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**Murdered sleep: Crime and aesthetics in France and England,
1850–1910**

Winchell, James Arthur, Ph.D.

University of Washington, 1988

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**Murdered Sleep: Crime and Aesthetics
in France and England, 1850-1910**

by

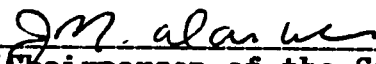
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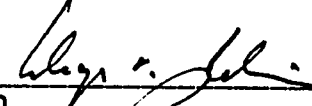
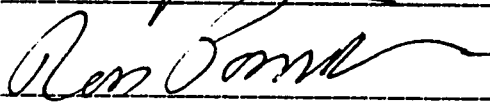
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Abstract

MURDERED SLEEP: CRIME AND AESTHETICS

IN FRANCE AND ENGLAND, 1850-1910

by James Winchell

Chairperson of the Supervisory Committee:
Professor Jean Dornbush
Department of Comparative Literature

By 1850 the popular literature of crime in France and England had been highly visible to the public and salient in the minds of writers, artists and thinkers for some sixty years. The explosion of Gothic romances across Europe in the 1780's and 90's and the flowering of melodrama in the same period are other indications of the tectonic shift in popular consciousness and of a renewed interest in questions of transgression and legitimacy effected by the French revolution.

After 1850, however, a new "literature of crime," emphasizing the relations between beauty and transgression, emerges in France and England. When disguised as Beauty, a nascent sense of modern or "deep" crime (in Balzac, De Quincey, Dickens, Poe and Baudelaire) deliberately exploits "the modes of error and truth" inherent in its status as a representation, while at the same time "falling away from literature" toward a critique of the "reality of the moment." "Aesthetic crime" presents the image of inter-subjective transgression as an action freed from pre-determined or monological interpretation.

Beauty and Crime: by forcing the two together, as

Baudelaire did in the guise of modern tragedy, as Huysmans, Schwob, Lorrain, Rops, Wilde and Dostoevsky did in hybrid, decadent and novelistic genres, the artist compounds the indeterminacy of the one with the over-determined nature of the other. In the period after 1850, no version of this issue is unambiguous; the "mystique of transgression" reveals persistent social and metaphysical concerns. This very forcing of the mask of transgression upon the face of beauty results, perhaps, in the characteristic fatigue of the period, borne along by the unhappy conscience that knows no rest, in the desolated cells of murdered sleep.

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DEDICATION

To Claudia Royal,
Sadie Corbitt Warren, and
Rita Smilkstein.

Intuition is the dream of truth.

Chapter I

Theory of Aesthetic Crime

"One ought to be good, or pretend to be.
(mimeisthai)."

Democritus

"'In Alexandria, they say that the only man incapable of crime is the man who has already committed it and repented; to be free of error, let us add, it is well to have professed it.'"

Jorge Luis Borges

"Every work of art is an uncommitted crime."
Theodor W. Adorno

I.1 Toward an Iconographic Anthropology of Crime

By 1850 the literature of crime in France and England had been highly visible to the public and salient in the minds of writers, artists and thinkers for some sixty years. Literary historians discern the emergence of such a sub-genre in the explosion of Gothic romances across Europe in the 1780's and 90's; another sign of the emergence of such a literature is usually seen in the flowering of melodrama that occurred roughly at the same time, in the tectonic shift in popular consciousness effected by the French revolution. The social and historical significance of occult emotions and labyrinthine architectures for the moral universe of Gothic romance is matched by similar elements in melodrama, where the "moral occult" was codified in a vastly popular form. As

Charles Nodier stated, it was a form that embodied "the morality of the Revolution."¹ The publication of the first Newgate Calendar in 1774 marks the emergence of a new literature of crime; the publication in 1826 of The New Newgate Calendar serves to emphasize, if any such emphasis be necessary, the growing fascination in the popular mind with crime and punishment.

Despite the historical specificity of these phenomena, however, "literature of crime" may seem at first blush too vast a conceptual umbrella; almost any literary act, from any period, it might be argued, may be grouped therein. After all, close upon the creation of the world, in Genesis, follows the murder of Abel by Cain. Paris did, in the fact of myth, carry Helen off to Troy; likewise, Oedipus did enact his tragic fate in part by murdering his father. Prometheus, after the quarrel with vengeful Zeus, thief-like stole away from Olympus with a glowing coal, secreted in a giant fennel stalk, purloined for mankind.² The thief Cacus, in Canto XXV of the Inferno,

. . . does not ride the same road as his brothers
because he stole--and most deceitfully--
from the great herd nearby;. . . .³

It is indisputable that literature traditionally has taken as a macro-theme the determination of the grounds of transgression not only in terms of what we might call the social drama of intersubjectivity, but also in the fields of

originary myth and metaphysical law. Like the goddess Athene, sprung from the head of Zeus, the figure of Sin in Milton emerges from Satan's head and in her train brings War, and from her womb bears the fruit of incest, Death. The literature of Western tradition is in fact a catalogue of such transgressions. "Toute littérature," writes Baudelaire, "dérive du péché."⁴

These sins, however, represented in epic or mythic genres, might be differentiated from "crimes" to the degree that they bear more normative than reflective weight for their authors and their audiences. The early associations between myth and religious ritual attest to the promulgation and renewal of social norms by means of literary representation; it is by means of these parables and narratives that traditional societies formulate and learn patterns of behavior and the consequences of transgression, especially within the codes of fate, guilt and retribution played out by the dramas of gods and mortals interacting. The poetic justice of the "cautionary tale," found at the center of folk tales and oral literatures, seems designed not only to please, but more importantly to teach worldly norms by negative and positive example.

This issue of "positivity" (derogated sometimes by Marxist critics as "system-stabilizing") versus "negativity" in works of art is a particularly thorny one for aesthetic theory not only in our own, but in all periods. "The history

of the arts," writes Hans Robert Jauss, "has always shown the swing of the pendulum between 'transgressive function' and interpretive assimilation of works."⁵ A critical struggle is immediately implied by the concept of normativity itself--that is, between the "norm-destroying" and "norm-creating" effect of works of representation.⁶ The stakes in this debate are high, and seem to have been so across the history of Western aesthetics.

"Homer and Hesiod," writes Xenophanes, "attributed to the gods all things which are disreputable and worthy of blame when done by men; and they told of them many lawless deeds, stealing, adultery, and deception of each other."⁷ Centuries later it was Giambattista Vico who, in The New Science (1744), inquired why Homer, if he was indeed all-wise, depicted with such relish not only the laudable behavior of the gods, kings and heroes, but also their vile deeds as well. "The reason he gives," Joan Rockwell writes, "is that which occurs immediately to common sense and sociological reasoning: that the poet is limited, by his audience and his own conditioning, to the norms and values of his own society."⁸ The poet and his material are produced in a social and historical moment, and therefore must contain some information about the behavioral norms found therein. Works of representation from all periods show signs of the "heteronomous intent"⁹ of the poet who weighs the social, ethical and historical ambiance as well as the aesthetic one

around him. The absorption of the norms validated, or the rejection of the norms questioned in representation, are indisputable effects of the hermeneutic process, however difficult they may be to trace or demonstrate.

Indeed, the distinction between normative and reflective modes of representation may seem superfluous in light of recent findings in hermeneutics, semiotics, and aesthetic theory. "Debates about whether or not a positive hero can have negative traits, and the like, are in fact as asinine as they appear to anyone who is not a student of dramatic theory," states Theodor Adorno; the role of aesthetic form and structure is to give order to the "elements of real life in a manner such that they become estranged from their extra-aesthetic existence."¹⁰ This estrangement is an effect of the transformation by which the "extra-aesthetic essence" of phenomena is appropriated by art. In this way, represented transgression in some texts is freed from the tendentious moralizing (for moderns, "culpable" normativity) that might be associated with it directly because of its perceived content.

It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that like the dialectic interpenetration which occurs between such critical concepts as "mimesis" and "construction," "normative" and "reflective" modes of representation only realize themselves in the other, and not in some space beyond or between them.¹¹ Indeed, the broader concept of mimesis

seems to encompass both the reflective and the normative functions of representation, at least in classical aesthetics; mimesis, as the goal of representation, tends to blur any distinction between the normative (or didactic) and the reflective aspects of tragedy and reception. Aristotle imputes the origin of poetry to two causes: to the "instinct of imitation," "implanted in man from childhood," and then to the pleasure derived from the inevitable learning process produced by the instinctual mimetic act.¹² It seems clear that, with its priority in instinct, the imitative or reflective impetus to representation must take precedence over the normative features of these "earliest lessons" for Aristotle.

It might be argued, however, that the philosopher's emphasis on mimesis derives from the built-in distortion inherent in the act of writing a "poetics." Aristotle's insistence on the reflective mode, like the demand by "realists" that art be "true to life," means that art must thereafter "become conscious of, and articulate, its aversions," producing a self-conscious sense "in which art is an allergic reaction against art."¹³ The aesthetic norms implied by Aristotle's choice, for any succeeding playwright, immediately cause an irritating rash of "lenient prohibitions"¹⁴ that will inevitably affect his act of creation. The relations between playwrights and theorists in French neo-classicism, for example, bear witness to this

phenomenon. Like formal or technical norms, the cultural norms embedded in the work, "no matter how compelling and historically necessary they may be, tend to lag behind the concrete life of works of art."¹⁵ Nevertheless, socio-cultural norms and aesthetic norms rub against each other in the overlapping of the "magnetic fields" of pragmatic reality and private dream set in motion by the hermeneutic process itself.

While there are no doubt reflective (or "realistic") aspects in epic, tragedy, and attic mythologies, the normative impulses of represented transgression in "naive" works and cultures seem to have enjoyed a priority, or a programmatic, even ethical superiority in aesthetics which has vanished underground during the modern experience. Despite his insistence on mimesis over the didactic or normative function of poetry, Aristotle still acknowledges the heuristic pleasure contained in a viewer's exclamation, faced with the representation of a character in drama: "'Ah, that is he.'" Alternate translations make this even clearer: "'Ah, that is a so-and-so,'" or even "'Ah, this man is that sort of man.'"¹⁶ This acknowledgement of the normative power of tragedy accounts for aesthetic and ethical norms simultaneously: the viewer's enjoyment "may be due to the admiration of a perfect technique of imitation,"¹⁷ but at the same time there is heuristic pleasure in the recognition by the viewer of the model of the imitation. "This discovery

and justification of cathartic pleasure by which Aristotle corrected the 'straightline mechanism' on which Plato had based his condemnation of art," writes Jauss, "is probably the most provocative inheritance of classical poetic theory."¹⁸ This solution to the question, "'why the contemplation of the most saddening event gives us the most profound pleasure'",¹⁹ has indisputably informed Western aesthetics. The "saddening event" in representation is transgression, and Aristotle posits both a reflective and a normative solution to the seemingly ambiguous pleasure derived from its inherent sadness.

Let us bracket for a moment the essential term catharsis, defined by Jauss as "the fundamental communicative aesthetic experience [which] . . . corresponds to the practical employment of the arts for the social functions of conveying, inaugurating, and justifying norms of action."²⁰ For the seeming priority of technique (poesis) over ethical recognition (ethos in aesthesis) might suggest that normativity in tragedy takes a secondary position: in the mere act of writing a "poetics," it might be argued, Aristotle the critic steps out of the "charmed circle" of ritual communication (or normative ethical practice) and into the "disenchanted" realm of theory, of "aesthetic" pleasure.

This claim, that the shift from ritual to aesthetics represents a "disenchantment," is perhaps not so self-evident as it may appear at first. Just as anthropologists have

concluded that the gift, or the act of gift-giving, often serves as an operation that aims to disarm the hostile Other,²¹ artistic representation may have served as a comparable "process of neutralization," as an "anti-emotive" against a hostile universe. This seems particularly plausible in the case of paleolithic art, which predominantly features scenes of zoological life. These animal paintings may have represented a "magic process":

Processus "magique" sans doute, mais pas tout à fait à la façon dont l'entendent nombre de sociologues: il s'agissait peut-être moins de réaliser un envoûtement pur et simple qu'une "réconciliation" entre gibier et chasseur et, dans le cas de l'animal réellement agressif, qu'une "prophylaxie magique" protectrice.²²

In this case, prehistoric art might be more an "economy of action"²³ than a "magic spell" in the strict sense of the term. Such an economy, based on the real threats to a traditional society possessing little or no surplus value, is "normative" in the very realm of material well-being. François Grégoire further traces the organic usefulness of this kind of normative representation in the art of children which, like primitive art, does not exist as an object of disinterested luxury or contemplation, and is not rendered "realistically," but rather aims at an ensemble of the traits borne by the represented object which permit the artist to recognize and to use it.²⁴ The "utility" of this operation

emerges in the process by which the surprising or frightening aspects of the object might be "normalized" in the act of drawing; again, the child or primitive artist does not cast a spell on the object, but rather defuses the power of unknown or incompletely comprehended objects by the "anti-emotional" act of representation, in creating "'un système clos soustrait artificiellement aux influences perturbatrices trop compliquées.'"²⁵ Is it not possible to discern in this process of "normalization" an act of recuperation in the face of unknown or incomprehensible phenomena, an act of representation only secondarily reflective, bearing first and foremost a function of normative valuation for the artist and for those who would view the work?

Colin Wilson, in A Criminal History of Mankind, answers in the affirmative. Basing his remarks on the findings of Harvard paleontologist Alexander Marshack, he writes:

If Marshack is correct, ancient man did not indulge in doodling. His art was strictly purposeful. . . . All this offers us . . . an answer to Ardrey's question about what homo erectus did with his enlarged brain. He used it to create the earliest form of science. Science is, after all, an attempt to understand and control nature by the use of reason.²⁶

In this light, or at least in these circumstances, representation might be said to be inherently a normative act; its drive to reflect phenomena assumes a decidedly

secondary position to this salient function of normativity. For if cave painting, etching on bone fragments and writing itself emerged as a sort of pre-alienated science (of norms deduced in the face of incomprehensible nature), then the grounds for the present inquiry into the hermeneutic process of aesthetic transgression become clearer. For crime in at least some forms of representation, perhaps in most traditional and modern genres bearing normative and reflective emphases, bears important information regarding the social life of religious impulses.

In traditional societies, sanctions against transgression evolved in the form of taboos. The power behind these sanctions depended largely upon their swift and sure operation "as the action of laws of nature":

The most important of these, perhaps, is the one often noted: the internal effect on the criminal of the knowledge that he has broken taboo. The conscience with which his society has imprinted him destroys him from within--as often noted to this day by anthropologists--just as Orestes was instantly aware of the Furies hunting him down when he had killed his mother, though no one else could see them.²⁷

Religious ritual, as the "historical narrative" of the deeds of the gods,²⁸ bears the essence of taboos; Greek drama, writes Joan Rockwell, "is essentially the ritual presentation of crime and punishment, and more specifically,

of the destruction of the criminal who breaks taboo."²⁹ These dramas, while they may strike modern sensibilities as unjust--dependent as our concepts of justice are on elements of intent and premeditation--"were evidently regarded as exemplary tales, and satisfied the public conscience of the people of Athens."³⁰ This a priori link between individual fate and the destiny of the nation, race or people seems to have been self-evident for fifth-century Athens, as it was, at least to some degree, in other societies that produced epics and sagas. As Colin Wilson writes, "To commit a crime--say theft or murder--a man would have to set himself up against the will of the gods; and under the psychological conditions of a theocracy, this would be tantamount to suicide."³¹ To ensure the promulgation of this certainty, tragedy originally provided the Athenians with an experience of normative transgression and fate through the surrogate criminal, as was later codified in the Aristotelean doctrine of catharsis through "pity and terror." "The invention of this didactic substitute for the exemplary cruelties of despotic justice," concludes Rockwell, "must surely be counted as one more proof of the superiority of Greek civilisation."³²

My thesis, then, is this: representations of transgression in traditional, pre-critical and pre-theoretical social settings tended to be unembarrassed about the normative weight they delivered. The resulting system

of taboos and transgressions, relatively unencumbered with the self-consciousness we associate with the modern, finds its purest expression in the fetish, which is symbolic in a markedly different way than is a symbolically structured work of representation.³³ In the modern era, however, the normative component of represented transgression, even when relegated to a secondary position behind reflective modes, begins to embarrass ever-more-alienated authors and audiences. The career of the conventions and contrivances of melodrama, to cite just one example, illustrates this process in a striking way.³⁴ The "vertical-axis" information (sin, received religious norms and versions of the sacred) borne by taboos has had to find its way onto the "horizontal axis" of inter-subjective relations. Increasingly, the nature of these relations is determined by historical and political change, in the modern epoch, in the secularized, "de-mythologized" form of transgression: crime. Writing on the novel, Mikhail Bakhtin states: "Events acquire a public significance as such, only when they become crimes. The criminal act is a moment of private life that becomes, as it were, involuntarily public."³⁵ Conversely, tragedy (as a form of represented transgression less "embarrassed" than succeeding forms) presents a moment of public life that becomes, through catharsis, involuntarily private.

While the links between the facts of real crime and the images of crime that proliferated in nineteenth-century

literature are indisputable, the complex interactions of the reflective and normative impulses in the representation of nineteenth-century crime seem inextricable. The "horizontal-axis" hermeneutics of modern criminality--its post-revolutionary, secularized, "public" nature compounded by revolutionary artistic procedures derived from realism--defies categorization and immediately reduces the would-be historian to exercises in focus-narrowing. Nevertheless, writers (Michel Foucault first comes to mind) who proceed undaunted by the englobing vastness of criminality have in recent years produced works whose theoretical breadth and findings attest to the central importance of crime and its image in the modern era. Michael R. Weissner, inspired by Foucault, writes that crime statistics for the early modern period "demonstrate beyond a shadow of a doubt that crime was an integral aspect of European social development, occurring more frequently than either births or deaths."³⁶ A look through the literary histories and bibliographies of the same period attests to the explosion of the "literature of crime" which corresponds to the socio-historical ("hard") data so recently assembled.

Indeed, the recent discourse on crime in relation to modernity has necessarily developed in a double register: following Foucault's model, the historian of crime must simultaneously select data for analysis and clarify the procedural tools with which he is performing the selection in

order not to duplicate the motivations or prejudices of those data themselves. Already complicated by problems of hermeneutics when discerned in literary works, issues of law, crime, and justice are especially subject to misreading because of the tendency of the bearers of power "to criminalize the customs of the poor in the name of work discipline."³⁷ These "bearers of power," of course, may or may not include authors and readers.

Gordon Wright chooses crime as the locus in which the dynamics of modernity have evolved, directly "reflecting changes in values and mentalités."³⁸ Crime in fact may be the barometer of change par excellence: "'There are no "facts of crime" as such, only a judgmental process that institutes crimes by designating as criminal both certain acts and their perpetrators. In other words, there is a discourse of crime that reveals the obsessions of a society.'"³⁹ This "discourse of crime" in the nineteenth century took place both in literary and non-literary contexts: while the latter would come to invent, in 1838, the term "penology," and in 1885, the term "criminology,"⁴⁰ the former would explore the baffling phenomenon of pandemic crime by aesthetic, not scientific, means.

This exploration takes place in a literature fundamentally anxious about the presence of norms in its "objectively rendered" reflections. Louis Chevalier states:

While the conventional histories of

Paris are unduly impoverished by ignoring or misinterpreting crime, the many recent studies of criminal literature and criminality in the nineteenth century also labor under a similar misconception. They concentrate on crime alone and are, so to speak, fascinated by it, while wholly ignoring general history.⁴¹

This "general history" would include, it seems reasonable to infer, the social and economic infrastructures of the criminal classes, as well as the ideological and religious superstructures informing their proliferation, especially in the context of the belief systems of the dominant classes and authorities over them.

Chevalier proceeds to discuss the historical specificity of Parisian crime in the period, stating that the very word "crime" as he uses it in this context must be understood not as an exceptional consequence of social existence, not as something abnormal, but as "one of the most normal aspects of the city's daily life in this phase of its development."⁴² Trained as a demographer, Chevalier makes a leap in this work from the reliance on statistics that marked his earlier books to what he calls the "aggregate approach" to demographics. Instead of dealing with correlations between hard historical statistics (population, incidence of crime, and so on) and literary works from the period, he proposes to "embrace and . . . quiz"⁴³ the world implied by the work, the world artistically reflected in and normatively projected by the novels and plays of the first half of the century. Chevalier

contends that this "aggregate" of interactions, interpreted in the zone where literature and statistics of population composition and changes overlap, will render an account of "many of the material and moral characteristics of the Parisians of the time."⁴⁴ Clearly, the historian's "leap in the dark" here consists of his willingness to discuss the latter characteristics--the moral--in the face of an era and a literature overwhelmed by the imperative to "realism" seemingly decreed by the industrial revolution and overweening materialism itself.

The bulk of the evidence, both statistical and literary, drives Chevalier to the insight that there indeed exists a genius loci for the environs of Paris. Moreover, this spirit of place, discernible in both scientific and fictional writings of the period, allows the historian to posit the existence of a force similar to the one presently under elaboration here. Discussing the writings of the "entertainer" Jules Janin, he notes:

We must indeed place Janin's description of the southern faubourgs--so deeply dyed with poverty and crime, crushed under the detritus of the city--in the front rank beside the contemporary medical topographies and Parent-Duchatelet's monographs and, too, on a level in this respect with Balzac, Hugo, and Sue. Like the doctor, the criminologist and the novelist, the entertainer was compelled to invest these places with the character which was specifically their own.⁴⁵

In this coincidence, or repetition--"the fact that the same places were described by every writer in the same terms and associated with the same images"⁴⁶--Chevalier detects what he calls "the expression of the pressure of opinion."⁴⁷ For crime in the first half of the nineteenth century was such an important aspect of people's lives that the writers of the period--whether scientific or literary--could not help but treat the reality of the problem by reflecting its topography, its demography, as well as its color, drama and poetry. Balzac's famous statement, in the Avant-Propos to La Comédie Humaine, that "Le hasard est le plus grand romancier du monde: pour être fécond, il n'y a qu'à l'étudier. La Société française allait être l'historien, je ne devais être que le secrétaire.",⁴⁸ might be viewed as the most important programmatic statement of this tendency. But the reflective aspects of these representations, however dominant, were always driven, Chevalier demonstrates, by normative forces often presented by the author only "involuntarily."⁴⁹ Despite the emerging exigencies of "realism" and "reflection," or perhaps because of them, these authors were unwilling, or unable, to divest themselves completely of the didactic or normative lessons borne by the evidence of miserable criminality before them.

Writing in December of 1831, Thomas Carlyle puts his finger on the social orientations in contemporary literature

(including journalism, of course) as a lamentably reflective, and therefore faultily or insufficiently normative, procedure:

Again, with respect to our Moral condition: here also, he who runs may read that the same physical, mechanical influences are everywhere busy. For the "superior morality," of which we hear so much, we, too, would desire to be thankful: at the same time, it were but blindness to deny that this "superior morality" is properly rather an "inferior criminality" produced not by greater love of Virtue, but by greater perfection of Police; and of that far subtler and stronger Police, called Public Opinion.⁵⁰

The "realism" of the public debate (in artistic representation as well as in non-fiction) on criminality--that is, the burgeoning activity in popular forms, including serial publication--drives the Victorian sage, precisely on the eve of the Victorian age, to posit this relation between the "physical, mechanical influences" of "realistic" literature and its attendant, craven "inferior criminality" masquerading as morality. The hermeneutic relations between the writers and readers of this literature of "inferior criminality" occur along the horizontal axis of reflective "realism," which process Carlyle places squarely in the domain of a "superior" police force, Public Opinion. It is the "busy-ness" of this arena ("he who runs may read") and the proliferation of these new, "horizontal" syntaxes of

moral contention that trouble Carlyle; he yearns for an emergence of an authentic normativity, which would leap out of catchpenny dialogue onto the paradigmatic or vertical axis. "This last," he writes (Public Opinion as "that far subtler and stronger Police"), "watches over us with its Argus eyes more keenly than ever; but the 'inward eye' seems heavy with sleep."⁵¹ And what is the cause of this disturbing condition for the moralist? "At no former era," he complains, "has Literature, the printed communication of Thought, been of such importance as it is now."⁵²

The first half of the century--the brave new "now" for Carlyle--rethinks the very ground upon which it might discuss and represent issues of transgression, especially with the advent of "realism." Carlyle notes this as a "sign of the times," and the conflation of "realism" in literature and lowly journalism serves to further flatten, to an even greater degree, the already "flattened" (or "horizontalized") status of the vertical axis about which he complains.

If this fundamental shift in the concept of transgression in representation might be posed in terms of discourse, then, sin (normative, "vertical axis") is essentially monological and crime (reflective, "horizontal axis") is determined dialogically.⁵³ While sin (or its institutional coefficient, evil) is conceived, delineated and suffered privately, according to laws received from atemporal or spiritual authority, crime lives in the secular public.

This may seem a paradox, for the telos of normative transgression (sin) in representation is cathartic imprinting and socialization, while reflective transgression (crime) is set, by the end of the eighteenth century, in the "disenchanted," privatized, atomized world of political and industrial revolution. It is for this reason that Edgar Allan Poe's "Man of the Crowd" is called "the type and genius of deep crime."⁵⁴ The setting in which he wanders--the vast, shifting public realm, overpopulated, restless, urgently "modern"--is precisely what makes him "unreadable." He is the figure of the new transgressor, highly symbolized in his inscrutable anonymity, detached from any a priori values: the born criminal.

Almost as an antidote to Carlyle's complaint in 1831, that the emerging morality of public discourse is indistinguishable from criminality, Oscar Wilde propounds a more detached, objective, "aesthetic" version of this phenomenon. "There is no essential incongruity between crime and culture," he writes some fifty years later, in 1891. "We cannot re-write the whole of history for the purpose of gratifying our moral sense of what should be."⁵⁵ The tottering edifice of "positive" ethics and "earnest" normativity so energetically upheld by the Victorian age, almost in spite of a literature compelled by history to accent the reflective modes, is dealt blow after blow in the aesthetics of crime after 1850. In a more brilliantly

paradoxical formulation of the same idea, Wilde states:

"Crime in England is rarely the result of sin. It is nearly always the result of starvation."⁵⁶

Crime in the nineteenth century differs from sin precisely because it depends largely on the Other and modifies itself according to material, social and historical circumstances. Sin, on the other hand, has become a private affair; it has been driven indoors, so to speak, to the confines of the drawing rooms and salons of the European bourgeoisie. The confessor, as an agent of spiritual institutions, absolves sin by exacting internal restitution in the act of confession. This occurs in a symbolically partitioned box: the screen between the sinner and the agent of transcendental authority lends the voice of the former a strikingly interiorized, self-contained resonance. Indeed, the confession of sins is tantamount to an act of prayer, and the confessor, completely subject to the coordination of the voice and normatively imprinted conscience of the sinner ("good faith," or the sinner's willingness to confess at all), serves by his presence to evoke penitence, to lend a private context to penance. Like the Socratic "inner voice" of conscience, the confessor is anonymous; like the deity, he is invisible. The terms of absolution he delivers to his client derive not from history, but from immutable doctrine: the confessed delivers his monologue; the confessor delivers his terms of absolution from what might be called the

monologic, paradigmatic, "vertical axis" of transcendental value.

On the other hand, unlike the priest, the detective--that nascent species of nineteenth-century secular confessor--lacks these atemporal powers of absolution. From his arrival in Balzac and in the stories of Poe to his full elaboration in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment, he is endowed above all with powers of ratiocination. The detective is an agent of the penal establishment, not an agent of absolution. Like Poe's C. Auguste Dupin, he is the embodiment of reason, not forgiveness. Yet the "reincarnation" of the arch-criminal Vautrin as the Inspector General of the detectives of the Sûreté, in Balzac's Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes (1838-1847), is framed in a demonic mythology: like Athene, Vautrin the police inspector ultimately springs from the head of a god: i.e., the churchified transgressor, his former "incarnation," the "Abbé" Carlos Herrera, a.k.a. "Trompe-la-Mort" and, as such, illustrates Carlyle's point concerning the inversions of criminality and morality. Not content to endow this character with god-like omnipotence, or the closest thing to it, Balzac also compares him to an aestheticized, insincere Christ:

Ainsi traîné, le mourant levait
les yeux au ciel de manière à
ressembler au Sauveur descendu de la
croix. Certes dans aucun tableau
Jésus n'offre une face plus

cadavérique, plus décomposée que
ne l'était celle du faux Espagnol,
il semblait près de rendre le
dernier soupir.⁵⁷

While still subject in its iconography to the high romanticism of Balzac, however, the image of the detective, his emergent reasoning, his deductions, his prerogatives, all come to draw their strength from the syntagmatic or "horizontal axis" of social, legal and historical value. Likewise, Porfiry Petrovich, in Crime and Punishment (1866), may enact his dialogical drama of conscience with Raskolnikov only within the boundaries prescribed by his police powers. The enormous artistic power of his spiritual relations with the double axe murderer, however, derives precisely from the disjunction between his official forensic mission and his own powers of "psychological" (for Dostoevsky, roughly coefficient with "spiritual") observation. The murderer is driven by a theory of permissive history, according to which transgression, crowned by success, is rendered orthodoxy. He cites Napoleon, Solon and Mohamet as the "criminals" whose sins became law by dint of their will power and worldly powers of auto-validation. As the author of a little treatise on criminality and the "great criminals" of history (which the thorough Porfiry Petrovich has read), Raskolnikov might only find redemption in the monologic realm of sin; his Hegelian, proto-Nietzschean will to power, however, does not admit to the existence of such a realm.⁵⁸

Porfiry's pursuit of his criminal quarry marks the fullest, most important nineteenth-century elaboration of the detective precisely because of the exhaustive way in which the seemingly antithetical realms of crime and sin are allowed to penetrate each other in his three dialogues with Raskolnikov. The symmetry in the Raskolnikov/Porfiry/Liza triangle demonstrates that Porfiry's powers, essential to the first stage of the murderer's confession and conversion, are ultimately effective only on the horizontal axis. His interactions with the murderer drive Raskolnikov onto the vertical axis, however: once there, he undergoes the corresponding, horizontal axis-part of the process of the redemption of the criminal "aesthetic louse," as Raskolnikov calls himself, which the saintly prostitute must perform. Lacking "vertical" powers of authoritative absolution or spiritual consolation, Porfiry Petrovich pursues the transgressor in an arena of scandal, ideology, and history--as if these public realms had become, by the 1860's, the ground upon which sin might most powerfully be represented--in the form of aesthetic crime.

I.2 Realism, Anti-Enlightenment and Decadence

"Yet was not Conrad thus by Nature sent
To lead the guilty--guilt's worst instrument;
His soul was changed, before his deeds had driven
Him forth to war with man and forfeit heaven."
Byron, "The Corsair," XI, 248-252.

"Certes l'homme ne consent plus ici à s'unir à

la nature que dans le crime: resterait à savoir si ce n'est pas encore une façon, des plus folles, des plus indiscutables, de l'aimer."

André Breton, L'Amour fou, Ch. V

A palpable, even decisive shift away from the "magic prophylaxis" of works bearing predominantly normative and normalizing orientations toward works more reflective in their procedures may be discerned in the passage of European civilization out of the seventeenth, through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century. The consensus on this point is broad: the doctrine of the levels of style, for example, announced by Aristotle as an ancillary to the problems of mimesis, is held to have been abandoned by "modern realists" in an "emancipatory" moment occurring early in the nineteenth century. Erich Auerbach writes:

When Stendhal and Balzac took random individuals from daily life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them the subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of distinct levels of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, as either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment. They thus completed a development which had long been in preparation. . . . And they opened the way for modern realism.⁵⁹

On the other hand, in the "Metaphysics of Tragedy,"

Georg Lukacs diagnoses the universal levelling process of modernity as the reason behind the "impossibility of tragedy in the modern era."⁶⁰ From either perspective--i.e., Auerbach's possibility or Lukacs's impossibility of "modern tragedy"--the normativity associated with genres--and for the moment I am speaking in terms of both social and formalistic norms--seems to shift with the advent of modernity. But shift toward what?

In a description of this phenomenon, Adorno writes:

The influx into art of experiences that are no longer forced into given genres and the need to constitute form out of these experiences . . . are two phenomena which indicate the growth of 'realism', measured purely in terms of aesthetic categories rather than content. . . . the relation of content to the society from which it springs is thus rendered much more direct. . . .⁶¹

Although writing about "aesthetic categories" (forms) rather than themes (content) here, it is clear that the "experiences" artists could "no longer force into given genres" are in the main transgressions, especially by the end of the eighteenth century. During the revolutionary period the energies of the group and of the individual surpassed certain generic bounds, so to speak, and whether one refers to this moment as an emancipation from a priori social norms or from a priori literary genres, as a birth of a new "realism" or, as in the case of Lukacs, as a disappearance of the self-evidence of fates and destinies, it is clear that

the problems of authority, legality and social identity haunted the period. The Enlightenment revaluation of law coalesces most notably in Montesquieu's De l'Esprit des lois (1748), where the accent is placed on the universal rule of law, not on any "relativity of institutions in time."⁶² This sort of static historiography proved unsatisfactory for the early romanticists; accordingly, a certain "expressivist anthropology," as Charles Taylor calls it, came into play.

The historical evidence of both the French Revolution and the sturm und drang movement in Germany demonstrates a crucial moment not only for the world view of new generations of artists and intellectuals in the early part of the nineteenth century, but also for later interpreters as well: it is "an epistemological revolution with anthropological consequences."⁶³ "The essential difference can perhaps be put in this way," Taylor writes: "the modern subject is self-defining, where on previous views the subject is defined in relation to a cosmic order."⁶⁴ Dispensing with eighteenth-century static models of law and ontology, from the "Great Chain of Being" to its substitute in "natural law," and thereby rejecting any meaningful, pre-existing order, the modern subject is born into exile, or criminalized, definitively from day one: this "disenchanted" state of the world (a term Taylor borrows from Max Weber) is the price paid for the "exhilaration and power" felt by the self-defining identity which needs "no longer [to] define his

perfection or vice, his equilibrium or disharmony, in relation to an external order."⁶⁵ The modern world view was determined by this confluence of philosophical revolution and religious reformation; protestantism, across Europe, in Taylor's account, "waged unconditional war" on the sacred, i.e., on the "heightened presence of the divine in certain privileged places, times and actions."⁶⁶ The iconoclasts of the French Revolution, in their attacks on cathedrals, carried out this war physically on the institutional forms of the sacred in France.

This modern, self-defining subject faces a "locus of contingent correlations to be traced by observation, conforming to no a priori pattern;" Taylor speaks of this new world not only as a "disenchanted" one but also as a "desacralized" one, as a world which produces art that is "objectified."⁶⁷

Consequently, this new world could only establish grounds for its own authority--or legality--in the field of what Jacques Derrida calls the "transgression of discourse":

. . . this transgression of discourse (and consequently of law in general, for discourse establishes itself only by establishing normativity or the value of meaning, that is to say, the element of legality in general) must, in some fashion, and like every transgression, conserve or confirm that which it exceeds.⁶⁸

Our statement above, therefore, must necessarily be modified: the shift from works predominantly normative to works predominantly reflective is perhaps better understood as a shift from an older, static sense of normativity to a newer, more productive sense of normativity derived from dialogic reflections recorded along the social and historical axis. Derrida's willingness to explore this phenomenon as a "transgression of discourse" effectively brackets or suspends the traditional distinction between social norms and literary genres, which may be said to behave in similar ways. For Derrida, the transgressive function of discourse, as a continual renewal of the concept of the value of meaning or normativity, in this way serves precisely "to affirm itself as transgression and thereby to accede (sic) to the sacred, which 'is presented in the violence of an infraction.'"69

The shift from primary emphasis on normativity to a procedure of reflection in representation does not, then, denote any abandonment of the essence of normativity ("the value of meaning") in any way: the sacred is still at stake in the life of norms and their investment in literary "realism." Nonetheless, it is an "objectified" or "disenchanted" world in which this process of masking (of the unreal as the "real" in representation) is necessary.

The fact that there are ethical or normative stakes involved in this transition is most apparent for Taylor in the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who "virtually

reinterpreted the traditional opposition of virtue and vice into the modern opposition of self- versus other-dependence."⁷⁰ Paradoxically, however, the hermeneutics of the narrative process by which Rousseau's "expressivist anthropology" is expressed--i.e., the necessarily interpretive nature of his self-defining "confessions"--require a newly active reader/interpreter to receive them. Peter Brooks states:

The question of identity, claims Rousseau--and this is what makes him at least symbolically the incipit of modern narrative--can be thought only in narrative terms, in the effort to tell a whole life, to plot its meaning by going back over it to record its perpetual flight forward, its slippage from the fixity of definition. To understand me, Rousseau says more than once in the Confessions, . . . the reader must follow me at every moment of my existence; and it will be up to the reader, not Rousseau, to assemble the elements of the narrative and determine what they mean.⁷¹

Rousseau's "confessions" are refreshingly secular, narrated along the syntagmatic axis in order that his emergent personality, newly freed from divine paradigm, might be reinterpreted and understood in the community of humankind.

This exhilarating reinterpretation leads, according to Taylor, through Herder and the succeeding generation of German thinkers, to the characteristic romanticist reaction against the scientism emerging from Enlightenment sources, a

reaction witnessed across Europe. The "expressivist" experience of "an objectified world as exile" took shape in a form of yearning "for an earlier time when the world was seen as a text, when nature was the locus of meaning."⁷² Thus, the "scientific" disallowal of any a priori meaning in the world, in the name of "objectivity," met with extremely powerful forces of spirit and flesh who would do battle with the programmed insignificance produced by such scientism. Nature, for many Romantics, would become the new locus of meaning, but not in a pre-lapsarian sense; rather, in "a communion appropriate to subjectivities,"⁷³ nature would prove to be the arena in which the scientistic dichotomies of the Enlightenment would be reunited--"on the model of a work of art, in which no part could be defined in abstraction from the others."⁷⁴

This recurrence to Nature, as a legitimate a priori form of meaning endowed, like the expressivist subject, with its own self-reliant ontology, marks the first glimmer of l'art pour l'art. This is especially ironic, perhaps, given the estrangement of art and nature in traditional formulations of l'art pour l'art. In its turn, as we shall see below, the social mask adopted by l'art pour l'art, after the explosive developments in France in the 1840's and after the pan-European disillusionment of 1848-1850, will become le crime pour l'art, or le crime pour le crime, or aesthetic crime. But in order to understand the history of relations between

crime, art and nature, it is necessary to return briefly to the Enlightenment.

"Man imagines himself free from fear when there is no longer anything unknown," write Horkheimer and Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment.⁷⁵ "That determines the course of demythologization, of enlightenment, which . . . is mythic fear turned radical."⁷⁶ This "mythic fear" derives from the inexplicable in nature and in humankind, no less for the eighteenth century than for prehistory. The Encyclopédie itself stands as an immense monument to the energies unleashed by the experience of a fresh gaze upon a universe newly explicable; Sade's collected writings, in their voluminousness and their "exhaustive" explorations, are yet another illustration of the radical demythologization of phenomena undertaken during the period. Similarly, the Lisbon earthquake, as an act of divine injustice, occasions in 1756 Voltaire's "Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne," and three years later the epochal demystifications of Candide. The systematic application of scientific classification to natural phenomena (Linnaeus, Jussieu) by eighteenth-century naturalists marks a profound spread of the demythologizing impulse precisely in the first (and last) refuge of myth: Nature itself.

Writing in 1755, Morelly posits an ultra-materialist "Code de la Nature," which states an emergent Enlightenment doctrine regarding nature and transgression. Speaking of men

in general, he states:

Après tout, ce n'est par leur faute, s'ils ont été induits en des erreurs qui, multipliées et perpétuées de générations, sont devenues insurmontables. Si donc, en conséquence de ces erreurs, quelques particuliers se trouvent réduits à la dure nécessité de devenir criminels, dans les principes même de nos Moralistes, n'ont-ils pas le droit de s'excuser d'une méchanceté dont tout le système a été bâti avant eux?77

Morelly in this instance inserts nature, or the perceived "amorality" of nature, into the space of a priori belief systems which are then being cleared away by Enlightenment thought. The errors to which men are driven by desire are ingrained and insurmountable and, in this way, stand in for forces such as fate (tragic destiny) and divine justice previously encoded in traditional or pre-critical forms of representation. The resulting apology for natural criminals seems logical, reasonable, even "liberal" in the context of this "code of nature": after all, these criminals have the right not only to be excused in the Enlightenment arena of "philosophy," but also "dans les principes même de nos Moralistes." These are precisely the grounds, as we shall see, upon which romanticist writers will object to such a code of materialist nature.

It is important to note that Morelly does not refer to sin, but rather to crime, as the transgression in question.

The realms of received theology and the sacred are no longer even in question in this natural code; sin as a concept is already defunct in this early materialist version of social conditioning. Unlike the laws of religion, which for the Enlightenment are subject to new, anthropological explication, the laws of Nature are incontestable and immutable, subject to investigation and classification, but not to revision. ("Les armes du fanatisme peuvent détruire ceux qui soutiennent ces vérités," writes Julien Offray de La Mettrie, "mais elles ne détruiront jamais ces vérités mêmes.")⁷⁸ Inevitably, this reinsertion of an a priori code leads the Enlightenment thinker to "the cycle whose objectification in the form of natural law he imagines will ensure his action as a free subject."⁷⁹ For Morelly, this brings a new moral law and a new certainty: "Il est incontestable," he states, "comme je le prouve ailleurs, que tant que les loix de la Nature subsistent dans leur entier, il n'y a point de crime possible; point, par conséquent, de crime à punir."⁸⁰

This sort of re-definition of the grounds of criminality finds its reductio ad absurdum in assertions by La Mettrie, author of L'Homme Machine, in a work from 1774, the Discours sur le bonheur:

Nous sommes donc en droit de conclure que, si les joies puisées, dans la nature et dans la raison, sont des crimes, le bonheur des hommes est d'être criminels.⁸⁰

Where Morelly speaks of "erreurs," La Mettrie speaks of "joies"; where the former speaks of a regrettable "méchanceté," the latter speaks of "bonheur." There exists in the twenty years intervening between these two pronouncements a sort of exacerbation of the Enlightenment discourse on transgression, a heating up of the terms in which nature and crime might be discussed. This exacerbation leads La Mettrie into casuistry, as Marcel Ruff demonstrates, when he appends the following disclaimer to his statement quoted above as a sort of afterthought intended to preempt his critics: "Qu'on ne dise pas que j'invite au crime," he states, "car je n'invite qu'au repos dans le crime."⁸² The sense of this statement is difficult to determine precisely, but the subtext of a rhetorical levelling of distinctions seems clear enough. The freedom to carve out a new zone of transgression, simply by rejecting in advance the charge of inciting to actual crime by inventing an alternative space within the transgression ("repos dans le crime"), is paid for with a new possibility for, or a new alienation from, meaning. In this way, Enlightenment thought "with every step becomes more deeply engulfed in mythology. . . . It wishes to extricate itself from the process of fate and retribution, while exercising retribution on that process."⁸³

Therefore, for La Mettrie, Morelly, and eventually for Sade, every crime is equal to every other crime, for all of them are decreed by nature; indeed, the "laws of nature,"

once understood, create a rhetorical release from culpability, along with the possibility for "le bonheur dans le crime," as Barbey d'Aurevilly will call it during the décadence. It must be remembered that the experience of crime during the period was more common than birth and death; these claims mirror in the social realm, therefore, the philosophical materialism which declares that all matter is equal to all other matter. "The identity of everything with everything else is paid for," assert Adorno and Horkheimer, "in that nothing may at the same time be identical with itself."⁸⁴ This resulting alienation of nature from consciousness results in the "identity crisis" traditionally associated with romanticism.

Literary history ascribes to the decadence of the latter half of the nineteenth century a secondary status as a latter-day manifestation of romanticism itself, relegating it to the period of the fin de siècle of 1880-1900. This periodization is doubtless helpful with regard to understanding the continuation of romanticist preoccupations in decadent works; the developmental lines of these thematic and stylistic preoccupations have been catalogued by Mario Praz, A.E. Carter, and Jean Pierrot, among others.⁸⁵

The shortcomings of this critical tradition with regard to the decadence emerge, however, when the aesthetic preoccupations of the period are placed in the context of intellectual and social history. The questions concerning

the "who" and the "what" and the "how" have been explored with regard to the decadence, but the hermeneutic question "why" has rarely been posed. As Tobin Siebers states it,

In The Romantic Agony, Mario Praz advanced the most persuasive theory of the Romantic character to date, arguing lucidly that the essence of Romantic sensibility lies in the agonies of perversity, diabolicalness and suffering. Yet, if Praz brilliantly catalogued the rise of sadism and masochism during Romanticism, he nevertheless failed to explain why the growth occurred and why it was so central to Romantic creativity.⁸⁶

Posing precisely this question ("Pourquoi écrire?") in his look at the status of writing in society, Jean-Paul Sartre focuses immediately on the period after 1850 in France: "L'extrême pointe de cette littérature brillante et mortelle, c'est le néant."⁸⁷ For the decadence, he states, "l'imagination est conçue comme faculté inconditionnée de nier le réel et l'objet d'art s'édifie sur l'effondrement de l'univers."⁸⁸ The period seems to have taken the claims to autonomy of earlier forms of l'art pour l'art to pathological extremes, as attested to by both the works of the period and the critical tradition. But this need not be the final judgment passed upon it. Sartre's critique of the social role of the decadent writer as "parasite" and "bourgeois prince" reopens the question of the relation between aesthetics and social codes, between

reflective and normative modes in representation. The preoccupation of the decadence with crime, and especially the proliferation of aesthetic (or "symbolic") crime after 1850, as a variation upon the criminal motifs in the literature of high romanticism, provide a rich source of evidence for these issues, too often repeated to ignore.

The Sartrean attack upon the aesthetic practices of the decadence is based on the charge that they aimed solely, like the "era of high capitalism" from which they emerged, to "consume the world."⁸⁹ In accepting the money of the bourgeoisie, Sartre states, the writer of the fin de siècle "exerce son sacerdoce puisqu'il distrait une part des richesses pour l'anéantir en fumée."⁹⁰ At the same time, however, the decadent places himself above all social responsibility by means of his aesthetic pronouncements, which state baldly that "pure destruction" and pleasurable, inevitable decline comprise the essence of content and form. Zola's naturalism, for example, in this context may be viewed as a decadent form of realism: it sets in motion a fatally pre-determined set of bio-cultural phenomena in which the author assumes the decadent role equivalent to that of Balzac's detached secretary: writer as scientist. Similarly, the Goncourt brothers would declare themselves, in the preface to Germinie Lacerteux, mere anatomists in the "clinique de l'Amour."⁹⁰ "Tout cela demeure, à la fin du siècle, passablement confus et contradictoire," Sartre

allows. Then follows a key statement:

Mais lorsque la littérature, avec
le surréalisme, se fera provocation
au meurtre, on verra l'écrivain,
par un enchaînement paradoxal mais
logique, poser explicitement le
principe de sa totale
irresponsabilité.⁹²

The provocation to murder referred to here is André Breton's famous statement, that "L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, revolver au poing, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule."⁹³ Is it possible that this statement constitutes the final straw in writerly "irresponsibility" for Sartre because it exceeds the bounds of aesthetics and "descends into the street," no longer bracketing or framing the criminal act aesthetically, in representation, but actually inciting the reader (or the surrealist in embryo) to some murderous project in praxis? Might this recurrence to normativity on Sartre's part, precisely in a programmatic, even theoretical work devoted to writing itself (Qu'est-ce que la littérature?), be what leads a recent critic to refer to "l'humanisme sartrien, dernier avatar de la pensée classique . . . "?⁹⁴

The decadent moment discerned by the "classicist" Sartre in the surrealist's provocation to murder reproduces the passage from the "conscience thétique à la conscience critique, ou de la thèse à la crise" noted by Vladimir Jankélévitch as the determining moment of decadence.⁹⁵

The thesis of conscience bears normativity before reflexivity; the crisis, or critical moment, reflexively distances itself from legality as it bears "pour toute altérité le Soi--qui est le monstre du Moi devenu objet de lui-même," which is one definition of vice.⁹⁶ For Sartre, the hyper-aestheticized vices explored by writers he finds parasitical in the fin de siècle become an all-too-real crisis of actual violence in the "purest surrealist act." The monstrous implosions of the "knights of nothingness" finally explode publicly in the surrealist provocation to murder, the ultimate writerly irresponsibility.

Writing in 1950, Jankélévitch discerns an essential procedure at the heart of decadence he calls "teratogenesis," i.e., "the production of monsters or monstrous growths."⁹⁷ Considered synchronically, as a psychological moment rather than an historical phenomenon, "La décadence est la maladie constitutionnelle de la conscience," he writes.⁹⁸

La conscience qui a une fois pris
conscience de son opération
découvre en elle-même une ironie
réflexive, un pouvoir indéfini de
dédoulement dont nulle force au
monde ne peut l'empêcher de
compliquer et subtiliser l'exposant;
la conscience qui s'est une fois
découverte ne cesse de se diviser
cancéreusement d'avec soi, de
devenir plus abstraite, plus
légère et plus intelligente; en se
découvrant elle découvre, comme le
menteur, le secret de son exercice
et de son propre usage comme
conscience, secret dont les suites

. incalculables expliquent
 rétroactivement le prix de
 l'innocence perdue.⁹⁹

This "lost innocence" at the center of decadent sensibility bears perhaps the brunt of the pejorative weight periodically brought to bear by "virtuous civilizations" against hedonistic or sybaritic ones; at the same time, however, one need not confuse decadence with "the Fall" or any similar catastrophic corruption. Rather, like biological or evolutionary degeneration, to which it so often compares itself, decadence should be considered in the metaphoric light of its own obsessions as "un procès naturel qui a son propre rythme, son temps, son périodisme."¹⁰⁰ It is, in the biological metaphor, a "processus vertébré ayant une légalité déterminée."¹⁰¹

Decadence derives its monstrous creations and its monstrous autotelic fascinations precisely from this ontological locus of lost innocence posited within a pre-determined legality. Issues of law and transgression come naturally to it; in the nineteenth century it self-consciously derives its authority from nature, in the form of neo-darwinian, organicist metaphors:

L'espèce, qui est une sorte de macro-organisme, se comporte comme l'individu; les Etats, les empires, les civilisations se comportent comme les espèces. Il y a des races 'fatiguées', et il y a des civilisations 'épuisées'. L'individu vieillit, l'espèce

dégénère et les beaux-arts
périlclitent: une même loi
préside donc à la sénescence, à
la dégénérescence, et à la
décadence,-- une loi pambologique
d'usure et de flétrissement.¹⁰²

Jankélévitch here accounts for the claims made by decadent writers, most succinctly by Paul Bourget, in his "Théorie de la décadence," which forms Part III of his study of Baudelaire, one of the chapters in his Essais de psychologie contemporaine (1881). For Bourget, and for the "school of decadence" itself, the idea of a society must be likened to an organism ("assimilée à un organisme").¹⁰³ He posits an organic law that will determine a priori the monstrous transgressivity of decadence, thereby reinserting the monstrosity of febrile self-consciousness into a natural frame or setting. This "natural" scheme structurally resembles the Enlightenment account of nature as an a priori system of legitimation, if not of values:

L'individu est la cellule sociale.
Pour que l'organisme fonctionne avec
énergie, il est nécessaire que les
organismes moindres fonctionnent
avec énergie, mais avec une
énergie subordonnée, et, pour que
ces organismes moindres fonctionnent
eux-mêmes avec énergie, il est
nécessaire que leurs cellules
composantes fonctionnent avec
énergie, mais avec une énergie
subordonnée. Si l'énergie des
cellules devient indépendante, les
organismes qui composent l'organisme
totale cessent pareillement de
subordonner leur énergie à
l'énergie totale, et l'anarchie qui

s'établit constitue la décadence
de l'ensemble. L'organisme social
n'échappe pas à cette loi.¹⁰⁴

Bourget's reasoning here is particularly rich. The problematic notion of social relations--expressed in normative terms in less self-conscious eras--so thoroughly thrown into chaos by the revolutionary events of the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth century, is in this instance rendered clearly--no doubt too clearly--in the molecular/cellular metaphor of organisms, energies, ineluctable balances and laws of sufficiency between them. The question immediately arises: if society must be compared--nay, "assimilated"--to organic forms, which partake of some systematic super-equilibrium of energy budgets and hierarchical subordinations, then why or how has the perceived state of decadence come about?

Paul Valéry once noted something to the effect that there are two forces continually threatening the universe: order and chaos. Bourget's figurative reasoning, this metaphor of decadence as a biological function no less appropriate for man-made civilisations than for the biosphere, recalls not only the Great Chain of Being of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also the tortuous explications of "natural transgression" in Morelly, La Mettrie, and Sade. Bourget is faced with the continuing dissolution of transcendental order as reflected in the material world of the Second Empire and the Third Republic.

He produces, however, an important version of the decadent paradox that assumes a profoundly anti-Enlightenment stance perfectly in accord with its origins in romanticism. The paradox is this: Nature, which bears a priori legitimacy and therefore excuses (or even decrees) criminality as "natural," has somehow produced an imbalance among organisms, which in turn creates an anarchy of unsubordinated energies, thanks to which individual organisms are no longer in harmony with the total energy system of Nature itself, resulting in a period of both social and psychological decline.

Paradoxically, then, Nature loses the a priori status conferred upon it by Enlightenment thinkers because of these imbalances--which Nature itself has produced. While transgression is decreed in the eighteenth-century version, the romanticist reaction to a seemingly amoral Nature endows it anthropomorphically with a spirit which recreates a moral, ethical or transcendental space for values. Thus, Wordsworth concludes the poem "Nutting": "--for there is a spirit in the woods."¹⁰⁵ Romanticism, and decadence after it, reject in this way the levelling imposed upon Nature by eighteenth-century individualism and radical materialism; they do so in different ways, however, and with divergent attitudes toward Nature. For the decadence, of course, nature itself is relegated to a secondary position behind the shimmering veil of subjectivity and artifice. As Oscar Wilde states it in a famous passage from "The Decay of Lying" (1891),

Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us.106

Decadence partakes of the self-validating "expressivist anthropology" of the modern era, yet its radical subjectivity finds expression most often in stylized reiteration rather than, say, the prophetic, devout or rebellious modes of iteration practiced by the romanticists. Unlike the decadent imagination, the innovative or creative genius of romanticism ("le génie novateur" for Jankélévitch) has little concern for taste; it seeks harmony with Truth, rather than Style. The relatively unselfconscious genius of high romanticism bears normativity as a seemingly intrinsic feature of its existential status:

. . . créant de rien un style qui sera la mode de demain, c'est à dire deviendra normatif, fera précédent, imposera à tous un décor, une légalité, une canonique et même une conception de l'existence, le génie est littéralement en deçà de la dissociation du bon et du mauvais goût, comme Adam supralapsaire demeure en deçà de la dissociation du bien et du mal. . . .107

The teratogenetic nature of decadence, then, is less concerned with the harmony of its Truth than with the style of its Suffering; it is immediately distanced from

normativity because its painfully reflexive "conscience à la seconde puissance"¹⁰⁸ determines not only its art, but also its very sense of identity. The characteristic decadent transgression--the blurring of the line between art and life, a favorite among decadent writers--is a symptom in extremis of this priority of the reflective mode in the century.

"Realism" and decadence, despite apparent surface counter-indications, share deep-structure features in their relation to, and representation of, transgression. If we might "rub history against the grain," as Walter Benjamin has proposed,¹⁰⁹ then decadence is not the last gasp of previously instituted tensions (between nature and law, reflection and normativity, transgression and transcendence); rather, romanticism and the "realism" of the first half of the nineteenth century, along with the Enlightenment before it, are embryonic forms of the systemic, pandemic decline so urgently cultivated in France and England after 1850.

Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" emerges as the decadent transgressor, the essential aesthetic criminal, in his allegorical nature, his "unreadability," and his pronounced modernity. As "the type and the genius of deep crime,"¹¹⁰ he is the living representation of the man who has lost "the ability to stand apart from the environment as an individual, and at the same time to enter into contact with that environment--and gain a foothold in it--through the approved

forms of communication."¹¹¹ The Man of the Crowd, qua criminal, represents the emergent nineteenth-century embodiment of a tendency traceable at least back to the Enlightenment:

. . . a trend which is deep-rooted in living beings, and whose elimination is a sign of all development: the trend to lose oneself in the environment instead of playing an active role in it; the tendency to let oneself go and sink back into nature. Freud called it the death instinct, Caillois 'le mimétisme.' This urge underlies everything which run(s) counter to bold progress, from the crime which is a shortcut avoiding the normal forms of activity, to the sublime work of art. A yielding attitude to things, without which art cannot exist, is not so very remote from the violence of the criminal.¹¹²

Poe's narrator tracks the old man's course through the busy quarters and abandoned passageways of London out of curiosity, struck by the undecidable appearance and indecipherable goal of his quarry. The narrator reads in his gestures, in his turnings and retracing of his steps, in his alternating impatience and boredom, the undivulged "essence of all crime."¹¹³ He glimpses through a rent in the stranger's roquelaire the two symbols of the aesthetic criminal: the diamond and the dagger, the signs of purity and transgression, of hard, multi-faceted beauty and hard-edged foul play. Wearing the nineteenth-century equivalent

of sneakers ("caoutchouc over-shoes"), the narrator follows the stranger in great determination to fathom his secret:

He entered shop after shop, priced nothing, spoke no word, and looked at all objects with a wild and vacant stare. . . . I saw the old man gasp as if for breath while he threw himself amid the crowd; but I thought that the intense agony of his countenance had, in some measure, abated. . . . I observed that he now took the course in which had gone the greater number of the audience--but, upon the whole, I was at a loss to comprehend the waywardness of his actions.¹¹⁴

The "mystery" of the old man is revealed to be precisely the unfathomable nature of his mystery. Poe's tale is a sort of shaggy-dog story in which the revelation at its conclusion is revealed to be an anti-revelation: it simply "does not permit itself to be read."¹¹⁵ The astonished reader turns back to the tale itself, to its twists and turns, and realizes that the apparent pointlessness of the stranger's itinerary matches that of the pages themselves, now perused once again for some clue to secret of the entire enterprise. The "type and genius of deep crime" has evinced indeed the "yielding attitude to things" of the death instinct, and his criminality assumes a "higher" status in the account of the narrator for its unfathomable tendency to "sink back into nature." Always close to the edge of violence, the "negative capability" borne by the Man of the Crowd also approaches the sublimity of a work of art. In fact, even

though he remains unreadable, he ultimately achieves the status of the scriptible in Poe's text itself.¹¹⁶

The aesthetic re-writing of crime in the second half of the nineteenth century has been largely a dead letter for the twentieth. These manuscripts found in these bottles represent "found subjects" whose allegories of community and transgression have so far lain largely unopened and unread. Let us proceed now to name the keys to these hyper-historical allegories of decay, that they may project their meanings anew.

I.3 Decadence and "Deep Crime"

"He then grew serious, and desired to ask me freely whether I was not troubled in Mind by the Consciousness of some enormous Crime, for which I was punished at the command of some Prince, by exposing me in that Chest; as great Criminals in other Countries have been forced to Sea in a leaky Vessel without Provisions. . . ."

Swift, Gulliver's Travels, II,8

In the second version of his long study of Poe's life and works ("Edgar Poe, Sa vie et ses oeuvres," 1855), Charles Baudelaire begins with an anecdote concerning a criminal brought before the court "dans ces derniers temps," who wore on his forehead a "rare et singulier tatouage: Pas de chance!" This sign of unhappiness was borne by the accused above his eyes as the "étiquette de sa vie, comme un livre

son titre, et l'interrogatoire prouva que ce bizarre écriteau était cruellement véridique."¹¹⁷ Rotten luck (le guignon), so familiar to convicts and to readers of Les Fleurs du Mal, becomes the analogy by which Baudelaire will discuss the literary destiny of the American writer.

Amid all the imagery of fallen angels, diabolical Providence, and prefigured states of anathema in the opening lines of his study, Baudelaire recurs to the realm of criminality when he accounts for the situation of the "âmes sacrées" (poets) in society: ". . . les Etats-Unis ne furent pour Poe qu'une vaste prison qu'il parcourait avec l'agitation fiévreuse d'un être fait pour respirer dans un monde plus amoral,--qu'une grande barbarie éclairée au gaz. . . ." ¹¹⁸ Indeed, he argues, Poe was not the only guilty man ("coupable") in a country "où il y a des millions de souverains, un pays sans capitale à proprement parler, et sans aristocratie."¹¹⁹ When Baudelaire truly wants to condemn a criminal society, as he does in the subsequent "Notes Nouvelles sur Edgar Poe" (1857), which originally served as preface to his translation of Poe's works in Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires, he draws not only upon criminality, but also upon the teratogenetic repertoire of decadence to describe Poe's homeland as a nation of slave owners: "Un pareil milieu,-- . . . cette cohue de vendeurs et d'acheteurs, ce sans-nom, ce monstre sans tête, ce déporté derrière l'océan"¹²⁰ (emphases added).

America, "this headless monster"--Jankélévitch is explicit in his analysis of the acephalic monsters of decadence; after the flowering of heads without bodies (which signify "les contenus en folie"¹²¹) comes the multiplication of headless torsos, which signify forms emptied of all content. Baudelaire's double formulation for the New World (as a headless monster and a deported criminal) is a precise statement of the decadent formalism, the "ogrerie bourgeoise," which afflicted the life and work of Poe. Jankélévitch, describing decadence as a phenomenon, names these as the two poles of "la conscience désaxée [qui] oscille entre le Charybde des contenus en peine et le Scylla des formes vides."¹²²

It is especially significant for the present inquiry that Baudelaire's second essay--written with the idea in mind that he was unhappy with both versions of the first biographical sketch of Poe¹²³--begins with the exclamation: "Littérature de décadence!" and explores the status of nature in a period of decay. Moreover, in his role as Poe's translator, Baudelaire points to the clamor for positive normativity in literature by academic critics and bas bleus as a particularly notable and lamentable feature of the period.

Some decades before Bourget's theory was enunciated, then, Baudelaire takes issue with the scientific metaphor of the organism and its phases of development and decline:

Le mot littérature de décadence implique qu'il y a une échelle de littératures, une vagissante, une puérile, une adolescente, etc. Ce terme . . . suppose quelque chose de fatal et de providentiel, comme un décret inéluctable; et il est tout à fait injuste de nous reprocher d'accomplir la loi mystérieuse.¹²⁴

If there be injustice here, it lies in the accusation of "decadence" brought against writers who are merely fulfilling ("accomplir") the "mysterious law" decreed by the "fatal and providential" term "littérature de décadence" itself.

"Tout ce que je puis comprendre dans la parole académique," Baudelaire remarks ironically, "c'est qu'il est honteux d'obéir à cette loi avec plaisir, et que nous sommes coupables de nous réjouir dans notre destinée."¹²⁵ Since all is decadence, the only crime "we" (poètes maudits? Baudelaire? and Poe?) are guilty of is enjoying the spectacle of systematized transgression; surely this aesthesis, and its resultant poetic practice, cannot be in itself criminal. Aesthetic crime, practiced in an era of "natural perversion" and systemic decay, is simply ironic, pleasurable transgression: inverted virtue for a perverse age.

This reasoning comes early in the fin de siècle (1857), but lays bare nonetheless an important aspect of the period, posed once again in terms of legality and transgression. While it is stated in the context of a Philippic against professors and critics--and as the opening gambit in his new

remarks on Poe--it proceeds to open an enormously rich inquiry into nature, "natural perversity" and civilization, a discourse central to the aesthetics of crime.

For Baudelaire, the Virginian poet was a product of a time and of a nation irremediably infatuated with itself; nevertheless, or perhaps because of this fact, Poe produced an "imperturbable" affirmation of natural Perversity, "qui fait que l'homme est sans cesse et à la fois homicide et suicide, assassin et bourreau. . . ."126 Baudelaire posits this perversity, after Poe, not only as "natural," but as "primordial." In fact, he casts the American as a suitable respondent to the reproach leveled by Rousseau against "'l'Animal dépravé" with a pronouncement particularly telling for the status of nature in the decadence: "Que celui-ci [Rousseau] eût raison contre l'Animal dépravé, cela est incontestable; mais l'animal dépravé a le droit de lui reprocher d'invoquer la simple nature. La nature ne fait que des monstres. . . ."127 Thus, Baudelaire performs the inversion of Enlightenment claims for nature as a normative system immune to ethical or moral valuation on the vertical (transcendental) axis. Yet there is still a sort of dialectic of transgression in nature present in Baudelaire's inversion: after all, just as Morelly and La Mettrie, and Sade after them, claimed that nature excused, even decreed criminality, the author of Les Fleurs du Mal argues that nature creates only monstrous transgression, which indeed

becomes its "mysterious law." It is easy to see how the concept of Nature as a constant mutatio in pejus might serve Baudelaire as an antidote to the cheerful, positivistic view of evolution about which he complained so bitterly; but the mise-en-abîme effect of these paradoxes within paradoxes is immediately apparent. It attests to a profoundly paradoxical need to transgress against a world perversely predetermined by human transgression. "Tout en ce monde sue le crime," writes Baudelaire in Mon Coeur mis à nu, describing the world reflected in the popular press. "Guerres, crimes, vols, impudicités, tortures, crimes des princes, crimes des nations, crimes des particuliers, une ivresse d'atrocité universelle."¹²⁸

Poe's importance not only for Baudelaire, but for the generation after him, emerges from these considerations; more tellingly, perhaps, it bursts forth from a juxtaposition of one of his earliest fables of transgression, "MS. Found In A Bottle" (first published in 1831), with "La Cité Dormante," Marcel Schwob's revision of it from 1892. For both writers enclose a secret message, sealed in a "found object," tossed into the arabesque waves they see stretching from the decadence to the future, or to nothingness; and each work is shot through with images of crime and metaphysical transgression. English-speaking readers are no doubt more familiar with Poe's story than with Schwob's, which appeared in Le Roi au masque d'or, the second collection of Schwob's

rarefied symbolist contes; French readers may have spotted Schwob's story in Pierre Castex's important anthology, Le Conte fantastique en France. There is no doubt, however, that Schwob was familiar with Poe's life and work; there are several instances where he has imitated the American's thematic and formal models.¹²⁹ What is especially pertinent to the current inquiry is the revealing dialogue produced by the two stories juxtaposed, a two-part development of the theme of the hypersymbolic sea voyage, posed in an aesthetic of proliferating allegory, bearing profoundly decadent meditations on novelty, transgression, and the seemingly inevitable exacerbation of the crisis of conscience besetting the century.

Much has been made in the critical literature of Poe's opening gesture (pronounced by the narrator) of "MS. Found In A Bottle," the disclaimer made in the first person to the effect that the teller is a down-to-earth, no-nonsense man of reason who would, in normal circumstances, be the last to concoct such a tale of fantastic occurrences as the one that is to follow. One critic sees this "discrepancy" as a parodistic gesture, mocking the literary type of the supernatural adventure story and distancing the reader from the narrator.¹³⁰ For Daniel Hoffman, however, this characteristic *poesque* stratagem is less a concession to genre, not to mention a "discrepancy," than it is a means by which the author interweaves the discursive undercurrents

necessary for embodying the signs of his necessarily cryptographic imagination with the "factual" tone contained in reports of all adventures, whether fabulous or believable:

We follow the course of the voyage, its proximate end--destruction, or survival and return. We read the MS. in a bottle we have picked up from the upper current of the sea, where it has washed ashore on our beach. We give our credence, or fealty, to the verbatim report of the humdrums and the wonders that Poe's voyagers have witnessed. Only below the surface, beneath the currents of the oceans, in the central veins and arteries beneath our own skins, do these submerged analogies flow and pulse into our awareness. Then, by our own ratiocinative processes, we intuitively put together the correspondences with the meanings to which they correspond.¹³¹

In a convoluted way, Poe's narrator, the "actual" author of the "actual" MS. we are reading, strives to establish himself as the bearer of some superior form of normativity. Detailing his intellectual habits and formation, he states that more than anything else, the "works of the German moralists" provided him great delight, but this only in an inverted way. For he admired their writings "not from any ill-advised admiration of their eloquent madness, but from the ease with which [his] habits of rigid thought enabled [him] to detect their falsities."¹³² He is thereby, at least in his own eyes, the bearer of a set of norms that out-

normatize even the venerable Germans, who are in fact subject to fits of irrationality. "I have often been reproached with the aridity of my genius;" he continues, "a deficiency of imagination has been imputed to me as a crime."¹³³

Explicitly, then, Poe's narrator's "reasonableness," the "aridity" of his genius which he clearly aligns with a superior normativity, is a mark of his criminal status. He bears yet another sign of criminality, however. While his genius for rationality clearly endows him with a "superior" normativity, the opening lines also inform us that "ill usage and length of years" have driven him from his country, and estranged him from his family. He bears therefore the double stigma of rational philosopher and of social outcast.

As the "Simoon" strikes and leaves only the narrator and the old Swede on board, the latter is said to be subjected to a creeping "superstitious terror" while the more rational narrator's "soul was wrapped up in silent wonder."¹³⁴ When he is thrown into the rigging of the gigantic (ten times the size and weight of the original ship) supernatural craft that plunges down upon them in the stormy chaos of the sea, his narration achieves a new rhythm, a new emotional pitch, and acquires numerous asterisks, which reflect a new partitioning or even fragmentation of his consciousness while they serve to break up the (no doubt illusory) linearity of the text itself.

Nature is clearly out of joint here; the predictability

of time and space have been subjected to the notorious unpredictability of the watery medium of sea voyaging, which bears a symbolic relation to the sensation of psychic slippage, of chronic vertigo created by a cosmological lack of solid ground: for Poe, the aesthetic principle of the sea is arabesque. As the out-of-control hulk runs before the winds further and further to the South, the sun itself begins to change, first "emitting no decisive light," then no light at all, "as if its rays were polarized."¹³⁵

Just before sinking within the
turgid sea, its central fires
suddenly went out, as if hurriedly
extinguished by some unaccountable
power. It was a dim, silver-like
rim, alone, as it rushed down the
unfathomable ocean.¹³⁶

Nature's dependability is suspended; the "laws" of physical science, which had formed the epistemological grounding for the narrator, have been seemingly washed away with the rest of the crew and the old Swede, and then the craft itself, until the narrator finds himself, invisible to the rest of the crew, on an outsized, supernatural craft. He is subject to "an indefinite sense of awe" when he perceives them, which leads him to hide in the hold, for "[he] was unwilling to trust [him]self with a race of people who had offered, . . . so many points of vague novelty, doubt and apprehension."¹³⁷ Nature (in the form of the elements) has gone awry; human nature (in the narrator and in the god-like

captain and crew) has slipped somehow into the sublime:

A feeling, for which I have no name,
has taken possession of my soul--a
sensation which will admit of no
analysis, to which the lessons of
by-gone time are inadequate, and for
which I fear futurity itself will
offer me no key. To a mind
constituted like my own, the latter
consideration is an evil.¹³⁸

The narrator's mind may have been constituted in a certain way up to this point, but now he realizes that the indefiniteness of the whole adventure has propelled him into the realm of novelty itself: "A new sense--a new entity is added to my soul."¹³⁹ He no longer need conceal himself from others, as he had been forced to do in his previous existence (in his society and family), because he is invisible anyway; from the captain's own cabin he procures writing materials and, even though he knows he is doomed, swears to "enclose the MS. in a bottle, and cast it within the sea."¹⁴⁰ The captain embodies the notion of time, which has been suspended ever since the collision ("We are surely doomed to hover continually upon the brink of eternity, without taking a final plunge into the abyss"¹⁴¹); his "gray hairs are records of the past, and his grayer eyes are sybils of the future."¹⁴² While the narrator unaccountably produces the word "DISCOVERY" by daubing upon neatly folded canvas with a tar brush, and finds his spirit infused with the awe of the new, he also finds himself caught up in images of the distant

past, which seem somehow related to the antiquated mathematical instruments that lie about the ship "on every part of the deck."¹⁴³ In this way an element of sheer chance ("DISCOVERY" is revealed only when the sail is unfurled) collides with tradition in the locus of the person of the narrator. Looking at the ship and its "simple bow and antiquated stern," he states:

[T]here will occasionally flash across [his] mind a sensation of familiar things, and there is always mixed up with such indistinct shadows of recollection, an unaccountable memory of old foreign chronicles and ages long ago.¹⁴⁴

This delineation of the all-encompassing terror of the new establishes a vocabulary of time in the context of the very old. While the captain embodies this dichotomy, the ship bears physical evidence of a sort of ancient timelessness, so to speak, which will disappear into the abyss with everything else. "Poe's allegory of the 'novel' is that of the breathlessly spinning yet in a sense stationary movement of the helpless boat in the eye of the maelstrom," writes Adorno in Minima Moralia.¹⁴⁵ For Poe, as for Baudelaire after him, the new is:

. . . a blank place in consciousness, awaited as if with shut eyes, [which] seems the formula by means of which a stimulus is extracted from dread and despair. It makes evil flower.¹⁴⁶

Faced with the blank abyss of the future, for a time wherein

the present had already been radically devalued, Poe returns to the old in a way that would become central to decadent aesthetic ideologies: for "the cult of the new, and thus the idea of modernity, is a rebellion against the fact that there is no longer anything new."¹⁴⁷ The ramifications of this crisis of novelty will be treated below, in the context of Baudelaire's and Schwob's restatement of its tensions.

A similar recourse to extremities of physical scale--from gigantism to miniaturism--which Jankélévitch perceives as a component of decadent aesthetics, is certainly present in Poe's narrative. The supernatural ship is outsized in every detail, and is likened to the human body in the apothegm provided by "an old weather-beaten Dutch navigator," to wit: "'It is as sure, [. . .] as there is a sea where the ship itself will grow in bulk like the living body of the seaman.'"¹⁴⁸ And where is this sea, in which the living body of the seaman [semen] grows, if not the amniotic sea of intrauterine space?

The critical tradition concerning Poe's relations to his mother is greatly indebted to Marie Bonaparte, of course, who demonstrates in several contexts how one of Poe's greatest fears, expressed time and again in the tales, amounts to a transgression of startling gravity: "The fear, the guilty fear of re-entering his mother's womb."¹⁴⁹ The hero of "MS. Found In A Bottle" succeeds "in touching bottom":

. . . in reaching those innermost

uterine depths where the foetus once
lay, bathed in those amniotic waters
which are one of the few vestiges of
that parent ocean from which,
phylogenetically, we have all
sprung.¹⁵⁰

The shuddering climax to this story, the last moment before the bottle will be thrown back into the torrent for the edification of the living, is expressed in corporeal terms: the ship is "lifted bodily from out the sea"¹⁵¹ as it whirls down into a "gigantic amphitheatre, the summit of whose walls is lost in the darkness and the distance." The act of "going down" the reverse-birth canal--perhaps we might call it the death-canal--is depicted in the final lines of the story "amid a roaring, and bellowing, and thundering of ocean," with the ship "quivering--oh God! and--going down!"¹⁵² The author's laconic postscript concerning his cartographic prescience describes how the "maps of Mercator" depict the ocean "as rushing, by four mouths, into the (northern) Polar Gulf, to be absorbed into the bowels of the earth. . . ." ¹⁵³

This transgression is pre-sexual, inasmuch as it is not an Oedipal act of possession; rather, Poe's "guilty fear" of reverting to the womb is enclosed safely within the bounds of allegory, which is in its turn encoded in the narrator's account, which is in its turn stoppered up within the bottle, which in its turn has flown upstream while he has been dragged inexorably downstream, characteristically (for the

decadence) against the grain. The sense of "newness" that infuses the narrator's soul also informs the allegorical refiguration of his guilty "rebirth"; the consequences for the nineteenth century of this crisis of novelty are profound, and profoundly linked in literature to transgression.

Huysmans remarks (in the meditations of *Des Esseintes*) that a qualitative difference between Poe and Baudelaire might be traced in their different approaches to women: Poe's affections were positively chaste and solemn compared to the extravagant amours of Baudelaire. In a similar contrast, Marcel Schwob's version of "MS. Found In A Bottle" is an orgy of symbols and hyper-symbolic constructions, and the components of criminality in the retelling have been allegorically complicated to take Poe's relatively uncluttered symbology to a new, baroque extreme. Furthermore, another feature of Jankélévitch's account of decadence--reiteration in place of iteration, "le génie devenu gérant"¹⁵⁴--is evident throughout Schwob's revision of Poe's procedure.

In his symbolist romance, Le Livre de Monelle, Schwob writes that "Toute construction est faite de débris et rien n'est nouveau en ce monde que les formes,"¹⁵⁵ yet the form of "La Cité Dormante" itself is a refiguration of Poe's Chinese-box construction. Schwob's tale employs the same technique of retrospective presence: at the end of the

narrative, there is a note informing us that this is a found manuscript:

. . . dans un livre oblong à
couverture de bois; la plupart des
feuilletés étaient blancs. Sur la
lame supérieure étaient
grossièrement gravés deux fémurs
surmontés d'un crâne et le livre
émergeait du sable d'or d'un
désert jusqu'alors inexploré.156

Schwob's story, in a way, picks up where Poe's leaves off, symbolically and even socially speaking. It begins with the sighting of an unknown coastline and the order given by the "Capitaine au pavillon noir" to land: far away now from the merchantman designation of Poe's narrator's first ship, and distant also from the stately, disinterested atmosphere of the supernatural vessel upon which Poe ends his narrative, Schwob's crew are unambiguously criminalized: pirates. Furthermore, they have lost their way because the compasses were smashed in the last storm--like Poe's tempest, precisely the kind of storm in which the very bearings of nature, and the feeble tools men use to "read" nature, are sent skidding off their pinions into the gyres of epistemological uncertainty.

But in this reiterated version of the allegorical seagoing adventure of transgression, the crew has been exponentially re-symbolized to the point that it makes up a catalogue of decadent humanity, composed of:

. . . ceux qui avaient remué les
tarots dans la nuit et ceux qui
était ivres de la plante de leur
contrée, et ceux qui était vêtus
de façon diverse, quoi qu'il n'y
eût pas de femmes à bord, et ceux
qui étaient muets ayant eu la
langue clouée, et ceux qui, après
avoir traversé, au-dessus de
l'abîme, la planche étroite des
flibustiers, étaient demeurés fous
de terreur, tous nos camarades noirs
ou jaunes, blancs ou sanglants,
appuyés sur les plats-bords,
[qui] regardaient la terre
nouvelle. . . .157

Not only is the outcast crew composed of pirate/prophets ("les tarots"), substance abusers ("ivres de la plante de leur contrée"), transvestites, mute mutilation victims and madmen permanently terrorized by other pirates, they also represent, we come to learn, all the countries, races, and language groups of the world. Schwob deliberately raises the stakes from Poe's tale of an exiled rationalist, face to face with his individuation and his destiny, to a parable of a race of representative criminal exiles. Despite their differences, they are united by two things: "une passion semblable et des meurtres collectifs."¹⁵⁸ Whether this passion is to be interpreted strictly as a homoerotic one, or more broadly as a romanticized passion for the life of marginalized, symbolic criminals who happen to practice "inversion," as homosexuality was called in the nineteenth century, is left ambiguous. The "collective murders" uniting them are far less so.

While Poe's narrator is conscience-stricken, hyper-rational and disoriented by Nature, the pirates in Schwob's tale are bloodthirsty, stealthy, professional assassins:

. . . semblables à une colonie
d'animaux malfaisants et disparates,
habitant une petite île flottante,
habitues les uns aux autres, sans
conscience, avec un instinct total
guidé par les yeux d'un seul.¹⁵⁹

This singular figure ("un seul") emerges as the focal point of the narrative in two ways: first, he is said to be the only one who understands their life of shipboard drunkenness, debauchery, and bloody maneuvers against other vessels; second, he emerges as the narrator, a particularly sly technical coup de théâtre Schwob springs on the reader at the end of the tale. Like the crew, "Captain Black Flag" detests silence and shares his hammock with a fellow pirate en travesti:

Il ne vivait lui-même que dans
l'agitation, et son horreur du
silence était telle que pendant les
minutes paisibles de la nuit, il
tirait par sa longue robe son
compagnon de hamac, afin d'entendre
le son inarticulé d'une voix
humaine.¹⁶⁰

Just as Poe exploits the spiral figure of psychic slippage, the arabesque of the tumultuous sea, Schwob develops the motif in the context of the landing on the coast sighted in the first line of the tale. Thus, he repeats the

gigantesque landmark upon which Poe concludes his vision:

"Là s'ouvrait un couloir rocheux, dont les murs verticaux semblaient se rejoindre dans l'air, tant ils étaient hauts."¹⁶¹ Poe's oceanic arabesque becomes the shifting sands of the beach in Schwob, and Nature has once again, in an alien context, come out of joint:

La nature inanimée avait perdu la
vie mouvante de la mer et le
crépitement du sable; l'air du
large était arrêté par la
barrière des falaises; les plantes
semblaient fixes comme le roc, et
les bêtes brunes, rampantes ou
aillées, se tenaient dans une bande
étroite hors de laquelle il n'y
avait plus de mouvement.¹⁶²

The captain, we learn, believes he has found "le Pays Doré" dreamt of by all pirate outcasts, and delivers a moving speech ("des paroles émues") to motivate his crew to explore inland. The oppressive silence of the place, which is anathema to the buccaneers, is tolerated because of the promise of infinite riches delivered by a rampart of golden sand, which, when mounted by the explorers, "fuyait sous nos pas."¹⁶³ Poe's guilty allegory of uterine re-occupation has been extended by Schwob to an exploration of paradise by a symbolically representative crew of outcasts who have abandoned completely the rationality that fails Poe's narrator. But whereas Poe's god-like captain is a living embodiment of time-in-suspension, evoking in the narrator "a feeling of irrepressible reverence and awe," a "sentiment

ineffable,"¹⁶⁴ Schwob's Black-Flag Captain has become, or rather becomes as the story concludes, the narrator himself. The transgressor thus develops from a child-like figure, awe-struck by the captain/father ("Father Time") in Poe to a fully conscious, fully culpable freebooter, a guilty, "inverted" captain who in fact narrates the MS. we now read.

Where Poe's explorer is estranged from family and home, Schwob's narrator has no homeland at all, as we learn in the final paragraph, at the moment of revelation of the narrator/pirate captain identity. Only he, of all the pirate crew, is able to flee the sleeping city, which he does in a terrified and exhausted state:

. . . et malgré le sommeil et
l'affreuse lassitude qui me gagne,
je vais essayer de retrouver par les
ondulations du sable doré, l'Océan
vert qui s'agite éternellement et
secoue son écume.¹⁶⁵

This setting out to find the sea marks a significant reversal of the direction of Poe's narrator's descent while it retains a certain amount of ambiguity regarding the fate of the narrator. An end-note (another feature Schwob carefully copies from Poe's model) informs us that this manuscript (marked with skull and crossbones) was found jutting from the golden sand of a previously unexplored desert, no doubt tossed there as the Black-Flag Captain returned to the watery medium lost by Poe's narrator at the

end of his manuscript, itself tossed and found--by us.

By means of this reiteration, this minor-key variation, Schwob heats up the decadent crisis of conscience only adumbrated in Poe's high allegory by means of a new level of symbols: the symbology of the Sleeping City discovered by the explorers behind the rampart of golden sand. Jankélévitch has discussed the "pouvoir indéfini de dédoublement" ("indefinite power of doubling")¹⁶⁶ characteristic of the decadence, and Schwob doubles with this development not only the figures of the crew members themselves, but also the symbolic/allegorical register of Poe's tale. The sleeping city is immense, crowded with carriages, animals and human beings; yet all the figures in the oppressively silent streets stand immobile, as if frozen in the midst of their gestures like statues of wax, and they are distinguishable from the living only by their coloration. For like the crew, the inhabitants of the Sleeping City represent all races and peoples. The pirates pass among them "comme des êtres vivants et actifs au milieu d'une réunion de peuples morts."¹⁶⁷

The pirates attempt to overcome the "malédiction du silence" imposed upon them by crying out, jerking their heads like madmen, hurrying their steps--but the air, like the atmosphere invoked at the end of Poe's tale, "semblait avoir un poids de chose corporelle."¹⁶⁸ Even the birds and the flies hang suspended, immobile, as if "emprisonnées dans un

bloc de cristal."169 But finally the crew are overcome, in terms linking the nature of their transgressions with the New:

L'horreur du silence nous enveloppa.
 Nous qui cherchions dans la vie
 active l'oubli de nos crimes, nous
 qui buvions l'eau du Léthé, teinte
 par les poisons narcotiques et le
 sang, nous qui poussions de vague en
 vague sur la mer déferlante une
 existence toujours nouvelle, nous
 fûmes assujettis en quelques
 instants par des liens
 invincibles.170

The captain/narrator is terrified by the crew's reaction to the painful silence and the death-like state of the city and its frozen inhabitants, which precipitates his flight, as noted above. It is the function of the crew's delirious reaction to the city in the symbolic/allegorical register which provides insight into the way Schwob's revision of Poe slides toward a social, historical, even topical vision of the future:

Et parmi les peuples aux quatre
 couleurs qui nous regardaient
 fixement, immobiles, ils choisirent
 dans leur fuite effrayée chacun le
 souvenir de sa patrie lointaine;
 ceux d'Asie étreignirent les hommes
 jaunes, et eurent leur couleur
 safranée de cire impure; et ceux
 d'Afrique saisirent les hommes
 noirs, et devinrent sombres comme
 l'ébène; et ceux du pays situé
 par-delà l'Atlantide embrassèrent
 les hommes rouges et furent des
 statues d'acajou; et ceux de la
 terre d'Europe jetèrent leurs bras

autour des hommes blancs et leur
visage devint couleur de cire
vierge.¹⁷¹

Schwob's version of a symbolic return to one's place of origin has stepped away from the individuated, intrauterine allegory in Poe toward an almost despairing vision of outcasts of all races, once sufficiently terrified and traumatized, embracing the immobilized, hollow simulacra of racial and national identity. Where the community of the pirate ship was surely artificial--Schwob says as much--the zombie emptiness of the terrorized gesture of embrace by each of the races is clearly worse. The anarchic Black-Flag Captain, who has no "fatherland" and who cannot "go down" the way Poe's narrator can, is left to his own devices in his hyper-alienated trek toward the eternally green, eternally animate and animating Ocean "from which, phylogenetically, we have all sprung."¹⁷²

Schwob's allegory traces a passage to consciousness of normative transgression, reiterating the oneiric allegory of unconscious (or semi-conscious) laws and transgressions formulated by Poe and critically adumbrated by Baudelaire. The critical intelligence responsible for the reiteration, however, need not necessarily be denigrated as a mere decadent mannerist or rococo variationist. Where the initiative gesture of Poe--itself a reiteration, given the history of wandering criminals in Western literature, stretching from the Wandering Jew to the Flying Dutchman to

the Wild Huntsman to the Ancient Mariner--bears a cryptic locus of shifting, arabesque allegory, the ultra-decadent imitative gesture of Schwob desires a dark clarity, a cultural universality, a species-wide cohesion--to the degree that transgression becomes the rule rather than the exception, the beginning instead of the end.

The "crise thétique" in Poe--the allegorical exploration of the son's fearful desire to reverse the very conditions of his birth--becomes the "crise critique" in Schwob, for the latter-day allegorist brings a critical theory of history to his aesthetic of crime. "'Savez-vous pourquoi j'attache autant d'importance à la connaissance précise de l'état des classes criminelles durant cette période du XVe siècle?'" Schwob asked interviewer W.G.C. Byvanck in 1891. He continues:

C'est que je crois être sur la trace d'un fait moral qui me semble d'une valeur capitale pour la science historique et pour l'histoire de l'humanité. C'est alors pour la première fois que ces classes dangereuses ont acquis la conscience d'une vie autonome et située hors des limites de la société régulière. Elles faisaient contrepoids à la bourgeoisie, qui se groupait autour de la royauté. C'était la substance dont allait s'alimenter le mouvement contre l'autorité de l'Eglise et de l'Etat qui commence à se manifester au début du XVIe siècle.¹⁷³

Schwob's "moral fact" consists of a perceived coming-to-consciousness of the criminal classes as separate and autonomous from the established powers of royalty, church and bourgeoisie. This realization, which he calculates from the fifteenth century (it should be kept in mind that Schwob was a gifted historical linguist who deciphered the jargon of the coquillards and Villon) provided the moral substance that would nourish the forces of revolution against the authority of corrupt institutions.

In fact, Colin Wilson describes a hierarchy of criminality corresponding to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs or values, which he claims corresponds in turn to historical periods of crime. "Until the first part of the nineteenth century, most crimes were committed out of the simple need for survival--Maslow's first level" (i.e., physiological needs).¹⁷⁴ By the mid-nineteenth century, Wilson observes, this pattern was changing to one in which "the most notorious crimes are 'domestic murders' that take place in respectable middle-class homes,"¹⁷⁵ an emerging setting for crime thanks to the new prosperity of the post-industrial-revolution period. By 1888, with the appearance of Jack the Ripper, the "sex crime" emerged, significantly different from previous forms because "the killer's contemporaries did not recognize them as sex crimes; they argued that the Ripper was 'morally insane', as if his actions would only be explained by a combination of

wickedness and madness."176

Wilson determines the most modern form of crime in terms of Maslow's fourth level of human needs, i.e., the need for esteem, "to be liked and respected," which leads closely to a fifth category in Maslow's theory: the need for "self-actualization," "the need to know and understand, to create, to solve problems for the fun of it."177 In this area, Wilson writes, may be placed a large number of modern crimes whose motivations might otherwise remain obscure:

. . . there was an increasing number of crimes in which the criminal seemed to feel, in a muddled sort of way, that society was somehow to blame for not granting him dignity, justice and recognition of his individuality, and to regard his crime as a legitimate protest. . . . 178

This most recent development in Wilson's theory corresponds to Schwob's theory of history, which demonstrates the latter's erudite awareness of this emerging modernity of crime; the decadent component of his aesthetics derives from his attributing to this tendency itself a moral value. Just as Naturalism is decadent realism, and just as Zola created the "Mouche d'Or" in the figure of Nana, who would rise out of the "realistic," "reflective" dungheap to which she had been relegated by "high capitalism" to wreak her poetically just revenge on the criminals of industrialism and speculation--in order to prove her moral value in the face of

her derisive social superiors--Schwob reworks a fable of individual alienation and transgression in light of his larger theory of social history and morally defensible criminality. Like Rodion Romanovitch Raskolnikov, Schwob is a revolutionary with the "moral fact" ("fait moral") of history on his side; like him, Schwob's decadent treatment of these issues creates a sense of aesthetic crime, in which transgression actually seeks the law instead of fleeing it. In my opinion, this is extremely touching and desperate.

Adorno writes in Aesthetic Theory that ". . . modernism in its earliest theoretical articulations, with Baudelaire, takes on a fatalistic ring. The new is intimately related to death."¹⁷⁹ Add to this the idea, elaborated in Minima Moralia, that "newness installs itself in the place of overthrown divinity amidst the first consciousness of the decay of experience,"¹⁸⁰ and the several components of aesthetic crime facing the period after 1850 fall into place. For in this light, the "crisis of novelty" present from Poe to Baudelaire to the decadence in general serves to decree a dialectic of intersubjective transgression and dark beauty--crime considered symbolically, or aesthetically. Indeed, the entire spectrum of decadent writers and artists across the latter half of the nineteenth century, from Baudelaire to Swinburne, from Félicien Rops to Jean Lorrain, "allegorically celebrates the sanctity of pleasure in the fearsomely liberating still-life of crime."¹⁸¹

The manuscripts found in bottles, or jutting from the sands of time forbiddingly marked with skull and crossbones, mark a significant stage in the "decomposition of the subject," which Adorno states is "consummated in his self-abandonment to an ever-changing sameness."¹⁸² The horror of novelty achieves apotheosis in the repetition compulsion central to decadent self-consciousness. It drives nervous sensibility to the criminal extremes of a civilization newly barbarous. "La dégénération est une maladie du progrès," writes Jankélévitch. "La décadence est l'extrême civilisation."¹⁸³ In a way, the decadent reaction to novelty is to yearn for timelessness: at the end of "Le Voyage," the last poem in the cycle "La Mort," Baudelaire addresses the "vieux capitaine" of death in the imperative mode, in yet another reiteration of the scene from Poe, demanding to plunge into the abyss,

. . . Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du nouveau!¹⁸⁴

Aesthetic crime borrows crisis motifs from "realistic" depictions of life among the dangerous classes (pre-1850) in the reflective mode, driven by a desire to share referents with the world. In this, it resembles the realism mustered by several pre-1850 writers and, indeed, may be found in their works.¹⁸⁵ After 1850, however, aestheticized depictions of criminal acts and criminal ratiocinations borrow thesis motifs from religion and magic, thereby seeking

to reintroduce a dialectic of symbols and transgressions on the vertical axis of transcendental, ethical valuation, and at the same time seeking to escape the limitations of any realism unduly bound by the common sense of pragmatic or political pressures.

Aesthetic crime, then, is a coded figuration of the impossibility of community, even (in Poe) in the midst of the crowd, an absorption of the horror of individual existence (the reverse-birth canal) or of social conditions (the sleeping city), refigured in the guise of a thesis or a crisis of conscience. Unlike crime in the world, however, it lives in symbolist allegory, decadent allegory, and it seems to seek the law across a landscape of overthrown divinities in order to enact a reconstitution of meaning--in normative transgression.

I.4 Aesthetic Crime in an Age of Inversion

"No one should be surprised if we deal in the terrible; it is because everything around us is terrible."

Eugène Sue, Les Mystères de Paris

"The error that aestheticism made was aesthetic."

Theodor W. Adorno

In his drive to describe the appropriation of the spirit of the punished by the workings of the ruling powers, Michel Foucault describes the process whereby the popular

broadsheets which published true tales of criminal behavior in the nineteenth century disappeared, to be supplanted by "a whole new literature of crime."¹⁸⁶ He discerns the workings of the controlling classes in this shift because the new form takes the shape of:

. . . a literature in which crime is glorified, because it is one of the fine arts, because it can be the work only of exceptional natures, because it reveals the monstrousness of the strong and powerful, because villainy is yet another mode of privilege: from the adventure story to de Quincey, or from the Castle of Otranto to Baudelaire, there is a whole aesthetic rewriting of crime, which is also the appropriation of criminality in acceptable forms.¹⁸⁷

Foucault's complaint here stems from the observations he makes regarding the disappearance of a mode of popular crime writing which served not only as a normative force, but also as a political-identity determinant for the lower classes:

". . . the criminal of the broadsheets . . . brought with him, beneath the apparent morality of the example not to be followed, a whole memory of struggles and confrontations."¹⁸⁸ The criminal in these popular forms could achieve saint-like status upon his execution, with the lessons derived from his transgression, his punishment and his "apotheosis" bearing in popular memory a particular and pronounced normative value, both "positively" and "negatively." For if the criminal was "glorified" by this treatment in print, the lessons borne by his repentance and his exile also served to "justify justice"

to the masses.¹⁸⁹ Foucault cites eighteenth-century penal reformer P.L. Lacretelle on the normativity consciously exploited by the powers-that-were in this popular form:

In order to satisfy this need for strong emotion, in order to deepen the impression of a great example, one allows these terrible stories to circulate. The poets of the people take them up and spread their fame to every part of the land. One day a family hears at its door the story in song of the crime and execution of its sons.¹⁹⁰

Thus, Foucault formulates a critical view of this popular literature of crime (found in the broadsheets, almanacs and pamphlets):

. . . neither as a spontaneous form of 'popular expression', nor as a concerted programme of propaganda and moralization from above; it was a locus in which two investments of penal practice met--a sort of battleground around the crime, its punishment and its memory.¹⁹¹

But the "aesthetic" version of crime supplanted these earlier, popular forms, precisely because "the power that condemned" the criminals among the people could no longer support the disproportionate criminality directly engendered by the glorification aspect of its depictions and accounts. Foucault compares these mimetic eruptions of "copycat" criminality to the "'disturbances around the scaffold'" during which "a ceremony that inadequately channelled the

power relations it sought to ritualize" would backfire, creating a scene of new crime rather than a controlled scene of normative punishment. Charles Dickens, among other penal reformers in the period, noted on several occasions the lamentable pretext for crime (in the form of pocket-picking, prostitution, public drunkenness and general disorder) provided by the supposedly edifying scene of public execution.¹⁹²

Contemporary criminologists demanded the suppression of popular broadsheets "as the political function of popular illegality altered."¹⁹³ Similarly, penal reformers in England worked for abolition of the death penalty itself and succeeded merely in eliminating public executions. Foucault attributes the appearance of the "aesthetic re-writing of crime" to these shifts in political realities which mirror, he states, the grand shift of the focus of punishment from the body to the spirit of the condemned: with this shift, he further asserts, "we have moved from the exposition of the facts or the confession to the slow process of discovery; from the execution to the investigation; from the physical confrontation to the intellectual struggle between criminal and investigator."¹⁹⁴

Foucault further asserts that this new genre of aesthetic crime in literature robbed the people of the "old pride in its crimes" as "the great murders had become the quiet game of the well behaved."¹⁹⁵ The common man became

"too simple to be the protagonist of subtle truths. In this new genre," he writes:

. . . there were no more popular heroes or great executions; the criminal was wicked, of course, but he was also intelligent; and although he was punished, he did not have to suffer. The literature of crime transposes to another social class the spectacle that had surrounded the criminal.¹⁹⁶

In my opinion, Foucault's view of this process has unduly reduced the complexities of the hermeneutic struggle (between heteronomous and autonomous semantic codes) and the absorption process (of criminality by aesthetics) to an oversimplified manifestation of the machinations of the power and prerogatives of the ruling class. While his argument is compelling in the area of social structures, the extrapolations he projects from the historical to the literary realm call for a complementary insight derived from aesthetic theory.

This is not to say that the claims made by the decadence for autonomy need be taken too seriously, or themselves opposed to Foucault's account: that would be to collapse into the value system of the phenomena in question itself. Rather, I propose in the chapters that follow to grant full purchase to the interpenetration of pragmatic reality and the literary act that constitutes what Paul de Man calls "the continuous appeal of modernity, the desire to break out of

literature toward the reality of the moment. . . ."197 De

Man further states:

Baudelaire states clearly that the attraction of a writer toward his theme--which is also the attraction toward an action, a modernity, and an autonomous meaning that would exist outside the realm of language--is primarily an attraction to what is not art. The statement occurs with reference to the most anonymous and shapeless 'theme' of all, that of the crowd: 'C'est un moi insatiable de non-moi.'198

Clearly, the crowd is a prerequisite for this emerging sense of "deep crime"; I have also stated above my central thesis, that aesthetic crime is an absorption of the horror of these social conditions in the guise of a crisis of conscience more or less related to some new thesis of conscience. This horror, so effectively traced by Foucault, need not be reduced to a one-dimensional function of state or economic-repressive power. Instead, the formulation "guise of a crisis of conscience" should be allowed the full range of its hermeneutic complexity: when disguised as Beauty, modern crime deliberately exploits "the modes of error and truth"199 inherent in its status as a representation, while at the same time "falling away from literature" toward a critique of "the reality of the moment."200 As Adorno states in Aesthetic Theory, after Baudelaire "The only way in which art can. . . transcend the heteronomy of capitalist society

is by suffusing its own autonomy with the imagery of that society."²⁰¹ Ultimately, any distinction between reflective and normative emphases in representation tends to collapse during the nineteenth century: with the emergence of theories of modernity, both procedures (or any priority of one over the other) are neutralized in the continual pressure exerted by the heteronomous world on the supposed autonomy of the literary act. Indeed, "Modernity" itself may be definable in terms of this tension and the disappearance of unambiguously positive normativity in representation.

In a letter dated March 5, 1852, Baudelaire complains that the coup d'état of December 2, 1851 "m'a physiquement dépolitiqué. Il n'y a plus d'idées générales."²⁰²

This disillusionment was largely communicated to the spiritual descendants of Baudelaire in France and in England, resulting in what is generally agreed to be a "cultification" of Art in the fin de siècle. The claims made throughout the period, that there existed an innocent sphere of experience where ethical and aesthetic questions need not collide, rested on the problematic assertion that the poet, like some aesthetic outlaw, is simultaneously innocent of "psychological scruples" and capable of communicating his visions "in all innocence."²⁰³ Oscar Wilde declares in a similar vein that the "so-called forgeries" of Thomas Chatterton:

. . . were merely the result of an

artistic desire for perfect representation; (and) that we had no right to quarrel with an artist for the conditions under which he chooses to present his work; and that all Art being to a certain degree a mode of acting, . . . to censure an artist for a forgery was to confuse an ethical with an aesthetical problem.²⁰⁴

Freed in this fashion from the "earnest" moral laws governing critical judgment and artistic expression, Wilde creates the illusion of an "innocent sphere" from which versions of culture, history, morality and myth might be launched. This illusion, all too often, depends on a dialectic of symbols and felonies as the sine qua non of its literary existence. Wilde proclaims the vivifying powers of art and crime: for him, aesthetic criminality effects an "intensification of personality."²⁰⁵

In Hans Robert Jauss's account of the "aesthetics of negativity," we find the following incisive critical version of this issue:

It is not the traditional practical functions of art in cult, the establishment of norms governing ways of life, or the fellowship of play (to give more neutral terms to the 'services' art performs) which are socially significant in Adorno's 'aesthetic historiography.' . . . According to Adorno, it is not until it becomes autonomous that art attains its social rank. Precisely in negating all social ties does it become eminently social.²⁰⁶

Contrary to Foucault, then, my project here consists of exploring not only the norm-destroying effect of aesthetic crime, but also its norm-creating effect as well, both in the context of the illusions of autonomy created for the symbol by the period itself. That is to say, the current inquiry will develop not only the repressive measures implied by the appropriation of the literature of crime by the "aesthetic classes," but also the opposition to social domination and plea for community contained in the pre-eminently paradoxical nature of aestheticized transgression. In the period after 1850, no version of this issue is unambiguous; in effect, the paradox of programmatic, transgressive teratogenesis is spiritual grace. Set in frames of dark beauty, aesthetic crime enacts a secret drama of truth-seeking, a quest for renewal, a Hegelian "victory of the slave and the constitution of meaning"²⁰⁷ in a desolated landscape of "overthrown divinities."

Literary history has not had an easy time of it interpreting these issues. One example from twentieth-century criticism will serve as an illustration: when V.S. Pritchett commends Dickens for the evidently new departures in his last novel, The Mystery of Edwin Drood (1870), he is in my opinion only half correct. For with this work and Wilkie Collins's The Moonstone, he remarks:

. . . we begin the long career of
murder for murder's sake, murder
which illustrates nothing and is

there only to stimulate our skill in
detection and to distract us with
mystery. 208

Pritchett's perception of the aesthetic shift in this crime narrative (and his implicit comparison to l'art pour l'art) is a good one, but the claim he makes for the supposed autonomy of this aesthetic crime--as if it were a mere crossword puzzle worked with phonemes, or a jigsaw puzzle without a picture, presented solely for the reader's delectation or mental exercise--is off the mark. Several elements in Edwin Drood reveal both Dickens's continuing fascination with the proairetic code (the code of actions, the "Voice of the Empirical") and, at the same time, a new, even vigorous fascination with exotica which brings with it new realms of hermeneutic (the "code of enigmas and answers")²⁰⁹ material: opium, the "criminal intellect" of John Jasper as "a horrible wonder apart," the "Mixture of Oriental blood" in the Landlesses, and even Jasper's "hypnotic, and perhaps other para-normal, powers."²¹⁰

In a literary irony rare in history, matched only perhaps by Wilkie Collins's contention that the author's dramatic reading of the scene dramatizing Bill Sykes's murder of Nancy (from Oliver Twist) actually (physically) killed Dickens himself, The Mystery of Edwin Drood attains a profound depth in its hermeneutic preoccupations precisely because it is unfinished, and will forever remain so. The unfinished murder mystery is itself a crime against closure.

In Dickens's case, the shift from proairetic to hermeneutic preoccupations jumps off the graph because the enigma-- compounded not only of the (putative) murder and ambiguities of identity among several characters, but also of drug addiction, dream states, racial mixing, and conspiracy--will never attain solution, will never fulfill its own promise of form. To claim, as Pritchett does, that this work amounts to a parlour-game is to trivialize literature itself.

It is no mere coincidence, moreover, that this century-spanning emphasis on the "code of enigmas and answers" parallels the invention and development of the detective or crime story:

The clearest and purest example of the function of the hermeneutic would no doubt be the detective story, in that everything in the story's structure, and its temporality, depends on the resolution of enigma. . . . the hermeneutic [is] a general gnomic code, concerned not narrowly with enigma and its resolution but broadly with our understanding of how actions come to be semiotically structured, through an interrogation of their point, their goal, their import.²¹¹

The hermeneutic process surrounding aesthetic crime, like Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia, thereby "insures the primacy of context over text."²¹² Both ideas conceptualize "that locus where centripetal and centrifugal forces collide,"²¹³ i.e., the collisions in culture between the

normative and the reflective, between ethical notions and physical actions.

Aesthetic crime, or the criminalization of Beauty, is in my opinion the "truth content" behind the "material content" of fin de siècle decadence, symbolism, and naturalism. In a period so thoroughly imbued with strains of transcendental idealism and doctrinal vestiges of romanticist l'art pour l'art, in which the claims of empirical reality are repeatedly (even repetitiously) decried, the preoccupation with criminality reveals, as in a photographic negative, strong and persistent social as well as metaphysical concerns. To state a paradox, the urge to trespass in decadent literature and iconography in many cases becomes a bid for deliverance from evil; in an age of inversion, the imagery of transgression sometimes aspires to transcendence.

In its systemic upheaval, its ferocious uncertainty, the period 1850-1910 resembles the world of the Counter-Reformation described by Walter Benjamin in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, wherein the "insuperable despair" so prevalent in the works of the period is revealed by the "massive ornamental layer of truly baroque stucco,"²¹⁴ while the keystone or truth-content remains inaccessible beneath the surface features, "and only the closest investigation can locate it."²¹⁵ Benjamin discerns a tension in these seemingly formulaic works that "derives from a question concerning the redemption of mankind."²¹⁶ The

seventeenth century, like the late nineteenth, denied "religious aspirations . . . a religious fulfilment, demanding of them, or imposing upon them, a secular solution instead."²¹⁷ These generations of the Counter-Reformation, like those of the period after 1850, "enacted their conflicts under the yoke of this compulsion or the spur of this demand."²¹⁸

During the "age of high capitalism," as Benjamin has called the age of Baudelaire, political power in France was still in the hands of criminals; a secular critique of the illegitimacy of power is therefore, when need be, created in the image of the astute, "businesslike" criminal. In Châtiments, for example, Victor Hugo announces that Robert Macaire, the fictional charlatan/ criminal/ "entrepreneur," is in fact the leader of the gang of conspirators around Napoleon III:

L'Europe est sous ses pieds et tremble sous son trône;
Il règne par la mître et par le hausse-col.
Ce trône a trois degrés: parjure, meurtre et vol.
Voici qu'à la hauteur des empereurs stylites,
Entre Auguste à l'oeil calme et Trajan au front pur,
Resplendit, immobile en l'éternel azur,
Sur vous, ô panthéons, sur vous, ô propylées,
Robert Macaire avec ses bottes éculées!²¹⁹

With the political and spiritual bases behind the law so highly suspect to intellectuals, the modern equivalent of the sacrificial crisis--i.e., a decadent, "asymmetrical" manipulation of transgressive imagery, especially in the

figure of the narcissistic criminal--became something of a modus operandi for many artists until the arrival, roughly around 1910, of new strains of modernism faced with a new host of social, historical and technological pressures.²²⁰

In Mon Coeur mis à nu, Baudelaire exclaims, "Les brigands seuls sont convaincus,--de quoi?--qu'il leur faut réussir. Alors, ils réussissent."²²¹ In one of the proposed prefaces to Les Fleurs du Mal, he states that his book is a "dictionnaire de crimes" and that he would not object to being mistaken for "un assassin." If, in order to succeed (read "fail" in an age of inversion), it is necessary to be convaincu (convinced, earnest, full of conviction, convicted), and if only brigands attain that quality, then the role it is necessary to create is clear. Every role assumed by the artist, then, has a criminal aspect: original sinner and street-level Hermes in an "age of steam and cant," revolutionary parricide bereft of hope, disinterested dandy/murderer, ideologically committed manipulator of transgressive language and form bearing the ironic apotheosis of paradox--for the decadence, all are absolutely eternal, all will be absolutely modern.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

1 Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976), p. 1.

2 Robert Graves, The Greek Myths: 1 (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 144.

3 Dante Alighieri, Inferno, Trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Bantam, 1982), p. 228.

4 Marcel Ruff, L'Esprit du mal et l'esthétique baudelairienne (Paris: Armand Colin, 1955), p. 3.

On this issue, Gilles Deleuze writes, in Nietzsche et la philosophie: "L'existence comme démesure, l'existence comme hybris et comme crime, voilà la manière dont les Grecs, déjà, l'interprétaient et l'évaluaient. L'image titanesque ('la nécessité du crime qui s'impose à l'individu titanesque') est, historiquement, le premier sens qu'on accorde à l'existence." I should also note that my version of this discussion had already been composed when I came upon a similar line of reasoning in Edward Sagarin's excellent study of criminal literary characters, Raskolnikov and Others: Literary Images of Crime, Punishment, Redemption, and Atonement (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), pp. 1-16.

5 Hans Robert Jauss, Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 16.

6 Jauss, p. 16.

7 cited in Monroe Beardsley, Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present: A Short History (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1966), p. 25.

8 Joan Rockwell, Fact In Fiction: The Use of Literature in the Systematic Study of Society (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 6.

9 Jauss, p. 16.

10 Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, Trans. C. Lenhardt, Ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 322.

11 Adorno, p. 65.

12 Aristotle, Poetics, Trans. S.H. Butcher, Intro. Francis Fergusson (New York: Hill and Wang, 1961), p. 55.

13 Adorno, p. 53.

14 Adorno, p. 55.

15 Adorno, p. 55.

16 Aristotle, Poetics, IV, 5 (several trans.).

17 Jauss, p. 23.

18 Jauss, p. 23.

19 Jauss, citing Kommerell, p. 23.

20 Jauss, p. 35.

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22 Grégoire, p. 328.

23 Grégoire, citing Lalo, p. 318.

24 Grégoire, p. 328.

25 Grégoire, citing Luquet, p. 328.

26 Colin Wilson, A Criminal History of Mankind (London: Grafton, 1985), p. 122.

27 Rockwell, p. 45

28 Rockwell, p. 48.

29 Rockwell, p. 48.

30 Rockwell, p. 48.

31 Wilson, p. 151.

32 Rockwell, p. 54.

33 Adorno, p. 20.

34 For an especially incisive discussion of this issue, see Peter Brooks, The Melodramatic Imagination.

35 M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four

Essays, Ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 122.

36 Michael R. Weissner, Crime and Punishment in Early Modern Europe (Brighton: The Harvester Press, Ltd., 1979), p. 3.

37 Weissner, citing Foucault, p. 3.

38 Gordon Wright, Between the Guillotine and Liberty: Two Centuries of the Crime Problem in France (New York: Oxford UP, 1983), p. vii.

39 Wright, citing Perrot, p. 153.

40 Philip Collins, Dickens and Crime (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1962), p. 321.

41 Louis Chevalier, Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes. In Paris During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century, Trans. Frank Jellinell (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973), p. 5.

42 Chevalier, p. 5.

43 Chevalier, p. 39.

44 Chevalier, p. 39.

45 Chevalier, p. 66.

46 Chevalier, p. 66.

47 Chevalier, p. 66.

48 Honoré de Balzac, La Comédie Humaine (Paris: Editions de la Pléiade, 1951), Vol. I p. 7.

49 Chevalier, p. 67.

50 Thomas Carlyle, "Signs of the Times" and "Characteristics." In The Emergence of Victorian Consciousness: The Spirit of the Age, Ed. George Levine (New York: The Free Press, 1967), pp. 35-36.

51 Carlyle, pp. 35-36.

52 Carlyle, p. 34.

53 This distinction, indeed the very basis for this argument, are both derived from M. M. Bakhtin's writings,

specifically the first of the four essays in The Dialogic Imagination, "Epic And Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel."

54 Edgar Allan Poe, Poetry and Tales, Ed. Patrick F. Quinn (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), p. 396.

55 Oscar Wilde, The Artist As Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde, Ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 339.

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57 Balzac, Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes, Préface et notes de Pierre Barbéris (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p. 375.

58 Jacques Derrida, in "From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve," notes the following with regard to this question: "The Hegelian Aufhebung is produced entirely from within discourse, from within the system or the work of signification. A determination is negated and conserved in another determination which reveals the truth of the former. From infinite indetermination one passes to infinite determination, and this transition, produced by the anxiety of the infinite, continuously links meaning up to itself. The Aufhebung is included within the circle of absolute knowledge, never exceeds its closure, never suspends the totality of discouse, work meaning, law, etc. . . . The Hegelian Aufhebung thus belongs to restricted economy, and is the form of the passage from one prohibition to another, the circulation of prohibitions, history as the truth of the prohibition." In this way, Raskolnikov's treatise might also be said to move within a restricted moral economy, despite his discourse of transcendence via transgression.

59 Erich Auerbach, Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature, Trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1953), p. 554.

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64 Taylor, p. 6.

65 Taylor, p. 9.

66 Taylor, p. 9.

67 Taylor, p. 9.

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69 Derrida, citing Bataille, p. 274.

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72 Taylor, p. 23.

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75 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, Trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), p. 16.

76 Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 16.

77 Cited in Ruff, p. 33.

78 Cited in Otis E. Fellows and Norman L. Torrey, Eds., The Age of Enlightenment: An Anthology of Eighteenth-Century French Literature (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 365.

79 Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 12.

80 Cited in Ruff, p. 33.

81 Cited in Ruff, p. 34.

82 Cited in Ruff, p. 35.

83 Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 12.

84 Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 12.

85 An especially useful recent work in this area is Jean Pierrot's The Decadent Imagination, 1880-1900, Trans. Derek Coltman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

86 Tobin Siebers, The Romantic Fantastic (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 184.

87 Jean-Paul Sartre, Qu'est-ce que la littérature? (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), p. 162.

88 Sartre, p. 162.

89 Sartre, p. 165 (my translation).

90 Sartre, p. 166.

91 Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, Germinie Lacerteux (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1979), p. 23.

92 Sartre, pp. 166-167.

93 Breton cited in Sartre, p. 164.

94 Eric Gans, Essais d'esthétique paradoxale (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 178.

95 Vladimir Jankélévitch, "La Décadence," Revue de Métaphysique et de morale, 4 (1950), p. 343.

96 Jankélévitch, p. 342.

97 The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged Edition (New York: Random House, 1973), p. 1464.

98 Jankélévitch, p. 339.

99 Jankélévitch, p. 339.

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101 Jankélévitch, p. 338.

102 Jankélévitch, p. 338.

103 Paul Bourget, Essais de psychologie contemporaine (Paris: Lemerre, 1881), p. 19.

104 Bourget, p. 20.

105 William Wordsworth, Selected Poetry and Prose, Ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman (New York: Signet, 1970).

- 106 Wilde, p. 312.
- 107 Jankélévitch, p. 342.
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- 109 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Illuminations, Ed. Hannah Arendt, Trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 256-257.
- 110 Poe, p. 396.
- 111 Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 227.
- 112 Horkheimer and Adorno, p. 227.
- 113 Poe, p. 388.
- 114 Poe, pp. 394-395.
- 115 Poe, p. 388.
- 116 Cf. Roland Barthes, S/Z (Paris: Seuil, 1970), p. 10: "En face du texte scriptible s'établit donc sa contre-valeur, sa valeur négative, réactive: ce qui peut être lu, main non écrite: le lisible. Nous appelons classique tout texte lisible."
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- 118 Baudelaire, p. 576.
- 119 Baudelaire, p. 577.
- 120 Baudelaire, p. 594.
- 121 Jankélévitch, p. 351.
- 122 Jankélévitch, p. 351.
- 123 Baudelaire, p. 976, note 1.
- 124 Baudelaire, p. 590.
- 125 Baudelaire, p. 590.
- 126 Baudelaire, p. 591.
- 127 Baudelaire, p. 593.

128 Baudelaire, p. 128.

129 An important discussion of the parallels between the two writers may be found in John Alden Green's unpublished dissertation, "The Literary Career of Marcel Schwob, 1867-1905." Diss.: University of Washington 1960.

130 Gary Thompson, Poe's Fiction: Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales (Madison: Univ. Wisconsin Press, 1973), p.167.

131 Daniel Hoffman, Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe (New York: Anchor, 1973), p. 148.

132 Poe, p. 189.

133 Poe, p. 189.

134 Poe, p. 192.

135 Poe, p. 192.

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137 Poe, p. 194.

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141 Poe, p. 197.

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145 Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life, Trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978), p. 235.

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147 Adorno, Minima, p. 235.

148 Poe, p. 196.

149 Hoffman, p. 149.

150 Marie Bonaparte, The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-Analytic Interpretation (London: Imago, 1949), p. 352.

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152 Poe, p. 199.

153 Poe, p. 199.

154 Jankélévitch, p. 348.

155 Marcel Schwob, Le livre de Monelle / Spicilège / L'étoile de bois / Il libro della mia memoria (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1979), p. 43.

156 Marcel Schwob, "La Cité dormante." In Le roi au masque d'or / Vies imaginaires / La croisade des enfants (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1979), p. 152.

157 Schwob, Le roi, p. 147.

158 Schwob, Le roi, p. 148.

159 Schwob, Le roi, p. 148.

160 Schwob, Le roi, p. 148.

161 Schwob, Le roi, p. 148.

162 Schwob, Le roi, p. 149.

163 Schwob, Le roi, p. 150.

164 Poe, p. 197.

165 Schwob, Le roi, p. 152.

166 Jankélévitch, p. 339.

167 Schwob, Le roi, p. 151.

168 Schwob, Le roi, p. 151.

169 Schwob, Le roi, p. 151.

170 Schwob, Le roi, p. 151.

171 Schwob, Le roi, p. 152.

172 Bonaparte, p. 352.

173 Hubert Juin, citing Byvanck, "Préface." In Schwob, Le roi, p. 11.

174 Wilson, p. 15.

175 Wilson, p. 15.

176 Wilson, p. 15.

177 Wilson, p. 14.

178 Wilson, p. 15.

179 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 31.

180 Adorno, Minima, p. 235.

181 Adorno, Minima, p. 236.

182 Adorno, Minima, p. 238.

183 Jankélévitch, p. 362.

184 Baudelaire, p. 100. The Baudelaire/Poe connection at the end of "Le Voyage," along with several formulations sketched out here, owe a great deal to passages in Adorno, especially section 150 of Minima Moralia.

185 I am thinking here not only of Balzac and Dickens, but also of the William Godwin of Caleb Williams (1794), the Bulwer-Lytton of Paul Clifford (1830) and Eugene Aram (1832), the Thackeray of Catherine (1839-40), as well as of the many French "realists" in prose in the decades before 1850. On the parallels between Decadence and Realism, the following passage from Linda Nochlin's Realism (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971) applies in some ways to both:

If the Realists contracted their field of vision in temporal and emotional terms, they expanded it to take in a vastly wider range of experience. . . . For the Realists, . . . indeed for the 'peintre de la vie moderne' the noble and beautiful were less appropriate than the commonplace and undistinguished. The very boundary-line between the beautiful and ugly had to be erased by the advanced artist. Could any subject in and of itself be considered ugly and therefore be rejected? (p.33)

186 Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1979), p. 68.

187 Foucault, p. 68.

188 Foucault, p. 67.

189 Foucault, p. 68.

190 Foucault, p. 310, n. 7.

191 Foucault, p. 67.

192 Cf. Philip Collins, Dickens and Crime, pp. 220 ff.

193 Foucault, p. 68.

194 Foucault, p. 69.

195 Foucault, p. 69.

196 Foucault, p. 69.

197 Paul de Man, Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 162.

198 De Man, p. 159.

199 De Man, p. 164.

200 De Man, p. 162.

201 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 31.

202 Charles Baudelaire, Correspondance (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), Vol. I, p. 188.

203 Remy de Gourmont cited in Jean Pierrot, The Decadent Imagination, p. 73.

204 Wilde, p. 152.

205 Wilde, pp. 323-324. The idea referred to, i.e., the conjunction of aestheticized personality intensification and crime, is from "Pen Pencil and Poison: A study in green":

A mask tells us more than a face.
These disguises intensified his

personality. In an incredibly short time he seems to have made his mark. . . . His life-work falls naturally under the three heads suggested by Mr. Swinburne, and it may be partly admitted that, if we set aside his achievements in the sphere of poison, what he has actually left to us hardly justifies his reputation.

206 Jauss, p. 15.

207 Derrida, p. 275.

208 Cited in Collins, p. 308.

209 Peter Brooks, Reading, p. 18:

The proairetic concerns the logic of actions, how their completion can be derived from their initiation, how they form sequences. . . . The hermeneutic code concerns rather the questions and answers that structure a story, their suspense, partial unveiling, temporary blockage, eventual resolution, with the resulting creation of a 'dilatory space'--the space of suspense--which we work through toward what is felt to be, in classical narrative, the revelation of meaning that occurs when the narrative sentence reaches full predication.

210 Collins, pp. 300-301.

211 Brooks, Reading, p. 18.

212 Bakhtin, p. 428.

213 Bakhtin, p. 428.

214 Walter Benjamin, The Origin of German Tragic Drama Trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), pp. 78-79.

215 Benjamin, Origin, p. 79.

216 Benjamin, Origin, p. 79.

217 Benjamin, Origin, p. 79.

218 Benjamin, Origin, p. 79.

219 Victor Hugo, Châtiments, Ed. P. J. Yarrow (London: Athlone, 1975), p. 93.

220 For the relations between motifs of asymmetrical and symmetrical mythic-ritual violence and modernity, cf. René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, Trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977) and also his Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde (Paris: Grasset, 1978).

221 Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes, p. 407.

Chapter II

Baudelaire and Aesthetic Crime

"J'ai pensé souvent que si Jésus-Christ paraissait aujourd'hui sur le banc des accusés, il se trouverait quelque procureur qui démontrerait que son cas est aggravé par la récidive."

Du vin et du hachisch, comparés
comme moyens de multiplication de
l'individualité (1851), Pt. II

II.1 Tragedy and "l'architecture secrète"

"The tragic begins at the border beyond which nothing can be remedied; it is the realm where, behind institutions, uninstituted laws rise. . . . Tragedy means an ontological antinomy."

Angelos Terzakis

When Friedrich Nietzsche envisioned a tragic culture in 1872, he outlined a living genealogy of slayers of Philistines as thinkers whose "wisdom takes the place of science as the highest end--wisdom that, uninfluenced by the seductive distractions of the sciences, turns with unmoved eyes to a comprehensive view of the world, and seeks to grasp, with sympathetic feelings of love, the eternal suffering as its own."¹ He goes on to posit the necessity for any such individual "dragon-slayer" to create a new art, "the art of metaphysical comfort," and to "desire tragedy as his own proper Helen. . . ."² Although he would repudiate

this passage in his later "Attempt At A Self-Criticism" (1886), the terms in which Nietzsche interrogates himself some fifteen years later are particularly striking when considered in the historical context of Charles Baudelaire's work and aesthetic theory:

How now? Isn't this [the call for the "dragon-slayer" who would "desire tragedy"] the typical creed of the romantic of 1830, masked by the pessimism of 1850? Even the usual romantic finale is sounded--break, break-down, return and collapse before an old faith, before the old God. How now? Is your pessimists' book not itself a piece of anti-Hellenism and romanticism?³

The "pessimists' book" Nietzsche refers to here is his own The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music, where the epochal antinomy of Apollo and Dionysus would be posited in terms strangely appropriate for the French poet who had died a mere five years before its publication. After all, just as Nietzsche's book was written to champion the "new art" of Wagner, Baudelaire himself had written the similarly serious and enthusiastic essay "Richard Wagner et Tannhauser à Paris" in 1860 (first published on April 1, 1861 in la Revue Européenne). For it is precisely in this locus of synaesthesia, romanticism, break-down and tragedy that Baudelaire developed a structural mythology for Les Fleurs du Mal, a mythology which draws heavily upon the world of tragic criminality refracted through a "modern" optical lens, itself

ground together into an aggregate of romantic ideals and post-1850 pessimism and decay.

In doing so, Baudelaire explores the aesthetic of evil not only in a metaphysical realm--for example, in the cosmological struggle between God and Satan--but also in the social realm, where the absorption of the horror of metaphysical conditions may be most dramatically enacted in the guise of criminality. For the drama of the poet-hero of Les Fleurs du Mal is consciously tragic, and the "architecture secrète" noted by Barbey d'Aurevilly reveals a structure and resonance in the work as a whole that draws a great deal of power from the social drama of intersubjectivity and transgression.

Of the two passages most often cited in the Baudelairean critical canon with regard to this issue, the paragraph in a letter from the poet to Alfred de Vigny (December, 1861) bears perhaps the greater weight in terms of the author's consciousness and intention:

Le seul éloge que je sollicite pour
ce livre est qu'on reconnaisse qu'il
n'est pas un pur album et qu'il a un
commencement et une fin. Tous les
poèmes nouveaux ont été faits
pour être adaptés au cadre
singulier que j'avais choisi.⁴

Not only is Baudelaire further refining and enriching this structure at this late date (1861, upon publication of the second edition), but he also had shown concern for the

architectonics of the volume from 1846 onwards, when Les
Lesbiennes, the original title for the collection, was first
 announced.⁵ Based on this and other evidence, it is safe to
 say that Baudelaire's concern for the overall structure of
 the work is evident across its creation, revision,
 publication, prosecution and re-edition.

Barbey d'Aurevilly's statement, published within a month
 of the publication of the first edition of Les Fleurs du Mal
 in 1857, is the second indispensable passage treating this
 issue, and still stands as an insight remarkable for its
 breadth and acuity:

. . . il ne faut pas s'y méprendre,
 dans le livre de M. Baudelaire,
 chaque poésie a, de plus que la
 réussite des détails ou de la
 fortune de la pensée, une valeur
très importante d'ensemble et de
situation, qu'il ne faut pas lui
 faire perdre, en la détachant. Les
 artistes qui voient les lignes sous
 le luxe et l'efflorescence de la
 couleur percevront très bien qu'il
 y a ici une architecture secrète,
 un plan calculé par le poète
 méditatif et volontaire. Les
Fleurs du Mal ne sont pas à la
 suite les unes des autres comme
 autant de morceaux lyriques,
 dispersés par l'inspiration et
 ramassés dans un recueil, sans
 d'autre raison que de les réunir.
 Elles sont moins des poésies qu'une
 oeuvre poétique de la plus forte
unité. Au point de vue de l'art et
 de la sensation esthétique, elles
 perdraient beaucoup à n'être pas
 lues dans l'ordre ou le poète, qui
 sait bien ce qu'il fait, les a
 rangées.⁶

Barbey's contentions here--that the overall plan of the book bears a sort of super-value that encloses the successes (of details or of "la fortune de la pensée") of the individual poems within a sort of formal subset, that the book would lose a great deal if considered merely as a collection of "morceaux lyriques," and that the author must be supremely conscious of this order and unity--will be repeated innumerable times in the critical tradition. Indeed, in 1956 L. J. Austin would refine upon this observation by his "contention that the architecture does not consist merely of the suggested connecting-links between the different books, but exists within the books themselves to a hitherto unremarked degree."⁷

In his 1960 study of the architecture of the book, D.J. Mossop begins with three important assumptions: first, that the second edition of Les Fleurs du Mal "corresponds to the final form of any work of art,"⁸ and therefore must serve as the version upon which the critic should construct his account; second, that the architecture "is intended to represent a drama which is that of an anonymous "poète" who cannot properly be called Baudelaire however much he may resemble his creator, and who is designed to have a universal, as well as an individual, significance";⁹ and third, that the poems on Beauty are "a central feature of the architecture and serve to make the problems arising from an aesthetic the starting point of a human tragedy."¹⁰

But how is it possible to link the formal or generic considerations of Attic tragedy with the formal and thematic workings of Baudelaire's modern masterpiece? Even the "architecture secrète" of Les Fleurs du Mal itself, as a critical or analytical concept, may depend upon mythological thinking which Leo Bersani finds both "crucial and ambiguous":¹¹

On the one hand, it seems clear that Baudelaire always thought of his poems as constituting a single unified work. The thirty-five poems which he added to the 1857 edition of Les Fleurs du mal for the 1861 edition modify the content of the work without changing the poet's architectural intention. New poems enter into a preexistent structure; presumably, they don't disrupt an already given structural completeness. Les Fleurs du mal is similar to A la Recherche du temps perdu in this respect: both works appear to be governed by the esthetic myth of nontransforming additions.¹²

Bersani goes on to state that Baudelaire's insistence on the architectural unity of the book "suggests a neatly thematic view of Les Fleurs du mal. The order in which they appear would correspond to different stages of a drama working toward a dénouement."¹³ Far from seeing this unity as a limitation, however, D. J. Mossop extracts formal significance from the fact that "Hymne à la Beauté" and "Le Voyage" were both written for the second edition, "at a time

. . . when we may be sure that Baudelaire was writing with the architecture clearly in mind,"¹⁴ and that "the same plea is made to death as was made to beauty in the same movement of escape from Spleen and with the same indifference to consequences ('Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?')."¹⁵

For Bersani, however, such a critical claim posits merely one among many possible "thematic enclosures," which "immobilize the work's significance; they put an end to the circulation of its meanings."¹⁶ Where the more recent critic perceives in Les Fleurs du Mal an organization "along the lines of an approach to, and then a retreat from, a conception of desire which, had it been fully triumphant, might have precluded any possibility of architectural organization,"¹⁷ the earlier critical tradition stresses the structural basis "underlining the basic unity of the poet's nature and of the tragedy which springs from it."¹⁸ As we shall see, these two positions are not irreconcilable; indeed, they meet and collide precisely in the realm of tragedy.

The term "tragedy" here refers not only to the general sense of any drama with an "unhappy ending," but more specifically to the generic realm of a dramatic action "in which the hero is destroyed."¹⁹ By insisting on the tragic form as it is embedded in the six books of Les Fleurs du Mal, Mossop signals an important tension between the individual and the group, and not merely (as had been previously

accentuated in critical tradition) between the individual and himself. "We have been very aware of the kind of reading which we can describe as Hamlet without the Prince," writes Raymond Williams, "but we have been almost totally unaware of the opposite and equally erroneous reading of the Prince of Denmark without the State of Denmark. It is this unity which we must now restore."²⁰ In Greek tragedy, for example, the scene of representation might be said to consist of "a company of individuals, named and dressed alike, [who] surrounded a single figure, all hanging upon his words and deeds: they were the Chorus and the impersonator of the Hero."²¹ Furthermore, the character of the tragic hero was largely determined not only by what tradition calls a "tragic flaw," but also by the suffering created (directly or indirectly) by public tensions, or tensions between public legality and private prerogative. In turn, Freud views this individual suffering as a reenactment of an historical scene in which the members of the group (who would become the Chorus) have caused the individual's (Hero's) suffering; later, in the scene of tragic representation, they "exhausted themselves with sympathy and regret and it was the Hero himself who was responsible for his own sufferings."²² On this point, Williams provides the following insight:

We think of tragedy as what happens to the hero, but the ordinary tragic action is what happens through the hero. When we confine our attention to the hero, we are unconsciously

confining ourselves to one kind of experience which in our own culture we tend to take as the whole. We are unconsciously confining ourselves to the individual. Yet over a very wide range we see this transcended in tragedy. Life does come back, life ends the play, again and again. And the fact that life does come back, that its meanings are reaffirmed and restored, after so much suffering and after so important a death, has been . . . the tragic action. . . . Tragedy can then be generalized not as the response to death but as the bare irreparable fact [emphases added].²³

Charles Baudelaire musters formal and thematic elements of Greek tragedy and traditional drama in order to create the role of the "impersonator of the Hero" who will depict and adopt the multifarious responsibilities of transgression, of appetitive infractions as well as metaphysical ones, of crime as well as sin. The entire exercise will take place in an atmosphere of moral synaesthesia, in which contingent history alternately melts away and returns in the struggle between "le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable."²⁴ Classical tragedy, moreover, devoted as it is to the theme of the "heroic individual who, by excess of virtue, becomes a breaker of norms and thus a criminal,"²⁵ thereby provides the poet with a range of mythic, pictorial and psycho-social materials upon which he might draw, even if he will exploit them unsystematically in terms of form or theme. Baudelaire will invert, in a romanticist mode, some tragic conventions,

while simultaneously diving into the deepest layers of tragic consciousness in order to investigate once again--in light of 1830 and 1850, the two inherited Zeitgeists mentioned by Nietzsche--the social and spiritual truths secreted there in the form of aesthetic crime.

Another passage ubiquitously cited in the critical canon comes from Mon Coeur mis à nu, XI:

Il y a dans tout homme, à toute
heure, deux postulations
simultanées, l'une vers Dieu,
l'autre vers Satan. L'invocation à
Dieu, ou spiritualité, est un
désir de monter en grade; celle de
Satan, ou animalité, est une joie
de descendre.²⁶

Antinomy, duality--both partake of and contribute to the master movement of the period, the "pouvoir indéfini de dédoublement" by which Vladimir Jankélévitch characterizes "la décadence."²⁷ "La double postulation," Baudelaire seems to ask in his architectural strategies and in the allegories contained therein, "comment se construit-elle?" The answer lies not only in the internalized, metaphysical or solipsistic flaws borne by the hero in his struggle with his god and his demon, but also in the palpable tensions evoked and explored by the poet with regard to other human beings. It is possible that our acceptance of a strict association between the lyric and the private, itself a modern distortion, has led to a limited reading of Baudelaire.

"The terms in which the problem [the tragic guilt of the poet-hero] is stated provide the title of the first book [of Les Fleurs du Mal], Spleen et Idéal," states Mossop; ". . . Envisaged in its simplest form, the conflict which opposes the poet-hero to himself and to his environment is a struggle to escape from Spleen towards the Ideal."²⁸ Thereby, the "double postulation" acknowledges the cosmological tension along the vertical or metaphysical axis, with God and Satan assuming their polar positions along it. "Whence the dual aspect of original sin: by casting beings out from himself, God himself falls in multiplicity."²⁹ Embedded in these cosmological tensions, the eminently physical (and not manifestly metaphysical) crimes depicted in Les Fleurs du Mal derive their heightened aesthetic status from a context of tragic inter-subjectivity, which emerges in the frame of the "secret architecture" of the six books.

These six books correspond to the developmental stages in a tragic action, wherein the "successive forms of the poet-hero's ideal," its expression and its deception, emerge in the following contexts: God, art and woman ("with the transitional ideal of beauty") in Spleen et Idéal; the "real" scene of life in the world-at-large (roughly coefficient with Paris) in Tableaux parisiens; drugs (or alternate realities) in Le Vin; sado-masochistic sexual encounters, or "crimes of love" (if only rendered allegorically, as in "L'Amour et le crane") in Fleurs du Mal

("anticipated, of course, by the cycles dealing with woman in Spleen et Idéal"); Satan and "alternate worship" in Révolte; and finally, death (or "alternate life") in La Mort.

We have seen how the end of "Le Voyage" (the last poem in La Mort and the final poem in the second edition) bears a great deal of resonance and ambiguity, implying as it does a new action, or a new life, or simply "the new." As in Poe's "Ms. Found In A Bottle," and in Schwob's refiguration of the symbolic sea voyage in "La Cité dormante," the ending remains open-ended, suspended in its unfinalizability by the flippant Baudelairean catchword of moral relativism so congenial to his "scandalous" voice, the same expression uttered in the face of criminal Beauty: qu'importe? "Death, once again, is a necessary actor but not the necessary action," states Williams.³⁰ ". . . Most of the great tragedies of the world end not with evil absolute, but with evil both experienced and lived through."³¹ Baudelaire's aesthetic of transgression is experienced, or dramatized, socially; it moves through the architectural thematics of the six books as through so many inter-subjective settings or "scenes of the crime."

For Baudelaire, transgression emerges as an aesthetic principle to the degree that it provides the procedural impetus for the transformation of one side of the double postulation into the other. Indeed, "The 'two

postulations'--as well as the entire moral and religious vocabulary to which they give rise in Baudelaire--can in fact be thought of as an escape from the anxieties produced by the Baudelairean discovery of psychic mobility, of unanchored identity."³² For unlike Sin, whose post-lapsarian status for Baudelaire is immanent in all things, indifferently indiscriminate, the act (or the "scene") of crime distinguishes one individual from the other and the individual from the group. Indeed, the criminal act as a manifestation of individual Will achieves its most pronounced aesthetic value when depicted in a scene bearing tragic (or, in some cases, mythic) resonance almost as a proscenium arch.

Aesthetic crime realigns the conditions of alterity and, as if by electric spark, transforms ennui into its opposite; it re-establishes difference in a universe where Nature itself is flat and monotonous. "Je voudrais," Baudelaire told his friend Jules Levallois, "les prairies teintes en rouge, les rivières jaune d'or et les arbres peints en bleu. La nature n'a pas d'imagination."³³ "For Baudelaire," Pierre Emmanuel writes, ". . . it is Nature which is the fall. Generation perpetuates the fall: birth is an original sin. . . ." ³⁴ Yet in the ambivalent relations Baudelaire cultivated with Nature, crime clearly serves to differentiate the individual from the a priori transgression determined by Nature. Indeed, "the aesthesis of modern lyric poetry has its antiromantic starting point in the Fleurs du Mal," writes

Hans Robert Jauss. "Here, Baudelaire accomplishes the aesthetic revaluation of nature."³⁵

By theoretically linking the two, he simultaneously accomplishes the aesthetic revaluation of crime as well. For crime, like nature and like Beauty in "Hymne à la beauté," is non-utilitarian; nevertheless, it retains the qualities of its opposite: its distinctive coloration of ultra-utilitarian (or supremely self-interested) indifference. The aesthetic image of crime, the metaphor of tragic intersubjective transgression, drives the machines of desire and sparks the energy necessary for the "dissolution" of the hypocritically indifferent dandy. The tragic feast of modernity evokes the cycle of askesis, of an ascetic renunciation of desire for desire's sake, in this emerging "deep criminal." For he bears what René Girard calls "metaphysical desire": unlike the criminal who stands to profit from his crimes, Baudelaire tells us in a famous passage, the dandy "ne peut jamais être un homme vulgaire. S'il commettait un crime, il ne serait pas déchu peut-être; mais si ce crime naissait d'une source triviale, le déshonneur serait irréparable."³⁶ Like an aesthetic object, some horrific bibelot, a crime is not to be bought or sold, but merely contemplated as "a joy forever."

Transgression bears, then, two ontological natures, which correspond to the two axes we have established here. It is utilitarian on the horizontal axis of history, while

non-utilitarian on the vertical axis of metaphysics. Aesthetic crime lives precisely in the zone where the two collapse, or are forced together in the seemingly impossible space of modern tragedy. Like the hero of classical tragedy, the poet-hero who impersonates him in Les Fleurs du Mal "must be plunged into a bewildering vortex of crime,"³⁷ experiencing the metaphysical imperatives as they emerge legally, socially, and phenomenologically around him. In the aesthetic context of these transgressions, then, the poet-hero alternately enacts rebellion or delectation, or both simultaneously; modern metaphysics, at least for Baudelaire, is derived from these tensions always under the rubric of the double postulation. "The further the poet-hero moves away from God in the direction of Satan," states Mossop, "the stronger becomes the pull of the force that binds him to God. And when at last the aspiration towards Satan himself weakens, the poet-hero's soul relapses into a state of frustrated inertia in which the two postulations cancel each other out completely."³⁸ Aesthetic crime, to put it simply, therefore provides the impetus for the movement both away from God and away from Satan. Like some perfume or some color, or any other agent of synaesthesia, crime immediately establishes difference and, in its aesthetic version, ultimately undermines it.

How is this possible? Baudelaire's poet-hero, like the hero of Sophocles's Oedipus Rex, like all of post-lapsarian

humankind, is always already guilty;³⁹ his dramatic quest for innocence (or beauty, or transformation), therefore, creates itself first in terms of alterity, or the sensation of inter-subjective difference. The poetry of aesthetic crime is set on the horizontal axis first in order to dramatize individual desire. "When Baudelaire speaks of original sin," states Emmanuel, "he seems to understand not a transgression, a human revolt, but the principal identity between desire and life: therefore, the state of man because of his birth, expulsion out of another inconceivable state, [is] anterior to the conception."⁴⁰ In other words, because sin is original and a priori in Baudelaire's metaphysics, just as "fate" was for Sophocles, crime is a primary form aesthesis may assume if it is to live, if it is to reflect the tragic work of desire; and just as Beauty is endowed with a mercurial amorality, inter-subjective transgression (in the case of "Hymne à la beauté," murder) achieves a certain status as energizer or mobilizing agent for Beauty's transformative workings:

Tu marches sur des morts, Beauté, dont tu te moques;
De tes bijoux l'Horreur n'est pas le moins charmant,
Et le Meurtre, parmi tes plus chères breloques,
Sur ton ventre orgueilleux danse amoureusement.⁴¹

The double postulation stands as the sort of static or fixed ontology of sin, while crime and beauty (both, in the tragedy of Les Fleurs du Mal, represented in the scene of inter-subjective transgression) move the dandy along the

fluid continuum necessarily stretched between the two poles repeatedly posed as metaphysical reference points:

Que tu viennes du ciel ou de l'enfer, qu'importe,
O Beauté! . . .

De Satan ou de Dieu, qu'importe? Ange ou Sirène,
Qu'importe, si tu rends, . . .
L'univers moins hideux et les instants moins lourds?⁴²

Marcel Ruff accentuates the poet's preoccupation with le mal as a metaphysical problem more or less coefficient with la condition humaine; he states that the mental environment behind Spleen et Idéal is comparable to Baudelaire's disgust at "le contraste offensant, répugnant, de [s]on honorabilité spirituelle avec cette vie précaire et misérable" mentioned by Baudelaire in the letter to Madame Aupick dated December 30, 1857.⁴³ Nevertheless, the critic insists that the examination of conscience constituted by Les Fleurs du Mal as a whole "is not limited to the person of Baudelaire; it extends to all humanity"; moreover, he maintains that "this aspect of his work [its universality] would never have earned for Baudelaire the title 'Poet of Evil' unless in his verse he had blended it with the rarer quality of celebrating le mal as committed by man."⁴⁴ He further states:

Among these errors, some are true offenses, others are irregularities which appear morally reprehensible perhaps, yet are not universally condemned by law. The offenses go

as far as crime, in 'Le Vin de l'Assassin,' for example. They include theft and prostitution in 'Le Crépuscule du soir.' The allusions of the opening poem, 'Au lecteur,' cannot be counted, for they refer to people who abstain from these offenses. . . .45

Yet despite this and other evidence (and especially the numerous pronouncements on crime and criminality throughout the collected writings of Baudelaire, not to mention the plan for the play "L'Ivrogne"), Ruff concludes that "one must remember in regard to these specific offenses, . . . that they are never treated from a social standpoint, nor from a truly moral standpoint, but as the effects of a predisposition toward evil common to all men and originating in our satanic bent."46

To counter such orthodox, universalizing claims, it is necessary to look no further than to the dedication, then to the prefatory piece of the volume, and to the first three "cycles" of Spleen et Idéal. For in his dedication to Théophile Gautier, in "Au Lecteur" and in the first part of the tragedy in six acts which comprises Les Fleurs du Mal, the reader is ushered into a complex hermeneutic circuit where the Other is consciously implicated in not only the internalized psychology and introspection of the poet-hero, but also in the tragic setting of a social group in the throes of a legal crisis, with all its "moral" and inter-subjective implications intact.

In order to demonstrate this assertion, I turn first to the dedication of the volume (along with the annotations made by the author on a proof page from the 1857 edition) to Baudelaire's "maître et ami," Théophile Gautier. Without entering into the debate on the poet's "sincerity" or his rhetorical strategy with regard to his dedicatee, so clearly and informatively discussed elsewhere,⁴⁷ it should be noted that "the greatest liberty that Baudelaire takes . . . lies in the omission of Emaux et Camées from the list of Gautier's works."⁴⁸ Indeed, Baudelaire refers to Gautier as "l'auteur d'Albertus, de La Comédie de la Mort et d'España"⁴⁹

This absence, furthermore, may be profitably considered in light of a difference between the two poets regarding the "best way of avoiding confusion between purely artistic values in poetry and the extraneous value of morality," which was to exclude "subject matter which directly invited moral judgements."⁵⁰ By 1857 Baudelaire was willing to entertain the idea of such an exclusion, whereas before 1852 he might have been less likely to do so.⁵¹

Gautier's "Préface" to Emaux et Camées, unlike Baudelaire's, ends on a hermetic, rather than a hermeneutic, note:

Comme Goethe sur son divan
A Weimar s'isolait des choses
Et d'Hafiz effeuillait les roses,

Sans prendre garde à l'ouragan

Qui fouettait mes vitres fermées,
Moi, j'ai fait Emaux et Camées. 52

How much of political and historical import is evoked by this "ouragan"--the revolution of 1848, the Second Republic, the "crime-of-the-century" betrayal of the republic by the coup d'état of December 2, 1851--yet the presence of all this stormy history is signalled only prefatorially, in passing, by its absence, by Gautier's strategic exclusion. In a statement very pertinent to the present inquiry, Baudelaire acknowledges with some humor that his book transgresses not only against l'art pour l'art, but also against the moral and criminal codes of the world. Addressing Gautier, he states:

Je sais que dans les régions
éthérées de la véritable
Poésie, le Mal n'est pas, non plus
que le Bien, et que ce misérable
dictionnaire de mélancolie et de
crime peut légitimer les réactions
de la morale, comme le
blasphémateur [sic] confirme la
Religion. 53

By this gesture, Baudelaire defers to Gautier's mastery of the ethereal realms (fashioned on the "other side of the windows" which separate him from the "storm" of history), while acknowledging the presence in the work, systematically arranged as in a lexicon ("dictionnaire de . . . crime"), of the reactionary world. Baudelaire is doubly a "blasphémateur," then: first against Gautier, and then against the social and historical world; indeed, it is for the sake of

his transgression against l'art pour l'art that Baudelaire "so curiously anticipates and approves the action of those who will later try and condemn him."⁵⁴

Immediately following the dedication to Gautier, as noted by Marcel Ruff above, the crimes mentioned in "Au Lecteur" are uncommitted:

Si le viol, le poison, le poignard, l'incendie,
N'ont pas encor brodé de leurs plaisants dessins
Le canevas banal de nos piteux destins,
C'est que notre âme, hélas! n'est pas assez hardie.⁵⁵

Contrary to Ruff's assertion that these crimes may not be "counted" among the crimes treated in the volume, however, I would note that by their absence they are all the more strategically included in the systemic criminality established by the dedicatory and the prefatory gesture. For the poet effects a sort of forced socialization of the reader by means of "a sweeping indictment of the universal 'postulation vers Satan' which unites the 'hypocrite lecteur' in an unwelcome fraternity with the poet."⁵⁶ With the "hélas" of the last line of this stanza, the poet-hero proves that he differs from the reader not in any essential way, but only in terms of his superior energy, "which drives him to extremes and gives him something at least of the prestige of a fallen angel."⁵⁷ And it is this energy, posited repeatedly in criminal terms, which will liquidate the static, vertical-axis moralities in the "aesthetic of

tragedy, where energy itself is a value, irrespective of the use to which it is put."⁵⁸ "En d'autres termes," writes L. J. Austin, "ce qui intéresse Baudelaire, c'est plus l'intensité du sentiment qu'il éprouve que la valeur de son objet."⁵⁹ Moreover, this aesthetic choice emerges not just in the poetry, but in other instances as well: for example, Baudelaire finds the same energy, the same amoral electricity, in the gaze of the women painted by Delacroix, "qu'elles se distinguent par le charme du crime ou par l'odeur de la sainteté."⁶⁰

In his theory of tragedy, Aristotle states that "life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action."⁶¹ Contrasted with "action" elsewhere in his writings is "passion," (praxis and pathos, respectively), and these two terms may help us to make a fine distinction between a striking moment of aesthetic criminality in Gautier and its more "energetic" enactments in the tragedy of Les Fleurs du Mal. Francis Fergusson writes:

Action is active: the psyche
perceives something it wants, and
'moves' toward it. Passion is
passive: the psyche suffers
something it cannot control or
understand, and 'is moved'
thereby.⁶²

Emaux et Camées focuses on what might be called the secret life of objects; the "secret life" of matter itself is fully elaborated on a programmatic, pantheistic basis in the first poem of the volume, "Affinités secrètes: madrigal

panthéiste."⁶³ While the passions of matter are explored on even an atomic level, however, the action (praxis) of depicted or aesthetic crime is suppressed in Gautier's topical poem, "Lacenaire" (part II of "Etude de Mains"). The pathos of uncontrollable horror, on the other hand, is placed in the foreground.

Kept in preservative liquid, the severed hand of the infamous assassin stands as an object of profound contemplation for the poet:

Curiosité dépravée!
J'ai touché, malgré mes dégoûts,
Du supplice encor mal lavée
Cette chair froide au duvet roux.

Momifiée et toute jaune
Comme la main d'un pharaon,
Elle allonge ses doigts de faune
Crispés par la tentation.⁶⁴

The poet, like the executioner, is able to read "couramment" in the folds of the skin of the murderer's hand the "affreux hiéroglyphes" left there by vices and the irrepressible desires for gold and living flesh; in the "fauves sillons" of the mummified hand it is possible to witness the crimes, corruption, and debaucheries played out in scenes of gambling and prostitution, all ornamented ("diaprées") with the fine shadings, the nuances of wine and blood, as was the "ennui des vieux Césars" (line 68).

The poetic function of transgression here resembles the one outlined in the last two quatrains of "Au Lecteur," and a

striking contrast emerges in comparing Gautier's version with Baudlaire's:

Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!
 Quoiqu'il ne pousse ni grands gestes ni grands cris,
 Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris
 Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;

C'est l'Ennui!--l'oeil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,
 Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka. . .66

Where "Ennui" is "objectified" by Gautier, evoked almost associatively by the contemplative poet viewing the severed hand of a great criminal, it is personified (and thereby dramatized to a greater degree) by Baudelaire. Gautier's concluding gesture might almost be called "aesthetically moralistic," to the degree that it extracts a frisson, a certain delectation from the very form of the disembodied hand:

En même temps molle et féroce,
 Sa forme a pour l'observateur
 Je ne sais quelle grâce atroce,
 La grâce du gladiateur!67

As an object formerly belonging to a member of the "Criminelle aristocratie," the member in question betrays no sign of work, having never wielded the tools of honest labor. The poet then steps back from his object of contemplation and, in a crucial and critical gesture, distances poetry from criminality in a move marked, again, more by pathos than by praxis, endowed with the distancing effect of moral passion:

Saints calus du travail honnête,
 On y cherche en vain votre sceau.
 Vrai meurtrier et faux poète,
 Il fut le Manfred du ruisseau!68

The hand, this particular synecdoche--the disembodied tool of crime, which stands figuratively not only for Lacenaire the whole man, and not only for his murderous career, but for an entire history of crime and vice, evoking the ennui-ridden, degenerate Caesars and implying by its material nature ("En même temps molle et féroce") the gladiatorial combats of lost ages--emerges in the poet/executioner's moral stance as a "safe" moment of aesthetic crime, to the extent that the poet does not confuse the value of Lacenaire's transgressions with that of his poetry. His "art" was effected with the knife, not the pen; nor was his hand sealed with the holy imprint of honest work, the "Saints calus." The allusion to the Byronic criminal-savant, set in the context of the "ruisseau" ("gutter"), a word usually bearing pejorative weight when not used technically, accentuates the distance established earlier in the poem between the poet and the criminal, in the same way that the poet maintains his moral distance from the object itself. Lacenaire himself was something of a poet, of course, and Gautier's revulsion seems factitious, even priggish in light of the frisson discernible in the poem itself.

Baudelaire's procedure in "Au Lecteur" differs from

Gautier's, and the difference points again to the former's development of the possible range of aesthetic crime. By implicating not only himself, but the reader as well, into an astute system of complicity, even "connivance in evil,"⁶⁹ Baudelaire eliminates the moral distance so painstakingly maintained by his "maître et ami" in "Lacenaire." For boredom is not merely an attribute borne by distant and degenerate rulers ("Comme l'ennui des vieux Césars!"), nor one revealed associatively by a mummified murderer's hand. Boredom for Baudelaire is rather a living figure known well to us all:

C'est l'Ennui!--l'oeil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,
Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.
Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
--Hypocrite lecteur,--mon semblable,--mon frère!⁷⁰

For Leo Bersani, "Au Lecteur" signals the poet's primary concern with "an imaginative promiscuity that leaves humanity indifferent to the ethical quality of the wildly heterogeneous scenes to which it 'sacrifices' itself. . . . crime in Baudelaire is in fact a defensive strategy against the dangers of that promiscuity."⁷¹ Once again, a distinction between Gautier's aesthetic of crime and the one practiced by his avowed disciple may be made: where the former luxuriates in the "sheer mobility of fantasy"⁷² afforded by the hand of the murderer, Baudelaire's condemnatory complicity with Ennui (and aggressive identification with the reader in this regard) suggests that

"the greatest threat in Ennui is not the scenes which it may actually produce but rather its very aptitude for producing scenes."⁷³ Unlike the romanticist Gautier, for whom aesthetic crime is present in the associative object, Baudelaire has absorbed the issue subjectively and works in his preface to implicate the reader as well.

The criminals in "Le Crépuscule du soir," as another example of this criminal function of energy, engage in their work in order to satisfy desires as natural as they are perverse; they neither evoke distant, "romantic" crimes nor are they safely objectified and preserved in formaldehyde:

Et les voleurs, qui n'ont ni trêve ni merci,
Vont bientôt commencer leur travail, eux aussi,
Et forcer doucement les portes et les caisses
Pour vivre quelques jours et vêtir leurs
[maîtresses].⁷⁴

There is a certain sympathy here, however ironic, on the part of the poet for the criminals in question. It derives from an overweening sense of sadness faced with the spent energies comforted, or even aided and abetted, by "le soir charmant, ami du criminel," which "vient comme un complice, à pas de loup. . . ."⁷⁵ The drama of this criminalized system, of this illicit series of scenes of crime, is evoked in large part by the enormous energies, and attendant fatigues, rendered in the poem with a great deal of dramatic force. This is not the case, of course, for all of Les Fleurs; but praxis, or tragic action, clearly dominates pathos in this

instance. Both are available, even necessary, to tragedy, as Aristotle demonstrated.

Lest the distinction between Gautier and Baudelaire seem too fine here, let us look again at the role of ennui in these two poems. For Gautier, ennui is evoked by the object, then associated with the "vieux Césars" as an attendant state, or common attribute, of great criminality; for Baudelaire, on the other hand, Ennui personnified takes on a larger status, as a sort of principle or existential state, a "state in which any evil might be committed."⁷⁶ Indeed, Bersani states:

. . . other crimes are more dramatic; boredom neither makes great gestures nor utters loud cries. It is a vacuum; it would destroy the world merely by sucking it into its own void. But this is not too dissimilar from what Baudelaire describes as the esthetic state, as the artist's uncontrolled and unreserved openness to other forms of being.⁷⁷

The figure of boredom is an aesthetician, "an armchair virtuoso of crime,"⁷⁸ and the reader is caught up in the fraternity of the bored poet's delectations; the possibility of any rejection of this complicity has been preemptively disarmed by the charge, along with its admission by the poet, of hypocrisy.⁷⁹ The "subjective" immediacy of Baudelaire's aesthetic procedure, as opposed to the objectively distanced, yet strangely judgmental "neutrality" evoked in Gautier's

stance, again derives from the superior energies involved in Baudelaire's sense of transgression.⁸⁰ All possible crimes are negatively implied by the superior, even infinite lassitude of the houka-smoking figure of Ennui. As Baudelaire states in "Le Goût de l'Infini," (part I of "Le Poème du Hachisch"):

Hélas! les vices de l'homme, si
pleins d'horreur qu'on les suppose,
contiennent la preuve (quand ce ne
serait que leur infinie expansion!)
de son goût de l'infini; seulement,
c'est un goût qui se trompe souvent
de route. . . . C'est dans cette
dépravation du sens de l'infini que
gît, selon moi, la raison de tous
les excès coupables.⁸¹

Therefore, to paraphrase: while mankind's taste for vice supposedly evokes horror, mankind's infinite variations on crime at the same time prove our taste for infinity. This taste is often mistaken in its procedures, alas. For when this taste for the infinite is "depraved," or corrupted, all "guilty excesses" emerge. When this taste is not corrupted, the personality of the individual may enjoy the pleasurable "multiplication of personality" experienced under the influence of drugs or art. The fine line separating art and crime is in some cases obliterated, then, at this site of the pre-moral taste for the infinite. This aspect of Baudelaire's aesthetic prefigures the acte gratuit elaborated in this century by André Gide and the "liberating amorality" explored in Jean Genet's thought.

It is clear that the Infinite, heavenly and infernal, sky and abyss, reaches from Spleen to Idéal; the subject is driven along this axis behind the engines of tragedy. In "L'Idéal," poem XVIII of Spleen et Idéal, a poem whose placement in the group of poems programmatically treating Beauty is crucial, the poet-hero rejects the contemporaneous artistic versions of feminine beauty as "Produits avariés, nés d'un siècle vaurien" which will never have the capacity to "satisfaire un coeur comme le mien."⁸² The spleen-ridden site of Gavarni's pale, diseased beauties (the quasi-emblematic "hôpital") will never house "Une fleur qui ressemble à mon rouge idéal"⁸³. In the tercets, however, all this negativity vanishes in an evocation of three trans-historical tragic presences, and in a striking parallel drawn between Shakespeare's pre-eminent tragic heroine, a Greek tragic author, and the mythological figure of Night, mother of Titans, as depicted by Michaelangelo:

Ce qu'il faut à ce coeur profond comme un abîme,
C'est vous, Lady Macbeth, âme puissante au crime,
Rêve d'Eschyle éclos au climat des autans,

Ou bien toi, grande Nuit, fille de Michel-Ange,
Qui tors paisiblement dans une pose étrange
Tes appas façonnés aux bouches des Titans.⁸⁴

Lady Macbeth, that tragic female soul rendered powerful by means of crime, yet forever trapped within the frame of dramatic representation, leaps in the poet-hero's consciousness from an Attic dream of Aeschylus into the

northern climate of fogs and shadows. The accent on the voluptuous energy of ideal beauty in representation is stressed again in the action ("Qui tors paisiblement dans une pose étrange") and the lineage of Night, who is simultaneously mother of Titans and daughter of Michaelangelo!

As Mossop writes in his conclusion:

On the plane of aesthetics, one must certainly accord universality to the attraction of tragic emotion . . . Far from being peculiar to him [the poet-hero] and his creator, the ideal expressed in the poems on Beauty is that which is implied in mankind at large by the existence of the tragic genre itself.⁸⁵

It is in the first three "cycles" of Spleen et Idéal (poems I-XXI), then, that Baudelaire works to establish the complex and extremely resonant network of tragic, aesthetic and social references which will launch and support the entire secret architecture of all six books of Les Fleurs du Mal. These cycles comprise poems I-VI, then poems VII to XVI ("La Muse Malade" to "Châtiment de l'Orgeuil," a cycle of art and discipline called by Mossop "The Heart of the Poet"), and finally the crucial cycle, the transition group of five poems treating ideal beauty and taking the poet-hero from the social/individual tensions established in poems I-XVI to the encounter with the women who, in the tragic myth of the book, will drive the poet-hero's energies repeatedly along the

continuum between spleen and the ideal. This network, in its thematic composition and in the intersections created between individual poems, comprises perhaps the most important version of aesthetic crime in the period.

II.2 Tragedy and the "Nature" of Crime

The introduction of the chorus, says Schiller, is the decisive step by which war is declared openly and honorably against all naturalism in art. . . . For this chorus the Greeks built up the scaffolding of a fictitious natural state and on it placed fictitious natural beings.
Nietzsche

In the first cycle of Les Fleurs du Mal (poems I-VI), the ideals of God and Art achieve expression precisely in terms of community, both familial and species-wide. "Bénédiction," far from a mere establishing gesture of the pathos of the poet in the world (a pathos that will nonetheless be immediately thereafter iterated in II, "L'Albatros"), in fact evokes the actions (praxis) of tragic transgression and the socio-legal crisis traditionally explored by tragedy. Even Leo Bersani, who would prefer that the entire work be understood in light of "desire which, had it been fully triumphant, might have precluded any possibility of architectural organization,"⁸⁶ allows that the "guilty, devious" characters in the first poem "are transformed, in 'Les Phares,' into a community of virtuous

sentinels guiding one another through the tragic course of life. . . ."87 Thus, the horde of the differentiated group is counterposed to, or transfigured into, a civilizing tradition of cultural beacons; the resulting exposition of the range of tragic tensions, from I to VI ("Les Phares"), is extremely complex and intriguing.

The movement toward the group in "Bénédiction" begins with the scene of the Mother faced with her monstrous Poet-offspring, and she states her curse upon the night of his conception. She is prepared not only to disfigure the symbolic tree of his expression ("l'instrument maudit de tes méchancetés"), but she is depicted after her speech preparing the scene of the most frightful "high crime" of which the species is capable:

Elle ravale ainsi l'écume de sa haine,
Et, ne comprenant pas les desseins éternels,
Elle-même prépare au fond de la Géhenne
Les bûchers consacrés aux crimes maternels.⁸⁸

There ends the first section of the poem, and the next four quatrains shift the scene ("Pourtant. . .") to the Child in the process of socialization, always under the beneficent gaze of an unnamed Angel and a Spirit. Individuation brings with it alienation, however, and the others underhandedly try to harm him, then keep him at a distance "Avec hypocrisie." The third section, also four quatrains in length, shifts the chronological setting to the adulthood of the poet-hero, this time focusing on "Sa femme," who screams a public

proclamation of her hypocritical and impious intention to usurp in his heart the place of the gods, and in the process musters elements of the deepest structures of tragic representation: Dionysiac revels and sacrificial dismemberment of the scapegoat-god. She exclaims:

'Comme un tout jeune oiseau qui tremble et qui palpite,
J'arracherai ce coeur tout rouge de son sein,
Et, pour rassasier ma bête favorite,
Je le lui jetterai par terre avec dédain!'89

"Bénédiction" stands as a mythic statement of an originary drama, bearing characteristically inverted tragic elements: the hero is not a god, nor is he a ruler, nor is he even of high social position, yet his piety and his status as Poet raise him to the dubious distinction of scapegoat or worthy candidate for ritual dismemberment. The final five quatrains, comprising the speech of the hero-Poet, draw upon biblical formulations while stating sentiments that are distinctly pre-Christian.⁹⁰ While the poem serves as the first moment of exposition for the drama of *Spleen et Idéal* and for the six books to follow, the dramatic crisis in the poem itself is imagined rather than achieved in any possible denouement. The systemic tension created by the criminal malevolence of the Other is stated once again in line 56 ("... l'aspect des peuples furieux"), and the poet foresees his own place amidst the "éternelle fête," yet the poet's enunciation of the Ideal, his projection of his future

crowning in true imitatio Christi style, must suffice as a resolution.

Like an inverted epic, this poem (as the introduction to the grand movement from Ideal to Spleen) ends, rather than begins, in medias res. Addressing "mon Dieu," and formulating the material that will compose his "beau diadème" of poetic glory, the poet states:

['] Car il ne sera fait que de pure lumière,
Puisée au foyer saint des rayons primitifs,
Et dont les yeux mortels, dans leur splendeur entière,
Ne sont que des miroirs obscurcis et plaintifs!'91

This conclusion, stressing once again the collective gaze of the Other ("l'aspect des peuples furieux"), leaves the poet-hero surrounded by the sacrificial horde, yet still enunciating his statement of faith.

The title itself is extremely polyphonic, a multivalent suggestion of the levels of faith and irony that reflect the social tension inherent in tragedy. For the word "bénédition" means simultaneously three things: first, a state of grace accorded by God (which, as a state of being, is not lightly subject to modification); second, it is an act of blessing or baptism (which, in the speeches and actions of the Other here, is rather a curse); finally, a "bénédition" is a prayer or a vow expressing gratitude. This meaning, in the final speech, bears a primary value as the highest possible statement of the poet's faith, cosmologically independent, yet strangely vulnerable to the

malevolent social ironies or codes of transgression surrounding him. For instead of stressing the transcendent qualities of the divine light, the final two lines stress a "fall," again to the eyes of the mortals:

... les yeux des mortels, dans leur splendeur entière,
Ne sont que des miroirs obscurcis et plaintifs!⁹²

Poem II, "L'Albatros," again postpones, or actually freezes, the movement of the drama by its symbolic structure, which this time exploits the passive strategy of pathos and thereby serves as a counterpoint to the action of "Bénédicton." The bird bears titular and emblematic status here, and its struggle as a victim of a cruel community ("les hommes d'équipage") is evoked in a symbolic equivalency between itself and the poet:

Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées
Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer;
Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,
Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher.⁹³

Unlike the protagonist actor-poet in I (who "stands" for himself), the albatross symbolizes the poet in II, and mutely suffers his symbolic fate. Although the bird/poet is no less exiled and no less tortured than the poet-hero in I, the situation is pathetic to the degree that it does not present an action, but rather evokes, as in a still-life ("nature morte"), the sensations experienced while watching a helpless being suffer and (implicitly) die.

The complex dovetailing or interlocking structure of this first cycle (poems I-VI) hinges on poem III, "Elévation," and leads by several means from the "low" ending of II to the transformative, "high" process detailed in poem IV, "Correspondances." The first quatrain of "Elévation," for example, features two pairs of adverbial indicators-of-transcendence: "Au-dessus" and "Par delà". In the second quatrain, the poet addresses his spirit, stepping away from the one-to-one, third-person symbology of the albatross/poet in II in order to create a more dynamic version of the Ideal, one reiterated in the form of a winged being, but this time endowed with "une aile vigoureuse" as opposed to the futile, helpless "ailes de géant" of the albatross. After having spoken in the first person and addressed his bird-like spirit as "Tu," however, the poet effects a melding of the two once again in a suppositional third person, taking up again the volitive or benedictory mode first encountered at the end of I and establishing a new realm of artifice and creation to introduce poem IV, "Correspondances." Having recalled the world of spleen (first encountered in "Bénédiction"), the poet and his winged spirit come together at the end of III in a prayer or wish that expresses, once again in exposition, the Ideal:

Heureux celui qui peut d'une aile virgoureuse
S'élancer vers les champs lumineux et sereins;

Celui dont les penses, comme des alouettes,

Vers les cieux le matin prennent un libre essor,
 --Qui plane sur la vie, et comprend sans effort
 Le langage des fleurs et des choses muettes!⁹⁴

The enchaînement or suite d'idées from these lines to IV need hardly be stressed; the "langage des fleurs et des choses muettes" would seem a proper prelude to the "confuses paroles" of the second line of "Correspondances."

Furthermore, where the first quatrain of III insists by repetition ("Au-dessus," "Par delà") on physically surpassing natural boundaries and formations, IV describes the presence in and the passage of the poet-hero through the temple of Nature. But what is the nature of Baudelaire's version of Nature in this important and much-commented-upon poem?

"The poem affirms the unity of nature, and its whole movement posits that art is what makes that unity, through correspondences, permanently possible," writes Nicole Ward Jouve.⁹⁵ To this reading we might contrast the less "conclusive" contention of J.-D. Hubert, who asserts:

Au premier quatrain, le poète nous dit, semble-t-il, que l'univers est parfaitement intelligible à quiconque détient la clef des correspondances et parvient à déchiffrer les symboles qui l'environnent; mais il se peut également que le poète proclame ici l'intelligence supérieure de la Nature dont les forêts observent l'homme avec des 'regards familiers', c'est-à-dire en pleine connaissance de cause, tandis que l'homme passe 'à travers des

forêts de symboles' sans comprendre
quoi que ce soit!⁹⁶

Does "l'homme" partake of the system of intelligent and intelligible signs as in a communion (the "confuses paroles" helped along by the "regards familiers"), or does the individual qua individual somehow miss the "transports de l'esprit et des sens" (l. 14) available only in the realm of "une ténébreuse et profonde unité"? It seems clear that the ambiguity surrounding the relation between "l'homme" and "La Nature" in this poem derives from this existential tension between unity and differentiation, between collectivity and individuation, and that the much-discussed synaesthesia asseverated in the tercets is a commentary on the process whereby difference is adumbrated and then obliterated. The choice of the verb "chanter" to name the act of synaesthesia itself is significant, for the "transports de l'esprit et des sens" thereby evoke, however obliquely, a musical language, a choral, multi-voiced element of poetic or tragic versions of originary ritual itself.

Far from being a statement of some pantheistic or theological unity, as some in the critical tradition would claim,⁹⁷ the sonnet establishes a network of transformative differences within a shadowy, profound and horizontally reciprocal unity. Furthermore, "Correspondances" deserves its pre-eminent position in the expository cycle because it inaugurates the passage from sensory data to language--from

"parfum" to "symbole"--which is dramatized in a tragic action across the grand scheme of the "architecture secrète" of the six books.

The traditional critical view of the opening quatrain of "Correspondances" diminishes its pure metaphoricity in the name of some "literal value," as follows:

Baudelaire . . . reverses and extends this classic analogy [i.e., the "temple of nature"]: for him (as equally for certain of his contemporaries), it is the forest that recalls the temples of Man, and that itself becomes the one vast temple of Nature; the trees of the forest by implication form (one presumes) the 'pillars' of the temple, and as such have not only a certain literal value, but additionally represent all those other objects of Nature by which Man feels himself to be observed.⁹⁸

Now, given Baudelaire's ambivalence about Nature throughout his writings, the focus on this inversion of the "classical analogy" would seem pertinent and insightful; likewise, the extrapolation from the literal pillars (i.e., trees) to "all other objects of Nature by which Man feels himself to be observed." But the metaphoric system need not be frozen in the image of the "forest," nor fixed on the vertical axis of supernatural analogy or theological speculation; rather, let us briefly make a fuller interpretive acknowledgment of the elements of social ritual and memory implied in the sonnet, and of the dramatic context

in which the poem is positioned in Spleen et Idéal.

"Correspondances" begins:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.⁹⁹

Nature in this first quatrain is, in my opinion, "denaturalized" in the metaphor by its transformation (in the syntax of metaphoric substitution) into an architecture of the sacred ("un temple"); ritual and human community, both veiled in language ("de confuses paroles"), compose a metaphoric "forêt de symboles," less a collection of "trees" than a strangely anthropomorphized group ("de vivants piliers . . . des forêts de symboles/Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers") of frères and semblables. The gazes directed toward "l'homme" are "familiers," the knowing looks of a plurality of the similar. Indeed, what are the "other objects of Nature by which Man feels himself to be observed," if not first and foremost other people? To state that "The poem affirms the unity of nature, and its whole movement posits that art is what makes that unity . . . permanently possible,"¹⁰⁰ is insightful to the degree that it insists on art, but lacks insight by insisting on some a priori "unity" in Nature.

On the contrary, this poem marks the realization of individuation by the poet-hero in the face of social or "artificial" phenomena formerly undifferentiated; he relates

the scene in the third person ("l'homme") in order to present and evoke the sense of separation or distance involved in the "transports." Art is not posterior to Nature, neither in this sonnet nor in Baudelaire's aesthetics in general. He asks, for example, in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," "Qui oserait assigner à l'art la fonction stérile d'imiter la nature?"¹⁰¹

Georges Blin's distinction between the "analogie verticale" and the "analogie horizontale" corresponds to L. J. Austin's opposition between "la Symbolique" and "le Symbolisme." The first term in both pairs would describe "relations between the natural world and a supernatural world,"¹⁰² while the second term would concern itself with "relations between such natural things as the flight of an albatross, and the activity and accompanying état d'âme of a poet."¹⁰³ (Whether or not the "état d'âme of a poet" may be described as a "natural thing" is an issue insufficiently explored in these accounts.) Too often, however, critics tend to associate value judgments with one or the other of these distinctions, some blaming the poet's predilection for mere "natural symbolism" as being insufficiently mystical. Others, however, like Austin, hold that Baudelaire:

. . . may have started with a supernatural symbolism (a poetics based on the belief that nature is a symbol of divine reality), and, finding that reality was satanic, not divine, eventually turned in

disappointment to natural
symbolism.104

This theory, in its flexibility and allowance for the continual re-working of the poems and the architecture of Les Fleurs du Mal (not to mention the changes in the poet's thinking), at least allows for the demonstrable fact that Baudelaire repeatedly states the theory of correspondances in terms of the supernatural in his prose writings.105

For there is an inherent ambiguity in any attempt to make a direct correlation between the idea as it appears in verse, and especially in an architecturally designed verse collection, and the idea as it appears in prose. For the "fact that it is found in the work of Swedenborg proves nothing as to his [Baudelaire's] mystic powers," Mossop states. He continues:

It may be doubted whether there is any feature of his supernatural symbolism--or of his accounts of his adventures--which could not have been invented by a poet who consciously sought for new 'correspondances' between his knowledge of existing religious cosmology and religious symbolism. If that is so, the distinction between supernatural symbolism and natural symbolism is reduced to a difference in the nature of the subject-matter treated: it does not necessarily involve a distinction between mystical and non-mystical modes of knowledge.106

Mossop's discussion of the question of correspondances

juxtaposes two passages from Baudelaire's prose which I would cite because of their extremely powerful associations within my locus of ideas here. The first is from Fusées, and accentuates the demystified procedure whereby the poet creates the symbol as a means of revealing the profound within the quotidian: "Dans certains états de l'âme presque surnaturels, la profondeur de la vie se révèle tout entière dans le spectacle, si ordinaire qu'il soit, qu'on a sous les yeux. Il en devient le symbole."¹⁰⁷ With this statement, and especially the phrase "le spectacle, si ordinaire qu'il soit, qu'on a sous les yeux," Baudelaire substantiates three aesthetic tenets or procedures: first, that everyday life is worthy of a place in poetic symbology (itself no great revelation in the wake of romanticism and realism); second, that the subject can transform "ordinary" reality by psycho-linguistic means (from "états d'âme" to "symbole"); and third, that as a result of the first two, the symbol may mediate between the spectacle and the "soulful" subject.

This "spectacle," at least as presented in the first cycle of poems in Spleen et Idéal, concerns social or intersubjective relations marked by tensions and transgressions that establish the epic or mythic grounds for a modern tragic action. For as early as the Salon de 1845, Baudelaire had announced that "Celui-là sera le peintre, le vrai peintre, qui saura arracher à la vie actuelle son côté épique, et

nous faire voir et comprendre . . . combien nous sommes grands et poétiques dans nos cravates et nos bottes vernies."¹⁰⁸ This idea stands in perfect accord with Baudelaire's programmatic definition of modernity as a combination of the eternal and the transitory; in the exposition of Spleen et Idéal, he draws upon tragic convention as a source for the "côté épique" necessary for his eminently modern flowers.

Furthermore, Mossop cites the following passage, from Baudelaire's essay on Victor Hugo, to elaborate upon "the mysterious phrase 'la profondeur de la vie'":

Le vers de Victor Hugo sait traduire
pour l'âme humaine, non-seulement
les plaisirs les plus directs
qu'elle tire de la nature visible,
mais encore les sensations les plus
fugitives, les plus compliquées,
les plus morales (je dis exprès
sensations morales) qui nous sont
transmises par l'être visible, par
la nature inanimée ou dite
inanimée; non-seulement la figure
d'un être extérieur à l'homme,
végétal ou minéral, mais aussi sa
physionomie, son regard, sa
tristesse, sa douceur, sa joie
éclatante, sa haine répulsive, son
enchantement ou son horreur; enfin,
en d'autres termes, tout ce qu'il y
a d'humain dans n'importe quoi et
aussi tout ce qu'il y a de divin, de
sacré ou de diabolique.¹⁰⁹

"This is the 'langage des fleurs et des choses muettes' of which Baudelaire speaks in the last line of 'Elévation'," Mossop states. "It is not a matter of knowing what the

celestial (or infernal) equivalent of a flower may be or look like. It is a matter of seeing the analogy between the appearance or situation of that flower and some aspect of the human condition. . . ."¹¹⁰ The references to the divine, the sacred and the diabolical, Mossop reasons, merely make evident the fact that "Baudelaire takes for granted the relation between the human and the supernatural."¹¹¹ Indeed, in terms of the conventions of Attic tragedy, other human beings (or gods in this disguise) are often manifestations of forces viewed as supernatural.

It is important, when considering Baudelaire's views on Nature, to keep in mind the genre, the context, and the year in which they are uttered. As late as the Salon de 1859 he would denounce the "positivist" painter who would dare, in the name of objectivity, to portray Nature "in the absence of Man."¹¹² Flying in the face of this criticism of any artistic version of "l'univers sans homme" come later declarations for a world-weary leaning toward a sublime Nature "from which Man has been excluded."¹¹³ It is essential, nonetheless, to consider the "frame" of Les Fleurs du Mal and to allow the free play of dramatic and architectural strategies their full latitude in what is essentially a poetic work of tragic fiction.

Baudelaire names "Nature" in poem IV first as a dramatic gesture of exposition rather than as a theoretical statement of personal belief. After all, the scene of poems I through

III is "natural" only inasmuch as they are set in landscapes, out of doors. Furthermore, the figure who "y passe à travers des forêts de symboles" clearly bears representative value for the race, more so than the individuated "Poète" in I and II, or the first-person speaker in III, or the "Je" in V ("J'aime le souvenir . . ."). He is, in fact, named in the generic "l'homme."

The secret architecture supports these contentions in several instances. For "La Nature est un temple," a man-made structure supported by anthropomorphized entities; the access to "natural" data, as in the "langage des fleurs et des choses muettes," is therefore always already mediated by signs and man-made symbologies: as a scenic subset of a temple (an over-arching, grandiose, all-inclusive structure) the "forêts de symboles" are first a set of signs, and only secondly "forêts." Moreover, the linkage between IV and V ("J'aime le souvenir de ces époques nues") immediately brings the poet-hero's meditations out of this "natural" present and into the very essence of history ("le souvenir"), to some originary moment when Phoebus Apollo "se plaisait à dorer" the statuesque representations of physical health and nobility of the human form in some golden age. Isis, too, (named here "Cybèle") is contrasted in her cosmic beauty and generosity ("si belle") to modern mothers, whose heritage is syphillitic and hideous (ll. 7-28). Unlike the grotesque mother/infanticide of I, Isis "Ne trouvait point ses fils un

poids trop onéreux," and "Le Poète" of today, who wishes to evoke these "natives grandeurs," finds himself chilled by the distance in time and ontology which separates him from this aureate past. For the one aspect of the contemporary human being which retains the most of Nature--i.e., the same nude bodies enjoyed by man and woman in the past--now evokes expressions of horror: "O ridicules troncs! torsés dignes de masques!" (l. 21). The synecdoche of "troncs" here, to designate the human body, again resonates with the anthropomorphized arboreal community of "vivants piliers" in IV. While "Elévation" and "Correspondances" are set in a sort of eternal present tense, the "langage des fleurs" of poem III (which clearly functions in conjunction with the "parfums frais . . . Et d'autres corrompus" of IV) allows the metaphor access to the synaesthesia of sensory interpenetration. Furthermore, the "transports de l'esprit et des sens" are governed throughout the sonnet by the architecture of the sacred posited in the opening line.

Clearly, all possibility of a "natural" Nature--stated much more specifically in V than in "Correspondances," incidentally--has been thrown into obscurity, and all that remains to the poet, as a member of the "races malades" (and it is precisely in this "racial" or species distinction that any possible expression of homage is stated) is to "rendre à la jeunesse un hommage profond." The last five lines of V, then, evoke both the "langage des fleurs" of III,

the "parfums," "l'expansion des choses infinies" and "les transports" of IV:

--A la sainte jeunesse, à l'air simple, au doux front,
A l'oeil limpide et clair ainsi qu'une eau courante,
Et qui va répandant sur tout, insouciant
Comme l'azur du ciel, les oiseaux et les fleurs,
Ses parfums, ses chansons et ses douces chaleurs!114

The human subject, Ideal Youth, to whom the Poet representing the sickly races would render homage, goes about spreading "ses parfums, ses chansons et ses douces chaleurs" in a state as lacking of anxiety or self-consciousness ("insouciant") as that enjoyed by natural phenomena, and in precisely the same terms used in "Correspondances" to establish a syntax or circuitry of sensory phenomena ("Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent"). Yet it is now the individual human being, however idealized, who bears the capacity to confer these blessings on the Other and on natural phenomena:

L'homme, élégant, robuste et fort, avait le droit
D'être fier des beautés qui le nommaient leur roi;
Fruits purs de tout outrage et vierges de gerçures,
Dont la chair lisse et ferme appelait les morsures!115

Indeed, as in the scene of the anthropomorphized "vivants piliers" in "Correspondances," the metaphor of virgin fruit, with the play on the word "flesh," here provides yet another corresponding anthropomorphic moment: while "beautés" could possibly refer to mute natural objects, these could hardly name "l'homme" as their king.

The metaphor of unbitten human fruit, in the "fact of metaphor" female virgins, is extended in the reference to the contemporary virgins who carry the syphilitic inheritance from the mothers (cf. V, ll. 25-28).116

This "portrait of the artist" dovetails into the next poem, "Les Phares" (VI) to the degree that the individuated bearer of symbols (or of speech, suggested in V as mere breath, "ses douces chaleurs") approaches the status of a trans-historical (again, idealized) community of cultural beacons. Artist after artist is named and invoked; their works extend the terms of the second quatrain of "Correspondances" ("Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté"); the "confuses paroles" there have been transfigured here in VI into painterly images and chiaroscuro, only to be synaesthetically melded in the last quatrain in the form of a single cry. No longer a question of a "temple," the architectural metaphor now for the scenic structures of human/nature ("labyrinthes," "citadelles") have proliferated by thousands, and are reiterated in terms unmistakably referential to the out-of-doors scene of "fictitious nature" in "Correspondances":

Ces malédictions, ces blasphèmes, ces plaintes,
Ces extases, ces cris, ces pleurs, ces Te Deum,
Sont un écho redit par mille labyrinthes;
C'est pour les coeurs mortels un divin opium!

C'est un cri répété par mille sentinelles,
Un ordre renvoyé par mille porte-voix;
C'est un phare allumé sur milles citadelles,

Un appel de chasseurs perdus dans les grands bois!¹¹⁷

The strength of numbers, the presence of the plurality, emerges clearly in the sheer weight of the repetition here of the word "mille," which corresponds to the repeated (no less than seven times in two lines) types of figurative human expression named by the plural demonstrative adjective "ces." This extension of the forest/man-made-structure metaphor, first stated in "Correspondances," this evocation of the very grounds of transformative interpenetration of sensory data and symbolic expression, all emerge in terms of the Other, in terms of what Baudelaire will call elsewhere "les foules." And this should not astonish us: as Benjamin tells us, ". . . the crowd really is a spectacle of nature--if one may apply the term to social conditions. . . . For the crowd is the spirit world's mode of existence."¹¹⁸ There exists an extremely resonant echo of the movement of "Correspondances" which illustrates our argument here. "Obsession," the penultimate poem in the cycle of "Spleen" poems (LXXIV, "La Cloche Fêlée" to LXXX, "Le Goût du Néant"), might be called the splenetic companion piece to poem IV. The poet this time addresses elements of nature and comments upon his tendency (inspired, apparently, by a line from Aeschylus, "le rire innombrable des flots marins")¹¹⁹ toward the pathetic fallacy:

Grands bois, vous m'effrayez comme des cathédrales;
Vous hurlez comme l'orgue; et dans nos coeurs maudits,

Chambres d'éternel deuil où vibrent de vieux râles,
Répondent les échos de vos De profundis.

Je te hais, Océan! tes bonds et tes tumultes,
Mon esprit les retrouve en lui; ce rire amer
De l'homme vaincu, plein de sanglots et d'insultes,
Je l'entends dans le rire énorme de la mer.¹²⁰

Thematic and pictorial motifs shared with IV abound, with interesting and even compelling developments between them. Where there is no narrative persona in "Correspondances," here the poet directly addresses the natural forces through which the generic "l'homme" merely "passes" in the earlier poem. Indeed, the "homme vaincu" of line 7 partakes, by reason of suffering and its human expression, of a common state shared by the poet ("nos coeurs maudits"). The metaphor of the "temple of Nature" has been transfigured, or "re-naturalized": by repeating the term of the simile ("comme des cathédrales," "comme l'orgue"), the poet makes it clear that here it really is a question of woods and forests; similarly, there is nothing metaphorical about the Ocean addressed in the second quatrain. And where all the senses are implied in the synaesthetic movement of IV, the purely verbal aspect of human expression is stressed here ("râles," "rire," "sanglots," "insultes.")

Indeed, the "De profundis" ascribed to the woods refers back architecturally to the Te Deum mentioned in VI, 34 ("Ces extases, ces cris, ces pleurs, ces Te Deum") as the "écho redit par mille labyrinthes," the cry of the Ideal in art as the action of "les phares" across human history. In the

context of *Spleen*, however, there is no consolation in these cries; language, the very material of the poet's art (just as the shadows and rays of light serve the great painters in "*Les Phares*"), is merely an echo of some natural, universal, mocking laughter posited by the poet.

The tercets take up two terms from "*Correspondances*" so literally that the architectural intent here seems irrefutable. Instead of the "confuses paroles" addressed to "l'homme" by the anthropomorphized plurality, in "*Obsession*" Night is said by its starlight to speak "un langage connu" (l.10). Harrassed and broken by *Spleen*, the poet now seeks some respite from the babble of natural symbolism; in the final tercet, the veritable proof of Baudelaire's intense focus on alterity across *Spleen et Idéal* is stated unequivocally:

Mais les ténèbres sont elles-mêmes des toiles
Où vivent, jaillissant de mon oeil par milliers,
Des êtres disparus aux regards familiers.¹²¹

Once again, the "milliers" first stated in "*Les Phares*" ("mille porte-voix," etc.) signal the presence of the community and the common aspirations embodied in language itself. By this stage in the tragedy, however, the sensory pleasures of synaesthesia (IV) and the guaranteed nobility of artistic expression (VI) have passed, leaving only the haunting spectres of the sacrificial horde and their representations ("toiles" in "*Obsession*," "noirs tableaux" in

V, the "chiaroscuro" effects in IV and VI). Tellingly, the living images of the group have so internalized themselves upon the deepest psychic resource of the poet that they "spurt" or "gush out" ("jaillir") from his eye, then level at him (by implication) the most unpleasant of "regards familiers." In keeping with the "re-naturalization" of the forest metaphor noted above, these gazes form a chain of reference reaching through "Correspondances" back to "Bénédiction," where "les yeux mortels" are recognized by the aspiring poet as lowly "miroirs obscurcis et plaintifs" (1.76). In this way, "Obsession" hangs as the tragic pendant to "Correspondances," reiterating in the secret architecture of Spleen et Idéal the social and collective dynamic within the poet-hero's consciousness.

For Baudelaire, tragedy is the memory of ritual. It creates the scene or space in which the workings of the supernatural analogy may be depicted in collision with social or historical phenomena. Attic tragedy, itself born of this collision, becomes the locus of conventions upon which the poet of Spleen et Idéal can draw. The second quatrain of "Correspondances" posits the two sides of the Attic antinomy as they would be named by Nietzsche: "la nuit" corresponds to Dionysus, while "la clarté" names perhaps the most salient attribute of Apollo. The former's ritualistic relation to the poet in "Bénédiction" is established in the sacrificial projects of dismemberment pronounced by the

poet's "femme," while the presence of Apollo is attested by name in V (as "Phoebus"). Moreover, the first edition (1857) featured "Le Soleil" in place of "L'Albatros" (poem II), a poem in which the sun is evoked in personification ("Ce père nourricier, ennemi des chloroses"); Phoebus Apollo, as the patron of poetry, is mentioned again explicitly in the first poem of the second cycle, "La Muse Malade" (VII).

The movement toward the synthesis of these two mythic forces, then, is dramatized in music marked by deeply sonorous nasals, which in fact echo the "échos" named in line 5:

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
 Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
 Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
 Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.¹²²

Nietzsche might have been describing the project of the poet-hero in these first six poems when he states: "In the heroic effort of the individual to attain universality, in the attempt to transcend the curse of individuation and to become the one world being, he suffers in his own person the primordial contradiction that is concealed in things, which means that he commits sacrilege and suffers."¹²³ The poet-hero of Baudelaire's exposition revisits and evokes the tragic scene, but despite his suffering is unable to attain one-ness because of the all-too-modern curse of Ennui. His crimes across the six books, along with the crimes he depicts

or considers as aesthetic objects, repeatedly give evidence of a fall from the supernatural realm, from some golden age, to the present, from divine justice and myth to human injustice and history. The double postulation, of course, provides in its turn a dialectical antidote to this romanticized Ideal: the dandy, faced with oceanic one-ness and cosmological unity, steps away in disdain or disgust. This "modern" stance itself, however, is endowed with its own mythology, its own ritual.

"What Baudelaire meant by correspondances," writes Benjamin, "may be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form. This is possible only within the realm of ritual." The "primordial contradiction that is concealed in things" is momentarily synthesized in the tragic approximation of ritual, and it is by means of this synaesthesia that Baudelaire gains access to what Benjamin calls "the full meaning of the breakdown which he, a modern man, was witnessing." 125 As Baudelaire states to Alphonse Toussenel in a letter from January, 1856, "L'homme raisonnable n'a pas attendu que Fourier vînt sur la terre pour comprendre que la Nature est un verbe, une allégorie, un moule, un repoussé, si vous voulez... --nous le savons par nous-mêmes, et par les poètes." 126 The problematic intervention of language, symbol, allegory, and conventions ("un moule") thus renders the social dimension of synaesthesia immediate and inescapable for modernity, in a

situation quite unlike the one enjoyed by the "époques
nues."¹²⁷

In Mon Coeur mis à nu, Baudelaire attests to this
tension: "Il ne peut y avoir de progrès (vrai, c'est-à-dire
moral) que dans l'individu et par l'individu lui-même. Mais
le monde est fait de gens qui ne peuvent penser qu'en commun,
en bandes. . . ."¹²⁸ As Nietzsche states it, ". . . a
poet is a poet only insofar as he sees himself surrounded by
figures who live and act before him and into whose inmost
nature he can see."¹²⁹ "The hero," Benjamin concludes, "is
the true subject of modernism."¹³⁰

But the Baudelairean poet-hero is only individuated in
the face of the Other: the central image of the
fencer/artist, eternally (and fatally) duelling with his
material, replicates a primordial scene of social conflict
and competition. For again, according to Benjamin, "Beauty
can be defined in two ways: in its relationship to history
and to nature. In both relationships the semblance, the
problematic element in the beautiful, manifests itself."¹³¹
The relation between semblance and the senses (data and
perception) constitutes the essential problem and process of
poetry, and the conditions under which data and perception
are formulated by Baudelaire are certainly more subject to
human nature than to "natural Nature" per se, especially in
the expository light established by "Bénédiction" and
"L'Albatros." Indeed, he so often questions the legitimacy

or even the existence of the latter concept that it seems naive to suppose that "le langage des fleurs" could have any other function for the Baudelaire of Les Fleurs du Mal than as message-bearer for Spleen and le mal:

. . . nous verrons que la nature
n'enseigne rien, . . . c'est-à-dire
qu'elle contraint l'homme à dormir,
à boire, à manger, et à se
garantir, tant bien que mal, contre
les hostilités de l'atmosphère.
C'est elle aussi qui pousse l'homme
à tuer son semblable, à le manger,
à le séquestrer, à le torturer;
car, sitôt que nous sortons de
l'ordre des nécessités et des
besoins pour entrer dans celui du
luxue et des plaisirs, nous voyons
que la nature ne peut conseiller que
le crime.¹³²

"That Baudelaire makes God play one or several roles in his ritual theater does not always signify that God is merely a symbolic projection," writes Pierre Emmanuel, "but only that Baudelaire's religiosity is of an order less spiritual than psychic, ill separated, if at all so, from the conflicts in which he struggles."¹³³ These conflicts, situated along the horizontal axis of natural symbolism and obsessively preoccupied with the "regards familiers" of the Other(s), emerge very strikingly in light of the tragic action or "plot" of Les Fleurs du Mal.

It may seem absurd to talk about "plot" in the context of a collection of lyric poems, but the inevitable implication of attributing a tragic structure to Baudelaire's masterpiece would seem to be that there must exist, however

tenuously, some "plot" across the six books which one might discuss as one would discuss the plot of a play or a novel. To Leo Bersani's objection, registered above, that any critical insistence on the "architecture secrète" tends to "put an end to the circulation of its meanings,"¹³⁴ I would respond that the delineation of tragic resonance, including a plot, on the contrary works within the architecture as, in the words of Peter Brooks, "a concerted plan for the accomplishment of some purpose which goes against the ostensible and dominant legalities of the fictional world, the realization of a blocked and resisted desire."¹³⁵ In other words, plot (significance over time), as a part of the secret architecture, may be in fact the means by which the very relations between desire and legality are tested; without plot architecture, a certain developmental resistance within the poet-hero's dilemma would be missing. And there is no doubt about what the author believed on this point: as Baudelaire wrote to editor Alphonse de Calonne, "Je suis un de ceux (et nous sommes bien rares) qui croient que toute composition littéraire, même critique, doit être faite et manoeuvrée en vue d'un dénouement. Tout, même un sonnet; jugez du labeur!"¹³⁶

Indeed, a large part of the "plot" of Les Fleurs du Mal emerges in the poems and cycles of poems taking as their subject the poet-hero's relation with the female Other who bears, in her often iconographic individual identity (La

Vénus Noire, La Vénus Blanche, etc.), as well as in her personifications as Beauty, a difficult and complex relation to Desire and to Nature belied by the poet's rather simplistic misogyny: "La femme est naturelle," Baudelaire tells us, "c'est à dire, abominable."¹³⁷ "Elle est simpliste, comme les animaux.--Un satirique dirait que c'est parce qu'elle n'a que le corps."¹³⁸

In fact, Woman-as-Other makes up the subject of the most highly aestheticized version of represented criminality in the entire work. While poems I-VI "take stock" of the poet's situation in the world, vis-a-vis his mother, his wife and his social group, and poems VII-XVI ("La Muse Malade" to "Châtiment de l'Orgueil") sound the depths of what Mossop calls "the heart of a poet," poems XXII-LVII ("Parfum Exotique" to "A Une Madone"), by far the largest group of poems (35) in Spleen et Idéal, treat the poet-hero's initiation into relations with women rather in an intimate, day-to-day context than on the more highly mythic stage of tragic action. In the Journaux Intimes, the voice of the dandy ironizes upon the "necessity" of women, but the terms in which his irony is couched reveal once again the aesthetic, transgressive, and dramatic nature of the role of the female Other in the work: "Ce qu'il y a d'ennuyeux dans l'amour, c'est que c'est un crime où l'on ne peut pas se passer d'un complice."¹³⁹ Ultimately, the presence of the female Other in poems I-XXI, up to the beginning of the poems

to Jeanne Duval, works in exposition precisely as the pistol introduced in Act I of the drawing-room tragedy functions: by the last act, it must go off.

Across the eighty-five poems of Spleen et Idéal, we witness an overall passage from the latter term to the former. Although neither concept is independent of the other, the poet-hero's will to the Ideal develops itself in the face of Spleen by means of the expository representation of community, symbol, discipline and (female-personified) Beauty. But by the time he reaches the penultimate stage of Book I, with the cycle of Spleen poems (discussed above as the context for poem LXXIX, "Obsession"), all of the elements necessary for exposition are in place, and the successive acts in the tragic action can then proceed.

Mossop describes the unfolding of this action in Books II-VI (Tableaux Parisiens to La Mort) as a recurring cycle of aspiration and resignation between "the pain that is an essential ingredient in the satanic pleasure of conscious wrongdoing . . . [and] the undiluted pain of the periods of remorseful Spleen which follow such orgies of excitement";¹⁴⁰ this would account for the calmer, more "recollected-in-tranquility" tone of the opening poems of Tableaux Parisiens ("Paysage", "Le Soleil"). Indeed, Book II itself marks a passage, once again, away from the conditions in which the Ideal is possible toward ineluctable Spleen: where it begins with the idealized landscape (determinedly "unnatural") of

the city in its artificial beauty, the book ends with splenetic versions of the same landscape. The aesthetic criminality of this passage through the book is marked by the central hinge-poem, "Le Crépuscule du Soir," and its component of Spleen is provided in the final Parisian companion piece, "Le Crépuscule du Matin":

Une mer de brouillards baignait les édifices,
Et les agonisants dans le fond des hospices
Poussaient leur dernier rôle en hoquets inégaux.
Les débauchés rentraient, brisés par leurs
[travaux. 141

With the succession of reversions to Spleen, then, experienced and recounted in Tableaux Parisiens and in Le Vin, the poet-hero passes from the narration of urban scenes of struggle and crime to the description of the secret life of wine, especially in the hinge poem of Book III, "Le Vin de l'Assassin," in which the narrator is the murderer himself, and the victim his wife:

Elle était encore jolie,
Quoique bien fatiguée! et moi,
Je l'aimais trop! voilà pourquoi
Je lui dis: Sors de cette vie!¹⁴²

We know that this criminal act was so important to Baudelaire that he planned his most substantial theatrical endeavor around it in the form of the melodrama L'Ivrogne, the details of which we find in the letter of January 28, 1854 to the actor Tisserant. We further know that Baudelaire

drew upon a section of Champavert by Petrus Borel ("Passereau, l'écolier"), with this important modification: while Borel's murderer-schoolboy acts out of jealousy, the first-person murderer in Baudelaire's version acts out of an obscure sense of demonic perversity,¹⁴³ a state aided and abetted by alcohol. Both titles--"Le Vin de l'Assassin" and L'Ivrogne--attest to the central importance of the stimulant upon the criminal. We shall discuss below the importance of Baudelaire's failure to complete any stageable, dramatized version of the myth he places so adroitly in the development of the tragic action in Les Fleurs du Mal.

In his essay on Wagner, Baudelaire lays bare the mythic and tragic connection between desire and transgression precisely in the context of the "total theatre" he describes in the work of the German composer. The relation between the following passage and the double postulation, especially in conjunction with my theme of aesthetic crime as the praxis of the tragic trajectory from one postulation to the other, emerges clearly:

Tout cerveau bien conformé porte en
lui deux infinis, le ciel et
l'enfer, et dans toute image de l'un
de ces infinis il reconnaît
subitement la moitié de lui-même.
Aux titillations sataniques d'un
vague amour succèdent bientôt des
entraînements, des éblouissements,
des cris de victoire, des
gémissements de gratitude, et puis
des hurlements de féroce, des
reproches de victimes et des hosanna
impies de sacrificateurs, comme si

la barbarie devait toujours prendre
 sa place dans le drame de l'amour,
 et la jouissance charnelle conduire,
 par une logique satanique
 inéluctable, aux délices du crime.¹⁴⁴

This "satanic logic" is developed with a fascinating variation in Book IV, Fleurs du Mal. The cycle begins with the violent depiction of a four-part locus of guilt, Art, Ennui and the female (faced with the artist/murderer) in "La Destruction," then passes to the extremely resonant depiction of the "sanctity of pleasure within the fearsomely liberating still-life of crime"¹⁴⁵ in "Une Martyre," itself subtitled "Dessin d'un Maître Inconnu." In terms of the passage along the Spleen-Ideal continuum, the increase or heating-up of the tragic stakes involved in erotic criminality derives from the complication of the allegorical nature of these scenes of crime and the resultant attainment of a new sublimity of transgression. This passage towards ever-more-refined allegory (or ever-more-allegorical allegory) is easily demonstrable in Fleurs du Mal: while there are allegorical elements in "La Destruction," the proliferation of characters bearing capitalized abstractions as their names ("La Débauche" and "La Mort" in CXII, "Les Deux Bonnes Soeurs"), and the openly, literally allegorical final four poems of the cycle (CXIV, "Allégorie" to CXVII, "L'Amour et le Crâne") demonstrates this movement unequivocally.

It is the conjunction of the female victim, the criminal action rendered explicitly in aesthetic terms ("dessin,"

"allégorie," "Vieux Cul-de-Lampe") and the tragic thrust of this cycle that most interests me here. For, as Benjamin shows in The Origin of German Tragic Drama, the convention of allegory in tragedy can create a situation in which "Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else."¹⁴⁶ This proliferating referential system makes possible "a destructive, but just verdict" which may be "passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance."¹⁴⁷ In other words, the image of the female victim, the psychology of the poet-hero, and even the object/medium of the tragic action itself (plot, character, rhythm), all may be sacrificed in the allegorical drive for transcendental signification. As Benjamin states:

. . . all of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can indeed, sanctify them."¹⁴⁸

This evocation of the sacred marks once again the intimate relation between tragedy and the martyr-drama;¹⁴⁹ Baudelaire's "sanctification" of the tragedy of modern consciousness is achieved by means of aesthetic crime, at the sacrificial altar of the female Other, in "Une Martyre: Dessin d'Un Maître Inconnu":

Elle est bien jeune encor! --Son âme exaspérée
 Et ses sens par l'ennui mordus
 S'étaient-ils entr'ouverts à la meute altérée
 Des désirs errants et perdus?

L'homme vindicatif que tu n'as pu, vivante,
 Malgré tant d'amour, assouvir,
 Combla-t-il sur ta chair inerte et complaisante
 L'immensité de son désir?¹⁵⁰

Thus, the body of the female serves as a locus for the poet-hero's fascination in multifold ways: aesthetic object (viewed with varying degrees of Kantian "disinterestedness"), allegorical figure (pre-eminently the personification of Beauty), and transformative Victim. I will discuss below how the protean mythology of Lesbians and heartless lovers (as self-enclosed female Dandies of sensuality) and prostitutes (as metamorphogenic beings whose status simultaneously as subject and object provokes the frisson of the new) emerges as the grounds for prosecution of Baudelaire's masterpiece in 1857 by authorities bent on retributive justice.

It is not only in the evidence of the trial, however, that information emerges regarding the hermeneutics of Baudelaire's transgressive cosmology and its reception by the Second Empire legal authorities and reading public. In his plan for L'Ivrogne, Baudelaire states that the crime he plans to depict on stage will be "bien fin, . . . et bien subtil . . . mail il faut absolument le faire comprendre."¹⁵¹ His attitude with regard to the prospective public for his play is ambivalent, whence his concerns to make his drama understood. On the one hand, he is absolutely certain that

the events it will portray are comprehensible, even common:

"Que de fois j'ai été frappé par des cas semblables en lisant la Gazette des tribunaux!"¹⁵² On the other hand, the motive of the murderer--rendered obscure in "Le Vin de l'Assassin"--retains its original simplicity as depicted in Borel's version, i.e., as an act of jealousy:

--Vous avez déjà deviné que notre ouvrier saisira avec joie le prétexte de sa jalousie surexcitée pour se cacher à lui-même qu'il en veut surtout à sa femme de sa résignation, de sa douceur, de sa patience, de sa vertu.--Et cependant il l'aime,--mais la boisson et la misère ont déjà altéré son raisonnement.¹⁵³

He explains to Tisserant that the difficult psychology of crime may be beyond the general theatre-going public, as if to explain the necessity of a motive: "Remarquez de plus que le public des théâtres n'est pas familiarisé avec la très fine psychologie du crime, et qu'il eût été bien difficile de lui faire comprendre une atrocité sans prétexte."¹⁵⁴ In terms of form, Baudelaire proposes three acts of exposition, with the murder to be committed in the fourth, just as the allegory of crime in Les Fleurs du Mal is exposed in its purest form in Book IV: "Le quatrième acte. Le crime,--bien prémédité, bien préconçu."¹⁵⁵ He is not, however, fanatically attached to this formal division: "Je serais bien disposé à diviser l'oeuvre en plusieurs

tableaux courts, au lieu d'adopter l'incommode division des cinq longs actes."¹⁵⁶ He is very concerned about production and a possible financial bonanza, however; he notes at the end of his letter, "Je suis tout à vous. Mes terribles besoins d'argent vous répondront de mon activité."¹⁵⁷

Thus humiliated by poverty, the Dandy drives his "cult of the image" to the marketplace.¹⁵⁸ His failure to bring about the completion of this or any theatre project, however, signals a significant difference between the two dramatic forms, tragedy and melodrama--a difference that reveals a great deal about the relations between genres and historical exigency.

In his essay on "Baudelaire's Theatre," Roland Barthes provides the insight necessary to understand the importance of tragedy for Baudelaire's work in general, and the important distinction between the kind of tragedy we have been tracing in Les Fleurs du Mal and the "agonizing Passion of vulgarity" to which the melodramatic theatrical projects give witness. For Baudelaire's indications for character and staging are too general and alien to the "density of signs and sensations built up on stage" to allow for real or effective theatricality. Instead of providing a dramatist's or director's view of the projected play, in Barthes's opinion, Baudelaire's "production values" are naive, "in other words, fulfilled, static, ready-made, pre-cooked. . . .":¹⁵⁹

The 'color of crime' necessary, for

example, in the last act of L'Ivrogne is a critic's truth, not a dramatist's. In its initial movement, the production can be based only on the plurality and the literalness of objects. Baudelaire, on the other hand, conceives things in the theater only as accompanied by their dreamed-of doubles, endowed with a spirituality vaporous enough to unify them, to alienate them all the more.¹⁶⁰

In this way, Barthes signals the deep need in Baudelaire's literary production for "a space deeper and stabilized by the painter's theocratic gesture."¹⁶¹ The recurrence to allegory is the time-honored, baroque procedure for the infusion of transcendental significance into matter; in tragedy, as Benjamin points out, "destiny is not only divided among the characters, it is equally present among the objects."¹⁶² He further states:

For once human life has sunk into the merely creaturely, even the life of apparently dead objects secures power over it. The effectiveness of the object where guilt has been incurred is a sign of the approach of death. The passionate stirrings of creaturely life in man--in a word, passion itself--bring the fatal property into the action.¹⁶³

This "fatal stage property" in Les Fleurs du Mal is woman, rendered as an object with more frequency and more fatality as Spleen gains ascendancy in the tragic action. By Book IV, the object exercises its power even though "apparently dead," as in "Une Martyre":

Réponds, cadavre impur! et par tes tresses roides
 Te soulevant d'un bras fiévreux,
 Dis-moi, tête effrayante, a-t-il sur tes dents froides
 Collé les suprêmes adieux?¹⁶⁴

Clearly, this decollated colloquy prefigures the vertiginous reiteration, even to repetition compulsion for the decadence, of the semantic site of aesthetic crime par excellence, the myth of Salomé.

Barthes concludes that "Baudelaire put his theater everywhere except, precisely, in his projects for plays."¹⁶⁵ Because he saw the stage as the realm of the foules and the populace, he had to "protect theatricality from the theater":

. . . fearing [that] the sovereign
 artifice would be threatened by the
 collective character of the
 occasion, he hid it far from the
 stage, gave it refuge in his
 solitary literature, in his
 poems. . . .¹⁶⁶

Tragedy, the genre of the "theocratic gesture," endows the "architecture secrète" with the formal key to its transgressive and social essence. For by segregating theatricality from his theatre, and pursuing the terror of the sacrificial gesture at the heart of the Attic form, Baudelaire "rejoins . . . that sociability he pretended to postulate and to flee."¹⁶⁷

"Mes opinions sur le théâtre. Ce que j'ai toujours trouvé de plus beau dans un théâtre," Baudelaire writes,

" . . . c'est le lustre--un bel objet lumineux, cristallin, compliqué, circulaire et symétrique."168 This central source of light, symbol of divinity and clearly of no vulgar "theatrical" value, is the focus of the poet's emotional and aesthetic investment in spite of the ostensible drama on stage. Then, in a significant admission, he continues: "Cependant, je ne nie pas absolument la valeur de la littérature dramatique. Seulement, je voudrais que les comédiens fussent montés sur des patins très hauts, portassent des masques plus expressifs que le visage humain, et parlassent à travers des porte-voix. . . ."169

Clearly, Baudelaire describes tragedy here as his only dramatic alternative. He could compose such a work within his tragic "dictionnaire de mélancolie et de crime," but was unable to complete his "theatre" for the stage. By means of this "negative theatre," this "vast background" against which "rises finally the success of Les Fleurs du Mal,"170 he was able to perpetrate "that pure murder of literature, which we know since Mallarmé to be the torment and the justification of the modern writer."171 Aesthetic crime is the procedural name for this paradox, this passage from presence to absence.

II.3: Aesthetic Prosecution: The Trials of Les Fleurs du Mal

"Je fus toujours vertueux
sans plaisir; j'eusse été
criminel sans remords."

--Baudelaire, "Notes" sur
Les Liaisons dangereuses

"Manier savamment une langue, c'est
pratiquer une espèce de sorcellerie
évocatoire."

--Baudelaire, "Théophile Gautier"

"Infirm of purpose!
Give me the daggers: the sleeping
and the dead
Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye
of childhood
That fears a painted devil. . . ."
--Macbeth, II, ii

Aesthetic crime, albeit uncommitted, provoked
nonetheless very real and very illustrative prosecutions
during the period 1850-1900.¹⁷² The charges brought against
Les Fleurs du Mal on August 20, 1857, in the 6e Chambre
correctionnelle, stated offenses against "bonnes moeurs" and
against public and religious morals.¹⁷³ The events leading
up to the trial and the judicial facts of the case are well
known and need not be recounted in toto here: the odious
attack in Le Figaro, Baudelaire's letter of July 11
expressing fears to his publisher that a seizure of the
edition and prosecution were imminent, the arguments and the
outcome of the trial itself, all have been retold and
commented upon in several contexts.¹⁷⁴ A fairly exemplary
modern view of the entire affair was presented by W.T. Bandy

at the time of the centenary in 1957:

The fact remains that, despite its unsavory reputation, the Figaro was the most powerful, as well as the most despised, member of the petit presse. What is more important, its spicy columns were as eagerly read by the government ministers as they were by café society, and its accusations, regardless of their merit, were too widely publicized to be ignored. That the moral, to say nothing of the literary, views of this irresponsible sheet were acted upon by the government of 1857 is a perfect illustration of the cultural and ethical level that prevailed in the government of Napoleon III, a hegemony of semi-royal bastards and unscrupulous parvenus.¹⁷⁵

The trials of Les Fleurs du Mal, especially the first, interest me here because they provide a clear indication, or a clearly ambiguous series of indications, of the social and historical stakes involved in the aesthetic manifestation of the author's immense and complex metaphysical desire. Clearly, it is not enough merely to dismiss the prosecution of this book as an historical aberration, the dreary and inevitable product of a corrupt regime. I have discussed above the function of aesthetic crime as a mechanism of moral synaesthesia, which evinces the "psychic mobility" inherent in Baudelairean desire and continually undermines, along the axis of the double postulation, the conditions of difference and identity. There remains to be demonstrated the historical and cultural conditions which result in the

misprision, by journalist/critics and government officials, which results from mistaking aesthetic crime for crime in the real sense (prosecution); we shall also inquire into the complex procedure by which this author simultaneously provoked and rejected this treatment and the nature of the legal thinking involved in this interpretation (the excised pieces as evidence of a prescriptive or retributive justice).

By a stroke of historical coincidence that can hardly be called non-causal, the year 1857 marks not only the prosecution of Baudelaire's masterpiece but also, some six months earlier, of Flaubert's. Dominick LaCapra has extensively surveyed the prosecution of the latter's masterpiece in *Madame Bovary on Trial* (1983), and many of his findings apply to the conditions and procedures under which Baudelaire was prosecuted. Indeed, the state prosecutor in both cases was the same, M. le substitut Ernest Pinard, "jeune, libéral, habile homme,"¹⁷⁶ a man who would go on to become a conseiller d'Etat and, in 1868, Minister of the Interior.

LaCapra's discussion focuses on the process whereby " . . . the trial processed as ordinary crime what was, in significant and special ways, ideological or political 'crime.'"¹⁷⁷ He goes on to demonstrate that Flaubert's novel "was ideologically criminal in that it placed in question the very grounds of the trial by rendering problematic its founding assumptions,"¹⁷⁸ which assumptions he organizes

under two categories: what I shall call a "first-level" heading, "the validity, in the context common to the novel and the trial, of norms relating to the family and religion," and a "second-level" heading, "the tenability of a belief in the central identity of the subject of narration and judgment."¹⁷⁹ Following LaCapra's lead, I distinguish between these two "levels" in order to avoid mixing inextricably the conscious and stated prerogatives of Second Empire interpretation and justice (first level, the "norms" violated) with the interpretations available to us now in light of modern critical theory (second level, the "central identity" of the narrator and his "authoritative" or value-judgmental relation to the author). By distinguishing these levels himself, LaCapra astutely bridges the gap between the historical/judicial conditions of literary production/reception and the "aesthetic dimension"¹⁸⁰ of the autonomous work of art, which gap literary criticism has traditionally maintained as a means of guaranteeing the "specificity" of the work as an aesthetic object. ". . . Far from being a straightforward exemplification of the ideology of pure art," writes LaCapra, "Madame Bovary, as 'ideological crime,' is at the intersection of the traditional and modern novel. . . . it simultaneously invokes conventional expectations (such as those operative at the trial) and places them in subversive, possibly regenerative, question."¹⁸¹ It is this "threshold position" between the traditional and the modern, he

concludes, that gives the novel "a conjoined ideological and formal significance, a status and function to which the trial paid indirect homage."¹⁸²

Indeed, as we have already seen, Les Fleurs du Mal occupies a similar "threshold position" with regard to the high Romanticist poetry written before 1850 and the succeeding poetries of symbolism and modernity in general. Indeed, the trial of Baudelaire's book paid indirect homage to it in precisely the same way it did to Madame Bovary: as accounts of the trial repeatedly demonstrate, many are the scabrous, seamy and steamy works published but not prosecuted during the Second Empire. It was no accident that these two works, without doubt "the two most intransigently honest books of 1857,"¹⁸³ were singled out while many lesser works received no such prosecutorial attentions.

One of the ironies revealed by LaCapra's account of the trial of Madame Bovary derives from the unsettling truth that Monsieur Pinard, acting as government prosecutor, "was disturbed by the novel" in ways that the defense attorney, a Monsieur S  nard, was not. Pinard "seemed open to the temptation of a narcissistic, hysterical, and beautiful woman whose existence was imaginary but whose effects might be real."¹⁸⁴ In fact, based on Baudelaire's own notes for his defense, an homologous structure to this one might be discerned in Pinard's reactions to Les Fleurs du Mal and the fairly conventional arguments mustered by defense attorney

Chaix-d'Est-Ange for his client in the later trial. Based on Pinard's interpretations of Flaubert's and Baudelaire's works, no matter how "naive" they may seem to us now, we can certainly say that he saw a great deal at stake in these two trials; for him, the moral codes and belief systems (ostensibly) upheld in the prosecution's case are those thrown into doubt by the representations of the "criminal" authors--at least according to the rather arbitrary consensus arrived at by a shadowy group of Figaro journalists and Second Empire government operatives. This situation is ironic inasmuch as it reveals the prosecutor, not the defense lawyer, as the more "sensitive" or "susceptible" reader. Clearly, he "takes literature seriously" in a way the defense attorneys do not, or will not admit in their arguments. The indication that Pinard was subject to what has come to be called "Bovaryisme" would seem to make him a "better reader" than one who was not, at least from the author's point of view.¹⁸⁵

"Another difference between prosecution and defense" in the trial of Flaubert's book, continues LaCapra, "is that between outrage and complacency."¹⁸⁶ He further states:

Sénard for the defense is unflappably complacent both in his thought and in his mode of presentation. He simply refuses to be bothered by certain questions. His interpretation is in one sense more narrowly conservative than that of the prosecutor, for--despite his apparently 'liberal' conclusion--he

construes the novel as a simple, clear, and distinct confirmation of existing morality and society. . . . Morality for S nard is virtually identical with the existing order of society, and the moral of the novel is for him one of conservative adaptation within the status quo.¹⁸⁷

Similarly, Baudelaire's lawyer at the first trial (the second would take place some eighty years later, in 1949) would state three positions or points in refutation of the state's case, and it is reported that his presentation took three times as long.¹⁸⁸ First, the defense states that the poet has presented his vision of evil out of a desire to express the horror of it all ("Il est au vice ce que Moli re fut   la tartuferie")¹⁸⁹; second, and this is the argument the most dear to Baudelaire's heart, that to judge the entire book merely on the basis of detached pieces is an injustice to the ensemble and stands in gross disregard to the "antidotes" contained within the secret architecture itself.¹⁹⁰ The third argument, suggested by Sainte-Beuve and played down by the author, states that other writers, much freer and "saltier" than the accused, were not prosecuted under French law, thus revealing the arbitrary nature of this judicial procedure. This argument, Baudelaire's least favorite,¹⁹¹ proves by far the weakest of the three, for it fails to account for the "new depths" to which "l'immoralit  des productions" has sunk, and thereby actually lends impetus to the prosecution: ". . . il faut

toujours qu'il [le ministère public] puisse punir le vice, sans cela le résultat final serait l'impunité absolue, à quelque degré qu'on fût descendu."¹⁹²

LaCapra puts his finger on two very strong insights from which the Imperial Prosecutor argues for a retributive verdict against Flaubert, and again, the same arguments may be brought against Baudelaire: "The effect of the novel on the reader--and perhaps the intention of the author--is for Pinard one of demoralization and corruption. The novel is literally poison."¹⁹³ Despite Flaubert's defense (of providing an "object lesson" or "morality play" warning prospective Emmas against such behavior, which corresponds to Baudelaire's claim of providing his visions as horrific negative examples to be viewed normatively), the ending of the novel is not truly moral in Pinard's view: "The death of Emma proves nothing. . . . Her self-poisoning is a willful event that resembles her adultery, thereby compounding her crime rather than serving as a punishment for it."¹⁹⁴ These opinions are located, we might say, on the "first level" mentioned above: counterposed to the "morality" (or apparent immorality) of the heroine (and ergo of the novel, and of the novelist, in the prosecutor's eyes) are the values and "validity of norms relating to the family and religion."¹⁹⁵ Pinard's second insight attains to the "second level" of prosecutorial and critical thinking, the one concerning "the tenability of a belief in the central subject of narration

and judgment."¹⁹⁶ As LaCapra states, "For Pinard there is no stable, secure, or reliable position within the novel from which to condemn Emma."¹⁹⁷ Even worse, "The author is an elusive presence at best whose position cannot be determined. What is left is the overpowering personality of Emma and the example she gives."¹⁹⁸ The technical and psychological breakthroughs so often marveled at by modern criticism, the shifts in perspective and the sparkling technical effects achieved through free indirect discourse, have an opposite effect on the government's legal interpreter in 1857:

For Pinard the fact that no one in the novel is in a position to throw the first stone leads to the conclusion that one must look outside the text to a larger and more certain text--that of 'Christian morality, which is the foundation of our modern civilizations.'¹⁹⁹

Technically and generically speaking, the central "problem" of narrative undecidability in the novel Madame Bovary is perhaps less of an issue in Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal. A sense of the poet-hero's presence, as a speaker or actor, however veiled in or distanced from the poem, is guaranteed by the lyric, whereas Flaubert's narration is pointedly indeterminate in terms of point of view. Moreover, a contemporary critic like Barbey d'Aurevilly was perfectly aware of the secret architecture and the unifying presence of structure it provided in the first edition: "Elles sont

moins des poésies qu'une oeuvre poétique de la plus forte unité."²⁰⁰ For the prosecution, however, the presence of criminal imagery (first level) borne by a supreme aesthetic of "moral undecidability" ("Qu'importe?"--level two) was discerned in specific poems. But Baudelaire's protestations against singling out individual poems for prosecution were of no avail, and the resultant ambiguity in the face of detached, individual tableaux depicting aesthetic crime fuels the prosecution with essentially the same moral ambiguity it had blamed on Flaubert's novel. Where LaCapra traces Pinard's prosecutorial impulse to the crisis (or hysteresis) "that is related to the problems of language, the narrative subject, undecidability or indeterminacy of voice, the uncanny, the carnivalesque,"²⁰¹ the same (or similar) effect in reading Baudelaire derives, in the case brought by the Imperial Prosecutor, from the central, mercurial procedure involved in individual poems representing aesthetic crime: "psychic mobility"²⁰² is compounded in the incriminated pieces with the continual establishment of difference and its immediate collapse or obfuscation, all in a pictorial/thematic arena of intersubjective transgression.

What LaCapra calls "ideological crime" in Flaubert is properly so called: as a product of a prose narrative (no matter how innovative), the for-itself (pour-soi) bears an inherent ideological agenda. But the in-itself (en-soi) borne by lyric poetry bears an aesthetic component first and

foremost, a self-enclosed sense of "still life" that remains even in the most dramatic depictions of criminality and interpersonal violence. The fact that "Pinard's prosecution of Baudelaire, in spite of its 'successful' outcome (Baudelaire was convicted), was more moderate than his treatment of Flaubert," is attributed in one source to the possibility that a powerful spiritual or even Christian force was evident to the prosecution in Baudelaire's work, while all such "Christian vestiges . . . had completely disappeared from the soul of Flaubert."²⁰³

Ironically, then, Baudelaire's first trial ends in a verdict of guilty, in the following terms:

'En ce qui touche la prévention
d'offense à la morale publique et
aux bonnes mœurs: Attendu que
l'erreur du poète, dans le but
qu'il voulait atteindre et dans la
route qu'il a suivie, quelque effort
de style qu'il ait pu faire, quel
que soit le blâme qui précède ou
qui suit ses peintures ne saurait
détruire l'effet funeste des
tableaux qu'il présente aux
lecteurs et qui dans les pièces
incriminées conduisent
nécessairement à l'excitation des
sens par un réalisme grossier et
offensant pour la pudeur...
Condamne...' ²⁰⁴

Where Flaubert was merely subjected to a reprimand, a "didactic lecture on art (in other circumstances a sufficient punishment for Flaubert)," and release without any award of court costs,²⁰⁵ Baudelaire was subjected to a fine (later

reduced) and, much more seriously, the excision of the six "pièces incriminées" from the ensemble of Les Fleurs du Mal. The judgment itself states that these six poems serve to excite what is called, in obscenity cases in this century, "prurient interest," and this verdict reflects the charges brought for offenses against public morals, the charges brought for offenses against religious morality having been dropped.

Just as Flaubert's prosecution operates interpretively on two distinct hermeneutic levels, is it not possible that two such levels of interpretation and judgment might exist in Baudelaire's case as well? For one thing, several poems featuring scenes of sensuality, sexual intimacy and "perversion" were initially charged under the heading of offenses against public morals, then dropped from the censor's list (these include "Sed non satiata," "Le Beau Navire," and "La Mendiante Rousse"); the final list of incriminated poems represents by no means an exhaustive or systematic excision of all material possibly deemed offensive by the prosecutor. As "poisonous" works, these poems are subject to a judgment on the first level as crimes against the "validity of norms relating to the family . . ."206 and, it is assumed, of norms relating to public life as well. But what about the second level of interpretation discerned in the prosecution of *Madame Bovary*, the level upon which an intolerable sense of narrative and moral indeterminacy is

condemned? I turn now to the corresponding second level of indeterminacy involving the "tenability of a belief in the central identity of the subject of narration and judgment"²⁰⁷ discernible in the six excised poems of Les Fleurs du Mal.

One modern critic, looking into the "stigmatized" poems, actually discerns this indeterminacy, but attributes its shock value to the poet's equation of "his two essentially different concepts of love" (i.e., "animality" and "platonic" love) and his reduction of them "to the same basic carnal level."²⁰⁸ While the condemned trio "Léthé," "Les Bijoux," and "Les Métamorphoses du vampire" are attributed to Baudelaire's voluptuous fascination with Jeanne Duval, the poem inspired by Mme. Sabatier, "A Celle qui est trop gaie," is seen as a sadistic reduction of "ideal love" to the same level of carnality so vividly depicted in the poems to his mulatto mistress:

While in terms of Jeanne, the
feminine soul is entirely
circumscribed within physical
proportions and made an object of
play or a form of narcotic for the
male, Baudelaire's ideal love fares
no better; the poet verbally
humiliates and violates it for its
inability to provide physical
satisfaction.²⁰⁹

Thinking in terms of the expectations of Second Empire readers, Balakian further states that "one is inclined to conclude that what proved revolting or immoral in these four poems was not his representations of love but the utter

joylessness of his approach to beauty whether on a physical or spiritual plane."210 She determines that the poet's defense during the trial, that there is a redeeming attitude of horror at the events depicted, is either unconvincing or absent:

. . . evil is a deed more than a state. In these poems there is no actual action that might induce horror or even pity. There is, however, perverse intent: the poet's inclination to debase the object of his attraction. It is this will to defile beauty which proved distasteful in these poems despite his careful artistry of words.211

This lack of any judgmental or "horrified" presence in these poems clearly corresponds to the narrative undecidability in Flaubert; Baudelaire's claim for the redeeming presence of this perspective, however, is based on the secret architecture which, once again, is clearly violated by isolating individual poems for prosecution.

Balakian argues for an aesthetic judgment which plays the remaining two condemned poems, "Lesbos" and "Femmes damnées," (subtitled "Delphine et Hippolyte") against the other four. She puts forward these two poems as superior works based on the assertion that they "contain images of love unique and independent of contemporary models and of personal experiences." 212 Unlike the other four incriminated poems, the Lesbian poems are "a triumph of

originality such as he has not attained even in his famous 'Correspondances' or 'Le Voyage.'"213 Indeed, she claims that any injustice that may have been done to Baudelaire by the prosecution does not rest in the fine of three hundred francs, but rather in the associating for posterity "through this unfortunate condemnation four poems of uneven value with three of his most original and aesthetically unusual masterpieces."214

Balakian concludes her argument with a description of the essential undecidability of the condemned pieces, but still wants to use her preference for the more "sympathetic" Lesbian poems as the decisive criterion upon which her distinction between the two groupings is based:

In liberating love from good and evil, and in detaching it from social implication and real life models, he seems to metamorphose his own complicated human entanglements and triumph over the particular. In so doing, he transcends the irritating and sometimes monotonous duality of his love. Instead, the physical and the spiritual are molded into each other to create a single melancholy pattern as sensuality proves unsatisfying and the ideal assumes the illusiveness of the dream. The poetic synthesis thereby achieved, ironically, purges his work of whatever ugliness there could be found elsewhere to serve as a target for censorship.215

This is a fascinating claim, indeed. Instead of seeing the excision of the condemned pieces as a crime against the

work, Balakian blames instead the "guilt by association" created for posterity by grouping the "ugly love" poems with the Lesbian poems; then, even while stating a very important insight (the "poetic synthesis" achieved by transcending "the irritating and sometimes monotonous duality of his love,") she finds that this manifestation of what I am calling here criminal undecidability redeems the rest of the ensemble ("elsewhere") by purging it of its "ugliness"--precisely the claim Baudelaire makes in his defense of the work as a whole.

I would take issue with Balakian's distinction between the two groups of condemned pieces, however, and would especially state that the thematic difference--Lesbian versus heterosexual eros--surely matters more to the modern critic than it did to the Imperial Prosecutor. Clearly, the poet's "will to defile beauty" as evinced in the four heterosexual poems is more blamable for Balakian than it was for Pinard. Indeed, the addition of the hinge poem for the group of poems on Beauty, poem XVI ("Hymne à la beauté") to the 1861 edition makes the poet's central tenets explicit: Beauty itself drives the engines of criminality; criminality is the inter-subjective means of transformation par excellence; transformation in turn produces indeterminacy; indeterminacy, both a source and a product of symbolic and moral synaesthesia, is a primary characteristic of Beauty. As L.J. Austin states, ". . . ce qui intéresse Baudelaire, c'est plus l'intensité du sentiment qu'il éprouve que la valeur

de son objet. . . . la valeur suprême pour Baudelaire est l'énergie spirituelle de l'homme, quelle que soit la direction qu'elle vise, quel que soit le domaine où elle s'exerce."216

The "crimes of love" in the Lesbian poems, contrary to Balakian, derive not only from their offenses against conventional morality (level one), but just as importantly from the inscrutable over-determinations involved in the moral synaesthesia created by the imagery of narcissism. As Delphine tells guilt-ridden Hippolyte:

--'Qui donc devant l'amour ose parler d'enfer?

Maudit soit à jamais le rêveur inutile
Qui voulut le premier, dans sa stupidité,
S'éprenant d'un problème insoluble et stérile,
Aux choses de l'amour mêler l'honnêteté!217

The narrator-poet addresses the two women by pronouncing upon their unenviable future:

Plongez au plus profond du gouffre, où tous les crimes,
Flagellés par un vent qui ne vient pas du ciel,

Bouillonnent pêle-mêle avec un bruit d'orage.
Ombres folles, courez au but de vos désirs;
Jamais vous ne pourrez assouvir votre rage,
Et votre châtement naîtra de vos plaisirs.218

By the last quatrain, it becomes evident that the two women are not only criminals, but "lamentables victimes" destined to a state of eternal suffering depicted in terms generally associated with the suffering of the infinitely

alienated hero-poet himself:

Loin des peuples vivants, errantes, condamnées,
A travers les déserts courez comme les loups;
Faites votre destin, âmes désordonnées,
Et fuyez l'infini que vous portez en vous!219

Balakian's distinction between the Lesbian and heterosexual incriminated pieces seems to derive from a perceived difference between the poet-hero's sympathy for his soeurs de l'infini and the wholly unsympathetic transgressive acts he represents in "A Celle qui est trop gaie" and "Les Métamorphoses du vampire." The female vampire--an interesting transposition of references, because the fluid sucked by her from the poet is not initially called blood, but rather semen metaphorically figured as bone marrow (l. 17)--herself undergoes at least six figural transformations: from woman to serpent (in simile), to pustulent goat-skin, to mannequin (retrospective), to skeleton, to weather-vane, to wind-blown sign. Her eventual reduction to a pure, yet overdetermined signifier, resembles the transformation of the "beloved" female addressee into the rotting carcass, then the poem itself in "Une Charogne."

This encounter, while clearly objectionable on the first level to Pinard, also partakes of the uncanny, which in Freud "signals the return of the repressed, and . . . is related to the problematization of the boundary or limit between the real and the imaginary."²²⁰ The "sorcellerie évocatoire" Baudelaire claimed for the astute manipulation of language

clearly works against him in this case; just as Pinard was subject to Emma Bovary's "spell," so does his case against Baudelaire reflect a blurring of the line between real and imaginary crime. In this context the prosecution of a book, strangely enough, seems more and more to resemble the medieval cases of charges brought against culpable barnyard animals and transgressive inanimate objects.²²¹

The poet-hero fantasizes carrying out an appropriate punishment upon "celle qui est trop gaie", for example, which stands in for a parallel punishment carried out upon Nature itself in the poem. Where he "actually" commits the violent act upon a flower, he creates in the conditional mode ("Ainsi je voudrais" l.25) the image of the same punishment effected upon the self-enclosed victim, the beautiful representative of inaccessibility. Addressing her, he will "faire à ton flanc étonné/ une blessure large et creuse," (ll. 31-32) wherein he will:

A travers ces lèvres nouvelles,
Plus éclatantes et plus belles,
T'infuser mon venin, ma soeur!²²²

The poet-hero's precise (literal) crime here is not specified with regard to this particular fluid, this "venom" with which he would avenge his humiliations at the hand of Nature. But the surface aggression and uncanny hostility present in this and the other condemned heterosexual poems seems to differentiate them from the incriminated Lesbian

poems, where the tone of the poet-hero's relations with his subject is markedly different. Of course, Baudelaire is not erotically implicated in the lesbian poems; curiously, it is his distance from the erotic tie which allows him the closeness of sympathy. But ultimately this distinction is absorbed by a larger view: Beauty in Baudelaire is finally that which mocks any attempt to possess it.²²³

In this light, Beauty stands in an unequivocal relation with inter-subjective transgression. This anti-Platonism, this deliberate and systematic breakdown not only of difference, but thereby of assured moral value in aesthetics, provoked the actions of the prosecutor Pinard; it represents the poetic version of Flaubert's actionable narrative indeterminacy in prose.

There are many types of justice, and the charges brought and the judgment rendered against Baudelaire seem to draw whatever component of justice they may claim for themselves from what legal and penological theory call "retributive justice." "Retributivists" concentrate on the motive of the criminal, not the complaint of the victim; indeed, a "real" victim is precisely what is missing in Baudelaire's "crimes." Without a victim, the prosecution turns the judicial focus upon the author in the name of some "useful or desirable effect beyond the very justice of the punishment itself."²²⁴ For the retributivists, "the desert of the criminal is thought to be both a necessary and a sufficient condition for

his being punished."²²⁵ Given the wide interpretive latitude (one might say prosecutorial carte blanche) provided by the articles cited in the charges and the volatile sorcery of the nature of the putative offenses (offenses against public and religious morals), it is understandable how such a retributive mode of justice, viewed by theorists as incoherent and indefensible, would find its way into the procedure. Did Baudelaire deserve prosecution, or induction into the Académie française, or both?

Retributive justice creates a conflict with the "requisites of desert," which would account for the intervention on behalf of the accused by other respected writers and, ultimately, by the Princesse Mathilde herself.²²⁶ This conflict derives from the ambiguities involved in the prosecution of images and ideas in the name of socially acceptable--or, ahem, necessary, from the point of view of civilization--norms and values. The question of the criminal's "desert" ultimately "boils down to the contested moral imperative,"²²⁷ an imperative claimed by both sides in these two cases. For "whenever the punishment is justified in terms of a further, useful or desirable effect beyond the very justice of the punishment itself,"²²⁸ an argument can be put forward for the injustice of the entire procedure. There is little doubt that the state intended Baudelaire's punishment to carry no inconsiderable weight of symbolic significance, as a deterrent to himself and to others:

aesthetic crime thus provokes aesthetic prosecution.

Unlike the merely salacious pornographer, however, the author in these cases has mustered the imagery of transgression and the formal procedures creating radical undecidability as a serious and disputatious gesture toward norms and mores around him--especially in the minds of the Second Empire authorities. The pose of "pure art"--avoided, incidentally, by Baudelaire's defense during the trial--is commented upon with some ferocity by Baudelaire in a letter to Narcisse Ancelle of February 18, 1866:

Faut-il vous dire, à vous qui ne l'avez pas plus deviné que les autres, que dans ce livre atroce, j'ai mis tout mon coeur, toute ma tendresse, toute ma religion (travestie), toute ma haine? Il est vrai que j'écrirai le contraire, que je jurerais mes grands Dieux que c'est un livre d'art pur, de singerie, de jonglerie; et je mentirai comme un arracheur de dents. 229

This refusal to plead the rights of Art in his case is the point focused on by Sartre in his reconstruction of Baudelaire's personality:

Not once did he attempt to defend the content of his book; not once did he try to explain to the judges that he did not accept the moral code of 'cops' and pimps. On the contrary, he invoked it himself. . . . rather than question whether their interdict was well founded, he accepted the secret shame of lying

about the meaning of his work.²³⁰

Baudelaire would write to Sainte-Beuve that if he had himself pleaded his case, he would have better defended himself. ²³¹ "Qu'aurait-il plaidé?" asks one writer. "L'incompétence des juges? Peut-être. Mais sûrement la liberté de l'Art et son indépendance vis-à-vis de la morale." ²³² But these pleas would challenge the very ground upon which the Second Empire version of retributive justice would operate, and Sartre is again probably correct when he states the reason why Baudelaire could not reject these grounds: "It was in the name of those values that he wanted absolution and he preferred to be condemned by them rather than to be whitewashed in the name of a wider and more fruitful ethic which he should have invented himself."²³³

Baudelaire, like Flaubert, was caught in the double bind that proves the centrality or primacy (as an issue) of aesthetic crime for our understanding of the period: he exploits the requisite criminal imagery as a secret or masked reformer, and he is prosecuted for this imagery as if he had perpetrated it in daily life. But like some inverted Groucho Marx, who did not wish to join any club that would have him as a member, Baudelaire did not wish to argue with a social system that would prosecute him. His aesthesis of crime functions by means of obfuscation or destruction of difference, which simultaneously reflects this same obfuscation in the world, and criticizes it from a position

of superior normativity. This truth, called by Pierre Emmanuel "the paradox of redemptive satanism," is a result of a desperate attempt to establish aesthetically a new law, which is precisely why the existing law prosecutes the attempt.

Emile Durkheim has argued that "not only the punishment of crime, but crime itself, is necessary for social cohesion."²³⁴ Retributive justice argues, in this light, that "'We do not punish it because it is a crime,' . . . 'but it is a crime because we punish it.'"²³⁵ The state thereby proves the author/criminal correct in his estimation of the situation around him, simultaneously providing criminal status (by prosecuting him) and artistic value (by acknowledging the truth value, at least allegorically, of his vision.) If this recognition were not true, then every "offensive" production would be prosecuted. As it is, works of superior literary quality are pursued judicially, while negligible works are not. Pinard himself was aware of this slippery state of affairs, at least on one level. His brief begins with the acknowledgment: "'Poursuivre un livre pour offense à la morale publique est toujours chose délicate. Si la poursuite n'aboutit pas, on fait à l'auteur un succès...'"²³⁶ But he fearlessly goes on to state that "'le juge n'est point un critique littéraire; il est le gardien de la morale publique, il est une sentinelle qui ne doit point laisser passer la frontière.'"²³⁷

This normative "frontière" is precisely the one crossed, using the evocative sorcery of language, by the poet; his prosecution by retributive justice itself becomes in its turn a "normative" demonstration of the social stakes involved in the representation of aestheticized crime.

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Chapter III

The Decadent Mask As Transgressive Metaphor

"Masks stand at that equivocal frontier between the human and the 'divine,' between a differentiated order in the process of disintegration and its final undifferentiated state--the point where all differences, all monstrosities are concentrated, and from which a new order will emerge. There is no point in trying to determine the 'nature' of masks, because it is in their nature not to have a nature but to encompass all natures."

--René Girard

III.1 The Pandemic Mask and the Decay of Difference

The mask appears veritably everywhere in the decadence: in the poetry, tales, and novels of the period; it plays a role in the theatre and shows its face across the iconography of the era, as well as in the literary criticism and aesthetic theories propounded after 1850. The mask is manifest as well in the chronicles, memoirs, essays and even in daily life of the flesh-and-blood actors who crossed the stage of the theatrum mundi in Europe and England at the end of the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth.

Beginning with what Mario Praz calls "the mechanical detachment" that so often accompanies such a quasi-universal emblem, the question poses itself: how may we approach the

aesthetic issues posed by the mask without falling into the trap of mistaking its "essence"? Since it is seen so often throughout the epoch, there is no doubt something significant, perhaps even something central, to be found in its presence and its function. How might we discover its meanings without tripping over its excesses of meaning, its repetitions, its penchant for disguise and its (perhaps falsely) metaphysical character? Finally, how might the metaphor of the mask after 1850 be interrogated in terms of its transgressions, apparent or real--and against which laws does it transgress?

It is a fact that some writers and historians evince strong scorn for the decadent period (when they allow its "decadence" at all) precisely because of its grotesqueries, its excesses, its indefatigably repeated motifs, its perverse and too-often ironic aesthetic stance, its false face, soiled or depraved, whose exhalations smell too often of the slaughterhouse, the sewer or the tomb. Even Mario Praz, after a detailed discussion of the work of Jean Lorrain, "l'Homme aux masques," feels a bit apprehensive and ill-at-ease:

The reader may be surprised that I have devoted so much space to an examination of the work of a mannerist like Lorrain. My reply is that this work, precisely because it is so hopelessly ruined by mannerisms, provides an excellent illustration of the common background of the Decadents and of

themes which were repeated at the time with a sort of mechanical detachment.¹

There are two remarkable assertions here: first, that even the study of a work riddled with clichés, as the work of such a "mannerist" as Lorrain is stated to be, may be worth the trouble, even if only to demonstrate this "common background" of decadent bric-a-brac; and second, that there exists some sort of "mechanical detachment" which characterizes the mannerisms of the period. In this, of course, he is correct: writers and painters of the decadence effectively reduce their motifs to clichés by returning to them innumerable times, as if searching for some lost shiver along the spine of which only a faded echo remains. A striking example of this repetition compulsion is found, to cite only one example, in Félicien Champsaur's Le Jazz des masques which, although dating from 1928, exhibits still the need to rework to the bitter end worn-out motifs.

At the same time, all masks are not clichés; but where might the interest, so lively and salient, that the period showed for this motif have originated? In order to approach the question of the mask and its relation to the decadence in general, it will be necessary to begin by underlining the definitions of the word itself and then to explore some of the critical approaches already elaborated: the biographical (George Trembley, Hubert Juin, Philippe Julian and Pierre Kyria); the classificatory (generally thematic) approach; and

the simply chronological or historical approach.

Under the word "masque," the Littré dictionary gives the following definitions:² first, the word exists as a feminine noun originating in the Languedocian word "masco," meaning "sorceress" or "witch"; in the Auvergne region, "une masque" (feminine) means a "woman who leads a dubious life"; this word apparently comes from the low Latin "masca," meaning "sorceress" or "witch." The very word, then, thrusts us immediately into the realm of metaphysics as if by a spell. Littré says that the current usage of the term in its feminine form is nothing less than a "familiar term of insult used . . . to signify a girl or a woman and to reproach her for her ugliness or malice."

Etymologists are not in agreement, however, concerning the word's ancient roots nor their meanings: some claim that "masca" is derived from the word "masticare," meaning "to chew," because the witch devours little children; which origin may be also related to the word "manducus," which means "the eater," and which came to signify a scarecrow; others state that the word derives from the word "mascharat," meaning "pleasantry" or "joke," which leads us to the masculine substantive: "le masque," a "false face of painted cardboard, with which the face is covered for purposes of disguise."

These objects that cover the face, then, may be placed there for several reasons. There exist tragic masks, for

example, and Littré avails himself of a citation from Barthélemy in order to establish that "'tragedy made use of the mask almost at the moment of its birth; the name of the first actor to adopt a comic mask, however, has not come down to us.'" The word "persona" is thought to have come from the fact that one passed sounds (sons) through (per) the mask, which mask helped to indicate the nature of the character being portrayed. Littré, still citing Barthélemy, further informs us that it is permissible in antique tragedy to change masks each scene. Moreover, he goes on to say that one could imprint "the symptoms of the principal affections of the soul" on the tragic mask, "in order to add a new degree of verisimilitude to the imitation." The mask, in this sense, is deceptive in what might be called a positive way: it superadds art to the human face in order to render it more truthful in imitation.

Already we stand at the threshold of paradox: the depth of the character, his subterranean traits, his mystery, his psychology, are only more effectively revealed by means of a surface, an object without depth in and of itself, which covers precisely the most expressive part of the human being all the better to express it.

The word has other significations, other nuances: "mask" is often used "to describe the face of an actor," (the tool of the trade), and therefore serves to differentiate between the "false" or "lying" face (in the Platonic sense)

of the actor and the "sincere" visage of the human being. This is the sense adopted by the decadence to specify the literary personalities of the period: these "masks" take the form of critical portraits, either of authors (as in Remy de Gourmont's literary overview of the period, Le Livre des masques, 1896) or of society at large, or of the demi-monde. One also finds the word "masque" used implicitly as a designation for a theatrical genre (as Littré informs us), "of an extraordinary and bizarre pomp, an ensemble of music, dance, improvised constructions, paintings, feasts, of scenes spoken or rhymed between allegorical characters, rigged out in dress of prodigious richness." This description fits the type of theatre developed in the seventeenth century, practiced by Ben Jonson among others; yet by the nineteenth century the name of Edgar Allan Poe, whose "Masque of the Red Death" (1842) bears perhaps a closer thematic resemblance to the decadence than do the entertainments of the Elizabethans, first comes to mind.

The definitions that follow in Littré give us even further elaborations on the figurative nature of the word; we enter into a realm of proliferating nuance absolutely appropriate to the decadence. He speaks of a metonymic mask, to indicate a person in disguise: "I recognize you, handsome mask!" "Mask" is also an architectural, painterly and sculptural term, used to describe "a face separated from the rest of the body, placed usually among the ornamentation";

this signification situates itself easily, in terms of decapitation, fragmentation and ornament, within the neo-Baroque aesthetic canon of the decadent period.

Finally, still according to Littré, one may speak of the mask as a "false appearance" in a figurative and general sense, one that hides the truth of the thing masked instead of revealing it. "'Nature wears only a veil,'" writes Buffon, "'it is we who give her a mask; we cover her with prejudice, we suppose that she acts, that she operates as we act and think.'" This passage, as cited by Littré, leads to another series of problems concerning the decadents: the masked (or obfuscated) relation between man and nature, the endemic sentiment of separation, of falsehood and of artifice which the male artists of the period sense with regard to women, themselves, and toward the entire universe:

L'étrange rage qui a produit les
Néron et les Héliogabale le mord
au cœur. 'L'appareil sanglant de
la destruction' rafraîchit seul
pour une minute cette fièvre d'une
sensualité qui ne se satisfera
jamais. Voilà l'homme de la
décadence, ayant conservé une
incurable nostalgie des beaux rêves
de ses aïeux, ayant, par la
précocité des abus, tari en lui
les sources de la vie, et jugeant
d'un regard demeuré lucide
l'inguérissable misère de sa
destinée, par suite--car voyons--
nous le monde autrement qu'à
travers le prisme de nos intimes
besoins?--de toute destinée!³

Bourget's subject here is Baudelaire; indeed, as we have already discussed in Baudelaire's case, these issues recur in the context of criminality and inter-subjectivity; Baudelaire chooses precisely this emblem as the means to explore them in the very important poem in the expository section on Beauty in Les Fleurs du Mal, "Le Masque" (poem XX):

O blasphème de l'art! ô surprise fatale!
La femme au corps divin, promettant le bonheur,
Par le haut se termine en monstre bicéphale!⁴

Given its centrality in the works of the period, it is not surprising that the mask holds a place of eminence in the biographical approach taken by critics of the decadence. Hubert Juin, writing a preface to a collection of writings by Jean Lorrain, publishes it under the title "L'homme aux masques": Man with Masks. But apart from biographical details, what does such a title tell us? In fact, what are we to make of such a phrase as this one, also from Juin: "A moment arrived wherein Marcel Schwob the man was metamorphosed into a ghost."⁵ In fact, the biographical essays of Juin, valuable for their enthusiasm, often go no further than this: "Later, he [Marcel Schwob, another "homme aux masques"] will no longer want to be [known as] the author of The Book of Monelle: it was simply too dear to his heart. This is an incomparable example of literature!"⁶ The "critical biographies" of Jean Lorrain by Philippe Julian (Jean Lorrain ou le Satiricon 1900, 1974) and Pierre Kyria

(Jean Lorrain, 1973) suffer from the same sort of lack of theoretical criteria to aid in understanding the underlying truth content of such an oft-repeated motif.

Academic criticism in certain instances achieves greater success in pursuing a more thorough approach to decadent aesthetics. John Alden Green succeeds in his efforts to see and evaluate previously unavailable documents, and his chapters on literary influences on Schwob show a certain rigor. He succeeds too in his reevaluation of the first biography of Schwob by Pierre Champion (Marcel Schwob et son temps, 1927) and he establishes a copious bibliography that begins to fill the gaps left by the incomplete edition of the Oeuvres complètes (published 1927-1930).

George Trembley, in Marcel Schwob: Faussaire de la nature (1969), succeeds in identifying some problems of Schwob's aesthetic theory and practice, but there is still a sort of impressionism that dominates his remarks on the aesthetic issue imposed perhaps by the biographical focus. On the question of the influence of history on Schwob, and of his seeming need for erudite support in his stories, Trembley writes:

. . . as Camille Mauclair correctly observes: 'erudition for him is only a means of sometimes speaking through the mouths of the dead the truths he would never make known directly.' He who donned so many masks in his stories borrows this "faux-visage," which allows him to make confession as discreetly as can

be made by an 'upstanding monsieur
who has a horror of being noticed.'⁷

There are, it would seem, two problems of procedure here: behind the larger issue of the problematic relation between art and the life of the author, there also exists the more specific problem of knowing the intentions of Marcel Schwob. How, and why, might we suppose that this "upstanding monsieur" felt any need to make confession at all? This question raises another: does this need to confess, even if it did exist, hold a great deal of interest for us? Does it throw new light on the stories themselves, on the aesthetic procedures witnessed in the text, or on the aesthetic of the mask found throughout Schwob's work? These questions notwithstanding, George Trembley is conscious of these problems, perhaps more than the other biographical critics. But in his discussion of the "double author" who is Schwob, he writes:

He [Schwob] was capable of passing the most lucid judgments on his own writing. But from the moment he decided to put on a mask, one can no longer affirm anything with certitude. This is why his youthful writings are so interesting: he is not yet dissimulating himself so systematically, as he will come to do later in life.⁸

It would seem that there is still a problem here, a critical problem not unrelated to the mask itself. One might argue, for example, that the fact that the author "is not yet

dissimulating himself so systematically" renders the youthful writings not more interesting, but precisely the opposite. Despite these demurrers, however, the work of George Trembley is important, for he focuses clearly on the centrality of the metaphor for Schwob. Trembley is conscious of the limitations of the biographical method. He writes ironically that "the drawback (or perhaps the payoff) with Schwob is that we do not know to what extent, like Don Quixote, he actually believed in his windmills."⁹ Trembley points out in this way what he calls "one of the ambiguities of the mask: it deceives, yet it does not deceive."¹⁰

Other approaches to the question of the decadent mask pose another sort of problem. A good example of a typology of masks, for example, is found in the postface by Francis Lacassin in a recent reedition of Jean Lorrain's Princesses d'Ivoire et d'ivresse (1980, orig. publ. 1902). Lacassin categorizes not only the stories of the volume in question (including a series of tales titled "Masks in the Carpet"), but he also treats many other stories by Lorrain which feature a mask; throughout, he asserts that ". . . it is the obsessive ambiguity of the mask that contributes toward making of nocturnal Paris the nightmare of the city by day."¹¹ Here we get a whiff once again of the "bric-a-brac" of the decadence deplored by Praz. And again: "If the mask transforms the nightmare into reality, ether makes of reality a nightmare."¹²

Lacassin also touches upon an essential problem of the decadent mask, but once again seems to stumble on what is "theoretical" in the problem and as a result falls once again into the biography of the author. Lacassin's study turns, in a way inevitably, toward the anecdote. "If he acquired . . . the taste for masks," he writes, "Lorrain used it in a systematic fashion and not as a mere accessory: as a technique of introspection."¹³

A third approach to the problem of the decadent mask, sketched out by Lacassin and disdained by Trembley, would be a chronological typology of the masks of the decadence.

Trembley writes:

It would be easy to cite all the veiled faces and all the mirrors of glass or water that populate the writings of the period. . . .¹⁴

I have to state, however, given the difficulty of finding many of the very rare texts of the decadence, that the task is really not so as easy as he claims.

Beginning with my summary chronology (Appendix 1), I have tried to establish a classification of masks not by themes (jealous mask, sadistic mask, etc.), but rather by frames (fictional or "real") in order to approach its metaphoric function. In the work of art or in the daily life of the period, four of these frames may be discerned: 1. the theatre, especially in the tradition of the commedia

dell'arte; 2. the carnival or the masked ball; 3. the world of represented crime, where the mask serves either to disguise or protect the wearer, or to provide an alibi, or, in one fascinating example, as the instrument of crime itself; and finally, 4. the frame of the deceptive portrait. I turn now to some examples of the masks of each of these categories in order to clarify the problem conceptually and to render more precise the function of the mask as a breaker of frames, as a central, transgressive metaphor for the decadence, and thus as the emblem par excellence for aesthetic crime.

The importance of the commedia dell'arte tradition for the period becomes evident not only in the proliferation of Pierrots and Harlequins during these years, but also in the great importance placed by certain writers and artists on the tradition of these serviceable masks. Decadent Pierrots emerge in several frames or scenic contexts: Aubrey Beardsley, for example, in "Pierrot's Library"¹⁵ (1896), shows a Pierrot far from the theatre, standing transfixed by his reading, only partially masked this time, not only by his traditional whiteface, but by his reading glasses! In "The Death of Pierrot"¹⁶ (1896), he is seen in bed, surrounded by costumed actors tiptoeing into his chamber, some masked, some signalling to the viewer for silence, finger to lips.

Even Jean Lorrain, that unrepentant mannerist, complains about the excessive use of these figures:



Figure 1 Aubrey Beardsley, "Pierrot's Library"¹⁵



Figure 2 Aubrey Beardsley, "The Death of Pierrot"¹⁶

Pourquoi toujours cet éternel
 Pierrot, cette éternelle Colombine
 . . . Ah! qui nous fera la
 pantomime macabre et vécue, la
 pantomime moderne, à l'Edgar Poë
 ou à la Mark Twain; mais, dans les
 faits divers, ceux que l'on lit tous
 les jours, ils pullulent, les
 merveilleux sujets de pantomimes
 poignantes!¹⁷

Lorrain is speaking, evidently, about himself; for we shall see how he adapts the figural conventions of Italian masks to create these "poignant scenes," these eminently modern and delectable pantomimes of everyday criminality as reported in the "faits divers" of the popular press.

But perhaps one of the best examples of the importance attributed to the Italian mask is found in Lulu, the "roman clownesque" by Félicien Champsaur published in 1901. From the first pages of his novel, the author creates an atmosphere of disguise, theatre, frivolity and menace that serves to form the personality and mythic firmament of his central character.

Lulu spends her childhood desperately taken with the masked world of Harlequin, the "blockhead only three-quarters masked,"¹⁸ of Pantalon, with his "tawny mask," and of Pierrot in his white face and makeup. By dint of having seen them in the books (forbidden to young Lulu) belonging to her mother, she begins to see them everywhere:

Lulu vit . . . des figures et des
 masques se dessiner dans les nues
 et, pour elle, jouer une parade. . . .

Passaient sur le firmament, en
 batifolages, ou bien en querelles,
 les masques bergamesques de
 qualité, coquetant entre eux . . .
 toutes les figures légendaires et
 fardées des comédies italiennes.¹⁹

Her world becomes a theatre without a curtain, where masked characters, borrowed from the past and transformed in the hallucinations of the "clownesse" she becomes, strut about in their finery; for she herself is in the process of transforming herself into "la nouvelle petite camarade d'éternité" of the "vieux mimes célestes."²⁰ The theatrical masks become in this way a figure of hallucination, a trope of delirium, or the face of falsehood in an incomprehensible, vertiginous world.

But this idea of the intimate relation between the real (or natural) world and the theatre of masks, which is nothing but a new version of the old idea of theatrum mundi, is witnessed again in Jean Lorrain; in fact, it becomes central to his "mannerist" work as a whole:

Toutes ces grimaces flottantes dans
 les ténèbres, ricanements
 équivoques de pierres qui
 regardent, d'arbres qui veulent
 saisir, agrandissements subits
 d'objets inanimés, qui s'animent
 dans l'ombre déforme et dont
 l'ombre menace, qui les a vus
 enfant, les retrouvera sûrement
 dans les masques; les masques, cette
 épouvante errante de nos rues et de
 nos musées, qu'ils soient le
 grossier cartonnage au rabais des
 marchands de jouets, ou le chef-
 d'oeuvre de cire éclos sous les

doigts modelleurs; car le masque,
 c'est le rire du mystère . . .
 c'est la laideur voulue de la
 réalité exagérée pour cacher
 l'inconnu.²¹

This "conjugation" of the world and the mask becomes very quickly one of the "mannerisms" of Lorrain which are a part of the bric-a-brac, along with a profusion of Pierrots and Harlequins, of the decadence mentioned above. But as we shall see, the spiritual yearning or metaphysical desperation at the source of these figurations cannot be deferred indefinitely. For the decadence, difference is finite; the mask, as its vehicle, becomes human, all too human. Inter-subjectivity depends on the Other, and the privileged social contexts for the metaphoric mask are precisely the carnival and the masked ball, where the irony of the mask, with its equivocal ambiguity, is almost automatically predetermined as an aspect of these settings. These frames themselves sometimes seem to recur automatically, however; in fact, Lorrain does avail himself of them with the "mechanical detachment" described by Praz. But this "automatism," as Praz recognized, far from rendering these works negligible, instead makes them all the more significant: in a supposedly "minor" genre in a "minor" period, the primary access to significance may be attained by being as "minor" as possible.

The carnival is, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, the site of cultural exuberance where all possible events may take place.²² The carnival mask thereby takes on transgressive

functions with significant resonance, even if only "mechanically repeated." Thus, in Propos d'âmes simples of Lorrain (1904), two stories serve as to illustrate this "frame" for the metaphoric mask, wherein disguised souls scour the streets in a dance of crime and madness.

In the story "Pendant le Corso," for example, there is an immediate evocation of a terrifying, intoxicating atmosphere where all is ambiguous:

Dans un halo de poussière
multicolore et lumineuse, tant de
confetti jetés par poignées des
tribunes au cortège et du cortège
aux tribunes, des masques passaient
et repassaient, hurlant, gambadant
aux sons de fracassantes musiques
. . . Toute une foule bariolée,
pailletée et dansante d'arlequins
trépidants, de pierrots
épileptiques, de moines
hystériques et de pantins
gesticulants grouillait, se
poussait, se culbutait avec des
appels, des chants et des cris
d'animaux. . . . "23

The narrator, himself masked, makes some remarks about this ambiguity or equivocality, which he pushes very quickly to a metaphysical level. "The mask encourages all possible attempts by authorizing all hypotheses. . . , "24 he states; but in this case, the hypothesis is one involving theft and murder proposed by three dominoes, whose conspiratorial discussion is overheard by the narrator. Whether they serve to designate real danger or the simple vertigo of a dubious identity, carnival and masked



Figure 3 Aubrey Beardsley, "The Scarlet Pastoral"¹⁶

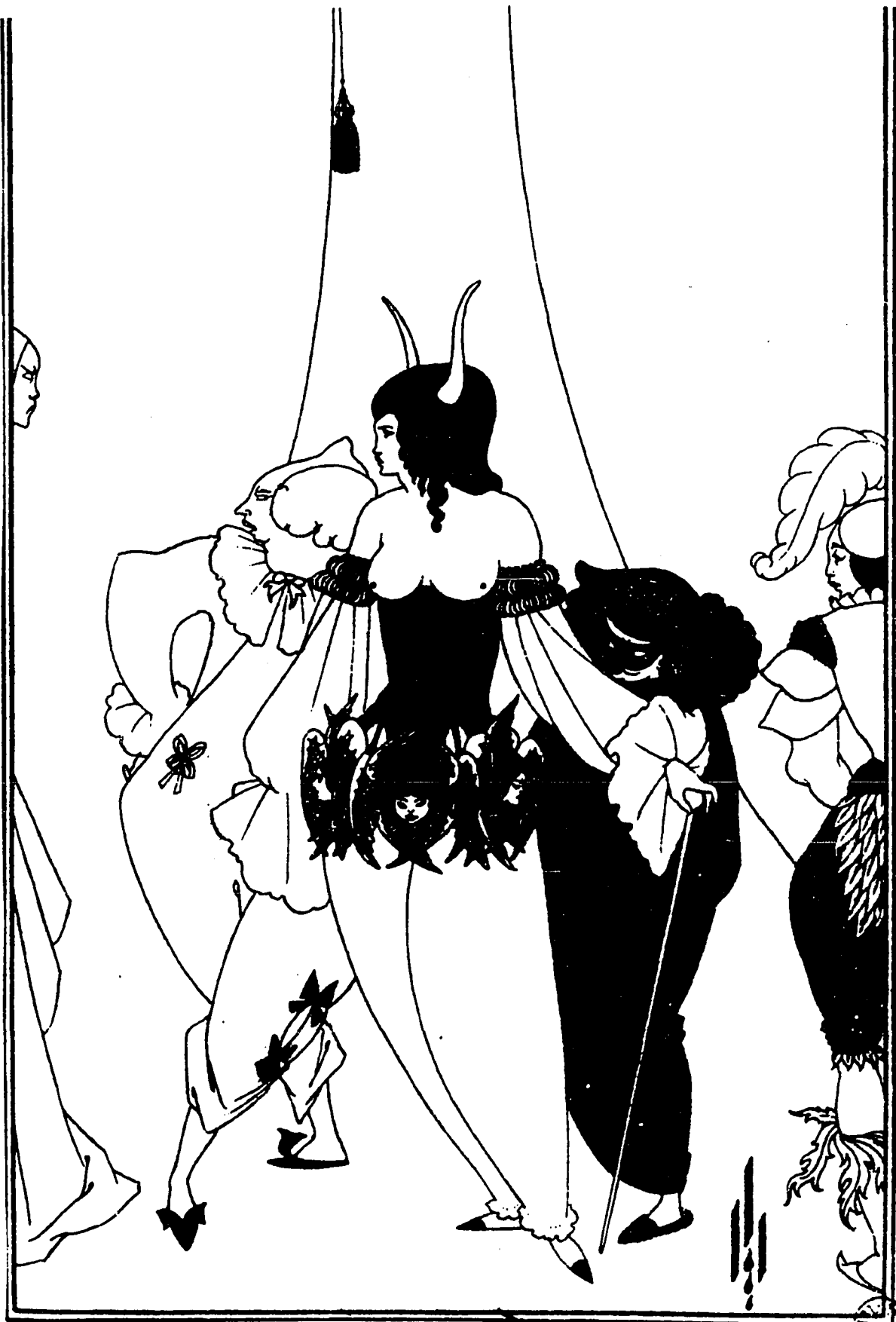


Figure 4 Aubrey Beardsley, "The Mask of the Red Death" 16

ball both come to represent the space of enigma personified and actualized in society. The narrator states:

. . . à l'entrée de ces trois
dominos, j'ai eu comme un choc.
J'ai senti qu'un mystère entraînait
ici et que j'entraais dans le
mystère.²⁵

The effect produced by this "masked setting" is one of generalized mystery. In Lorrain's "Dans un ascenseur," in the same collection, we see a similar function of the mask, as a sort of inanimate agent of the sacred, in the masked ball. "Ah!" begins the narrator, a journalist named De Jurieux, "C'est à une pitoyable fantaisie de bal costumé que je dois la plus équivoque et la plus gênante aventure de ma vie. . . ."²⁶ The setting is a masked ball thrown by a certain "Jules Roques," who sets in motion parties organized around select themes: "Antique Ball," "Mystical Ball," "Children's Ball," and in this story, the "Women's Ball." Transvestism and sexual ambiguity are in this way explored by this journalist hardly inclined, we learn incidentally, to dress himself up as a woman.

Following the advice of a friend, he chooses to go as an Arab woman, and his remarks on the art of disguise specify some elements of the aesthetics of the decadent masked ball, especially anonymity and a certain morose exoticism:

C'est l'anonymat du mystère.
Inquiétants, ces spectres
impénétrables du Désert, ces

Touregs masqués, qui sont au Centre africain de nos jours ce qu'étaient les Faux-visages à la Hongrie du moyen âge. Moine ou bandit, stryge ou Mauresque, la femme arabe est tout indiquée, surtout avec le voile noir.²⁷

It will suffice to relate that the unfortunate journalist/arab woman in a burnous never arrives at the ball, that he/she gets stuck between two floors in a malfunctioning elevator. "Dragged" to the prefecture of police by a level-headed concierge, it is finally necessary to "come clean" about his disguise and his reasons for it. The transgressor against sexual and racial identity, "de-contextualized" because of a pre-eminently modern breakdown (elevator failure), is literally criminalized and subjected to police inquiry. In the pragmatic world of the elevator and the concierge, the masked image of transgression is mistaken for the real thing, and a Chinese-puzzle irony is established. This "insincere" ambiguity provides public access--and who (besides the inevitable police) more representative of the "public" than the institutional concierge?--to the fin de siècle unconscious.

We should note in passing that the ambiguous eroticism of the masked ball, somewhat ridiculous (and ridiculed) in Lorrain, takes itself much more seriously in the hands of other artists of the period. Edouard Manet, in his painting "Bal masqué à l'opéra" (1873), paints:

. . . men wearing tophats [whose] faces are bare; the women are masked. Might we not compare this to the 'Déjeuner sur l'herbe' (1863), which juxtaposed men fully clothed with a woman completely nude, with another half-naked? The very wearing of the mask seems to be from the start indecent, an erotic provocation. A nude woman wearing a mask would seem to become all the more naked the longer she keeps it on.²⁸

It is not far from the eroticism of the masked ball to the figure of death who attends this function undisguised. Félicien Rops, in his illustration "La Mort au bal masqué,"²⁹ shows us the unexpected guest, with a well-turned ankle and dressed in a sumptuous gown, poised to begin a dance. The skull, with its hollow orbits, the jaw that seems to tremble with the expectation of movement, all contribute to an ironic memento mori: the living, festive death mask disguised only by its surroundings.

The idea of the guest at the masked ball who has no need to actually wear a mask falls rather quickly into cliché, however, as becomes evident in the Histoires de masques (1900) by Jean Lorrain. One of the frame narrators in the story "Le Masque" tells of a schoolboy adventure that befell him one night at the masked ball. Among the guests there arrives:

. . . un masque de carton imitant à s'y méprendre le visage humain, mais quel visage! . . . une tête camuse et ricaneuse, au sourire

figé découvrant les gencives, mais
surtout l'horreur de ce nez absent
dans cette face rosâtre, donnant
l'impression d'une tête
d'écorché. . . c'était si hideux
et si réussi que je ne pus retenir
un cri d'admiration.³⁰

It is not difficult to imagine what happens then.
Fascinated by the chef-d'oeuvre which is the mask, the
narrator attempts to snatch it away from its bearer and, as
he states in horrified recollection:

. . . 'mes doigts touchaient de la
chair . . . le masque n'était pas
un masque, c'était le vrai visage
de ce malheureux: il sortait de
l'hôpital.'³¹

But the author/narrator, who places a certain distance
between himself and his frame interlocutor, seems to mistrust
this too-easy irony himself, saying, "'C'est en effet,
concluais-je, une assez curieuse impression de masque.'"³²
But he seems hardly convinced. Moreover, since the
interlocutor had already pronounced some ironic observations
about the style and the tale of the narrator ("'Il abusait
vraiment, le cher monsieur!'"),³³ one might suppose that the
author would like to hold at arm's length this slightly
shopworn, and therefore too truly "false," figural mask and
metaphor. In any case, the carnival and the masked ball
recreate a "customary" social setting where the most
disquieting passions and transgressions--horror, frenzy,
sexual ambiguity, death--veil themselves, hide themselves,



Figure 5 Félicien Rops, "La Mort au bal masqué"²⁹



Figure 6 Félicien Rops, "La Mort Syphilitique"²⁹

and remake each other in order to reveal themselves anew beneath yet another mask.

The idea of a masked criminal does not appear on the face of it too astonishing: living outside the law, he hides his face, and thus his identity, in order to avoid detection and escape punishment. Of masked murderers, masked highwaymen, and masked thieves, there is no shortage in the nineteenth century, nor during the fin de siècle itself. In the oeuvre of Marcel Schwob, like Lorrain a writer for whom the mask seems quasi-universal and at the base of his aesthetic theory, masks preponderate and play a multiplicity of roles. "L'homme voilé," from the collection Coeur Double (1891), serves as an illustrative example.

A traveler in a train recounts what has happened to him during the night: he had found himself in a car with two other men, one falling asleep immediately, the other rising to draw a curtain across the lamp globe; with growing disquiet, the narrator realizes that he did not get a glimpse of the face of the other:

J'aperçus une tâche confuse, de la
couleur d'un visage humain, mais
dont je ne pus distinguer le moindre
trait. . . . Il avait tourné sa
figure vers moi, et je ne l'avais
pas vue; la rapidité et le mystère
de son geste étaient
inexprimables.³⁴

Becoming more and more fearful, the narrator begins to

worry about the "missing" fact of the other and the bizarre atmosphere surrounding him. But suddenly he feels calm, relaxed; he undergoes "la chute intérieure qui précède le sommeil et l'évanouissement,"³⁵ and he faints away "véritablement les yeux ouverts."³⁶ He is evidently hypnotized by the masked man, who reveals himself to his subject as "Jud," the famous railway-car murderer.³⁷ In this case, the mask simultaneously creates a sense of horror around the crime, and reveals a face that symbolizes a fatal, animalesque terror. The will of the narrator is crushed, stolen, destroyed by the spell of the murderer's mask, while at the same time mysteriously endowed with a superhuman vision capable of piercing through to the double heart of things, to the paradox of guilt and identity: that the passive observer of crime is ultimately indistinguishable from the criminal himself.

The narrator watches, stupefied, while his masked dominator slits the throat of the sleeping traveler opposite, "comme on saigne un mouton."³⁸ He watches, his senses dulled, as the veiled man, masked with a veil the color of human flesh, comes toward him in order to smear with blood his inert fingers and his face, where "pas un pli ne bougeait."³⁸ At the end of the tale, he comes to his senses standing at the train-compartment glass, his face covered with blood, beside a cadaver with a gashed-open throat.

The mask in this case, on the surface of things, serves

as a disguise for the guilty man. But what is more interesting is the fact that the mask also serves metaphorically, in part to destroy the will power of the narrator. "Jud"'s mask is a latent means of crime, and at the same time an allegorical locus of communal guilt; in a later story by Lorrain, it will become a literal tool of criminality, the murder weapon itself. It is also another type of mask, the sanguinary "makeup" smeared ritualistically upon the face of the narrator, which furnishes the real murderer's alibi. Furthermore, the action of the railway-car murderer, veiled in hypnotic mystery and utterly senseless, might be interpreted as a sacrificial gesture in which traditional elements of religious crisis have found their way into a decaying world of deteriorating values and destruction of difference. The author's comparison of the victim to a sheep makes this clear; the setting of the story, inside a rocking railway car (like Lorrain's elevator, the "new site" of social interaction for the nineteenth-century), bears an important component of a larger, social context in which to set the crime: like some tragic playwright, Schwob "is suggesting that the scene before our eyes is only the tip of the iceberg, that the real issue is the fate of the community."⁴⁰

This mask no longer works merely to cover the face and identity of some romanticist bandit (one thinks immediately of Schiller's robbers, or of Nodier's Jean Sbogar), but here

it serves the criminal rather as a means of psychological power, as a metaphysical means of crime as well as physical disguise, and finally as a metaphor for the sacrificial "balancing of the scale, not of justice but of violence."⁴¹ The narrator/victim's stupefaction at this allegory, this incomprehensible rebus of symbols and ritual murder, is powerfully communicated to the reader.

In similar fashion, the traditional portrait genre referred to as a "mask" bears a symbolic or allegorical character interesting in several ways. It is perhaps for this reason that the idea of the literary or social portrait as a mask, related perhaps to the popular sub-genre of the physiologie so prevalent during the first half of the century, is quite common during the decadence, and its workings and appearance seem as fraught with metaphorical applications as the masks "à la lettre" we have just considered.

The Goncourt brothers, for example, published Une Voiture de masques in 1856, a series of dramatized or dialogic portraits, some in epistolary form, all in a more or less "naturalistic" vein. (The portrait became something of a specialty for the Goncourts; in 1892 another collection, Les Portraits nouveaux du dix-huitième siècle, would be published.) These small, concentrated glimpses of the human face are called "masks" initially as a reference to the theatrum mundi. Indeed, the postface makes this connection

clear:

Mesdames et Messieurs, Voici vingt-deux comédiens de la troupe du bon Dieu: des hommes. Ils ont ôté leurs masques et vont vous conter leur histoire.⁴²

Much later in the period, René Maizeroy would come to use "le masque" as the appellation of a sub-genre of portrait, and he would not be the last. In his turn, he adds this nuance: the "mask" embodies the reputation or reknown of the subject. "Aujourd'hui, il s'exploite lui-même comme une ferme de Beauce, il vit sur son masque et sur sa couronne fermée."⁴³ Maizeroy also uses the mask to characterize the disguise of the Amazon en travesti: "Elle voudrait être un homme. . . . Elle en a le masque."⁴⁴ He even touches upon the metaphor complementary to the mask for the period of the decadence, which is to say, the mirror, which I will discuss below. Speaking of his epoch, he exclaims, ". . . se voir en des miroirs grossissants n'est-elle pas, hélas! la caractéristique du siècle qui se meurt en des singeries."⁴⁵

There are other examples of the mask/portrait in the period: in 1896 Remy de Gourmont published, as mentioned briefly above, Le Livre des masques: portraits symbolistes, which was subtitled "Gloses et documents sur les écrivains d'hier et d'aujourd'hui"; Félicien Champsaur produced his Masques Parisiens, for which Félicien Rops furnished a strikingly evocative illustration depicting a profusion of available masks, suspiciously decollated-looking, all within



Figure 7 Félicien Rops, "Masques parisiens" 46



Figure 8 Aubrey Beardsley, illustrations for Balzac's
Scenes of Parisian Life⁴⁷

reach of the central, dreamy female figure.⁴⁶ In England, Aubrey Beardsley created a sort of mask/portrait of Balzac for an edition of the Scènes de la vie parisienne.⁴⁷

Having established these "frames" or contexts in which we might begin to recognize not only the ubiquity, but also the variety of the masks of the decadence, I turn now to explore in more systematic fashion its function as a metaphor in a period marked by a systemic and increasingly heated destruction and refiguration of difference.

III.2 The Living Metaphor: The Mask of Life

"Le Crime capital pour un écrivain c'est le conformisme, l'imitativité, la soumission aux règles et aux enseignements. . . . La seule excuse qu'un homme ait d'écrire, c'est de s'écrire lui-même, de dévoiler aux autres la sorte de monde qui se mire en son miroir individuel. . . ."

--Remy de Gourmont, "Préface"
Le Livre des Masques

"Comme les masques sont le signe qu'il y a des visages, les mots sont le signe qu'il y a des choses. Et ces choses sont des signes de l'incompréhensible."

--Marcel Schwob, "Préface"
Le Roi au masque d'or

"Our highest insights must--and should--sound like follies and sometimes like crimes when they are heard without permission by those who are not predisposed and predestined for them."

--Nietzsche
Beyond Good and Evil, 30

In the first two studies in La Métaphore vive, Paul

Ricoeur establishes the Aristotelean parameters of the problem of the nature and function of the metaphor as a figure of speech, definable "in terms of movement. . . . "48 This movement, this "dynamic of the metaphor . . . would rest on the aperception of the similar. . . "49 which, in its turn, one might also call the disguising of the similar; it becomes "that which the Greek calls precisely paradoxa, that is, deviation from an anterior doxa [belief]. . . . "50 The decadent mask, as a metaphor, functions precisely in the fashion described by Ricoeur: it "surprises and renders rapid instruction; it is following this strategy that surprise, combined with dissimulation, plays a decisive role. . . . "51

Moreover, a distinction between worn-out metaphors, which become part of the daily language mustered by all, and "good" metaphors, uncommon and more or less fresh and unexpected, becomes possible in terms of the metaphor as a "swerving aside from the current usage of the words in question."52 In attempting to extract a key quality of these "fresh" constructions, Aristotle states that they all have the "'character of an enigma'";53 later, Ricoeur widens the field of his inquiry and specifies these "good" qualities in a discussion of the theories of Emile Benveniste:

. . . the necessary conditions for a good metaphor--precision, clarity, nobility, natural character, coherence--'have only to do with invented metaphors employed

figuratively, which have not yet
received the sanction of common
usage.'⁵⁴

Without pursuing the vast theoretical problem of the tendency of the trope/figure (the "good" metaphor) to join with or become the trope/catachresis ("worn out"), I will adopt some terms from Ricoeur's account in order to better establish a rhetorical and linguistic model for the decadent mask. Since the mask metaphorically draws upon all the characteristics of the figural and animated presentation discussed by Aristotle, i.e., "brevity, surprise, dissimulation, enigma, antithesis,"⁵⁵ I propose a version of the decadent mask as the adventure of the human face, just as "the metaphor is the adventure of the word."⁵⁶ For just as we have seen emerge a sort of "cult of energy" in Baudelaire's aesthetics of transgression, the decadent mask acts as an agent for the obfuscation of difference and the re-establishment of identity; it propels the subject away from the Self and toward the Other, at the same time refiguring the grounds of artifice and identity. Grammatically speaking, the decadent mask is a transitive verb: its nature is inter-subjective. Furthermore, it becomes an agent for metamorphosis: to the degree that it modifies itself as well as others, it even becomes, in Léon Bloy's phrase (describing Joris-Karl Huysmans), "l'incarnation de l'adverbe."⁵⁷

A felicitous confusion between the word "figure"

(rhetorical term) and the word "figure" (expressive portion of the human head) also permits other conjunctions:

It must be admitted that the figure, as the "epiphore" in Aristotle, is itself only pronounced in metaphor; "figures" are to discourse what contours, features, and external features are to the body; 'discourse, although not forming a body, but rather an act of mind, has nevertheless in its different ways of signifying and expressing, something analogous to the differences between forms and features found in actual bodies.'⁵⁸

The two "figures," of rhetoric and physiognomy, enter into a very useful homology: they become the "figures" which serve to express, to dissimulate, to add nuance or imitate, within discourse itself; this relation is parallel to the role of the face with regard to the body (which is in its turn a metonymic "figure" for the totality of the individual; "body," in this case, means the entire being, the presence of organism as well as the absence of spirit.)

But the mask, inasmuch as it plays a dynamic role and not a static one,--is it really a metaphor, or is it not more precisely the spark that jumps the gap, or the trope that creates or communicates the metaphoric rapport between two ideas? Is the mask the metaphor itself, or merely the means whereby the metaphor functions?

In truth, it seems to be both simultaneously. Without taking up the semantic debate between the terminologies of

Fontanier and Aristotle, it seems to me profitable to render this point more precisely. Ricoeur writes: "It is within a single term that the trope exists, but . . . it is between two ideas that it takes place, by transport from one to the other."⁵⁹ The same is true for the mask: it exists in a single object (made of cardboard, silk, metal, or flesh), but it takes place between two ideas (or identities, or deceptions), similarly "by transport from one to the other."⁶⁰ For during the decadence, the mask allows the Aristotelean pleasure to learn (or to apprehend by imitation) while hiding things in order to reveal them all the better (by perverse fidelity). "A mask," writes Oscar Wilde, "tells us more than a face."⁶¹

This irony or, more precisely, this paradox leads us to further reflections upon the relation between the mask and the other metaphoric motif so dear to the decadence, the mirror. George Trembley has perceptively noted that:

. . . the influence of symbolism, which both used and abused them, was no . . . stranger to this preference [for both figures] and it would be easy to cite all the veiled faces and all the mirrors of glass or of water that inhabit the writings of this era. For the mask and the mirror are beautifully appropriate for representing all the ambiguous relations between the individual and the world, as well as between the individual and himself.⁶²

Trembley states that, for the mask in Schwob, "the

general element to which it is necessary always to refer is ambiguity."⁶³ And while the essence of the mask is mendacity, duplicity, dissimulation and ambiguity, the mirror represents the fidelity of the image--terrifying rather than reassuring, however--and the value, however painfully it may be achieved, of self knowledge. The irony of this fidelity emerges in striking fashion in Schwob's story, "Le Roi au masque d'or," and Trembley notes its importance:

But for the artist who pursues his own image, every surface is a reflection . . . [and] 'seeing oneself can only make one unhappy.' For wanting to tear away appearances, to know the truth of his being, the king in the golden mask trades one lie for another.⁶⁴

But despite this deception, there exists on the rhetorical or aesthetic level a fluid and complementary relation between the two metaphors, mask and mirror. But how does each figure in the model we are developing here? There are at least two possibilities.

First, they might be considered as in a grammatical relation: the mask is the mirror, conjugated. The mirror is the mask in the infinitive. Once again, Ricoeur suggests just such a relation, and the metamorphosis or conjugation of the verb may well serve as a term for comparison. According to Ricoeur, the metaphor must be associated with "l'acte central du discours, la prédication."⁶⁵ The mask and the

mirror, as metaphors and as two aspects of the verb, are thus at the same time things (real or imaginary objects) and actions (acts of predication by a given subject).

The infinite character of the mirror is best evoked by the mise en abîme effect of one mirror facing the other. Moreover, the eyes of the self-contemplating observer may serve as this second mirror. In this regard, the fable by Oscar Wilde comes to mind: the pool swears that it loved the visits of now-dead Narcissus upon its banks because, unlike the Oreads of the field and the forest, who were passed by the god without a glance, it was able to contemplate its own beauty reflected in the eyes of Narcissus himself.⁶⁶

The mask, at the same time, conjugates itself in several "persons," in the singular and the plural, in several modes. Mendacious, transgressive and pleasurably "guilty," it tends to fix one aspect of the personality, however ambiguous it may be: to express, to transform, to equivocate, to hide something in favor of revealing something else. All manifestations of being that remain vague, undifferentiated or purely potential in the infinitive form of verb, surge forth by means of the mask. One might easily imagine not only the mask in the indicative (or perhaps in the "counter-indicative") mode, but also the mask in the subjunctive, which expresses the wish, the doubt, or the will. The mask may even act criminally in the imperative, as we shall see below (Lorrain, "Masques de Londres et d'ailleurs," 1902).

Secondly, at a more highly evolved level, because the mask/metaphor defines itself as a ". . . deviation with regard to an anterior doxa,"⁶⁷ the following homology emerges:

A	B
ORTHO-DOXA	PARA-DOXA
ortho: right, correct	para: beside, deviation from
MIRROR (faithful)	MASK (deceptive)
C	D

According to this homology, A is to C what B is to D; the four elements are situated in a dynamic relation already characterized above as fluid and complementary. The tension of the movement between the elements, in turn, lends itself to the proliferating allegory and paradox characteristic of decadent aesthetics. As we shall see, the deceptive mask becomes revealing, and the faithful mirror can itself become deceptive in a second degree.

Moreover, it should be remarked that these relations are rather diachronic than synchronic, above all for the "good" metaphors of fresh invention. That is, they reveal in their content, albeit in crypto-symbolist and heavily involuted codes, references to social and historical transgression deeply imbued with alterity. In their formal or intertextual life, however, they renounce these "commitments" and are therefore themselves masked in the synchronic realm:

The metaphor, as an innovation, is thus to be placed among changes in sense, therefore among diachronic facts; but as an accepted deviation [from preceding usages], it aligns itself with polysemia, therefore on the synchronic side.⁶⁸

Thus, there is no apparent development across the centuries (or at least across the last decades of the nineteenth century) in the rhetoric of the mask as a metaphor of invention; there is only this aesthetic tension which returns to the figure from time to time to rework the problems of identity and of deception, in order to give voice once again to the ambiguities of truth in the face of untruth, of fidelity in the face of transgression, in order to retrace the Aristotelean route from terror to pity, which continues in the Nietzschean "tragic culture" of the fin de siècle all the way to death.

Each individual mask, in all the fables and poems of the period, thus becomes a tragic mask, but in a miniaturized form. Regarding this singular effect and its social consequences, Schwob remarks:

. . . Aristophane nous montre Cléon
après son passage aux affaires
publiques, vêtu d'une robe verte et
vendant des boudins parmi les
garçons baigneurs. Je suis
enchanté de ce crieur de saucisses
près d'une maison infâme
d'Athènes, et des filles de joie
qui trempaient leurs doigts au
Pirée dans la sauce de ses tripes.
A un tel point de vue, vos ruffians

semblent ni moins utiles ni moins
 respectables que le chef de l'Etat.
 . . . Imaginez que la ressemblance
 est le langage intellectuel des
 différences, que les différences
 sont le langage sensible de la
 ressemblance. Sachez que tout en ce
 monde n'est que signes, et signes de
 signes.⁶⁹

It remains for me to render more precise the determining characteristics of the decadent metaphor in its transgressive identity. As I have already mentioned, some examples of the mask/metaphor which had become habitual even before the decadence, and of which the period adopted the usage without changing too much their essential features, include the theatrical masks and the majority of the masks of the ball, the carnival and the criminal. The decadence, as I will demonstrate, avails itself of these motifs in order to arrive at its own primary goals--terror, vertigo, pity, sexual irony or ambiguity--without perverting to too great a degree its accepted usage and essence, often without "deviating" in any radical way from the function dictated by the tradition of Italian comedy, cloak-and-dagger romanticism, or simply stories of brigands and highwaymen.

But in order to distinguish the metaphors of paradoxical innovation from the shopworn metaphors of the decadence, with its imitative and minor-variation spirit, it will be necessary to note the characteristics proper to the deviant metaphor as cited by Emile Benveniste. Moreover, it should be noted that the decadent masks are decadent precisely to

the degree they are perverse.

A prime example of a theatrical mask that "perversely" comes to enact historical crime is found in Lorrain, in his collection of poetry titled Les Griseries (1887). Set against backgrounds of fêtes galantes, reworked after the eighteenth-century fashion, several scenes are created in high rococo style, wherein young women and young men, sometimes made-up if not masked, divert themselves while wearing theatre costumes. The park in the moonlight expressionistically reflects alternately the hidden will or desires of the characters and of nature. Lorrain's masks here are seemingly clichés borrowed from the pictorial tradition of Fragonard or Watteau, but in some of the poems in this collection the mask plays a role more important than that of a simple detail of decor. In the poem "Rocailles," for example, the moon is presented simultaneously as the main character in the scene and as an emblem, a symbol for the artificial world that exists between the disguises and their reflections. Let us not forget, furthermore, that the moon itself reflects its pale light, without being its source:

. . . La lune à travers les quinconces
erre, illuminant les ronces
Du parc, illustre endormi

Et le bassin des Rocailles,
Où rôde un reflet ami,
Songe, dans l'ombre à demi
Plongé, de l'ancien Versailles

Fille et soeur des dieux augustes,

La lune en domino blanc
 Glisse et d'un baiser tremblant
 Effleure en passant les bustes70

The moon appears masked in several poems in Les Griseries; this figure itself becomes an expected metaphor, even a worn out one, in Lorrain. But the most interesting mask of the collection is the one borne by the "étrange et sinistre" character who threatens Pierrot in the short play, "La Damnation de Pierrot." This mask is equivocal in his air of menace and seduction. He is "drapé d'un grand manteau . . . [et] sous son loup de satin luisent deux yeux de faune."71

The surprising element in all of this, however, is the role played by Pierrot as a witness to the change brought by History, in this case by the French revolution. This incarnation depicts a Pierrot face to face with social and historical injustice, and the masked man has the task to show him the (masked) reality of the spectacle of Cydalise and of Léandre guillotined by "the people." The man in the satin loup must unveil for him the "reality" of real life, in the park which is at the mercy of death and history. He states:

Vois, la rougeur s'éteint à l'horizon sanglant
 Et, blanche comme toi dans son domino blanc,
 Vois monter au ciel bleu la reine des fées72

And Pierrot speaks to the moon as:

. . . l'adorée,
 Ô lune, ô confidente à la face nacrée73

But this face is masked, and after having undergone the vision of the decapitated lovers, Pierrot exclaims, "O bon roi Louis Seize!", to which the masked man replies:

La rime juste et bonne en est quatre-vingt-treize.
Brisés les bleus trumeaux, les Watteau, les Lancret.
Du pays des baisers au pays de regret
Il suffit d'un Marat pour faire le voyage!
A Paris maintenant, au Présent.⁷⁴

The metaphoric function of the theatrical mask has here been adapted to a play of disguises rather historical than psychological. Pierrot, tracked by an historic truth, watches his naive illusions disappear, themselves unmasked beneath the pale light of his "former confidante" the moon, herself masked and transformed like the spirit of Pierrot.

A more striking case, perhaps, of this deviation of the metaphor is found in the frame of the criminal mask. For there exists a close relation between the stories of Marcel Schwob, where we witnessed the function of the criminal mask per se, and those of Jean Lorrain. For the latter, the mask as a means of crime attains a metaphoric level spectacular in its simplicity.

This intertextual relationship between Schwob and Lorrain is established at the beginning of the story "Masques de Londres et d'ailleurs," in Lorrain's collection Le Vice Errant (1902):

C'est bien un décor de square
anglais qu'on voudrait pour cette

scène. Londres, les crimes, les nuits et les masques de Londres! Marcel Schwob ne vous a jamais raconté l'histoire de ces cadavres masqués du quartier des Docks, au bord de la Tamise? Elle eût figuré avec honneur dans son Roi au masque d'or, mais il a négligé de l'y mettre.⁷⁵

Furthermore, at the end of the tale, the narrator's interlocutor cries out, "'Ce serait du bon Poe, si ce n'était du bon Schwob.'" And the narrator, with a wink at the reader, states that "'Et ce sera du Lorrain puisque je vous l'ai contée.'" ⁷⁶

Briefly, the English find themselves with an abundance of cadavers on their hands, murder victims found in the poor or working quarters. The bodies are not marked with any trace of violence or aggression. When the victims are no longer the poor of the neighborhood, smelling of wine or garlic, but the well groomed rich, the smell of chloroform around their corpses is remarked and the police begin their inquiry in earnest. At this moment a cadaver is discovered wearing a wax mask very well modeled and resembling a human visage fast asleep. Lifting the mask, the police discover the cause of death: stuffed into the mask is a large wad of cotton, chloroformed, by which the victim is killed without violence. Investigators learn that witnesses believed they had seen several trios of men crossing the bridges of the neighborhood, those on each side holding the man in the middle up and helping him to walk, all of which had created

the impression of two friends helping a drunk on his way home.

Literally, then, the mask serves here as the instrument of the crime: it is more dangerous than a knife or pistol, moreover, because it is highly clandestine and discreet, even unto invisibility:

C'était toujours le même masque de
cire hermétique et clos, sans
ouvertures à la place des yeux et
à celle des lèvres et plein
d'ouate imbibée de chloroforme;
masque d'une insignifiance rare,
visage de pleutre ou d'honnête
homme qui n'en contenait pas moins
la mort.⁷⁷

I have already discussed the mask/metaphor worn by the criminal himself in Schwob, the efficacy of which is derived from its visual and hypnotic side. It serves as an accessory to the crime, impregnated with a psychological and destructive power. In Lorrain's version here, however, the metaphor accomplishes a sort of perversion by becoming the means of the crime placed on the face of the victim, not the criminal. This perverted metaphor would have been "du bon Schwob," the narrator himself tells us, if it had not become "du bon Lorrain."

In this fashion, still according to Benveniste,⁷⁸ the accuracy of the traditional metaphor becomes, with the decadents, sheer excess; clarity becomes ambiguity or doubt; nobility becomes abjection or ignominy, the natural character

or personality becomes the character à rebours, and coherence becomes fragmentation. This last quality might even be translated into terms of health (coherence or integrity of being) and illness (the decline of the organism, the necessity of nutritive enemas, etc.).

In order to distinguish more clearly the mercurial nature of the paradoxical metaphor, Max Black's idea seems pertinent here:

. . . Il est plus éclairant de dire
que c'est la métaphore qui crée la
ressemblance, plutôt que la
métaphore ne formule quelque
ressemblance existant auparavant.⁷⁹

These resemblances are found in portraits.

When Félicien Rops, in the engraving "Hypocrisie,"⁸⁰ lifts the domino from the visage of the woman in order to put it on her buttocks, he creates a movement of resemblance instead of repeating one. Moreover, there is a certain clarity (the mask as object one puts upon the face) that becomes in this movement obscurity (why, and how, would one want to mask someone's buttocks?); there is even a certain precision which is transformed into excess. In order to account for this movement more explicitly, let us now compare "Hypocrisie" with another engraving by Rops, very similar to the first, titled "La Pudeur de Sodome."⁸¹

Here we find the same buttocks masked with the same domino, but in this case the artist complicates the



Figure 9 Félicien Rops, "Hypocrisie" 80



Figure 10 Félicien Rops, "La Pudeur de Sodome"⁸¹

correspondance between buttocks/face by adding other "masking" elements: a blindfold on the eyes of the woman, a sliding curtain which hides her from the piercing gaze of the idol, and a fan that covers simultaneously part of one buttock and part of the domino. Behold the living metaphor of the Decadence: the characteristic and natural mask, already deviated by placing it on the buttocks, is once again perverted or deviated, by redoubling the masks on the masks and veils on the thing already hidden.

At the same time, it seems that the function of the mask as metaphor, as seen in the works of Rops, depends directly on the "frame" or the context of the work of art. Max Black writes that, "Par un effet de filtre, . . . ou d'écran, 'la métaphore supprime certain détails, en accentue d'autres, bref organise notre vision de l'homme.'"82 This effect emerges very clearly in the series of illustrations for Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in which Aubrey Beardsley avails himself of several metaphoric masks which serve to "organize" the vision of the figure in the frame of the work itself.

For example, in the two versions of "La Toilette de Salome," the coiffeur is masked. But the first version, judged obscene because of several sexual and symbolic elements incorporated in the plan, shows him bearded and refined, thin, young and elegant.⁸³ His mask seems to hide him from his female client, herself half naked and surrounded by a group of youthful servants who seem to manifest a

penchant for auto-eroticism. The second version, however, shows an elegant, clothed Salome in a dress markedly "fin de siècle" in style, but in this case the censor has succeeded in suppressing all the ironic and masturbatory elements from the first version, except the mask of the coiffeur.⁸⁴ This latter character, however, has undergone a striking transformation: while he is still masked, his face has changed a great deal. No longer bearded, neither is he thin; he has become ugly, old and deformed, and on his face (or the part of it still visible) we glimpse several warts.

In these two versions, the mask serves to inform the coiffeur's appearance and to define his relation with Salome: uncensored, the mask seems almost emblematic of decadent finesse and refinement; censored, it cannot veil the bleak grotesquerie of the now-vacant scene. The mask is more than a symbol; it is a paradoxical metaphor without which the second version, with the other symbolic or allegorical elements of the first version suppressed, could no longer function.

It is perhaps more difficult to demonstrate the existence of a paradoxical mask in another illustration from the Salome series, "Enter Herodias."⁸⁵ First, almost all the pictorial elements are allegorical, which modifies the "frame" of the metaphor. According to Brian Reade, for example, the figure of Oscar Wilde in the foreground holds:

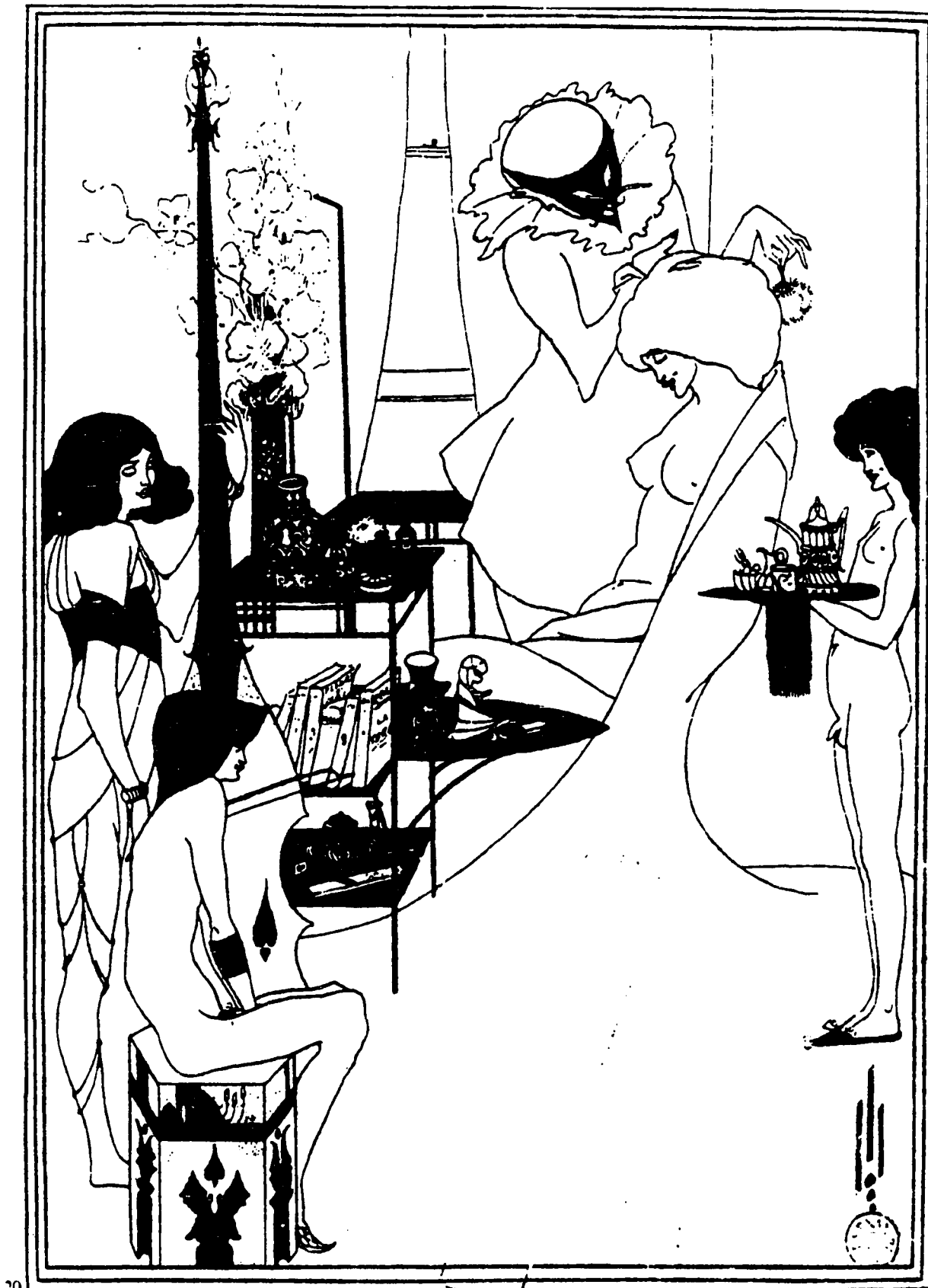


Figure 11 Aubrey Beardsley, "La Toilette de Salome" (I)83



Figure 12 Aubrey Beardsley, "La Toilette de Salome" (II) 84



Figure 13 Aubrey Beardsley, "Enter Herodias"85

. . . his caduceus [which] is also a crutch, because he leans on a gospel of 'curing the soul by means of the senses, and curing the senses by means of the soul.'86

The figure on the left, deformed and monstrous, personifies lust; his swollen member, in terms of visual composition, corresponds to the feminine symbol of the vaginal, flaming taper. The young man on the right, who has removed his mask and holds it before the audience, reveals his sexual organs in an unexcited state. He does so in an allegorical fashion while gazing upon the breasts, supposedly vertiginous, of the femme fatale to his right. I will not attempt to resolve once and for all the question of the problematic relation between metaphor and allegory here. Although a similar effect of genital masking-by-superimposition is at work in "Enter Herodias," as in previous examples by Rops, it might be argued that the "frame" of this particular illustration creates a role for the mask too shopworn, too narrowly symbolic to be classed among the truly paradoxical decadent masks.

This is not the case, however, for the illustrations made by Beardsley for Lysistrata (1896). Here, the metaphor has deviated to such a degree from the literal or expected sense of the mask that it is possible for the mask to disappear completely from the illustration. Startlingly, almost invisibly, it will be replaced by another figure: the masculine member which will in its turn function

metaphorically as a "mask" for its bearer, a mask that reveals more than it hides.

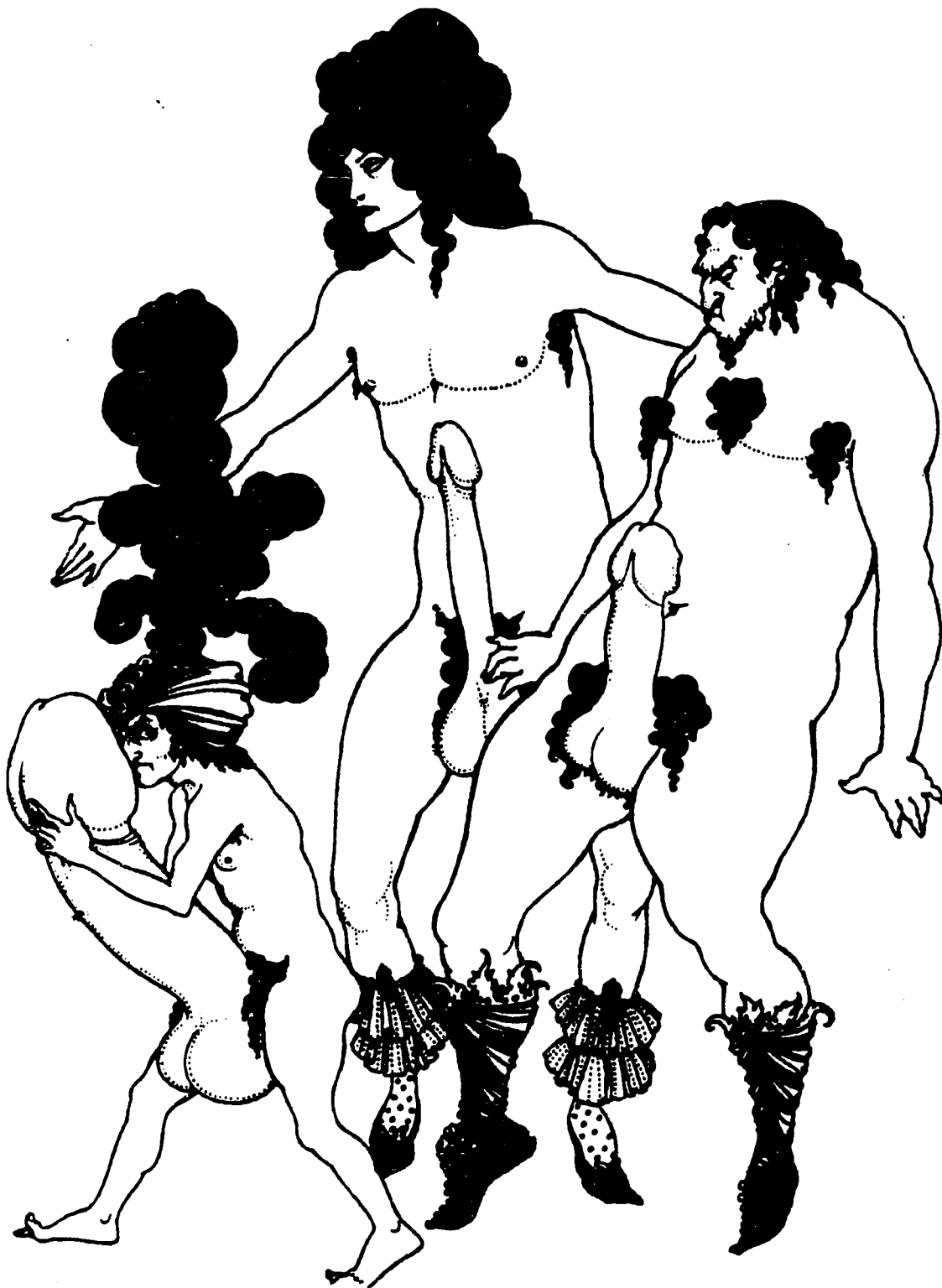
In the case of "The Examination of the Herald,"⁸⁷ for example, the compositional rapport between this swollen and exaggerated member and the face of its bearer is visually established: the pubic hairs that surround the genitals have the same visual rhythm, the same outline as the hair surrounding the face; moreover, the composition of the entire picture traces a curved line that rises from the legs and which directs itself toward the top of the erect penis lightly touched by the finger (and the face!) of the old man doing the examining. This line crosses the herald's face up to the moving feather on his cap, which in its turn suggests the potential movement of the character: ejaculation. The head of the herald's member has become his revealing mask; this metamorphosis is so well masked, moreover, that the character no longer has any need whatsoever for a mask of cardboard or of silk.

The same metaphor, or metaphoric function, seems to be in effect in Beardsley's "The Lacedaemonian Ambassadors."⁸⁸ The plume of the deformed dwarf is, in this case, as exaggerated as his member, which in its turn is almost as large as his entire body. The virile dwarf even gives the impression of wanting to hide his face behind his enlarged penis, no doubt to hide his ugliness. His ferocious and fearsome eye seems to fix us in its gaze. The character on



AUBREY BEARDSLEY

Figure 14 Aubrey Beardsley, "The Examination of the Herald" '87



AUBREY BEARDSLEY

Figure 15 Aubrey Beardsley, "The Lacedaemonian Ambassadors" 88

the right regards his own member with a mistrusting look; he realizes that he is at the same time endowed with a mask perfectly appropriate for his ugliness and his lust, but that he is cursed at the same time to be under the sway of its power, its will and its primordial spell.

By taking up again and accentuating the same play upon the pubic hairs and the hair around the face, Beardsley produces an effect of masks which, once again, are neither of silk nor cardboard, but of flesh. These are the paradoxical and unexpected masks of the decadence, gifted with all the "good" metaphoric qualities: that of precision become excess (the exaggerated member) and that of coherence become fragmentation (the member precedes, even hides the man); simultaneously, they are and they create the living metaphor of decadence. As Tzvetan Todorov writes, "La figure est ce qui fait paraître le discours en le rendant opaque. . . . "89 The mask/metaphor makes decadent discourse appear by complicating, by piling up its significations on a multi-valent plan, until the level of rebus or insoluble puzzle is attained, up to the moment when the mask itself disappears in paradoxa.

III.3 Transcendence and Aesthetic Transgression:

Centrality of the Abstracted Mask

"The hero of modernity designates contemporary society as a tribe of primitives."

--Michel Serres, "The Apparition of Hermes: Don Juan"

"Qu'importe ta bêtise ou ton indifférence? Masque ou décor, salut! J'adore ta beauté!"

--Baudelaire, "L'Amour du Mensonge"

"The final revelation is that Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of art."

--Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying"

In the Salon de 1859, Charles Baudelaire remarks, with regard to the statue that serves him as a model for "Le Masque" (poem XX of Les Fleurs du Mal), one characteristic of the metaphor which I have attempted to describe from the standpoint of its aesthetic procedures and prerogatives:

Dans cet ouvrage, tout est charmant et robuste. Le caractère vigoureux du corps fait un contraste pittoresque avec l'expression mystique d'une idée toute mondaine, et la surprise n'y joue pas un rôle plus important qu'il n'est permis (emphasis added).⁹⁰

Surprise, which is another way to describe the movement of the living metaphor, is all the more surprising to the degree that it does not attract too much attention to itself. It is "good" in the same way that an actor is "good," on

condition that he not "act too much." The mask, like the actor, like the living metaphor, is forced to mask itself; the aesthetic values which present themselves masked must be, in the Decadence, reworked and reshaped all the way to pure paradox. This paradox, like any "reality," must undergo its own movement toward its opposite, above all if it is too facile. If it partakes, in its form or its content, of the mannerisms or of the "bric-a-brac" of any aesthetic "movement" at all, it must pass through this fluid and complementary tension. For such a proliferation of masks, veils, fans, greasepaints, poisons, decollated heads and heads of hair indicates a certain universality, a pandemic presence, which Baudelaire noticed in the same Salon:

Ce qui avait d'abord enchanté vos
yeux, c'était un masque, c'était
le masque universel, votre masque,
mon masque, joli éventail dont une
main habile se sert pour voiler aux
yeux du monde la douleur ou le
remords.⁹¹

"Le Masque: Statue Allégorique Dans Le Goût de la Renaissance" is a crucial moment in the expository sub-cycle of poems (itself crucial architecturally) treating beauty in Spleen et Idéal.⁹² Placed in the 1861 edition immediately before the hinge poem "Hymne à la Beauté," the poem effects a synthesis of the two types of ideal woman posited in the sub-cycle itself: the angel and the siren. The first poem of the sub-cycle, "La Beauté" (XVII), depicts the angel of

unapproachable femininity in terms very important for the present inquiry. The figure of beauty addresses humankind ("ô mortels") from an unassailable position, based on some essence indistinguishable from matter (ll. 1-4). The second quatrain establishes, with her claim that she never cries or laughs, her angelic status ("Je trône dans l'azur . . . ") and her impassibility. The tercet echoes her status as a manifestation of matter, claimed in the opening line ("comme un rêve de pierre") in terms of the "plus fiers monuments," from which she borrows her "grandes attitudes" (l. 9). Her vision, itself the object of the "austères études" of poets, takes the form of two distorting mirrors, figures of infinite amelioration:

Car j'ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,
De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles:
Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!⁹³

We have already seen how the tragic inter-subjectivity of Baudelaire's architectural strategy is established in the succeeding poem, "L'Idéal" (XVIII); within the sub-cycle, however, it is important to note that the feminine ideal posited here takes on its identity within the second term of the female antinomy: the siren in the succeeding poem, "L'Idéal." For Lady Macbeth, "âme puissante au crime" (l. 10), emerges in the first tercet as the positive solution to the negative versions of beauty established in the quatrains (that is, the "vignettes, . . . né[e]s d'un siècle vaurien"

which will never satisfy the poet's heart, and the "beautés d'hôpital" among which the poet cannot discern "Une fleur qui ressemble à [son] rouge idéal"). Lady Macbeth in turn gives way to the figure of Night, the supreme siren of art and myth depicted as an odalisque in the final lines ("Qui tors paisiblement dans une pose étrange/Tes appas façonnés aux bouches des Titans.") In this figuration of the Ideal, the tragic figure of the siren--endowed with mythic, "titanesque" criminality--assumes an iconography resolutely equal, in size and scope, to the image of the more ethereal, less corporeal image of the transcendental angel of Beauty.

The succeeding poem, "La Géante" (XIX) refigures this operative antinomy by marking a passage from the monstrous siren ("une jeune géante," "une reine") toward the pacific, even "angelic" calm of embodied landscape. The poet would have liked, in the mysterious lost age in which the poem is set ("Du temps que la Nature . . . Concevait chaque jour des enfants monstrueux" ll. 1-2), to:

Dormir nonchalamment à l'ombre de ses seins,
Comme un hameau paisible au pied d'une montagne.⁹⁴

This first glimpse of synthesis between the two poles of ideal beauty prepares, then, the mirrored version of this passage depicted in "Le Masque." The synthesis of angel and siren, itself dramatized in this key poem, also marks a telling moment of fusion between the figure of the mask and

the aesthetics of inter-subjective transgression central to my inquiry here.

In "Le Masque," Baudelaire interrogates the identity of the first-person pronoun by means of the Other. "Qu'est-ce que signifient," asks Simone Delesalle, "ces emplois de 'tu', 'vous', 'nous', au fil des poèmes, quelles sont les lignes de force de leur distribution en face du 'je' à la fois triomphant et vaincu?"⁹⁵ She further remarks that the poet frequently effects a passage, "à l'intérieur du même poème, d'une adresse au genre humain à un dialogue intérieur, de l'évocation d'un personnage à celle d'un paysage ou d'une abstraction,"⁹⁶ both of which insights pertain to the poems leading up to and the poem following "Le Masque." This is also the case, perhaps most significantly, within "Le Masque" itself.

With the opening line, the poet implicates a plurality of observers, both (or all) determined by the first-person plural imperative:

Contempons ce trésor de grâces florentines;
 Dans l'ondulation de ce corps musculeux
 L'élégance et la Force abondent, soeurs divines.⁹⁷

Once again posited as an antinomy (i.e., the aesthetic qualities of elegance and strength figured as "soeurs divines"), the figure of ideal beauty here partakes of a determined synthesis of the two roles established within the sub-cycle; like the figure of Beauty in poem XVII ("La

Beauté), this masked statue is also "un rêve de pierre" (l.1), but this time literally rather than figuratively. She also shares some qualities with the angel, but this time they are "miraculously" grafted onto the figure of the siren:

Cette femme, morceau vraiment miraculeux,
Divinement robuste, adorablement mince,
Est faite pour trôner sur des lits somptueux,
Et charmer les loisirs d'un pontife ou d'un prince.⁹⁸

Baudelaire even chooses the same verb ("trôner," "to reign, to be supreme, as on a throne") for the angel/siren as he had used for the unmitigated angel of "La Beauté." There, she reigns in the azure realms; here, in "lits somptueux."

The face of the statue, described in the imperative to some second person observer ("--Aussi vois ce souris fin et voluptueux," l. 8) speaks to "us" in terms of the very abstractions which inform the proud independence of the siren: every line of her face says, "'La Volupté m'appelle et l'Amour me couronne!'" (l. 12). The viewer is drawn to further investigation, and the two imperatives previously used--in the "tu" and "nous" forms--are restated in successive lines:

Vois quel charme excitant la gentillesse donne!
Approchons, et tournons autour de sa beauté.⁹⁹

The ensuing revelation of statuesque duality is a "blasphème de l'art," a "surprise fatale," and the monstrous element of the siren/landscape in the preceding poem ("La

Géante") is refigured here as a "monstre bicéphale" (i.e., the siren) which gives the lie to the "corps divin" (angel) initially admired by the viewers. The speaker exclaims, again directing the gaze of the Other:

Mais non! ce n'est qu'un masque, un décor suborneur,
Ce visage éclairé d'une exquise grimace,
Et, regarde, voici, crispée atrocement,
La véritable tête, et la sincère face
Renversée à l'abri de la face qui ment.100

The angelic face of this allegorical figure reveals a flow of tears which, the speaker claims, finds its way to his "coeur soucieux" (l. 26); the lie of the angel, subordinated within the triumph of the siren, provides consolation, even aesthetic inebriation, to the poet, who exclaims:

Ton mensonge m'enivre, et mon âme s'abreuve
Aux flots que la Douleur fait jaillir de tes yeux!101

There follows a crucial, even critical moment for the entire ensemble of Les Fleurs du Mal. On this question of pronouns and direct address by the poet, Simone Delesalle states that Baudelaire, throughout Les Fleurs, "ne s'adresse jamais à un homme qu'en l'appelant 'lecteur', c'est à dire participant provisoire de son opération alchimique."102 However, "Le Masque" ends with a dialogue in which the poet addresses the "tu," previously implicated in the imperatives, as an "insensé," a male onlooker whose response to the drama-in-stone before them is insufficiently coherent, rendering him thus "insensé"--insane, absurd, extravagant.

Foiled by the perfect beauty of the siren, the addressee had asked the poet in direct discourse why she is in tears, she who, in her capacity of siren, ". . . mettrait à ses pieds le genre humain vaincu" (l. 30).¹⁰³

The poet responds by asserting the "humanity" of the figure, neither angel nor siren but both, grafted onto a bicephalic form tragically subject to the exigencies of the past and the pain of the future, "living" and therefore human:

--Elle pleure, insensé, parce qu'elle a vécu!
Et parce qu'elle vit! Mais ce qu'elle déplore
Surtout, ce qui la fait frémir jusqu'aux genoux,
C'est que demain, hélas! il faudra vivre encore!
Demain, après demain et toujours! -- comme nous!¹⁰⁴

The speech of the interlocutor and the play of personal pronouns here marks a significant, if not unique, moment in the ensemble of Les Fleurs du Mal. As Eric Gans states, "La fraternité est élément à la fois du contenu et de la forme de la poésie baudelairienne: le poète dit 'nous' à la fois pour exprimer cette fraternité et pour la créer."¹⁰⁵ The fraternal resemblance between the poet and the "hypocrite lecteur" implied in the prefatory poem is here mise-en-scène in a context of masked difference and monstrous beauty, "living" in time yet immobilized in a "dream of stone." Baudelaire's irony here derives from his search for the Ideal (Beauty) within the realm of the concrete, which search in effect seeks what Gans calls "une

Différence coupable."¹⁰⁶ The possibility of romanticist bonheur is purely imaginary, furthermore, and therefore inauthentic ". . . car l'imaginaire du Moi comporte l'exclusion factice des Autres."¹⁰⁷ By his ironic assertion of the "authentic" artificiality contained within the "inauthentic" imaginary of "Le Masque," Baudelaire's aesthetic practice moves toward the Other and subtly evokes the poet's representative status (for himself as legislator, law-bringer) with regard to humanity at large.

"Ainsi l'expérience baudelairienne ne privilégie pas le poète," writes Gans; "elle typifie dans son insuffisance même l'expérience de tout le monde, l'impossibilité d'un soin vraiment efficace pour un autrui égal à soi-même."¹⁰⁸ As we saw in Chapter II, the double postulation drives Baudelaire's aesthetic practice along the axis of Difference and Identity with protean ease, moving mercurially in the socially significant, densely populated tragic scene of moral synaesthesia. The spiritual and linguistic energies thus mobilized "produit chez Baudelaire un état d'équilibre où le travail poétique . . . doit compenser la culpabilité de la Différence expérientielle."¹⁰⁹ Baudelaire's practice, and by extension his aesthetic theory (both so coherent, if so highly paradoxical), remains a poetry of disillusion,¹¹⁰ yet is at the same time:

. . . vraiment fraternelle en ce
qu'elle met la Différence que

confère la parole poétique au service de la démystification de toute Différence. Aussi Baudelaire peut-il enfin dans 'Le Voyage' qui clôt Les Fleurs du mal servir d'un Nous qui inclut pleinement le lecteur jusqu'à l'expulsion absolue du Je.¹¹¹

In a footnote to his essay, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," Walter Benjamin provides a sudden flash of insight into the poet's necessarily masked aesthetic:

Beauty can be defined in two ways: in its relationship to history and to nature. In both relationships the semblance, the problematic element in the beautiful, manifests itself. . . . Beauty in its relationship to nature can be defined as that which 'remains true to its essential nature only when veiled.' The correspondances tell us what is meant by such a veil. . . .¹¹²

Benjamin further states that this veil might be called the "reproducing aspect" of the work of art and notes that the "correspondances constitute the court of judgment before which the object of art is found to be a faithful reproduction--which, to be sure, makes it entirely problematic."¹¹³ For Baudelaire, and for the decadents after him, the first aspect of beauty--i.e., history or tradition, is just as difficult as the second aspect: Nature, the disquieting realm of correspondances wherein all is necessarily masked.

The universe itself, then, is masked and hidden away; if

one desires to draw nearer to its deceptive "reality," one must avail oneself of the same sort of metaphor (masks upon masks) in order to recreate it in its own hidden and deceptive image. If one need further demonstration that this state of affairs be historically and socially, rather than merely "aesthetically" determined, I turn once again to Nietzsche, who asserts in 1886:

A man whose sense of shame has some profundity encounters his destinies and delicate delusions, too, on paths which few ever reach and of whose mere existence his closest intimates must not know: his mortal danger is concealed from their eyes, and so is his regained sureness of life. Such a concealed man who instinctively needs speech for silence and for burial in silence and who is inexhaustible in his evasion of communication, wants and sees to it that a mask of him roams in his place through the hearts and heads of his friends. . . . Every profound spirit needs a mask: even more, around every profound spirit a mask is growing continually, owing to the constantly false, namely shallow, interpretation of every word, every step, every sign of life he gives.¹¹⁴

"Human nature" is masked in language; history, therefore, and Nature, too, are masked. According to one of the interlocutors in Oscar Wilde's "The Decay of Lying," nature exists only à rebours; she is our creation, ours alone. Wilde chooses precisely the fog, one of the veils of nature, as a metaphor for this human and artistic act of

creation:

At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects.115

One even has the right to cast doubt upon the existence of natural phenomena because of the primacy of Art as veil, as lie, as revelatory deception:

There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them.116

Ultimately, the power of the metaphor, above all of the shopworn metaphor which approaches the category "trope-catachresis," should not be abused, at risk of one's health:

Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. Where the cultured catch an effect, the uncultured catch cold.117

Clearly, the fogs, veils and masks can manifest themselves in representation and in life in too "reflective" and literal a fashion, exaggerated in an "unhealthy" realism against which Wilde never ceased to protest. These are the interminable Harlequins of which Jean Lorrain complains, and even

Lorrain's own mannerisms complained about by Mario Praz, not without reason.

In procedural terms, the mask/metaphor serves the decadent sensibility as an object to "discover," according to the idea of Monroe Beardsley:

La chose essentielle . . . est de
découvrir un objet . . . autour
duquel il rassemble un ensemble de
relations qu'on peut apercevoir en
tant que rassemblées, grâce à
leur intersection dans cet objet. 118

The decadent mask, as just such an object, serves to unleash this "discovery" by means of its metaphoric functioning; at the same time, its cumulative effect in the diverse works of the period creates a metaphor for transgression itself. This is made possible by conjoining "timeless" beauty with historical exigency.

Indeed, in the catalogue of nineteenth-century literary obsessions there exists a tendency called by Peter Brooks "hyper-retrospectivity,"¹¹⁹ which denotes precisely the forcing of the mask of aesthetics onto the face of history (or even personal memory) in a sometimes-neurotic gesture of reconciliation through "rehearsal of the past" or repetition. The aestheticized re-writing of the past emerges in Walter Pater's Marius the Epicurean, for example, in a signal way; the "historical aesthetics" of the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood find echoes in much of the proto-symbolist writing of Flaubert (Salammô, La Tentation de Saint-Antoine,

"Hérodias") and, after him, of the decadent writers in general. By this "forcing" of the two beauties, history itself is masked by the continual, supremely paradoxical demystification and remystification of identity and difference by another involution of the veil.

In Benjamin's account, these aesthetic vacillations with regard to "nature," as the realm of correspondances, mark a radical refiguration of historical data in favor of the "data of remembrance" which is precisely ahistorical: i.e., ritual, "crisis-proof" synaesthetic aporia difficult of access in language. These "timeless" moments lend to Baudelaire's verse a "sense of measureless desolation" for Benjamin; the dandy, the one who is "past experiencing," finds little consolation in the feeling that he has been "dropped from the calendar."¹²⁰ From his vantage point of ultimate spleen, the "melancholy man sees the earth revert to a mere state of nature. No breath of prehistory surrounds it; there is no aura."¹²¹ The ritual associations with the mask in traditional cultures, as well as the early connection between Greek theatre and ritual practice, lend further resonance to the deep-structure centrality of the mask as a transgressive metaphor not only for the Decadence, but for all cultures.

Like the flourishing of photography, a development with which the proliferation of decadent masks is almost exactly contemporaneous, the crisis of this metaphor marks another

aspect of the crisis of aura and reflects the disappearance of cult value in the systemic destruction of difference notable across the nineteenth century. At the same time, the figure of the mask itself, as the bearer of some mysterious and mercurial quality of framing and de-framing, resembles in its procedures modernist abstraction and, as such, may be said to function in typically "modern" ways. For in its progress toward trope-catagoresis, it borders on the sort of abstraction--effected, for example, by a realignment (as in cubism) or sudden penetration (as in abstract expressionism) of the picture plane--which will be posited in the early years of this century.

Charles Altieri has recently written that modernist abstraction strategically emphasizes the "syntactic activity of a work of art" (as opposed to its "semantic activity," by which meanings are created and communicated) and thereby serves to confront the modern audience with a realm of representation in which the traditional thematic, psychological and interpretive concerns of post-Renaissance art are "bypassed."¹²² He hastens to emphasize that this program, enacted in abstract art, "is less an end in itself than the means for establishing a new kind of allegorical semantics."¹²³ Abstraction functions, then, both as a "negative force," capable of circumventing the conventional expectations associated by the audience with artworks, and as a "positive force" which adumbrates meaning within an

allegory of its own syntax.

Abstraction does not demand some difficult new sense of "participation" from the viewer where none had been before, however; rather, states Altieri, it substitutes one type of participation for another. It is as if the "characters" of figurative works step through the picture plane and sublimate new essences at the atomic level of elemental construction. "Instead of engaging our sympathy with the plight of particular agents, who are themselves largely defined by their social circumstances," Altieri states, ". . . these Modernist negations require us to locate the semantic force of the work in the distinctive compositional energies which maintain this allegorical site as something one cannot reduce to a perceptual field."¹²⁴ Faced with abstract art, the viewer must shift the ground upon which he makes the time-honored investments of emotional energy, sympathy, terror or pity classically demanded by the plight of characters in figurative situations. Instead of meditating upon "the qualities of interpreting those plights and circumstances which the artist exhibits," the viewer "must continue to posit metaphoric resonance for the concrete action of the [abstract] work while recognizing that the action resides primarily in the direct display of strange conjunctions between physical and mental properties."¹²⁵ The "utopia of the signified," to borrow a term from Eric Gans, so central to Baudelaire's poetics, shifts toward the "utopia of the

signifier" more strikingly characteristic, to take just one example, of the poetics of Mallarmé.¹²⁶

The decadent mask is a transgressive metaphor to the degree that it is an aesthetic vehicle which undermines its own vehicularity; it does so in its form (trope-catachresis) and in its content (criminal disguise, tool of crime, decollated or bicephalic locus of monstrosity, inter-subjective transgression). It serves as a proto-abstract motif because it proposes, like abstract art itself, "modes of thinking that can carry enormous scope," and it relies to a certain degree on its "elemental syntactic properties"¹²⁷ for sense- and myth-making: it bears within itself--or, perhaps more accurately, upon its own false face--its own picture plane. Unlike the more recent, more radically abstract forms of the twentieth century, however, the mask must draw upon a genealogy of what Altieri calls "the traditional dramatic, narrative and argumentative frameworks that have traditionally established the work's universalizing dimensions."¹²⁸ While modernist abstraction pursues its more purely syntagmatic referentiality in the light of a certain "reductiveness,"¹²⁹ the decadent mask still bears traces of the universalizing dimensions which inform the tragic and ritual scene of its origins.

Finally, modernist abstraction in its twentieth-century manifestations bears, as a sign of its reliance on its own syntax, "an adamant resistance to all received ethical forms

for those universals";¹³⁰ the decadent mask, in its relation to formal transgression and intersubjective criminality, also resists received ethical forms, but to a less "adamant" degree. The vestigial aura hovering around this "adventure of the face" for the Decadence still posits some classical form of transcendence, however paradoxical or unattainable. The mask, then, is the primary agent of the paradox of paradoxes for the fin de siècle: by its transgressions, it proposes transcendence. Both actions, or the collisions between them, are effected most powerfully by aesthetics; any possibility of effecting their mutual interpenetration in pragmatic reality (engagé) has been more or less abandoned. As we shall see in Chapter IV, however, this "abandonment" itself may be a mask, a desperate disguise applied to the most fervent spiritual and social yearnings.

Eric Gans situates Baudelairean signification at a sort of hinge point between the "utopies de l'imaginaire" of romanticism (signifié) and the "utopies du langage" of high symbolism (signifiant). He distinguishes the former by "son refus de se débarrasser de la textualité rhétorique ou logos classique,"¹³¹ which attachments Altieri has noted as sure to be adamantly broken by practitioners of modernist abstraction. Romanticists, however, engage rather in only a partial abolition of referents;¹³² such a transgression against traditional social and ethical referential systems is only possible, however, when it is "soutenu par une nouvelle

foi utopique."¹³³ This faith, moreover, ultimately transcends the poetic text, because "sa vérité . . . ne brise jamais la forme poétique utilisée paresseusement comme un outil hérité par le poète, qui ne s'aperçoit pas que cette forme ré-instaura le vieux monde au moment même où il tente de l'abolir."¹³⁴

By giving "Le Masque" the sub-title "Statue Allégorique Dans Le Goût de la Renaissance," Baudelaire acknowledges the continuing presence of traditional aesthetic and even ethical norms; at the same time, however, the ahistorical dandy derives delectation from the workings of a Beauty intimately tied to transgression and Difference, with a succeeding differentiation from Difference by means of identification ("Comme nous!"). As Gans states:

L'utopie romantique a beau se politiser, s'élancer vers l'universel, son universalisme apparent n'est que le signe d'une mauvaise conscience qui cherche à créer une communauté en multipliant les individus, tous simulacres du Moi originaire, jusque dans leur désir <<commun>> de se fondre dans un tout organique. . . . C'est l'imaginaire, par lequel l'utopie individuelle tente de se donner une respectabilité publique, qui nous la fait qualifier d'<<utopie du signifié>>.¹³⁵

Thus, even the community posited by decadent representation may be merely a disguised version of narcissistic grandeur, a masked replication of the Self in

search of a "public respectability" which is utopic precisely because of its impossibility. This, then, is a first glimpse of the grounds for the vertigo of self-deception so much explored by the younger generation of post-symbolists and post-decadents like Maurice Barrès, Romain Rolland and André Gide.

Eric Gans divides his version of romanticism into two periods, before 1848 and after 1848, which corresponds more or less to the dates by which we have navigated in the present inquiry, 1850-1851. But whatever year one chooses as the hinge date for these developments, the period of the decadence stands clearly in the path that leads from the "essentially Romantic project of cultural cure"¹³⁶ to the critique of such projects implied by the subsequent breakthroughs in modernist abstraction. The decadent and symbolist refigurations of the mask inherited from tradition exemplify the process by which a metaphor transcends itself, actually approximating the movement toward the syntactic epistemologies of non-figurative modernist abstraction. These movements occur almost imperceptibly, however, like some undersea tropism--from trope to tropism--but it seems clear that, for the decadence, the masked universe is a proto-abstract universe, dramatized in transgression in the name of transformation. For decadent reasoning states that in a criminal world, beauty is only possible in redemption; in a falsely moral world, redemption is only possible through

the aesthetic manipulation of beautiful-but-criminal objects. The crimes against nature, sufficiently masked in recognition of nature's own mask, aim at its re-creation; the crimes against the gods, sufficiently masked in recognition of their cosmological masks, aim fetishistically at their re-invocation; the crimes against humanity, sufficiently masked in recognition of the inter-subjective masks of mimetic desire, aim at its redemption. In the metaphor of the criminal mask, the decadent reveals the vestigial classicism which would invoke self-knowledge as the most sacred of laws.¹³⁷

In the face of the execrable century, however, such knowledge--for community as well as for the self--is made possible only by means of a manipulation of images of transgression against any "naive" version of Identity. The Platonic injunctions against confusing images of crime can only be heeded in the fin de siècle by breaking those aesthetic laws; a "higher legality," in the wake of criminal regimes (Second Empire, and the First Empire for that matter) or earnest apotheoses of Philistinism (Victorianism), is attainable for a certain part of the decadence by means of aesthetic transgression, or the artistic manipulation of criminal beauty.

"Against the background of an illusory, social totality, art's illusory being-in-itself is like a mask of truth," writes Adorno. This aesthetic wholeness stands, in its

supernatural negativity, as a would-be antithesis of a false social totality¹³⁸ in France and England in the latter half of the nineteenth century. I shall turn now to further inquiry into the grounds for these claims as evinced in a lecture sacrificielle of key works by Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde, two inverted ("criminal") redeemers for an "undeserving age."

NOTES TO CHAPTER III

1 Mario Praz, The Romantic Agony (New York: World, 1956), p. 351.

2 The following discussion of definitions based on Emile Littré, Dictionnaire de la langue française (Monte Carlo: Editions du Cap, 1968). All translations are my own.

3 Bourget, p. 28.

4 Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes, p. 17.

5 Marcel Schwob, Le Livre de Monelle, préface de Hubert Juin (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1979), p. 7.

6 Marcel Schwob, Le Roi au masque d'or, préface de Hubert Juin (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1979), p. 35.

7 George Trembley, Marcel Schwob, Faussaire de la nature (Genève: Droz, 1969), p. 18.

8 Trembley, p. 19.

9 Trembley, p. 20.

10 Trembley, p. 20.

11 Jean Lorrain, Princesses d'Ivoire et d'ivresse, postface de Francis Lacassin (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1980), p. 276.

12 Lorrain, p. 278.

13 Lorrain, p. 279.

14 Trembley, p. 30.

15 Brian Reade, Aubrey Beardsley (New York: Viking, 1967), plate 198.

16 Reade, plate 62.

17 Jean Lorrain, Le Vice errant (Paris: Lattès, 1980), p. 52.

18 Félicien Champsaur, Lulu (Paris: Fasquelle, 1901), p. 17.

- 19 Champsaur, p. 18.
- 20 Champsaur, p. 19.
- 21 Jean Lorrain, Histoires de masques, préface de Hubert Juin (Paris: Editions Belfond, 1968), p. 77.
- 22 Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin, Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis, U of Minnesota Press, 1984); cf. also Rabelais and His World, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968).
- 23 Jean Lorrain, Propos d'âmes simples (Paris: Ollendorff, 1904), p. 22.
- 24 Lorrain, Propos, p. 243.
- 25 Lorrain, Propos, p. 245.
- 26 Lorrain, Propos, p. 208.
- 27 Lorrain, Propos, pp. 209-210.
- 28 Gilbert Lascault, La Figure de la femme et la femme figurée (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1980), p. 120.
- 29 Félicien Rops, L'Oeuvre gravé de Félicien Rops (Paris: H. Veyrier, 1975), p. 159.
- 30 Lorrain, Masques, p. 48.
- 31 Lorrain, Masques, p. 48.
- 32 Lorrain, Masques, p. 49.
- 33 Lorrain, Masques, p. 47.
- 34 Marcel Schwob, Coeur double, préface de Hubert Juin (Paris: Union Générale d'Editions, 1979), p. 106.
- 35 Schwob, Coeur, p. 107.
- 36 Schwob, Coeur, p. 107.
- 37 Why Marcel Schwob, himself a descendant of an established, assimilated Jewish family, should name the ritualistic surrogate murderer by an approximation for the German word for Jew is an issue I intend to take up in a future work.
- 38 Schwob, Coeur, pp. 108-109.

- 39 Schwob, Coeur, p. 109.
- 40 René Girard, Violence and the Sacred (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), p. 44.
- 41 Girard, p. 45.
- 42 Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, Une Voiture de masques (Paris: Dentu, 1856), n. p.
- 43 René Maizeroy, Masques (Paris: Victor-Havard, 1887), p. 3.
- 44 Maizeroy, p. 73.
- 45 Maizeroy, p. 74.
- 46 Félicien Rops, The Graphic Works of Félicien Rops (New York: Léon Amiel, 1975), p. 120.
- 47 Reade, plates 480 and 481.
- 48 Paul Ricoeur, La Métaphore vive (Paris: Seuil, 1975), p. 24.
- 49 Ricoeur, p. 34.
- 50 Ricoeur, p. 39.
- 51 Ricoeur, p. 49.
- 52 Ricoeur, p. 39.
- 53 Ricoeur, p. 48.
- 54 Ricoeur, pp. 84-85.
- 55 Ricoeur, pp. 49-50.
- 56 Ricoeur, p. 51.
- 57 Cf. Léon Bloy, Le Salut par les Juifs (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1986).
- 58 Ricoeur, p. 73.
- 59 Ricoeur, p. 77.
- 60 Ricoeur, p. 77.
- 61 Oscar Wilde, Intentions, in The Artist As Critic:

Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde, ed. Richard Ellmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 323.

62 Trembley, p. 30.

63 Trembley, p. 33.

64 Trembley, p. 33.

65 Ricoeur, p. 83.

66 Oscar Wilde, The Annotated Oscar Wilde, ed. H. Montgomery Hyde (London: Orbis, 1982), p. 75.

67 Ricoeur, p. 39.

68 Ricoeur, p. 157.

69 Schwob, Le Roi, p. 43.

70 Jean Lorrain, Les Griseries (Paris: Tresse et Stock, 1887), p. 39.

71 Lorrain, Griseries, p. 69.

72 Lorrain, Griseries, p. 78.

73 Lorrain, Griseries, p. 79.

74 Lorrain, Griseries, p. 80.

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76 Lorrain, Vice, p. 63.

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Chapter IV

The Social Aesthetics of Corruption

"Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep,'--the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast,--. . .
Still it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house:
'Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more,--Macbeth shall sleep no
more!'"

Macbeth, II,2

IV.1 Huysmans and Wilde: Intertextuality of Murder and "Naturalism"

"L'art n'a rien à faire, -je le dis
haut et ferme, avec la pudeur et
l'impudeur. Un roman qui est
ordurier est un roman mal fait, et
voilà tout."

Joris-Karl Huysmans, "Emile
Zola et l'Assommoir" (1876)

"There is no such thing as a moral
or an immoral book. Books are well
written, or badly written. That is
all."

Oscar Wilde, "The Preface,"
The Picture of Dorian Gray (1891)

"All beautiful things belong to the
same age. . . . In a very ugly and
sensible age, the arts borrow, not
from life, but from each other."

Oscar Wilde, "Pen Pencil and
Poison: A study in green" (1889)

In May, 1883, Stéphane Mallarmé wrote to Joris-Karl
Huysmans to thank him for a presentation copy of the latter's

most recent work of art criticism, L'Art Moderne. In this letter Mallarmé playfully asks about "the noble gentleman, whom I often picture to myself in the midst of his books and flowers."¹ This fictional "noble gentleman," the duc Jean Floressas des Esseintes, was soon to appear on the stage of French letters as the hero of A Rebours, a novel composed during the course of 1883 and published in the Spring of 1884. The aesthetic principles of des Esseintes, so hermetic, so refined, so fatal, would diffuse themselves almost programmatically through the latter part of the decade and be taken up during the 1890's in a striking way in England by, perhaps most notably, Oscar Wilde in The Picture of Dorian Gray.² The intertextual relations between these two books, and the developments in the parallel lives of the two artists during the latter half of the last decade of the waning century, are especially pertinent to understanding the metamorphoses of aesthetics and crime in the period.

When Huysmans published A Rebours he was thirty-six years old and had been publishing his works for some fifteen years. It was the seven or eight years immediately preceding the year 1884, however, which determined his approach to phenomena as a writer. Although he had published art and theatre criticism and some Baudelairean prose poems, it was his meeting with Emile Zola that proved most important for his development up to the time of writing this novel, which Valéry would later call the Bible and "livre de chevet" of

the younger generation of decadents and symbolists. Moreover, the influence of this work was not limited to France, nor is it limited to the fin de siècle; as I shall demonstrate, these works state in a significant way the final paradoxical version of the classical antinomies of representation: to please and to teach, to "reflect" human actions and to normatively edify, to signify eternal beauty, or modern truth--or both.

The issue of art and morality, from the reception accorded Zola's first naturalist works in France to the reception in England of the "aesthetic movement," continued to obsess the period; as we saw in Chapter II, the civil charges of offenses against public morality brought earlier in France against Flaubert and Baudelaire for literary images were no mere illusion. The same issue emerges, with some startling twists, in light of the intertextual relations between Huysmans's version of aesthetic transgression and its reiteration in Wilde's novel. Clearly a leading proponent of French literature in Victorian England, and following the lead of his teacher, Walter Pater, Wilde posits Realism and Romanticism as antitheses in the preface to Dorian Gray, which antinomy had also played a crucial role in Huysmans's development as a novelist and his eventual aesthetic practice in A Rebours. Wilde states:

The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.

The nineteenth-century dislike of
Romanticism is the rage of Caliban
not seeing his own face in a glass.³

The mirror of art, in Wilde's antithesis here, is simultaneously both infinitely truthful (reflecting faithfully the face of the raging century) and infinitely deceptive (disguising or masking that same raging face). His aesthetic theory continually posits a space determined by beauty beyond the reach of the earnest criticism of moralizing, high-minded guardians of public virtue. Ironically, these "moralists" were more often than not representatives of the popular press, whose attacks on Wilde were triggered in large part by resentment over the author's "assertive familiarity with an aristocratic mode of life . . . which 'in reality' he did not enjoy."⁴

How is it, then, that Wilde's aestheticism relates to the work of Huysmans, the French naturalist/decadent, and what does it mean for the social issues at the core of the image of aesthetic criminality?

In 1876, Huysmans had published an exuberant, youthful statement of artistic purpose, "Emile Zola et l'Assommoir," in the Belgian journal l'Actualité, edited in Brussels by Camille Lemonnier.⁵ This long essay treats with characteristic generosity not only the individual novel mentioned in the title, but also presents a panorama of nineteenth-century literature up to Zola, a theoretical excursus on the tenets of Naturalism, a portrait of Monsieur

et Madame Zola at home, and an account of all the novels of Les Rougon-Macquart up to and including L'Assommoir.

Passages on the naturalist's version of "la langue populaire" spoken by the characters of the latest novel, to cite just one example among many other observations, are especially interesting now, in light of the criticism of abusing needlessly arcane and recherché vocabulary customarily brought against Huysmans and the decadents in general.⁶

The young disciple, who participated in Zola's circle and would later publish a short novel (Sac au dos) in the collective work that bore the title Les Soirées de Médan in 1880, takes great pains in this early essay to distance the naturalist school from the tradition of romanticist bohemianism and colorful, aggressively self-marginalizing artist/criminals so prevalent in nineteenth-century tradition. In fact, he asserts that this sub-class of "êtres extravagants," sprung forth from Théophile Gautier's scarlet waistcoat, have unfortunately assumed the status of legend in the minds of a misunderstanding public; later, with the appearance of Henri Murger's la Vie de Bohème (1849-50), the image of the artist as a disreputable, vaguely criminal type in the mind of the bourgeoisie grew even more dreadful: "quand parut la Vie de Bohème, tous les courtiers en pommades et en vins sentirent s'accroître encore leur monstrueuse horreur pour les écrivains et les peintres," he states.⁷ The tangled mane of Gautier and the

pointed beard of Pétrus Borel frightened the bourgeois families of France to such a degree that they "se seraient plutôt fait hacher en morceaux que de marier leur Hermance avec l'un de ces histrions barbus. . . . "8 By re-invigorating this mythology in La Vie de Bohème, states Huysmans, it is fair to say that "si jamais artiste s'est complu à traîner ses confrères dans la boue, c'est bien Henri Murger!"9

The young naturalist then calls for an end to these myths, especially an end to the popular caricatures of Emile Zola "costumé comme Mes Bottes et faisant saillir sous un feutre qui bat de l'aile une barbe parfumée d'absinthe et un nez fleuri de roses. . . . "10 Where the romanticists may have cultivated a sort of revolutionary or stylistic affinity with the "dangerous classes," states Huysmans, it is now time to recognize the scientific, sober and detached position of the naturalist school, especially as led by the Master. The popular derision heaped upon the "scabrous" naturalist is sheer hypocrisy, itself a product not only of the tradition of bohemian excess, but also of professional envy and literary competition: "L'hypocrisie a beau jeu en France;" he states, "quatre lignes sur la morale dont on trousse les jupes, et l'on a droit au prix Monthyon et au fauteuil vermoulu des Académies."11 To counter these misconceptions, maintained by bourgeois ignorance, journalistic pettiness and academic ill-will, Huysmans posits the image of Emile Zola

the Naturalist as a bourgeois à l'aise chez lui, the "'ventre cérébral'" with his wife, his piano, and his happily humming samovar, who receives once a week the young disciple/novelists characterized in the press as "cette bande des 'porcs, ces réalistes à quatre pattes', . . . ou bien les tueurs d'âme, les gens qui se préparent à faire leur petit Assommoir, comme les ont nommés des journaux graves."¹² Once again, Huysmans blames the popular press for associating the naturalist writers with their "low" subjects, instead of distinguishing between the writer/scientist and his "dangerous," criminal subject matter.

For the artist-as-naturalist, far from associating with his criminal subjects, now lives in sober, suburban bourgeois calm (in Zola's case, Batignolles) in order better to reflect on the dramas of transgression played out before him. Zola's studio, unlike the cluttered garret of the romanticist, contains "comme objets d'art, un paysage de Claude Monet, l'impressioniste, des chinoiseries et des jardinières en vieux cuivre rouge."¹³ Neither here, nor in the comfortable lodgings below, is there any sign of "ces chambres honteuses qui semblent désignées, par le public, comme le repaire des hommes de lettres, [dont] les murs soient tendus d'étoffes noires à larmes d'argent et agrémentés de têtes de mort et de tibias en sautoir."¹⁴ "Nous sommes loin," he concludes, "de 1830 et des farces lugubres inventées par les

romantiques!"¹⁵

The claim of the naturalists, as Huysmans goes on to elaborate in part II of the Zola essay, finally amounts to the claim made by most succeeding generations of artists: that is, the claim to a higher, more "real," realism. Citing the naturalist cenacle's preference for Balzac over Stendhal, Huysmans states that the difference between realism and naturalism has to do with depth: realism would consist, in the "most creditable" opinion, "à choisir les sujets les plus abjects et les plus trivials, les descriptions les plus repoussantes et les plus lascives, ce serait, en un mot, la mise au grand jour des pustules de la société."¹⁶

Naturalism, on the other hand, reflects unflinchingly the existence of these pustules, and is willing to show them in all their stark reality, yet with something more added to the whole. According to a statement by Zola the Master, Naturalism is "l'étude patiente de la réalité, l'ensemble obtenu par l'observation des détails," yet with this addendum: "J'ajouterai," states Huysmans:

". . . qu'il est difficile, en faisant une oeuvre vivante et vraie, de ne pas faire la morale. Le vice engendre son châtement lui-même, le dévergondage est plus puni par les suites qui en découlent que par les lois édictées contre lui:-- faire vrai, c'est faire moral."¹⁷

This certainty, of the ineluctable presence of moral

truth at the center of represented "reality," seems itself a paradoxical core at the heart of naturalistic procedures, especially given the scientific bases for many of Zola's theoretical statements. Once again, faced with the general incomprehension and hostility that greeted the appearance of L'Assommoir, Zola felt the need to express this operative morality at the center of the work categorically; as Huysmans relates it, Zola had stated that he wanted to paint "la déchéance fatale d'une famille ouvrière, dans le milieu empesté de nos faubourgs," and that his book is "de la morale en action simplement."¹⁸

The aesthetic of transgression in Zola's cycle of novels presents a topic in itself, one far too vast to enter into here. But as Michel Serres has demonstrated, thermodynamics may be the "law" at the center of a great deal of nineteenth-century narrative, and a steam engine may be said to circulate among the "hereditary flaws and murders"¹⁹ repeatedly depicted across the Rougon-Macquart twenty-volume series. In this model, the individual organism's relation to social life in Zola is depicted in a series of grills, each drawing its laws from the other: the genetic grill ("race," hereditary flaws, "decline") leads in the social context ("milieu," physical site) to the historically determined, steam-powered thermodynamic grill ("moment," with a built-in, positivist critique of the social costs of the industrial revolution), which in turn leads to the mythological grill,

whereby higher moral laws establish some "higher poetry," a sort of transcendental equilibrium in the face of systemic imbalance: ". . . in an aged Europe asleep beneath the mantle of reason and measure, mythology reappears as an authentic discourse," writes Serres on Zola's procedure.²⁰ As in Greek mythology, the race, moment et milieu of Zola's characters provide the requisite representational dynamism, or arena for transgression, as well as the requisite target zone in which transcendental (vertical axis) ethical value might land: "Thus the circumstance is the murder and the law is traced upon the ground."²¹ With this re-invention of mythological discourse in Zola, Serres specifies the nature of the moral center of Les Rougon-Macquart merely glimpsed by the disciple Huysmans. "Let us not forget," Serres concludes, "that Leibniz, proto-inventer of the new science, said in time and against his time that one should listen to old wife's tales."²²

Huysmans's account of the validity of the Master's procedure, along with the reasons behind his own defense of it, provide us with a contemporary context for what was to come after. Ultimately, Huysmans claims for Zola and for Naturalism a direct genealogy from Balzac to the degree that the "reflective" procedures of realism lie at the center of Naturalist procedure. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the disciple draws an important distinction between the hair-by-hair dissections of characters in the

"realism" of Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers, and the more "objective" aesthetic distance maintained by Zola in his relations to his characters. Unlike Flaubert, who stated, "Madame Bovary, c'est moi!", Zola's aesthetic theory allows him a broader canvas and therefore a psychological study "moins minutieuse et plus large," with less authorial implication in the psychology of his characters. Huysmans concludes:

Il possède selon moi une faculté
géniale: savoir créer un
personnage auquel il n'infuse aucune
idée qu'il ne saurait avoir; . . .
il ne prête à une femme du peuple
ni la façon de penser, ni la façon
de s'exprimer d'une femme d'un autre
monde; il ne l'affine ni ne
l'enjolive, et grâce à cette
méthode, il atteint ce but suprême
de l'artiste: la vérité, la
vie!²³

It might be expected that this state of discipleship and enthusiasm could not last forever, and the publication of A Rebours marks a turning point in Huysmans's relations with his avowed master. The year 1884 marks an important moment in the development of aesthetic theories which would pass under the various banners of Naturalism, Symbolism and Decadence. The novel contains chapters of extravagant praise of contemporary artists as perceived and appreciated by the other-worldly, supremely neurasthenic hero des Esseintes, including Baudelaire, Odilon Redon, Gustave Moreau, and the symbolist chieftain Mallarmé who, upon reading A Rebours,

wrote to the author this congratulatory and even grateful letter:

Here it is, the one book that had to be written--and how well you have written it!--at precisely this moment in our literary history! Considering it now as it lies on the table before me, its treasures of learning gathered together beneath my gaze, I really cannot imagine it other than it is;--yet you know how, in the hour of reverie after reading a book--even a work one admires--the mind almost always conjures up a different book. But no! here everything is as it should be, nothing is missing: scents, music, liqueurs, old books and books that almost belong to the future--not forgetting, of course the flowers!--all these form a complete picture of the paradise which sensation alone can offer a man in search of modern or primitive pleasures. . . .24

Mallarmé would go on to publish a poem in 1887 titled "Prose (pour Des Esseintes)," a difficult work of syntagmatic self-referentiality whose title means two things simultaneously: the poem is dedicated to the supreme Dandy des Esseintes, himself a fictional character--and is, at the same time, mere "prose" for his refined taste and intellect, where the difficulty of the piece renders it the least "prosaic" piece possible for the rest of us.25

Zola's reaction to A Rebours was, on the other hand, as Robert Baldick puts it, "chilly in the extreme."26 Zola seems to have been convinced that his disciple had wandered momentarily from the right path of Naturalism, yet would

surely return now that this unpleasantness was over. He wrote a letter to Huysmans from Médan in which he predicted (incorrectly) that A Rebours "will at least count as a curiosity among your other works."²⁷ Huysmans, on the other hand, in the preface written to the novel for a re-edition twenty years later, could, with the benefit of hindsight, proclaim that all his later works--including the Catholic novels--were contained "en germe" in A Rebours. Huysmans notes the choice presented to him by Barbey d'Aurevilly, the Catholic writer who, strangely enough, had previously offered the same alternative to Charles Baudelaire: "'Après un tel livre, il ne reste plus à l'auteur qu'à choisir entre la bouche d'un pistolet ou les pieds de la croix.'" Huysmans concludes this 1903 preface laconically: "C'est fait."²⁸

But in the Spring and Summer of 1884, Huysmans felt uneasy about offending his master. As Baldick tells it, "He therefore sought to reassure the older writer in a letter which combined genuine modesty with deliberate untruth."²⁹ He even went so far as to "hint that the entire novel was nothing more than a literary leg-pull."³⁰ The matter did not rest there, however, and the walk in the country with Zola upon Huysmans's next visit to Médan is recounted by the latter in the 1903 preface:

. . . with a frown [he] reproached me with this book, saying that I had delivered a terrible blow to Naturalism, that I was leading the school astray, that I was burning my

boats with such a novel, since no type of literature was possible in this genre, exhausted by a single volume; and amicably--for he was a good fellow--he urged me to return to the beaten track, and set to work on a novel of manners.³¹

Huysmans had to admit, face to face with the master, that Zola's petri-dish novels, and his theories, "'seemed . . . hackneyed, moribund, and--whether he liked it or not--totally lacking in interest.'"³²

The reasons behind this break are succinctly stated by A.E. Carter, who distinguishes between Zola's declining race of the Rougon-Macquart families and the truly decadent dandy des Esseintes, and touches upon a central feature of modernity and aesthetic transgression:

None of Zola's degenerates, not even Renée Saccard [in La Curée], has the self-conscious taste for corruption which distinguishes the true decadent. The active sadism of Jacques Lantier [in La Bête Humaine] is involuntary; he craves enormities not . . . as a means of procuring a fresh titillation of his senses or a supreme expression of his moi, but because he cannot help it, owing to the insanity he has inherited from Tante Dide and her drunkard lover. To some extent, heredity is proposed to explain Des Esseintes' perversities. But we tend to lose sight of this explanation as the novel progresses: his complicated anti-socialism and his sadistic debauches are not sufficiently attached to his family tree. The truth is that the literary schizophrenia . . . in decadent sensibility (love of the modern and hatred of the modern) had

grown too strong by 1884 to be
 ignored any longer. By isolating
 his hero, representing him as ' . . .
 vivant seul, loin de son siècle,
 dans le souvenir d'époques plus
 cordiales, de milieux moins vils,'
 Huysmans resolved the problem
 against the modern.³³

This "resolution against the modern" lies at the center of the concept I delineate here: aesthetic crime. For ultimately, "real" crime (sensed by the artists as endemic to the age) and the accompanying proliferation of criminal imagery engages Baudelaire and his spiritual descendants with all the fascination of the most powerful approach-avoidance problem possible. Like some gap in the gums, where one has just lost a tooth, the decadent tongue could not resist a continual probing of the imaginary life of such a phenomenally social element. The image of crime after 1850 bears simultaneously the deep, sombre, yet vivacious color of romanticist tradition and the stark, pustulent and unholy terror of "realist" depictions of social injustice and historical decline.

The wearying arguments over the "morality" of presenting images of criminals and criminal acts in literature in England surely contributed to Wilde's adoption of the French version of the problem rather than the British one, mired as it was in the interminable debates about social hygiene and prison reform. The power of Wilde's psychological insight, and the narcissistic dilemma at the center of his own

personality, rendered the terms of the "earnest" debate on crime in England utterly pointless and uninteresting. For the aesthete raised on Balzac, the rather bloodless disputes over the intentions of Bulwer-Lytton, Ainsworth and Dickens in their depictions of criminality were without life nor art. One can imagine Wilde's reaction to Dickens's preface to the 1841 edition of Oliver Twist, where Dickens explains the reasons for his choice of subject:

I had read of thieves by scores--
 seductive fellows (amiable for the
 most part), faultless in dress,
 plump in pocket, choice in
 horseflesh, bold in bearing,
 fortunate in gallantry, great at a
 song, a bottle, pack of cards or
 dice-box, and fit companions for the
 bravest. But I had never met
 (except in Hogarth) with the
 miserable reality. It appeared to
 me that to draw a knot of such
 associates in crime as really do
 exist; to paint them in all their
 deformity, in all their
 wretchedness, in all the squalid
 poverty of their lives; to show them
 as they really are, for ever
 skulking uneasily through the
 dirtiest paths of life, with the
 great, black, ghastly gallows
 closing up their prospect, turn them
 where they may; it appeared to me
 that to do this, would be to attempt
 a something which was greatly
 needed, and which would be a service
 to society.³⁴

This, admittedly, bears a component of aesthetic preoccupation: the beauty here will derive from an accurate reflection of squalor; yet ultimately Moral Progress is the

goal, pictorial accuracy in representation merely the procedure. The overt concern for Dickens is edification rather than "realism." His increasing tendency toward overt aestheticism, however, in the representation of criminal life, from Oliver Twist through Barnaby Rudge through Our Mutual Friend, all the way to the opium-clouded dreams of murder and conspiracy in the unfinished Edwin Drood, is clearly demonstrable. But the nagging issue of "moral casuistry" in the depiction of criminal acts--the criticism leveled at Bulwer-Lytton, for example, as someone who believes that crime does not pay, except for the novelist--was no doubt as lifeless and prudish for Wilde as the claim by Dickens that he would present "realism" in the details of his criminal band, yet would "banish from the lips of the lowest character...any expression that could by possibility offend"35 Indeed, this hearth-hugging, family-oriented, auto-bowdlerizing side of the "realist" Dickens is precisely the aspect of the English writer's sensibility derisively cited in Huysmans's article on Zola:

Oh! je le sais, la bégueulerie et la sottise aux abois crient désespérément: nous voulons des oeuvres chastes et qui nous consolent; la vie est déjà bien assez triste, pourquoi nous la montrer telle qu'elle est? faites comme Dickens, des romans observés et pudiques, des romans qui amusent et où la vertu triomphe dans l'apothéose des dernières pages.36

In order, therefore, to best clarify the nature of the parallel rejection, in Huysmans and Wilde, of both "realist" and "naturalist" versions of criminality, it is essential to understand the intertextual lineage that leads from Balzac to his characters (Vautrin and Lucien de Rubempré) to Huysmans (through Zola) to his characters (des Esseintes and Auguste Langlois), to Wilde to his characters (Lord Henry Wotton and Dorian Gray). For just as the author of A Rebours would come to reject the Naturalism he had championed as a disciple of Zola, Oscar Wilde would come to distinguish, in "The Decay of Lying" (first published in January 1889, then collected in Intentions in 1891) between Balzac's superior imaginative force and Zola's ultimately inferior aesthetics. Like Huysmans, Wilde compares Zola's realism with Balzac's, but he also ascribes a higher "reality" to Balzac's mix:

As for Balzac, he was a most remarkable combination of the artistic temperament with the scientific spirit. The latter he bequeathed to his disciples; the former was entirely his own. The difference between such a book as M. Zola's L'Assommoir and Balzac's Illusions Perdues is the difference between unimaginative realism and imaginative reality.³⁷

Citing Baudelaire, Wilde demonstrates how Balzac's characters, bearing as they do the superior force of will they derive from their creator, actually bear larger amounts of "real life" than do living people one meets in quotidian

existence. "A steady course of Balzac," he states, "reduces our living friends to shadows, and our acquaintances to the shadows of shades."³⁸

With a sleight-of-hand gesture, Wilde then demonstrates the degree to which he has assimilated the anti-realist, anti-modern lessons of Huysmans and of des Esseintes:

One of the greatest tragedies of my life is the death of Lucien de Rubempré. It is a grief from which I have never been able to completely rid myself. It haunts me in my moments of pleasure. I remember it when I laugh. But Balzac is no more a realist than Holbein was. He created life, he did not copy it.³⁹

For too long, the critical canon has dismissed this claim as yet another of Wilde's paradoxes, easily avoided once thus classified. Marthe Robert, however, cites Wilde's "aesthetic" grief as crucial to a critical understanding of Balzac's achievement in the nineteenth-century context. Drawing a parallel between the arriviste Lucien and the first of her two genre-determining types (le bâtard and l'enfant trouvé), she notes a genealogical source for the lineage of aesthetic criminals (authors and characters) I am attempting to trace here:

Le plus malheureux de tous les jeunes loups ayant un rang élevé dans la Comédie humaine est certainement Lucien de Rubempré, qui, lui, devra payer par la prison et le suicide la faute majeure d'avoir renié son nom (au grand

chagrin d'Oscar Wilde, conscient
sans doute de ses affinités
profondes avec cette figure aussi
trouble que charmante.)⁴⁰

Robert further demonstrates how Lucien's fall, unlike those
of so many other balzacian adventurers, is determined in
advance not by his "liaison ignominieuse avec Vautrin--
liaison équivoque ou plutôt, assez claire, vu
l'homosexualité dont l'ancien forçat fait parade"⁴¹--but
rather by his determination to reject his father's ignoble
name, a rejection symbolically tantamount to the primordial
crime par excellence in her Freudian reading: parricide.

Cette volonté de reniement, qui
fait autour de lui de terribles
ravages, est à elle seule l'aveu de
ses désirs parricides, c'est
pourquoi, ne pouvant accepter ni la
mésalliance de sa mère, ni changer
de nom sans éprouver de remords, il
se donne volontairement la mort au
moment même où le tribunal humain
se prépare à le relâcher.⁴²

Who, then, is Lucien's "aesthetic" father? Of all
Balzac's characters, Vautrin (alias Jacques Collin, aka
Trompe-la-Mort, aka Abbé Carlos Herrera) bears the species
of will and the power of autogenesis and protean shape-
shifting most closely resembling that of the deity at the
center of the "human comedy" of the restoration, the novelist
himself. In all his incarnations save his last, Vautrin is
the "author of the Crime"; he is also, in the momentous
peripeteia contained in Illusions Perdues and Splendeurs et

misères des courtisanes, the "creator" of Lucien. In this, he is hardly disinterested: he stands to profit from these "beautiful" crimes just as he will exploit (materially and sexually) the creation of his beautiful criminal protégé. These crimes will be perfectly executed, marked by the high arts of planning, organization and execution: "--Une si belle invention vaut la vie, dit Jacques Collin en admirant la façon du crime, comme un ciseleur admire le modèle d'une figurine."⁴³ The moral ambiguity of Vautrin's god-like status is fully recognized by the author, who had stated as early as 1821, in Sténie, the idea that "tout pacte social est un crime."⁴⁴ Balzac's epochal realization--that the criminal act bears aesthetic value freed from moral constraints, just as the work of art does--renders most powerfully the terms of the problem for the remainder of the century and nascent modernity.

The criminal pact forged and carried out by Vautrin with Lucien will be refigured in a more purely "aesthetic" context by Huysmans and Wilde. This "aestheticism" of crime reveals not only a continuing literary preoccupation, but also a veritable nerve storm of intertextual, metaphysical desire, a century-spanning epidemic of internal mediation. "If the modern emotions flourish," writes René Girard, "it is not because 'envious natures' and 'jealous temperaments' have unfortunately and mysteriously increased in number, but because internal mediation triumphs in a universe where the

differences between men are gradually erased."⁴⁵ Not only do we witness precisely just such a destruction of difference in the moral synaesthesia of Baudelaire's aesthetics, but we witness an exacerbation of this destruction in the claim by Wilde that Balzac's fictional characters render one's real-life acquaintances less "real": thus, not only has the difference between "good" and "evil" been tentatively destroyed in the Baudelairean question posed to Beauty ("Qu'importe?"), but the ontological difference between flesh-and-blood human beings and imaginary characters has been effectively flattened as well. The prototype of this destruction of difference is forged in Vautrin's miraculous (yet novelistically "inevitable") transformation: in the "last incarnation" of the "inverted" master criminal, he becomes the French equivalent of Scotland Yard's Chief of Detectives. Rastignac asks him:

--Mais qu'allez-vous donc être?
 --Le pourvoyeur du bagne au lieu
 d'en être locataire, répondit
 Jacques Collin.⁴⁶

Just as the aesthetic criminal is sometimes indistinguishable from the police, he is often indistinguishable from the dandy, and the drama of hyper-retrospectivity and aesthetic crime after 1884 in France and England bears several earmarks of this figure as he developed up to and then through Baudelaire. The avatar of modernity,

the dandy is nevertheless faced in the fin de siècle with the "literary schizophrenia" of decadence as posed above by A.E. Carter: love of the modern and hatred of the modern.⁴⁷ Just as Vautrin creates the beautiful criminal in Lucien, and endows him moreover with social and sexual ambiguity, even "inversion," so does des Esseintes create Auguste Langlois as he would an art object; so, finally, does Lord Henry Wotton create Dorian Gray.

The episode of Auguste Langlois in A Rebours marks, curiously enough, a socially conscious project for the world-weary des Esseintes. The creation of an avenging criminal (treated by des Esseintes to a carte-blanche status at a brothel, which status he then instructs the Madam to withdraw, thereby forcing the young man into a life of crime in order to support himself in the fashion to which he has "artificially" grown accustomed) may seem merely another example in a series of failed aesthetic experiments. This particular failure, however, and its futility as an aesthetic procedure (ironically recognized by the author himself), mark it as exemplary of the issues behind Huysmans's break with Zola. The whorehouse project is like a caricature of Zola's petri-dish method; August Langlois becomes himself a caricature of Zola's mythic figures of degeneration and preordained transgressions. He simply refuses to degenerate.

When the Madam asks des Esseintes where he found "that baby," he responds, "'Why, in the street, my dear.'" She

misunderstands, implying that her regular customer "'like[s] 'em young,'"48 to which des Esseintes responds with a shrug of his shoulders:

--Tu n'y es pas; oh! mais pas du tout, fit-il; la vérité c'est que je tâche simplement de préparer un assassin. Suis bien, en effet, mon raisonnement. Ce garçon est vierge et a atteint l'âge où le sang bouillonne; . . . en l'amenant ici, au milieu d'un luxe qu'il ne soupçonnait même pas et qui se gravera forcément dans sa mémoire; en lui offrant, tous les quinze jours, une telle aubaine, il prendra l'habitude de ces jouissances que ses moyens lui interdisent; admettons qu'il faille trois mois pour qu'elles lui soient devenues absolument nécessaires--et, en les espaçant comme je le fais, je ne risque pas de le rassasier;--eh bien! au bout de ces trois mois, je supprime la petite rente que je vais te verser d'avance pour cette bonne action, et alors il volera, afin de séjourner ici; il fera les cent dix-neuf coups, pour se rouler sur ce divan et sous ce gaz!49

Des Esseintes thereby informs Madame Laure that, after he succeeds in addicting the boy to these rare pleasures, he will withdraw the allowance, terminate the arrangement, whereupon the "naturalistic" conditioning will take over, driving the boy to burglary, even to murder, in order to pay for pleasures he has come not only to desire, but to need. Further benefits may also derive from this act of creation:

--En passant les choses à l'extrême, il tuera, je l'espère, le monsieur qui apparaîtra mal à

propos tandis qu'il tentera de
 forcer son secrétaire; alors, mon
 but sera atteint, j'aurai
 contribué, dans la mesure de mes
 ressources, à créer un gredin, un
 ennemi de plus pour cette hideuse
 société qui nous rançonne.⁵⁰

This "revolutionary" gesture is qualified authorially by the irony of des Esseintes's reservations about the extent of his "engagement" ("dans la mesure de mes ressources, . . .") and by the equivocal, even comic reaction of the prostitutes gathered around the outspoken criminal creator: "Les femmes ouvrirent de grands yeux."⁵¹ The embarrassed future criminal Langlois, now conditioned in the hothouse of the dandy's favorite bordello, emerges from his erotic exercise; des Esseintes, back on the street, addresses this stupefying speech to his criminal creation:

--Nous ne nous verrons plus, fit-il;
 retourne au plus vite chez ton père
 dont la main est inactive et le
 démange, et rappelle-toi cette
 parole quasi évangélique: 'Fais
 aux autres ce que tu ne veux pas
 qu'ils te fassent'; avec cette
 maxime tu iras loin.⁵²

Just how "far" he intends for his protégé to go is limited only by the infinite possibilities of crime, a realm of activity bearing the same open-endedness and imaginative liberty as delectation, connoisseurship and art itself. "--Surtout ne sois pas ingrat," des Esseintes tells Auguste Langlois upon parting, "donne-moi le plus tôt possible de

tes nouvelles, par la voie des gazettes judiciaires."⁵³ The boy disapproves his creator, however: "--Le petit Judas! murmurait maintenant des Esseintes, en tisonnant des braises; --dire que je n'ai jamais vu son nom figurer parmi les faits divers!"⁵⁴ By his failure to commit a crime sufficiently infamous to merit the attentions of the journalists, Auguste Langlois has betrayed his inverted sermonizer-on-the-mons veneris ("Fais aux autres ce que tu ne veux pas qu'ils te fassent"); thus, des Esseintes is betrayed by his criminal because the latter does not sufficiently trespass to meet even the "low" standards of the sensational journalism of fin de siècle crime.

Further meditating, retrospectively now, upon this failed project, the aesthete reveals its key, an organizing idea simultaneously oriented toward societal trends and artistic ends, revealing a profound preoccupation with history and the shifting ground of intersubjectivity for the supposedly hermetic dandy:

. . . en agissant de la sorte,
j'avais réalisé le parabole
laique, l'allégorie de
l'instruction universelle qui, ne
tendant à rien moins qu'à
transmuer tous les gens en des
Langlois, s'ingénie, au lieu de
crever définitivement et par
compassion les yeux des misérables,
à les ouvrir tout grands et de
force, pour qu'ils aperçoivent
autour d'eux des sorts immérités
et plus cléments, des joies plus
laminées et plus aiguës et, par
conséquent, plus désirables et

plus chères.⁵⁵

Thus, Auguste Langlois comes to reify the democratic allegory of universal education, which des Esseintes bitterly views as an all-too-physical manifestation of popular resentment, misguided republicanism and mediated desire. His reasoning assumes a dialectical cast as he further meditates upon this allegory-in-flesh; where he had initially intended the "refinement" of the boy as a "revolutionary" act against a "hideous society which is bleeding us white,"⁵⁶ he realizes that the "criminality" of his naturalistic gesture is in fact perfectly consonant with the values of that very society, and that thereby the Auguste Langlois project is a failure of precisely the same type as his other artistic "projects."

. . . le fait est que, comme la
douleur est un effet de
l'éducation, comme elle s'élargit
et s'acière à mesure que les
idées naissent: plus on
s'efforcera d'équarrir
l'intelligence et d'affiner le
système nerveux des pauvres
diabes, et plus on développera en
eux les germes si furieusement
vivaces de la souffrance morale et
de la haine.⁵⁷

Des Esseintes expresses the ne plus ultra of metaphysical desire in his aestheticism; his particular brand of dandyism, however, belies somewhat the cold indifference of the Baudelairean dandy, revealing to a lesser degree what Girard calls a coldness "calculated to stir up desire, a coldness which is always saying to the Others: 'I am self-

sufficient.'"58 Unlike the Baudelairean dandy, des Esseintes is less and less convinced of his own autonomy. His project for the criminal development of Auguste Langlois is the most directly public of his artistic gestures in the novel, and it is by means of the boy (and the boy's hoped-for murderous success) that, in Girard's terms, des Esseintes would "universalize" and "industrialize" ascetic renunciation for the sake of desire. Although des Esseintes's aristocratic origins are posited as the source of his mental and physical decline, and his attitudes clearly derived from an aristocratic superiority, Girard might very well be describing him and his plan for Auguste Langlois when he states: "There is nothing less aristocratic than this undertaking; it reveals the bourgeois soul of the dandy. This high-mannered Mephistopheles [the inverted Christ of the sermon on the mound of Venus] would like to be the capitalist of desire."59 As in Vautrin's "creation" of Lucien, the dandy des Esseintes's creation of the surrogate criminal becomes, in one sense, the mechanical reproduction of askesis (ascetic renunciation for the sake of desire) by means of aestheticized transgression. One has the feeling that if the project were to achieve success, des Esseintes might well open a school for criminals in order to turn them out in mass production--always as a revolutionary gesture, of course.

The aesthetic criminal becomes, therefore, a figuration of the dandy in a state of crisis. As Benjamin puts it, the

Baudelairean dandy finds no consolation in having been dropped from the calendar; des Esseintes, watching his criminal protégé vanish into (perhaps) law-abiding oblivion, witnesses yet another hothouse organism wither and fail under his touch. Aesthetic crime fails as surely as his experiments in aesthetic tortoise-husbandry fail. The dandy-in-crisis attempts a project in the public sphere and finds that the allegory of universal education, which he thought to control in the figure and criminal fate of Auguste, is in fact already "well on the way to turning everybody into a Langlois."⁶⁰ Not only has he been dropped from the calendar, but des Esseintes has even been dropped from the Gazette des Tribunaux: the vast, democratized, secularly instructed public have already surpassed in criminal reality his supposed breakthrough in criminal aesthetics, as embodied in the "failed" criminal Auguste Langlois.

The demonstrable fact of Oscar Wilde's preoccupation with the aesthetics of criminal activity--and his eventual equation of the two procedures--has long been established in the critical literature dealing with his career and his life. Recent critics, moreover, have enlarged the scope of this issue, especially into hermeneutical and social realms. As Stoddard Martin writes:

By any reasonable standard of our age or most of history, Wilde was not a criminal. However, like Sade, he nurtured a fascination for

'crime': it is there in almost everything he wrote, from the romanticization of terrorism in Vera, or the Nihilists to the sentimentalization of the condemned man in The Ballad of Reading Gaol. . . Wilde's self-estimation as an 'individual' (in his Weltanschauung nearly synonymous with 'artist') required him always to dare something more; and, as he became increasingly influenced by the French of the 1880's (at the same time he was beginning in earnest his homosexual vagaries from wife and family), he pressed in his stories and statements of 'intention' towards more overt flirtation with criminal themes.⁶¹

An exhaustive examination of Wilde's "flirtations" with criminal themes is beyond my scope here, however, for criminal activity lies at the center of most of the prose works and many of the poems. "Lord Arthur Saville's Crime" (1889) has been described as a "schematic, amusing fantasy on murder";⁶² "The Portrait of Mr. W.H." (also 1889) explores issues of "artistic fakery and artistically induced self-destruction,"⁶³ while "Pen, Pencil and Poison" (also 1889) describes the career of Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, a friend of Charles Lamb and a man who:

. . . though of an extremely artistic temperament, followed many masters other than art, being not merely a poet and a painter, an art-critic, an antiquarian, and a writer of prose, an amateur of beautiful things, and a dilettante of things delightful, but also forger of no mean or ordinary capabilities, and as a subtle and secret poisoner

[was] almost without rival in this
or any age."⁶⁴

Indeed, the term "Aesthetics of Crime" has appeared most powerfully and pertinently in the recent critical analysis of Wilde's work by Rodney Shewan, Oscar Wilde: Art and Egotism (1977). In this succinct and compelling account, Shewan notes the difference between the artist-in-art (the painter Basil Hallward) and the artist-in-life (the paradoxicalist dandy Lord Henry Wotton) as exemplified in their relations to Dorian Gray:

Basil's conventional medium is art;
Lord Henry's rival and ultra-modern
medium is life itself, and his
subject is Dorian. He plays on
Dorian as on 'an exquisite violin'
. . . and his 'poisonous theories'
which Dorian unwisely and
uncritically puts into practice,
'just as I do everything that you
say, Harry', make 'the lad ...
largely his own [i.e., Lord Henry's]
creation.'⁶⁵

The resulting confluence of issues--formation of the subject and the influence of mediated desire, especially in relation to aesthetic theory and creation, all set in motion by means of crime, or inter-subjective transgression--takes center stage in Wilde's novel. On the other hand, the ideological or inter-subjective elements in Huysmans's novel emerge most directly in the incident of Auguste Langlois, and otherwise are relegated to being noticeable only in their absence from des Esseintes's musings over bibelots and books.

The issue of aesthetic crime becomes the mainspring of Wilde's masterpiece, however, the central issue in the formal aspects of the narrative as well as the philosophical (and later, prosecutable, or at least "blamable") aspects of personality explored in the work itself. The influence of the "French Model" is notable, however, as is the latter-day conjunction of artistic and "scientific" (read "naturalistic") procedures. Shewan writes:

Lord Henry, a covetous sybarite
fledged in the Paternian cloister,
prefers the experimental or
'scientific' method, but the subject
matter provided by science seems to
him 'trivial or of no import.'
'Human life' is the one thing worth
study; and so, like the 'true
critic,' but with none of his purity
of motive, Lord Henry lives
vicariously on the emotions and
experiences of other people.⁶⁶

Not only has Dorian been "formed" by Lord Henry's "poisonous" aphorisms, but he has also been "poisoned by a book." ⁶⁷ Although Wilde would identify this "yellow-backed French novel" as A Rebours under cross-examination by Edward Carson in 1895 at the Queensberry trial,⁶⁸ in the original typescript sent to Lippincott's Wilde identified this book, lent to Dorian by Lord Henry Wotton, as "Le Secret de Raoul par Catulle Sarrazin."⁶⁹ Apocryphal or not, the French novel called by the narrator "the strangest book that he [Dorian] had ever read"⁷⁰ bears distinct similarities to Huysmans's

novel:

It was a novel without a plot, and with only one character, being, indeed, simply a psychological study of a certain young Parisian, who spent his life trying to realize in the nineteenth century all the passions and modes of thought that belonged to every century except his own, and to sum up, as it were, in himself the various moods through which the world-spirit had ever passed, loving for their mere artificiality those renunciations that men have unwisely called virtue, as much as those natural rebellions that wise men still call sin.⁷¹

The continual recourse to metaphors of contagion ("germs") or chemical invasion ("poisons") points up once again the power of these ideas to take on almost a life of their own, as nerve storms or epidemic agents of mediated and mimetic desire. The ontological difference between author and character, or Pygmalion character and Galatea character, has been collapsed in an atmosphere of generalized destruction of difference. And rushing into this ever-flattening space of the fin de siècle, like some nervous and contagious protoplasm of the forces of desire, is the aesthetic problem of crime and the criminal acts portrayed in terms of aesthetics.

The mechanism by which the young Englishman inculcates the forces of the history of criminal desire is very literally spelled out:

Yet one had ancestors in literature, as well as in one's own race, nearer perhaps in type and temperament, many of them, and certainly with an influence of which one was more absolutely conscious. There were times when it appeared to Dorian Gray that the whole of history was merely the record of his own life, not as he had lived it in act and circumstance, but as his imagination had created it for him . . . He felt that he had known them all, those strange terrible figures that had passed across the stage of the world and made sin so marvellous, and evil so full of subtlety. It seems to him that in some mysterious way their lives had been his own.⁷²

Further demonstration of this procedure, which might be called decadent Bovarysme, is again to be found in Dorian's historical ruminations on, in turn, the historical ruminations of des Esseintes. I make this point not to needlessly multiply examples, but instead for the striking intertextual evidence it affords. "The hero of the wonderful novel that had so influenced his life had himself known this curious fancy," the narrator tells us, leading into a lengthy description of the scenes and meditations of the mysterious novel's "seventh chapter."⁷³ The description of the bric-a-brac Dorian finds so wonderful does not precisely correspond to that in the seventh chapter of A Rebours, although both feature extensive ruminations on Latin readings and history.

Instead of a precise coordination of pictorial or "aesthetic" materials between the two chapters, there exist

startling parallels between the forces of mimetic desire, in the form of intertextual "contagion," an historical focus on issues of law and criminality, and on the formation of the Subject: flipping from Wilde to Huysmans, the reader sees that chapter VII of A Rebours begins precisely after the account of the Auguste Langlois episode. Indeed, it begins with this resonant, single-sentence paragraph:

Depuis cette nuit où, sans cause apparente, il avait évoqué le mélancolique souvenir d'Auguste Langlois, il revêcut toute son existence.⁷⁴

It is no accident that this "fantastic chapter, and the two chapters immediately following,"⁷⁵ as cited by Dorian Gray, begins with this conjunction of the name of Auguste Langlois and the tormented act of recalling "toute son existence" by des Esseintes. Even the name "Auguste Langlois," which might be translated as "Venerable Englishman" and interpreted as an epithet for the first dandy to import his "germ" into France, Beau Brummell, now projects out of France into yet another "Venerable Englishman," this time Dorian Gray himself. In chapter VII, des Esseintes is as if forced into this retrospective recounting of his own life, which is triggered by the evocative name of his failed criminal creation. He meditates upon ecclesiastical law and theological fine points, repeatedly taking refuge in art from the brain-busting problems of interpretation and baroque,

casuistical hair-splitting involved in retro(intro)spection:

Ce fut, durant quelques jours, dans sa cervelle, un grouillement de paradoxes, de subtilités, un vol de poils fendus en quatre, un écheveau de règles aussi compliquées que des articles de codes, . . . puis le côté abstrait s'effaça, à son tour, et tout un côté plastique lui succéda, sous l'action des Gustave Moreau pendus aux murs.⁷⁶

Des Esseintes, as Lord Henry Wotton's mediator in criminal Pygmalionism, maintains the greater "purity of motive" by focusing primarily on art objects; his decking a living tortoise with jewels, and thereby killing it, and his own problematic relations with his own body-as-object and its dysfunctional metabolism, are clearly monstrous, products of decadent teratogenesis. This monstrosity emerges in a clearer, if still miniaturized, version in his project for the Other, Auguste Langlois. But this criminal project remains just one incident among many, and the whole forms a pattern, an aesthetic, most strikingly so in light of the final pages of the novel. For des Esseintes emerges from his meditations yearning for a renewed intervention of Christ, which apparition is hoped for with direct reference to the conditions of life in the fin de siècle. In fact, bourgeois stupidity itself is now posed as the "contagion":

Maintenant, c'était un fait acquis.
Une fois sa besogne terminée, la
plèbe avait été, par mesure
d'hygiène, saignée à blanc; le

bourgeois, rassuré, trônait,
 jovial, de par la force de son
 argent et la contagion de sa
 sottise. Le résultat de son
 avènement avait été l'écrasement
 de toute intelligence, la négation
 de toute probité, la mort de tout
 art. . . .⁷⁷

For the despairing des Esseintes, poised on the brink of conversion, a "contagion" of Americanized, bourgeois stupidity rises like a tide, in "waves of human mediocrity," ready to overwhelm the sanctuary of his coveted isolation. As the scandal in the British press demonstrates, the public debate over the "morality" of Dorian Gray was itself just such a wave, seemingly contagious, of systemic, even wilful incomprehension:

It was in fact journalistic hostility toward the socially mobile self-advertiser that led to the controversy over The Picture of Dorian Gray, and it was with the reception of the novel that Wilde paid for his attacks on journalists in his literary and political theory. But both sides in the debate were so caught up in the opaque images of advertising that both presented contradictions--contradictions clearly related to an age more materialistic than its participants could admit.⁷⁸

The materialism of naturalist procedure is clearly what drove Huysmans away from its practice; Wilde, too, stepped away from Zola in favor of Balzac, and ultimately adopted a fantastic motif--the metaphysical, metamorphosing portrait of Dorian Gray--as the means of re-invigorating anti-materialist

mythology, in Michel Serres's terms, "as authentic discourse."⁷⁹ Writing in what Stoddard Martin calls the "annus mirabilis of 1890-91," the year in which Oscar Wilde published three great works (Salome, The Soul of Man under Socialism, and The Picture of Dorian Gray), the irrepressible Léon Bloy puts his finger on the "idée centrale et vertébrale" of A Rebours, calling it "ce haillon d'idée emprunté à la pouilleuse métaphysique de Schopenhauer: 'Seul, le pire arrive!'"⁸⁰ He goes on to blame the aestheticism of Huysmans/des Esseintes, maintaining no distinction whatsoever between the fictional personage and the author:

Il est vrai que l'expérience
finissait par une dégoutation
salutaire. L'auteur, écoeuré de
son identique radotage, fermait tout
à coup son livre en poussant un
grand cri vers Dieu... Comment
deviner que cette clameur était
encore un artifice littéraire?⁸¹

Thus, not only is aesthetic crime in question, but for the ultra-Catholic Bloy, a merely "aesthetic" version of religion as well is skeptically viewed as yet another factitious procedure.

For both Huysmans and Wilde, the aesthetic criminal refigures the Dandy-in-crisis, which creates a situation in which difference must be re-invented, by means of an (admittedly decadent) re-invention of reference. Where the

Naturalist Zola maintained a certain distance from his materials and supported the ontological difference between himself (as author) and his characters, the two decadent writers purposely, even programmatically sought to cross those boundaries, to obfuscate the difference between writer-as-scientist and writer-as-criminal. The difference in the degrees to which these two writers would pursue this idea is reflected in their differing fates: Huysmans would become a Trappist monk and hagiographer, Wilde the self-incriminating, judged, incarcerated and exiled "redeemer" for an unworthy mercantile nation, in an elaborate re-enactment of sacrificial victimage shrouded in a decadent mythology of redemption. In numerous ways, echoing again the formulation of Michel Serres, the circumstance for Huysmans and Wilde is the creation of aestheticized murderers, and the law is to be traced not upon the ground, but upon their very flesh.

IV. 2 Murdered Sleep: Dialectic of Transgression

Everything in this world has two handles. Murder, for instance, may be laid hold of by its moral handle (as it generally is in the pulpit, and at the Old Bailey); and that, I confess, is its weak side; or it may also be treated aesthetically, as the Germans call it--that is, in relation to good taste.

--De Quincey, "On Murder
Considered As One of the Fine Arts"

"Oh, I'm an aesthetic louse and nothing more! . . . The fear of aesthetics is the first sign of impotence. Never, never before have I realized it more clearly than now. And it is now that I least of all understand why what I did was a crime."

--Dostoevsky, Crime and Punishment

Even if, in his dying moment, the criminal should go so far as to repudiate his crime, he remains, in his ignorance and fear, haunted by a supernatural negativity.

--Sartre, Saint Genet

The structural parallels between the literary fates of Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde might best be demonstrated in light of a work by Félicien Rops, "La Tentation de St. Antoine."⁸² This dessin en couleurs, itself an allegory of askesis, is mentioned by Freud in his essay, "Delusion and Dream in Jensen's 'Gradiva'," where the analyst points to the allegorical narrative in the work as a clear example illustrating the mechanism by which repressed material returns to the life of the subject in complex and convoluted ways. In the case of Rops's St. Antoine, as in

the cases of Huysmans and Wilde, the work of representation demonstrates the dream-like, haunting, yet victorious return of banished material in the very mode and means by which it was originally repressed:

A well-known etching by Félicien Rops illustrates this fact . . . [i.e., that "the very thing which has been chosen as a means of repression becomes the carrier of the thing recurring"] more impressively than many explanations could; and he does it through the model case of repression in the lives of saints and penitents. As ascetic monk has sought refuge, most likely from the temptations of the world, near the image of the crucified Savior. Then, phantom-like, the cross sinks and, in its stead, there rises shining the image of a voluptuous, unclad woman, in the same position of the crucifixion. Other painters of less psychological insight have, in such representations of temptation, depicted sin as bold and triumphant and relegated it to some place near the Savior on the cross. Rops alone has allowed it to take the place of the Savior on the cross; he seems to have known that the thing repressed proceeds, at its recurrence, from the agency of repression itself.⁸³

Freud's reading of this allegory permits crucial access to the psychopathology of the era as well as of individual artists. For not only does Rops's work illustrate the process in question, it also shows that the period itself was aware of this phenomenon and able to give this "psychological insight" pictorial and allegorical figuration some time

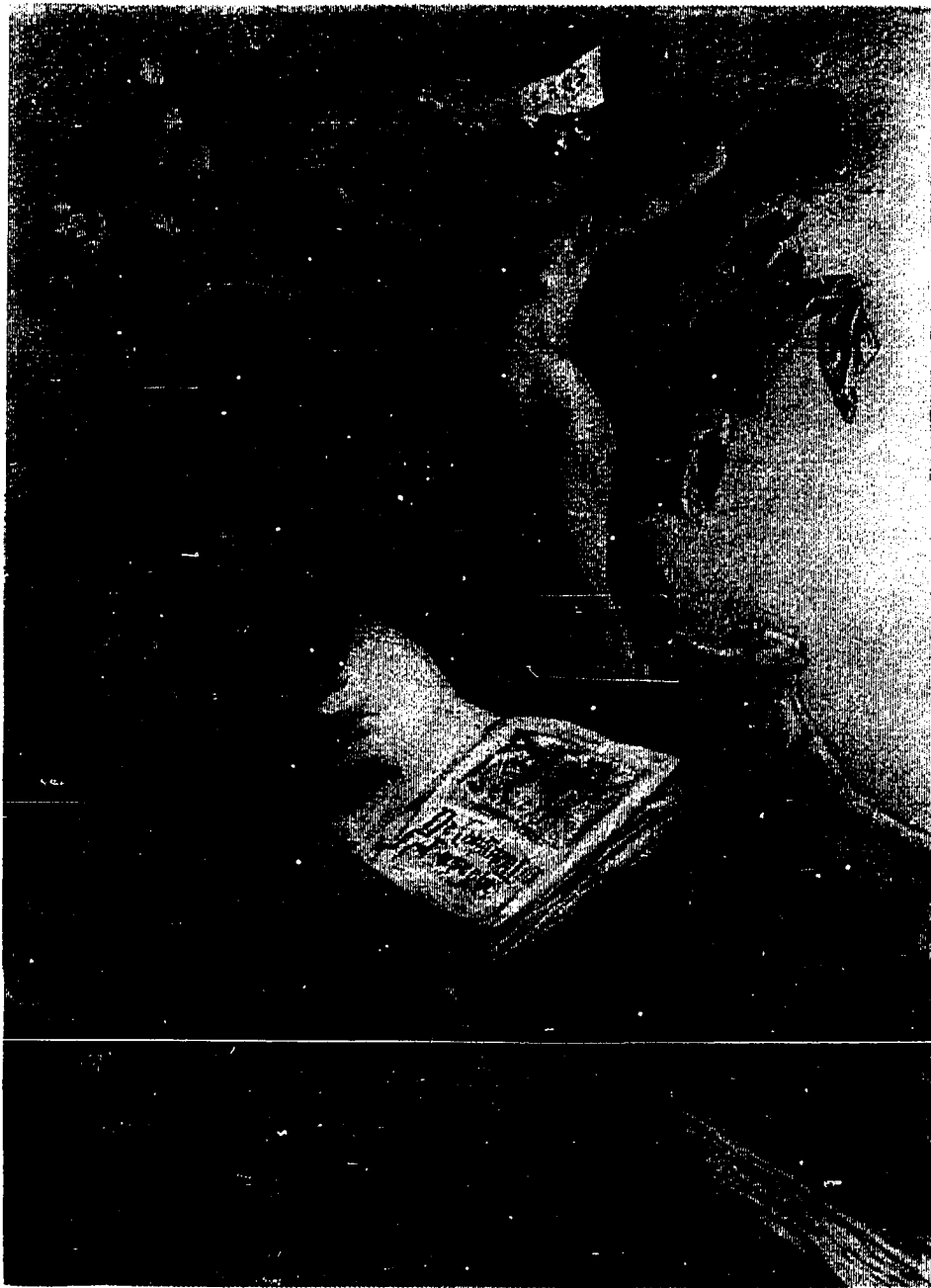


Figure 16

Félicien Rops, "La Tentation de Saint Antoine" 82

before scientific psychology provided it with a name. There are several elements in the illustration, however, that Freud does not mention in his appreciation, which should be noted here.

First, the Christ figure leans away from the cross, as if transfixed in a displaced posture of supplantation; his arms, freed from the cross-bar, still reach to the full extension of excruciation; his hands still bear spikes fixed in stigmata; his legs, only partially visible, are wrapped in the red robes of a second figure whose position compositionally complements that of Christ: i.e., la folie, Madness. The frenzied, gnarly hands of this figure reach back across his own body and hold, as if by main force, the body of Christ in its precipitous pose. The face of Madness, unlike the black-eyed vacancy visible in Christ's face, is animated to a crazy degree. Eyes popping, mouth twisted in an insane, leering grimace, a preternatural tongue snakes out in hyper-extension. Obscured by his copious hood, yet tellingly bursting out of its floppy folds, are two horns: this madness is fully demonic.

The two bodies, redeemer and tormentor, themselves form a skewed, corporeal cross behind the wooden one, upon which the female Eros (so identified in the written notice above her head) now luxuriates rather than excruciates. Her face is ecstatic, alluring, and an unearthly orange aura of attraction emanates from her head and upper torso. Monstrous

cherubs, grotesquely fleshy (from the waist down) and skeletal (from the waist up, including smiling skulls) hover above the area marking the confluence of erotic aura and sacrificial transcendence: her luxurious emanation points in the direction of their realm, just as the vacant-eyed Christ's still-glowing halo does. The flowers strewn by the skeletal-cherubic memento mori correspond to the wreath or crown of living flowers on the head of female Eros, which lend of course a complementary, symbolic botany to the displaced Christ's crown of thorns. These elements, all strictly relegated to the upper half of the frame, function almost algebraically in a dialectic of symbols and personifications. The two sides of the equation are remarkably balanced.

The dialectic itself in the upper portion of Rops's allegory might be sub-titled "The Truth and Consequences of Transgression": Christ, the figure of deliverance, by whose suffering the transgressions of all humans are ostensibly redeemed, is only feebly present, held in place for mysterious reasons by the teratogenetic hybrid figure of Madness and Satan, whose gaze clearly torments the Saint figure as much as does the come-hither gaze of the seductively cross-bound female. Satan and Christ present the thesis and antithesis of Consequences (the repressed), and Eros-as-woman makes up the synthesis element in a triad of Truth (the return). This upper-frame syllogism, in terms of

the present work, formulates the intersection of inter-subjective transgression (crime, on the socio-historical, horizontal axis) and metaphysical transgression (sin, on the vertical axis) in precisely the terms the decadence formulated for itself. The problematic element of aesthesis and of representation finds its expression, in turn, in the lower half of the frame.

The penitent, or Saint, reels back on one knee from a low lectern, upon which rests a massive, open tome: on the page we can clearly read "De Continentiã Josephi," beneath an illustration featuring a laurel-crowned satyr in hot pursuit of a blonde, blue-caped female. Saint Antoine, in tattered robe and wild, profuse beard, holds clenched hands to his temples and casts a sidelong gaze upward, where his eyes meet simultaneously those of Demonic Madness and seductive Eros. The book is "bound," not only in its binding, but also by the now-open buckles shown dangling from its cover. The lower right corner of the frame features the doubling figure of the Saint (just as every figure in this work has its double), in this case the alert pig, front feet resting attentively on two stacked books, snout aimed secondly at the face of Christ, but aimed firstly at the pudenda of the pleasurably crucified female.

We know from other of Rops's works, especially the equally allegorical "La dame au cochon (Pornocrates),"⁸⁴ that the pig stands in his symbology for the libidinal instincts.

Aesthetics, sublimation, learning, representation, all are strangely subverted by the alert, every-ready bestiality of the pleasure principle. In "La dame au cochon," the figures of Sculpture, Music, Poetry and Painting sit in abject dismay and inactivity beneath the spectacle of the promenade of the tenuously leashed Libido by the blindfolded Prostitute. The truth of the Saint is the pig, just as the truth of the Christ is Satanic Folly; likewise, the truth of representation is Eros: in the illustration upon the page of the Saint's open book, the female fleeing the satyr is the double in representation of the female-in-the-flesh enticing him. Her flight (from an act of rape?) is captioned "On the Abstinence of Joseph," and the Saint has clearly been distracted by the overwhelming power of the "return" of the very material (in the inverted crucifixion rising before his tortured gaze) which he has thus far kept repressed in asceticism, or in representation. Other huge tomes lie scattered around, in the chilling desuetude of quotidian experience. The doubling element of Eros's emanating aura of attraction, pictorially speaking, is clearly Saint Antoine's profuse beard. The libidinal equipment comes with the mortal territory.

Not only does Rops's allegory bear significant psychological truth for the analyst, but it also contains its own commentary on the aesthetics of transgression and the unavoidable intersection of representation and normative



Figure 17 Félicien Rops, "La Dame au cochon
(Pornokrates)"⁸⁴

value. For what, in Rops's allegorical algebra, is the pictorial double of Eros? As noted above, in terms of composition and fable, the pig doubles the Saint, the figure of Demonic Folly doubles Christ, the hybrid cherubim double each other, and the Saint complements the figure of Eros--in a sort of attraction of opposites. The Saint and Eros are themselves doubled by the satyr and the nymph, however, in the satyric illustration, itself a fable (no doubt a "moral fable," since it comes from the Saint's "bound" library) on abstinence (or self-control, or "continence").

As Freud points out, however, the insight of Rops allows the viewer access to the dialogue between the repressed image (in the context of a moral tale) and its libidinal "return" in the very locus of the method--study, meditation, askesis--by which it was repressed in the first place. For the decadence, the metaphor of Eros supplants the supremely normative myth of Christ, which is itself insanely held in tottering place by demonic folly. This phenomenon ab ovo was surely not unique to the decadents, of course; Rops cautions, however, that for the Saint, the penitent, or the artist, the metaphor will lose its status as a mere figuration, assuming the fleshly form in which the forces of myth, art, figuration, and aesthetics no longer hold sway. Moreover, as Huysmans himself demonstrates, in his essay on Rops in Certains (1889), the artist "qui cède aux abois lubriques n'est guère en état de les traduire sur un papier ou sur

une toile."⁸⁵ Indeed, he goes so far as to say that "Il est donc vraisemblable que l'artiste qui traite violemment des sujets charnels, est, pour une raison ou pour une autre, un homme chaste."⁸⁶

For this reason, Huysmans judges Rops to stand in opposition to the frenetic spirit of a lubricious age, which decrees the social and economical reification of the overheated forces of desire and materialism, which both reflect and sanction the hardly "aesthetic" forms of real-life crime besetting the entire population. In a letter to Arij Prins dated 6 December 1897, Huysmans would write:

Il y a une rage de jouir, de vivre largement du haut en bas de l'échelle; ajoutons le manque d'idées religieuses, le seul frein qui puisse exister, en somme. Ici, on nous prépare des générations élevées sans Dieu. Le résultat s'est déjà fait sentir par une recrudescence d'alcoolisme et de condamnations pour vols. Dans quelques années, s'il n'y a pas une réaction, le peuple sera chez nous un réservoir de bandits. Il est vrai qu'il ne sera jamais plus ignoble que la bourgeoisie qui nous gouverne. . . .⁸⁷

This generalized criminalization sensed by the most sensitive minds of the period, then, seems to drive certain artists toward this typically baroque form. Benjamin has discussed the relations between the historical and figurative grounds of allegory in two different periods in which it

flourished (the Middle Ages and the sixteenth century), and an extrapolation from his findings to the conditions in which decadent allegory proliferated seems entirely demonstrable. "It is by virtue of a strange combination of nature and history that the allegorical mode of expression is born. . . . Significance and death both come to fruition in historical development, just as they are closely linked as seeds in the creature's graceless state of sin."⁸⁸ Any perceived, endemic criminality in a given historical period, for Flaubert and Baudelaire embodied in the Second (False) Empire and for Wilde in the Victorian apotheosis of prudery and hypocrisy in the face of social injustice, drives the hermeneutic impulses of allegory. The social catastrophe of criminal proliferation, sensed early in the period as a problem embodied in the Other, moves through aesthesis toward the Self. To illustrate the difference between the two, the decadent criminal motifs often draw on historical subject matter in order to gain access to the "subterranean fantastic, the occult-spectral,"⁸⁹ a realm similar to what Brooks calls the "moral occult," itself borne early in the century by melodrama. No longer subject to Enlightenment teleologies, "for which human happiness was the supreme purpose of nature,"⁹⁰ decadent allegories of crime and askesis finally leap from the horizontal axis of earthly, intersubjective transgressions of historically situated human beings to a different procedural orientation: "their

mysterious instruction."91

Rops's allegory of the return of the repressed, however, as Freud shows, demonstrates the mechanism by which any ascetic repression of desire betrays itself. The novels and allegories of the fin de siècle, notably the works of Huysmans, Wilde, Dostoevsky and Rops, bear the dark negativity of aesthetic crime therefore normatively: crime, as a social phenomenon first and a supernatural problem only second, is treated within a prophylactic aesthesis which yearns to represent viable norms "post-normatively." These norms themselves, often posited as givens in some lost, mythic past (hyper-retrospectively), might now only be formulated in terms of their transgression. Every modern paradise, decadent or otherwise, is subject to figuration, or aesthesis, only once lost.

The historical, real-life institutions in which the real-life equivalent of these replicated little murders are processed (the "Old Bailey" or the pulpit, in De Quincey's terms) fail, due to a generalized moral bankruptcy, to pose any such viable norms: art, therefore, and its attendant, ever-increasing dependence on theory, becomes the last refuge of normativity, both prescriptive and descriptive. Flaubert writes to Louise Colet:

Aux époques où tout lien commun
est brisé, et où la Société
n'est qu'un vaste banditisme (mot
gouvernemental) plus ou moins bien
organisé, quand les intérêts de la

chair et de l'esprit, comme des
loups, se retirent les uns des
autres et hurlent à l'écart, il
faut donc comme tout le monde se
faire un égoïsme (plus beau
seulement) et vivre dans sa
tanière. . . . Aimons-nous donc en
l'Art, comme les mystiques s'aiment
en Dieu. . . .92

In a similar vein ("un vaste banditisme"), referring to a contemporary financial-political scandal, Huysmans writes in the letter to Arij Prins cited above: "Quand on a vu le Panama et autres choses de ce genre, on ne peut guères [sic] garder d'illusion sur le sens immoral d'un pays."⁹³ Hyper-retrospectivity is one mode in which to express the metaphysical desires that find themselves repressed or "blocked" in such a self-consciously decadent historical moment.⁹⁴ Looking back on devotional art Huysmans, still writing about Rops, states that "La Pureté . . . est morte après le Moyen Age; elle est maintenant inaccessible en art, ainsi que le sentiment divin dont elle émane, à des générations privées de foi." Félicien Rops, however, "avec une âme de Primitif à rebours,"⁹⁵ has accomplished precisely the inverse of the work of such primitive painters as Fra-Angelico, Memlinc, Roger Van de Weyden and Grunewald: ". . . il [Rops] a pénétré, résumé le satanisme en d'admirables planches qui sont comme inventions, comme symboles, comme art incisif et nerveux, féroce et navré, vraiment uniques. . . . [une] synthèse du Mal."⁹⁶

The parallel developments in the literary and

biographical fates of Huysmans and Wilde may be exemplified in the allegorical refiguration of "La Tentation de St. Antoine" by Félicien Rops, then, in the following way: emblematically, aesthetically, Huysmans would assume the role of the penitent Saint (Antoine) during the last decade of the century, while Oscar Wilde would manipulate himself, by hook or by crook (expression used advisedly), into the position of surrogate redeemer/Eros on the cross. After the publication of Là-Bas in 1891, which we shall examine below, Huysmans would begin a process of conversion which he would chronicle in a series of anti-generic novels; he would also write one of the astonishing documents of the period, a hagiography titled Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam, in 1901, the year after Wilde's death. This hagiography is an attempt to rival in prose the pictorial effects Huysmans so admired in the Primitive painters of the late Middle Ages, especially Mathaeus Grunewald. His luminous, heartfelt meditation upon the latter's scene of the crucifixion, viewed by Huysmans in Cassel and described in the opening pages of Là-Bas, marks the birth of the writing technique he would call "supra-naturaliste":

Grunewald était le plus forcené des idéalistes. Jamais peintre n'avait si magnifiquement exalté l'altitude et si résolument bondi de la cime de l'âme dans l'orbe éperdu d'un ciel. Il était allé aux deux extrêmes et il avait, d'une triomphale ordure, extrait les

menthes les plus fines des
 dilections, les essences les plus
 acérées des pleurs. Dans cette
 toile, se révélait le chef-
 d'oeuvre de l'art acculé, sommé de
 rendre l'invisible et le tangible,
 de manifester l'immondice éplorée
 du corps, de sublimer la détresse
 de l'âme.⁹⁷

The component of aesthetic distance and the decided smack of high connoisseurship evident in this description are self-evident. This emergence of a new écriture of suffering in 1891 is further developed in the 1901 hagiography: Sainte Lydwine comes to enact, in her suffering and her martyrdom, the heterodox doctrine of mystical substitution and reparation of sins; Huysmans, by means of an ultra-aestheticized procedure, would represent her life as a variation on sacrificial victimage particularly telling for the history of the spirit and the world. The "supra-naturalist" procedure is joined with the social and historical concerns felt by the author throughout his life: the work begins with a somber and horrific account of the violent turmoil and political upheaval in Europe in the fifteenth century, as a background against which Sainte Lydwine will effect her transformations. This is, appropriately enough, a sort of inverse situation to the one explored in Là-Bas, in which the group is healthy and the criminal individual is ill.

How is it that Huysmans places himself, by the same sort of "mystical substitution," into the position of the

aesthetic Saint? For one thing, his conversion trilogy marks his progress through the Trappist monastery at Ligugé and the transcendental, transformative power of the symbology of the liturgy, architecture, music and practice of monastic devotion. But secondly, during his final illness he made several statements which make clear his yearning for martyrdom and expiation. Ravaged by excruciating cancers, he refused morphine injections from his doctors, stating: "'Ah! You want to prevent me from suffering! You want me to exchange the sufferings of God for the evil pleasures of the earth! I forbid you!'"⁹⁸ Most tellingly, he then remarked to a friend, in obvious remembrance of Bloy's criticism of the last, desperate prayer of des Esseintes ("Comment deviner que cette clameur était encore un artifice littéraire?"⁹⁹): "I hope that this time they won't still say that this is only 'literature'...."¹⁰⁰

Wilde, in his turn, would undergo a series of disasters in his personal life in the years after the annus mirabilis of 1891, as is well known. It is also a commonplace in the critical-biographical canon now to concede the mythic gesture of mystical substitution Wilde hoped (consciously or not) to effect because of his martyrdom at the hands of an unworthy lover (the "Judas" Bosie of De Profundis) and an unworthy social group surrounding him. "Wilde's Christ is 'Hellenic', derived from Renan, noble, an exponent of Love over Law. . . . [and] Because of his very goodness, Wilde's Christ

is doomed."¹⁰¹ The various manifestations of Wilde's Christ myth occur in numerous works, including the "ego Parables" and Salome. This female figure of aesthetic transgression, however, must join Wilde's Christ figures in a composite version of his personal myth. For while the Christ of "The Selfish Giant" and De Profundis are figures of good, Salome is "An anima figure of aristocratic authority," writes Martin, ". . . [who] embodies Wilde's supreme value of 'Beauty' and reveals what in moral terms that value signifies: a type of evil."¹⁰²

Rops's allegory of Saint Antoine refigures both mythic possibilities, and furthermore "narrates" the critique of repression and spiritual discipline remarked by Freud. For the decadence, aesthetic crime finally draws itself away from the horizontal, intersubjective axis and nearer to aesthetic sins and aesthetic transcendence: both Wilde and Huysmans, in the works that make up the respective completions of their creative lives, seek the allegorical relations between the enactment of reparation for the crimes and sins of entire social groups, corporeal anguish, and the apocalyptic spectacle of the turning century. The image of sacrifice emerges, both in "supra-naturalism" and in the elaborate aesthetic-sacrificial myth of De Profundis, as the most potent allegory-making substance in the artist's arsenal.

Just as the period 1850-1910 exploits allegory and posits new generic hybrids (poèmes en prose, for example),

the novelistic genre is also eminently malleable as a formal means suited to represent breakthroughs in relations showing how normativity is attracted to transgression. Aesthetic crime, in representation, bears allegorical information which draws upon formal problems as well as thematic preoccupations. Because it flourishes in protean or indeterminate genres, aesthetic crime restates another version of the "legal" problems posed by the very concept of genre. There are numerous versions of aesthetic crime in Baudelaire's poèmes en prose and in the symbolist contes of Schwob, Lorrain and Wilde. These genre-benders refigure significant explorations of aesthetic crime, of determination of the law by models of transgression:

Que l'oeuvre 'désobéisse' à son
genre ne rend pas celui-ci
inexistant: on est tenté de dire:
au contraire. Et ce pour une double
raison. D'abord parce que la
transgression, pour exister comme
telle, a besoin d'une loi--qui sera
précisément transgressée. On
pourrait aller plus loin: la norme
ne devient visible--ne vit--que
grâce à ses transgressions.¹⁰³

"The rule of law" in representation, and especially in the subterranean life of specific genres or sub-genres, therefore functions in ways that parallel the reformulation of law in social groups, even if their consequential relations are difficult or impossible to prove. With the institutionalization of democratic impulses in France and

England and the successive revolutionary, restoration or reform movements across the nineteenth century in the two countries, new literary forms emerge in an atmosphere in which social or class differences (material, infrastructural) vanish, leaving a space in which other, mythological types of difference (supernatural, superstructural) might re-establish themselves on newly-cleared terrain. Aesthetic crime wears the thesis or "legal" mask of "aestheticism," of l'art pour l'art, often as a means of seeking some quasi-legal or para-legal antithesis (crisis) in order to effect the synthesis of a new normativity, a new law.

These large forces were not limited to Europe, of course; in Crime and Punishment, for example, the dialogical interaction between norms and actions also exploits aesthetics and crime as a means to this new "synthesis of evil." Yet, as René Girard remarks, the predominant modern interpretations of Dostoevsky's works seem often to confuse or even reverse the terms of enactment by which these transformations are effected, thereby perverting his thought:

Dostoevsky is the prophet of the whole series of deifications of the individual which have been proclaimed since the end of the nineteenth century. The fact that he was the first to treat certain themes tends to lend support to romantic interpretations. His foresight is so astounding it is thought that Dostoyevsky must himself be secretly committed to the development he foresees. . . . The

Dostoyevskian novel is supposed to present an early embodiment of the modern hero, not quite freed from his orthodox swaddling clothes. Everything in Dostoevsky which goes beyond revolt is attributed to not-yet-dispelled mists of feudalism and religion, and the critics thus cut themselves off from the highest levels of novelistic genius. Bit by bit, with the help of history, one gets used to denying the most glaring evidence and Dostoevsky is enrolled under the banner of 'modernity.'¹⁰⁴

Similarly, Dostoevsky's works were singled out by Leo Lowenthal for his studies in reader reaction and the sociological bases of literary reception in 1934.¹⁰⁵ In this early attempt at a modern sociological poetics, Lowenthal shows how Dostoevsky's novels (as read in pre-World War I Germany) actually "replaced social interaction as the crucial focus of cultural life."¹⁰⁶

Fascination with the disturbed and criminal mentalities that Dostoevsky so skillfully portrayed expressed a genuine interest in alienation, but one that was ideologically distorted by its blindness to the social origins of this condition. . . . the enormous popularity of Dostoevsky's novels in certain sectors of the German populace betokened an increasing flight from a harsh reality and the growing acceptance of irrational authority. It was thus not surprising that after the war Dostoevsky was linked to Kierkegaard as a prophet of social resignation.¹⁰⁷

On the other hand, far from enrolling Dostoevsky in

support of some cult of the tormented individual, as Girard complains of, and equally far from blaming Dostoevsky as a "prophet of social resignation," Vladimir Nabokov criticizes Crime and Punishment rather on moral and artistic grounds. He bases his condemnation especially on the redemption scene, where there "comes this singular sentence that for sheer stupidity has hardly the equal in world-famous literature: 'The candle was flickering out, dimly lighting up in the poverty-stricken room the murderer and the harlot who had been reading together the eternal book.'"108 Nabokov takes exception bitterly to this idea, this conjunction of characters, calling it "crude and inartistic." Pursuing the question why this passage is the way it is, he states:

I suggest that neither a true artist nor a true moralist--neither a good Christian nor a good philosopher--neither a poet nor a sociologist--should have placed side by side, in one breath, in one gust of false eloquence, a killer together with whom?--a poor streetwalker, bending their completely different heads over that holy book. The Christian God, as understood by those who believe in the Christian God, has pardoned the harlot nineteen centuries ago. The killer, on the other hand, must be first of all examined medically. The two are on completely different levels. The inhuman and idiotic crime of Raskolnikov cannot be even remotely compared to the plight of a girl who impairs human dignity by selling her body. . . . There is no rhetorical link between a filthy murderer, and this unfortunate girl. There is

only the conventional link of the Gothic novel and the sentimental novel. It is a shoddy literary trick, not a masterpiece of pathos and piety.¹⁰⁹

Nabokov concludes his discussion of Crime and Punishment with a priggish citation from Kropotkin, who he says "very aptly remarks: 'Behind Raskolnikov one feels Dostoevski trying to decide whether he himself, or a man like him, might have been brought to perform personally the act as Raskolnikov did. ... But writers do not murder.'"¹¹⁰ This is an (anti)insight: it very perceptively notes the crucial problem of the "implication" of the artist in the crimes he represents aesthetically, yet rejects this possible breakthrough (especially interesting in terms of the "return of the repressed") as unthinkable. Furthermore, the Marquis de Sade, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, Lacenaire and even Jean Genet prove Kropotkin wrong, at least to a degree: writers are human beings, and human beings commit crimes, even murder. With this "repression," then, Nabokov concludes his own deliberation upon why Dostoevsky created such a murderer as Raskolnikov, whose "motivation [to kill] is extremely muddled."¹¹¹

The reasons for this "muddled" situation, however, and the reasons behind Raskolnikov's confusion, derive precisely from the issues at stake in aesthetic crime: social integrity, in the form of duty to family (mother and sister), to the self and to the Other (primarily, Porfiry Petrovich

and ultimately, Sonya) collides spectacularly with a more abstract sense of duty to Truth (historical and "moral") and to Society (which will never miss the old pawnbroker, as one "louse" more or less). A generalized sense of "ontological sickness" lies behind Raskolnikov's criminal dilemma; the act of murder, seemingly sanctioned by the killer's proto-Nietzschean theories of history and law, is at the same time proscribed by conflicting, internalized codes of moral and ethical truth. These contradictions, caused and relentlessly exacerbated by the workings of internally mediated desire, burst onto the horizontal axis of inter-subjective transgression in the form of aesthetic crime:

One sudden thought--a thought that was utterly irrelevant--almost made him laugh. 'Napoleon, the pyramids, Waterloo--and a nasty, wizened old hag, a moneylender with a red box under her bed--what could a fellow like Porfiry [the detective] make of it? His aesthetic sense won't allow him. "A Napoleon crawl under an old woman's bed?" Oh, rot!' . . . I'm an aesthetic louse and nothing more.'112

By some strange conjunction of images--pyramids versus an old woman's bed--the would-be Napoleon refigures the terms of his criminal act and his prospects for detection and prosecution. The seemingly unbridgeable disjunction between Waterloo and the pawnbroker's bedroom serves the murderer's delusion. He is an "aesthetic louse" rather than a "real"

one like the parasitical pawnbroker (in his own mind, at least) and this aesthetic disjunction between his internally mediated role (criminal as lawbringer) and its tawdry reality (of which he is also painfully conscious) serves to feed the delusion that he is immune from detection. Underestimating the detective Porfiry Petrovich's perspicacity, Raskolnikov therefore comes to perceive the absurdity of the "aesthetics" involved in the situation: Napoleon would never crawl under an old woman's bed. Later, in his talks with Sonya, he again attempts to reconcile himself with his act on "aesthetic grounds":

'Oh, I see! It's not the aesthetically right form! Well, I just fail to understand why blowing up people with shells or killing them by a regular siege is a more respectable form. The fear of aesthetics is the first sign of impotence. Never, never before have I realized it more clearly than now. And it is now that I least of all understand why what I did was a crime.'¹¹³

It is surprising that Nabokov, whose critique of form is usually so perceptive, should neglect the formal symmetry involved in the character triangle of Raskolnikov/ Sonya/ Porfiry Petrovich. Because of several thematic parallels and echoes, it is clear that the detective and the prostitute form a dyad, the first terms in the syllogism of Raskolnikov's transformation. For although it is Sonya who eventually tells the murderer the story of Lazarus, it is the

detective who first plants the seed of the myth in Raskolnikov's tormented brain. Porfiry Petrovich is the murderer's secular confessor, antagonistically perceived, whose function as such corresponds to that of the prostitute, who acts in her turn as his transformative/transcendental confessor. Any possibility of a priest/confessor is ruled out, of course, by Dostoevsky's anti-institutional bias. Porfiry Petrovich, in his highly developed individuality, his psychological astuteness and his scientific ratiocinations, is more an "aesthetic detective" than he is a representative of a repressive or ominous police organization.

Raskolnikov's real antagonist, furthermore, is not the detective, but rather Svidrigailov. Like other of Dostoevsky's characters who are committed to evil in an unmitigated way, Svidrigailov's suicide marks the final stage of mediated, metaphysical desire.¹¹⁴ A second triangular configuration of characters, then, would include Raskolnikov, Svidrigailov and, at the third point, the combination of Porfiry Petrovich and Sonya. The latter pair work in tandem, both oriented primarily on the socio-legal, horizontal axis, yet also bearing transcendental or transformative value for the redeemable criminal. However, for the dandy Svidrigailov, any such mediations as Raskolnikov undergoes (susceptible to such mediating myths as Napoleon or Lazarus) would be unthinkable:

'You see, we educated people have no

especially sacred traditions, unless indeed one of us invents them for himself from books, or copies them out from some ancient chronicles. But those are mostly scholars, eccentric fools, in a way, so that to a man of the world it's even unbecoming to be like them.'¹¹⁵

"As the mediator approaches," writes Girard, "the phenomena connected with metaphysical desire tend to be of a collective nature."¹¹⁶ The apocalypse of aesthetic crime, especially in the fin de siècle, functions in a dialectic between the isolated individual and the collectivity. For Raskolnikov, the apocalyptic vision of collective suicide in a lawless world of mysterious "contagion" emerges during his worst fever, precisely before his recovery and the conclusion of the novel:

Whole villages, whole towns and peoples became infected and went mad. They were in a state of constant alarm. They did not understand each other. Each of them believed that the truth only resided in him, and was miserable looking at the others, . . . They did not know whom to put on trial or how to pass judgment; they could not agree what was good or what was evil. They did not know whom to accuse or whom to acquit. Men killed each other in a kind of senseless fury. . . . In the cities the tocsin was sounded all day long: they called everyone together, but no one knew who had summoned them or why they had been summoned, and all were in a state of great alarm.¹¹⁷

Huysmans creates just such a nightmare vision of

collective frenzy and chaos at the end of La Bas (1891), a novel similar in many ways to Crime and Punishment, yet distinctive from the Russian work both structurally and in terms of atmosphere. Durtal, the author's appointed alter-ego, whose spiritual progress is continued in the conversion trilogy of novels (En Route, 1895; La Cathédrale, 1898; L'Oblat, 1902) is launched upon a discussion of the historical moment and the exigencies of writing novels in the first scene of the book:

' . . . ce que je reproche au
naturalisme, ce n'est pas le lourd
badigeon de son gros style, c'est
l'immondice de ses idées; ce que je
lui reproche, c'est d'avoir incarné
le matérialisme dans la
littérature, d'avoir glorifié la
démocratie de l'art!' 118

In order to rectify this, Durtal proposes a novelistic practice which will continue in the path carved by Zola, but with a second level of form and content built into it, two parts:

. . . soudées ou plutôt
confondues, comme elles le sont dans
la vie, celle de l'âme, celle du
corps, et s'occuper de leurs
réactifs, de leurs conflits, de
leur entente. 119

It will be necessary, therefore, for Durtal to create a second path "in the air," parallel to the Naturalist's path of documentary precision and detail, and by means of this

other path to encompass:

. . . les en deçà et les après, de
faire, en un mot, un naturalisme
spiritualiste.¹²⁰

No other artist is thus engaged, claims Durtal, with one
exception:

Tout au plus pourrait-on citer,
comme se rapprochant de ce concept,
Dostoievsky. Et encore est-il bien
moins un réaliste surélevé qu'un
socialiste évangélique, cet
exorable Russe!¹²¹

The figure Durtal chooses as central character in his
novel, the intercalated chapters of which come to complement
the drama of Durtal's explorations of the lower depths of fin
de siècle Parisian satanism and occult practices, is Gilles
de Rais, "le seigneur criminel" of the fifteenth century.
His role in the story of Durtal's experience with the people
and appurtenances of satanic messes noires is brilliantly
complex and resonant. For the experiences of Gilles de Rais,
as recounted by Durtal, plumb the depths of criminality, yet
do so in a historical context composed of the retrospective
meditations and yearnings for social cohesion we have
characterized above as hyperretrospectivity:

A n'en pas douter, ce fut une
singulière époque que ce Moyen
Âge, reprit-il, en allumant une
cigarette. Pour les uns, il est
entièrement blanc et pour les

autres, absolument noir; aucune
 nuance intermédiaire; époque
 d'ignorance et de ténèbres,
 rabâchent les normaliens et les
 athées; époque douloureuse et
 exquise, attestent les savants
 religieux et les artistes.¹²²

The integrated role of religious authority in social life served to maintain precisely the differences so systematically undermined in the modern era; aesthetic crime, in the case of Durtal's version of the heinous transgressions of Gilles de Rais, thereby becomes the means whereby social difference reestablishes itself in the fifteenth century in ways impossible for the nineteenth.

Ce qui est certain, c'est que les
 immuables classes, la noblesse, le
 clergé, la bourgeoisie, le peuple,
 avaient, dans ce temps là, l'âme
 plus haute. On peut l'affirmer: la
 société n'a fait que déchoir
 depuis les quatre siècles qui nous
 séparent du Moyen Age.¹²³

Gilles is depicted as a phenomenon of satanic ingenuity, as a vessel in which the dark powers found their way into human society and which was ultimately controllable only through the institutional and centripetal forces of the Catholic church. The problematic aspects of the crimes of Gilles de Rais are continually explored in terms usually associated with beauty and aesthetics. Indeed, Durtal notes to himself the three stages of personality development through which his character must pass, all three seemingly

distinct and different beings, yet mysteriously rolled into one: first, the brave and pious soldier who fought alongside Jeanne d'Arc; second, "l'artiste raffiné et criminel"; third, "le pécheur qui se repent, le mystique."¹²⁴

To take just one example, this description of Gilles's crimes (in stage two of his personality development) calls to mind scenes from many decadent works featuring decollation and necrophilia, notably Wilde's *Salome*:

Artiste passionné, il baisait, avec des cris d'enthousiasme, les membres bien faits de ses victimes; il établissait un concours de beauté sépulcrale; et, alors que, de ces têtes coupées, l'une obtenait le prix, il la soulevait par les cheveux et, passionnément, il embrassait ses lèvres froides.X 168

This "artiste" is at the same time, of course, also described in terms of his animality, his stupidity, his authoritarian nature; all these qualities make him different from his contemporaries, and this difference, once fully and legally recognized, brings about social cohesion and renewal of faith. The clergy, moreover, in the time of Gilles de Rais capable of doing equally "artistic" battle with the criminal, now, in the vulgar nineteenth century, preaches nothing but sobriety of spirit and "la bourgeoisie de l'âme."¹²⁶

After being found guilty and sentenced to be hanged and burned alive, the people rally around the *Maréchal de Rais*

in an act resembling a sacrificial crisis, yet endowed with genuine justice:

Et ce peuple dont il avait et
mâché et craché le coeur,
sanglota de pitié; il ne vit plus
en ce seigneur démoniaque qu'un
pauvre homme qui pleurait ses crimes
et allait affronter l'effrayante
colère de la Sainte Face; et, le
jour de l'exécution, dès neuf
heures du matin, il parcourut, en
une longue procession, la ville. Il
chanta des psaumes dans les rues,
s'engagea, par serment, dans les
églises, à jeuner pendant trois
jours, afin de tenter d'assurer par
ce moyen le repos de l'âme du
Maréchal.¹²⁷

The efficacy, the social integrity, the legitimate triumph of justice over "aesthetics" and "artistes" such as Gilles de Rais, are all stressed in Durtal's interlocutor's reply to this account: "Nous sommes loin, comme vous voyez, de la loi américaine du lynch, dit des Hermies."¹²⁸ This same interlocutor, disgusted at the continuing spectacle outside in the streets of the vulgar mob, drunk on democracy, chanting for the political mediocrity Boulanger, asks in exasperation what will become of the children of this fetid bourgeoisie, to which Durtal replies in the final lines of the text:

Ils feront, comme leurs pères,
comme leurs mères, répondit
Durtal; ils s'empliront les tripes
et ils se vidangeront l'âme par le
bas ventre!¹²⁹

The dark, "supernatural negativity" contained in this conclusion partakes of what Girard calls "a victory over metaphysical desire that transforms a romantic writer into a true novelist."¹³⁰ Huysmans here states, as he had "unconsciously" on the last page of A Rebours, the transcendence of solitary consciousness in light of preceding novelistic structures of crime and redemptive punishment.¹³¹ In this way, aesthetic crime succeeds where real-life crime cannot; similarly, the artist achieves these moments of truth and new beginnings in ways impossible to maintain in daily life. For "The truth of metaphysical desire," writes Girard, "is death."¹³²

During the outcry in the periodical press over the "morality" of The Picture of Dorian Gray, Wilde composed a letter to the editor of the Scots Observer, which letter is itself cited by counsel during the first of Wilde's three trials:

Your critic then, Sir, commits the absolutely unpardonable crime of trying to confuse the artist with his subject-matter. For this, Sir, there is no excuse at all.¹³³

The letter goes on to cite Keats's remark on Shakespeare, that he "had as much pleasure in conceiving the evil as he had in conceiving the good,"¹³⁴ and then concludes with this claim for the "mirror of art":

It was necessary, Sir, for the dramatic development of this story, to surround Dorian Gray with an atmosphere of moral corruption. Otherwise the story would have had no meaning and the plot no issue. To keep this atmosphere vague and indeterminate and wonderful was the aim of the artist who wrote the story. I claim, Sir, that he has succeeded. Each man sees his own sin in Dorian Gray. What Dorian Gray's sins are no one knows. He who finds them has brought them.135

Wilde's further explications of the novel are recapitulated by Regina Gagnier, who states:

The result of the crimes was that Hallward lost his model and his life, Wotton saw his friends and family disgraced and was left without an audience for his pratings, and Dorian's "soul" was transferred and confined to the material image, the horrible, brittle picture. The reviewers saw the wrong sins and failed altogether to see the retribution. Rather than responding to their implicit allegations concerning his own 'sins,' Wilde turned the tables on his critics in a feat of condescension and self-promotion.136

The drama of Wilde's downfall, his disgrace and imprisonment and eventual exile, is well known and hardly need be recounted here. The final document appropriate for my purposes, however, remains De Profundis, an astonishing account of a consciousness heightened by suffering and chastened by punishment, yet strangely puzzled by the continuing riddle at its center. Like Huysmans's

hagiography of Sainte Lydwine, De Profundis crosses the boundaries of fiction and stands as an auto-hagiography, a reiteration of the mythic struggles and sacrificial agony of a narcissistic Christ. Addressed to his "Judas," Alfred Lord Douglas, this epistolary christology recounts the past, the present, and the futureless future in tones alternately moving, excruciated and stoic-philosophic. The profound narcissism in the relationship, viewed retrospectively by the author, is revealed in sentences such as these:

In the morning you were quite yourself. I waited naturally to hear what excuses you had to make, and in what way you were going to ask me for the forgiveness that you knew in your heart was invariably waiting for you, no matter what you did; your absolute trust that I would always forgive you being the thing in you that I always really liked best, perhaps the best thing in you to like.¹³⁷

The author states, in these lines, the astonishing sentiment that the loved one's trust that he would always forgive him was the one quality he (the author) always loved best, "perhaps the best thing in you to like." (Merely writing this sentence is difficult because of the complexity involved in this autotelic trust.) The author's ability to trigger this favorite quality in the loved one's behavior, then, depended on his own willingness to forgive the transgressor whose absolute faith in exacting the author's

eventual forgiveness, as it were, charmed the subject in advance and thereby was fulfilled in advance by itself. This situation does not occasion difficulty now, however: "And as the gods are strange, and punish us for what is good and humane in us as much as for what is evil and perverse," he writes, "I must accept the fact that one is punished for the good as well as for the evil that one does."¹³⁸

The problem for the narcissistic, "aesthetic" Christ remains Beauty, however; just as Salome is "attracted to Iokaanan less for his spiritual purity than for his imperviousness to the fascination she is able to exercise over other men,"¹³⁹ the character type in Wilde's works who cannot be controlled by Beauty--Iokaanan, Basil Hallward, Christ, Wilde himself--"becomes the martyr-masochist."¹⁴⁰ The martyr-masochist, in turn, embodies a final metamorphosis, even an apotheosis, of the aesthetic criminal. As Wilde writes in De Profundis, "For I have come, not from obscurity into the momentary notoriety of crime, but from a sort of eternity of fame to a sort of eternity of infamy."¹⁴¹ Wilde further claims that he "awoke the imagination of my century so that it created myth and legend around me," he writes, ". . . But I let myself be lured into long spells of senseless and sensual ease. I amused myself with being a flâneur, a dandy, a man of fashion."¹⁴²

The martyr-masochist in the myth of De Profundis, however, needs not a following of the faithful, but rather a

following of betrayers like the person to whom the document is addressed, who would worship in a place rhetorically indistinguishable from a prison:

When I think about religion at all,
I feel as if I would like to found
an order for those who cannot
believe: the Confraternity of the
Faithless one might call it, where
on an altar, on which no taper
burned, a priest, in whose heart
peace had no dwelling, might
celebrate with unblessed bread and a
chalice empty of wine.¹⁴³

This inversion of redemptive ritual, here accomplished in the form of punishment, marks a thesis-antithesis relation in Wilde's myth which corresponds to the displaced Christ held in place by the hybrid figure of Madness and Satan in Rops's allegory; the synthesis, for Wilde, will be accomplished in his own substitution for his imprisoned equivalent of excruciated Eros, pleasurably crucified and undeniably impervious to the desires of the ostensibly penitent Bosie:

Everything to be true must become a religion. And agnosticism should have its ritual no less than faith. It has sown its martyrs, it should reap its saints, and praise God daily for having hidden Himself from man. But whether it be faith or agnosticism, it must be nothing external to me. . . . If I may not find its secret within myself, I shall never find it: if I have not got it already, it will never come to me.¹⁴⁴

The apotheosis of the aesthetic criminal passes through two stages: the first corresponds to what I have called here, following Jankélévitch, the "thesis crisis" of identification and classification, in which difference is remarked and even appreciated. In this phase, the "man of the crowd" is observed and followed on his migrations like some phenomenal creature; he is the Other, the "type and genius of deep crime," the criminal flâneur/man of the crowd in Poe, or the protean phenomenon of transgression and auto-legitimation named Vautrin in Balzac. The second phase or stage in his development corresponds to the "critical crisis" of organism or species decline, during which difference is radically questioned or even destroyed: the aesthetic transgressor gradually migrates away from the Other toward the Self. The tragedy of Baudelaire's poet-hero traces this curve, for example, in the passage from the ritual or mythic scene of social differentiation early in Spleen et Idéal through the phases of criminal "flowering" observable in the six books of the ensemble of Les Fleurs du Mal. The aesthetic criminal, like the dandy and in many instances indistinguishable from him, finally renounces transgression in an act of askesis and slips inexorably toward the return of this repressed material.

As Rops demonstrates, however, this last phase of apotheosis is "inverted" because it bifurcates in the two "ascetic" directions depicted in the allegory of Saint

Antoine, as exemplified in the parallel biographies and mythologies of Joris-Karl Huysmans and Oscar Wilde. Thus, the aesthetic criminal ceases to be seen, becoming instead the incarcerated spectator who is simultaneously a participant in and witness to his own transgressive transfigurations.

NOTES TO CHAPTER IV

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2 Baldick lists the following other works as having been directly inspired by A Rebours: Remy de Gourmont's Sixtine, George Moore's A Mere Accident and Mike Fletcher, and also Wilde's Salome and the "The Sphinx." There are, no doubt, others (p. 88).

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6 This issue is discussed exhaustively in A. E. Carter, The Idea of Decadence in French Literature (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1958), Ch. 5, "The Glamours of Syntax."

7 Huysmans, p. 152.

8 Huysmans, p. 151.

9 Huysmans, p. 152.

10 Huysmans, p. 154.

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25 Jean Dornbush reminds me that the suggestion has been made that "Prose" should be taken in its etymological sense, meaning "hymn" or "sequence."

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- 45 René Girard, Violence and the Sacred, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1977), p. 14.
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- 48 J.-K. Huysmans, Against Nature, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 81.
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- 50 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 105.
- 51 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 105.
- 52 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 106.
- 53 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 106.
- 54 Huysmans, A Rebours, p. 106.
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- 57 Huysmans, A Rebours, pp. 106-107.
- 58 Girard, p. 162.
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66 Shewan, p. 115.

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Chapter V

Conclusion: "Une Promesse de (bonheur) dans le crime"

and

The Mystique of Transgression

Ce Visiteur inouï, attendu par moi
quatre mille ans, n'aura pas d'amis et sa
misère fera ressembler les mendiants à
des empereurs. . . .

Les charognes en putréfaction se
couvriront de parfums puissants achetés
à des navigateurs téméraires, pour se
préserver de sa peste, et, dans
l'espoir d'échapper à son contact, les
empoisonneurs des pauvres ou les
assassins d'enfants diront aux montagnes
de tomber sur eux.

--Léon Bloy,
Le salut par les Juifs

Art, since it became autonomous,
has preserved the utopia that evaporated
from religion.

--Max Horkheimer

The nineteenth century marks an era in human history
when significant shifts in consciousness concerning the
forms of social relations and interactions take place. In a
multitude of contexts--class difference, material
production, daily life, technological and artistic creation--
the experience of the period attests to a proliferation of
unprecedented experiences for the individual, the family, and
the nations of the West.

Viewed from one perspective, the accompanying proliferation of a new literature of crime marks "the appropriation of criminality in acceptable forms. . . . the affirmation that greatness too has a right to crime and that it even becomes the exclusive privilege of those who are really great."¹ According to this line of thought, the "aesthetic" appropriation of criminality by the ruling classes constitutes yet another manipulation of the oppressed classes in Europe, who previously had achieved class identity in the literary celebration of its great transgressors.

As I have argued in the preceding chapters, however, the issues involved in this phenomenon cut across class differences and very rapidly involve themselves in issues of hermeneutics and aesthetic theory. In order to approach this complex issue, I have distinguished between reflective and normative modes of representation. For represented actions are "reflective" inasmuch as mimesis, or imitative reflection upon the actions and reactions of others, informs them and drives them to occur (either in the image or in the world.) Represented notions are "normative" inasmuch as they imply (in "poetic justice") or otherwise state "what people should or should not do or say under specific circumstances."²

Aesthetic crime is inter-subjective transgression represented as an action freed to some degree from pre-determined or monological interpretation. At first, (i.e.,

roughly before 1850) aesthetic crime seeks to reflect or re-create inter-subjective transgression "realistically," i.e., as it exists in the world, in common experience. Secondly, however, aesthetic crime seeks, through whatever means, to re-institute normativity in the realm of social terror and the generalized collapse or destruction of difference, or, put another way, in the face of the chronic obliteration of ethical bases. This operation occurs along the vertical axis of supernatural symbolism, which ultimately comes to accomodate the secular or socio-historical horizontal axis of natural symbolism. It is not surprising that such issues and procedures should emerge during a period in which artists were seriously preoccupied with the myth of decay and decline, a period in which Baudelairean "modernity" seems to over-determine its component of the eternal in the face of the overwhelmingly transitory.

The distinctly post-Baudelairean formulation by Huysmans, describing the works of Rops--a "synthesis of Evil"--states in another way two important functions of aesthetic crime: it repeatedly forces one set of empirical actions (inter-subjective transgressions) into the hermeneutic crucible of value, valorization, and ethics. It extrapolates "aesthetically" (with theories of Beauty and "good taste" functioning as normative concepts) from the violated body to the body politic; rape, theft, aggression, murder, all form the empirical canon of "centrifugal"

materials (subject to spontaneity and violence) upon which the mask of "centripetal" value (what Freud calls the "reality principle") is placed in representation.

If possible, then, I would associate the proairetic material ("voice of the empirical"³) so prevalent in nineteenth century narrative (social upheaval and post-revolutionary adaptation) with the broad current of technical procedures stretching from realism to naturalism, at least for the moment. For what are the realists proposing, in terms of Stendhal's mobile mirror and Balzac's scrupulous secretary, if not a procedural reflection of empirical reality? The "aestheticist" emphasis exploited increasingly by the writers I have discussed here, especially in Baudelaire and after, signals an increasing emphasis on the hermeneutic code (of enigmas and answers, verging toward a theory of "good taste") applied to the codes of action inherited from pre-1850 traditions. "Even an aesthete, working on a novel, becomes in this genre an ideologue who must defend and try out his ideological positions, who must become both a polemicist and an apologist," states Bakhtin.⁴

Like the dichotomy between form and content, any mutual exclusivity between these two descriptive concepts--reflective and normative, proairetic and hermeneutic--ultimately vanishes: to take just one example, the proto-dandy clearly emerges in Stendhal, in the form of Julien

Sorel and Fabrice del Dongo, as well as in Balzac, as we have seen, in the form(s) of Lucien de Rubempré and Vautrin, among others. Any demonstrable emphasis on "reflective" procedures before 1850 and on "normative" procedures after 1850 should not be overstated. As André Malraux remarked, "Flaubert's characters are often Balzac's characters conceived in the mode of failure rather than success . . . and L'Education sentimentale is Balzac's Illusions perdues whose author no longer believes in ambition."⁵ Is "ambition" somehow more closely associable with "reflection," while "failure" somehow has to go with "normativity"? Clearly, the answer is no. This palpable shift toward failure does mark some kind of shift, however, in the hermeneutic realm, a shift similar, perhaps parallel, to the one under delineation here. The world in France and England after 1850 approaches the condition of being "totally mediated by social reality," as Adorno states; therefore, "nothing is blameless." And aesthetic crime, as a phenomenon, is particularly "vulnerable to contingency."⁶

It is important, however, not to put an unqualified "plus" sign next to either of these descriptive categories. Instead, aesthetic crime should be understood as a term that functions dialogically or dialectically, with the first and second elements inherently bearing aspects of the other. Just as the operative nineteenth-century antinomies (art/nature, good/evil, and so on) should be considered

always in light of the rhetorical context in which they are mustered, so should "aesthetic crime" be approached as a critical term which forces together magnetic concepts with opposing poles.

While being an after-image of man's repression of nature, art tends to negate repression reflectively, ultimately joining forces with nature. Thus totality is not just heteronomously imposed on art works by the subject, but becomes an imaginative restitution of the other. Domination of nature gives up its violent stance as it becomes neutralized by art. Thus art becomes a model of undamaged wholeness, since it restores to the damaged other its true shape. The aesthetic whole is the antithesis of the false social totality.⁷

Stendhal's idea, often repeated in the writings of the Frankfurt School, states that "true art was an expression of man's legitimate interest in his future happiness,"⁸ which gives "une promesse de bonheur." This idea should be interpreted in the light of Adorno's claims here. If art "tends to negate repression reflectively," as he states, then it is fair to say that the hermeneutic impulses of aesthetic crime also serve in this "imaginative restitution of the other." While crime in the world depends on the reduction of the Other to the status of object (and resulting violence), aesthetic crime may in fact work antithetically to "restore to the damaged other its true shape."⁹ In an era when the



Figure 18 Félicien Rops, "Le Bonheur dans le crime"¹¹

"false social totality" had been effectively criminalized from top to bottom, even to the degree where the difference between the top and bottom is effectively obscured, aesthetic crime may work as a hermeneutic whole to counteract the inherently atomized, and therefore damaged, "false social totality."¹⁰ Barbey-d'Aurevilly's tale, "Le Bonheur dans le crime," (in Les Diaboliques, 1874) effectively creates an integrated aesthetic borne by an impossibly integrated couple as bearers of a sort of "higher animality" and higher criminality in a society of animated fragments. Their integrity attains to some (false) monumental autonomy, as depicted in the etching by Félicien Rops done to illustrate this tale.¹¹

The luminous negativity of aesthetic crime is produced by its normativity; its ominous positivity, on the other hand, derives from its impulse to create in its turn new agents of mimetic desire, new "contagions" of individual and group violence. As Raskolnikov and the reader learn together, norms are sometimes established by acts of transgression, but not every act of transgression has normative value. For the theorist of aesthetics and sociological poetics, "The basic question is not whether the action is norm-conforming or norm-breaking, but which norms, ideas and reasons were invoked by the actors for the performance of the action."¹² These "actors" include both fictional personages and authors, of course; by eliminating

the distinction between them, heteronomy is guaranteed and reflective procedures are allowed to function as "imaginative restitution(s) of the other."¹³

Epidemics of mimetic desire, however, draw upon the image of transgression for renewals of momentum and the ominous positivity of aesthetic crime (its "contagion" as a model for behavior) may serve to drive these destructive, even sado-masochistic or self-destructive psychological forces. Any "antinomian" reading (i.e., by one who believes himself freed from moral law by some a priori state of grace) of aesthetic crime, for example, may monologically fetishize one side of the issue or the other. If the reflective aspects of represented criminal behavior are focused on to the exclusion of the normative, damage by contagious desire to the subject is possible (Bovarysme). If the normative aspects of aesthetic crime are focused on to the exclusion of the reflective, then damage to the aesthetic object is possible in violations of its aesthetic autonomy ("socialist realism"). The former damage might derive from acting out dramas of mediated desire in real life ("copycat crimes"), while the second type of damage would occur in acts of ideologically motivated misinterpretation. As Philip Rieff states it, "'Morality,' the sadism of the super-ego, appears as a stupid alternative to 'the will to power,' the sadism of the ego. . . . To resist the demands of conscience may be an act of maturity, since conscience may be a source of crime as

well as of piety."¹⁴

De Quincey himself was aware of this problem in hermeneutics when he wrote, in "On Murder Considered as one of the Fine Arts":

If, therefore, any man thinks it worth his while to tilt against so mere a foam-bubble of gaiety as this lecture on the aesthetics of murder, I shelter myself for the moment under the Telemonian shield of the dean. . . . Nobody can pretend, for a moment, on behalf of the dean, that there is any ordinary and natural tendency in human thoughts, which could ever turn to infants as articles of diet; under any conceivable circumstances, this would be felt as the most aggravated form of cannibalism--cannibalism applying itself to the most defenceless part of the species. But, on the other hand, the tendency to a critical or aesthetic valuation of fires and murders is universal.¹⁵

De Quincey here is making an important claim for the rights of the guilt-free, responsible individual to exercise a sort of "scientific" approach to phenomena freed from inherent, monologic normative codes. Moreover, by his tone and his high humor, De Quincey challenges the aesthetic claims of Kantian disinterestedness faced with the "object" of the corpse. The "supernatural negativity" surrounding the scene of the crime, even when considered "aesthetically," continues to haunt not only the criminal, but also the author and the viewer.

In some cases, of course, "positive" versions of

sacrificial gestures and situations, or the manipulation of sacrificial imagery, are clearly a signs of the failure of the search for normativity, or the collapse back into traditional sacrificial mythologies. Many are the examples of inverted, diabolic or satanized versions of this issue, insufficiently negative, produced especially during the period in question; hence, the diabolic bric-a-brac wearing itself out in the innumerable volumes of Sar Péladan or in the endlessly reiterated, mumbo-jumbo cultification of phallic myth in Aleister Crowley.¹⁶

Decadent reasoning states that in a criminal world, beauty is possible only in transformation, which may come to resemble, if sufficiently "aesthetic," redemption itself; in a falsely moral world, then, transformation may be attempted by means of crimes set in a hierarchy of ascending values, beginning on the horizontal axis (natural symbolism) with crimes against nature and crimes against the other, then ostensibly leaping to the vertical axis (supernatural symbolism) in a transcendental act of criminal transformation in the form of crimes against the gods. The fact that these conjunctions of nature, social reality and supernatural belief systems are so crucial to this process renders the works by Baudelaire, Huysmans and Wilde so exemplary.

In the face of "une promesse de bonheur" as manipulated in the aesthetic context of "le bonheur dans le crime," then, it is important to note the "mystique of transgression" as

outlined by Girard as an antidote to the somewhat programmatic aesthetics of crime as it has come down to the twentieth century from the nineteenth. "Toute la pensée moderne est faussée par une mystique de la transgression dans laquelle elle retombe même, quand elle veut lui échapper," he states.¹⁷

Indeed, the phrase 'modern world' seems almost like a synonym for 'sacrificial crisis.' . . . It is not law, in any conceivable form, that is responsible for the tensions and alienations besetting modern man; rather, it is the increasing lack of law. The perpetual denunciation of the law arises from a typically modern sense of resentment--a feedback of desire that purports to be directed against the law but one that is actually aimed at the model-obstacle whose dominant position the subject stubbornly refuses to acknowledge. The more frenzied the mimetic process becomes, caught up in the confusion of constantly changing forms, the more unwilling men are to recognize that they have made an obstacle of the model and a model of the obstacle.¹⁸

The "model criminal" has a tendency, therefore, earnestly to imitate the obstacle of the spectator, until finally the spectator absorbs the mystique of transgression, as embodied in the model criminal, which then can produce a mass-psychological, ominous unanimity. The criminal's image of autonomy--in real life or in representation--his "bonheur dans le crime"--is a very strong magnetic force of desire

which creates its own powers of mediation. The decadent versions of aesthetic crime, especially in relation to what has come to be known to us as modernity and post-modernity, flee their putative autonomy in a strangely fashioned act of engagement, bearing in their aesthetic-criminal enigmas an "exemplification made a cultural weapon in a war against the prevailing criteria for reference."¹⁹

Nineteenth-century crime, as a social act, needs a component of autonomy in order to challenge the prevailing criteria by which it is considered by the population at large, as reflected in popular forms--in journalism, for example; aesthetics, wearing the mask of putative autonomy, seeks therefore to represent the pre-eminently social act of inter-subjective transgression. Art and Crime: forcing the two together, as Baudelaire did in the guise of modern tragedy, as his successors did in hybrid and novelistic genres, serves as a means of compounding the simple indeterminacy of the one with the simple indeterminacy of the other. This very forcing of the mask of crime upon the face of beauty results, perhaps, in the characteristic fatigue of the period, what has been called recently the "literature of exhaustion," borne along by the weariness that knows no rest, in the desolated cells of murdered sleep.

NOTES TO CHAPTER V

- 1 Foucault, p. 68.
- 2 Ladislav Holy and Milan Stuchlik, Actions, Norms and Representations: Foundations of Anthropological Inquiry (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1983), p. 81.
- 3 Brooks, Plot, p. 18.
- 4 Bakhtin, Dialogic, p. 333.
- 5 Malraux cited in Brooks, Plot, pp. 175-176.
- 6 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 313.
- 7 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 402.
- 8 Jay, p. 179.
- 9 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 402.
- 10 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 402.
- 11 Rops, Aquarelles, p. 30.
- 12 Holy and Stuchlik, p. 82.
- 13 Adorno, Aesthetic Theory, p. 402.
- 14 Philip Rieff, Freud: The Mind of the Moralist (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 279.
- 15 Thomas De Quincey, "On Murder Considered As One of the Fine Arts," in The English Mail Coach and Other Essays (London: Dent, 1912), p. 88.
- 16 Martin, *passim*.
- 17 René Girard, Des Choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde (Paris: Grasset, 1978), p. 406.
- 18 Girard, Violence, p. 189.
- 19 Altieri, "Infinite Incantations," p. 120.

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Appendix A

CHRONOLOGY OF THE MASKS OF THE DECADENCE

- 1856 Goncourt brothers, Une Voiture de Masques
- 1857 Baudelaire, "Le Masque" (Les Fleurs du Mal, XX)
- 1863 Manet, Déjeuner sur l'herbe
- 1873 Manet, Bal Masqué à l'Opéra
- 1874 Villiers, "Le Convive inconnu" (1st version)
- 1881 Verlaine, "Légende intime" (Sagesse, I, 1)
- 1883 Villiers, "Le Convive des dernières fêtes," in Contes cruels
- 1887 René Maizeroy, Masques
- 1888 James Ensor, L'Entrée du Christ à Bruxelles
- 1889 death of Villiers
Marcel Schwob, "Le Loup"
_____, "Un Squelette"
Huysmans, "Félicien Rops," in Certains
Ensor, Squelettes se chauffant autour d'un poêle
- 1890 Schwob, "Les Sans Gueule"
_____, "L'Homme Double"
_____, "L'Homme Voilé"
- 1891 Schwob, Coeur Double
_____, "Les Faulx-Visages"
Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," "The Truth of Masks," in Intentions
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CURRICULUM VITAE

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