

# Fatal Contraptions, Misconceptions, and the Painful Pangs of Parturition

## Norman Simms

### Introduction: The World We are Born into is a Blur

As described by an infant researcher, the infant spends the first six months, for the most part, in an associative dream-like state of consciousness with a very blurred apprehension of reality and largely uncoordinated motor skills.<sup>1</sup>

It is not only because of the size of the human brain, and other physical features of upright-walking *homo sapiens* that we are all born many months prematurely—and that is, as anyone who has lived through or witnessed childbirth, an often difficult, painful, and dangerous process. Not only that (though physical size does matter) but also because in many ways our neotenic state gives us the advantage of never quite fitting comfortably into the world; be it emotionally, psychologically, or intellectually. Still very much an external foetus,<sup>2</sup> the immature infant requires a complex and constant nurturing environment if it is to survive and operate successfully in the world where we human beings have few of the strengths and instinctive skills of other animals. Neuronal development in the brain well into childhood (and adolescence, we now must add), in other words, goes hand in hand with the creation of organized communities and, in a dynamic

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Janus, ‘Transformations in Emotional Structures throughout History’, *Journal of Psychohistory*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2016), p. 189. The key authority Janus alludes to here is D. Stern, *The Diary of a Baby* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Janus speaks of the first so-called “extra-uterine early year”. See ‘Transformations in Emotional Structures’, p. 189. The expression “external foetus” is one often used by Lloyd DeMaus, as are its analogous cousin term “cultural playground” for the so-called games that are played in later life and draw on the rules, songs, temporary space-and-time markers of the childhood *ludes*. This notion of humankind as a game-playing animal and history as its rationalized interpretation of such ritualized performances goes back to Johan Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* (1938).

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series of spurts of mental, social and historical influences, we create the so-called second nature for ourselves which is called history.

Such a second nature, however, is fraught with its own difficulties, and leads us to play out our remaining years of physical and psychological development in a blurry field of dreams, a sandbox of confused emotions and tensions. These periodic surges of development include regressions driven by the imperfect and complex powers created and unleashed by unperceived or misunderstood ‘others’, some of these energies causing positive results, others disabilities and anti-social deficits, yet none of them operating in a smooth, coherent and completely predictable manner. Indeed, it is the great differences in the formation of neuronal circuitry in the brain, the expression of hormonal triggers, and the moment-by-moment transformations in the natural and built environment, that gives us the impetus to achieve consciousness and rationality: something that is beyond other living entities, however specialized and complex they may become as individual beings or collective entities.

More than that, Ludwig Janus, quoted above, argues that our mental life (brain neuronal growth, complex and intricate socialization)—conscious and unconscious—begins earlier than the moment of actual birth and extends past infancy, childhood and adolescence, so that the blurry apprehension of reality and uncoordinated control of motor skills is not really ever transcended while being, at the same time, the grounds upon which refinements in perception, social cooperation, and inter-generational memories can develop. The world of our feelings, thoughts, and neuronal activities seems like a ‘phantasmagoria’, in the sense of a confusion of illusions and delusions, partly real and partly self-deluded constructions.

Yet in this article, I am going to use ‘phantasmagoria’ in a different sense, one that combines its actual performance as an entertainment founded on optical illusions and mechanical effects, and another, a concomitant sense, in which the term stands for the technological enhancement of our mental activities, in other words, as an epistemological engine to produce new aspects of personality, knowledge, and insight. For this reason, another way to say what is a biological description of our mind at birth in the head note to this article (and it appears initially as a shock, a blur pregnant with meanings and misunderstandings) is what Tom Gunning argues from an historicist point of view:

before the nineteenth century the world of imagination and images, *phantasia* and *phantasmata*, constituted the medium not only of vision but also of psychology generally, as images were the means by which

objects penetrated consciousness, dreams occurred, artists created works, lovers became obsessed, magical influences were conveyed, memories were preserved—and ghosts appeared.<sup>3</sup>

Didier Delmas brings together much modern thinking about the way the phantasmagoria provided a means of crystallizing traditional European ideas of how the body and mind in the world were shaken apart during the Revolution of 1789. Delmas aptly remarks:

The phantasmagoria of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were one of the first symptoms of the movement toward the construction of the modern subject. It took the turning of the camera obscura inside out—making it into a magic lantern—to illuminate the subject profiling the horizon of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup>

Delmas then points out what is to be a key theme in this article, that the epistemological crisis was caused by the French Revolution, as the mentality of most people were caught between “revolution and reaction,” as Peter Brooks suggests; “a world where reason had lost its prestige, yet the Godhead has lost its otherness; where the Sacred has been re-acknowledged but atomized, and its ethical imperatives psychologized.”<sup>5</sup> But where Brooks places the depiction of this liminal space between the epistemologies of rationality and irrationality in the rise of Gothic novels, such as Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* or Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Delmas suggests:

The phantasmagoria as a genre was also the expression of the fear of seeing that reason was suddenly contingent on the health of the body; and that mind and body together were subjected to instability and decay. The concretion of the mind within the body was destabilizing a system of knowledge that had relied on the autonomy of thought to make sense of the reality of the world.<sup>6</sup>

The phantasmagoria, as a public entertainment or private performance, provided the metaphorical construct by which a new population of citizens could imagine their difficult negotiations through an always unfamiliar world inhabited with archaic fears and unworldly desires. The world into

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Gunning, ‘To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision’, *Grey Room*, no. 26 (2007), p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Didier Delmas, *Why 1839? The Philosophy of Vision and the Invention of Photography* (PhD thesis, McGill University, Montreal, 2005), p. 63. As with most dissertations, this one contains much information and cites many texts unavailable elsewhere; it must be used cautiously.

<sup>5</sup> Peter Brooks, ‘Virtue and Terror: *The Monk*’, *ELH*, vol. 40, no. 2 (1973), p. 249.

<sup>6</sup> Delmas, *Why 1839? The Philosophy of Vision*, p. 64.

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which they were born, by its very uncanniness, made their behaviour and their place seem uncertain, precarious, and dangerous. For some single persons, families, communities, and historically coherent religious and national entities, however, the overriding identity and external controlling social mechanism of monitoring and punishing transgressive behaviour does not reach the same levels of refinement and reflexivity as others. There is, thus, an imbalance between the component parts of social control and individual intellectual comprehension. In brief, in our modern world of sensitive intercommunal relationships between individuals, small groups, and larger social entities, there is a plethora of historical traps and ideological contraptions. Much of this, alas, is also claptrap, merely jargon and self-defensive boasting that tries to hide the failure to come to grips properly with the basic psychological (including the older sense of ‘moral’) problems involved. Nevertheless, the audiences who went to see phantasmagoria were mixed assemblies of the ‘citizens’ of the post-Revolutionary populace who now paid to see why and how they had been left out, and find themselves actually seated in the middle of the performance-space and cast as co-operators of the illusions being exposed. If they were duped, then that was part of the show; the thrill, the fun, the realization that you were being tricked.

Another big problem to overcome in the study of how the inward turn of scientific<sup>7</sup> as well as fictional narrative<sup>8</sup> is brought about is that which stumbles on the approach that assumes human minds are not just machines or harmonious internally-self-correcting organisms, but that the organism seems to float in neutral space, without emotions, without hostile forces impinging on it, and without confronting its own decomposition and decay through disease and old age. From conception through birth and the onset of fatal events the human being is buffeted from trauma to trauma, and the pathos-laden memories of such painful and humiliating occurrences return in private dreams or in culturally encoded rituals, iconic images or verbal cues that act as triggers for the return of the repressed.

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<sup>7</sup> Eric R. Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain, from Vienna 1900 to the Present* (New York: Random House, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> The phrase was first used in the title of a history of modern novels by Erich Kahler, *The Inward Turn of Narrative*, trans. Richard Winston (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973).

Delmas's thesis rather awkwardly expresses<sup>9</sup> the concept of how late seventeenth-century popular superstitions could be imagined as part of everyday discourses and entertainments and arouse shared feelings of dread and pleasure, while if put on the spot in academic situations, legal proceedings or other formal occasions such wild imaginings would be denied and treated with scorn (as seen in the novels of James Hogg):

For the ordinary citizens of the Enlightenment the hideous monsters populating the netherworld were as real as anything else. They readily believed that ghostly characters would sometimes cross the forbidden boundary between the world of shadow and that of light to seek revenge, or when (impudently or imprudently) summoned by black magic. At that time, spirits may have been the product of uncontrollable forces but they never were that of the viewer's own mind.<sup>10</sup> Hallucinations, later understood to be the creation of an ailing mind caused by an unwell body, were then identified as apparitions—actual concretions of spiritual matter. Under the pretence of debunking the common belief in apparitions some ingenuous showmen created an entire new genre of spectacle that used a sophisticated apparatus based on a powerful magic lantern and cleverly designed slides. One of these men of mystery, Étienne-Gaspard Roberson [sic], baptized his own show 'The Phantasmagoria', a name that came to designate all such displays.<sup>11</sup>

Hogg's narrator in *The Perils of Man* indicates that superstitions were not just left over (the residue of)<sup>12</sup> ideas or images of previous belief systems, but could be felt as "an overwhelming"<sup>13</sup> presence; they were a heavy

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<sup>9</sup> With no little touch of class prejudice, racial stereotyping, and postmodernist misattribution of irrationalism as common in the past: or what used to be called 'sophomoric' thinking.

<sup>10</sup> One need only read Chaucer or Shakespeare to see how silly and exaggerated such a statement is; though it is certainly what Romantic novelists would fictionalize as the mind of the unsophisticated lower classes, the naïve groups of women, madmen and children, and the people or 'folk' who dwell on the margins or just on the other side of civilization.

<sup>11</sup> Étienne-Gaspard Robert's stage name was Robertson. See Delmas, *Why 1839? Philosophy of Vision*, p. 63.

<sup>12</sup> The original sense of a superstition was the material remains left on an altar following a ceremonial sacrifice to the gods. The deity was to have received the burnt fat and bones that went up into the sky, while the officiants and other participants were to have eaten the burnt meat, both constituting a communal meal; what was left over, therefore, was meaningless. Later developments of the term made it refer to beliefs and practices which had been overtaken or replaced by a subsequent religion. Finally, superstition came to mean folk beliefs or 'old wives' tales" that did not stand up to common sense or rational inquiry.

<sup>13</sup> James Hogg, *The Three Perils of Man: or War, Women and Witchcraft. A Border Romance* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme and Brown, 1822), vol. 1, p. 61.

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weight of something other than the material of ordinary common sense, something experienced by all classes of society, even the learned and the powerful. Professional and traditional storytellers evoked the power, architecture and decorations of buildings and ritual performances triggered collective feelings, and political actions recapitulated archaic motivations and consequences.<sup>14</sup> These ancient memories could arise as “some sudden frenzy of delirium” or slip in unseen and unheard like “a phantom they could not escape.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, they were in the root sense an inexplicable “phenomenon” or an “*eclaircissement* ... fairly within the bounds of their comprehension.”<sup>16</sup>

Before we examine a literary moment in this process of epistemological crisis, the time when what has always been known and trusted suddenly slips away, seems to fade out or lose focus, and so becomes an unrecognized otherness (‘alterity’ or ‘non-text’), let us examine what Giovanni Careri says concerning the attempt by Aby Warburg to find a place between image, ritual action and myth, the *Gegensätze der Lebensanschauung* (the contradictions of life) or *Erlebnis* (the experience of lived reality):

We propose to reformulate this idea by suggesting that the *things* which are the object of the dialogue between image, myth and rite are located in a space which is neither linguistic, visual nor performative. It is difficult to name precisely this space and the *things* found there. These things are in fact neither actions, words nor images; they are simultaneously that which the dialogue between action, word and image presupposes as a common ground. The hypothesis implied by my interpretation of Warburg’s ‘method’ is that there where an effective dialogue between action, word and image knots itself, it is the complexity of the world and the regeneration of its inexhaustible otherness which is enriched.

As Hogg’s narrator explains, such “apparitions” or “phenomena” erupt into the experience of susceptible minds in “a state of perturbation,”<sup>17</sup> thus more than an idle fancy or stray shiver of fear; something is uncanny because it seems appropriate and yet unfamiliar. Significantly, Hogg’s text keeps returning to the metaphor of a theatrical performance, with stage and

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<sup>14</sup> Hogg, *The Perils of Man*, vol. 1, p. 65.

<sup>15</sup> Hogg, *The Perils of Man*, vol. 1, p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> Hogg, *The Perils of Man*, vol. 1, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> Hogg, *The Perils of Man*, vol. 2, p. 17.

audience, players and setting, but above all with a series of projected “pictures.”<sup>18</sup>

Freud’s deep-probing introspective gaze here further manifests as a sensitive and highly subjective response to the uncanny experiences, a reaction to the breeze-like shuddering of the repressed memory that now surges back into consciousness in some unrecognizable form, like the nymph bearing fruits into the room full of Renaissance revellers, all of them in carefully posed and static harmony to one another, while she is wafted in on the archaic winds, seen in her unruly hair, her fluttering garments and her somewhat shocked facial expression. These lapses from strict scientific protocol into case histories that read more like popular fiction than clinical reports are something that Freud says he cannot control. That very inability to restrain his impulses consoles him; not, however, by absolving him from responsibility, but also by reassuring him that he has grasped at the fleeting moment of revelation. As Georges Bataille would later speculate, these formless forms that Hogg<sup>19</sup> and other nineteenth-century novelists describe keep shape-shifting, fading away, reappearing in new guises, and keeping the whole from fixing into some kind of permanence.

### **Historical Tropes, Traps and Ideological Contraptions**

A less perfect machine survives fundamentally, by a sort of transmigration of souls, in the more apparently perfect and complex machine or from some angles by killing it.<sup>20</sup>

In order to describe the faulty epistemological machinery that grinds out all the modern claptrap, however disguised as reason and scholarship it may seem, we need to dredge up an old term for such a mechanism, *contraption*. This is not only because such an old-fashioned word forces us to recognize inside its orthography (rather than its etymology) and sound-structure the traps and contrariness in its very construction, but because it makes us realize that we are talking about something clumsy, clunky, and inefficient; an old-fashioned machine that produces lies, half-truths, and half-baked truisms; and at the same time, it reminds us of the contractions that drive the engine of parturition.

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<sup>18</sup> Hogg, *The Perils of Man*, vol. 2, p. 18.

<sup>19</sup> Hogg, *The Perils of Man*, vol. 2, pp. 33-34.

<sup>20</sup> Gabriel Tarde, *Les lois de l'imitation: étude sociologique* (Paris: Felix Alcan, 1890; repr. Elibron Classics Replica Edition, 2005), p. 203.

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The discussions that follow deal with matters as diverse as childbearing and miraculous visions on the coasts of Normandy and Belgium, nineteenth-century scientific discourses, archaic imagery shooting up out of repressed childhood trauma, and the development of novelistic depictions of internal and external hallucinations experienced *in extremis*: hence the limits of naturalistic art and the afterlife of the archaic in the innovations in optics and audio-technology in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of these instances are *topoi*, that is, formalized rhetorical ways of grasping a shocking and painful subject; not commonplaces in the sense of cliché or hackneyed expression, but rather, as Aby Warburg puts it, *Pathosformeln*, the condensed neuronal trigger to repetition and return of the repressed passions, a set of places, times, actions and characters that vary through their *Nachleben* (cultural afterlife) but also accumulating new aspects as they cathect (become aroused) in the encounter with historically specific events.<sup>21</sup> These are examples of the collective memory that reappear in literature, paintings, sculptures, formal dances, architectural enclosures of emotional space, dramatic moments, and all those rituals and playful gestures that seem to outlast personal or political meanings. As the images migrate through time and space, so too do the primary passions they originally encoded, and indeed make it possible to speak the unspeakable, imagine the unimaginable and conceive of the inconceivable. Some periods and cultures find such conceits or emblems ugly or grotesque, others beautiful and ideal, while still others accept them as natural or normal.<sup>22</sup>

### **Parturition as a Breakthrough of the Repressed**

Listen! A noise on the mountains, like that of a great multitude! ... The Lord Almighty is mustering an army for war ... Because of this all hands will go limp, every man's heart will melt. Terror will seize them, pain and anguish will grip them; they will writhe like a woman in labour. They will look aghast at each other, their faces aflame (Is. 13:4-8).

Descriptions of a woman undergoing a breech birth or a caesarean operation, her body being mangled under the knife and the cold steel

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<sup>21</sup> Adi Efal, 'Warburg's "Pathos Formula" in Psychoanalytic and Benjaminian Contexts', *Assaph: Section B. Studies in Art History*, vol. 5 (2000), p. 221.

<sup>22</sup> Koen Vermeir, 'The Magic of the Magic Lantern (1660-1700). On Analogical Demonstrations and the Visualization of the Invisible', *The British Journal for the History of Science*, vol. 38, no. 2 (2005), pp. 127-159. For a discussion on the differences between symbol and emblem, see p. 157, note 84.



forceps of the male midwife, so as to save a child who will probably not live beyond the first few moments after birth, are a *topos* or commonplace, as though the nature of birth itself is a moment of extreme terror and self-sacrifice. Here, for example, is the final paragraph in the introductory biographical section by Gérard de Nerval to the re-edition of Jacques Cazotte (1719-1792), *Le Diable Amoureux* ('The Amorous Devil' or 'Devil in Love', 1772):<sup>23</sup>

Elisabeth Cazotte, engaged for a long time by her father to the Chevalier de Plas, an officer in the Poitou regiment, eight years later married this young man who had followed the Emigré Party. In my eyes, the destiny of this heroine's fate could not have been more felicitous than up to then; she died during a caesarean operation in giving birth to a child and crying out as they were cutting her into pieces that they ought to save him. The child only lived for a few instants. However, there remain a few members of the Cazotte family. His son, Scévole, having escaped as by miracle the massacre of 10 August, still lives in Paris, and piously carries on the traditions of his father's beliefs and virtues.

This act of *caesarism*, a phrase so evocative of political ambitions and violence, as well as of a drastic action to remove a foetus unable to pass, one way or another, through the birth canal, without taking either or both the mother's and the infant's life, a procedure conducted without anaesthetic to block out or minimize excruciating pain. Pain, already a necessary feature of a woman's labour, mandated by the first book in Holy Scripture as Eve's punishment, is also always a concomitant of heroism and martyrdom, a defining feature because it is known and witnessed in acts of terrorism, punishment and spiritual ecstasy. Pain, of this sort, mixing and further precipitating new manifestations and varieties of its deathly processes, is also contagious, a collective and shared obsession that seeps from one consciousness into another, always feeding on deeply hidden unconscious anxieties, fears and memories of trauma. In this "inner world of our being," says Peter Brooks, the traditional consciousness of religious thought, "the *mysterium* ... has been de-reified and internalized ... atomized into a complex of taboos and interdictions."<sup>24</sup> In the instance of Elizabeth Cazotte's parturition—and later the scene created by Emile Zola in *Zest for Life*—as the agony of labour continues and the mother's mind falls away further and further from rational control and articulate speech,

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<sup>23</sup> This edition contains two hundred drawings by Charles-Édouard de Beaumont.

<sup>24</sup> Brooks, 'Virtue and Terror', p. 252.

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these contradictory and threatening passions are experienced not as sublime moments of *extasis* (being lifted out of oneself) and rapture than as subliminal manifestations of *sparagmos* (being torn apart) and as rupture (the violent separation of mother and foetus).

Particularly in Zola's novel *Le joi de vivre* (*Zest for Life*), Lazare Chanteau, the father imagines the shared neurosis of his morbid fear of death with his pregnant wife Louise:

Henceforward they were both haunted. No confession escaped their lips, this was a shameful secret that must not be spoken of; only when they lay in bed, stretched on their backs, with eyes wide open, they could clear one another's thoughts. She was just as neurotic as he. They must have infected one another with anxiety, as two lovers fall victim to the same fever.<sup>25</sup>

The moral contagion is not limited to the married couple, who share the dread of death as an unspoken secret between them, as everyone else in the household, parents, servant, dog and cat is more or less aware of a similar feeling of dread and degeneration occurring around and in themselves; even the local curate and doctor who visit the Chanteau family participate, and the villagers and fisher folk constantly confronting the ravages of weather and tides and identifying themselves with the very deathly powers inherent in these natural phenomena, without always being able to articulate the anxieties they experience, this kind of *fin de siècle* morbidity, this sense that not just all things tend to fall apart eventually through the passage of time and the inexorable force of nature. This is more than a fashionable *Weltschmerz* or a philosophical trope of Schopenhauer's pessimism;<sup>26</sup> for Zola, as a novelist rather than a philosopher, it is a more complex and multi-layered psychological affliction, a moment of terrible epistemological crisis, one that contains within itself a counter-memory of moments of overcoming death through the generation of new populations and the possibility of survival of disease and injury and thus a contrary sense of optimism in the eventual victory of reason and love. Such optimism could, as with Lazare, be "a constant display of bravado about annihilation, and then, as the narrator in Zola's novel explains, perhaps somewhat ironically,

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<sup>25</sup> Émile Zola, *Zest for Life*, trans. Jean Stewart (London: Elek Books, 1955), p. 228.

<sup>26</sup> Sébastien Roldan, *Émile Zola et le pessimisme schopenhauerien: une philosophie de La Joie de Vivre* (Masters thesis, Université de Québec, Montréal, 2000).

his pessimism outdid that of ‘the old fellow’, as he called Schopenhauer, the more violent passages of whose works he would recite from memory.<sup>27</sup>

While for Lazare this pessimism consisted in an extreme skepticism on the possibility of science and technology setting the world right and a debilitating obsession with his own death and thus rationalizing his own laziness and lack of real talent in any of the projects he dabbled in, for Pauline, his real love and guide through life, the association with her cousin and his illnesses and failures only reinforced her growing sense that even with further acts of self-sacrifice and abnegation she could not succeed in creating a happy and harmonious existence for either of them, nor for Louise or old man Chanteau. If her beauty and her courage could not rescue them from the corrupted world, there seemed no possibility of happiness for herself, and her hopeful dreams again and again shuddered into nightmares of despair. As the two frustrated and confused lovers waded in the coastal waters, the kind of world-weariness and hopelessness expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes comes through:

Nothing seemed to have changed, either, under the open sky; the sea was still there, infinite, ceaselessly repeating the same horizons in its continual inconstancy.<sup>28</sup>

Like Pauline’s willingness to give up her chance to marry Lazare to Louise and to donate her diminishing funds to others—the Chanteau family during their financial crises, to underwrite her cousin’s various projects in the arts and sciences despite realizing how foolish and futile they are, and to distribute alms to local children even as they manifest a lack of gratitude, continue to purvey lies about the status of their parents, and thus display marks of irremediable corruption and degeneration—Lazare’s courageous rescue of an infant from a burning house seems to illustrate a breakthrough of selflessness in a time of danger, and thus of hope for the entire human race.<sup>29</sup> But the young man’s split off version of himself vaguely perceived at the time he races into the conflagration leaves no lasting mark on his character, though for several hours he seems to realize what a fool he has been hitherto, and Pauline’s joy at seeing her beloved behave so

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<sup>27</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, p. 230. Jean Stewart’s translation makes more explicit what is implied in the original text: “He also expanded further on the theories of the ‘old man’, as he called Schopenhauer, in the more violent passages he recited from memory.”

<sup>28</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, p. 235.

<sup>29</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, pp. 239ff.

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courageously soon dissipates itself in the quick return to the dull reality of their lives. The two cousins' attempt to make love descends from a near rape scene to a description of a cold disengagement of their affections for one another. The probing of the signs evident to her do not, however, take Pauline very far in finding a way to ameliorate their situation, but only to confirm its impossibility, a disjuncture based on both their psychological characters, his superficial and dilettantish approach to everything in life, and her lack of will power to overcome the obstacles fate has placed before her, but which would dissolve if she made a clean break from the Chanteau family as she several times almost brings herself to begin. Both of them, each for separate reasons, step back from the brink of the truth.

### **The Horrible Hysterics of Childbirth**

The secret process of disintegration of better nature seemed to have reached its destructive climax; she had never appeared so unbalanced, so consumed with nervous agitations.<sup>30</sup>

In Zola's late nineteenth-century novel, the realistic details focus not just on the medical condition, with the suffering of the mother, the anxieties of the father Lazare, the concern and consternation of the midwife and her assistant Pauline, and the scientific objectivity of the physician called in attendance, but there is a constant return to the specific image of the infant's hand dangling from its mother's womb and grasping after life. The scene is cast in the shadowy light of a single candle, each of the players, as it were, set in a place surrounding the woman in labour. Later we will return to this same passage and examine it from a somewhat different angle to bring out its intellectual and ritual aspects.

At first we see that the fictional description is not quite a stereotypical scene of melodrama, with sentimental concerns for the feelings of each of the actors on this stage. The very flickering of the lights alerts us to an eerie, uncanny, and unworldly display of projected images into the empty space of their experiences, and as is indicated by what is seen directly and what is only imagined, the qualities of the *fantasmagorie* begin to reveal themselves. This "spectacle" moves from crisis to crisis, from one "*attente effroyable*" (frightful attack) to another, until Louise's patience and modesty are worn down, she opens herself to the full glare of the spectators who see, not the nudity of a female, but

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<sup>30</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, p. 138.

they too had lost consciousness of her nudity. They saw nothing but the pitiful misery of it, the dramatic struggle for birth, which killed all sense of love. Thus brutally exposed to the light, all the disturbing mystery had gone from that delicate skin with its secret places, with its fairy crispy fleece; nothing remained by suffering humanity, childbirth amidst blood and ordure, the mother's womb strained to a bursting point, the red slit stretched agonisingly, like the wound made by an axe in the trunk of some great tree, spilling its life-blood.<sup>31</sup>

What they then see is “*une petite main noire*” (a little black hand) opening and closing, as though desperately and yet pitifully clutching after life in the world it is entering into. In the original French text:

“*Repliez un peu la cuisse,*” dit, Madame Bouland à Pauline. “*Il est inutile de la fatiguer.*”

*Le docteur Cazeneove s'était placé entre les deux genoux, maintenus par les deux femmes. Il se retourna étonné des lueurs dansantes qui l'éclairent. Derrière lui, Lazare tremblait si fort, que la bougie s'agitait son poing, comme effarée au souffle d'un grand vent.*

“*Mon cher garçon,*” dit-il, “*posez le bougeoir su la table de nuit. J'y verrai plus clair.*”

*Incapable de regarder davantage, le mari alla tomber sur une chaise, à l'autre bout de la pièce. Mais il avait beau ne plus regarder, il aperçevait toujours la pauvre main du petit être, cette main qui voulait vivre, qui semblait chercher à tâtons un secours dans ce monde, ou elle arrivait la première.*<sup>32</sup>

Note that the French version offers terms that are resonant with Romantic and Gothic tales and thus suggest the grotesque and the horrible scene unfolding, but there is also a set of tones and terms which fit with a running under-description of the phantasmagoria: especially *des lueurs dansantes* (the dancing glow of the candlelight) in Lazare's trembling fingers and the way the light itself moves forward and backward to create the effect of a spirit floating through the space of the spectacle.

“Let the leg give a little,” said Madame Bouland to Pauline. “No need to wear her out.”

Dr Cazenove was standing between the two knees, each held by one of the women. He turned round, puzzled at the way the light was

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<sup>31</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, p. 264.

<sup>32</sup> Émile Zola, *La joie de vivre* (Paris: G. Charpentier et E. Fasquelle, 1893), pp. 631-632.

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flickering; Lazare behind him, was trembling so violently that the candle shook in his hand as though in a great gust of wind.

“My dear little fellow,” said the doctor, “put the candlestick on bedside table. I shall see better.”

Incapable of watching any longer, the husband retreated to the further end of the room and sank into a chair. But although he had stopped watching, he still kept on seeing the little creature’s pathetic hand, clinging to life, seeming to grope for help in this world into which it had led the way.<sup>33</sup>

As in the phantasmagoria, the key projected image is that of a spectral figure who bridges the space between the world of everyday life and the occulted region of spirits, ghosts, and demons. If the focus can be shifted from the superficial attempt to raise goose bumps of anxiety and the shudders of self-deception, as many popular writers of the late nineteenth century attempted in their fictions, and placed instead on the desire to capture the processes by which the mind engages with the moment of release from common sense and stultifying academic logic, then the phantasmagoria by enacting what Aby Warburg called “ghost stories for all adults” (*Gespensstergeschichten für ganz Erwachsene*) can be understood in the terms we have been trying to articulate.<sup>34</sup> Fabio Camilletti says, summing up the essay we have been following and refining to our own ends:

The process can be seen as a *haunting*, through which the explored alterity (the charming grace of certain poetry, the ‘charming nightmare’ of certain images, the eruptions of the unconscious in diurnal life) *haunts back* the analyst’s writing.<sup>35</sup>

For in addition to Warburg’s adult ghost stories there is also the allusion Freud makes to the *unheimlich* quality of his own scientific writings. In fact,

he would not be surprised ‘to hear that psychoanalysis, which seeks to uncover ... secret forces [has] for this reason itself come to seem uncanny to many people’. Rather than a clue revealing a wider frame to

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<sup>33</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, p. 265.

<sup>34</sup> Leland de la Durantaye, ‘Ghost Stories for the Very Adult’, *The Believer*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2008), p. 26.

<sup>35</sup> Fabio Camilletti, ‘Details and Momentary Lapses of Reason in Leopardi, Warburg and Freud’, *Thinking in Fragments: Romanticism and Beyond* (University of Birmingham, UK, 16-17 December, 2010), p. 12.

the rational mind, the haunting detail ‘uncover[s] ... secret forces’, fading back onto the analyst’s gaze.<sup>36</sup>

This haunted and haunting space—a space not broken apart violently by a caesarean birth or the use of metal tools to extract a foetus descending in the wrong way through the birth canal but opened through the fading away of strict boundaries in thought and between thought and feeling—is where Aby Warburg tells us the creative imagination is ignited and metaphors are subtly created. It is, in other words, the highly charged trauma of birth that manifests the conditions for the *Pathosformeln* (emotionally charged or cathected forms and figures) to achieve recognisability as a memory and a triggering mechanism in the mind. Such recognition, however, remains more complex and subtle than Warburg was able to articulate in words, and could only attempt finally in the images he tacked on to the panels of his *Bildatlas*.<sup>37</sup> Earlier in the nineteenth century, this had been played out in the dynamic between a traumatized audience still shuddering from the events of the French Revolution, the operators of the magic lantern show being projected through and on to smoke and mirrors by devices that extended and retracted their lenses, and a strange variety of persons, things, places, and ideas brought forth out of the remembered recent past to be contemplated and yet rejected as unreal and deceitful, that is, in this case, denied because too painful to accept and morally repugnant because of the deceptions and morally deferred decisions. Delmas suggests by way of explanation:

The spectators of the phantasmagoria sat in the dark chamber facing the manifestation of the pictures that had first formed in their heads. The audience had physically broken through the previously impenetrable separation between thought and reality; it stood on the dark side of the retina, at least for a while. It is at this moment that the metaphor of the camera obscura reached its apogee and collapsed in an instant, for the observer was now physically inserted in (the *camera obscura*) of the mind.<sup>38</sup>

Whereas the midwife works with the assistant in the dimly lit bed chamber to ease the pains of the woman in labour by giving her legs physical support, the father-to-be becomes too nervous to hold the candle steady and retreats to a darkened corner: and there, without looking directly at the

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<sup>36</sup> Camilletti, ‘Details and Momentary Lapses’, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Jacob Siefring, ‘Aby Warburg’s Tale’, *Bibliomaniac*, 30 May 2012, at <http://bibliomaniac.com/aby-warburg>. Accessed 17 August 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Delmas, *Why 1839? The Philosophy of Vision*, p. 72.

scene in front of him, the implications being too painful to observe, he nevertheless keeps seeing the tell-tale emergent leg of his son (“the little creature”) in his imagination. Dr Cazenove “puzzled at the way the light was flickering,” conceives of it only in the literal sense of Lazare’s shaking hands, with no consideration of the ethical or spiritual significations of this breaking up of the light rays, nor of the historical precedent in a clunky set of machinery creating the phantasmagoria of birth. The problem is finding a way to disentangle the various discourses that were playing themselves off against each other during the nineteenth century, scientific, literary, popular, and philosophical and in a society that was not only going through an extended period of political and technological revolutions, but also suffering a series of epistemological crises.

### **Rhetoric and Myth: Energy and *Enargeia***

What we have tried to do, then, is to bring our contemporaries to life for posterity in a speaking likeness, by means of the vivid stenography of a conversation, the physiological spontaneity of a gesture, those little signs of emotion that reveal a personality, those *imponderabilia* that render the intensity of existence, and, last of all, a touch of that fever which is the mark of the heady life of Paris.<sup>39</sup>

Speaking of the imponderables (what is too weighty to bear as thoughts) in a culture brings to the fore the term *ideology*, in this context, refers to a mass (or a mess) of pseudo-ideas, that seems to be the underlying, unquestioned (and unquestionable) expression of the existing social and intellectual order. Unlike *myth*, to which it weaves in and out like carollers in a medieval village dance, wherein the discourse appears in narrative and imagistic terms: this is how it is done because this is how it was done *ab initio* by those who established the paradigms of behaviour and morality and this is how it appears to us because we all agree in our collective visions and our public dreams; and yet ideology seems to be spoken discursively as what we have been told to do in natural laws, basic regulations, and age-old customs or traditions time out of mind. Myths can be attributed to specific shamans, prophets, saints, and heroes, while ideology is always attributed to unnamed sources that pass on their knowledge from person to person through the generations in maxims, proverbs, and other ponderously wise sayings.

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<sup>39</sup> Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, ‘Preface’, *Pages from the Goncourt Journals*, ed. and trans. Robert Baldick, *New York Review Books*, 2007 [1962], p. xxxi.



But as we can infer from the “Preface” to their *Journals* published in 1872, the Goncourt Brothers aimed to describe the new realistic discourses—we might call them novelistic, if there were any coherence to that generic title itself. The new species of writing, still a mode of rhetoric, seeks to persuade its audience, whether readers or listeners, in the private space of their own silence or in the shared theatre of declamation and harangue, that what the words transmit is persuasive, real and true. The classical handbooks of oratory called this *enargeia*, a term translated usually as vivid speech, convincing writing, lively, and powerful discourses. Somehow, for each new generation, the language of persuasion of this sort, be it homiletic, political, fictional or whatever, performs an act of rhetorical magic: it turns words into mental images, which at once force out prior sensations and memories in order to occupy the space of what is experienced as true and, at the same time, reshape the reception and recollection of reality and dream to conform to this vivid pattern.

On the one hand, then, the fiction of the novel and historical, sociological and philosophical writings that are modelled on this persuasive illusion of truth and reality, is that, at least for the moment, it is not false, that its radical selection of details and its stylised creation of background, are the way things have always been, are and must be. On the other hand, so lively is this stenography, with its configuration of reflective shorthand signs, that most of the audience, even most of the time, do not realize they are being duped or bamboozled. When the trick is part of a pleasant entertainment, not much harm is done; indeed, much good in the way of understanding and insight can be accomplished. But, as in the discourses and imagery of Judeophobia, when the trick deludes, deceives, and distorts the world and the ideas about it that we have learned and learned to test by experience and reason, then we are dealing with archaic myths long-bubbling in the lowest depths of modern people’s unconsciousness and pernicious pseudo-sciences and duplicitous illusions of liberalism. That is why Hippolyte Taine, in the introductory chapters of the second volume of his influential study *De l’intelligence*, speaks of the mind as a great theatre of illusions, specifically “an internal phantasmagoria.”<sup>40</sup>

But what do Edmond and Jules de Goncourt mean by the “imponderables that render the intensity of existence”? If these *je-ne-sais-*

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<sup>40</sup> Hippolyte Taine, *De l’intelligence, deuxième partie: Les diverses sortes de connaissance*, second edition (Paris: Librairie Hachette, n.d.), p. 35.

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*quoi* stand outside normal linguistic words and cultural images, are they part of the ineffable qualities of the air and light the artistic movements of the late nineteenth century were seeking to depict, a grasp of existential, impressionistic and symbolic realities within the temperament of the painter or sculptor or musician, or the regions of dynamic reality outside, below, or beyond the world of positivistic science and bourgeois materialism, or the powerful impulses, instincts and drives of the unconscious, preconscious and what Freud would eventually term the id? Following John Crary,<sup>41</sup> Didier Delmas says:

Crary doesn't believe that the emergence of a modern visual order, in the nineteenth century, completely did away with realist representation. For Crary the vision that began to be expressed by the impressionists [sic] with Manet followed by the post-impressionists [sic] like Cezanne was actually a peripheral movement to the realist core that was taking hold in modern society and continued to be developed throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the diffusion of photography, cinema and television.<sup>42</sup>

If so, that is, if the ideal of the new aesthetic, anthropological, and psychological theories are not by definition and in essence the logical outcomes of some direct progression in technology nor in aesthetic thought, but themselves irrational, uncontrollable, and anarchic: where does that leave those who would live by reason, order and justice? Many important art historians and connoisseurs in the *fin de siècle* and beyond opposed the new aesthetics and epistemologies precisely because they felt these movements were a betrayal of Enlightenment ideals and nineteenth-century science and technology, as well as a woeful departure from the sensibilities that kept art as a separate and important way of seeing the world.

### **Seeing the World before it is Born: Shared Phantasies and the Phantasmagoria**

Yet, while the late nineteenth century thinkers and public of Europe wrestled with this dilemma, they found themselves both fascinated by the new vision and the freedoms it promised and frightened, anxious and threatened by these facets of themselves—their bodies, their minds, their social relationships, their institutions—so much so that they could sometimes only see or imagine or think of them as dangerous others: more

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<sup>41</sup> Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> Delmas, *Why 1839? The Philosophy of Vision*, p. 25.

enemies within than external national foes, that is, as or at least like Jews.<sup>43</sup> The development of art history itself as a separate discipline within the universities, or enfolded within various forms of *Kulturgeschichte* (cultural history as opposed to *Geistesgeschichte*, a form of psychohistory), was therefore both a reaction to and against this loss of separation as a requisite for refined study of the various “epistemic regimes” contending with one another.

This article attempts to show that the phantasmagoria appears historically as a separate form of technology and entertainment within the same developed felt-need at the close of the eighteenth century that led rapidly to the invention of various forms of photography.<sup>44</sup> As Delmas puts it: “aside from being dependent on scientific developments the discovery of photography is the result of radical changes in episteme and was one of the strategies devised for coping with those changes.” The “blooming epistemic panic”<sup>45</sup>—the shock of the changes effected by the French Revolution of 1789, which brought about the breakdown of the ancient regime in more than politics, but in social and national relationships, religious feelings, and artistic concepts—was a search for “stabilization” of the “instant.” Whereas the “moment” and the “momentary” shifts of the remembered past had marked clearly defined and memorable changes in society and psychology, the new “instant” and its “instantaneous” changes came too quickly, too radically, too painfully evident in their immediate aftermath. What was experienced painfully and humiliatingly were “vagrant”<sup>46</sup> remnants, an incoherent residue of the old reality that could not be believed in and fragments of something new that as yet had neither form, words, or recognizable feelings inherent in them. Stabilizing these instants on glass or film by chemical means or, as Joseph Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833) put it, through the sun impressing the images on a daguerreotype was one way of capturing the instant, and which then revealed far more than was expected, just as it lost the older generic shape

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<sup>43</sup> See the long discussion of why Alfred Dreyfus liked Meissonier’s paintings and never mentioned the Impressionists or Post-Impressionists, along with my running argument on whether or not there is such a thing as a specifically Jewish aesthetics, in Norman Simms, *Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus: In the Phantasmagoria* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Delmas, *Why 1839? The Philosophy of Vision*, p. 67.

<sup>45</sup> Delmas, *Why 1839? The Philosophy of Vision*, p. 36.

<sup>46</sup> Delmas, *Why 1839? The Philosophy of Vision*, p. 37.

that portraits and landscapes were assumed to have been representations of reality. Memory, as a further means of storage, was exposed to be a ruse, a formalized discipline taught at home through informal education and in fairy tales, in classrooms and lecture theatres with classical tropes and schemes, and during Mass by a whole range of visual, tactile and auditory means.<sup>47</sup> The phantasmagoria was another means, a total secular performance that sought at once to project the spirits of the past with the technology of the present and to expose the diverse tricks of the *ancien régime* while taking control over the still powerful emotions they had produced by fraudulent means.

In the course of the nineteenth century, impresarios like John Henry Pepper and later George Méliès would add technical improvements to the phantasmagoria, leading towards motion pictures, but the psychological and moral implications of the elaborate illusion remained at best implied in its public performances, the deeper aesthetic significances brought out in more sophisticated painterly, literary, musical, balletic, and operatic versions, often experienced through allusion and analogy rather than imitation or description. Having once disturbed the grounds of common sense and scientific logic,<sup>48</sup> the return of the repressed feelings and imagery becomes embodied in political actions and institutions, as well as in entertainments and mass spectacles.

### **Balzac and the Fantasy of Birth in a Fictional Phantasmagoria**

What Mary Shelley actually did in *Frankenstein* was to transform the standard Romantic matter of incest, infanticide, and patricide into a phantasmagoria of the nursery.<sup>49</sup>

Walter Benjamin expresses a different way of looking at the absurd, fantastic and painful experience of childbirth as a phantasmagoria of blood, mucous, and discarded tissue, a mixed conceit of shock and disappointment

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<sup>47</sup> See for instance Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (London: Random House, 2014).

<sup>48</sup> Marina Warner, *Spirit Visions. The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (Yale University, 20-21 October 1999), p. 85.

<sup>49</sup> Ellen Moers, 'Female Gothic', in *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (New York: Doubleday, 1976). See also Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (Harmondsworth: Flamingo, 1995), especially Part Three '1972: Exiles', pp. 133-198; and Claire Tomalin, 'Introduction', in Mary Shelley, *Maurice, or The Fisher's Cot* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999 [1988]), pp. 1-54. Both these texts are very personal discussions of newly-found documentation of the Shelley Circle in their European exile.

for someone expecting an infant to emerge “trailing clouds of Glory” into the world or a rhetorical figure of physical pain followed by cultural transcendence as articulated by Elizabeth Stewart:

The overarching function of the phantasmagoria is to conceal complexity, contradiction, and irony ... to tolerate the transformation of infantile super-concrete perception and primitive ‘thought’ via actual things ... subjective fantasies and dreams.<sup>50</sup>

A less pretentious account of pregnancy and childbirth is to be found in one of Balzac’s novels. Despite the awkward and sentimental language, the narrator gives a remarkably realistic account of the young woman’s experiences, something she attempts to describe to her best friend, also recently married. Balzac, while certainly not a female author in the genre of woman’s Gothic novels, attempts to present the scene through the epistles Renée de l’Estrade sends to Louise de Macumer<sup>51</sup> with no ulterior motives than the event itself: it has no symbolic value in relationship to greater themes at the heart of the novel nor those which our contemporary feminist critics seek to discover in the culture they analyse as cruel and unjust to the female sex. The romantic language and the sentimental feelings and concepts forming the matrix of Renée’s thoughts and style of writing belong to her for what she is, still a somewhat naïve child-bride in a society that values women as social ornaments, breeders of the next generation and indifferent to the political issues of the day.

The undecided, debatable relationship of the visionary to the vision, of witness to portent, of the sayer to the encrypted message of the scrying mirror, still vexes arguments about memory and fantasy, with regard to phantasmagoric revelations of childhood ordeals, for example.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Elizabeth Stewart, *Catastrophe and Survival: Walter Benjamin and Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2009), p. 83.

<sup>51</sup> Honoré de Balzac, *The Letters of Two Young Brides*, trans. R. S. Scott, in *Masterpieces of French Romance*, ed. Edmond Gosse (London: William Heinemann, 1923). Originally published as *Mémoires de deux jeunes mariées* (1841), and the next year as part of ‘Scenes of Domestic Life’, an extended series of novels that form *La comédie humaine*.

<sup>52</sup> Warner, *Spirit Visions*, p. 86. To (de)scry in this sense means not only to peer into or breakthrough the perceptual barrier between the ordinary and supernatural, but to deeply disturb the mental balance or psychic harmony of the person who sees more than he or she ought to by conventional standards. Yet, as one may see in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, what Alice thinks she experiences on the other side helps her turn from naïve child to mature woman, even as the epistemological crisis deepens for her: both sides of the mirror are part of the same reality, and yet to be caught within the opaque space between makes her uncomfortable wherever she goes.

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Letter XXXI opens with Renée apologizing for not reporting on the birth of her child three months earlier: “I have never been able to find a single tiny moment to write to you, my dear soul,” a complaint that any new mother, even today, will find familiar.<sup>53</sup> At first, rather than detail the time-filling duties of motherhood and the physical exhaustion she is recovering from, the letter-writer, speaks of the pride she felt in presenting the newborn Armand to church for his ceremonial entrance into society, both lay and spiritual, her own sense of blessedness through the baptism of the infant, and only hinting at less formal requirements in the phrase “out of the midst of the confusion one radiant memory rises,” so that we seem to infer a necessity here for putting off the more gruesome details until she can re-establish her relationship with her friend Louise who has not yet been granted the joys of maternity. When she requests that Louise write to her to report on her social activities as a newlywed—“all your gaieties, paint your happiness”—there is more than a slight tinge of envy for a life of pleasure that she has now renounced in bearing a child, and a wisp of recrimination directed at a childhood companion who has managed so far to escape the miseries of motherhood.

Then as the epistle continues, Renée almost recognizes that she is at once talking down to Louise because of her blessed new status, since she has risen two stages above her friend, first, in attaining the maturity her new role as mother grants to her, as though Louise, though married, nevertheless has been left behind as a child herself; and second, more implied than stated openly, as someone who has been initiated into the mysteries of adulthood, the secret pains and humiliations of giving birth, a process during which modesty and dignity are set aside, beginning with the physical awkwardness and sickness of the final months of pregnancy are lived through, a hidden state of confusion signalled by the lapse in syntax and style of her writing:

My child—why now I’ve called you my child!—but indeed it is in the sweetest word that ever rises to a mother’s heart, and mind, and lips—well then, dear child, I dragged myself about our garden, wearily enough all through those last two months, weighed down by the discomfort of my burden.<sup>54</sup>

What had been their private paradise of extended childhood—for even as adolescents these girls were playing with dolls and whispering games about

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<sup>53</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 219.

<sup>54</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 211.

fairly tale versions of what romance was all about—becomes a shameful wasteland, a place of isolation and dread for the impending “blessed event” that they cannot fully imagine because no one had deemed them responsible or important enough or even capable of understanding the natural secrets of sex and pregnancy:

I did not know how dear and tender it was, in spite of all the misery it was costing me. I felt such terrors, such deadly presentiments, that no amount of curiosity could overcome them. I reasoned with myself, told myself there was nothing to dread in any natural event—I promised myself the joys of motherhood.

A word like *tender*, which in eighteenth and seventeenth century novels alludes to the delicacy and refinement of sexual pleasures, and like *dear* suggests adoration and pure feelings of love, also points towards the soreness and pains experienced through the body, especially those parts of the anatomy which are affected by changes to the physiology of the pregnant female. Thus when *terror* replaces *tender* as the operative word, the stress on pain pushes the whole perspective into a reflective examination of how added stress evokes a history of humiliation and injury that begins in the primal trauma of birth. In the eighteenth century writings on the sublime, profound feelings were generated through the imagination when there was a conjunction of extreme passions—sexual arousal and physical agony.<sup>55</sup> If the observer could maintain a distance between the represented scene of terror, then the reflected feelings of pain, humiliation and injury would be received in an aesthetic sense of “delightful horror,”<sup>56</sup> that is, the sublimely tragic.

Renée purports to say that she had no way of anticipating how glorious would be the fact of bearing a child in the way her husband and his family would like, especially in the light of the infant being a male and so born a proper heir to the name and privileges of the father; while the priest who baptizes the little boy would thus also enhance her own proper spiritual status within the church in imitation of the Virgin Mary. However, what Renée actually discloses to her friend (and all other readers of the fictional text) is that she was kept away from any friends or friendly relatives, carefully guarded in the lonely yard next to her house from any

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<sup>55</sup> Peter K. Klein, ‘Insanity and the Sublime: Aesthetics and Theories of Mental Illness in Goya’s Yard with Lunatics and related Works’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, vol. 61 (1998), pp. 198-252.

<sup>56</sup> Klein, ‘Insanity and the Sublime’, p. 230.

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contamination or untoward knowledge of what she could look forward to as a woman, and that therefore she could only call on her childish thoughts, along with the idealized and naïve conversations she had shared with Louise, and subsequently her feeble attempt to convince herself that all was for the best against her suspicions that everyone was keeping her from learning about the ordeal she would soon undergo and the important changes in her whole style of life in having to dedicate herself to the care and education of the forthcoming child.

But even now in writing to Louise after the fact—the birthing, the cleaning up afterwards, and the imposition of long dreary hours of care for the child—Renée cannot bring herself to acknowledge that only one of the outcomes for her ordeal would be the relief of having a baby boy and eventually being able to take it to church for baptism. The other outcomes, liable to occur at any stage in pregnancy, birthing and its postpartum pains and humiliations, are illness and in many instances death.

But alas! I felt no stir at my heart, even when I thought of the child, which stirred so briskly within me and, my dear, that kind of stir may be pleasant to a woman who has already borne children, but in the first instance the griever of an unseen life brings one more astonishment than satisfaction.<sup>57</sup>

She does not experience the first pangs of a natural maternal instinct but openly the kicking of a mysterious being, and very much the unwanted presence of something alive inside her, something that may be alive but only at the expense of her own life. A mother who has gone through the process many times before may be able to relax with some degree of security in the pleasant outcome that is ideally spoken of or written about, but which a frightened adolescent, whose introduction to men and sexuality was anything but romantic or pleasurable can only approach with hesitation and fear.

Fearing she may be overstepping propriety in confessing these negative thoughts to her dear friend and also hesitant about awakening anxieties for her own impending introduction to the sexual act and to pregnancy, Renée again falters in her syntax and style:

I give you my own experience, you know me to be neither insincere nor theatrical, and my child was more the gift of God—for it is God who sends us children—than that of a beloved husband.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 211.

<sup>58</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, pp. 211-212



The hyphenated clauses set off thoughts that are not entirely coherent nor consistent with what Renée thinks is proper to say to Louise, unsure even if the writer of the epistle knows what is best for her to confess to herself under these difficult circumstances, as they go against the romantic dreams the girls shared in their garden and which society imposes on them as appropriate to young females to know in lieu of the harsher realities of bourgeois married life. Rather than see the newborn infant as a gift of God, the product of a mutual act of love, or even the product of a sexually active husband and a passive and fertile matter (material) which she then cares for on his behalf, the child is his from its inception. The womb then belongs to him as her master, the child is his at birth, and if he were to die it would be an orphan. To think of the infant as given to her by the deity is, behind what the church may say about its own nurturing role, to provide the mother with some kind of compensation for the painful initiation into sexual intercourse and the bloody and dangerous ordeal of birth. But domestic violence, marital rape, and social exclusion form a reality much less pleasant for the young and naïve bride to contemplate: instead of a romantic comedy, she fears a tragedy of the terrible.<sup>59</sup> Hence the ambiguous sentence that closes this paragraph:

Let us bid farewell to these bygone sorrows, which, as I think I shall never know again.<sup>60</sup>

The immediate import seems to be that the writer invites her friend to pass beyond the grief occasioned by their separation, and the immediate difficulties in being forced to marry men who are virtual strangers to them and to bear children before they are mature enough to handle these experiences.<sup>61</sup> Renée tries to reassure Louise that all is not as bad as they feared, and, as married women, soon enough when Louise can share the condition of motherhood with Renée, they can bring their old friendship to

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<sup>59</sup> Klein, 'Insanity and the Sublime', p. 231.

<sup>60</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 212.

<sup>61</sup> James Krasner, 'Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief', *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, vol. 19, no. 2 (2004) deals with a grief 'embodied' in the sensory memory of lost limbs, but what he says can be applied to a deeper neuronal memory of these traumatic senses of loss (e.g., the lost innocence of childhood), pain that returns even after the immediate event or instant has passed (e.g., recurrent nightmares, neurotic symptoms displaced to analogous parts of the body) and anticipated pains transferred by shared stories between friends and relatives, punishments inflicted as a warning of worse things to come, collective games and cultural rituals (p. 21, note 3).

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a mature level of intimacy and trust. But taking the words in a somewhat different way, and stressing that the writer is more concerned with convincing herself that she need no longer fear the future of subsequent pregnancies and births, they can also share their old friendship as women, as they did as naïve young girls. In addition, there is also a further hint that what they once shared as *sorrows*, their sense of loss both of their friendship and their innocence, can never be revisited. They are forever separated by the fact of being married and becoming mothers

Then finally the day of giving birth arrives and Renée begins to give her report on what happened. The description follows the process of changes that occur within her body as the foetus begins its emergence from the womb and out into the world. Though she does not mention it for some while, Renée is not alone, although she is absorbed in the physiological movements of her own body and that of the baby moving down the birth canal, that she seems to be all alone facing the world, a material world of which she is a component part.

When the awful moment came upon me I had gathered up such powers of endurance and I had expected such cruel anguish that, so I am told, I bore the hideous torture in the most astonishing fashion.<sup>62</sup>

The child that finally slips out of her body is a part of herself that becomes a separate being, and yet her loneliness, isolation, and release from the pains of labour make her at once like all other women in the same condition and distinct by her endurance and resilience. The ordeal of birth moreover gives her a special status *vis-à-vis* her friend to whom she writes of these experiences: they are no longer virtual sisters (or twins), for one is now a full-grown woman privy to the secrets of life, the other still a child observing from the outside, the other side of the mirror, in the adjoining but not symmetrical panel.

### **The Doppelgänger Effect**

Before we pick up our discussion of the aesthetic, moral and scientific problems of how to describe and therefore how to negotiate one's way through the phenomena of parturition, with all its ambiguous pains and uncanny humiliations, we need to go to another novel, Amandine Aurore Dupin's *Indiana*, originally written in French under her *nom de plume*, George Sand, in 1832. There is a point early on in the narrative when a

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<sup>62</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 212.

would-be seducer of the title character gets himself entangled with Indiana's maid servant, Noun, a woman he finds so close in appearance, background, and character, that he cannot be sure whom he is pursuing and falling in love with. One evening, having imbibed a little too much wine, the effect of their merging into one image becomes acute, and for a moment he is not sure who he sees reflected in the mirror:

*Peu à peu le souvenir vague et flottant d'Indiana vint se mêler à l'ivresse de Raymon. Les deux panneaux de glace qui se renvoyaient l'un à l'autre l'image de Noun jusqu'à l'infini semblaient se peupler de mille fantômes. Il épiait dans la profondeur de cette double réverbération une forme plus déliée, et il lui semblait saisir, dans la dernière ombre vaporeuse et confuse que Noun y reflétait [sic], la taille fine et souple de Mme Delmare.<sup>63</sup>*

Little by little a vague memory of Indiana began to float in and out of Raymon's drunken consciousness. The two mirror panels that each reflected Noun's image into infinity seemed to be peopled by a thousand phantoms, and as he stared into the depths of that double image he thought he could see, in the final hazy and indistinct reflection of Noun, the slender, willowy form of Mme Delmare.<sup>64</sup>

It is important to note a discrepancy between the original French text and the modern English translation offered by Eleanor Hochman. Sand's *ivresse* can be turned into "drunken consciousness" with no problem, although to speak of consciousness here risks evoking the later sense of the term: not merely outside of awareness as motivated by dark forces of repressed energy, in other words, something more than the effects of too much alcohol. However, there is a problem when translating *reverberation* into *reflection*. The metaphor of the mirror that sends back light waves in the form of a doubled image cannot be easily taken to replace the sense of a more mechanically-induced transformation of light waves that shudder and change their status as they pass through a glass that is both translucent and opaque: what is seen is a refraction, a distorted image, or at least one that caught between an accurate representation and a blurred simulacrum.

Similarly, *infini* means more than "infinity" in a mathematical or astrological sense; it still harbours within itself in the early nineteenth

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<sup>63</sup> For the French text, see George Sand, *Indiana*, Bibliothèque électronique du Québec, Collection *À tous les vents*, vol. 12, version 1.01, pp. 107-108, at <https://beq.ebooksgratuits.com/vents/sand-indiana>. Accessed 17 August 2017.

<sup>64</sup> George Sand, *Indiana*, trans. Eleanor Hochman (New York: A Signet Classic, 1993), p. 76.

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century an aura of the spiritual world beyond our material senses. A more difficult problem emerges when judging the aptness of “the depths of that double image” as an ‘englishing’ of *la profondeur de cette double reverberation*: an image may be the result of this reverberation, refraction or blurred emanation of light or heat from a surface, but here some more complicated process is alluded to, not least the way in which a magic lantern projects images through a series of lens in the darkness of a closed chamber on to a cloth screen or cloud of smoke. By turning *une forme plus déliée* into “the final hazy and indistinct reflection of Noun” the translator conflates two phrases and creates one statement, losing the sense of the most unloosened or slenderest of “formless forms,” the blurry indistinctions of dream, illusion, and trance and the *fuite des idées* (escape or elusive flight of ideas) that Aby Warburg imagines to be the wispy<sup>65</sup> appearance of the *ninfa*, the nymph who erupts into orderly perceptions with the energy of something archaic and unconsciously traumatic.<sup>66</sup> In the same way, the rendering of *la dernier ombre vaporeuse et confuse* into “the final hazy and indistinct reflection” misplaces the mirroring effect from the magic lantern to the screen upon which the image is projected.<sup>67</sup> The English translator seems unaware of the phantasmagoric nature of the description.

The translation of *Indiana* does, however, seem to call to mind terms appropriate to a Gothic novel concerned with the phenomenon of the *Doppelgänger*, a being composed of two selves, the clash of incompatible personalities and the disruption of essential coherence—“vague memory,” “float in and out,” “drunken consciousness,” “two mirror panels a thousand phantoms,” “the depths of that double image,” a depiction of uncanny, preternatural dread, grotesque mixtures of physical desire, emotional pain, and epistemological exhaustion. It would be instructive for us to render the

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<sup>65</sup> As in a will’o’th’wisp, a puff of fiery marsh gas racing through a dark forest, imagined as a spectral being. It seems related to how Sand often refers in *Indiana* to the shock of highly charged emotional encounters as electrical sparks (p. 41) or phosphorescent explosions (p. 39).

<sup>66</sup> Eduardo Mahieu, ‘El goce imitado la ninfa de Warburg’, *Cercle d’Etudes Psychiatriques* (2007). At: [http://eduardo.mahieu.free.fr/2007/goce\\_ilimitado\\_de\\_ninfa.htm](http://eduardo.mahieu.free.fr/2007/goce_ilimitado_de_ninfa.htm).

<sup>67</sup> In her *Histoire de ma vie*, George Sand speaks of first discovering the orblutes as a very young child while with her parents in Spain. She stands on a roof and watches the flashing lights reverberate around the architectural features, and she dates the awakening of her imagination to this moment. I discuss this phenomenon at length in the ‘Introduction’ to *Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus* (2013).

novel's key passage wherein Raymon, the aristocratic seducer of both these Creole women from La Réunion<sup>68</sup>—Indiana the mistress and Noun the serving maid—sees both as virtually the same person:

Little by little the vague and floating memory of Indiana began to mix into Raymon's drunken stupor. The double-panelled looking glass reflected back and forth both images of Noun in an infinite regress of thousands of phantoms. Out of the depths of this reverberating production of elusive visions he thought he could discern one last.

This insight belongs more to the narrator, that ambiguous persona of George Sand, which is at once a male voice who confides familiarly with the supposedly male audience and the female author standing behind the text and manipulating a wider readership of both sexes (and not least women who applaud her revelations of male perfidy, hypocrisy, and self-delusion). When the narrator interprets the development of the would-be seducer's plan to carry off an elaborate plot to have both women in his power, she sets him up for his own fall: "Raymon felt that if he were skilful enough, he might yet be able to deceive both women at once."<sup>69</sup> What actually transpires proves that he is not only lacking in the skills of seduction but also in the perspicacity to understand the truly complicated nature of the situation and the complexities of each of these young women's differing personalities. He does not see at all that he is alienated from his inner self and the consequence of which is that Noun, when she fruitlessly appeals to him for support when she becomes pregnant, realizes Raymon's love is duplicitous and his pretence of aristocratic honour a shallow farce, and drowns herself. Meanwhile he also misreads Indiana's own reactions to the death of her dearest friend, both in the sense of her real naïveté regarding the game of sexual teasing he is playing with her and the moral force of that innocence in not yielding to his perfidious advances.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Some commentators mistakenly give the name Madagascar to the French colony the novel designates as Bourbon. The name Bourbon was given to the island at the Congress of Vienna and was used until the fall of the monarchy when it reverted to La Réunion.

<sup>69</sup> Sand, *Indiana*, p. 84.

<sup>70</sup> Two years following the confusion in Raymon's mind that leads to his delusion of Indiana and Noun merging into the same blurred image, the same scenario is recalled and inadvertently recapitulated when the mistress dresses herself in the same garments her maidservant had been wearing on that fatal night and the conditions are such that "*la même apparition*" ("the same apparition") appeared to the nefarious seducer. While "*Indiana ne pouvait pas lire au fond de son cœur*" ("Indiana had no idea of the effect she was producing on Raymon," this is precisely how he reacts: "Raymon almost stumbled in his panic at

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In the case of Renée and her letters to her friend attempting to set forth what she has learned through her marriage and childbirth, the structures of revelation and assumed superiority show the limits to, and the liabilities of, enforced innocence and restricted education in the ways of the real social world. What Renée tries to tell her friend she has learned from witnesses to her ordeal in childbirth, that is, that she did not suffer to the full extent possible and that she had been unnecessarily frightening herself into believing things would be excruciatingly unbearable were they true. Instead, while demonstrating a maturity beyond that of her friend Louise, she now misinterprets herself as a romantic heroine who comes through more safe than harmed, more relieved than traumatized, or at least until her husband shows himself again to be—like Indiana’s persistent suitor—a deceiver and a man without scruples or morals. Both men fail to grasp the intelligence or the innocence of their prey, or of any women at all, and by that cultural blindness fail also to see the duplicity of their own condition, as they believe themselves to be projecting into the world a true masculine character while hiding behind a mask of emotional weakness and moral confusion.

Putting aside further discussion of George Sand’s *Indiana* and returning to Balzac’s epistolary novel, we can now see that when Renée recalls the actual experience of her marriage night, she does not have the social insight to see it as a form of rape; while her experience of parturition is only relatively better than anticipated. In the way she attempts to draw herself apart from her friend and claim the moral high ground, as well as social acceptability that grants her the status of a grown-up in the family, she again misreads the transition from infancy to adulthood. For she does not take into account the restrictions that remain to her as a female, a wife, and a daughter-in-law. Renée, as we see in the text she produces as a letter to her friend, imagines herself in the form of one of those doubled-creatures so popular in the later nineteenth-century fiction, such as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) or Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), where the split between appearance and reality manifests as a pair of incompatible *Doppelgänger*.

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seeing his superstitious fears realized in what he takes to be “*les traits livides d’une femme noyée*” (“the livid face of a drowned woman”) Sand, *Indiana*, pp. 264-267; and Sand, *Indiana*, trans. Hochman p. 151.

For about hour, dear love, I was sunk in a condition of prostration which was something like a dream. I felt as if I were two persons. An outer husk torn, torn, tortured, agonized; and an inner soul that was all calm and peace.<sup>71</sup>

Although the figure of the outer husk and the inner core of a text is common to rhetorical parsing of allegories—and even mystical parables in both Jewish and Christian traditions—Balzac’s young letter-writer, unaware of the historical tradition in which she frames her words, nevertheless approaches a problem of what actually constitutes a self, a conscious, rational ego, or an unconscious congeries of desires and fears; a sense that one is what one says and does or that one is what one feels without being aware of how it manifests in speech or behaviour. Here, unlike earlier moral allegories wherein the central self of the protagonist is either assailed by a demonic enemy from without and a ministering angel residing within, or two testing forces, one good and one bad, Balzac’s fictional character tries to grasp the material body as a field of painful experiences that shred the calm and innocent self into a bloody node of incoherence, while the inner soul observes in a state of quiet detachment all that is happening to its husk. But none of this is something Renée can recall as it occurred during a period of “prostration,” and her “feeling of being like two persons” has to be constructed less from raw sensory memories and more from the witnesses—midwives, female relatives, perhaps a male doctor in attendance, and probably not her husband or father, as males would be normally excluded from the room unless they were professionals. The writer of the letter also intercalates imagery and concepts learned through the reading of romantic novels and moral pamphlets directed at first-time mothers-to-be. It is unlikely that she would have available to her—or for Balzac to be familiar with—the kind of more scientific and liberal studies on women, domestic politics, and advice to new husbands as the books published by Jules Michelet in the mid-nineteenth century.

Jules Michelet pointed out in his studies of matrimonial laws, customs, and politics,<sup>72</sup> that the female enters into this legal bond as a child—and she is often much younger, less educated, and inexperienced in the ways of the world than her husband—but then, as she takes up management of the household, from care of her offspring, control over

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<sup>71</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 212.

<sup>72</sup> Jules Michelet, *L'Amour* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1859) and *La Femme* (New York: Carleton, 1860).

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servants, and overseer of health and education for all, she also takes up another role *vis-à-vis* her ‘man’. She has to give him comfort, emotional and sexual, to be sure, but also because she is attentive to his needs, worries, and anxieties, she becomes his helpmeet in those matters that she learns through association with him. By the time her children are sufficiently mature as not to require her constant attention, some of which is passed on to others, such as tutors and nurses, and eventually to professionals outside the home, her husband is at a stage in his own development where he comes to depend upon his wife as social mediator and behind-the-scenes advocate in business affairs and political ambitions. Because she is so much younger than he, when he begins to slow down towards his dotage and various illnesses afflict him his wife is still mature and strong enough to assume a position from which she can easily slide from nominal head-of-household to actual dominant figure, especially if she can manipulate her own children and greedy relatives so as to maintain her own independence as a widow. Of course, though neither Renée nor Balzac sees this trajectory in any explicit terms, it is still there implicitly in the same kind of general knowledge that Michelet and other contemporary observers noted during the nineteenth century. What is more visible, when we make explicit the metaphors, allusions, and conventional gestures recounted in the text, is the machinery of the novel itself as a phantasmagoria.

### **A Time to Die and a Time to Love**

Then, as Renée continues her letter, fumbling for words, there comes an elaborate but not quite coherent or logical conceit of the rosary as an elaboration of a crown of thorns:

While I was in that strange condition my sufferings seemed to blossom like a crown of flowers above my head. It was as though a huge rose that sprang upward out of my skull grew larger and larger, and wrapped me all about. The rosy colour of the blood-stained blossom was in the very air, and everything was red to me.<sup>73</sup>

The crown of roses over her head strongly suggests imagery derived from the biblical *Song of Songs* (*Shir ha'Shirim*) and in particular the Catholic derivatives in the *Magnificat* and other praises of the Virgin Mary, a conceit that connects the physicality and sensuousness of sexuality and

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<sup>73</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 212.



childbirth with the mystical purity of the Virgin Birth and the Immaculate Conception. Growing out of her skull, the huge rose becomes a radical variant of the Tree of Jesse that marks the bloodline of David's royal family and its culmination in the formal marriage of Mary to Joseph and its symbolic manifestation in the *hieros gamos* (sacred union) pictured in the traditional icons associated with the Annunciation, whereby the Mother of God is impregnated by the Word conveyed by the angel Gabriel, a *verbum* depicted as a ray of light passing into the Virgin Mary's body by way of her ear (Luke 1:26-38). At the same time, and with a strong undermining of both the spiritual and mystical aspects to the event, the skull acts as the *momento mori*, a grotesque reminder of human mortality and the mutability of the flesh. Her memory-image of the huge rose enfolding her head in layers of redness points back to the overwhelming physical sensation of being covered in blood during the moment of parturition and its immediate aftermath:

Then, when I had reached a point at which body and soul seemed ready to part company, I felt a pang that made me think I was going to die that instant.<sup>74</sup>

Because of the high incidence of death surrounding the relatively low levels of cleanness and hygiene and a concomitant lack of understanding of antiseptic procedures before Dr Lister's discoveries, and even while there was an increase in the number of physicians specializing in gynaecology, the fear of death for the mother was prevalent right through to the end of the nineteenth century. No amount of obfuscation through romantic imagery or pious admonitions from the church could dispel those morbid thoughts, just as an awareness of the likelihood of infant mortality right through the first few years of life surrounded the reality of motherhood with premonitions of loss.

I screamed aloud, and then I found fresh strength to bear fresh pains. Suddenly the hideous concert was hushed within me by the delicious sound of the little creature's shrill wail.<sup>75</sup>

Again it is only by looking back after three months that Renée can write to her friend in such an upbeat way, eliding the long period between when she was in fear, close to any number of accidents or infections that might shorten her own and her boy's life, and surrounded by the "hideous concert within me," that is—and here we come close to the emblematic

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<sup>74</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 212.

<sup>75</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 212.

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representation of parturition as a phantasmagoria, a combination of ghastly images, horrid sounds, and morbid allusions to death, dismemberment and a miraculous survival. The “little creature” that cries out in pain from inside her body is at once the foetus metamorphosing into a newborn infant and her own recapitulated experiences as an emergent being born of her mother’s womb, a doubled and thus grotesque image, so that she is mother and child at the same time, traumatized by the ordeal and the somatic mirrored experience.

No words of mine will ever express that moment to you. It seemed to me that the whole world had been crying out with me, that everything that was not pain was clamour, and then that my baby’s feeble cry had hushed it all.<sup>76</sup>

Clamour and pain, the baby’s feeble cry, all create that concert which is at the heart of the performance, where in the couchant mother opens herself to public scrutiny, as the infant emerges into the world. This phantasmagoria can be recognized only through close examination of the text, its words, its rhythms, its allusions. Thus the indication of the multiple players on the stage, who also stand as witnesses to the production:

They laid me back in my great bed.<sup>77</sup>

At this moment, after exhausting herself in the labours of childbirth, the light of a fantasy shines through her eerie moment between consciousness and unconsciousness.

It was like entering Paradise to me, in spite of my excessive weakness. Then two or three people with joyful faces and tearful eyes held out the child to me. My dear, I cried out in horror:

“What a little monkey!” I said. “Are you sure it is a baby?” I asked.

And I lay back once more, rather grieved at not feeling more maternal.<sup>78</sup>

What she takes to be an entrance into Paradise, with all its archaic biblical and cultural implications of either the Earthly Paradise of sensual delights and the heavenly region of pure spirit and divine rewards, the immediate sense seems to grasp after a Place of withdrawal from recent labours, and therefore less of an idealized and therefore unreal pleasures—the only pleasure held out is the momentary cessation of pain—than an illusion too flimsy to be sustained. Looking back after the three months interlude and directing her remarks directly out of the letter to its recipient, Louise, “my

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<sup>76</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 212.

<sup>77</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 212.

<sup>78</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, pp. 212-213.

dear,” in a confession that is partly self-mockery framed as a speech out of comic play. The “horror” breaches the divide (what Warburg spoke of as the *Zwischenraum*, the opening up of a space for feelings, thoughts and images to form out of the formless pre-conceptual experiences)<sup>79</sup> between the shock in the immediate aftermath of childbirth in seeing the ugly, ill-formed shape of the infant, which, instead of an angelic creature, is “a little monkey,” which makes her question fatuous; and the present-time sense of reflection on how all her feelings at that time were confused, exaggerated, and grotesque in their incoherence. She thus concludes this statement or reproduction of an imagined burlesque show by undercutting both what is either tragic, or comic, down to the size of banality and farce: she blames herself for not feeling more maternal, as though that were a natural set of instincts and impulses, rather than a designation for a socially-constructed suite of cultural attitudes and clichéd expressions. If anything, after so many hours of discomfort, suffering and humiliation, it is the mother who should be seen as a monkey—a human being stripped of her dignity and ideals, at least for the moment; sweaty, dishevelled, and exhausted, while the infant, little Armand, is washed clean, wrapped in warm blankets, and cooed over by his grandmother and other female attendants, the midwife team who beam with joy and pride, as if they were the heroic survivors of the ordeal.<sup>80</sup>

As though there were an imaginary camera slowly receding from its close up and x-ray portrait of the female-narrator compressed into her own genital organs and still attached to the foetus that slides out of her body, the scene takes on a different perspective, one in which we can see

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<sup>79</sup> These moments can occur in literature through the fissuring of the conventionalized language of poetry and rhetoric, or as Alexander Pope said “What oft was thought but ne’er so well expressed:” the witty deconstruction of superficial platitudes and their replacement by new *Pathosformeln*, passionate locutions that act as triggers to the experience of catharsis, purgation and refreshment, and yet the original healthy state is not recovered: at best, the *míaron*, the miasma of pollution, filth and shock remain to reappear “as time goes by.” See Sigrid Wiegel, ‘Epistemology of Wandering, Tree and Taxonomy: The System Figure in Warburg’s Mnemosyne Project Within the History of Cartographic and Encyclopedic knowledge’, *Images re-Vues: Histoire, Anthropologie et Theorie de l’Art*, vol 4 (2013), at <http://imagesrevues.revues.org/2934>. Accessed 17 August 2017.

<sup>80</sup> On the metaphor of the midwife as philosopher and creator of creative thoughts, see Norman Simms, ‘Anti-Semitism as Catachresis’, *Mentalities/Mentalités*, vol. 2, no. 3 (2016), at <http://mentalitiesjournal.com/past-editions>. Accessed 17 August 2017.

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the actors in the play, the stage-sets, and the magic lantern projecting fantastic imagery into the cloud of pain and unknowing:

“Don’t distress yourself, my dear,” said my mother, who had constituted herself my nurse, “you’ve borne the finest child that ever was seen. Take care not to excite yourself; you must apply your whole mind now to growing dull; you must be exactly like the cow that grazes for the sake of having milk.”<sup>81</sup>

The narrative steps still further back, showing at once the mechanics of the phantasmagoria, the role-playing by various *dramatis personae*, and the iconic images that attempt to substitute social myths of ease and comportment for the actual scene of labour, pain and physical dangers associated with the first days, weeks and even months after a child is born.

So I went to sleep, firmly resolved to do as Nature bade me. Ah, dearest, the waking up out of all that pain, those confused feelings, those first days during which everything is dim and painful and uncertain, was something divine. The darkness was lightened by a sensation the delights of which surpassed that of my child’s first cry.<sup>82</sup>

Darkness and shadows are virtually preconditions for the effects of the phantasmagoria to take hold of the spectators’ imagination, and in the instance we are dealing with here it is the aspect of *nigredo* (shadow, evening and night, as well as putrefaction, solar eclipse, death) Maria Rzepińska and Krystyna Malcharek tell us have been associated with “the darkness of the womb” and “the embryo of birth.”<sup>83</sup> The passage of the foetus from the darkness within to the lightness without is, however, tainted by the ordeal of the labour the mother must go through, an experience Baroque scientists and philosophers analogized to astronomical and alchemical transits and transformations, spiritual ecstasies and anxieties, and the artists’ *pittura tenebrosa* making this mixture and darkness and light a value in itself:

Kepler’s words about darkness as “astronomorum oculi” and the alchemists’ *nigredo* as the cosmic earliest beginnings and, at the same time, the necessary phase of death and putrefaction in order that life and light might arise—all these symptoms somehow meet, forming an important trend at the time of the Baroque.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 213.

<sup>82</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 213.

<sup>83</sup> Maruia Rzepińska and Krystyna Malcharek, ‘Tenebrism in Baroque Painting and its Ideological Background’, *Artibus et Historiae*, vol. 7, no. 13 (1986), p. 105.

<sup>84</sup> Rzepińska and Malcharek, ‘Tenebrism in Baroque Painting’, p. 106.

Secularized and naturalized, these phenomena are recreated through the elaborate apparatus of the phantasmagoria, with smoke and mirrors, musical sounds and tactile features, and then, further, as a familiar popular entertainment, a figurative intellectual lens for dealing with bodily functions, such as parturition.

Thus, in Balzac's nineteenth-century French novel, whoever the Mistress or Master of the phantasmagoria is, whether Nature or Renée's mother as 'nurse' or midwife, or perhaps the fictionalized voice as part of the heard and seen consciousness of the narrator or author himself, remains uncertain, even if we factor in further the original readers or ourselves in the present of our study.

My heart, my soul, my being, an individuality hitherto unknown was roused out of the shell in which it had been lying suffering and dull, just as the flower springs from the root at the blazing summons from the sun.<sup>85</sup>

The little rogue was put to my breast; that was my '*fiat lux*'. Of a sudden I knew I was a mother. Here was happiness, delight—ineffable delight, although it be one which involves some suffering.<sup>86</sup>

The passive mode not only reiterates the presence of several people in the room with her, but indicates that Renée has not of her own accord reached out to the infant. He has been put to her breast, like a "little rogue," at once a playful creature or pet, and a type of sexual playfellow who initiates the foreplay and awakens her desire for married love, a passion that was imposed on her when she was still virginal and naïve, fearful of the encounter. This physical coupling can now be seen as her self-creation and transformation from victim-child to loving-partner, the beginning of a new life for her, the "*fiat lux*" or "Let there be light" of Genesis.

Knowledge is said to come with delight, and yet the transition is hidden in a mist of imposed idealism, the *ineffable* delight, and therefore, though not yet explained, a physical pleasure that also brings suffering. At which the rhetorical thrust through the impasse of a knowledge that is still ignorance and a pleasure that still gives pain is to address Louise from a position of assumed moral and epistemological superiority.

O my beautiful, jealous Louise, how you will prize a pleasure which lies between ourselves, the child, and God!<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 213.

<sup>86</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 213.

<sup>87</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 213.

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This may mean, in the first instance, that Louise cannot know the pleasures that Renée too has given birth and brought forth an infant that will attach itself to her at the breast. Until then, the writer has no way to share her knowledge. Second, the child that is borne of woman makes her unique and different from her previous friend; they are separate beings who depend upon past experiences they have shared, not their present conditions. Third, God also stands between the two young brides of the novel's title, partly because the divinity has graced the first with an infant that proves the efficacy of married love to introduce a new life into the world and second, compounding the paradox of physical love—a painful encounter between the naïve virgin and her virile and mature husband that yields though further suffering a different kind of totally dependent lover in this child—and spiritual pleasure superimposed on the carnal events leading up to it: this, too, is a mystery that Renée cannot share with Louise until she has gone through a similar experience.

However, these paradoxes, analogies and mysteries remain vague and fragile, feeble cries, as it were, because they still stand in place of a different kind of natural truth that the whole apparatus of the phantasmagoria attempts to distort and make palatable to a society in which the old religious faith is nearly disappeared and the new secular, scientific Positivism has not assimilated itself into the intimacies and feelings of bourgeois social relationships. The next vignette of the selfish little creature seeking to gain control over the material essence of the mother, even against her will in a kind of parody of rape, indicates that part of the new enjoyment felt by Renée is compounded of both a physical pleasure in being mastered by her own little man and by taking over control of the sexually-powerful drives at the heart of this relationship.

The only thing the little creature knows is his mother's breast, that is the only spot that shines to him in the world. He loves it with all his strength; he thinks of nothing but the fountain of his life; he comes to it, and goes away to sleep, and wakes to come back to it again.<sup>88</sup>

In her eyes, the baby is obsessed with his mother's breast, believes it is his by right of strength, and is the centre of his whole world. In other words, her nurturing body is the creative centre of the universe, the sun. Yet she is not the god of this solar system of mutual pleasures, but as much its product, as the suffering that makes the system work.

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<sup>88</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, pp. 213-214.

There is an ineffable love in the very touch of his lips, and when I feel them, they give me pain and pleasure at once—a pleasure that becomes an actual pain—a pain that ends in delight.<sup>89</sup>

Here is the surrogate extension of coitus, the passion that means at the same time the highest form of physical pleasure and the extreme experience of pain, a mystical paradox coded into the religious dogmas and imagery associated with the Crucifixion of the loving Son and the pathos and grief of the *Mater Dolorosa*, the Mother of Sorrows.

I can give no explanation of the sensation I feel radiate from my breast to the very springs of my life—for it seems as it were the centre of a thousand rays, that rejoice my heart and soul. To bear a child is nothing, but to nurse it is a perpetual maternity.

Even as she attempts to describe herself as the heart and soul of Christian ecstasy and passion, Renée reveals herself as part of the contraption that produces artificial images projected from a magic lantern on to a smoke-screen and to the accompaniment of strange sounds, smells, and textures played about the spectators at the phantasmagoria.

The next paragraph opens a scene of erotic, almost pornographic interest in the mother's enjoyment of nursing her newborn infant, a connubial act in which "[e]very desire is more than satisfied."

O Louise no lover's caress can equal that of the little pink hands that move about so softly and try to cling to life. What looks the child casts, first at its mother's breast, and then at her eyes. What dreams he dreams, as she watches his lips clinging to his most precious possession. All one's mental powers. As well as all one's bodily strength, are called into action. One's corporal life and one's intelligence are both kept busy. Every desire is more than satisfied.<sup>90</sup>

In addition to the imitation of an adult sexual encounter, the description opens up the vital powers of the mother-infant gaze, so important to the child's neuronal development and the mother's healing of incomplete maturation during her own babyhood, in that the crossed eyebeams of the pair stimulate growth and inhibit excessive developments in an unconscious quest for balance and order.

At this point, Renée seems to reiterate many of the same words, gestures, and allusive pointers she has already written to Louise, but now these portions of her phantasmagoric memory put the emphasis on different aspects of the projected scenario, beginning with the cosmic myth wherein

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<sup>89</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 214.

<sup>90</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 214.

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the mother sees herself as the newly-created earth feeling the original rays of light from the sun:

That heavenly sensation of my child's first cry—which was to me what the first sun beam must have been to the earth—came back to me when I felt my milk flow into his mouth, and it came back to me again just now, when I read his first thought in his first smile.<sup>91</sup>

For it is more than a reiteration of the Book of Genesis's depiction of a gradual, overlapping and systematic evolution of the world, deeply contrasted with the violent and abusive sexual acts that mark out the cosmogenesis described in ancient Greek and Latin versions of "the beginning."<sup>92</sup> The cosmic perspective tilts to reveal the natural flow of human emotions between the generations depending upon reciprocity of pleasuring, the mother's milk feeding the child and the baby's smiles, coos and signs of satisfaction filling her with pleasure. Out of these preverbal sensations of mutual pleasuring flows another series of developments now intellectual and verbal, for the mother-infant relationship moves from pure physicality through mutual gazing on to reading and interpretation, an interpretation that is an active creative force:

He laughed, my dear. That laugh, that look, that pressure, that cry, those four delights are infinite—they stir the very bottom of one's heart and touch such strings which nothing but they can reach.<sup>93</sup>

This dynamic dialectic of communication from one level of experience to another and then back again, each time reshaping and re-interpreting the pleasures and their meaningfulness, leads the writer: ambiguously the author's fictional Renée. Renée is able to articulate insights far beyond what her formal learning has taught her. The narrative follows the directing voice of Balzac whose understanding is derived from intimacies with women, such as his sister and his Polish lover, and his imagination that combs through various mystical philosophies appearing in the post-Revolutionary period. He reviews these in his journalistic writings and puts

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<sup>91</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 214.

<sup>92</sup> I have shown how the opening hymnal passages in Genesis are written in response to Hesiod and Ovid, as well as many other cosmogenic classical works. The biblical authors substitute a logical unfolding of dependent acts over measured periods of time (called 'days and nights') whereas the Greeks and Romans show creation as intrusive, transgressive and sudden collisions of the gods, their powers, and products. See Norman Simms, *Festivals of Laughter, Blood and Justice in Biblical and Classical Literature* (London, ON: Sussco, 2008).

<sup>93</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, pp. 214-215.



together ideas that will not be codified as psychology and medical advances until much later in the nineteenth century. It is the laughter that is shared as all these voices coalesce and, as in a Phantasmagoria, train different light beams through one another, synchronized to musical sounds and to other sensory projections.

When she tries to explain herself further, however, Renée gets herself caught in the trap of conventional pieties and social banalities, even as her words are filtered through the magic lantern of the author's controlling text:

The [planetary] spheres must be bound to the Deity. Even as a child is bound to every fibre of his mother's being. God must be one great mother's heart.<sup>94</sup>

By the mid-nineteenth century in France, the new cult of the Sacre Cœur was making itself felt as part of the Church's drive to recapture adherence from a society riven by revolutionary political ideas and advancing towards secular modernity and Positivist science,<sup>95</sup> but here we can see Balzac resisting that regressive mode of extra-Scriptural revelation and anti-rational religiosity, as the unschooled and still very naïve Renée sees her relationship to her son and her God as cast in the light of a new sentimentalized sexuality transferred from the marital relations of husband and wife to the maternal ties of mother and child. Examined too closely, the assertions by this letter writer are blasphemous. They are also socially radical because these statements place the strength of the family and the domestic household not on the dominance of the father's economic and intellectual superiority but on the physical bond between children and mother. The paternal contribution to this new domestic politics is minimalized, if not trivialized as a means to an end, the impregnation of the wife:

There is nothing visible, nor perceptible, in conception, nor even in the months of waiting out to nurse a child, Louise, is a constant happiness. You watch the daily progress of your work, you see the milk grow into flesh, and blossom in the dainty fingers, so like flowers and quite as delicate—you see it form slender and transparent nails, and silky hair, and little restless feet.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 215.

<sup>95</sup> Raymond Jonas, *France and the Cult of the Sacred Heart: An Epic Tale for Modern Times* (University of California Press, 2015).

<sup>96</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 215.

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A child's feet—why they have a language of their own—a child's first expression lies in them. To nurse a child, Louise, is to watch with astonished eye an hourly process of transformation.<sup>97</sup>

When the baby cries, you do not hear it with your ears, but with your heart. When its eyes smile, or its lips, or it kicks with its feet, you understand all it means as though God wrote it for you on space in letters of fire.<sup>98</sup>

Nothing else in the world possesses the smallest interest for you. The father ... you are ready to kill him if he dares wake the child. The mother by herself is the whole world to her babe, just as the babe is the whole world to its mother.

She feels so certain that her existence is shared by another, she is so amply rewarded for her care and suffering—for there is suffering ... as every nursing mother finds out for herself.<sup>99</sup>

In these five months<sup>100</sup> my young monkey has grown into the prettiest creature that any mother ever bathed with her happy tears, washed, brushed, combed, and adorned, for God himself only knows the unwearying delight with which a mother dresses, and undresses, brushes and washes and kisses her little blossom My monkey, then, is not a monkey any longer, but a baby, as my English nurse calls him, a pink-and-white baby, and feeling himself loved, he doesn't scream so very much—but the real truth is that I hardly ever leave him, and I try to pervade his very soul with mine.<sup>101</sup>

Here the text takes a new and radical turn. While using of the key words and images already present in the description of giving birth, the appearance of the newborn, and the feelings she experiences through all these aspects of her lying in and parturition, Renée begins to evaluate her relationship and feelings about her husband and then about the changes that have occurred to and around her.

Dearest, I feel something in my heart now which is not love, but something which must complete the feeling in the case of a woman who does not love.

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<sup>97</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 215.

<sup>98</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 215.

<sup>99</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 215.

<sup>100</sup> The opening of the lines of this chapter 'The Memoirs of Two Young Brides' claimed that only three months had passed. See Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 210.

<sup>101</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, pp. 215-216.

Insofar as she sees herself completed as a person by the transition from virginal bride to sexual partner and then to maternally-charged mother, her relationship with her husband has shifted from the one of utter dependence on him as the head-of-the-household, her master in terms of financial and social control over her life, and whose physical pleasures also depend on his active role as initiator of sexual encounters. She now understands her position in other terms, set against different frames of reference, and measured by higher standards of pleasure and fulfilment as a person.

Nevertheless, despite occasional lapses into naïve language of sentimental romances and pious clichés, Renée is relaxed and composed enough to perceive the realistic ties still imposed on her by communal conventions. Her father-in-law and his father both start to look at Renée in a new way, no longer as a stranger or interloper, but a member of the family, the mother of their next generation, while Louis, her husband, wanders about telling trees and stones of his joy in being the father of a son, owning up to her that he had grave misgivings that she could actually produce an heir for him. So while the wife and mother is happy because the men around her are proud of her accomplishment, she nevertheless has a suppressed frustration in never being valued for herself, but always in relation to others. Or, as she tries to express her secret thoughts, she is being locked into her biology, and not allowed to act out her own individuality as a complete human being.

As she attempts to explain these new feelings and moral insights to her childhood friend Louise, however, Renée transvalues many of the truisms and their images in order to include her new sense of completeness and superiority, and to do she speaks, with the author's guiding hand, of the life opened up to her as a contraption to bond together contradictory, fragmentary, and unspeakable notions of the self, in other words, a rhetorical machine that projects the image of her flesh-and-blood self as young mother through a complicated magic lantern to entertain her audience—the readers of the novel, real and fictional, and the members of the household and extended family who articulate to her the diverse changes allowable within bourgeois society according to the stages in her passage from innocence to experienced wife, mother and home-manager while exposing to view the various devices in play.

She at first argues that the experience of having a child and undertaking its nutrition and early formation as a social being, her maternal love exceeds her as wife. She begins to expound this contrast by

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constructing a figure of a tapestry woven into cloth and the colours that can be seen as the image coalesces into a work of art and yet there are two other factors that she cannot quite put into word to explain the conceit further. On the one hand, the tints on the surface of the tapestry begin to dim as the continuing sunlight fades them; on the other, the underside of the embroidered cloth does not reveal what pictures are displayed on the surface, but rather indicate the knots and cross-looped ties that are created by the process of creation itself. It is these hidden ties, bonds and knots that give the cloth its strength.

Every hour adds some fresh bond between a mother and her child. The feeling within my heart convinces me that the maternal sentiment is imperishable, natural, and unailing—whereas I strongly suspect that love has its intermissions. People do not love each other in the same fashion at every moment—the flowers embroidered into the tissue of this life are not always of the brightest colours. And then love may and must come to an end. But motherhood need fear no decline; it deepens with the child's needs and develops with its growth.<sup>102</sup>

Another factor implied in this complex and apparently confused figure of the embroidered tapestry its constituent threads sewn directly into the material cloth, and seen as a different kind of significant pattern of stitches and bindings only appears obliquely, particularly when we note the cunning shift from the child as the newborn infant that grows from total dependency towards independence and the mother's attachment which, instead of being severed, like the umbilical cord, through subsequent formation, education and experience, grows stronger and more significant because the female herself gains in maturity of reflection and the gaining of practical skills inside and outside the small circle of female attendants at home, so that the child, which had been wittily identified with the bride as she gives birth to her own more mature self, now shifts yet again to take in the husband—and the wife grows into the roles of friend, helpmeet, advisor, and maternal care-giver for him. "This is," Renée says to Louise, one's "own special life," a secret that she shares surreptitiously with her friend, even though this friend has not yet passed through the various stages of development leading up to its actual understanding. In other words, by passing these incoherent and inconsistent beams of light through the magic lantern lens of the novelistic text, Balzac discloses that hidden process to the reader.

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<sup>102</sup> Balzac, *The Letters*, p. 217.

## Émile Zola and the Literary Horrors of Birth

Peter Brooks famously traces the melodramatic impetus to a vacuum created by a perceived death of the Sacred in the excesses of the French Revolution and Reign of Terror, “the epistemological moment” that signals “the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions”—Church and Crown—the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms—tragedy, comedy of manners—that depended on such a society.”<sup>103</sup>

As already hinted at earlier in this article, another account, of child-rearing also appears in the twelfth of Zola’s Rougon-Macquart novels *La joi de vivre*, known in English as *Zest for Life*. Given the “flat style” of this narrative, as Angus Wilson terms it, in order to get close to the kind of inner experiences (*intime*)<sup>104</sup> of the woman in labour we have been talking about, we need to work from both the original and the translation. It is also important to see that the naturalistic scene of painful parturition experienced by the woman in question belongs to a much larger pattern of processes of decay, corruption, and natural destruction.

Throughout the novel, the characters and events are set along the Normandy coastline where the heavy seasonal tides are constantly eating away at the shoreline, undermining the foundations of the fishermen’s huts, and, when an attempt is made to construct an artificial sea-break or jetty to hold back the floods, the heavy waves, whipped up by storms at sea, destroy the wooden structures. Similarly, punctuating all key developments in the narrative and providing a background human tragedy, the patriarch of the Chanteau family suffers from an increasingly debilitating case of gout, his pains resounding throughout the house, and his eventual immobility creating a reason why no one else can live in harmony and peace. The two

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<sup>103</sup> Noël Montague-Étienne Rarignac, ‘The Gothic and the Grotesque: The Mysteries of the Golden Mansion’, *The Gothic Imagination* (27 May 2012), at <http://www.gothic.stir.ac.uk/guestblog/the-gothic-and-the-grotesque-the-mysteries-of-the-golden-mansion>. Accessed 17 August, 2017.

<sup>104</sup> In French, the term *intime* means both intimate in the sense of private acts and feelings between a husband and wife, or lovers, and the domestic sanctity of the family and household. It also comes to mean the silent, often dreamy world of the mind now composed of conscious and unconscious elements, or as here the normally private life of the body and its processes, which become in a modern objective and scientific world the very essence of the personality. Miyuki Terashima, ‘Le discours de “l’intime” dans les “Rougon-Macquart”’: Etude d’une trilogie romanesque: *la Joie de vivre, L’Œuvre, Le Docteur Pascal*’ (doctoral thesis, Université Sorbonne Nouvelle, Paris, 2011).

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central characters are Lazare Chanteau, a young man who is unable to settle on a profession to follow, constantly drawn towards various enthusiasms which soon bore him so he falls back into a sense of morbid and obsessive fear of death that makes him prematurely old, virtually senile at times, and Pauline, his younger cousin, who comes from Paris to join the household after her own parents die and whose presence is at once a of sunshine, love, and hope and at the same time a cause of resentment, jealousy, and greed.

Lazare and Pauline seem to be, according to some critics, opposite poles of a Schopenhauerian confrontation, the implicit incompatibility of the two attitudes leading each of these people to be drawn towards each other with sexual passion and yet unable to accept one another as satisfying partners and thus forcing themselves into heart-breaking self-sacrifice and the crushing of intellectual and social ambition. Another stranger in the house, Louise, also a cousin, spends her summer holidays with the family; but while she is rich, beautiful, and seemingly full of life, her presence is also morbid and debilitating, and she seems of offer a more alluring affection to Lazare. Pauline mistakes this superficial attraction and girlish flirtation for a serious and mature love, the kind she cannot bring herself to offer the man she desires. It is, however, the visitor's momentary enthusiasms and support for Lazare's projects (he dabbles in music, science, medicine, engineering, novel-writing and journalism) again makes her appear to be of greater worth to him and the older folk in the household. Her recently-inherited large fortune appeals to their peasant-like mentality, especially when it is opposed to Pauline's smaller but carefully invested heritage that she generously gives away to keep the family together, something the others cite as a fault—as though she were frittering away the money that ought to belong to Lazare, and thus to them. They want Louise to support Lazare's changeable interests, and do good deeds in the neighbourhood befitting the patriarch's role as mayor of the failing stability of the village. Pauline, ever-willing to sacrifice her best interests and even herself to make Lazare happy, makes no complaints even as she comes to realize she is being taken advantage of.

We find in each of these processes of physical decay, emotional and intellectual diminution, and psychological self-destruction premonitions—imagistic and thematic foreshadowing—of the climactic Chapter X where Louise (now married to Lazare, partly at Pauline's connivance) goes through her near-fatal childbirth of a son to be named Paul. In a few exemplary close-readings now, it will be seen that Zola's

aims are to shift the generic scope and tone of these actions away from the moral and satiric discourses where such details have normally resided and into a more objective, scientific, naturalistic mode, and yet, at the same time, not to drain them of all signifying power beyond the details themselves. In the first case, the several descriptions are cumulative, building up particular locutions, patterns, and allusions that achieve climax in the near-death experience of Louise in parturition. Second, the return of older iconic signifiers through interweaving of the different processes—wasting disease, meteorological destructiveness, undermining of self-confidence, debilitating and morbid obsession with the approach of death—gives to the novel as a whole a sense of philosophical purpose that is quite distinct from the allegorical and homiletic superficiality constructed in all but a very few literary texts (Prudentius, Dante, Spenser, Milton). Third, as in the formal contours of the phantasmagoria, the return of the repressed emotions through the technological projection of contemporary ghosts and evil forces of anarchy and chaos, drives the argument to confront, overwhelm, and replace the import of Schopenhauer's negativity.

In Zola's *La joi de vivre*, when the local midwife, Madame Bouland, arrives to aid the young mother Louise in a difficult birth begun in her eighth month, she recommends, after noting the difficulties exceed her legal range of operations under French law, that the father quickly call for a physician. Dr Cazenove arrives, assesses the situation, and declares that he does not think both mother and infant can survive. Though there is some professional rivalry between the midwife and the male physician who attend the birth of Paul Chanteau, the difference in status and experience is, despite that superficial resemblance, not at all like that fictionalized (and satirized) in Laurence Sterne's mid-eighteenth-century novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. Sterne's narrative echoes the notion of the male midwife as a grotesque monster.<sup>105</sup> *Tristram Shandy* also deals more seriously with the question of a female naturalism, represented by the commonsense awareness of female needs in the district midwife, Mrs Shandy's wish to be treated at home by a woman, and the naïve gender prejudices of the two Shandy brothers, My Father Walter and My Uncle Toby, for whom a woman's mental life, as well as her anatomy, remain

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<sup>105</sup> Anna Ostrowska, 'Birth: A Changing Scene. Part II: A Controversial Figure of Man-Midwife', *Wellcome Library* (10 December 2012), at <http://blog.wellcomelibrary.org/2012/12/man-midwife>. Accessed 17 August 2017.

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great mysteries. But what is most comical about the birthing scene are the portentous and pedantic procedures carried out by Dr Slop, with his cold metal instruments that lead, tragically during the attempt to extract the foetus during a breech birth, to the virtual circumcision and near castration of the future hero of the novel.<sup>106</sup>

Here is where we begin to comment on Zola's narrative voice in regard to what the text calls "*sa maternité ensanglantée et béante*"<sup>107</sup> and which Stewart's translation expands to the more explicit theatrical expression "the bloodstained, gaping spectacle of parturition."<sup>108</sup> Quickly, Louise's modesty gives way to unconcern for her nakedness, her attempt to self-control lapses into animal-like screams of pain, and her awareness of what is happening simply disappears into the unconscious enactment of this primal scene, as do the others assisting the doctor and midwife, especially Lazare who, as in the fire rescue of the peasant infant, here acts on sheer instinct. Here it is important to watch the tonal and allusionary differences between the original French and the translator's interpretation of the text and the event. Zola writes, as we have seen:

*On lui obéissait, cette nudité avait aussi disparu pour eux. Ils n'en voyaient que la misère pitoyable, ce drame d'une naissance disputée, qui tuait l'idée de l'amour. A la grande clarté brutale, le mystère troublant s'en entaille de la peau si délicate aux endroits secrets, de la toison frisant en petites mèches blondes; et il ne restait que l'humanité douloureuse, l'enfantement dans le sang et dans l'ordure, faisant craquer le ventre des mères, élargissant jusqu'à l'horreur la fente rouge, pareille au coup de hache qui ouvre le tronc et laisse couler la vie des grands arbres.*<sup>109</sup>

They obeyed his [Dr Cazenove's] orders, for they too had lost consciousness of her nudity. They saw nothing but the pitiful misery of it, the dramatic struggle for birth, which killed all sense of love. Thus brutally exposed to the light, all the disturbing mystery had gone from that delicate skin, with its secret places, with its fair crispy fleece; nothing remained but suffering humanity, childbirth amidst blood and ordure, the mother's womb strained to bursting point, the red slit

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<sup>106</sup> See, for example Norman Simms, 'The Missing Jews and Jewishness in *Tristram Shandy*', *The Shandean*, vol. 4 (1992), pp. 135-152.

<sup>107</sup> Zola, *La joie de vivre*, p. 399.

<sup>108</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, p. 264.

<sup>109</sup> Zola, *La joie de vivre*, pp. 399-400.



stretched agonisingly, like the wound made by an axe in the trunk of some great tree, spilling its life-blood.<sup>110</sup>

The translator attempts, it seems, to make the situation more naturalistic, that is, close to the scientific accuracy of a real parturition, as it is assumed that Zola was aiming for as his primary goal. In this sense, the novelist seeks to strip away romantic sentimentality and idealism and to brush aside the curtain of bourgeois modesty usually drawn across such an event. To a certain extent this is an apt assessment of Zola's way of writing, as demonstrated by his accumulation of notes from technical handbooks and records of conversation with medical professionals. However, the inner workings of the passage—as indeed, of the whole novel—taken from a different perspective, that of challenging a purely positivistic view of parturition as a medical event, when we read in a way that listens closely to tone and follows threads of allusion into other contexts, what emerges are several different cultural factors only partly grasped by the translator.

There is, to begin with, a sense of the performative perspective, such as the dramatic, the spectacular, and the phantasmagoric, indicated in the way layers of pretentiousness and pseudo-objectivity are cut away by shocking clash of modes of social discourse: technical jargon, colloquialisms and argot, romantic and erotic terminology; by such a means, the participants express themselves through their thoughts recorded by the narrator, speeches made to themselves, comments passed between them, and interpretive verbal gestures by the controlling author. Such discourses mark their status by age, gender, profession, and propensity to introspection. This includes the former naval surgeon whose experience with gynaecological patients is limited and who finds himself desperate to negotiate his way through this difficult procedure where the descending foetus is in danger of or even may already be dead, as well as the midwife who recalls not only many years experience in the region but also the most recent activities over the past twenty-four hours. Both of these professionals regard themselves as performing before an audience, especially one another. Meanwhile, the family group have already given away their emotional concerns for an almost robotic obedience to his directions, yet they are scrutinized by the narrator to register their awareness of how they perform before the others, and test themselves under trying circumstances. The larger, outer audience consists of all those

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<sup>110</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, p. 264.

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reading the novel at the time it was written and subsequently. When it is recognized that the physician's own expertise is being tested by this procedure, what he is displaying to the world—all those in the room with him, as well as those of us who examine the events and feelings of the participants through the medium of the literary text—is the viability of nineteenth-century medical science.

That literary text exists for us as a thick discourse and multi-layered set of rhetorical allusions. The exposure of Louise's private parts comes, not as in a strip-tease that arouses prurient or erotic interest—such as characterized and thus defined the 'French novel' of the period—but whose scientific validation cannot be assured, since terms such as 'mystery', 'secret', and 'suffering humanity' remain as connections to older genres of literature, the moral, the satiric and the mythical. Any reader educated in a classical culture will also recognize here allusions to the Christian sense of moral disgust adhering, as even modern poets like William Butler Yeats put it, to the location of love "in the place of excrement."<sup>111</sup> Similarly, the more literary spectators will not only recall the school boy's shock at seeing a female sexual organ for the first time and fearing she is suffering from a brutal excision of the male member, but be reminded of the place in the third canto of the *Aeneid* where Virgil recounts how his hero Aeneas tries to chop down a tree on a deserted island only to find the bloodied branch speaking and telling him of its mythical history as the navigator Polydorus, a *topos* repeated in Dante and many other more modern texts.

In this way Zola creates a vision of Louise's terrible ordeal in terms that resonate with the ghosts of literary memories, just as the audience of a phantasmagoria at the close of the eighteenth century sought to rediscover the old feelings of awe and mystery that they had just experienced being eradicated by the French Revolution, an event they hoped would guarantee a more rational world to live in, and yet which they could not bring themselves to let go of completely. At the same time, Pauline, as a young woman who has often contemplated her own maturing naked body and read Lazare's medical texts, has both a proud and desire-laden respect for female sexuality, and thus makes comparisons between both her own voluptuousness and Louise's scragginess, her eagerness to bear a child and

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<sup>111</sup> From W. B. Yeats, 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop' (1933).

her cousin's wife as frightened, ashamed and ignorant of her physiological processes. It is the play of these different perspectives and juxtaposition of the various tonalities that makes the whole passage something more than a mere naturalistic depiction of childbirth.

The text continues a few lines later:

*Au milieu des muscles engorgés et tendue, entre les bourrelets rosâtres, l'enfant apparaissait. Mais il était arrêté là, par l'étranglement de l'organe, qu'il ne pouvait franchir. Cependant, les efforts du ventre et des reins tachaient encore de le chasser; même évanouie, la mère poussait violemment, s'épuisa ce labeur, dans le besoin mécanique de la délivrance; et les ondes douloureuses continuaient à descendre, accompagnées chacune du cri de son obstination, luttant contre l'impossible. Hors de la vulve, la main de l'enfant pendait. C'était une petite main noire, dont les doigts s'ouvraient et se fermaient par moments, comme si elle se fut cramponnée à la vie.*<sup>112</sup>

Amidst the swollen, straining muscles, between pinkish folds of flesh, the child could be seen. But it had stopped there, unable to get past because of the narrowness of the organ. Meanwhile, however, the abdominal and lumbar muscles were still striving to expel it; even unconscious, the mother was still pushing violently, exhausting her in labour, in the mechanical urge to be delivered; and the waves of pain still swept downwards, each accompanied by a cry in her stubborn battle against the impossible. The child's hand was hanging out of the vulva. It was a tiny black hand, its fingers opening and closing intermittently as though it were clutching at life.<sup>113</sup>

Stewart's translation seems to want to smooth out, not only the clash of tones and generic expectations, but the dynamic activity of the event itself. Thus where Zola says the *l'enfant apparaissait*, the child appeared, the English version puts the action into a passive voice: "the child could be seen." But this emergence of the foetus into view suggests at least two phenomena. On the one hand, the appearance of some supernatural monster out of the darkness of the mother's womb, typical of the horror stories increasingly popular at the end of the nineteenth century and then revived with the rise of cinematic narratives. On the other, the technical mastery developed in phantasmagoria shows which make spirits, ghosts and other images from the other side seem to suddenly appear and rush in at the spectators gathered in a darkened room.

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<sup>112</sup> Zola, *La joie de vivre*, p. 403.

<sup>113</sup> Zola, *Zest for Life*, p. 265.

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Even further, translating *étranglement* (strangling, choking, throttling) as “narrowness” further softens the original text’s rough view of the event, removing the violence of the parturition, *il ne pouvait franchir* (the foetus could not cross through the borders between internal and external life), the English version changing the passive voice to the active, as though the infant were about to make a cautionary stop in its awkward and difficult descent into the social world gathered about. Then, where the French text shows *les efforts du ventre et des reins* (the stomach and kidney or loins) to hold back the foetus’s birth, the translator offers a more technical and thus naturalistic view of the muscles contracting in order to expel the little creature. To be sure, both versions of Zola’s novel essentially mean the same thing, but they do not have the same affective resonance, and that difference changes the meaning and the general impression generated by the text. Instead of an automatic reaction on the part of the muscles in two crucial parts of the anatomy to rid themselves of an alien presence as the translation seems to imply, the original narrative depicts two virtually autonomous entities in the maternal body labouring to keep within the maternal space the creature they have lived with for eight months—and therefore which is not yet fully ready to be born. They are seen in a staged combat.

The English version also conflates two close but still separate descriptions: *son obstination, luttant contre l’impossible* (her obstinate or pig-headed or perverse attempt to fight against the forces of nature in her own body) versus “her stubborn battle against the impossible.” Zola makes clear there are two unconscious natural forces struggling against one another, Louise’s secret desire or maternal instinct to bring the child safely into the world and the mechanical reflexes of her muscles and organs attempting to keep from expelling a foreign body.

The final sentence in this passage seems to be matched in both versions, the original French and the translation into English. However, the varying context that the two versions offer point towards different kinds of generic and tonal resonance. If the “tiny black hand” is read as a naturalistic statement, with the narrator evoking pity for the dying child pathetically grasping after life, then the sentimental qualities stand to the fore and indeed reach towards the inexorable tragedy of the defective birth. The helpless foetus cannot achieve safety after its ordeal. The attending doctor and observing midwife both agree on this: that at best one or other of the persons involved will die, the mother whose body is being torn apart and the infant whose viability is virtually impossible under the conditions of its awkward angle in the birth canal; and most likely both of them will not survive. If, however, *une petite main noir* (a little black hand) is read alternatively as part of the genre of

ghost stories (*Gespensstergeschichte*) and other grotesque tales, then this is an image of a nearly dead or monstrous ill-formed creature seeking entry into the world where it can only frighten and do harm. Whatever was human about it has already been transformed into something unworldly, a blackened and shrivelled remnant of organic life.<sup>114</sup>

## Conclusion

For most modern artists, as for most psychoanalysts and novelists, the attempt at breaking below the surface was pursued with sensitivity, skill, and patience, but sometimes, as with the early twentieth-century Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka, the search was more violent and rough. Kokoschka once spoke of his art as being carried out with a “psychological tin can opener”:

When I paint a portrait, I am not concerned with the externals of a person—the signs of his clerical or secular eminence or his social origins ... What used to shock people with my portraits was that I tried to intuit from the face and from its play of expressions, and from gestures, the truth about a particular person.<sup>115</sup>

Another modern critic expresses Kokoschka’s techniques and the goals in this way:

The rough overall style of Kokoschka’s painting gets even rougher in the representation of the hands. When Kokoschka painted this work, Erica Tietze watched him put down his brushes and actually scratch into the surface of the paint with his fingernails. Such intensity comes through in much of Kokoschka’s work and makes him one of the most fascinating figures of late German Expressionism.<sup>116</sup>

Not only is the mysterious black and shrivelled arm of the ambiguously alive foetus a familiar mystery in nineteenth-century horror tales, but also represents a key technical depiction of a point in scientific discourse when the nature of how the brain-mind articulates sensory feelings that are no longer stimulated by reality, but rather by a painfully awkward memory and illusion of life. At the same time, in the paintings of the Kokoschka, the unseen dimensions of human personality and relationships are signalled by strangely unreal gestures of hands and arms, depictions that have been noted to reform similar functions

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<sup>114</sup> James Krasner, ‘Doubtful Arms and Phantom Limbs: Literary Portrayals of Embodied Grief’, *Proceedings of the Modern Languages Association*, vol. 119, no. 2 (2004), pp. 216-232.

<sup>115</sup> Quoted by Eric Kandel, *The Age of Insight: The Quest to Understand the Unconscious in Art, Mind, and Brain* (New York: Random House, 2012), p. 124.

<sup>116</sup> ‘Hand to Hand Combat’, Art Blog by Bob (8 March 2008), at <http://artblogbybob.blogspot.com.au/2008/03/hand-to-hand-combat.html>. Accessed 17 August 2017.

## *Fatal Contraptions*

as psychoanalytic associative word-games developed by Sigmund Freud and his earliest psychoanalytic colleagues in Vienna.

Then as Zola's fictional observers in this scene of painful parturition stand back, already despondent in their realization that there is no possible way to save the infant's life, though some small possibility of the mother surviving her ordeal, the doctor greases his hands with lard and pushes his arm into the mother's body, thus trying to gentle the blackened creature out without exacerbating Louise's wounds. But everything he is doing cannot be seen. Only the narrator describes what the internal operation. With "a show of laughter," the doctor removes the foetus, hands it to the servant Véronique, who then takes it to another room. The success here seems to be in saving the life of Louise at the expense of the still-born "bluish-black" infant. But then again, behind closed doors, which only the narrator is privileged to see and describe to the readers of the text, Pauline takes up the newborn creature and rubs it continuously to bring it back to viability. The show is no longer public to the participants other than the self-sacrificing cousin; her experience is of being a different kind of *sage femme* or midwife, rebirthing the child by her own efforts and later articulating her efforts as being a second mother.

She is not the same as a *commère* or godmother, although Pauline plays this role openly, while maintaining her silence almost absolutely on her other more secret relationships to the child and therefore to Louise and to Lazare in a kind of non-erotic *ménage à trois*.<sup>117</sup> When Pauline does tell Lazare that she will neither marry another man nor leave the Chateau household because she is a second mother to little Paul, he does not understand the implications. It is as though the extra layers of allusion and implication that were contained in words and images were projected through the ambiguities of the text in the same way as images of spirits and demons were projected by a magic lantern on to a smoky screen in a phantasmagoria and then converted into the peculiar novelistic mode we have attempted to examine in this article.

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<sup>117</sup> Possibly an allusion to the racier sort of French novels of the *fin de siècle* such as those by Catulle Mendès, Guy de Maupassant, or Paul Bourget.