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Anadyomène”), provocative waitresses (“Au Cabaret-Vert, cinq heures du soir” and “La Maline”), shop girls (“Les Reparties de Nina”), and explicit descriptions of bodily functions (“Oraison du soir,” “Accroupissements”). The squalor and beauty of urban life are the subject of several pieces of *Les Illuminations*. Rimbaud, who claimed “il faut être absolument moderne” (*Une Saison en enfer*) and spoke of progress, the poet as *travailleur*, and the invention of a new poetic language (*les lettres dites du voyant*), preceded Zola by several years in his proposals for a “modern” poetry and did so much more violently. If it were so shocking to bourgeois sensibilities in 1876 to have degenerate urban workers the subject of a novel, a genre certainly less esthetically rigorous than lyric poetry, it is perhaps no wonder that Rimbaud’s poetry, which frequently treated more base subjects, was withheld by its very few connoisseurs until the time of publication of *Germinal* in 1885. While the symbolists, the decadents, the surrealists, and so many other groups claimed Rimbaud as their forefather, he may be more aptly identified as the first naturalist poet.

The Two Faces of Eve: Villiers’s Response to Zola’s *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*

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Since the inception of the women’s movement, feminists critics have, not surprisingly, shown an acute interest in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, a myth that has for centuries shaped western notions of gender roles. Critics such as Mieke Bal and Ilana Pardes have recently sought to show that although traditional readings of the story have generally represented Eve as lethal (she is a victimizer to be avoided lest one be killed by her love), when one pays close attention to the story, other, multivalent, heterogeneous readings are possible (Eve as a namegiver, for instance).¹ Feminists have expressed the difficulty of gaining appreciation for their alternative readings, considering the seemingly entrenched acceptance of patriarchal interpretations of the story. Indeed, it is perhaps this ancient myth, more than any other, to which patriarchal society owes one of its most persistent and enduring binary operations—the nature versus culture dichotomy in which women (like Eve, who is first to eat the apple) tend to be associated with nature and the senses, where men (like Adam, who *knows* the apple is forbidden) tend to be associated with reason and the intellect.

It is not difficult to see the persistence of this nature-culture, male-female binarism in nineteenth-century France, where industrialization and the rise of the bourgeoisie created a society in which men were generally expected to seek a profession and work outside the home, while women were increasingly consigned to the fulfillment of socially ordained domestic and reproductive roles. In this sense, nineteenth-century renderings of the Adam and Eve myth may be studied in terms of the operations of power on the level of ideology, operations which manifest themselves in discourses of gender difference. Accordingly, a feminist reading of the Eve-like character in two novels, Zola’s *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret* (1875) and Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *L’Ève Future* (1886), may serve to deconstruct the

¹ See Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 104–31 and Ilana Pardes *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) 15–54.

discourses of gender and power at work in the texts. More specifically, I am interested in investigating to what extent these works disrupt the nature-culture dichotomy and in demonstrating that while Villiers's text, with its depiction of Eve as an android, is seemingly much more revolutionary than Zola's work, the two books may, on an ideological level, share more in common than one would assume.

Zola's *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* presents a moment of intense spiritual crisis in the life of Serge Mouret (Doctor Pascal's nephew), a young abbot in a small southern village, and an unusually obsessive collector of all sorts of Virgin Mary paraphernalia. Problems arise one evening for the priest when he becomes strangely troubled by Mary's image. He can no longer concentrate on her with the singleness of mind he once had, and begins to confuse her traits with those of another woman. Little by little, as he gazes at her, he realizes that he has fallen in love with Albine, an Eve-like young woman who lives with her uncle in "le Paradou" (an obvious reference to "le Paradis"), a huge, fertile garden estate (akin to the garden of Eden), located on the outskirts of town. Much of the drama and tension in the text is thus caused as the priest's image of Mary, a symbol of moral perfection and purity, is disrupted by the image of Eve, a symbol of danger and temptation. Duly mortified by such erotic thoughts, the abbot takes the extreme measures of begging his statuette of the Virgin to castrate him so that he may remain forever united with her as a little boy, untroubled by an awakening libido. Then he falls into a dead faint. Awakening several days later in a strange bed, he finds that his uncle Pascal has conveniently arranged for him to convalesce during his mysterious illness in the fresh air of the Paradou. It is at this point in the text, when Serge and Albine spend three weeks of bliss together like Adam and Eve, that the various discourses on the feminine become most interesting.

Feminist psychoanalytic critics such as Laura Mulvey, in her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"² have suggested that one of the ways in which patriarchal narratives attempt to mitigate the threat posed by the female body is to deny or disavow its sexual lack, hence depicting it, as Mulvey states, as "reassuring rather than dangerous."³ "Reassuring" means turning woman into an object, a fetish, or finding a way to asexualize her. This strategy operates on many levels in the text, more particularly in the descriptions of Albine, which occur with obsessive frequency, as

something, indeed *anything* other than a sexually mature woman—a plant, animal, child, or flower. Certainly, flowers are a conventional image used to associate women with nature and can be considered as symbols that mitigate feminine sexual threat through their androgynous aspect, since they contain both elements of reproduction within the same blossom.⁴ Not surprisingly, the first time we see Albine, she is portrayed as a giant walking flower. By rendering her a bouquet, Zola reifies her while denying her subjectivity: "Elle était comme un grand bouquet d'une odeur forte."⁵

Flowers also mitigate sexual threat by serving as symbols of chastity and purity, especially the white lilies and roses constantly associated with the Virgin Mary: "...tout le jardin de Marie poussait autour de lui, avec ses hautes floraisons de chasteté. Le Rosaire laissait couler entre ses doigts sa guirlande d'Ave, coupée de *Pater*, comme une guirlande de roses blanches, mêlées des lis de l'Annonciation..." (107). Later, white lilies again appear in a remarkable scene in which all threat of sexual transgression is momentarily stopped. Serge and Albine enter a sort of white palace made exclusively of lilies, a sort of sex-free zone, a canopied haven that serves to wash their sexuality away in a blanket of whiteness. In a giant womb of flowers, they remain unhindered by sexual desire even as they stand naked in front of each other: "Jusqu'au soir, Albine et Serge demeurèrent avec les lis... Serge y perdit la dernière fièvre de ses mains. Albine y devenait toute blanche, d'un blanc de lait qu'aucune rougeur ne teintait de rose. Ils ne virent plus qu'ils avaient les bras nus, le cou nu, les épaules nues... Quand ils quittèrent les lis, ils n'avaient pas dix ans..." (188).

Thus, in the incredible fecundity of the garden, they enter this lily-haven and are rendered sexless. But of course they cannot remain children forever, despite the abbot's earlier wish in front of the Mary statuette. Eventually, flowers lose their purifying benefits, as in this scene where they serve as conventional symbols of an emerging adolescent sexuality by accentuating Albine's throat, arms and hair: "Elle continuait à rire, la tête renversée, la tête toute gonflée de gaîté, heureuse de ses fleurs, des fleurs sauvages tressées dans ses cheveux blonds, nouées à son cou, à son corsage, à ses bras minces, nus et dorés" (59). And, it is interesting to note that as the moment of the abbot's "fault" draws near (he does eventually sleep with Albine) the vegetation is described as more and more sexually menacing and perverse: "Ce n'était plus l'heureuse langueur des plantes

² See Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation* (New York: David R. Godine, 1984) 361-73.

³ Mulvey 368.

⁴ For an interesting discussion on the androgynous nature of flowers, see Sayeeda H. Mamoon, "Flowers of Androgyny: The Garden of Salomé in Fin-de-Siècle Art and Literature," diss., Indiana University, 1996, 1-131.

⁵ Émile Zola, *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 1972) 59.

aromatiques... Ils écrasaient des herbes puantes: l'absinthe d'une griserie amère; la rue, d'une odeur de chair fétide; la valériane, brûlante, toute trempée de sa sueur aphrodisiaque" (228).

In addition to rendering her a flower, another strategy for mitigating Albine's feminine power, for attempting to make her something *other* than the cause of fear, is to depict her as an animal, as in this scene where she crawls on her stomach to eat from the lower branches of a cherry tree. In addition, her child-like laughter, a constant element in the narrative, helps to break the sexual tension: "Quand elle se vit découverte, elle eut des rires prolongés, sautant sur l'herbe comme un poisson blanc sorti de l'eau, se mettant sur le ventre, rampant sur les coudes, faisant le tour du cerisier, tout en continuant à happer les cerises les plus grosses" (202). But an animal can of course signal danger as well, for although not human, and totally unselfconscious about its sexuality, it *is* nevertheless sexual. The ambivalence of the animal signifier is evident in this scene where, described as a seemingly innocuous squirrel as she crawls about in a tree, her budding sexuality keeps creeping in, in the form of her naked thighs: "Et, serrant sa jupe... sans voir qu'elle montrait ses cuisses, elle prit l'arbre nerveusement, se hissa sur le tronc, d'un seul effort des poignets. Là, elle courut le long des branches, en évitant même de se servir des mains; elle avait des allongements souples d'écureuil... Elle n'eut pas le moindre effroi... elle agitait ses cuisses demi-nues..." (202-03).

The descriptions of Albine as a mother figure, particularly when she acts as Serge's nursemaid during his most helpless period of convalescence, serve to render her nurturing rather than threatening. During the initial period of convalescence, moreover, Serge is too weak and fragile to think about sex. In these scenes, she is like a mother teaching her baby to walk: "Allons, du courage, répéta Albine. Tu sais que tu m'as promis de faire cinq pas. Nous allons jusqu'à ce mûrier... Là tu te reposeras.' Il mit un quart d'heure pour faire les cinq pas" (164). Even as a mother figure, however, Albine becomes dangerous, as we have seen with her "tarnishing" of the image of the Virgin Mary. In fact, visually, she and Mary have an almost symbiotic relationship. Even the abbot's sister notices the physical resemblance between the two, pointing out Albine's affinity with the Virgin, as she is depicted in one of Serge's engravings: "Oh! Vous êtes belle... Vous ressemblez à une image que Serge avait dans sa chambre. Elle était toute blanche comme vous. Elle avait de grandes boucles qui lui flottaient sur le cou..." (320). It is not surprising, then, that the priest considers his sin as having definitively killed Mary's virginity. In a desperate attempt to reestablish the law of the father, he

eventually replaces all of his Mary icons with symbols of Jesus on the cross, and banishes all women and all feminine elements from his religion. Such extreme measures to keep out the feminine seem an overreaction—indeed an almost hysterical one—when we consider the true nature of the abbot's "sin." For it should be mentioned that during his entire time at the Paradou, Serge conveniently suffers from total amnesia, therefore remembering neither the sexual feelings that caused his illness, nor even the fact that he is a priest. Therefore, it is questionable whether he has sinned at all in his act of love with Albine. The story thus serves to absolve him, in a sense, since he was totally unaware.

In addition to rendering woman "reassuring" rather than dangerous, a second strategy used to deal with the disturbing sight of woman's sexual lack, feminist critics tell us, is to punish the cause of fear. Mulvey states that in the male subconscious, "pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt (immediately associated with castration), asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness. This sadistic side fits well within the narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and end."⁶ Once the priest's spiritual struggle has been won (and he has opted for Jesus), Albine, it seems, is no longer needed in the narrative. Her sudden death at the end of the novel suggests that her whole *raison d'être* was to provide a temptation, a supreme test of faith for the abbot. Her death not only typifies the punishment that the patriarchy often carries out upon transgressors, it does so while making her look like the classic, self-sacrificing woman—a martyr to love and to one man's Herculean spiritual struggle. In addition, she conveniently dies before her pregnancy has become visually apparent, thus sparing the abbot not only responsibility for the baby, but also any public humiliation.

A seemingly diametrically opposed depiction of Eve can be found eleven years later in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève Future*. Generally considered a groundbreaking work of early science fiction, the novel raises questions of sexuality, desire, and gender with the express purpose of shattering comfortable categories like woman=nature and man=culture, and no wonder: a real woman resembling a work of art but deemed spiritually deficient by her lover is replaced by a completely artificial replica indistinguishable from the real woman—but spiritually more satisfying—by the American inventor Thomas Edison. In addition to creating in astonishing detail one of the first

⁶ Mulvey 368.

androids in French fiction (not even Jules Verne's writings contain robots), Villiers foresaw in this work of "brave new woman" the existence of a significant number of modern inventions and conveniences, including the hearing aid, telephone, phonograph, tape recorder, megaphone, intercom, camera, moving pictures, and an advanced braking system for trains. While some of these devices (such as the phonograph and the telephone) did exist in primitive form already in 1886, Villiers nonetheless foresaw their mass production, distribution, and usage.

This work confronts many central taboos and ambivalences of the fin-de-siècle period that we still find pressing today in our postmodern era—questions about the power and limits of machines and science over the human capacity to think and experience the real, preoccupations of much of contemporary science fiction, of such postmodern theorists as Jean Baudrillard and Donna Haraway, and such films as *Blade Runner* and *Tank Girl*. In her groundbreaking essay "A Cyborg Manifesto,"⁷ Haraway offers up the cyborg as the central agent of postmodernism—a creature simultaneously animal and machine, a fiction mapping our social and bodily reality, and an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings between machine, organism, body, mind, and tool. Hence, one would hope that Villiers's android Hadaly, with her four surfaces, her wires, her lungs consisting of two phonographs of gold, her sophisticated systems of locomotion and balance, would serve as a visionary image of a new world order, an instrument of change who would break up, explode, and blur such traditional binary operations as nature-culture, public-private, ideal-material, and science-religion.

Unfortunately, however, when we consider that this "ideal" woman comes complete with an owner's manual and is intended to be sustained on a diet of zinc and salt pills, fed to her by her male keeper once or twice a week, we realize that Hadaly is more akin to a pet or a household appliance than a "brave new woman." Indeed, Villiers seems more intent on creating an amusing parody of modern scientific contraptions than in exploring new, egalitarian possibilities in the relations between the sexes. In the following passage, her maker, Thomas Edison, explains to her lover, Lord Ewald, the proper feeding procedures, delighting in the fact that she can take her pills by herself, if only he will put them in a dish for her and then point them out by brushing the pearls of her necklace: "Voici la nourriture que prend, une ou deux fois la semaine, Hadaly... J'ai dans ce vieux bahut,

certaines boîtes de pastilles et de petites tablettes qu'elle s'assimile fort bien *toute seule*, l'étrange fille! Il suffit d'en placer une corbeille sur quelque console, à distance fixe de sa dormeuse habituelle, et de la lui indiquer en effleurant une des perles de son collier."⁸ Later in this same scene, Edison proves how completely dependent she is on her life-giving male keepers. He explains that if she cannot find her food at the very moment she wants it, she faints, or more accurately, dies. This is no cause for worry though, according to him, since it gives her lover the "truly divine pleasure of resuscitating her" (with tablets and a little water): "...lorsqu'elle ne trouve pas ces aliments sous sa main au moment où elle les *désire*, elle s'évanouit — ou, pour mieux dire, elle meurt. — Elle meurt?... murmura le jeune lord en souriant. — Oui, pour donner à son élu le plaisir vraiment divin de la ressusciter" (146).

Since Hadaly is kept rather like a pet dog, it is not surprising that one of her principal traits, one that is seen as a significant improvement upon most *real* women, is her obedience. Indeed, I would like to draw the analogy between the training sessions that Ewald undergoes in order to learn to keep her, and classes in an obedience school. Edison explains, for example, how Lord Ewald can get her to come to him, more willingly than her living model, simply by stroking the amethyst on her index finger and saying, "Come here, Hadaly." "En ces instants, assise ou étendue, elle se lèvera doucement si, lui prenant la main droite, vous frôlez la sympathique améthyste de la bague de l'index, en lui disant: 'Venez, Hadaly'" (144). And, just as we sometimes have to force-feed medicine to our pets, Lord Ewald learns he will have to "oil" her once a month to prevent rust, with a mixture forced through her lips when she is drowsy: "Tous les mois vous en glissez la valeur d'une petite cuiller entre les lèvres de Hadaly, pendant qu'elle semble ensommeillée" (142). She is as loyal as a dog, too, guaranteed never to cuckold her lover. If another man should even try to touch her, a deadly dagger at her waist will automatically deliver a mortal blow to the offender. Since Hadaly is not endowed with the mechanical ability or the will to control the dagger herself, I would argue that it does not serve as an empowering phallic symbol, but as merely another device that guarantees her obedience to her male owner, much like a chastity belt.

Unfortunately, Villiers's "new" Eve suffers much the same fate as Zola's. After Edison finishes training Lord Ewald on how to operate her, and sends them both on a steamer back to England to live

⁷ See Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991) 149–81.

⁸ Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *L'Ève Future* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1960) 145 (my italics).

happily ever after, a fire breaks out in the luggage compartment where she is stored on the ship, and she is lost at sea. Hence, just as Albine was rendered "superfluous," in a sense, once the spiritual battle was won, so Hadaly is rendered the same, once Edison accomplishes his greatest life work of creating the perfect woman. Sadly, we never get to see what life would be like with an android. Therefore, while highly innovative in many respects, I would like to suggest that Villiers's book, with its persistent misogynistic subtext, is less grounded in postmodernism and contemporary science fiction than in its own time—and more specifically in the nineteenth-century revamping of another myth, not so much that of Adam and Eve as that of Pygmalion. In fact, the novel constantly refers to Hadaly as an art object, and its central metaphors are the *Winged Victory* and the *Venus de Milo*.⁹

The complex of beliefs involving male creative power, the female body, and the creation of art receives its most perfect rationalization in the ever-popular nineteenth-century representation of the Pygmalion myth: stone beauty made flesh by the warming glow of masculine desire and genius.¹⁰ In the original story, it is Pygmalion, an artist king, who makes a statue of a woman and falls in love with it, but it is a woman, the goddess Aphrodite, who brings the statue-woman (later named Galatea) to life. Hence, both man and woman participate in the artistic process. Nineteenth-century depictions of the myth, however, tend to portray the male artist not only as the creator of the woman/art object, but as the person who, through the "magical" powers of his genius, breathes life into that object. It could thus be argued that many writers, in ignoring Aphrodite's contribution to the story, represented the myth in such a way as to diminish woman's power as artistic creator while accentuating male powers of creativity. Growing religious skepticism in France during the nineteenth century seems to be at least partially responsible for displacing Aphrodite in the myth with an increasing misogyny in such a way that the male creator, like the Thomas Edison of Villiers's text, was transformed into a sexually dominant god who fashions from inert matter an ideal erotic object for himself, a woman cut to the very pattern of his desires. However, in creating the character of Sowana, the mysterious woman who imbues Hadaly with her soul and sculpts much of her body, Villiers is one of the rare authors of his time who offers us an Aphrodite figure—a female character with significant artistic powers. In this sense, he does

at least somewhat disrupt the nature-culture dichotomy in placing a woman on the side of the intellect and creativity. It is regrettable, however, that he dedicates so few pages in the novel to Sowana, while casting her in a minor role as Edison's helper. In addition, the fact that she, too, dies at the end of the novel suggests that, like Hadaly, she is expendable once the scientist has obtained her help in completing his great scientific project.

On the surface, then, Zola and Villiers represent two diametrically opposed nineteenth-century ideologies: Zola, the bourgeois, democratic ideology; and Villiers, the elitist, artistic ideology. But a major irony in Villiers's work—an irony I hope to have brought to light—is that while he claimed to loathe the new bourgeois society, he was, upon closer examination, very much a part of it. His own writing, which tended to deny women's creative powers, helped to promote a particular type of binary bourgeois ideology in which men were associated with public life, artistic creation, and cultural production, while women were associated with domesticity and obedience. Therefore, in some respects, Villiers was himself at the source of the bourgeois ideology that he claimed to abhor.

Finally, I would like to conclude that the differences between these two portrayals of Eve—"natural" Eve, on the one hand, and "artificial" Eve, on the other—are not as great as they may seem on the surface. Despite its postmodern veneer, Villiers's novel does not significantly disrupt traditional, modernist binarisms such as nature-culture, male-female, and science-religion. It ends up being, in many respects, a rather conventional effort to control woman by making her into a robot. And in Zola's text, virtually every signifier of the feminine—flower, child, mother, animal—innocuous when taken at face value, contains within it a tremendous threat to the patriarchy's moral and spiritual purity. In fact, the whole narrative is driven by the need to stave off feminine sexual threat. The fact that both Villiers and Zola deem it necessary to reassert total control over the fate of their Eve character, by abruptly getting rid of her, demonstrates the persistent fear of women evident in much of nineteenth-century discourse.

⁹ See Marie Lathers, *The Aesthetics of Artifice: Villiers's 'L'Ève Future'* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996) 56–84.

¹⁰ See Linda Nochlin, *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988) 19.