Distribution Agreement

In presenting this thesis or dissertation as a partial fulfillment of the requirements for an advanced degree from Emory University, I hereby grant to Emory University and its agents the non-exclusive license to archive, make accessible, and display my thesis or dissertation in whole or in part in all forms of media, now or hereafter known, including display on the world wide web. I understand that I may select some access restrictions as part of the online submission of this thesis or dissertation. I retain all ownership rights to the copyright of the thesis or dissertation. I also retain the right to use in future works (such as articles or books) all or part of this thesis or dissertation.

Signature:

____________________ ____________

Audrey Burba Date

Dying in Detail:
Feminine death and the question of authorship in 19th century French fiction

By

Audrey Burba
Doctor of Philosophy

Department of French and Italian

Elissa Marder
Co-Advisor

Philippe Bonnefis
Co-Advisor

Geoffrey Bennington
Committee Member

Laura Otis
Committee Member

Accepted:

Lisa A. Tedesco, Ph.D. Dean of the James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies

---

Date

Dying in Detail:
Feminine death and the question of authorship in 19th century French fiction

By

Audrey Burba
B.A., Brigham Young University, 2004
M.A., University of Utah, 2006

Advisor: Philippe Bonnefis, Thèse d'État.
Advisor: Elissa Marder, Ph.D.

An abstract of
A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in French
2012

Abstract

Dying in Detail:
Feminine death and the question of authorship in 19th century French fiction

This dissertation examines the paradoxical status of the feminine death scene throughout 19th century French fiction. Focusing on novels and a novella produced after the birth of Realism, Honoré de Balzac's *Le Lys dans la Vallée* (1835), Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Emile Zola's *Nana* (1880), and Guy de Maupassant's "Yvette" (1884), it is specifically interested in looking at the effects that the growing importance of the detail in narrative production has had on the representations of feminine deaths.

Certainly, the most obvious effect has been on the aesthetic of the death scene. The 19th century's early idealization of the dead feminine form, characteristic of the romantic tradition, is gradually replaced by a more gruesome depiction of death. Who can forget the smallpox which turns Nana, the perfection of the feminine form, into an oozy mass of discarded flesh? or Emma's horrendous suicide, punctuated by the detailed descriptions of her vomit (first white and gravelly, then thick and black as ink)? Narrated in detail, these feminine deaths appear fiercely opposed to the alignment of death and beauty. Each text stresses the physical symptoms of death and highlights the body of the protagonist: she rots, yellows, pales, and decays.

However subversive they may seem in the realm of aesthetics, the "detailed deaths" of feminine protagonists also raise troubling questions with regard to narrative production and authorship. The three chapters which make up this dissertation examine the ways that details, instead of participating in the narrative's elaboration, appear as fragments of another narrative. Rather than operate in a manner consistent with their narrative function, as the tools of the masculine author, the details that fill the deaths of feminine protagonists depict a woman's death as a conscious act of authorship. Mme de Mortsauf, Emma, Nana and Yvette all fiercely appropriate the odious realities of their deaths to author something other than the fiction to which they belong.

Dying in Detail:
Feminine death and the question of authorship in 19th century French fiction

By

Audrey Burba
B.A., Brigham Young University, 2004
M.A., University of Utah, 2006

Advisor: Philippe Bonnefis, Thèse d'État.
Advisor: Elissa Marder, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
James T. Laney School of Graduate Studies of Emory University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in French
2012

Acknowledgements

This dissertation took shape under the direction of Elissa Marder and Philippe Bonnefis. I would like to thank them here for both their intellectual guidance and for their generous support. Their insightful comments and encouragements consistently challenged and inspired me. I am grateful to Laura Otis for her kind attention and incisive response to my work. I am equally grateful to Geoffrey Bennington who took the time to read the dissertation in its penultimate form. I also wish to thank the Department of French and Italian at Emory University for the countless and sometimes unexpected ways in which they have contributed to the completion of this dissertation.

I want to express my gratitude to the James T. Laney Graduate School at Emory University for providing me with time and funding with the *Dean's Teaching Fellowship*. I also wish to thank the donors for *The Anne Amari Perry Award* and *The Thomas M. Hines French Studies Scholarship* for their generosity.

I want to acknowledge with particular gratitude the love and encouragement I received from my parents, Jean-Luc and Beatrice Magré, and my sister, Kimberley Magré. Finally, I am privileged to acknowledge and thank my husband, Joey Burba, for always believing in me.

Table of contents

Introduction: *Inusta feminea mortis infamia* 1

I. *Le Temps des belles mortes* 1

II. *Kalos thanatos* 7

III. In detail 12

CHAPTER 1: Twice Dead : Madame de Mortsauf's deaths in *Le Lys dans la vallée* 15

I. Failed eloquence 18

II. An Odious death 30

III. Beautiful deaths 37

IV. Opium & Poetry 46

V. A Deadly fiction 54

CHAPTER 2 : Moles and Beauty Marks : Signs of sex and signs of death in *Nana* 59

I. Signs of sex 69

1. The Anatomy of Venus 69

2. Displaced anatomy 85

II. Signs of death 93

III. *Petits riens* 102

CHAPTER 3: Voir Yvette et mourir 106

I. *Quelle fille ?* 108

II. *Liseuses enragées* 115

III. Literary suicides 126

IV. Endings 139

Conclusion:Death in a flower bed 151

Bibliography 159

Introduction

Inusta feminea mortis infamia[1]

I. *Le Temps des belles mortes*

For at least the first part of the nineteenth-century, images of beautiful dead women invaded the cultural imagination and dominated the sphere of representation. This is the century which revived Ophelia and Elaine and created the cult of the sublime consumptive.[2] The fascination between the two privileged objects of representation of that period, the erotic body and the dead body[3], seemed to find its most exquisite expression in the description and representation of a woman's death. Death, in the early nineteenth-century was overcome by beauty. It was, as Philippe Ariès calls it, *le temps des belles morts.*[4]

---

[1] This title is borrowed from Eva Cantarella's article « Dangling Virgins: Myth, ritual, and the place of women in Ancient Greece" where she quotes Pacatus, a fourth century writer on the topic of hanging: "Death by hanging, Pacatus writes, is *inusta femineae mortis infamia*: it is a feminine death, unworthy of a man." (61)

[2] In *Idols of Perversity,* Bram Djikstra describes the 19th century Ophelia fad:

> ...and what was Ophelia if not the late nineteenth-century's favorite madwoman? Nothing is more indicative of the singular popularity of Shakespeare self-effacing heroine that than the fact that around 1890 the Parisian cosmetics firm the Houbigant sought to create massive interest in its latest facial powder by calling it "Poudre Ophélia." The new product was widely advertised as a true "talisman of beauty." Presumably a less than self-effacing woman might, by making use of the powder, create at least the outward appearance of being as decorously pale and fragile as any true Ophelia." (46).

As for Tennyson's Elaine, she became with Ophelia, a favorite amongst painters.
The most famous consumptive of the nineteenth century is of course Marguerite Gautier from Alexandre Dumas Fils' *La Dame aux Camélias,* who also became the inspiration for the beloved Violetta of Guiseppe Verdi's *La Traviata.* For a compelling reading of the myths born around the image of the consumptive, I would direct readers to Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*.

[3] "In this period morgues were visited like picture galleries while the wax museum conflated the fascination for the preserved dead body with aesthetic pleasure. This period also perfected the technique of embalming and mummification. What characterizes this 'cult of the beautiful dead' is a subjective fascination with idealized images of the deceased in such a way that permanently embalmed bodies and stable images displace and replace impermanent materiality." (Bronfen, 87).

[4] Unfortunately, the work of Ariès in *L'Homme devant la mort* fails to notice the particularly gendered dimension of "la belle mort".

In France, the work of the Anne-Louis Girodet de Roussy-Trioson is one of the best examples of the century's fascination with the representation of the dead feminine form. His most famous work, "Atala au tombeau" (1808) depicts the death of François-René de Chateaubriand's heroine in *Atala* (1801). The novel is the tragic love story of a young Indian couple Atala and Chactas who fall in love but cannot marry because she has taken a vow of chastity. Atala dies after taking poison, in what is considered to be one of the most beautiful deaths of the Romantic tradition.

> Atala était couchée sur un gazon de sensitives de montagnes, ses pieds, sa tête, ses épaules et une partie de son sein étaient découverts. On voyait dans ses cheveux une fleur de magnolia fanée…Ses lèvres, comme un bouton de rose cueilli depuis deux matins, semblaient languir et sourire. Dans ses joues d'une blancheur éclatante, on distinguait quelques veines bleues. Ses beaux yeux étaient fermés, ses pieds modestes étaient joints, et ses mains d'albâtre pressaient sur son cœur un crucifix d'ébène ; le scapulaire de ses vœux était passé à son cou. Elle paraissait enchantée par l'Ange de la mélancolie, et par le double sommeil de l'innocence et de la tombe. Je n'ai rien vu de plus céleste. Quiconque eût ignoré que cette jeune fille avait joui de la lumière, aurait pu la prendre pour la statue de la Virginité endormie. » (153)

As Atala's death demonstrates, a beautiful death had as much to do with beautification as beatification. The religious dimension of her death through the presence of a priest, the preservation of her virginity, and the ways with which she courageously faces death as a Christian, also invites a reading of her death as a "good death". The narration of Atala's "good and beautiful death" oscillates between a shy deference for her saintly deed and an erotic admiration of her form. Breast, mouth and crucifix all share the narrative of her death. In this subtle balance between the erotic and esthetic quality given to the corpse and the heroic virtue and chastity given to the dead woman, *la belle morte* is born.[5]

---

[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau's Julie in *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloise* (1761) appears as the direct precursor of the trope symbolized by Atala. Her illness appears as a means of sanctification, a form of redemptive suffering through which the heroine is disincarnated, delivered from her carnal body, spiritualized, and more beautiful on her death bed than ever before. Surrounded by her household, Julie's final words are

However, the century which gave us the death of Atala, also gave us the more troubling deaths of Balzac's, Flaubert's and Zola's feminine protagonists. Coinciding with the rise of realism, new fictions of feminine deaths are born. The dying heroines of the latter 19th century suffer more grossly, more overtly than their romantic counterparts. Who can forget the smallpox which turns Nana, the perfection of the feminine form, into an oozy mass of discarded flesh? or Emma's horrendous suicide, punctuated by the detailed descriptions of her vomit (first white and gravelly, then thick and black as ink)? In Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée*, the dying heroine qualifies her death as « odious »: « Ah ! c'est la mort, mon pauvre Félix, me dit-elle, et vous n'aimez pas la mort ! la mort odieuse, la mort de laquelle toute créature, même l'amant le plus intrépide a horreur…moi qui désirais demeurer belle et grande dans votre souvenir, y vivre comme un lys éternel, je vous enlève vos illusions. » (1201) These feminine deaths appear fiercely opposed to the alignment of death and beauty. Instead, their deaths reveal the horror which lies below the idealized dead feminine form of the romantic tradition.[6]

The subversive nature of these *odious* deaths has always generated critical interest. The seminal works of Mario Paz with *The Romantic Agony* (1933), Bram Djikstra with *Idols of Perversity* (1988) and Elizabeth Bronfen with *Over her Dead Body* (1992) amongst many others have traced the shifting but nevertheless insistent presence of the 19th century's morbid obsession with feminine deaths. More recent work in the

---

made more remarkable by her striking, supernatural beauty: « Ce discours, prononcé d'abord d'un ton grave et posé, puis avec plus d'accent et d'une voix plus élevée, fit sur tous les assistants, sans m'en excepter, une impression d'autant plus vive, que les yeux de celle qui le prononça brillaient d'un feu surnaturel ; un nouvel éclat animait son teint, elle paraissait rayonnante ; et s'il y a quelque chose au monde qui mérite le nom de céleste, c'était son visage tandis qu'elle parlait. » (704).

[6] For the purpose of situation my work within the larger framework of the French literary tradition, I will sometimes refer to different literary movements (especially romanticism and realism). However, these terms are only meant to be approximate terms, not rigid categories. In fact, I hope the dissertation will actually raise questions in terms of the validity of such literary demarcations.

intersecting fields of death studies, medical history, and literary criticism have brought a renewed interest and perspective on the plethora of feminine deaths of the 19th century in their social, historical and political implications.[7] By drawing from the richness of the literary critical discussion and borrowing from various other disciplines that have also critically looked at these deaths, the dissertation will re-examine the feminine death scenes in Honoré de Balzac's *Le Lys dans la Vallée* (1835), Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Emile Zola's *Nana* (1880), and Guy de Maupassant's "Yvette" (1884).

In its initial stages, my exploration of these feminine death scenes was concerned with the ways they challenged prior representations of feminine deaths. However, as my work evolved, I realized that pitting these *odious* deaths against the beautiful deaths of "Romanticism" would only produce a superficial comparative study of the shifting aesthetics of the 19th century. Such a reading did not, and in fact could not, account for some of the other phenomena which emerged around these "new" deaths. These deaths coincided with a drastic rethinking of the novel as a viable medium of representation. Issues surrounding narrative production (or textual composition) appear inextricably tied up with the death (or decomposition) of a woman. Strikingly, these issues all appeared through the details used to narrate the death of a woman. They enter the scene like parasites and viruses. They shatter the semblance of beauty, devastate the body, fragment death and threaten, by not going unnoticed, the very status of their own narrative function.

[7] See for example the work of Lisa Downing's *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature* published in 2003, Evanghélia Stead's *Le Monstre, le singe et le foetus* (2004) or Gérard Jorland's *Une société à soigner: Hygiène et salubrité publique en France au XIX siècle*", published in 2010.

For these reasons, and as the title of the dissertation suggests, the readings which follow are less interested in sustaining rigid literary categories than they are in tracing (irrespectively of each text's literary attribution and publication date) the use of the detail during the scene of its heroine's death. Although I often situate my analyses in relation to other fictional narratives from the 19th century, each chapter focuses on one text so as to uncover its narrative mechanism, not to inscribe it within a predetermined teleological literary history. As Ellen Rooney writes in her introduction to Naomi Schor's *Reading in Detail*: "The story of the detail is, of course, inseparable from the all too familiar story of the demise of classicism and the birth of realism, but it should not, indeed, indeed cannot be reduced to that story, for to retell the story from the perspectives of the detail is inevitably to tell *another story*" (xlii)

The *other story* offered by the work of Naomi Schor has been influential in giving my work a critical perspective on the link between the detail and the representation of feminine death scenes. Though the specific representation of death does not figure at the heart of her work, the critical relationship between femininity and the detail that she articulates has direct bearing on my own readings of feminine death scenes:

> To focus on the detail and more particularly on the *detail as negativity* is to become aware, as I discovered, of its participation in a larger semantic network, bounded on the one side by the *ornamental*, with its traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence, and on the other, by the *everyday*, whose "prosiness" is rooted in the domestic sphere of social life presided over by women. In other words, to focus on the place and function of the detail since the mid-eighteenth century is to become aware that the normative aesthetics elaborated and disseminated by the Academy and its members is not sexually neutral; it is an axiology carrying into the field of representation the sexual hierarchies of the phallocentric cultural order. The detail does not occupy a conceptual space beyond the laws of sexual difference: the detail is gendered and doubly gendered as feminine. (xlii)

By uncovering the powerful ideologies which lie below the use of the detail, Schor's work has been central in challenging traditional esthetic valorization and by extension in challenging traditional reading practices. As a result, the linear reading method I adopt in my readings of each novel is not intended to reflect the linearity of the lives of each heroine, but is meant to trace the presence of the detail from beginning to end. The details which proliferate around the woman's body (throughout the various narratives analyzed) always triumph during her death. A woman always dies in detail.

For the feminine protagonists of Balzac, Flaubert, Zola and Maupassant, death is more than an invitation to self-reflection. One by one, somewhere within each novel, the heroine takes her turn in front of the mirror. She studies her faces, enumerates her symptoms, and examines herself in details. But it is not until her death that she, the object in the mirror and the object of the narrative, becomes a subject. Death provides a new kind of self-reflexivity. Death becomes allows her self-assertion and self-inscription within the narrative. There is nothing more radical and more powerful than that moment of contemplation. The end of Emma's death begins with the tears she sheds and that fall on her hand mirror. Nana's sex and its inextricable link to her death are also revealed in full-length mirror. When Yvette studies her own face, enthused by the discovery of a "thousand things" previously left unseen, she knows the beauty found in the mirror will quickly be replaced by the horror of death.

> En se regardant dans sa glace, elle se dit tout d'un coup : « Demain, je serai morte. » Et un singulier frisson lui passa le long du corps. « Morte ! Je ne parlerai plus, je ne penserai plus, personne ne me verra plus. Et moi, je ne verrai plus rien de tout cela ! »Elle contemplait attentivement son visage, comme si elle ne l'avait jamais aperçu, examinant surtout ses yeux, découvrant mille choses en elle, un caractère secret de sa physionomie qu'elle ne connaissait pas, s'étonnant de se voir, comme si elle avait en face d'elle une personne étrangère, une nouvelle amie. Elle se disait :

> « C'est moi, c'est moi que voilà dans cette glace… » Elle prit ses grands cheveux tressés en nattes et les ramena sur sa poitrine suivant de l'œil tous ses gestes, toutes ses poses, tous ses mouvements. « Comme je suis jolie ! pensa-t-elle. Demain, je serai morte, là, sur mon lit». (292)

During her "close-up", Yvette sees herself in details, admires her beauty, and discovers herself anew. And yet, even *cette petite bête*, *cette petite Yvette*, knows that no matter how pretty you are in life, death turns everyone into putrid decay: "Elle regarda son lit, et il lui sembla qu'elle se voyait étendue, blanche comme ses draps. « Morte. Dans huit jours cette figure, ces yeux, ces joues ne seront plus qu'une pourriture noire, dans une boîte au fond de la terre. » (292)

II. *Kalos thanatos*

The irony behind the 19th century notion of the "beautiful death" and its association with femininity is that in its earliest origins the "beautiful death" had absolutely nothing to do with women.[8] *Kalos thanatos,* meaning beautiful death in Greek, is the term

[8] The Greek origins of "the beautiful death" have been somewhat forgotten and are sometimes mistakenly equated with the notion of "the good death" which refers to a Christian death. These two undoubtedly share a common relationship to immortality: the beautiful death assured enduring fame for the hero, while the second assured the immortality of the soul. These two deaths, no matter their differences, assured a continued existence. Like a Greek hero, the true Christian was to "fight the good fight". According to the early literature of the *Artes Moriendi,* the dying was to engage in a fight between good and evil. Many of the accompanying illustrations to these "death manuals" are reminiscent of warfare, depicting angels and demons divided and hovering over the dying. Death always revealed who had won the battle. The best of saintly deaths, as they are sometimes called, took place before the eyes of many, who watched as death revealed the true state of the dying's soul.

But a good death is not a beautiful death. The differences between the two are great and many scholars such as Jean-Pierre Vernant and most recently Allan Kellehear have dedicated a majority of their work to the particularities of these deaths. However, even an untrained eye can point to two major variations in the connotations of these deaths. First, a good death is dependent on the moment of agony which must weaken the dying and push him to the limits of his physical and mental abilities. The most famous "good deaths" belong to Jesus Christ and Roman Catholic saints who, for the most part, agonized for a considerable amount of time. Second, anyone could die a good death regardless of age, gender, or esthetic considerations. The horrifying deaths of martyrs and patron saints (through torture or illnesses which attacked the integrity of the body for men and women alike) often contributed to their eventual canonization.

employed in Athenian funeral orations to describe the particularly courageous deaths of Greek warriors. Jean-Pierre Vernant, a French historian and anthropologist whose work advanced the study of death in ancient Greece, compares this type of death to a photographic developer: a *beautiful death* delivered the latent, true and final image of the young and courageous men who died in battle at the peak of their lives.[9] For the Greek warrior, the beautiful death was therefore not understood to be the final instant or end of life but the finite and awaited instant of life. Vernant writes that “through a beautiful death, excellence no longer has to be continually measured against someone else or to be tested in combat. Rather, excellence is actualized all at once and forever after in the deed that puts an end to the hero’s life.” (57) True death, in classical Greece, was the absence of fame and renown while true existence was achieved by being recognized, praised and admired. A beautiful death was therefore first and foremost an assurance of the permanence of the masculine self.

Immortality was not only understood to mean the absence of death but also the absence of aging and illness. There is, as indicated by the adjective, an actual aesthetic dimension to the beautiful death: “the blood, the wounds and the grime on the corpse of a young hero recall his courage and enhance his beauty with masculine strength, but on old man- gray-bearded, withered – their ugliness becomes almost obscene… A bloody death

---

Gradually, with the secularization of the western world, the notion of the “good death” has lost it direct Christian affiliation but kept its trademark characteristic of long duration. As it were, the “good death”, especially since tuberculosis in the nineteenth century, was what emerged as the conclusion of a long illness. By the end of the 19th century, the classical connotation of the “the beautiful death” was completely lost. To have a beautiful death, meant to have a well-earned calm and natural death for both men and women. The *Trésor de la langue française* gives an example from Zola to explain the connotation of the term*: Belle mort.* Mort naturelle, calme et sans souffrance (par opposition à la mort violente ou à la mort après une longue maladie). *Mourir de sa belle mort. Il était heureux de s'être fait oublier dans ce coin de province, en y gouvernant le moins possible, certain maintenant d'y mourir de sa belle mort, avec le régime qu'il portait depuis de longues années en terre* (ZOLA, *Travail*, t.2, 1901, p.169).

[9] See “La belle mort et le cadavre outragé” by J.-P. Vernant in *La mort dans les sociétés anciennes*, ed. G. Gnioli and J.-P. Vernant (Cambridge and Paris, 1982).

is beautiful and glorious when it strikes the hero in the fullness of youth; it raises him above the human condition and saves him from common death by conferring sublime luster on his demise. The same kind of death, for an old man, drops him beneath the level of humanity and changes his end from a shared fate into a horrible monstrosity." (Vernant, 64) Whether the wounds were in themselves beautiful or merely provided the necessary contrast to the beauty of the young virile body, a beautiful death was understood to be an aesthetic experience which belonged only to men. Although effeminate men, weakened men, old men, were ineligible for the beautiful death, children – and especially women – were radically excluded from it.

This particularly gendered view of death gave beautiful deaths to men and hideous deaths to women: "There was one form of suicide - an already despised form of death – that was more disgraceful and associated more than any other with irremediable dishonor. This was hanging, a hideous death, or more exactly a "formless" death (*aschemon*), the extreme of defilement that one inflicted on oneself only in the utmost shame. It also turns out – but is it just chance? – that hanging is a woman's way of death: Jocasta, Phaedra, Leda, Antigone ended in this way..." (Loraux, 9) In *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, Nicole Loraux writes that the death of women in ancient Greece consisted precisely in having no glory: they were formless, *informe*, *infâme, infamous.* Women's deaths belonged uniquely to the private sphere: women died in their bedrooms, they were mourned only by their families. They were never to be famous or achieve the immortal fame enjoyed by men.

Loraux's interest lies precisely in the ways in which tragedy, as a literary genre but more generally as a textual creation, seems to subvert the accepted social notions around death and the sexes. She writes in her introduction:

> But there was a genre that, as a civic institution, delighted in blurring the formal frontier between masculine and feminine and freed women's deaths from the banalities to which they were condemned, as indeed in Herodotus, women died only of violent deaths... More precisely, it was in this violence that a woman mastered her death, a death that was not simply the end of an exemplary life as a spouse. It was a death that belonged to her totally, whether, like Sophocles' Jocasta, she inflicted it "herself upon herself" or, more paradoxically, had it inflicted upon her. It was a brutal death, whose announcement was curt – thus for the wife-and-mother of Oedipus "one word is enough, as brief to utter as it is to hear: she is dead, that noble figure Jocasta"; but the manner of the death, that noble figure gave rise to a long recital. For the event, as soon as it was announced in its stark nakedness, evoked a question that was always the same: "How? Tell us, how?" So the messenger gave an account, and it was thus that tragedy broke the silence that was widely observed in the Greek tradition on the manner of death." (3-4)

First, Loraux's observations on the subversive nature of tragedy suggest that the public acknowledgment of feminine deaths, through the medium of representation, did not reflect social realities. However, the more subtle and interesting part of her argument has to do with the ways in which tragedy reveals a woman's manner of death. These necessarily hideous deaths ("necessarily" because they were the deaths of women), become objects of curiosity, prompting the production of a narrative: "How? Tell us, how?" Functioning as narrative catalysts, the hideous deaths of women produce the stuff of stories.

As she explains, the narrativization of a woman's death proves to be both a powerful tool and a dangerous threat. The power with which the death narrative endows the author in his ability to author a text also endows the feminine protagonist with authoritative (i.e. masculine) qualities thereby disturbing the established social and sexual

roles of the *polis*. To give women the same rights over death as men, meant giving power, dignity, and authority to women. In her presentation of the case of Jocasta, Loraux goes as far as to suggest that the death of a feminine protagonist inaugurates a sort of self-creation or a type, as it were, of something akin to authorship. In choosing their deaths, women almost become able to break their silence. I say almost because it is precisely in this hint at the possibility of feminine authorship that Loraux's argument is the richest. Women are never fully able to author their own deaths in tragedy because those death scenes are always located off-stage. Still in her reading of Jocasta's death, Loraux writes: "The staging in Sophocles even follows a standard sequence – a silent exit, a choral chant, and then the announcement by a messenger that, out of sight, the woman has killed herself." (21) The death of the feminine protagonist is not performed, nor is it told in her voice. Always off stage, tragedy controls the authorship of a woman's death narrative by excluding her actions from the stage, by removing her bodily presence. Her death is controlled by the messenger's narrative, told by a third, impersonal male voice. Loraux tells us that women's site of deaths, in tragedy, was always located at the throat. Strangulation assured silence.

Nicole Loraux's observations regarding the subversive effects of the narration of woman's death have been instrumental in helping me understand the paradoxical status of feminine deaths in the nineteenth-century French novel. The deaths of which I speak appear as equally productive and destructive textual forces. While they make for good stories, they are nevertheless treated as a threat that the narrative must control. So while a feminine death provides the (male) author with the central event in his text, it also gives birth to the possibility of a feminine (or feminized) text. Tragedy, we know, excised this

possibility by excising feminine deaths from the action of the play, turning a woman's death into a man's tale. But when it comes to the feminine deaths staged after the birth of the realist novel, women are not so easily condemned to silence. Staged at the heart of the novel, the incessant presence of the dying woman threatens the tale of the male narrator.

III. In Detail

The first chapter of the dissertation, entitled "Twice Dead: Madame de Mortsauf's deaths in Honoré de Balzac's *Le Lys dans la vallée"*, looks specifically at the ways in which questions of narrative style are raised through the death of its protagonist, Madame de Mortsauf. Through the novel's discreet epistolarity, the event at the heart of Balzac's narrator's own narrative (the death of his beloved) is threatened by the other voices in the text, who offer a different version of the woman's death. Somewhere between romanticism and realism, the novel oscillates between the authorial voice of its main narrator Félix, who attempts to create a "romantic narrative" and the feminine voices that disrupt it by mocking Félix's writing style and by pointing to the obvious realities of Mme de Mortsauf's death. As the women "nit-pick" over Félix's writing and as the symptoms of Madame de Mortsauf appear, the detail emerges as a woman's weapon, as a woman's pen, as a woman's voice, as a possibility for feminine authorship.

Chapter 2, "Moles and Beauty Marks: Signs of sex and signs of death in Emile Zola's *Nana"*, both expands upon the discussions of death in Balzac's novel, and looks even more closely at the textual threat posed by the detail. In Zola's novel, clear links emerge between the detail, representations, death, and feminine sexuality. Working first

with the some of Zola's best contemporary criticism on this topic, I suggest that the narrative and critical attention circulating around the descriptions of Nana's body (dead or alive) is produced by the novel's own uncertainties regarding its viability as a mode of representation. In crude terms, the "naturalist" project, paraphrasing Nana's words "to show and tell all", seems to fail when pitted against the body of the courtesan. Critical consensus would suggest that the text fails in representing Nana's sex and succeeds in representing Nana's death. However, by following a little detail imprinted onto Nana's skin ("son signe") other ways of seeing the novel become possible. From this new perspective, it seems Nana's sex has been there all along, while her death asserts a less formidable presence.

The final chapter of this dissertation, "Voir Yvette et mourir," juxtaposes the two threads explored in the first two chapters by focusing on the role of the detail in feminine deaths and its relationship to feminine authorship.[10] Before examining the most famous "self-authored" death of the 19th century, the death of Emma in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, I take a detour through a less-known novella by Guy de Maupassant entitled "Yvette" (1884). It is the story of a young avid reader of novels named Yvette who, unbeknownst to her, is the daughter of a courtesan. As the plot unfolds and Yvette learns of her mother's profession, she engages in a struggle similar to Emma Bovary's: she engages in a doomed attempt to reconcile the tales of romance novels with the stark

[10] In "Noli me videre", Bronfen makes a similar argument for the suicides of the protagonists from Richardson's *Clarissa* (1784), Tennyson's 'Lancelot and Elaine" (1859) and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). She writes: "I will now address the question of how an aesthetically staged performance of death may not also signify a moment of control and power, given that the woman's self-disintegration also becomes an act of self-construction. Each of the three texts to be discussed – Richardson's *Clarissa*, Tennyson's 'Lancelot and Elaine' (1859) and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) – depicts a woman using death as a conscious act of setting a mark, as a form of writing with her body, a materialization of the sign, where the sheer material factualness of the dying and the dead body lends, certainty, authority and realness to this attempt at self-textualisation." (141)

realities of the life to which she is destined. Like Emma, Yvette attempts suicide at the end of the novel. Suddenly, however, at the moment of death, the two texts diverge: Yvette lives and Emma dies. As I hope to show, the surprisingly different fates of these very similar heroines allows for a reconsideration of Emma's death. By considering these two suicides as examples of attempts of feminine authorship, the death of Emma can no longer be considered a failure. Unlike Yvette, she achieves what she had set out to do. So is it not possible that Emma's violent death was her text, her textual creation, rather than the author's censure of her romantic death?

CHAPTER 1

Twice Dead[11]: Madame de Mortsauf's deaths in *Le Lys dans la vallée*

> « *Est-il possible que je meure, moi qui n'ai pas vécue ? moi qui ne suis jamais allée chercher quelqu'un dans une lande ?* »
>
> Mme de Mortsauf

Félix de Vandenesse, Honoré de Balzac's narrator in *Le Lys dans la vallée* (1835), does not have much success as a writer. By his own account we know that as a young man, his pleading letters were mocked by his mother for their overly sentimental style: "Pour décider mes parents à venir au collège, je leur écrivais des épitres pleines de sentiments, peut-être emphatiquement exprimés, mais ces lettres auraient-elles dû attirer les reproches de ma mère qui me réprimandait avec ironie sur mon style?" (975). His long confessional letter, which makes up the majority of Balzac's novel, is intended for his mistress Natalie de Manerville, and it is also very poorly received. So poorly indeed that she responds to his mammoth epistle with a short message promptly ending their relationship. She had wanted a thoughtful explanation for his mood swings and sometimes melancholic behavior but received instead a boring and bothersome voluminous confession. With biting sarcasm, she exhorts him never to repeat this exercise: "Mon ami, car vous serez toujours mon ami, gardez-vous de recommencer de pareilles confidences…" (1227), « Quand on a sur la conscience de pareil crimes, au moins ne faut-il pas les dire. » (1228) Félix's crimes, as Natalie calls them and he confesses in his letter, are to have broken the heart and precipitated the death of Henriette

---

[11] This titled is borrowed from Margaret Lock's brilliant book entitled *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death*. In this comparative anthropological study, Lock raises important questions about the status of death in the modern world. '

de Mortsauf, a married and pious woman. In the end, the letter fails in securing Natalie's love, just as the letters of his youth failed to capture his mother's affection.

Just as she had scoffed at his letters, Félix's mother once rejected him after he had pleaded for her love and affection. Upon his return to Tours as a youth, she had noted his quiet and mournful demeanor. When questioned, he attempted to explain his gloomy behavior by throwing himself at her feet and imploring her with "an eloquent plea starved for love". Far from sympathetic to his "eloquent plea", his mother calls his passionate speech comedic or theatrical and doubts his sincerity: "Je me jetai à ses pieds, j'embrassai ses genoux en pleurant à chaudes larmes, je lui ouvris mon cœur, gros d'affection; j'essayai de la toucher par l'éloquence d'une plaidoirie affamée d'amour, et dont les accents eussent remué les entrailles d'une marâtre. Ma mère me répondit que je jouais la comédie. ». (981) This failed attempt at reaching out to his mother parallels what happens between Félix and Natalie: a demand for justification by the beloved leads to an inappropriate response from the lover and is immediately followed by the lover's rejection. Both times, the rejection is characterized by a critique of his overly sentimental style; making it impossible to decipher whether it is Felix who is rejected or rather, if it is his sentimental tone which is most offensive to both these women.

From Natalie de Mannerville's response, it appears that it is Félix's "bad writing" along with the "bad things" of which he writes which seal the fate of their relationship. But as her response also suggests, his letter raises questions in regard to Mme de Mortsauf's fate. Natalie points to a link between his writing style and her death: « Pauvre femme! elle a bien souffert, et quand vous avez fait quelques phrases sentimentales, vous vous croyez quitte avec son cercueil.» (1227) While Natalie undoubtedly sees in Félix's

narrative an attempt to cover over his guilt through his use of sentimental language, her accusation also leads to another possible reason for the production of the letter: a rewriting of Mme de Mortsauf's death. There are in a sense two deaths for the novel's heroine: one physical which occurred before the letter and one textual produced by the letter. It is as if the letter, or rather its parts, "quelques phrases sentimentales", killed and buried Mme de Mortsauf a second time. In a way, she has succumbed to two different, albeit deadly, illnesses, one physical (the death before the letter, with physiological causes) and one sentimental (created by the letter, taking the form of love and heartbreak).

The first segment of this chapter, entitled "Failed Eloquence", will trace the ways in which Natalie's letter functions not only as a response to Félix but as a critical reading of the letter and evaluation of its literary value. As Natalie's criticism suggests, something about Félix's narrative lacks authenticity, lacks sincerity and most importantly lacks originality. Following Natalie's critical lead, the next section "An Odious death" will examine Félix's attempts at producing a more romantic version of Mme de Mortsauf's illness and eventual death. "Beautiful Deaths" will contextualize Mme de Mortsauf's death within *La Comédie Humaine* in the hope of drawing out its particularities, which will be discussed in the subsequent section, "Opium and Poetry." By comparing Mme de Mortsauf's death to the deaths of the collection's other feminine protagonists, I hope to highlight the particularities with which *Le Lys dans la vallée* raises questions around what it means to author a woman's death. The novel stages a struggle between the author's narrative intent and the impassable reality of the woman's illness. As Mme de Mortsauf's odious death threatens his carefully woven narrative, Félix, in a

move which already announces Baudelaire, turns to opium to smooth over the horrific spectacle of her death. The words of de Quincey and Baudelaire echo in Balzac's novel: "O juste, subtil et puissant opium...! tu possèdes les clefs du paradis!..." (417) Finally sedated under a cloud of opium, Félix's heroine regains her beauty and possibly earns her place within Balzac's collection of beautiful dead women. But the final section entitled "A Deadly Fiction" will focus on the ways in which the feminine voices in the text return through Natalie's letter to contest this version of Mme de Mortsauf's death and to object to Félix's narrative as a whole.

I. Failed eloquence

Natalie de Manerville appears in *Le Lys dans la vallée* as an astute and incisive reader. In her brief two-page response to Felix, she ends their relationship and espouses the role of literary critic, fiercely criticizing the formal and thematic dimensions of the letter. As many critics have now observed, the late addition of Natalie's letter into the novel is indicative that Balzac had planned and structured his novel to include such a critique of Félix's narrative[12]. In his article "Virtue-Tripping: Notes on *Le Lys dans la*

[12] Frustrated by the poor critical reception of his 1835 epistolary novel *Le Lys dans la vallée,* Honoré de Balzac had written a different preface for each of the first four editions. Each time, he hoped to guide his readers towards what he deemed to be a more appropriate reading of his novel. The *Revue des deux mondes* complained of his "termes barbares et inintelligibles", *La revue de Paris* mocked his "style emphatique et boursouflé". But the style was to be understood as an integral and intentional literary construction. So, as it were, it was not Balzac who had composed a poorly written letter but Felix, the narrator. Balzac writes time and time again that the narrative *I* is not the voice of the author. In the original preface: " Si la masse lisante s'est agrandie, la somme de l'intelligence publique n'a pas augmenté en proportion. Malgré l'autorité de la chose jugée, beaucoup de personnes se donnent encore aujourd'hui le ridicule de rendre un écrivain complice des sentiments qu'il attribue à ses personnages ; et s'il emploie le je, presque toutes sont tentées de le confondre avec son narrateur. »

With these prefaces he strongly protested other accusations related to this author/narrator confusion. He addressed in each of these four prefaces the fact that his work was not a *roman à clef.* After

vallée », Peter Brooks writes that the novel's structure serves to subvert the traditional notion of narrative and to question the nature of the novel itself. He writes:

> For it is the structuration of the novel that guides us to the structures apparent in and through the characters' discourse – which elicits in the reader a complex and suspicious relationship toward their claims to wholeness and self-mastery. To give only the briefest summary: we begin with the letter from Félix to his new beloved, Natalie de Manerville, a presentation of the narrative to follow. Then comes the narrative proper, which moves through to Mme de Mortsauf's ultimate letter which, read only after her death, in fact presents another perspective on the whole story from its beginning, thus creating a true effect of palimpsest. Then, finally, we have Natalie de Manerville's reply to Félix after having herself read the narrative. It is a beautifully-managed and intricate structure…Most pertinent here is the fact that the narrative is presented as a confession – containing another, counter-confession within it – ostensibly elicited by the demand of another, which is read and analyzed by this other within the frame of the novel itself. (159)

Out of this elaborate network of exchanges between lovers, the novel nevertheless gives Natalie's letter the final word. Her letter, the first which doesn't adopt the others' confessional tone, requires no answer and is not incorporated, or framed, within Felix's larger narrative. As a result, her letter occupies an ambiguous place within the novel, at once participating in its fictional elaboration but simultaneously refusing to take part in the narrator's own fiction.

Victor Brombert in *The hidden reader: Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Baudelaire, Flaubert* adopts a slightly different stance on the status of this final letter, suggesting that

---

its publication, Balzac complained to Mme Hanska of the strange accusations he received: "J'en suis à cinq plaintes formelles de personnes autour de moi qui disent que j'ai dévoilé leur vie privée. J'ai les lettres les plus curieuses à ce sujet. Il paraît qu'il y a autant de M. de Mortsauf qu'il y a d'anges de Clochegourde, et les anges me pleuvent, mais *ils ne sont pas blancs*. » It is not to say that Balzac did not find inspiration from the people in his life, but rather, he liked to stress that his characters were fictive, literary constructions. In his preface to the 1839 *Cabinet des antiques*, he likens character constructions to painting: "La littérature se sert du procédé de la peinture, qui pour faire une belle figure prend les mains de tel modèle, le pied de tel autre, la poitrine à celui-là. L'affaire du peintre est de donner la vie à ces membres choisis et de la rendre probable. S'il vous copiait une femme vraie, vous détourneriez la tête. » (Séginger, Gisèle. Introduction, Commentaires et Notes dans *Le Lys dans la vallée* d'Honoré de Balzac, Le livre de Poche, p. 429-430)

while the letter does indeed, despite its late addition, participate in the novel's fictional development, it also reflects Balzac's anxiety about the critical reception of his novel:

> The letter is of major importance in the strategy of the novel. Yet, the idea of an epistolary confession came to Balzac rather late, at a time when it would seem that the novel was already largely written…The device might well have been conceived as an ironic protection, for this novel of a confession is also a confession in the form of a novel. What is more important is that the frame corresponds to a reaction of the author as reader, that it suggests a creative process determined by the already written text, or rather by a text in the process of being written. Correcting proofs was for Balzac a creative stimulant. The added beginning thus provides more than a frame; it participates in the fictional elaboration. That Balzac was an attentive reader of his own text is of course confirmed by Natalie's letter at the end of the novel. (24)

While this interpretation of the novel's genesis is entirely possible, we know that Natalie's letter did very little to stop the negative contemporary reaction it received: the irony was evidently lost on its first readers. Balzac attempted to protect himself, or rather teach his reader how to read his novel, by creating a number of prefaces but nowhere in Balzac's correspondence or manuscripts does Natalie's letter appear to have been given this official function. Furthermore, while the idea that an author would project himself onto the figure of the reader, not the narrator, is interesting, it does not wholly account for the existence of the letter and its very precise point of view.

Natalie reads Félix's letter and responds to him from a very gendered position. She makes clear she has read his letter as a woman and is responding as a woman, commenting on the nature of women (The word "femme" reappears incessantly within Natalie's letter). The demand for the letter itself was not only the request of a lover but the request of a woman: "Je vous ai fait une imprudente demande, j'étais dans mon rôle de femme, de fille d'Ève, le vôtre consistait à calculer la portée de votre réponse. Il fallait me tromper… » (1228). Félix's narrative, as criticized by Natalie, fails as a response

because it neglects to consider the gender of its reader. While she deplores the ways he has written about the women in his life, she also stresses that women will never accept his narrative: « Nous ne sommes pas si sottes que vous le croyez: quand nous aimons, nous plaçons l'homme de notre choix au-dessus de tout...Si vous tenez à rester dans le monde, à jouir du commerce des femmes, cachez-leur avec soin tout ce que vous m'avez dit: elles n'aiment ni à semer les fleurs de leur amour sur des rochers, ni à prodiguer leurs caresses pour panser un coeur malade. Toutes les femmes s'apercevraient de la sécheresse de votre cœur, et vous seriez toujours malheureux. » (1229) As her letter suggests, she mostly deplores the fate of his next *lectrice*, the unknown fourth woman to whom she refers: "Savez-vous pour qui je suis prise de pitié? pour la quatrième femme que vous aimerez. Celle-là sera nécessairement forcée de lutter avec trois personnes ; aussi dois-je vous prémunir, dans votre intérêt comme dans le sien, contre le danger de votre mémoire. » (1226)

Félix's memory and written recollections are deemed dangerous by their first feminine reader because of the details shared about his love for Mme de Mortsauf, his lust for Lady Dudley, the disillusion which followed and his self-declared incapacity to ever love a woman with the same intensity. She simply has no wish to compete with a dead woman. And as she makes clear, no other woman ever will. However, when Natalie criticizes the "range" or "breadth" of his narrative, one cannot help but wonder if she is, intentionally or not, hinting at the impossible length of the letter. As we learn from Félix's introductory letter, Natalie was supposed to read the almost 400 page letter in one day![13] She claims in her response to have reached the conclusion that he must have

[13] He ends his first letter with an "A ce soir". Peter Brooks, in his article "Virtue-Tripping: Notes on Le Lys dans la vallée" writes that the "à ce soir" also reveal some of Felix's intentions regarding the intended

considerably "bored" or "bothered" (the word "ennuyé" allows for this ambiguity) both his English mistress Lady Dudley and the chaste Mme de Mortsauf. And as she adds, he would need to find a very boring woman to marry, someone like Sterne's Mrs Shandy, so she could indifferently deal with his own bothersome and bored attitude: "Je crois, mon ami, qu'il faut vous marier à quelque Mme Shandy, qui ne saura rien de l'amour, ni des passions, qui ne s'inquiétera ni de lady Dudley, ni de Mme de Mortsauf, très indifférente à ces moments d'ennui que vous appelez mélancolie pendant lesquels vous êtes amusant comme la pluie… » (1228) All her allusions to boredom make one wonder if Natalie wasn't actually revealing her own boredom and dislike for the letter and its author. Perhaps, as Natalie's letter suggests, he would also need to find a very boring reader to read his very long and very boring narrative.

It seems that the only person truly captivated by the narrative is the narrator himself. Due to the early morbid rhetoric used to describe his writing process, "...j'ai dû fouler au pied des répugnances inviolées. » (969), one wouldn't expect Félix to be so long-winded over such loathsome memories. Yet Félix claims to be finding pleasure in digging up his past. In one of the few instances where he directly addresses Natalie, Felix describes the strange, almost morbid pleasure he finds in displaying these exhumed memories for his reader: "Chose étrange! Je fouille ce monceau de cendres et prends plaisirs à les étaler devant vous…" (1223).[14] The strange pleasure Félix finds in

---

effect of the letter: "His closing phrase – "A ce soir" – suggests that the confession should reinforce an erotic reawakening, a new object-cathexis – which in fact, we realize, is comparable to analytic transference, since the new object is she who listens to his confession." (159).

[14] The length of Felix's letter (depending on one's edition, an average of three hundred pages) reveals that both the narrator (and perhaps the author) had borrowed the epistolary format only as a means of justifying the creation of a very different type of text. As we know, Felix "accepts" the task of "filling in" the silences which have cast a cloud over his and Natalie's relationship. Jumping at the invitation to narrate, Félix is hardly able to disguise his pleasure in *finally* being able to tell his story: "*Enfin* tu l'as deviné, Natalie, et peut-être vaut-il mieux que tu saches tout : oui, ma vie est dominée par un fantôme, il se dessine vaguement

displaying and exhibiting his narrative production is directly related to the style heavily criticized by Natalie. Caught in the pleasure of linguistic production, frantic, Félix obsessively multiplies his use of rhetorical devices and figures of speech. His narrative is heavy with literary clichés and biblical references: stars, virgins, angels, tears, flowers and sunsets colonize his letter. He is unearthing the old clichés of literature along with the body of the dead heroine. And the more he writes, the more he focuses on producing an eloquent and sentimental narrative, like the ones he claims to admire, Félix loses control over its intended effect and exposes a secondary narrative which lies below its romantic or sentimental version. Even when he becomes aware of it, he begs Natalie to read on: "Lisez-moi, je vous en conjure, avec indulgence!" (1144)

Most notably, Félix first loses linguistic control in the bouquets he composes for Mme de Mortsauf. Though he initially believes the language of flowers to be an innocuous means of expressing his love for her, it quickly becomes a way of releasing the "mortal exhaustions of abstinence" in a safe and chaste manner. The bouquets he originally composed with her children become a solitary and thinly veiled masturbatory exercise: their written descriptions betray an almost pornographic scene. Most obviously it is once the bouquets shift from the realm of the visual to the realm of the textual that they reveal their true meaning and that Félix brazenly displays for Natalie the ardor of his sexual desires for another woman: «…enfin tout ce que ces naïves créatures ont de plus échevelé, de plus déchiré, des flammes et de triples dards, des feuilles lancéolées,

---

au moindre mot qui le provoque, il s'agite souvent de lui-même au dessus de moi…Quoique le travail que nécessitent les idées pour être exprimées ait contenu ces anciennes émotions qui me font tant de mal quand elle me réveillent trop soudainement, s'il y a avait dans cette confession des éclats qui te blessassent, souviens-toi que tu m'as menacé, si je ne t'obéissais pas, ne me punis donc point de t'avoir obéi. Je voudrais que ma confidence redoublât ta tendresse. » (970) Félix is ready to tell *all,* « peut-être vaut-il mieux que tu saches tout ».

déchiquetées, des tiges tourmentées comme les désirs entortillés au fond de l'âme. Du sein de ce prolixe torrent d'amour qui déborde, s'élance un magnifique pavot rouge accompagné de ses glands prêt à s'ouvrir, déployant les flammèches de son incendie au-dessus des jasmins étoilés et dominant la pluie incessante du pollen… » (1057) Amidst his phallic, and by his own admission verbose, composition of « tormented spears, stems and shafts, and glands" (all vernacular terms for penis) and an imminent explosion of "pollen" (a term rich in sexual references), Félix places a bright red poppy[15], in full bloom, ready to receive an imminent, incessant and dominant discharge of pollen. Enthralled with his composition (floral and narrative), Félix describes the orgasmic result the bouquets had on both him and Mme de Mortsauf: "Ce fut pour moi, je n'ose dire pour elle, comme ces fissures par lesquelles jaillissent les eaux contenues dans un barrage invincible…Cependant à l'aspect de ces bouquets j'ai souvent surpris Henriette les bras pendants, abîmée en ces rêveries orageuses pendant lesquelles les pensées gonflent le sein, animent le front, viennent par vagues, jaillissent écumeuses, menacent et laissent une lassitude énervante. » (1058) The innocent pleasure he claims to find in his floral compositions, which actually suggest a sexual discharge, is for Natalie an odious insult. When Félix cries: "Jamais depuis je n'ai fait de bouquet pour personne!" (1058), Natalie responds : « …gardez-vous de recommencer de pareilles confidences qui mettent à nu votre désenchantement, qui découragent l'amour et forcent une femme à douter d'elle-même…Vous m'avez donné le désir de recevoir quelques-uns de vos bouquets enivrants, mais vous n'en composez plus. ». (1227)

[15] As Professor Elissa Marder pointed out to me, the poppy which had such an orgasmic effect on Mme de Mortsauf will return at the end of Félix's narrative in the form of the opium used to anesthetize (or euthanize?) her.

Félix's ambivalent desire for Mme de Mortsauf is reflected in the floral associations he creates around her. Though he praises her purity by naming her his "dear lily" ("mon cher lys") throughout most of the novel, he simultaneously wishes for the engorged red poppy he placed at the center of the bouquet. When he secretly rejoices at the count's illness, it is because Mme de Mortsauf appears to bloom: "Annulé par la maladie, le comte ne pesait plus sur sa femme, ni sur sa maison…Cette fleur, incessamment fermée dans la froide atmosphère de son ménage, s'épanouit à mes regards, et pour moi seul; elle prit autant de joie à se déployer que j'en sentis en y jetant l'œil curieux de l'amour." (1132). Félix continues to describe the intoxicating effect of his blooming flower to Natalie, actually directly calling out to her again to witness and ponder its perfection: "Ah! Natalie, oui, certaines femmes partagent ici-bas les privilèges des Esprits Angéliques, et répandent comme eux cette lumière que Saint-Martin, le Philosophe Inconnu, disait être intelligente, mélodieuse et parfumée!" (1132) Natalie is subjected to the same interpellation and offense, when Félix asks her to consider the beauty and sexual prowess of his other mistress, Lady Dudely: "À vous qui leur enviez tant de choses, que vous dirai-je que vous ne sachiez de ces blanches sirènes, impénétrables en apparence et sitôt connues, qui croit que l'amour suffit à l'amour, et qui importent le spleen dans les jouissances en ne les variant pas, dont l'âme n'a qu'une note, dont la voix n'a qu'une syllabe, océan d'amour, où qui n'a pas nagé ignorera toujours quelques chose de la poésie des sens, comme celui qui n'a pas vu la mer aura des cordes de moins à sa lyre. Vous connaissez le pourquoi de ces paroles. » (1142) Natalie's objections with Félix are nowhere more apparent than in this insult barely attenuated by tired romantic clichés.

Beyond the annoyance created by his sentimental style, Natalie also attacks the polar representations he creates of the two women in his life. She writes: "Je renonce à la gloire laborieuse de vous aimer: il faudrait trop de qualités catholiques ou anglicanes, et je ne me soucie pas de combattre les fantômes. Les vertus de la Vierge de Clochegourde désespéreraient la femme la plus sûre d'elle-même, et votre intrépide Amazone décourage les plus hardis désirs de bonheur. » (1226). Rather than refer to the women by name, Natalie strips each mistress of her individuality to reveal the archetypes on which they are founded. The capitalized "Vierge" and "Amazone" signal that Mme de Mortsauf and Lady Dudley are just imagined, fetishized versions of the already existing prototypes of the femme fatale and virgin, clichés of the social imaginary. Félix however, is less precise in the role he wishes to play within this narrative. Though always declaring his innocence, he is also always boasting about his romantic exploits: "J'étais donc le jouet des deux passions inconciliables que je vous ai décrites et dont j'éprouvais alternativement l'influence. J'aimais un ange et un démon…je surpris dans mon âme un mouvement d'orgueil de me savoir l'arbitre de deux destinées si belles, d'être la gloire à des titres si différent de deux femmes si supérieures, et d'avoir inspiré de si grandes passions que de chaque côté la mort arriverait si je leur manquais." (1183).

Though she does critique Félix for his romantic posturing, Natalie reserves her most biting sarcasm for Felix's literary version of Mme de Mortsauf. Natalie's remarks indicate that she primarily objects to the "written" Mme de Mortsauf. She is critical of the rhetoric, of the symbolisms of purity and virtue with which Félix endows her. In her answer to his letter, Natalie strips all sentimentality from Felix's descriptions turning the lily, angel and star into "la Vierge de Clochegourde", a particularly ridiculous sounding

epitaph due to the awkward and suggestive name of the house. It appears the name of the house is turned into an insult: the adjective “cloche” (idiotic) combined with “gourde” (clumsy) makes for a ridiculous virgin. And when she does mimic Felix’s sentimentality, it is to ridicule the language used to describe his mistress. Like the great letter writer before her, Mme de Merteuil, Natalie’s evokes of the *celestial* woman occupying the writer’s attention as an attack directed at the writer himself and at his textual creation[16]: “J’ai trop souvent rencontré entre nous deux la tombe de la sainte. Comment, cher comte? Vous avez eu pour votre début une adorable femme, une maîtresse parfaite … » (1227)

But if Natalie objects to the clichés Felix sets before her, the same cannot be said for Mme de Mortsauf. Her engagement with Félix’s sentimental and rhetorical demands is, from early on in the narrative, an important factor in the development of their courtship. She reveals in her final letter that she has been captivated by his letters, charmed by his writing. Mme de Mortsauf describes the inexplicable and fatal draw she experiences while “reading” Félix: “Que vous dirai-je? Votre écriture avait un charme, je regardais vos lettres comme on contemple un portrait.» (1216) Before her death and thus before the production of the narrative, Mme de Mortsauf was already striving to become Felix’s romantic heroine[17]: “Bien, je veux être l’étoile et le sanctuaire, dit-elle en faisant allusion aux rêves de mon enfance et cherchant à m’en offrir la réalisation pour tromper mes désirs.” (1081) In this particular mode of phrasing and responding to desire, by passing through figurative language, both Félix and Mme de Mortsauf never need to

[16] In Laclos’ *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, the marquise de Mertueil ridicules Valmont’s descriptions of madame de Tourvel. Borrowing from his letters, Mme de Merteuil turns the sentimental idealized manner in which he speaks of her into a mockery: see letter 127 (page 370). There she becomes, “l’adorable, la céleste Mme de Tourvel…”. Laura Otis helpfully pointed to the relationship between the two novels. As much as Natalie resembles Merteuil in skill as reader and writer of letters, Félix fails to measure up to Valmont.

[17] If Natalie’s letter suggests Mme de Merteuil, Mme de Mortsauf undoubtedly evokes Mme de Tourvel (up until her illness and the reading of her final letter).

reveal the actual object of their desire. Just like the bouquets, sentimental language allows for romantic exchanges by masking the transgressive nature of their love. As Natalie's letter will later reveal, "the star" and "the sanctuary" are not so much symbols but euphemisms for desires which Félix and Mme de Mortsauf both refuse to articulate.

Mme de Mortsauf's willing participation within Félix's fiction is eventually revealed to be a mode of authorship. Structurally, she co-authors the letters to Natalie since her letters are frequently transcribed and inserted into Félix's narrative. However, she also authors herself within the text before it was written; essentially tailoring herself to become the heroine of Félix's fiction. To become his lily of the valley, an image we know Felix cherished (he almost reveals it to be the title of his letter[18]), Mme de Mortsauf dresses to become and look more like the flower Félix wanted her to be: "Pourquoi donc aimai-je à mettre une robe blanche? Ainsi je me croyais mieux votre lys…" (1170). In her deliberate choice of dress color, Mme de Mortsauf reveals her own participation in Félix's fantasy and the latter production of her literary self. Using her body as a canvas, she strives to give physicality to the symbol she has already become. Hours from her final agony, Mme de Mortsauf dons her white dress to receive Félix: "J'aperçus alors Henriette en robe blanche, assise sur son petit canapé, placé devant la cheminée ornée de nos deux vases pleins de fleurs...Elle avait dépensé les dernières forces d'une fièvre expirante à parer sa chambre en désordre pour y recevoir dignement

---

[18] Felix's account of his first time seeing Mme de Mortsauf seems to signal that he has given a title to his letter. He directly addresses his reader, Natalie, and as if referring a reader back to the title of a novel, he indicates that the subject in question is finally entering the narrative: « Sa robe de percale produisait le point blanc que je remarquai dans ses vignes sous un hallevergier. Elle était comme vous le savez déjà, sans rien savoir encore, *le lys de cette vallée*… » (987). Felix's tendency to make into Mme de Mortsauf an archetypal character before her reader ever meets her, is according Leo Bersani one of Balzac's particularities. He writes: "The narrator "gives us" his character before they even appear. The analytical portraits which introduce characters partially solidify them in certain psychological and moral patterns, and it often seems as if the action in a Balzacian novel merely illustrates an exposition which already contains the whole story." (35)

celui qu'elle aimait en ce moment plus que toute chose…Ses tempes creusées, ses joues rentrées montraient les formes inférieures du visage, et le sourire que formaient ses lèvres blanches ressemblait vaguement au ricanement de la mort. Sa robe croisée sur son sein attestait la maigreur de son beau corsage. » (1200)

In the end, the white dress does little to cover over the horrific symptoms of Mme de Mortsauf's illness. Emaciated by starvation, her agony is long and revolting[19]. As her illness robs her of her youth, beauty, and femininity, Mme de Mortsauf shrivels up and becomes a wilted flower, not the blooming lily she longed to embody. Even her romantic gestures are cruel symptoms of her mortality[20]. She tells Félix: "Ah! c'est la mort, mon pauvre Félix, me dit-elle, et vous n'aimez pas la mort! la mort odieuse, la mort de laquelle toute créature, même l'amant le plus intrépide, a horreur…moi qui désirais demeurer belle et grande dans votre souvenir, y vivre comme un lys éternel, je vous enlève vos illusions. » (1201) In her comments on Mme de Mortsauf's death, or more precisely manner of dying, Natalie is ambiguous. She claims she does not wish to die *like* Mme de Mortsauf: "J'ai trop souvent rencontré entre nous deux la tombe de la sainte: je me suis consultée, je me connais et je ne voudrais pas mourir comme elle." (1227) In this somewhat enigmatic statement, Natalie could refer to the specific nature of Mme de

---

[19] It is during Felix's fourth trip to Clochegourde that he notices that Mme de Mortsauf is not well. This trip, according to the novel's chronology, would have taken place during the Spring of 1820 or 1821. Later, he indicates that he was 29 when Mme de Mortsauf's passed away, making her death take place sometime in 1823 on a "humid October morning".

[20] With the beginning of her illness, Mme de Mortsauf's attempts at nurturing her love with Felix are thwarted or somehow corrupted by her approaching death. In one of her first overt romantic gestures, she gives Felix some of her hair. However, her gift only faintly evokes the lovers' ritual exchange of locks. She does not cut her braid or her curl to hand to Felix but instead gathers her hair as it falls out. In this way, her token is more reminiscent of the mourning jewelry fashioned of or to carry the hair of the deceased: "Elle m'entraîna dans sa chambre, me fit asseoir sur son canapé, fouilla le tiroir de sa toilette, se mit à genoux devant moi, et me dit: - Voilà les cheveux qui me sont tombés depuis un an, prenez-les, ils sont bien à vous, vous saurez un jour comment et pourquoi." (1138) By giving Felix her hair before her death, her token does not so much appear as an attempt to preserve her existence in Felix's memory but as signs of her mortality, of her decaying appearance, as the veritable symptoms of her death.

Mortsauf's illness and its horrific symptoms. Instead, an emphasis is placed on the link between being in an amorous relationship with Félix and a woman's agonizing and ugly death. Choosing thus a better death than Mme de Mortsauf, Natalie ends her relationship with Félix and names the man, not the illness, as the real killer.

II. An Odious Death

The true horror of Mme de Mortsauf's death is indirectly but almost more cruelly revealed through the figure of her hypochondriac and capricious husband. This authentic *malade imaginaire,* as ridiculous as he is monstrous, exposes the repulsive mechanisms of the illness in crude medical terms. Believing that he is afflicted with what will later, in a cruelly and ironic twist, kill his wife, he shares with all who will listen the details of his ailment:

> Cette exaltation de la sensibilité entretient dans une constante irritation la muqueuse de l'estomac. Si cet état persiste, il amène des perturbations d'abord insensibles dans les fonctions digestives : les sécrétions s'altèrent, l'appétit se déprave et la digestion se fait capricieuse : bientôt des douleurs poignantes apparaissent, s'aggravent et deviennent de jour en jour plus fréquentes…la muqueuse s'épaissit, l'induration de la valvule du pylore s'opère et il s'y forme un squirrhe dont il faut mourir… Voyez mon teint jaune-paille, mes yeux secs et brillants, ma maigreur excessive ? Je me dessèche… (1152-1153).

That a man would discuss the state of his digestive system, the consistency of his secretions, the texture of his mucus, is relatively comical in a Molieresque sort of way; but the fact that he attributes the perturbation of the basest of human functions to a particularly refined sensitivity makes the patient and the illness twice as laughable. The ridicule doesn't escape Félix who responds with a smirk: "En sorte, lui dis-je en souriant, que les gens de cœur périssent par l'estomac?" (1152). For those around him, Mr de

Mortsauf is not so much affected by a “péricardite”, an illness of the heart, as by hysteria, the illness of the womb (as manifested by the location of his symptoms). Félix and Mme de Mortsauf recognize «chez le comte une âme hystérique.” (1012), describe him “semblable à une petite maîtresse…Enfin des simagrées désordonnées, comme chez les femmes...” (1024) She explains: “Le comte est nerveux comme une petite maitresse, reprit-elle pour adoucir l’idée de la folie en adoucissant le mot…” (1026).

The baseness and ridicule associated with the count’s illness disappear completely when a similar illness strikes Mme de Mortsauf. There are no discussions or speculations regarding the state of her digestive system. Though Félix expresses multiple times his shock and horror at the physical effects of the illness, the descriptions remain superficial. Unlike her husband’s, Mme de Mortsauf’s body appears as a body without physical organs and processes, as a vessel for her spirit. According to Félix’s narration of her illness, even the doctors agreed with the priests. Mme de Mortsauf was dying of an incurable illness. In the words of Dr Origet, it did seem after all that “les gens de cœur périssent par l’estomac”:

> Elle meurt d’une affreuse mort, elle meurt d’inanition. Quand elle me fit appeler au mois de juin dernier aucune puissance médicale ne pouvait plus combattre la maladie ; elle avait les affreux symptômes que M. de Mortsauf vous aura sans doute décrits, puisqu’il croyait les éprouver. Mme la comtesse n’était pas alors sous l’influence passagère d’une perturbation due à une lutte intérieure que la médecine dirige et qui devient la cause d’un était meilleur, ou sous le coup d’une crise commencée et dont le désordre se répare; non, la maladie était arrivée au point où l’art est inutile : c’est l’incurable résultat d’un chagrin, comme une blessure mortelle est la conséquence d’un coup de poignard. Cette affection est produite par l’inertie d’un organe dont le jeu est aussi nécessaire à la vie que celui du cœur. Le chagrin a fait l’office du poignard. Ne vous y trompez-pas ! Mme de Mortsauf meurt de quelque peine inconnue. (1192)

By giving the base stomach the same spiritual function as the heart, Origet transforms her illness into an embodied "chagrin"[21]. The unnamed organ, which we contextually attribute to her stomach, becomes a place rich in symbolisms: belly, womb, and uterus. The repeated use of the word "dagger" combined with the seat of the illness evokes a stabbing of the belly, or the Japanese hara-kiri ("cutting the belly"), thereby suggesting a suicide or a murder as cause of death, rather than a medical condition. Interestingly enough, despite evidence to the contrary (such as her final letter), Félix never considers the possibility that Mme de Mortsauf may be committing suicide. Instead, with the doctor's diagnosis, he comes to his own grandiose conclusion before examining the effects of her illness: "Elle meurt de chagrin…elle mourrait donc par moi! Ma conscience menaçante prononça un de ces réquisitoires qui retentissent dans toute la vie et quelquefois au-delà." (1193). Nevertheless, as Félix's illness narrative will frequently reveal, his claim to be the cause of Mme de Mortsauf's death is at times inconsistent with the physical manifestations of her illness.

Out of this tension between Félix's fiction and Mme de Mortsauf's body, which seem to give two different causes of death, the mechanism of Félix's narrative is exposed: his letter consists in turning death into art. Though Félix clearly recognizes from his conversation with Mr de Mortsauf that her symptoms are identical to the ones he had previously described to him: "J'écoutais le comte avec terreur. En revoyant la comtesse, le brillant de ses yeux secs et la teinte jaune-paille de son front m'avaient frappé, j'entrainai le comte vers la maison en paraissant écouter ses plaintes mêlées de

---

[21] As Professor Elissa Marder kindly pointed out to me, the word "chagrin", especially in the Balzacian Canon, does only refer to sadness or melancholia. The other meaning of "chagrin", which would evoke in the English "shagreen" or the untamed skin of an animal, allows for another interpretation of the doctor's diagnosis. The physical manifestation of her illness, at "skin-level", would indicate that like her husband she is suffering from a hysteric somatization.

dissertations médicales ; mais je ne songeais qu'à Henriette et voulais l'observer» (1153). He describes her yellowing complexion as the desired effect of a painter's brush: "…je voyais la fatale teinte jaune-paille, qui, sur ce céleste visage, ressemblait au reflet des lueurs divines que les peintres italiens ont mises à la figure des saintes… » (1154). In a matter of lines, Felix recasts the symptoms of her illness in the service of a romanticized reconstruction of her illness. Her yellow tint accentuates her "celestial" face, evokes the faces of saints and Italian masterpieces. During his last trip to Clochegourde, Félix conceals again the realist aspects of the illness by inscribing it within an artistic register: « Sous les flots de dentelles, sa figure amaigrie, qui avait la pâleur verdâtre des fleurs du magnolia quand elles s'entrouvrent, apparaissait comme sur la toile jaune d'un portrait les premiers contours d'une tête chérie dessinée à la craie ; mais pour sentir combien la griffe du vautour s'enfonça profondément dans mon cœur[22], supposez achevés et pleins de vie les yeux de cette esquisse, des yeux caves qui brillaient d'un éclat inusité dans une figure éteinte. » (1200). Oscillating between "realist" observations (her emaciated and cave-like eyes) and "artistic" comparisons, Felix's description directs the reader away from her concrete disintegration and toward an understanding of her illness as an artistic construction. He notes her yellow countenance not as one would detect a physical symptom but rather as one would detect the formal aspects of an artistic production: she is as a yellow canvas. Her skeletal traits are not a sign of emaciation but are only the initial lines of an unfinished portrait: "les premier contours d'une tête dessinée à la craie".

This is not to say that Felix does not wish for his reader to know that Mme de Mortsauf is indeed ill and suffering. The story he has wanted to tell all along is after all

---

[22] The interchangeability of the symbolic "heart" and organic "stomach" recurrent in the novel is again apparent in this surprising passage. As the reader expects for the "grip of death" to tighten around the stomach of the dying woman, it instead tightens around Félix's heart.

the tale of a woman's painful death and his relation to it. Therefore, the art in Felix's narrative would consist in presenting a certain amount of physical suffering, as testament of his ability to inspire passion and despair in the most virtuous of women, without losing the overall romanticized tone of the narrative. In truth, the task would have been easier if she had been dying of something other than this terrible affliction. Mme de Mortsauf is, for Felix, clearly dying of the wrong illness. The ridicule is that Mortsauf should be the one dying of a base and physical illness. Instead, it is Jacques, her young and frail son, who appears to carry his mother's illness: "Cette brune jeune fille, à la taille de peuplier, contrastait avec Jacques, frêle jeune home de dix-sept ans, de qui la tête avait grossi, dont le front inquiétait par sa rapide extension, dont les yeux fiévreux, fatigués, étaient en harmonie avec une voix profondément sonore. L'organe livrait un trop fort volume de son, de même que le regard laissait échapper trop de pensées. C'était l'intelligence, l'âme, le cœur d'Henriette dévorant de leur flamme rapide un corps sans consistance; car Jacques avait ce teint de lait animé des couleurs ardentes qui distingues les jeunes Anglaises marquées par le fléau pour être abattues dans un temps déterminé… » (1155). Jacques appears as the embodiment of his mother's "true" illness. His illness at once describes the symptoms of consumption (fatigue, fever, weight loss, hollow sound of the voice) and the heart and soul of Mme de Mortsauf, thus equating the woman and the illness.

Félix's association between Jacques' illness and Mme de Mortsauf is consistent with the heavily gendered and estheticized connotations of pulmonary tuberculosis in the 19th century. A truly fashionable disease, TB supposedly afflicted only the most delicate

and passionate of beings: artists, women and those of a superior sensibility. [23]As Felix describes it, it is a disease of the "intellect, of the soul and of the heart". Its symptoms are seen as a mythical disincarnation, not as literal, physical disappearance caused by inanition. Like the poet Jules Laforgue[24], for whom English women were the ultimate consumptives, Felix also compares Jacques' traits to the ones of these fated beauties. Just as in the case of Mr and Mme de Mortsauf, the novel is cruel: the wrong illness appears to be afflicting the wrong body. Lady Dudley, the only youthful English beauty, in the novel is in perfect health while the child on whom the family's fate lies is doomed.[25] Mme de Mortsauf is not consumptive: she is not being consumed – rather with a play on the double meaning of the word, she dies because she cannot consume.

To Michael Lastinger's claim in «Re-Writing Woman: Compulsive Textuality in *Le Lys dans la vallée*" that a disconnect exists in *Le Lys* between gender and bodies, I

---

[23] Ironically, the fashionable disease in Balzac's novel (of which Mme de Mortsauf claims to *not* be dying) is named as another stomach ailment: gastritis, not TB. While Mme de Mortsauf observes her son's coughing fit, she tells Félix that she sometimes experiences stomach aches. If she had been in Paris, it would have been given a more fashionable diagnosis:
"- Mais, lui dis-je pendant qu'elle suivait Jacques par un long regard, vous ne m'avez pas répondu. Ressentez-vous quelques douleurs?
- Oui, parfois à l'estomac. Si j'étais à Paris, j'aurais les honneurs d'une gastrite, la maladie à la mode. » (1156)
In *Illness and Metaphor*, Susan Sontag writes of the popularity and myths which revolved around TB well into the 20th century and which was the true fashionable illness: "For snobs and parvenus and social climbers, TB was one index of being genteel, delicate, and sensitive. With the new mobility (social and geographical) made possible in the eighteenth century, worth and station are not given; they must be asserted. They were asserted through new notions about cloths ("fashion") and new attitudes towards illness. Both clothes (the outer garment of the body) and illness (a kind of interior décor of the body) became tropes for new attitudes towards the self." (28)
[24] In « Entre phtisie et tuberculose : l'écriture de Jules Laforgue », Gérard Briche explains that Laforgue's poetry heavily draws on this popular belief. One does not die of TB like one dies from other illnesses. Rather than witness the slow collapse of the physiological system, those dying of TB benefit from a dematerialization of the body. With each spit of blood, they expel their own physiology and consequently, their own mortality: « Désincarnation donc : par un mouvement inverse de celui par lequel Dieu s'incarne parmi les hommes, le phtisique se désincarne et se retire. L'hostie, blême et sanglante, est alors l'objet transitionnel qui manifeste la divinité prenant corps dans le pain, mais qui manifeste aussi le phtisique prenant âme dans le crachat – abandonnant une chair littéralement incorporelle. » (159)
[25] "Cette belle lady, si svelte, si frêle, cette femme de lait, si brisée, si brisable, si douce, d'un front si caressant, couronnée de cheveux de couleur fauve et si fins, cette créature dont l'éclat semble phosphorescent et passager, est une organisation de fer. » (280)

would add that there is an added disconnect between gender, bodies and illness exhibited in the novel.[26] The English woman is not consumptive, the French boy bears all the signs of TB; the husband is a hysterical hypochondriac, the wife dies of a defeminizing ailment. No longer mistress or wife, she is stripped of her sexuality, divested of human characteristics, reduced to an unnamable entity: "Ce n'était plus ma délicieuse Henriette, ni la sublime et sainte Mme de Mortsauf; mais le quelque chose sans nom de Bossuet qui se débattait contre le néant..." (1200) Something about her illness and its horrific effects is unsettling to Félix (and to the readers of the novel and the letter). He believes, in a way, that is not how a woman should die or nevertheless how women used to die: « Il semble que personne ne meure de chagrin, ni de désespoir, ni d'amour, ni de misères cachées, ni d'espérances cultivées sans fruit, incessamment replantées et déracinées. La nomenclature nouvelle a des mots ingénieux pour tout expliquer : la gastrite, la péricardite, les mille maladies de femme dont les noms se disent à l'oreille, servent de passeport aux cercueils escortés de larmes hypocrites que la main du notaire a bientôt essuyées.» (1194) Offering yet another perspective on the theme of mismatched bodies, genders and illnesses, Félix suggests that it is through a linguistic process that the origin of some of these misattributions can be found.

In Félix's fiction, the physical illnesses attributed to women have become euphemisms for more serious sentimental crimes. Medical terminology robs women of

---

[26] In «Re-Writing Woman : Compulsive Textuality in *Le Lys dans la vallée*", Michael Lastinger discusses a similar structure of disconnect between bodies and genders. Like the illnesses which fail to be "identical" to the bodies they afflict, Lastinger suggests that "the major characters in *Le Lys* are hardly "identical" to their sexuality citing as example Mr and Mme de Mortsauf: "...he really has all the traits of a "mégère," as we see when Henriette defends his capricious temper by explaining that "le comte est nerveux comme une petite-maîtresse"…Henriette is the breadwinner, the sole provider…" (238-239) The same phenomenon is also at work in the descriptions of Felix who often compares himself to a young woman: "When he first goes to Clochegourde to be formally presented to Henriette, he stands before "l'imposante chatelaine" and" blushes like a guilty school girl. As Lastinger notes again, "It is surely no accident that Louis XVIII also calls him "Mlle de Vandenesse"…" (240)

their romantic deaths by covering over the spiritual dimension of the illness and leaving the real executioners unpunished:

> Quelle faiblesse et quelle impuissance dans la justice humaine! elle ne venge que les actes patents. Pourquoi la mort et la honte au meurtrier qui tue d'un coup, qui vous surprend généreusement dans le sommeil et vous endort pour toujours, ou qui frappe à l'improviste, en vous évitant l'agonie? Pourquoi la vie heureuse, pourquoi l'estime au meurtrier qui verse goutte à goutte le fiel dans l'âme et mine le corps pour le détruire ? Combien de meurtriers impunis! Quelle complaisance pour le vice élégant ! quel acquittement pour l'homicide cause par les persécutions morales. (1193)

He invokes, in support of this interpretation, a variety of cases belonging to the larger fiction to which the novel belongs, and compares Mme de Mortsauf's death to other feminine deaths within *La Comédie Humaine*: Lady Brandon's in *La Grenadière* and Louise de Chaulieu's in *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées,* who both die of grief, despair, love, secrets and unfulfilled hopes (as perhaps Mme de Mortsauf also should have): "Lady Brandon arrive en Touraine pour y mourir dans cette humble maison où lady Dudley était restée deux semaines, et tuée, par quel horrible dénouement? Vous le savez ! Notre époque est fertile en événement de ce genre. Qui n'a connu cette pauvre jeune femme qui s'est empoisonnée, vaincue par la jalousie qui tuait peut-être Mme de Mortsauf? » (1193) By giving a few examples from a common trend in feminine deaths, Félix attempts to reintegrate Mme de Mortsauf's death into a romantic context; and from this new place, he can also rename her illness.

III. Beautiful deaths

In her book on feminine death in Balzac, entitled *La Femme, la faute et l'écrivain,* Véronique Bui insists on the overwhelming presence of the feminine death scene within

La Comédie Humaine. The frequent exploitation of the theme is paralleled by its diegetic disproportion to the rest of the narrative: "…Toutefois, la scène d'agonie se distingue des autres types narratifs par l'inscription de la durée dans le récit. En nous faisant entendre les dernières paroles du moribond, l'écrivain crée une espèce d'égalité *conventionnelle*, pour reprendre la terminologie de Genette, entre temps du récit et temps de l'histoire. La scène d'agonie se remarque donc des autres épisodes du texte à ce ralentissement du récit qui permet au lecteur d'assister à l'agonie comme les personnages fictifs représentés" (57). Feminine death scenes in Balzac's *Comédie* tend to occupy a large amount of narrative time. But far from only offering a "real time" narration of the agony and eventual death of the protagonist, surprisingly these death scenes are also essential in terms of character development. The characters benefiting from long death narratives are active participants in these scenes. More like themselves than ever in the moment of death, they confirm what the larger narrative had intended to highlight about them. Death brings light to the dying protagonist, revealing her true and essential "character."

For both Lady Brandon and Louise de Chaulieu, the type of death they suffer appears as a natural progression of the literary character that they are. Again, citing Bui, the way these women die is meant to serve as the final, "authentifying" act, of both author and character: "Point culminant d'une vie, elle achève le portrait moral du personnage et fait sens par rapport a cet être fictif et par rapport à l'horizon du texte. Elle est la dernière pierre apposée dans ce grand édifice qu'est le roman." (55) Lady Brandon dies in a manner consistent with her life: she dies a calm and edifying death. Louise de Chaulieu, the avid reader of romantic novels, stages her own fashionable death in order to die like one of her favorite heroines, Rousseau's Julie d'Etange.

Like Mme de Mortsauf, Lady Brandon of *La Grenadière* dies surrounded by the beauty of the Touraine valley on an October afternoon. However, she dies of an undefined affliction, "un mal inconnu", not of a medically identifiable illness. And while this affliction does transform and affect her body, it appears to have a spiritualizing effect (much like the romanticized descriptions of TB). Rather than become a corpse like Mme de Mortsauf, she bypasses physical corruption to reach an immortal and immaterial form:

> Souvent, lorsque sa maîtresse, belle encore, plus coquette qu'elle ne l'avait jamais été, parant son corps éteint et mettant du rouge, se promenait sur la haute terrasse, accompagnée de ses deux enfants, la vieille Annette passait la tête entre les deux sabines de la pompe, oubliait son ouvrage commencé, gardait son linge à la main, et retenait à peine ses larmes…Les couples joyeux qui allaient alors à Saint-Cyr, la petite Courtille de Tours, et les groupes de promeneurs voyaient au-dessus de la levée, le soir, cette femme pâle et maigre, tout en deuil, à demi consumée, mais encore brillante, passant comme un fantôme le long des terrasses. (29)

Still attractive and feminine, Lady Brandon dies a beautiful death (*meurt de sa belle mort*). Her death is enjoyed. It is welcomed. As she communes one final time with the beauty of the valley around her, it has already become paradisiacal. Her final instants with her children bring her so much joy that it is happiness which takes her breath away: « Un éclair de joie brilla dans les yeux à demi éteints de la mère, deux larmes en sortirent, roulèrent sur ses joues enflammées ; puis, un grand soupir s'échappa de ses lèvres, et elle faillit mourir victime d'un accès de joie... ». (38). Everything is in perfect order; even her room is perfectly kept[27]. Lady's Brandon's wishes are communicated; her final rites are received in the presence of a priest and a choir boy: "Dans la matinée, madame Willemsens reçut les sacrements au milieu du plus touchant appareil." (39) Lady Brandon's death is effortless. As the natural progression of a dignified and edifying life,

[27] « Enfin le samedi soir, madame Willemsens ne pouvant supporter aucun bruit, il fallut laisser sa chambre en désordre. Ce défaut de soin fut un commencement d'agonie pour cette femme élégante, amoureuse de grâce. » (34)

her death appears as an appropriate conclusion to her existence.

Similarly, in Balzac's 1841 epistolary novel *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées*, Louise de Chaulieu's death seems fitting of her life. Like Rousseau's Julie, and shortly after reading Rousseau's novel, Louise falls in love with her tutor. And while she often condemns Rousseau's novel as boring and preachy[28], she nevertheless regards its heroine as a true master teacher on all aspects of love. When her friend Renée attempts to give her advice, Louise dismisses her recommendations by citing Julie as the ultimate reference on matters of the heart: "La Julie de Jean-Jacques, que je croyais un professeur, n'est qu'un étudiant auprès de toi. » (86) In the same way, she considers her tutor's love letters as superior to the ones written by literary characters. For Louise, to have her lover surpass the letter writing skills of Rousseau or Richardson's protagonists is the ultimate proof of his worth as a lover: "Par une seule lettre, il est au delà des cent lettres de Lovelace et de Saint-Preux. Oh ! voilà l'amour vrai, sans chicanes. » (91)[29] Jealous of her friend's romanticized life, Renée compares Julie's love affair to a play or the preface of a novel: "Impertinente! pourquoi t'aurais-je écrit? que t'eussé-je dit? Durant cette vie animée par les fêtes, par les angoisses de l'amour, par ses colères et par ses fleurs que tu me dépeins, et à laquelle j'assiste comme à une pièce de théâtre bien jouée, je mène une vie monotone et réglée à la manière d'une vie de couvent… j'épouse alors ta belle vie si féconde, si nuancée, si violemment agitée, et je me demande à quoi te mèneront ces turbulentes préfaces, ne tueront-elles pas le livre ?" (132-133)

---

[28] « Cela me va très-fort : il y aurait quelque chose de sinistre à recommencer la Nouvelle-Héloïse de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, que je viens de lire, et qui m'a fait prendre l'amour en haine. L'amour discuteur et phraseur me paraît insupportable. Clarisse est aussi par trop contente quand elle a écrit sa longue petite lettre ; mais l'ouvrage de Richardson explique d'ailleurs, m'a dit mon père, admirablement les Anglaises. Celui de Rousseau me fait l'effet d'un sermon philosophique en lettres. » (60)

[29] Samuel Richardson's 1748 novel *Clarissa* appears to be another one of Louise's favorites.

In many ways, Renée is right. Louise and Felipe's turbulent beginnings were the cause, according to Louise, of his premature death and thus, the end of their love story. Nevertheless, several years later, Louise falls in love again. Through a misunderstanding worthy of one of Racine's tragedies (which Louise also enjoys reading), she believes Gaston, her lover, is cheating on her and decides to kill herself. In a gesture similar to Julie d'Etange's, she catches a fever after exposing herself to the dew of an "étang". In an exchange with Renée, whom she had begged to accompany her in death as Julie had asked for Claire, she explains how she made herself sick:

> – Je me suis rendue poitrinaire au plus haut degré en quelques jours.
>
> – Et comment ?
>
> – Je me mettais en sueur la nuit et courais me placer au bord de l'étang, dans la rosée. Gaston me croit enrhumée, et je meurs. (259)

Louise is satisfied with her death. It is, according to her, soft and elegant. She says to Renée: "Adieu, mon ange, j'ai rendu ma mort douce, élégante, mais infaillible…Ma mort sera, comme ma vie, empreinte de distinction et de grâce : je mourrai tout entière. » (253) Traditionally the added adjective, to die "whole" refers to the state of mind of the moribund: to die whole is to die with full presence of mind, thus suggesting that to die whole means to "live" or experience one's own death. But Louise, in keeping with her romanticized view of life, love, and death, gives her own interpretation of what it means to die "whole", « tout entière ». First, to die "whole" is to die as one lived. Death figures as an extension of one's life. In Louise case, she attempts to die as she lived: full of grace and distinction. But to die "whole" also has an aesthetic dimension for Louise: "Quant à moi, je ne me plains pas, je meurs comme je l'ai souhaité souvent: à trente ans, jeune,

belle, tout entière. » (260) As she later adds, she meant to stay pretty all the way to her casket : "– Je veux être jolie jusque dans mon cercueil, m'a-t-elle dit avec ce sourire qui n'est qu'à elle, en se mettant au lit pour y languir ces quinze jours-ci. » Louise's final words to the priest are reported to have been: "N'est-ce pas que je fais une belle mort ? » (262) According to Renée, Louise did have a beautiful death. Even her delirium was deemed truly elegant: "…ce fut un délire vraiment élégant." (262)

Véronique Bui observes that Louise seems to confuse ethics and aesthetics. And though she admits that the deaths of some romantic heroines have inspired some of the most beautiful paintings of Romanticism, she continues to claim that what Louise mistakenly refers to her death as "la belle mort", has very little to do with aesthetics. (55) But actually, Louise's seemingly innocent remark, the remark of a young woman who does not know the difference between dying as a Christian or dying young and pretty, suggests that the two may be inextricable; or perhaps, more interestingly maybe, Louise is actually striving for another kind of death altogether: the deaths of which she had read in her favorite novels, like Julie's and Clarissa's: the death of the Romantic heroine. These deaths are the ultimate moments of accomplishment of womanhood, when she appears both as her most virtuous and most beautiful self. In many of Balzac's texts, as in *La Grenadière* the narration of a moral, saintly death of a woman is always accompanied by her beautification. Even Mme Grandet, a notoriously ugly character, becomes physically beautiful in her Christian death. In *Eugénie Grandet*, we learn that her husband had stopped tormenting her since her illness, as she appeared more and more angelic: "Depuis la maladie de sa femme, il n'avait plus osé se servir de son terrible: ta, ta, ta, ta, ta! Mais aussi son despotisme n'était-il pas désarmé par cet ange de douceur,

dont la laideur disparaissait de jour en jour, chassée par l'expression des qualités morales qui venaient fleurir sur sa face. Elle était tout âme. Le génie de la prière semblait purifier, amoindrir les traits les plus grossiers de sa figure, et la faisait resplendir. » (62) A good death, in the Christian sense, can make even the most vulgar of women beautiful by literally erasing or buffing away traces of ugliness. A woman cannot die of a beautiful death if she is not beautiful.

One of Balzac's most memorable death scenes in *Le curé de village* (1839) is allotted an entire chapter entitled "Véronique au tombeau". In this chapter, the death of the heroine Virginie Sauviat Grasslin is explicitly described, by the narrator and the other characters, as the exemplification of a "beautiful death" in both its ethical and esthetic dimensions. Reminiscent by its title and subject of Girodet de Roussy-Trioson's 1808 "Atala au tombeau", the death of this heroine is something to be contemplated both for religious and esthetic edification. So beautiful and solemn, Véronique's death appears as a textual masterpiece worthy to be the subject of a painted masterpiece[30]: « Ce spectacle fut touchant et terrible à la fois ; mais il fut solennel par la disposition des choses, à un tel point que la peinture y aurait trouvé peut-être le sujet d'un de ses chef-d'œuvre. » (253) As it is narrated, the beauty in Véronique's death is understood and grasped by its witnesses primarily by sight. It is not her final confession which characterizes her death as beautiful. Rather, it is the work of death on her body, the physical changes which are brought about through death, that strike those attending the last hours of Véronique's life. Death operates on her body to reinstate and reveal the latent, true, and final image of the

[30] Not only by its reference to Girodet's painting but also by her name's reference to the legend of Saint Veronica. According to apocryphal Christian history, Saint Veronica had collected the greatest of all masterpieces when her veil, which she used to wipe Christ's face during his agony, imprinted the image of his face.

dying.[31] Thus in the moment of death, she appears more herself than she has ever been:

> Il semblait à tous que jusqu'alors Véronique avait porté un masque, et que ce masque tombait. Pour la dernière fois s'accomplissait l'admirable phénomène par lequel le visage de cette créature en expliquait la vie et les sentiments. Tout en elle se purifia, s'éclaircit, et il eut sur son visage comme un reflet des flamboyantes épées des anges gardiens qui l'entouraient. Elle fut ce qu'elle était quand Limoges l'appelait la *belle madame Graslin*…On entendit un cri étouffée ; la Sauviat se montra, elle bondit jusqu'au lit en disant : - « Je revois donc enfin mon enfant ! » L'expression de cette vieille femme en prononçant ces deux mots *mon enfant,* rappela si vivement la première innocence des enfants, que les spectateurs de cette belle mort détournèrent tous la tête pour cacher leur émotion. (247)

To those around her, Véronique is made more recognizable in death. Her own mother's exclamation, reminiscent of a mother's exclamation at the birth of a child: "Voilà donc enfin mon enfant!" suggests that perhaps her death has also the quality of a birth. Death is a form of self-refinement for Véronique, a sort of self-fashioning through which emerges an *essence*: the truest and purest version of the self.

Véronique is focused throughout her agony on the religious dimension of her death and its significance in terms of self-accomplishment. Like Louise, she also claims to want to die "whole"; but she properly uses the expression. She intends to face her death with complete presence of mind: "Si Dieu me fait la grâce de me laisser mourir tout entière, répondit-elle avec une sourire céleste, croyez que cette faveur est utile à la gloire de son Église. Ma présence d'esprit est nécessaire pour accomplir une pensée de Dieu tandis que Napoléon avait accompli toute sa destinée. » (242) The reader learns, along with many of those attending her death, that Véronique had pushed her religious devotion to an extreme by practicing strict asceticism and repeated self-mortification. By wearing a hair shirt daily for thirteen years, she had voluntarily begun the process of her own

---

[31] As Philippe Bonnefis pointed out to me. Véronique also comes into herself by becoming one with her name through its etymology: *true* from the Latin: *vera* and *image* from the Greek: εικόνα.

physical annihilation. When the doctors finally order that it be removed so as to make her more comfortable in her final instants, the maid exclaims: “Madame’s body is all a wound”: “Quand Aline passa, tenant ce terrible instrument de pénitence enveloppé d’une serviette, elle leur dit: - Le corps de madame est tout une plaie! » (242) However, this wound which makes both readers and characters cringe, never takes away from Virginie’s beauty but perhaps even enhances it. When Véronique’s mother reveals her terrible secret, Monsieur Ruffin is struck by Véronique’s grace: “ - Marcher, s’écria-t-elle, et porter un affreux cilice de crin qui lui fait de continuelles piqûre sur la peau ! Cette parole glaça le jeune homme, qui n’avait pu demeurer insensible à la grâce exquise des mouvements de Véronique, et qui frémit en pensant à l’horrible et constant empire que l’âme avait pu conquérir sur le corps. La Parisienne la plus renommée pour l’aisance de sa tournure, pour son maintient et sa démarche, eût été vaincue peut-être en ce moment par Véronique.» (233) Monsieur Ruffin’s reaction to the mother’s disclosure introduces the ambiguous esthetic of Véronique’s death. Just as Ruffin is horrified by the object of torture, he nevertheless marvels at the ways in which it has never affected her grace and beauty. Even more shockingly, it is now, “en ce moment”, that he knows her to be wearing the hair shirt that her allure takes on a noted charm and elegance.

By alternating the revelation of her body as wound with a comment on her beauty, the narrative controls the potential horror caused by the sight of her chafed torso. Additionally, her body is only indirectly revealed. The only two to lay eyes on Véronique’s wounded body, the mother and the maid, never give it a detailed description. It is simply named as a whole: “une plaie”. Or in the case of the mother, we only know of its effects: “qui lui fait de continuelles piqûre sur la peau”. The remaining characters, and

the novel's readers, are asked to leave the room when it is removed; and only permitted to reenter once Véronique is dressed. Her wound is not for the eyes. It functions instead as a narrative catalyst permitting the simultaneous conclusion of Véronique's death and of Balzac's novel. The discovery of the wound gives birth to another tale, Véronique's mother's, which contributes to the exhaustive logic of the novel and foreshadows Véronique's terrible confession. As Janet Beizer's *Ventriloquized bodies* suggests in the case of Zola's hysterical feminine characters but which can also be ascribed here to Balzac's heroine, the muted body of the feminine character "nevertheless produces the stuff of stories." (1)[32] Véronique's muted body, because it is always hidden, becomes the catalyst for another story.

IV. Opium & Poetry

In *Le Lys dans la vallée,* the story told by Mme de Mortsauf's body at the end of the narrative appears very different from the story told by Félix in his letter. Her physical transformations unveil a different Mme de Mortsauf : bitter, angry, jealous, and selfish. As if they were inseparable, vice and symptoms are painted together unto her body and told, ironically, by the appearance of her mouth: "Ses tempes creusées, ses joues rentrées montraient les formes intérieures du visage, et le sourire que formaient ses lèvres ressemblaient vaguement au ricanement de la mort…Ses lèvres décolorées se tendirent alors sur ses dents affamées pour essayer un de ces sourires forcés sous lesquels nous cachons également l'ironie de la vengeance, l'attente du plaisirs, l'ivresse de l'âme et la

---

[32] I will discuss Janet Beizer's seminal work on nineteenth-century narratives of hysteria in more detail in my second chapter on Emile Zola's *Nana.*

rage d'une déception. » (1200 - 1201) As her white lips tell of a simultaneous loss of beauty and morality, Félix's « Mme de Mortsauf » collapses: « Ce n'était plus ma délicieuse Henriette, ni la sublime et sainte madame de Mortsauf mais le quelque chose sans nom de Bossuet qui se débattait contre le néant… » (1200). Mme de Mortsauf's death already announces the horrific death of Mme Bovary: "Emma, le menton contre sa poitrine, ouvrait démesurément les paupières: et ses pauvres mains se traînaient sur les draps, avec ce geste hideux et doux des agonisants qui semblent vouloir déjà se recouvrir su suaire." (469) In both death scenes, death and the feminine form have become aligned with horror. The deaths described are no longer the easy deaths of beautiful women but the embodiment of death in all its stark realities.

As Félix fails to recognize his creation during Mme Mortsauf's death, multiple new voices enter her death narrative. Her death is no longer told only from the perspective of the lover and letter writer but from the ones of the vicar and the doctor. Upon his hastened return to Clochegourde, he is stopped multiple times by the religious and medical personnel assisting Mme de Mortsauf's death; each time, in an attempt to prepare Félix for her terrible transformations: "Notre chère malade meurt exactement de faim et de soif. Depuis ce matin, elle est en proie à l'irritation fièvreuse qui précède cette horrible mort, et je ne puis vous cacher comme elle regrette la vie. Les cris de sa chair révoltée s'éteignent dans mon cœur où ils blessent des échos encore trop tendres; mais monsieur de Dominis et moi nous avons accepté cette tâche religieuse, afin de dérober le spectacle de cette agonie morale à cette noble famille qui ne reconnaît plus son étoile du soir et du matin.» (1199) Though l'Abbé Birotteau and Doctor Origet try to mask the physical and moral realities of her death from her family, they are explicit with Félix and

give him detailed descriptions of her simultaneous physical and moral deterioration.

Despite their best attempts, doctor and vicar are never able to give Mme de Mortsauf a more dignified death. But, aware of her "odious death", Mme de Mortsauf finds a certain freedom in it. The revelations made by her body give her a new agency, even a new personality: "Henriette, vous n'aimez donc plus notre chère vallée? …- Si dit-elle en apportant son front sous mes lèvres par un mouvement de câlinerie; mais, sans vous, elle m'est funeste…*sans toi* », reprit-elle en effleurant mon oreille de ses lèvres chaudes pour y jeter ces deux syllabes comme deux soupirs. Je fus épouvanté par cette folle caresse… » (1201) Espousing the role of seductress and leaving behind the one of virgin, Mme de Mortsauf admits to all of her most adulterous desires: "Ils croient que m'a plus vive douleur est la soif. Oh! oui, j'ai bien soif, mon ami. L'eau de l'Indre me fait bien mal à voir, mais mon cœur éprouve une plus ardente soif. J'avais soif de toi, me dit-elle d'une voix plus étouffée en me prenant les mains dans ses mains brûlantes et m'attirant à elle pour me jeter ces paroles à l'oreille… » (1202) With this final revelation, she experiences a new impulse for life and declares: "- Oui, vivre!...vivre de réalités et non de mensonges". (1202)

But within Félix's narrative, these final excesses of life and desire are staged as the true height of Mme de Mortsauf's agony. Children and husband are sent away, leaving only Félix and the confessor to witness the horrific spectacle of what they see as her death. Juxtaposed to her passionate declarations are the fervent prayers of the confessor:

> Quand le confesseur vit sa pénitente ainsi, le pauvre homme tomba soudain à genoux, joignit les mains, et récita des prières...
> -*Kyrie eleison*!" disait le pauvre abbé, qui, les mains jointes, l'œil au ciel, récitait des litanies.

> Elle jeta ses bras autour de mon cou, m'embrassa violemment et me serra en disant : « Vous ne m'échapperez plus ! Je veux être aimée, je ferai des folies comme lady Dudley… (1203)

According to the doctor and the vicar, the renewed life and vigor exhibited by Mme de Mortsauf only point to a prolonged and more painful final agony. In agreement, both men turn to opium to anesthetize her moral agony and calm her physical passions. As if science and religion had both failed in their attempt to (if not cure) at least provide her a good and beautiful death, opium appears as the magical substance capable of returning beauty and virtue to the dying. Peter Brooks writes in "Virtue-Tripping: Notes on *Le Lys dans la vallée*", "It remains only to drug her with opium, so that she can achieve a Christian death, and save appearances." (157)

"Bathed in opium", Mme de Mortsauf re-appears as the version of the woman Félix loved. From Bossuet's unnamable entity, Félix calls her by her first names. The beautiful and virtuous woman returns to conclude Felix's letter:

> Tout était calme et pure. Une douce lumière éclairait le lit où reposait Henriette baignée d'opium. En ce moment le corps était pour ainsi dire annulé ; l'âme seule régnait sur ce visage, serein comme un beau ciel après la tempête. Blanche et Henriette, ces deux sublimes faces de la même femme, reparaissaient d'autant plus belles que mon souvenir, ma pensée, mon imagination, aidant la nature, réparaient les altérations de chaque trait où l'âme triomphante envoyait ses lueurs par des vagues confondues avec celles de la respiration…nous échangeâmes tous quatre des regards où l'admiration de cette beauté céleste se mêlait à des larmes de regret. Les lumières de la pensée annonçaient le retour de Dieu dans un de ses plus beaux tabernacles. Les lignes de son visage se purifiaient, en elle tout s'agrandissait et devenait majestueux sous les invisibles encensoirs des Séraphins qui la gardaient. Les teintes vertes de la souffrance corporelle faisaient place aux tons entièrement blancs, à la pâleur mate et froide de la mort prochaine. » (1206)

The opium erases the odious death and calms the flesh. The "green tints" which had previously pointed out her corporeal suffering are erased by the white tints of the saintly

death. It is in this anesthetized version that the household members recognize their beloved Mme de Mortsauf. Having achieved or recovered her celestial beauty once under the influence of the drug, the members of the household are called back to cherish this last image of the dying and to hear the edifying confessions occasioned by a return of virtue. Madeleine, echoing Véronique's mother's: "« Je revois donc enfin mon enfant!», is moved by her mother's recovered beauty and exclaims: "Enfin! voilà ma mère!" (1206).

Making a Christian death possible, the opium also allows Félix to author a new, or second, more poetic death for Mme de Mortsauf. In her opium induced softness, Félix recovers his "lily": the blooming flower in perfect harmony with her beloved valley. Nature's symphony, joined by bells of the church, provides a grandiose background for her exemplary death. The ringing of the Angelus bell coming from the "clocher du bourg" also calls out to "Clochegourde" and its dying saint. Her death becomes poetry. Once anesthetized, her death can be estheticized:

> En ce moment, l'Angélus sonna au clocher du bourg. Les flots de l'air adouci jetèrent par ondées les tintements qui nous annonçaient qu'à cette heure la chrétienté tout entière répétait les paroles dites par l'ange à la femme qui racheta les fautes de son sexe. Ce soir l'*Ave Maria* nous parut une salutation du ciel. La prophétie était si claire et l'événement si proche que nous fondîmes en larmes. Les murmures du soir, brise mélodieuse dans les feuillages, derniers gazouillements d'oiseau, refrain et bourdonnements d'insectes, voix des eaux, cri plaintif de la rainette, toute la campagne disait adieu au plus beau lys de la vallée, à sa vie simple et champêtre. Cette poésie religieuse unie à toutes ces poésies naturelles exprimait si bien le chant du départ que nos sanglots furent aussitôt répétés. (1206- 1207).

As if he, too, had been affected by the drug, Félix narrates a perfectly magical death, rich in sensory experiences. Her death is a song "le chant du depart"; and her body, a perfectly sculpted marble. Silent, cold, immobile, she appears more beautiful: "Je demeurai

pendant toute cette nuit les yeux attachés sur Henriette, fasciné par l'expression pure que donne l'apaisement de toutes les tempêtes, par la blancheur du visage que je douais encore de ses innombrables affections, mais qui ne répondait plus à mon amour. Quelle majesté dans ce silence et dans ce froid!...Quelle beauté dans ce repos absolu, quel despotisme dans cette immobilité : tout le passé s'y trouve encore, et l'avenir y commence. Ah ! je l'aimais morte, autant que je l'aimais vivante. » (1201)

Her eventual flawless death allows Mme de Mortsauf to remain "a flawless model of womanhood, the ideal beauty, the perfect mother, the paragon of feminine, or Romantic 'virtue'." In short, she is truly an imaginary being", like the heroine of a sentimental fiction. (Lastinger, 245). Reminiscent of the ultimate romantic death of Atala in Chateaubriand's novella, Félix's letter perfects the death of his heroine: esthetic, nature and religion unite to recreate one of the most beautiful deaths in literary history:

> Atala était couchée sur un gazon de sensitives de montagnes; ses pieds, sa tête, ses épaules et une partie de son sein étaient découverts. On voyait dans ses cheveux une fleur de magnolia fanée...celle-là même que j'avais déposé sur le lit de la vierge, pour la rendre féconde. Ses lèvres, comme un bouton de rose cueilli depuis deux matins, semblaient languir et sourire. Dans ses joues d'une blancheur éclatante, on distinguait quelques veines bleues. Ses beaux yeux étaient fermés, ses pieds modestes étaient joints, et ses mains d'albâtre pressaient sur son cœur un crucifix d'ébène ; le scapulaire de ses vœux était passé à son cou. Elle paraissait enchantée par l'Ange de la mélancolie, et par le double sommeil de l'innocence et de la tombe. Je n'ai rien vue de plus céleste. Quiconque eût ignoré que cette jeune fille avait joui de la lumière, aurait pu la prendre pour la statue de la Virginité endormie. (88-89)

As if Félix had simply followed a formula, the death of Mme de Mortsauf follows the composition of Atala's death. Nature and religion, in perfect harmony, assist the heroine in her metamorphosis. At once incarnate and disincarnate, she sheds the impermanence of her physical body to become Woman: beautiful, celestial and eternal. As Edgar Allan Poe

famously writes in “The Philosophy of Composition”: “...the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world – and equally it is beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover.” (165)

According to Poe’s theory of composition, the tale of Mme de Mortsauf’s death should have produced a successful narrative. Is not the bereaved lover speaking the death of a beautiful woman? Yet Natalie’s violent reaction to the letter, as we’ve already seen, suggests that something in Félix’s fiction has failed to produce its intended effect.[33] Many critics have attributed this failure to the insertion of Mme de Mortsauf’s final letter into Félix’s narrative[34] (essentially, breaking the rules of Poe’s composition by allowing the dying lover, not the bereaved lover, to write her own death). By narrating her illness and eventual death, Mme de Mortsauf threatens the coherence of Félix’s narrative. Her posthumous letter reappears much like the violence of her physical symptoms. As if the

---

[33] The “way” Mme de Mortsauf dies was in fact Balzac’s contemporary critics’ most forceful complaint. They accused Balzac, like Natalie accused Félix, of having cruelly written (in Félix’s case caused) the death of an innocent woman. For the critics, the “lily” deserved a better, more poetic death. As a critic of *Le Temps* writes in June 1836, Mme de Mortsauf’s death is a discordant and cruel twist on a life which should have merited the kindness of deaths:

> A quoi bon cette morte hideuse et cet impur délire des derniers instants? Ce n’est pas ainsi que le lys devait tomber. Il fallait effeuiller jour à jour cette belle vie et l’incliner sur sa tige comme une fleur qui a senti de trop près le soleil. La douce vision d’Henriette devait s’effacer mollement, sans éclat, sans bruit, sans désespoir. Qui aurait pu se défendre d’une longue émotion en face de ce coucher d’une vie si triste et si pure ? L’âme d’ailleurs, était montée par tout ce qui précède, à ce ton de mélancolie caressante. Au lieu de cela, l’auteur nous retire subitement de ce monde des idéalités flottantes et des rêveuses illusions, pour nous jeter au milieu des réalités les plus repoussantes. » (Quoted in Gérard Gengembre’s article “Critique littéraire et critiques de lecteurs en 1836 : Le *Lys*, Roman illisible ? »)

First, according to the critique of *Le Temps* Balzac’s text is flawed by the unexpected intervention of the medical realism of the illness. The critic claims the reader to be violently thrown out of the romantic world he has laboriously created into the most repulsive realism. Secondly, he is critiqued for violating the coherence expected of a fictional character: Mme de Mortsauf *should* have “gently faded” from her sweet and virtuous original portrait. As Leo Bersani discusses in “The Taming of tigers”, Balzac often fixes “his characters in the reader’s mind, before they appear, as clearly defined social and moral personalities. His introductions, furthermore, partially control his novel’s future: psychological patterns have been set which undoubtedly exert a certain pressure on the course of the story, and, to some extent, the Balzacian novel has an obligation to conform to the way in which it has been introduced.” (36).

[34] See in particular Michael Lastinger’s article « Re-Writing Woman : Compulsive Textuality in Le Lys dans la vallée ».

effects of the opium had worn off, the letter projects the ghostly voice of the fallen woman, still lusting after her lover: "Si vous avez oublié ces terrible baisers, moi, je n'ai jamais pu les effacer de mon souvenir: j'en meurs! Oui, chaque fois que je vous ai vu depuis, vous en ranimiez l'empreinte; j'étais émue de la tête aux pieds par votre aspect, par le seul pressentiment de votre arrivée. Ni le temps, ni ma ferme volonté n'ont pu dompter cette impérieuse volupté…Ah ! si dans ces moments où je redoublais de froideur, vous m'eussiez prise dans vos bras, je serais morte de bonheur. » (1216) Her letter reveals that whatever heroism was found in Mme de Mortsauf's final instants had everything to do with the opium. Her own voice testifies that she does not die well. She is not *sauve* and *sauvée*, as her name would have us believe.

Avowedly perplexed at the revelations made in her letter, Félix inserts it into his text without much introduction: "Enfin par un suave midi d'automne, un de ces derniers sourires du ciel, si beaux en Touraine, je lus sa lettre que, suivant sa recommandation, je ne devais ouvrir qu'après sa mort. Jugez de mes impressions en la lisant ? » (1214) Contrary to what one should expect, Mme de Mortsauf's letter is not followed by his impressions. And though Félix claims to have fallen into an "abyss of reflection", he actually says very little in response to her passionate revelations. Thus standing strangely independent within the text, the letter tells another version of her death: the death which had been censured by the opium. The letter remains uncommented upon and unanswered. Félix abruptly closes his narrative with a brief summary of the final moments of his stay at Clochegourde.

V. A Deadly fiction

As her letter reveals, Mme de Mortsauf sealed her fate when she began subscribing to Félix's fiction. Unlike his more careful readers, who assured their survivals by a complete censoring of Félix's stories, Mme de Mortsauf is seduced by Félix's romantic posturing and his letters; the very things his mother and Natalie had so harshly criticized: "Que vous dirais-je? votre écriture avait un charme, je regardais vos lettres comme on contemple un portrait. Si, dès ce premier jour, vous aviez déjà conquis sur moi, je ne sais quel fatal pouvoir, vous comprenez, mon ami, qu'il devint infini quand il me fut donner de lire dans votre âme. Quelles délices m'inondèrent en vous trouvant si pur, si complètement vrai, doué de qualités si belles, capables de si grandes choses, et déjà si éprouvé ! » (1216) For the first time, Félix's letter succeeds in securing the love of a woman. Charmed by his letters and then charmed by their writer, Mme de Mortsauf confesses to have fallen under a fatal spell: "Homme et enfant, timide et courageux! Quelle joie quand je nous trouvais sacrés tous deux par de communes souffrances! Depuis cette soirée où nous nous confiâmes l'un à l'autre, vous perdre, pour moi c'était mourir… » (1216)

The evening which decided her eventual death, "cette soirée où nous nous confiâme l'un à l'autre", features Félix's long, impassionate speech where he self-identifies with all the clichés of the Romantic hero and writer. Including Mme de Mortsauf in the description of his remarkable sensibility, Félix describes two beings paralyzed by violent passions:

> N'appartenons-nous pas au petit nombre de créatures privilégiées pour la douleur et pour le plaisir, de qui les qualités sensibles retentissent toutes à l'unisson en produisant de grands retentissements intérieurs, et dont la nature nerveuse est en harmonie constante avec le principe des choses...Un orgue expressif doué de

> mouvement s'exerce alors en nous dans le vide, se passionne sans objet, rend des sons sans produire de mélodie, jette des accents qui se perdent dans le silence ! … La sensibilité coule à torrents, il en résulte d'horribles affaiblissements, d'indicibles mélancolies pour lesquelles le confessionnal n'a pas d'oreilles. N'ai-je pas exprimé nos communes douleurs ? » (1019)

Like the romantic heroes before him, Félix describes a *malaise*, a vague and aimless longing, marginalization and melancholia. What is particular to Félix's speech however, are his use of the interrogative and the plural pronoun "nous". In suggesting a common suffering, Félix's speech becomes a means of seduction. Cleverly, the interrogatives which punctuate his speech distract from Félix's self-flattery, and praise Mme de Mortsauf. By including her in his description, Félix thus suggests a natural bond between them born from their superiority over the common man. The effects of Félix's speech have already been revealed: Mme de Mortsauf is won over, and Félix secures his place in the Mortsauf household.

In her brilliant study of the Romantic hero and writer entitled *The Male Malady*, Margaret Waller suggests that this type of tender and sensitive stance adopted by the men of the Romantic canon (and in this case Félix) is strategic: "this new avatar of masculinity would discover that in modern times a man wields far more power over a woman when he bemoans his weakness than when he displays his strength." (3)[35] Interestingly enough, while this strategy is indeed effective in the case of Mme de Mortsauf, we know it to have the opposite effect on Natalie. Félix thrives in the role of the Romantic hero but fails to convince as a Romantic writer. His letter, which she calls

---

[35] Mme de Mortsauf's immediate response to Félix is telling. The avatar of masculinity mentioned by Waller is defined by Mme de Mortsauf as a complete change of gender: "- Comment si jeune savez-vous ces choses? Avez-vous donc été femme ? - Ah ! lui répondis-je d'une voix émue, mon enfance a été comme une longue maladie. » (1020) What Mme de Mortsauf identifies as feminine traits, Félix quickly redefines as an illness : *une maladie*, or rather *un mal*, evocative of the Romantic *mal du siècle*.

his “few sentimental sentences”, reveals an impostor: “Votre air de chevalier de La Triste Figure m’a toujours profondément intéressée: je croyais à la constance des gens mélancoliques; mais j’ignorais que vous eussiez tué la plus belle et la plus vertueuses des femmes à votre entrée dans le monde. » (1228) Natalie responds to his claim of remarkable sensibility with the assertion that he has the hardest of hearts : « toutes les femmes s’apercevraient de la sécheresse de votre cœur… » (1229) She strips his persona from its Romantic associations: “Vous êtes parfois ennuyeux et ennuyé, vous appelez votre tristesse du nom de mélancolie: à la bonne heure; mais vous êtes insupportable…ces moments d’ennui que vous appelez mélancolie pendant lesquels vous êtes amusant comme la pluie… » (1227-1228) According to Natalie, Félix is not melancholic. He is just boring.

Giving Natalie the final word and final assessment of Félix’s letter gives her voice a powerful presence and a new perspective on the characteristics of Félix’s narrative. Her letter allows for the voices of the other women in his narrative to return and echo throughout her own response to Félix. After the fact, it seems that all the women in the text, albeit not always consciously, object to Félix’s narrative. It turns out that even Mme de Mortsauf’s young daughter, Madeleine, arrives at the same conclusion as his mother, Lady Dudley and Natalie: “Monsieur, dit-elle d’une voix tremblante d’émotion, je connais aussi toutes vos pensées; mais je ne changerai point de sentiments à votre égard, et j’aimerais mieux me jeter dans l’Indre que de me lier à vous. Je ne vous parlerai pas de moi ; mais si le nom de ma mère conserve encore quelque puissance sur vous, c’est en son nom que je vous prie de ne jamais venir à Clochegourde tant que j’y serai. » (1222)

Michael Lastinger makes the interesting point that Balzac had ironically added the

story of Félix's childhood, during which we learn of his mother's curt responses to his letters, Henriette's posthumous letter and Natalie's final response, after the creation of the original text, as an afterthought perhaps. But nevertheless these three major textual additions "all which add the voice of a woman to a text once exclusively presented through that of a Romantic male, alter significantly the nature of Félix original story and make necessary a radical reconsideration of the text as a whole" (238). In parallel to the genesis of the novel, the feminine voices in the text, ironically, do seem to belong to another time. To Félix's sentimental narrative, emulating the confessional structure of the 18th century novel, the women and Natalie seem anchored in the realism of the 19th century.[36]

As the event which drives the production of Félix's narrative, these other feminine voices (and textual additions) necessarily also raise questions about Mme de Mortsauf's death. Despite Balzac's protestations that she does die a good and beautiful death, the readers of the novel and the reader of the letter seem to disagree. [37] To the romantic death authored by Félix, other versions of her death continually emerge and

[36] Natalie's final warnings or « avertissements » ressemble the preface, also an « avertissement », of Laclos' *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* in which the novel's claims to authenticity is put into question through its treatment of feminine deaths. As the « editor » writes, the deaths of the heroines do not correspond to their time: "Notre avis est donc que si les aventures rapportées dans cet Ouvrage ont un fond de vérité, elles n'ont pu arriver que dans d'autres lieux ou dans d'autres temps…Pour préserver au moins, autant qu'il est en nous, le Lecteur trop crédule de toute surprise à ce sujet, nous appuierons notre opinion d'un raisonnement que nous lui proposons avec confiance, parce qu'il nous paraît victorieux et sans réplique ; c'est que sans doute les mêmes causes ne manqueraient pas de produire les mêmes effets, et que cependant nous ne voyons point aujourd'hui de Demoiselle, avec soixante mille livres de rente, se faire Religieuse, ni de Présidente, jeune et joli, mourir de chagrin. » (26) I am grateful to Professor Elissa Marder for this valuable insight.

[37] In an August 1836 letter to Mme Hanska, Balzac writes: "Il y a des ignorants qui ne comprennent pas la beauté de la mort de Mme de Mortsauf, et n'y voient que la lutte de la matière et de l'esprit qui est le fond du christianisme. Ils ne voient que les imprécations de la chair trompée, de la nature physique blessée, et ne veulent pas rendre justice à la placidité sublime de l'âme, quand la comtesse est confessée et qu'elle meurt en sainte.» Contemporary critics deplored the author's break from the traditionally idealized feminine death scene. Balzac's friends like Mme de Berny and Zulma Carraud both "regret" Mme de Mortsauf's horrible death.

contest the narrator's own narrative. There are the details of her inanition, which tells of the horror of her physical death. She hardly exhibits the shape feminine perfection: she rots, yellows, and starves. There is her final letter which tells of her bitter and jealous end. And then there is Natalie's letter which accuses the man and the writer of the same crime, of two deaths. Mme de Mortsauf's physical death appears as just one of the deaths occasioned by Félix. By living and dying again in the bad writing of the letter writer, Natalie claims that Mme de Mortsauf dies a second time and of a death which does not belong to her. Never referring to the illness, Natalie focuses her attack on Mme de Mortsauf's death as it exists within Félix's narrative: "Pauvre femme! Elle a bien souffert, et quand vous avez fait quelques phrases sentimentales, vous vous croyez quitte avec son cercueil. » (1227) In the end, Natalie deplores Mme de Mortsauf's death but for reasons other than the ones expressed by Balzac's critics: it is not Mme de Mortsauf's actual death which has failed but something about the type of narrative itself, something about Félix's letter, which cannot inscribe a less than ideal feminine death, a realist death perhaps, within the Romantic canon.

CHAPTER 2

Moles and Beauty Marks:
Signs of sex and signs of death in Emile Zola's *Nana*

> *Lorsque nos artistes nous donnent des Vénus, ils corrigent la nature, ils mentent. Edouard Manet s'est demandé pourquoi mentir, pourquoi ne pas dire la vérité; il nous a fait connaître Olympia, cette fille de nos jours…*
> Emile Zola, *L'événement illustré* Mai 1868

Of the memorable scenes in Emile Zola's *Nana*, the mirror scene is perhaps the most famous. There is something strangely mythical about this scene, in the ways in which it seems to have existed before it was ever written, and the ways it continues to expand through the volume of critical attention it has received. Foreshadowed we might say by Edouard Manet's famous 1877 *Nana*, the painting, inspired by the young Nana of *L'Assommoir,* depicts a similar situation to the one we find in the later novel: a young woman in a corset, standing in front of a man's shaving mirror, applying make-up, brazenly looking at the spectator while an older man on the periphery of the canvas, meant to be a john we know, looks on. The textual version of this scene, as it appears in *Nana,* is no less spectacular, and perhaps more daring. There, the protagonist is naked in front of a full-length mirror, mesmerized by her own reflection as she examines and touches the voluptuous curves of her body. Count Muffat, in the role of the john, is frustratingly subjected to and isolated from this *solitary enjoyment* with a mix of desire and disgust. Somewhere on this textual canvas, close to Muffat since he has just finished reading it, lies a newspaper containing Fauchery's article entitled "La mouche d'or", an allegorical portrait of Nana, a sort of second mirror containing another reflection of the woman at hand.

As has often been remarked, the power of this scene lies in the way in which it appears as a mise-en-abyme: the simultaneous revelation of the body and the text, of a body as a text; or perhaps of a "corps à corps": a text casting itself onto a body, testing its strengths and weaknesses. Many of Zola's best critics have noted that this scene is crucial in the ways in which it simultaneously engages with the novel's greatest thematic concerns while illuminating the novel's own concern with its viability as a medium of representation. The question posed in this scene, through Nana's nudity, is directly challenging the novelist's own *naturalist* project. How much can really be shown? How much of Nana's body do we ever really see? How much nudity can truly appear on the page? Surprisingly enough, one of the answers to this question is offered by Nana herself. The courtesan turned both reader and literary critic ironically declares Zola's own literature disgusting and false in its pretenses to "show it all" and "represent nature": « Elle avait lu dans la journée un roman qui faisait grand bruit, l'histoire d'une fille; et elle se révoltait, elle disait que tout cela était faux, témoignant d'ailleurs une répugnance indignée contre cette littérature immonde, dont la prétention était de rendre la nature; comme si l'on pouvait tout montrer! » (339) In her commentary on this scene in « Uncovering *Nana* : The Courtesan's New Clothes », Janet Beizer states that Nana's antithetical stance to Zola's (as expounded in "Le Roman experimental") provides an instability in narrative authority: "To Zola's "one must tell everything," Nana impertinently replies "One cannot show all."...Nana's rebuttal of absolute revelation challenges the authority of the narrative plot, which tells of the incessant disrobing of her body. And more critically, it threatens the very principle of Zola's narrative: if telling is showing and Nana, despite appearances, does not *show* everything, can narrative *tell*

everything, as Zola claims?" (46) With various aims, many of Zola's other critics besides Beizer such as Jean Borie, Peter Brooks, and Naomi Schor have also demonstrated that the novel exhibits an explicit concern with representation and its limits in their various works.[38] All refer to the same mirror scene and specifically to the thing that does not get *told,* that does not get *shown*, the thing that does not get *represented* in this scene of complete nudity: Nana's sex.

While each of their brilliant readings differs in its focus and in what Nana's missing sex represents and implies, most critics agree that the novel stages "the woman's sex as unknowable and unrepresentable" in a manner consistent with the novel's thematic representation of Nana as inaccessible to the male (Brooks, 27).[39] Famously, the scene meticulously traces the triumphant curves of the courtesan's body only to suddenly shift to an allegorical and vague evocation of her sex.

> Un bras derrière la nuque, une main prise dans l'autre, elle renversait la tête, les coudes écartés. Il voyait en raccourci ses yeux demi-clos, sa bouche entrouverte, son visage noyé d'un rire amoureux ; et, par-derrière, son chignon de cheveux jaunes dénoué lui couvrait le dos d'un poil de lionne. Ployée et le flanc tendu, elle

---

[38] See Peter Brooks, "Storied Bodies of Nana at Last Unveil'd," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 16, No 1 (Autumn, 1989): 1-32; Jean Borie, *Zola et les mythes: ou, de la nausée au salut* (Paris, 1971) ; Naomi Schor, *Zola's Crowds* (Baltimore, 1978) ; Janet L. Beizer, « Uncovering Nana : The Courtesan's New Clothes , » *L'Esprit Créateur* 25 (Summer 1985)": 45 - 56 and "The Body in Question: Anatomy, Textuality, and Fetishism in Zola," *L'Esprit Créateur* 29 (Spring 1989): 50 – 60.

[39] In his brilliant commentary "Storied Bodies, or Nana at Last Unveil'd", Peter Brooks stresses that the censuring of Nana's sex or rather the "airbrushing" of Nana's sex is an intended effect of the novel, necessary and consistent with the rest of Zola's story. If there is no sex, or if her sex remains hidden, "there is no way into her" (24) and no one can take possession of her. "...Nana's sex [is] a lever whose force can lift the globe ("dont la force soulevait le monde"): an antiphallus more powerful than the male member. Her sex is all the more powerful in that its mechanism remains hidden. More than a machine, it is a motor, a steam engine, as all the imagery of heat, hot vapors, and pressures associated with Nana suggests. We are given to understand that the whole dynamic of the narrative in *Nana* derives from, emanates from, her sex, which is perhaps ultimately why her sex cannot be directly represented."(27) Muffat's reaction to Nana's self-contemplation confirms Brooks' interpretation of her occult sexual power. In a flash of pure exasperated violence, he puts an end to her solitary pleasure by throwing her down on the floor: "Brusquement, tout fut emporté en lui, comme par un grand vent. Il prit Nana à bras-le-corps, dans un élan de brutalité, et la jeta sur le tapis...Il avait conscience de sa défaite, il la savait stupide, ordurière et menteuse, et il la voulait, même empoisonnée." (227). As we know, Muffat has already slept with Nana, he has already, literally, sexually, penetrated her. And yet, as the quote above undoubtedly states, he continues to feel "defeated" as if the sexual act never really succeeded in possessing the woman.

> montrait les reins solides, la gorge dure d'une guerrière, aux muscles forts sous le grain satiné de la peau. Une ligne fine, à peine ondée par l'épaule et la hanche filait d'un de ses coudes à son pied. Muffat suivait ce profil si tendre, ces fuites de chair blonde se noyant dans les lueurs dorées, ces rondeurs où la flamme des bougies mettait des reflets de soie. Il songeait à son ancienne horreur de la femme, au monstre de l'écriture, lubrique, sentant le fauve. Nana était toute velu, un duvet de rousse faisait de son corps un velours ; tandis que, dans sa croupe et ses cuisses de cavale, dans les renflements charnus creusés de plis profonds, qui donnaient au sexe le voile troublant de leur ombre, il y avait de la bête. C'était la bête d'or, inconsciente comme une force, et dont l'odeur seul gâtait le monde. Muffat regardait toujours, obsédé, possédé, au point qu'ayant fermé les paupières pour ne plus voir, l'animal reparut au fond des ténèbres, grandi, terrible, exagérant sa posture. Maintenant il serait là, devant ses yeux, dans sa chair, à jamais. (1271)

In this successive unveiling and veiling of Nana's body, the shift between the beginning and end of the paragraph could not be more apparent. From Nana's open and opening posture, head thrown back and arms open, the description concludes with the closing of the Count's eyes. The soft glow of candlelight which first illuminated her body later creates a deep and dark shadow at the site (and Muffat's sight) of her sex. In a sort of reverse striptease[40], the naked courtesan becomes clothed, or to borrow from the text's own lexis, she is veiled and hairy, "voilée et velue". Textually, the narrative which once displayed this body with audacity by faithfully naming and describing all of its parts and their consistencies, textures, and shapes becomes blurry and dark in the evocation of her sex: "dans sa croupe et ses cuisses de cavale, dans les renflements charnus creusés de plis

[40] The expression of "reversed striptease" is borrowed from Elissa Marder's reading of Charles Bovary's initial description in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary.* In *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)* she points to the way in which Charles' clothing transforms mundane nudity into a spectacle by producing an intermittence of clothing and skin. Forced to notice the meeting point of nudity and clothing, the spectator is thus unsettled in the object of his gaze. Though I do not use the term "reversed striptease" in the same way (Elissa Marder suggests the clothes actually reveal nudity while I propose that Nana's nudity is gradually clothed), the central issue at the heart of both readings remain the same:

> The designated *nouveau* is described, from head to toe, in a kind of reversed striptease – his fully clothes body transforms the ordinary and quotidian nakedness of his wrists into a spectacle – "son habit-veste de drap vert à bouton noirs devait le gêner aux entournures et laissait voir, par la fente des parements, des poignets rouges habitués à êtres nus."We are asked to look at this meeting point of body part, covering, and cleft. But what, exactly, is being revealed or covered over in this scene? Or more precisely, what drama between covering and exposure does this image both present and obscure to our gaze? (98)

profonds, qui donnaient au sexe le voile troublant de leur ombre, il y avait de la bête." Eventually, the silky complexion flaunting her nudity is covered in fuzz[41], "un duvet", described as velour, a fabric used for the making of women's clothes. But most importantly, she is clothed by Muffat's slippage into allegory. By the time his gaze gets to her sex, he no longer sees a naked woman. Her nudity is veiled by his biblical and animal references. She is the monster, a beast, a fundamental unknown and thus perhaps an un-representable entity.

Taking her cue from Schor's reading of this scene in *Zola's Crowds,* Beizer notes that the slippage between the anatomical precision of Nana's naked body and the use of euphemism to refer to her sex points to a paradigm inherent in the novel: "veil, text, euphemism, fetish, phallus, signifier – whose elements all refer to the simultaneous creation/repression of a signified. The veil is the signifier, the promise of a signified, of a plenitude of meaning, but it is also the obstacle that bars access to the signified. Euphemism is only the most obvious manifestation of the textual difference between telling and showing, the constant renewed promise to show what in truth will – never can – be revealed." (53) For Beizer, this scene is thus the most obvious occurrence of a dynamic inherent in the novel, which she terms the incessant *strip-tease* of the courtesan. From her entrance into, to her exit from the novel, Nana is consistently half naked or

[41] In *Zola et les Mythes ou de la Nausée au Salut*, Jean Borie observes Nana's pilosity as one of her two primary physical characteristics. When coupled with the first of these two attributes: her little mouth so symbolic of her appetite, Nana's sex appears in both its allegorical implication and a possible physical interpretation: "On voit le rôle de cette pilosité: l'animalité dévoreuse que nous avions déjà relevée dans la petite bouche rouge, dans la "friandise du sourire, se précise ici et achève la transformation de Nana en monstre…Nous voici donc en face d'une nouvelle bête humaine…Nana ne l'oublions pas, n'est qu'une extension, un représentant de son propre corps et de cette « chair centrale », son sexe. Le sexe de Nana est une gueule de fauve à rouge crinière. » (50) But rather than take the time to examine the actual physical image which is prompted by his own reading, Borie's gesture is strangely similar to Count Muffat's in that he also slips right away into an allegorical reading of her sex by suggesting that Nana's genitals are described in terms reminiscent of Freud's reading of Medusa's head.

half-dressed, slightly covered and partly denuded. The tension born from this teasing intermittence[42] is reflected in the composition of the term *strip-tease*. It is hyphenated and more importantly, it is a disjunctive. As such, the term captures and points to the two conflicting movements of the novel (one of which promises to show and the other of which refuses to tell) thus also allowing for two different readings of the text. Speaking specifically on the effect of Fauchery's article and its juxtaposition to Nana's nudity during the mirror scene, Beizer writes: "The novel unfurls in a state of conflict, and as such invites two disparate readings. It pretends to be a "strip": an unveiling, a disclosure, which is given as a social allegory, thus as a totalizing revelation. But the transcendent allegory (the "message") is consistently eclipsed by the story of desire (the would-be medium) much as the courtesan's unveiling is more *tease* – promise and process – than disclosure and fait accompli, or *strip*." (47)

Fauchery's article, as the text within the text, does occupy an unsettling place within the narrative sequence. First, as a piece of journalism belonging to the public sphere, the article appears as an intrusion into the privacy of Nana's bedroom. Precisely, as Beizer notes, it appears to function as the insightful truth about Nana, her *true* portrait, or in the latter terms as her *unveiling*; and thus making up for what we do not see in the mirror. It is through the reading of the article that Muffat is *awakened* and *sees* the *real*

[42] Roland Barthes' definition of "intermittence" in *Le Plaisir du texte* is used by Janet Beizer to describe the essence of Nana's seductiveness : "intermittence: l'intermittence...de la peau qui scintilla entre deux pièces (le pantalon et le tricot), entre deux bords (la chemise entrouverte, le gant et la manche); c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore: la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition. » (Beizer, 49 - quoting Barthes in *Le Plaisir du texte*. Paris : Seuil, 1973. 19). Beizer gives as another example of this dynamic"…when Muffat gains entry to Nana's dressing room and Nana appears nude, her body is nonetheless veiled, first by a curtain, later by a qualifying statement which covers both her nakedness and the prior description of it:« Elle ne s'était pas couverte du tout, elle venait simplement de boutonner un petit corsage de percale, qui lui cachait à demi la gorge. » (p.132)" (49).

Nana[43]: “Cependant, il restait frappé par sa lecture, qui, brusquement, venait d’éveiller en lui tout ce qu’il n’aimait point à remuer depuis quelques mois. » (225) There is an obvious amount of tension between Fauchery’s social allegory of Nana as a golden fly corrupting Paris, its function as an abrupt moment of enlightenment for Muffat, and the later shadows cast on her sex, which forbid her complete unveiling. However, the issues around Fauchery’s article are much more complex, since I would argue that the article does not actually contain the “naked truth” about Nana. Technically, it is even far from the abrupt revelation it pretends to be:

> La chronique de Fauchery, intitulée *La Mouche d’Or,* était l’histoire d’une fille, née de quatre ou cinq générations d’ivrognes, le sang gâté par une longue hérédité de misère et de boisson, qui se transformait chez elle en un détraquement nerveux de son sexe de femme. Elle avait poussé dans un faubourg, sur le pavé parisien ; et, grande, belle, de chair superbe ainsi qu’une plante de plein fumier, elle vengeait les gueux et les abandonnés dont elle était le produit. Avec elle, la pourriture qu’on laissait fermenter dans le peuple, remontait et pourrissait l’aristocratie. Elle devenait une force de la nature, un ferment de destruction, sans le vouloir elle-même, corrompant et désorganisant Paris entre ses cuisses de neige, le faisant tourner comme des femmes, chaque mois, font tourner le lait. Et c’était à la fin de l’article que se trouvait la comparaison de la mouche, une mouche couleur de soleil, envolée de l’ordure, une mouche qui prenait la mort sur les charognes tolérés le long des chemins, et qui, bourdonnante, dansante, jetant un éclat de pierreries, empoisonnait les hommes rien qu’à se poser sur eux, dans les palais où elle entrait par les fenêtre. (1269-1270)

Fauchery’s article never appears within the novel. Rather, the reader is given a summary of the article which could be attributed either to Muffat or to the narrator. This shortened, abstract-like version of the article also gives an abstract quality to the topic it treats. First, though the reader can and does infer that the article is written in direct reference to Nana,

[43] Professor Laura Otis kindly pointed to the ways in which notions of revealing and unveiling have appeared as the original function of journalism since its beginnings; thus the names of newspapers like “The Daily Mirror”.

it is nevertheless just an inference[44]. The article never actually refers to Nana but speaks of an anonymous prostitute. Instead of giving her genealogy to endow her with an identity, a name, a background; she is only given a set of genetics, genetics which could belong to any and perhaps to every living Parisian prostitute: five generations of poverty and alcoholism. As such, Nana doesn't appear as herself but as a representative of an entire social class, which the article claims she is avenging. But for Fauchery, what makes Nana (or the more general and anonymous prostitute) most dangerous is her sex which has given her the kind of social mobility available only to women.[45]

With a pattern strangely similar to the one used to give Nana's mirror portrait, Fauchery's article, read by Muffat, attempts to unveil Nana but also slips into figurative language at the height of his argument. From a physical genealogy (parallel to the description of her physical body in the later scene), the prostitute becomes a plant, and finally another animal. Muffat's golden beast is at first a golden fly in Fauchery's article. What is more, the same evasive references to her sex, which appears as the central characteristic of the person described, pervade the text. The literal effects of her sexual activity and the act itself are never named; "it" happens between her snowy thighs « entre

[44] There are indeed a set of clues which allow for this conclusion. In the title of the article "La mouche d'or" we can hear something like the corrupted echo of the titled play and role *The Blond Venus* which brought about her success and propelled her into high society. But most importantly, within the larger context of Zola's *Rougon-Macquart,* the generality of the description would suffice in identifying Nana. It is through a genealogical process that the character is created and thus recognizable according to the genealogy scripted into her literary existence.

[45] It is important to note quickly that Nana's ancestry is given no importance in terms of its reproductive implications. What I mean here, is that the article and its author are not preoccupied by the idea that this degenerate body may continue to populate society with its corrupt offspring. A legitimate threat, one would think, coming from a woman sleeping with half Paris and who has already given birth to a frail and sickly child. Rather, the emphasis of the article is placed on the possibility of vengeance for the lower classes offered by the feminine sex. *Nana* stages the revenge of the lower class (classe défavorisée) by the weak (sexe faible): an ideological concept central to the novel.

ses cuisses de neige" *as* some women spoil their milk.[46] This shift into simile, euphemism and allegory to again refer to Nana's sex and sexuality is particularly surprising considering the genre of Fauchery's text, as presented by the novel. As a piece of journalism, a genre idealistically close to Zola's naturalism, we would expect a factual evaluation of the courtesan: the millions she was suspected to have earned, the worth of her jewels, the types of clients she entertained, and the diseases she may even carry.[47] And yet, despite the lack of direct representation of the courtesan, the reader, through the figure of Muffat, is nevertheless convinced, enlightened, shocked, as if something had indeed been revealed: "Cette chronique était écrite à la diable, avec des cabrioles de phrases, une outrance de mots imprévus et de rapprochements baroques. Cependant, il restait frappé par sa lecture, qui, brusquement, venait d'éveiller en lui tout ce qu'il

---

[46] Though I will discuss the notion of a reversed "biology" or "thanatology" in more detail later in the chapter, Professor Laura Otis has suggested that already in this reference to menstruation and failed reproduction, Zola is transforming processes associated with life into the processes of death (putrefaction and decomposition.)

[47] This type of chronicle of a prostitute's diseases and habits was already done, by the judicial system, through the mise-en-carte of 19th century Parisian prostitutes. As we can recall, both Nana and particularly Satin are worried over the prospect of being caught by the police for this reason. In *The Novel and the Police,* D. A. Miller writes: "What is *Nana* but an extended *mise-en-carte* of a prostitute: an elaborately researched "examination" sustained at the highest level by the latest scientific notions of pathology and at the lowest by the numerous "fiches" on which data is accumulated? ... *Nana* is the title of a file, referring both to the prostitute who resists the record and to the novel whose representational practice has already overcome this resistance." (21).
Closer to the Fauchery's style, there existed in 18th century London yearly directories by the names of *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies* and *Man of Pleasure's Kalendar* which cataloged the names, addresses and various descriptions of each prostitute. For an interesting reading of these fascinating publications, see Elizabeth Campbell Denlinger's article "The Garment and the Man: Masculine Desire in "Harris's List of Covent-Garden Ladies" 1764-1793" in *Journal of the History of* Sexuality, Vol. 11, No 3 (Jul., 2002), pp. 357-394. Though I have not pursued the subject or traced the existence of such a catalog dating to Zola's time, it nevertheless indicates a certain contemporary openness to the crude and direct discussion of the prostitute. Parent-Duchâtelet pseudo-scientific endeavor is perhaps the best known French example of the attention given to the prostitute.

n'aimait point à remuer depuis quelques mois. »[48] (1270) Somehow, we can only assume then that Fauchery's stylistic detours have effectively "told-all".

The parallel structure of these two sequences suggests that perhaps more of Nana's sex is shown to the reader than critical consensus has previously agreed upon. By tracing the various appearances of female sexuality and the feminine sex, I will suggest that the matter at hand is not so much whether or not the feminine sex is represented at all but is centered rather on the displaced ways in which feminine anatomy does get represented. In this chapter's first section, I will trace the various "appearances" of Nana's sex through her theatrical representation of Venus, her animal characteristics and through her unlikely resemblance to another woman in the text, Sabine. In the final section, my reading of *Nana* will focus on Zola's last depiction of his protagonist and in the ways in which her disfigured face appears as the long awaited appearance of her sex. However, as her face and sex superpose onto one another, the possibility of a final portrait or death mask of the heroine, immortalizing Nana's mesmerizing form for the last time, appears to have reached the limits of representation. The novel forbids the reader from taking a final glance at the dead heroine. She is all text and can only be read. Unrecognizable, an explosion of flesh and matter thrown onto a pillow, Nana is no longer a painting, a portrait, or a woman. Manet could not have painted that Nana; we must leave it to literature to decompose Venus.

---

[48] Professor Elissa Marder kindly pointed to the link established between journalism and prostitution in Muffat's reading. Its wide circulation along with the speed of its production appears as offensive, as "outrageous"/"outrant" as the prostitute herself.

I. Signs of Sex

1. The Anatomy of Venus

The suppressed depiction of feminine anatomy, as it appears in *Nana*, points directly to an enduring problem in the representation of feminine sexuality. The crisis in representation of the nude, characteristic of 19th century painting as exemplified by the work of Manet and Courbet, is a motif which is incessantly taken up in Zola's novel.[49] From the beginning of the novel, Nana is associated with the classical incarnation of the nude through her role as Venus in Bordenave's play *La Blonde Venus*. Upon her entrance on stage and into the novel, she calls to mind the traditional nude by evoking the work of Botticelli, Bouguereau and Cabanel: "Nana était nue. Elle était nue avec une tranquille audace, certaine de la toute-puissance de sa chair. Une simple gaze l'enveloppait ; ses épaules rondes, sa gorge d'amazone dont les pointes roses se tenaient levées et rigides comme des lances, ses larges hanches qui roulaient dans un balancement voluptueux, ses cuisses de blonde grasse, tout son corps se devinait, se voyait sous le tissu léger, d'une blancheur d'écume. C'était Vénus naissant des flots, n'ayant pour voile que ses cheveux. » (1118) In his introduction of Nana, the novelist paints the voluptuous forms of Nana's body by stressing her shapeliness, *round* shoulders, *rigid and pointed* nipples, *large* hips, *full* thighs, etc... The presentation of these body parts constitutes a fairly

---

[49] TJ Clark in *The Painting of Modern Life* speaks of the importance of the nude in the social imaginary of the 19th century:

> It is the place in which the body is revealed, given its attributes, brought into order, and made out to be unproblematic. It is the frankness of the bourgeoisie – here, after, is what Woman looks like; she can be known in her nakedness without too much danger. That is because her body is separate from her sex. Her sex, one might say, is a matter of *male* desire; those various fauns, bulls, falling coins, enfolding clouds, tritons, goats, and *putti* which surround her. They are all, for the male viewer and accept as figures of his own feelings; and there *she* is, somehow set apart from her own sexuality, her nakedness not yet possessed by the creatures who whisper, stare, or hold up mirrors." (130)

standard manner of representing the classical nude since the beauty of her form depicted through her nudity is also slightly veiled and softened by a translucent fabric and by her hair. We must assume, since the novel does not tell us otherwise, that Nana's sex remains veiled like the sex of the classical nudes she evokes. Up to this point, Nana's nudity appears "whole": a harmony is created between her body parts as their common shapeliness is stressed. There is no indication that certain parts of her body may be missing in this depiction, and as such it appears as a "complete picture". There is, in a sense, no sex to see.

It is in the second half of this description that Nana's sex emerges. By using the conjunction *and* to begin the next sentence in this descriptive passage, the sentence actually draws attention to itself and to the transitional function of its conjunction with the opposite effect. The conjunction suggests a forced transition or an unnatural transition between a classical representation of nudity and what appears next: "C'était Vénus naissant des flots, n'ayant pour voile que ses cheveux. *Et*, lorsque Nana levait les bras, on apercevait, aux feux de la rampe, les poils d'or de ses aisselles. » (*my emphasis,* 1118) This irregular transition is located right at a point of convergence between Nana's hair « ses cheveux » which function as a cache-sex and the triumphant exposure of her armpit hair "les poils d'or" which immediately and violently evoke its complementary hair, pubic hair. Thus, Nana's armpit hair also signals the presence of her sex: "Tout d'un coup, dans la bonne enfant, la femme se dressait, inquiétante, apportant le coup de folie de son sexe, ouvrant l'inconnu du désir. » (1118) The troubling birth of woman (endowed with a sex) out of the original birth of Venus (the goddess without a sex), appears as a shocking revelation for the audience, despite the fact that her sex remains veiled.

However, the men in the audience have undoubtedly *seen* something both titillating and menacing: “Il n’y eut pas d’applaudissements. Personne ne riait plus, les faces des hommes, sérieuses, se tendaient, avec le nez aminci, la bouche irritée et sans salive. » (1118)

Nana’s hair, one her most memorable traits, has an ambiguous function throughout the novel and especially an ambiguous place in her role as a Venus. As we’ve seen above, the novel carefully juxtaposes two types of human hair, one which veils the courtesan’s body while the other seems rather to reveal the hidden body part. In Nana’s early entrance onto the stage, she sets the audience ablaze by simply pulling up her long, blond hair to show off the back of her neck: “Tout de suite, elle s’était tournée, remontant, faisant voir sa nuque où des cheveux roux mettaient comme une toison[50] de bête; et les applaudissements devinrent furieux. » (1108) As Nana pulls her hair up, more hair is revealed. The hair which she shows the audience, in resembling the coat of a beast, evokes something closer to androgenic hair; short, curly, tough hair, which produces furious applause. By the spectators’ reaction, it seems as though Nana has brazenly

---

[50] I am indebted to Professors Philippe Bonnefis and Elissa Marder for stressing the importance of the word “toison” or fleece in the description of Nana’s hair. Her golden hair compared to a fleece is immediately evocative of the myth of the Golden Fleece. The spectators, Muffat and the army of men seeking her attention appear as Jason and the Argonauts on a deadly quest to possess her. Ironically, the men united by their common desire for this golden fleece also evoke the Order of the Golden Fleece founded by Philip III whose knights effectively wore a golden fleece as badge of the order. The rallying and demise of the Parisian male upper class around a woman’s (pubic) hair is epitomized in the scene during which Muffat in his chamberlain uniform is debased by Nana:

> Elle fut prise d’un caprice, elle exigea qu’il vînt un soir vêtu de son grand costume de chambellan. Alors, ce furent des rires, des moqueries, quand elle l’eut, dans son apparat, avec l’épée, la culotte blanche, le frac de drap rouge chamarré d’or, portant la clé symbolique pendue de sa basque gauche. Cette clé surtout l’égayait, la lançait à une fantaisie folle d’explications ordurières. Riant toujours, emportée par l’irrespect des grandeurs, par la joie de l’avilir sous la pompe officielle de ce costume, elle le secoua, le pinça…Patatras ! il n’y avait plus rien, tout s’effondrait. Elle cassait un chambellan comme elle cassait un flacon ou un drageoir, et elle en faisait une ordure, un tas de boue au coin d’une borne. (1461)

In addition, my numerous conversations with Professor Bonnefis on the importance of “l’odeur” (especially in terms of Nana’s signature scent, “parfum de violettes”) and “le visage” in *Nana* have directly influenced the argument I will develop later in the chapter. As Elissa Marder pointed out, the link between Nana’s poisonous odor and the golden fleece is evocative of Medea the poisonous sorceress.

"flashed" the audience. Furthermore, the "faisant voir" qualifying her action, which we can only ambiguously translate as "showing", has a more complicated meaning. This "making seen", a more literal translation, insinuates that Nana is letting something be seen, is *showing* something that would have to deliberately be revealed or unveiled if it were to be looked at.

In *Les lieux du désir : Topologie amoureuse de Zola*, Sylvie Collot brings to light the leitmotif of the « fly away hairs" or *frisons* throughout Zola's work. The little curls on the back of the neck and temples, or in Nana's case her armpit hair, reappear as the possibility of another form of *désordre* and points to the body part covered with "messy" hair. She writes: "Dans la coiffure même, une mode appréciée ou un certain négligé, qualifié aussitôt de « débraillé de fille » - ont pour commun effet de permettre à un désordre prometteur de se faire jour; il s'agit des *frisons* ou petites mèches folle, de la nuque et des tempes le plus souvent, dont l'éparpillement, la dispersion suggère à l'homme troublé, Muffat comme Octave Mouret, Maxime comme M. de Vaugelade, la possibilité d'autres désordres. Ils évoquent, en animant une nuque fortement sexualisée, l'intime toison sexuelle toujours voilée. » In a footnote following this observation, Collot turns to the exception in the Rougon-Macquart by citing the case of Berthe in *La Terre.* In her brief comment on the discussion surrounding the fact that Berthe does not "have one", she begins to suggest that the presence of woman's "sexual fleece" is an inherent necessity for male desire to function:

> La toison sexuelle féminine fait par ailleurs l'objet, dans *La Terre,* d'une discussion révélatrice à propos du personnage de Berthe surnommée « N'en a pas » : « Elle a *ça* comme une gamine, aussi *lisse* que la main ! Parait que c'est *d'un bête*, que c'est *d'un laid*, tout nu ! comme qui dirait *le plus vilain de ces vilains petits moigneaux*, sans plumes qui ouvrent le bec, dans les nids, oh ! mais vilain, vilain, *à en dégobiller dessus.* » (*T.* IV, 478)

> Ce que masque le poil, c'est donc la blessure féminine, ce « moignon », cette cicatrice, dans son manque tragique, écœurant et excitant à la fois. Cette carence est tellement assimilée à une plaie, à un trou, que l'homme au cours du rapport devra « boucher » ou « recoudre » la femme béante (*T.* IV, 612). (12)

The hair is necessary for male desire to function without disgust. It covers over the visual horror of the lack and thus allows sexual desire to take place. Reading Nana in these terms would suggest that her sex does get represented in the novel – but through the optic of male desire. For Nana to be desirable, the horror of her sex must always be veiled.

In the same ways in which Nana is always half-covered or half-naked, Nana is also stripping by undoing and pulling up her hair. The discreet and constant presence of her hair-dresser, Francis, testifies to the amount of attention given to her hair. In her outstanding study *Coiffures*: *hair in Nineteenth-Century French literature and Culture*, Carol Fifelj indicates that woman's hair being undone usually connotes nudity and intimacy; hence, the common representations of Venus with a mass of long flowing hair. As she points out, the same dynamic is used in the nineteenth-century novel to preface a scene of intimacy[51]:

---

[51] Originating back to the Old Testament, this trope is heavily exploited in the 19th century. "In paintings, Venus is usually represented with masses of long, flowing hair; they include not only nineteenth century ones like Cabanel's, but also famous works by Botticelli, Titian and other masters... In the nineteenth century women rarely cut their hair, and the beautiful women in novels have very long hair, as we see when they remove their hairpins or combs and let it fall down. For some, the tresses come down to the shoulders; others make it even farther. Huysmans's Marthe has a curl that snakes along her dress; Villier's Hadaly and Gautier's Madeleine de Maupin have hair that falls down their backs; in Flaubert's *Novembre*, Marie's hair reaches her hips; Albine's tresses make it to the small of her back (Zola, *Faute de l'abbé Mouret*); Emma Bovary's all the way to her calves...In *Madame Bovary* Homais's young apprentice Justin has a sexual awakening when he sees Emma undo her chignon. She is at her toilette in her bedroom; and the hair rolls down in a kind of undressing: "quand il aperçut la première fois cette chevelure entière qui descendait jusqu'aux jarrets en déroulant des anneaux noirs, ce fut pour lui le pauvre enfant, comme l'entrée subite dans quelque chose d'extraordinaire et de nouveau dont la splendeur l'effraya » (285). Because it signifies woman's sexuality, the hair is alluring and frightening at the same time. The passé simple of the verbs and the phrases *la première fois, entrée subite,* and *extraordinaire et….nouveau* show that this is a sexual initiation for Justin. For the reader, the profusion of Emma's hair, falling down to her calves, is an indication of her intense sexuality." (90) Flaubert undoubtedly plays with this artistic cliché in *L'Education Sentimentale.* Famously, Mme Arnoux's grey tresses are a turn off to her young lover Frédéric.

> In the scene when she is naked in front of the mirror. Nana's chignon has become unattached. The association of long, unbound hair with eroticism and nudity often brings Zola to use the adjective *nu(e/s)*, naked, to modify nouns for hair. It covers part of the body, yet calls attention to what it hides. As we have seen, nineteenth-century hairstyles were all carefully arranged: the hair was pulled up or back to chignons, restrained by pins, combs, and other ornaments. Because it was undone only in moments of intimacy (at a woman's toilette or when she was with her husband or lover), when hair comes down in novels, it carries a strong sexual charge.[52] (90)

Nana's hair has in some ways the same function as her clothing (or lack of), which intermittently suggest, reveal and veil her nudity. Nana clearly exhibits two types of hair and when the hair which *suggests* has been pulled up, another kind is revealed and *reveals*. In this particular instance chosen by Rifelj, the scene describes that her undone chignon of blond hair covers her back with the hair of a lion: "...par derrière, son chignon de cheveux jaunes dénoué lui couvrait le dos d'un poil de lionne." (226) The undone hair which seems at first to signal Nana's nudity and then cover it, also uncovers another type of hair, and again it is *un poil*, a word typically reserved for describing the hair of an animal. Nana's hair, in its double function of veiling and unveiling, also seems to reveal another aspect of the courtesan's nudity.

As we've already begun to see in the previous two examples, the appearance of this other nudity is often accompanied by references to animality. It is primarily through her hair that Nana is associated with animality and bestiality. But we must be specific that

---

[52] Carol Rifelj reading of this scene immediately brings to mind another scene in *Nana.* After a long night entertaining her lovers when she would much prefer to be with Satin, Nana furiously shakes all the bobby pins out of her hair to get in bed more quickly with her lover:

> Mais déjà Satin, sur les peux d'ours de la chambre à coucher se roulait et l'appelait.
> « Viens donc ! viens donc ! »
> Nana se déshabilla dans le cabinet de toilette. Pour aller plus vite, elle avait pris à deux mains son épaisse chevelure blonde, elle la secouait au-dessus de la cuvette d'argent, pendant qu'une grêle de longues épingles tombait, sonnant un carillon sur le métal clair. (346)

The kind of frenzy with which Nana undoes her hair resonates in her rage-like passion for Satin. Her impatience with her *coiffure* as indicative of her sexual excitement and desire is exclusively reserved to describe her homosexual encounters. Nana never expresses that kind of intensity of desire in her heterosexual relationships.

hair and sex always remain explicitly interrelated. Both *animal* and *poil* aim at defining or rather showing something of the courtesan's sex. Nana is always made to resemble a female animal and more often than not, an animal whose name is also slang for prostitute, whore, *fille*, etc...[53] During the scene of the Longchamps races, Nana and Vandreuves' filly (who also bears the name of the courtesan) are masterfully juxtaposed, forming a powerful hybrid. The woman and the horse's movements are completely synchronized; the crowd cheers, it seems, for both the woman and the horse. Nana first recognizes her likeness to the filly by her coat, not by their common name: "On ne l'avait pas vue ainsi, le coup de soleil dorait la pouliche alezane d'une blondeur de fille rousse… « Tiens ! elle a mes cheveux ! cria Nana ravie. Dites donc, vous savez que j'en suis fière ! » » (374) As Nana voices her admiration for the horse's hair, the link with her coat evokes instead the hair of a promiscuous woman, "une fille rousse". And it is perhaps no accident that she is a filly, "a pouliche", not a mare, "a jument", since the term "pouliche" was not only slang for a young woman but also for prostitute.

The same type of suggestive naming is repeated when her hair is described as covering her back like a lion's mane: "...son chignon dénoué lui couvrait le dos d'un poil de lionne." (226). In the 19th century, "lionne" was the name given to high-class courtesans[54]. In the opening scene of the novel, as she enters the stage, her lack of talent is compared to the fretting of a hen: « L'autre, cette grosse fille qui se tapait sur les cuisses, qui gloussait comme une poule, dégageait autour d'elle une odeur de vie, une toute-puissance de femme, dont le public se grisait. » (41) "Poule", needless to say, is

[53] Already in Manet's *Nana*, a crane or "grue" appears above the head of the john, referencing the other meaning of word, prostitute, and thus qualifying the woman looking in the mirror.
[54] In "Les Français peints par eux-mêmes : encyclopédie morale du dix-neuvième siècle », a chapter is dedicated to the « lionne », described through the life of a Madame Dureynel.

also slang for prostitute and literally closer to the double meaning of *cocotte*. For the sake of one more salient example, there is of course Nana's association with a female cat, "une chatte", a term referring to the feminine sex.

In *L'innommable*, Philippe Bonnefis writes of Zola's multiple references to animals throughout the Rougon-Macquart novels. Rather than pointing to specific animals, Zola's constant references to a variety of animals actually strip the animals (and the people) of their individuality to evoke a more general bestiality: "Il n'y a pas véritablement, chez Zola, de pittoresque animalier. A de rares exceptions près, la bête se dépouille de ses traits distinctifs, s'efface derrière la bestialité. Toutes figures dissipées, reste seulement cette horloge du bestiaire qui fait entendre son martèlement monotone. » (32) Nana's multiplied associations with the bestiary of sex do indeed turn her into a more general beast. Muffat's long contemplation of Nana ends with a concluding, definitive and yet vague qualification of her as a beast and animal: "...il y avait de la bête. C'était la bête d'or...Muffat regardait toujours, obsédé, possédé, au point qu'ayant fermé les paupières pour ne plus voir, l'animal reparut au fond des ténèbres… » (1271).

A quick interpretation of these animal/prostitute associations, and certainly part of Zola's intent in the creation of these associations, is their role in characterizing Nana as nothing more than a sexual animal. Most editions of the novel cite Zola's famous reference to *Nana* as the story of a bitch followed by a pack of dogs: "Le sujet de Nana est celui-ci: "Toute une société se ruant sur le cul. Une meute derrière une chienne, qui n'est pas en chaleur et qui se moque des chiens qui la suivent.» [55] The metaphor of the hunt, evoked in the description of the men as a pack of hounds, suggests another animal commonly hunted: the doe or in French "biche", another term tied to the bestiary of

[55] Quoted by Henri Mitterand in Gallimard's 2002 preface to *Nana,* p. 15.

prostitution. With the connotation of the words “chienne” and “biche” or any of the slang translations of the animals previously mentioned (pussy for *chatte*, loose woman for *cocotte* and *poule*, courtesan for *lionne* and whore for *pouliche)*, these terms would seem to suggest specifically that Nana is an animal in heat, or is always in heat like an animal. But Zola’s stressed disassociation of “chienne” and “chaleur” troubles the ways in which we are to understand Nana as a character. Surprisingly, this bitch is not in heat. On the one hand, the first biological interpretation of the term, suggesting that Nana is not ovulating or will not reproduce, is consistent with her chosen profession. Sex with a prostitute is not meant to induce sexual reproduction. Though Nana has a son, Louiset, the novel suggests that he wasn’t born from an encounter with a client.[56] Since she is an established courtesan, the scene of her miscarriage confirms the complete dissociation implied between the sexuality of a prostitute and the one of an “honest” woman. It is as if these two women had completely different anatomies, one with and one without the ability to reproduce. The men who learn of Nana’s short pregnancy are surprised, not by her inability to carry a child to term but by the ridiculous idea that she could get pregnant in the first place: “Puis, ils arrondissaient le dos, ça ne les regardait pas, ça venait d’elle; hein? Epatante cette Nana ! Jamais on n’aurait cru à une pareille blague de sa part ! » (390) Finding its biology at odds with its function, Nana also imagines her sex as divorced from its animal reproductive functions: « Et elle avait une continuelle surprise,

---

[56] Even Louiset however appears as a still-born. Always sick and mute, he appears as a piece of discarded flesh in contrast to the life exuded by his mother: « Il marchait sur ses trois ans, ça faisait un gaillard. Mais il avait eu un eczéma sur la nuque, et maintenant des dépôts se formaient dans ses oreilles, ce qui faisait craindre une carie des os du crâne. Quand elle le voyait si pâle, le sang gâté, avec sa chair molle, tâchée de jaune, elle devenait sérieuse ; et il y avait surtout chez elle de l’étonnement. Que pouvait-il avoir, cet amour, pour s’abîmer ainsi ? Elle, sa mère, se portait si bien ! (436) Louiset appears much like a skeleton and decomposing corpse in this description. The cadaverous presence he maintains throughout the novel is often striking and disturbing. Nana’s own surprise at the sight of her son, is echoed by the same surprise during the scene of her miscarriage.

comme dérangée dans son sexe; ça faisait donc des enfants, même lorsqu'on ne voulait plus et qu'on employait ça à d'autres affaires?» (389)

Through another omission in Fauchery's article, we can give another layer of meaning to Zola's insistence that "the bitch is not in heat". As such, Nana is not an example of animal sexuality in its reproductive implications. Upon her first appearance, the success of her stage presence is tied to the animal sexuality emanating from her and yet something else unsettles this classification. Nana appears as something other than animal, or as more animal than animals: "Quelques mains battirent, toutes les jumelles étaient fixes sur Vénus. Peu à peu, Nana avait pris possession du public, et maintenant chaque homme la subissait. Le rut qui montait d'elle, ainsi que d'une bête en folie, s'était épandu toujours d'avantage, emplissant la salle. » (48) Rather than necessarily reference a physiological state, *le rut* becomes in this case a noun-adjective used to describe the sickening and maddening odor of her sex and its effects on men, not watching this time, but inhaling its presence. Nana is not in heat or rather, does not need to be in heat to produce sexual excitement. That is the power of her sex. The odor of Nana's sex, incarnated by this *rut*, is precisely that which cannot be veiled; it is precisely the only part of her anatomy which cannot be covered. So while the spectators' may not have seen Venus's sex, they have certainly smelled it.

Bordenave had actually predicted the success of his play by betting on the strong odor emanating from the dreadful actress: "Est-ce qu'une femme a besoin de savoir jouer et chanter? Ah! mon petit, tu es trop bête...Nana a autre chose, parbleu! et quelque chose qui remplace tout. Je l'ai flairée, c'est joliment fort chez elle, ou je n'ai plus que le nez d'un imbécile. » (1098) His chosen metaphor to reference Nana's sex appeal is

nevertheless, as we've already seen, a literal description of her sex. It is the Count Muffat who is always most troubled and even indisposed by Nana's "feminine odors": " Un moment, craignant de défaillir dans cette odeur de femme qu'il retrouvait, chauffée, décuplée sous le plafond bas, il s'assit au bord du divan capitonné, entre les deux fenêtres. Mais il se releva tout de suite, retourna près de la toilette, ne regarda plus rien, les yeux vagues, songeant à un bouquet de tubéreuses, qui s'était fané dans sa chambre autrefois, et dont il avait failli mourir. Quand les tubéreuses se décomposent, elles ont une odeur humaine. » (152) The smell which had earlier spread and filled the theater is concentrated in Nana's dressing room, causing the count to feel ill. The physiological power of her odor is quickly accompanied by a threat as evoked by Muffat's association of her smell with the smell of wilted flowers, those famous "tubéreuses", which had once almost killed him. The bouquet which should have masked the scent of human odor reveals instead a dangerous and potentially deadly stench.[57]

The odors which populate the novel and particularly surround Nana are distinct in the ways in which they appear as a threat to those who cannot avoid entering into contact with them; they are inevitably inhaled. Though they are not always necessarily bad smells, they never attain the pleasant connotation of perfume. They are always troubling, menacing odors, and there is a clear difference between the two. Even the description of her signature scent, Nana's "parfum de violettes"[58], is specifically referred to as an "odor of violets": « Et, dans cette pièce toute pleine de la vie intime de Nana…on la trouvait au

[57] Jean Borie notes in *Zola et les Mythes* that women in Zola are primarily revelead through their smell: "Pour Zola, la femme se révèle par son odeur, et c'est même le critère de l'œuvre réaliste que de s'incorporer cette odeur. Comme le dit le sculpteur Mahoudeau avant de se mettre au travail, dans un moment de fièvre créatrice : « Tu verras si ça pue la femme » (l'*Œuvre,* R.M. IV, p. 67). » (115)

[58] It is not surprising that Zola gives violet perfume as Nana's signature scent The "parfum de violettes" was made famous by the empress Josephine and the perfume became a 19th century fad. Nana is also after all empress of her own "demi-monde".

déshabillé, avec son odeur de violette… » (1368) But this pleasant odor only thinly veils a more a threatening, aggressive and « sharper » odor : « Sur la toilette, les bouquets, des roses, des lilas, des jacinthes, mettaient comme un écroulement de fleurs, d'un parfum pénétrant et fort; tandis que, dans l'air moite, dans la fadeur exhale des cuvettes, trainait par instants une odeur plus aiguë, quelques brins de patchouli sec, brisés menu au fond d'une coupe.» (1137) The perfume given off by the flowers is interrupted by the random intrusion of another odor reminiscent of human odor: patchouli. For Muffat, all odor appears as simultaneously feminine and threatening. If we could play on words, *odor di femmina* becomes *orror di femmina*.[59]

As Philippe Bonnefis writes in *Parfums: Son nom de Bel-Ami*, « l'odeur » in Zola has a powerfully unsettling presence. It is tyrannical: constantly undermining what sight had previously thought assimilated and/or conquered: "...l'odeur c'est un fait, tyrannise la vue... l'odeur, au surplus, a en elle-même quelque chose d'infernal. Un je ne sais quoi qui fait immédiatement craquer les coutures de l'âme. Qui menace l'être dans ses fondements, démesure l'espace de sa condition chimique. » (46) Nana as the constant object of the gaze, a gaze constantly stripping her bare, still resists satisfying the scopophilic desire which dominates the novel. Though it is true that we see her everywhere, the smell which also follows her everywhere points to something that cannot be seen, to a truth which cannot be exposed. Nana's smell is the sign of danger: "l'odeur est désordre, et elle l'est par essence. Est puissance de chaos. » (46). The danger is real, disrupting the workings of the body, rendering its victim unable to order the world he inhabits. As we've already seen, under the spell of Nana's "odor", Muffat almost faints

[59] I couldn't help borrowing this play on words from Jacqueline Rousseau-Dujardin book *Orror di Femina: la peur qu'inspirent les femmes.*

and loses control of the stabilizing sense of sight. Muffat's world or "space", to borrow from Shakespeare, is "out of joint" as soon as the odor of Nana seeps into his sphere.

Emitting something like an airborne virus, Nana's vagina appears as a miasmatic threat. In his article, Fauchery uses the lexicon of physical decomposition to discuss the impact of her corruption claiming that the problem at hand is as biological as it is social. In *Feux et Signaux de Brume*, Michel Serres remarks that Fauchery's theoretical exposé on social law and order is written in terms of physiological processes:

> Ici, l'article dit la loi. Y circulent quatre liquides, le sang et l'alcool, d'une part, la neige et le lait, de l'autre. Or le sang pourrit et se gâte, comme tourne le lait. Ils s'arrêtent de circuler, ils coagulent, caillent. S'immobilisent, pris. Et, dès lors, se corrompent. Pourrissent, fermentent, comme l'alcool l'a fait, deviennent ordure, fumier charogne. Charogne et fumier, bien assurément, puisque le sang, le lait, l'alcool sont des liquides organiques…Voici la mouche d'or…Elle circule, se répand, élargit le cercle de la contagion. Le mal court. Par essence, il circule. Il fait la passe, par le tact. La mouche touche, la passade. Et le virus est déposé. (239)

Though Serres brilliantly notes the biological implications of Fauchery's article, it is to immediately use the notion of virus as allegorical of moral, social, and economic decay. Rather than plunge back into the allegorical signification of the article, I would like to return to it in order to reexamine the ways in which the text resists a reductive allegorization of her sex. In a tangible way, Nana's sex is described as a biological entity in the sense that she functions according to certain scientific tenets. And yet, the term "biology" doesn't seem adequate when speaking of Nana. If "biology" is the science of life, Nana's sex can only be understood by the science of death, thanatology. As such, I would argue that the characteristics of Nana's sex owe a lot to 19th century miasmatic theory which claimed that "all odor is illness" and "all illness is odor"[60]: "La théorie

[60] In *Organic Memory: History and the Body in the Late Nineteenth & Early Twentieth Centuries*, Laura Otis discusses the ways in which Zola often incorporated such scientific theories as metaphors for other

miasmatique postulait que "toute odeur est maladie" et "toute maladie est odeur" non comme une esthétique, mais comme une sémantique de l'odorat. Les odeurs n'offusquaient pas tant une sensibilité exacerbée par de nouvelles conventions sociales qu'elles révélaient les processus chimiques invisibles de décomposition de la matière végétales et animale… » (Jorland, 206)[61] Her "feminine odor" no longer belongs to the realm of the artifice, as her violet perfume would have, but as manifestation of the scientific principle of decomposition. There is something inherently terrifying, something which evokes death, in the smell of Nana's vagina simply in the fact that it has an odor.

With Nana as "la chair centrale", occupying the novel with all her *aplomb*, it is easy to forget that other feminine bodies even inhabit the novel. However, when they do they shock in the ways in which they share attributes so closely associated with Nana. Despite the plurality of women, the feminine sex remains singular. The other courtesans,

---

forms of corruption. In her discussion of *L'Assommoir* she writes of the contagious Parisian air which contributed to Nana's mother's degeneration:

> Zola's Gervaise, who degenerated from a good-natured and conscientious worker into a degraded alcoholic, responded to both hereditary and environmental pressures. In the passage quoted here, a disease ridden environment, the slums of Paris, "infected" her, eventually activating her innate pathological burden. In this case, Zola employed two metaphors in parallel, one so common in the discourse of degeneration that one scarcely recognizes it as a metaphor: the physical filth of the clothes represent the moral filth of the neighborhood, and her contact with this filth, which "poisons the air" in more ways than one, represent her contact with the more insidious moral filth. (42-43)

[61] Nana is inscribed into the landscape of miasma. The Paris which she inhabits is none other than a swamp: a miasmatic, poisonous and putrid city: "Les soirs humides, lorsque Paris mouillé exhalait une odeur fade de grande alcôve mal tenue, elle savait que ce temps mou, cette fétidité des coins louches enrageaient les hommes. » (275) The most "miasmatic" spaces in the novel, are of course none other than the ones occupied by women like Nana and Satin, the theater and the bedroom. Though the bedroom seems like an evident conclusion, the theater is more surprising but seems to have been a historical reality. Among Antoine Lavoisier's work on dietary hygiene, waterways, animal magnetism, hygienic conditions in prisons and hospitals, we also find specific observations about lighting in cities and theaters: "Ici, c'est Lavoisier qui, paraissant faire trêves à ses immortels travaux, vient s'asseoir dans nos salles de spectacles; mais, étranger aux jeux de la scène, il y vient étudier l'altération progressive de l'air, qui vicient les émanation de ce peuple qui, entraîné par le plaisir, se livre, avec insouciance, aux dangers qu'il crée lui-même, et ne soupçonne pas que le génie veille auprès de lui pour les lui signaler et en neutraliser les effets!".[61 61] (cited by Jorland from A. Guérard, "Considérations générales sur l'hygiène", *AHPML,* 1er s. t. XXVII, 1842, pp. 43-75 ; citation pp. 43-44.)

prostitutes and actresses also invade and infest the novel with the smell of their sex: "Le comte Muffat, pris de sueur, venait de retirer son chapeau; ce qui l'incommodait surtout, c'était l'étouffement de l'air, épaissi, surchauffé, où traînait une odeur forte, cette odeur de coulisse, puant le gaz, la colle des décors, la saleté des coins sombres, les dessous douteux des figurantes. Dans le couloir la suffocation augmentait encore ; des aigreurs d'eaux de toilettes, des parfums de savons descendus des loges, y coupaient par instants l'empoisonnement des haleines…les continuels battements lâchaient des senteurs de femme, le musc des fards mêlé à la rudesse fauve des chevelures. » (1206) As a source to the suffocating effect of the theater, Muffat identifies (amongst other emanations) the underwear of the extras which even the perfumes, soaps and *eaux de toilettes* cannot mask. At the top of the stairs, Muffat almost faints: « En haut, au quatrième, il étouffait. Toutes les odeurs, toutes les flammes venaient frapper là : le plafond jaune semblait cuit, une lanterne brûlait dans un brouillard roussâtre. Un instant, il se tint à la rampe de fer, qu'il trouva tiède d'une tiédeur vivante, et il ferma les yeux, et il but dans une aspiration tout le sexe de la femme, qu'il ignorait encore et qui lui battait le visage. » (1223)

But we know, through Bordenave's own admission, that the smell of Nana's sex is "pretty strong", *joliement fort*. According to the laws of miasmatic theory, the contamination power of her sex is therefore the strongest. This first translates itself in the ways in which she strips others of their humanity, as if it were animality itself which were contagious. She turns men into dogs[62]. But it is foremost Muffat, the man who perhaps had not been inoculated through enough contact with women (since we know of

[62] Georges Hugon is especially described as Nana's puppy : « …et Georges, très gris, très excité par la vue de Nana, hésita devant une idée qu'il mûrissait gravement, celle de se mettre à quatre pattes, sous la table, et d'aller se blottir à ses pieds, ainsi qu'un petit chien. Personne ne l'aurait vu, il y serait resté bien sage. » (123)

his late virginity), who is most drastically transformed by Nana.[63] Taking pleasure in the constant debasing games she puts him through, Muffat experiences a radical rupture with his own fundamental beliefs of what it means to be human and civilized:

> Les anciennes épouvantes dévotes de leur nuit d'insomnie tournaient maintenant en une soif de bestialité, une fureur de se mettre à quatre pattes, de grogner et de mordre…elle le traita en animal, le fouailla, le poursuivit à coup de pied.
> « Hue donc ! hue donc ! Tu es le cheval…Dia, hue ! sale rosse, veux-tu marcher!"
> D'autres fois, il était un chien…Elle lui aimait sa bassesse, goûtait de la jouissance d'être une brute. Il aspirait encore à descendre, il criait :
> « Tape plus fort…Hou ! hou! Je suis enragé, tape donc ! » (1461)

Their shared furious need for bestiality, to sink to the lowest ideological and physical states, points not only to her ability to contaminate but to her own contamination. Louiset and the miscarried child do suggest that Nana, despite her health, is carrier of something deadly, an illness perhaps, of a sexual nature: from her insides appear dead or dying children, and that strong and disturbing odor surfaces. Also, it would be hard to forget Nana's lover, Satin, who we know had contracted an unidentified illness from Madame Robert and died in "bad shape", *dans un fichu état,* at Lariboisière. It is interesting to note that the narrative and diegetic chronologies allow for two different accounts of Nana's last visit to Satin. Diegetically, we know that Nana does not become sick right after visiting Satin at the hospital since she leaves France for a few months. However, within the novel's own chronology, Nana's leaves her house to say her last goodbyes to Satin at the end of chapter XIII in very good health, and in the opening sequence of chapter XIV, she has returned dying of a very contagious disease which the novel identifies as

[63] Before the game turned violent, Muffat and Nana amused themselves by acting like animals: "Elle l'amusait en ours, avec sa peau blanche et sa crinière de poils roux. Il riait, il se mettait aussi à quatre pattes, grognait, lui mordait les mollets, pendant qu'elle se sauvait, en affectant des mines d'effroi." (445). Later, the modifying « acting like » an animal is replaced by a genuine becoming, an instinctive need to become animal.

smallpox. One can only wonder what and if she had caught something there at Lariboisière in the last kiss given to Satin: “Elle restait grosse, elle restait grasse, d’une belle santé, d’une belle gaieté....et elle partit en grande toilette pour embrasser Satin une dernière fois, propre, solide, l’air tout neuf, comme si elle n’avait pas servi.” (1470) Nevertheless, the stressed « order » qualifying Nana’s appearance « *propre, solide, l’air tout neuf, comme si elle n’avait pas servi*. » is replaced, in the final chapter, by a marked disorder. As Rose Mignon attempts to leave the defunct’s room “en ordre”, it seems *hélas* that no true order can be brought to the chaos of the dead woman’s face: “...Rose donna un dernier coup d’oeil pour laisser la pièce en ordre. Elle tira un rideau devant la fenêtre; puis, elle songea que cette lampe n’était pas convenable, il fallait un cierge; et, après avoir allumé l’un des flambeaux de cuivre de la cheminée, elle le posa sur la table de nuit, à côté du corps. Une lumière vive éclaira brusquement le visage de la morte. Ce fut une horreur. » (1485)

2. Displaced Anatomy

Before speculating on the significations of the illness chosen by Zola to kill off his protagonist, I would like to linger on a last observation with regards to the associations created among odor, illness and Nana’s sex. As a contagious entity, her sex is a threat twice as menacing due to its intangible nature. The veil which had previously managed to cover her sex is unable to contain it. Worse, this sex cannot be isolated, precisely located or “bottled-up” and thus cannot be controlled. As Nana’s armpit hair had begun suggesting, her sex is everywhere and has very little to do with the expected (maybe even “naturalist”) representation of a woman’s anatomy; in any case, the kind of sex which

would appear in a particular place (in between her thighs), at a particular time (during a scene of intimacy) is not the one which appears in the novel. Thus the affirmation that Nana's sex remains veiled or absent throughout the novel is in this analysis turned into a question. In what ways is Nana's sex unveiled? The noted reactions of the men within the novel suggest that they actually may have *seen* this sex so invisible to many readers. Their ability to *see* suggests that perhaps critics and characters are not reading a woman's body in the same ways or are not looking in the same places. In this novel which has so much to do with specularity, where a woman's body is constantly scrutinized and interpreted, one must look everywhere to find a woman's sex.

In an often cited scene[64], Fauchery speculates on Sabine Muffat's sex and sexuality through his observation of a little mole the countess has on the left side of her face, on the corner of her mouth. As read by Fauchery, the mole or beauty mark (depending on how we choose to translate "signe") is a marker of sexuality, a place from which a woman's sex and sexuality can be read. Despite her sepulchral home, pious husband, and dinner party guests which should point to her complete lack of sexuality, the incongruous little detail on her face suggests otherwise to Fauchery as he continues to suspect that beneath her propriety lies a repressed sexual appetite. He finds in her mole the first hint of her dormant desires: "Mais un signe qu'il aperçut à la joue gauche de la comtesse, près de la

[64] In Zola's Crowds, Schor briefly discusses this scene and points out that Fauchery's observation of Sabine's mole, besides being validated in the novel's plot since he becomes her lover, is also reiterated both by Nana and Count Muffat. Nana claims to know that Sabine is not any better than her. She claims to have a discerning eye for these sorts of things: "Tiens! Je m'en doutais, dit Nana. Eh bien! Mon cher, elle a beau être comtesse, c'est une pas-grand-chose...Oui, oui, une pas-grand-chose…Vous savez, j'ai l'œil moi. Maintenant, je la connais comme si je l'avais faite, votre comtesse…Voulez-vous parier qu'elle couche avec cette vipère de Fauchery ?...Je vous dis qu'elle y couche ! On sent bien ça, entre femmes. » (204) As for Count Muffat, Schor notes that the discovery of his wife's affair prompts obsessive thought in which Nana and Sabine are constantly equated: "...if Sabine, like Nana is attractive to other men, then Sabine = nana as *objects of desire*..."Des images chaudes le poursuivaient. Nana nue, brusquement, évoqua Sabine nue. A cette vision qui les rapprochait dans une parenté d'impudeur, sous un même souffle de désir, il trébucha" [p. 1278]. (100)

bouche, le surprit. Nana avait le même absolument. C'était drôle. Sur le signe, de petits poils frisaient; seulement, les poils blonds de Nana étaient chez l'autre d'un noir de jais. N'importe, cette femme ne couchait avec personne. » (85) The use of the conjunction « but » which introduces the description of the mole suggests a contrast unexpected in light of what we already know about the countess, namely that she is not the type of woman to take on lovers. But as we see, the mole creates an unexpected resemblance between the countess and the courtesan, suggesting perhaps that these two women may have more in common than expected. Finally, the "whatever" which closes the paragraph and description of the mole suggests that the mole, which *should* have indicated something about the countess and her sexual habits, is this time misleading.

However, the countess's mole does not cease to fascinate Fauchery and remains linked to his speculations with regards to her sexuality throughout the entire chapter.[65] Sabine's mole has the same appearance and effect as the "mouche galante", the cosmetic beauty mark so popular in the 18th century. As Patrick Wald Lasowski writes in *Le Traité des mouches secrètes*, like Sabine's mole, the "mouche galante" communicates with its

---

[65] In his analysis of the portrait in Zola, Philippe Bonnefis writes of the ways in which the zolian portrait is built upon a semiotic discordance. Though the portrait is undoubtedly "visible" as well as "lisible", it is through the existence of an unexpected "signe" (term which applies in its multiple significations in the case of Sabine Muffat) that a reading can take place. Using the case of Christine in *L'Oeuvre,* he points to the discordance in her face which is nevertheless the exact element that succeeds in creating her portrait:

> Quant à l'efficacité de l'opération, l'on n'en décidera qu'après l'examen. Soit donc, pour étude, le portrait de Christine dans *L'œuvre*. « Le haut était d'une grande bonté, d'une grande douceur, le front limpide, uni comme un clair miroir, le nez petit, aux fines ailes nerveuses ; et l'on sentait le sourire des yeux sous les paupières, un sourire qui devait illuminer toute la face. Seulement, le bas gâtait ce rayonnement de tendresse, la mâchoire avançait, les lèvres trop fortes saignaient, montrant des dents solides et blanches. C'était comme un coup de passion, la puberté grondante et qui s'ignorait, dans ces traits noyés, d'une délicatesse enfantine. » Le haut du visage ne s'applique pas au bas. Il y a asymétrie, il y a incompatibilité. L'incompatibilité découverte n'en est pas moins logiquement maîtrisée, cependant, puisqu'elle signifie. Après tout, c'est bien à ce signalement-là qu'on reconnaît Christine. A cette différence que le signe ainsi produit n'est signe que d'être celui de l'impossible articulation de deux systèmes de signes entre eux. Il est au signe ce que serait une cicatrice sur un corps sans défaut, signe de ce qui ressort, de ce qui fait saillie, et qui effectivement refait saillie à chaque nouvelle apparition du personnage. (108)

onlooker, first claiming the gaze through its "spectacularity" and second by revealing something intimate, formerly illegible: "Sur le visage, les mouches affichent le journal intime du corps, retourné au-dehors, rendu à sa nature spectaculaire. Exposé en objet de spectacle, le sujet est distrait de lui-même, et fait tourner les têtes. Il fuit son identité, son être responsable." (85) In fact, as Fauchery continues to arrive at different conclusions, her mole becomes the marker of a possibility he incessantly returns to because actually, this mole is also very strategically placed "au coin des lèvres". According to the nine positions possible for a "mouche galante", the one on the corner of the lips was named la *Baiseuse*,[66] leaving no doubt plenty to Fauchery's imagination.

> Pourtant, il s'oubliait de nouveau à regarder la comtesse Sabine. Elle se reposait de ses soins de maitresse de maison, à sa place accoutumée, muette, les yeux sur un tison qui se consumait en braise, le visage si blanc et si fermé, qu'il était repris de doute. Dans la lueur du foyer, les poils noirs du signe qu'elle avait au coin des lèvres blondissaient. Absolument le signe de Nana, jusqu'à la couleur. Il ne put s'empêcher d'en dire un mot à l'oreille de Vandreuves. C'était ma foi vrai; jamais celui-ci ne l'avait remarqué. Et tous les deux continuèrent le parallèle entre Nana et la comtesse. Ils leur trouvaient une vague ressemblance…
> « Tout de même on coucherait avec », déclara Fauchery.
> Vandreuves la déshabillait du regard.
> « Oui, tout de même, dit-il… » (1163)

Just when Fauchery determines that she indeed does not have any lovers, the mole again disturbs his conclusion, especially as the curly hairs growing out of it turn blond and become exactly like Nana's (and Nana's blond *poil* was a titillating revelation). Interestingly, Fauchery doesn't quite say that her mole or "signe" is *like* Nana's but rather states that she bears Nana's "signe". The mole signals Nana's sexuality, translatable as a

---

[66] "Le siècle reconnaît effectivement neuf mouches, neuf muses galantes, dont les noms peuvent parfois changer. Elles correspondent chacune à une position particulière, fixée selon les lois de la coquetterie. Leçon de la modiste ou du maître de ballet :

Celle qu'on met près de l'œil est la *Passionnée*. Au coin de la bouche, c'est la *Baiseuse*. Sur les lèvres, la *Coquette*. Au nez, l'*Effrontée*. Sur le front, la *Majestueuse*. En dessous de l'œil, c'est l'Assassin. Aux fossettes, l'*Enjouée*. A la lèvre inférieure, la *Discrète*. La *Voleuse* sert à couvrir un bouton." (*Le Traité des mouches secrètes*, 92)

promiscuous sexuality. The men arrive at the conclusion that she may after all take a lover.

We can infer from Fauchery's reading of Sabine that Nana's body has also been careful read. As indicated by Beizer, Nana's body is very much a text and signifying corpus: "Seeking to satisfy his prurient curiosity about the Countess Sabine's morality, Fauchery notices that she has a mole ("un signe") on her left cheek exactly like one Nana has. He reads this identifying mark as a sign of Sabine's potential depravity, deducing that her morality may be as similar to Nana's as her mole." (48) However, as the "signe" signifies, it also signals the presence of a sex which first seemed inexistent: "...elle menait depuis son marriage une existence cloîtrée, entre son mari et sa belle-mère. Dans le monde, les uns la disaient d'une froideur de dévote, les autres la plaignaient… » (1148)

If we scoured Zola's novel for another mention of a mole on Nana's face, we'd be hard pressed to find one exactly. In fact, though another mole appears on Nana, it is certainly not on her face.[67] The mole discreetly, and briefly, appears on Nana's hip. The appearance, or revelation, of her little brown mole seems implicitly tied to the moment at which it appears. In other words, it seems as though this mole could only appear, in the mirror, during a scene of insular and solitary sexual pleasure. In fact, though Muffat is present during the entire scene, it is not at all clear that even sees the mole (but we will return to this). Nana's frequent habit of stripping and passionately gazing at and touching of her body evokes a kind of foreplay. But in this case, the spectator, Muffat, is subjected

[67] In Zola's original sketch of Nana, she did not have moles or beauty marks but a certain number of freckles: "Blonde, rose, figure parisienne, très éveillée, le nez légèrement retroussé, la bouche petite et rieuse, un petit trou au menton, les yeux bleus très clairs, avec des cils d'or. Quelques taches de sons qui reviennent l'été, mais très rares, cinq ou six sur chaque tempe comme de parcelles d'or. » (cited from «Dossier Documentaire: Fiches-Personnages (Folios 191-193),» in Zola, Emile. *Nana*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 1994.

to it, not treated to it, because he is excluded from it. Captivated by the mirror and her reflection, Nana becomes her own spectator, simultaneously seducing and being seduced: "Un des plaisirs de Nana était de *se* déshabiller en face de *son* armoire à glace, où elle *se* voyait en pied. Elle faisait tomber jusqu'à *sa* chemise; puis, toute nue, elle *s'*oubliait, elle *se* regardait longuement. C'était une passion de *son* corps, un ravissement du satin[68] de *sa* peau et de la ligne souple de *sa* taille, qui la tenait sérieuse, attentive, absorbée dans un amour d'elle-même… Alors Muffat se fâchait, et elle restait surprise. Que lui prenait-il? Ce n'était pas pour les autres, c'était pour elle. » (*my emphasis* 224) The stressed use of the possessive and reflexive suggest that Nana is at once the subject and object of her own desire. Muffat is only intermittently present to Nana as an agent of disruption of her "plaisir solitaire". It isn't surprising then, that Muffat's reflection never appears in Nana's mirror, since his desire and pleasure cannot occupy this scene.

We must be clear then that two types of desires are staged in the mirror scene. The scene itself could and should be divided into two parts. There is the last part, often and already discussed, where it is through Muffat's gaze and desire that Nana's sex does not appear. But before this oft studied passage is the scene which stages Nana's own desire. After putting down Fauchery's article, to which we will return shortly, Muffat's gaze is immediately directed at her attentive and playful fingering of a little brown "signe": "Alors, il leva les yeux. Nana s'était absorbée dans son ravissement d'elle-même. Elle pliait le cou, regardant avec attention dans la glace un petit signe brun, qu'elle avait au-dessus de la hanche droite; et elle le touchait du bout du doigt, elle le faisait saillir en se renversant d'avantage, le trouvant sans doute drôle et joli, à cette place. » (225) This little brown « signe », which we know to be a mole or more

commonly in the French a « grain de beauté », is nevertheless given, in the novel, this ambiguous homonym. In this particular context, Nana's "signe" signifies or points to the presence of another "little mole" which more commonly "bulges" or juts out (saillit) when touched by the tip of one's finger (touché du bout du doigt), namely, the clitoris. It is perhaps not an accident either, that from the "signe", the novel tells us that she continues to study "other parts of her body": "Puis, elle étudia d'autres parties de son corps, amusée, reprise de ses curiosités vicieuses d'enfant." (225) The "other body parts" studied, though un-named, are suggestive of her genitalia by their coupling with the awakening of a child's sexuality. Clearly, the scene of contemplation is more like a masturbatory episode: [69]an event most frustrating, most infuriating, most castrating for the male observer....

Though the text suggests that Muffat witnesses this self-satisfied and satisfying sexual rapture, "son ravissement d'elle-même", as she plays with her "signe", he remains radically isolated from the act he is supposedly witnessing. Between the first two sentences of the paragraph a gap decidedly appears: "Alors, il leva les yeux. Nana s'était

---

[69] A more overt masturbatory version of this scene was written by Henry Céard in one of five sketches he gifted Zola, after the latter had consulted him for anecdotes and stories around the world of Parisian prostitution. Henry Mitterand points out in his presentation of *Nana* in the Pléiade's *Les Rougon-Macquart*, to what extent Zola has borrowed from Céard's sketches. But Céard's version of this scene, in the third sketch, is decidedly more obvious in the depiction of the masturbation:

> C'était un plaisir des longues soirées d'hiver. Dans un appartement capitonné de soie d'une teinte expirante, le lustre et les appliques allumés au milieu de la nuit factice des rideaux tirés, elle se coiffait, longuement. Et tandis que son amant, sur un canapé bas, s'étendait en fumant de rêveuses cigarette, elle, les jambes chaussées de bas mauves envahissant à demi les cuisses, les pieds bottinés jusqu'à mi-jambe, le ventre nu, le torse nu, la gorge nue, elle s'approchait de son armoire à glace, et souriait au grand feu. Et doucement, comme savourant la splendeur de son corps, perdue dans la contemplation des lignes correctes de sa chair, d'un geste voluptueux, elle s'envoyait d'amoureuses salves de baisers. Peu à peu, peu à peu, la main descendait, et pendant que le visage prenait une sensuelle expression de douleur, c'était dans le miroir à double biseau, le rondissement de doigts, et la grâce lesbienne d'une Vénus de Médicis obscène. (quoted by Mittérand in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, p.1681)

We could observe right away that while Céard more overtly refers to the courtesan's masturbation through the slow slipping of her hands "peu à peu, peu à peu" and the curling of the fingers, the same hands and fingers also cover over the sex being touched. As Nana's cheveux/poil paradigm has indicated, the same object simultaneously hides and reveals.

absorbée dans son ravissement d'elle-même." Though Muffat looks up, he never sees her. At least we are not told what he sees. Instead, it is through Nana's own gaze that her body and her sex appear in the mirror. And ironically, it is Nana's own finger which points to the sex we thought we couldn't see and that Muffat never sees. This scene, where Nana finds herself pleased and surprised by the discovery of her "signe', differs from Muffat's own experience which can be qualified by a lack of discovery. Whatever he may or may not have been able to see, we can be sure that he does not see the kind of sex which would fulfill his desire. Represented through a "signe", Nana has a sex without that tubular tract, the part of a woman's genitalia which makes a male partner "necessary". Instead, all there is of Nana's sex is the clitoris, not surprisingly the only visible portion of the feminine sex. So while we could read the absence of Nana's vaginal opening as a specific instance of its characterization as a "non-sex"[70], it wouldn't be an adequate reading of this scene. There is a sex there, the problem for Muffat is that it is a self-satisfied and self-satisfying sex. Borrowing from Luce Irigary, we could say that Muffat in fact wishes for nothing more than for the presence of a « non-sex », of « a hole-envelop to sheath and massage his penis »[71].[72] Instead, it is him who finds himself without a sex, radically cut off from hers.

The physical "signe" on Nana's body finds its textual equivalent in Fauchery's article as the "fly" or "mouche". In the multiple definitions of "signe", we find its

[70] As discussed in Luce Irigaray's seminal "Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un".

[71] « Les zones érogènes de la femme ne seraient jamais qu'un sexe-clitoris, qui ne soutient pas la comparaison avec l'organe phallique valeureux, ou un trou-enveloppe qui fait gaine et frottement autour du pénis dans le coit : un non-sexe, ou un sexe masculin retourné de lui-même pour s'auto-affecter. » (23)

[72] I should clarify here, at the risk of falling into the trap zolian critics often fall into according to Naomi Schor in "Le sourire du Sphinx: Zola et l'enigme de la féminité", that I am not even attempting to suggest that femininity is a given for Zola. In a gesture closer to Schor's, I hope to underline the incredibly complex nature of feminine sexuality and to discuss the ways in which its power is difficulty articulated within the novel.

definition of a "natural mark on the skin", something like a mole as I've so far translated the thing. But we also find it as synonym of "mouche" for the little circle of black velour or taffeta imitating the beauty mark (or mole) worn by women.[73] In this way, Fauchery's reading of Nana's degenerative influence on French society is traced directly back to her sex through a network of word associations. If "mouche" is just another word for Nana's sex, it is thus specifically sexual contact with Nana which Fauchery warns against. She is transmitting a disease, "une force de la nature, un ferment de destruction", corrupting and disorganizing Paris from her snowy thighs. As such, her "signe" is authorized yet another definition, the one of symptom this time. As if her sex were always already a manifestation of an illness, by the end of the novel, the mole/fly/sign/signe/clitoris/ beauty mark take the form of a pustule, the "sign" of small pox.

II. Signs of death

To the many that have looked into the mirror to find a trace of Nana's sex, I would suggest using a microscope. For it is first in the infinite details of her body that her sex, or rather portions of her genitalia appear. As the discreet detail that tells all, the "signe" printed onto the body functions as the novel's vanishing point. Nana and the novel converge at this "signe", rich in its implications. It is at once sex, sexuality, femininity, corruption and illness that meet there. At the moment of her death, it is thus obvious that no autopsy is needed (as in the case of Emma Bovary). The novel ends with

[73] In *Le Trésor de la langue française,* here is one of the definitions given for mouche : Petit rond de taffetas ou de velours noirs, ou d'un point de crayon spécial, imitant le grain de beauté, que les femmes se mettaient parfois sur le visage ou sur le décolleté par coquetterie ou pour rehausser la blancheur de leur peau

a close-up reading of Nana's face[74], covered in "signes" which this time take the name of "pustules" and "boutons":

> Nana restait seule, la face en l'air, dans la clarté de la bougie. C'était un charnier, un tas d'humeur et de sang, une pelletée de chair corrompue, jetée là, sur un coussin. Les pustules avaient envahi la figure entière un bouton touchant l'autre ; et, flétries, affaissées, d'un aspect grisâtre de boue, elles semblaient déjà une moisissure de la terre, sur cette bouillie informe, où l'on ne retrouvait plus les traits. Un œil, celui de gauche, avait complètement sombré dans le bouillonnement de la purulence ; l'autre, à demi ouvert, s'enfonçait, comme un trou noir et gâté. Le nez suppurait encore. Toute une croûte rougeâtre partait d'une joue, envahissait la bouche, qu'elle tirait dans un rire abominable. Et, sur ce masque horrible et grotesque du néant, les cheveux, les beaux cheveux, gardant leur flambée de soleil, coulaient en un ruissellement d'or. Venus se décomposait. Il semblait que le virus pris par elle dans les ruisseaux, sur les charognes tolérées, ce ferment dont elle avait empoisonné un peuple, venait de lui remonter au visage et l'avait pourri. (1485)

As Nana's final portrait reveals, the virus, made manifest through the signs on her face, comes from below. Specifically as if it had been dormant somewhere else, such as on her hip or genitalia, it finally appears on a part of the body which is always visible: the face. The behavior or rather movement of her unidentified virus, is more reminiscent of a venereal disease than smallpox. While both transmitted by touch, the text gives the virus an alternative source: it is not Louiset who has killed his mother according to the final portrait. The virus which lies dormant "below" is contracted on the streets (dans les ruisseaux) from already contaminated bodies (sur les charognes).

Zola picked the perfect illness for Nana by killing her off, officially, with smallpox (la petite vérole), since it easily suggests its big sister syphilis (la grande vérole). Undoubtedly Zola intended for the two illnesses to overlap: one destroyed the

---

[74] I find it worth mentioning that ironically, Nana could not have been more wrong on what her face would look like after her death. While she predicted a "tiny little head", it is indeed a massive head and paragraph which serve as her final portrait. Almost truly, as if the little head were seen through a telescope : « Et elle se serrait les joues, elle s'agrandissait les yeux, s'enfonçait la mâchoire pour voir comment elle serait. Puis, se tournant ver le comte, ainsi défigurée : « Regarde donc, j'aurai la tête toute petite, moi. » » (387)

face, one destroyed the sex. As Sander Gilman writes in *Difference and Pathology*, to kill Nana of smallpox is the perfect pun both in French and English: “Nana dies of the pox. (This is a pun because of the rapidity of decay demanded by the moral implication of Zola’s portrait. It would not do to have Nana die slowly over thirty years of tertiary syphilis.) Smallpox, with its play on the pox, works quickly and gives the same visual icon of decay.” (105) Like Gilman, many of the novel’s critics tend to agree that the designated illness (small pox) is mostly a point of entry into another reading of Nana’s body, afflicted by another illness. Gilman writes: “The decaying visage is the visible sign of the diseased genitalia through which the sexualized female corrupts an entire nation of warriors and leads them to the collapse at Sedan.” (Gilman, 105) In a more methodical reading of the illness, Peter Brooks in *Realist Vision* emphasizes the importance of the official illness but only to quickly arrive at the conclusion that the smallpox on her face is the displaced manifestation of the venereal disease on her genitalia: “Note that Zola doesn’t have Nana brought down by a venereal disease: the sins of the genitals are displaced upward, to her face, in another allegorizing move.” (126)

But Brooks is right to make this note and perhaps a little more time should be allotted to smallpox before it is turned into syphilis. Smallpox makes recurring appearances throughout the novel. Most notably, before Nana’s disfigured face, the novel had also featured the pock-marked face of an old prostitute, *la Reine Pomaré*, announcing Nana’s death: “La Reine est bien déchue, ayant quittée le vernis miroitant du luxe pour la cosmétique des fanges, l’ignoble masque d’une croûte durcie sur la plaie du visage : « C’était, dans ce paquet de haillons, sous un foulard en loques, une face bleuie, couturée, avec le trou édenté de la bouche et les meurtrissures enflammées des yeux. » Il ne reste

plus à la décomposition que de frapper Vénus en personne. » (Wald-Lasowski 81) Appearing as one of the two alternatives to old age for the prostitute (the other being Irma d'Anglars[75], also a queen in her own rights), *la Reine Pomaré's* disfigured face, "couturée" most likely by smallpox, frightens Nana. But the grim portrait of the *Queen* pales in comparison to Nana's. At the hour of her death, Nana is made unrecognizable.

Before the violence of the venereal disease, Nana is first defaced. Zola had found inspiration, as we know from Mittérand, from Céard. In fact, more than finding inspiration, Zola had researched smallpox in order to create Nana's final portrait with scientific precision:

> Il lui restait encore à préparer la description de la mort de Nana. Il eut recours, une dernière fois, aux services de Céard, à qui il demanda, le 13 décembre, "une description exacte, scientifique et très détaillée d'un masque mortuaire d'une femme morte de la petite vérole, et une description d'une chambre du Grand-Hôtel ». Céard lui envoya d'abord un tout récent ouvrage sur la variole, publié chez Delahaye par P. Toussaint Barthélemy : *Recherche sur la variole*. Il espérait, de plus, pouvoir aller examiner un cadavre de variolique à l'amphithéâtre de l'hôpital Lariboisière ! Zola n'en demandait pas d'avantage. « J'ai reçu votre livre…Cela me suffira. J'inventerai un masque, en rapprochant des documents. Je suis très tenté par la variole noire, qui est plus originale dans l'horreur. Seulement, je vous avoue que, si pouvez voir un cadavre, sans trop vous déranger – hein ? drôle de commission ! vous me ferez plaisir. De cette façon je n'inventerai rien…» (Mittérand, 1692 & 1737)

Zola is nevertheless tempted by the most spectacular form of smallpox. "La variole noire" or hemorrhagic smallpox is the most deadly and the most horrifying. Most importantly, black pox doesn't just destroy the face but destroys the throat, the stomach, the rectum and the vagina. Nana is not just stripped of her beauty by smallpox (like *la*

---

[75] Irma d'Anglars is presented in the novel as an inaccessible and unlikely possibility. Nana and her party only succeed in seeing her from afar during their ride around her property. After seeing Pomaré, she appears from afar "du fond des ténèbres": « Et, Nana, devant cette vieillesse affreuse de fille noyée dans le vin, eut un brusque souvenir, vit passer au fond des ténèbres de Chamont, cette Irma d'Anglars, cette ancienne roulure comblée d'ans et d'honneurs, montant le perron de son château au milieu d'un village prosterné. » (345)

Reine Pomaré or even *la Marquise de Merteuil*). She is literally stripped of form. One can only imagine what the body underneath the sheet has become. She is, as Rose Mignon constantly repeats, "bien changée"; the modifying "bien" being inadequate for the formless mass she has become. And as the constant references to Venus continue to suggest, the disease has attacked both the human and artistic form.[76] Indeed, "Vénus se décomposait". Smallpox erases both the face of the woman and the masterpiece. The Manet has become unavailable to the canvas; in any case, the marred masterpiece has given birth to another form of mastery, perhaps to a new esthetic. It was Gustave Flaubert who perhaps said it best. In a letter he writes to Zola on February 15th 1880 his enthusiasm is unparalleled: « Au-dessus de tout ! – Oui, nom de Dieu ! Sans pareil… La mort de Nana est Michelangelesque ».

Flaubert's choice of adjective is indicative of his admiration and yet the choice seems strange when revisiting Nana's death. References to Michelangelo easily evoke notions of visual artistic mastery and esthetic perfection, not to an oozy gray mass. But perhaps Flaubert's "michelangesque", in all its irony, is reserved to qualify and compliment the literary production. The literary portrait of the dead courtesan is the work of one who has mastered the effects of language. Truly, Nana's face vanishes under a multiplication of signs both symptomatic and linguistic. Of course, the work of illness and death disfigure the feminine face, but one also gets the sense that the feminine body

---

[76] In *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret,* another defaced Venus (one made of marble, not flesh) also appears. « Il y a murmura-t-elle, une femme de marbre tombée tout de son long dans l'eau qui coule. *L'eau lui a mangé la figure*. »Alors, il voulut voir à son tour…C'était quelque noyée de cent ans, le lent suicide d'un marbre que des peines avaient dû laisser choir au fond de cette source. » (*my emphasis* 229) La nappe claire qui coulait sur elle avait fait de sa face une pierre lisse, une blancheur sans visage, tandis que ses deux seins, comme soulevés hors de l'eau par un effort de la nuque, restaient intacts, vivants encore, gonflés d'une volupté ancienne. » (229)

collapses under a kind of linguistic excess[77]: it is the accumulation of details, the multiplications of qualifiers which obliterate her: “charnier, tas, pelletée, corrompue, pustules, bouton, flétries, affaissées, boue, moisissure, bouilli, purulence, informe, noir, gâté, crôute, rougeâtre, abominable, horrible, grotesque...”. What appears instead is a formless mass of flesh pierced with two black holes, surrounded by a mass of hair. The final portrait of Nana’s face doesn’t appear like much of a death mask which would have preserved the form and traits of the defunct. Rather, the accentuated formlessness of the face turns it into another “body part”, evoking Jean-Louis Alibert’s depictions of female syphilitic genitalia, reproduced and discussed in Gilman’s *Sexuality*.[78] They are striking in the ways in which the woman’s thick black healthy pubic hair contrasts with the massive pustules which have infested and deformed the vagina. It is much like the disturbing presence of Nana’s hair, golden and bountiful, around her vanishing face. As introduced again by that “and”, suggesting its striking discord with the rest of the portrait, the sentence introduces Nana’s hair as the only remnant of her previous appearance framing a grotesque void: “*Et,* sur ce masque horrible et grotesque du néant, les cheveux, les beaux cheveux, gardant leur flambée de soleil, coulaient...” (*my emphasis*, 1485)

The tension, or perhaps interchangeability, at play between the face and the genitalia is interestingly a phenomenon exclusive to the feminine representation. In the first nineteenth-century atlases of medicine published by Jean-Louis Alibert, though there were representations of both female and male genitalia with syphilitic infections, only faces of female syphilitics were depicted:

---

[77] In *Ventriloquized bodies*, Janet Beizer writes of Nana’s body as “stricken with semiotics”. As such, her disfigured face puts an end to the conflict between modes of reading (according to its allegorical or literal implications): ““stricken with semiotics,” textually afflicted, is the page upon which the narrative conflict is written. Her death in a sense effaces the conflict, for it renders the “page” illegible.” (187)

> The relationship between the hidden genitalia and the face, the public sign of the disease, is manifest. No faces of male syphilitics are represented. For it is the mask of female beauty, here revealed as the sign of corruption, that points toward her role as the source of the disease...Framed by the drapes that conceal the rest of the patient, the genitalia are emphasized and made anonymous by the drapes. The drapes serve as a curtain that has been raised to reveal the hidden nature of the disease, the presentation of genital signs and symptoms parallel to the facial ones seen in the portraits. The seeming anonymity of the genitalia is linked to the face, the icon of the individuality of the patient. (Gilman in *Sexuality* 238)

The drapes which reveal the genitalia in the medical plates mimic the lights and veils which have attempted to both cover and reveal the sex of the courtesan throughout the novel. It is always in this manner that the face/sex of the courtesan appears. As Rose Mignon prepares to leave the cadaver, she closes a curtain and lights the body, creating a « close-up » of the face: "Elle tira un rideau devant la fenêtre; puis elle songea que cette lampe n'était pas convenable, il fallait un cierge; et, après avoir allumé l'un des flambeaux de cuivre de la cheminée, elle le posa sur la table de nuit, à côté du corps. Une lumière vive éclaira brusquement le visage de la morte. » (1485). Framed by the light, the face of the dead prostitute appears as the portrait of her diseased sex, as it would have appeared perhaps, under the light of a medical lamp.

If Nana's sex found its medical reflection in Alibert's plates, it could also find its poetic double in Baudelaire's *charogne.* There is no face to pass through to arrive at a woman's sex this time. In Baudelaire's poem, there is no disfigured face, the corpse is all belly: putrid and decaying. If we examined all of its body parts carefully, we would also find two legs, spread apart wide, "comme une femme lubrique" which point again to that belly and invite the reader, through the opening located between the legs, to peer into the body. The carcass opens itself up:

> Au détour d'un sentier une charogne infâme
> Sur un lit semé de cailloux,

> Les jambes en l'air, comme une femme lubrique,
> Brûlante et suant les poisons,
> Ouvrait d'une façon nonchalante et cynique
> Son ventre plein d'exhalaisons

The striking *exhalaisons* and miasmatic gases emanating from the carcass (not to mention the flies which feed off its belly so reminiscent of Fauchery's article) are also ever present in the scene of Nana's death. If we followed Baudelaire's logic, this would be the fate of all women – they would all be dying of/from their bellies:

> Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
> A cette horrible infection,
> Étoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
> Vous, mon ange et ma passion !

In a way, to give Nana syphilis, is more or less to give her the illness of woman. A woman's sexuality and syphilis are synonymous in the ways in they are misunderstood and feared by 19th century positivism. In Zola's novel, all women emit smell and contagion.[79] Even female aristocrats show "signs" of illness. As she is described by Wald Lasowski, Syphilis is the woman Zola paints in *Nana*: "Changeante, mouvante, véritable Protée. De là naît *Syphilis*, nébuleuse diffuse, quand la maladie, échappant à toute définition, déçoit les catégories les plus éprouvées – jusqu'aux philosophiques. C'est dans ce retrait du positivisme que *Syphilis* impose sa ligne de fuite, son sillage, ou sa trace : déchirante à la surface des discours et des corps, des plus évidentes certitudes. »

---

[79] Ironically, the smells and miasma which had brought the men to Nana is now the element keeping them away. No man enters the room of the *Grand Hôtel* to which she has been brought to die. They all wait downstairs, too afraid to go upstairs and see Nana. Muffat, though intending a disguise, nevertheless paces the sidewalk with a handkerchief covering his mouth and nose, as if he too, were afraid of contamination: "Devant le Grand Hôtel, sur un banc, un homme cachait son visage dans un mouchoir. Fauchery, en arrivant, l'avait montré d'un clignement d'œil à Mignon...C'était le comte Muffat, qui jetait un regard en l'air, sur une des fenêtres. » (1475) It is worth noting that it is only men who never make it up to the room, the women of the novel however all congregate around the bed of the dead, as if unafraid of contamination. Whatever Nana had, they couldn't catch it – not from her anyway.

(18) In the troubling scent of the dressing rooms and in the Muffats' living room, it is the elusive odor of woman which signals the danger of the feminine sex: it is in fact deadly.

With these observations in mind, we return to Nana's final portrait – the one which is supposed to appear as the true and latent image of the character. True, the "signe" she wears on her hip, the pustules on her face, all become the physical manifestation of a moral stain, « une tache »: « Sur le lit, une masse grise s'allongeait, on distinguait seulement le chignon rouge, avec une tache blafarde qui devait être la figure. » (1478) Her face as a whole becomes symbolic of feminine promiscuity. As Bertrand Jennings notes, she is the incarnation of sexual perversity:

> …narcissisme, comme en témoignent ses nombreuses stations devant les miroirs (1270 ff); lesbianisme dans ses rapports avec Satin et autres "souillons" (1360, 1375, 1453); bestialité dans ses ébats louches avec le chien Bijou dont Muffat est jaloux (1358); sadisme dans ses relations avec La Faloise qu'elle giffle par plaisir (1457) ou Muffat qu'elle avilit, humilie et frappe et dont elle fait un souffre-douleur commode (1365, 1450-1461); masochisme dans sa liaison tumultueuse avec le comédien Fontan (ch. VIII) ; nécrophilie enfin dans les rapports qu'elle entretient avec le sénile marquis de Chouard qui mettait « un coin de charnier » (1463) dans son lit. (60)

In this way, Nana's death is a punishment she had coming. However, in her relationship with Sabine Muffat, in the chiasmus formed between the two women[80], she does not only bear the stain of perverse sexuality but of a more general feminine sexuality. Suddenly, all the terms become equated: feminine is sexual, is illness, is perverse as the "signe", "mouche", "pustule" and "bouton" had previously been. Nana's final portrait begins to leak out. In trying to be all, to say all, to show all, it leaves its reader confused, grasping

[80] Brooks notices this relationship in *Realist Vision* but does not account for the effect produced by the reversal of roles: "...Nana and the Countess, Sabine Muffat, have in fact undergone a sort of chiasmus (one of Zola's favorite figures), where Sabine has become a kind of sex addict, whereas Nana tries to play the respectable woman." (122)

once again for any of the certitudes established around the representation of feminine sexuality.

III. *Petits Riens*

To conclude our reading, we again turn to Manet, but to *Olympia* this time. In his brilliant reading of *Olympia*, T.J Clark traces the reaction of contemporary art criticism to accentuate the discomfort created by Manet's nude. As he notes, Olympia was decidedly sexual (and that was not necessarily the problem) but the issue revolved around the ways in which her sexuality belonged to her and could not be, in one glance, visually appropriated by the male observer:

> The achievement of Olympia, I should say, is that it gives its female subject a particular sexuality as opposed to a general one. And that particularity derives, I think, not from there being *an order* on the body on the bed but from there being too many, and none of them established as the dominant one. The signs of sex are present in plenty, but they fail, as it were to add up. Sex is not something evident and all of a piece in *Olympia*; that a woman has a sex at all – and certainly Olympia has one – does not make her immediately *one thing*, for a man to appropriate visually; her sex is a construction of some kind, or perhaps the inconsistency of several. (132)

The unease and sometimes outrage at Manet's work centered thus around the multiplied *signs* of sexuality which not only challenged the traditional representation of the nude but also contested the masculine gaze: the multiplication of signs causing the sex of the woman to no longer be recognizable and therefore neutralizable. Clark cites among the signs of her displaced sexuality, the elements which we also observe in Nana: her hair, her pilosity, her candor, her gaze, etc... However, he fails to mention another "petit rien" which had infuriated one of Manet's fiercest critics, Camille Lemonnier: "...The nude has

modesty only if it is not a transitory state. It hides nothing because there is nothing to hide. The moment it hides something, it becomes prurient, for in reality it shows it all the better. In order to stay virgin the nude in art must be impersonal and must not particularize; art has no need of a beauty spot upon the neck or a mole on the hindquarters. It hides nothing and shows nothing: it makes itself seen as a whole...” (quoted in TJ Clark, 129) We recognize in Lemonnier’s critique that “signe” which appears on the body as the brazen revelation of that which should be hidden, or worse, of that which should not exist.

In the marginal detail of the “signe”, Nana’s sex (as Olympia’s) unexpectedly peaks and speaks out. Never appearing as expected, filled with conjunctions and grammatical juxtapositions, the details appearing on and around Nana’s body disrupt a coherent, collective, encompassing and reassuring view of her body and her sex. If there had been a sex there to see (which would have found its painted equivalent in Gustave Courbet’s *l’Origine du monde* for example), contained by a frame, a mirror, or a narrative, it could not indeed have been the truth of Nana’s sex. Like the painters who pretended nudes weren’t women, Zola would have also been lying.

To tell the truth about a woman’s body then is to paint it in detail. Or rather, it is to paint its details. And, as Naomi Schor brilliantly demonstrates in *Reading in Detail,* the persistent association of the feminine and the detail in the realm of esthetics converges into a threat aimed at classical masculine esthetic and its valorizing of uniformity and proportion (a claim clearly illustrated by Lemonnier’s harsh criticism of the detail in *Olympia*). “The irreconcilability of details and the sublime and the concomitant affinity of details for the effete and effeminate ornamental style points to

what is perhaps most threatening about the detail: its tendency to subvert an internal hierarchic ordering of the work of art which clearly subordinates the periphery to the center, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background." (15) However, since the stakes and lures of valorizing the detail in one's reading have already been explored by Schor, the question which remains is what is at stake in writing in detail? The easy answer, as Ellen Rooney suggests in her introduction to Schor's book, is not wholly satisfactory: "The story of the rise of the detail is, of course, inseparable from the all too familiar story of the demise of classicism and the birth of realism, but it should not, indeed cannot be reduced to that story, for to retell the story from the perspectives of the detail is inevitably to tell *another* story" (xlii)

The proliferation of the "signe" or detail becomes, by the end of Zola's novel, an infernal compulsion leading to destruction. The novel's incessant impulse to undress Nana in detail, to describe Nana in detail, ends at its apogee: in that detailed, precise death mask, carefully carved by Zola: formlessness. In this impulse to write the feminine form, the linguistic mechanism of the novelist's prose appears to have destroyed its own grammar: there are simply too many verbs, too many adjectives, too many nouns for the passage to function as a description. No portrait can emerge. Whether this was an intended effect is unclear. Mastery or failure? In either case, the typical response to this portrait is to suggest Nana got what she deserved, like Laclos' bad heroine Merteuil, Nana is punished for her sins. But, there is a much more disquieting possible ending to this story. In rereading her death, without getting trapped in its details, a chemical process emerges which make Nana as menacing, as fluid, as ungraspable as she was life. The liquefaction of Nana's corpse, emitting more than ever its terrifying odor, suggests its

eventual evaporation. Nana, as it were, is not really dead. She has left the room: a miasma carried into the streets by a gust of wind, traveling on the breaths of the crowd below:

> La chambre était vide. Un grand souffle désespéré monta du boulevard et gonfla le rideau.
> « A Berlin ! à Berlin ! à Berlin ». (1485)

CHAPTER 3

Voir Yvette et mourir[81]

Yvetot: Voir Yvetot et mourir ! (v. Naples et Séville)[82]
Gustave Flaubert, *Dictionnaires des idées reçues*

In a present-day literary edition of Gustave Flaubert's *Dictionnaire des idées reçues,* something like the following received idea would figure next to Emma Bovary's name: cautionary tale; reading novels will cause nervous attacks, depression and suicide; feminine condition; see *Bovarysme*. These clichés would not be so far from most critical readings of the novel. Emma's sexuality, untimely fate, and their connection to her reading habits are still a vital discussion within the academic forum.[83] As a natural extension of the topic, critical attention has also been paid to the ways in which this particular nexus reappears in other works of fiction following the novel's 1856 publication. Emma Bovary looms large over the production of other feminine literary characters like Anna Karenina, Gwendolen Harleth, and Isabel Archer, to name a few of the great heroines who have been said to resemble Flaubert's ill-fated creation.

In the French tradition, the ghost of Emma reappears in a less famous and less voluminous format in Guy de Maupassant's 1884 novella entitled "Yvette". The novel

---

[81] This title was generously suggested to me by Elissa Marder. While discussing an initial version of this chapter, she pointed out the proximity of Flaubert's *received idea* to the conclusions I had drawn as a result of my reading of Maupassant's novella *Yvette*. I hope that the chapter will itself gradually reveal the ironic relevance of the chosen title.

[82] Guy de Maupassant actually knew Yvetot very well since he had spent time there as a young man, trapped in a boarding school. In April 1868, in a letter to Louis LePoittevin, he describes it as a "couvent triste où règnent les cures, l'hypocrisie, l'ennui" (qtd in Wald Lasowski, 39).

[83] Elissa Marder in *Dead Time* succinctly summarizes the centrality of this discussion in the *flaubertian* critical tradition: "While virtually all readers and critics of *Madame Bovary* (beginning of course, with the legal, political, and cultural institutions that saw fit to put the book on trial) would agree with Michael Riffaterre's observation that "*Madame Bovary* is a fiction about the dangers of fiction," critics have widely divergent ways of interpreting the causes and consequences of Emma's reading habit. Reading Emma's reading habits is a favorite activity of *Bovary's* critics, many of whom seem to be vaguely reassured by the notion that Emma's misfortunes and suffering can in large part be attributed to her unhealthy and ultimately misguided dependency on works of fiction." (135)

and novella share a young feminine protagonist, an avid reader of novels, who, gradually disenchanted by reality in matters of the heart, seeks refuge from her disillusion in her romantic notions of suicide. The broad strokes shared by the two texts highlight the unusual wealth of details they also ambiguously share. In the details of Maupassant's story, the nature of the relationship between the novel and the novella is established as a precise form of intertextuality. For its size, its diminutive title (Yv*ette*), amongst the many "shrunken" details from Emma's suicide, "Yvette" appears as a miniature version of the novel. Emma's big blue *bocale* returns as tiny bottles; potent arsenic is replaced by mild chloroform; for the suicide letter, there is a suicide note. The details are all there, but in stunted versions.

Yet readers of "Yvette" know that Emma's gruesome death does not find its echo in Maupassant's text. The details which populate the description of Emma's physical agony completely disappear in the case of Yvette. Her suicide is not the embodied experience of a *flaubertian* death; in Maupassant, suicide is a peaceful, dreamlike sequence[84]. Most importantly, Emma dies and Yvette lives. These radically different endings raise questions with regard to the early relationship established between the two

---

[84]This is a theme recurrent in the work of Maupassant and most specifically in his 1889 short story "L'Endormeuse". "L'Endormeuse" tells of an establishment dedicated to providing peaceful and pleasurable assisted suicides. The curious narrator who decides to "try" the seamless asphyxiation procedure finds himself dangerously drawn into this appealing ethereal death (caused by inhaling the scent of a flower):

> Le secrétaire ajouta d'une voix plus basse: « On change à volonté la fleur et le parfum, car notre gaz, tout à fait imperceptible donne à la mort l'odeur de la fleur qu'on aima. On le volatilise avec des essences. Voulez-vous que je vous le fasse aspirer une seconde ? .... Étendez-vous sur l'Endormeuse. »
> Un peu inquiet, je m'assis sur la chaise basse en crêpe de Chine, puis je m'allongeai, et presque aussitôt je fus enveloppé par une odeur délicieuse de réséda. J'ouvris la bouche pour la mieux boire, car mon âme s'était engourdie, oubliait, savourait, dans le premier trouble de l'asphyxie, l'ensorcelante ivresse d'un opium enchanteur et foudroyant. » (1167)

As Philippe Bonnefis points out in *Parfums,* the conflation of the flower's perfume with the poison it carries will reappear during the scene of Yvette's death. She appears to suffocate on the scent of roses: « des roses au chloroforme… » (116)

texts. Why does Maupassant, at the site of death, change his story? Why does Yvette live if Emma dies? And if there is "une grande mort" in Flaubert's novel, shouldn't there also be "une petite mort" in Maupassant's novella?

Comprised of four parts, this chapter will begin with "Quelle fille?" by introducing Maupassant's novella and by highlighting the ways in which the text insists on language's failure to adequately qualify and reveal one's sexuality. In particular, as the narrative plays on the multiple connotations of the word *fille,* the girl in question (Yvette) appears fiercely intent on controlling her relationship to the word and to the narrative world she inhabits. The second section, entitled "Liseuses enragées" will look at the ways Yvette's relationship to literature shifts according to the sexual demands placed upon her. From the figure of the reader, to heroine and eventually to author, Yvette uses her literary experiences in an attempt to stop her inevitable ending. As the dialogue between "Yvette" and *Madame Bovary* will demonstrate in this section and the following, "Literary Suicides", the texts are inhabited by counter-author figures who object to the narratives within which they exist. The female characters' suicides, I will argue in "Endings", are their attempts at writing the conclusions of their lives and of their stories. As to the extent of their success, we can say for sure that the stature of Emma's canonical death easily trumps Yvette's poor little death.

I. *Quelle fille?*

« Yvette » opens with a conversation between Servigny and his friend Léon Saval as they exit a Parisian café. The men, we know, are headed somewhere, but only after an initial portrait of the two men and the busy streets of Paris, do we find out, along with

Léon Saval, the exact nature of their destination. They are headed to a woman's house. Through a series of questions, which Servigny only obliquely answers, Saval attempts to assess what "kind" of woman they will be visiting[85]:

> « As-tu prévenu cette dame que tu allais me présenter chez elle ?
> Servigny se mit à rire.
> « Prévenir la marquise Obardi ! Fais-tu prévenir un cocher d'omnibus que tu monteras dans sa voiture au coin du boulevard ? »
> Saval, alors, un peu perplexe, demanda :
> « Qu'est-ce donc au juste que cette personne ? »
> Et son ami répondit :
> « Une parvenue, une rastaquouère, une drôlesse charmante, sortie on ne sait d'où, apparue un jour, on ne sait comment, dans le monde des aventuriers, et sachant comment y faire figure. Que nous importe d'ailleurs. On dit que son vrai nom, son nom de fille, car elle est restée fille à tous les titres, sauf au titre d'innocence, est Octavie Bardin, d'où Obardi, en conservant la première lettre du prénom, et en supprimant la dernière du nom. (235-236)

As the conversation reveals, the lady is a prostitute: from "dame", to "personne", to "parvenue", to "drôlesse charmante", she eventually is given the final qualifier "fille". In this initial introduction of the marquise, Servigny carefully notes that there are multiple ways in which the marquise is qualified as a *fille*[86]. She has remained a young woman, *une jeune fille*, as indicated by the fact that she is not married, has perhaps never been, and still uses her maiden name (or a version of it). Nevertheless, Servigny makes something very clear by noting a distinction: she is no longer a young woman in terms of her innocence, "sauf à titre de son innocence". In referencing her sexual habits, Servigny immediately offers yet another definition of what it means to be a *fille*, in colloquial French: a common prostitute. The same word, *fille*, is thus used twice to qualify two

---

[85] In *La Maison Maupassant,* Patrick Wald Lasowski notes that this casual walk amongst men to the "maison close" is a recurring pattern throughout his novellas, transforming both characters and readers into "regulars": Aux premiers mots de la nouvelle qui ouvre son premier receuil de contes, Maupassant nous introduit: "On allait là, chaque soir, vers onze heures, comme au café, simplement." Avec cet air de simplicité qui fait du lecteur un habitué des lieux. » (18)

[86]Because the word *fille* cannot be translated into English without losing all of its connotations, and because this will appear as central to the argument I will develop in this chapter, I have decided to keep the word in the French.

completely different, if not opposite, types of feminine sexuality: one connoting virginity and abstinence; the other, promiscuity and prostitution.

Perhaps, if Servigny had only qualified the noun with an adjective, *jeune* for example, this initial fumble over the word could have been avoided. But Servigny is always stumbling over language, getting caught in its traps, never finding the right word, stuttering, even lisping. When he addresses Yvette, it is always with the colloquial pronunciation of *mademoiselle*, creating a *zezayement*, a lisp essentially:

> "Servigny lui répondit:
>
> « Tant que vous voudrez, mam'zelle. »
>
> En lui parlant, il ne prononçait jamais mademoiselle, par suite d'une camaraderie familière. » (246)

Coincidentally, the lisp at *mademoiselle* is complemented by Servigny's *begayement*, stammering, around the word *fille*. Still in conversation on the way to the Marquise's house, Servigny declares to Saval: "Moi, je vais surtout dans la maison pour la fille. » (237) In this apparently simple declaration, the whole of Servigny's problem is revealed. Though he means to say that he goes for the daughter, the fact that he omits the possessive article in front of *fille* allows for a moment of hesitation. *La maison* in question is a high class brothel. The mother, by his admission, is also a courtesan. So is he saying that he goes there for the daughter or the prostitute? Pour *sa fille* or *la fille*? The reader quickly learns that he is indeed after the Marquise's daughter Yvette, though he nonetheless also hopes that the daughter has become *aussi fille que sa mère*.

Through this lack of grammatical precision, Servigny's conflicted desire for Yvette surfaces: "Elle *me* trouble, *me* séduit et *m*'inquiète, *m*'atttire et *m*'effraye." (238).

As the string of direct objects demonstrates, Yvette has a startling effect on Servigny. Reduced to the status of object, he is unable to control the dynamic of the relationship: « Elle paraît m'aimer et se moque de moi; elle s'affiche en public comme si elle était ma maîtresse et me traite dans l'intimité comme si j'étais son frère ou son valet. » (239) Until the mystery surrounding her sexual maturity is clarified, she maintains an unknown advantage.[87] Servigny's real question is: *« quel genre de fille est-elle ? »* If Saval, perplexed, had again asked Servigny, « Qu'est-ce donc au juste que cette personne ? » Servigny could not have answered whether she was a virgin or a slut:

> Cette *fille*, Yvette me déconcerte absolument, d'ailleurs. C'est un mystère. Si elle n'est pas le monstre d'astuce et de perversité le plus complet que j'aie jamais vu, elle est certes le phénomène d'innocence le plus merveilleux qu'on puisse trouver. Elle vit dans ce milieu infâme avec une aisance tranquille et triomphante, admirablement scélérate ou naïve. Merveilleux rejeton d'aventurière, poussé sur le fumier de ce monde-là, comme une plante magnifique nourrie de pourritures[88], ou bien fille de quelque homme de haute race...On n'y comprend rien…Et je me demande chaque jour : «Est-ce une gamine charmante ou une abominable coquine ?» (*my emphasis* 237-239)

His only certainty rests on the eventual equation of the terms: "Elle n'a donc qu'une profession possible: l'amour. Elle y viendra, à moins qu'elle ne l'exerce déjà. Elle ne saurait fuir sa destinée. De jeune fille, elle deviendra fille, tout simplement. Et je voudrais bien être le pivot de cette transformation." (240) Only on this point does Servigny specify a difference between the *jeune fille* and this other *fille*. It is, as he notes, a question of destiny, or perhaps heredity. According to Servigny, with her mother already in the profession, Yvette's future is decided.

---

[87] This is most obvious in Servigny's playing the simpleton Muscade to amuse Yvette.

[88] This clear allusion to Emile Zola's Nana as a possible model for Yvette is later traded for another one of Zola's heroines from *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*, Albine (the relationship between the two heroines will be discussed in the conclusion of the dissertation). In a journal article written about Nana she is described as a beautiful plant fed from manure and scum: « Elle avait poussé dans un faubourg, sur le pavé parisien ; et, grande, belle, de chair superbe ainsi qu'une plante de plein fumier » (1269)

Mothers and daughters always have a way of imprinting onto one another in the work of Maupassant; and the case of Yvette is no different. In “Yvette” the equation of mother and daughter is not simple since it is not manifested in terms of physical resemblance, as in so many of Maupassant’s writings. Surprisingly, Yvette and the Marquise do not look alike. Their initial portraits reveal two opposites[89]:

> La maîtresse de maison ... se retourna et s’en vint d’un pas majestueux avec une grâce dans la démarche et un sourire sur les lèvres. Son front étroit, très bas, était couvert d’une masse de cheveux d’un noir luisant, pressés comme une toison, mangeant même un peu des tempes. Elle était grande, un peu trop forte, un peu trop grasse, un peu mûre, mais très belle, d’une beauté lourde, chaude, puissante. Sous ce casque de cheveux, qui faisait rêver, qui faisait sourire, qui la rendait mystérieusement désirable, s’ouvraient des yeux énormes, noirs aussi. Le nez était un peu mince, la bouche grande, infiniment séduisante, faite pour parler et pour conquérir. (242)

In contrast to the marked imposing pace with which the Marquise greets her guests, Yvette lightly comes running through the crowd of guests with youthful enthusiasm: « Soudain, du fond de l’appartement, une grande fille s’élança, traversant tout, heurtant les danseurs…Elle courait à petit pas rapide comme courent les femmes dans les foules…Elle avait sur les traits un épanouissement de vie, une illumination de bonheur. Sa chair blanche, dorée, une chair de rousse, semblait rayonner. Et l’amas de ses cheveux, tordus sur sa tête, des cheveux cuits aux feux, des cheveux flambants pesait sur son front, chargeait son cou flexible encore un peu mince.[90] (243) More striking than the disparate paces of movement in the two women, their differences in age and in size, are

[89] In *Parfums*, Philippe Bonnefis writes that it is precisely in order to avoid the tragedy of becoming *like* her mother that Yvette turns to suicide. He writes: « Inversement, parce que les filles, chez Maupassant, filles sans père comme le sont les garçons, effets sans causes, sans cause déterminable, ont pourtant sur ces derniers le redoutable privilège de recommencer leur mère dans un corps nouveau, dans une chair nouvelle, d’être leur mère ressuscitée, sera-ce pour n’être pas *comme* sa mère qu’après un dernier adieu à son image, à ce fantôme d’elle-même que lui renvoyait sa glace, vague figure comme entre deux eaux reflétée, s’y dissolvant déjà, « Comme je suis jolie ! pensa-t-elle. Demain je serai morte, là, sur mon lit », Yvette s’administre le cordial, le breuvage magique dont Maupassant connaît si bien les vertus, qui dénoue tous les liens, trouble l’eau des miroirs, embrouille tous les traits, le seul qui apporte l’oubli. » (115)

[90] Yvette’s red hair is already an indication of a natural inclination towards prostitution.

the differences marked by their hair. Yvette's messy strands of red hair oppose the smooth, orderly, and military-like quality of the Marquise's *casque noir*. If Yvette wears white, her mother always wears black.[91]

Yvette's resemblance to her mother comes through her potential profession; and, as the novella insists, in clearly and consciously adopting the role and language of the courtesan. The Marquise's gift for speaking the language of the *demi-mondaine*, a subtle and controlled suggestive language, is praised throughout the novella: "Saval n'était plus seul. La marquise Obardi l'avait rejoint. Elle lui parlait de choses mondaines, de choses banales avec cette voix ensorcelante qui grisait. Et, le regardant au fond de la pensée, elle semblait lui dire d'autres paroles que celles prononcées par sa bouche. » (245) In contrast to this professional linguistic mastery, Yvette's speech is particularly troubling for Servigny. Though Yvette speaks like a prostitute, Servigny doubts that she understands the implications of her words: "Elle dit des choses à faire frémir une armée; mais les perroquets aussi. » As Servigny's observation denotes, he fears that Yvette is only an echo of her mother, unconsciously playing the role and speaking the lines absorbed from her surroundings.[92] His frustration thus dwells in the fact that Yvette has not yet learned from her mother or has not yet become *like* her mother.

---

[91]The women's two dresses are precisely described: "[Yvette] était vêtue d'une toilette complète de flanelle blanche qui l'enveloppait délicatement dans la mollesse flottante de l'étoffe…La marquise paraissait heureuse, très heureuse. Tout en noir, noblement drapée dans une robe sévère qui dessinait ses lignes pleines et fortes… » (251). Yvette's light and floating white gown, a social indication of her maidenhood, contrasts with her mother's tailored black dress. For a Madonna/whore reading of these details, I would refer readers to Shelley Thomas's article "The Prostitute/Mother in Maupassant's Yvette" in *L'Esprit Créateur"*, Vol. 39, N. 2. Summer 1999. Pp. 74-84.

[92] Shelley Thomas makes a similar argument in her article "The Prostitute/Mother in Maupassant's Yvette":

> Like the archetypal Echo, Yvette merely mimics. On the other hand, the language she imitates produces the image of the sexually mature female or, in her case, the prostitute. The narrator confirms for the reader that Yvette's image as the prostitute is based on her relation to language. "Elle semblait instruite de tout parce qu'elle avait l'air de parler de tout, parce qu'elle avait pris le ton, l'allure, les mots osés des gens qui vivaient autour d'elle » (100). The narrator's view of Yvette reflects the traditional paradigm of the female voice found in mythological archetypes like

As the novella will later reveal, Yvette objects to this transition and writes in her suicide note that she is dying in order not to become a *fille entrenue;* or in other words, to maintain her honorable status as a *jeune fille.* "Je meurs pour ne pas devenir une *fille entretenue*." (*my emphasis,* 298*)*. The two adjectives that separate these two opposite terms, that charge a simple noun with a type of sexuality, are scrupulously preserved by Yvette. She notes this difference by giving a qualifier to all ambiguous terms. When she confronts her mother about her profession, she declares multiple times that she wants them to be "honest women", stressing the adjective and eventually infuriating her mother, who sees its repeated use as an attack: "Ce mot qui revenait "honnêtes femmes" soulevait la marquise d'une fureur de fille et elle cria: "Tais-toi! Je ne te permets pas de me parler comme ça. Je vaux autant qu'une autre, entends-tu ? Je suis une courtisane, c'est vrai, et j'en suis fière; les honnêtes femmes ne me valent pas. » (287). Yvette's mother also chooses her words succinctly and throws at Yvette the exact word to qualify her profession: courtesan[93]. However, amongst this precise dialogue between the women, the narrator fails to qualify his own use of the word *fille* ("soulevait la marquise d'une fureur de fille"). This lack of precision on the part of the narrator, in a discussion which directly engages the ways a woman's sexuality is made manifest through language, suggests that much like Servigny, he does not see the need to qualify the noun.

> Narcissus and Echo, where the female voice can only repeat. Her voice is characterized by silence, lack of authority and autonomy. It is precisely this tendency to repeat that the narrator uses to marginalize Yvette, not as a prostitute but as a female, "ses audaces de parole ven[aient] de sa mémoire, de cete faculté d'imitation et d'assimilation qu'ont les femmes, et non d'une pensée instruite devenue hardie" (100-01). (79)

Though I disagree, as we will see, with the fact that Yvette is characterized by silence, lack of authority and autonomy, I find Thomas' references to Echo a particularly useful paradigm for thinking about Yvette's relationship to her mother.

[93] It should be noted that while the term chosen by the marquise accurately reflects her economic and social form of prostitution, it is still a term less injurious than the *fille* used by the narrator and the men in the novella.

Living within a world and a text which refuse to acknowledge this difference, Yvette nevertheless continues to stress the distinction. The importance of this difference between *une honnête femme* and *une fille entretenue* was a notion Yvette had learned over and over while reading: “Sa mère! un amant! quelle honte! Mais elle avait lu *tant* de livres où des femmes, même des mères se donnaient ainsi, pour renaître à l’honneur aux pages du dénouement, qu’elle ne s’étonnait pas outre mesure de se trouver enveloppée dans un drame *pareil* à tous les drames de ses lectures.» (*my emphasis,* 284) Stressing the quantity of books with this common plot[94], the text highlights the profound effects left by the many novels read by Yvette. More than simply teaching a linguistic and sexual distinction, the stories appear to have had an important moral impact on Yvette. Like the heroines of her library, Yvette seeks the same denouement: to remain an honorable young woman and save her mother from the shame of her profession.

II. Liseuses enragées

As it turns out, Servigny’s biggest obstacle to a sexual relationship with Yvette is a stack of sentimental novels. Ironically, Servigny is reproaching novels with the opposite of what conservative 19th century French institutions had charged them with. Rather than propelling a young girl into a life of debauchery, the novels seem to preserve Yvette’s innocence. Instead of poisoning her mind, they provide an antidote to the social sphere

---

[94] By referring to the quantity of other books which tell of the same story, Maupassant inscribes his own novella within a particular genre, and allows his heroine to predict the ending. However, as I will later discuss, the novelist denies Yvette her happy ending. Her failed suicide only veils the crueler irony of the ending to her story as she becomes, while still on her death bed, *une fille entretenue.*

she inhabits. In either case, her ferocious reading habits are condemned and declared the cause of her puzzling behavior: « C'est d'ailleurs une liseuse de romans enragée…Chaque semaine, la Librairie Nouvelle lui adresse, de ma part, tout ce qui a paru, et je crois qu'elle lit tout, pêle-mêle. Ça doit faire dans sa tête une étrange salade. Cette bouillie de lecture est peut-être pour quelque chose dans les allures singulières de cette fille. Quand on contemple l'existence à travers quinze mille romans, on doit la voir sous un drôle de jour et se faire, sur les choses, des idées assez baroques. » (239) The literal lack of discipline that Servigny reproaches in her reading habit echoes the well-known social stigma born in the 18th century, which blamed novels for female maladies (ranging from aphasia, hysteria, rashes, and coughs to promiscuity – also considered an illness with both moral and physical consequences). After all, the term "liseuse enragée," used by Servigny, also evokes a medical condition: to be *enragée* first means to have contracted rabies.

In *Scenes of Seduction: Prostitution, Hysteria, and Reading Difference in Nineteenth century France*, Jann Matlock traces the numerous legal, medical, social and literary discourses which explicitly tied "deviant" feminine sexuality to the popular novel. The dangers of literature were proclaimed by physicians: "'If your daughter reads novels at age fifteen," the eighteenth-century Swiss physician Samuel Tissot is quoted as declaring, "she will be hysterical at age twenty."The injunction echoed throughout the nineteenth-century, casting an aura of titillation over literary works portraying the social world. The novel was targeted as dangerous because it allegedly awakened affections and sensitized the overly impressionable female nature to the world of sexual experience." (9) Famously and ironically, the wisdom of the physician becomes in Flaubert a superstitious

wives' tales from Madame Bovary senior. At a loss for a cure (and even a diagnosis) to his wife's melancholy, Charles calls on the wisdom of his mother:

> Alors il écrivit à sa mère pour la prier de venir, et ils eurent ensemble de longues conférences au sujet d'Emma…
> -Sais-tu ce qu'il faudrait à ta femme ? reprenait la mère Bovary. Ce seraient des occupations forcées, des ouvrages manuels ! Si elle était comme tant d'autres, contrainte à gagner son pain, elle n'aurait pas ces vapeurs-là, qui lui viennent d'un tas d'idées qu'elle se fourre dans la tête, et du désœuvrement où elle vit.
> -Pourtant elle s'occupe, disait Charles.
> -Ah! elle s'occupe! À quoi donc? À lire des romans, de mauvais livres, des ouvrages qui sont contre la religion et dans lesquels on se moque des prêtres par des discours tirés de Voltaire. Mais tout cela va loin, mon pauvre enfant, et quelqu'un qui n'a pas de religion finit toujours par tourner mal.
> Donc il fut résolut que l'on empêcherait Emma de lire des romans. L'entreprise ne semblait point facile...N'aurait-on pas le droit d'avertir la police, si le libraire persistait quand même dans son métier d'empoisonneur? » (219 – 220)

La mère Bovary interestingly groups in the same category novels, "bad books", and anti-clerical literature to which she attributes the same effect: a toxicity which not only penetrated the soul but also the body, turning the bookseller into an assassin.[95] This reference, we know, will have contributed to many discussions on Emma's death and the idea that it was a murder, rather than a suicide. It is not the bookseller who poisoned Emma Bovary, but the writer himself. The irony is famous, since Flaubert was eventually put on trial for having written a "poisonous" novel (the exact term used by the prosecutor[96]).

In "Yvette", the figure akin to the bookseller, the librarian, reappears through Servigny in the role of the seducer. In his self-appointed capacity as Yvette's librarian, Servigny can only hope that she will read the « right » kind of novels, ones which we will allow their relationship to progress: "Je suis, en attendant mieux, son fournisseur de livre.

---

[95] Madame Bovary senior's affirmation appears as a premonition to Flaubert's own fate with the French legal system. The accused murderous librarian of the novel becomes Flaubert himself, a criminal writer.
[96] For more on the Flaubert's trial, see Dominick LaCapra's book *Madame Bovary on Trial*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Elle m'appelle son "bibliothécaire"."(239) However, it seems the novels fail to produce romantic and/or sexual desires in Yvette, as they had in the case of Emma. Servigny suspects that her unusual reading habits have something to do with her enigmatic behavior. The problem, as he sees it, isn't so much that she is an avid reader but that she reads all types of books[97], all at once, and in no particular order. For Servigny, this kind of dis-ordered reading transforms Yvette into an incoherent text, a text which he cannot read. In conversation with Saval, he shares his failed attempts at seducing Yvette and his complete incomprehension of her person: "Servigny raconta ses tentatives et leurs insuccès, puis il reprit: "Décidément, cette petite me trouble. Figure-toi que je n'ai pas pu m'endormir. Que c'est drôle, une fillette, Ça a l'air simple comme tout et on ne sait rien d'elle.» (258) Blaming Yvette's age (by calling her by the diminutive *fillette*) and her lack of maturity as a reader, Servigny fails to take responsibility for his own shortcomings.

Though Servigny continuously attributes his failures to Yvette's naiveté, lack of intelligence, readings, etc., a closer look at his multiple attempts to seduce her reveals that he may be the one to blame. Central to each of his advances, Servigny's inability to communicate, to speak, even, appears as a frustrating problem: « Il ne savait plus que lui

[97] Servigny even objects to Yvette's reading material. Surprised to find her with an entomological treaty, he receives the book with hesitation and anxiety:

> La jeune fille aussitôt tira un livre de sa poche et dit en riant :
> « Muscade, vous allez me faire la lecture. »
> Et elle lui tendit le volume.
> Il eut un mouvement de fuite.
> « Moi mam'zelle? mais je ne sais pas lire ! » ….Il reçut le livre, l'ouvrit, resta surpris. C'était un traité d'entomologie. Une histoire des fourmis par un auteur anglais Et il Et comme il demeurait immobile, croyant qu'elle se moquait de lui, elle s'impatienta : « Voyons, lisez », dit-elle. Il demanda : « Est-ce une gageur ou bien une simple toquade ? »

The scene, which calls to mind a child asking an adult to be read a story, at first infantilizes Yvette, suggests she cannot read. And yet, it is instead Servigny, in his role as Muscade who declares he cannot read. Unsurprisingly, when he does begin to read, his skills are less than impressive.

dire, sentant bien qu'on ne parle pas à une jeune fille comme à une femme, troublé, cherchant ce qu'il devait faire, se demandant si elle consentait ou si elle ne comprenait pas, et se courbaturant l'esprits pour trouver les paroles tendres, justes, décisives qu'il fallait. Il répétait de seconde en seconde : « Yvette ! Dites, Yvette ! » Puis brusquement, à tout hasard, il lui jeta un baiser sur la joue. » (256) Literally dispossessed of language, Servigny struggles to find the words to express his desires. Like a parrot, he stupidly repeats her name and eventually brutishly throws himself on her. In another attempt, he appears stricken with aphasia. During a theatrical exchange between the couple, Servigny's lines remain unintelligible to Yvette:

> « … - Voyons, finissons cette comédie. Voulez-vous ou ne voulez-vous pas?
> - Je ne vous comprends point.
> - Vous n'êtes pas si bête que ça. D'ailleurs je vous l'ai dit hier soir.
> - Quoi donc ? j'ai oublié.
> - Que je vous aime.
> - Vous ?
> - Moi.
> - Quelle blague !
> - Je vous jure.
> - Eh bien, prouvez-le.
> - Je ne demande que ça !
> - Quoi, ça ?
> - À le prouver
> - Eh bien, faites.
> - Vous n'en disiez pas autant hier soir !
> - Vous ne m'avez rien proposé
> - C'te bêtise !
> - Et puis d'abord ce n'est pas à moi qu'il faut vous adresser.
> - Elle et bien bonne ! A qui donc ?
> - Mais à maman, bien entendu. » …
>
> Il crut qu'elle se moquait encore de lui, et, rageant tout à fait : « Mam'zelle, vous me prenez pour un autre. » Elle le regardait toujours, de son œil doux et clair. Elle hésita, puis elle dit : « Je ne vous comprends toujours pas ! (269)

While Yvette's constant "I don't understands" could suggest that it is her naiveté which prevents communication between the couple, a closer look at Servigny's grammar offers

another possibility. Afraid or unable to utter a complete sentence, Servigny remains vague in his request. The direct objects stricken from his lines force Yvette gradually to put together his thoughts.[98]

Amongst all these masculine linguistic failures, linguistic mastery is successful primarily in the realm of the feminine: first in the case of the Marquise Obardi's bewitching voice and suggestive tongue and surprisingly, in Yvette's incessant interpretive activity. As Servigny continuously mis-reads Yvette, she incessantly strives to reconstruct the meaning of his ambiguous advances. In a perfect moment of miscommunication typical of Servigny and Yvette's interaction, he fails to say exactly what he means, and she fails to understand him completely. Nevertheless, Yvette mouths Servigny's words over and over, seeking to grasp the breadth of their meaning. She probes and works with the words and the grammar employed by their speaker:

> Elle était rentrée, elle s'était sauvée à la façon d'une bête blessée, blessée en effet profondément par *ces paroles qu'elle se répétait sans cesse pour en pénétrer tout le sens, pour en deviner toute la portée*: "Vous savez bien qu'il ne peut pas s'agir de mariage entre nous... mais d'amour." Qu'avait-il voulu dire? Et pourquoi cette injure? Elle ignorait donc quelque chose, quelque secret, quelque honte? Elle était seule à l'ignorer sans doute? Mais quoi? …Et elle avait songé, réfléchi, cherché, pleuré, mordue de craintes et de soupçons. Puis son âme jeune et joyeuse se rassérénant, elle s'était mise à arranger une aventure, à combiner une situation anormale et dramatique faite de tous les souvenirs des romans poétiques qu'elle avait lus. Elle se rappelait des péripéties émouvantes, des histoires sombres et attendrissantes qu'elle mêlait, dont elle faisait sa propre histoire, dont elle embellissait le mystère entrevu, enveloppant sa vie. » (*my emphasis,* 275)

To understand Servigny's words or perhaps to cope with their potential meaning, Yvette draws on her experience as a reader, and seeks to give them a context. Choosing fiction over other more "realistic" probabilities, she assigns them the meaning she prefers by

[98] In her comments on this chapter, Professor Elissa Marder noted that the confusion that had emerged around the word "fille" at the beginning of the novella returns at the utterance of the word "aimer" (which has two very different meanings in the eyes of Yvette and Servigny).

giving them a context derived from the novels she has read: perhaps there can only be love between them because she is the daughter of a prince or the orphaned daughter of illustrious nobles (both hints that indeed, she has not been reading the novels Servigny had hoped for).[99]

All these imagined scenarios, despite their differences, are bound by the common aim of reinventing her origin, of giving herself a better birth, a more poetic context, out of which she hopes to rise up as a heroine: « Elle s'attendrissait sur elle-même, heureuse au fond et triste aussi, satisfaite surtout de devenir une sorte d'héroïne de livre qui aurait à se montrer, à se poser, à prendre une attitude noble et digne d'elle. Et elle pensait au rôle qu'il lui faudrait jouer, selon les événements devinés. Elle le voyait vaguement, ce rôle, pareil à celui d'un personnage de M. Scribe ou de Mme Sand. » (276) Turning her life into a text which she can understand and control, Yvette is pacified by possibilities offered by the novels she has read and thus able to accept the cruelest of discoveries: her mother's prostitution and the true meaning of Servigny's remarks.

Yvette's identity, which had previously been formed in a gender continuum with her mother, is shattered the instant she discovers her in the arms of Saval. The little girl, who often cried for her mother, cries one last time at the scene she witnesses through the window:

> Une seule était éclairée, celle de sa mère. Et, tout à coup, deux ombres apparurent dans le carré lumineux, deux ombres côte à côte. Puis, se rapprochant, elles n'en firent plus qu'une; et un nouvel éclair projetant sur la façade un rapide et éblouissant jet de feu, elle les vit qui s'embrassaient, les bras serrés autour du cou. Alors, éperdue, sans réfléchir, sans savoir ce qu'elle faisait, elle cria de toute sa

[99] As Professor Elissa Marder pointed out during one of our many discussions on this chapter, Yvette is clearly acting out what Freud later describes in his 1909 "Family Romances". Yvette creates a fiction (from other fictions) in which she develops an adoption fantasy, giving herself a new father or completely new parents with a higher social station.

> force, d'une voix suraiguë: "Maman!" comme on crie pour avertir les gens d'un danger de mort. »

As her cry rips through the night, interrupts the lovers, shatters the remnants of Yvette's certainties, and warns of a looming death, it also announces her birth as a self-made literary character: « Sa pensée avait rôdé en des aventures si tragiques, poétiquement amenées par les romanciers, que l'horrible découverte lui apparaissait peu à peu comme la continuation naturelle de quelque feuilleton commencé la veille. Elle se dit : « Je sauverai ma mère. » Et presque rassérénée par cette résolution d'héroïne, elle se sentit forte, grandie, prête tout à coup pour le dévouement et pour la lutte. » (284)

Yvette's self-identification as literary heroine introduces a major shift within the novella. Not only does she choose how she wants to occupy the narrative, but on the basis of all the stories she has read, she also begins to create a new one. From this moment on, two narrative modes begin to co-exist within Maupassant's text: the original narrative to which Yvette belongs and its reinterpretation and rewriting from within as it is done by Yvette. To see the world in which she lives as a series of clear and moral absolutes, in which virtue and honor always triumph, she must strive incessantly to overcome the gap between her desires and the actuality of her situation, as it emerges through Servigny's advances and in turn announces her impending entrance into the world of prostitution. At once text (an undecipherable one according to Servigny), reader (striving to give new meaning to the words and actions of those around her), heroine (feminine protagonist of her own melodrama), and now author, Yvette begins to plot out a counter-narrative which will redirect her life toward a chaste and honorable one.

Emma Bovary's famous identification as literary heroine appears opposed to Yvette's own literary models. The two women had clearly not been reading the same

novels. As Yvette seeks to find strength to preserve her honor and chastity through her literary models, Emma reaches her own heroic self-identification in adultery when she becomes Rodolphe's mistress: "Alors elle se rappella les héroines des livres qu'elle avait lus... Elle devenait elle-même comme une partie véritable de ces imaginations et réalisait la longue rêverie de sa jeunesse, en se considérant dans ce type d'amoureuse qu'elle avait tant envié." (266) As Naomi Schor masterfully writes in "Pour une thématique restreinte: Écriture, parole et différence dans *Madame Bovary*", it is finally with Léon that Emma realizes another status as literary heroine. She imagines herself as more than the heroine of her own narrative and believes herself to have become the incarnation of the literary heroine: "Enfin, avec Léon, elle réussit pleinement son coup: d'héroïne-pour-soi elle se transforme en héroïne-pour-autrui: « Elle était l'amoureuse de tous les romans, l'héroïne de tous les drames, le vague *elle* de tous les volumes de vers » (p. 289). » (39) According to Schor, Emma's desire to become a literary character by taking on lovers also points to the her desire to become an author. The extent of her success, by the end of the novel, is debatable. However, what is sure, is that Emma's desire for authorship is marked by delay and frustration: "Emma s'installe dans l'attente d'un "événement", elle se munit d'avance des outils de l'écrivain: "Elle s'était acheté un buvard, une papeterie, un porte-plume et des enveloppes, quoiqu'elle n'eût personne à qui écrire… »(39).[100]

Yvette's own status as author appears different from Emma's. Emma's delayed authorship offers a sharp contrast to Yvette's bold affirmation. Yvette does not require an

---

[100] Naomi Schor writes that behind Emma's wish for Charles' fame hides her own desire to be a successful and renowned author: "Emma souhaite que Charles devienne un grand médecin car:

> Elle aurait voulu que ce nom de Bovary, qui était le sien, fût illustre, le voir étalé chez les libraires, répété dans les journaux, connu par toute la France. (p. 95)

En réunissant ces deux tronçons d'une même phrase, d'un même fantasme, nous voyons surgir l'ambition profonde d'Emma: être romancière célèbre. » (39)

addressee. On her personal stationery, circling her monogram, she inscribes a motto: “Elle se résolut même à prendre pour devises ces deux mots: "Moi seule", et elle chercha pendant plus d'une heure de quelle manière il les fallait disposer pour qu'ils fissent bon effet, gravés autour de son chiffre, sur son papier à lettres. » (277) Simultaneously author and reader of her own writing, Yvette writes to herself on her own stationery. But this schizophrenic practice, reminiscent of the terms Servigny had used to speak of Yvette’s deranged reading practice, brings Yvette clarity, not confusion. The inscribed “moi seule” immediately communicates the alienation felt by Yvette from her mother and the other characters in the story. It also hints at her alienation from the very narrative within which she exists, which longs to tell the tale of a young woman’s entrance into the world of prostitution. And yet, Yvette’s “moi seule” is not quite an inscription of despair. It is, after all, a motto (“une devise”). Inscribed around her initials, it appears as a commentary on her own name, or rather, as an attribute given to her person. She, alone and determinate, must set off to change the writing on the wall. Yvette’s “moi seule” is perhaps, then, her first brazen act of authorship.

Suddenly Yvette, but also certainly Emma, no longer appears as a mere reader of novels. A closer look reveals that in fact, the clichés with which I had introduced the two characters are inaccurate; or in any case, if Emma and Yvette are readers, they are also writers. “The tropology of the woman reader reading”[101], dominant in the eighteenth

---

[101] See Nancy K. Miller’s article “Rereading as a woman: The body in practice” for an introduction to this trope:

> We should recall that the dominant trope of the act of novel-reading in the eighteenth century is the figure, or allegory, perhaps even the fact, of the *lectrice,* the woman reader reading. *Les Liaisons* provides us both with the standard model, Mme de Tourvel – the beleaguered heroine in a story she does not understand, reading, as fortification against the plotting hero, volume two of *Christian Thoughts* and volume one of *Clarissa*; and the model ironized, Mme de Merteuil. The super woman reader who would be (male) author (early in the novel she proposes to write

century novel is replaced by women who have already *read* in the work of Flaubert and Maupassant. Flaubert's and Maupassant's narrators linger on their protagonist's pasts to stress the quantity of books the two had already consumed: « Et Emma cherchait à savoir ce que l'on entendait au juste dans la vie par les mots de *félicité,* de *passion* et d'*ivresse* qui lui *avaient paru* si beaux dans les livres. Elle *avait lu Paul et Virginie*…Pendant six mois, à quinze ans, Emme *se graissa* les mains à cette poussière des vieux cabinets de lecture. » (*my emphasis,* 97-100)

However, early in the novel, Emma stops devouring novels and magazines and turns her attention to writing. Elisabeth Bronfen writes in "Over her dead body: *Madame Bovary*" that Emma is now more busy "reading herself" than reading novels; and in the midst of this self-reading, a desire to write emerges. Chapter 9 in the first part of the novel particularly highlights this shift. In a matter of pages, Emma compulsively consumes all the texts she can get her hands on and then loses complete interest in reading: "Elle dévorait, sans en rien passer, tous les comptes rendus de premières représentation, de course et de soirées, s'intéressait au début d'une chanteuse, à l'ouverture d'un magasin…Elle étudia, dans Eugène Sue, des descriptions d'ameublements; elle lut Balzac et George Sand y cherchant des assouvissements imaginaires pour ses convoitises personnelles. A table même, elle apportait son livre..." (128) Two pages later, "Elle s'était acheté un buvard, une papeterie, un porte-plume et des enveloppes, quoiqu'elle n'eût personne à qui écrire; elle époussetait son étagère, se regardait dans la glace, prenait un livre, puis, rêvant entre les lignes, le laissait tomber sur ses genoux." (131)

Valmont's memoirs in his place), the marquise instead *re*reads from Crébillon, Rousseau and La Fontaine to prepare for her part in the fiction she embodies...(358)

With their books on their laps instead of in their hands, Emma and Yvette are free to take on the role of author. The extent of their success is debatable.[102] Emma's eternal struggle with the platitudes of language is a well known and an often discussed feature of Flaubert's novel.[103] In Maupassant's novella, Yvette's attempts to alter her family's (hi)story are also unsuccessful. She appears absurdly divorced from the very narrative within which she exists. All of her dramatic confrontations and attempts to convert her mother, to impress Servigny with her grandiose and moral ideas, prove to be unsuccessful. She finds herself completely alone, misunderstood by all and unable to alter the course of events set before her.

III. Literary suicides

Victim of both social and narrative determinism, yet still unwilling to submit to the pre-ordained sentence, Yvette decides that her only means of escape, her only means of control over the plot, is to exit the narrative altogether; and this, means death. In a story whose plot resolutely resists being changed, her suicide appears as her final attempt at both authorship and self-authorship: « …elle voulait quelque chose d'énergique, de vraiment grand, de vraiment fort, qui servirait d'exemple; et elle se résolut à la mort. »

[102] Of the many excellent critical works devoted to this debate, aside from the ones explicitly discussed in the chapter, I have found the following to be most helpful: Nathaniel Wing's "Emma's stories," in *The Limits of Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Maria Assad's "Who really killed Emma Bovary?" (Paper delivered at Eleventh Annual Nineteenth-Century French Studies Colloquium, Vanderbilt University, 17 October 1985. And Naomi Schor's *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

[103] For example, in *Ventriloquized Bodies,* Janet Beizer makes a compelling argument for the figure of Emma as figure of the condemned feminine writer. In her chapter devoted to the relationship between Louise Colet's *La Servante* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, Beizer argues that "the woman written is not only a reconstruction but also a restriction of the woman writer, who is contained when she is cast in the mold of Emma Bovary, her feminine excesses indulged only to be finally condemned." (135)

(291) She does not merely think of her death in terms of its implications for her life or spiritual salvation perhaps, but rather in terms of produced effect. Like any author, she seeks a spectacular denouement to the story she is writing- "quelque chose de vraiment grand, de vraiment fort, qui servirait d'exemple". "To take one's life, is to force others to read one's death" Margaret Higonnet writes in "Speaking silences" (68); to stop and read the note, the body, the person and the life.

Suicide is no longer just a means of preventing her entrance into the world of prostitution the creation of a text she would find satisfaction reading. Yvette understands suicide as a means of delivering a particular image to those who failed to see her as a romantic heroine. Ironically, suicide is then equated with complete liberty: the right to be who one wants to be. It appears as self-assertion, symbolized by the right to act upon oneself in a manner of one's own choosing. Similarly, while many read Emma Bovary's suicide as the ultimate manifestation of her self-dispossession, the scene of her decision portrays a new and assertive Emma. In a « heroic transport », Emma runs away from her narrative world: "Elle reconnut les lumières des maisons, qui rayonnait de loin dans le brouillard. Alors, sa situation, telle qu'un abîme se représenta. Elle haletait à se rompre la poitrine. Puis, dans un transport d'héroïsme qui la rendait presque joyeuse, elle descendit la côte en courant, traversa la planche aux vaches, le sentier, l'allée, les halles, et arriva devant la boutique du pharmacien. » (457) As her situation is *represented* through the village of Yonville, Emma runs to her death, as if running to safety and freedom, by running through the streets of the village.[104] She appears to reach the exit by entering

[104] Emma's run through the streets is evocative of the movement and motion which was one symbolic of her own *stasis*: "Un homme, au moins, est libre; il peut parcourir les passions et les pays, traverser les obstacles, mordre aux bonheurs les plus lointains. Mais une femme est empêchée continuellement.» (172) In death, gender no longer holds Emma back. Like a man, she is free to run elsewhere.

through the door of the pharmacy. Before the reader learns of her decision, Emma has already chosen her death.

Due to a conspicuous absence of textual evidence, critics still speculate on the method chosen by Emma to commit suicide. Flaubert's *style indirect libre* would have provided the perfect format for an explanation, but her reasoning never gets written into the text. Instead, the usually self-reflexive literary character becomes all body, all action. On the contrary, Maupassant's text lingers on the question of method. Yvette insists on the particulars of her death. The method appears as important as the act itself. She rules out all the methods which would require some kind of technical skill, such as using a dagger or a gun. She also rules out hanging, a method she deems ridiculous, ugly and beneath her: "Elle fut disposée immédiatement à cette détermination extrême, avec la légèreté des âmes exaltées et jeunes. Et elle songea au moyen qu'elle emploierait. Mais tous lui apparaissaient d'une exécution pénible et hasardeuse et demandaient en outre une action violente qui lui répugnait. Elle renonça bien vite au poignard et ou revolver qui peuvent blesser seulement, estropier ou défigurer, et qui exigent une main exercée et sûre – à la corde qui est commune, suicide pauvre, ridicule et laid – à l'eau parce qu'elle savait nager. Restait donc le poison mais lequel ? » (291) By carefully choosing her death, Yvette assures both its ease and beauty. She is intent on avoiding any methods which could jeopardize the esthetic dimension of her death. This insistence on the final image she hopes to project begins to suggest that her dead body is also meant to have a narrative function; or rather, that her dead body is also meant to be a text.

Yvette's commentary on needing a "deft and sure hand" to create a "good suicide" resonates with her previously failed efforts at writing a new ending to her story.

Her suicide, intended to appear as a work of art (by insisting on its esthetic and moral dimensions), is Yvette's final attempt at authorship. However, this time it is with her whole body that she intends to write, not with just the hand. At once page and writing instrument, Yvette sets out for the death of Atala, Juliette, and Cleopatra. Effortless. Classic. Beautiful. Yvette, both creator and creation declares: "Je vais leur montrer comment on meurt" (293). As Susan Gubar explains in ""The Blank Page" and the Issues of Female Creativity", feminine authorship (as represented in 19th century European literature) is restricted to the realm of objecthood rather than subjectivity. A woman can become a work of art but not an artist. "This model of the pen-penis writing on the virgin page participates in a long tradition identifying the author as a male who is primary and the female as his passive creation-a secondary object lacking autonomy, endowed with often contradictory meaning but denied intentionality. Clearly this tradition excludes woman from the creation of culture, even as it reifies her as an artifact within culture. (247) Nevertheless, through a reading of George Eliot's *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda,* Gubar demonstrates that failed attempts at artistic creation, in our case in the production of fiction, lead women to a last option: "the woman who cannot become an artist can nevertheless turn herself into an artistic object." (249) In a double reversal of the myth of Pygmalion, Yvette (the artist) becomes the artistic object; and the living woman attempts to turn herself back to marble.

With this goal in mind, it isn't surprising that Yvette chooses to poison herself. It promises an easy death. And, the right poison would not attack the surface of the body, leaving it untouched by the physical reality of death.[105] Poison had created both the

[105] As Philippe Bonnefis writes in *Parfums,* Yvette seeks to reconstruct the masterfully beautiful deaths featured in "L'Endormeuse":

beautiful death of Atala and the horrifying death of Emma. We can only assume that such a fervent reader of novels old and new would have read Chateaubriand and Flaubert: « Restait donc le poison, mais lequel? Presque tous font souffrir et provoquent des vomissements. Elle ne voulait ni souffrir, ni vomir. Alors elle songea au chloroforme, ayant lu dans un fait divers comment avait fait une jeune femme pour s'asphyxier par ce procédé. » (291) Frightened, perhaps, by Emma's literary vomiting, Yvette rules out arsenic. But the poisons used in the "successful literary suicides" (Juliet and Atala's for example) are not named. They do not have scientific names. They are like magic potions, capable of uniting beauty, love and death. For lack of more information, Yvette draws inspiration from a reassuring « fait divers ».

In her unconscious shift from "heroine de roman" to "cas quelconque ou fait divers", Yvette's suicide becomes problematic. In fact, Maupassant's narrative seems to insist upon its protagonist's unfortunate misstep. From the moment Yvette draws from a "common death" to author "une mort romanesque", she is stripped of all poetic license. All the pesky details of "real" life comically interrupt and invade Yvette's grand gesture: the pharmacists only sell small bottles of chloroform. In a tragically comical episode, Yvette thus ends up scouring the country side and then Paris in the hopes of accumulating enough little bottles to die: she gets one from Bougival, one from Croisset, a third from

---

Et c'est Yvette étouffée par les roses ; c'est surtout l'invention, la merveilleuse et charitable invention, dont *l'Endormeuse* se fait gloire, un assoupissement exquis, une mort de rêve : « je fus enveloppée par une odeur délicieuse de réséda ».

Et si, d'entre toutes les fleurs, si, d'entre tous les viatiques, c'est sur celui-là que s'est porté le choix des bienfaiteurs de l'Œuvre de la Bonne Mort, ce n'est pas, on le soupçonne sans de solides raisons. Le mot *réséda* vient du latin *resedare*, parce que l'on attribuait autrefois à la fleur ainsi nommée des vertus sédatives. Pline, dans son *Historia Naturalis,* enseigne qu'on l'employait en particulier pour résoudre des tumeurs, mais qu'en l'appliquant on prononçait cette formule magique : *reseda morbos !* Car *reseda* est un impératif. O fleur, calme ces maladies !...Quant à toi, mort, repos !...

Douce ! la mort, douce !... (102)

Chatou, a fourth from Rueil and the next day she leaves for Paris: "Et pendant tout l'après-midi, elle alla de pharmacie en pharmacie, achetant dans chacune quelques gouttes de chloroforme. Elle revint le soir, les poches pleines de petites bouteilles." (292) There is a sort of cruelty in the narrative's insistence on this petty detail. The amount of work required to die, the image of Yvette returning home with her pockets full of little clinking bottles of chloroform makes her suicide appear completely out of sync with its intended effect as an act of grandeur, worthy of a heroine's final act. From the gigantic *bocale* from which Emma immediately stuffs her face to Yvette's little clear bottles which incessantly delay her death, Yvette's true misfortune lies in her inability to author anything grand.[106]

Maupassant's narrative appears to persecute Yvette by refusing to give her the context necessary to achieve a grand death. Yvette's suicide is constantly interrupted, narratively speaking, by the other scenes juxtaposed to it. In between her despair, the writing of her suicide note, her first inhalations of chloroform, the text inserts the off-colored stories, laughs and songs of her mother's friends: "Yvette pensait: "Je vais mourir! Je vais mourir !" Et son cœur gonflé de sanglots, crevant de peine, l'étouffait. Elle sentait en elle un besoin de demander grâce à quelqu'un, d'être sauvé, d'être aimé. La voix de Servigny s'éleva. Il racontait une histoire graveleuse que des éclats de rire interrompaient à tout instant. La marquise elle-même avait des gaietés plus fortes que les autres… Yvette prit la bouteille, la déboucha et versa un peu de liquide sur le coton. »

---

[106] Ironically, the poison in Maupassant (chloroform sold at every pharmacy) is hard to get get, while the arsenic in Flaubert is surprisingly easy to get. Though it is under lock and key, Emma is able to get right to it: "Le clef tourna dans la serrure, et elle alla droit vers la troisième tablette, tant son souvenir la guidait bien, saisit le bocale bleu et arrracha le bouchon, y fourra sa main… » (458) The irony is also noted in the *DIR*: "ARSENIC – Se trouve partout! – Rappeler Mme Lafarge/ Cependant, il y a des peuples qui en mangent ! »

(298) Within this narrative montage, Yvette's suicide loses all signifying power. Her suicide is de-dramatized and ridiculed by its framing.

Though Yvette attempts a particular mise-en-scène of her death, the novella's original mise-en-scène undermines the construction of her death scene. Yvette moves her furniture around in order to place herself outside her open window, next to a gigantic rose bush. Positioning herself in an appealing fashion, reclined on a long chair, she begins to inhale the chloroform while gazing at the moon : « Puis elle roula sa chaise longue auprès de la fenêtre, attire une petite table à portée de sa main…Un immense rosier couvert de fleurs qui, parti de la terrasse, montait jusqu'à sa fenêtre… » (298) However, the open window consistently interrupts her suicidal ecstasy by allowing the cruel reality of her narrative world to enter: "...elle entendit qu'on l'appelait en bas. Sa mère avait dit : "Eteins donc la bougie." Puis la voix de Servigny s'éleva claire et comique : « Eteignez donc vot' bougie, mam'zelle Yvette. » Et tous reprirent en chœur : « Mam'zelle Yvette, éteignez donc votre bougie. » (301) Her mother's banal request is echoed by a choir of buffoons. As the novella had told the reader in its introduction, the dukes, princes and knights, chanting "Hip – hip – hurra – mam'zelle Yvette" below her balcony, are just johns making fun of gallantry.[107]

The events taking place outside her window finish turning Yvette's suicide into a parody of a romantic death. As her mother begins to worry, the men (who think Yvette has accidently fallen asleep) attempt to wake with a series of perverted romantic gestures. Servigny first attempts to wake her by throwing roses into her room. The effect of the

---

[107] When Servigny and Saval are headed for the first time to the home of the Marquise, Servigny explains the game played between the guests with their made-up and ridicule titles: "Tu ne te figures pas la collection de titres de fantaisie qu'on recontre dans ce repaire...Moi, là-dedans, on m'a baptisé le duc de Servigny. Je ne sais ni comment ni pourquoi...Laisse moi faire, je te présenterai comme le vice-roi du Haut-Mississippi, et personne ne s'étonnera. » (240-241)

gesture loses any sentimental significance by the sheer amount flowers thrown up and by the startling and comical effects it has on Yvette. Forced out of her slumber by the projectiles, Yvette almost screams : “Alors Servigny, cueillant les roses rouges du gros rosier poussé le long du mur et les boutons pas encore éclos, se mit à les lancer dans la chambre par la fenêtre. Au premier qu’elle reçut, Yvette tressauta, faillit crier. » (302) Next, the « chevalier » decides to climb up her balcony not to rescue her, as a knight might have, but with the hope of a *rendez-vous* : “Permettez, permettez, c’est là une grosse faveur, je réclame ; c’est un trop bon moyen…c’est un trop bon moment…pour obtenir un rendez-vous ! »[108] (302) Titillated at the possibility of obtaining a « rendez-vous » with Yvette, the exact thing all the men present are seeking, the men decide her fate (and thus of her virginity) with a long game of coin toss. Since the honor is won by none other than the “prince”, the scene of her rescue is a ridicule spoof of the Shakespearean cliché. Too drunk, too fat and too discombobulated to make it up the balcony, the prince looks for a ladder: “Mais le prince regardait autour de lui d’un air inquiet. « Que cherchez-vous ? demanda le chevalier. – Mais…je…je voudrais bien…une échelle. » » (302) The joke is more cruel if we think again about the poison, knowing as Maupassant knew very well, that chloroform couldn’t really kill you (especially if you left your bedroom window wide open).

The conflict between the context (the outdoor sequence) of the suicide and its text (the indoor sequence) prohibits Yvette from maintaining narrative control over her death. One could say that her suicide does not go according to plan. From within the bedroom,

[108] As the novella will suggests with its ending, the suicide of young woman does in fact appears as the best way and the best moment for a man to obtain sexual gratification. However, it will not be the “chevalier”, or the “prince” who will succeed but the *parvenu* (literally and figuratively speaking) who makes it up to her bedroom.

the poorly chosen poison contributes to the interruption and eventual end of her suicide attempt. Rather than asphyxiating her, the chloroform seems to keep Yvette alive. Functioning more like a medicine than a poison, the chloroform appears to cure her of death: "Elle respirait lentement et regardait la lune, en face d'elle, sur les arbres. Quelque chose était changée dans son esprit. Elle ne pensait plus comme tout à l'heure. Le chloroforme, en amollissant son corps et son âme, avait calmé sa peine, et endormi sa volonté de mourir…. Mais comme elle voulait songer toujours, elle versa encore cette eau de rêve sur le coton, et se remit à respirer, en écartant parfois le poison de sa narine, pour n'en pas absorber trop, pour ne pas mourir. » (300) The ambiguous syntax of the previous sentence allows for a double interpretation of Yvette's dainty sniffs. The colony of comas allows the eye to read : "Elle se versa encore cette eau de rêve sur le coton, en écartant parfois le poison de sa narine pour ne pas mourir. » and « Elle se versa encore cette eau de rêve sur le coton, et se remit à respirer pour ne pas mourir. » by skipping over an arbitrary clause. Is Yvette inhaling chloroform in order not to die?

The medicinal properties of the poison along with the disembodied high it produces suggest that Yvette may have taken the wrong drug. Appearing like something closer to ether, that "extraordinary medicinal fluid"[109], chloroform functions as a physical and moral anesthetic rather than a poison : "Quelque chose de vif et d'agréable la pénétrait jusqu'au bout des membres, jusqu'au bout des pieds et des mains, entrait dans sa chair, une sorte d'ivresse vague, de fièvre douce…Deux fois elle versa du chloroforme dans le coton, avide maintenant de cette sensation physique et de cette sensation morale,

---

[109] In 1761, a Liverpool surgeon named Michael Turner publishes the book *An Account of the Extraordinary Medicinal Fluid, called Aether* in which he extols the miraculous medicinal benefits of ether for curing head-aches, vertigo, epilepsy *convulsions, hysteric and hypochondriac disorders, etc...* Historically, a switch between the drugs would have been entirely possible since pharmaceutical ether was sometimes used instead of chloroform for its anesthetic properties.

de cette torpeur rêvante ou s'égarait son âme. Il lui semblait qu'elle n'avait plus d'os, plus de chair, plus de jambes, plus de bras. On le lui avait ôté tout cela doucement, sans qu'elle s'en aperçut.» (299) Gradually stripped of her body, Yvette craves the weightless and disembodied sensation created by the drug.

In light of this change from poison[110], to medicine, to recreational drug, the dreamlike sequence produced by the chloroform begins to look like a psychedelic trip.[111] The text does not describe the sentimental projections of young woman but describes a series of hallucinations:

> Elle regardait la lune et voyait une figure dedans, une figure de femme. Elle recommençait à battre la campagne dans la griserie imagée de l'opium. Cette figure se balançait au milieu du ciel puis elle chantait ; elle chantait avec une voix bien connue, l'*Alleluia d'amour*….Yvette avait des ailes maintenant. Elle volait la nuit, par une belle nuit claire, au-dessus des bois et des fleuves. Elle volait avec délices, ouvrant les ailes, battant des ailes, portée par le vent comme on serait porté par des caresses. Elle se roulait dans l'air qui lui baisais la peau, et elle filait si vite, si vite qu'elle n'avait le temps de rien voir au-dessous d'elle, et elle se trouvait assise au bord d'un étang, une ligne à la main ; elle pêchait.
> Quelque chose tirait sur le fil qu'elle sortait de l'eau, en amenant un magnifique collier de perles, dont elle avait eu envie quelque temps auparavant. Elle ne s'étonnait nullement de cette trouvaille, et elle regardait Servigny, venu à côté d'elle sans qu'elle sût comment, pêchant aussi et faisant sortir de la rivière un cheval de bois. (301)

[110] The chloroform is at first not even a poison; its curious proximity to the rose bush suggests it is first a scent or perfume. The chloroform and the rose bush are textually and narratively placed next to one another. Reclining on her chair, Yvette could easily grab the cotton with one hand, and a rose with the other, making it hard to tell which scent was the poison: "Puis elle roula sa chaise longue auprès de la fenêtre, attira une petite table à portée de main et plaça dessus la bouteille de chloroforme à côté d'une poignée d'ouate. Un immense rosier couvert de fleurs, qui, parti de la terrasse, montait jusqu'à sa fenêtre exhalait dans la nuit un parfum doux et faible passant par souffles légers ; et elle demeura quelques instants à le respirer. » (298). Before inhaling the chloroform, she breaths in the flower.

[111] In Flaubert, Emma too appears to have some hallucinations, or rather visions, produced by a liquid other than her poison: consecrated oil. The drops of holy oil applied on Emma's adulterous body function like the drops of chloroform in "Yvette". « Cependant elle n'était plus aussi pâle, et son visage avait une expression de sérénité, comme si le sacrement l'eut guérie. Le prêtre ne manqua point d'en faire l'observation ; il expliqua même à Bovary que le Seigneur, quelquefois, prolongeait l'existence des personnes lorsqu'il le jugeait convenable pour leur salut ; et Charles se rappela un jour où, ainsi près de mourir, elle avait reçu la communion. (470)

Yvette's *trip* outside her window plays a crucial role in her sudden decision to live: "Pourquoi ne vivrait-elle pas? Pourquoi ne serait-elle pas aimée ? Pourquoi n'aurait-elle pas une vie heureuse?" (300) For the first time, Yvette appears to have a lived experience which exceeds her romantic expectations and which prompts her to see her previously impossible *life wish* with renewed hope: all her desires are instantly satisfied. "Quelque chose tirait sur le fil qu'elle sortait de l'eau, en amenant un magnifique collier de perles, dont elle avait eu envie quelque temps auparavant." Her previous romantic disillusions have been surpassed by the magic of her hallucinations. The drug has proved to be more satisfying and more effective than fiction in bridging the gap between romance and reality.

Along with the radical change in the function of the poison, its results could not be more fundamentally opposed to Yvette's original intent. She continues, both by a new love "for this eau de rêve" and by a new desire to live, to daintily sniff bits of the drugs. As she relinquishes her will to die, Yvette also relinquishes her life to its inevitable ending. Servigny's sentence (the death of the *jeune fille*) continues to echo throughout the narrative, « De jeune fille elle deviendra fille, tout simplement. », and stifles the voice of the suicide note:« Je meurs pour ne pas devenir une fille entretenue. »

As the first man to succeed in the rescue of (or *rendez-vous* with) Yvette, Servigny is the only character who reads Yvette's suicide note. However, calling it reading is a generous description of the quick glance it is given by Servigny:

> Mais Servigny s'étant retourné, vit une lettre sur la table. Il la saisit d'un mouvement rapide et lut l'adresse. Il comprit et pensa : « Peut-être ne faut-il pas que la marquise ait connaissance de cela. » Et, déchirant l'enveloppe, il parcourut d'un regard les deux lignes qu'elle contenait:
>
> « Je meurs pour ne pas devenir une fille entretenue. »
>
> Yvette.

> « Adieu, ma chère maman. Pardon. »
> « Diable, pensa-t-il, ça demande réflexion. » Et il cacha la lettre dans sa poche. » (305)

The speed with which the narrative, through Servigny's brief examination, addresses the note and then hides it from view, turns the letter into an inconsequential object. Her suicide note, which should have functioned as an explanatory text for her death, is not given any narrative attention. Though Servigny declares the note to "require some thought", it isn't given a thought at all and disappears in his pant pocket, crumbled like a candy wrapper: an insignificant little detail. In Servigny's possession, Yvette's last words are torn – *déchirer* – and hidden – *cacher*.

By hiding the letter away from the Marquise[112], Servigny censures Yvette and her ending. Adopting the stance of the Father, he chastises her like a child, insisting that she never repeats *des folies pareilles*:

> Il tira de sa poche la lettre trouvée sur la table :
> « Est-ce qu'il faut montrer cela à votre mère ? »
> Elle fit « non » d'un signe du front.
> Il ne savait plus que dire, car la situation lui paraissait sans issue. Il murmura :
> « Ma chère petite, il faut prendre son parti des choses les plus pénibles. Je comprends bien votre douleur, et je vous promets… »
> Elle balbutia :
> « Vous êtes bon…
> Ils se turent. Il la regardait. Elle avait dans l'œil quelque chose d'attendri, de défaillant ; et, tout d'un coup, elle souleva les deux bras, comme si elle eût voulu l'attirer. Il se pencha sur elle, sentant qu'elle l'appelait ; et leurs lèvres s'unirent. » (307)

This exchange between Servigny and Yvette, during which she negates the value of her letter, ushers Servigny's instantaneous victory. Both body and text have failed in Yvette's attempt to author herself a better, more noble ending. And she's failed too, in appearing

---

[112] Logic would suggest that Yvette's letter was addressed to her mother. However, the text is conspicuously vague in actually naming the addressee. In actuality, nothing suggests that the letter could not have been addressed to Servigny or even someone else.

like a heroine. Though she takes on the pose of a dead woman in a "posture bien abandonnée, une posture de morte..." (301), she doesn't fool Servigny, who sees her situation in a humiliating light: "Puis il se rapprocha du lit, et aussitôt la pensée lui vint que la jeune fille avait repris connaissance, mais qu'elle n'osait pas le montrer par honte, par humiliation, par crainte des questions. » (305) The ending is more favorable to Servigny who, as we see, pockets Yvette along with her note.

Conspiring with Saval to be left alone with Yvette, Servigny asks his mother for "just a minute" alone to bring back Yvette to the arms of her mother: ""Non, c'est fini. Tenez, allez-vous en une minute, rien qu'une minute, et je vous promets qu'elle vous embrassera quand vous reviendrez. » »(306) We know that after this, Yvette and Servigny share a kiss, symbolizing their new tacit agreement. However, their kiss appears to have taken longer than a minute: "....et leurs lèvres s'unirent. Longtemps ils restèrent ainsi, les yeux fermés. » (307) Their common sensual *bien-être*, along with Servigny's ambiguously ironic « C'est fait » suggests that the exchange was much more than a kiss.[113]

In this moment, Servigny's prediction that « De jeune fille elle deviendra fille, tout simplement. » (240) is accomplished. With a tinge of irony we are told, he shouts to the mother and Saval that they may come in the room: "Vous pouvez entrer. C'est fait maintenant." (307). The ambiguous "c'est fait" has very little to do with bringing Yvette back to life. The exchange between Yvette and Servigny suggests rather the death of the jeune fille, and the birth of the *fille*. Standing on the bedroom's balcony "l'âme radieuse,

---

[113] This scene appears as a perversion of the fairytale kiss. Reminiscent of fairytales such as "Snow White" and "Sleeping Beauty", Servigny's kiss seems to bring Yvette back to life. However, in a reversal of fates, Yvette does not become a princess and Servigny is certainly not her prince. The princess is a prostitute and the prince a Parisian parvenu.

la chair émue", Servigny hums a refrain just as if he were smoking a cigar. It seems there is a death after all in "Yvette", and a little one at that. The bedroom is not the site for a grand death, but as the size of the novella already suggested, is the site of "une petite mort".

IV. Endings

Instead of a tragic catharsis where virtue triumphs over desire and mortality, Yvette's attempted suicide turns her into both a prostitute and a junkie. In a sense, Yvette will never really cease to die.[114] Her profession will ensure that she will continue to experience a multiplicity of "little deaths". This underlying structure of radical irony leaves the reader with a complicated message with regard to the possibility of feminine authorship. On the narrative level, the struggle certainly lies, as in the case of Emma Bovary, in women's social and historical plights. However, on a purely textual level, the heart of the drama lies elsewhere. It lies in this struggle between the main character and the very narrative which she inhabits. Unable to sign the text that is her life with her death, the all-too-powerful author turns his heroine into a mockery of literary falsehoods. In the end, Yvette is far from the heroine she had hoped to be. She appears far from the honorable women she wished to emulate, more cowardly than even Emma Bovary – only daintily sniffing little bits of not quite severe enough poison out of tiny bottles.[115]

---

[114] Yvette's death appears as an ironic reversal of women's classical motive for suicide: chastity. As early as the Middle Ages, women were taking their lives, like Yvette, in order to remain chaste. As Margaret Higonnet writes in "Speaking Silences: Women's suicide", rape or even the sexual commodificaiton of a woman necessitated her death: "If woman is taken to be a commodity, rape means total devaluation: reified, then stolen, she has no essence left to justify her continuing existence. Trespass necessitates *trépas*." (74) However, in the case of Yvette loss of chastity inaugurates the beginning of her new life.

[115] As Professor Laura Otis pointed out to me, maybe all these little sniffs are symbolic of all her *petites morts*.

At the heart of Yvette's death-wish (to die like a heroine) appears an impossible life-wish[116], a desire to belong and to author another fiction altogether. Most famously, this type of literary discontent is often observed in Flaubert's novel and given as a motive for Emma's suicide. In "Over her dead body: *Madame Bovary*", Elisabeth Bronfen speaks of Emma's death as a wish for textualisation into another type of fiction:

> Death is both the fulfillment of her desire to transform her life, modeled on literary principles into a text; a last effort to live romance by dying a romantic death...Her final death scene is significantly doubled, recalling medieval tombstone sculpture, where the intact body of the deceased, the *gisant*, is doubled with a figuration of the decayed body, the *transi*. The first death performs the beautiful, good death induced by romantic fiction. It comes as a painless death that allows her to write one last letter for posthumous reading [ ] and glide out of life. (418)

Seen in this light, Emma's suicide is as cruel a failure as Yvette's. Precisely, Emma's death is reminiscent of a beautiful death in the ways in which it continuously fails to be one. Her method is vulgar at best: she crams rat poison into her mouth. Her suicide letter is also never really read. Charles only reads half a sentence, then fixatedly truncates the letter to one word referring to her condition, not her story: "Il bondit au secrétaire, brisa le cachet et lut tout haut : *Qu'on n'accuse personne*... Il s'arrêta, se passa la main sur les yeux, et relut encore.

- Comment!... Au secours ! à moi!

Et il ne pouvait que répéter ce mot: « Empoisonnée ! empoisonnée !» » 461)

However, I hesitate to agree with Bronfen on Emma's supposed intent to recreate, with her suicide, the beautiful death of the romantic heroine. Often, critics seem to forget that the Emma who famously wondered "ce que l'on entendait au juste dans la vie par les

---

[116] Higonnet writes: "The attempt expresses not merely a deathwish but an uncommunicable or impossible lifewish. As in so many other aspects of women's lives, it is the appearance or the representation rather than an "essence" that matters. As Simone de Beauvoir said, "women have been pretexts rather than agents. The suicide of Lucretia has had value only as a symbol" (Beauvoir 1953: 162). (81)

mots de *félicité*, de *passion* et d'*ivresse*, qui lui avait paru si beaux dans les livres. » (97), is much younger and more hopeful than the disillusioned Emma who runs to her death. By the end of the novel, she no longer attempts to reconcile life and literature. And there is no evidence that she ever tries to so with her death. During her final exchange with Rodolphe, Emma is confronted by the cruel reality of life and the lies of romance. Her relationship with Rodolphe had been nothing but a lie: "Tu m'y as fait croire: tu m'as pendant deux ans, trainée dans le rêve le plus magnifique et le plus suave!... Hein ? nos projets de voyage, tu te rappelles ? Oh ! ta lettre, ta lettre ! elle m'a déchiré le cœur !... Et puis, quand je reviens vers lui, vers lui qui est riche, heureux, libre ! pour implorer un secours que le premier venu rendrait, suppliante et lui rapportant toute ma tendresse, il me repousse, pace que ça lui coûterait trop trois mille francs ! » (456) This realization is the final blow for Emma. She appears fatally wounded before she even considers suicide: "Elle ne souffrait que de son amour, et sentait son âme l'abandonner par ce souvenir, comme les blessés, en agonisant, sentent l'existence qui s'en va par leur plaie qui saigne. » (456)

The language of loss (loss of memory, blood and life) which appears in this original evocation of her death, remains once Emma has taken the arsenic. Emma's death is famously characterized by her continuous loss of bodily fluids: vomit, sweat, blood, tears and that horrifying black liquid which comes out at the end. As she is progressively hollowed by the poison, Emma also appears to experience a gradual loss of language. She forbids Charles to address her, then begins to sigh, murmur, open and close her jaw without producing a sound: - Ah! voilà que ça commence! Murmura-t-elle.

- Que dis-tu ?

Elle roulait sa tête avec un geste doux plein d'angoisse, et tout en ouvrant continuellement les mâchoires, comme si elle eût porté sur sa langue quelque chose de très lourd. » (460). Then, in the midst of her agony, words are replaced by inarticulate cries: "Elle jeta un *cri aigu*...Puis elle se mit à *geindre*...Peu à peu, ses *gémissements* furent plus fort. Un *hurlement sourd* lui échappa..." (*my emphasis*, 460) Her incoherent screams create an equally incoherent death. As the men witnessing her death attempt to "read" her death, through her symptoms and the letter, Emma is first unwilling, then unable to answer their questions. Finally, the last of Emma's words, which we assume could have revealed Emma's motives, gets stuck in Charles' throat. As if he were choking on the words themselves, he cries for help (for himself): "Il s'arrêta, se passa la main sur les yeux, et relut encore.

- Comment! Au secours! À moi !

Et il ne pouvait que répéter ce mot : « Empoisonnée ! empoisonnée ! » (461)

The physical horror of the death combined with the pervasive silence of her letter, have never ceased to fascinate the readers of *Madame Bovary*. Yet, the curiosity around this death is strange considering that it doesn't appear to be much of a mystery. In *Politique De La Littérature*, Jacques Rancière succinctly lists some of the obvious explanations for Emma's death clearly provided by the novel:

> ...pourquoi Emma Bovary s'est-elle suicidé ? À cela, le roman offre toute les réponses souhaitables : elle s'est suicidée parce qu'elle ne pouvait payer ses dettes ; elle était endettée à cause de ses aventures extraconjugales ; ces aventures résultaient elles-mêmes de l'écart abyssal entre la vie qu'elle avait rêvée à partir des romans lus dans le couvent où elle avait été et celle qu'elle devait vivre aux côté d'un médiocre officier de santé dans une misérable bourgade de province. Son suicide, en bref, apparaît comme le terme logique d'une suite de désillusions qui découle d'une illusion originelle : par excès d'imagination, elle avait confondu la littérature et la vie réelle. (59)

Yet the death of Emma continues to trouble its readers. A voluminous critical corpus analyzing the death scene in *Madame Bovary* continues to grow. It seems we suspect that Emma's letter contains truths others than the ones offered by the novel. For the philosopher Jacques Rancière, the root of the discontent lies in the question itself, since it asks for an answer which could never address reasons beyond simple narrative elaboration. As he sees it, the question does not address the purely literary dimensions of Emma's death:

> ...le saut des raisons fictionnelles internes aux raisons sociales, non fictionnelles, laisse tomber ce qui se tient entre le dedans et le dehors, entre le fictionnel et le non-fictionnel, à savoir l'invention de la fiction elle-même…Il faut donc partir de ceci : si Emma meurt, c'est parce que l'écrivain Flaubert a décidé d'écrire un livre sur la mort d'une femme. Que la ville de Rouen ait été en ce temps-là agitée par le suicide d'une jeune femme adultère n'explique évidemment pas ce choix. C'est là un sujet parmi les centaines de sujets possibles qu'il a passé sa vie à brasser. Et ce n'est certainement pas son aspect de leçon social qui la retenu. Les problèmes sociaux ne l'ont jamais intéressé et les leçons de morale pas davantage. Sa seule préoccupation a toujours été la littérature en elle-même, la pure littérature. La question est alors de savoir quel rapport peut-il exister entre la mort d'Emma et le souci de la pure littérature. Et c'est bien là ce que demandait la question apparemment erronée : pourquoi *fallait-il* tuer Emma Bovary ? (60-61)

Surprisingly, Rancière's brilliant meditations on the question overlook the important role played by gender in the construction of this paradigm. He develops his argument around a series of examples of other feminine characters and yet never considers the obvious common denominator.[117] Taking sex into account, a more precise question would have to be: "pourquoi fallait-il tuer une femme?"

According to the some of the most brilliant writers of the 19th and 20th centuries, poets and novelists alike, the death of a woman is the most *literary* or *poetic* of all topics because it allies two of literature's greatest concerns: death and beauty. In an article entitled "The philosophy of composition", Edgar Allan Poe declares that the death of a

---

[117] Jacques Rancière works mostly with Proust's Albertine and Woolf's Rhoda to develop his argument.

woman is “the most poetical topic in the world”. He writes that the topic of his famous poem *The Raven* was chosen in accordance with this unquestionable fact: **“...** I asked myself — "Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the *universal* understanding of mankind, is the *most* melancholy?" Death — was the obvious reply. "And when," I said, "is this most melancholy of topics most poetical?"... "When it most closely allies itself to *Beauty:* the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.” Similarly, in the preface to the *Wings of the Dove*, Henry James explains how the literary creation of a dying heroine gives birth to the narrative, to the dramatic situation[118], and to the aesthetic of the novel.[119] For James, (in the case of the *Wings of*

---

[118] In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Peter Brooks suggests that James concern for the “dramatic”, or as Brooks calls it the “melodramatic” element in the novel, is inextricably tied to its production as a modern “realist” novel. For James, the melodramatic mode is essential to the production of a readable work of fiction, “ he once said in criticism of Flaubert, even if we are so strangely constituted as to be nine-tenths purely literary, there must still be that one-tenth that makes us want to buy the book and sit down to read it.” (x)

[119] From 1907 to 1910, Henry James selected, reworked and wrote prefaces for his previously published works in preparation for the New York Edition, intended to be the “definitive” edition of his best fiction. In these prefaces, James discussed the circumstances of production but most especially focused on explaining the literary principles through which each novel was created. The prefaces were eventually published as a collection entitled *The Art of the Novel* (New York and London: Scribner’s, 1934). In the preface written in 1908 for the New York Edition of *The Wings of the Dove*, James gives a theoretical basis for the novel, previously published in 1902. The novel, as he explains it, was constructed around the idea of “a young person conscious of a great capacity for life, but early stricken and doomed, condemned to die under short respite, while also enamored of the world…Yes then, the case prescribed for its central figure a sick young woman…”. (xxxii) We know of course that the original model for Milly Theale, the young sick heroine of *The Wings of the Dove*, was without doubt James’ young cousin Minnie Temple who had died of tuberculosis in 1870. And while James occasionally exhibits a strange sort of compassion for his heroine, it is as a novelist, interested most in principles of literary production that he speaks of her. He explains how the literary creation of a dying heroine gives birth to a narrative, to a dramatic situation, and to an aesthetic – or, in other words, realizes the novel.

Henry James refers to Milly Theale by name, in the preface, only once she has been introduced as a formal literary device, referring to her as a figure, an image or a protagonist. James explains how, from the image of “a sick young woman”, *The Wings of the Dove*, as a novel, was born. First making one’s protagonist ‘sick’ is a question of textual and narrative efficiency; or, in James’ words, the most direct way of getting at the “soul of drama”: meaning that a sick protagonist was the most direct way of producing a literary hero or heroine.

Milly Theale is a fascinating heroine: the central figure of the novel, conspicuously too absent, always threatening to die but, as explained by James in the 1908 preface, absolutely essential in narrative production. It is through her and by her, as a sick heroine, that the novel is built: “…she would found her struggle on particular human interests, which would inevitably determine, in respect to her, the attitude of other persons, persons affected in such a manner as to make them part of the action.” (xxxiii). But equally as strange as her importance and absence in the making of the novel, is the novelist’s description of her

the Dove) making one's protagonist 'sick' is first a question of textual and narrative efficiency; or, in his own words, the most direct way of getting at the "soul of drama". He writes "– as if to be menaced with death or danger hadn't been from time immemorial, for heroine or hero, the shortest cuts to the interesting state… (xxxii) James speaks of his dying heroine as the corner-stone of the novel, as the necessary narrative catalyst. As for the importance of the protagonist's gender, he cites direct "realistic" reasons and perhaps indirect "esthetic" considerations. James believed men suffered "on the whole more overtly and more grossly than women, and resist with a ruder, and inferior strategy".

The potential answers offered by Poe and James seem strangely inadequate for answering Rancière's question however. The death of Emma Bovary challenges the literary principles they establish so logically, because Emma's death cannot be qualified as the death of a beautiful woman. Her death strips her of beauty and dignity. She suffers overtly and crudely: "Elle ne tarda pas à vomir du sang. Ses lèvres se serrèrent davantage. Elle avait les membres crispés, le corps couvert de taches brunes, et son pouls glissait sous les doigts comme un fil tendu, comme une corde de harpe près de se rompre. Puis elle se mettait à crier, horriblement. Elle maudissait le poison, l'invectivait, le suppliait de se hâter… » (463) But what is more troubling and more inexplicable about her death, besides the horror into which it is inscribed, is the method chosen by the author to kill his heroine. To fully understand the death of Emma Bovary, one has to consider that Flaubert

---

function. James speaks of Milly as the corner stone of the novel; and yet, she is only ambiguously a productive force. The economic and dynamic terminology used by James also suggests that this particular heroine is also a powerful destructive force: "I have named the Rhine-maiden, but our young friend's existence would create rather, all round her, very much that whirlpool movement of the waters produced by the sinking of a big vessel or the failure of a great business; when we figure to ourselves the strong rowing eddies, the immense force of suction, the general narrowing engulfment that, for any neighboring object, makes immersion inevitable." (xxxvi) In such a way, James seems to describe the production of the narrative as simultaneously emerging and sinking along with the progression of the heroine's physical deterioration.

makes his heroine kill herself. The most accurate version of Rancière's question would thus have to be: "pourquoi fallait-il qu'une femme se tue?"

In truth, the question has never been ignored by the critical tradition. The link between femininity, suicide and literature continues to be a topic of interest, and Emma's death is often read as an example of a common thematic trend particular to the 19th century. The suicide of the feminine protagonist occasions radical considerations on notions of feminine agency, and by extension on the possibility of feminine authorship. Over and over again, it seems that masculine narratives (or narrators, or writers) stage the self-murder of their feminine protagonists, an act which vividly symbolizes agency, only to trivialize it and subvert it. As Maupassant's novella clearly illustrates, a woman's writing (even writing of her own death) exists only in the powerful hands (or pocket) of a man.

In "Speaking Silence: Women's suicide", Margaret Higonnet writes that the "great literary suicides of the nineteenth century, Emma Bovary and Anna Karenina, imply disintegration and social victimization rather than heroic self-sacrifice." (71) The inscription of a woman's suicide into a text appears thus as a double denial of her agency, autonomy, and authorship. In the case of *Madame Bovary*, what Emma thought to be suicide, the right over her own life, appears as murder. Emma's suicide cannot be self-murder if her desire for death is not her own. Margaret Higonnet writes: "In the broader view, Emma dies not so much by her own choice as by the victimizing effects of a society that imprisons young women in convents and then in traditional families and perverts their hopes for individual self-fulfillment through an ideology of romantic love and bourgeois consumption. Though sensuous in appearance, her desires are ideological

constructs that have little to do with instinctuality: they have been fostered by the trivial wish-fulfillment novels she consumed at the convent. (77) For Higonnet, this precise reliance on social explanations, particular to the realist novel, is exactly the method with which the writer can undermines the heroine's choice to die.

On a stylistic level, one also particular to the climax of the realist novel, the multiplicity of details (belonging to a variety of discourses) fragments and eventually explodes the symbolism of the gesture. It appears that little of Emma's suicide really belongs to her. The intent is erased by the frightening details of her death. "Even Anna Karenina, one of the most compassionately drawn heroines of nineteenth-century fiction, is shown to vacillate in her last moments. Tolstoy makes her act manipulative and vengeful: "I shall punish him and escape from everyone and from myself." He also deprives it of dignity through small but acute details. Held back by her red handbag, she struggles free and carefully throws herself on the tracks at the right moment. Yet as she drops, Tolstoy tells us "she was terror-stricken at what she was doing. "Where am I? What am I doing? What for?" She tried to get up" (Tolstoy 1965: 798)" (Higonnet, 78). Attacked by the detail (by a woman's own detail as Anna's red purse reminds us), women's deaths, but especially their suicides, are hollowed out of meaning.[120] The

[120] In *Madame Bovary*, the strap of the red handbag which strips Anna Karenina of a grand death reappears in another detail of a woman's accessory. Emma describes the immobility of a woman's life through the restraint of a hat string: "Mais une femme est empêchée continuellement. Inerte et flexible à la fois, elle a contre elle les mollesses de la chair avec les dépendances de la loi. Sa volonté, comme le voile de son chapeau retenu par un cordon, palpite à tous les vents ; il y a toujours quelque désir qui entraîne, quelque convenance qui retient. » (172)
The importance of the detail and its link to femininity is explored throughout the novel through the portrait of Emma. As Peter Brooks writes in *Body Work*, Emma always appears fragmented by the details which make-up her portrait. As he describes it, she is essentially arrested from subjectivity through the excessive use of details. Emma never appears whole: "In fact, while we have many details, including her dark hair, her supple waist, her amber skin, her white fingernails, her dark eyes with their soft black eyelashes, we have rather little sense of what she looks like. Descriptions tend toward the metonymical, accumulating details of her body and especially of her dress and accessories. Emma tends to become a fetishized object,

excessive representation of the particulars of death covers over symbols and allegories; and even prompts the subject (because only a subject can commit suicide) to question its own subjectivity. When Anna asks "Where am I? What am I doing? What for?", she displays a loss of consciousness (of her surroundings and of herself), which in turn undermines the original intent of her suicide.

The haunting detail of the red handbag reminds us that even in death, life remains. Up until the very end, the fictions of Flaubert, Maupassant, and Tolstoy continue to inject doses of reality into the deaths of their heroines: size limitations and drunken interruptions in the case of Yvette; compulsive vomiting and endless chatter of the men around her for Emma. The women's frantic desires to escape from the cruelties of existence through drugs[121] and death are staunchly opposed by their fiction's representations of life, by their *realism*. In "Yvette", we know that reality triumphs over death. But, we can't help but think that Yvette would be better off dead. And perhaps, it is in this morbid observation that the shared nature of "Yvette" and *Madame Bovary* can be best understood. Their suicides trouble and appall us because perhaps they seduce us into thinking that maybe, life isn't worth living.[122]

---

or rather an object is never seen whole because her accessory details become fetishes, arresting attention along the way." (91)

[121] Anna Karenina, as is sometimes forgotten, is addicted to morphine.

[122] Richard Seiden in "Suicide among Youth, A Review of Literature 1900-67" writes that suicide "troubles and appalls us because it is so intransigently rejects our deeply held conviction that life must be worth living." But Jacques Choron, in *Suicide*, is right to point out that perhaps what really troubles and appalls us is the fact that perhaps life may not be worth living:

> As the modern Spanish Philosopher José Ortega y Gasset has pointed out, for most people at all times "life" meant limitation, obligation, dependence and oppression. They go on living simply by the force of habit, sometimes out of curiosity or vague hopes for a better future, and because they are afraid of the alternative – death. But the suicide seems to have conquered this fear. Thus he confirms not only the suspicion that life may not be the highest good but the one that death may not be the greatest evil. In challenging the usual attitudes towards both life and death, the suicide is not merely a nonconformist but also a seducer... (4)

Instead of reading Emma's death through the lens of literary disillusions, we could read it through her newly acquired disgust for life. And in this light, Emma's suicide doesn't appear as the cruel failure we often think it to be. It is with contempt for her existence that she eats rat poison; Emma's vomit is a manifestation of her disdain for her life and her text. Even after her death, Emma's vomit continues to cover the pages of the novel. The black liquid which dribbles out of her mouth, risking to stain the wedding dress Charles had put on his corpse bride, appears as another one of her insults. Emma spits on the novel's romantic gestures[123]: "Puis elles se penchèrent pour lui mettre sa couronne. Il fallut soulever un peu la tête, et alors un flot de liquides noirs sortit, comme un vomissement de sa bouche. » (479) And in the final instance of her agony, Emma's most grotesque gesture appears through the description of her protruding tongue and the rolling of her eyes: "Sa poitrine aussitôt se mit à haleter rapidement. Sa langue tout entière lui sortit hors de la bouche ; ses yeux, en roulant, pâlissaient comme deux globes de lampes qui s'éteignent, à la croire déjà morte, sans l'effrayante accélération de ses côtes, secouées par un souffle furieux, comme si l'âme eût fait des bonds pour se

---

[123] In an often ignored but nevertheless puzzling moment, Charles is transformed into one of Chateaubriand's heroes. Alone and crying, he writes a letter (worthy of any romantic hero) communicating his wishes for the burial of his beloved: "Il s'enferma dans son cabinet, prit une plume, et après avoir sangloté quelque temps, il écrivit: « *Je veux qu'on l'enterre dans sa robe de noces, avec des souliers blancs, une couronne. On lui étalera les cheveux sur les épaules ; trois cercueils, un de chêne, un d'acajou, un de plomb. Qu'on ne mise rien, j'aurai de la force. On lui mettre par-dessus toute une grande* pièce de velours vert. Je le veux. Faites-le.» Ces messieurs d'étonnèrent beaucoup des idées romantiques de Bovary… » (475). In comparison to Charles's wishes in regards to the staging and burial of her corpse, it becomes apparent that Emma hardly stages her death.

Elizabeth Bronfen suggests that "Emma intends herself to emerge after death as a work of art, an image of the romantic notion of a *belle morte,* and presenting a hermeneutic task to her survivors so that her corpse poses as part of and repetition of and repetition of the romantic corpus. Yet the second phase of her death subverts this first beautiful image. It is a horrible spectacle of pain, agony and physical decomposition." (418) However, as the passage clearly reveals, it is Charles who attempts to reconstruct an Emma compatible with *his* notions of a *belle mort*, after her own chosen "ugly" death. In this way, the second phase of her death appears as Emma's actual hermeneutic task. The black liquids do not blot over her writing, she appears to blot over Charles's own attempts at re-authoring her death.

détacher. »[124] (471) Furiously attempting to part with life "comme si l'âme eût fait des bonds pour se détacher", Emma continues to insult life with her gruesome death. At the life she has learned to hate and to death, she sticks out her tongue, rolls her eyes, and laughs: "Et Emma se mit à rire, d'un rire atroce, frénétique, désespéré, croyant voir la face hideuse du misérable, qui se dressait dans les ténèbres éternelles comme un épouvantement…Une convulsion la rabattit sur le matelas. Tous s'approchèrent. Elle n'existait plus. » (472)

[124] In the continued description of her death, her agony resembles an exorcism: « Félicité s'agenouilla devant le crucifix, et le pharmacien lui-même fléchit un peu les jarrets, tandis que M. Canivet regardait vaguement la place. Bournisien s'étais remis en prière, la figure inclinée contre le bord de la couche, avec sa longue soutane noire qui traînait derrière lui dans l'appartement…A mesure que le râle devenait plus fort, l'ecclésiastique précipitait ses oraisons… » (471)

Conclusion

Death in a flower bed

So many deaths. And yet, no trace of blood. Instead there are flowers: magnolias for Atala, lilies for Mme de Mortsauf, violets for Nana, roses for Yvette, and for Emma, paper flowers. Of course, flowers and women have always been equated. The cliché has transcended time: "women are flowers". In each novel, the flowers are naturally symbolic of something particular about the woman. "The language of flowers" speaks about each protagonist, about her sexuality, her virtue, and her flaws. Atala and Mme de Mortsauf could not have been violets, just as Nana could not have been a rose. Violets were sold on street corners, but the lily is symbolic of the Virgin Mary, and the magnolia stands for purity. At the hour of death, flowers continually ally themselves with the dead feminine form. Atala is buried with a withered magnolia in her hair: "Atala était couchée sur un gazon de sensitives de montagnes; ses pieds, sa tête, ses épaules et une partie de son sein étaient découverts. On voyait dans ses cheveux une fleur de magnolia fanée… » (88) Her first death bed is a lawn of sensitives (*mimosa pudica*).[125]

Flowers appear during feminine death scenes in discreet ways. In the case of Yvette, the rose bush climbing up the side of her window is only adjacent to the scene of her death. In *Le Lys dans la vallée,* the doctor prescribes the opium and orders all the flowers to be removed from the room. A woman named Rose assists Nana in her death. Emma vomits her famous black liquid when madame Lefrançois, Félicité, and Charles' mother move her to place a wreath of flowers on her head: "Puis elle se penchèrent, pour

[125] In English, they are often called "touch-me-nots". These make a perfect bed for a woman who chose death over the loss of her virginity.

lui mettre sa couronne. Il fallut soulever un peu la tête, et alors un flot de liquides noirs sortit, comme un vomissement, de sa bouche.” (479) They appear as the details of the feminine death scene, as touches of beauty amongst the horror of death. Each author appears as a bit of a florist, marking each death scene with the symbol of beauty.

*

What was just a detail in the previously described deaths reappears as the centerpiece of the feminine death scene in Emile Zola’s *La Faute de l’Abbé Mouret* (1874). From the beginning, the novel overflows with descriptions of overabundant flowers:

> La végétation y était énorme, superbe, puissamment inculte, pleine de hasards qui étalaient des floraisons monstrueuses, inconnues à la bêche et aux arrosoirs des jardiniers…Autrefois, le parterre, entretenu pour un maître qui avait la passion des fleurs, montrait en plates-bandes, en bordures soignées, un merveilleux choix de plante. Aujourd’hui, on retrouvait les même plantes mais perpétuées, élargies en famille si innombrables, courant une telle prétentaine aux quatre coins du jardin, que le jardin n’était plus qu’un tapage, une école buissonnière battant les murs, un lieu suspect où la nature ivre avait des hoquets de verveine et d’œillet. (1345)

The novel concludes in the same mode of excess. The death of the feminine protagonist is inundated with flowers: roses, violets, carnations, wallflowers, morning glories, heliotropes, lilies, tuberoses, hyacinths, poppies, and calendulas. Placed amongst this monstrous flourishing, Albine fades into the background and becomes the detail of a floral composition. This aesthetic shift from centerpiece to detail also appears textually. Over and over, the flowers’ names are repeated. “... elle chercha les *œillets*, coupant jusqu’aux boutons, liant des gerbes géantes d’*œillet*s blancs, pareilles à des jattes de lait, des gerbes géante d’*œillet* rouges… » (*my emphasis,* 1513) The same list of flowers, in various orders, appears up to three times within the same paragraph. The death scene is

overcome with flowers, monstrously multiplying aesthetically and textually. On a narrative level, flowers also play a crucial role in the creation of the plot's climax. The breathtaking beauty of Albine's suicide is all made of flowers.

Overcome with despair after her love affair with Serge Mouret is destroyed by his religious fervor, Albine wanders about her beloved garden, le Paradou, in search of guidance. Le Paradou remains frustratingly silent until Albine finally hears the faint song of winter: a soft goodbye exchanged by plants and flowers. "Maintenant qu'elle ne questionnait plus la terre en créature révoltée, elle entendait une voix basse courant au ras du sol, la voix d'adieu des plantes, qui se souhaitait une mort heureuse. Avoir bu le soleil de toute une saison, avoir vécu toujours en fleurs, s'être exhalé en un parfum continu, puis s'en aller au premier tourment, avec l'espoir de repousser quelque part, n'était-ce pas une vie assez longue, une vie bien remplie, que gâterait un entêtement à vivre davantage ? (1511) Like the plants and flowers that die at the dawn of winter, Albine decides to end her life while it is still beautiful, while she is still untouched by the frost of life and the bitter disappointment which always accompanies love. "Elle croyait comprendre, à cette heure. Sans doute, le jardin lui ménageait la mort comme une jouissance suprême. C'était à la mort qu'il l'avait conduite d'une si tendre façon. Après l'amour, il n'y avait plus que la mort. » (1511) Her death, she thinks, will punctuate her life with a kind of pleasure achievable only in death.

Seeking pleasure and death, Albine does not scour the garden for a manner of death but for a place to die. Albine paces the Paradou looking for a bed in which to receive her last kiss: "Elle monta aux grandes roches, les interrogeant, leur demandant si c'était sur leurs lits de cailloux qu'il lui fallait expirer...Elle longea les rivières des

prairies, se penchant presque à chaque pas, regardant au fond des eaux si une couche ne lui était pas préparé, parmi les nénuphars. » (1512) As Albine eventually finds, the only suitable place to receive death is in a bed of flowers: « Et tout d'un coup, au moment où elle arrivait au parterre, elle surprit la mort, dans les parfums du soir. Elle courut, elle eut un rire de volupté. Elle devait mourir avec les fleurs. »[126] (1512)

In a surprising twist, Albine does not die in the garden. She doesn't lie amongst the flowers and wait for her death. Instead, she plucks every single flower from the ground and brings them by armfuls into the room with the blue ceiling, "la chambre au plafond bleu". The room's painted sky, which had witnessed their love, now appears to watch over the staging of her death. Albine first runs to the roses, then to the violets, carnations, stocks, morning glories, heliotropes, tuberoses, hyacinths, poppies, and calendulas. She drowns the bed in a sea of flowers, transforming it into another, indoor, flower bed: "Et à large brasses, elle couvrit entièrement le lit de toutes les jacinthes et de toutes les tubéreuses qu'elle avait apportées; la couche était si épaisse qu'elle débordait sur le devant, aux pieds, à la tête, dans la ruelle, laissant couler des traîner de grappes. Le lit n'était plus qu'une grande floraison. » (1514).

As much as the death scene in *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret* is authored by Zola, it is also, narratively speaking, authored by Albine. She labors to create her death scene. She runs back and forth, from the garden to the room, to fill it with flowers. She rearranges the furniture, closes the curtains, positions and weaves the flowers into wreaths. However, there is undeniably a destructive force at the source of her creative impulse. The novel doesn't describe a woman picking flowers, but a fury devastating a garden:

---

[126] In the word "parterre", which translates into flower bed, we also hear "par la terre". In death, Albine is returned to the "earth" (as in dirt and ground) like a plant or flower.

“elle s’acharna surtout sur des plates bandes de tubéreuses et de jacinthes...elle ravagea plus loin un champ de pavots, elle trouva moyen de raser encore un champ de soucis. » (1513) Later, as Albine prepares her room, it is again with the vocabulary of destruction that the narrative qualifies her decorating attempts. She *drowns* the chairs with calendulas, poppies and morning roses. She suffocates her bed with hyacinths and tuberoses. Roses fall like hail over the room: “elle ne regardait même pas où elles tombaient; la console, le canapé, les fauteuils, en reçurent; un coin du lit en fut inondé. Pendant quelques minutes, il plut des roses, à grosses touffes, une averse de fleurs lourdes comme des gouttes d’orage, qui faisaient des mares dans les trous du carreau. » (1515) It is as if Albine attacked creation itself by destroying the paradisiacal garden. Unlike the cases of Yvette or Mme de Mortsauf, Albine does not compete with the narrator, or even the author; she rivals with creation itself. [127]

Like an artist, she scrutinizes her creation and adds, here and there the final touches of her death scene: “Un instant, elle restait debout, regardant autour d’elle. Elle songeait, elle cherchait si la mort était là. Et elle ramassa les verdures odorantes, les citronnelles, les menthes, les verveines, les baumes, les fenouils, elle les tordit, les plia, en fabriqua des tampons, à l’aide desquels elle alla boucher les moindres fentes, les moindres trous de la porte et des fenêtres. Puis, elle tira les rideaux de calicot blanc, cousus à gros point. Et, muette, sans un soupir, elle se coucha sur le lit, sur la floraison des jacinthes et des tubéreuses. » (1515) When she is satisfied with the setting, once she has created the perfect tableau in which to die, [128]Albine lies down to await the conclusion of her labor:

[127] Within the larger context of the novel, Albine competes with the creator himself. The novel stages Serge’s conflict around his irreconcilable carnal desires for Albine and spiritual devotion to God.
[128] Several paintings illustrating Albine’s death were produced and enjoyed tremendous success. The best known are John Collier’s “Death of Albine” (ca. 1895) and Lucy Hartmann “Albine” (ca. 1899).

"La grande chambre était parée. Maintenant elle pouvait y mourir." (1515) Albine dies of a languid asphyxiation, losing her breath to the perfumes in the room.

As she had anticipated, her death amongst the flowers is described as a sublime agony. Each flower and each perfume becomes an instrument of both torture and pleasure. They sedate and excite, sicken and soothe, stifle and set free. They take the place of Albine's body and it is through their descriptions that her death is narrated. Her last breath is concealed by a choir of roses and the last sigh of the hyacinths and tuberoses on her bed. She fades and gets absorbed into a breathtaking floral symphony:

> Ne bougeant point, les mains jointes sur son cœur, elle continuait à sourire, elle écoutait les parfums qui chuchotaient dans sa tête bourdonnante. Ils lui jouaient comme une musique étrange de senteurs qui l'endormit lentement, très doucement. D'abord, c'était un prélude…Mais elle suffoquait davantage, la passion arrivait avec l'éclat brusque des œillets, à l'odeur poivrée, dont la voix de cuivre dominait un moment toutes les autres. Elle croyait qu'elle allait agoniser dans la phrase maladive des soucis et des pavots, qui lui rappelait les tourments de ses désirs. Et, brusquement, tout s'apaisait, elle respirait plus librement, elle glissait à une douceur grande, bercée par une gamme descendante des quarantaines, se ralentissant, se noyant, jusqu'à un cantique adorable des héliotropes, dont les haleines de vanille disaient l'approche des noces. Les belles de nuit piquaient ça et là un trille discret. Puis, il y eut un silence. Les roses, languissamment, firent leur entrée. Du plafond coulèrent des voix, un chœur lointain. C'était un ensemble large, qu'elle écouta au début avec un léger frisson. Le chœur s'enfla, elle fut bientôt toute vibrante des sonorités prodigieuses qui éclataient autour d'elle. Les noces étaient venues, les fanfares des roses annonçaient l'instant redoutable. Elle, les mains de plus en plus serrées contre son cœur, pâmée, mourante, haletait. Elle ouvrait la bouche, cherchant le baiser qui devait l'étouffer, quand les jacinthes et les tubéreuse fumèrent, l'enveloppèrent d'un dernier soupir, si profond, qu'il couvrit le chœur des roses. Albine était morte dans le hoquet suprême des fleurs. (1516)

Nevertheless, the myriad of scents which come and go follows the movements of her death: slow, fast, slow, fast... The tempo of her death, marked by the floral symphony, works its way to grand finale like a mounting orgasm. Her agony has the rhythm, the intimacy (through the sharing of breaths), and the euphoric sensation of sex. In her final

gasp, in the empty space of the interrupted breath, Albine reaches death at the site of sexual ecstasy.

Albine achieves a truly flawless death. The doctor Pascal who has come to see her remains reverent at the sight of the scene. He finds her death so beautiful that he quickly dismisses the possibility of resuscitating her. To resurrect the dead beauty would be to ruin a death too beautiful, too well executed, to be marred by life: “Albine, très blanche, les mains sur son coeur, dormait avec un sourire, au milieu de sa couche de jacinthes et de tubéreuses. Et elle était bien heureuse, elle était bien morte. Debout devant le lit, le docteur la regarda longuement, avec cette fixité des savants qui tentent des résurrections. Puis il ne voulut pas même déranger ses mains jointes ; il la baisa au front, à cette place que sa maternité avait déjà tachée d’une ombre légère. En bas, dans le jardin, la bêche de Jeanbernat enfonçait toujours ses coups sourds et réguliers. » (1519) Instead, it is the prose of the author who re-introduces life into the aesthetic perfection of the death scene. The regular sound of the spade hitting the ground reminds us of the *hole* Jeanbernat is digging for Albine.

The doctor is “strangled with emotion” when the farmer explains his digging: “Je fait un trou, répondit-il simplement. Elle a toujours aimé le jardin. Elle sera bien là pour dormir.” Le docteur sentit l’émotion l’étrangler.” (1518) As a well-known figure for the author, Pascal’s experience with Albine’s death may reveal something about the novel’s own aesthetic production. In the oscillation between beauty and the baseness of reality, sleeping beauty is put to rest in a *hole*. But this is perhaps where her death is the most beautiful, or rather when death becomes sublime. Provoking at once awe and horror, the

death of a woman is much like the death of a flower. As beauty withers and is swallowed by the earth, she reminds us of both the fragility of life and its unbearable continuity.

Bibliography

Apter, Emily S. *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

Ariès, Philippe. *L'homme Devant La Mort*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1977.

Armstrong, Carol M, and Édouard Manet. *Manet Manette*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002.

Assad, Maria L. "Who really killed Emma Bovary?" Paper delivered at Eleventh Annual Nineteenth-Century French Studies Colloquium, Vanderbilt University, October 1985.

Balzac, Honoré de. *Le Lys dans la vallée* in *La Comédie Humaine,* T. IX. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Pléiade. Gallimard, 1978

_____. *Le Lys dans la vallée*. Le livre de poche, 1995.

_____. *Le Curé de village*. Garnier – Flammarion, 1967.

_____. *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées.* Paris: Furne, 1842.

Barthes, Roland. *Le Plaisir du texte*. Paris : Seuil, 1973.

Baudelaire, Charles. *Oeuvres Complètes.* Paris: Gallimard, 1961.

Barthes, Roland. *Le Plaisir du texte*. Paris : Seuil, 1973

Bayard, Pierre. *Maupassant, Juste Avant Freud*. Paris: Minuit, 1994.

Beizer, Janet. "The Body in Question: Anatomy, Textuality, and Fetishism in Zola," *L'Esprit Créateur* 29 (Spring 1989), pp. 50 – 60.

_____. "Uncovering Nana: The Courtesan's New Clothes ," *L'Esprit Créateur* 25 (Summer 1985), pp. 45 – 56.

_____. *Ventriloquized Bondies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

Bersani, Leo. *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction.* Oxford University Press, 1970.

Bonnefis, Philippe. *L' Innommable: Essai Sur L'oeuvre D'émile Zola*. Paris: Soc. d' d'Enseignement Supérieur, 1984.

_____. *Mesures de l'ombre.* Lille: Presses universitaires de Lille, 1987.

_____. *Parfums : Son nom de Bel-Ami*. Paris : Galilée, 1995.

_____. *Sept portraits perfectionnés de Guy de Maupassant.* Paris : Galilée, 2005.

Borie, Jean. *Zola Et Les Mythes; Ou, De La Nausée Au Salut*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971.

Bossuet, Jacques-Bégnine. *Œuvres*, ed. L'Abbé Velat and Y. Champailler, Pléiade. Paris : Gallimard, 1961

Briche, Gérard. "Entre Phtisie et Tuberculose: l'écriture de Jules Laforgue." *Revue des sciences humaines* #208. Lille : Université de Lille III.

Brombert, Victor. *The hidden reader: Stendhal, Balzac, Hugo, Baudelaire, Flaubert*. Havard University Press, 1988.

Bronfen, Elisabeth. Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

_____. "Over her dead Body: *Madame Bovary*". *The Nineteenth-Century Novel*: *A Critical Reader*, ed. Stephen Regan. London: Routledge, 2001.

Brooks, Peter. *Body Work*: *Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993.

_____. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

_____. *Realist Vision*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

_____. *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1984.

_____. "Storied Bodies of Nana at Last Unveil'd," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 16, No 1 (Autumn, 1989), pp. 1-32.

_____. "Virtue-Tripping: Notes on *Le Lys dans la vallée*. Yale French studies: Intoxication and Literature. No 50 (1974), pp. 150 – 162.

Bossuet, Jacques-Bégnine. *Œuvres*, ed. L'Abbé Velat et Y. Champailler. Pléiade. Gallimard, 1961.

Bui, Véronique. *La femme, la faute et l'écrivain : la mort féminine dans l'œuvre de Balzac.* Honoré Champion Éditeur : 2003.

Cantarella, Eva. « Dangling Virgins: The place of women in ancient Greece". *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*. ed. Susan R. Suleiman. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Chateaubriand, François-René. *Œuvres romanesques et voyages*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969.

Chambers, Ross. *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism*. Translated by Mary Seidman Trouille. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Choron, Jacques. *Suicide*. New York: Scribner, 1972.

Clark, T J. *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1986.

Collot, Sylvie. *Les lieux du désir : topologie amoureuse de Zola*. Paris: Hachette, 1992.

Corbin, Alain. *Les filles de noce: misère sexuelle et prostitution : 19e et 20e siècles*. Collection historique. Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1978.

_______. *Le miasme et la jonquille: l'odorat et l'imaginaire social XVIIIe-XIXe siècles.* Collection historique. Paris : Aubier Montaingne, 1982.

Denlinger, Elizabeth Campbell "The Garment and the Man: Masculine Desire in "Harris's List of Covent-Garden Ladies" 1764-1793" in *Journal of the History of* Sexuality, Vol. 11, No 3 (Jul., 2002), pp. 357-394.

Dijkstra, Bram. *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-De-Siècle Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Donnard, Jean-Hervé. Introduction. Honoré de Balzac. *Le Lys dans la vallée* in *La Comédie Humaine,* t. IX. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. Ed. Pierre-Georges Castex. Gallimard, 1978

Dumas, Alexandre. *La Dame aux Camélias*. Librairie Générale Française, 1983.

Downing, Lisa. *Desiring the Dead: Necrophilia and Nineteenth-Century French Literature*. Oxford: Legenda, European Humanities Research Centre, University of Oxford, 2003.

Flaubert, Gustave, Serge Bloch, and Pascal Lemaître. *Le Dictionnaire Des Idées Reçues*. Paris: Nathan, 2006.

Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary***.** Paris : Flammarion, 1986.

Freud, Sigmund. *Collected Papers 5,* ed. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, 1959.

Gengembre, Gérard. «Critique littéraire et critiques de lecteurs en 1836 : Le *Lys*, Roman illisible?». *Romantisme* , «Balzac, «Le Lys dans la vallée» : «cet orage de choses célestes»». Société des études romantiques. Sedes : 1993, pp. 15 – 36.

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the attic: The Woman writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

Gilman, Sander L. *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985.

_____. *Sexuality: An Illustrated History: Representing the Sexual in Medicine and Culture from the Middle Ages to the Age of Aids*. New York: Wiley, 1989.

Gubar, Susan. "“The Blank Page” and the Issues of Female Creativity”. *Critical Inquiry*. 8.2 (1981), pp. 243-263.

Higonnet, Margaret. “Speaking Silences: Women’s suicide”. *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Hirsh, Marianne. “Spiritual *Bildung:* The Beautiful Soul as Paradigm.” *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development,* eds. Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsh, and Elizabeth Langland. Hanover: University Press of New England, 1983.

Irigaray, Luce. *Ce Sexe Qui N'en Est Pas Un*. Paris: Éd. de Minuit, 1991.

James, Henry, J D. Crowley, and Richard A. Hocks. *The Wings of the Dove: Authoritative Text, the Author and the Novel, Criticism*. New York: Norton, 2003.

Jennings, Chantal B. *L'éros Et La Femme Chez Zola: De La Chute Au Paradis Retrouvé*. Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1977.

Johnson, Barbara. « The Lady in the Lake » in *A New History of French Literature*. Ed. by Denis Hollier. Cambridge : Havard University Press, 1989.

Jorland, Gérard. *Une Société À Soigner: Hygiène Et Salubrité Publiques En France Au XIXe Siècle*. Paris: Gallimard, 2010.

LaCapra, Dominick. *Madame Bovary on Trial*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982.

Laclos, Chaderlos. *Les Liaisons dangereuses.* Paris: Gallimard, 1972.

Laforgue, Jules. « Complaintes ». *Poésies complètes.* Paris: Gallimard, 1979.

Lastinger, Michael. « Re-Writing Woman: Compulsive Textuality in *Le Lys dans la vallée* » *The French Review,* Vol. 63, No2 (Dec., 1989), pp. 237-249.

Lock, Margaret. *Twice Dead: Organ Transplants and the Reinvention of Death*. Berkeley: University of California Press: 2002.

Loraux, Nicole. *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987.

Marder, Elissa. *Dead Time: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)*. Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2001.

Matlock, Jann. *Scenes of Seduction : Prostitution, Hysteria and Reading Difference in Nineteenth-Century France*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994.

Maupassant, Guy, and Louis Forestier. *Contes Et Nouvelles: II / Texte établi et annoté par Louis Forestier*. Paris: Gallimard, 1979.

Miller, D A. *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.

Miller, Nancy K. *The Heroine's Text: Readings in the French and English Novel, 1722-1782*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980.

_____. "Rereading as a Woman: The body in practice". *The Female Body in Western Culture: Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986.

Otis, Laura. *Organic Memory: History and the Body in the late Nineteenth & Early Twentieth Centuries.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994.

Paz, Mario. *The Romantic Agony.* London: Oxford University Press, 1951.

Parent-Duchâtelet, Alexandre-J.-B. *De la Prostitution dans la ville de Paris.* Paris: Baillère, 1837.

Poe, Edgar. "The Philosophy of Composition". *Graham's Magazine*, Vol. XXVIII, No4 (April 1846), pp: 163-167.

_____. *The Philosophy of Composition*. *Critical Theory: The Major Documents*. Urbana: University of Illinois, 2009

Rancière, Jacques. *Politique De La Littérature*. Paris: Galilée, 2007.

Rifelj, Carol D. *Coiffures: Hair in Nineteenth-Century French Literature and Culture*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010.

Rooney, Ellen. "Foreword". *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* by Naomi Schor. New York: Routledge, 2007.

Rothfield, Lawrence. *Vital Signs: Medical Realism in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992.

Rousseau-Dujardin, Jacqueline. *Orror di femina: la peur qu'inspirent les femmes.* Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2006.

Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloise*. Paris : Garnier Frères, 1960.

_____. *Œuvres complètes*. Paris : Gallimard, 1959.

Schor, Naomi. *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory, and French Realist Fiction.* NewYork: Columbia University Press, 1985.

_____. "Pour une thématique restreinte. Écriture, parole et différence dans *Madame Bovary*. *Littérature*, No 22, 1976, pp.30-46.

_____. *Reading in Detail: Aesthetic and the Feminine*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

_____. *Zola's Crowds*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.

Séginger, Gisèle. Introduction. Honoré de Balzac. *Le Lys dans la vallée.* Le livre de poche, 1995.

Seiden, Richard. "Suicide among Youth, A Review of Literature 1900-1967". Supplement to the *Bulletin of Suicidology*, December 1969.

Serres, Michel. *Feux Et Signaux De Brumes*. Paris: B. Grasset, 1975.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador, 1990.

Stead, Evanghélia. *Le Monstre, Le Singe Et Le Fœtus: Tératogonie Et Décadence Dans L'Europe Fin-De-Siècle*. Genève: Droz, 2004.

Thomas, Shelley. "The Prostitute/Mother in Maupassant's *Yvette*". *L'Esprit Créateur*, Vol. 39, No 2 (Summer 1999), pp.74-84.

Tolstoy, Leo. *Anna Karenina*, rev. trans. and ed., Leonard J. Kent and Nina Berberova. New York: Modern Library, 1965.

Turner, Matthew. *An Account of the Extraordinary Medicinal Fluid, Called Aether: This Truly Extraordinary Chemical Preparation Is Not a New Discovery, Having Been Known ... by Many of the Greatest Chymists*. Liverpool?: s.n, 1760.

Vernant, J.-P. "La belle mort et le cadavre outragé". *La Mort, Les Morts Dans Les Sociétés Anciennes*. Eds. Gherardo Gnoli and Jean P. Vernant. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

Wald, Lasowski P. *La Maison Maupassant*. Paris: Gallimard, 2009.

_____. *Le Traité des mouches secrètes*. Paris : Gallimard, 2003.

_____. *Syphilis: Essai Sur La Littérature Française Du Xixe Siècle*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982.

Waller, Margaret. *The Male Malady : Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel*. Rutgers University Press, 1993.

Wing, Nathaniel. *The Limits of Narrative*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1986.

Zola, Émile, Armand Lanoux, and Henri Mitterand. *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire Naturelle Et Sociale D'une Famille Sous Le Second Empire. Texte Intégral Établi*. Paris: Gallimard, 1960.

Zola, Émile. *Nana*. Paris : Gallimard, 2002.

_____. *Nana*. Paris : Classiques Garnier, 1994.

_____. *Oeuvres Complètes*. Paris: F. Bernouard, 1927.