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### "Familles, Je Vous Hais!": The Family in the French Interwar Novel

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## Abstract

“Familles, Je Vous Hais !”: The Family in the French Interwar Novel

Chandler Abshire

2022

Under the Third Republic, social and political theorists responded to national crises by advocating for a strengthening of the traditional patriarchal family. After the French defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1, officials put faith in the family as a panacea for the various demographic and moral ills that led to the defeat. The interwar period again saw the return of such calls, but authors of the interwar period carry out clear critiques of the patriarchal family as a source not of moral and reproductive strength, but rather of prejudice and stagnation.

The interwar period is often overlooked by scholars or studied only for what it can tell us about the World Wars or the rise and fall of France’s first socialist government in the 1930s. But the 1920s and 1930s were a period of intense cultural production, when artists and authors experimented with new methods and new forms of social and political engagement through art. The novels studied in this dissertation engage actively with the contemporary social and political situation in France as well as with the French literary tradition, rewriting the *roman d’éducation* and the domestic novel for a new century.

In this dissertation I study the place of the family in novels and novellas by Louis Guilloux, Paul Nizan, Irène Némirovsky, François Mauriac, Colette, Roger Martin du Gard, André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Each chapter of the project moves through different relationships — fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, siblings. Finally, the last two chapters turn to different alternatives to the family that

those on the margins of bourgeois society might seek out — political groups, friendship, mentorship, romantic relationships, crowds.

By centering the family in their novels, these interwar French authors ensure that their social and political critiques of the Third Republic get right to the heart of the traditionalist assumptions on which the republican social order was based. Further, by showing young peoples' rejection of the existing order, interwar authors explore new models of citizenship and social engagement. Though their adolescent protagonists struggle to turn their rebellious energy into effective political action, the rebellious energy that bubbles up throughout these works provides hope for national renewal after the first World War.

“Familles, Je Vous Hais !”: The Family in the French Interwar Novel

A Dissertation  
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School  
Of  
Yale University  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

By  
Chandler Abshire

Dissertation Director: Alice Kaplan

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I dedicate this project to my mom, who taught me to love literature and who has been with me every step of this journey.

## Introduction

The interwar period — and the 1930s in particular — has not been explored in the same depth as the periods of war that bookend it. To some, these “hollow years”<sup>1</sup> of French history are only interesting for the insight they provide into the failure of France’s first socialist government or into the impending Second World War that looms so large in retrospect, but do not constitute a unique object of study in their own right.

The interwar period was a time of intense cultural production and according to Olivier Rony, the 1920s saw the birth of a “vie littéraire” in Paris: new publishing houses were established, as were new journals and newspapers with a focus on literature, such as *Les Nouvelles littéraires* (1922), *Europe* (1923), *Candide* (1924), *Gringoire* (1928), *Marianne* (1932), and *Ce Soir* (1937). Other existing newspapers dedicated more space to articles on literature and art or added a weekend literary supplement. Literary criticism had a heyday at this time, with these articles becoming an important site of political and social criticism. Though critics sometimes prioritized their ideological concerns over faithful readings of novels, this makes literary criticism at the time a particularly rich place to understand the concerns of the day and changing ideas about the responsibility of writers.<sup>2</sup> The works I study here were fully a product of this literary life. Many of the authors I study were critics themselves — notably Paul Nizan, Jean-Paul Sartre, and André Gide — and were very conscious of how their works responded to those of their contemporaries and where they fit into the French literary tradition.

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<sup>1</sup> See Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Olivier Rony, *Les Années roman, 1919-1939: Anthologie de la critique Romanesque dans l'entre-deux-guerres*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1997), 13-4.



At this time, authors and critics were especially interested in renewing the novelistic form, which many agreed had stagnated, with poor-quality, predictable works saturating the market since the end of the nineteenth century. In 1932, René Trintzius, literary critic for *Europe*, bemoaned what he called the “académisme” of the novel, in 1932:

Qu'on le veuille ou non, nous sommes arrivés à une période qu'on pourrait appeler d'académisme du roman. Les recettes sont connues, étiquetées, classées. Tout le monde, avec un peu d'ingéniosité, peut écrire un roman possible. Si l'intelligence se joint à l'ingéniosité, nous avons alors ce que les critiques jugent « une œuvre remarquable » et qu'ils ont tort de tant remarquer.<sup>3</sup>

Following the First World War, writers and artists explored new forms of political and social engagement through their work. Fiction was the privileged mode through which writers grappled with the collapse of the positivistic values and rhetoric that characterized the nineteenth century and that culminated in the destructive Great War.

I study how several novels and novellas of the interwar period carry out social and political critiques through representations of the family. Although throughout the Third Republic the family was considered a natural source of French strength and stability, interwar authors across the political spectrum question such traditionalist assumptions, revealing the family to be an unnatural grouping, fundamentally at odds with the best interests of its members. Attention to the family and alternatives to it in literature allow us to understand authors' critiques of the place of the individual of the established order and how they explore new bases for an eventual social order.

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<sup>3</sup> René Trintzius, “Review of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*,” in *Les Années Roman*, 486.

*Family under the Third Republic*

The family was at the center of policy discussions throughout the nineteenth century. After the establishment of the French Republic, it was essential to define the rights of individuals and the collective, and to establish where the state would fit into this relationship. Governments in the early years of the Republic defined themselves by the family-related policies they put in place.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, the state took on a larger role in regulating the French family, particularly among poor populations.<sup>5</sup>

After the Revolution, everyone, liberals and traditionalists alike, understood the nuclear family as the natural basis for society. For liberals like Madame de Staël or Alexis de Toqueville, marriages founded on mutual consent were the expression of a natural need to develop relationships. Such relationships were the way to individual happiness, which was itself a social good. Just as the doctrine of *laissez faire* would promote health and progress in the economic sphere, so too would freedom in one's private life ensure individual growth and happiness.<sup>6</sup> In traditional circles, the patriarchal family was seen as the best means to enforce gender roles and morality. The historian Michelle Perrot highlights how in moments of crisis, traditionalists doubled down on their support of the family: "Au reste, familles dissolues, femmes oubliées de leurs devoirs sont les boucs émissaires ordinaires des défaites militaires et des commotions

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<sup>4</sup> Lynn Hunt, "Révolution française et vie privée," in *Histoire de la vie privée*, ed. Philippe Ariès and Georges Duby, (Paris: Seuil, 1999), 4:31-2.

<sup>5</sup> Michelle Perrot, "Les Acteurs," in *Histoire de la vie privée*, 4:79. See also Roddey Reid, *Families in Jeopardy: Regulating the Social Body in France, 1750-1910*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Michelle Perrot, "La famille triomphante," in *Histoire de la vie privée*, 4:84-5.

sociales.”<sup>7</sup> This would certainly be true of the Restoration and the Third Republic, and later, after each World War.

The national response to an earlier conflict laid the foundation for discussions of the family in the interwar period. After the humiliating defeat in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1, national leaders asserted that strengthening traditional family structures and gender roles would cure the national weakness that led to defeat. Political language became decidedly medical at this time. The defeat provoked widespread concern about *dégénérescence*, which encapsulated declining birth rates and hereditary or social diseases, or *fléaux sociaux*, like alcoholism or prostitution.

In *Sexing the Citizen*, Judith Surkis examines the centrality of conjugality, both as a literal social structure and as a metaphor for the complementarity of private and public spheres, in discussions surrounding education under the Third Republic. Cultural critics spoke of the marriage of the individual interest of the citizen to the larger social interests of the nation. In this highly gendered model, men were the only ones with access to the identity of citizen, while women were assumed to represent the interests of the family and of society as a whole.<sup>8</sup> This family ideal demanded personal sacrifice from its members, and particularly from the mother. One’s role within the family eclipsed individual identity. The family home, where men and women had clearly defined roles and patriotic duties, was the ideal space for children to learn about moral conduct and their own future

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>8</sup> This definition of social duty perpetuated and justified the gendered division between citizens and non-citizens. And framing the capacity for moral self-regulation as an essentially male quality served to justify universal male suffrage (Judith Surkis, *Sexing the Citizen*, (New York: Ithaca, 2008), 2-4).

national duty. A strong family unit was thus central to the moral and physical well-being of the nation.<sup>9</sup>

Moralizing language about the family placed pressure on families to maintain a spotless reputation. Perrot explains that the family was, especially by the end of the nineteenth century, a “microsociété menacée,” subjected to the watchful eye of outsiders who could make or break a family’s reputation. This created antagonism between the family and those outsiders closest to it: neighbors and domestic staff. Further, families had to prioritize collective interests over the well-being of its individual members. Given the increasing valorization of individualism, this inevitably led to conflicts within the family, as individuals chafed against the stringent regulations and expectations of family life.<sup>10</sup>

Further, medical language comparing France to a diseased body pervaded social and political discourse in *fin-de-siècle* France.<sup>11</sup> Such language was in turn used to normalize and justify state control of individual bodies.<sup>12</sup> In this climate, family members who did not represent the ideal of health and morality could cause scandal for the whole family. Perrot acknowledges that money was at the root of many family conflicts. But

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<sup>9</sup> See Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> Perrot, “Drames et conflits familiaux,” in *Histoire de la vie privée*, 4:243-4.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the medicalization of language in the political sphere, see Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France: the medical concept of national decline*. As historian Michelle Perrot explains, such blending of legal, medical, and moral discourse had already begun earlier in the nineteenth century. Doctors in the first half of the century supported marriage “à la fois comme régulateur d’énergie et comme moyen d’éviter les dangereuses copulations du bordel, destructeur de la race” (“Fonctions de la famille,” in *Histoire de la vie privée*, 4:103).

<sup>12</sup> Criminology at this time focused on hereditary traits that predestined individuals for crime or madness: removing these individuals from the family home and incarcerating them was the common practice, as much to prevent crime as to prevent reproduction. It was in this context that eugenics gained such traction. See Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics*.

when it came to the scandals that threatened the family's reputation, economic concerns took a back seat to scandals involving individuals' bodies. Perrot puts illegitimate births at the top of the list, with the shame falling especially on the mother of the child, the child being proof of pre- or extramarital sex. In a society increasingly anxious about biological social strength, physical deformity and mental illness were seen as blemishes on the entire family.<sup>13</sup>

As Perrot notes, abuse — even murder — of illegitimate and handicapped children was the norm. The mentally ill were typically locked within the family home or interned in asylums. Women were especially likely to be locked away by their families because of insanity. “[L]’asile se nourrit de plus en plus du drame privé et du conflit familial dont le médecin est le juge et l’arbitre.”<sup>14</sup>

Perrot notes that the family was the cause of many of these cases of “insanity”: women were sent to asylums for displays of excessive emotion in response to grief over the loss of a child, despair over a husband's abusive behavior or infidelity. Despite general cultural anxiety around the crimes of women, the most common violence in families was husbands' abuse of their wives. This was the reality in a society where juries proved willing to forgive “crimes passionnels,” the name most men chose to give to their decision to murder their wives in order to protect their honor, and where women in reality had very limited legal resources.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Perrot, “Drames et conflits,” 250-2.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 261.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 253-4. Perrot explains that working-class women actually benefited from more resources to rebel against unfair treatment by husbands. If they could prove that they were left without sufficient resources to take care of their family, they could receive legal support and they could also go to newspapers with vitriolic comments about their husbands and their husbands' lovers (Ibid., 256-8).

Despite this trend, the stigma of having such a troubled family member remained strong enough to discourage some from institutionalizing family members, even into the interwar period. François Mauriac represents such a situation in *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927): rather than allow Thérèse to be convicted of the attempted murder of her husband, Thérèse's in-laws lock her in the family home so that her crime will not hamper the marriage of Thérèse's sister-in-law.

The interwar period was another moment of traditional return to the family after the devastation of the war at the population level and shifting gender roles. Given the significant death toll among young Frenchmen and the increased mobility of women, there was much anxiety during the interwar period around the breakdown of gender roles.<sup>16</sup>

Though the interwar period was a time of progressive change, which culminated in the rise to power of the Popular Front, this period did not bring significant changes for women or the family.<sup>17</sup> In fact, this socialist government, elected through an untenable alliance between various leftist groups, was unable to fulfill many of its idealistic promises. The leaders of the Popular Front subordinated the role of women to the larger cause of the working classes, and when the Popular Front government discussed giving

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Louise Roberts explains that literature from this period that depicted the modern woman did so more often than not in order to restore her to a traditional domestic role (*Civilization without sexes: reconstructing gender in postwar France, 1917-1927*, (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994)). On the other hand, Carolyn Dean has argued that certain attempts to strengthen the moral order actually normalized deviant behaviors (*The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2000)).

<sup>17</sup> For more on the relationship between the Popular Front and women, see Louis-Pascal Jacquemond, *L'Espoir Brisé* (Paris: Belin, 2016) and Françoise Thébaud, *Quand nos grand-mères nous donnaient la vie* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1986).

the vote to women, it was always for a limited group such as the widows and mothers of fallen soldiers or women with diplomas.

Even in the 1930s, women were still portrayed as primarily responsible for depopulation because rather than marrying and having children, they had taken on employment. Throughout all of these discussions, politicians on the right and the left never abandoned the conviction that a woman's civic duty was, first and foremost, to bear children. France could not return to its prewar strength unless French women started families.

The historian Christine Bard shows that interwar feminists in fact relied on these prejudices about women's "nature" to justify their demands for rights. Reformist feminists<sup>18</sup> demanded rights for women *because* of women's natural difference from men, and in all things, they focused on defining the role of women not as individuals, but rather in relation to the family and to society. If women could vote, their natural gentleness would prevent future wars and their probity would reduce social ills like alcoholism and prostitution; if working women were given financial support, they could stop working and focus on strengthening their families.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> See Christine Bard, *Les Filles de Marianne: histoire des féminismes 1914-1940*, (Paris: Fayard, 1995). Radical feminists who insisted on the equality of the sexes in all things were still a minority in interwar France, and though the women who supported this ideology made a significant impression on their contemporaries, they did not command large influential organizations. The feminist organizations that held real political and social sway in the interwar period were for the most part conservative organizations that had been established around the turn of the century, and even as early as the 1870s. Bard mentions that the stability of the Third Republic, after virtually constant political and social turmoil throughout the nineteenth century, allowed French feminists to finally organize in a lasting way (Ibid., 20). The vast majority of these Belle Époque feminist organizations were conservative in terms of their view of women and their leaders were largely well-educated and well-off women who prioritized bourgeois respectability in all they did. By the interwar period, many of the same women who founded these organizations in the nineteenth century still held prominent positions in the organizations. Moreover, many of these leaders were committed to maintaining apolitical organizations (Ibid., 183).

<sup>19</sup> Françoise Thébaud also discusses material gains for women that were justified not in terms of individual women's well-being, but rather in terms of what would support families and improve French natality. As

Similar arguments would come to the fore again in recent decades by those who opposed the adoption of the Pacte Civil de Solidarité, which would, among other things, recognize the legal status of same-sex couples. In 1999, the minister of justice framed the debate over the legality of civil unions between same-sex couples as a question of national strength.<sup>20</sup>

*Third Republic Education: harnessing the crisis of adolescence*

At the same time as there was this intense faith in the family as the ideal space to raise children, there was also a conviction that the family was not enough: public schools were the best equipped to usher boys through the challenging moments of crisis, and were essential in responding to the crisis of adolescence. Indeed, this was an idea that dated to earlier in the century: early republican leaders based their conception of a national education system on the idea that children “appartiennent à la république avant d’appartenir à leurs parents.”<sup>21</sup>

Under the Third Republic, public school was made free in 1881 and mandatory for all children in 1882. Policymakers and cultural critics framed public primary school as an extension of the nuclear family, and as a bridge between family and state. Public school provided young male children with a structure mimicking family life (with the

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examples of these advances for the good of the family, Thébaud cites improved pre- and post-natal care, government allocations for mothers of *familles nombreuses*, improved hygiene in hospitals, the creation of dedicated maternity wards, and temporary refuges for abandoned mothers (which were closer to prisons than to comfortable dormitories) (*Quand nos grand-mères donnaient la vie*).

<sup>20</sup> Cited by Michael Lucey, *The Misfit of the Family: Balzac and the Social Forms of Sexuality*, (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 14.

<sup>21</sup> Cited by Lynn Hunt, “Révolution française et vie privée,” 31.



*instituteur* or *institutrice* taking on a parental role) and gave them the preparation necessary for them to become good Republican citizens.<sup>22</sup> The new educational model was in fact meant to mimic and enhance natural maturation. An important aspect of this model was the recognition that young men have individual wills: rather than simply attempting to suppress those wills, this new school system would take advantage of that willpower to foster moral self-regulation, a quality central to the ideal French citizen during this time of supposed moral decadence.

Adolescence was a crucial moment in boys' education, and a *crise d'adolescence* was much discussed by policymakers and critics. At this time, young men's independent wills were awakened, and they could be led astray by nefarious influences. The school system sought to cultivate boys' individual spirits to get them safely through this crisis. The energy that caused adolescents to rebel was the same force they needed to learn to harness in order to resist nefarious influences.

Surkis emphasizes the contradiction at the heart of this educational model: the ideal male citizen was expected to be independent and self-governing, but he could only fulfill his social and political responsibilities by embedding himself in a series of social

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<sup>22</sup> The first of the Jules Ferry laws, passed on August 1, 1879, and which focused primarily on the establishments of public schools for *institutrices* also aimed to increase the number of girls' primary schools throughout the country (after an initial push to establish public primary schools in the 1830s, few new schools had been founded). In the discussions of this element of the law, we see the doctrine of separate spheres being consciously established. It was women's patriotic duty to be educated in a basic understanding of Republican values and citizenship, as well as some simple, useful knowledge, "telles que l'instruction morale et religieuse, la lecture, l'écriture, le calcul, et le système legal de poids et mesures" (*Journal Officiel de la République Française*, July 29, 1879). The need to educate girls was described thus, "...on a compris que cette oeuvre patriotique serait incomplète et en partie stérile, si elle ne s'appuyait pas sur l'enseignement des filles, trop négligé jusqu'alors, si on ne faisait pas de chaque femme une institutrice au foyer domestique, et si l'unité de l'instruction [...] ne maintenait pas, dans la famille, l'unité des idées et des sentiments" (*Journal Officiel de la République Française*, July 31, 1879).

This language of sterility is an example of the pervasiveness of conjugality as a guiding metaphor in politics at this time, highlighting the perceived complementarity of men and women's roles as citizens and framing girls' education as a solution to degeneration.

structures. The citizen first passes through various forms of tutelage — the intervention of his parents and then of a public school *instituteur* or *institutrice* — and then he must become responsible for a wife and children in order to come into his full autonomy.

The interwar authors I study in this dissertation refuse to take for granted the morality of the family or the naturalness of traditional gender roles. These authors reveal that though institutions like the family and the public school were believed to foster the autonomy of young people, they in fact maintained order by stifling individual wills. They dramatize the crisis of adolescence, showing a rejection of traditional social roles as a necessary first step toward individuation and eventually toward positive social action. The restless, rebellious energy of young people offers hope in a period of political stagnation and pessimism after the war.

### *The Noir mode in interwar culture*

In several of the novels I consider in this dissertation, individualistic revolt against the family veers into the territory of deviance and crime. This interest in crime is indicative of the paradigm shift from the melodramatic to the noir mode.<sup>23</sup> In contrast with the melodramatic mode, which Peter Brooks defines by its totally expressive character and clear moral categories, the noir mode is characterized by its ambiguous moral order and situates evil in familiar, seemingly innocent places.<sup>24</sup> In the noir mode, the villain could just as easily be the dangerous-looking, mustachioed man as the rosy-cheeked child or the friendly, attractive neighbor.

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<sup>23</sup> Sarah Maza highlights this shift in *Violette Nozière* (Berkeley: University of California, 2011), 176-7.

<sup>24</sup> Raymond Borde and Étienne Chaumeton, “Vers une définition du film noir” in *Panorama du film noir américain (1941-53)*, (Paris: Minuit, 1955), 5-15.

If the melodramatic imagination was a necessary source of clarity for a nineteenth-century European population that had just lost the moral certainties offered by traditional religious and social hierarchies,<sup>25</sup> the twentieth-century shift from the melodramatic to the noir mode is perhaps the inevitable result of the First World War. The noir mode, though present before World War I, really erupted after the war in response to the breakdown of any sense of moral categories.

The central place of crime in these novels also reflects popular culture at the time. The *fait divers*, a short description of an unusual event, often a crime, undoubtedly had a moment in the interwar period. This period saw the establishment of several crime magazines modeled on the *fait divers*, such as *Déetective* (founded in 1928 and subtitled “*Le premier hebdomadaire des faits-divers*”). The crime magazines at this time focused on sensationalized coverage of crimes. Crimes like the Papin Affair and the Nozière Affair were great fodder for these magazines because they gave an opportunity to dissect people’s private lives. They reenforced a general sense that appearances were deceiving.

Interwar authors make their critiques of the family that much more unsettling by tapping into the same public anxieties that drove the popular crime press. Further, by combining critiques of the family with depictions of crime and unmotivated acts,<sup>26</sup> these authors not only undermine dominant family ideals, they also reject even the suggestion that there could be a natural ethical order to which society could return.

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<sup>25</sup> Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale, 1976), 15.

<sup>26</sup> Unmotivated crime was of great interest to French intellectuals and psychoanalysts, and their work in turn influenced French criminology during the 1930s. The Papin sisters’ case was one of the key examples Lacan used in his thesis on paranoia and the Surrealists published a collection of poetry about Violette Nozière in 1933. See Rachel Edwards and Keith Reader’s study of this case and the works of psychoanalysis, literature, and film that responded directly to it (*The Papin Sisters*, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2001)).

*The foyer and class divisions*

Even while the barrier between public and private life dissolved in crime reporting, the privacy of the bourgeois home remained an important symbol of the barrier between the proletariat and the middle classes. Literary critics signaled as much in their responses to Eugène Dabit's popular *Hôtel du Nord*,<sup>27</sup> published in 1929, set in a hotel in the outskirts of Paris that houses workers, many of whom are single men or men living away from their wives and children for work. Dabit took inspiration from the hotel his parents owned and ran on the quai de Jemmapes. This work won the Prix Populiste in 1931, though Dabit did not necessarily consider himself a populist author. The novel is structured around a series of vignettes that take readers into the private lives of these individuals, but also show, through the overlapping stories, how public all of these lives are.

For certain critics, conservative and liberal alike, the plight of the working classes could be understood as a desire for a *foyer*, for *embourgeoisement*. Dabit's critics identified the possession of a private family home as the real barrier between the working class and the bourgeoisie: even the lowest rungs of the bourgeoisie — artisans and shopkeepers — possess a *foyer*. André Thérive, the critic for *Le Temps* and one of the authors of the *Manifeste populiste* (1929) highlighted how central the possession of a private home space was to class divisions: “ce qui, à notre époque, laisse à la foule un caractère « prolétarien », c'est le manque de logement.”<sup>28</sup> For Thérive, the feeling that

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<sup>27</sup> Part of the novel's popularity and warm critical reception was due to the support of Roger Martin du Gard, who took Dabit under his wing, commenting on his manuscript and including a personal note to copies of the novel sent to critics (Rony, *Les Années roman*, 401).

<sup>28</sup> André Thérive, “Review of *Hôtel du nord*,” in *Les Années roman*, 406.

characterized this class could be nothing other than the desire to become bourgeois. He applauded Dabit's depiction of this longing, so different from what the communists alleged workers really wanted: "cette classe qui ne demande qu'à ne plus former une classe, quoi qu'en disent les marxistes. Une aspiration constante à la vie régulière, à l'embourgeoisement, la caractérise en effet."<sup>29</sup> Brasillach, writing in the right-wing *Action française*, echoed this pity for those "Français qui n'ont plus nulle part la moindre racine, la moindre attache."<sup>30</sup> Such language reveals a clear prejudice that dominated at this time, the assumption that bourgeois social status was the ideal to which all Frenchmen strived. The possession of a *foyer* meant stability. And this *embourgeoisement* also implied the increased dignity of the individual.

### *Relationships*

The novels I study here tell a different story. Written throughout the 1920s and 1930s, these novels all take readers inside the bourgeois *foyer* and reveal this space as one that fundamentally lacks stability. Authors show that the appearance of stability must be carefully and consciously constructed, a process that often involves the violent suppression of individual will. Given the essential place of the family in politics and the language used in political and social policy that foregrounded the family and the body, centering their political and social critiques around the family allows authors to get right to the heart of assumptions undergirding the Third Republic. Considering how different these authors were in their political and social engagement, the similarities in their

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 406-7.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Brasillach, "Review of *Hôtel du nord*," in *Les Années roman*, 407-8.

treatment of the family are striking. These authors share a disdain for the ideal French family and an immense respect for individualism.

I have divided this project up by relationship: fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, siblings, and finally alternatives to the nuclear family found in relationships with friends, mentors, and colleagues. Organizing my analysis in this way allows me to highlight how assumptions about and expectations placed on the family impacted family members differently and helps me tease out the political and social preoccupations of the works.

The first chapter concerns two novels — *Le Sang Noir* (1935) and *La Conspiration* (1938) — that frame the post-war climate as a crisis of father-son relationships. The lack of clear moral leadership from father figures at the national level is reproduced and critiqued at the level of the family. These authors, both actively engaged in the Communist Party, assert that the republican secondary school and the bourgeois family, though both celebrated as essential to the moral and intellectual development of young male citizens, are fundamentally opposed to the individual's best interests. Following in the footsteps of Vallès and Barrès, these authors adopt and subvert the form of the nineteenth-century *roman d'éducation*, or *roman d'apprentissage*, in order to highlight the role of this novelistic form in perpetuating a harmful bourgeois system. In place of the existing model of citizenship, Guilloux and Nizan explore a new form of French citizenship based in individualistic acts of revolt. The male characters in these novels act in unexpected, often unmotivated ways, to escape the social expectations placed on them. Acts of revolt, even if not leading to a clear goal, are necessary before any real social change can take place. Guilloux and Nizan suggest that individualistic

revolt and antibourgeois sentiment may be a path to communism, but also reveal the limits of these impulses as motives for sustainable political engagement.

In the second chapter, I turn to relationships between mothers and daughters in works by Irène Némirovsky (*L'Ennemie* (1928) and *Le Bal* (1929)) and François Mauriac (*Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927)). Whereas fathers make easy symbols for national leadership, depictions of mothers get at the heart of the primacy of the nuclear family in the French Republic's conception of social order. The naturalness of maternal affection was central to how French society responded to moments of national crisis, and Némirovsky and Mauriac show mothers at their absolute worst *because* of the expectation of order placed on the family. It was the central responsibility of the mistress of the house to ensure that her family projected an appearance of order, whether or not that was the case. Both authors lay bare the duties of the *maîtresse de maison*, showing how ruthless a woman must be toward her family in order to successfully perform this role and how dangerous failure to do so can be for a woman and her family. At the same time, these works feature women unapologetically pursuing pleasure and independence. Though they do not have access to the same outlets as the male protagonists of *Le Sang Noir* and *La Conspiration*, and though they were not full legal citizens like those young men, Francine, Gabrielle, Rosine, Antoinette, and Thérèse follow this same model of citizenship, defining themselves as individuals through acts of revolt, even violent crime.

When some young people find themselves unable to turn to their parents for support, they turn to siblings. My third chapter explores how authors present the possibilities and limits of sibling relationships. Having grown up with the same values and traumas, siblings share a deep bond that seems able to withstand family conflicts. But

in *Le Toutounier* (1938), *Les Thibault* (1922-40), and *Le Nœud de vipères* (1933), those same shared experiences that form the basis of such a strong sibling bond also lead to strained relationships between siblings in adulthood. The siblings in *Les Thibault* and *Le Nœud de vipères* work together to counter the domineering behavior of parents, which helps achieve some balance in the family, though it also turns the family home into a war zone. Both of these authors also consider the important place of inheritance in defining relationships between siblings. In Mauriac's assessment, the family's economic function seems to doom family members to be hostile toward one another.

My fourth and fifth chapters are dedicated to works in which male protagonists seek alternatives to the family on the margins of bourgeois society, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925), *L'Enfance d'un chef* (1939), and *Mort à crédit* (1936). Mentors and friends, sexual partners, neighbors and crowds all offer possibilities outside of the nuclear family. Through these diverse relationships, young male characters explore different versions of masculinity. These novels are similar to works like *Le Sang Noir*, *La Conspiration*, and *Les Thibault*, in which young men look to political groups for personal fulfillment. However, those works show characters who join a revolutionary cause out of a desire to make their actions count, only to find that in order to truly commit to the cause, they must set aside their personal ambitions for the interests of the movement. Unable to reconcile this expectation with their desire for individual greatness, Bernard Rosenthal, Serge Pluvillage, and Jacques Thibault turn to dramatic acts of escape that are ultimately self-destructive. The protagonists considered in these last two chapters seek out situations outside of the family that allow space for individual desire and ambition.



Gide, Sartre, and Céline explore what a radical model of individual development, focused on self-interest, would look like.

In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (1948), Jean-Paul Sartre signals 1930 as a moment when French authors changed their relationship with history: “le décalage s’est accusé [...] entre le mythe littéraire et la réalité historique. Ce décalage, nous l’avons senti bien avant de publier nos premiers livres, dès 1930. C’est vers cette époque que la plupart des Français ont découvert avec stupeur leur historicité.”<sup>31</sup> The novelists in the present study confront the disconnect Sartre identifies between literature and history, and they produce perceptive critiques of the established order from within the conflicts of everyday life. The domestic sphere becomes a privileged space in which authors engage with history and envision new futures for France.

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<sup>31</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948), 255.

## Chapter 1

### Citizens in Revolt

Louis Guilloux's *Le Sang Noir* (1935) and Paul Nizan's *La Conspiration* (1938) both take on national politics after World War I through a focus on father-son conflict. Each work features a rift between two generations' view of state rhetoric following the outbreak of World War I. Guilloux and Nizan use the conventional nuclear family structure and roles to critique existing expectations of the citizen and to explore a new model of citizenship based on revolt.

In both novels, young men see the object of competition as their father, because their father represents the expectations placed on the son, as well as the values of an older generation. Guilloux and Nizan take for granted that revolt against one's father is essential for a young man to develop as an individual. And by rejecting their fathers, protagonists in these novels refuse to accept the values and assumptions that led to the war. Both authors suggest that it is necessary for an individual to establish this independence at the level of the family before they can participate effectively in society and politics. These authors explore the idea of the *crise d'adolescence*, demonstrating special interest in the political and social good that young people's desire to revolt might present and showing the limits of a revolt undertaken without clear goals.

Guilloux and Nizan were both engaged in far-left politics. Guilloux was more of a fellow traveler, never officially adhering to the Communist Party, while Nizan, on the other hand, was a devoted Party member. Guilloux and Nizan present political engagement on the left as an eventual ideal where young men can grow as individuals, but communism remains just outside of the action of both novels. Guilloux's novel was

published just before the Popular Front, France's first socialist government, rose to power through a coalition of various groups on the left. Nizan published his novel just before the dissolution of this government, after its largely disappointing years in power. Nizan's disillusionment comes across in his depiction of young men's inability to commit to effective political action. Both authors are more concerned with examining the needs and motives of young men, that which might lead to or prevent their participation in politics, rather than with providing a successful story of political engagement.

Though both authors are critical of their protagonists' lack of follow-through, they nevertheless give a hopeful image of the future for France by highlighting the energy of the younger generation. In order to become individuals, to come into their own generation, these young men must revolt against bourgeois complacency. In a nation so concerned about *dégénérescence*, young men's revolt represents the promise of life and virility in the future.

#### *Following Vallès and Barrès*

Guilloux and Nizan strengthen their commentary on the crisis of adolescence by writing in the style of the *roman d'éducation*, a subgenre that defined the French realist tradition of the nineteenth century. These novels tell the story of a young male protagonist trying to achieve social success and make his fortune. Though they contain biting social critique, Balzac's novels, for instance, describe and teach the ideal of the male citizen under capitalism, initiating the reader to the codes of the capital and illustrating how to succeed in the modern metropolis. In so doing, they perpetuate and solidify the system they describe.

Already, authors at the end of the nineteenth century, notably Vallès in his trilogy, *L'Enfant* (1878-9), *Le Bachelier* (1881), and *L'Insurgé* (1886), and Barrès, with *Les Déracinés* (1897), adopted the *roman d'éducation* to critique that form's perpetuation of the status quo.<sup>32</sup> These authors, writing from opposite ends of the political spectrum — Vallès on the far left and Barrès on the right — both assert that the secondary school system aimed at training students in *lettres classiques* for careers as literature professors is ill-equipped to prepare students for the social realities of the *fin-de-siècle*. They use the *roman d'éducation* to imagine new models of citizenship outside of that educational system. For Vallès, this new model of citizenship is one of radical political engagement whereas for Barrès, the solution would involve preparing young people for more modest careers, close to home.

Following in the footsteps of Vallès and Barrès, Guilloux and Nizan rewrite the *roman d'éducation* to question the ideal of male citizenship after the war and the role of bourgeois institutions — both secondary school and the family — in individual development. These authors adopt and critique this genre to question the place of literature in perpetuating a flawed capitalist system and the myths of individual greatness and equality that undergird that system.

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<sup>32</sup> On the one hand, these authors were reacting against realist novelists like Balzac who framed their works as pedagogical tools for young people from the provinces *en route* to Paris. On the other hand, they also wrote against a different genre, which Denis Pernot calls the *roman de socialisation*. This subgenre arose among conservative authors seeking to combat the negative influence of novels. They wrote their own novels with normative messages, acting as an “instituteur-romancier” who carries out a “pédagogie de répétition”: “Cadre contraignant. Qui veut se faire entendre d'une jeunesse malade et malheureuse doit en effet écrire de manière à satisfaire ses habitudes et ses capacités de lecture. L'instituteur-romancier s'oblige ainsi à pratiquer une pédagogie de la répétition : d'un point de vue idéologique, il prélève souvent son message de socialisation dans un intertexte social déjà répétitif. Lu en fonction des contraintes que lui imposent les peurs de la jeunesse, le roman de socialisation se présente donc comme une véritable machine à promouvoir les valeurs conventionnelles. Il prend en effet plus souvent l'aspect d'un roman de conformation que celui d'un roman de formation” (*Le Roman de socialisation (1889-1914)*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1998), 75). For the ways in which Vallès and Barrès subvert existing genres, see François Proulx, *Victims of the Book*, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2019).

In the same vein, Guilloux and Nizan critique the distance between what young men learn in the *lycée* and the reality of French society. They both show that the educational system harms French society by indoctrinating young boys with patriotic rhetoric. Nizan also includes a scathing critique of the kind of knowledge imparted in the *lycée*. A comprehensive study of the great works of literature and philosophy stands as an obstacle between bourgeois adolescents and social engagement.

Guilloux and Nizan both reveal the nefarious role language plays in maintaining the bourgeois social order and the responsibility of writers to use language to build social consciousness and work toward change. This language is used to build up an ideal, but it is also used in turn as a veneer to conceal disorder. But both authors show that while language can be used (and is used by the bourgeoisie) to conceal truth and to disguise motives, it can also serve as a powerful tool to expose hypocrisy and to call others to action.

### **Educating citizens in *Le Sang Noir***

In *Le Sang Noir*, Guilloux zooms in on a small, provincial town of around 20,000 inhabitants, based on his native Saint-Brieuc. Though Saint-Brieuc was home to a large working-class population during Guilloux's childhood there, he chooses to focus on the smaller middle-class population in his fictionalized version of the community, in order to write an exaggerated critique of bourgeois complacency. The novel takes place during World War I, and the action of the novel builds to two events, a party to celebrate Madame Faurel, a local official's wife, who is being awarded the Légion d'honneur — an award that places her in the ridiculed company of Flaubert's Homais —, and an anti-war

protest by young *mobilisés* at the train station. The parallel Guilloux creates between these events introduces a scathing critique of the extent to which the older generation perpetuates a false narrative about the war that protects them from the harsh reality their sons face.

The novel features a conflict between two generations of men, the generation of fathers, who are too old to fight in the war or are at least spared the bloodiest combat in the trenches, and the sons who are being conscripted and sent to the front. While the sons are painfully aware of the reality of the war, the older generation in the town avoid confronting the reality of this situation. Though the war rears its head in the town at times — young soldiers line up to board trains that will take them to the front and the mayor is seen visiting homes to tell families that their sons have been killed in combat — the bourgeois parents prefer to construct a different image of war, one that makes them feel good.

The men in *Le Sang Noir* who most clearly embody untruthful language are all teachers at the local high school. These are the men framed as father figures by the Third Republic. And Guilloux reveals that their responsibility is not to support the growth of young men but rather to teach the rhetoric and social norms to which these future citizens are expected to conform.

There is one teacher in this town who stands apart from the others: François Merlin. Merlin isolates himself from his peers because he recognizes their hypocrisy. The other adults in the town see Merlin as a ridiculous figure because he removes himself in this way, because of his lifestyle (he is openly in a romantic relationship with his illiterate housekeeper, Maia), and because he suffers from deformed, enlarged feet that limit his

mobility. People poke fun at him behind his back. Everyone in the town calls him “Cripure,” because he often lectures on Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* (*Critique de la raison pure*). Guilloux based Cripure on his own philosophy tutor, Georges Palante, an anarchist.

Faced with a dearth of trustworthy role models and recognizing that Cripure is different from the other adults in the town, several of Cripure’s former students turn to him for support. Like Barrès’s Bouteiller, Cripure inspires his students by opening their eyes to different philosophers and encouraging them to think critically. In his youth, he also wrote a biography of a local artist, Turnier, which Cripure’s former students see as revolutionary. Cripure works on a new, ambitious philosophical treatise over the course of the novel.

However, Guilloux shows that Cripure’s clear sight has left him cynical and unwilling to engage in society or politics at all. Guilloux casts Cripure as the clear spiritual father figure who could help the young men direct their frustration and make a difference in the nation. However, because he cannot work through his personal despondency, he remains unwilling and unable to accept responsibility for these young men. Cripure has a moment of redemption when he slaps Nabucet, a colleague of his and his principal detractor. Nabucet challenges Cripure to a duel and Cripure accepts. Various inhabitants of the town rally around Cripure and help to have the duel called off. However, Cripure ultimately falls into total desperation and ends his life through suicide. Cripure is perhaps the target of the harshest critique in the novel (even the narrator refers to him as “Cripure”) because he justifies his inaction as a total rejection of the bourgeois social order. This novel was a clear response to Céline’s 1932 debut, *Voyage au bout de*

*la nuit* and Malraux's *La Condition humaine* (1933), all three novels concerned with the hopeless alienation of the individual.

Guilloux shows how the bourgeois family and the Third Republic public school both fail to prepare young men for reality and fail to help them develop as individuals. Revolting against this status quo is presented as urgent, and young men do undertake small acts of revolt throughout the novel. These acts do not coalesce into a clear project for the future, though. Guilloux hints at communism as a viable path, though this remains on the margins of the novel.

Guilloux highlights a tension between two different kinds of fatherhood: one is the role prescribed by the government to teach young men obedience to the values of the Third Republic. The other is individualized guidance, which would teach young men to look at the world with a critical eye and determine their own path. Guilloux emphasizes fathers' need for reeducation, that they might be able to guide their sons in a new way.

Guilloux's focus on language in this project intended to renew the *roman d'éducation* corresponded to his political engagement at the time. In June 1935, Guilloux helped organize the Congrès des écrivains antifascistes, sometimes called the Congrès international des écrivains pour la défense de la culture, at the palais de la Mutualité in Paris. This reunion of authors from thirty-eight countries was conceived in response to the increase of fascist power in Germany. This important conference to defend the freedom of literature against the threat of fascist censorship was an extension of the project Guilloux was bringing to fruition in *Le Sang Noir*.



*Misleading appearances*

From the beginning of the novel, Guilloux foregrounds not the war but rather the willful blindness of the leaders of the town. He thus encourages his reader to see the behavior and values of these people as the real disease affecting France, of which the war is just a symptom. The reader first sees the town through the eyes of an outsider, Captain Plaire, a childhood friend of the “villain” of this novel, Nabucet. Plaire visits Nabucet during his permission, hoping to have a good time with his sophisticated friend. The name Plaire (the verb “to please”) seems fitting for this libertine figure who hopes to find pleasure in his visit to Nabucet’s town.

Through the eyes of Plaire, himself an object of critique as a military man who visits this town in hopes of an escape from reality, the reader sees the extent to which Nabucet self-fashions and cushions himself (figuratively and literally: his isolated house is full of layers of lush fabrics, furniture, and tapestries) against reality.

Though Nabucet, a teacher, acts every bit the worldly libertine, Plaire’s point of view allows the reader to see the sharp contrast between the way Nabucet presents himself and the reality of his situation. Nabucet describes the town as “attachante,” “séduisante,”<sup>33</sup> but his friend quickly sees that it does not have the charm he expected: dirty rainwater flows along the streets of this town<sup>34</sup> and in contrast with the open spaces surrounding Nabucet’s secluded home, the high walls of the convent in town are imposing, claustrophobic.

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<sup>33</sup> Louis Guilloux, *Le Sang Noir*, (Paris: Folio, 2000), 64.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-3, 83.

Elsewhere, Guilloux echoes this image of contamination, showing the town as contaminated by war: songs from a Russian camp can be heard at various times throughout the novel; a German prisoner of war helps serve tables at Madame Faurel's party; certain rooms in the public buildings have been transformed into field hospitals; mothers and wives of dead soldiers make small talk about their mourning clothes.

Though Plaire is disappointed by the disordered appearance of the town, he is also disappointed that the town does not have the immoral side he hopes to find there. Plaire learns that beneath Nabucet's posturing as a wild philanderer, his sex life does not extend beyond his frequent harassment of underaged girls. Nabucet likes to imagine himself as a savior to the girls he lusts after, providing an image of troubled father-child relationships. Nabucet has not slept with another woman since his wife's death, ten years before. Beneath the bourgeois order of the town in general, Plaire does not find the sexual immorality he expects and hopes to find: the brothel does not get much traffic, and men do not sleep with one another's wives.

Guilloux's critique comes through Plaire's thoughts, when he chastises himself for holding onto childish hopes, like "un tout petit qui voyage pour la première fois et se figure naïvement qu'à vingt kilomètres de son trou il va rencontrer les palais des Mille et Une Nuits."<sup>35</sup> It is childish for this military man, who has experienced firsthand the war the nation is currently engaged in, to believe that he will find paradise in this small village.

Nabucet keeps up an untruthful vision of himself even in his own thoughts. We later hear about Nabucet from Nabucet, himself: "Assurément, M. Nabucet était de tous

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 72.

les professeurs le plus délicat et le plus fin, le plus cultivé — après Cripure toutefois — le plus poli, le plus ‘vieille France’ comme il disait lui-même de lui-même.”<sup>36</sup> Even in his own thoughts, Nabucet constructs a fiction about himself: he imagines he is a character willingly stuck in a great past. In this vein, Nabucet has even built up an imaginary rivalry with Cripure, who he feels is the only threat to his desire to be the most sophisticated intellectual in the town.

After Plaire, other characters will voice critiques of Nabucet that ensure the reader views him from a critical distance. Later, Nabucet gleefully attempts to match his actions to this imagined version of himself as he offers his “hommages” to Madame Marchandreau: “Il salua, à droite, à gauche, fit une pirouette, comme il imaginait qu’en faisaient les marquis au grand siècle, et disparut.” Behind Nabucet’s back, Madame Marchandreau and the other women in the room, the concierge and her daughter (who Nabucet has just sexually assaulted), share their real thoughts about this man, thinking “Quel affreux visage il avait!” and exclaiming, “Parce qu’on n’est que des concierges !”<sup>37</sup>

Nabucet and Plaire, both of them government representatives, embody bourgeois decadence and willful self-deception. Through the layers of critical distance he establishes between the reader and these characters, Guilloux ensures that the reader of *Le Sang Noir* cannot be blind like these characters.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 97.

*Pretty as a picture*

Guilloux continues his critique of the discrepancy between appearance and reality through a depiction of a typical middle-class family, the Bourciers. Lucien Bourcier, a young veteran, causes uproar in his family when he refuses to attend the celebration for Madame Faurel in uniform, “un bel uniforme de fantaisie destiné à faire sensation et à attirer sur Lucien les regards de tous et principalement des femmes.”<sup>38</sup> Guilloux generalizes the experience of the Bourciers to the French bourgeois family in general, and he uses this scene to emphasize that the lack of understanding causing a rift between this family predates the war. Their last name, Bourcier, even ties them to the capitalist economic order: it is a homonym for *boursier*, the word for a student who receives financial aid and also an evocation of “La Bourse,” the French stock market. This family’s ideal appearance is built on illusion, just like the credit system.

Guilloux highlights the incompatibility of the experience of war with the continued prioritization of family duties. In order to fulfill her duty as a mother (namely, marrying off her son), Madame Bourcier must blind herself to the reality of her son’s experience. Guilloux’s construction of this scene pushes the reader to see Mme Bourcier’s insistence as selfishness, even a monstrous inhumanity. Guilloux juxtaposes ideal and real images of the soldier. While Lucien’s parents see only how attractive Lucien will look in his uniform, Guilloux’s third-person narrator dwells on the physical change that has come over this young man: there is something around his eyes that reveals his maturation, “les traces subtiles, devinées plutôt qu’aperçues, des acquisitions

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 114.

de la douleur et de l'intelligence."<sup>39</sup> Lucien also bears physical scars after being wounded in the war. Lucien's appearance stands in stark contrast to the depiction of Nabucet as the very picture of health in his earlier description of his exercise regimen.<sup>40</sup>

Guilloux's narration asserts that this visual evidence of trauma, more than the uniform that is so sure to attract the admiring gaze of young women, is the mark of a soldier. The rift Guilloux tackles in this scene is a familiar one: the divide between war front and home front. By focusing on physical appearances, Guilloux places clear blame on Lucien's family for their refusal to recognize the visible proof of the horrors of war. Instead of seeing their son's pain, Lucien's parents scold their son for how much he has changed, expressing disappointment since he now displays disobedience toward his parents, a new coldness that they either cannot or do not want to understand. Ironically, Lucien's parents blame him for *his* lack of understanding: "Tu es devenu dur."<sup>41</sup>

Guilloux takes his condemnation of self-deception one step further as Lucien's mother proceeds to describe how badly behaved Lucien was as a child, how disrespectful he was as a teenager under the influence of Cripure. However, it becomes clear through the scene that Lucien's mother has invented these stories of childhood disobedience.<sup>42</sup> Lucien really was a good, obedient son until he went to war. By trying to trace Lucien's disobedience to his childhood, Lucien's mother attempts to efface the reality of her son's experience in the war.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 122-3.

Though it is clear that the war has changed Lucien's view of family life — and the immediate tension in this scene is the result of Lucien's parents' refusal to understand his perspective on the war — Guilloux takes pains to explain that the rift in the Bourcier family is a tension inherent to all bourgeois families. He shows that the fault for social disorder lies not with the young men who return from the front, or even with the war, but rather with the bourgeois hypocrisy that predated the war, that caused the war, and that perpetuates the war. After Lucien makes it clear that he will not attend Madame Faurel's party, the narrator explains that though this ends the conversation, it does not resolve the family conflict:

Le malheur, c'est que le phénix renaissait toujours de ses cendres. Ces feux de joie des familles bourgeoises n'étaient nullement des feux purificateurs. Lucien le savait par une longue expérience. Quand on s'était tout dit, rien n'était vidé. Les arguments qui avaient une fois servi à blesser d'une manière souvent si subtile ne perdaient jamais leur venin. Ils pouvaient resservir indéfiniment, blesser aussi sûrement la centième fois que la première et enfin, comme il en avait vu autour de lui tant d'exemples, ils pouvaient finir par tuer comme on tue avec le poison. Et c'était cela qu'ils appelaient la vie de famille, la douceur du foyer et autres ordures ! Quand on comprenait sur quelle somme d'hypocrisie et de méchanceté reposait ce qu'ils appelaient un monde...<sup>43</sup>

Guilloux generalizes the problems of the Bourcier family to all “familles bourgeoises.” What Guilloux depicts here is the vicious cycle generated by the need to repress emotion. Though family members may express their frustration, they are unable to resolve conflicts fully. Guilloux emphasizes the cyclical nature of these conflicts with his image of the phoenix and his repetition of the words “renaissait,” “jamais,” “indéfiniment,” “la centième fois.” Yet this repeated rebirth conceals a slow rotting of family relationships.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 119. This is Guilloux's ellipsis. Throughout, omitted passages will be indicated with brackets: [...].

The argument about Lucien's attendance at Madame Faurel's party and the war more generally has simply revealed what has long been rotten: "La question avait pris en quelques minutes un caractère d'âpreté, presque de violence, qui leur révélait à tous à quel point la dissension était profonde entre eux. Il y avait longtemps d'ailleurs que « ça couvait » et l'occasion enfin était née."<sup>44</sup> Guilloux shows that if the bourgeois family ideal remains as it is, focused more on the appearance of harmony than on real understanding between family members, this pattern of explosion and repression will continue to characterize family life. Lucien's experience in the war (and the communists he met there) has helped him see this cycle clearly. Lucien realizes that he must either perpetuate this cycle himself or break from it altogether: "rester, accepter et mourir avec eux, ou refuser, partir, et travailler à tout changer y compris cela."<sup>45</sup> After this episode, Lucien plans to leave for London, and then Sweden, where he will most likely join a communist group.

Further, Guilloux presents this domestic drama as a conflict between different social roles within the family. Though he begins the scene by referring to Lucien's parents by name (though his use of Monsieur and Madame Bourcier only names them through their positions in the family), he shifts to referring to these characters as "la mère" and "le père" later in the scene. It is through Lucien's thoughts that Guilloux really caricatures the different ideal family roles. Through Lucien's anticipation of his family's arguments, Guilloux shows how different family members call on certain moral values to guilt their son into obedience. Lucien predicts that his mother will bring up "l'amour

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 125.

filial,” his sister will present his obstinance as a personal betrayal of all she has done for him, and his father will command Lucien from his position as head of the family, without really doing anything to enforce his command.<sup>46</sup> Lucien’s sister has clearly already chosen to “rester, accepter, et mourir avec eux,” and to do so, she must support the family’s agenda even if it means being cold to her brother. Guilloux reveals that though a family may remain united in name and appearance by prioritizing these values, in truth family members may use these values and the common knowledge of how family members ought to act to manipulate those who deviate from the mold.

In this scene that is so much about visual evidence, the narrator remarks ironically as the Bourciers fight, “À eux trois, ils formaient un groupe parfait pour un photographe.”<sup>47</sup> Guilloux mimics Madame Bourcier’s preoccupation with Lucien’s appearance to thoroughly undermine the importance the bourgeoisie lends to maintaining appearances.

### *Scripted fatherhood*

While the argument about the uniform occurs primarily between Lucien and his mother, Guilloux pays special attention to Lucien’s father during his depiction of the argument. He highlights Monsieur Bourcier’s passivity and his discomfort doing anything other than playing the role laid out for him. Appropriately, this man so uncomfortable expressing himself freely is the town censor. Guilloux’s narrator notes that the father and son are both uncomfortable sharing what they think of each other: “Ils

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 121.



eussent préféré, les uns et les autres, éviter cet accident, les deux hommes surtout. Ils ne tenaient pas tellement à se dire ce qu'ils pensaient l'un de l'autre. Pour les femmes — la mère et la sœur — cela avait moins d'importance."<sup>48</sup> This reluctance reflects the lack of connection between all fathers and sons in this novel, but it also shows the influence of a certain ideal of masculinity, one that identifies disguising emotions as a strength.

Though he tries to appear imposing, Monsieur Bourcier also adopts a defensive posture throughout the argument. At the beginning of the scene, Monsieur Bourcier and Marthe, Lucien's sister, stand in the doorway. Then, Monsieur Bourcier moves to stand behind the armchair into which Madame Bourcier falls at one point during the discussion, as though physically wounded. While behind the armchair, "Le père avait posé une main sur le dossier du fauteuil, l'air très embarrassé. De toute évidence, il aurait voulu être ailleurs, n'avoir pas à intervenir dans ce débat. Mais il ne pouvait « lâcher » sa femme."<sup>49</sup> Though it causes him great discomfort, Monsieur Bourcier feels duty-bound to support his wife against his son. His wife and the chair also serve as a physical barrier, shielding him from the conflict with his son.

Guilloux's physical description of Monsieur Bourcier likens this man who is so set in his ways to a piece of furniture: "Planté devant son fils, les mains toujours derrière le dos, il écartait les jambes, pesait de tout son poids sur le sol, ne faisait qu'un avec le plancher, comme un meuble."<sup>50</sup> In his attempt to look imposing, Monsieur Bourcier ends up looking a little ridiculous. This rule-following father in his coat and white tie is just

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 117.

another fixture forming the backdrop of the bourgeois home, with the same symbolic importance as a sofa or a stove.

Monsieur Bourcier sees himself as an example of obedience, and he is proud that his appearance testifies to his sense of duty. Monsieur Bourcier explains that Lucien risks appearing too independent if he refuses to wear his uniform: “le père reproach[ait] à son fils de vouloir se montrer trop indépendant, c’est-à-dire ingrat.”<sup>51</sup> But Monsieur Bourcier’s choice of example reveals the fine line between the definition of patriotic duty in this society and conforming to social norms: “Est-ce qu’il n’était pas lui-même un argument vivant ? Est-ce qu’il avait fait tant de manières pour endosser ce matin sa belle chemise empesée, sa redingote, nouer autour de son cou d’apoplectique, sa belle cravate blanche ? Il l’avait fait avec plaisir, au contraire.”<sup>52</sup>

Indeed, Monsieur Bourcier always seems to follow a script: “Il y avait dans cet homme quelque chose de primitif et d’animal, de curieusement ininspiré, qui faisait que les mots même les plus simples ne venaient jamais qu’avec peine. Un homme qui n’avait jamais pu écrire une lettre sans faire dix brouillons.”<sup>53</sup> Guilloux connects Monsieur Bourcier’s difficulty with language to a primitive, animalistic quality. In his performance of fatherhood, he is unable to go off-book.

Empty language also takes the form of patriotic poetry, written by two of the teachers at the high school, Nabucet and Babinot. Nabucet paints a banal and incoherent patriotic quatrain of his creation on a banner, which forms the ridiculous cherry atop the

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 118.

decorations for Madame Faurel's party.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, one day when Babinot and Cripure pass two soldiers while on a walk, Babinot tries to inspire them with his patriotic rhymes. When Babinot hands some of his poetry to these soldiers, they refuse to hear more of this morale-boosting verse, which is so out of touch with their experience, and they tear up the pages. They tell Babinot that like all the soldiers at the front, they have had enough, and that Babinot is an idiot to believe his son (who is also off fighting in the trenches) thinks any differently. When Babinot threatens to report them as "bad Frenchmen," one of them hits him across the face with a belt.<sup>55</sup> Thus, Babinot is literally blinded in this moment that reveals the extent of his self-deception about the reality of the war.

Though Cripure looks down on Babinot, thinking to himself how silly and unpatriotic this man is, he does not, ultimately, have the courage to speak up and to put Babinot in his place. Cripure corroborates Babinot's lie at Madame Faurel's party, confirming the story Babinot tells about his injury (that a fly flew into his eye). In Babinot's version of the story, the soldiers, who were in fact German spies, *wanted* him to read his poems.<sup>56</sup>

Guilloux connects these lies directly to the bourgeois men's desire to distance themselves from the reality of the war. When Babinot drunkenly urges his colleagues to come together to chat about anything but the war in order to keep their morale up, he uses the *feuilleton* — the part of nineteenth-century newspapers that typically contained serialized novels intended to interest a broad public — figuratively to describe what they

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 287-8.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 296, 302-3.

will create together through their chatter.<sup>57</sup> In fact, Moka explains that because news came in that morning that Babinot's son was killed at the front, he and the other teachers have been pushing Babinot to tell stories all night to keep him from finding out the truth.<sup>58</sup> The act of storytelling serves here as an immediate buffer to the reality of the war. But these forms of storytelling are clearly different from Guilloux's own project. Guilloux's work seeks to reveal truth, rather than providing an escape from it. He thus places his work in direct opposition to the self-deception and willful ignorance of the bourgeoisie he depicts. *Le Sang Noir* is designed specifically to undo the kind of fictions the bourgeoisie writes to entertain and distract themselves.

In addition to critiquing the self-serving complacency and performative patriotism of these teachers in their daily lives, Guilloux also shows how empty nationalist rhetoric is institutionalized in the school. Cripure overhears Babinot's nasal drawl from his classroom as Babinot quizzes his students on the history of Verdun. After reminding students that a bad student is a bad Frenchman, here using the same threat he will use on the soldier who tears up his poems, Babinot asks his class to tell him about the eleven sieges of Verdun, beginning with the siege by Attila in 451.<sup>59</sup> Though he is teaching during the Battle of Verdun, the bloodiest battle of World War I, Babinot has his students memorize and repeat facts about past French greatness.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 313.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 197-8.

*A reluctant father*

Cripure's own failure to accept the role of father revolves around language. Guilloux represents Cripure's inability to connect with his biological son, Amadée, as a linguistic shortcoming: Cripure cannot call Amadée his son (he and Maïa refer to him as their nephew) or even bring himself to use the informal "tu" when addressing him. When Amadée expresses disappointment that a rebellion against the war has been quashed, Cripure scoffs at his son's idealism, which he believes is so melodramatic and conventional that it belongs in a Zola novel.<sup>60</sup> Cripure makes the same mistake as his peers, assuming that these young men are naïve. He pushes his son away because he considers him too idealistic, rather than helping him cultivate his frustration and find more productive ends. Cripure's disdain extends to the young soldiers as well; he thinks as they pass him, "O vil troupeau ! Tu mérites ton sort... Toute cette jeunesse qui consent à se laisser duper. O bassesse et bêtise humaines ! Mais révoltez-vous donc !"<sup>61</sup> With these lines that resemble verse, Cripure unfairly places the onus for the war on these young men.

Similarly, rather than guiding his students, Cripure rejects them. The novel opens with a scene in which Étienne Couvier, one of Cripure's former students, visits him in the hopes of gaining some sense of purpose before he heads to the warfront. Étienne arrives with Cripure's biography of Turnier, a local philosopher with a tragic love story, in hand, in search of a spiritual father figure. Étienne's hopes are high: "Cripure, le seul homme capable de répondre à ses questions, le seul qui pourrait lui être fraternel, le seul pur,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 280-1.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 143.

parmi toute cette bande de vendus et de bouchers !”<sup>62</sup> Étienne numbers his own father among these “vendus” and “bouchers.” Like Cripure, Étienne clearly sees the hypocrisy that surrounds him: “Ses rapports avec son père, et en général avec tout le monde : un misérable jeu de cache-cache où chacun trouvait le moyen de tricher. Ils avaient plus peur de la vérité que de la mort. Cripure, au moins...”<sup>63</sup>

But Cripure refuses to serve as a paternal role model for Étienne. During Étienne’s visit, Cripure disowns his early writing and the ideals Turnier stood for. The “intransigence” that inspired Étienne is not what Turnier represents in Cripure’s cynical eyes: this man failed because he believed in something other than himself. According to Cripure, “« toute croyance est une fêlure » quand elle n’est pas une hypocrisie.”<sup>64</sup> What Cripure aspires to is “[u]ne intransigence absolue, continua-t-il en jetant cette fois à Étienne un regard enflammé de défi. Votre Turnier — ce *votre* fit sursauter Étienne — ne partageait pas tout à fait cet avis. Mais comment donc ! Il s’est présenté aux élections !”<sup>65</sup> Cripure comments under his breath that life is absurd and that it is simply “une affirmation [...] de soi-même.”<sup>66</sup> Cripure’s rejection of any kind of ideal results in stasis.

In the context of Étienne’s search for some larger meaning in life, this extreme refusal to participate in community appears solipsistic and unproductive, and Étienne certainly does not want to hear that the life he is about to give is absurd. Guilloux reveals that the real problem is not Cripure’s current disavowal of his writing, but rather his false

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 51.

motives for writing the book in the first place. Cripure was not motivated by a firm political belief, but rather by a selfish desire to win back his lost love. He hoped that by writing this work, more an autobiography than anything else, which allowed him to “se poser en martyr,” he would get the attention of his ex-wife, Toinette.<sup>67</sup> It is significant that Cripure reveals the Turnier biography to be fictional, since in this case, the fictional story was better able to reveal the truth about the social system it represented than a true biography would have been. Guilloux thus suggests the crucial role fiction has to play in revealing truth and inspiring others.

### *Critical reading*

Nabucet and Babinot’s poems are full of empty, deceptive language. By contrast, the poetry of Francis, one of Cripure’s former students, show literature’s ability to reveal truth and engage with historical reality. Francis goes beyond the kind of language Babinot’s students are encouraged to use, creating his own. Francis writes about war in order to show the true experience of current events and to call on readers to act as one to fight injustice. Francis struggles to explain his wish for truth: “J’aime la vie [...] L’amour de la vie... Une vie vraie, quoi, dit-il, conscient de son impuissance à s’exprimer complètement. On nous a trop trahis.”<sup>68</sup> Francis’s anti-war poems are one attempt to express this demand for truth. Guilloux includes two of these short poems in their entirety to allow the power of this raw and pure motivation to affect the reader, and to help the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 167.

reader understand the experience of young men at this time.<sup>69</sup> Francis's poems are given the same amount of visibility in Guilloux's novel as Nabucet's quatrain.

Like expressing truth through language, critical reading is a skill that can help young people break from the current social order. Lucien and Francis serve as models for the reader of *Le Sang Noir*. Lucien reads Francis's poems, deeming them good pieces of work. Further, both Francis and Lucien read and critique those around them. These two young men show the reader how to extend one's quest for the truth beyond the page. They show what one can understand about people's characters through external observations. When Francis arrives in front of the city hall, he looks around him, alarmed to find that everyone around him looks joyous. He notes, "On dirait une foire. [...] Ils n'ont pas l'air d'y penser. Curieux, vous ne trouvez pas ? C'est comme une partie de plaisir."<sup>70</sup> Francis is able to see the distance between appearances and truth. He remarks, "C'est drôle, il y a toute une apparence de la vie qui nous cache la vie elle-même, vous ne trouvez pas ? Comme une croûte sur la vie. Est-ce vrai ? On croit que les choses sont comme on les voit, mais c'est vraiment une bêtise."<sup>71</sup>

This "croûte" is a necessary part of the social order. It matters very little whether one is genuine in one's actions; to be a good Frenchman, one must commit to constructing this crust, a semblance of solidarity that in practice depends on harming many individuals. In the context of the war, Guilloux suggests that this collectively constructed semblance of solidarity conceals a complete disregard for human life.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 167-8.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.



Lucien also judges Babinot, who he sees one night brandishing one of his historic weapons and fighting with his shadow. Lucien highlights the sinister quality of Babinot's ridiculousness: "La folie de ces petits messieurs avait quelque chose d'oppressant qui ne laissait nulle chance au comique, toutes les chances à la colère."<sup>72</sup> Guilloux makes sure that his reader does not mistake the superficiality and distance from reality of these bourgeois as a comedy. That misinterpretation is where the real danger lies. Extending this act of reading beyond the page is a practice that counters the deceptive construction of appearances that characterizes this society.

Cripure's students also read their teacher's cynicism. About to leave for the front, Étienne realizes that he is now alone in his desire to uncover the truth. Étienne sees clearly that like the other adults in this town, Cripure is being dishonest with himself and with this young man:

Il aurait voulu être loin déjà, abandonner là cette conversation si pénible, si menteuse. Comme tout était compliqué, embrouillé, falsifié ! Ils s'étaient menti à eux-mêmes et lui avaient menti en tout. Et Cripure continuait. S'y retrouverait-il jamais ? Découvrirait-il jamais sous tant de mensonges une vérité ? Aurait-il le temps ? « Devine, ou je te dévore ! » Le sphinx ouvrait déjà la gueule : ce soir la caserne, dans trois mois...<sup>73</sup>

The sphinx serves as a metaphor for the war, devouring young men like Étienne. With this reference, Guilloux also connects misleading language with the war. Later in the novel, when Lucien's mother accuses him of disobedience and assumes that he learned this from Cripure, Lucien scoffs. He considers Cripure just as guilty for the current state of things as his parents or Nabucet.<sup>74</sup> In contrast with their teachers, these young men see

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 124.

clearly, and they are able to identify instances of others' self-deceit for the reader.

Guilloux uses the young men's judgment of Cripure to set up the central challenge of the novel: Cripure will have to learn to be honest with himself.

Cripure engages in critical reading of his surroundings, too. While at Madame Faurel's party, he is struck with the contrast between the party and reality. When he moves toward the window for some fresh air, Cripure sees a teacher in a nearby classroom showing his students the saber that belonged to his son, who was killed in combat two months before. This is the only instance of a teacher bringing the real, painful experience of war into the classroom, and the students are clearly touched by this display of real emotion. Cripure turns away from this scene just as Nabucet begins his speech, and Cripure gives voice to Guilloux's judgment of this contrast. In contrast with the true emotion of the grieving father, Cripure thinks of Nabucet and the other partygoers as ridiculous actors who refuse to take off their disguises or to abandon the "fables" they have taken such pains to construct.<sup>75</sup> In contrast with such fables, Guilloux's novel confronts reality head on.

Two father figures — Monsieur Marchandean and Cripure — attempt to perform critical readings on themselves. In these moments, Monsieur Marchandean and Cripure become aware that they have denied their own agency, framing themselves as victims. Guilloux offers a more genuine fatherhood, characterized by empathy and guidance, as an antidote to the empty language and false solidarity young men learn in school. He suggests changes that need to be made at the level of the family, to check the influence of

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 305-6.

school teaching, as well as changes that teachers ought to make to prepare young men for the real world and to guide them toward moral autonomy.

Guilloux shows what fathers could give their sons through a touching moment of empathy between Monsieur Marchandau and Monsieur Couvier. After Marchandau finds he will not be able to travel to Paris to stop his son's execution for insubordination in the army, he trips over Couvier, who lies drunk on the side of the road, overcome with grief because his son has just left for the front. These fathers take each other's hands, sharing in grief for their sons and a certain amount of self-pity. Though both men successfully held themselves at a distance from the war until this point, they must now confront it head on.<sup>76</sup> Marchandau, at least, realizes in this moment the responsibility he has for his son's life. Though he understands that it would not have been effective to try to prevent his son's conscription or help his son desert, he could have done something to counter his son's indoctrination: "[Il] n'avait jamais rien fait pour enseigner à son fils autre chose que ce qui s'enseignait et qui n'avait pour l'héroïsme qu'un respect teinté de suspicion."<sup>77</sup> Guilloux's use of the impersonal reflexive here ("ce qui s'enseignait") emphasizes that this is the status quo, a default that no one would think to contest or change. Guilloux's language here emphasizes complacency. But Marchandau reveals that he knew there was another vision he could have given his son about the nation and adulthood. This father realizes that he ought to have pushed back against the state rhetoric. By depicting Marchandau's realization of his complicity in this system that is about to take his son's life, Guilloux suggests that fathers have not only the ability, but

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 502.

also a moral responsibility to teach their sons a different conception of values, values based on trust and community rather than maintained through distrust and suspicion.

Cripure performs a similar self-critique as he looks at his reflection in a mirror at a café. Drinking in the middle of the day, Cripure pities himself, ruminating on his failed marriage. But what Cripure says about his relationship to Toinette actually applies to his relationship to bourgeois hypocrisy: “J’ai su percer le mensonge, mais là s’est arrêtée mon audace. Je n’ai pas su agir, je n’ai rien su prendre, pas su garder Toinette. A présent, je suis vieux, laid, infirme, seul [...] Battu à plates coutures. Encore n’ai-je pas le droit de me dire battu, puisque je n’ai pas livré bataille. Je n’ai le droit de rien. Je ne suis rien. Rien que l’un d’eux.”<sup>78</sup> Cripure does not even realize how clearly he sees and judges himself, because he is so fixated on his past. Guilloux employs third-person omniscient narration to highlight the lie that Cripure is living: “Mais cette haine de la bourgeoisie qu’il croyait en lui si naturelle et si fondée n’était peut-être qu’une manière de se dissimuler à soi-même et de compenser un certain amour des choses faciles et basses ; au fond : une imposture.”<sup>79</sup> Though Cripure tries to escape in drink, he finds himself having a conversation with himself in the mirror. The narrator, focalized through Cripure’s thoughts, concludes, “Pas moyen de fuir, même dans le vin ! Toujours spectateur de soi-même.”<sup>80</sup>

Further, in this scene, Cripure confronts his divided identity. “Car enfin quoi, tout de même! ce n’était pas lui, Merlin-Cripure qui était le Cloporte. Le Cloporte était tout de

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 230-1.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 235.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 245.

même un personnage distinct de lui. Un autre ‘*Pas moi.*’”<sup>81</sup> Cripure is divided by how the town perceives him. Further, he projects himself onto other figures: *le Cloporte* is the name he gives to a man who walks the streets at night, a name that means “the woodlouse” and evokes the “clop clop” noise the figure makes when he walks, limping and using a cane.<sup>82</sup> Elsewhere, Cripure also projects himself onto Turnier, the man about whom he wrote a biography when he was younger.

### *Bugs and canes*

To understand the weight of Cripure’s dialogue with himself in this scene, we must consider the place of *le Cloporte* in this novel. For Guilloux insistently weaves together three motifs throughout the novel — this woodlouse, a fly, and a cane — which together associate *le Cloporte* with the nagging reality of the war that Cripure and his peers attempt to ignore, and, more generally, with bourgeois cruelty and hypocrisy.

The first mention of *le Cloporte* comes early, in the first chapter, through Cripure’s thoughts. His thoughts in this initial scene alternate between *le Cloporte*, his poor relationship with his son, the humiliating memory of losing Toinette, and the “clique militaire” of the Russian troops Cripure can hear from his home.<sup>83</sup> From this introduction to *le Cloporte*, Guilloux opens the possibility that *le Cloporte* is a metaphor for the realities of family division and war that continually creep into Cripure’s thoughts. Later, the night before the duel, Cripure will explicitly connect the sounds of the soldiers he can

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 12-7.

hear from his home to his emotional state. When the sound of Russian soldiers singing wafts into his home, Cripure thinks that these are “plus que des chants, comme s’ils avaient contenu quelque mystérieuse allusion au drame de sa vie et de sa mort.”<sup>84</sup>

The choice of the word *cloporte* connects this figure to the large black *mouche* (fly) that Moka, a young colleague of Cripure’s and one of his few sympathizers, believes follows him.<sup>85</sup> On one level, this black fly reappears throughout the text literally. To hide the truth of having been hit in the eye by a French soldier, Babinot tells the other guests at Madame Faurel’s celebration that his eye was injured when a fly flew into it.<sup>86</sup> Additionally, characters are occasionally seen swatting at their faces or blinking as if a fly is circling them,<sup>87</sup> and Maïa avoids eye contact with Cripure by pretending to search for something (“Une mouche ?”) that fell into her soup.<sup>88</sup>

Guilloux also includes less direct echoes of the fly: for instance, an echo appears through the past participle “mouché,” meaning someone was bested or put in their place,<sup>89</sup> as well as through a reference to a woman as “une fine mouche.”<sup>90</sup> As the mayor makes his way through town announcing soldiers’ deaths to families in the town, becomes a visual reference to the fly: he is compared to the Angel of Death but also looks rather like a big black fly, draped in a long, black, wing-like coat.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 474.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 323-4.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 296.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 495, 594.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 473.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 452.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 547.

Elsewhere, *la mouche* is explicitly associated with death and ghosts. This occurs when Moka visits Cripure the night before the duel is set to take place to let him know that the duel with Nabucet has been called off. In this moment, Moka retrieves Cripure from the certainty of death. It is appropriate, then, that over the course of this conversation, which in a way occurs beyond the land of the living, both men are alternately described as phantoms. But they are simultaneously described as flies. Moka, referred to as “Moka la mouche,” appears to Cripure as a ghost with red hair.<sup>91</sup> As Cripure talks, explaining that he feels betrayed by Moka, who has taken his death from him, Cripure comes to resemble a phantom, distant from the reality around him.<sup>92</sup> He scares Moka, and it is only when Moka gets up the courage to reach out and touch Cripure that Cripure “materializes” and returns to his surroundings.<sup>93</sup> With this touch, Moka also confronts his own fear, finally catching the fly that has been haunting him.

However, the persistent mentions of *le Cloporte* and *la mouche* are not simply reminders of the war. These imagined insects are another way for Guilloux to illustrate the hypocrisy of the people in this town. In the first scene, Cripure’s preoccupation with Toinette, his fleeting, noncommittal thoughts about the war, and his paranoid belief that he is being persecuted by the whole town, are all ways in which Cripure distracts himself from his own role in preserving the status quo, from his own complacency. As the novel goes on, Guilloux only strengthens the association between *le Cloporte* and bourgeois

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 573.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 578.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 581.

hypocrisy, thereby making this creeping, haunting figure into a metaphor for the bourgeois tendency to distance oneself from reality.

To strengthen the association between *le Cloporte* and bourgeois hypocrisy, Guilloux associates *le Cloporte* with Nabucet through the image of the cane. The association between Nabucet and a cane is made explicit through an anecdote Cripure tells Moka about an act of cruelty he witnessed years ago in Paris: a bourgeois man repeatedly hit a dying Chinese man who had been chased and arrested over the head with his cane. This story encapsulates the bourgeois need to get rid of outsiders as well as the unwillingness to directly dirty one's hands. He uses one of the attributes of his position to keep himself at a distance from the violence, to maintain some "decency." Cripure connects this figure directly to Nabucet: though he knows Nabucet did not live in Paris at the time, every time he thinks back on this experience, he imagines Nabucet as the man with the cane.<sup>94</sup> Cripure concludes with a sharp refusal of typical psychological explanations given for this kind of gratuitous violence: when Moka begins to speak of sadism, Cripure explodes, "Je n'aime pas beaucoup cette manière de réhabiliter le bourgeois dans la psychologie, monsieur Moka."<sup>95</sup>

Finally, late in the novel, Cripure succeeds in acting in a way that is essential to his growth as an individual and that represents an attack on the bourgeois hypocrisy at the root of French society's problems: Cripure slaps Nabucet. Because of this collection of motifs, Guilloux is able to present Cripure's act against Nabucet (the slap) as a symbolic act that allows him to rewrite his past and to revolt against bourgeois hypocrisy.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 329-31.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 330.



Throughout the novel, Guilloux juxtaposes the petty competition between Nabucet and Cripure with the reality of the war to show how ridiculous their personal rivalry is. Maïa directly compares the two conflicts when she derides Cripure for playing the “p’tit soldat.”<sup>96</sup> However, he also emphasizes the importance of this conflict for Cripure’s growth as an individual and the symbolic importance of this conflict of values. When Cripure slaps Nabucet, he not only rebels against this embodiment of bourgeois hypocrisy; he also gains the opportunity to rewrite his own history. When Nabucet challenges Cripure to a duel, Cripure gets the chance to finally enact the duel to which he should have challenged Toinette’s lover. But even in this instance, although Guilloux’s reader can understand Cripure’s slap as a symbolic attack against the bourgeoisie, it is not clear whether this slap is in fact motivated by a hatred of bourgeois hypocrisy or if it is motivated by a personal desire for revenge.

The remembered association between Nabucet and a cane is essential in the decision to call off the duel between Nabucet and Cripure. When Cripure’s seconds come to Captain Plaire asking him to settle the duel, Plaire is only convinced that Nabucet has lied about Cripure’s physical fitness and the injustice of Cripure’s slap once he remembers a time when, while he and Nabucet were playing as children, Nabucet came armed with a cane and hit Plaire.<sup>97</sup> Once he confronts his friend’s penchant for gratuitous cruelty, he is inclined to take Cripure’s side.

The night before the duel, Cripure has a dream that conflates *le Cloporte* and Nabucet. Cripure shoots at *le Cloporte*, as he imagines he will do to Nabucet in the duel.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 452.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 529-30.

Nothing happens to *le Cloporte* and he turns around, this time holding not a cane but a sword, Nabucet's weapon of choice for the duel. This conflation of Nabucet and *le Cloporte* adds to the idea that the duel will be an opportunity for Cripure to exorcise demons of his past. With the previous doubling of Cripure and *le Cloporte*, the dream also prefigures Cripure's suicide. What follows in the dream parallels Cripure's counting of gold coins: Cripure dreams of many little *cloportes* with eyes that shine gold like rats. This dream brings together the different associations Guilloux develops with *le Cloporte*, as a pest, as a reminder of the past, as an incarnation of bourgeois cruelty and hypocrisy.<sup>98</sup>

While Plaire and the others discuss whether to call off the duel, Cripure spies on two lovers, a man and a woman, outside his window. Cripure first sees the man, who walks with a cane and keeps to the shadows. Cripure thinks this man is *le Cloporte*. But the scene morphs twice. When the woman arrives and the man begins to chase her playfully, the sounds of their chase remind Cripure of the sound of the policemen in Paris chasing the Chinese man years before. The cane the man holds also reminds Cripure of the bourgeois man who used this implement to kill the Chinese man. But at the sound of the woman's laughter, this memory of cruelty is replaced with the memory of Toinette. Once he imagines the woman to be Toinette, Cripure projects himself onto this man, he takes the place of *le Cloporte*.<sup>99</sup>

Through this series of motifs, Guilloux pushes the boundaries of the realist novel to blur the line between the imagined and the real. Guilloux shows a way in which art can

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 559-61.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 480-1.

surpass a reading of reality through external observation. The constellation of related motifs Guilloux creates through his combination of access to different characters' thoughts and external observation is evidence of fiction's power as a tool for social critique. By enabling symbolic links between these different characters' fears, insecurities, and action, fiction has the power to reveal the complicity of all of these people in the established social order and to emphasize the deep imperceptible ties that bind community.

### *Writing truth*

Though Cripure achieves personal and symbolic victory when he slaps Nabucet, he fails to make a significant social difference in the way he could, through accepting a mentorship role or through writing. Through Cripure's downfall, Guilloux performs a clear critique of a kind of writing that seeks to show truth, without actually engaging with historical reality.

Though when he was young he wrote the biography of Turnier that expressed some truth and inspired young men, he disowns that work and gives undue importance to a new, overly ambitious work, the *Chrestomathie*. "S'il réussissait sa *Chrestomathie*, ce serait bien autre chose. Non plus des points de vue, comme ils disaient, mais une certaine philosophie de la contradiction et de la douleur."<sup>100</sup> And yet the notes Cripure takes for this project seem to be rather self-centered. Again, he will use his writing to go back over his failed love story: "*Note pour la Chresto*: Aimer T... dans tout son destin, y compris ce que j'ai appelé sa trah... *Je comprends cela*. (Il souligna ces mots deux fois.) Que n'ai-

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 231-2.

je été capable autrefois d'un tel amour ! Je l'aurais conquise à jamais."<sup>101</sup> Though Cripure thought that writing would help him move forward, his writing in fact allows him to remain fixated on the past. Though Cripure's biography of Turnier was a social critique,

Guilloux uses Cripure's thoughts about the "*Chresto*" to problematize his own work as an author. Though Cripure believes that writing or, better, speaking the truth will have a concrete impact, Guilloux's narration of this resolution through free-indirect discourse highlights the tension between this potential for concrete impact and the reality of writing this text as a withdrawal from action: "il disposa ses feuillets et ses notes comme s'il n'allait plus penser qu'à son ouvrage, comme si toute action au monde, y compris le duel, allait être suspendue, jusqu'au moment où il aurait achevé non pas de raconter mais de *dire*."<sup>102</sup> In his thoughts, Cripure highlights the significance of this act of writing down a truth that will go beyond the page to become speech; however, this is also an act that will seem to suspend the reality around Cripure. In Cripure's case, his writing project serves as an escape from participation in the political and social life of the nation. Through Cripure, Guilloux asks what an author's duty is beyond the books he writes.

Cripure's suicide confirms Guilloux's critique of Cripure's writing and Cripure's refusal to help young men create a better society. Cripure ostensibly kills himself because his manuscript of the *Chrestomathie* is destroyed by his dogs. This act reveals the extent to which Cripure saw this project as a direct reflection of himself.

It is clear that Guilloux's novel aims to do something different than the self-centered *Chrestomathie*. *Le Sang Noir* extends beyond Cripure's death, minimizing the

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 457.

importance of this man's influence. Guilloux concludes his novel with the image of Lucien's ship to England raising its anchor.<sup>103</sup> Though he has remained on the periphery of Cripure's story, Lucien's growth is the real model for the reader. His story, as Guilloux conveys it, is successful because it represents a series of ruptures. Lucien breaks from his family and society's expectations of him as the son of a middle-class family and a returning soldier. He also breaks from Cripure's teaching. He realizes before he leaves how limited Cripure's teaching was: Cripure only taught *mépris*.<sup>104</sup>

Guilloux's choice to end the novel with the word "ancre" (anchor) aligns his project with Lucien's trajectory. "Ancre" evokes its near homonym, "encre," ink. Guilloux's choice to end with the raising of the anchor might also be a lifting of the pen to continue the story or a lifting of the pen because his role in this story is finished, and Lucien is in control now. There is another inky image in the description of Cripure's suicide: the teacher's bullet wound is described as a "tache noirâtre," a blackish stain, like an ink stain.<sup>105</sup> In the context of Cripure's suicide, this image furthers Cripure's conflation of himself with his writing. Perhaps the "sang noir" of the title also refers to these paths away from the bloody war, one of which marks an embrace of social engagement and the other which represents a refusal to participate in this broken society. The ink that Guilloux uses to write this work of literature revealing and condemning complacency represents another way to move forward: he proposes an engaged version of

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 631.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 535.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 609.

the realist novel that can make a difference in society.

### **Individualism and revolution in *La Conspiration***

Like Guilloux, Nizan uses a conflict between generations of men in *La Conspiration* to discuss French values before and after the First World War. Paul Nizan, who was Jean-Paul Sartre's classmate at the École Normale Supérieure, was a prolific journalist and critic, very engaged in the community of writers and intellectuals of 1930s Paris. He spent a year in Moscow editing a French language Soviet journal *La Littérature internationale*. A firm believer that authors should be engaged in real political events, Nizan also spent a time reporting from the middle of the action in the Spanish Civil War. He even ran for political office in the provinces on a communist platform.

Nizan's work fell into obscurity after his death in 1939 in large part because of the unfortunate timing of his decision to leave the Parti Communiste Français. Nizan publicly broke from the Party following the Germano-Soviet pact of May 1939, but he published his letter of *démissionnement* the day before communist activities were declared illegal in France and police cracked down on them. Nizan died in combat shortly after this and his colleagues took advantage of his death to rewrite Nizan's story and motives. They turned on Nizan, drawing connections between the themes of betrayal in his work and what they felt was a betrayal of the Party.

It was not until the 1960s that Nizan was taken up by students as a model of left-wing intellectualism and insurrection. Sartre's preface to a reedition of Nizan's pamphlet, *Aden Arabie*, in 1960 sparked this resurrection of Nizan but also flattened much of the complexity of Nizan's life and writing. Sartre depicts Nizan as an uncompromising

militant, as a man obsessed with death and betrayal. What we see in *La Conspiration* is an author interested in the path of young middle-class men to engagement in communism.

*La Conspiration*, Nizan's third and final novel, follows a group of five young university students, from 1925 to 1929, as they found an anti-bourgeois journal, *La Guerre Civile*,<sup>106</sup> and embark on a conspiracy to gather information that will help the Communist Party prepare for militant action in Paris, though they do not belong to the Party. The young men's contributions to the conspiracy (ultimately only some military plans for military protection of Paris and some designs for a new metallurgy machine) reveal how blurred the lines are for them between political revolt and rebellion against their families. Nizan supports this kind of thinking to some extent but also shows its limits.

Much as Barrès does in *Les Déracinés*, Nizan sets up his novel as a sociological experiment, with each of the young men representing a different socio-economic background. Bernard Rosenthal is the son of a stock broker; Philippe Laforgue is the son of an engineer who has worked his way into a managerial position; Serge Pluvinage represents the *petite bourgeoisie*: his father transported corpses for the police department.

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<sup>106</sup> *La Guerre Civile* is the title of a short-lived anti-bourgeois journal Nizan helped found with several Surrealists and other left-wing intellectuals in the 1920s. As Yves Buin explains, the real *La Guerre Civile* fell apart before it came to fruition, in large part because the members were committed to the place of mysticism in their political project (Yves Buin, *Paul Nizan*, (Denoël, 2011), 53-5). This mysticism was at the heart of the founding of *L'Esprit*. Nizan also showed himself to be personally intrigued by mysticism: he twice retreated from Paris to explore a religious vocation. Buin explains that Nizan was particularly drawn to the mysticism of such a vocation and to Protestant morality. On two separate occasions, Nizan retreated from life as a Parisian intellectual to explore ascetic Protestant devotion. There is even mention in *La Conspiration* that Bernard and Philippe missed the *Clarté* movement (Paul Nizan, *La Conspiration*, (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1968), 59). This was another short-lived 1920s journal with which Nizan collaborated, similarly invested in both an anti-bourgeois message and metaphysics.

The two other friends are Bloyé, who shares his name with characters in both of Nizan's previous novels and who, like Philippe, is described as descended from peasants. Bloyé and Jurien, the fifth friend, are hardly described and remain in the background throughout the novel.

In his review of *La Conspiration*, Sartre asked if the work was really a novel, since Nizan's characters are not fleshed out: they are little more than representatives of different social classes. Moreover, Sartre wondered about the limits of a political novel: "Un communiste peut-il écrire un roman ? Je n'en suis pas persuadé : il n'a pas le droit de se faire le complice de ses personnages."<sup>107</sup> Novel or not, Nizan's choice to keep his characters flat and to maintain his critical distance from them is an important part of how he analyzes youth from the perspective of class.

*La Conspiration* is divided into three parts: the first focuses on the political side of things. We follow the young men as they create a political journal, *La Guerre Civile*, and embark on a political conspiracy to align their actions with their writing. During this process, the conspirators seek advice from François Régnier, a veteran and a successful author, who disappoints the young men with his cynical apolitical position.<sup>108</sup> Régnier is one of the characters (in addition to Bernard, Philippe, and Serge) whose first-person

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<sup>107</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, "La Conspiration," in *Situations, I*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), 36.

<sup>108</sup> It is likely that Régnier is based in part on Henri Barbusse, the famous WWI chronicler who ended up editing the journal *Monde*, which Barbusse billed as a communist periodical but which was rejected by the PCF for the heterogeneity of political perspectives it featured in the name of objectivity. Nizan was tasked with removing Barbusse from control of *Monde* in 1931. In the letters he wrote to Barbusse in which he attempted to pressure the older man to relinquish control of the paper to the Party, Nizan rails against Barbusse's claim to objectivity: in Nizan's eyes, this is just complacency that only serves to maintain the status quo. "Votre attitude sur cette question n'est pas différente de celle d'un directeur de revue bourgeoise de gauche pour qui les communistes seraient acceptables dans la mesure où ils auraient du "talent et dissimuleraient sous un voile agréable d'objectivité leur position politique" (Annie Cohen-Solal, *Paul Nizan: Communiste impossible* (Paris: Grasset, 1980), 282). Yves Buin suggests that Régnier could also be considered an alter-ego of Nizan that allows Nizan to explore what it would be like to be a writer free of party constraints (Buin, 243-4).



writing is inserted into the novel. Régnier's diary entries provide a critical look at the young conspirators.

The second part of the novel moves away from politics almost entirely. Nizan turns Bernard's story into a *roman d'amour*, focused on his strained relationship with his bourgeois family and his affair with his sister-in-law, Catherine. This section ends with Bernard's suicide and his family's successful attempt to cover up any scandal that may come from it. The novel's third section centers on Serge Pluvinage, who has remained on the sidelines up to this point. He writes a letter to Philippe in which he describes his upbringing and his choice to join the Communist Party (he is the only one of the friends who does), and finally confesses to having betrayed the hiding place of the communist leader Carré. Serge ends up following in his father's footsteps, taking a position with the police.

Like Guilloux, Nizan carries out his critique of official rhetoric and bourgeois complacency through his depiction of a "guerre civile" between fathers and sons. *La Conspiration* is set one generation later than Guilloux's work, but the situation is the same: there is one generation that fights and one that is either too old or too young. In both novels, though, it is the older generation that is accused of complacency, even though in *La Conspiration* it is the older generation that participated in the war.

Bernard frames the goal of his journal, *La Guerre Civile*, as "la critique de la mystification et la mise au clair du mensonge." As the young men begin their journal, the nation "sortait d'un temps prodigieusement mensonger" where all messaging centered on the necessity and righteousness of the war. But it is clear that the country has not really moved forward.

Ils s'apercevaient qu'ils n'avaient pas été moins dupés au lycée que leurs pères ou leurs frères aînés sur le front. Leurs mères, solitaires et facilement héroïques, comme toutes les femmes des hommes qui mourront dans les guerres, avaient elles-mêmes menti avec une aisance civique qui confond. Dix ans après Versailles, presque tous les hommes qui étaient revenus du front, sauvés au dernier moment par la sonnerie de clairon de l'Armistice, hésitaient encore à dévoiler le sens des inventions rhétoriques pour lesquelles ils avaient combattu : on a rarement le cœur de se désavouer et de crier sur les toits qu'on a cru un jour les menteurs sur parole ; il faut être bien fort pour ces aveux publics, on aime mieux avoir été complice que naïf. On comprendra pourquoi Laforgue et ses camarades ne méprisaient personne plus profondément que les Anciens Combattants.<sup>109</sup>

Nizan sets a scene in which no one has faith in the official narrative of the war. As in Guilloux, the generations are defined by their differing relationships to official rhetoric. Nizan, like Guilloux, highlights the responsibility of the school system in perpetuating this false narrative. This tragic event that should have changed everything has changed nothing at the level of state messaging. The general agreement to perpetuate a myth about the war is another contender for the conspiracy signaled by the title of the novel.

Clearly, this critique comes from the young men's perspective. Guilloux and Nizan both encourage their readers to share the younger generation's critical view of their elders, but whereas Guilloux idealizes his young male characters, Nizan takes a more critical stance, highlighting the ways in which the younger generation also becomes complicit in perpetuating such myths.

Nizan paints a vivid picture of the political situation in 1920s France that establishes the national crisis as a lack of father figures. The young men first come together with politics in mind in 1924 during celebrations of the pantheonization of Jean Jaurès, the Socialist leader and founder of the paper *L'Humanité* who was assassinated in 1914 by a French nationalist at a time when Jaurès was working to prevent the outbreak

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<sup>109</sup> Paul Nizan, *La Conspiration*, 58-9.

of war. In *La Conspiration*, Jaurès's pantheonization reveals the superficiality of interwar leadership. Nizan highlights the general lack of male leadership at this time before moving into his critique of the pantheonization itself. After the war, father figures were literally lacking, millions of men having died in the war, and Nizan makes it clear that symbolic father figures lack, too. Nizan points out that 1924 had already been marked by the deaths of prominent male leaders on both sides of the political spectrum: Lenin, Wilson, and the German industrialist and politician Hugo Stinnes. What follows, though, is above all a critique of French leaders on the Left.

French leaders in the years following the war continued to uphold the patriotic rhetoric of the war and the years preceding it in order to enforce the status quo and justify their power. The *Bloc national républicain* (or simply the '*Bloc national*'), was a right-wing coalition that came to power following the Armistice, with Clemenceau (a war hero, known as '*père la Victoire*') at its head. The chamber this coalition formed was familiarly called *la Chambre bleu horizon*, after the color of French military uniforms in World War I. Though a left-wing government came to power in 1924, the "bloc des Gauches" did not achieve the political change they promised. The pantheonization of Jaurès perfectly symbolizes the superficiality and inefficacy of the left-wing government:

En mai, des élections pleines de lyrisme avaient amené au pouvoir le bloc des Gauches : comme on venait d'en finir avec la Chambre bleu horizon, on croyait que la guerre était définitivement liquidée et qu'on allait tranquillement recommencer le petit glissement régulier vers la gauche où les historiens sérieux voient le secret de la République en trouvant que cette fatalité providentielle arrange bien des choses et permet de dormir sur ses deux oreilles.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 43.

This left-wing government is even worse than its right-wing predecessor because of the added layer of hypocrisy: “Jaurès victime de la guerre est glorifié par ses assassins.”<sup>111</sup>

This government, to Nizan, has just as much faith and stake in the status quo as did the Chambre bleu horizon. Nizan frames their choices as selfish moves to ensure their peace of mind and that of other elites.

During this scene, a communist protest passes, and the vivacity of this is a sharp contrast with the solemn show. It is described as an irresistible river moving down the street. Communism is immediately presented as the movement necessary to break France from its stagnation: “Les hommes immobiles ne résistèrent plus aux hommes en mouvement, les spectateurs au spectacle, les taciturnes aux chanteurs, ils descendirent pour connaître le mouvement du fleuve ; Laforgue, Rosenthal et Bloyé perdirent ce qui leur restait de respect humain, ils s’y jetèrent aussi et se mirent à chanter.”<sup>112</sup> And, indeed, this physical movement translates into political action for the young men: soon after, they work together to found their revolutionary journal. But just as this participation in the protest is the result of the young men getting swept up in the collective enthusiasm, so too do they undertake their journalistic endeavor without a clear political goal in mind.

The young men come across a series of potential father figures outside of their homes and aside from national leaders. André Simon, a friend in the military who gets roped into the conspiracy, has his superiors in the army; Serge looks up to Daniel, a leader of Serge’s communist cell; Rosenthal believes the author Régnier will be able to

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 53.

offer advice to the group. Finally, Nizan dangles one ideal father figure in front of the reader's nose: Carré. Serge is the only member of the group that gets to meet him, and this is only a brief encounter, just enough to give Serge the evidence he needs to betray Carré's hiding place (Régnier's home). Carré remains on the periphery of the narrative, out of the reach of these young men who are not brave enough to join the Communist Party and forced into hiding because of the political situation in France.

In a novel supposedly about communism, these are almost the only scenes that feature an explicit discussion of the movement. Carré describes his view of communism through a series of conversations with Régnier — alongside whom he fought during the war — while he hides out at his home. These scenes reveal Nizan's intended audience: Carré attempts to convince Régnier, who exemplifies the vilified “ancien combattant,” the apolitical author, the cynical bourgeois who lazily stands by the status quo. “Invincible libéral [...] infidèle à l'homme,”<sup>113</sup> Carré calls him. These conversations represent a confrontation between two models of fatherhood.

Carré explains that he was attracted to communism because it is the only political movement that requires an individual's full commitment in both public and private life: “Le communisme est une politique, c'est aussi un style de vie.”<sup>114</sup> Though in the Third Republic model, the public and private spheres supposedly complement one another, in reality this division allows one to step away from politics, even to contradict one's political position in private life: “Les socialistes se réunissent et parlent politique, élections, et après, c'est fini, ça ne commande pas leur respiration, leur vie privée, leurs

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 208.

fidélités personnelles, leur idée de la mort, de l'avenir. Ce sont des citoyens. Ce ne sont pas des hommes.”<sup>115</sup> In a similar way, the brotherhood Carré felt with his fellow soldiers during the war is nothing compared to his relationship with his fellow communists: “les fidélités de parti sont plus puissantes que les fidélités de la mort et du sang, mais il savait enfin qu'il pouvait demander à Régnier ce qu'on a le droit d'exiger d'un homme de qui on a été dans une guerre le témoin.”<sup>116</sup>

In contrast with those socialist “citoyens” who keep politics at arm's length, Carré has come into a fuller understanding of himself as an individual through communism: “Le communisme n'était pas seulement pour Carré la forme qu'il avait donnée à son action, mais la conscience même qu'il avait de lui-même et de sa vie.” His convictions are “des valeurs personnelles si profondes qu'il ne pensait pas plus à les remettre en question que les battements de son cœur.”<sup>117</sup> Carré presents this search for individual development as the central motive for *all* communists: “Même maladroitement, même à tâtons, même s'il retombe, le communiste a l'ambition d'être absolument un homme. [...] Un communiste n'a rien. Mais il veut être et faire...”<sup>118</sup> Though the Third Republic was based on a model of reproduction, communism appears the truly productive structure.

In his articles, Nizan elaborated on this idea of communism as a path to individualism. Nizan explains in 1933, in response to Mauriac's critique of Catholics who wrote anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist pieces for *Esprit*, that the individualism held so dear by French republicanism is not possible under a capitalist system:

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 207-8.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 209.

La revendication des droits de la personne humaine, aussi longtemps que ne sont pas combattues et abolies les causes temporelles de la mutilation, de « l'aliénation » de tous les hommes, ne saurait être valable que pour quelques hommes. La revendication de l'individu ne sort pas des limites de l'individualisme de l'homme bourgeois, qui s'oppose de toutes les façons à la réalisation de l'individu véritable. [...] La lutte communiste contre l'individualisme ne signifie pas autre chose que la lutte réelle pour le développement de l'individu. L'individualisme n'est rien d'autre [...] que la doctrine et la pratique de la solitude bourgeoise. L'individu ne s'épanouira que lorsque les conditions de la solitude capitaliste auront été abolies. Il n'est pas question de sauvegarder la « singularité » de la personne, mais de créer l'individu en le plongeant dans les rapports de la masse. Sinon, il n'y aura jamais que la duperie préméditée consciemment par les démagogues fascistes. Il n'y aura jamais que la « réalisation » de quelques personnes « choisies. »<sup>119</sup>

Under capitalism, individualism remains the privilege of the bourgeoisie and is a way to avoid social consciousness. Elsewhere, Nizan emphasized that though individualism was only really accessible to elites, the promise of individual greatness was dangled in front of everyone else to keep people motivated: “L'individualisme est l'ensemble des mythes que la société bourgeoise fabrique pour consoler les hommes de ne pas être des individus.”<sup>120</sup>

Nizan was sure that other communist writers felt the same way he did. In an article about André Gide, written while Gide was closest to the communists, Nizan proclaims that it is only communism that allows and encourages an author to achieve literary greatness.

Comment se fût-il refusé à ce monde où pour la première fois dans l'histoire, dans « un Etat sans religion, une société sans cloisons », le développement de l'homme total est possible, exigé ? Ce développement est au centre même de la révolution : ce développement a toujours été au centre de la révolution. [...] Comment l'écrivain de l'individualisme se fût-il refusé à entrer dans cet immense mouvement ? L'individualisme

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<sup>119</sup> Paul Nizan, *Paul Nizan: intellectuel communiste, 1926-1940: articles et correspondance inédite*, ed. Jean-Jacques Brochier, (Paris: Maspéro, 1967), 224-5.

<sup>120</sup> Paul Nizan, *Pour une nouvelle culture*, ed. Susan Suleiman, (Paris: Grasset, 1971), 96.

bourgeois n'est que le repliement sur soi, la rumination solitaire de l'atome que créent la propriété privée, le droit bourgeois, la politique bourgeoise : l'individualisme que Gide rêvait était tout entier dans l'épanouissement, le développement, la liberté créatrice, la richesse des échanges avec les autres hommes, avec l'univers.<sup>121</sup>

Nevertheless, it remains difficult to take Nizan at his word in these passages. Though Nizan may have believed that joining the communist party finally freed him from the feeling of entrapment he experienced in bourgeois society, he was nevertheless a bourgeois intellectual, a *normalien*, and he had ambitions to become a great novelist. All the doors were open to him in bourgeois French society.

Nizan's choice to focus on young bourgeois students allows him to get to the heart of the flaws of the French rhetoric of individualism and the self-governing male citizen. Nizan shows that this rhetoric on which the French republic relies disguises a reality of constraint and inequality. Nizan plays on the crisis of adolescence so central to Third Republic educational theories. This moment when young men move from controlled education to political consciousness and social engagement is framed in *La Conspiration* as a moment to either willingly accept social expectations or to revolt against those expectations. In this way, bourgeois society defines the ideal path and determines and controls the form that escape or revolt might take. Nizan's focus on bourgeois adolescents allows him to highlight the ways in which the capitalist order prevents individualism and to highlight communism as a more effective means to achieve this value that was so important to French culture.

Sartre wrote in his review of the novel that youth emerges as a feature of bourgeois society. Sartre writes, "Le jeune homme est un produit de la famille

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<sup>121</sup> Nizan, *Intellectuel communiste*, 119.



bourgeoise, sa situation économique et sa vision du monde sont exclusivement familiales.”<sup>122</sup> In contrast with workers, who are shot abruptly and early into adult worries and miseries, the sons of bourgeois families have the luxury to be “jeunes gens,” to “vivent à plein ce grand ennui abstrait.”<sup>123</sup> By focusing on families at different rungs of the bourgeoisie, Nizan is able to analyze how harmful this social construct is, both for French society and for the individual young men who are stuck in this position.

Further, just as one’s access to “youth” is determined by class, so too are one’s options for escape from youth and from class-based social expectations. The comparison Nizan sets up between the stories of Bernard Rosenthal and Serge Pluvillage allows him to explore the effectiveness of individualistic revolt for people of different socio-economic statuses.

Against the backdrop of a country where separation between public and private life is the norm, and even encouraged, Nizan explores the dual nature of personal revolt against the family.<sup>124</sup> He indulges the myth of the individualist citizen, putting forward a revised model of citizenship defined by revolt. To find personal fulfilment and to avoid hypocrisy in his personal life,<sup>125</sup> it is necessary for a young man to think and express

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<sup>122</sup> Sartre, “*La Conspiration*,” 35.

<sup>123</sup> Sartre, “*La Conspiration*,” 34.

<sup>124</sup> Nizan ran in the same circles as intellectuals interested in psychoanalysis, and it was in the early 1930s that freudo-marxism really flourished. These ideas informed his depiction of the family in his work, especially in *Antoine Bloyé*. We know that Nizan knew Lacan and read at least some of Lacan’s work, even reviewing Lacan’s doctoral thesis on paranoia in the February 10, 1933 issue of *L’Humanité* (Buin, 73-4).

<sup>125</sup> The narrator describes, for instance, when he notes the discomfort between Bernard and his father, “cette confuse défiance qui règne presque toujours entre les pères et les fils et dans cette rivalité, cette ambition de dépassement, cette tentation de mépriser les défaites, qui naissent chez les fils quand l’âge des imitations est passé, et quand ils commencent à se dire que les pères sont toujours vaincus” (Nizan, *La Conspiration*, 134). Part of this rivalry is also due to their similarity: “Bernard croyait parfois avec une sorte de colère se retrouver en lui ; il lui suffisait de regarder son père pour imaginer avec une exactitude

himself independently of the family and a revolt against the family has great symbolic importance as a revolt against the institution at the heart of bourgeois society. Nizan plays up the tension between young men and their families as an opposition between two conspiracies.

Nizan believed that destruction and revolt were necessary before positive action could be possible. Brochier elucidates the interaction between positive and negative philosophy in Nizan's work: "Si tout passe par le négatif — et Nizan était bien persuadé de la nécessité de nier, de détruire, d'abord — la négativité a deux faces. Elle peut être le commencement de rien, une lente agonie, celle de la pensée bourgeoise. Elle peut être aussi le commencement de tout, phase de la dialectique qui se renverse en positivité."<sup>126</sup>

Nizan was extremely critical of this "pensée bourgeoise" which represented complacency, cynicism, and immobility. Destruction with no interest in constructing something new would simply lead to complacency. In *La Conspiration*, he looks at the social factors that prevent young men from turning their destructive acts of rebellion into positive revolutionary engagement.

### *Littérature révolutionnaire*

In many of his articles, Nizan expresses the urgent need for a "*littérature révolutionnaire*." But what exactly would this revolutionary literature look like? For one thing, Nizan defined revolutionary literature in contrast with what he described as

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insupportable l'avenir de son propre corps. [...] [I]l est affreux de ressembler à son père, à sa mère, de se prévoir" (Ibid., 132).

<sup>126</sup> Nizan, *Intellectuel communiste*, 29.

classicism: works that looked to the past for inspiration.<sup>127</sup> The “parti du Mouvement,” on the other hand, is forward-looking: “Le parti du Mouvement n’a pas d’ambitions classiques parce que tout le secret de ses créations est une mise en accusation du monde et la volonté de le changer : il se définit moins par ses pouvoirs de description que par ses ambitions d’avenir.”<sup>128</sup>

This kind of writing was engaged in effecting change. Nizan in fact considered such literature impossible without an author’s own active participation in political life. In a review of Ramon Fernandez’s writing, Nizan argued,

Tout le drame littéraire d’aujourd’hui est ici : on ne peut écrire sur la politique que si on la vit, et on se dit que si on la vit on n’aura point le temps de l’écrire. [...] [L]e problème du romancier est peut-être aujourd’hui de trouver un rythme alterné d’action et de création qui le fasse passer de l’engagement dans la politique à un récit sur la politique. Ce rythme fut celui des romanciers de l’amour [...] L’homme intérieur à la révolution est seul capable de se passer de justifications, c’est à dire de la duplicité mortelle de l’art.<sup>129</sup>

Nizan did struggle, though, to reconcile his revolutionary volition with his status as a bourgeois intellectual. He was careful to distinguish true revolutionary literature from what he saw his fellow left-wing intellectuals writing. In terms of content, truly revolutionary literature would differ from literature that is simply *about* workers, as such an approach risked fetishizing workers. Nor would it simply bemoan the plight of the *petit bourgeois*, a trend that simply perpetuated the myth of individualism that facilitated

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<sup>127</sup> Nizan referred to such conservative work as the “parti de la Résistance”: “Dans un temps comme celui où nous sommes, qui met en question tout l’édifice de l’économie, de la politique et des mœurs, le parti de la Résistance littéraire fait des rêves sur l’Art classique: il voudrait que ce qu’il aime soit assuré de durer. Mais sa mauvaise conscience lui interdit de le produire authentiquement: il ne peut qu’imiter sa complaisance et son irresponsabilité.” (Ibid., 122).

<sup>128</sup> Nizan, *Intellectuel communiste*, 122.

<sup>129</sup> Cited by Yves Buin, *Paul Nizan*, 207.

exploitation of workers. Revolutionary literature, Nizan believed, would be able to show any subject at all, but through the eyes of the proletariat.<sup>130</sup> In this same article, Nizan comments on the problem of audience: Nizan was not blind to the fact that his own writing was mainly for and about other bourgeois intellectuals. One of the first challenges revolutionary writers like him faced was reaching a broader audience.<sup>131</sup> Nizan drew on his split identity when creating the characters of *La Conspiration*.

Like Guilloux, Nizan works within the *roman d'éducation* form to highlight how the language of duty, heroism, and individualism, passed down both through literature and through state rhetoric influences the expectations of young men and warps their worldview. He seeks to create revolutionary literature from within the bourgeois novel.

#### *Personal revolt, symbolic war*

Nizan supports the political necessity of the young men's revolt against their fathers by connecting acts of revolt to their fathers' betrayal of French working-class

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<sup>130</sup> Nizan, *Pour une nouvelle culture*, 36.

<sup>131</sup> Nizan wrote about this issue from a few different angles. On the one hand, he made a point to take seriously the kinds of things workers actually read: popular magazines and newspapers, police novels, etc. In particular, Nizan admired certain works of police fiction and traced similarities between these popular novels and great nineteenth-century novelists like Dostoyevsky. The mix of discourse styles and the fascination with conspiracy and betrayal in *La Conspiration* may be attempts to incorporate elements of these popular writing styles.

Further, Nizan was highly critical of the way culture was treated by the bourgeoisie under the Third Republic, as a curated inheritance that defined Frenchness and that could be passed down from one generation of bourgeois students to the next. He wrote a number of articles about this problem, including his reviews of works by authors like Julien Benda and Emmanuel Berl. In his article "L'ennemi public no 1," Nizan reports on instances of literal policing of ideas in French public schools.

Nizan's own writing does contradict these concerns, though. His writing is filled with the kind of learned references that make up the *héritage culturel* he critiqued. It is clear that his target audience is other bourgeois intellectuals, and not workers. Further, to publish his novels, Nizan decided to move from the small radical left-wing publishing house that had published his pamphlets, Rieder, to the larger, "bourgeois," Grasset. The well-known publisher would give Nizan access to a wider audience and would put him in a position to be considered for prestigious literary prizes. Though he let his editor, Louis Brun, know how uncomfortable he was being published alongside what he believed to be fascist works, he remained with this publisher that suited his literary ambitions (Cohen-Solal, 184-6).

values. This motif of betrayal is present already in Nizan's first novel, *Antoine Bloyé* (1933), which is based on the life of Nizan's father. In this novel, Antoine's life parallels the growth of the railroad in France, making his involvement in this industry seem inevitable: the railroad first comes to Antoine's hometown when he is one year old. Antoine rises above his working-class origins and joins the managerial staff at a railroad company. But Antoine's social ascent is fraught: in placing himself above the workers' struggle, he becomes the enemy of the workers under his supervision as well as the enemy of his father.<sup>132</sup> In *Antoine Bloyé* and then in *La Conspiration*, Nizan shows that capitalist society, with its narrative of upward mobility with each generation in fact engenders and depends on rivalry between fathers and sons.

Philippe's description of his father mirrors the depiction of Antoine Bloyé as a man who has completely merged his identity with his work: Philippe writes to Bernard, "Mon père est de plus en plus réduit à sa condition de polytechnicien et d'ingénieur [...] Il étale en attendant une suffisance insupportable et un orgueil professionnel qui m'accablent. Les soirées sont pleines de discours sur la fabrication des machines, la direction des entreprises et les vices sournois de la classe ouvrière."<sup>133</sup> Philippe's description seamlessly shifts from obsession with work to class prejudice, as if the two are inextricable. Philippe's mother has also embraced this class prejudice: "Ma mère est une personne décorative et frivole qui passe son temps à voir des dames de son rang et

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<sup>132</sup> Antoine's social mobility is also a loss of identity. He is a *déclassé*, educated above his class but not fully integrated into the bourgeoisie. He concludes that he is a traitor. Lacking a community, he comes to define his identity through his work. Finally, when Antoine is demoted in the wake of a scandal he has nothing to do with, he realizes the extent of his social isolation and sinks into a depression that ultimately kills him. Nizan weaves together psychoanalysis and Marxism by defining male citizenship in capitalist society in terms of generational rivalry. This combination of psychoanalysis and Marxism is, to Annie Cohen-Solal, the great innovation of Nizan's work (Cohen-Solal, 130).

<sup>133</sup> Nizan, *La Conspiration*, 191.

qui vit assez exactement à Strasbourg comme la femme d'un haut fonctionnaire à Hanoï ou à Casablanca, qui ne fraye point avec les indigènes."<sup>134</sup>

Because Philippe believes that his father has betrayed the values of his peasant ancestors, he feels able to justify his own revolt against his father as a defense of those traditional values. Nizan communicates Philippe's thoughts through free-indirect discourse:

[S]'il recherche, pour s'y reconnaître, quelques conseils posthumes de ses ancêtres paysans, ils ne sont jamais loin. Infidèle à son père qui a tant fait pour lui et qui ne se prive pas mon Dieu de le lui reprocher, il peut se consoler en s'écriant qu'il est du moins fidèle à son grand-père : rien ne menace plus profondément la solidité bourgeoise que ces chassés-croisés de trahisons qui se composent, qui ne sont que les suites communes des célèbres étapes de la démocratie.<sup>135</sup>

Though Philippe's revolt will be against his father, this passage highlights the collective betrayal of these traditional values of which the French Republic as a whole is guilty. And Nizan does not exclude the left from responsibility for this movement toward progress and away from traditional values.

Philippe will mention his parents' betrayal of the working class again when he writes to Bernard to share his contribution to the conspiracy. Philippe has stolen some of his father's plans for new metalworking equipment. Though Philippe is not sure whether these plans are even valuable as they were not kept under lock and key, he concludes matter-of-factly, "Cet acte contraire à toutes les valeurs filiales m'a paru tout à fait naturel."<sup>136</sup> Philippe's act represents at least a symbolic victory against what his father

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 191.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 192.

has come to represent: “mon père est de ces commis du capitalisme qui ont été éblouis après la guerre par les nouveaux saint-simoniens, et que Ford lui paraît être le plus grand homme du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.”<sup>137</sup>

*Policing the family*

Further, to frame revolt against the family as a necessary political act, Nizan casts Bernard Rosenthal’s family as an institution that polices the actions of its individual members. The Rosenthals are a wealthy Jewish family, thoroughly assimilated to French society. Bernard’s father works as a stock broker, and Bernard’s older brother, Claude, has been groomed to follow in his father’s footsteps. Though they live in a primarily Jewish neighborhood in Paris, they scorn any element of Jewish culture or identity, laughing anytime someone utters a word in “la langue oubliée.”<sup>138</sup> This is an act of self-censorship necessitated by the French definition of national identity.

Nizan describes the Rosenthals’ social circle as very insular, and the “des petits clans qui composaient le milieu des Rosenthal” are just like them.<sup>139</sup> Nizan emphasizing the vulnerability of this unit that appears so impenetrable. Part of this vulnerability comes from the Rosenthals’ Jewish identity, which meant a precarious position with respect to French identity. The other part of this vulnerability is purely a result of capitalist society that, though it allows upward social mobility, also necessarily brings the opposite: once

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>138</sup> Bernard sees his family as having betrayed their Jewish identity: “on avait trahi la pauvreté, l’exil, et la colère.” Bernard struggles to determine his feelings toward the Jewish identity that his family has abandoned, but that nevertheless makes up part of their identity. Nizan suggests that it is simpler for Philippe Laforgue to betray his father than it is for Bernard to break from his family for this reason (Ibid., 15-7).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 150.

one has moved up in society, that position is not guaranteed to be permanent. Though Monsieur Rosenthal's success as a businessman might have been necessary to reach this station, Nizan shows that it is really the appearance of the family that is necessary to maintain one's status, since the appearance of family harmony is central both to the definition of French national identity and central to bourgeois identity. Nizan shows how the appearance of harmony and security in the private sphere is the source of power for a family like the Rosenthals.

Enfin, c'était une famille qui se plaisait, comme toutes les autres, à composer des images rassurantes de sa cohésion et de sa permanence : les cours de la Bourse qui montaient, les frères et les sœurs qui s'entendaient, les maladies qui guérissaient, les soirées sous la lampe, les études des enfants, les mariages, les naissances, les fiançailles, les enterrements où les vivants se retrouvaient à l'entrée du cimetière Montmartre ou du Père-Lachaise, les voyages, les meubles qu'on changeait, les dîners qu'on mangeait, les fêtes qu'on souhaitait, — tout semblait protéger les Rosenthal des malheurs, de la peur, de la mort.<sup>140</sup>

This enumeration of the rituals of family life<sup>141</sup> forms a set of fortifications that protect the Rosenthals. Even in death, there are certain markers of status that must be upheld, a certain way things must be done: the family's dead are buried alongside greats in the historic Montmartre and Père-Lachaise cemeteries. The repetition of “on” toward the end of this passage reinforces the sense of collective identity and action. This pronoun, combined with the use of the imperfect, also carries the impersonal and atemporal quality of social expectations. These are the things that one simply does, the expectations of this social rank. Nevertheless, this image of strength also shows vulnerability: this family has

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>141</sup> See Anne Martin-Fugier's analysis of the ritualization of bourgeois family life in the nineteenth century (“Les rites de la vie privée bourgeoise,” in *Histoire de la vie privée*, 4:175-241).



to work to construct a strong, impenetrable appearance. Capitalist society creates this fragility which, as we will see, sometimes forces a family to act immorally.

Bernard's relationship to his family is clearly an obstacle to his political engagement. Nizan's third-person narrator criticizes Bernard for his hypocrisy in continuing to eat with his parents, to accept allowance from them, to go on lavish family vacations, despite his desire to be an anti-bourgeois intellectual. The narrator criticizes Bernard because he has only made the break from his family in thought: "comme c'est facile, une rupture intérieure, qu'aucune action n'atteste que la satisfaction du cœur!"<sup>142</sup>

Contrary to the myth that the family is a naturally harmonious unit, the Rosenthals actively construct and maintain an appearance of harmony by suppressing individual actions that threaten that appearance. When Bernard's family finds out that he has been having an affair with his sister-in-law, Catherine, they gather the family to end this relationship. Bernard's mother simply tells him the solution the family has decided on, without his input: "Nous avons donc très peu de chose à nous dire, dit Mme Rosenthal. Personne ne doit rien savoir de nos drames. Catherine restera avec son mari. [...] Il n'y aura aucune rupture publique : je ne tolérerai pas le scandale."<sup>143</sup> Private and public spheres intersect as the family comes together to put an end to this relationship : the Rosenthals' living room is transformed into a courtroom, Bernard's parents and brother "établis dans leurs poses de juges."<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 219.

Subjected to external policing of appearances, the Rosenthals control Bernard and Catherine's behavior. In this scene, the family is compared to a beast that consumes the scandalous affair and Bernard. Bernard refers to his family as "mes carnivores" and after Bernard's judgment has been passed, the narrator describes the family as a sea anemone, lying in wait for its prey:

Comme c'est puissant et inflexible, une famille ! C'est tranquille comme un corps, comme un organe qui bouge à peine, qui respire rêveusement jusqu'au moment des périls, mais c'est plein de secrets, de ripostes latentes, d'une fureur et d'une rapidité biologiques, comme une anémone de mer au fond d'un pli de granit, tranquille, nonchalante, inconsciente comme une fleur, qui laisse flotter ses tentacules gorge-de-pigeon, en attendant de les refermer sur un crabe, une crevette, une coquille qui coule...<sup>145</sup>

With this slippage between family, body, sea creature, and plant, Nizan places his depiction of the Rosenthals in dialogue with metaphorical depictions of the nation in official and critical discourse throughout the Third Republic that enforced the connection between nation, family, and nature. Nizan challenges the assumption this kind of discourse made that any of these entities are naturally stable and harmonious. Here, an appearance of tranquility obscures an immense potential energy. The comparison to a flower, perhaps the most clichéd symbol of natural beauty, appears increasingly ridiculous as the passage develops into violent imagery.

Bernard will invoke another natural metaphor later, when he thinks of his family as a spider that weaves a web to catch and retrieve any members of the "clan" who try to escape. This web is specifically the invented stories that the family will tell to explain a dissenter's escape: "Sages comme des araignées, ils préparaient de loin les reprises de la

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 226.

vie.”<sup>146</sup> Bernard imagines for instance his family preparing to cast him as the prodigal son when they talk about him.<sup>147</sup> Such comparisons between the Rosenthals and animals or insects also suggest that the ability to silence scandal is a natural survival technique for the bourgeois family. Before he launches into his series of metaphors, Nizan makes clear his critique of the family through a specifically human image: a family is “plein de secrets.”

This scene reveals Nizan’s interest in police fiction. Nizan saw police novels, which were largely read by the working class, as propaganda for the bourgeois police state.<sup>148</sup> Nizan uses this scene of policing instead to show how the bourgeois state has corrupted interpersonal relationships. This is what the private sphere looks like in an “époque policière.”<sup>149</sup> By tapping into the same anxieties as police fiction, Nizan employs a feature of this genre to counter purposes.

Effective as his critique of the Rosenthals is, it is necessary to note that Nizan instrumentalizes the family’s Jewish identity, tapping into antisemitic anxieties through his depiction of the monstrosity of this family, in order to strengthen his critique of capitalism. Nizan does not use this scene to challenge antisemitic representation in the

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> In his review of the popular *Fantômas* series, Nizan took the political dimension of police novels seriously, writing, “les mystères redoutables de la police paraissent dévoilés, et honnêtes. Car le voile n’a été soulevé qu’en partie. [...] C’est là le grand secret du roman policier : on présente la police comme la grande protectrice des honnêtes gens contre le crime ; on provoque la sympathie à l’égard de la police. Mais derrière cette sympathie, protégée par elle, se développe la fonction politique de la police. Le lecteur se suit du côté du policier qui traque aussi les ouvriers en révolte. La lutte contre la criminalité n’est que le paravent de la lutte contre la révolution” (Nizan, *Pour une nouvelle culture*, 69).

<sup>149</sup> Nizan uses this phrase in his 1935 article, “L’ennemi no. 1,” in which he condemns the policing of the family’s counterpart in the public sphere: public schools (Ibid., 130).

same way he challenges what he saw as the pro-bourgeois and pro-policing messages contained in police fiction.

When Bernard commits suicide as a last-ditch effort to hurt his family and to assert his will over the family's plan for him, his mother rewrites his motives in order to save face and to erase Bernard's intent. At Bernard's funeral, she determines to protect her family's power by portraying the suicide as the inevitable result of Bernard's corruption at the hands of his revolutionary friends. Madame Rosenthal refuses to shake Philippe's hand, because

Mme Rosenthal venait, dans un éclair d'inspiration, en voyant entrer Laforgue, de découvrir la version familiale qui sauverait définitivement l'honneur des Rosenthal, la version qui expliquait le goût de la Révolution, la séduction de Catherine, la mort : la fable des influences, la légende des mauvais amis allaient trouver des fortunes nouvelles dans le folklore tragique de l'avenue Mozart, puisque Bernard était mort d'une maladie, d'un germe mortel venu du dehors, puisque les Rosenthal savaient qu'ils ne fabriquaient pas eux-mêmes les poisons qui les tuaient.<sup>150</sup>

Madame Rosenthal thus rewrites the meaning Bernard hoped to convey with his suicide, transforming it into a cautionary tale to bolster her own class's security. This "version familiale" and the reference to folklore stands out as a code for the lies a family will have to tell to protect its reputation. Nizan's language of fiction here is significant: it establishes a contrast between fiction used by the bourgeoisie to conceal the truth and fiction used by Nizan to unveil the harmful mechanisms of these domestic spaces.

Although Bernard thinks of his father and brother as his rivals, it is his mother who orchestrates this suppression of Bernard's individuality. Through these moments, Nizan shows a woman whose domestic or familial responsibilities have become

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<sup>150</sup> Nizan, *La Conspiration*, 236-7.

essentially public. Madame Rosenthal manages the barrier between private and public spheres.<sup>151</sup>

These depictions of conspiracy align the Rosenthals' management of family drama with the functioning of capitalism. Bernard's father describes the stock exchange as "absolument un jeu" and explains that far from being controlled by some overarching principles that one can study scientifically, the big decisions are made through political intrigue and rumors: "Tout le marché repose sur des racontars de concierge."<sup>152</sup> Capitalist bourgeois society stands in stark contrast to the open, honest picture Carré paints of communism. Critical as he is of Bernard's self-centeredness, Nizan shows that he is on the right track in his perception of the conspiratorial machinations of bourgeois society.

### *Stories of escape*

At the same time as he draws the reader into the symbolic dimensions of personal revolt against the family, Nizan also emphasizes the political ineffectiveness of his protagonists' individualistic acts. Setting up a parallel between Bernard and Serge's stories, Nizan introduces a class-based comparison of young people's access to individualism and examines the motives that drive young people from different backgrounds toward political acts. Through their individualistic acts, both Bernard and

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<sup>151</sup> Anne Martin-Fugier looks at *savoir-faire* manuals from the nineteenth century to analyze the expectations placed on the *maîtresse de maison*: her role was one of surveillance, of her children, of her household staff. It was also a quite public role of maintaining a social network and the appearances necessary to ensure her family's social standing. At the same time, this woman was expected to ensure that the home fostered the perfect happiness of each member of the family ("Les rites de la vie privée bourgeoise," 4:182-9). Nizan's depiction of Madame Rosenthal highlights how contradictory this model is.

<sup>152</sup> *La Conspiration*, 137.

Serge attempt unsuccessfully to escape the constraints of their social positions, and Nizan shows how unlikely such a motive is to lead to sustained political engagement.

Sartre picked up on Nizan's representation of the impossible individual escape from adolescence with which Nizan innovates the coming-of-age novel. "Nizan montre bien qu'on sort [de la jeunesse] seulement par révolution. La jeunesse ne porte pas en elle sa solution : il faut qu'elle s'effondre et se déchire ; ou bien c'est le jeune homme qui meurt, comme Rosenthal, ou bien il est condamné par son complexe familial d'infériorité à traîner, comme Pluvinage, une adolescence éternelle et misérable."<sup>153</sup> Nizan is interested in Bernard and Serge's stories in what prevents these young men from achieving that escape through action in service of the Revolution.

*Heroism and tragedy: Bernard's escape*

Instead of working toward concrete political action, Bernard attempts to frame self-serving actions as contributing to a greater good through the use of language of heroism that reflects that of literature and of Third Republic rhetoric. Nizan reveals that Bernard's attempt to rewrite his actions as those of a hero prevents his revolt against his family from leading to sustainable political action.

Bernard's affair with Catherine allows the illusion of escape from the regulations of family life and from historical reality more generally. Bernard's affair with Catherine begins in a trip to Normandy that parallels the trip Bernard took to Greece ("[le] lieu où il imagine l'amour"<sup>154</sup>) to visit his sister, which was filled with erotic, exoticist images of

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<sup>153</sup> Sartre, "La Conspiration," 35.

<sup>154</sup> Nizan, *La Conspiration*, 183.

local women and ancient statues. Since it takes him away from Paris, Bernard can imagine the same voyage to a place outside of space and time when he goes to Normandy. Nizan allows his reader to fall into this same distraction, too, immersing them in Bernard's love story.

Bernard attempts to justify his affair with his sister-in-law, Catherine, as a political act and as his heroic duty, but Nizan shows that in reality this affair is an attempt by both Bernard and Catherine to escape from ennui and to revolt against social expectations. There is a symbolic dimension to Bernard's betrayal of his older brother, Claude, who represents the path that Bernard's parents expect him to take. Claude works in finance and belongs to the far-right group the Jeunesses patriotes (the Camelots du roi being just slightly too antisemitic for him). Though only five years older than Bernard, Claude, to his great pleasure, is regularly mistaken for a World War I veteran.<sup>155</sup> Bernard's obsession with the symbolic dimension of his affair with Catherine distracts him from his political plans.

Throughout his affair with Catherine, Bernard attempts to justify his behavior as a larger political statement, as a betrayal of his family from within, as a victory over his brother and the values he represents, and as a gallant attempt to save Catherine from her unhappy marriage: "Il se dit qu'il lui fallait arracher complètement Catherine à son mari, que c'était même son seul devoir."<sup>156</sup> Bernard also uses this same language of duty to talk about purifying Catherine, again using political language to describe his personal

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<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 136-7.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 181.

relationship.<sup>157</sup> Madame Rosenthal echoes this language, approving of Bernard spending more time with his well-bred sister-in-law. She thinks, “Kate apprivoise notre sauvage.”<sup>158</sup> The affair has the paradoxical result of bringing Bernard closer to his parents for a time.

Characters often criticize Bernard for his tendency to give false justifications to his actions. Catherine does just this when she breaks up with Bernard, pointing out that he does not understand why he wanted to be with her. In the letter she writes to Bernard to break things off definitively, after Bernard’s family has gathered to end their relationship, Catherine writes, “Ce drame est arrivé parce que vous l’avez voulu [...] vous croyiez m’aimer quand je n’étais pour vous que l’occasion de vous venger des vôtres. Comme vous respirez aisément dans le scandale !”<sup>159</sup>

Similarly, Bernard’s friends also criticize Bernard’s romantic justifications for his conspiracy idea. When Bernard writes to Philippe to explain the need to act in a way that is both useful to the Revolution and that carries a great personal sacrifice or creates some irreversible effect in the conspirator’s personal life, Philippe accuses his friend of being too romantic in his ideas. Philippe calls Bernard’s conspiracy “dostoïevskienne” and remarks that this idea seems more self-serving than truly productive: “Peut-être que si nous ne redoutions pas une servitude politique et que si rien ne nous semblait plus important que de ne pas choisir, la véritable solution consisterait pour nous aussi dans l’adhésion pure et simple au parti.” He also points out, “Tes songes clandestins me

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 182, 187.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 226-7.



paraissent cependant plus efficaces en vue de ta perfection personnelle que pour la réussite concrète de la conquête du pouvoir politique par le prolétariat.”<sup>160</sup> André Simon, a former classmate of Bernard and Philippe’s, who Bernard calls on to join the conspiracy, using his position as an army secretary to steal defense plans for Paris, also reacts with skepticism to Bernard’s conspiracy. He thinks that “toute cette hardiesse était excessivement vaine” and feels “aucune envie d’agir seul pour une révolution qui, décrite par Rosenthal, paraissait bien mythique, et qui ne le passionnait pas.” To André, this idea seems “enfantine et parfaitement absurde.”<sup>161</sup>

This passage frames romantic justification of political actions as self-serving and directly opposed to effective action, which would involve joining the Party and answering to its authority. Nizan also shows how detrimental this romantic, novelistic point of view is to the individual through his depiction of Bernard’s suicide. Infuriated that his affair with Catherine has not even ruffled his family’s feathers and that Catherine has no intention of leaving Claude, Bernard goes on a drinking binge and decides suicide is the only way to hurt his family. He thinks, ““La mort pourrait être contre eux l’affirmation qu’aucun de mes actes n’a pu être. Vais-je leur sacrifier jusqu’à la liberté de ma mort, mon seul acte?... Ils feront d’ailleurs une drôle de gueule si je me tue...J’ai tout manqué, mais je serai allé au moins un jour jusqu’au bout de moi-même. Si l’amour est perdu, sauvons au moins la tragédie!”<sup>162</sup> This scene reveals the extent to which Bernard’s conception of his identity relies on his ability to define himself in opposition to his

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 233.

family's expectations. Here, Bernard turns to fiction, invoking tragedy to give value to his death.

In the moments before his suicide, Bernard struggles to reconcile this fictionalized image of himself with reality:

Il se persuade que la pureté de la passion s'est heurtée à la toute-puissance des mythes, de la société, du destin. Mais la passion qu'il croit encore à cette heure avoir éprouvée pour Catherine est moins pure qu'il ne le pense, elle est mêlée de jalousie, de colère, des vieux ressentiments de l'enfance ; elle manque de force et de candeur. Personne n'est là pour l'éveiller, pour lui dire qu'il s'est composé seul une femme irremplaçable : *il est incapable* de comparaisons, incapable de se dire qu'à son âge, il peut encore vivre sur des inconnues, et qu'il a été fou de tout jouer sur Catherine. *Il est aveuglé, il ne connaît plus* de l'amour que l'obstination qui lui survit. *Il n'avouera jamais qu'il s'est trompé* en inventant qu'il ne possédait au monde qu'une seule protection contre la mort, qu'un seul bien. Mais il est placé à un point extrême de fureur, d'où *il ne découvre aucune* revanche possible, *aucune* entreprise qui pourrait atteindre les siens, *aucun* moyen de retrouver Catherine. Il prend pour du désespoir l'impuissance de l'orgueil. *Il n'imagine même pas* qu'il pourrait reconquérir Catherine en acceptant s'il le fallait tous les partages. C'est qu'il aime moins Catherine qu'il ne croit...<sup>163</sup>

The tone of this passage shifts at the beginning of the second sentence, with the word "Mais." The narration in the passage that precedes this one brings the reader close to Bernard's thoughts through free-indirect discourse. But here, the third-person narrator interrupts with a series of negations to establish a critical distance between the reader and Bernard. The insistence of these negations conveys a dramatic irony on a couple of levels. On the one hand, these negations emphasize the real tragedy of this young man's lack of clear perspective and can be read with a regretful tone. But the irony of these repeated negations is not limited to this sense of regret; these negations place full responsibility on Bernard for his feeling of emptiness. Rather than seeking a connection

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 232-3, emphasis mine.

to reality and effective social engagement, he sought to rewrite himself as a tragic hero: he is responsible for distancing himself from reality, to the point of idealizing Catherine and exaggerating his own feelings for her. As we have seen, his mother will easily replace this fiction with her own when she creates her own story of Bernard's death.

Bernard's tragedy may be one of misreading, of being too easily influenced by the combination of state rhetoric and literary heroism he has imbibed. Failing to translate his energy into effective political action, Bernard becomes a literal version of what Vallès called a "victim of the book."<sup>164</sup>

*Individualism and isolation: Serge's escape*

The third part of *La Conspiration*, follows Serge Pluvillage, who through the rest of the novel has remained an outsider to the group, the object of his friends' mistrust. This mistrust turns out to be justified, when it becomes clear that Serge, though the only one of the friends courageous enough to join the Communist Party, has betrayed Carré's hiding place to the police. Before the third part of the novel begins, Philippe and Bernard accuse Serge of this act of betrayal, but Serge admits nothing.

In the third part of the novel, Serge takes control of his confession, first telling his girlfriend Marguerite what he has done, and then writing a full confession in a letter to Philippe. Like Bernard, Serge establishes his identity through an act of writing, a literal one this time, but Serge's is a confrontation with reality, not an escape from it. Serge, like Bernard, is concerned with sharing the motives for his actions, but Serge engages in the

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<sup>164</sup> François Proulx describes Vallès's conviction that with books, there was always a danger of misreading, which warped peoples' perceptions of themselves and which could doom them to disappointing confrontations with reality that could not accommodate the ideal they found for themselves in a book (*Victims of the Book*, 25-7).

therapeutic process of reflecting on his motivations after the fact, whereas Bernard creates fictions to convince himself his actions serve a higher purpose.

This confessional letter is more a biography than a description of the betrayal of Carré. It contextualizes Serge's choice to first join the Party and then to betray Carré in a long struggle to find belonging among his bourgeois classmates. He finally describes his resigned decision to join the police.

Serge explains that he writes his confession to save himself from suffocation. After he tells his girlfriend of his betrayal of Carré, he realizes his voice is threatened: "Ce qui l'étouffait, c'était le sentiment qu'il serait désormais condamné au silence, qu'il avait parlé, en parlant à Margot, pour la dernière fois, que personne n'entendrait jamais plus la vérité sur sa vie, que rien ne le définirait plus que la solitude où il venait d'entrer, où il n'aurait jamais plus que des complices."<sup>165</sup> His confession is more a biography than anything else.

Some critics of *La Conspiration* felt Serge's confession was the only redeeming part of the novel. André Rousseaux, for instance, felt Serge's story was what saved this novel which was otherwise hindered by Nizan's background as a *normalien* and his communist politics. "Je disais en commençant que le communisme ne nuit pas au talent de M. Nizan. Je me reprendrai peut-être pour finir : il lui nuit dans la mesure où le communisme est une utopie trop inhumaine. M. Nizan a besoin de revenir de trop loin pour rentrer dans l'humain. De là les faiblesses de son roman."<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Nizan, *La Conspiration*, 260.

<sup>166</sup> André Rousseaux, "La Conspiration par Paul Nizan et Liaisons du monde par Léon Bopp," in *Le Figaro*, 29 October, 1938.

Walter Benjamin wrote in a letter to Max Horkheimer that he preferred Serge's story as well, as it was the only part of the novel that offered a view of life on the margins of bourgeois society and the proletarian movement. Benjamin liked how Nizan conveyed the sense of community among marginalized groups, "the complicities that exist between these ostracized professional groupings — informers, prison officials, funeral-bidders — and certain parts of Paris, which are chiefly inhabited by poor people."<sup>167</sup> These people are united in a shared lack of control over their circumstances: "[Serge] belongs to the family of those whose secret paths, along which they circumnavigate a world built by others, are preordained."<sup>168</sup>

Nizan invites a class-based comparison of Serge and Bernard's relationships to family, and particularly to father figures. Serge's family is the third that Nizan describes in detail, after the Rosenthals and the Laforgues. Each family represents a different social class: there are the upper-middle-class Rosenthals, and the Laforgues, who, though not wealthy, are clearly well-off. Serge's family is of the lower middle class: his father was a *petit fonctionnaire* who worked for the police department, transporting cadavers. Serge often accompanied his father in his work, and this brought Serge into contact from a young age with the margins of society, with crime, poverty, clandestine life, and death. Serge is the only one of the young men who literally lacks a father during the timeframe of the novel: his father was killed in the war. Serge ties his hardships to his father, but he specifically blames his father's job, not his beliefs. Serge in fact suggests that his friends' ability to disrespect their fathers, to take for granted their support of the family, is a

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<sup>167</sup> "Walter Benjamin to Max Horkheimer," in Paul Nizan, *The Conspiracy*, trans. Quintin Hoare, (New York: Verso, 2011), 234-5.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid*, 234.

privilege and sign of their social standing: “les railleries dont vous accabliez vos pères n’étaient qu’une élégance de plus, un signe de votre bourgeoisie.”<sup>169</sup>

With Serge, Nizan explores what happens when a character does jump head-first into real life and political engagement. And this decision is inextricable from Serge’s social status. As Sartre pointed out in his review, the bourgeois characters have the luxury of knowing their actions don’t mean anything and they can go back to the comfort of their homes if something goes wrong:

Lafforgue [*sic*] et Rosenthal, fils de bourgeois, étudiants, vivent à plein ce grand ennui abstrait. Leur légèreté sinistre, leur agressive futilité vient de ce qu’ils n’ont point de charges et sont par nature irresponsables. [...] leurs actions sont des fumées, ils le savent, et c’est ce qui leur donne le courage d’entreprendre, encore qu’ils feignent de l’ignorer. Comment les appeler, ces entreprises si graves et si frivoles, sinon des « conspirations » ?<sup>170</sup>

As malicious as their families may appear, Bernard and Philippe’s parents offer an assurance for young men like Bernard and Philippe. The spider’s web that prevents Bernard from escaping from his family is also a safety net. Serge risks more in his individualistic acts than Bernard does, but this reality also makes individual agency all the more precious for Serge.

Though the perspective of class dominates, Nizan includes other details in Serge’s story that resist this too-neat view of class-based determinism. Physical deformity, for instance, colors Serge’s experiences in society, like Cripure. Serge recognizes that he has been treated with suspicion his whole life because of his lazy eye (a trait Nizan and Sartre both shared). The way Serge tells the story, his “yeux infidèles” seem to have a greater

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<sup>169</sup> Nizan *La Conspiration*, 275.

<sup>170</sup> Sartre, “*La Conspiration*,” 34.

impact on his life than his social status. His shifty eyes cause his friends to distrust him and exclude him from their activities, and they cause him to prefer clandestine to public encounters, which he uses as an explanation for his decision to first join the Communist Party and then to turn to the police. I will explore two tensions that define Serge's story: he seeks out role models but ends up treating them as rivals, and he seeks independence but cannot live without community.

### *Role model and rival*

Serge's story brings into focus something that has been at work throughout the novel: throughout the novel, father figures have been more useful to the young conspirators as rivals than as role models. By rejecting the expectations father figures represent or try to impose on them, the young men attempt to define themselves as individuals. Again and again, Serge actively seeks out alternative father figures and betrays them, successfully establishing himself as a free-thinking individual, but also isolating himself.

Serge's feelings toward Bernard and Philippe are illustrative of this blending of role model and rival. Serge describes his feelings toward Bernard and Philippe as "envie" and his academic achievement and political choices are motivated by a desire to impress and one-up them. In particular, Serge envies his friends their cultivation, the result of their comfortable bourgeois upbringing and the values of their class, which helps them succeed academically, but which also clearly proves their belonging in bourgeois society.

Serge explains that his decision to join the Communist Party was sparked by a feeling of social inferiority and a desire to impress his bourgeois friends.<sup>171</sup>

But in other ways, Bernard and Philippe have outlets for their individualistic desires that remain unavailable to Serge. For instance, while Serge does impress his friends when he is the only one courageous enough to join the Party, Bernard's choice to keep *La Guerre Civile* out of Party hands means that he remains in control because of his social status. Serge remarks that within the friend group, "il y avait toujours des *altitudes*." They have a vested interest in not altering the status quo. Similarly, Serge describes Bernard's suicide as yet another manifestation of Bernard's privilege and superiority, an act that is completely inaccessible to Serge, who is fully immersed in the real world: "Le suicide même de Rosen. [...] m'a paru le dernier défi qui pouvait me venir de vous, le dernier acte inimitable que l'un de vous me proposait..."<sup>172</sup>

Other male role models who stand out in Serge's story are Daniel, a metalworker who is the secretary of the Party cell Serge joins, and Massart, the police commissioner who was a friend and colleague of Serge's father and is intimately involved with Serge's mother. Each of these men represents a different path Serge could follow.

Carré and Régnier also serve as more remote father figures. Serge has heard of the legendary Carré through his work with the Party. And when Serge initially rejects his mother and Massart's attempt to find him a position with the police, saying that he

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<sup>171</sup> Nizan, *La Conspiration*, 272-6.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.



dreams of becoming a writer, Serge turns to Régnier for advice, realizing he does not really have anyone else he can go to for advice.<sup>173</sup>

Serge pushes each of these characters away. Serge's betrayal of Carré is simultaneously a betrayal of Bernard, Philippe, Daniel, and Régnier. Though this act brings Serge in line with Massart's vision for him, Serge also resists Massart's authority, by doing nothing to throw his friends off his trail when they confront him with their suspicion that he betrayed Carré. Serge thus ensures that he cannot continue to be a pawn for the police department, continuing to serve as an informant against the Communist Party.

With these acts of betrayal, Serge establishes his individual identity. This is exactly the value Bernard and Philippe get from their rebellions against their fathers: this is a way to personal development, not political change. Because Serge interacts with such a diverse series of father figures, it is not possible for his rebellions against them to coalesce into any cohesive symbolic political project. In fact, Serge blends all of his father figures together after his betrayal of Carré. Right before he goes to tell Massart the Party suspects him of betraying Carré, he notices that Massart has "exactment les yeux de François Régnier" and that he twirls his pencil in the same way as Daniel does.<sup>174</sup>

### *Independence and community*

With Serge, Nizan emphasizes the contradictory nature of the Third Republic model of citizenship that is achieved through both encouragement of the individual spirit

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 287-8.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 252, 254.

and an individual's participation in social structures. Serge struggles to find a balance between the supportive community he needs and the space for him to define himself as an individual. Serge rebels against the expectations of different groups in order to assert his agency, but he ultimately isolates himself completely.

Each time Serge follows one of his role models, he finds himself in a masculine pseudo-family. While his relationship with Bernard and Philippe is unfulfilling because of class-based hierarchy that governs the organization of their journal, Serge finds an ideal family among the men he works with in the Communist Party: "Ce petit groupe d'hommes m'a donné la seule idée que j'aurai d'une communauté humaine."<sup>175</sup> With this observation, Serge echoes Carré's characterization of communism as the only political grouping that does not leave the private life untouched. Carré describes his choice to join the Party as deciding who he could live with, expressing the breakdown between public and private spheres inherent in the choice of a political party. Though Serge chooses to assert his autonomy over remaining in this family, he also acknowledges the lasting impact of the experience of such a brotherhood, comparing it affectionately to an illness: "on ne guérit pas du communisme quand on l'a vécu."<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 279. Nizan struggled with hierarchy within the Communist Party, too. In fact, some of Nizan's biggest responsibilities in the Party had to do with politics and hierarchy within the Party. For instance, he was asked to dethrone Henri Barbusse at his own paper, *Monde*, because although this paper alleged itself to be a communist organ, it was too eclectic in the articles it published to be accepted by the International. When Nizan traveled to Moscow, he experienced the hierarchy the Party had established among French communist authors. Though Nizan and his wife, Henriette, were received with much respect and treated to many comforts, their experience was nothing compared to the reception of Malraux or Gide. Nizan, as the less-established author, was tasked with receiving Malraux. Overall, this trip put Nizan in his place and highlighted to him the irony of a bourgeois author being glorified by the Communist Party. Nizan was again disappointed to realize how much he had been left out of French politics while he was in Moscow in 1934. He knew nothing of the leftist coalition being formed in Paris until he was back in France. He would have a similar feeling of betrayal when he learned of the pact between the USSR and Nazi Germany in 1939. See Annie Cohen-Solal, *Paul Nizan: communiste impossible*.

<sup>176</sup> Nizan, *La Conspiration*, 279.

After Serge betrays Carré and realizes he has lost his family in the Communist Party, Serge seeks a sense of community on the margins of bourgeois society. As a child, because of his father's job, Serge was initiated into the "famille des mondes clandestins qui gravitent autour du monde patent où on occupe sa vie."<sup>177</sup> As he walks home from his last Party meeting, Serge hopes to find understanding among the other lonely people on the streets of Paris. He thinks, "La misère des vagabonds et la solitude parfaite où il venait d'entrer étaient des formes identiques de la poursuite et de la fuite : un homme aussi égaré que lui peut toujours espérer qu'un de ces personnages nocturnes qui circulent entre les marges de la vie et auxquels il se sent terriblement semblable l'aidera à fuir les cercles où il se débat."<sup>178</sup> Serge feels solidarity with these other individuals who are excluded from or who have escaped bourgeois society. This hopeful image of community in solitude proves overly romantic, though. Serge only crosses paths with one person on his walk, a sleeping woman whom he bumps into, who yells insults at Serge as he hurries away.<sup>179</sup>

Ultimately, Serge does choose community over independence. Though he does so reluctantly, he turns to Massart and the police, because, as he thinks to himself, "Il faut que je me cramponne, se dit-il. Je n'ai plus qu'eux !"<sup>180</sup> Though this choice to join the police goes against Nizan's politics, this is a significant homecoming for Serge, a choice to follow in his father's footsteps. And he works within the system that has excluded him:

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 250-1.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 260.

if he cannot be part of the ruling class, he can be part of the organization that supports the authority of that ruling class and maintains the status quo.

Though Serge's ruptures from his role models help define Serge as an individual, it is clear that they are self-destructive. Social isolation was for Nizan the inevitable condition of men under capitalism, but Serge's active role in this isolation introduces the added isolating factor of unequal access to the individualism so highly valued by French republican society. Serge appears to be a victim of the messaging directed at the *petit bourgeois* under the existing French capitalist system: he tries to value individualism above all, but he is left with nothing.

Nizan explicitly connects Serge's entry into the police to Bernard's death when the police commissioner explains that the police force is a last resort for men who have failed in a past life: "on entre dans la police comme on se suicide."<sup>181</sup> Serge's individual identity will henceforth be eclipsed by service to the bourgeois state, just as Bernard's family erases his motive for suicide. Both men's stories also represent struggles to find their voices. Though in his life, Serge lacks the freedom Bernard enjoys, he proves more successful in his form of escape. Serge retains control of his story through his act of confessional writing.

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*Le Sang Noir* and *La Conspiration* take for granted and even validate a young man's revolt against his father as a necessary first step to achieving large-scale change in post-World War I France. Guilloux and Nizan explore the limits of revolt as a defining quality of citizenship. Though the desire to define oneself as an individual is best

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 256.

achieved from revolt against the status quo, it is challenging to channel that impulse into an effective social movement. Both authors propose adherence to the Communist Party as an ultimate goal, but effective political engagement remains on the margins of the stories they tell.

Through their careful attention to how language is used to enforce the status quo and how young people engage in literal and figurative reading and writing, Guilloux and Nizan not only renew the *roman d'éducation* to critique the existing educational model; they also make the case for engaged works of fiction in the interwar period.

## Chapter 2

### Behind Closed Doors

In the previous chapter, we saw male protagonists look outside the home, toward political associations and actions, for opportunities to grow as individuals. In this chapter, I turn to the actions female protagonists undertake within the home to distance themselves from social expectations.<sup>182</sup> The women in *L'Ennemie* (1928) and *Le Bal* (1929) by Irène Némirovsky, and *Thérèse Desqueyroux* (1927) by François Mauriac, turn to betrayal of family members, even violent crime, to assert their agency and break from the constraints of their families.

While they explore daughters' efforts to individuate, these authors also work within the tradition of domestic fiction — in the nineteenth century, a genre coded feminine and typically written by, for, and about women — to question and redefine the ideal image of womanhood. They write against the ideal of maternal sacrifice that dominated in France since the Enlightenment. Lesley Walker describes the progressive ideal of motherhood that was propagated through art and literature in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries: women were shown as extremely energetic: hard-working, self-sacrificing, self-governing, and also tender.<sup>183</sup>

This image of mother as diligent nurturer persisted throughout the nineteenth century, taking on a more explicitly political role: while women prepared their daughters to be productive and marriageable (reproductive), they also prepared their sons to take on

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<sup>182</sup> Much work has been done by feminist scholars to reframe the domestic sphere as a site of political action. See for instance Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: a political history of the novel*, (New York: Oxford, 1987).

<sup>183</sup> Lesley Walker, *A Mother's Love*, (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University, 2008).

the responsibilities of republican citizenship. Judith Surkis discusses the role of the mother-teacher who prepared young children for this patriotic path in the years before they attended public school.<sup>184</sup> Even when later in the nineteenth century, wealthy women took on a fairly public role, maintaining her family's social network through correspondence, social visits, and entertaining, the *maîtresse de maison* still sacrificed her own identity to make herself a symbol and facilitator of her family's social status.<sup>185</sup>

In *Vichy et l'éternel féminin*, Francine Muel-Dreyfus explains that the idealized vision of the *famille nombreuse* kept together by a self-effacing *femme au foyer* were reproduced persistently throughout the Third Republic, through propaganda, literature, laws. Muel-Dreyfus characterizes the "eternal feminine" as ever-present, internalized by a culture, and emerging at certain specific historical moments, especially moments of crisis.<sup>186</sup> The eternal feminine involves the belief in "La représentation d'un ordre biologique, immuable, « naturel », nécessaire, vient légitimer la représentation d'un ordre social immuable, « naturel » et nécessaire."<sup>187</sup> As Muel-Dreyfus explains, this conception of social order was propagated by many different sources working in their own political or social interests in the years leading up to WWII, all of which worked together to create a pervasive myth that laid the groundwork for the French population's acceptance of regressive family policies under Vichy.<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> *Sexing the Citizen*, 29. Becoming an *institutrice* was likewise seen as the ideal way for an unmarried woman to fulfill her maternal needs.

<sup>185</sup> See Anne Martin-Fugier, "Les Rites de la vie privée."

<sup>186</sup> Francine Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy et L'Éternel féminin*, (Seuil: Paris, 1996), 18.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>188</sup> Muel-Dreyfus explains that women were also responsible for imposing this myth on one another, through educational practices for young girls. She also explains that certain conservative women's

Far from propagating this ideology of feminine sacrifice, mainstream interwar fiction resisted assumptions about the naturalness of maternal love and the natural harmony of the patriarchal family. Though writing for more moderate or conservative audiences than Guilloux and Nizan,<sup>189</sup> Irène Némirovsky and François Mauriac paint pictures of family dysfunction that are in line with the family portraits created by those authors on the political left and that resist the ideal of maternal sacrifice. Moreover, they interrogate how the pressures placed on women to serve certain social and economic functions place mothers in a position of needing to hinder their daughters' ability to develop as individuals, rather than nurturing them.

Némirovsky and Mauriac show how these pressures are felt by different groups within the bourgeoisie. Némirovsky's families are newcomers to the upper crust and somewhat clumsily learn how to fit in, whereas Mauriac's families are well-established and conservative provincial families, concerned primarily with building the wealth and influence of the family over time, and passing them on to the next generation.

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movements tapped into internalized notions of gender-based hierarchy to grow their numbers. Muel-Dreyfus quotes one woman who joined a Catholic feminist group that espoused the notion of a natural social order based in gender hierarchy and gender-based differences. This woman, not realizing that she has of course internalized notions of natural differences between men and women passed down through the Catholic Church, as well as through the educational system, laws, and a variety of popular cultural products, explains that when she first heard the messages from this Catholic feminist group, she found that they helped her make sense of things she had always felt were true (Ibid., 180).

<sup>189</sup> Némirovsky published a number of her works in *Gringoire*, a right-wing, antisemitic paper. See Suleiman's discussion of Némirovsky's complex relationship to Jewish identity in *The Némirovsky Question (The Némirovsky Question: the life, death, and legacy of a Jewish writer in twentieth-century France)*, (New Haven: Yale University, 2016)).



### **Mother-daughter competition in *L'Ennemie* and *Le Bal***

*L'Ennemie* and *Le Bal* are a natural pair: Némirovsky wrote and published them within a year of one another, at the same time as she drafted *David Golder*, a dramatic depiction of a family destroyed by wealth. The main action of *L'Ennemie* and *Le Bal* focuses on the conflict between a young adolescent girl and her mother. As in most of Némirovsky's works, the father is largely absent, working long hours to make the fortune that his wife and daughter(s) spend with abandon. These mother-daughter relationships are far from harmonious, the mothers far from self-effacing. Instead, the most natural behavior is driven by selfishness, an individualistic need to act, love, and possess.

Both of these works draw heavily on Némirovsky's own difficult relationship with her mother. The glamorous Fanny Némirovsky, Irène's mother, spent much of Irène's childhood taking vacations with her lovers, spending the money her husband made recklessly. She dressed her daughter as a child well into her adolescence to appear younger herself. The one real mother figure Irène Némirovsky did have in her life was her nanny. When her nanny was fired and committed suicide shortly after, Némirovsky was traumatized. She rewrote the episode of the firing of her nanny many times, including in *L'Ennemie*.

In both of these short fictional works, Némirovsky explores how the class and gender expectations these women face exacerbate the feelings of resentment and jealousy already present between mother and daughter, but she also shows ways that the daughters act to assert their individuality, sometimes using these social pressures to their advantage.

*L'Ennemie*

*L'Ennemie* opens on Francine Bragance and her two young daughters, Gabri and Michette, taking a walk through the park with a new man Francine is seeing. This is a typical outing for the family. While her husband is away fighting in WWI, Francine takes a job and suddenly finds herself in public life. She learns how to dress and do her makeup to be appealing to men and starts going out with a steady rotation of men, sometimes bringing her daughters along, sometimes leaving them at home alone or in the care of a neglectful housekeeper. One day, during Francine's absence, Michette, the younger of the two sisters, falls and dumps a pot of boiling water on herself. She dies shortly after and Gabri pledges to avenge her sister's death.

The story picks up again a few years later: the Bragances are now wealthy, Monsieur Bragance's cousin and business partner, Charles, has come to live with them and he and Francine have begun to have an affair. Gabri is called "Gabrielle" now and is expected to dedicate herself to studies befitting an upper-class girl. Though her behavior is under more scrutiny than it was before, Gabri finds a female companion that her mother approves of and begins going to dance halls. Gabri acts out, having a short affair with a man, but she returns to her earlier obedience after this relationship leads to what we would now call date rape. Gabri then tries to harm her mother in other ways. She writes an anonymous letter to her father, revealing her mother's affair with Charles. Francine finds the letter before Gabri can deliver it, but she believes Gabri when she blames her detested English governess and fires the governess immediately.

Though this revenge plot fails, it gives Gabri confidence: Gabri decides to seduce Charles himself. Though Gabri gets Charles to fall for her, Francine has taken Gabri as a

confidante in the meantime and Gabri cools on the idea of revenge. The two women bond when they realize they are both terribly lonely. Though this new friendship confuses Gabri, she ultimately decides to sleep with Charles, solidifying her betrayal of her mother. She waits for him in his room, but when her mother enters instead of Charles, Gabri panics and jumps off the balcony to her death.

### *Le Bal*

*Le Bal* takes place only over a few days. Here, Némirovsky tells the story of a newly wealthy couple, Alfred and Rosine Kampf, as they plan to throw their first ball, an event that will mark their entrance into Parisian high society. Their fourteen-year-old daughter, Antoinette, is being groomed, like Gabri, as a trophy daughter. She resents the belittling surveillance and criticism to which the “grandes personnes” subject her. Antoinette’s parents make the mistake of forbidding Antoinette from making an appearance at the ball. Though her daughter is still a gawky pre-teen, Rosine is jealous of the attention Antoinette is bound to receive. Rosine wants to enjoy wealth and attention herself before taking on the responsibility of marrying off her daughter. But Antoinette rebels: when her governess, hoping to make time for a *rendez-vous* with her boyfriend, asks Antoinette to mail the invitations to the ball, Antoinette impulsively throws them all in the Seine.

The night of the ball arrives: Rosine dons her most resplendent dress and every piece of jewelry she owns and rushes around nervously. Antoinette hides behind a sofa to watch her parents’ failure. But Antoinette has forgotten that she hand-delivered an invitation to Mademoiselle Isabelle, her piano teacher (and teacher to many society girls)

and a known gossip. Mademoiselle Isabelle arrives and stays for hours, taking in Rosine's humiliation. At the end of the novella, Rosine cries, comforted by her daughter, who daydreams about laughing about her mother's humiliation one day with a man.

It is tempting to dismiss *L'Ennemie* as a less elegant first stab at what would become *Le Bal*,<sup>190</sup> as they address such a similar relationship and retell some of the same episodes, but that would risk obscuring the earlier work's unique treatment of revenge and the confusion of the mother and daughter's identities.

### *Sexual competition*

In both works, Némirovsky frames the competition between mother and daughter as a sexual one, as if between two unrelated rivals. In *L'Ennemie*, this competition is literal and one-sided: Gabri seduces Charles to get revenge on her mother, but Francine is so self-absorbed that she never sees Gabri as a threat to her relationship. Though Gabri's betrayal of her mother is an important act of revenge, she fails to create an identity for herself, following, rather, in her mother's footsteps. Charles even points out how much Gabri looks like her mother.

In *Le Bal*, Rosine sees her daughter as a rival before Antoinette is even old enough to really be a sexual rival to her mother. Antoinette's potential to become a rival is enough. When Antoinette is first described, she seems to be seen and assessed through her mother's eyes:

Quatorze ans, les seins qui poussent sous la robe étroite d'écolière, et qui blessent et gênent le corps faible, enfantin...les grands pieds et ces longues flûtes avec des mains rouges au bout, des doigts tachés d'encre, et

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<sup>190</sup> Margaret Scanlan outlines the shortcomings of *L'Ennemie* in *Understanding Irène Némirovsky*, (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press: 2018), 16-22.

qui deviendront un jour les plus beaux bras du monde, qui sait ?.. une nuque fragile, des cheveux courts, sans couleur, secs et légers...<sup>191</sup>

Awkward as she is, Antoinette's appearance is evidence of her growing body. The certainty that she will soon look different is a source of anxiety for her mother.

Antoinette's adolescence is all the more threatening because once Antoinette enters society, her mother will have to take on the responsibility of finding a husband for her daughter. Rosine wants to enjoy herself as an individual, as a woman, before that identity is completely usurped by her identity as a mother: "Apprends, ma petite, que je commence seulement à vivre, moi, tu entends, moi, et que je n'ai pas l'intention de m'embarrasser de sitôt d'une fille à marier"<sup>192</sup>

Rosine's assertion marks a turning point in their relationship because it places mother and daughter on equal terms as two women both pursuing pleasure: "Jamais Antoinette n'avait vu dans les yeux maternels ce froid regard de femme, d'ennemie..."<sup>193</sup> Rosine thinks of her daughter as an equal, as any other woman. For her part, Antoinette sets herself apart from the "grandes personnes" who she thinks treat her as a child, restricting her liberty. Antoinette reflects on her mother's refusal to let her attend the ball, thinking, "Sales égoïstes ; c'est moi qui veux vivre, moi, moi, je suis jeune, moi... Ils me volent, ils volent ma part de bonheur sur la terre."<sup>194</sup> Both women express the idea that there is a limited amount of pleasure and youth available, creating a sense of urgency. Rosine's cold eyes may hint at violent thoughts, but it is Antoinette who makes her

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<sup>191</sup> Irène Némirovsky, *Le Bal*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Olivier Philipponnat, (Paris: Livre de Poche, 2011), 1:358.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 373.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

destructive fantasy explicit: “Par moments, elle haïssait tellement les grandes personnes qu’elle aurait voulu les tuer, les défigurer, ou bien crier: « Non, tu m’embêtes » en frappant du pied.”<sup>195</sup>

### *Witnessing*

Némirovsky’s characters are constantly observing and judging. It is in this way, Némirovsky suggests, that society enforces rules of conduct for women and maintains class divisions. In *Le Bal*, display of the home stands as the most powerful tool to cinch social standing and in both works, mothers control their daughters’ behavior by subjecting them to constant observation. Némirovsky emphasizes the fragility of such power structures, though. Whether they are aware of it or not, her characters are judged constantly by domestic staff who know better the conventions of upper-class society.

As in *La Conspiration*, the breakdown of the barrier between private and public spheres threatens to ruin a family. Here, Némirovsky shows how much more strongly that pressure is felt by women, because they are judged not only on the reputation of the family but also on how they conduct themselves as individuals in their private lives. Throughout all her works of domestic fiction, Némirovsky expresses this concern about how private life becomes visible and the real dangers this exposure presents for women. She is especially interested in how women place this pressure to conform on one another.<sup>196</sup> Mothers and daughters weaponize surveillance in their conflicts with one

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 358.

<sup>196</sup> Némirovsky would explore this pressure through surveillance again in *Suite Française* (1942), connecting the pressure of the external gaze to state power. In *Dolce*, the second part of the novel, Némirovsky shows how women in an Occupied town enforce one another’s’ resistance to Nazi occupiers through surveillance. Lucile Angellier, the wife of a prisoner of war, faces such pressure from her mother-in-law and neighbors as she falls in love with Bruno von Falk, the German officer quartered in her home.

another. Francine and Rosine impose surveillance on their daughters to make them into status symbols but Gabri and Antoinette turn their gaze on their mothers to take revenge.

In *L'Ennemie*, Francine's daughters and maid watch her, as do neighbors and passersby. But Francine seems to understand exactly how far she can push social norms when appearance is all that matters:

Et certes personne, en voyant passer, avenue du Bois, cette ravissante poupée dont les compagnons changeaient si souvent et ces gamines pâles, ne se fût douté qu'elles étaient parfaitement en règle avec la société, qu'elles avaient quelque part un mari et un père, et qu'elles formaient, si bizarre que cela pût paraître, quelque chose de semblable à une famille.<sup>197</sup>

Something might be a little off, but they look enough like a family to pass. And Francine, who has made herself into a perfect doll, seems completely aware of the power of appearances.

Others explicitly teach Gabri and Michette to see their mother as immoral. For instance, Eugénie, their maid “leur faisait entendre fort clairement que leur mère « était une pas grand-chose, qui trompait son mari avec tout un chacun, et les délaissait, que c'en était une honte et la fable de la maison. »”<sup>198</sup> Though Francine is concerned with constructing a specific image of herself for a male audience, she has perhaps not paid enough attention to how others, especially other women, view her behavior over time.

On the day Michette dies, Francine successfully manipulates others' opinion of her. Though the neighbors have watched and judged Francine harshly for her neglectful

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Though Lucile longs to escape from historical reality and pursue a relationship with Bruno, she ultimately rejects Bruno and helps her neighbor, an escaped prisoner of war, go into hiding after he kills a German interpreter.

<sup>197</sup> Irène Némirovsky, *L'Ennemie*, in *Œuvres complètes*, 1:258.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, 260.

behavior, her very public display of grief after this incident causes neighbors to pity and forgive her.

[S]on chagrin força le pardon de tout le monde, de tout ce menu peuple de voisins, de concierges, humble et redoutable, grand dispensateur de lettres anonymes et de dangereux potins. On lui pardonna le scandale de sa rentrée, au petit jour, dans la maison funèbre, ses amants, sa beauté, l'abandon où elle avait laissé ses filles, on oublia tout parce que sa douleur fut violente et bavarde. Mais Gabri ne pardonna pas.<sup>199</sup>

Manipulating her own appearance still proves a powerful tactic for Francine. The same public behavior that has put Francine in a vulnerable position is also what gets her out of trouble. This threatening possibility of denunciatory letters is a reminder of the legal precarity of a woman's position. Under the Loi Naquet, adultery was cause for a man to divorce his wife and was punishable under the penal code. This mention of the threat of anonymous letters foreshadows Gabri's revenge plot later in the novella.

After Monsieur Bragance makes a fortune flipping factories in Poland, Francine gains a certain level of freedom to spend her time and money as she wishes. But with social ascent also comes a more stringent expectation of appearance, one which Francine has not yet mastered. Though in some ways she looks the part of a wealthy woman, her taste is questionable: "Mme Bragance n'avait pas eu le temps de se familiariser avec l'art nouveau et elle gardait sa faveur au style Louis XVI-Exposition 1900."<sup>200</sup> More importantly, she does not manage her household well: "tout s'en allait de travers dans la belle demeure, comme autrefois dans le petit appartement de la rue d'Armaillé."<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.



And there is now a full household staff to witness Francine's failure. Dinnertime is especially disordered: it never happens at a set time, so the food is always cold or overcooked. Miss Allen, Gabri's governess, requires Gabri to be ready for dinner at seven thirty, and the two women sit in silence and wait as long as it takes for Gabri's parents to return home. The household staff are frustrated as they struggle to deal with these uncertainties ("les domestiques grognent").<sup>202</sup>

Ironically, Francine's affair with her husband's cousin, Charles, who lives with the Bragances, is a source of stability in this disordered home. For a time, at least, their relationship is monogamous. Charles also brings out a maternal love Francine has never known before. And when Charles eats at home, "on mangeait toujours à peu près à l'heure."<sup>203</sup>

Némirovsky plays on the same idea in *Le Bal*. Rosine and Alfred worry that their employees will discover and reveal how recent their social ascent is. Rosine and Alfred have started calling each other "vous" in front of their employees and Rosine warns her husband against being too casual: when Alfred takes off his jacket, Rosine cautions him, "n'oublie pas de ne pas le laisser trainer ici comme l'autre fois... J'ai bien vu à la figure de Georges et de Lucie qu'ils trouvaient cela étrange qu'on se mette au salon en bras de chemise..." They know better than Alfred and Rosine what is expected of people in this world. Rosine continues, advising her husband to take the opinion of the servants seriously: "ce sont eux qui font les réputations en allant d'une place à une autre et en

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

bavardant.” This is how Rosine has gotten useful information about others in their set.<sup>204</sup> They are unable to relax in their own home.

The parents in both works pass their class anxieties onto their daughters. While Francine enjoys increased freedom and revels in the glamorous clothing now within her grasp, Gabri, now called “Gabrielle,” must study for hours each day and is forbidden from leaving the house unless she is chaperoned. This state of constant surveillance is frustrating for Gabri but also helps her understand herself as an object, as a trophy for her mother, just another embellishment Francine can use to prove her wealth to others.

With the family’s newfound wealth, Gabri is made to look and act the part of a wealthy, well-bred girl. Her movements are restricted for propriety’s sake (though her mother comes and goes with Charles as she pleases), she has an English governess, and studies German with a private tutor. She is aware that she is being educated to satisfy her mother’s vanity:

Gabri — la malheureuse — devenait une jeune fille parfaitement élevée et instruite. Sa mère pouvait dire d’elle, avec un petit air flatté et négligent : « Oui, ma petite fille n’a pas quatorze ans, mais elle parle couramment l’anglais et l’allemand, et, ma foi, elle joue déjà très gentiment du piano, vous savez ? »<sup>205</sup>

Likewise, Antoinette in *Le Bal* lives under a heightened level of surveillance at home, and is also expected to become a symbol, through her education and perfect behavior, of the family’s social ascent. Antoinette’s parents expect her to “se taire et apprendre ses leçons, un point, c’est tout.”<sup>206</sup> Rosine’s surveillance of Antoinette reveals

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<sup>204</sup> Némirovsky, *Le Bal*, 363-4.

<sup>205</sup> Némirovsky, *L’Ennemie*, 276.

<sup>206</sup> Némirovsky, *Le Bal*, 361.

how threatening her daughter is to her and the family. Antoinette acts like a typical fourteen-year-old, resisting her mother's authority, but an episode where Rosine corrects her daughter's behavior highlights Rosine's insecurities about her social status. Rosine enters the room where her daughter is studying and becomes angry when Antoinette does not rise to greet her. She leaves and reenters the room, demanding that Antoinette properly greet her.<sup>207</sup> Her uncompromising treatment of Antoinette is due at once to personal pride and to feelings of social inferiority.

Rosine is especially concerned that Antoinette might reveal to the household staff where the family lived the previous year. Rosine instructs Antoinette to respond, if asked, that they came from the south. If anyone pushes the point, she is to say that they lived in Cannes ("c'est plus distingué").<sup>208</sup> Antoinette is also concerned about the opinion of the staff, but for her it is more a question of personal pride: she is repeatedly embarrassed when her mother scolds her or treats her like a child in front of the staff.<sup>209</sup>

While it oppresses them, attention to appearances also becomes a source of power for both girls. Gabri first tries to get revenge on her mother by writing a poison pen letter to her father revealing that her mother is having an affair with Charles. Though she does not succeed in sending the letter to her father, the fact that her mother believes her innocence and fires her governess at Gabri's command reveals to Gabri the power she has over others' lives. Further, as Margaret Scanlan points out, when she writes, Gabri aligns herself with larger social forces that have a real impact on Francine's life:

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., 357-8.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 359, 374.

Gabri, like the child Jane Eyre, always watching from the sidelines where no one notices her, is becoming powerful because she is a knowledgeable witness. Implicitly, she identifies with the morality of a middle-class society by which women like her mother, or Jane's harsh aunt and bullying cousin, are judged deficient. So even though she is a child, her correct observation aligns her with social forces that have real power outside the family; she need not remain helpless forever.<sup>210</sup>

Further, Gabri uses her awareness of her role as a symbol of her mother's wealth to her advantage in her quest for revenge. She acts out in an especially public way that could compromise the symbol of social success that her mother wants her to be: she begins to go regularly to dance halls with a rebellious friend who her mother has naively approved as a companion for Gabri because she has an impressive family name.

Gabri's big plan for revenge involves seducing Charles. But the problem with this plan is that Gabri takes her mother's place rather than working to develop her own identity. It is an act that affirms Gabri's agency and her sexual power as a young woman, but it blurs the line between Gabri and her mother.<sup>211</sup>

On the night that Gabri decides to consummate her relationship with Charles, officially committing to her betrayal of her mother, she waits for Charles in his room. But when Gabri sees her mother enter his room too, obviously with the same idea, Gabri retreats to the balcony and jumps to her death. This ending is abrupt and ambiguous.

Gabri's reaction to her mother's appearance in the room introduces the idea of patricide: she notices her mother's "visage ravagé, flétri; toutes ces meurtrissures, toutes ces rides semblaient lui crier : « Parricide, parricide. »"<sup>212</sup> Gabri's final thought is

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<sup>210</sup> Scanlan, 17.

<sup>211</sup> Scanlan, 18-9.

<sup>212</sup> Némirovsky, *L'Ennemie*, 350.

ambiguous. Olivier Philipponnat, the editor of Némirovsky's complete works, notes that the term "parricide" could equally refer to the killing of a father or a mother.<sup>213</sup> It is not clear if Gabri wants to harm her mother by killing herself, if she is afraid of harming her mother by revealing the relationship between herself and Charles (and so kills herself to save her mother this pain), or whether she sees herself becoming her mother and wants to kill that part of herself. By jumping, Gabri prevents the act of witnessing that would have really harmed her mother: the proof of Gabri and Charles' relationship. Gabri spares her mother this sight.

*Le Bal*, on the other hand, ends with a clearer victory for Antoinette through an important act of witnessing. Though her oversight is unintentional, Antoinette harms her mother deeply when she forgets that before throwing all of her mother's invitations in the Seine, she delivered one invitation to her gossiping piano teacher. Rosine's embarrassment would have been bearable had there not been a witness who would surely tell other influential families about this failure.

Antoinette is the other witness to her mother's embarrassment, as she hides behind a sofa to watch her mother unravel. Antoinette also imagines a day when she will tell men about this incident and laugh at her mother's humiliation. Margaret Scanlan asserts that in this moment, Antoinette succeeds in separating herself from her mother's decline in a way that Gabri does not.<sup>214</sup> Yet, Antoinette does not succeed in separating herself completely from her mother: the humiliation she has wrought on her family could affect her own chances in society. Further, even in her fantasy of a joke shared with a

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<sup>213</sup> Némirovsky, *L'Ennemie*, 350.

<sup>214</sup> Scanlan, 22.

future lover, Antoinette centers her mother's story. The life she imagines for herself is still wrapped up in defining herself against her mother.

As brutally critical as she is, Némirovsky does show some moments of sympathy toward her characters, especially acknowledging these women's loneliness, perhaps an inevitable part of a woman's experience that is accentuated as their wealth increases. Némirovsky proves particularly sympathetic to her characters when she moves away from upper-class Parisian, Jewish society, the environment in which she was raised.

For instance, Némirovsky takes a sympathetic view of Madeleine, the daughter of a well-off provincial bourgeois family, in a short story, *La comédie bourgeoise* (1934) one of a series of four short stories inspired by film.<sup>215</sup> The work begins with a dinner party at which Madeleine meets the man her family has arranged for her to marry. This is a story of Madeleine learning to uncomplainingly accept the life that has been laid out for her. What follows is an unfulfilling life during which Madeleine literally walks along the same path through town every day, first alone, then with her children. Despite Madeleine's obvious dissatisfaction with this life, she lies to her daughter who, as an adolescent, asks Madeleine if she ever wanted anything different. In a heartbreaking moment, Madeline tells her daughter no, and that her daughter will not feel so bored if she busies herself practicing piano. At the end of the story, Madeleine's (now grown) children find a level of freedom and fulfillment that she never pushed for herself, and

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<sup>215</sup> As Olivier Philipponnat notes, Némirovsky does not seem to have had any real hopes to turn these *Films Parlés*, which she published as a collection in 1934, into films. Rather, she saw interpreting characters' emotions through that which was visible externally as a compelling writing challenge. As Philipponnat points out, though, Némirovsky cannot help slipping into her characters' minds in these short stories. (Némirovsky, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:1019-22)

Némirovsky shows Madeleine's children's resentment of their mother, who has become a burden to them.

Némirovsky's compassionate view of a woman's limited life in the provinces takes place in exactly the same *milieu* François Mauriac chooses for his works. While Némirovsky shows sympathy for a woman who allows provincial conventions to define her, Mauriac provides a complex, sympathetic portrait of a woman who rebels against those norms.

**“On l’a fait disparaître”: Silencing the Individual in *Thérèse Desqueyroux***

Mauriac's *Thérèse Desqueyroux* tells the story of a young woman from a well-off family in the Landes, where the economy revolves around lumber. The novel opens on Thérèse as she leaves the courthouse in Bordeaux: the young woman will not be tried for the attempted murder of her husband because her husband has testified in her favor. On the train ride home, Thérèse plans the confession she will give her husband when she returns home. She thinks over her adolescence and marriage. Thérèse's memories of her life make up almost half of the short novel.

Though this novel begins with what seems like a liberation and a moment of family solidarity, things quickly change. When Thérèse gets home, she is told that her husband's testimony was just meant to avoid a scandal that could interfere with the engagement of Anne de la Trave, Thérèse's sister-in-law, an alliance that would enable two powerful families from the region to consolidate their wealth and influence. Thérèse will be imprisoned within the family home, unable to see her daughter, and in order to keep up an appearance of family harmony, Thérèse will go each week to the market and

to church with her husband. During her imprisonment, Thérèse allows herself to deteriorate physically. Shocked at her appearance after only a few weeks, her in-laws agree to let her move to Paris once Anne is safely married.

This novel was based in part on real criminal cases from the first decade of the twentieth century. Scholars have identified two main sources of inspiration for the Thérèse character. One is the 1906 trial of Henriette Canaby, who attempted to poison her husband. Mauriac was present at Canaby's trial and later wrote in his 1933 essay, "Le romancier et ses personnages," "Entre plusieurs sources, il y a certainement eu la vision que j'eus, à dix-huit ans, d'une salle d'assises, d'une maigre empoisonneuse entre deux gendarmes. Je me suis souvenu des dépositions des témoins ; j'ai utilisé une histoire de fausses ordonnances dont l'accusée s'était servie pour se procurer les poisons. Et là s'arrête mon emprunt direct à la réalité."<sup>216</sup> Another case that may have served as inspiration for Thérèse was that of Blanche Monnier, a provincial socialite locked in a cramped, squalid room for over 25 years by her mother, who opposed her daughter's choice of husband. This imprisonment came to light in 1901, and years after this case was tried, André Gide collected documents from the original police investigation and coverage of the trial in a work called *La Séquestrée de Poitiers*, which he published as an independent pamphlet in 1930 and in the volume *Ne Jugez pas* (1930), which also collected Gide's notes from his two weeks as a juror in the Assize court of Rouen as well as some notes on *faits divers*.

As Mauriac published these various works about Thérèse, there was a great interest in crimes committed in the domestic sphere by women. A few years after

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<sup>216</sup> Cited by Jean-Charles Gonthier, *L'Affaire Canaby: la vraie Thérèse Desqueyroux*, (Éditions des Écrivains: 2000), 7.



Mauriac published *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, two such crimes received an immense amount of media attention: on February 2, 1933, two maids, the Papin sisters, violently murdered their employer and her daughter. Just over a month later, on March 23, 1933, Violette Nozière (sometimes spelled Nozières) poisoned her parents, killing her father and nearly killing her mother. Both cases sparked a significant amount of creative work in different fields. There were films based on each crime, as well as a play based on the Papin Affair.<sup>217</sup> The Surrealists also published a collection of poetry about Violette Nozière in 1933.

It was years before Mauriac transformed Henriette Canaby and Blanche Monnier into his fictional heroine. In total, Mauriac would write four works about Thérèse: *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, *Thérèse chez le docteur* (1933), *Thérèse à l'hôtel* (1933), and *La Fin de la nuit* (1935). She also appears briefly in a chapter of *Ce qui était perdu* (1930). I discuss the later incarnations of Thérèse in more detail below. Sensationalistic press coverage of such cases could not do what Mauriac was able to do through fiction, bringing readers inside characters' heads to understand the social pressures they face and their complex motives for their crimes. From these real tragedies, Mauriac constructs a modern response to *Madame Bovary*, with his provincial woman doing everything she can to self-actualize. Even the novel's title resists the pessimism of Flaubert's masterpiece: whereas Emma becomes one of three Madame Bovarys, Thérèse retains her first and maiden names in the title of her novel.

Like many of Mauriac's other works, *Thérèse Desqueyroux* immerses readers in the hypocritical Catholicism and morality of the wealthy, landed bourgeoisie in the

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<sup>217</sup> See Rachel Edwards and Keith Reader, *The Papin Sisters*.

provinces of southwest France, where he was from. He shows how an obsession with money and status (the legal functions of the family, namely inheritance) have degraded the bourgeois family and prevent it from being the source of social and spiritual stability that it could be. Thérèse rebels against this dangerous conformity, first trying to harm her husband and then harming her own body in an act that subverts the ideal of self-sacrificing motherhood. Mauriac shows that protecting this stability involves silencing those, like Thérèse, who would threaten it: her family conspires to hide crime and hostility within the walls of the family home, a crime just as violent as Thérèse's act. In this novel, acts of rebellion and repression are all the domain of women.

### *Conformity*

From the beginning, Mauriac describes Thérèse as an outsider. She feels she does not belong in her husband's world. She feels superior to those around her because she is intelligent and curious and refers to people like her husband as "la race aveugle, [...] la race implacable des simples."<sup>218</sup> Thérèse could also be read as a queer character. Thérèse appears most comfortable in a space that is coded masculine, excelling in discussions about business. And Mauriac's depiction of the relationship between Thérèse and Anne de la Trave hints at romantic attachment.<sup>219</sup>

Like the pine forest, by turns a reassuring source of power and a prison, conformity is both a source of comfort and a source of oppression. As Thérèse reflects on

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<sup>218</sup> François Mauriac, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, in *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes*, ed. Jacques Petit (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 2:34.

<sup>219</sup> Thérèse's queerness is particularly interesting in light of Jean-Luc Barré's recent biography of Mauriac, in which he discusses the author's homosexuality and how important that was in Mauriac's own feeling of estrangement from his provincial community. See Jean-Luc Barré, *François Mauriac: biographie intime*, (Paris: Fayard, 2009).

her relationship with Bernard, she remembers how she felt when she and Bernard decided they would marry. She was excited that things were falling into place, that she was doing what was expected of her (“Tout le pays les mariait parce que leurs propriétés semblaient faites pour se confondre”<sup>220</sup>), and she thought of her marriage at that time as a refuge:

“Jamais elle ne parut si raisonnable qu’à l’époque de ses fiançailles : elle s’incrétait dans un bloc familial, « elle se casait » ; elle entraît dans un ordre. Elle se sauvait.”<sup>221</sup>

Mauriac’s word choice with “s’incruster” and “se caser” insists on the real constraint Thérèse will find in marriage.

Further, the point of view of this same passage jumps between Thérèse’s thoughts and the perspectives of others (other members of the community gossiping about Thérèse, perhaps). The choice of “parut” indicates that others might be observing her and approving of her behavior. The quotation later in the passage (« elle se casait ») could also come from an outside observer. Thérèse’s sense of self is inseparable from the expectations of those around her.

The harm this emphasis on conformity can cause for members of the community becomes clear in a conversation between Thérèse and Jean Azévêdo, a neighbor whose family is ostracized because they are Jewish. Jean and Thérèse discuss individuation (what Jean and his classmates in Paris seek above all else: “devenir soi-même”) and the repression that is the norm in the Landes. This conversation between outsiders is revealing. Jean tells Thérèse:

Regardez, me disait-il, cette immense et uniforme surface de gel où toutes les âmes ici sont prises ; parfois une crevasse découvre l’eau noire : quelqu’un s’est débattu, a disparu ; la croûte se reforme... car chacun, ici

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<sup>220</sup> Mauriac, *Thérèse Desqueyroux*, 31.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

comme ailleurs, naît avec sa loi propre ; ici comme ailleurs, chaque destinée est particulière ; et pourtant il faut se soumettre à ce morne destin commun ; quelques-uns résistent : d'où ces drames sur lesquels les familles font silence. Comme on dit ici : « Il faut faire le silence. »<sup>222</sup>

Because of his outsider status, Jean is able to see the other families clearly and help Thérèse see how they operate.

This pressure to quash potentially scandalous behavior is specifically critiqued as an attack on the individual. Talking to Jean, Thérèse comes to understand that this has happened to some of her family members. She tells Jean, “Parfois je me suis enquis de tel grand-oncle, de telle aïeule, dont les photographies ont disparu de tous les albums, et je n’ai jamais recueilli de réponse sauf, une fois, cet aveu: « Il a disparu... on l’a fait disparaître. »”<sup>223</sup>

### *Silencing and imprisonment*

On one level, Thérèse’s silence is literal: when she returns to Saint-Clair, her whole confession “s’effondre.” As soon as she is back in her hometown, Thérèse loses momentum and realizes she is indifferent about her confession. Bernard is also not interested in hearing anything from Thérèse. When Thérèse first sees Bernard, she asks him to let her escape: she will be happy disappearing into the forest and living on her own. But Bernard cuts her off: “Vous osez avoir un avis ? émettre un vœu ? Assez. Pas

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 61-2.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 62.

un mot de plus. Vous n'avez qu'à écouter, qu'à recevoir mes ordres, — à vous conformer à mes décisions irrévocables."<sup>224</sup>

Even more frustrating to Thérèse is the realization that even if she were to speak, Bernard would not understand. When Thérèse sees Bernard, she realizes that he is not the man she imagined speaking to while she was on the train:

La seule approche de cet homme avait réduit à néant son espoir de s'expliquer, de se confier. [...] Durant tout ce voyage, elle s'était efforcée, à son insu, de recréer un Bernard capable de la comprendre, d'essayer de la comprendre ; — mais, du premier coup d'œil, il lui apparaissait tel qu'il était réellement, celui qui ne s'est jamais mis, fût-ce une fois dans sa vie, à la place d'autrui ; qui ignore cet effort pour sortir de soi-même, pour voir ce que l'adversaire voit.<sup>225</sup>

The reconciliation is over and Thérèse already sees herself as Bernard's "adversaire."

Mauriac resists the silencing of Thérèse at the level of the text by using free-indirect discourse to convey Thérèse's thoughts.

As with the Rosenthals in *La Conspiration*, the solution this family has found is to absorb crime within the family home to prevent scandal. Thérèse's punishment will further silence her and make her valuable only for her visibility. Though she will be locked in her room, she will protect the family's influence and wealth by making public appearances with her husband and his family to prove how happy and unified they are. She becomes a sort of puppet that the family will use for financial and political gain: "Il importe, pour la famille, que le monde nous croie unis et qu'à ses yeux, je n'aie pas l'air de mettre en doute votre innocence."<sup>226</sup> Bernard tells his wife, "vous n'êtes plus rien ; ce

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 78.

qui existe, c'est le nom que vous portez, hélas."<sup>227</sup> A family's name and reputation are clearly more important than the lives of the individuals that make up that family.

Thérèse's father approves of his daughter's imprisonment. A politician preparing for an upcoming election, he relies on his daughter maintaining a flawless reputation. He even refuses Thérèse's request to stay with him or for him to stay with her after the trial, explaining that any change to normal appearances will look suspicious.

Bernard, unlike Thérèse, has done what is expected of him, erasing his own will for the good of the family: "Je ne cède pas à des considérations personnelles. Moi, je m'efface : la famille compte seule. L'intérêt de la famille a toujours dicté toutes mes décisions. J'ai consenti, pour l'honneur de la famille, à tromper la justice de mon pays. Dieu me jugera."<sup>228</sup> Here, Bernard opposes the law of the family to the law of the nation, placing the law of the family above that of the nation. He depicts his duty to the family as heroic, a selfless sacrifice. And he suggests that the law of the family may be sanctioned by God.

Bernard's reflection on this confrontation with his wife reveals how the whole family has gotten involved to orchestrate Thérèse's punishment. Bernard sees himself as succeeding in the difficult task of battling a dangerous monstrous force with order.

Bernard [...] connut une vraie joie ; cette femme qui toujours l'avait intimidé et humilié, comme il la domine, ce soir ! comme elle doit se sentir méprisée ! Il éprouvait l'orgueil de sa modération. Mme de la Trave lui répétait qu'il était un saint ; toute la famille le louait de sa grandeur d'âme : il avait, pour la première fois, le sentiment de cette grandeur. [...] ce soir, Bernard avait le sentiment de sa force ; il dominait la vie. Il admirait qu'aucune difficulté ne résiste à un esprit droit et qui raisonne juste [...] Le pire des drames, voilà qu'il l'avait *réglé* comme n'importe

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 78.

quelle autre affaire [...] Qu'y a-t-il d'humiliant à avoir épousé un monstre, lorsque l'on a le dernier mot ?<sup>229</sup>

In this passage, Mauriac shows how this family twists religious language and republican notions of duty and order to justify personal interests.

*Women silence women*

Even though Bernard communicates the terms of Thérèse's punishment, women appear again and again to be the real energetic force in the politics and economy of this community. "Les femmes de la lande sont très supérieures aux hommes qui, dès le collège, vivent entre eux et ne s'affinent guère ; la lande a gardé leur cœur ; ils continuent d'y demeurer en esprit ; rien n'existe pour eux, que les plaisirs qu'elle leur dispense."<sup>230</sup>

In this community, women control wealth. Thérèse brings her family's wealth and land to her marriage (indeed, she is even wealthier than her husband), and Madame de la Trave actively increases the wealth of her family by facilitating this marriage between her son and Thérèse and through the marriage she plans between her daughter, Anne, and the son of the Deguilhem family.

Madame de la Trave explains how she will handle any complications Thérèse might present, describing how Thérèse's grandmother was handled:

Elle n'a pas nos principes, malheureusement ; par exemple, elle fume comme un sapeur : un genre qu'elle se donne ; mais c'est une nature très droite, franche comme l'or. Nous aurons vite fait de la ramener aux idées saines. Certes, tout ne nous sourit pas dans ce mariage. Oui... la grand-mère Bellade... je sais bien... mais c'est oublié n'est-ce pas ? On peut à peine dire qu'il y ait eu scandale, tellement ç'a été bien étouffé.<sup>231</sup>

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid., 79-80.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 34-5.

Madame de la Trave clearly outlines a division between those who belong and those who do not. But the line between the two is not set in stone: someone can be shaped to conform. This of course also implies the opposite danger of others being corrupted by outsiders.

Early in her marriage, Thérèse must enact a similar repression on Anne de la Trave. Anne threatens to ruin her betrothal to the son of the Degueilheim family when she starts seeing Jean Azévédo in secret. The de la Trave family expects Thérèse, who is Anne's best friend, to bring Anne back in line: "Enfin l'essentiel était qu'elle ramenât la petite à la raison: « Mes parents comptent sur toi: tu peux tout sur elle... si... si !... Ils t'attendent comme leur salut. »"<sup>232</sup> Mauriac again describes this suppression as a battle: when Anne returns from her time away, she is described as "vaincue."<sup>233</sup>

Thérèse has complicated feelings about her role in Anne's story. She does not take Anne's side; rather, she feels jealous of this friend who has gotten to feel passion that Thérèse did not even know to look for. After reading Anne's description of her love in a series of letters, Thérèse's appearance reveals her awakened desire: "Thérèse leva les yeux et fut étonnée de sa figure dans la glace. Il lui fallut un effort pour desserrer les dents, avaler sa salive. Elle frotta d'eau de Cologne ses tempes, son front. « Elle connaît cette joie... et moi alors ? et moi ? pourquoi pas moi ? »"<sup>234</sup> Later conversations with Jean, though intended to convince Jean to leave Anne, give Thérèse a taste of a different

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 42.



life with someone who sees the world through a critical eye and through whom she can begin imagining a different kind of life in Paris.

### *Self-effacement*

Thérèse tries to find her identity by concretely affecting those around her, and then herself. She tries to explain that she poisoned her husband not out of any real desire to kill him, but rather “d’une curiosité un peu dangereuse à satisfaire.”<sup>235</sup> Later, when Bernard finally asks her why she did it, she has a different idea, though she realizes that there was not just one motive for her actions: “Il se pourrait que ce fût pour voir dans vos yeux une inquiétude, une curiosité — du trouble enfin.”<sup>236</sup> She wanted to break the perfect façade of order that Bernard and his family have worked so hard to construct.

Forced into imprisonment and invisibility, Thérèse explores the possibility of asserting her identity or coming into a strong sense of her individuality through an extreme form of self-effacement. Locked in her room, Thérèse finds the literal destruction of her body a way she can be in touch with herself. She refuses to eat, just smoking cigarette after cigarette. Her suffering gives her purpose, and it is a purpose that only affects her. Too despondent to close the window to her room, she lies in bed, challenging herself to see how long she can remain uncovered in the cold. “Sans que ce fût selon une volonté délibérée, sa douleur devenait ainsi son occupation et — qui sait ? — sa raison d’être au monde.”<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 92.

With everything taken from her, this physical destruction of her body is the only way Thérèse can resist her imprisonment. And it works: when her husband and in-laws return after a few weeks away, they are frightened by her appearance and Bernard agrees to let her go after Anne's marriage.

Mauriac compares Thérèse's self-effacement to that of other women in this community, who disappear behind their identities as wives and mothers. Anne is upset that Thérèse seems completely indifferent to her own child, and Thérèse reflects on how different their understandings of selfhood are. Thérèse is entirely focused on herself, while Anne waits to let her identity be defined by external circumstances:

Elle ne comprendrait pas que je suis remplie de moi-même, que je m'occupe tout entière. Anne, elle, n'attend que d'avoir des enfants pour s'anéantir en eux, comme a fait sa mère, comme font toutes les femmes de la famille. Moi, il faut toujours que je me retrouve ; je m'efforce de me rejoindre [...] Les femmes de la famille aspirant à perdre toute existence individuelle. C'est beau, ce don total à l'espèce ; je sens la beauté de cet effacement, de cet anéantissement... Mais moi, mais moi...<sup>238</sup>

By destroying her body, Thérèse removes herself from the narrative of maternal sacrifice and of the reproduction of wealth.

The novel's conclusion offers a different kind of disappearance: Thérèse disappears into the anonymity of a Paris street. But this ending does not represent a complete freedom: Thérèse must still be prepared to return home for important family events to play the part of the happy wife.

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 97.

*The Thérèse sequels*

Together, the three works that follow the 1927 novel paint a picture of a woman increasingly suffering from mental illness and desperate for human connection, isolated from her family by her crime. Thérèse feels oppressed and becomes increasingly paranoid over the course of these works, and her physical appearance declines rapidly, reflecting these internal changes. Thérèse never mentions feeling guilt for her actions; rather, she suffers from what she dubs her imprisonment. Her family makes it impossible for her to truly move past her actions; she is unable to escape the identity of *empoisonneuse*.

The three sequels to *Thérèse Desqueyroux* were published starting six years after the first novel. Mauriac published two short stories in the weekly literary journal, *Candide*. *Thérèse chez le docteur* appeared on January 12, 1933 and *Thérèse à l'hôtel* on August 31, 1933. Finally, another novel, *La Fin de la nuit*, followed in 1935. The tone of both of the short stories is very different from the tone of the original novel. *Thérèse chez le docteur* places the reader completely outside of Thérèse's mind: we are in the position of Catherine, the doctor's wife, listening through the door as a mysterious woman (Thérèse) arrives for a late-night appointment with her husband. With this voyeuristic setup, Mauriac plays on the curiosity that his readers surely feel to see Thérèse after all these years. During this conversation, Thérèse gives hints of the life she has led in Paris. She joined the same social set as Jean Azévédo, spending time socializing at clubs. She and Jean even had a romantic relationship for a time. Thérèse describes telling another man about how she poisoned her husband. In a soapy twist, this man, Phili, a loathsome

character who first appears in *Le Nœud de vipères* is trying to convince Thérèse to poison someone for him.

Thérèse also describes how her family's perception of her impacts her relationship with her daughter, Marie: she sees her daughter for one week every year, takes her to places like the circus. But she is under strict regulations: she must meet with Marie at least five hundred kilometers from Bordeaux and Marie's *institutrice* accompanies them everywhere to ensure that Thérèse cannot harm her daughter:

Son institutrice l'amène dans un endroit que je désigne d'avance, mais qui doit être au moins à cinq cents kilomètres de Bordeaux : c'est une exigence de mon mari. Jours affreux : j'ignore si la petite connaît l'accusation qui pèse sur moi, en tout cas je lui fais peur. L'institutrice s'arrange toujours pour que ce ne soit pas moi qui leur verse à boire... Vous comprenez : je suis capable de tout.<sup>239</sup>

Playing on the reader's curiosity, Mauriac withholds a physical depiction of Thérèse until a couple of paragraphs from the end. When Catherine does finally break into her husband's office and see Thérèse, her appearance is shocking:

L'inconnue regardait Catherine. Elle enleva sa toque et découvrit un front trop vaste, des cheveux coupés, pauvres et rares, déjà grisonnants : ni poudre ni rouge n'apparaissait sur les joues creuses, sur ces lèvres ravalées, sur ces pommettes. La peau jaune tournait au marron sous les yeux.<sup>240</sup>

Mauriac creates an interesting parallel between Thérèse and Catherine, who clearly has a strained, somewhat abusive relationship with her husband. At the end of the story, Thérèse's actions actually help Catherine see that she does not love her husband. Catherine rushes into the examination room after her husband cries out. He huddles

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<sup>239</sup> François Mauriac, *Thérèse chez le docteur*, in *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes*, 3:13.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

behind his desk, believing that Thérèse has pulled a gun out of her purse, but she is actually just holding a prescription. The story ends with Catherine laughing at her husband after she sees his cowardice: “Il m’a fallu vingt années... Mais enfin, c’est fini ! Je suis délivrée. Elis, je ne t’aime plus.”<sup>241</sup> Her laughter is the first eruption of her newfound freedom. Like Thérèse in the 1927 novel, this woman realizes that she has been holding on to an image of her husband that she has constructed.

In *Thérèse à l’hôtel*, the point of view makes a marked shift back to the introspection of the 1927 novel. This short story is told in first person narration, and Thérèse even writes her own story now. She cuts in after a description of herself: “Je relis ce que je viens d’écrire : aucun doute que je ne trouve une satisfaction à cette image de moi-même. Au fond, ne suis-je pas la prisonnière d’un rôle ? d’un personnage ?”<sup>242</sup> Thérèse may interrogate her social role here — as a mother and a wife — or perhaps the role in which her actions have cast her: she is dangerous, a poisoner, a criminal. This question also winks at Thérèse’s existence as a literary character.

In this story, Thérèse stays at a hotel after her lover, Phili, commits suicide. Though Thérèse again finds herself alone, this suicide has relieved her from the pain of unrequited love as well as her anxiety that in their investigations of Phili’s crime, the police and (more importantly) journalists would discover her.<sup>243</sup> Thérèse first begins in a vein that seems to reveal much of her character from the original novel. She reflects on

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>242</sup> François Mauriac, *Thérèse à l’hôtel*, in *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes*, 3:59.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 60.

her indifference toward Phili's death, as well as the difference she feels between herself and other women:

Je ne m'ennuie pas avec moi-même. C'est peut-être ce qu'il y a de plus inhumain en moi, que cette curiosité. Une complaisante défaillance du souvenir permet à la plupart de vivre en paix. Tout s'efface, pour eux, de ce qu'ils ont tissé dans la trame de leur vie. Les femmes, surtout, sont une espèce sans mémoire ; c'est ce qui leur assure, à travers toutes les horreurs, ces yeux d'enfants : ils n'ont rien reflété de ce qu'elles ont commis. Sur ce point, je ne ressemble pas aux autres femmes.<sup>244</sup>

She sees herself as wild: "Les femmes bêtes deviennent des bêtes dès qu'elles ne sont plus tenues en laisse par la famille, par les conventions."<sup>245</sup>

However, this unleashing from family expectations has not led to real freedom, but rather to a simultaneous feeling of wandering and imprisonment: "c'est moi qui vivrai, désormais, dans cette prison de mon crime inutile. Rejetée au néant par ma prétendue victime, par ma famille. Moi, la créature la plus errante qui soit au monde et la plus abandonnée."<sup>246</sup> Her whole identity is reduced to the single act of poisoning: "Mes actes m'emprisonnent. Mes actes ? Non, mon « acte. »"<sup>247</sup>

But then in an unexpected change of tone, our heroine fixes all of her attention on an eighteen- or nineteen-year-old boy eating with his family near her in the hotel restaurant. She becomes obsessed with gaining this young man's attention. She succeeds and tells him her story, an act of creation that provides some relief from her feeling of despair.

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<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

Two years after he published these short stories, Mauriac published *La Fin de la nuit*, which picks up fifteen years after Thérèse's murder attempt. Thérèse appears much older than her forty-five years here: she suffers from her imprisonment at the hands of her family, is becoming increasingly paranoid, and wishes to die but cannot find the courage to end her life. Mauriac did not conceive of this novel as a sequel to *Thérèse Desqueyroux*. He did not intend for this "portrait d'une femme à son déclin" to portray the same Thérèse as his earlier works.<sup>248</sup> This novel provides an answer to the question of why Thérèse poisoned her husband, but the question of Thérèse's agency has no place here: Mauriac's answer relates to the forces of evil or insanity.

Marie comes to Paris to stay with her mother because she has fallen in love with a young man who studies in Paris, paralleling Anne de la Trave's ill-fated affair with Jean Azévédo years before. The reasons for Thérèse's isolation from the family have been hidden from Marie. These two women have found each other in their resistance to the family's oppressive tactics and it seems like this reconciliation might be a very positive thing.

Thérèse invites Georges, Marie's love, over to help them out but Georges falls in love with Thérèse. Thérèse tries to convince Georges to stay with Marie and then puts her energy into trying to reunite the two young people. Georges and Marie get married, though Georges does not love her, and the novel ends with the painful death of Thérèse.

Mauriac sets out with a clear ideological message about the hypocrisy of these Catholic families in the provinces, but he is obviously interested in the complexities of this character. Paul Nizan remarked on this tension in Mauriac's work, between dwelling

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<sup>248</sup> Preface to *La Fin de la nuit*, in *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes*, 3:1012.

on and bringing out the complexities of human life and writing a novel with a Catholic lesson. In his review of *La Fin de la Nuit*, Nizan describes Mauriac's Catholicism as an obstacle to his writing. Mauriac keeps trying to affirm his religious message, but it rings false amid his complex psychological portraits of his characters: "Mauriac est un grand romancier que ses limites étouffent. Il voudrait affirmer Dieu partout, mais il ne le peut jamais que dans une conclusion en trompe-l'oeil, conclusion parfois rejetée, comme dans ce livre."<sup>249</sup> Indeed, Mauriac did have a different conclusion to Thérèse's story in mind, in which she found religion, but he discarded this conclusion to *La Fin de la Nuit* because he had trouble envisioning it.<sup>250</sup> The novel instead ends with the agony.

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Together, *L'Ennemie*, *Le Bal*, and *Thérèse Desqueyroux* do not show an ideal image of motherhood, but rather broken relationships between women, strained by social expectations. Both authors show women who are taught that their value lies in their ability to solidify their family's social status. They explore the possibilities that daughters have to use this conception of their role to fight back from within oppressive structures. While individualistic acts allow for symbolic victories, they also isolate the women who undertake them.

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<sup>249</sup> Nizan, *Pour une nouvelle culture*, 77.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-7.



### Chapter 3

#### The Ties that Bind

In this chapter, we turn to sibling relationships in Colette's *Le Toutounier* (1938), Roger Martin du Gard's *Les Thibault* (1922-1940), and François Mauriac's *Le Nœud de vipères* (1933). In all of these works, siblings are united by their shared experience of difficult childhoods, sometimes of difficult relationships to their parents. A theme that emerges is that even in the most unloving household, siblings share a deep understanding of one another because of their shared upbringing. Despite the empathy possible between siblings, the family traits and childhood habits that siblings share interfere with their ability to support and nurture one another as adults.

In *Le Toutounier*, the memory of past separation and an inability and unwillingness to move beyond childhood dynamics prevents the Eudes sisters from providing one another the emotional support they need as adults. In *Les Thibault*, the challenge preventing the Thibault brothers from growing together is the pride they inherited from their father and a tendency to incorrectly assume that they see the world in the same way because they are brothers. Mauriac is less interested in individual actions and personality traits. He condemns the family as a legal and economic institution as inevitably harmful to relationships among family members.

#### **“Leur code particulier”:** sisterhood in *Le Toutounier*

Colette's novella *Le Toutounier*, published in *Paris-Soir* from June to July 1938, tells the story of Alice Eudes, who travels to Paris to stay with two of her sisters after her husband commits suicide. This novella is the sequel to *Duo* (1934), which details the

tumultuous final days of Alice's marriage to Michel, during which Michel finds out that Alice has been having an affair with a colleague of his and struggles to come to grips with his wife's betrayal. That work concludes with Michel's death.

Alice's return to her childhood home, where two of her sisters still live, is comforting at first, but it quickly becomes clear that there is a good deal of distance between the sisters. For Alice, who left home years ago when she got married, this reunion with her sisters is a realization that the family is not the solid unit it was when she left. This distance is due on the one hand to the sisters' romantic relationships as well as to the tone of the relationship they established with one another in childhood. The sisters' idiosyncratic code of behavior and their personal language form the basis of their strong bond, but they also prevent the sisters from being open with one another and supporting each other through emotional challenges in adulthood.

Daughters of a musician, the Eudes sisters are all creative and, having grown up without much money, they have had to become independent from a young age. In *Duo*, Michel describes the sisters as "ces quatre filles alertes, ingénieuses, pauvres avec élégance, dénuées d'humilité."<sup>251</sup> He thinks of the Eudes as

une famille accablée de filles qui se savaient lourdes, qui se battaient rageusement pour vivre. Une des trois sœurs d'Alice jouait du violon, le soir, dans un cinéma, une autre, mannequin chez Lelong, se nourrissait de café noir. Alice dessinait, coupait des robes, vendait quelques idées de décoration et d'ameublement. « Les Quat' z' arts », comme on les appelait, formèrent un quatuor médiocre, piano et cordes, et jouèrent dans une grande brasserie qui fit faillite.<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> Colette, *Duo*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 3:925.

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid*, 924-5.

They have something special, even if they are not particularly beautiful or feminine or talented. And this special quality really shines through when they are together.

Though in some ways the sisters are opposites — Colombe, the oldest, is masculine and cynical, while the youngest, Hermine, who dyes her hair blonde, is naïve and fragile — they all bear a striking resemblance to one another. As they get ready to leave the house together after Alice moves back home, they echo one another's mannerisms:

Elles se bousculèrent dans l'étroit cabinet de toilette, creusèrent le ventre, rentrèrent la croupe pour circuler entre le lavabo et la baignoire de zinc repeinte dix fois, se délassèrent en propos inutiles. À tour de rôle elles outrèrent le rouge de leurs lèvres, l'orange de leurs joues, grimacèrent identiquement pour vérifier l'éclat de leurs dents, enfin se ressemblèrent d'une manière banale et frappante. Mais elles cessèrent de se ressembler dès qu'elles eurent coiffé trois chapeaux différents. Elles eurent toutes trois le même geste infallible en inclinant sur l'œil droit le béret, le feutre usagé, le bonnet de laine verte. Colombe ne possédant pas de manteau moutarde, Alice noua sous son menton un gros foulard violet. Leurs mouvements, quand il s'agissait de parure, atteignaient le but avec virtuosité, utilisaient magistralement des couleurs et des tissus de rencontre.<sup>253</sup>

Though they assert their individuality in their dress, their mannerisms are so similar that these exaggerated movements and bold colors come together in a sort of harmony.

At the heart of the family home is a sofa, which the sisters call “le toutounier.” The “toutounier natal” is comforting in its solidity and in its sensual, human presence: “vaste canapé d'origine anglaise, indestructible, défoncé autant qu'une route forestière dans la saison des pluies. Un coussin vint à la rencontre de la nuque d'Alice. Son cuir était froid et doux comme une joue. Elle flaira le vieux maroquin tout imprégné de tabac

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<sup>253</sup> Colette, *Le Toutounier*, in *Œuvres*, 3:1228.

et d'un parfum de chevelures et lui donna un petit baiser."<sup>254</sup> The sofa serves as an escape for the sisters, evoking England, Morocco, an isolated path in a damp forest.

Now that they are adults, the comforting sofa with its human qualities is all the more important as it stands in for the mother and father they have lost. Colombe, who sleeps on the sofa at night so that Hermine can have the bedroom to herself, is always running her fingers across the *toutounier* as if it were a piano, mimicking her father's playing. Despite the human sensuality of the sofa and its centrality to the everyday lives of the sisters (it is a place to talk, to smoke, to sleep), it is sacrosanct: when Alice, joking, alludes to Colombe having sex on the sofa, Colombe objects violently, crying "j'aimerais mieux me mettre la ceinture toute la vie ! Notre toutounier si pur..."<sup>255</sup>

The women's name for the sofa is tied to a private language the sisters share, composed of words with a repetitive, musical cadence that recall the musical environment their father created for them in childhood: "guézézi," "ma lolie," "mon boudi"<sup>256</sup> are all pet names the sisters use to refer to one another. "Le Balabi" is the nickname the sisters have given Colombe's lover.

Like the other words the sisters compose, "toutounier" is a neologism that echoes other cozy, homey nicknames like "tata" (a term of affection for one's aunt) or "tonton" (a term of affection for one's uncle). It also evokes words that share the root "tou-" (tout, toujours, etc.), words that refer to togetherness, completeness. The sisters build their shared identity around this language: they call themselves "les toutounières" and speak

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid., 1218-9.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 1269.

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 1257.

with “le ton toutounier,” “ainsi elles nommaient une liberté invétérée de plaisanter sans rire, de n’éviter aucun sujet de conversation, de garder leur sang-froid presque en toutes circonstances, et de s’abstenir des larmes.”<sup>257</sup> This language allows openness and protects the sisters as they discuss difficult topics. The invented language and the ironic tone that accompanies it consolidate the intimacy between the sisters and serve as a source of collective strength that they can take with them even when they are not physically in this private space.

This shared language also offers the Eudes sisters creativity and freedom of expression that they as women are not necessarily afforded in public life or in their romantic relationships. Hermine is faced with a significant power imbalance in her relationship with the older, married man the sisters have dubbed “Monsieur Weekend.” Colombe suspects her youngest sister has even had to face legal consequences for her affair as the result of anonymous letters and blackmail: she believes Hermine has been summoned to the “commissaire aux délégations judiciaires [...] Là où on va se plaindre pour les scandales de famille et les... enfin les chantages...”<sup>258</sup> Though Colombe seems to be on a more equal playing field with her lover, Carrine (Balabi), she reveals that he is selling songs she has helped write without giving her credit: “sauf le refrain, la chanson est de moi... Elle est gentille.”<sup>259</sup> Colombe’s situation echoes that of Colette’s own experience ghost writing for her husband Willy.

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 1220.

<sup>258</sup> Ibid., 1243-4.

<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 1223.

Later, Alice tries to stay in her and Michel's own Paris apartment for the night and is compelled to return to the *toutounier*. She takes stock of her apartment and is shaken when she sees her husband's office, just as it was before his death. She leaves the apartment in a hurry, desperate to get back to the *toutounier*. "L'escalier, qu'elle éclaira, servit d'épreuve à ses genoux tremblants. « C'est presque fini... Encore un étage... Voilà c'est fini. » [...] Elle souriait, fourbue, et appelait machinalement : « Le toutounier... Le toutounier... »"<sup>260</sup> The sofa represents all of the comfort her sisters' presence and a return to her childhood home offers. On this night, Alice and Colombe spend the night on the sofa together.<sup>261</sup>

### *Obstacles to intimacy*

Despite the comforting familiarity of this return to the family apartment, Alice also encounters a great deal of tension at home, caused primarily by the sisters' relationships with men, which cause rifts in the family and are personally damaging to each of the sisters. The sisters' preoccupation with their relationships seems to be their typical pattern: Colombe muses, "Plus monogames que nous quatre, ça n'existe nulle part."<sup>262</sup>

On the one hand, the sisters' relationships threaten to divide the Eudes family. Both Alice and Bizoute created a rift within the family when they married and moved away. Because Bizoute is still away from home, this reunion between Alice, Colombe,

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 1238.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 1220.

and Hermine is incomplete. Moreover, upon her return, Alice is conscious that she is now an outsider in the relationship between Colombe and Hermine. She feels that she is bothering her sisters with her problems.<sup>263</sup> For their part, Colombe and Hermine are both distracted by their relationships with married men. Alice feels certain that Colombe and Hermine will soon leave home to live their own lives: “Ce qui va se décider ce soir, pensait Alice, ce n’est pas seulement le sort de ces deux amoureuses, mais aussi ma propre solitude. Car elles partiront, l’une et l’autre. Déjà elles partent... Nous ne résistons jamais à un homme. Il n’y a que dans la mort que nous ne le suivons pas...”<sup>264</sup>

At the same time, Alice also pulls away from her sisters because she feels that because she has married and left home and experienced the loss of her husband, she has lived more than them. She takes on a superior tone, judging her sisters: “Leur impatience... songeait Alice. Elles sont comme des brûlées. Elles sont comme de pauvres filles qui ont trente-cinq ans, vingt-neuf ans, qui sont faites pour n’échapper à rien, ni au bonheur, ni au malheur. Elles croient que toute leur vie s’engage aujourd’hui...”<sup>265</sup>

All of the “monogamous” relationships depicted in this work involve infidelity and all of the sisters have to sacrifice a part of themselves to have these relationships. For Alice and Bizoute, there is the painful departure from home. For Colombe and Hermine, monogamy means full, self-sacrificing commitment to a man who is unable to return that commitment. Though Alice and Michel were quite happy together, Alice admits in *Duo* that she cheated on Michel with a colleague of his named Ambrogio because Ambrogio

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 1264.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 1266.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 1267.

helped her connect with a part of her she had left behind: they shared an interest in the things she was interested in when she was younger, like music, that were not part of her relationship with Michel.<sup>266</sup>

The sisters have also built emotional restraint into their sisterhood since they were children, making them ill-equipped to help one another express and process their emotions. Though the “ton toutounier” allows the sisters to be open about any topic, the pressure to veil everything with an ironic distance ultimately prevents the sisters from nurturing one another. Along with the sisters’ private language, a “code particulier” characterizes the sisters’ relationship — “la convention de légèreté, de silence et d’ironie qui régissait leurs rapports.”<sup>267</sup> Though like the “ton toutounier,” this code unites the sisters, its rigidity ultimately prevents the women from supporting one another. This code is a caricature of bourgeois respectability: the sisters are not to talk about touchy subjects or show emotion: “leur code particulier leur interdisait l’effusion.”<sup>268</sup>

When the sisters come together on the sofa, they veil their conversations in so much irony that they end up speaking around or understating their problems. When Alice first arrives, she and Colombe talk about how Alice is coping with Michel’s death. The conversation remains very superficial and indirect. This is in part because Alice herself struggles to express her feelings about what has happened and does not want to dwell on her sadness, and partly because irony is the only way these sisters know to speak about a

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<sup>266</sup> Colette, *Duo*, 926.

<sup>267</sup> Colette, *Le Toutounier*, 1225.

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*



serious issue. When Alice asks Colombe how Hermine is, Colombe sarcastically responds, “Va bien... À peu près bien.”<sup>269</sup>

When in public, the code obligates the sisters to enforce “appropriate behavior.” The code and this language combine in a couple of scenes where the sisters either gain mastery over their own emotions or exert control over one another. For instance, while out at dinner with her sisters, Alice starts sinking into depressing thoughts, and she stops herself with a series of musical syllables and quotes from the sisters’ code: “Hé là, hé là, qu’est-ce que c’est que ces façons ? Pas d’histoires pendant qu’on mange, paragraphe III du code Toutounier. Paragraphe IV : jamais de discussions en public.”<sup>270</sup>

Likewise, when Hermine has a breakdown at a restaurant, her sisters do what they can to avoid a scene rather than showing sympathy for Hermine. Hermine begins sobbing, and Alice and Colombe ignore her to get her to stop, feeling a mix of concern and embarrassment. “Une pudeur fraternelle les détournait de la sœur atteinte, et elles s’abstinrent de la regarder comme si elle eût, en public, souffert du ventre ou saigné du nez.”<sup>271</sup> After Hermine stops crying, Alice offers a quick “Guézézi, guézézi” to encourage her sister, who remains visibly upset. Even the shared language of the *toutounières* is largely used to bring the sisters back to “proper,” unemotional behavior. Though the language holds sentimental meaning, it is not meaningful in itself: its main role is to prevent real vulnerability and even to encourage silence. Alice then thinks, “Avec appréhension, avec une sorte de répugnance, Alice songeait qu’il lui faudrait peut-

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid., 1220.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid., 1231.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid., 1232.

être forcer le silence de cette sœur blonde et dissimulée.”<sup>272</sup> It is a bit unclear whether Alice feels she needs to “force” her sister to be quiet because she feels it will help her sister calm down or just out of concern for appearances, but this violent language is nonetheless unexpected.

Though the novella ends with the three sisters sleeping on the *toutounier* together, imagining that Bizoute is there with them, this reunion is more a goodbye than anything else. The childhood home Alice returned to offered comforts in the shared challenges the sisters face, but it also showed her how irretrievable the past is. Colette also leaves her reader with a sense of what the sisters have not accomplished together: so outwardly strong and bold together, the Eudes sisters are limited in their ability to forge a deep emotional connection by the very language and behavior that form the basis of their sisterly bond.

### **L’élán des Thibault: Pride and brotherhood in *Les Thibault***

*Les Thibault* tells the story of Oscar Thibault and his two sons, Antoine and Jacques, from around 1904 to 1918. The eight volumes of this *roman-fleuve* were published from 1922 to 1940. Oscar Thibault is a strict Catholic who governs his family with authoritarian means, teaching his sons to fear him. Martin du Gard contrasts Oscar’s parenting style with the indulgent Protestantism of the Fontanins, a family that lives in the same orbit as the Thibaults: they vacation in the same place and Jacques strikes up a friendship with the Fontanin son, Daniel, and a romantic attachment with Jenny, Daniel’s

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 1232-3.

sister. The relationship between Antoine and Jacques, outside of their father's domineering presence, offers another possibility.

Martin du Gard follows Antoine and Jacques as they finish school and embark on their different career trajectories: Antoine, the older of the two, about twenty-one when the novel begins, follows a clear path to become a doctor. Though Monsieur Thibault is disappointed that Antoine rejects religious faith for faith in science, he approves of his son's ambition. Jacques, on the other hand, eleven when the novel begins, distresses his father and brother with his rebelliousness. As a child, Jacques and Daniel share a secret correspondence made up of poetry and love letters. When the notebook in which they exchange messages is found, raising concerns about a possible homosexual relationship, Jacques and Daniel run away together to Marseille, hoping to make it to North Africa. Antoine retrieves the boys and Oscar sends Jacques to a youth reform penitentiary he directs. After Jacques is released from the penitentiary into Antoine's care, he runs away again and starts a new life in Switzerland, where he makes a living as a journalist and eventually joins a group of communist revolutionaries. The brothers come back together twice more, once when their father dies, and again in the days before World War I begins.

### *An egalitarian home*

Brotherhood is first presented as an alternative to the father-son relationship that will be mutually beneficial for both brothers. The second volume of the series, *Le Pénitencier*, opens when Antoine begins to worry that he has not heard from his brother

in nine months and to suspect that the penitentiary where Monsieur Thibault has sent Jacques may be harmful to the boy.

At the “Fondation Oscar Thibault,” Antoine finds Jacques living in total isolation from the other boys and is subjected to constant surveillance. Moreover, Jacques is falling behind in his studies. Though he supposedly works with a tutor at this penitentiary, the tutor only spends about three or four hours per week with Jacques. After Antoine finds that Jacques is not, in fact, thriving in his provincial jail cell, the elder brother convinces his father to let him take over the care of Jacques.

Antoine uses Jacques’s education as his main argument when he tries to convince his father to bring Jacques back home. He describes the “oisiveté pernicieuse” that threatens Jacques’s future. Getting nowhere with his father, Antoine goes to the family’s confessor, and the other father figure in Antoine’s life, l’abbé Vécard, for guidance. He speaks “avec feu”: “j’ai tellement la conviction que ce petit a besoin d’une très grande liberté ! Qu’il ne se développera jamais dans la contrainte !”<sup>273</sup> Antoine tells Vécard what he did not dare tell his father: he plans to move out of his father’s home and take care of Jacques himself. In contrast with Oscar’s harsh parenting style, Antoine proposes to nurture his brother’s independent spirit by creating an environment of equity and openness.

When Vécard presents Antoine’s idea to Oscar, he does so in such a way as to allow Oscar to retain his sense of pride and paternal authority. Vécard explains that by sending Jacques to live with Antoine, Oscar will not only give Jacques the freedom

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<sup>273</sup> Roger Martin du Gard, *Les Thibault*, in *Œuvres complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 1:727.

necessary to quell his rebellious spirit; by putting Antoine in charge of the moral well-being of Jacques, Oscar will nudge Antoine back toward religion.<sup>274</sup>

When Jacques returns from Crouy, he and Antoine move out of their father's home and into a separate apartment on the ground floor of the same building. Here, Antoine will also develop some more professional autonomy: he will receive medical patients in two rooms of this new apartment. Though they have their own private space, the two young men are still well within the reach of their father's authority. They also dine with their father in his home each night.

Antoine does not present himself as a father to Jacques; rather, he explains that the two brothers will form one unit, helping each other reach their potential:

nous sommes deux frères. Ça n'a l'air de rien, et pourtant c'est une chose toute nouvelle pour moi, et très grave. Frères ! Non seulement le même sang mais les mêmes racines depuis le commencement des âges, exactement le même jet de sève, le même élan ! Nous ne sommes pas seulement deux individus, Antoine et Jacques : nous sommes deux Thibault, nous sommes les Thibault.<sup>275</sup>

Antoine sees in Jacques the same “combinaison exceptionnelle d'orgueil, de violence, d'obstination” that characterizes all of the Thibaults. With Antoine's help, Jacques will figure out how to harness what Antoine calls “l'élan des Thibault [...] cet élan intérieur qui te faisait dépasser tous les autres.”<sup>276</sup> Antoine explains, “il faut savoir en tirer parti [...] Voilà le moment de mesurer cette force en toi, de la connaître, de t'en servir.”<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Ibid., 1:739.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 1:763.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 1:764.

Vague as Antoine's pep talk is, it has the desired effect, motivating Jacques and reassuring him that he is going to be taken care of here. After his conversation with Antoine, Jacques cries for the third time on this difficult day of his homecoming "parce qu'on semblait de toutes parts vouloir l'aimer ; parce qu'on allait maintenant s'occuper de lui [...] parce que c'en était fini pour lui d'être tranquille."<sup>278</sup> This last line foreshadows the great difference between the brothers: for Antoine, the pursuit of greatness can only happen within established institutions: he respects Jacques's ambition to be a writer, but his main goal for this new life with his brother is to bring Jacques to academic excellence. For Jacques, the path to greatness is through disruption, through revolt.

But this difference in values is not immediately apparent. When Jacques returns from the penitentiary, his behavior is clearly altered: he keeps to himself, speaks little, and is uncomfortable going outside. Antoine considers his education of Jacques much like caring for a convalescent. He helps his younger brother gradually acclimate to his freedom: he starts giving Jacques little errands to run to get him out of the house.<sup>279</sup> He also works with some academic friends of his to develop a curriculum that will help Jacques make up for lost time and prepare to reenter school, but that will also be flexible enough to allow his brother to ease back into his studies.<sup>280</sup>

This freedom is in fact very beneficial for Jacques: "Jacques profitait, sans en abuser, de l'indépendance qui lui était accordée. D'ailleurs Antoine, sans le dire devant

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 1:765.

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 1:766.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 1:765-6.

son père, mais avec l'assentiment tacite de l'abbé Vécard, ne redoutait guère les inconvénients de la liberté. Il avait conscience que la nature de Jacques était riche, et qu'il y avait fort à gagner à la laisser se développer à sa guise et dans son propre sens."<sup>281</sup>

Antoine, in turn, feels empowered by his new responsibility: his commitment to educate Jacques "donnait enfin un but à son existence, jusqu-là désespérément vide, stérile."<sup>282</sup>

However, it quickly proves impossible for the brothers to remain completely open with one another, and for a reason that is not all that surprising with two young men living together: they fall for the same girl. Lisbeth, the concierge's young niece, comes to take care of her aunt and starts working as housekeeper to Antoine and Jacques. Jacques falls hopelessly in love with Lisbeth, who in the meantime has started having an affair with Antoine. The more experienced Antoine does not take his affair with Lisbeth terribly seriously, but after Lisbeth's departure, it becomes clear to Antoine that Jacques's feelings for this young woman were much stronger than he thought. Pitying his naïve brother, Antoine keeps his relationship with Lisbeth a secret.

This drama with Lisbeth leads to a big secret on Jacques's part: devastated that Lisbeth is gone, Jacques turns to Daniel for solace. Despite the promise Jacques made to Antoine and his father to cut ties with Daniel, Jacques takes back up a secret correspondence with his friend and plans to see him.<sup>283</sup> Once this hidden correspondence is brought to light, Antoine unfairly places all the blame for breaking their promise of honesty on Jacques, though he recognizes that he is avoiding making his own confession

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 1:766.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 1:758.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 1:776-81.

about Lisbeth, “un aveu qui l’eût gêné plus encore que son frère.”<sup>284</sup> Antoine reproaches Jacques: “Tu m’as trompé; à la première occasion, tu as rompu le pacte. Maintenant, c’est fini : jamais plus je ne pourrai avoir confiance en toi.”<sup>285</sup> In this moment, Antoine also gets the sense that he may not know his brother as well as he thought. When he sees how strongly Jacques reacts to Lisbeth’s departure, “Une fois de plus, il avait la révélation de ce feu caché sous la cendre, toujours prêt à s’embraser ; et il mesurait la vanité de ses prétentions éducatrices.”<sup>286</sup>

Against his father’s wishes, Antoine does take Jacques to see Daniel, though Jacques is not as desperate to see his friend as he lets on: “En réalité, Jacques n’y tenait pas autant qu’on aurait pu le penser. Il était encore trop sauvage pour souhaiter d’autres contacts, et l’intimité de son frère lui suffisait ; d’autant qu’Antoine s’efforçait de vivre avec lui sur un pied de simple camaraderie, sans rien qui pût marquer leur différence d’âge et moins encore l’autorité dont il avait été investi.”<sup>287</sup>

### *A new life*

It is not until years later that Antoine realizes how unhappy Jacques became while they were living together. After Jacques is accepted into the École Normale Supérieure, he runs away from home. Jacques is not heard from for three years, and his father believes he committed suicide. This is where *La Sorellina*, the fifth volume, published in

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid., 1:779.

<sup>285</sup> Ibid.

<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 1:775.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 1:767.



1928, opens. Oscar Thibault is seriously ill and Antoine hopes to find Jacques and bring him home to see his father before it is too late.

Antoine learns Jacques's whereabouts from Jalicourt, a professor and poet from whom Jacques sought advice when deciding whether to go to college or jet off on his own and try to make a living as a writer. Jalicourt tells Antoine that he advised Jacques to stay in school because Jacques has a strong enough will that school will not harm him: "L'École n'est fatale qu'aux timides et aux scrupuleux."<sup>288</sup>

Antoine finds Jalicourt when the professor sends a letter to Jacques (at Antoine's address) to congratulate him on a short story he has published under the pseudonym Jack Baulthy in a Swiss youth journal. The short story, *La Sorellina*, is inspired by Jacques's life. It centers on a young Italian man, Giuseppe, torn between his love for Sybil Powell, the daughter of an English Protestant family with whom Giuseppe is close (based on Jenny de Fontanin), and Annetta, Giuseppe's younger sister (based on Gise, the niece of Mademoiselle, Antoine and Jacques's old governess).

Once he realizes how personal the story is, Antoine skims it, looking for clues about Jacques's whereabouts as well as mentions of himself. Giuseppe does indeed have an older brother, Humberto. The portrait is not flattering: "Parfois, dans le regard de son aîné, Giuseppe a discerné l'effort d'une sympathie [...] d'une sympathie tarée d'indulgence. Mais, entre eux, dix ans, un abîme. Humberto se cachait de Giuseppe, qui mentait à Humberto." Antoine takes offense at this accusation that he makes only a effort at sympathy ("L'effort ? Ingrat !"). Antoine admits Jacques is right, though he is frustrated that Jacques is so bitter toward the family after so many years apart: "En gros,

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 1:1168.

tout cela, même ce qui concerne Humberto, est assez exact. Mais quel souffle de rancune ! Après trois ans de séparation, de solitude, trois années sans nouvelles des siens, faut-il que Jacques hâisse son passé, pour avoir de tels accents !”<sup>289</sup>

Antoine reads on: “Giuseppe aime son frère. Pas comme un frère. Comme un oncle qui pourrait devenir un ami. S’ils étaient seuls assez longtemps, peut-être Giuseppe parlerait-il. Leurs tête-à-tête sont rares et d’avance composés. Pas d’intimité possible avec Humberto.”<sup>290</sup>

This is not the first time the Thibaults try to define brotherhood through a comparison to another kind of relationship. When Jacques first comes home to live with Antoine in *Le Pénitencier*, Antoine compares Jacques to a mistress who he is bringing into a new home he bought for her: “Lorsqu’il fit entrer son frère dans leur appartement et qu’il referma la porte derrière eux, il avait l’âme en fête d’un amant qui fait à sa première maîtresse les honneurs d’un logis préparé pour elle seule.”<sup>291</sup>

Antoine tries to look for a specific cause for Jacques’s departure, and this allows him to remain in denial about how limited his relationship with his brother is. Antoine just thinks about how distant he was during the summer before Jacques’s departure because of his relationship with Rachel: “« Évidemment », se dit Antoine, en se rappelant l’été de 1910. « C’est à cause de Rachel, c’est ma faute. »”<sup>292</sup> It is true that Antoine was in his own world with Rachel during those months and that Antoine was with Rachel

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 1:1177-8.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 1:1181.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 1:758-9.

<sup>292</sup> Ibid., 1:1181.

when Jacques ran away. Antoine again reveals his superficial understanding of Jacques's behavior.

After contacting the journal that published *La Sorellina*, Antoine finds Jacques living in Lausanne, Switzerland, working as a writer. Antoine goes to bring his brother home and his relief and excitement to see his brother after three years are not matched by Jacques. Antoine gets emotional when he hears Jacques's voice and sees Jacques smiling, eating at his boarding house in Lausanne, engaged in a debate with some other young people and an older man. Jacques looks happy, intellectually stimulated, and mature.<sup>293</sup>

However, when their eyes meet, the spell is broken: "Ses yeux, hardis, joyeux, s'étaient fixés sur Jacques; et Jacques, les pupilles dilatées, les lèvres entrouvertes, regardait, lui aussi, son frère. Interrompu net au milieu d'une phrase, il conservait sur son visage pétrifié l'expression d'une gaieté dont ne subsistait que la grimace. Cela ne dura qu'une dizaine de seconds." Jacques moves quickly to keep his two lives separate. "Déjà Jacques s'était dressé, mû par cet unique souci : avant tout, donner le change, pas de scandale."<sup>294</sup>

The brothers' reunion is awkward. Antoine is overly cheerful and chatty, not asking Jacques the personal questions he really wants to ask "« Alors », fit Antoine, s'efforçant à une cordialité qui sonnait faux, « je m'assieds... Nous avons tant à nous dire ! » En réalité, il songeait surtout à questionner. Mais il n'osait pas. Afin de gagner du temps, il se lança dans un récit détaillé, et malgré lui technique, des diverses phases de la

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 1:1199-1200.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 1:1200.

maladie paternelle.”<sup>295</sup> Jacques gives Antoine a particularly chilly reception: “Et c’était lui, maintenant, dont l’accent frémissait, tandis que Jacques, ramassé dans son fauteuil, tendait vers le poêle une figure farouche qui semblait dire : « Père va mourir, tu viens m’arracher d’ici, c’est bien, je partirai, mais qu’on ne m’en demande pas plus. »”<sup>296</sup>

Jacques appears to let his guard down a couple of times, feeling touched when his brother calls him “mon petit” and letting a little smile slip when Antoine mentions hearing their father and Mademoiselle singing a song they remember from childhood.<sup>297</sup> But he grieves the loss of something bigger than Antoine can understand: the distance he has established between himself and his family, this new life he has built. This life is the first thing he has really created for himself. He is upset to see his hard work undone in an instant: “Pensait-on que la mort de son père pouvait l’atteindre dans cette vie toute neuve qu’il s’était faite, le débucher de son refuge, changer quoi que ce fût aux motifs qui avaient exigé sa disparition?”<sup>298</sup> Jacques starts sobbing when he realizes that his “bel isolement” is finished:

Il lui semblait voir crouler cet abri que, depuis trois ans, il s’était construit de ses mains, pierre à pierre, dans la peine, dans l’orgueil, dans sa solitude ; il conservait assez de sagacité, dans ce désarroi, pour regarder la fatalité en face, pour comprendre que toute résistance finirait par échouer, qu’on obtiendrait tôt ou tard son retour, que son bel isolement, sinon sa liberté, avait pris fin, et qu’il valait mieux composer avec l’irréparable ; mais cette impuissance le faisait suffoquer de douleur et de dépit.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 1:1204.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 1:1204.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 1:1201.

<sup>299</sup> Ibid., 1:1202.

What Antoine might see as something purely destructive — Jacques has cut ties to his past and isolated himself — is a creative act to Jacques. This isolation, on Jacques's terms, served to replace the months spent imprisoned in Crouy.

Though the relationship between Antoine and Jacques promised to be this new, free space where Jacques could be what he wanted to be and reach his full potential, the apartment on the ground floor of his father's home is completely wrapped up in the values and assumptions of the father's home. Antoine could not understand what a radical break Jacques needed to make from his father's home to explore his own identity.

### *Inheritors*

In *L'Été 1914*, the brothers come back together for the first time after their father's death. Antoine has taken over his father's home and adopted a bourgeois lifestyle. He focuses on medical research, which he conducts out of a laboratory he has built in the Thibault home. As tensions build toward World War I, Jacques, now a revolutionary in Geneva, is sent to Paris on a mission to support the communist anti-war effort. Against this backdrop of chaos, the brothers seek each other's company, but they have trouble communicating effectively.

Jacques has not seen his brother since their father's death, but given the seriousness of the political situation, he decides, after some hesitation, to visit Antoine. When they see each other, Jacques is “envahi soudain par une de ces vagues de tendresse fraternelle qui le soulevaient, malgré tout, chaque fois qu'il retrouvait Antoine en chair et en os, son visage énergique, son front carré, sa bouche...”<sup>300</sup> Though Jacques does not

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<sup>300</sup> Martin du Gard, *Les Thibault*, 2:117-8.

approve of Antoine's resemblance to their father, the brothers' shared history provides a brief escape from historical events. The brothers find common ground, laughing about their father's secretary, "Pendant une minute, leurs rires sonnèrent à l'unison. Ils retrouvaient, pour un instant, leur terrain fraternel, inaliénable."<sup>301</sup>

But each time they are together, the situation turns tense. For one thing, Jacques and Antoine have trouble getting a moment alone: the team of medical researchers working with Antoine tend to linger at his house after their work is done, arguing about the war. Jacques is frustrated that this lack of privacy forces him to delay giving Antoine updates about his life, such as his decision to donate his inheritance to the Communist International for the anti-war effort or his newly rekindled relationship with Jenny de Fontanin: 'il lui déplaisait de paraître se cacher d'Antoine.'<sup>302</sup> When the brothers do get a chance to talk, they have significant disagreements. First, Jacques struggles to convince a self-centered Antoine about the likelihood of war. Then, they take opposed stances on their response to mobilization. Jacques refuses to fight on principle and plans to run away to Switzerland with Jenny, using false papers. Antoine, on the other hand, in the first group of reservists to be mobilized, sees it as his duty to his fellow republicans to fight, even if he personally disagrees with the war. Though these discussions emphasize the distance between the brothers' value systems, the brothers are at least able to respect one another's decisions.

In spite of themselves, the brothers find comfort in one another's presence. As Jacques runs around the city anxiously, trying to stay abreast of the developing situation

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 2:150.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 2:536.

while also spending quality time with Jenny, “le besoin irraisonné de revoir son frère s’emparait de lui.”<sup>303</sup> When he sees his brother again, he feels safe:

Les regards des deux frères se croisèrent. Une émotion fraternelle crispa en même temps leurs bouches, dans une sorte de sourire amical, lourd d’arrière-pensées. Malgré tout ce qui les divisait, jamais ils ne s’étaient sentis aussi proches ; jamais, pas même devant le lit de mort de leur père, ils ne s’étaient sentis aussi liés par le secret d’un même sang. Ils se serrèrent la main, sans un mot.<sup>304</sup>

They experience the same silent connection when Jacques accompanies Antoine to the train station when he leaves for the front. The brothers exchange one final, meaningful look that solidifies their emotional connection:

Chacun d’eux lut dans le regard de l’autre la même interrogation : « Te reverrai-je ? » Des larmes, en même temps, leur montèrent aux paupières. Tout leur passé, toute cette histoire familiale, insignifiante et unique, qu’ils possédaient en commun et qu’ils étaient seuls au monde à posséder, leur revint, par brusques images, à l’esprit. Du même geste, ils écartèrent les bras et s’étreignirent gauchement. Le feutre de Jacques heurta la visière d’Antoine. Il y avait des années, des années, qu’ils ne s’étaient embrassés : depuis cette petite enfance qu’ils venaient tous deux de revivre, dans un éclair.<sup>305</sup>

These brothers who have so much trouble communicating finally succeed in expressing their love for one another this sweet, awkward hug. The devastating war succeeds in bringing them together, right before separating them forever. Their reunion evokes an ideal national brotherhood for France during this period of mobilization, though this is not at all the image Martin du Gard provides of France in the days before the war. As the brothers engage in debates with other young men and learn about the international stakes at play in the conflict, and Jacques witnesses Jaurès’s assassination, a critical picture

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 2:587.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid., 2:591.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 2:636.

emerges rather of a population sent to war without a thought by elites and divided in its response to the war.

In his review of *L'Été 1914*, Paul Nizan appreciated Martin du Gard's engagement with reality, noting that all of his characters "cessent d'être des personnes privées parce que leur inventeur a saisi que le temps du privé est fini. Personne n'échappe plus au monde, la vie privée a cessé d'y être possible au même titre que la pensée privée qui mesurait le monde d'un seul homme."<sup>306</sup> Not only does this volume mark an end to private life, it also marks an end to the Thibault family. In this one volume Antoine and Jacques both liquidate their inheritance fairly quickly: Antoine pours his money into scientific research and maintenance of the family home, while Jacques donates his entire inheritance to the Communist International to support the anti-war effort. As Grant Kaiser explains, the death of the father represents a loss of order and control. In *L'Été 1914*, a sense of powerlessness reigns, with respect both to the war and to the fortune that Monsieur Thibault collected over his life.<sup>307</sup>

The brothers die, too, neither of them in a heroic fashion. Jacques's death is particularly cruel: desperate to act, Jacques plans a suicide mission in which he will fly over battlefields, scattering copies of an anti-war manifesto in French and German. The plane crashes in Alsace shortly after take-off and Jacques, severely burned and unable to speak, is captured by French soldiers who believe he is a German spy. One of these soldiers shoots Jacques when it becomes too difficult to carry him. Antoine dies of lung disease, months after he is the victim of a gas attack on the warfront.

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<sup>306</sup> Nizan, *Pour une nouvelle culture*, 231.

<sup>307</sup> Grant E. Kaiser, "Jeu et Généalogie : la mort du Père Thibault," in *Roger Martin du Gard: son temps et le nôtre*, ed. André Daspre and Jochen Schlobach (Paris: Klincksieck, 1984), 211-7.



Brotherhood in *Les Thibault* offers brief glimpses of a family that could be, one based in equality and mutual respect, rather than the accumulation and transmission of wealth, but because of lingering class prejudice, pride, and historical circumstance, this ideal is never realizable. The story of the Thibault brothers is, in the end, one of a failed connection.

### **Sibling conspiracy in *Le Nœud de vipères***

François Mauriac's view of siblinghood within the bourgeois family is completely cynical. In *Le Nœud de vipères*, he echoes *Le Père Goriot*, showing siblings coming together only to strip their father of his fortune. Louis, a former lawyer, and Isa, are a bourgeois couple in the provinces. They have three children — Hubert, Geneviève, and Marie —, the youngest of whom, Marie, dies in childhood. The novel is framed as a confession that Louis writes to his wife. It is not clear at first what Louis sets out to confess. The journal-letter jumps back and forth between the past and present. Louis describes his experience of meeting Isa and the early days of their relationship and then jumps to the events happening in the present, as he writes his confession: a family dinner at Easter, a trip to Paris, Isa's death and funeral.

The central "confessions" of Louis's letter are an explanation of where his marriage went wrong (he admits where his own insecurities harmed the marriage and also explains that Isa is not blameless in how things turned out), a description of his plot to disinherit his children, and finally his path to religion, which he abandoned as a young man. Along the way, Louis also admits to a number of wrongs: his jealousy over Isa's strong bond with the children caused Louis to try to win the children away from his wife;

early in their marriage, Louis slept around; he even had a son, Robert, before his marriage, whom he plans to support financially. Louis also reveals the sins of those around him, transcribing conversations between his children and Isa as they plan to recover their inheritance.

Mauriac shows that the legal role of the family as a vehicle for inheritance makes it impossible to develop real supportive relationships. Instead, a transactional relationship is imposed between parents and children, which in turn creates an unnatural competition between siblings. Like Antoine and Jacques, the siblings in this book are united by their difficult relationship with their father. Hubert mentions how negatively his relationship with his father affected his adolescence: “Le mépris que j’inspirais à mon père a empoisonné mon adolescence [...] il a fallu bien des années pour que je prenne enfin conscience de ma valeur.”<sup>308</sup> Given the journal format, we mostly see how this strained relationship affects Louis.

From the beginning of their relationship, Louis explains, Louis and Isa were a mismatch. Isa is from an established provincial bourgeois family and though Louis had money, he did not have the same pedigree as Isa’s family. This difference has long been a source of insecurity for Louis. He also moved away from religion early on, and this caused a strain in their relationship.

When Louis and Isa had children, Isa enthusiastically embraced her role as mother, forming a close relationship with the children that Louis was not really interested in taking part in. Louis feels he has lost his wife: “Dès la naissance d’Hubert, tu trahis ta vraie nature: tu étais mère, tu n’étais que mère. Ton attention se détourna de moi. Tu ne

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<sup>308</sup> François Mauriac, *Le Nœud de vipères*, in *Œuvres romanesques et théâtrales complètes*, 2:526.

me voyais plus.”<sup>309</sup> Later, when the children grow older and Louis takes an interest, there is not really space for him in their relationship with their mother.

As the children grew older, this divide between Isa and the children on one side and Louis on the other only grew more pronounced, and became wrapped up in Louis’ feelings of insecurity and paranoia. He remembers, for instance, coming inside after a smoke to find that he interrupted his children’s conversation and laughter. They retreat to their own corners when he enters the room: “Calme bonheur dont je me savais exclu, zone de pureté et de rêve qui m’était interdite. [...] J’entrais au salon, et les voix se taisaient. Toute conversation s’interrompait à mon approche.”<sup>310</sup> Noting the negative effect he has on the household, Louis begins to perceive himself as “l’ennemi” of his wife and children (“Tu étais mon ennemie et mes enfants sont passés à l’ennemi”).<sup>311</sup> He refers to the children as Isa’s “troupeau,” and “cette meute familiale.”<sup>312</sup> With respect to Louis’ paranoia, Mauriac includes one significant detail: Louis made a name for himself as a lawyer when he defended a woman named Madame de Villenave, who falsely confessed to trying to murder her husband, by accusing her son of attempted murder. Louis used Freud to explain the son’s jealousy of his father as a motive for murder.<sup>313</sup>

In the present day, when Louis writes this letter, his children are adults, with children of their own. Replacing the vague sense of distrust is a specific conflict centered on the question of inheritance. Louis has decided to strip his children of their inheritance

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 430.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 427.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., 426.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 423-4.

and they plot to get it back. Louis overhears his family conspiring against him, and this shifts the power dynamic in the household. Louis sees himself not as his family's enemy but as their victim: "Un grand calme régnait en moi ; un apaisement né de cette certitude : c'étaient eux les monstres et moi la victime. [...] J'éprouvais, pour la première fois de ma vie, le contentement d'être le moins mauvais."<sup>314</sup> Louis feels that his children are waiting, hoping for his death.<sup>315</sup> This shift seems to justify for Louis his renewed efforts to withhold his fortune from his children.

The conspiracy to recover the inheritance is led by the two siblings, Hubert and Geneviève. In one scene, Louis eavesdrops on Geneviève, Hubert, and their children while they attempt to pressure Isa to stand up to Louis. In this scene, Phili, Geneviève's son-in-law, emerges as the most unrelenting predator of the bunch. While other members of the family insist on a certain level of respect when speaking to and about the matriarch, Phili is harsh with her. This man represents a threat from outside the family, a philanderer who married into the family because he knew of their wealth.

But Geneviève and Hubert enable Phili's behavior and his motive for marrying into the family. Geneviève stands by Phili's demands for his inheritance out of concern for her daughter's well-being as well as in solidarity with Phili against Louis: she, too, wants the money she is due. Further, Geneviève understands greed to be the reason anyone married into their family, joking that her husband, Alfred, was preoccupied by the thought of her family's "énorme !" fortune on their wedding night.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 472.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 420.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 471.

After Isa leaves, Hubert and Geneviève take over the discussion, planning how they can manage both of their parents. Here, the siblings work as a team. In contrast with the Eudes and Thibault siblings, Hubert and Geneviève are really not differentiated from one another. They generally agree with one another and they build on each other's ideas, every now and then checking each other or introducing a complication.

They plan to have Louis declared mentally incompetent. Janine suggests using his treatment of them as proof of Louis's incompetence: "En tout cas, on ne peut nier le caractère inhumain, monstrueux, antinaturel de ses sentiments à notre égard..."<sup>317</sup> Mauriac makes clear the family's dual role as biological and legal. How "natural" a father's treatment of his family is may have direct legal and financial consequences. Hubert suggests that they will have to bring their mother to this idea "peu à peu" and Geneviève agrees, chiming in thoughtfully that this solution will likely be more palatable to their mother than divorce, because it will be less scandalous.<sup>318</sup> The siblings' plan also involves neutralizing the threat of their illegitimate half-brother, Robert. Hubert and Alfred travel to Paris to threaten Robert to take legal action against him and his mother and convince him to accept a bad deal of only 1,200 francs per year, which they would start paying only after Hubert and Alfred receive their inheritance.<sup>319</sup> Louis finds out and promises Robert more, with payment beginning immediately. When he lets Hubert and Geneviève know about this commitment later, Geneviève, by that time assured she will receive her millions, suggests to her father that Robert's allowance is a little high.

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 471-2.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid., 492-3.

At Isa's funeral, Hubert and Geneviève speak with Louis alone to make a final case for keeping their inheritance, not realizing that their father has already decided to restore their inheritance. In this scene, the reader finally gets a sense of the distinct personalities of Hubert and Geneviève. This scene also reveals tension between the two siblings about their strategy: they plan to come clean about their conspiracy and to ask Louis for help in a straightforward way. However, it becomes clear that Hubert has a clear idea of how to stage this request to make it appear most sincere and worthy.

Hubert justifies his actions, explaining to his father that his cause was a selfless one: "Il faut que tu comprennes que je luttais pour l'honneur, pour la vie de mes enfants."<sup>320</sup> Elsewhere, Hubert describes his fight for his inheritance as a duty to the family: "C'est une question de justice, une question de moralité qui domine tout. Nous défendons le patrimoine, les droits sacrés de la famille."<sup>321</sup> In this logic, their father's resistance to their inheritance is petty and short-sighted, harmful to the family. The family in Hubert's eyes has nothing to do with interpersonal relationships; rather, the family is an institution that persists through time and that is made of possessions and reputation. With language like this, he justifies the cruelties he engages in along the way. And Janine, Geneviève's daughter, picks up on this language too when she speaks harshly to her grandmother, urging her to stand up to her husband: "Cela me fait de la peine de vous dire ces choses, bonne-maman. Mais c'est mon devoir."<sup>322</sup> This duty to the *patrimoine* is greater than that of respect for one's elders.

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 504.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid., 471.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 468.

Hubert and Geneviève clearly have different ideas about how they should present their case to their father. When Hubert begins speaking, Geneviève reproaches him for being too groveling, objecting to his characterization of their plotting as “lâches complots.”<sup>323</sup> Hubert, in turn, reproaches his sister when she starts to get too honest. She gives away some of the troubles she is having in her family and the real reason she wants money. Geneviève explains that though her husband’s income is enough to support their family, she worries about Janine’s future with Phili, who threatens to ruin her. She gets carried away talking about the negative influence Phili has had on Alfred. Hubert cautions her, afraid she will jeopardize their request: “Mais ce n’est pas de cela qu’il s’agit, Geneviève, dit-il d’un ton irrité. On dirait qu’il n’y a que toi et les tiens au monde.”<sup>324</sup> Geneviève comes back, accusing Hubert of selfishness, and the two bicker until their father interrupts them.

This interruption is enough to remind the siblings of their shared enemy, and they take up a defensive posture together: “ils ne songeaient plus à se battre ! Ils tournaient vers moi des yeux durs et méfiants. Ils attendaient ; ils se mettaient en garde.”<sup>325</sup> The thing that really cinches their unified identity as siblings is their shared distrust of their father.

Louis looks at his children after telling them that he will give them everything immediately, and will only keep a place to live and a monthly allowance for himself: “Je contemplais ce couple fraternel. Il n’y avait rien là qui dût me faire horreur. Un homme

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<sup>323</sup> Ibid., 503.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., 506.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

d'affaires menacé, un père et une mère de famille retrouvant soudain des millions qu'ils croyaient perdus."<sup>326</sup> This change in fortune unites the two further: they confer and make a display of prudence: "Geneviève déclara qu'ils n'acceptaient pas mon sacrifice, qu'ils ne voulaient pas que je me dépouille."<sup>327</sup>

The novel concludes with an alliance between Hubert and Geneviève, even against Geneviève's daughter, who came to sympathize with her grandfather when she spent time with him in the last days of his life. After Martin du Gard depicts Louis's death, which interrupts what we can only assume is a statement of Louis's belief in God,<sup>328</sup> he inserts two letters, one from Hubert to Geneviève and one from Janine to Hubert. These letters frame what we just read and call on the reader to judge Louis. Hubert's letter, which he sends to Geneviève along with the confession we have just read, asks Geneviève to take these pages into consideration before she passes judgment on her father. Hubert explains that though Geneviève is insulted in the accompanying pages, their father's writing proves his humanity. As a result, Hubert has forgiven his father.<sup>329</sup>

Despite his acknowledgement of the redeeming aspects of the written confession, Hubert does his best to discredit his father. For instance, he asserts that his father simply stopped trying to fight his children on the question of inheritance because when they foiled his initial plan, he was so sick that he no longer had the time to come up with a

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 507.

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 508.

<sup>328</sup> "Ce qui n'étouffe, ce soir, en même temps que j'écris ces lignes, ce qui fait mal à mon cœur comme s'il allait se rompre, cet amour dont je connais enfin le nom ador..." (Ibid., 526). Susan Suleiman studies this moment as an example of a loose end that complicates the novel's message of Catholic salvation. (*Authoritarian fictions: the ideological novel as a literary genre*, (New York: Columbia University, 1983), 224-232).

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 526-7.



new strategy.<sup>330</sup> He also urges Geneviève to destroy Louis's confession after she reads them because, he says, they show their father in such a negative light that it could be detrimental to the family's reputation for others to see him in this way.<sup>331</sup> If we are to believe what Louis's confession has taught us about Hubert's calculating nature, we might read this as Hubert's plan to keep anyone from learning about his and his siblings' machinations.

Janine's letter offers a final attempt to salvage Louis's reputation. Janine cared for her grandfather in the last days of his life and saw the spiritual change that came over him. Though she, alongside her husband Phili, ardently supported her family members' attempt to secure their inheritance from Louis, she does not think that the family's cruel discrediting of this man is warranted. She urges her uncle to show her the confession and to retract his statements about his father, but it is clear that this plot to rewrite Louis' story will be between Hubert and his sister.

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Lacking support from parents, siblings turn to one another in these novels for companionship, emotional support, or to assert their interests in a hostile home environment. Though siblings, benefitting from a shared upbringing, seem perfectly poised to support one another, those very same shared experiences prevent them from supporting one another as they grow apart and develop as individuals. Whereas Colette and Martin du Gard show siblings who genuinely need loving relationships with one another but who struggle to achieve them, Mauriac seems to assert that genuine

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 527-8.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 528.

camaraderie between siblings is impossible because of the economic function of the bourgeois family.

## Chapter 4

### Putting Down Roots

In the preceding chapters, I have suggested alternatives to the family such as school, political groups, romantic relationships, the military and police force, anonymous groups on the margins of society, mentorship relationships. Such alternative families<sup>332</sup> take center stage in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (1925), *L'Enfance d'un chef* (1939), and *Mort à crédit* (1936), where protagonists distance themselves from fraught relationships with their biological families and move toward other communities. Where the pressures on the biological family place harsh limits and expectations on young men, André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline explore what financial and/or moral support different kinds of social groups can offer to the individual, as well as the drawbacks and dangers of these relationships.

The thrust of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, *L'Enfance d'un chef*, and *Mort à crédit* is a search for masculine identity. Each work features a conflict between an ideal masculinity as defined by society and a masculine identity delineated by the individual. These novels are much more concerned with the path of individual protagonists than with the fate of French society as a whole, and that emphasis sets them apart from works like *Le Sang Noir* and *La Conspiration* which are so clearly situated within a moment of historic change. In the present chapter, I focus on Gide and Sartre's perspectives on the concept of uprooting, as used by Maurice Barrès. Bourgeois characters move between mentors, immersing themselves in new ways of understanding their identities. I conclude with a

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<sup>332</sup> Michael Lucey has used the term "alternative families" in *The Misfit of the Family* in his analysis of how characters excluded by bourgeois society group together and work within the legal system to legitimize their bonds and prevent themselves from disenfranchisement, and in how Balzac stages debates about such groups between characters in the novels.

fifth chapter on Céline's exploration of a similar theme in the world of the *petite bourgeoisie*.

### **Uprooting in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs***

In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide explores spaces and groups that echo the family and that allow characters to free themselves from social expectations. Adopting the attitudes of a mentor can be a way for characters to grow outside of their parents' orbit; but Gide shows that breaking from such mentor relationships can be just as important as adhering to them, and the choice to do so serves as strong evidence of a young man's growth.

*Les Faux-Monnayeurs* gravitates around two protagonists who are preparing to take the *baccalauréat*, Bernard Profitendieu and Olivier Molinier, and their families. The friends move between two symbolic father figures, both of whom are writers: Olivier's uncle Édouard and Count Robert de Passavant, an aristocratic libertine figure and writer of *romans de gare* whom Édouard views as his professional rival. From the beginning, Édouard is in the position of a savior, having traveled to Paris to help his childhood friend, Laura Douviers (née Vedel), as she decides what to do about an illegitimate pregnancy. He also takes it upon himself to reunite his former piano teacher, Monsieur de La Pérouse, and Boris, the teacher's estranged grandson.

Another central plot line bubbles up throughout: this is the literal counterfeiting alluded to in the title. A mysterious man, Victor Strouvilhou, has recruited a group of middle school boys, including Olivier's younger brother, Georges, to put counterfeit

coins into circulation for him. This same group of boys pressure Boris to commit suicide in a rigged round of Russian roulette, framed as an initiation ritual for their group.

These stories about the *collégiens* are based on two real *faits divers*, one from 1906 about a counterfeit scheme that involved using young students to circulate counterfeit coins — an event that could only take place before the war, since France abandoned the gold coin in 1914 — and another from 1909 about the suicide of a young adolescent, instigated by his classmates.<sup>333</sup> Despite these specific points of inspiration, or perhaps because he was so committed to them, the setting of the novel is ambiguous. Gide struggled to write a novel that could accommodate these pre-war events and also be very much about the present moment, or even anticipate the future.<sup>334</sup>

This ambiguous setting is one way in which Gide's only "roman" resists the exaggerated historical specificity of the Balzacian realist novel. Additionally, this ambiguous setting emphasizes continuity of social values before and after the war. Further, though these events took place before the war, they allow Gide to tap into anxieties about money, sexuality, and unmotivated acts that characterized the interwar period.<sup>335</sup> Whereas other authors studied here are interested in the historical specificity of

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<sup>333</sup> Both *faits divers* are reprinted in André Gide, *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), 91-4.

<sup>334</sup> Gide's journal reveals the author's indecisiveness about when his novel would take place. Though the real stories on which Gide based the novel took place before World War I and the gold coins necessary for the plot were abandoned by France in 1914, Gide wanted his novel to be of the moment, or rather, "*Actuel, à vrai dire, je ne cherche pas à l'être, et, me laissant aller à moi-même, c'est plutôt futur que je serais*" (Ibid., 15). A month later, Gide worries about the novel becoming too abstract: "Je ne puis prétendre à être tout à la fois précis et non situé. Si mon récit laisse douter si l'on est avant ou après la guerre, c'est que je serai demeuré trop abstrait." He notes that "les pensées, les préoccupations" are entirely different before and after the war and determines that the best course of action will be a novel in two parts, one before and one after the war (Ibid., 23-4).

<sup>335</sup> Jean-Joseph Goux has studied *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* as a commentary on the breakdown of pre-war systems of meaning, in money, language, and patriarchal order (*Les Monnayeurs du langage*, (Paris: Galilée, 1984)). One event that illustrates such anxieties was the highly publicized Stavisky Affair, which

the individual's struggles, Gide suggests a timelessness in the individual's struggle to find belonging.

### *Epic novel*

The timeless quality of the work was also central to Gide's ambitions to renew the novelistic form. In 1922, Gide explicitly connected *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* to the epic, focusing on an idealization that he felt was lost in the *roman bourgeois*: "Seul, le ton de l'épopée me convient et me peut satisfaire ; peut sortir le roman de son ornière réaliste. [...] Notre grande époque littéraire n'a su porter son effort d'idéalisation que dans le drame. *La Princesse de Clèves* n'a pas eu de suite ; quand le roman français s'élançait, c'est dans la direction du *Roman bourgeois*."<sup>336</sup>

One element of the "ton de l'épopée" that Gide plays with in order to revitalize the novel is the use of clear moral categories. The clear distinction Gide introduces between right and wrong, good and bad, real and counterfeit, is present from the title. This moral quandary manifests in language of a devil-angel conflict. Vincent Molinier, Olivier's older brother, is the character most affected by the devil's influence. Gide explains in his *Journal* that Vincent (along with Olivier) is not well equipped to fight off the devil's influence. As he tries, he loses his own identity, believing he becomes the devil. On February 23, 1923, Gide wrote,

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revealed the holes in French republican systems that were meant to guarantee stability and the spread of truth and knowledge: journalism, politics, a capitalist economic system. Though not the smoothest operator, Stavisky took advantage of vulnerabilities in Third Republic systems, like the multiple levels of bureaucracy and the lax regulation of the *crédits municipaux*, to run his cons. For more on the Stavisky Affair, see Paul F. Jankowski, *Stavisky: A Confidence Man in the Republic of Virtue* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002).

<sup>336</sup> Gide, *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, 54.

Vincent et Olivier ont de très bons et nobles instincts et s'élancent dans la vie avec une vision très haute de ce qu'ils doivent faire ; — mais ils sont de caractère faible et se laissent entamer. Bernard, au contraire, réagit contre chaque influence et se rebiffe. [...] Vincent se laisse lentement pénétrer par l'esprit diabolique. Il se croit devenir le diable ; et c'est quand tout lui réussit le plus qu'il se sent le plus perdu [...] il finit par croire qu'il est Satan.<sup>337</sup>

Alongside these moral absolutes, Gide presents a legal definition of good and bad, which Gide reveals to be tied up in false assumptions and classicism. Monsieur Profitendieu, a *juge d'instruction*, voices the assumption of children's innocence. He is sure that in the case of the counterfeiting scheme, there must be an older man taking advantage of their naïveté. He warns Édouard that Georges Molinier is involved in this scheme: "je sais que le jeune Georges — tout naïvement, je veux le croire — est un de ceux qui s'en servent et les mettent en circulation. [...] Je ne mets pas en doute qu'on n'abuse de leur innocence et que ces enfants sans discernement ne jouent le rôle de dupes entre les mains de quelques coupables aînés."<sup>338</sup> With this belief in mind, Monsieur Profitendieu warns the children involved that the police are onto them.

Strouvilhou echoes this language, but his assumption is not about children's innocence, but rather about their parents' willingness to do anything in their power to ensure that their children do not look guilty. Knowing that the boys he is working with come from "good families," many of the parents working in prominent positions in politics and law enforcement, Strouvilhou feels confident that the families will pay him to keep any scandal involving their children silent. He tells his cousin Ghéridanisol "Les

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<sup>337</sup> Gide, *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, 62–3.

<sup>338</sup> André Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, in *Romans*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 1204.

gosses de bonne famille, tu comprends, c'est ceux-là qu'il nous faut, parce qu'ensuite, si l'affaire s'évente, les parents travaillent à l'étouffer."<sup>339</sup>

Yet, the novel resists any clear moral dichotomy. Gide's insistence on clear morals in fact reveals how insufficient such categories are to explain the events in the novel. In 1924, Gide reflected on how the action of the novel consistently eludes clear categorization:

Il n'est pas d'acte, si absurde ou si préjudiciable, qui ne soit le résultat d'un concours de causes, conjonctions et concomitances ; et sans doute est-il bien peu de crimes dont la responsabilité ne puisse être partagée, et pour la réussite desquels on ne se soit mis à plusieurs — fût-ce sans le vouloir ou le savoir. Les sources de nos moindres gestes sont aussi multiples et retirées que celles du Nil.<sup>340</sup>

One character whose story exemplifies this moral grey area, for instance, is Boris.

Gide penned the following reflection on him while drafting the novel:

Boris. Le pauvre enfant comprend qu'il n'y a pas une de ses qualités, pas une de ses vertus, qui ne puisse être tournée en défaut par ses camarades : sa chasteté en impuissance ; sa sobriété en absence de gourmandise ; son abstinence générale en couardise, sa sensibilité en faiblesse. Tant il est vrai que rien ne permet de se lier autant que des défauts communs, ou des vices, tant il est vrai que la noblesse de l'âme empêche la facilité de l'accueil (aussi bien d'être accueilli que d'accueillir).<sup>341</sup>

Boris struggles with his solitude, but joining a group may be a much worse outcome for him since it requires a sacrifice of his goodness. Gide introduces a question of whether a relationship can be deemed good or bad based on its effect on an individual. If a relationship brings much needed company to an individual's life, are the sacrifices that relationship might require bad?

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 1146.

<sup>340</sup> Gide, *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, 76-7.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 77-8.



Lucey has emphasized the place of irony in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, explaining that to take Gide's language of authenticity and inauthenticity at face value would be a mistake. Doing so has led critics to reproduce the same phobic language to which characters are subjected in the novel. Gide ironizes such language of authenticity and inauthenticity, showing how characters employ it to deny their own desires.<sup>342</sup>

Explicit discussions of writing in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* solidify this critique. Throughout the novel, Gide inserts Édouard's journal entries, in which he theorizes the novel he is writing (also entitled *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*). Many of these passages were taken directly from Gide's own journal. Édouard's preparatory notes for his novel reveal how he censors any aspects of his lived reality that seem indecent, cruel, or insufficiently motivated. As Michael Lucey has discussed, Édouard's tidying of the truth parallels other characters' rejection of their sexuality. Lucey highlights the difference between Gide's novel and the novel Édouard plans to write: Édouard chooses not to write about the senseless suicide Boris is pushed into, whereas Gide makes the suicide the climax of his novel.<sup>343</sup>

### *Leaving home*

In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide presents the bourgeois home as the place where such phobic black-and-white thinking reigns. Gide shows that leaving the limiting expectations of this environment is important to individual development. When they leave home, his characters expose themselves to moral uncertainty and opportunities that

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<sup>342</sup> Michael Lucey, *Gide's Bent: Sexuality, Politics, Writing*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 108-117.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

are necessary to their growth. Bernard voices the question all of the young men in the novel face: “A quoi faire servir cette force que je sens en moi ? Comment tirer le meilleur parti de moi-même ?”<sup>344</sup> It is important to note that in contrast with other works studied here, Gide is not interested in how this energy could turn into political or social engagement. He is more interested in individual growth as a social good in itself. It is possible to read Nizan’s *La Conspiration* as a rewriting of both *Les Déracinés* and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* that centers the question of social engagement in a way that neither of the earlier works did.

Gide is interested not only in moments when characters choose associations outside of the family, but also in the moments when they choose to break from associations that take them away from their sense of self. Gide believed that leaving home and one’s comfort zone (both physically and intellectually) was necessary for personal growth. He expressed this in his review of *Les Déracinés*, nearly three decades before he wrote *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*. Gide took issue with Barrès’s assumption that leaving one’s home is harmful. Gide felt he defied the categories Barrès established, as his parents were from two different sides of France: “où voulez-vous, Monsieur Barrès, que je m’enracine ?” he asked.<sup>345</sup> Gide argues that contrary to Barrès’s assertion, uprooting is necessary for any growth. And he emphasizes that Barrès is so focused on physical displacement, he fails to acknowledge all of the other forms of uprooting that are taken for granted as necessary and beneficial: is not all instruction a form of *déracinement*?

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<sup>344</sup> Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 1214.

<sup>345</sup> André Gide, *Essais critiques*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1999), 4.

Gide, who often figured himself as a traveler or a wanderer in his writing, expresses the idea that pushing oneself out of one's comfort zone is the way to learn and to make oneself more valuable from a social perspective: though it might be safer to encourage everyone to stay home and learn nothing they do not already know, Gide asks what this will cost: "ne peut-il nous plaire de voir un homme exiger de soi la plus grande valeur possible ?"<sup>346</sup>

In this review, Gide makes a distinction between the strong and the weak: strong wills will benefit from any form of *dépayement*, while weak people will struggle:

Plus l'être est faible, plus il répugne à *l'étrange*, au changement [...] L'instruction, apport d'éléments étrangers, ne peut être bonne qu'en tant que l'être à qui elle s'adresse trouvera en lui, héréditairement ou originalement, de quoi y faire face ; ce qu'il ne surmonte pas risque de l'accabler. L'instruction accable le faible.

Oui, mais le fort en est fortifié.<sup>347</sup>

This is something Gide kept in mind as he planned *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, dividing characters into strong- and weak-willed (as seen above, Vincent and Olivier are weak, susceptible to temptation, while Bernard is strong). But he also complicates this distinction. The weak characters are the ones capable of learning in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*: Olivier learns to seek mentors who will support him rather than hold him back. On the other hand, "strong" characters like Bernard are rigid because they refuse to accept any realities that do not match their expectations.

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<sup>346</sup> Gide, *Essais critiques*, 7.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-7.

In *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Édouard echoes Gide's response to Barrès, noting a Paul Bourget quotation that might make a good epigraph for a chapter of his novel: "La famille..., cette cellule sociale," and a chapter title, "Le Régime Cellulaire."

Certes, il n'est pas de geôle (intellectuelle) dont un vigoureux esprit ne s'échappe ; et rien de ce qui pousse à la révolte n'est définitivement dangereux — encore que la révolte puisse fausser le caractère (elle le replie, le retourne ou le cabre et conseille une ruse impie) ; et l'enfant qui ne cède pas à l'influence familiale, use à s'en délivrer la primeur de son énergie. Mais encore l'éducation qui contrarie l'enfant, en le gênant le fortifie. Les plus lamentables victimes sont celles de l'adulation. Pour détester ce qui vous flatte, quelle force de caractère ne faut-il pas ?<sup>348</sup>

And, reflecting on the suffocating behavior of mothers who fuss anxiously over their children or suffocate them with language of dependence, Édouard concludes,

L'Avenir appartient aux bâtards. — Quelle signification dans ce mot : « *Un enfant naturel !* » Seul le bâtard a droit au naturel.

L'égoïsme familial... à peine un peu moins hideux que l'égoïsme individuel.<sup>349</sup>

With *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Gide rewrote Barrès's collective coming-of-age novel that highlights the necessity of uprooting. Each of Gide's young characters experiences physical displacement and some kind of change in role model or influence that readjusts their thinking. Even when these places or relationships are not positive influences on an individual's development, Gide shows that it takes great strength of character to turn away from an unhelpful place or relationship and move on to a new environment.

Gide sets up the novel as a social experiment, presenting, as Barrès did in 1897 and as Nizan will do in 1938, a large cast of young men in different social circumstances,

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<sup>348</sup> Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 1021-2.

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*, 1022.

to examine how they react to similar events. Some reviewers of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* criticized Gide for not differentiating his protagonists enough. Edmond Jaloux, for instance, observed that Gide was more focused on ideas than on creating distinct characters, and did not distance himself enough from certain characters to let them take on lives of their own. Jaloux added, helpfully, that Gide might better differentiate his characters by providing physical descriptions of his protagonists.<sup>350</sup> It is perhaps more helpful to consider the Profitendieu and Molinier children as echoes of one another, as different potentialities for young men raised in quite similar circumstances. For all of the characters in this novel are echoes or doubles of other characters. The intersecting plot lines mimic one another, and over all of this is Édouard's explicit discussion about a novel that resembles this one but that is not Gide's novel.

I will start by outlining how Gide portrays the bourgeois home as a place of suspicion and surveillance, and then I will consider some of the alternative domestic spaces and alternative families that Gide explores in the novel. Gide does not assert that there is one alternative social structure that will support every man and that ought to form the basis of society in France (as Nizan does with the Communist Party). He instead takes a radically individual approach to social groupings, showing how each decision to join a group or mentor or to break these associations contributes to an individual's development.

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<sup>350</sup> Edmond Jaloux, "Review of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*," in *Les Années Roman*, 263-4.

*Suspicion and oppression in the home*

At first glance, the patriarchal family and law appear to be two sides of the same coin: the fathers of the two central families in this novel both work in law enforcement. But beneath this veneer of orderliness, Gide depicts the family home as a place of oppression and suspicion. From the first scene of the novel, in fact, Gide pokes a hole in this façade: Bernard searches through his mother's secretary for old letters of hers that prove he is the son of a different man than the one who raised him. Olivier's younger brother will echo this search later in the novel when he finds and steals letters that prove his father is having an affair.

Bernard's internal monologue introduces a metacommentary on the conceits of the detective novel: he frames himself as a character in a detective novel, thinking to himself, "C'est le moment de croire que j'entends des pas dans le corridor."<sup>351</sup> Gide's narrator will pick up this same tone throughout the novel, for instance countering Olivier's assumption that his older brother, Vincent, sneaks out to see his mistress and inviting the reader to follow Vincent.

Non, ce n'était pas chez sa maîtresse que Vincent Molinier s'en allait ainsi chaque soir. Encore qu'il marche vite, suivons-le. Du haut de la rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs où il habite, Vincent descend jusqu'à la rue Saint-Placide qui la prolonge ; puis rue du Bac où quelques bourgeois attardés circulent encore. Il s'arrête rue de Babylone devant une porte cochère, qui s'ouvre. Le voici chez le comte de Passavant. S'il ne venait pas ici souvent il n'entrerait pas si crânement dans ce fastueux hôtel. Le laquais qui lui ouvre sait très bien ce qui se cache de timidité sous cette feinte assurance.<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 933.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*, 959.

Gide introduces a policing gaze through his narrative voice and through this *laquais* who sees through Vincent's attempt to dissimulate his nervousness. The narrator physically follows Vincent's path through the city: "suivons-le." With the shift to the *nous* form, the reader enters into complicity with the narrator. The reader is at once with the narrator, looking on the scene from above, and invited to stand in the shoes of the *laquais*, observing Vincent face to face. Throughout the novel, Gide will emphasize characters who observe each other and make assumptions about one another's feelings. Moments such as these position the reader as a detective, encouraging them to be suspicious. Gide thus sets up the expectation that things are not what they seem.

In other cases, the family home becomes oppressive because parents do not take responsibility for the family's well-being: this is the case, for instance, with the Vedel family. The Vedels' oldest son has moved to the colonies, where he has acquired a number of debts. His sister, Rachel, has taken on the responsibility of paying them off, since her parents prefer to avoid such difficult matters. Armand describes how his mother and father's avoidance of responsibility contributes to the oppressive situation: "Maman s'efforce de ne rien comprendre. Quant à papa, il s'en remet au Seigneur ; c'est plus commode. A chaque difficulté, il tombe en prière et laisse Rachel se débrouiller. Tout ce qu'il demande, c'est de ne pas y voir clair. Il court ; il se démène ; il n'est presque jamais à la maison. Je comprends qu'il étouffe ici ; moi, j'y crève."<sup>353</sup> Rachel represents the disastrous consequences of failing to uproot: she is the only one of the Vedel children resigned to remaining in the family home, and she suffers for it. She makes herself a martyr, already deteriorating physically, going blind.

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 1128.

Gide also pays great attention to how the physical layout of domestic spaces supports suspicion and surveillance: a central staircase through the Molinier house allows Olivier to hear Vincent sneaking out each night (“depuis que je suis averti, je surveille — oh ! sans le vouloir...”).<sup>354</sup> The pension run by Pastor Vedel and his father-in-law Azaïs, is set up for the surveillance of Sarah, the pastor’s rebellious daughter. Sarah sleeps in a room right next to her parents’, so to go out at night, she must sneak through a secret door to her brother, Armand’s room. Though her brother is indulgent of her behavior, he is not completely trustworthy:

Elle ouvrait la porte secrète.

Sarah craignait de rencontrer son frère, dont elle redoutait les moqueries. Armand favorisait, il est vrai, ses entreprises les plus hardies ; on eût dit qu’il y prenait plaisir, mais seulement par une sorte d’indulgence provisoire, car c’était pour les juger ensuite et d’autant plus sévèrement ; de sorte que Sarah n’aurait pas su dire si ses complaisances mêmes ne faisaient pas enfin le jeu du censeur.<sup>355</sup>

### *Désencadrement*

In contrast with the oppressive bourgeois homes, Gide presents some alternative domestic spaces to which characters escape from their family homes. Whereas the bourgeois home is built on hetero-normative relationships and asks family members to sacrifice personal interests for the interests of the group (namely reproduction of its members and wealth), these alternative spaces allow for non-normative couplings and self-interested desire to flourish.

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<sup>354</sup> Ibid., 954-5.

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 1164-5.



Passavant's aristocratic home, for instance, is the scene of both private family functions like the death of Passavant's father, and semi-public forms of economic exchange, gambling and prostitution. In this space, Olivier and Passavant reenact the Rastignac-Vautrin relationship: Olivier is tempted both by desire for Passavant and by professional ambition: Passavant offers to make him the editor of a literary review, an opportunity Olivier would have thought impossible at his age.

The Vedel-Azaïs pension occupies a sort of middle-ground between middle-class home and free space. Though the Vedel children are under careful surveillance, the dormitory allows for certain levels of freedom for the students. Sarah's room is a place for friends to gather, to smoke, and to flirt. Later, she and Bernard will have sex in her room and the next morning, Armand will satisfy a voyeuristic desire, peeking at the two sleeping bodies through the door that separates his room from his sister's.

Another type of pseudo-domestic space in the novel is the sanatorium. The two sanatoriums featured in the novel may allow for different forms of freedom, but they also enable perhaps even more rigorous policing of behavior than the bourgeois home. The first of these sanatoriums, in Pau, serves as the backdrop for an affair between Vincent and Laura, Armand and Sarah's older sister. The resort facilitates this relationship because here Laura and Vincent are not only free from the watchful eyes of their families and Laura away from her husband; they also experience freedom from the rules of society, since they both believe they are dying. This freedom from society that the sanatorium offers proves illusory: it becomes clear that neither Laura nor Vincent suffers from tuberculosis, and they both leave, Laura now pregnant with Vincent's child.

The other sanatorium is located in Saas-Fée, Switzerland. Bernard, Édouard, and Laura set up a deviant mock family at this resort: Édouard, an old friend of Laura's, has brought her to Switzerland to get her away from her family and Vincent while they decide what to do about her illegitimate pregnancy. These three characters reserve two rooms at the hotel: the men share one room to give Laura privacy, but because Laura and Édouard pose as a married couple when they reserve the room, they have to move their things around each morning so the hotel staff do not become suspicious. Aside from this constraint, though, the three are free to live as they want. They develop a complex love triangle: sharing a bedroom allows space for a certain level of intimacy and for something akin to homosexual desire to develop between Bernard and Édouard; Bernard falls in love with Laura, and Édouard and Laura confront feelings they have long held for one another. At this sanatorium, Laura nearly actualizes the relationship with Édouard that she has desired for years, and for which her relationship with Vincent, and even her marriage, were simply unsatisfying substitutes. Despite, and maybe because of, their intimate living situation, Édouard holds Laura at a distance, trying to play the role of respectful friend. Though Laura and Édouard get to play the happy couple, their relationship is strained.<sup>356</sup>

Laura connects her frustration to her displacement:

Malgré la première apparence, et encore que chacun, comme l'on dit, « y mît du sien », cela n'allait qu'à moitié bien entre l'oncle Édouard et Bernard. Laura non plus ne se sentait pas satisfaite. Et comment eût-elle pu l'être ? Les circonstances l'avaient forcée d'assumer un rôle pour lequel elle n'était point née ; son honnêteté l'y gênait. Comme ces créatures aimantes et dociles qui font les épouses les plus dévouées elle

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<sup>356</sup> “De plus, lorsqu'elle se remémorait le passé, il lui paraissait qu'Édouard l'avait trompée en éveillant en elle un amour qu'elle sentait encore vivace, puis en se déroband à cet amour et en le laissant sans emploi. N'était-ce pas là le secret motif de ses erreurs, de son mariage avec Douviers, auquel elle s'était résignée, auquel Édouard l'avait conduite, puis de son laisser-aller, sitôt ensuite, aux sollicitations du printemps ? Car, elle devait bien se l'avouer, dans les bras de Vincent, c'était Édouard encore qu'elle cherchait” (Ibid., 1077).

avait besoin, pour prendre appui, des convenances, et se sentait sans force depuis qu'elle était désencadrée. Sa situation vis-à-vis d'Édouard lui paraissait de jour en jour plus fausse. Ce dont elle souffrait surtout et qui, pour peu que s'y attardât sa pensée, lui devenait insupportable, c'était de vivre aux dépens de ce protecteur, ou mieux : de ne lui donner rien en échange ; ou plus exactement encore : c'était qu'Édouard ne lui demandât rien en échange, alors qu'elle se sentait prête à tout lui accorder.<sup>357</sup>

Here, as Gide slips into free-indirect discourse, he highlights and critiques Laura's internalization of normative discourse. She does the work here that would allow her to justify her desire for a sexual relationship with Edouard, and to remove her desire from the situation. It becomes a question of honesty and fairness, rather than one of an illicit desire that needs to be "satisfait."

Laura describes her state as one of *désencadrement*: she has been removed from her frame, and away from her home and her husband, she struggles to know herself. Laura acknowledges that the certainty offered by a clearly delineated social role can be a source of comfort. And yet, as Laura struggles to understand what would be right in this new context, Gide points to the fragility of a social order based in such constraint. On one level, the language of framing recalls the privileging of conforming in appearance rather than in fact. Further, the reference to a frame introduces the idea of containment and what is not contained: a frame draws attention to where a work of art has been artificially cut off or interrupted and to that which lies beyond its bounds.

Feeling that this situation is "unnatural" and aware of Bernard's affections, Laura imposes a normative role on herself — reframes herself — taking to playing a mother or older sister role with Bernard. The certainty afforded by the traditional gender role comforts Laura and holds an enamored Bernard at arm's length. At the same time, taking

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 1076.

on a maternal role permits a certain level of intimacy that is still within the bounds of bourgeois morality. As in an earlier scene where Bernard, right after leaving his family home, suppresses his homosexual desire for Olivier after sleeping over at his house,<sup>358</sup> Laura goes through a process of self-censorship here, retreating into the bounds of bourgeois expectations.

This, then, is a moment like those that Lucey describes in Bernard's case, in which Gide shows his reader the process by which a character views their own behavior through a phobic lens (Laura's sense of "honnêteté") and limits or represses their behavior accordingly. By showing how this process plays out for different characters, Gide successfully inserts a critique of phobic, normative discourse — its impossibility, its artificiality, its harmfulness — into his novel.

Boris also stays at this resort. His experience follows a different pattern. Boris was raised in an unconventional home (his mother performed in music halls), and this gave him a certain amount of freedom. In particular, Boris had a friend who taught him how to masturbate, which was such a liberating experience that Boris understood it as something supernatural, calling it "de la magie."<sup>359</sup>

The sanatorium, for Boris, becomes not a space of freedom, but a space of repression: here, he is subject to a psychoanalytic treatment that has involved removing him from his mother's care and forbidding him from masturbating. His psychiatrist, Madame Sophroniska, has even allowed him to believe that his masturbation may have

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<sup>358</sup> Michael Lucey discusses how in this moment of waking, Bernard's internalized phobia takes over, as Bernard suppresses the dream he had in Olivier's arms and "run[s] from the dream and from sleep back to reality" (*Gide's Bent*, 122-3).

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*, 1097-8.

played a role in his father's death. In the same way that the resort has compressed Bernard, Édouard, and Laura into their complex love triangle, the resort serves as a hothouse for Boris. As part of his treatment, Madame Sophroniska pushes Boris to spend time with her daughter Bronja. He ends up in a problematic dependent relationship with this companion, a pastiche of heterosexual love.

### *Mentorship*

The other pseudo-familial relationship that Gide highlights is the mentor-mentee relationship. Through Olivier's experience, Gide suggests that revolt against a bad mentor may be just as important for personal development as forming a positive attachment to a mentor. After Édouard and Bernard go to Switzerland together, Olivier ends up getting close with Robert de Passavant and travels to Italy with him. Both of these relationships offer the young men access to new experiences and, because both of their mentors are novelists, they receive a certain access to artistic development. Whether or not Bernard and Olivier are conscious of it, these relationships also allow for the expression of homosexual desire.

But when Olivier and Bernard return to Paris, it is clear both of them have changed. Bernard judges things Olivier says as "pas de lui."<sup>360</sup> And Olivier also feels that Bernard seems to defend ideas that he would not have believed in before his trip to Switzerland. Olivier is frustrated that Bernard has changed, but Olivier also judges his friend by Passavant's values: "Mais comment eût-il pu prévoir que Bernard, qu'il avait

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 1142.

laissé si frondeur, allait se poser en défenseur de sentiments et d'idées que Passavant lui apprenait à ne considérer point sans sourire ?”<sup>361</sup>

Once Olivier sees Passavant through Bernard and Édouard's eyes, he rejects Passavant's mentorship. He realizes that “Auprès d'Édouard, ce qu'il avait de meilleur en lui s'exaltait. Auprès de Passavant, c'était le pire.” And the language in this passage makes it clear that this is something Olivier has known but has chosen to ignore: “il se l'avouait à présent ; et même ne l'avait-il pas toujours reconnu? Son aveuglement, près de Passavant, n'avait-il pas été volontaire?”<sup>362</sup> Olivier's mother echoes this language of good and bad influences when she tells Édouard she approves of his relationship with her son: “J'ai peur pour eux [ses fils] de la débauche, ou des liaisons dégradantes. Olivier se laisse facilement entraîner. Vous aurez à cœur de le retenir. Je crois que vous pourrez lui faire du bien. Il ne tient qu'à vous...”<sup>363</sup>

After Olivier finally sleeps with Édouard, shortly after his rejection of Passavant, he tries to commit suicide. After he recovers, he explains that he felt compelled to kill the part of himself that he had let Passavant influence, essentially performing an exorcism: “il protesta qu'en rien de tout cela il ne se contentait plus à se reconnaître ; que c'était tout cela qu'il avait voulu tuer, qu'il avait tué, qu'il avait effacé de sa vie.”<sup>364</sup> Olivier seems successful in finding a new path that reconciles togetherness and the development of free will, as well as the development of a self-conscious ability to shape his own identity.

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 1144.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid., 1172.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 1187.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 1190.

Bernard undergoes a similar rebirth: he has a vision where an angel leads him through the *bas-fonds* and to a right-wing political meeting at which his brother is present.<sup>365</sup> Bernard's brother represents one path Bernard could follow, but Bernard refuses to sign onto this movement, recognizing that it would require a denial of his own identity. The choice of signing on with the political group is presented as a negative choice, to which Bernard should commit "si tu doutes de toi," as the angel tells him. Though he leaves the meeting without signing, he comes to the conclusion that he still wants a rule by which to live: "La réponse me paraît simple : c'est de trouver cette règle en soi-même ; d'avoir pour but le développement de soi."<sup>366</sup> As at the beginning of the novel when Bernard decided to leave home, Bernard chooses a radical selfishness here. While this experience leads Bernard to value his independence, his path remains unclear. The one change, though, is that Bernard seems able to retain this independence while living at home: he reconciles with his father, realizing that he needs the support his father offers. Whereas Olivier proves that he is self-aware enough to understand what is the "best" and "worst" in him, Bernard has undergone no such self-analysis.

### *Boris*

Olivier's suicide attempt prefigures Boris's suicide, with which the novel concludes. Boris comes from the most fraught background depicted in the novel. He is at the center of a rift in his family that has resulted in his estrangement from his

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 1208-12.

<sup>366</sup> Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 1215.

grandparents. Boris is the illegitimate son of La Pérouse's son, and Boris's father died when he was young.

Though Boris's mother kept in touch with Madame de La Pérouse, Madame de La Pérouse jealously excludes her husband from this relationship. Monsieur de La Pérouse loves Boris desperately, even though he has never met him, and this love offers hope throughout the novel of a strong alternative relationship. This is what drives Édouard to bring Boris to his grandfather. Despite Édouard's (and the reader's) high hopes for this reunion, coming to Paris is just another painful forced displacement for Boris, and La Pérouse, for his part, has trouble expressing his love for this boy.

Boris turns to the other community available to him, that of his classmates. They have formed a club, calling themselves "chevaliers du devoir." Azaïs approves of this group, assuming they encourage one another to be good men; like Monsieur Profitendieu, he blinds himself to the possibility of young people's cruelty.<sup>367</sup> In reality, Ghéridanisol has roped them into his cousin, Strouvilhou's, counterfeit scheme. Peer groups are a troubled space from the beginning of the novel. In a description of Bernard and Olivier's friends, the narrator observes, "Chacun de ces jeunes gens, sitôt qu'il était devant les autres, jouait un personnage et perdait presque tout naturel."<sup>368</sup>

The group of middle school boys invents an initiation ritual for Boris that involves him playing Russian roulette during study hall. It is unclear whether the boys know it, but the gun is loaded, and Boris ends up killing himself. In describing this event, Gide remains faithful to the *fait divers* that served as his inspiration, including details

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 1016-17.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 934.



from that report like the children drawing names out of a hat to determine who will shoot himself, one of the classmates taunting the Boris figure by counting down the minutes until his act, and one of the children having the self-possession after the shooting to hide the gun.<sup>369</sup>

Though this is ostensibly a game of chance, Boris also consciously accepts that he will die, and this blurs the line between murder and suicide. It is possible that this is motivated by his realization that he has been taken from the places where he did feel at home, with his mother first and then with Bronja. Boris has just learned that Bronja died. He has also just gone through this psychological treatment that has taught him to deny himself, to see himself as evil. Strouvillhou takes advantage of this, having Ghéridanisol slip a note to him that makes him believe all of the students know his secrets.

Characters' reactions to Boris's death cause the novel to end on an uneasy note: the boys who orchestrated Boris's suicide do not show remorse and Édouard feels the boy's death is so messy that he cannot include it in his novel. Édouard writes in his journal:

Sans prétendre précisément rien expliquer, je voudrais n'offrir aucun fait sans une motivation suffisante. C'est pourquoi je ne me servirai pas pour mes *Faux-Monnayeurs* du suicide du petit Boris ; j'ai déjà trop de mal à le comprendre. Et puis je n'aime pas les « faits divers. » Ils ont quelque chose de péremptoire, d'indéniable, de brutal, d'outrageusement réel... Je consens que la réalité vienne à l'appui de ma pensée, comme une preuve ; mais non point qu'elle la précède. Il me déplaît d'être surpris. Le suicide de Boris m'apparaît comme une *indécence*, car je en m'y attendais pas.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>369</sup> A 1909 article from the *Journal de Rouen* providing these additional details is reprinted in Gide, *Journal des Faux-Monnayeurs*, 93-4.

<sup>370</sup> Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 1246.

By prioritizing his ideas, Édouard really just plans a novel that will leave his prejudices unquestioned. In this moment, Gide definitively distances his novel from Édouard's. For Gide did exactly the opposite of what Édouard describes here, taking inspiration for Boris's story from a *fait divers*. Édouard's omission is all the more egregious, given that Gide's depiction of Boris's suicide is so faithful to real events.

Gide creates a parallel between the last of his narrator's words before Édouard's final journal entry and the last paragraph of the novel which comes from Édouard's journal: Gide's narrator, explaining that Georges is the only of the boys who feels guilty, cynically remarks that at least this event brought Georges back to his family: "Georges n'était pas si corrompu que son admiration pour Ghéridanisol ne cédât enfin à l'horreur. Lorsqu'il revint ce soir chez ses parents, il se jeta dans les bras de sa mère ; et Pauline eut un élan de reconnaissance vers Dieu, qui, par ce drame affreux, ramenait à elle son fils."<sup>371</sup> This remark is cynical but does also acknowledge the gravity of this moment of growth for Georges.

Similarly, Édouard's final journal entry and the last words of the novel concludes with a family reunion that contains none of the darkness of Georges's reunion with his mother. Édouard writes,

J'apprends par Olivier que Bernard est retourné chez son père ; et, ma foi, c'est ce qu'il avait de mieux à faire. En apprenant par le petit Caloub, fortuitement rencontré, que le vieux juge n'allait pas bien, Bernard n'a plus écouté que son cœur. Nous devons nous revoir demain soir, car Profitendieu m'a invité à dîner avec Molinier, Pauline et les deux enfants. Je suis bien curieux de connaître Caloub.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> Gide, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, 1245.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 1248.

Édouard erases the “*indécence*” of Boris’s death with a reassuring image of perfect decency and filial piety. Édouard’s remark at the end, that he looks forward to meeting Caloub, Bernard’s brother, prevents the novel from closing off in a completely neat way. This young man, too, though here he orchestrates a reunion between his father and brother, will inevitably go through the same uncertainties of adolescence as the other boys we have seen in the novel, and as Gide makes clear, the stakes are high.

These final lines are an example of how Édouard would tidy up and censor reality for his novel. Édouard’s image of family reunion is an uneasy conclusion to the events just described, enacting the kind of return to an image of family harmony that had been such a crucial tool to the French government in times of national crisis.

### **Rootlessness in *L’Enfance d’un chef***

While Gide valorizes *déracinement* as a way for an individual to build a strong character, Sartre, writing nearly fifteen years later on the eve of a second World War, emphasizes the detrimental effect of an impressionable young person joining different groups without any sense of self. Featuring a protagonist who only understands himself and his desires through external opinions, *L’Enfance d’un chef* parodies the *roman d’éducation*.

Lucien Fleurier is the only son of a wealthy provincial industrialist, and he is in line to take over his father’s business. The name Lucien places this character in line with protagonists of the nineteenth-century *roman d’éducation*, specifically Lucien de Rubempré of Balzac’s *Illusions perdues*. Like his nineteenth-century predecessors, Lucien will acquire ideas about his identity through reading. The name Fleurier also

evokes the verb *fleurir*, to flourish or to bloom. Lucien's goal is precisely that, to develop as a man.

Lucien was born just before World War I, and the novella follows him from childhood at the end of the war through his adolescence during the interwar period. Lucien is expected to follow in his father's footsteps, taking over the business. Lucien's father tells him: "c'est pour cela que je t'ai fait."<sup>373</sup>

Unlike Barrès's *déracinés*, Lucien is perhaps too good at adapting to new environments. He moves between different groups of men and with each of them fully adopts the group's ideology, and prejudices. First, a friend at school, Berliac, introduces Lucien to surrealism and through him, Lucien meets an author and mentor, Bergère, with whom Lucien has a brief sexual relationship. Worried he will "get in the habit"<sup>374</sup> of sleeping with men, Lucien distances himself from Bergère, and through another friend at school, ultimately finds himself among a group of Camelots du Roi and avid readers of *Action Française*, Maurras's extreme right-wing journal. Lucien makes a good impression on this group by exaggerating his antisemitism eventually killing a Jewish man to prove himself. Where Gide's novel remains ambiguous in its setting and disconnected from historical reality, Sartre immerses his reader in the interwar social and political landscape, showing the real political consequences of different mentor relationships.

Though he so fully adopts the ideas and behavior of his mentors, Lucien struggles with the feeling that these different extremes he adopts are difficult to reconcile with one

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<sup>373</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Enfance d'un chef*, in *Oeuvres Romanesques*, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (Paris: Gallimard, 1981), 325.

<sup>374</sup> "Mais si j'en prends l'habitude? pensa-t-il avec angoisse" (Ibid., 356).

another and with what Lucien understands as his “true” self. In early childhood, Lucien is haunted by what he calls “vrai Lucien”: this is his first identity, composed of his parents’ values and prejudices. As a child, he begins to question his love of his parents and of God and he worries that he has lost his real self. Sometimes he worries that he might not be anything at all.

Lucien’s parents’ values offer a comforting certainty to Lucien as he experiments with different associations. But Sartre highlights how superficial and anachronistic the Fleuriers’ values are. Religion for the Fleuriers is primarily a status symbol: as the most prominent family in the area, they host the priest for a meal every Sunday. The Fleuriers are proud of their “santé morale,” a hereditary quality, rather than one based in any ethical behavior: this language of morality simply serves to justify their social superiority. Monsieur Fleurier embodies a traditional masculinity: he is tall and strong, and he fought in World War I. He is an authoritarian and paternalistic employer. In his opinion, the secret to being a good boss is, “il faudra que tu saches te faire obéir et te faire aimer.”<sup>375</sup>

Sartre undercuts the moral authority of the Fleuriers in depictions of interactions between Monsieur Fleurier and his employees. The younger generation of workers do not show the same deference to Monsieur Fleurier as the older generation did. Such moments illustrate that Monsieur Fleurier’s management style is unsustainable amid growing class consciousness and movements for workers’ rights in the interwar period. It is not possible for Lucien to simply become his father, as his father expects he will. Lucien must find what it means to be a man in post-World War I France.

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 325.

*The somnambulist*

Lucien's conception of belonging to a community is completely dependent on producing tangible effects on others. He carefully observes the effects he can produce on his mother and housekeeper through his words: "C'était choquant : quand Lucien disait à maman : « Ma jolie maman à moi », maman souriait et quand il avait appelé Germaine : arquebuse, Germaine avait pleuré et s'était plainte à maman. Mais quand on disait : marronnier, il n'arrivait rien du tout."<sup>376</sup>

Placing so much power in the effect he has on others, Lucien comes to define his identity through others' opinions of him. The first such opinion makes Lucien feel special but reveals how fragile his understanding of the world is. His mother's friends and the school mistress fawn over Lucien when he is young, telling him he looks like a little girl, and a "petite poupée."<sup>377</sup> He loves the attention he receives and likes the idea of being played with like a doll, of existing just for the pleasure of those with authority. But this language also confuses him. Lucien, worried, wonders if his mother would grow a moustache and become a man if she put on his father's pants.<sup>378</sup>

It is difficult for Lucien when his parents and their friends stop giving him this kind of attention, and this marks the beginning of his education as a man. This shift coincides with the outbreak of World War I. With his father's departure for the front, Lucien's mother's worry establishes a distance between the two. Distracted, she no longer laughs when Lucien acts silly.<sup>379</sup> Even after Monsieur Fleurier returns safely,

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 320-1.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 321.

adults treat the boy differently: “depuis qu’on lui avait coupé ses boucles, les grandes personnes s’occupaient moins de lui ou alors c’était pour lui faire la morale et lui raconter des histoires instructives.”<sup>380</sup> His education in republican masculinity begins in earnest.

Because his personal identity is completely determined by external factors, Lucien’s relationship with his family and the values they represent is also fragile. The inevitable result is a division of Lucien’s sense of self. In childhood, Lucien recites his love for his parents as if repeating a lesson: “M. le curé, qui venait déjeuner à la maison tous les samedis, lui demanda s’il aimait bien sa maman. Lucien adorait sa jolie maman et son papa qui était si fort et si bon.”<sup>381</sup> But as soon as he repeats “J’aime ma maman” on his own, his voice stops sounding like his own and he realizes he may not love her.<sup>382</sup>

Elsewhere, Lucien pretends to be an orphan, but because his identity is built on love for his parents, this game throws his whole identity into confusion. Lucien is not able to distinguish between reality and his imaginary childhood games. He plays the role of the orphan, “mais il finit par ne plus très bien savoir à quoi. À l’orphelin ? Ou à être Lucien ?”<sup>383</sup>

Lucien struggles with the realization that he does not love his parents and God, the double loyalty that ought to define him. He moves from playing imaginary games to pretending to be the person his parents expect him to be:

Il détestait le bon Dieu : le bon Dieu était plus renseigné sur Lucien que Lucien lui-même. Il savait que Lucien n’aimait pas sa maman ni son papa et qu’il faisait semblant d’être sage et qu’il touchait son pipi le soir dans son lit. [...] Lucien entreprit aussi de persuader au bon Dieu qu’il aimait sa

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 318.

maman. De temps à autre, il disait dans sa tête : « Comme j'aime ma chère maman ! » Il y avait toujours un petit coin en lui qui n'en était pas très persuadé, et le bon Dieu naturellement voyait ce petit coin.<sup>384</sup>

He becomes aware of his hypocrisy and resents God's knowledge of this disconnect between his public and private selves. He acknowledges here that he is an actor ("il faisait semblant"), playing a role in his family and in his community and seeking to convince himself of his sincerity.

Here, we also see a reference to Lucien's troubled relationship with his body and sexuality. Before entering puberty, Lucien seems only able to notice his physical development when others point it out. His classmates, for instance, call him "grande asperge" when he has a growth spurt. Though his father assures him that all Fleuriers are tall, that Lucien is coming into his identity as a Fleurier man, Lucien remains ashamed of this characteristic that makes him different from his classmates.<sup>385</sup> He lacks control over his growing body and displays the kind of horror with his body that will be a recurring theme in Sartre's work, from *La Nausée* to *Les Mots*: "Lucien ne savait que faire de son corps [...] il avait toujours l'impression que ce corps était en train d'exister de tous les côtés à la fois, sans lui demander son avis."<sup>386</sup> As he enters puberty, Lucien's relationship to his body only becomes more fraught, with his budding sexuality and masturbation putting him at odds with his moral education.

After reading a children's science journal, Lucien believes that he can explain his betrayal of his family's values through sleepwalking. This is the first time Lucien uses

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 329.



reading material to understand himself: this will be a trend throughout his future relationships. He learns about sleepwalkers in *Le Petit Explorateur*, “et il avait pensé qu’il devait y avoir un vrai Lucien qui marchait, parlait et aimait ses parents pour de vrai pendant la nuit ; seulement, le matin venu, il oubliait tout et il recommençait à faire semblant d’être Lucien.”<sup>387</sup> Sartre repeats the language of pretending (“faire semblant”), emphasizing a disconnect between appearance and reality.

### *The surrealist*

Once he reaches adolescence, Lucien has the freedom to pursue relationships beyond his family. Charles Berliac is a new student at Lucien’s school who impresses everyone with his fashionable clothing and worldliness. He introduces Lucien to popular American music, to Surrealism, and to psychoanalysis, opening for Lucien a world completely different from that of his family home.

Psychoanalysis gives Lucien a new vocabulary to describe the contradictions in his character. Lucien and Berliac revel in sharing their dreams and their troubling emotions. Lucien is relieved to find this space that validates the complexities he has struggled with since childhood. Lucien reveals to Berliac that he once wanted to commit suicide. Berliac, in turn, brags to Lucien that he felt sexual desire for his mother until he was fifteen.<sup>388</sup> After reading Freud, Lucien is thrilled and relieved to conclude, “Parbleu pensa-t-il, j’ai un complexe.”<sup>389</sup> Growing and learning in this new relationship involves

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 338-9.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 339.

splitting himself: “Le véritable Lucien était profondément enfoui dans l’inconscient; il fallait rêver à lui sans jamais le voir, comme à un cher absent.”<sup>390</sup> Historical reality becomes just another one of their complexes. The friends commiserate indulgently, calling themselves “les vraies victimes de la guerre” and “une génération sacrifiée,”<sup>391</sup> though they do not elaborate on what they mean.

Berliac introduces Lucien to his mentor, Achille Bergère, a surrealist author who is appropriately, for a mentor, named “shepherd,” (in the feminine form). As soon as Lucien is alone with Bergère, he tells him all about his complexes: “Lucien lui raconta longuement son suicide; il lui expliqua aussi qu’il avait désiré sa mère, et qu’il était un sadico-anal, et qu’il n’aimait rien au fond, et que tout en lui était comédie.”<sup>392</sup> Bergère identifies the state Lucien is in as “désarroi,” and lends him Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* and Lautréamont’s *Chants de Maldoror* to provide a new lens through which Lucien can understand himself.<sup>393</sup> Lucien’s reaction to this label is revealing: he wonders, “Désarroi... [...] à quoi est-ce que ça va m’engager ?”<sup>394</sup> Based on a label, Lucien will feel obligated to act a certain way.

Though Lucien is excited by the new ideas Berliac and Bergère introduce him to, he is not without reservations. When, under Bergère’s guidance, Lucien starts thinking for himself, he gets scared and finds solace in the reassuring stasis of his family: “dès que Lucien se surprenait à éprouver une sensation un peu fine, une impession originale, il se

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

<sup>394</sup> Ibid.

mettait à trembler. Il aurait volontiers souhaité n'avoir plus que les perceptions les plus banales et les plus épaisses ; il ne se sentait à l'aise que le soir avec ses parents : c'était son refuge."<sup>395</sup> The evening conversations at home that Lucien thinks of here blend nationalistic prejudice with updates on the health of family members.<sup>396</sup> The family's complacency is an antidote to free thinking.

During a trip to Rouen, Bergère and Lucien consummate their relationship. The whole event is framed as out of Lucien's control. When he sees that there is only one bed in the room, "Lucien ne fut pas surpris : il avait vaguement pensé pendant le voyage qu'il partagerait la chambre de Bergère mais sans jamais s'arrêter bien longtemps sur cette idée. À présent il ne pouvait plus reculer, il trouvait la chose un peu désagréable, surtout parce qu'il n'avait pas les pieds propres."<sup>397</sup> Though Lucien is uncomfortable throughout this sexual encounter, the source of the discomfort is ambiguous. In part, Lucien is physically bothered by his dirty feet and later by nausea from drinking. He is also worried about what others will think of him. When Lucien, unable to get an erection, retreats to the bathroom, he reflects that he is "atrocement humilié mais il ne savait pas s'il avait honte d'avoir subi les caresses de Bergère ou de n'avoir pas été troublé."<sup>398</sup> Concern over others' opinions wins out, and Lucien decides to return to the bedroom to try again: "Il faut pourtant que j'y aille, pensait-il, il le faut, sans quoi il se foutra de moi — avec Berliac !" <sup>399</sup> Others' esteem is more important than Lucien's wants.

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 347-8.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 351.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 354.

<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

When he accepts a passive role, he is able to enjoy himself. Bergère calls Lucien a doll, echoing the language Lucien found so appealing when he was a young boy, and Lucien is finally aroused.<sup>400</sup> Lucien leaves Rouen happy with himself at having pleased someone else (“Somme toute Lucien n’était pas mécontent de lui-même”).<sup>401</sup> Of course, such language also allows Lucien to relieve himself of any responsibility or active homosexual desire.

It is not until Lucien returns home that he confronts the way others would see his actions. Once he is in this conservative environment, he judges his actions as his parents would. He realizes that he has a new label and gets angry at Bergère for burdening him with it: “à son réveil, il lui sembla qu’il grelottait en dedans. Il se leva et se contempla longtemps dans la glace. « Je suis un pédéraste [...] Il savait, lui. Ce qu’il m’a fait faire porte un nom, ça s’appelle coucher avec un homme et il le savait. »”<sup>402</sup>

Lucien tries to absorb even opposing identities into his sense of self: “[I]l y avait des étiquettes qui s’accrochaient à vous un beau matin et il fallait les porter toute sa vie : par exemple, Lucien était grand et blond, il ressemblait à son père, il était fils unique et, depuis hier, il était pédéraste.”<sup>403</sup>

He realizes that if he gets accustomed to pederasty, he will lose status in the eyes of others: “On dirait de lui : « Fleurier, vous savez bien, ce grand blond qui aime les

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 355.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid., 355-6.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 356.

hommes ? » Et les gens répondraient : « Ah ! oui, la grande tantouse ? Très bien, je sais qui c'est. »<sup>404</sup> Further,

Il deviendrait un homme taré, personne ne voudrait plus le recevoir, les ouvriers de son père rigoleraient quand il leur donnerait un ordre. Lucien imagina avec complaisance son épouvantable destin. Il se voyait à trente-cinq ans, mignard et fardé, et déjà un monsieur à moustache avec la Légion d'honneur, levait sa canne d'un air terrible. « Votre présence ici, monsieur, est une insulte pour mes filles. »<sup>405</sup>

Though up to this point, Lucien has allowed labels to define him, absorbing the label into his sense of self, here he sets out to prove to himself that it is not too late to avoid his fate, since “il n'avait pas eu grand plaisir aux caresses de Bergère”<sup>406</sup>: “Ça n'est pas si grave, pensa-t-il, je peux encore me sauver. Il a abusé de mon désarroi, mais je ne suis pas *vraiment* pédéraste.”<sup>407</sup> He decides that he will cure himself, and become “un homme comme tous les autres” by seeing a psychoanalyst and taking a mistress.<sup>408</sup>

He does in fact have two relationships with women after this. The first involves the daughter of one of his father's employees, which does not go anywhere because Lucien decides that to *not* take advantage of his clear power over this girl would be the more noble course of action. Then Lucien's friend, Guigard, introduces him to a friend of his girlfriend's, Maud, with whom Lucien begins a steady relationship that actually appears based in friendship and mutual respect.

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Ibid.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid., 357.

<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

Family is also part of his cure. His parents' phobic language of moral taints allows Lucien to retroactively construct an image of his resistance to liberal behavior and beliefs:

En fait, il n'avait cessé de résister : Bergère l'avait emberlificoté dans ses raisonnements, mais Lucien avait bien senti par exemple, que la pédérastie de Rimbaud était une tare, et, quand cette petite crevette de Berliac avait voulu lui faire fumer du haschich, Lucien l'avait proprement envoyé promener : « J'ai failli me perdre, pensa-t-il, mais ce qui m'a protégé c'est ma santé morale ! » Le soir, au dîner, il regarda son père avec sympathie. M. Fleurier était carré d'épaules, il avait les gestes lourds et lents d'un paysan, avec quelque chose de racé et les yeux gris, métalliques et froids d'un chef. « Je lui ressemble », pensa Lucien. Il se rappela que les Fleurier, de père en fils, étaient chefs d'industrie depuis quatre générations : « on a beau dire, la famille ça existe ! » Et il pensa avec orgueil à la santé morale des Fleurier.<sup>409</sup>

Lucien's home again becomes a "refuge"<sup>410</sup> from the complication of identity that comes from outside experiences. As Bernard does in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Lucien censors his curiosity about values other than those of his father, but his censorship of homosexual feelings is more explicit than Bernard's. Sartre exaggerates how reactionary the doctrine of *suffisance* is. Traditional ideals may offer comfort, but it is clear that they offer this comfort by masking complex feelings and changing cultural values. Lucien's experience with labels is that they come from external sources and stay with you, but an individual does have agency over which labels define him in others' eyes.

Though the loss of this label causes Lucien to worry that he is nothing, he comforts himself again with the belief that "c'est parce que rien ne m'a sali." Again, Lucien expresses the idea that an obligation to behave in a certain way would follow

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<sup>409</sup> Ibid., 359.

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 347.

from the label: “Berliac, lui, est salement engagé.”<sup>411</sup> Sartre associates this conservative conception of morality with inaction.

*The antisemite*

*L’Enfance d’un chef* is known most of all for its portrait of Lucien as an antisemite, an identity he takes on gradually throughout the novel, first through Lucien’s exposure to his parents’ casual antisemitism and the antisemitic jokes Bergère makes at Berliac’s expense. After breaking with Bergère and Berliac, neither of whom seems to give Lucien a second thought, despite his worries of backlash after Lucien sleeps with Bergère, Guigard introduces Lucien to a conservative group, led by one of their classmates, Lemordant. Lemordant and his friends, all Camelots du Roi, are loud, muscular, energetic, in a sharp contrast with the brooding Berliac and his complexes. Lemordant gives Lucien some reading material — Barrès — telling Lucien that he is a “déraciné.” Whereas the abstractions of Freud and Lautreamont overwhelmed Lucien, he identifies with how grounded Barrès’s writing is in the land.<sup>412</sup> Likewise, Lucien admires the solidity of Lemordant and his friends “voilà comme je devrais être : un roc.”<sup>413</sup>

Lucien is also attracted to this group because they validate his agency. Lemordant asks Lucien to sign a petition in response to another student petition from students at the École Normale Supérieure protesting obligatory military service. Though Lucien does not understand what he is signing, he is thrilled to affirm his identity through this first

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<sup>411</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>412</sup> Ibid., 371-2.

<sup>413</sup> Ibid., 366.

political act. “Quand il entendit « tu as le droit de dire ton mot », Lucien fut traversé par une inexplicable et rapide jouissance. Il signa.”<sup>414</sup>

Lucien realizes that he can impress this group by proving himself to be a fervent antisemite. He takes a more active role in his labeling this time, making sure this one sticks. He shocks his friends with antisemitic jokes and makes a show of identifying Jews when he is out with his new friends. This dynamic reaches a crescendo when Lucien’s friends attack a Jewish man reading the communist paper *L’Humanité*. Lucien proves he is more dedicated than his friends: realizing that they might leave the man, Lucien is overcome with an urge to join the attack (“ce fût plus fort que lui”). He punches the man as hard as he can, most likely killing him.<sup>415</sup> Now his decision to officially join the Camelots du Roi seems, to Lucien, inevitable: “Je ne peux pas continuer, pensa-t-il, à les suivre dans leurs équipées en amateur. À présent, tout est bien pesé, il *faut* que je m’engage !”<sup>416</sup>

Monsieur Fleurier approves of Lucien’s decision to join the Camelots du Roi, considering his son’s choice to engage in politics an important step in his development as a man. “Il faut bien [...] que Lucien apprenne son métier d’homme,” he tells his wife.<sup>417</sup> The politics of the group, though more extreme than the values of Lucien’s parents, are in keeping with their prejudices. Some of the antisemitic jokes Lucien uses to wow his friends are borrowed from his father.

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<sup>414</sup> Ibid., 371.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid., 377-8.

<sup>416</sup> Ibid., 378.

<sup>417</sup> Ibid., 377.



And the decision to join the group does seem to be a step in Lucien's maturing as a man. The day Lucien joins the Camelots and purchases the requisite phallic cane, he has sex with Maud for the first time.<sup>418</sup> Echoing Emma Bovary, Lucien repeats "J'ai une maîtresse" to himself on the métro ride home as he realizes with disappointment that now that he and Maud have shared such "écœurante intimité," he no longer feels like his own person: "il ne pouvait plus distinguer sa chair de celle de Maud." He reassures himself, imagining how he will brag to Guigard that he has slept with Maud, but "il était mal à l'aise : il se sentait nu dans la chaleur poussiéreuse du métro, nu sous une mince pellicule de vêtements, raide et nu à côté d'un prêtre, en face de deux dames mûres, comme une grande asperge souillée."<sup>419</sup> Here is another phallic image, this one not so empowering. The performative machismo of the Camelots, which Lucien thought would prove an antidote to his homosexuality only leads to more dirtiness, he is the "homme taré" he feared homosexuality would make him.

Further, Lucien's antisemitism threatens his relationship with more moderate friends. Lucien attends the birthday party of Pierrette, Guigard's sister, who Sartre suggests is a potential love interest for Lucien. Guigard introduces Lucien to another guest, who is Jewish, and Lucien leaves the party, refusing to shake this man's hand. Though Lucien immediately regrets his rashness, vacillating on whether or not to return to the party and apologize, he remains committed to his decision.

To Lucien's and the reader's surprise, Guigard apologizes to Lucien the next day and validates Lucien's commitment to his principles, assuring Lucien that all is forgiven:

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<sup>418</sup> Ibid., 379.

<sup>419</sup> Ibid., 380.

Pierrette laughed, the Jewish guest understood, and Guigard's parents even expressed their approval of Lucien's "conviction."<sup>420</sup> Just as Lucien's parents call upon the idea of their "santé morale" to justify their oppression of others, so too does such a conception of integrity easily slip into a valorization of hate.

With this approval in hand, Lucien proudly affirms his identity as an antisemite and feels superior to his friends, more mature than them. As he struts through the halls of the school, he imagines that others talk about him, that they fear and admire him. "Guigard et Pierrette, se dit-il avec attendrissement, sont des enfants."<sup>421</sup> Feeling he has a clear sense of identity and direct power over others, Lucien can consider himself a man.

What follows is a contradictory passage, that calls into question Lucien's newfound identity. At first, he is proud that "cette fois-ci, il n'avait plus besoin des yeux de Guigard : c'était à ses propres yeux qu'il paraissait respectable — à ses yeux qui perçaient enfin son enveloppe de chair, de goûts et de dégoûts, d'habitudes et d'humeurs."<sup>422</sup> But as his thoughts continue, he again confuses his understanding of himself with others' perceptions of him:

« Là où je me cherchais, pensa-t-il, je ne pouvais pas me trouver. » Il avait fait, de bonne foi, le recensement minutieux de tout ce qu'il *était*. « Mais si je ne devais être que ce que je suis, je ne vaudrais pas plus que ce petit youtre. » En fouillant ainsi dans cette intimité de muqueuse, que pouvait-on découvrir, sinon la tristesse de la chair, l'ignoble mensonge de l'égalité, le désordre ?<sup>423</sup>

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid., 383.

<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid.

Lucien hints that he has come to sympathize with those he has been taught to view as inferior. To justify his cruelty, he must again retreat into his parents' social superiority. The author breaks through Lucien's thoughts to put things into perspective with this reminder that there is no equality here, and Lucien refuses to leave space for this line of questioning. Lucien continues,

« Première maxime, se dit Lucien, ne pas chercher à voir en soi ; il n'y a pas d'erreur plus dangereuse. » Le vrai Lucien — il le savait à présent —, il fallait le chercher dans les yeux des autres, dans l'obéissance craintive de Pierrette et de Guigard, dans l'attente pleine d'espoir de tous ces êtres qui grandissaient et mûrissaient pour lui, de ces jeunes apprentis qui deviendraient *ses* ouvriers, des Féroliens grands et petits dont il serait un jour le maire [...] il était, il serait toujours cette immense attente des autres. « C'est ça, un chef. »<sup>424</sup>

Here, Sartre gets to the heart of his critique of Lucien and this social group. Sartre shows us a young character walking through the process of choosing complacency over reality, choosing to accept what he understands is a myth of his social and moral superiority to homosexuals, Jews, and his future employees. It is only possible for Lucien to perpetuate his father's legacy through conscious self-deception.

Although for all intents and purposes, Lucien comes full circle, returning to an unquestioning eagerness to take his father's position, Lucien does come to understand that he is fundamentally equal to the marginalized groups he rejects and to whom he claims superiority. He recovers "vrai Lucien" — the Lucien at the top of a moral and socio-economic hierarchy that he has been out of touch with since the beginning of the novel — by suppressing anything that contradicts that image or calls it into question. But he also learns that he can manipulate others' perceptions of him, and comes to understand the power he can derive from this control. This is a grim image of the basis of human

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

relationships, focused entirely on power. The great conclusion Lucien comes to, ostensibly the end of his education, is a sense of privilege, framed in legal terms: “J’AI DES DROITS !” Lucien murmurs to himself.<sup>425</sup>

Taking the idea of environmental influence to an extreme with his depiction of Lucien Fleurier, Sartre shows that *déracinement* is necessary, but that it can be detrimental in and of itself. Like Gide, Sartre pushes back against Barrès’s wariness of uprooting, emphasizing how much the outcome depends on the strength of character of the individual. However, with this demonstration, he takes a step back from the optimism Gide expresses about wandering.

Lucien must distance himself from the normative complacency of his family if he is to have any hope of understanding his own identity and developing into his own man. Unlike in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, Lucien’s experiences with different groups do not teach him to think for himself; far from it. Lucien takes adolescent impressionability to an extreme, simply adopting others’ judgments of him as fundamental truth about his character.

Sartre’s novella introduces an important political angle to this question. Though Gide touches on political influence in Bernard’s trajectory, his 1925 novel privileges questions of personal identity over national political ones. In 1939, Sartre directly connects Lucien’s weak character as well as the specific masculine and moral ideals he learned to his willingness to be influenced by right-wing extremism. Though *L’Enfance d’un chef* tackles the present moment head-on, with Sartre deriding movements on both

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 387.

the extreme left and right, this critique does not coalesce into a positive vision of social change.

In this work we can see a young Sartre's interest in engaged literature, but it will not be until after the war, during which he was held as a prisoner of war, that he will articulate his convictions about the place literature and art must take up in the political and social sphere. A decade later, Sartre will articulate this ideology with confidence in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, explaining that literature is necessarily engaged in historical circumstances. In light of this reality, he urges his fellow artists to take seriously their responsibility in shaping history, rather than adopting the passive stance toward history that their schooling has taught them.<sup>426</sup> The critique of fascism that Sartre articulates through Lucien's story anticipates the author's condemnation of intellectual passivity after the war in works like *Qu'est-ce qu'un collaborateur* (1945) and *Qu'est-ce que la littérature* (1948).

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<sup>426</sup> Sartre explains that this is the view of history he and the other members of his generation learned in school: "Bien sur, ils avaient appris à l'école que l'homme joue, gagne ou perd au sein de l'histoire universelle, mais ils n'en avaient pas fait l'application à leur propre cas : ils pensaient obscurément que c'était bon pour les morts d'être historique" (*Qu'est-ce que la littérature*, 256).

## Chapter 5

### *Familles d'apprentissage*

Like *L'Enfance d'un chef*, *Mort à crédit* (1936) features a young man struggling with his family's clear expectations for his future. Louis-Ferdinand Céline's second novel is the semi-autobiographical story of Ferdinand Bardamu, Céline's literary alter-ego and the hero of his first novel, *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932). *Mort à crédit* opens after World War I on a middle-aged Ferdinand, who works as a doctor in the Zone on the outskirts of Paris. What follows is Ferdinand's first-person narration of the story of his childhood and adolescence in the years before the war.

The son of a lower-level civil servant and a small boutique owner, Ferdinand faces pressure from his family to get an apprenticeship that will assure the family's financial future. A young Céline felt this same responsibility. "Je n'ai pas eu de jeunesse," Céline remembered.<sup>427</sup> This pressure creates tension between Ferdinand and his parents. Though Ferdinand's father has a good education (he speaks some Latin, for instance), Ferdinand's upbringing has required a lot of sacrifices: "Mon père pour m'élever, il s'est tapé bien des boulots supplémentaires. L'empreinte son chef l'humiliait de toutes les façons."<sup>428</sup> Ferdinand's family and neighbors make sure that he is intensely aware of the burden he bears: "C'était le sujet inépuisable. Si je la gagnerais jamais ma

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<sup>427</sup> Godard, *Céline*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 13. Letters an adolescent Céline wrote home from England show his sense of duty to his family. Though Céline did not enjoy his time in England, he made sure to write each week to assure his parents he was making the most of his time there and to inquire about his parents' health (Ibid., 28-31).

<sup>428</sup> Louis-Ferdinand Céline, *Mort à crédit*, in *Romans*, ed. Henri Godard (Paris, Gallimard, 1981), 1:551. It was common in the early twentieth-century for Parisian families of the lower middle class to have only one or two children: space was, as it is today, limited in Parisian apartments and a family could provide fewer children with a better education and better opportunities to find a job or marry well (Maza, *Violette Nozière*, 20–1). As Ferdinand's story shows, this could lead to greater pressure on those children.

vie?...”<sup>429</sup> “Gagner sa vie” takes on a deeper significance in this novel: not only to earn a living, but also to repay a debt to his parents. When he fails to live up to these expectations, Ferdinand’s parents are disappointed with him: “Je justifiais pas les sacrifices !”<sup>430</sup>

Ferdinand holds a series of apprenticeships, but he is unable to hold onto them, often for reasons out of his control. He works at Berlope’s ribbons and trim store, where he is fired for spending time with another employee rather than focusing on his work. Then he works for a jeweler, Gorloge, but he is fired after Madame Gorloge sexually assaults him to steal a valuable set of pins he is tasked with keeping safe, and then frames him for the theft. Ferdinand spends nine months in England, working for the Merrywins, who run a boarding school. Though Ferdinand is happy and healthy here, and even falls in love with Mrs. Merrywin, things go south: when the Merrywins’ students begin flocking to a new rival boarding school, they despair, Mr. Merrywin turning to alcohol and Mrs. Merrywin drowning herself. Heartbroken, Ferdinand returns home. Ferdinand’s last apprenticeship is with an inventor and con artist, Roger-Marin Courtial des Pereires

Rather helping his family achieve upward social mobility, Ferdinand causes his family to lose status and money. Their home, the claustrophobic Passage des Bérésinas, based on the Passage Choiseul where the author grew up, serves as a physical metaphor for the challenge Ferdinand’s parents face in trying to achieve social mobility:

Il faut avouer que le Passage, c’est pas croyable comme croupissure. C’est fait pour qu’on crève, lentement mais à coup sûr, entre l’urine des petits clebs, la crotte, les glaviots, le gaz qui fuit. C’est plus infect qu’un dedans de prison. Sous le vitrail, en bas, le soleil arrive si moche qu’on l’éclipse avec une bougie. Tout le monde s’est mis à suffoquer. Le Passage devenait

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<sup>429</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 644.

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*, 785.

conscient de son ignoble asphyxie !... On ne parlait plus que de campagne, de monts, de vallées et merveilles...<sup>431</sup>

Even as circumstances worsen, Ferdinand's parents emphasize that which sets them apart from workers: they define themselves by their lack of debt and their moral superiority. These are the things they must protect as a family:

Ma mère, c'est pas une ouvrière... Elle se répète, c'est sa prière... C'est une petite commerçante... On a crevé dans notre famille pour l'honneur du petit commerce... On est pas nous des ouvriers ivrognes et pleins de dettes... Ah ! non. Pas du tout !... Il faut pas confondre !... Trois vies, la mienne, la sienne et puis surtout celle à mon père ont fondu dans les sacrifices... On ne sait même pas ce qu'elles sont devenues... Elles ont payé toutes les dettes.<sup>432</sup>

Michelle Perrot explains that this self-sufficiency was a key way for those at the lowest rungs of the bourgeoisie to delineate themselves from the working classes. Their attitude reflects a differing conception of community, too: whereas mutual aid was necessary and expected among poorer communities, the *petite bourgeoisie* took pride in not asking for help.<sup>433</sup>

Maintaining a spotless reputation as a family is essential to securing employment for Ferdinand. Ferdinand's uncle Édouard remains in the background for most of the novel, but he is a second father figure for Ferdinand, his connections instrumental in getting Ferdinand several of his jobs. Rereading *Mort à crédit* in 1938, André Gide was especially touched by Céline's treatment of Édouard's character, which he considered

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 568. These are Céline's ellipses. Throughout, omitted passages will be indicated with brackets: [...].

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 541.

<sup>433</sup> Michelle Perrot, "Drames et conflits," 4:251-2.



evidence of a “sensibilité singulière” in Céline’s writing.<sup>434</sup> Though Ferdinand’s parents are loath to ask for help and Ferdinand himself is uneasy with his lack of independence, the family must rely on Édouard, and must eventually borrow money. The family is not able to protect Ferdinand, nor is Ferdinand able to provide for them. Extensions of the family and alternatives to it prove inevitable in Ferdinand’s story.

After the success of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, a novel that was hailed as an important populist work and as a necessary intervention in a novelistic tradition that had become formulaic and “academic,”<sup>435</sup> and that almost won the Prix Goncourt, critics had high expectations for *Mort à crédit*’s depiction of the lower classes and their struggle for social mobility. The success of the first novel doomed the second to unfavorable comparisons.<sup>436</sup> Compared to the earlier novel, *Mort à crédit* fell flat, confusing critics with its pessimism, obscenity seemingly for obscenity’s sake, and disconnect from reality.

In his review of the novel for *L’Action Française*, Robert Brasillach mocks Céline, imagining the novelist flipping through Chautard’s *Dictionnaire de l’Argot*,

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<sup>434</sup> Gide, *Essais critiques*, 304.

<sup>435</sup> René Trintzius celebrated *Voyage au bout de la nuit* as a counter to the “académisme” of the novel. In contrast with the formulaic works saturating the market, there was something alive about Céline’s writing: “A la vérité on compte les ouvrages où l’on sent un homme, un homme qui se livre des pieds à la tête, du cœur au corps. Quand vous lisez le *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, dès les trente premières pages, vous savez que vous êtes en présence d’un homme. Le choc est plus que rare, inoubliable” (“Review of *Voyage au bout de la nuit*,” 486).

Other critics lauded Céline for his use of vulgar language and foregrounding of base behavior, which gave Céline’s characters their humanity. Pierre Descaves, for instance, assured readers of *L’Avenir* that “M. Louis-Ferdinand Céline n’entend pas épater son lecteur ni le choquer ; ses crudités, la bassesse même de son héros procèdent d’une veine trop naturelle pour qu’on puisse dresser une protestation au nom de la morale outragée (in *Les Années roman*, 475-6).

<sup>436</sup> Céline remained bitter long after the chilly reception of *Mort à crédit*, letting his bitterness fuel his pamphlets (Godard, *Céline*, 241-2). Céline was also furious that his publisher, Denoël, refused to publish certain passages, leaving entire pages blank (Ibid., 219-20).

meticulously translating every word of a first version of the novel, written in standard French, into slang, like a student: “ce roman [...] me paraît une sorte de gigantesque *traduction*.” He found the novel boring, monotonous, overworked: “Je crois bien que M. Céline est la victime d’une méthode.”<sup>437</sup>

In Nizan’s eyes, Céline’s second novel had no chance of living up to his first: “Ferdinand n’est plus que le reflet mort de Bardamu. *Mort à crédit* n’est plus qu’un immense pastiche du *Voyage*.” This judgment was political and aesthetic: whereas Nizan respected Céline’s engagement in *Voyage au bout de la nuit* — in which he condemns the war and colonialism — he felt that *Mort à crédit* failed to engage with reality.

Not only did this second novel lack engagement with politics — “Céline ne dénonce plus aujourd’hui que les pauvres et les vaincus” — Nizan appears personally offended that the only explicit mention of politics was through a prostitute who voices communist ideology. Moreover, Nizan aligned Céline’s aesthetic project with that of the Symbolists, asserting that like the Symbolists, Céline distorts reality.<sup>438</sup>

On ne s’en rend d’abord point compte parce qu’il remplace les ornements célestes par des ornements excrémentiels, les aurores spirituelles par les érotismes des passages de l’Opéra ou des fossés des fortifications. Là où le symboliste des années 90 écrivait azur, M. Céline écrit merde. Le parti pris me semble identique dans l’un et l’autre cas [...] Il s’agit toujours de

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<sup>437</sup> Robert Brasillach, “Louis-Ferdinand Céline: *Mort à Crédit*,” *Action Française*, 11 June, 1936.

<sup>438</sup> Paul Nizan “Pour le Cinquantenaire du Symbolisme: *Mort à crédit*, par Louis-Ferdinand Céline,” *L’Humanité*, 15 July, 1936. Also cited in Nizan, *Pour une nouvelle culture*, 205-6. André Gide was in fact interested in how *Mort à crédit* Céline’s novel departs from reality: “Ce n’est pas la réalité que peint Céline; c’est l’hallucination que la réalité provoque; et c’est par là qu’il intéresse” (*Essais critiques*, 304). Gide writes this in “Les Juifs, Céline et Maritain,” in which he defends *Bagatelles pour un massacre*, arguing that anyone who knows Céline and his work would understand that this tirade is not meant to be taken seriously. Gide intends this comment on the unreality of *Mort à crédit* to serve as proof of Céline’s tendency toward “jeu littéraire.” He writes: “S’il fallait voir dans *Bagatelles pour un massacre* autre chose qu’un jeu, Céline, en dépit de tout son génie, serait sans excuse de remuer les passions banales avec ce cynisme et cette désinvolte légèreté” (305).

donner de la réalité une représentation totalement symbolique, à travers les écrans déformants d'un langage concerté.<sup>439</sup>

This overworked, academic approach took the life out of Céline's text: "Céline écrit, comme les symbolistes, une langue savante, c'est-à-dire morte." For the young Communist novelist, this unrealistic and cynical portrait of working-class reality could only impede social change.

### *Storytelling*

Let us turn to the beginning of the novel, where Céline sets up his discussion of solitude and community. Echoing the traditional opening line, "Nous voici encore," of a music hall clown,<sup>440</sup> the middle-aged Ferdinand begins with a direct address to the reader, as he reflects on his isolation: "Nous voici encore seuls. Tout cela est si lent, si lourd, si triste... Bientôt je serai vieux. Et ce sera enfin fini. Il est venu tant de monde dans ma chambre. Ils ont dit des choses. Ils ne m'ont pas dit grand-chose. Ils sont partis. Ils sont devenus vieux, misérables et lents chacun dans un coin du monde."<sup>441</sup> He literally finds himself alone, his neighbors just having left his home, where they had come together to remember their concierge, who has just passed away. But this musing on his isolation also refers to Ferdinand's loneliness in life: the people in his life have gradually left him.

From this initial scene, Céline introduces not only the solitude that is so central to his main character's story, but also the possibility of family beyond one's family of

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<sup>439</sup> Nizan "Pour le Cinquantenaire du Symbolisme."

<sup>440</sup> David Hayman, "Céline," in *Critical Essays on Louis-Ferdinand Céline*, ed. William K. Buckley, (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1989), 163.

<sup>441</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 511.

origin. One possibility of family is found in solidarity between people living through similar difficult circumstances. Ferdinand and his neighbors in the Passage are united by the inhumane, equalizing conditions of their environment.

This group that gathers in Ferdinand's home at the beginning of the novel celebrates "une douce et gentille fidèle amie." This is a woman that Ferdinand cared for, a woman he worried about when she first began to cough.<sup>442</sup> Though Ferdinand struggles to find friendship and support with his family, he succeeds in developing ephemeral relationships with different people he encounters throughout his life.

Here, we learn that language, specifically storytelling, also has the power to create intimacy and consolidate community. Those who gather in Ferdinand's home do not simply commiserate; they speak. Ferdinand's father is a great storyteller, and his tales of the family's unique experiences allow the other residents of the Passage to escape from their harsh reality and to imagine a different life together. Through storytelling, he shares experiences outside of the Passage, such as when the Bardamu family lend a table to a bourgeois family for a party and get a look at how these people live or when they visit the Exposition Universelle.<sup>443</sup> With this power to imagine other possibilities, stories also veer into the territory of lies used to exploit people. Courtial des Pereires is a powerful storyteller, but the stories he tells use republican rhetoric of individualism and then of traditional values to manipulate others.

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<sup>442</sup> Ibid.

<sup>443</sup> Ibid., 585, 580-1. Céline really attended this Exposition Universelle as a child. He remembered the Exposition as "une énorme brutalité," with people fighting their way to the Galerie des machines: "la galerie des machines, pleine, pour la première fois, de métaux en torture, de menaces colossales, de catastrophes en suspens. La vie moderne commençait" (*Cahiers Céline*, ed. Jean-Pierre Dauphin and Henri Godard, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 1:78). This Exposition parallels another exposition, that of 1937, which would have been under construction when this novel came out in 1936.

Ferdinand's own storytelling sometimes gets him in trouble. He is fired from his first apprenticeship for telling stories to another apprentice rather than focusing on his work and in adulthood, patients at Ferdinand's clinic complain about his inappropriate stories ("on m'a déjà fait mille réflexions désagréables pour les histoires que je raconte"<sup>444</sup>). He seems compelled to connect with people through language. Though Ferdinand's father is a storyteller, he discourages his son from creative pursuits of his own, certain that "ça prépare pas à la vie."<sup>445</sup> Faced with negative responses to his love of language, Ferdinand turns to silence as the novel goes on as a means to resist the expectations placed on him.

Creativity is at the heart of the one solid, meaningful relationship Ferdinand has in his family: his relationship with his grandmother. This character is based on the author's real grandmother, Céline Guillou. She took the young Louis-Ferdinand Destouches to the movies and exposed him to other elements of popular culture that provided his first taste of art. He chose Céline as his pen name in honor of his grandmother.<sup>446</sup>

Céline's innovative style reinforces the importance of this freedom through language. Céline resist the realist novel form by inserting passages in his novel from the tale of King Krogold, the series Ferdinand reads in a children's magazine and then adds onto. The tale not only serves as an escapist narrative that brings the reader out of the Passage; it also introduces an additional masculine ideal that stands alongside the hard-working sacrificing vision of masculinity Ferdinand's father represents. Further, the anti-

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<sup>444</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 512.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, 565.

<sup>446</sup> Godard, *Céline*, 26-7.

modernist, anti-progress perspective that this tale combines with the Céline's language of decay, disorder, and excrement to critique contemporary society.<sup>447</sup>

The novel itself is framed as an act of oral storytelling by the first-person narrator. Throughout, Céline's language use reflects oral speech, though as critics have remarked since the novel's publication, there is a poetic quality to the language that must not be mistaken for a simple attempt to reproduce popular dialect. The orality of Céline's language, filled with the hesitations, exclamations, and vulgarities, bring the reader into this unifying space of storytelling as well.

Céline's language use was considered by critics of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* to be key to his successful depiction of the humanity of his downtrodden characters. George Bernanos, for instance, asserted that Céline's language use in *Voyage* had an artificial quality that allowed the novelist to get at a deeper truth about the lives of the poor. He approved of "ce langage inouï, comble du naturel et de l'artifice, inventé, créé de toutes pièces à l'exemple de celui de la tragédie, aussi loin que possible d'une reproduction servile du langage des misérables, mais fait justement pour exprimer ce que le langage des misérables ne saura jamais exprimer, leur âme puerile et sombre, la sombre enfance des misérables."<sup>448</sup>

In his review of *Mort à crédit*, Nizan addressed the question of Céline's orality, noting that Céline is not the only one of his contemporaries interested in capturing a "style parlé." He argues that Céline's attempt is a clear failure: "il n'obtient jamais que des effets stéréotypés." Like Bernanos, Nizan highlighted the poetic quality of Céline's

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<sup>447</sup> Alice Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality: fascism, literature, and French intellectual life*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 25.

<sup>448</sup> George Bernanos, "Au bout de la nuit," in *Les Années roman*, 485.

language use, stressing that far from mimicking popular speech patterns, Céline subjected his language to a contrived poetic rhythm. In his review of the novel, Nizan cites several passages from *Mort à crédit* that break down into perfect eight-foot lines of verse.<sup>449</sup>

Amid the negativity of his review of *Mort à crédit*, Brasillach did find something nice to say about Céline's language use. He admits that he found Céline's awkward, short sentences and familiar language did convey "une émotion vraie," as in the narrator's description of his grandmother's death. However, the critic is careful not to take things too far: "Je ne suis pas sûr que ce soit là de l'art."<sup>450</sup> Though critics struggled to see past the contrived vulgarity of Céline's style, language is still fundamentally at the heart of human connection in Céline's second novel.

### *Crowds*

As Alice Kaplan has pointed out, the large crowds that crop up throughout *Mort à crédit* can be seen as a "pseudofamily."<sup>451</sup> Sometimes Ferdinand's neighbors, this extended family that help raise Ferdinand and share in his social circumstances, form crowds. When they become crowds, though, these people become anonymous and threatening.

Ferdinand is always surrounded by community through his neighbors. This is a group formed through the shared experience of difficult circumstances. Everyone who lives on this street seems to have high hopes for Ferdinand's success, just like his parents

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<sup>449</sup> Paul Nizan, "Le Cinquantenaire du Symbolisme." For an analysis of Céline's plurivocalism and blending of linguistic registers, see Henri Godard, *Poétique de Céline*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1985).

<sup>450</sup> Brasillach, "Mort à crédit," *Action Française*, 11 June, 1936.

<sup>451</sup> Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 117.

do. When Ferdinand returns from England, for example, everyone is excited to see how much he has grown and they all share in his parents' disappointment when they realize that Ferdinand has not learned any English.<sup>452</sup> There also always seem to be a few men stationed near the entrance to the arcade, watching the neighbors' comings and goings, maintaining order.

As with Serge's story and *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, there is the suggestion that a family-like community may be found among those marginalized by bourgeois society. The initial impression of each of these crowds is one of unity: the crowd moves in unison, prompted by the same impetus. However, each scene of the crowd turns ugly: these scenes point more toward the nightmarish character of a community forced into the shared dehumanizing experience of marginalization and the inhumane conditions of living in close quarters.

During a feverish hallucination, Ferdinand imagines his neighbors becoming an uncontrollable crowd. A customer in Ferdinand's mother's boutique takes on gigantesque proportions as she drapes herself in layers of lace. This giant woman leads Ferdinand and his neighbors out of the Passage, toward the Exposition Universelle. However, when they arrive, they realize that they have been duped. The Exposition is no longer open, and the giant woman flies away, leaving the neighbors to rush home. The scene becomes frantic and violent as they run back to the Passage and then struggle to get in, the gates being locked. Unable to return home, Ferdinand and his father join the other crowds of Paris, shuttled around by omnibuses. The episode ends with father and son hearing the artist

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<sup>452</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 784-5.



“La Méquibre,” perform at the Comédie Française, after the roof has been lifted off of this theater.

The vision is at first exuberant: the giant “faisait des signes... Et qu’on se dégrouille tous ! Qu’on s’échappe vivement du Passage... Et dare-dare !... Et tous en chœur !... Y avait pas une seconde à perdre !”<sup>453</sup> This is an invitation to the reader, as well, to participate in the collective excitement. The ellipses here give the impression that the members of this group talk over one another, contributing to this passage together. The increasingly choppy exclamations respond to this call to hurry. Together, we rush to exit the Passage and clutch the woman’s underskirts so that she can sneak us into the Exposition. They finally escape from the claustrophobic Passage: “On s’est même précipités vers la sortie tous ensemble... On a envahi les Boulevards...”<sup>454</sup>

Once free from the Passage, the woman grows to one hundred times her size and the residents of the Passage rush “comme des souris” to hide in her skirts. Enthusiasm has already turned to a frantic, violent urgency. In the rush, Madame Juvienne, the perfumer, is killed, suffocated by a mound of jasmine flowers and then trampled by a herd of elephants. Her death prefigures the violence that is to come. Ferdinand does not dwell on this death, continuing to accelerate the description: “Il fallait pourtant qu’on avance !”<sup>455</sup> And again, Céline emphasizes togetherness: “Tous les gens qu’on avait connus, ils couraient maintenant tous ensemble dans les profondeurs de la dame.”<sup>456</sup>

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<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 586.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 589.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 590.

Everyone works together as the group exits the Passage: “C’était le moment, tout le monde l’a compris, de se racornir encore un peu [...] On s’écrase, on suffoque, on rampe tout à fait à plat.”<sup>457</sup> Céline’s sentences get choppy, speeding up the pace of this passage as Ferdinand and his companions near the exit, the language helping push these characters to freedom outside of the Passage. This repetition of “on” emphasizes the collective nature of this action and invites the reader into this effort.

Over the course of the scene, Céline’s depiction of the crowd of neighbors shifts from specificity to anonymity. This group moving in unison is made up of individuals that Ferdinand knows well, and at first, he calls them by name. When they begin following the cliente, Ferdinand walks alongside his mother, father, aunt Armide, and uncle Édouard, as well as

tous les petits vauriens du Passage... les revendeurs en parapluies... Visios aux blagues à tabac... les demoiselles du pâtissier... Ils attendaient Madame Cortilène la fatale, elle était là à côté de nous... Son revolver en bandoulière, rempli de parfums... Elle vaporisait tout autour... Madame Gounouyou, des violettes, celle qui restait enfermée depuis tant d’années à cause de ses yeux chassieux, et le gardien tout en bicorne, ils se concertaient à présent [...] et le petit Gaston lui-même, un des petits relieurs décédés, il était revenu tout exprès.<sup>458</sup>

In the face of the shifting reality of this vision, Ferdinand imagines these well-known neighbors with specificity and nostalgia, connecting each one to a personal memory. They come together to make something beautiful and uplifting.

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 590.

<sup>458</sup> Ibid., 587.

But then things turn ugly: as they move closer to the Place de la Concorde, where the entrance to the Exposition is located, Ferdinand shrieks, startling the giant woman, who lifts her skirts, causing all of the Passage residents to fall:

Elle a retroussé d'un seul coup tous les volants de ses jupes...son pantalon...plus haut que la tête...jusque dans les nuages... Une vraie tempête, un vent si glacial s'est engouffré par-dessous qu'on en a hurlé de douleur... On restait figés sur le quai, abandonnés, grelottants, à la détresse. Entre le remblai et les trois péniches la cliente s'était envolée !... Tous les voisins du Passage ils sont devenus tellement blafards que j'en reconnaissais plus aucun... Elle avait trompé tout son monde ! La géante, avec ses larcins magnifiques... L'Exposition y en avait plus !... Elle était finie depuis longtemps !... <sup>459</sup>

A vision that represented upward social mobility at first dissolves into a betrayal by the bourgeoisie. The promise of freedom and progress that attending the Exposition represented is simply a trick. At the same time, the neighbors who earlier in the scene Ferdinand named one by one become unrecognizable.

Suddenly, the group, frozen in place, becomes frantic, full of energy: they run, they shape-shift, they are violent. As they run back to the Passage, individual faces stand out as individuals suffer horrible fates: Ferdinand crushes la Méhon and watches his uncle get crushed. His aunt disappears, too. But the familiar becomes increasingly horrific and unrecognizable: Ferdinand's mother becomes a double of the giant woman, lifting her skirts to run, as her legs grow thinner and thinner, until they resemble the spindly legs of a spider and she trips and gets left behind.

Despite these disappearances, the group grows in number, and by the time they arrive at the Passage, they push on the gate with the force of a thousand people: "On s'y met à mille, on s'y met à cent pour pousser la lourde... [...] On est dix mille à faire

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<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 591.

pression.” The crowds in the distance add to their numbers: “Par les échos de la rue Gomboust, il nous arrive des rafales des cent mille cris de la catastrophe... Ce sont les foules qu’on écrabouille au large de la place Gaillon... C’est la furie des Omnibus... La fantasia qui continue”<sup>460</sup> The pressure Ferdinand and his neighbors exert on the gate to the Passage seems to also crush this distant crowd.

This scene carries a symbolic dimension: the collective escape from the Passage can be seen as a metaphor for social mobility. From the beginning, Ferdinand and his neighbors join together to lift themselves above this middle-class woman, laughing when they find that her clothes are filled with stolen goods. It seems that the material differences that make up this class division are simply an illusion. Though the escape is exciting, there is a real potential for danger, and the language of people being crushed — Madame Juvienne suffocates under a mound of flowers and is trampled by elephants, Ferdinand’s uncle Édouard is “écrasé” — heightens the comparison to social ascension. Unable to reenter the Passage, the neighbors then fade into the anonymous crowds of Paris, subject to the movement of the city. This scene, along with an earlier hallucination of Ferdinand’s, also set at the Place de la Concorde, echoes the violent demonstrations of February 6, 1934, a connection that accentuates the symbolic dimension of a lower-class struggle for rights in this scene.

In a later scene, the crowd of neighbors band together against Ferdinand when he fights with his father and tries to strangle him. When Ferdinand comes home drunk hours later than expected, neighbors help Ferdinand, asking if he has been out celebrating a new job offer and telling him how worried his parents have been. But the neighbors change

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<sup>460</sup> Ibid., 592.

their tone dramatically minutes later when they burst into Ferdinand's family's home to stop Ferdinand from trying to strangle his father and then a neighbor, Hortense, who has come in to see what is going on.

When the group of neighbors enter the apartment, they are described like the other crowds in the novel, first through the thunderous sounds they make, which echo through the Passage, and then their appearance in indefinite numbers: "J'entends les échos, les rumeurs. Voilà une ruée qui s'amène... ça cavalcade dans la boutique, ça grouille en bas dans les marches... Ils se poussent tous à chaque étage... Ils envahissent." They proceed to attack Ferdinand: "[I]ls m'encerclent, ils m'engueulent, ils groument... Ils me filent des menaces, des injures [...] Les autres vaches, ils me rebousculent, ils me poussent [...] Ils sont extrêmement brutaux [...] Je prends tous les coups [...] Il m'en arrive de tout le monde [...] Ils me crachent encore dans la gueule."<sup>461</sup>

Ferdinand and the neighbors become brutal as a group, and this invasion of the home also results in the breakdown of the façade of orderliness and harmony Ferdinand's family has worked so hard to construct. The crowd serves as witness to the private sphere. For this family so concerned with maintaining an image of respectability, the surveillance of neighbors poses an inherent threat. This violent scene only emphasizes that reality. These crowds of neighbors that provide care but also competition and surveillance are an ambivalent presence in Ferdinand's life.

Céline's unsettling scenes of community gathering stands in marked contrast with the idealized image of crowds in poetic realist<sup>462</sup> works like Marcel Carné's 1939 film, *Le*

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<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 823-4.

<sup>462</sup> Poetic realism was a movement of the 1930s and 1940s. Though their messages were fatalistic, these films presented stylized, idealized images of the French working classes. Filmmakers of the poetic realist

*Jour se lève*. In this film, Jean Gabin plays François, a worker who barricades himself inside his apartment after killing a rival out of feelings of jealousy and possessiveness. In one scene, a crowd of neighbors and coworkers gathers around Jean Gabin's building. The camera zooms in on several of these people as they shout words of encouragement and attest to Gabin's innocence and good character. Far from communicating any idealizing populist message, Céline's scenes of working-class community emphasize the horrible side of such connections formed just out of a shared experience of exclusion and oppression. As we have seen, Nizan also writes against this sort of image: though Serge Pluvinage experiences a certain level of camaraderie among other marginalized groups in Paris, the shared experience of exclusion is not enough to build a strong community. Nizan contrasts this fragmented community with the strong loyalties generated by collective revolutionary action.

### *Work families*

Each time Ferdinand takes a job, he is inserted into a new family. These businesses, like Ferdinand's mother's boutique, are all connected to the owners' homes, so there is no clear division between private and economic spaces. This structure offers a glimpse at the dramatic personal problems affecting these outwardly respectable middle-class families. As Ferdinand exclaims later, rejecting flirtatious advances from a young English girl, families harbor rot, despite appearances: "Ça va les tendresses ! les aveux !

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movement included Marcel Carné, Jean Renoir, Jean Vigo, Julien Duvivier, and Jean Grémillon. See Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap, 2005).

C'est comme les familles ! Ça se repère pas du premier coup, mais c'est pourri et compagnie, c'est fourmillant d'infection."<sup>463</sup>

Each of these situations opens the possibility of real human connection — he finds camaraderie with the other young men he works with and he experiences sexual development through relationships with his employers' wives — but each time, Ferdinand is left exploited or alone. These financially determined relationships do not allow for real support. Ferdinand does try to resist these environments, though, rehearsing his confrontation with his father.

Ferdinand works hard at Berlope's store, but Ferdinand's friendship with a fellow apprentice, André, endangers his job. The two boys bond through an act of storytelling, opening up to one another about their abusive home lives. They also take first steps toward sexual development together: the two children show each other their genitals, ogle female customers together, and try to make sense of these customers' flirtatious behavior.<sup>464</sup>

However, when André realizes that Ferdinand wants his job, he grows distrustful. Noticing that André is reading the King Krogold stories in "Les Belles Aventures Illustrées," Ferdinand tries to use storytelling to repair the friendship: he offers to tell his friend how the story continues in future issues and share his own extensions of Krogold's story. However, Ferdinand is fired when he is caught telling these stories. Ferdinand's mother is incensed when Lavelongue tells her he is firing her son: "Tu restes, me dit-il, des heures caché au grenier !... Au lieu d'avancer ton travail !... Et tu débauches le petit

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<sup>463</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 713.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*, 640-2.

André !... Il t'a surpris ! Ne nie pas !... En train de raconter des histoires ! des dégoûtantes même ! [...] Avec un enfant du peuple ! Un enfant abandonné !”<sup>465</sup> Not only are the stories evidence of immorality, Ferdinand’s mother also does not approve of her son wasting time with a boy so far below the station she wants for her son. Competition in the workplace makes real friendship difficult for boys with similar backgrounds and Ferdinand’s responsibility to his family comes in direct conflict with this child’s need for companionship.

Through his subsequent apprenticeships, Ferdinand participates in new forms of intimacy but still struggles to connect with others. In the first case, Ferdinand is used. In the second case, Ferdinand closes himself off, resisting a relationship that he wants. First, Ferdinand works for Monsieur Gorloge, a small-time jeweler who “donnait surtout dans la bague, la broche et le bracelet ouvragé, et puis les petites réparations.”<sup>466</sup> Gorloge runs his small business from his apartment: in addition to Monsieur and Madame Gorloge, Ferdinand works in this domestic space alongside another apprentice, Robert, and a worker, Antoine.

It is clear early on that the dynamic of this business is off. “Ça marchait jamais très fort l’harmonie chez les Gorloge. Ils s’engueulaient à pleins tuyaux et encore plus fort que chez nous.”<sup>467</sup> Monsieur Gorloge and Antoine clearly do not get along. But the extent of this disharmony is really visible in the sexual depravity of the place. From the beginning, Madame Gorloge is sexualized through the gaze of the three male employees.

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid., 649.

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 657.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 664.



Ferdinand bonds with these other men when they spy together on Madame Gorloge through holes Antoine has found or drilled in the walls.<sup>468</sup> When Monsieur Gorloge leaves town for ten days, this sexual depravity reaches a peak. Madame Gorloge makes it clear that she is the one who holds the power in this household, through her sexuality. Antoine and Madame Gorloge openly have sexual relations with each other in front of Robert and Ferdinand. Then, Madame Gorloge rapes Ferdinand so that she can steal from his pocket a valuable jewelry commission that he is holding until Monsieur Gorloge returns.<sup>469</sup> The blame falls on Ferdinand and he is fired. Ferdinand suspects Madame Gorloge but does not feel he can say anything against the “bonne patronne.”<sup>470</sup> This ordeal further humiliates Ferdinand’s parents and threatens Ferdinand’s chances of getting another position.

Nevertheless, Ferdinand’s uncle is able to help secure him an opportunity at an English boarding school, Meanwell College. Ferdinand will help Mr. and Mrs. Merrywin run the school and will also have the chance to learn English. Céline spent a couple of stints abroad to learn languages, his parents hoping that knowledge of modern languages, more than formal schooling, would give their son an advantage in a future career in business.<sup>471</sup>

This episode with the Merrywins is different from Ferdinand’s previous two apprenticeships. It is a sort of utopia: Ferdinand physically improves in the fresh air on the English coast and in addition to the tenderness he feels toward Nora Merrywin, his

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<sup>468</sup> Ibid., 666-7.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid., 675-84.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., 685.

<sup>471</sup> Godard, *Céline*, 27-8.

employer's wife, he proves himself to be caring, looking after a student with special needs named Jonkind. He finds that real human connection is not incompatible with his responsibilities.

Nora is the inverse of Madame Gorloge. She is subtle and angelic. Though Nora is gentle, she clearly holds power in her relationship with Ferdinand, not only because of their economic relationship: Ferdinand describes this graceful woman as bewitching, her influence on him as sorcery.<sup>472</sup>

Despite the ostensibly harmonious environment of Meanwell, though, Ferdinand glimpses evidence that all is not well in the Merrywin house. What appears so perfect at first becomes a failed utopia: he notices numerous bottles of whiskey being carried upstairs to Mr. Merrywin and sees Nora's sadness. When a new rival school opens up nearby to which the Merrywins' students begin transferring, the Merrywins crumble.

Even before these troubles, though, Ferdinand resists life in England. Ferdinand frames his resistance to participating in communal life in England as heroic and masculine: "Pendant trois mois j'ai pas mouffeté ; j'ai pas dit hi ! ni yep ! ni youf !... J'ai pas dit yes... J'ai pas dit no... J'ai pas dit rien ! C'était héroïque."<sup>473</sup> But this resistance to learning English and to participating in communal life is connected to past repressions inflicted by others. When Nora reads a medieval tale from an illustrated book that echoes the medieval tale of King Krogold Ferdinand read as a child, Ferdinand is on the verge of giving into the happiness he feels there and talking, but he holds himself back, remembering how he has been punished in the past for his love of stories:

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<sup>472</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 722, 724.

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*, 735.

J'en voulais plus moi, merde ! des histoires !... J'étais vacciné !... Et le petit André alors ? C'était pas lui, la crème des tantes ?... Il m'avait pas fait grimper ? Des fois ? ... La fine tournure de charogne ! Je m'en rappelais pas moi des légendes ?... Et de ma connerie ? A propos ? Non ? Une fois embarqué dans les habitudes où ça vous promène ?... Alors, qu'on me casse plus les couilles ! Qu'on me laisse donc tranquille !... Manger ma soupe, mon oignon !... J'aime mieux la caille que des histoires !... Gi ! C'est pesé ! C'est dans la fouille !... J'ai même montré que j'étais un homme, je me suis barré avec Jonkind, je l'ai laissée seule lire son bouquin...<sup>474</sup>

Bitter from the resistance to creativity he has faced in past jobs and his failure to patch up his relationship with André through stories, Ferdinand struggles to ignore the part of him that loves imagining and creating. He now enacts the silencing and isolation he has experienced in the past on himself and he frames this self-regulation as manliness (“J’ai même montré que j’étais un homme”).

Elsewhere, Ferdinand appears to be physically unable to act the way others expect him to, as if his body asserts its independence. Ferdinand wants to make his uncle Édouard proud since this man found him this position, but he cannot:

En somme, j'étais bien rebelle, bien ingrat, bien rebutant... J'aurais pu m'y coller un peu... que ça m'aurait pas écorché... pour lui faire plaisir à lui... Mais au moment où je cédaï je sentais le fiel me reprendre toute la gueule... toute la vacherie me remontait... un ragoût abject... Sûrement merde ! Que j'apprendrais rien !... Je retournerais plus charogne qu'avant ! Je les ferais chier encore davantage !... Des mois déjà, que je la bouclais !... Ah ! C'est ça ! parler à personne ! Ni ceux d'ici ni ceux de là-bas !<sup>475</sup>

This strong reaction comes from a desire for revenge. He positions himself against everyone around him. It is also as if he has a physiological reaction against doing something just to please someone else, with this reference to “fiel,” bile or venom, that

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<sup>474</sup> Ibid., 751.

<sup>475</sup> Ibid., 749.

overcomes him. Céline, too, marks his independence through the bile and other bodily fluids he spatters across the pages of his novel. Ferdinand goes on, listing previous employers and coworkers who wronged him in different ways. Though he feels grateful toward Édouard, even this generosity has been tainted by the pressure his father puts on him to take advantage of this situation.

After Ferdinand has been in England for eight months, he and Nora consummate their relationship. Ferdinand at first attempts to reject Nora, afraid that she will compromise herself and afraid that he will subject his family to another scandal. Ferdinand is thrilled, though, to be with Nora, but as soon as they achieve this new level of intimacy, the situation shifts to the other extreme: Nora says goodbye to Ferdinand and then runs off and drowns herself.<sup>476</sup> Ferdinand, unable to wake a drunken Mr. Merrywin and overwhelmed with a feeling of helplessness, leaves that night for France, not even taking his bags. After all the energetic resistance he put up and the overflowing emotion and physical sensation he just felt with Nora, Ferdinand feels he has lost his energy: “Je pense... J’imagine... Je suis épuisé... je suis sonné... Et pas bien du tout au fond !... Je suis à bout quoi !... Sans char, je peux plus arquer... Je peux plus remonter au Meanwell... Je veux plus tenter même... Je m’appuye... Je peux rien faire moi !... j’y suis pour rien dans la salade ! Rien du tout !...”<sup>477</sup> He grieves both this woman he loved and the possibility of nurturing human connection their relationship represented.

In these apprenticeships, Ferdinand grows in a version of masculinity based in sacrifice of personal interests. He frames his self-silencing as a heroic resistance but it is

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<sup>476</sup> Ibid., 769-70.

<sup>477</sup> Ibid., 773.

clear that he acts out of fear of being hurt in the ways he was hurt before. Each time, Ferdinand finds that meaningful human connection, independence, and personal dignity are at odds with these family-like situations in which he finds himself. Although Ferdinand finally finds a situation that is really nurturing, he understands his identity and independence in such a way that rejecting the expectations everyone has for him is the only way he can retain his sense of self.

As with Bernard Profitendieu, Ferdinand does not take any significant positive action toward defining his identity or affirming his masculinity. Rather, he asserts his independence in a negative way, by refusing to participate in groups that place any expectations on him, even when these expectations are not out of keeping with his character. This is perhaps an exaggerated interpretation of the self-control valorized by the Third Republic.

### *Courtial des Pereires*

Ferdinand's last apprenticeship is different. With the help of a connection of uncle Édouard's, Ferdinand secures a position as secretary to Roger-Marin Courtial des Pereires. This character, a sort of renaissance man — an inventor, writer, editor, aeronaut, etc. — embodies the energy and optimism that has had no place in Ferdinand's life in the Passage. Courtial's story was about the only thing that redeemed *Mort à crédit* in Brasillach's eyes. He found the picaresque tone that Courtial's entrance into the novel introduces "fort amusant" and felt that in this part of the novel, Céline "abandonne toutefois, ou à peu près, son goût de l'obscène pour l'obscène."<sup>478</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Brasillach, "Louis-Ferdinand Céline: *Mort à Crédit*."

Courtial is both part of respectable society and outside of it: his manuals on various scientific topics are part of the public-school curriculum,<sup>479</sup> but his hope of financial success depends on his ability to manipulate people and take advantage of their gullibility and base desires. Ferdinand is no longer with an outwardly respectable family like the Gorloges or the Merrywins, but he finds a more loving home than he experienced in those situations. The word father, “père,” even appears in Courtial’s name. Ferdinand’s relationship with this mentor allows him to really explore a new way of being a man that does not depend so much on social obligations.

In some ways, Courtial represents a traditional masculinity: he is a clear authority figure, sure of his command of reason, physically fit despite his advanced age, he is a self-made man, skilled in many areas of his life. “Son aplomb, sa compétence absolue, son irrésistible optimisme le rendaient invulnérable aux pires assauts des pires conneries...”<sup>480</sup> The relationship between Ferdinand and Courtial is successful in part because it is mostly one-sided: Ferdinand, good at listening and “fermant [s]a gueule” after his years of apprenticeships, serves as a sounding board for Courtial.<sup>481</sup>

This man’s power manifests in his forward-thinking inventions and in his manipulation of language and truth. He has no patience for arguments, intervening to assert his reasoning: “Ses verdicts, dans tous les cas, les plus subtils, les plus douteux, les mieux sujets aux ergotages devenaient des vérités massives, galvaniques, irréfutables, instantanées... Il suffisait qu’il intervienne... Il triomphait d’autorité...”<sup>482</sup> Indeed, there

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<sup>479</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 848.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*, 832.

<sup>481</sup> *Ibid.*, 850.

<sup>482</sup> *Ibid.*, 833.

is something sublime about this man. Though he bends the truth and plays on people's gullibility and vulnerability to win them over to his crazy ideas, he also seems to truly believe in his projects. Courtial, making his own rules and gladly living on the margins of bourgeois society, offers a refreshing contrast to characters like Ferdinand's parents, who experience social failure even though they attempt to conform to social ideals.

Courtial is a creative force in this novel, perhaps the only one aside from King Krogold, gleaned through Ferdinand's reading, and the narrator's own act of storytelling. Courtial is prolific, his knowledge expansive: "il arrêta jamais de produire, d'imaginer, de concevoir, résoudre, prétendre... Son génie lui dilatait dur le cassis du matin au soir..."<sup>483</sup> This dilation characterizes Courtial's speech. He speaks in enumerations and chains of exclamations. The subtitle of his journal, *Génitron*, encapsulates this speech pattern: "*invention, trouvaille, fécondité, lumière !*"<sup>484</sup> Céline in fact dedicates nearly half of the novel to the Courtial episode, almost as if the author struggled to contain him.

Courtial contrasts with the order that characters strive for elsewhere in the novel, and Ferdinand is happy in this new, more open space that flouts the social rules and ideals Ferdinand has been held to his whole life. For Courtial, a certain level of chaos is a positive thing. He is comfortable in the chaos of the *Génitron* offices: "Il se retrouvait à merveille dans ce chaos vertigineux... [...] Il avait le sens du désordre... Il plaignait tous ceux qui l'ont pas... Tout l'ordre est dans les idées ! Dans la matière pas une trace !..."<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 835.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 837.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid., 845.

In a description of the offices of *Génitron* that veers into Courtial's life philosophy, he describes the disorder of the offices as harmony:

le désordre, mais mon ami c'est la belle essence de votre vie même ! de tout votre être physique et métaphysique ! Mais c'est votre âme Ferdinand ! des millions, des trillions de replis... intriqués dans la profondeur, dans le gris, tarabiscotés, plongeants, sous-jacents, évasifs... Illimitables ! Voici l'Harmonie, Ferdinand ! Toute la nature ! une fuite dans l'impondérable ! [...] En l'Harmonie, Ferdinand, la seule joie du monde ! La seule délivrance ! La seule vérité !... L'Harmonie ! Trouver l'Harmonie ! Voilà... Cette boutique est en Har-mo-nie ! [...] comme un cerveau pas davantage ! En ordre ! Pouah ! En ordre ! Enlève-moi ce mot ! cette chose ! Habituez-vous à l'Harmonie ! et l'Harmonie vous retrouvera ! Et vous retrouverez tout ce que vous cherchez depuis si longtemps sur les routes du Monde...<sup>486</sup>

Disorder is the stuff of his inventions, of progress. This fecund mess, and Courtial's whole career, needs to exist outside of the bounds of social nicety, outside of the republican ideals of self-governance and order for it to be fertile.

Courtial's projects do not pay off, though. He falls into financial trouble and tries to save himself with increasingly mad plans. After living with Courtial for a time, Céline's narrator remarks that Courtial was pettier and more calculating than he first realized: "C'était pas extrêmement brillant tout à fait en dessous. Il était même assez carne, mesquin, envieux et sournois..."<sup>487</sup> Ferdinand is fooled by Courtial's performance of brilliance, just like everyone around him. In Ferdinand's relationship with Courtial, *Mort à crédit* conducts an exploration of mentorship that intersects with themes of *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* and *L'Enfance d'un chef*. Like Olivier Molinier, Bernard Profitendieu, and Lucien Fleurier, Ferdinand is drawn in by Courtial's promise of renewal, progress,

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid., 846.

<sup>487</sup> Ibid., 849.



life that his family does not represent. Impressed by this larger-than-life figure, seduced by the kind of language he uses, Ferdinand soaks up all his mentor has to teach like a sponge.

*Courtial's crowds*

Courtial, more than any other character in the novel, brings people together through language. With this language, he encourages collective dreams of technological mastery over the natural world. He is skilled at tapping into such dreams of progress as well as individual ambition. But the self-interested motives of those he gathers together create the potential for conflict.

Crowds are necessary to Courtial's financial success. Hopeful inventors — “la bande des grands maniaques, les abonnés du « Génitron »...<sup>488</sup> — always swarm around the journal's offices. They are another level of the exciting disorder in the offices. And yet, this community, drawn together by the dream of individual glory, also has the potential to turn competitive and hostile.

The dangerous potential of Courtial's crowd of inventors becomes apparent when Courtial launches a competition with a life-changing prize. The competition is funded by a curate, who is interested in creating a cloche that could retrieve treasure from shipwrecks through suction. The curate's entrance into the novel parodies a *deus ex machina*: he proposes to fund this competition when Courtial is at his lowest: recent projects have failed and Courtial and his wife find themselves in debt: “Il nous offrira

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<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

toutes ses ressources, sa propre fortune, il voulait bien tout risquer...”<sup>489</sup> The curate’s language use is a degeneration of Céline’s narration and Courtial’s linguistic excitement: the priest’s language is nonsensical, untruthful. It is obvious from this caricature that religion does not hold a claim to truth in this novel.

As soon Courtial announces the competition for a “Cloche au Trésor Fond des Mers,” the office is flooded with inventors: “ce fut une véritable orgie [...] C’était la ruée continuelle ! [...] Toute la journée c’était la foire!... Le magasin, il fléchissait sous le poids des curieux...”<sup>490</sup> Inventions soon begin to pour in and the offices have become even more disorganized: The narrator compares the office to a stable, remarking, “Déjà que c’était normalement une terrible pétaudière, alors depuis cette cohue, y avait plus un sifflet d’espace !... Un fumier énorme !...”<sup>491</sup> This is another moment of excess, but as the days go on without any word from the curate, the mess starts to take on a feeling of rot: “Une litière en pleine éruption... absolument écœurante... du plancher jusqu’au deuxième... papelards fendus, bouquins crevasses, manuels pourris, manuscrits, mémoires, tout ça rendu en serpentins... nuées de confetti voltigeurs... Tous les encartages dépiautés, en vrac, en mélasse...”<sup>492</sup> The inventors who have been in and out of the offices have even defaced the statues of Hippocrates and Flammarion that legitimate the journal. This group is enthusiastic and productive, but also destructive.

The crowd is present, too, when the competition falls apart. After an anxious period waiting for the curate, he visits the office to look through the submissions and pay

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<sup>489</sup> Ibid., 937.

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., 946.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 951.

<sup>492</sup> Ibid.

Courtial. When he sees some of the designs for his cloche, he launches into a fit of exuberance, throwing the papers around the office, rolling in them.

A crowd gathers to watch police take the curate away, and then they turn to Courtial for an explanation. “Les gens s’attourent devant notre porte.”<sup>493</sup> They gather for entertainment: “Y avait la foule, sous nos arcades... Ils se régalaient, ils perdaient rien de la belle séance... Et les commentaires allaient fort... Ça ruminait énormément...” And they watch greedily as bank notes are sent flying around the office, while Ferdinand does his best to catch them.<sup>494</sup>

Once the police are able to leave with the curate, breaking free from the crowd, the crowd turns their attention to Courtial: “Tous les pilonneurs alors ils ont reflué devant la boutique... Ils comprenaient rien ! Ils arrêtaient plus de nous conspuer...”<sup>495</sup> Céline echoes the water imagery he used before to describe the crowd of neighbors that rush in to prevent Ferdinand from killing his father. The crowd and Courtial’s people are now adversaries, and Céline compares the humiliating arrest of the curate and the failure of the competition to Napoleon’s defeat in the Battle of Trafalgar (“Après un pareil Trafalgar on ne savait plus quelle contenance prendre”).<sup>496</sup> The crowd even begins to take over the narrative through the moment of free-indirect discourse (“Ils comprenaient rien !”).

They also compete with Courtial’s control of language through the incessant noise they make:

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<sup>493</sup> Ibid., 952.

<sup>494</sup> Ibid., 953.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid., 954.

<sup>496</sup> Ibid.

Ça bardait du matin au soir... Et souvent encore dans la nuit ils arrivaient à me réveiller avec leurs vociférations. Un défilé d’hurluberlus exorbités jusqu’aux sourcils, qui se dépoitraillaient devant la porte, gonflés, soufflés de certitudes, de solutions implacables... C’était pas marrant à regarder... Il en surgissait toujours d’autres !... Ils bouchaient la circulation... Une sarabande de possédés !...<sup>497</sup>

Like Courtial, what they say is less important than how they say it, and how much they say. These inventors are blown up, full of hot air, but they talk and they argue: they make noise. Courtial has assembled a group of people who behave in the same way as he does. Céline even participates in the enthusiasm of this crowd, using his diction to multiply the noise, with the choice of the verb “boucher” here echoing the word for mouth (“bouche”).

Simply refusing to let their hopes be crushed, the inventors take over Courtial’s office, figuratively drowning Courtial in ideas: “Ils revenaient toujours plus nombreux, rapporter des nouveaux projets...”<sup>498</sup> As an act of resistance, the crowd of inventors physically occupies the *Génitron* offices, talking and taking up space. They become tangled up in the mess of papers and furniture in the room: “Ils étaient si entassés, tellement grouillants dans la boutique, embistrouillés dans les chaises, raccrochés sur les monticules, emmitouflés dans les paperasses, qu’on pouvait plus rien entrer prendre... Ils voulaient seulement rester là, nous convaincre encore une minute, avec les détails inédits...”<sup>499</sup> As the passage continues, Céline continues his word games, stringing together a series of adjectives formed from past participles ending in -é. Céline repeats the same sounds throughout this enumeration, with a series of adjectives echo syllables

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<sup>497</sup> Ibid.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 956.

<sup>499</sup> Ibid., 954-5.

from previous words: “grouillants” “embistrouillés” “emmitouflés.” The excessive quality of these repeated forms recalls and intensifies the noise of the crowd and the tightly packed environment of the office, making the passage feel heavy, overloaded, crowded.

But the inventors get impatient and obsessive, each one demanding that Courtial fund his invention. The language accelerates and picks up exclamation marks again as the inventors become more frenzied:

Ils faisaient la révolution pour le plaisir d’être emmerdants !... Ils nous en voulaient mille fois plus ! Ils se montraient mille fois plus charognes ! râleurs ! écumeux ! que jamais auparavant qu’on les saignait jusqu’à l’os !... C’étaient des véritables démons !... Chacun gueulait comme à la Bourse pour la défense de son bastringue !... Et puis tous ensemble !... Ça faisait un vacarme effroyable...

Personne pouvait plus attendre !... Chacun fallait qu’on lui construise à la minute ! pas une seconde ! son abracadabrante système !... Que ça fume !... Et que ça fonctionne !... [...] Pour chacun son trésor à lui... !<sup>500</sup>

By tapping into individualist ambitions, Courtial has created a hostile, competitive community. But this situation is not unique to Courtial’s journal: Céline connects this enthusiasm to the stock exchange, placing the inventors in line with the national symbol of capitalism and individualist success.

In response, Courtial, Ferdinand, and the other employees of the *Génitron* yell back, with much more colorful language:

On leur a bien hurlé pourtant qu’on en avait salement marre de leurs entourloupes de dégueulasses... de supporter leur cohue !... que tout ça c’était du bourre mou !... Mon Courtial est grimpé exprès, dans l’escalier tire-bouchon pour leur dire toute la vérité... Il l’a hurlée à tue-tête au-

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 955.

dessus de la foule... Il avait mis son chapeau de forme tellement c'était solennel... Un aveu complet, j'étais là...<sup>501</sup>

Courtial loses this battle of language. He tells the group that the competition is over, but the crowd twists his words into a war cry. Courtial explains, “tout le business était à l'eau !... « A l'eau ! A l'eau !... » Ils trépignaient d'enthousiasme en entendant ces paroles... Ils reprenaient tous en chœur: « Dans l'eau ! Courtial ! Dans l'eau ! A l'eau !... »<sup>502</sup> The crowd becomes Courtial's false echo. If Courtial is a modern demagogue,<sup>503</sup> he has failed here to make his message heard. Or rather, he has been too successful in tapping into the hopes and individualistic aspirations of these people: “Ils savaient tous qu'il faut souffrir quand on a la foi ! La foi qui soulève les montagnes, qui renverse les mers... Ils en avaient une terrible...”<sup>504</sup> In this crowd of individualists, everyone believes that Courtial is also only looking out for himself, lying to them to keep the competition money and glory for himself.

One day, soon after, Ferdinand is overwhelmed by a crowd. As happens most days, a wave of inventors descend on the *Génitron* at the end of the work day “C'est l'instant foireux où tous les magasins relâchent leurs petits maniaques, leurs employés trop ingénieux...”<sup>505</sup>

Il me parvient une grande clameur ! Par la Galerie d'Orléans... ça s'amplifie, ça se rapproche !... C'est beaucoup plus qu'une rumeur... Ça gronde ! C'est l'orage !... C'est un tonnerre sous le vitrail !... Je m'élanç !

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., 955-6.

<sup>503</sup> Alice Kaplan has described Courtial's trajectory in the novel as a “transition from individualist chicanery to demagoguery” (*Reproductions of Banality* 117).

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., 956.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., 958.

Je saute jusqu'à la rue Gomboust, d'où paraissait venir le plus de boucan... Je tombe là sur une horde, des possédés tout hagards, des brutes mugissantes écumeuses... Ils doivent être au moins deux mille dans le long couloir à beugler !... Et il en jaillit toujours d'autres, des rues adjacentes...<sup>506</sup>

Again, the crowd is a sound first. This crowd is not only violent in speech — “Ils hurlent au massacre ! Au meurtre !”<sup>507</sup> — they also act violently, using a cart as a battering ram to break down the arcades in front of the *Génitron*.

After scanning the crowd and noting the inventors he recognizes, Ferdinand realizes that the group has found a new leader. Verdunat has achieved the dream of all of these inventors, having produced his own design for the treasure-hunting cloche. Ferdinand is surprised to see him in the middle of this group: “C’est un comble ! Le voilà lui-même, dépoitraillé, Verdunat !... Il surplombe son appareil ! Il est grimpé sur le sommet ! Il vocifère ! Il rassemble les autres paumés ! Il exhorte ! Il va les relancer à la charge !...”<sup>508</sup> Verdunat is also surrounded by his family, who help him push his cloche to the *Génitron* office: “C’est la farandole... maman, grand-père et petits loupiots.”<sup>509</sup> They send the cloche through the window of Courtial’s office, destroying the place and nearly killing Courtial.<sup>510</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 959.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 960.

<sup>508</sup> Ibid.

<sup>509</sup> Ibid.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid., 961-2.

*Courtial's Familistère*

Rather than help to make others' dreams a reality, Courtial decides to instrumentalize people to get himself out of debt. Courtial's greatest enterprise involves creating a self-sustaining radio-telluric potato farm that employs the children of poor *zonières*, those living on the outskirts of Paris. Courtial places his utopia in line with both paternalistic nineteenth-century social projects and with the fascist youth corps of the interwar period<sup>511</sup> by calling it the "Familistère Rénové de la Race Nouvelle."<sup>512</sup> Like those projects, his farm will offer a solution to social concerns, specifically to the same worries Ferdinand's family faces.

Courtial's advertisement for the project traces a clear continuity between the ideals and assumptions of the past and his present moment. He finds he can convince people to join his cause even more effectively by appealing to internalized ideals about the family. Courtial brings the most explicit discussion of the family into the novel, using precisely the pressure that has caused a rift in Ferdinand's family to convince parents to send their children to work for him. Courtial proclaims his decision to target families: "Les individus c'est fini !... Ils ne donneront plus jamais rien !... C'est aux familles, Ferdinand ! qu'il convient de nous adresser ! Une fois pour toutes, toujours aux familles ! Tout pour et par la famille !..."<sup>513</sup>

Courtial advertises to parents, claiming that sending their children to this potato farm collective will make them good parents because it will make their children healthier,

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<sup>511</sup> Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 117-8.

<sup>512</sup> One such project was constructed in Guise by industrialist and social and political theorist, Jean-Baptiste André Godin. See Roger-Henri Guerrand, "Espaces privés," in *Histoire de la vie privée*, 4:346-50.

<sup>513</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 1008.



provide them with an education, and teach them real professional skills. These are the same pressures that drive Ferdinand's parents' decisions about their son:

C'est aux « Pères angoissés de France » qu'il a lancé son grand appel ! A ceux que l'avenir de leurs chers petits préoccupait par-dessus tout !... A ceux que la vie quotidienne crucifiait lentement au fond des villes perverses, putrides, insanes !... A ceux qui voulaient tenter l'impossible pour que leur petit chérubin échappe à l'atroce destinée d'un esclavage en boutique... d'une tuberculose de comptable... Aux mères qui rêvaient pour leurs chers mignons d'une saine et large existence absolument en plein air !... loin des pourritures citadines... d'un avenir pleinement assuré par les fruits d'un sain labeur... dans des conditions champêtres... De grandes joies ensoleillées, paisibles et totales !... Des Pereires solennellement garantissait tout cela et bien d'autres choses... Il se chargeait avec sa femme de tout l'entretien complet de tous ces petits veinards, de leur première éducation, de la secondaire aussi, la « rationaliste » ... enfin de l'enseignement supérieur « positiviste, zootechnique et potager » ...<sup>514</sup>

Courtial has realized the limits of appealing to people interested in achieving individual greatness. Egos and personal ambition get in the way. This passage elucidates how some of the pressures placed on people like Ferdinand's parents are communicated. The "honte" that so affects Ferdinand's parents is not just shame at not appearing bourgeois enough, but also shame at not appearing to be a good parent (understood in this work to mean raising one's child above one's own social status). These roles are also tied up in a sense of nationalistic duty. Though he uses language of the family, Courtial takes advantage of the social pressures placed on the family to build up his own individualistic project.

This traditionalist message did not just affect families like Ferdinand's: Céline taps into the same kind of rhetoric that characterized totalitarian regimes of the 1930s and 1940s. Alice Kaplan connects Courtial's project to that of the fascists, writing, "Courtial

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<sup>514</sup> Ibid., 1008-9.

has finally understood his times. He has made the transition from individualist chicanery to demagoguery, from romantic to futurist, from shaper of machines to people mechanic.”<sup>515</sup> He has understood, in other words, that it is more effective to tap into general internalized social anxieties about the family rather than individualist dreams. Courtial enacts a National Revolution *avant la lettre*, anticipating the rhetoric that would win general French support for this traditionalist project. Céline mocks such moralizing rhetoric, showing Courtial’s language to be cynical and profit-driven.

Amazingly, though, this exploitative scheme may lead to the only family in the novel capable of supporting young people. There is a real sense of community on the farm and the children benefit from the freedom and fresh air the farm affords. The potatoes, unsurprisingly, do not grow. As a result, the tough *zoniers* get to take control of their destiny, working together to steal food from nearby farms to feed the group. And the language used shows a sense of community. Ferdinand refers to Courtial as “notre Courtial,”<sup>516</sup> to the children as “nos mômes.”<sup>517</sup> “Nos pionniers eux ils prospéraient, ils profitaient de l’indépendance !... On leur imposait pas de contrainte, ils faisaient en somme tout ce qu’ils voulaient !... même leur discipline... eux-mêmes !”<sup>518</sup> Though its name brings to mind utopic, paternalistic housing for workers of the nineteenth century, Courtial’s familistery gives these children ownership over their lives. Though it has no hope of serving its intended purpose, this farm is successful in building a sense of

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<sup>515</sup> Kaplan, *Reproductions of Banality*, 117.

<sup>516</sup> Céline, *Mort à crédit*, 1014.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*, 1015.

community and of collective ownership for the children. As in Ferdinand's earlier experiences, the group unites in the face of challenging circumstances.

Following the rules and trying to make honest social progress has not worked out for Ferdinand, and this communal life offers a different possibility. With this Familistère episode, Céline critiques the place of the family in French society, and in particular how inaccessible that ideal is for the lower classes, but he also shows a hopeful image of community in unlikely, hostile circumstances. Throughout his childhood, Ferdinand struggles to sustain just such relationships based in a shared experience of difficult circumstances. However, he has repeatedly found these relationships impossible in the context of different living and work environments because of the social and economic pressures to which Ferdinand and his peers are subjected. He lives in a world where financial well-being and friendship are incompatible. It is only in the total absence of rules and expectations that a real community seems able to spring up.

When the Familistère falls to pieces — the farm fails and Courtial commits suicide, racked with debt and crushed that his farm has not worked out — Ferdinand wants only to get away. Though his uncle Édouard encourages him to take his time and find a good opportunity, — agency Ferdinand has never before been granted — Ferdinand makes the impulsive decision to join the army.

This is a concern Ferdinand has expressed before: when he first goes to live with Édouard, after attacking his father, Ferdinand worries about remaining dependent on his uncle. Though his uncle is supportive and gives Ferdinand plenty of space, he thinks, “Ça pouvait pas s'éterniser... Je pouvais pas prendre des racines... Il était gentil, mon oncle, mais précisément... Et puis alors comment vivre? Rester toujours à sa charge?... C'était

pas sérieux...”<sup>519</sup> Ferdinand is unable to make a place for himself while dependent on someone else. Though it may be tempting to put down roots with his kind uncle, Ferdinand knows that he must resist this temptation.

After Courtial’s suicide, Ferdinand decides to join the army, and this move provides a path away from family obligations and a rejection of the kind of future his parents envision for him. The last line of the novel, “Non, mon oncle,”<sup>520</sup> solidifies Ferdinand’s rejection of his family. This conclusion brings the reader to the moment where *Voyage au bout de la nuit* picks up Ferdinand’s story. And yet in enlisting, Ferdinand relinquishes his independence, escaping into the power structure of the Third Republic, just like Serge Pluvillage in *La Conspiration*. Perhaps the certainty of finding community in the army, the choice of the larger family of the French nation, is most important to Ferdinand. Read alongside the negative depiction of the army in *Voyage au bout de la nuit*, though, this conclusion is overly optimistic.

This very continuation of Ferdinand’s story, through the framing device of an older Ferdinand narrating his past, resists the finality of Serge Pluvillage’s trajectory. Ferdinand’s endpoint as a writer, narrating his own story in the first person, is itself an assertion of the independence and creativity of the individual that suggests a possibility for redemption through the creative process.

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Gide, Sartre, and Céline all create characters who move between different groups and role models on the margins of bourgeois society. Though these different groups have

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid., 829.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid., 1104.

the potential to foster individual growth, all three authors warn that any alternative family-like group still presents an equally great, if not greater, threat to individual free will and freedom of expression.

In all of these works, a question emerges about the individual's will power in these relationships, as well as the suggestion that the ability to resist the influence of a role model may be evidence of character growth. Though Olivier Molinier proves up to the task, the acts of self-censorship and denial of personal identity in which Bernard, Lucien, and Ferdinand engage, though framed as heroic and moral, are clearly harmful to these young men. The refusal on the part of these three characters to recognize where their individual identities differ from national ideals, or to go beyond simply rejecting what they do not like, is an exaggeration of the impact of Third Republic ideals of citizenship.

These works all preceded their authors' active engagement in political life. Gide would flirt with communism in the 1930s and then abandon it, returning to his apolitical interest in the individual after a visit to the Soviet Union left him disillusioned. Sartre, though clearly interested in situating his work in the historical moment, did not articulate his project of engaged literature until after the war. Céline was still supported by readers on the Right and Left at this time, though his anarchic tendencies made critics on the Left nervous. Shortly after the publication of this novel, he would jump head-first into politics and break definitively from the left with the publication of *Mea culpa* and his notorious antisemitic pamphlet, *Bagatelles pour un massacre*.

The lack of a clear political perspective in *Mort à crédit* offers a much more pessimistic view of the protagonists' options than in works like *La Conspiration* or *Le*

*Sang Noir*. Not one of the works studied in chapters four and five presents a really positive outlet for the frustrations the characters face. Even Olivier, who seems to have the most successful ending, entering a relationship with Édouard, has chosen as his guide a man with very limited perspective and a failed writer, not an ideal choice of mentor for an aspiring author. In all three works, there is not ultimately a clear message about whether the protagonists are just as well off remaining close to their families as they are leaving them.

## Conclusion

### *Plus ça change*

The interwar period was a time of significant change for France: gender roles began to shift, class consciousness grew and France elected its first socialist government, artists and writers employed new techniques to create literature engaged in social and political critique. Everything seemed possible, and yet official policies and political rhetoric remained largely unchanged. Though the Great War of 1914-1918 may have opened up new possibilities for women in the public sphere and created space for the expression of non-normative sexuality,<sup>521</sup> the dominant message remained one of a society based in the strength of the patriarchal family.

Depictions of the family in the interwar novel are necessarily political, getting right to the heart of the assumptions on which the French social order was based. Reading with attention to the family allows us to understand the way in which social norms were communicated and enforced and to see the different kinds of social groupings authors explored as alternatives to the family. Even in works that do not articulate a particular political ideology as a solution to France's problems, depictions of the family and family-like relationships critique the existing order and imagine new possibilities for French society.

Guilloux, Nizan, Némirovsky, Mauriac, Colette, Martin du Gard, Gide, Sartre, and Céline suggest that prioritizing reproduction of the population and wealth leads not to growth and strength but rather to stagnation. By featuring young people moving through a crisis of adolescence, they reframe the post-World War I moment not as a tragic

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<sup>521</sup> See Carolyn Dean, *The Frail Social Body*.

endpoint but rather as a new beginning for the nation. In the face of rigid social structures that allow little space for individual identity and creativity to flourish, these authors propose outlets that might allow for development that the traditional family structure does not support. These include crime, affairs, suicide, writing, political engagement, and simply moving away from home. Rebellious, destructive acts, especially by female characters, counter the official narrative of reproduction.

Nevertheless, characters in the novels studied here struggle to translate their rebellious impulses into positive social and political action. They learn that joining different groups may mean sacrificing their values and individualistic ambitions. Lacking legitimate outlets outside of the family, female characters risk solitude and shame when they reject the social role laid out for them.

Yet even when characters fail to find a path toward social change, the novels that contain them are evidence of positive action. These works exhibit a new understanding of the role literature can take in the public sphere: their authors, many of whom represent a younger generation that came of age during the interwar period, engage in their own acts of rebellion against the existing literary order and assert the place of literature in the public sphere. They critique the novel's role in perpetuating bourgeois republican values and find innovative ways to renew the novelistic form. Even Céline's novel, despite all its pessimism, is erupting, energetic, uncontained.

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In spite of the critiques interwar authors carried out against the presumed stability of the bourgeois family and its privileged place in republican society, another national crisis shook France, and with it came a traditional return to the family. The rapid French



defeat in World War II and subsequent occupation of the nation introduced a crisis of virility.<sup>522</sup>

In response to the defeat of 1940, the Vichy government launched a National Revolution, grounded in ideals of a return to the land and a return to the traditional patriarchal family. The motto “Travail, Famille, Patrie” replaced the republican motto, “Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité.” Faced with the real separation of families as a result of the war — some two million French men were imprisoned in prisoner-of-war camps —, the government doubled down on policies and propaganda to strengthen the family. Divorce became much more difficult to obtain and the government cracked down on abortion. Robust propaganda campaigns reinforced a normative vision of the family and traditional gender roles.

As the historian Miranda Pollard explains, the pressure placed on women to commit to this traditional role took on a new language at this time: women were called to accept personal sacrifice for the nation just like their husbands who were willing to give their lives on the war front. This sacrifice was referred to as the *impôt de sang*, a blood tax that all French people owed to their country.<sup>523</sup> The modest increases in mobility

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<sup>522</sup> As Wolfgang Schivelbusch explains, the defeat was framed as a gender reversal for France and Germany. Previously, French commentators had tended to frame Germany as an uncivilized, emotional girl in need of protection by her rational, masculine French neighbor (Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2003), 121). Further, the Occupation was figured in literature from the time as a “viol” (violation, or rape) of the French national body. Némirovsky, for instance, describes a German officer thus: “il violait le cœur de la maison” (Irène Némirovsky, *Suite Française*, in *Oeuvres complètes*, 2:1742). As this metaphor indicates, this was also a moment of extreme intersection between private and public spheres. Not only did occupying troops live in French homes, often sharing them with the homeowners, French people also subjected one another to intense surveillance. With so many Frenchmen away in prisoner-of-war camps, women were responsible for recuperating some kind of moral victory through their behavior on the home front.

<sup>523</sup> See Miranda Pollard, *Reign of Virtue*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 42-70. The message was largely the same under Nazi rule in Germany. For more on family policy and the expectations placed on women in the German context, see Claudia Koonz, *Mothers in the Fatherland*, (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1987).

granted to women during the interwar period were quickly rolled back. After the war, women who violated these expectations were subjected to public humiliation, incarceration, and even, in the case of legislation punishing abortionists, execution.

Not only did the government work to reinforce traditional family ideals, opposing divorce and abortion, there was also an ever-present threat of *délation*: French people sent thousands of anonymous letters during the Occupation, revealing to the authorities that a certain family was Jewish, that a woman was cheating on her husband, or that a doctor was secretly performing abortions. In a toxic atmosphere of denunciation, the strength of the nation was thought to depend upon mutual surveillance.

In this context, Simone de Beauvoir would write, “Désormais, la famille serait souveraine, la vertu allait régner, il faudrait parler dévotement de Dieu dans les écoles. Je reconnaissais cette chaude bêtise qui avait obscurci mon enfance : elle accablait officiellement le pays tout entier. [...] Vichy, en bloc, était pour moi un honteux scandale.”<sup>524</sup>

### *The family home in the Occupation novel*

Two Occupation novels illustrate how family continued to be mobilized in literature to comment on the political order. Both Vercors’s *Le Silence de la mer* (1942) and Irène Némirovsky’s *Dolce* (1942), the second volume of *Suite Française*, depict the relationship that develops between a Frenchwoman and the Nazi officer quartered in her home. The officers in each work are nearly identical, both an amalgamation of the

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<sup>524</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force de l’âge*, in *Mémoires*, ed. Jean-Louis Jeannelle and Éliane Lecarme-Tabone, (Paris: Gallimard, 2018), 1:788.

stereotypes disseminated by Nazi propaganda<sup>525</sup> that framed the Occupation as a step toward a relationship between equals: France and Germany would soon be like siblings. Both works pursue this idea of a family that would transcend national borders by emphasizing the human connection the officer and the female protagonist form in each work. But in both works, nationalist divisions ultimately triumph.

*Le Silence de la mer* has a clear message of resistance: though tempted by the utopian notions the sentimental officer von Ébrennac shares, which he has learned from Nazi propaganda, the Frenchwoman and her uncle, who lives with her, refuse to say a word to him. Vercors' novel reinforces the conservative image of the family as a stronghold against immorality. Nationalism, and the French family prevails. The French home, though physically invaded, remains a symbol of moral resistance.

*Dolce* is more complex: again, a French woman, the wife of a prisoner of war, Lucile Angellier, is drawn in by the sympathetic German officer Bruno von Falk. Némirovsky situates this relationship within the broader context of an occupied town: many of the young women have relationships with German soldiers, but Lucile also faces immense pressure from other women, especially older ones, to resist in the way Vercors's characters do, by refusing to speak or even to look at the occupier. Lucile's mother-in-law, who lives with her, follows this kind of mute resistance. For most of the novel, Lucile's mother-in-law appears to be the enemy of both Lucile and Bruno, subjecting the two to hostile surveillance, making the home feel like a prison for Lucile.

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<sup>525</sup> Nathan Bracher, *After the Fall*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 226. Though *Le Silence de la mer* and *Dolce* are strikingly similar, Némirovsky would not have had access to Vercors's work (Ibid., 196).

Despite disapproval from Lucile's mother-in-law, the relationship between Lucile and Bruno goes further than the relationship between Frenchwoman and officer in *Le Silence de la mer*. In long conversations, Lucile and Bruno bare their souls to one another, developing a deep bond. Through her relationship with Bruno, Lucile creates a safe and free space within the family home: "Cette amitié entre elle et l'Allemand, ce secret dérobé, un monde caché au sein de la maison hostile, que c'était doux, mon Dieu ! Elle se sentait alors un être humain, fier et libre. Elle ne permettrait pas à autrui d'empiéter sur ce qui était son domaine propre."<sup>526</sup> In this relationship, Lucile and Bruno can escape from historical reality.<sup>527</sup> Though Némirovsky encourages sympathy for Lucile and Bruno, there is no question that this possibility of escape from an oppressive home life through love for a Nazi is an uneasy and impossible utopia. Bruno shatters these illusions one day when he grabs Lucile forcefully, lustfully. Lucile violently rejects Bruno, suddenly overwhelmed with an awareness of all that marks Bruno as an enemy:<sup>528</sup> an enemy to France, but also to Lucile's vision of the private world they could create together.

The novel's conclusion is ambivalent. Though Lucile rejects Bruno and helps a neighbor escape after he shoots a German interpreter, this novel does not provide an

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<sup>526</sup> Némirovsky, *Suite Française*, 1795-6.

<sup>527</sup> Nathan Bracher cites this passage as an example of Lucile's attempt to escape historical reality (*After the Fall*, 247).

<sup>528</sup> "Ce qui les faisaient ennemis, ce n'était ni la raison ni le cœur mais ces mouvements obscurs du sang sur lesquels ils avaient compté pour les unir, sur lesquels ils n'avaient pas de pouvoir. Il la touchait avec de belles mains fines mais ces mains dont elle avait souhaité la caresse, elle ne les sentait pas, tandis que le froid de cette boucle de ceinturon pressée contre sa poitrine la glaçait jusqu'au cœur. Il lui murmurait des mots allemands. Étranger ! Étranger ! ennemi, malgré tout et pour toujours ennemi avec son uniforme vert, avec ses beaux cheveux d'un blond qui n'était pas d'ici et sa bouche confiante" (Némirovsky, *Suite Française*, 1822).

image of French unity or moral strength. Instead, French family and community are just as hostile, if not more so, than the Germans. Nationalism is clearly an unnatural construct, maintained through hostile surveillance among members of a population, and preventing real human connection.

Like *Le Silence de la mer*, this is a story of resistance, but it is also a rejection of the values of the National Revolution and a complicated problematization of nationalism. Némirovsky shows a national family built on a lack of trust. Like her interwar works, *Dolce* rejects the very basis of national assumptions about the social order by foregrounding a woman who attempts to shirk the expectations placed on her so that she might pursue personal pleasure. Creating this character who so clearly questions official state rhetoric about the war and the role of women was an important act of resistance for Némirovsky against this government and society that rejected her.

A focus on the particular enables Vercors and Némirovsky to complicate the official black-and-white narrative of national conflict. Within the walls of the family home, lines between enemies and victims are blurred and acts of patriotic resistance represent sacrifices of at least personal happiness and at most a vision for a better, more human world. However, in the political context of the second World War, these Occupation novelists found themselves just as constrained as their characters, forced to choose between resistance and collaboration. The resigned acceptance of historical reality in these novels stands in contrast to the energetic social experiments of the interwar novel. The latter opened up models to which authors could return as they imagined alternative futures for France in the post-war era.

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