

**THE MEDAN MATRIX:
HUYSMANS AND MAUPASSANT FOLLOWING
ZOLA'S MODEL OF NATURALISM**

DISSERTATION

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By

Jennifer Kristen Wolter, B.A., M.A.

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The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Professor Charles D. Minahen, Adviser

Professor Christiane Laeuffer

Professor Mihaela Marin

Approved by

Adviser
Department of French and Italian

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ABSTRACT

Comparable to a matrix, the Médan group incarnates a system for the production of naturalist literature with Emile Zola serving as the model for a select handful of writers. Nourished by the scientific developments of the nineteenth century, Zola's theories and successful practice of naturalism drew Joris-Karl Huysmans and Guy de Maupassant, among others, to the movement. Yet, they soon diverged from Zola's model of naturalism, as did Zola himself at times. The first chapter of this dissertation seeks to reveal the inherent discrepancies within the theory of naturalism that prevent a true fusion of science and art in the novel.

Les Soirées de Médan, a collection of stories about the Franco-Prussian War, united the writers in a show of adherence to the naturalist movement. While the work garnered the reputation of a manifesto, the stories belie the deviations from naturalism that were present and growing in Huysmans, Maupassant, and even Zola. Chapter two approaches the Médan group from its foundation in support of an aesthetic ideal to the contradictory display of naturalist and non-naturalist features in Les Soirées de Médan.

The untenability of the Médan group is confirmed by the members' attraction to various literary styles. Chapters three and four examine Huysmans's A rebours and Maupassant's "Le Horla," hailed as exemplars of

the decadent and fantastic genres. Themes of artifice in A rebours and the supernatural in “Le Horla” overturn the conventional subject matter of naturalism. It is a mistake, however, to distance these works entirely from the naturalist theories that ground them. Even so, both writers choose to depict some of the most unnatural aspects of human existence.

Overall, the interplay of naturalist and non-naturalist elements in Huysmans and Maupassant blurs the lines of classification to affirm that the writers possess unique talents independent of their initial allegiance to Zola’s campaign of naturalism. Indeed, Zola recognized the individuality of artistic genius and embraced diversity in the Médan group. The metaphor of the matrix therefore is not to force each writer into the same mold, but rather to provide a template for the exploration of humanity in literature.

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VITA

March 30, 1973 Born - Toledo, Ohio

1995 B.A. French and English, *summa cum laude*, University Honors, Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, Ohio

1996 M.A. French Language, Literature, and Civilization, Middlebury College Graduate French School, Middlebury, Vermont and Paris, France

1996-2001 Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of French and Italian, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1999-2001 Peer Teaching Supervisor and Course Coordinator, Department of French and Italian, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1999-2001 Assistant Director of the Undergraduate French Language Program, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

2001-present Graduate Research Associate, Individualized Language Learning Center, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

PUBLICATIONS

"Viewing Au Bonheur des Dames in the Context of Occupied France."
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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: French and Italian

Concentrations in Nineteenth-Century Literature, Film Studies, and Linguistics

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INTRODUCTION

Comparable to a matrix, the Médan group incarnates a system for the production of naturalist literature with Emile Zola serving as the model for a select handful of promising young writers. While Zola's influence extended to more than a few artists of his time, I have chosen in this study to concentrate on those who took part in publishing Les Soirées de Médan along with Zola in 1880. More specifically, the two most notable writers in this grouping are Joris-Karl Huysmans and Guy de Maupassant, whose affiliation with the Médan group poses a significant point of comparison to their work as independent artists. Starting with an examination of the theory of naturalism and the contributions of Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans in Les Soirées de Médan, I intend to provide the means for considering these and other of their works both inside and outside the matrix of naturalism.

Nourished by the scientific developments of the nineteenth century, naturalism came into shape in Zola's volumes of theoretical writings that include Le Roman expérimental (1880). By introducing science into the art form of the novel, Zola proposes a methodology for presenting a realistic rendering of the society of his times, as is evident in the subtitle to his twenty-volume series of novels, Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le Second Empire. Yet, Zola's talent for transfiguring the real outshines his

scientific aims. In applying his theoretical works to the practice of his fiction, we essentially find an internal battle of the thinker and the writer. The first chapter of this dissertation, then, seeks to reveal the inherent discrepancies in the theory of naturalism that may prevent a true fusion of science and art in the novel.

Certain profound dictums make up the credo of naturalism, such as Zola's reference to a work of art as "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament" and his advice to young writers to "découvrir votre coin de vérité, grâce à la méthode." These statements leave the door open to interpretation and allow for a large role to be given to the temperament and originality of the artist. Accordingly, in a work like Les Soirées de Médan, one finds a union of quite diverse talents that overwhelm the professed intentions of the authors to show their common "tendances littéraires" and "affinité de tempéraments." While that publication and its surrounding documents situate the work as a sort of manifesto of naturalism, the contents of the stories about the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 display an osmosis of naturalist and non-naturalist elements.

Zola's "L'Attaque du moulin" leads the way in this collection as a banner for naturalism. However, classical and symbolic qualities in this drama of the siege of a mill in a small village, which becomes the site of a brief but potent skirmish, combines with the love story of its two young protagonists, Françoise and Dominique, to create a text that is in many respects non-naturalist. Maupassant's "Boule de suif," clearly the star of the group, follows as an ironic social commentary of the virtuous prostitute who upholds a moral victory within the microcosm of society represented by her fellow travelers. Huysmans's "Sac au dos" departs from the other stories to recount the author's own adventures as

a soldier felled by dysentery in the semi-comical tale of Eugène Lejantel, a precursor of the decadent protagonist des Esseintes of the later novel A rebours. Chapter two of my study analyzes these three stories within the commotion of the Médan group's battle of naturalism to uncover a mixed reading of naturalist and non-naturalist features that predict the departures of Huysmans and Maupassant from the establishment of the Médan group and from Zola's own self-contradicting model of naturalism.

J.-K. Huysmans's A rebours (1884) is thought to be a clean break from naturalism, as the author would assert some twenty years later in a preface added to the novel. My evaluation of this novel in chapter three shows many signs of the struggle between naturalism on the one hand, chiefly in its method of documentation and its theories of determinism and degeneration, and the aesthetics of *fin-de-siècle* decadence on the other. Hailed at the time as the breviary of decadence, A rebours embraces all things decadent in the character of des Esseintes and his artificial, museum-like home. However, my study also points out a number of significant naturalist traits that are often overlooked or unrecognized as remaining faithful to Zola's model of naturalism and indeed Huysmans's own manifestation of naturalism that appears in his other works. The notion of a spiritual naturalism that comes to the fore in a later setting, Là-bas, may suggest a new, personal interpretation of Zola's naturalism that permits Huysmans to go beyond the constraints of another man's doctrines to incorporate his own musings on that which is beyond the scope of human knowledge, namely into the realm of mysticism, reflecting the author's ultimate religious conversion.

Chapter four deals with Guy de Maupassant's "Le Horla" (1887), which likewise surpasses the traditional Zolian model of naturalism to encounter the possibilities of another world existing beyond our own. In this way, the story is perhaps the best representation of Maupassant's pursuit of the fantastic and proof of the subtle ambiguities he was able to master in this genre. The competing interpretations of the Horla as a supernatural being or a hallucination produced by the narrator's imagination, possibly as a sign of encroaching madness, both present challenges to naturalism. In the case of the latter, the writing of madness poses a crucial problem for the naturalist method. In his 1888 essay on "Le Roman," Maupassant speaks of the illusions of realism that necessarily prevent any work of fiction from being a true mirror of reality. This argument thereby confronts the very heart of Zola's naturalism, as the language of madness is full of trickery and illusion instead of clarity and rationality. As with Huysmans's development of a spiritual naturalism, we may also consider a new ideology in Maupassant's interpretation of naturalism that I propose to call his own theory of "illusionism."

Many issues stem from this view of Huysmans's and Maupassant's evolution during the 1880s. Did they seek to divorce themselves from naturalism altogether? Or, did they abandon only Zola's model, in effect revising naturalism according to their own aesthetics? A decade after Les Soirées de Médan, Jules Huret questioned most of the top writers of the time in order to determine in his Enquête sur l'évolution littéraire the status of literature, primarily of naturalism, including whether Huysmans and Maupassant "ont réellement évolué ou seulement changé de sujets et d'étiquettes" (45). One

respondent, Anatole France, cites Maupassant and Huysmans as former disciples of the naturalist school now turning to “le roman psychologique” (56-57). But, rather than considering this a rupture, it only stands to reason that naturalism would give way to psychology in literature, as it marks a logical shift in focus from the science of the body to the science of the mind. Once the factors of heredity, environment, and society had been sufficiently explored as literary topics, there would be room and opportunity for writers to delve deeper into the minds of their subjects.

Huysmans’s A rebours and Maupassant’s “Le Horla” provide a solid base for comparison both in terms of thematic content and methodology, particularly concerning the protagonists of each work and their attempts to deal with unnatural phenomena. In other words, the protagonist is engaged with elements that seem to go against nature, whether coming from within his own mind or found in the environment. Both of these works are focused on individual subjects in increasing circumstances of isolation, and they are also written, to a certain degree, in a subjective manner through internal focalization. In both cases, the protagonist is driven to madness, resulting in confusion, despair, physical and mental illness, and even thoughts of suicide. More importantly, each loses the ability to rationalize and use logic, turning more and more to the irrational thoughts and obsessions that occupy his mind, thus rendering the works as psychological studies, which could be a form of naturalism that builds on the initial physiological phase.

Like Huysmans and Maupassant, Zola too dealt with the intricacies of the human mind and, perhaps unintentionally, expanded the frontiers of naturalism

beyond the adherence to the science and theory of his day. Many different literary, scientific, philosophic, and artistic movements come into confluence in Zola's model of naturalism. Indeed, a sizable segment of Zola scholarship is concerned with the aspects of his works that seem at odds with the stated doctrines of naturalism, confronting the apparent incompatibility of Zola's theory and practice. In the Rougon-Macquart series, one cannot miss the grandeur of symbolic figures to which Zola confesses in a letter to Henry Céard: "J'ai l'hypertrophie du détail vrai, le saut dans les étoiles sur le tremplin de l'observation exacte" (22 March 1885, Corr V, 249). The Ebauches for his novels are also revealing, emphasizing the poetic nature of each project: Au Bonheur des Dames is "le poème de l'activité moderne," Nana is "le poème des désirs du mâle," and La Terre is "le poème vivant de la terre." The matrix of naturalism in its genetic conception thus presents a fertile grounds for study, as more and more critics are turning to the origins of Zola's works, evident in recent studies by Henri Mitterand, Le Roman à l'œuvre: Genèse et valeurs, and Colette Becker, Zola: Le Saut dans les étoiles.

In my view, the most ample demonstration of Zola's non-naturalist aesthetics comes in L'Œuvre (1886), a semi-autobiographical novel whose Ebauche provides a panoply of considered titles that include "le génie, l'idéal, la gloire, l'immortalité, création, la lutte contre l'ange, la vie universelle," and so on (425-26). So many of these return Zola to a romantic view of life and nature rather than a scientific and methodical naturalist approach. The novel itself is flooded with romanticism from the start in the true-to-life account of childhood

adventures shared by Claude Lantier and Pierre Sandoz, both of whom have been shown to be fictional representations of Zola himself:

C'étaient des fuites loin du monde, une absorption instinctive au sein de la bonne nature, une adoration irraisonnée de gamins pour les arbres, les eaux, les monts, pour cette joie sans limite d'être seuls et d'être libres. [. . .] [I]ls avaient ainsi, dès quatorze ans, vécu isolés, enthousiastes, ravagés d'une fièvre de littérature et d'art. (94-96)

L'Œuvre also serves a more pragmatic purpose of showing a group of young artists out to take the Parisian art world by storm. In this band of brothers, we see a strong resemblance to the Médan group, even down to a detail in Zola's notes that equates one of the characters with Maupassant for being "très malin, tournant contre la bande, se mettant à part, cajolant les critiques, passant au boulevard" (41). My examination of the matrix of naturalism in Zola, Huysmans, and Maupassant could then be traced in the fictional world of L'Œuvre as well. However, rather than pursuing this secondary application of the matrix metaphor, a concept that is detailed in my second chapter, I have chosen to limit my focus to the real-life Médan group. Nonetheless, L'Œuvre is important throughout my study as a basis for many Zolian concepts that are comparable in the works of Huysmans and Maupassant.

Ultimately, the setting of the Médan group may be considered as a matrix in the production of naturalism as it was carried out by Zola, Huysmans, and Maupassant. The idea of Huysmans and Maupassant "following" Zola's model of naturalism is doubly charged with the notions of following after the events that centered around the 1880 publication of Les Soirées de Médan and following in terms of adherence to Zola's model. In this study, I will point to Huysmans's and Maupassant's own models of naturalism to indicate a larger application of

the universal theory of naturalism in dialogue with Zola's paradigm. The extent to which these Médan associates followed Zola's model of naturalism can enlighten our understanding of the complex, hybrid natures of A rebours as decadent-naturalist and "Le Horla" as fantastic-naturalist. Although Huysmans and Maupassant, like Zola, ground their works in the scientific, naturalist theories of heredity, temperament, and other environmental factors, and support their writings with documentation from the field of modern science, they reach beyond the conventional treatment of naturalist concepts by choosing to depict some of the most unnatural or "non-natural"¹ aspects of human existence. Therefore, the essential question of what makes a work naturalist or non-naturalist, according to the definitions provided in theory and in practice, will guide this study in order to arrive at a new interpretation of the works of Huysmans and Maupassant as well as offering further possibilities for the study of Zola's own model of naturalism.

¹ Since the term "unnatural" connotes not only what is not natural ("non-natural") but also what is abnormal or even strange, I use it only when such added semantic values are implied. However, the broader term "non-natural" is applicable to anything that is not natural, in the normal order of things, or found in nature. Therefore, "non-natural" does not necessarily convey the pejorative sense of "unnatural." Additionally, I use the term "non-naturalist" to refer to that which is not naturalist, for similar reasons. For instance, "anti-naturalist" would indicate a deliberate opposition to naturalist theories or tendencies, which is not always intended.

CHAPTER 1
NATURALISM IN THEORY AND IN PRACTICE:
INTRODUCING SCIENCE INTO THE ART FORM OF THE NOVEL

The problem of reconciling the scientific mission of the naturalist writer with the artistic expression of literature arises and extends from Le Roman expérimental (1880), a collection of essays in which Emile Zola articulates his views on naturalist theory and practice, following the example of Claude Bernard's experimental method in medicine.¹ This text is considered by many to be Zola's manifesto of naturalism. However, Zola's theoretical work has generally been disparaged. Yves Chevrel observes that most criticism, both contemporaneous and modern-day, emphasizes the subjects or themes of the naturalist novel over the experimental method: "Le Roman expérimental [. . .] has been neglected for a long while, and if Zola research, especially during the last few decades, has taken some pleasure in reevaluating his novels, it has at the same time underestimated or even ignored his critical and theoretical studies" ("Toward an Aesthetic of the Naturalist Novel" 47). My aim, then, is to address Zola's experimental method in conjunction with the scientific theories that he introduced into the art form of the novel. This fundamental examination of the

¹ The title essay, "Le Roman expérimental," is the most significant for my study, but I also refer to the work as a whole for general discussion.

theory and practice of naturalism will serve to enlighten my study of Zola, Huysmans, and Maupassant in Les Soirées de Médan and beyond.

By the end of the 1870s, Zola's Rougon-Macquart series was well underway with the triumph of L'Assommoir still resounding even as Nana began to appear in serial form alongside "Le Roman expérimental" in Le Voltaire in October 1879. Yet, the internal conflict of naturalism in theory and in practice was already showing in this concurrent publication. Alain Pagès suggests in Bataille littéraire that the fictional work overshadows the theoretical essay: "Si la critique a si mal lu pendant l'automne 1879 ce texte fondamental ['Le Roman expérimental'], c'est certainement à cause de son entourage romanesque [. . .]. Ainsi le discours naturaliste, dans son effort de conquête spatiale, s'est-il détruit lui-même: par son désir d'une trop grande extension" (84). While Pagès is concerned here with the public reception of these texts, we may also look inside them to find a competition between theory and fiction on the level of content as well. The contrast between Zola's model of naturalism in theory and in practice will ultimately show that the non-naturalist features of fiction steal the spotlight from the theoretical grounding professed in Le Roman expérimental.

Many of the articles reproduced in Le Roman expérimental were originally written in 1875-1879, first for the Russian journal Vestnik Evropy, or Le Messager de l'Europe, before being published in France, mostly in Le Voltaire. Pagès comments on the ramifications of Zola's collaboration with the foreign journal: "La théorie du 'Roman expérimental' va naître de cette nouvelle possibilité d'expression, de ce détour insolite par une revue étrangère. [. . .] Le Messager de l'Europe est l'école du discours naturaliste" (82-83). In his later

preface to Le Roman expérimental, Zola indicates his polemical purposes and thanks Russia for accepting his writings when his own nation's press did not:

Qu'il me soit permis de témoigner publiquement toute ma gratitude à la grande nation qui a bien voulu m'accueillir et m'adopter, au moment où pas un journal, à Paris, ne m'acceptait et ne tolérait ma bataille littéraire. [. . .] Ce sont donc ici des articles de combat, des manifestes, si l'on veut, écrits dans la fougue même de l'idée, sans aucun raffinement de rhétorique. (55)

The language Zola uses is quite revealing, as he speaks in a very personal way of the literary battle in which he felt he was engaged. Indeed, Zola's prolific contributions to several popular journals, especially in the year 1879, amount to nothing less than a conquest for naturalism.²

Henri Mitterand, in "Zola théoricien et critique du roman," refers to the period of 1879-1881 as "une deuxième époque du naturalisme [qui coïncide] avec un véritable forcing didactique et polémique de Zola" (14). After years of engaging in the trench warfare of journalistic debate, Zola was ready to leave that part of his career in a blaze of glory with retrospective works like Le Roman expérimental and a year-long campaign of articles, justly called Une Campagne, in Le Figaro.³ Zola's strategy seems to have been to solidify the place of both naturalism and himself in the literary world, as Mitterand shows in reference to Le Roman expérimental:

C'est pour lui une manière de clore une carrière, déjà longue, de chroniqueur et de critique, d'affirmer une maturité de chef d'école,

² Consult Henri Mitterand and Halina Suwala, Emile Zola journaliste, 118-27, for proof of the quantity of articles Zola published in 1879 alone. Moreover, this year was the first since the debut of the Rougon-Macquart series in which he did not publish a novel, leading Pagès to conclude that it was instead a year for "réflexion théorique" (80).

³ While he maintained no regular engagement with any journal after 1882, Zola did occasionally write articles and open letters, the most famous being "J'Accuse," published in L'Aurore, 13 January 1898, in defense of Alfred Dreyfus. Also of note is his Nouvelle Campagne in Le Figaro in 1895-1896.

et surtout de montrer que les œuvres qui viennent de déclencher le scandale -- et de lui apporter la fortune -- répondaient à une esthétique délibérée, longuement approfondie, et forte. C'est aussi une manière d'affirmer, à quarante ans, une maîtrise comparable à celle des grands devanciers [. . .] Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, les Goncourt. C'est le geste qui compte, dans ces conditions. Il atteste la parfaite connaissance que Zola, professionnel de l'édition depuis près de vingt ans, a acquise de la communication "médiatique," dirions-nous aujourd'hui. (7-8)

Zola's promotion of naturalism at this particular time and in the comprehensive format of a book underscores the importance of the experimental method in naturalism. As shown even by the title, Le Roman expérimental insists upon the primacy of scientific experiment in literature and proves to be invaluable for documenting the impact of naturalism not only as a literary movement of the late nineteenth century, but also in terms of its scientific and historical significance.

Using Le Roman expérimental as a point of reference, it is possible to see how Zola's brand of naturalist literature relates to the scientific penchant of the times. This chapter entails a two-fold definition of naturalism based on the literary and scientific influences that came to shape its theory and practice. For my purposes, it is necessary to limit this study to the fields of literature and science, though the origins of naturalism may be traced through art criticism and philosophy as well.⁴ Indeed, Zola draws from each of these disciplines in his critical writings to bolster the naturalist movement in literature. Scholars have sought to define literary naturalism in terms of these other kinds: scientific, artistic, and philosophical. But these definitions are inadequate because they are

⁴ In "Le Naturalisme théorique de Zola," Mitterand outlines the history of naturalism and its lexical tradition, dating from Richelet's dictionary (1680), to demonstrate its development in the fields of science, philosophy, and the arts, arriving finally at the first citation in the nineteenth century in Russian criticism, opposing "l'école naturaliste" and "l'école de la rhétorique" in a discussion of the theory of the novel (183-86).

either too general or too restrictive. Above all, as David Baguley notes in Naturalist Fiction, “the scientific tendency is the most reductive of all three, making of naturalism an abstract method” (42). The scientific method, however, is precisely what Zola and other naturalist writers point to as being most distinctive in defining their works.⁵

There is, of course, much more to consider than the issue of scientific methodology provided in this explanation of naturalism. Looking beyond the form of the experimental method, it is important to include the substance of science as well, the actual work produced by nineteenth-century scientists and theorists. It is not only Bernard’s experimental method that counts here, but also the theories of positivism and determinism along with studies of evolution and heredity by such notable figures as Charles Darwin, Prosper Lucas, and Hippolyte Taine, who has been called a “go-between between science and literature” (Furst and Skrine 17). Thus, in the manner of Taine, this chapter examines naturalism’s attempt to connect literature and science. By beginning with the literary and scientific factors that shape naturalism, it will then be possible to apply this understanding of naturalist theory to its actual practice in the fictional works of Zola, Huysmans, and Maupassant.

⁵ Henry Céard, for example, makes a point of situating the true definition of naturalism apart from the polemics surrounding Zola: “C’est en dehors des définitions passionnées de la polémique excitée contre Zola qu’il faut chercher la formule du naturalisme. Le naturalisme n’est point un dogme littéraire, c’est une méthode scientifique” (“Naturalisme,” L’Intermédiaire des Chercheurs et Curieux 18 [10 May 1885]: 281).

The Modern Concept of Naturalism

My use of the term “modern” in relation to naturalism reflects the innovative quality expressed in the theorization of the movement in the late nineteenth century.⁶ Although many attacked Zola for his use of the term “naturalisme” in reference to the literature of his time, he was quick to assert that he did not invent it, nor did he believe that it was specific to the current trend in literature:

Mon grand crime serait d’avoir inventé et lancé un mot nouveau, pour désigner une école littéraire vieille comme le monde. D’abord, je crois ne pas avoir inventé ce mot, qui était en usage dans plusieurs littératures étrangères; je l’ai tout au plus appliqué à l’évolution actuelle de notre littérature nationale. Ensuite, le naturalisme, assure-t-on, date des premières œuvres écrites [. . .].⁷

For Zola, the naturalist novel of the late nineteenth century becomes a reinvention of this timeless concept as he takes it upon himself to define what naturalism should be in Le Roman expérimental. Here, he sets forth his own method and reasoning for other writers to follow, including the need for objective documentation and the study of humans in relation to their environment. These characteristics of the experimental method are closely linked to the scientific discoveries of the century, constituting what is truly innovative in Zola’s naturalism. Zola thus exalts the new novel of the nineteenth century: “Aujourd’hui, ce sont les romanciers qui sont les princes littéraires du temps; ils tiennent la langue, ils tiennent la méthode, ils marchent en avant, côte à côte avec la science” (165).

⁶ It is understood that every era considers itself modern and thus the application of the term in my study is not meant to refer to the modernist movement of the early twentieth century.

⁷ “Le Naturalisme au théâtre,” Le Messager de l’Europe, January 1879, rpt. in Le Roman expérimental, 139.

To situate naturalism in the context of his own times, Zola incorporates many scientific terms and notions in his theoretical writings, with words such as “observation,” “enquête,” “étude,” “document humain,” and “logique” dominating his discourse. However, Henri Mitterand suggests that the scientific quality of Zola’s naturalism is not quite as innovative as it may seem: “[L]e discours naturaliste de Zola renoue bien avec l’héritage de l’esprit des Lumières, qui au dix-huitième siècle avait déjà emprunté les objectifs et le langage de la rationalité scientifique pour revendiquer la liberté du jugement et la liberté de la création” (“Le Naturalisme théorique” 187). Moreover, Aimé Guedj contends that the whole matter of the relation between science and literature reopens an earlier debate: “En effet, ce n’est pas aux alentours de 1880 mais vingt ans plus tôt que se forme l’image prestigieuse du romancier savant. Et ce n’est pas Zola mais les critiques les plus sérieux des revues les plus éminentes qui la mettent en circulation à propos d’une toute autre génération d’écrivains,” which includes Flaubert among others (“Le Naturalisme avant Zola” 568). Thus, Zola’s supposedly new premise of the writer as a savant employing logic and reason is put into question, as Mitterand and Guedj demonstrate, since others had made the association between literature and science well before him.

For as much as Zola set out to provide a modern definition of naturalism, it is equally determined by what it is not. Naturalism can be defined by the ways in which it differs from previous literary movements and ideologies. Mitterand cites evidence that Zola found fault with certain aspects of the French literary heritage, among them “l’idéalisme classique, qui étudie ‘l’homme abstrait, l’homme métaphysique’” and “le romantisme, qui nie le réel en lui substituant

l'imaginaire et 'grandit mensongèrement les personnages'" ("Le Naturalisme théorique" 187). Contrary to his rejection of these former standards, hints of classicism and romanticism appear both in Zola's fictional works and in his writings on the theory of naturalism. Therefore, it would be wrong to disregard completely the presence of past literary influences in naturalism.

Halina Suwala, among others, has acknowledged how much Zola was inspired by authors like Hugo, Michelet, Shakespeare, and Montaigne in addition to contemporary scientific theorists. In her study Autour de Zola et du naturalisme, Suwala comes to the conclusion that there can be a successful blend of science and literary tradition:

C'est là, dans cette alliance féconde entre science et littérature, que réside pour Zola, sinon la rupture, du moins l'apport nouveau de la formule naturaliste. On peut observer chez Zola-théoricien une double tendance: volonté de sauvegarder la continuité, de chercher dans les grandes œuvres du passé des titres de noblesse pour sa formule naturaliste, et volonté d'apporter quelque chose de radicalement nouveau, conforme aux exigences de l'époque nouvelle [. . .]. (56)

This double tendency manages to include the seemingly opposed notions of continuity and rupture, which Suwala uses to characterize the formulation and elaboration of naturalist theory. She extends this observation to Zola's work as a novelist: "Il emploie tous les procédés les mieux éprouvés de l'art narratif, les structures les plus codés du récit, mais en les détournant de leur utilisation traditionnelle, en les subordonnant à des objectifs nouveaux" (56). Like Suwala, I find that naturalism, as a theory and in practice, differs from other literary movements precisely because it marries tradition and innovation from the

disciplines of literature and science, in effect creating a literary art form according to scientific laws and procedures.

In order to understand the convergence of science and literature at this point in time, we may consider two basic ways to account for the development of the naturalist movement.⁸ First, some deem it a revolution whereby naturalist writers, rather than following in the footsteps of their predecessors, break significantly from that tradition and strike out on their own new path. A second view of naturalism holds that it may be more like an evolution out of previous movements, dependent on them for its very existence and sharing some of the same characteristics along with the new, which in this case is the inclusion of science. According to this viewpoint, Zola proudly traces the heritage of naturalism to Diderot, “le véritable aïeul des naturalistes,” whose influence was carried through to Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and the Goncourts.⁹ Though most critics believe in the need to temper these claims, Charles Beuchat, in his far-reaching Histoire du naturalisme français, enthusiastically confirms this line of “triumphant” naturalism, calling Homer the first naturalist and Rabelais “le véritable père du naturalisme”: “Grâce à des génies de la force d’un Balzac, d’un Stendhal ou d’un Flaubert, le naturalisme poursuit joyeusement sa marche triomphale” (287).¹⁰ Thus, the notions of revolution and evolution are both

⁸ See David Baguley’s chapter on the “Histories” of naturalism in Naturalist Fiction.

⁹ However, Baguley suggests that, “had they been alive to do so, Stendhal and Balzac would have protested as vigorously as did Flaubert at being included in Zola’s great tradition. [. . .] Clearly, for polemical purposes, the novelist is fabricating a largely mythical heritage in the guise of literary history” (13).

¹⁰ Baguley challenges Beuchat’s claims: “The author casts his net over an extraordinarily wide sea, making half of French literature naturalist in kind [. . .]. Most other literary historians, as one would expect, are more restrained in their views, but there are more than a few vestiges of the same overall vision and spirit” (14).

evident in attempts to define the literary history of naturalism and, in fact, are often used, however problematically, interchangeably.

Many subscribe to the generalization that Zola sought a complete revolution in literature by rejecting romanticism as a legitimate shaping factor of naturalism. David Baguley, for instance, develops the thesis in Naturalist Fiction that Zola reduces all literature to two contending types: naturalist and romantic. Yet, Zola is forthcoming in stating otherwise: “Aujourd’hui, quand on étudie le mouvement littéraire depuis le commencement du siècle, le romantisme apparaît comme le début logique de la grande évolution naturaliste.”¹¹ Still, despite his insistence upon the vast evolution of naturalism through the ages, including romanticism, Zola expresses the desire to break from the constraints of the romantic tendencies ingrained in naturalist writers, a struggle that would become apparent in his novel L’Œuvre. Zola’s own words in 1896 reveal that he held on to the view throughout his career that each new literary movement must wipe the slate clean: “Dans cette terrible lutte pour la vie qu’est la littérature, tout nouveau venu a le besoin de faire la place nette, d’égorger ses aînés, s’il veut pour lui tout le champ, tout l’empire” (Nouvelle Campagne, OC XIV, 724). This statement, with its allusions to battle, demonstrates that Zola regards naturalism as a revolutionary movement, even though at other times he acknowledges the contributions of previous movements, as he does in Le Roman expérimental.

Maupassant perceptively combines both the revolution and evolution points of view in one characterization of Zola, defining his literature as a change from what came before, even if nothing really can be new in literature any more:

¹¹ “Lettre à la jeunesse,” Le Messager de l’Europe, May 1879, rpt. in Le Roman expérimental, 108.

Zola est, en littérature, un révolutionnaire, c'est-à-dire un ennemi féroce de ce qui vient d'exister.

Quiconque a l'intelligence vive, un ardent besoin de nouveau [. . .], est forcément un révolutionnaire, par lassitude de choses qu'il connaît trop [. . .]. Alors un étrange besoin de changement naît en nous; [. . .] nous cherchons autre chose, ou plutôt nous revenons à autre chose; mais cet "autre chose" nous le prenons, nous le remanions, nous le complétons, nous le faisons nôtre; et nous nous imaginons, de bonne foi parfois, l'avoir inventé.

C'est ainsi que les lettres vont de révolution en révolution, d'étape en étape, de réminiscence en réminiscence; car rien maintenant ne peut être neuf. ("Emile Zola," Chroniques II, 311-12)

Although Maupassant does not say so, I believe this "autre chose" could be the experimental method itself. By bringing a new element to the world of literature, Zola purports to have invented a whole new form. But, Maupassant argues that it was already there and is now only reinvented. This conclusion, then, returns to the view promoted by Zola that naturalism is not something entirely new, but rather a new incarnation of a literary tradition that is centuries old.

Henri Mitterand makes a similar point to convey Zola's dual position as innovator and inheritor. Mitterand reminds us of the big picture involving other domains besides literature and their contributions to Zola's naturalist theory:

Zola est donc un novateur, par le système conceptuel qu'il construira, à partir de 1866, autour du mot et de la notion de naturalisme, et par la vigueur avec laquelle il le propulsera à travers l'espace des doctrines et des écoles littéraires. Mais c'est aussi un héritier, par la déjà longue et complexe histoire du mot, dont il récupérera, pour les fondre ensemble, toutes les significations et toutes les valeurs: scientifique, philosophique, artistique et littéraire. ("Le Naturalisme théorique" 185-86)

According to Mitterand, this syncretism of the separate paths of naturalism results in "une théorie littéraire intégrée" (186). Zola's naturalist theory thus emerges from a gathering of ideas already in existence in different fields.

Furthermore, the principal element that is the goal in each of these manifestations of naturalism is the notion of “la vérité.” Among naturalism’s literary predecessors, the desire to depict what is real comes through most convincingly in realism. Yet, the search for truth ties naturalism to the classic and romantic traditions as well, which Mitterand points out in his discussion of “la vérité naturaliste”: “Les Classiques et les Romantiques ont travaillé eux aussi au nom de la vérité” (186). Therefore, the fundamental idea of truth belongs to an extensive line of literary predecessors and, despite its new scientific angle, does not constitute much of an innovation in naturalist literature.

Science, however, is an integral part of the evolution of naturalism that extends beyond the bounds of literature. Zola writes, “le Naturalisme est l’évolution même de l’intelligence moderne. [. . .] [I]l ouvre l’infini, comme la science des Newton et des Laplace a reculé les limites du ciel des poètes” (letter to Gustave Rivet, 12 February 1879, Corr III, 294). J. H. Matthews, in Les Deux Zola: Science et personnalité dans l’expression, shares the view of a naturalist lineage that dates back centuries, noting especially the close connection with realism: “Pour Zola, [. . .] il n’y a pas de distinction à faire entre le naturalisme et le réalisme, car il constate une ‘grande évolution naturaliste’ qui part du quinzième siècle pour arriver au dix-neuvième” (12). Many studies have established the overwhelming similarities of the two movements, arguing that naturalist literature is a more specialized, scientific type of realist literature.¹² Zola, however, persists in boasting the predominance of naturalism, according to

¹² See, for example, Bornecque and Cogny, Réalisme et naturalisme, Furst and Skrine, Naturalism, and Yves Chevrel, Le Naturalisme. On the theories of realism and naturalism, see Philippe van Tieghem’s Les Grandes Doctrines littéraires, 215-34.

David Baguley, who says that Zola, “not content to assimilate realism and naturalism, goes so far as to incorporate realist literature into a (largely fictitious) naturalist tradition whose existence he wishes to establish and confirm” (“An Essay on Naturalist Poetics” 44).

While there are problems with reducing such large bodies of literature to clear-cut categories, the fact remains that realism’s influence in the development of naturalism is, for the most part, more straightforward and not as problematic as those literary influences that differ more drastically from the final product of naturalist literature. What is most important here is to accept Zola’s belief that the unifying factor over such a long and diverse span of literature is the observation of nature, which writers seek to represent faithfully in their works. Matthews points out that “Zola a bien compris qu’à toutes les époques les prosateurs, comme les poètes, ont eu la prétention de peindre la nature et de dire la vérité” (Les Deux Zola 12-13). For Zola, nature is not merely a background, nor should it on the other hand dominate through gratuitous description. Rather, nature is vital to the discovery of human existence, as encapsulated by Winston Hewitt in Through Those Living Pillars: Man and Nature in the Works of Emile Zola: “The writer must not consider nature as a separate entity, but reveal how it relates to and determines man, how it affects him and brings about a change in his sentiments and actions” (27). Hewitt concludes that Zola’s naturalism is more romantic than realist: “Zola, as he visualizes nature, is more a late-born progeny of the romantics than a member of the second generation of the realists. Actually, in many respects, romanticism and realism come into confluence in Zola’s naturalism” (143). Taking as a point of departure Hewitt’s

suggestion that Zola unites realism and romanticism in the treatment of nature, I intend to show that romanticism's passionate temperament and classicism's humanistic value of truth also converge in Zola's formulation of naturalism.

Human Nature: Painting Life through the Artistic Temperament

Naturalism is not only concerned with the functional aspect of human nature or behavior as a scientific study, but also the separate elements of "humanity," or that which is "human," and "nature," inherited from the classical and romantic traditions. In an 1875 piece contained in Zola's Documents littéraires, the author posits the belief that all literary movements are essentially occupied with the same cause: "Les classiques, les romantiques, les réalistes, crient ensemble que le talent, la vérité, le style, sont de leur côté [. . .]. En somme, la seule base possible est encore la nature; on peut, sans crainte de se tromper, la prendre pour commune mesure" (OC XII, 427).¹³ While nature is the only viable source for literature, according to Zola, there must be something to distinguish it from a photographic sort of reproduction: "Il faut donc introduire l'élément humain, qui élargit tout d'un coup le problème et en rend les solutions aussi variées, aussi multiples, qu'il y a de crânes différents dans l'humanité" (427).

In this article, Zola resurrects his famous reference to a work of art as "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament," first pronounced a decade earlier. Calling upon this "instrument de critique" that he has employed

¹³ "Réception de M. Dumas fils à l'Académie française," Le Messager de l'Europe, March 1875. The series Documents littéraires is devoted mainly to studies of great authors of the romantic period: Chateaubriand, Hugo, Musset, Gautier, Sand.

frequently in studies of other artists and writers, Zola hesitates to use it with conviction in dealing with the elusive notion of truth in literature: "C'est une terrible chose que la vérité, en littérature. Les écrivains n'ont pas les certitudes des mathématiciens. [. . .] [D]ans les lettres, le doute reste éternel" (427).

Nevertheless, he proceeds with the study of Dumas *filis*, in this case, using an approach that I would like to apply to Zola himself in order to view the coexistence of the real, objective nature and the subjective, romantic temperament in the artist's pursuit of a truthful representation of humanity.

Zola's important statement, which has come to be known as the very definition of his aesthetics,¹⁴ appears for the first time in "Proudhon et Courbet" in Mes Haines in 1866 and is also put into use in the study of Taine in the same collection. The context of this dictum in its original presentation is noteworthy: "Il faut que je retrouve un homme dans chaque œuvre, ou l'œuvre me laisse froid. Je sacrifie carrément l'humanité à l'artiste. Ma définition d'une œuvre d'art serait, si je la formulais: 'Une œuvre d'art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament'" (OC X, 38). Zola's explication is charged with a very personal and even religious view of the artist in the words immediately following this proclamation: "Que m'importe le reste. Je suis artiste, et je vous donne ma chair et mon sang, mon cœur et ma pensée. [. . .] [J]e me donne entier, dans ma violence ou dans ma douceur, tel que Dieu m'a créé" (38).

The hand of God in the creation of the artist and in the creation of nature is a troublesome matter for Zola. In fact, he replaces the term "création" with

¹⁴ Halina Suwala speaks for many in saying that this definition "donne la clef de l'œuvre entière de Zola, aussi bien de sa création romanesque que de sa doctrine esthétique" (Naissance d'une doctrine 136).

“nature” in future writings. Jean Kaempfer has shown, in Emile Zola: D’un naturalisme pervers, that this change in terminology is substantive: “Ce repentir est significatif d’une modification de l’horizon culturel: en 1880, l’exploration positiviste du monde à évincé la démiurge romantique, dans l’esprit de Zola, et la correction terminologique rend compte de cette évolution” (183). By removing the term “création” from this formula, Zola is, in effect, replacing any romantic notions of a divine creator with a more scientific view of nature.

What the artist must seek to represent is “le vrai,” or “la vérité” of human existence, which is implied in Zola’s conception of nature. In his “Lettre à la jeunesse,” he urges naturalist writers to use the experimental method to express the “truth” of their personal experience: “[O]n vous demande de chercher et de classer votre part de documents humains, de découvrir votre coin de vérité, grâce à la méthode” (127). Elsewhere, in “Le Naturalisme au théâtre,” Zola likens the practice of writing to the pursuit of truth throughout all time: “Mon opinion personnelle est que le naturalisme date de la première ligne qu’un homme a écrite. Dès ce jour-là, la question de la vérité était posée” (140).

Halina Suwala associates this fundamental purpose of naturalist literature with classicism in particular: “C’est [. . .] en se réclamant surtout de la tradition classique que [Zola] demande à l’artiste de traduire dans son œuvre le fond permanent de l’homme et de chercher à atteindre à la ‘vérité générale’ largement humaine” (Autour de Zola 53). Thus, following this argument, the representation of “un coin de la nature” echoes one of the central principles of classicism, that is, to discover the essential truth of humanity.

Another indicator of the classical influence on Zola has to do with the formal element of language. In "Toward an Aesthetic of the Naturalist Novel," Yves Chevrel brings attention to the contradictions inherent in the fifth part of Le Roman expérimental where Zola classifies the matters of form, style, and rhetoric among the "divers points secondaires" and yet recognizes that "la forme suffit pour immortaliser une œuvre" (93). Zola's insistence upon form in the works of others, even if he does not discern it in his own writing, brings to light his classical heritage. According to Chevrel, Zola is "an heir of the great French classical tradition [and] remains indebted, more than he would acknowledge, to a kind of formal and stylistic perfection that goes beyond any method of investigating society, or that functions at least at another level" (48).

On top of his quest for truth in representation, Zola adds the qualification that nature be filtered through the temperament of the artist, admitting that personal expression cannot be disregarded: "Certes, si la vérité seule comptait dans une œuvre, l'art progresserait avec les sciences, les œuvres deviendraient d'autant plus grandes qu'elles seraient plus vraies. Seulement, il faut introduire la personnalité de l'artiste, et aussitôt la vérité n'est plus qu'un des deux membres de la formule" (Documents littéraires, OC XII, 305). Zola's encouragement of the artistic temperament enters dangerous territory as it goes beyond the bare essentials of nature and humanity to allow for embellishment by the artist.

Colette Becker, in Les Apprentissages de Zola, delineates Zola's laudatory descriptions of the romantic artist, qualities that are also his own, in support of his argument that true artists are not made, but born with a sort of poetic genius:

Les “beaux rêves,” qu’il appelle ailleurs “l’étincelle,” “la pensée,” “l’idée,” “le génie,” “ce quelque chose qui n’a pas de nom,” “ce qui ne s’acquiert pas,” différencient le véritable artiste de l’ouvrier. [. . .] “On naît poète, on devient ouvrier.” Ce disant, il fait sienne la conception romantique de l’artiste élu de Dieu, et discrédite les “habiles,” qu’il opposera plus tard, dans ses articles du Salut public de Lyon, ses Salons, ou Le Roman expérimental, aux “tempéraments.” (58)

This view of the artist’s innate talent is at odds with the role of the naturalist writer whose work, much like that of a reporter, does not at first glance require any special sort of creativity or poetic genius. Yet, Zola reasons that it is precisely this task that must be filtered through the temperament of the artist in order to transform a photograph into a work of art.

Zola’s earlier “théorie des écrans” foreshadows this idea with its account of how artists perceive the world:

[T]oute œuvre d’art est comme une fenêtre ouverte sur la création; il y a, enchâssé dans l’embrasure de la fenêtre, une sorte d’Ecran transparent, à travers lequel on aperçoit les objets plus ou moins déformés [. . .]. Ces changements tiennent à la nature de l’Ecran. On n’a plus la création exacte et réelle, mais la création modifiée par le milieu où passe son image.

Nous voyons la création dans une œuvre, à travers l’homme, à travers un tempérament, une personnalité. [. . .] La réalité exacte est donc impossible dans une œuvre d’art. (375)¹⁵

Of the three types of screens, classic, romantic, and realist, Zola naturally states a preference for the realist one as the least distorting, but he also understands that this barrier is always there nonetheless. Thus, the temperament of the artist is constantly in play in a work of art, whether realist, classic, or romantic.

Though most of Zola’s sentiments regarding the romantic artist stem from his youth and are revealed first in the early 1860s, they are also present later in

¹⁵ The “théorie des écrans” is articulated in a letter to Antony Valabrègue, 18 August 1864, Corr I, 373-82.

his naturalist doctrine concerning the temperament of the artist and in his fictional writings. Halina Suwala's analysis of the literary influences on Zola confirms that his impression of the romantic artist shaped his own identity as a writer: "C'est en 'disciple' des romantiques qu'il revendique la liberté totale de l'art et qu'il impose à l'artiste la mission de manifester sa personnalité dans une œuvre qui ne doive rien aux règles d'une école quelconque" (Autour de Zola 52). As I will explore later, Zola insists in Le Roman expérimental that the artist not be bound by any formal school. His advice to younger writers is to engage in their art with the guidance of the experimental method. Zola advocates a convergence of artistic expression and scientific theory, which unites the past and the future, as Colette Becker shows: "Son esthétique se caractérise, en définitive, par la volonté de concilier un certain passé et l'avenir, la Personnalité, héritage du romantisme, et la Science, mythe du monde contemporain" (Les Apprentissages 253).¹⁶ The freedom of the artist's temperament, although inherited from the romantic tradition, is a necessary ingredient for what Zola believes separates naturalism from other, more restrictive schools of literature and compounds with modern science to distinguish itself as a unique entity in the literary landscape of the late nineteenth century.

Moreover, as David Baguley asserts in Naturalist Fiction, Zola's romantic notion of the artist gains a certain legitimacy through the adaptation of the experimental method: "Zola equates the writer's genius, subjectivity,

¹⁶ Decades earlier, J. H. Matthews made the two notions of personality and science the basis for his study Les Deux Zola: "Il y avait chez lui deux hommes. L'un voulait écrire des romans ayant une valeur qu'il croyait scientifique. L'autre était prêt à se livrer sans arrière-pensée à ses impressions du monde. On peut donc diviser en deux groupes les caractères de l'expression chez Zola, et les classer sous les titres 'Science' et 'Personnalité'" (Avant-propos, x).

temperament with the process of experimentation. [. . .] Zola's theory was not merely an attempt to arrive at a more scientific type of realism, but also, on the contrary, a way of vindicating scientifically his deep-seated Romantic belief in individual genius" (57). Rather than regarding naturalism simply as a scientific version of realism, Baguley points to the acceptance of the romantic view of the artist by way of the experimental method, thereby "allowing Zola to maintain, to further and to bolster his own deeply rooted, long-standing conviction about a work of art, as the product of a writer's 'temperament,' as realism plus the artist's genius" (57). The succinct phrase "realism plus the artist's genius" captures the significance of temperament in the pursuit of realistic representation in literature. This provision may indeed be regarded by Zola as a factor in distinguishing naturalism from realism, along with the introduction of a scientific methodology.

Yet, this line of thought conflicts somewhat with Zola's declaration that naturalism has been in existence since the earliest forms of literature. Now, with the incorporation of science, as Baguley points out, there is "a mark of originality, a source of generic renewal" in spite of Zola's endeavor to ensconce naturalism in centuries of literary tradition:

In flagrant contradiction [. . .] to his numerous attempts to assert the existence of a long-standing naturalist tradition, Zola can write in 1880: "Notre roman est donc absolument original et ne tient en rien au roman du passé; ou, du moins, depuis le commencement de ce siècle, l'ancienne formule a été tellement modifiée par l'emploi des méthodes scientifiques, qu'il en résulte une formule toute nouvelle [. . .]." Thus, conveniently, by invoking the innovativeness of scientific literature, the novelist is divorcing it from past conventions, just as equally conveniently in other circumstances, [. . .] he does the very opposite. (63)

Instead of insisting on the contradictory nature of Zola's remarks, I would characterize the opposed literary and scientific influences on naturalism as complementary. As shown in this study and in others, the classic and romantic features of naturalism provide a link to a much larger literary establishment with the ideals of truthful representation of nature and artistic temperament at its foundation. Nonetheless, the advancement of science in the nineteenth century facilitates a new type of literature, perhaps not divorced from past conventions as Baguley suggests, but rather a modification in the process of writing.

The literary models Zola followed in his youth are coupled with the innovation of scientific methodology as he comes to define naturalism formally. Colette Becker, like Halina Suwala, comments on this progression, noting that Zola is initially "partagé entre cette conception romantique du Poète et des goûts classiques" (*Les Apprentissages* 59). At the same time, Zola is also looking toward science as the future of literature. In 1861, he begins to struggle with the introduction of science in literature: "[L]a poésie peut vivre grande et forte, en dehors d'une science et d'une civilisation avancées; [. . .] cependant ce sont là deux éléments qui s'offrent au poète et [. . .] il peut en faire jaillir le sublime [. . .]" (letter to Jean-Baptistin Baille, 18 July 1861, *Corr* I, 306). Even from this early stage, Zola acknowledges a discrepancy between poetry and science. Yet, he also sees the potential for greatness if the poet has the ability to combine these two elements in a work of art. However, this view, as further demonstrated by the terminology he uses here and elsewhere to associate naturalist writing with poetry and art, ultimately detracts from the scientific mode of writing promoted in *Le Roman expérimental*.

The Scientific Language and Theories of Naturalism

As has been shown, Zola does recognize previous literatures in the formation of naturalism, giving particular credit to romanticism as the beginning of the naturalist evolution in the nineteenth century. Perhaps just as important as the literary aspect of romanticism is the impact it had on the French language, which Zola calls “le renouvellement de la langue” in his “Lettre à la jeunesse”:

Il fallait jeter l’ancien dictionnaire dans le creuset, refondre le langage, inventer des mots et des images, créer toute une nouvelle rhétorique pour exprimer la société nouvelle; et seuls peut-être des poètes lyriques pouvaient mener à bien un pareil travail. [. . .]
Il fallait une génération de poètes lyriques pour empanacher la langue, pour en faire un instrument large, souple et brillant.
(108-09)

Zola praises romantic writers for facilitating linguistic development in addition to paving the way for naturalist literature. The newness of the language extends to the application of scientific theories with their own specialized terminologies. Zola also takes inspiration from Emile Littré’s Dictionnaire de la langue française, according to Colette Becker: “Littré a tenté ‘une analyse mathématique de l’esprit humain,’ qui permet d’expliquer le passé et -- ce qui est capital aux yeux de Zola -- de ‘faire prévoir, par analogie, la marche présente et future de la langue’ [. . .]” (Les Apprentissages 240).¹⁷ Moreover, the issue of language is fundamental in the adaptation of the experimental method, as Zola proclaims in Le Roman expérimental: “Au fond, j’estime que la méthode atteint la forme elle-même, qu’un langage n’est qu’une logique, une construction naturelle et scientifique” (92-93).

¹⁷ The citations of Zola come from articles published in 1866 in L’Événement, OC X, 216 and 662.

In addition to methodology, the language Zola uses in the novel must be considered experimental too in the sense that he is not only quoting characters' popular dialogue, but also experimenting with it himself through the voice of the narrator, creating a linguistic hybrid of popular and standard language.¹⁸ Even well before Le Roman expérimental, Zola employs the language of science in naturalist literature. The landmark instance where he uses scientific language in writing fiction comes in 1867 in Thérèse Raquin. This novel and its paratexts provide evidence of the scientific influences that shaped naturalism, including Zola's implementation of the experimental method and his views on determinism. The novel's epigraph, taken from Taine, establishes from the start the connection between the abstract values of literature and the concreteness of objects that can be studied in the physical sciences: "Le vice et la vertu ne sont que des produits comme le vitriol et le sucre." However, several scholars have debated the veracity of Zola's scientific aims in this prototypical naturalist novel, finding instead many non-naturalist elements that foreshadow the Rougon-Macquart series.¹⁹

A focused look at a few theories of the nineteenth century will suffice to understand the application of the experimental method and the scientific foundation of naturalism.²⁰ Claude Bernard's Introduction à l'étude de la médecine expérimentale (1865) is at the base of Zola's theories developed in Le

¹⁸ Tullio Pagano studies this "contamination of authorial discourse" in the case of L'Assommoir in Experimental Fictions, 64-71.

¹⁹ John C. Lapp's study of the novel as drama in Zola Before the Rougon-Macquart paved the way for future works by critics such as Colette Becker, Robert M. Viti, and Maria Watroba.

²⁰ For a more encompassing view of the impact of sciences on naturalism, see, for example, chapter two in Furst and Skrine's Naturalism.

Roman expérimental.²¹ Zola is straightforward in linking his study with that of Bernard: “Je n’aurai à faire ici qu’un travail d’adaptation, car la méthode expérimentale a été établie avec une force et une clarté merveilleuses par Claude Bernard [. . .]. [J]e compte, sur tous les points, me retrancher derrière Claude Bernard” (59). As he explains it, Zola adapts Bernard’s practice of medicine to the practice of writing fiction, finding that medicine and literature alike can employ the experimental method. He firmly believes that it can be applicable to any genre or discipline. The fact that the experimental method is taken from the field of science and applied to literature distinguishes naturalism more than the genre of the novel or even its subject matter, which many tend to emphasize as the defining attributes of naturalism. Yet, the question must be asked, is it possible to transfer a scientific method to an aesthetic domain such as literature?

Lilian Furst²² is representative of critics who refute this possibility: “To equate the arts with the sciences and to foist the scientific method on to the creative artist was patently absurd, and this fundamental flaw was to make the doctrine untenable” (30-31).²³ At the root of their criticism is the problem of the phrase, “une œuvre d’art est un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament.” These critics contend that the subjectivity allowed here surpasses the restrictions

²¹ An extensive study has been done by Reino Virtanen, Claude Bernard and His Place in the History of Ideas. See also Pierre-Yves Bourdil’s “La Science littéraire: Emile Zola sous le regard de Claude Bernard” and Jean-Louis Cabanès’s “Zola et le modèle bernardien,” in which the author discusses the contradictions of the experimental method, including the difficulties Zola encountered in trying to reconcile the element of temperament with the “impersonnalité de la méthode” (85-86).

²² Although I normally refer to Naturalism as the work of Lilian Furst and Peter Skrine, who are listed as co-authors, the book’s table of contents clarifies that Furst wrote all but one section. My exclusion of Skrine in the above mention is to lend precision to my critique of arguments that should be attributed to Furst alone.

²³ Baguley summarizes similar arguments made by F. W. J. Hemmings, Angus Wilson, and Philip Walker (Naturalist Fiction 58).

of the scientific theory that Zola advocates. In Le Roman expérimental, Zola seeks to offer a compromise between the scientist and the artist. While he insists that the naturalist writer is, first and foremost, a man of science, he also permits an artistic side: "Sa personnalité d'artiste s'affirme ensuite par le style. C'est ce qui constitue l'art" ("Lettre à la jeunesse" 127-28). Zola believes that the writer's style determines a novel as a work of art, apart from the limitations of the scientific method. In his theory, then, the naturalist novel need not be devoid of any artistic value. Still, we must challenge the integration of science and art in the novel since these two modes are not readily compatible: science deals with facts while art embraces fictions and symbols. The alliance of these two opposing influences of science and art may lead us to consider naturalism as a sort of hybrid.

Most recent critics have abandoned the reductive view of the experimental method displayed by Furst in order to approach Zola's theory in a new manner. David Baguley revives the argument in Naturalist Fiction by explaining that the scientific method can be interpreted in a wider sense:

[I]f we allow for the fact that the references to the scientific method should be taken less literally than has often been the case, that is, more precisely, as a series of analogies, and if we recognise that what Zola is proposing, as he clearly states, is a departure from the *realist* practice of literature, his central argument is not without a certain validity. (59)

Here again there is mention of the distinction between naturalist literature and other types, namely realist, thus reinforcing its dependence upon other movements for its definition. But, the scientific method gives Zola the right to claim a new way of writing backed by the accreditation of science.

Naturalism had to be presented to the public in such a way as to legitimize the movement. Baguley suggests that we therefore read Le Roman expérimental “in the context of that continuous battle of prefaces, manifestos and journal articles [. . .] which was the reality of literary life (and survival) in Zola’s time” (60). In a similar vein, Henri Mitterand, in Le Discours du roman, downplays the strictness of Zola’s scientific theories in light of the polemical purposes intended therein: “Le propos du Roman expérimental apparaît moins théorique que stratégique” (166). Zola’s adaptation of the experimental method, then, is considered by many prominent scholars to be not necessarily a formal method to follow to the letter, but rather a justification for imposing an authentic stamp on the practice of naturalist literature. In the words of historian René Wellek, “we do an injustice to Zola in taking him literally” because “quoting or paraphrasing Bernard was a rhetorical device -- possibly an unfortunate device -- to cloak his theories with the prestige of contemporary science” (14). Alain Pagès arrives at a similar conclusion in his essay “En partant de la théorie du roman expérimental”: “[D]ans le Roman expérimental, l’assimilation constante entre l’activité du biologiste et celle du romancier, la poursuite incessante d’une même métaphore risquent de cacher l’originalité de la pensée de Zola” (70-71). Before we can determine the originality of Zola’s work, as Pagès does in applying the theory of Le Roman expérimental to the study of Germinal, it is necessary to consider what is borrowed from Bernard and what is Zola’s own invention.

Zola spoke of “la méthode expérimentale” as early as 1866 and many of his theories were developed before he even read Bernard’s study. One of his Médan disciples, Henry Céard, reports having given Zola a copy of the book

only in 1879.²⁴ Therefore, as Reino Virtanen affirms, Bernard's work is "no longer regarded as having inspired the Rougon-Macquart cycle from its inception" (121). Instead, the idea seems to have come from reading Prosper Lucas, as is confirmed by Yasmine Mortazavi, who relays that Zola cited "le gros bouquin de Lucas sur l'Hérédité naturelle" as the impetus for writing "une série d'ouvrages à travers lesquels se dérouleraient les manifestations successives de l'hérédité" (qtd. in Mortazavi 303-304).²⁵ In addition, Virtanen shows that Zola's assignment of the experimental method to his own writing is more of an afterthought than an inspiration: "[Zola] had already marked out his path years before in such writings as Thérèse Raquin. [. . .] It would seem that he sought in Bernard the authority which attacks on his 'physiological' novels made him think he needed" (120).

With the publication of Le Roman expérimental more than a decade after Thérèse Raquin, we can see that Zola's newfound appreciation for Bernard serves to reinforce his own thinking and lend credence to what he was already doing. For both men, the significance of their work lies in its modern, progressive nature. According to Pierre-Yves Bourdil, "si Claude Bernard ou Zola ont une très vive conscience de la *modernité* de leur entreprise, c'est qu'ils sont convaincus que ce qui fut soutenu jusqu'à eux est dépassé par la nouvelle méthode, laquelle établit une franche rupture avec les points de vue

²⁴ It is probable, though, that Zola was familiar with the ideas of Bernard well before then. His first mention of "la méthode expérimentale" is in Deux définitions du roman (OC X, 281), but he does not refer to Bernard and, in fact, it is not known whether he meant to allude to him.

²⁵ This research is based on the findings of a Doctor Cabanès whose conversation with Zola is recorded in "La Documentation médicale des Rougon-Macquart" in La Chronique médicale, 15 November 1895. Lucas's Traité philosophique et physiologique de l'hérédité naturelle dates from 1847-1850.

traditionnels” (255). Whereas the literary definitions of naturalism oscillate between the notions of continuity and rupture, recalling the terms used by Halina Suwala, Bourdil shows that the scientific method of Bernard and Zola marks a rupture from the traditional attitude toward medicine as an art. The idea of experimentation in medicine and in literature, which had already been shown in Zola’s presentation of Thérèse Raquin, takes on a newer precision in Le Roman expérimental, as Zola demands the same scientific treatment of literature that Bernard had gained for medicine: “Puisque la médecine, qui était un art, devient une science, pourquoi la littérature elle-même ne deviendrait-elle pas une science, grâce à la méthode expérimentale?” (81).

The problem of the experimental method in naturalism resides mainly in its aspiration to apply a scientific procedure to the artistic form of literature. This fact was acknowledged even by Zola’s contemporary critics, including two of his biggest detractors, Anatole France and Ferdinand Brunetière.²⁶ Yet, one of Zola’s own followers, Henry Céard, was also forthcoming in pointing out the faults of this scientific analogy:

Décidément, il y a un sophisme capital dans votre étude sur le roman expérimental. Claude Bernard, quand il institue son expérience, sait parfaitement dans quelles conditions elle se produira et sous l’influence exacte de quelles lois déterminées. [. . .] Les lois du cerveau n’étant que bien vaguement formulées, au lieu d’aboutir à une réalité scientifique, comme Claude Bernard, [le romancier] aboutit simplement à une hypothèse, vraisemblable sans doute, mais qu’il ne peut appuyer sur aucun fait et qui laisse prise à toutes les discussions. (letter of 28 October 1879)

²⁶ Brunetière published his critiques of naturalism in the definitive edition of Le Roman naturaliste in 1896, after several previous editions beginning in 1882. Alain Pagès describes the anti-naturalist critic as “un fervent partisan de l’idéal classique” (La Bataille littéraire 22).

Despite these warnings, Zola the novelist clung to the ideals of Bernard the physician in an attempt to validate his practice of naturalist writing. Perhaps if he had been willing to admit to the inadequacies of his reasoning, as Céard had tried to convince him, naturalism would have fared better in the eyes of its critics. Virtanen speculates that if Zola had been more flexible regarding the adaptation of Bernard's method for writing, he would have made a more effective case for naturalism: "The essay would have gained in logical cogency what it might have lost in a certain crude publicity value, if Zola had advanced the analogy as simply a suggestive parallel" (122).

The publicity surrounding Zola's attachment to Bernard's scientific work came mostly from literary critics. Although little is known about the scientific community's response to Le Roman expérimental, David Baguley presents the opinions of one of Bernard's associates, René Ferdas, who wrote a pamphlet against Zola's essay in 1881:

He claims that "M. Zola n'a pas compris un traître mot du livre de Claude Bernard," makes the ironic suggestion that a Chair in the Experimental Novel be established at the Medical School in Paris and -- what is perhaps most significant about his attack -- uses the opportunity to remonstrate against the crudities of L'Assommoir, parodying Zola's own text by juxtaposing passages from Claude Bernard and quotations from Zola's novel. Clearly, at least for Dr. Ferdas, the seriousness of Zola the theoretician was no compensation for the excesses of Zola the novelist. (Naturalist Fiction 58)²⁷

For lack of further evidence, it is not possible to say with certainty that Ferdas speaks for the entire scientific community of this period. However, his criticism of Zola falls in line with many of the arguments against naturalism raised by

²⁷ The essay by Ferdas, "La Physiologie expérimentale et Le Roman expérimental: Claude Bernard and M. Zola," is reprinted in the collection of critical texts assembled by Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau, Zola: Textes de Ulbach et al., 135-45.

literary critics. Given his position as a medical scholar and supporter of Bernard, it is likely that Ferdas's views are reliable, thus making it possible to advance the assumption that there was probably a similar reaction to Zola and his theory of naturalism in the scientific field as there was in literature.

There are still other dimensions to consider regarding the scientific basis of naturalism beyond the experimental method of Claude Bernard. Applying the experimental method in fictional writing is a matter of form and procedure; Zola assumes this methodology as a means to present his own ideas on the workings of heredity and human behavior. In addition to the methodological influence of Bernard, much credit is due to other theoretical influences of nineteenth-century science. Of these, the theory of determinism had a most profound impact on Zola's formulation of naturalism. This theory builds on the advances made in the nineteenth century regarding our understanding of evolution. The works of Lamarck and Darwin led to a "radical self-reassessment in human history," as shown by Furst and Skrine: "Instead of being creatures of the Divine Will, [humans] had to accept themselves as only slightly above the animal level, and life itself as a continuous struggle [. . .]. In contrast to the idealization of man by the Romantics, the Naturalists deliberately reduce him [. . .], stripping him of higher aspirations" (16). This Darwinian view gained further support in the studies of heredity done by Prosper Lucas and Hippolyte Taine, whose example was of the utmost importance in guiding Zola's mission as a novelist.

Taine's impact on Zola and naturalism is viewed by some as being even more fundamental than that of Bernard.²⁸ In fact, the key notion behind Zola's theory of Le Roman expérimental derives from Taine: "[S]i la méthode expérimentale conduit à la connaissance de la vie physique, elle doit conduire aussi à la vie passionnelle et intellectuelle. Ce n'est là qu'une question de degrés dans la même voie, de la chimie à la physiologie, puis de la physiologie à l'anthropologie et à la sociologie" (60). The language shadows that of Taine, and it is known that Zola's readings of Taine were highly influential in forming his own theory.²⁹ This exposition can be added to Zola's more overt association with Bernard to arrive at the duality of Le Roman expérimental, as explained by Baguley: "The essential dynamic of Zola's essay could be characterised as a constant shift between two positions: on the one hand, a series of quotations and paraphrases recently culled from Claude Bernard's book [. . .] and, on the other hand, this 'naturalist' thesis acquired much earlier from Taine" (Naturalist Fiction 55). A cursory look at Taine's relation to naturalism will help to further our understanding of the development of Zola's own theories.

Criticism in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century turned toward science, reflecting contemporaneous scientific developments. Known as "la nouvelle critique" or "la nouvelle école," the line of criticism forged by Charles-Augustin

²⁸ The correspondence between Zola and Taine reveals a supportive kind of criticism between the two, as John C. Lapp has shown, concluding that "non seulement les œuvres de Taine, mais sa critique et ses conseils personnels aidèrent à former le créateur des Rougon-Macquart" ("Taine et Zola: Autour d'une correspondance" 326).

²⁹ In an interview with Louis Thébor in Le Figaro, 6 March 1893, Zola confirms the inspiration he drew from Taine: "C'est vers l'âge de vingt-cinq ans que j'ai lu [Taine] et, en le lisant, le théoricien, le positiviste qui est en moi, s'est développé. Je puis dire que j'ai utilisé dans mes livres sa théorie sur l'hérédité et sur les milieux et que je l'ai appliquée dans le roman" (qtd. in Henri Martineau, Le Roman scientifique d'Emile Zola 75).

Sainte-Beuve was continued by Hippolyte Taine. As Paul Rousselot noted at the time, this sort of criticism “préfère la science à la poésie, la physiologie à la psychologie, l’histoire naturelle à l’histoire” (qtd. in Suwala, Naissance d’une doctrine 103). It follows that we see in Taine’s writings the prominence of science in the realms of literature and history. As early as 1866, Zola took note of Taine in his Deux définitions du roman, a work that René-Pierre Colin has called “son premier véritable manifeste” (Tranches de vie: Zola et le coup de force naturaliste 83). In it, Zola speaks of a “romancier analyste” whose work is to be performed in the manner of a surgeon or an “anatomiste de l’âme et de la chair” (OC X, 281). This language is nearly identical to that of Taine, who referred to Stendhal and Balzac as anatomists and physicians in his Essais de critique et d’histoire (1866). Elsewhere, in L’Événement (25 July 1866), Zola lauds Taine for his methodology that coincides with naturalism: “Il est le naturaliste du monde moral. Il croit qu’on peut arriver à classer les faits de la vie intellectuelle comme on classe les faits de la vie physique” (OC X, 564).

Despite his overall admiration for Taine and his work, Zola recognized that there were some differences in their ways of thinking. One issue raised by Patrizia Lombardo in “Zola et Taine: La Passion du document,” is that “le scientisme de Taine est pour ainsi dire dirigé vers le passé et celui de Zola vers le présent, ou l’un tend vers la philosophie, l’autre vers le roman” (194). Lombardo cites evidence that Zola thought of Taine as “un homme hanté par la peur de la Commune et qui se met à trembler devant le monde moderne” (194).³⁰ The

³⁰ Lombardo arrives at this assessment based on a letter Zola wrote to Louis Boussès de Fourcard, 11 May 1879, to which she refers in her article.

problem of modernity is significant for Zola, who ultimately felt that Taine did not fulfill his role in the world of criticism: "C'est M. Taine qui est actuellement le chef de notre critique, et il est à regretter qu'il s'enferme dans l'histoire et la philosophie, au lieu de se mêler à notre vie militante [. . .]." ³¹

Since Zola does not see Taine as living up to his expectations, he takes it upon himself to become the great critic of his generation with a flurry of critical publications in the months following this statement, including Le Roman expérimental. Another important aspect of the above critique is Zola's concern that Taine is too caught up in history and philosophy. The discrepancy noted by Lombardo between Taine's philosophy and Zola's purposes in the writing of novels returns to the notion of the artist's personality. In Mes Haines, Zola criticizes him for not permitting the full expression of personality in a work of art: "Je supplie seulement M. Taine de faire une part plus large à la personnalité" (OC X, 153). Earlier in his discussion, he develops a passionate description of art in modern times: "[Le beau] est dans la vie, dans la libre personnalité [. . .]. L'artiste doit [. . .] ne consulter que son cœur et que son époque [. . .]" (146). This optimistic outlook on the artist's expression of the beauty of life in modern times confronts the often negative deterministic view held by many of the naturalists.

Taine's contributions to the theory of determinism are very significant in Zola's naturalism. In his Essais de critique et d'histoire, Taine builds upon Darwin's ideas by addressing the factors of "la race" and "le milieu" in the study of human behavior. Taine adds a third element, "le moment," to these biological

³¹ "La Formule critique appliqué au roman," Le Voltaire, 27 May 1879, rpt. in Le Roman expérimental, 226.

factors of heredity and environment in order to account for the influence of present circumstances. This theory promotes the conception that all human activity is determined by forces that are beyond control, thereby removing both free will and responsibility. Zola uses Taine's theory to support his experiments of studying characters' temperaments in naturalist literature. Yet, this application of deterministic theory has been much criticized, as Halina Suwala observes: "On reprend le reproche, déjà ancien, que le déterminisme tainien, faisant disparaître la liberté humaine, mène à une indifférence morale des plus dangereuses et, en matière d'art, à la négation du goût et à la suppression de tout jugement de valeur" (Naissance d'une doctrine 103). In taking away the belief in human freedom, determinism hinders not only the fictional characters in a novel, but perhaps more problematically, it also restricts the writer's freedom.

Zola distinguishes between the scientist and the philosopher in carving out the role of the novelist in Le Roman expérimental:

Pour un savant expérimentateur, l'idéal qu'il cherche à réduire, l'indéterminé, n'est jamais que dans le *comment*. Il laisse aux philosophes, l'autre idéal, celui du *pourquoi*, qu'il désespère de déterminer un jour. Je crois que les romanciers expérimentateurs doivent également ne pas se préoccuper de cet inconnu, s'ils ne veulent pas se perdre dans les folies des poètes et des philosophes. (86)

The naturalist writer, according to Zola, is to use the experimental method in order to arrive at the understanding of how things happen. Hence, the positivist ideology becomes an integral part of naturalism. Positivism, in the words of D. G. Charlton, is a theory which holds that "science provides the model of the

only kind of knowledge we can attain" (5).³² In this theory, it is the study of observable phenomena that leads to knowledge, thereby denying the possibility of answering metaphysical questions.

Once again, however, the artistic temperament comes into play, which Zola seems to encourage all the more by saying that "la méthode n'est qu'un outil; c'est l'ouvrier, c'est l'idée qu'il apporte qui fait le chef-d'œuvre" (83). Zola continues to promote "le génie de l'expérimentateur" as the dominant force behind the naturalist writer's work, citing Bernard: "L'idée, c'est la graine; la méthode, c'est le sol qui lui fournit les conditions de se développer, de prospérer et de donner ses meilleurs fruits suivant la nature" (83). Zola admits that if the artist pursues the idea alone, without being controlled by the method, he remains as a poet unable to prove a hypothesis and foundering in indeterminism. But, he does not address the underlying question of the plausibility of subjecting a poetic idea to the confines of a scientific method. Even the vocabulary used here is problematic. Zola is talking about ideas rather than facts and touches on the question of "l'idéal": "Tout ce que nous ne savons pas, tout ce qui nous échappe encore, c'est l'idéal, et le but de notre effort humain est chaque jour de réduire l'idéal, de conquérir la vérité sur l'inconnu. Nous sommes tous idéalistes, si l'on entend par-là que nous nous occupons tous de l'idéal" (84). Although he calls himself an idealist in this sense, Zola is quick to separate himself from those who are content to remain in the world of ideas without striving for the

³² Charlton examines the great thinkers of this age, citing Auguste Comte as the "father" of positivism in the nineteenth century (2). However, he groups Comte, Taine, and Ernest Renan as "les faux amis de la philosophie positiviste" who gradually distort positivism in their writings. On the other hand, Charlton credits Bernard and Émile Littré as "les vrais amis" of positivism and goes on to call Bernard's *Introduction à la médecine expérimentale* the "standpoint of true philosophical positivism" even though its aim is practical and not philosophical (72-73).

enlightenment provided through the scientific method. In other words, he suggests that “cette question de l’idéal, scientifiquement, se réduit à la question de l’indéterminé et du déterminé” (84).

Zola cautions naturalist writers not to concern themselves with the unknown, nor even to question why things happen; however, this is an issue that poses a challenge to naturalist literature. Positivism, and consequently naturalism, can only remain on the surface of things. Once all the neatly displayed, observable facts of the material world have been presented and analyzed in naturalist literature, there still remains an inestimable amount of mystery in the physical universe and in the realm of imagination that demands attention. Such is the occupation of Huysmans and Maupassant in their later works. Even Zola could not resist delving into matters of the mind and the unaccountable, inexplicable phenomena that pervade human existence.

Additionally, the limitations imposed by determinism, in the end, may be a reason for the need to diverge from the naturalist method of writing. In the quotation from Mes Haines discussed earlier, it is clear that Zola struggles with Taine’s philosophy in respect to the artist. According to Suwala, Zola fights for the “moi créateur” of the artist:

Sans nier l’influence sur l’homme de la race, du milieu et du moment, Zola reste persuadé que l’étude de ces facteurs ne saurait, à elle seule, éclairer le mystère de l’acte créateur. [. . .] L’œuvre d’un écrivain, affirme-t-il, est “un monde de création humaine,” et “il existe, en littérature, autant d’univers différents qu’il y a d’écrivains,” chaque artiste ayant une manière particulière de voir et de sentir. (Autour de Zola 131)³³

³³ Zola’s words are found in “Erckmann-Chatrian,” Mes Haines, OC X, 126-38.

The primacy of the artist's personality and creative genius upheld by Zola is at odds with Taine's deterministic theory. In his critical writings, Zola consistently names three necessary qualities for modern literature: "personnalité," "vérité humaine" or "vérité générale," and "conformité à l'époque."³⁴ The last of these reflects Taine's factor of "le moment," but the first two bring to mind again the influences of romanticism in revealing the artist's personality and classicism in the expression of a universal human truth.

All told, while Zola draws from the literary heritage of classicism and romanticism, he is inspired more by the new scientific models of his times. However, science for Zola may be just that, a model or source of inspiration, rather than the complete and faithful adoption of scientific principles or a whole new way of dictating his work as a novelist. Alain de Lattre, in Le Réalisme selon Zola, mentions the precision of analysis and observation in science, but shows that for Zola it is more a matter of grasping the nature of scientific laws than attempting to define them or truly understand them: "Ce que Zola retient ici de la science, c'est peut-être moins la constitution d'une objectivité nouvelle qu'un mouvement d'inspiration, un élan vers les choses, une façon plus simple et crue de les vivre et de s'y rapporter" (27).

The writer's aim is not to be a true scientist, but to understand what can be learned from science. And, though Zola truly is a man of his times, building upon the scientific discoveries of the nineteenth century, it is his concept of the personality of the artist that sets him apart, as Colette Becker concludes in Les

³⁴ Suwala outlines these "trois exigences" as the foundation of Zola's aesthetics in Naissance d'une doctrine, 72.

Apprentissages: “Ces idées n’ont, en elles-mêmes et prises indépendamment, rien d’original à l’époque [. . .]. Ce qui lui est propre, c’est l’accent particulier qu’il met sur la nécessité du tempérament” (130). The notion of temperament in Zola’s statement, “un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament,” applies specifically to the writer. But, he extends the study of temperament to his fictional characters as well. In doing so, Zola introduces scientific theories into the equation, as temperament can be determined by factors such as race, heredity, and environment.

The Master Plan: Subjective In(ter)vention in Naturalist Writing

Many have shown that there surely are problems with Zola’s plan to adopt Bernard’s experimental method, as Virtanen summarizes: “Almost every commentator on Zola’s essay has smiled at the presumption of the novelist who fancies he is conducting experiments when he is merely contriving plots and putting invented characters into fictitious settings” (122). The problem of selection is significant because it compromises the objectivity of the writer.

A large number of critics have endorsed the experimental method up to a certain point where it then fails to hold up, as expressed by Roland Stromberg:

[Zola] could approximate the scientific method in collection of “facts”; he could remain morally neutral toward his facts by overtly neither praising nor blaming. But his treatment of his material was another matter. Here, no doubt unconsciously, he used many criteria of selection not drawn from his facts. Underneath the trappings of scientific objectivity, Zola structured his tales much as novelists always have done, using myths, archetypes, value judgments. (xvii)

Thus, the imposition of the artist's personality alters any attempt at an objective, scientific representation of facts. Stromberg captures the essence of this argument in a clear statement: "Realistic observation can provide the materials for art, but it cannot be that art itself" (xviii).

The example of Thérèse Raquin illustrates this point. The preface to the second edition of this much maligned novel (15 April 1868)³⁵ explains the project in terms of a scientific experiment: "Dans Thérèse Raquin, j'ai voulu étudier des tempéraments et non des caractères. [. . .] J'ai choisi des personnages souverainement dominés par leurs nerfs et leur sang, dépourvus de libre arbitre, entraînés à chaque acte de leur vie par les fatalités de leur chair" (59-60). By depicting characters deprived of free will, Zola shows the strength of temperament over reason. In this deterministic view, characters are fated to succumb to forces beyond their control, leading them to irrational acts or behavior that cannot be explained by science alone. But, they are also subject to the direction of the writer. Zola's treatment of the characters does not fully obey the rules he expounds in the preface. As Furst and Skrine's study points out, these characters are "not mere puppets at the mercy of outer determinant forces," resulting in the assertion that "the prototype of the Naturalist novel already comes up against certain features of Naturalist theory which were to prove untenable and indeed undesirable in a work of art" (45).

³⁵ This "preface" is an addendum to the second edition of the novel. It is, in essence, a defense against the charges of immorality in literature, or "la littérature putride," leveled by Louis Ulbach (under the pseudonym of Ferragus). Zola had also written a response to the article in Le Figaro (31 January 1868), in which he strives to defend not himself, but "la cause de la vérité" (QC X, 727). His argument comes down to one striking metaphor: "La vérité, comme le feu, purifie tout" (729). On the "discours préfaciel" of Thérèse Raquin, consult Henri Mitterand's "La Préface et ses lois: Avant-propos romantiques" in Le Discours du roman.

For many critics, the deterministic aspect of naturalism takes away the interest for the reader. Limitations imposed on characters render them ordinary to a fault, as suggested by F. W. J. Hemmings in The Age of Realism: "If one analyses Zola's characters singly, one finds that they are sadly lacking in what is called autonomy. They rarely develop, they seldom if ever transcend their 'given' natures, they never surprise us" (188). However, the behavior of many of Zola's characters is far from ordinary. Rather, it is the extraordinariness of the lives of these characters as perceived by readers that shocks them at first, then settles in as commonplace. David Baguley speaks of a "déjà-lu" whereby every naturalist novel is essentially the same: "Dans le registre naturaliste, les malheurs et les désastres sont facilement prévisibles; les 'fatalités de la chair' sont inexorables" (Le Naturalisme et ses genres 5). In this way, the innovation of writing about characters' heredity or other physiological influences quickly becomes overused and, at the same time, perhaps looms too pessimistic.

Characters of naturalist novels are victims of a pessimistic determinism according to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer. René-Pierre Colin assesses the "personnage-type du roman naturaliste": "Ecrasé par la vie, les choses, la fatalité biologique, il est perpétuellement en porte à faux par rapport à son siècle" (Schopenhauer en France: Un Mythe naturaliste 152). Colin generalizes that "le pessimisme schopenhauerien cristallisa bien des thèmes déjà familiers aux naturalistes français" (149), and Yves Chevrel echoes the sentiment in saying that "le naturalisme serait la version littéraire du schopenhauérisme" (Le Naturalisme 106). Zola, however, protested being labeled a Schopenhauerian

and criticized other naturalist writers for their increasingly pessimistic works.³⁶

L. S. Dembo presents the argument made by Alexandre Baillot that Zola was affected more than he realized, but concedes that the issue is still up for debate

(15). In Detotalized Totalities: Synthesis and Disintegration in Naturalist, Existential, and Socialist Fiction, Dembo acknowledges that Zola “resembled” Schopenhauer in his pessimism and his notions about the Will, finding that the Schopenhauerian view of the world as Will, as “endless struggle” and “competition,” is very much relevant in Zola. However, he cites Huysmans’s denial that Zola was ever a real pessimist as a counter-argument (15-16).

Dembo finally asserts that Zola “did not have the kind of temperament that would allow him fully to embrace a Schopenhauerian vision of the world” (24).³⁷

Yet, the influence of this philosophy, perhaps indirectly, on Zola’s personal temperament and carried into his writing of characters, is evident in his belief in “la bête humaine” and in his interpretation of the world as a “detotalized totality,” which Dembo defines in the Rougon-Macquart series as “a society in the throes of moral disintegration and governed only by ambition and greed” (25). Without placing too much emphasis on the pessimistic side of determinism, I find that Zola does subscribe to the notion that humans are subject to their biology and, as a result of determinism, rational choice and self-

³⁶ David Baguley, in “From Man’s Misfortune to Au Bonheur des Dames: Zola Against Naturalism,” discusses Zola’s “fundamental disagreement with [other writers’] uncompromising pessimism and with the literary consequences of their cheerless views” (111).

³⁷ Alain de Lattre also provides support that Zola was a temperate optimist: “Si le ‘pessimisme’ est une marque assez constante de Zola, tout au moins de son œuvre, on n’aurait point de mal à relever que ‘l’optimisme’ en est un caractère au moins aussi profond” (212).

control give way to genetic anomalies or other overwhelming circumstances.³⁸

As will be shown later, the effects of determinism ultimately lead characters in naturalist novels to an unnatural sort of existence dominated by irrational, compulsive behavior, such as the obsession with artifice or fantasy.

Furthermore, there is an overriding question that stems from Zola's deterministic practice of depriving his characters of free will, one which perhaps shakes the very foundation of his novelistic purpose, as expressed by Yves Malinas in Zola et les hérédités imaginaires:

[O]n peut se demander à quelles règles obéissent ces personnages dépourvus de libre arbitre: ont-elles été édictées par Zola? Quelle est alors leur valeur scientifique?... Sont-elles indépendantes de l'auteur? Dans ce cas, comment en a-t-il eu connaissance?... S'il ne les connaît que pour y être soumis lui-même comme tous les humains, s'il ne dispose pas lui-même de plus de liberté que ses personnages... alors, qui a écrit les Rougon-Macquart? (30)

Malinas answers this question by saying that Zola did understand this contradiction and explained it by distinguishing between the poet and the savant (31). However, is it not also possible that, in doing so, he explains away the validity of his scientific goals and undermines his own objective of adopting science in literature?

Alain de Lattre poses a similar question in an effort to reconcile the work of the artist with that of the savant: "Si l'artiste et le savant parlent de la même chose, ils n'en parlent pas de la même façon et ce que l'on demande à l'un n'est pas ce qu'on attend de l'autre" (10). While many scholars grapple with the duality of the poet and the scientist in the person of the naturalist writer, J. H.

³⁸ Gaétan Picon's description of the Rougon-Macquart series, on the other hand, stresses the pessimistic aspect of determinism: "une épopée pessimiste de la nature humaine, montrant à la place des caractères libres, des tempéraments façonnés par des tares héréditaires" (1090).

Matthews does not view it as being problematic for Zola. Of course, Matthews's opinion is not to be taken as overly simplistic in arriving at this acceptance of both sides. He quotes Zola's words from Le Roman expérimental to confirm his argument: "Il n'y a pas de contradiction entre ce mot 'poète' et le but scientifique que poursuit le romancier. Car, pour Zola, la Science est 'de la poésie expliquée,' et le savant, 'un poète qui remplace les hypothèses de l'imagination par l'étude exacte des choses et des êtres'" (20). For Zola, science and poetry are one, as he expresses in the letter of 6 July 1864 to Valabrègue: "Je crois qu'il y a dans l'étude de la nature, *telle qu'elle est*, une grande source de poésie" (Corr I, 367).

Although Matthews's explanation offers a plausible compromise, allowing both the poetic and scientific aspects of the writer, the problem is keeping in check the temperament of the artist. For the scientist, imagination has no place in the process of observation and experimentation. But, the objectivity of science must be compromised in a work of art. Lacking the guidance of a creative imagination, the result would be simply a scientific report.

Moreover, the authoritative power of the scientific method is also at risk when it is faultily made to fit where it does not belong in literature. De Lattre maintains that "l'application de la méthode scientifique à l'œuvre littéraire a pour effet de compromettre le souci de réalisme au nom de quoi précisément elle en sollicitait l'appui" (11). Is it possible, then, that Zola's use of science backfires precisely where it was supposed to have strengthened his naturalist cause? This question may be answered in part by the artificiality of the experimental method when applied in literature. Malinas notes that "l'expérimentation n'est pas l'observation: elle demande des conditions artificielles" (39). Thus, the problem

of naturalism, for many of Zola's contemporaries and modern-day critics alike, is the attempt at experimentation, not observation, as Brigitte Weltman-Aron argues in "Le 'Procès-verbal' de l'expérience": "[P]eu de critiques mettent en cause l'instrument que constitue la faculté d'observation ou la recherche de documents pour le romancier; seule la possibilité de l'expérience dans un sens scientifique semble contestable dans un roman" (100).

A common reproach of the experimental method is that it can only be artificially manipulated in literature since the novelist is always in control of conditions in the experiment/novel and, therefore, must know everything. Tullio Pagano, in Experimental Fictions, finds that "the notion of experiment in narrative always implies the active intervention of the author [. . .] to direct conflicts toward a certain outcome" (17). In this sense, there can be nothing unexpected, nothing that would surprise the writer. Not everything is determined by physiological or psychological factors alone. The creative and subjective mind of the writer is, above all else, the most controlling factor. Although the naturalist writer's observation of nature and human behavior may be objective, its passage into the fictional world of the novel under the guise of experimentation is subject to the inventions of the writer's mind. Pierre Martino concludes that "le romancier ne trouvera jamais dans son *expérimentation* que ce qu'il y aura préalablement introduit lui-même" (38). The experimental method in literature, as Zola's critics would insist over and over, is therefore an artificial version of the method used in science because the novelist is at liberty to tamper with evidence and rearrange the facts to fit his master plan.

Henri Mitterand's essay on "La Genèse du roman zolien" in Le Regard et le signe contemplates the author's Ebauches for the prevalence of a sort of "je-metteur en scène" directing the action. Zola's contemporary Louis Desprez also implies that Zola knew very well what he was doing in the practice of posing hypotheses to which he already knew the solution:

La doctrine positiviste, m'écrit M. Zola, la méthode expérimentale, sont aujourd'hui les outils qui trompent le moins. Seulement, dans l'application, il faut admettre l'hypothèse, et c'est par l'hypothèse qu'on marche en avant. [. . .] [J]e crois que, tout en acceptant pour bases les vérités acquises de la science, nous devons aller en avant à la découverte des vérités entrevues. (220-21)

Desprez further characterizes Zola's force and originality in his masterful creation: "Certes, il travaille dans la vie, mais la vie de ses livres est de la vie arrangée par un artiste" (234). However, based on his letter and other evidence,³⁹ I believe Zola would insist that not everything is arranged or predetermined in his novels, only the hypothesis, and that the rest would play out according to the laws of determinism without his intervention. Yet, Tullio Pagano suggests that Zola is mistaken to think such a thing possible: "Zola recognizes the importance of the author's 'personnalité' but limits it to the formulation of an initial 'hypothèse.' Although one might agree that a certain degree of determinism is present in the premises of any fictional work, the role of the author cannot by any means be limited only to the initial 'hypothèse'" (46).

Desprez's presentation of Zola's letter seems to indicate that Zola was perfectly cognizant of his authorial role in the application of the experimental method. But, a more recent critic, F. W. J. Hemmings, addresses the "fallacy" of

³⁹ For instance, Zola detests the notion of art that is purposely not true to life: "Je n'aime point ce mot d'art, qui entraîne avec lui je ne sais quelle idée d'arrangement, de convention. Je ne connais que la vie" ("Causerie du dimanche," Le Corsaire, 3 December 1872, OC X, 974).

this practice, saying that Zola never seemed to have noticed it, or if he did, he ignored it (The Age of Realism 183-84). Hemmings's view, shared by a number of critics, is that Zola's scientific method for writing a faithful account of reality is an impossibility. Yves Chevrel would attribute this impossibility to the actual process of writing: "L'écriture naturaliste est une écriture artificielle, parce qu'elle est une écriture artistique. [. . .] Le naturalisme n'est pas la reproduction du réel 'tel quel'; il ne peut pas l'être par le fait même du passage à l'écriture" (Le Naturalisme 162). Both critics present valid points concerning the alteration of reality that takes place in naturalist or any kind of writing. But, it need not preclude the aim of a realistic form of writing, even if the writer's subjectivity must be accepted as part of the package.

Although Zola speaks of his desire to represent the "vérité" of human existence, his subjectivity often clouds his attempts. As J. H. Matthews and many others point out, Zola is unable to be perfectly objective:

Toute vision du monde ne saurait être que subjective [. . .].
Qu'il le veuille ou non, comme tout autre artiste, Zola interprète
à sa manière la réalité. [. . .] [J]usque dans les passages où il
s'efforce de rester le plus impassible, on sent la présence de l'artiste,
qui communique son impression très individuelle de la réalité.
(Les Deux Zola 36)

The presence of the artist in a work of art colors and distorts the depiction of reality, as Zola admits. In naturalism, though, he calls for a rejection of literary extravagances by way of following a scientific method. Matthews interprets Zola's claim that life must be presented without frills: "C'est la méthode documentaire qui fournira au romancier les éléments de la réalité qu'il va communiquer, car les descriptions lyriques ou fantaisistes sont écartées comme

étant une déformation de la vérité" (19). This estimation of Zola's method, however, lies in contrast to the actuality of his prose, as has been debated by many critics. Zola's novels are more than real and do, in fact, contain such lyrical and fantastical descriptions.

Despite Zola's efforts to distance himself from stylistic embellishments, he often returns to the liberties allowed by the temperament of the artist. Furst and Skrine attribute the variance between naturalist theory and novels to the unexpectedly large role of the artist's temperament, leading them to observe that "there is a discrepancy between theory and practice in the Naturalist novel which does *not* exclude the imaginative in language and symbolism, or the nobler sides of human nature, or even distinct elements of romance" (54).

Likewise, many critics excuse Zola for falling short, in practice, of the scientific ideals he set for himself in theory, and even argue that it is precisely this "shortcoming" or the inability to achieve a purely objective, scientific form of writing that makes his novels into works of art. Baguley therefore poses the question, "Do we give primacy to the science or to the fiction?" (Naturalist Fiction 61). In other words, is naturalism to be judged more as a theory or as a practice? And, how do the issues of theory and practice engage other naturalist writers besides Zola, the so-called master of naturalism? In the next chapter, these questions will be considered in the context of the Médan group, but in order to do so, one must take into account the voice of criticism.

Surveying the Critical (Battle)Field of Naturalism

Although overwhelmingly concerned with the problem of the vulgar subject matter of naturalism, debates carried out by critics in Zola's time occasionally focused on the contradictions inherent in Zola's theories and novels. As Furst and Skrine put it, "the second half of the nineteenth century was a time of bewildering contradictions" and naturalism too was "torn between its theory and its practice" (22). Any "bewildering contradictions" observed in literary debates regarding naturalism in the late nineteenth century have nearly subsided in modern-day criticism, as most critics shy away from dealing with Zola's campaign for the experimental method and the other problematic issues of naturalist theory. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, many current studies simply overlook or set aside Le Roman expérimental and the numerous volumes of Zola's critical writings when analyzing his novels. However, we do a disservice to the author in reducing the theories that he developed so carefully and extensively to the rank of "divers points secondaires," borrowing Zola's own phrase on the matter of style.

Surprisingly, the few modern-day critics who do touch upon the theoretical trappings of naturalism argue that the differences between theory and practice do not have to be seen as detrimental to naturalism at all. For example, Henri Mitterand expresses the opinion that "le naturalisme est impuissant s'il reste prisonnier de ses propres concepts: la vérité, le réel, la logique, l'observation, l'expérimentation, et tout le reste" (Zola: L'Histoire et la fiction 61). Scholars like Mitterand assert that the effectiveness of naturalist writing hinges on the ability to use these concepts rather than be restrained by them. But, if

writers stray too far, it follows that their writings can no longer be characterized as truly naturalist. This interpretation conflicts somewhat with that of Mitterand. While he maintains that naturalism can reconcile divergences from its own doctrine and can even be strengthened by them, I believe that such divergences point to a necessary movement away from naturalism or, at best, a kind of hybrid derived from naturalism that bears the effects of non-naturalist influences. Therefore, in my study of Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans in Les Soirées de Médan and beyond, I seek out the hybrid nature of their writing in order to identify the naturalist and non-naturalist elements that characterize their works and their aesthetics.

While most modern-day critics, represented here by Mitterand, praise Zola for going beyond the limits of his own doctrine, a few, such as Lilian Furst, point to the absurdity of trying to unite science and art in the form of the novel. A large number of critics from earlier in the twentieth century similarly could not look past the incompatibility of naturalist theory and practice, seeing only the flaws in the experimental method and therefore ignoring naturalist works as worthy of discussion. David Baguley notes the silence of critics in the first half of the century despite the sustained presence of Zola in the literary world: “When, for fifty years (1903-1952), Zola lapsed into almost total disregard by the critics, there were still novelists and poets, no doubt less inclined than most to accept unthinkingly prevailing views, who continued to read and comment perceptively on his works” (“Zola and His Critics” 12).

The revival of Zola scholarship in France in the 1950s, however, marks a turning point in the attitude toward naturalism.⁴⁰ Marcel Girard comments on the unfortunate state of Zola studies until the important research published by Guy Robert in 1952,⁴¹ which not only led to a renewed interest, but also a more dignified treatment of Zola's work: "Il est gênant [. . .] de constater que la critique a singulièrement négligé cet écrivain [. . .]. Les profondeurs de Zola ont été niées, ou ignorées, ou quelquefois soupçonnées, mais le plus souvent sévèrement dédaignées. On a écrit beaucoup plus sur le défenseur de Dreyfus que sur l'auteur des Rougon-Macquart" (137). Yet, despite their resurrection of Zola's fiction, critics in the 1950s still did not occupy themselves with the theoretical side of Zola, often saying that he was a great writer in spite of naturalism.⁴²

However, this view is at least a notch above those, primarily contemporary critics of Zola, who condemn his model of naturalism altogether. Anatole France and Ferdinand Brunetière, as mentioned earlier, disdain naturalist subject matter, but they also pass judgment on Zola's naturalist theory. Brunetière points to the disparity between Zola's theory and his actual works in Le Roman naturaliste: "[E]n vain il se proclame réaliste ou naturaliste, et [. . .]

⁴⁰ A parallel renaissance to the one in French criticism took place in England in the 1950s with such landmark studies as F. W. J. Hemmings's Emile Zola and Angus Wilson's Emile Zola: An Introductory Study of His Novels. C. A. Burns remarks: "C'est vers cette époque que Zola, devenu enfin auteur classique, entre au programme des études universitaires. Des thèses sur Zola et le naturalisme se multiplient, la renommée de l'écrivain ne cesse de grandir" ("La Présence d'Emile Zola en Angleterre" 500).

⁴¹ Robert published a general work, Emile Zola. Principes et caractères généraux de son œuvre, as well as a critical and historical study of La Terre, opening the door for many similar studies. His decision to focus on this particular novel is all the more significant given that it was one of the most scandalous, provoking "Le Manifeste des cinq."

⁴² Exceptions to this generalization are Jean Fréville and Jean Rostand, whose writings in the 1950s address issues related to the matter of science. Excerpts from their works are available in Colette Becker's Les Critiques de notre temps et Zola. Another valuable collection of essays from the 1950s is Présence de Zola.

comme romancier, sinon comme critique, il n'a jamais rien eu de commun avec les doctrines qu'il professe" (126). In fact, he likens Zola to a romantic: "Chose bizarre! ce 'précurseur' retarde sur son siècle! Ses Etudes sonnent l'heure de l'an 1900, et ses romans marquent toujours l'heure de 1830" (129).

Along with these judgments, Brunetière adds the charge that the deterministic theory of naturalism goes against Western thinking. He asserts that societies are founded on the belief that human beings have free will, or at least think that they are in control of their own destiny, and therefore attacks Zola for subjecting his characters to the laws of nature without the ability to think and act freely: "[V]ous éliminez du *roman expérimental* ce qu'il y a peut-être de plus intéressant pour l'homme, et de plus vivant, au plein sens du mot, à savoir: la tragédie d'une volonté qui pense" (114). Brunetière's concern for the freedom of the human mind is shared by his contemporary René Doumic, who faults naturalists for their "inintelligence" when it comes to the expression of reality because they do not recognize "la réalité supérieure des idées," which may never be truly understood, but the pursuit of which constitutes "la noblesse et la dignité de la pensée humaine" (qtd. in Colin, Zola. Renégats et alliés, 235).⁴³ Brunetière's opinion that taking away human free will also removes what is most interesting in the novel reflects the argument that the theory of determinism is too restrictive in literature. Naturalism's reliance upon scientific observation and experimentation attenuates the element of human agency and responsibility since it attributes everything to the laws of nature. This dominant feature of the

⁴³ Colin places Brunetière and Doumic along with Jules Lemaître to form a "trinité idéaliste" of critics who are against naturalism's "vaine tentative de reproduction du réel" (235).

naturalist doctrine may explain, in part, why Zola and other naturalist writers soon surpassed the limitations of their own theory.

The evolution of Anatole France's attitude toward Zola provides a glimpse of the personal nature of criticism in the late nineteenth century. Artistic differences separated them for the most part, but France's opinion of Zola's theory and his works is shown to have grown over the years. Christa Bevernis quotes phrases from La Vie littéraire that demonstrate France's negative, subjective views in regard to Zola and naturalism: "La critique de France [. . .] dépeignait Zola comme un auteur 'qui n'a pas de goût,' 'qui ignore la beauté des choses,' 'qui avilit l'humanité,' qui 'méconnaît l'idéal des hommes,' bref, comme un auteur qui a perdu son talent et dont l'œuvre 'est une insulte envers la majorité des Français'" (236). Years later, France's criticism became more impartial and, as Zola's writing extended beyond the limits of naturalism, France's estimation of the novelist and his works greatly improved.⁴⁴ France saw Zola's greatness as a writer because he was able to exceed naturalism, as Bevernis concludes: "Anatole France reconnaissait que Zola, avec son œuvre, brisait les limites de sa théorie, contredisait sa doctrine avec ses meilleures réalisations, et c'est de cela que [. . .] résultait pour lui l'importance de Zola" (237). Thus, France's ultimate appreciation of Zola foretells the manner in which most modern-day readers and scholars view Zola, that his success lies in the ability to separate his works from the theories of naturalism.

⁴⁴ France spoke in honor of Zola upon his death, calling him "un grand citoyen" and "un honnête homme, admirable par la clarté de sa raison et la fermeté de son courage," as he was impressed not only by Zola's later works, but by his involvement in the Dreyfus Affair.

In twentieth-century criticism, one must stop for a moment at the important work of the Marxist Georg Lukács.⁴⁵ Compared with Mitterand's later views, Lukács's take on the same basic notion, that Zola did not follow naturalist doctrine to the letter, arrives at a different interpretation. While Mitterand's way of thinking accepts both the strictures of naturalism and the freedom to go beyond them, Lukács rejects the naturalist method completely, saying that Zola achieved success only because he was able to break from naturalism. For Lukács, naturalism reduces the writer to a mere spectator:

Zola's method, which hampered not only Zola himself but his whole generation, because it was the result of the writer's position as solitary observer, prevents any profoundly realistic representation of life. Zola's "scientific" method always seeks the average, and this grey statistical mean [. . .] spells the doom of great literature. (Studies in European Realism 91)

Lukács also incorporates the criticism of Lafargue who argued, in accordance with the traditions of Marx and Engels, against Zola's method. Lafargue compared Zola to a newspaper reporter, which is in keeping with Zola's own objectives, yet he felt that Zola was "isolated from the social life of his time" (90). The characterization of Zola, or any other naturalist writer, as a solitary observer presents an interesting challenge to the dynamics of the Médan group, to be considered in the next chapter.

Another point raised by Lukács in certain essays contained in Writer and Critic is that the scientific method leads to a subjective, rather than objective work: "[I]nvestigation of social phenomena through observation and their

⁴⁵ The chapter entitled "The Zola Centenary" (written in 1940) in Lukács's Studies in European Realism is most pertinent. Articles by Jacques Pelletier ("Lukács, lecteur de Zola") and Brian Nelson ("Lukács, Zola and the Aesthetics of Realism") supply detailed analyses of this essay in particular and of Lukács's criticism of Zola in general.

representation in description bring such paltry and schematic results that these modes of composition easily slip into their polar opposite -- complete subjectivism" ("Narrate or describe?" 140). In a separate essay, "Art and Objective Truth," Lukács analyzes the phrase supplied by Zola to define a work of art, "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament." Lukács takes this saying as an example of the "eclecticism" of naturalist theory: "A scrap of reality is to be reproduced mechanically and thus with a false objectivity, and is to become poetic by being viewed in the light of the observer's subjectivity, a subjectivity divorced from practice and from interaction with practice" (32-33). He argues that the detached perspective of the solitary observer fails to create a true vision of reality since the writer is not engaged with the subject matter that he is writing about. The idea of transforming reality into something poetic reveals what Lukács calls an "ever-intensifying subjectivization" evident in the transition from naturalism to impressionism, which could be seen in Zola's L'Œuvre, for instance.

Furthermore, the notion of the poetic coincides with Lukács's comment on Zola's writing style: "[T]here was an urge in Zola, to go beyond the grey average of naturalism in his composition. [. . .] [H]e created many extraordinarily effective pictures. No reader can fail to be deeply impressed by his admirable descriptions of pits and markets, the stock exchange, a racecourse, a battlefield, or a theatre" (Studies in European Realism 92). The descriptive passages in Zola's novels, painted eloquently in words, signal for Lukács a romantic quality in that Zola "was compelled to have recourse to a romanticism of the Victor Hugo stamp in order to escape, in part at least, from the counter-artistic

consequences of his own naturalism" (93). A number of critics throughout the twentieth century have also come to embrace the idea that Zola was truly a lyric poet attempting to be a theoretician of naturalism. For example, Robert Margerit's "Zola sans le naturalisme" addresses this aspect of Zola, the poetic genius uncomfortable in the shoes of a theorist: "Tel est assez généralement le destin des chefs d'école, lorsqu'ils ont vraiment un autre génie que celui de doctinaire" (Présence de Zola 88). For as much as he believed in his own theorizing and desired to disseminate naturalism among the ranks of younger writers, Zola's own works betray his underlying lyricism. As will be shown, "L'Attaque du moulin" demonstrates his poetic style even within the context of what was considered a manifesto of naturalism.

Lukács speaks for many critics of the mid-twentieth century when he summarizes the ultimate success of Zola by stating that "it was only because he could not always consistently adhere to his own programme that Zola could ever become a great writer" (91). A similar view is shared by Lilian Furst in more recent times. Furst arrives at the "paradoxical conclusion" that naturalism "succeeded best where it seemed to fail, i.e. where it departed from, or rather outstripped its own intentions" (Naturalism 71). Unlike Mitterand and most other critics, Furst does not seek to override the limitations of naturalism in order to allow for discrepancies between theory and practice. Instead, she clearly denotes the shortcoming of naturalism as a failure: "As a serious attempt to bring the arts into line with the sciences it failed, as it was bound to do in so misguided an undertaking" (71). Furst also gives a straightforward account of the innate defects and limitations of naturalist theory rather than putting a positive spin on

them, as others do by suggesting that Zola's theory of naturalism was not always to be taken seriously.

Like Furst, I believe that Zola should be held accountable for his theory. However, unlike Furst, I certainly do not believe that it was a failure. My view is closer to that of Mitterand, although perhaps not as broad. Mitterand and most modern-day critics tend to overlook the discrepancy between Zola's experimental method and his novels, thereby dismissing the validity of the scientific goals that he endeavored to introduce in literature. Instead of discounting the experimental method and Zola's other scientific aims in this manner, I have sought to address in this study one of the foremost problems in the very foundation of naturalism; that is, whether science can truly be applied in the creative writing process and in the artistic form of the novel. In closing this chapter, it is well understood that the association of science and literature in naturalism remains a difficult one. Much more could be said of the controversy surrounding naturalism in general and in reference to Zola alone.

As will be shown in the course of this study, there are instances where the demands of science are simply not compatible with the artistic talents of Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans. Conversely, when there are strong elements of naturalism in their seemingly non-naturalist works, particularly in A rebours and "Le Horla," one must not ignore them. Modern criticism, for the most part, accepts the non-naturalist aspect of works by Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans as a given. Also, they regard each of these writers as unique, individual talents, but the connection between these three most prominent members of the Médan group has not been adequately explored. The reaction of nineteenth-century

criticism, and indeed throughout much of the twentieth century, often reveals a disapproval or outright rejection of naturalist theory in opposition to the brilliance of their works that lies in their non-naturalist features. Consequently, there is an important question to consider: How did Zola and the Médan group defend naturalism amongst themselves and to their critics? The establishment of this group, their presentation of a sort of naturalist manifesto in the form of Les Soirées de Médan, and the public discourse surrounding this work will therefore be examined along with an analysis of the naturalist and non-naturalist qualities of their stories in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2
TALES FROM THE BATTLEFIELD:
LES SOIREEES DE MEDAN AND THE CAMPAIGN OF NATURALISM

Les Soirées de Médan (1880)¹ are tales of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, but read in another light, they also tell the tale of the battlefield of naturalism. First, as a whole, the work is often considered and promoted as a manifesto of naturalism poised on the frontline in the highly-charged critical debates of the late nineteenth century. Second, the stories themselves contain not only the literal theater of war, which actually is undermined in the narrative, but also a battleground for conflicting naturalist and non-naturalist elements. Les Soirées de Médan diverges in many ways from the theory of naturalism and ultimately contradicts the purpose set forth in the introduction: “Notre seul souci a été d’affirmer publiquement nos véritables amitiés et, en même temps, nos tendances littéraires” (33). Indeed, the publication of this work by Emile Zola and his so-called disciples, Guy de Maupassant, J.-K. Huysmans, Henry Céard, Léon Hennique, and Paul Alexis, known collectively as the Médan group,

¹ Médan, located along the Seine northwest of Paris, is the site of Zola’s home, acquired in 1878, that served as a gathering place for many of his writer and artist friends. The title of this volume of war stories is quite misleading for the uninitiated reader. Through my conversations with Zola’s great-granddaughter, Mme Martine Le Blond-Zola, I learned that many visitors to the house, now a museum, peruse the book expecting to find it light reading, that is, tales of pleasant evenings spent at the country retreat.

presents the appearance of a cohesive band of writers united not only by an intellectual camaraderie, but also by a similar approach to their literary craft.

The implication of a true professional friendship in the introductory statement belies, to some degree, the reality that unfolds in biographical accounts and correspondence. In fact, the fragmented nature of the group is discernible even in these opening remarks. Despite the use of the pronoun “nous,” there is some indication that it was written by Henry Céard alone. In her edition of Les Soirées de Médan, Colette Becker cites “une brève carte de visite par laquelle Zola demande à Céard de lui apporter ‘la préface des Soirées de Médan.’” (8). Moreover, this instruction regarding the preface is the only mention of Les Soirées de Médan in the correspondence between Zola and the other authors. The unsigned preface was later attributed to Zola in Léon Hennique’s own preface added to the work in 1930, describing it as his “combative préface” (30). Thus, the work’s introduction is just one example of the contradictions, deceptions, and grandstanding of the Médan group that will be shown to demonstrate the unstable foundation of the group. The most telling proof of their tenuous connection may be that within the span of a few years following this landmark publication, the group had dispersed and its former members were finding success in non-naturalist genres. Therefore, the question is raised whether the publication of Les Soirées de Médan signals the beginning or the end of the Médan group, not just in terms of their alliance as writers, but more importantly, in their support of naturalism.

As proponents of this emerging naturalist movement led by Zola, the less recognized members of the Médan group undoubtedly sought to make names

for themselves as well to make a living. Without attaching too much negativity to this observation, we must acknowledge the significance of the publicity gained by association with Zola. Many critics at the time pointed to the self-serving interests of these young, unestablished writers, who were seen as imitators of Zola, calling them by any number of derisive terms. On a more humorous note, the satiric journal Le Chat Noir issued this disfiguration of the Lord's Prayer, mocking the Médan group's seeming efforts to ride the coattails of Zola to fame and fortune: "Notre père Zola, qui êtes à Médan, que vos romans soient payés très cher."² In fact, the very inception of Les Soirées de Médan is jeopardized by evidence that the theme of the Franco-Prussian War was chosen as a matter of convenience to make use of previously published material. The prevalent reading of the work as a naturalist manifesto, or a unified declaration of literary ideals, as suggested in the preface, is therefore challenged in this study.

For the purpose of discussing this publication, the term "Médan group" refers only to the five writers who took part with Zola in penning Les Soirées de Médan. But, the Médan group was thought to encompass more unofficial members, as Alain Pagès explains in "Le Mythe de Médan," listing young naturalists in various groupings as they were perceived by contemporary critics. To name just one, Octave Mirbeau was supposed to have been included in the writing of Les Soirées de Médan.³ Along with my study of the group as a whole, I have chosen to focus on the stories by Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans, whom most literary historians and readers would likely identify as independent

² Le Chat Noir 46, 25 November 1882, qtd. in Hannoosh, Parody and Decadence, 62.

³ René-Pierre Colin's Zola. Renégats et alliés is an invaluable resource for information on many of the young naturalists, featuring a section of biographical portraits.

writers before recalling their association with the Médan group. Unlike Alexis, Céard, and Hennique, they are more readily distinguishable apart from the group. That is not to say that this “other half” of the Médan group is not worthy of being studied in a similar fashion.⁴ Much work remains to be done on them, not only for their collaboration in Les Soirées de Médan, but also as naturalists in their own right, as well as on other lesser-known naturalists, including what may be called the “anti-Médan group” of the “Manifeste des cinq,” who accused Zola of having deserted the naturalist camp, abandoning his troops and betraying his own *œuvre*.⁵

The cases of Huysmans and Maupassant present a significant opportunity for reevaluating their other works in light of their Médan experience and their engagement with naturalism at various points in their careers. The extent to which each member of the Médan group initially adopted Zola’s model of naturalism, with its focus on scientific theories and the experimental method, is debatable. What brought them together in the late 1870s was their common desire to participate in the campaign of naturalism by supporting Zola and each other, using both offensive and defensive strategies. In the previous chapter, I set the framework for the critical discourse surrounding naturalism, thereby establishing the battleground for Zola and the Médan group. Within this

⁴ Given the constraints of my study, I am forced to exclude the examination of their stories, but will include some mentions of their involvement with Les Soirées de Médan and with Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans.

⁵ These five, Paul Bonnetain, Joseph-Henry Rosny, Lucien Descaves, Gustave Guiches, and Paul Margueritte, sharply denounced Zola’s novel La Terre in Le Figaro, 18 August 1887. Years later, they expressed regret for the attack against Zola with a public apology for “cette folle incartade” and Rosny called it in hindsight an “acte absurde.” When the “Manifeste” first appeared, Zola made the following remarks in an interview with Fernand Xau in Le Gil Blas: “Si Maupassant, Huysmans, Céard m’avaient parlé de la sorte publiquement, j’avoue que j’eusse été quelque peu estomaqué! Mais la déclaration de ces messieurs ne saurait me produire un tel effet!” (Speirs and Signori, Entretiens avec Zola 9).

atmosphere, it is easy to see why a grouping such as this one would be important as a means to promote and defend naturalism, to spark curiosity and create controversy, and ultimately to stand united in Les Soirées de Médan, a work that simultaneously embodies and resists being a manifesto of naturalism.

This chapter, then, explores the dynamics of the Médan group as a matrix. The plentiful definitions of this term will be narrowed down in my discussion. Working from the Latin etymology of the word, related to the womb or the mother, we may wish to replace the maternal signification with a paternal one, coining the term *patrix*.⁶ However, the nurturing aspect of the mother is not at all inappropriate for the Médan group. Zola and his wife served almost as surrogate parents to these young men, who in fact were only a few years younger than Zola. Furthermore, the more technical meanings of the matrix are most relevant to my explanation, primarily those of a model or mold from which to cast a duplicate. Of course, it is impossible to reduce such talented and original writers as Maupassant and Huysmans to this form, but the possibility for comparison may be addressed. Therefore, a close look at the inner workings of the group, focusing specifically on Huysmans and Maupassant in relation to Zola, aims to explain their participation in the Médan group and the writing of Les Soirées de Médan through the consultation of their own stories in the volume as well as critical pieces and correspondence, which may prove significant to their questioning of Zola's naturalist theory.

⁶ To my knowledge, such a word does not exist, but I have chosen not to adopt it, in part, because of the other derivations from *pater* or *patri-*, as in patriarchy, for example, which I believe is too strong a term to apply to the Médan group.

Advancing the Naturalist Cause

It has often been said that the only thing worse than being attacked by critics is to be ignored by them. In some cases, being the object of negative criticism is even more desirable than receiving critics' endorsement for the sheer benefit of drawing more attention and creating a "succès de scandale." By banding together, the members of the Médan group attracted the attention necessary to secure a place in the literary scene for themselves and for naturalism. Unlike many other literary schools, naturalism did not have an official journal or critic, though not for lack of trying. For a time, Le Voltaire was practically a semi-official journal for the naturalists. Zola did everything he could to present the up-and-coming naturalists to the public. In modern terminology, we could say that he served as their publicist or manager by coordinating media opportunities for them, not only getting their works accepted in journals, but also finding publishers for their novels and setting them up with theater contacts. Colette Becker, in her introduction to Les Soirées de Médan, confirms Zola's commitment to publicize his "fidèles" as much as himself and his efforts to win them a brief engagement with La Réforme: "Il les recommande, le 12 août 1878, à Francolin, qui va faire paraître une nouvelle formule de La Réforme, comme de 'jeunes écrivains, d'opinions très avancées, littérairement parlant, et dont les articles seront très remarquables'" (11).

But, in the most crucial arena of literary criticism, the Médan group had loftier goals of establishing their own naturalist journal, to be called La Comédie

humaine,⁷ and recruiting Taine to act as their mouthpiece, a role which Zola himself would assume though he claimed not to want that position. Indeed, Zola would soon abandon nearly all journalistic work to focus on his novel writing: “Un dégoût violent me prend de mes articles au Figaro. Je rêve, quand j’aurai lâché ça, un plongeon dans de longs travaux où je pourrai disparaître pendant des mois” (letter to Céard, 6 May 1881, Corr IV, 174). Later that year, Zola would write: “J’ai quitté la presse et j’espère n’y point rentrer. [. . .] En somme, je me suis assez battu, que d’autres me remplacent. Moi, je vais tâcher de créer” (letter to Jules Troubat, 5 November 1881, Corr IV, 236). A few years after, in a letter to Octave Mirbeau in March of 1885, Zola would confirm his detachment from journalism as evidence that he did not wish to be considered the leader of naturalism: “Mais pourquoi dites-vous que je conduis le naturalisme? Je ne conduis rien du tout. Voici bientôt quatre ans que je n’ai écrit une ligne dans un journal, je travaille dans mon coin, en laissant rouler le monde où il lui plaît” (Corr V, 247).

Although Zola had certainly done his part to publicize naturalism and his fellow writers over the years, his formal resignation from journalistic debate at a time when the Médan group was just beginning to get a foothold may be the catalyst that would herald a quick demise for the group. Except for Huysmans, the others had yet to publish any serious work and their attempts at criticism pale in comparison to the volumes of critical studies done by Zola. By withdrawing himself from the day-to-day rigors of critical writing, it may

⁷ The idea was to follow up the success of Les Soirées de Médan with their own forum for naturalist discussions that were to include many others beyond the Médan group, like Edmond de Goncourt, and even foreign correspondents.

seem that Zola deserts the cause of the Médan group perhaps even more than they do; however, this would be an underestimation of his devotion not only to the cause, but also to his peers. Zola made a natural, passionate spokesperson to headline what became, effectively, the media blitz of naturalism, as shown by Colette Becker in her assessment of Zola's talent for generating publicity: "Il a le sens du public [. . .] il sait varier, surprendre, exciter la curiosité, faire parler de lui, en alimentant, voire en créant, polémiques et petits scandales" (Les Apprentissages 369). Henri Mitterand also speaks of Zola's leadership ability in this group of writers: "Son langage est celui de l'accusation et de la défense, du combat, de la victoire et de la défaite, de l'antagonisme, du bouleversement, de la révolution, de la vie et de la mort" (Le Discours du roman 170). Zola's ardent attachment to the cause of naturalism, even after he had retired from journalism, shows in his unflagging support of his peers, praising their talents even when they strayed from naturalism.⁸

Zola, the great defender of others, also had to defend himself and his theories. While his novels were almost always greeted with enthusiasm, his theories certainly were not always as well received, as has been shown in the previous chapter. Nonetheless, Zola and his model of naturalism garnered many supporters not only among the public who read his articles and novels, but also within the literary community in the form of the Médan group. The Médan group helped to promote naturalism thus, in a way, giving Zola some payback for the success the young naturalists found by being associated with him. For a

⁸ See, for example, Zola's reviews of Maupassant's Des Vers (25 May 1880, QC XII, 614-19) and Huysmans's Croquis parisiens (15 June 1880, QC XII, 619-23).

time at least, their efforts as a group managed to fill the void of not having an official critic to represent naturalism and further served to counterbalance the attacks of critics against naturalism.

However, the group did not often speak of the theory of naturalism, leaving Zola, for the most part, alone in his defense. Zola's goal was not only to present and defend his doctrine of naturalism, but also to extend the task of theorizing naturalism to others besides himself. In "Littérature et politique dans les écrits de Zola (1879-1881)," Roger Ripoll analyzes Zola's effort to do so in the years following L'Assommoir: "[I]l exploite ce succès, cherche à occuper le terrain, à faire du naturalisme non pas la doctrine d'un individu, mais le principe d'un renouvellement de la littérature et de la cohésion d'une équipe" (51).

As Halina Suwala notes in Autour de Zola, Zola's early critical writings unabashedly insisted upon "le moi de Zola," as the titles Mes Haines and Mon Salon demonstrate (128), thereby setting up the notion that when Zola spoke of naturalism, he was speaking for himself only.

The Médan group contributed little, if anything at all, to the theory of naturalism. Henri Mitterand explains that Huysmans and Maupassant "se sont refusés à dogmatiser" and that Céard and Alexis left writings of little significance, leading to the conclusion that "le naturalisme n'est pas le discours d'un groupe, d'une école, mais celui d'un seul homme" (Zola: L'Histoire et la fiction 56). Although it may be too simple to condense naturalism to Zola alone, Mitterand's statement does highlight the fact that it was mostly for outward appearances only that the Médan group supported naturalism. Furthermore, by taking under his wing the younger writers of his generation, Zola managed to

draw together a group as he wished, but at the price of naturalism becoming known as a school.

The very label of “naturalisme” implies that it is a school of thought or ideology. According to Mitterand, it becomes “une étiquette conceptuelle abstraite, haussée au même niveau d’emploi analytique et classificateur que *romantisme* ou *réalisme*, et imposant par là même l’idée d’une école, d’un courant nouveau” (Zola: L’Histoire et la fiction 54). Many scholars trace the idea of naturalism as a school to the 1868 preface to Thérèse Raquin in which Zola writes of “le groupe d’écrivains naturalistes auquel j’ai l’honneur d’appartenir” (63). This invocation of a naturalist group of writers in 1868 precedes the Médan group by nearly a decade, but Zola may be adding his name to the group that he sees in such writers as the Goncourts and Flaubert. Yet, the main body of his essay is written in self-defense with the predominant use of the first person: “Donc il faut que je présente moi-même mon œuvre à mes juges” (59). Zola’s reference to a group of naturalist writers, if premature, may be a means of generating publicity as well. Mitterand, for example, places confidence in the implications that it has for the future development of such a group, seeing it as “un pari sur l’avenir, un acte de baptême, et une excellente manœuvre publicitaire” (“Le Naturalisme théorique” 183).

The preface to Thérèse Raquin, with its initiation of terminology both theoretical and scientific, proves to be a manifesto of naturalism in a way that the group publication of Les Soirées de Médan would never be. Jacques Dubois, in “Emergence et position du groupe naturaliste dans l’institution littéraire,” calls this preface the first naturalist manifesto and looks upon it as a prophecy for the

alliance of a group standing behind Zola in support of naturalism: “[La préface] dit l’avènement d’une littérature sérieuse qui, même, ne sera presque plus de la littérature. L’étude scientifique est un mot d’ordre simple et clair dans lequel quelques jeunes auteurs qui attendent une ligne directrice vont se reconnaître” (84-85). Dubois categorizes each phase of the naturalist movement, with the Médan group coming clearly into shape in the third phase, the “phase de conquête et d’émergence.” He cites the year 1880, with the publication of Les Soirées de Médan and Le Roman expérimental, as “la marque définitive de l’émergence”: “Longtemps discutée et célébrée à l’intérieur du groupe, la doctrine entre à ce moment [. . .] dans une phase de rationalisation et de systématisation qui finit de l’instituer” (86). It is only in the fifth phase, the “phase de déclin,” that Dubois admits to the group’s abandonment of Zola and naturalism as “Maupassant et Huysmans cherchent des voies personnelles” (87). But what Dubois does not address is the internal dysfunction of this group in which each member had his own motives in mind, which did not necessarily include giving full support to Zola’s theory of naturalism.

Even the dissemination of the word “naturalisme” is due to Zola’s solitary efforts, as F. W. J. Hemmings suggests in “The Origin of the Terms *Naturalisme*, *Naturaliste*”: “Had it not been for Zola’s indefatigable ‘plugging’ of the word in a succession of newspaper and magazine articles in the late seventies, naturalism would probably never have become so momentous a word” (109-110).⁹ A few

⁹ Sylvie Thorel, in “Naturalisme, naturaliste,” outlines the spread of these terms through Zola’s usage and in conjunction with a study of dictionaries from the period, finding that “Zola, s’il n’a pas inventé les termes, les a en tout cas chargés d’un sens qu’ils ne possédaient pas encore” (78). See also Furst and Skrine’s chapter on the term “Naturalism.”

years after Zola's death, one member of the Médan group, Henry Céard, expressed the view that Zola himself had not believed in the word:

Naturalisme, c'est le mot mis en circulation par Zola, qui croit modérément à la qualité de sa doctrine et confesse imprudemment à Goncourt: "Eh! je m'en moque, du mot *naturalisme*, et pourtant je le répèterai, parce qu'il faut un baptême aux choses pour que le public les croie neuves." (Cogné, Le "Huysmans intime" 135)

Another problematic term used in naturalism is "le roman," which according to Zola, "ne signifie plus rien, appliqué à nos œuvres naturalistes" and brings to mind "une idée de conte, d'affabulation, de fantaisie" (Le Roman expérimental 228). The etymology of "roman" also suggests "romantique" and "romanesque," whereas Zola saw early on the need for a revision of terminology: "Il y a quinze à vingt ans déjà, on avait senti l'impropriété croissante du terme, et il fut un moment où l'on tenta de mettre sur les couvertures le mot 'étude'" (228).¹⁰

Linguistic matters also concerned others in the Médan group. Some actually preferred other terms over "naturalisme." For instance, David Baguley finds that Maupassant was impatient with the term "naturalisme" and that Huysmans liked better the label "intimisme" ("The Nature of Naturalism" 14). I will further explore the attitudes of Maupassant and Huysmans toward naturalism and toward being considered naturalists later in this study. For now, what is most important to recognize is that the disagreement between members of the Médan group simply over the word "naturalisme" gives a strong indication of their ultimate incompatibility.

¹⁰ Zola did indeed attempt to add the subtitle "Etude" to Thérèse Raquin, but his editors would not allow it because "il pouvait faire croire que [le] volume était une œuvre aride et trop sérieuse et éloigner par-là toute une catégorie de lecteurs" (qtd. in Becker, Les Apprentissages, 327).

Another member of the group, Paul Alexis, though he was the most faithful to Zola and decidedly the most fervent member of the Médan group,¹¹ insisted upon the fact that naturalism was more for the critics than for themselves, saying that “l’école naturaliste fut [. . .] fondée, sans préméditation, grâce surtout aux aboiements de la critique” (Emile Zola, notes d’un ami 149). The conception of a group or school therefore comes from the outside influence of the critics rather than generating from within the sphere of those who became its members. As David Baguley asserts, Zola was “fully aware that naturalism can only flourish if a cohesive group of writers shares its literary practices and has models to which it can relate” (Naturalist Fiction 68). Thus, the Médan group fulfills the need to bring writers together in a common practice of naturalism. Such a move suggests that naturalist writing, like that of many formal schools, is aimed just as much, if not more, toward the critics and toward an inner circle of writers than toward a readership of average individuals.

At times, it seems that the naturalists are essentially writing for each other, that is, to provide good examples of what naturalist literature should be, more than for any other audience or purpose. The theoretical discourse of naturalism certainly supports such a view, as Chantal Pierre-Gnassounou expresses in Zola: Les Fortunes de la fiction: “*A priori* le naturalisme, tel qu’il s’énonce dans les écrits de propagande, ne se préoccupe guère du lecteur, considéré comme une

¹¹ The famous phrase that is forever associated with Alexis came in a telegram sent in response to Jules Huret’s Enquête sur l’évolution littéraire: “Naturalisme pas mort. Lettre suit.” B. H. Bakker emphasizes Alexis’s devotion to Zola and to naturalism in his presentation of their correspondence, suggesting that “l’école’ naturaliste se réduit en somme à un maître et à un disciple, à Zola et à Alexis” (21). René-Pierre Colin’s recent edition of Alexis’s Emile Zola, notes d’un ami refers to the often-overlooked author as “le saint Jean de Médan” and hopes to “rendre à cet écrivain vilipendé un peu du lustre qu’il mérite” (iv).

entité strictement secondaire” (65). Naturalism, with all its theoretical accoutrements, especially the guidelines for the experimental method, shows itself to be more concerned with the writing process than the activity of reading. The vague notion of public opinion, as disseminated in the wealth of literary journals of the time, even comes before the tastes of the individual reader. Accordingly, the discourse or the “buzz” surrounding the Médan group and its self-promotional marketing efforts matter almost more than their actual writings.

In addition to the writers’ identity as a group, the key to the success of this movement is that each writer be prolific and represent naturalism to the public and to the critics. In the years leading up to Les Soirées de Médan, Zola reveals these beliefs in his correspondence: “Ce n’est qu’avec des œuvres que nous nous affirmerons; les œuvres ferment la bouche des impuissants et décident seules des grands mouvements littéraires” (letter to Hennique, 2 September 1877, Corr III, 114). A letter to Céard further insists upon the need for the group to produce important works and lots of them,¹² placing special emphasis on Huysmans, who at that time had set aside Les Sœurs Vatard, only half-finished:

Il est notre espoir, il n’a pas le droit de lâcher son roman, quand tout le groupe a besoin d’œuvres. Et vous, que faites-vous? Je vois bien que vous lancez d’anciennes pièces; cela ne suffit pas, il faut en écrire de nouvelles, et des drames, et des comédies, et des romans. Nous devons d’ici à quelques années écraser le public sous notre fécondité. (16 July 1877, Corr III, 79)

For the most part, the Médan group failed to live up to these expectations.

Nonetheless, this correspondence represents an effort on Zola’s part to enlist others in his quest for promoting naturalism and therefore would suggest that

¹² As F. W. J. Hemmings puts it, Zola realized that “advertisements are wasted if the goods advertised are not being produced” (Emile Zola 167).

the Médan group is in the process of forming a “school” of naturalism under Zola’s guidance.

Furthermore, Zola’s implication that one person’s work would stand for the entire group demonstrates that the writer’s position is in the process of being redefined from that of an individual to a team player. Zola downplays the notion of a school in his “Lettre à la jeunesse,” appearing only months before Les Soirées de Médan, to emphasize instead the universal application of the experimental method for any and every writer to “découvrir [son] coin de vérité” (Le Roman expérimental 127). This advice dovetails with the solitary vocation of the artist that appears throughout the history of literature. For Yves Chevrel, naturalism marks a rupture from this tradition as the writer descends from the proverbial ivory tower and takes on a productive role alongside his comrades: “[L]a vocation d’homme de lettres doit s’épanouir et se réaliser dans la profession d’écrivain, le génie solitaire devient le travailleur solidaire de ses concitoyens” (Le Naturalisme 49).

Chevrel’s statement on the transformation of the writer from “le génie solitaire” to “le travailleur solidaire” is clever, but somewhat problematic. Rather than seeing the members of the Médan group as “travailleurs solidaires” who are united in the common cause of naturalism, I prefer to consider them a group of distinct “génies solitaires” in that the individuality of each member is not sacrificed for the sake of the group or in the name of naturalism. First, the work of the naturalist writer is a solitary endeavor; each member of the Médan group writes in solitude. Thus, Les Soirées de Médan, as will be discussed later, is a pieced-together collection of separate efforts. Furthermore, each writer, as I

will show in the cases of Huysmans and Maupassant specifically, maintains his own literary style apart from the doctrines of Zola and naturalism. Already in their publication of Les Soirées de Médan there is evidence that the writers are united not in support of naturalism, but against other types of literature, such as the patriotic fiction that was so prevalent following the Franco-Prussian War. If the Médan group is to be known as a school, it is more for what they stand against rather than for anything that may tie them together. Although they may present a front of solidarity in regard to naturalism, underneath it all, they are still individual talents with very different styles that would manifest themselves both in Les Soirées de Médan and in their independent works.

Moreover, how can the Médan group be called a school when their own supposed leader is against such a thing? From his earliest days in the literary world of Paris, Zola refuted the idea of belonging to a school despite his close association with various groups of artists and writers. Colette Becker comments on the climate of a sweeping republicanism to which Zola and a host of new journals¹³ added momentum with their expression of unconventional views: “[I]ls refusent les écoles, les modèles, mettent au contraire l’accent sur le tempérament, le génie” (“Aux sources du naturalisme zolien” 16). Becker begins with the provision that Zola’s ambitions must be situated in the political and economic context of his generation: “[A]rrivant à Paris en 1858, [. . .] le *provincial* Zola, confronté à une certaine expérience, a été sensible aux aspirations de sa

¹³ Their names alone are significant, for example, La Jeune France, La Réforme littéraire, Le Travail, and La Revue du progrès.

génération, de ceux qui ont eu vingt ans en 1860, et les a théorisées avec plus de vigueur -- et surtout plus de constance -- que d'autres" (13).

The point about age is important because it detaches Zola from the rest of the Médan group, who were approximately ten years younger and therefore perhaps of a slightly different mindset. This observation becomes significant when we consider that the younger members of the group were all around twenty years old in 1870, which is noteworthy in the example of Maupassant's and Huysmans's firsthand experience with the war and the lifelong impact it had on their writing. By distancing Zola from the others, it is then possible to attribute some of what Becker calls their "incompréhensions réciproques" to this gap of a few years which, although not too far apart temporally, represents a greater difference in terms of mentality, both their own individual mentalities and the collective mentality of contemporary society.¹⁴ In fact, Becker distinguishes two kinds of naturalism: first, Zola's naturalism, which would always bear the mark of the political and economic revolution of the early 1860s, and second, the naturalism of those who are typically assigned to the "groupe naturaliste," namely the Médan group.¹⁵

In 1864, Zola wrote that "les écoles n'ont jamais produit un seul grand homme. Ce sont les grands hommes qui ont produit les écoles." However, Jacques Dubois offers a reformulation of this statement that rings true for Zola:

¹⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, in Les Règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire, also cites the Médan group as a prime instance where "l'âge social est largement indépendant de l'âge biologique," making it true that "dans le champ littéraire [. . .] les générations peuvent être séparées par moins de dix ans" (177).

¹⁵ For information on the political and economic situation in France during the years in question, Becker refers readers to Alice Gérard's Le Second Empire. Innovations et réaction and René Rémond's La Vie politique en France, 1848-1879, Vol. 2.

“C’est en produisant le naturalisme comme école que Zola se produit comme grand homme” (75). Terms such as “grand homme” and “école” can be very specious when applied to Zola and naturalism, given his protestations against seeking fame or being the leader of a school. Despite these claims, Zola’s status as a “grand homme” plays a large part in bringing about the existence of the Médan group. Since Zola had already forged the path of naturalism through his novels and critical pieces, newcomers to the naturalist movement were perceived by some as trying to make their way simply by association rather than on their own initiative. René-Pierre Colin illustrates the politics of alliances in that era: “Les jeunes naturalistes, qu’ils l’avouent ou le taisent, vont tenter, en faisant allégeance à plusieurs initiateurs, de profiter de la gloire qui s’attache à eux” (Tranches de vie 46).

But no other naturalist writer would equal Zola, thus reinforcing the notion of a school in which Zola is master and the rest are destined to be forever his pupils as long as they remain in this school. Jean Richepin notes precisely this phenomenon in his contemporary critique: “[La publication des Soirées de Médan] prouve chez nos six naturalistes, l’intention de se poser en école, et elle va faire prendre plus que jamais M. Zola pour un pontife suivi de caudataires.”¹⁶ A similar observation is made by another contemporary Gustave Geffroy, who takes the image of a school literally: “On s’acharna [. . .] à transformer l’écrivain des Rougon-Macquart en un moniteur qui dictait des préceptes, en un pion qui surveillait une classe de jeunes” (234). The names used in the press to refer to the group further promote these images, as they are called not only “les médanistes”

¹⁶ “Les Six Naturalistes,” Le Gil Blas (21 April 1880), rpt. in Montfort 26-27.

or “les médaniens,” but more precisely “les zoléens,” “les zolistes,” or “Messieurs Zola.” More scathing terms were used for the group as well, including the recurring metaphor of the Médan group as a tail trailing behind Zola. Rather than seeing them as a tail, a group of schoolboys, or any of the other images typically used to degrade, I propose that we consider the Médan group in the image of a matrix.

The Médan Matrix

A matrix is defined as “that within which, or within and from which, something originates, takes form, or develops.”¹⁷ The Médan group is comparable to this figure in the sense that it provides the setting for naturalism to take form and develop. Although the theoretical concept of naturalism had already been well established by Zola alone, the multiplying force of the Médan group continued the spread of naturalism by reproducing rapidly. Like a matrix, Zola is the common point of generation for the others. Yves Chevrel shares a similar view on a larger scale, defining Zola as “le lieu géométrique” where the literary tendencies of his age come together: “Plus qu’un exemple ou même qu’un pionnier qu’on suit plus ou moins bien, il est un modèle, au sens technique du terme” (*Le Naturalisme* 31). Elsewhere, Chevrel extends Zola’s influence to the “loftiest minds” of the times, including Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Tolstoy: “It is Zola who discovered a common measure for all these talents, and a formula

¹⁷ Webster’s New World College Dictionary, 4th ed.

wide enough and yet close enough to distinguish them from the outside world and bind them to one another" ("Toward an Aesthetic of the Naturalist Novel" 47). While this grouping poses some problems, as Chevrel discusses in his article, it nonetheless presents a universal naturalist aesthetics for the European novel that revolves around the central motivation of Zola's naturalism.¹⁸

Although such an expansive reach may be arguable, the notion of a matrix is more effectively applied to the immediate circle of the Médan group. Building from the initial definition, Webster's Dictionary specifies that a matrix can be, among other things, "a die or mold for casting or shaping." Particularly relevant are the examples given in the printing industry: "a metal mold for casting the face of type" or "a papier-mâché, plaster, or similar impression of type, etc., from which a plate can be made, as in stereotypy."¹⁹ In the production of naturalism, Zola serves as the mold from which the others take their form. The nature of the matrix in this instance is two-fold. First, it is the original structure that gives shape to all others. But second, it is the exact image of those that are created from it. Applying this metaphor to Zola and the Médan group, Zola is unique first in that he is the point of origin upon which the Médan group depends, but he is also equal to the rest of the group in their shared identity as naturalist writers following the same experimental method. Therefore, the Médan group

¹⁸ Chevrel clarifies that the theory of determinism is behind this new conception of the novel as writers can "express the unity of life through a logical narrative pattern: everything has a cause, everything must have a cause [. . .]. The main thing is to explain, to deduce. Aesthetics here means logic" (50).

¹⁹ Although the primary definition of stereotypy has to do with the process of printing from stereotype plates, the secondary definition, although not indicated in this meaning, is intriguing nonetheless when considered in relation to the Médan group: "abnormal repetition of an action, speech phrase, etc., or abnormal sustained maintenance of a position or posture."

is, in manufacturing terms, the product of naturalism and the goal of their enterprise is to get the public to buy naturalism, both literally and figuratively.

It was essential to market naturalism to the public in order to ensure its survival and, perhaps more importantly, that of its workers.²⁰ Zola's experience in the world of publishing taught him the commercial value of literature as well as its aesthetic value. Colette Becker analyzes this "conception moderne" that Zola addresses in "L'Argent dans la littérature."²¹ In contrast to the aristocratic types who believed that talk of money debases literature, Becker rightly sees that, for Zola, it was a necessity: "Pour Zola, qui n'a pas de fortune personnelle, les lettres sont non 'une récréation de l'esprit,' mais 'une carrière'" (Les Apprentissages 98).²² The same can be said of most of the young naturalists, who were linked by social status as much as by their literary pursuits, as Christophe Charle points out: "[L]es médaniens sont des journalistes ou des employés besogneux. Il s'agit de créer un capital symbolique à partir du succès de Zola, non de gérer [. . .] une tradition littéraire prestigieuse" (65). Their shared socio-economic position falls in line with Zola's view of naturalist writers being equal and gives further weight to his refusal to be known as the master of naturalism: "Tous, les grands et les petits, s'y meuvent librement, travaillant à l'investigation commune, chacun dans sa spécialité, et ne reconnaissant d'autre autorité que celle des faits, prouvée par l'expérience. Donc, dans le naturalisme, il ne saurait y avoir ni de novateurs ni de chefs d'école" (Le Roman expérimental 90).

²⁰ Léon Deffoux and Emile Zavie call the Médan group "bons fonctionnaires du 'Bureau des Etudes Humaines'" (17).

²¹ Le Messager de l'Europe, March 1880, rpt. in Le Roman expérimental.

²² Becker refers to Zola's essay "Stendhal," Les Romanciers naturalistes, OC XI, 67.

However, the younger naturalists did look up to Zola and a few others they considered masters, namely Flaubert and the Goncourts, and celebrated them with such events as the famous “dîner Trapp.” This banquet of 16 April 1877 is significant for what the press made of it, for example by printing an invented menu in La République des Lettres that featured items like “Potage ‘purée Bovary’” and “Liqueur de ‘l’Assommoir.’” David Baguley calls this ceremonial dinner a “media event,” but one that adds “a certain aura of credibility to the myth of the founding of a new literary school” (Naturalist Fiction 18). Léon Deffoux and Emile Zavie also recognize what this event looked like to the public, suggesting that it was intentional on the part of the young naturalists wishing to form a legitimate group, “la volonté du groupe de s’affirmer ainsi par une manifestation collective” (11). Furthermore, a journal account by Henry Céard points to another publicity-hungry motive: “Puis c’était Charpentier qu’on invitait, avec l’arrière-pensée que cette politesse le déciderait à publier les romans à venir.”²³ Yet, one of the honored guests, Edmond de Goncourt, described in his Journal the more altruistic goal that he witnessed among “la jeunesse des lettres réaliste, naturaliste” that evening: “Voici l’armée nouvelle en train de se former” (II, 1182-83).

The image of the Médan group as an army would come to be a lasting theme within the group itself and for the outside observers who favored the group and the battle of naturalism. For instance, there is the dedication of Léon Hennique’s La Dévouée to Céard and Huysmans in which he calls them “ses frères d’arme” along with using other war metaphors. Also, positive military

²³ The full account is quoted in C. A. Burns, Henry Céard et le naturalisme, 95-96.

references from critics rivaled the many negative ones that were hurled against the Médan group.²⁴ Pierre Martino would later reflect on the triumph of naturalism: “C’est [. . .] vers 1890, à une date où, après une courte bataille d’une dizaine d’années, le petit groupe naturaliste était devenu une grande armée victorieuse” (174). Martino is correct in calling the group victorious; however, I disagree with his time frame of “une courte bataille d’une dizaine d’années” from 1880 to 1890. The Médan group’s battle of naturalism ended much earlier than that. By 1890, most of them had defected from the naturalist camp or were “missing in action” with no works of real significance. Instead, the height of the battle came in the few years leading up to and immediately following the pinnacle of Les Soirées de Médan in 1880.²⁵ Though the dates chosen by Martino may be a bit off the mark, the language is still appropriate for depicting the battle mood of the group and ties in with the very subject of Les Soirées de Médan.

Before exploring this publication in detail, it is important to understand the “battle plan” of the Médan group. On the offensive front, the naturalists set out their novels as representations of naturalist literature. But, it is the work of paratextual pieces, such as prefaces and journal articles, to defend the novels and their authors. Not only does each writer defend his own work, but also there are many instances where the naturalists defend the work of their peers.

²⁴ For example, in “La Bataille de Médan,” Emile Bergerat, writing as “l’Homme masqué” in Le Voltaire, 13 May 1881, referred to Zola and his followers as “le cheik” and his “petits hachichins” (Colin, Zola. Renégats et alliés, 53).

²⁵ In La Bataille littéraire, Alain Pagès states that most literary historians would also situate “le triomphe du naturalisme” in the years 1879-1880. First, he sees a triumph for Zola with the success of L’Assommoir and the publication of Nana and “Le Roman expérimental” in Le Voltaire, generating enormous amounts of publicity: “Zola bataille ferme avec ses détracteurs et répond point par point aux attaques dont il est l’objet” (16). Secondly, there is an important development in what he calls “la nouvelle école littéraire” with the publication of Les Soirées de Médan, “un texte symbolique qui témoigne de son influence” (16).

The greatest strength of the Médan group lies in the network of defensive support that they provide for each other. In this regard, we may apply the mathematical definition of a matrix as a grid or “a set of numbers or terms arranged in rows” to understand the cross-references between the group’s members. The term’s additional meaning in the circuitry of electronics as “a process in which several signals are combined for transmission” is especially pertinent to their mission statement in the introduction to Les Soirées de Médan, affirming their shared “tendances littéraires.”

While they claimed to have come together because of an “affinité de tempéraments,” to quote Maupassant,²⁶ Léon Hennique later revealed what he felt was the true motivation for the group’s formation: “Les groupements [. . .] viennent de la camaraderie plutôt qu’ils ne sont la conséquence des mêmes idées. [. . .] Les naturalistes, nous nous groupâmes autour de Zola, parce que nous étions outrés des attaques dont son œuvre littéraire était l’objet [. . .]” (qtd. in Boyer 93-94). Thus, the desire to defend Zola and naturalism against critics spurred the Médan group just as much as, if not more than their initiative to promote themselves as naturalists. However, the group’s impassioned defense of Zola’s novels, especially L’Assommoir in 1877, would not be matched in defending his theory.

Perhaps the strongest backer of Zola in the years prior to Les Soirées de Médan was J.-K. Huysmans. His article “Emile Zola et L’Assommoir”²⁷ attests to his support of Zola and his works, if not his theories. Zola’s written response to

²⁶ “Comment ce livre a été fait,” Le Gaulois, 17 April 1880, rpt. in Les Soirées de Médan, 293. This testimonial will be considered in its entirety in coming pages.

²⁷ This essay, first published in the Belgian review L’Actualité, will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Huysmans provides a glimpse of their relationship and their attitude toward the public reception of their works: “Vous avez forcé l’éloge et je n’accepte votre enthousiasme que pour la stupeur qu’il a dû produire chez certaines gens. Puis, n’est-ce pas? c’est un drapeau que vous levez. Entre nous, nous nous dirons nos vérités; mais devant le monde nous serons très insolents” (Corr II, 554). This revelation of putting up a public front that hides the “vérités” shared between them suggests a complicitous alliance that could also be applicable to the entire Médan group later on. But, it also shows a mutual respect and a desire to foster each other’s growth as novelists. Zola is, in effect, recognizing Huysmans as a peer, not as a student.²⁸

In addition to his positive review of Zola’s novel, Huysmans’s own works demonstrate a firm commitment to naturalism and to Zola, with the publication of Marthe, l’histoire d’une fille in 1876 and Les Sœurs Vatard in 1879, which he dedicated to Zola from “son fervent admirateur et dévoué ami.” Marthe, the story of a prostitute, deals with a quintessential naturalist topic that would later be treated by Zola in Nana. The fact that Huysmans wrote this novel before he really even knew Zola shows that he was drawn independently toward naturalism in his choice of subject matter and therefore was a naturalist of his own choosing, not merely under Zola’s influence. Furthermore, Huysmans was the most involved in trying to establish the naturalist journal La Comédie

²⁸ In fact, Zola would say in an 1880 interview with Fernand Xau for La Paix, “Huysmans n’est même pas mon élève, c’est l’élève de Goncourt” (qtd. in Montfort 39). Also in this interview, Zola strongly repudiates the appellation of master, evoking similar images as in the above-cited letter to Huysmans: “Je ne suis pas, je ne veux pas être chef d’école! ... C’est encore une légende qu’il faut détruire! Je suis, selon l’occasion, porte-drapeau ou porte-voix. Je cherche dans mes romans à tenir haut et ferme le drapeau du naturalisme, j’essaie, enfin, dans mes études de critique, de défendre ses droits et ses prérogatives. Rien de plus” (39).

humaine, for which he was to have served as editor. His letters to Zola in the fall of 1880 attest to the preparatory work begun on this project.²⁹

Despite the fact that Huysmans's literary achievements to this point outweighed those of the rest of the group, all were considered equals, and therefore, according to anecdote, the placement of their stories in Les Soirées de Médan was determined at random following Zola's "L'Attaque du moulin," which was to be positioned prominently as the lead story.³⁰ Guy de Maupassant's "Boule de suif" happened to be put second in the volume, but it truly eclipsed the other stories, including, many would argue, that of Zola. In Zola's own words, "Boule de suif" was "certainement la meilleure des six, elle a un aplomb, une tenue, une finesse et une netteté d'analyse qui en font un petit chef-d'œuvre. Du reste, elle a suffi, dans le public lettré, pour mettre Maupassant au premier rang, parmi les jeunes écrivains d'avenir" (Une Campagne, OC XIV, 622).

Due in part to his newfound recognition among critics and the public alike, Maupassant soon came to be the spokesperson of the group through a letter printed in Le Gaulois (17 April 1880) regarding the publication of Les Soirées de Médan and the group's involvement in the naturalist movement. Yet, Maupassant was often distant from the group, a feeling he expressed to Flaubert only months earlier upon the premiere of his play Histoire du vieux temps, a

²⁹ Plans came to an end with the loss of support from their publisher and thus, in the words of René-Pierre Colin, "avec ce rêve disparaissait, pour les écrivains du groupe de Médan, le dernier espoir de se rassembler autour d'idées communes" (Zola. Renégats et alliés 55). Two articles by Léon Deffoux also deal with this subject: "Huysmans fondateur de journal" and "Un Projet d'hebdomadaire naturaliste: La Comédie humaine."

³⁰ Léon Hennique's preface to the 1930 edition reads: "[J]e tire au sort les places que chacun -- hormis Zola -- devra occuper dans le futur in-12, et Maupassant arrive premier" (Les Soirées de Médan 30).

comedy in verse: “[S]a bande [la bande de Zola] me lâche, ne me trouvant pas assez naturaliste [. . .]” (26 February 1879, CEC 263). Nonetheless, Zola continues to show himself as a great supporter of all of his young associates, even in the case of Maupassant’s ventures into non-naturalist types of drama. In response to the above-mentioned play, Maupassant wrote to Flaubert that “Zola et sa femme ont applaudi beaucoup et m’ont vivement félicité plus tard” even though the rest of Zola’s “bande” ignored him: “aucun d’eux n’est venu me serrer la main après le succès” (263).

This mention of Maupassant’s engagement in the theater can be coupled with his debut in poetry, like Huysmans and Zola in their early days as well, amounting to a “crise de vers” that many artists of his age endured, as Maupassant himself recognized in the adolescent nature of such “acné mussétiste.”³¹ This commonality of the Médan group seems to have gone unappreciated by its members, as is demonstrated in Maupassant’s correspondence with an outside friend, Robert Pinchon, in 1877: “Je fais partie d’un groupe littéraire qui dédaigne la poésie. Ils me serviront de repoussoir; c’est pas bête: je pousse au naturalisme dans le théâtre et dans le roman, parce que plus on en fera, plus ça emm... et c’est tout bénéf pour les autres. Gare la réaction, les amis!” (CEC 226). This letter indicates what would later be revealed in a letter to Flaubert at the time of the publication of Les Soirées de Médan: that Maupassant was more interested in poetry than prose and in his own ventures more than the group’s.

³¹ Qtd. in Louis Forestier, “Guy de Maupassant et la poésie,” 139.

Like Flaubert, who really only knew Maupassant as a poet before his death in 1880, Zola was quite enthusiastic about Maupassant's poetry, but more because he saw it as forging the way for a naturalist type of poetry. In "Les Poètes contemporains," first published in 1878, Zola writes:

[J]e lis parfois des pièces très caractéristiques annonçant une tendance naturaliste chez beaucoup de débutants. C'est ainsi que je parlerai du poème d'un jeune homme, M. Guy de Maupassant ["Au bord de l'eau"]. [. . .] La donnée est un peu risquée, mais j'ai rarement vu un tableau plus magistral et d'une vérité plus vraie. Qui ne comprend que la réalité apporte aux poètes une poésie nouvelle? Un poète naîtra qui dégagera du milieu contemporain une formule poétique d'une très grande largeur. (Documents littéraires, OC XII, 385)³²

Zola's specifications for the naturalist poet of the future are expressed in the last lines of this article: "Je crois qu'il sera profondément moderne, qu'il apportera la note naturaliste dans toute son intensité. Il exprimera notre monde, grâce à une langue nouvelle qu'il créera" (388).

However, this reformed role of the poet is at odds with Zola's concurrent statement in "Lettre à la jeunesse" where he distinctly separates poets from naturalists, relegating the former to an idealistic realm while the naturalists, those "bons fonctionnaires" of the Médan group, concern themselves with the real world: "[L]es poètes peuvent continuer à nous faire de la musique, pendant que nous travaillerons" (Le Roman expérimental 134). A similar view is put forth by the faithful "deputy" of the Médan group, Paul Alexis, in 1882 when it appears that Maupassant has abandoned poetry for good: "[Depuis deux ans], attelé à d'autres labeurs [. . .], Maupassant n'a plus fait de vers. Mon opinion

³² As Bernard Joly notes in "Maupassant et Zola," it is likely that Maupassant, who certainly must have seen the article when it appeared in Le Voltaire, would have been simultaneously flattered and bothered by the praise of his poem's "naturalist" style (210).

intime est même qu'il n'abandonnera plus la prose, notre rigoureuse prose travaillé, autrement souple que le vers, plus apte que lui à rendre toutes les complications de notre vie moderne [. . .]."³³ Still, the fertile grounds of poetry for the development of Maupassant's style are often hailed by critics as the source of his prose, and indeed, one of his contemporaries, Jules Lemaître, observed that "ses vers déjà, quoique la poésie y fût abondante et forte, étaient plutôt des vers de prosateur" (304).

But, with Les Soirées de Médan, Maupassant established his place in the group and in the eyes of the public as the most promising of the young naturalist writers. His essay in Le Gaulois reflects his adherence to the group and provides his definition of the group's purpose: "Nous n'avons pas la prétention d'être une école. Nous sommes simplement quelques amis, qu'une admiration commune a fait se rencontrer chez Zola, et qu'ensuite une affinité de tempéraments, des sentiments très semblables sur toutes choses, une même tendance philosophique ont liés de plus en plus" (Les Soirées de Médan 293). The language of Maupassant's essay echoes that of the volume's introduction, especially in painting the consistency of the members' "tempéraments." But this statement is most ironic coming from Maupassant, whose ties to the group were the least close and would soon dissolve altogether.

Moreover, this positive spin on the group's collaboration excludes the obvious: their hopes to achieve notoriety for themselves and for naturalism were, at that very moment, coming to life in the press. The introduction to Les Soirées de Médan displays the group's desire to ignite debate and, in a roundabout way,

³³ "Guy de Maupassant," Le Réveil, 28 May 1882, rpt. in Bakker, "Naturalisme pas mort," 471.

invites criticism: “Nous nous attendons à toutes les attaques, à la mauvaise foi et à l’ignorance dont la critique courante nous a déjà donné tant de preuves.”

Later, Léon Hennique, in his preface to the 1930 edition, recalls the group’s contentment with the reaction solicited by the publication of Les Soirées de Médan: “La critique est furieuse, attaque... Nous n’avons pas peur; nous nous amusons. Le public s’amuse aussi, achète” (30-31).

It is important to note that the writing of Les Soirées de Médan was not a collaboration in the true sense of the word. The authors never worked together on it, thus reinforcing the notion that the Médan group is not a well-blended unity, but rather an amalgam of very distinct individuals. Each story was written separately and three of the six had been published before the idea of a compilation even came about.³⁴ Though we may never know for sure how Les Soirées de Médan originated, one theory is that the group’s discussion happened upon the subject of the Franco-Prussian War and literature related to it. Then, partly as a matter of convenience, they selected this topic to expedite publication since they were essentially halfway done.

There are various accounts by the authors, written at different times and under different circumstances, dealing with the motivation for writing Les Soirées de Médan. As Alain Pagès shows in “A propos d’une origine littéraire,” they all add up to a legend created by the authors: “Ils peuvent se contredire car leur propos n’est pas historique. Chacun interprète l’événement en fonction de

³⁴ Zola’s “L’Attaque du moulin” was printed in Vestnik Evropy (Le Messager de l’Europe) in July 1877 before appearing in France in Le Figaro (25 April 1880) and in La Vie Populaire (25 April-8 May 1880). Huysmans’s “Sac au dos” was released in serial form in the Brussels paper L’Artiste (19 August-21 October 1877). Henry Céard’s “La Saignée” was published in Slovo in Saint Petersburg (September 1879).

son projet narratif, et n'en donne qu'une vision partielle" (209).³⁵ The disparity among these accounts may also suggest that the true story of the volume's origin is either not very compelling or that it would reveal ulterior motives, such as those divulged by Maupassant in his correspondence with Flaubert.

Though none of the accounts given by the Médan group can be taken completely at face value, those of Maupassant may be the most suspect. His letter to Le Gaulois demonstrates his ability to embellish the truth for dramatic effect. In this essay, he evokes an idyllic setting and a Boccaccian fashion of storytelling as the authors of Les Soirées de Médan take turns sharing their tales in the summer evenings, which has been shown to be a fabrication since the plans for Les Soirées de Médan were likely plotted out in late fall of 1879 in Zola's apartment in Paris. Maupassant's fanciful account recalls the oral tradition of narrative and is far from espousing the naturalist objective of rendering "la vérité." This invention seems all the more incredible when juxtaposed with the truth of the matter that Maupassant discloses in a letter to Flaubert about Zola's suggestion to publish a volume once he learned that Huysmans and Céard had already written stories on the war that would fit with his own: "Alors, il engagea Hennique, Alexis et moi à faire chacun une nouvelle pour compléter l'ensemble. Cela avait de plus l'avantage que son nom ferait vendre et nous donnerait cent ou deux cents francs à chacun" (CEC 273).

In further contrast to Maupassant's idealized treatment of Les Soirées de Médan in the letter to Le Gaulois, he expresses certain hesitations about the work

³⁵ See his summary of essays by Maupassant, Alexis, and Hennique in "A propos d'une origine littéraire." His main point in discussing the errors and contradictions contained in these essays is to show that "l'événement des Soirées de Médan est très vite devenu dans la conscience de ceux qui l'ont vécu une réalité symbolique où l'imaginaire l'a emporté sur le réel" (208).

and about naturalism as a whole in another letter to Flaubert that coincides with the volume's release (and the letter to Le Gaulois) during the month of April 1880: "C'est une préparation parfaite à mon volume de vers [Des Vers] qui paraîtra mardi et qui coupera court, en ce qui me concerne, à ces bêtises d'école *naturaliste* qu'on répète dans les journaux. Cela est la faute du titre Les Soirées de Médan, que j'ai toujours trouvé mauvais et dangereux" (CEC 286).³⁶

Maupassant's hypocrisy toward naturalism, and in some ways toward naturalist writers, is not entirely surprising, given his halfhearted association with the Médan group, his divergence from naturalism in his own writings, and the views he would later present about the illusions of literature in "Le Roman" in 1888. What is most surprising is the disclosure that his involvement in Les Soirées de Médan is mainly for his own profit. Apparently, his concern is not for the success of naturalism or the Médan group or even that of the volume and his own "Boule de suif." Instead, he seems interested in making a name for himself with the intent to advance the sales and public reception of his current volume of poetry and any future works.

But, aside from motives of monetary gain or making a name for themselves, the authors also used Les Soirées de Médan as an instrument in their battle of naturalism. As a creative work, the short stories speak for themselves, taking an offensive position by proving to the public that the naturalist treatment of the subject of war is unified. Yet, there is much to be considered in reading the stories themselves, both as a unity and individually, that undermines the

³⁶ Maupassant's misgivings about the title are shared by Flaubert, who felt that "le titre est stupide." It is also believed that Flaubert turned down a request to take part in Les Soirées de Médan because he did not feel motivated by the subject. Nonetheless, the work bears the dedication: "A notre ami et maître, Gustave Flaubert."

coherence of the volume. Secondly, the discourse surrounding this publication, from the authors' introductory statement to the journal articles written at the time and even many years later, displays a defensive attitude in explaining what their intentions were for this volume. Therefore, Les Soirées de Médan needs to be evaluated on two levels by looking at the stories themselves as well as the paratextual discourse.

Les Soirées de Médan: A Naturalist Manifesto of War?

Les Soirées de Médan is more a reflection of the outward battle of naturalism than the battles of the Franco-Prussian War. The discourse surrounding this publication drew more attention at the time, and perhaps even to this day, than the actual stories. Yet, the stories by Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans merit debate on both the naturalist and non-naturalist qualities they display. Ultimately, I question whether Les Soirées de Médan fulfills the role of a manifesto in this battle of naturalism waged by the Médan group or whether it does more harm than good by demonstrating the inconsistencies and flaws of the theory and practice of naturalism. The battle of naturalism, as has been shown thus far, is primarily one that pits the Médan group against its critics. However, my study of Les Soirées de Médan also reveals a latent internal battle between the group members' divergent styles, whether they are conscious of them or not, apart from and, in fact, contrary to naturalism.

On the one hand, the variety of individual talents brought to naturalism by each member of the Médan group complement each other, as Léon Deffoux

describes, saying that naturalism finds “sa puissance de rayonnement dans la rencontre de trois personnalités aussi fortes que Zola, Maupassant et Huysmans, soutenues par l’intelligence d’un Céard, la subtilité d’un Léon Hennique, la fidélité d’un Paul Alexis” (qtd. in Dumesnil, La Publication des “Soirées de Médan” 10). The totality of this publication does indeed present a naturalist vision of war from several angles and, in that respect, qualifies as a manifesto, or a concerted declaration of the naturalists’ beliefs on this subject and, by extrapolation, on life in general.

On the other hand, there are indications that the differences within this group are irreconcilable, as the years following Les Soirées de Médan would show. Moreover, not only is there dissonance between the members of the group, there is also an inner struggle discernible in the writings of Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans. Despite the common naturalist theme of pessimistic determinism, shown here in the circumstance of wartime, many elements in Les Soirées de Médan betray naturalism and reveal non-naturalist leanings that foretell the divergent tendencies that were either already existent or developing. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to consider the characteristics of these stories, and of the volume as a whole, that unite the work and its authors in relation to the naturalist goals of depicting the reality of human existence, specifically in the context of war.

The first thing that strikes the reader and introduces this work as a manifesto is the title. Many scholars share the belief that the title not only misrepresents the contents of the volume, but is the one factor that is most responsible for leading to the perception of the work as a manifesto by the

Médan group. Yet, the authors tell a different story of how the title credits the hospitality they received at Zola's country home. For example, Céard writes in 1908 that "on choisit à l'unanimité cette appellation bourgeoise, les Soirées de Médan, parce qu'elle rendait hommage à la chère maison où Mme Zola nous traitait maternellement et s'égayait à faire de nous de grands enfants gâtés" (qtd. in Montfort 53).³⁷ Zola's grandson, Jean-Claude Le Blond-Zola, adds this comment on the significance of the title as "la marque d'une belle unité littéraire [. . .] qui grandit à Médan lors de séjours sans façon de cinq jeunes célibataires pleins de talent, heureux de trouver auprès de ce couple admirable que furent Emile et Alexandrine Zola, affection, richesse de cœur et d'esprit" (93-94).

The familial, womb-like atmosphere provided by Zola and his wife contribute to the image of the Médan group as a matrix. In his semi-autobiographical novel L'Œuvre, Zola gives a fictionalized rendering of this relationship in the recurring scenes where Sandoz and his wife delight in hosting the group of artists that includes Claude Lantier. Zola's description of the regular Thursday night get-togethers at the Sandoz apartment replicates his own paternal instincts toward his real-life circle of intimates: "Cela l'enchantait, d'être en bande, tous amis, tous vivant de la même idée. Bien qu'il fût de leur âge, une paternité l'épanouissait, une bonhomie heureuse, quand il les voyait chez lui, autour de lui, la main dans la main, ivres d'espoir" (138).

Beyond the romanticized explanation of the title for Les Soirées de Médan, it is still likely that part of the group's intention was to use this title, which

³⁷ Mme Zola herself reflected upon memories of the Médan group in an interview conducted by A. Souberbielle for L'Aurore (11 March 1905). See Montfort 110-111.

suggests evening meetings and discussions,³⁸ to position the work as a manifesto. Still, some modern-day critics would dispute such a notion, claiming that the idea of Les Soirées de Médan as a manifesto was created by contemporary criticism, not by the authors themselves. According to Colette Becker, this conception came about because critics focused on the title and what it meant to them, rather than what it meant to the authors: “Ce sont eux [les critiques], en effet, qui, par malveillance, les [Les Soirées de Médan] ont données comme modèles de textes naturalistes, valeur que ne leur ont jamais attribuée leurs auteurs” (Introduction 8). Nonetheless, the authors had to be aware of the interpretations that would be attached to such a title. By choosing a name that reflects upon Zola and the gathering place of Médan, they are calling attention to themselves and this “school” of naturalism, as it has come to be known, instead of placing the emphasis on the subject of the Franco-Prussian War.

A number of critics, then and now, point to the self-glorification that comes with the place name’s connection to Zola as a kind of metonymy. Albert Wolff, in Le Figaro (19 April 1880), chided the pretentiousness of a title that aimed to elevate Zola and Médan to levels they did not deserve. Becker contextualizes Wolff’s critique by comparing Zola’s association with Médan to that of other literary greats: “Donner la célébrité à Médan [. . .] c’est aussi, pour Zola, s’affirmer face aux maîtres: Hugo, qui a rendu célèbres Jersey et Guernsey; Flaubert, qui est lié à Croisset; c’est se dégager de ceux qui -- comme Goncourt -- ont fait leur célébrité à Paris: Médan ne désigne que Zola” (Introduction 14).

³⁸ One might think of the various incarnations of group debates found in social settings within Zola’s novels, such as the discussions of politics and class conflict in Le Ventre de Paris and Germinal, or the lively exchanges among artists in L’Œuvre.

Alain Pagès has further investigated the myth of Médan, commencing with the title: “Voilà, en effet, des nouvelles sur la guerre de 1870, écrites dix ans après, en 1880, et qui cachent leur sujet, en annonçant autre chose: des *soirées* -- quelles soirées? -- et un *lieu*, assez peu connu, dont la prononciation est même modifiée: *Médan*, pour *Medan*” (“Le Mythe de Médan” 31).³⁹ The similarity of the name Médan to the actual battle scene of Sedan later depicted in La Débâcle, though coincidental, is also fortuitous because it furthers the metaphor of the battle of naturalism and lends a sense of historical importance to this village.

One of the proposed titles, L’Invasion comique, would have brought the work closer in line with its subject of the Franco-Prussian War. Henry Céard explains that the group debated several titles and that Huysmans’s idea, L’Invasion comique, was ultimately discarded for being too aggressive and anti-patriotic (Cogny, Le “Huysmans intime” 155). The Médan group’s decision to go with the more benign title of Les Soirées de Médan comments on how they marketed themselves and their work. David Baguley observes that “such compromises show that the naturalists were involved in artful strategies in presenting their works for publication within the context of certain reader expectations and also that their texts have a performative intentionality beyond the declared mimetic and demonstrative functions” (Naturalist Fiction 163). By changing the title, the Médan group displaces any intentional provocation away from their stories and onto the authors themselves, thereby engaging the group, not their stories or the subject of war, in the battle of naturalism.

³⁹ In actuality, as Jean-Claude Le Blond-Zola points out, the town’s name is written “Médan” in the document issued when Zola purchased his house there, contrary to the legend disseminated by Alexis that Zola added the accent mark (16).

Besides the interpretations of the title, an overview of the volume's structure and themes will help to determine what needs to be evaluated in considering the work as a manifesto. Structurally, the form of the short story is advantageous because it gives each of the writers an equal starting point. Pagès, in "A propos d'une origine littéraire," calls the short story a "genre mêlé" that takes in all the writers' different fortes, which vary from the novel for Zola and Huysmans, to theater for Céard and Hennique, to Maupassant's early poetry. Additionally, many writers throughout literary history, including Zola, began their careers by writing short stories. This genre, then, provides for the Médan group a "unité de débutant," according to Pagès ("Le Mythe de Médan" 37).

The short story is also accommodating because of its brevity and its journalistic feel, to which all members of the Médan group were accustomed. The genre is not only practical, but fosters a sense of equality among naturalist writers that would promote the cohesiveness of the group and of naturalism. To this end, Rita Schober suggests that Zola purposefully chose the form of the short story in order to prove the point that naturalism is a method that can be adopted by any writer in any genre: "Zola était intéressé, dans ces années décisives de son combat littéraire pour la victoire du naturalisme, à démontrer la fécondité de sa méthode littéraire par son application dans des modes d'écriture différents" (178). This idea stems from Zola's statement in his "Lettre à la jeunesse": "Donc, une fois encore, le naturalisme est purement une formule, la méthode analytique et expérimentale. Vous êtes naturalistes, si vous employez cette méthode quelle que soit d'ailleurs votre rhétorique" (Le Roman expérimental 127).

Rather than seeing Les Soirées de Médan on the surface as six detached stories, each with different characters, settings, and motives, the inherently complementary observations about war and human behavior permeate the entire volume. This naturalist vision of the War of 1870 can be traced through the succession of the stories, almost as if they were designed to build upon each other in telling a complete story. In her study of “Quelques attitudes modernes envers la guerre,” Marion Piper finds an inclusive picture of war in the overriding arc of the volume:

Dans l'ordre de leur présentation, “L'Attaque du moulin” est un épisode de l'invasion, “Boule de suif” un épisode de l'occupation, “Sac au dos” dépeint le milieu des hôpitaux militaires, “La Saignée” un épisode du siège, “L'Affaire du grand 7” un épisode de la vie caserne, et le titre même d’ “Après la bataille” parle tout seul. (35)

And yet, the seeming comprehensiveness of this outward structure disguises the jumbled interior, which is made up of confusing glimpses of the war. In fact, the war is a vague mystery throughout the stories: its effects may be felt, but the battles themselves are meaningless.

The only story containing a battle scene is that of Zola and there the futility of war is the primary message with the ironic ending cry of “Victoire! Victoire!” amidst an appalling scene of death and destruction. David Baguley accurately notes the chaotic aspect of the war, particularly in “L'Attaque du moulin”: “Descriptions of battles [. . .] are presented in a Stendhalian manner from the confused perspective of the simple soldier, ignorant and afraid. [. . .] Even in Zola's story, military action is an absurd toing and froing as each side takes over the mill” (Naturalist Fiction 148). The haphazard circumstances of

war affirm naturalism's deterministic belief that humans are victims of overwhelming circumstances that control their lives. The prevalence of the pronoun "on," most notably in "Sac au dos," illustrates this concept of an unnamed subject dictating things: "on nous empila comme des bestiaux dans des wagons" (123); and again later, "on nous empila dans les wagons et nous quittâmes la ville pour aller où?... personne ne le savait" (129-30). There are plenty more examples in "Sac au dos" of this "on" that directs Eugène Lejantel's existence, where he goes, what he eats, everything he does. The reader never knows exactly who this "on" is, nor does Eugène, but the point is that it really does not matter. All that matters is the power that "on" has in the lives of Eugène and the others.

The "on" in "Boule de suif" is also ambiguous, but it initially represents a distance from the action rather than a tangible influence. Whereas the "on" in Huysmans's story is acting directly on Eugène and his companions, Maupassant uses "on" to keep the action away from any one character: "Les Prussiens allaient entrer dans Rouen, disait-on" (78). The "on" presumably represents a collectivity, the inhabitants of Rouen. With the arrival of the troops comes the feeling of a forced submission not only to the Prussians but to some kind of more powerful fate: "[L]a même sensation reparaît chaque fois que l'ordre établi des choses est renversé, que la sécurité n'existe plus, que tout ce que protégeaient les lois des hommes ou celles de la nature se trouve à la merci d'une brutalité inconsciente et féroce" (79). In part, this brutality is human, in the form of the invading Prussian army. But, this statement also reflects the feeling of powerlessness against the war and against life itself. Perhaps Zola expresses this

inevitability best in the person of le père Merlier who, in the midst of all the confusion toward the end of "L'Attaque du moulin," still "gardait son attitude muette et rigide de vieux paysan, qui ne lutte pas contre la fatalité des faits" (71).

Lilian Furst concludes that the coherence of Les Soirées de Médan lies in this existential uncertainty that appears in each story, that is, a "resignation vis-à-vis outer disorder and inner disorientation" ("The Coherence of Les Soirées de Médan" 129). Indeed, the stories are "coherent" in the general attitude they convey about war, mainly because they consist of pessimistic and ironic accounts of events surrounding war. Irony is, in many ways, the unifying theme of the volume. Baguley cites even the form of the stories as part of their rhetoric of irony, calling them a "series of short, varied works in implicit defiance and rejection of the epic expansiveness and continuity of the noble genre of war" (Naturalist Fiction 150).

The title L'Invasion comique would have better captured the mood of the stories instead of the abstract and unrelated title of Les Soirées de Médan. While some critics have seized the definitive title as the only evidence to support the work's status as a manifesto, another possibility is that the stories themselves, regardless of the title that covers them, unite the work as a manifesto. Claude Digeon, for example, offers this argument: "Ces nouvelles, qui toutes portent sur l'année terrible [1870], montrent, par leur rassemblement, l'accord qui existe entre leurs différents auteurs. Les Soirées de Médan ont, à ce titre, la valeur d'une déclaration, d'un manifeste. Elles nous présentent de la guerre la vision naturaliste [. . .]" (264). The naturalists are united all the more because their take

on the war is the polar opposite of the ultra-patriotic literature that dominates in the decade and particularly in the early years following the war.⁴⁰

The theme of war is not a typical one for naturalism,⁴¹ says Digeon, because it deals with a “commotion extraordinaire et brève qui a paru déplacer toute la société, mais dont la peinture n’offre pas, semble-t-il, de leçons valables pour l’avenir, pour la science” (260). But I find that the circumstance of war is ideal for examining the effects of “le moment,” one of Taine’s three determining factors, on human behavior. The Médan group’s choice of the Franco-Prussian War is intriguing also because it suggests that they must have had an agenda in mind for choosing a topic that does not seem in compliance with the subject matter typically addressed in naturalist literature. Knowing that they would elicit strong reactions to a less than patriotic account of the war, the Médan group refused to conform to the popular trend in literature of the period.

Yet, Maupassant insists in a letter to Flaubert that their intent was not to be anti-patriotic, but rather to be frank: “Nous n’avons eu, en faisant ce livre, aucune intention anti-patriotique, ni aucune intention quelconque; nous avons voulu seulement tâcher de donner à nos récits une note juste sur la guerre [. . .]. Ce ne sera pas antipatriotique, mais simplement vrai” (5 January 1880, CEC 273). Contrariwise, Digeon’s study of the patriotic literature of the period shows that most of these works are destined only to incite the emotions of the reader: “[L]es thèmes d’inspiration en soient simples (gloire des vaincus, appels à l’espérance

⁴⁰ Most of these sorts of publications appeared during the period of 1870-1873, according to the list given by Digeon, 54-55.

⁴¹ It is not until several years later that naturalist writers would address the war in novels such as Le Calvaire by Mirbeau, 1886; Sous-ouffs by Descaves, 1889; and Zola’s own La Débâcle, 1892. Huysmans’s and Maupassant’s preoccupation with the war as a theme in their own writing will be considered later.

d'une future revanche)" (50-51). These works "baignent dans une même atmosphère morale faite d'une certaine assurance trompée, d'un désir d'être plus fort que le destin malheureux" (51), leading Digeon to conclude that this is "une littérature d'évasion" (64). The Médan group's treatment of the war, then, combats the chauvinism rampant in this decade of literature that Digeon judges for the most part as lacking any significant artistic value. In agreement with Digeon, I believe that Les Soirées de Médan constitutes "une œuvre proprement littéraire" in the sense that it takes the theme of war and gives it an aesthetic value: "[L]es écrivains cherchent, non plus à nuire à l'adversaire de leur pays, mais à donner d'un passé proche une expression valable, c'est-à-dire, en ce cas, naturaliste" (265). The emphasis in their stories is no longer on the Prussian enemy but on other topics: the senselessness of war in "L'Attaque du moulin," social interactions in "Boule de suif," and the individual in "Sac au dos."

That is not to say, however, that the descriptions of the Prussians are any less present or significant than in the patriotic types of literature. The images of Prussian soldiers in Zola's and Maupassant's stories rejoin the traditional depictions of a brutal army overpowering the innocent residents of French villages.⁴² While the enemy is virtually absent in Huysmans's story, there are descriptions of Prussian officers in Zola's and Maupassant's stories. Both authors comment not only on their appearance and behavior, but even on the

⁴² Colette Becker explains that the numeric superiority of the invading Prussian army was a leitmotif of literature in the years following 1870 and even connects this to a small detail in Zola's story: "Dans la première version de 'L'Attaque du moulin,' celle de 1877, 'dix hommes' -- et non quatre -- s'emparaient de Dominique resté seul dans le moulin après le départ des soldats français" (Introduction 20). There are only slight modifications between the first and second versions of Zola's story, primarily having to do with simplifying the language and eliminating redundancies.

strangeness of their language, which Zola calls “une langue effroyable” (53) and Maupassant “une voix inconnue et gutturale” (79). In “L’Attaque du moulin,” the officer is “un homme grand et sec,” and “bien qu’il parlât le français très purement, il avait une raideur toute prussienne” (54). The officer in “Boule de suif” is “un grand jeune homme excessivement mince et blond, serré dans son uniforme comme une fille en son corset” who speaks in a thick accent that Maupassant mocks: “Il invita en français d’Alsacien les voyageurs à sortir, disant d’un ton raide: ‘Foulez-fous tescentre, messieurs et tames?’” (94).⁴³ The indications of a subjective commentary in these physical descriptions, such as the adjective “sec” in Zola’s and the comparison to a girl in Maupassant’s, as well as the interpretive terms “raide” and “raideur” suggest a departure from a purely objective account.

Digeon argues that both Zola and Maupassant “se sont astreints à une objectivité, à une impartialité supérieures” that distinguishes their stories from the others in Les Soirées de Médan (268). On the contrary, I find that the examples cited above point to a certain degree of subjectivity in these stories that surpasses the objectivity called for in a naturalist text. Therefore, this notion of a subjective approach used in the stories of Zola, Maupassant, and especially Huysmans, introduces the importance of non-naturalist elements contained in Les Soirées de Médan that not only defy the work’s identity as a manifesto, but also point to a divergence from naturalism in each of these writers.

⁴³ Jeanne Bem, in “Le ‘Travail’ du texte dans ‘Boule de suif,’” analyzes both of these factors in Maupassant’s narrative. First, the thin silhouette of the Prussian officer is the opposite of Boule de suif’s “boule”-ish figure. Secondly, Bem argues that the fricative letter *f* in his speech may stand for “femme” and even “fou,” such that “‘Foulez-fous’ fait une foule de fous” (106).

“L’Attaque du moulin”: Bearing the Banner

In approaching this story, it is unfortunate to note that Zola later belittled the work in his correspondence. In a letter to Charles Marpon, he says that he prefers “Le Capitaine Burle” over “L’Attaque du moulin” (12 January 1882, Corr IV, 255-56) and his words to Damase Jouaust are even more disheartening: “Je suis bien contrarié de ne pouvoir vous autoriser à prendre ‘L’Attaque du moulin.’ [. . .] Pourquoi choisissez-vous cette nouvelle, qui n’est pas une de mes meilleures? Prenez-en donc une autre, prenez par exemple ‘La Fête à Coqueville,’ que je préfère mille fois” (21 September 1885, Corr IV, 340). While these other works to which Zola refers are largely forgotten, there is at least a trickle of criticism throughout the twentieth century on “L’Attaque du moulin.” Its relevancy in the context of Les Soirées de Médan, however, is usually what draws any commentary on the story rather than its literary value.⁴⁴ Indeed, the short stories of Zola are, on the whole, far overshadowed by his novels.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, the fact that Zola continued to produce short stories throughout his career speaks to the validity of the form as a genre for the author even as he achieved greater acclaim in writing novels.

Zola’s contribution to Les Soirées de Médan singlehandedly made the volume a success. Had it not been for his story, most readers never would have picked up the book. Many of Zola’s contemporary critics praised “L’Attaque du

⁴⁴ Such is the conclusion of David Baguley’s study of Zola’s tale “Les Coquillages de M. Chabre,” which he examines in relation to Maupassant as an “unwitting anticipation of one writer’s influence upon another” (“Maupassant avant la lettre?” 86). Baguley ranks the artistic merit of “L’Attaque du moulin” well below that of “Les Coquillages de M. Chabre” (86).

⁴⁵ One notable example in response to this drought of scholarship on Zola’s short works is the recent study by Marjolein van Tooren, Le Premier Zola: Naturalisme et manipulation dans les positions stratégiques des récits brefs d’Emile Zola.

moulin" as the best of the group. Yet, their reasons for liking it are quite the opposite of what Zola might have expected. They saw in Zola's story a departure from the naturalist style that they denounced. "L'Attaque du moulin" pleased them precisely because they felt it was not a naturalist text. For instance, Maxime Gaucher writes in La Revue Politique et Littéraire (24 April 1880): "On pourrait même dire qu'elle n'est pas naturaliste du tout, cette nouvelle; mais M. Zola se fâcherait" (qtd. in Baguley, "L'Envers de la guerre," 243). While I would not go so far as to agree completely with this assessment, I tend to agree with E. Asse that Zola's may be the least naturalistic story of the volume.⁴⁶ Another contemporary, the English critic Edmund Gosse, extends the non-naturalist style of "L'Attaque du moulin" to all of Zola's short works, saying that they "reveal a M. Zola considerably dissimilar to the author of Nana and of La Terre -- a much more optimistic, romantic, and gentle writer" (2).

Some modern-day scholars have also found that Zola's short stories, more than his novels, display a highly personalized style that conflicts with the objective impartiality that Zola proclaimed in his theoretical writings on naturalism. His early stories especially are predominantly autobiographical, and the nature of L'Œuvre, for example, is a return to this style. Murray Sachs, in "Zola's Art of the Short Story," suggests that the stories Zola wrote later in life signal a "mid-life crisis," causing him to revisit nostalgically "the medium he employed to deal with his youthful identity crisis" (152). Sachs finds that these "mature short stories," specifically "L'Attaque du moulin" and "La Mort

⁴⁶ René Dumesnil interprets Asse's remarks as a compliment to Zola: "Le critique louait le romancier de sa discrétion et de la fraîcheur agreste de ses paysages" (La Publication des "Soirées de Médan" 177).

d'Olivier Bécaille," are "not at all examples of literary Naturalism, as he defined it, nor do they show any concern with heredity, environment, social, and political forces, or life in the Second Empire" (152). Instead, these stories are "firmly focused on private emotional issues of life and death," which weighed heavily on Zola's mind as he neared his fortieth birthday in 1880 and was forced to cope with the deaths of his mother and of Flaubert (152).

According to Zola, "L'Attaque du moulin" tells a true story. Written originally for his Russian readers at the suggestion of Turgenev, the story was first titled "Un Episode de l'invasion de 1870" and was introduced as follows: "[J]e vous raconterai une histoire vécue que j'ai entendue d'un témoin" (qtd. in Becker, Introduction 16). In point of fact, though, Zola would later admit that the story was invented.⁴⁷ Despite his claim to report a real secondhand account of the war, the story does not read at all like a documentary, but rather a dramatization of events that may indeed have some roots in a real-life encounter.

The manipulation of human emotion in this story denies the impartiality of the naturalist writer's method. Colette Becker argues that "tout, dans le récit de 'L'Attaque du moulin,' structure, choix des protagonistes, des points de vue, symboles, vise, avec une efficacité parfois trop systématique, à émouvoir le lecteur, à dénoncer l'horreur de la guerre" (Introduction 21). This efficacy mentioned by Becker has to do with the layout of the story in five compact chapters, "une tragédie en cinq actes," in which the image of complete happiness in the beginning is overturned in a matter of two days and one night into utter,

⁴⁷ Rita Schober cites a letter to Van Santen Kolff, 26 January 1882: "[Zola] faisait expressément remarquer qu'il s'agissait 'd'une nouvelle de pure imagination' dont les 'faits généraux' étaient certes 'dans l'air,' mais dont le développement narratif ('le milieu, la localité, les personnages, la fable ont été créés par moi') était de sa pure invention" (179).

incomprehensible destruction. Sachs makes a similar observation about the story's structure, saying that it is "borrowed from the classical theatre: a relentless crescendo of horror, divided into five numbered segments, like the five acts of a Racinian tragedy" (150). Therefore, the very structure of the story coupled with such tragic themes as war, honor, love, and death, links "L'Attaque du moulin" to the classical tradition more than to naturalism.

Zola's story also resists classification as a naturalist text because of its many lyrical, bucolic descriptions in the romanticized style of Hugo or Sand. Maupassant confided to Flaubert: "Zola, bien, mais ce sujet aurait pu être traité de la même façon et aussi bien par Mme Sand ou Daudet" (CEC 286). This critique further emphasizes the fact that Maupassant held a fair but restrained admiration for Zola. In "L'Attaque du moulin," the first chapter, that is, before the intrusion of war, presents a detailed view of the idyllic setting for the story and portrays le père Merlier, his daughter Françoise, and her fiancé Dominique in a sentimental light. However, by the end of the story, the landscape that was painted so richly in the beginning has been destroyed by the war, along with the lives of these characters. Becker provides evidence of a subjective commentary made by Zola in the first version of this story, which is not in the revision published in Les Soirées de Médan: "La guerre avait fait une abomination de ce coin si tendre de nature." According to Becker, this sentence captures the essence of Zola's story: "C'est cela qui intéresse le romancier: non le récit du combat, qui ne tient que très peu de pages, mais celui des souffrances qu'entraîne la guerre" (21). Thus, the author's subjectivity can be uncovered through his

sentimental treatment of the characters and of nature, uniting this story with romanticism more than with naturalism.

Furthermore, multiple examples of anthropomorphism, namely in the instance of the water mill, contribute to a non-naturalist reading of Zola's "L'Attaque du moulin" and provide evidence that his poetic style well exceeds the naturalist method. The title is the first indication that the mill is the most significant feature of the story. The war is evoked here too, but the attack is on the mill, not on the village of Rocreuse or its inhabitants. The mill is indeed one of the main characters of the story as Zola attributes human-like qualities to the parts of the object, such as "la roue du moulin, qui craquait en tournant, avec la toux asthmatique d'une fidèle servante vieillie dans la maison" (38). Beyond this narrative description, Zola extends the use of the metaphor, this time coming from the mouth of le père Merlier through indirect speech: "Quand on conseillait au père Merlier de la changer, il hochait la tête en disant qu'une jeune roue serait plus paresseuse et ne connaîtrait pas si bien le travail" (38-39). The mill is such an important entity in the life of le père Merlier that Zola places it alongside the living beings in the story: "[Le père Merlier] adorait sa fille, il avait une solide amitié pour Dominique, son futur gendre; mais sa roue tenait aussi une large place dans son cœur" (55). The "death" of the mill is even expressed as the passing of a human spirit: "C'était l'âme du gai moulin qui venait de s'exhaler" (73). According to Becker, the mill seems to have come from a "gravure romantique" and the surrounding landscape "renvoie à l'imaginaire du romancier et non à la réalité" (273, note 2). This imagination and the

personification of inanimate objects are important facets not only of this story, but are also indicative of Zola's poetic style throughout his entire *œuvre*.

The descriptions of nature in "L'Attaque du moulin" provide additional examples that verge on the mythical, as Robert M. Viti has shown in "Myth, Time and History in Zola's 'L'Attaque du moulin.'" Viti sees that everything in and around Rocreuse suggests "an ancient, timeless, ever-recurring fairy tale world" (177). Zola's opening depiction of the setting contains the evaluation that "on se croirait dans quelque parc enchanté" with the "voix chuchotantes [des] ruisseaux" and "les herbes allumées [qui] dorment dans la chaleur" (38). But, for all this personification of nature, the reverse is also true as Zola describes his human characters in terms of the plant and animal worlds. For instance, the townspeople cannot quite understand "comment la fille du père et de la mère Merlier, tous deux si bien plantés, poussait mal" (40). As she grows, however, they are confident that "elle devait finir par être ronde et friande comme une caille" (40). Dominique is also described physically by a nature metaphor: "souple et grand comme un peuplier" (41). While there is no outright characterization of le père Merlier as an animal or plant, Viti suggests an interpretive reading of his name: "Le père Merlier, by his very surname, seems akin to the *merle* and the *merlan*, creatures of tree and water" (178). Additionally, Viti considers the name as a reference to Merlin, the magician of Arthurian legend, finding that "Merlier, the magician/ruler -- he is, after all, mayor of Rocreuse -- of another timeless realm is suspicious of Dominique's power over Françoise, as though he were a rival sorcerer" (178). The language used in Zola's

story coincides with this sort of analogy since le père Merlier wonders how Dominique “avait bien pu ensorceler sa fille” (41).

There is also special significance in the name of le père Bontemps. Viti deconstructs the name to argue that this character is “the embodiment of *le bon vieux temps*, the good old days of Rocreuse” (181). His intervention in the story is pivotal for the unfolding of events in the final section, though he never speaks directly. His encounter with Françoise could be easily overlooked: “Il la salua, il venait de voir le meunier au milieu des Prussiens; puis, en faisant des signes de croix et en marmottant des mots entrecoupés, il continua sa route” (69). But, with the report that her father is in danger of being executed, Françoise knows that her time is up and she must leave Dominique. Only Dominique’s revelation a few paragraphs later reveals the importance of le père Bontemps, as his return is due to what he has learned from the old beggar: “Il a fallu que le père Bontemps me contât les choses... Enfin, me voilà” (70).

Dominique’s return to the mill is the culmination of a series of temporal ultimatums and time cues that mark the entire story. Viti cites these as proof of the “linear, chronometric time [that] overwhelms the ageless Rocreuse” (180), which is part of a larger meaning for Zola:

With masterful concision, Zola has gone well beyond the effect of war on individual lives and has depicted the end of one world and the beginning of another, [. . .] a new society, whose engine is the clock and timetables not the turning mill wheel, whose ideal space is the railroad yard not the forest, whose vision is linear not cyclical. (182)

The implications for Zola’s replacement of the old with the new are compatible with naturalism’s treatment of the changing, modern society. Thus, for all its

non-naturalist elements, "L'Attaque du moulin" carries a typically naturalist message in that the war is the catalyst that brings about change, forcing this timeless village to come to terms with the realities of the modern world.

The last line of the story, the French captain's triumphant cry of "Victoire! Victoire!" is perhaps the most important clue to reading "L'Attaque du moulin" as a naturalist text. As mentioned previously, this remark is an ironic twist that forces the reader to reevaluate the entire story. David Baguley analyzes this "shock tactic" as an "assault on the reader's received ideas and heroic conception of war": "With a single stroke the whole set of motifs of the narrative is transformed into rhetorical 'motivation' through the rebounding effect of this final touch, which reveals the manipulation of ironic contrasts contained in the story" (Naturalist Fiction 147). Until the final abrupt line, "L'Attaque du moulin" bears a resemblance to the types of patriotic literature discussed earlier. It is the story of a devoted daughter, a passionate young man ready to sacrifice himself to the enemy, and a steadfast old man ever faithful to his family and home. Throughout most of the narrative, there is little indication of the naturalists' pessimistic take on the war. Even though this is the only story of the volume that contains an actual battle scene, the idea of war is secondary to the love story of Françoise and Dominique, the dedication of le père Merlier to his mill, and the many vivid descriptions of nature. With the ironic turn of events at the very end, Zola is essentially asking readers to put into question everything they have just read. In this light, "L'Attaque du moulin" may appear to be more of a parody of patriotic literature.

Yet, this final line of the story does not erase all that has come before. Despite the ironic and pessimistic ending, which represents a naturalist view of the war, the lasting impressions of “L’Attaque du moulin” consist of many more elements that are classical, romantic, and mythical, thus distancing the story from naturalism and from the rest of the volume, as many of Zola’s contemporaries rightly noted. Furthermore, Zola later had it turned into a lyric drama.⁴⁸ Jules Huret questioned the four living members of the Médan group for their opinions, wondering if they felt any humiliation for the ultimate fate of this work that had been the “drapeau” and “manifeste” of the naturalist school. Huysmans’s evaluation shows that he had seen early on the dramatic potential in Zola’s story: “avec l’amoureux aventurier et héroïque, l’amoureuse, l’officier et le moulin, c’était déjà pas mal opéra-comique” (qtd. in Dumesnil, La Publication des “Soirées de Médan” 192). Henry Céard’s response is even more insightful, if not prophetic, finding it “naturel que le naturalisme allât vers la musique comme il était allé vers la peinture” and that Zola would conquer this medium as well: “Zola à l’Opéra-Comique, c’est exactement le même Zola qui a fait Thérèse Raquin en 1868. Voyez toute son œuvre: le mot *conquête* y est répété sans cesse, et s’il est allé à l’Opéra-Comique, croyez-le bien, c’est pour *conquérir* encore” (qtd. in Dumesnil 192-93). Thus, the story’s dramatic adaptation confirms that “L’Attaque du moulin” occupies a fairly important place in Zola’s career, more than has conventionally been acknowledged, spanning some sixteen years from its first print appearance to its successful theatrical debut.

⁴⁸ Staged by Alfred Bruneau at the Opéra-Comique in 1893. Zola’s collaboration with Bruneau resulted in a number of minor successes, such as Messidor, L’Ouragan, and L’Enfant roi, which provide a further source for studying Zola’s non-naturalist characteristics in the genre of theater.

“Boule de suif”: The Silver Star

The Silver Star Medal is a military decoration awarded for gallantry in combat. I find that this description is a most fitting introduction to the character of Boule de suif, the “fille galante” whose virtues outshine those of her supposedly upstanding and righteous compatriots. Her heroic sacrifice to the Prussian officer who holds them hostage is a saving act in the context of the occupation. Since her selflessness goes unappreciated by her fellow citizens, the thought of a Silver Star is quite ironic, but nonetheless deserved. Breaking down the elements of the phrase, the Silver Star may also be bestowed upon Maupassant’s story. The fact that it is silver, and not the traditional first-place gold, reflects its position as second in Les Soirées de Médan. But, like the prestigious Silver Star Medal, “Boule de suif” is the real star of the collection.

Everybody was astonished when “Boule de suif” appeared, creating an overnight success for Guy de Maupassant. In fact, there were rumors, both at the time and for years afterward, that he had written the story with the help of Flaubert.⁴⁹ While it has been shown that Flaubert did provide suggestions for future editions of the story, these tales of a collaboration were proven false.⁵⁰ Flaubert had no part in either the inception or redaction of the story, expressing after the fact that he was extremely impressed by Maupassant’s work, “un chef d’œuvre” that was sure to last. Although he did not have a hand in writing the story, Flaubert’s presence is nonetheless unmistakable, as Yvan Leclerc shows in

⁴⁹ Actually, Huysmans may have spread this rumor in later years, according to an entry in the Journal of his confidant, l’Abbé Mugnier, 22 December 1904: “Huysmans affirmait que Flaubert avait arrangé ‘Boule de suif’ de Maupassant” (Leclerc, “Maupassant: L’Imitation, le plagiat,” 120).

⁵⁰ See Louis Forestier’s edition of “Boule de suif” in Contes et nouvelles. Forestier gives evidence from the correspondence of Maupassant and Flaubert that refutes this accusation (1296).

“Maupassant: Le Texte hanté.” According to Leclerc, place names like Tôtes (Tostes in Madame Bovary) and the Hôtel de Normandie (Café de Normandie in Madame Bovary), along with the circumstance of the Prussian invasion of Rouen reflecting the occupation of Flaubert’s Croisset home, indicate a conscious, but hidden effort by Maupassant to inscribe his mentor in the text (265).⁵¹

In another article, “Maupassant: L’imitation, le plagiat,” Leclerc suggests that the author took inspiration from any number of his contemporaries. For example, the figure of the prostitute could have come from Huysmans’s Marthe, Zola’s Nana, or Edmond de Goncourt’s La Fille Elisa, citing the name “Cornudet” from chapter 63 in this novel and the closeness of Elisa and Elisabeth Rousset, who seems to be prefigured in Goncourt’s description of his character in chapter 22.⁵² Leclerc evaluates these allusions as “autant de clins d’œil intertextuels, et presque de pieds de nez aux illustres devanciers” (119). Yet, Maupassant’s work must, and does, stand on its own. One can hardly say that he borrowed the theme of the prostitute when it was a common grounds for literature of the period and would become a privileged motif throughout his entire *œuvre*. In fact, it is quite possible to see that Maupassant is more memorable for his prominent portrayal of prostitutes than the other authors Leclerc mentions. Furthermore, the coincidental nature of the names is far from being conclusive evidence that there was any influence on Maupassant’s creative choices. In fact, the name of Elisabeth Rousset virtually disappears inside the text of “Boule de suif,” as the title indicates.

⁵¹ A similar argument is illustrated by Jeanne Bem in “Le ‘Travail’ du texte dans ‘Boule de suif.’”

⁵² Many scholars agree, however, that the real-life model for Boule de suif was Adrienne Legay, whose story was told to Maupassant by his uncle Charles Cord’homme, who is supposedly modeled in the character of Cornudet (Dumesnil, La Publication des “Soirées de Médan” 144).

Contemporary and modern critics alike agree that Maupassant's story is by far the best of the volume. Still, Rita Schober poses the question usually taken for granted: Why is "Boule de suif" considered better than the other stories? After all, as she puts it, neither Zola nor Huysmans were lacking in talent (179-80). They both took their contributions seriously, in fact revising them from previously published material. Schober's investigation leads to the conclusion that there is an internal unity which allows that "la dialectique du sujet, du thème et de l'idée narrative peut se déployer pleinement dans la nouvelle de Maupassant: c'est là-dessus que se fonde sa supériorité littéraire" (187). In order to understand this assertion, an elucidation of terminology is required.

First, the "sujet" or "domaine" of all the stories in Les Soirées de Médan is the war, making the collection a prime example for study (178). The "thème" is "la question que l'artiste pose au sujet" (176) and can therefore vary among and within each of the authors' stories. Finally, the "idée narrative" signifies "les éléments constitutifs de la fiction par lesquels le thème est transposé sur le plan littéraire" (177). Maupassant's story, Schober argues, is the only one that demonstrates a unity of all three elements. In addition to Maupassant's critique of Zola's "L'Attaque du moulin" cited earlier, Schober uses his critiques of the other Médan authors to suggest that he correctly saw in their stories a "dialectique insuffisamment développée entre sujet, thème et idée narrative" (183). For example, Maupassant said of Huysmans, "pas fameux. Pas de sujet, pas de composition, peu de style" (CEC 286).⁵³ Thus, "Boule de suif," while it shares the common "sujet" of the Franco-Prussian War with the other stories in

⁵³ The term "sujet" in this case would be "thème" in Schober's terminology.

the volume, is distinguished from the rest because of its excellence in the treatment of the war (“thème”) and the “idée narrative” that it employs.

My study of the story addresses the two elements of theme and narrative, with special attention to their naturalist and non-naturalist implications. The theme is chiefly a pessimistic one for Maupassant. The writer’s personal experience with the war, as summarized by Mary Donaldson-Evans in “The Decline and Fall of Elisabeth Rousset,” lends an explanation to his pessimism: “Maupassant, a young idealist at the time of the war, had enlisted a year before he was obliged to, so eager was he to participate in a French victory which he felt to be imminent. [. . .] [T]he disastrous outcome was a turning point, an end to his youthful optimism and naïveté” (17). Unlike Zola, both Maupassant and Huysmans had a direct engagement with the subject they are called on to write about in Les Soirées de Médan. As we shall see, Huysmans’s story is very close to an autobiography. Maupassant, however, does not choose to deal with the reality of what he himself observed in “Boule de suif” or in any of his stories.⁵⁴ Yet, his comments on the war experience, as in this excerpt from “La Guerre” in Le Gil Blas of 11 December 1883, set the tone for our reading of “Boule de suif” and his other stories: “Nous l’avons vue, la guerre. Nous avons vu les hommes redevenus des brutes, affolés, tuer par plaisir, par terreur, par bravade, par ostentation” (Chroniques II, 295).

Maupassant’s treatment of the subject of war is much larger than any one personal experience he may have had. “Boule de suif” and others, such as “Deux

⁵⁴ There is also not much talk of his war encounter in his correspondence, counting five letters that are grouped conveniently in Jacques Biennu’s Maupassant inédit, 51-60.

amis" in 1883, reveal Maupassant's hatred of the Prussians specifically and of war in general. A strong anti-militaristic sentiment is evident in a vivid passage early in "Boule de suif" where he associates the invasion of the army with such natural disasters as earthquakes and floods: "[L]'armée glorieuse massacrant ceux qui se défendent, emmenant les autres prisonniers, pillant au nom du sabre et remerciant un Dieu au son du canon" (79). All of these things "sont autant de fléaux effrayants qui déconcertent toute croyance à la justice éternelle, toute la confiance qu'on nous enseigne en la protection du ciel et en la raison de l'homme" (79). The use of such loaded language indicates an overwhelming pessimism in which humans are powerless against not only nature, but also the acts of mankind. In this instance, the scientific theory of determinism, based on unavoidable natural or physiological influences, joins with the pessimism that comes from humans choosing to do evil to each other in war. Maupassant's pessimistic handling of the war is, for the most part, in line with the naturalists' view. But, the language he uses, as I will show, seems to come from a subjective voice that goes beyond telling an objective account to convey a particular message not only about the war but about society as well.

"Boule de suif," although the first of his short stories that truly gained him recognition, was not Maupassant's first tale of the Franco-Prussian War. In 1877, he had written "Le mariage du lieutenant Laré," of which Claude Digeon gives a brief synopsis: "petite histoire d'une troupe d'éclaireurs qui rencontrent un vieillard et sa fille fuyant leur château envahi et les secourent galamment: leur chef, le lieutenant Laré, en sera récompensé par le noble vieillard qui lui accorde la main de sa fille" (268). This story seems to be a more optimistic version of

"L'Attaque du moulin." Like that story, it also shares with "Boule de suif" the treatment of women as pawns in the game of war. The difference is that the girl in Maupassant's earlier story is a given by her father in gratitude, whereas Boule de suif is given as ransom to the Prussian soldier by a group of self-serving strangers in order to guarantee their release. Therefore, the 1877 story, which Digeon summarizes as a "mélange de galanterie et de courage" (269), does not contain the same negative messages about war as does "Boule de suif."

The character Boule de suif is essentially the opposite of the type of heroine that is found in patriotic literature, but she is the heroine of the story nonetheless. For Maupassant to make a "fille galante" the champion of this story, and of others, indicates an ironic twist on the typical image of feminine heroes in patriotic literature, the faithful wives and chaste daughters such as Françoise in Zola's "L'Attaque du moulin." Richard Bolster, in "The Patriotic Prostitutes of Maupassant: Fact or Fantasy?" discusses several of Maupassant's short stories, such as "Mademoiselle Fifi" and "Le Lit 29," but does not find evidence to justify any historical inspiration for these characters, concluding that "Maupassant's attachment to the theme of the patriotic prostitute must surely be explained by its paradoxical nature and usefulness for an attack on bourgeois morality" (17). Mary Donaldson-Evans likewise notes that "Boule de suif" is situated in the context of Maupassant's war stories and his "whore" stories: "It is not by chance that the two themes frequently collide, and that his most unforgettable prostitutes are war heroes as well" ("The Decline and Fall" 19).⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Charles Stivale builds on the arguments of Donaldson-Evans to make the claim that "Boule de suif" is "a transitional text since it serves as a key discursive example of how the narrative of war, prostitution, and class conflict intersect to establish an exemplary textualization of strategies of

Maupassant's creation of a heroine out of a prostitute is not only an innovation in war literature, but also provides a social commentary on the rest of the travelers, none of whom possesses the same dignity as she does. But, this social commentary is naturalist in that it elevates a shunned member of society, making the prostitute a worthy subject for literature.

Furthermore, the treatment of social distinctions in this story marks it as a naturalist "document humain" more than a war story. The struggle of the social classes is more important than the struggle of war, which remains only a vague presence in this story. Marion Piper finds that "Boule de suif" is based on "des luttes à l'intérieur d'une seule nation [qui] ne sont pas supprimées même en face de l'ennemi commun extérieur" (42). One example of the importance of the social aspect of this story over that of war is the fact that Maupassant's main use of military language comes in the passage where the group is planning to convince Boule de suif to give in to the Prussian officer:

On prépara longuement le blocus, comme pour une forteresse investie. Chacun convint du rôle qu'il jouerait, des arguments dont il s'appuierait, des manœuvres qu'il devrait exécuter. On régla le plan des attaques, les ruses à employer, et les surprises de l'assaut, pour forcer cette citadelle vivante à recevoir l'ennemi dans la place. (108)

The substitution of this planned conspiracy or "attack" on Boule de suif for that of a real battle is ironic because it replaces the kind of militaristic activity that the reader might expect upon reading of the Prussian invasion in the first few pages of the story.

the art of rupture" (*The Art of Rupture: Narrative Desire and Duplicity in the Tales of Guy de Maupassant* 106).

There are many of these ironic contrasts in this story, such as those signaled by capitalization in the text. For instance, Boule de suif's traveling companions are described as "des honnêtes gens autorisés qui ont de la Religion et des Principes" (85). But, in truth, they lack the values that Boule de suif, quite unexpectedly, exhibits. The use of capitalization is a subtle declaration made by the narrator on the supposed importance of these qualities for his characters, and made by Maupassant himself on the social values he perceives in the world around him. Another instance of Maupassant's use of capitalization to mock political clichés is found in the following dictum that decries a naïve, xenophobic attitude: "Car la haine de l'Etranger arme toujours quelques intrépides prêts à mourir pour une Idée" (81). This sentence is also an example of Maupassant extending the present tense beyond normal narrative usage to express aphorisms. Marc Bégin points out in his discussion of "les présents gnomiques" and other kinds of non-specific uses of the present tense in "La Tension narrative dans 'Boule de suif,'" that "le temps des verbes est alors déterminé par le caractère intemporel d'expériences ou de perceptions qui peuvent appartenir aussi bien au lecteur qu'au narrataire" (127). Thus, while the messages behind Maupassant's words may be valid naturalist observations, the manner in which they are conveyed has been deliberately crafted. Such contrived manipulation of language to provoke a particular effect for the reader distorts the facts and qualifies as non-naturalist.

David Baguley points out the ironic effect obtained when the bourgeois characters "employ noble and heroic language in the interests of baser motives" (Naturalist Fiction 147). Their persuasive tactics include references to the heroic

tales of Judith, Lucretia, Cleopatra, “toutes les femmes qui ont arrêté des conquérants, fait de leur corps un champ de bataille, un moyen de dominer, une arme” (109).⁵⁶ The discourse of the body is prioritized here and throughout the narrative as *Boule de suif* is treated as an object to be consumed. Maupassant’s physical portrait of *Boule de suif* is realistic to a point, but also transcends reality with such phrases as “des doigts bouffis, étranglés aux phalanges, pareils à des chapelets de courtes saucisses” (86). Like the animal and vegetal descriptions of Zola’s characters, particularly Françoise, in “L’Attaque du moulin,” Maupassant blends metaphors into his assessment of *Boule de suif*: “Petite, ronde de partout, grasse à lard, [. . .] elle restait cependant appétissante et courue, tant sa fraîcheur faisait plaisir à voir. Sa figure était une pomme rouge, un bouton de pivoine prêt à fleurir” (86).

Boule de suif is also viewed in a series of body parts, or metonymies, as if being panned by a camera, beginning with her fingers mentioned above, then moving over her skin, chest, eyes, mouth, and teeth. With this treatment, *Boule de suif* is otherized by not only the traditional male gaze, but also the female gaze of her traveling companions and indeed the reader’s gaze. This topic is the subject of Lexey Bartlett’s “Other Eyes that Other-ize,” suggesting that “the complicity of female characters in objectifying other women [. . .] implicates them in marginalizing members of their own sex through the use of the male gaze” (12). The main voyeur in the story, however, is a male, Loiseau, with his spying on “les mystères du corridor” (98). He is the leader in the sport of the male gaze

⁵⁶ Noticeably absent, however, is Joan of Arc, whose ties to the story and character of *Boule de suif* cannot be missed: the context of war, a strong faith in God, even the setting of Rouen. Perhaps this image hits too close to home for the travelers to dare imply that a common prostitute might in some way, however slight, approximate this saintly figure.

since he is the only member of the group willing and able to meet the defiant glare of Boule de suif in the beginning of the story: "[E]lle promena sur ses voisins un regard tellement provocant et hardi qu'un grand silence aussitôt régna, et tout le monde baissa les yeux à l'exception de Loiseau, qui la guettait d'un air émoustillé" (86).

Loiseau's lecherous gaze extends to Boule de suif's food as well, as he "dévorait des yeux la terrine de poulet" and is the first to accept her offer to share (89). When the others follow suit, it is as if they are partaking in a primal act: "Les bouches s'ouvraient et se fermaient sans cesse, avalaient, mastiquaient, engloutissaient férocement" (90). Donaldson-Evans gleans a Darwinian concept in Maupassant's narrative: "While part of the savagery of this scene may be explained by Maupassant's desire to remain faithful to the tenets of Naturalism, we can also see in it a scarcely veiled Darwinism which is verbalized later in the tale by the count himself: 'Il ne faut jamais résister aux gens qui sont les plus forts'" (25). Although I would not say that Maupassant consciously wished to be faithful to naturalism and its doctrines, this ideology does reflect the "survival of the fittest" mentality that was a part of evolutionary theory, particularly in the pessimistic interpretation of it that is closer to Huysmans than Zola.

Moreover, there is a naturalist emphasis on the physicality of eating, as well as the descriptions of hunger ("le violent besoin de manger" 88) and even yawning: "De temps en temps quelqu'un bâillait; un autre presque aussitôt l'imitait; et chacun, à tour de rôle, suivant son caractère, son savoir-vivre et sa position sociale, ouvrait la bouche avec fracas ou modestement en portant vite sa main devant le trou béant d'où sortait une vapeur" (88). This common "trou

béant" equalizes all the travelers, regardless of the hand that conceals it or the social status that prevents some, especially the women, from displaying a natural body function. The shared experience of eating begins to break down social barriers and leads to conversation ("on ne pouvait manger les provisions de cette fille sans lui parler" 91), thus exchanging one oral function for the other. Throughout this story, eating and speaking are the main activities that drive the action, and both are central to the ultimate sacrifice of Boule de suif.

As discussed earlier, the language used to talk Boule de suif into sacrificing herself to the Prussian is militaristic and heroic. The word "sacrifice," which appears repeatedly in the narrative, also connotes a sacrificial slaughter. Alain Boureau develops this idea in "Maupassant et le cannibalisme social" with the argument that the entire story is built around food references: "[L]e récit du voyage est centré sur deux repas tandis que l'attente à l'auberge est scandée de repères alimentaires" (354). Boureau sees in "Boule de suif" an allegory of the birth of the Third Republic in which the prostitute represents the victimized Commune, leading to the restoration of social order "grâce à Boule de suif qui se laisse dévorer par les voyageurs et par l'envahisseur" (361).⁵⁷ The sacrifice of Boule de suif fulfills the act of cannibalism to which Loiseau alluded earlier in the story: "[I]l proposa de faire comme sur le petit navire de la chanson: de manger le plus gras des voyageurs" (88).

The "sale" of Boule de suif is indicated in Maupassant's text from the very start in the mention that the French military commanders are such common folk

⁵⁷ Mary Donaldson-Evans also describes a cannibalistic sort of sacrifice in that the group is "comparable to the bourgeois who quietly nourish the occupying soldiers: indeed, they 'feed' Boule de suif to the Prussian in exchange for their own freedom" (29).

as “ex-marchands de suif ou de savon” (78). Boule de suif’s name continues to make her an object of consumption for the group even after she has sacrificed herself for the sake of her fellow travelers, as Mary Donaldson-Evans demonstrates: “The fact that the prostitute is identified with animal fat by her nickname, and that all but one of the travelers lunch on meats (suggestive of Boule de suif’s role by the nouns used to characterize them: *morceau*, *gibier*, etc.) reinforces the notion of self-sacrifice” (27). Boule de suif’s function as a martyr for the good of the group reverses the typical image of the prostitute as “la croqueuse d’hommes,” studied by Lynda A. Davey. Her argument points out that Boule de suif, despite her alimentary name, consumes less and less as the narrative progresses (65). Moreover, the sexual appetite of the prostitute is replaced in Maupassant’s story with the fervor of religion, thereby reflecting in her morality the sympathy that he has for such characters. Yet, the almost hysterical nature of Boule de suif’s religionism is also tangible, as Donaldson-Evans observes in A Woman’s Revenge: “Maupassant was quick to draw the obvious conclusion: the more ‘sexual’ the woman, the greater her capacity for religious ecstasy” (84).

The names of Boule de suif and other characters are rich with symbolic value. It is important to recognize that the nickname Boule de suif is not employed in the direct discourse of the story. While the narrator refers to her as Boule de suif, the other characters always address her as Madame or Mademoiselle Elisabeth Rousset. Indeed, there is a significant shift that takes place when the group is trying to convince her to submit to the Prussian officer: “[A]u lieu de l’appeler ‘madame’ comme on l’avait fait jusque-là, on lui disait

simplement ‘mademoiselle,’ sans que personne sût bien pourquoi, comme si l’on avait voulu la faire descendre d’un degré dans l’estime qu’elle avait escaladée, lui faire sentir sa situation honteuse” (109). The ammunition of language is also employed a while later when the count changes registers to speak to her using the “tu” form and calling her “ma chère” (112). Rather than entering further into a detailed analysis of name symbolism, I merely wish to acknowledge that this symbolism does exist, whether intentional or not, and may be interpreted as a non-naturalist feature of Maupassant’s story, much like the name symbolism found in Zola’s story and in Huysmans’s as well.⁵⁸

There are also metaphors associated with non-human things, which is another shared characteristic of Zola’s and Maupassant’s stories. One of the most illustrative in “Boule de suif” is the “armée de pigeons blancs,” which substitutes for the real French and Prussian armies and also depicts the group of travelers, “[cherchant] leur vie dans le crottin fumant qu’ils éparpillaient” (115). The cast of characters, with each individual or couple representing a different social position, appears a bit too carefully arranged. Maupassant’s troupe is not at all random, but rather chosen to fit his plans, in other words, it is an “illusion réaliste.” This parodical Noah’s ark in miniature is shown by Charles Castella to give a sort of “échantillon sociologique” of the “milieu provincial urbain” (Les Contes et nouvelles réalistes 135-36). Additionally, the situation of all the passengers traveling together in the stagecoach conjures up a traditional ironic genre for David Baguley in the “convention of the ‘ship of fools’” (Naturalist

⁵⁸ In addition to the food references with the name Boule de suif, Donaldson-Evans comments on the names of Cornudet (“corps nu”) and Follenvie (“folle-envie”) and compares the geometric connotations of Boule de suif and Mme Carré-Lamadon (“The Decline and Fall” 21-22).

Fiction 150). The locus of the stagecoach as a “ventre,” which can signify either a uterus or a stomach, has been examined by a few critics. For example, Jeanne Bem reads the entire story in a series of “sphères emboîtées” (104). Boule de suif, like a “boule de neige,” is presented lastly in the narrative, thus engulfing the other nine characters. Her gift of food shared in the carriage creates a “refuge foetal relativement tiède, nourricier et obscur” (104). Building on Bem’s imagery, I would add that the outside backdrop of the coach making its way through the snow amounts to a snow globe effect. The natural element of the weather, though not as dire as the Biblical flood, also encloses the characters in their own version of Noah’s ark.

Maupassant’s and Zola’s stories are similarly marked by non-naturalist elements in their subtle usage of name symbolism and metaphors. There are formal and stylistic correspondences as well. The *fil conducteur* of food references in “Boule de suif” is much like the temporal references in “L’Attaque du moulin” and serves to regulate the unfolding of the story. Maupassant’s story is also like Zola’s in its classical structure and feel. Tadeusz Kowzan, in “Fortune théâtrale de ‘Boule de suif,’” asserts that Maupassant “a un instinct dramatique incontestable, qu’il sait exploiter à merveille, dans ses ouvrages narratifs, les éléments considérés comme composantes typiques du drame: exposition, nœud, crise, péripétie, catastrophe, dénouement” (143). Both Zola’s and Maupassant’s stories conclude with a punch-line sort of ending. Like the officer’s victorious cry in “L’Attaque du moulin,” Maupassant’s story concludes with Cornudet’s brazen whistling of *La Marseillaise*, another ironic twist on patriotic values.

A few other critics have noted elements of non-naturalist genres in the story, such as Lilian Furst who implies that we must look beneath the “tragicomic surface” of the story to find the real message of human dignity in the character of Boule de suif (“The Coherence of Les Soirées de Médan” 128).

Marion Piper develops the notion of a comical treatment that undermines Boule de suif’s heroism:

Ce n’est pas l’hypocrisie de ses compagnons de voyage qui enlève quelque chose à l’héroïsme réel de Boule de suif, ni le fait qu’elle a accepté de faire un compromis avec ses sentiments patriotiques, car en ce faisant elle se sacrifie pour les autres. Néanmoins, par l’aspect cocasse de toute cette aventure, Maupassant retire de Boule de suif une partie de la grandeur qu’on associe normalement avec l’héroïsme. (36)

Therefore, while the irony employed in Maupassant’s story may be part of a naturalist, pessimistic attitude toward war, it also links the text to a completely separate tradition in that ship of fools suggested by Baguley. The comical aspect of the story is another variation from a more straightforward naturalist account. However, Maupassant’s use of comedy does not reach the level of Huysmans’s narrative.

The final scene in “Boule de suif” is, in effect, a death scene like the one in Zola’s tale. The female protagonists in both stories undergo similar reactions to the dramas they have experienced: Françoise “imbécile entre les cadavres de son mari et de son père” (74) and Boule de suif who “restait droite, le regard fixe, la face rigide et pâle, espérant qu’on ne la verrait pas” (117). Both are deprived of speech, dumbfounded at the absurdity of the events that have occurred. In Maupassant’s account, it is Boule de suif who has died, though figuratively. The language used to express her torture, however, emphasizes the very literal

physicality of her suffering: “[E]lle regardait, exaspérée, suffoquant de rage [. . .]. Une colère tumultueuse la crispa d’abord, et elle ouvrit la bouche pour leur crier leur fait avec un flot d’injures qui lui montait aux lèvres; mais elle ne pouvait pas parler, tant l’exaspération l’étranglait” (117). This death by strangulation is further described metaphorically as a drowning or being buried alive in the snow: “Elle se sentait noyée dans le mépris de ces gredins honnêtes [. . .]” (117). Finally, the reappearance of the term “honnêtes” from the initial description of the travelers comes back in full ironic force here at the end.

As we have seen Zola’s “L’Attaque du moulin” indicating a breach of naturalism, but one that points to the larger scope of his talents as a writer, so too with Maupassant do we find a hint of his concern with the unknown that would be explored in his fantastic tales. Early in “Boule de suif,” there is a suggestion of “quelque chose dans l’air, quelque chose de subtil et d’inconnu” (80). These ideas would play out in a number of Maupassant’s later works and, in fact, could be directly applied to the arrival of the otherworldly creature in “Le Horla.” A more gruesome image that approximates “Sur l’eau” and other suspense tales is apparent in the case of fishermen retrieving “souvent du fond de l’eau quelque cadavre d’Allemand gonflé dans son uniforme” (80-81). Maupassant’s complex attitude toward nature is also mixed with his sense of wonder toward the mysteries of the universe in his description of the snow in “Boule de suif”:

Un rideau de flocons blancs ininterrompu miroitait sans cesse en descendant vers la terre; il effaçait les formes, poudrait les choses d’une mousse de glace; et l’on n’entendait plus dans le grand silence de la ville calme et ensevelie sous l’hiver que ce froissement vague, innomable et flottant de la neige qui tombe, plutôt sensation que bruit, entremêlement d’atomes légers qui semblaient emplir l’espace, couvrir le monde. (82)

In this passage, there are numerous elements foreshadowing ideas dealt with in “Le Horla,” such as the significance of whiteness, the misleading appearance of things, and the priority of an indescribable sensation over hearing, or any of the five senses, indicating a desire for perception on an entirely different plane than that allowed by our weak human form.

“Sac au dos”: Beating a Hasty Retreat

J.-K. Huysmans’s “Sac au dos” announces his departure from naturalism toward a significantly different literary style, one that would evolve throughout his career. Following Zola’s and Maupassant’s stories in order of placement in Les Soirées de Médan, it also follows their lead as a simultaneously naturalist and non-naturalist narrative. Epitomizing this dichotomy, “Sac au dos” is alternately the most and least naturalist story of the volume. While this story is not as well known as those of Zola and Maupassant, it is important to recall that Huysmans’s career as a naturalist writer was burgeoning at the time of this publication. It is most interesting to consider that, although Huysmans had been in the public eye more than Maupassant or any of the other Médan associates up to that point, Maupassant’s outstanding story and his critical voice in the manifesto-like defense published in Le Gaulois essentially stole the spotlight from this “firstborn” of the naturalist movement fathered by Zola.⁵⁹ Likewise,

⁵⁹ As will become evident in A rebours, there is an Oedipal quality or indeed a patricide of sorts committed in Huysmans’s rejection of Zola’s naturalism. Christopher Lloyd argues that “Zola was the father whom Huysmans had to kill in A rebours, to be born as an author in his own

"Sac au dos," with its conflicting signs of naturalism and decadence, is an early indication of the division to come.

"Sac au dos" is often regarded as a pithy, autobiographical account of Huysmans's own involvement in a war that he viewed mostly from the sidelines, having been beset with dysentery. Yet, it represents nonetheless a significant effort within his lifetime of work on the theme of the Franco-Prussian War.

Brian R. Banks explains, in The Image of Huysmans:

[T]here were various states [of "Sac au dos"] in the preceding years successively called "Le Chant du départ" and "Leprosérie," as well as the variations under the same title. It seems, therefore, to have been a work more important than the place it eventually took, and certainly parallels another piece on the same theme of the 1870 Prussian war that was returned to throughout his life and eventually burned at his death: "La Faim." (86)

Although this treatment of the war theme is a preoccupation for Huysmans throughout his career, he actually did not deal with it explicitly in most of his works. In fact, in this prime opportunity for him to recast his role and truly engage with the war in "Sac au dos," the battlefield becomes a secondary motif, relegated to the background setting and secondhand reports, as the main action focuses on the psychology and physiology of the protagonist and first-person narrator, Eugène Lejantel, who never really gets to see, much less be involved in a battle scene.

Moreover, the lasting impressions of Eugène and his war follies supersede any glimpses of the author's commentary on war. Huysmans's stance toward war is an absolutely negative one, according to his pessimistic Schopenhauerian philosophy. Thus, we read in A rebours:

right" (39), and Joseph Halpern also works from the assumption that "Zola is the father assassinated in A rebours" in "Decadent Narrative: A rebours" (96).

Sous prétexte de liberté et de progrès, la Société avait encore découvert le moyen d'aggraver la misérable condition de l'homme, en l'arrachant à son chez lui, en l'affublant d'un costume ridicule, en lui distribuant des armes particulières, [. . .] et tout cela pour le mettre à même d'assassiner son prochain sans risquer l'échafaud, comme les ordinaires meurtriers qui opèrent seuls, sans uniformes, avec des armes moins bruyantes et moins rapides.⁶⁰

The denunciation of the military as an institution and the philosophies of war in general is comparatively pared down in "Sac au dos." Instead of seizing the occasion to strengthen his arguments against war, Huysmans tells the story through the naïve perspective of Eugène. After a brief, failed attempt at law school, Eugène finds himself called to the army, though he does not even understand the motives behind the war: "Je me sondais, cherchant un état que je pusse embrasser sans trop de dégoût, quand feu l'empereur m'en trouva un; il me fit soldat de par la maladresse de sa politique" (122). Yet, this ambivalent perception of the war may be precisely what is in order for the naturalist narrative. Rather than forcing a subjective interpretation of this war onto readers, Huysmans presents a story that is deliberately subtle in its application of the real-life experiences of its author.

"Sac au dos," because it does stem from personal knowledge and is true to that reality which he knew both from firsthand observation and careful reading of reported events, succeeds in following the naturalist method of documentation. According to Pierre Waldner in "J.-K. Huysmans et la guerre de 1870," the research presented by Pierre Lambert in 1954 shows that even some of the most minute details and seemingly unrealistic events in the story are on the

⁶⁰ A rebours 198. This passage was brought to my attention by René-Pierre Colin, Zola. Renégats et alliés, 122. I would like to point out also the significance of the capitalization of "Société," which may be comparable to Maupassant's practice in "Boule de suif."

contrary quite firmly grounded in reality: “[D]es recoupements avec divers journaux de Paris ou de province en fournissent la preuve, ce qui revient à souligner, à partir d’une observation précise, non seulement la sincérité absolue de Huysmans, mais la valeur documentaire de son témoignage” (36). Lambert’s early study also suggests that it is possible to see in Huysmans’s story, as Henry Céard did, the “germe initial autour duquel s’organisera l’Œuvre tout entier” (149). Although Lambert is speaking here of the religious implications for Huysmans, such as the portrayal of the kindly nurse Sœur Angèle in the story, his statement is also valid for my own study of the non-naturalist development in the writer’s career.

Henry Céard’s “Huysmans intime” features a comparative study of the two versions of “Sac au dos” published in 1877 and in 1880.⁶¹ A few of the changes made for the second version in Les Soirées de Médan are substantial. Céard emphasizes, for example, a series of religious verses in the original: “Ils ont été supprimés dans le ‘Sac au dos’ des Soirées de Médan et, pour les lecteurs comme pour nous, ce serait méconnaître un des éléments primordiaux de la psychologie de Huysmans, si nous les laissions, ignorés dans le ‘Sac au dos’ édité à Bruxelles” (77). Like Céard, René Dumesnil later comments on a few modifications that Huysmans made “sans doute par scrupule,” such as restraining the passages concerning Sœur Angèle and Reine, the young woman he encounters on the train on his way home (La Publication des “Soirées de

⁶¹ Colette Becker’s edition of Les Soirées de Médan contains both versions, including the complete story as it was originally published in L’Artiste, 305-26.

Médan" 151-52).⁶² Without a doubt, the religious elements both here and in A rebours foretell the drastic life change that Huysmans would undergo, choosing salvation at the foot of the cross over the revolver, as he put it in the 1903 preface to A rebours. But, the attempts to suppress religious content from his story for its inclusion in Les Soirées de Médan implies that spiritual topics were not to be a part of naturalist literature, at least not in this instance.

There is another omission that is just as important as the missing religious verses, if not more so, in the hymn of *bibelots* and books welcoming Eugène home in the original version. Before considering the deleted passage, it is worth noting that these *bibelots* and books are still very much present in the second version's ending, with religious overtones that are nonetheless apparent, even though not specified as such: "[J]e reste là, extasié, béat, m'emplissant les yeux de la vue de mes bibelots et de mes livres" (151). In fact, *bibelots* are such a treasured part of Eugène's existence, that it seems he has packed some to go along with him in the titular backpack that he empties and repacks several times as he moves from one makeshift hospital to the next: "Je remets dans mon sac les bibelots que j'en avais tirés, et nous repartons, cahin-caha, pour l'hospice de la ville" (133). While the term "bibelots" may refer to miscellaneous everyday odds and ends, Renée Kingcaid makes the case, in her article "With a Knickknack on his Back," for considering that they may indeed be real *objets d'art* that Eugène just could not do without. This explanation of his aesthetic tastes dominating even in the

⁶² Though beyond the scope of this study, a closer look at Eugène's encounters with Sœur Angèle and Reine, particularly in the first version of the story, reveals another important aspect of Eugène's war experience. To mention just one example, Julia Przybos studies these relationships in terms of the false notes given by the assonance of Eugène/Angèle and the rhyme of Eugène/Reine (111-12).

context of war is joined by a psychological motivation, as Kingcaid describes them as “comfy” or transitional objects, like a teddy bear, blanket, or thumb.

Eugène’s treatment of his possessions in “Sac au dos” is nearly indistinguishable from the sorts of material obsessions displayed by des Esseintes in A rebours. We may therefore read these lines from the first version of “Sac au dos” with des Esseintes in mind: “Je retrouve mon logement tel que je l’ai laissé; mes bibelots, mes livres semblent me souhaiter la bienvenue. J’allume toutes les bougies pour mieux les voir, c’est un *Te Deum* de couleurs, un hosanna de flammes!” (325). This linguistic blending of books and other objects with religious music suggests a marriage of all the things that are most valuable to Eugène as well as to des Esseintes. The synesthesia of sound and sight in the “*Te Deum* de couleurs” is a further reflection of Huysmans’s aesthetics and the descriptive technique that will be developed in A rebours. Moreover, extending the comparison of Huysmans to Zola, the personification of these objects is not too far from the “characters” of the mill and the woods in Zola’s “L’Attaque du moulin.” In fact, it surpasses Zola’s descriptions and points to an even more imaginative and artificial style in Huysmans.

Pierre Cogy, in his introduction to Le “Huysmans intime,” mentions stylistic changes made for the second version of “Sac au dos” which show that Huysmans was concerned about the economy of language: “Huysmans paraît vouloir retourner à la sobriété d’un Flaubert: c’est pourquoi il supprime les détails non indispensables” (20). Stylistically, then, Huysmans’s narrative resembles Flaubert more than Zola. The precision of “Sac au dos” applies to the content of the story as well as his writing style. Huysmans has little to say about

the details of the war, but those that he does discuss favor the baser side of things in all too full detail. Oddly enough, the editors of L'Artiste assured their readers, particularly female readers, that they would not be offended:

Aujourd'hui nous commençons la publication de "Sac au dos," la très alerte nouvelle de J.-K. Huysmans. C'est la narration sincère et piquante de sa campagne de mobile en l'an de sang 1870. Mais que nos lectrices se rassurent, il n'est question, dans cet humoriste récit, ni de morts ni de blessés -- bien au contraire: ce récit guerrier est idylle, pimpante et gaie. (OC I, 251)

While it is true that there are not any gory depictions of a battle scene, there are still frequent references to injuries and illnesses that this statement does not admit. As Julia Przybos describes in her study of the physiological geometry of "Sac au dos," Huysmans paints images that are not permissible in polite society: "Excrement, vermin, dirt, disgusting odors, festering wounds, and gangrened flesh are so many subjects inappropriate to polite conversation. They are all forbidden. So that although fundamentally destructive, war might yet also provide a kind of liberation from taboos" (109). Huysmans's story, in this way, joins Maupassant's in the idea that the war breaks down social barriers. Like Maupassant's emphasis on the shared bodily functions of eating and yawning, Huysmans's descriptions of illness, injuries, and so on, show the equalizing power of the war.

Given the physical ailments that Eugène observes and experiences himself in the story, the terms used by the editors of L'Artiste to describe "Sac au dos" as an "idylle, pimpante et gaie" are curious. Nonetheless, the story does often read like a comedy adventure, as Huysmans's proposal for the volume's title, L'Invasion comique, would reflect. David Baguley even ties "Sac au dos" to the

genre of the picaresque with Eugène as a kind of “naturalist picaro” in the sense that he is “irony’s substitute for the hero” (Naturalist Fiction 150). There are indeed many comical aspects to the story, beginning with Eugène’s description of his ridiculous appearance in hospital attire: “Quelle figure et quel accoutrement, bon Dieu! [. . .] avec ma grande robe gris-souris, ma culotte d’un roux pisseux, mes savates immenses et sans talons, mon bonnet de coton gigantesque, je suis prodigieusement laid. Je ne puis m’empêcher de rire” (126).

Laughter recurs throughout the text, signaling that Eugène’s and the others’ participation in the war is more a party than a hardship, especially after they have been dismissed from the action by their illnesses or injuries. In fact, it becomes a moveable feast, as the fun continues even as they are relocated by train, precisely because the Prussians are entering Châlons: “Nous chantions à tue-tête, nous buvions, nous trinquions; jamais malades ne firent autant de bruit et ne gambadèrent ainsi sur un train en marche! On eût dit d’une cour des Miracles roulante” (131). Despite the uncertainty felt in the face of that unknown “on” that dictates the soldiers’ lives, whether that be the military commanders or a more ambiguous deterministic fate, as discussed earlier, there is still a human drive to pursue happiness. Perhaps the levity is a coping mechanism, but the adventures of Eugène and his comrade Francis are most significant examples of the good times to be had in a time of war. The friendship between these two young men is fast and true: “Nous devenons tout de suite amis [. . .]. Nous connaissons l’un et l’autre tel et tel peintre, nous entamons des discussions d’esthétique et oublions nos infortunes” (126). Clearly, Eugène has found his counterpart in this “voisin de lit” that fate has brought together.

Along with their shared tastes for aesthetic and artistic subjects, Eugène and Francis also partake in a number of adventurous escapades revolving around food, alcohol, and women. In one scene, for instance, the narrator launches into a detailed, lyrical description of the meal they are served in a hotel while on leave, mingling the sights and smells of the food, wine, and flowers on the table and culminating in the expression “O sainte joie des bâfres!” (133). The act of eating is an important topic in this text, much like in “Boule de suif.” In the beginning of the story, eating is used metaphorically for spending money: “[J]e mangeai l’argent de mes inscriptions [. . .] avec une blonde qui prétendait avoir de l’affection pour moi, à certaines heures” (121). This phrase can also be read as a metonymy, as Robert Ziegler explains in “The Naturalist Cloaca”: “First metonymized as the money used to obtain her favors, the woman he consorts with then becomes the nourishing liquidity that is associated with devouring her. [. . .] The tuition consumed as payment for sexual pleasure [. . .] links Lejantel’s scholarly, intellectual, and aesthetic pursuits with nurture and food” (177).

In addition to sex, food is associated with other acts of the body in the hospital. For example, excrement is equated with food as the narrator tells of the joking done with bedpans: “[Q]uelques-uns des plus malades avaient [. . .] sous leur lit une vieille casserole que les convalescents faisaient sauter comme des cuisinières, offrant, par plaisanterie, le ragoût aux sœurs” (139). Julia Przybos deals with many such examples in her article, which is organized by the public and private aspects of ingestion, digestion, elimination, and copulation. According to Przybos, Huysmans’s story demonstrates a progression from realism to naturalism to decadence. It is most naturalist in discussing the public

nature of physiological functions in the war camp and hospital. On the other hand, the story exceeds naturalist doctrine in the end when Eugène retreats to the privacy of his own home, “pour savourer la solitude des endroits où l’on met culotte bas, à l’aise” (151). As mentioned before in reference to the religious overtones of the story’s ending, the final line also announces the important themes of solitude, physical comfort, and the home as sanctuary for des Esseintes in A rebours. In contrast to the tragic irony in other stories in the volume, particularly in the strong punch-line endings of Zola and Maupassant, Huysmans’s is more of a literal punch line employing a comic sense of irony.

Nevertheless, along with the comedy, there is also a more serious side to “Sac au dos” in its ironic treatment of war. Emilien Carassus claims that Huysmans’s story sets about demystifying the war, “de tourner l’héroïsme guerrier en dérision” (19). With this objective, Huysmans joins the naturalists’ view of war. However, in contrast to Maupassant, for example, Huysmans does not demonstrate any strong antimilitaristic sentiments here. Waldner observes that “‘Sac au dos’ ne contribue évidemment en rien à l’animation de la renaissance nationale: aucune haine de l’Allemagne n’y prévaut, aucun nationalisme français non plus” (42). This statement indicates that Huysmans’s story is nothing like the typical patriotic literature and, therefore, is linked to the unity of Les Soirées de Médan. Yet, “Sac au dos” is concerned not as much with providing a naturalist view of the war as it is with other aspects of society. For instance, the narrator describes the segregation of soldiers in the barracks according to social class: “Une fois installées, les compagnies se scindèrent; les ouvriers s’en furent dans les tentes habitées par leurs semblables, et les bourgeois

firent de même” (125). Thus, in this description Huysmans is making a subtle commentary, like Maupassant’s treatment of similar social distinctions among the travelers in “Boule de suif.”

David Baguley calls “Sac au dos” the most iconoclastic text of the collection because the narrator’s irony is turned not only upon the military and the medical corps that Eugène encounters, but also educational institutions, the law, and politics (150). The first few paragraphs of the story deal with these other institutions and show, from the start, that the primary subject is not the war, but Eugène himself. Given the brevity of the short story genre, Huysmans is constrained to reserve fully-developed discourses on these subjects to later novels, such as those delivered in the oratorical style of A rebours. The narrative organization Huysmans uses in “Sac au dos” can be considered a divergence from typical naturalist forms of writing. Yves Chevrel points out that the “journal intime” is rare in naturalist novels, but does appear in some short stories, though this was the only time Huysmans ever used it (Le Naturalisme 133). The story of “Sac au dos” is told by a first-person narrator who recounts his “war experience” from a highly subjective point of view, thus making it difficult, if not impossible to group the work under the banner of naturalist objectivity. In essence, “Sac au dos” is more of a psychological study than a war story, not unlike Zola’s “L’Attaque du moulin” is more a love story than a war story.

The stylistic differences between Huysmans and the others, however, are more distinguishing. As previously stated, Zola’s prose is highly lyrical and reminiscent of a romantic style. The narration of “Boule de suif” is more direct in following the action and shows what Lilian Furst calls “the delicate control of

Maupassant" ("The Coherence of Les Soirées de Médan" 131). Huysmans's story, however, is much more relaxed in tone, due in large part to the voice of the first-person narrator. The casualness of Eugène's narration may reflect Huysmans's own attitude about the war. It is significant that the only real account of war in the story is told by someone other than the narrator. Eugène, like the reader, experiences battle only through a secondhand report as the soldier in the next bed tells the group about what the war is really like. This description of the war, relayed to the reader by the narrator in the third person, departs from the first-person narration throughout the rest of the text. At times, the narration in this passage is in the *style indirect libre*, which Furst explains is used "to convey simultaneously the dual perspective of the active participant and of the passive listener" (131).

This passage in the story is also the closest to a naturalist documentation of battle. However, the fact that the main character only experiences it secondhand places the emphasis on his subjectivity rather than on an objective telling of the war. Robert Ziegler finds that Eugène is so disgusted by the vulgarities of war that, after a while, he cannot stand to hear the story again:

[W]hile the soldier enjoys the psychoanalytic benefit of talking, Lejantel, unpracticed in the art of war as discourse, shuns the narrative, which substitutes for the bloodshed it describes. Bleeding, streaming, the story becomes itself an undressed wound [. . .]. Thus, in a defensive gesture, Lejantel attempts to staunch the flow by regressively retreating to his own state of unknowing: "Nous finissons par nous boucher les oreilles et par tâcher de dormir." (180)

The fact that the narrator says they have heard this story at least twenty times is another explanation, and one that is more obvious, for Eugène's unwillingness to

listen. The desire to escape from even hearing about the war is applicable, in some ways, to Huysmans as well as his protagonist. Ziegler sees that “Sac au dos” is “typical of Huysmans’s practice of subverting the literary principles on which his writings are seemingly structured. Unlike Zola, who wore the mantle of the Naturalist physician, Huysmans and his hero are sickened by the real, which is only made less virulent by its conversion into art” (175).

Overall, the account of Eugène’s war adventure, although based on Huysmans’s own experience and supported by his reading of other actual events, is a fictionalized version that abandons naturalism’s objectivity for a more artistic expression. Though Huysmans had no choice in the matter of avoiding the war due to his illness, the choice that he makes in avoiding war in this story is purposeful. As a writer, Huysmans is more concerned with depicting the aesthetic pleasures in life, shown here as he privileges *bibelots*, books, discussions of art, food, friendship, and women. Despite the social activities that please Eugène during his war experience, his most profound joy comes when he is able to return to the solitude of his home. Thus, the happy conclusion in “Sac au dos” marks a sharp contrast to the tragic and ironic endings of both Zola’s and Maupassant’s stories. Finally, the lasting images of self-indulgence and privatization in “Sac au dos” virtually encapsulate the entire existence of des Esseintes in A rebours. Therefore, while Huysmans’s “Sac au dos” does uphold certain naturalist characteristics, as has been shown, it is also a decadent type of narrative that predicts his future novel.

The Aftermath

Considering the naturalist and non-naturalist elements of the stories in Les Soirées de Médan, the bigger question is to consider the divergences that pulled apart the Médan group. If this publication was to mark the beginning of the naturalist movement, as has often been acknowledged historically, how can it also be the end? Alain Pagès infers that the publication in 1880 marks the height of naturalism rather than its beginning. Pagès further proposes that this “origin” is also an ending: “Après 1880, le groupe des Médanistes va très vite se désagréger [. . .]. Au lieu de développement espéré, c’est un déclin rapide qui a suivi” (“A propos d’une origine littéraire” 211). However, as Léon Deffoux noted many years earlier, it is remarkable that the Médan group appeared to last as long as it did, that is, “jusqu’aux environs de 1887, soit une bonne dizaine d’années”: “Que six écrivains aient pu rester unis aussi longtemps, c’est un événement littéraire assez rare [. . .]” (Montfort 102). Certainly, the Médan group dissolved well before 1887, taking into account that Huysmans published A rebours in 1884 and that Maupassant remained largely independent from the group. Yet, the assertion by Pagès that the events of 1880 set in motion a rapid decline may be a bit too hurried since none of the members of the group completely rejected naturalism or their fellow naturalists publicly and most of them continued as naturalist writers in the first few years of the decade.

In the end, contrary to what is said in the introduction to Les Soirées de Médan, the proclamation that the group shared the same literary tendencies is a flawed statement. Zola himself recognized the uniqueness of the group’s members: “C’est que tous cinq diffèrent radicalement de tempérament, c’est

qu'en dehors des questions générales pas un des cinq n'a les mêmes sentiments ni les mêmes idées" (Une Campagne, OC XIV, 580). Yet, it is precisely this variation in temperament and style that allowed the members of the Médan group to flourish. Their incompatible ways, though destructive to the life span of group, led to greater individual achievement. F. W. J. Hemmings believes that Zola understood this eventuality as well: "Experience had taught Zola that the early dissolution of such groupings was in the nature of things; this instability [. . .] was proof of the vitality of its component members. The one or two brilliant writers in Zola's circle were bound, by the fact of their brilliance, to walk alone, each in his own path" (Emile Zola 169).

From the perspective of literary critics and the reading public of 1880, Les Soirées de Médan and the formation of the Médan group announced the foundation of a new school of literature. Surely, they expected more collaborative works along these lines. In fact, along with their abandoned plans for a journal, Paul Alexis later divulged the group's intent to publish a collection of six plays: "Les Soirées de Médan devaient avoir, non pas une suite, mais un pendant: le Théâtre de Médan." This volume was to consist of "six pièces de théâtre, librement écrites, c'est-à-dire sans le souci de la représentation immédiate," in other words, "une manière de 'spectacle dans un fauteuil' ou de 'théâtre-libre' précurseur."⁶³ The group's battle plan to move their conquest toward the theater, not only in written form as stated here, for they did want to stage these plays as well, reveals a desire to enlarge the reach of naturalism.

⁶³ Paul Alexis, "Les Soirées de Médan," Le Journal, 30 November 1893, rpt. in Les Soirées de Médan, 298-300.

Theater did turn out to be a true calling for some, especially Hennique, and provided the opportunity to produce a few minor works jointly.⁶⁴ However, in retrospect, it is clear that Les Soirées de Médan was a one-time event and that any large-scale collaborative effort by the Médan group would not be repeated. Alexis, ever the most faithful of the group, lamented the failure: “Comme les plus belles choses d’ici-bas, comme l’amour et quelquefois même l’amitié, les Soirées de Médan ne devaient pas avoir de lendemain” (300).

Although there was no sequel to the publication, many critics regard the following decade as proof of the victory won for naturalism by Les Soirées de Médan. For example, the metaphor of the battle of naturalism comes to the forefront again in C. A. Burns’s remark that “la bataille naturaliste était gagnée, définitivement, après la publication des Soirées de Médan” (Henry Céard et le naturalisme 93). However, Burns is careful to nuance this statement with another metaphor that coincides with my own evaluation of the Médan authors’ careers beyond Les Soirées de Médan: “Les amis de Médan, partis d’origines bien différentes et arrivés ensemble en 1880 au carrefour de leurs esthétiques personnelles, carrefour que symbolise bien le volume des Soirées de Médan, devaient reprendre bientôt des routes indépendantes” (94). After having intersected briefly in the Médan matrix to promote naturalism and themselves, Huysmans, Maupassant, and the others now had the notoriety necessary to continue on their separate ways. Their future success would no longer depend upon being associated with the group nor would it reflect upon others in the

⁶⁴ René-Pierre Colin provides the following examples: “la rédaction d’une pantomime par Huysmans et Hennique (Pierrot sceptique), des œuvres théâtrales mises en chantier (une adaptation de [Zola’s novel] La Conquête de Plassans, L’Abbé Faujas, par Hennique et Céard, Aline, une pièce entreprise par Hennique et Alexis)” (Tranches de vie 41).

group. Each would have both the privilege and the liability of being judged independently of the others.

This chapter has explored various reasons for the existence of the Médan group, beginning with the fact that there really was no other choice, given the context of the literary world in the late nineteenth century. Above all, they came together in the belief that there is strength in numbers. In this environment of spirited debate, the need to develop theories and manifestos dictated the work of any literary group. Therefore, the publication of Les Soirées de Médan, whether or not intended as a manifesto of naturalism or the naturalist take on the War of 1870, nicely fit that purpose. A close examination of the war stories by Zola, Maupassant, and Huysmans has revealed many elements, thematic and structural, that prove indeed to be compatible with the theory and practice of naturalism, but there is also an even greater number that are not. These non-naturalist features point to the divergence from naturalism that the writers, Zola included, would push even further in their future works.

The diversity among the group's members, which threatened the solid(ar)ity of the group, also enabled each to grow as an artist. It may seem that certain members of the group simply used this coveted membership for selfish reasons; that is, to make a name for themselves by latching on to Zola for a time, then quickly abandoning naturalism to move on to their "real" interests. While there is some degree of truth to this evaluation, we cannot dismiss the worth of the Médan group altogether. Members came to the group willingly and were never forced to accept Zola's theory of naturalism, as René-Pierre Colin points out: "Zola, en fait, ne leur avait imposé aucun manifeste à contresigner, il n'avait

pas réclamé à ses alliés le moindre aval, la moindre caution” (Tranches de vie 40). But, without a concerted manifesto supporting naturalism, and since Les Soirées de Médan did not play that role as well as some thought it should, the network of the Médan group could not be sustained.

The publication of Les Soirées de Médan in 1880, while establishing a public beginning for a group of naturalist writers who came together with a shared conviction, simultaneously uncovered the differences that separated the group into distinct talents. Rather than viewing Les Soirées de Médan exclusively as a beginning or an end, it is more appropriate to say that this publication and the discourse surrounding it marked the beginning of the end of the Médan group’s existence and its members’ adherence to the theory and practice of naturalism. While Huysmans and Maupassant struggle with the attractive and repellent forces of naturalism, as will be shown in the next two chapters, they nonetheless form with Zola what Albert Thibaudet calls “le noyau du naturalisme” (927), for although they may not be indelibly linked with the Médan group as are the other members, they are often associated first with naturalism. Therefore, the divergent paths toward decadence and the fantastic taken by Huysmans and Maupassant, respectively, will be shown intersecting with naturalism, its theories and its practice as modeled by Zola, along the way.

CHAPTER 3
NATURALISM'S OWN DECADENCE:
HUYSMANS AGAINST NATURE AND NATURALISM IN A REBOURS

J.-K. Huysmans's A rebours (1884) marks a reversal of naturalism immediately by its title alone, translated as Against Nature or Against the Grain. The title has been the subject of much discussion, with the most provocative question being "A rebours de quoi?" This query presupposes a norm against which to turn, thereby conjuring images of movement or revolution. The idea of movement is prevalent in the titles of many of Huysmans's works, making a synthesis for his entire career in the themes of rupture, adaptation, and evolution. Jean-Pierre Vilcot cites "Sac au dos" as "l'ordre pour la marche, le nomadisme imposé," followed by A rebours, Là-bas, and En route (A vau-l'eau could be added), all these expressing "un mouvement d'éloignement motivé par le désaccord avec l'existence quotidienne" (5-6).¹ Siphoning this wider view of Huysmans's *œuvre* into the container of A rebours, I consider the novel as an instance of movement on three counts: in the rupture from naturalism, in the adaptation to a decadent aesthetics and literary style and, finally, as an evolution toward the writer's own concept of spiritual naturalism.

¹ This quest culminates in the later works En rade and La Cathédrale, which Vilcot sees as designations of refuge in accordance with the writer's religious conversion.

In A rebours, Huysmans is literally going against nature itself in addition to the nature of things as he moves away from the matrix of naturalism, including his association with Zola and the Médan group, as well as his own earlier naturalist writings. The novel's protagonist, Jean Floressas des Esseintes, manufactures a minutely detailed, artificial environment in which to live out his ideal, isolated existence. However, his situation turns sour, partly because it is determined by the hereditary degeneration of his family. The narrator presents this background in a "Notice": "La décadence de cette ancienne maison avait [. . .] suivi régulièrement son cours; l'effémination des mâles était allée en s'accroissant; comme pour achever l'œuvre des âges, les des Esseintes marièrent, pendant deux siècles, leurs enfants entre eux, usant leur reste de vigueur dans les unions consanguines" (61). These genetic influences reflect Zola's theorizing and the studies of Darwin and Lucas, thus placing Huysmans's novel within the naturalist tradition. Yet, the "Notice" also points to something more: the *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon of decadence. The uncertainty of how to interpret this novel is therefore raised in the reader's mind: Is this another in the line of Huysmans's naturalist novels or is it the announcement of a new, divergent path away from naturalism, as the title seems to indicate?

It is helpful to consider a brief overview of critical studies in order to understand the evolution of Huysmans's career in terms of his naturalist and non-naturalist qualities. Some critics, led by Pierre Cogny, assert that Huysmans was indeed a true naturalist throughout, citing not only thematic evidence within his novels, but also his adoption of Zola's practice of documentation. In J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité, Cogny discusses the lasting impact of

Zola's methods on Huysmans to include even his later works: "Acquis, depuis les premières années de sa carrière, au naturalisme, Huysmans ne s'en détachera jamais tout à fait [. . .]" (239). Although Cogny's study is devoted in the main to showing the predominant naturalist traits of Huysmans, he does begin by saying that "s'il n'était déplaisant et facile de commencer une étude de ce genre par un paradoxe, je dirais volontiers que la caractéristique première de J.-K. Huysmans naturaliste est d'être, précisément, assez peu naturaliste [. . .]" (13).² It is unfortunate that Cogny dismisses this point too soon and later insists that Huysmans was "jusqu'au bout naturaliste" (228). In another study years later, however, Cogny finds that "Huysmans adhère au naturalisme parce qu'il se sait capable, grâce à l'Art, de dépasser le naturalisme" (J.-K. Huysmans: De l'écriture à l'écriture 49). This remark elucidates the distinction between Huysmans's naturalist methodology and non-naturalist writing. Cogny mentions the term "naturalisme esthète" as coming close to describing A rebours, while insisting nonetheless that it remains "surtout une œuvre à part à tous les égards" (80).

Most critics tend to agree with Cogny's earlier assessment that Huysmans was more or less a "bon naturaliste," specifically in the works prior to A rebours. Representing the other side of the argument, Ruth B. Antosh's study, Reality and Illusion in the Novels of J.-K. Huysmans, seeks to build on Robert Baldick's opinion that "in temperament and esthetic outlook, Huysmans was never really a naturalist at all" (9). She observes, "Baldick, alone among the major specialists on Huysmans, suggests that Zola's naturalist influence on Huysmans was in fact

² Historian Charles Beuchat makes a similar declaration, although not concerning Huysmans's writing style, but his aesthetics. Given his aversion to nature, says Beuchat, Huysmans "a beau se dire naturaliste, alors: il en emploie les termes et l'audace, mais l'esprit n'y est pas." He therefore concludes that Huysmans "ne relève pas du bon naturalisme" (II, 106-107).

of little importance to the latter's development as a novelist. In so doing, he opens the way to a new perspective on Huysmans' writings" (9).³ Antosh's work, then, joins that of Baldick in leading to a reevaluation of Huysmans as a non-naturalist writer through the examination of his correspondence and critical writings in addition to his novels.

Brian R. Banks, another whose work draws upon both public and private sources, presents the many ways of viewing Huysmans's image. Banks's explanation of the hereditary aspect of the des Esseintes family is especially pertinent, as he mentions the author's first intention for writing a novella, to be called Seul, compared with the eventual result: "[T]he definitive version with its influx of wealth to satisfy the fantasies becomes de-naturalized, to become the 'quintessence of everything under the sun,' as the author's researches became the 'extract of specialities, the sublimate of a different art'" (96). The implications of the working title Seul and the fancies of des Esseintes will therefore be considered as part of my examination of the singular nature of the hero or "antihero," as he may more appropriately be called.

In the finalized version of A rebours, Huysmans's original exposition of a naturalist-inspired "tare héréditaire" becomes overshadowed by the ensuing eccentricity of des Esseintes. Although the context for Huysmans's novel is based on the foundations of heredity and determinism, it is taken to the extreme as des Esseintes's decadent lifestyle worsens his physical condition: "Les excès de sa vie de garçon, les tensions exagérées de son cerveau, avaient

³ Baldick is known for his authoritative biography, The Life of J.-K. Huysmans, and his reviews in French Studies in the 1950s. As with Zola scholarship, there was a renewal of interest in Huysmans during this decade, thanks in part to the release of many papers that had been kept private by the executor of Huysmans's estate, Lucien Descaves, until his death in 1949.

singulièrement aggravé sa névrose originelle, amoindri le sang déjà usé de sa race" (130). Thus, there are numerous examples to be shown of des Esseintes's decadence, including the artificial objects in his home, his tastes in art and literature, and his ventures in the outside world, that affect his physical being.

A rebours has been read by some as either a strictly naturalist work or a parody of the naturalist novels that dominated the literary scene. While these views cannot be dismissed, most readers acknowledge that there are much more complex interpretations to the novel and that it represents the very antithesis of the naturalist novel. A rebours is generally considered the first major novel of the decadent movement. Jacques Dubois, like many, defines the decadent novel as a refutation of naturalism and of Zola's theories: "[L]e roman de la décadence s'écrit en haine du naturalisme, en rejet obsessif de l'école de Zola" ("Entre nécessité et contingence: Le Roman décadent" 380).

Though the conception of decadence must be scrutinized further, both independently and in relation to naturalism, the juxtaposition of Huysmans's supposed, newfound "decadence" and his former adherence to naturalism is evident in the author's preface added to the novel in 1903. Reflecting on the publication of A rebours, Huysmans explains: "On était alors en plein naturalisme; mais cette école, qui devait rendre l'inoubliable service de situer des personnages réels dans des milieux exacts, était condamnée à se rabâcher, en piétinant sur place" (45). Huysmans's departure from naturalism can be characterized as the need to escape the limitations of its doctrines, for which he faults Zola: "Il y avait beaucoup de choses que Zola ne pouvait comprendre; d'abord ce besoin que j'éprouvais d'ouvrir les fenêtres, de fuir un milieu où

j'étouffais; puis, le désir qui m'appréhendait de secouer les préjugés, de briser les limites du roman, d'y faire entrer l'art, la science, l'histoire" (55). Ironically, Huysmans's words are nearly identical to those used by Zola to launch the naturalist movement. These ideas and other information revealed in the preface will be analyzed in order to determine Huysmans's perception of naturalism and to examine more closely the relationship between Huysmans and Zola.

Zola's estimation of Huysmans's writing reveals mixed feelings even before A rebours. Zola points to the artistic style and timbre of Huysmans's language, which would become all the more prominent in A rebours:

Huysmans est un raffiné de la langue, un des stylistes les plus précieux, les plus délicats que nous ayons. [. . .] [I]l est le poète excessif de la sensation. [. . .] Rien de lourd, de commun; au contraire, son défaut est le rare, l'exquis, l'exceptionnel. Il raffine trop, il tourmente et travaille trop ses phrases comme des bijoux. (Une Campagne, OC XIV, 581)

The language of A rebours, featuring obscure vocabulary, archaisms, and neologisms, as well as the musical quality of the words, is an important part of Huysmans's aesthetics that is evident, for example, in the lyricism of the poems and prose works cited by the protagonist, along with Huysmans's own narrative flair. His style is therefore attractive to a number of artists of his age, including Maupassant, who finds an affinity for the neurotic des Esseintes.

Above all, there is a mixing of mind and body as des Esseintes travels through space and time in his mind through memories, dreams, and hallucinations, and develops physical pain in response to his emotions and nervous condition. Huysmans's protagonist strives to use his intellect to master the small universe he has created for himself while attempting to reverse the

organic laws of nature that control his body and the world around him. A rebours displays an anti-naturalist stance by seeking to overturn the rules of nature and depicting des Esseintes's exquisitely decadent and unnatural lifestyle. Yet, the question remains whether his downfall in the end signals a submission to nature and thus a triumph for the deterministic theories of naturalism as well, or whether we are to give priority to the mind of the aesthete and the apparent glorification of decadence that is present in the majority of the text.

Deconstructing the "Natural Naturalist"

The epithet "natural naturalist" comes from James Laver, Huysmans's first English biographer, who joins Cogny in recognizing Huysmans's innate talents as a naturalist "to the end of his days, in spite of the very different ends to which he was to devote his talents" (65).⁴ Yet, in fact, Huysmans was not a "natural" naturalist; rather, it was something he had to work at, as all good naturalists had to do, with thorough research and painstaking efforts to transmit the reality of their observations faithfully in writing.⁵ Huysmans's seriousness in pursuing the occupation of an experimental novelist, as advocated by Zola in Le Roman expérimental, is noticeable in the example of his making lists of synonyms so that, as Christopher Lloyd explains, he would "have a ready store of 'shades' he could apply where necessary" and that "such nuances could be

⁴ Paradoxically, the title of Laver's work is The First Decadent: Being the Strange Life of J. K. Huysmans. The perception of Huysmans as the "first" decadent, both chronologically and in terms of importance, is open to debate and will be considered later.

⁵ Recall the metaphor of the Médan group as "bons fonctionnaires du 'Bureau des Etudes Humaines'" (Deffoux and Zavie 17).

‘mixed’ scientifically” (23). This description reiterates Zola’s notion of the novelist’s double role as artist and scientist, a characteristic that proves to be tricky in defining Huysmans as well as Zola. Many factors come into play in determining the degree to which Huysmans may be called a naturalist, a decadent, or a non-naturalist writer (or any of the other labels he has been assigned, such as impressionist or symbolist), only some of which may be addressed adequately in this study.

One significant aspect of Huysmans’s writing is “l’écriture artiste,” a quality ascribed to the Goncourts, also referred to as literary impressionism.⁶ The language of A rebours amazes the reader with its blend of slang and preciousness, a hybrid mix that reflects the duality of naturalism and decadence. Françoise Court-Perez, for instance, in her book on the novel calls Huysmans “un esthète de l’argot” (51). Huysmans goes even further than Zola in his use of popular language, as A. E. Carter illustrates in The Idea of Decadence:

Beginning with Romanticism, there was a mass invasion of new words into French; [. . .] but, until Huysmans and even after him, it was employed with a certain timidity. Even Zola, for all his audacity, only uses slang in direct quotation [. . .]. But Huysmans wrote slang, combining it with learned, foreign, or classical words, whenever he wanted a “decadent” effect -- which was quite often. (135)

Since many studies of the vocabulary, grammar, and syntax of A rebours are available to aid in analyzing Huysmans’s writing style, I will not elaborate here.⁷

⁶ A few notable studies on “l’écriture artiste” have been submitted by Alain Pagès, including “Modèles de l’écriture artiste,” which acknowledges Zola along with the Goncourts as two distinct models, “le modèle lexical d’un Goncourt, pour qui la recherche du terme rare doit l’emporter; et le modèle visuel d’un Zola, pour qui l’analyse sociale doit rester prioritaire” (289). See also Henri Mitterand, “De l’écriture artiste au style décadent” in Le Regard et le signe, 271-90.

⁷ The most comprehensive is that of Marcel Cressot, La Phrase et le vocabulaire de J.-K. Huysmans, upon which nearly every future linguistic study has been based.

But it is significant that the disparate types of writing already apparent in Huysmans's first few publications foretell the everchanging tastes that would span his career. From the Baudelairean-inspired collection of prose poems Le Drageoir aux épices in 1874 to the prototypical naturalist novels Marthe and Les Sœurs Vatard later in the decade, Huysmans's development mirrors that of Zola in the decade before.⁸ Despite the array of styles within Huysmans's lifetime of work, Henry Brandreth cautions against seeing the author as "a kind of literary chameleon hopping from one literary clique to another" (14). Quite the contrary, Brandreth insists that "the apparent reactions and contradictions in his life were in fact part of an ordered development" (14). Coinciding with Brandreth's account of the evolution of Huysmans's career, which is chiefly from a religious perspective, most scholars observe three phases: the naturalist phase (1876-1882), the decadent phase (1884-1891), and the religious, mystical phase (1895-1903).⁹

There are, however, works that resist this oversimplified schema, particularly those in the middle part of Huysmans's career. Un Dilemme, a novella published a few months after A rebours, is caught between naturalism and decadence.¹⁰ Alain Pagès classifies it within "la meilleure veine naturaliste" ("A rebours, un roman naturaliste?" 16) and Laver contends that in it Huysmans "reverted to an earlier manner, the manner of straightforward Naturalism" (93). Baldick takes a similar position, calling this work a "matter-of-fact antidote to the extravagant fantasy of A rebours" (94). The belief that A rebours was only a

⁸ Huysmans, however, did not abandon the genre of the prose poem, as his Croquis parisiens in 1880 will attest, in addition to his preferences shown in the literary discussions of A rebours.

⁹ See Ruth B. Antosh's study for a convincing challenge of these traditional divisions.

¹⁰ En rade is another work that displays, three years after the supposed break from naturalism signaled in A rebours, both decadent and naturalist qualities, according to George Ross Ridge (Joris-Karl Huysmans 66).

dalliance or a temporary diversion from Huysmans's true naturalist occupation is articulated by Pierre Waldner in his introduction to the novel:

A Rebours sera un jeu, une délivrance et peut-être, à la limite, un exorcisme, car Huysmans espère qu'en donnant libre cours aux idées et aux obsessions qui encombrant sa conscience il les rejettera hors de lui une fois pour toutes et se retrouvera de nouveau disponible pour ces œuvres de vérité que demeurent à ses yeux les œuvres naturalistes. (30-31)

Later though, Waldner reaches the conclusion that it would be impossible for Huysmans to go back to naturalism after having succumbed to the "curiosités" of such things discussed in A rebours; in essence, he had become a "prisonnier d'A Rebours" (39).

The idea that A rebours imprisoned Huysmans opposes the conventional notion that the novel was a bid to escape from "la prison de Médan," that is, the confines of naturalism and the Médan group. Helen Trudgian's in-depth study of the writer's aesthetics sees his naturalist phase as an attempt to submit to a style not his own, "l'effort d'un grand coloriste pour se priver rigoureusement pendant quelques années de toute imagination, de toute interprétation pittoresque et personnelle des choses" (55). Christophe Charle also considers A rebours from this perspective. Rather than being the exception to the rule in Huysmans's lifelong naturalist career, he sees it as a return to his more artistic side evident in Le Drageoir aux épices: "Sa conversion, à l'opposé du naturalisme, est ainsi à la base, une reconversion" (75). While these views are tenable, it is difficult to reduce Huysmans to such categories by insisting upon either his artistic or scientific naturalist side to the exclusion of the other. Brian Banks warns that we cannot compartmentalize A rebours and points out that

“Huysmans constantly returned to his Parisian sketch pad, Baudelairean palette, or Naturalist canvas throughout his life” (56). Un Dilemme, therefore, could not and, in fact, did not denote a return to naturalism after A rebours. Instead, as Robert Ziegler writes in a recent article on this “often disparaged, generally forgotten” story, “it suggests the new direction that Huysmans’ work was taking, as it moved away from its emphasis on environment and the body and began to turn toward the development of ‘un naturalisme spiritualiste’” (69-70).

The conception of a “naturalisme spiritualiste” unfolds in Là-bas in 1891.¹¹ In the form of an interior monologue, the character Durtal does not discredit Zola’s naturalism, but does realize the need for something more: “Il faudrait, en un mot, suivre la grande voie si profondément creusée par Zola, mais il serait nécessaire aussi de tracer en l’air un chemin parallèle, une autre route, d’atteindre les en deçà et les après, de faire, en un mot, un naturalisme spiritualiste” (31). No longer content to accept Zola’s naturalism, Huysmans here develops his own brand of naturalism, albeit in a roundabout way. Instead of stating these views in an independent theoretical essay, he slips his ideas into the narrative of Là-bas.¹² Huysmans did explain these views further in a letter of November 1891 where he maintains his fidelity to the method of documentation

¹¹ Huysmans also uses the terms “naturalisme mystique,” “réalisme surnaturel,” and “supranaturalisme” in reference to the same concept.

¹² In a related example of this indirect sort of theorizing in the novel, Catherine Dousteyssier-Khoze cites the debate between Durtal and des Hermies on the subject of naturalism as an example of “l’autoparodie naturaliste”: “Le discours critique est donc intégré dans une nouvelle version du roman naturaliste, le roman hyper- ou supra-naturaliste. [. . .] [I]l s’agit d’une parodie (à fonction critique) de l’acte d’écriture lui-même, ultime degré de l’autoparodie et symptôme de modernité” (118-19).

encouraged in him by Zola, but also seeks in his writing to go “vers un au-delà [. . .], vers des états-d’âme moins connus, je crois, intéressants et troubles.”¹³

Huysmans’s naturalism, then, differs from that of Zola in that he demands the exploration of such influences as the metaphysical, the psychological, and the mystical, those unaccountable aspects of human life that become the obsession of both Huysmans and Maupassant. Huysmans wants to reach beyond the visible into the realm of things unseen and unproven. *Pie Duployé* unites the traditional naturalist methodology with the untraditional subject matter found in Huysmans’s writing, calling it “une littérature d’observation, mais d’observation de l’invisible” (65). François Livi makes a similar assessment of Huysmans’s shifting focus in *A rebours* and beyond: “[T]out en portant un coup fatal au naturalisme tel que Zola et ses disciples les plus orthodoxes le pratiquaient, Huysmans reste fidèle à l’esprit du réalisme. [. . .] Huysmans cherche à peindre une tranche de vie, une vie, cette fois-ci, partiellement invisible” (31).

One additional point in Huysmans’s letter brings to mind both Zola’s famous formula of “un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament” and his “théorie des écrans”: “La vie, dans un roman, est vue au travers d’un verre qui colore tout, sans quoi c’est la photographie pure si la vision personnelle de l’auteur ne façonne pas ses milieux et ses gens.” Such a clear statement of his aesthetic outlook demonstrates the near completion of a journey toward discovering his purpose as a writer. Yet it is, at the same time, a restatement of Zola’s own take on the naturalist novelist. There is some truth to the idea that

¹³ Excerpts are supplied in Antosh, 29-30. The letter was printed in *L’Amateur d’Autographes: Revue Rétrospective et Contemporaine* (June 1907): 164-66.

Huysmans remained a Zolian naturalist in his understanding of the novelistic endeavor. A key to deciphering this contradiction is to consider, as has been shown, the artistic liberties allowed in Zola's naturalism, namely the primacy of the artist's temperament.

In A rebours, des Esseintes himself recognizes this facet of naturalism without, however, acknowledging its association with Zola or naturalism specifically: "[P]our lui, les écoles n'existaient point; seul le tempérament de l'écrivain importait" (205). Huysmans, for a time, seems to have been unsure of the place of his own temperament in his work. Looking back on his career in the 1903 preface, he had this to say: "Je comprends [. . .] rien du tout entre l'année 1884 et l'année 1891, entre A Rebours et Là-Bas" (58). Thus, true to its title, Un Dilemme reflects the dilemma in which Huysmans found himself in the years following A rebours, a dilemma that conceivably is solved by the writer's acceptance of his own temperament and a personal literary style developed in the notion of a "naturalisme spiritualiste" in Là-bas.

Before Huysmans was to clarify his ideas and formulate his own aesthetics of spiritual naturalism, his involvement with the Médan group cemented his reputation, for a time at least, as a proponent of naturalism proper and as one of Zola's closest followers. Huysmans, though, never theorized his works as Zola did. The manner in which he presented his ideas on spiritual naturalism in Là-bas demonstrates the indirectness of his approach. His essay "Emile Zola et L'Assommoir" (1877) nonetheless confirms his belief in naturalist theory at that time. Probably the best-known extract from the essay is the

following: "Pustules vertes ou chairs roses, peu nous importe; nous touchons aux unes et aux autres, parce que les unes et les autres existent" (OC II, 161).

The troublesome issue raised by this assertion is that naturalist literature tends to favor the "pustules vertes" over the "chairs roses," or the sordidness of life over its splendor. All the same, in this essay, Huysmans falls in line with the naturalist view of the artist as observer and recorder of modern life. He encourages showing both sides of society in a statement that reflects his own tendency to view things as opposites: "[N]ous montrons ces deux faces, nous nous servons de toutes les couleurs de la palette, du noir comme du bleu" (161). Using similar terms, Zola's response to Huysmans's essay indeed identifies the problem of giving preferentiality to the "pustules vertes" in a critique of his and other naturalists' tendency toward depictions that are too pessimistic: "Nous voyons tous trop noir et trop cuit" (qtd. in Chastel 277).

Also worth mentioning in Huysmans's essay is the preponderance of the subject pronoun "nous." Similar to Zola's reference to a group of naturalists in the preface of Thérèse Raquin, this essay rests on the assumption that one naturalist speaks for all and that naturalist writers are united in their understanding of naturalism. In point of fact, apart from its application to Zola's L'Assommoir, the essay stands as a sort of treatise on naturalism, as various critics have suggested. To summarize, Antosh gathers statements that describe it as "one of the most important manifestoes of the Naturalist movement,"¹⁴ "un exposé et une apologie du naturalisme,"¹⁵ and "one of the best statements of the

¹⁴ George Ross Ridge, J.-K. Huysmans, 17.

¹⁵ Henry M. Gallot, Explication de J.-K. Huysmans, 68.

Naturalists' aims" (14).¹⁶ I would add to the list Helen Trudgian, who presents the essay in perhaps the most magnanimous terms as "le grand manifeste du mouvement naturaliste, vigoureux et sincère" (63).

Still, I find that Huysmans contributes very little that is new or different as far as theory is concerned, but rather relies on Zola as the sole theoretical force for naturalism. For example, when closing his own statements on naturalism in the second part of the article, Huysmans concludes that "le naturalisme, c'est, suivant l'expression même de M. Zola, l'étude patiente de la réalité, l'ensemble obtenu par l'observation des détails" (166). Of course, in deference to Zola, this article is a defense of his novel after all and it is only appropriate that Zola's words should take priority. However, Huysmans seems to be hiding whatever his own interpretations of naturalism may be under the cloak of Zola, whom he calls here "le plus exquis des hommes et le plus bienveillant des maîtres" (158), in contrast to future statements in his correspondence with peers about wishing to step out from Zola's shadow. Huysmans would later write to Léon Bloy, around the time of A rebours: "Vous êtes un sous-Veuillot et moi un sous-Zola. L'étiquette est collée: nous la porterons notre vie durant, car nous n'avons plus assez d'illusions pour croire à une justice littéraire future ou présente" (22 June 1884, Lettres. Correspondance à trois 24).

In his glowing report of Zola and his ideologies in the essay on L'Assommoir, Huysmans neglects certain crucial elements of Zola's naturalism: "Il va sans dire que je ne m'occuperai ici ni de la théorie scientifique développée par l'auteur, ni des questions politiques [. . .]. Tout cela m'importe, en vérité, fort

¹⁶ Henry Brandreth, Huysmans, 23.

peu. Je ne traiterai [...] que l'œuvre d'art proprement dite" (168). In glossing over the need to talk about scientific theory, Huysmans chooses instead to occupy himself with the artistic side of Zola's novels. As Antosh puts it, "in his so-called 'manifesto of naturalism,' Huysmans revealed an appreciation for that which is distinctly non-naturalistic in Zola's work" (18). Huysmans's praise for La Curée, Le Ventre de Paris, and La Faute de l'abbé Mouret, which are three of Zola's least naturalist novels,¹⁷ thus detracts somewhat from his discussion of L'Assommoir and shows his admiration for Zola the visionary poet instead of Zola the scientific naturalist.

The methodical practice of documentation that is suggested in Huysmans's essay ("l'étude patiente de la réalité, l'ensemble obtenu par l'observation des détails") seems to be a common point for Huysmans and Zola. But, while both Zola and Huysmans came from modest backgrounds, their approach to transcribing the reality of the lower classes is not the same. In Huysmans's early novels especially, he takes as inspiration real people he met and observed. He is known for being a *flâneur*, which for him meant, according to Laver, partaking in "the haunting of the back streets, by inclination as well as through lack of means" (26). We see this behavior put to the extreme in A rebours as des Esseintes remembers walking the streets of Paris and attempting to corrupt the young Auguste Langlois by introducing him to the vices of expensive cigarettes, alcohol, and brothels. Huysmans has also been called a "flâneur artiste" and, more than any of the other Médan associates, a "peintre de

¹⁷ These novels will be considered later for their non-naturalist and indeed decadent qualities.

plein-air” by Fernande Zayed (75).¹⁸ In this description, we are reminded of Zola’s painter Claude Lantier with his endless promenades about Paris in Le Ventre de Paris and in L’Œuvre.

Huysmans, like Claude and unlike his own protagonist des Esseintes, suffers from what Zayed calls the “complexe du vieux garçon: la claustrophobie” (75-76). Quite the opposite, des Esseintes seems to suffer from a sort of claustrophilia, closing himself up in his house at Fontenay-aux-Roses. Yet, this too is based on Huysmans’s own life, as revealed in a letter to Zola: “[J]e vais me mettre prochainement à un roman. J’attends le 15 juillet, époque à laquelle je partirai, pour 3 mois, à Fontenay-aux-Roses pour le commencer sérieusement. Je vais là-bas pour mes névralgies” (Lettre XXIX [vers le 23 juin 1881], Lettres inédites à Zola, 75-76). Incidentally, the novel to which Huysmans is referring is not A rebours but La Faim, a story that never reached completion about the siege of Paris after the Franco-Prussian War.

Huysmans’s texts are often visible reflections of his own life. The documentary styles employed by Huysmans and Zola vary by degree of separation from the reality to be portrayed. The immediacy of what Huysmans wrote in “Sac au dos” or in Les Sœurs Vatard,¹⁹ for instance, exceeds the secondhand accounts gathered by Zola to write about the war or his fact-finding missions to mining villages, department stores, and so on, for his novels on those *milieux*. Huysmans, according to the saying, wrote what he knew; Zola wrote

¹⁸ See Fernande Zayed’s Huysmans: Peintre de son époque, which shows that Huysmans’s *œuvre* acts as “un miroir de l’époque et de l’esprit ‘fin de siècle,’” for his own evolution is that of his era: “du naturalisme au symbolisme, du positivisme à l’idéalisme, du matérialisme au spiritualisme et au mysticisme, en un mot, du pessimisme à l’optimisme et du désespoir à l’espérance” (xxiii).

¹⁹ This 1879 novel set in a book bindery not only depicts a place and persons that Huysmans knew, but provides a social documentary of wage-earners in the early Third Republic (Lloyd 56).

what he learned. Moreover, Zola did not always do his own research. As indicated by Banks, “among others it was Huysmans who provided Zola the archrealist with firsthand material collected from continuous walks and nocturnal adventures across Paris” (5). Huysmans’s scouting of reality and its subsequent transformation into literary form epitomizes the ideal of the experimental method, even more so than Zola’s implementation of the method he espoused. Brandreth claims that “the disciple was thus a truer realist than the master and was later to have bitter things to say about the secondhand nature of much of Zola’s supposed observation” (24-25). While Brandreth fails to cite any particular episode to prove this contention, the authors’ correspondence does substantiate the fact that Zola took advantage of Huysmans’s access to files in the government office where he worked.²⁰

The difference in the two writers’ practice of documentation does not mean, however, that one is necessarily better than the other. First, we must acknowledge the veracity of several of Zola’s novels that are supported by meticulous investigation of actual persons and events, some of which are in large part autobiographical, such as La Confession de Claude and L’Œuvre. Second, although some might view Huysmans as being truer to the experimental method, and this may indeed be the case in certain of his works, we must credit Zola for having the ability to go beyond his realm of familiarity to explore settings and lifestyles that he did not personally know. Huysmans, though he states in the preface to A rebours that he was compelled to break from the

²⁰ See, for example, Huysmans’s letters of June 1881 on architecture in response to Zola’s request for material for his novel Pot-Bouille (Lettres XXVI-XXIX, Lettres inédites à Emile Zola 65-77).

limitations of naturalism, was more or less obliged to write only of things he happened to already know. Enzo Caramaschi implies that Huysmans was unable to detach himself enough to be an objective observer and see things outside his immediate sphere: "Ce qui lui fait cruellement défaut, c'est en premier lieu la faculté -- où Zola excelle et fait école -- de passer avec aisance d'un 'milieu' géographique, ou social, ou professionnel, à un autre" (74). While Zola aspires to present a sweeping view of society under the Second Empire in the Rougon-Macquart series, Huysmans is preoccupied with the individual, or as Caramaschi puts it, "Huysmans semble être voué à l'exploitation pure et simple d'une idiosyncrasie" (76).

Huysmans's portrayal of des Esseintes in A rebours embodies this summation of his writing; des Esseintes truly is the archetype of idiosyncrasy. In this novel, Huysmans twists the practice of documentation to leave behind the portrayal of the average in favor of a study in elitism. Pierre Jourde, in L'Identité impossible, observes that "le goût de la documentation, hérité des méthodes de Zola, commence à changer de sens," no longer scrupulously representing reality, but rather choosing to "s'enfoncer dans l'érudition" (20). Des Esseintes's obscure references are, of course, the result of Huysmans's extensive study and thus promote the identification of the author with his protagonist. A rebours is not only the story of des Esseintes's idiosyncrasy but also, to some extent, that of Huysmans. As Hans Eichner puts it, when it comes to the endless discussion of little known Latin authors, "if this list consists, for the most part, of names you have never heard, Huysmans has made his point; for he has developed the art of one-upsmanship to the level where it becomes sublime" (193). This quality of

privileging the individual and his eccentric tastes therefore supports the reading of the novel as decadent, both in the popularized sense of being self-indulgent and in accordance with the conception of decadence as an aesthetic ideology.

Still, in some respects, A rebours is indeed both naturalist and autobiographical, as many of Huysmans's contemporaries believed. Michael Issacharoff identifies certain critics, including fellow Médan author Paul Alexis, who read A rebours as "l'étude (naturaliste) d'un cas de névrose" (68). Maupassant also saw in the text the study of a real illness, although his remarks expose his own appreciation for that which is non-naturalist: "Je ne pourrais tenter l'analyse complète du livre de Huysmans, de ce livre extravagant et désopilant, plein d'art, de fantaisie bizarre, de style pénétrant et subtil, de ce livre qu'on pourrait appeler 'l'histoire d'une névrose.'"²¹ Maupassant's evaluation echoes Huysmans's own description of his work, stated in a letter to Zola, as "une sorte de roman-fantaisie bizarre, une folie nerveuse qui sera, je crois, assez neuve, mais qui fera demander mon immédiat internement à Charenton" (Lettres inédites à Zola 90). Huysmans felt that the public would confuse the follies of his protagonist with himself and he was right. Issacharoff clusters a second group of contemporary critics of A rebours, among them Jules Barbey d'Aureville and Léon Bloy, who "semblent l'avoir mieux compris car ils soulignent le côté autobiographique du roman" (68).²² Issacharoff notes in the

²¹ "Par-delà," Le Gil Blas, 10 June 1884, rpt. in Chroniques II, 407.

²² Barbey d'Aureville made the cutting remark that Huysmans's protagonist was "un malade comme tous les héros de cette époque malade" and assigned him to the ranks of those in mental institutions: "Il est de l'hôpital Charcot" (Le XIXe siècle: Des œuvres et des hommes II, 339). He also issued this prophecy: "Après un tel livre, il ne reste plus à l'auteur qu'à choisir entre la bouche d'un pistolet ou les pieds de la croix" (from Le Constitutionnel, 28 July 1884). Huysmans's response in the 1903 preface: "C'est fait" (59), indicating his religious conversion.

introduction to his study, however, that “la critique huysmansienne se préoccupe beaucoup trop, surtout du vivant du romancier, des détails biographiques, en laissant souvent de côté tout essai d’analyse littéraire” (11). Therefore, beyond the biographical information relevant to the task of deconstructing the myth of the “natural naturalist,” it is fundamental to consider as well the problem of interpreting the novel in relation to the matrix of naturalism and together with the more widespread perception of the novel as decadent.

The Novel(ty) of Decadence

A rebours is hailed as the first authentic decadent novel for encapsulating the *fin-de-siècle* spirit of nineteenth-century France. The term “fin de siècle” came into existence here, as shown by Max Nordau in his study of degeneration: “[I]t was in France that the mental state so entitled was first consciously realized” (1). A cogent definition is provided by Séverine Jouve in Les Décadents: Bréviaire fin de siècle: “Fin de siècle: point ultime d’une civilisation éperdue, conclusion vertigineuse d’une époque essoufflée, dernier conflit d’ombre et de lumière qui modifie, poétise et teinte de fantastique la réalité” (7). A rebours, in conjunction with its expression of the *fin de siècle*, presents what may be considered a realistic account of the lifestyle of the French dandy in the figure of des Esseintes and may therefore indicate a plausible interpretation of the naturalist assignment to “découvrir votre coin de vérité.”

A trio of labels, “decadent,” “dandy,” and “aesthete,” can be used to describe des Esseintes. While there are nuances to be understood between these

words, the most current at the time of A rebours was “dandy,” a term as much in fashion as those men who became celebrities for their tastes in clothing, accessories, the arts, and all-around indulgent behaviors.²³ Michel Lemaire brings together the three markers in calling A rebours “la synthèse du dandysme décadent”: “Il reprend et formule d’une manière incisive les préoccupations des dandys depuis Baudelaire et il y joint les tentatives des esthètes de l’époque symboliste” (153).

One cannot assume that the novel is an exclusively and completely decadent text. Perhaps the most legendary description of the novel comes from Arthur Symons who declared it “the breviary of the decadence” (The Symbolist Movement in Literature 76).²⁴ G. A. Cevasco supplies a definition of the word “breviary” in his explanation of Symons’s use of the term:

[A] breviary is a special prayer book of psalms, hymns, and selected parts of Holy Scripture read daily by ordained clergymen of the Roman Catholic Church. A Rebours, [Symons] knew, was a breviary of sorts, its scripture being one of art, music, flowers, gems, liqueurs, and books that Aesthetes -- men who consecrated their lives to a religion of beauty -- read day in and day out. (“The Breviary of the Decadence” 193)²⁵

Paul Valéry joined Symons’s view of the novel, calling it his bible and bedside book.²⁶ Even so, one must question this attitude toward A rebours. Perhaps the

²³ The most informative works on the dandy are Emilien Carassus’s Le Mythe du dandy, Roger Kempf’s Dandies: Baudelaire et cie, and Michel Lemaire’s Le Dandysme de Baudelaire à Mallarmé.

²⁴ Symons, who has been called “the self-appointed historian of decadence” by Suzanne Nalbantian (10), wrestled with the terms “decadent” and “symbolist.” In 1893, he wrote an essay entitled “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” but by 1900 when this later work appeared, he showed a preference for the term “symbolist” in describing the literature of the day. See chapter five of G. A. Cevasco’s book The Breviary of the Decadence for more analysis on this distinction.

²⁵ Cevasco has recently revisited the subject of this article in light of current research and thought in his 2001 book by the same title.

²⁶ For further commentary, see Henri Mondor, “Paul Valéry et A rebours.”

novel would have been more deserving of such accolades if written in the first person from a real decadent's perspective. As it stands, the reader is unsure whether Huysmans sides with des Esseintes or is mocking such types.

Some critics have, in fact, read A rebours as a parody of decadence. Gustave L. Van Roosbroeck's 1927 article, "Huysmans the Sphinx: The Riddle of A rebours," centers on the idea that Huysmans's intention was to satirize the decadents or dandies that he observed in Parisian society, such as the Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fézensac, who has been accepted as one, if not *the* real-life model for des Esseintes.²⁷ Van Roosbroeck contends that "all through the book runs, like a red thread, a constant vein of parody" (308) in which Huysmans gives "a caricature of the Baudelairean *poseur* of the times" (324). On top of this satirical layer of the novel is a second layer, which Van Roosbroeck sees as the dissemination of the actual opinions of Huysmans, not des Esseintes, concerning art and religion. These views are valid, to some extent, and can certainly be considered as part of the autobiographical nature of the novel.

G. A. Cevalasco, in his essay on the "Satirical and Parodical Interpretations of J.-K. Huysmans's A rebours," concedes that the novel is not Huysmans's personal confession, but still suggests that it is a glimpse of "what he would have done if he had had the means, what he would have done if fortune had made him a Comte about Paris instead of a clerk in the Ministry of the Interior" (281).

²⁷ See Louis Marquèze-Pouey's study of Montesquiou and des Esseintes, based on the premise that "il n'est pas possible de dissocier ces deux 'portraits' [. . .] parce que, l'un dans la réalité, l'autre dans le roman, ils constituent le type parfait de l'esthète décadent" (140). Speculation on the models for Huysmans's protagonist extends beyond French references, which also include Baudelaire, Barbey d'Aurevilly, and Edmond de Goncourt, to Beau Brummell of England and King Ludwig II of Bavaria. Many have noted des Esseintes's fictional inspirations as well, such as Poe's Roderick Usher and the hero of Balzac's La Peau de chagrin, Raphaël de Valentin.

Huysmans, under the pseudonym A. Meunier, admitted no less by saying that des Esseintes and characters in his other novels come together to form one person, Huysmans. In essence, he is making a jibe at himself:

Un des grands défauts des livres de M. Huysmans, c'est, selon moi, le type *unique* qui tient la corde dans chacune de ses œuvres. *Cyprien Tibaille* et *André, Folantin* et *des Esseintes* ne sont, en somme, qu'une seule et même personne, transportée dans les milieux qui diffèrent. Et très évidemment cette personne est M. Huysmans, cela se sent [. . .].²⁸

Cevasco takes this statement as proof that Huysmans's objective was not to write a satire, parody, or caricature of decadence or decadents in A rebours and thereby attempts to overturn Van Roosbroeck's interpretations. While Van Roosbroeck makes some interesting points, his reading of the novel is difficult to sustain because, as Cevasco asks, "Since A Rebours was published in what can be called an early phase of Decadence and actually helped crystallize the Movement, can it be a satire or parody on a literary movement that was still in a generative stage?" (280).

Further verification of the novel's and novelist's earnestness comes from contemporary criticism. The response to Huysmans's novel among his peers, both artists and critics, was overwhelmingly favorable.²⁹ Elrud Ibsch provides a synopsis, concluding that the main reason for the enthusiastic acceptance of A rebours had to do with its newness: "Any kind of work deviating from the overall materialism of the period could expect a positive reception. The novelty factor can be simply described as: 'against naturalism'" (218). Huysmans's

²⁸ Les Hommes d'aujourd'hui (1885), rpt. in Brunel and Guyaux 25-29. The pseudonym is a thinly veiled reference to Anna Meunier, an intimate acquaintance of Huysmans.

²⁹ That is not to say, however, that conservatives approved of the novel. Koenraad W. Swart reminds us that A rebours was "severely criticized by writers upholding traditional literary taste" even though the "avant-garde" in France and elsewhere welcomed it vigorously (163).

creation of *des Esseintes* would also serve as a direct inspiration for Stéphane Mallarmé's "Prose pour des Esseintes" and Oscar Wilde's *Dorian Gray*. This book set off an entire movement despite the author's humble intention of writing it for the amusement of a "happy few." According to Albert Thibaudet, the novel far exceeded expectations: "C'est A Rebours qui a fait Huysmans célèbre. De 1886 à 1895 il a modelé, ou plutôt il a fabriqué tout un petit peuple littéraire" (Histoire de la littérature française 378).³⁰ In effect, Huysmans had become the de facto leader of a new movement, like Zola before him.

Decadence is perhaps more rightly called a movement and not a school for it resists formal structure and adherence to doctrine even more so than naturalism. Yet, it does bear some of the trappings of a concerted effort to promote itself as a school of literature. Many of the elements I have discussed in reference to naturalism are evident in decadence as well. One example is the quasi-official journal, Le Décadent, headed by Anatole Baju from 1886 to 1889. David Weir finds that this journal followed on the heels of A rebours to exploit the aesthetic legitimacy of the idea of decadence and that Baju would "[proclaim] in virtually every issue 'le triomphe du Décadisme' as the literary school of the day" (98). The question of terminology raised by the coexistence of "décadence" and "décadisme" (and "décadentisme") is another matter.³¹ Overall, Baju's preference for the term ending in "-isme" seems to promote its reputation as a school and invite reaction from the public and from critics.

³⁰ Huysmans revisited the enormous impact his book had from the perspective of the 1903 preface in these terms: "A Rebours tombait ainsi qu'un aérolithe dans le champ de foire littéraire et ce fut et une stupeur et une colère [. . .]" (58).

³¹ K. W. Swart makes the distinction that "Décadentisme" or "Décadisme" represents a group that held more radical views (165).

Noël Richard's comprehensive work on Baju and the decadent movement underscores the predilection for linguistic rebellion, as he calls the phenomenon of decadence "une crise d'adolescence esthétique": "Avec les néologismes et les mots de formation savante, les Décadents recourent également aux archaïsmes, aux termes dialectaux, aux mots populaires et argotiques" (258). This sort of vocabulary enrichment, typified in A rebours, demonstrates what Richard calls a "vif désir de renouvellement de la forme comme des idées" (258). The desire for "renouvellement" seems to fly in the face of any standard definition of decadence as a decline or falling away. However, "renouvellement" and similar terms like "innovation" may be the precise terms for describing the decadent movement as well as Huysmans's novel.

Adding to the conception of a new school, there were some theorists of decadence. Several literary figures contributed to the foundation of decadence, including such forerunners as Gautier, Baudelaire, Flaubert, and the Goncourts. However, Paul Bourget has been dubbed the first theorist of decadence.³² Jean Pierrot credits Bourget for being instrumental in conceptualizing "la sensibilité esthétique contemporaine" and assigning it the name of "décadence" as early as 1876 (20). He appreciates that Bourget, "tout en admettant que la Décadence constitue une grave crise d'âme, [. . .] affirme, à la différence de la plupart des critiques traditionnels, qu'elle possède une influence littéraire positive" (25).

³² Bourget's "théorie de la décadence" is formulated in an essay on Baudelaire, published originally in 1881 and reprinted in his Essais de psychologie contemporaine (1883), in which he also studies the Goncourts among other writers whose style suited the decline of society. K. W. Swart comments: "In the analysis of their works Bourget referred to the irresistible wave of nihilism which was engulfing European civilization" (162). Bourget's ideas also had a profound effect on Nietzsche, who became, in the words of Suzanne Nalbantian, "the self-ordained philosopher of decadence" (2).

This reinvention of the term in a positive light strives to replace the prevalent negative connotation of decadence. Earlier in the century, decadence was felt to be an overly ornamental form of romanticism that revisited the decadence of the late Latin period. More immediately, though, the association of decadence and the poetry of the second half of the nineteenth century is displayed in the feeling of lassitude and overindulgence, “a Roman surfeit” that Suzanne Nalbantian points to in the first line of Mallarmé’s “Brise marine”: “La chair est triste, hélas! et j’ai lu tous les livres” (5). Such a phrase could easily have come from the mouth of des Esseintes, whose library is filled with books he has consumed to the point of exhaustion.

Paul Verlaine is another poet linked with decadence, more so than Mallarmé because he was, as Nalbantian shows, “more overt in establishing *the* analogy between the Second French Empire and the late Latin one,” as is declared in his sonnet “Langueur” in 1884: “Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la *décadence*” (5). In addition, Verlaine served as a theorist to some extent, being affiliated for a time with Baju’s journal where he published in 1888 his “Lettre au ‘décadent.’” David Weir quotes a passage in which Verlaine praises the word “*décadisme*” as “a liberation from the pejorative connotations of decadence” (99). Evidently, Bourget’s efforts to correct the understanding of decadence had not been enough. It is not necessary to go further into the manipulations of such terminology or other details of Verlaine’s essay in order to advance the notion that his “Lettre au ‘décadent.’” is something of a counterpart to Zola’s “Lettre à la jeunesse.” Weir summarizes that Verlaine’s letter calls *décadisme* “the true

literary path that all young writers should follow, particularly if they have been led astray by rival schools such as naturalism and symbolism" (99).

Well before the decadent movement came into focus, there was Théophile Gautier's 1868 "Notice," which has been called by A. E. Carter "the matrix of all subsequent decadent writing" (131).³³ In this essay, Gautier expresses the idea that the style of decadence is "ingénieux, compliqué, savant, plein de nuances et de recherches, reculant toujours les bornes de la langue, empruntant à tous les vocabulaires techniques, prenant des couleurs à toutes les palettes, des notes à tous les claviers" (qtd. in Carter, 123). Although the essay predates *A rebours*, this description of the decadent style certainly applies to Huysmans.

It is of interest to mention that Gautier's 1868 "Notice" was added to Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* in several later editions. Baudelaire, who had dedicated his volume of poems to Gautier in 1857, was hailed as a decadent even then. Gautier's "Notice" encouraged the identification of Baudelaire as a poet of decadence. However, this appellation raises problems since Baudelaire did not accept the label. Swart explains: "What was decadent, according to Baudelaire, was the society of his time, not the art that tried to express this decadence" (115). Yet, Paul Bourget is representative of those who persisted in considering Baudelaire as a decadent archetype: "Voilà l'homme de la décadence" (22-23).

Although decadence is a concept that dates back to earlier in the century and even beyond, it came to fruition around 1870. Decadence, like naturalism, is

³³ In "The Literary Concept of Decadence," Alice R. Kaminsky calls Gautier's essay "the most well known definition of decadence in terms of style" (372). George Ross Ridge also proclaims it as "the most important single document, stylistically, of the French decadence" and finds that Gautier "seizes the essence of the decadent style more firmly than any commentator before or since" (*The Hero in French Decadent Literature* 9-10).

closely tied to the Schopenhauerian pessimism in vogue in the latter half of the century. Thomas G. West evaluates the appeal of the philosophy to the two camps with the admission that they both had a rather sketchy understanding of it (314). Pessimism proved to be a dividing point, with Zola objecting to the doctrine while Huysmans, Maupassant, and others were drawn to it more and more: "Schopenhauer flattered their nascent despair with the hint of a sophisticated metaphysic and led other Naturalists further away from the optimism of natural science and Positivism" (323). The Schopenhauerian view of the world coupled with the War of 1870 to bring the feeling of decadence to the forefront of this society in decline. Koenraad W. Swart devotes a chapter to the "year of disaster" to show that the unexpected defeat exacerbated the conditions of an already pessimistic France.³⁴ Likewise, François Livi states that the loss of the war accentuated the swelling currents of pessimism and "diverses formes de maladie de l'âme" (20). Max Nordau, in Degeneration, goes a step further in pointing to an epidemic of mental disease that affected thousands, particularly in Paris where there was talk of "la folie obsidionale" or "siege-madness" (42-43). If we accept this line of interpretation, we may then reconsider Les Soirées de Médan as a decadent text in which the invading Prussians, equivalent to Barbarians, bring about the collapse of an Empire.

We must, however, avoid placing too much emphasis on the War of 1870 as a factor in the rise of decadence. In fact, during the height of decadence from

³⁴ Swart also cites the abundance of pamphlets and articles that express this anxious mood: La Chute de la France, La Fin du monde, De la décadence de nos mœurs, La France dégénérée, 1871: Les Premières Phases d'une décadence (124).

1884 through the *fin de siècle*, France enjoyed a time of peace and progress.³⁵

Yet, it was the developing trend in literature throughout the second half of the century to reflect the apprehensive atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*. This characteristic of the period's literature is not bound by any particular timeline, literary movement, or genre. George Ross Ridge, for instance, holds the view that decadence is a common ground for nearly all writers of the second half of the nineteenth century: "Decadence is their common metaphysical concern [. . .]. These 'decadent' writers -- symbolist, realist, parnassian, for all are concerned with decadence -- were in fact haunted by the fear that Western civilization was fast drawing to an end because of man's moral, social, political, and religious decay" (The Hero in French Decadent Literature 2). Ridge further asserts that "their depictions of decadent men and women, i.e., their literary heroes and heroines, have prompted many critics to assume, erroneously, that the writers were in fact what many of them were actually protesting against" (2).³⁶ This statement may be used in reply to those who see des Esseintes as the fictional manifestation of Huysmans himself. Rather than too readily drawing a likeness between the writer and his hero, we must also allow for the interpretation of the novel as Huysmans's sober commentary on the decadence of his time.

A nuanced application of terminology is in order. Instead of calling Huysmans a decadent writer, for he obviously cannot be neatly classified as

³⁵ Mary Donaldson-Evans is right to point out that decadence considered society and progress as pathogenic agents (Medical Examinations 94).

³⁶ In addition to Max Nordau, Georg Lukács also makes this argument in the essay "Healthy or Sick Art?" in Writer and Critic. Barbara Spackman studies this topic in Decadent Genealogies, finding that "decadents are decadent not because they depict illness and decay but because they do not recognize the existence of health, of the social sphere that would reunite the alienated writer to the progressive forces of history" (6).

such, we may still call him a novelist of decadence, if not *the* novelist of decadence.³⁷ Following Ridge's argument, Huysmans and most writers of his period, including Zola, are concerned with decadence, though they may not be decadents per se. Huysmans and others rebuked such labels perhaps because it meant they were being associated with radicals whose interests were more political than literary, such as Baju, or simply because they, like many artists, refused to have any label imposed on them. Swart examines various perceptions of decadence among writers and, at the same time, reminds us that poets like Mallarmé and Verlaine resisted being defined as poets of decadence:

Mallarmé, whose poetry Huysmans had, not entirely inappropriately, characterized as the summit of decadence, held that "decadence" was a horrible label and that it was high time to renounce anything resembling it. [. . .] Verlaine himself, although more than any other major literary figure, responsible for the school's name, later on declared that the term had no meaning whatsoever. (166)

A few modern critics agree with such an opinion as that of Verlaine and dodge the problem of semantics or even advise a complete discontinuation of the terms "decadent" and "decadence."³⁸

When talking about the decadent movement of the late nineteenth century, most critics prefer the term "décadence" to other derivations such as "décadisme" or "décadentisme" for the implications of the suffix "-isme." As Séverine Jouve points out, "entre naturalisme et symbolisme, elle [la décadence]

³⁷ This view inadvertently builds a triumvirate structure that includes Bourget as the theorist of decadence and Baudelaire as the poet of decadence.

³⁸ Nalbantian mentions Henri Peyre as having called for the dismissal of the term "decadence" (134). Laurence Porter summarizes other critics' views in the 1970s: "The good Huysmans critics like Victor Brombert, Lilian Furst, and Michael Issacharoff have recently avoided the term 'decadent' altogether [and] Alice Kaminsky formally proposed abandoning it" ("Literary Structure and the Concept of Decadence" 189-90).

se refuse à devenir *décadentisme*” (*Les Décadents* 15). In effect, one can consider “*décadentisme*” or “*décadisme*,” involving other artists and political motives, as parallel movements to decadence or subsections within the same movement. Although decadence escapes the perception of these other labels attempting to legitimize themselves by attaching an “-isme,” it does not always manage to escape the connotative meanings that lead to a negative understanding of the term.³⁹ Given these connotations, it is not undesirable, then, to reform the definition of the term.

The idea of innovation, as paradoxical as it may seem when applied to decadence, whose etymology includes the image of a setting sun, is right on target with the newness of decadence itself. Richard Gilman, in his study of the “strange life” of the epithet “decadence,” points out that the late nineteenth century saw the first instances of applying “decadent” to persons rather than things (73). Even as late as 1884, the use of “*décadent*” in reference to persons had not yet been fully assimilated, as Louis Marquèze-Pouey notes in this comment on *A rebours*: “Le mot *décadence* --pas encore *décadent* -- est d’ailleurs, avec *spleen* (ou *ennui*) et *névrose*, un des mots-clés du roman; il était fatal qu’on fît l’association entre les excentricités du héros et les particularités -- réelles ou imaginaires -- de la littérature décadente, entre des *Esseintes* et le *Décadent*” (142-43).⁴⁰ Though *des Esseintes* was soon to be equated with “*décadent*,” the

³⁹ Arthur Symonds’s essay, “The Decadent Movement in Literature,” gives a rare example of an early denotative definition of decadence (97).

⁴⁰ Marquèze-Pouey illustrates the lexical development of the term in the late nineteenth century, noting that the only dictionary entry for “*décadent*” is in the *Dictionnaire général* (1890) where it is designated simply as a “néologisme” (15).

relative absence of the word in Huysmans's text reflects its novelty in being applied to persons. Huysmans never specifies his hero as such, and the only appearance of "décadents," in the plural adjectival form, is in reference to "les écrivains décadents, latins et monastiques des vieux âges" (193).

As an introduction to our present-day understanding of decadence, Gilman shows that the term has been popularized to the point of debasement, as in indulging in a decadent dessert: "It is all something of a joke, a cuteness about moral being and behavioral risks; it's a bit of camp about what was surely a troubled spiritual condition that some of our predecessors took pains to try to identify" (17). Rather than dwell on these efforts at defining the term or trace the etymology of the word and its various historical applications, as Roger Bauer has done so thoroughly, I have approached decadence from its opposites. Bauer states that "décadence s'oppose à 'renouvellement' et à 'élévation'" (56).

However, we can also see such seemingly contradictory terms as synonymous when talking about decadence in late nineteenth-century France. Similarly, Gilman grapples with the instability of "decadence" as "[a] word and concept whose significations and weights continually change in response to shifts in morals, social and cultural attitudes, and even technology." In this regard, Gilman concludes, "it resembles 'progress,' one of its rough antonyms" (19).

In my reading of A rebours, I find that ideas of progress and modernity pervade the text to the extent that it cannot be said that Huysmans has given up completely on this "decaying" society that was observed by decadent and naturalist followers of Schopenhauerian pessimism. Nor does he abandon the naturalist quest to portray the reality of the contemporary world. More

precisely, the novel presents an original view of one case study in the character of des Esseintes, which makes the novel a naturalist type of “document humain.” Des Esseintes is a thoroughly modern man who rejects only certain aspects of modernity in favor of the decadence of the past that he appreciates, for example, in the literature of the late Latin writers. Also, by discarding the romantic-naturalist cult of nature to create instead a cult of artifice, with all the problems and failures that poses for des Esseintes, A rebours may be read as a text in which naturalism and decadence collide, or in a slightly different sense, as an early expression of the decadence of naturalism.

A Modern Hybrid: The Cross-Breeding of Decadence and Naturalism

Decadence is a movement of transition, but not merely a temporal shift. Jean Pierrot refutes the too restrictive view of decadence as a preparatory phase of symbolism in order to highlight its role as “une ligne de clivage essentielle entre l’esthétique classique et l’esthétique moderne” (20). Pierre Cogny also treats A rebours as a novel of transition but, rather than seeing a change in aesthetics, he shows how it bridges the gap between the past and the future in Huysmans’s ever-present naturalism and sense of modernity:

Ce naturalisme -- qui se révèle à chaque instant dans le style -- est net dans la fidélité au moderne que conserve des Esseintes malgré les apparences. Il veut, au fond, [. . .] franchir d’un bond l’espace qui sépare le Moyen-Age du moderne, mais il ne méprise jamais pour autant le moderne et A rebours se présenterait à nous comme un ouvrage de transition qui, de Zola, nous conduirait à Marcel Proust, le maître, comme des Esseintes, de l’introspection [. . .]. (J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l’unité 90)

Another transitional role imposed on decadence, though still having to do with aesthetics, deals with the narrative forms of prose and poetry. David Weir explains that, “by introducing a more pronounced element of poesis into the novel, decadent writers move away from mimesis as an aesthetic base” (15).

The poetic quality of A rebours is marked and some have even referred to the novel as a series of prose poems. Huysmans’s affinity for the prose poem is well known and comes through in des Esseintes’s preferences, as in his expressed desire for a perfect form in some sort of short, poetic work:

Bien souvent, des Esseintes avait médité sur cet inquiétant problème, écrire un roman concentré en quelques phrases qui contiendrait le suc cohobé des centaines de pages toujours employées à établir le milieu, à dessiner les caractères, à entasser à l’appui les observations et les menus faits. [. . .] Le roman, ainsi conçu, ainsi condensé en une page ou deux, deviendrait une communion de pensée entre un magique écrivain et un idéal lecteur [. . .]. (222)

Essentially, this is a proposal for a new and improved form of the naturalist novel. Des Esseintes is not calling for the dismissal of naturalist subject matter (“le milieu, les caractères, les observations”), but a renovated treatment of it. However, A rebours is, in effect, the opposite of a “condensed novel in one or two pages,” considering its extremely lengthy discussions of art and literature.

Moreover, the lack of a discernible plotline or sequential organization defies traditional conceptions of the novel. Some would argue there is indeed a plot in A rebours, that of “lost illusions,” which is the plot of countless nineteenth-century novels, according to Gail Finney (76).⁴¹ While Finney’s idea

⁴¹ Finney compares Zola’s Germinal with A rebours for similarities in the aestheticism of naturalism and decadence (“In the Naturalist Grain: Huysmans’s A rebours Viewed through the Lens of Zola’s Germinal”). For more on the idea of the “plotless” novel, see Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau’s La Tentation du livre sur rien: Naturalisme et décadence.

of what constitutes a plot is debatable, it is generally agreed that there is at least no structural plot to A rebours. Kai Mikkonen's The Plot Machine develops the thesis that A rebours "follows the symbolist principle of suggestion rather than any 'crude' plotted structure" (49). Actually, I find that there is something of a *fil conducteur* to the narrative: the progression of des Esseintes's neurosis and ensuing physical illness. Yet, structurally, this does not support any purposeful layout for most of the chapters. They are more or less interchangeable since they tend to be orations on various subjects not necessarily related to one another.

Dean de la Motte, in "Writing Against the Grain," sees in A rebours a resemblance to the "open" modernist text in its "eschewal of causal progression, traditional character development and teleology" (20). In the novel, he does not find the untying of the traditional knot, but a "static binding, a word singularly appropriate for the character who has his walls bound like books" (20-21). This critic joins others in classifying the novel as a type of manifesto announcing a modernist agenda (23).⁴² For all its originality, A rebours is nonetheless enigmatic. It breaks the traditional molds of novel and poem alike and, contrary to its appellation as a manifesto, resists standing for anything, but rather stands against various themes and thus is true to its title. Pierre Jourde's study of "l'identité impossible" of A rebours begins by stating that the book is "un texte du non" (13).⁴³ The objects of des Esseintes's tirades are extensive, as he rebuffs

⁴² Pascaline Mourier-Casile also cites A rebours as "le premier manifeste de la Modernité fin-de-siècle" (152).

⁴³ Françoise Court-Perez, in "A rebours: Figures de l'antinomie," also takes as subject the many inversions that constitute the novel, listed here in abbreviated form: "A rebours du temps, du progrès, du pouvoir, de la nature, du corps naturel, du naturalisme dominant, du sacré, de la démocratisation" (159).

almost every aspect of modern society to take refuge in the past. However, this is problematic because he is dependent upon modernity to sustain his existence.

In a sense, modernity antagonizes decadence. Des Esseintes does not want to embrace modern society and yet counts on its conveniences to make possible his unusual hobbies: the “orgue à bouche,” the genetically-manipulated flowers, and the dining room built like a ship’s cabin, replete with mechanical fish in artificially-colored aquariums. These all require science for their “creation,” some of which des Esseintes has mastered, such as knowing how to mix liqueurs or colors in the aquarium. The flowers are a more complex matter that falls outside his reach. He must seek the aid of local horticulturists, “les seuls et les vrais artistes.” Des Esseintes acknowledges that nature “fournit la matière première, le germe et le sol, la matrice nourricière,” but gives it over to human hands to alter the soil chemically and to experiment with cross-breeding flowers to arrive at the desired result (138).

In addition to biological and chemical science, des Esseintes’s artificial existence relies on the industry of transportation that brings objects (books, art, the jewel-encrusted tortoise, etc.) to him. In this way, he remains connected to Paris and modern society. His position in the banlieue, “au ban de la société” (235), is not a hindrance to his cultural addictions thanks to the railroad, which is but a different kind of boulevard, according to T. J. Clark (151). Des Esseintes thus replaces his former ambulatory exploration of Paris with a modern, mechanized means of transportation that allows him to explore his obsessions from the margins of society.

Moreover, as des Esseintes initially tries to turn his back on modern society, he also rejects the natural world that is, according to the prevailing view, God's creation. Des Esseintes acclaims the genius of man for creating artifice, thus reacting against God: "[L]'homme a fait, dans son genre, aussi bien que le Dieu auquel il croit" (81). Huysmans chooses to replace God with human genius in a parallel way to Zola's revised definition of a work of art not as "un coin de la création" but as "un coin de la nature." However, Huysmans's formula goes one step further to replace nature with artifice, as the narrator of A rebours demonstrates in reference to des Esseintes and other "raffinés": "Comme il le disait, la nature a fait son temps [. . .]. A n'en pas douter, cette sempiternelle radoteuse a maintenant usé la débonnaire admiration des vrais artistes, et le moment est venu où il s'agit de la remplacer, autant que faire se pourra, par l'artifice" (80).

Nevertheless, Huysmans does not abolish nature altogether in A rebours. In fact, there are passages that suggest an overwhelming urge to return to nature, which will be considered as part of the "singular nature" of des Esseintes. Nor does he completely abandon faith in God. A rebours marks a turning point, rather, in Huysmans's religious evolution that dovetails with the search for the right place and time that plagued so many nineteenth-century writers, according to Enzo Caramaschi:

[Huysmans] a d'abord cherché dans une "modernité" à tous crins les voies de son originalité, mais bientôt il ne cesse de vomir son temps; il décide de refuser le présent en bloc pour lui opposer un Moyen Age de sa façon, qu'il fera coïncider avec l'âge d'or de la foi, et qu'il met en rapport avec son propre retour à la Foi. Le tournant est marqué par A rebours. (63)

The desire to escape from the modern world is expressed not only through des Esseintes's retreat to his "thébaïde raffinée," but also in this statement on the inadequacy of modern surroundings for the superior artist: "En effet, lorsque l'époque où un homme de talent est obligé de vivre, est plate et bête, l'artiste est, à son insu même, hanté par la nostalgie d'un autre siècle" (207).⁴⁴

This mental time travel undertaken by the artist and by des Esseintes in his analysis of the Latin decadence is a sign that the late nineteenth century was not a true period of decadence. Leonard R. Koos explains that it "does not incarnate an authentic, uncontrollable decadence, but rather a simulated, uninherited one that is predicated on the mediocrity of the present, not its catastrophic collapse" ("Fictitious History" 123). As shown in the above quotation from A rebours, the so-called decadence of des Esseintes comes about only because he is not satisfied with that time in which he happened to be born. It is an arbitrary matter having little to do with the *fin-de-siècle* mentality that is often attributed as the cause of this period of decadence. Some scholars caution against according too much significance to the *fin de siècle*. As Nicholas White points out, our attention is drawn to multiples of a hundred, a "centurial mysticism" ("Narcissism, Reading, and History" 261) and we therefore designate special meaning to an otherwise ordinary number. The notion of the *fin de siècle* is a point of contention for Max Nordau, who acknowledges that language demands a term to express this awareness, but chides its absurdity: "Only the brain of a child or of a savage could form the clumsy idea that the century is a

⁴⁴ Des Esseintes cites, for example, Flaubert's Salammbô and La Tentation de Saint Antoine. He also feels a sort of nostalgia for some lost, fantasy world in Zola's description of Le Paradou in La Faute de l'abbé Mouret (209).

kind of living being, born like a beast or a man, passing through all the stages of existence, [. . .] to die with the expiration of the hundredth year [. . .]" (1).⁴⁵

Huysmans seems to have always felt the need to be on the cutting edge. After all, his participation in the Médan group demonstrates his desire to be a part of something revolutionary in literature. When naturalism became used and stale, too popular, and, as G. A. Cevalco describes it, "almost academically acceptable" ("The Breviary of the Decadence" 196), Huysmans struck out on his own. The 1903 preface confirms this need for change or movement, as the author says his aim was to "faire à tout prix du neuf" (55). Benoît Niess sees Huysmans as modern in the sense that "il a adhéré au Naturalisme puis à d'autres mouvements parce qu'ils exprimaient la forme la plus récente du beau" (100). The aestheticism of decadence appealed to Huysmans as an answer to the tedium of modern society as well as to the stagnation of naturalism. Yet, the fact that Huysmans resigns his hero to the inescapable fate of returning to that society at the end of A rebours indicates, to use the words of Natalie Doyle, that "the ideology of decadence is at a dead-end" (21), and all that is left is to embrace modernity at the approach of the new century. That modernity includes a return to the laws of nature defended by contemporary science and naturalism.

As dissimilar as they may appear on the surface, decadence and naturalism share not only the element of modernity, but many traits that are apparent in A rebours. Before Huysmans, the Goncourts set the standard for

⁴⁵ The demystifying of decadence as a relative concept of the passage of time is shared by Vladimir Jankélévitch in a philosophic essay on the subject: "La décadence a commencé tout de suite, dès la première blancheur de l'aube et le jour même de notre naissance; de sorte que tout, en un sens, est décadence [. . .]" (359).

both naturalists and decadents.⁴⁶ Both groups claimed the authors of Germinie Lacerteux as models, as David Weir illustrates, citing a “confluence of pathology and aestheticism” in their work (47), which also is found in Huysmans and in Zola. In all truth, for Huysmans to move between naturalism and decadence is not the drastic change it may seem. Naturalists and decadents were not diametrically opposed to one another, as shown by the fact that they “worked alongside each other as friends and collaborators” and published in magazines such as La Revue Indépendante and Le Chat Noir, which were “congenial to naturalism and decadence equally” (Stephan 9-10). Fernande Zayed demonstrates this compatibility in terms of doctrine as well, saying that the decadents were “pronaturalistes”: “Alors que les Symbolistes repousseront complètement la doctrine naturaliste, les Décadents sont positivistes, antireligieux et antisociaux, s’attachent à démontrer la décadence de la société et insistent sur les instincts de l’homme” (418). Their mutual admiration for the Goncourts and Flaubert too reinforces the notion that the two groups shared similar views regarding both style and content.

Flaubert served as a stronger inspiration than Zola for some members of the Médan group, including possibly Huysmans. Huysmans was one of many young naturalists who emulated L’Education sentimentale as the ideal naturalist novel. In the preface to A rebours, he speaks of Flaubert’s novel as “un chef-d’œuvre qui a été beaucoup plus que L’Assommoir le paragon du naturalisme”: “[C]e roman était pour nous tous, ‘des Soirées de Médan,’ une véritable bible”

⁴⁶ Another who interests both groups is Hippolyte Taine. We have already seen the importance of his deterministic theory for naturalism but, as A. E. Carter notes, Taine showed in other works “a marked taste for the more alluring aspects of decadence” (52).

(45). Yet, Jefferson Humphries calls Flaubert “the first fully fledged decadent writer” because, alongside his interpretation of decadence as a “fall” from realism, Flaubert was “first to fall *into* the theoretical implications of realism” (324). Humphries explains that the objective of realism is not reality, but rather “truquage.” Like “truquage,” the notion of simulation, as expounded by Jean Baudrillard, is quite more extensive than pretending: “[F]eindre, ou dissimuler, laissent intact le principe de réalité: la différence est toujours claire, elle n’est que masquée. Tandis que la simulation remet en cause la différence du ‘vrai’ et du ‘faux,’ du ‘réel’ et de l’ ‘imaginaire’” (12). This distinction poses a significant point of unison with Maupassant’s articulation of the “illusion” of realism in “Le Roman.”

While simulations pervade Huysmans’s text to the point of exposing their artificiality, they nevertheless remain within the realm of mimetic illusion. Humphries’s study revolves around the artificial simulations of memories, emotions, and sensations evoked by the cricket in A rebours. The cricket kept in a cage in des Esseintes’s Parisian boudoir serves as a synecdoche of his childhood and his mother: “[Q]uand il écoutait ce cri tant de fois entendu, toutes les soirées contraintes et muettes chez sa mère, tout l’abandon d’une jeunesse souffrante et refoulée, se bouscuaient devant lui [. . .]” (70). This treatment raises the cricket to more than a mere mimetic object in the text, thereby going beyond its realistic purpose to achieve a decadent or anti-realistic effect. Humphries concludes that “the theoretical implications of realism are [. . .] decadent -- that is to say, anti-realistic. [. . .] [D]ecadence is nothing but the theoretical development of mimetic realism to its logical end” (329-30).

John R. Reed also ties decadence to realism as a transitional art form: “[Decadence] employs techniques of Realism to convey extreme aesthetic conditions; thus it utilizes ugly details and even brutality to convey the sense of spiritual longing” (14). Françoise Gaillard pushes the notion a notch further, signaling the destruction of realistic representation, as A rebours “dévoilait les truquages du cabinet optique de la littérature réaliste” (“A rebours: Une Ecriture de la crise” 115). Gaillard sees A rebours as indicating “le choix délibéré de l’anti-doxa” (111) and thus a crisis of referentiality in writing.⁴⁷ Leonard R. Koos’s recent article “Executing the Real in *fin-de-siècle* France” similarly deals with A rebours as one especially noteworthy novel in “a body of works which consistently sought to expose the cracks in the increasingly decrepit concept of the real [. . .] under the provocatively assumed label of Decadence” (37).

While scholars like Humphries and Reed pose the thesis that decadence is the culmination of realism, or, like Gaillard and Koos, its undoing, we may look further back to Mario Praz, A. E. Carter, and K. W. Swart, who define the movement as either an outgrowth or reaction to romanticism. Though each presents a different interpretation of the link between romanticism and decadence, these three tend to be lumped together in later critical studies. The most pertinent to my study is A. E. Carter, because his views are applicable to the relationship of decadence and naturalism, which will enter into my study of the “naturalistic decadence” of Huysmans that is also found in Zola.

⁴⁷ Elsewhere, Gaillard argues that des Esseintes is a “prisonnier des préceptes sociaux, de la doxa, qu’il suit à ‘rebours’ certes, mais qu’il suit tout de même” (“A rebours ou l’inversion des signes” 140).

To identify A rebours as exclusively naturalist or exclusively decadent is not plausible, nor desirable, as has been shown thus far. However, it is possible to see in the novel a hybrid, a naturalist variety of decadence that resides both in the story and within the character of des Esseintes. From the “Notice” onward, there is a steady deterioration of des Esseintes’s physical and mental condition, which carries out the premise of the naturalist theories related to the degenerative effects of heredity. Yet the rise in aesthetic decadence throughout the novel works to counteract this naturalist decadence. The text itself is a manifestation of the decadence or decline of naturalism, confirmed twenty years later in the preface that recognizes the end of naturalism for this author at least. Even in Zola, there is a convergence of naturalism and decadence, going beyond the physiological to embrace the aesthetic. Therefore, while Huysmans saw A rebours retrospectively as a clean break from naturalism, the modern-day reader can join the view held by many readers in 1884 that the novel is quite naturalistic, but tempered by the aesthetic movement of decadence, a description that can be applied with careful discrimination to Zola’s work as well.

Naturalism’s Own Decadence

Charles Bernheimer’s last work, Decadent Subjects, published posthumously in 2002, includes a chapter entitled “Decadent Naturalism/ Naturalist Decadence.” My own study of A rebours may benefit greatly from these terms. Indeed, Bernheimer specifies that “much more could be said about the naturalist subtext and intertexts of A rebours” (72), though he concentrates

instead on En rade, another of Huysmans's middle works that has been alternately classified as naturalist or decadent. Bernheimer's main point in this study, which also includes Zola's La Faute de l'abbé Mouret,⁴⁸ is that "naturalism and decadence form a nexus that transcends individual writers in the *fin de siècle*" (91). He asserts that most naturalist texts include "decadent moments" (58), which could lead to a revision of the historical view of decadence as the antithesis of naturalism, and he argues that the very subject of Zola's Rougon-Macquart series is decadence, even if the method is naturalist (59). On the other side of the coin, Bernheimer finds that "the sense of natural process that subtends most decadent texts is entirely naturalistic in character" (58). Therefore, he deduces that naturalism and decadence "acted like the unconscious of the other," forming a "mutual imbrication" (58). Building from these arguments, I propose that we consider naturalism's own decadence, both in the literal sense of its decline and in the implied meaning of the decadent elements within its own theory and practice, as shown by Huysmans and Zola.

Decades earlier, A. E. Carter, in The Idea of Decadence, introduced the concept of naturalistic decadence. Carter's definition hinges on a distinction between two terms used synonymously in the late nineteenth century: degeneracy and decadence. Degeneracy, as shown in the notorious work of Max Nordau,⁴⁹ is pathological, while decadence is aesthetic in his view. Thus, we find

⁴⁸ Here he reprises an earlier article, "The Decadent Subject," in which he reads La Faute de l'abbé Mouret for its "egregious falling-away" from the norm of natural sexuality.

⁴⁹ Max Nordau's 1892 Entartung, or Degeneration, though important in its time, has been largely discounted because of its moralistic tone, verging on an almost hysterical style of address, which unwittingly reflects the hysteria that he decried in the *fin de siècle*. I have limited my use of the text to such fundamental points as the notion of biological degeneration and the *fin-de-siècle*

that most of Zola's Rougon-Macquarts are affected by the degeneration of their family tree, but there are also hints of aesthetic decadence, according to Carter: "The river of degeneracy that washes through that massive work, while it touches decadence at so many points, is not self-conscious enough to be truly decadent: the balance between science and literature is upset; we do not find it restored until the novels of Huysmans" (80-81). The ultimate instance where this balance between science and literature is upset is Le Docteur Pascal, the final novel in the cycle, which, according to Daniel Pick in Faces of Degeneration, subverts the naturalist endeavor of pure empiricism because it "dramatises the contradictions, indeed even the disintegration, of the positivism which had hitherto partially structured Zola's own project" (4).

Antoine Compagnon's discussion of La Curée in "Zola dans la décadence" coincides unintentionally with Carter's distinction between aesthetic and naturalistic decadence, as he observes that "les visions esthétique et médicale de la décadence se mêlaient déjà dans l'adultère incestueux commis par Renée sur la personne de Maxime, son beau-fils, lui-même qualifié de pourri et dégénéré" (211-12). Maxime approximates des Esseintes both as a degenerate and a dandy. Michel Lemaire, in his study of "le dandysme," suggests that Maxime is distinct from the rest of Zola's Rougon-Macquart characters who are decadent primarily in the sense of hereditary degeneration (135). But Maxime is closer to the description Lemaire provides of decadents as "les fruits ultimes de vieilles familles aristocratiques, lymphatiques ou nerveux; ou du moins s'imaginent-ils ainsi" (135). Zola portrays Maxime in these terms: "La race des Rougon s'affinait

concept that is the basis of his study, although he does deal with many aspects of Huysmans's and Zola's works, unfortunately insisting too often upon the degeneracy of the artists themselves.

en lui, devenait délicate et vicieuse. [. . .] Cette famille vivait trop vite; elle se mourait déjà dans cette créature frêle, chez laquelle le sexe avait dû hésiter [. . .]; hermaphrodite étrange venu à son heure dans une société qui pourrissait” (142). By changing the character’s name, this account could be substituted almost verbatim for the “Notice” of A rebours, the only real discrepancy being between the “fastness” of the Rougon family, whose decline is sparked by contemporary social factors as well as physiology, compared with the slow deterioration of the des Esseintes family over many generations.

For Zola, decadence is a reflection of a decadent society. In this, he joins Baudelaire’s view that what was decadent was the society of that time, not the art used to express that decadence. Yet, there is a tangible element of artistic or aesthetic decadence in Zola as well. One critic to note Zola’s aesthetic decadence is Jean de Palacio, who writes of the “étrange attirance avec laquelle Zola lui-même côtoie la Décadence dans La Curée, La Faute de l’abbé Mouret et Nana” (Figures et formes de la décadence 16). The hothouse scene in La Curée is a key example, among others, that qualifies Zola’s text as decadent and foreshadows the extraordinary flowers in A rebours. Gérard Peylet, in Les Evasions manquées, discusses the flowers in both books and concludes that, while both writers depict “un mélange de délectation et d’horreur,” Huysmans accentuates the artificiality of the flowers, which raises them to the level of an art form (147-48). Zola focuses less on the flowers themselves, though they do occupy a significant portion of the narrative, than on the interaction of his characters. Still, this passage certainly rivals that of Huysmans in terms of aesthetic style.

While Zola's novel may be read as an instance of aesthetic, in addition to naturalistic, decadence, likewise the flower-dream sequence in A rebours may be read as not only aesthetic, but naturalistic. First, the very presence of the flowers brings a part of nature into the sterile house. Second, they are not entirely monstrous things, as Pierre Jourde calls to our attention in his article on "Le Monstre": "[L]es fleurs exotiques de A rebours sont parfaitement normales d'un point de vue botanique" (243). It is true, though, that the flowers Huysmans chooses are, according to Suzanne Nalbantian, "the most monstrous and the rarest flowers in the state of botany of his time" (7). Nalbantian, discussing the flowers as metonymies for (mostly female) body parts, finds that, "although Huysmans was presumably confronting Naturalism, he was in fact showing how decadence was directly related to Naturalism" because they become, in Huysmans's story, "the transmitters of disease, concretely conveying the notion of decay" (7). Likewise, Jonathan Patrick, in "Why Does It Have to Hurt? The Diseased Body in J.-K. Huysmans," equates the diseased-looking flowers with diseased human flesh that demands to be seen, like the "pustules vertes" of Huysmans's famous statement.

Ultimately, the flowers act as a sensory stimulus because they resurrect for des Esseintes a subconscious thought that plays out in a frenzied dream. Musing on the mesmerizing ugliness of these flowers, des Esseintes is reminded of the rotting nature of mankind, affected by generations of syphilis (137). In his dream of "la Grande Vérole," des Esseintes is at once drawn to and terrified by the

female-flower figure.⁵⁰ Although the dream acts as a surreal experience, it does not cross that frontier into surrealism because it remains dissociated from the “real” present of the narrative. Many critics have commented on the expertly controlled language of the dream sequence.⁵¹ Frédéric Canovas finds, far from being too abstract, an “écriture commune” between the writing of the dream and the “compte rendu artistique” that Huysmans employs in his art criticism (148). Gisèle Séginger, in her study of *A rebours* as a “roman d’écriture,” extends this authorial regulation beyond the dream to include Huysmans’s entire text, in that “le langage a toujours un caractère fortement rhétorique et contrôlé” (78).

Huysmans, unlike Maupassant in “Le Horla,” does not give in to a discourse of madness here. Michel Collomb offers this assessment of the writing of the “cauchemar”:

Appliquant ici la méthode naturaliste à l’étude d’une névrose, Huysmans ne saurait donner libre cours au discours de la folie. D’où, à la place du délire névrotique, cette ekphrasis, cette mise à distance [. . .]. Le cauchemar naturaliste vient à sa place logique dans la série progressive des manifestations de la névrose, au même titre que les hallucinations visuelles ou auditives. (79)

Collomb further makes the point that the dream narrative contains numerous “petits détails immotivés, précisions inutiles,” which he calls, in a pastiche of Barthes, “des effets d’irréel” (82). But, for all its surrealistic content, the dream itself is, in actuality, a natural occurrence, a physiological and perhaps

⁵⁰ Angela Nuccitelli makes a convincing argument for reading the culminating point of all the symbols in the novel in her study of the central figure of the Femme-Fleur. In this dream analysis, she finds that “seemingly isolated symbols from the earlier chapters are slowly and precisely linked in des Esseintes’s mind” (341). Moreover, in addition to the dream serving as the symbolic center of the novel, it is the structural center as well because it comes in the middle chapter of the novel, thus situating it literally at the center of the text.

⁵¹ See, for example, Françoise Carmignani-Dupont’s reading of the “Fonction romanesque du récit de rêve.”

psychological response caused by the sensory stimulation of the flowers.

However, Huysmans's treatment of the dream, its very invention and the depth of description it receives, turns it into something more than a slight naturalistic event in the novel to raise it to the level of art.

Stylistically, Huysmans and Zola share the "psychology of sensualism" at the heart of the theory of *l'art pour l'art*.⁵² George Ross Ridge contends that Zola is no less decadent a stylist than Huysmans because they both create in their writing the same type of decadent product: "Synaesthesia and the transposition of art forms [. . .], neatly packaged in a gilded vocabulary" (The Hero in French Decadent Literature 11). One example of this communion of style is the lyrical passage in Zola's Le Ventre de Paris known as the "symphony of cheeses," which Huysmans replicates in the form of the "orgue à bouche" and his own "symphony of perfumes" in A rebours. Huysmans dotes on Zola's depiction of Les Halles in the 1877 essay intended to promote L'Assommoir. His assessment is notable for its exclamatory emphasis on Zola's stylistics:

Après ce styliste prestigieux, Gautier, notre maître à tous, au point de vue de la forme, il était difficile de donner une note nouvelle, une note bien à soi, dans la description purement plastique. Zola l'a fait. [. . .] Telles de ses natures mortes [. . .] sont peintes avec la fougue et la couleur forcenée d'un Rubens! (176)

The art critic in Huysmans comes through in this review, a trait developed more fully in A rebours. Also, in Huysmans's laudation of the symphony of cheeses, we see that he uses language that predicts both the chapter on precious jewels in A rebours as well as the celebration at the end of "Sac au dos": "Je signale

⁵² Eric C. Hansen, in Disaffection and Decadence, goes so far as to say that Zola and a few others, though they condemned the idea of art for art's sake, "were often more faithful to its premises than were some of its supposed adherents" (xiv).

comme bijoux étranges la symphonie des fromages qui, tandis que les femmes cancanent, s'élancent comme un feu d'artifice, comme un Te Deum, comme un Hosanna de senteurs rudes!" (176).

The similarity in the aesthetic tastes of Huysmans and Zola, as seen in this early, optimistic stage, persists to a later, pessimistic stage that is often underestimated. Just as Huysmans's outlook turned darker, so did that of Zola. Antoine Compagnon offers a view of "les fantasmes décadents [qui] parcourent l'œuvre entière de l'écrivain" (211), ranging from La Curée to Fécondité, in "Zola dans la décadence." He also mentions L'Œuvre, whose 1886 publication "n'a pas peu contribué à faire de cette année-là l'*annus mirabilis* de la décadence et la date où la fin de siècle a vraiment eu lieu en France" (212), though he fails to elaborate on this point. Yves Chevrel's description of the novel may enlighten since he calls L'Œuvre "la formulation la plus nette des angoisses et des inquiétudes que suscite la fin de siècle" ("Le Tournant du XIXe au XXe siècle" 522).⁵³ Jacques Dubois, in "Entre nécessité et contingence," also points to some of the decadent qualities of Zola's more mature novels without, however, calling them specifically decadent works: "On sait [. . .] que plusieurs des Rougon-Macquart de la fin du cycle s'assombrissent pour faire place aux thématiques de l'impuissance, de la perversion et de l'artifice. Et l'on pense à L'Œuvre comme à La Bête humaine ou à L'Argent" (381).

⁵³ Chevrel leads us to the cemetery scene at the end of L'Œuvre in which Bongrand speaks of "cette fin de siècle encombrée de démolitions," saying that "l'air de l'époque est mauvais" and gives off "une puanteur de mort" (417). Sandoz, ever the optimist, disagrees: "Nous ne sommes pas une fin, mais une transition, un commencement d'autre chose," consoled in the steady march of reason and the solidity of science (418).

Such notions indicate that Zola too participated in or even precipitated the decadence of naturalism. Dubois finds that “le naturalisme génère la décadence comme son aboutissement ‘fatal’” (381), thus implying that naturalism is responsible for its own demise. Guy Chastel proposes, in a like fashion, that naturalism “a vu venir sa décadence” because of the limitations it set up from the start: “Ce qui le condamnait dans sa forme intrinsèque, c’est qu’il était à sens unique” (278). In going “à rebours,” Huysmans not only frees himself from the constraints of naturalism, but puts them in reverse by highlighting the opposite of whatever naturalism would recommend. However, these attempts to go against naturalism are rarely carried to completion in the novel.

Naturalism’s belief in the determining factors of nature, such as heredity and environment, is at once maintained and overturned in A rebours. For instance, the Darwinian model of the survival of the fittest is presented and takes a decisive Schopenhauerian turn in the case of “l’immonde tartine,” a scene in which des Esseintes observes a group of children fighting over food. Yet, des Esseintes’s reaction transfers this fleeting naturalist observation into a decadent indulgence, as he is overwhelmed by “un pica, une perversion,” demanding his servant to fix him a snack just like theirs then later deciding not to eat it, but to throw it to them in order to have them scramble for it and to give the less fit of the bunch “un aperçu de la vie qui les attend” (197-200). What intervenes between these two acts is a discourse on des Esseintes’s views of the “cruelle et abominable loi de la lutte pour l’existence” (197) and his strong feelings against “l’inutile procréation” (198).

Two other instances of Huysmans's distorted take on naturalist theories are shown in chapter six when des Esseintes recalls his attempts to derail the lives of others.⁵⁴ Des Esseintes relies on the laws of human nature to work in his favor when he drives an acquaintance to sabotage his marriage in the purchase of a trendy round apartment. The couple's dissatisfaction with the apartment and consequently with their marriage leads to adultery and thus a victory for des Esseintes, as he gloats, "Mon plan de bataille était exact" (118). Renée Kingcaid evaluates this scene, though it is in the naturalist vein, as less potent because it is only a recollection: "[B]ecause it is relegated to memory, [. . .] it figures within A rebours as further evidence of the rejection of Naturalism: breezily recounted, the anecdote figures as child's play, its Naturalist scheme barely worth the narrative challenge for Huysmans" ("Amazing Grace" 78). Yet, I would argue that the fact that the episode is referred to only in memory does not take away from its value. Indeed, it does not substantiate a rejection of naturalism because des Esseintes, in the present of narration, derives just as much pleasure from the simple thought of it as he did from the actual event in the past. This happy recollection stirs the memory of another incident, mentioned earlier, when des Esseintes aims to turn the adolescent Auguste Langlois into a criminal. While the former experiment succeeds, the latter results either in failure or an unconfirmed success. This ambiguous outcome reflects the uncertainty of naturalist theory for this "romancier expérimental" without, however, rejecting it altogether.

⁵⁴ In the 1903 preface, Huysmans observes that the chapter's number has a coincidental significance and that, unlike other chapters which he sees as containing the seed for future works, the content of this chapter now disturbs him: "Pour le terrible chapitre VI dont le chiffre correspond, sans intentions preconçues, à celui du Commandement de Dieu qu'il offense, et pour certaines parties du IXe qui peuvent s'y joindre, je ne les écrirais plus évidemment de la sorte" (51). In actuality, both of these commandments are mentioned in chapter nine of A rebours (150).

Pierre Jourde, in L'Identité impossible, sees in this second episode a parody, "un retournement du thème de la relation du maître et de l'élève" (73), which can be applied in the Zola-Huysmans relationship. Though this is an extreme example, there is some truth in the revelation that Huysmans sought to throw out the reputation of himself and the other members of the Médan group as neophyte followers of Zola, as proven in his correspondence and eventually in his 1903 preface. Halina Suwala's chapter on "le dialogue brisé" of Huysmans and Zola goes beyond the anecdotal interest of this ruptured friendship to explore the larger problem of the different varieties of naturalism, with Huysmans and Zola at opposite poles. On the personal side, Suwala writes of the "hostilité grandissante de Huysmans envers Zola" that leaves modern-day observers perplexed because this hostility evident in letters to third parties was not at all discernible in letters to Zola, which kept a friendly and respectful tone to the end in 1896 (Autour de Zola 251). Suwala suggests that the Dreyfus Affair was a turning point in their relationship, citing anti-Semitic statements by Huysmans along with his harsh criticism of Zola's defense of Dreyfus.

In spite of this, it is more a question of ideology that differentiates the two writers, with the conception of modernity at the center. Suwala ascribes to Zola the adherence to the science of the day, the "conformité de l'art aux tendances les plus profondes de l'époque" (249). But, for Huysmans, she finds, after a brief period of embracing modernity in the articles assembled in L'Art moderne, a growing contempt for modern society. In his other major work on art, Certains, Huysmans distorts the Tainean theory of the influence of "milieu" by saying that this method applies differently to superior artists as a reverse determinism that

causes the artist to react against the conditions dealt in life: “La théorie du milieu, adaptée par M. Taine à l’art est juste -- mais juste à rebours, alors qu’il s’agit de grands artistes, car le milieu agit sur eux alors par la révolte, par la haine qu’il leur inspire [. . .]” (OC X, 20).

Although Suwala does not detect this attitude in Zola, one can easily support an interpretation of such a reversal of the Tainean element of “milieu” in certain of his works, as Zola does not willingly accept the societal constraints placed upon his characters. Both writers depart from a common theoretical standpoint to condemn the same aspects of society, which Gail Finney evaluates in her study of A rebours and Germinal: “[A]lthough Huysmans attacks middle-class society from above -- from the vantage point of his aristocratic aesthete -- and Zola attacks it from below -- through the eyes of the working class -- the objects of their criticism are largely the same: materialism, hypocrisy, commercialism, utilitarianism, philistinism” (75). Thus, while Zola embraces modern society in some of his works, he fights various dimensions of that society in other works, often even bringing the two views into conflict within the same novel, as in Au Bonheur des Dames.

The decadence of naturalism is a concern of both Huysmans and Zola. Huysmans’s desire for something new in literature begs the question: Was there nothing new to be found within naturalism? Had its newness truly been used up in so little time? The idea of a “naturalisme spiritualiste” may provide the answer for Huysmans and perhaps for Zola too. Elizabeth Emery proposes that Zola took inspiration from Huysmans in the 1890s, thus marking an exchange of the established roles of master and student. She infers that Zola, who himself felt

that naturalism was coming to an end, accepted the challenge of Huysmans in Là-bas to expand the horizons of naturalism. Zola's idealistic series Les Trois Villes and Les Quatre Evangiles support Emery's claim of the influence Huysmans now held over Zola, but she does concede that it is inaccurate to call Zola now a disciple of Huysmans (49).

As confirmation of Zola's thinking at this time, Emery points us to the interview with Jules Huret in which Zola expresses his thoughts on the perceived end of naturalism: "C'est possible. Nous avons tenu un gros morceau de siècle, nous n'avons pas à nous plaindre; et nous représentons un moment assez splendide dans l'évolution des idées au dix-neuvième siècle pour ne pas craindre d'envisager l'avenir" (189). Clearly, Zola is not assuming a defeated attitude in regard to the waning of naturalism. While crediting naturalism's important place in literature, Zola also speaks to the future in this interview with Huret, calling for writers who will address the spirit of modernity in their work:

L'avenir appartiendra à celui ou à ceux qui auront saisi l'âme de la société moderne, qui, se dégageant des théories trop rigoureuses, consentiront à une acceptation plus logique, plus attendrie de la vie. Je crois à une peinture de la vérité plus large, plus complexe, à une ouverture plus grande sur l'humanité, à une sorte de classicisme du naturalisme. (192)

In this way, Zola is passing the torch to the next generation to take his model of naturalism and improve upon it by allowing for a more humanistic approach.

Emery follows the development of Zola's own writing in the decade following these remarks to underscore the similarity between Zola's mindset and that of Huysmans, as expressed in Là-bas: "Like Huysmans' 'naturalisme spiritualiste,' Zola's theory wanted to explore science *and* religion, body *and*

soul" (45, emphasis added). Employing Zola's words from the Huret interview, we may designate this later stage of Zola's career in the post-Rougon-Macquart novels a classicism of sorts in its return to universal values and aesthetics.

Anthony Greaves, in "Zola et l'esprit décadent," shows that Zola recognized decadence in his time, both as an artistic movement⁵⁵ and in the moral corruption of society that he depicts in the Rougon-Macquart novels. However, not giving in to the pessimism of decadence, Zola held out hope for such remedies as education, work, and procreation, which become major themes in his later series of novels. Religion is also to be considered, but Zola is far from the spiritual, mystical approach of Huysmans.

Instead, Zola remains firm in his commitment to science and positivism, as expressed in an 1893 speech that provides a complement to the sort of statements he made in the Huret interview:

L'idéal, qu'est-ce donc autre chose que l'inexpliqué, ces forces du vaste monde dans lesquelles nous baignons, sans les connaître? [. . .] A mesure que la science avance, il est certain que l'idéal recule, et il me semble que l'unique sens de la vie, l'unique joie qu'on doit mettre à la vivre, est dans cette conquête lente, même si l'on a la mélancolique certitude qu'on ne saura jamais tout. ("Discours au banquet de l'Association Générale des Etudiants," OC XII, 681)

For Zola, the message to youth in this reprisal of his "Lettre à la jeunesse" has not changed. The refrain of his speech is "travail," as he encourages an empirical approach to investigating the world around them. The exploration of the unknown, for Zola, is a matter for science. For Huysmans and Maupassant, it is left to the imagination, and while Zola regrets that humans may never be able to

⁵⁵ Greaves indicates a mention in Zola's 1896 article "Sur le naturisme" of the birth of a new generation "dégantée de tout symbolisme, décadentisme, mysticisme et autres choses pareilles" (OC XII, 714).

comprehend all the mysteries of the universe, it will be shown that Maupassant holds quite the opposite view, one that is closer to Huysmans's mysticism.

With Huysmans defining his own brand of spiritual naturalism and Zola calling for a classicism of naturalism, two views that are shown to be compatible in Emery's study, the writers themselves did not see any such similarities. A significant clue to grasping the complexity of the Huysmans-Zola relationship can be found in their correspondence in 1891. Zola wrote to Huysmans upon the publication of Là-bas about their perpetual differences: "On semble s'apercevoir aujourd'hui, mon cher Huysmans, que nous ne pensons pas tout à fait de même. Mais cela, n'est-ce pas? a toujours été, et cela ne nous a jamais empêchés de nous aimer dans nos œuvres" (15 May 1891, Corr VII, 141).

Huysmans, though he condemns Zola's suffocating naturalism in the 1903 preface, held out the hope a decade before that Zola could free himself from such restraints, as he felt he had done. In the Huret interview of 1891, Zola admitted the need for change and, in an uncharacteristic turn, stated that he would consider undergoing a change himself in response to his critics:

Donc, c'est entendu, le naturalisme finira quand ceux qui l'incarnent auront disparu. On ne revient pas sur un mouvement, et ce qui lui succédera sera différent, je vous l'ai dit. La matière du roman est un peu épuisée, et pour le ranimer il faudrait un bonhomme! [. . .] D'ailleurs, si j'ai le temps, je le ferai, moi, ce qu'ils veulent! (193)

Zola's words in this announcement express nearly the same sentiment that would be articulated by Huysmans in the 1903 preface. It is uncertain whether Huysmans, in 1903, appreciated an evolution in Zola's writing from the time of this interview until his death. His preoccupation in the preface is not with Zola's

later writings but his works up until 1884 and the ideology of naturalism at that point in time. But, this revelation in 1891 struck Huysmans, who responded in his own interview with Huret: “Zola ne vous a-t-il pas dit que, s’il en avait le temps, il se mettrait lui-même à chercher *l’autre chose*? [. . .] Eh bien! savez-vous qu’il en est capable! [. . .] Il est encore jeune, et s’il veut, d’un coup de ses reins d’athlète, il peut percer le tunnel où il a acculé le naturalisme” (200-201).

The mixture of goodwill and criticism displayed in Huysmans’s comment returns to the “agreement to disagree” with Zola. Rather than forcing Huysmans and the rest of the Médan group to fit into his matrix of naturalism, Zola not only acknowledged, but encouraged the variety of talents within the group. Still, Huysmans, in his retrospective self-analysis in the 1903 preface, says that he did feel trapped in this matrix, though perhaps unconsciously at the time:

A vrai dire, ces réflexions ne surgirent en moi que bien plus tard. Je cherchais vaguement à m’évader d’un cul-de-sac où je suffocais, mais je n’avais aucun plan déterminé et A Rebours, qui me libéra d’une littérature sans issue, en m’aérant, est un ouvrage parfaitement inconscient, imaginé sans idées préconçues, sans intentions réservées d’avenir, sans rien du tout. (47-48)

The solitary quest of the writer, to detach himself from Zola and find his own style, has been shown through Huysmans’s evolution from naturalism to decadence to spiritual naturalism. Yet, the last and perhaps most important piece of the equation is this 1903 preface in which Huysmans participates in the criticism of his novel from a removed perspective, distanced by twenty years’ time and a dramatic change of personal temperament. Thus, the 1903 preface is a means to delve into the singular nature of both the writer and his hero. The “Notice” is another paratext to the novel that may be considered further in the

study of the character development of des Esseintes and his solitary existence, indicated by the original title Seul, as explicative of the mind-body dichotomy that confronts alternately the naturalist and decadent readings of the text.

The Singular Nature of Writer and (Anti-)Hero

Much like Zola's preface to Thérèse Raquin, the essay tacked on to A rebours in 1903 defends the writer's intentions and helps guide the reader to a clearer understanding of the novel. Most critics emphasize its nature as a religious apology that Huysmans provides after his conversion, though it makes the reader wonder why he chooses to do so for this work only and not any of his other texts. Huysmans writes in the preface that he did not really understand des Esseintes at the time, which explains why there were so many different interpretations by critics: "Si je n'ai pas compris moi-même, à plus forte raison les autres ne comprendraient-ils point les impulsions de des Esseintes" (58). However, without forcing an autobiographical reading of the novel, I do find that the singular nature of the writer Huysmans intersects and dovetails with the singular nature of his hero, or "anti-hero," since des Esseintes can hardly be described as heroic in the traditional sense.

With its preface-less debut in 1884, A rebours did not immediately remove its author from the naturalist tradition. In fact, by all outward appearances, it seemed to fit squarely within the naturalist lineage, even down to the fact that it was distributed by Charpentier, undisputably "the naturalists' publisher." Alain Pagès, though he sees a rapid decline in the Médan group after 1880, extends

Huysmans's identification as a naturalist for several years after A rebours, citing Huret's unhesitating classification of the writer among the naturalists in his 1891 Enquête: "C'est la préface de 1903 qui, en réécrivant *a posteriori* l'histoire du roman, nous pousse à anticiper sur une rupture, qui est loin d'être réalisée en 1884" ("A rebours: Un Roman naturaliste?" 3).

Richard Griffiths takes a similar stab at eradicating the "mythe central" of A rebours, that it was written as a reaction against naturalism, with the preface contributing to that illusion (20-21). An example Griffiths gives is a letter in which Huysmans attempts to smooth things over with Zola by distancing himself from his hero and revealing his supposedly "true" literary preferences:

[J]'ai jeté à l'eau mes idées personnelles et ai exprimé des idées diamétralement opposées aux miennes qu'il ne pourra venir à personne l'idée de m'attribuer, puisque j'ai écrit tout le contraire dans L'Art Moderne. J'ai déclaré qu'il préférerait la Tentation à l'Education, la Faustin à Germinie, la Faute de l'Abbé Mouret à l'Assommoir -- Ça c'est clair -- et cette antipode absolue de mes préférences m'a permis d'émettre des idées vraiment malades et de célébrer la gloire de Mallarmé ce qui m'a semblé être d'une assez affable blague! (Lettre XL, [vers le 25 mai 1884], 104)

Pierre Lambert adds a note in Lettres inédites à Emile Zola on the dubious nature of this letter. Rather than taking these statements as fact, Lambert insists that "il ne faut donc voir [. . .] dans cette déconcertante mise au point, qu'un mensonge, assez déroutant sans doute, destiné à faire avaler à Zola la pilule amère d'A rebours, et retarder un peu [. . .] la rupture que ce livre marquait [. . .] avec les conceptions de l'école naturaliste" (108).⁵⁶ The rupture explained in hindsight in Huysmans's 1903 preface should, therefore, be cautiously allowed into evidence.

⁵⁶ Robert Baldick also comments on this letter, which he says, "combined genuine modesty with deliberate untruth" (89). He reconciles these discrepancies by saying that Huysmans wanted to maintain his friendship with Zola.

Huysmans's identification with des Esseintes, which he denies in the above letter and which, conversely, he suggests elsewhere, also poses a problem in the interpretation of the preface and novel. The novel, although written in the third person, tends to read as an autobiography. The modes of autobiography and stream of consciousness have been recognized in A rebours. Yet, Ana Gonzalez Salvador challenges this perception of the novel by using Philippe Lejeune's concept of the "pacte autobiographique." In Je est un autre, Lejeune deals with the degrees of authenticity that are at stake in the text, and asserts that "si le texte est entièrement écrit à la troisième personne il ne reste que le titre (ou une préface) pour imposer une lecture autobiographique" (47). Gonzalez Salvador is perspicacious enough to observe that the proper title of the preface, "Préface écrite vingt ans après le roman," impedes the possibility of reading the text as autobiography: "Ce titre confirmerait, dans la bouche de l'auteur, que l'œuvre appartient au genre du roman: dans ce cas, il s'agirait plutôt d'un pacte romanesque [. . .]" ("Lecture d'une préface" 48).

The writer, in calling his work a novel, obliges the reader to accept it as such, although it is still possible to add other interpretations, as Sylvie Thorel-Cailleteau does in La Tentation du livre sur rien: "A rebours est un ouvrage théorique autant qu'un roman" (211). She cites the text's dual quality as a clinical case study and vast catalogue as evidence of the naturalist principles of "la tranche de vie" and "la documentation," but draws the line, however, at the novel's title. Were it a true naturalist novel, one would expect a title such as Des Esseintes, in the tradition of Marthe or Les Sœurs Vatard, or Seul, Huysmans's original thought that reflects the nature of the protagonist's existence, or even

L'Assommoir du dandy, an expression coined by Jean-Pierre Bertrand *et al.* (208).

All of these would seem more in keeping with the conventional titles for naturalist novels than the defiantly ambiguous A rebours.

One significant feature that separates Huysmans from des Esseintes is that in the preface there is very little mention of the protagonist. Instead, it is a discourse of the “je” signed by Huysmans employed both in the present of 1903 and the past of the novel’s era in 1884. There is also a collective first-person pronoun, the “nous tous, ‘des Soirées de Médan,’” as well as the “on” of generality: “On était alors en plein naturalisme [. . .]” (45). In this preface, Huysmans takes the position of reader of his own text, a paradoxical situation analyzed by Dominique Jullien in “La Préface comme auto-contemplation,” which Valeria di Gregorio Cirillo also views as a “pratique sans aucun doute narcissique [. . .] qui invite l’écrivain à se servir d’un espace communicationnel hors du texte, mais qui anticipe sur lui et le glose [. . .]” (53).

Huysmans’s preface is narcissistic not only in the meaning indicated by this critic but also in that the preface redirects the reader toward itself before granting access to the text. Huysmans is delaying us from getting into the novel and drawing attention to himself instead. The preface, by its imposing presence before the text, demands to be read before the “Notice” even and before the narrative of des Esseintes’s life when, in all truth, it should be regarded as a postface. The preface and the “Notice” thus act as a double bridge of paratexts to cross before reaching the novel. The distinguishing factor between them, though the terms are often used interchangeably, is that the preface performs a didactic

purpose, while the “Notice” belongs to the fictional realm of the novel.⁵⁷ Yet, some critics would assert that the reader may stop at the “Notice,” for all one needs to know of *des Esseintes* is contained therein.

The “Notice” has been called a miniature naturalist novel or, as Daniel Grojnowski suggests, a ten-page “roman d’éducation” that is annihilated once the narrative begins in chapter one as *des Esseintes* “ne récuse pas seulement son moi social, il renie également son moi intime” (82).⁵⁸ In giving the background of *des Esseintes*, Huysmans is essentially condensing the subject matter of an entire naturalist novel. We may recall the passage cited earlier in which *des Esseintes* expresses that such a condensed novel is, in his opinion, the ideal form.

However, Huysmans seems to be using it here in order to set aside the naturalist explanation and move on to the part of the story that interests him more.

Nonetheless, the fact that it is even there at all indicates that A rebours cannot be an outright rejection of naturalism. Indeed, it relies on the naturalism of the “Notice” to catapult the story into decadence.

The “Notice” is concerned with origins, much like Zola’s first volume of the Rougon-Macquart series, La Fortune des Rougon, to which he assigns the “scientific title” Les Origines in the 1871 preface.⁵⁹ Huysmans’s “Notice” could

⁵⁷ See Gérard Genette’s discussion of “l’instance préfacielle” in Seuils, where he lays out the many terms used for prefatory texts and comments on the co-presence of two or more whereby, for instance, the preface “assume une fonction à la fois plus protocolaire et plus circonstancielle,” preceding an introduction that is “plus étroitement liée au propos du texte” (150).

⁵⁸ In “‘A rebours’ de: Le Nom, le référent, le moi, l’histoire, dans le roman de J.-K. Huysmans,” Grojnowski addresses each of these categories. Besides “le moi,” “le nom” is also significant here. The name Jean Floressas *des Esseintes* has been the subject of much inspection, summarized broadly as consisting of three parts: a saint, flowers, and essences, or quintessences.

⁵⁹ Huysmans recognizes the importance of this work in his essay on Zola and L’Assommoir: “Encore que j’admire Thérèse Raquin [. . .] et que je reconnaisse de réelles qualités dans Madeleine Féral, son livre de transition, Emile Zola ne me semble avoir donné sa véritable note que depuis la Fortune des Rougon [. . .]” (OC II, 167).

likewise be called "Les Origines" for its exploration of the origins of des Esseintes. Rodolphe Gasché, in "The Falls of History," finds that the entire novel has a preoccupation with origins: "[I]t is as a whole turned backwards in an attempt to explore origins, beginnings, and memories, thus receiving whatever meaning it has from its past" (191). One could, in fact, interpret this turning backwards as another implication of the novel's title. Then again, it is significant that des Esseintes remains blind to the repercussions of his own origins.

The gallery of portraits that faces the reader and des Esseintes in the "Notice" does not give a complete picture of the degeneracy of this family, but is instead fractured by missing portraits: "un trou existait dans la filière des visages de cette race" (61). However, the portrait of one "mysterious" head serves as an intermediary, "un point de suture entre le passé et le présent" (61). Thus, most of des Esseintes's ancestry is represented by a hole or an absence of reference. Des Esseintes is not entirely alone, however, because as Christopher Lloyd puts it, "the hereditary monsters in the dungeon are waiting" (87). He is accompanied, even haunted, in body and spirit by countless ancestors. Yet he, like the other mysterious being in the portrait, becomes the sole representative of his race, "un seul rejeton" (61). But, unlike the ancestor who is reduced in the painting to only a mysterious head, des Esseintes's existence is dictated by an organic body as well as a living mind. In fact, the "Notice" provides a description of des Esseintes's physical appearance, primarily the details of his face, which lets the reader identify with the character first visually from the outside before entering into his mind.

The “Notice” consists mostly of memories, slowly introducing the reader to the mindset of des Esseintes. At first glance, the character’s childhood recollections resemble those of Claude and Sandoz in L’Œuvre and coincide with the romantic ideal of relishing one’s place in nature: “Sa grande joie était de descendre dans le vallon [. . .]. Il se couchait dans la prairie, à l’ombre des hautes meules, écoutant le bruit sourd des moulins à eau [. . .], il grimpait sur les côtes balayées par le vent et d’où l’étendue était immense. [. . .] Il lisait ou rêvait, s’abreuvait jusqu’à la nuit de solitude [. . .]” (63). This last sentence points to a significant difference in Huysmans’s novel compared to that of Zola, for the young des Esseintes is alone, while Zola’s characters, modeled on his own life, partake in the shared solitude of “cette joie sans limite d’être seuls et d’être libres” (L’Œuvre 94).

Des Esseintes’s childlike love of nature and the countryside returns to him later when his physical pain and mental anguish push him to seek refuge in his garden, sitting on the grass under a tree, for the first time since his arrival at Fontenay (196). Even before this nervous crisis, des Esseintes “voulut même sortir de sa maison, se promena un peu, dans la campagne, lorsque vinrent ces jours de pluie qui la font silencieuse et vide; il se força à marcher, à prendre de l’exercice” (131). Thus, nature itself is not anathema to des Esseintes, but is a resource for finding both physical and emotional solace. Even the name of the place where Huysmans situates his hero’s retreat, the same town where he

himself took refuge,⁶⁰ is indicative of the importance of nature, as the “roses” of Fontenay-aux-Roses evoke both the visual and olfactory stimulation of nature.

Des Esseintes’s surveying of the landscape in his youth manifests itself in his adulthood, though in an opposite way. Rather than going out into nature, he remains indoors and lets nature in through windows, not only visually but also by opening windows to let in fresh air, as he does when overcome by the scents he has been sampling: “Il ouvrit la croisée toute large, heureux de prendre un bain d’air” (161). His dining room windows are blocked by multi-colored aquariums and reduced to portholes and the windows in his study have panes that are “craquelées, bleuâtres, parsemées de culs de bouteille aux bosses piquetées d’or” (74), thus approximating the references to distorting glass and screens discussed in letters by both Huysmans and Zola. But there are other windows that permit a clear, natural picture of the outside world. Des Esseintes is affected by the outside environment, as a particularly rainy week motivates him to plan a trip to London. The narrative joins des Esseintes as he “parcourait son cabinet de travail où il continuait à scruter les nuages” (163).

The portrait of the landscape that follows is remarkably naturalistic, in keeping with the appraisal of naturalists’ descriptive technique offered by Léon Deffoux and Emile Zavie: “[U]n paysage de pluie les attire plus qu’un décor ensoleillé; il pleut beaucoup dans les romans naturalistes” (16):

Des fleuves de suie roulaient, sans discontinuer, au travers des plaines grises du ciel, des blocs de nuées pareils à des rocs déracinés d’un sol. [. . .] Les flots d’encre s’étaient volatilisés et taris, [. . .] une brume d’eau enveloppa la campagne; la pluie ne croula plus, par cataractes, [. . .] mais elle tomba, sans relâche, fine,

⁶⁰ Recall his letter of June 1881, *Lettres inédites à Zola*, 75-76.

pénétrante, aiguë, délayant les allées, gâchant les routes, joignant avec ses fils innombrables la terre au ciel [. . .]. (163-64)

Huysmans's linguistic painting of the setting epitomizes the tenor of his work as novelist, poet, and art critic, as Annette Kahn observes: "It is a development of the soot, dirt, and river imagery used in the prose poems, in the early novels, and in the descriptions of Raffaëlli's paintings. The sky is described in vocabulary usually associated with the land, so that the whole of nature is combined in an overwhelming and depressing presence" (93).

Another important view of nature comes in chapter two as des Esseintes looks out from this window at night over the desolate, "silencieux paysage," seeing it in shades of black and white:

[L]a plaine paraissait [. . .] poudrée de farine d'amidon et enduite de blanc cold-cream; dans l'air tiède, évantant les herbes décolorées [. . .], les arbres frottés de craie par la lune, ébouriffaient de pâles feuillages et dédoublaient leurs troncs dont les ombres barraient de raies noires le sol en plâtre sur lequel des caillasses scintillaient ainsi que des éclats d'assiettes. En raison de son maquillage et de son air factice, ce paysage ne déplaisait pas à des Esseintes [. . .]. (81-82)

This passage is reminiscent of a scene in "Sac au dos" in which Eugène Lejantel watches the night countryside from the moving perspective of a train. The language employed by Huysmans prefigures two characteristics seen in the above-cited descriptions in A rebours. First, there is the joining of the natural elements of earth and sky, caused not by rain, but by the darkness: "Il n'y avait pas une étoile, pas même un bout de lune, le ciel et la terre ne semblaient faire qu'un" (131). In this nighttime portrait, there are also features that call to mind a human face, like that of the plain covered in cold-cream: "[D]ans cette intensité d'un noir d'encre clignotaient comme des yeux de couleurs différentes, des

lanternes attachées à la tôle des disques" (131). The poetic description of nature, particularly at night, in "Sac au dos" foreshadows the descriptions in A rebours and the two together serve as an illustration of Huysmans's ability to paint nature in words. Yet, it is the artificial quality of the landscape in A rebours, with its "maquillage" and "air factice," that appeals most to des Esseintes, though being true to nature nonetheless.

The combination of nature and artifice, then, rather than one or the other, is what the mature des Esseintes has come to appreciate. Nowhere is this quality more evident than in his *éloge* of the locomotives, which can only be fully appreciated if the reader considers des Esseintes's attitude toward women. Des Esseintes may be considered a misogynist in light of the mention in the "Notice" of des Esseintes's past with women, pointing out "la bêtise innée des femmes" (66) who no longer hold any interest for this confirmed *célibataire*.⁶¹ His posture toward women stems from his relationship with his mother, a thorny issue that has been approached by many critics. Nathalie Limat-Letellier in Le Désir d'emprise undertakes a Freudian reading of the mother-son dynamic, finding that "la mère de des Esseintes est en effet la matrice même de la Décadence, de l'hystérie nerveuse, des symptômes morbides obsessionnels et des états d'angoisse qui s'emparent irréversiblement de des Esseintes à son tour" (41).

⁶¹ The "Notice" reveals also that des Esseintes's father was a virtual *célibataire*, as he lived an independent life in Paris most of the time (62). For more on both des Esseintes and Huysmans as *célibataires*, see Jean Borie's important general study Le Célibataire français, along with his specialized book Huysmans: Le Diable, le célibataire et Dieu, as well as René-Pierre Colin's "Huysmans et les saluts du 'vieux garçon.'" Jean-Pierre Bertrand *et al.* also discuss A rebours as representative of the trend toward the "roman célibataire" in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century.

Des Esseintes's mother determines his existence not only genetically and psychologically, but also behaviorally. The memory of his mother, "immobile et couchée, dans une chambre obscure du château de Lourps" (62), is purposefully revived in his adult years as he listens to a cricket hanging in his bedroom to reprise those "soirées contraintes et muettes chez sa mere" (70). The hermetically sealed house at Fontenay is like a sterile womb that stirs a sort of maternal "nesting" in the protagonist, though it is an empty nest. Bettina Knapp, in Exile and the Writer, calls the house a "mother symbol" that acts as both a womb and tomb (78), and Françoise Grauby presents a similar reading, finding in her study of procreation in "Comment naissent les monstres" that des Esseintes identifies with the "mère morte": "Ainsi les signes d'une maternité primitive: le maniement de la terre, l'emboîtement dans un espace de plus en plus restreint, symbolisent une non-présence bourrée d'échos et de réminiscences maternelles" (18-19). While the Fontenay house may be a mother symbol, the important thing to remember is that it involves symbolic production only, not biological reproduction. Des Esseintes leaves the ancestral home, the château de Lourps, and relocates to a place of artificial production, a house that is a museum.⁶²

Des Esseintes's misogynistic and Freudian attitudes toward women hinder his personal relationships and lead him to appreciate female beauty only in the artifice that man has created. To demonstrate what he finds as the epitome of man's ability to rival nature, des Esseintes muses on two locomotives that have him enraptured more than any natural woman. The only woman in the

⁶² Françoise Court-Perez cites the entire novel as a place where "le lecteur est convié à passer de salle en salle dans un musée bien ordonné" (Joris-Karl Huysmans: "A rebours" 7).

novel who approaches such a lofty status in the eyes of des Esseintes is Salomé, as painted by Gustave Moreau. Yet this painting is a material creation of an extraordinary woman through artistic expression that is more exotic than mimetic.⁶³ In his study of the locomotives, des Esseintes derides the common conception of woman as the fairer sex created by nature:

Et puis, à bien discerner celle de ses œuvres considérée comme la plus exquise, celle de ses créations dont la beauté est, de l'avis de tous, la plus originale et la plus parfaite: la femme; est-ce que l'homme n'a pas, de son côté, fabriqué, à lui tout seul, un être animé et factice qui la vaut amplement, au point de vue de la beauté plastique? est-ce qu'il existe, ici-bas, un être conçu dans les joies d'une fornication et sorti des douleurs d'une matrice dont le modèle, dont le type soit plus éblouissant, plus splendide que celui de ces deux locomotives adoptées sur la ligne du chemin de fer du Nord. (80-81)

The two locomotives, la Crampton and l'Engerth, are personified to the extent that they are described in human terms. It is paradoxical that, while Huysmans is writing of the beauty of machines, the way he chooses to describe them is precisely in words depicting natural women, thus suggesting an ironic intent.

The anthropomorphic quality of these portrayals presages Zola's description of la Lison in La Bête humaine in 1890. But, one key difference between Huysmans's and Zola's treatment of these machines is that Zola's protagonist, Jacques Lantier, actually interacts with la Lison to the point of an almost symbiotic relationship, while des Esseintes is a passive observer who has only a removed, aesthetic appreciation for la Crampton and l'Engerth. In this

⁶³ There is much to be said of Salomé's importance as a female figure that both entices and frightens des Esseintes, extending beyond the limits of the present study. The novel's discourse on painters such as Moreau and Odilon Redon provides the grounds for many correlations to be made between their artwork and des Esseintes's state of mind. Redon in particular deals with the subconscious and is therefore significant not only in Huysmans's text, but also in Maupassant for presenting visually in the arts that hesitation between worlds when one is not sure whether one is experiencing a dream, a hallucination, or is glimpsing the supernatural.

regard, Zola's narrative even exceeds that of Huysmans in its non-naturalist personification. Des Esseintes's distance from the women-locomotives applies to women in general. In fact, the mechanical nature of the locomotives is present in the mind of the reader later in the narrative of des Esseintes's past relationship with Miss Urania, an American acrobat, "au corps bien découpé, aux jambes nerveuses, aux muscles d'acier, aux bras de fonte" (145). Thus, Miss Urania is the complement to the locomotives: they are machines described in human terms and she is a woman described in mechanical terms.

Yet, in the end, neither of these female forms is adequate for the singular des Esseintes, nor is there any masculine counterpart for him, whether sexual or platonic. Miss Urania is an androgynous figure, as symbolized by her name ending in *-a* to create a feminization of the Greek god Uranus. As she evolves to become more masculine in the eyes of des Esseintes, he in turn becomes feminized, thus accomplishing the decadent theme of the reversal of gender roles in love: "Cet échange de sexe entre miss Urania et lui, l'avait exalté; nous sommes voués l'un à l'autre, assurait-il" (146). On the contrary, the two were not meant for each other, nor was des Esseintes to find happiness in his relationships with the unnamed ventriloquist, whose very "name" evokes "le ventre" or the maternal womb, or the young man he picks up on the streets, although this is perhaps the closest he comes to the "idéal extrahumain" he seeks: "Et du hasard de cette rencontre, était née une défiante amitié qui se prolongea durant des mois; [. . .] jamais il n'avait supporté un plus attirant et un plus impérieux fermage; jamais il n'avait connu des périls pareils, jamais aussi il ne s'était senti plus douloureusement satisfait" (150). The only entity, other than himself, that

can satisfy des Esseintes's needs, and this only for a limited time, is his house at Fontenay, because it is precisely of his own creation and, though inanimate, provides a constant source of amusement by its s(t)imulation. As with Eugène Lejantel's self-indulgent return home at the end of "Sac au dos," des Esseintes experiences what Victor Brombert calls the wish to "close the cage" from within (155), or a sense of claustrophilia.

Des Esseintes's inability to find the perfect human companion manifests itself both at the beginning and end of the novel, thus framing his solitary existence. In the "Notice," the narrator evaluates des Esseintes's pessimism and misanthropy, "son mépris de l'humanité," which prompts his departure from Paris in search of a "thébaïde raffinée" where he would find refuge "loin de l'incessant déluge de la sottise humaine" (65-66):

Décidément, il n'avait aucun espoir de découvrir chez autrui les mêmes aspirations et les mêmes haines, aucun espoir de s'accoupler avec une intelligence qui se complût, ainsi que la sienne, dans une studieuse décrépitude, aucun espoir d'adjoindre un esprit pointu et chantourné tel que le sien, à celui d'un écrivain ou d'un lettré. (65)

The resolution of the story in des Esseintes's return to Paris is a bookend to this initial despair because he realizes that the literary scene of the world he left could not possibly have improved but, in fact, has probably deteriorated with those men marrying and becoming even more idiotic than before. Des Esseintes questions where he might possibly find his equal:

[E]st-ce qu'il connaissait un homme dont l'existence essaierait, telle que la sienne, de se reléguer dans la contemplation, de se détenir dans le rêve? est-ce qu'il connaissait un homme capable d'apprécier la délicatesse d'une phrase, le subtil d'une peinture, la quintessence d'une idée, un homme dont l'âme fût assez chantournée, pour comprendre Mallarmé et aimer Verlaine? Où, quand, dans quel

monde devait-il sonder pour découvrir un esprit jumeau, un esprit détaché des lieux communs, bénissant le silence comme un bienfait, l'ingratitude comme un soulagement, la défiance comme un garage, comme un port? (235)

This elusive “esprit jumeau” must have a “twin” or double personality as well, like that of des Esseintes, with a “positive” side that appreciates all that is aesthetically pleasing in terms of language, the arts, and philosophy, while on the “negative” side being pessimistic, misanthropic, and reclusive.

The only potential friend for des Esseintes can be found in Huysmans's other novels, as suggested in his statement that all of his main protagonists are one person, himself. The ideal of friendship that is denied the protagonist in À rebours opposes that in “Sac au dos” between Eugène Lejantel and his artist friend Francis, who share the same appetite for adventure, food, and women. Without forcing the connection between des Esseintes and Eugène, it is possible to see some common points, as indicated previously, in Eugène's scatological nature and his rejoicing in the sanctuary of his home.

The lives of both characters are determined by movement to and from Paris and the railway is a privileged means of transportation in both narratives. While des Esseintes praises the locomotives for their female beauty, Eugène's train journey is also associated with feminine beauty, as it is there that he meets Reine. Furthermore, the train is the happy means by which he regains his home after having been released from his encampment in military hospitals. Des Esseintes likewise travels home by train after having gone to Paris for his “imaginary” trip to London: “[I]l revint [. . .] à Fontenay, ressentant l'éreintement physique et la fatigue morale d'un homme qui rejoint son chez soi, après un long

et périlleux voyage" (174). The difference is that Eugène's tribulations were real, being shuffled from one military camp to the next while suffering from dysentery. Des Esseintes's voyage was mostly a figment of his imagination, visiting a bookstore and a pub that fabricated thoughts of London. Still, the comfort he feels upon returning home is nearly identical to that experienced by Eugène:

[D]es Esseintes considéra ses livres, et à la pensée qu'il aurait pu se séparer d'eux pendant longtemps, il goûta une satisfaction aussi effective que celle dont il eût joui s'il les avait retrouvés, après une sérieuse absence. Sous l'impulsion de ce sentiment, ces objets lui semblèrent nouveaux, car il perçut en eux des beautés oubliées depuis l'époque où il les avait acquis. Tout, volumes, bibelots, meubles, prit à ses yeux un charme particulier; son lit lui parut plus moelleux [. . .]. (175)

The ending of "Sac au dos" similarly celebrates the reunion with books and *bibelots*. But, Eugène's initial reaction to being released from the military, exclaiming "Je vais enfin revoir ma mere! retrouver mes bibelots, mes livres!" (148), reveals one other element that is missing from des Esseintes's life: his mother or for that matter any person, female or male.

The above-cited passages about des Esseintes's search for someone who shares his literary tastes bring to mind the fact that, for all his engaging with the texts of certain authors and poets that he either adores or detests, he never meets any of these artists. Des Esseintes's literary experience is thus one-sided, as he is revolted even by the Parisian "hommes de lettres" whom he had counted on for providing intellectual companionship as a young man (65). He is reduced to the stationary existence of reader at Fontenay, which differentiates him from Huysmans, who went to Fontenay to write, that is, to cure his health in order to

be more productive. Nicholas White, in his study of the “écoles, influences et intertextes” of *A rebours*, weighs this comparison regarding the intertextuality of the novel: “Ayant renoncé aux rapports intersubjectifs de tous les jours, des Esseintes s’insère dans ce réseau intertextuel. Et lui, c’est avant tout un lecteur et un spectateur, ce qui suggère un contraste entre la créativité de l’auteur et la stérilité de cette incarnation de la Décadence, des Esseintes” (109). White adds that the distance between the writer and his hero, “cet espace de la narration à la troisième personne,” also marks the distance between “la production de l’art et sa consommation” (109).

Yet, des Esseintes is hardly even a reader any more, for he has read everything and consumed not only the contents of his books but of everything else in his object-filled home.⁶⁴ Now it is the ekphrastic quality of the books that pleases him most, as demonstrated in his display of three Baudelairean poems as religious relics (75) and his rebound edition of Baudelaire’s works in a format “rappelant celui des missels” (176-77). This is not to say that he no longer cares about the contents of these books. After considering the details of this special volume’s composition, he takes it in his hands and does indeed read “certaines pièces qui lui semblaient [. . .] plus pénétrantes que de coutume” in their new binding (177). The tactile aspect of books is an important part of his aesthetic appreciation for his library, as has been shown by Jean de Palacio: “Le livre ne relève plus de la vue, mais du toucher: *il a changé de sens*” (*Figures et formes* 211).

⁶⁴ Rosalind H. Williams provides a study of des Esseintes as a consumer, concluding that he remains unattached to specific possessions. Once they have served their purpose in stimulating his imagination and can no longer produce that desired effect, they are discarded (135). She suggests that des Esseintes “minimizes consumption that satisfies desires of the body and of social status in order to attain more freedom in consumption that satisfies his cravings for the ideal” (134).

Nonetheless, the ideas still engage his mind, and A rebours stands as a book about books, with endless intertextualities.⁶⁵ Far from reading as a naturalist novel, it reads instead like a series of critical essays and, in that sense, is indeed like the naturalists' critical works, their own prefaces, and defenses of other naturalist writers' works. Huysmans, in writing of the 201 authors⁶⁶ he has chosen to analyze, is revealing to the reader what the decadent's library should comprise. Consequently, Julia Przybos, in her article on des Esseintes's *bibliothèque*, finds that Huysmans is jeopardizing the very uniqueness of his work: "Cet apôtre de l'individuel et de l'intime publie le roman et l'abandonne à la curiosité des lecteurs qui 'pénètrent' chez des Esseintes et 'parcourent' des yeux les rayons de sa bibliothèque. [. . .] [L]e roman peut être imité, risquant de se voir banalisé" (72). The popularization of literary works, or any other object for that matter, obliterates their appeal to des Esseintes. In this elitist ideology, des Esseintes rejoins the notion of Huysmans as an elitist writer.

In the end, the books examined by des Esseintes take over the discourse of the novel to the extent that Huysmans's writing becomes a mirror of what des Esseintes reads. Through his story of des Esseintes, Huysmans practices an elite form of writing that surpasses his former works, such as "Sac au dos" and the "écriture artiste" of decadence even. François Livi evaluates this tendency of Huysmans, which I am calling the singular nature of the writer, to write only for

⁶⁵ To give just one example, Jeanne Bem calls A rebours "un festival de l'intertextualité" in opening her discussion of Huysmans's citation of Flaubert ("Le Sphinx et la Chimère dans A rebours" 23). The direct quotation from La Tentation de Saint Antoine is evaluated for its presence in Huysmans's novel in recognition of the "signification 'matricielle'" provided by the "texte-Flaubert" for the "texte-Huysmans" (29).

⁶⁶ This figure comes from Jean de Palacio, who further delineates the number of references to the most frequently discussed authors: Baudelaire, nineteen; Edgar Allan Poe, twelve; Mallarmé, ten (Figures et formes 204).

himself and those like him who can appreciate the sophistication of his writing: “Ce qui intéresse Huysmans, c’est le détournement des mots, en vue de créer des impressions rares. Huysmans dépasse les procédés de l’écriture artiste: il souhaite établir une distance critique beaucoup plus grande entre l’écriture et le lecteur” (100). To be more precise, Huysmans’s writing really only distances the “common” reader, not the ideal reader to which he referred in his formulation of the condensed novel, “une communion de pensée entre un magique écrivain et un idéal lecteur” (222). Des Esseintes, in his own mind, is that ideal reader who seeks others like him to share in a sort of exclusive book club: “une collaboration spirituelle consentie entre dix personnes supérieures éparses dans l’univers, une délectation offerte aux délicats, accessible à eux seuls” (222).

The word “seul,” which appears repeatedly in the text and was the working title for Huysmans, joins the image of des Esseintes seeking an equal being and creates a framing device for the narrative that the writer uses to enforce the singular nature of his hero. In the “Notice,” des Esseintes’s retreat to Fontenay is prompted by the feeling of lassitude with life: “Il se retrouva sur le chemin, dégrisé, *seul*, abominablement lassé, implorant une fin que la lâcheté de sa chair l’empêchait d’atteindre” (66, emphasis added). This portrayal echoes the *fin-de-siècle* attitude and reflects the predicament that des Esseintes feels in suicidal terms. At the end of the novel, des Esseintes again laments his solitary quest, but this time in the form of a prayer: “Seigneur, prenez pitié du chrétien qui doute, de l’incrédule qui voudrait croire, du forçat de la vie qui s’embarque *seul*, dans la nuit, sous un firmament que n’éclairent plus les consolants fanaux du vieil espoir!” (241, emphasis added). The recurring motifs of movement and

night are evident in this ending, in addition to its obvious religious significance in the turning from suicidal thoughts to asking for salvation.⁶⁷

Also important is the alternating desire and fear of solitude. Although des Esseintes tells himself time and again that he wants to be alone, he has a natural fear that goes with it. For instance, at the end of chapter five, the narrator relays that des Esseintes, “tel qu’un ermite,” feels “mûr pour l’isolement” (116). Yet, by the beginning of chapter seven already, he is being consumed by this self-imposed hibernation: “Il vivait sur lui-même, se nourrissait de sa propre substance, pareil à ces bêtes engourdies, tapies dans un trou, pendant l’hiver; la solitude avait agi sur son cerveau, de même qu’un narcotique” (122). The isolation that has overworked his imagination has gone so far as to affect his faculties, as he is no longer able to read: “Il était maintenant incapable de comprendre un mot aux volumes qu’il consultait; ses yeux mêmes ne lisaient plus; il lui sembla que son esprit saturé de littérature et d’art se refusait à en absorber davantage” (122). If des Esseintes can no longer appreciate or “consume” literature and art, what is there to his life? The only answer is a return to culture, society, and nature.

It has already been shown that des Esseintes’s physical ailments cause him to seek refuge in nature, but it is also true that his mental deterioration drives him back to society. As early as chapter eleven in the novel, des Esseintes feels the need for movement, activity, and, most significantly, for other human beings. He is “dévorer du désir de marcher, de regarder une figure humaine, de parler

⁶⁷ See Ana Gonzalez Salvador, “A rebours: Impasse et issue,” for a discussion of the juxtaposition of suicide and faith in these quotations.

avec un autre être, de se mêler à la vie commune" (165). Not only does he want to interact with others, he wants to be among the crowds of the city. For a brief moment, he coincides with Huysmans the writer as well as Zola's character Claude Lantier in their engagement with the city as artistic inspiration. The desire des Esseintes expresses here provides for the reader a mental picture of the protagonist in a bustling scene of an impressionist painting, as he wishes to "se sentir bousculé dans un brouhaha de rue, dans un vacarme de foule et de gare" (165). The modern, naturalist themes of crowds and trains thus reappear in the novel; however, they are thwarted in des Esseintes's aborted trip to London. While he does get as far as Paris and traverses the train station, the crowd scenes are not described in typical naturalist fashion. Rather, the "incessante activité" he claims to want to experience exists only in his mind during the carriage ride around Paris (167).

Des Esseintes's return to Paris marks not only a medical need but also an aesthetic one since he must be engaged with the culture that is such an intrinsic part of his being. He struggles with the city as a place that both attracts and repels him. But, it is certain that he cannot live without the knowledge associated with the culture of that city, as Nicholas White explains in his evaluation of "that Other Scene, the city" as the "textual origin and *telos*" of des Esseintes: "These urban parentheses locate before and after the novel itself that cultural knowledge which reading requires" ("Narcissism, Reading, and History" 266). Des Esseintes is dependent upon Paris to sustain his intellectual curiosity. G. A. Cevasco explores the "existential vacuum" into which Huysmans throws des Esseintes, finding the writer to be engaged in a "mad

pursuit of beauty" (51). The same is true of des Esseintes and, by placing him within an existential vacuum, Huysmans is experimenting with the possibility of various means to find the ideal of beauty beyond the limitations of naturalism. A rebours, however, only demonstrates the impossibility of living in a vacuum.

Even sealed within the vacuum of his house, des Esseintes cannot be made to give up his concern for outside issues. Contrary to Brombert's view of the wish to "close the cage" from within, René-Pierre Colin suggests that the walls that separate des Esseintes from the world are designed to filter, not close out altogether, "le réel" ("Des Esseintes ou le corps du livre" 78). Robert Melançon develops a similar notion that "des Esseintes ne cherche pas tant à quitter le monde et à l'ignorer qu'à le contredire [. . .]. Il ne tourne pas le dos à son époque, il polémique avec elle" (331). In this argument, we find an identification of des Esseintes, like Huysmans, as a "peintre de son temps." Therefore, it is difficult to agree with Richard Terdiman's contention in The Dialectics of Isolation that des Esseintes, unlike the heroes of Balzac or Stendhal, fails to encounter the world around him (85). I have shown in this study that des Esseintes is very much engaged with the literary, scientific, and social ideas of his time. Nevertheless, as mentioned before in reference to literature specifically, all of des Esseintes's social "interactions" are one-sided. For all his rants against modern society, it is significant that that society virtually ignores des Esseintes.

In the end, the outcome for des Esseintes is not as successful as the literary success produced for the writer. He must face the limitations of his degenerative body and nervous condition, for these are ultimately shown in the novel to be things that he cannot turn "à rebours." Numerous studies have concluded that

the physiological aspect of the novel's ending is proof of the triumph of naturalism. Christopher Lloyd speaks for many when he summarizes, "Whatever des Esseintes's perversions and inventions, these minor transgressions of cultural codes are finally subsumed in A rebours by the monstrous forces of nature, reproduction, disease and death" (96). Carol A. Mossman makes a similar deduction that is applicable to Huysmans's writing as well: "From Huysmans's case we stand to learn that all language, however exalted, is grounded in the body" (353).

My concern, though, in this study has been more for the mind than the body of des Esseintes. Indeed, recalling the "Notice," is it not clear that Huysmans has already revealed that des Esseintes is determined by his physiological composition, "un grêle jeune homme de trente ans, anémique et nerveux" (61)? And, if des Esseintes can so easily recognize the potential deterministic unfolding in the lives of Auguste Langlois or the scrawny children he observes, why is it that he is unable to reflect upon his own childhood, "menacée de scrofules, accablée par d'opiniâtres fièvres" (62), and see the misery in store for himself? If the reader is able to see the degeneracy painted in the faces of des Esseintes's ancestors, how can it be that he does not see it as well? These questions may begin to be addressed by considering the emotional, psychological aspect of des Esseintes's mind, with its rationalizations and coping mechanisms, rather than the logical reasoning of the mind's intellect. In other words, the temperament and subjectivity of this character prevails over the rational, objective nature of observation and experimentation, the very issue that proves to be a sticking point of naturalism.

Following Huysmans's Model of Naturalism

Ultimately, Huysmans's experiment in A rebours shows that des Esseintes, rather than relinquishing control to the determinism of his physical inheritance, tries obstinately to assert his free will, thus presenting a challenge for naturalism. But the novel's final prescription for an abandonment of indulgent, decadent tastes, solitude, and hypersensitivity provides a naturalist resolution in the return to the conventions of society, fellowship, and medicine. Nevertheless, A rebours breaks ground and clears the field for the spiritual form of naturalism that Huysmans was cultivating. This individual interpretation of naturalism would embrace those things left unsaid by Zola's theorizing, the mystical and elusive elements of human existence. A rebours, then, is a clearing house of sorts for the physiological concerns of naturalism and a showcase for the aestheticism of decadence, joining the two together in a move toward a more penetrating, psychological purpose of Huysmans's novelistic endeavor.

The duelling aspect of decadence and naturalism in the novel is evident in the writing itself, as Ludmilla Jordanova observes that Huysmans "built the entire narrative around mind/body interactions" (122) and "had no choice but to take medicine seriously, to deploy its languages" (124), therefore leading to the conclusion that, "for a book that was ostensibly hostile to Zola's naturalism, the degree to which it depends on relentlessly naturalistic descriptions of physical and mental states, of therapies, and of morbidity is noteworthy" (126-27). The faithfulness of Huysmans to contemporary medical research is substantiated in correspondence with Zola. Zola criticized the "confusion" of the book: "[I]l me déplaît que des Esseintes soit aussi fou au commencement qu'à la fin, qu'il n'y ait

pas une progression quelconque [. . .]" (20 May 1884, Lettres inédites à Emile Zola 106). Huysmans, in response, defends his methodology: "J'ai pas à pas, suivi les livres de Bouchut et d'Axenfeld sur la névrose; -- je n'ai pas osé intervertir les phases de la maladie [. . .]" (Lettre XL [vers le 25 mai 1884] 103).⁶⁸

The advance of des Esseintes's neurosis follows a strict progression in Huysmans's narration, as Ruth Plaut Weinreb notices: "Whereas the rest of the work fluctuates between dream and reality, the hero's decline develops within ordinary time-space limits in which the contingency of events is respected" (224). Huysmans maintains a clear sense of authorial control in contrast to des Esseintes's loss of control. The use of naturalist medical theory and terminology, like the carefully researched essays on other subjects, places Huysmans far from the discourse of madness. Joseph Halpern assesses this sense of command despite the fact that encyclopedic discourse and digression subvert narrative logic and linear development: "Madness does not really lie within the possibilities of this discourse: A rebours is never a text monstrously out of control. [. . .] [I]ts encyclopedism is a restrained tendency, subject to the logical rules of development" (101). A rebours, therefore, acts as a foil to "Le Horla," as will be shown, in terms of the extent to which the writer participates in the discourse of madness that presents itself as an option for depicting the hero's neurosis, or "nervosisme," which Françoise Gaillard describes as "l'autre de la maladie" ("Le Discours médical pris au piège du récit" 92).

⁶⁸ Eugène Bouchut, Du nervosisme (Paris: Baillière, 1877) and Alexandre Axenfeld, Traité des névroses (Paris: Baillière, 1883).

Neurosis, as suggested by Christopher Lloyd, represents far more than a nervous disorder: “[E]ssentially it becomes a metaphor for the fundamental sickness Huysmans sees in man and nature” (99). This metaphor returns to the notion of decadence by illustrating the *fin-de-siècle* fixation on degeneracy as less of a concern than a fascination with decay. While the naturalists may have been more interested in the physical aspect of illness, decadents saw the possibility for going beyond the flesh into the realm of the metaphysical. As Lloyd puts it, “Like the dream, neuroses open the gateway to mystery, and ultimately perhaps to the magical possibilities of a world where the monstrosities of nature and human behaviour can find redemption” (100). In A rebours, Huysmans has only begun to explore those magical possibilities and he leaves it to his future works, such as Là-bas, to pick up where A rebours left off. The notion of spiritual naturalism can be applicable to the reading of Maupassant’s “Le Horla” as well and, in fact, the significance of the terms “hors-là” (“horla”) and “là-bas” may be considered further.

The imagination is one key element that poses a concern for the writer seeking to portray the mind of the protagonist. Jacques Monférier assesses the role of imagination in A rebours: “Conscient des capacités de son imagination, le personnage de Huysmans en use pour fuir une réalité décevante, mais il sait qu’il a besoin d’une technique sûre pour ne pas verser dans la folie” (235). It can be debated whether or not des Esseintes’s neurosis is actually a form of madness, for he himself recognizes the possibility that his illness may be psychosomatic: “Eh! je deviens stupide, se dit des Esseintes; la crainte de cette maladie va finir par déterminer la maladie elle-même, si ça continue” (126). The doctor’s

prescription to return to Paris seems to indicate that madness has not yet set in, but has the potential. For now, it is only “une *question* de vie ou de mort, une *question* de santé ou de folie” (233, emphasis added).

Des Esseintes in A rebours and the anonymous narrator of Maupassant’s “Le Horla” may be thought of as subjects in the experimentation that the writers conduct with their characters. Though Huysmans intervenes in the narrative to ensure a distance from a discourse of madness, such authorial control is not as clearly established in “Le Horla.” Conversely, Pierre Cogny’s description of the Latin language so appreciated by des Esseintes can be interpreted in terms of an “horla” that builds from word to sentence to the entire book, “tout un système, complexe à l’infini, de miroirs déformants qui, de déstructuration en déstructuration, parviennent à la création hallucinante comme une vision de cauchemar d’une espèce de non-être plus présent que l’être” (“La Destruction du couple Nature-Société” 62). Language itself is an “horla” for Huysmans, a writing toward that mystifying and mystical “là-bas.”

Though it has been the focus of my study to address A rebours in keeping with the qualifications of naturalism and decadence, the solution may lie in seeing the novel as solely the work of a one-man movement. At the time of its publication, some claimed it as the breviary of decadence, while others saw it alternately as naturalist, a parody of naturalism, or an outright autobiography. Modern-day critics have joined in taking sides in this debate and have added the perception of the novel as an important transition into modern literature. The novel, its author, and hero thus become a common point of generation or a matrix for many diverse movements and ideologies.

Yet, Huysmans and his revolutionary novel retain a uniqueness that cannot be replicated. François Livi balances the notion that A rebours is the distinct work of one writer that somehow also opens up possibilities for scores of other writers:

Mille chemins s'ouvrent, mille possibilités s'offrent à partir de 1884, au moment où Huysmans publie A rebours. Esthètes, mystiques, captifs d'un absolu purement verbal, hommes ravagés par les sens, littérateurs pourront également se réclamer de ce livre. Dans ces broussailles, Huysmans se fraye un chemin qu'il est seul à pouvoir suivre. (48)

In opening the door by showing the possibility for new types of literature, Huysmans promptly closes the door on decadence because, as A. E. Carter puts it, after A rebours "there was little more to be said" (20). The novel is both a beginning and an end for Huysmans's "decadent" career. Moreover, in Huysmans's aesthetic quest, A rebours represents "the matrix about which his whole life revolved," to borrow the words of G. A. Cevasco (The Breviary of the Decadence 4). Huysmans's 1903 preface reveals that he found everything that was to follow contained "en germe" in A rebours (50); but, of those successive works, none attempted to follow the lead set by A rebours. In the end, the novel, like its hero and its author, is of a singular nature that is so distinct as to not be classified in any one category or outdone by any other work in Huysmans's *œuvre*, nor perhaps by any other writer who would seek to emulate his model.

CHAPTER 4
THE FANTASTIC ILLUSION OF REALITY:
MAUPASSANT'S NATURALISM AND (THE) BEYOND IN "LE HORLA"

The concept of mind over body seen in Huysmans's A rebours is similarly apparent in "Le Horla" by Guy de Maupassant,¹ thus going beyond Zola's model of naturalism to explore matters unexplained by science. There are many points of comparison between the two texts that support my investigation of the naturalist and non-naturalist elements in "Le Horla." Both des Esseintes and the unnamed diarist of "Le Horla" live in solitude as their lives are increasingly determined by forces that seem beyond their control. As shown, des Esseintes comes to realize that his physical ailments stem from not only his weakened constitution, but also from the obsessive inner workings of his mind. In Maupassant's story, however, there is no immediate sign of a physiological or psychological flaw as the diarist is overcome by the Horla, supposedly a supernatural being whose impressive arrival by means of "un superbe trois-mâts brésilien, tout blanc" compels the narrator to invite its presence: "Je le saluai, je ne sais pourquoi, tant ce navire me fit plaisir à voir" (8 mai).²

¹ References are to the 1887 version of "Le Horla," which was preceded the year before by a much shorter version in Le Gil Blas and ultimately published in a collection by the same name.

² Citations will be indicated throughout by the date of the diary entries rather than page number.

The narrative begins with realistic descriptions of man in nature, content with his home, family, and surroundings, thus establishing a deterministic basis guided by heredity and environment in the opening exposition:

8 mai. -- Quelle journée admirable! J'ai passé toute la matinée étendu sur l'herbe, devant ma maison [. . .]. J'aime ce pays, et j'aime y vivre parce que j'y ai mes racines, ces profondes et délicates racines, qui attachent un homme à la terre où sont nés et morts ses aïeux, qui l'attachent à ce qu'on pense et à ce qu'on mange, aux usages comme aux nourritures, aux locutions locales, aux intonations des paysans, aux odeurs du sol, des villages et de l'air lui-même.³

However, Maupassant leads the character into isolation, delving into his mind in a move toward a psychological version of the fantastic. Many critics agree that there is an abandonment of realism in Maupassant's fantastic stories, such that his characters lose touch with reality. Yet, in my analysis of "Le Horla," I intend to seek out that "illusion" of reality, as specified in Maupassant's essay "Le Roman," within the setting of what is usually classified as a fantastic tale.

A number of studies by theorists of the fantastic will inform this reading, including Tzvetan Todorov's Introduction à la littérature fantastique, which provides a definition of the hesitation that determines a fantastic narrative. This hesitation that toes the line between pure fantasy and the uncanny can also be indicative of the possibility of two interpretations of "Le Horla." While the fantastic may be regarded as a distinct genre, like decadence, it also intersects with realism and naturalism, resulting in hybrid types of literature. Therefore, it is plausible that "Le Horla" is simultaneously fact and fantasy. Indeed, I will

³ Actually, the manuscript shows that the diary opens with a line of suspension points and ends in the same way, a significant feature that will be addressed in the course of my study. This manuscript has been reproduced by Yvan Leclerc. The original is at the Bibliothèque Nationale and is the only manuscript of any of Maupassant's stories known to be in existence.

develop the notion that Maupassant unites the two in giving a realistic, even naturalistic, treatment of the supernatural or, in other words, a text of supernaturalism that goes beyond naturalism in its discussion of the beyond.

There are various influences manifest in Maupassant's writings, showing a propensity for romantic, classical, and decadent values, but none more deep-seated than the lessons learned from Flaubert. Several critics have addressed the inherent paradoxes, perhaps summarized best by Pierre Cogny in "Maupassant, écrivain de la décadence?": "Maupassant ne pouvait être ouvertement ni réaliste, ni naturaliste, ni décadent, ni symboliste, du fait qu'il était inconditionnellement -- j'allais dire maladivement -- Flaubertiste" (204-05). Yet, this view only gives some indication of the multiplicity of Maupassant's writing. There is much more to consider, as Mariane Bury, following the lead of Louis Forestier, would advise in "Le Goût de Maupassant pour l'équivoque": "Plus on progresse dans la connaissance de cette œuvre de romancier, de nouvelliste, de chroniqueur, de poète, plus diverses se font entendre les voix maupassantiennes" (83).

In addition to Maupassant's fiction, his scores of essays or *chroniques* foster a better understanding of his aesthetics.⁴ Quite a few of these are pertinent for their revelations of Maupassant's criticism of specific writers, including Zola and Huysmans, as well as his general views on artistic subjects. In spite of detractors who contend that Maupassant was not an able theoretician, the corpus of *chroniques* represents the essence of his literary philosophy in a thorough,

⁴ A very small portion of the *chroniques* are published in the 1938 volume associated with René Dumesnil's edition of the *Œuvres complètes* under the title *Chroniques, Etudes, Correspondance de Guy de Maupassant*. Therefore, I will refer to this work only for Maupassant's correspondence, abbreviated *CEC*, and, for the *chroniques*, will consult instead Hubert Juin's three-volume *Chroniques*, published in 1980.

articulate manner. The most important is “Le Roman,” composed in September 1887, only months after “Le Horla,” and printed in 1888 as the preface to Pierre et Jean. This piece not only gives readers a coherent discussion of Maupassant’s ideas on realism and the novelistic endeavor, but also offers proof that the writer was fully in possession of his faculties when writing “Le Horla,” which is too often judged in hindsight as an autobiographical account of the author’s lapse into a syphilis-based madness.

The main problem to consider from the outset is Maupassant’s association with naturalism, which has thus far in my study been limited to his participation in the Médan group. To some degree, he endorsed naturalism, at least early in his career, as in his account of the origin of Les Soirées de Médan. There is little to indicate that he was ever against naturalism, and nothing close to the anti-naturalist stance in Huysmans’s 1903 preface. However, Maupassant became increasingly known for his reluctance to speak about literary topics, which is evident in his 1891 interview with Jules Huret.⁵ Many critics therefore give priority to Maupassant’s private writings in estimating his attitude toward naturalism, especially his correspondence with Flaubert in which both authors mock the grandstanding of Zola and his theorizing of naturalism.⁶

Still, the theory of naturalism did work up to a point for Maupassant. A good number of his works can be identified as naturalist, but I have chosen to undertake a close study of what many critics agree is his greatest fantastic tale in order to test the limits of naturalism. Unlike naturalism’s demand to represent

⁵ Huret quotes Maupassant, “Oh! littérature! monsieur, je ne parle jamais. J’écris quand cela me fait plaisir, mais en parler, non” (203).

⁶ See, for instance, the letter of 24 April 1879 in which Maupassant scoffs at the pretentiousness of Zola’s essay “La République et la littérature” and calls him “absolument fou” (CEC 267).

reality in an objective manner, Maupassant's writing, in "Le Horla," shows nearly the opposite. The narrative is presented through the subjective viewpoint of a character whom we suspect is going mad. The second version of "Le Horla" departs significantly from the first, which is introduced by a doctor in a mental institution. Both versions of "Le Horla," among other tales and journal articles by the author, reflect the fascination with the emergent field of psychiatric studies in the late nineteenth century. Recalling that Zola brought the newfound theories of Darwin, Lucas, Taine, and above all, the experimental method of Bernard, into naturalist literature, so does Maupassant integrate what he has learned from contemporary scientific studies in his writing.

Maupassant coincided with many naturalists, including Huysmans, in adopting a pessimistic view of life formulated by factors like the War of 1870, the general decline in society felt at the *fin de siècle*, and the philosophies of Arthur Schopenhauer and Herbert Spencer. There is also much evidence from the author's own life to add to the pessimism that persists throughout his career. Thus, the darker side of naturalism, too, colors Maupassant's reinvention of the fantastic, blending scientific legitimacy and its new avenues of discovery along with a healthy dose of skepticism into the tradition of the fantastic genre that dates back to the earlier part of the nineteenth century and even further. My study of "Le Horla," accordingly, will address such important questions of genre and ideology in exploring whether the story is truly a fantastic tale marking Maupassant's clear departure from naturalism, or rather a naturalist take on matters concerning the human mind and the supernatural.

Maupassant's Fantasia: Compositions of the Master Illusionist

The central theme of Maupassant's "Le Roman" may be deciphered as a code for the writer's overall aesthetics: "J'en conclus que les Réalistes de talent devraient s'appeler plutôt des Illusionnistes" (52). Although Maupassant does not call himself an "illusionniste," the expression may be not only the most innocuous, but in fact the most suitable for him. Whether through deliberate effort or circumstance, Maupassant maintains the illusion of being a true naturalist by supporting Zola and other naturalists and by writing works that are at least compatible with, if not grounded in naturalist theory. Moreover, Maupassant is something of an illusionist in the popular sense of a performer who is constantly changing the appearance of things, improvising, or presenting illusions in writing. For example, the arguments in his critical essays are often contradictory, partly because he was drawn to such equivocation. Finally, there are varying aspects of Maupassant's fictional works, which have been debated by some critics, creating the illusion that he is a romantic, a classic, a decadent, a symbolist, and so on. In other words, he is beyond being a naturalist. In the end, such attempts at classification fail to describe adequately the artist who encompasses all of these elements, the master illusionist.

The application of any label to Maupassant is a precarious undertaking, since he states, in several outlets, his aversion to making distinctions between literary types when, in his view, all that matters is talent: "Quant au genre de talent, qu'importe! J'arrive à ne plus comprendre la classification qu'on établit entre les Réalistes, les Idéalistes, les Romantiques, les Matérialistes ou les Naturalistes" (Chroniques II, 328). It is all the more significant that this

statement is made in a preface to Jules Guérin's Fille de Fille in 1883, a format typically used to assert literary beliefs, as in Zola's preface to Thérèse Raquin. Though not referring to Zola specifically, Maupassant calls that sort of apologetic preface "une espèce de sermon en faveur d'une religion littéraire" and claims to have abandoned any former convictions: "J'ai eu quelques croyances, ou, plutôt, quelques préférences: je n'en ai plus; elles se sont envolées peu à peu" (328). Despite his opposition to formal categorizations of literary theories, Maupassant does express his own aesthetics through the *chroniques*, his correspondence, and ultimately, his study of "Le Roman," in which we may discern his attitude toward such concepts as temperament and the mission of the artist, formulated largely following Flaubert's example, in relation to Zola's model of naturalism.

Like Flaubert, Maupassant did not always differentiate between realism and naturalism, grouping works under the heading "écoles de la vraisemblance" in an 1882 essay ("Romans," Chroniques II, 40). Maupassant is often linked to these schools, and there is much to support those ties, but he protested against the prescribed tenets of literary groups and their theories. In a revealing letter from 17 January 1877, believed to have been addressed to Paul Alexis, Maupassant sets forth a "profession de foi littéraire" (CEC 223). The letter is apparently in response to a proposal for a literary manifesto, which Maupassant cannot sanction. He writes, "Je ne crois pas plus au naturalisme et au réalisme qu'au romantisme. Ces mots à mon sens ne signifient absolument rien et ne servent qu'à des querelles de tempéraments opposés" (224).

As his argument goes, the only criteria necessary for great literature are originality and beauty: "Soyons des originaux, quel que soit le caractère de notre

talent [. . .]. Tout peut être beau quel que soit le temps, le pays, l'école, etc., parce qu'il est des écrivains de tous les tempéraments" (224). While this pronouncement echoes Zola's espousal of a new standard in which the artist represents "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament," the letter contains also a criticism of the restraint he finds in naturalism being but one manifestation of art rather than an open horizon, calling it as limited as the fantastic (225). Although Maupassant does not elaborate on this comparison of naturalism and the fantastic, I find that it predicts the fusion of the two genres in opening up a new form of the fantastic, indeed a new form of naturalism, that will become manifest in works like "Le Horla."

Some important revelations of Maupassant's character and his relationship with Zola and the Médan group can be gleaned in this letter. Maupassant insists with force that he "ne discute jamais littérature, ni principes," finding that "parfaitement inutile" (225). By the end of the letter, however, he seems to have found a perfect use for such discussions: "Si l'on faisait le siège d'un journal pendant six mois en le criblant d'articles, de demandes par des amis, etc., etc., jusqu'au moment où l'on y aurait fait entrer tout à fait l'un de nous? Il faudrait trouver une chose inattendue qui frapperait un coup, forcerait l'attention du public" (226). The reference to mounting a concerted "attack" on a journal reinforces the notion of forming the Médan group in order to benefit the interests of the individual as well. As Maupassant puts it, "A cinq on peut bien des choses" (225-26). It is not certain who, exactly, the five are in this case, but presumably, Zola is left out. Maupassant seems to have some sort of a collusion with the other members of the group, as may be inferred from his request that

“cette lettre ne doit pas sortir de notre *cercle*, bien entendu, et je serais désolé que vous la *montrassiez* à Zola, que j’aime de tout mon cœur et que j’admire profondément, car il pourrait peut-être s’en froisser” (225).⁷

It is clear that Maupassant would like to sustain the illusion of backing naturalism to Zola at least, if not to the public. Notwithstanding his reservations about embracing naturalism as a school or theory, he was a strong supporter of Zola the artist. Like Huysmans had done five years earlier, Maupassant wrote an essay that praises Zola’s talents and offers a good deal of biographical information. The essay exists in two forms, the first appearing in Le Gaulois in 1882 as a promotional tool for Zola’s Pot-Bouille. The expanded second edition for the collection “Célébrités contemporaines” published by Quantin (1883) includes a more detailed analysis of Zola’s works and theories. From the start, Maupassant associates the name of Zola with celebrity, invoking first and foremost his polemics: “Zola! quel appel au public! quel cri d’éveil! [. . .] jamais nom est-il mieux tombé sur un homme? Il semble un défi de combat, une menace d’attaque, un chant de victoire” (Chroniques II, 306). Given his desire to make a name for himself, it appears that Maupassant has much to gain by playing up his association with Zola. Perhaps that is part of the reason why he goes into such detail of Zola’s life in this article.

Aside from the anecdotal sketches of Zola, Maupassant gives solid critiques of the Rougon-Macquart novels produced up to that point, focusing on

⁷ Exclusion of Zola from the group may not, however, represent a duplicitous act. There may be, rather, a desire to respect the master by separating him from the pack. One further example that is open to interpretation is the dedication of Maupassant’s Contes de la bécasse (1883) to the other four Médan disciples, Zola excepted. Does this suggest a subtle nod to Zola by not lumping him in with the others, or instead an attempt to keep a distance from the man and his doctrines?

La Curée and Le Ventre de Paris, as did Huysmans, more than the naturalist paragon L'Assommoir. Though he does refer to Zola as the "maître naturaliste," Maupassant recognizes the discrepancy between Zola's precepts and his writing. He cites Zola's romanticism as the root of a revolution within the writer, but one that is compromised. Calling Zola not only a "fils des romantiques," but "romantique lui-même," Maupassant points to Zola's grandiose style as the basis for the inconsistency of his theory and practice: "[I]l porte en lui une tendance au poème, un besoin de grandir, de grossir, de faire des symboles avec les êtres et les choses. [. . .] Ses enseignements et ses œuvres sont éternellement en désaccord" (314). For Maupassant, the impact of doctrines is negligible, as he insightfully reads the lasting poetic qualities of Zola's works, describing the Rougon-Macquart novels as "de la haute poésie" (315).

But he does extract one theory from Zola, which is related to this thwarted reaction against romanticism: "Sa théorie est celle-ci: Nous n'avons pas d'autre modèle que la vie puisque nous ne concevons rien au-delà de nos sens" (313). While romanticism did reach for that which is beyond the immediacy of our senses, Zola professed to be occupied with concrete, observable phenomena. However, the "besoin de grandir" found in Zola's writing is at odds with this notion. The limitation of naturalist theory to the faithful representation of "la vérité" denies the exploration of things left to the imagination or the realm of possibility, a matter that is investigated by Maupassant in "Le Horla." Maupassant's critical interpretation of Zola's theory here underlines recurring themes from throughout his *chroniques* having to do with such concepts as

realistic representation and the involvement of the artist's temperament in rendering that reality, both in relation to naturalism and his own aesthetics.

In the *chroniques*, which number well over two hundred, Maupassant was able to hone his analytical skills and dissert on subjects that also surface in his fiction. A few critics have seen in the *chroniques* the foundation of Maupassant's future works, referring to his journalistic activity metaphorically as the "laboratoire" where "tout se forge," according to Hubert Juin (15), and the "canevas" for a "préparation au gros œuvre futur," in one of the first studies of Maupassant journaliste et chroniqueur by Gérard Delaisement (13).⁸ These texts provide a means of entry into the investigation of Maupassant's works that had been ignored by scholars, as Delaisement notes, with the exception of André Vial.⁹ An American contemporary of Vial and Delaisement, Edward D. Sullivan, denounced, in Maupassant the Novelist, the assumption that Maupassant did not articulate his literary views elsewhere than in "Le Roman," and attributed this oversight to the inaccessibility of the *chroniques*.¹⁰ Since these essays are now able to be consulted in their entirety, there is no reason to perpetuate the myth that Maupassant was silent on literary subjects. The path of inquiry pioneered

⁸ For further elaboration on the subject of Maupassant's maturation through journalism, see Marie-Claire Bancquart, "Maupassant journaliste," and Anne de Vaucher, "Théorie et pratique du journalisme chez Maupassant."

⁹ Vial is at the forefront of a renewal in Maupassant criticism in the 1950s with his substantial work Guy de Maupassant et l'art du roman. Mariane Bury, in a 1998 article "Naissance d'un écrivain," attests to the progress made by subsequent researchers toward "la lente sortie du tunnel amorcée depuis la thèse d'André Vial," paying particular attention to the 1980s as a site for the reevaluation of Maupassant's novels, short stories, and *chroniques*, all of which demonstrate his entire *œuvre* as being "toute proche de notre modernité" (7).

¹⁰ Sullivan, along with Francis Steegmuller, who authored the respected biography Maupassant: A Lion in the Path, had given an inventory of 177 articles in a supplement to the bibliography of Maupassant in the Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France (Oct.-Dec. 1949).

by Delaisement and others shows that there is much work to be done on the evaluation of Maupassant's novels and short stories in relation to his *chroniques*.

Maupassant's first published *chronique*, which is one of the most instructive in defining his aesthetics, is devoted to Flaubert. His apprenticeship with Flaubert was a highly influential facet of his development that he recalls in "Le Roman": "Pendant sept ans je fis des vers, je fis des contes, je fis des nouvelles, je fis même un drame détestable. [. . .] Le maître lisait tout, [. . .] développait ses critiques et enfonçait en moi, peu à peu, deux ou trois principes qui sont le résumé de ses longs et patients enseignements" (58). Maupassant's training under Flaubert appears far more disciplined than any sort of relationship between Zola and the Médan group. The difference in approach between the two "masters" brings to mind Zola's insistence upon equality. Zola raises Maupassant, very early in his career, to a lofty status with Flaubert, even going beyond to express Maupassant's dynamic temperament:

Il doit certainement beaucoup à Flaubert [. . .]. Mais il apporte une originalité propre qui perçait dès ses premiers vers, et qui s'affirme aujourd'hui dans sa prose; c'est une virilité, un sens de la passion physique dont flambent ses meilleures pages. Et il n'y a là aucune perversion nerveuse, il n'y a qu'un désir sain et fort, les amours libres de la terre [. . .]. Cela donne un accent très personnel de santé féconde et de belle humeur un peu hableuse à tout ce qu'il écrit. (*Une Campagne*, OC XIV, 622)

This glowing review reflects many of the qualities present in the young Maupassant, but it ignores his darker side already evident in such early fantastic tales as "La Main d'écorché" and poems like "Terreur" in *Des Vers*.

In the *chronique* "Gustave Flaubert" (1876), Maupassant extols his mentor as a true artist, an "auteur impersonnel" who possesses not merely "son style,"

but “le style”: “c’est-à-dire que les expressions et la composition qu’il emploie pour formuler une pensée quelconque sont toujours celles qui conviennent *absolument à cette pensée*, son tempérament se manifestant par la justesse et non par la singularité du mot” (*Chroniques* I, 20). This appraisal of Flaubert’s emphasis upon form (“chez lui, la forme c’est l’œuvre elle-même”) stands in contrast to Zola’s style,¹¹ as he compares the two in his *chronique* on Zola: “Son style large, plein d’images, n’est pas sobre et précis comme celui de Flaubert” (*Chroniques* II, 316). Yet, he does not discount Zola’s style, but rather acclaims its “hardiesse brutale” in the audacity of using popular language when he “s’adresse au public, au grand public, à tout le public, et non pas aux seuls raffinés.” He continues, “Il n’a point besoin de toutes ces subtilités; il écrit clairement, d’un beau style sonore. Cela suffit” (316). Clearly, Zola’s style in works such as *L’Assommoir*, cited here by Maupassant, is far removed from the contrived stylistics of Huysmans in *A rebours*. But it is significant to note that while Maupassant dismisses the need for “toutes ces subtilités” in Zola, he singles out the “style pénétrant et subtil” of Huysmans’s work at roughly the same time (“Par-delà,” *Chroniques* II, 407). This apparent contradiction on matters of style is reconcilable in Maupassant’s understanding of the artist’s temperament and individual talent, as each writer has “son style,” which, as mentioned above, is distinct from his appreciation of Flaubert’s supreme style.

The mission of the writer or artist is a vital component of Maupassant’s aesthetics. In his 1883 *chronique* “Les Audacieux,” Maupassant establishes the

¹¹ Recall that Zola ranked the matter of “forme” among the secondary points in his *Roman expérimental*, but that he also qualified it as being sufficient for rendering a work immortal, commenting on the timelessness of “le spectacle d’une individualité puissante interprétant la nature en un langage superbe” (93).

artist's role in terms that recall Zola's notion of the artistic temperament:

"L'écrivain regarde, tâche de pénétrer les âmes et les cœurs, de comprendre leurs dessous, leurs penchants honteux ou magnanimes, toute la mécanique compliquée des mobiles humains; il observe ainsi suivant son tempérament d'homme et sa conscience d'artiste" (Chroniques II, 280). The methodology of the artist's production appears to be espoused in a similar fashion by both Zola and Maupassant, calling for observation filtered through the individual temperament of the artist. However, there are two issues involved with the implementation of this practice that separate them: the artist's vision of the world and the manner in which the artist chooses to present that vision.

For Maupassant, an artist must have the talent to attain "l'art littéraire," which he defines as the most important of three elements, above imagination and observation, that distinguish a truly great artist: "cette qualité singulière de l'esprit qui met en œuvre ce je ne sais quoi d'éternel, cette couleur inoubliable, changeante avec les artistes" ("Question littéraire," Chroniques II, 21). He goes on to list those who have demonstrated this "troisième don," ranging from Homer to the classics and the romantics and arriving at Gautier and Baudelaire. Such an inventory of the most gifted artists of all time recalls Zola's discussion in Le Roman expérimental, but the distinction in Maupassant's analysis is the intangibility of this mysterious talent or genius. Both Maupassant and Zola provide for the individuality of the artist, which Zola incorporates in his formula for representing nature "à travers un tempérament." Maupassant, however, goes beyond the task of observation and even beyond the free reign of imagination to

see in the work of the artist something mystical, escaping explanation, which can only be called “l’art littéraire.”

In a later essay, “La Femme de lettres,”¹² Maupassant also attests to the stylistic superiority in the writing of all great artists, embodying a beauty of expression that exceeds the basics of subject matter and the mere words employed: “L’artiste ne cherche pas seulement à bien dire ce qu’il veut dire, mais il veut donner à certains lecteurs une sensation et une émotion particulières, une jouissance d’art, au moyen d’un accord secret et superbe de l’idée avec les mots” (Chroniques II, 427). Maupassant allows for the writer’s liberty of expression in ways that surpass Zola’s naturalist doctrine. While Zola does advocate interpretations according to the artist’s individual talent, Maupassant takes this further than giving a faithful representation to endorse a calculated arrangement of elements for beauty’s sake. He writes of the artist’s pursuit of “cette force plastique des mots qui deviennent vibrants, vivants dans la phrase,” for example, the placement of a single word to achieve the desired effect (427).

Along with the insistence upon style or the beauty of expression that separates Maupassant’s aesthetics from Zola, the vision of the world itself revolves around the concept of beauty. In his first *chronique* on Flaubert, Maupassant attributes to him the belief that the artist’s mission is to “faire beau”: “car, la beauté étant une vérité par elle-même, ce qui est beau est toujours vrai, tandis que ce qui est vrai peut n’être pas toujours beau” (Chroniques I, 20). Zola’s take on the latter statement would likely be the inverse, that is, “ce qui

¹² The artist discussed in this essay is George Sand, whose talents are praised by Maupassant in refuting Herbert Spencer’s claim that any female artist must be abnormal, “un monstre dans la nature” (Chroniques II, 426).

est vrai est toujours beau.” Still, there is some validity in applying this reformulation, at least in part, to Maupassant as well. Reading further, he explains that “une chose très-laide et répugnante peut, grâce à son interprète, revêtir une beauté indépendante d’elle-même, tandis que la pensée la plus vraie et la plus belle disparaît fatalement dans les laideurs d’une phrase mal faite” (20). Here again, Maupassant places the all-important emphasis on form and style.

Yet, in another *chronique* written only a few months later, he prioritizes the subject matter and embraces the search for beauty in even the most hideous things: “La beauté est en tout, mais il faut savoir l’en faire sortir; le poète véritablement original ira toujours la chercher dans les choses où elle est le plus cachée” (“Les Poètes français du XVI^e siècle,” *Chroniques* I, 36). He substantiates his claim by invoking “la merveilleuse ‘Charogne’ de Baudelaire.”¹³ If this example is to prove, according to the adage, that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, it also depends nevertheless upon the intervention of the artist, for the poem is not wholly true to life as an objective document, but rather gives a poeticized reflection of reality.

In Maupassant’s estimation, “la vérité absolue” does not exist. This principle of his aesthetics differs significantly from Zola’s naturalism. The notion of the artist’s temperament, while shared by both writers, is grounded firmly in reality for Zola. Emile Henriot believes that Zola “a horreur de tout ce qui n’est pas l’affirmation de la vérité sèche, dure et positiviste” (292), which is an outdated and extremist opinion to be sure, but is actually not too far from the

¹³ Annarosa Poli examines in detail “le côté baudelairien” of Maupassant, which extends far beyond the modern quality of finding poetry in subjects customarily considered as repugnant.

established theory of Zola's naturalism. Maupassant, on the other hand, states in his essay on Zola that "la vérité absolue, la *vérité sèche*, n'existe pas, personne ne pouvant avoir la prétention d'être un miroir parfait" (*Chroniques* II, 314).

In contrast to showing in Flaubert the artist's mission to "faire beau," Maupassant demonstrates the fallibility of Zola's aim to "faire vrai" in what may be construed as a criticism of Zola's experimental method:

Ainsi Zola, qui bataille avec acharnement en faveur de la vérité observée, vit très retiré, ne sort jamais, ignore le monde. Alors que fait-il? avec deux ou trois notes, quelques renseignements venus de côtés et d'autres, il reconstitue des personnages, des caractères, il bâtit ses romans. Il imagine enfin, en suivant le plus près possible la ligne qui lui paraît être celle de la logique, en côtoyant la vérité autant qu'il le peut. (314)

This account of Zola's procedure of gathering material for his novels by means of documentation, often from secondhand sources, suggests that Zola himself was an "illusionniste." In "Le Roman," Maupassant makes a persuasive attempt to highlight the distinction between the two types of reality that tend to be confounded in naturalist literature. His comment could very well be applied to Zola: "Mais si nous jugeons un naturaliste, montrons-lui en quoi la vérité dans la vie diffère de la vérité dans son livre" (49). While Zola's experimental methodology promoted the ideal of presenting reality through the clearest of "écrans," Maupassant shows that in actuality, Zola's works were distorted, larger than life, following in the romantic tradition cited earlier, and thus presenting a reality of his own invention.

In the end, Zola's allowance for temperament grows exponentially in Maupassant's conception of the artist. Maupassant arrives at a middle ground between Flaubert's "faire beau" and Zola's "faire vrai" in the central argument of

“Le Roman”: “Faire vrai consiste donc à donner l’illusion complète du vrai, suivant la logique ordinaire des faits, et non à les transcrire servilement dans le pêle-mêle de leur succession” (52). The artist’s mission, then, is to “reproduire fidèlement cette illusion avec tous les procédés d’art qu’il a appris et dont il peut disposer” (53). This prescription allows for both the artistic style of Flaubert (“les procédés d’art”) and the truthfulness in representation championed by Zola (“reproduire fidèlement”), with the underlying foundation of Maupassant’s belief that there can only be illusions of reality in art.

Autour du “Roman”: The Multiplicity of Illusionism

Maupassant’s illusionism is a theory in its own right, drawing from realism and naturalism alike, but promoting above all else the originality and imagination of the artist. Although Maupassant does not attach an “-isme” to the “illusions” that surface in “Le Roman,” I propose that we view his essay as a sort of manifesto of illusionism.¹⁴ As Zola did in his “Lettre à la jeunesse,” Maupassant advises other artists to develop by way of “le travail continuel” and “la connaissance profonde du métier” (57), with the goal of acquiring a “talent” for writing through patience: “Il s’agit de regarder tout ce qu’on veut exprimer assez longtemps et avec assez d’attention pour en découvrir un aspect qui n’ait été vu et dit par personne” (58). It is in this manner, says Maupassant, that one may make a new contribution in a literary world where all has already been said.

¹⁴ The term “illusionism” does indeed exist and can be used in describing the art of pictorial illusions, as in the *trompe l’œil*. However, to my knowledge, no critic has used this expression to define the writing of Maupassant.

Thus, Maupassant's theory of illusionism, developed throughout his career and virtually codified in "Le Roman," is a manifestation of his own originality as well as an invitation to others to uncover their own originality.

In this study, I have refrained from prioritizing "Le Roman" over the *chroniques* and other sources, contrary to what has been done traditionally in Maupassant scholarship, in order to show the constancy of certain principles throughout Maupassant's development from the late 1870s onward. The summation of these views in "Le Roman" revisits the main elements of his aesthetics under the terms of what I am calling "illusionism." The theory of "Le Roman" is not exclusively reserved for the genre of the novel as the title implies. In addition to extending beyond the form of the novel, Maupassant's illusionism converges and intersects with several ideologies on certain points that emerge in naturalism as well: the rhetoric and ideals of classicism, the linguistic virtuosity of romanticism, the pessimistic philosophy of decadence.

Another incentive to look beyond "Le Roman" in assessing Maupassant's theoretical and literary ideas is that the essay is mired in surrounding debates of the time. Robert Lethbridge has picked up on a line of reasoning first suggested by G. Hainsworth that Maupassant's essay has much to do with the scandal involving Zola's novel La Terre and "Le Manifeste des cinq" (Pierre et Jean 17). While there is no record of Maupassant's thoughts on the matter, he could not have ignored the diatribe against Zola. With "Le Roman" appearing in the same journal as the "Manifeste," Le Figaro, the very next month, it is possible to see in it some response to the situation, especially as Maupassant commented negatively on the practice of criticism and implicated certain figures who were

involved in “Le Manifeste des cinq” in a roundabout fashion.¹⁵ Lethbridge offers a different side to the argument, however, by stating that Maupassant’s intentions in writing “Le Roman” were not actually far from the motivations of the authors of the “Manifeste.” He quotes from Maupassant’s correspondence with his lawyer to explain that the essay was “a statement of ‘mes idées sur mon art’ (a phrase which belies its professed neutrality) ‘afin de ne plus laisser de prétextes à des méprises et à des erreurs sur mon compte,’ the most prevalent of which was, and indeed still is, that he should be grouped as one of the exponents of Zola’s Naturalism” (17).

Although Lethbridge emphasizes more the distance that Maupassant sought to put between himself and Zola, he writes elsewhere of the essay serving to distinguish Maupassant’s works from the psychological approach of Paul Bourget: “At a public level ‘Le Roman’ is designed to frustrate the kind of invidious assimilation exemplified by the reception of Mont-Oriol, widely perceived as the signal that Maupassant had transferred his allegiance to Bourget’s ‘camp’” (“Maupassant, Scylla and Charybdis” 6). In my view, while the essay may be an attempt to assert his independence from all literary groups, Maupassant cannot extricate himself from associations with such leaders as Flaubert, Bourget, and Zola. It is undeniable that they have left a mark on the writer, as he cannot help but include them in his own theoretical writings. For example, in “Le Roman,” Maupassant juxtaposes the “roman d’analyse pure,” associated with Bourget, and the “roman objectif,” aligned with Flaubert and

¹⁵ Maupassant was likely referring to Edmond de Goncourt and his followers in his attack on the “vocabulaire bizarre, compliqué, nombreux et chinois qu’on nous impose aujourd’hui sous le nom d’écriture artiste” (59). It is commonly thought that Goncourt was at least indirectly responsible for instigating the “Manifeste des cinq.”

Zola. Maupassant's distinction between the two types reprises a discussion from the *chronique* "Les Subtils" that divides "objective" and "psychological" novelists, labeling the former "metteurs en scène" and the latter "métaphysiciens" (*Chroniques* II, 394).

Progressing from these two categories, he goes on to describe a few great writers, such as the Goncourts, whom he christens "les subtils" for compelling the reader to undertake with them "un voyage d'exploration dans le cerveau humain" (395). In many works, Maupassant himself qualifies for this appellation of "subtil." In "Le Roman," rather than separating the two modes decisively, he calls for the assimilation of the depth of a "roman d'analyse pure" into the simplicity of the "roman objectif" as a vehicle for psychological investigation¹⁶:

[A]u lieu d'expliquer longuement l'état d'esprit d'un personnage, les écrivains objectifs cherchent l'action ou le geste que cet état d'âme doit faire accomplir fatalement à cet homme dans une situation déterminée. [. . .] Ils cachent donc la psychologie au lieu de l'étaler, ils en font la carcasse de l'œuvre, comme l'ossature invisible est la carcasse du corps humain. (54)

The naturalist theory of determinism is present here in the mention of a "situation déterminée," and Maupassant does discuss in an earlier article the need for diverse characters, "suivant leur tempérament physique et les milieux où ils se sont développés," in a manner that recalls the Taineian factors of "la race, le milieu, et le moment" ("Messieurs de la chronique," *Chroniques* III, 42). Yet, in "Le Roman," the physical and social determining factors are joined by the impact of an underlying psychology to form what Maupassant calls a more

¹⁶ Ferdinand Brunetière, in his review of *Mont-Oriol* in "Trois Romans," makes an illuminating assessment of the author's psychological technique in comparison to that of Bourget, saying that Maupassant's is "plus physiologique, et comme telle plus scientifique," which he aptly calls "de la physio-psychologie" (210). In my view, this reflects an integration of the methods of both Bourget and Zola.

sincere and “vraisemblable” novel. By fusing the two novelistic forms elaborated in “Le Roman,” Maupassant is moving toward a new standard in literature. A number of Maupassant’s works have been dubbed successful hybrids, especially Pierre et Jean, which embodies the idea of combining the “roman d’analyse pure” and the “roman objectif,” in spite of the writer’s proclamation that the preface was not meant to pertain to that novel specifically.¹⁷

While it is arguable whether Maupassant intended to write novels that were not purely naturalist, it is plain to see in hindsight that he did reform naturalism in a sense. Gérard Delaisement extends the doctrines set in “Le Roman” and throughout the *chroniques* to the progression of his writing, leading to the “perfection de la doctrine naturaliste” (Maupassant journaliste 19). For an explanation of this view, we may return to the contemporary observations of Ferdinand Brunetière, the major critic of naturalism, who found in Maupassant a new avenue opening up from the beleaguered movement. Building on his initial appreciation for the young writer,¹⁸ Brunetière looks to him to take naturalism to the next level, comparing his vocation to that of Flaubert before him:

Lorsque les romantiques eurent accompli leur tâche, un romantique survint, il s’appelait Gustave Flaubert, qui fit lui seul beaucoup plus contre eux, avec Madame Bovary, qu’aucun classique ou pseudo-classique, en enrageant, ne l’avait pu trente ans durant. Maintenant que le naturalisme à son tour a terminé sa besogne, qui n’était point tout à fait inutile [. . .], il n’appartient d’en triompher enfin et de l’achever qu’à un naturaliste. (“Trois romans” 212)

¹⁷ André Vial hails precisely the novel’s “caractère hybride” (L’Art du roman 399).

¹⁸ In his first mention of the Médan group in “Les Petits Naturalistes,” 1 July 1884, Brunetière acknowledges that Maupassant’s work contains “tous les défauts qu’exige l’esthétique naturaliste,” but that one may also find “quelques qualités qui sont assez rares dans l’école” (Le Roman naturaliste 320).

Brunetière considered Maupassant a true naturalist, indeed the best of them, as revealed in his 1888 essay “Les Nouvelles de M. de Maupassant,” commending his works for being “impersonnelles comme les œuvres classiques” (Le Roman naturaliste 379).

This proclamation raises a number of important issues. First, Brunetière made the comment specifically in reference to Maupassant’s *nouvelles*, not his novels, and as late as 1888, when it is typically accepted that Maupassant was no longer a naturalist per se. A more pressing point of aesthetics is raised in Brunetière’s association of naturalism, and Maupassant specifically, with the ideals of classicism. Many scholars have characterized Maupassant’s work as representative of the classical tradition in naturalism, such as Pierre Cogy, who acclaims the writer for having obtained, “comme les classiques, l’illusion de la vérité par la parfaite simplicité du style, fait rare dans l’école naturaliste” (Le Naturalisme 91). This observation includes two components of Maupassant’s classicism evident in his citation of Boileau in “Le Roman”: “l’illusion de la vérité” and “la parfaite simplicité du style.” The first tenet learned from Boileau’s Art poétique illustrates Maupassant’s belief in the need to manipulate reality for the sake of rendering it “vraisemblable,” because, according to Boileau, “le vrai peut quelquefois n’être pas vraisemblable” (51). Rather than adhering to the unattainable and undesirable practice of transcribing “rien que la vérité et toute la vérité,” Maupassant calls upon the realist, if he is truly an artist, to produce not a banal photograph of life, but a vision that is “plus complète, plus saisissante, plus probante que la réalité même” (51).

In addition to the vision presented by the artist, words themselves have the potential to color reality. Maupassant quotes a second verse from Boileau that reflects his desire for precision and clarity of style: “D’un mot mis en sa place enseigna le pouvoir” (59). Several critics have commented on the rhetoric of Maupassant, but his version of it must be assumed in the context of realism, in other words, “une rhétorique du réel.”¹⁹ Working from the binary definition provided by Aaron Kibédi-Varga, “la rhétorique est *l’art de bien dire et l’art de persuader*, l’art du discours orné et l’art du discours efficace” (20), we can see that Maupassant certainly does not embrace all aspects of rhetoric. There is little mention of it in his theoretical writings and when there is, it is in the pejorative sense of the “discours orné” that he refutes. In “Le Roman,” Maupassant speaks out against the “écriture artiste” of his period and also alludes to the centuries of literature that have tried to throw their “archaïsmes prétentieux” and their “préciosités” into the “eau pure” that is the French language. Maupassant’s rhetoric does not engage in linguistic theatrics, but rather aims to render “l’effet de réel” by means of clear, logical language in tandem with “les procédés d’art” discussed earlier. The measures endorsed by Maupassant can be found, for instance, in his statement that “le véritable pouvoir littéraire n’est pas dans un fait, mais bien dans la manière de le préparer, de la présenter et de l’exprimer” (“Gustave Flaubert,” *Chroniques* III, 109).

As indicated in the title of her article, “Rhétorique de Maupassant ou les figures du style simple,” Mariane Bury rightly sees that Maupassant abandons

¹⁹ Michel Crouzet explores the implications of such a notion in “Une Rhétorique de Maupassant?” The question mark in the title signifies the paradox of rhetoric and realism.

the classical figures of rhetoric for a realistic style that aspires to “une lisibilité, une universalité” (63). Yet this manner is still, according to Bury, a return to the values of classical rhetoric in reaction to “le bouleversement romantique et les excès naturalistes” (65). Knud Togeby stresses also the formal aspect of classicism in the genre of the short story. Contrary to romanticism, which he says mixes or dissolves genres, classicism and naturalism cultivate “les genres purs” and respect their limits. Togeby anoints Maupassant “un des classiques du conte” for giving it “une forme fixe,” and for practicing “le souci de la composition,” which applies to classicism and naturalism as well, but which finds in the short story of Maupassant the ultimate instrument for a precise, eloquent style (26). Thus, the persuasive nature of Maupassant’s rhetoric, using simple language to convey a particular view, or illusion, of reality reaches its finest expression in the form of the short story.

Upon the occasion of Maupassant’s funeral, Zola credited the young writer with the mastery of the short form: “Je pourrais citer tels de ces courts récits qui contiennent, en quelques pages, la moelle même des gros livres que d’autres romanciers auraient écrits certainement. Mais il me faudrait tous les citer, et certains ne sont-ils pas déjà classiques, comme une fable de La Fontaine ou un conte de Voltaire?” (OC XII, 682). Unlike Zola, whose many-layered, far-reaching social analyses would be hindered by the constraints of a short story, Maupassant reveled in the challenge of saying more by writing less. Although Togeby exaggerates in saying that “les problèmes sociaux, politiques et nationaux n’existent pas pour Maupassant” (50) -- “Boule de suif,” for one, refutes that notion -- he does articulate well the difference in scope required for

Zola's subjects in comparison with Maupassant, who, he finds, "se sent à son aise dans les cadres du conte serré qui l'obligent à reformer la réalité et à choisir les détails au lieu de les rassembler" (51). This characterization of the writer's task to transform and selectively present reality firmly resounds in "Le Roman." Yet, it is curious that the essay is concerned exclusively with the novel given the writer's overwhelming occupation with the genre of the short story.

Though Maupassant wrote only six novels in total, compared to more than three hundred short stories, the theory of the novel dominates his discourse. One explanation for his failure to comment on the structure or thematics of his short stories is that he held a higher opinion of the novel, as stated in a letter of October 1891: "[J]e me suis absolument décidé à ne plus faire de contes ni de nouvelles. C'est usé, fini, ridicule. J'en ai trop fait d'ailleurs. Je ne veux travailler qu'à mes romans, et ne pas distraire mon cerveau par des historiettes de la seule besogne qui me passionne" (CEC 408). Zola suggested in his funeral oration that Maupassant's foray in the production of novels was partly a reaction to critics: "Maupassant voulut élargir son cadre, pour répondre à ceux qui le spécialisaient, en l'enfermant dans la nouvelle" (684). However, he also praised his "romans superbes, où toutes les qualités du conteur se retrouvaient comme agrandies, affinées par la passion de la vie" (684).

Overall, Zola found in Maupassant a vital engagement with life: "[C]e qu'on peut dire, c'est que, jusqu'au dernier jour, ce prétendu indifférent de la littérature a aimé passionnément son art et qu'il cherchait toujours, qu'il s'efforçait de progresser toujours, avec le sens de plus en plus aiguisé de la vérité humaine" (685). This view reopens the larger question of Maupassant's mission

as a writer, *autour du roman et du 'Roman,'* weaving in and out of reality, in and out of the contemporary society in which he found himself. At the center of this mission is the “vérité humaine” that Zola notes. Up to this point, I have emphasized the “vérité” aspect of this quest as a procedure in Maupassant’s illusionist practice of realism. It remains to be seen to what extent he deals with the “humaine” component, that is, the human mind, body, and spirit that may be extrapolated from “Le Horla” to a more general view of late nineteenth-century French society and indeed the universal philosophical concerns of humankind.

Street Theater: Illusions of Modern Life

As a “peintre de son époque,”²⁰ like Zola and Huysmans, Maupassant takes his art from the streets and returns it to the streets, in effect performing illusions in his writing that reflect the reality he observed. Drawing from the “faits divers” of his times, Maupassant’s stories often sensationalize reality into prose for a public that was eager to receive them. Moreover, contrary to those who belittle his concern with social issues, it is plain to see that the writer dealt with certain essential aspects of modern life in his works, including “Le Horla.” His tastes ran to the decadent *fin-de-siècle* spirit, both in terms of the decline felt in that society and the aesthetic values shared by Huysmans. In “Le Horla,”

²⁰ This title applies to his ties to the art world as well. Maupassant was acquainted with many artists of his time, as Delaisement reports: “Zola et Maupassant ont ensemble rencontré leurs amis peintres dans les grands salons de l’époque” (*Le Témoin* 11). Furthermore, he wrote art criticism, though not to the extent of his peers, featuring in his *chroniques* Moreau, Courbet, Corot, and others. See Marie-Claire Bancquart’s “Maupassant et l’artiste” and Joseph-Marc Bailbé’s *L’Artiste chez Maupassant* for an overview of the subject and Louis Forestier’s “Guy de Maupassant et le Salon de 1886,” which gives an in-depth look at the implications of Maupassant’s art criticism for his own views on artistic creation.

then, we may observe a confluence of scientific, spiritual, societal, and artistic elements scaled down from his global aesthetics.

Halina Suwala situates Maupassant's social involvement, both in his fiction and critical pieces, midway between Flaubert and Zola, seeing him more engaged in the world than Flaubert, but too skeptical to latch on to social causes with the vigor of Zola (Autour de Zola 282). Nonetheless, she reads in the totality of his short stories and novels a fair representation of the various stages of the writer's existence, which, though not necessarily autobiographical, paint the surrounding *milieux* in "capsules" of society, "toute une 'Comédie humaine' en miniature" (282). Maupassant's works, like Zola's Rougon-Macquart, include characters from all walks of life, with one notable exception: "l'ouvrier." The urban working class is virtually absent in his writing and, therefore, poses a sharp contrast with Zola and even the early Huysmans. He does, however, privilege the prostitute as a literary figure, as seen in "Boule de suif."

Maupassant shows a preference for "le paysan," which in some respects is the rural counterpart to the urban "ouvrier" and thus a fitting subject for naturalist literature. In fact, his representation of characters in their own vernacular is in keeping with Zola's effort to document the lives and language of those who had rarely been allowed in literature until then. The language of Maupassant, with particular concentration on the regional *patois* of his native Normandy, is the focus of a study by Anthony Butler, who concludes that the writer is not a "philologue" like Zola²¹ because for him "le langage de ses

²¹ Butler quotes from Zola's preface to L'Assommoir, in which the author refers to his work as "un travail purement philologique," responding to those who were alarmed by its language:

personnages n'est jamais un objectif en soi, mais uniquement un des outils à l'aide desquels l'écrivain forge son récit" (183-84). This remark corresponds with the emphasis that Maupassant places upon stylistic procedure and returns to the classical ideal of precise language. Maupassant's works are inclusive of the linguistic standards for each situation he explores, as shown in the transcription of the Prussian officer's language in "Boule de suif" and of the servants in "Le Horla." For example, the narrator of "Le Horla" goes to the extent of recording his servant Jean word for word in his diary: "J'ai que je ne peux plus me reposer, monsieur, ce sont mes nuits qui mangent mes jours" (3 juillet).²²

Although he was of aristocratic birth, Maupassant shows himself to be close to the everyday workings of contemporary society through his own employment as a government clerk and through his journalistic work, counting a number of *chroniques* that are political in nature.²³ One of Maupassant's earlier *chroniques*, "Choses du jour," reveals his cynical observations of a society corrupted by the prevalence of "pots-de-vin" in current affairs: "Nous vivons sous le règne du pot-de-vin, dans le royaume de la conscience facile, à genoux devant le veau d'or" (*Chroniques* I, 373). This pessimistic view of a decadent society spills over into his fictional writing to some degree, as Marie-Claire Bancquart affirms in calling Maupassant "l'un des interprètes les plus éloquents et les plus touchants encore de la crise que traversait son époque tout entière,"

"Mon crime est d'avoir eu la curiosité littéraire de ramasser et de couler dans un moule très travaillé la langue du peuple."

²² The first version of the story has him saying, "C'est mes nuits qui perdent mes jours" (*Le Horla* 193). This example is just one among many revisions that can be analyzed between the two versions of the story.

²³ See Mariane Bury's "Maupassant chroniqueur ou l'art de la polémique" for a quite inclusive treatment of the writer's discussion of political matters.

a period that gives rise to both decadence and the fantastic as reactions to the rational positivism of the age (Maupassant conteur fantastique 17-18).

Pierre Cogny's "Maupassant, écrivain de la décadence?" traces the ways in which Maupassant was decadent, based primarily on a reading of "Un Cas de divorce."²⁴ Questioning Maupassant's apparent ignorance of the neighboring decadent movement and vice versa, Cogny reasons that, like Huysmans, Maupassant "aurait été décadent avant les Décadents" (199). The connection between Maupassant's aesthetics and decadence is undeniable, as Cogny catalogs the common traits: "affinement d'appétits, de sensations, névrose, hystérie, hypnotisme, morphinomanie, schopenhauerisme, rapports au modernisme, impassibilité, réalisme, hostilité au bourgeois, travail sur l'écriture plus ou moins formulé, etc." (199). Clearly, these features pertain to Maupassant and Huysmans both, pointing to the larger framework of the decadent feeling of the period even before it became a fashionable movement in literature.²⁵

In "Le Horla," the diarist's wealthy bachelor status and behavior, lounging on his property, cultivating his rose garden, or suddenly becoming the man about town, visiting acquaintances and attending the theater in Paris, link him to the image of a dandy. This characterization is confirmed by his practice of inspecting his appearance in the mirror: "j'avais coutume de me regarder, de

²⁴ The story merits a closer look in comparison with A rebours. In short, Cogny describes it as evoking "le Baudelaire de la Charogne relue avec les yeux du des Esseintes adorateur des orchidées" (201).

²⁵ Further commentary on Maupassant's association with decadence may be found in Jean Pierrot's L'Imaginaire décadent. Marie-Claire Bancquart broadens the topic in "Un Auteur 'fin de siècle'?" to consider Maupassant's participation in the "curiosités" and "excès" of the *fin de siècle*, including his attraction to the newly-available electricity and riding in a hot-air balloon named "Le Horla." However, Bancquart concludes that, while he does display characteristics of the *fin-de-siècle* spirit, Maupassant does not flaunt it in his writing, showing more concern with ordinary places and things rather than artifice and extravagance.

la tête aux pieds, chaque fois que je passais devant" (19 août, b).²⁶ Also of note is his concern with material possessions. The preponderance of possessive articles seems exaggerated throughout the text, as in the itemized description of his bedroom with "mon lit," "ma cheminée," "ma porte," though the house is not as carefully scripted as that of des Esseintes. On the contrary, the house in Maupassant's text is rather benign and promotes a feeling of comfort: "J'aime ma maison où j'ai grandi" (8 mai). This is especially significant to consider in comparison not only to the des Esseintes family manor, but also to the more sinister settings of many fantastic tales like Poe's house of Usher, for instance.

The diarist's egocentric position toward society is another sign of decadence, one that is shared with des Esseintes. In his musings on the national holiday (14 juillet), he experiences a mix of emotions similar to des Esseintes's observation of a group of children at play in A rebours: "Fête de la République. [. . .] Les pétards et les drapeaux m'amusaient comme un enfant. C'est pourtant fort bête d'être joyeux, à date fixe, par décret du gouvernement. Le peuple est un troupeau imbécile [. . .]." The narrator's tirade continues on a political bent, criticizing the stupidity of the collective people blindly following leaders who themselves are merely falling in line with "des principes" that are "niais, stériles et faux." This commentary on "principes" recalls "Boule de suif" and points to a larger theme in Maupassant's entire *œuvre* and life philosophy. In "Maupassant

²⁶ There are two diary entries for 19 août, which I have designated "a" and "b," although the text does not make any such distinction nor is there any explanation for adding a second entry on this day. The double diary entry of 19 août may find an explanation in the diarist's double self. Martin Calder offers one view: "The diary is doubled and split with itself like the diarist who lives 19 August twice -- or rather the diary which records the diarist twice -- two diarists once each on the same date" (53). Also, Gerald Prince argues that it could mean the start of a new calendar, one in which the Horla will reign, because it is "the date on which the protagonist fails to see his image in the mirror and that on which he 'sees' the Horla's imminent victory" ("Le Horla," *Sex, and Colonization* 187).

pessimiste?” Mariane Bury asserts that all of his novels are marked by social satire (76). The question mark in Bury’s title rather loses its place inside the article as the matter of Maupassant’s pessimism is laid out as unquestionable. Bury states that the very expression “Maupassant pessimiste” is a pleonasm, since pessimism was a constant throughout Maupassant’s life, even if some would describe him in the beginning as “un pessimiste gai.”²⁷ However, I find that Bury paints too sweeping a view of Maupassant’s pessimism, given the many episodes throughout his works that suggest an optimistic exuberance for life, particularly when he interacts with nature, as in the first diary entry of “Le Horla” and in works like “Une Partie de campagne.”

Yet, there is truth in the notion that pessimism runs throughout Maupassant’s writing career and personal life. Many biographical details, ranging from his troubled family situation to his reading of Schopenhauer and Spencer, shape his intellectual pessimism.²⁸ Without placing too much emphasis upon Maupassant’s personal life in his work, it is quite possible to see the impact that hereditary and environmental factors have on the writer as well as on the characters in a book. The importance of the War of 1870 is a certainty among the naturalists, as shown in Les Soirées de Médan. Maupassant’s interest in the war was a major preoccupation all through his life’s work, as it was for Huysmans

²⁷ Bury cites Emile Faguet, Propos littéraires, 3e série, Société Française d’Imprimerie et de Librairie, 1905, p. 207.

²⁸ In addition to Francis Steegmuller’s oft-cited biography and those of his French counterparts dating back to Edouard Maynial’s 1906 study, consult Albert-Marie Schmidt’s Maupassant par lui-même, which is regarded as the first biography to give a real portrayal of Maupassant’s darker side. See also Roger L. Williams’s chapter on Maupassant in The Horror of Life for a good overview of his medical history, and Nafissa A.-F. Schasch’s Guy de Maupassant et le fantastique ténébreux for its examination of the writer’s “shadowy” life in relation to his work from a largely Freudian psychoanalytic perspective.

and Zola too, culminating in an unfinished novel, L'Angélus, that was to be his greatest achievement, according to his servant François Tassart.²⁹ The novel would have brought Maupassant's career full circle, returning to "Boule de suif." Despite the difference in story lines, the two texts are notable for their mutual setting, even down to the similarity in their opening scenes of the Prussians entering Rouen. Taken as a fragmented whole, the remains of L'Angélus suggest the philosophical nature of the story, which focuses on a child born in a stable on Christmas night, crippled from Prussian brutality suffered in utero, and the conception of an incomprehensible God beyond the reach of human senses.

Jean Salem's recent study Philosophie de Maupassant points out Maupassant's "dénonciation 'matérialiste' de la guerre," referring not only to the War of 1870, but to other militaristic interests, such as France's expanding colonialism.³⁰ In the case of "Le Horla," there is a possibility for reading the story as an allegory of the Franco-Prussian War or any other instance of aggression. The story hinges on the notions of invasion and domination that belong historically to centuries of war and colonization. Dreaming of the innumerable life forms that surely exist in other universes, the narrator likens the Horla's arrival from the beyond to that of the conquering Normans: "Un d'eux, un jour

²⁹ Maupassant's reported estimation of the novel brings to mind his everlasting devotion to the values of style inherited from Flaubert, while at the same time divulging his propinquity to the subject matter: "Je vais [. . .] donner toute la puissance d'expression dont je suis capable; tous les détails y seront soignés avec une minutie qui n'aura rien de fatigant. Je me sens admirablement disposé pour faire ce livre, que je possède si bien et que j'ai conçu avec une facilité surprenante. Ce sera le couronnement de ma carrière littéraire, je suis convaincu que ses qualités enthousiasmeront tellement le lecteur artiste qu'il se demandera s'il se trouve en face de la réalité ou d'un roman" (271).

³⁰ The reference to "matérialisme" comes from Maupassant's *chronique* "La Guerre," which Salem traces through several appearances: first published in Le Gaulois (April 1881) in the context of Tunisian affairs, then modified for Le Gil Blas (December 1883) on the topic of war with China, and eventually integrated in Sur l'eau (1888) in its "version le plus pessimiste qui ne croit même plus à la Paix future des peuples," according to Salem (73-74).

ou l'autre, traversant l'espace, n'apparaîtra-t-il pas sur notre terre pour la conquérir, comme les Normands jadis traversaient la mer pour asservir des peuples plus faibles?" (17 août). This comparison is made even before he realizes that the Horla made its way by ship. Two days later, he would associate a story out of Rio de Janeiro about an epidemic of madness to the Brazilian boat that passed by his home, although there is no sure knowledge that that very ship had set sail from Brazil and even less so that it brought with it either a contagious form of madness or the Horla. This flawed reasoning needs to be investigated further, but the more global problem here is the invention of a Brazilian scapegoat as the narrator decides to "blame it on Rio." Gerald Prince tallies the racist and xenophobic attitudes displayed in the text. The narrator's fierce territorialism, evident from his first diary entry, and the exoticism of the Horla do battle in a number of ways elaborated by Prince.³¹

This confrontation scenario may also be applicable to the situation of the Franco-Prussian War. In essence, the Prussian army, with its foreign language, appearance, and behavior, assaults the French homeland, forcing its people to be on the move, as shown in "Boule de suif." In "Le Horla," the narrator's account of the madness epidemic in Brazil shows the same thing: "Les habitants éperdus quittent leurs maisons, désertent leurs villages, abandonnent leurs cultures, se disant poursuivis, possédés, gouvernés comme un bétail humain [. . .]" (19 août, a). The diarist's attempts to flee from the Horla are a similar response to the invasion of privacy, sanity, and identity that he experiences. Indeed, the ultimate

³¹ See "'Le Horla,' Sex, and Colonization," esp. 186-87. Prince points out that Maupassant's manuscript mentioned a "foreign race," replaced in the published version by "supernatural race" (188, note 13).

destruction of his house and the deaths of those trapped inside serve as another reminder of attacks on civilians, like the one portrayed in Zola's "L'Attaque du moulin." The narrator's description of the weakness of humans against supernatural beings in "Le Horla" epitomizes the status of average Frenchmen ill-equipped to defend themselves: "Nous sommes si infirmes, si désarmés, si ignorants, si petits [. . .]" (17 août). This fatalistic attitude also brings to mind the helpless, wounded soldiers in Huysmans's "Sac au dos." The narrator in "Le Horla," however, is deeply concerned with his own war situation, resisting the Horla's efforts to domesticate him: "Pourtant, l'animal, quelquefois, se révolte et tue celui qui l'a dompté... moi aussi je veux... je pourrai... mais il faut le connaître, le toucher, le voir!" (19 août, a). The inability to perceive the Horla by any human means thus stands in contrast to the empirical positivism of the nineteenth century.

An important part of Herbert Spencer's philosophy³² has to do with the theory of relativism, which prevails over the positivism of Taine or Comte in Maupassant's view of the world as illusion, recalling his statement that "la vérité absolue, la *vérité sèche* n'existe pas," or in other words, that the "real" world is whatever each artist makes it out to be. Maupassant's endorsement of both Spencer and Schopenhauer finds its first public forum in the article written to promote Les Soirées de Médan. He indicates his preference for these philosophers over the "grands maîtres" of romanticism, whom he still admires greatly, by saying that the former "ont sur la vie beaucoup d'idées plus droites

³² For more on Spencer, see Daniel Becquemont and Laurent Mucchielli, Le Cas Spencer: Religion, science et politique.

que l'illustre auteur des Misérables" (Les Soirées de Médan 294). It is significant that such a pronouncement is made in this context, which may reflect a unified philosophy among the Médan group. However, it must also be conceded that it is Maupassant speaking alone on themes that extend beyond the composition of Les Soirées de Médan. Nevertheless, his reproach of the sentimentality of the romantic school in favor of the "vieille sagesse" of Montaigne and Rabelais and the "raison" of Voltaire and Diderot, is presumed as a commonality of the group by the use of the pronoun "nous" alternately with "je."

Moreover, there is what J. H. Matthews calls a "unité de ton" that is grounded in Schopenhauerian pessimism in all the works of the Médan group. In "Maupassant écrivain naturaliste," Matthews takes a stance against traditional criticism in his insistence upon the lasting effects that naturalism had on Maupassant as well as the others: "[C]es auteurs ont été marqués par le naturalisme, cette méthode littéraire mise au service d'une attitude en face de l'homme et du monde, et [. . .] cette méthode, comme cette attitude, a laissé son empreinte sur l'œuvre entière de Maupassant" (661). Maupassant, like Huysmans, did not adopt Zola's scientific conception of the novel, which is perhaps the most defining aspect of naturalism. His essay on Zola, also like that of Huysmans, omits any talk of the experimental method, and one is hard-pressed to find the same kind of vocabulary used by Zola, words like "expérience," "document," or "formule," anywhere in Maupassant's writings. Even so, the methodology of documentation and experimentation is present in Maupassant, as Matthews maintains, only he relies more on his own personal experience than on research into other types found in society that Zola would

seek out. Juxtaposing Zola against Maupassant and the other young naturalists, Matthews infers that the latter group is “trop voué à la vision pessimiste du monde pour voir dans le roman une arme sociale” (660).

Looking at Maupassant overall, Pierre Cogny, in Maupassant peintre de son temps, prudently cautions against referring to him as either the author of “Boule de suif” or the author of “Le Horla,” but rather as the author of “Boule de suif” and “Le Horla”: “A la successivité recouvrant des alternatives trompeuses nous préférons la simultanéité, tellement plus conforme à la réalité” (12-13). It is in this manner that we can regard the totality of the stories contained in Le Horla. André Fermigier, in his preface to the *recueil*, expresses the opinion that Maupassant “a cherché à montrer dans Le Horla tous les aspects de son talent, toutes les ressources de son répertoire” and that he wanted to “varier le ton, faire alterner le rose et le noir pour ne pas rebuter par une vision trop pessimiste un public qui attendait surtout de lui d’être distrait” (20). While I do not aspire to take up a study of the entire collection,³³ I find that it is possible to read even within “Le Horla” both “le rose” and “le noir” in such pairs as the optimism of nature and the pessimism of determinism, madness and sanity, wonderful fantasy and sober reality. Thus, in Maupassant’s writing, specifically in “Le

³³ The possibility does exist for analyzing the work as a whole, following Mary Donaldson-Evans’s observation, in “Maupassant et le carcan de la nouvelle,” that current research is turning to the notion that “les recueils de Maupassant, loin d’avoir été assemblés au hasard comme le prétendent la plupart des critiques, se distinguent par une cohérence voulue et que Maupassant était à proprement parler, non un simple conteur, mais un ‘recueilliste’” (77, note 7). There remains much more to be done on this subject, but Mariane Bury has published such a study of “Le Horla” in which she proposes that a certain reading of the story is formulated based on its surroundings. “Le Horla,” the lead story, is followed not by another “fantastic” tale, but by “Amour,” which Bury describes as “une histoire de chasse suscitée par la lecture d’un ‘fait divers’” (“Comment peut-on lire ‘Le Horla’?” 255). It is also interesting that the collection includes a story dealing with the War of 1870, “Les Rois,” thus further demonstrating Maupassant’s lifelong concern with the topic.

Horla,” the theory of illusionism delivers a unique, modern invention, based on the illusionist concept of reality, that allows the coexistence of realist/naturalist and other elements, particularly the fantastic.

Modern Revisions of the Fantastic, Part I: Disillusion

Maupassant’s theory of illusionism infuses realism concurrently with the fantastic, among other modes discussed above, so thoroughly that it is impossible to draw a line where reality ends and fantasy begins. In fact, “Le Horla” and other tales labeled fantastic can be read as essentially realist texts, according to his own definition. Granted, Maupassant goes beyond the conventional concept of reality to verge upon fantasy, but he does so without giving over to it completely, that is, still existing within the illusion of reality. However, that illusion is increasingly subject to a disillusioned view of the world. Maupassant’s pessimism comes to the fore in his writings on the mysteries of the universe, expressed until then in poetry and in fantastic literature, that science was slowly unveiling. These arguments go a long way in explaining some of the matters raised in “Le Horla.”

Like naturalism and decadence, the fantastic may be misjudged as a genre. Franz Hellens proposes that the fantastic is, in essence, “une façon de voir, de sentir, d’imaginer” and argues that one finds traces of it throughout the literatures of all times, even in the most realistic and naturalistic texts of the nineteenth century (9). Others choose a slightly narrower classification, as does Georges Jacquemin in agreement with historian Marcel Schneider that the

fantastic can be mapped from the Middle Ages to the present, with the “grande époque” being the nineteenth century (9).³⁴ The conventional view holds that it truly emerged in Germany with E. T. A. Hoffmann and then in France in the last quarter of the eighteenth century with stories like Jacques Cazotte’s Le Diable amoureux (1772), but that the movement flourished in the nineteenth century, especially around 1830³⁵ and again toward the end of the century.

Charles Nodier’s essay “Du Fantastique en littérature,” published in 1830, establishes a theory in which, according to P.-G. Castex, “l’univers fantastique offre un refuge à tous ceux que déçoit et décourage le siècle nouveau” (64). This theory also foretells the existential dissatisfaction felt by the decadents. However, Schneider would insist that the fantastic is not simply “un divertissement décadent, un jeu d’intellectuel oisif, un moyen d’évasion,” which he cites as frequent accusations against fantastic writers (8). Rather, in his words, “le fantastique, c’est le réel qu’il suffit de voir avec d’autres yeux et c’est aussi l’espace du dedans” in that it allows us to explore “l’autre côté de nous-mêmes, l’envers des choses, l’au-delà des apparences, la face sombre du soleil” (8). This characterization is one of the best that has been given of the fantastic, a term plagued by the problem of definition, like decadence.³⁶

³⁴ There are many complete studies to initiate the reader to the history of the fantastic in France, including Marcel Schneider, La Littérature fantastique en France; P.-G. Castex, Le Conte fantastique en France de Nodier à Maupassant; and more recently, Jean-Baptiste Baronian, Panorama de la littérature fantastique de langue française.

³⁵ The rise of the fantastic alongside romanticism, or rather as part of the vast romantic movement considered by Mario Praz and others, has been noted in writers like Balzac, Nodier, Gautier, Mérimée, and Nerval.

³⁶ The preponderance of unsatisfactory responses in defining the fantastic has been laid out by Jean-Baptiste Baronian, even down to a comment on the popularization of the term in everyday usage (14).

Obviously, one would not immediately identify Zola as a fantastic writer. However, using Hellens's universal view of the fantastic, we may find some aspects of Zola's writing to conform to such conceptions. Moreover, I disagree with Georges Jacquemin's singling out of Zola for exclusion from the fantastic writing of the nineteenth century (32). On the contrary, Zola may be included for being concerned with the "au-delà" in his writing, both in the traditional form of the romantic period and in the modern form that we equate with Maupassant. First, we may look to some of his early short stories as being inclined toward the romantic/fantastic. For example, Edmund Gosse analyzes Zola's "Le Sang" (1862) as being "in the clouds of the worst romanticism" (7). According to his summary, this tale recounts ghostly adventures in the manner of Hoffmann or Pétrus Borel, associated with "the age of 1830, with its vampires and ghouls" (7).

Two other stories move Zola closer to the modern fantastic, "Un Mariage d'amour" (1866) and "Histoire d'un fou" (1868), which begins with the line, "On s'occupe beaucoup des aliénés en ce moment" (OC IX, 311). As will be shown in the case of Maupassant, the reflection of contemporary trends in psychiatric phenomena is part of his modern revision of the fantastic, but perhaps Zola has beat him to it. Zola's stories, which tell basically the same tale as Thérèse Raquin, give the "fait divers" a psychological treatment in literature. Thérèse Raquin proposes the alternate interpretations of haunting by the ghost of Camille or the hallucinatory effects of guilt on susceptible minds, in a way similar to Maupassant's presentation of the supernatural vs. the diarist's mental delusion.³⁷

³⁷ See, for example, Colette Becker's two studies of the novel: "Thérèse Raquin ou l'obsession de la noyade" and "Thérèse Raquin: La Science comme projet, le fantasme comme aveu."

Not only in Thérèse Raquin, but throughout Zola's Rougon-Macquart, illusions of ghosts and other phantasmal appearances abound: the specter of Tante Dide that permeates the series; the floating cadaver of Chaval in the flooded mines of Germinal; the haunting presence of Caroline in the department store in Au Bonheur des Dames; the portrait of Claude's deceased son in L'Œuvre, along with the infamous painting of the "femme sans tête." The obsession with haunting is carried to the end of Zola's career in the 1898 story "Angéline ou la maison hantée," where the narrator believes he is seeing the ghost of a little girl. Although Zola's experiments with the fantastic tend to be resolved with physiological or psychological explanations, there is also a strong artistic element that surpasses reality. In this way, the master of naturalism displays the sort of illusionism advocated by Maupassant's theory.

It is surprising that Maupassant's theoretical writings virtually ignore the fantastic, even though it occupied such a large place in his fiction. He did, however, write a *chronique*, "Le Fantastique" (1883), that touches on the genre's past and present status, but without addressing his own story-telling. While the majority of the essay is devoted to Ivan Turgenev, whom Maupassant describes as "un conteur fantastique de premier ordre" (Chroniques II, 257), he also invokes the long history of fantastic literature: "Elle a eu, cette littérature, des périodes et des allures bien diverses, depuis le roman de chevalerie, les Mille et une Nuits, les poèmes héroïques, jusqu'aux contes de fées et aux troublantes histoires d'Hoffmann et d'Edgar Poe" (257). Despite this grand heritage, the main idea inculcated from the first line of the essay is that the time for traditional fantastic literature is over because, "lentement, depuis vingt ans, le surnaturel est

sorti de nos âmes. Il s'est évaporé comme s'évapore un parfum quand la bouteille est débouchée" (256). The disappearance of the supernatural in literature may be attributed to a process of demystification that Maupassant elaborates more extensively in the earlier *chronique* "Adieu mystères."

In the present essay, though, Maupassant is content to summarize that "le premier pas, le grand pas est fait" in the pursuit of understanding that which had theretofore been unknown: "Nous avons rejeté le mystérieux qui n'est plus pour nous que l'inexploré" (256). Nonetheless, although he foresees the demise of fantastic literature in the coming twenty years when all mystery would be eradicated,³⁸ he clings to the "extraordinaire puissance terrifiante" of Hoffmann and Poe that comes from their ability to "coudoyer le fantastique" in the presentation of "des faits naturels où reste pourtant quelque chose d'inexpliqué et de presque impossible" (257). Thus, the uneasy combination of natural and supernatural or, at least, unexplained elements holds a strong allure for Maupassant and points to the seeds of his own artistic interpretation of the fantastic: "[Q]uand le doute eut pénétré enfin dans les esprits, l'art est devenu plus subtil. L'écrivain a cherché les nuances, a rôdé autour du surnaturel plutôt que d'y pénétrer. Il a trouvé des effets terribles en demeurant sur la limite du possible, en jetant les âmes dans l'hésitation [. . .]" (257). This latter statement, which predicts Todorov's definition of the fantastic a century later, shows that Maupassant sought a modernized version of the fantastic in uniting the growing

³⁸ This prediction is necessarily flawed, but not entirely without merit. The last great wave of nineteenth-century fantastic literature peaked around the turn of the century with a period that Schneider calls "fantastique symboliste et décadent," featuring works by Remy de Gourmont, Alfred Jarry, Joséphin Péladan, and Jean Lorrain, that built upon the foundation of Huysmans's A rebours (see chap. 12).

knowledge acquired through exploration with the remaining mysteries of the universe. Such is the ambition of many of his own stories, with “Le Horla” as a prime example for its balance between the poles of the supernatural or the natural as the driving forces of the protagonist’s experience.

In spite of the lack of further critical analysis of the fantastic in Maupassant’s theoretical writings, there may be room to apply some ideas from “Le Roman” and certain *chroniques* to “Le Horla.” However, as with the absence of the short story genre in his essay-writing, one must question the motive for avoiding a fully developed theory concerning the fantastic. Combining these two components, the short story and the fantastic genre, raises another issue: why does Maupassant not deal with the fantastic in the full-length form of a novel? The proximity of “Le Horla” and Pierre et Jean, including its preface, adds to the mystery surrounding Maupassant’s silence on his participation in the fantastic and even permits the hypothesis that he did not consider “Le Horla” to be fantastic, but realistic or “illusionistic,” in accordance with its concurrent publications. It seems nearly impossible to consider Maupassant as a fantastic writer “malgré lui,” but it is possible that he did not make a deliberate effort to take his writing to the extremes of the fantastic genre of the past.

Maupassant’s version of the fantastic has more to do with how the story is told than with its content. For the most part, his works contain no extravagant instances of ghosts or supernatural beings, but rather tell the tale of ordinary characters encountering their own fears and the limits of their knowledge and imagination. In “Le Horla,” for example, there is a plausible psychological cause for the phenomena experienced by the diarist. Even if we, like the diarist,

consider the Horla as an otherworldly creature who has come to colonize or domesticate human life on earth, this interpretation still represents a logical, Darwinian viewpoint: “Un être nouveau! pourquoi pas? Il devait venir assurément! pourquoi serions-nous les derniers! [. . .] [S]a nature est plus parfaite, son corps plus fin et plus fini que le nôtre [. . .]” (19 août, a). This vision of the supernatural is not too far-fetched to be beyond the realm of possibility. Also, as Marie-Claire Bancquart asserts, “Maupassant a du surnaturel une définition par elle-même matérialiste et réductrice,” shown in the statement in “Lettre d’un fou” that it is simply “ce qui nous demeure voilé” (Maupassant conteur fantastique 47). Thus, the fantastic aspect of Maupassant’s narrative lies more in the uncertainty within the mind of the diarist, with less of an emphasis upon outside influences.

The conviction of science is precisely what Maupassant laments in the literature of his period, as noted in “Le Fantastique” and even more so in “Adieu mystères,” but he does not go as far as Huysmans does in his apparent affinity for Poe’s “consolant aphorisme” that “toute certitude est dans les rêves.”³⁹ Maupassant is not quite as enticed by the ethereal dream world as Huysmans. For example, in “Le Horla,” the dreams and hallucinations experienced by the protagonist are the means for examining the mind, not the ends unto themselves. Maupassant fuses together the elements of dreams, illusions, and the imagination with the hard physical sciences to designate the human mind as the

³⁹ Quoted in his discussion of the macabre paintings of Odilon Redon in L’Art moderne (OC VI, 301). Huysmans explicitly links Redon and Poe in A rebours, as des Esseintes considers the artwork “comme au sortir [. . .] d’une lecture d’Edgar Poe dont Odilon Redon semblait avoir transposé, dans un art différent, les mirages d’hallucination et les effets de peur [. . .]” (113). He describes these drawings in terms that predict Maupassant’s rendering of the fantastic: “[Ces dessins] innovaient un fantastique très spécial, un fantastique de maladie et de délire” (113).

locus for artistic and philosophic exploration. Throughout his *œuvre*, there is a movement toward internalization, delving further into human thought and emotion, that comes with the constant input of knowledge absorbed from the surrounding world. Two of Maupassant's *chroniques*, "Adieu mystères" and "Par-delà," address the impending cognizance of the many illusions in the world through scientific advancement on an artistic level and through maturity on a personal level. These ideas together establish the basis for his reincarnation of the fantastic in the age of realism and naturalism.

"Adieu mystères," written in 1881, anticipates "Le Fantastique" in the refrain "c'est fini," signifying the evaporation of mystery in modern life and, correspondingly, in literature. Stylistically, "Adieu mystères" reads like a dramatic plea for expanding the frontiers of knowledge, even as Maupassant reminisces on the open possibilities of dreams and imagination in a less learned time. The essay begins with the admonition, "Honte aux attardés, aux gens qui ne sont pas de leur siècle!" (*Chroniques* I, 311). But are we to take the statement at face value or to infer a tone of sarcasm? Maupassant's invocation of modernity utilizes the symbol of the locomotive in protesting the ability of poets to delude readers: "Vous n'avez plus le droit de nous tromper. [. . .] Vos fables héroïques ne nous donnent plus d'illusions [. . .]. Vos pauvres fantômes sont bien mesquins à côté d'une locomotive lancée, avec ses yeux énormes, sa voix stridente, et son suaire de vapeur blanche qui court autour d'elle dans la nuit froide" (313-14). This image prefigures the anthropomorphized locomotives of *A rebours*, but its purpose is more instructive than lyrical. Indeed, the force of this locomotive foreshadows the unharnessed strength and speed of la Lison in

La Bête humaine or, perhaps more fittingly, the train that passes by Claude's burial at the end of L'Œuvre, juxtaposing blind indifference and sorrow. Zola's locomotive possesses "une voix énorme et grasse, un sifflet guttural, d'une mélancolie géante" (419), speaking to the solemnity of the occasion, but also grinding away on its course. Thus, there is mourning for the loss of an adventurous, artistic spirit, as in Maupassant bidding adieu to the "mystères" that had captured the imagination of uninformed minds, but there is also a "full steam ahead" approach to a future increasingly informed by scientific discovery.

Zola's underlying presence is palpable in "Adieu mystères." At times, the words seem to have come directly from Zola, as in Maupassant's exclamation, "Oui! vive la science, vive le génie humain! gloire au travail de cette petite bête pensante qui lève un à un les voiles de la création!" (314). In this statement, we may recall Zola's replacement of the term "création" with "nature" in his famous formula. However, while Zola heartily embraces the process of disillusionment, Maupassant qualifies his acceptance of advancement with somber reluctance: "Eh bien, malgré moi, malgré mon vouloir et la joie de cette émancipation, tous ces voiles levés m'attristent. Il me semble qu'on a dépeuplé le monde. On a supprimé l'Invisible. Et tout me paraît muet, vide, abandonné!" (314). Here, Maupassant seems to long for the creative mind of the poet that he supposedly denounced earlier. The refrain "c'est fini" is therefore both definitive and despised. In Maupassant's eyes, the mysticism of the universe is being replaced by science. Using an example that may bring to mind Zola's mystical forest and water mill in "L'Attaque du moulin," he dictates, or perhaps laments, that "les choses ne parlent plus, ne chantent plus, elles ont des lois! La source murmure

simplement la quantité d'eau qu'elle débite!" (314). In my view, Maupassant does regret the shrinking wonder of the universe, the substitution of imagination with scientific experimentation and proven hypotheses, and would resist ever giving in completely to the resolution of modern science in his own writing.

Furthermore, the restrictions imposed by knowledge upon the human mind and imagination fuel the pessimism displayed later in "Par-delà" (1884). At the same time, Maupassant argues that there are no absolute boundaries. Despite the certainty of some scientific discoveries, there is still room for exploration, for challenging the limits of science: "Nos maladies viennent de microbes? Fort bien. Mais d'où viennent les microbes? et les maladies de ces invisibles eux-mêmes?" (*Chroniques* II, 403). Overturning his earlier view of the "génie humain" that participates in science, Maupassant now takes a cynical approach in calling out the futility of some research. While the above discussion of microbes may open up a metaphysical debate, and indeed he revisits the topic in "Le Horla" as the diarist questions where his fever has come from,⁴⁰ Maupassant doubts the worth of any such pursuit: "Nous ne savons rien, nous ne voyons rien, nous ne pouvons rien, nous ne devinons rien, nous n'imaginons rien, nous sommes enfermés, emprisonnés en nous. Et les gens s'émerveillent du génie humain!" (403). The recurring theme of being imprisoned is a sign that Maupassant's pessimism has grown since "Adieu mystères," and is reflected in the notion of "le piège" set forth by Micheline Besnard-Coursodon as having both thematic and structural implications throughout Maupassant's works.

⁴⁰ "On dirait que l'air, l'air invisible est plein d'inconnaissables Puissances, dont nous subissons les voisinages mystérieux" (12 mai).

The wonder of exploring the unknown has turned into dismay in the short lapse from “Adieu mystères” to “Par-delà,” as the writer realizes that all there is to be found is disappointment: “C’est en cherchant l’inconnu qu’on s’aperçoit bien comme tout est médiocre et vite fini” (403). Along these lines, Maupassant observes the pointlessness of travel in a manner that conjures des Esseintes’s aborted trip in A rebours, even though he was in actuality an avid voyager. The Mont Saint-Michel, “ce château de fées planté dans la mer,” holds a special place in his fiction, beginning with the 1882 story “La Légende du Mont Saint-Michel.” In “Le Horla,” the diarist’s account of this mystical place reads like a travelogue, introduced as “une excursion charmante” that has cured his illness (2 juillet).⁴¹ Here too the diarist relays the legends of “ce fantastique rocher qui porte sur son sommet un fantastique monument.” The double emphasis upon the fantastic nature of this site, further stressed by the adjective’s placement before the noun, and compounded by details like the towers adorned “de chimères, de diables, de bêtes fantastiques, de fleurs monstrueuses” and the monk’s tale of a pair of supernatural creatures, “un bouc à figure d’homme et une chèvre à figure de femme,” quarrelling in “une langue inconnue,” situate this narrative within the realm of the purely fantastic or “le merveilleux.”

There are several instances of the diarist’s efforts to escape the confining prison that his home and his mind are becoming by traveling or by taking refuge in nature. While going to Paris or Rouen does provide a respite from his mental anguish, his outings in nature turn on the diarist in a manner surpassing the bare

⁴¹ Philippe Hamon also notes the usage of “locutions stéréotypées du genre ‘Guide Michelin’” in this scene and in the panoramic description of Rouen, equating the two passages as “des sortes de tableaux descriptifs d’écriture impressionniste” (“‘Le Horla’ de Guy de Maupassant: Essai de description structurale” 37).

elements of the natural world to create a number of illusions playing tricks on his mind. For example, his venture into the Roumare forest quickly deteriorates from a quest for invigoration into the frightening sense of being overwhelmed by the towering rows of trees, “deux armées d’arbres démesurément hauts” that enclose him under a thick green, almost black ceiling (2 juin). The ensuing panic of being alone, then of being pursued, causes him to turn in circles, his eyes deceiving him: “les arbres dansaient, la terre flottait.”

Another encounter with nature has him utterly convinced of the existence of an invisible other. Unlike the Horla’s nocturnal visits, this one is certified by the light of day in the diarist’s gardens where he observes a rose seemingly picked and held in the air by an unseen hand (6 août). The diarist affirms that he has seen something, but he knows not yet what he has seen: “Cette fois, je ne suis pas fou. J’ai vu... j’ai vu... j’ai vu!” The absence of a grammatical object in this case is only corrected later when he has more fully conceptualized and named the Horla. His vision has been confirmed by another sense, hearing: “J’écoute... je ne peux pas... répète... le... Horla... J’ai entendu [. . .]” (19 août, a). This allows him in the next entry of the same day to exclaim: “Je l’ai vu!” (b). Yet, this feeble accomplishment by the human senses is overruled by their fallibility in the narrator’s Darwinian view of the Horla’s superiority.

When he travels to the safe house of Parisian society, the diarist stumbles upon the same remedy prescribed to des Esseintes. Only in the company of others may he free his mind from obsessions, a truth he recognizes early on, but fails to heed: “Quand nous sommes seuls longtemps, nous peuplons le vide de fantômes” (12 juillet). Maupassant goes beyond the pragmatic solution of

embracing the familiar urban culture that is proposed and refused in “Le Horla.” Instead, he shows that his protagonist is compelled to return to the pursuit of the unknown, dangerous though it may be. On three occasions, the diarist finds a reprieve in other places: Mont Saint-Michel, Paris, and Rouen. But even in Paris his mental status is affected by his involvement in the suggestion techniques performed by Doctor Parent. The doctor’s name is significant also because it implies that he is an authority figure, and perhaps even controls his patients’ minds like parents determine their children genetically and behaviorally.

Hélène Diaz Brown, in L’Effet fantastique ou la mise en jeu du sujet, reads the narrator’s travels in terms of child psychology as a game he is playing, considering himself the sole “maître de son univers” (44). But, his position as master is compromised, as shown in his motivation to return home, sketched in ambiguous terms: “Décidément, tout dépend des lieux et des milieux. [. . .] Nous subissons effroyablement l’influence de ce qui nous entoure” (21 juillet). He now seems to be more aware of the susceptibility of the human mind not only to the powers of hypnotism, but also to one’s surroundings, that is, everyone and everything that exists within the realm of possibility. At least this newfound knowledge, which reflects the theory of determinism, provides some kind of therapy in that the first few days of his return home are characterized by the same simple pleasures that entertained him previously: “Je passe mes journées à regarder couler la Seine” (2 août).

In the scene of 7 août, there is a balancing act that reveals the optimistic and pessimistic struggle in Maupassant. The diarist meditates on his situation while strolling along the water’s edge, delighting in the sunlight bouncing off the

water and making the earth “délicieuse.” In addition to this mention of the natural elements, the diarist also seems content with his sensory perception of nature: “Le soleil [. . .] emplissait mon regard d’amour pour la vie, pour les hirondelles, dont l’agilité est une joie de mes yeux, pour les herbes de la rive, dont le frémissement est un bonheur de mes oreilles.” The sight of man at one with himself and his place in nature is soon upset by the infiltration of a stronger influence: “Une force, me semblait-il, une force occulte m’engourdissait, m’arrêtait, m’empêchait d’aller plus loin, me rappelait en arrière.” Like the reminder of an ever-present determinism weighing on human life, the moment of happiness found in nature is overshadowed by the the diarist’s concern with the unknown forces controlling him. Nevertheless, his letdown at finding no bad news upon his return reveals that he is not only caught up in the game with the Horla, but even growing dependent upon its intervention in his otherwise uneventful life: “Il n’y avait rien; et je demeurai plus surpris et plus inquiet que si j’avais eu de nouveau quelque vision fantastique.” The direct specification of the visions the diarist has been experiencing as fantastic may be a clue from the author that this is, indeed, fundamentally a fantastic tale.

Ultimately, though, the diarist is overcome by the Horla, as told in the diary entries of mid-August. His loss of will signals a submission to dominant forces, which may be either the laws of determinism or the supernatural authority of the Horla, whom he describes ultimately in the chiasmus “l’Etre nouveau, le nouveau maître” (10 septembre). The structure of the chiasmus is further charged with meaning in the symbol of the Greek letter “chi,” representing the point of contact or intersection of corresponding segments.

In this application, the diarist may be encountering his virtual double. However, since the words indicate this other “être” as a “maître,” and not an equal, the mathematical significance of the “chi” may be a more fitting solution, as it stands for the unknown quantity, or entity in the case of the Horla.

While the diarist believes that his weakened constitution is the Horla’s doing, the description is given in terms of a physical disease, further entangling the two interpretations of supernatural and natural causes: “Quand on est atteint par certaines maladies, tous les ressorts de l’être physique semblent brisés, toutes les énergies anéanties, tous les muscles relâchés, les os devenus mous comme la chair et la chair liquide comme de l’eau” (13 août). The last phrase of this sentence provides another chiasmus both structurally and semantically. Furthermore, the rhyme of “os” and “eau” at opposite ends of the phrase anchors the chiasmus. This carefully crafted chiasmus as well as the aforementioned one are outstanding examples of Maupassant’s artistry or, in keeping with the imagery of the master illusionist, his “sleight of word.”

The diarist’s next attempt to regain control comes as he delights in having the ability to give an order to “un homme qui obéit” to take him to Rouen (16 août). However, this salvaged semblance of power is short-lived because the Horla reclaims the voice of authority: “[J]’ai voulu dire: ‘A la gare!’ et j’ai crié [. . .] ‘A la maison’ [. . .]” (16 août). The diarist’s explanation of the Horla’s “ventriloquism” is not satisfactory. Does he believe that the Horla travels with him or that it communicates telepathically? Perhaps he is imposing these words on himself subconsciously. His excitement in planning ways to catch the Horla supports this interpretation. In fact, his two-hour excursion is filled by going to

buy a book by Hermann Herestauss⁴² about “les habitants inconnus du monde antique et moderne.” Thus, his main concern is not to escape from the Horla, but rather to find out more about it. In the end, the inextinguishable drive of human inquisitiveness presents itself as an alternative to accepting the established parameters of one’s physical and mental confinement in the ordinary world.

The diarist’s interest in the peoples of other worlds, contemplated in his reading of the Herestauss book and his study of the night sky (17 août), reflects Maupassant’s desire to go “any where out of the world,”⁴³ as expressed in the preface to Au soleil, a collection of travel pieces: “Le voyage est une espèce de porte par où l’on sort de la réalité connue pour pénétrer dans une réalité inexplorée qui semble un rêve” (OC IV, 4). The dreamlike quality of unfamiliar lands is thus contrasted with the boredom and over-awareness of one’s own constantly disillusioned view of reality. There are, however, certain therapies to Maupassant’s disillusioned conception of the world, including his love of nature, art, solitude, women, and other diversions. The one that occupies the utmost place of importance throughout his *œuvre* is nature. However, his appreciation of nature is attenuated by an essential problem in the juxtaposition of divine creation and the genius of humans, a view shared by Huysmans.

In contemporaneous works from 1890, Maupassant expresses conflicting feelings about his place in nature. In La Vie errante, he describes it as

⁴² This name is provocative too. Not only do both the first and last names begin with the same letter as the Horla’s, but also the German translation, “Herr ist aus” can be meaningful, as some critics have suggested, because it not only sounds foreign, but may be interpreted as “the man from ... [nowhere].” In my view, Maupassant’s construction of the name Hermann Herestauss may also allude to the master of the fantastic in Germany, Hoffmann.

⁴³ Bear in mind that des Esseintes exalts Baudelaire’s prose poem of this name precisely at the center of a triptych in A rebours (75).

intoxication: "Etre seul, sur l'eau et sous le ciel, par une nuit chaude, rien ne fait ainsi voyager l'esprit et vagabonder l'imagination. Je me sentais surexcité, vibrant, comme si j'avais bu des vins capiteux, respiré l'éther ou aimé une femme" (OC IV, 161). But, at the same time, this love of nature's splendor clashes with a description of the base, animalistic elements that the character Roger de Salins deplores in L'Inutile Beauté, adding that all that is beautiful comes from man's invention, not from God:

[J]e dis que la nature est notre ennemie, qu'il faut toujours lutter contre la nature, car elle nous ramène sans cesse à l'animal. [. . .] C'est nous qui avons introduit dans la création, en la chantant, en l'interprétant, en l'admirant en poètes, en l'idéalisant en artistes, en l'expliquant en savants qui se trompent mais qui trouvent aux phénomènes des raisons ingénieuses, un peu de grâce, de beauté, de charme inconnu et de mystère. (OC VIII, 16)

Although these words cannot be assigned directly to Maupassant, I join the belief of critics like Pierre Cogny and René-Pierre Colin that the character effectively speaks for the author.⁴⁴

In "Le Horla," it may be that the diarist speaks for Maupassant in some instances, as in the episode of 14 août that addresses both the existence of God and the view of humans as animals in nature. At once, the diarist is taken by a sudden craving: "[I]l faut, il faut, il faut que j'aille au fond de mon jardin cueillir des fraises et les manger" (14 août). This animalistic need to satisfy an urge, whether or not it is hunger, subjugates man to nature. He implores God's grace, but within the context of doubt: "Est-il un Dieu? S'il en est un, délivrez-moi,

⁴⁴ Cogny cites this excerpt as representative of a recurring philosophy throughout Maupassant's works (44), while Colin's reference to it begins with the statement that "Maupassant partage certainement l'opinion de Roger de Salins" (Schopenhauer en France: Un Mythe naturaliste 104).

sauvez-moi!" Even as he struggles to believe in God, the diarist is sure that "les Invisibles existent!" (15 août) and marvels at the creations of nature.

In the manner described in the above passage from L'Inutile Beauté, Maupassant effectuates an artistic embellishment of nature in the communion of human, animal, and plant life in his rhapsody of a butterfly, "une fleur qui vole!" (19 août, a). This flying flower, which reaches supernatural proportions like the Femme-Fleur in A rebours, is envisioned as a gigantic, inexpressible form, "grand comme cent univers," floating from star to star. Micheline Besnard-Coursodon interprets this symbol as "un rêve de libération, la vision anticipée d'un être libéré de la matière, du déterminisme des lois de la nature, de toute limitation, c'est-à-dire du piège naturel et matériel" (95-96). However, the diarist does not recognize it as such, that is, he does not acknowledge the certainty to be revealed in dreams and imagination valued by Poe and Huysmans. Instead, he understands this vision as a sign of his entrapment and his delusion: "C'est lui, lui, le Horla, qui me hante, qui me fait penser ces folies!"

Conversely, in "Par-delà," Maupassant's final estimation is that only those who live in a total state of ignorance and delusion may be happy, as he repeatedly chants phrases of "Heureux ceux qui..." to arrive at the conclusion, "Heureux ceux qui s'intéressent encore à la vie" (403). For Maupassant, those who are mad fall into this blissful category, as I shall demonstrate next in moving from the disillusion to the delusion that is part of his modern revision of the fantastic. In "Le Horla," the disillusionments that taint the diarist's experiences with nature, travel, other people, sensory perception, and life in general, mount to shake his confidence such that he has no choice but to give in to delusion. Yet,

as we shall see, the diarist's determination to commit suicide in the end suggests that he was not able to give in completely to that delusion.

Modern Revisions of the Fantastic, Part II: Delusion

Recalling the author's penchant for the combination of the "roman objectif" and the "roman d'analyse pure," joined with his interest in the medical exploration of psychological phenomena, Maupassant incorporates contemporary trends of psychopathology in his works, privileging the delusions of madness. In so doing, he brings modern science into the art form of literature, as called upon to do in the naturalist movement, thereby revitalizing the traditional fantastic with more of an emphasis upon human knowledge over the supernatural.

According to Maupassant's view, it seems that Huysmans's character des Esseintes comes closer than his own to giving in happily to delusion. Although nearly all of the pessimistic discussion in "Par-delà" may be applied to the case of des Esseintes, as I briefly suggested earlier, the remainder does focus explicitly on A rebours, which Maupassant praises for telling the story of "la maladie d'un de ces dégoûtés" (403). He identifies with Huysmans's hero who, having exhausted the pleasures of life, fabricates a new existence "à force d'imagination et de fantaisie" (404). This terminology, which Huysmans also adopts in calling his novel "une sorte de roman-fantaisie bizarre," places the work within the domain of the fantastic, according to definitions of the label and the genre as a whole. Both the Littré and Larousse dictionaries of the period equate the term

“fantastique” with the imagination,⁴⁵ and modern interpretations have upheld this link along with the added component of the reality principle.⁴⁶

French theoreticians of the fantastic in the 1950s-60s, such as P.-G. Castex, Roger Caillois, and Louis Vax, introduced the concept of the genre as distinct from the marvelous (“le merveilleux”) and the fairy tale by admitting the necessary basis of reality upon which there is an imposition of the bizarre or abnormal. Castex cites the “intrusion brutale du mystère dans le cadre de la vie réelle” (8), and Caillois likewise speaks of “un scandale, une déchirure, une irruption insolite, presque insupportable dans le monde réel” (*Images* 15). In most instances, the disturbance comes from an external source, but this need not be a requisite for determining a fantastic work. In *A rebours*, there is a disturbance, which is not fully explainable, that comes mainly from within the mind in the form of a neurosis, thus sharing many similarities with the mental torment experienced by the protagonist of “Le Horla.” Without investigating further or seeking to impose a fantastic reading upon *A rebours*, I find that Maupassant’s description of the work may open the door to this possibility. In the end, though, the conclusion of “Par-delà” reveals his concern as lying not in a

⁴⁵ The Greek etymology, from which the Latin *phantasticus* derives, gives “that which is made visible, visionary, unreal,” according to Rosemary Jackson, who tackles the ambiguity of the term in chapter two of *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion*. Marcel Schneider supplies the evolution of the word “fantastique” beginning as far back as the Renaissance, where he reads in Ronsard the signification of “mené par son imagination, visionnaire” (143). The application of the term “fantastique” in literary history, however, originated in Jean-Jacques Ampère’s discussion of Hoffmann’s tales in *Le Globe* in 1828 (Castex 7-8).

⁴⁶ See, for example, Irène Bessière’s work on “l’expérience imaginaire des limites de la raison” in *Le Récit fantastique: La Poétique de l’incertain*, 29-64, and William G. Plank’s essay “The Imaginary: Synthesis of Fantasy and Reality.” The works of Christine Brooke-Rose and Rosemary Jackson are also important for addressing the ways in which the fantastic subverts reality. However, as Deborah A. Harter points out, there are no complete studies that address what she calls the “surprising alliance” of the fantastic with the practices of nineteenth-century realism, insisting that the relation is seen either as one of opposition or as “a presence of one form in the other,” which ultimately serves to keep them apart (134, note 9).

comprehensive analysis of the novel, but more in the plight of des Esseintes, “ce névrosé” who appeals to Maupassant as “le seul homme intelligent, sage, ingénieux, vraiment idéaliste et poète de l’univers, s’il existait” (407).

The diarist in “Le Horla” is a kindred spirit to des Esseintes. Indeed, one may easily see the entire episode of “Le Horla” as something that could have happened to des Esseintes. The basis of reality is set for both, followed by the intrusion of the bizarre, which calls into question the mental health of each protagonist. There are valid physiological or psychological explanations in both cases, yet the writers’ treatment of each situation leaves the reader in doubt. The uncertainty felt by the reader and also by the character(s) within a text is the hinge that determines the fantastic, according to Tzvetan Todorov in Introduction à la littérature fantastique⁴⁷: “Le fantastique, c’est l’hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel” (29). It is important to recognize that Todorov’s “groundbreaking” notion of the hesitation involved in fantastic literature was already present in Maupassant’s theoretical writing in “Le Fantastique,” as shown earlier. Todorov’s innovation also included seeing the fantastic from the point of view of an implicit reader: “Le fantastique implique donc une intégration du lecteur au monde des personnages [. . .]. *L’hésitation du lecteur* est donc la première condition du fantastique” (35-36). But, here too, Maupassant

⁴⁷ The word “introduction” in the title of this 1970 work indicates that Todorov is opening the question of what constitutes fantastic literature (from a structuralist approach), but is not attempting to answer definitively something which possibly can never be answered. Although the fantastic had garnered the attention of many earlier scholars, those studies were mostly concerned with historical or thematic aspects of the genre. Todorov’s poetics of the fantastic revitalized this field of study and has since served as the cornerstone of many inquiries concerning fantastic literature.

had already proposed a reader-response theory in considering the “lecteur indécis” who, grappling with the blurred limits of possibility, “perdait pied comme en une eau dont le fond manque à tout instant, se raccrochait brusquement au réel pour s’enfoncer encore tout aussitôt, et se débattre de nouveau dans une confusion pénible et enfiévrante comme un cauchemar” (257).

The bewilderment experienced by the reader, described as being in a “cauchemar,” coincides with the uncertainty of the protagonist’s view of the world. In the case of *des Esseintes*, the scale of hesitation tips toward a physiological explanation, as revealed in the bookends of the novel: the “Notice” alerts the reader to the flawed lineage of the *des Esseintes* family and the ending effectuates a return to Parisian society as a preventive measure against the encroaching madness. These factors help to remove the novel from consideration as a fantastic text and situate it within a naturalistic concept of decadence, such as I have discussed in the previous chapter. In “Le Horla,” the diagnosis is more ambiguous. The diarist appears initially as a robust character, exalting life and nature, and expressing a strong connection to his family roots. In the idyllic description of the first diary entry, Maupassant makes certain that his protagonist is normal in that there is no hereditary cause for any future mental illness. However, the reader is forewarned in an oblique way of the susceptible nature of the diarist by his overuse of exclamation marks in describing his health, by his association of physical and emotional symptoms, and by his premonitions: “J’ai sans cesse cette sensation affreuse d’un danger menaçant, [. . .] ce pressentiment qui est sans doute l’atteinte d’un mal encore inconnu, germant dans le sang et dans la chair” (16 mai).

Another facet of Maupassant's character is the sense of belonging and appreciating one's identity as part of a family and community. Unlike des Esseintes, this character is neither a recluse nor a misanthrope. He is not drawn to all the esoteric pursuits of a des Esseintes, but rather seems to enjoy the simple pleasures of life. By most early indications, Maupassant's protagonist seems sound in mind and body, making it all the more conclusive to consider the diarist as a rational person and leading us to believe as the story progresses that the Horla truly is an external, supernatural presence, and not the invention of a sick mind. Yet, his insistence upon "le moi," evident from the first entry's dominating discourse of the "je" and his close identification with his home and possessions, sets up the possibility for a subjective reading of the diarist's psyche. Furthermore, there are hints throughout "Le Horla" that the diarist may be overwhelmingly preoccupied with the study of psychological phenomena. For instance, he is knowledgeable of the current practices of mind manipulation, citing the path paved by Mesmer (16 juillet), which may be a signal of an abnormally high interest in the subject. Considering that he partakes in such specialized reading as the book by Herestauss and the Revue du Monde Scientifique, are we to believe that this sort of pastime is typical of a learned man of Maupassant's era, or rather that he is consumed with thinking about medical and psychological topics to the point of obsessive compulsion?

While Huysmans studied theories on neurosis proposed by Bouchut and Axenfeld in preparing to write A rebours, Maupassant went a step further. Not only did he read medical texts, he also attended public lectures given by the famous neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot at the Salpêtrière hospital on the

subjects of hysteria and hypnosis in the mid-1880s. Charcot's audience included such figures as Henri Bergson, Emile Durkheim, Edmond de Goncourt, Alphonse Daudet, and Sarah Bernhardt. Cristina Mazzoni, in Saint Hysteria, reports that these demonstrations of the treatment of hysterics were often perceived as "fully staged dramatic performances, successful above all at drawing a largely nonmedical audience from *tout Paris*" (29). The scene of mesmerism in "Le Horla" at the home of the diarist's cousin, Madame Sablé, amounts to Maupassant's own rendering of these spectacles. His assessment of Charcot elsewhere exposes his attraction to the exploration of mysterious illnesses of the mind as well as the detrimental effects of such involved study, shown in this excerpt from the 1882 story "Magnétisme"⁴⁸: "Charcot [. . .] me fait l'effet de ces conteurs dans le genre d'Edgar Poe, qui finissent par devenir fous à force de réfléchir à d'étranges cas de folie. Il a constaté des phénomènes nerveux inexplicables et encore inexplicables [. . .]" (OC II, 84).⁴⁹

Even as Maupassant writes of Charcot falling under the influence of the madness he sees in his patients, at the same time, he contends that the doctor is unduly influencing those patients by accentuating their nervous condition: "[Charcot] entretient à grands frais dans son établissement modèle de la Salpêtrière un peuple de femmes nerveuses auxquelles il inocule la folie [. . .]" ("Une Femme," Chroniques II, 111-12). For all his assiduous study of the

⁴⁸ "Magnétisme" was the term used for hypnotism at the time, and those who practiced it were called "magnétiseurs." It is also useful to note that doctors who dealt with psychiatrics were then known as "aliénistes."

⁴⁹ In an interesting turn, Charcot commented on Maupassant's fiction -- though it is unclear to which work he was referring, the only indication being "un livre de nouvelles" -- as recounted in an 1893 letter written by René Valléry-Radot, the son-in-law of Pasteur: "Cela est triste, disait-il, cela est d'un malade. Il y a autre chose dans le monde que ces spectacles-là. Le monde vaut mieux, il y a plus de bonté" (qtd. in Guillaumin 71).

doctor's lessons, Maupassant found fault in the overriding abuse of the diagnosis of hysteria, which Jean-Louis Cabanès attributes to the fact that the focus on this disease, promoted by Charcot from 1878 on, made it into a "maladie à la mode" (Le Corps et la maladie 186). The dominance of hysteria as a leading cause of the degeneration witnessed by Max Nordau in the artistic world confirms its pervasive reach, despite the writer's malicious style of criticism. Maupassant also passed judgment on hysteria's ubiquitous presence in the late nineteenth century, declaring in "Une Femme," "Hystérique, madame, voilà le grand mot du jour," and, after going through a laundry-list of "symptoms" that would all too readily warrant the diagnosis of hysteria, concludes, "Vous êtes ceci, vous êtes cela, vous êtes enfin ce que sont toutes les femmes depuis le commencement du monde? Hystérique! Hystérique! vous dis-je" (111).

Although hysteria is regarded historically as a strictly female ailment,⁵⁰ the notion of male hysteria is a newer concept⁵¹ studied by Mark S. Micale in Approaching Hysteria, one which may be applied to both des Esseintes and the diarist of "Le Horla." During the 1990s, which he calls a second *fin de siècle*, Micale observes a rise of professional interest in the history of the disease even as it saw a decline in the medical world, with the terminology of hysteria on the verge of becoming anachronistic (4). Indeed, Ilza Veith had already noted three decades earlier that the term was becoming outdated, replaced in the field of

⁵⁰ The standard work to consult on the evolution of hysteria from ancient Egypt to modern times is Ilza Veith's Hysteria: The History of a Disease. Veith allows for different manifestations of the disease according to various societal interpretations, but demonstrates that the root of all cultures' understanding of it began with the image of the discontent, wandering womb, and its nomenclature, derived from the Greek *hysteria*, therefore reflects that idea.

⁵¹ "Newer" is a relative term. According to Mazzoni, Charcot made the "controversial claim to have scientifically established the existence of a male hysteria," which he found mainly among the lower classes (5).

psychiatrics by the expression “conversion symptom,” to reflect Freud’s theory that “neurotic patients generally suffer from a marked emotional tension which arises from an unconscious source, and that this tension [. . .] may be converted from its emotional manifestation into a physical ailment” (viii).

The more neutral term of “conversion symptom” is perhaps better equipped to deal with the male hysteria that Micale traces in the literary world to Baudelaire’s early perception of the disorder’s two-fold applicability to men as well as women and to literature as well as medicine. Gauging from his 1857 review of Madame Bovary, Baudelaire predicted a male counterpart to Emma in future works like A rebours: “L’hystérie! Pourquoi ce mystère physiologique ne ferait-il pas le fond et le tuf d’une œuvre littéraire, ce mystère [. . .] qui se traduit chez les hommes nerveux par toutes les impuissances et aussi par l’aptitude à tous les excès?” (OC II, 83).⁵² Baudelaire’s suggestion also allows for an understanding of the diarist in “Le Horla” as a male hysteric, only Maupassant does not focus on the physiological, but rather the psychological nature of his protagonist’s experience. Nonetheless, this does not prohibit the diagnosis of hysteria, for, while it is often said to be caused by “une lésion interne,” according to Cabanès, “Maupassant soutient qu’elle est un phénomène culturel” (187).

Rae Beth Gordon’s research on the “cross-pollination between psychiatrists and imaginative writers” in the nineteenth century leads to a deconstruction of “the dichotomy of ‘natural’ and supernatural by revealing that the former may be as strange as the latter,” as described in the editor’s preface by

⁵² Gérard Gasarian’s De loin tendrement deals with hysteria in Baudelaire and points to further implications for the male hysteric in prose as well as poetry.

Laurence Porter in L'Esprit Créateur (6). In Gordon's judgement, Maupassant's fantastic tales are terrifying not for any suggestion there may be of the supernatural, but rather "the experience of mental alienation, the psychic phenomena that had been so meticulously documented -- but that remained to be explained -- by medicine" (20). This statement recalls Maupassant's observation in "Magnétisme" that Charcot dealt with largely inexplicable phenomena. Charcot also was attuned to spiritual and aesthetic matters, as evidenced by his writings on faith healing in La Foi qui guérit,⁵³ and in a study called Les Démoniaques dans l'art (1886) that arrives at a naturalist type of conclusion: "Toute ressource manque à l'artiste, peintre, sculpteur, acteur, en dehors de l'observation exacte de la nature. Car il ne suffit pas de déformer à plaisir et de faire étrange à volonté" (109).

By contrast, it is possible to see in the revision of "Le Horla" from one version to the next a deformation of sorts by Maupassant's elimination of the setting of the mental hospital, which further confuses the reader and the protagonist as to the character's sanity. Calling upon the aid of a medical expert in the first version -- in fact, Doctor Marrande is said to be "le plus illustre et le plus éminent des aliénistes" (Le Horla 192) -- serves to legitimize the protagonist's experience with the Horla because the doctor believes his story. Indeed, André Targe points out that the doctor has become "presque l'ami du malade" (447). The context is noteworthy, as Targe explains, because there is a theatrical quality in the presentation of the narrative before a panel of

⁵³ Charcot, like Zola in Lourdes (1894) and Huysmans in Les Foules de Lourdes (1906), was inspired by the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to the peasant girl Bernadette Soubirous in 1858. Nonetheless, Charcot states that faith healing belongs entirely to the scientific order (111).

specialists.⁵⁴ The doctor introduces the narrator almost in the manner of a promoter for a sideshow of some freak of nature: “Je vais vous soumettre le cas le plus bizarre et le plus inquiétant que j’aie jamais rencontré” (192).

Having this character state his case in his own words, instead of it being told by the doctor, proves to be a sticking point. On the one hand, he argues persuasively for the veracity of his encounter with the Horla with calm, collected precision, thus epitomizing the discourse of rhetoric. It is clear that in his time at the hospital he has thought things over and decided how best to narrate his story. He even checks himself by adjusting his delivery in response to the audience’s reaction: “Je sens, Messieurs, que je vous raconte cela trop vite. Vous souriez, votre opinion est déjà faite: ‘C’est un fou’” (195).⁵⁵ However, the reader’s underlying skepticism of this incredible tale, which evidently is shared by those in attendance, reinforces the understanding that all is taking place within the walls of a mental institution and we must question the patient’s reliability.

Moreover, it seems improbable that any real doctor would so readily fall under the spell of his patient’s story-telling, especially given the frequency of cases of hysteria, including outbreaks of mass hysteria in the late nineteenth century. Hence the impact of artistic intervention. Rather than having the story told by an impartial observer, Maupassant allows the character to speak his own

⁵⁴ Targe also contends that the “allure objective et quasi scientifique” of this setting prevents the reader from being able to identify with the character, which is further compounded by his story being embedded in the doctor’s opening and closing statements. Targe’s study, “Trois apparitions du Horla,” juxtaposes profoundly the two versions of the story as well as adding commentary on the third specification of “Le Horla” in Maupassant’s voyage in the hot-air balloon of this name.

⁵⁵ Essentially, the second version of the story is an attempt to slow things down as the diarist can develop his thoughts on paper in his own time. Thus, it becomes more suspenseful as the narrative is drawn out longer even as the time frame is reduced from over a year in the first version to barely four months in the second.

mind, but one that we suspect is unsound. The confusion of the medical panel, hovering between disbelief and a semi-hypnotic state induced by the mesmerizing story, places the reader in doubt. Nevertheless, we have the assurance of the institutional setting to support the notion that Maupassant was letting us know that his character was fundamentally insane and that his primary doctor was incompetent for believing such a story in the end: “Je ne sais si cet homme est fou ou si nous le sommes tous les deux..., ou si... si notre successeur est réellement arrivé” (199). The absence of a response from the panel leaves one to wonder whether they would fall in line with their colleague or commit him along with his patient.

In the second version, the medical establishment is replaced by the Horla. The expectation of finding a medical reason for the occurrences in “Le Horla” has been abandoned as Maupassant releases his protagonist fully to the realm of his imagination. Additionally, the diarist takes up his own psychoanalysis in a move that predates the foundational theories of Freud.⁵⁶ One of the criticisms leveled against Todorov is that his reading of Maupassant’s fantastic tales tends to chalk them up to what he labels “étrange,” that is, “uncanny” in Freudian terms. Freud’s 1919 study of the uncanny, which translates to “l’inquiétante étrangeté,” builds upon the dual definition of the German *unheimlich*, as T. E.

Apter explains: “The uncanny [. . .] belongs to that class of the terrifying which

⁵⁶ Pierre Bayard, in *Maupassant juste avant Freud*, takes an inverse approach to the more common practice of applying psychoanalysis to the reading of Maupassant’s works by seeking to read Freud with the aid of Maupassant, “en appliquant la littérature à la psychanalyse” (13). The author ponders the parallel influence of Charcot and the surrounding intellectual climate of the times on these two important figures, one writing in theory, the other in fiction, noting that “tous deux se sont trouvés ensemble dans le même lieu, à la même époque, face à Charcot [. . .] et surtout, tous deux ont été confrontés à une même évolution de la pensée européenne” (11). See also Elisabeth Roudinesco’s history of psychoanalysis in France in *La Bataille de cent ans*, especially chapter two of the first part, which deals with the confluence of all three individuals.

leads back to something long known by us or felt by us: in short, the uncanny, or strange, actually points to the recurrence of something very familiar, but repressed or discarded" (33). The uncanny, for all its strangeness, is nonetheless able to be explained at least on a subconscious level, and so is different from the purely fantastic in which no explanation may be found.

We may then question where madness falls, for, as Deborah Harter argues, Todorov's study offers no indication and is "unable theoretically to account for those texts in which madness is significant" (6). Harter sees further complication in the inability to locate madness, following the analyses of Derrida and Foucault that madness cannot be said and can only be misapprehended (90).⁵⁷ While Harter does not address this problem in "Le Horla" at length, she does suggest there is a "production of a veritable 'body' of madness" (91) in the being of the Horla that I believe coincides with a discourse of madness as the narrator articulates his interaction with this other "body." Therefore, in my reading of "Le Horla," I will consider those illusions of the other as part of the totality of illusions that make up Maupassant's view of reality.

Ultimately, in his modern revision of the fantastic, Maupassant's concern with disillusionment goes hand-in-hand with delusion, as can be seen in "Le Horla," a text that produces illusions of madness, yet still within the framed illusion of reality. These ideas find a synthesis in the profound and revealing

⁵⁷ See Derrida's discussion of Foucault's *Folie et déraison* in "Cogito et histoire de la folie," in which he postulates, "Faire l'histoire de la folie elle-même, c'est donc faire l'archéologie d'un silence" (57).

statement made in the first lines of “Madame Hermet” in 1887.⁵⁸ Here the narrator extols the delusional state of those who are mad, forsaking the ideals of logic and reason, the hallmarks of realist and naturalist literature:

Les fous m’attirent. Ces gens-là vivent dans un pays mystérieux de songes bizarres, dans ce nuage impénétrable de la démence [. . .]. Cette vieille barrière, la logique, cette vieille muraille, la raison, [. . .] se brisent, s’abattent, s’écroulent devant leur imagination lâchée en liberté, échappée dans le pays illimité de la fantaisie [. . .]. Eux seuls peuvent être heureux sur la terre car, pour eux, la Réalité n’existe plus. (*OC* III, 147-48)

The ending of this passage recalls Maupassant’s phraseology in “Par-delà” (“Heureux ceux qui...”), as well as the main aspects of his pessimism, including his chagrin in the face of the disillusionment that is forced upon lucid minds. Maupassant’s divagation from naturalism into the exploration of psychological phenomena serves to highlight the inadequacy of science alone in engaging the imaginative spirit of the human mind. Thus, in “Le Horla” and his other fantastic tales, he draws upon the mystery of the traditional fantastic in giving a modern revision of the genre.

Illusions of Self and Other(s)

Reading “Le Horla” in light of the author’s interaction with the medical community and the growing interest in unlocking the mysteries of the mind, we may conceive of the story as an attempt to incorporate scientific advances into literature, while at the same time holding back, or rather, holding onto a number

⁵⁸ Concerning this story that is contemporaneous to “Le Horla,” Charlotte Schapira writes, “De vrai conte sur la folie, dans l’œuvre de Maupassant, il n’y en a peut-être qu’un seul: ‘Madame Hermet’” (35).

of illusions. In some respects, “Le Horla” is a classic ghost tale that rejoins the fantastic tradition of the romantic period for its treatment of supernatural themes, language of fear, and stylistic achievement of uncertainty. However, it is also altogether modern. Following on the heels of A rebours, Maupassant tells the story of a singular hero who represents many others by communicating the concerns of his age, one that is caught between progress and decadence, as well as fundamental concerns about the human condition and the universe. Unlike des Esseintes, the diarist speaks in his own voice through his journal-writing, yet there are a host of others who speak through him or for him, including the actual author, Maupassant, the important influences of Flaubert and Zola, and ultimately the Horla itself, the other being that gains a voice through the maddened discourse of the journal. The text’s engagement with the reader also involves a juxtaposition of self and other as the reader can alternately identify with the diarist and yet question his voice and his reason. Therefore, I wish to consider some of the many illusions of self and other(s) primarily in the language of “Le Horla,” since the main motivation for writing a journal is to reflect upon oneself and one’s thoughts, emotions, and experiences with others.

Any literary work is subject to preconceptions about the association of the writer with his creation, but in the case of Maupassant, there are many factors that have been argued by reputed scholars to link the writer’s own life with his fiction. For example, Pierre Cogny perpetuates the autobiographical readings proposed by Edouard Maynial and André Vial in framing the author’s life in terms of his works to arrive at an assemblage of five representative stories, with “Le Horla” occupying the titular place of importance, in Le Maupassant du

“Horla.” The other four, “Lui?” “Un fou?” “Fou” and “Qui sait?” are also tales of madness, among the thirty or so that exist in Maupassant’s *œuvre*, and point to the ambiguity displayed in many of those titles, most of which are made up of one or two enigmatic words, with a significant number ending in question marks.⁵⁹ A more detailed categorization of Maupassant’s works according to the progression of his mental illness is provided by P.-G. Castex in his chapter “Maupassant et son mal,” where he describes the summation as “jusqu’au bout lucide, mais peu à peu envahie par une atroce angoisse” (465).

Knowledge of the author’s life has led to an erroneous interpretation of “Le Horla,” among other works, that could not have been foreseen by the public at the time of its appearance. Only in retrospect do some deduce that “Le Horla” is the work of a madman. Most of his contemporary readers had no reason to believe that he was on the path to insanity. Nevertheless, Maupassant anticipated such a reaction, as Huysmans did with A rebours, for they both knew that their writing defied the norm. François Tassart relays Maupassant’s words:

J’ai envoyé aujourd’hui à Paris le manuscrit du Horla; avant huit jours vous verrez que tous les journaux publieront que je suis fou. A leur aise, ma foi, car je suis sain d’esprit, et je savais très bien, en écrivant cette nouvelle, ce que je faisais. C’est une œuvre d’imagination qui frappera le lecteur et lui fera passer plus d’un frisson dans le dos, car c’est étrange. (93)

Antonia Fonyi assesses this statement as proof that even though Maupassant was not “en état de psychose” in writing “Le Horla,” the very fact that he feels it necessary to deny a reading of “un épisode psychotique” serves to affirm the possibility of witnessing “la menace de la perte d’identité” in someone who was

⁵⁹ Cogny also mentions “Fou?” for its similarity to “Fou,” and the poem “Terreur,” which he calls a prefiguration of “Le Horla” (8). The poem, which reads almost like prose, is a nearly identical depiction of the sort of night hauntings experienced by the diarist.

disposed to psychosis and who used writing as a defense against the invasion of madness (“La Limite: Garantie précaire de l’identité” 758). However, contrary to Maupassant’s prediction, Roger L. Williams informs that “Le Horla” was not regarded by contemporaries in this light. Keeping in mind that it was “intellectually fashionable to be concerned about hysteria and other personality disorders,” Williams maintains that several of Maupassant’s friends “claimed to have given him the idea for the story in order to exploit the fashion” (243).⁶⁰

The writing in “Le Horla” conveys madness through a precise, persuasive approach called for in Maupassant’s theoretical writings. The story is certainly more than autobiography, though that does not mean all such elements must be discounted. But, more important, it is an artistic composition. Maupassant transforms a medical theme into literature, which was ostensibly the intent of Zola’s experimental method, in ways that both adhere to and surpass that objective. While he may have been just as qualified as any medical expert, if not more so, his narrative treatment of madness goes far beyond being a “document humain” of his “coin de vérité.” A doctor would not strive for the type of dramatization that Maupassant achieves in casting the reader into a state of doubt along with the diarist, which is the hesitation that distinguishes the fantastic. Louis Vax demonstrates this notion in his comparison of a doctor and a writer: “Le médecin cherche à apaiser son malade, le conteur veut troubler son lecteur” (L’Art et la littérature fantastiques 21). Thus, Zola’s equation of the

⁶⁰ The only corroborating evidence I have found comes from Louis Vax: “[L]e thème du conte, déjà exploité par Fitz-James O’Brien [in “What was it?” (1859)], a été suggéré à l’auteur, sans doute par Léon Hennique” (Les Chefs-d’œuvre de la littérature fantastique 155). This bit of information is significant for my study, considering that Hennique was part of the Médan group.

novelist and physician in Le Roman expérimental is displaced in the fantastic and in Maupassant's writing.

Many critics predictably associate the journal form of "Le Horla" with a mirror and indeed find several interesting uses of mirrors in the text.⁶¹ For example, we may perceive an identity crisis for the diarist because his image appears where it should not be and fails to appear precisely where it should be: the hypnotized Mme Sablé can see her cousin in a "carte de visite" (16 juillet),⁶² but the actual mirror in the diarist's bedroom does not reflect his image because of the Horla's intervention (19 août, b).⁶³ The diarist also must see himself from the perspective of a double, which Brewster Fitz finds in "the otherness of the 'I' once it is recorded in writing" (962). In fact, the diarist even talks to himself, or perhaps to an implied reader, in describing an out-of-body experience: "Figurez-vous un homme qui dort [. . .]" (5 juillet). His explanation reveals a fascination with this other self because he wonders whether his possible sleepwalking is a manifestation of "cette double vie mystérieuse qui fait douter s'il y a deux êtres en nous, ou si un être étranger, inconnaissable et invisible, anime, par moments, quand notre âme est engourdie, notre corps captif qui obéit à cet autre [. . .]."

⁶¹ Sylvie L. F. Richards's recent article, "Mirrored Distortions: Catoptrics and the Fantastic in Guy de Maupassant's 'Le Horla,'" goes a long way in addressing what she believes to be lacking in criticism on this subject. See also Brewster E. Fitz, "The Use of Mirrors and Mirror Analogues in Maupassant's 'Le Horla'" and Trevor A. Le V. Harris, Maupassant in the Hall of Mirrors. Valerie Raoul's The French Fictional Journal: Fictional Narcissism/Narcissistic Fiction provides a general study of the genre with many applications for Maupassant's work.

⁶² Phillipe Bonnefis points out that this is not just any piece of paper; it is basically a "carte d'identité" (Comme Maupassant 131). Moreover, the image she sees in this white card is a reflection of the diarist holding a photo of himself, thus a double image.

⁶³ It is believed that Maupassant experienced this sort of hallucination himself and incorporated similar scenes in other writings, such as in "Lettre d'un fou," a story many consider to be a primitive version of "Le Horla." For further comparison of the "carte de visite" and mirror scenes, see Trevor Harris, "La Révolution et le cercle," 163-66, and Max Milner, La Fantasmagorie: Essai sur l'optique fantastique, 111-12.

The theme of the double appears not only in the association with mirroring, but is omnipresent in the text, down to such fine points as those in the last day's account of trapping the Horla: the diarist locks the door "à double tour" (mentioned two times), he carries "deux lampes" to set the house on fire, and watches outside as "deux autres fenêtres éclatèrent" and "deux mansardes s'ouvrèrent" (10 septembre).⁶⁴ The diarist's language also reflects the process of doubling back with the verbs "revenant" and "retournant" and the repetition of phrases, "C'est fait... c'est fait...," and "je l'enfermai, tout seul, tout seul." There is a duality of form at the beginning of the text as well that mirrors the duality of man and nature, evident in the phrase, "J'aime ce pays, et j'aime y vivre" (8 mai).⁶⁵ The narrator repeats words and phrases throughout, which intensifies as he pauses to question himself over and over. An abundance of suspension points, question marks, and exclamation points also lends to this growing discourse of madness. Finally, in the last lines of the journal, all these elements come together: "Non... non... sans aucun doute, sans aucun doute... il n'est pas mort... Alors... alors... il va donc falloir que je me tue, moi!..." Furthermore, the key word "alors" has been cited by some as an inverted form of "Horla," which phonetically achieves the warped reflection of the diarist's own self.⁶⁶

It is important to consider at least briefly the implications of naming the Horla, starting with its dominance established in the title. Although the diarist does not name the Horla until late in the diary (19 août, a), the reader knows

⁶⁴ See Hélène Diaz Brown's comments on the significance of the number two in "Le Horla" (120).

⁶⁵ Trevor Harris cites a high incidence of pairs of terms, especially in the opening paragraphs of the diary, and a system of binary oppositions that runs throughout (Hall of Mirrors 169).

⁶⁶ Alain Schaffner, for example, analyzes the significance of this last image, which "permet d'opérer le renversement, le passage de l'autre côté du miroir" (160).

from the outset that this is a story of the other just as much, if not more than it is about the diarist. In the first version, the narrator devises the name: "L'Être! Comment le nommerai-je? L'Invisible. Non, cela ne suffit pas. Je l'ai baptisé le Horla. Pourquoi? Je ne sais point" (Le Horla 196). The second version is even less certain as the diarist initially shares an identity with the Horla in the pronoun "on," as in, "On avait donc bu cette eau? Qui? Moi? moi, sans doute? Ce ne pouvait être que moi?" (5 juillet). The persistence of question marks in what should be declarative sentences indicates what the diarist will soon find out, that the "on" is this "être invisible," this "quelqu'un," this "il," that eventually divulges its name: "il semble qu'il me crie son nom [. . .] le... Horla... c'est lui... le Horla... il est venu!" (19 août, a). The difficulty of naming the unknown is a distinction between realist and fantastic texts, as Philippe Hamon argues in "Un Discours contraint": "Dans le programme réaliste, le monde est descriptible, accessible à la dénomination. Par là, il s'oppose au monde du discours fantastique (l'innomable, l'indescriptible, le monstre...)" (162). Maupassant's naming of the Horla, according to this analysis, would serve to move the text from the pure fantastic into an illusion of reality. The Horla does not remain a vague, indescribable phantom, but is authenticated by having a name, a list of likes and dislikes, a series of performed actions, even a murky physical presence as it eclipses the diarist's image in the mirror.

The neologism "le Horla" has prompted numerous interpretations, most of which prioritize its otherness. Alain Schaffner proposes that the Horla's name "a tout simplement été choisi par Maupassant pour la richesse de ses sonorités (qui évoquent la mort, l'horreur, le hurlement, etc.) et pour la remarquable

diversité des interprétations auxquelles il se prête" (151). Its strangeness confronts the familiarity of so many names in the narrator's journal: names of people (Dumas *films*, Musset, Mesmer in the public domain; Mme Sablé, Doctor Parent on a personal level) and places (Rouen, Mont Saint-Michel, Paris, the Théâtre-Français). The fact that it is capitalized asks the reader to treat it as a proper noun, yet the appendage of an article, *le*, sets it apart from human beings and objectifies it. This article also questions its sexuality, given that names ending in *-a* are typically feminine. Indeed, this ambiguity can be understood as either an inclusion of both sexes or a choice between the two: *le* or *la*.⁶⁷ The addition of a mute *h* becomes significant in this scenario for the separation, a brief moment of hesitation, that it causes. We may recall Todorov's insistence upon hesitation and add to it his assertion that "seul le langage permet de concevoir ce qui est toujours absent: le surnaturel" (87). The supernatural is inscribed in the Horla in the reading of "hors" and "là," indicating a creature from the beyond, which is the most accepted interpretation of the name.⁶⁸

The central dichotomy of self and other in "Le Horla" takes shape in two main forms: one external, the diarist vs. the Horla; the other internal, the diarist vs. himself or his double. The first supports the reading of the supernatural and the second, the natural manifestation of madness. Both have implications for the writing process. The first-person structure of the journal and Maupassant's

⁶⁷ On the subject of the "feminized" other, see Charles J. Stivale's article "Guy de Maupassant and Narrative Strategies of 'Othering.'" Mary Donaldson-Evans provides the intriguing explanation that Maupassant, who spent two weeks in England in 1886, may have been transcribing the phrase "le or la?" that he would have heard frequently in conversations with English hosts unsure of the gender of French nouns (*A Woman's Revenge* 136).

⁶⁸ For more on the Horla's name, see Philippe Bonnefis, who considers it as "un nom migrateur" for its various meanings (*Comme Maupassant* 135-39).

presentation of a stable, rational character manipulate the reader to side with the diarist. However, the diarist possesses a schizophrenic voice that devolves throughout the text. The Horla's escalating interference in the mind of the diarist forces the reader to question where the words come from, for it becomes uncertain who is really dictating the narrative. Along with the question of narrative identity raised in any text, that is, whether the words are to be attributed to the narrator or to the actual author, this text breaks down further into a struggle between the diarist and the Horla inside the realm of the narrative. At one point in the diary mentioned earlier, the writer fears he has lost control of his speech (16 août). Though it is temporary, and he assigns this loss to the superior power of the Horla, it may also be a case of aphasia, a loss of language due to madness.

Yet, Maupassant is capable of writing madness in a coherent, logical manner. The text of "Le Horla" does display signs of madness, but on the whole, it is a comprehensible text, which Monique Plaza, in Écriture et folie, assimilates in the "double dessein" of the author: "montrer la logique de la folie, son intelligibilité, et plonger le lecteur dans le doute" (180). Not only the reader, but the narrator too is uncertain, since he is not sure where to find his voice. Hélène Diaz Brown notes the imposition of the Horla in the diarist's language as it takes over his thoughts: "Bien qu'il commence sous la forme d'un journal intime qui devrait être centré sur le JE, c'est plutôt la présence du pronom IL qui l'emporte, à mesure que le narrateur devient de plus en plus obsédé par la manifestation du

Horla" (11). This intrusion of an (other) "il" thus presents a strong challenge to the narrator's egocentric nature.⁶⁹

From the start, says Mary Donaldson-Evans in "Beginnings to Understand," the reader is entering into a tale of deception with the diarist's opening "speech" coaxing us, along with the diarist, into a comfort zone on this "journée admirable," replete with its depiction of "*his* house, *his* windows, *his* garden" (39). The landscape returns the diarist to his inner, childhood self because, as Claude-Gilbert Dubois observes, it features all the basics that are invariably found in most "dessins d'enfants," indicating the "paysages projectifs" studied by child psychologists: house, tree, grass, water, the sun, and so on (20). The diarist's attachment to the soil goes beyond his familial roots to unite him physically with his homeland and with the human condition.

The natural elements of earth, water, wind, and fire⁷⁰ are closely linked to the illusions of self and other in "Le Horla." The earth is a framing device: it gives birth to the diarist's ensuing adventure with the first sight of him being "étendu sur l'herbe" (8 mai) and, in the end, taking refuge in the Hôtel Continental. This earth-based name is especially significant because it marks a contrast to the realm of the Horla, whose figurative birth comes by way of the water since it makes its arrival "sur (la) scène / Seine," not just from the "au-delà," but from the "eau-delà."⁷¹ The Horla's association with water is further

⁶⁹ This other "il" is in addition to the "je-il" implied in the journal as the present "je" narrator reports the past events of a "je-il" actor. See André Targe's schematic of the intra- and extradiegetic levels of narration in "Trois apparitions," 448.

⁷⁰ These are addressed explicitly in "Le Horla": "Pourquoi pas d'autres éléments que le feu, l'air, la terre et l'eau? -- Ils sont quatre, rien que quatre, ces pères nourriciers des êtres! Quelle pitié! Pourquoi ne sont-ils pas quarante, quatre cents, quatre mille!" (19 août, a).

⁷¹ The latter phrase has been employed by Pascale Krumm, "La Peur de l'autre," 542.

established by the nightly emptying of the carafe, a metonymic extension of the diarist's body, which is also being drained by the vampiric Horla. Refusing solid foods, the only other liquid the Horla drinks is milk, another life-sustaining source, recalling the "sein(e)." The absence of color in water and the whiteness of milk are additional clues to the Horla's existence, substantiated by its importation on a white boat and the seeming invitation of the narrator's white house.⁷² The element of wind, like the Horla, is beyond human vision, and while it is also invisible, its effects may be seen just as easily, as discussed in the conversation at the Mont Saint-Michel.

Lastly, fire is a point of contention between the diarist and the Horla, extending also to the confrontation between the sunlight of day and the mysterious darkness of night. In the episode of 19 août, b, the narrator goes to the trouble of recording that "j'avais allumé mes deux lampes et les huit bougies de ma cheminée" in order to light up the Horla. By making it bright as day, he is attempting to regain the order of day, of that "journée admirable," from the nocturnal terrorism of the Horla. With only a few exceptions, the Horla's hauntings occur at night, especially as the narrative progresses. Although there is just one specific time notation in the diary, "12 août, 10 heures du soir," we may surmise that the diarist does most of his writing at night, chronicling the events of the day.

Moreover, after having lit his lamps and candles on the night of 19 août, he tries to attract the Horla by pretending to write. This detail is important for

⁷² It is only toward the end of the text, 19 août, a, that the narrator reveals the color of the house as he connects his reading of the Brazilian epidemic of madness to the Horla's presence on the boat: "Il a vu ma demeure blanche." However, in the manuscript, we see that Maupassant intended to offer a clue from the first lines, "devant ma maison blanche," but crossed it out.

two reasons: first, it shows that the diarist believes the Horla is intrigued by what he writes or by the act of writing in general, as are the readers; and second, it reveals that he has not only lost his voice, but also the ability to speak through written word since he only simulates writing. The feeling of being regarded by the Horla (“je sentis, je fus certain qu’il lisait par-dessus mon épaule”)⁷³ triggers the diarist to face its presence, but instead, results in having to face his own mortality as he loses sight of himself: “[O]n y voyait comme en plein jour, et je ne me vis pas dans ma glace!... Elle était vide, claire profonde, pleine de lumière!” The slow reappearance or rebirth of his image out of the mist of the Horla is like “la fin d’une éclipse,” his identity once again confirmed by seeing his body “ainsi que je le fais chaque jour en me regardant.”

The same two lamps that have played a recurring role in this narrative are the means the diarist uses in the end to ignite his home. This final use of fire, a natural element manipulated by man, seeks to destroy the Horla and liberate mankind,⁷⁴ but ultimately annihilates the diarist. His dissociation from himself will be realized the following day when he contemplates suicide, but there is also an immediate detachment from his home as he abandons the possessive article and can only speak of it now in unfamiliar, frightening terms: “La maison, maintenant, n’était plus qu’un bûcher horrible et magnifique, un bûcher monstrueux, éclairant toute la terre [. . .]!” The use of such vocabulary relates the

⁷³ See Micheline Besnard-Coursodon, “Regard et destin chez Guy de Maupassant,” on the significance of “le rapport regardant/regardé” in relation to the larger dialectic of the “piège/victime du piège” in “Le Horla” and throughout Maupassant’s *œuvre*.

⁷⁴ The manuscript contains the phrase, “le jour de ma délivrance, l’aurore de ma liberté.” Indeed, some critics have read the ending as a birth scene, especially given the significance of the ninth month. See, for example, Antonia Fonyi, “La Nouvelle de Maupassant: Le Matériau de la psychose et l’armature du genre,” 80. Moreover, since the final entry written on 10 septembre describes the previous day, that means the events occurred on the ninth day of the ninth month.

narrative in the end to the fantastic and confirms a reversal from the opening description of the house on that “journée admirable.” Now it is depicted metaphorically by phrases like “un volcan de flammes,” “la fournaise,” “la cuve de feu,” and “ce four.” Furthermore, this horrific scene is an ironic resolution to the diarist’s efforts to replace night with day, as the fire illuminates the night sky and emulates the dawn: “Les oiseaux se réveillaient; un chien se mit à hurler; il me sembla que le jour se levait!”

Though the diarist’s obsession with the Horla manifests itself physically with such evidence as water disappearing, pages turning, or the floating rose in the garden, Maupassant hints that all of these things may only be illusions by insisting from the start upon the weakness of “nos sens misérables”: “nos yeux qui ne savent apercevoir ni le trop petit, ni le trop grand,” “nos oreilles qui nous trompent,” “notre odorat, plus faible que celui du chien” (12 mai). On the other hand, this sensory limitation provides the perfect reasoning to believe in the supernatural because it is unable to be detected by weak human senses. But Cristina Mazzoni also offers a view of madness as *ekstasis*, “the state of otherness reached by being displaced out of one’s senses” (11), which may give a clue to the diarist’s insistence upon the inadequacy of his senses. Maupassant was attuned to the aesthetics of the senses, as shown in his discussion of Rimbaud’s “Voyelles” in La Vie errante, describing the medical phenomenon of “l’audition colorée” and concluding that such instances of synesthesia are prevalent in “les délicats un peu hystériques” (OC IV, 164-65). Working from the diarist’s various experiments with sensory perception, for instance the convergence of taste, touch, and sight in the series of tests performed between 6 and 10 juillet, it seems

that Maupassant leaves the question unsolved for the reader to decide his or her own view of the Horla, whether it is an other, supernatural being beyond our senses, or existing only in the diarist's imagination precisely because it cannot be physically proven.

If the Horla is beyond the reach of the diarist's human senses, the diarist too is, in many ways, beyond the reader's comprehension. Since he goes to such pains to determine the Horla's name and appearance, why does the diarist not disclose such information about himself? The diary form seems to preclude the need for a physical description, but this is the case in many of Maupassant's works.⁷⁵ Contrary to Huysmans's detailed portrait of des Esseintes's face and body, Maupassant gives no descriptive markers for his character's appearance in "Le Horla," which has the effect of rendering him only vaguely in the reader's mind. While the Horla is accorded a name, the diarist remains nameless throughout the text, another expected trait of a journal supposedly written for oneself, but again a common technique used in nearly all of Maupassant's fantastic tales. According to Antonia Fonyi, this practice in "Le Horla" in particular reflects the protagonist's solitary nature: "[I]l vit dans une solitude absolue où il n'a pas besoin de nom, de signe qui le distingue des autres" ("La Solitude du narrateur dans le récit fantastique" 203).

As part of the solitary nature of the hero, the diarist in "Le Horla" is, like many of Maupassant's heroes, a wanderer. The determinism that interferes in human life is a significant source of consternation, as Kurt Willi concludes:

⁷⁵ The 1886 version of the story, however, does give some limited information. The narrator relays that the character appears "fort maigre, d'une maigreur de cadavre, comme sont maigres certains fous que ronge une pensée, car la pensée malade dévore la chair du corps plus que la fièvre ou la phtisie" (*Le Horla* 192).

“Chez tous les personnages, depuis Boule de suif jusqu’au narrateur de l’Angélus, on assiste à cette tentative toujours reprise de dépasser les limites, de sortir du ‘cercle étroit’ de leur vie” (99).⁷⁶ As in the title of La Vie errante, the wandering nature of the diarist in “Le Horla,” both physically and mentally, points to the insecurity faced by all individuals against the forces of determinism, the unknown, and perhaps even the supernatural. Maupassant’s creation of a nameless character, who, despite references to a specific time period in “Le Horla,” embodies the concerns of any age, fosters the notion that he could be any one of us, or indeed every one of us.

Without trivializing the important philosophical and literary questions of the story, a number of critics have read “Le Horla” as a quest for the reader to undergo along with the narrator. For example, the effects of the “je” / “jeu” upon the reader is the premise of Hélène Diaz Brown’s study, and Laurence Porter, along similar lines, proposes that the reader assume a “pacte fantastique” analogous to Philippe Lejeune’s “pacte autobiographique” (“Editor’s Preface” 5). The problem, however, is that the “willing suspension of disbelief” risks blurring the distinctions, which are already problematic, between fantasy and all of fiction (5-6). I too believe that one cannot limit “Le Horla” to a “pacte fantastique,” not only for the reason given by Porter, but also because, as Brown points out, the reader is not always content to go along with the diarist, as the text pushes the limits of the reader’s patience: “On peut imaginer un lecteur excédé qui suit l’évolution du personnage, un peu comme dans un film où le danger est connu

⁷⁶ Armand Lanoux even links the need for evasion to actual movement in Maupassant’s works: “Le roulement de la diligence de ‘Boule de suif’ continue. Le plus souvent, le roman, avant Maupassant et Stendhal mis à part, était assis. Avec Guy, on est sans cesse en déplacement” (164). See also Jean Pierrot, “Espace et mouvement dans les récits de Maupassant.”

du spectateur qui voudrait parfois en avertir le héros à l'avance" (17). Also, the story is much more than a fantastic tale, as has been shown throughout my study. Its complexity does invite readers to play with the many interpretations it offers, but in the end, readers should resist the temptation to insert themselves into the text, a warning that Ross Chambers extrapolates from the scene in which the Horla reads over the diarist's shoulder: "Ne vous substituez pas au narrateur en lisant par-dessus son épaule [. . .]. Ne soyez pas, en d'autres termes, ce lecteur qui, en épousant de trop près l'identité du narrateur [. . .] détruirait l'identité du texte dans son ensemble" ("La Lecture comme hantise" 115).

As the narration progresses, we readers search our minds for answers along with the diarist. Ulrich Döring, in "A la recherche de la raison perdue," notes that the reader "se surprend à être victime de sa volonté de toujours tout expliquer" and observes the diarist's positivistic conception of the world through his employment of the dominant cultural discourses (medical, psychological, etc.) to "assurer sa domination sur son propre corps, sur son esprit et sur le monde" (179). The diarist attempts to track down the mystery of the Horla from an empirical approach, for example, performing his nightly experiments with water and other nourishment to test the hypothesis that he is really acting in his sleep. Such efforts to rationalize the inexplicable occurrences quickly prove insufficient and unconvincing. What we are witnessing in the diarist is not merely the act of an experimenter, but also the diarist as subject in Maupassant's larger experiment with human thought, perception, and imagination.

The explanations offered by the diarist's encounters with others at Mont Saint-Michel and Paris join with the scientific knowledge he has acquired on his

own through reading to map out various justifications for his rationality. Nancy H. Traill finds that the narrator's ability to synthesize all of these interpretations is itself a sign of his rationality (129).⁷⁷ However, Ross Chambers, in "La Lecture comme hantise," cites the narrator as a "lecteur des indices/symptômes qui 'révèlent' la présence du Horla," sometimes where there is no proof, as in the faulty logic that confirms the Horla's arrival from Brazil just because he saw a Brazilian type of boat (112-13). This willingness to believe everything he "reads" amounts to what Chambers calls "un secret besoin de croire qui fait pencher en faveur du Horla" (112). In essence, the diarist is assuring himself of his innocence and his sanity by blaming other people, things, or beings beyond his control, for his dilemma.

This notion can be summarized in the character's self-description as "un halluciné raisonnant" (7 août).⁷⁸ The oxymoron is noteworthy because the diarist implies that he is not mad by using the hypothetical conditional: "Certes, je me croirais fou, absolument fou, si je n'étais conscient, si je ne connaissais parfaitement mon état, si je ne le sondais en l'analysant avec une complète lucidité." But, at the same time, this description coincides with the one that he gives for mad people he has known: "J'ai vu des fous; j'en ai connu qui restaient intelligents, lucides, clairvoyants même sur toutes les choses de la vie, sauf sur un point." The hinge of lucidity, therefore, acts as the balancing factor between

⁷⁷ See her study, Possible Worlds of the Fantastic: The Rise of the Paranormal in Fiction, particularly the chapter "Guy de Maupassant: The Scientific Cynic," for an analysis of "Le Horla" as an example of the paranormal, which she evaluates as a new mode of the fantastic practiced by realists like Turgenev and Dickens.

⁷⁸ Charlotte Schapira supplies information about this term's appearance in the manuscript: "Maupassant avait d'abord écrit 'halluciné raisonneur,' puis avait modifié 'raisonneur' en 'raisonnant,' peut-être afin d'éviter le suffixe d'agent *-eur*, par trop actif" (43, note 11).

the rational and irrational for the diarist, leaving the reader just as unsure which way the scales will tip.

Like his protagonist, Maupassant dealt with madness through the filter of lucidity. According to Nafissa Schasch, “la folie de Maupassant était pour ainsi dire ‘une folie lucide’” (183), and Marcel Schneider even calls him a “naturaliste halluciné” (265). The blending of naturalist values like determinism and science with the fantastic manifests itself as a borderline state not only in “Le Horla,” but in many of his works. Anne-Marie Baron finds that “même dans ses contes les plus naturalistes, il sait saisir le moment où l’individu, en état de choc, éprouve soudain des sentiments violents, extrêmes, qui traduisent le vacillement de sa raison” (765). This “état-limite,” which Baron locates between neurosis and psychosis, is shown in “Le Horla,” for example, in Maupassant’s aim for linguistic accuracy in depicting the clinical status of the diarist: “Les ratures du manuscrit montrent la conscience qu’a eue l’auteur de la nécessité de maintenir dans les premières pages l’ambiguïté entre folie et rationalité [. . .]” (769).

The idea that Maupassant was aware of the doubt he was creating returns to Todorov’s poetics of the fantastic, which were expressed by Maupassant first in “Le Fantastique.” Furthermore, this purposeful arrangement of elements for effect, as well as the wish to paint illusions of reality, coincides with the aesthetic views proffered in “Le Roman” and throughout his *chroniques*. Overall, “Le Horla” epitomizes the many diverse characteristics of Maupassant’s talent as an artist, ranging from the hesitation inherent in the fantastic to the broader hesitation between the fantastic and naturalism, and encompassing the multitude of illusions that make up his unique style, enumerated throughout this study.

Following Maupassant's Model of Naturalism

In the end, perhaps "Le Horla" is really a big ruse from Maupassant the master illusionist. Certain critics have proposed that the text is basically a hoax. Terry Heller, in The Delights of Terror, claims that "Le Horla" loses its veracity when the reader drops the convention that the journal was added to daily rather than fabricated whole (97). If we keep in mind the author's place in all this, of course it is possible to see that the journal was not kept daily by a fictional character and that it was pieced together by a creative mind, who may have conceived of it as a total picture. Maupassant's role in manipulating the story, its protagonist, and even the readers, cannot be overlooked. Above the concern with mind manipulation inside the story, Maupassant's narrative in the case of "Le Horla" and many other stories reaches out to the reader, inspiring a feeling of doubt that has been identified as the sign of the fantastic, but which is even broader than that. Maupassant's modern revision of the fantastic includes not only the inheritance of the traditional genre, but his own infusion of the themes of disillusion and delusion that introduce notes of decadence and naturalism, all painted through the distorting filter of the artist's temperament.

Maupassant's modern revision of the fantastic, however, poses a challenge to naturalism. Some aspects of "Le Horla" even point to a rejection of naturalist values, such as the diarist's failed experiments and the mirror scene, which Trevor Harris evaluates in Maupassant in the Hall of Mirrors: "This supreme moment of terror [. . .] translates into a concentrated reflection (!) on representational or 'Naturalist' fiction [. . .]" (175). In his article, "La Révolution et le cercle," Harris takes this argument further by reading "Le Horla" as an

ironic text that parodies naturalism, posing more questions than it answers. Yet there are answers, rational answers, proposed by Maupassant in nearly every seemingly irrational event. For example, Harris cites the diarist's image of a butterfly, "une fleur qui vole," to explain the "mystery" of the floating rose. Perhaps nature or his senses are playing tricks on him, that is, seeing a butterfly as a rose, but not to the extent that the text seems to infer. Harris is convinced that an exhaustive study of "Le Horla" in this light would show that "Maupassant a glissé dans son texte des bribes d'explication pour tous les événements 'inexplicables'" (161).

The ending of "Le Horla" renders a darker outcome for the protagonist than in Huysmans's A rebours. While des Esseintes manages to escape from madness and self-destruction in the nick of time, Maupassant asks us to consider a plea of insanity for his anonymous diarist. Mary L. Poteau-Tralie takes the final act in "Le Horla" in which the diarist sets fire to his home, locking his servants inside, as proof that "this entire diary has been leading the reader to an innocent verdict in what is, in the end, a tale of murder" (114). This twist at the end is indicative of a general practice in Maupassant's stories. Poteau-Tralie adds that the reader has been "placed under the spell of a voice of authority, effectively hypnotized" (114).

If the reader has been hypnotized by Maupassant's narrative, similar to the first version's panel of doctors being spellbound by the narrator's speech, perhaps the diarist in the second version is under his own spell. The diarist admits early on what could be the key to the story: he might be, in effect, both the subject and instrument of hypnosis: "J'ai dû être le jouet de mon imagination

énervée, à moins que je ne sois vraiment somnambule, ou que j'aie subi une de ces influences constatées, mais inexplicables jusqu'ici qu'on appelle suggestions" (12 juillet). Having observed the technique performed on his cousin, is it not plausible that the diarist too may be under some sort of hypnotic trance? The first inexplicable phenomena occur during sleep, which is equivalent to a hypnotic state in which the subject is susceptible to carry out suggested behaviors without any knowledge or memory of doing so.⁷⁹ Yet, the questions abound: who hypnotized the diarist, when, and under what circumstances? The diarist continues to struggle with the notion of hypnosis even until the decisive moment of naming the Horla on 19 août, blaming science for opening the door to this manipulation of the human mind: "[Mesmer et les autres médecins] ont joué avec cette arme du Seigneur nouveau, la domination d'un mystérieux vouloir sur l'âme humaine, devenue esclave. [. . .] Je les ai vus s'amuser comme des enfants imprudents avec cette horrible puissance!"

This criticism of contemporary psychology recalls Maupassant's skepticism toward Charcot's conception of hysteria and may facilitate a reading of "Le Horla" as a commentary on male hysteria specifically. Although we know little of the back story of the diarist, he appears to fit the mold of the eccentric dandy of the decadent period. Several indices enumerated in this study support this characterization. It is quite possible that a life of excess and overstimulation has led to a heightened sensitivity, as in the case of des Esseintes. According to this interpretation, the story is not one of psychosis, nor of the borderline state,

⁷⁹ See Micheline Besnard-Coursodon's analysis of the sleep state in "Le Horla" as a "paralysie du corps, de la raison, de la volonté, que l'Autre [. . .], le Horla, agresse" ("Une 'Chaise basse en crêpe de Chine': Sommeils maupassantiens" 44).

but rather of neurosis. Nevertheless, the discourse of madness that one finds in the narrative implicates a more serious form of mental illness, as has been shown through the terrorized language of the story even down to details of punctuation, capitalization, ambiguous vocabulary, and so on.

"Le Horla" ends with a line of suspension points, which has been traditionally interpreted as the narrator's final sign of madness and impending suicide, but not all editions include the line of points preceding the text, as is shown in the manuscript. It is possible that this first line reflects the hesitation or fear that the narrator experiences in beginning his story, representing the "seuil" that Charles Grivel calls "le lieu fantastique par excellence" (28). Hélène Diaz Brown finds that the commencement of the text is "déjà dans l'impossibilité de trouver son souffle pour débiter, comme s'il avait peur de se lancer" (115). However, it seems that the pleasant nature of the first entry contradicts these interpretations. In my view, this framing device essentially suspends the diary in an unsure setting, in the realm of the imagination.

Another indication of the text as an "unreal" narrative builds on Maupassant's deliberate choice of having the diary / story commence on 8 mai for its reference to Flaubert, who died 8 May 1880 and whose house may be the very model for the one in "Le Horla."⁸⁰ Flaubert's presence in this story extends beyond the allusions of the date, the description of the narrator's white house, or Rouen. His influence upon the stylistic development of Maupassant has been shown in "Le Horla" and throughout his writing in the precision of creating literature that is both realistic and artistic. Zola is present too in the naturalistic

⁸⁰ See Yvan Leclerc, "Maupassant: Le Texte hanté," 266-67.

treatment of the subject of mental alienation, the positivistic search for empirical knowledge, and the theories of determinism that pervade this text and his overall pessimistic outlook.

Zola spoke at Maupassant's funeral about the evolution he saw in the writer "vers d'autres terres d'observation," citing his "curiosité des cieux nouveaux, des contrées inconnues" (OC XII, 685). This inquisitiveness extended into the wanderings of the mind to consider philosophical matters that he addressed in the *chroniques* and in works like "Le Horla." Maupassant's own views, as expressed in the 1889 article "L'Evolution du roman au XIXe siècle," are in line with the revelations of the writer's temperament in a work of art, as he comes back to Zola's famous view of "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament." Maupassant advises that "ce tempérament peut avoir les qualités les plus diverses, et se modifier suivant les époques, mais plus il aura de facettes, comme le prisme, plus il reflétera d'aspects de la nature, de spectacles, de choses, d'idées de toute sorte et d'êtres de toute race, plus il sera grand, intéressant et neuf" (Chroniques III, 384). Maupassant's mention of the innovation available in the naturalist formula ultimately coincides with his overall modernity and with the modern concept of naturalism.

For the most part, Maupassant avoids being pigeonholed by composing his own unique style, largely developed in his theory of "illusionism," drawing upon elements of realism, naturalism, the fantastic, and other movements. I have shown in this study how Maupassant transformed the traditional fantastic through the incorporation of contemporary thought and science, especially in the area of psychology, which essentially served as a naturalist take on issues that

transcend the typical fare of naturalism: the double realm of the supernatural and the mind's limitless imagination in dreams, hallucinations, delusions, and even within rational thinking. The latter is tied to Maupassant's foundation of deterministic pessimism in the idea that human beings are trapped by their physical condition and the inadequacy of their senses in a world of unknown, incomprehensible proportions. These views reflect the concerns of his era, particularly in regard to the decadent, *fin-de-siècle* spirit, but they are also indicative of the universal concerns of humankind, a timeless concept with implications for today's readers as well. It is in this pursuit, therefore, that Maupassant engages the fantastic illusion of reality to go beyond any constraint of time period, literary movement, or even rationality itself, to explore those compelling, but unanswerable questions that pertain to all forms of life.

CONCLUSION

In the end, the theory and practice of naturalism by Zola, Huysmans, and Maupassant revolves around the question of what determines a work of art. All three expressed their views, at one time or another, in a manner fitting to each writer. Zola's statement came first in the critical debates of art in Mes Haines in 1866 and was applied from then on in numerous studies of authors and artists alike: "Une œuvre d'art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament" (OC X, 38). The placement of Zola's formula, which has come to be known as the very definition of his aesthetics, in Mes Haines and other critical pieces, reflects the "master" naturalist's proclivity and expertise in the arena of theorization. As I have discussed in this study, Zola's replacement of "création" with "nature" demonstrates his attempts to supplant the romantic notion of a divine creator with a more objective, scientific view of nature and the artistic pursuit to represent the reality of modern life in art and literature. Although Zola's intent was to perform this function using an empirical approach grounded in the scientific theories of his day, as professed in Le Roman expérimental, one can still find many vestiges of romanticism and classicism as well as other signs of divergence from naturalism throughout his works.

While some praise Zola for going beyond the limits of naturalism, others point to the impossibility of trying to unite science and art. Though the criticism

in the late nineteenth century was reactionary in tone, it does show that many of Zola's contemporaries rightly noted flaws and inconsistencies in the naturalist doctrine early on. Zola's inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to see the problems with his theory of naturalism may be partly the result of feeling pressured to espouse the scientific theories of his age. Not being a specialist in the field of science, Zola was bound to make some mistakes in laying out his plans for naturalism, as Marcel Girard argues:

Zola embrasse à la hâte, sans discussion, sans examen sérieux, selon les hasards de l'actualité, d'une lecture ou d'une conversation, les éléments disparates de plusieurs doctrines qui lui paraissent s'accorder vaguement avec sa position littéraire. Taine, Darwin, Claude Bernard, le Dr Lucas, Schopenhauer, [. . .] tout cela entre pêle-mêle dans son système [. . .]. Comme Etienne Lantier dans Germinal, il "se bourre" de lectures mal digérées. (151)

Written in the 1950s, Girard's assessment of Zola's scientific abilities contains some truth, but is, however, too dismissive. Modern-day criticism, following the suggestion of Yves Chevrel, Henri Mitterand, and others, is returning to the debate of Zola the scientific theorist vs. Zola the poetic genius to show that the discrepancies between naturalist theory and practice are not to be overlooked, but rather evaluated and appreciated.

The formation of the Médan group in the late 1870s provided a matrix for naturalism in the shared production of naturalist writing. In the course of this study, I have shown Huysmans and Maupassant entangled in the labyrinth of naturalism, moving in and out of naturalist discussions while also weaving naturalist and non-naturalist elements in their fiction. Their stories in Les Soirées de Médan, along with the banner story of Zola, present a number of different

features, ranging from a naturalist, pessimistic take on the Franco-Prussian War to an audacious display of subjective narratives, contrived stylistics, ironic and comic modes, that foreshadow changing tastes in the years to come. Les Soirées de Médan was essentially a cause for the group to rally round in a public show of support. When the excitement died down and they were faced with the possibility of their fifteen minutes of fame ticking away, the members of the Médan group had to reconsider their beliefs and opinions of Zola's naturalism in relation to their own, which may have led them to confront the shortcomings of naturalist doctrines within the scope of what they had in mind for their careers.

The development of Zola, Huysmans, and Maupassant also points to the matter of a naturalist genre. All three started out in poetry, that adolescent "acné mussétiste," in Maupassant's words, which gave way to what they considered as the more substantial genre of prose, specifically the novel. But, one may ask, why was poetry not pursued as a naturalist form? Early on, Zola saw in Maupassant a disposition to a naturalist type of poetry, but is this a contradiction in terms? Zola's theory of naturalism, based on the "roman expérimental," excludes poetry, leaving to poets and philosophers the quest for "l'idéal." Yet, the works of François Coppée and Jean Richepin, among others, suggest the foundation of a realist-naturalist poetry, that is, according to Philippe Hamon, "a genre of which criticism and literary history are in general supremely unaware" ("The Naturalist Text and the Problem of Reference" 28). Theater was another realm that drew interest from the naturalists, as shown in the Médan group's plan to stage a sequel to Les Soirées de Médan in the theater. The collaborations by some of the group's members, as well as Maupassant's and Zola's own forays

into theater point to another direction for the naturalists' talents. Indeed, the Théâtre-Libre of André Antoine attests to the place made for theatrical representations of naturalist works. Zola's attraction to the theater largely extends beyond naturalism, including a few minor comedies and tragedies in his early years and a series of lyrical dramas at the other end of his career. While a few of Zola's novels achieved some degree of success in theatrical adaptations, the relative absence of properly naturalist plays warrants further examination.

Huysmans's and Maupassant's experimentation with other forms besides the novel goes hand-in-hand with their divergence from naturalism. A rebours does away with the standard conception of a novel based on a logical, unfolding plot to present instead an assemblage of chapters that often read as critical essays on the arts, philosophy, religion, medicine, and a multitude of issues that concern the protagonist and Huysmans too. "Le Horla" is representative of the overwhelming number of short stories that constitute Maupassant's *œuvre* and that reflect his occupation with topics like madness, the supernatural, and, more importantly, the uncertainty that lies between fantasy and reality. The provisions of naturalist theory were both accepted and rejected, sometimes simultaneously within these works, in effect creating a unique form of naturalism for each writer who chose to follow its outlines. Neither Huysmans nor Maupassant was perfectly in line with Zola's model of naturalism, but then neither was Zola himself. Zola's model has shown that, rather than being a failure for its inability to marry science and art, naturalism can be adapted to any number of instances and still provide a substantial and provocative framework for observation and experimentation with various phenomena.

The treatment of the psychological along with the physiological in Huysmans's and Maupassant's writing need not be considered at odds with naturalist theory, for the psychological novel and the experimental novel are not exclusive of one another. In Maupassant, for instance, we see the combination of "le roman d'analyse pure" of Bourget with "le roman objectif" of Flaubert and Zola. Recalling Zola's insistence upon the artist's temperament, we may extrapolate the argument that naturalism encourages the involvement of the mind as well as the body. Is temperament not, after all, an aspect of one's psychological being? What the writers are doing, then, is extending the allowance of temperament beyond the creator and into their characters. If Zola acknowledges the role of temperament in the life of the artist, he must also find it in the fictional lives of his characters. Naturalism's search to represent "la vérité" must not, therefore, strip away the influence of one's temperament, but rather express the psychological nature of humans along with their physiology. However, this practice of including the psychological also opens the door for anomalies. Just as naturalist literature deals with diseases of the body, it must deal with diseases of the mind as well. Here, naturalists are not only concerned with portraying the common people and their common ailments, but also the abnormal behaviors caused by both physiological and psychological problems.

Both Huysmans and Maupassant turn to the mind as a world of infinite possibility to express another dimension of the human condition that naturalism is unable to explain: dreams, hallucinations, encounters with the otherworldly. Imagination is essential for pursuing these thoughts and for escaping the boredom of convention in literature and in life in general. Maupassant reveals in

his essay on Zola the miserable stasis that settles in after the enthusiasm of entering a new literary period:

[Q]uelque belle qu'elle soit, une forme devient fatalement monotone [. . .]. Alors un étrange besoin de changement naît en nous; les plus grandes merveilles même, que nous admirions passionnément, nous écœurent parce que nous connaissons trop les procédés de production, parce que nous sommes du bâtiment, comme on dit. ("Emile Zola," Chroniques II, 311-12)

Helen Trudgian, in L'Esthétique de J.-K. Huysmans, likens Maupassant and Huysmans, so close in age and temperament, in terms of the *ennui* that is evident already in "Boule de suif" and "Sac au dos," and that would only be compounded as they continued in the path of naturalism (85-86). Out of this feeling grew the need for change, discernible in their attraction to the world of dreams and illusions.

Both writers superseded their naturalist roots in turning to different kinds of literature, but the public was prepared to accept them because Zola had paved the way for innovation in literature, allowing those who followed to pioneer their own paths. Huysmans's turn to decadence and Maupassant's turn to the fantastic clearly prove this point, as each found perhaps their greatest success in these non-naturalist genres, defining modern revisions of decadence and the fantastic that attracted their own followings. Moreover, the decadent feeling of this *fin-de-siècle* society, developed in part because of the defeat in 1870 and the rise in Schopenhauerian pessimism, encouraged the growth of reactions to a naturalist literature that dwelled upon the depressing, sordid aspects of life. The remedies of art, nature, and imagination may be seen in A rebours, "Le Horla," and several of Zola's works as well, especially L'Œuvre. The aesthetic "will" in

these cases endeavors to override the “Will” of Schopenhauer’s philosophy and the forces of determinism, such as heredity and environment, expounded in the theories of Taine, Lucas, and Darwin.

The notion that each of the three works by Zola, Huysmans, and Maupassant are autobiographical to some extent fosters the equation of the writer with his hero and thereby offers a view of the most fertile grounds for naturalism, as the writer’s task set by Zola in Le Roman expérimental is to “découvrir [son] coin de vérité” (127). In these works, the writer is regarding his own situation and his “other” self in a number of ways through the dialectics of self/other, individual/society, mind/body, reality/fantasy. These areas of investigation situate naturalism at the crossroads of modernity, engaging with issues that are central to human identity in the late nineteenth century in accordance with scientific, artistic, and philosophic trends. Overall, the interplay of naturalist and non-naturalist elements in Huysmans and Maupassant blurs the fixed lines of classification to affirm that the writers possess unique talents independent of their initial allegiance to Zola’s campaign of naturalism. Indeed, Zola recognized the individuality of artistic genius and embraced the diversity among the members of the Médan group, insisting that all were equal in their pursuit of a faithful representation of nature according to each artist’s view. The metaphor of the matrix therefore is not to force each writer into cookie-cutter sameness, but rather to provide a template of opportunity for the exploration of humanity in literature.

Later in their careers, Huysmans and Maupassant came to express their views of a work of art in statements that I believe serve as a response of sorts to

Zola's famous formula of a work of art being "un coin de la nature vu à travers un tempérament." While this expression has been shown in my study to be valid in the readings of both Huysmans's and Maupassant's works, these authors' own words articulate more precisely their aesthetics at a point in time when each had discovered his own path as a writer and left behind Zola's guiding influence. By juxtaposing their statements with Zola's conception of a work of art, we may be able to encapsulate the nature of Huysmans and Maupassant following Zola's model of naturalism.

In a letter to l'abbé Boullan at the time of Là-bas, Huysmans writes, "Je veux confondre tous ces gens -- faire une œuvre d'art d'un réalisme surnaturel, d'un naturalisme spiritualiste. Je veux montrer à Zola, à Charcot, aux spirites et d'autres que rien n'est expliqué des mystères qui nous entourent" (7 February 1890). As in Là-bas, Huysmans's theorizing takes an indirect approach. Rather than asserting his arguments explicitly, we can only look to his personal correspondence or his fictional characters, whom the author directly linked to himself when writing under the guise of the pseudonym A. Meunier, for any insight into his aesthetics. This letter comes to us by way of Robert Baldick's biographical study (195 in the French translation) from the original citation in Jean de Caldain's article in Le Matin, "Le Satanisme est-il pratiqué aujourd'hui?" (21 April 1908). Although the reference is obscure, it exemplifies the secrecy and ambiguity of assigning any literary beliefs to Huysmans, which is further confirmed by his explanation of A rebours in a preface coming twenty years after the fact, and attests to the need for more research into the private side, the many images, of Huysmans in relation to his fictional works. Moreover, this statement

in the letter to l'abbé Boullan is striking for its clarity of expression, one that seems to speak for Maupassant as well. Indeed, in their later years, both Huysmans and Maupassant could be grouped under the heading of "réalisme surnaturel" for their involvement with those matters unresolved by the Zolian interpretation of naturalism.

Maupassant expresses the concerns of his times as a "peintre de son époque," like Zola and Huysmans, and yet, his classic style and artistry exceed any time frame. As Philippe Bonnefis contends in Comme Maupassant, the writer resembles not just his contemporaries, but "il ressemble aussi bien à des écrivains qui peuvent être antérieurs ou postérieurs" (120). The timeless quality of Maupassant's writing is joined by his limitless quest to reach beyond the frontiers of human knowledge to consider that which is imperceptible to our senses. In the 1890 volume La Vie errante, whose title summates the writer's own literary and philosophic journey, Maupassant declares, "Une œuvre d'art n'est supérieure que si elle est, en même temps, un symbole et l'expression exacte d'une réalité" (OC IV, 228). This synthesis of Maupassant's search for precision plus that elusive something more in his depiction of reality is a key to what I have defined as his theory of illusionism, which may be uncovered throughout his many *chroniques* and ultimately in "Le Roman." Although Maupassant was more of a theorist than Huysmans, the prevalent view is that "Le Roman" is basically the only example of Maupassant's critical work. On the contrary, my study has made use of a good number of the *chroniques* that merit a closer look in elucidating the writer's fiction. Finally, the acceptance of reality as an illusion according to the interpretation and manipulation of each artist/illusionist proves

to be an extension of Zola's allowance for artistic temperament and thereby both unites and separates the two naturalists.

Ultimately, in order for naturalism to be workable in practice, it had to be open to interpretation by the individual artist. The malleability of the Médan matrix has shown that the groundwork of Zola's theorizing was too self-aggrandizing and overzealous in setting up a strict doctrine that was intended to distinguish this group of writers from all others. Rather than being a rigid mold for all to fit into, the matrix of naturalism was designed to accommodate various forms. The question of whether Huysmans's A rebours and Maupassant's "Le Horla" conform to Zola's model would seem to be answered clearly in the overwhelming evidence of non-naturalist traits in these works. Yet, Zola's own works also break the mold. Therefore, the matter returns to the diversity of individual talents in the Médan group, as Zola himself acknowledged and as Maupassant expressed best in his defense of Les Soirées de Médan: "Nous avons donc ce seul objectif: L'Etre et la Vie, qu'il faut savoir comprendre et interpréter en artiste. Si on n'en donne pas l'expression à la fois exacte et artistiquement supérieure, c'est qu'on n'a pas assez de talent" (294). In the end, the talents of Huysmans and Maupassant led them to new adaptations of naturalism, simultaneously following Zola's model and surpassing it, as Zola did in his own way, to effectuate a (r)evolution in literature as new as Zola's modern conception of naturalism itself.

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