
Oedipus as Reader in Georges Rodenbach's *La Vocation*

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In his 1925 essay "Resistances to Psycho-analysis," Freud pays tribute to Schopenhauer for acknowledging "in an intensely impressive passage" the "incomparable significance of sexual life." Freud goes on to emphasize the breadth of the psychoanalytic definition given to sexuality, maintaining that it means more than "the impulsion toward a union of the two sexes or toward producing a pleasurable sensation in the genitals," but rather it bears a "resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-preserving Eros of Plato's *Symposium*" (218).

Those interested in the *fin de siècle* cannot help but see irony in the fact that Freud's praise of Schopenhauer coincides with a characterization of sexuality as a positive and ennobling force. What in Freud is the sovereign principle of life signified for Schopenhauer man's tyrannical subjugation by a blind impulse to reproduce. What in Freud raises man up in Schopenhauer ties humanity to a world of illusion, shackling him to the objects of his desire, constituting him as the puppet of his will. Eros, Freud's enlightened ruler, remains in Schopenhauer a contemptuous despot, "the true hereditary lord of the world," as Schopenhauer calls him, who, when seated upon his "ancestral throne . . . laugh[s] at the preparations which have been made to bind [him]."¹

Freud's two most important foundational contributions to psychoanalytic theory — enumeration of the stages of infantile sexual development and identification of the Oedipus complex — had received considerable thematic elaboration in the fiction of the *fin de siècle*, at the time the influence of Schopenhauer's views had been the most pervasive in France. Indeed, Schopenhauer's description of sexual desire as an oppressive king whose subjects are powerless to depose or imprison him evokes an image of the Oedipal father who cannot be overthrown by his son. If today one looks through the lens of Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy at the major tenets of Freud's theory of sexuality, one can clearly see that it is a deep-seated anti-feminism, the depiction of woman as lure that prevents man's ascension to a state of detached equanimity and impassive contemplation

which most profoundly shaped the Decadents' conception of the mother-son relationship, identifying it as the central one in a deadly Oedipal triangle.

What was it, then, in Schopenhauer's views that accounted for their popularity in the *fin de siècle*? What mechanisms allowed for their widespread diffusion among the artists, poets, and intellectuals of the time? According to Jean Pierrot, the Decadents discovered in Schopenhauer "many ideas that they held dear: condemnation of the idea of Progress, profound analyses of love and an emphasis on the role of the unconscious, hostility with regard to woman considered as a simple instrument of nature" (78).² Existing disenchantment with Zola's scientific positivism and a renewed interest in mysticism and the occult combined with prevailing Decadent misogyny to create a pair of contrasting literary figures, the male thaumaturge like Maître Janus in Villiers' *Axel* and the sadistic female sexual monster like Clara in Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices*.

Dissemination of Schopenhauer's ideas contributed to a hardening of long-standing oppositional gender roles that pitted a male hero's spiritual or aesthetic longings against the treachery of the woman bent on ensnaring him and confining her prey in the cage of his desires. It is therefore not surprising that the Decadents should have undertaken a reconfiguration of the Oedipal triad, identifying the target of the emancipatory Oedipal murder as the mother herself. While continuing to exalt an idealized father who pointed the way out of a world of sorrow and frustration, the Decadents increasingly attacked the mother who prolonged her son's dependency, using her sexuality to thwart the child's efforts to reach maturity and achieve successful self-differentiation.

A focus on Georges Rodenbach's 1895 novel *La Vocation* illuminates both the Decadents' redefinition of relationships in the traditional Oedipal triangle and their resituation of the hero's role in the enlightened male reader of their texts. Thus, Rodenbach's narrative may restage a familiar drama in which the child's parricidal fantasies are magically realized, an absent father introjected as ego ideal becomes a god who punishes the son for coveting the mother, and religion predictably functions to instill guilt incurred by transgressing the incest taboo. But while adopting the Oedipus story, Rodenbach makes an innovative change by shifting the narrative focus away from the child's indulgence in forbidden desires and onto the mother's choreographing her son's enactment of impulses that chain him to the physical world and prevent him from escaping into the solitary realm of aestheticized religion. More importantly, while illustrating the case of a failed character tormented by sexual hunger, riven by the Schopenhauerian "*dualité volonté-représentation*" ("duality of Will and Representation"; Berg, "Le Lorgnon" 126), Rodenbach's work also constitutes its reader as the true hero whose lucidity

enables him to gaze into the mirror of the text and apprehend a truth to which the novel's protagonist is blind.

Born in 1855 in the Belgian town of Tournai and raised in the neighboring city of Gand, Rodenbach was introduced at an early age to an unconsoling view of religion. Recalling his education at the celebrated Collège Saint-Barbe, Rodenbach describes how school outings regularly ended with a visit to the cemetery, and chapel convocations were accompanied by harangues "*sur la brièveté de la vie, la mort inévitable, l'horreur du péché*" ("on the brevity of life, inevitable death, the horror of sin"; "Au Collège" 204). During an initial visit to Paris in 1871, Rodenbach attended Elme Caro's lectures at the Collège de France, presentations of Schopenhauer's philosophy which deepened Rodenbach's sense of the futility of love and the pointlessness of life. "Is it true," asks Caro, "that existence is a misfortune and that nothingness is better than being?" (qtd. in Pierrot 62).³

Already in his 1892 novel *Bruges-la-Morte*, Rodenbach had dramatized the conflict between sexual attraction and a dignified life of perpetual mourning and private prayer. Underscoring the illusory nature of erotic love is the fact that the protagonist, Hugues Viane, enters into a compromising liaison with an actress because she can impersonate his dead wife. Whereas the inconsolable widower first longed to lie down beside the figure of Marie de Bourgogne represented on the entablature of her sarcophagus, he is later entangled in desires that force him to abandon the purity of grieving detachment in favor of the living flesh of his wife's double. Rejecting the ascetic values of renunciation and piety, Hugues chooses a woman's body and, in so doing, violates the Oedipal injunction against possessing the mother to whom his etherealized wife is assimilated. As Berg writes, "the ongoing process whereby the vanished wife becomes sacred leads to her being identified with the taboo body, the untouchable stone body of the Mother" ("Lecture" 127).⁴ Hugues' devotional fidelity to the memory of his wife makes his betrayal all the more sacrilegious, since the beloved, metonymized as the tress of amber hair Hugues keeps in a crystal reliquary, is likened to the Vierges des Primitifs "[*qui*] *ont des toisons pareilles*" ("who have a similar mane"; 20).

Absent in *Bruges-la-Morte* is the censorious Oedipal father who comes between the guilty child and a mother hallowed by her otherworldliness or degraded by her sexual immodesty. Enforcement of religious prohibitions against Hugues' necrophilic and incestuous impulses is a responsibility entrusted to the city itself, "*personnage essentiel*," Rodenbach writes in the "*Avertissement*," "*qui conseille, dissuade, détermine à agir*" ("an essential character who advises, dissuades, motivates to act"; 16). Associated with the ghostly white hush of the Béguines, the swans swimming in the canals, the gentle voice of chimes whose petals are scattered from

the bell-towers of the city, Bruges is feminized, and Hugues' cult of the dead is encouraged by the Mother Church. Sublimated as the sensuality of worshipful fervor, religion in *Bruges-la-Morte* lacks the terrible majesty of the angry, castrating, omnipotent father that brings a sense of the transcendent to Rodenbach's later novel. In the conventual serenity of Bruges' faithful, in the spiritual aesthetic of Belgian masters "*qui peignaient comme on prie*" ("who painted in the way one prays"; *Bruges-la-Morte* 80), in Memling's triptych commemorating the massacre of the eleven thousand Virgins whose wounds are flowers and whose blood hardens into rubies set in "*des diadèmes éternels*" ("eternal diadems"; 80), Rodenbach represents a maternal religion celebrating the beautiful inviolability of the female body. The vigilance of a watchful super-ego projected as God is a quality assigned to Bruges' old women in their widows' weeds, eavesdroppers who monitor the activity of passers-by in the mirrors (*espions*) affixed to their windows.

In *La Vocation*, the gaze of an all-seeing God is no longer relayed by the public eye, since those who see Madame Cadzand and her son return from morning Mass cannot fathom the secret of the couple's unhappiness. Internalized in the Prologue as readers of the unrecounted story, Bruges' mothers are no longer privileged as characters who advise, dissuade, or direct the action, but are subordinated to a narrator whose knowledge contrasts with their incomprehension. Rodenbach differentiates between the ineffectual scheming of Madame Cadzand, trying in vain to control her son's life, and the teleological finality of a text that begins at the end, when Hans has already renounced his vocation, and his mother, estranged from her son as a result of her machinations, has finally realized "*qu'elle a gâté la vie de Hans et même la sienne*" ("she spoiled Hans' life and even her own"; 187). References to destiny, an implacable God indifferent to the entreaties of a repentant sinner, contrast the will of a silent and unforgiving father with the structuring authority of Rodenbach's narrator, who interjects commentary on events in the course of their relation. Opposed to the guidance given by a storyteller whose sentimental remarks shepherd readers toward an approved response is the single, ambiguous message God delivers to Hans on the subject of his vocation.

From the beginning, Monsieur Cadzand is presented as the model for an unapproachable and unresponsive God receding into the mystery of his inscrutability. As a new mother, Madame Cadzand had been reluctant to relinquish to a nurse her role as care-giver, realizing that, at night, peasant girls often sleep like the dead. Once when Hans is crying, Madame Cadzand asks her husband to rock the cradle and when he fails to answer, she tries to waken him, only to find that in death he had been transformed into a statue of wax, "*muet, froid, immuable*" ("mute, cold, immutable"; 15). As psychoanalysis teaches that the mother's failure to respond

to her baby's needs motivates vocalizations that are the basis of speech — “emptiness experienced as cries and tears, delayed fullness, then as calling, a way of demanding a presence, language” (Abraham and Torok 262)⁵ — the dead father's silence is interpreted as God's calling, an address to the child who has lost his way.

Rodenbach clarifies the Oedipal implications of the parricidal scene by picturing the father's corpse interposed between Madame Cadzand and her son, “*allong[é] auprès du berceau de Hans*” (“stretched out beside Hans' cradle”; 16). Interdicting the coupling of mother and child, the father is equated with his still voice, with a soul that rises up toward the ceiling where shadows made by a night-light coalesce into “*des taches comme on en voit à la surface de la lune*” (“spots like those seen on the surface of the moon”; 15-16).

It is under the auspices of male instructors that Hans is led out of the maternal house toward the cloister where a life of contemplative introspection prepares him for his ascension into heaven. Unlike the misdirected nun, “*femme . . . née pour la vie de famille, qui s'étirole sous les guimpes du célibat*” (“a woman born for family life, who withers away beneath the wimple of spinsterhood”; 51), Hans gladly submits to the castrating authority of surrogate fathers and so accepts his role as a transmitter of God's word in compensation for his loss of the progenitor's virility. It is the Dominican brother's impassioned eloquence that makes Hans aware of his calling, as he imagines letters of fire burning away the illusion of worldly attachments. Masculinized speech evoking the threat of divine retribution causes Hans to spurn the harlot of life “*[avec] ses plaisirs au vain maquillage qui se décompose vite dans les larmes*” (“with its crudely made up pleasures that are quickly dissolved by tears”; 55).

Even Rodenbach's earlier characterization of Hans' parents emphasizes the conventional gendering of the material world of women and the language realm of men. Linking the nominative authority of the father to his power to create, Rodenbach describes Monsieur Cadzand as an accomplished scholar “*qui s'était fait nommer archiviste de la province*” (“who had gotten himself appointed as the archivist of the province”; 8). References to a crib lovingly prepared for the newborn are etymologically connected to the incunabula, the literary cradle of Bruges' history painstakingly researched by Hans' father. Hans' name itself is a linguistic ejaculation, “*[qui] s'élançe, un peu bref, et retombe sur lui-même, comme un jet d'eau raccourci*” (“which shoots forth briefly and falls back on itself, like a momentary jet of water”; 11-12). Yet despite its phonetic shortness, the name also situates Hans in terms of Bruges' cultural history, as the baby bears “*le nom d'un saint de l'art*” (“the name of a saint of art”; 12), Hans Memling, so that by association with the painter, the child becomes a descendant of the spiritual aesthetic he later

adopts. Connected to the unknowable will of God, Hans' fate is to assume a creative legacy that defines him first as the filial namesake of Belgium's greatest painter and finally as the fictional progeny of one of Belgium's most noted Symbolist authors.

Initially, Hans' religious sensualism reveals his nascent spirituality as being influenced by his mother. Putting words out of the mouth, like taking in food, affords a compensatory oral satisfaction that makes praying resemble tasting "*le délice d'un fruit qui fond*" ("the delight of a fruit that melts"; 23). Carried along on an organ's rising swells, Hans surrenders to music that exalts his emotions, "*le faisait vibrer, pleurer, tanguer sur ses vastes houles*" ("made him vibrate, weep, and pitch on its vast swells"; 23). Silent approbation conveyed by a Madonna's serene benevolence presides over the emergence of the child's faith. As a choirboy, Hans' participation in the sacred offices involves a reward for self-display recalling an earlier episode when, as an infant, he had danced naked to the doleful music of an organ-grinder. Gesturally undressing his own nudity, divesting himself of his flesh in order to rise up and out of the world, Hans had been moved to vacate the mother's gift of the body in order to assume paternal responsibility for the language that turns fallen reality into divine music.

Witnessing the consecration of the Host, Hans again glimpses his dead father's vanishing soul as the black shadow of the moon, since one sees the face of Jesus in the wafer "*comme on voit davantage un visage humain dans la lune, en montant sur une tour, le soir*" ("as one sees a human countenance in the moon, when one climbs a tower in the evening"; 24). Even when collaborating in the celebration of Communion, Hans honors his father's memory, as he rings a bell signaling significant moments in the Mass, scattering droplets from an aspergillum of sound in a spray of notes recalling his given name.

If the guilt incurred by the parricidal son motivates Hans' choice of a vocation, his decision to become a monk also helps to appease the victim resurrected as Hans' judge. By serving God, Hans can see the dark face of the man in the moon lit up by rays emanating from "*le grand soleil du Saint-Sacrement*" ("the great sun of the Holy Sacrament"; 30). A father whose disappearance had been recorded by black crepe festooning the infant's cradle, Monsieur Cadzand is restored as the God Hans realizes he had previously known only "*dans l'absence*" ("through his absence"; 30).

The conflict staged in Rodenbach's novel is between the mother's attempt to exploit her son's religious sensualism and the father's direction of the child toward a life of solitary erudition and spiritual seclusion. In the novel, the maternal avatars alluded to in Freud's myth of the Three Caskets are represented by Madame Cadzand or her surrogates, as she tries to take advantage of Hans' Mariolatrous

tendencies by substituting real women for the Virgin, whom the boy admits loving “*parce qu'elle est femme*” (“because she is a woman”; 41). Installation of a statue of Mary, Hans’ adornment of the house as a shrine to a mother arrayed with flowers and dressed in lace anticipate the later introduction of the maid Ursula, who symbolizes the mother as the despised amanuensis valued only for her sexual servitude. In order to keep her son near, Madame Cadzand reverses the sublimating effects of religion by encouraging coitus instead of communion, which, she realizes, “is also a form of incorporation, an act of possession, for a long time desired and then consummated, in which one feels another being, who is God, enter into oneself and live in oneself” (47).⁶

Rodenbach’s narrative prescribes condemnation of Madame Cadzand by opposing her to the story’s implied maternal readers, who nevertheless share with her a dream of their own sons’ filial loyalty. As the price of inseparability is unspoken remorse, “*tout grand bonheur est un défi, une violente lumière qui attire les papillons noirs, les mauvais sorts*” (“every great experience of happiness is an act of defiance, a violent light that draws black butterflies, bad fortune”; 12). Contrasting with shadow moths of mourning, the dark lunar face of the father who flees the world of light and life are Hans’ white crib and his house filled with flowers. Projecting onto Hans his unformulated castration fears, Madame Cadzand tries to protect her son from the self-mutilation to which he succumbs in becoming an *enfant de chœur* (a choirboy).

Madame Cadzand’s fixation on the unruly blond profusion of Hans’ hair, her subsequent decision to stuff a pillow with his shorn locks mixed with swans’ down and wool highlight the symbol of hair as the material attachment of mother and child, since, as Gilbert Durand says, “*la chevelure*” is “*le fil naturel servant à câbler les premiers liens*” (“hair is a natural thread that serves to braid the first ties”; 117). Because the fetish object is an acknowledgment and disavowal of the absence of the maternal phallus, the treasured strand of hair stands for the beloved whose loss is simultaneously mourned and denied. Hugues Viane’s veneration of his dead wife’s amber tresses, Madame Cadzand’s preservation of Hans’ curls, precious fibers with which she weaves “*les jours moroses de son avenir*” (“the gloomy days of her future”; 29), indicate the characters’ refusal to detach themselves from a dead past. The familiar Decadent figure of the *mère mortifère* (death-dealing mother) combines with images of the spinner who obstructs the male’s impulse to ascend and traps the black butterfly in a tangle of sexual desire.

Significantly, it is Madame Cadzand and not Hans who uses the pillow as a transitional object which does not facilitate separation but more closely binds the mother to the child. In her identification with her son, Madame Cadzand imag-

ines the pillow as both the head rest of the maternal breast and the metamorphosed self of the castrated boy whom she captures in the web of her baneful influence. Weaving the shell vacated by the transformed child, "*ce joli butin de cocons*" ("this pretty treasure of cocoons"; 29), she fashions a prison to contain his new self, fetishizing Hans' hair as the link that he breaks and that she reconnects. The precondition to Hans' individuation and accession to genital maturity is his ability to dispose of his own body. Thus, Madame Cadzand's practice of tonsorial magic is motivated by a conflation of her son and the shorn corpse of her dead husband (27). Because of the Decadents' confusion of Oedipal roles, it is Madame Cadzand who imagines the haircut as reenacting the murder that had allowed her to possess her child to begin with.

Asserting that "[m]atricide, not patricide, is at the heart of the heroic myth in its typical and universal form" (2), Jean-Joseph Goux discounts Freud's reading of the Oedipus story as "an anomaly." Rather than murdering the male progenitor who forbids intercourse with the mother, the child successfully reaches manhood only by destroying the female dragon, "who binds and captivates her son, holds him back, traps him in the numberless coils of her reptilian attachment" (26). Rodenbach grafts a Decadent version of the Oedipus narrative onto what Goux calls the monomyth in a way that shifts attention away from the authority of the castrating father and onto the mother's paralyzing love that perpetuates the child's infantile dependency. The liberating sword with which the hero slays the monster becomes, in Rodenbach, the scissors used to cut the infant's attachment to the mother's body. Overdetermined, the figure of the child's hair reappears in Madame Cadzand's richly symbolic reaction to the prospect of Hans' tonsure, which she associates with transcendence, judgment, mutilation, and the end of time. Recalling the pillow she imagines as stuffed with wool taken from the slaughtered lamb of Christ, Madame Cadzand equates Hans' castration with a circular "*plaie en forme d'hostie*" ("wound in the shape of a Host"; 63), a wound mirroring the unblinking eye of a pitiless God. The temporal flow signified by the undulation of the blond hair,⁷ is arrested, replaced by an empty clock face telescoped into the pale countenance of a spectral moon, the "*étoile morte*" ("dead star"; 63) representing an inflexible father's cold surveillance.

Adopting elements of the monomyth outlined by Goux, Rodenbach's narrative suggests that the heroic passage to manhood comes only after successful completion of a "deadly struggle that is the bloody initiatory separation from the mother-monster" (34). Because of his pessimistic misogyny, Rodenbach does not conclude his book with a hierogamy, a triumphant rebirth of the male who is betrothed to a beautiful bride. In the Decadent version of the Oedipus myth, the

father-murder, which brings introjection of a retributive judge, combines with a failed attempt to escape the treacherous, ensnaring mother. What Goux, after Lacan, calls the “desire for castration” is conveyed by Hans’ decision to leave the maternal house, to cut himself off from the illusory world of Schopenhauerian will, to accept a conventual life as the “sacrifice that is the condition of a second birth” (Goux 32). Because he is denied the self-affirming apotheosis of the virile conqueror, Hans can only retreat into the sanctuary of religion, which Rodenbach shows to be another barren womb. Seeking mastery of the language enabling him to rise above the world of sexual desire, he embarks on a substitute quest, undergoes an alternative trial that articulates the author’s wish to be reborn as his work.

Not only is Hans castrated by a manipulative mother; he is also defined by religion as an object to be molded by God’s will, shaped by his teachers’ lessons, swayed by the Dominican brother’s rhetorical vehemence. Not a speaker whose language sets him free, Hans is an ear, a receptacle for others’ messages, “*un parloir où Jésus descendait lui parler*” (“a parlor into which Jesus descended to talk to him”; 57). Rodenbach’s address to an audience originally comprised of mothers, and his interest in dictating their response suggest a reassertion of the male prerogative to initiate communication with receptive female readers who, together with him, beget the children of their interpretations. The writer is different from the sterile sermonizer cut off from his congregation, an unproductive man sowing in the wind, standing alone in front of his window, “*évangélisant les oiseaux et les poissons*” (“evangelizing birds and fish”), preaching to swans, smoke, trees, and bells, “*à tout ce qui passe, image la brume, habite le silence*” (“to everything that passed, imaged the mist, inhabited the silence”; 133).

Necessitated by a failed matricide, the Decadents’ effort at self-definition fails, and yet that failure is transformed into art. Hans’ fall into the flesh is paralleled by an aesthetic redemption of the story of the *vocation manquée* (missed vocation) whose authenticity is problematized by the silence of the novel. Whereas the voice of God is audible to Hans alone, the narrative speaks clearly, openly discussing the psychology of the hero’s guilt, attributing his sexual dormancy to remorse over the parricidal wish, describing the awakening of Hans’ flesh as a profanation of art, characterizing his sin as the expiatory submission of a transgressive self to the authority of the dead father.

As a procuress supplying surrogates who continue her work of imprisoning the child in the realm of desire, Madame Cadzand promotes a relationship between Hans and the daughter of a friend. But because Hans remains cold, unresponsive, sexually disabled by the memory of his father’s corpse, the couple is left speechless in each other’s presence, “*comme s’il y avait un mort entre eux*” (“as if there were a

dead body between them”; 123). Since fate is administered by a God created in the father’s image, Hans’ punishment for murder is to be disallowed the chance to atone. While delivering the sinner from the hell of temptation, the soteriological promise of Christ’s suffering is canceled by the image of a crucified nude who is the instrument of man’s damnation (150). Since guilt motivates sin, Hans’ guilty act compels him to surrender to the punishing agent “[*qui*] arrivait du fond de l’éternité” (“who was arriving from the bottom of eternity”; 136). As art and religion deliver man from disappointment, pain, and time, the vehicle of Hans’ downfall also dishonors the memory of the creator whose name Hans bears. Demonized as the sexual devourer, the temptress Ursula is the enemy of Saint Ursula, who is immortalized in Memling’s celebration of her martyrdom, as the virgin becomes the seductress, and the immaculacy of art is sacrificed to the uncleanness of the flesh.

In Rodenbach’s novel, commission of the forbidden act takes place in an altered version of the primal scene, where Madame Cadzand listens in scandalized awe as, on the floor above, Hans is initiated into the mystery of sexual passion. Hans’ attraction to the Virgin “because she is a woman” finds its natural and forbidden outlet in the upstairs bedroom, which substitutes for the downstairs altar. As the culmination of Madame Cadzand’s campaign to substitute erotic love for divine love, lust for piety, Hans’ sin is meant to marry the son to the mother using Ursula as intermediary. Regression to a state of pre-Oedipal narcissism, in which the infant experiences a fusion with the mother, is inverted so that it is Madame Cadzand who becomes the enveloping and omnipotent subject for whom the unseen coitus exists “*comme les objets existent pour le miroir*” (“as objects exist for the mirror”; 157). Indulgence in incest by proxy is the castrating abomination that silences the voice of God and opposes symbolic relinquishment of the fornicator’s virility. Only Madame Cadzand can convince herself that “*l’entrée en amour est aussi comme une ordination*” (“falling in love was also like an ordination”; 156), since, for Hans, it is a surrender to the demon of lechery, a defeat by the female who catches him in the web of her darting blue eyes, “*araignées [qui] quittent leur toile à laquelle un fil les rattache*” (“spiders which leave their web to which they are attached by a thread”; 162).

After Ursula’s banishment, a belated contrition initiates a reconciliation of mother and son. Madame Cadzand, having realized that her selfishness cost Hans’ love, acknowledges that “[*u*]ne mère est trop exigeante qui rêve de garder toujours son fils auprès d’elle” (“any mother who dreams of keeping her son beside her is too demanding”; 175). And Hans, having lost the trial of matricide, cannot raise himself to the level of the introjected father and so is unmanned by feelings of unwor-

thiness. Regendering himself as a defiled virgin, a ruptured hymen, he is a broken vessel unable to contain Christ's precious blood, which seeps away "*en gouttelettes, en bruine rouge éternisant autour du vase fêlé la sueur d'agonie du Jardin des Olives*" ("in droplets, in a red mist that prolongs for eternity, around the cracked vase, the sweating death agony of the Garden of Olives"; 186).

Everlastingly joined by guilt that also separates, Rodenbach's characters are consigned to silence, like the swans that do not feel their purity darkened by the shadow of the couple's mourning. Yet whereas Hans' betrayal of his calling results in a cessation of God's speech, Rodenbach's address to his readers continues as black text tattooing the page. Marking the conclusion of a novel that thematizes "*la déception du rêve par le monde extérieur*" ("a dream disappointed by external reality"; Bodson-Thomas 64), Rodenbach's final passage marks the reconstruction of the dream as narrative.

In the Epilogue, Rodenbach returns to the idle mothers sitting at their windows, watching the despondent pair returning from morning Mass. Focusing on the symbol of the *espion* as a privileged vantage point and as the glass reflecting the viewer's narcissistic gaze, Rodenbach likens the mother/son relationship to the relationship between the reader and the novel. Those previously encouraged to identify with the female witnesses to the story's unrelated tragedy are now constituted as male judges, impressed into playing the role of a father whose knowledge assimilates the story to himself. Enlightened by information imparted by an omniscient narrator, the reader is elevated out of the trap of the text as spectacle and afforded an Olympian perspective inducing him to condemn Madame Cadzand for her possessiveness and other mothers, "*qui ne devinaient rien*" ("who suspected nothing"; 187), for their ignorance.

Yet as the child is the reflective product of parental narcissism, "*[m]iroir où les époux qui s'aiment se voient tous les deux en un seul visage*" ("a mirror in which two loving spouses can see each other in a single face"; 12), the text risks becoming a medium that bewitches the reader with an image of his face. Rodenbach's novel therefore counsels the audience to free a literary work that can only reflect their identity. Commenting that the universe of Schopenhauer "*est . . . régi par le principe du miroir*" ("is governed by the principle of the mirror"), Christian Berg adds that, in the writings of La Jeune Belgique, the subject is often transfixed by a phenomenal world that acts as the reflection of his will. Like the Symbolist aesthete who, having severed the ties binding him to the realm of desire, then rises into the rarified domain of representation, Rodenbach's readers free themselves from the image they glimpse in the *espion* of the novel. In opposition to the character's humiliating defeat by women who exploit his desires, Rodenbach's audience is

exalted by the text's celebration of their discerning male intelligence. As Berg observes, man is condemned "to undergo the allurements and enchantments of Maya, or illusion, unless, through reflection, art, or introspection, he becomes aware of his situation" ("Le Lorgnon" 126).⁸ By overcoming the incestuous temptation to couple with a text begetting the hermeneutic it prescribes, interpreters of Rodenbach's book are celebrated as Oedipal heroes who triumph, not by passing a test of their manhood, but by demonstrating the intelligence they gain from reading a work that fosters introspection, philosophical reflection, and an appreciation of art as art. In teaching how to murder a mother bent on enslaving the child in whom she sees only herself, Rodenbach's text models the initiatory passage of the reader whose vocation it honors.✻

Notes

¹ Taken from Schopenhauer's Fourth Book of *The World as Will and Idea*, Chapter 42, and translated by James Strachey, in an "Extract from Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol. 19, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1961): 224.

² *"bien des idées qui leur tenaient à coeur: la condamnation de l'idée de Progrès, des analyses profondes de l'amour et une mise en évidence du rôle de l'inconscient, l'hostilité à l'égard de la femme considérée comme un simple instrument de la nature."*

³ *"Est-il vrai que l'existence soit un malheur et que le néant vaille mieux que l'être?"*

⁴ *"la sacralisation progressive de l'épouse disparue mène à l'identification de celle-ci avec le corps interdit, le corps de pierre intangible de la Mère."*

⁵ *"vide ... expérimenté comme cris et pleurs, remplissement différé, puis comme occasion d'appel, moyen de faire apparaître, langage."*

⁶ *"est aussi une incorporation, une possession, longtemps désirée, puis consommée, où on sent un autre être, qui est Dieu, entre en soi, vivre en soi."*

⁷ Amplifying on Bachelard's comments on hair, water, and the figure of Ophelia, Durand writes that *"l'onde de la chevelure est liée au temps, à ce temps irrévocable qu'est le passé"* ("the wave of the hair is connected to time, the irrevocable time which is the past"; 108).

⁸ *"à subir le leurre et les enchantements de la Maya ou de l'illusion, à moins qu'il ne prenne conscience (par la réflexion, par l'art ou l'introspection) de sa situation."*

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