdrum life of the *grande bourgeoise,* of leaving behind the heady pleasures of intellectual life for what she calls "les petites guerres enrubannées."[263] Rather than devoting her energies to activism and advocacy for and with her fellow women, she dismisses them along with the men she so vehemently despises. Mary here seems to be acting as a mouthpiece for Rachilde herself, who had nothing but scorn for the New Women movement and turn-of-the-century feminism more broadly. Indeed, she formalizes her position in a 1928 essay titled *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe*, in which she qualifies feminism as one of the "new dogmas"[264] of the era and reiterates her commitment to individualism over equality: "Il faudrait apprendre [à la femme] la mesure, c'est-à-dire que l'égalité n'est pas la préséance."[265] Her reasoning? Women are too weak-minded: "Je continue à regarder comme un danger tout accaparement cérébral de la femme parce que son cerveau est peut-être moins solide que celui de l'homme."[266] Rachilde essentializes female inferiority, then accuses contemporary feminists of demanding privileges to which they have no right. If women can never be truly equal to men, they have no valid claim to equality. In this regard she is ideologically aligned with early Zola and Huysmans, though the former eventually came to support the New Woman movement.

Inasmuch as Rachilde lauds naturalism, listing naturalist novels among Mary's favorite texts,[267] she distances herself from the decadent tropes of her contemporaries: "Ah! ils la faisaient rire avec leur *décadence,* elle était de la décadence de Rome et non point de celle

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262. Rachilde, 305.
263. Rachilde, 305.
264. Rachilde, *Pourquoi je ne suis pas féministe* (Paris: Éditions de France, 1928), 6.
265. Rachilde, *Pourquoi,* 21.
266. Rachilde, *Pourquoi*, 21.
267. Rachilde, *La Marquise,* 301.

d'aujourd'hui."[268] A return to the past glories of Western civilization was a core feature of Huysmans's decadence, as was its meta- and intertextuality. We saw in the second chapter the ways in which decadent texts tend to reference themselves as well as other decadent texts. Notable here is how Rachilde also uses such techniques to simultaneously assume the label of decadence and to distinguish her particularly ruthless brand of decadence from what she sees as the anemia of her decadent rivals. *La Marquise* is in this sense both a case-study and a neo-decadent manifesto, a rejection of prevalent decadent styles that instantiates her own decadent ideals: Rachilde's decadence lies in her disavowal of decadence as a fad. It is just another example of the period's "lâcheté universelle," which is first and foremost evidenced by gender slippage: "Elle ne prenait pas plus le parti de celle-ci que de celui-là [...] une afféterie regrettable se mêlait à ces drames, leur donnant tout de suite des airs de vaudeville."[269] If women tend to be hysterical and neurotic, and men have become hysterical and effete—that is, denatured women—then there is no recourse but a return to the patrician savagery of Rome. Who better to incarnate such an archetype, in all of its elegance, cruelty, and cunning, than Mary Barbe?

And, moreover, who better to receive the brunt of her ire but a pederast? In one of the final scenes of the novel, upon encountering a group of flamboyant gay men, Mary gains a new sense of purpose: "Ce serait une idéale volupté que lui fournirait l'agonie d'un de ces hommes, peu capable de se défendre d'une femme."[270] This is not just any sensual pleasure, but an ideal one. Queerness is a *mal du siècle*: it represents not just a blurring of categories, but a quickly metastasizing corruption of society as a whole, a decline into feminine folly and weakness. Mary, then, stands for a return to a lost civilization far removed from the artifice and frivolity of modern France. The novel refuses true closure: the reader is left on the precipice of Mary's unrealized dream of slaughtering "un de ces mâles déchus."[271] This irresolution makes sense, for the accomplishment of the murder would signal the triumph of the old ways over the new. It is Rachilde's fundamental pessimism that inhibits such a fanciful ending. Because such a return to Roman decadence is impossible, it must remain ideal. The word thus takes on a second meaning: although this, for Mary, would be a perfect murder, its symbolic implications relegate it to the realm of the conceptual. At this the novel's non-ending, all that remains is the protagonist's dark hope, an impossible hope that nevertheless authorizes acts of immense inhumanity.

Unlike Huysmans and Zola, Rachilde centers female empowerment in many of her novels. She is critical of medically, legally, socially, and politically authorized forms of misogyny and goes to great lengths to nullify and invert the power differentials in and through which they manifest. However, what initially appears as resistance and liberatory subversion are soon revealed as an intensified perpetuation of decadent sexism and homophobia propped up by a turn-of-the-century individualism so extreme that it posits a subject whose singularity lies in its self-emancipation from *all* social constraints. What unites their projects, in addition to the generic and formal similarities that I have outlined, is the ways in which their ethical radicalism is consistently undermined by their author's ideological loyalties and blind spots. Each novelist offers a vision for a better world through a critique of the one they inhabited, yet at every turn, they enact forms of textual violence at odds with the narratives of progress woven into their works.

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268. Rachilde, *La Marquise,* 303 (original italics).
269. Rachilde, *La Marquise,* 302.
270. Rachilde, *La Marquise,* 311.
271. Rachilde, *La Marquise,* 313.

Relics, Revivals, and How to Read

This study is not meant as a cautionary tale for present-day writers, nor as a smugly anachronistic castigation of writers past. Taken together, it is an exercise in historicized critical reading and a demonstration of the theoretical power of literature. It is incumbent upon latter-day critics to avoid readings that are too optimistic, that gloss over the violences and elisions of the works of the past. We might here think of the Italian introvert of my introduction, who discerned in the muddle of Zolian moralism a glimmer of positive queer representation. Had he read Rachilde and encountered her ill-fated queer characters, would he have seen in them an affirmation of his own identity? Had he corresponded with her, what would he have said? At the same time, I have attempted to temper my analytic paranoia, that impulse to dissect texts, to examine and critique their inner workings, with a kind of synthetic repair that allowed me to read them as sites of unanticipated possibility and innovation. Stories are inevitably mired in the ideas of their time, but are also capable of thinking differently, and of thinking better. They remind us to be critical of our own assumptions, beliefs, and ethical frameworks, and the more thoroughly we examine them, the more possible a just world becomes. After all, the landscape of the past was once that of the present, of the *now.* Like Rachilde, I close on an open question—albeit a more hopeful one: how can we continue to criticize our institutions, systems, and discourses, and interrogate our modes of knowing, being, and desiring, in ways that center care, fulfillment, and the common good?

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Appendix

Stéphane Mallarmé, “Le vierge, le vivace, et le bel aujourd’hui” (1887)

Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd’hui
Va-t-il nous déchirer avec un coup d’aile ivre
Ce lac dur oublié que hante sous le givre
Le transparent glacier des vols qui n’ont pas fui !

Un cygne d’autrefois se souvient que c’est lui
Magnifique mais qui sans espoir se délivre
Pour n’avoir pas chanté la région où vivre
Quand du stérile hiver a resplendi l’ennui.

Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
Par l’espace infligée à l’oiseau qui le nie,
Mais non l’horreur du sol où le plumage est pris.

Fantôme qu’à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
Il s’immobilise au songe froid de mépris
Que vêt parmi l’exil inutile le Cygne.