

Figures of Degeneration in *Fin-de-Siècle* French Literature

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**Abstract**

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This dissertation explores how authors used the biological metaphor of degeneration to explain and condemn the decline of France in the first decades of the Third Republic. Degeneration was originally a medical coinage used in studies of specific forms of mental illness, but progressively became a recurrent term connecting biology and cultural criticism, and allowed late-nineteenth-century authors to theorize social decay. Faith in science having been adopted as the more or less official dogma of the Third Republic, and doctors having achieved great prestige as well as political power, the medical concept of degeneration took hold as an explanatory model for countless physical, social and moral afflictions. *Fin-de-siècle* France offers a remarkably rich ground for observing the diffusion of such a discourse into literature. This dissertation focuses on the fantasies of decline and loss that pervade the literature of the period and

draws on scholarship about degeneration in British literature, but seeks to illuminate the “Frenchness” of the corpus. Indeed, surprisingly, no systematic study of the pervasiveness of degenerative tropes in French literature of the period has been undertaken. While the authors of the texts under study (Bourget, Daudet, Zola, Verne, Bertrand, Goncourt) did not constitute a unified literary school, their shared concerns connect their fictions as diagnoses of and correctives to a collective malaise. Coalescing around three figures of degeneration—social climbers, prostitutes, and colonials—these concerns revolved around perceived threats to social order, moral values and organic health in the early Third Republic. Contemporary scientific theories offered a template for the characterization of degenerates, but these authors appropriated and reworked such discourse in their fictions to their own ends of social and political critique. Portrayed as both symptoms and causes of a larger degeneration, the protagonists are in turn censured and pitied, as these sharply individualized figures stand for a pathological and reprehensible milieu. The degenerate protagonists become the diseased norm in the Opportunist Republic, collapsing individual deviance into a collective malaise.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband, Drew, who has always believed in me and encouraged me. Drew, you are my best friend. You have always been there for me. You picked me up when I was discouraged and cheered me along. Truly, I could never have finished the dissertation without your help. Thank you.

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## **Introduction**

### **Degeneration in *fin-de-siècle* France**

From its early formulation as a medical term concerning specific mental illnesses, degeneration evolved throughout the second half of the nineteenth century into a comprehensive way of theorizing otherness. It was largely prevalent in France at the end of the century, an era most concerned with the various manifestations of the perceived decay of civilization. The authority of degeneration theory in *fin-de-siècle* France has much to do with the political situation of the 1880s and 1890s, as the historical convulsions that marked the last decades of the century were viewed by some as evidence of the decline of the country and of its citizens. The Third Republic was established in the wake of the 1870 defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, which precipitated the fall of Napoleon III and the end of the Second Empire. The Commune of 1871, which was severely repressed by republican troops, marked the last popular uprising in a turbulent century. Its memory played an important part in determining the course of the new regime, whose leaders sought to divorce the idea of the republic from that of revolution. However, many in the elites continued to fear sudden outbursts of popular enthusiasm or anger.<sup>1</sup> François Furet, in his history of the Revolution, writes: “Thus, the last great uprising in the French revolutionary tradition [the Commune] is also that which induced the greatest fear and shed the most blood, as if it were the ultimate exorcism of a violence that had been inseparable from our public life since the end of the eighteenth century. In

this Paris in flames, the French Revolution says farewell to history. Yet what the bourgeoisie sees is the opposite: the evidence of a terrifying threat more than ever looming over its destiny and the future of civilization” (489).<sup>2</sup>

As we shall see, the uses of degeneration theory shifted during the last decades of the century, from medical discourse to cultural and social thought. Degeneration’s hold may also be traced in literature of the period. As Stephen Arata states in *Fictions of Loss*, his study of degeneration in popular British narratives, “a nation, or any imagined community, is held together in part by the stories it generates about itself.” (1). Indeed, works of fiction from a certain period may be read as particular, “stylized answers,” responses to “questions posed by the situation in which they arose” (Burke 1). Surprisingly, considering the French origin of the medical theory of degeneration and the prevalence of the trope in social and cultural discourse on France, there have been no comprehensive studies of degenerate figures in French literature.<sup>3</sup> My focus in this dissertation is on works set and written during the last decades of the nineteenth century in which authors present characters that exhibit degenerative traits. These authors do not constitute a distinct literary school; their aesthetics and politics do not form a cohesive whole. But what interests me is that they deploy the vocabulary and imagery of degeneration in ways that reveal shared concerns for the fate of the nation, its culture, its citizens’ minds and bodies. This is not to say that the fictions studied here are a reflection of a historical reality, but rather that they participate in the elaboration of a discursive paradigm specific to that age, by using and transforming concepts borrowed from other types of discourse. As such, they constitute a form of cultural criticism in themselves, and

attending to the historical specificity of the response that they propose to the situation at hand contributes to our understanding of the period.

The political and social anxieties brought about by the bruising defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870 and subsequent establishment of the republic were manifold: loss of relevance on the international stage, loss of political power to the uncivilized masses, decline of traditional social and religious values, confusion about gender roles. In fact, as Daniel Pick shows in *Faces of Degeneration*, “there was no one stable referent to which degeneration applied; instead a fantastic kaleidoscope of concerns and objects through the second half of the century, from cretinism to alcoholism to syphilis, from peasantry to urban working class, bourgeoisie to aristocracy, madness to theft, individual to crowd, anarchism to feminism, population decline to population increase” (15). Degeneration theory proved particularly useful to social observers in linking biology and cultural criticism, by articulating the relationship between the degenerate individual (that it sought to identify) and the fate of the nation, as the supposed causes and effects of degeneration “reached deep into the collective life of the people” (Arata 3). As Robert Nye argues in *Crime, Madness and Politics*, the “medical concept of national decline” became dominant in the last decade of the century, when “degeneracy was no longer simply a clinical theory of abnormal individual pathologies but a *social* theory of persuasive force and power” (143). In addition to establishing a continuum between the individual and the social, degeneration theory provided a set of scientific concepts that implicated biology and the social in reciprocal relationships.

*Fin-de-siècle* France, as mentioned above, offers a remarkably rich ground for observing the diffusion of such a discourse. Faith in science having been adopted as the

more or less official dogma of the Third Republic, and doctors having achieved great prestige as well as political power, the medical concept of degeneration was particularly prevalent in discussions of the French situation at the end of the century (Nye 46). Historically, advances in science and the accompanying ideology of scientific progress had been linked to political progress. Auguste Comte's post-Enlightenment *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1827-1830) charted the evolution of societies from the ages of theology and metaphysics to the age of positivism, in which rational constructions would transform the world through science. It heralded an era of great scientific discoveries, from Berthelot's experiments in chemistry to Bernard's and Pasteur's advances in medicine and the Curies' discovery of radioactivity. The scientific method and its ascribed determinism were then applied to the social sciences. Renan's scandalous *Vie de Jésus* (1863), Langlois and Seignobos's positivist *Introduction aux Sciences Historiques* (1897) and Durkheim's creation of sociology, for instance, all derive from the faith in the applicability of the methods of the hard sciences to the social field.<sup>4</sup>

However, Comte's and his disciple Littré's optimistic vision of a scientific progress which would lead to an ideal society, characterized by unity, stability and harmony, was counterbalanced by deep anxieties about the future of society, which, perhaps paradoxically, also stemmed from new scientific discoveries. The confidence in the ability of science to explain everything and to secure a peaceful and secure future gave way to a feeling of dismay at the phenomena that were being uncovered by scientists. In particular, advances in the fields of neurophysiology and psychiatry revealed the existence of multifarious pathologies of the will, ranging from neurasthenia to schizophrenia and even homicidal mania (Harris 56). Hippolyte Taine, in *De*

*l'Intelligence* (1870), his influential treatise on psychology, described the fragile nature, the uncertain equilibrium, of the human mind. "Hence our idea of self is a group of coordinated elements whose reciprocal associations, continually under attack, continually victorious, are preserved during wake and reason, just as the composition of an organ is preserved in health and in life. But the mind is always threatened by madness, just as the body is always threatened by disease" (2:230). Narratives of decay, decline, and collapse time after time offset narratives of progress.

Bénédict-Augustin Morel's *Traité des Dégénérescences Physiques, Intellectuelles et Morales de l'Espèce Humaine* (1857) is considered the founding text of degeneration theory, "set[ting] the terms of the discussion of degeneration for the rest of the century" (Hurley 193). While the idea of decadence has always existed, in its late-nineteenth-century incarnation it came to be couched in an increasingly pathologized discourse, and the pseudo-science of degeneration was the most prevalent explanatory theory for a variety of moral and social ills.<sup>5</sup> Degeneration was originally a medical term used in studies of cretinism,<sup>6</sup> but progressively became a recurrent term linking biology and cultural criticism, and allowed late-nineteenth-century authors to theorize social decay. In an age when establishing cultural, social and scientific norms was a pressing concern, degeneration offered a powerful explanatory tool for a whole range of pathologies and deviant behaviors, because of its capacity for creating links among seemingly discrete phenomena. Morel, a psychiatrist with a primary interest in cretinism, contended that various mental and physical deficiencies sprang from the organism's adaptation to its environment, a process that produced responses "that are successful in the short-run task

of adaptation, but potentially dysfunctional to the organism in the long run” (Nye 121).<sup>7</sup> The degenerate, according to Morel, was a “morbid deviation from an original type” (5).

Morel’s initial focus was on lesions of the brain, caused by certain “modern poisons,” diseases, poor diet, or even an accidental blow to the head. Since he considered the human being as a unified whole, matter and spirit, and as such, believed that physical conditions affected one’s health and one’s thoughts and actions, he connected these physical lesions to deviant behaviors. He also asserted that thoughts and actions were shaped by moral and social habits. In addition, degenerate lesions were transmissible, although not necessarily reproduced as a constant anomaly, and progressive, getting increasingly acute across generations. Morel was “the first to articulate [degeneration] into a full-blown theory of heredity” (Hurley 193) by proposing a narrative model for degeneration’s development.<sup>8</sup>

Morel studied, for instance, the link between alcoholism and madness. He discovered that certain brain lesions could cause a propensity to alcohol abuse, which in turn, he argued, could be transmitted to the next generation in a slightly different form. Degenerates were produced “as Lacassagne [a prominent doctor of legal medicine and criminologist] put it, by the “evil and misery and deprivation” of their parents... Degeneracy was not merely biological, not entirely social, but also contained a moral element, offering scientific support of very old ideas about moral deterioration” (Cragin 152). And while Morel’s first concern was with the threat of the uncontrolled reproduction of cretins, his theory encompassed “an infinite network of diseases and disorders” and sought to explain “the patterns of return and transformation” that governed their spread and intensification (Pick 50). Therefore degeneration went from referring to

a particular form of organic disease to denoting the moral malaise of society. Indeed, as the theory suggested, degenerative lesions within an individual human organism caused a “morbid deviation from an original type,” which in turn wrought moral effects. Hurley states that “within this larger etiology of degeneration, difference from whatever constituted a cultural norm was reinscribed as immorality, and immorality reinscribed as innate, pathological deviance” (207). The hereditary transmission of this harmful trait meant that offspring were congenitally more prone to sinful behaviors.

While Morel thought that degenerates eventually became sterile, “during the last decades of the nineteenth century, this model of degeneration yielded to one that was ever more contagious, ever more progressive in its effects—that could spread wildly through the ranks of society and destroy an entire culture” (Hurley 196).<sup>9</sup> In addition, as organicist social models, influenced by Saint-Simon and his social physiology, replaced mechanistic and mathematical views of communities, such as Condorcet’s, which had been prevalent in the eighteenth century, the welfare and progress of a given society were seen as inextricably linked to the health of the individuals who, like cells in an organism, constituted it. Organicist theorists opposed eighteenth-century contractual theories of the origin of society, according to which societies were formed by associations of free, autonomous individuals, and were “comparable with a mechanism made by man, whose parts worked together according to a preconceived scheme,” explains Daniela Barberis (56). Instead, thinkers such as René Worms, founder of the *Revue Internationale de Sociologie*, Alfred Espinas and Jacques Novicow, proposed that each society was a natural whole, with its laws and attributes. This whole, formed by individuals performing various integrated functions, was greater than the sum of its parts: “in the same way that

an organism was more than a simple cell conglomerate, a society was more than a simple grouping of individuals” (Barberis 57). And, just as living organisms were subject to the laws of evolution, societies as well followed the same patterns: the principles of development over time, differentiation and organization, defined in evolutionary biology, could be applied to societies.<sup>10</sup>

Among the various evolutionary theories developed throughout the nineteenth century, the neo-Lamarckian tradition was the most influential in France. Based upon the studies of eighteenth-century naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, this model put forward the notion of a functional relationship between the organism and its environment, as opposed to constant struggle.<sup>11</sup> Hostile to Darwin’s ideas of random variation and natural selection, this view focused on “the organism’s purposive, and therefore directed, attempts to adapt to the ceaselessly changing milieu” (Harris 67).<sup>12</sup> Faced with environmental changes, the organism adapted by acquiring behavioral traits that would reestablish equilibrium between itself and the environment. This new internal organization would then be transmitted to its offspring. The prevalence of neo-Lamarckism in France was crucial in the development of degeneration theory, as it allowed thinkers to link changes in the environment with alterations in the organism, alterations which may be experienced as pathologies and transmitted to offspring. Nye explains that “on account of the neo-Lamarckian idea of inherited characteristics, each case of individual pathology could be regarded as a symptom that a syndrome of degeneracy was unfolding, and a cause of future—worse—cases” (143). The degenerative process resulted from the complex interactions of environmental and hereditary influences; it could be activated by the right combination of extrinsic factors

and intrinsic potential for degeneration. Medical and other writers had to face the chilling prospect that the progress of civilization could be the cause of physical and social pathology: the gradual poisoning of entire population by a diseased milieu. By determining the environment's causal relation to degeneracy, they revealed a vicious circle of deteriorating bodies, deteriorating minds, and deteriorating moral character of the people.

This concern for a widespread physical, mental and moral degradation defines Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1892, translated into French in 1893), the best-known and most widely read treatise on degeneration. Nordau, himself a medical doctor, went one step further in diagnosing degeneration in the growing immorality of *fin-de-siècle* culture. The bulk of Nordau's treatise is a highly idiosyncratic study of various aesthetic movements that he identifies as degenerate (the pre-Raphaelites, Symbolism, Tolstoyism...), as they embody unwholesome breaks from traditional forms, thus denoting not progress, but mental and cultural devolution. He opened his treatise by explicitly linking pathology and culture, with an account of the cultural traits of the phenomenon of *fin-de-siècle* degeneration, and framed the discussion in terms of the medical terms of diagnosis and etiology. Like Morel, Nordau described the physical deformities that afflict degenerates, but his foremost interest lay in the mental stigmata of moral insanity, excitability and hysteria. Also like Morel, Nordau identified environmental causes for the gradual poisoning of individuals: "A race which is regularly addicted, even without excess, to narcotics and stimulants in any form... which partakes of tainted foods... which absorbs organic poisons... begets degenerate descendants" (34). For him, modern life itself was harmful in the long run: the strain put on bodies and

minds by the exigencies of modern life was a catalyst for degenerative processes. He writes: “All the symptoms enumerated are the consequences of states of fatigue and exhaustion, and these, again, are the effect of our contemporary civilization, of the vertigo and whirl of our frenzied life, the vastly increased number of sense impressions and organic reactions, and therefore of perceptions, judgments, and motor impulses, which at present are forced into a given unity of time” (42). Human organisms have not had time to adapt to these new conditions; the increase in “crime, madness and suicide” (40), in heart and nerve diseases, is evidence of that fact. Organic degeneration and this modern fatigue fed into each other and contributed to national degeneration. Nordau proposed a moral hygiene to counteract the effects of degeneration, to fight against what he saw as “the anti-social vermin.”<sup>13</sup> Values such as hard work, clean thinking and resolve would eventually triumph over the disorder and weakness of degenerates.<sup>14</sup>

Nordau highlighted the particular case of France among other European nations, claiming that it was particularly vulnerable to degeneration because of its recent history: “Upon this nation, nervously strained and predestined to morbid derangement, there broke the awful catastrophe of 1870” (42). His concerns echo those of numerous French writers, who were particularly worried by consequences of the fall of the Second Empire and the establishment of the Third Republic. By comparing social structures with mental structures, in which lower functions are subordinated to higher faculties, scholars could argue that hierarchy was a naturally occurring, normal state in nature. As a consequence, some of them viewed the extension of rights and responsibilities to all sectors of society with increasing suspicion. Pick argues that “the credibility of the conception of degeneration owed a great deal to the broad crisis of liberal social optimism in the face of

revolution” (67). Many among the intellectual elite feared that democracy, by giving power to the uneducated and potentially dangerous masses, would lead to the inevitable decline of civilization. At stake in the preservation of social order and traditional institutions was national survival. In an article written in 1893 for the *Revue des Deux-Mondes*. Gabriel Tarde, a criminologist and legal expert, described crowds as subhuman and degenerate: “a crowd let loose, even when it is composed of a majority of intelligent people, is always both childlike and beastlike: childlike in its changing moods, in its abrupt shifts from anger to laughter, beastlike in its brutality” (182-3). He also warned of the destructive potential of headless crowds, wondering how to save “humanity’s intellectual and artistic pinnacles from destruction and democratic leveling” (61). This pressing menace to civilization, coming from the fact that political power was now within the reach of the barbaric multitude, was intensified by the idea that this multitude, in addition to being unruly, irrational and disruptive, was also plagued by pathological disorders, and thus threatened the society in its organic core. Ernest Renan and Hippolyte Taine were two of the most vocal and influential writers who commented on and analyzed France’s situation, and linked its current perceived degeneration to the Revolution.

Renan, a historian and philosopher, famous for his *Vie de Jésus* (1863), was a great believer in the explanatory power of science. Aligned with the liberals during the Second Empire, he ran unsuccessfully in 1869 for a seat in Parliament. France’s defeat in the Franco-Prussian war prompted him to write *La Réforme Intellectuelle et Morale de la France* (1871), a pamphlet in which he decries France’s mediocrity and complacency and calls for a new beginning upon sound political and social bases to launch France’s

regeneration. This work marks a shift in Renan's thought from a liberal to a more conservative and authoritarian perspective. It is significant in the light of degeneration theory because Renan makes use throughout of the extended metaphor of the sick body to refer to France, and also because it links questions of biology and race to ideas of historical degeneration.

The book is divided in two roughly equal sections entitled "Le Mal" and "Les Remèdes." In the first, Renan refers to France as "enervated," "demoralized" (2), and envisions himself as a "doctor" about to diagnose and operate on a patient (4). Comparing France under the Second Empire to an "homme qui a une blessure mal cicatrisée" (21), weakened already by the French Revolution and its aftermath, he argues that the Franco-Prussian war was the catalyst, but not the cause, of the general collapse that ensued. Indeed, he seeks to show that the fall of the Ancien Regime led to a crisis in legitimacy that weakened the country to the point of being unable to fight back against any form of external aggression.<sup>15</sup> The Commune is described in even more grotesque terms, as a putrid infection, which almost killed the nation (a "cadaver" in need of "resuscitation" 56). The medical imagery that structures his assessment of the situation culminates in the image of mental illness that, he contends, represents the country under democratic rule, as a body without a head, that is to say, a madman. Renan was deeply suspicious of universal suffrage, believing that it could only lead to the reign of mediocrity (45-47). He traces France's national and political degeneration into the madness of democracy. Although he was not a counter-revolutionary, he disagreed with the egalitarian creed of the republic and the obsession with the search for riches that he thought dominated the mindset of Frenchmen. Idleness, pacifism, greed, individual

satisfaction, were the leading preoccupations of the people, to the detriment of values such as loyalty, love of the homeland, and action (23). Furthermore, democracy weakened the military fiber and the intellectual life of the nation. A great admirer of Germany in spite of the recent conflict between the two countries, Renan also defined France's degeneration in racial terms, suggesting that Germany's victory was partly determined biologically. The German race is intrinsically more disciplined, more austere, than the Celtic French. Racial differences are expressed in temperament and in action: the French, who were led by a Germanic feudal and military aristocracy in the ninth century, have since then declined and let their nobility wither away. He views the democratization of political life as a biological aberration. Some men, he argues, are fit to lead because of an innate biological advantage, but the overhaul of social and political structures brought about by the Revolution has relegated them to inaction and promoted instead an inferior class of men.<sup>16</sup>

The second part of his pamphlet, "Les Remèdes," proposes some suggestions for enabling the regeneration of the country (a mitigation of universal suffrage in the form of a two-chamber Parliament, the establishment of a scientific education). "[Renan's] goal is to combine modern society, and its bent towards hedonist individualism, with the necessity of a strong nation, intellectually and militarily; there ensues his examination of the development of citizenship in democracy" (Furet 491). Renan's concern is to educate the elites so that they will be able to better lead the masses. Indeed he concludes, in disagreement with Enlightenment philosophy, that reason is the privilege of the few, not the purview of the many.<sup>17</sup> For him, therefore, the ideological premises of the French Revolution were misguided. The cult of Reason, which he sees as one of the causes of the

weakening of the nation, should lead to elitism, not to democracy. Renan is hopeful that the country will experience “le commencement d’une régénération” after the terrible events of 1870-71. Like Nordau, Renan advocates hard work (the last word of the book is *Laboremus*) as an antidote to degeneration.

Taine was a philosopher and historian, and the author of the extensive *Origines de la France contemporaine*, which he began writing during the Commune. He devoted the rest of his life to this project, which sought to trace the contemporary political and social reality of France through its origins in the Ancien Régime and the Revolution. Taine was a conservative, ferociously opposed to the French Revolution. Like Renan, Taine uses medical imagery to describe the condition of contemporary France. Even more than Renan, Taine uses mental illness as a representation of France’s degeneration. “Taine’s *Revolution* developed a commonplace of nineteenth-century medicine, the view that social revolt could gravely disturb the body and mind, and indeed set off an epidemic of insanity” (Pick 69). Furthermore, Taine describes the leaders of the Revolution (Marat, Danton, Robespierre...) as mentally ill themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Taine’s conception of the individual is strikingly different from that of the *philosophes*. For him, as for Renan, the individual is not ruled by reason, but by instincts.<sup>19</sup>

Il est triste, quand on s’endort dans une bergerie, de trouver à son réveil les moutons changés en loups; et cependant, en cas de révolution, on peut s’y attendre. Ce que dans l’homme nous appelons la raison n’est point un don inné, primitif et persistant, mais une acquisition tardive et un composé fragile. Il suffit des moindres notions physiologiques pour savoir qu’elle est un état d’équilibre

instable, lequel dépend de l'état non moins instable du cerveau, des nerfs, du sang et de l'estomac. Prenez des femmes qui ont faim et des hommes qui ont bu; mettez-en mille ensemble, laissez-les s'échauffer par leurs cris, par l'attente, par la contagion mutuelle de leur émotion croissante; au bout de quelques heures, vous n'aurez plus qu'une cohue de fous dangereux; dès 1789 on le saura et de reste. – Maintenant, interrogez la psychologie: la plus simple opération mentale, une perception des sens, un souvenir, l'application d'un nom, un jugement ordinaire est le jeu d'une mécanique compliquée, l'oeuvre commune et finale de plusieurs millions de rouages qui, pareils à ceux d'une horloge, tirent et poussent à l'aveugle, chacun pour soi, chacun entraîné par sa propre force, chacun maintenu dans son office par des compensations et des contrepoids. Si l'aiguille marque l'heure à peu près juste, c'est par l'effet d'une rencontre qui est une merveille, pour ne pas dire un miracle, et l'hallucination, le délire, la monomanie, qui habitent à notre porte, sont toujours sur le point d'entrer en nous. À proprement parler, l'homme est fou, comme le corps est malade, *par nature* (emphasis added); la santé de notre esprit, comme la santé de nos organes, n'est qu'une réussite fréquente et un bel accident.<sup>20</sup> (360-61)

The Rousseauvian social contract that forms the foundation of the post-revolutionary system is, according to Taine, an aberration in that it is based on an erroneous conception of human nature.<sup>21</sup> The abstraction created by the *philosophes* is not “l'homme vivant, durable et formé lentement par l'histoire” (379). Taine claims that man has evolved from barbaric beginnings to a civilized creature with the passage of countless generations. However, he also claims that each man retains this primal identity, which reveals itself

under strain, for instance the strain brought about by rapid social changes. “Ajoutez à cela les clameurs, l’ivrognerie, le spectacle de la destruction, le tressaillement physique de la machine nerveuse tendue au-delà de ce qu’elle peut supporter, et vous comprendrez comment, du paysan, de l’ouvrier, du bourgeois, pacifiés et apprivoisés par une civilisation ancienne, on voit tout d’un coup sortir le barbare, bien pis, l’animal primitif, le singe grimaçant, sanguinaire et lubrique, qui tue en ricanant et gambade sur les dégâts qu’il fait.” (86) These images, of the primitive barbarian or the (Darwinian?) ape, represent two of the degenerative anxieties present at the *fin-de-siècle*: the return to barbarism or animality in the modern era.<sup>22</sup> In addition, Taine, who like Renan was an elitist, sees the system that emerges after the Revolution as anti-natural: “Ce qui règne désormais, c’est une aristocratie à rebours, contraire à la loi, encore plus contraire à la nature. Car, dans l’échelle graduée de la civilisation et de la culture, à présent, par un renversement brusque, les échelons inférieurs se trouvent en haut, et les échelons supérieurs se trouvent en bas” (461).<sup>23</sup> Thus Taine presents a triple degenerative condition that materializes out of the Revolution: biological, cultural and political degeneration have put France to its knees. Unlike Renan, Taine was pessimistic about France’s capacity for regeneration.

Renan’s and Taine’s works represent attempts at documenting degeneration from a historical perspective. In the fictions I study, the authors also attend to the historical specificity of their era, and explore through plot and character development various aspects of degeneration. In doing so, they exploit and transform existing concepts and contribute to the diffusion of the discourse on degeneration through culture. Class, gender and race are the three concepts that inform the organization of the study, which I

link to the great projects of the early Third Republic: education, family policies, and colonization.

In the first chapter I examine Paul Bourget's *Le Disciple* and *L'Etape*, Alphonse Daudet's *L'Immortel* and *La Lutte pour la Vie*, and Maurice Barrès's *Les Déracinés*. These texts decry the young generation's lack of morals and criticize the Third Republic's institutions for bringing about social and moral disorder. More or less loosely based on a gruesome *fait-divers* from 1878, the texts present the *struggle-for-life* as a symptom and cause of social decomposition.<sup>24</sup> The 1878 murder case offers a starting point for a consideration of the link between the purported social Darwinism associated with the republican system, and in particular its educational policies, and the perceived rise in violent crime. The republican school is imagined as an institution resting on both egalitarianism and competition: it annihilates social distinctions while promoting rivalry among students. The protagonists in these texts are young men from the lower classes who aspire to rise in society, adopting the struggle for life as the guiding principle for their conduct. The struggle for life is viewed as a trademark trait of the new republican system, but also as a regression to a state of nature that negates millennia of moral values and traditions. Described as degenerates themselves, because of innate, hereditary deficiencies that make them "born criminals," the protagonists are presented as regressive, atavistic beings at odds with the standards of moral behavior. But they are also seen as products of an unnatural system, the post-revolutionary order, which the authors view as a historical aberration with grave consequences. Like Taine, Bourget, Daudet and Barrès express dismay at the direction taken by France and its political leaders. The authors highlight the fact that the particular historical conditions of the last

decades of the century make the contemporary social and intellectual milieu a breeding ground for degeneration, aggravating the protagonists' latent hereditary tendencies to violence and leading to their actualization in crime.

The topic of the second chapter is the representation of prostitutes as agents of degeneration. With the emphasis placed on the role of women as wives and mothers in nineteenth-century society, the prostitute's un(re)productive and overt sexuality posed a triple threat: to public morality, to bourgeois patrimony, and to health. The science of the day defined the prostitute as a fundamentally, organically corrupt woman, a being shaped by an aberrant biology. The prostitute could be construed as degenerate in various ways: mental illness, caused by disease or heredity, was often invoked as the source of her lack of moral sense; her sexuality was seen as depraved and primitive; her way of life exposed her and others to venereal disease, vice and excess. Hygienist discourse and policies sought to identify and circumscribe this threat. J-K Huysmans in *Marthe*, Edmond de Goncourt in *La Fille Elisa*, Emile Zola in *Nana* and Alphonse Daudet in *Sapho*, bring into play scientific assumptions about the nature of prostitutes. In particular, they deploy the metaphor of disease and contagion to emphasize the protagonists' degenerate nature and degenerative potential. However, unlike the scientific discourse that shapes the representation of prostitutes, these texts point to the diseased nature of the environment that the protagonists inhabit, a world of generalized sexual promiscuity.

The final chapter examines the affinities between scientific racism and degeneration theory in the context of literature about the colonies. Throughout the nineteenth century, race, construed as a biological category by thinkers such as Gobineau, became the dominant factor for explaining social and cultural differences. Race was also

invoked as a determining motive for colonial expansion. The “civilizing mission” implied a betterment of “inferior” races; it was also seen as an alternative to and a substitute for *la Revanche*, as politicians argued that it would reenergize the French “race” and combat cultural and biological degeneration at home. Novels that describe the encounters between French colonial soldiers and settlers and Africans raise the question of the effect of contact with “inferior” races and with African nature. In Jules Verne’s *Cinq Semaines en Ballon* and Pierre Loti’s *Le Roman d’un Spahi*, contact with Africa and its inhabitants brings about a regression or reverse evolution in the protagonists. Africans, seen as primitive, arrested at an earlier stage of evolution, are characterized by animality, dominated by instincts. The white protagonists’ “going native” is seen as a nightmarish degenerative scenario according to which their experience is viewed as an undeniable loss. However, in Louis Bertrand’s *Le Sang des Races* the African experience results in an invigorating return to the source of French greatness, to physical strength and ingenuity, as an antidote to the excessive refinement of metropolitan France. The imaginary Sudan in Emile Zola’s *Fécondité* likewise provides an opportunity for the further expansion of a new France, in which traditional agrarian values prevail. The rewriting of return or regression as regeneration, instead of degeneration, points to a conception of history as a cycle of growth and decline, as opposed to linear progression.

What studying this diverse corpus of works shows, as I argue throughout, is that biological, social and cultural factors were mutually implicated in the observation and explanation of France’s degeneration. While the authors I study may not have been medical experts, the use of the major concepts of degeneration in their fictions is evidence of the widespread nature of the vocabulary and assumptions of the theory,

which would have been known to their readers. To determine whether France was actually degenerating is not the purpose of this study, which attends rather to the imaginative responses to or perceptions of degeneration.

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<sup>1</sup> In his treatise on crowds, *La Psychologie des foules* (1895), Gustave Le Bon describes the takeover of civilization by barbaric masses.

<sup>2</sup> All translations from the French are mine unless noted.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Pick's *Faces of Degeneration* is an excellent overview of the theory from a European perspective, including France, Germany, Italy and England. The book's focus however, is on medicine and the social sciences. Literature is mentioned only in passing. Robert Nye's *Crime, Madness and Politics* is focused on France, but again, literature is not treated in depth. William Greenslade's *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel* deals with the impact of the theory on British literature, as does Stephen Arata's *Fictions of Loss*. Studies on the French fin-de-siècle tend to focus on the Decadent and Symbolist movements, which constitute more sharply defined schools than the grouping I am studying here. See for instance Patrick McGuinness's *Symbolism, Decadence and the fin-de-siècle*. A very recent article by Stephen McLean on Zola's *Nana* is one of the only direct attempts at addressing the dearth of scholarship on degeneration in French studies.

<sup>4</sup> See Porter 65-78 for an account of the development of the science of social statistics and social mathematics.

<sup>5</sup> Pick writes that "the potential degeneration of European society was thus not discussed as though it constituted primarily a religious, philosophical or ethical problem, but as an empirically demonstrable medical, biological, or physical anthropological fact" (20).

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<sup>6</sup> Cretinism is a congenital condition of stunted physical and mental growth, due to hypothyroidism.

<sup>7</sup> Degeneration relies on the assumptions of evolutionary naturalism, but constitutes, as Kelly Hurley puts it, “evolution reversed and compressed” (193).

<sup>8</sup> Questions of heredity came under increasingly sharp focus during the second half of the century. See Coffi and López-Beltrán for accounts of the development of a science of the mechanisms of heredity. Prosper Lucas’s *De l’hérédité naturelle* (1847) is the key treatise on heredity. As Pick describes, “inquiry into heredity was perhaps the most striking example of the re-direction of questions of economic and social progress to the evolutionary problem of the body’s reproduction” (197).

<sup>9</sup> The reasons for this shift are not immediately apparent, but maybe linked to the general sentiment that France’s degeneration was an undeniable fact after the 1870 defeat and 1871 Commune.

<sup>10</sup> Degeneration, like evolutionary theory, hinges on the articulation of the relationship between the individual and the species. The principles of change, adaptation, and transmission implicate the individual and the social.

<sup>11</sup> See Conry 305-334 on the continued influence of Lamarck in the late nineteenth century.

<sup>12</sup> See also Nye 119-121.

<sup>13</sup> One of the answers to the situation was eugenics, which was not as developed in France as it was in England, for instance (see Donald J. Childs’s *Modernism and Eugenics*). There was a movement in the mid-1880s, led by Georges Vacher de Lapouge,

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that called for the qualitative control of population. See Pierre-André Taguieff, “L’Introduction de l’Eugénisme en France.”

<sup>14</sup> According to degeneration theory, organic, social and moral factors were all intertwined and influenced one another. For instance, organic derangement could lead to moral depravation, which, if widespread, could cause social upheaval. Conversely, the adoption of moral habits, transmitted to offspring, could reverse organic decline and ensure social harmony.

<sup>15</sup> This argument is developed fully in Fabrice Bouhillon’s *L’Illégitimité de la République*.

<sup>16</sup> In keeping with his contemporaries, Renan relied on assumptions regarding the nature of elites as racially distinct from common people, constituting perhaps an entirely different species.

<sup>17</sup> This conception of man is derived from contemporary scientific developments regarding the functioning of the brain and the overall fragility of the neurophysiological system and from evolutionary theory, which explained the emergence of certain mental traits as an evolutionary process. See Harris 41.

<sup>18</sup> Taine offers various diagnoses of mental pathologies that, he claimed, afflicted the leaders of the Revolution and were responsible in part for forming the Jacobin spirit.

<sup>19</sup> Taine proposed a conception of man derived in part from evolutionary theory. He accepted the premise of man’s animality and envisioned the typically human qualities (of reasoning, for instance) as a later development, hence more unstable and fragile than the basis of instincts.

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<sup>20</sup> This idea of the fragility of health, and mental health in particular, was developed in Taine's earlier *De l'Intelligence*. The dominant biological model indeed asserted that the brain, as the last organ to fully develop, was also the most refined and the most fragile. Therefore extreme stress could erase the veneer of civilized behavior, which would lead to a regression to an earlier animal past.

<sup>21</sup> In his introduction to *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*, Taine developed the ideas of race, milieu and moment to explain the characteristics of a specific author and his temperament. These notions can be extended to any individual, since all humans, for Taine, are the products of a long history. "Par nature, il est un individu, c'est-à-dire un petit monde distinct, un centre à part dans un cercle fermé, un organisme détaché, complet en lui-même et qui souffre lorsque ses tendances spontanées sont contrariées par l'intervention d'une force étrangère. Par l'histoire, il est devenu un organisme compliqué, où trois ou quatre religions, cinq ou six civilisations, trente siècles de culture intense ont laissé leur empreinte, où les acquisitions se sont combinées, où les hérédités se sont croisées, où les particularités se sont accumulées, de façon à produire le plus original et le plus sensible des êtres; avec la civilisation croissante, sa complication va croissant: partant son originalité s'approfondit, et sa sensibilité s'avise; d'où il suit que, plus il se civilise, plus il répugne à la contrainte et à l'uniformité. Aujourd'hui, chacun de nous est le produit terminal et singulier d'une élaboration prodigieuse, dont les étages ne se sont superposés que cette fois dans cet ordre, une plante unique en son espèce, un individu solitaire, d'essence supérieure et délicate, qui, ayant *sa structure innée et son type inaliénable*, ne peut donner que ses fruits propres" (171, emphasis added). This explains why Taine was vehemently opposed to the dogma of equality proposed by the Revolution

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and its republican followers.

<sup>22</sup> The fear of regression to a primal state was present in the colonial literature of the period, which identified this primitive nature with the “natives.” Some of the works under study in Chapter Three explore the consequences of this regression.

<sup>23</sup> This sentiment is expressed in the fiction of Barrès, Daudet, and Bourget that I study in Chapter One.

<sup>24</sup> The word was one of the entries in the 1877 supplement to Larousse’s *Grand Dictionnaire universel du dix-neuvième siècle*. Daudet spells it *struggle-for-lifeur*, Bourget *struggle-for-lifer*. See Lyle 312.

## Chapter One

### The Politics of Darwinian Devolution

“It has become a commonplace to speak of the constant increase in crime, madness and suicide,” writes Max Nordau in *Degeneration* (1892), his account of the effects of modern phenomena on individuals and societies (40). For him, the increase in criminality is one of the social manifestations of generalized degeneration. Nordau’s focus is on degenerate art and artists, whom he considers as similar in many ways to criminals. Degenerates, be they criminals or artists, “lack... the sense of morality and of right and wrong” (18).<sup>1</sup> Sixteen years earlier, in *Criminal Man* (1876; translated into French in 1887), the founding text of criminal anthropology, Cesare Lombroso<sup>2</sup> had also linked degeneration and criminality in the figure of the born criminal. An atavistic individual, marked by distinctive physical and psychological traits that resembled features of primitive peoples or animals, the born criminal was an evolutionary throwback, biologically predetermined to commit crimes. Atavism for Lombroso was the mark of a degenerative disorder, implying a return to an earlier state of evolution.

Lombroso’s work was influenced, according to Gibson and Rafter, by the “standard social Darwinism of his day:” “*Criminal Man* as a whole offers a master narrative of the evolution of law and crime from the plant and animal world to savage society and finally to civilized Europe” (Introduction, 25-26). Indeed, his work is marked by a more or less explicit teleology, according to which biological evolution coincides

with the progress of civilization and morality. He claims that “the most horrendous and inhuman crimes have a biological, atavistic origin in those animalistic instincts that, although smoothed over by education, the family, and fear of punishment, resurface instantly under given circumstances” (91). His objective in creating the science of criminology was to “produce a science of social defence against atavism and anarchy” (Pick 126). This belief in the power of science to solve social issues was characteristic of the nineteenth century, in which narratives of progress through the extension of human knowledge were prevalent. Auguste Comte, founder of positivism, claimed that rational constructions would transform the world through science. Claude Bernard, who established the use of the experimental method in medicine, sought to explain human behavior through physiology.

Zola’s “roman expérimental,” which he based largely on Bernard’s “médecine expérimentale,” may be seen as the extension of this faith in the power of science to explain human behavior to literature. Metaphysical man is dead, he proclaimed, physiological man is the subject of a literary inquiry which is, in fact, a scientific enterprise whose goal is to produce knowledge disengaged from the irrational and the supernatural. His Rougon-Macquart project, as an observation and experiment on the human aiming to discover the laws of thought and the passions, was inscribed within the march towards greater knowledge of the human. Zola’s unbridled enthusiasm and optimism regarding the benefits of the application of the methods of the hard sciences to literature were palpable in his proclamation of the goals of the naturalist enterprise in *Le roman expérimental* (1880): “To be masters of good and evil, to regulate life, regulate society, resolve in the end all the problems of socialism, most of all to bring solid bases

for justice by resolving through experience the questions of criminality, is that not to be the most useful and most moral workers of human labor?" (24)

There was, however, another literary and philosophical current that steered away from this vision of progress, and constitutes a distinctly more pessimistic lineage to Comtean thought. By appropriating certain terms and scientific theories, in particular social Darwinism, authors such as Daudet, Bourget and Barrès articulated an approach that was decidedly less hopeful about the future of mankind and fundamentally hostile to recent democratic developments. These authors, who considered traditional values as threatened by republican policies, adopted scientific discourse in order to support a conservative, and sometimes downright reactionary, agenda. The republic, born out of the French defeat in the 1870 war against Prussia, was firmly established by the 1880s, and had taken on as one of its major projects to provide a free and secular education to its population.<sup>3</sup> This new school system, put in place by the Ferry laws (named for the Minister of Public Instruction Jules Ferry) in 1881 and 1882, according to conservatives, was causing France to degenerate further, because it was creating a generation of social Darwinists who were, in essence, morally insane, as the republican education unambiguously eliminated religious instruction from the curriculum.

The novels and play under study in this dissertation explicitly censor the characters who adopt the Darwinian theory of the struggle for life, envisioned as a feature of the republican, democratic creed, as their guiding principle. In Daudet's novel *L'Immortel* (1888) and play *La Lutte pour la vie* (1889), Paul Astier represents the new class of ambitious young men whom Daudet dubbed "*struggle-for-lifeurs*," for whom the Darwinian catchphrase "le fort mange le faible" serves as sanction and rationalization for

their amoral conduct. In Barrès's *Les Déracinés* (1897), Racadot and Mouchefrin justify their murder of the rich and beautiful Astiné Aravian by using a variation of the same phrase. In Bourget's *L'Etape* (1902), Antoine Monneron describes his and his sister's *arriviste* attempts in similar words. In the preface to *Le Disciple* (1889), Bourget warns his young readers against the type of the *struggle-for-lifer* who is represented in part by the title character (11). And yet, while all of these texts present the "struggle for life" as a new scientific rationalization for criminal acts, and hence as detrimental to the fabric of society, they also suggest that it reins in and ultimately crushes the threats it gave rise to.

For Daudet, Bourget and Barrès, natural selection constitutes both a disturbing force insofar as it is associated with the values of the new democratic, republican society, and a mechanism of control and containment of the threats to order and stability that it generates itself. In their fictional works they present and censure protagonists whose trajectories are made possible by the particular set of conditions in late-nineteenth-century France and whose failures illustrate the impossibility for society to find a place for such characters (Astier, Greslou and Racadot end up dead; Antoine Monneron is exiled). On the one hand, Darwinism in its social application implies a complete license for unbridled ambition and greed, with no concern for others; on the other hand, the forces at work in the "struggle for life" destroy the young ambitious men whose very existence they permitted. What is staged in the fictional works under study is the destructive potential of natural selection when it operates in a social context, revealing what Chamberlin and Gilman have called "the dark side of progress" and echoing Darwin's own warning in *The Descent of Man*: "we must remember, progress is no invariable rule" (1: 189).

The introduction of Darwin's theory of evolution in France was fraught with controversy. It took some time before the notion of natural selection could take hold. Indeed, the neo-Lamarckian theories explained the variability of species, and in ways that many of the French found more palatable than Darwin.<sup>4</sup> Based upon the studies of eighteenth-century naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, this model put forward the notion of an equilibrium between the organism and its environment, as opposed to constant struggle, and maintained that traits acquired during the life of an individual could be transmitted to its offspring. Hostile to Darwin's ideas of random variation and natural selection, this view focused on "the organism's purposive, and therefore directed, attempts to adapt to the ceaselessly changing milieu" (Harris 67). Faced with environmental changes, the organism adapted by acquiring useful behavioral traits that would reestablish equilibrium between itself and the environment. This new internal organization would then be transmitted to its offspring. In her translation of Darwin's *Origin of Species*, published in 1862, Clémence Royer, an unconventional female scientist, philosopher and anthropologist with an absolute faith in progress, strived to reconcile the two theories, positioning Lamarck as a precursor to Darwin. By the late 1870, however, Darwin's theory was generally accepted by scientists, even in France.

Some objections were raised to Darwin's theories because of Clémence Royer's translation—some said mistranslation or appropriation—of Darwin's text.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in the first edition of her translation of the *Origin of Species*, she translated "natural selection" by "élection naturelle," adding an element of volition to what Darwin had intended to describe as a process governed by chance and not intention (at Darwin's request, she corrected her error in subsequent editions). The most problematic aspect of

Royer's text is her blatant application of Darwin's theory to political and social ends. In her long preface she argues for the potential relevance of Darwinism to many areas of human life and insists on the social applications of the theory of natural selection, overtly appropriating Darwin for liberal and progressive causes: for instance she launches a full-blown attack on established religion, calls for greater participation of women in the work force and for more equality in marriage (Henry 298-300). She even chides the naturalist for failing to draw the logical consequences of his theory in the moral and political realms. Calling natural selection "the providential law... the necessary guarantee of welfare and progress for all of the organic creation" (liii), she attacks Christian charity as a system that, by defending the weak, fosters the growth and multiplication of the "fallen or degenerate representatives of the species" at the expense of the strong and healthy ones (liv), thus impeding the march of progress. Instead, she calls for "unlimited individual freedom," for "free competition" between individuals, arguing that this regime of liberty "applied to all of organized nature since the dawn of life" has proven its benefits (lviii). The destabilizing implications of such a view alarmed traditionalists, who imagined that this would result in "atheism, materialism and social degradation rather than stability and the sure path to progress" (Henry 299).

Objections were raised also from religious circles (Conry 412-3). Darwinian theory, by offering a naturalistic account of the development of human beings from ape-like ancestors, was seen as incompatible with Christian beliefs.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the theory of evolution negates the idea of total and immediate creation (although Darwin himself did not speculate on the origin of life) as well as the notion of design. While religious dogma puts forward the idea of human nature as unchanged since the Fall, man according

to Darwin was the product of evolution: “Darwin’s emphasis on divergent lines of evolution from common ancestors, represented by the image of a branching tree or branching coral, made it difficult to believe in the unfolding of a divine plan” (Brooke 195). Furthermore, Darwin’s contention that the moral sense had evolved over time in terms of survival value also appeared irreconcilable with the idea of God as the ultimate source of moral values. For many religious thinkers, the idea of the continuity of species promoted by evolutionary theory was understood as the reduction of human beings to bestial status. The perception that Darwinian theory could supply ammunition for attacks on religion was compounded by the fact that, in France, the Catholic Church had been under attack by republicans for a century, with attempts made to limit its influence, and in particular to reduce its hold over education.

Darwin’s theory aroused great enthusiasm among the young generation. Anatole France, for instance, described going to the Jardin des Plantes, his “Darwin under his arm” (2: 56). Daudet himself professed his admiration for the “great Darwin.” Yet many were troubled by social Darwinists’ unabashed embrace of unbridled competition between individuals, detecting in it the potential risk of social upheaval or decay. For instance, Ferdinand Brunetière, a leading critic for the prominent *Revue des Deux-Mondes*, condemned the indiscriminate application of scientific principles to all aspects of life. In a review of Bourget’s *Le Disciple*, Brunetière argued, against the views of progressive intellectuals such as Royer, that limits should be imposed on scientific inquiry if it threatened social order. According to his view, applying the laws of evolution and natural selection to human action and thought resulted in the decomposition of society, the decay of any values, the negation of what constitutes humanity. Therefore, he

concluded, scientific discoveries have an innately “subversive” and destructive potential (215). In particular, Brunetière opposed the view that man is part of nature, which, according to him, characterized modern art and science and indeed, Darwinism:

There lies perhaps the great error of the century. Universally, in morality, just as in science and in art, it has been professed that man can be reduced to nature, joined to or merged with it, without regard for the fact that in art, as in science and in morality, man is human only inasmuch as he distinguishes, separates and excludes himself from nature. (220)

While Brunetière did not dispute the existence of instincts within man, he contended that it is precisely in overcoming nature that humanity is achieved. Civilization is born and develops out of opposition to nature, and “returning to nature would be returning to animality” (222). He saw contemporary science and philosophy, describing man as part of nature and subject to its laws, as supporting an untenable regression to barbarism. “What do the laws of “nature,” the “struggle for life” or “natural selection” have in common with us?” he asked (222). For Brunetière, if these laws were applied to humanity, civilization would collapse, as they negate the principles upon which society is based. Values of justice and compassion are what distinguish man from beast and guarantee the perpetuation of a harmonious social life.

An outspoken partisan of order and tradition, Brunetière attacked not only the scientists who promote the struggle for life as an explanatory account of all phenomena, but also the naturalist artists who adopted such a view of humanity and hence contributed to the contamination of the intellectual milieu and to the decay of values. He reminded writers that “the examples they put before our eyes are always recommendations,

insinuations or suggestions” and that “everything that they explain, they make allowance for, since in representing one thing they do not condemn it” (225-6). To counter moral degeneration, Brunetière called for the regeneration of the arts, and of literature in particular, seeing in Bourget’s novel a vindication of his own conservative ideas about science, morality and religion. Writers needed to take a stance and defend a certain moral and social order, a call answered by Bourget, Daudet and Barrès.

At stake in the works under study, despite their apparent focus on individual human beings and situations, is the physical and moral health of the nation, with the protagonists exemplifying the new disturbing forces that threaten to disrupt social order and in due course, to destroy moral values. Bourget, Daudet and Barrès were unambiguously opposed to the new democratic order; according to them, science had been misused to promote an unhealthy, unsustainable, and ultimately deleterious way of life, and they sought to apply scientific theories and language to criticize democratic institutions and call for a return to traditional values and institutions. In *L’Immortel*, *La Lutte pour la vie*, *Le Disciple*, *L’Etape* and *Les Déracinés*, the social version of the struggle for life was presented as promoting the idea of upward mobility for the lower classes, condoning the development of appetites—for money, for status—unrestrained by social codes, and discarding values such as pity, charity, compassion or solidarity. These fictional works are concerned with the detrimental consequences of the wrongheaded application of Darwinism to society, which cannot lead to the progress of humanity, but rather to its descent into barbarism, which I call Darwinian devolution.

All three authors were inspired by a sensational affair, the Barré-Lebiez case of 1878. In the preface to *La Lutte pour la vie* (1889), Daudet refers specifically to the case

as a model for the character of Paul Astier in *L'Immortel* (1888) and the subsequent play; one sub-plot in Barrès's *Les Déracinés* (1897) follows closely the unfolding of events of the *fait-divers*; Bourget always claimed *Le Disciple* (1889) was based on the Barré-Lebiez case.<sup>7</sup> Barré was a lawyer's clerk, and Lebiez a medical student who, having fallen on hard times, murdered and dismembered the widow Grillet to steal her stocks. A few days after the brutal crime, while the police were investigating, Lebiez gave a lecture titled "Darwinism and the Church" in which he contrasted the Christian ideal of charitable brotherhood with the theory of the struggle for life which, in his view, justified the domination and even extermination of the weak by the strong. His lecture ended with ominously murderous words: "Every being tries to seize his place under the sun; but at the banquet of nature, there isn't room for all the guests, the table isn't laid for everyone: each struggles to win his place: the strong tends to choke the weak." (quoted in Carter 95). After his arrest, he invoked the same line of defense, but failed to convince the jury. He and his accomplice were executed in September 1878.

In the works under study, based on this *fait-divers*, the authors examine Darwinism and its consequences on individuals and society. Troubled by the political, social and cultural changes brought about by the establishment of the Third Republic, they used the Barré-Lebiez case as a starting-point for a reflection on the relationship between the social and the individual when that relationship is based on the Darwinian "struggle for life." At stake in all of these works is the question of social change, whether it should occur and how, what the role of the individual in social change could be. At the same time, Daudet, Bourget and Barrès represent different strands of conservatism, which it is important to distinguish from one another. Daudet came from a monarchist

background, whose “opposition to the republic is undeniable” (Guineret 203). Bourget’s political thought evolved throughout the last decades of the century: from early republican sympathies, he became gradually more and more conservative, embracing monarchist perspectives in the 1880s. Barrès, the only one among the authors under study to participate actively in politics, was elected *député* for the Boulangist party in 1889,<sup>8</sup> but subsequently shifted to the more traditional nationalist right and became one of the main proponents of ethnic nationalism. All three of these authors share a belief in the inherent immorality of the republican system, the destroyer of traditional values and social order, and a concern for the health of the nation and the individuals that it comprises.

In the preface to his 1889 play *La Lutte pour la vie*, Daudet insists that he does not condemn “the great Darwin” himself, but rather those in the post-1870 generation whose wicked and wrongheaded application of the theory leads to vile and base acts (i). He describes having himself been seduced by “the brutal Saxon phrases” such as “the survival of the fittest,” enthusiastically following Gambetta, the prominent Republican statesman, when he declared that “France... must become scientific” (ii). The shift came with the Lebiez case, which Daudet claims revealed to him the inherent moral and social dangers in Darwin’s theory. This realization, together with his observation that the type was multiplying around him, prompted him to create the character of Paul Astier, “a mixture of several young adventurers I knew” (v).

Paul Astier plays only a minor role in the earlier novel *L’Immortel*. He is the son of a historian, Léonard Astier-Réhu, a peasant from Auvergne turned intellectual, who

gained access to the sacrosanct *Académie* through his marriage with the daughter of an *académicien*. The son, a self-proclaimed *arriviste*, plots throughout the novel to marry the young and rich widow Colette de Rosen, only to see his relentless efforts thwarted by his own mother's conspiracy to encourage Colette's marriage to the Prince d'Athis. Astier then redirects his attentions on the aging but still powerful Duchesse Padovani, the Prince's spurned mistress, and eventually marries her shortly before his father, his reputation as a scholar ruined by a scandal concerning fake historical documents, commits suicide. In *La Lutte pour la vie*, Paul Astier, now *député*, is pursuing Esther de Sélény, a Jewess whose wealth and connections would help him become a minister. His wife, on the verge of financial ruin, aware of his manipulative scheming and his numerous infidelities, resists and finally agrees to the idea of granting him a divorce. Lydie Vaillant, her maid and one of the women whom Paul seduced, is driven to suicide when she realizes that he has no intention of marrying her. Her distraught father, upon discovering that Paul is responsible for his daughter's dishonor and death, shoots him, and utters the concluding words of the play: "We struggle for life, don't we, young man? ... The strong eat the weak. (He cocks his gun and shoots.) And so I do away with you, rascal!" (152)

While *La Lutte pour la vie* relies on Darwinian terminology much more than the earlier novel does, *L'Immortel* still implicitly denounces the ills brought about by Darwinian principles. It draws on some of the major assumptions surrounding the degeneration of contemporary civilization, such as the wrongheaded direction of evolution, the growing threat of miscegenation in an increasingly mobile society, and the dissolution of morals and values when challenged by an uninhibited individualism. Paul

Astier is first described as the product of incompatible heredities. His father, a professor and renowned historian, married his mother, of Creole descent, not for love, but because of the fact that her father and grandfather were *académiciens*, that connection all but guaranteeing his own election to the *Académie*. The son of peasants from Auvergne, one of the most rural and backward regions of France, he is shown throughout the novel as still a peasant, living a frugal life, eating like “a mountain dog” (25). His wife, on the other hand, having grown up under more favorable circumstances, aspires to a life of material comfort – and is aware of the social limitations of her husband and his vulgarity. Their son Paul shares none of his father’s intellectual predispositions: refusing to compete for the prestigious Prix de Rome after studying architecture, he just wants “to make money right away, that [is] his ambition” (22). Physically, he looks a lot more like his mother, sharing the “same rosy Creole flesh...the same supple waist, inscrutable grey eyes” (8). The question of Paul’s physical resemblance to his mother and of the potential implications for his character is linked to the mid- and late-nineteenth-century interest in questions of heredity, in particular in its relation to social ills such as alcoholism, poverty or crime.<sup>9</sup> What is implied by the narrator in Paul Astier’s case is that his physical resemblance to his mother indicates a similarity in temperament as well, and indeed they both share aspirations for a better, more comfortable life than what Astier-Réhu offers them. Her affluent Creole background may have caused her to develop a taste for luxury and comfort that is turn is transmitted to her son. In addition, one can see “in both faces, a minor flaw, barely visible, a slight deviation of the nose, giving them a contemptuous expression, something untrustworthy” (8-9). This description of an inherited facial feature slides into a moralizing judgment, an association that is reminiscent of the

contemporary effort by scientists to find readable signs of criminality.<sup>10</sup> Physiognomy, based on the late-eighteenth-century writings of Johann Caspar Lavater, was extremely popular in the nineteenth century as a way of relating appearances to the inner truth of a person.<sup>11</sup> Early on in the novel Paul conspires with his mother to steal the valuable historical papers his father has been collecting for years, thus actualizing their latent deviousness. This crime against the father, the theft of what would have been his inheritance, manifests the alienation between father and son, which grows into hostility as the novel unfolds. This derives in part from the inability for Astier-Réhu to see anything of himself in his son, thus considering him a hereditary aberration. They are described as “two strangers... belonging to enemy races” (206). The father-son bond is completely negated in favor of a strictly individualistic pursuit of success, a struggle for life with no consideration for the other.

Daudet, through the condemnatory tone of his narrator, clearly deplores the absolute estrangement that results in the dissolution of the family. As father, mother and son are reunited for the last time, after the revelation of the conspiracy to steal and sell the papers, the narrator comments on the spread of such a dysfunctional family model: “A family portrait indeed; but of the modern family, afflicted by the broad crack that runs from top to bottom in European society, attacking its principles of hierarchy, of authority; an even more striking crack here, at the *Institut*, where domestic and traditional values are judged and rewarded” (354).<sup>12</sup> What this suggests is that the Astiers’ specific situation is only one example of a dangerous trend. Individual ambitions pursued at all costs without any regard for morals and tradition lead to the disintegration of the social fabric at its very core: the family. Indeed, as Nicholas White has shown in *The Family in Crisis*, the

*fin de siècle* may have been characterized by the *fin de famille* as well, as “one version of the end of history which struck a particular chord in a society based on property and inheritance and obsessed by the question of its own legitimacy” (136).

Even the original bond between mother and son degenerates into rivalry. They find themselves acting at cross-purposes, with Mme Astier trying to convince Colette de Rosen to marry the Prince d’Athis while her son is courting the young widow.<sup>13</sup> When they come to the realization that they are, in a very real sense, competing against each other, their rage is palpable, and can only be masked by an effort to abide by the code of manners: “And it is such a strong discipline, that of high society, which is able to suppress within these two beings the urge to scream, to stamp their feet, to roar and to slaughter which seized their souls” (214). The text does not explain the reason for the resurgence of these violent instincts in Paul Astier and his mother. But this resurfacing of violence provides a way for Daudet to link the “struggle for life” (the guiding principle of the new social order as envisaged by Royer and other social Darwinists, which Daudet condemned) with a state of primitive nature (as opposed to civilization), thus questioning the idea of the evolution of society toward a more generalized application of the struggle for life as necessarily progressive. On the contrary, the representation of mother and son as raging beasts points to the inherent violence that rests at the heart of a society in which individual ambition and personal gain have become the only standard by which to live. Thus these “new” values or modes of living, construed by their proponents as beneficial because liberating, represent for their opponents a reversion to an “old” (primal, primitive) state of nature that had gradually been brought under control.

Paul Astier’s urge to kill is almost immediately redirected onto a confrontation

with the Prince d'Athis, his victorious rival for Colette's hand. After a minor altercation at the card table, Paul challenges the Prince to a duel, determined to kill him in a manner that is sanctioned by society, thus masking his bestial rage, his resentment against the Prince's aristocratic status, under the cloak of respectable and acceptable behavior. At this moment, two systems collide: contemporary society is nominally democratic (which in this novel and for conservatives such as Daudet means that it has embraced the struggle for life as a social principle), thus enabling Astier to compete with a prince for Colette de Rosen's affections; but social classes and status inequalities in actuality remain valid and determine the characters' conduct, preempting the full application of democratic ideas.<sup>14</sup> The duel may be seen both as the remnant of a bygone era, when questions of honor and values were still relevant, and for Paul, as a very literal enactment of the struggle for life, allowing him to directly confront his social superior. Since duels were traditionally reserved for social equals, the fact that Paul is even able to challenge the Prince is an indication of the changing mores, a sign that democracy is gaining ground.

In a tragicomic twist of fate, Paul slips and falls, gravely injuring himself as the duel is about to start. His friend Védrine, an artist, who, unlike Paul, is quite content with his life and family, is his witness at the duel.<sup>15</sup> He attributes Paul's continuing streak of bad luck to "the minor flaw" he inherited from his mother (8-9), again, like the narrator did earlier, linking a physical trait to a moral judgment:

No matter how much he plans his tricks... at the last moment something gives, and without completely destroying his project, prevents him from getting what he wants. Why? Simply, maybe, because his nose is not straight... I assure you,

these deviations are almost always the symptom of a deceitful mind, of a devious direction. (248)<sup>16</sup>

In spite of the fact that he almost lost his life, Paul is determined to keep on fighting, and uses his misfortune in a new plot to gain wealth and status, turning his attentions to the aging Duchesse Padovani, the Prince's former mistress, still distraught by her lover's desertion. From "feline" duelist (238), he turns into a bird of prey, watching her "with the eyes of a hunter, sly, vigilant" (298). The animal comparisons underscore the instinctual nature of his constant need to struggle, but the text also shows the deeply deliberate, intentional and calculated way in which he plans his every action. The seduction of the Duchesse is a case in point, as Astier, through a series of carefully orchestrated moves, manipulates her sentiments and succeeds in winning her heart. It is in his moment of triumph, that Astier is called a *struggle-for-lifEUR* – the only mention of the term in the novel – by his friend Védriine:

- Yes, one of our handsome *strugforlifeurs* [sic] !

The sculptor repeated the word, giving it more emphasis: "struggle-for-lifers!" referring to this new race of ferocious youths to whom the good Darwinian invention of the "struggle for life" serves as a scientific excuse for all kinds of vile acts. (367)

The text underscores not only the ferocity of the young social climber's behavior, but also the inhumanity of most of the other characters (with the exception of Védriine), suggesting that all of society has been corrupted by the values of upstarts. Indeed, even the intellectuals are of dubious moral worth. For instance, Freydet, Astier-Réhu's protégé, candidate to the *Académie*, is too preoccupied with his chances of getting elected

to truly mourn the death of his sister. Astier-Réhu himself is incapable of charity, unable to see and comprehend the suffering of others. When walking past a group of starving paupers, he does not notice them, as “his big teacher’s eyes could only see inside books, with no direct or emotional notion of life issues” (107). One could also argue that there is very little difference between his loveless marriage to Adélaïde Réhu and his son’s marriage with the Duchesse: after all, they were both using women to pursue their ambitions. In addition, Astier-Réhu’s interest in purchasing historical manuscripts derives mostly from greed, not from intellectual curiosity. Yet the historian is not censured in the novel to the extent that his son is, as his remaining sense of honor leads him to commit suicide at the end of the novel.

Paul Astier’s death at the end of *La Lutte pour la vie*, conversely, is meant to be seen as a well-deserved punishment for a constant disregard for the lives of others. The play opens with Paul Astier now in a position of power, but seeking again to rise higher in society, and ends with his death at the moment of his triumph. Unlike *L’Immortel*, the play contains a number of direct mentions of Darwinism—Darwin is referred to in the first scene as Astier’s “favorite author” (6)—and its applications, as well as references to the Barré-Lebiez case, making it a lot more transparent than the novel. Its scope is also narrower, taking place over a few weeks, involving fewer characters, and its tone is decidedly more melodramatic, appealing to the spectator’s emotions and righteous indignation. Astier is indeed presented in an even more Machiavellian light. For instance, he refuses to renew a widow’s lease under the same generous terms that his wife had agreed to, arguing that “in business, there are no feelings. Darwin’s law rules” (18). His relationship with the young Lydie Vaillant enacts the traditional conflict between

innocence and evil: she is duped by his promises, used as a ploy only to hide from his wife his real interest in the rich Esther de Sélény. But to the melodramatic frame Daudet adds a Darwinian twist, with Astier claiming that “women have become more romantic, more sentimental, while men have become more ferocious and life harsher” (21). I view this account as the expression of Astier’s belief that his actions are to be seen as a *response* to an environment that requires one to rely on instincts and force, as if he were exonerating himself from any form of moral judgment or excluding his behavior from any kind of ethical framework.

The climax of the play occurs when Paul Astier almost turns into a real murderer. Faced with his wife’s stubborn refusal to grant him a divorce, he is seized again, as in the novel, by the urge to kill. During a party at his Parisian home, he finds in his pocket the vial of poison that Lydie Vaillant used to commit suicide. He pours a few drops into a glass of water that he then offers to his wife, but relents at the last minute, telling her to throw it away. His unwillingness to actually go through what would be a most egregious application of social Darwinism, eliminating his own wife to ensure his future success, indicates that there remains in him some measure of social restraint. It is in essence what his friend and assistant Chemineau says when he describes Astier’s physical appearance: “you look better like that... you looked rather unpleasant earlier, in shirt sleeves; it’s amazing how clothes can straighten a man up!... A white necktie is almost a moral code” (111). This suggests that clothing, as the veneer of civilization, restricts the free play of aggressive instincts, but also that the beast is never far beneath the surface, that regression and degeneration remain constant threats. Astier describes himself not as a bestial criminal, but as a new Napoleon, whereas Chemineau points out the similarities

between his friend and Barré and Lebiez, “two school friends, educated, intelligent, but greedy... and Darwinian to the core... The strong eat the weak. Your whole creed” (25-26). The more or less explicit link between Napoleon and the two criminals underscores Daudet’s own assessment of France’s political situation: Napoleon, as the heir of the Revolution, was often seen by conservatives as the final destroyer of the Ancien Régime, the illegitimate and ultimate social climber who was also a ruthless monster, Darwinian *avant la lettre*.

At the end of the play, however, Astier seems for a time to abandon his Darwinian principles in favor of a Romantic ethos in which women enable the betterment of men.

As he declares his love for Esther, he says:

Up until this day, up until this blessed moment, I considered life as a struggle, as a clash of ferocious and voracious ambitions. I walked on freely, without scruples, heartless. I was harsh, I was cynical. It is not my fault. I am a product of my time, and others will come after me, who will be even more ruthless... Serenity, a certain peace in my whole being, something big, soft, that surrounds me and disarms me, and if you want it, will make me a different man, change my aggressive instincts into goodness. (148-149)

In this unexpected—and short-lived—reversal, one notices the fact that Astier shifts the blame for his brutal actions onto society at large, suggesting that he is only the product of adaptation (the crucial Darwinian process) to the values that dominate the world in which he lives, or that he evolved into a form that was suited for survival and success within this world. His avowed ruthlessness is both a modern trait, one that is required for survival and success in a society that allows and encourages the struggle for

life, and an atavistic and animalistic remnant of an earlier state of nature. The question of heredity, which determined his character in the novel, is all but absent in the play, shifting the blame to the social and intellectual milieu. Moral insanity may not be the attribute of a single individual, but rather the mark of a generalized social degeneration.

As Daudet indicates in the preface to *La Lutte pour la vie*, his goal is not to criticize the validity of Darwin's theory as such, and the novel and as well as the play sustain this view: Astier is seen as the product of Darwinian evolution as Daudet understands it. What the two works underscore are the noxious effects of the application of Darwinism to social life. Antonin Caussade, Lydie Vaillant's former fiancé, is the only scientist in the two works, and voices Daudet's own opinion about the *struggle-for-lifeur*. Védrine's words from the novel *L'Immortel* are repeated *verbatim* in the play (Act III, scene 5), but Caussade proposes in addition a review of the evolution of man and society, underscoring the distinct nature of civilized man from animals:

[the law of nature], the law of caves and forests... but we are past that, thank God! Man now stands upright, he invented fire, light, conscience and moral life, he scared the wild animals away.... But now the wild animals are taking revenge... when they are applied, Darwin's theories are wicked, because they look for the brute inside man, ... they wake up what remains of four-legged creatures in the standing quadruped. (88-89)

This view is close to Brunetière's, in that it links a teleology of biological progress with the development of morality: to become human is to relinquish the brute, to overcome our kinship with animals. "Conscience and moral life" are antithetical to the law of nature, that is to say the struggle for life. The question of values, morals, and

honor is raised again at the very end of the play, when Lydie Vaillant's father shoots Astier. Vaillant's name brings to mind notions of courage, bravery, but also good character. Although he invokes Astier's Darwinian motto "the strong eat the weak" as he fatally shoots his daughter's seducer, the motives that bring about his gesture are clearly different from Astier's desire for riches and power: he seeks revenge for the wrong inflicted on his innocent daughter. In this final melodramatic twist, the audience is clearly meant to interpret Vaillant's cold-blooded murder of Astier in relation to a time-honored code of values according to which family, morality, honor are placed above one's self-interest. His act is judged much differently from Astier's attempted murder of his wife, because Vaillant is not a *struggle-for-lifefeur* but the defender of traditional values, bringing to an end the destabilizing and dangerous rise of the young man.

In a review of Daudet's play entitled "Parisian Darwinism: The 'Struggle-for-Lifefeur,'" published in the *Westminster Review*, an anonymous British critic noted that the particularity of the French social and political situation made the country more prone to a misinterpretation and appropriation of Darwinism for reprehensible ends.

[I]t is conceivable that loose notions of a distorted Darwinism, floating in the Parisian atmosphere — notions embodied in such crude formulas as "Le fort mange le faible," "Tue-moi ou je te tue" — may act like poison-germs on minds already sick with unwholesome longings for luxury, wealth, and power, unattainable by legitimate means. And, in truth, the Theory of Evolution is, in the hands of an average Frenchman, an unfamiliar and dangerous weapon. As a nation, they long ago abandoned the arduous uphill way of evolution for the tempting shortcut of revolution, and perhaps it was inevitable that they should; for

there seems to be something essentially antagonistic to evolutionary methods in the Gallic mind, whose bent is all towards rapid logical reasoning promptly resolved into action; whereas Nature's ways, as revealed in evolution, are to human judgment, often unreasonable, and above all, illogical, and her action immeasurably slow, and often halting and purposeless. Yet Nature's ends are infallibly attained where reason and logic fail. (164)

This reviewer highlights a specifically French misreading of the theory of evolution as the failure to understand the ways of nature, which he links to the political idea of revolution. What this excerpt suggests is that the Enlightenment principles of "reason and logic" which characterize the French are contrary to the ways of nature, that revolution, i.e. the revolution of 1789 (the outcome of "*rapid* logical reasoning *promptly* resolved into action") is itself an aberration, that the democratic system in place (one that encourages "unwholesome longings for luxury, wealth and power") is perverted. For French conservatives, the establishment of the Third Republic and its entrenchment through the 1880s, often seen as the final victory of the principles of the revolution, and by extension of the Enlightenment, constitutes the culmination of an unnatural and degenerative process. The texts under study more or less explicitly raise the same issues, that of the pace of social change and its relationship to the disintegration of moral values and that of the validity of applying a scientific theory to the realm of human action. Indeed Paul Astier, and, as we shall see, Antoine Monneron, Paul Greslou, Racadot and Mouchefrin, are all products of the republican educational system and its (for Daudet, Bourget and Barrès) misguided belief in equality. What the authors attempt to show is that by obliterating social distinctions and by encouraging young men to think that they

can achieve anything, the democratic republic has in fact created the conditions for a complete state of social warfare, that is to say for a return to a primitive, barbaric condition in which appetites and desires are unchecked. In other words, the revolution has made social evolution go awry and civilization degenerate. Astier, after all, is the grandson of a peasant, and thinks that he can marry a duchess.

Bourget's Antoine Monneron, in *L'Etape* (1902), is similar in many ways to Paul Astier: the son of a peasant turned college professor, he is not interested in intellectual pursuits, but seeks a life of pleasure and luxury to which he believes he is entitled. The novel as a whole is an indictment of contemporary French society, presented through the eyes of a blatantly judgmental narrator. *L'Etape* centers around Antoine's brother, Jean, a sensitive young man who, throughout the novel, questions the democratic and republican dogma that the educational system and his father have inculcated in him. In love with the daughter of his father's intellectual rival and political enemy, the ultra-conservative, traditionalist, Catholic Ferrand, Jean gradually comes to accept Ferrand's assessment of his family's circumstances and of the country's situation, eventually converting to Catholicism and rejecting the republican creed of his father. Jean accepts the need to return to traditional values, in order to reverse what is described as the damage done by the Revolution and the Republic.

The sub-plot that concerns Jean's older brother Antoine serves as an illustration of the failures and dangers inherent to the republican system, which did away with inherited privileges and proclaimed equality as a dogma. The novel stresses the necessity to revert to older values, to social hierarchies and discipline. Interpreting the principles of the

republic, he considers that it is his right, in a democratic society that promotes notions of equal opportunity, to gain the wealth and pleasure hitherto reserved to the upper classes. The narrator describes him as a sensualist with no qualms, with a “deeply, violently plebeian sensibility... a vulgar animality” (1: 227). The clearly negative connotations of this characterization align the desire to rise in society with the basest (“plebeian,” “vulgar”) and most dangerous instincts: for Bourget’s narrator the causal link between the animal, sensual core of Antoine’s being, which makes him a degenerate, and his will to scramble up the social ladder is undeniable. The text also shows that these animal tendencies are inherited from his mother, an indolent, self-absorbed, unintelligent, vulgar Provençale, with a “core of animal egotism” (1: 76), whose pretty face charmed a hardworking, shy and innocent Joseph Monneron when he got his first teaching position in Nice.

Like Paul Astier, because of the apparent predominance of his mother’s physical features and character traits, Antoine is hereditarily predisposed for leisure and individualism. Like Paul Astier again, Antoine corresponds to a type, the social climber, whose intrinsic inclination for sensual gratification allows him to “adapt to the Paris of pleasure with startling ease” (1: 232). This suggests that Antoine belongs to a certain species, or race, as Daudet might say, of young men, eager to succeed at all costs, and able to adjust to a new environment (a crucial Darwinian notion) because of their own natural inclination: the Parisian environment, not his ancestral home, one in which there are no moral values, only an uninhibited quest for pleasure at all costs. Antoine’s situation, like Paul Astier’s, arises from the combination of hereditary and environmental factors, and, crucially for the argument that Bourget and Daudet want to make, is a

product of the modern, republican era. Indeed, Joseph Monneron is a professor in the new educational system put in place by the Third Republic, and meets his wife when he is sent (by the ministry) to Nice. The implication is that without the spatial and social mobility that the republic encourages and relies on, Monneron would not have met his wife, their two bloodlines would not have been mixed, and a creature such as Antoine would not have been born. In addition, the Parisian atmosphere provides a favorable milieu in which Antoine's unbridled ambition is allowed to flourish. He adopts a false identity as an aristocrat, Monsieur de Montboron, and spends time at the races with his mistress, Angèle d'Azay, a wealthy *cocotte*. In order to sustain this lifestyle, he forges signatures at the bank where he works, obtaining money that he plans to pay back with his winnings from the races. When he is unable to do so, he resorts to extortion, intending to blackmail his sister Julie's wealthy aristocratic lover, Adhémar de Rumesnil. His plot eventually fails, and facing prosecution, Antoine is sent to the colonies.

In contrast with Jean, his brother, who is a student, prone to deep thought and contemplation, Antoine is a man of action, constantly moving from project to project, yet always motivated by a desire to rise in society. In a chapter titled "The path to crime," he tells Jean: "I've had enough of being in society like the poor wretches at the door of nice restaurants, sniffing the aroma of the food that others are eating. I want to be among these others; to walk into the dining room; to sit at the table; to have my share of the delectable dishes simmering in the kitchen" (1: 219). The use of the food metaphor echoes Lebiez's lecture on Darwinism, in which he used the image of a great banquet where everyone had to fight to earn his place. Antoine then goes on to point out the inadequacies of a democratic system that promises equality and opportunity but cannot deliver, fueling his

profound sentiment of class resentment. “I have always been told about democracy, equality, everyone’s right to everything. Then, when it comes to practice, this equality comes down to the lousy piece of paper one places in the ballot box. ... I don’t give a damn about that piece of paper!” (1: 219) This outburst shows that his is a primarily socio-economic interpretation of the democratic dogma of equality: political rights are insufficient to fulfill the expectations raised by the milieu he was born in. He recognizes the de facto inequalities that the system *pretends* to annihilate. He wants to be the equal of aristocrats in terms of access not to political decision-making, but to a lavish lifestyle. He is, in a sense, only the product of a system that led him to anticipate success, according to the Republic’s “ideal program,” encompassed in the catchphrase “all careers open to all” (2: 196). He is also an example of the insufficiencies of the republican system, in which opportunities remain limited, frustrating the ambitions it itself has fostered.

The term “struggle for life” appears for the first time in the novel in reference to the Monneron sister, Julie, a young woman studying to become a schoolteacher, who is the mistress of one of Jean’s aristocratic friends. Like her brother Antoine, she is dissatisfied with her professional and social prospects, torn between the “harsh necessities of her existence and her aspirations” (1: 79). As with Antoine, her education and the intellectual milieu in which she grew up have fueled her ambitions. She is described as having read “too much and indiscriminately” (1: 241), that is, without moral guidance.<sup>17</sup> Her secret affair with the wealthy, carefree Rumesnil offers her a way to access the world of pleasure and affluence that she dreams of. She imagines herself, the granddaughter of a peasant, married to the young aristocrat, sharing his title of nobility.

It is doubtful that the young woman would have invoked Darwin to explain her actions. After all, her fantasies of marrying a young aristocrat seem to be straight out of the romances that she perhaps read. Yet the text underscores her similarities with her brother Antoine, having inherited “brutal [tendencies]... from her mother” (2: 15). And Antoine, aware of her liaison before his brother Jean, recognizes the similarities between her situation and his own. He tells Jean: “We both know enough to understand that there is only one law across the world: the struggle for life. She is struggling for life [*elle struggleforlifise*] in her own way, this girl” (1: 100). And although Julie does not succeed in committing any crimes, she does attempt to kill her lover once she understands that he has no intention of marrying her in spite of the fact that she is pregnant with his child. This highlights once again how the ideas of the struggle for life, unmet aspirations created by the republican system, hereditary imbalance and violence are linked for Bourget: a degenerate system engendering further individual degenerates. The text, however, does not reveal her state of mind at the moment when she makes the decision to pull the trigger, and she is presented more like a victim of circumstances than the scheming free agent that her brother Antoine describes her as, and unlike him, she returns to the fold after the incident and is forgiven by her family.

The existence of the *struggle-for-lifeur* as evoked in this novel involves a dual process: on the one hand, Antoine is a character dominated by base instincts and appetites, a throwback, it seems, to earlier times; on the other hand, he is clearly a product of modern times, of post-Enlightenment democracy, a system which, according to the thesis upheld by Bourget, by destroying traditional, and in particular religious, values, has unleashed individual barbarism and degeneration.<sup>18</sup> The novel thus comments

on both the evolution of society and the fate of individuals: the rule of Reason in society is blamed for the return of unreason among individuals. Jean, once the family crisis has burst, declares that “on the basis of Reason alone, anything can be justified and anything can be destroyed, because everything can be discussed” (2: 184). By becoming increasingly rational, Bourget argues, man becomes paradoxically less human, that is to say less moral and compassionate.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, his strictly rational upbringing leaves Jean feeling like a “barbarian” when it comes to the “intimate life of the soul” (2: 165). The form that the struggle for life—eternal though it may be—, seen here as a destructive process, takes is essentially modern. It exists in the particularly virulent mode that it does because of the particular conditions of modernity—the displacement of religion, the rise of the lower classes, the increased mobility of the population, the egalitarian educational system. The novel as a whole may indeed be seen as an indictment of the Revolution and its principles as embodied in the Republic.

Jean asks: “since 89, [do] we [not] strain helplessly to establish anything that will last according to the anti-natural [*antiphysiques*] ideas of the Revolution?” (2: 115-116) Echoing the ideas expressed by Ferrand, the Catholic thinker and his father’s rival, Jean thinks that the Revolution, and by extension the republic, has disrupted the “natural” evolution of society by allowing for the rapid climb of educated young men from the lower classes, promoting them to the intellectual elite without giving them the time and means to mature into the position. Ferrand’s model does not exclude social transformation, but allows it in the form of gradual evolution, like that evoked by the British critic of Daudet. The Revolution and the republican system, its contemporary extension, are anti-natural because they disrupt traditional forms of social development,

that is to say the slow movement upward of portions of the lower classes. Indeed Ferrand, much like the critic in the *Westminster Review*, diagnoses the cause of Jean Monneron's malaise as the speed with which his family was made to evolve: "[This malaise] stems from the fact that your family did not develop according to natural laws... Culture was given too quickly to your father and to you. Duration is lacking, an earlier growth of the race, without which class transfers are dangerous. You have gone too fast [*brûlé une étape*] and you are paying for what I call the French error and which is ... an essential ignorance of the essential laws of the family" (1: 55).

This "error" appears glaringly to Jean as he makes a mental comparison between his home and Ferrand's: he notices the "noble décor" of Ferrand's study (1: 32), while in his parents' living room, the prints representing "Rouget de Lisle singing *La Marseillaise*," some of "Nicolas Poussin's shepherds," "two Roman triumphal arches," and the portraits of Hugo, Michelet, Jules Ferry and Gambetta, all Republican icons, are a testament to Monneron's "disparate tastes" and "incoherence" (1: 74), a reflection of their social condition. What this lack of coherence represents for Jean and for the narrator is the shallowness of the culture that his father acquired, as opposed to the deeply-felt historical sense that Jean gets when observing the portraits in Ferrand's study. Early in the novel, Ferrand describes the "fake self that an education that pretends to set the individual free by separating him from his traditions" has created within Jean (1: 42), who is first and foremost, like his father, a peasant. The Monnerons' uprootedness, their lack of belonging, a consequence of the father's too-quick ascent, is at the heart of Jean's malaise. It is directly related to the Revolution and the advent of democracy: swift and radical changes brought about in the wake of the Revolution have destabilized society

and compromised its further development. Ferrand states that “in order for families to grow, duration is necessary... Your grandfather and your father believed, as did our country for the last hundred years, that we can skip a step [*brûler l'étape*]” (2: 244).

The question of a natural order lies at the heart of Bourget's novel. On the one hand, for Antoine Monneron, the struggle for life as observed in nature should be the model of social interaction in modern times: the system of castes and distinctions that the revolution and republic have brought down is seen as an artificial construction designed to restrict the free play of social agents.<sup>20</sup> In Antoine's interpretation of a democratic society as one in which everyone can fight or scheme for access to the riches and leisure hitherto reserved for the aristocratic elite, the republican dogma of equality ensures the application of the struggle for life. In this view, social evolution and the resulting order are based on a natural principle. On the other hand, for Ferrand, the narrator, and gradually for Jean Monneron himself, equality is an anti-natural principle. They view social distinctions not only as necessary, but as products of a gradual process of differentiation. Jean, for instance, becomes increasingly aware of his atavistic peasant nature, of the innate and inherited differences between himself and the Ferrands. Unlike the atomistic conception of the individual that his brother embraces, for Jean the self is the product of multiple forces: regional origin, family history, tradition, and religion.

Antoine is an obvious example of one of the ways in which evolution has gone wrong, but Jean himself is described as a degenerate, albeit one who, through contact with some healthy elements, can be reformed or rehabilitated, because of his acute sensibility and openness to questioning received dogma. He is portrayed as, and feels like, a product of the anti-natural uprooting from tradition, values, and environment

caused by his father's rise from peasant to intellectual. Ferrand offers the diagnosis early on: "You and [your father] are victims of the democratic thrust understood and endured by our country, where the individual has been considered as the basic social unit. This destroys both society and the individual" (1: 55). Physically weak, with "spindly" limbs (1: 3), a "colorless complexion" (1: 4), which are caused by his life as a solitary scholar, Jean resembles his father (unlike his brother and sister, who are closer to their mother). But unlike his father, whose devotion to the democratic principles that have given him his current position is absolute, he is tormented by his lack of rootedness, weighed down by the deeply felt sense of not belonging where he is, knowing that he is, by heredity, a peasant: "The good race of *vivarais* [a rural region south of the Massif Central] farmers, which he originates from, is revolting within himself, in spite of himself, against the paternal error" (1: 26). Unlike Antoine, who relishes the new environment he finds himself in, Jean longs to be back on the land of his ancestors. The narrator does not elaborate further on the reasons for such a difference in temperament, but throughout the novel insists on Jean's feelings of maladjustment and identification with his peasant ancestors. The brothers, offspring of the same couple, have inherited different traits from their parents: Antoine is biologically predisposed to the search for pleasure while Jean is both more prone to reflection and atavistically linked to his *vivarais* forebears. The difference between the two brothers illustrates the dual nature of the Darwinian evolution described in the novel: the elder devolves into a destructive and unrepentant creature, adopting the barbaric creed of his environment, while the younger brother, by converting to Catholicism and marrying Brigitte Ferrand, reconnects with his "natural" roots and rejoins the slow course of evolution.

Bourget insists on the fact that he is not fundamentally hostile to science, but only to the wrongheaded application of scientific theories in the political and social domains. Darwin's theory is not inherently evil; the democratic application of the struggle for life is. This is expressed clearly by the blatantly judgmental narrator:

But Science and Democracy, as France understands it, seem absolutely irreconcilable, for in all the countries which pass as democratic and which prosper, in America for instance, democracy is synonymous with oligarchy, feudality almost. Science proves that the two laws of life, across the universe, are continuity and selection, to which French democrats respond with the absurd dogma of equality, and they give to the present, under its most brutal shape, by the rule of numbers, every right over the past. (2: 109-110)

With this statement Bourget seeks to recuperate Darwin—by mentioning continuity and selection—for a conservative, anti-democratic agenda, going against Royer's appropriation of the theory for progressive ends. Indeed the novel is predicated on the naturalization of the existence of social classes, that is to say, on the idea that each individual's place in society is determined by factors such as family history or regional origin, so that the social hierarchy appears to be biologically established. As we have seen, Jean feels deeply connected to his peasant roots; Ferrand is the embodiment of the conservative middle-class, the depository of culture and traditional values; Rumesnil, although he is a member of the *Union Tolstoï*, a radical club, acts like “a man of good breeding [*de bonne race*]” (2: 150) after Julie's attempt on his life. The egalitarian creed of the Republic therefore runs counter to the laws of nature. Ferrand does, however, concede that there can be transfers between classes. Jean, by marrying his daughter

Brigitte, will be able to found a bourgeois family, because unlike his father, he will be marrying into an established bourgeois family (not becoming bourgeois through education) and will adopt its traditional values (not radical republican ideas). The “right” way to evolve, then, involves a return to the past, to traditions and religion, which allows for the gradual integration of new elements into the old system: a slow Darwinian evolution as opposed to a quick Darwinist revolution. Conversely, Antoine’s exile to the colonies suggests that he cannot be assimilated into society, that he is an aberrant form that has to be isolated and rendered powerless. The novel’s ending adumbrates a potential future for Jean and Brigitte within the context of a democratic society, a society within which social order is preserved and which contains the threat from the rising lower classes by a literal alliance with the bourgeoisie and an embrace of its conservative values.

Bourget had voiced his hostility to the democratic principles of the Revolution in an earlier novel, of which *L’Etape* may be seen as a more authoritarian rewriting, articulating in unambiguous terms his own beliefs about the individual, democracy, and science. *Le Disciple*, published in 1889, tackles similar issues, but presents less clear-cut conclusions, as exemplified by the various reactions to the novel which I will discuss below. In the preface to *Le Disciple*, Bourget confronted head-on the threat posed to society by the degenerative potential of the Republic. This preface invites the reader to consider his novel as a cautionary tale designed to rouse the young generation from the state of apathy in which it has fallen. Stating his responsibility as a man of letters for providing healthy reading material to the young middle-class men who will lead the

country, he proposes an aesthetic remedy to what he perceives as the ills of *fin-de-siècle* civilization. France, he writes, is in a pathological state of moral crisis, and the future of the nation is uncertain. As in *L'Étape*, 1789 serves as a touchstone for his criticism of the current state of affairs. Looking back at the past century, from the vantage point of 1889, the centennial of the French Revolution, Bourget laments the decline of his country. The sense of trepidation and anxiety he felt is made palpable by the inflammatory tone of the preface. The nation has suffered at the hands of “ignoble masters,” “abominable politicians” whose “deceitful mediocrity” has crushed the bourgeoisie and smothered the growth of a healthy ruling class (8). France had experienced a century of revolutionary convulsions, which were thought at the time to cause great disturbances to the body and the mind and even lead to epidemics of insanity, and had recently suffered a major military defeat at the hands of the new German nation.

Bourget claims that the young generation is affected by a similar kind of depression and pessimism as the generation that followed the defeat of Napoleon’s Grande Armée, the anemic, pale and weak-willed youth described by Musset in *La Confession d’un enfant du siècle*. The combined effects of post-revolutionary fatigue and military defeat (1815 and 1870) have drained the physical and moral strength of the young. However, Bourget claims that the *fin-de-siècle* neurosis is even more pernicious than post-Napoleonic pessimism. Indeed, he argues that it is not only the physical and social environment, but also the intellectual milieu that has contributed to the frailty of the psychic and physical constitution of contemporary youth. The alliance of positivist science with democracy, he writes, is to blame for their corruption. “When applied to human beings, scientific objectivity becomes an excuse for callous indifference to the

feelings and dignity of the individual, while the ethic of universality, far from liberating us from our passions, increases our enslavement to them” (Chaitin 67). In his novel, he questions the teleology of scientific progress, the optimistic prognosis for evolution, presented in some positivist narratives, arguing that instead of an increased sophistication of the individual, advanced civilization produces degenerate, aberrant and harmful deviations from the norm.

Bourget presents two such aberrations in his preface: the “*struggle for life*” and the “delicate nihilist” for whom “good and evil, beauty and ugliness, vice and virtue... appear as objects of mere curiosity” (11-12). For the former, as we have seen in Daudet’s novel and play, the principles of the Darwinian struggle for life may be applied to all fields of experience, serving as justifications for an unbridled quest for pleasure and success. For the latter, other human beings are objects to be studied with a scientific objectivity that turns into a cold disdain for humanity. These two characters are essentially modern figures and as such should be distinguished from historical forms of decadence, for they are products of an age in which the explanatory power of science was considered supreme; faith in science was one of the dogmas of the Third Republic. The disciple in Bourget’s novel is usually understood as an example of the latter type of degenerate, and studies of the novel often overlook the features which make him a “brutal positivist.”<sup>21</sup> But the novel’s central conflict, that between Greslou and the Comte André, is essentially Darwinian. The text indeed emphasizes Greslou’s identity as a “civilized barbarian,” whom Bourget labels “the most dangerous species,” sharing many similarities with Daudet’s Paul Astier (11). However, Bourget’s work, similarly to Daudet’s, locates the source of corruption and crime not among the dangerous working-class, nor the

backward peasantry, nor the decadent (and dying) aristocracy, but among what Max Nordau, author of *Degeneration*, considered the healthiest segment of society: the educated middle-class.

The title character in *Le Disciple*, Robert Greslou, is a young, middle-class student, who, after failing the entrance examination to the Ecole Normale, is hired as a tutor by an aristocratic family. Influenced by contemporary theories of determinism, especially those of Adrien Sixte, a fictional philosopher who is presented as the founder of scientific psychology, he decides to conduct an experiment on his employer's daughter, Charlotte. He plans to seduce her and to keep a detailed record of the different stages of the seduction, in order to examine it scientifically. Envisioning himself as a latter-day Julien Sorel, whose role models are not military figures but thinkers such as Sixte, Taine, Spencer or Ribot (160), he intends to contribute to the progress of science by analyzing the development of Charlotte's passion for him. He claims to be a disciple of Claude Bernard and Pasteur, comparing their experiments with his own: "These scientists vivisection animals. Wasn't I going to vivisection a soul at length?" (201) His plan backfires when he falls in love with the object of his study. As the two lovers are unable to marry, due to their different social positions, they agree to a double suicide pact. However, after they spend the night together, Greslou refuses to let Charlotte commit suicide, proposing instead that they elope. The young woman, aware of the dishonor of her situation, kills herself by swallowing some of Greslou's *nux vomica*, leaving a letter to her brother, the Comte André, detailing the circumstances of her death. Greslou is accused of her murder and brought to trial. His mentor, Sixte, having read his memoir, calls on the Comte André, hoping to convince him to reveal the truth about Charlotte's

death before the end of the trial. The Comte gives his testimony, exonerating Greslou from any legal responsibility. He is acquitted and freed. A few hours after the end of the trial, the Comte shoots and kills Greslou, claiming to have done justice.

The novel opens with the disruption to Sixte's customary routine caused by a court's summons to appear before an investigative judge regarding the Greslou case, of which Sixte was hitherto unaware. After his interview, Greslou's mother pays him a visit, accuses him of being the cause of her son's troubles, and leaves him a manuscript. Much of the novel is then taken up by Greslou's first-person memoir, written during his detention, in which he gives a comprehensive account of his life, from his childhood to the moment of his arrest. He writes: "I can now see distinctly that the crisis I am experiencing has been caused first by my heredity, next by the milieu of ideas in which I grew up, and then by a milieu of facts, in which I have been transplanted since my arrival among the Jussat-Randons" (99), describing a conflation of factors reminiscent of Taine's trilogy of race, milieu and moment.<sup>22</sup> Structured like a scientific case-study, with subsections titled "heredity," "milieu," "transplantation," the text presents Greslou's self-analysis, using terms taken from evolutionary science, and relying on well-known assumptions regarding what determines character, thought and action.

The plot of the novel revolves around the seduction of Charlotte, which is framed in Darwinian terms. It is when he meets the Jussat-Randon family that Greslou's energies become focused on a new form of the struggle for life. Being in close contact with the upper class stirs up ambitions within him. His ostensibly scientific project to study the development of love in Charlotte is in fact coded in the language of competition and challenge to her brother, a competition which he expresses in evolutionary terms, as

reenacting the atavistic struggle for life that had been contained for generations by an unquestioned social hierarchy. Again, it is in a republican, democratic society that regressive or degenerative elements develop. The novelty of the situation, compared to *Le Rouge et le noir* for instance, lies in Greslou's awareness of the historical moment that allows him to confront André, and in his analysis of his and his opponent's characteristics in scientific terms. His explanations for the confrontation are indeed steeped in the science of heredity of the day and decidedly Darwinian in their outlook.

The first factor that Greslou analyzes is his background, in particular his hereditary make-up. He laments the fact that he is the product of miscegenation: his father came from Lorraine (one of the provinces lost to Prussia in the 1870 war), his mother, like the Monneron wife, from the South.

For the last hundred years there have been mixtures between provinces and races which have burdened our blood with excessively conflicting heredities... My mother and I are an example of this, which I would describe as excellent were it not that the pleasure of finding the undeniable proof of a psychological law is accompanied by the bitter regret of having been its victim. (113-114)

Greslou's memoir suggests that what caused the crisis which led to Charlotte's death was the combination of hereditary taint and environmental factors, a combination that was made possible only in the post-revolutionary era, which encouraged the development of an unscrupulous (because unfettered) science, as Brunetière argues, and through unrestricted social movement, produced a generation of young people with "conflicting heredities," with a predisposition for mental imbalance.<sup>23</sup> His mother's southern mentality, which he describes as constricted, prejudiced, bigoted, clashes against his (and

his father's) analytical skills and intellectual curiosity. From an early age Greslou feels drawn to his father's side, accompanying him on long walks in the countryside, during which he learns to think about a variety of objects and phenomena, from plants and rocks to clouds, in a scientific manner. As an adolescent, Greslou abandons religion altogether to focus on philosophical and scientific inquiry, which he considers as irreconcilable with faith. This is the moment when Sixte's influence begins, and in her first meeting with the philosopher, Greslou's mother accuses him directly of having caused her son's lapse from faith. Ironically, the terms used by Greslou in his memoir to describe his discovery of Sixte's theories evoke a religious conversion.

Greslou's mental imbalance, deriving from a primary internal tension between science and religion, between father and mother, is manifested by a propensity for excess in everything. When this tension seems to be resolved in favor of a dogged pursuit of science, a second one develops within the young man. With the abandonment of religion comes, as in the Monnerons, a lack of moral guidance in his life, and this in turn, unleashes brutal instincts, a theme which Bourget develops to greater lengths in *L'Etape*. It is no accident that his rejection of religion coincides with the escalation of his intellectual frenzy and with the awakening of his physical desire.

In Bourget's estimation, the intemperance of his sexual appetite links him to primitive brutes with no concern for right and wrong, while the zeal with which he pursues his intellectual interests makes him negate moral values in favor of scientific advances. In a sense, therefore, Greslou is doubly morally insane and degenerate. Greslou's sexual education, by a thirty-year-old factory worker named, not innocently, Marianne,<sup>24</sup> brings to the surface a violent and brutish self whose existence he has never

hitherto suspected: “a sensual being, tormented by the lowest and most brutal desires” (144). The tension between these two poles continues to plague him for the rest of his life, as there always remains in him the memory of sex, “the impure beast, embedded in [him] within the thinking beast” (216). His unbounded egotism, combined with an excessive sensitivity, the adherence to scientific principles instilled in him by his father and confirmed by his reading of Sixte, which led to the rejection of his mother’s religion, bring into being the *struggle for life*, the “monster” who places his own yearning for intellectual and physical gratification above any collective requirement, described in the preface (11). This suggests that a hereditary flaw, the imbalance caused by the mixing of two incompatible bloodlines, constitutes an essential part of Greslou’s eventual development.

Like Paul Astier and Antoine Monneron, products of miscegenation, Greslou is an essentially modern figure. However, while Astier justifies his conduct by a somewhat basic understanding of Darwinian principles, Greslou’s relationship with modern science is more complex. Sixte’s theories allow him to rethink the nature of his self: no longer as a stable entity, but rather as the result of tensions whose equilibrium is always tenuous, rather like Taine’s description: “our idea of self is a group of coordinated elements whose mutual associations, perpetually under attack, perpetually successful, are maintained during our waking state... like the composition of an organ is maintained in health and in life. But madness is always at the doorstep of the mind, just as disease is always at the doorstep of the body” (*Intelligence*, 2:230). This new science, the “milieu of ideas” which contributes to his development, gives him the tools to analyze his instability—and then justify his behavior. What he draws from his scientific studies is that his condition is

normal, because it can be explained. Sixte's evolutionary psychology—like Darwin's evolutionary biology—does not establish norms, since any variation, any difference belongs to the realm of normal possibilities: the ontological difference between normal and pathological no longer holds (Canguilhem).

Throughout the century, there was much concern, however, for identifying deviants and potential criminals as intrinsically different from other people. As mentioned earlier, Bertillon's efforts to classify criminals according to specific measurements or Lombroso's concept of the "born criminal" were attempts at identifying and controlling potential criminals. While Greslou does not correspond, strictly speaking, to the criminal type described by Lombroso, he shares some of his characteristics, displaying on his face visible signs of a mental imbalance or weakness, which may be interpreted as a propensity for crime. It is only after Sixte learns that the young man has been accused of murder that he decodes Greslou's physical appearance in terms of criminal deviance. Remembering his meeting with Greslou two years earlier, Sixte recalls "a young man of about twenty, with beautiful bright black eyes which lit up a face that was slightly too pale" (42). After his interview with the investigative judge, Sixte "re-reads" this face and finds on it the signs of latent insanity: "these very bright black eyes, these overly brisk gestures, ... there was nervous imbalance in this young man" (77). This nervous imbalance could be, according to Sixte, a sign of the "return of brutal animality in the civilized" (77), the "barbarism" mentioned in the preface, a phenomenon that Lombroso identifies as atavism and that is one of the foremost features of the born criminal.<sup>25</sup> The novel shows that atavism clearly plays a role in Greslou's reprehensible behavior: his upbringing, paired with the social conditions in contemporary society, in

which individualism is placed above any commitments to the community or the nation, brings about the resurfacing of violent instincts and urges.

In contrast to Greslou's muddled heredities and conflicted upbringing, the Comte André, Charlotte's brother, embodies the purity of an aristocratic bloodline and the uncomplicated adherence to age-old values. Greslou describes the Comte André as the "embodiment of action," a strong, muscular man, on whose face one can read determination and "invincible will" (168), as the incarnation of energy and vigor, the descendant of generations of men who cultivated strength in character and body (171). Just as Greslou's predilection for the life of the mind originates in his hereditary make-up, so does André's taste for physical activities. His athletic build and martial features, as well as his obvious contempt for the indolence of intellectual pursuits, serve to accentuate the absolute difference between the two young men. Greslou describes the impression he had during their first meeting: "I was faced with a creature different from me, but one that was complete and fulfilled the conditions of its species" (169). The terms "creature" and "species" underscore the biological nature of the distinction between the two men, which Greslou observes as a naturalist.

According to Greslou, his hatred for the Comte André derives from his ancestors' hatred of the other man's ancestors, and he views his scientific project as a form of revenge for wrongs inflicted generations earlier. In his memoir, the term "atavistic" appears to justify feelings of personal dislike, which are also linked to class resentment. Greslou analyzes his instinctual hostility towards the other man as "the likely trace of an unconscious atavism" (170). Indeed, in the confrontation with the young aristocrat, Greslou sees a reenactment of the struggle for power that his ancestors lost: André's

blood is “of pure conquering race,” whereas his own is “the blood of a conquered race” (170), and his ancestors are “the boors, the oafs from which [he] descended” (203). This explanation for the difference in social status between the two young men makes of the existence of social classes a biological and unchanging fact.<sup>26</sup> Greslou believes that his superior intellectual abilities, which make him “civilized” while the Comte is “but a barbarian” (171), should translate to a socially superior position. In his dreams of glory and fame, he imagines being a renowned scientist, the like of Claude Bernard, Pasteur or Ribot, his contribution to the progress of science guaranteeing a high social position. He devises his plan within this logic of revenge and struggle against the Comte André: Greslou describes himself as having a “predatory soul” (257), and proposes to seduce “the Comte’s sister” (192)—thus showing that the confrontation with the Comte, fueled by class resentment, is his primary driving force.

Atavism in Bourget’s novel is, however, not seen in a wholly negative light. Just as Jean Monneron’s instinctive longing for the land and values of his ancestors in *L’Etape* represent a positive trait and allow him to recognize his father’s error, André is portrayed as an anomaly even within his own family. The family as a whole presents the symptoms of a feeble, degenerate and anemic aristocracy. His father, the old aristocrat, is a ridiculous hypochondriac (157) longing for the old days of the First Empire. Lucien, Greslou’s charge, is described as lazy, slow, as well as delicate and sickly (159, 188). Charlotte herself, according to Greslou’s description, takes after her father in her nervous disposition and her “almost morbid sensitivity” (187). She is also fragile, succumbing to various physical and mental ailments. By contrast André appears as an utterly different being, the picture of health and physical strength. For Greslou, he resembles, by “obvious

atavism” (187), one of his illustrious ancestors rather than any of his closer relatives. The resurgence of ancestral traits is here presented as a clearly positive characteristic. André is described as a born soldier who considers that any intellectual pursuit is futile and for whom delight comes from physical activities such as hunting and horse riding. The state of indecision in which he finds himself during Greslou’s trial makes him physically sick: he is described as fighting an internal struggle between his innate contempt for his own lie in letting Greslou be condemned, and his desire for revenge for the lost honor of his sister. “There he was, the man of action for whom uncertainty was an intolerable distress, after three months, having made no decision” (351). The inner peace he gains by burning his sister’s letter, resolving to stay silent and let the trial take its course, is short-lived: he receives Sixte’s letter the next day. He then has no choice but to appear in court and testify in Greslou’s favor, since he cannot face the shame of being called a liar and a coward (358). This adherence to a code of honor seems old-fashioned, outdated, atavistic, but is meant to be seen in a positive light. Indeed this biological atavism runs counter to a destructive social evolution; age-old values offset the modern negation of morality.

His final act, the shooting of Greslou after his acquittal, is narrated from an external point of view that gives no insight into his psyche, thus reinforcing his image as a man of action and not reflection. Much like Vaillant’s shooting of Paul Astier at the end of *La Lutte pour la vie*, this action underscores his loyalty as a “gentleman hungry for honor” (359) to a set of values from another era, one that Bourget would like to see reinstated instead of the brutal individualism that prevails in his society. Indeed, André then gives himself up for arrest, having accomplished his deed, an act that precludes any reading of Greslou’s killing as the action of a *struggle for life* in the modern sense,

although it clearly reenacts the destruction of the weak by the strong. Indeed, it is through the ancestral struggle that the superior race, of which André is a representative, gained the advantage over the weaker ones, a victory that then determined the social hierarchy for centuries as a natural order, disrupted only by the Revolution.

*L'Etape* ends in an unambiguous embrace of traditional, religious values and a repudiation of republican egalitarianism, and with a clear vision of Jean and Brigitte's marriage as auguring a bright future for those who embrace their roots, time-honored ideals, and accept their place in society. By contrast, *Le Disciple's* ending does not entirely resolve the question of the future.<sup>27</sup> Greslou's death does signal the failure of the *struggle-for-lifeur's* attempt at upending social order but André's arrest does not represent a tangible success for the old order. In addition, as Loué points out, the novel ends with the destruction of two families; the only survivor in the drama is the childless, socially isolated Sixte (53).

The last two pages of the novel describe Greslou's mother and Sixte watching over Greslou's dead body. The presence of the mother is significant because observing her grief gives Sixte an irrepressible urge to pray, even though he does not utter any words, and makes him cry as well, humbled by "the impenetrable mystery of fate" (370). Greslou's mother is a less important and far less vocal figure in *Le Disciple* than Ferrand is in *L'Etape*, and Sixte's turnaround is less definite than Jean Monneron's embrace of Catholicism and tradition. Nevertheless, the earlier novel also concludes with a potential return to faith as Sixte comes to accept his share of responsibility for Greslou's project, and to recognize that science is unable to offer any support in the face of the kind of pain and suffering that he is witnessing.

The apparent open-endedness of *Le Disciple* prompted a debate between some of Bourget's friends, who were among the most well-known intellectuals of the time. As we have seen earlier, Brunetière sees in the novel a vindication of his own conservative ideas, advocating a return to traditional values and rejecting democracy. In response to his impassioned review, Anatole France, whose political ideas are opposed to Brunetière's, argues for the continuation of scientific exploration as a moral duty. Like Brunetière, he posits that Sixte's determinism, or "scientific fatalism" (62), negates any kind of morality, and its concrete application can only lead to crime. But unlike Brunetière, he also argues that the crime is entirely Greslou's, not Sixte's, because scientific and philosophical speculation is not a guide for the conduct of one's life. For France, there exists a separate sphere of intellectual inquiry within which all sorts of ideas and theories can be explored with absolute freedom and without any concern for practical applications. Yet what ought to determine one's conduct is, according to France, rather vaguely, "the simplest morality" (63). Brunetière's blanket condemnation of determinism on moral grounds misses the point, for "what misled Greslou was not determinism but pride" (63).

In contrast to Brunetière's vision of a stable and constant set of values to guide man's conduct, France presents a dynamic image of the progress and development of society and its morals. France argues that advances in thought such as the ones occurring at the time are innately subversive and are often condemned as morally wrong before being accepted as new standards. "It is impossible to decide if a doctrine whose first effects today are harmful will not be greatly beneficent tomorrow" (65-66). For him, today's revolutionary or subversive idea is the morality of tomorrow, and deliberately

returning to ignorance by denying or condemning the progress of modern science is more likely to lead back to wickedness or depravity than pursuing deeper and more extensive knowledge of human nature. “Subordinating philosophy to morality is wishing for the death of thought... and at the same time stopping the progress of morals and the blossoming of civilization” (70). He questions Brunetière’s shortsighted regression to bygone values. In a way, it seems that France’s concept of the development of society follows a certain evolutionary pattern, with new, better ideas replacing older, obsolete forms, although he claims to not be defending any philosophical or scientific theory.

One may agree or disagree with France’s theory of knowledge or conception of ethics. However his reading of *Le Disciple* seems hardly defensible. He claims that the novel raises the question of Sixte’s responsibility for Greslou’s action without answering it, attributing Sixte’s emotional turmoil at the end of the novel to a disjoining of heart and mind. In fact Sixte does recognize Greslou as his disciple (369) and his tears are preceded by a conscious and clear recognition of the boundary beyond which science is no longer valid. The novel unquestionably demonstrates that scientific inquiry ought to submit to society’s control.

Hippolyte Taine also wrote a letter to Bourget in which he lamented the vision of the irreconcilability of science and morality that the novel seemed to promote.<sup>28</sup> According to Taine, the novel could be read in two ways, as discrediting either morality or science: some readers (those without strong moral convictions) may find Greslou “interesting” and even “likable,” and admire his dedication to his work, his ambition and his courage in facing death. By convincingly presenting his case, the novel may end up exonerating him. Others (those with firm beliefs) will find him repugnant and

will entirely reject the theories of natural laws, arguing that the fact that determinism can be invoked to absolve him of his crimes identifies the concept as morally lacking.<sup>29</sup> While praising Bourget for his insightfulness and talent in describing a complex psychological case, Taine declares that the error lies in the portrayal of Sixte as the representative of modern science. For Taine, Bourget gave Sixte “an inadequate mind and an inadequate scientific education” (290): he lives cut off from the outside world, conducts no experiments and is thus, for Taine, unprepared to provide any meaningful contribution to the analysis of the moral and social world. Indeed for Taine it is impossible to consider the individual in isolation; scientists studying psychology can only do it in awareness of the social context. Therefore he condemns Sixte’s pronouncement that “for a philosopher, there is neither crime nor virtue. Our decisions are facts of a certain order which conform to certain laws, that is all” (65). For Taine, Sixte’s determinism is shallow because it fails to consider good and evil, vice and virtue as fundamental characteristics of human behavior.

Taine does not find a contradiction between determinism and morality, responsibility or justice; for him there is “conciliation and even fundamental identity.” (292). His conclusion is quite different from France’s and Brunetière’s, since for him science is neither independent from nor subordinated to society, but rather derives from careful observation of social facts. He cites his own work on *Les Origines de la France contemporaine* as an example, claiming that his moral judgment is firmly rooted in the rigorous analysis of social phenomena and of the psychology of the participants. It can be inferred that for Taine, the fact that Sixte has failed to conduct any experiments himself is

a grave fault, one that invalidates the theories he is admired for. However the philosopher is not responsible for the misguided application of his theory, deficient as it is.

Barrès, in *Les Déracinés* (1897), the first volume in a trilogy called “Roman de l’énergie nationale,”<sup>30</sup> similarly takes up the question of the influence of a philosophy on impressionable young men. Although Barrès does not directly tackle the issue of the teacher’s personal responsibility, he concludes that the system of which the teacher is a representative and an agent has to be held responsible for the disciples’ actions when they are based on the philosophy and value-system that the institution puts forward, in this case, the republican educational system. The novel follows seven young men from Lorraine, who, although coming from various social classes, were friends during their years at the *lycée* of Nancy. The novel opens with the arrival of a new professor of philosophy, Bouteiller, who through his teachings on Kant and universal reason, profoundly influences the young men, stirring in them the ambition to leave their province and become “useful” to the nation. In the next few years, they all go to Paris, where some of them study law or medicine, while others, less favored by social and familial circumstances, are forced to earn a living. They form an association as a way of channeling their youthful energies in some direction, and after a solemn pact by Napoleon’s tomb, they decide to open a newspaper to be their public voice.

Unlike Daudet and Bourget, Barrès was directly involved in French political life. A follower of General Boulanger, he was elected *député* in 1889 (and then beaten four times before being reelected in 1906 for the conservative *Entente républicaine démocratique*), and steadily moved to the right, joining the *anti-dreyfusards* and

Déroulède's *Ligue des Patriotes*. In the 1890s he formulated his idea of the importance of one's attachment to one's ancestors and motherland ("la Terre et les Morts") as the foundations of one's identity, and became known as a staunch nationalist and traditionalist, although he accepted the parameters of the republican system.<sup>31</sup> His adherence to republican principles hinged on the idea of a strong man and an elitist system within which an illustrious past could find a new incarnation. The central chapter "Au Tombeau de Napoléon" presents the emperor as such a rallying figure.<sup>32</sup> As François Sturel tells the history of Napoleon, the group of young men appears to undergo a transfiguration, to become animated by a newfound sense of purpose, inspired by "NAPOLÉON, PROFESSEUR D'ÉNERGIE" (author's typography, 215). However, as they lack the historical and cultural basis for forming a meaningful association, the chapter ends with a presentation of their respective concerns. Sturel, Rœmerspacher, Saint-Phlin (the three young men with the closest ties to their origin and their region) think about "destiny, duty, culture;" Suret-Lefort (the son of a businessman, destined to become a lawyer) contemplates "appearances;" Racadot and Mouchefrin (both from lower class backgrounds) "pleasure;" Renaudin (the first one to go to Paris, a failed journalist) "food" (228). The narrator establishes a hierarchy of purposes that coincides with the social hierarchy, from upper to lower classes, suggesting that only members of the gentry or bourgeoisie are able to answer the call of the nation, since the young men of the lower orders are dominated, organically, it seems, by desires and appetites.

One of the sub-plots in *Les Déracinés* follows the unfolding of the Barré-Lebiez case very closely. Racadot and Mouchefrin, among the seven graduates, are at the bottom of the social ladder. In Paris, they lead a hand-to-mouth existence, unable to succeed in

spite of their education. The question of heredity is raised for both young men: Racadot comes from a lineage of serfs and embodies the characteristics of his “race,” “the type of the rural slave” (55). In spite of the social and political changes, the “upheavals” (55) that have made it possible for him to attend the *lycée* in Nancy, he remains in essence, according to the narrator, a lowly creature, stimulated by appetites and greed. His friend and associate Mouchefrin is a dwarfish, almost deformed man, “unpleasant in appearance, [with] a wide and swollen mouth” (57), whose father had sold his land to open a photography studio. The narrator speculates that his physical degeneration has been caused by exposure to the chemicals used for photography. After they move to Paris, they find themselves united in their destitution and resentment, as well as by what the narrator unproblematically describes as the natural bond between members of the lower classes, who share “the same animality, a taste for alcohol, for heavy foods” (139). Animal metaphors, often connoted negatively, abound concerning the members of the lower orders, implying their exclusion from the realm of intellectual pursuits and civilization, suggesting their belonging to an earlier, more primitive state of evolution. Racadot and Mouchefrin are like wild animals, “they have their look, their filthy smell, their cruelty, maybe, their cowardice, and certainly their endurance” (142).

Racadot decides to open the newspaper, ironically called *La Vraie République*, using money from his father. Although it does attract the attention of Taine, among other intellectuals and prominent figures, the venture is not financially successful. When the need for money becomes unbearably pressing, Racadot and Mouchefrin resort to all sorts of expedients, including blackmail, but after all of their strategies fail, they devise a plan to steal money and jewels from Astiné Aravian, a beautiful Armenian widow, who had

been the mistress of their former classmate François Sturel. They lay a trap for her one evening, taking her to a deserted area of Billancourt and beating her to death, leaving her decapitated body on the bank of the Seine. The narrator comments on this crime: “It is only natural for Astiné Aravian to be murdered... the deed that the peasants Racadot and Mouchefrin have carried out adds a banal episode to the eternal Jacquerie”<sup>33</sup> (395). As *Le Disciple*’s Greslou views his conflict with the Comte André as a reenactment of the ancestral struggle between two races, so it is with Racadot and Mouchefrin, resenting Astiné’s wealth and access to power. However, their transgression can be characterized not only by its similarity to a series of other, older, similar crimes, but also by the newness of the justification that its perpetrators develop. Just as the real Lebiez had given a lecture on Darwinism days after murdering the widow Grillet, Racadot prepares a speech, ostensibly on the occasion of Victor Hugo’s recent death, but in which he proposes a vision of humanity and society that is strikingly similar to that put forward by his real-life counterpart:

Thriving at the expense of others, using all possible means, this is what nature teaches us. “Fraternity,” empty and misleading word, must be replaced by “parasitism”... The issue is not to alter the condition of struggle, which cannot be modified because it is the actual law of the world, but to abandon the idea that it is evil. (406)

According to the narrator, the abandonment of a moral judgment concerning the laws of nature is the direct consequence of Bouteiller’s teachings, which inculcated in the young men the idea that they were “citizens of humanity, emancipated, initiated into pure reason” (38), and no longer members of their community. These *déracinés*, as the novel

calls them, no longer have access to the stores of traditions, local culture and values that guarantee a stable social life, and thus become morally insane degenerates. Barrès indicts the republican educational system, one that promotes values of universality, based on the principles of the French Revolution: “The Board of public education has turned them against their little homeland, has trained them through emulation without instilling in them one religious idea—revealed religion or scientific ideal—which would provide social ties” (232). Again, as in Daudet’s and Bourget’s works, moral sense for Barrès derives from tradition, embodied in one’s origins (family and land). The young men’s move to Paris appears as “a betrayal, a loathsome rejection” of what Barrès envisions as their true nature (90).

Paris again is presented as the locus of moral corruption, where “violent appetites would easily be awakened by an almost wild freedom” (56), and indeed when the young men go out at night, they are compared to beasts of prey, on the “hunt for sex, for vanity, for money” (202). The freedom and anonymity provided by the capital, as well as the availability of alcohol and sex, transform the young men into creatures of desires and appetites. Racadot and Mouchefrin, for instance, live among bookmakers and prostitutes. Both of them are forced for financial reasons to abandon their university studies, and end up living by their wits. Their common failure to “make it” in the city, as opposed to their friends, is linked to their class: unlike Sturel, Rœmerspacher, Saint-Phlin or Suret-Lefort, Racadot and Mouchefrin cannot count on their family’s financial support. In spite of their professor Bouteiller’s statement, as he is leaving the *lycée* early in the novel, that “the heritage of human thought is not the privilege of fortune” (35), Racadot and Mouchefrin’s trajectories signal otherwise. Again, as in *L’Etape* and Daudet’s novel and

play, the question of the pace of social change is raised. Racadot and Mouchefrin's resentment stems from the fact that social realities do not correspond to their aspirations. While the others turn to intellectual pursuits (because they can afford to), they interpret Bouteiller's teachings in terms of greed and material satisfaction, like Paul Astier and Antoine Monneron, and, like these two characters, they are ultimately excluded from the system that gave them their position: "the instinctive mechanism of this group tends to eliminate the Racadots, the Mouchefrins, to reject them back to the proletariat, to degrade them" (356). Social Darwinists themselves, they are crushed by social Darwinism.

In fact, the narrator explains that once the young men are taken out of the "communism" of the *lycée*, a social order based on privileges and exclusion prevails: "just as chickens pounce on a sick bird to destroy it or keep it out, each group tends to reject its weakest members" (131), a variation on social Darwinism's motif of the survival of the fittest. Racadot and Mouchefrin's weakness or sickness appears to be that they belong to the lower classes, and hence, the narrator suggests, are unfit for positions of responsibility. What Barrès criticizes is the fact that the educational system dishonestly promises equality of opportunity to all and is unable to fulfill the expectations of *boursiers*, like Mouchefrin, who find themselves forced to sustain themselves by any available means. The narrator claims that "they are not a rising democracy, but a degraded aristocracy" (143), giving the sense that social development has gone awry, that it is not moving in the direction of progress, but toward decline and degeneration. For Racadot and Mouchefrin the options are to return to their region and take up their fathers' respective trades or to turn to a life of crime. In the minds of these young men, the first option is untenable, since it negates all that they strive for and is an admission of failure.

The second option is more attractive, and available to them because of the lack of moral direction that results, according to Barrès, from the teaching of the likes of Bouteiller.

André Gide disputed Barrès's explicit view that physical, social, intellectual or spiritual uprooting is detrimental to the individual and to society at large in an article that prompted a debate between some of the leading intellectuals of the period, such as Charles Maurras, writer and founder of the Action Française, an ultra-nationalist group, Léon Blum, literary critic and future Prime Minister, or Rémy de Gourmont, one of the leading proponents of the Symbolists.<sup>34</sup> Gide's argument is twofold. First, he raises an aesthetic objection to the heaviness of what he calls dismissively Barrès's "electoral thesis," arguing that the novel invalidates Barrès's logic, because most of the uprooted do succeed in a way (only Racadot and Mouchefrin's actions can be judged harmful and amoral). Secondly he contends that being confronted with the unfamiliar, the strange, the foreign, whether physically or intellectually, is the precondition for greatness. Quoting Nordau, he writes: "In a situation in which it often finds itself and which for many is the same, the organism acts in a banal way; in a situation which is presented to it for the first time, it will give proof of originality, if it cannot avoid doing so" (54). He concedes that rootedness suits the weak, whose organism is not able to sustain the effort of adaptation to new conditions, that only the strong are destined to become stronger through an encounter with the new. Furthermore he claims that the most significant social evolution takes place through overcoming the new, which is how heroes are created. He grants that this mechanism of social change inevitably crushes its victims, but asserts that the gains should not be sacrificed to the comfort of the many. Gide's refutation of Barrès's thesis therefore is based not on the egalitarian creed of the republic: he wants to show that not

everyone is fit to receive the benefits of uprooting through education, for instance, but rather on an embrace of elitism—which may be seen as a form of social Darwinism. Charles Maurras, a writer and politician, founder of the nationalist and monarchist Action Française, responded to Gide's review by attacking “academic Kantianism” and “the morals and politics of Rousseau” which, he claimed, were taught in the republican school system. For him, as for Barrès, these ideas represented the philosophical uprooting of entire generations, starting with the French Revolution.

As Gide points out, the other members of the group, their friends from the Nancy *lycée*, subject to the same influences, are not tempted by a life of crime, and their judgment appears to be less affected by the noxious ideas transmitted by Bouteiller. While the narrator of the novel does not elaborate on the reasons for this difference, it can be inferred that the lower classes are predisposed to immorality and crime to an extent that the middle to upper classes are not.<sup>35</sup> However, as only Racadot is arrested and convicted of Astiné Aravian's murder, Sturel and Rœmerspacher wonder what should be done with Mouchefrin. Although they condemn the crime, they decide not to denounce him, accepting the risks inherent to the operation that seeks to transform “young *Lorrains*, children of tradition” into “citizens of the universe, men conforming to pure reason” (461). By protecting Mouchefrin from the police, the other members of the group also seek to correct the fact that society had not dealt him and Racadot a fair hand. Rœmerspacher says: “I recognize that society, in relation to Racadot, to Mouchefrin, has not functioned according to the Kantian principle... If the individual must serve the community, the latter must serve the individual in turn” (461). Therefore their support for

Mouchefrin is justified by the acknowledgment of the failures of the system and by their continuing faith in it.

Barrès's novel is the most explicitly ideological of the works under study. The narrator's comments direct the reader to a predetermined conclusion: that the republican school system has deleterious effects on individuals, by not providing them with a morality that can be applied in their life, and on society, by encouraging unrestrained competition. Racadot and Mouchefrin appear as symptoms and causes of degeneration: their heredities and environment predispose them to crime; through their actions they perpetuate a degenerate system.

The containment of violent criminals was a pressing issue in the nineteenth century. As mentioned earlier, degeneration theory, based on evolutionary naturalism, became the most prominent way of explaining criminal tendencies and behaviors. The protagonists in the works under study are presented as degenerate criminals, whose behavior is explained by a combination of hereditary and social factors. But for Daudet, Bourget and Barrès, the French revolution and its philosophy were the primary cause of a more pervasive form of degeneration, one that spread moral insanity through the teachings of its educational system. Their condemnation of social Darwinism, embraced by some progressives as the creed of the modern era, was two-pronged. Firstly, they rejected the notion that the struggle for life ought to be the principle according to which humans interact, arguing for a discontinuity between the natural world and civilization. The protagonists that they censure are represented with animal traits to underscore that, as atavistic throwbacks, they belong to another order and cannot be part of civilized

society. Secondly they viewed social Darwinism as a socially disruptive doctrine which clashed with their belief in the existence of natural elites, against the egalitarianism of the republic.

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<sup>1</sup> Moral insanity was also a defining characteristic of degenerates for Morel.

<sup>2</sup> Max Nordau dedicated *Degeneration* to Lombroso.

<sup>3</sup> See Eugen Weber's classic *Peasants into Frenchmen* for an account of the efforts by republicans to modernize attitudes and behaviors, in particular through the school system.

<sup>4</sup> See Conry.

<sup>5</sup> Darwin, according to Joy Harvey, was "both amused and startled by her preface" (89).

<sup>6</sup> The most famous confrontation between a cleric and a Darwinist is the 1860 debate that opposed the Anglican bishop of Oxford, Samuel Wilberforce, and Thomas Huxley, during which Wilberforce is said to have asked Huxley whether it was through his grandfather or his grandmother that he was descended from a monkey, to which Huxley replied that "he would not be ashamed to have a monkey for his ancestor, but he would be ashamed to be connected with a man who used his great gifts to obscure the truth."

<sup>7</sup> Michel Mansuy notes, in his comprehensive biographical study of Bourget up to the publication of *Le Disciple*, that the novel's plot corresponds much more closely to a more recent sensational case, *l'affaire Chambige* of 1888. Chambige was a young lawyer with an interest in psychology, who had been close to Bourget a few years earlier. His affair with Mme Grille, an older, married woman, ended in a double suicide pact, but he somehow survived and was accused of Mme Grille's murder. Bourget's name was mentioned during the course of the investigation, as an influence on the young man.

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Mansuy suggests that Bourget's insistence on the fact that *Le Disciple* was not based on the Chambige case, but on the decade-old *fait-divers*, was to create a diversion from the potential damage that his involvement in the tragic story would entail (Mansuy 486-488). Albert Autin, in an earlier and perhaps less objective study of *Le Disciple*, cites only the Lebiez case as the trigger for Bourget's composition of the novel (Autin 47-55). There is no doubt that the particulars of the Chambige case fit Bourget's novel more closely, and Bourget's denial of any involvement in the case may very well be an instance of intellectual bad faith. However, the defense invoked in the Barré-Lebiez case raises the same questions as Bourget's novel (whether science can explain and excuse morally reprehensible actions, whether Darwinism can serve as basis for morality), and in *L'Etape* (1902), which is in some ways a rewriting of *Le Disciple*, Bourget created a character who justifies his criminal actions by referring explicitly to the struggle for life.

<sup>8</sup> Boulanger was a general in the French army, named Minister of War in 1886 and subsequently pushed aside because of his great popularity. He decided to run against parliamentary republicans in partial elections in 1888, and was elected triumphantly. His program stood for an authoritarian regime, hostile to the compromises of the Opportunist Republic, and for a strong nationalism (his principles were *Revanche* [against Prussia], *Révision* [of the constitution], *Restoration* [of the monarchy]). However, the Boulangiste movement, which seemed to represent a credible threat to the institutions of the Third Republic (many feared he would seize power through a *coup d'état*), was short-lived. After an electoral defeat in 1889, Boulanger retreated from public life and eventually committed suicide in 1891.

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<sup>9</sup> Prosper Lucas, in his treatise on heredity (1847-1850) posited that acquired traits could be transmitted from parents to offspring (455-506) and that certain features were determined separately by each parent (200-201).

<sup>10</sup> Alphonse Bertillon, head of the photographic service at the Paris police headquarters, devised in 1882 a system of anthropometric identification based on fourteen anatomic measurements (height, size of feet, hands, ears, nose...). Cesare Lombroso proposed in *Criminal Man* a typology of criminals, emphasizing the readability of symptoms of criminality. His treatise was extremely influential throughout Europe, not only for criminologists and penal reformers, but also for writers and journalists seeking to explore questions of criminality.

<sup>11</sup> See chapters 1 and 2 in Gray's *About Face*.

<sup>12</sup> The French word for "crack" that Daudet uses is *fêlure*, which is also the term that Zola used to describe the hereditary flaw that affects the Rougon-Macquarts.

<sup>13</sup> By encouraging Colette to marry the Prince, Mme Astier seeks in fact to take revenge on the Duchesse Padovani.

<sup>14</sup> Colette de Rosen's reservations concerning a possible union with Paul stemmed from considerations of class. She considered "marriage to a commoner an impossible degradation" (166).

<sup>15</sup> Védérine is the only truly positive character in the novel: uninterested in glory, yet able to understand the workings of society and the Académie, he rejoices in small pleasures, almost always accompanied, it seems, by his perennially contented wife and their perfect children. Perhaps an idealized representation of Daudet himself, who, lest detractors

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should assume that his vicious attack on the institution was motivated by spite, says in the epigraph he was never interested in being elected to the Académie.

<sup>16</sup> Hartley indicates that in Lavater's physiognomy, the "nose and cheeks represented moral life" (34). The slight deviation in Paul Astier's nose therefore would indicate a deviant character, as Védrine infers.

<sup>17</sup> The republican school system, as mentioned earlier, was entirely secular, and thus, for conservatives, incapable of providing moral direction.

<sup>18</sup> Bourget himself returned to Catholicism in the 1890s, officially converting in 1901.

<sup>19</sup> Like Astier-Réhu in *L'Immortel*, who is unable to see past his books and does not notice the paupers on the streets.

<sup>20</sup> This was also Clémence Royer's contention.

<sup>21</sup> See Lyle 313.

<sup>22</sup> Taine proposes these three concepts as the basis for the scientific value of sociological inquiry in his introduction to *Histoire de la littérature anglaise*.

<sup>23</sup> "For the last hundred years" is another way of saying, as the preface does, "since 1789."

<sup>24</sup> Marianne is one of the symbols of the French Republic.

<sup>25</sup> Greslou obviously is not one of Lombroso's born criminals. What I want to suggest is that Lombroso's idea that some people are predetermined to commit crimes, because of the combination of hereditary and environmental factors, is mirrored in the determinism of Bourget's novel. In addition, Sixte is described as a "born philosopher" oblivious to the outside world and to his own physical needs, whose life is entirely lived in the mind.

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These characterizations indicate that Bourget adhered to a form of biological determinism.

<sup>26</sup> This naturalization of the difference in social classes also appears in Greslou's relationship with Charlotte, in which the concern for miscegenation plays a role. It is not only because they belong to different classes that their union is unthinkable. Rather, the underlying belief that they are biologically different justifies this conclusion. See also the description of the young woman's physique, which underlines this clear separation between "races" (187).

<sup>27</sup> This can be partially explained by the fact the Bourget became gradually more conservative, eventually embracing Catholicism and a return to the monarchy.

<sup>28</sup> Taine and Bourget had a relationship of mutual respect, as evident in the pages of Taine's *Correspondance*. However, after the publication of *Le Disciple*, it seems that Taine's opinion of Bourget changed, and their correspondence stopped.

<sup>29</sup> This interpretation leaves out the ending of the novel as well as the preface, both of which clearly censure the young protagonist as an active agent of his own fate.

<sup>30</sup> The other two novels are *L'Appel au Soldat* (1900) and *Leurs Figures* (1902) in which he calls for a return to patriotism and militarism. In 1899 Barrès delivered a lecture entitled "La Terre et les Morts (sur quelles réalités fonder la conscience française)" in which he articulated the themes of attachment to one's regional roots and to one's family as a way of "restituer à la France une unité morale, de créer ce qui nous manque depuis la révolution : une conscience nationale."

<sup>31</sup> See Zeev Sternhell, *Maurice Barrès et le Nationalisme Français* (Paris: A. Colin, 1972).

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<sup>32</sup> Unlike Bourget and Daudet, who see Napoleon as the ultimate upstart and thus a dangerous precursor to the likes of Astier or Greslou, Barrès finds in Napoleon an energizing and positive figure. His conception of French history relies on strong, unifying heroes like Joan of Arc, Henri IV or Napoleon.

<sup>33</sup> A reference to fourteenth-century peasant revolts against feudal lords, emphasizing again the idea of class resentment which fuels the young men's anger.

<sup>34</sup> This debate, which took place in the press between 1897 and 1903, became known as "La Querelle du Peuplier" because of the use of the poplar tree as an example of the effects of uprooting and transplanting.

<sup>35</sup> This is a common assumption in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social thought: the lower classes were sometimes described as the dangerous class.

## Chapter Two

### **The *roman de filles*: Diseased Domesticity**

Michel Foucault contends that the nineteenth century saw sexuality as a privileged object of knowledge. The proliferation of specialized discourses on sex, he argues, reveals the link between knowledge and the workings of power in a politics of sex that seeks to define, regulate, control and discipline deviant practices and figures. In *The History of Sexuality* he identifies four figures around which mechanisms of regulation and discipline were deployed in the nineteenth century: “the hysterical woman, the masturbating child, the Malthusian couple, and the perverse adult” (105). In *Scenes of Seduction*, Jann Matlock adds to these “four great lines of attack” the prostitute, which, she argues, cannot be subsumed under the diagnosis of hysteria. In fact, Matlock argues, the hysteric and the prostitute constituted “opposite models against which an orderly body could be measured” (6). She writes that “the prostitute became a privileged object of knowledge in her own right” (4), as studies of prostitution by doctors or social hygienists focused on establishing the prostitute’s difference and legislators sought to contain and regulate the practice of prostitution. Prostitutes were seen as posing a particular threat because of the great emphasis placed on the family as the basis for a stable and prosperous society in the bourgeois century, concerned with the transmission of property, values, and hereditary traits. Wives and mothers, whose roles as educators, guardians of values and domestic angels were firmly established, played a central part in

guaranteeing the social, mental, and physical health of the new generation and the nation as a whole.

This chapter examines the representation of prostitutes in the fiction of the first decades of the Third Republic, in order to illuminate the relationship between the discourse on degeneration that pervaded the *fin de siècle* and the fictional women who embodied, albeit phantasmatically, specific threats to the moral, social and physical health of the nation. While Matlock investigates the connections between discourses on the hysteric and the prostitute, this chapter examines the intersections of degeneration theory with discussions of prostitution.<sup>1</sup> Matlock's contention is that the articulation of female deviance along the two lines she identifies in fact relies on a single process of "reading difference" (7). Reading difference is also at the core of degeneration theory, and this chapter argues that within the degenerative paradigm, the prostitute was the sole incarnation of female degeneracy.

Degeneration theory provides a powerful explanatory system for bringing together biology and the social and is a particularly productive model in a study of prostitution. Indeed degenerative patterns articulate the link between a sharply individualized and pathologized figure and general anxieties about society and civilization, because they underscore the relationships between organic disease, individual behavior and social milieu, with each element acting on and reacting to the other two. Prostitutes therefore embody exemplary figures of degeneration: they were seen as vectors of disease, mentally ill, spreading immorality and vice throughout society, and, as evolutionary theories took hold, as atavistic creatures, but also as victims or products of particular circumstances, as manifestations of an immoral and diseased

system. In *Les Filles de Noce*, his landmark study of prostitution in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Alain Corbin notes that in the 1870s and 1880s a vast body of scientific literature was produced in response to the perception of a growing prostitudinal threat that reflected “the profound anxieties generated... by the social and political changes underway” (37). While Corbin’s study deals with works of fiction only briefly, this chapter focuses on novels published during those two decades, a time during which degeneration theory was also reaching prominence. Novels that engage historical problematics and work out imaginary solutions can provide insight into the ideological and political struggles surrounding such questions.

Biological and social threats coalesced in the figure of the prostitute. Courtesans, prostitutes, *cocottes* and *demi-mondaines* abound in the novels and plays of the period, pointing to the prominence of prostitution as a social phenomenon, but also to the enduring fascination that it exerted over male artists. Published in rapid succession, Huysmans’s *Marthe* in 1876, Edmond de Goncourt’s *La Fille Elisa* the following year, Zola’s *Nana* in 1880 and Daudet’s *Sapho* in 1884 all feature prostitutes as central characters.<sup>2</sup> While the portrayal of fallen women in literature was not new (Prévost’s *Manon Lescaut* in the late eighteenth century, Balzac’s *Esther Gobsek*, Eugène Sue’s *Fleur-de-Marie* earlier in the nineteenth century), the novels under study reveal an awareness of current scientific discourses about women in general and prostitutes in particular, and reflect contemporary fears of degeneration embodied in their protagonists. The prostitute could be construed as a degenerate in various ways: mental illness, caused by disease or heredity, was often invoked as the source of her lack of moral sense; her sexuality was seen as depraved and primitive; her way of life exposed her and others to

venereal disease, vice and excess. The prostitute was therefore represented as a pathological anomaly, a deviation from an ideal type, that of the honest woman.<sup>3</sup> The portrayal of prostitutes in the novels under study relies on the assumption of their pathological nature. However, these texts also point to the diseased nature of the environment that the protagonists inhabit, a world of generalized sexual promiscuity. According to Nordau, the author of the influential treatise *Degeneration*, “unbridled lewdness” (5) was a sign of degeneration, as “the systematic incitation to lasciviousness causes the gravest injury to the bodily and mental health of individuals, and a society composed of individuals sexually over-stimulated, knowing no longer any self-control, any discipline, any shame, marches to its certain ruin, because it is too worn out and flaccid to perform great tasks.” In fact, he claimed, “no task of civilization has been so painfully laborious as the subjugation of lasciviousness” (557).

Arguments for the regulation of prostitution were, according to Corbin, threefold: a moral argument that stated that the public had to be protected from the spectacle of vice; an economic argument according to which the transmission of patrimony (or bourgeois men’s wealth) could be threatened by commercial sexuality; and a sanitary argument that identified prostitutes as agents of contagion (“Commercial” 209).<sup>4</sup> At the core of these arguments was a conception of the family unit as the anchor for a healthy, moral and prosperous society. Within this paradigm, women played a pivotal role in securing the reproduction of patrimony, values and heredity. As we shall see, the science of the period sought to confirm such a view. Indeed, scientific findings about women were seen as evidence of the inherent truth and goodness of the ideology of the separate spheres, which developed in the post-revolutionary era.<sup>5</sup> Yet the system seemed to be

under attack under the conditions of modern life, and in the 1870s and 1880s, these anxieties crystallized around the figure of the prostitute, seen as the antithesis of and the most direct threat to the domestic angel, guardian of values, health and wealth.

*L'Amour* (1859) and *La Femme* (1860), written by the republican historian Jules Michelet, were designed as guidelines toward social regeneration. Michelet's work is significant because it anticipates *fin-de-siècle* discourses by linking the threat of biological degeneration with social anxieties related to female sexuality and its regulation. The novels under study, by Huysmans, Goncourt, Zola and Daudet, make use of the dichotomy prostitute/honest woman, and exploit medical terms and imagery linked to degenerative fears in their representations of prostitutes as affected by diseased heredities, mental illness, and as potential agents of infection, threatening the whole social body. In *Sapho*, Daudet presents the anatomy of a *collage*, a long-term relationship between a (usually bourgeois) man and a *fille*. Conceived and presented as a moral lesson, a cautionary tale aimed at the next generation, the novel is based on his involvement with Marie Rieu, a well-known *cocotte* who had been the mistress of numerous Parisian artists, among whom were the photographer Nadar and the poet Banville. Like Michelet, whom he read and admired, Daudet was concerned with the moral and physical health of the individual and the community, and his novel censures Sapho, seen as a degenerate herself and as an agent of further degeneration. In Huysmans's *Marthe* and Zola's *Nana*, the eponymous characters also embody the degenerative and disruptive potential of the prostitute. But in both cases the prostitute, while lacking moral sense and marked by diseased heredities, is seen as a product of a corrupt environment: the diagnosis of degeneration expands from the individual to the

general milieu. Finally, Goncourt's *La Fille Elisa* further collapses the difference between healthy/diseased, moral/immoral, victim/cause of degeneration by suggesting that standard morality may be a catalyst for an even more fateful decline in the protagonist. The novel oscillates between representations of the prostitute as diseased and unstable, and hence as the potential source of moral and physical contamination, and as the victim of an exploitive system that eventually leads to her demise.

The ideology of female domesticity became the dominant discourse about women's place in the post-revolutionary social order, an order based not on gender equality, but on sharply defined sexual differences. Women were present and played significant roles during the French Revolution, but they were not granted the same rights as men, and republican reluctance to welcome women in public life lasted well into the twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> One of the central arguments against the participation of women in politics was their identification with traditional religion and counter-revolution.<sup>7</sup> Women were seen as superstitious, as enemies of the Enlightenment, a position that was illustrated by Michelet in *Les Femmes de la Révolution*. For instance, he quotes a revolutionary commander fighting the counterrevolutionaries in the Vendée region, claiming that "it is women who are the cause of our troubles; without women, the republic would already be established, and we would be back home, happy" (122). However, the connection between women, superstition and counterrevolution was not the only element in male revolutionaries' opposition to granting full citizenship to women, as they were also distrustful of female revolutionaries. As McMillan describes in *France and Women*, most male republicans subscribed to the doctrine of separate spheres,

according to which “women’s contribution to society could only be made through the private sphere of the home” (31). For conservatives as well, female participation in revolutionary actions was unnatural. Their reaction to the participation of women during the Commune of 1871 illustrates such a view. As Gay Gullickson argues, the myth of the *pétroleuses*, working-class women rumored to have started fires during the insurrection, is particularly significant because it collapses political upheaval and sexual power: “revolution was like the unruly woman: it threatened to turn the social order on its head, a social order that was assumed by its beneficiaries ... to be natural” (261). The conservative historian Hippolyte Taine, for instance, who witnessed the events of the Commune of 1871, described, in a letter to his wife, the madness of women’s actions, which he related to the Terror of 1793. “Two hundred shrews from Belleville wanted to go to Versailles yesterday, gun in hand, pretending that the soldiers would not dare shoot them; this is the madness of [17]93” (*Correspondance* 91-92). Both sides of the political aisle were generally in agreement about the place of women in society.

The question of women’s otherness and subordination was obviously not new. From Antiquity and the Middle Ages to the early modern era, women were identified as the dangerous sex, subject to more violent emotions and sexual urges than men, and in Christian thought women were associated with sin. But, as the Enlightenment brought scientific attention to the question of sexual difference, it reinforced the idea of a distinctive female nature, a trend that intensified in the nineteenth century with new scientific investigations of the female body, focusing on defining biological and physiological features that characterize femaleness.<sup>8</sup> The male bourgeois order rested on the belief, supported by scientific evidence, in women’s inferiority and radical otherness.

Indeed, scientific “discoveries” confirmed age-old views of women as irrational, weak and emotional. What scientists underscored was, as earlier, the sexual nature of women, but the shift was in the importance now given to the reproductive function, so that female sexuality was no longer represented as primarily aggressive or dangerous. Women were now biologically identified as wives and mothers. The emergent picture emphasized women’s spiritual and moral strengths, their nurturing instincts, which made them perfectly suited to an existence revolving around domesticity and the reproduction of the species. Motherhood indeed became the defining condition of women, following Rousseau’s and Prudhomme’s vision of women as the mothers of future citizens.<sup>9</sup> Female sexuality was to be constrained within a normative frame that guaranteed both the perpetuation of the species and social order. Therefore the scientific discourse on women justified their exclusion from public life on physiological and psychological grounds at the same time as an ideal of domesticity was developed, establishing collective norms defining the social function of women as wives and mothers.<sup>10</sup>

Michelet’s *L’Amour* (1859) and *La Femme* (1860) illustrate the conflation of scientific and social concerns around femininity. By naturalizing the institution of marriage, his project matches the interests of an era concerned, as Foucault analyzed, with establishing norms and containing deviance. He recounts in *La Femme* (1860) an autopsy that he was witness to, and which serves as the impetus for the presentation of his program of regeneration of society through marriage. Seeing the decline of the family as the portent of moral, social and national collapse, he warns that “we must not follow the example of Italy, of Poland, Ireland or Spain, where the decline of the family and personal selfishness have greatly contributed to the failure of the State” (lxiii). Early in

the introduction, he expresses his chagrin at the failure of relationships between men and women, which he sees as a symptom of a distinctly modern type of degeneration and presents as a historical fact: “no one can be blind to the critical fact of the times. Because of a remarkable combination of social, religious, economic circumstances, *man lives apart from woman*... the hearth is extinct, the table silent, and the bed cold” (ii). As Michelet, in a discourse imbued with pathos, laments the statistical decline of marriage, he also calls for a renewal of the institution itself. He recounts the objections to marriage raised by bachelors at a dinner party, from the cost of having a wife, to the retrograde and religious view of the world that women have (*La Femme* xi-xii), to which he replies that men’s lack of willpower and desire is at the root of the decline in marriage. He proposes in *La Femme* to chart the development of a woman from birth, suggesting ways in which her upbringing would make her the best possible mate for a man and constantly emphasizing the beneficial effects that a woman brings to her spouse, her family, and society at large: she is “a harmonic power who, from the family circle, can radiate more widely into society!” (*La Femme* 547). Women’s generative and regenerative potential was of primary importance for Michelet and other public figures, as they could counter the effects of degeneration.

Michelet describes the autopsy in a section unambiguously titled “Woman cannot live without man” and makes the case for marriage as not only the sole destiny available to women, but more importantly as the necessary condition for men and women’s growth as individuals. The breakdown of the institution of marriage dooms society as a whole, because, for him, a successful marriage is the precondition for the individual’s (both male and female) thriving, and consequently for the health of the entire society, the family

being the transitional unit between the individual and society. As Claudie Bernard states, Michelet “voit dans l’ordre domestique la condition d’un épanouissement à la fois individuel et collectif, fondé sur ce grand poncif romantique: l’amour” (81). Michelet describes the direct continuum linking Love, Family and Society: “the Family rests upon Love, and Society upon the Family. Therefore Love precedes all” (*L’Amour*, 1). Love, which Michelet insists is crucial to the development of society, is atrophied by what he calls “the dull pleasures of polygamous life” (3)—by which he means the incapacity for a man to settle down and truly love only one woman. His observation of the young woman’s corpse in *La Femme* is the occasion for a reflection on the physical vulnerability of all women, and for a critique of the social conditions that have led to her early demise. Her death, which for Michelet takes on an archetypal quality, enacts what Bronfen describes as the “social sacrifice of the feminine body,” a death which is the precondition for “the preservation of existing cultural norms and values or their regenerative modification” (181).

This same didactic impulse was already present in *L’Amour*, whose publication a year earlier Michelet justified by invoking the necessity to reenergize the soul of Europe through the establishment of satisfying marital relationships. To justify his didactic enterprise, Michelet presents a doomsday scenario, a degenerative nightmare according to which the race will come to extinction after a succession of increasingly weakened generations, echoing Morel’s prediction in his 1857 treatise on degeneration. “The punishment is as follows: this ailing woman, from her aching womb, will give birth to a sick child, who, should he live, will always seek lethal relief for his innate enervation in alcoholic and narcotic enervation. Let’s assume that, by some misfortune, such a man

procreates. He will beget, with an even sicker woman, an even weaker child. May death come, for a decisive cure and solution” (4). This essentially modern condition, according to Michelet, is caused by the alteration of the soul and the will brought about by the sense of trepidation and speed of modern life. Like Morel earlier and prefiguring Nordau at the end of the century, Michelet focuses on the hereditary and environmental factors that affect man’s physiological and psychological constitution. Man seeks to dull his senses with alcohol and narcotics, identified by Morel as poisons that could lead to an individual’s degeneration. These poisons diminish the mind and body, and this diminished condition is then transmitted in an exacerbated form to offspring.

*L’Amour*, part pamphlet, part novel, seeks to counter the effects of such ailments by providing a sort of handbook for young men, in which Michelet describes the various stages of love and marriage and imparts advice on topics such as how to choose an appropriate dwelling, what activities a wife should be engaged in, or even what foods she should be offered. Michelet’s avowed goal in this work is to encourage young men to marry. In the introduction to *L’Amour*, Michelet warns readers of the disintegration of the social fabric through pathological disorders. “The nineteenth [century] is struck at the two poles of nervous life, thought and love, in man and his weakened, failing, paralytic brain, and woman and her painfully festering womb. This century will be called that of the diseases of the womb—in other words, of woman’s grief and abandon, of her despair” (4). In these sentences, Michelet collapses physical and social ailments, linking pathology and social disorder: man losing his intellectual abilities, woman losing her generative potential, as a result of the strain of modern life.

In *La Femme*, the story of the young woman whose corpse he observes provides Michelet with an exemplary illustration of the contemporary dysfunctional state of relationships between men and women, a state that leads to individual degeneration as well as collective decline. The dead woman was a twenty-eight-year old seamstress who, after being seduced and abandoned with her child, had left her province to start anew in Paris. Living the “destitute, dry and empty life” of a “needleworker” (lv), she had fallen ill. In her misery and isolation, unable to take a few days’ rest, she had had to go to the public hospital where, in spite of the good care she received, she died of tuberculosis. In many respects, her story follows the conventional plot and the ethical structure of melodrama: a narrative of injustice, staging the conflict between purity, innocence and evil.<sup>11</sup> With this individual story, Michelet makes the case for the necessity to reform society, starting with the position of women. The specific details of the young seamstress’s life, such as the callousness of her lover, the condemnatory judgment of her unfortunate condition in her hometown, her economic vulnerability and isolation in an urban environment, all become for him symptoms of a widespread disorder in society and acquire an exemplary dimension and value. The dead woman’s particular story allows him to move his discourse into the public arena, addressing issues such as women’s precarious economic status, their helplessness and dependency, or the regulation of marriage and paternity, all of which were coming to the forefront in the political life of the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

The case of the young seamstress is of particular interest for Michelet not only for the all-too-common narrative of seduction and abandonment, poverty, disease and death, which allows him to develop his proposal for a renewal of marriage, but also for the

unusual tumor found in the woman's womb during the autopsy. "That in the sanctuary of generative and fertile life, this cruel dryness, this desperate atrophy, an Arabia, dare I say, a rock, was found... that the poor woman had turned to stone... this threw me in a sea of gloomy thoughts" (liii). Although she displayed no outward signs of such an illness, and although her other organs were normal—the pathology is visible only in death—Michelet analyzes the "extraordinary" state of her womb as an indication of an endemic crisis threatening French society at its core: a pathological variation, harmful to the individual and to society at large, but which remains invisible until it is too late. The medical diagnosis then turns into social commentary. In Michelet's estimation, because of the decline in marriage, contemporary France is degenerating into a state of barbarism, which makes women even more vulnerable to despair and abandonment, and which results in both social decay and in physical deterioration, manifested in physiological disorders such as the diseased womb of the young seamstress.

His argument in favor of marriage indeed derives from biology ("histoire naturelle") and history, as he contends that monogamy characterizes the higher animals and the more successful and advanced societies (*L'Amour* 5), seeking to establish an organic continuity between nature and society. Therefore the "polygamous life" which he sees as characterizing the modern era may be seen as a regression or degeneration to an earlier state of evolution. In addition he identifies such practices as catalysts for organic derangement or disease: social and biological factors are intimately entwined. To remedy the situation, to strengthen the family, he proposes a study of love, or perhaps more precisely of Woman as the object of love, from the perspective of physiology and moral practice (12).

With his historico-scientific study, Michelet also proposes to challenge deep-seated prejudices against women, and to reassess the value of femininity in the destiny of humanity in the light of recent scientific discoveries.<sup>13</sup> To this end, he quotes recent studies on embryogenesis or ovology (15) and mentions his friendship with “an eminent physiologist” (39) to assert the validity of his claim of a fixed sexual difference at a historical moment of considerable challenge to conventional norms. The young seamstress’s autopsy, together with those performed on hundreds of suicides by anatomists Coste and Gerbe (15), gives access to secrets of femininity accessible only in death: “they were able to examine death, and hundreds of women have revealed the supreme mystery of love and pain to them.”<sup>14</sup> What these scientific observations and studies offer for him is undeniable evidence, grounded in physiology, of woman’s radical otherness: “she does nothing like us. She thinks, she speaks, she acts differently. Her blood does not follow the same course as ours... She doesn’t breathe like us... She doesn’t eat like us” (*L’Amour* 50). In this essential difference lies the source of her weakness, from a physical perspective, and of her power as a moral force, a view similar to Darwin’s in *The Descent of Man*, discussed below. Michelet’s avowed goal is to promote a stable couple and family as the basis for a republican social order that rests on sexual difference, not equality. In doing so, he defines the bourgeois foyer, with female domesticity as its corollary, as the norm from which deviations are seen as threats.<sup>15</sup>

The thrust of Michelet’s argument in favor of a benevolent patriarchal bourgeois model of matrimony is twofold: women are weak and vulnerable, and therefore need protection; their moral sensibility is the necessary constituent of a healthy civilization. Throughout *L’Amour*, Michelet insists on the vital role that women have to play and on

the beneficial effects of their presence. The trouble with contemporary society is that it has placed undue demands on women, forcing them to work outside the home and putting them at risk for physical and psychological harm, and by extension, threatening society with degeneration. He describes the plight of peasant women, the strain placed on factory workers, the woes of governesses and the anguish of actresses, all in terms which make it clear that their work is causing them to waste away.<sup>16</sup> According to Michelet, women should not work outside of the home, because it is only in the domestic context, under the protection of their husbands, that their innate capacity for good can blossom. He presents working-class women as victims being forced by their economic situation to become prostitutes.<sup>17</sup> The consequence of this unnatural arrangement is, again, the weakening of the race.

One of the concerns that Michelet voices over the fate of young bachelors is precisely the availability of women, and particularly poor women as objects of sexual pleasure: “the growing destitution of poor women... makes them available... From this situation ensue the satiety and enervation, the absence of interest for a higher love, the lethal boredom that man would find if he had to pursue what he can easily obtain every night” (*La Femme*, vi). By contrast, in *L'Amour*, he describes an exemplary relationship in which husband and wife mutually benefit from their union: the woman supplies regenerating comfort to the man, who provides for his family. In this mutually beneficial relationship, equilibrium is reached: it balances the male and female elements, and perhaps more importantly, it stabilizes the innate tensions that characterize women.

In his depiction of women, Michelet brings into play the common trope of the doubleness of female nature (strength/weakness, variation/fixity, nature/civilization). But,

just as he claims to elevate her (as an object of veneration, as the ideal companion, as the regenerating mother), he defines the course of her life as systematically determined by biology. As Ann-Louise Shapiro argues, Michelet “most dramatically collapsed woman into her womb, rendering her a being apart whose essential life experiences and possibilities were dictated by biology” (96). Menstruation, with which Michelet was endlessly fascinated, anchors women into the great natural cycles, and represents for him the defining trait of womanhood.<sup>18</sup> By reducing women to their bleeding womb, Michelet also defines them as essentially sick. In “La femme est une malade,” the second chapter in *L'Amour*, he claims that “in fact, 15 or 20 days out of 28 (we could say almost always) woman is not only sick, but injured” (*L'Amour*, 56-57). Women are then physiologically incapacitated, unfit, in a way, for anything but their biological functions, and even their “normal” physiological state is pathologized.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, as “the male body came to represent the standard for health, the female body came to be seen as an aberration from the norm” (Spongberg, *Feminizing* 5).

What is more, the domination of the female by her biology, which unites her with eternal nature, also makes her the victim and the source of violent disorders. Indeed, Michelet contends that “the purest, the most virtuous, has in her blood a germ that sooner or later will reveal itself” (*L'Amour*, 334). As Claudie Bernard describes, “[r]éduite à la matrice, la femme risque de se laisser emporter par le rut, l’hystérie, la folie du sang; en elle sommeille la goule, la sorcière aux sabbats meurtriers, la bacchante aux fureurs mutilantes” (83). Indeed, the blood that links the female to the stability of a cyclical nature may also cause her to lose control, to become erratic and destructive. “By refusing to accept the consequences of her biological weakness, she becomes, in Michelet’s

fantasy, an emasculating, violent creature seeking to revenge her own mutilation by mutilating others” (Bernheimer, *Figures* 207). Marriage and motherhood are presented at once as women’s biological destiny and as the only way to contain women’s menacing biology, as female sexual deviance seems to always be lurking, as a potential threat to the stability of the family and society.<sup>20</sup> Michelet’s presentation of marriage and family as the preconditions for a stable and prosperous society and as a way to contain feminine nature is characteristic of the dominant ideology in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Women are seen as the guardians or repositories of society’s advanced values, while at the same time representing the potential for barbaric, instinctive destruction. Michelet thus places a regulated deviance at the core of the norm he seeks to establish.

Michelet does not dwell on the subject of prostitution, although he raises the question of female deviance. Prostitutes, however, embody the antithesis of his vision of loving and nurturing women thriving within the constraints of domestic life. The representation of prostitutes in public discourse, as Alain Corbin describes, “is based on the central idea that the prostitute possesses all the characteristics that run counter to the values of the time” (*Filles* 20). The world of prostitutes was represented as an underworld, a sort of underground society that represented a moral, social, sanitary and political threat. For hygienists, doctors and politicians throughout the nineteenth century, prostitution, as the most visible form of female deviance, and how to regulate it were major concerns. The authoritative treatise on prostitution, which informed policies and subsequent studies throughout the century, *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris*, was published in 1836 by Parent-Duchâtelet, a hygienist, member of the Public Health Council, and author of a previous treatise on sewers. Undertaken at the request of a

philanthropist who wanted to find out as much as possible about prostitutes to help them repent and reform, Parent-Duchâtelet's work rested on the belief that prostitution was necessary "for the orderly maintenance of civilized society" (Bernheimer, *Figures* 16), but had to be strictly controlled. Indeed for Parent-Duchâtelet, in agreement with organicist conceptions of society, prostitution was essential to the management of society, an "indispensable excremental phenomenon that protects the social body from disease" (Corbin, *Filles* 16). He was an advocate of the system of *tolérance* and surveillance (as opposed to prohibition) in which prostitutes were contained within a whorehouse and inscribed on the registers of the police: "society needs the deviant body yet needs to maintain that deviance in a marginal space where it can be watched, its trajectories carefully traced" (Brooks, *Reading* 162).

The world of vice, at the margins of society, had to be contained and controlled to avoid contamination of the larger social body. In order to do so, Parent-Duchâtelet devised a taxonomy of prostitutes, basing his study on observation, interviews and archival research. His extensive research focused on establishing the distinctive characteristics of prostitutes and produced "a statistical description of the physical types of prostitutes, the quality of their voices, the color of their hair and eyes, their physical abnormalities, their sexual profiles in relation to childbearing and disease, their family background and education" (Bell 45-46). His psychological portrayal of prostitutes insisted on their childishness, their laziness, their aversion to order, rules and routines. For Parent-Duchâtelet, the prostitute "symbolizes disorder, excess, lack of foresight" (Corbin, *Filles* 21). He also described the typical trajectory leading a woman into a life of prostitution as a combination of biological and social factors: an innate propensity to vice

and debauchery, and an environment in which lower-class women were vulnerable, due to low wages or unemployment. However, in his attempt to identify specific physical attributes that characterize prostitutes, Parent-Duchâtelet came to the unsettling conclusion that there were no significant physical features that could help to distinguish prostitutes from other women, including no difference in their sexual organs.<sup>21</sup> They were also remarkably healthy, except for an inevitable exposure to venereal diseases.<sup>22</sup> In addition, one of the undercurrents in Parent-Duchâtelet's project is his belief that prostitutes could be reformed, and that prostitution was a temporary occupation, a phase in certain women's lives, who could then return to "normal" life.

However this conception of prostitution and prostitutes lost its credibility in the last decades of the century, at a time when the system of *tolérance* was perceived to be less and less effective, and when new scientific studies presented competing theories for explaining prostitution. Corbin notes that varied factors such as the contestation of political authority, the development of atheism, the decline of the Church's influence, the progress of liberalism which made punishment more difficult, new attitudes in opinion, and increased social mobility contributed to the failure of the regulatory system (*Filles* 38-39). It appears as though a large number of prostitutes could not be accounted for, and the boundaries between adultery, lax morals, debauchery, vice and prostitution were not clear. In addition, an abolitionist movement started to develop, which criticized the system for perpetuating immoral behavior. The perhaps more concrete peril of syphilis, which dominated the last decade of the century, added to renewed concerns over the future of the bourgeois family, which seemed to be under attack by the discussion about the reinstatement of divorce in the 1870s. As these changes heightened anxieties over the

social circulation of vice, a new scientific discourse on prostitution developed, which emphasized the biological difference that Parent-Duchâtelet had been unable to find evidence of and explicitly linked prostitutes to social and physiological degeneration.

Lombroso, the founder of criminology and famed author of *Criminal Man* (1876), in which he explicitly linked criminal behavior to degeneration, published a study of female criminals in 1893 (translated into French in 1896), which illustrates *fin-de-siècle* attitudes toward prostitutes. Lombroso's main contention in *Criminal Man* was that born criminals were throwbacks to earlier stages of evolution, atavistic, primitive creatures unfit for life in civilized society. His argument in *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* is that the prostitute, as the archetype of the female criminal, is a degenerate creature, the equivalent of the born male criminal. Prostitution for Lombroso is a "morbid and retrograde phenomenon in a certain class of people" (103), a formulation which recalls Morel's definition of degeneration as a morbid deviation from an original type.

Unlike his treatise on criminal man, *Criminal Woman, the Prostitute, and the Normal Woman* opens with a section on normal women, which is designed to establish a standard against which deviance can then be defined. In the opening chapter, Lombroso traces the development of male and female in the animal world from a Darwinian evolutionary perspective. Indeed Darwin concluded in *The Descent of Man* that men are physically stronger and intellectually superior to women (2: 316, 326-7). Darwin also identified the "maternal instinct" as one of the reasons for women's inferiority, since their "greater tenderness" towards their infants extends to other individuals, making them less competitive and ambitious, and therefore less likely to attain excellence than men (2:

326). In addition, their great powers of “intuition,” “rapid perception” are, according to Darwin, features of lower races or less advanced civilizations (2: 326-7). Lombroso’s treatise relies heavily on these Darwinian assumptions, as he goes on, in the following chapters, to describe some of the characteristics of women, from their weight and height to their muscular strength, from their sensitivity to their moral sense and intellectual capacity, and concludes that women have been arrested at an earlier stage of evolution than men. He writes: “the development of differentiation of the female is restricted by the great organic expenditure required from reproduction. Inversely, the boundaries of masculine development are broader. Thus we can understand how under the influence of the conditions of life the male... would, through a biological law, have been able to develop more than the female” (45). To reinforce this inferiority, he, like Darwin, often describes women as childlike, in physical, intellectual and moral terms. As in the case of the born criminal in *Criminal Man*, Lombroso identifies the stigmata of degeneration, which signify and prove the criminal’s primitive nature. “Women are big children; their evil tendencies are more numerous and more varied than men’s, but usually these remain latent. When awakened and excited, however, these evil tendencies lead to proportionately worse results” (183). By establishing this norm, according to which women constitute a deficient category of humanity, Lombroso, like Michelet and Darwin before him, defines femaleness itself as regressive, pathologizing even ‘ordinary’ womanhood.<sup>23</sup> According to this view, women are likely to lose control, to be erratic, overexcited; they are ruled by instinct rather than intellect; they are characterized by a weakness of the will; they are naturally duplicitous.

The evolutionary patterns that underpin Lombroso's characterization of women also come into play in his consideration of values and mores. Indeed he draws an implicit parallel between the evolution of humans as a species and that of society, thus naturalizing social and moral standards, values and practices. Therefore, when he writes that "in women the entire force of moral evolution is directed toward the creation and reinforcement of modesty; thus moral degeneration (in other words, *moral insanity*) necessarily obliterates that virtue" (216), he implies that prostitutes, lacking in modesty, are affected by moral degeneration, which places them even further down the evolutionary ladder than other women. This echoes his conception of the born criminal as an atavistic creature. As his contention is that the prostitute represents the true female criminal type, female crime is thus explained as the unproblematic manifestation of disease and biology. Innate characteristics lead some women to crime. For men there are alternative modes of defining criminality—for women deviance is always biological. Born prostitutes are atavistic, their bodies marked by physical degeneration as an outward sign of moral insanity. What Lombroso's theory illuminates is a shift toward biological explanations that identify the prostitute as fundamentally degenerate, and therefore impossible to reform, and prostitution as a degenerate practice that threatens the rest of the social body with contamination. According to Corbin, this attitude is distinctive to the end of the century, when "the object is no longer to underscore the prevalence of mental illness or of hysteria among prostitutes and to invoke, by way of explanation, the effects of alcohol abuse or the influence of specific diseases, but rather to consider in itself the practice of venial love as insanity, of which the various prostitutorial activities are symptoms, and to prove that this illness results from degeneration" (*Filles* 436-7).

In Huysmans's *Marthe*, Edmond de Goncourt's *La Fille Elisa*, Daudet's *Sapho* and Zola's *Nana*, the eponymous protagonists are represented as marked by degeneration, spreading vice, disease and ruin around them. They are the embodiment of contemporary fears over the circulation of vice, the spread of venereal disease, in particular syphilis, and the weakening of the family, the race and the nation. The novelists use pathologizing images to characterize the protagonists and their heredities, thus echoing contemporary scientific findings on prostitutes. Indeed, Sapho, Marthe, Nana and Elisa may all be seen as examples of born prostitutes, impervious to reform and redemption, whose sexual appeal leads men to regress to instinctual animality, and whose (metaphorical or real) link to diseases infects all of those around them. Embodiments of degeneration, biologically predetermined to lead a life of vice, like in Lombroso's theory, these prostitutes nevertheless are characterized by a lack of visible marks of degeneration, like in Parent-Duchâtelet's study. The oscillation between these two poles of representation however serves to underscore the ever-growing threat of an invisible but ubiquitous degeneration.

In *Sapho* (1884), Alphonse Daudet presents the trajectory of a young man from Provence, Jean Gaussin, who arrives in Paris as a student, hoping to obtain a position in the French administration. At a masquerade ball the naïve young man meets Fanny Legrand (Sapho), a *cocotte* who seduces him. Their tumultuous liaison spans the whole novel, from their first meeting through various episodes of communal life and separation, to their final goodbye. Much of the novel recounts Gaussin's attempts to free himself from what he sees as the corrupting and destructive influence of his mistress. Indeed his inability to completely sever ties with her leads him to postpone his acceptance of a

consular post, damaging his career prospects. Most crucially, this causes the termination of his engagement to Irène Bouchereau, the daughter of a doctor, which in turn leads his father to disown him. At the end of the novel, Gaussin is in Marseille, waiting for Sapho to join him on his trip to Peru, where he has been given a consular position, but she never comes. Instead, she sends him a note saying that she is settling down with one of her former lovers. In the novel, Sapho is unambiguously identified as a degenerate, lacking moral sense, hereditarily predisposed to vice, and metaphorically associated with disease. More significantly, the novel presents Gaussin's degeneration as an effect of his liaison with Sapho. The consequences of this *collage* also extend beyond his own descent into immorality, brutality and disease, as his failure to break up with the *cocotte* brings about the end of his engagement, thus crushing the promise of a bourgeois family, as well as a rupture in the family line, as his father cuts him off from his inheritance. Bourgeois values, wealth and health and all compromised by the contamination of the young man by the *fille*.

Sapho's heredities are evoked briefly, as she and Gaussin run into her father one evening on the streets. The old man, a former soldier now living in poverty, is described as having a "puffy face, apoplectic with drink, in which Gaussin thought he could see a vulgar version of Fanny's harmonious and sensual profile, her wide and lascivious eyes!" (132). This brief description highlights the hereditary transmission of vice, a degenerative hereditary pattern that Morel had identified in his treatise. Manifested in the father as alcoholism, which Morel described as a cause and a symptom of degeneration, the disorder emerges in Fanny as a propensity for vice. The sentence also underscores the physical degradation that the degenerative trait has effected in the old

man, and prefigures the decay that Sapho herself will experience over the course of the novel. This physical degradation is also foreshadowed by the description of the three old courtesans, Wilkie Cob, Sombreuse, and Clara Desfous, whom Gaussin meets at a luncheon in Enghien, “three ‘*élégantes*,’ as the great prostitutes call themselves, three old whores who were among the icons of the Second Empire” (189), a grotesque trio of decomposing flesh and hideous decay.

The question of the visibility of vice and by extension, of degeneration, crucial to Parent-Duchâtelet and Lombroso, is raised throughout the novel by the numerous and conflicting descriptions of Sapho. The first chapter opens with a description of Sapho at the masquerade ball, dressed like an Egyptian. The first two words of the work are: “Look at me,” and the chapter, filtered through Jean Gaussin’s consciousness, consists of his looking at Sapho and the other guests at the party. However, the scene is marked by his inability to truly see, because of the “curtains,” “blinds,” “screens,” “bizarre speckled light from countless lanterns” (9) which distort his perceptions. In addition, Sapho is concealed by her costume, her accessories, to the point that Gaussin is unable to see what she looks like. “Young, pretty? He couldn’t say...” (7). This itemization of the body, which is accessible only as dismembered, in fragments, mimics a kind of anatomical dissection. Much like the prostitutes in Parent-Duchâtelet’s studies and unlike the autopsied bodies described by Michelet or the prostitutes observed and categorized by Lombroso, Sapho’s body at first does not yield to the inquiring gaze.<sup>24</sup>

There remains throughout the work an attention to the representation and visibility of her body as a means for Gaussin to know, and by extension to control and dominate her. Ironically, he had seen her body long before meeting her “during his

childhood,” in the form of a bronze sculpture that was displayed in his father’s office (36).<sup>25</sup> Sapho herself also owns a marble version that Gaussin notices during his first visit to her home, detecting a certain resemblance between the artwork and his mistress: “he noticed the similarities... between the work of art and his mistress” (36). It is not until later on that, during a conversation with the sculptor Caoudal, who had “discovered” and named Sapho, Gaussin realizes that the model and his mistress are one. Up to this point, Gaussin knew his mistress only as Fanny Legrand; Caoudal reveals her stage-name. It is also on this occasion that he is made aware of her long history of “*collages*,” from Caoudal to La Gournerie, a poet, Dejoie the novelist, and Flamant, an engraver turned counterfeiter. Gaussin becomes enraged and disgusted at the thought that he is living with such a woman: “Pretty, Sapho’s bronze... bronze for trade” (76-77). He is also bewildered at the omnipresent representations of Sapho that he is familiar with from the works of the many artists who shared her bed.<sup>26</sup> The statue, available for purchase in Parisian stores, becomes for Gaussin the stand-in for the degrading commodification of the female body and for its potential for ubiquitous circulation and contamination. Indeed, as the artistic replicas of Sapho’s body are disseminated all over Paris, the real Sapho potentially infects her lovers with disease and vice.

The conversation with Caoudal and Déchelette, the engineer at whose house the masquerade ball had taken place, marks a turning point in the relationship between Sapho and Gaussin: aware of her identity and her history, he is now determined to put an end to their liaison. After wandering through the streets of Paris, he returns home and finds Sapho asleep.

Beautiful, yes, beautiful, her arms, her chest, her shoulders of fine and pure amber, without any spots or cracks. But on her reddened eyelids... on her features at rest, no longer sustained by the fierce desire of a woman wanting to be loved, what weariness, what confessions! Her age, her story, her excesses, her whims, her *collages*, and Saint-Lazare, the slaps, the tears, the fears, everything showed and sprawled; and the purple bruises of pleasure and insomnia, and the weary fold in her lower lip, worn out, used up like a well that everyone drinks from, and the nascent puffiness with which flesh comes undone in the wrinkles of old age.” (79)

This autopsy on a living woman, detailing various parts of her body, reveals the visible signs of her depravity, engraved in layers of infamy upon her flesh. The division between the beautiful parts of her body and those that display signs of decay and putrefaction make of her a sort of chimera, a dual being whose identity remains in tension. Sapho is indeed characterized throughout the novel by a remarkable capacity for transformation. According to Henry James, who wrote a letter to Daudet after reading his novel, the study of the *fille* is “un de ces portraits qui épuisent un type” (109), the richness and variation in her character contributing to the tension in her representation, oscillating between sophistication and filth. She is in turn a refined and somewhat educated woman, the quintessential Parisian creature existing within the artistic milieu, with “a *womanly* reservation, with the superiority—over the bourgeois women he met in the provinces, at his mother’s—given by a smattering of art, familiarity with all things, which made her conversation interesting and diverse,” a domestic angel running their household with grace and efficiency, leading him into “a new, delicious life” (56), but also a “horrible beast,” “wicked beast,” whose devouring sexuality both attracts and repulses him.

The spread of vice, made visible on the face of a sleeping Sapho early in the novel, continues to cause the decay of her physical appearance as the story unfolds. From the alluring and mysterious Egyptian at the masquerade ball, the sophisticated Parisian giving advice on plays and art exhibits, she becomes the picture of the “*pierreuse*,” one of the lowest among the order of *filles publiques*: “Gaunt, looking ten years older, her eyelids swollen and bloody, covered in mud from her dress to her hair, in the terrified disorder of a *pierreuse* chased by the police, this is Fanny” (316-317). Sapho’s bodily ruin is accompanied by numerous references to the woman as a sewer: “he watched this woman’s life leaking like a sewer under his eyes” (72), “in this overflow of filthy rage, like the mire and the stench of a leaky sewer” (142), “in her anger there arose the sludge of resentment and hatred” (230). The link between the female and the sewer had been underscored by Parent-Duchâtelet, who was inspired by his study of Parisian sewers (*Essai sur les cloaques ou égouts de la ville de Paris*) when he wrote his treatise on prostitution. Charles Bernheimer describes Parent-Duchâtelet’s “fascination with the productivity of the biological processes of decomposition and their tendency to infiltrate, erode, and dissolve restrictive boundaries” (*Figures* 10) and his contention that prostitution was a necessity in society and that, just like human waste, it could be managed and controlled, an assumption that the texts under study question.

The duality that surrounds her representation, her capacity for morphing into the role of a homemaker, makes her an even more serious threat to bourgeois society than an average *fille publique*. Parent-Duchâtelet in his classification of available women had argued that the *femmes galantes*, *femmes à parties*, *femmes de spectacles et de théâtres* constituted the greatest danger to established order, since they could not be identified as

prostitutes and therefore could not be marginalized through administrative measures (Bernheimer, *Figures* 8-33, and Porter 6-69). These women, who “make deliberate use of female undecidability as a tactic to control and limit male authority” (Bernheimer, *Figures* 27), embodied the threat of decay and devitalization that lay at the heart of non-sanctioned sexuality. In Daudet’s novel, Sapho’s ability to pass for an honest woman translates into the appearance of respectability and domestic bliss in her life with Jean Gaussin. When they first start living together, he reasons that this arrangement is altogether beneficial, since it provides him with a semblance of stability, and shields him from venereal disease: “wasn’t his life cleaner than when he used to go from whore to whore, putting his health at risk?” (56)

However, Sapho, far from protecting Gaussin, is herself identified with disease, in particular syphilis. Syphilis, “a profoundly *social* disease... was associated with prostitution, with degenerescence and with madness, and so was perceived with even more moral anxiety than other diseases” (Worton 39). By collapsing pathology with social and moral ills, syphilis may be seen as the exemplary degenerative disease. Although it is conspicuously absent from the depiction of the milieu in which the courtesan lives, Michel Tournier reads Sapho as “the personification of Syphilis” (18). Daudet even suggests in the novel an etymological link between the name of the courtesan and that of the disease: “the word Sapho ... whose original grace, dragged about for centuries, has been smeared with filthy legends, from the name of a goddess [Sapho] has become the label of a disease” (77). While this link is erroneous, there is no doubt that Sapho comes to represent the degenerative and harmful potential of the *fille*.

The idea of contagion permeates the whole novel, with vice spreading throughout society, woman and disease being metaphorically linked at the level of the body.<sup>27</sup>

Daudet himself was syphilitic, and died in 1897 from the neurological complications of the disease.<sup>28</sup> The novel is a semi-autobiographical account of his liaison with Marie Rieu, whom Edmond de Goncourt describes in the *Journal* as “this crazy, enraged, unsettled female” (859) and who Daudet believed had infected him with the disease in the 1860s. As Berrong explains, at the time of *Sapho*’s composition, the novelist was in intense pain, a situation which undeniably explains the moralistic stance taken in the novel, which reads like a narrativization of the concerns voiced by Michelet over the fate of the bourgeois family. Daudet was, according to his son Léon Daudet, a great admirer of Michelet, and had read *La Femme*.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, its dedication, “pour mes fils quand ils auront vingt ans,” leads the reader to expect some edifying moral from the story. The novel indeed provides a warning against the long-term effects of prolonged contact with immorality, as Gaussin indeed becomes sick himself, not with syphilis, but with what he describes as “sickness of the will,” which affects both his ability to make decisions and act upon them, and what Berrong calls “moral will,” or the concern for the laws of society (308).

Upon his first encounter with Sapho, at the masquerade ball, Gaussin, captivated gives in to her invitation in spite of himself: “he was obeying a will greater than his own, the impulsive force of desire” (17), already dominated by the lust that she inspires him. What characterizes Sapho’s power, like Marthe and Nana, as we shall see, is her ability to control men. Gaussin, under her spell, is incapable of resistance, and weak-willed, controlled by lust and baser instincts. His intellect is powerless when confronted with

Sapho's sexual appeal. The "sickness of the will" that he suffers from is linked to this subordination of the intellect to instincts, which constitutes a pathological regression to an earlier stage of evolution. For Nordau, individual degeneration may be characterized by the "enslavement of the judgment of the individual by his most insensate and self-destructive appetites; enslavement of the inflamed man by the crazed whims of a prostitute; enslavement of the people by a few stronger and more violent personalities. And he who places pleasure over discipline, and impulse over self-restraint wishes not for progress, but for retrogression to the most primitive animality" (554).

Jean, however, naively believes for a time that the power of his true love for Sapho will transform and reform her. The redemption narrative that Parent-Duchâtelet wished for is present in *Sapho*, as the young man naively sees himself as a potential agent of change in her life: "And so it was true, the redemption through love that poets write about; and he felt a great pride in thinking that all the great, famous men that Fanny had loved before him, far from regenerating her, degraded her further, whereas he, with sincerity as his only strength, would maybe pull her out of vice for ever" (156). The explicit teleology assigned by Gaussin to their trajectory is reminiscent of melodrama: an initial corruption followed by regeneration. It is an essentially conservative view, which reinforces the moral sense of a patriarchal society. But throughout the novel this melodramatic narrative arc is overlaid by the naturalist narrative of descent and decay, according to which the prostitute, born in the rot of working-class life, is condemned to remain in her fallen state and will drag those around her down with him. By the end of the novel, the naturalist narrative has taken over Gaussin, as he realizes that he will never

be able to change Sapho: “Now, go back to your filth... I was too kind to try to pull you out of this mud” (356).

Indeed the sense of progress and redemption that Jean desires at first is continually frustrated and disrupted by Sapho’s own discourse, as if she sought to affirm her own identity as a *fille*, and, by extension, her own degenerative potential. According to her rather cynical view of human nature, both sexes are equally run by instinct. She says: “All men are the same, mad with vice and corruption, this little one just like the others” (103); “Women are all the same... When they are with men there is just one thing in their mind” (167). Her words negate all constructions of the sexual differences so crucial to the stability and morality of the social order, and propose a hypersexualized vision of humanity, in an endless cycle of lust. Sapho, unrepentant, unreformed, implicates all men and women in the same corruption. While Gaussin initially resisted this predatory view, always using the restraint he gained from his good breeding, he gives in to his anger and hits his mistress, an act of violence which Sapho takes as a declaration of love, and which leads to his final fall. Up until this point, Sapho had been the one prone to fits of rage, but as Gaussin explains, “the influence of contact and habit is so miraculously penetrating that two individuals living the same life end up resembling each other” (324). With this statement, Gaussin underscores the potential degenerative aspects of his adaptive qualities: contact with Sapho has caused him to descend to her level.

At the end of the novel, as Gaussin is reminiscing about the five years he lived with Sapho, he thinks that his story would make a first-rate medical case:

He would write to Bouchereau [the father of his fiancée Irène], to the great physiologist who was the first the study and describe the sickness of the will, to

propose a terrible case, the story of his own life, from the moment he met that woman, when she put her hand on his arm, to the day when, thinking himself safe, intoxicated with happiness, she took hold of him again, with the magic of the past, that horrible past in which love had such a small place, only cowardly habit and vice deep in his bones..." (360)

Gaussin is fundamentally, physiologically and psychologically changed by his liaison with the *fille*, and indeed, prostitutes were regarded as "agents of organic derangement" (Bernheimer, *Figures* 210). Gaussin attributes the cause of the pathological weakness of his will, which prevents him from acting, to the corrupting and degrading power of his mistress, which has penetrated him all the way down to his bones. The "sickness of the will" that he is afflicted with is presented as an infection, vice being equated with a transmissible disease. He in turn becomes an agent of transmission of vice: "And what she knew, the perversions of pleasure that she had been inoculated with, Jean was getting skilled at them as well to pass them on to others. And so the poison goes, spread, burning body and soul, like the torch the Latin poet writes about, which went from hand to hand across the stadium" (103-104).<sup>30</sup> Sapho therefore represents the degenerative potential of the *fille*, damaging bourgeois society at its very core.

While *Sapho* focused on the degenerative effects of the *fille* on one individual, hinting only at the potential contamination of a larger circle, *Marthe* and *Nana* present the prostitute as a more generalized threat to the social body. Published in 1876 in Belgium to avoid censorship and seizure, *Marthe, Histoire d'une fille* is Huysmans's first novel, and according to Ernest Raynaud, critic at the literary review *Mercure de France*,

the text that inaugurates the genre of the *roman de filles*. The novel follows Marthe, a working-class prostitute turned actress, through a succession of *collages*. She, like Nana, moves through society, her lovers ranging from the low-class, alcoholic Ginginet, and the would-be writer Leo to a wealthy young man from the upper classes. Mentally unstable, potentially syphilitic, constantly on the move, Marthe represents the antithesis of an honest woman, as the regulatory systems fails to track and control her. But Nana, even more than Marthe, embodies the failure of the regulatory project as she wreaks havoc on Parisian high society. Zola's novel, published in 1880, follows the trajectory of the eponymous protagonist, a working-class actress and prostitute, like Marthe, whose sexuality constitutes a disruptive element against which men are powerless and which brings them and their families to ruin. She is a member of the Rougon-Macquart family,<sup>31</sup> in whom the hereditary *fêlure* is manifested as a propensity for vice. Recounted in the novel, her formidable rise in Parisian society, from working-class slums to a magnificent town house on Parc Monceau, results from her seducing and ruining a series of men, among which the Hugon brothers, the Jewish banker Steiner, the journalist Fauchery, the Count Vandeuves and, most dramatically, the Count Muffat, imperial chamberlain.

*Marthe* opens, like *Nana*, with a scene from a theater, where Marthe's appearance on the stage subjugates the male audience in spite of the general mediocrity of the play. Her attractiveness and sex appeal are emphasized in the description of her body and her clothing, characteristics that will remain unchanged until the end of the novel, through her various misfortunes. What is more, she infects others, her viewing audience at the theater, with the fever of sexual desire, exemplifying the link between illness and vice, between pathology, moral decay and social subversion. Indeed for Pick, "images of

depraved women” are linked to “political unrest, biological degeneration and the threat of levelling or homogenisation” (86). *Nana*’s famous opening scene, with the protagonist appearing nude on stage, as the Blond Venus, also implicates all men in the audience in a generalized “rut” (56) which in turn leads to their “nervous derangement and collapse” (57). In fact male sexual desire for Nana is often described in terms that connote degeneration, as a fall into primitive, instinctual, unreflective lust or as disease. Count Muffat for instance, is seized by a “dizzy spell” (224), “convulsions” and “fever” (313). Eventually he lets Nana treat him like an animal, “enjoy[ing] his baseness, [taking] pleasure in being a brute” (461). Muffat’s descent into animality is representative of the implicit link made between sexuality and degeneration. The animal comparisons in *Nana* also contribute to this picture of degenerate sexuality. Nana herself is compared to a “lioness” (236), “a golden beast” (237). In the central chapter of the novel, the conflation Nana/animal is realized in the racehorse that bears her name. Nana (the horse) improbably wins the race, and the “roar of the mob, the roar of a wild beast” (395) resounds as the riotous crowd chants the name “Nana.” Thus animality spreads from the *fille* to the whole undifferentiated crowd in the orgasmic boisterousness of this collective roar (Schor, *Zola* 85). This “confirms that Nana (or at least her equestrian double) again becomes the object of the crowd’s primitive sexual desire” (McLean 68).

The *fille*’s degenerate potential, manifested in the reactions of various crowds and individuals when faced with her sexual appeal, is explained in the novels by references to heredity and milieu. Degenerate elements in Marthe’s origins and upbringing are brought to light in the second chapter, which returns to her earlier history. Her father, Sébastien Landousé, died of tuberculosis a few years after his marriage to a maker of artificial

pearls who followed him to the grave when Marthe was fifteen. While Huysmans does not dwell on the mechanisms of heredity, his presentation of Marthe's antecedents echoes some of the underlying concerns of social hygienists (in particular prostitutes' association with the transmission of venereal diseases) as well as some of the common assumptions regarding prostitutes (in terms of their supposed temperament). The opening line of the chapter, "after ten years of fruitless struggles and of patiently endured misery," appears as a realist cliché of the life of the working class, as it glosses over Sébastien Landousé's struggles as a failed artist. The text does not reveal the underlying conditions that led to Marthe's father's early demise. However, the mention of "excessive love and labor" (73) suggests that the decline in his health may have been caused in part by syphilis. Syphilis, as mentioned earlier, was a great cause of concern for hygienists and legislators at the end of the century, as the disease crystallized degenerative anxieties by bringing together moral, social and biological factors. Further, the emphasis in the latter part of the century on congenital syphilis highlighted the threat of the spread of disease and immorality across generations. As Spongberg states, "the symptoms of congenital syphilis came to be read as the signs of degeneracy" ("Written on the Body," 86).

Later in the chapter more details emerge about Marthe's heredities and her temperament, underscoring her singularity.

She was a singular girl. Strange passions, a repulsion for the trade, a hatred for poverty, a sick aspiration for the unknown, a resilient despair, the touching memory of those bad days, without food, beside her ailing father; the belief, born out of the resentment of the scorned artist, that protection gained at all costs, through base or vile acts, is everything; a desire for comfort and splendor, a

morbid languor, a neurotic disposition inherited from her father, a certain instinctive laziness inherited from her mother, who was so brave in tough times, so weak in the absence of necessity, were swarming and bubbling furiously within her. (75)

The descriptive paragraph quoted above is significant as it rehearses some of the common assumptions about the typical temperament of prostitutes: their laziness (“paresse instinctive”), their taste for comfort (“appétence de bien-être et d’éclat”), as well as the overwhelming strength of their emotions (“fourmillaient et bouillonnaient furieusement”). The text does not suggest anywhere else that Marthe may be affected by syphilis. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, she remains beautiful and physically unaffected by any of her reversals of fortune. However, according to Morel’s law of progressivity, which stressed the hereditary transmission and progressive worsening of degenerative traits, Marthe’s neurotic tendencies may well be an accentuated version of her father’s own mental imbalance, and throughout the novel, the narrator insists on the potential for mental breakdown.<sup>32</sup> This paragraph signals Marthe’s singularity in terms of morbid predispositions, caused both by heredity and by the conditions of her upbringing. It emphasizes both the personal frustrations experienced by the character (and her father, as if the lack of social recognition were an inherited trait) and her contaminated blood. The combination of the intrinsic factor of an innate predisposition to vice, diseased heredities, and the extrinsic factors of working-class poverty and lack of opportunity for women leads Marthe to become a prostitute, as happens later in the same chapter. This outcome illustrates a naturalist degenerative equation that combines biological determinism with social preconditions to explain the inevitability of her trajectory.

In *Nana*, degenerative assumptions also come into play to describe and explain the courtesan's trajectory. In particular, the journalist Fauchery's article about Nana, "The Golden Fly," placed in the middle of the novel, rehearses common tropes such as the influence of heredity, the resurgence of atavism, the explicit threat posed by the degenerate to the social order. Nana is described as a beautiful "plant" emerging from the "manure" of the slums, the offspring of "four or five generations of drunks," whose blood is tainted by alcoholism and poverty (235). At the end of *L'Assommoir* (1877), the novel centered around Nana's mother Gervaise and the effects of alcoholism on the working class, the girl's innate predisposition to vice, manifestation of the hereditary *fêlure* of the Rougon-Macquart, was already introduced. Fauchery's column then describes her as afflicted by "nervous derangement," implying a biological deviance at the core of her destructive sexuality. The metaphor of disease and rot is then deployed as Nana's power is evoked as a "force of nature... corrupting and disorganizing Paris between her snowy thighs" (235). The explicit link between Nana and nature, and the implicit link between Paris and order and civilization link are significant: what is stated is that contemporary society is unable to "normalize" or "civilize" Nana's nature. Her sexuality is likened to a primitive force that overwhelms civilization, which is powerless, unfit to resist this degenerative ferment.

*Marthe* continues with the description of the monotony of Marthe's work as a maker of artificial pearls and the conversations with the young women she works with and who seem to all be engaged in occasional prostitution (perhaps a commentary on working-class life). Jules Simon, a philosopher and republican statesman, published in 1861 a widely-read treatise on *L'Ouvrière* in which, like Michelet, he argued that

women's work undermined the family and thus contributed to the decline of society. An unabashed proponent of the doctrine of separate spheres, Simon viewed factory work as a social and moral threat: drunkenness and loose morals were associated with factory work; women who worked were unable to be good mothers (McMillan 112-3). Marthe's trajectory illustrates such a vision: as the text says, "a women's workshop leads to Saint-Lazare," the hospital-prison where women, most of them prostitutes, were incarcerated and submitted to treatment (75). She resolves to sell her sexual favors, partly out of boredom, partly out of financial distress. Disgusted by her first experience with an older man, she goes through a succession of lovers, but then falls ill and is no longer able to work (Simon, like Michelet, also insisted on the physical drain of factory work on women). She eventually becomes involved with a young man and moves in with him. Their miserable dwelling and hand-to-mouth existence represents an inverted picture of the bliss of the bourgeois *foyer*. Marthe finds out that she is pregnant and gives birth prematurely to a sickly girl, but the baby and the young man both die during a cold night. This failed attempt at family life suggests that circumstances are working against Marthe, pushing her back into prostitution, but also that Marthe is unfit to be a mother, which, as we have seen, was seen as women's biological destiny.

The question of procreation indeed was deemed crucial, particularly in the last decades of the century, as the pursuit of national strength depended on the ability for a healthy population to reproduce. Unproductive—or unproductive sexuality—was seen as a sign of degeneration. In *Nana*, the issue of degenerate offspring is embodied in her son, Louiset, who eventually dies from smallpox, infecting his mother. The sickly little boy's physical description highlights his degeneration: "tainted blood, limp flesh, with

yellow blemishes” (342), he is the picture of disease just as his mother is a picture of health. His pale face is covered with “scrofulous” lesions, which were thought at the time to be signs of tuberculosis or syphilis (296). As in *Sapho*, syphilis is not mentioned in the novel, but Nana, like Sapho, may be seen as the embodiment of the disease, infecting all the men around her. Louiset’s visible illness may be seen as a sign of the worsening of degeneration in the degenerate’s offspring, his lesions somatizing his mother’s vice. With Nana’s miscarriage (chapter XII) and Louiset’s death the degenerate’s lineage comes to an end, as predicted by Morel. But the novel shows that the contamination extends beyond her offspring to the entire society, and will continue even after her own death. The last page describes Nana’s lasting legacy: “her work of ruin and death was done, the fly that flew off the stench of the slums, carrying the ferment of social rot, had poisoned these men” (474).

The second chapter in *Marthe* contains all the elements of a naturalist novel condensed within a less than a dozen pages: hereditary tendencies, a working-class milieu, unfortunate circumstances, disease and death, but Marthe somehow survives “fresher and more alluring than ever” (81). Her story then begins in earnest, as she joins one of her fellow pearl makers as a prostitute in a brothel. Her life is described as sordid and monotonous, and Marthe escapes after a short time, wandering in the unfamiliar streets only to be “discovered” by Ginginet in a tavern. Seduced by her youth and beauty, Ginginet vows to teach her how to sing and act in two weeks. The chapter ends with a description of Marthe as diseased, contaminated, not by syphilis or another venereal disease, but by “theater fever” (90). Her figure therefore is constantly associated with pathology, although she remains in perfect health and her beauty unaffected by any of her

misadventures. The medical metaphor allows Huysmans to draw on assumptions surrounding degeneration: the degenerate is both a victim and an agent of physical, social and moral decline, and Marthe appears in just this guise throughout the novel.

After the performance, a young admirer, Leo, whose verses in her honor were read in the lodge just before the performance, introduces himself. He and Marthe eventually disappear together, leaving Ginginet, the actor who had “discovered” Marthe in a tavern after she had run away from a brothel.<sup>33</sup> The evolving relationship between Ginginet, Marthe and Leo forms the core of the novel, which presents, in a sense, a sordid version of the trio of husband, wife and lover of traditional melodrama. In particular the novel exposes the parody of domesticity in Marthe and Leo’s *collage* as well as her subsequent life with Ginginet. After the initial attraction, Leo’s decision to have Marthe move in with him is primarily financial (104). This resembles the common practice among the bourgeoisie for whom marriage was first and foremost determined by economic considerations. However, Marthe proves to be a poor homemaker (in spite of the etymology of her name, meaning “mistress” or “lady of the house”), an unfit incarnation of female domestic ideals. She is unskilled at cooking, mending his clothes or keeping their home tidy, her conversation is insipid, she smokes and drinks, bringing into their space some of the practices that she picked up at the brothel. What is more, she often goes out during the day, refusing to be confined to an interior space. Her behavior represents an alternative femininity, one that rejects the constraints placed on women within the ideology of the separate spheres.

In fact, the recurrent narrative element is Marthe *leaving* (the brothel, Leo, Ginginet, her subsequent lovers), refusing to be tied down. Every time she leaves she

finds herself “sur le pavé,” an expression that suggests social and moral degradation. She leaves the brothel and is found by Ginginet; she leaves Ginginet to be with Leo; she leaves Leo and returns to the brothel; she leaves the brothel and marries Ginginet; she leaves him again and finds a wealthy lover whom she leaves to return to Leo; and at the end of the novel, she finds herself again at the brothel. Her physical mobility is complemented by social mobility as well. Already in the opening chapter at the theater, she infected “all” in the audience with sexual desire. Indeed Marthe, like Nana, circulates amid various social classes, from the common and crude clientele of the whorehouse to the upper circles of the moneyed class. Her lovers range from the lower classes to high society: Leo, the bohemian journalist, Ginginet, would-be actor and alcoholic, an unnamed, wealthy young man. Significantly, she is always the one to end the relationships, thus asserting her power over the men around her. In a noteworthy moment, she even throws out her wealthy lover from the apartment he is paying for. Nana is also presented as the decider or selector in her choice of sexual partners, and controls the comings and goings of men even in the townhouse that Muffat paid for. This reversal of gender roles and of social order, seen from the perspective of the evolutionary assumptions that inform degeneration theory, provides evidence of the degenerative potential of the *fille*.

The second volume of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* was concerned with the conscious mechanisms of sexual selection in nature and in man. As we have seen, Darwin postulated the physical and intellectual superiority of men over women, and claimed that this superiority had given men the prerogative in sexual selection, whereas in nature females were the selectors. The fact that Marthe and Nana are able, through the power of

their sexuality, to control men and to decide who their sexual partners are implies a reversal, or rather, a regression to an earlier state of nature. Nana's followers are described as "a pack of hounds" (85), "a scramble of males" (459), emphasizing the fall into animality and undifferentiation caused by her sexual appeal. A primitive, and thus degenerate, sexuality is unleashed within a highly civilized environment, a modern, urban center.

Indeed, men's intellect, deemed by Darwin to be superior to women's, causing them to become the sexual selectors, is "subordinated to the bestial pursuit of sexual gratification. Indeed, the confusion generated by their superior capacity for reason merely accentuates the powerlessness of men in the face of Nana's overwhelming sexuality" (McLean 71). Muffat's downward spiral into an adulterous and humiliating liaison with Nana is a case in point. Like Gaussin in *Sapho*, Muffat, whom "an increasing listlessness left without willpower" (181), becomes increasingly passive, his will and intellect yielding to Nana's sensual dominance. This mental indolence is linked to, or caused by, an awakening of his senses. Described early in the novel as a devout man, in a sexless marriage with the Countess Sabine, Muffat is seized by "vertigo" (165), becomes "dizzy," "crazed" (224) in Nana's presence. Occasionally, in moments of solitary reflection, he has clear visions of his situation: "in three months, she had corrupted his life, he already felt spoiled to the core by her filth.... Everything in him was going to rot... He saw the disorder that this ferment was causing, himself poisoned, his family destroyed, a corner of society breaking and collapsing" (236). The destructive power of the *fille* extends beyond the individual man, to his family and society at large.

In a short chapter, midway through *Marthe*, Ginginet declares to Leo: “At least she has an advantage over other [women], she refuses to deceive men. Marthe will not lie, now that she won’t have the opportunity to simulate the wails of true love: what bourgeois would call taking a plunge in the cesspit, descending to the lowest rung of infamy, I call it atonement, a return to honesty!” (119-120). In this statement, Ginginet upends traditional bourgeois morality, using a religious term (“expiation”) to define Marthe’s return to the brothel. What his assertion implies is that Marthe’s embrace of her identity, or her nature, as a prostitute, is more moral than a forced or hypocritical conjugal or pseudo-conjugal life. Nana also turns down numerous marriage proposals, valuing her freedom above all (447). It is unclear whether Ginginet condemns all monogamous unions or only those involving women of Marthe’s “nature,” but it is implied that certain women are biologically predetermined to be prostitutes, as Lombroso maintained. What is clear is that he and Marthe, as well as Nana, belong to a world in which traditional values do not hold.<sup>34</sup> As Parent-Duchâtelet warned in his study of prostitution, the existence of such a world within society is a threat to its stability and the most worrisome element in prostitution. The novels show the failure of regulation in containing Marthe and Nana and in preventing them from circulating in multiple levels of society, in controlling the spread of moral decay. Indeed Nana, at the height of her power, becomes disembodied and ubiquitous: “Nana, invisible, spread out over the party, with her nimble limbs, was decomposing that world, penetrating it with the ferment of her smell floating in the warm air, on the *canaille* rhythm of the music” (425).<sup>35</sup>

*Marthe*, which opens with Ginginet’s words, ends with his autopsy at the morgue, following a descent into alcoholism and poverty. It is significant that it is his decaying

body that is on display: Marthe remains, as mentioned earlier, physically untouched by the excesses and misfortunes of her life. No physical degradation can serve as criteria for her identification as a prostitute. Instead, Ginginet's body bears the marks of a life of abuse. With his central place in *Marthe*, structurally and narratively, Ginginet may be a stand-in for the decay that threatens society as Marthe moves through it. He is vulgar, violent and wasteful, clearly uninterested in upholding or respecting bourgeois values. When Marthe sees him for the last time, she can barely recognize him. The grotesque description of his decaying body reveals the signs of pathologies associated with a life of vice,<sup>36</sup> while Marthe remains "ever pretty" (160). This implies that Marthe is a vector of disease and immorality, but cannot be identified as such. Therefore the prostitute's body, which represents an exacerbated and deviant sexuality, one that goes against the dominant emphasis on a benevolent and productive female nature, remains unidentifiable. Nana as well remains healthy and beautiful until the last chapter on the novel. The description of her diseased and decomposing body marks the end of Zola's novel. It might be tempting to read her death from a painful and disfiguring disease as a moral ending, a punishment for a life of vice. Such a reading would undoubtedly substantiate bourgeois moral standards, but in fact, it is clearly stated that she contracted smallpox from her son, Louiset. Therefore Nana's death is a direct consequence of her being a mother.

In *La Fille Elisa* (1877), the first novel written by Edmond de Goncourt after his brother's death from syphilis in 1870, the representation of the *fille* oscillates between censure and compassion, muddling the moral judgment. In spite of Goncourt's claim in

the preface to be speaking “as a doctor, as a scientist, as a historian” (vi), the novel offers a peculiar combination of narrative chapters and appeals to the reader’s sympathy for Elisa’s plight. In addition, prostitution is seen in turn as offering a necessary, and even valuable contribution to society’s functioning and as a crushing, debilitating system, responsible for Elisa’s degeneration.

Goncourt’s avowed goal, according to the preface, was to denounce the cruelty of the Auburn system of silent confinement in prisons, the inhumane conditions of incarceration that lead some of the inmates to madness. But the first half of the novel is a *roman de fille* presenting Elisa’s life from childhood to womanhood, with her hereditaries, upbringing, experiences in a succession of whorehouses, up to the murder that she commits and that leads to her trial and imprisonment. As Ruth Harris shows in *Murders and Madness*, the courts at the end of the nineteenth century routinely relied on medical experts to determine a defendant’s responsibility in committing a crime, as “the distinction between ‘madness and badness’ became exceedingly problematic, requiring specialist knowledge to make an accurate distinction” (9). These psychiatric evaluations made use of determinist theories involving physiological and hereditary factors in order to identify motive and responsibility. Goncourt’s novel is a plea for Elisa’s case, giving explanations for her confused mental state at the time of the crime. The novel clearly shows that she is mad and not bad, which is problematic in relation to the moral code that defines the prostitute as the antithesis of the honest woman. By elucidating the various influences upon her moral and mental development, the text invites a sympathetic look at her. Although she represents mental and moral degeneration (she is mad, a prostitute and a murderer), she appears as a victim of the system, of circumstances, of “fatalité” as

Raynaud writes, in his article on *romans de fille*. Hence the text subverts common assumptions about degeneration and the threat it represents for individuals and society at large.

*La Fille Elisa* rehearses some of the common assumptions regarding prostitutes and their link to physical, moral and social degeneration: the title character is described as mentally unstable; she is geographically and socially mobile, thus threatening the stability of social order. In addition, in Elisa's character, the conflation of prostitute and female criminal is realized, thus crystallizing contemporary anxieties surrounding the proximity between the world of vice and that of violent crime, as characterized in Lombroso's treatise.

In line with the representation of prostitutes in contemporary scientific discourse, Elisa's situation as a prostitute results from the combination of intrinsic and external factors. In particular, the narrator insists on the latent mental imbalance that characterizes her. As a child she contracted typhoid twice in less than six years (27). According to contemporary medical treatises, typhoid was seen as an organic cause of madness (Giraud 60-61). Indeed, the narrator describes Elisa as troubled by violent emotions, internal fury, uncontrollable rage as a consequence of this illness: her mood fluctuates, she goes through phases of intense energy followed by episodes of apathy (30). Hence the fact that Elisa had typhoid provides a pathological explanation for her mental imbalance, which in turn is linked to prostitution. Her fall into prostitution is described as an impulsive, barely conscious decision, as if the organic lesion resulting from her childhood illness had also dulled her moral sense. Thus her immoral behavior is

explained as a symptom of pathology: organic derangement is translated into moral disorder, as in Morel's theory of degeneration.

The daughter of a midwife who also performed illegal abortions for women of all backgrounds, Elisa was exposed at a young age to "the shameful adventures, the dramas of hidden liaisons, the stories of unnatural passions, the consultations about venereal diseases, the daily disclosures of all the sullied impurities, of all the repellent secrets of culpable Love and Prostitution" (22). Young Elisa therefore gained knowledge of the various trajectories that led women to her mother's practice. In contrast with the narrator's judgmental terms, which recall Parent-Duchâtelet's association of prostitutes with sewers, her mother saw no difference between the "*femmes en carte*" and "honest women" (41), and Elisa, getting used to hearing prostitutes talking about their line of work, "had come to consider the love trade as a profession, slightly less arduous, slightly less tiresome than others, a profession in which there is no off-season" (41). As in *Marthe* and *Nana*, prostitution appears as an alternative to the drudgery of working-class life. Therefore, when the opportunity to leave her mother, who was constantly worried about the precariousness of her situation and under the relentless threat of the police, presented itself in the person of a prostitute from Lorraine, Elisa seized it and "became a prostitute, easily, naturally, almost without a disturbance in her conscience" (41).<sup>37</sup> The use of the adverb "naturally" indicates that Elisa was predestined to become a prostitute, a fateful combination of intrinsic (her illness and consequent lack of moral sense) and extrinsic (the ubiquity of prostitution in her environment) factors leading to this outcome.

Her life as a prostitute begins in a provincial brothel, a family operation where her Parisian origin is considered elegant and sophisticated, in contrast to the other residents

who are former domestic servants and farm maids, pointing again to the vulnerability of working women's position not only within the urban industrial order, but also within traditional agricultural society. While the depiction of the prostitutes' daily life focuses on its monotony and Elisa's ensuing boredom, the narrator, in a comparison between country and city prostitution, suggests that the whorehouse in a rural setting functions as a significant center of socialization, where young men experience living in close proximity with women. As such, according to the narrator, the whorehouse plays an important role in preparing them for their future life as married men (64). The whore plays the role of a surrogate wife (or does the wife play the role of a surrogate prostitute?) in this subversion of the ideal of domesticity, according to which a marriage's success rests to some extent on its very opposite. Moral categories and social conventions, naturalized in scientific and political discourse, break down within this context. This model of socialization indeed places prostitution, a practice generally judged immoral, as the heart of the development of a successful marriage, thus contradicting the dominant discourse, *à la* Michelet, which naturalizes the marriage institution.

In addition, prostitution involves a confusion or breakdown in social differences, blurring the boundaries between classes. The narrator describes what working-class men look for in a prostitute as "a conventional elegance, a simulacrum of distinction, a comedy of mannerism, the *chic* of good education: the reality or simulation of a collection of things and features more delicate than what [they] encounter in males and females of [their] class" (119), while the upper classes are attracted to the *canaille*. Prostitution thus entails social confusion and destabilization.

Furthermore, the provincial whorehouse is likened to a sort of *salon* where news and gossip are exchanged and discussed, highlighting the connection between prostitution and social circulation and mobility. The presentation of this connection between elite centers of intellectual exchange and dens of iniquity appears comical, as it comes after a description of the residents of the *maison* as unsophisticated, coarse and torpid, quite the opposite of the urbane, vivacious and witty *salonnières*. The unlikely association between the two worlds, however, may be analyzed differently. If the whorehouse is like a *salon*, could it be that the *salon* is like a whorehouse as well? This would indirectly substantiate the idea of prostitution's ubiquity among all social classes as well as the assertion of a fundamental prostitudinal female nature, thus placing an immoral practice at the core of civilized socialization.

While in the first chapters of the novel prostitution is mostly represented in a nonjudgmental manner as an ordinary, and even socially beneficial, system, later on a shift occurs in the narrator's stance as well as in Elisa's character. She is portrayed as the victim of a degrading system that turns her into a subhuman creature once she adopts the standard viewpoint on prostitutes as degraded and shameful beings:

The perpetual shocks to the nervous system, caused by excitement in a body that neither provokes nor seeks it; –... the excess alcohol, without which a *fille*, before a health committee, said the “job was really impossible”; –... the abrupt transitions between the darkness of the days and the blazing brightness of the nights, between empty and feverish hours; –the insomniac exhaustion of a profession in which no time belongs to the worker; –... the vague awareness that she no longer was a person endowed with free will, but rather a creature at the

very bottom of humankind, twirling at the mercy of the whims and demands of authority, of the madam, of who comes and goes: a poor creature who is not quite sure, amid the vestiges of her piety, that God's compassion will reach down to her; – the daily sentiment of her degradation tied to the deadly sense of her disgrace ; –all of these physical and moral elements, through which the unnatural reality of prostitution lives and suffers, had, over time, given shape in Elisa to the disabled and unbalanced being characterizing, within the altered original woman, the general type of the prostitute. (101-03)

The explicit progression in this paragraph, starting with the endless physical demands, abuses and excesses in the prostitute's life and ending with the psychological harm and sense of moral disgrace that ensues, invites the reader to link physical damage with mental and moral effects, as in degeneration theory. Indeed, whereas the early part of the novel eluded moral categorization and showed that Elisa had become a prostitute "naturally," as an inevitable consequence of her diseased predisposition and environment, this paragraph presents prostitution itself as the cause of disease and degeneration. Whereas earlier prostitution was presented as an inevitable part of society, here the narrator insists on its "unnatural" character and its destructive impact on Elisa. Her physical and mental decline in this context appears as a modification of her nature by the very practice that earlier seemed to define her. A shift therefore occurs in the novel from the degenerate individual to the impact of the practice itself on the individual. It is no longer the original lesion, the disease causing moral insanity, the individual's anomaly in the moral and physical sense, that is the point of interest, but rather the milieu that forces changes on her.

The remainder of the first half of the novel shows Elisa drifting from brothel to brothel, in a fruitless quest for a fulfilling relationship. Her mental imbalance intensifies, to the point that she is prone to convulsive seizures, momentarily losing control of her movements (144-145). She is in a continuous “vague state of suffering, of inscrutable confusion in organization, or moral sadness—the hypochondriac tendency of a wounded soul to see everything in black” (146). This mental degradation eventually leads to her murdering her lover, a young soldier with whom she falls passionately in love. The murder is not narrated until a flashback in the middle of the second half of the novel, when Elisa is incarcerated. She is described as seized “by a *vertigo*, by a need to kill, by a murderous fury” (211), “the madness of one of the homicidal rages of prostitutes” (210). This represents the last phase in her descent into madness, which started early in life with her flights of rage, continued and intensified with her reading frenzy, and culminated in the murder. In fact, the first half of the novel can be considered a justification of the verdict of insanity that allows Elisa to escape the death penalty.

In Elisa, the shift from dullness or moral indifference to a recognition of her abject condition occurs as a consequence of her reading novels. The language used to describe this transformation evokes both enchantment and disease: “In common women, who can barely read, reading produces the same delight as in children. On these ignorant minds for which the *extraordinary* of books from the circulating libraries constitutes a new pleasure, on these defenseless minds, dull and uncritical, novels have magical effects. They grab the thoughts of the reader, who instantly, foolishly, becomes the dupe of the absurd fiction. It fills her up, shakes her up, makes her feverish” (71).<sup>38</sup> In contrast to the typhoid fever that initially led to the dullness of her moral sense, her reading fever

exacerbates her yearning for purity and chastity, virtues deemed paramount for women in bourgeois society. As the “absurd fiction” presented in the novels that Elisa reads involves idealized romantic relationships, it infects her with a morality based on a misguided understanding of female nature, which she experiences as an irreconcilable tension within herself. It is as if she had become her own “morbid deviation from an original type,” the degenerate variation of an original degenerate. The narrator further insists on the internal contradiction between the love that Elisa longs for and her degradation: she has “supernatural feelings of heroism, of abnegation, of self-sacrifice, of chastity. Of chastity, I say, especially for the prostitute, in whom medical science has reported the purity of dreams and the sort of unconscious aspiration of her debased self toward the immateriality of love” (72). The association of woman with purity and love mirrors Michelet’s vision, but in Elisa’s case, this causes a descent into madness, not the revitalizing fantasy proposed in *L’Amour*. Indeed, it is the imposition of a bourgeois morality that leads to her fatal decline.

Disease, madness, social disorder: in *Sapho*, *Marthe*, *Nana* and *La Fille Elisa* the threats posed by prostitutes are vividly represented. For Nordau, an unrestrained sexuality was among the prominent features of the decaying *fin de siècle*, characterized by “a contempt for traditional views of custom and morality... a practical emancipation from traditional discipline” (5). Indeed he mentions “unbridled lewdness, the unchaining of the beast in man” as the first attribute of the *fin de siècle*, which means “the end of an established order” (5). With the emphasis placed on the role of women in the functioning of society, the existence of female degenerates was seen as a particularly pressing

problem. The novels rely on scientific assumptions defining the biological nature of the prostitute as deviant. The protagonists indeed can be identified as “born prostitutes,” fundamentally corrupt creatures, organically predisposed to a life of vice. But they also embody alternatives to domestic femininity as well as the failure of strategies of containment. Indeed, the metaphor of contagion, and the more or less explicit bond between prostitute and disease, underlies the plots of the novels. Bourgeois marriage, which was supposed to secure financial stability, uphold moral values, and sustain physical health, crumbles, and in its stead vice circulates, like a virus.

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<sup>1</sup>I do not seek to minimize the importance of the discourse on hysteria throughout the nineteenth century. Janet Beizer’s account in *Ventriloquized Bodies* of the “hystericization of culture,” a process through which hysteria came to function as a “sociocultural category” rather than a “medical term” (6), in fact comes close to the way I see the concept of degeneration as pervading different forms of discourses and standing in for a variety of causes and symptoms of social and physiological ills. In this chapter, the naturalization of gender categories, which may be seen as an effect of the “hystericization of culture” comes into play as the prostitute is defined, as we shall see, against a biological norm. Evelyne Ender, in *Sexing the Mind*, argues that the representations of hysteria in medical and literary discourse produced a gendered consciousness. In fact, the texts I study exemplify in many ways the epistemological appropriation of the female subject and the gendered scopophilic order that Ender sees emerging in and through discourses on hysteria.

<sup>2</sup> Prostitutes featured prominently in Maupassant’s writing throughout the 1880s as well.

<sup>3</sup> We must recall Morel’s definition of degeneration as a “morbid deviation from a type.”

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<sup>4</sup> See also Jill Harsin's *Policing Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Paris*.

<sup>5</sup> On the entrenchment of a gendered norm, see Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* and Jean Bethke Eilshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman*.

<sup>6</sup> On female engagement in revolutionary activity, see Godineau.

<sup>7</sup> On the political implications of the debate on women and reason, see Geneviève Fraisse, *Muse de la raison*.

<sup>8</sup> According to Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* the female body became both highly sexualized and a privileged object of medical knowledge through what he calls the "hysterization of women," that is to say the collapse of the female and the uterus (104).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, in *Emile*, Rousseau contends that maternity is what constitutes a woman's occupation, according to a firmly established natural law: "To maintain vaguely that the two sexes are equal and that their duties are the same, is to lose oneself in vain declaiming; it is to say nothing so long as one does not respond to these considerations. Is it not a sound way of reasoning to present exceptions in response to such well grounded-general laws? Women, you say, do not always produce children? No, but their proper purpose is to produce them" (536).

<sup>10</sup> The Code Civil of 1804 defines marriage as a relationship of submission and obedience of the wife to her husband. See Arnaud-Duc; Heuer 127-142 and McMillan 36-41.

<sup>11</sup> See Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*.

<sup>12</sup> The law reinstating divorce was eventually passed in 1884. Its main promoter, Alfred Naquet, was a declared enemy of the bourgeois family. In an 1869 book titled *Religion*,

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*Property and the Family* he urged for the abolition of marriage as a weapon in the war to destroy bourgeois society. See McMillan 152.

<sup>13</sup> In this respect, *L'Amour* and *La Femme* have to be considered within the scope of his whole *oeuvre*. The emphasis on female figures in his *Histoire de France* is particularly notable.

<sup>14</sup> See Bronfen 3-14 for an analysis of *Der Anatom*, a painting representing the autopsy of a young woman. Bronfen's reading of the painting yields complex and contradictory interpretations regarding femininity and mortality, wholeness and fragmentation of the self. The woman's dead body, as for Michelet, is a privileged site of signification.

<sup>15</sup> Michelet's theory of the family as based on a strong conjugal relationship in which the husband "creates" his wife, who in turn fulfills her mission as provider of economic, sexual and sentimental satisfaction and regeneration, stands in contrast with more reactionary conceptions, such as the monarchist Louis de Bonald's, which calls for a much stricter hierarchical order within the family.

<sup>16</sup> See the sections titled "L'ouvrière" (xvii-xxx) and "La femme lettrée" (xxxi-xxlviii) in the introduction to *La Femme*. The women he describes are all from the lower classes. Michelet indeed recommends that bourgeois men marry women from the working to lower-middle class, "pauvre" (lxiv), perhaps as a literalization of his Republican interest in fostering the embrace of the working class by the bourgeoisie.

<sup>17</sup> His benevolent patriarchal family model is not far from the emphasis placed by feminists in the 1870s and 1880s on a stable family life that could liberate women from the brothel into marriage.

<sup>18</sup> See Moreau for an account of Michelet's ambivalence regarding menstruation.

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<sup>19</sup> See also Knibiehler 359-360.

<sup>20</sup> See the debate between Michelet, Proudhon and feminist Jenny d'Héricourt in the 1860s. D'Héricourt defended the idea of a feminine selfhood that exceeded the normative bounds of marriage and motherhood and asserted her position as a female intellectual. See Caroline Arni, "La toute puissance de la barbe."

<sup>21</sup> The only two consistent characteristics that he identified were a tendency to be overweight, which he attributed to prostitutes' physical idleness, and a raucous voice, the effect of alcohol abuse and exposure to the cold.

<sup>22</sup> Parent-Duchâtelet identified the threat of syphilitic contagion in a way that prefigures the health panic of the end of the century: "of all the diseases that can affect the human race through contagion, and which are the most detrimental to society, syphilis is the most serious, the most dangerous, and the most dreadful" (2: 33).

<sup>23</sup> See Horn, who writes: "ironically, at the precise moment that woman was identified as "normal" and "normalizing," as embodying and conserving the norms of the species, she was marked as other, if not pathological, and as opposed to history and civilization" (117).

<sup>24</sup> On the fragmentation of the gaze and its effects on representation, see Brooks, *Body Work*, chapter 4, and Schor, *Reading in Detail*.

<sup>25</sup> Later on in the story, the statue of Sapho is replaced by one representing Adolphe Thiers, provisional president during the first years of the Third Republic. While Sapho embodies the loose sexual mores of the Second Empire, Thiers represents the return of "Moral Order" that characterized the beginnings of the conservative republic.

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Bernheimer, in *Figures of Ill Repute*, describes the multiple links between the world of art and prostitutes.

<sup>27</sup> In *Feminizing Venereal Disease*, her study of medical literature on venereal disease and its influence on the construction of the prostitute, Spongberg writes that “prostitutes were seen as both physically and morally responsible for the spread of venereal disease. They were seen not merely as agents of transmission but as inherently diseased, if not the disease itself” (6).

<sup>28</sup> Daudet himself, like numerous other artists of the era, was afflicted with syphilis. He wrote a memoir, *La Douleur*, published posthumously, in which he recounted his physical and mental suffering. He eventually died at 57 from the neurological complications of the disease.

<sup>29</sup> Léon Daudet, in a biography of his father, writes: “Il vénérât Michelet, il le relisait constamment; il trouvait sans cesse, pour le sublime auteur de l’*Histoire de France*, de la *Femme*, de la *Mer*, de la *Bible de l’Humanité*, de nouvelles formes laudatives” (182).

<sup>30</sup> Other literary fictions presented prostitutes as knowing transmitters of syphilis: in Charles-Louis Philippe’s *Bubu de Montparnasse*, the young prostitute, Berthe, infects clients with full knowledge of her condition; Rosalba, in Barbey d’Aurevilly’s “La vengeance d’une femme” also knowingly contaminates the men that she sleeps with.

<sup>31</sup> Zola’s project with the twenty novels that make up the Rougon-Macquart cycle (1871-1893) was to study the effects of milieu and heredity on five generations of individuals.

<sup>32</sup> Marthe even attempts to commit suicide, and at the end of the novel, Leo predicts that her life will end either in alcoholism or in suicide.

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<sup>33</sup> Ginginet's name, according to critic Pierre Cogny, comes from a slang verb for looking or watching (Cogny 170). He thus embodies within the text the scopic function that is so essential to both science and naturalist literature. Indeed the male characters, and primarily Ginginet and Léo, spend a lot of time looking at Marthe. The descriptions always emphasize her beauty, which is for Ginginet a sexual attribute, whereas Leo views her as a work of art.

<sup>34</sup> In contrast, Leo accepts the routine and comfort of marriage, declaring in a letter to his friends that he now embraces the banality of his life, married to a woman who "isn't even pretty" (166). This resignation is a far cry from Michelet's ideal regenerative union.

<sup>35</sup> The word *canaille* as a noun refers to the lowest orders, the populace; as an adjective it means vulgar, dishonest, immoral.

<sup>36</sup> The interns at the morgue describe him as afflicted by "un tas de maladies plus épatantes les unes que les autres" (163).

<sup>37</sup> Elisa's relationship with her mother is fraught with conflict. The two do not meet again until much later, when Elisa has been incarcerated for years and her mother visits her in order to ask her for money. While the absence of maternal feeling was considered a common character trait of prostitutes, in Elisa's case it is her own mother's lack of it that is emphasized. Elisa herself does not have children.

<sup>38</sup> In the preface, Goncourt describes *La Fille Elisa* as literature for grown, responsible men ("des hommes faits"), in contrast to what he sees as the dominant forms of fictions, destined to a seemingly insatiable female reading public. Indeed he views his work as not designed for the "enjoyment of young ladies on the train," but rather as a serious plea for reform of the prison system.

## Chapter Three

### Going Native: Race and Degeneration in Colonial Literature

The question of the degeneration of the French race was posed with increasing fretfulness in the last decades of the century, particularly after France's resounding defeat in the war against Prussia in 1870. To explain the decline of the nation on the international stage, observers such as Renan in *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871) blamed the complacency and materialism of the Second Empire, its lack of dynamism, the weakness of France's educational system compared to Prussia's, and the democratic "negation of discipline" (54). In addition to these factors, demographic statistics showing that the "French population was growing at one-third the German rate" aggravated the sense of inferiority to her neighbor felt throughout the 1870s (Weber, *France* 23).<sup>1</sup> Politicians presented colonization as a way to counter national decline, as well as to stimulate individual energies. Official discourse used the specter of a degenerating France to validate its imperialist enterprise, whose justification hinged on a hierarchical racialist model. Indeed, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, race, considered as a biological fact, had become a predominant explanatory factor for the differences between various peoples and cultures. Scientific racism, as William Cohen shows in *The French Encounter with Africans*, became the prevailing mode of discussion over differences between nations and civilizations. Commonly-held assumptions, such as the superiority of whites over blacks, were pervasive in public discourse as well as

literary fiction: they linked seemingly undeniable, observable facts with perceived or imagined strengths and deficiencies and served as the basis for arguments in favor of colonization.

Nevertheless, the fictions under study, written during the period of the fastest expansion of the French empire, cannot be read as triumphant odes to the white man or to colonization. In fact, deep anxieties about the future of the white race in general, and about the French race in particular, underlie these texts, anxieties that can be traced to degeneration theory.<sup>2</sup> Verne, in *Cinq Semaines en ballon* (1863) and *Le Village aérien* (1901), Loti, in *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881), Bertrand, in *Le Sang des races* (1899) and Zola in *Fécondité* (1899) present various forms of contact with Africa and the effects of such contact on the protagonists. In keeping with prevalent views, their texts represent Africa and Africans as less evolved than Europe and Europeans. But in contrast with the official imperialist rhetoric of progress deployed by officials, their fictions illustrate the degenerative possibilities of colonization. Indeed, the assumption that certain races are superior to others is paired with a notion of evolution implying that “inferior” races are less evolved; so when a representative of the “superior” race, because of his immersion in a new environment, takes on some characteristics of the “inferior” race, the adoption of these traits is seen as constituting an atavistic regression to an earlier stage of evolution. Nordau explicitly linked degeneration and arrested evolution: “the disease of degeneracy consists precisely in the fact that the degenerate organism has not the power to mount to the height of evolution already attained by the species, but stops on the way at an earlier or later spot” (556). In Verne’s and Loti’s novels, racial degeneration is expressed in terms of backwardness, submission to instincts and urges, violence and unbridled

sexuality. However, in Bertrand's work, some of the same traits are viewed positively, as regenerative elements in a declining European race, plagued by the complacency and lethargy decried by Renan as some of the underlying causes of the 1870 defeat. In Zola's novel, the white settlers also seek to reclaim the past greatness of their race. Degeneration and regeneration hinge on a combination of biological and social factors, from a betterment of the race stock to the adoption of (or return to) moral values. Before turning to the novels, I will briefly trace the tension between degeneration and regeneration in public discourse.

In his famous 28 July 1885 speech to the *Chambre des députés*, Jules Ferry articulated the principal arguments in favor of France's colonial enterprise. These fell into three main categories. Firstly, Ferry argued that colonies constituted much-needed markets for the country's agricultural and industrial production, securing a more prosperous economic future in an era of increasing protectionism among European nations. Secondly, he claimed that France had a right and a duty to civilize inferior races, officially laicizing and involving the government in the so-called *mission civilisatrice* that Christian missionaries had been advancing for decades.<sup>3</sup> Thirdly, he contended that colonial expansion was a political necessity for the nation whose status as a great power was threatened by other countries' military, economic or demographic expansion. At stake was the protection and promotion of France's position in the world.

Opponents to expansion, such as Paul Déroulède from the right or Georges Clemenceau from the left, contested both the economic and political arguments, claiming that conquering, controlling and administering new territories came at a high cost and that

France should strengthen her continental position instead of sending resources to faraway lands. The Republic had been born following a resounding military defeat and the loss of two provinces, Alsace and Lorraine, and the question of *la Revanche* loomed large for politicians of the period.<sup>4</sup> For anti-imperialists the focus was to be on domestic reconstruction, while for pro-imperialists expansion abroad was the only way to secure and nurture the renewed strength of the country, as successful military campaigns would restore confidence in the worth of the French army.<sup>5</sup> The underlying concern for both groups was France's power; the differences lay in the means used to achieve a full national recovery. Yet in spite of political and popular opposition to colonial expansion, which twice brought down Ferry's ministry in the 1880s, France pursued an aggressive imperial policy: between 1870 and 1914 France's overseas holdings increased more than ten-fold, with most of the territorial gains being made in Africa.

There was little opposition or resistance to Ferry's second claim, which he called the "humanitarian" or "civilizing" argument. In his speech, Ferry pointed to the supposedly undeniable fact that "there is more justice, more material and moral order, more fairness, more social virtues in North Africa" since it had been conquered by France, and asserted that the prohibition of slavery and the slave trade, implemented by the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, constituted an unquestionable mark of progress. For Ferry and other colonialists, colonization was to be a mutually beneficial process, as it brought civilization to supposedly inferior beings and contributed to the greatness of the nation. In *A Mission to Civilize*, her study of the evolution of imperial rhetoric, Alice Conklin points to the particular significance of the concept of *civilisation* for French republican imperialists. Originating in the Enlightenment, the term "capture[s] the

essence of French achievements compared to the uncivilized world of savages, slaves, and barbarians,” as it stands for the “triumph and development of reason, not only in the constitutional, political, and administrative domain, but in the moral, religious, and intellectual spheres as well” (14).<sup>6</sup> French imperialists imagined France as particularly suited to the task of civilizing other peoples, because for them French civilization was, unquestionably, civilization *par excellence*, and spreading it was an ethical imperative.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed carrying out the work of civilization in the colonies was envisioned as lifting them upwards from a condition marked by corruption, superstition, tribalism, dishonesty, indolence, lack of self-discipline, and infusing them with French values of resistance to tyranny, faith in reason and science, belief in progress. Colonizing was justified as means to enlighten the native populations, to guide them along the road to intellectual, moral, social and political maturity. In this view the colonized were seen as being at once unquestionably inferior to the colonizers but also as capable of evolving along the same lines. David Spurr, in *The Rhetoric of Empire*, describes this as a common trope in colonial discourse, in which questions of identity and difference are charged with political and moral weight. He writes: “members of a colonizing class will insist on their radical difference from the colonized as a way of legitimizing their own position in the colonial community. But at the same time they will insist, paradoxically, on the colonized people’s essential identity with them—both as preparation for the domestication of the colonized and as a moral and philosophical precondition for the civilizing mission” (7). In the last decades of the nineteenth century, this question of identity and difference was articulated in racial terms. Whereas there were many objections to Ferry’s colonial policy, as demonstrated by the multiple interruptions during his speech, no one

questioned his division of the world into inferior and superior races, nor the sense of duty that befell the latter to spread their accomplishments.<sup>8</sup>

Colonization was justified by two contradictory racial ideologies, both of which assumed the superiority of the white race. One view insisted on the innate characteristics of distinct races, on the fixity of racial characteristics, on the biological determination of various peoples' destiny: some races were suited to lead and conquer, others to be dominated. The other held that the differences between cultures and civilizations were mainly caused by environmental factors, and that eventually societies that were deemed "inferior" would evolve and progress according to the model of development followed by Europe.<sup>9</sup> For many intellectuals, such as Taine, Renan or Gobineau, the innate characteristics of the different races were accepted as facts, backed by the sciences of the day (such as physical anthropology or phrenology). For instance, in his six-volume *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-1855), which remained a touchstone for race theorists into the twentieth century, Gobineau presented a detailed historical and scientific study of race as the determining factor in the course of human history. A novelist, diplomat, and Tocqueville's protégé, Gobineau had enormous influence on race theorists of the late nineteenth century. Many of his assertions, for which he supplied a wealth of documentation, from ethnographic reports and travel narratives to scientific treatises, reiterated the most commonly held views regarding the various races: the black race, at the bottom of the ladder, is characterized by "mediocre intellectual abilities," "vigorous desires," "voracity of sensations"; the yellow race has "little physical strength," "a tendency to mediocrity in all things"; the white race is distinguished by its "reflective energy," its "great physical power" and its "remarkable love of life" (351-

354). For Gobineau, the white race, with its greater beauty, its physical, intellectual and moral strength, was unquestionably superior to the other two. It is easy to see how Gobineau's work, which, after a few decades of neglect, went into a second and third edition in 1884 (Kale 58), could be used to support a colonialist agenda, as it provides a purportedly scientific basis for the hierarchical view of races. Gobineau's potential influence can be gauged by the fact that the book might have been standard reading for the colonizers. Owen White writes: "It comes as no surprise to find the *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* listed as one of a small number of works of non-fiction available to colonial civil servants in their library at Koulouba, the administrative capital of the French Soudan" (95).

Although Gobineau's treatise was used to support such an agenda, his primary concern was not to promote an expansionist program. His *Essai* was instead a consideration of world history from the perspective of racial difference, and arose out of concern for what he perceived as the inevitable degeneration of French society. His main concern was to describe and define the processes by which civilizations expand, degenerate and die. The originality of his thesis lies not in the hierarchical view of race that it presents but rather in its contention that societies decline and fall not because of factors such as immorality, irreligion or bad government, but because of an intrinsic and inevitable deterioration of the blood of its members. He viewed the course of history as the gradual decline of the three primitive types, the white, yellow and black races, the dilution over time of their distinctive characteristics. Gobineau put forward an organicist conception of society, functioning as a living body, subject to internal "disruptive diseases" (30) that eventually lead to its decline and death. He identified degeneration,

which he defined as the loss of a people's original worth, as the only sufficiently powerful cause of a society's demise: "no external cause had a death grip on [society] until a destructive principle, born out of itself and within itself, ... had vigorously developed and... as soon as this destructive fact existed, the nation could only die" (37). His vision of history is one of inevitable decadence, according to which civilizations are inescapably subject to biological degeneration. In the wake of the French defeat and eventual collapse of the Second Empire in 1870, Gobineau wrote, in a letter to his sister: "Everything is finished, the play is over, the death agony has begun, and we are now like all the other Latin nations, drifting. I was going to calculate our chances for regeneration, but that would be foolish. This is a lost country; this is a debased and incurable race" (*Ce qui est arrivé*, 45).

Written in reaction to the same events, Renan's *La Réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871) proposes on the contrary that France has the potential to regain her lost glory. The pamphlet is a call for renewal; one of the ways through which this might be achieved is conquest and colonial expansion, which Renan justifies according to the same racial hierarchy as that described by Gobineau.

There is nothing shocking in the conquest of a country of inferior race by a superior race... Just as conquest among equal races is to be condemned, the regeneration of inferior or degenerate races by superior races is part of the providential order for humanity. With us, the common man is almost always a *déclassé* nobleman; his heavy hand is better suited to handling the sword than the menial tool. Rather than work, he chooses to fight, that is to say he returns to his first condition... Nature has made a race of workers, the Chinese race, who have a

wonderful manual dexterity and almost no sense of honor; govern them with justice, levying from them, in return for the benefit of such a government, a generous allowance for the conquering race, and they will be satisfied; a race of tillers of the soil, the Negro race; treat them with kindness and humanity, and all will be in order; a race of masters and soldiers, the European race. Reduce his noble race to work in the *ergastulum* like the Negroes and the Chinese, and they rebel. Among us, every rebel is, more or less, a soldier who has missed his calling, a creature made for the heroic life, who is being made to carry out tasks that are contrary to his race: a poor worker, too good a soldier. But the life that makes our workers rebel would make a Chinese or a *fellah* happy, as they are not military creatures at all. Let each one do what he is made for, and all will be well.

(93-94)

For Renan and others, the essential differences between races determine their place in a fixed hierarchy, a providential order guaranteeing harmony within society, peace among nations, and prosperity for all. By claiming that racial differences were inborn and unchanging, colonization is accepted as an inevitable and natural fact. As Tzvetan Todorov explains, “si la fonction de maîtrise, militaire et conquérante, est dans la nature, alors les guerres d’expansion sont parfaitement légitimes, pourvu qu’elles ne se déclenchent pas entre « maîtres », mais permettent la conquête des peuples ouvriers et paysans; autrement dit, la guerre parfaite, c’est la guerre coloniale” (134-5). As a result, a new society can be imagined, where the bourgeois social contract is extended to the colonies. In addition, Renan suggests that through this process whites could regain the heroic spirit that contributed to their original greatness: conquest and colonization offer

the possibility of a renewal of strength and a return to core values presumably weakened with the course of history. This is, in essence, what Ferry advocated in his speech: a colonial project that would reenergize the country (in anticipation of *la Revanche* or as a substitute for it) while confirming a natural world order in which white Europeans are dominant. Colonization is presented as the occasion for the display and confirmation of white superiority, as the source of national regeneration, and as the “salvation” of inferior races.

Official imperial discourse was paradoxically based on principles of radical alterity that guaranteed the superiority of the colonizer, but also asserted the possibility of evolution for the colonized. Crucial to this balancing, however, is the fact that the relative weight of one or the other conception of race shifted in the last decades of the nineteenth century. At first French colonial enterprise was dominated by the doctrine of “assimilation,” according to which the colonies were to be refashioned in the image of the motherland. The colonial subjects would supposedly become Frenchmen, enjoying the same rights, access to education, laws, as their counterparts in the *métropole*, guided through this process of evolution and progress by their benevolent colonizers. However, assimilation was never strictly implemented: French citizenship was granted to only a small minority of the native population; few resources were devoted to education in the colonies; different sets of laws applied to Frenchmen in the colonies and to the natives. Ferry, in a Senate report on a trip to Algeria in 1892, lamented the attitude of some of the colonizers:

It is difficult to get European colonists to understand that . . . the natives cannot be exploited without limits. I do not believe that the colonists are oppressing the

natives in the crude sense of maltreating them. . . . But if violence is not to be found in the colonists' actions, it is certainly present in their words and feelings. . . . Very few colonists are committed to the educational and civilizing mission which is the duty of the superior race; fewer still believe that it is possible to improve the conquered race. On the contrary, they proclaim even more loudly that the conquered race is incorrigible and ineducable. (qtd. in Hargreaves 12)

Such attitudes eventually resulted in a shift in policy, from the doctrine of assimilation to that of association, which promoted the view that local circumstances determined the way administrative procedures should be applied, and that it was not beneficial for most natives to try to implement a French way of life at the expense of their own. This alteration in government policy was a reaction to the difficulties faced in implementing a program in which both colonizer and colonized mutually benefit from colonization. The language in Ferry's report highlights the tension between the two conflicting views of race described above: on the one hand, the belief in progress and evolution (or improvement); on the other hand the idea of a fixed natural order within which each race, because of its innate characteristics, has its place.

This tension, which characterized the colonial project from the outset, also plays out in the fictional works under study. I examine a group of novels which depict whites in Africa during the decades of colonial expansion, paying particular attention to the effects of such contact on the white protagonists. While France might lack the colonial writing tradition that Britain has, innumerable novels and short stories, many of them forgotten today, were written, often by second-rate authors, and read by a seemingly insatiable public. The conquest of Africa provided a wealth of material for writers of the period, the

continent fulfilling various functions in the narratives. It could be the object of observation, with the goal to advance knowledge; it could be seized for profit and personal gain; it could be controlled for a political, collective benefit; or it could be the beneficiary of a moral obligation. The protagonists in the novels under study likewise represent a wide range of roles: explorers, adventurers, soldiers, and settlers.<sup>10</sup> Their authors are a disparate group, representing various trends in colonial literature: Jules Verne was a hugely popular writer, whose tales of adventures in exotic locations were said to have influenced a generation of young readers to explore and participate in France's foreign ventures; Pierre Loti's experience as an officer in the French Navy served as the basis for his fictional works, in which the discovery of new locales parallels the discovery of the self; Louis Bertrand was considered the head of a literary school of colonial writers: his works were decidedly more political than those of the other authors under study; Emile Zola seems like an anomaly even in this disparate set, as he wrote little about colonies, but his novel *Fécondité* evokes some of the prevalent myths about Africa, and is an unambiguous defense of colonial expansion. Written during the decades when the ideology of the civilizing mission was formed, these popular novels echo the dominant racist ideology by representing blacks according to the common stock of images, stereotypes and assumptions present in official discourse and scientific studies. But they also confront the disturbing possibility of the permeability of racial categories, and thus get at and help us analyze the intellectual, political and moral cleavages that existed within French debates about colonialism and race. These texts reveal the deep anxieties generated by the contact with Africa, which has the potential to both spoil and

reenergize the protagonists. They raise questions about the future of France as a nation, about the values upon which the republican political system was founded.

By portraying contact with the continent and its inhabitants, and by delving into the consequences of such contact for the European protagonists, the texts under study question the hierarchy of races and complicate the neat division between civilization and barbarism that political discourse often suggested was the stable basis for these debates. On the one hand, in these texts, Africa figures as a foil to Europe, and the inferiority of its inhabitants, which constitutes one of these narratives' premises, is clearly displayed. The narratives seek to confirm the accepted fact of the divide between civilized and barbarian. On the other hand, they show that contact with Africa reactivates latent instincts in the European characters, in a return to origins that questions the belief in the inherent nobility of the whites, so dear to Renan or Gobineau, or in the ineluctability of the march of progress.

In Jules Verne's *Cinq semaines en ballon* (1863), for instance, the explorers, confident in their superiority, are confronted with the possibility of their own transformation into the cannibals that they tried to avoid, thus highlighting the tenuous and illusory nature of the distinction between man and beast. In his *Village aérien* (1901), the adventurers come into contact with an unknown tribe that could be the Darwinian missing link between man and ape. As they seek to determine whether the Wagddis are men or apes, the revelation that their king is a senile European scientist destabilizes the hierarchy of races and species. Pierre Loti's *Le roman d'un spahi* (1881), an account of the relationship between the young protagonist and a black woman, presents Africa as a de-civilizing place and raises questions about miscegenation, racial purity and white

superiority. By contrast, Louis Bertrand's *Le sang des races* (1899) envisions Algeria as a new, productive and reenergized extension of France. Finally, Zola's *Fécondité* (1899) dreams up a utopian Sudan as an agrarian paradise with a thriving population. These novels all deal with the impact and consequences of contact with Africa on individuals, on the nation, and on the white race as a whole. The exploration, conquest and settlement of Africa serve as the backdrop for considerations of the evolution of the protagonists. Although most of the novelists under study are not overtly political (only Bertrand had a clearly identifiable political stance, as a nationalist in favor of colonization), their works participate in a general conversation on the health of the nation and the benefits and pitfalls of colonization. In particular, they provide insight into fantasies of racial degeneration and regeneration.

Jules Verne's novels were hugely successful in his day, as tales of adventure, celebrations of the triumph of modern science, and explorations of unfamiliar locales. While only three of the novels in the series of *Voyages Extraordinaires* take place in Africa, the first one, published in 1863, tells of a trip across the entire continent. The self-explanatory title *Five Weeks in a Balloon: Journeys and Discoveries in Africa by Three Englishmen* announces the mission that Dr. Fergusson, his manservant Joe, and his friend Richard Kennedy undertake: to cross the entire continent from east to west (Zanzibar to Senegal), the main rule of the expedition being to remain airborne. Indeed, the goal of the journey is not to conquer, not even to explore, but rather to avoid any contact with Africa. The colonial project (conquest, settlement, or civilizing mission) is evoked only briefly, as Kennedy voices his misgivings regarding the expedition. "Was the discovery of the

source of the Nile truly necessary? ... Would it contribute to the happiness of mankind? ... When, finally, the tribes of Africa will be civilized, will they be happier? ... Besides, were they sure that civilization was not there rather than in Europe?" (35) However, these questions are presented as excuses for him to not take part in an undertaking that he deems too risky. His ambivalence disappears completely once the trip gets under way. Beyond the game-like activity and the scientific challenges posed by the length of the trip, Fergusson, a scholar, seeks to add to the existing knowledge of the continent, by providing the missing geographical information that could link up what other expeditions have uncovered about Eastern and Western Africa. The first chapter ends with a list of the previous explorers of Africa, to which he hopes his name will be added.

Anticipating the success of his enterprise, Fergusson proclaims the conquest of science over myth in an enthusiastic speech to the crewmen on board the ship taking him from England to Zanzibar. He voices his belief in the inevitability of progress, in the power of modern science and technology to reveal age-old secrets and to dispel legends: "The nineteenth century would certainly not pass before Africa revealed the secrets buried in her chest for the last six thousand years" (57). The Comtian echoes of this speech point to the deep-seated conviction that Europeans had the capacity to dominate everything. Alice Conklin in her study of French imperial rhetoric, argues that "mastery" was the operative concept at the core of imperial ideology, "mastery of nature, including the human body, and mastery of what can be called 'social behavior'" (Conklin 5-6). Fergusson represents such a form of mastery: as a scientist, he is able to "read" the signs in the landscape that reveal the secrets of the continent, such as the presence of a gold mine, or to analyze the changes in weather patterns to determine the most favorable

course for the balloon. The only driving force behind his resolve to undertake the expedition is his will-to-knowledge. In addition, he is presented as capable of astonishing restraint, eating and drinking very little, as well as characterized by an absolute detachment from any mercantile temptation. He embodies the intellectual and moral superiority of the white scholar. Africa unrolls its fertile landscapes and various riches, from ivory to gold mines, without any effect on him. He usually remains in the balloon while Joe and Kennedy go hunting or fetch water, underscoring the fact that Africa remains for him a non-place. The continent viewed through his eyes is entirely subordinated to his scientific gaze (Spurr 17); it is only a map to be completed.<sup>11</sup> Looking down from the balloon, the landscape itself even looks like a map (81). In the balloon, the Westerners represent science, knowledge, total control over the world thanks to their intelligence and technology, whereas on the ground is the realm of the body, of desires and appetites.<sup>12</sup>

The novel is predicated on the absolute separation between the two worlds, a separation that is physically maintained by the use of the balloon as a means of transportation. The choice of the balloon allows Verne to present various scientific digressions regarding the technological advances required by the ambitiousness of the project, but also plays a symbolic role in structuring the novel along a vertical axis. The balloon allows this expedition to elude the various dangers that caused others to fail “in their struggle against the elements, against hunger, thirst, fever, against ferocious beasts and even more ferocious tribes” (23). The balloon thus represents the pinnacle of Western ingenuity against the forces of nature and against the native populations. In the text, a constant comparison is drawn between the balloon and Africa, between advanced

technology and primitive nature. Being physically removed from the ground, the three Westerners experience Africa as a form of spectacle: the dangers lurking at every turn (from mosquitoes to sandstorms, from alligators to man-eating savages) are obliterated by the safe distance that is always maintained and supposedly demonstrates the superiority of white technology over the environment and the natives. The inhospitable African landscape and the ferociousness of the native tribes are described at length from the perspective of the white explorers, observing from a distance. The descriptive pauses allow for the satisfaction of the reader's curiosity, but also register the sense of horror felt by the men in the balloon and highlight the unbridgeable gap between the two groups.

The spectacle of violence and raw natural force that Fergusson, Joe and Kennedy are witnessing is not only the unfolding of a geographic space, but also constitutes a journey back in time. Not only is Africa presented as an inaccessible and inhospitable place, but perhaps primarily it offers a regression to an earlier era or prehistory. Africa was commonly described as the land of origins, and its inhabitants were often considered as human beings at an earlier stage of development. Fergusson, for instance, mentions the name of a tribe, the "Nyam-Nyam," and explains its transparent etymology by saying that the word "mimics a chewing sound" (159). Thus the onomatopoeic language of Africans is described as rudimentary, lacking in abstractions, this linguistic primitiveness echoing the primal nature of the appetites that dominate its speakers. In addition, the various tribes encountered in succession by the three men are virtually indistinguishable, characterized only by their savagery, cruelty, and belief in superstition. If evolution was taken as a process involving species differentiation as well as upward movement, then the description of African tribes as indistinguishable from one another supported the

assumption that they were stuck in a state of primal undifferentiation. As Africa was described as a land without history, so Africans were seen as peoples without history, forever stagnating in their primitiveness.<sup>13</sup> In addition, black Africans are described as nearly indistinguishable from apes. When Joe and Kennedy are hunting, Fergusson, who had remained aboard the balloon to take notes on the expedition, is attacked by what Joe first describes as “Negroes,” but who turn out to be apes. “-From a distance, there isn’t much difference, my dear Samuel. –Neither is there from up close, said Joe” (104). Later on, as he has just killed a cannibal, Kennedy calls him “the horrible beast” (169). Most of the novel is articulated according to racist stereotypes that seek to secure the absolute difference between the Westerners and the natives, and the association between the latter and animals.

In addition to confirming the stereotypes of Africans as less evolved than Europeans, the novel also confronts the question of their humanity. The explorers indeed encounter man-eating tribes and have to wonder what they have in common with them. Fergusson refuses to intervene in a raging battle between two tribes, even when the violence becomes cannibalistic. The encounter with cannibals raises the question of the distinction between man and beast. The cannibals cannot be considered fully human because they belong to the realm of nature, not culture. A few days later, when Fergusson and his companions save a missionary from certain death at the hands of cannibals, Fergusson declares: “this is about a man’s salvation” (180). The parallel between the missionary’s rescue and the absence of intervention in the cannibalistic warfare highlights the difference in status between a white man and black “beasts” in the eyes of

Fergusson. The rescue is justified on the grounds of his humanity, which is denied to the native tribes.

Yet the absolute difference between civilized and barbarian is annihilated when Kennedy, because of extreme hunger, begins to regress and turns into an animal himself: “he was pacing back and forth, growling gruffly, biting his fists, ready to open his veins to drink his blood” (230). Pacing like an animal, howling, Kennedy has lost the capacity to control his instincts. The incoherence of his speech is a symptom of the failure to master his bodily urges. Turning against himself in an act of self-cannibalization, Kennedy appears to have lost his rational self. It is perhaps because of Kennedy’s taste for food (he likes to eat and drink well) that he is the only one to degenerate in such a way.<sup>14</sup> As mentioned earlier, Fergusson represents the consummate intellectual, showing little interest in practical considerations of sustenance, whereas Kennedy, a man of robust constitution, appears to be more concerned with such matters. His sanguine nature might make him more susceptible to primitive urges. At that point, however, all of the Westerners are faced with the necessity to recognize what they share with the cannibals and to confront the possibility of the reversibility of evolution.<sup>15</sup> The difference that seemed so obvious and insurmountable at first turns out to be obliterated, and with this the unquestioned hierarchy of races is also ruptured. The African spectacle sets the stage for a degenerative process that might lead to the reexamination of assumptions regarding races, evolution, and progress. The atavism of the African tribes offers a vision of the Europeans’ “own more primitive being” (Spurr 46). The chilling prospect of reverse evolution leads the three white men to make a clean break and flee such a dangerous place.

The episode makes up only a short portion of a chapter and ends very rapidly, with a providential windstorm that leads the explorers to an oasis where water and sustenance are found. In the short and dispassionate discussion that ensues, Kennedy alludes to his temporary madness, but the full implications of his transformation are not examined. Indeed, Fergusson deflects the conversation to the story of James Bruce, a late-eighteenth-century Scottish explorer. He describes the incredulity of the readers of Bruce's travel journal regarding his description of men eating raw meat, and Bruce's response, a demonstration involving raw steak with salt and pepper. It is as if the text retreated from the full consideration of the implications of Kennedy's regression, the white scientist seeking refuge into a narrativization of Africa in an anecdote that is both historical and humorous, leaving the question of kinship with the cannibals at a safe distance. Indeed, Bruce's addition of seasoning to his dish of raw meat is a marker of civilization. It removes the consumption of raw meat from its "primitive" setting and transforms it into an unusual and slightly dangerous "civilized" meal.

The journey across Africa continues, and the three men encounter more savage tribes, cross more inhospitable deserts, avert more natural disasters, until they finally reach Senegal, from where they sail back to England where they are hailed as heroes, having accomplished what they had set out to do. The superiority of white technology is confirmed by the novel's denouement. However the episode described above unsettles the neat divisions between whites and blacks, civilization and barbarism, culture and nature. It reveals the existence of an uncivilized self beneath the surface, of a savage within, and suggests that the domination of reason over instincts, of culture over nature,

of whites over blacks, is tenuous at best. It thus upsets the neat racial categorization upon which the novel is predicated.

This categorization also informs Loti's novel *Le Roman d'un spahi* (1881). Pierre Loti was a prolific writer of travel sketches and novels, based on his extensive travels abroad as an officer in the French Navy and as a private citizen. His best-sellers were published at the height of late-nineteenth-century orientalist scholarship. Although Loti was a hugely successful writer in his day, there has been comparatively little academic interest in his work, as his popularity waned in the early twentieth century. In her review of Loti scholarship, H el ene de Burgh identifies two tendencies: one, from the 1970s to the end of the 1980s, which classifies him as an orientalist writer and an advocate for colonization, and a more recent one which seeks to appreciate what she sees as the ambiguities and contradictions in his work.

*Le Roman d'un spahi* is one of two full-length novels set in the French colonies. In contrast with Verne's novel, Loti explores the consequences of prolonged contact with Africa and Africans. The novel tells the story of Jean Peyral, a young man from the rural region of C evennes, who is sent to Senegal for five years of military service. Much of the narrative deals with the relationship between the *spahi*—a cavalryman in the French African Army—and his young African mistress, Fatou-gaye. The novel ends in a melodramatic fashion: Jean is killed by African warriors during an ambush only a few weeks before the end of his deployment, and Fatou-gaye, upon finding his body, strangles their infant son before committing suicide. Peyral experiences degradation and dissolution, in which contact with the African environment and its inhabitants causes the

young man to lose his identity and leads to his demise. Unlike Verne's protagonists, Peyral does not seek knowledge or entertainment in Africa. Rather, he is fleeing an unfavorable economic situation, the lack of opportunity for young men like him. The army offers him a way out of French stagnation by placing him in a new environment. One of the functions of the colonies was to provide young men not only with the prospect of a military career, but with an opportunity for adventure and heroism that was no longer available in France. To counter the weakening of the race and the dilution of heroic qualities plaguing modern society, contact with the new, the unfamiliar, the unknown, seemed an appropriate solution. Such a belief inspired both fictional and non-fictional works. For instance, Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, an economist and early advocate of colonization<sup>16</sup> described the perilous situation France was in: an overly comfortable existence stunted the need for heroism and greatness in a race born to lead. This led to the lack of ambition and drive in French youth. Since the environment no longer provided opportunities to develop these essential qualities, there was a need to come in contact with the new to reactivate the latent heroism of the race. Leroy-Beaulieu claimed that "our children... held in softening tenderness, in debilitating care, inclined to a half passive and sedentary life, have only exceptionally the spirit of enterprise and adventure, the endurance and perseverance that characterized their forebears... France tends more and more to become a nation of small, middling *rentiers*, of mediocre and dull civil servants" (351). The colonial project represented a way to extend French power abroad as well as a regenerative venture for individuals. Colonial literature made use of this trope: the possibility of adventure was "a godsend for those to whom the metropolitan horizon seemed closed" (Astier-Loutfi 51).

By contrast with these lofty aims, however, *Le Roman d'un spahi* revolves around the development and complications of the predominantly sensual relationship between the *spahi* and Fatou-Gaye. There is very little action, except for the events described in the concluding chapters, and much of the novel focuses on the monotony and inertia that characterize Jean's life and on his reactions to his surroundings. His contact with Africa is not the reenergizing experience imagined by Leroy-Beaulieu. On the contrary Peyral finds himself weakened further by his immersion in the African environment.<sup>17</sup> The explorations of the foreign locale serve as a pretext for the exploration of Jean's feelings. The passivity of his character is emphasized early on in the novel: "the setting, the climate, nature, had gradually subjected his young mind to enervating influences; — slowly, he had felt himself sliding down strange slopes" (27), as if his willpower and agency had been weakened by contact with the new. Unlike Kennedy's regression to an animal state, in Peyral's case the transformation is a dissolution of the self into an indistinct torpor. The reason for this difference may be linked to the attributes foregrounded by Loti and Verne in their presentation of the native populations. In Verne's novel, the focus was on the savagery and brutality of the African tribes (as a foil to Fergusson's reflective and scientific stance); in Loti's, the emphasis is on the apathy and laziness of the black residents of Saint-Louis. These works therefore expose two different facets of degeneration.

The exotic environment in which Peyral is placed plays a crucial role in determining the arc of the narrative, from Saint-Louis to the the interior of the country and back, to the final expedition to Dialdé, where Jean meets his fate. First there is Saint-Louis, which is described as a decaying, crumbling town: "Saint-Louis, a town that

already has a past, an earlier colony dying away” (51). The reference to Saint-Louis’s colonial past as a major commercial hub for West Africa, still retaining strong links to European society, places it as a sort of simulacrum of the *métropole*, where there is some semblance of social life, but which seems to be troubled by the same ills afflicting European society. Even the buildings reflect a world in decay, and the *spahis*’ life seems very similar to the one they led prior to their coming to Africa: a succession of days filled with military duties and nights of debauchery.

In Saint-Louis, Jean meets and is seduced by Cora, the mixed-race wife of a rich trader, whose sophistication and pale skin project the image of a Parisienne: she is “so white that she could be mistaken for a Parisienne” (44). This liaison underscores Jean’s naiveté: as a young man from the provinces, he has been left untouched by the corruption of urban life, since “in his village, one was sheltered from the unhealthy contagions, the precocious depravity of the city’s sick” (31). His relationship with Cora, in a colonial setting that seeks to emulate the sophistications of Parisian life, introduces him to this corruption. One night, as he finds his mistress with another man, he realizes that he has mistaken what amounted to a seduction game for true love. The incident not only emphasizes the disingenuousness of social relations, but also raises the question of her race: “the *mulâtresse*, granddaughter of a slave, had reappeared in all her atrocious cynicism, beneath the well-mannered and elegant woman” (58). Cora, the product of an earlier colonization, that of the Antilles, is revealed as duplicitous and cruel because of her racial origin. This first contact with a non-white constitutes the first taint to Peyral’s purity, leading him to a near-fatal illness followed by a descent into drunkenness and violence.

After this episode, the *spahis* leave Saint-Louis for a mission in the interior of the country. Outside of Saint-Louis, they are confronted with the violence of the elements, with a primitive Africa. Their journey inland is a regression to a primeval era, with torrential rains evoking biblical times: “the artists who have painted the *deluge*, the cataclysms of the primitive world, have not imagined such fantastical features, such terrifying skies” (101). The soldiers see gigantic trees, a baobab with the “rigid structure of a mastodon” (93), encounter dangerous fauna and flora, face the perils of the unknown. But underneath the sense of wonder and the excitement afforded by the confrontation with danger, which offers a sharp contrast with the monotony and inertia of life in Saint-Louis, there is an underlying sense of sadness and loss, the “eternal sadness of the land of Ham” (116). This characterization of Africa and Africans as marked by a biblical curse evokes a lack of historical progression (“*éternelle*”).<sup>18</sup>

In addition, African nature is seen in an unfavorable light compared to the landscape of his childhood, the mountains of Cévennes, which afforded him with a sense of freedom, independence, and energy. The contact with nature in the African context produces opposite effects; instead of the peace that he gained from his escapades in the Cévennes, the African environment saturates his senses. Nature, which sheltered him in his youth from the corruptions of urban life and provided an outlet for his energy, represents in Africa a corrupting influence that affects his personal development. This suggests a disconnect between Peyral and his environment: his body and mind are not adapted to the African milieu he is thrown into. Through this disorienting experience of excess and the description of a disintegrating psychic state, Loti explores the boundaries of consciousness.<sup>19</sup> When spring comes, Peyral finds himself overwhelmed by powers he

cannot control, his conscious will and self dissolving in the heat and passion brought about by the intoxicating environment. Peyral's "fall" is narrated in a series of four chapters, concluding the first section of the novel, which all start with the chant "*anamalis fobil*," a reference to an African dance ritual: "the howl of frenzied desire, of black sap heated in the sun, of scorching hysteria... a hallelujah of negro love, hymn of seduction sung by nature, by the air, by the earth, by the plants, by the scents!" (117-118). These chapters culminate with Peyral's first sexual encounter with Fatou-Gaye, the young black girl who nursed him back to health after his illness. The narrator explicitly links the behavior of blacks with the life of African nature, assuming an unquestioned connection between the environment and their actions. Jean finds himself pulled into an alien life of the senses in spite of himself. This experience of subjective disintegration is expressed in a language that evokes contamination and poisoning by a natural force that saturates his senses, annihilates his self-control, and dissolves his conscious will.

And Jean felt this negro spring burning through his blood, running like a raging poison in his veins... The renewal of all this life exasperated him—because that life was not his. In men, the boiling blood was black; in plants, the rising sap was poisoned; the flowers had dangerous scents and the beasts were full of venom... Within him as well, the sap of his youth was rising—but in a feverish way that weakened its source." (119)

This is an illustration of what Spurr identifies as the "crisis of the Western subject in the non-Western world" (151). The natural environment acts as an enervating influence, in which the civilized self dissolves into the life of the senses and into sexual excess: the renewal brought about by the arrival of spring is an initiation into a dangerous otherness

(“empoisonnée,” “dangereux,” “venin”). After this episode Peyral becomes a liminal figure: he no longer lives in the barracks with the other *spahis*, but in a crumbling house in the middle of Saint-Louis with his mistress. Even in his physical appearance, in spite of being “de pure race blanche” he is able to pass for an Arab, wearing the “muslim fez,” with eyes “like those of an Arab” (10). His personal relationships, from his white fiancée, to Cora the *mulâtresse*, to Fatou the black woman, become less and less socially acceptable. When his relationship with Fatou becomes known, through rumors, in his native village, his return to France becomes less and less likely. And in his behavior too, Peyral seems to be “going native:” described at first as a kind and gentle man, he then turns to beating Fatou when he judges that she misbehaves. Only when they are separated (after she steals and sells his watch) does he regain status among his peers and, according to the narrator, his dignity as a white man, finally gaining the promotion he had been denied for the time that he had a black mistress. “Besides, it seemed to him that he had regained his dignity as a *white man*, tainted by contact with this black flesh; his past intoxication, the fever of senses overexcited by the African climate, when he looked back, only aroused a feeling a profound disgust” (279).

The sexual relationship with Fatou is seen as a transgression, and is morally coded along a black and white divide. Peyral’s pure white race is set against Fatou’s blackness (the word *noir* occurs 130 times in the novel), which connotes moral decay. She is called “that wicked and perverse creature, with a black face and a black soul” (266). In addition, her physical appearance links her to animals and triggers the fear of further degradation: “for a long time, this had scared the *spahi*: he didn’t like to see the palms of Fatou’s hands, which, in spite of himself, evoked... those of a monkey... The interior

discoloration, the fingers slightly tinged, had something *not quite human* that was terrifying” (174). The blatantly racist presentation of Fatou in the novel, however, also emphasizes her racial purity and a certain nobility, and her distinction from “certain African tribes that are usually considered in France as the generic model of the black race:” “she was of pure *khassonké* type: a short, thin and straight nose, with fine nostrils, a graceful mouth, with splendid teeth, and most notably, wide eyes of bluish enamel” (14); “she was of antique perfection,” like “an idol of polished ebony” (190). The movement of attraction and repulsion experienced by Peyral marks the back-and-forth that characterizes their relationship, between moments of genuine affection, disgust and shame. The oscillations often occur when Peyral receives letters from his mother, which remind him of the alien nature of the continent and, by extension, of his mistress. These letters, inserted in the narrative, act as reminders of his duties to his family (through his experience in Africa he is supposed to better his financial situation in order to be able to marry his cousin Jeanne), and to the nation as a whole. It is probably not innocent that the name of his mother, Françoise, evokes the motherland, France, to which he never returns. His fiancée eventually marries a bailiff, on the day that Peyral is killed in an ambush.

Peyral unknowingly fathers a child with Fatou, a little boy whom he discovers during the final military expedition along the Senegal River. The infant represents the combination of the two races, but he is described as almost white: “the child had rejected his mother’s blood... his skin was tanned, but he was white, like the *spahi*” (325). The child’s existence, living proof of miscegenation, marks the end of any dream of return to the homeland for Peyral. From then on, his absorption by Africa is complete. He dies shortly thereafter, along with several other *spahis* during a military operation against a

rebel chief, Boubakar-Ségou. Fatou, who had remained at the military encampment, eventually finds his body, strangles her baby and poisons herself.

In one of his later novels, *Le Village aérien* (1901), published almost four decades after *Cinq Semaines en ballon*, Jules Verne revisited Africa. By that date, the continent had been largely explored, mapped and exploited. Whereas *Cinq Semaines en ballon* was predicated on the fixity of races and species, *Le Village aérien* invites the reader to contemplate the potential for evolution and change.<sup>20</sup> According to the two main protagonists, Max Huber, a Frenchman, and John Cort, an American, Africa had lost most of its potential to surprise and amaze. At the start of the novel, the two men are on their way back from a hunting trip, during which they were hoping to find some excitement by hunting large game before returning to work for a trading company. Huber concedes that they did experience the unexpected (“de l’imprévu”) but admits that he was hoping for the extraordinary (“de l’extraordinaire”), the mythical qualities that positivist science had deprived Africa of (4). It is as though Africa, for Huber, were on the way to becoming as banal as Europe through its mapping and conquest.<sup>21</sup> Early in the novel, Huber muses on the fact that Europe used to be home to fantastical creatures, ancient tribes and druids, and he hopes that Africa still retains some of the same mythical qualities. Cort chides him: “-And what were you hoping to find, Max? ... Unknown kingdoms, enchanted cities, mythological goldmines, new species of animals, five-legged carnivores and three-legged human beings?” (15). Later on, in his “half scientific half fanciful daydreams” (71), Huber contemplates the possibility of the existence of extraordinary creatures who come not from mythology, but from an adaptive process:

“Besides, limiting oneself to modern scientific data, couldn’t one accept the existence, in this wooded immensity, of unknown beings, adapted to the conditions of this habitat?” (67). Huber’s ruminations create a parallel between Europe and Africa in a pattern of development, the loss of the enchanting qualities of the continent opening it up to the possibility of progress along the lines of Europe’s own evolution; it implies that Europeans are more evolved than Africans, but also that the former have lost some of their original strengths or values as a price for progress, and that the latter might be on their way to a higher stage of development. The colonial experience could be the occasion for a regeneration of the race. Getting away from the degradation of the motherland, the stunting experience of modern life, would lead one to retrieve the lost values of heroism that originally made the greatness of Europe. A return to origins would be seen as regenerative. As Peter Dunwoodie explains, “imaginatively, [European disintegration] constitutes the negative pole in opposition to which the faraway fantasy places can be perceived as harbouring values which Europe has lost. . . . The European abroad thus lives out an inner quandary in which the Other is both inferior *and* source of values, in which technology is both progress *and* loss” (74).

However the novel starts by insisting on the separate nature of whites and blacks, and by establishing a hierarchy among the members of the expedition, including among whites. Huber and Cort, the main protagonists, function as standards for correct behavior, embodying the values of honesty and compassion (before the start of the novel they rescue a young boy from cannibals). They occupy the top of the hierarchy. Urdax, the Portuguese ivory trader who was their guide during the hunting trip, is presented in a negative light. Motivated by greed and base mercantile preoccupations, he is clearly

morally inferior to Huber and Cort and is quickly dispensed with, trampled to death by an angry herd of elephants while he was ironically trying to protect his stock of ivory. There is also a gradation among the non-whites (degree of morality parallel to a stage of evolution). Llanga, the young child that Huber and Cort saved from cannibals and in essence adopted before the start of the novel, looks almost white, thus signaling his racial closeness to the Westerners. This is also coded in moral and intellectual terms: “as has been observed in some tribes, his complexion was almost fair, his hair was blond, unlike the frizzy wool of blacks, his nose was aquiline, not flat, his lips were thin, not full. His eyes sparkled with intelligence” (8). In addition to his physical appearance, he imitates in his behavior that of the white men by saving a young Wagddi from drowning and caring for him much like Cort and Huber had done for him earlier on. He also quickly learns to speak a few words of French. Llanga thus seems to represent the potential for rapid evolution: it is as if he were becoming Westernized through contact with Huber and Cort. However his accomplishments are mocked by his mentors, who poke fun at his shaky grasp on the French language. Control and authoritativeness remain in the hands of the two white men. Khamis, the expedition’s scout, from Cameroon, is characterized by his extraordinary composure, which according to the narrator is biologically determined: his blood is “thicker than that of whites, and not as red, which... makes him less sensitive to physical pain” (35). He proves to be of invaluable help to the white men, saving them on several occasions. Like Llanga, Khamis is portrayed in a sympathetic light, but his qualities are often compared to those of animals. For instance, he possesses an uncanny sense of orientation, “a kind of instinct, similar to that of animals” (56). Khamis also takes great pains to distance himself from the other black members of the expedition,

whom he sees as inferior creatures. The cowardly and greedy porters, with no sense of honor or loyalty, occupy a lower rung of the ladder. Even further down one finds the savage tribes of Central Africa, seen as barely human, living like animals in a state of nature, lacking the basic principles of civilization: “It might be tempting to classify these creatures, beasts with a human face, among animals, in Equatorial Africa where weakness is a crime and strength is everything! And in fact, even as adults, many of these blacks do not master the basic knowledge of a five-year-old child” (20). In this “Darwinian fable”<sup>22</sup> Verne collapses the concepts of species evolution and individual growth: black Africans are presented as the least evolved humans and each “step” up the ladder represents an intellectual and moral gradation. The assumption underlying the novel is that the hierarchy of races is justified by a pattern of development, and that evolution is tantamount to progress.

As Gillian Beer explains, in Darwin’s thought there was a tension between the egalitarian idea of kinship and the hierarchical model of development that placed white men at the top:

The story of development tended to restore hierarchy and to place at its apex not only man in general, but contemporary European man in particular...This hierarchy was achieved by reintroducing the model of the single life cycle with its pattern of growth, both physical and intellectual, from childhood through to manhood. Development extends into the idea of progress and bears with it the assumption that control is achieved by and accorded to the fully adult, that the process of cultural change is one of improvement, and that the passage from ape

to man can be charted through the degrees of development of diverse races.”  
(114-115)

Thus Darwinian theory could be used to support the racist view according to which races represented different steps on a ladder of development.

However, after setting up this hierarchy, the novel's plot revolves around the breakdown of the seemingly comprehensive racial categorization. As Huber, Cort and their companions, after a nearly fatal encounter with a herd of elephants, take refuge in the unexplored central forest, they discover the Wagddis, a tribe of humanoids, living in the forest's canopy. They also find among them Dr. Johausen, a German linguist who had disappeared a few years earlier on a scientific mission to discover the language of apes, and who has now become the king of the Wagddis. The discovery of the Wagddis causes Huber and Cort to attempt to define the parameters of humanity, from physiological factors to social, intellectual and philosophical considerations, as this new tribe proves impossible to classify. The first definition is attempted by Cort, even before he and Huber come upon the Wagddis. As Huber was musing about the closeness between black Africans and apes Cort replied: “It is only... what distinguishes man from beast, a being endowed with intelligence from a being who is subject only to the impersonality of instinct” (118-119). At first, upon examining the young Wagddi that Llanga rescues from drowning, Huber and Cort conclude that he is morphologically more human than ape-like: he has two hands, not four, and feet made for walking, no hair on his face, no long arms, and no tail. They declare: “It is obvious that this individual is closer to man than ape in his general shape, and probably in his internal constitution as well” 146). The astonishing discovery of “an absolutely new creature that no anthropologist had ever

observed, and that, in short, seemed to be midway between humanity and animality” (146) leads Huber and Cort to struggle to classify this “new race” (182).

Later on, as they were on the verge of being engulfed by rapids, they are rescued by a group of Wagddis that lead them to the eponymous village in the treetops. As they reach the gigantic suspended structure, “five kilometers in diameter” they have to recognize and admire the technological skill needed for its construction (184). They remain in the custody of the Wagddis for three weeks, during which they are able to observe their customs and way of life. The Wagddis walk upright, can make fires, and talk. Their social structure also displays a certain measure of complexity, as its members occupy different functions among a hierarchical organization: there are warriors, hunters, guards and servants. For Llanga, they are undeniably humans. While the reader is not privy to Llanga’s reasoning, one can infer that it is because of the fact that the Wagddis saved Huber, Cort and Khamis from drowning in the rapids, thus replicating his own rescue of the young Wagddi earlier on (which itself recalled his rescue from cannibals by Huber and Cort). Thus for Llanga it seems that values such as compassion, devotion and courage ensure one’s belonging to the human race. Khamis, however, refuses to consider the Wagddis as humans. Just as earlier in the novel he had insisted on differentiating himself from the black porters, he proudly seeks to distinguish between the Wagddis and humans, while acknowledging the sense of proximity between his own people and the Wagddis: “his dignity as a native of the black continent suffered from the thought that those beasts might be so close to his kin in their natural abilities” (173).

Cort and Huber do not offer a conclusion right away, although the original distinction between instincts and intelligence would place the Wagddis within the realm

of humanity (their first action, the rescue of Huber, Cort, Khamis and Llanga from the rapids, signals a form of moral sense, and possibly a sense of debt for the rescue of their young child by Llanga earlier on). Instead, they discuss what criteria should be used to determine whether or not the Wagddis are human. Throughout their stay with the Wagddis, all that Huber and Cort are willing to concede is that their hosts are unusual, extraordinary, as if they recoiled from granting them the status of humans. “In any case, they were members of a distinct race, probably bearing the ‘minus’ sign in relation to humanity” (174). The use of language and of advanced technology, do not constitute sufficient evidence for them, so they turn to more abstract standards. “And, even if this unknown race were physically close to mankind, the Wagddis would need to display signs of morality, of religiosity unique to mankind, to say nothing of the ability to formulate abstractions and generalizations, and of artistic, scientific and literary abilities” (184), most of which Huber and Cort do not observe during their three-week stay among the Wagddis.<sup>23</sup> They do concede that “[the Wagddis] certainly distinguish good from evil” (201). They also have a conception of family and kinship, a sense of belonging that goes beyond animal attachment. To Huber’s question “since the Wagddis have so many human qualities, why shouldn’t we welcome them among the ranks of mankind?” Cort answers: “Because they seem to lack one notion that is shared by all men... that of a supreme being, in a word, religiosity, which can be found among the most savage tribes” (202). However, shortly after this conversation, the Wagddis do display a certain sense of the sacred in the elaborate ceremony involving their king, His Majesty Msélo-Tala-Tala.

During the ceremony, Huber and Cort realize that the king of the Wagddis is actually the missing Dr. Johausen, a German scientist who had disappeared two years

earlier while studying the language of apes. They exclaim: “No mistake was possible, he was a white man, a proper member of the human race!” (218) For them, his presence accounts for some of the human accomplishments of the Wagddis—such as their use of some German words or the making of utensils, and they readily credit these to his influence, which explains “how some measure of progress had extended to the lifestyle of these types, on the first rungs of the human ladder” (221). This, in essence, discounts the Wagddis’ own achievements prior to the arrival of the white man, but also suggests the possibility of an accelerated evolutionary process through which they could gain full access to humanity. For, although Cort proclaims that it can never be concluded that “man is an evolved ape or ape a degenerate man” (183), the narrative itself clearly shows otherwise. Indeed, as highly evolved apes who, through contact with a European, have gained a certain measure of civilization, the Wagddis seem to be on their way to becoming humans. Whether they can reach a fully human status is what is debatable. On the other hand, Dr. Johausen, who ought to be an exemplar of Western accomplishments, is degenerating into an ape himself: “His Majesty’s grimace would not have been disowned by the most grimacing baboon in Ubangi” (226). Eventually, Huber and Cort decide to leave Johausen in the forest, since he appears to no longer be worthy of rescue. Huber declares that “there is really nothing we can get from this human beast! He has turned into an ape... Let him remain on and keep reigning over apes!” (228)

The novel, although far from devoid of racist prejudices, calls into question the notion of essential difference between races and species, by presenting a system in which relations of contiguity preclude the possibility of a clean break between races and between species. In spite of the numerous attempts by the main protagonists to define and

circumscribe races and species, the sense of absolute distinction between whites and non-whites, as well as between humans and animals, is absent from the novel, the continuity between one and the other being secured by the instability in the order of species. In addition the novel suggests the possibility of rapid evolution and devolution as well as the ultimately porous nature of racial distinctions.

Like Verne's adventurers, Louis Bertrand seeks in Africa the possibility of regeneration for French society. Unlike Verne, however, Bertrand views Africa as the source of a restoration of ideals and opportunities, and as a privileged site of racial renewal. Indeed the values that Bertrand puts forward are in ostensible opposition to what are usually seen as accomplishments of Western civilization. In the 1920 preface to *Le Sang des races*, from 1899, he proposes a program for national regeneration that includes social, racial and aesthetic elements. Bertrand advocates a return to a Latin Africa, in reference to the glorious days of Roman imperialism, with what he calls "rebarbarization," implying a return to a less civilized state. Bertrand, like Nordau, blamed the ills of contemporary French society on its over-refinement and sophistication. His case is unique among the writers studied here in that he considers contact with Africa to have largely positive and regenerative effects. Bertrand was a conservative monarchist, critical of the Republic, of *fin-de-siècle* decadent culture, and through his writing he called for the recovery of the strength and vitality of previous generations.<sup>24</sup> Influenced by Gobineau's racial theories, he had a staunch belief in the superiority of the white race over others. Unlike Gobineau, however, Bertrand thought that the past greatness of the

race could be regained, that its innate qualities and values could be reactivated, and that cultural and racial degeneration could be reversed.

In the preface to the novel under study, he mentions his admiration for Cardinal Lavigerie, whose proposal to proselytize and colonize resonated deeply with him.<sup>25</sup> Bertrand and Lavigerie, who looked to Augustine as a model,<sup>26</sup> shared the idea that Africa had once experienced greatness, during the Roman occupation, and that it could recover it through the work of the settlers. Bertrand claims that North Africa, characterized by ethnic disunity and “congenital anarchy” (11), was prosperous and civilized only under Latin hegemony. Emphasizing France’s own Latin heritage, Bertrand views a Latin North Africa as a natural extension of the country. Colonization therefore would allow France to recover a past greatness while returning North Africa to its own former glory.

This project is paralleled in the aesthetic sphere by his call for a revitalization of literature, which echoes Nordau’s plea in *Degeneration*. Nordau indeed conceived his treatise primarily as an attack against degenerate art. Bertrand advocates a return to an Aristotelian model of plot as character-in-action (9). The emphasis on the individual worth, self-reliance, freedom, and vitality of his protagonists therefore is as much an aesthetic as a moral feature of his work. The return to Antiquity indeed implies a return to the possibility of individual heroism, unthinkable in the republican France of his day.<sup>27</sup> In Bertrand’s work, degeneration is envisaged as a collective fate, whereas regeneration is an individual endeavor.

The narrative focuses on the working-class population of settlers from the south of Europe, Spaniards, Italians, Greeks. It is essentially a coming-of-age novel, centered

on the experiences of Rafael, the son of Spanish settlers, as he becomes a competent cart-driver, and is structured by a back-and-forth movement between Algiers and the south of the country, the latter offering “the indefinite possibilities of our conquest” (7). Although the word “conquest” evokes a military operation, in *Le Sang des races* it is accomplished not by soldiers, but by working-class settlers.<sup>28</sup> Bertrand insists on the value of work and action as an antidote to the decline and apathy of the old Algiers, and by extension, of the old country. Nordau as well had insisted on the value of work as a way to counter degeneration: “action... alone keeps the organism healthy and moral” (156). Bertrand greatly admired the ebullience and dynamism of the settlers, who were building the infrastructure of the colonies and represented, for him, the future of France. Indeed he presented them as uniquely able to exploit the land and make it productive and profitable, unlike the native populations.

The land itself, in its strangeness and roughness, offers the potential to reenergize France by pushing the protagonists to deploy their physical strength and ingenuity. One of the characters declares: “I can breathe in the South, whereas I choke in Algiers; I walk; I use my strength; I see something new every day. And there is something else that I can’t express... the land, the air, the sun...” (238). This “new France” whose rough terrain has yet to be tamed, whose climate poses challenges to the settlers, provides a fertile ground for the renewal of the Latin race, whose innate characteristics of vigor and ingenuity are stifled in the old country. What is valued indeed is not intellectual sophistication (most of the characters are barely literate), but rather the raw force of a macho culture.<sup>29</sup> Strong appetites and desires, delight in the physical life characterize the protagonists, who have the appearance of barbarians. Midway through the novel, Rafael is described as covered

in the blood of one of his mules. Bertrand acknowledges in the preface that his protagonists may seem like barbarians, but contends that this apparent barbarism is in fact the vitality and energy of an invigorated race, a positively charged atavism. Instead of focusing on Europe's cultural achievements as indications of racial superiority, Bertrand, much like Gobineau, regards vitality, masculinity, and vigor as the markers of a dominant race. After attending a performance of *Carmen*, Rafael says dismissively: "All that... isn't worth as much as a night in Boughzoul!" (245).<sup>30</sup> France is declining, exhausted by centuries of civilization that have stifled individuals' potential for growth and greatness. Like Barrès, Bertrand emphasized that national regeneration could occur only through race and milieu, not intellect.<sup>31</sup>

In fact, the true barbarians are, for Bertrand, the indigenous inhabitants. Arabs appear only twice in the text, and in both instances are described in negative terms: "[Rafael] was repulsed by the locals, their filth and dullness... Their stench made him sick... Rafael felt only scorn for this rabble" (225-6). But their proximity is at the core of Bertrand's call for rebarbarization. According to Lorcin, "it was in their midst that the new Latin race would be properly schooled. In a bourgeois society, like that of France, which was constantly threatened by loss of vigour (*ramollissement*) due to an excess of well-being or sentimental humanitarianism, it was a good thing... to live in the middle of a rough, often troubled area" ("Decadence" 190). The development of the positive qualities of the Latins of Africa can only occur against a clearly defined and hostile Other. For rebarbarization to be successful, the Latins must compete with and overcome the true barbarians, by assuming some of their characteristics. Like Leroy-Beaulieu in his treatise on colonization, Bertrand assumed that France had become over-civilized, and

that contact with the rough environment and people of Africa would reactivate the latent qualities of the race, halt the degeneration caused by complacency and over-refinement, and restore the to greatness.

For Bertrand, the “Latins” are uniquely and innately able to carry out the work of colonization and settlement. In contrast, the Northern Europeans do not fare as well in Algeria, because, it seems, they are physiologically ill-suited to withstand the heat and wind of the desert. For instance, Thérèse, a young woman whom Rafael meets in Medea and who becomes his mistress, is affected by the environment to the point of losing herself. “Dizzy, swept up by the brutal rhythm, Thérèse longed for Rafael’s embrace. Her scruples, her former reserve came back to her at once, but without arousing any feelings of remorse. All of the *ideas* she had brought from France, she now regarded as foreign, as only good for over there. They no longer existed. They melted into the dreadful breath of the South” (155). For Bertrand, race is a combination of environment, culture and blood. Pale-faced Thérèse, transplanted into an alien land, is unable to adapt; her beliefs cannot resist change. Her experience is similar to Loti’s Peyral, whose own identity and will dissolved in the heat and torpor of Senegal. The Latins, on the other hand, only become more determined to overcome the hostile landscape and climate and thrive under such harsh conditions.

In the novel, Europe itself is presented as the site of barbaric disintegration and decline. According to Belamri, Bertrand “was convinced that the French ‘race’ developing overseas was superior to that of the *métropole*, which he considered exhausted by a murderous and backward democracy, corrupted by dilettante intellectuals, submerged by a sick and dim-witted proletariat” (194-5).<sup>32</sup> When Rafael makes one trip

to Spain to visit his relatives, he becomes “more and more convinced that he was sinking deeper into savagery” (256). In addition, although they are his relatives by blood, he feels no closeness to them. “First of all he felt a gulf between him and his relatives. He would never be able to understand them or live their life” (279-280). It seems as though the two groups had evolved along different paths, the Europeans in Europe declining and degenerating, while the settlers in Africa were getting more vigorous and more numerous even as they were reclaiming the past greatness of their race.

The novel ends with Rafael leaving Algiers for the South, after a brief courtship and marriage to Assompcion, the daughter of Spanish settlers. Indeed for Bertrand, the way to create a strong, passionate race is through intermarriage among Latin races; as a consequence, their innate qualities will be further concentrated. The fertility of the women is glorified, as is their ability to produce a “handsome, hardworking, ardent race” (Lorcin 319). According to Bertrand, their vitality and energy derives from their race and from the environment in combination.

To conclude, I would like to briefly discuss Zola’s *Fécondité* (1899), the only novel where he mentions Africa at length, and one in which colonization is presented, as in Bertrand’s work, as a source of national and racial regeneration. It is the first novel from the *Evangelies* cycle, a group of four novels intended by Zola to expose the ills of contemporary France, “a society in its death throes, in its hatred for normal and healthy life” (425), and to adumbrate visionary solutions.<sup>33</sup> Zola addresses in *Fécondité* the issue of depopulation, which was seen as a particularly pressing problem in France, and as a sign of national degeneration. With its blatant anti-Malthusian stance, *Fécondité* proposes

a cure to “our modern neurosis, our degeneracy” (410), manifested in the voluntary sterility of bourgeois families (who choose to have only one child), and the plight of working-class girls seduced, abandoned, and forced to have illegal and unsafe abortions. In his plea for a strong and growing population, to counter the “senseless death of the nation” (270), Zola’s concerns echo those of Nordau and his diagnosis of “*fin de race*” (2). The novel is especially critical of bourgeois men and their quest for selfish enjoyment. Like Nordau again, Zola views the decline of French society as a consequence of modernity, “the price paid for an overly acute civilization” (146). As an alternative and a solution, Zola “imagines a bountiful agrarian society ... combating the pathologies associated with urban life in a modern industrial setting” (Mayer-Robin 6). In the novel’s final section, this utopian vision extends to Africa, in an imaginary Sudan colonized and peopled by the offspring of the Froment couple, whose extraordinary fertility announces the regeneration of the race and the nation. Although the novel deals primarily with the Froments in France, the African epilogue is significant in its embrace of colonization as an opportunity for the renewal of certain French virtues, similarly to the function of the conquest of Algeria in Bertrand’s novel.<sup>34</sup>

The novel is centered on Mathieu Froment, his wife Marianne,<sup>35</sup> and their numerous offspring and follows them over several decades, in their gradual conquest of the land of Chantebled, outside of Paris. Mathieu’s choice to leave his good position as an engineer to return to the land is the starting point for a steady expansion of both family and wealth. Indeed *Fécondité* is predicated upon the idea that only manual work is truly productive. Mathieu Froment’s decision to farm Chantebled was an economic and a moral one. Not only did he believe that cultivating Chantebled would allow him to

provide for his family, but he viewed manual labor as an expression of moral integrity, showing respect for the earth and the passage of the seasons. His move back to the land is a direct condemnation of the corruption and “unnaturalness” of modern, urban life. *Fécondité* indeed promotes a conservative and traditionalist agenda based on agrarian values, a “nostalgic pastoralism” (Spurr 30). Mathieu’s dream of a fertile agrarian paradise materializes over the course of the novel, and extends in the last section of the book beyond his corner of France into Africa, through a son’s venture in the Sudan. Nicolas, one of their last-born, recognizing the lack of opportunity available to him in France (his older brothers have seized control over the factory, financial firm, farm, mill), leaves for Africa and essentially disappears from the novel. His destiny is mentioned briefly on two occasions, when the reader learns that he has left for Senegal and later on has traveled into the Sudan. Only in the final chapter of the novel, during the celebration of Mathieu and Marianne’s seventieth wedding anniversary, the occasion for a large-scale family reunion, does one of Nicolas’s sons, Dominique, return to Chantebled.

Dominique’s description of the African Froments’ accomplishments is lyrical, giving the epilogue an unrealistic, quasi-mythic dimension. The young man insists on the immensity of the territories available to settlers, in contrast to the limitations of Mathieu Froment’s original Chantebled.<sup>36</sup> Nicolas’s project was to found “at the heart of virgin territories, where he dreamed of a new France, a vast colonial empire that would rejuvenate the old race by providing it with its share of land” (661). The link between the availability of land and the renewal or regeneration of the race, explicit in this sentence, has demographic, economic and moral components. Nicolas’s venture into Africa is in fact a repetition of his father’s conquest of the original Chantebled, which itself was an

effort to counteract the demographic and moral decay of urban life. The land of promise in Africa, there to be seized by whoever is willing to work, gives the Froment family the opportunity to keep growing: Nicolas has even more children than Mathieu, the original patriarch. The Froments' extraordinary fertility therefore reaches across the continent, and promotes the wealth of the family and the nation. The process of procreation and childbirth, so crucial narratively and thematically to the novel as a whole, is what characterizes its African epilogue as well. Indeed, colonization is first and foremost an expansion of the family, and the relationship of the colony to the metropole is expressed in familial terms: "A new France is born afar, an unlimited empire... The new, vast France, linked to its mother" (741).

In addition to highlighting the link between family and nation, Dominique's discourse presents an optimistic vision of the colony as "the sovereign France of tomorrow" (740), "the wonderful future France" (734) "the young, gigantic France of tomorrow" (751). This section of the novel reads like overt propaganda in favor of colonization, which will offer, according to Seillan "the certainty to provide France with the means to its demographic and moral regeneration, ... the promise to conquer the Sahara desert, to transform the Sahel into a breadbasket and to guarantee the wealth and happiness of all settlers" (364). As in Bertrand's text, the focus is on demographic and economic expansion; regeneration occurs through fertility and manual labor. But unlike Bertrand, who describes the day-to-day life of the protagonists in unsentimental and realistic ways, Zola presents a mythical narrative that places Africa and its settlement outside of history. Bertrand's vision of a regenerative colonization of Algeria is based on a return to a past historical era, whereas Zola's image of colonization involves an

abstraction from history. Indeed, the territory settled by the Froments is shown as a primordial land, where the Niger River fertilizes the virgin soil like “a god creating a world as yet unknown” (737). The Sudan Zola describes is a luxuriant paradise, virtually uninhabited, and hence suitable for the establishment of a new settlement.<sup>37</sup>

The Froment colony heralds a future African France, bigger, more populous and more prosperous than the motherland. The narrator, in his optimistic exuberance, presents an exalted vision of the future, when each will reap “the benefits expected in our age, economic equality gained as was political equality, the fair distribution of wealth made easy, mandatory work restored in its glorious necessity” (746). The novel ends with “the generous utopia” of “the family joined with the nation, the nation joined with humanity, a single fraternal people,” of a world where “peace, truth and justice” reign (750). The march of progress towards these lofty ideals is guaranteed, for the narrator, by demographic expansion and by the conquest of land. As Nicolas’s wish upon his departure for Africa had been “to found another dynasty of Froments” (661), his son’s description of the African venture confirms the growth of the family, their take-over of land and ensuing wealth.

However, the economically, demographically and morally successful colonization, which represents for Zola the promise of national regeneration, rests on disturbing premises. Indeed the republican progressivism of the future utopia is in tension with the conservative ideals of racial purity and feudal, agrarian patriarchy upon which the settlement is based. While Dominique claims that “there is, in the colonies, no race more fertile than the French race, which seems to be sterile on our old land” (742), this race is in fact not the French race, but the Froment clan. Indeed, they are the only settlers,

“a single family” (724) populating “the other France, ... born out of their womb” (734). And while Dominique explains that they “live in a republic” (738), the recurrent terms used to describe the society founded by his father in the Sudan (empire, kingdom, kings, princes) evoke the Ancien Régime.<sup>38</sup> Zola’s own avowed progressive ideology is contradicted by the conservative utopian vision presented in the text. In his evocation of the Froments’ mission in the Sudan, Zola places the colony in a paradoxical position in relation to the homeland. For such a committed republican as Zola, this appears paradoxical and raises the question of whether this imaginary colonization of Africa would contribute to the continent’s evolution (progress?) toward republican ideals or whether it would leave it stagnant, outside of history.

What is at stake in these fictional representations of encounters with African and Africans is the preservation of a racial and geopolitical hierarchy seen as threatened in *fin-de-siècle* France. The shock of the 1870 defeat in the war against Prussia troubled Frenchmen and created anxieties about the future of the nation and its relevance on the world stage. Racial degeneration emerged as a convincing account of France’s perceived decline, and the colonial enterprise as a possible corrective to the malaise of post-1870 France. The novels take up, more or less explicitly, the challenge of reaffirming France’s dominant position in such uncertain times. Whether the prominent position of white Europeans is explained in biological terms, using Darwinian theory, or imagined as the culmination of a destiny rooted in ancient history, the novels seek to present it as an undeniable fact. Yet, even as Verne and Loti proclaim the unquestionable superiority of the white man, their texts betray profound anxieties about the actual strength of his position. In Bertrand’s and Zola’s novels, France’s racial decline is acknowledged, and

its reversal through colonization is outlined. These authors, through their fictions, participated in the elaboration of an ideological construction of the binary degeneration/regeneration that informed public life during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> The first chapter in William Schneider's *Quality and Quantity* provides a good overview of the affinities between demographic anxieties and degeneration theory (11-55).

<sup>2</sup> In *The Meaning of Race*, Kenan Malik argues that "the notion of race expressed both the idea of superiority given by certain evolution and the sense of pessimism given by inescapable regression" (73).

<sup>3</sup> See Seillan 13-15. Victor Hugo, the prophet of the republic, gave a speech in 1879 in which he called for the republic to seize Africa, the land of "barbarism" and "savagery," to promote "harmony, brotherhood and peace" ("Discours sur l'Afrique").

<sup>4</sup> The political ideology of Revanchism developed in the 1870s, drawing from patriotic sentiment seeking to reverse the territorial losses of the war. Paul Déroulède, one of the most vocal members of the nationalist right, allegedly said to Jules Ferry, regarding the colonial enterprise: "J'ai perdu deux sœurs [Alsace and Lorraine, the two provinces lost in the war of 1870], et vous m'offrez vingt domestiques [numerous territories in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Polynesia became part of the French Empire in the early Third Republic]."

<sup>5</sup> Napoleon III's imperialist ambitions had ended in defeat, with the failed Mexican colonial venture of 1867 and the execution of Archduke Maximilian. The African expeditions of the mid-1870s, and the subsequent military actions undertaken in the

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1880s and 1890s provided opportunities for small groups of soldiers—not the massive Napoleonic armies—to show their individual heroism by fighting new enemies.

<sup>6</sup> See also Spurr 120-124. Spurr, like Conklin, points to the particularly French idea of colonization in the name of civilization. He writes that “the colonial empire had been rhetorically endowed with the noblest sentiments of the French Revolution, the humanistic ideals of the Third Republic, and the historical grandeur of French civilization itself” (120).

<sup>7</sup> In *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said describes the European colonial expansion not simply as an act of acquisition and accumulation, but as upholding an “almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples” (10).

<sup>8</sup> In his *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau identified “two sorts of inequalities in the human species:” the first, “natural or physical” inequality, concerns the biological differences in “age, health, strength of body and qualities of the mind and soul;” the second, “moral or political inequality,” consists of “the different privileges that some enjoy to the prejudice of others” (29-30). In the scientific discourse on race that developed in the nineteenth century, the two types of inequality were conflated, or rather, the second type was reduced to the first.

<sup>9</sup> This debate extended at the time to the consideration of the origins of humanity: proponents of the first view argued for a polygenist conception of humanity, according to which human races are of different lineages whereas others argued for a single origin of humanity. In general, for polygenists, different races followed different evolutionary paths, whereas for monogenists, racial differences were explained by the fact that races were at different stages on the same evolutionary path.

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<sup>10</sup> Seillan proposes in the introduction to his book on French colonial literature a useful classification of the texts according to their primary function (*savoir, distraire, vouloir, devoir*).

<sup>11</sup> See also Mary-Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* for a theorization of the ways Europeans "read" and represented exotic lands.

<sup>12</sup> In her study of colonial literature, Martine Astier-Loutfi notes that the cruelty, sadism and brutality of the indigenous people were commonplaces in literary representations as well as in public discourse (30).

<sup>13</sup> Victor Hugo, in the "Discours sur l'Afrique" mentioned above, claimed that Africa was a land without history.

<sup>14</sup> Earlier, when the explorers discover a gold mine, it is Joe, the manservant and hence the one member of the expedition who is not part of the leisured class, who appears to lose his mind at the thought of abandoning such riches. Fergusson manages to convince him to leave by marking the mine's location on a map that he promises to give Joe upon their return to England.

<sup>15</sup> The large-scale exploration and colonization of Africa took place in the decades following the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*.

<sup>16</sup> His *De la colonisation chez les peuples modernes* went through five printings in a short period of time. The ideas he presented in this work, the "bible of colonialism," inspired Jules Ferry and other politicians on the left (Daughton 10).

<sup>17</sup> In "The Tender Frame of Man," Mark Harrison looks at the links between race, climate and disease in the colonies in the British context. He shows that in the nineteenth century, medical men were increasingly thinking that Europeans could never be fully

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acclimatized to the “pathogenic climate” of certain colonies (78). Racial differences therefore translate into questions of adaptation or adaptability to various environments. Loti’s insistence of the effects of the heat on Peyral underscores the fact that the young man is ill-suited for life in Senegal because of it is such an alien milieu for his natural constitution.

<sup>18</sup> The curse of Ham was used as a justification for slavery and racial domination well into the nineteenth century. The biblical legend also fit well within the pseudo-scientific system of racial divisions embraced at the time.

<sup>19</sup> See Spurr 146, 148.

<sup>20</sup> Verne insisted that he did not adhere to Darwin’s theory of evolution. In fact he contended in a 1901 interview that “the conclusions I shall put forward will be ... entirely opposed to the theories of Darwin” regarding the kinship between men and apes (qtd. in Glick 450). However, the idea of evolution had sufficiently permeated the culture that in spite of Verne’s denial, Darwin’s influence is evident in the novel.

<sup>21</sup> At the close of the first chapter, the two protagonists have a conversation regarding their expectations and Huber misquotes Baudelaire in reference to his search for the new, escaping the ennui of modernity through contact with Africa: “Fouiller dans l’inconnu pour trouver du nouveau” (16).

<sup>22</sup> This is Pelckmans’s term.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the only art that is mentioned is music: the Wagddis are entranced by an out-of-tune barrel organ, brought from Europe by Johausen. For the adventurers, the Wagddis’ fascination with the broken object and the discordant sounds it emits constitutes in fact a sign that they have no potential for appreciation for real art.

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<sup>24</sup> Lorcin writes that colonization for Bertrand “was an urgent task for essentially it consisted of regenerating the French race, enfeebled by a century of well-being and security and a weak, senseless education” (*Imperial Identities* 205).

<sup>25</sup> Lavignerie became archbishop of Algiers in 1867, and was made cardinal in 1882. He led the Church’s efforts to Christianize North Africa. In his preface, Bertrand compares him to archbishop Turpin, from the *Chanson de Roland*, one of the oldest French literary texts (5). The reference to Charlemagne’s campaign against the Saracens allows Bertrand to place the colonial enterprise within a mythical lineage that links the birth of the French nation with the fight against the Infidels. Bertrand was extremely disdainful of Islam, which he viewed only as a destructive force, and sought to demean the influence of Arab culture in North Africa.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine was bishop of Hippo (in present-day Algeria) and played a great role in strengthening the place of the Christian Church against other faiths. While the religious element is present in the preface and in other writings by Bertrand, it is absent from this novel.

<sup>27</sup> The revolutionary action of the crowd, and its institutional incarnation in the republic, represented, for Bertrand, the antithesis of individual heroism.

<sup>28</sup> Bertrand was a professor of literature and was sent to Algiers in 1891. The military conquest of Algeria had taken place under the Restoration and the July Monarchy, and was complete by 1848. Algeria was officially declared part of France in the Constitution of 1848.

<sup>29</sup> The value placed on individual action, as opposed to reflection or reverie, recalls the dichotomy found in Bourget’s *Le Disciple* between Greslou and Comte André. The latter,

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described as a man of action, embodied the (lost) values of France's past glory, whereas Greslou's status as an intellectual was linked to the country's decline from over-refinement, by an excess of rationality, in turn connected to the rationalism of the Enlightenment and by extension, the Revolution.

<sup>30</sup> What this suggests is that Africa will provide more excitement and adventure than any literary or musical piece, even *Carmen* (Prosper Mérimée's novella, published in 1847, was adapted as an opera by Georges Bizet in 1875), which represented an exoticized Spain as a land of danger, mystery and sexual license.

<sup>31</sup> See Lorcin, "Decadence" for a brief account of the links between Barrès and Bertrand. Both were natives of Lorraine, their work is animated by the same nationalist purpose, and their respective ideologies have a lot in common. Bertrand however thought that the colonies offered a better school of national energy because of the opportunities afforded to individuals.

<sup>32</sup> See chapter 1 for an account of the link between republican politics, especially educational policies, and degeneration.

<sup>33</sup> Zola's project with the *Évangiles* cycle, written at the cusp of the *fin de siècle*, was, as Mitterand explains, to present the fractured *polis* of the present, but also to announce the harmonious, utopian *polis* of the next centuries (85). Written between 1897 and 1902, the three novels, *Fécondité*, *Travail* and *Vérité* (at the time of Zola's death in 1902, the fourth volume, *Justice*, was unwritten) are *romans à thèse* in which the author tackles contemporary moral and social issues.

<sup>34</sup> Bertrand and Zola were at odds politically, but their embrace of colonization transcends the divisions between left and right.

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<sup>35</sup> In *Monsters and Revolutionaries*, Françoise Vergès studies how the French state used the image of la Mère-Patrie to impose “an ideal model of filiation” (4). Zola’s extraordinarily fecund Marianne is an embodiment of the benevolent and productive republican order.

<sup>36</sup> Up to that point, the narrator had insisted on the growth and vast expanse of Mathieu’s domain.

<sup>37</sup> Seillan shows that Zola’s Sudan, settled and populated by Frenchmen, was a myth, an imaginary place used for purely narrative and thematic purposes.

<sup>38</sup> See Seillan 374-378 for an analysis of the conservative utopia in *Fécondité*; Mayer-Robin comments on the imperialistic and militaristic rhetoric of the African pages in the novel (9, 12). Baguley also points to the ideological contradictions in the novel.

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