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# Experimenting on difference: women, violence, and narrative in Zola's naturalism

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Dissertation

**EXPERIMENTING ON DIFFERENCE:  
WOMEN, VIOLENCE, AND NARRATIVE IN  
ZOLA'S NATURALISM**

by

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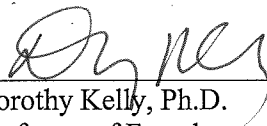
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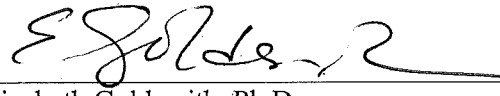
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(Order No.                    )

**SAMANTHA PETERSON**

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, 2015

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation examines the role of women in four of Émile Zola's novels, in particular their privileged position as the conduits through which he exerted his "experimental" literary method. Zola has long been recognized as subjecting his female characters to extreme violence, but scholars have not yet thoroughly explored how the ways in which he represents this violence provide insight into the nature of his narrative practice. For Zola, literary fiction offers access to a scientific truth, and the female body and its capacity for procreation is the source material for his investigation. By subjecting his female characters to analysis and ultimately dissection, Zola violently exploits the creative potential of their bodies and builds a literary empire upon them.

In *La Curée*, Zola presents one of his first experimental heroines, a bored and pampered wife whose identity is constructed through reflections and refractions via a series of mirrors, both visually and narratively. This multiplicity of interferences effaces the female voice and subjectivity while exploiting the visual appeal of the female body.

*Nana* offers a counterpoint on the same theme, featuring a woman who, through the desirability of her body, reverses the paradigm and exerts control over those around her with masterful manipulation of optics and language. Nana's body inscrutably defies analysis and playfully disrupts gender constructs by assuming contradictory sexual characteristics that are only indirectly observable.

Zola shifts his narrative focus from the women themselves to the broader notion of sexual difference in *La Bête humaine*, in which the female body signifies the difference that drives male desire and destabilizes civilized society. The representability of sex becomes increasingly problematic as female speech, filtered through the body, puts the reliability of language into question. The problematics of the legible body that Zola develops in these texts can be traced all the way back to *Thérèse Raquin*, in which he conducts a literary investigation into the relationship between bodies and texts. This short novel, Zola's first of the genre, is particularly interested in the different (pro)creative capacities of male and female bodies and the representational possibilities inherent in them.



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## Introduction

It is only in the last few decades that scholars have taken a serious look at Émile Zola's treatment of women in his novels, revalorizing the ambiguity with which he approached the definitions of masculine and feminine. Politically and socially, Zola lobbied for girls' education, if only to ensure that they better fulfilled their prescribed roles as wives and mothers. In his fiction, women are not consistently demonized or praised, but run the gamut from the terrifyingly enticing Nana to the saintly maternal Clotilde; some are educated and hardworking, others slovenly and lazy. There is no one Zolian woman, but there is a Zolian fascination with the feminine, and it lies at the heart of his novelistic project, with women's bodies serving as the medium through which the author conducts his scientific and artistic experiments. The centrality of his female characters to his aesthetic and political program has only begun to be explored, and this dissertation aims to demonstrate the degree to which Zola's treatment of women was central to his naturalist literary philosophy. That women were fundamental to his art does not mean, however, that they are not consistently victims of the gruesome violence that also pervades his works. Zola's women, of all class levels and temperaments, are consistently the victims of his most violent scenarios, precisely because they are the true subject of his naturalism.

During his time and in the subsequent decades of Zola studies, scholars and critics alike have characterized Zola's approach as that of an anatomist, dissecting and inspecting human bodies in all their intimate physicality, and certainly Zola never shied away from graphic detail. He even characterized his work in similar terms, for example,

in the preface to the second edition of *Thérèse Raquin*: “J’ai simplement fait sur deux corps vivants le travail analytique que les chirurgiens font sur des cadavres.”<sup>1</sup> And while several of his characters embody the author within his novels (the writer Sandoz in *L’Œuvre*, the journalist Fauchery in *Nana*), it is Pascal Rougon, the eponymous *Docteur Pascal* of the final Rougon-Macquart novel, who gives insight into Zola’s ultimate interest. Pascal’s life work, documenting his own family’s history in order to develop a theory of heredity, begins with the dissection of the bodies of pregnant women and a thorough investigation into “[l]a vie intra-utérine.”<sup>2</sup> The doctor’s anatomical studies lead him to larger questions (“Pourquoi et comment un être nouveau? Quelles étaient les lois de la vie, ce torrent d’êtres qui faisaient le monde?”) and he graduates to “[d]es dissections sur l’humanité vivante” with a special focus on “sa propre famille, qui était devenue son principal champ d’expérience.”<sup>3</sup> Pascal’s project is, ostensibly, the Rougon-Macquart novel cycle itself, and as in Zola’s Rougon-Macquart, the bodies of dead women inspire and drive the narratives. That Pascal’s dead women are also pregnant is crucial to understanding the centrality of the feminine in Zola, although perhaps not for the most obvious reason: not every woman in Zola’s novels is a mother, but the centrality of the female body in the mystery of life, sex, and even death, is tied to potential maternity or lack thereof. This mystery can be unlocked only through the body itself, privileging the female body’s usefulness as object of scientific study over the life of the woman. Both Pascal’s genealogical history and Zola’s Rougon-Macquart cycle depend

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<sup>1</sup> Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Émile Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal* (Paris: Folio Classique, 2009), 87.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

upon the bodies of (ideally, dead) women. Dorothy Kelly finds that, at least in *Le Docteur Pascal*, “the Naturalist investigation into heredity is the investigation of woman, sex, and reproduction.”<sup>4</sup> This dissertation examines the woman-focused nature of Zola’s investigation and the novelistic representations of gender and sexual difference that emerge from it.

A gruesome detail from his 1883 work *Au bonheur des dames* exemplifies the foundational role of woman in the construction of the Zolian empire: the eponymous department store, successful business venture of Octave Mouret, is built upon the corpse of Octave’s first wife, who fell into the foundations during a tour of the construction and whose body remains embedded underneath the building. Since the late Madame Mouret’s family financially supported the opening of Octave’s store, his empire is both physically and economically dependent on his wife’s death. The foundations of Zola’s texts, and primarily those of the Rougon-Macquart cycle, are built on the bodies of women. The Rougon-Macquart themselves descend from one woman, Adélaïde Fouque, whose sexual *détraquement* carries on through all subsequent generations and concurrently through every text of which they are the subject. And while not every woman featured in the Rougon-Macquart cycle is a member of the eponymous family, the female body is consistently the site through which Zola’s novelistic project plays itself out, almost always at the expense of the woman’s agency and bodily existence. Their bodies are the conduits of the texts themselves.

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Kelly, “Experimenting on Women: Zola’s Theory and Practice of the Experimental Novel.” in Cohen, Margaret and Christopher Prendergast, eds., *Spectacles of Realism: Gender, Body, Genre* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995): 244.

During the time frame of *Au bonheur des dames*, the success of Octave's store thrives on his manipulation of his female clientele, and his disdain for the women who sustain his business even turns violent in what is otherwise one of the less physically violent novels of the Rougon-Macquart. During his daily inspection of the store with one of his "lieutenants", Bourdoncle, as they are discussing a night of debauchery with some of the store's more distinguished clients, Octave shines in a flourish of misogynist violence:

– Vous savez qu'elles se vengeront.

– Qui donc? demanda Mouret, auquel la conversation échappait.

– Mais les femmes.

Alors, il s'égaya davantage, il laissa percer le fond de sa brutalité, sous son air d'adoration sensuelle. D'un haussement d'épaules, il parut déclarer qu'il les jetterait toutes par terre, comme des sacs vides, le jour où elles l'auraient aidé à bâtir sa fortune. Bourdoncle, entêté, répétait de son air froid:

– Elles se vengeront... il y en aura une qui vengera les autres, c'est fatal.

– As pas peur! cria Mouret en exagérant son accent provençal. Celle-là n'est pas encore née, mon bon. Et, si elle vient, vous savez...

Il avait levé son porte-plume, il le brandissait, et il le pointa dans le vide, comme s'il eût voulu percer d'un couteau un cœur invisible.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Émile Zola, *Au Bonheur des Dames* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2011), 80.

Octave's attitude is immediately and violently antagonistic, as is the narrator's description of his demeanor: the words "percer" and "brutalité" precondition the gesture of stabbing that concludes the passage. Remarkable here is not just the violence of Octave's charade, but also his choice of weapon. Stabbing an "invisible heart," he kills an imaginary woman with a pen. While Zola as the author doesn't explicitly identify with Octave as a character (as he does with other figures in the Rougon-Macquart), the gesture of killing an invisible woman with a pen is a uniquely authorial violence, one that plays itself out repeatedly throughout Zola's works. Octave Mouret's action, symbolically murdering a threatening woman with a pen, is a theatrical interpretation of the author's own treatment of his female characters.

The female body and the female voice are both physically and textually exploited in the naturalist author's pursuit of the truth of life, family, and society. They drive the text, their bodies being the ultimate key to "la poursuite de la vérité par la science", which Pascal, acting as Zola's avatar, calls "l'idéal divin que l'homme doit se proposer."<sup>6</sup> This search for truth, offering a "divine ideal" to the one who carries it out, is undertaken as much by Zola as by Pascal, who both turn to the female body as their primary experimental material. What Zola finds, perhaps because his investigation is a literary one, is that the "truth" of femininity is itself ambiguous and elusive; the further he pushes toward a defining truth of the female sex, the more difference renders itself indefinable. While he may exert a "divine" authorial power over his characters and novels, the

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<sup>6</sup> Zola, *Le Docteur Pascal*, 98.

investigation into the female sex requires new conceptions of sexual difference and its representation, often in ways that challenge male dominance and even authorial mastery.

This dissertation examines four of Zola's heroines and their roles as discursive forces within their texts, as well as their privileged roles in the author's experimental method. Renée, Nana, Séverine, and Thérèse each interact in surprising ways with both the circulation of communication within their novels and the narrations of the novels themselves, while also serving as the living subjects of Zola's brutal experimentation. By closely examining the role of each woman in these four novels, we can understand the systems of representation at work in the naturalist project and the complex role of the female body, voice, and subjectivity in Zola's works.

My project is primarily structured around the close reading of Zola's texts, but it also draws on the work of several important works of criticism and theory. Dorothy Kelly's impressive and inspiring body of work was my main inspiration for examining women in Zola and their relationship to the narrative. The work of Naomi Schor and Janet Beizer, who both thoughtfully explored the stakes of the female body in the social economy of Zola's world, is the basis upon which I develop my own argument; my work extends the subject matter considered by Schor and Beizer beyond the focus on the physical body to the female voice and its participation in the narrative.<sup>7</sup> I have organized my main analysis along Schor's two structuring axes of Zolian criticism: the anxiety of origins and the anxiety of difference. Both of these axes also structure the central

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<sup>7</sup> Specifically I refer to Schor's *Zola's Crowds* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978) and *Breaking the Chain* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), and Beizer's *Ventriloquized Bodies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).



institution of the family, the main organizing force in Zola's work. Each of the four women I study has a peculiar relationship to maternity, Zola's anchoring element in family structure, and therefore I consider each character in the context of the family model. Susan Hennessey has done remarkable work on mothers in Zola's novels, as well as the usurpation by men of feminine procreative processes and roles.<sup>8</sup> Others, particularly Beizer, Schor, Peter Brooks, Charles Bernheimer, and Rachel Mesch have provided excellent analyses of Zola's representation of the female body through psychoanalytic perspectives, and my work builds upon these interpretations using Freud's theories of identity formation, fetishes, the death instinct, and the uncanny.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the paradigm of the mirror stage, as developed by Jacques Lacan, is central to my understanding of identity formation along the visual axis, particularly in the dissolution of difference between self and other. Finally, I turn to theoretical models of societal development in order to trace the effects of difference in the greater social body under the Second Empire. The theories of Freud and René Girard regarding desire, violence, and the foundations of civilization provide approaches to understanding sexual difference and its resonance in the Rougon-Macquart cycle.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> See: Susan Hennessey, "Maternal Space and (Re)production in Les Rougon-Macquart, by Émile Zola." *Neophilologus* 82, no. 2 (1998): 209-220; and "Zola's Male Creation: Reproduction in Les Rougon-Macquart," *French Review* 72, no. 6 (May 1999): 1010-1022.

<sup>9</sup> See: Peter Brooks, "Storied Bodies, or Nana at Last Unveil'd." *Critical Inquiry* 16, no. 1 (Autumn 1989): 1-32; Charles Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute: Representing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Rachel Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge: French Women Writers at the Fin de Siècle* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> I specifically turned to Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) and Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (New York: Norton, 1990) in this part of my analysis.

While I incorporate the ideas of these critics into my analysis, this dissertation expands on their work by identifying the resonances among these four characters, which have not previously been considered together in depth in a single work of criticism. At stake in all four novels is a problematic of representation of the female body and its signification of sexual difference: how can narration represent the unrepresentable? How can we dissect, analyze, and represent a textual body, already *itself* a representation? Finally, how does a male author, represented by numerous doubles within his texts, reconcile his role as ultimate creator with the uniquely female capacity for maternity and creation in which he is so heavily invested?

The first chapter centers on Renée Saccard, the second wife of an unscrupulous real estate speculator in *La Curée*. Renée's semi-incestuous affair with her stepson Maxime is often understood as Zola's re-appropriation of Racine's *Phèdre*, modernized and vulgarized in the sexual economy of the Second Empire. Renée is in fact a reflection of multiple textual references: she is at any given point Echo, Phèdre, Messalina, Eve, Lady Macbeth, the Sphinx, and even Chateaubriand's René. Both within the novel and at the textual surface level, she is constantly refracted through other literary existences, reducing her own subjectivity to one of a reflection: her role as the nymph Echo in a play within the novel leaves her doubly muted. Her constant mirror-gazing, inseparable from the gaze of others that reduces her to a refraction of multiple mythological women, interiorizes this refraction, leaving her literally at a loss for words: she is incapable of voicing her desires, not because they are tragically passionate like Phèdre's, but because she is little more than a commodity in a society that situates women as viewed objects,

not speaking subjects. Renée provides a good starting point for my study because, although she exerts her liberty through a life of luxury, she does not manage to master the systems of discourse that keep her subjugated, and it is not until the end of the novel that she realizes to what extent her husband and stepson have manipulated and dominated her. Her myopia is symptomatic of her problematic literacy: she can neither “read” clearly (situations, words, or her inner self) nor express herself in any coherent way. All lines of communication, inward and outward, are deflected, refracted, or otherwise distorted, leaving her in a helpless position, despite her apparently lofty socioeconomic status.

The central scene of Renée’s incestuous affair is tellingly triggered by a mirror. Out to dinner with Maxime, Renée playfully reads erotic graffiti off a wall-length mirror in one of the café’s private booths, a densely encoded space in Second Empire society. She begins reading the phrase “J’aime Maxime”, which another woman has written, but is interrupted by her stepson before she can speak his name: speaking the words another has written animates the signifier, transferring it to Renée’s discourse. The resulting argument, after Maxime’s interruption, leads to their first incestuous act, apparently possible only after Renée’s twisted confession. However, the question of this particular speech act sets the tone for the entire novel: Is Renée ever expressing herself, or another? Is Renée ever being herself, or is she always the creation of another? If her own discourse is determined by that of others, reflected in various textual and literary mirrors, can she even speak? My first chapter investigates these questions, revealing and refuting the erasure of the female voice through multiple societal mirrors. It examines the particular mechanisms by which women are discursively erased, and which Renée’s literary sisters

will undermine. The question of any character's autonomy within a novel, especially a female character written by a male author, is an undercurrent, initially traced in this chapter, that will inform the remainder of my dissertation.

Renée is, in many ways, a precursor to Nana, the subject of my second chapter, despite what may initially appear to be their polar opposition. In her eponymous novel, Nana is a high-end prostitute, exotic dancer, actress, and the ruling queen of the Second Empire *demi-monde*. Her body is worshipped, desired, and admired, and like Renée's, her appearance inspires endless textualizations, in the form of gazettes, articles, and rumors. Nana, too, is compared to mythological figures, predominately Medusa and Melusina. However, unlike Renée, Nana assumes these references positively, embracing her role as a "mangeuse d'hommes"<sup>11</sup> and conflating these mythic signifiers with their signifieds. Her body, and her sexuality, are not enveloped in the discourse of transgression and passion, as is Renée's. *Nana* is the novel of female revenge, of the woman asserting her body as equal to a man's, going beyond notions of inferiority and lack. Nana's body and its adornments, for example, feature her breasts to the point where men begin to feel that they are lacking the positive sign of gender that would be the phallus.

Although she is neither intelligent nor intuitive, Nana's very nature disrupts the notions of sexual difference that a traditionalist, aristocratic sector of her society wants to maintain, a group represented by her tortured lover, the count Muffat, and his adulterous wife. This disruption is often expressed discursively, as when Nana playfully reframes

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<sup>11</sup> Émile Zola, *Nana* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 47.

what may be considered the central scene of the novel: an admirer reaches up into her skirts at a dinner party only to have his finger pricked by a pin. “Maintenant, c’est signé” says Nana, as the man’s blood drips onto her lap, staining her white dress.<sup>12</sup> The suggestion of her *vagina dentata* realigns the scene from one of masculine penetration to one of female penetration, but Nana’s remark slips it back into a traditional mode: that of the economic and sexual contract of marriage. The bloodstain may appear to be reminiscent of the loss of virginity, and Nana’s own language may seem to support this paradigm, but the hidden structure of the scene under the skirt, along with the ambiguous nature of Nana’s remark, opens up the possibility of a reordering of sexual difference, one that threatens male superiority and even male existence. This central scene represents the entire novel’s concern with gender, difference, representation, and language, and Nana’s terse remark reverberates through every enunciation within the novel, destabilizing the foundation of sexual difference that structures her world.

The miniscule act of violence “written” on Nana’s skirt will escalate by the end of her story, and will eventually explode in *La Bête humaine*, Zola’s version of the crime detection novel. In this narrative of the unleashing of the human unconscious, multiple acts of violence resonate throughout northwest France, traveling along its rail lines. Several murders and suicides are linked in a causal chain that traces back to a singular discursive aberration. The mid-level rail employee Roubaud catches his wife in a small lie about a tiny gem on an otherwise mundane day, in a conversation that leads to her admission that her protector Grandmorin, head of the rail company, had raped her before

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 135.

her marriage. Roubaud's jealous rage leads to the couple's murdering the aggressor on a train, a scene observed by off-duty conductor Jacques. This initial murder will lead to Roubaud's mental decomposition and his wife Séverine's affair with Jacques, and in each case, violence will ensue, resulting ultimately in Séverine's murder by her deranged lover, in a strange act of revenge against female sexuality dating back to a primal scene "au fond des cavernes" in Jacques' atavistic imaginary.<sup>13</sup>

Other murders and assaults pile up around these central ones, all related to Séverine's initial lapse in discourse while chatting with her husband that one day. The proximate and ultimate causes converge around female sexuality, centered on Séverine. The echoes of her lies and other linguistic manipulations spread from Le Havre to Paris, destabilizing the logic and reason on which the rail company is founded, to the point where trains derail, both intentionally and otherwise. Séverine's feminine, mendacious discourse disrupts the foundations of a company whose one goal is profit: the logic of money is superseded by one of base human instincts in a portrait of the human race and its inability to keep up with powerful technology. In *La Bête humaine*, Zola conducts a thorough experiment on feminine discourse and modes of communication, along with their inherently physical expressions. The laws of thermodynamics drive the plot machine; the potential energy of sexual difference reaches dangerous levels as increasingly desperate men struggle to take control of their lives and the women who inspire, and release, their desire.

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<sup>13</sup> Émile Zola, *La Bête humaine* (Paris: Pocket, 2001), 79.

My third chapter explores not only the primal male unconscious as represented by Jacques, but also the sexed discourse of Séverine and its interference with the governing structure of society in the microcosm of the Compagnie de l'Ouest. The failures of the justice system to identify and punish the perpetrators of the overwhelming number of crimes in the novel are telling in that they expose its refusal to recognize human nature and even human language: Séverine's seemingly unwitting manipulation of the investigative discourse is more than enough to render it ineffectual. As in *Nana* and *La Curée*, the thematics of looking take on a significant weight in *La Bête humaine*, but in a manner that challenges privileged male agency. When interrogated about her protector's murder, Séverine's body replaces verbal communication, seducing the representatives of the Second Empire government and subverting systems of reading and writing to the point of breaking down the entire justice system, that is, the distinguishing ethical feature of human civilization. In a narrative so invested in the nature of narrative itself, confession becomes a privileged form of communication, and one nearly exclusively associated with women. And in Zola, female communication is rooted in the body; *La Bête humaine* takes a gendered look at the legible body and all of its narrative potential.

My fourth chapter centers on a novel that is not part of Zola's celebrated Rougon-Macquart cycle. Published before any of the others discussed here, *Thérèse Raquin* adopts an entirely different style, structure, and tone. More reminiscent of Poe than of Balzac, it tells the story of an adulterous couple that murders the weak husband, only to succumb to crushing guilt, in the form of ghostly apparitions of the victim, and eventually mutual suicide. Like *La Bête humaine*, this peculiar novel depicts a murder inspired by

female sexuality implicated in an overdetermined family structure. Thérèse's husband is her cousin Camille, with whom she was raised as a sister, and whose masculine identity is undermined by the overbearing maternity of his mother, Thérèse's aunt. The result is a sickly, unhappy coupling, whose lack of gender and family differentiation leads to its inevitable disintegration. After the murder, the newly liberated adulterous couple begins to lose touch with perceptive reality, suffering hallucinations and other reminders of their crime and its victim. The grieving mother-aunt, Madame Raquin, learns of their crime as they must increasingly confess to each other to relieve their guilt, but only after she has succumbed to full-body paralysis. Like paralytic Tante Phasie in *La Bête humaine*, she watches silently, unable to speak or communicate what she knows. The breakdown of communication, and the entire absence of a justice system, makes *Thérèse Raquin* a study of family structure and female sexuality, a more focused narrative than that of *La Bête humaine*, and one whose very title condemns the female protagonist as the central figure, even though she is neither victim nor perpetrator. Thérèse, ironically, is the *pharmakos* whose unsuccessful sacrifice will lead to the implosion of the family.

*Thérèse Raquin*, despite its many plot similarities to other Zola novels, distinguishes itself from *La Bête humaine* and the other Rougon-Macquart texts by its unique narrative techniques and implied attitude toward writing. The character of Laurent, the lover-murderer, is in many ways a figure of the author. He is an artist, a painter, whose most prolific and meaningful work is produced only after his crime, when the victim's image haunts every painting he creates. The haunting of artistic production by a recurring theme or image is analogous to Zola's own corpus, a vast narrative



collection haunted by the recurring face of the sexual woman, his initial victim, constantly reincarnated and demanding retribution. *Thérèse Raquin*, published four years before the first Rougon-Macquart episode, is an embryonic study of the themes, structures, and attitudes that will inform the representation of the Rougon-Macquart women. *Thérèse Raquin* is also a fascinating meditation on the problematics of the legible body, and the legibility of the body within, and through, the text; even in this early novel, Zola sets out an investigative, experimental program that theatrically recreates human experiences while presenting them for dissection and analysis (not to mention commercial consumption). The female body is the site of that experimentation, and in this early novel in particular, Zola plays with fantastical systems of representation to explore the mysteries of life through the female sex.

By undermining established structures of looking, speaking, reading, creating, and (re)producing, Zola writes the feminine in new and interesting ways, but his novelistic program depends on the violent destruction of women and their bodies. To speak of Zola as a feminist writer is clearly inappropriate, but his approaches to representing women as part of his experimental method are remarkable in their reexamination of sexual difference. Like Octave, Zola needs women to complete his masterpiece, and manifests an ambivalent attitude toward them, alternating between fear, adoration, mistrust, and fascination. His work can be read as an investigation into the feminine and its narrative potential, as well as an effort to represent the unrepresentable: sexual difference itself. To that end, Zola must assume the role of male (pro)creator, and populate his novelistic universe with men in his own image who carry out his investigation, and his artistic

creations, within the texts themselves. This examination of the female sex and its representability, violent as it sometimes is, opens up new avenues for understanding gender, sex, and sexual difference. Octave's pen, capable of both creation and destruction, is Zola's instrument in constructing his *oeuvre*, and like Octave's store, Zola's corpus is built on, and fueled by, the female body and the stories it produces.

## Chapter One:

### **Reading Reflections in *La Curée*: Language, Identity, and the New Social Economy**

*Zola is the Baron Haussmann of the novel.*  
Naomi Schor<sup>14</sup>

Naomi Schor's equivalence of Émile Zola and Georges-Eugène Haussmann refers to the author's structuring of his ambitious novel cycle, the *Rougon-Macquart*; specifically, she argues, different strata of the French population are confined to different spaces and different novels, the lower classes in *L'Assommoir*, the higher in *La Curée*, et cetera, just as Haussmann reordered Paris into classed *quartiers* and *banlieues*. She sees Zola as the master creator, classifier, and container of social order in his fictional world, as he makes sure that class distinctions are differentiated and controlled. But she could just as easily refer to his construction of a new material and social France, a fictional one, in which the transition into modernity and all of its stakes are played out through the dramas of one extended family. Zola's masterful weaving of a single family's story through multiple episodic novels is a testament to his architectural (architextual?) prowess. Each novel is like one of Haussmann's sweeping boulevards, showcasing a new view, and use, of the same space. But this equivalency is incomplete without an acknowledgement of Zola's own incorporation of Haussmann, both the man and the new era he ushered in, into his Haussmann-ized texts.

In *La Curée*, the second novel of the *Rougon-Macquart* series, Haussmann's works inform the narrative plot machine not only by furnishing the basis of the main

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<sup>14</sup> Schor, *Zola's Crowds*, 129.

character's professional life, but also by, literally and figuratively, building the new Paris, one obsessed with ostentation, and one in which individual identity becomes increasingly absorbed by the greater social body. The design of the new urban cityscape pioneered by Haussmann eliminated small, hidden alleyways and dark corridors, opting for wide, light-filled boulevards that highlighted military monuments and, famously, made it more difficult for civilian barricades to hold out against soldiers. This new focus on visibility is echoed in Zola's novel, in which Aristide Saccard (né Rougon) exploits the Haussmann renovations by using governmental connections to swing real estate transactions to his advantage. Aristide and his young second wife Renée are at the center of the new *haute bourgeoisie* whose ethics and aesthetics are rooted in ostentation of wealth in every register: decorative, sartorial, theatrical, and even sexual. As the old social structures of aristocracy and its relatively stable hereditary economic system begin to dissolve, economic power and its signifiers now drive all social institutions, especially marriage and family, whose structures are being redefined by these new cultural imperatives. Because of these shifts, norms and taboos are also in a state of flux, and the hunt for money and pleasure from which the novel derives its title spins wildly out of control. The female body, being the bearer of maternity and marriage that solidifies familial belonging, also slips in function from procreative to purely sexual, with an increased economic value tied to its visual desirability.

In every plot and subplot of *La Curée* there is a structuring violence: a powerful force exerting pressure on a weaker one, subjugating differentiated voices and furnishing the energy of the text. Aristide violently, and silently, dismembers the city of Paris

through strategic real estate speculation and reaps the economic benefits. His son Maxime keeps Renée silent on the matter of their incestuous sexual relationship, and takes advantage of her unstable ego and weak sense of self to satisfy his desires. Renée slowly destroys the ways of the old aristocracy by enduring a rape, pregnancy, miscarriage, and marriage of convenience, all with the strange suggestion of intention. Aristide's sister, Sidonie, engineers Renée's marriage (and many other sexual and social arrangements) with the combined manipulative control of a madam and a con man. At every level, power is sought and collected through subtle violences enacted on the very notions of identity and identification that reshape society in a manner analogous to the way that Haussman's *travaux* reshaped the city itself. These forces exert themselves more obviously at key moments in the narrative, but the power structures that produce them are part of a continuum of ethics and mores that finds itself in period of flux in conjunction with the ascendancy of the *haute bourgeoisie* under the Second Empire. As the character who suffers at the nexus of these multiple violences, Renée provides a fascinating study in the gendered violence of modernity so eloquently evoked by Debarati Sanyal.<sup>15</sup> She is Zola's tragic heroine in an age where power is derived from the display of wealth, and Renée is ultimately little more than a pretty display case for her husband's jewels.

These structuring forces are not created and maintained through surveillance in the Foucauldian sense. Rather, in a kind of transformation of the Foucauldian paradigm, in this society, *being seen* is the true source of power. While it may seem like the passive position, the viewed object maintains control over his or her outward appearance on

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<sup>15</sup> Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

every level: clothing, hairstyles, jewelry, and lavish decorative style. Indeed, it is the outward display of this control that proves more powerful than the display itself. Renée, for example, has naturally blonde hair, but claims to dye it every month because a constructed, mannered appearance subscribes to an aesthetics of ostentation on which this society places a premium.<sup>16</sup> In such a society, the field of the sensory is where identity and meaning are anchored. This shift ripples throughout the *haute bourgeoisie* to the point where language slips in and out of the control of its speakers, destabilizing the symbolic order to which, according to Lacan, subjects with fully formed egos would belong. For example, Renée's appearance is necessarily mediated by discourse, as the explanation that she dyes her hair is an integral part of her social appearance. Such an external, linguistic nexus of identity leaves the subject unstable, to the point where she may no longer recognize herself, as is the case with Renée. The interweaving of the visual and the discursive will culminate in the over-the-top performance of *tableaux vivants* at the end of the novel, along with the heroine's subsequent emotional unraveling.

Zola himself characterized *La Curée* as “la note de l'or et de la chair”,<sup>17</sup> the poem of the monetary and sexual extravagance that defined the *haute bourgeoisie* of mid-nineteenth century Paris. Between her greedy husband and her depraved stepson, Renée Saccard is the tragic mother figure of this new economic family, held together by a violence that subtly redefines the social body in terms of a new currency. Renée's

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<sup>16</sup> “Mais quand la mode des cheveux jaunes arriva, elle fut charmée, et pour faire croire qu'elle ne suivait pas la mode bêtement, elle jura qu'elle se teignait tous les mois.” Émile, Zola, *La Curée* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 130. Going forward, in this chapter, page numbers given in parentheses refer to this edition.

<sup>17</sup> “Dans l'histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire, *La Curée* est la note de l'or et de la chair.” Preface to the first edition, cited by Jean Borie. (7)

problematic relationship with her *haute bourgeoisie* society is rooted in the breakdown of representation inherent in this new social structure. Zola's characterization of "la note de l'or et de la chair" shows to what extent sex and money have become inextricable in this world: they are one "note," valid currency of the new economy. By extension, family relationships lose their distinction from both sexual and financial ones, engendering adultery and incest as natural consequences, to the point where a sexual relationship between a woman and her stepson is no longer encoded as "transgressive" within the novel itself. Indeed, it is only through intertextual connections that readers are able to clearly read the "text" of *La Curée*. Renée's incest is rendered as such only by her association with Phèdre, and her economic and social vulnerability is made clear by her role as Echo. In these cases, theatricality is the necessary mode of representation, given the heavily visual nature of *haut bourgeois* aesthetics and the unreadable nature of a changed and changing society whose semiotics are no longer reliable.

A point of entry into understanding these social dynamics is provided by a close look at the use of proper names in the novel. Their onomastic significance is less important than how each character manipulates their own. The prime example is Aristide himself: on his brother's suggestion, he drops his surname Rougon to avoid any association with his father, whose past political views might compromise Aristide's ambitions. This *non du nom du père* superficially cuts Aristide off from his hereditary faults, although Zola consistently insists on the speculator's exemplary "Rougon" character. Intertextuality is key here: to the reader, Aristide's disavowal of the family name only serves to reinforce his belonging to the textual family of the Rougon-

Macquart: for disavowal requires, and therefore acknowledges, a recognition. The omnipotent narrator makes the reader privy to the conversation between Aristide and Eugène. However, within the novel, by choosing a version of his late wife's family name (Sicardot), Aristide essentially detaches himself, onomastically, from any relational unit. He is ultimately individualized and essentially artificial, complemented by his artificial marriage to Renée and fake affair with the socialite Laure d'Aurigny. The choice of Saccard is purely auditory: in it, Aristide hears the counting of coins. Readers might also associate the name with both *le sac* (wealth) or *saccager* (to pillage), both telling allusions to Aristide's character; Aristide himself may be following these associative chains when arriving at his decision. However, his only expressed reaction is sensual: he responds to the auditory signifier, not to the onomastic significance itself, in keeping with the audio-visual locus of meaning that defines his society. The scene in which he chooses his new name with the help of his brother Eugène is brimming with oblique references to money.

« Je *compte* changer de nom, [Eugène] dit-il enfin, tu devrais en faire autant... nous nous gênerions moins.

– Comme tu voudras, répondit tranquillement Aristide.

– Tu n'auras à t'occuper de rien, je me *charge* des formalités... veux-tu t'appeler Sicardot, du nom de ta femme?

Aristide leva les yeux au plafond, répétant, *écoutant la musique des syllabes*:



« Sicardot..., Aristide Sicardot... ma foi, non; c'est ganache et *ça sent la faillite*.

– Cherche autre chose alors, dit Eugène.

– J'aimerais mieux Sicard tout court, reprit l'autre après un silence;

Aristide Sicard..., pas trop mal..., n'est-ce pas? Peut-être un peu gai... »

Il rêva un instant encore, et, d'un air triomphant:

– J'y suis, j'ai trouvé, cria-t-il... Saccard, Aristide Saccard! ... Avec deux c... hein! *Il y a de l'argent dans ce nom-là; on dirait que l'on compte des pièces de cent sous.* »

Eugène avait la plaisanterie féroce. Il congédia son frère en lui disant, avec un sourire: - Oui, *un nom à aller au baigne ou à gagner des millions.*

(87, emphasis added)

The words *compte*, *changer*, and *charge* seem to infiltrate the speech of the two brothers without their realization. Like the sound of coins being counted, the auditory presence of money redefines the language of communication. Aristide not only adopts a new name, but creates an entirely new one. Michel Serres might remark that this act violates the natural laws of thermodynamics (something can't come from nothing), but from a socially economic perspective, it violates the law of inheritance and family belonging. Aristide's self-baptism sets up the "crisis of representation" that, for Sanyal, is the hallmark of modern urban life and its literary avatars.<sup>18</sup> If Aristide can instantaneously, and voluntarily, cease to be a Rougon, how can anyone, or anything, be reliably known?

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<sup>18</sup> Sanyal, *Violence of Modernity*, 96.

Proper names in *La Curée* are the ultimate platform for its characters to manipulate the system of signs that should structure their society. By refusing a name with any sort of onomastic or social signification, Aristide depersonalizes himself, becoming more of an incarnation of ambition, speculation, and greed than a man. He is defined by the *sound* of money, entering into the new economy whose meaning derives from audiovisual ostentation (one that privileges the signifier, at that) rather than familial belonging.

Like Aristide, his sister Sidonie abandons all familial belonging by leaving behind both her maiden name and that of her husband. Known simply as Madame Sidonie, her detachment from old societal affiliation consumes her entire being. After her marrying in Plassans and opening a fruit shop in Paris, Sidonie's history becomes strangely elliptical: Aristide tracks her down and finds that her husband and shop have both disappeared, and neither Sidonie nor the narrator offers any explanation. The disappearance of husband and business represents the initial detachment from the social economy and sexual identity defined by that attachment. Sidonie opens what appears to be a lace boutique, but it is obviously a false front: "il y avait effectivement, dans la vitrine, des bouts de guipure et de la valenciennne, [...] mais, à l'intérieur, on eût dit une antichambre, aux boiseries luisantes, sans la moindre apparence des marchandises" (92). The appearance of merchandise in the window is part of the superficial aesthetics of the age, but unlike the hôtel Saccard, whose magnificent windows are designed to visually open up its private space to the viewing public, Sidonie's boutique is not eager to ostentatiously display its interior. Like Sidonie herself, the space's external signifiers are untrustworthy, as we shall see. The role of her boutique in the social economy, as its store windows would

identify it, is unclear. Her neighbors notice that she is never actually in her boutique, but constantly coming and going. The boutique space itself is divided, and while she never seems to even enter the commercial space that houses the lace business, she does sell various objects out of her entresol, an appropriately intermediate and undefinable space.

This space really serves only as an elongation of Sidonie's true office: the streets of the city. She is an *entremetteuse*, a go-between who arranges relationships, spreads information, and discerningly maintains and manages the secrets of an entire society. This economy of vice is neither private nor public but both, and to easily slide from one to the other, Sidonie must shed her gendered identity. "La femme se mourait en elle" (95) as she assumed the work of a bearer of information: a *seme*. Sidonie is an emblematic figure of the dissolution of differences that makes Zola's women so remarkable. She is detached from all categories, little more than the discursive fluid that conducts the societal circulation so eloquently evoked by Michel Serres.<sup>19</sup>

In all cases, the abandon of a family name is equivalent to a total detachment from the world of the flesh: Sidonie, for example, becomes less of a woman and more of an embodiment of the all-for-profit attitude that emblemizes this society. Aristide maintains a certain sexualized lifestyle, but it is almost entirely superficial, as evidenced by his special arrangement with the socialite and known prostitute Laure, with whom he maintains a mutually beneficial, but entirely fake, affair. His son Maxime, like most children in the Rougon-Macquart family, is a concentrated distillation of his forebears: Aristide's detachment from the traditional family organization is crystallized in

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<sup>19</sup> I refer specifically to Serres' examination of fluid dynamics as described in *Feux et signaux de brume: Zola* (Paris: Grasset, 1975).

Maxime's unidentifiable gender and debauched behavior, epitomized in his incestuous and sexually perverse affair with Renée. To drive the point home, Zola is careful to never "speak" the full names of either Maxime or Renée, that is, one never reads the names "Maxime Rougon" (or is it Saccard?) or "Renée Saccard" within the text, disengaging them discursively from their family ties. Thus, even at the most basic level of signifiers and signifieds, the characters of *La Curée* embody artificiality, detached from all identifiers that would anchor them to a bygone family system. The bloodline is abandoned in favor of an economic family organization in which social belonging is defined monetarily.

Maxime's role as the distillation of the family values is even more ironic given his name: he fails to live up to the bigness it suggests, expressing instead an infantile femininity or even hermaphroditism, making him a likely precursor to *Nana's* Georges Hugon.<sup>20</sup> He is further trivialized as his youthful naïveté becomes awkwardly apparent during his first meeting, and flirtation, with his young but older stepmother Renée. Like Georges for Nana, Maxime is Renée's doll, whom she dresses in women's clothes to amuse her friends. In other words, he is anything but the largeness that his name would suggest. Furthermore, the high vowel ending in French is more commonly associated with feminine names and nouns, giving the name Maxime a feminine ring when

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<sup>20</sup> Maxime's childhood femininity remains with him physically and socially: "Mais la marque de ses abandons d'enfant, cette effémination de tout son être, cette heure où il s'était cru fille, devait rester en lui, le frapper à jamais dans sa virilité" (134). His feminine characteristics are clearly associated with both the degeneration of his family line and the devolving Second Empire society: "[I]l était un produit défectueux, où les défauts des parents se complétaient et s'empiraient. Cette famille vivait trop vite ; elle se mourait déjà dans cette créature frêle, chez laquelle le sexe avait dû hésiter [...]; hermaphrodite étrange venu à son heure dans une société qui pourrissait." (152)

pronounced orally, once again conflicting with the impression of grandiosity. The name might also be seen as an onomastic warning of Maxime's lack of true love for the women he beds: the central *X* falls among the word *AIME* (mAxIME), forbidding the full formation of the word, just as Renée's reading of her true feelings will be interrupted by Maxime himself in the central scene at the Café Riche.

Finally, Renée, whose name carries the most allegorical weight of anyone in the novel, fails to live up to the ideal of rebirth.<sup>21</sup> At no point in the novel does she experience, witness, or even conceive a re-birth of any kind. One may argue that her emergence from the *pension* and subsequent rape constitute this definitive change, but Zola's narration insists on Renée's self-awareness throughout this process. The young *pensionnaire* stares at men's bodies from her window, imagining the shape of their torsos under their minimal clothing, and even endures her rape "avec une sorte d'attente épouvantée" (148). Just as Renée compares her life disparagingly to the grand antique drama of *Phèdre*, we may consider the deflation of the rebirth ideal promised by a name charged with so much meaning. Compare her, for example, to Chateaubriand's René, and we are fully aware of Zola's intentional deflation of the Romantic heritage which he struggles to shake off.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> In Zola's preparatory notes for the novel, Renée's character is named Blanche, another name weighty with (in this case, unrealized) symbolism. See preparatory documents for *La Curée*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms, NAF 10281.

<sup>22</sup> André Benhaim has done an excellent study of the unlikely relationship between Chateaubriand's René and Renée Saccard, examining the latter as a degenerated descendant of the former. His examination of Renée's unique *mal de siècle* is particularly informative. See André Benhaim, "De René à Renée." *Cahiers Naturalistes* 73 (1999): 151-166.

**(Mis)reading Mirrors: Reflected Discourse, Refracted identities**

Renée is also the character who, as a woman, best demonstrates the violence of the transition to the new social economy. Married off to Aristide at a young age to hide her pregnancy, she abruptly left behind the remains of the old aristocracy for the bourgeoisie. She is an economic asset to Aristide, who eyes her family's country property as a long-term return on investment. She never fully succeeds in understanding or participating in the new social economic order exemplified by her husband. She is beautiful and socially graceful, but unlike her husband and her family, she is unable to master this new social structure. While Aristide reinvents himself to gain every economic advantage, mastering his auditory and visual presence, Renée's identity is constantly mediated by an external gaze, even within a closed system. When she contemplates herself in a mirror, the power of her vision is dismissed by insecurities related to the vision of others: "Renée montait, et, à chaque marche, elle grandissait dans la glace; elle se demandait, avec ce doute des actrices les plus applaudies, si elle était vraiment délicieuse, comme on le lui disait" (55). Even as she looks directly at an image of herself, she cannot identify what it is she is looking at: she asks herself, with no response, whether or not her beauty lives up to its own reputation. Her inability to clearly view and process what she sees, especially in a self-reflective situation, is mediated by a greater discourse: not only by what others say about her ("comme on le lui disait"), but also by the theatrical paradigm that structures her social world ("avec ce doute des actrices"). Renée's identity is therefore entirely external: as she stares into the mirror, she sees not

herself, not a desiring subject, but an object, desired and discursively defined, even consumed (“*délicieuse*”). She cannot even read the text of her own body: is she beautiful or not? She cannot decide: the ever-present “on” maintains control at all times. She may play the role of the desiring subject, as she will in the *tableaux vivants* of the penultimate chapter, but the theatricality of her identity and her expression limits her, to the point where she can neither identify nor read her own body. The female body is here disjointed from female subjectivity, which, without a connection to self, remains stifled and ineffectual.

Renée is in fact an extreme, caricatural example of the Lacanian subject who never advanced out of the mirror stage. Lacan’s understanding of ego formation begins within the first year of life, when an infant first sees his full bodily reflection in a mirror. The image of a total, unified entity in the mirror contrasts with his own sense of corporal fragmentation. With the mediating aid of a third term, most likely the gaze of the mother, the infant identifies with the image, and the ego forms. This ego is necessarily alienated from the self, however, as it is always already mediated by an inverted, external reflection. For Lacan, the child moves past this initial stage only when the specular “I” comes to terms with the social “I” – for Renée, however, the specular image of herself will always be disconnected from the social one in her subjectivity. She cannot reconcile the two: does what others *say* about her match what she *sees* in the mirror? All she can do is wonder. The social discourse dominates her individual ego, to the point where she is blinded to visual reality. This blindness is not limited to self-recognition. Renée cannot even see others without the mediating effects of societal mirrors and lenses. During the

carriage ride with Maxime in the bois de Boulogne that opens the novel, she uses a pair of men's glasses, "un binocle d'homme" (40), to examine the other women in the park, particularly her rival Laure d'Aurigny. As Susan Harrow has pointed out, Renée must learn to "see like a man" in order to participate in the gendered social economy as an active, desiring subject, although she will still always be alienated from her visual perceptions and their social stakes.<sup>23</sup>

Along this axis, we can see how Zola's later heroines develop. Nana, for instance, adores her mirror-image, almost to the point of sexual pleasure. She takes childish delight in her own doubling, drawn to "l'autre Nana, qui, elle aussi, se baisait dans la glace" (227) while her tortured admirer Muffat looks on, excluded from this closed circle of desire. In this scene, Nana short-circuits the Lacanian mirror system by the very exclusion of the third term of the male. His presence is frustratingly extraneous as Nana indulges entirely in self-love, and seems only to serve to accentuate his pathetic devotion to a woman he will never fully possess. Unlike Renée, Nana is neither affected nor influenced by the mediation of society as she reads her own image: she recognizes herself and finds pleasure in doing so, while the admiration of her own body is simply a bonus. Rachel Mesch and Sandy Petrey have both remarked on Nana's joy in her own replications: her mirror image, her lesbian lover Satin, and the prize-winning horse that shares her name. Even her own name is a doubling (Na-na), one that permeates and entrances the *demi-monde* over which she reigns. In short, Nana's identification with her

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<sup>23</sup> Susan Harrow, "Myopia and the Model: The Making and Unmaking of Renée in Zola's *La Curée*," in *L'écriture du féminin chez Zola et dans la fiction naturaliste*, ed. Anna Gural-Migdal (Bern: Peter Lang, 2003), 251-270.



image in the mirror is total and closed, whereas Renée's is entirely open, always refracted through the eyes and words of the Other, and therefore her social ego is externally determined, leaving it vulnerable to manipulation and destabilization. This is why Nana's demise within her text is purely physical, resulting entirely from her own sexual choices, whereas Renée's is social, emotional, and mental.

Renée's problematic interactions with mirrors are at the heart of the incestuous relationship that defines her central drama in the novel. In a private room at the aptly named Café Riche, Renée and Maxime find themselves surrounded by a floor-to-ceiling mirror. Other patrons have scribbled playful notes on the mirror-wall, much like today's bathroom graffiti. Renée stares, amused, at the plethora of names scratched into the mirror, including instances of her own. These coincidental moments of proper names highlight the truly arbitrary relationship between proper names and individual identities, already demonstrated by Aristide's unceremonious re-naming.

The pivotal moment comes when Renée notices Maxime's name written on the mirror. It is important to note that she does not read (that is, comprehend) the context of this particular written utterance of "Maxime": just as her own name appears as a coincidental repetition of a shared signifier, "Maxime" written alone on the mirror has no link to its signified. It is only when Renée herself reads the phrase aloud that context and signification are assigned to this grouping of syllables. She begins: "J'aime...", but before she can complete the phrase ("...Maxime"), her stepson intervenes, preventing her from essentially admitting her incestuous desire aloud. Even though she did not compose

the phrase, uttering it realigns its context and shifts its signification: the *je* slips from an anonymous writer to Renée.

The displacement from written to verbal is not only what creates signification, but also what triggers the adulterous, incestuous *faute*. Maxime stops Renée from reading the phrase in order to prevent her admission of a desire that they both already suspect but could never verbalize. It should be noted that Renée never finishes pronouncing the damning sentence: instead, she and Maxime tangle up in a playful wrestling match that ends with a mutual recognition of the expression of sexual desire and its consummation. The verbal admission of the *faute* is impossible, but the *faute* itself is not: it even seems preferable, at least to Maxime. The elliptical narration of their incest ends curiously. It is worth citing the entire exchange here.

« Ah! Voici ton nom, Maxime, s'écria Renée... écoute... 'J'aime...' »

Mais il s'était assis sur le coin du divan, presque aux pieds de la jeune femme. Il réussit à lui prendre les mains, d'un mouvement prompt; il la détourna de la glace, en lui disant d'une voix singulière:

« Je t'en prie, ne lis pas cela. »

Elle se débattit en riant nerveusement.

« Pourquoi donc? Est-ce que je ne suis pas ta confidente? »

Mais lui, insistant, d'un ton plus étouffé:

« Non, non, pas ce soir. »

Il la tenait toujours, et elle donnait de petites secousses avec ses poignets pour se dégager. Ils avaient des yeux qu'ils ne se connaissaient

pas, un long sourire contraint et un peu honteux. Elle tomba sur les genoux, au bout du divan. Ils continuaient à lutter, bien qu'elle ne fit plus un mouvement du côté de la glace et qu'elle s'abandonnât déjà. Et comme le jeune homme la prenait à bras-le-corps, elle dit avec son rire embarrassé et mourant:

« Voyons, laisse-moi... tu me fais mal. »

Ce fut le seul murmure de ses lèvres. Dans le grand silence du cabinet, où le gaz semblait flamber plus haut, elle sentit le sol trembler et entendit le fracas de l'omnibus des Batignolles qui devait tourner le coin du boulevard. Et tout fut dit. (185)

There are several remarkable details in this short scene. The first is Maxime's sudden reaction and shift in tone. The first *mais* of the second line initiates a reaction, signaling the young man's instantaneous understanding of the entire paradigm: the written word, the (to-be) spoken word, as well as Renée's complete ignorance of both her actions and their implications. The *mais* signals Maxime's authoritative interruption of Renée's speaking/reading, underscored by the imperative: "ne lis pas cela."<sup>24</sup> His choice of words is worth noting: he explicitly forbids Renée from *reading*, not *saying*, *lire* versus *dire*. Another *mais* steps up the force of Maxime's authority, his tone growing more *étouffé* – "smothered," in other words, violently silenced. The subjugation becomes more physical than verbal as Maxime's voice softens and Renée shakes her wrists to

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<sup>24</sup> Maxime's grasping of Renée's hands to pull her away from the mirror will be sublimated later in the young woman's final outrageous costume, as a Tahitian girl, wearing gold bands around her wrists and neck, symbolizing the stranglehold that her stepson and husband keep on her at all times, often via the mediation of jewelry.

loosen his grip. Verbal communication fails altogether as the focus shifts to their eyes and a curiously singular, perhaps shared, smile (*un long sourire*). As the couple falls onto the couch, Renée speaks with a “dying laugh” (*son rire...mourant*), complaining that Maxime is hurting her. Zola emphasizes the orality of Renée’s speech by mentioning the “murmure de ses lèvres,” heightening the sensuality of the scene. This detail also completes the visual representation of the scene as it revolves around Renée’s body: the narration mentions her feet, hands, wrists, eyes, knees, and full body, whereas only Maxime’s voice is repeatedly evoked. The foregrounding of Renée’s body (primarily lips) against Maxime’s voice privileges a male speech (immaterial and authoritative) over a female speech (redundant, empty, and anchored to the body). Maxime’s control of both Renée’s body and her speech are made equivalent by this relationship.

Yet what really strikes the reader of this scene is the narration of what would be the moment of incest. Instead of a narration of a sexual act, Zola gives us a description of what Renée, and notably *only* Renée, sees and hears from her position on the couch. The elliptical void is filled by the sights and sounds of the city: a flaming gas lamp and the sound and shaking of an omnibus. As many critics have noted, the division between private (interior) and public (exterior) is consistently breached in *La Curée*, often audibly, and Zola makes this explicit at this precise moment. The act of incest and the presence of the city are inseparable, as Zola later acknowledges in his description of Paris, “la ville complice” (338). But the link between the city and the sexual act is more complicated than this. The sounds of the bus not only replace the narration of incest, that is, the voice of the narrator, but also those of both Renée and Maxime. The gradual silencing of the

woman, first with the “dying laugh” and then with the ellipsis of her last remark, leads into the violent shaking and roaring of the omnibus. This loud intrusion of public into private is a telling effect of Zola’s Haussmannian reconfiguration of the city in *La Curée* and its analogous reconfiguration of social and sexual relations, all triggered by transgressive speech and its suppression. The sexual act itself is treated as one of violence, enacted on the female voice. Renée finds herself dominated first by Maxime, then by the modern metropolis, a concretized emblem of the social character of the Second Empire, as the bus drowns out her already dying words of protest.

The conclusion of the scene completes the erasure of Renée’s voice and her little remaining subjectivity. After being ordered not to read, speak, or express herself in any way, Renée’s subjugation is completed by the narrator: “Et tout fut dit.” The passive *fut* plus the past participle emphasizes the lack of definitive speaker, somewhat oxymoronically. It also renders the incestuous act as a verbal one, despite the complete lack of speaker and voice. The result is a final erasure of Renée’s self: her voice has been entirely replaced by a nonexistent speaker, who is able to say all (*tout*), while she is forbidden from completing a coherent utterance.

What is signified by *tout* remains even more elusive. Its wholeness seems to fill the strange lack that Maxime senses before Renée notices his name on the mirror: “Quelque chose d’ordinaire et d’accoutumé lui manquait” (185). The *quelque chose* that is missing seems to be a clear understanding of Renée’s sexual identity and therefore of their prescribed relationship. The ambiguity of what is missing is clearly a sexual one, as Maxime is “mal à l’aise” while examining—in the mirror—the lines of Renée’s hips

under her slim-cut domino that perfectly outlines her feminine body (185). Seeing his stepmother in this reflected light, just as when he had earlier seen her by the light of his cigar in the coach,<sup>25</sup> unsettles his understanding of her sexual identity, not only along a male/female axis, but also within her familial role. The emphasis on her hips helps the reader recall that Renée is not Maxime's biological mother, an important distinction in this indefinable new familial relationship. It is worth noting that while Renée will constantly question her transgression and suffer pangs of guilt regarding her crime, this is the only moment in the novel when Maxime feels uneasy about his attraction toward her. Once the attraction is consummated, Maxime carries on without a care in the world. It is only when he considers her form in the mirror, and hears her pronounce her incestuous desire, that he stumbles. Notably, after their first sexual encounter, Maxime brushes off any semblance of guilt by noting that he was drawn to Renée only because he thought of her as a boy: "Il l'avait prise pour un garçon, il jouait avec elle, et ce n'était pas sa faute, si le jeu était devenu sérieux" (188). His reduction of their serious crime to an infantile game is simply Maxime's version of the narrative ellipsis that represents the dissolution of difference between the two lovers. Indeed, Maxime remarks that if Renée had simply shown off a bit of skin, he would have recognized her femininity, her artificial maternity, and her marital status, and therefore would never have transgressed: "Pour sûr, il ne

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<sup>25</sup> In this brief moment in the coach, Maxime examines his stepmother by the light of the cigar which he is still puffing on; the resulting light is "haletante", like an extension of Maxime's own breath. Her beauty is therefore visible only through the filter of male physicality, and entirely determined by his control: "[L]e cigare de Maxime se ravivait, tachait l'ombre de rouge, en jetant un éclair pâle et rose sur le visage de Renée. Elle était adorable, vue à cette lueur rapide; si bien que le jeune homme en fut frappé.

'Oh oh, dit-il, nous paraissions bien jolie, ce soir, belle maman... Voyons un peu.'

Il approcha son cigare, tira précipitamment quelques bouffées, Renée, dans son coin, se trouva éclairée d'une lumière chaude et comme haletante." (171)

l'aurait pas touchée du bout des doigts, si elle avait seulement montré un coin d'épaule. Il se serait souvenu qu'elle était la femme de son père" (188). The structures of three paradigms (femininity, maternity, marital status), the trifecta of the socially defined woman, are collapsed by the end of the scene.

The wholeness suggested by *tout* also contrasts starkly to the elliptical description of the incest itself: in fact, *nothing* is said. This is an unusual rhetorical hiccup by Zola, who rarely shies away from the graphic or the transgressive. Going beyond the domination of Renée's voice by that of an invisible and inaudible speaker, this phrase even seems to exclude the authority of the *narrator himself*, replacing his narrative process by what is essentially an authorial lie: nothing is said. This brief remark questions, therefore, both the ability of Renée to overcome a masculine discursive authority and the power of narration to enunciate a negation. The ellipsis is significant: Renée and Maxime's incest is an implosion of family structure, sexual difference, and narrative authority, *signified* by a collapse of language.

### **Re-reading *Phèdre*: The Modern Tragedy of Language**

Because of her incestuous relationship and tragic fate, Renée has been alternately called "une nouvelle Phèdre" (by Zola himself)<sup>26</sup> and "an anti-Phaedra."<sup>27</sup> The overlapping of her story with that of the myth is undeniable, but Zola's heavy-handed intertextuality seems to backfire once Phèdre enters the novel proper. In the fifth chapter,

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<sup>26</sup> In his first preparatory notes for the novel, Zola made his referential intentions clear: "Décidément, c'est une nouvelle Phèdre que je vais faire." Preparatory documents for *La Curée*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms, NAF 10282, f° 298.

<sup>27</sup> Sandy Petrey. "Stylistics and Society in *La Curée*." *Modern Language Notes* 89, no. 4 (May 1974): 636.

Renée and Maxime attend a performance of *Phèdre* in what would be a tragic mirroring of their love affair – if it weren't in Italian. Listening to the Italian version of the play, Renée and Maxime don't actually understand the spoken lines: “Et même ce drame leur causa une émotion particulière, dans cette langue étrangère dont les sonorités leur semblaient, par moments, un simple accompagnement d'orchestre soutenant la mimique des acteurs” (241). The narration of Phèdre's tragedy, in Italian, is now little more than a decorative accessory, adding audio-visual beauty to the deflated “mimicry” of the actors, much as the surname Saccard was musically pleasing to Aristide. The two lovers know the story well enough to understand the performance even without completely understanding the language, but the gap between the actors' verbalization of the Italian script and the comprehension of these two audience members is large enough to keep at least Renée from recognizing her own tragedy in the mirror held up for her. Like the disparate signifier and signified in the restaurant mirror scene, the verbalized *faute* of Phèdre in Italian remains disconnected from its signified, the *faute* of Renée. The mirror of theatrical performance deflects the reflection just enough to distort Renée's reality. Later, she won't even understand Maxime's jokes about their own relationship mocked in the play. Renée's sense of self, especially in the social register, is so skewed, that she is the only one not in on the joke about the drama in which she plays the central role.

Why include such a scene? If the superficially obvious comparison between Renée and Phèdre is lost on the main character entirely, it is even less convincing to many thoughtful readers, especially Petrey. Going beyond the apparent obsession with modernizing and vulgarizing classic myths that seems to define the aesthetics of this age,



this episode serves as another example of the very structure of language disintegrating under the weight of Second Empire excesses, and specifically within the sphere of Renée's sexuality. The sign collapses somewhere between Phèdre's admission of guilt (in Italian) and Renée's non-admission at the Café Riche (in someone else's words). By having his characters see the play in Italian, Zola adds one more degree of separation between Renée's fantasy of the gods living out their divine incests in some antique grotto and her shameful affair with her effeminate, narcissistic stepson. Her incest "drama" is now little more than another deflated imitation of an imagined antique grandeur produced by the aesthetics of Zola's Second Empire bourgeoisie.

Having his star characters attend a performance of *Phèdre* in Italian is also a sly move on the part of the author to avoid a direct confrontation with the *Phèdre* of Jean Racine, obviously the version of the myth at the forefront of the French literary canon and the one to which a reader's mind will immediately jump. Articles and studies abound on the overarching reference to Phèdre's situation in *La Curée*, but there has yet to appear any work that provides a close textual comparison of Zola's novel with Racine's masterpiece. While such a thorough investigation would be beyond the scope of this current project, it is worth examining the remarkable similarities between the two works.

Their primary connection, and certainly the most interesting one to my current study, is the problematic of language embodied by both Renée and Phèdre as speaking, desiring subjects. Roland Barthes characterized Racine's masterpiece as a tragedy of language, one in which all of the tension, psychology, and action of the plot radiate out

from the core problem of *dire* vs. *ne pas dire*.<sup>28</sup> Laurence de Looze expanded on this by adding a dimension of modality and condition to this polarity: *devoir* vs. *ne pas devoir*, particularly in the conditional mood, supplies the true meaning of Phèdre's dilemma and ultimate demise.<sup>29</sup> Of course, being informed at once by Athenian law and Jansenist dogma, Racine's Phèdre's problem is one of code violations, both moral and legal, and the power of human passions even under such constraints. However, Renée's "passion" is vague, dull, and unnamable in a way that Phèdre's isn't. Renée herself recognizes this at the theatre: "Comme son drame était mesquin et honteux, à côté de l'épopée antique!" (242). We must be careful to note here that when Zola pens this phrase for Renée, he is in no way demeaning his poetry against the greatness of Racine's: "l'épopée antique" refers to (her idyllic vision of) the ancient myth, not Racine's re-imagining and re-writing of it. Both Zola and Racine stay true to the ideologies that produce their Phèdres: the metaphysical and epistemological problematics of tragedy for the latter, and the materialistic ostentation and revised moral code of the bourgeoisie for the former. In this way, each work crystallizes both the powers and limits of their respective genres. The Phèdre of the modern novel cannot be immediately equated with the Phèdre of classical tragedy, though their situations and structures may seem, at the surface, identical.

Readers will be quick to point out that "identical" is not the proper term here. After all, Renée consummates her incestuous desires while Phèdre does not. But as it has been cogently argued, for Racine, speaking the desire equates to acting on it. Phèdre's

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<sup>28</sup> Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1967).

<sup>29</sup> Laurence de Looze, "Dire, devoir, and the Conditional Mode of Discourse in Racine's Phèdre," *French Forum* 13, no. 3 (Sept 1988): 287-296.

admission is equivalent to Renée’s action. So what of Renée’s admission? We have seen that, in truth, it doesn’t exist. Maxime blocks her speech at the Café Riche and so her desire is never *uttered* – even its consummation is recounted elliptically. We have seen how the gap between Renée’s act of reading aloud and Maxime’s observation of her utterance is emblematic of her discursive subjugation. By comparing her “admission” to Phèdre’s confession to her servant C enone in Act I of Racine’s play, we uncover another layer of linguistic conflation.:

C ENONE

Aimez-vous?

PH EDRE

De l’amour j’ai toutes les fureurs.

C ENONE

Pour qui?

PH EDRE

Tu vas ou ir le comble des horreurs.  
J’aime...   ce nom fatal, je tremble, je frissonne.  
J’aime...

C ENONE

Qui?

PH EDRE

Tu connais ce fils de l’Amazone,  
Ce prince si longtemps par moi-m eme opprim e?

C ENONE

Hippolyte? Grands dieux!

PH EDRE

C’est toi qui l’as nomm e!

(I.3.258-264)

The interrupted phrase that begins “J’aime...”, here repeated by Phèdre, will later be repeated, “mesquin et honteux” (242), by Renée in the Café Riche, who struggles to make out the graffiti scratched on the mirror. Phèdre, like Renée, will not complete the phrase: instead C enone, her specular double, finishes it for her, a fact Phèdre is quick to point out. For in Racine, if speech is act, Phèdre wants to be clear that she did not commit the act of speaking her crime aloud. For now, at least, that is left to her other self, the equivalent of Ren ee’s image and name inscribed in the mirror of the private room at the Caf e Riche. The chain of *enjambements* and interruptions between the two women, rare in Racine’s perfected art of alexandrines, interlocks their speech and interweaves the admission between the two of them. Ph edre’s particularly fractured line “Tu vas ou ir... J’aime...”, surrounded by otherwise perfectly aligned alexandrine verse, shows to what extent her passion has overcome her ability of self-expression. She physically trembles and shivers (“je tremble, je frissonne”), and the instability resonates into her speech.

In the Caf e Riche scene, Ren ee is literally reading words someone else has written. Since *La Cur ee*, more so than Zola might have been keen to admit, takes a large percentage of its dramatic structure from Racine’s play, one might say that Ren ee here is reading *Ph edre*. The shift from text to speech is of course central to the paradigm of theatrical representation, and thus carries more weight and meaning in the play than in the novel. However, Zola plays on this transformation by *writing* Ren ee’s *reading* of Ph edre’s *speech*. He represents the initial text-to-speech shift and underlines it by linking his text to Racine’s dialogue. Ren ee “reads” *Ph edre* at the Caf e Riche, where she fails to understand what her utterance entails. At the actual performance of the play, she doesn’t

understand enough Italian to grasp the meaning of the speech, understanding only musical symbols. This does not mean, however, that Renée doesn't know Phèdre's story or, more importantly, its resemblance to her own, although Maxime clearly understands the importance of this better than she does. She simply cannot understand the text itself, the semes chosen by various authors to express the drama.

The moral and legal complications of incest have never been completely resolved as they relate to either text. Endless articles and book chapters have been dedicated to the question: is Phèdre guilty? And one could easily imagine a similar wave of criticism inspired by Renée's situation. Even within each work, reactions vary. Œnone is shocked at her lady's admission of desire, but Thésée's reported death seems to dispel all suppositions of crime or wrongdoing on Phèdre's part. Let us not forget that Hippolyte is not related by blood to the title character, and so Thésée's death would apparently, by Athenian law, dissolve all family relations between the two. Indeed, romantic love seems to be inextricably linked with family ties in the play, as Thésée chooses to adopt Aricie as his daughter in its final lines, simply to honor Hippolyte's love for her after his gruesome death. It is also important to remember that in the background text of the play, Thésée (apparently randomly) chose Phèdre over her sister, a fact Phèdre alludes to aloud in her fantasy that replaces Thésée in the labyrinth with Hippolyte, and her sister Ariane with herself. In any case, the definition of, and public reaction to, incestuous desires is less than clear.

Renée, of course, is not related by blood to Maxime. Her marriage to Aristide is also ensconced in a gray area, having been motivated entirely by financial concerns on

his part. Remember that Renée was married off to Aristide by her family when she was raped and impregnated, and also that the entire affair was facilitated by Sidonie. Renée's legal obligations to her (legal) husband are clear, but Zola constantly reminds us that moral codes among the Second Empire bourgeoisie are anything but consistent. Even Aristide's "affairs" are artificial: he and Laure d'Aurigny falsify a relationship so as to maintain a chic image that gives them both financial advantages. So what encodes Renée's affair as *incestuous*? The answer, I would argue, is purely textual.

As we have seen, in the scene at the Café Riche, in which Renée and Maxime first commit their crime, the sexual act is elliptically alluded to after Renée's non-uttered utterance. The overlay of the text of *Phèdre* further envelops the scene in a blanket of discourse, overdetermining the speech of the characters with multiple signifieds, all leading back to the written text. By drawing attention to the acts of writing, reading, and speaking, and privileging them over the sexual act, Zola renders the incest as purely linguistic. It can be understood only by its relationship to other texts, particularly *Phèdre*, but as André Benhaim has also eloquently argued, to Chateaubriand's *René*. It is coded as criminal or immoral only by these other texts, as Maxime and Renée's own society lacks the moral compass to define such acts as transgressive. Those who discover the lovers, including Aristide, are remarkably non-reactive. Perhaps the reason the narration eclipses the sexual act itself is because it hardly merits description in a society that doesn't even recognize such an act as deviant. Only Renée, who maintains some connection to the old aristocracy, remarks on their wrongdoing: "C'est infâme, ce que nous venons de faire là" (186). Maxime, however, simply makes dismissive excuses.

Their second encounter is just as entrenched in discourse as the first. After an imperial ball, Maxime accompanies Renée back to her apartment. They discuss trivialities, including the young man's friendship with his betrothed Louise, as Renée prepares for bed. Maxime follows her about, continually recounting jokes that Louise has told him, when Renée suddenly turns and embraces him:

Elle passa dans son cabinet de toilette. Maxime la suivit, pour lui raconter un nouveau mot de Louise qui lui revenait à la mémoire, tranquille comme s'il se fût attardé chez un ami, cherchant déjà son porte-cigares pour allumer un havane. Mais là, lorsqu'elle eut posé le candélabre, elle se tourna et tomba dans les bras du jeune homme, muette et inquiétante, collant sa bouche sur sa bouche. (207)

The placing of the candelabra links this moment to the one at the Café Riche by emphasizing the visible light of the space. Just before the first scene, much attention was given to the cigar light by which Maxime examines Renée. This time, as he fumbles for a cigar, Renée takes charge, controlling the light source and, silently, initiating the encounter. In this case, the narrator does not shy away from describing physical contact, repeating the word "bouche" somewhat awkwardly. What is noteworthy, however, is that this is the end of the narration. The text quickly shifts to an elongated description of Renée's boudoir. Indeed, the next line after the citation begins "L'appartement particulier de Renée..." (207), and the narration does not return to the present moment until four pages later. Besides building up anticipation for the readers, this odd structuring smothers the act in text.

### Silencing Echo: Repetition and Re-appropriation

The penultimate chapter of *La Curée* brings Renée's drama to its deflated climax. The Saccards give a *bal travesti* before which M. Hupel de la Noue will stage his poem, "Les Amours du Beau Narcisse et de la Nymphé Écho," in a series of three *tableaux vivants*. The transposition of the work from Ovid's written lyrics to visual tableaux, starring the leading actors of Renée's social circle, stays true to this society's obsession with ostentation. The effect is indeed a purely static visual one, as the actors do not speak or move, but pose silently in lavish, anachronistic sets, dressed in over-the-top allegorical costumes. The poet claims to have chosen a visual representation because it is "plus noble, [...] plus près du beau antique" (272), but even he cannot escape the materialism of his age: during the set up of the first tableaux, as he organizes his leading ladies and their costumes, he admits that "s'il avait renoncé aux vers, c'était pour écrire son poème 'avec des étoffes savamment combinés'" (273, emphasis mine). The word *éttoffe*, is a meaningful choice here, as it deftly includes both the visually consumable surface by which everything is assigned value by Second Empire aesthetics and ethics as well as the tangible, material wealth it signifies. Many critics note that the settings of the three tableaux reflect the major themes of *La Curée*, namely in their attention to money and sex. Maxime is Narcissus, Aristide is Plutus, and Renée, of course, is Echo, while all the secondary characters of the novel fit into their appropriate roles. However, what is truly original in this episode is Zola's commentary on the nature of narrative and artistic representation.



M. Hupel de la Noue's non-verbal poem relies on popular culture and myth to convey meaning in much the same way that the novel's Italian *Phèdre* does. Maxime, despite his lack of knowledge of Italian, follows the play thanks to his education and familiarity with the Phèdre myth. Likewise, M. Hupel de la Noue expects his audience to recognize the key figures and situations represented by his tableaux, and is sure to include modern details to drive the point home (for example, piles of contemporary golden coins are strewn about Plutus' cave). Even then, he still can't resist ("il ne put résister" [278]) a running commentary, speaking to anyone close enough to hear him, identifying characters and explaining their relationships. Simple captions won't do: he ends up recounting all of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to two men in the public for two hours (290). Hupel de la Noue's "poem," then, conveys none of its own meaning. The intended structure of visual representation is undermined by the author's own verbal interferences, which replace the narrative function of the tableaux. Even the term "author" here loses its stability: as the stars of the tableaux arrange themselves on stage, and Hupel de la Noue simply recounts Ovid's work to the same audience that views them, the role of the author is dispersed to the point of lacking sense.

Even though the poet intends to stay "plus près du beau antique," his use of modern details anchors the tableaux in the values of his contemporary society, namely in its adoration of money. The most blaringly anachronistic details of the staging are also its most materialistic: before the copious piles of modern coins in Plutus' cave (appropriately reigned over by Aristide), Hupel de la Noue hears his highest compliment from one of Aristide's business partners: "C'est classique, [...] Vous connaissez votre

temps, monsieur le préfet” (283). The real narrative of the tableaux, then, is a metatext: they represent the nature of representation as Second Empire Paris understands it. The “temps” of which Hupel de la Noue is truly an expert is one of bastardization, vulgarization, and materialization of the common currency of the literary and mythological canon. For such tastes, the way to say “plus près du beau antique” is to modernize the story by incorporating the visual signifiers of wealth: for in this group, the ostentation of money carries more value than the money itself.

To Zola’s reader, the “poem” does reflect the various dramas played out in the novel, and critics have shown to what degree each poem-actor plays his or her novel-character within the tableaux. Again, no new meaning is communicated, a fact that in itself communicates the inescapability of the closed discursive circle that unites and condemns this society. The overdetermination of identity in this particular representation is especially detrimental to Renée, whose role as Echo leaves her doubly muted: not only is her role silent like everyone else’s, but her character Echo can only repeat the words that (male) others have said to her. This final theatrical role imprints publicly on Renée the discursive subjugation that her society has imposed on her throughout the novel. Echo’s repetitious curse is in fact an exaggerated example of the nature of language, as we are all condemned to endlessly repeat the words of others, trapped in the prison-house of language as speaking-beings, or Lacanian *parlêtres*. According to Lacan, the entrance into language is the moment of the formation of the unconscious and alienation from the self. Meaning is always external, and slippage is a constant risk. Echo is the figure of the

*parlêtre par excellence*, a fact that becomes clear if we look back to Ovid's telling of the story, from which M. Hupel de la Noue composes his tableaux.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Echo is a nymph who suffers the wrath of Juno after stalling the reigning goddess with chatter while her philandering husband, Jove, got rid of his amorous entourage of nymphs. Juno, cursing Echo's talent for effective discourse, deprives her of her gift of conversation: she can only repeat back the final words that others speak to her. She is not yet pure voice, and this is the true punishment: she is a subject who cannot speak her desire, or enter into the symbolic order of language, but who can recognize, feel, and suffer within it. At this point in her tragedy, she is entirely disconnected from her utterances, whose signifiers are shifted and contorted to her detriment. In the episode with Narcissus, as Naomi Segal has shown, an (implicitly male) narrator takes advantage of her condition, appropriating the female voice to play with language in such a way as to reveal the male domination over it.

It chanced Narcissus, searching for his friends,  
Called 'Anyone here?' and Echo answered 'Here!'  
Amazed he looked all round and, raising his voice,  
Called 'Come this way!' and Echo called 'This way!'<sup>30</sup>

Their "conversation" continues in this manner, with Echo's involuntary repetitions imitating natural discourse. The slippage of the signifiers is played out to extremes, as Echo unwittingly repositions each sign to imitate a "true" conversation. Her speech is doubly dictated by Narcissus and the clever narrator, and the privileged reader, occupying

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<sup>30</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. A.D. Melville (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 62.

a position of superior knowledge, takes pleasure in recognizing both this cleverness and the ensuing confusion. A triad of implied males (narrator, reader, protagonists) entraps Echo in an inescapable cage of language. Devastated, Echo's body wastes away in grief, but her voice survives; oddly, Ovid seems to identify her voice with her self, even in its restrictive nature: "Only her voice, her bones are turned to stone. / So in the woods she hides and hills around, / For all to hear, alive, but just a sound" (63). Disembodied, Echo is really no different than she was in bodily form. She is alive, but just a sound, and just the sound that others create and control.

Echo is only half of this narrative, however. Ovid tragically pairs the nymph, who is little more than an acoustic mirror, with a young man who treasures his own visual and acoustic images. Narcissus, the son of a nymph, is "from birth adorable" (61), and in his sixteenth year, he "seemed both a man and a boy; and many a youth / And many a girl desired him" (61). His beauty is thus twofold twice over again: he occupies a privileged position of the adolescent, straddling both the ignorance of childhood and the sublimated sexual desire of adulthood. He is the love-object of both young men and women, but he cares for neither. Ovid calls his lack of preference "pride", and it is not until he has spurned the wrong woman that his curse of self-love becomes fatal. His crucial interaction with Echo precedes the water-mirror episode, a detail that M. Hupel de la Noue thoughtfully ignores; the condensation of the two parts of the Narcissus myth reinforces both the young man's isolation and the young nymph's desperation.

Zola makes the resemblance between Maxime and Narcissus clear long before the performance of the tableau. Maxime is young, "both a man and a boy", and popular

among all groups. Especially when considered as his father's wingman, the youngest Rougon's duality is, like that of Narcissus, more additive than reductive. That is, Maxime's duality and doubling are empowering, whereas Echo's duality, the body disconnected from the voice, leaves her to waste away. Maxime is both boy and man, stepson and lover, and sexual rival and homosocial companion. Renée, like Echo, suffers from divisive, reductive dualities: she cannot be both stepmother and lover, voice and body, so, like her Ovidian counterpart, Renée disintegrates. Even though Maxime is expressly identified with Narcissus, he does not share the same fate. Narcissus' demise begins when, after a curse from a spurned lover, he catches a glimpse of himself in a pond with a mirror-like surface. In the long soliloquy inspired by this moment, the young man admits to being in love with the creature he sees in the mirror, listing the individual features he admires, *without recognizing himself*. There is a distinct passage of time between the moment of perception and the moment of recognition. Maxime, on the other hand, functions in a world of instant gratification: he may lack perception and insight, but never when it comes to his own desire or its satisfaction. We have seen how Renée, like Narcissus, fails to read and register her own image in the mirror. In that situation, a greater social discourse mediates the visual identification. For Narcissus, the mediating factor is a blindness stemming from excessive desire. Near the end of his speech, and potentially through the very act of speaking, the youth finally recognizes himself and realizes that this desire can never be satisfied. In Ovid's version, the young beauty wastes away, much as Echo did, although without the lingering open wound of the trapped voice.

Renée's inability to express herself verbally is the direct result of pressure exerted by the greater social body, particularly through the conduit of men such as Maxime and Aristide. Even when it comes to self-identification, Renée is at a loss: she cannot even understand her own mirror image without the mediation of the Other, while Sidonie and Aristide swap identities, names, and images with ease, maintaining a certain level of control over their social selves that Renée can never master. As Echo's existence comes to be defined by the authoritative and immaterial male voice, the locus of Renée's identity is paradoxically located in a disembodied, dispersed social discourse, which is inherently coded as masculine by the characters that exert this power directly.<sup>31</sup>

The three tableaux that "act out" the *Metamorphoses*, as we have seen, are little more than embellished, visual representations of existing relationships in this contemporary society. In their theatricality, however, they are telling. Instances of theatrical representation abound in the novel, such as in the performance of *Phèdre*. But the text is infused with other, less classical theatrical scenes, beginning with the "theater" of the *promenade au bois*, where socialites examine each other with binoculars. Everyone in Renée's circle is constantly performing for an audience of themselves, performing the "to-be-looked-at-ness" that Laura Mulvey finds to be the inherent denotation of femininity in visual culture.<sup>32</sup> While Mulvey speaks about modern cinema, this notion can be extended to the world of *La Curée* because of the gendered visibility that

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<sup>31</sup> In her excellent account of the Narcissus and Echo paradigm in French fiction, Naomi Segal has shown to what extent the narcissistic male ego and the subjugated female voice have permeated the French canon. See: Naomi Segal, *Narcissus and Echo: Women in the French récit*, (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1988).

<sup>32</sup> Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009): 19.

permeates and informs identity formation in its society. This reflective and refractive theatrical system is simply part of the self-involved discursive circulation of the Second Empire bourgeoisie, and it has no more powerful symptom than that of the artistic tastes of the era.

A parallel detail that runs through this chapter shows to what extent discourse is circular and repetitive in this particular social world. Hupel de la Noue compliments one of his actresses, the marquise d'Españet, on her lovely costume; she replies, "J'en ai un bien plus joli dessous!" (277). It takes the poet a few minutes to understand the joke, but he relishes it more and more as he rethinks it. Going beyond notions of surface, the female body, and sexual identity (the marquise is in fact in a lesbian relationship), we can follow the circulation of this joke to better understand the nature of discourse in this particular society. Hupel de la Noue runs into Saccard and a group of other men, to whom he recounts the joke: "La marquise. Imaginez-vous qu'elle vient de me dire...' et il raconta le mot. On le trouva tout à fait réussi. Ces messieurs se le répétèrent. Le digne M. Haffner, qui s'était approché, ne put lui-même s'empêcher d'applaudir" (277). There is another in-joke here, as M. Haffner is the ignorant husband of the marquise's lesbian lover, but notice the circulation of the joke. Zola doesn't repeat it for us, but the men repeat it amongst themselves ("ces messieurs se le répétèrent" [277]) much the same way Hupel de la Noue needed to repeat it to himself in order to appreciate it. The joke circulates in closed circuits, attaining its meaning only through this circulation. Hupel de la Noue continues his rounds of the room, running into M. de Mussy, who must immediately be brought in on the joke:

« Vous ne connaissez pas le mot de la marquise? »

Et il le lui conta, sans attendre la réponse. Il le pénétrait de plus en plus, il le commentait, il finissait par le trouver exquis de naïveté. « J'en ai un bien plus joli dessous! » C'était un cri du cœur. (283)

Much as his “poem” reforms and transforms a premade text into his own, Hupel de la Noue appropriates Mme d’Espanet’s original text by “penetrating” and commenting on it. Indeed, he must include a commentary on the initial speech act (“c’était un cri du cœur”), as if the joke itself was not enough. M de Mussy, recently promoted to a very serious government job, does not find the vulgarity of the joke amusing. The mood turns solemn as Eugène Rougon, the older brother of Aristide and the direct supervisor of Hupel de la Noue, appears in the audience. Nervous, Hupel de la Noue seeks to reassure himself with another commentary on the marquise’s joke.

Il se sentait de plus en plus gêné, lorsqu’il aperçut M De Saffré; il lui prit le bras, s’accrocha à lui comme à une planche de salut. Le jeune homme entraînait, c’était une victime toute fraîche.

– Vous ne connaissez pas le mot de la marquise? lui demanda le préfet.

Mais il était si troublé, qu’il ne savait plus présenter la chose d’une façon piquante. Il patageait.

– Je lui ai dit: “vous avez un charmant costume”; et elle m’a répondu...

– “J’en ai un bien plus joli dessous,” ajouta tranquillement M De Saffré. C’est vieux, mon cher, très vieux.



M Hupel De La Noue le regarda, consterné. Le mot était vieux, et lui qui allait approfondir encore son commentaire sur la naïveté de ce cri du cœur! - Vieux, vieux comme le monde, répétait le secrétaire, Mme d’Espanet l’a déjà dit deux fois aux Tuileries. (287)

While “vieux comme le monde” may be a clichéd expression (itself “vieux comme le monde”), in this context, M De Saffré is, for us, obliquely commenting on the endlessly repetitive and unoriginal nature of language, especially within the closed system of Parisian *haute bourgeois* society. Zola’s masterful interweaving of the poet’s staging of the *Metamorphoses* and his attempted performance of the marquise’s joke shows to what extent all forms of communication are entrapped in endless repetition. Hupel de la Noue’s artistic commentary and lofty appreciation of a vulgar joke borders on parody, but the involvement of the entire social group grounds this detail in the same discursive and performative structures as the Italian *Phèdre* and the *tableaux vivants*.

The nature of the joke itself is, pardon the pun, revealing. We have seen how Zola, in *La Curée*, smothers the sexual act in text. Everything is said, but nothing is told. The marquise’s flirtatious joke hints at the sexual function of the female body without actually denoting it. Indeed, the characterization of the naked female body as a costume or covering may be antithetical, but it once again evokes the notion of performance. The marquise’s body is intended for visual consumption and masquerade – even when it is *itself* covered by a costume. The multiple layers of covering, and their discursive reveal, redefine notions of reading and performance. The private, covered body is made public through joke-telling; however, the joke itself re-covers the body. Much like the mirror

paradigm, this circular logic will evolve in *Nana*, where the main character's naked body is itself a constructed and perfected visual ideal of womanhood. In *La Curée*, however, the female body is both smothered by and exposed through language.

### **“Qui l’avait mise nue?”: Discursive Authority and the Female Body**

The marquise d’Espanet navigates this system quite well; Renée, on the other hand, is less successful. At the ball following the *tableaux* presentation, Renée’s fantasy world finally crumbles as Aristide discovers her *en flagrant délit* with Maxime. Sidonie sees the two slip away privately and alerts her brother while Renée and Maxime argue about his upcoming marriage to Louise de Mareuil. The possibility of Maxime’s abandoning her for a marriage motivated by finance is the last straw for Renée, who finally realizes that she is nothing more than an object, exchanged in the sexual economy that her husband and stepson control and who is easily thrown away at the prospect of a better deal. Her reaction is emotionally and physically violent as she confronts Maxime, whose flippant response elicits a last, desperate attempt to maintain control over herself and her sexual life.

« Eh bien oui, je l’épouse. Après ?... Est-ce que je ne suis pas le maître ? »

Elle vint à lui, la tête un peu baissée, avec un rire mauvais, et lui prenant les poignets :

« Le maître ! toi, le maître !... Tu sais bien que non. C'est moi qui suis le maître. Je te casserais les bras, si j'étais méchante ; tu n'as pas plus de force qu'une fille. »

Et comme il se débattait, elle lui tordit les bras, de toute la violence nerveuse que lui donnait la colère. Il poussa un faible cri. Alors elle lâcha, en reprenant :

« Ne nous battons pas, vois-tu ; je serai la plus forte. » (305)

Renée then threatens to lock Maxime in her apartment and then elope together. She is ready to use every force at her disposal, physical and financial, to have her way, which means agreeing to cede her family property to her husband. She signs the appropriate papers, kisses Maxime to seal her victory, and opens the door to reveal Aristide. He is silently furious, but as he approaches the couple, he notices the signed papers and the “encrier ouvert à la plume encore humide” (308). He smiles, thanks Renée for signing, and agrees to send over her part of the money that night, then leaves amicably with Maxime. In comparison to Renée's menace of physical violence, Aristide's gentle smile and friendly words (he repeats “ma chère amie”) undermine Renée's empty threats.

The violent, jealous reaction that Renée expects, and even desires, is non-existent. The void left by her evaporated “drama” is quickly filled with the sounds of the ball:

Eh quoi! Ils étaient partis tranquillement, amicalement. Ces deux hommes ne s'étaient pas écrasés. Elle prêtait l'oreille, elle écoutait si quelque lutte atroce ne faisait pas rouler les corps le long des marches. Rien. Dans les ténèbres tièdes, rien qu'un bruit de danse, un long bercement. Elle crut

entendre, au loin, les rires de la marquise, la voix claire de M De Saffré. Alors le drame était fini? Son crime, les baisers dans le grand lit gris et rose, les nuits farouches de la serre, tout cet amour maudit qui l'avait brûlée pendant des mois, aboutissait à cette fin plate et ignoble. Son mari savait tout et ne la battait même pas. Et le silence autour d'elle, ce silence où traînait la valse sans fin, l'épouvantait plus que le bruit d'un meurtre.

(309)

Renée has been utterly negated by the newly cemented homosocial relationship between Maxime and Aristide. Indeed, it is her sexual and financial negation that brings them together and solidifies their familial, if not fraternal, bond. In the space where Renée's dream had existed, the narrator establishes both a silence (*rien, silence*) and a cacophony (*un bruit de danse, les rires de la marquise, la voix claire de M De Saffré, la valse sans fin*); that is, Renée is surrounded by verbalizations without meaning, much like the purely musical sounds of the Italian *Phèdre*. It is at this moment that she finally realizes that these two men have reduced her to a commodity and eliminated her subjectivity. For Renée, this is equivalent to being stripped naked. After the two men leave, she stares into another full-length mirror, once again misreading her own image, and repeatedly asks herself "qui l'avait mise nue":

Elle s'aperçut dans la haute glace de l'armoire. Elle s'approcha, étonnée de se voir, oubliant son mari, oubliant Maxime, toute préoccupée par l'étrange femme qu'elle avait devant elle. La folie montait. Ses cheveux

jaunes, relevés sur les tempes et sur la nuque, lui parurent une nudité, une obscénité. (309)

Just as the sounds of the ball read to Renée as a silence, now her hair and costume read as “une nudité, une obscénité.” These antithetical thoughts bring her body and her identity into the void left by her elimination from the incestuous triangle. This time, however, Renée recognizes that her negated body and identity are the result of the overdetermined relationships she maintained with her husband and stepson and the destructive interference that resulted from them. Her dream, the incestuous idyll and even the violent reaction of her offended husband, have been exposed as empty, and consequently, so has her entire social existence. Before this final, revelatory mirror, Renée reflects on her childhood and the events that led to her marriage: the violence that led to her pregnancy and her eventual marriage to Aristide, and its remarkably non-violent non-ending, and finally the “tapage de l’or et de la chair” that has taken over her body and ruined her life (310). Early in the novel, we saw that Renée cannot read her image in the mirror because her identity was externally determined. Now, however, she is *conscious* of this external determination and its disconnect from her inner sense of self. It is this consciousness that leaves her feeling stripped naked. The non-eventful dénouement of the novel tells us that Maxime marries his betrothed Louise, Aristide continues his successful business ventures, and Renée dies quietly of meningitis.<sup>33</sup> Her very ordinary, very un-Zolaesque

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Harrow finds a causal relationship between Renée’s myopia and her migraines, linking her slow physical unraveling to her struggles to see and read. Following this analysis, the meningitis that kills the young woman could be the ultimate form of the neurologic disorder that has distorted her visual processing. Harrow, “Myopia and the Model,” 258.

demise is a necessary consequence of her negation by the powers exerted through the men in her life.

Although published over a decade after *La Curée*, *Au bonheur des dames* can in some ways be seen as a prequel to the imagery and themes of its predecessor. In the latter novel, Octave Mouret, Aristide's nephew, is the highly successful owner and manager of the eponymous department store. Like his uncle, Octave has an uncanny knack for business, and his genius is rooted in the understanding, and manipulation, of the female character: women's tastes, desires, and eventually spending habits are violently exploited. The physical space of the store is, literally, built upon Octave's late wife, who died after falling into the foundations of the building during construction. Much as Aristide plans a violent dismemberment of Paris in a swath of theatricality before the eyes of his stunned and frightened wife, Octave enacts his machinations with performative flair in the quiet but telling scene near the beginning of the novel where he stabs an imaginary woman with his pen in response to his subordinate Bourdoncle's suggestion that his manipulated female clientele might one day take their revenge. Like poor Angèle, Bourdoncle is frightened by his leader's passion and the violence that comes through in the performance of his business plan. Performative elements abound in this scene: Octave's accent is exaggerated, and his every movement suggests meaning: "d'un haussement d'épaules, il parut déclarer que..." (80). The manipulation and exploitation of women is at the heart of *Au bonheur des dames*, both the novel and its titular institution, but it is a subtle, pervasive violence, embodied in Octave's imagined stabbing. What links this scene, and Octave in general, with his uncle Aristide's drama is the stabbing instrument itself: the

pen. Octave symbolically acts out the exploitation in which Aristide participates and which defines the society of *La Curée*: women are defined, commoditized, and controlled through language, from which they cannot escape without sacrificing their sexual identity. The inkwell in Renée's apartment is "encore humide" (308), from the blood-ink of Octave's pen, the phallic instrument of language creation that penetrates her as a *parlêtre* and seals her fate as the mute woman.

In *La Curée*, the violences that shape the new social group of the *haute bourgeoisie* are silent and subtle, but all the more effective for being so. Like the authorship of the *tableaux*, the violence that maintains the structure of this new social economy is dispersed and omnipresent: it enacts itself through the greed of men, both financial (Aristide) and sexual (Maxime). In order for women to succeed in this system, they, like Sidonie, must shed their sexual identity and immerse themselves entirely into the circulation of resources that feeds the economy. Renée, however, is unable to participate in this circulation; she can neither read nor express herself within the new discursive structure of representation, and therefore she loses her footing and is swept away into a meaningless existence, "mise à nue" by the men that take advantage of her. Zola, as a narrative Haussmann, is opening up a new avenue and reorienting the sensorial experience of his Paris. He also sets the scene against which the rest of the *Rougon-Macquart* will play out: he shows in *La Curée* how text can efface a body while representing it, as well as how male authority realigns a discursive framework to the complete disadvantage of female subjectivity. In this early novel, Zola exercises the

narrative and linguistic mastery that will inform the rest of his experimental project as he further investigates the female body and voice in his pseudo-fictional Second Empire.



## Chapter Two:

### **Threatening Femininity: Nana's *autre chose* and the Dis-organ-ization of Paris**

--*You should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so.*

Banquo, *Macbeth*, I.iii.45-47<sup>34</sup>

Banquo, a fellow general that Macbeth will eventually have murdered, speaks this famous line to the three witch sisters as a sly wink to the audience acknowledging the fact that these monstrous women are played by men on stage. But the paradigm that produces it recalls Freud's famous formula, that the first thought we have upon meeting another person is to determine his or her gender from visual cues. Banquo's insult is petty: you are so hideous that you verge on the masculine, and I cannot identify you as feminine. But it is also telling of a trope that remains, veiled, in the Zolian text. As Banquo's discourse questions the femininity of the sisters, Zola's discourse puts into question his heroine Nana's femininity, even as she seduces all of Paris with her overpowering female sexuality. Even nude, Nana is always veiled by her hair, by a shadow, or by the text itself. So how do we know that she is a woman? More importantly, how is the paradigm of visual gender markers problematized by Nana's body itself? Finally, in keeping with the Shakespearean model, what role does the theatrical frame play in this paradigm?

To answer these questions, we must investigate how Nana's physiology, as well as the way others read it, offers a new perspective on her sexual identity and its effect on

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<sup>34</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1997).

the society that produces her. The journalist Fauchery claims, within the narrative, that Nana “désorganisa[it] Paris entre ses cuisses de neige.”<sup>35</sup> The verb *désorganiser* is telling, as Nana slowly undoes the categories that structure Second Empire society (class, gender) with her redefinition of the sexual organ (*dés-organ-iser*), and its value within the sexual economy. Nana’s gender is not defined by a lack of a phallus, but rather by a presence, and a threatening one at that. The discursive structure of invagination, as observed in literary texts by Jacques Derrida, appears throughout the novel in various manifestations, destabilizing the dichotomy of male/present/external and woman/absent/internal. What would be the reassuring signs of Nana’s difference are systematically undone by a web of contradictions, leaving the reader with an ensemble of doubts as to the very nature of femininity, or what Dorothy Kelly has termed an “aporia of gender.”<sup>36</sup> *Nana* is Zola’s investigation into the construction of sexual difference and its ambiguous definition; his findings are remarkable in their implied revalorization of the primacy of the female body, but his attitude toward the sexual woman remains cautious at best, as Nana’s dangerous sexuality ruins entire families.

Naomi Schor brilliantly condensed the complexities of Zola’s naturalist project down to two major axes: an anxiety of difference and an anxiety of origin.<sup>37</sup> In this chapter, I structure my analysis along these two axes, integrating Nana’s problematic maternity (origin) and her questionable sexual identity (difference) into my reading of

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<sup>35</sup> Émile Zola, *Nana* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005): 224. Going forward, in this chapter, page numbers in parentheses refer to this edition.

<sup>36</sup> Dorothy Kelly, *Fictional Genders: Role and Representation in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989): 1.

<sup>37</sup> Schor, *Zola’s Crowds*, xi.

several scenes. Reading *Nana* as an examination and an expression of these two anxieties proves extremely useful in understanding the title character's highly dissonant physiology and its textual manifestations. Dis-organ-ization implies disruption along both of these axes: a questioning of phallic differential structures (difference) and a betrayal of the female maternal function (origin). It is this anxiety that Zola seems bent on exploring in *Nana*, and what he discovers is a much less stable system of representation than we might anticipate. *Nana*'s threat is as discursive as it is physical, financial, or material.

#### **“Maintenant, c'est signé” : Discursive Undoing of Difference**

From the scandalous first chapter of *Nana*, Zola pulls no punches. His display of one woman's seductive power over an entire city (and by extension, an entire generation of France) is alarming in its assertive sexuality, filthiness, and ultimate hopelessness. But this “poème des désirs du mâle”<sup>38</sup> is subversive in its system of representation more so than its subject matter. It is in this first chapter that we learn of the “little” nothing that defines at first *Nana*'s theatrical career, and eventually her life: “*Nana a autre chose, parbleu! et quelque chose qui remplace tout. [...] Oui, elle ira loin*” says Bordenave, the director of the Théâtre de Variétés, before *Nana*'s unforgettable début (25). The “autre chose” is our first introduction to *Nana*'s elusive sex, constantly sought but never revealed in the novel, even when she is completely nude. What is remarkable about Bordenave's choice of words here is that the “autre chose,” which can be described only elliptically, is something that *Nana has*—as opposed to the notion of a feminine sexual

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<sup>38</sup> This is how Zola described the novel in his preliminary notes. See the preparatory documents for *Nana*, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Ms, NAF 10313, f° 208.

identity defined by a *lack*. The rest of the novel unfolds as an attempt to see, represent, and control this *autre chose* and its threateningly contradictory nature.

Nana's nearly-nude performances, adorned with her smile of the "mangeuse d'hommes" (47) are enchanting for the male characters within the novel, but it is their interaction with her body at other, less stylized moments that contribute to the unraveling of the difference that a male discourse would impose upon her. In the fourth chapter, the feminine mold begins to crack, and the penetrating nature of Nana's sexuality claims its first victim. Though she may appear, from certain angles, to play out traditional sex roles, closer examination reveals a much more complicated script that in fact obscures the lines along which sexual difference can be denoted. Critics such as Peter Brooks have long asserted that Nana's femininity is troubling because her sex is "unknowable and unrepresentable."<sup>39</sup> Seemingly playing along with both these assertions and the male fantasy that created her, however, Nana asserts her femininity in unprecedented fashion.

Bored and tipsy at her own dinner party, annoyed by her amorous target Muffat's lack of response to her advances, Nana makes do with the fat banker Steiner, her neighbor at the dinner table. Her coiffure is coming undone, and the flowers of her corsage are losing their petals ("[I]es roses de son chignon et de son corsage s'étaient effeuillées; il ne restait que les queues" [135]). Steiner, who has been groping underneath Nana's skirts, suddenly pulls back his hand after pricking a finger on a pin that had been placed in the fabric while she was getting dressed. Blood drips down, staining Nana's white dress. "Maintenant, c'est signé," says Nana (135). But what, exactly, is *signé*? In

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<sup>39</sup> Brooks, "Storied Bodies," 19.

both senses of the word (*represented* and *written*), Nana's meaning is vague. Ostensibly, she is referring to an imaginary amorous/economic contract with the banker, but the meaning of this sign and the discourse defining it is polyvalent. There is no preceding dialogue that clarifies the identity of the thing signified by *ce*, nor what *ce* has *signé*, further convoluting the sign.

The staining of the white dress by the woman's blood, especially after the intrusion of a man, certainly evokes the loss of virginity and the signing of the economic and sexual contract of marriage. However, it is remarkably Steiner's blood, not Nana's, that is drawn. Although this is the first in a long series of examples demonstrating the poisonous nature of Nana's sex, specifically in its capacity for menstruation, the allusion to the bleeding female sex is simply that—an allusion. The fact that a woman's sex is apparently causing a man's finger, a decidedly phallic instrument, to bleed is a remarkable role reversal. What is *signé*, then, is Nana's supposedly unrepresentable sex. It is written on Steiner's phallic, but impotent, hand, which then passively writes on the skirt of Nana's dress. The fantasy of male penetration is violently imploded to one of female penetration. Much like the flowers of her *parure* that have lost their (feminine) petals, revealing stark (phallic) stems, the true power of Nana's sex is more phallic than vaginal, more penetrating than penetrable. Not only can it reverse physiological sex roles, but it can also unravel the very structure of the signs that represent these roles.

Here we have an example of Nana's power of Derridean invagination, this time in reverse: Steiner's hand in Nana's skirt plays out the typical structure of sexual relations, but the pin's prick reverses that dynamic when the internal and penetrable (skirt, vagina,

female) assumes an external form and function (pin, prick, penis), penetrating the penetrator. Again, what is *signé* is that which is doing the signing: Nana's feminine yet phallic function, displaced first to the pin, then the finger, then the dress. One could argue that the pin that pricks was put in place by her youngest admirer Georges, and therefore retains its phallic meaning, making Steiner's injury one of homosocial connection and rivalry. However, in this scenario, the woman is neither excluded nor victimized by the homosocial relationship. Nana's discourse still controls and reframes the scene, maintaining her dominance of the entire structure, especially given the amorous cliché that the scene acts out on a superficial level.

One might further argue that the pins play into a more traditional system of sexual representation as they were in fact placed there by men. Georges Hugon and Paul Daguene, two of Nana's lovers, are observing her toilette (a scene that plays itself out repeatedly over the course of the novel) when she tears her dress and has a fit over it. A flurry of activity follows, as Nana tries on other dresses but furiously goes back to the original. The two men scramble on their knees to replace the "déchirure" (104) with pins while Zoé, her loyal servant, fixes Nana's hair. Besides demonstrating Nana's childish and petulant nature, the scene thematizes the repaired rip, a sartorial avatar of the fetishization of the female genitalia. Viewed from this angle, Steiner's injury is evidence of the danger not only of Nana and her sex, but also of the attempt to cover, or in Freudian terms, fetishize, woman's lack of a penis. We can read the pin and the rip as symbols of a fetish object and female genitalia, respectively, transferred to the sartorial domain. When the pin, whose function would be to reassure man that woman is not

castrated, becomes the penetrative and potentially castrating instrument, the fetish function backlashes violently. What is *signé*, then, is the assertive defetishization of Nana's body by her own sexuality: she refuses to play into a paradigm that reassures a male sexual privilege. Therese Dolan, in her study of clothing (or lack thereof) in *Nana*, aligns the multiple scenes of mending Nana's wardrobe with those of her makeup routine, referencing the constant need to cover up her "true" form with the tricks of the (oldest) profession, presenting an artificial cover for the threat of her poisonous sex.<sup>40</sup> Nana's comment, "maintenant, c'est signé", is the ultimate cover, glossing over the subversive danger of her assertive femininity with a cliché that would play directly into the hands of male sexual dominance and, more importantly, sexual difference. With this brief remark, Nana realigns the entire scene to one of masculine penetration and feminine passivity, until a closer reading unravels the many layers of this cover-up.

As Rachel Mesch brilliantly illustrates, Nana's power is indeed at least partly discursive.<sup>41</sup> She exacts her revenge on upper class men by subverting the masculine discourse that would aim to define and control her. Indeed, Nana is a discursive force in the novel even before her first appearance. Her name alone has immediate and profound power over all of Parisian society:

Devant eux, une queue s'écrasait au contrôle, un tapage de voix montait, dans lequel le nom de Nana sonnait avec la vivacité chantante de ses deux syllabes. Les hommes qui se plantaient devant les affiches, l'épelaient à

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<sup>40</sup> Therese Dolan, "Guise and Dolls: Dis/covering Power, Re/covering Nana," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 26, no. 3-4 (Spring/Summer 1998): 368-386.

<sup>41</sup> Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge*.

voix haute ; d'autres le jetaient en passant, sur un ton d'interrogation ; tandis que les femmes, inquiètes et souriantes, le répétaient doucement, d'un air de surprise. Personne ne connaissait Nana. D'où Nana tombait-elle ? Et des histoires couraient, des plaisanteries chuchotées d'oreille à oreille. C'était une caresse que ce nom, un petit nom dont la familiarité allait à toutes les bouches. Rien qu'à le prononcer ainsi, la foule s'égayait et devenait bon enfant. Une fièvre de curiosité poussait le monde, cette curiosité de Paris qui a la violence d'un accès de folie chaude. On voulait voir Nana. Une dame eut le volant de sa robe arraché, un monsieur perdit son chapeau. (26-27)

In the first few pages of the novel, Nana is already a discursive force. Her name is mystifying and mesmerizing, even physical (“une caresse”). The marriage of love and violence is equally present, as men “throw” (“jetaient”) her lovely name about, and people’s clothes are ripped apart (even off) by the excited crowd. Like her *autre chose*, the unnamable quality that defines her essence, Nana’s name is a miniscule thing with an inordinate amount of force. From “un petit nom”, “une caresse”, two meager syllables, all of Paris undergoes “une fièvre”, becoming “la violence d’un accès de folie chaude,” most remarkably signified by the tearing (off) of clothes. The power of an almost-nothing over an entire crowd is of course a linguistic/onomastic version of the power of Nana’s sex, a meager nothing that inspires a disproportionate amount of desire and even violence. This phenomenon inserts itself into Janet Beizer’s study of the textual and the sexual in *Ventriloquized Bodies*, where she reads Nana’s body as text, and even as the universal



signifier within the novel.<sup>42</sup> Nana is *Nana* and vice versa: the discursive and the physical overdetermine each other to the point where the signifier-signified relationship becomes unstable. Nana here is of course synthesized with *Nana*, first released as a serialized novel in *Le Voltaire*. Zola depicts the curiosity of Nana's Paris for her person, and of *Nana's* Paris for her story. The distance between the Nana of the text and that of the metatext is collapsed, destabilizing the sign and putting into question Nana's representability altogether.<sup>43</sup>

In order to appreciate the full extent of this synecdoche, we must remember that Nana is not even the full name of the character. Anna Coupeau, daughter of Gervaise Macquart and her ill-fated first husband Coupeau, appears in *L'Assommoir*, first published in 1877. The name "Nana" is almost a fetishization of the true name, unrepresentable because of the name Coupeau, a blend of *couteau* (knife) and *couper* (cut) in French, a threateningly castrating blend. Nana's true name, in fact, never appears in the text of *Nana*, even though many allusions are made to her childhood and to *L'Assommoir* itself. Perhaps Zola, implicated in the male discourse that produces her, cannot bring himself to enounce her castrating threat, but only refer to it allusively.

The *tare héréditaire* that Nana carries is therefore predominately discursive: she inherits her father's name, the signifier of the feminine threat to men. In the same way that he attempts to veil and fetishize her sex, which is never fully revealed, Zola never

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<sup>42</sup> Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>43</sup> Zola's gift for marketing his own novels through scandal was already well practiced by the time *Nana* first appeared serially in 1879. See Chapter Four for a discussion of Zola's marketing techniques for *Thérèse Raquin* and their narrative implications.

makes her surname explicit in her own novel. We can know it only through allusion and displacement—much as we can know her sex. Nana’s own reframing of the pin prick episode shows to what extent her discursive power extends into the narrative itself. Her subversion of the (male) discourse is the extension of her (female) agency, signed by the active and phallic role played by her sex. Not only does her physiology seem to exist outside the realm of sexual difference, but she also threatens to undo the very notions of difference that define and even create her.

### ***Des menstrues monstrueuses: The Violence of Female Physiology***

Nana’s own discourse, on one level, treats the pin prick scene as one of a loss of virginity. The novel is indeed rife with images of the bleeding female sex, evoking menstruation, loss of virginity, and even miscarriage. Naomi Schor reminds us that Zola was imbued with the ideology of the historian Jules Michelet, who famously linked all aspects of femininity (in all its impurity) to menstruation, an “irruption of difference, [a] bloody reminder of castration.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, Charles Bernheimer contends that it was Michelet’s theories that “influenced Zola more than any other.”<sup>45</sup> The bleeding vagina was indicative of a healthy reproductive system, the hallmark of womanhood. However, in *Nana*, menstruation is closely associated with the state of not being pregnant, and by extension, by non-procreative sex and especially a female sexuality that overwhelms the physiological functioning of maternity.

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<sup>44</sup> Schor, *Breaking The Chain*, 31.

<sup>45</sup> Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, 202.

Nana is, however, biologically a mother. Her son Louiset was born *de père inconnu* when she was only sixteen. Sickly, silent, and most of the time absent, he is very literally the product of an unhealthy womb. The issue of Nana's maternity has been treated at length, most notably by Pascale Krumm,<sup>46</sup> but it is Holly Woodsen Waddell who remarks on the horror that stems from a non-procreative sexuality expressed both in *Nana* and in Gustave Courbet's painting *L'Origine du monde*: by featuring the female organ, these works "trouble the boundaries between maternity and sexuality, which have carefully been separated in Western theology."<sup>47</sup> Young Georges Hugon, interestingly enough, is the only character within the novel to remark on this trouble. At Nana's dinner party, Gaga, one of the women of Nana's social circle, is discussing her options for marrying off her daughter Lili when "Georges, de plus en plus étonné, demanda à Dagueuet si toutes ces dames avaient comme ça des enfants" (115). For Georges, the *demi-monde* is not all it's cracked up to be in the theater. He "les trouvait 'popote', il avait cru qu'on allait s'embrasser tout de suite" (113). But it is certainly the fact that the women have children that stuns him. Shockingly, the courtesan's body is capable of maternity and not exclusively sexuality. Nana herself shares this perspective in a telling moment of free indirect discourse, childishly surprised at her own pregnancy later in the novel.

Cela lui semblait un accident ridicule, quelque chose qui la diminuait et dont on l'aurait plaisantée. Hein? la mauvaise blague! pas de veine,

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<sup>46</sup> Pascale Krumm, "Nana maternelle: oxymore?" *The French Review* 69, no. 2 (Dec., 1995): 217-228.

<sup>47</sup> Holly Woodson Waddell, "Et elle tomba en vierge: Venus and the Modern Mother in Zola's *Nana*," *Excavatio* 15, nos. 3-4 (2001): 86.

vraiment! Il fallait qu'elle fût pincée, quand elle croyait que c'était fini. Et elle avait une continuelle surprise, 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? La nature l'exaspérait, cette maternité grave qui se levait dans son plaisir, cette vie donnée au milieu de toutes les morts qu'elle semait autour d'elle. Est-ce qu'on n'aurait pas dû disposer de soi à sa fantaisie, sans tant d'histoires? Ainsi, d'où tombait-il, ce mioche? (389)

Her own child, “cette vie donnée,” to her is little more than an annoyance, an “accident ridicule”, even a bad joke. She feels disconnected from her own body (“dérangée dans son sexe”) and refers to it simply as *ça*: “ça faisait donc des enfants, même lorsqu'on ne voulait plus et qu'on employait ça à d'autres affaires?” Nana distances her *self* from her *sex*, which to her is simply a tool that she uses for “other things.” The functioning of maternity is relegated entirely to a mysterious, autonomous process (“ça faisait donc des enfants”) which Nana herself admits is part of nature (“la nature l'exaspérait”), but which interferes with the social functioning of her femininity. The anxiety of origin (“d'où tombait-il?”) is dismissed as an annoyance until her near-fatal miscarriage, when the men who come to wish her well simultaneously gather to attempt to dispel the anxiety of the potential paternity. This passage also foreshadows the “mare de sang” in which Zoé will soon find her unconscious madame: “la maternité grave”, “cette vie donnée au milieu des morts”, “c'était fini.” In a rather tragic fashion, Zola here reinforces his insistence on hereditary genetics: both Nana and her unborn child seem to have come out of nowhere.

Nana's "d'où tombait-il?" responds to the "d'où Nana tombait-elle?" (26) of the novel's opening pages in a resonance that subtly, but tragically, links mother to child through a (contradictorily) shared anxiety of origin. Again, as readers of Zola, we are aware both of Nana's paternal and her literary origin, and so the narrator's question "d'où Nana tombait-elle?" takes on a metaphysical meaning, invoking the anxiety of origin induced by female sexuality.

And yet, Nana's maternity remains, as Krumm and Waddell note, problematic. Despite her seemingly infinite number of sexual encounters, Nana's only experiences of physical maternity are the sickly Louiset and her serious miscarriage. She does, however, accumulate what Waddell calls "oedipal" sons, such as the young Georges who, despite being only a year or two younger than she, relishes the familial sexuality of their relationship.<sup>48</sup> These "play" children are more than just an element of Nana's supposed depravity: they are also indicative of the problematic blurring of the sexual/maternal distinction. Nana's first intimate moments with Georges almost immediately follow her claims that he is too young for such things, and that she will remain his "maman" (189), while Georges' true "maman" will later see her son fatally wounded at the feet of his strangely maternal lover.

Nana's miscarriage is a disturbingly painful scene, uncomfortable even for seasoned readers of Zola. Zoé finds her passed out on the floor of her *cabinet*, "dans une mare de sang, comme si on l'avait assassinée..." (369). The fact that Nana cannot conceive a healthy child is not hard to believe, given Zola's diagnosis of a

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

“détraquement” of her sex, but that such a condition would put the young woman’s life in jeopardy is unexpected. Otherwise plump, healthy, and *bonne fille*, Nana’s health is put in danger only when maternity is a possibility.<sup>49</sup> The pool of blood in which Nana lies is the apex of the series of vaginal bleeding that punctuates the novel, and this time it is at its most poisonous, affecting Nana herself. Zoé’s reading of the sight as a murder resonates with the depiction of Nana’s physiology as threateningly violent, especially when the narrative attempts to confine it to a maternal function.

The image of Nana’s monstrous menstruation recurs throughout the novel, through various perspectives. After her failed attempt at domestic life with the actor Fontan, she and Muffat meet at the theater, in another actress’s dressing room, to reconcile. The room is filthy, “très sale, avec une débandade de pot ébréchés, une toilette grasse, une chaise tachée de rouge, comme si on avait saigné sur la paille” (297). It is the decorative equivalent of the female body. Nana herself sits on the stained chair, scratching at the seat “qui saignait sous elle” (299). Her femininity overcomes Muffat who falls at her feet, “les jambes coupées” (299). Nana’s menstruation is the signifier of her lack of maternity: she bleeds because she is fertile but unproductive. She is the very definition of a prostitute: a woman who privileges sexuality over maternity when it comes to the economy of her body. The space of the theater is a privileged one when it comes this feminine identity: it is here that Nana, as a phenomenon, is born, and also where the intimate relationship between sexuality and performance is readable (see

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<sup>49</sup> Louiset, it should be noted, is almost a narrative excuse for Nana’s sickly heredity and maternal frivolity to be on display, and not really an example of a true familial relation. We cannot effectively cite him as evidence of the proper procreative functioning of Nana’s body.

Bordenave's repeated insistence on terming his theater "un bordel" in the first chapter). Muffat's "jambes coupées" are the sign of submission to the dominant female, even of his castration.

Interestingly enough, the red chair motif also appears in the Muffat salon, the aristocratic foil to Nana's consistently disorganized surroundings. The parallel between Sabine, Muffat's wife, and Nana is made explicit by Zola through the *signe* (birthmark) that they share. Fauchery first notices it in Sabine's salon: "Mais un signe qu'il aperçut à la joue gauche de la comtesse, près de la bouche, le surprit. Nana avait le même, absolument" (85). Fauchery, the character most often charged with a narrative burden in the text, and also the one most closely related to Zola (he is a journalist), is appropriately the one to read Sabine's *signe*. He will also read Nana's *signe* and translate it as *La mouche d'or*, his Zola-esque allegorical newspaper article describing a certain courtesan's ascent from the *peuple* to the head of Second Empire society. Reading Sabine is tougher than it seems: the men discuss her lack of a (known) sex life, and bet on the shape of her (hidden) thighs. Only Fauchery seems perspicacious enough to recognize the semiotics of the female body displayed by each woman. Each *signe* is described as a small mole on the left cheek with a few hairs curling out – a facial displacement of the female sex and pubic hair. Fauchery, even through his quick denial, associates this hair with the woman's sexuality, implicating Sabine's eventual participation in the sexual economy of Paris under the Second Empire: "N'importe, cette femme ne couchait avec personne" (85).

Other details of Sabine's true nature catch Fauchery's eye, all reducing her existence to her femininity. Like a gentrified version of Nana's bloody straw chair, the chair on which Sabine sits is bright red, the only colorful piece of furniture in the Muffat household, "et qui jurait" (79). The chair's profanity is appropriately linguistic, as it signifies the menses that define the Zolian feminine life. The choice of the verb *jur*er also alludes to a clash with the Catholic dogma that envelops both Muffat and his household, and against which feminine sexuality will slowly drive him. In a somewhat gruesome (but typically Zolian) detail, the red chair (and Sabine) sit across from their counterpart, the chair in which the count's mother died. This face-off between the dead mother and the living, sexual daughter-in-law plays itself out silently and decoratively. Sabine's femininity, represented by the red chair and the menstruation it suggests, asserts itself in the face of death and in the face of the past. She is a mother, and a sexual one, breaking the same barriers that Nana herself cannot overcome without great difficulty and at her own peril. Perhaps the true threat to male Parisian high society comes not from Nana, but from Sabine.

Fauchery's final reading of Sabine's femininity is auditory. Sabine breaks the aristocratic silence of her own salon with contagious Nana-esque laughter:

Elle se mit à rire, tout en refusant de parler. Sabine, gagnée par cette gaieté, porta son mouchoir à ses lèvres. Et ces rires, dans la solennité de la vaste pièce, prenaient un son dont Fauchery resta frappé; ils sonnaient le cristal qui se brise. Certainement, il y avait là un commencement de fêlure.

(91)



As Rachel Mesch has suggested, the trope of the *fêlure* in Zola refers not only the *tare héréditaire* that permeates the familial universe of his characters but also the physical female genitalia.<sup>50</sup> Sabine's screeching laugh conveys these two meanings, related to Nana and all women through the shared *fêlure*, but extends to a third: that of destruction. The "cristal qui se brise" foreshadows Nana's childlike fascination with shattering the delicate and expensive gifts she receives from her many suitors and the eventual disorder that Sabine's affair with Fauchery will bring about in the Muffat household. The emphasis on Sabine's mouth, contradictorily signaled by the handkerchief she uses to hide her lips, also relates to Nana's mouth, forever open in laughter. Both women will later be defined by their consumption of men, money, and property, and the open laugh foreshadows this. The lips of the mouth, of course, are also a displacement of the female sex, the *fêlure* which Sabine is only coyly covering here, much in the way Nana seductively covers and reveals her flesh.

The many instances of menstrual references in *Nana* thus punctuate the text with reminders of physical femininity and all its stakes. It also serves to unify the two main feminine characters in the novel, even if we never hear Sabine speak or know the details of her affairs. Questions of sexuality and maternity haunt not only masculine-feminine notions of difference but also distinctions among the classes, as shown by Nana's *signe* chez Sabine. The feminine threat to masculine authority comes from her capacity to bear children – or her choice not to. By ignoring or abandoning their motherly duties and their fertility altogether, Zolian women can remove themselves from the (particularly upper

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<sup>50</sup> Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge*, 29.

class) economy of family and embrace a transgressive sexuality. Menstruation, unlike pregnancy, does not require a male contribution, and thus threatens masculine dominance over the sexual economy. Nana in particular imposes an image of menstruation even over one of male sexuality (Steiner's bloodstain), privileging feminine agency and physiology. Even at Nana's own peril, the bleeding female organ imposes its presence.

### **From *Mélusine* to *Méduse*: Goddesses and Monsters**

It is easy to identify Nana with Mélusine, her final theatrical role at the Variétés. This mythical fairy holds a special place in a uniquely French mythology, as the founder of the Lusignan family (mère-Lusignan is reportedly the source of her name). In a fourteenth-century narrative by Jean d'Arras, Mélusine is the wife of the mortal Raymondin, and the mother of their ten sons. She is, as Jonathan Krell remarks, "an ideal mother, fertile and loving."<sup>51</sup> However, her children are deformed and sickly, and she maintains one strange rule with her husband: he must never look upon her while she bathes on a Saturday. After many years of a happy marriage, Raymondin breaks Mélusine's commandment and spies on her in her bath. He is horrified to see her true form: "Down to her navel, she looked like a woman, and she was combing her hair; from her navel down, she had an enormous serpent's tail."<sup>52</sup> Though horrified by this vision, he remains loyal and loving, that is until one of their sons commits arson and murder. It is only once he sees her vile "true" nature present in their children that Raymondin

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<sup>51</sup> Jonathan F Krell, "Between Demon and Divinity: Mélusine Revisited," *Mythosphere* 2, no. 4 (2000): 377.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

denounces his wife, and Mélusine flees the castle, fully transformed into her true serpentine form.

Mélusine's double image is remarkable in its masculine/feminine split. Her human half "looks like a woman," reinforced by the combing of her hair. Her lower half is pure masculinity: the phallic serpent's tail. This antithetical mix of masculine and feminine signifiers obviously begs the question: what *is* Mélusine? She *looks* like a woman, she *has* a tail, but her essence escapes description; she seems the only being whose essence *is* difference. She retains feminine pronouns only because she *appears* feminine by marrying and producing children. Her maternity defines her not only as female but also as human. This is why Raymondin, shocked at the spectacle, doesn't repudiate Mélusine – until her tenth son becomes a criminal. The child's act defines the mother's essence, and it is only then that Raymondin rejects his wife, who is now visually all monster.

Nana's association with Mélusine goes beyond her brief theatrical role. Jonathan Krell, in his excellent history of the figure of Mélusine in the French canon, highlights Nana as an embodiment of the dark side of the fairy, recalling her early-Christian roots as seductive and dangerous demon, leading men of God into evil, much like the serpent of Genesis. Jean d'Arras presents a much more innocent woman, an unwilling victim of a hideous curse. But Zola, according to Krell, has "resatanized" Mélusine in the person of Nana.<sup>53</sup> She is once again the vain and lusty seductress who brings about man's downfall: Eve and the Serpent rolled into one.

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<sup>53</sup> Krell, "Between Demon and Divinity," 381.

But Krell fails to remark on any further reflections of Mélusine in Nana's character, especially the heart of Mélusine's story: her husband's violation of her commandment never to look upon her bath on Saturday. Nana's nudity isn't exactly forbidden to anyone, certainly not to any man, and her beauty is universally recognized. And yet, a central element of Zolian criticism is that Nana's sex is never fully visible.<sup>54</sup> Her "true form," that which would define her sexual identity, remains hidden, continually veiled by her hair, a bit of gauze, or the shadow of her own flesh. Her serpent's tail *is* her femininity, her supposed lack of a penis that remains hidden even when she is fully nude. It is only in very select circumstances that one can witness this monstrous, unnatural part of Nana's body.

Three scenes in the novel play out the thematics of the Mélusine myth, all three involving the count Muffat. The most obvious is near the end of the text, when Nana simply appears in the mute role of the fairy on stage, posing nearly-nude in an artificial grotto while Muffat and the rest of Paris look on. The most remarkable instance, however, is in the seventh chapter, when Nana admires her form in a full-length mirror while her lover reads Fauchery's essay, *La Mouche d'or*. Dropping the newspaper and focusing on the forms of Nana's body, Muffat begins to see her "true form":

Nana était toute velue, 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

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<sup>54</sup> See Brooks, "Storied Bodies;" Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*; Schor, *Breaking the Chain*; and Janet Beizer, "Uncovering *Nana*: The Courtesan's New Clothes," *L'Esprit Créateur* 25, no. 2 (Summer 1985): 45-56.

de leur ombre, il y avait de la bête. C'était la bête d'or, inconsciente comme une force, et dont l'odeur seule 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. (226)

While the visible horror of Mélusine's nudity is limited to her lower half, Nana's sex is her entire body, her self. It penetrates the count's eyes and flesh. Muffat recognizes the serpent in Nana's form: "Il songeait à son ancienne horreur de la femme, au monstre de l'Écriture, lubrique, sentant le fauve" (226). One thinks, of course, of Eve and the Serpent, the two responsible for the Fall, and Muffat reverts almost instantaneously to his religious formation, synthesizing the two figures in his characterization of woman as the "monstre de l'Écriture" (226). This is the "resatanized" Mélusine to which Krell refers, not only a dark monstrous figure, but a penetrating one, as Muffat senses Nana's femininity "dans sa chair."

Much like Raymondin, Muffat's horror at this vision doesn't drive him away from the monstrous woman. In the Mélusine myth, the man keeps his secret and continues to love his wife until the criminal actions of their child. It is only then that Raymondin confesses to spying on his wife, causing Mélusine to assume her fully demonic form and fly away. Muffat, of course, also stays with Nana, despite his profound repulsion and anger toward her and the demonic woman he sees. It is only when he catches Nana and his father-in-law, the debaucherous marquis de Chouard, in bed together that he finally

and fully renounces her. Furthermore, Georges' suicide attempt occurs only after he learns of Nana's relationship with his brother, Philippe: "ça lui semblait une inceste" (419). It is only when the woman betrays the traditional familial law and the role it ascribes to her that these men fully demonize her, even after relishing the dangerous, forbidden excitement of a sexual relationship with her.

Even before this oft-cited episode, Muffat and Nana act out the Mélusine fantasy in the Théâtre de Variétés, the nexus of all mythological allusions in the text. The count is visiting the wings of the theater, fascinated by the artifice of it all. However, when Nana struts onto stage for her famous nude scene, Muffat insists on watching the performance, even from the wings.

Alors, Muffat voulut voir; il applique l'œil à un trou. Au-delà de l'arc de cercle éblouissant de la rampe, la salle paraissait sombre, comme emplie d'une fumée rousse; et, sur ce fond neutre, où les rangées de visages mettaient une pâleur brouillée, Nana se détachait en blanc, grandie, bouchant les loges, du balcon au cintre. Il l'apercevait de dos, les reins tendus, les bras ouverts; tandis que, par terre, au ras de ses pieds, la tête du souffleur, une tête de vieil homme, était posée comme coupée. [...] Quand elle eut poussé la dernière note au milieu d'une tempête de bravos, elle salua, les gazes volantes, sa chevelure touchant ses reins, dans le raccourci de l'échine. Et, en la voyant ainsi, pliée et les hanches élargies, venir à reculons vers le trou par lequel il la regardait, le comte se releva, très pâle. (167)

Zola's bleak prose here depicts Muffat's brusque desire to see and his spying as impulsive, nearly instinctive. Nana's (near-)nudity is not new to him, but it had previously been performed for a public audience. This vision is private, secret, and quite literally opposite. From this new perspective, she is no longer an element of a performative paradigm; there is no audience, because Nana, "grandie", blocks them. It is as if Muffat is indeed spying on Mélusine alone in her bath. Even the atmosphere recalls that of a bath: "une fumée rousse" and "une pâleur brouillée" humidify the air, slowly filling the space with the liquidity that Zola so often associates with femininity.<sup>55</sup> The fact that Muffat sees Nana from behind is insisted on almost incessantly by the narrative voice, but in a way that frames the image entirely with body parts: *reins, hanches, bras, échine, chevelure*, and even the decapitated *tête* of the line-giver, are the points of reference of Muffat's view. This performance is firmly inscribed in the physical, composed of multiple and various body parts in a Frankensteinian representation of a representation. The head of the line-giver, representative of the discourse imposed upon Nana and all the characters in the theatrical space, is here separated from his body, an uncanny metaphorical decapitation/castration brought about by Nana's assertive presence.

A necessary implication of Muffat's perspective here is that Nana's sex is technically not visible to him; however, the Zolian *trou* is still incessantly present, as is the essence of feminine sexuality. Moving from the audience to the *coulisses*, from public

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<sup>55</sup> Dorothy Kelly explores this association more profoundly in "Assigning Blame;" one of the key exemplary scenes involves Nana's presence at her father's tragic fall that leads to the undoing of her entire family in *L'Assommoir*. See: Dorothy Kelly, "Assigning Blame: Female Sexuality, Guilt, and Violence in *L'Assommoir*," *Excavatio* 2 (Fall 1993): 67-71.

performance to private espionage, Muffat moves from the vaginal to the anal. He sees underneath the pretty covering of Mélusine's human impression to discover the true nature of femininity in the Zolian universe: filth, covered by a theatrical artifice. It is only after this vision that Muffat truly sees the backside of the scenery. After being seduced by the artifice of Nana's makeup routine in her dressing room, he is disgusted and haunted by the revelation of what exists underneath it. When he isn't mesmerized and petrified by Nana's sex, he is repulsed by the sight of her body *without* her sex. After his troubling vision of Nana's backside, Fauchery leads Muffat through the endless dark circles of the backstage, in what is easily interpreted as a descent into Hell, despite the upward climb. Each of his senses is simultaneously stimulated and revolted. He sees the stairway is "badigeonné de jaune," he feels "un souffle ardent lui tomber sur la nuque," and smells an "odeur de femme," all the while hearing Nana sing on stage (168). He becomes increasingly drunken with disgust as he experiences this dirty, feminine space. Zola isn't shy here: one room is "noircie par la crasse des peignes," one of the ingénues spills dirty water all over the floor, Muffat detects "des coins de nudité", bits and pieces of female bodies everywhere he looks (169). Finally, at the apex of this ascent, he reaches the ultimate *saleté*:

Au troisième étage, Muffat s'abandonna à la griserie qui l'envahissait. La loge des figurantes était là; vingt femme entassées [...] Et il montait au dernier étage, lorsqu'il eut la curiosité de hasarder encore un regard, par un judas resté ouvert: la pièce était vide, il n'y avait, sous le flamboiement du gaz, qu'un pot de chambre oublié au milieu d'un désordre de jupes



traînant par terre. Cette pièce fut la dernière vision qu'il emporta. [...] 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. (169-170)

Once again, the female sex assumes a liquid state, as Muffat drinks it in; this image resonates with the liquidity, and certainly the bodily fluids, that signify feminine sexuality in the Zolian text. Muffat is indeed penetrated and invaded by “le sexe de la femme,” emanating from an abandoned chamber pot. Female sexuality is thus signified by excrement, a mass of skirts, and a pile of female bodies stuffed in a room – hardly the majesty associated with Nana’s figure. This is the underside of the veil, the one that will expose itself on Nana’s decomposed face at the end of the novel. As Charles Bernheimer notes, the description of Nana’s smallpox-ravaged visage is “largely excremental.”<sup>56</sup> The filth of the theater is the mirrored version of the monstrosity of the female nude. Even while playing Venus, Nana is as monstrous as Mélusine nude, a vision Muffat cannot see until he peeks behind the curtain.

While never explicitly mentioned, Nana’s association with Medusa is repeatedly alluded to.<sup>57</sup> In French, Mélusine and Méduse are onomastically, if not etymologically, closely related, and both of their stories are defined by the thematics of looking. According to Ovid, Medusa is one of the Gorgon sisters, once a lovely maiden, but cursed by Athena with hideous looks crowned by a head of serpents after being raped by

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<sup>56</sup> Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, 224.

<sup>57</sup> Perhaps Zola’s reluctance to even mention the name *Méduse* is indicative of his own (male) anxiety about Nana’s petrifying powers, much as his reluctance to mention her surname.

Poseidon. Looking upon her visage turned men to stone. She is only defeated by Perseus who has the presence of mind to only look upon her in the reflection of his mirrored shield. He decapitates Medusa and affixes her head to his shield so that he in turn may petrify his enemies.

While Nana is certainly not hideous to look upon in the colloquial sense, her effect on men is equally paralyzing, even stiffening. When she first appears nearly nude on stage in *La Blonde Vénus*, the men react peculiarly. Their faces “se tendaient,” Muffat is “marbré”, Vandevres is “très pâle”, and Steiner has a “face apoplectique” (49). Not dead, of course, they are entranced, even mesmerized (a term of certain import in the time of Charcot) by the female body. Unlike Medusa, however, Nana doesn’t paralyze with the horror of her ugliness, but rather the horror of her femininity. But how do we reconcile the two, especially given the fact that Nana is supposedly representing Venus, the eternally beautiful goddess of love and beauty?

Freud, unsurprisingly, read Medusa as an embodiment of male castration anxiety. His analysis is problematic in that he equates Medusa with her decapitated head that retains its petrifying power. Her head signifies decapitation, and thus castration: “The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something.”<sup>58</sup> The array of snakes atop her head seem to either signify castration or reassure against it: Freud is somewhat contradictory here. In his essay “The Uncanny,” he reminds us that the unconscious “is fond of representing castration by a doubling or multiplication of a

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<sup>58</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Medusa’s Head,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), 18:273.

genital symbol.”<sup>59</sup> In the case of Medusa, he cites “the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration,” but also suggests that the snakes, “however frightening they may be in themselves, [...] nevertheless serve actually as a mitigation of the horror,” as they replace the penis that would be lost in castration.<sup>60</sup> So Medusa’s hair both signifies and reassures against castration. Either way, we must note that Freud is conflating Medusa with her head, and her petrifying gaze with the petrified gaze of her onlookers, as is clear from the fact that he titled his essay “Medusa’s Head.” There is no mention of the pre-decapitated Medusa, to the whole woman, as if Freud is petrified himself of analyzing the power of a woman (however monstrous she may be) over men. If the snakes adorning her head are indeed representative of castration, as Freud partially suggests, then it seems odd that he would not read Perseus’ decapitation/castration of Medusa as the reassuring denial of woman’s castrating threat. The structure of Freud’s interpretation is not, however, unlike Zola’s. Both men synthesize their heroine with the source of her power. Medusa is only her head, and Nana is only her sex. By extension, Nana’s entire body is her sex, and her sex is her entire body. Veiled by hair (that is, by Medusa’s phallic and threatening snakes), Nana’s entire duvet-covered body is petrifying.

Other critics have noted that Nana herself is not immune to her own petrifying power, citing her plastic stances and her “chair de marbre” as she poses before her admirers at the Variétés (49). Jonathan Krell places Nana’s plastic seduction within an

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<sup>59</sup> ----, “The Uncanny,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), 17:235.

<sup>60</sup> Freud, “Medusa,” 273.

erotics that privileges immobility.<sup>61</sup> However, as Charles Bernheimer reminds us, it is not Nana herself that inflicts her destruction on Paris, but the male fantasy that creates, empowers, and chases after her—Zola included.<sup>62</sup> The author says it best himself: “Le sujet [de *Nana*] est celui-ci : Toute une société se ruant sur la cul. Une meute derrière une chienne, qui n’est pas en chaleur et qui se moque des chiens qui la suivent. Le poème des désirs du mâle, le grand levier qui remue le monde.”<sup>63</sup> It is *male* desires and their consequences that furnish the body of the text. The pack of hounds is the subject, not Nana herself. Ever the scientist, Zola simply presents Paris with the female body and observes. Nana’s *chair de marbre* is the textual depiction of an idolized image, a marble statue depicting a goddess, not the monstrous victim of a fatal femininity.

The fact that Zola identifies his heroine with two serpentine women with sexually-charged imagery reframes our perspective on Nana’s sex. No longer passive and internal, the female sexual organ becomes modeled on the serpentine body: external, tubular, present. Like the *méduse* that fascinated Valéry with its extruded genitalia,<sup>64</sup> Nana threatens, even penetrates men with the force and presence of her own; one need only think of the pin-prick episode. Her sex is now unrepresentable because it is contradictorily present, dangerous, and all-encompassing. It is only *sign(ifi)é* by its effects, by the blood from Steiner’s finger which it has pricked, and by the myths which Zola is forced to employ in order to write her. On the most basic level, the serpentine

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<sup>61</sup> Jonathan F. Krell, “Nana: Still Life, *Nature Morte*,” *French Forum* 19, no. 1 (January 1994): 65-79.

<sup>62</sup> Charles Bernheimer, “Response to Peter Brooks,” *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (Summer, 1991): 868-874.

<sup>63</sup> Preparatory documents for *Nana*, BNF, Ms, NAF 10313, f° 207-208.

<sup>64</sup> This episode is referenced in Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, 204.

woman puts into question the reassuring stability of inside and outside. Bernheimer and others associate this state of menacing difference as the very definition of hysteria<sup>65</sup> and the concept of the phallic woman. Indeed, Bernheimer affords her “a kind of phallic power in male fantasy,” and elaborates that this image “contributes to a terrifying fantasy of the phallic woman who both absorbs his masculinity and asserts the exclusive power of her female autonomy.”<sup>66</sup>

Freud might write of castration anxiety in reverse, as he hints at with his limited and somewhat contradictory interpretation of Medusa. Men may fear Nana because she is *not* castrated, because she displays phallic signifiers. Derrida, however, describes a structure that materializes Nana’s threat. He writes of invaginated texts, referring to a form whose surface folds in on itself, forming an internal pocket made of external surface. This concept is best explained by Jonathan Culler:

What we think of as the innermost spaces and places of the body—vagina, stomach, intestine—are in fact pockets of externality folded in. What makes them quintessentially inner is partly their difference from flesh and bone but especially the space they mark off and contain, the outside they make inner. An external frame may function as the most intrinsic element of a work, folding itself in; conversely, what seems the most inner or central aspect of a work will acquire this role through the qualities that fold it back outside of and against the work.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Bernheimer, *Figures of Ill Repute*, 207.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>67</sup> Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

With such a structure, for which the vagina is the primary model, the internal/external divide loses its effective meaning, putting into question the very nature of the two terms. Nana's sex, her body, is represented by Zola's text as external, inversely invaginated. The phallic serpent is now the vaginal serpent, threatening because its very existence puts sexual difference into question: neither internal nor external, and yet both at once. While describing Nana's unique sexual appeal through the art of the tease, Beizer also, somewhat contradictorily, sums up Nana's threatening invaginated nature: "One could argue that the essence of Nana's seductiveness lies in the play of presence and absence; a presence that is never quite realized, an absence on the eternal verge of becoming present."<sup>68</sup> Nana truly does fall on the border between internal/external, absent/present, thereby invalidating the function of the border in the first place. This constant striptease may be seductive, but it also subversively unravels notions of sexual identity. Nana's body may be difficult to turn away from, but it is more in the manner of Medusa than of Venus. The association of Medusa with both erection and castration makes Nana a desirable, but dangerous, object to behold.

The invagination model multiplies throughout the text, on various levels, often in relation to the nightmare of Nana's anatomy. Steiner's pin-prick is one example: the external surface of his hand is penetrated, seemingly, by what should be *interior*: Nana's vagina, or even her skirt. Her sex itself, via the pin, becomes external, active, and penetrating, "dans sa chair à jamais" (226). Muffat's solo excursion through the *passage des Panoramas* is another example. The *passage* itself is reminiscent of the vaginal canal,

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<sup>68</sup> Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies*, 179.

and its uneasy distinction between interior and exterior is just as troubling: truly *unheimlich* in the sense of Freud's citation of the old joke, "Love is homesickness."<sup>69</sup> The count wanders down a narrow corridor, hot, stuffy, and humid, although technically just an extension of outdoor space. The liquidity of the surroundings is classic Zolian femininity: "un air humide et chauffé mettait une vapeur lumineuse dans l'étroit couloir" (212). Various bibelots line the windows, as Muffat seems to relive his dizzying ascent of the wings of the Variétés. But one object at the end of the *passage* catches his attention: "un énorme gant de pourpre, au loin, semblait une main saignante, coupée et attachée par une manchette jaune" (212). One thinks of Steiner's pricked finger, now an entire hand bitten off and swallowed up by the *passage*. The glove itself offers another invagination: the narrative displaces an external cover (glove) into that which it covers (hand), confusing inside and outside in an already threatening and unstable space. Interestingly enough, Freud cites "a hand cut off at the wrist" as a prime example of an image that induces a feeling of the uncanny, specifically derived from the castration complex.<sup>70</sup> The violence of castration is suggested by the fact that the hand is bleeding (*saignante*), bringing us back once more to the threat signified by Steiner's bloody finger.

Nana, somewhat unsurprisingly, adores the *passage des Panoramas*: "C'était une passion qui lui restait de sa jeunesse pour le clinquant de l'article de Paris, les bijoux faux, le zinc doré, le carton jouant le cuir" (218). She is truly in her element, surrounded by the artifice that recalls the "Olympe de carton" in which she debuts. She even reminisces about her youth, growing up in the gutters of Paris: or even, as Freud might

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<sup>69</sup> Freud, "The Uncanny," 245.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

suggest, she recalls the safe feeling of her mother's womb, the very aspect that elicits an uncanny reaction for a man. Her attraction to the artificial resonates with Muffat's own, but the fact that she feels at home in an invaginated space is consistent with her feminine subjectivity.

The theater itself may be the primary invagination of the text. The public goes inside the theater to see a representation of the outside world. If the theater truly masters the illusion of reality on stage, and we keep the entire room in perspective (as theatergoers in Zola's time certainly did), the relationship between inner and outer destabilizes. It becomes a pocket of social externality folded in. Artificiality becomes a factor, of course, but in the universe of *Nana* the line between artificial and genuine is intentionally blurred, both by the author and within the diegesis. "Ce monde du théâtre prolongeait le monde réel" (155) states the narrative voice, as the actors imitate genteel mannerisms while partying backstage. Even when not in the sphere of public performance (on stage), the actors constantly perform for one another and for their visitors. Nana herself is constantly aware of her presence and its effect on others, adjusting her performance as necessary. Before she even pronounces her first lines on stage, she walks onto the scene, "riant au public" (35): not only breaking character, but also mocking the audience, as if aware of her immediate power over them and the disorganization she will eventually cause. When her acting and singing fail, she compensates with a sultry display of femininity:

Comme elle terminait le couplet, la voix lui manqua complètement, elle comprit qu'elle n'irait jamais au bout. Alors, sans s'inquiéter, elle donna



un coup de hanche qui dessina une rondeur sous la mince tunique, tandis que, la taille pliée, la gorge renversée, elle tendait les bras. Des applaudissements éclatèrent. Tout de suite, elle s'était tournée, remontant, faisant voir sa nuque où des cheveux roux mettaient comme une toison de bête; et les applaudissements devinrent furieux. (36)

Nana's self-control and awareness of her audience ("elle comprit") makes her the consummate actress. The display of her body, which successfully replaces verbal communication, unites the universe of the play with that of the audience, driving them increasingly mad: first the applause erupts ("éclatèrent"), then quickly becomes "furieux." The disorganization of Paris with which Zola credits his courtesan seems to begin at this very moment.

As Sandy Petrey has brilliantly shown, the relationship between the theater and the "real world" is even more complicated than this, as each one seems to repeatedly copy the other. When the copy copies the copy, the original is lost or never existed. Petrey relates this lack of origination, particularly its development in *Nana*, with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity: "À l'origine de la pratique sexuelle se trouve la représentation; ce qui définit la sexualité chez Butler la définit chez Zola."<sup>71</sup> This analysis puts into question once again the notion of difference, as Nana's sexuality is incessantly associated with her theatrical representation and, as Muffat discovers, its artifice. Bordenave's insistence that visitors refer to the Variétés as his brothel is indicative of the

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<sup>71</sup> Sandy Petrey, "Anna-Nana-Nana: Identité sexuelle, écriture naturaliste, lectures lesbiennes." *Cahiers Naturalistes* 41, no. 69 (1995): 74.

theater's "true" nature, as a site of performative representation (and therefore gender production) implicated in the sexual economy of the Second Empire.

### **“Ça me manque un peu” : Masculine Lack**

There are at least three characters that act as foils to Nana's identity: Satin, Sabine, and Georges. The onomastic slippage between the women (Nana-Satin-Sabine), the lesbianism shared with Satin, and the *signe* shared with Sabine all highlight the universally feminine aspects of Nana's sexuality. But it is the Nana-Georges couple that most interestingly problematizes both Nana as individual and Nana as woman. This has not gone unnoticed by critics: Pascale Krumm and Naomi Schor in particular have analyzed the character in depth. But Georges' intimate moments with Nana also act out the destabilization of the internal/external gender structuring system initially put into question with the finger prick episode.

Naomi Schor best understood Georges as a sort of transvestite to the second-degree: he first appears in chapter one, unnamed, and covered in feminine and childlike signifiers. At the Muffats' dull reception, he is a "fille déguisée en garçon," even resembling Nana with his "frisures blondes" (88). He is soon drawn into the world of the *demi-monde*, under the spell of Nana and the world of unrepressed sexuality that she represents. His first intimate encounter with her occurs at her estate in the country where, after getting caught in the rain, she clothes him in her own garments while his clothing dries. For Schor, this girl dressed as a boy dressed as a girl undoes all layers of gender identity imposed on him by the vestimentary code: "His 'real' sex, his gender, recede into

the unknowable.”<sup>72</sup> The multiple layers of transvestism reflect the copy of a copy model that Judith Butler uses to undo traditional conceptions of gendered anatomy. Georges himself, rather jokingly, remarks on his “lack” of femininity:

« Hein, c’est fait pour lui; à part le corsage qui est trop large... Il n’en a pas autant que moi, ce pauvre Zizi.

-Ah, bien sûr, ça me manque un peu », murmura Georges, souriant. (186)

Well aware of the game, Georges plays along with Nana’s comment on his lack of a bosom. Though he is dressed as a woman and “semblait une fille” (186), his masculinity carries a lack. The elliptical “ça me manque un peu” may refer to breasts, but the use of “ça” and the sly smile of the young effeminate man suggest that he lacks a phallus.<sup>73</sup> Like the Steiner episode, we must realign our perspective here to appreciate the many layers of meaning Zola has packed into a few phrases. The woman’s garment brings out his feminine physique, but his “lack” of breasts prevent him from being a woman. Since feminine identity is more often signified by a “lack”, we have here a new definition of masculinity that mirrors (reverses) the traditional structure: women have, men lack. It is Nana’s body, the usual filler of the dress, that brings out this masculine shortcoming.

The choice of breasts as the feminine signifier is telling here. Nana’s breasts are one of her weapons in her talent of blurring the maternal and the sexual. She clearly did not, and probably never would, breastfeed her son, who lives with her aunt on the outskirts of town, but in her nude stage scenes, her breasts are prominent. The maternal

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<sup>72</sup> Schor, *Zola’s Crowds*, 101.

<sup>73</sup> “Zizi,” Nana’s nickname for Georges, is also a French euphemism for penis, often used by parents speaking to children. It is unclear whether this usage of the term existed in the 1870s, but the contemporary connotation of “ce pauvre Zizi” is undeniable.

functioning of Nana's breasts is indeed relegated to the background, but their trace is recognizable in the appearance of milk throughout the novel. Milk is, of course, reminiscent of both motherhood and childhood, two states that Nana perversely blurs. At the end of her dinner party, Nana wants Steiner to take her to the bois de Boulogne where "nous boirons du lait" (136), and then jumps about with "une joie d'enfant" (136) when he concedes to her caprice. Their relationship is indeed "signé" more with milk than with blood, and after the penetrating and threatening prick, Nana shifts into a playful mode of sexuality, knowing that she has ensnared Steiner. The chapter ends with an annoyed Steiner accompanying Nana and Blanche who declare "Nous voulons qu'on le tire devant nous" (137), that is, that they want to see the cows milked before them, a decidedly sexual vision that suggestively blurs the imageries of the female breast and the male sex.

But milk does not just signify a childish idyll that contrasts with the overtly and dangerously sexual. It also acts as a sign of feminine poison, another victim of woman's monstrosity. Fauchery's article provides a graphic metaphor: "Elle devenait une force de la nature, un ferment de destruction, sans le vouloir elle-même, corrompant et déorganisant Paris entre ses cuisses de neige, le faisant tourner comme des femmes, chaque mois, font tourner le lait" (224). Making reference to an old belief that the mere proximity of women's menstrual blood sours milk, Fauchery here also inscribes his imagery into the discourse that demonizes menstruation as a lack of maternity. "Entre ses cuisses de neige" euphemizes (and, as always, avoids the enunciation of) the female sex, notably with a milky white image. The odor of soured milk also permeates the theater: one critic's face is said to have "une bienveillance qui avait un arrière-goût gâté, comme

du lait tourné à l'aigre" (42). The *pourriture* of milk is the sign of Nana's *pourriture* of Parisian morals, as milk embodies the innocence and idyll of both chastity and motherhood, as well as the *nourriture* of a healthy child and a healthy society. Fauchery thus links Nana's power of dis-organ-ization to her menstruation, dutifully following in Michelet's footsteps.

While Georges shares some of the most genuinely tender moments with Nana, he is also sadly one of the most gruesome victims of her contradictory identity. The finger prick episode is repeated near the end of the novel with much more tragic results. After learning of the "incest" of his brother's affair with Nana, the young Georges attempts suicide by stabbing himself in the chest with Nana's scissors. Once again, a phallic instrument associated with the feminine sartorial domain is implicated in the stabbing of a man. Scissors are also, of course, closely associated with castration.<sup>74</sup> What is remarkable is the state in which Georges lies after the attempt. Despite the violence of the act, the scissors plunged into Georges' breast remarkably do not seem to draw much more blood than the pin that pricks Steiner's finger: "Il était tout blanc, les yeux fermés. Ça ne saignait presque pas, à peine un peu de sang, dont la tache mince se perdait sous le gilet" (427).

Georges here resembles the *hommes médusés* of the opening scene, petrified when penetrated by Nana's presence, this time nearly fatally. What little blood is drawn is nearly veiled by the text itself: the "meager stain" (*tache mince*) disappears underneath his jacket, a small trace of femininity covered by his man's wardrobe. Georges' chest, the

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<sup>74</sup> I address the seemingly contradictory functions of stabbing and snipping in Chapter Three.

site of this new wound, was also the site of his masculine lack jokingly mentioned during the transvestism scene, now fully “feminized” by the wound inflicted by the feminine phallus, the scissors. Beyond castrated, Georges is penetrated. Nearly simultaneously, Georges’ mother Madame Hugon appears, dignified and noble even in the horror of her son’s injuries, and takes him away to the family home, cursing Nana as she goes. Georges has thus been reclaimed by the “true” family, one devoid of sexuality after Nana has betrayed their relationship with both the incest of her affair with Philippe and her transgression of sexual difference.

It is also remarkable that the question of marriage is present in both incidents: Georges stabs himself as Nana refuses and belittles his marriage proposals, and Steiner’s bloodstain is interpreted by Nana as the seal on their union. In both cases, the Derridean interpretation of *hymen* is useful. In his writings on Mallarmé, Derrida famously pointed out the double and contradictory signification of *hymen*: marriage/union and the breakage that seals this union.<sup>75</sup> The idea of marrying Nana seems laughably impossible, much like her maternity (as demonstrated by Pascale Krumm). If she were married, she would not be Nana: without a hymen (virginity), she cannot have a hymen (marriage). She belongs to a much more fluid economy of social and sexual relations, one reigned over by the *entremetteuse* La Tricon instead of the Empress Eugénie. Any attempt to fix her in a traditional, aristocratic system (à la the Muffat household) is met with a painful reminder of her unique physiology and the threat it poses to conceived notions of sex and gender.

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<sup>75</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1992): 161-165.

Georges' wound also bleeds onto the floor, leaving a small trace of a stain. This *tache*, of course, doesn't disappear as easily as Georges does. It remains on the white carpet at the entrance to Nana's bedroom, fading only as her numerous lovers walk over it, such that it acts as a gauge of Nana's sexual activity to Muffat. It haunts the count much as the infamous spot haunts Lady Macbeth, written (*signé*) on the apartment floor. If we read this scene as a repetition of the Steiner episode, what exactly is signed here is less clear. Georges now carries the *autre chose*, the little nothing that resembles a wound, as if infected by Nana's femininity, and the bloodstain is the signifier of this wound. Notably, this small mark is at the very site of masculine differential lack: the chest. Georges has thus, following Zola's invaginated logic, feminized himself through an act of self-penetration. If Nana's sexuality is onanistic, as some have suggested, this is Georges' version. Inscribed on the interior surface of Nana's bedroom, analog of the theater near the end of the novel, this sign enters into the complicated, contradictory system of interior/exterior (here, private/public) that quickly unravels as the novel climaxes.

It may seem odd to open a study of *Nana* with a Shakespearean quotation. But as I have read *Nana* as the expression of an anxiety of difference, William T. Liston reads *Macbeth* as a domestic tragedy that plays itself out along the line of sexual difference. While "none of Shakespeare's plays is so explicit in demarcating man from woman,"<sup>76</sup> according to Liston, *Macbeth* also returns nearly obsessively to images of the perversion of those terms, particularly concerning Lady Macbeth. Notably, Liston cites

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<sup>76</sup> William T. Liston, "Male and Female Created He Them: Sex and Gender in *Macbeth*," *College Literature* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 232.

uses of milk as a recurring reference to a subversive feminine sexual identity: “in every case, the image has amounted to a perversion of nature.”<sup>77</sup> Like *Nana*, *Macbeth* offers a new, if threatening, perspective on femininity, based on contradictions and questionings of difference. The anxieties of difference and origin are as present in Zola as they are in Shakespeare, and both texts focus on the woman’s body as the site of these anxieties.

Returning to Banquo’s insult from *Macbeth* cited earlier in this chapter, we now have a new level of understanding of its inherent contradiction. The witches should be women, but their beards forbid Banquo and Macbeth to interpret that they are so. Nana should be a woman, but her *autre chose* forbids us to interpret that she is so. Like Mélusine, she only *looks* like a woman; the key identifier is forever veiled but ever active. Also as with Mélusine, the question of humanity comes into play. Liston suggests that in *Macbeth*, gender identity is equivalent to human identity, and that a questioning of one is inevitably a questioning of the other.<sup>78</sup> In other words, in the cases of Mélusine and Medusa, the lack of concrete categorization, or even the aporia, of their gender(s) is inherently linked to their monstrosity. Mélusine is a fairy, existing on the edge of the human world; she is both a figment of a fantastical mythology and the founder of a historical bloodline. Nana is a literary creation, both within the novel and without it, and her bordering of the two spheres belies any definition. She disorganizes and dis-organizes her own identity in order to elude the notion of identity altogether. At all times, she is either a truth wrapped in a theatrical artificiality, or a character of a story-within-a-story (*La Mouche d’or*). In both cases, much like Mélusine and Lady Macbeth, she

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.



borders between the male and the female, the internal and the external, the true and the fictional. The complexity of her existence, both textual and sexual, has only begun to be explored. The text of *Nana* puts into question the very definition of femininity, offering images of the ideal and clichéd woman (passive, maternal, internal) projected onto a body that consistently refutes those images. Her contradiction is one of a woman who simultaneously acknowledges, embodies, and dissolves notions of sexual difference, wreaking havoc on the society of whose anxiety she is both the product and the source.

### Chapter Three:

#### **“Celui-ci tuera celle-là”: The legacy of gendered violence in *La Bête humaine***

*Plaisir et pouvoir ne s'annulent pas; ils ne se retournent pas l'un contre l'autre; ils se poursuivent, se chevauchent et se relancent. Ils s'enchaînent selon des mécanismes complexes et positifs d'excitations et d'incitation.*  
 Michel Foucault<sup>79</sup>

Michel Foucault's choice of vocabulary in this section of *Histoire de la sexualité* is remarkable: the energy and implied movement of verbs such as *chevaucher*, *relancer*, and *enchaîner* are part of his strategy of refuting the repression hypothesis, supporting his philosophy that sexuality was a dynamic element of social institutions from the eighteenth century on. These terms, along with *excitation* and *incitation*, also invoke a particular dynamism, thermodynamism, which underlies the technological profile of the nineteenth century. No novel explores the interplay of sexuality, thermodynamism, and social institutions more powerfully than *La Bête humaine*, published as an integral novel in 1890. *La Bête humaine* brings together multiple novelistic projects (a crime novel, a novel on the world of railroad employees, and a political thriller), circulating seemingly effortlessly among them with a delicate balance between potential and kinetic energy until its explosive final act. It is a masterpiece of novelistic construction whose characters, plots, and geography are elegantly linked in a series of increasingly violent acts, all stemming from what Zola calls “le fond sombre de la bête humaine,”<sup>80</sup> the union of sex and death in primal human nature that lies apparently dormant under the guise of

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<sup>79</sup> Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité I: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971): 66-67.

<sup>80</sup> Émile Zola, *La Bête humaine* (Paris: Pocket, 2001): 208. Going forward, in this chapter, page numbers in parentheses refer to this edition.

modernity and progress, but which forces its way out through unspeakable acts of murderous violence. The novel is the expression of true human nature being unleashed through the very means by which we attempt to repress it: technology, machinery, and extensive organization. The thermodynamic conduits of the rail lines along which France's economic and political blood flows also carry the endemic *maladie* that will be its undoing.<sup>81</sup> *La Bête humaine* shows that sex and death, "plaisir et pouvoir", are inextricably linked, and the suppression of that link by the "mécansimes complexes" of modern institutions and technologies only increases the "excitation" with which it eventually explodes.

*La Bête humaine* is ultimately about detection: reading, writing, and understanding the hidden *maladie* in an effort to identify and control it. To call this a detective novel, however, would be to miss the point. The initial crime, committed over the first two chapters, carries no mystery with the readers, the witnesses, or the authorities. While the investigating magistrate, for political reasons, chooses early on in the novel not to prosecute the true criminals, he is perfectly aware of their guilt, and no further action is taken. This is not a procedural novel, *à la* Doyle or even Poe: it is the depiction of the darkest inner workings of human behavior, concretized in the figure of the *bête humaine*, and how they unravel civilization's best intentions to repress them. Civil detection and policing fail at every level, not through ineptitude, but through what

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<sup>81</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch expounds on the notion of the railway system as a bio-socio-mechanical circulatory system in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe, while Michel Serres, Susan Blood, Wojciech Tomasiak, and many others apply this notion to Zola's novels in general and *La Bête humaine* in particular. See: Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey. Trains and Travel in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, trans. A. Hollo (Oxford: Basic Blackwell, 1980).

the novel frames as the enduring and murderous dog-eat-dog mentality of the human spirit, stemming from an anxiety of difference that Naomi Schor thoughtfully evokes in all of Zola's novels, and which in *La Bête humaine* becomes an acute anxiety of gender difference.<sup>82</sup> The thermodynamic plot machine here is driven by violence, which is in turn rooted in difference and released into a space opened up by the destabilization of differentiating dynamics. The novel's somewhat ambiguous title reflects this malfunctioning referential framework: *la bête humaine*, the human beast, can refer to a monstrous human or to the animality inherent in all humanity; to the protagonist Jacques Lantier himself, or to the atavistic Other that seems to take over his body during his fits of murderous rage.

The pivotal scenes of *La Bête humaine*, therefore, focus on the conveyance of information, and particularly the act of confession. The "truth" of the crimes is not truly hidden from anyone, and certainly not from the reader, but the ways in which this truth is approached, narrated, and communicated are crucial to the author's greater project of depicting the human beast and the structures that both repress it and, eventually, release it. Because the violence unleashed through Jacques is instigated by difference, the space in which it operates is inherently linguistic. While rooted in an intolerance for the difference represented by the female body, the *maladie* can express itself only when the system of representations upon which the civilized community relies is destabilized: and because, as we saw in *La Curée*, speech is always anchored to the female body in the

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<sup>82</sup> Schor, *Zola's Crowds*, xi.

Zolian universe, the female body becomes the nexus of the crisis of distinctions that will explode by the end of the novel.

An overview of the characters and plots of *La Bête humaine* will prove useful, as the text is so exceptionally rich in overlapping plots and nuanced details that the author himself famously had trouble summarizing it.<sup>83</sup> Geographically, the novel shifts among Paris, Le Havre, and the small estate of La Croix-du-Maufras that lies halfway between the two; the characters, narrator, and plot all move among these sites by way of the railroad system, and nearly all of the characters work in one way or another for the massive Compagnie de l'Ouest, the administration responsible for this sector of the French rail network. The novel opens with the assistant station chief Roubaud's discovery that his young wife Séverine had sexual relations with her protector and father figure, the *président* Grandmorin, before their marriage. Driven mad with jealousy, Roubaud brutally beats his wife and forces her to write a letter to Grandmorin with the aim of luring him onto a train and killing him. The plan is carried out by the couple and witnessed by the off-duty train conductor Jacques Lantier, who catches a quick glimpse of Roubaud stabbing Grandmorin in the neck while "une masse noire" (83) (Séverine, he will later realize) holds him down at the knees. Later, investigating authorities interview all three, and the magistrate in charge of the investigation, Camy-Lamotte, quickly recognizes the true killers and their motivation, but declines to prosecute, knowing that the scandalous affair between Grandmorin and Séverine cannot be made public, for

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<sup>83</sup> In a 1889 letter to Jacques Van Santen Kolff, Zola explains: "Je ne puis vous dire tout au long le sujet, qui est assez compliqué et dont les rouages nombreux mordent profondément les uns dans les autres." Cited in: Susan Blood, "The Precinematic Novel: Zola's *La Bête humaine*," *Representations* 93, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 73.

political reasons. Upon meeting the Roubauds and hearing their testimony, Jacques also recognizes their guilt, but decides not to act on it when he finds himself attracted to Séverine. The investigators instead identify Cabuche, a brutish quarryman, as the probable murderer, although they again decline to prosecute. Cabuche had previously been implicated in the death of Louissette, another of Grandmorin's young protégées. After an alleged sexual assault by the *président*, Louissette had fled to her friend Cabuche for comfort, but died in his home. The police and the community in general are content to attribute the crime to an imaginary figure, an *assassin introuvable*, invented by Roubaud during his witness statement.

Life resumes its normal routine, and in an attempt to keep Jacques quiet, Séverine begins an affair with him, surprisingly to the indifference of her once violently jealous husband. Their passion is tempered, however, by what Jacques calls his "mal abominable" (77), an instinctive desire to kill women that is triggered by sexual stimulation and particularly by the view of bare female flesh. His *maladie* seems to not be aroused by Séverine, however, despite his attraction to her; he theorizes that maybe his knowledge of her participation in the murder has modulated his desires somewhat. Meanwhile, Jacques' mother figure, Tante Phasie, tells him that her greedy husband, Misard, has been slowly poisoning her in order to claim her inheritance, one thousand francs that she's hidden somewhere on their property. Her daughter, Flore, is in love with Jacques, although she is too proud to show it. But her jealousy grows too painful when, after a snowy train breakdown in front of her home, Flore witnesses Jacques and Séverine kissing. Flore is also Louissette's sister, and she rightfully recognizes Séverine as another

of Grandmorin's victims and therefore likely one of his murderers. Hell-bent on killing the two lovers, Flore later pulls Cabuche's horsecart, carrying heavy stones, onto the tracks of a train driven by Jacques and carrying Séverine: the inevitable crash causes dozens of deaths and many more injuries, but when she sees that her two targets survive, Flore commits suicide by walking into an oncoming train in a nearby tunnel.

Meanwhile, Roubaud, a broken man after living with the guilt of his crime and the resulting lack of satisfaction in his life, takes up gambling and loses his entire fortune, including the money he had stolen from Grandmorin to suggest robbery as a motive in the murder. Tante Phasie dies, poisoned by Misard who has since taken a new wife, and Séverine has begun planning her own husband's death, hoping Jacques will eliminate their one obstacle to happiness. Jacques loses his nerve several times during such attempts, so Séverine plans an elaborate trap to ensnare Roubaud. The plan involves her putting herself to bed, and when she gets up to explain everything to Jacques, her nudity and continued pressure to kill her husband triggers his old *maladie*, and he stabs her to death. Jacques escapes, and Roubaud and Cabuche are now both incriminated in the murder and sentenced to hard labor by the judge Denizet, who congratulates himself on his impeccable mastery of detective logic. Seemingly relieved to have finally satisfied his gynecidal instincts, and cleared of any legal wrongdoing, Jacques returns to work, and even takes up his stoker's mistress as his own. His stoker, Pecqueux, discovers the affair and attacks Jacques as they conduct a train full of soldiers heading to the front of the Franco-Prussian War. The two men fall out of the engine as they struggle and are dismembered by the careening train, now speeding along uncontrollably.

What triggers this chain reaction of murder and violence? Within the textual space of the novel, it is Séverine's admission to Roubaud of her relations with Grandmorin. More specifically, it is her forgetting of a lie in the opening scene of the novel, a small discursive disruption that shatters her marriage and her life. Looking nostalgically at a small ring—in the form of a snake with ruby eyes—Séverine drifts off into thoughtless memory recall while chatting with her husband. Suddenly he hears a contradictory statement in the origin story of the ring, and interprets it as evidence that Séverine slept with Grandmorin. Séverine's discursive hiccup, then, triggers Roubaud's violence, Grandmorin's murder, and eventually her own. While the men of *La Bête humaine* may carry the titular beast inside them, it is the women who release it. This gendered logic applies to the motivation of the "initial" murder: although Séverine, to our modern sensibilities, is the original victim, her husband reacts to her sexual past (we would say abuse) with jealousy, not anger. In today's parlance, we would call this victim-blaming; in Zola's narrative universe, Séverine is no more a victim than Roubaud. She is simply the object upon which men project what Lisa Downing has termed their "death-driven masculinity",<sup>84</sup> allowing its expression. The rape of Séverine and the parallel death of Louissette serve only to give *la bête humaine* a physical outlet, and *La Bête humaine* a narrative one.

Gilles Deleuze wrote of two heredities in the Rougon-Macquart series: *la petite hérédité*, the sum of physical and psychological characteristics that parents pass on to their children and which express themselves to varying degrees, and *la grande hérédité*, a

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<sup>84</sup> Lisa Downing, "The Birth of the Beast: Death-Driven Masculinity in Monneret, Zola and Freud," *Dix-Neuf* 5 (September 2005).



much more abstract and dispersed notion. *La grande hérédité* is heredity itself, “cette transmission qui ne transmet autre chose qu’elle-même”; or what Deleuze identified as *la fêlure*.<sup>85</sup> Within the narrative of *La Bête humaine*, a similar split makes itself clear. Significantly, this split is both gendered and discursive. When looking for an “original victim,” a *pharmakos*, we can follow Deleuze’s reading and examine *la grande hérédité* of the novel and its characters. Critics such as Lisa Downing and Susan Blood have pointed out that despite an omniscient narrator, the entire novel is *really* narrated from Jacques’ perspective; a telling choice, given the multiplicity of narrators, witnesses, and actors in the composition of the text.<sup>86</sup> But Jacques-as-narrative-burden also opens an avenue of access to the Deleuzian *grande hérédité*, both of Jacques and of the novel itself. Jacques was not initially part of the Rougon-Macquart origin story—he was invented retroactively and added to Gervaise Macquart’s brood, which includes Nana, and thus never appeared in *L’Assommoir*. Having originally intended to write a novel on crime starring Étienne Lantier, the eventual hero of *Germinal*, Zola restructured his novelistic program and created a new brother, someone through whom *La Bête humaine* and *la bête humaine* could exert themselves. And what is *la bête humaine* other than an atavistic Other, a misogynist and gynecidal demon that overtakes civilized reason and ethics to avenge “la première tromperie au fond des cavernes” (79)? In other words, Jacques is *heredity itself*, the very definition of Deleuze’s *grande hérédité*. Jacques not

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<sup>85</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Zola et la fêlure”, in *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969).

<sup>86</sup> See: Downing, “Birth,” and Blood, “The Precinematic Novel.”. Sándor Kálai points out further that nearly every character fills the role of investigator at some point in the novel, while Jacques is at various times witness, investigator, suspect, criminal, and victim. See: Sándor Kálai, “‘Son occupation unique était de rechercher les traces’: *La Bête humaine* de Zola et le roman policier,” *Excavatio* 21, nos. 1-2 (2006).

only carries the symptomatic characteristics of his forebears; he is both the vehicle by which they are carried *and* the characteristics themselves. His “artificial” genealogy condenses his role as the emblem of heredity.<sup>87</sup>

And *la petite hérédité*? It finds an anti-hero in Roubaud, only ever referred to by his family name. Roubaud is neither an ambitious Rougon nor a criminal Macquart; he simply strives to attain the small dream of a loyal, loving wife and a moderately successful career in the rail industry. Always the *sous-chef* and never the *chef*, Roubaud is the measure against which the other men in the novel reflect their successes in Girardian mimetic rivalry. He loses Séverine to both Grandmorin and Jacques (without even the suggestion of a fight in the second case), always remains the assistant station chief, and is never promoted to the apartment he and his wife dream of. He passively accepts responsibility for Séverine’s murder after his true confession to the Grandmorin murder is dismissed, so that even his true confession is tossed aside and subsumed in the more “logical” explanation of the self-righteous authorities. Roubaud is presented as a jealous, small man, who at one point erupted in a violent rage out of jealousy over his wife, then gave up entirely on the whole prospect, spiraling into a life of bitter resentment, alcoholism, and gambling addiction. He is the ultimate loser in the constant mimetic rivalry going on around him, and his only high point is the murder of his father-in-law, for which his guilt is quietly understood but never spoken by those around him.

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<sup>87</sup> Françoise Gaillard offers a nuanced reading of Deleuze as an approach to Zola, suggesting that there actually is no original scene that founds the mythic Rougon-Macquart heredity, and that the primitivism exemplified in Jacques’ character is a reconstruction of and by a shared unconscious “trace.” This reading seems particularly intriguing when analyzing Jacques’ textual (non-) heredity. See: Françoise Gaillard, “La peur de l’origine,” *Corps écrit* 32 (Dec 1989): 135-141.

Roubaud is not exactly a representative of *petite hérédité* as Deleuze understands it, but he is the epitome of the *petit homme*, the perennial loser in the chronic dog-eat-dog relationships of Zolian society. He is also ultimately a victim of the overdetermined family relationships and triangulated desires that entrap him into marrying Séverine without ever being able to possess her. While Jacques' dramatic *grand* murder of Séverine has become increasingly inevitable since the beginning of Zola's mythic time, Roubaud's *petit* murder of Grandmorin adheres to no logic other than localized jealousy. Even Flore's violent acts outdo Roubaud's in both scale and significance.

Roubaud's one point of pride, his marriage to a much younger woman, is built on much shakier ground than he realizes, and the structure falls apart with one discursive hiccup. We learn in the first chapter that when Séverine's mother died, she was taken in by Grandmorin as a protector and adoptive father: suggestions that the lecherous Grandmorin is also her biological father abound in the novel, but are never confirmed by the non-omniscient narrator. Séverine's origin, then, is murky at best, and the dissolution of the meager narrative holding it together will trigger the anxieties of origin and difference lurking beneath the surface of her world. What we do know is that Grandmorin engaged in a sexual relationship with Séverine: in our days we would call this molestation, but Zola has no concept of (or use for) female sexual consent, so whatever happened between the two is neither rape nor molestation (although incest is not ruled out). Either way, the relationship is transgressive, as Grandmorin is in a paternal (and of course non-conjugal) relationship with Séverine. Roubaud's anger at their relationship is rooted not in abhorrence at the fact that an old man took advantage of a naïve girl, nor

even in the fact that Séverine was not a virgin at the time of their wedding, but rather in the fact that Grandmorin is now his rival for the role of her sexual-paternal partner. Indeed, his relationship with his wife is encoded as paternal from the beginning: she loves him with “une affection filiale” (31) and he “l’adorait” (30); their relationship is one of familial devotion and even friendship, rather than of amorous desire and satisfaction. Séverine won’t even give her husband a small gift, or even a kiss, without the expectation of money in return, money that symbolizes his marital-paternal role of financial caregiver, a role previously filled by Grandmorin. The insertion of money into the equation is purposeful on the part of Séverine, preventing her from entering into a truly all-encompassing romantic relationship in which the exchange is purely amorous. All she has known her whole life is a man who takes care of her financially and to whom she owes a sexual obligation.

Such an arrangement is thus predicated on these small objects, exchanged as gifts to solidify the economic and sexual relationships and “family” structures: Séverine buys Roubaud a knife, Roubaud gives Séverine a coin, Grandmorin gave Séverine a ring, etc. These small gifts are the signifiers of the contracts keeping each pair together. The entire structure begins to fall apart when the significance of one such gift, Séverine’s snake ring, is put into question. Pensively contemplating her ring, Séverine recalls aloud its origin, without realizing it: “Mon petit serpent, dit Séverine d’une voix involontaire de rêve, croyant qu’il regardait la bague et éprouvant l’impérieux besoin de parler. C’est à la Croix-de-Maufras, qu’il m’en a fait cadeau, pour mes seize ans.” (42) This involuntary eruption of language is triggered by the sight of the ring, which Séverine calls “her little

serpent.” The ring isn’t a serpent, of course, but a *representation* of one, which evokes the image of a snake itself as well as sexual and biblical allusions: like the serpent in the garden of Eden, this one urges Séverine to know and to share her knowledge, spurring an unstoppable chain of events that will end with the collapse of the Second Empire.<sup>88</sup> Séverine here involuntarily speaks the truth, forgetting an earlier lie upon which her marriage was founded, and finds herself paralyzed immediately after. She had previously told her husband that the ring was a gift left to her by her mother, and not a token in a sexual exchange signifying her belonging to Grandmorin. Roubaud then puts together the sexual history of his young wife, beating the rest of the details out of her.

Roubaud’s motive in the murder of Grandmorin, then, is not so clear. While it may appear to the outside world that he is avenging the shame of his wife, or even killing out of jealousy, the narrator is quick to point out that Roubaud tolerates Jacques as Séverine’s lover for the rest of the novel, even maintaining a friendly work relationship with him. What seems to have truly triggered Roubaud’s rage, and the subsequent murder, is the breakdown of the discursive and economic structures keeping his marriage and family together. Séverine’s lie, or the forgetting of it, opens up a space for a representational realignment: if the small objects (ring, knife, coin), that signify the solidifying relationships are no longer trustworthy, what defines a marriage, a family,

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<sup>88</sup> Other instances of the confusion between representation and essence abound in the novel, always related to these small objects of exchange. Grandmorin’s watch, stolen during the initial murder to give the suggestion of robbery, evolves into the body of the victim itself, in a shared hallucination between the Roubauds, reminiscent of *The Tell-Tale Heart*. The watch is kept under a floor tile along with the cash the *président* was carrying at the time: two items whose representational functions become muddled once they enter into the space opened up by Séverine’s destabilizing discourse. The fateful knife, passed from Séverine to Roubaud and circulated back to Jacques, also loses its representational framework when Séverine cannot tell the difference between it and Jacques’ penis as she feels for the knife in his pocket.

even sexual difference? This new space, between the modern social institutions and the collective human unconscious, is where the pivotal moments of the novel happen, and where the human beast will be unleashed.

### **Anxieties of Origin, Dangers of Difference**

In *Zola's Crowds*, Naomi Schor investigates what she calls the “founding myth” of the Rougon-Macquart and the anxieties of origin and difference that formed the textual evolution of the fateful family.<sup>89</sup> These two anxieties are perhaps more palpable in *La Bête humaine* than in any other novel, despite (or perhaps because of) its retroactively created lineage. In the Rougon-Macquart family tree, Jacques is the son of Gervaise, the doomed heroine of *L'Assommoir*, and the brother of Nana Coupeau, Étienne Lantier, and Claude Lantier. But within the frame of *La Bête humaine*, Jacques' only familial belonging is to his godmother Tante Phasie, whose familial name recalls that of Adélaïde Fouque, “Tante Dide”, the ancestral matriarch and first tragic heroine of the Rougon-Macquart family, introduced in *La Fortune des Rougon*. This parallel nearly seems purposeful on the part of Zola. Like Freud, Zola conceives of certain neuroses (or in this case, Jacques' gynecidal tendencies) chronologically. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud explains his understanding of certain neuroses by juxtaposing their characteristics with anthropological accounts of contemporary “savage peoples”, who, presumably, resemble the ancestors of the civilized neurotic.<sup>90</sup> This compressed chronological conception of psychic aberrations is evoked in Jacques' atavism. Although *Totem and Taboo* postdates

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<sup>89</sup> Schor, *Zola's Crowds*, 4.

<sup>90</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1990).

Zola's works considerably, one sees a clear parallel in the atavistic currents running through both texts and their reliance on ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny on a sociological scale. And Jacques' close relationship with Tante Phasie, the onomastic double of Tante Dide, anchors his atavism in both the *grande* (phylogenic) and *petite* (ontogenic) *hérédités* of the Rougon-Macquart.

The Phasie-Jacques pairing also echoes that of Séverine and her wet nurse Mère Victoire, yet another maternal employee of the Compagnie de l'Ouest. These resonating structures help set up the Séverine-Jacques pairing as a balanced sexual partnership (as opposed to the paternal Séverine-Roubaud couple) whose evenness helps palliate Jacques' mania for a time. These analogous family relationships are elegantly explicated in the first two chapters, whose chronologically and structurally parallel plots converge on the scene of the murder of Grandmorin. In chapter one, Roubaud waits in Victoire's apartment for Séverine to return from a shopping trip, and when she arrives, insists on sleeping with her, and although she usually gives in, Séverine succeeds in verbally denying her brutally insistent husband "dans une révolte effrayée" (41). Shaken in the aftermath of the sexual assault, she fatefully reveals the origin of her snake ring. Roubaud, after beating the full confession out of her, forces her to write the letter to Grandmorin, inviting him onto the train where he will be killed. In chapter two, Jacques visits Phasie at her house, near the Croix-du-Maufras. There he encounters Flore, Phasie's daughter, who is characterized as an Amazon, a gloriously virginal warrior. Flore loves Jacques, but refuses to admit it; when he forces himself on her, she halfheartedly resists. When Jacques begins to feel his *maladie* taking over at the sight of

Flore's naked breasts, he runs off, not wanting to hurt his childhood friend. Flore believes her resistance drove Jacques away, and vows to return to her celibate life, while Jacques runs just close enough to the passing train to witness the murder of Grandmorin as it speeds by. The exquisite textual construction of the first two chapters develops extensive parallels between Roubaud-Séverine-Victoire and Jacques-Flore-Phasie that serve to enhance the fact that all expressions of desire in *La Bête humaine* are structured around triangles: that is, a third party is integral to the origin and expression of desire.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, these parallel structures set up Jacques and Séverine as perfectly complementary partners. The sexual and the familial are never separate in Zola, and so the family structures that produce these two individuals participate actively in their sexual attraction and successful union.

*La Bête humaine*'s exceptional detachment from the greater Rougon-Macquart narrative is reflected in the fact that natural motherhood is nearly nonexistent in the novel, although it is crucial to the construction of both the *Rougon-Macquart*, the series, and the Rougon-Macquarts, the individuals. Séverine is essentially motherless in the novel, a fact underscored by her symbolically heavy first name. Rumors suggest that her father is Grandmorin, but there is no evidence, and she remains hereditarily disconnected from all groups. More explicitly, we are reminded by Jacques that Séverine has no children, increasing her sex appeal as a woman whose body is entirely dedicated to erotic passion: "C'était une passion insatiable, la femme enfin éveillée, une créature faite

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<sup>91</sup> Note also that Flore doesn't "express" her love for Jacques until she grows jealous of Séverine (if one can consider triggering a murderous train derailment as an expression of love). Jacques will also later take Philomène as his lover, for whom he feels no attraction, because she is Pecqueux's mistress. No coupling in the novel is without its third term.



uniquement pour la caresse, tout entière amante, et qui n'était point mère" (293).

Séverine is neither mother nor daughter, but pure woman, in stark contrast to the other women in the novel whose familial roles are inscribed in their identities (Mère Victoire, Tante Phasie). An interesting counterpoint to Séverine's pure sexuality is Flore's pure virginity. Flore is also somewhat detached from the family paradigm: while she lives with her mother Phasie, Phasie's husband is not her father. Her sister Louise perished at the hands of Grandmorin and her stepfather eventually kills her mother. As the remains of her family collapse around her, Flore remains lucid and powerful, rebuking male attention with virginal pride. She is also the only character who is keen enough to observe the truth of all narratives going on around her. She alone knows about Louise, Séverine, and Grandmorin; the affair between Séverine and Jacques; and even the murder of Phasie by Misard. But, again, as a counterpoint to Séverine, Flore never gives herself up sexually or verbally: she never gives an *aveu*. And while Séverine's very name carries the severance that defines her femininity, when we first meet Flore she is literally surrounded by bits of cord which she is untangling. Critics such as Servanne Woodward have related this image to that of Fate cutting the cords of life, or even that of a puppet master, but in the context of the familial structures of *La Bête humaine*, Flore's tangled bits of cord are a powerful image of the unraveling not only of her own family, but also of the very notion of familial distinctions that has already dislocated her counterpart Séverine.<sup>92</sup> When the truth of Séverine's ring is revealed, the snake's symbolism slips from umbilical to phallic functional imagery, and Séverine's mother is effaced entirely

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<sup>92</sup> Servanne Woodward, "Tragédie et roman: d'un personnage à l'autre dans *La Bête humaine*," *Excavatio* 4 (Spring 1994): 83-92.

from existence within the novel. The image of Flore-as-Fate snipping bits of cord in the second chapter takes on a weightier meaning, announcing not only literal but also mythic deaths. The myth of Séverine as belonging to a class of pure, mothering women, no longer exists.

Finally, once again in contraposition to Séverine, Flore participates in the violence that integrates this population. Indeed, the Séverine-Flore pairing, centered on an artificial “sisterhood” and an amorous rivalry, mimics and mirrors the Roubaud-Jacques pairing. The men, however, as we have seen, enjoy a solidarity with each other rooted in a shared rejection of women and celebration of male homogeneity. Having lost her sister to Grandmorin’s violence, Flore, on some level, senses some connection to Séverine, but rivalry trumps all else. And, as predicted by René Girard’s model of mimetic rivalry and its subsequent violent crisis, Flore’s rage eventually reaches a critical mass, and she incites a deadly collision by blocking the tracks with Cabuche’s loaded horse cart as Jacques’ train approaches. The resulting cataclysm is one of Zola’s most artfully-written and painfully difficult scenes to read, with horses, humans, and unidentifiable parts of each strewn about, and a still-running train filling the air with ungodly sounds, smells, and sights. The number of casualties is not given, but the two targets, Jacques and Séverine, survive. Realizing this, Flore calmly takes her own life by walking into an oncoming train, thus, inversely, realizing the fate she failed to dole out directly. Flore is therefore the only female character in the novel who takes control of her own destiny, cutting her own cord as it were. She is also the only woman in the novel who makes an active effort to assume the male role as aggressor and perpetrator of

violence against women; ultimately, she fails, and succumbs to the ubiquitous misogynist violence that fills the Zolian universe with the bodies of dead women.

While Flore and Séverine provide variations on the notion of femininity in *La Bête humaine*, Jacques and Roubaud are consistently represented as fraternal *semblables*, apparent rivals but openly friends and amicable colleagues. A mutual desire and possession of Séverine, as well as a mutual tendency toward homicidal rage inspired by the female, unites them in a productive and positive way. Like Maxime and Aristide Saccard (*nés Rougon*), they enjoy a positive duality between the two of them, while Flore and Séverine suffer from a reductive, feminine duality, just as Renée Saccard does individually in *La Curée*. Jacques and Roubaud are also united by a small object that indirectly seals the contract of their fraternity, just as it economically seals the contract of Séverine's and Roubaud's marriage: the knife. A gift to Roubaud from his wife, the knife circulates throughout the novel as the instrument of each individual murder. Roubaud uses it to kill Grandmorin, and Jacques uses it in his attempts to kill Roubaud and others, and eventually to successfully stab Séverine to death. The phallic implications of this small, circulating object go beyond its physical form. Along with the pen and the train, the knife is one of the loci of power in the novel, and whoever wields it is able to exert power, in any number of ways, over the bodies of others: the gift of the knife to Roubaud participates in the economy that also affords him sexual access to his wife, while Jacques' inability to use the knife against Roubaud is suggestive of his inability to perform sexually with Flore and random women he stalks in street (although here the line between murder and sex is blurred). The use of the knife therefore seems to define

masculinity in the novel by affording its wielder complete control over the bodies of women.<sup>93</sup>

However, a remarkable moment between Jacques and Séverine puts into question the representational function of the apparently heavily symbolic knife. A brief question that could easily be brushed off as a lurid joke (“Is that a knife in your pocket, or...?”) destabilizes the very definition of Jacques’ masculinity, and therefore its ability to assume the burden of representing sexual difference. Just before Séverine sends off Jacques to kill her husband (a task he will fail to accomplish, due to his solidarity with his “semblable” [302]), she embraces her lover and feels the knife bulging in his pocket. Suddenly she feels a doubt: “était-ce bien le couteau qui renflait sa poche?” (305). She kisses him and rubs against his torso to be sure, finally groping with her hands to reassure herself. This brief moment of questioning resonates throughout the entire novel: what defines Jacques’ masculinity? These few lines, this bit of humor in an otherwise very dark novel, puts into question the notion of the phallus as defining difference. If Séverine can’t tell the difference between a knife and a penis, is there one? The question is essentially a negation: “is it a knife?” leaves no affirmative idea of what is in Jacques’

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<sup>93</sup> Total power over the female body is doubled for men, who can both kill women and give them orgasms, producing the same result of a lifeless body. Tolstoy illustrates this more directly than Zola in *Anna Karenina*, when the Count Vronsky sees the physical effect of his first adulterous encounter with the title character on her physical being: “He felt what a murderer must feel, when he sees the body he has robbed of life. That body, robbed by him of life, was their love, the first stage of their love. [...] But in spite of all the murderer’s horror before the body of his victim, he must hack it to pieces, hide the body, must use what he had gained by his murder. And with fury, as it were with passion, the murderer falls on the body, and drags it and hacks at it; so he covered her face and shoulders with kisses.” The narrator here blurs the distinction between Anna’s moral humiliation and her physical pleasure, and accordingly Vronsky’s social transgression and sexual prowess. As in Zola, the female duality is reductive and doubly negative, while the male duality is productive and doubly empowering. Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina* (New York: Barnes & Noble Classics, 2003): 140.

pocket, and the knife-as-penis analogy breaks down. Like Nana's *autre chose*, Jacques' difference is not linguistically representable. It is only through the mediation of Séverine's hands and inner monologue that the analogy becomes complete. We can also understand the Séverine/Roubaud pairing in these terms: Roubaud may dictate the fatal letter to Grandmorin, but Séverine controls the pen and physically produces the language. We have seen this sort of linguistic slippage in Zola before (for example, when Renée reads the graffiti in the restaurant with Maxime), and it always highlights both the gendering and gendered powers of written and spoken language. As we saw in *La Curée*, female speech and language are inherently tied to the body: Séverine writes, while Roubaud dictates. But *La Bête humaine* refines this paradigm by playing with the notion introduced in *Nana* that sexual difference cannot be represented by language because the sign always collapses. Jacques' defining characteristic *is not* a knife, and while Séverine searches for whatever it is, all she can reliably find and define is the knife itself.<sup>94</sup>

The representative (dys)function of the knife is paralleled by that of the train, a pseudo-phallic symbol on a much larger scale. The three scenes of Jacques' *maladie* are associated with three scenes of train malfunction. The first eruption of violent desire within the novel occurs when Jacques nearly stabs Flore at the sight of her milky white breasts; the first train incident is a breakdown between two large (white) snowbanks. Both incidents are without casualties, but they both foretell the tragedies ahead – and both take place within the vicinity of the Croix-du-Maufras, intersection of all violence

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<sup>94</sup> The symbolic and material importance of the knife is confirmed by two of Zola's potential titles for the novel, listed among more than one hundred possibilities in his preparatory documents: "Le couteau" and "La folie du couteau." Preparatory documents for *La Bête humaine*, Bibliothèque nationale, Ms., NAF 10274, folios 297-304.

within the novel. The second episode of Jacques' illness taking over, after Séverine's confession, is mirrored by Flore's sabotage that kills dozens, including herself, and injures many more. While Jacques' rage erupts more than ever before, circumstances spare both Séverine and the random stranger he stalks on the street; like the train crash, both he and Séverine miraculously escape, but the consequences of their time together are serious. In both cases, the final occurrences are fatal in every sense of the word. Jacques' final eruption of rage ends Séverine's life, while the ultimate train incident kills Jacques and unleashes a fiery nightmare train careening into the unknown, full of hapless soldiers speeding to the front of the Franco-Prussian War.<sup>95</sup> While Jacques' beloved train engine, named La Lison, is undeniably feminized in his relation to it, the structure of these three pairs of scenes shows the train as a phallic symbol whose representative functions emerge only as the train itself fails to function properly.<sup>96</sup> Through the multiple examples of function, dysfunction, and malfunction of these highly symbolic objects and their bearers, an overall dynamic of failed repression and of misrepresentation comes to light. The buried truth of the male human beast seethes beneath the surface of technological perfection and domination, inching its way out through the cracks of the representational system that keeps this civilization in order. Its points of escape lie at the seams of

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<sup>95</sup> Once again, Zola connects Nana and her distanced brother Jacques: *Nana* ended with gruesome, disfiguring death of the heroine and large crowds swarming the streets of Paris, reacting to the declaration of war with the refrain "À Berlin! À Berlin! À Berlin!"

<sup>96</sup> According to Dorothy Kelly, Jacques' attraction to La Lison is rooted in his preference for a reliably controllable machine-woman as opposed to the desiring, and therefore threatening, Flore and Séverine, who ignite his rage. See: Dorothy Kelly, "Gender, Metaphor, Machine: *La Bête humaine*," *French Literature Series* 16 (1989): 110-122.

difference (one of the multiple interpretations of *la fêlure*), and particularly of sexual difference, where representation fails.

### **“Tu ne sais pas, chéri”: Confession and the Female Body**

The escalating violence of *La Bête humaine* is easily understood and organized as a series of increasingly extreme acts of revenge, set off by the initial murder of Grandmorin. But the vengeance structure is not as clear-cut as it seems; more importantly, like the structure of discourse that informs the “truth” of the novel, this violence is inherently gendered within the paradigm of vengeance. In the sphere of the novel’s narrative timeframe, Grandmorin is the initial victim, and his death is witnessed from multiple perspectives that will open up conduits through which resonances of this initial violence will spread. But Grandmorin’s death is a reaction to the death of another victim: the virginal Séverine, the idealized gift of a wife that Roubaud loses the moment he learns of her sexual history. Roubaud’s motives are, to the modern reader, rooted in a petty jealousy over his own sexual property, and not in the concern he might have for the sexual abuse his adolescent wife suffered at the hands of her caretaker. In the logic of the Zolian patriarchy, the original victim is Séverine’s virginal purity. Despite this dissonance, Zola doesn’t abandon Séverine to an entirely oppressed role: he points to another “original” victim, Louissette, the young sister of Flore who was also molested by the *président*, and tragically died as a result. The parallel of Louissette and Séverine reminds us that, despite her husband’s reaction and the distrust of Grandmorin’s “true” heirs, Séverine is a victim, powerless and abused by the men in her life. Such a parallel is one of the hallmarks of Zola’s finely honed craft of the ungraspable truth, which shines in

this novel perhaps more than any other. The novelist carefully balances the Séverine-as-seductress image with the Séverine-as-helpless-victim one, never choosing a side, and letting the reader project a social fantasy onto the situation. Camy-Lamotte, the only character in *La Bête humaine* able to clearly decipher the “truth” from the signs he reads in an official capacity, is able to understand this balance and control it, turning it to his political advantage when necessary. The *assassin introuvable* becomes the (oxymoronically) concretized figure of this balance, a fictional killer, responsible for any inconvenient truths that the ruling class would like to keep in the dark. Even though he is the creation of the aggregated voice of the people, living first in rumors and whispers, Camy-Lamotte, perhaps understanding the Girardian scapegoating mechanism and hoping to exploit it, smartly encourages the “assassin’s” existence.<sup>97</sup> After all, it is the *original* crime he wants to keep quiet, and without a vengeful motive for Grandmorin’s death, there is no original referent of that vengeance. Roubaud’s circle of violence is, for the moment, neatly closed.

The reader knows, of course, that this isn’t entirely true. Once the fictional narrative of Séverine’s past is destabilized and a new space of truth is opened up, her

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<sup>97</sup> D.A. Miller connects the Foucauldian system of social discipline with official policing practices in the nineteenth-century novel through a process of disavowal: “the discretion of social discipline in the Novel seems to rely on a strategy of *disavowing the police*: acknowledging its affinity with police practices by way of insisting on the fantasy of its otherness.” Miller parallels this practice with the intratextual disavowing of police authority by criminals, but Zola reverses the mechanism. It is in fact the police who disavow the criminal, by choosing to ignore the truth to which the evidence points, even going so far as to allow the creation of a fictional killer: “une légende de police était en train de se former, romanesque : celle d’un assassin inconnu, insaisissable, un aventurier du crime, présent partout à la fois, que l’on chargeait de tous les meurtres et qui se dissipait en fumée, à la seule apparition des agents” (184). Maintaining Miller’s equivalence, Zola’s novel “acknowledges its affinity” with vigilante justice (and Foucauldian surveillance) by disavowing its authority. The positions are reversed, but the effect is the same. See: D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988): 16.



husband sends her to tie up the loose ends, first with Camy-Lamotte, then with Jacques. From this point on, the narration is punctuated by scenes of confession which are, remarkably, redundant for both the readers and the characters within the novel. No confession reveals any new information: it is the *confessions themselves* that carry meaning, and the act of speaking carries more weight than the contents of the speech. The confession is the true commission of the crime, and one senses that the crimes committed in the novel do not really occur until they are later confessed in detail.<sup>98</sup> But beyond their role in the detective function of the novel, confessions in *La Bête humaine* are integral to our understanding of language, communication, representation, and meaning, and particularly how these notions interact with the sexual difference that structures the Zolian universe.

As we saw in *La Curée*, the concepts of voice and speech in Zola are gendered, and these gendered differences are inherently linked to the male and female bodies. *La Bête humaine* explores all the possibilities of these differences, evoking the paradigm of the confession, or *aveu*, as the ultimate form of communication. The *aveu*, for Zola, is the only true *énoncé*: in a novel where the truth is elusive, murky, or even nonexistent, the *aveu* is a privileged discursive unit, or, in Foucault's term, "un rituel de discours."<sup>99</sup>

Three confession scenes, all featuring Séverine, offer multiple expressions of Zola's

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<sup>98</sup> This is an intriguing nuance to the *dire vs. ne pas dire* paradigm that informs *Phèdre* and subsequently *La Curée*, discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>99</sup> Foucault, *Histoire*, 87. For Foucault, of course, confession (*aveu*) is a crucial element of the construction of the apparatus of sexuality (*dispositif de la sexualité*), especially in the bourgeois milieu, beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Other than through an identification of the hystericization of the female body as part of the same constructive strategy, however, Foucault does not distinguish male confession from female confession.

conception of the *aveu*, which is more of a physical experience than a vocal one. It is worth noting here that Séverine is the only character that truly confesses in the novel, with the exception of the short scene where Jacques admits his love for her. But even that scene is more one of Séverine's confession, as it becomes clear through her manipulative speech *itself* that Séverine is admitting her guilt in the Grandmorin murder. Indeed, confession is a purely feminine form of speech in Zola, given its inherently physical character, as we shall see.

The first of these scenes is the pivotal one, where Séverine admits her sexual past with Grandmorin. We have seen how Séverine's discursive aberration incites a violent reaction in Roubaud, but this moment is not technically a confession; rather, it opens up the discursive space in which the confession becomes possible, even necessary. But Séverine, frightened by Roubaud's reaction and its consequences, is reluctant to speak her truth. Her husband cannot force the words *from* her, but instead speaks them himself, and forces them *into* her:

Il la jeta d'une secousse en travers du lit, il tapa sur elle des deux poings, au hasard. En trois ans, il ne lui avait pas donné une chiquenaude, et il la massacrait, aveugle, ivre, dans un emportement de brute, de l'homme aux grosses mains, qui, autrefois, avait poussé des wagons.

- Nom de dieu de garce! Tu as couché avec! ... Couché avec! ...  
Couché avec!

Il s'enrageait à ces mots répétés, il abattait les poings, chaque fois qu'il les prononçait, comme pour *les lui faire entrer dans la chair*.

- Le reste d'un vieux, nom de dieu de garce! ... Couché avec! ...

Couché avec! (43, emphasis added)

Roubaud makes up for Séverine's lack of explanation by furiously repeating the fragment "couché avec", unable to even form a complete phrase. Séverine's error, the forgetting of a lie that disrupted their conjugal peace, has resonated into Roubaud's speech, rendering him incapable of coherent language. This apparent linguistic regression is accompanied by a reminder from the narrator that his rage derives from a past self, a "brute [...] qui, autrefois, avait poussé des wagons." Roubaud's entire self is overtaken by an atavistic and animalistic other from his own past, released into the void opened up by Séverine's comment.<sup>100</sup> More remarkably, while he directs his physical violence at his wife, the source of Roubaud's rage is his own speech, and not a confession from Séverine's own voice: "Il s'enrageait à ces mots répétés." Furious at her lack of participation in her own confession, Roubaud wants to beat *his* words into *her* flesh; since feminine speech is anchored to the body, Roubaud wants to actually impress the confession into his wife's body, to bring order back to their relationship and to his world. His strategy works, and after repeated beatings and demands that she confess, Séverine concedes in order to spare her own life. This time, the information seems to shock him, despite his apparent earlier convictions of her guilt: "Cet aveu qu'il exigeait si violemment, venait de l'atteindre en

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<sup>100</sup> Indeed, as a reader begins the novel, Roubaud is presented as the titular *bête humaine*, as this is the opening scene of the text. It is only after a reader encounters Jacques that Roubaud begins to seem more or less average. But taken in the perspective of the whole text, Roubaud's minor case of Jacques' *maladie* serves to universalize the condition of the modern male. Lisa Downing even suggests that Jacques' condition is a natural consequence of societal conceptions of sexual difference (Downing, "Birth of the Beast," p. 35), and therefore Roubaud (himself taken over by an atavistic Other from his own past, in a *petite* version of Jacques' atavism) is just another instance of the universal *bête humaine*.

pleine figure, comme une chose impossible, monstrueuse. Il semblait que jamais il n'aurait supposé une infamie pareille" (44). There is clearly a discrepancy between Roubaud's realization of the truth and Séverine's admission of it. One inspires an atavistic, brutal rage; the other, shock and confusion. Knowledge of the crime and a pronounced admission of guilt have drastically different values, as we shall see in both of the subsequent confession scenes.

Unfortunately for Séverine, this is not the end of the ordeal. Her husband's capacity for both language and brutal violence return, and he smashes her head against the corner of the table, where "[d]es cheveux et du sang restèrent" (44). Now that he has forced the confession into her flesh, he extracts more from it, demanding both bits of her flesh and the communication of details, which, for Zola, are one and the same. As he continues to torture her physically, he demands that she speak more details of her experience, to the point where she gives every imaginable detail. This confession leaves Séverine physically exhausted, even annihilated: "Son être fuyait sous elle. Il lui aurait sorti le coeur, de ses doigts gourds d'ancien ouvrier. Et l'interrogatoire continua, elle disait tout, dans un tel anéantissement de honte et de peur, que ses phrases, soufflées très bas, s'entendaient à peine" (45). Zola likens the extracted confession to an extracted heart, and indeed, Séverine's pain is as physical as it is mental and emotional. From this point on in the chapter, she even loses control of her own voice, along with her "être." Her words lose their independence as they seep into indirect discourse, absorbed into the narration of the scene. This prefigures her passive participation in the subsequent murder: her husband dictates the letter that she will write to Grandmorin, and she will hold down

the victim so that Roubaud can kill him more easily. She is no longer a person, an *être*, but an instrument: a pen, a weight. Her physicality, like her voice, has been taken over by another for his own purposes. We shall witness a similar overtaking of Jacques' body, and particularly his hands, when his *maladie*, conceived as a possession, takes over him and drives him to kill.

A small, nearly charming detail earlier in this chapter renders the violent scene even more powerful. When Séverine first arrives home to an impatient Roubaud, she is not empty-handed:

« [...] Ah ! écoute, j'ai un petit cadeau. Dis : Mon petit cadeau.

Elle lui riait dans le visage, de tout près. Elle avait fourré sa main droite dans sa poche, où elle tenait un objet, qu'elle ne sortait pas.

« Dis vite : Mon petit cadeau. »

Lui riait aussi, en bon homme. Il se décida.

« Mon petit cadeau. » (31)

Séverine playfully forces her husband to parrot words back to her, in a scene the narrator characterizes with childlike innocence: “cette grande enfant passive, d'une affection filiale” (31). This playful moment represents an artificial idyll where the danger of releasing *la bête humaine* does not exist, or is at least kept at bay by Séverine's refusal to enter into a fully mature sexual relationship with her husband. This scene of innocent repetition will soon be replaced by the one of Roubaud's brutal verbal and physical beating, and the hidden object, an affectionate gift, will prove to be much more fatal when Jacques hides it in his own pocket: it is the knife that will be used to kill

Grandmorin and, eventually, Séverine. Such a scene so early in the novel is easily looked over or forgotten, but careful reading reveals Zola's refined art of dramatic irony and subtle foreboding that renders his prose so hauntingly poetic.

The second grand confession scene, also featuring Séverine, occurs during her visit to Camy-Lamotte in his office. Her husband has sent her to Paris expressly to calm any suspicions authorities may have on their account, with the intention that Séverine's charms will seduce Camy-Lamotte and dissuade him from investigating them as suspects. Séverine is indeed successful, although her visit doesn't go exactly as Roubaud had planned. Camy-Lamotte is in some ways a parallel figure to Grandmorin, each occupying a position of power in their respective institutions. The magistrate is fully aware of the political repercussions of an "inside job" so to speak, knowing that Grandmorin had a taste for young women under his care, and that the murder was likely motivated by revenge. He is also very aware of the Roubaud's marital situation, and correctly suspects that Séverine suffered at the hands of her benefactor and was likely presented to her current husband by her adoptive father. So when Séverine arrives in his office unsolicited and unannounced, he already begins to formulate the true narrative of the crime. Séverine, for her part, knows that Camy-Lamotte understands her past on some level, and that he would be suspicious of the young couple who, importantly, stand to inherit from the deceased. And, most crucially, Camy-Lamotte is in possession of the letter that Séverine sent to the victim, luring him to his doom; a simple handwriting comparison would be enough to indict the couple. But even without this written evidence, the

magistrate's innate ability to read signs gives him the truth of the matter, perfectly matched as it is against Séverine's "art inné de l'hypocrisie féminine" (157).

Séverine begins her seduction by inviting Camy-Lamotte to take up the privileged role of the father-lover: "Vous qui l'avez aimé, achevez sa bonne oeuvre, remplacez-le auprès de moi" (157). Immediately, the magistrate begins to soften, seeing Séverine in this new light: "comment la croire coupable, à la voir de la sorte, si paisible et si douce?" (157). Séverine, for all her naïveté and passivity, knows how to assume the role of the daughter-lover, doubly submissive and doubly possessed by the male other. She urges him to offer protection of her husband's career, as the scandal raised by the crime has put him in a compromising position. As is often the case with Zola's women, what Séverine says isn't nearly as effective as how she says it. The magistrate "étudiait jusqu'aux petits battements imperceptibles de ses lèvres" (158), honing in on the locus of female communication: the body. Notably, the narrator abandons direct discourse for indirect during Séverine's plea, then returns to direct discourse to express Camy-Lamotte's speech. It doesn't matter that the narrator usurps Séverine's speech, since Camy-Lamotte and the implicitly male reader are reading her body, not her words. Séverine tries to enter the game, trying to read beyond his words to determine if he is indeed in possession of the damning letter: "Elle aussi ne le quittait pas du regard, épiait les moindres plis de son visage, se demandant s'il avait trouvé la lettre" (158). But because the male voice carries an immaterial authority, distinct from the body, Séverine can't read his features, and can seek meaning only in his words. And that she does: judging his tone to be slightly exaggerated, she maintains her innocence and enters into the discursive trap he sets for

her when he asks for details about her fears regarding her husband's tarnished career. Séverine has no choice but to answer, and as she does so, she physically feels Camy-Lamotte's stare penetrating her body, reading the truth: "elle s'était sentie fouillée jusqu'à l'âme par ses yeux pâles" (158). She knows her body is the source of the hidden truth of her past, and that she cannot hide it.

What she can do, however, is turn the power of her body against a man whose desires are, at the most basic level, the same as every other man's in her life. Séverine masterfully walks a careful line, bringing up the potential scandal of the rumors incited by the murder, using her suggestive speech as a seductive entry into Camy-Lamotte's bodily desires. She even speaks the unattainable truth, teasing the magistrate with the utterance of their own crime, but leaving just enough to be desired:

- Mon dieu! Monsieur, c'est bien monstrueux, mais on nous a soupçonnés d'avoir tué notre bienfaiteur, à cause de ce malheureux testament. Nous n'avons pas eu de peine à démontrer notre innocence. Seulement, il reste toujours quelque chose de ces accusations abominables, et la compagnie craint sans doute le scandale. (158)

This suggestion of their involvement in the crime is enough to draw the magistrate into the seduction of Séverine's speech, voice, and body. He begins to find her attractive as she speaks these words:

Il fut de nouveau surpris, démonté, par cette franchise, surtout par la sincérité de l'accent. En outre, l'ayant jugée, au premier coup d'œil, d'une figure médiocre, il commençait à la trouver extrêmement séduisante, avec



la soumission complaisante de ses yeux bleus, sous l'énergie noire de sa chevelure. (158)

Mastery over her speech translates to mastery over her body, or at least its effect on others; the female body is a locus of communication, capable of rhetorical manipulation and the evocation of male desire. Camy-Lamotte fixates on her eyes and hair, the most powerful and meaningful areas of the female body in Zola, hearkening back to the Medusa that haunts both *Nana* and *La Curée*. He admits that even though she is not objectively beautiful, her speech draws attention to her body, and especially “la sincérité de l’accent”; that is, not the words themselves, but the voice that produces them. He even begins to understand his “old friend” Grandmorin’s attraction to such a “creature,” and reminisces about the days when he too could enjoy such “toys” without repercussion to his career: “Et il songeait à son ami Grandmorin, saisi d’une jalouse admiration: comment diable ce gaillard-là, son aîné de dix ans, avait-il eu jusqu’à sa mort des créatures pareilles, lorsque lui devait renoncer déjà à ces joujoux, pour ne pas y perdre le reste de ses moelles?” (158-159). Séverine’s plan is beginning to come together: she has succeeded in verbally/bodily (there is little distinction here) seducing Camy-Lamotte, to the point where he begins to fill the role of the influential dead man. But then, perhaps because Zola is not willing to hand over all the discursive mastery to a woman, she falters:

Mais Séverine, par une bravade de femme qui sent sa force, eut le tort d’ajouter: « Des gens comme nous ne tuent pas pour de l’argent. Il aurait fallu un autre motif, et il n’y en avait pas, de motif. » Il la regarda, vit

trembler les coins de sa bouche. C'était elle. Dès lors, sa conviction fut absolue. (159)

Relying too much on the bodily power of her speech, Séverine loses herself in the words to the point where the wrong ones come out. The magistrate snaps out of his spell and simply looks, particularly at the corners of her mouth, whose most minor movements betray an otherwise confident bodily control. The sudden pithiness of the language conveys the simplification of the entire paradigm: uncomplicated by the unreliable nature of female discourse, the conclusion of Camy-Lamotte's investigation is suddenly crystal clear. "C'était elle." The phrase is odd in its lack of reference: what is she? she is what? And yet, his conviction is "absolue": *elle* denotes her pure femininity, which is suddenly all he needs to know. Speech is no longer even necessary, and we return to indirect discourse. Séverine continues talking mechanically, disconnected from the bodily reflex of speech, but knows that it is entirely useless: "elle entendait sa voix continuer à causer du même ton égal, disant les mots qu'il fallait dire" (159). Camy-Lamotte knows he has won, Séverine knows she has lost, and the information they both seek (who has the letter? who wrote it?) is out in the open, without either having said it: "sous les paroles quelconques, tous deux ne parlaient plus que de choses qu'ils ne disaient point. Il avait la lettre, c'était elle qui l'avait écrite. Cela sortait même de leurs silences" (159). The truth is never spoken, but it makes itself known: Séverine's feminine speech has released it, without the reassuring structure of language upon which this society is built.<sup>101</sup> Silence

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<sup>101</sup> Jack Street points out that Denizet, who hears the conversation from another room but can't see Séverine, interprets the conversation entirely differently and remains convinced of the Roubauds' innocence. Without the legibility of the body, feminine speech can slip into the

and empty speech carries more meaning and conveys more information than words ever can because they allow the female body to achieve its full power of expression. *La Bête humaine* shows just how powerful silence and ignorance can be: the *non-dit* and the *indicible* of the narrative coalesce into the person of the *assassin introuvable*, who exists purely in discourse, but carries the burden of all the unknown and unspoken meaning of the novel.

While Camy-Lamotte's suspicions are confirmed by the mere presence of Séverine, this is not enough for the justice system. He needs concrete evidence, of course, and the space opened up by the young woman's problematic discourse gives him the opportunity to seize her one bit of remaining power: her written word, the concretized form of her voice. Handwriting is tied to the body, and is therefore an inherently feminine form of communication. Note that both times Séverine produces handwriting in the novel, she is not expressing her own words, but those of others, and particularly male others who hold authority over her: Roubaud and Camy-Lamotte, both substitutes for the original father-authority, Grandmorin. In both cases, the role of lover-father exercises power and control over female language, exploiting the young woman (and her handwriting) for their own personal gain. Control over writing is essentially control over the body, and in Zola, the balance of this control is always gendered. Séverine is merely an extension of her pen, an instrument of communication exploited for the exertion of power. The two writing samples of which Camy-Lamotte is in possession, the letter to

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polyvalent, and a purely Cartesian logician such as Denizet can't parse it reliably. See: Jack Street, "The Cinematic, the Visual, and the Scarcely Perceptible in Zola's *La Bête humaine*," *Excavatio*, 13 (2000): 209-213.

Grandmorin and the few words elicited from Séverine in his office, are essentially two pieces of Séverine's body, over which he now has complete knowledge and complete power.

The third, and crucial, confession scene is, in a way, a bookend to the opening one of the first chapter. Spending her first night with Jacques alone in Victoire's apartment, Séverine recreates her confession to her husband, in the very room where the pivotal first confession took place. Instead of confessing to a sexual experience, she gives Jacques every detail of the Grandmorin murder, even though he is already aware of her guilt. Once again, it is not the information itself that is crucial, but its conveyance: the signifier takes precedence over the signified. Jacques already knew the Roubauds killed Grandmorin, but Séverine feels a powerful need to give herself over, physically and verbally, to her new lover. The desire to speak is confounded with sexual desire, a logical confusion, given the inherently physical, and gendered, nature of speech. Zola paints this aggregate desire as uniquely feminine by beginning the scene with an initial sexual experience complicated by the female voice. Because of their presence in this room, the lovers must remain quiet to keep from rousing suspicion among their neighbors. The burden falls on Séverine who, after their first lovemaking session, comments to Jacques, "J'ai été sage, hein?" (254), wanting praise for keeping her voice down. This intimate moment between the two serves to highlight the privileged role of the female voice in sexual desire and satisfaction: a voiceless encounter is apparently worth remarking, and it is perhaps because of its voicelessness that Séverine nearly immediately feels a new desire, apparently unsatisfied from the last moment.

A short paragraph later, Séverine “brûla de nouveau”, and, “avec le désir, se réveilla en elle le besoin de l’aveu” (254). Already we have a sharp contrast to the previous episode that took place in this room, where it was Roubaud whose burning sexual desire violently forced the words from Séverine’s body. Now, she is the one burning to divulge her secret and her body, which, at this point, are one and the same. The desiring subject in Séverine, suppressed by Grandmorin and Roubaud, is liberating herself, and the consummation of her desire is necessarily communicative. In a novel so invested in the process of detection and the control of knowledge, Séverine’s singular comment to Jacques is telling: “Tu ne sais pas, chéri...” (255). She begins her seduction this way, repeating nearly this exact phrase three times. Jacques, of course, does know that the Roubauds killed the *président*, and Séverine knows this. But knowledge of the fact and knowledge of the narrative are distinct, and what Séverine is really saying is “I haven’t told you, chéri.” Indeed, while the reader, along with Jacques and Camy-Lamotte, know the *facts* of the murder, there has been no *narration* of it so far: while it has been committed, it has not been *uttered*, not even by the narrator of the novel. It is not until Séverine’s fully produced confession to Jacques, in direct discourse, that the crime seems to have truly happened.

The confession arouses both lovers, but the sensations are not purely sexual. Séverine’s physical desire is also “une agonie,” repeating the association of death and sex so prevalent in Zola, and prefiguring her own demise at the end of the novel. Jacques desires more details, but simultaneously feels cut off from Séverine emotionally: “Jacques la trouvait mainteant impénétrable, sans fond” (260-261). He refuses to make

love to her, even when she asks him to, and instead demands more details of the murder. She continues in the direct discourse that has now taken over the burden of the narration, until she is no longer able to produce the words. When she arrives at the description of the physical sensation of the murder itself, words fail her completely. From the lengthy paragraphs of her monologue, the text becomes a staccato dialogue between the lovers, nearly an interrogation, in which the repetition of key words leads to a destructive interference that ends the communication completely:

- Et alors, le couteau, tu as senti le couteau entrer?

- Oui, un coup sourd.

- Ah! Un coup sourd... pas un déchirement, tu es sûre?

- Non, non, rien qu'un choc.

- Et, ensuite, il a eu une secousse, hein?

- Oui, trois secousses, oh! [...]

- Des secousses qui le raidissaient, n'est-ce pas?

- Oui, la première très forte, les deux autres plus faibles.

- Et il est mort, et à toi qu'est-ce que ça t'a fait, de le sentir mourir

comme ça, d'un coup de couteau?

- À moi, oh! Je ne sais pas.

- Tu ne sais pas, pourquoi mens-tu? Dis-moi, dis-moi ce que ça t'a fait,

bien franchement... de la peine?

- Non non, pas de la peine!

- Du plaisir?

- Du plaisir, ah! Non, pas du plaisir!

- Quoi donc, mon amour? Je t'en prie, dis-moi tout... si tu savais... dis-moi ce qu'on éprouve.

- Mon dieu! *Est-ce qu'on peut dire ça?* (266-267, emphasis added)

Jacques pressures Séverine repeatedly to speak a crime that she has so far been unwilling or unable to utter. Just as her husband beat the words of her sexual past into her flesh after attempting to force himself on her, Jacques violently draws out a similar confession during a moment of intense sexual sensation. Séverine's language breaks down, and she is able only to parrot Jacques' words or give up entirely ("est-ce qu'on peut dire ça?"). The unsayable is what drives Jacques to lust and to murder, as it is rooted in difference, and particularly the sexual difference that women signify for him. As soon as Séverine finishes the above exchange, the two finally give in to their desires, "retrouvant l'amour au fond de la mort dans la volupté douloureuse des bêtes qui s'éventrent pendant le rut" (267). The bestial takes over where language left off and verbal expression becomes purely physical.

Afterwards, lying in bed with Séverine asleep on his arm, Jacques relives the murder he just witnessed, again, "avec une régularité mécanique" (268). Séverine's words have left an impression in his mind that takes over his consciousness and will release the Other within him, driving him to annihilate the female and the difference she represents. He doesn't kill Séverine at this moment, still having some control over himself and the ethos that is, at the surface, keeping his society together. Instead he leaves the room and roams the streets, hunting for a kill that will both satisfy his drive

and remain unnoticed enough to keep him out of jail. He stalks a stranger, fleetingly plans the murder, then loses his nerve once his victim boards a train and begins chatting with her friends. But this scene does prepare the climax of the novel, when Jacques' Other finally takes over completely and he kills Séverine, annihilating the difference that defines sex and gender and freeing him from a heredity which had taken over his mind and body.

**“De mâle en mâle,” *de mal en mal*: Mimetic Rivalry, Mimetic Violence**

The big question that readers of *La Bête humaine* invariably ask is simply: why? Why does Jacques kill his dearest love? What inspires his gynecidal rage? An initial comparison with his apparent foil, Roubaud, is illuminating. I use the term “apparent” because while situationally the two men are amorous rivals, their common object of desire serves more to unite than to divide them. That is, they correspond more closely to Eve Sedgwick’s model of homosocial relations than to René Girard’s model of mimetic antagonists. One could chalk this up to the fact that in our modern society, mimetic antagonism is kept at bay by various cultural and social structures; however, Zola’s novel exists in a world on the brink of slippage back into the “primitive” model, from homosocial bonding to antisocial violence. Jacques, of course, is the pin on which the balance hangs. For the majority of the novel, however, the two men are congenial coworkers, even when Roubaud learns of his wife’s affair. Their mutual desire for Séverine and their mutual (implied) antagonism with Grandmorin seems to solidify their bond, to the point where Jacques balks at Séverine’s request to kill Roubaud, having no personal vendetta against the man whose wife he is sleeping with. This is where Jacques



and Roubaud differ: Séverine's past affair with Grandmorin is enough to drive Roubaud into a murderous rage, while the thought of sharing Séverine does little to inspire Jacques' violent side. It is only when Séverine points out the pragmatic value of eliminating her husband that Jacques even considers it, but he is never able to complete the deed. In fact, it is Séverine's continued insistence that Jacques kill her husband that ultimately leads to her own demise.

So we return to the question: why does Roubaud kill Grandmorin, while Jacques does not kill Roubaud? Following the modern logic of jealousy and vengeance, as the judge Denizet does, one deduces that a man would kill to maintain possession of his wife; this is why he convincingly argues that Roubaud must have killed both Grandmorin and Séverine, using Cabuche as his hit man. After his arrest, Roubaud honestly admits to killing Grandmorin, and (also honestly) maintains that he did not kill his wife, despite his knowledge of her affair; but for Denizet, modern logic prevails, and he finds it impossible that Roubaud would tolerate one lover but not another. Once again, the truth is much less logical and much more murky, as Camy-Lamotte senses, but only according to the "rational", "modern" logic that Denizet so cherishes. What he cannot infer is that Séverine was indeed murdered out of sexual revenge, but that the offending trespass occurred at such a mental and chronological distance that "modern" logic cannot perceive it. Both Jacques and Roubaud act on impulses of inherently male violence modeled on Girard's mimetic rivalry model, but Jacques' rage is still rooted in an anterior paradigm that, in the world of *La Bête humaine*, can never truly be left behind.<sup>102</sup> This is the realm

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<sup>102</sup> Echoing Girard, Susan Blood calls this distanced reasoning "mimetic logic," in opposition to

of the primordial horde upon which Freud and Girard have so famously modeled their theories of human social psychology. Why does Jacques kill Séverine? Simply because she is a woman and he is a man. Sexual difference, once again, is at the heart of the matter.

According to René Girard, all cultural forms can be traced back in one way or another to the mechanism of the sacrificial victim, his understanding of the basis of all religion. And the mechanism of sacrifice is further traced back to desire, which Girard understands to be entirely mimetic: we desire objects only when they are desired by others, and therefore our desire is never really for the object at all. Mimetic desire inevitably leads to rivalry, and since the desire is contagious, the resulting violence is as well. Girard's theoretical community reaches a critical mass of violence or violent impulse, and ends up killing one of its members to rid itself of this impulse. The victim immediately takes on what Girard calls a sacred quality, as it has purged the community of a violent scourge that would have led to its destruction. Recognizing the murdered victim as sacred, the community then begins to ritually recreate the murder with surrogate victims, a process that becomes systematized over time, leading to the first primitive religion. Eventually all memory of the original crisis and the original "true" victim is forgotten, although it survives in myths and rituals shrouded in the sacred. Girard

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the linear, Cartesian logic to which Denizet subscribes. While her analysis purposefully eschews the misogyny of Jacques' bloodlust, she cites a cinematic replication of desire as the structuring force behind both his desire to murder and the novel as a whole: "Jacques gives himself over to the machine of mimetic desire from the moment that he identifies with Roubaud's image [when he witnesses the Grandmorin murder]. The heavy emphasis on Jacques's psychopathology obscures the fact of his identification with the mythic 'other'" (Blood, "The Precinematic Novel," 69). Further, among the oft-cited list of potential titles Zola considered for the novel, one finds "La logique du meurtre."

acknowledges that his theories overlap somewhat with Freud's as they are presented in *Totem and Taboo*; Freud uses the paradigm of the primordial horde to explain incest and patricide prohibitions. But Girard goes deeper in revealing mimetic desire as the ultimate driving force of social context.

Neither writer delves into the gender difference that is built into these structures. Girard speaks of a "crisis of distinctions," the result of mimetic rivalry run amok.<sup>103</sup> Difference and desire are inseparable in Girard's theory: difference spurs desire, and desire replicates itself to the point where difference is no longer possible. The surrogate victim, the one whose demise defines the ritual sacrifice, carries the burden of difference. Girard doesn't emphasize sexual difference as a factor in the choice of victim, which is somewhat understandable given that his main source material is Greek tragedy, although he makes passing mentions to sexual violence and sexual rivalry. In Zola, however, sexual difference is the prime difference, and the prime determinant of desire and therefore of violence. And like Girard and Freud, Zola conceives of his own primal horde as a mythic precursor to the violent modern man (predating even his own mythic ancestor, Tante Dide). And also like Girard, he conceives of violence as a *maladie*, a male illness that takes over the modern body and acts out its impulses against the wishes of the modern mind. But while Girard's primal violence reaches a paroxysm when differences are no longer discernible, Zola's is triggered by difference itself; or rather, by a dysfunction of difference that disrupts male solidarity and triggers the sacrificial crisis.

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<sup>103</sup> René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979): 49.

In short, Jacques kills Séverine (and nearly kills Flore) because their bodies represent the difference that the primeval man in him cannot tolerate.

On three distinct occasions in the text, the narrator repeats the following in nearly identical terms at the moments of Jacques' rage:

[C]'était comme une soudaine crise de rage aveugle, une soif toujours renaissante de venger des offenses très anciennes, dont il aurait perdu l'exacte mémoire. Cela venait-il donc de si loin, du mal que les femmes avaient fait à sa race, de la rancune amassée de mâle en mâle, depuis la première tromperie au fond des cavernes? Et il sentait aussi, dans son accès, une nécessité de bataille pour conquérir la femelle et la dompter, le besoin pervers de la jeter morte sur son dos, ainsi qu'une proie qu'on arrache aux autres, à jamais. (79)

Like Girard's primitive religious devotees, Jacques can't *remember* exactly why he feels the urge to kill women violently. Of course, Jacques has no such explanatory experience in his personal past, but his mind belongs to the greater, shared male memory. The Girardian mythic conception has condensed down into an individual endpoint, from an entire social community to a single person who carries the burden of policing difference and eliminating threats to the patriarchal order: his anger has increased as it has spread "de mâle en mâle." The text doesn't differentiate between a horizontal mimesis (men who spread the anger amongst themselves) or a vertical one (the rage has condensed and consolidated as it passes down through the generations), and in truth, it doesn't need to: the male sex is presented as homogenous, eternal, and evenly dispersed. Jacques may

have lost the *memory* of his ancestors, but the violent impulse hasn't dissipated. And once again, this violence is not derived from a lack of distinction between a man and his *semblable*: it is, and always has been, directed at the Other, "la femelle." Perhaps this is why the narrator qualifies this desire as "perverti." Jacques' desire is ultimately to "conquérir la femelle et la dompter", and not necessarily to selfishly keep all the women to himself, as Girard and Freud might suggest. Even though the passage ends with the notion that the primeval man desires to claim the woman as his own, and "[l']arrache[r] aux autres", the clause that begins with "ainsi qu[e]" renders this notion as purely analogical, perhaps to appeal to the modern logic that privileges mimetic rivalry.

The narration repeats nearly identical passages two more times in the novel: once when Jacques flees Séverine to kill a random stranger on the street, and once more when he finally kills the woman he loves. The repetition of the terms "la rancune amassée de mâle en mâle, depuis la première tromperie au fond des cavernes" is especially remarkable: the nearly-automatic reiteration echoes Jacques' automatic reflexes and loss of control at these moments. The language itself becomes robotic, even ritualized, as the narration aligns itself with a male perspective that has lost all touch with a conscious recognition of transgression. The unconscious of the human male seeps into the narration via the verbal expression of forgotten desires and drives.

The fact that these episodes occur repeatedly and nearly identically begs the question: what is their trigger? What inspires the primeval man to overtake the modern one in Jacques' body? It is clearly not just women, or even sexual arousal, for Jacques shares many intimate moments with Séverine and later with Philomène, without his

*maladie* taking over. If the rage of Jacques' ancestors was rooted in difference, it follows that Jacques' would be too. Indeed, the text suggests that a very specific signifier of sexual difference triggers Jacques' reaction: breasts. We saw in *Nana* that the heroine's body redefined the paradigm of sexual difference by questioning the primacy of the phallus as the defining characteristic of gender. Nana's breasts, representative of her *autre chose* that cannot be named, instead come to determine gender definitions: women have breasts, men do not. This is in direct opposition to the understanding that men have a phallus, and women do not; and even though *Nana* pre-dates Freud by several decades, its reconfiguration of the sexual difference paradigm is rooted in the conceptions that Freudian thought would later express. In *La Bête humaine*, it is the sight of breasts, and specifically their aggressively prominent display, that inspires Jacques' homicidal rage. The fact that his specific desire is to stab women in the chest, a desire accomplished during his final encounter with Séverine, aligns with this understanding.

The episode of Jacques' assault on Flore is presented as the epitome of the male versus female combat. Although Flore loves Jacques, and has longed desired his love, his physical approach and sexual advances trigger an automatic fighting reaction: "La guerrière se réveillait, cabrée, batailleuse, à cette première approche du mâle. [...] Elle eut un léger cri [...] où éclatait l'aveu de sa tendresse longtemps cachée. Mais elle luttait toujours, se refusait quand même, par un instinct de combat" (76). Flore is Jacques' female counterpart, a subject who, despite her modern emotional involvement, instinctively fights against the Other whose difference and otherness threatens her homogeneous identity. The two struggle, somewhere between intercourse and mortal

combat, until Jacques is able to grab Flore by the throat and rip her dress, exposing her breasts, which are, like Nana's, "durs et gonflés" (76). Jacques' demeanor immediately changes as he fixates on the female body before him, and particularly on the *gorge*, a term that in French encompasses the throat, the breasts, and everything in between. He reaches for Flore's scissors and "les aurait enfoncés dans cette gorge nue, entre les deux seins blancs, aux fleurs roses" (77). The color scheme of white and pink foreshadows the scene of the snowy train breakdown, but the theme of stabbing in the *gorge* will carry through every violent scene in the novel: Grandmorin, Séverine, Flore, and eventually Jacques will suffer fatal wounds in the neck, chest, or breast area. This first appearance of Jacques' raging *autre*, then, sets up the knife/*gorge* opposition, which itself echoes the phallus/breast distinction along which genders are redefined in Zola's texts.<sup>104</sup> The separating of the head and the neck also serves as a metaphor for the mind/body (or logic/instinct) divide along which all the violence in the novel is defined: Flore's body may desire Jacques, but her mind refutes him. Jacques may love Séverine, but an irrational Other takes over his body and destroys her. And the name Séverine itself recalls the act of severing, dismembering, or even *differentiating*. Indeed, the verb *sevrer* in French denotes the act of weaning an infant off breast milk: the ultimate differentiation between a mother's flesh (specifically, the breast) and that of her infant.<sup>105</sup> As her name

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<sup>104</sup> Recall Nana's disappointed young admirer Georges Hugon, who stabs himself in the chest with her sewing scissors, appropriating a feminine *snipping* tool for his own self-*stabbing* in the polyvalent *gorge*. The slippage in the snipping/stabbing function echoes that of the castration/penetration threat which tools such as knives and scissors (Flore's tool of choice) embody.

<sup>105</sup> Michael Lastinger has done an excellent analysis of the aborted murder scene, when Jacques stalks a stranger onto a train in order to satisfy his bloodlust with someone other than Séverine.

suggests, Séverine signifies difference, between bodies and between genders. And when her difference is visually exposed and verbally stimulated, Jacques' rage fatally erupts completely.

In the fascinating penultimate chapter of the novel, the lovers have planned to lure Roubaud to the Croix-du-Maufras, where Séverine will distract him while Jacques seals his fate. But when Jacques arrives and finds Séverine undressed and partially *couchée*, he sees her in a new light: a seductive and hypersexualized woman, no longer the docile lovmaker who satisfied his every (non-murderous) desire. Her commanding speech (no longer absorbed into non-threatening indirect discourse) and brazenly exposed body, and particularly prominent breasts, elicit his dormant *maladie*: “D’un mouvement câlin, elle s’approchait pour se pendre à lui de ses bras nus, levant sa gorge ronde, que découvrait la chemise, glissée sur une épaule. Et, comme il se reculait, dans une irritation croissante, elle se fit docile” (366). Once she gives in and becomes docile again, eventually covering herself in the bedding, the urge dissipates. But Séverine’s excitement resurges, and she again plans their crime aloud.

[- M]ême, en me déshabillant tout à l’heure, je songeais à un roman, où l’auteur raconte qu’un homme, pour en tuer un autre, s’était mis tout nu. Tu comprends? On se lave après, on n’a pas sur ses vêtements une

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The potential victim is chosen because of her motherhood, and her vocal discussion of the recent weaning of her child is the source of Jacques' pointed desire to kill her. See: Michael Lastinger, “Geo-Graphies: Writing on the Earth(Mother) in Émile Zola’s *La Bête humaine*,” in Freeman G. Henry, ed., *Geo/Graphies: Mapping the Imagination in French and Francophone Literature and Film* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003): 99-110.



seule éclaboussure... hein! Si tu te déshabillais toi aussi, si nous enlevions nos chemises?

Effaré, il la regarda. Mais elle avait sa figure douce, ses yeux clairs de petite fille, simplement préoccupée de la conduite de l'affaire, pour la réussite. Tout cela se passait dans sa tête. Lui, à cette évocation de leurs deux nudités, sous l'éclaboussement du meurtre, était repris, secoué jusqu'aux os, du frisson abominable.

- Non, non! ... Comme des sauvages, alors. Pourquoi pas lui manger le cœur? Tu le détestes donc bien? (367)

With a wink to his reading public, Zola evokes common tropes of crime and detective fiction by having Séverine cite “un roman” that inspires her method, setting up a *mise en abyme* that only serves to highlight the fact that procedural fiction, and even hyperbolized *faits divers*, artificially represents violent crime with false logic. It is also yet another instance of Séverine acting as the conduit by which writing becomes speech. But Jacques reads this as “sauvage”; for him, the utmost respect must be paid to his *semblable*, even as he murders him. Covering the female body is Jacques' last remaining hope of escaping his curse; seeing Séverine nude outside the bed, the designated realm of appropriate sexual activity, triggers the ancient rage tied to an independent female sexuality. And Séverine's continued insistence on speaking serves only to worsen the problem. Her feminine, physical speech aggravates Jacques' condition until he can take no more. Seeing the knife triggers a reflection on the never-ending circle he's about to enter into, killing the husband who killed the lover. An encouraging whisper from Séverine elicits a

violent reaction: “Est-ce que tu me prends pour un lâche? Cette fois, c’est fait, c’est juré!” (368). Although ostensibly he is promising Séverine that he will destroy their one obstacle to happiness, Jacques could just as easily be referring to the *mise à fin* of this never-ending cycle of homogeneous violence inspired by the female body, a task which the Other will take over for him. Zola once again plays with the analogy of sexual dysfunction in Jacques’ hesitation (“Il s’interrogeait déjà, inquiet, pareil à ces males qu’un accident nerveux frappe dans leur virilité” [368]), to really drive home the notion that Jacques’ violent rage is rooted in sexual difference and sexual identity, and to link sex and murder, Eros and Thanatos, *l’amour et la mort*. Jacques’ gendered bloodlust demands a lifeless body, and Séverine’s partially exposed chest continues to signify a female life and female sexuality that he cannot tolerate. Sensing her effect on him as he begs her to get back into the bed and cover herself, her “orgueil” (369) only makes things worse:

Étranglé, il ne soufflait plus. Une clameur de foule, dans son crâne, l’empêchait d’entendre; tandis que des morsures de feu, derrière les oreilles, lui trouaient la tête, gagnaient ses bras, ses jambes, le chassaient de son propre corps, sous le galop de l’autre, la bête envahissante. Ses mains n’allait plus être à lui, dans l’ivresse trop forte de cette nudité de femme. Les seins nus s’écrasaient contre ses vêtements, le cou nu se tendait, si blanc, si délicat, d’une irrésistible tentation; et l’odeur chaude et âpre, souveraine, achevait de le jeter à un furieux vertige, un balancement sans fin, où sombrait sa volonté, arrachée, anéantie. (369)

The emphasis is once again on Séverine's breasts, which "s'écrasaient" against Jacques, an odd choice of verb that lends a violent agency to this now threatening body part, to the point where Jacques is "étranglé" by them. The signifier of difference, the female chest, overwhelms Jacques with an "ivresse", and "l'autre, la bête envahissante" (371) literally takes over his body to destroy it. He stabs Séverine in the chest as she repeatedly asks "Pourquoi, pourquoi?" at first with her voice, then with her eyes.

« Embrasse-moi, embrasse-moi... »

Elle renversait son visage soumis, d'une tendresse suppliante, découvrait son cou nu, à l'attache voluptueuse de la gorge. Et lui, voyant cette chair blanche, comme dans un éclat d'incendie, leva le poing, armé du couteau. Mais elle avait aperçu l'éclair de la lame, elle se rejeta en arrière, béante de surprise et de terreur.

« Jacques, Jacques... Moi, mon dieu! Pourquoi? Pourquoi? »

Les dents serrées, il ne disait pas un mot, il la poursuivait. Une courte lutte la ramena près du lit. Elle reculait, hagarde, sans défense, la chemise arrachée.

« Pourquoi? Mon dieu! Pourquoi? »

Et il abattit le poing, et le couteau lui cloua la question dans la gorge. En frappant, il avait retourné l'arme, par un effroyable besoin de la main qui se contentait: le même coup que pour le président Grandmorin, à la même place, avec la même rage. Avait-elle crié? Il ne le sut jamais. (372-373)

From a desire to become entirely one with her lover (“Embrasse-moi”), Séverine slips into a panicked state of repetitive, mechanical language triggered by shock (“Pourquoi?”). Her repeated, automatic language is made all the more haunting by Jacques’ silence (“il ne disait pas un mot”). The blow itself is as much a reaction to Séverine’s voice as it is to her body, which are, essentially, one and the same. The narration brings both elements together when Jacques “lui cloua la question dans la gorge” with the fateful knife, echoing Octave Mouret’s imaginary stabbing of a woman with his pen in *Au bonheur des dames*. Jacques’ attack aims to annihilate the difference represented by the woman’s body, particularly the voice and the breasts, but, as the narrator points out, he recreates the Grandmorin murder nearly exactly, with the same weapon and the same wound. This act collapses the mimetic rivalry inspired by Séverine, and on which she was counting in order to escape the male lover-father once and for all; instead, Jacques, in his own crisis of distinctions, reaches a critical point where his very identity is threatened by the difference represented by the female body. He repeats the Grandmorin murder only to negate it; in killing Séverine in this way, he cancels out the petty jealousy of Roubaud’s crime and recalibrates the homosocial balance. He is no longer avenging “la première tromperie au fond des cavernes,” but returning order to a community where mimetic rivalry is starting to spin out of control. Killing Séverine, and in particular destroying her voice and her breasts, ends the cycle of murder that would have, in the end, left every man dead, and every woman alive.

This doesn’t mean, of course, that all is now right with the world. Séverine’s repeated “pourquoi” seeps into the indirect discourse of the narration, questioning the

finality of the act: “Pourquoi, pourquoi l’avait-il assassinée” (373). While Jacques feels relieved at having finally accomplished his instinctive wish to “posséder [la femme], toute entière, jusqu’à l’anéantir” (373), the narration, acknowledging a modern ethos that doesn’t allow, or understand, murdering one’s lover, doesn’t let him off the hook. A series of questions interrogates the true nature of Séverine’s murder, as modern logic and justice literally knocks at the door in the form of Roubaud, Cabuche, and Misard, threatening this grim idyll: “[E]t les deux meurtres s’étaient rejoints, l’un n’était-il pas la logique de l’autre?” (374); “Quoi? que s’était-il passé?” (374). The question of “logique” haunts Jacques almost instantaneously, without providing an answer. We have explored how Roubaud’s murder of Grandmorin and Jacques’ murder of Séverine both stem from a crisis of distinctions, and how vengeance is a driving factor in both. However, the question that haunts Jacques, *pourquoi?*, is representative of the contemporary moral logic that Denizet embodies, and will try to answer by explaining away the crime with a convenient fall man, Cabuche. But the *pourquoi?* never really dissipates: it remains the question on Séverine’s face when Misard and Roubaud find her cradled in Cabuche’s arms<sup>106</sup>, and it will explode outward as Jacques and Pecqueux are fatally mutilated by a wild train. This *pourquoi?* is the expression of the clashing of the male reaction to the

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<sup>106</sup> “Roubaud hocha la tête sans répondre, sans pouvoir détacher ses regards de Séverine, de ce masque d’abominable terreur, les cheveux noirs dressés sur le front, les yeux bleus démesurément élargis, qui demandaient pourquoi” (376). The last line of the climactic penultimate chapter once again evokes the image of Medusa, a figure that haunts the men of the entire Rougon-Macquart series. The particular emphasis on Séverine’s hair and eyes, and the fact that Roubaud is unable to move or look away, suggest that Séverine too will have her vengeance in death, just as the ghost of Flore appears to Jacques, “vengée à cette heure” (375), while he “se glaça” (375).

crisis of distinctions, the *bête humaine* that erupts in Jacques and Roubaud, and the modern moral logic of nonviolence and advanced civilization.

The more the *maladie* erupts into the modern society so enthralled with its own technological advancement, the less the term *maladie* itself becomes appropriate. For Jacques' *maladie* is really the universal truth of the human condition, not an anomaly. Shades of it come out in Roubaud and Misard, and even the ghost of Grandmorin. As the dying Phasie explains to Jacques in chapter two, "les bêtes sauvages restent des bêtes sauvages, et on aura beau inventer des mécaniques meilleures encore, il y aura quand même des bêtes sauvages dessous" (66). Like the blind Tiresias, the invalid Phasie is limited in movement but gifted with the word of truth; indeed, as her anti-aphasic name suggests, her speech is her defining essence, and she alone is able to express the truth of the world around her. As she slowly dies, poisoned by her husband, her voice is all that remains, and even in death, her eyes continue to speak, taunting Misard when he cannot find her hidden inheritance. Her speech, then, is purified and privileged; her comment on the "bêtes sauvages" can even be read as the key phrase of the novel. Its balanced structure is remarkably poetic, and the use of the future simple tense is eerily striking. One can almost sense a reply to Hugo's famous *ceci tuera cela*<sup>107</sup> with Phasie's insistence on continuity despite technological and cultural advances. The fact that Phasie speaks this phrase to Jacques is Zola's signature ironic wink to the reader, but it is a line from

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<sup>107</sup> Zola was clearly familiar with this phrase, having Claude Lantier cite it while marveling at the church of Sainte-Eustache in the middle of Les Halles: "Ceci tuera cela, le fer tuera la pierre, et les temps sont proches...." Émile Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris* (Paris: Folio Classique, 2002), 293.

Phasie's indirect discourse that seems to doom the characters of the novel and the French national pride in general. Gazing out her window at the endless waves of trains and passengers, she reflects on the sensation of seeing so many people pass her by anonymously: "Ça, c'était le progrès, tous frères, roulant tous ensemble, là-bas, vers un pays de cocagne" (66). Depending on one's reading of the novel, this phrase can appear more or less sarcastic, but Zola is certainly prefiguring the final scene of *La Bête humaine* and its parallel moment in *Nana*. Phasie's (possibly sarcastic) impossible dream imagines the train passengers as "tous frères," a homogeneous ideal in which a crisis of distinctions is either inevitable, according to René Girard's model, or impossible, according to Jacques' raging Other. Either way, it is a utopian ideal, like the "pays de cocagne", that the "bêtes sauvages" of modern humanity will never know. And, ironically, it is the female voice that expresses this irony. While Séverine's body and therefore speech may be cited as the ultimate cause of the anxiety of difference that haunts the male characters and even author of *La Bête humaine*, it is Phasie's privileged vocal expression that ultimately reads and speaks the truth of this uniquely Zolian detective novel.<sup>108</sup> Read in tandem, *Nana* and *La Bête humaine* show two sides of the same *fêlure*, the respectively female and male challenges to the economic and social *status quo* upon which the Second Empire is constructed; their twin endings doubly undermine this construction, unleashing

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<sup>108</sup> Returning to the list of proposed titles that Zola considered for the novel, it is worth noting that several possibilities mirror the centrality of the themes of progress and collective movement and its implied violent underside: "Sous le progrès", "En marche", "Tous frères", "Le monde en marche", "L'Humanité en marche", "L'envers du progrès", "Les dessous du progrès", and "Sous nos conquêtes." The author's choice, even if it never materialized, of "Tous frères" lends authority to Phasie's privileged speech while underscoring the universal bond between men exemplified by Jacques' and Roubaud's collegial relationship. But one in particular, "En route pour", elliptically aborts the destination, even the idea of destination: the *pays de cocagne* does not and never will exist, undermining even further the illusion of positive progressive movement.

the bestial humanity in the very machines that should be the sign of advanced modernity. While Jacques may have exacted an ancient revenge in killing Séverine, it is Flore, Phasie, and Nana who ultimately triumph, as the beast they unleashed destroys all in its path.



### Chapter Four:

#### **Bodies in Search of Texts: Experimental Staging and Narrative Mastery in *Thérèse Raquin***

*L'observateur et l'expérimentateur sont les seuls qui travaillent à la puissance et au bonheur de l'homme, en le rendant peu à peu le maître de la nature.*  
Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental*<sup>109</sup>

For Henri Mitterand, the realist novel marks the emergence of the body in literature; not the “corps textuel” of Romanticism, but a body that takes up space and interacts with the space around it: “la relation entre le corps et l’espace, entre le corps et son espace”, is reconsidered, revalorized, and re-represented in realism.<sup>110</sup> As Émile Zola’s first mature foray into the realist novel, *Thérèse Raquin* can be read as an investigation into the relationship between bodies and texts: how they inhabit and evoke each other, as well as the problematics of the legible body—and not just the female one. The choice of the female protagonist’s full name as the title of the novel is a relatively late one. The text’s first incarnation was as a three-page short story, *Un mariage d’amour*, published in *Le Figaro* on December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1866. Instead of Thérèse, Camille, and Laurent, however, the main characters were named Suzanne, Michel, and Jacques, and the story included no other characters. *Un mariage d’amour* was fleshed out into a longer novel and published serially in *L’Artiste* the next year, then as an integral novel later in 1867 under its current title. How do we account for the shift in titles, and especially toward one of the two protagonists who seem to share an equal burden in the

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<sup>109</sup> Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 75.

<sup>110</sup> Henri Mitterand, “L’espace du corps dans le roman réaliste,” in *Au bonheur des mots: Mélanges en l’honneur de Gérard Antoine* (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1984), 341.

central drama? The answer may lie in the textual space, that occupied by, and that taken up by, the female body. The opening scene of the novel zeroes in on both, starting from an identifiable intersection of Parisian streets that take on anthropomorphic qualities, with walls that are “suant toujours une humidité âcre” and that release “des souffles humides.”<sup>111</sup> The vocabulary of the dark, humid tunnel and a breathing hole evokes a bodily interior, particularly that of the female genitalia. As the narrative voice moves through the space of the passage du Pont Neuf, a sudden switch in tense from the present to the imperfect signals a textification, from description to narration, with an appropriately textual signal:

Il y a quelques années, en face de cette marchande, se trouvait une boutique dont les boiseries d’un vert bouteille suaient l’humidité par toutes leurs fentes. L’enseigne, faite d’une planche étroite et longue, portait, en lettres noires, le mot: *mercerie*, et sur une des vitres de la porte était écrit un nom de femme: *Thérèse Raquin*, en caractères rouges. (66-67, emphasis is Zola’s)

In a text already announced by a title, we find another: the title of the space of the novel, both the protagonist and her boutique. This instance of the famous name is also an epitaph, a name inscribed to denote the body of the formerly living, to commemorate their existence and tie their body to the text of their life.<sup>112</sup> To further drive home the

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<sup>111</sup> Émile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), 66. Going forward, in this chapter, all page numbers given in parentheses refer to this edition.

<sup>112</sup> Naomi Schor elaborates on the privileged role of the epitaph in Zola’s universe: “The epitaph is then an exemplary form of writing not only because of its extreme vulnerability to erasure, but also because for Zola it consists necessarily of that most privileged of written words, the proper

bodily association, Zola paints Thérèse's body with the same lines and colors as her announcing text, with the same mythic imperfect tense:

[O]n distinguait derrière les bonnets de l'autre vitrine, un profil pâle et grave de jeune femme. Ce profil sortait vaguement des ténèbres qui régnaient dans la boutique. Au front bas et sec s'attachait un nez long, étroit, effilé; les lèvres étaient deux minces traits d'un rose pâle, et le menton, court et nerveux, tenait au cou par une ligne souple et grasse. On ne voyait pas le corps, qui se perdait dans l'ombre; le profil seul apparaissait, d'une blancheur mate, troué d'un œil noir largement ouvert, et comme écrasé sous une épaisse chevelure sombre. Il était là, pendant des heures, immobile et paisible[.] (67)

Note how the “profil”, “nez”, and “lèvres” are all the active subjects of their own verbs, independent of belonging to a human, pure form. Responding to the “planche étroite et longue” of the street sign is a “un nez long, étroit”; to the “caractères rouges”, “les lèvres... deux minces traits d'un rose pâle”, and finally to the “lettres noires”, a “œil noir.” There is little distinction between the black and red text of the sign and the black and pink lines that make up the outline of Thérèse's body (and she is, for now, pure outline). While the sign points to the existence of a store space, the “profil de jeune femme” signals a hidden “corps, qui se perdait dans l'ombre.” And to completely fuse

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name. [...] Both Girard and Derrida contribute to valorizing the tombstone as the sole *trace* of a pre-text no longer available, an origin receding into the unknowable. With Girard we dwell on *who* is buried *below* the stone; with Derrida we focus on *what* is erased on the stone. But the victim (signified) and the epitaph (signifier) are inseparable; together they constitute a *sign* of the original violence.” Thérèse's position as the *pharmakos* of her story is thus doubly signified from the beginning of the text. Schor, *Zola's Crowds*, 71-72.

body and text at the grammatical and morphological level, Thérèse becomes “il”, *un profil, un corps*. It is not that her femininity has been effaced, but rather that her body is so ingrained in the textual space that it fuses with the femininity of the space itself. Body and text are not unproblematically confused, but Zola will use *Thérèse Raquin*, and Thérèse Raquin, to explore the full extent of this confusion and its novelistic possibilities.

Unlike that of *La Bête humaine*, the plot of *Thérèse Raquin* is relatively simple, a fact attested to by its initial, three-page iteration. Laurent falls in love with his friend's wife and cousin, Thérèse. The two plot to murder the weak husband Camille and do so by drowning him in the Seine in a staged boat accident. They then manipulate the grief-stricken mother/aunt, Madame Raquin, into consenting to their own marriage, but grisly hallucinations of Camille's dead, rotten body in their marital bed prevent them from ever enjoying the fruits of their crime. Driven to madness by their guilt, the couple commits suicide by drinking poison. The relatively simple plot and restricted perspective of the narration allow for a detailed investigation into the physical, emotional, and psychological symptoms of the two murderers. Zola is less interested in what drives the two to murder than how the act itself affects them. The distribution of the plot supports this thesis: of the novel's 32 chapters, 22 occur after Camille's murder. And as in *La Bête humaine*, the intervention of a judicial or policing force is completely disavowed, allowing for a more pure examination of Laurent's and Thérèse's breakdown by the true authority: the author, observer-*cum*-experimenter.

As Dorothy Kelly explains, “the Naturalist investigation into heredity is the investigation of woman, sex, and reproduction.”<sup>113</sup> Paradoxically, no other text in the Zolian universe seems more disconnected from heredity or more invested in this very investigation than *Thérèse Raquin*. Zola experiments with female sexuality, female physiology, and male reproduction, but the term “Naturalist” here seems to lose some of its footing. How do we reconcile the supernatural and fantastical elements of *Thérèse Raquin* with the realist, naturalist philosophy that informs the overall extent of Zola’s thought? *Thérèse Raquin* may not be a purely realist novel, but its openly declared documentary function gives us insight into the budding naturalism that will eventually structure the entire Rougon-Macquart cycle. If, as Kelly argues, and as we have seen in the texts studied so far, “Zola’s naturalist texts [...], in their quest for the ‘pure’ truth, carry out their project at the expense of women,” then *Thérèse Raquin*, as the author’s “supernaturalist” novel, goes beyond experimentation on women; with this novel, Zola opens up the investigation into the very categories of male and female that he will later exploit to drastic effect in the Rougon-Macquart series.

### **Maternity and Sexuality: The Male Womb and the Female Tomb**

As we saw, from its first lines, *Thérèse Raquin* privileges an interior female space, that is, broadly speaking, the maternal womb. The general critical mass of Zola’s studies tends to categorize maternity and fecundity as the epitomes of sainthood in Zola’s personal moral philosophy. Non-reproductive sexuality, for example, is one of the hallmarks of corrupted Second Empire decadence, and female sexuality is especially

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<sup>113</sup> Kelly, “Experimenting on Women,” 244.

damaging and dangerous when not channeled exclusively into procreation. The later *Évangiles* are often cited as evidence of these beliefs, but Jean Borie argues that this is not a consistent attitude in Zola's works, and maternity and procreation in the Rougon-Macquart novels is often excessive and nearly diarrheal.<sup>114</sup> There are no narrations of biological births in *Thérèse Raquin*, and the logic of biological reproduction expressed by the text is problematic, as we shall see. But a continual force of maternity is nevertheless present in the singular figure of Madame Raquin whose existence is defined by her role as life-giver and life-creator. A widow whose decrepit bodily health worsens over the course of the novel to the point of full-body paralysis, she is no longer capable of physically giving birth; instead, she continually medicates her only son Camille, feeding him medicine that keeps him alive but weak. Stunted and frail, he is physically infantilized and kept in that state by Madame Raquin's forced physical mothering:

Arrêté dans sa croissance, [Camille] resta petit et malingre. Ses membres grêles eurent des mouvements lents et fatigués. Sa mère l'aimait davantage pour cette faiblesse qui le pliait. Elle regardait sa pauvre petite figure pâlie avec des tendresses triomphantes, et elle songeait qu'elle lui avait donné la vie plus de dix fois. (71)

Camille is presented as a feeble body whose arms and legs have their own sickly movements, much as the child who has yet to pass out of the mirror stage feels uncoordinated and unwhole. This feebleness leaves Camille literally folded up ("cette faiblesse qui le pliait") in a fetal position. Maintaining her son in the physical state of an

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<sup>114</sup> Jean Borie, *Zola et les mythes, ou de la nausée au salut* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1971), 31.

unborn child leaves Madame Raquin in a state of triumphant maternity, not just having a son, but continually gestating and rebirthing him. The mother's love for her son is not even truly for him, but for him *as a projection of her maternity*: "Elle l'adorait pour l'avoir disputé à la mort pendant une longue jeunesse de souffrances" (70). But her role as life-giver is predicated on her ability to keep her son in as close to a pre-life state as possible; this ambiguous balance between life and death, birth and murder, is what Freud grapples with in his reevaluation of the primacy of the pleasure principle and the sexual drives. And, as non-reproductive sexuality is demonized in Zola's main body of work, non-sexual reproduction is equally horrifying.

The constant states of birthing and maternity are inscribed into the very texture of the novel whose setting, the passage du Pont Neuf, is first described, as we saw, as "suant toujours une humidité âcre" (65), while the boutique is "humide et obscure" (76), a quality that will later enhance the sensation that the lovers are in close contact with Camille's drowned cadaver. The liquidity of the entire text is not lost on critics such as Jean Borie who have even seen in it a precursor to Sartre's *nausée*, especially given the ennui of Thérèse's existence.<sup>115</sup> Dorothy Kelly has examined the femininity of liquid, and especially of water, in Zola, and its close association with female sexuality and its inherent danger for men.<sup>116</sup> But the humid, moist texture of *Thérèse Raquin* evokes especially the liquidity of the interior of the mother, and therefore of prenatal existence. That Camille is killed by drowning is an extreme extension of a life lived *in utero*. The choice of the passage du Pont Neuf as the address of the Raquin household may have

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Kelly, "Assigning Blame."

been a random one by Zola, and we have no preparatory materials to say otherwise. The choice of a *passage* is certainly intentional, given its symbolic and atmospheric weight, but the passage du Pont Neuf specifically is intriguing, as the name suggests both a tunnel (interiority) and a bridge (water), heightening the sense of dangerous arousal that Laurent will later feel while working his way through the *passage* to his mistress's bedroom.<sup>117</sup>

In *Thérèse Raquin*, intrauterine existence is the equivalent of the state of quiescence toward which organic matter tends to lead itself; that is, the ultimate goal of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In other words, the purpose of life is (natural) death, and Freud identifies this drive towards a state of inanimate peace as a death drive. This is Freud's answer to the problem of self-destructive behavior and certain psychic phenomena that seem to defy both the pleasure principle and the reality principle, such as the compulsion to repeat that defines what we would now understand to be symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder. All life, he argues, longs to return to a state before life began. In the case of individuals, this appears to be a longing to die naturally. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud does not go as far as to explicitly apply the rule that ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny and does not suggest that individuals long to return to the state before their *individual* life began; that is, a return to the womb.<sup>118</sup> The men of *Thérèse Raquin* are defined by their desire for peaceful, inanimate life, enveloped in warmth and exhibiting minimal energy. Camille's blissful idyll of a

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<sup>117</sup> "Dès l'entrée du passage, il éprouva des voluptés cuisantes. [...] Alors, rapidement, il entra dans l'allée; il monta l'escalier étroit et obscur, en s'appuyant aux murs gras d'humidité. Ses pieds heurtaient les marches de pierre; au bruit de chaque heurt, il sentait une brûlure qui lui traversait la poitrine." (92)

<sup>118</sup> He does, however, refer to the "phantasy of intrauterine existence" in other texts, namely *The Uncanny*. Freud, "The Uncanny," 244.



small post in a large corporation, as well Laurent's lazy desire to do as little as possible while being doted upon by a mother figure, both speak to a male desire to return to a still, intrauterine state; Laurent in particular longs to replace Camille in the care of Madame Raquin, and this drive outshines even his sexual desire for Thérèse as his main motivation for murdering Camille.<sup>119</sup> Thérèse, however, feels trapped and even buried alive in the dark, humid passage du Pont Neuf. For her, such an existence falls into the death end of the spectrum; her name inscribed on the sign in front of the boutique reads as an epitaph, an image that ironically opens the novel and announces the *non-vivant* character of the text, much as the aire Saint-Mittre opens the Rougon-Macquart cycle with an announcement of death.

While the entire novel does not take place solely in the Raquin boutique, the narration is nonetheless predominately limited to this claustrophobic space that is not only spatially but also temporally restricted. One of the most striking features of this short novel is its isolation; it is entirely ahistorical, and its characters seem to exist exclusively within the sphere of the text with no sense of belonging to world beyond the events of the novel. One could argue that any fictional character is nothing more than the sum of words on the page with no external existence, but given the historical rooting of the Rougon-Macquarts and the highly developed universe in which their lives play out, the world of *Thérèse Raquin* is comparatively restrained and isolated. This effect is

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<sup>119</sup> “Certes, le désir de posséder à lui seul sa maîtresse était entré pour beaucoup dans la pensée de son crime, mais il avait été conduit au meurtre peut-être plus encore par l'espérance de se mettre à la place de Camille, de se faire soigner comme lui, de goûter une béatitude de toutes les heures. [...] la vérité était qu'il avait cherché à assurer, par un assassinat, le calme et l'oisiveté de sa vie, le contentement durable de ses appétits.” (158)

intentional on the part of Zola, who desired a controlled environment in which to perform his observational experimentation described in the novel's famous preface of the 1868 edition. But a side effect of this structure is an enhanced familial perspective; the familial relationships of the characters are emphasized by their isolation and by the author's focused lens which serves to show that the group in focus belongs to a singular family. The suggestion of incest inherent in Thérèse and Camille's marriage is heightened by the claustrophobia not only of the passage du Pont Neuf, but also of the text itself.

If the story of *La Bête humaine* is the horror of sex, then that of *Thérèse Raquin* is undoubtedly the horror of family. When the author claims in the above-mentioned preface that the text is a study of "des tempéraments et non des caractères" (59), we should understand "tempéraments" to mean gendered familial belonging: for example, Laurent's lazy, sanguine desires to feel comforted and doted upon are in direct relation to his desire to be mothered, while Camille's sickness is a direct result of his own overbearing mother's care.<sup>120</sup> The novel, then, is a study of maternity, and in particular of maternity devoid of sexuality. As we shall see, reproduction without copulation will transform into a grotesque nightmare, contributing to the physical horror of the two main characters.

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<sup>120</sup> François-Marie Mourad also links the term "tempéraments" to family belonging through the idea of each character being under the sole influence of inherited family characteristics. While *Thérèse Raquin* does begin to engage with the notions of heredity that will blossom into the core of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle, within the sphere of the novel itself, its effects are negligible. Thérèse's feline, animalistic qualities are more linked to her connection to the exotic space of Algeria (and to the alterity of her femininity) than to her parents as individuals. See: François-Marie Mourad, "Thérèse Raquin: roman expérimental," *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* 84 (2010): 157-164.

Rohini Bannerjee, in a study of the novel's orientalist themes, notes that notions of parentage are destabilized from the beginning of the novel.<sup>121</sup> Thérèse ends up in the care of her aunt when the latter's brother presents her with an infant, saying "Voici une enfant dont tu es la tante" (71), and, notably, not "Voici mon enfant." Paternity is thus subsumed into maternity (albeit displaced from the mother to the aunt), and therefore entirely disavowed. Madame Raquin is thrilled at the prospect of double maternity, and sees in Thérèse not only an additional object of her own maternity, but as a future mother for Camille:

Mme Raquin regardait ses enfants avec une bonté sereine. Elle avait résolu de les marier ensemble. Elle traitait toujours son fils en moribond; elle tremblait lorsqu'elle venait à songer qu'elle mourrait un jour et qu'elle le laisserait seul et souffrant. Alors elle comptait sur Thérèse, elle se disait que la jeune fille serait une garde vigilante auprès de Camille. Sa nièce, avec ses airs tranquilles, ses dévouements muets, lui inspirait une confiance sans bornes. Elle l'avait vue à l'œuvre, elle voulait la donner à son fils comme un ange gardien. (73)

Madame Raquin therefore sees Thérèse as a child, a sister, a wife, and a mother, all in relation to her and her own son. Her desire to multiply her own motherhood entraps Thérèse in a cycle of endless relational femininity defined by an all-encompassing maternity.

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<sup>121</sup> While Bannerjee specifically relates Degans' abandonment to the greater colonialist mission, its implications on the representation of family are equally remarkable. See: Rohini Bannerjee, "Hors du mythe exotique: *Thérèse Raquin* et ses tactiques," *Excavatio* 16, nos. 1-2 (2002): 100-111.

This also has the effect of dissolving the differences that would define the familial roles of each character. Generational and gender differences are neutralized to the point where Thérèse loses all subjectivity. While the marriage of cousins was not legally or morally transgressive at the time, the coupling of Camille and Thérèse is problematic in its lack of differentiation between their two bodies. Since her arrival in the Raquin household, Thérèse has been drawn into the same psycho-physical space where her aunt keeps Camille in a constant state of prebirth. From the moment Thérèse arrives in Vernon, Madame Raquin treats them as her two biological children, giving them the same medications to corporeally adopt them essentially into the same womb.<sup>122</sup> They sleep in the same bed “sous les tièdes tendresses de sa tante” (72)<sup>123</sup> in a generalized scene of warmth, humidity, and cramped space.

Thérèse grandit, couchée dans le même lit que Camille, sous les tièdes tendresses de sa tante. Elle était d’une santé de fer, et elle fut soignée comme une enfant chétive, partageant les médicaments que prenait son cousin, tenue dans l’air chaud de la chambre occupée par le petit malade. Pendant des heures, elle restait accroupie devant le feu, pensive, regardant les flammes en face, sans baisser les paupières. Cette vie forcée de convalescente la replia sur elle-même [...]. (72)

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<sup>122</sup> Zola’s art of foreshadowing is at its height in *Thérèse Raquin*: Thérèse is forced to drink medications that make her ill to solidify her union with Camille much as she will end her life drinking poison with Laurent in mutual suicide.

<sup>123</sup> The alliteration in this sentence, in conjunction with the Raquins’ predilection for drinking tea, suggests a source for the name “Thérèse” (recall that the character was initially named Suzanne): *thé*, the liquid prepared by the mother/wife and consumed by the son/husband/brother, is inscribed into Thérèse’s very identity.

Enveloped in warmth, consuming exactly what her substitute brother consumes, and folded up upon herself (“accroupie”, “replia sur elle-même”), Thérèse experiences a second intrauterine existence, one that replaces the elliptical birth that the text effaces, and that collapses as many distinctions between herself and Camille as possible. With minimal physical difference between herself and her husband, there is little to no sexual desire or compatibility. She does not see him as a man, that is, as a sexual other that inspires desire. Her marriage to Camille means nothing more than going to bed in a different room: “Le soir, Thérèse, au lieu d’entrer dans sa chambre, qui était à gauche de l’escalier, entra dans celle de son cousin, qui était à droite. Ce fut tout le changement qu’il y eut dans sa vie, ce jour-là” (74). Thérèse’s later arguments with Laurent further drive home the lack of difference between her and her cousin: “Je l’aimais comme une sœur”, she says, with more than enough ambiguity as to whether “sœur” refers to herself or Camille (231).

It is not until Laurent’s arrival that Thérèse’s vibrant passion, dulled by the smothering maternity of her aunt and forced marriage to her lifeless cousin, becomes fully realized into sexual desire.

Thérèse, qui n’avait pas encore prononcé une parole, regardait le nouveau venu. *Elle n’avait jamais vu un homme*. Laurent, grand, fort, le visage frais, l’étonnait. Elle contemplait avec une sorte d’admiration son front bas, planté d’une rude chevelure noire, ses joues pleines, ses lèvres rouges, sa face régulière, d’une beauté sanguine. Elle arrêta un instant ses regards sur son cou; ce cou était large et court, gras et puissant. Puis elle s’oublia à

considérer les grosses mains qu'il tenait étalées sur ses genoux; les doigts en étaient carrés; le poing fermé devait être énorme et *aurait pu assommer un bœuf*. Laurent était un vrai fils de paysan, d'allure un peu lourde, le dos bombé, les mouvements lents et précis, l'air tranquille et entêté. *On sentait sous ses vêtements des muscles ronds et développés, tout un corps d'une chair épaisse et ferme*. Et Thérèse l'examinait avec curiosité, allant de ses poings à sa face, éprouvant de petits frissons lorsque ses yeux rencontraient son cou de taureau. (84, emphasis added)

The narrator, through Thérèse, depicts both the visibility and legibility of Laurent's body: we know how much space it takes up and therefore from whence it came ("un vrai fils de paysan"). Laurent is more than just surface, he is volume, with meaning to be gleaned from beyond the surface of his "vêtements," a sexualized male body. Thérèse realizes, in a moment of telling appropriation by the narrator, that "elle n'avait jamais vu un homme." The nuanced meaning of the term *homme* is further problematized by his animalistic characterization, particularly his "cou de taureau." For Thérèse, *homme* means more than just not *femme*: Laurent is a body, one that has an immediate effect on her own ("de petits frissons"). But this arousal is also immediately tempered by danger: Laurent's body is so strong that he could "assomer un bœuf." The novel has so far been steeped in a death that existed before life, but Laurent's arrival signals the possibility of a death brought about by life, by an energetic body.

Camille's lack of physicality, and lack of masculinity, never allowed for the expression of Thérèse's femininity, which remained suppressed in forced infancy by her

aunt. Laurent's arrival will awaken both her sexuality and her femininity, a trait we shall see only through the man's subjectivity:

Laurent étonné, trouva sa maîtresse belle. *Il n'avait jamais vu cette femme.*  
 [...] Au premier baiser, elle se révéla courtisane. Son corps inassouvi se jeta éperdument dans la volupté. Elle s'éveillait comme d'un songe, elle naissait à la passion. Elle passait des bras débiles de Camille dans les bras vigoureux de Laurent, et cette approche d'un homme puissant lui donnait une brusque secousse qui la tirait du sommeil de la chair. Tous ses instincts de femme nerveuse éclatèrent avec une violence inouïe [...]. (93, emphasis added)

Just as Thérèse “n'avait jamais vu un homme”, Laurent “n'avait jamais vu cette femme.” The shift from the indefinite article to the demonstrative is indicative of Laurent's belonging to the male eternal, the homogenous, unchanging masculinity that linked Roubaud, Jacques, and all the men of history in *La Bête humaine*. Thérèse, on the other hand, is an anomaly, a woman just discovering sexuality through a metaphorical birth (“elle naissait à la passion”), as if Laurent has created her through sex in a perverted recursion of procreation. Such powerful feminine sexual passion is not without its dangers: not only is Thérèse's shedding of her nervous temperament “une violence”, but Laurent is uneasy, even horrified at the “spectacle” (94) of her sexuality: “Les crises de Thérèse l'épouvantèrent presque, tout en irritant ses curiosités voluptueuses. [...] Il voulait oublier, ne plus voir Thérèse dans sa nudité, dans ses caresses douces et brutales” (93). Seeing his lover's naked body only adds to his horror, but the fright seems only to

heighten Laurent's sexual pleasure. This fine line between sex and horror, between life and death, structures the entire novel, and is clearly linked to Thérèse's sexuality and the "air pénétrant et âcre" that her body releases in Laurent's presence (93).<sup>124</sup> Like Nana, Thérèse's sexuality is more penetrating than penetrated, so much so that her physiology will infect her lover's.

The danger of fatal violence linked to sex is a constant for Zola, who will most thoroughly develop this theme in *La Bête humaine*. The relationship between Laurent and Thérèse is as violent as it is passionate, as the narration of their first encounter shows:

Puis, d'un mouvement violent, Laurent se baissa et prit la jeune femme contre sa poitrine. Il lui renversa la tête, lui écrasant les lèvres sous les siennes. Elle eut un mouvement de révolte, sauvage, emportée, et, tout d'un coup, elle s'abandonna, glissant par terre, sur le carreau. Ils n'échangèrent pas une seule parole. L'acte fut silencieux et brutal. (91)

It is remarkable that in both their first meeting and their first sexual encounter, there is emphasis on silence, and particularly on Thérèse's lack of speech. Their animalistic, "sauvage" passion seems preverbal, so carnal that it surpasses the mind and its ability to reason or communicate. And indeed, the narrator qualifies their union as "nécessaire, fatale, toute naturelle" (92); while there is not the same call to atavism in *Thérèse Raquin* as in *La Bête humaine*, Nature seems to have a say in this union of "brutes humaines" (60), whose complementary temperaments have unified them physiologically.

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<sup>124</sup> Recall that the walls of the passage du Pont Neuf are "suant toujours une humidité âcre" (65).



But the silence and violence of this first encounter also evoke death, particularly as the scene takes place under the eerie eyes of Camille's portrait, with the "face verdâtre d'un noyé" (90). Camille's presence, as a dead body, will forever remain between the two lovers as their sexual drives are contaminated by a death drive signified by the returned dead man. We have already seen the conjunction of sexual pleasure and death in *La Bête humaine*; in *Thérèse Raquin*, the dead body of their victim will continue to haunt the lovers, preventing them from ever consummating their own marriage. Not only is sex contaminated by death, however, but death is strangely sexual: the pivotal murder scene is rife with erotic details. Laurent looks at Thérèse, who is anticipating and fearing the murder to come, in strikingly foreboding terms: "Son amant la contempla, presque effrayé de la voir si immobile et si muette sous ses caresses. Cette tête blanche et morte, noyée dans les plis des jupons, lui donna une sorte d'effroi plein de désirs cuisants. Il aurait voulu se pencher et fermer d'un baiser ces grands yeux ouverts" (116). His lover's head is "morte", "noyée", and while Laurent is at first "effrayé" by this vision, he also experiences burning desires, and one in particular: to close her eyes (in death?) with a kiss. Zola may be practicing his art of heightened atmosphere to wring the most emotion possible out of Camille's death by using terms like "morte" and "noyée" to describe Thérèse here, but the effect is also one, once again, of a dissolution of differences. Is Thérèse dying, or Camille? Is she experiencing sexual pleasure or mortal guilt? Does Laurent want to kiss her or kill her? These oppositions become increasingly blurred as the text develops.

After the murder is complete, it is retroactively described in keenly erotic terms, namely those of sexual satisfaction:

Le meurtre avait comme apaisé pour un moment les fièvres voluptueuses de leur chair; ils étaient parvenus à contenter, en tuant Camille, ces désirs fougueux et insatiables qu'ils n'avaient pu assouvir en se brisant dans les bras l'un de l'autre. Le crime leur semblait une jouissance aiguë qui les écœurerait et les dégoûtait de leurs embrassements. (140-141)

Killing Camille was more satisfying than sex, so much so that sex is no longer even desired. Now that the third term, the mediation of desire, has been eliminated, the desire is extinguished, as if it has been eternally satisfied.

### ***Le naturaliste au théâtre: Staging Experimentation***

The famous second edition preface of *Thérèse Raquin* insists on the analytical aims of the text, with the infamous surgical analogy: “J’ai simplement fait sur deux corps vivants le travail analytique que les chirurgiens font sur des cadavres” (60). From the beginning, Thérèse and Laurent are not only reduced to bodies without wills or souls, but to cadavers, pure flesh with no animate or living quality other than an incomprehensible sexual instinct. And Zola not only expresses his desires to examine these lifeless bodies, but seems to revel in his power and ability to do so: “L’âme est parfaitement absente, j’en conviens aisément, puisque j’ai voulu ainsi” (60). In the text proper, Zola’s authorial presence makes itself known periodically, commenting on the psychological torture to which he is subjecting his characters. As bodies are displayed for public viewing at the municipal morgue that Laurent visits, the bodies of the main characters are on display for

Zola's reading public, including the psychological experiences that are signified by physiological (that is, neurotic) symptoms.

Because his characters are not actually dead bodies, there is a slippage in the pseudoscientific approach to the text, from a medical register to a theatrical one. Zola paints himself as an experimenter and an observer, recording and transmitting only what his characters do seemingly on their own: “Je n'ai eu qu'un désir: [...] jeter [les personnages] dans un drame violent et noter scrupuleusement les sensations et les actes de ces êtres” (60). But we know, of course, that he is in complete control of what he produces. Unlike the infected Laurent, Zola is in control of his creations, manipulating them to suit his literary project. He doesn't simply observe his subjects: he displays them, has them act out the drama, and choreographs their actions and reactions. He may approach the literary process as an experimental surgeon, but his methods resemble more those of Charcot than of Auguste Comte or Claude Bernard. The narration of *Thérèse Raquin* is in the spirit of Charcot's demonstrations of hysteria at the Salpêtrière, and like Charcot's, Zola's theatrical demonstrations are gendered.<sup>125</sup> Zola is the puppet master of Thérèse and Laurent, setting up their environment and pulling the correct strings to desired effect, with a running commentary that explicates the psychological and physiological experiences of the main characters. Theatrical puppetry is Zola's way of dissecting and examining living, social beings.

Reading *Thérèse Raquin* as a theatrical text is not an original approach: Zola himself reformulated the story as a play in 1873 to mediocre success, and published it

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<sup>125</sup> That Zola and other novelists of his era attended Charcot's demonstrations is attested to by various historians. See: Mesch, *The Hysteric's Revenge*, 206.

with a preface that would eventually inform his 1881 essay “Le naturalisme au théâtre.” Michel Claverie reads the novel as a tragedy in the tradition of *Phèdre*, with its depiction of passion and fatality<sup>126</sup>; Blandine Rickert follows up with an investigation into the text’s five-act structure and classical tragic unities<sup>127</sup>; and Clydia Davenport argues that Zola, not Ibsen, is the true father of modern drama, citing both the novel and its subsequent play as revolutionary.<sup>128</sup> These critics all approach *Thérèse Raquin* from a mythic perspective, via Phaedra and Clytemnestra and their tragic stage spectacles, or through the lens of classicism. But none considers the ahistorical notion of theater itself, of the physical existence of bodies on a stage, and Zola’s integration of that structure into his narrative. The narrative voice in the novel reveals how Thérèse and Laurent perform their textual existence much as characters in a play, where physical speech supplants text.

The theatrical structure of the text shows through at both the diegetic and extradiegetic levels. Thérèse’s conception of the Thursday night visitors as cardboard puppets elicits at once the uncanny horror of automata and living dolls that Freud evoked as well as the spectacular puppetry that Zola himself is practicing:

Et Thérèse ne trouvait pas un homme, pas un être vivant parmi ces créatures grotesques et sinistres avec lesquelles elle était enfermée; parfois des hallucinations la prenaient, elle se croyait enfouie au fond d’un

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<sup>126</sup> Michel Claverie, “*Thérèse Raquin*, ou les Atrides dans la boutique du Pont-Neuf,” *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* 36 (1968): 138-147.

<sup>127</sup> Blandine Rickert, “*Thérèse Raquin*: Observations sur la structure dramatique du roman,” *Les Cahiers Naturalistes* 55 (1981): 42-51.

<sup>128</sup> Clydia Davenport, “Zola, Ibsen, and the Modern Drama,” *Romance Notes* 29, no. 3 (Spring 1989): 195-198.

caveau, en compagnie de cadavres mécaniques, remuant la tête, agitant les jambes et les bras, lorsqu'on tirait des ficelles. (82)

Such a scene falls under Freud's second category of uncanny situations, those created by masters of fantastic fiction such as Hoffman, in which representations of uncanny objects and situations do not align with the framework of reality in which the author places the reader, and therefore elicit uncanny sensations on the part of the reader (as opposed to fictions in the realm of fairy tales, in which the world of the diegesis is so far removed from that of the reader that reality testing is not a factor and therefore the reader does not experience a sense of the uncanny). This scene therefore registers as uncanny for both the reader and the characters: Thérèse's horror of being entombed alive is not only a desire on the part of the author to elicit feelings of the uncanny, but also indicative of her situation as a Zolian character, and particularly a female character. She is entombed as a cadaver, but alive as a subject of medico-literary study, haunted by the automation and lack of personality of the secondary characters which are vital to the functioning of the drama into which her analyst has forced her. There is a fascinating double level of representation here, in which Thérèse's fictionality is tested much in the way the reality of Freud's example fictions is tested by their readers. She is the creation of her author, but that author plays, somewhat sadistically, with her situation as that creation. And that play is itself a fundamental element of the novel's structure.

The narrator's authority goes beyond omniscience; the author makes his presence, and his power, felt through the manipulation of the characters, through running commentary and the interplay of direct and indirect discourse. Zola, or rather, the

narrator, undermines what little independent subjectivity his characters may have by often restating their direct discourse in indirect narration. Compare, for example, the two narrations of Laurent's introduction to the Raquin family: Laurent himself, in direct discourse, explains his familial and living situations, immediately after which the narrator intervenes and recounts the same information. Laurent, instigated by Camille, explains how he ended up as an employee in a large office after telling his father he was studying law:

- Et tu n'as pas voulu être avocat? dit Camille de plus en plus étonné.

- Ma foi non, reprit son ami en riant... pendant deux ans, j'ai fait semblant de suivre les cours, afin de toucher la pension de douze cents francs que mon père me servait. Je vivais avec un de mes camarades de collègue qui est peintre, et je m'étais mis à faire aussi de la peinture. Cela m'amuse; *le métier est drôle, pas fatigant. Nous fumons, nous blaguons tout le jour...*

La famille Raquin ouvrait des yeux énormes.

- Par malheur, continua Laurent, cela ne pouvait durer. Le père a su que je lui contais des mensonges, il m'a retranché net mes cent francs par mois, en m'invitant à venir *piocher* la terre avec lui. J'ai essayé alors de peindre des tableaux de sainteté; mauvais commerce... *Comme j'ai vu clairement que j'allais mourir de faim, j'ai envoyé l'art à tous les diables et j'ai cherché un emploi...* Le père mourra bien un de ces jours; j'attends ça pour vivre sans rien faire. (84-85, emphasis added)

Nearly immediately after, the narrator takes back the reins and fills in the rest of the story with analytic and poetic emphasis:

*Il venait, en quelques mots, de conter une histoire caractéristique qui le peignait en entier. La profession d'avocat l'avait épouvané, et il frissonnait à l'idée de piocher la terre. Il s'était jeté dans l'art, espérant y trouver un métier de paresseux; le pinceau lui semblait un instrument léger à manier; puis il croyait le succès facile. Il rêvait une vie de voluptés à bon marché, une belle vie pleine de femmes, de repos sur des divans, de mangeailles et de soûleries. Le rêve dura tant que le père Laurent envoya des écus. Mais, lorsque le jeune homme, qui avait déjà trente ans, vit la misère à l'horizon, il se mit à réfléchir; il se sentait lâche devant les privations, il n'aurait pas accepté une journée sans pain pour la plus grande gloire de l'art. Comme il le disait, il envoya la peinture au diable, le jour où il s'aperçut qu'elle ne contenterait jamais ses larges appétits.*

(85-86, emphasis added)

The narrator essentially retells the same account of Laurent's recent history, in the same order, as if the reader had not just learned the very same information. This account is enhanced by commentary ("Il venait [...] de conter une histoire caractéristique qui le peignait en entier") and more developed characterization of the lazy young man, but the essential information is remarkably repetitive, as the narrator even chooses much of the same vocabulary as his character ("piocher la terre", "il envoya la peinture au diable", etc.). Some terms are replaced by synonyms ("mourir de faim" becomes "la misère", for

example), but the chronological structure of the speech and the essential “plot” of Laurent’s background are reproduced apparently without reason. The narrator even seems to invite the reader to analyze Laurent’s direct discourse in order to deepen his characterization: “Il venait, en quelques mots, de conter une histoire caractéristique qui le peignait en entier.” The choice of the verb *peindre* in this instance seems almost to be jab at Laurent’s own mediocre artistic abilities. In short, Zola has his character produce an informational discourse only to repeat the same story with added depth and characterization. So why give the reader both versions? Laurent is here Zola’s puppet, *performing* his speech for the reader *and* the other characters: what he says is not as important as the fact that he is saying it. His performance serves a purpose within the diegesis of the novel and therefore within the greater experimental project. Zola seems to have his character speak only so that he can then break down that speech and enhance it.<sup>129</sup>

The same practice is exercised on Thérèse, but in reverse, and with considerable distance between the two instances. Thérèse’s first moment of direct discourse does not occur until the sixth chapter, nearly thirty pages into the novel that bears her name. In bed with Laurent after one of their many rendez-vous, Thérèse feels compelled to share her life story with her lover in a scene that prefigures the bedroom confession scene of *La*

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<sup>129</sup> This is not exactly the same technique practiced in *La Bête humaine*, where characters retell scenes that have already taken place in the novel: in that instance, the scenes were never actually *uttered* and the reader has not encountered them, but the characters involved know the relevant details that are essentially repeated in the confession (e.g., Séverine’s confession of Grandmorin’s murder to Jacques). While the confessions of *La Bête humaine* locate the meaning of speech in the speech act itself, the repeated narrations in *Thérèse Raquin* showcase the characters as instruments in the author’s narrative experiment.



*Bête humaine*. The speech goes on for three full pages with minimal interruption, retelling in many of the same terms the novel's introductory chapters. For example:

J'étais accroupie devant le feu, regardant stupidement bouillir les tisanes, sentant mes membres se roidir. Et je ne pouvais bouger, ma tante grondait quand je faisais du bruit... plus tard, j'ai goûté des joies profondes, dans la petite maison du bord de l'eau. (94-95)

We already know that, in her childhood, Thérèse often “restait accroupie devant le feu” (72), that her aunt would scold her for making noise (72), and that she felt “des tressaillements de joie” when the family moved to the waterfront house (72). The purpose of this sudden explosion of speech from Thérèse is ostensibly to show her baring herself in entirety to Laurent, in direct opposition to the silence of the previous thirty pages: “Cette femme, que les circonstances avaient pliée et qui se redressait enfin, mettait à nu son être entier, expliquant sa vie” (93). Thérèse's speech is a sudden growth, a birth, as she metaphorically goes from “pliée” to “redress[ée]” and revels in speech, logorrhea even. Once again, what she says is not as important as the fact that she is saying it; the fact that her first discourse is modeled, in some cases word for word, on earlier narration only serves to show to what extent the narrator, and the author, maintains mastery over all discourse in the novel. This is Zola's staging of his own literary, and therefore scientific, mastery.

These moments of masterful puppetry remind us that the author is orchestrating the entire novel in order to dissect it; he is not documenting realistic events or creating a purely fictional plot, but setting up a spectacle to be consumed and analyzed, first by

himself, then by the reader. This is why the scenes of quasi-theatrical performances are complemented by commentary from the narrator/author figure himself. Remarkably, some of these address the experimental project directly. Three such instances are cited below.

Et, dans les commencements, Laurent et Thérèse se laissèrent aller à l'existence nouvelle qui les transformait; il se fit en eux un travail sourd qu'il faudrait analyser avec une délicatesse extrême, si l'on voulait en marquer toutes les phases. (140)

Laurent s'était trouvé tout d'un coup jeté en plein éréthisme nerveux; sous l'influence ardente de la jeune femme, son tempérament était devenu peu à peu celui d'une fille secouée par une névrose aiguë. Il serait curieux d'étudier les changements qui se produisent parfois dans certains organismes, à la suite de circonstances déterminées. Ces changements, qui partent de la chair, ne tardent pas à se communiquer au cerveau, à tout l'individu. (182)

Sans doute un phénomène étrange s'était accompli dans l'organisme du meurtrier de Camille. Il est difficile à l'analyse de pénétrer à de telles profondeurs. (203)

Zola's analytical method as it is laid out in the preface are here put to work, or at least announced. His pseudomedical discourse is punctuated by terms such as "organisme", "névrose", and "pénétrer", and even divides the "cerveau" from the rest of the "individu"

as the author assumes his surgical function. These citations also represent the experimental analytic process as a work that brings to light that which is dark or unreadable, and thus requires “une délicatesse extrême” in order to “pénétrer à de telles profondeurs.” Orchestrating the drama of Thérèse and Laurent’s relationship is, for him, part of that intricate work. And that drama can only be produced when Zola, the narrator-experimenter, puts their bodies to use in the service of the text.

While Zola claims to conduct his experiment on “les corps vivants” (60), the dead body is not excluded from his theatrical orchestrations, and indeed, much of the power of the narrative comes from the dissolution of difference between living and dead. The most powerful and memorable scenes of *Thérèse Raquin* are undoubtedly Laurent’s visits to the city morgue. Not only does the author unleash some of his most incredible descriptive prose in the depictions of dead bodies (and particularly of Camille’s), but he also presents what may be one of the most startling scenes of Parisian life in the mid nineteenth century: voyeuristic consumption of the anonymous bodies displayed in the morgue.<sup>130</sup> According to Vanessa Schwartz, the municipal morgue of Paris, opened in 1864 on the quai de l’Archevêché behind Notre Dame, was one of the city’s primary attractions to both locals and tourists alike, one that drew numerous crowds daily, on the order of tens of thousands of visitors on the busiest days, and up to a million visitors total each year.<sup>131</sup> While the motivation of displaying bodies to the public was a pragmatic one (authorities hoped passersby would recognize the unidentified dead), its function as far as the mass

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<sup>130</sup> Indeed, the visits to the morgue seem to be the only scenes where Zola anchors this drama in an identifiable cultural moment.

<sup>131</sup> Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 70.

public was concerned was that of entertainment, even theater, and the decorative setup of the morgue display was undeniably theatrical. Bodies were displayed in a large window, partially separated from the street by a wooden barrier, that was flanked by large green curtains (with, Schwartz points out, no practical function, only an aesthetic one).<sup>132</sup> They were perched upright on slabs or sitting in chairs and often wore aprons meant to cover their genitals but which ultimately became a costume, socializing the naked body for public integration. Schwartz even cites examples of makeup being used to maintain recognizable features on rapidly decaying bodies in the hopes of aiding identification.<sup>133</sup> At times when bodies were removed and replaced with new ones, the green curtains were closed across the viewing window so that visitors could not see the “behind the scenes” functioning that would dispel the theatrical illusion.<sup>134</sup> The morgue’s theatrical function was not lost on the public, who considered it a free show, better than a museum because the items on display were “real.” In Zola’s novel, the theatricality is consumed avidly by the passing public, who “se pressent, se donnent des émotions à bon marché, s’épouvantent, plaisantent, applaudissent ou sifflent, comme au théâtre” (132). These “représentations de la mort” (131) are recreated in the next at a new level: Zola re(-)presents the representations, redoubling the public and problematizing the motif of the viewable and readable body. The spectacle of the bodies at the morgue becomes the spectacle of the text of these bodies, further enhanced by the spectacle of the paratexts, including the (likely) orchestrated Ferragus condemnation to be discussed later in this

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 58

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 71.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p. 58.

chapter. Body is staged by and as text, text becomes meta- and para-text, itself focused on the offensive representation of those initial bodies, not just at the morgue but throughout the entire spectacle of *Thérèse Raquin*.

At the morgue, the “realness” of the dead bodies was simultaneously betrayed and enhanced by the theatrics of their presentation, much as the “realness” of Thérèse and Laurent is contaminated by their author’s experimentation and discursive intervention. What spectators may have truly relished was the interplay of theatrical representation or artifice with the undeniable realness of the bodies themselves. Schwartz’ notion of “the spectacularized real” is apt here, and she links public interest in the morgue with that of the *fait divers* and fantastic novels rooted in a scientific approach to crime, such as Poe’s short stories and, of course, *Thérèse Raquin*.<sup>135</sup> The visual theatrics of the morgue display participated in a development and circulation of discourse that included the *faits divers* and gothic crime novels. While the public was asked implicitly to identify corpses, the bodies inevitably became the subjects of entire narratives, to varying degrees of imagination, both by individuals and by the sensationalist Parisian press. Because these were anonymous bodies found around the city, they were often the victims of the more gruesome causes of death: murders, violent accidents, and suicides. The inherent suggestibility of the bodies was exploited by the press, who would drum up business through sordid speculation tied to the bodies on display. Such coverage inevitably led to more visits to the morgue, which in turn became more news, inspiring even more publicly

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<sup>135</sup> “[T]he morgue’s reality was represented and mediated, orchestrated and spectacularized.” Vanessa Schwartz, “The Morgue and the Musée Grévin” in *Spectacles of Realism: Body, Gender, Genre*, eds. Margaret Cohen and Christopher Pendergrast (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 279.

circulated texts through news reports.<sup>136</sup> The morgue was thus at the nexus of constantly renewed and widely circulated narration, inspired by the human body. Laurent goes to the morgue to find a body that will complete a text: “Il restait à Laurent une inquiétude sourde. Le décès de Camille n’avait pu être constaté officiellement. Le mari de Thérèse était bien mort, mais le meurtrier aurait voulu retrouver son cadavre pour qu’un acte formel fût dressé” (130). Holding a text in need of a body, Laurent heads to the morgue, display house for bodies in need of a text.<sup>137</sup> And the legibility of that body is mocked by the narrator in an ironic mode: “On aurait deviné que c’était là un employé à douze cents francs, bête et maladif, que sa mère avait nourri de tisanes” (134).

And what are the characters of *Thérèse Raquin*, or any Zola novel for that matter, other than bodies in the service of a text? While Zola compares himself to surgeon dissecting cadavers, he seems more closely related to the staff of the municipal morgue, propping up his bodies in a theatrical paradigm and allowing a text to develop and circulate. That his characters are not all dead seems to matter little: he still displays their bodies in a mode that heightens their legibility, encouraging his reader-viewers to join him in his analysis. We may identify with the costume jewelry merchant, the Raquins’ neighbor, who observes the family, including Laurent’s illicit comings and goings, as she peeks in on a world that is essentially put on display – for her and for us. Her participation in this voyeurism is linked with that of both the reader of the text and the

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<sup>136</sup> Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 69.

<sup>137</sup> My application of this term to bodies on display at the morgue is inspired by Emily Beeny’s analysis of Manet’s *Christ and the Angels* and its reception in 1864: “his is a body in search of a text.” Emily Beeny, “Manet, the Morgue, and the Death of History Painting?” *Representations* 122, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 64.

society from which the implied reader and the novel's characters belong, all unified in their enthusiastic consumption of the morgue spectacle: "La marchande de bijoux faux montrait à chacune de ses clientes le profil amaigri de la jeune veuve comme une curiosité intéressante et lamentable" (135). Even within the diegesis of the text, Thérèse's body, the "profil" that we first examined in the opening lines of the novel, inspires interest and pity. Or we may identify with the well-mannered lady who, upon finding a particularly handsome body in the morgue on a day that Laurent visits, "l'examinait, le retournait en quelque sorte du regard, le pesait, s'absorbait dans le spectacle de cet homme" (132). The verb *peser* gives weight and substance to the body before her (and us), blurring the lines between text, image, and physical existence.

And, of course, the highlight of the morgue spectacle is the exposed female body. Curiously, or perhaps not given our reading of Zola so far, the emphasis is always on the excitement of viewing exposed breasts:

Par moments, arrivaient des bandes de gamins, des enfants de douze à quinze ans. Ils appuyaient leurs mains aux vitres et promenaient des regards effrontés sur les poitrines nues. Ils se poussaient du coude, ils faisaient des remarques brutales, ils apprenaient le vice à l'école de la mort. C'est à la Morgue que les jeunes voyous ont leur première maîtresse.

(133)

The present tense of the last sentence essentializes the morgue experience and therefore the link between "le vice" and "la mort." Laurent, unsurprisingly, indulges in the same adolescent behavior, but with the added dimension of the sexual stimulation of violence

perpetrated on the female body: “Ce spectacle l’amusait, surtout lorsqu’il y avait des femmes étalant leur gorge nue. Ces nudités brutalement étendues, tachées de sang, trouées par endroits, l’attiraient et le retenaient” (131). Who is truly attracted and hypnotized by these brutalized female bodies: Laurent, or Zola? By re-presenting the spectacle, Zola effaces the difference between the two, and turns his novel into a theater of spectacle itself, but always at the expense of the female body.

### **Spectacle and Science: Sex and the Supernaturalist Text**

The attraction of the morgue spectacle is rooted in its “realness” – actual, physical bodies that concretize lurid narratives. How do we reconcile the “realness” of the morgue spectacle that informs all of *Thérèse Raquin* with the decidedly questionable “realness” of the later ghost scenes, and the appearance of an unreal and unscientific dead body in the subjectivity of the guilty murderers? Nearly every critical work on *Thérèse Raquin* addresses the apparent contradiction between the preface’s claim to scientific observation, the “copie exacte et minutieuse da la vie” (60) that Zola champions, and what John Lapp terms the “ghost story” of the latter half of the novel.<sup>138</sup> René Garguilo convincingly suggests that the ghost of Camille and its various recurrences (the eerie portrait, the fetus inside Thérèse) are projections of the two murderer’s guilt that exist only within their subjectivities.<sup>139</sup> Following Todorov’s classification, the mental and physiological *détraquement* of the main characters takes *Thérèse Raquin* out of the

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<sup>138</sup> John Lapp, *Zola before the Rougon-Macquart* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 96.

<sup>139</sup> René Garguilo, “L’obsession de la faute dans *Thérèse Raquin*: la laicisation du remords,” *La Licorne* 20 (1991): 113-122.



fantastic and into the strange (“étrange”) mode.<sup>140</sup> According to Todorov, fantastic literature depends on a hesitation on the part of the (implicit) reader in response to seemingly unnatural or supernatural elements. If these elements can be attributed to madness, for example, the narrative slips into the category of the strange, depicting unsettling images that are ultimately explainable by the laws of Nature. If we read Camille’s postmortem appearances as pure hallucination, entirely in the minds of the two lovers, then we can chalk up the supernatural elements of the novel to the order of the physiological, or what Zola consistently calls “les nerfs.” In that case, the preface’s claims hold up, as the author presents the true, biologically-rooted effects of crime on the guilty parties.

But the question remains: does a scientific study necessitate a fantastic, or “strange”, element? Let us not forget that the famous preface was included only with the second edition of the novel in direct response to the equally famous scathing review of the first, written by Ferragus (pseudonym of critic Louis Ulbach) titled “Littérature putride.” If Zola’s preface is no more than a self-defensive retort, its validity is already questionable. The paradigm is destabilized further by the suggestions of recent critics that both the Ferragus article and the preface were premeditated and orchestrated by the author himself as a way of drumming up publicity for the novel; if that is the case, he certainly succeeded.<sup>141</sup> But even if this argument is true, do we dismiss the paratext as a

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<sup>140</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), 46.

<sup>141</sup> Armand Lanoux’s theory that Ulbach and Zola conspired together is cited in Andy Byford, “The Politics of Science and Literature in French and Russian Criticism of the 1860s,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 56, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 210-230. That Zola might have composed his preface purely for publicity is suggested in Robert Viti, “Thérèse

publicity stunt, without considering it as a meaningful companion to the text proper? If we do, we might as well dismiss the entire novel: there is little doubt that the “putrid” elements of *Thérèse Raquin*, including the gruesome morgue scenes and the grotesque hallucinations, were expressly conceived so as to sell copies. A note from Zola to his editor supports this theory: “L’oeuvre est très dramatique, très poignante, et je compte sur un succès d’horreur.”<sup>142</sup> That Zola stretches the definitions of realism and what will later be called naturalism by manipulating its own professed “realness” purely for publicity reasons does not negate the power and significance of the novel, nor does it undermine his larger novelistic project. A young and struggling Zola in 1868 may have craved financial reward, but what he produced to earn it was nonetheless revolutionary.

Elizabeth Knutson has traced the thematic commonalities between naturalist fiction and gothic horror, citing “the themes of death, sexuality, necrophilia, obsession, and illness that pervade *Thérèse Raquin*” as direct descendants of fantastic literature.<sup>143</sup> Both approaches, Knutson notes, suggest the rejection of the rational: “the supernatural and the biological form a strange alliance by virtue of their shared opposition to reason.”<sup>144</sup> The world of *Thérèse Raquin* is not, however, entirely without reason, as we have seen: Laurent is a rational, if unlikeable, being, and even Camille’s simplicity is based in economic logic. It is Thérèse that introduces incomprehensible instincts and

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*Raquin* et sa préface: l’aveugle perspicacité,” *Excavatio* 3 (Winter 1993): 29-37; as well as in Robert Lethbridge, “Zola, Manet, and *Thérèse Raquin*,” *French Studies* 34, issue 3 (July 1980): 278-289.

<sup>142</sup> B.H. Bakker, ed., *Correspondance de Zola* (Montreal: Presses de l’université de Montréal, 1978), 1:523. Cited in: Elizabeth Knutson, “The Natural and the Supernatural in Zola’s *Thérèse Raquin*,” *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures* 55, issue 3 (Fall 2001): 141.

<sup>143</sup> Knutson, “The Natural and the Supernatural,” 142.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

complex inner life, infecting Laurent with her “nerves”, causing the *détraquement* that destabilizes reason and realism. What Zola does with *Thérèse Raquin* is naturalize the supernatural: find the ultimate truth in the incomprehensible and the unreal. His project, then, is not entirely unlike that of psychoanalysis, which seeks, through language, to make sense of the seemingly inexplicable. And what is the inexplicable for Zola, the true source of horror? Knutson and Kelly both agree: feminine sexuality. We may call *Thérèse Raquin* a “supernaturalist” novel, investigating the mystery of the horror of the female sex. The crucial link between the biological and the supernatural is ultimately the feminine; Thérèse lends her name to the title because she is the true subject of study.

The unique variety of horror inspired by the female sex is, of course, the Freudian uncanny. For Freud, sensations of horror or fright that evoke feelings of *das unheimlich* belong to “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar,”<sup>145</sup> and I place special emphasis on the term “familiar” here. Freud makes passing mention of the feeling of uncanny evoked by the female genitals among “neurotic men” and attributes this to the previously reassuring phantasy of intrauterine existence, transformed through repression and recurrence into something frightening.<sup>146</sup> He neglects to explore the *familiar* dimension, although it is mostly through a happy accident of the English language that the German *bekannt* and *vertraut* can both translated as the ambiguous English *familiar*.<sup>147</sup> However, since Freud finds significance in parsing the German *unheimlich* as a jumping off point for his analysis of the term, we may grant

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<sup>145</sup> Freud, “The Uncanny,” 220.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 245.

<sup>147</sup> The German *familiär*, denoting familial intimacy, does not carry the same sense of “known, acquainted” as the English *familiar*.

ourselves the liberty of doing the same. What his “neurotic men” may find uncanny is not just the female genitals themselves, but the notion of familial belonging through a physical memory of intrauterine existence. Why do some characters of *Thérèse Raquin* revel in the enclosed, humid, warm, and static existence of the passage du Pont Neuf, while others live it as a constant nightmare? Camille, forced into eternal fetal existence, has not had the chance to repress or recall the experience of life in the womb, since he has physically, mentally, and emotionally never really left it. Thérèse, on the other hand, experienced a full separation from her mother, and living in the womb-like and tomb-like space of the Raquin household fills her with horror and revulsion. And Laurent, forced out of his *heim* against his will, longs to return to a state of comfort and quiescence, although the further he falls under the spell of Thérèse’s “nerves”, the more he finds the physical space of the passage to be threatening.

Examples of uncanny details abound in *Thérèse Raquin*, and indeed, it is easy to slip into a fantastical or horror mode with such an abundance of frightening elements. But Zola is careful never to slide into the unrealistic: he seems prescient of Freud’s caveat regarding reality-testing and the aesthetic power of the uncanny. For Freud, not every example of what is usually considered uncanny elicits uncanny sensations, especially when those examples occur in works of fiction. The key, he explains, is the level of the “material reality of the phenomena”<sup>148</sup>; for example, in the world of fairy tales or other mythologies, we tolerate a much broader definition of what is realistically possible, and thus are not horrified at what would otherwise be uncanny phenomena. Uncanny

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 248.

experiences stemming from infantile complexes, such as fears related to castration, are themselves subject to a certain “psychical reality” testing, relating to their state of repression.<sup>149</sup> Any frightening element that does not arouse an uncanny sensation fails one of these two tests, and can be further mediated in literature by the “imaginary reality imposed on us by the writer.”<sup>150</sup> The fact that the entirety of *Thérèse Raquin* is steeped in the uncanny, down to the very texture of the novel, is therefore remarkable: the so-called fantastical elements all fall into the class of Freudian uncanny, and can therefore be linked to psychical, and therefore sexual, paradigms. This hypothesis seems confirmed by the fact that the majority of the seemingly supernatural elements of *Thérèse Raquin* occur in the marital bed of the two protagonists. The novel is a supernaturalist investigation of sexual desire and its related bodily experiences; that this investigation turns gruesome and hallucinatory is explained, I believe, by Freud’s breakdown of the term *unheimlich* in relation to the female genitals and the castration complex.

The paralyzed Madame Raquin is an especially pathetic extension of the internment fantasy gone wrong. She becomes the bodily incarnation of the hazy definition between life and death that haunts the world of *Thérèse Raquin*, and the old woman’s paralysis is as frightening for others as it is for her.

On eût dit le masque dissous d’une morte, au milieu duquel on aurait mis deux yeux vivants; ces yeux seuls bougeaient, roulant rapidement dans leur orbite; les joues, la bouche étaient comme pétrifiées, elles gardaient une immobilité qui épouvantait. (207)

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 250.

Son esprit était comme un de ces vivants qu'on ensevelit par mégarde et qui se réveillent dans la nuit de la terre, à deux ou trois mètres au-dessous du sol; ils crient, ils se débattent, et l'on passe sur eux sans entendre leurs atroces lamentations. (209)

That the mother's body has become lifeless, yet still living, "vivante encore et enterrée au fond d'une chair morte" (209), gives added horror to Thérèse's later necrophilic pregnancy, when a dead body is trapped inside a live one. Thérèse and Laurent, however, are not frightened by the lifeless woman, and are rather relieved to not be alone while still excluding the possibility of a witness to their crime.

Madame Raquin's embodiment of the eerie space between life and death is further witnessed by her attempt to denounce the criminals once she learns of their guilt. With extreme effort she manages to move her hand and fingers in an attempt to *write* the truth of her son's death beneath the eyes of her regular Thursday night visitors, tracing out the letters slowly. With each movement of her hand, her friends Michaud and Grivet try to interpret her thoughts, always incorrectly. When she finally arrives at "*Thérèse et Laurent ont...*", the murderers are ready to break her arm before she can finish; a well-timed *coup de théâtre* stops the scene at the height of its power when the widow loses control of her hand and the text is cut short, losing its comprehensibility:<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>151</sup> Zola's powerful use of dramatic irony in this scene, as well as the *coup de théâtre* setup, seem to contradict his documentarian approach, as well as his later theoretical writings that condemn sympathetic characterizations and *coups de théâtre*. Susan Hiner has shown other examples in *Thérèse Raquin* that suggest the young author is still struggling to shake off his Romantic literary

Grivet était vexé de ne pas avoir été cru sur parole. Il pensa que le moment était venu de reconquérir son infaillibilité en complétant la phrase inachevée de Mme Raquin. Comme on cherchait le sens de cette phrase: - C'est très clair, dit-il, je devine la phrase entière dans les yeux de madame. Je n'ai pas besoin qu'elle écrive sur une table, moi; un de ses regards me suffit... elle a voulu dire: "Thérèse et Laurent ont bien soin de moi." (217)

Madame Raquin exemplifies feminine communication in the extreme: no longer able to produce speech, she relies on her body to communicate language, and specifically a text. But because her body is *détraqué*, she cannot communicate fully, and the idiotic visitors utterly fail at reading both the text of her body and the one produced *by* her body. This scene of feminine bodily communication is rendered uncannily frightening by the suspension of a divide between living and dead: the animate hand seems to act independently of its owner, despite the immense energy and effort Madame Raquin is actually putting into its movement. The fright inspired by the hand is filtered through Thérèse and Laurent in a masterful demonstration of suspenseful prose.

Freud reminds us that the unique variety of fear inspired by severed limbs, and their independent animation, is tied to the castration complex. Madame Raquin's limb is not severed, of course, but her intermediary position between life and death only adds to the eerie movement of her lifeless arm. Similarly, Laurent experiences an uncanny fright as he paints portraits that, despite himself, all resemble his dead victim.

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heritage, or perhaps even giving a conscious parody of it. See: Susan Hiner, "In Cool Blood: Mourning Landscapes in *Thérèse Raquin*," *Excavatio* 11 (1998): 1-7.

Et il eut cinq Camille devant lui, cinq Camille que ses propres doigts avaient puissamment créés, et qui, par une étrangeté effrayante, prenaient tout les âges et tous les sexes. [...] Cette pensée que ses doigts avaient la faculté fatale et inconsciente de reproduire sans cesse le portrait de Camille lui fit regarder sa main avec terreur. Il lui semblait que cette main ne lui appartenait plus. (204-205)

The question of Laurent's (pro-)creative power is tied to his relationship with Thérèse, as we will see, but the loss of control of his extremities, as witnessed by the uncanny "étrangeté effrayante" that he experiences, evokes the repressed fear of castration; the return of the repressed is signified by the return of Camille. That Laurent loses control of his hand, or more aptly of his hand's signifying potential (through the medium of paint), evokes in him the fear of castration that is ultimately tied to Thérèse, the object of his desire refracted through Camille.

More frightening and threatening than Madame Raquin, however, is her cat François. François' early association with Thérèse and the exotic, animalized Other seems to set the stage for his threatening presence as the dramatic tension escalates. Early in the affair, the couple's excitement is heightened by the possibility of being caught, even if only by the cat:

- Regarde donc François, dit Thérèse à Laurent, on dirait qu'il comprend et qu'il va ce soir tout conter à Camille... dis, ce serait drôle, s'il se mettait à parler dans la boutique, un de ces jours; il sait de belles histoires sur notre compte...



Cette idée, que François pourrait parler, amusa singulièrement la jeune femme. Laurent regarda les grands yeux verts du chat, et sentit un frisson lui courir sur la peau.

- Voici comment il ferait, reprit Thérèse. Il se mettrait debout, et, me montrant d'une patte, te montrant de l'autre, il s'écrierait: « Monsieur et madame s'embrassent très fort dans la chambre; ils ne se sont pas méfiés de moi, mais comme leurs amours criminelles me dégoûtent, je vous prie de les faire mettre en prison tous les deux; ils ne troubleront plus ma sieste. » Thérèse plaisantait comme un enfant, elle mimait le chat, elle allongeait les mains en façon de griffes, elle donnait à ses épaules des ondulations félines. (98)

Thérèse's theatrical imitation of François exoticizes the female, animalizing female sexuality and recalling the feline feminine of the orientalist imaginary, as in Balzac's "Une passion dans le désert" or Barbey d'Aurevilly's "Le bonheur dans le crime" (whose publication postdates *Thérèse Raquin* but whose plot similarities are not to be ignored). Both lovers have a physical reaction to the idea of a talking cat: Laurent feels a "frisson", while Thérèse assumes feline mannerisms and performs a monologue as François. Once again, the female body is charged with performing the language of another, under the control of a male author (be it animal or human). Thérèse's transformation into cat is at once playful, sexual, and threatening, hinting at the multiplicity of stages her sexual energy has struggled to escape throughout the various stages of her life. Having her perform as a cat, however, plays into the continual performance Zola forces her to give to

an implicitly male reader, capitalizing on the paradigm of the hysterical woman no longer in control of her own body or voice.

As Madame Raquin grows increasingly paralyzed, she essentially becomes a double of François, a being with an unknowable inner life who observes but cannot express anything through verbal language. They are especially connected through their troubling eyes, eyes that replace passive observation with seemingly active expression. And eventually, both will know the lovers' secret crime. Only François, however, seems threatening enough to Laurent to inspire him to action. The murderer brushes off his mother in law's threatening glances while continuing to take care of her: "Va, va, regarde-moi bien, murmura-t-il, tes yeux ne me mangeront pas" (213). Because Madame Raquin has lost control of her body, the locus of female communication, she poses no threat of verbal betrayal. Yet the silent François elicits a different reaction from Laurent: "Hé! parle donc, dis-moi enfin ce que tu me veux" (240). Although it may be sarcastic, Laurent expects François to speak and is irritated, even threatened, by the cat's apparent refusal to confess what he knows, to the point where he eventually throws him out a window to his death.

François' threat is double: his association with Thérèse's sexuality gives him a threatening unknowable quality, echoed by his non-speaking eyes. But it is his association with, and substitution of, Camille that leads to his ultimate doom. François becomes the new *enfant gâté* of Madame Raquin, immediately finding her lap when he enters the room and constantly watching Laurent "comme au sein d'une forteresse inexpugnable" (240). François' death even resembles Camille's in several key details:

Laurent throws the cat out a window, much as he threw Camille out of the boat; François cries and attempts to bite Laurent's hand, just as Camille bit Laurent's neck; Thérèse suffers "une atroce crise de nerfs" (241) in both instances; and Madame Raquin "pleura François presque autant qu'elle avait pleuré Camille" (241).

The murder of François is one of a series of iterations recreating the primal scene of the initial murder of Camille. We saw how the mimetic logic of *La Bête humaine* condemned its characters to endlessly repeat the murders as the violence resonated outward in an eternal return of the titular *bête humaine*; while Zola seems less interested in an ancient genealogy in *Thérèse Raquin*, similar shades of a repetition compulsion emerge in the text, limited to, but enhanced by, the novel's isolated spatial and temporal scope. While Zola is, of course, writing well before Freud, his representations of this compulsion as well as the return of the repressed is striking.

We have been reading Camille's death by drowning in the Seine as an extreme extension of the overbearing maternity of Madame Raquin and the sexuality of Thérèse, but the imagery of drowning by passing below the water line also lends itself well to the notion of the separation of death and life, as well as the unconscious and the conscious. The lovers' hallucinations put into question the concrete divide between life and death, as well as between objective reality and subjective imaginations; indeed, this is the source of the novel's fantastic power, as we have seen. But even in the immediate aftermath of Camille's murder, Thérèse and Laurent feel a need to fight the return of the dead man: "le furieux serrement de main qu'ils échangeaient était comme un poids écrasant jeté sur la tête de Camille pour le maintenir sous l'eau" (127). The line between the memory of

Camille and his physical body begins to disintegrate, eliciting fear in the lovers long before they suffer grisly hallucinations. And when the repressed does return, it is through the conduit of the female body and its sexual potential:

Jusque-là, le noyé n'avait pas troublé les nuits de Laurent. Et voilà que la pensée de Thérèse amenait le spectre de son mari. [...] À un moment, il lui sembla que sa couche était étrangement secouée; il s'imagina que Camille se trouvait caché sous le lit, et que c'était lui qui le remuait ainsi, pour le faire tomber et le mordre. [...] Dans son entêtement furieux, toujours il allait vers Thérèse, toujours il se heurtait contre le corps de Camille. À plus de dix reprises, il refit le chemin, il partit la chair brûlante, suivit le même itinéraire, eut les mêmes sensations, accomplit les mêmes actes, avec une exactitude minutieuse, et, à plus de dix reprises, il vit le noyé s'offrir à son embrassement, lorsqu'il étendait les bras pour saisir et étreindre sa maîtresse. Ce même dénouement sinistre qui le réveillait chaque fois, haletant et éperdu, ne décourageait pas son désir; quelques minutes après, dès qu'il se rendormait, son désir oubliait le cadavre ignoble qui l'attendait, et courait chercher de nouveau le corps chaud et souple d'une femme. (150-151)

It is only through the evocation of Thérèse, and specifically in an erotic mode, that Camille returns to Laurent. The murderer first imagines his victim *under the bed*, waiting for him to fall so he can bite him, in a phantasm that mimics the murder scene. The bed here is not only the site of rest and respite, but also sex, as Laurent repeatedly tries to

imagine embracing Thérèse in a strikingly detailed physical fantasy. Camille interrupts the sexual union, occupying the female position, and returning Laurent's desired caresses. The primal scene of sex and that of murder are now contaminating each other, as Thanatos perverts Eros, evoking the very horror that Freud described. The repressed husband returns, insisting on his role as the mediating third term in the erotic triangle.

Laurent's nearly mechanical repetition of the fantasy is remarkable; even the phrase "à plus de dix reprises" is repeated twice in this excerpt, as if the mechanized repetition is seeping into the narrator's objectivity. According to Freud, this compulsion to repeat is an instinct so powerful, and so elementary, that it overrides the pleasure principle that determines the majority of mental life, often expressing itself in dreams.<sup>152</sup> The repetition of the Thérèse/Camille cycle in Laurent's fantasy is reminiscent of that of the sexual instinct as it is explained in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: "the sexual act is associated with a momentary extinction of a highly intensified excitation" (76), one that dissipates and regenerates as sexual desire and sexual satisfaction alternate. Laurent's seemingly endless Thérèse/Camille fantasy is the very image of the sexual instinct and the death instinct alternating, always instigated, however, by the erotic female body, "le corps chaud et souple d'une femme."

Thérèse does not experience such hallucinations independently: as a literary descendant of Emma Bovary, her neurosis derives more from her "esprit détraqué par les romans" (57). The wedding night of the murderers is Zola's masterpiece of gothic horror, as the couple's erstwhile erotic desire for each other is replaced by the wet corpse of their

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<sup>152</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961).

victim: “Thérèse et Laurent retrouvaient la senteur froide et humide du noyé dans l’air chaud qu’ils respiraient; ils se disaient qu’un cadavre était là, près d’eux” (174). From now on, the lovers will feel the body of the drowned Camille between them, in the marital bed, no matter how many times they try to make love. Repetitions of erotic desire and gruesome guilt continue to cycle through, often with the representation of a return of the repressed. Their conversations are superficial, and they sense that *under* their language, Camille persistently lives on, to the point where their words lose all meaning:

Et malgré eux, par un étrange phénomène, tandis qu’ils prononçaient des mots vides, ils devinaient mutuellement les pensées qu’ils cachaient *sous* la banalité de leurs paroles. Ils songeaient invinciblement à Camille. Leurs yeux se continuaient le récit du passé; ils tenaient toujours du regard une conversation suivie et muette, *sous* leur conversation à haute voix qui se traînait au hasard. Les mots qu’ils jetaient çà et là ne signifiaient rien, ne se liaient pas entre eux, se démentaient; tout leur être s’employait à l’échange silencieux de leurs souvenirs épouvantés. (175, emphasis added)

This phenomenon is unconscious, “malgré eux”, and occurs *underneath* their audible pronunciations. The signified slips from the signifier and takes over, forcing itself up into their shared consciousness. Camille returns to torment the murderers through multiple conduits (Laurent’s scar, the cat François, Camille’s portrait, the dreams), but his invasion of the very language of the couple seems to be the ultimate horror, signaling the complete breakdown of the power of Eros over Thanatos. If their language cannot resist the return of the repressed, then neither can their bodies.

Laurent continually tries to fight the return of his victim by returning to the initial scene of desire. He wants Thérèse to cauterize his horrific bite wound by kissing it, repeating in nearly identical terms their first sexual encounter. The initial scene is reproduced here for comparison:

Puis, d'un mouvement violent, Laurent se baissa et prit la jeune femme contre sa poitrine. Il lui renversa la tête, lui écrasant les lèvres sous les siennes. Elle eut un mouvement de révolte, sauvage, emportée, et, tout d'un coup, elle *s'abandonna*, glissant par terre, sur le carreau. *Ils n'échangèrent pas une seule parole*. L'acte fut silencieux et brutal. (91, emphasis added)

Puis, tout d'un coup, avec une étreinte de bête fauve, il lui prit la tête dans ses larges mains, et, de force, lui appliqua les lèvres sur son cou, sur la morsure de Camille. Il garda, il *écrasa* un instant cette tête de femme contre sa peau. Thérèse *s'était abandonnée*, elle poussait des plaintes sourdes, elle étouffait sur le cou de Laurent. Quand elle se fut dégagée de ses doigts, elle s'essuya violemment la bouche, elle cracha dans le foyer. *Elle n'avait pas prononcé une parole*. (178, emphasis added)

Laurent's repetition compulsion has seeped into the narration, contaminating the very language of his existence. Like his endlessly cycling dream fantasy, Laurent is stuck in a repeated cycle of sex and death, desiring Thérèse but unable to separate her from Camille, and specifically from the gruesomely deformed, exceedingly dead body of

Camille. Thérèse, for her part, will kiss the scar of Camille's bite repeatedly, always with disgust and pain. Her attempt to replace Camille's "kiss" by her own is always thwarted, and the mark of the repressed victim remains.

### **Female Contamination and Male Reproduction**

While the author may claim to fill the role of analyst, surgeon, and experimenter, he creates an undeniable double in Laurent, who must also resist contamination from Thérèse in order to accomplish his "work."<sup>153</sup> Laurent assumes the role of visual observer and analyst generally as a painter of portraits, and specifically in the morgue scenes, where he must study dead bodies (much as Zola claims to do), read them correctly, and interpret his observations. In both cases, he fails to resist contamination from the female, as we shall see. While Zola insists that his characters are nothing more than brutish beasts, Laurent's supposedly "sanguine" character does not keep him from making informed decisions based on economic rationality. Indeed, much more so than Thérèse, Laurent goes through rational thought processes with every major decision he makes, weighing pros and cons and analyzing potential outcomes. This doesn't mean he isn't lazy or unintelligent, but that he calculates every move so as to expend as little energy as possible. When considering whether or not to become Thérèse's lover, he "se fit de longs raisonnements" (89), conversing with himself in his head. He has a "logique brutale de paysan" that guides his judgment (108). Only his physical passion for Thérèse seems to dull his reasoning ability: "Tout semblait inconscient dans cette florissante nature de

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<sup>153</sup> For an in-depth examination of female contamination of male work in Zola's other novels, see Kelly, "Experimenting on Women."



brute; il obéissait à des instincts, il se laissait conduire par les volontés de son organisme” (104). And this is a woman that he does not even find beautiful or particularly attractive: after all, it was only through a series of *raisonnements* that he even decided to take up a relationship with her. Thérèse, as a sexual woman, unleashes Laurent’s unconscious and turns him into a murderer:

“Et c’est ainsi qu’un nouveau coin de sa nature inconsciente venait de se révéler: il s’était mis à rêver l’assassinat dans les emportements de l’adultère. [...] L’idée de mort, jetée avec désespoir entre deux baisers, revenait implacable et aiguë.” (107)

Much like Séverine releases *la bête humaine* buried deep inside Jacques, Thérèse’s sexuality releases *la bête humaine* within Laurent, setting off a chain of events that will lead to her own demise. And like Nana, Thérèse embodies a *penetrating* sexuality, destabilizing the natural order of reproductive sexuality with a new paradigm of female penetration and male gestation: “sa maîtresse, avec ses souplesses de chatte, ses flexibilités nerveuses, s’était glissée peu à peu dans chacune des fibres de son corps” (104). Not only is Thérèse’s penetrating sexuality troubling, but it recalls the male fascination with, and subsequent fear of, a lack of separation from the female body, a point brought up by Dorothy Kelly in her study of the fear of female contamination: “There is a fear of incomplete separation from the mother, from femininity [...], a fear that one is still part of the mother’s body”.<sup>154</sup> Laurent may desire the quiescence of intrauterine existence, but the notion of being one with his mistress’s body causes

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<sup>154</sup> Kelly, “Experimenting on Women,” 241.

anxiety, one that will be validated when Laurent loses control of his own hands and thus of his artistic ability.

Susan Hennessy has written extensively on the notion of male (pro)creation in Zola, especially in *La Terre*. She argues that men in the Rougon-Macquart cycle subsume the traditionally feminine functions of reproduction<sup>155</sup>; given the problematic structures of reproduction and mothering in *Thérèse Raquin*, it is worth pausing to examine the male side of the creation process in the text. We have already seen that fatherhood and paternity are either nonexistent or entirely effaced within the novel. Thérèse's father denies his paternity of her, instead explaining her origin through the aunthood of Madame Raquin and providing written proof of his parentage through an *acte de naissance* that, curiously, carries the name Raquin and not Degans, his own. Biological fatherhood is thus entirely disavowed in *Thérèse Raquin*, but it does not lack for examples of male creation, predominately in the figure of Laurent.

Laurent's affinity for painting stems from his physical and mental need to return to that state of quiescence, his laziness. Painting is not, for him, a productive activity: it is a means to an end, a way to pass the time and satisfy his sexual desires (by ogling and seducing female models) with minimal effort. His work is generally unremarkable, a fact that does not seem to bother him in the least. Upon interacting with Thérèse, however, Laurent's artistic ability undergoes a serious transformation. It is through the perspective of a third party, and old artist friend of Laurent's, that we are able to appreciate this

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<sup>155</sup> See: Hennessy, "Zola's Male Creation" and Hennessy, "Maternal Space and (Re)production."

transformation. Shocked at the refined and developed touch with which these new works were painted, he re-examines Laurent himself and sees a new man:

La vérité était que le peintre ne retrouvait pas dans le mari de Thérèse le garçon épais et commun qu'il avait connu autrefois. Il lui semblait que Laurent prenait des allures distinguées; le visage s'était aminci et avait des pâleurs de bon goût, le corps entier se tenait plus digne et plus souple.  
(202)

Et il considérait Laurent, dont la voix lui semblait plus douce, dont chaque geste avait une sorte d'élégance. Il ne pouvait deviner l'effroyable secousse qui avait changé cet homme, en développant en lui des nerfs de femme, des sensations aiguës et délicates. (203)

The emphasis here is notably on Laurent's physique: his voice and movements have a new quality, one that has translated to his paintings. Painting, we are reminded, is a physical art in which the creator's body is necessarily implicated. The brush acts as a mediator, but the work is entirely rooted in the artist's hands; Laurent's new physical manner is the true source of shock for the friend, not the paintings. "Ça ne s'apprend pas d'ordinaire" (203), he remarks; artistic talent isn't learned because it is inherently physical, an extension of manual control. And in Laurent's case, this refined motor control is of a distinctively feminine nature; he has developed "des nerfs de femme." While the friend cannot find the source of this new artist, which he tellingly refers to as a "naissance" (203), our helpful narrator intervenes on his behalf:

*Sans doute* un phénomène étrange s'était accompli dans l'organisme du meurtrier de Camille. *Il est difficile à l'analyse de pénétrer à de telles profondeurs*. Laurent était *peut-être* devenu artiste comme il était devenu peureux, à la suite du grand détraquement qui avait bouleversé sa chair et son esprit. [...] [L]a maladie en quelque sorte morale, la névrose dont tout son être était secoué, développait en lui un sens artistique d'une lucidité étrange; depuis qu'il avait tué, sa chair s'était comme allégée, son cerveau éperdu lui semblait immense, et, dans ce brusque agrandissement de sa pensée, il voyait passer des créations exquises, des rêveries de poète. Et c'est ainsi que ses gestes avaient pris une distinction subite, c'est ainsi que ses œuvres étaient belles, rendues tout d'un coup personnelles et vivantes.

(203, emphasis added)

The narrator here leaves the friend's perspective and introduces his own analytical insight, with the rhetorical qualifications of "sans doute" and "peut-être" suggesting that he is offering his own reading and interpretation of the situation. He may be wrong, of course, since "il est difficile à l'analyse de pénétrer à de telles profondeurs," but his understanding is that his "maladie morale" is responsible for the refinement of his physical movements and therefore of his paintings. The lexical spectrum used to describe the new Laurent is distinctly linked to Thérèse: she is the one with feminine nerves, moral malady, and neurotic symptoms.

The conjugation of Thérèse's nerves and Laurent's sanguinity, strangely, does not have mutual effects. The narrator notes that "les nerfs surexcités de Thérèse avaient

dominé” (182), and that Thérèse gains no new personality characteristics or productive abilities from their union. Laurent, however, develops a newfound creative talent, producing multiple new studies. The unnamed artist friend continues:

Je n’ai qu’un reproche à te faire, c’est que toutes tes études ont un air de famille. Ces cinq têtes se ressemblent. Les femmes elles-mêmes prennent je ne sais quelle allure violente qui leur donne l’air d’hommes déguisés... tu comprends, si tu veux faire un tableau avec ces ébauches-là, il faudra changer quelques-unes des physionomies; tes personnages ne peuvent pas être tous frères, cela ferait rire. (203)

The union between Thérèse and Laurent, sealed by Camille’s death, has impregnated Laurent with Thérèse’s nervous physicality, and the result is a series of (pro)creations with fraternal resemblances. In other words, Laurent has assumed the female role of reproduction, creating a family through the physical act of painting, after corporeal contact with a partner of the opposite gender. Upon hearing his friend’s comment, Laurent has the horrifying realization that all of the studies look like Camille; he and Thérèse have created a new family of Camilles, which notably *he* has gestated and birthed. The mixed tone of the friend’s comment adds to this uneasy horror: he sees the family resemblance as nearly comical (“cela ferait rire”) while also evoking the “allure violente” of the female figures, which all resemble men in disguise. The confusion of roles in the procreative process has led to a confusion of genders altogether, informed by the discordant discourse it evokes in the viewer. And that confusion extends to Laurent’s body, the proper site of his guilt (which the narrator reminds us is purely physical and not

moral: “sa conscience n’entraîne pour rien dans ses terreurs” [183]). Not only are these effects physical, they are remarkable *feminine* in their physiological expression:

Il subissait ainsi des *crises périodiques*, des crises de nerfs qui revenaient tous les soirs, qui détraquaient ses sens, en lui montrant la face verte et ignoble de sa victime. On eût dit les accès d’une effrayante maladie, d’une sorte d’*hystérie* du meurtre. (184, emphasis added)

The periodic nature of his experiences, and their qualification as hysterical, render Laurent as physiologically feminine, at least in his role as life-giver (ironically, since his transformation is a direct effect of his actions as a life-taker).

Laurent’s strange reproductive abilities, if we may call them that, are a direct result of his sexual contact with Thérèse and its accompanying horror. Zola’s treatment of the logic of actual sexual reproduction in *Thérèse Raquin* is problematic at best. For a novel so invested in scientific study and acute observation, the lack of veracity relating to feminine physiology is remarkable. Months after her remarriage, Thérèse realizes she is pregnant. Careful readers should be shocked at this detail, as Laurent and Thérèse have not made love since before murdering Camille, at least two years previously. That Thérèse might not have become pregnant with either of her partners is believable, but that she may have become pregnant without sexual intercourse is impossible.<sup>156</sup> The only possible father is presented as Laurent; while we learn in the next chapter that Thérèse

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<sup>156</sup> As a contrast, we can refer to Christine’s pregnancy in *L’Oeuvre*, where the parents are able to explicitly identify the evening when their son was conceived: “les dates y étaient.” Similarly, in *Le Docteur Pascal*, Clotilde determines her son’s date of conception after a visit to the doctor. Zola’s comprehension of female reproductive physiology may not be perfect, but it does seem at least adequate with respect to the expected timeline, enough to question the believability of Thérèse’s experience. Émile Zola, *L’Oeuvre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), 209.

may be having an extramarital affair, the timeline is not clear, and in her own subjectivity, she only reacts to the possibility of Laurent's paternity. Laurent, however, has no knowledge of the pregnancy, and he unknowingly ends it himself.

Cinq mois environ après son mariage, Thérèse eut une épouvante. Elle acquit la certitude qu'elle était enceinte. La pensée d'avoir un enfant de Laurent lui paraissait monstrueuse, sans qu'elle s'expliquât pourquoi. Elle avait vaguement peur d'accoucher d'un noyé. Il lui semblait sentir dans ses entrailles le froid d'un cadavre dissous et amolli. À tout prix, elle voulut débarrasser son sein de cet enfant qui la glaçait et qu'elle ne pouvait porter davantage. Elle ne dit rien à son mari, et, un jour, après l'avoir cruellement provoqué, comme il levait le pied contre elle, elle présenta le ventre. Elle se laissa frapper ainsi à en mourir. Le lendemain, elle faisait une fausse couche. (237)

While there may be a tendency in the Rougon-Macquart for men to usurp the feminine reproductive function, here, the male is excluded entirely. Thérèse mysteriously becomes pregnant without sex, keeps the knowledge to herself, and orchestrates its termination. Here the man is instrumental in ending the pregnancy, not initiating it. And Thérèse's malaise is due less to carrying Laurent's child and more to giving birth to a dead Camille: "Elle avait vaguement peur d'accoucher d'un noyé. Il lui semblait sentir dans ses entrailles le froid d'un cadavre dissous et amolli." The male fantasy of a return to the womb has become, for Thérèse, a nightmare; it is if her horror at the sensation of being buried alive in the boutique has invaginated and internalized itself within her body.

Madame Raquin may have gotten her wish, for Thérèse to serve as a new mother to her son, but Zola has twisted this desire into a revolting and grisly physical experience. And in doing so, he has rejected the physiological truth of pregnancy and reproduction in favor of a supernatural(ist) experiment carried out on the most intimate and properly feminine site on and in a woman's body. Thérèse must suffer both the horror of a necrophilic pregnancy and the physical violence required to destroy it. This second murder of Camille is, seemingly unjustly, carried out only on the woman's body, the origin of the world and of the text of *Thérèse Raquin*.

This recreation in miniature of Camille's murder is one of many instances in the novel where scenarios repeat themselves endlessly, acting through and on the bodies of the characters. Camille is never truly gone: he lives on in the marital bed, in Thérèse's womb, in Laurent's scar, and in his portraits, where "toujours, toujours le noyé renaissait" (205). His murder is also recreated, again in Thérèse's self-abortion, in Laurent's murder of François, and even, via the subjectivity of Madame Raquin, in the endless confessions and accusations of the couple after her paralysis: "et la querelle continuait, âpre, éclatante, tuant de nouveau Camille" (222). The text of *Thérèse Raquin* develops from the endless repetitions and dies only with the central characters' suicides. But these repetitions, whose origins are obscured by the text itself, will not disappear from the cycle that follows.

There are several points of intersection between *Thérèse Raquin* and various volumes of the Rougon-Macquart cycle, far beyond those discussed in this dissertation.



The most evident are the relationship between art and sexuality in *L'Œuvre* and sex and murder in *La Bête humaine*, and multiple plot and character details are repeated from the original text. Nana's penetrating sexuality, Renée's displaced speech, and Séverine's automated confessions all harken back to Thérèse and the legible bodies tied to her. The bodies and texts of the Rougon-Macquart have their origins in *Thérèse Raquin*, where the problematics of non-reproductive sexuality and non-sexual reproduction, expressed in and on the maternal body, are first put under the experimental novelist's microscope. While not an explicit investigation into heredity, this novel allegorizes the fatal determinism of familial belonging; as Madame Raquin herself expressed, "cela ne sortait pas de la famille" (163). The mother's body and the brother's desire are inescapable, contaminating every sexual experience and binding Eros and Thanatos in an eternal cycle. It is with *Thérèse Raquin* that Zola reveals the dynamics of bodies and their texts, and the ambiguous role of the experimental, naturalist novelist who translates the spectacle into art, albeit an art informed by the anxieties of origin and difference that drive the entire naturalist project.

### Conclusion

In this dissertation I aimed to reveal the centrality of the female body to Zola's literary methodology, as well as to understand, or perhaps justify, the inordinate amount of violence that women suffer in his novels. While in later novels such as the *Trois Villes* series, non-reproductive sexuality is demonized in favor of procreation and female maternity, this is not quite the case in *Thérèse Raquin* or the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. The female body and female sexuality are approached with a curious, investigative eye – as well as a scalpel. There remains a sense of anxiety or mistrust on the part of the author toward his female characters, and the burgeoning moralist in him still cautiously distances himself from the dangers of femininity. Indeed, the violence done to women is as much a necessary act of experimentation as it is the elimination of a threat of contamination. However, Zola's narrative productions are entirely reliant upon the women that he cautiously studies, and to conduct his experiments, he must approach the feminine with a willingness to open up his texts to a certain ambiguity regarding sexual difference, allowing the female body and the female voice to inform his texts and challenge his representational capabilities.

In the first chapter I presented the case of Renée Saccard, Zola's version of a tragic heroine. Renée's identity is constructed indirectly through intertextual references, while her incestuous relationship with her stepson implodes her sexual subjectivity. Set against the backdrop of the Haussmann renovations, *La Curée* places Renée's experience within a paradigm of spatial, social, and sexual realignment, one in which Renée's specular "I" finds itself at odds with her social "I": for example, she claims to lighten her

hair every two months, even though she is a natural blonde. In her world, artifice and ostentation are privileged over truth, and she loses her identity as the distance between surface and substance collapses. The violence Zola exerts on Renée is textual and vocal, as the scenes in the Café Riche and the *tableaux vivants* party demonstrate. Her voice and self are effaced by those around her, including her author, who must destroy her subjectivity in order to represent its flawed construction.

*La Curée* is a point of entry into the social construction of Woman in Zola's Second Empire; *Nana* is a dizzying extreme of the same model. Both Renée and Nana are reigning queens of their domains, but while Renée's sexuality is subdued and controlled by the men in her family, Nana's is powerful enough to drive men to adultery, bankruptcy, and even suicide. Renée suffered from reductive dualities that canceled out her subjectivity, but Nana's body assumes a gender identity defined by presence, an *autre chose* that can't be represented or defined, but that asserts her sex as the universal signifier. In the second chapter of this dissertation, I read *Nana* as a literary investigation into the nature of sex and gender, questioning the primacy of the phallus and the representability of sex itself.

The discursive destabilization of Nana's sex is carried through to *La Bête humaine*, where the violence to which Zola subjects his female characters reveals its universality. Jacques, Roubaud, Misard, and even Pecqueux commit horrifying physical assaults on women, but in my third chapter, we saw how women elicit this violence – simply by signifying sexual difference. The female voice and female communication play a significant role here, and I showed that the physicality of female speech is inherently

tied to the female body and that both inspire desire that leads to destruction. The privileged form of communication in *La Bête humaine* is clearly the confession, showing the importance of (feminine) speech itself over its content, signifier over signified. The milieu of the train industry metaphorizes the destructive potential of the human spirit, driven by difference and desire, while providing a biting commentary on the notion of “civilized” contemporary society.

Finally, the fourth chapter examines *Thérèse Raquin*, published well before the beginning of the *Rougon-Macquart*. Why end an otherwise chronological study with the earliest published work? The investigative techniques at work in *Thérèse Raquin* become clear only when we keep the later novels and their experiments in mind. The theatrical elements of *Thérèse Raquin* are best understood once we see their applications in *La Curée*, and the return of the repressed, Camille’s ghost, takes on a new weight after we’ve seen Jacques’ atavistic Other at work in *La Bête humaine*. Finally, *Thérèse Raquin* addresses most directly the problematic role of the author/narrator/investigator as puppet-master, and mediator of the representation of his own experimental analysis. I exposed the controlled theatricality of Zola’s narrative in *Thérèse Raquin* as well as Thérèse’s function as the *matière primaire* of Zola’s experimentation. Take, for instance, her uncanny pregnancy, where the dramatic exploitation of a fantastical scenario takes precedence over the scientific accuracy of female physiology. As early as 1867, a young Zola was subjecting his female characters to a literary dissection of sorts as he carried out his investigation into the truth of sex, heredity, and life.

It may seem unfair to depict Émile Zola as a misogynistic mad scientist, and certainly not every female character in his corpus suffers the way that Séverine or Thérèse does. I merely hoped to revalorize the centrality and complexity of the women of the *Rougon-Macquart* and its surrounding texts by rereading their texts with a keen eye for narrative construction and the female voice. Despite my focus on the various forms of violence borne by these women, I hope to have brought to light Zola's innovations in writing women, gender, and sex. Nana's power, while presented through the filter of male anxiety even on the part of her author, is still a power that defies male dominance and primacy, and one that reads as particularly modern and forward-thinking. Renée, Séverine, and Thérèse may not succeed in asserting their own subjectivities, but Zola's use of, and writing of, their bodies reveals new ways of thinking about sexual difference and its literary representations. It is my hope that this study sparks renewed interest in Zola's depictions of women and leads to further research into the gendered component of his unique narrative methodology.

*Et quand je tiendrai tous les fils, quand j'aurai entre les mains tout un groupe social, je  
ferai voir ce groupe à l'œuvre, comme acteur d'une époque historique.*  
Émile Zola, Preface, *La Fortune des Rougon*, 1871<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Émile Zola, *La Fortune des Rougon* (Paris: Livre de Poche Classiques, 2004), 41.

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

**Samantha J. Peterson**  
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### EDUCATION

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**Boston University**, Boston, MA *January 2015*  
 Doctor of Philosophy degree in **French**  
 • Dissertation title: *Experimenting on Difference: Women, Violence, and Narrative in Zola's Naturalism*

**Boston University**, Boston, MA *September 2010*  
 Master of Arts degree in **French**

**Williams College**, Williamstown, MA *June 2008*  
 Bachelor of Arts Degree in **French**, Dean's List, Cum Laude

**Université de Paris III**, Paris, France *2006-2007*  
 Courses taken as part of Hamilton College Junior Year in France Program

### LANGUAGES

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- French: Advanced to near-native fluency
- Italian: Reading proficiency
- German: Reading knowledge

### TEACHING EXPERIENCE

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**Boston University**, Boston MA *2014-2015*  
*Course Facilitator, Boston University Study Abroad*  
 • IP 101: The Global Learning Experience (*an online course offered to students studying abroad, edX platform*)

**Boston University**, Boston, MA *2009-2014*  
*Presidential Teaching Fellow, Department of Romance Studies*  
 • LF 212: Fourth Semester French (Spring 2012, Fall 2012, Spring 2013)  
 • LF 211: Third Semester French (Spring 2011, Fall 2011, Fall 2014)  
 • LF 112: Second Semester French (Fall 2010)  
 • LF 111: First Semester French (Fall 2009, Spring 2010)

## ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIENCE

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### **Boston University Study Abroad** 2010-2014

#### *Graduate Intern in Academic Affairs*

- Reporting to the Academic Director for day-to-day administrative needs.
- Development and maintenance of online program evaluations completed by returning students each semester, including synthesizing evaluations into reports and completing custom reports requested by Study Abroad staff.
- Conducting initial review of newly proposed courses and advising Program Directors regarding course materials.
- Creation of support materials for Program Directors regarding curriculum development and review.
- Handling of course approval process including communication with department chairs, site instructors, curriculum committees, and associate deans.
- Collaboration with Director of Program Development regarding academic aspects of new and in-development programs.
- Coordination of learning outcome assessment planning, review, and budget projections.

### **Boston University Study Abroad Paris** 2013-2014

#### *Academic Graduate Assistant*

- Reviewing curriculum and advising Associate Academic Director on Boston University curricular standards.
- Reviewing syllabi for clarity and formatting; advising Associate Academic Director and faculty members on American-style syllabi; assistance in integrating French- and American-style course structure.
- Preparation of course approval materials, including translating syllabi and drafting course descriptions, for submission to Curriculum Committees in Boston.
- Reporting to the Associate Academic Director and Program Director for day-to-day administrative needs, including processing and synthesis of course evaluations completed by students.
- Planning and coordination of cultural activities for London & Paris students during the summer.

## AFFILIATIONS AND SERVICE

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### **Humanities Curriculum Committee** 2012-2014

*Committee Member, Study Abroad Liaison*

### **Social Sciences Curriculum Committee** 2012-2014

*Committee Member, Study Abroad Liaison*

**Modern Language Association** 2012-2014  
*Graduate Student Member*

**French Graduate Student Association**, Boston University 2009-2013  
*President (Fall 2012-Summer 2013), Vice-President (Fall 2010-Spring 2011), Secretary (Spring 2009)*

- Advocating for graduate students in French Literature, primarily within the Department of Romance Studies
- Advising fellow graduate students completing written and oral exams and other degree requirements
- Developed and maintained a shared “graduate student library”
- Coordination of professional development events, the Tournées Film Festival, and co-sponsored talks with the Université Populaire de Boston

**Tournées Film Festival At Boston University** 2009-2011  
*Committee Head*

- Award of FACE Council grant to fund five-screening film festival on campus.
- Head of festival organization, including screening arrangements and publicity, as well as delegation of duties to members of French Graduate Student Association

## PRESENTATIONS

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**University Of Pittsburgh Graduate Student Conference** October 2012  
 • Paper presented: “Monstrous Menstruation: The Threat of Female Physiology in Zola’s *Nana*”

**Boston College Graduate Student Conference** March 2011  
 • Paper presented: “« Un objet qui pût m’arrêter » : L’itinéraire masculin/féminin dans *La Provençale* et *Les Filles errantes*”

**Graduate Student Renaissance Colloquium**, Harvard University December 2009  
 • Paper presented: “L’Antiquité remémorée : mémoires mythiques chez Ronsard et Du Bellay”

## AWARDS

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**Ernest A. Jackson Fellowship** May 2013  
 Boston University Department of Romance Studies  
 • Research fellowship awarded for dissertation research to be completed in Paris, France.



**The Edwin S. And Ruth M. White Prize***May 2013*

Boston University Center for the Humanities

- Award for distinguished graduate work in the humanities.

**The Angela J. And James J. Rallis Memorial Prize***May 2013*

Boston University Center for the Humanities

- Award for distinguished graduate work in the humanities.

**Award For Excellence In Teaching***May 2011*

Boston University Department of Romance Studies

- Award for teaching excellence by a graduate teaching fellow in French or Spanish.

**Presidential Teaching Fellowship***2008-2013*

Boston University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences