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French Department

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**Death as a Symbol of Loss and Principle of
Regeneration in the Works of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam**

Lesley Anne Rankin

Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Death imagery in literature and art enjoyed a major revival of interest in late-nineteenth-century France, as it did elsewhere in Europe and America. It is a central theme in the writings of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam (1838-89), from his first poetry collection, the *Premières Poésies*, to *Axël*, his final drama. This thesis traces the development of the death theme in Villiers's work, and demonstrates that while it is very much associated with loss, it can also be viewed in an entirely positive light, and can even be seen as a gateway into new life in his later publications. It is indicative not only of the changing thought of the writer, but is also a gauge of the literary and spiritual climate of the time.

By way of introduction to the topic, death is exposed and contextualized as it has been represented in artistic form throughout the ages. I problematize mankind's understanding of the phenomenon of death, before examining its place in literature. Villiers's own writings are also situated in a historical and cultural context, in order to widen the reader's grasp of the factors affecting the work in its time.

The first chapter examines Villiers's first major publication, the *Premières Poésies*, and shows how the theme of death operates in it as a symbol of loss. Three main areas of loss in the mid-to-late nineteenth century are specifically highlighted, and their effects on the poet are noted. The focus of the next chapter shifts to the figure of the bourgeois, mainly with reference to Villiers's short stories. These much-maligned figures are emblematic of the losses outlined in Chapter 1. Moreover, they are so inculcated with an atmosphere of death that they affect, and infect, those around them. However, not all succumb to the stultifying influence of the bourgeois class, but rather seek to resist it. These literary characters are the objects of scrutiny in Chapter 3 of this thesis, where the two main means of resistance to death are identified as being hedonism and clausturation. Chapter 4 investigates the products of this resistance, the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale* and *homme fatal*. The principal defining features of these two types in Villiers's work are outlined, and their often morbid relationship with each other is explored. The final two chapters in this thesis are concerned with Villiers's two most important works. The elements that make up these pieces of writing are discussed, this time with the theme of regeneration through death in mind. Chapter 5 follows the desire for this in Villiers's novel *L'Ève future*, and notes its ultimate failure, while Chapter 6 examines and questions its success in the drama *Axël*.

This is a field of research not yet widely discussed in Villierian studies. While there have been individual examinations of the theme of death in Villiers's work, focusing on particular texts, this is the first critical analysis of the topos as it appears throughout his corpus as a whole. This in-depth investigation opens up a fresh understanding of Villiers's work, both as a solitary corpus and in the context of the *fin-de-siècle* period. The death theme is a unifying agent, holding the key to important thematic patterns. Whilst allowing for evolution and development within the work, this investigation demonstrates how different strands of Villiers's literary personality remain constant. This new understanding also plays a crucial role in terms of situating this enigmatic writer in the context and culture of his time.

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List of Abbreviations

OC: *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam: Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alan Raitt and Pierre-Georges Castex, with the collaboration of Jean-Marie Bellefroid, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1986)

CG: *Correspondance générale de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et documents inédits*, ed. by Joseph Bollery, 2 vols ([Paris]: Mercure de France, 1962)

VMS: Alan Raitt, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste* (Paris: Corti, 1965)

Please note:

- The first time the above texts are referred to in the thesis, a full bibliographical reference is given. Thereafter, the abbreviated form is used.
- All references to citations taken from Villiers's work in his *OC*, apart from the first, are given in the text as volume and page numbers.
- References to editors' comments from Villiers's *OC* are given as normal in the footnotes.

Introduction

Towards a Philosophy of Death

Death, and its place in human conception and perception, is changing in the (post-)modern world. In her recent study on the question of death in Western society over the past hundred years, Kate Berridge claims that throughout most of the century, it has been shrouded in an unspoken taboo. She describes herself as being part of 'the progeny of a death-defying, death-denying culture', which, owing to peace and medical progress, has been placed at a greater distance from the immediate threat of fatality than any previous generation.¹ However, Berridge's assertions are not new. In the 1950s, British sociologist Geoffrey Gorer published an article entitled 'The Pornography of Death' which argued that death was replacing sex as the taboo topic of conversation in polite British society.² This argument had a major impact on death studies, in Britain and beyond. For example, in the 1970s, French sociologist Jean Baudrillard stated, with obvious reference to Gorer, that 'le sexe est légal, seule la mort est pornographique'.³

The consensus now, though, is swinging away from the taboo thesis, with contemporary sociologists much less willing to accept it. Berridge is one such, asserting that with impact of the AIDS virus, British people are now more ready to talk openly about death, and to recognize their own and others' mortality. Another British academic, Tony Walter, also argues that the alleged British reserve about death is 'a strange taboo that is proclaimed by every pundit in the land, [at a time] when virtually no Sunday is without at least one newspaper discussing death, bereavement, hospices, or funerals'.⁴ This flux of attraction and repulsion towards death is part of the history of the subject through the centuries. Death is a topic which has always solicited the interest of artists and writers, and has not always been excluded from the public arena.

¹ Kate Berridge, *Vigor Mortis: The End of the Death Taboo* (London: Profile Books, 2001), p. 5.

² Geoffrey Gorer, 'The Pornography of Death', *Encounter*, October 1955, 49-52.

³ Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), p. 279.

⁴ Tony Walter, 'Modern Death: Taboo or not Taboo?', *Sociology*, 25 (1991), 293-310 (p. 293). See also Walter's book-length publication *The Revival of Death* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Death has been a theme in literature and art since antiquity. In the medieval period, there was a fear of the actual moment of death and of eternal damnation, with an emphasis on macabre imagery. This imagery was often publicly displayed, in the hope that it would instil a fear of hell into the masses. This explains in great measure the existence of macabre stonemasonry on the façades of many medieval churches. Elements of the macabre also pervade the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch (c.1450-1516), and those of Breughel the Elder (c.1525-69).⁵ This leaning towards a dark philosophy of death endured through the late Gothic period and into the Renaissance, as is indicated by Michelangelo's depictions of demons dragging tortured forms of men into hell in his fresco *The Last Judgement* in the Sistine Chapel.

However, as the Renaissance advanced and took hold, thinking on death became more refined. This was largely due to the influence of philosophers like René Descartes (1596-1650) and Blaise Pascal (1623-62), who drew attention in a more intellectual manner to a Christian belief in the separation of body and soul in the afterlife. This was the age of the *Vanitas*, a type of seventeenth-century Dutch still-life painting conveying a message relating to the vanity of life. These paintings contained objects symbolizing earthly power, knowledge, and pleasure, offset against *memento mori*, reminders of death, such as hourglasses and skulls.⁶ The emphasis was thus withdrawn from a sensationalist depiction of the coming of the instant of death, and was placed instead on the value of life itself. An educated man was expected to meditate on death throughout his existence, in order to recognize the insubstantial nature of his own life, and the ultimate worthlessness of worldly goods and success.

⁵ Hans Holbein's collection of woodcuts entitled *Danse macabre*, published in Lyon in 1538, is also a wonderful example of medieval macabre imagery.

⁶ See, for example, David Bailly's painting *Vanitas Still Life with Portrait of a Young Painter*, 1651 (*Vanitas stilleven met portret van een jonge schilder*) (Stedelijk Museum de Lakenhal, Leiden). This painting portrays a young artist, possibly Bailly himself, holding a picture of himself in middle age. He is surrounded by objects symbolizing many areas of worldly pleasure, such as a flute and a print of a lute player (music), a filled glass and a pipe (sensual enjoyment), books (knowledge), and gold ducats (wealth). The presence of a skull, withered flowers, and an hourglass point to the vanity of these other symbols.

With the coming of the ages of classicism, reason, and Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was a gradual and subtle shift in thinking away from the idea of life's vanity to its brevity. A growing awareness of the incomprehensible vastness of time and space, coupled with a diminishment in the strength of religious faith and belief, led to death being identified with a return to a void of infinite nothingness, itself often represented by nature. This vein of thought can be discerned in the French classicist painter Nicholas Poussin's *Les Bergers arcadiens*.⁷ This painting depicts three shepherds and a female figure examining a tomb bearing the inscription 'Et in Arcadia Ego' (And I too [am] in Arcadia). In Greek mythology, Arcadia was the home of Pan, a pastoral deity, and it came to be used in poetry as an image of a heavenly utopia. The inference from Poussin's painting is therefore that death is present even in an idyllic, pastoral paradise. However, the peaceful atmosphere of the painting allays all fear regarding it. Death, then, was not only about fear, as had been the case in the medieval period, or about sobriety of living, as it was in the Renaissance. It could also be about rest, whether that be secular or religious.

This sense of peaceful repose as regards death persisted into the nineteenth century, when a new current in art and literature rose to the surface. Romanticism, very much influenced by the self-awareness and self-probing of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, was a movement centred around the needs and concerns of the individual. With it came a feeling of *mal du siècle*, of spiritual angst, which was to dominate the inner drive of a new generation of writers and artists. The significance of death was perceived and interpreted on different levels. For example, it could be a means of happy reunion with family and friends who had gone on before. This can be seen in the poetry of Alphonse de Lamartine (1790-1869), which often represents death as a phenomenon which brings to an end situations of loss and absence. Speaking of the grave, the poet asks, 'Ne

⁷ Nicholas Poussin, *Les Bergers arcadiens*, c. 1638 (Musée du Louvre, Paris).

rejoindrons-nous pas tout ce que nous aimâmes / Au foyer qui n'a plus d'absent?'.⁸

More than the restoration of human relationships, death could also be a joyous return to the natural world, which was often vested with divine significance: 'La mort [... est une] approche merveilleuse de l'insondable, communion mystique avec les sources de l'être, avec l'infini cosmique'.⁹ For those with strong religious convictions, death meant the hope of meeting with a benevolent God. For example, although Victor Hugo acknowledges that death is generally feared by humans, he hopes it will be a 'monstre qui devient dans la lumière un ange'.¹⁰

All in all, death in the Romantic period began to be idealized as something beautiful and desirable, rather than an occurrence to be feared or avoided. As the movement evolved, this desire for death grew stronger, and a veritable fascination set in, a death-wish, which entailed 'not simply a passive retreat from life' but 'an active yearning for death'.¹¹ This yearning, which often led in literature, as in real life, to suicide, is epitomized in Chateaubriand's *Atala* (1801), where the main female character takes her own life in order to protect her maidenly honour.¹² Perhaps the most emblematic of Romantic suicides was that of the English poet Chatterton (1752-70). It was dramatized and brought to the French stage by Alfred de Vigny in 1835, while its Romantic idealism was immortalized in Henry Wallis's 1856 painting *The Death of Chatterton*.¹³ In the work of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, the theme of suicide manifests itself most strongly in the drama *Axël*, one of the zeniths of his literary production, and the object of study in Chapter 6 of this thesis.

⁸ Alphonse de Lamartine, 'La Vigne et la maison', in *Méditations poétiques: Œuvres poétiques complètes*, ed. by Marius-François Guyard (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), pp. 1484-94 (p. 1493). Originally published March 1857.

⁹ Philippe Ariès, *L'Homme devant la mort* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 467.

¹⁰ Victor Hugo, 'Ce que c'est que la mort', in *Œuvres poétiques*, ed. by Pierre Albouy, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1964-74), II (1967), 779-80 (p. 780). This poem forms part of Hugo's *Contemplations*, first published in April 1856.

¹¹ Ross Chambers, *The Hero in French Decadent Literature* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1961), p. 46.

There have been several recent critical studies of Villiers's work. However, the focus of attention fixed on this late-nineteenth-century author has been narrowing rather than widening. The spotlight has tended to rest solely on Villiers's futuristic novel *L'Ève future*, which, indeed, has much in it to appeal to the modern reader and critic. It contains the concept of an ideal female automaton, which has sparked studies relating to the female body, and to early science fiction.¹⁴ The novel's linguistic games and intertextuality, along with its double emphasis on idealism and derision, have also contributed to its renewed success in French literary studies. However, this concentration on one particular text, though it may possess great merit, often occurs to the detriment of other works which also deserve a measure of critical attention. Moreover, the theme of death, so much in circulation in the art and literature of late-nineteenth-century France, has not yet been fully explored as an autonomous motif throughout Villiers's work. It has previously featured as a limited and short focus of study, or as only one of several topics of investigation.

Chantal Collion Diérickx touched on the subject in her recent publication *La Femme, la parole et la mort*.¹⁵ However, her investigations centre on the occurrence and re-enactment of ancient principles of Greek tragedy, of which death is one, in Villiers's work, rather than on an exploration of the three topoi for their own sakes and in their own right. She argues that a close study of the use of woman, speech, and death in Villiers's work, illumines the reader's understanding of both *Axël* and *L'Ève future*, his two *chefs d'œuvre*. Earlier, Alan Raitt highlighted the importance of death in Villiers's work, especially in relation to the Wagnerian *Liebestod* theme. However, again, he

¹² For an account of real-life figures from the nineteenth century who chose to end their lives, see Chapter 6, entitled 'Death Wish', in Allan H. Pasco, *Sick Heroes: French Society and Literature in the Romantic Age, 1750-1850* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), pp. 134-56 (p. 144).

¹³ Henry Wallis, *The Death of Chatterton*, 1856 (Tate Gallery, London).

¹⁴ See, for example, Marie Lathers, *The Aesthetics of Artifice: Villiers's 'L'Ève future'* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Jacques Noiray, *'L'Ève future', ou le laboratoire de l'idéal* (Paris: Belin, 1999).

¹⁵ Chantal Collion Diérickx, *La Femme, la parole et la mort dans 'Axël' et 'L'Ève future'* (Paris: Champion, 2001).

couples it with other motifs rather than confronting death head on: 'Le thème de la parenté intime entre l'amour et la mort se retrouve dans toutes les œuvres de Villiers, depuis *Morgane* jusqu'à *Axël*, et il est certain que l'identité mystique de l'amour, la nuit et la mort, qui domine la pensée de Wagner, exerçait sur Villiers une attraction pour ainsi dire atavique'.¹⁶

Bertrand Vibert mentions death in passing in relation to several Villierian works. For example, in relation to the two published versions of the short story 'Véra' in 1874 and 1876; in relation to the problem of the death of God; and also in relation to the suicides of Axël and Sara.¹⁷ Jacques Noiray looks at the link between the machine, love, and death in his study *Le Romancier et la machine*: 'Toutes les machines, dans l'œuvre de Villiers sont, à des degrés divers, chargées de pouvoirs mortels, ou familières de la mort.'¹⁸

There are also shorter studies focusing on the death theme in individual works, such as Robert Ziegler's informative article on Villiers's 'Véra', which posits the thesis that deceased females in nineteenth-century literary texts are often the inspiration behind new creations.¹⁹ Ziegler thus alludes to the principle of regeneration through death, to which I also make strong reference in this thesis. However, to date, there has been no single study devoted entirely to an investigation of the theme of death in its own right in Villiers's literary output.

The aim of this thesis is therefore to redress the balance, and to provide a comprehensive study of the occurrence and development of the death theme in Villiers's whole corpus. I examine, in a more or less chronological order, a large selection of

¹⁶ Alan Raitt, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste* (Paris: Corti, 1965), p. 136. Henceforth, references to this critical work will appear in abbreviated form (see p. v).

¹⁷ Bertrand Vibert, *Villiers l'inquisiteur* (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1995), pp. 50-58; Chapter 3 (pp. 107-50); pp. 122-26.

¹⁸ Noiray, *Le Romancier et la machine: l'image de la machine dans le roman français (1850-1900)*, 2 vols (Paris: Corti, 1981-82), II (1982), 377.

¹⁹ Robert Ziegler, 'Mourning, Incorporation, and Creativity in Villiers's "Véra"', *French Forum*, 21 (1996), 319-29 (p. 320). See also Florence Giard, 'Images et valeur de la mort dans quelques "contes" de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam', *Recherches sur l'imaginaire*, 12 (1984), 50-73.

Villiers's complete works, representative of different stages in his literary career, analysing the principal signification of the theme of death in each.²⁰ I argue that, though manifesting itself predominantly as a symbol of loss, death is also, in many instances, a highly desirable state of being, or non-being, to reach. Throughout his work, Villiers uses this theme to suggest the possibility of regeneration: death in this sense is viewed as a means of achieving a change in life, and as an initiatory step onto a higher plane of existence.

However, in order to investigate the occurrence and significance of the theme of death in Villiers's corpus, it is first necessary to consider what is actually meant by and entailed in the notion of 'death'. Once elucidated, this exposition will initially be applied to literature in general. Then, since so much of what is signified by death-like imagery in Villiers's work is related to the social and political conditions in which he lived, an outline of the historical background to late-nineteenth-century France will be given. These findings and background knowledge will also be applied to the figure of Villiers himself, in order to gain an understanding of the relationship between the theme and the writer.²¹

²⁰ I approach Villiers's short stories and *La Révolte* in Chapter 2 in terms of thematic associations. This is the only exception to the otherwise chronological order of the study.

²¹ I refer throughout this thesis to death as a theme in Villiers's writings. Death is not only an event in life; it is also, as is evident here, a concept and event in literature, affecting plot, characters, and setting.

I. Death

Martin Heidegger begins his seminal critical work, *Being and Time*, by re-asserting the need for a discussion of the question of Being. This is despite that fact that

It is said that 'Being' is the most universal and the emptiest of concepts. As such it resists every attempt at definition. Nor does this most universal and hence indefinable concept require any definition, for everyone uses it constantly and already understands what he means by it.²²

The same is surely true of the question of Death today. This phenomenon is an unavoidable event in life, a topic of universal interest. After birth, it is the one experience which men and women must face, regardless of race, class, or age. It is 'le dernier futur de la vie', the very last instant known of existence.²³ However, like the Heideggerian question of Being, that of death is often taken for granted. To a childlike and unquestioning mind, death is straightforward and uncomplicated: it is the single moment a person leaves this life for whatever lies beyond it. However, this kind of surface knowledge differs from deep understanding, and it is here that complexities often arise.

Emmanuel Levinas labelled death a mystery, since it cannot be brought into the light of knowledge: 'l'inconnu de la mort signifie que la relation même avec la mort ne peut se faire dans la lumière; que le sujet est en relation avec ce qui ne vient pas de lui. Nous pourrions dire qu'il est en relation avec le mystère'.²⁴ Levinas indicates that death

²² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962; repr. 1997), p. 21. The original German text, *Sein und Zeit*, was first published in 1927.

²³ Vladimir Jankélévitch, *La Mort* ([Paris]: Flammarion, 1977), p. 18.

²⁴ Emmanuel Levinas, *Le Temps et l'autre*, 2nd edn (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985), p. 56. Originally published in 1947.

is something to which the human being cannot relate on rational terms, as it is absolutely other:

La mort, c'est l'impossibilité d'avoir un projet. Cette approche de la mort indique que nous sommes en relation avec quelque chose qui est absolument autre, quelque chose portant l'altérité, non pas comme une détermination provisoire, que nous pouvons assimiler par la jouissance, mais quelque chose dont l'existence même est faite d'altérité.²⁵

This absolute otherness of death explains in part the sense of attraction and repulsion, the taboo or not taboo, that the topic inspires. The unknown inspires fear, but it also invites enquiry, as Levinas's discourse, and the studies previously cited of Berridge, Baudrillard, and Walter, clearly suggest. Indeed, Jacques Derrida identifies the fascination with death as being a mainstay of philosophic enquiry: '[L'âme] philosophe d'entrée de jeu, la philosophie ne lui arrivant pas par l'accident puisqu'elle n'est autre que cette veille de la mort qui veille à la mort et sur elle, comme sur la vie même de l'âme.'²⁶ Not all of mankind values this kind of philosophic enquiry though, as Villiers himself noted: 'L'autruche se cache la tête, croyant n'être pas vue. Tel l'Homme devant la question de la mort.'²⁷ Apart from the fear of it, one of the main problems associated with a study of death lies in how one approaches it.

Vladimir Jankélévitch asserts that, 'on ne pense jamais la mort [...], car la mort est proprement impensable'. However, in the next breath, he suggests a way round this difficulty: 'Par contre, on peut penser des êtres mortels, et ces êtres, à quelque moment

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

²⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Donner la mort* (Paris: Galilée, 1999) p. 32.

²⁷ Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alan Raitt and Pierre-Georges Castex, with the collaboration of Jean-Marie Bellefroid, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), II, 1008. Henceforth, references to this collection of Villiers's complete works will appear as volume and page numbers in the text of the thesis. Editorial comments and other references will appear in the footnotes (see p. v).

qu'on les pense, sont des êtres vivants. Et ainsi, qui pense la mort pense la vie'.²⁸ In this, Janléévitch is in agreement with Heidegger, who states that 'death, in the widest sense, is a phenomenon of life'.²⁹

Death, therefore, when we speak of it, most often belongs in the sphere of life: once a person actually dies, it is too late for them to reflect on this experience or relate it to others. This strong link between death and life explains why Heidegger devotes so much time to it in his investigation of the question of Being. Heidegger in fact argues that all of a person's life is overshadowed by the phenomenon of death. The human being, or *Dasein*, is a Being-towards-death: 'Factically, Dasein is dying as long as it exists'.³⁰ However, though this may be true from an intellectual standpoint, the dying of Dasein is not immediately obvious at every point of its life. Indeed, in its youth, the human being is expected to be virile and strong. These qualities stand in opposition to death, which 'marque la fin de la virilité et de l'héroïsme du sujet'.³¹

Emmanuel Levinas is referring here to a person's physical death, as I also have done thus far. However, this reflection could also hold true for a second way of defining death, not in a physical, but in a metaphysical sense. Thus, a subject without virility or heroism, though physically alive, can be seen to be metaphysically dead. This metaphysical death occurs in several instances in Villiers's work, most notably in the case of the soulless bourgeois whom Villiers so mercilessly satirizes in his short stories. In total contrast to this bourgeois death is that chosen by his initiates, who opt to retreat from society in order to find satisfaction and fulfilment in a claustral death, or disappearance from the world.

Therefore, taken in both the physical and metaphysical senses, death is synonymous with loss. A person dies physically, and their absence is registered as loss.

²⁸ Jankélévitch, *La Mort*, p. 42.

²⁹ Heidegger, *Being/Time*, p. 290.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³¹ Levinas, *Le Temps/l'autre*, p. 59.

A person dies metaphysically, in that their *élan vital* has significantly diminished, or they have opted to retreat from the general inanity of the world at large.

There is, however, another way of looking at death. This is to view it not only as the end of life, but as the beginning of a new phase of existence. The subject dies, but passes on into an afterlife without actually ceasing to exist. This way of approaching death is often tied up with religious and spiritual beliefs. It is a means of removing the absolute 'otherness' of death which prevents our comprehension of it. In a way, death is conquered in this attitude, in that the fear of it, and the power that fear generates, is eliminated.

I have labelled this way of looking at death 'regeneration'. In scientific terms, regeneration is the re-growth of a part of an organism that has become dead. The loss of living tissue or cells is compensated for by new tissue or new cells that form. The sense of this scientific definition of regeneration is carried into a spiritual realm, where, if a life is regenerated, it enters a new and higher state of existence than was previously known to it. Though this kind of regeneration can take place in 'life', for example, when a person enters holy orders, it can also take place in 'death', when a soul enters paradise. Thus, loss, in this case, of life, is overcome through death.

Levinas discusses another way of looking at regeneration in *Le Temps et l'autre*, though he does not use this specific term. He speaks instead of 'victory over death':

Devant un événement pur, devant un avenir pur, qu'est la mort, où le moi ne peut rien pouvoir, c'est-à-dire ne peut plus être moi, – nous cherchions une situation où cependant il lui est possible de rester moi, et nous avons appelé victoire sur la mort cette situation.³²

³² Ibid., p. 85.

Levinas sees this victory, or regeneration, taking place in paternity, as the life of the (deceased) father is carried on through the life of the son.

Thus, loss and regeneration are two facets of the same phenomenon: death. Loss is an effect of death, while regeneration is a means of combating it. So far, however, what I have said relates to living human beings rather than characters, fictional or otherwise, in books. What happens when a philosophy of death is applied to literature? How does death work as a theme in a book? How do principles of loss and regeneration manifest themselves? These are questions which require an answer in the general before they are posed in relation to the specific writings of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam.

II. Literature and Death

In his article on death rites, art, and historical authenticity, Joseph H. Smith claims that 'a work of art is a work of love and mourning'.³³ With the term 'art' being widely applicable to various spheres of human creativity, including writing, and that of 'mourning' referring to grief expressed for an object or person lost through death, Smith is drawing attention to the relationship between literature and death. This relationship is visible on different levels.

Literature can be seen as an act of defence on the part of writers against the grave. In setting their words down in print, they ensure that what they have produced will remain after their death, and that they will thereby attain some degree of immortality. Following the same line of thought, a literary work can also be seen as a kind of tomb in itself, a place where the thoughts and immediate essence of a writer are preserved for future readers: 'tout livre est un tombeau – mais le seul qui puisse parfois s'ouvrir et laisser sortir l'ombre de qui y repose'.³⁴ This was a particularly obsessive motif in nineteenth-century European high culture, affecting, among others, writers like Leconte de Lisle and Baudelaire. Stéphane Mallarmé too, a close personal friend of Villiers, was particularly enamoured of this metaphorical representation of death. He wrote 'tombeau' poems to the memory of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire, and Verlaine, and in his 'Toast Funèbre' he sees the work of Théophile Gautier as combating the destructive effects of dissolution. Gautier's literary testament is 'le sépulcre solide où gît tout ce qui nuit, / Et l'avare silence et la massive nuit'.³⁵ Indeed, the goal of many

³³ Joseph H. Smith, 'Mourning, Art, and Human Historicity', in *Telling Facts: History and Narration in Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Joseph H. Smith and Humphrey Morris (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 127-39 (p. 134).

³⁴ Jean-Pierre Picot, 'Étude sur les tombeaux verniens', in *La Mort en toutes lettres*, ed. by Gilles Ernst (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1983), pp. 159-70, (p. 169).

³⁵ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Toast Funèbre', in *Poésies*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), pp. 42-43 (p. 43).

writers is to achieve a kind of immortality through their work: 'quel meilleur trompe-la-mort que le texte?'.³⁶

This view of literature and death is useful when considering the enduring significance of a writer's whole *œuvre*. However, it does not take account of the occurrence of instances of death in individual literary works: a piece of writing can immortalize the person who penned it without itself containing any reference to death, or indeed to immortality. Moreover, works that *do* carry death within them often convey a stronger message about death than that its effects are in some way nullified by the imperishable properties of literature.

Death is used in literature in different ways. Firstly, it is a traditional means of plot closure: the narrative ends with the death of the hero and/or heroine. This happens much in classical literature, for example the suicide at the end of Racine's *Phèdre* (1677). The occurrence of suicide increased in Romantic literature, where it became a selfish gesture of empowerment, such as that of Werther in Goethe's landmark text, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (*Die Leiden des jungen Werthers*, 1774). In fact, this kind of death had occurred so often even before the start of Villiers's literary career that it had come to be seen as a rather worn-out platitude: 'By the mid-1830s [...], literary death and especially literary suicide had become a tired cliché.'³⁷ However, there are also works which radiate an atmosphere of death in a more subtle way, through the imagery and language. Such works abound in *fin-de-siècle* French literature, where death, along with the decay which so often precedes it, is a vital motif, a thread tying together a whole piece of writing. It is with such writings that I am primarily concerned as regards Villiers, and for such that it is useful to construct a concept linking literature with death.

³⁶ Ruth Menahem, 'La Mort tient parole', in *La Mort dans le texte*, ed. by Gilles Ernst (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1988), pp. 29-49 (p. 48).

³⁷ Pasco, 'Death Wish', in *Sick Heroes*, pp. 134-56 (p. 134). See also Lieve Spaas's introduction to the special edition of *L'Esprit créateur* dealing with death in French literature and film: 'In film as well as literature death occurs with such frequency that it tends to become the cliché for the closure of a narrative.' *L'Esprit créateur*, 35.4 (Winter 1995), 3-6 (p. 4).

Vladimir Jankélévitch speaks of the phenomenon of death in the first, second, and third persons.³⁸ With the death of the third person (he/she/they), someone not personally known, the trauma of the event is distanced and can mean very little. In contrast, the thought of death in the first person (I/we), that is, ourselves, can be a source of tremendous anxiety. However, the death of the second person (you) steers a middle road between the two, whereby the possibility of dying can be encountered in proximity, without the feeling of being directly threatened:

Entre l'anonymat de la troisième personne et la subjectivité de la première, il y a le cas intermédiaire et en quelque sorte privilégié de la DEUXIÈME PERSONNE; entre la mort d'autrui, qui est lointaine et indifférente, et la mort-propre, qui est à même notre être, il y a la proximité de la mort du proche.³⁹

This analytical construct can be applied not only to bereavement experiences in people's lives, but also to death as it appears in literature. For a writer him or herself, for whom death in the first person is unthinkable because of its nearness, while in the third person it is too distanced, death in the second person is a reasonable means of apprehending such an idea. In terms of writing, this second-person death can be seen as the death of literary characters within the corpus. Though not living people, these protagonists have after all been given life by their literary creators. This is especially true of Villiers who vested much of himself in characters like Lord Ewald (*L'Ève future*) and Axël (*Axël*). Writing about death can be seen, in light of this, as a cathartic process of assimilating within oneself the concept of death, without actually experiencing it at too close a range.

The two means of perceiving death outlined in the previous section, either as an instance of loss or an opportunity for regeneration, can also be assigned to literature.

³⁸ Jankélévitch, *La Mort*, pp. 24-35.

The primary idea of loss in relation to literature and death is touched on in the analogy drawn by Joseph H. Smith between the forces of mourning and works of art. He is not the only writer to make this link. In his study *La Littérature et la mort*, Michel Picard describes death in literature as being a kind of child's teddy bear, symbolizing at once loss and a *maîtrise* of that loss.⁴⁰ In other words, images of death in literature point to a loss, or an absence, while at the same time trying to fill that void with a presence. As another critic explains in relation to the theme of death in the work of Jules Verne, a contemporary of Villiers: 'Face à la mort, le savoir du vivant n'a d'autre issue que de parler pour tenter de remplir le vide de son reflet futur. Parler, ou encore écrire.'⁴¹

Picard's theory may have been informed by Sigmund Freud's description and analysis of the Fort/Da child's game in 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle'.⁴² In his analysis of this game, Freud concluded that by throwing a wooden reel out of his sight, then pulling it again into his vision, the child was re-enacting his mother's disappearance and joyfully anticipating her return. Thus, the double metaphor of death as loss (the mother's disappearance) and regeneration (her return) was being played out. For Picard too, the teddy bear signifies death, in the loss of the presence of the mother, and regeneration, in the mastery of the loss by the substitution of the teddy bear for the mother.

Picard's use of the teddy-bear metaphor suggests that the loss with which the writer is coming to terms is of an object that brought stability or comfort. This is a useful vehicle for the consideration of the theme of death in literature, specifically with reference to the nineteenth century. This period in history saw great change in many areas of life, resulting in the loss of many established institutions and social groupings.

³⁹ Jankélévitch, *La Mort*, p. 29.

⁴⁰ Michel Picard, *La Littérature et la mort* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1995), p. 172.

⁴¹ Jean-Pierre Picot, 'Les Lieux de mort chez Jules Verne et leur inscription dans le texte', in *La Mort dans le texte*, ed. by Gilles Ernst (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1988), pp. 131-77 (p. 162).

⁴² Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', trans. by C. J. M. Hubback, in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by John Rickman (London: Hogarth Press, 1937), pp. 162-94 (pp. 166-68).

This brought a consequent and necessary readjustment, manifested in the creation, or (re-)generation, of new centres of stability and security. Many of these losses in French national and personal life were pertinent to Villiers himself. If death is used as a symbol of loss in his work, as I propose it is, then it is worthwhile to look at exactly what was absent and being mourned, in terms of his cultural context.

III. Villiers, Death, and the Nineteenth-Century French Context

At the start of their collection of essays on the subject of *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature*, the editors claim that ‘the contributors to this volume share an understanding that politics at the level of the state has great importance for many of the major developments in nineteenth-century writing, including the definition of what shall be valued as “literature”’.⁴³ In the case of Villierian ‘literature’, the political and cultural climate of the time was such that much of what Villiers wrote carried the seeds of some kind of reaction against it. Since that reaction often bore within it imagery of death and regeneration, it is useful for the purposes of this thesis to sketch a little of the historical background to the period.

In France, the nineteenth century was overshadowed by the events and aftermath of the cataclysmic 1789 Revolution which saw the deposition of the monarchy and the subsequent Terror, war, and attempts at political stabilization. It was a time of great loss, ‘a period of massive destruction: destruction of human lives; destruction of an age-old monarchy [...]; the destruction of a feudal order [...]; the sweeping away of the vast complex of laws and customs that constituted the feudal order, the framework of everybody’s life’.⁴⁴ The process of recovery, or regeneration, after this great destruction was interminably slow. The history books show that ‘every new political crisis made it seem clearer that “the Revolution” – not a succession of separate events, but one single process – had not ended in 1795 or 1815’: the repercussions of this ‘Franco-French War’ affected the whole of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ It was not until at

⁴³ *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism*, ed. by Jonathan Arac and Harriet Rivto (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 1.

N.B. also the wider post-modern debate on the definition of ‘literature’ to which Arac and Rivto make reference. Villiers himself viewed theatre as the apex of his literary aspirations, and wrote short stories begrudgingly, considering them a *gagne-pain* rather than pieces of writing of which to be proud.

⁴⁴ *A Literary History of France*, ed. by P. E. Chavret and others, 6 vols (London: Benn; New York: Barnes & Noble, 1967-74), IV: *The Nineteenth Century, 1789-1870*, ed. by P. E. Chavret (1967), 6-7.

⁴⁵ Robert Tombs, *France 1814-1914* (Harlow: Longman, 1996), pp. 7-8.

least the 1870s and the defeat of the Commune that a political equilibrium of sorts was regained, and indeed, some historians suggest that the real end of the Revolution came only in the post-World War Two period.⁴⁶

The loss of France's old political and social identity and the emergence of a new one was a bitter blow to Villiers. Born in traditionally monarchist Brittany in 1838, Villiers's aristocratic heritage and status were all but lost to him through the effects of the 1789 Revolution. However, he felt that it was incumbent upon him as a writer to seek to restore some of the wealth and power that were no longer his:

The line was [...] one of the grandest in the annals of French history, and the poet never ceased to be conscious of the privileges and obligations which this laid on him in a world which no longer recognized the qualities it represented.⁴⁷

As a royalist, Villiers mourned the passing of the old regime. However, he was also ambivalent towards it. His portrayal of the duke and the cavalier in the tale 'Entre l'ancien et le nouveau' demonstrates the sympathy he had with the royalist cause after the death of the Comte de Chambord in August 1883, and his understanding of their plight.⁴⁸ At the same time, he recognized that the tradition the monarchists represented was obsolete. In another tale, using the image of a 'salon Louis XVI' as a metaphor for French kingship, he wrote, 'Ici, tout est présage; tout annonce une fin, un déclin, une véritable disparition' (II, 527).⁴⁹

Not only were old social traditions dying or dead, the prestige attached to them was also being usurped. The changes in the structure of society meant that with the

N.B. also the problem in defining the limits of the nineteenth century: its boundaries are surely more fluid than beginning in 1800 and ending in 1899. It is most often seen in the French context as beginning after the 1789 Revolution, and ending with the 1914-18 war.

⁴⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁷ Alan Raitt, *The Life of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 3.

⁴⁸ 'Entre l'ancien et le nouveau', in *OC* II, 836-47. This tale is part of Villiers's *Œuvres non recueillies*: it was rejected at the last minute for *Chez les passants*.

⁴⁹ 'L' Avertissement' (*Chez les passants*), in *OC* II, 523-29.

stripping away of much of the status and material well-being of the aristocracy, there came a rise in social standing and expectations of power in the classes below them, especially the bourgeois class. Education, once reserved for a privileged few, was becoming more accessible to all levels of society. Primary education was made compulsory for all by the Guizot and Falloux acts of 1833 and 1850, so that adult literacy rose. This meant that more and more people could read the newspapers and periodicals which became popular especially after 1860. This, in turn, resulted in a greater section of the public being informed about, and potentially embracing, strong political views. Universal suffrage was granted to men after the 1848 revolution. This had an important sociological effect:

Lower and lower sections of the middle class were ruling in parliament, setting pace in society, letters, arts [...]. The populace, losing respect for their natural betters, bayed for its turn at the troughs of power [... and] the deferential society tottered.⁵⁰

The tottering of this deferential society directly affected Villiers, who was, after all, in the higher stratum of it, the stratum that was precariously hanging in the balance. His contempt for the middle classes is most vividly evident in his short stories, with bourgeois pride and arrogance being embodied in the figure of Tribulat Bonhomet. Villiers's own pride in the aristocratic tradition can be seen in the great number of eminent title-holders in the list of mourners included in the notification of his mother's death.⁵¹ Similarly, writing about the life of his deceased father, Villiers proudly states

⁵⁰ Eugen Weber, *France, Fin de siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 3.

⁵¹ Reproduced in Alan Raitt, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, exorciste du réel* (Paris: Corti, 1987), pp. 232-33.

that ‘malgré de grandes pertes de fortune, le marquis de Villiers de L’Isle-Adam n’avait jamais sollicité d’emploi, depuis la mort du roi Charles X’ (II, 836).⁵²

However, this decline of the nobility is only one aspect of French life in the nineteenth century. On the other side of the coin, the country was being regenerated by industry, commerce, and electricity. Although economically much slower than Britain and Germany, her rivals and neighbours, to take advantage of the Industrial Revolution, France was still very much affected by it. Hordes of workers from the provinces flocked to the cities to find jobs in the new factories that were being built. Moreover, the country was taking huge strides forward in technology. Especially relevant to Villiers was the development of the modern printing press, which resulted in a great increase in the production not only of books, but especially of newspapers and journals. Villiers himself co-founded and edited one such periodical, *La Revue des lettres et des arts*, which ran from October 1867 until March 1868.

The Paris exhibition of 1878 saw both Thomas Edison’s phonograph and Alexander Graham Bell’s telephone being demonstrated, as the power and potential of electricity was harnessed. At the Electrical Exhibition of 1881, the public could listen to opera performances on a ‘*théâtrophone*’, and on 28 December 1895, the world’s first public film screening took place in the Grand Café in Paris, courtesy of the Lumière brothers. The railway network was also greatly expanded throughout the century, thus facilitating travel for a much wider bracket of the populace than had previously been possible.

The excitement generated by the possibilities of social and technological advancement in the *fin de siècle* is reflected in a light-hearted and irreverent way in many of Villiers’s tales, such as ‘L’Affichage céleste’ and ‘La Machine à Gloire’.⁵³ Even though these are written in an ironic voice, mocking the idiosyncrasies and foolish

⁵² See ‘Le Marquis Joseph de Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’ (*Œuvres non recueillies*), in *OC* II, 835-36.

⁵³ Both of these tales feature in Villiers’s *Contes cruels*. See *OC* I, 577-80, 583-96.

ambition of a modern world, they also demonstrate an awareness that France was emerging from her backward and rural past into a mechanized and technological age.

However, in turn, this advance in one area meant decline and loss in another, and the rapid gains in knowledge and power left people questioning their own place in the world that was opening up to them. New machines seemed to do people's work faster and more efficiently. As Darwinist theory prevailed and the faith placed in pure sciences grew, religious belief declined and traditional philosophy became destabilized. People lost confidence in their fundamental supremacy, which had previously gone unquestioned, and were no longer at the centre of their own universe.

Villiers was greatly influenced by the American poet and short-story writer Edgar Allan Poe. In an attempt to explain the 'persistent, obsessive contemplation of death' in Poe's work, Gillian Brown argues that it was a reaction against what he saw as the 'minuteness of human history'.⁵⁴ Brown explains further the new outlook on life that was establishing itself in the nineteenth century: 'Within the new schema, human existence appeared to be merely a temporary phenomenon in an infinite and vast natural order. [...] Against the backdrop of the earth's story, the human story that composes history diminishes.'⁵⁵

This self-effacing view of mankind and history was not only being perpetuated in the United States. French society too was adjusting to new perceptions of the world and of the individual's place in it. There was a dichotomy in the whole structure of French life that was reflected in works of art, music, and literature of the time. On the one hand, old values and traditions were being lost: the *ancien régime* was dying and dead. However, hand in hand with this decline and death was a tremendous vision and drive for the future and for the possibilities it promised to hold. France was being

⁵⁴ Gillian Brown, 'The Poetics of Extinction', in *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 330-45 (p. 331).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

reborn into an era of machines and technology. It is from this polemical ambiguity, the death of an old world coupled with the birth of a new one, that much of the interest of the theme of death in Villiers's work stems. It is therefore to the investigation of death as a symbol of loss, but also as a necessary event facilitating a regenerative process, that this thesis is devoted.

I begin with an analysis of Villiers's *Premières Poésies*, his first major work published, primarily in relation to the theme of loss, in order to establish a starting-point to the writer's thought and the expression of it in his writing. The theme of death in his short stories is then examined, with chief reference to the figure of the bourgeois. Next, I elucidate the theme of resistance to the forces of death being perpetuated by the bourgeois in the modern world, and then study the products of this resistance, the fatal man, and his female counterpart, the fatal woman. The final two chapters focus on Villiers's two most profound works, the novel *L'Ève future* and the play *Axël*, where the theme of death is explored not only as a symbol of loss, but also as a principle of regeneration.

Chapter One

Death as a Symbol of Loss: The *Premières Poésies*

Villiers's *Premières Poésies* were composed in the period 1856-58, at a time when their teenage author was also working on various dramatic projects. They were edited and published by Nicholas Scheuring of Lyon, and the printer was a Monsieur Perrin, who had an established reputation as a producer of luxury editions and works on dramatic art. Villiers financed the costs of publication himself, and it was perhaps indicative of his youthful ambition and idealistic self-confidence that he chose to have his first major publication so beautifully bound. However, the volume's expense, and the fact that the poetry collection had been published in the provinces, did not encourage a good reception of it in what was the centre of French intellectual life, at least in the nineteenth century: Paris. This first volume of Villiers's poetry appeared in December 1859 when the author was just twenty-one years old. However, despite his great hopes, the *Premières Poésies* attracted little attention from the critics, which in turn did not readily facilitate a wide circulation of the collection among the general public.

Villiers had been born in Saint-Brieuc and was brought up in Brittany, but from 1855 onwards, his family had spent more and more time in Paris. There, he had sampled a small taste of café life and the round of theatre-going. In July 1858, he had published *Deux essais de poésie* at his own expense, thus marking the public start of his literary career.¹ Over the summer of 1858 he had spent several months at the house of Amédée le Menant des Chesnais at Montfort-sur-Meu in Brittany, during which time he continued to write poetry. Le Menant was a solicitor, and also a devout Christian. Villiers and he had many discussions on the topic of religion, and one of the *Premières Poésies* is dedicated to him.²

¹ Villiers's *Deux essais de poésie* contained 'Ballade' and 'Zaïra', both of which also appear in the *Premières Poésies*, where 'Ballade' has been shortened and re-titled 'Une Façon d'imiter M. de Pompignan'.

² N.B. An intellectual wrestling with religious beliefs is a hallmark of Villiers's work, and his relationship with Le Menant at the start of his career mirrors that with Léon Bloy at the end of it. It was partly due to

By 1859, Villiers had begun to frequent the Parisian salon of Hyacinthe du Pontavice de Heussey, a relation of his, where he had an opportunity to meet and mix with men of letters and thought. De Heussey was very much interested in the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831), a German idealist thinker. Hegel's philosophy and even the vocabulary he used were to have a great impact on Villiers's work. His influence is seen in its most undiluted form in 'Claire Lenoir', where the theosophical arguments of the Christian Claire are contrasted with those of her Hegelian husband. It was not until 1870, after Villiers's second trip to see Wagner, that he wrote to Mallarmé, 'J'ai planté là Hegel.'³ Thereafter, when Hegelian vocabulary does appear in Villiers's work, it is often misplaced.

However, at the time of the publication of the *Premières Poésies*, Villiers had not yet fully assimilated the writings of this German philosopher, nor was he yet in close contact with Baudelaire or the poets of the *Parnasse contemporain*, who would also deeply affect him in the future. In the absence of these later formative influences, Villiers's literary admiration was wholly channelled in the direction of the Romantics, in whose work he had been immersed in his school years.

Critics are unanimous in their opinion that Villiers's *Premières Poésies* owe much to the Romantics of the 1830s, and reflect his 'jeunesse "romantique"'.⁴ The work is dedicated to Alfred de Vigny, and Villiers borrows titles and themes from poets such as Hugo, Musset, and Lamartine. Even Villiers's choice of poetic form, from ballads ('Une Façon d'imiter M. de Pompignan') to long lyrical pieces ('Hermosa'), indicates an almost overbearing nostalgia for Romanticism.

pressure from Bloy that Villiers attempted to rework a Christian message into his largely occult drama *Axël* at the end of his life.

³ *Correspondance générale de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et documents inédits*, ed. by Joseph Ballery, 2 vols ([Paris]: Mercure de France, 1962), I, 158-59 (31 July 1870). Henceforth, references to this collection of correspondence will appear in abbreviated form (see p. v).

⁴ Anne Le Feuvre, *Une poétique de la récitation: Villiers de L'Isle-Adam* (Paris: Champion, 1999), p. 147.

However, despite a heavy reliance on both the atmosphere and form of Romanticism, these early poems are not without value, and do not lack interest for the modern critic. Alan Raitt points out that many of the themes of Villiers's later work are present in the *Premières Poésies*, while Luc Badesco goes further in his affirmation of the inherent worth of this volume of verse, despite its literary weaknesses:

La forme défectueuse des premiers poèmes n'était donc que l'erreur inévitable d'un débutant qui se cherchait. Mais si la qualité du vers était souvent 'déplorable', il faut s'empresse d'ajouter que l'attitude de l'auteur devant la vie, l'amour, la beauté ou la mort trouve ici sa première expression. [...] Et elle ne variera jamais dans ses données essentielles.⁵

Villiers himself was later to speak in disparaging terms of this first major attempt to launch himself on the literary world, describing the contents of the edition as his 'vers de collégien'.⁶ In a sense, this quick dismissal does have a ring of truth about it: Villiers was a young man at the time of the collection's publication, and an even younger one at the time of their composition. Towards the start of his acquaintanceship with Baudelaire, he makes it clear that he is distancing himself and his present projects from the *Premières Poésies*, and he asks Baudelaire to do the same: 'Vous ne me jugerez pas sur mon déplorable bouquin, et vous aurez de l'indulgence.'⁷ Indeed, this was the only collection of poems which Villiers was to publish, although he continued to write poetry throughout his life.⁸ He also retained a lyrical flow in his writing style, seen for example in Sara's imagery-laden 'Invitation au voyage' in Part II of *Axël*.⁹ Even

⁵ Luc Badesco, *La Génération de 1860, la jeunesse des deux rives* (Paris: Nizet, 1971), p. 675.

⁶ *CG* I, 170 (August 1871).

⁷ *CG* I, 47 ([1861]).

⁸ There are a large number of uncollected poems at the end of the Pléiade edition of Villiers's complete works (*OC* II, 848-64). There is also a series of poems under the title 'Conte d'amour', which appears in his *Contes cruels* (*OC* II, 734-39).

⁹ See *OC* II, 666-69.

Axël's description of his castle's fortifications and the loyalty of his subjects has a distinctly poetic air.¹⁰ It was perhaps passages like this in Villiers's dramatic works and others that prompted the Symbolists, according to Alan Raitt, to place him under the heading of 'poet', thinking exclusively of his prose works.¹¹ If he abandoned this literary form in publication, he did not forget its principles.

The reaction of the critics of the time was on the whole impassive or negative. The *Premières Poésies* were first reviewed in *La Causerie* on 11 December 1859 by Victor Cochinat, a journalist who had known Villiers since 1857. Cochinat was favourably disposed towards him, and speaks of his work in glowing terms. However, the mention of Villiers's age at the end does suggest that even Cochinat felt there was room for both the writer and his works to mature: 'c'est peut-être le recueil le plus remarquable qui soit sorti depuis quelques années de la plume inspirée d'un poète de vingt ans'. Alphonse Lemerre, writing in *Le Figaro* on 12 February 1860, described the 'magnificence de l'édition' as being just about 'le seul mérite de son recueil'. A passing reference was made to the *Premières Poésies* on 15 June 1860, in the *Revue des deux mondes*, in the context of the influence of Musset on the young generation of poets. Three years later, in the *Almanach de la littérature, du théâtre et des beaux-arts* for 1863, Jules Janin cites Cuvillier-Fleury who spoke of the poems as being 'd'un ton agréable et vif, elles ont l'innocence de la première jeunesse, avec ses haines d'une heure et ses désespoirs d'un jour'.¹²

Another gauge of the critical temperament towards Villiers at this stage was the reaction of the Lyonnais poet Joséphin Soulayry. Villiers had sent him a copy of the *Premières Poésies* via the printer, Monsieur Perrin, and Soulayry wrote back to the young poet to express his thanks. The overall tone of the letter is encouraging. Soulayry talks

¹⁰ See *OC* II, 622-27.

¹¹ Raitt, *VMS*, p. 152.

¹² These critical reactions are to be found in *OC* I, 1025-26.

of the promise of *vin doux*, and of young poetry, and describes Villiers as a *good* poet, who would certainly be a *great* poet by the age of twenty-five. However, it is also clear that Soulayr was aware of the limitations of Villiers's youthful compositions. The older poet advises the younger to 'songe[r] bien que la sobriété de la forme et la concentration de l'idée ne s'acquièrent qu'au prix de l'âge, et par la perte de cette écume *chatoyante* qu'on appelle *illusions de jeunesse*'.¹³

Overall, then, there is a feeling that Villiers's verses, when they were considered at all, were laid to one side as the product of a young mind of Romantic disposition. Indeed, it would hold true that in later years Villiers himself would share this point of view. The editors of the Pléiade edition of his complete works describe the author of the *Premières Poésies* as a 'jeune homme' who 'n'a pas encore trouvé une personnalité littéraire'.¹⁴ However, the value of these poems lies in their early exposition of the poet's views on life, on literary themes, and on the world in which he was living. Luc Badesco, in asserting the fact that the *Premières Poésies* or even *Isis* are works whose literary value is mediocre or even negligible, rightly balances the argument: 'Mais psychologiquement tout Villiers est là-dedans: sa personnalité et l'originalité de sa position face au monde.'¹⁵

Juvenilia, while they can be recognizably less polished than works of literary maturity, are not without worth either for the scholar or for the general readership. Often, they contain in embryo the literary forms and ideas that the author will later adapt and develop. Since this is so, the value of the *Premières Poésies* then resides in the fact that they indicate the starting-point from where Villiers's thought developed, and what, even at this early stage, were his preoccupations.

¹³ *CG* I, 38 (6 December 1859).

¹⁴ Raitt, Castex, *OC* I, 1022.

¹⁵ Badesco, *Génération 1860*, p. 21.

In the introduction to this thesis, I argued that death in literature is a symbol of loss, and I take this to be so in the case of the *Premières Poésies*. In this chapter, I highlight the main types of loss Villiers experienced in his youth, by analysing the death imagery in these first poems. This not only indicates areas of bereavement and suffering, but also reveals the poet's early mechanisms of expressing and coping with his loss.

1.1 The Loss of Religious Belief: The Death of God

One of the main themes which Villiers inherited from his Romantic masters, poets and playwrights like Musset, Hugo, and Lamartine, was that of the death of God. This was a fundamentally important concept in 1860 for the generation which believed that ‘si Dieu n’est pas encore mort, il est détrôné’.¹⁶ It was Nietzsche who later coined the phrase ‘God is dead’ in his publication *The Joyful Wisdom*: ‘God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him!’ (*Gott ist tot! Gott bleibt tot! Und wir haben ihn getötet!*).¹⁷ However, as Villiers’s *Premières Poésies* show, Nietzsche was merely expressing in writing a sentiment which had existed in the public conscience for decades: religious faith had become obsolete and irrelevant for many people, who simply no longer believed. For others, who still continued to practise religion, the basic tenets of Christianity were no longer at the centre of their social, intellectual, or even spiritual lives. This total rejection of God, or at least displacement of religious life and discipline, was to have a profound effect on people not only in France, but also around Europe in the nineteenth century, and was to manifest itself in themes and imagery of the art and literature of the time. After all, one-time believers had lost the focus of a form of spiritual life and religious stability which had been central to their inner psyches and socio-cultural beings for centuries.

This upheaval in religious life has been described as the ‘most profound social effect’ of the French Revolution.¹⁸ Villiers himself belonged to a long line of ardent Roman Catholics: ‘Noble, bretonne et convaincue de descendre d’une lignée qui s’était

¹⁶ Badesco, *Génération 1860*, p. 33.

¹⁷ The phrase ‘God is dead’ first appears in section 108 of *The Joyful Wisdom*. It also appears later as I have quoted it in section 125, ‘The Madman’. I have cited from *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. by Oscar Levy, 18 vols (Edinburgh: Foulis, 1909-1913), x: *The Joyful Wisdom* (1910), trans. by Thomas Common, 168. The original German text, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, was first published in 1882.

¹⁸ Tombs, *France*, p. 241.

illustrée dans la défense de la chrétienté, la famille de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam était triplement pieuse.¹⁹ However, the young poet lost religious faith in his teenage years, and though he later sought a place of reconciliation with the teachings of the Catholic Church, he could not resolve the dilemma surrounding a confrontation between the drive of his creative genius and an experience of Christian salvation. He could not bear the thought that his artistic liberty might be shackled:

D'un côté il était convaincu que de son orthodoxie catholique dépendait son sort dans sa vie future, autrement dit son salut éternel, pour lequel il était prêt à tout endurer. De l'autre, il ne pouvait accepter d'empiètement à sa liberté créatrice.²⁰

Thus, the loss of religious stability, in either the death or the dethronement of God, is the most important theme of Villiers's *Premières Poésies*, carrying with it the metaphysical anguish that necessarily followed. Evidence of this can clearly be seen in the poet's conception of the function of nature in relation to God and humanity, and his presentation of the place of man in the universe. It is on the presentation of these two topoi that this investigation on how the death of God manifested itself as loss is based.

¹⁹ Sylvain Simon, *Le Chrétien malgré lui, ou la religion de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam* (Paris: Découvrir, 1995), p. 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

1.1.1 Impact of the Death of God on the Natural World

In classical literature, one of the fundamental tasks of nature was to explain the divine mysteries of life, and to represent order and stability in the universe. However, in the increasingly industrialized European nineteenth century, the natural world no longer spoke the language of God, but instead had been silenced by the achievements and ingenuity of man. The loss of a means of divine communication was reflected in a form of death in the natural world. This is illustrated in Villiers's poem 'Exil', which presents 'les lys immaculés' that 'tombent sous les faucilles' (I, 10). The lily is an important symbol in Christian iconography. It represents purity and is specifically associated with the Virgin Mary, and hence with the authority of the Roman Catholic Church. However, these particular lilies are being cut down by sickles. This is a powerful image: the sickles, tools made and wielded by humans, are responsible for the destruction of a natural object that symbolizes a fundamental aspect of a supernatural religious faith. Thus, mankind is seen not only to be destroying nature, but also rejecting religion. Several critics and historians have long recognized the link between the rise of the importance of mankind and the diminishment of that of God in the nineteenth century: 'La décadence a pour cause la perte de la foi religieuse, le développement des machines condamnant l'homme à l'inertie du corps et de l'esprit.'²¹ Ironically, it was felt that an elevation of humanity's profile came at the price of decadence in society, which in turn was the cause of a lowering of expectations as to what people could actually achieve.

Decadence was not born in an instant, however, and Villiers's *Premières Poésies* indicate three main stages in the process whereby the changing function of nature

²¹ René Guise, 'Les Romans de "fin du monde": le problème de la mort collective dans la littérature de l'imaginaire au XIX^e siècle', in *La Mort en toutes lettres*, ed. by Gilles Ernst (Nancy: Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1983), pp. 171-83 (p. 177).

reveals the loss of religious authority in the spiritual life of mankind. The first stage is entirely positive, and sees nature in the role of a divine instrument revealing the existence and the glory of God. This is reflected in the *Premières Poésies*, where at times there is a nostalgic presentation of an age when nature spoke of God, and when mankind believed without questioning. In 'Découragement', there is a yearning for the first days of the universe, when the Earth was young and there was a clear indication of a divine presence in the vivid displays of the natural world. The poet would have retained his simple faith,

Aux accents de l'hymne sacrée
Que chantait sous le grand ciel nu
Toute chose à peine créée
À son Créateur inconnu. (I, 71)

In 'Primavera', the addressee of the poem is invited to listen to the 'mille voix de la nature immense' speak encouraging words to a humanity that understands even without thinking: 'Le rayon nous dit: "Dieu!", la nature: "Espérance!", / La violette dit: "Amour!"' (I, 63).

However, the second stage in the metaphorical death of nature as tool of divine revelation is seen in a loss of confidence in God, and in nature as his mouthpiece. In 'Sur un rocher', nature, in the rippling of the waters, still provides comfort, as it lulls the sailors to sleep. The atmosphere it evokes still speaks of the Divine: 'La Nuit et l'Océan s'aimaient, et l'espérance / semblait parler de Dieu mieux que dans un beau jour' (I, 72). On the surface, this is still a classical image of the natural world revealing and asserting the existence of God. However, there are variations in symbolism and imagery which suggest that the poet's perceptions are changing.

First of all, the emphasis on night is inherited from the Romantics, and seems to be an inversion of more conventional imagery of the sunlight reflecting the light of God. The use of the imagery of the Night and the Ocean is significant, since the darkness of night and the immensity of the sea are both used in the symbolism of death. These two strong images of death are linked in that of love, and seem also to speak of God, thereby creating a link between the grave, love, and the Divine. This is a chaste prelude to the more insistent sex and death imagery of the *fin de siècle*.

The noise of the swell of the sea is described as a 'soupon immense', denoting a feeling of sadness and emptiness (I, 72). The poet also hears 'le bruit silencieux du sanglot éternel': what was once a sacred hymn is now a lament (I, 72). Men are addressed as 'mortels' and 'victimes', who should be feeling 'des étourdissements en regardant le Ciel' (I, 72).

Although the image of nature as an instrument revealing the glory of God is not completely lost, there is a lack of assurance in the poet's contemplation of the Divine. As this stage proceeds further, however, and as religious doubt increases, there comes either a mishearing or a total loss of understanding of what had been spoken by the divine Voice.

This concept of a misconstrual of speech, or a distortion in the faculty of hearing will become an important facet of Villiers's work, and one to which modern critics are increasingly sensitive. For example, Anne Le Feuvre sees Villiers blaming especially female listeners for not hearing words properly: 'Innocentant le locuteur, Villiers s'en prend en revanche à l'auditeur, plus particulièrement même à l'auditrice, qui déforme les propos qui lui sont adressés et introduit le malentendu au sein de la parole'.²² She takes her cue from Deborah Conyngham, who argues that the problem of the rupture

²² Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 27.

between God and man is transformed in the novel *L'Ève future* through the arguments of Edison:

Nous avons dit que l'au-delà n'était plus présent dans les paroles et les bruits; Edison prétend que l'homme, de son côté, ne leur prête plus de sens. La mort de Dieu équivaut à la mort de l'idée de Dieu dans l'esprit de l'homme moderne. La plupart des hommes sont 'sourdes' d'une façon métaphorique.²³

In the *Premières Poésies*, this kind of deafness is reflected in the experience of Hermosa, who cannot properly hear the words Virtue speaks to her in the *premier chant*: 'Mais leur vrai sens, pour elle, était alors obscur' (I, 25). Similarly, she does not understand the voice of Faith, but hearkens instead to that of Sensual Pleasure. In 'Le Chant du Calvaire', nature itself takes on a wilful deafness, and seems to be deliberately and playfully misleading and frustrating man in his efforts to recover a lost faith. The poet talks of mankind crying "Seigneur! Seigneur!" at the stars 'qui répondent: "Peut-être!" et qui brillent toujours!' (I, 94).

After the stage of mishearing however comes the final phase in the disappearance of God from the life of man: absolutely nothing is heard from the sky. This is rightly defined by Bertrand Vibert as a metaphysical disaster by which the link is broken between the Creator and the created. This affects the value of human speech: 'L'inanité générale des paroles humaines [...] ne peut se comprendre que comme l'effet d'un désastre métaphysique par lequel s'est rompu le lien qui rattachait la créature à son créateur.'²⁴

In 'Hermosa', Villiers makes reference to 'le divin silence des cieux' (I, 29). However, this divine silence is more clearly illustrated in the poem 'Le Château de

²³ Deborah Conyngham, *Le Silence éloquent: thèmes et structures de 'L'Ève future' de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam* (Paris: Corti, 1975), p. 23.

Séid'. Here, there is a hostile image presented of a sombre and giant-like castle set on the rocks of the Pyrenees, before which nature itself, in the form of a hurricane, retreats. An atmosphere of death is created by carefully chosen imagery, such as that of the snow as a shroud covering the edifice. The watchwords of the castle are silence, immobility, and night: 'sublime de silence et d'immobilité / [... il] gardait comme un vieillard son silence et sa nuit' (I, 64). Instead of a word of divine reassurance, there is an eerie void 'où parle le silence à l'homme qui frémit' (I, 65). Even in its great strength, nature seems weak when pitted against the austere and formidable castle. This contrasts sharply with the picture painted of the wooded valleys, where

Les rayons du soleil doraient les verts feuillages;
Les hêtres chevelus abritaient le pastour;
Et souvent y chantaient les colombes sauvages
Aux doux gémissements d'amour. (I, 64)

However, it is to be noted that the pastoral peace of this image is complete in its own right: there is no sense that it points to a wider significance, that of the presence of God. Nature for many Romantic poets was seen as beautiful in itself, even outside of its use as a metaphor for the Divine, and this section of 'Le Château de Séid' points to the fact that Villiers himself was not unaware of this.

The 'Death of God' in nineteenth-century Europe therefore caused an inherent change in the function of nature in the universe, as interpreted by mankind, and the loss of this means of divine communication can be clearly seen in the *Premières Poésies*. If, however, the natural world experienced loss in the curbing of its communicative powers, then humanity itself, as recipient of these divine messages, must also in turn have suffered.

²⁴ Vibert, *L'Inquisiteur*, p. 112.

1.1.2 Impact of the Death of God on Humanity

The loss of religious faith in Europe in the nineteenth century caused a change in people's philosophical and theosophical identities, and again, Villiers's first collection of poetry effectively demonstrates this. There were three main areas of change in people's thinking: their outlook towards God, their regard of other people and their environment, and their self-consuming introspection.

The primary effect of the silence of the heavens reflecting the death of God was that religious faith was replaced by a gnawing doubt. In the 'Chant du Calvaire', Villiers bemoans his generation's lack of belief, 'car nous avons le Doute enfoncé dans le cœur' (I, 77). The capital 'D' emphasizes the enormity of the uncertainty that now dominates human reasoning: the use of upper-case letters in Villiers's writing often distinguishes the meaning of words, and separates the common from that which is of supreme significance.²⁵ Human pride no longer allowed for a simple, unquestioning faith, but demanded to understand as well as to know: 'Hélas! l'orgueil humain veut comprendre pour croire' (I, 78). A cloud of Doubt is even seen to pass by the Cross of Calvary, and again the use of the upper case at the start of the word underlines the weight of unbelief which the poet felt. Indeed, the voice of the despairing wordsmith goes on to admire early Christian martyrs because of the assurance of their faith: 'N'étiez-vous pas joyeux au milieu des tourments? / Il était près de vous, l'ange de l'espérance!' (I, 95).

In 'Hermosa' too, Don Juan suffers from religious doubt: 'Son œil eut un éclair funeste et surhumain: / Mais le Doute brisait le vol de son génie' (I, 52). Indeed, he

²⁵ See Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 34. Deborah Conyngham also talks of a 'dédoublément axiologique' taking place through the typology, especially in the use of capital letters, in her *Silence éloquent*, p. 42.

even rebukes God for causing this spiritual crisis: 'Vous avez fait douter les fils de la douleur' (I, 52).

Mankind's relationship with and outlook towards God had changed, and this is reflected in Villiers's first poems. This poetry also shows how the loss of the security of religious belief affected people in their relations with others and in their view of the world in which they lived. With the rise of individualism in the nineteenth century, human beings began to feel a sense of separation from their fellows. A sentiment of kinship and community was replaced by a growing sense of the solitude of the individual contrasted with the mass of other people around them.

Villiers's *Premières Poésies* also reflect this sense of the solitude of the individual. In 'Barcarolle', the poet is alone listening to the 'chants lointains' of the fishermen, which eventually fade away into the darkness of the night, perhaps itself representing death (I, 5). Progressing further than a feeling of individualism, however, people's feelings towards each other can also degenerate into open hostility. In 'À mon ami Amédée le Menant', the poet exclaims, 'Il nous faut bien lutter contre l'homme et l'espace!' (I, 70). He bemoans the fact that the weight of common miseries leads mankind to conflict, instead of solidarity: 'Au lieu de s'entraider, tous les humains, ces frères, / Se haïssent entre eux' (I, 70). Direct imagery of death also surrounds the solitary fighter who remains. A sail for him is a shroud, while his skiff, the vessel in which he travels through life, is a coffin: in the midst of life, there is death.²⁶

In relation to the way mankind perceived its environment, Villiers's *Premières Poésies* reflect the growing nineteenth-century sentiment that the lot of humanity had never been worse, and that a final apocalypse was not far away. This pessimism came to a head in the *fin de siècle*, when people wondered what the new century to come

²⁶ Villiers will again use the image of a coffin as an object of travel in *L'Ève future*, where the automaton Hadaly will cross the Atlantic hidden in her own satin-lined oblong box.

would bring them. It can be seen in works like Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, where the world of the gods and the gods themselves are destroyed in the funeral pyre built by Brünnhilde.

The problematic nature of the representation of religion in Villiers's work stems from the fact that despite his religious doubts and rebellion, the writer bore a great hatred towards a century where belief in God and the ideal had disappeared. Villiers was greatly influenced by Hegel's concept that there was an ideal world in existence beyond the visible one. Later, Mallarmé too would search for the ideal, though at times fleeing before its unnerving proximity. It was perceptible, but always just out of reach: 'Où fuir dans la révolte inutile et perverse? / *Je suis hanté. L'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur!*'.²⁷

Rather than a withdrawal from the ideal, however, the *Premières Poésies* demonstrate a search for it, as well as a lament that belief in God had disappeared: 'Sa position de base se trouve déjà nettement affirmée dans les *Premières Poésies* (1859), où il exhale sa détestation d'un "siècle immonde", d'où la croyance à Dieu et à l'idéal a disparu.'²⁸ In 'Découragement', Villiers's 'siècle immonde' is contrasted against the early times when religious belief came almost without human effort (I, 71), while in the 'Chant du Calvaire', the poet exclaims that 'jamais on n'a souffert autant que de nos jours' (I, 78). He makes his opinion clear about the times in which he lives: 'Ce siècle est un pourceau qui laisse sur sa route / Baver son muflé en rut sur le fumier qu'il broute!' (I, 78). The loss of faith, as Villiers represented it, meant that humanity's circumstances were becoming intolerable.

As with their outlook towards God and their conception of their environment, people's self-conceptions were also affected by the perceived death of the Divine. One

²⁷ Stéphane Mallarmé, 'L'Azur', *Poésies*, p. 21.

²⁸ Raitt, *VMS*, p. 164.

of the principal resulting phenomena was the terrible feeling of boredom that gripped those who were sensitive to it. In the 'Chant du Calvaire', the poet describes this feeling as a 'manteau de plomb' (I, 94). It is also blamed for the general indifference of mankind to wider issues of life outside its own well-being and comfort: 'Il chante, il tue, il boit. Quant à Dieu, qu'il s'arrange! / Où donc est la raison pour cet état! – l'ennui!' (I, 94).

Another effect of the great nineteenth-century sense of boredom was an intensified belief in the utter vanity of existence. This, coupled with the loss of religious faith, brought about an attitude of indifference towards death, which again is manifest in Villiers's *Premières Poésies*. At the start of 'Hermosa', as part of his description of Italy, the narrator expresses his desire to die there:

Je ne ferais cela par insouciance:

Rire, chanter, dormir; – c'est ennuyeux, la France!

Et l'homme qui s'ennuie est capable de tout. (I, 18)

The 'non-sense' of the universality of death, the fact that it ruthlessly cuts across class and age barriers, is put across to the reader at the death of Hermosa's father: 'Au fond, partout, la mort est à peu près la même, / Pour le héros et le bandit' (I, 22).

The vanity of existence, and the fact that there seems to be little difference between the misery of life and the misery of death, is used by the personified figure of Sensuality as an argument presented to Hermosa to persuade her to follow the carnal path: 'Vivre ou mourir? – disait la voix – mais, Vieille Terre, / Qu'importe? n'es-tu pas vanité sur misère?' (I, 26).

Indeed, it seems that many of Villiers's main characters are affected by this disillusionment. Don Juan himself is keenly aware of the vanity of his life. He is

willing to reveal the secret of his heart to Hermosa, 'Puisque, lassé de vivre en méprisant la vie, / [Il] regarde la mort sans haine et sans envie' (I, 34). After describing the promises of power and honour that he sees as possible in life, he expresses his concern that these positive qualities and achievements lack value when faced with the certainty that the tomb will take them all away: 'Voilà les vanités de nos sorts misérables: / Notre seul but est de mourir!' (I, 36). This is no simple depression, but leads to a death-wish, not out of desire, but out of lassitude: 'À quoi bon! C'est la loi de notre destinée. / C'est tout simple de n'être plus' (I, 36). Even Hermosa herself is glad to die young, while she is still beautiful.

Closely linked with, but seemingly contradictory to the sentiment of the vanity of existence, is the desire for an ideal in life, or for immortality, which the realization of the nearness of the grave produces. Patrick Coleman, in his study on *Reparative Realism*, cites the twin of melancholy as being manic idealism.²⁹ He is speaking about melancholia in French Romantic novels, but this concept is also reminiscent of a principle established by Sigmund Freud. Freud noted that melancholia had a tendency to turn into mania, labelling the 'regular alternation of melancholic and manic phases' as 'circular insanity'.³⁰ Villiers too has surely shown himself in his writings as being subject to this circular insanity: at one instant, he mocks and deplores the state of the modern world, while in the next, he is striving to create the perfect illusion, using the very same instruments of modernity which he had previously dismissed in scorn. Indeed, Villiers's philosophy of illusionism is in essence a system of manic idealism, since it strives at all costs to create and to preserve the ideal illusion no matter what the demands of reality may be.

²⁹ Patrick Coleman, *Reparative Realism: Mourning and Modernity in the French Novel, 1730-1830* (Geneva: Droz, 1998), p. 18.

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', trans. by Joan Rivière, in *A General Selection from the Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by John Rickman (London: Hogarth Press, 1937), pp. 142-61 (p. 154).

Villiers's illusionism grew from his understanding of Hegelian doctrine that the universe has an essentially ideal structure. However, whereas Hegel believed this ideality to be objective, Villiers posited it as being subjective. Thus, for Villiers, a person could choose to render his or her own ideal 'real' by willing it to be so. For example, in 'Véra' (*Contes cruels*), the comte d'Athol maintains, for a time at least, the illusion that his dead wife is still living, thereby causing her to be present in reality. Similarly, in 'Le Meilleur Amour', the last work which Villiers published in his lifetime (it appeared in *Le Figaro* on 10 August 1889), Guilhem Kerlis, a young Breton soldier killed in action in Africa, dies truly happy under the illusion that his fiancée has remained faithful to him. Indeed, the whole plot of *L'Ève future* also rests on Ewald's willingness to accept the illusion of Hadaly's reality.³¹

The pursuit of the ideal is a fundamental aspect of Villiers's work, and is very much linked to the dream world and the imagination. This is seen in the *Premières Poésies*. In 'À son chevet', it is when the poet is watching his loved one sleeping that he imagines her picking flowers in 'jardins idéals' (I, 63). Here, a pun establishes a link between eternal life and the pursuit of the ideal, in that the flowers the young lady is collecting are 'immortelles' (I, 63). Her poet/lover sees this excursion into fantasy as highly desirable, and urges her, 'Oh! ne t'éveille pas!' (I, 63). In 'Hermosa', Don Juan describes himself as being thirsty for paradise, and later admits to seeking for something of eternal significance and value, which he describes as 'Cet idéal maudit, cet inconnu, ce rêve' (I, 48). Illusionism, then, entailed precisely what is outlined here: a search for the absolutely satisfying object that the human mind and being desires in its own imagination, or own personal dream-world.

³¹ Villiers himself coined the term 'illusionism': at the start of his *Nouveaux Contes cruels* (1888), he lists 'L'Illusionisme' among other works 'EN PRÉPARATION' under the heading 'ŒUVRES MÉTAPHYSIQUES'. See *OC* II, 1288.

Another result of the loss of religious faith as reflected in nineteenth-century French literature is a sense of exile. This is again a literary theme that Villiers inherited from the Romantics. It was Lamartine who described man as 'un dieu tombé qui se souvient des cieux', thus representing him as an exile from heavenly places of peace and pleasure.³² Whether or not God was dead was in some sense of little importance: the main point was that people believed him to be so. Yet there remained a nostalgic desire for a faith that was no longer possible. This gave rise to a feeling of exile, a banishment, perhaps self-imposed, from paradise. Don Juan in 'Hermosa' is subject to this sense of exile, and echoes Lamartine's cry as he reveals his inner agony: 'Brûlé comme Cain d'une invisible flamme, / J'ai soif d'un paradis dont je suis exilé' (I, 52).

The sentiment of exile was an all-pervading force, rather like boredom. In 'À son chevet', the poet addresses his dreaming loved-one as 'ma malade exilée' (I, 63), and in the 'Chant du Calvaire', Villiers infers that to live is 'marcher dans un exil' (I, 77). In the notes to the Pléiade edition of Villiers's complete works, this is rightly interpreted as a purely imaginary exile.³³ Indeed, exile as a symbol and result of man's understanding of the death of God has to be primarily spiritual. It can however be reinforced through a geographical distancing. For example, in the poem 'Exil', the poet is presented as 'le fils de l'exil', who has left his old loves, 'la fille des plages', and 'une fleur de ces molles Antilles', symbols of nature untouched by man, to seek glory in Paris (I, 8-9). The theme of exile is important throughout Villiers's works since, as Bertrand Vibert has pointed out, all his 'personnages élus' are figures of exile.³⁴

Another outcome of the progress of humanity in the nineteenth century is man's inner hardening of his emotional and moral self. If God is dead, this then means the

³² Lamartine, 'L'Homme', in *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, pp. 4-11 (p. 6). This appeared in Lamartine's first *Méditations poétiques*, published in 1820. Villiers used it as a chapter epigraph in *L'Ève future* (OC I, 985).

³³ Raitt/Castex, OC I, 1027.

³⁴ Vibert, *L'Inquisiteur*, p. 77.

absence of a standard of morality that had served as a benchmark code of life and living for centuries. This, and the fact that it was felt the circumstances of life were growing more and more adverse, meant that there was little reason for people to guard moral qualities which rendered them vulnerable to an emotional wounding. In 'À mon ami Amédée le Menant', the poet describes a point when he experiences a loss of all illusions of his own goodness and moral worth:

Enfin, pâle, il saisit son cœur et le secoue...

Et toute illusion,

Espérance, amitié, charité, foi sublime,

Tombent autour de lui. (I, 70-71)

Hermosa also loses her innocence with the advent of Sensuality, which she chooses as her emblem. As she agrees with Don Juan in a coquettish manner that she is indeed a beautiful woman, the narrative notes almost as an aside that 'l'innocence, en pleurant, disparut à ce mot' (I, 27).

This exchange of innocence for sensuality is symptomatic of what was taking place overall in Villiers's *Premières Poésies* as regarded mankind and the death of God: one identity and code of values was being exchanged for another. However, there are other general conclusions which can be drawn as regards the effects of the loss of religious stability and how man coped with this intellectually.

There are several results of this recognized feeling of the loss of the knowledge of the Divine demonstrated in the *Premières Poésies*. First of all, there is a recognition that man's intellect does not allow for the security of religious belief: 'Le penseur, aujourd'hui, n'admet aucun système' ('Chant du Calvaire', I, 78). Villiers himself suffered from an intellectual stumbling-block over Christianity which caused emotional

and intellectual turmoil within him, as Sylvain Simon suggests: 'Chez Villiers, le cœur était chrétien mais l'intellect ne l'était pas.'³⁵ However, hand in hand with this rejection of a system of religious thought lies the recognition of a need for such a system. In 'Hermosa', the narrator begins by chastising the man who only eats and drinks, enjoying carnal pleasures without pursuing the spiritual, and hence denying the existence of God. He is dismissed as a 'bélître infame' (I, 18).³⁶ After also rejecting cynical philosophy, intellectual science, and sceptical love, the poet cries out, 'Mais, il faut bien finir par se faire un système, / Ou tout devient un gouffre où notre œil s'obscurcit' (I, 19). These contradictory feelings create a dramatic tension in Villiers's work, as Bertrand Vibert has noted: 'À ce stade, on peut affirmer que l'ambiguïté inhérente à l'œuvre de Villiers est une pensée qui soutient à la fois que Dieu est mort et que Dieu n'est pas mort.'³⁷ In this again, there seems to be a battle between the heart and the intellect.

Therefore, since people are in need of a system of religious thought, and since they are no longer in touch with the Divine themselves, they create their own solutions to fill the gap. First of all, they may turn to other powers and moral principles. In 'Hermosa', Virtue and Faith both offer themselves as tutelary companions to the female protagonist, though she chooses Sensuality. Don Juan himself asserts mankind's need for faith, and a form of beauty which is immortal and absolute. The painter seeks this in painting, he says, the poet in his dream, the conqueror in glory, and the priest in the law: 'Y découvrant toujours des profondeurs nouvelles, / Ils ont un vague espoir de beautés immortelles' (I, 48). Don Juan then goes on to identify the cornerstone on which his system is built:

³⁵ Simon, *Chrétien malgré lui* p. 183.

³⁶ Cf. Mallarmé, who places even the most ill-fated poets above the 'bétail ahuri des humains' ('Le Guignon', *Poésies*, p. 4).

Cet espoir, que les uns cherchent dans la science,

Les autres dans la foi, d'autres dans la puissance,

Moi, je l'ai cherché dans l'amour. (I, 48-49)

Villiers's Don Juan is presented as a seeker after an absolute. Though he has many lovers, he remains faithful to Hermosa when he finds her. Don Juan is not made happy by the extravagant lifestyle he and Hermosa lead: driven by the dictates of what is essentially a spiritual quest, he is now searching for something of a more lasting quality than the transitory.

However, those of a more carnal nature pursue other pleasures to fill the gap created by the death of God. In the 'Chant du Calvaire', Bacchus, the god of wine, is described by the decadent Romans as the 'dieu consolateur de la terre' (I, 89), though instead of bringing spiritual enlightenment, he rather draws a veil of forgetting over life: 'Evohe Bacchë! / Donne l'oubli, Dieu des Ivresses!' (I, 89).

In mankind's quest for a solution to the problem of the loss of a divine authority, people find themselves placed in the role of God. This too is a product of Romanticism, outlined by Luc Badesco. He speaks of man becoming the centre of an internal world of his own construction, growing to take the place of God, while attempting to build on Earth a human paradise, helped and encouraged by industrial progress: 'l'homme s'approprié la transcendance divine et devient lui-même sa propre transcendance'.³⁸

The deification of humanity is seen in the words of the courtesan Sempronia to the adolescent Lycénus in 'Chant du Calvaire'. Even though the stars, which once were seen to enunciate the speech of God, are shining in the night sky, the courtesan asks the boy to become her universe, while she will become his night, that is, the vehicle through which divine matters are communicated:

³⁷ Vibert, *L'Inquisiteur*, p. 120.

Dieux immortels! La nuit, d'étoiles parsemée,

Entoure l'univers d'une étreinte embaumée...

Oh! Sois mon univers, moi je serai ta nuit! (I, 82)

There is even a suggestion in Sempronia's Latin name of one of the qualities of the Divine: the eternal.

There is also a prime example of the deification of womankind in 'Hermosa'. The first time Hermosa appears in the text, she is presented in a goddess-like stance, with people at her feet, rather like several of Flaubert's still images of the heroine in his novel *Salammbô*, or like Gustave Moreau's representation of the troublesome daughter of Leda and Zeus, *Hélène sur les ramparts de Troie*.³⁹ Like these two, Hermosa is described as being 'sidéralement belle', and seems to be 'l'ange nocturne des humains' (I, 20-21). Like Sempronia replacing the night filled with stars, there is a 'signe idéal' found in 'les reflets de ses cheveux d'ébène'. This sign is 'une étoile de diamants' (I, 21). The artificial and man-made, as well as the human, are here replacing divine channels of spiritual communication. Hermosa is as 'un fantôme de la Vie' (I, 21). She now points to the ideal life behind the everyday.

Don Juan also becomes like a god to those who have succumbed to his charms. He describes seeing in the Orient a dark nation gathered round an ivory idol, and likens this to the attitude of his lovers around him: 'Eh bien, je me trouvai semblable à cette idole' (I, 50).

Indeed, Villiers himself as a writer attempted to fill the gap created by the loss of the validity of the word of God with his own work. His 'parole' was to 'soutenir la double gageure de suppléer le silence de Dieu, et de se démarquer du bruyant silence des

³⁸ Badesco, *Génération 1860*, pp. 30-31.

³⁹ *Salammbô* was first published in 1863; *Hélène sur les ramparts de Troie* was exhibited at the Parisian Salon of 1880. The whereabouts of the original painting are unknown, but other versions of it can be viewed at the Musée Gustave Moreau in Paris.

paroles humaines'.⁴⁰ In a world without God, language itself takes on supreme importance as a tool of man, dominating and also moulding every facet of life:

Si Dieu est mort, tous les systèmes religieux mais aussi politiques, économiques, sociaux, ne sont que des représentations qui n'ont pas d'autre lieu que le langage. La société, la démocratie, la république sont moins des réalités que des effets de discours.⁴¹

Villiers's *Premières Poésies*, therefore, contain a great deal of death-like imagery relating to the loss of religious faith. Indeed, the 'death of God', the effects of which are evident on the natural world and on mankind, is the issue which has made the greatest impact on the writer of this collection, causing a great upheaval in the manner in which he viewed life. However, this was not the only area of change and loss facing the man or woman of the nineteenth century. A feeling of instability concerning the affairs of the heart also led to much imagery concerning death appearing in the literature of the time, and a strong echo of this can be detected in the *Premières Poésies*.

⁴⁰ Vibert, *L'Inquisiteur*, p. 106.

⁴¹ B. Marchal, *Lire le symbolisme* (Paris: Dunod, 1993), pp. 22-23, cited in Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 109.

1.2 Lost Love

The theme of lost or doomed love was very important in Romantic literature. In *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, Goethe's Romantic hero finds his soulmate in a married woman, and her unattainability, coupled with his great passion, leads to his suicide. In an equally important novel for French literature, Chateaubriand's *Chactas* falls in love with Atala, who brings about her own death in order to keep a vow of chastity sworn to her dying mother.⁴² This aspect of his Romantic heritage was not lost on Villiers, and in the *Premières Poésies*, there is an exploration of the theme of death as a symbol of loss in love relationships: as well as his spiritual life suffering a loss, the author of this collection also feels the pain of a void in his emotional existence.

The writer of these first poems presents two different situations of loss in his emotional life. The first of these, the loss of a girl who enters a convent, is anticipated by Villiers in the poem 'Chanson'. Here, in the voice of Faust, the poet speaks the words that Mephistopheles has whispered in his ear, in order to persuade the girl that he loves to abandon 'l'autel sombre' that so often leads to the convent (I, 13). The youth and natural beauty of the young lady are contrasted with the stark formality of the 'cloître austère' (I, 13). She is advised to dry her tears with flowers, though these flowers are in danger of confusing the dampness of her eyes with dew.⁴³

The theme of love, youth, and beauty lost to a convent is presented here only in its early stages. It will later be developed in *Le Prétendant* in the character of Sione de Santos, and in the experience of Sara in *Axël*. It is also the focus of the tale 'L'Amour suprême' (*L'Amour suprême*), where the male subject narrator recounts the

⁴² This text is *Atala* (1801). Goethe's *Werther* was published earlier, in 1774.

⁴³ The same also happens with Axël's tears and Sara's rose *Axël*. See *OC II*, p. 666.

metaphysical death of Lysiane d'Aubelleynne through her entry into a convent.⁴⁴ The shock of this, coupled with macabre imagery, is seen in the narration as the young woman undergoes the initiation ceremony: 'Je me rappelai, dans un éclair, le terrible cérémonial dont la prise du voile est entourée pour les Carmélites de l'Observance-étroite. Les symboles de ce rituel se succédaient, pareils à des appels précipités de la pierre sépulcrale' (II, 12-13).

The second situation of loss as regards love presented in the *Premières Poésies* is that of a lover to the grave, and this can be seen in 'De Profundis clamavi'. This poem is very much based in the Romantic tradition. The title is the same as that of one of Baudelaire's poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, and the epigraph is taken from Musset's 'Stances à la Malibran'. It illustrates one of the most famous themes of Romanticism, an address to a beloved one who is dying or dead, seen for example in poems like Lamartine's 'Le Lac'. Whereas Lamartine wrote 'Le Lac' while his (absent) lover Julie Charles was still alive, Villiers's poem has been written six months after the death of his sweetheart. The context of 'De Profundis clamavi' is a visit to a wood where the poet and his lover used to stroll. The girl was an innocent 'jolie enfant' who smiled at the sky and the future (I, 66). There is an indication here of Villiers's future belief that ideal love is only possible in dream or illusion, in that he describes their relationship as a 'songe radieux' (I, 67).

The poet expresses his disbelief that he is still living, and later rebukes God. He sees now the end of the meaning of his existence. He feels that his life, as far as emotional fulfilment is concerned, is over. Now, if he is to look for an ideal in love, he will have to look not at the future, but into the past:

⁴⁴ N.B. This metaphysical, claustal death is different to that experienced by the bourgeois, since it is regenerative. See Chapters 2 & 3 of this thesis for a fuller explanation of these types of metaphysical death.

Morte! et je suis encore en proie à l'existence!

C'est donc cela la vie? Et déjà mon enfance

A-t-elle disparu loin de ce cœur brisé?

Seigneur, vous êtes grand, mais vous êtes sévère!

Ainsi, me voilà seul: c'est fini sur la terre;

Cela s'appelle: 'le Passé'. (I, 67)

The natural world, in the countryside around them, is strongly identified with the two lovers. In life, the poet claims that the nightingale, a bird associated with love and beauty, often held its breath as they passed, hearing their light steps. There are flowers near the young girl's tomb, as if young doves, symbols of purity, brought them. Nature itself seems to reflect the death of the girl, as the lilies and roses also die away. Only the cypresses, themselves funereal trees, remain.⁴⁵ It is under these that the loved one is buried.

The strongest image linking love with death is found in the fourth part of this poem, in the picture of the poet's inner being as a coffin: 'Mon amour triste et fier brûle encor dans mon âme, / Comme une lampe d'or veille sur un cercueil' (I, 68). However, this feeling of pain is regarded as an attractive emotion. The poet now refrains from shedding tears, since he has found a charm in pain itself. There is also a form of pride in the solitary cry, 'Et mon cœur seul porte le deuil!' (I, 68). The poet has fallen into the trap of self-pity and proud revelling in misery which was so common to the Romantics, and which would eventually emotionally paralyse the *fin-de-siècle* generation of writers and artists, whilst at the same time forming part of their aesthetic.

There has been much speculation as to whether Villiers did actually lose a sweetheart to the grave in his later teenage years. Some have suggested, perhaps leaning

⁴⁵ The branches of the cypress tree, grown in Southern Europe and Western Asia, are used at funerals, and are hence associated with mourning.

heavily on the content of the *Premières Poésies*, that she died; others, that she entered a convent to take on a form of claustral death. Still others have suggested that there were in fact two romances in the young man's life at this time, and that he lost both, one to physical death, the other to a life of religious devotion in a convent.⁴⁶ It is not easy from Villiers's correspondence to surmise the truth of this matter, and it represents an area of difficulty for modern biographers. The poetry in this collection could give the reader some clues, but there is a danger in reading too much into the import of these laments for lost love. This was a standard form of composition for Villiers's Romantic masters, as is seen above, and it could be that he was merely experimenting with the genre. Indeed, given Villiers's sensitive nature and vivid imagination, it would not be missing the mark completely to suggest that much of what he wrote here was fiction, but so ingrained in the poet's mind and spirit that he later came to believe it. The interest of these love poems, for the purposes of this thesis, lies principally in the vision of emotional attachment and the close association of love with death that they present.

The *Premières Poésies* depict a strong desire for love to triumph over death. This is seen in one of the first poems in the collection, 'Guitare'. Although Villiers completely distanced himself from his first poems shortly after their publication, he clearly felt that 'Guitare' did have its merits, since he used it in an only slightly revised form as a serenade for Tannuccio in *Elèn*.⁴⁷ It was set to music in 1888 by V. Loret. This poem bears a title borrowed from Victor Hugo, as well as a Hugolian refrain: 'Il faut aimer. [...] Aimons encor! [...] Aimons toujours!' (I, 12). The Spanish background against which it is set also gives strong clues that it belongs in the Romantic tradition: French Romanticism was very much drawn towards the exoticism provided by the

⁴⁶ See e.g. Badesco, *Génération 1860*, pp. 681-85 for an account and analysis of these premises.

⁴⁷ See *OC* I, 220-21.

scenery and culture of Spain and North Africa, for example, Victor Hugo's play *Hernani* (1830).

'Guitare' is a call to love, now and always. The action takes place at the hour of serenades, in the evening. This is an idyllic yearning for harmony, where human love and religious propriety fit together into place, in the 'nuits divines' (I, 12). The call for love to remain even after it would naturally fade is found in the third stanza, when the poet urges his lover, 'Aimons toujours!' (I, 12). This cry is uttered even in Autumn, a time that signals the coming of winter and the dying of natural life, represented in the leaf-fall from the orange trees. Therefore, love triumphs over an autumnal death, when nature itself is perishing.

A second poem in which the desire for a love that is immortal is manifested is 'Lasciate ogni speranza'.⁴⁸ This is a poem that develops further the aesthetic of a traumatic experience linking love with death. Its title comes from Dante's *Inferno*, where the words are placed over the entrance to hell itself. This sends out strong signals as to the measure of the poet's feeling, and also situates the poem against a specific literary background. The rather lengthy epigraph is of major interest and importance to 'Lasciate ogni speranza'. It relates the tale of a large coffin, carried by twelve giants, to be thrown into the sea: '*À un aussi grand cercueil, il faut une grande fosse*' (I, 73). This itself is a strong image of death, since the sea too is an icon of the grave. The coffin's large size is justified by the fact that it must be substantial enough to contain the poet's love and his sufferings, another indication of the close relationship between love, suffering, and death in Villiers's mind.

The main body of the poem traces the poet bidding farewell to youth and to his dead fiancée, while promising to dedicate himself to the singing of immortal songs.

⁴⁸ This poem was also published in Catulle Mendès's *Revue fantaisiste* on 15 February 1861, with only some small modifications in punctuation.

Again, as in 'De Profundis clamavi', there is the image of the poet's childhood following his lover into the grave, and the embrace of pain as an almost positive result, encouraging to live. This kind of comfort, however, is only available to 'les cœurs vraiment grands', in contrast to the crowd 'aux bégaiements confus' (I, 73).

The poet compares himself with rocks, immovable and immobile, which lean over themselves as the waves retreat before them. This is an image of the self-examination prevalent in Romanticism, and also refers back to the picture painted of the castle in 'Le Château de Séid', which stands strong against the buffets and assaults of nature.

The theme of regeneration through death is suggested here in its early stages at the end of the poem. After the grave claims his lover, and with her, his youthful hopes, the poet is inspired to ask his muse for 'chansons immortelles' (I, 73). Instead of ceasing to exist himself, the poet uses the deaths of others, and even the death of a part of himself, as a springboard to seek for higher things: he pictures himself as an eaglet about to take flight, exploring the area stretching out ahead of him. This desire for flight is not only an escape from the trap of being lost in too sombre a reverie on death, but also an attempt to conquer the effects of this same death: it is for *immortal* songs that the poet asks. He is looking for an antidote to ephemeral love, a form of beauty that the grave will not destroy.

One of the thematic couplings in *fin-de-siècle* literature that was most in danger of destroying the life of male protagonists was that of sex and death.⁴⁹ This concept of the union between love and death will become very important in Villiers's literary output, for example in the short story 'Akëdysséiril' (*L'Amour suprême*), and later in *Axël*. The beginnings of it can also be seen in Villiers's *Premières Poésies*. In 'Hermoda', there is a presentation of the two sides of love, sensual and spiritual.

Hermosa herself is a personification of sensual love, abandoning herself after the departure of Don Juan 'volontiers, par mollesse, / Aux troubles sensuels d'une nuit de jeunesse' (I, 56). Her goal in life is the fulfilment of the pleasure-drive within her, and she directs herself wholly towards this end. The love of which she partakes is deeply egotistical and self-motivated: her aim is to

Aimer pour elle seule et sans livrer son âme,
S'estimer, quant au reste, au-dessus de tout blâme,
Mourir jeune et dans un palais. (I, 55)

Thus, this carnal side of love is also closely associated with the solitary pride of the fatal woman and her desire for death.

The theme of sex and death is seen most clearly in the *Premières Poésies* in 'Zaira', which was the second of the two poems published by Tinterlin in July 1858, prior to the appearance of Villiers's first poetry collection. In this instance, it reflects Villiers's search for ideal love, in that the young Arab girl has promised to remain faithful not only to the living, physical person of her betrothed, but also to his memory. Love in this setting is immediately associated with death, and is presented as being a noble sentiment, which can be declared with a strong note of pride: 'Je suis de la tribu d'Azra, / Chez nous on meurt lorsque l'on aime!' (I, 15). Zaira begins a Villierian tradition of loving only once that will continue to Lord Ewald, the fated hero of *L'Ève future*, and to the eponymous hero of *Axël*. However, if the reader is seduced by the charm of this girl's faithfulness, he or she misses the fact that this love is essentially tainted. It is a love that is a driving, living, and motivating force within her, causing her to reject the suitor before her face. However, it is a love that causes death, and even the

⁴⁹ See the section on Sex and Death in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

object of it could himself be dead. This will later develop into a full-blown wish for death in love, but here, the attraction that Villiers felt towards the theme is indicated in its early stages.

Don Juan in 'Hermosa', however, discovers that sensual love does not completely satisfy him, and it is principally through him that the search for the ideal in love is depicted. His present dissatisfaction is so great that Hermosa herself is alerted to it: 'Et je compris alors que nos plaisirs de flamme / Ne pouvaient apaiser les ardeurs de ton âme' (I, 34). Instead of the flaming passion of sensual love, Don Juan looks for an absolute and immortal affection: again, there is the desire for something to last beyond the grave. Anne Le Feuvre speaks of the eternal return of Villiers's texts and characters,⁵⁰ and Don Juan is the first in a long line of Villierian protagonists who demonstrate the journey of the initiate onto a higher plane of life and existence. Don Juan fails to find the principle of new life in death, and retreats discouraged and sad. However, years later, Villiers's Axël, his final initiate, will reject life altogether, and find triumph and fulfilment in death itself.

Love, then, in these *Premières Poésies*, is seen primarily in terms of loss, either in unfulfilment or death. This death can either be actual and physical, or symbolic and metaphysical, as in the entry into a convent. Yet death is not the only outcome of lost love in these poems: death itself can be seen as the opportunity for a new start, for a move in a new direction, as in 'Lasciate ogni speranza', where the poet is prompted to seek now for immortal songs, which will outlive the grave. It is abundantly clear however that the imagery of death runs alongside that of love, and in some cases, love actually leads to death.

⁵⁰ Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 337.

1.3 Death and the Nation

After having looked at how themes of death manifest themselves in Villiers's *Premières Poésies* in relation to both the religious and emotional life of the poet, I now intend to spend some time examining how issues which affected the government and political life of the nation had an impact on this collection. In the introduction to this thesis, I drew attention to the political and social instability of France in the nineteenth century, arguing that it was reflected in the literature of the time, including that of Villiers. Although he had relatively little involvement in the political arena, there were times when Villiers did link his name with affairs of the state. For example, he allegedly put himself forward as a candidate for the throne of Greece while he was still a young man in 1863.⁵¹ He also supported the Paris commune in its early stages, and stood as a legitimist candidate in the city's municipal elections of 1881.⁵²

There is little in the *Premières Poésies* that refers to political issues. However, one poem in the collection does allude to the political climate at the time of their publication. 'Une façon d'imiter M. de Pompignan' was one of the two poems published by Tinterlin in 1858, though it appears in the *Premières Poésies* in a much shorter and more refined form. It is a response to comments published in English newspapers describing the French tricolour as being covered with crimes and murders. It is an intensely patriotic poem: Villiers seems to take very seriously the insults made against his country's flag, protesting that 'Le drapeau d'un pays, c'est le pays lui-même' (I, 60).

This is a strange poem for the traditionalist, monarchist Villiers to pen, since the events that inspired its inscription revolved around an attempt to destroy the régime of Napoleon III. However, he is willing to lay aside issues of monarchy and government

⁵¹ See Raitt, *Life of*, pp. 37-39.

for the sake of his country. He sees the leaders of a country, like its flag, embodying the defining qualities of the state itself: 'Le véritable nom que portent, dans la vie, / Bourbon, Napoléon, Valois, c'est la Patrie' (I, 61). Just as death was a reconciliatory force in the area of romantic love, uniting lovers who had been separated through circumstances, so the grave brings together these opposing factions of the leadership of France: 'Ces héros ennemis, frères par leurs courages, / Dieu les réunit au tombeau' (I, 61). A similar thought is expressed in 'Hermosa', where the writer questions the value of power and authority when, 'Au fond, partout, la mort est à peu près la même, / Pour le héros et le bandit' (I, 22).

'Une façon d'imiter M. de Pompignan' was originally entitled 'Ballade', and its envoy is a meditation on what kingship represented at that time for Villiers. The monarchy, and the loss of it, was an issue to which the poet returned throughout his life, and here it is very much surrounded with imagery of death, as if he is bitterly trying to come to terms with its disappearance:

Un trône, pour celui qui rêve,
Un trône est bien sombre aujourd'hui! [...]
Il a sceptre et lauriers pour branches:
Il est formé de quatre planches,
Absolument comme un cercueil. (I, 61)

An acceptance of the loss of the monarchy was one of the issues in the nineteenth century that faced the part of French society to which Villiers belonged: the aristocracy. As is seen here, Villiers's underlying concern with it was apparent in his writing.

⁵² See *ibid.*, pp. 202-03.

Another area of French national life which affected the art and literature of that time was the expansion of the French empire, and with it, a heightened interest in things exotic. In the eighteenth century, France had been fascinated with things Chinese, and a fashion of *chinoiserie* had swept Parisian boudoirs and salons. In the course of the nineteenth century, the French empire in North Africa and the Caribbean was established and expanded, and towards the end of it, Japanese art also greatly influenced French painters.

Critical opinions are mixed as to whether France as a nation gained or lost by this glimpse, both figurative and literal, of new horizons. For example, Jonathan Arac and Harriet Rivto, with reference to one of the essays in their publication, argue that the embrace of foreign culture had a detrimental effect on that of the home nation:

The established European powers found their traditional self-definitions challenged by the imperatives of capitalism and empire. That is, expansion – incorporation of the alien, either territorially or economically – was necessary to maintain preeminence, but that same expansion could diffuse or undermine the common culture on which the sense of shared nationality ultimately depended.⁵³

Conversely, the influx of the exotic can also be seen to have regenerative properties in terms of Western art and literature. The French painter Paul Gauguin found inspiration in the simplicity of form and boldness of colour in Tahiti, where he lived and worked from 1891 to his death in 1903. Graphic artists like Toulouse Lautrec were also influenced by techniques of Japanese art.

The authoritative voice on Orientalism, Edward Said, also discusses the regenerative aspects of exotic culture on that of Europe, specifically that of India, in relation to Gustave Flaubert's unfinished novel *Bouvard et Pécuchet*:

What Bouvard had in mind – the regeneration of Europe by Asia – was a very influential Romantic idea. Friedrich Schlegel and Novalis, for example, urged upon their countrymen, and upon Europeans in general, a detailed study of India because, they said, it was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism and mechanism (and republicanism) of Occidental culture. And from this defeat would arise a new, revitalized Europe: the Biblical imagery of death, rebirth, and redemption is evident in this prescription.⁵⁴

Of course, both arguments have elements of truth in them: for a new, revitalized Europe to take shape through an interest in exotic culture and philosophy, it was likely that part of the old Europe would fade away and die.

There are a number of poems in Villiers's *Premières Poésies* which betray the author's interest in the exotic. For example, there is the otherness of Spain and North Africa in 'Guitare' and 'Une Bouteille de vin d'Espagne'. 'Chanson arabe' and 'Zaïra' point to the exoticism of Asian culture. However, it is the poem 'Prière indienne' that most vividly displays Villiers's enthusiasm for the incorporation of the exotic in his writing. Indeed, the cultural mix in the poem is at times confusing, and in places, quite overwhelming. The epigraph is inspired by *Macbeth*, a Shakespearean play about Scottish intrigue and kingly dispute. The poem itself paints a picture of an Indian Brahman praying to his god Brahma near a black fetish. Among the deities and entities from which he asks protection are Shiva, another powerful Hindu god, along with vampires, which spring from European legend. He also invokes protection from Thugs, members of an Indian sect devoted to the goddess Kali, who ritually strangled their victims. In his prayer, the Brahman compares a Thug to a 'djinn des savanes' (I, 11). However, the jinn belongs to Islamic Arabian mythology, not that of Hindu India.

⁵³ Arac/Rivto, *Macropolitics*, p. 6.

⁵⁴ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, 2nd edn (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1995), p. 115. First published in 1978.

Finally, the priest asks protection from 'le serpent vert et chauve', which could be a reference to the Edenic serpent of Christian mythology (I, 11).

This mixture of cultural and religious icons was to become almost a hallmark of Villiers's work. Sylvain Simon writes that 'on peut très bien imaginer [...] que dès *Isis* Villiers avait en vue un syncrétisme christiano-pagano-occulto-hégélien'.⁵⁵ As can be seen here though, this could apply even from the very start of Villiers's literary career. Throughout his life, he gathered images and ideas for their beauty and idealism, not for their cultural or even logical coherence.

It is clear then that principles of loss and regeneration were asserting themselves in the national life of France in the nineteenth century, specifically in this case with reference to the monarchy and exoticism. Both of these phenomena feature as themes in Villiers's *Premières Poésies*. The issue of the monarchy is very much surrounded by imagery of death, while Villiers's unbridled enthusiasm for the exotic is apparent in his liberal and at times disordered use of it. Villiers will continue to refer to both throughout his work, but they are seen here in their early stages, pointing to the death of an old culture, and the birth of a new one.

⁵⁵ Simon, *Chrétien malgré lui*, p. 47.

1.4 The Symbolism of Death in the *Premières Poésies*

The theme of death is clearly well-represented in these *Premières Poésies*, in relation to the religious, emotional, and national life of France. Before bringing this chapter to a close, however, it will be useful to investigate the type of symbolism Villiers uses in terms of death, loss, and regeneration, in order to pull together the three areas of life which have been discussed here. Much of this symbolism will also continue to feature in Villiers's work in future years.

There are images and metaphors found in the *Premières Poésies* which are echoed later on, and which point to a feeling of loss. For example, there is a strong connection in the *Premières Poésies* between situations of death and loss, and the leaving of childhood. In 'À mon ami Amédée le Menant', the poet speaks of the 'moment de quitter son enfance fanée' as being the time when man suddenly sees 'la terre moins ornée, / Le ciel plus inconnu' (I, 69). This link between the start of adulthood and the loss of religious faith can also be seen in 'Hermosa', and in Villiers's first attempt at a philosophical novel, *Isis*, published shortly after the *Premières Poésies* in 1862. The link between entering adulthood and the loss of love is established in 'De Profundis Clamavi', where the poet asks if 'déjà [son] enfance / A-t-elle disparu loin de ce cœur brisé?' (I, 67).

Silence is another important theme in Villiers's work, indicating of course a loss of communication. In the recent past, critics have been particularly sensitive to the theme of silence in relation to Villiers, Deborah Conyngham even devoting her thesis to it, which was later published as *Le Silence éloquent*. It is a theme which will continue to be important in Villiers's later work. For example, Bertrand Vibert interprets the

roles of the main characters of *Axël* as being guardians of silence, and describes *L'Ève future* as a 'roman suspendu sur le mot "silence"'.⁵⁶

In popular mythology, silence is associated with death: the grave does not speak, but keeps its secrets. For a human being, it denotes the loss of vocal speech, and shrouds him or her in mystery. Communication is now dependent not on the mute parlance of the silent communicator, but on the onlooker's interpretation of his or her gestures and actions. However, these movements and signals can be understood on a number of different levels, according to the experience of those who observe them. Silence is therefore for a large part an unreliable means of communication, save for Villiers's main characters, many of whom find a dignified solace in each others' lack of speech: 'Refuge de ceux qui se refusent à déformer leurs émotions, le silence ouvre la voie d'une communication sincère, morale'.⁵⁷

It is ironic that what was seen as a metaphysical disaster in divine communication was later to become the very method of speaking of Villiers's main protagonists. This signals another way in which man replaced the Divine. This depth of communication is not however present in the *Premières Poésies*, where the silence is deep and empty.

Reference has already been made to the silence of nature after the perceived death of God in the *Premières Poésies*. Where once there was dialogue, there is now no open communication with the Divine through the natural world. However, not only nature, but also people can be silent and cut off from communication. After the departure of Don Juan, Hermosa gives herself to other lovers, but her voice is hushed when they seek a more meaningful relationship with her than the transitory. She also sets herself to seek only pleasure in love, and to 's'abstraire en silence / Du reste des

⁵⁶ Vibert, *L'Inquisiteur*, pp. 357, 364.

⁵⁷ Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 158.

réalités' (I, 55). Here, Hermosa's silence points to the loss of the ideal in which she sought fulfilment: the love of Don Juan. This disappointment is linked to a retreat to a dream world of a person's own construction, as Hermosa distances herself from the realities in which she chooses not to be involved.

Silence is also connected with the solitude of Villiers's elect, like the lonely subject of 'À mon ami Amédée le Menant', who 's'y dresse en silence et lutte solitaire' (I, 70). This kind of isolation is linked with sterility, and with the rejection of progenerative power. In 'À mon ami', the subject says goodbye to and leaves behind mother, sister, and even fiancée 'pour voguer plus seul vers de plus vastes plages' (I, 69). His existential angst is a private affair, leading to the rejection of natural family relations. This concept of the solitary, sterile individual was especially important in *fin-de-siècle* thinking, where writers and artists were obsessed with the extinction of whole family lines through sterility seen to be caused by a decadent lifestyle, or simply through the desire for solitude. In 'À mon ami', the 'mer stérile' is put forward as a stumbling-block to the solitary man (I, 70). The tomb is also sterile in that in natural terms there is no hope of life coming from it.

For the man who leaves behind those whom he could love, the memory of them becomes obscure and distant. This theme of memory and forgetting features in the *Premières Poésies* as it will do later in Villiers's work, and is linked to the idea of *le néant*: a gaping abyss of nothingness. In 'À mon ami', after bidding farewell to his family, the poet then experiences 'la tempête aux souvenirs funèbres' (I, 70). Later, as an old man, he abandons his vessel to the 'flots de l'oubli' (I, 71). This suggests that a certain kind of memory is associated with death and is seen as a threat. The emptiness of forgetting that follows is, however, of little comfort. In 'Hermosa', forgetting is described as a second shroud which covers a person's coffin: 'L'oubli, second suaire / Des livides captifs du cercueil solitaire' (I, 22).

Another phenomenon resulting from the sense of the presence of death in life is a strong dwelling upon, and at times a deep nostalgia for the past, as if the poet is determined not to let it be covered in forgetting. In the *Premières Poésies*, there is evidence of a tremendous yearning for the past, and a looking back at it for comfort and direction. In 'Découragement', the poet laments that in modern times, people are left with only a memory of having lived: 'Qu'est-ce, hélas! maintenant, que vivre? / – Se souvenir qu'on a vécu' (I, 72). This shows the levels of pathos to which he felt humanity had descended, and it also establishes a connection between life, death, and memory, which will become important in Villiers's presentation of the bourgeois class. The inference is that life nowadays lies only in the remembrance of having lived. This surely suggests that the vital state is a literally a thing of the past: the poet speaks as if life were over, and there is a condition of living death.

However, in 'Barcarolle', the past too is strongly associated with the funereal cloak of death, and is seen as a threatening force.

Allons!... chante, ô poète!... avant que les années
Que le passé va prendre et qu'un Dieu t'a données,
Sous leur manteau funèbre aient glacé ton essor. (I, 6)

In 'Le Château de Séid', the castle is in ruins, a sure sign that time is triumphing over it, and that it quite literally belongs to the past. It is described as 'le vieux manoir', which is 'gros de passé', and guards its silence like an old man (I, 64). The image of the past presented here is not a reassuring one: 'D'austères visions passent sur vos décombres, [...] / Ô vous, des souvenirs cariatides sombres!' (I, 65).

In 'Hermosa' however, the female protagonist has vanquished the past, in a quite violent manner, to prevent it having any further power over her. Here also, a link is established between the past, memory, and forgetting:

Le passé te brûlait; mais devant ton empire
Tu le saisis soudain dans son dernier repli;
Et, crispant tes doigts blancs sur ton torse insensible,
Tu l'arrachas d'un coup et le jetas, paisible,
Dans les cachots sourds de l'oubli. (I, 55)

Hermosa is now free from the bonds and memory of her former life, and is able to pursue the ideal that she has chosen. However, the area of the dream world and the ideal, linked with a search for immortality, is also strangely associated with death in the *Premières Poésies*. In 'À son chevet', it was when the loved one was asleep and dreaming that she found her 'jardins idéals' (I, 63). Of course, there is a strong link between sleep and death, in that both states carry a person out of this world in terms of their state of consciousness. The 'immortelles' imagery in 'À son chevet' also points to a victory over the silence of the grave and the open, yawning chasm of the tomb. It was with this same desire to defeat the grave that Don Juan also struggled.

In 'Hermosa', the character who gives her name to the title of the poem describes the dream state as 'cette demi-veille / Où l'idéal survit au désir qui sommeille' (I, 32). It was in this state that she saw clearly some of the inner thoughts of her lover, Don Juan. However, ironically, the reality of seeing him with his hand on his dagger immediately roused her from this idyllic reverie, giving her an 'angoisse terrible' (I, 33). In this case, an image of the menace of death has broken both the woman's perceptive powers and her grip on her ideal.

The association of night, death, and woman, which would later become so important in the iconography of the *femme fatale*, can also be seen here in these first poems. There is an emphasis on night in the first poem in the collection, 'Barcarolle'. Later on, Hermosa is pictured as an 'ange nocturne', and a 'fantôme de la Vie' (I, 21). When she made her choice to live for sensual pleasure, death began to play a part in her physical appearance:

Un jour avait suffi pour changer son visage:
La mort l'avait déjà marqué de son nuage,
La volupté de sa pâleur! (I, 26-27)

There is also a strong link established between sensuality and death, or sex and death. Hermosa pleads with Don Juan that life does have a meaning by using the argument that when all else is gone, there remains one ghost: 'la Volupté!' (I, 42). This is the emblem by which she chooses to live, and the ideal that she will pursue. The poem 'Zaïra' also presents a strong vision of the concept of death accompanying that of love. These are the first instances where Villiers 'avait présenté la mort comme le seul lieu où puisse s'accomplir le véritable amour'.⁵⁸

Finally, there is in these *Premières Poésies* a link between individual people and death: a person can be so strongly marked with the presence of death that there is a physical sign of it. This of course happens to Hermosa, whose face is clouded by the nearness of the grave. Don Juan is also strongly associated with death, even in life. He rejects the comfort of Hermosa laying her head on his breast, describing it as 'une fleur sur un tombeau!' (I, 30).

⁵⁸ Simon, *Chrétien malgré lui*, pp. 177-78.

This imagery and symbolism of death plays a large part in conveying the mood of Villiers in the *Premières Poésies*, and will continue to be important in his later works. Death fulfils a fundamental function in these poems, providing both themes and imagery, while itself standing as an image for situations of loss or difficulty. Indeed, in listing the principal themes of this collection, Sylvain Simon concludes that 'ce qui couronne ces causes d'angoisse et en constitue la cause fondamentale, [c'est] l'obsession de la mort'.⁵⁹ It is used principally as a symbol of loss, but there is also a suggestion of it playing a role in the regeneration into an ideal life which Villiers's characters are already seeking.

⁵⁹ Simon, *Chrétien malgré lui*, p. 17.

Conclusion

The Welsh poet Dylan Thomas advised his dying father to fight against the forces of death at work in his body, urging him,

Do not go gentle into that good night

Rage, rage against the dying of the light.⁶⁰

In Villiers's works too, there is a strong measure of conflict in his refusal to accept situations of loss in his life. It is from here that stems his nostalgia for a time when religious faith came without effort, his search for the ideal love of his childhood, and also his striving for recognition of his aristocratic status. Although he was in many ways fascinated by the modern world, by science and what futuristic inventions could mean for mankind, his goal was to use these things in order to recreate the past. There was a constant refusal in Villiers to live in the present, and even in his contemplation of the future, there is a retrospective glance at what had gone before and an unwillingness to let the light of his heritage die. The next chapter will attempt to explain why his feelings on the present world were so strong, and what life in it entailed for the poet.

⁶⁰ Dylan Thomas, 'Do not go gentle into that good night', in the *Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. by Alexander W. Allison and others, 3rd edn (New York: Norton, 1983), pp. 1181-82 (ll. 18-19).

Chapter Two

Death and the Bourgeois:

The Theme of Death in Villiers's Short Stories

and the Play *La Révolte*

It is clear from the first chapter of this thesis that the *Premières Poésies* had strong ties with the literature of the preceding Romantic generation. Villiers's first poems manifest themes and literary structures central to late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century thought and convention, such as a preoccupation with the loss of religious faith and with lost love, and the rigid structuring of long lyrical poems in regular alexandrines. However, a departure from the traditions of Romanticism can be seen in the writing and publication of short stories. Although Romantic writers had produced shorter-length narratives, Villiers broke new ground in this area, in his honed craftsmanship, and in the satire he employed.

The publication of short stories became an increasingly common occupation for writers during the nineteenth century. This was very much linked to the rise in production and distribution of newspapers and periodicals. Literature is not exempt from the effect of changes in the scientific, social, and political spheres, and the growth of the newspaper industry demonstrates this well. Improvements in publishing equipment, beginning with the invention of the rotary press in 1846, effectively meant that greater numbers of texts could be published.¹ Industrialization and the resulting urbanization also had an impact on literary trends, since there were more people in cities, hence facilitating a wider possible distribution of texts. An increase in levels of literacy also increased readership numbers, while a change in censorship legislation in 1868 meant that writers could express their views with more artistic freedom. All of these factors encouraged a rapid growth in the press industry. Many periodicals and newspapers had a short life span, but the sheer volume of publications produced meant that the gap they left was quickly filled.

¹ See Patrick Brantlinger, 'Mass Media and Culture in *fin-de-siècle* Europe', in *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy*, ed. by Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 98-114 (p. 104).

The periodical became a meeting-ground for those of like mind to publish, exchange and respond to each others' ideas. Villiers began to write in the French press in December 1859, the same month which marked the publication of his *Premières Poésies*. These first pieces were musical reviews which were printed in *La Causerie*, edited by Victor Cochinat, from whom he was to receive favourable critical appraisals of his first collection of poems.² The first of Villiers's tales to be published was 'Claire Lenoir', which appeared from 13 October to 1 December 1867 in the weekly periodical that he himself co-edited, *La Revue des lettres et des arts*. 'L'Intersigne' followed soon after. It was published from 8 December 1867 to 12 January 1868, also in *La Revue des lettres et des arts*, and 'Azraël' was published on 29 June 1869 in *La Liberté*.

Villiers continued to write short stories during the 1870s, which was a time when his family commitments were increasing. On 13 August 1871, the family benefactress aunt Kérinou died, leaving Villiers bereft financially with the additional burden of helping to support his ageing parents. By 1880, he was living with a common-law wife, Marie Dantine. She had a son, Albert, by a previous marriage, and another boy, Victor, was born to Villiers on 10 January 1881. The writer's mother passed away in April 1882, leaving him responsible for his senile and increasingly troublesome father, who died on 1 December 1885. These increased obligations meant that a greater degree of financial responsibility fell on Villiers's shoulders, and the publication of short stories became a relatively easy way for him to earn money. His productivity greatly increased in direct proportion to his need.

There was an increase in the numbers of Symbolist and other avant-garde publications in the 1880s, which meant that Villiers had a greater opportunity to be published in a press which was favourably disposed towards his satirical and illusionist

² Villiers published '*Herculanum* de Félicien David à L'Opéra' on 1 December 1859, and '*Il Trovatore* au théâtre Italien' on 18 December 1859, both in *La Causerie*.

philosophy and style. However, also by the early 1880s, even the larger newspapers such as *Le Figaro* were willing to print his short stories.³ It was certainly a more stable occupation than writing dramas which were seldom guaranteed to be performed. Even when they did appear on stage, they were often not well received either by the critics or the public.⁴

The measure of success which Villiers experienced with his short stories, and their accelerated rate of production, are reflected in the increasingly rapid compilation of collections of his work. The *Contes cruels* were the first tales to be published collectively, in February 1883. There were twenty-eight pieces of writing in this collection, whose composition spanned some fifteen years. The next collection, entitled *L'Amour suprême*, appeared in 1886. It contained thirteen tales, which had been written within the preceding three years. *Tribulat Bonhomet*, a collection of stories including 'Claire Lenoir' and other extracts centred around this arch-bourgeois figure, emerged from the presses in May 1887. *Histoires insolites*, a collection of twenty pieces, was published in February 1888, while the *Nouveaux Contes cruels*, comprising eight tales, appeared only nine months later in November 1888. Finally, *Chez les passants*, containing seventeen pieces of work, some tales, some journalistic articles, were published posthumously in February 1890. Other short compositions remaining unpublished at Villiers's death are gathered together at the end of the Pléiade edition of his complete works.⁵

It is ironic that until recently, it was for these tales that Villiers was best known as a writer. Although he was a prolific short-story writer, he wished to be known first and foremost as a dramatist, and not as a *conteur*. In fact, it seems that he held his short

³ Villiers collaborated on *Le Figaro* from April 1883 until August 1889. He also wrote regularly for *Gil Blas*.

⁴ For example, see Raitt's *Life of*, p. 103, which recounts the failure of *La Révolte* in May 1870 after only five performances. Although some critics wrote favourably of the play, most did not, and it was also misunderstood by the theatre-going public.

stories in relatively low esteem. Alan Raitt observes in *The Life of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam* that Villiers did not place as much importance on his *contes* as on his longer pieces of work,⁶ and Michelet quotes him in *Figures d'évocateurs* as exclaiming in reference to *L'Amour suprême*: 'Bah! des anecdotes!'.⁷

However, there is real worth in these shorter compositions. At the publication of the *Contes cruels*, Mallarmé wrote in excitement to Villiers: 'Tu as mis en cette œuvre une somme de Beauté, extraordinaire. La langue vraiment d'un dieu partout! Plusieurs des nouvelles sont d'une poésie inouïe et que personne n'atteindra: toutes, étonnantes. [...] Ah! mon vieux Villiers, je t'admire!'.⁸ In his short stories, Villiers has laid out in a concise and accessible form his views on subjects such as modern life and politics, and on topical issues such as the use of the guillotine, which he strove to put forward in his dramas and novels. The collections of tales can therefore form a complementary backdrop to these longer works.

The short stories were also ground on which Villiers could develop his linguistic prowess. Perhaps it was their relatively short length, coupled with the underlying seriousness of the message or effect that Villiers wished to convey, that rendered evident the author's inventive mastery and manipulation of language in the tales, which are full of puns and word games. At times there is a great mix and confusion of authorial and characters' voices, so that the reader is at once kept interested and disconcerted: 'Yet every tale, whether it be sad or gay, mocking or serious, disturbs and disorientates the reader.'⁹

⁵ See *OC* II, 701-847 (especially pp. 701-35).

⁶ Raitt, *Life of*, p. 259

⁷ Victor-Émile Michelet, *Figures d'évocateurs* (Paris: Figuière, 1913), p. 225, cited in *OC* II, 1019.

⁸ Mallarmé, *Correspondance*, ed. by H. Mondor & J.-P. Richard for first vol, and H. Mondor & L. J. Austin for following vols, 11 vols, (Paris: Gallimard, 1959-1985), II (1965), 239 (20 March 1883). Cited in *OC* I, 1260.

⁹ Raitt, *Life of*, p. 250.

Villiers also developed meta-textual relationships involving characters and language, and there are links between the short stories and some of the longer works which Villiers considered to be of more literary value. For example, at the start of 'Le Traitement du docteur Tristan' (*Contes cruels*), an 'Ève-nouvelle' is listed among other examples of the marvels of modern science. It is described as a 'machine électro-humaine (presque une bête!...), offrant le clichage du premier amour, – par l'étonnant Thomas Alva Edison, l'ingénieur américain, le Papa du Phonographe' (I, 730). This creation is obviously a prototype for the android produced by Villiers's fictional Edison in his novel *L'Ève future*.

Bourgeois turns of phrase are also produced and reproduced by various characters throughout the tales, novels, and dramas. For example, Alicia Clary in *L'Ève future* bears a strong relation to bourgeois previously introduced to the reader in the tales. Alicia tells a sceptical Edison, 'D'ailleurs, ma devise est: "Tout pour l'Art!"' (I, 961), while in 'Le Traitement du docteur Tristan', the narrator recounts, 'Le traitement du Dr Chavasses est *tout* rationnel; sa devise est: "Tout pour le Bon-Sens et par le Bon-Sens!"' (I, 731). These links help to place the tales within the context of Villiers's other work, suggesting that their value lies not just in themselves as isolated pieces, but also as sources of reference for longer texts.

The genres which feature in these collections are many and varied. Bertrand Vibert divided the *Contes cruels* into four generic classes: 'Contes et nouvelles', 'Poèmes en prose', 'Fantaisies', and 'Chroniques'.¹⁰ William Conroy Jnr has also attempted to classify the tales of the 1870s, which he sees as including satiric tales, tales of mystery provoking terror and suspense, poetic tales set in an earlier historic period, and 'a few stories defying easy classification'.¹¹ Later collections included historical

¹⁰ Bertrand Vibert, 'Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et la poétique de la nouvelle ou comment lire les *Contes cruels*?', in *Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France*, 4 (1998), 569-82 (p. 574).

¹¹ William T. Conroy Jnr, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), p. 82.

accounts, character sketches, and journalistic articles. One of the linking features between these different genres, however, is the recurrence of the theme of death. This often occurs along with an imaginative exploration of the supernatural, and a strong critique of the bourgeois and their lifestyle. Indeed, Villiers often uses a presentation of the supernatural, coupled with a sharp reminder of the reality of death, in order to provoke some kind of reaction on the part of his bourgeois character, or indeed, his bourgeois reader.

After examining the relationship between Villiers and the American short-story writer Edgar Allan Poe, this chapter looks at what exactly the bourgeois represented for Villiers. I also seek to establish how the theme of death is presented in the short stories, and how this relates to the image of the bourgeois and the idea of loss. The play *La Révolte* is referred to in the last section because of its relevance to the question of the danger of the bourgeois.

2.1 Villiers and Poe

In her essay on literature and life in *fin-de-siècle* England, Alison Hennegan argues that from 1880 to the end of the century, the short story was to become one of the most important forms of writing both in England and in France.¹² There were many French literary men and women who experimented with short-story writing in the nineteenth century, among them Balzac, Gautier, Mérimée, Sand, and most notably Maupassant. Tales produced by the German author and musician E. T. A. Hoffmann also became popular after their publication in France in the early eighteen-hundreds.

However, the literary figure who had the greatest influence on the composition of Villiers's *contes* was not in fact French or German, but American. Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) is best known for his short stories, though he did also write poetry, such as 'The Raven' (1845) and 'Annabel Lee' (1849). It is Baudelaire who is best known for French translations of his work, although others were also involved in bringing Poe into the French language. Victor Meunier's wife Isabelle was among the first with *The Black Cat* published 27 January 1847 in the socialist *Démocratie Pacifique*. Other French writers, among them Mallarmé, were to render their own translations of Poe's work, while artists like Odilon Redon and Édouard Manet demonstrated a direct inspiration, fuelling nineteenth-century theories of the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*.¹³

Critics are unanimous in their opinion that it was from Baudelaire that Villiers first gained his enthusiasm for Poe.¹⁴ Villiers did not know enough English to be able to read the original texts, and so must have approached them in translation. This would

¹² Alison Hennegan, 'Personalities and Principles: Aspects of Literature and Life in *fin-de-siècle* England', in *Fin de Siècle and its Legacy*, ed. by Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 170-215 (p. 173).

¹³ Mallarmé published his translation of Poe's 'The Raven' in May 1875. The text was illustrated with etchings by Manet. See also Odilon Redon's lithographic collection *A Edgar Poe* (1882: Art Institute of Chicago).

¹⁴ See Raitt, *VMS*, p. 87.

very probably mean Baudelaire's translations, due to the high literary esteem in which Villiers held him, though there is no mention of Poe in their correspondence.

There has been much literary criticism produced on the relationship between the work of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam and that of Edgar Allan Poe. Camille Mauclair, Mallarmé, Rémy de Gourmont, Georges Rodenbach, and Gustave Kahn, among others, have all highlighted the link between the Frenchman and his American master.¹⁵ In Huysmans's *À Rebours*, it is after reading 'ces terribles philtres importés de l'Amérique' that des Esseintes addresses himself to Villiers de L'Isle-Adam.¹⁶ This archetypal aesthete notes the literary inheritance of Villiers's 'Claire Lenoir' with regard to Poe's tales: 'ce conte dérivait évidemment de ceux d'Edgar Poe, dont il s'appropriait la discussion pointilleuse et l'épouvante'.¹⁷

It was from Poe that Villiers developed the short-story form. Although other authors had previously written narrative accounts which were short in length, Poe was the first to evolve a theory of short-story writing, based on a consideration of the overall effect it would produce: 'I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*', wrote Poe in his 'Philosophy of Composition', published in 1846.¹⁸ This aim of creating an effect is placed above the teaching of a moral or a lesson.¹⁹ Villiers takes this further and combines both: he often writes his tales in order to produce a single effect, but that single effect is in turn underpinning an underlying moral message.

¹⁵ See Raitt's chapter on Villiers and Poe in *VMS*, pp. 83-100, especially pp. 83-86.

¹⁶ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À Rebours* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1978), p. 216.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

¹⁸ *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. by James A. Harrison, 17 vols (New York: Crowell, 1902), xiv, 193-208 (p. 194). See also Baudelaire's French translation: 'Pour moi, la première de toutes les considérations, c'est celle d'un effet à produire', from 'La Genèse d'un poème', trans. by Baudelaire, in *Œuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire*, ed. by Jacques Crépet, 20 vols (Paris: Conard, 1923-53), viii (1936), 151-77 (p. 161). Vibert refers to this statement by Poe in 'Comment lire', 569-82, (p. 579).

¹⁹ Célestin Pierre Cambiaire, *The Influence of Edgar Allan Poe in France* (New York: Stechert, 1927), p. 167.

From Poe, Villiers also took 'the production of terror by pseudo-scientific means'.²⁰ However, in the same way, Villiers does not present fear for its own sake, as Poe often does: again, the Frenchman uses it most often to demonstrate a philosophical point.²¹ Villiers and Poe are also very much linked by their interest in the supernatural, their relation of this to science, and their preoccupation with the theme of death. It is this theme of death that I will now go on to investigate. However, since it is so much caught up with the presentation of the bourgeoisie in Villiers's tales, it will first of all be useful to identify the social and moral position of the rising middle classes in France in the late nineteenth century.²² This will be done in terms of their relations with aspiring writers and artists in general, and with Villiers in particular.

²⁰ Raitt, *Life of*, p. 66.

²¹ Raitt, *VMS*, p. 89.

²² I am using the term 'middle classes', and also 'middle class', not in the socio-political cultural context of the British twentieth/twenty-first century, but with reference to the bourgeoisie in France in the late nineteenth century. They were also a 'middle class', bridging the gap between the *paysans* and the aristocracy.

2.2 The Bourgeois

One of the results of the nineteenth century's industrial revolution was a rapid urbanization in the industrial centres and capitals of Western Europe. Class barriers were redefined, and a new type of bourgeois emerged across the developing nations. This class was particularly conspicuous in France because of the dramatic fall of the aristocracy, which meant that the bourgeois assumed positions of prominence and importance far more quickly than their European neighbours.

It is easiest, as Priscilla P. Clark, author of *The Battle of the Bourgeois*, has done, to define this social grouping in economic terms.²³ The bourgeois were white-collar workers who organized the production or distribution of goods or services, but who took no part in their manual production. This distinguished them both from the aristocracy, by their direct participation in the economic life of the country, and from the workers, by their non-manual labour.

It was in the eighteenth century that the bourgeois began to be considered in literature. However, this early consideration consisted not so much of a depiction of the bourgeoisie on their own terms, but in relation to the aristocracy. As the bourgeois class grew, however, and as they became the dominant force in the economy, they also in turn became the dominant class in society, usurping the position previously held by those in the upper echelons. Through their economic strength, the bourgeois gained the right to be positively defined in social, political, and cultural terms. By 1830, the bourgeoisie were no longer viewed as resented outsiders, a foil against which to hold a more representative section of acceptable society, but they were rather themselves the

²³ See Priscilla P. Clark, *The Battle of the Bourgeois: The Novel in France, 1789-1848* (Paris: Didier, 1973), p. 20.

legitimate representatives of the populace. This had repercussions not just for the nobility, but also for writers and artists:

Not merely integrated into society, for the writer the bourgeois *was* society. If in the aristocratic Ancien [R]égime the artist was integrated and the bourgeois excluded, the nineteenth century reversed the positions and integrated the bourgeois while excluding the artist. Once criticized in the novel from the vantage point of a superior with whose cultural interests and attitudes the writer largely agreed, the bourgeois was flailed in the nineteenth-century novel from the opposite view, that of a victim.²⁴

Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, last in the line of the prestigious L'Isle-Adam family and aspiring dramatist, can clearly be identified as one such victim of the rise of the bourgeois class. He felt threatened by their ascent in society, and he despised them because their positivist philosophy was wholly opposed to his idealism. The hatred of this group of people was an inheritance from the Romantic generation:

Sans doute, l'exécration du 'bourgeois' obtus et borné, véritable primate de l'histoire naturelle romantique; le mépris pour le 'philistin' méfiant, positif, et croquesou, ne constituent point alors une originalité. C'était même un article de foi des romantiques.²⁵

César Graña also notes the strong links between the fiery passion and zeal of Romantic literature and a dismissal of the mediocrity of the bourgeois in his study on the bohemian and the bourgeois:

²⁴ Clark, *Battle/Bourgeois*, p. 27.

²⁵ Jacques-Henry Bornecque, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam: créateur et visionnaire, avec des lettres et documents inédits* (Paris: Nizet, 1974), p. 58.

Romantic literature glorified strong passions, unique emotions, and special deeds. It despised normalcy, foresight, concern with customary affairs, and attention to feasible goals – everything of which the middle class was a daily example. [...] The bourgeoisie represented ambition without passion, possessiveness without depth of desire, power without grandeur, everything that was spiritually paltry and anti-vital, everything that was inadequate and pettily self-protective, in a psychological and even a biological way. Greed was bourgeois, but so were carpet slippers and head colds.²⁶

Villiers de L'Isle-Adam despised the spiritual and moral lack of depth, as well as the overall inadequacy of the bourgeois, both as an aristocrat and as an artist. As an aristocrat, he bore a grudge against the bourgeoisie in terms of power and prestige. The rise of the middle classes into the realms of political power was another nail in the coffin of Villiers's glorious aristocratic heritage: 'The bourgeois deranged the habits, the attitudes, the preconceptions of a culture which glorified the past and adjusted with difficulty to the present.'²⁷ The bourgeois owned the present, while the nobility had lost the reins of power and glory. This may help to explain the emphasis on timeless settings, and a leaning towards the past in Villiers's works, exemplified in the feudal atmosphere of *Axël*.

An aristocratic disdain of this lower class would have been ingrained in Villiers's psyche from birth, and it formed part of his family background. Indeed, when the writer became unofficially engaged to Estelle Gautier in 1866, his parents refused to sanction the proposed marriage, and his aunt Kérinou threatened to cut him off financially. This was because his fiancée was the illegitimate daughter of a singer and a writer, and hence belonged to a lower social stratum than the Villiers family.²⁸

²⁶ César Graña, *Bohemian versus Bourgeois: French Society and the French Man of Letters in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), pp. 68-69.

²⁷ Clark, *Battle/Bourgeois*, p. 30.

²⁸ See Raitt, *Life of*, pp. 62-63.

Villiers, however, saw the bourgeois not just in class terms, but as representing a potentially universal state of being which transcended social divisions: 'Je hais le bourgeois, mais le bourgeois dont je parle, j'en trouve autant sous la blouse que sous les noms les plus illustres du monde' (II, 1001). Indeed, the whole social structure of society was re-interpreted by men of letters. Their own values were exalted to new levels of importance, and a new elite emerged: 'It was [a new social order] of a hierarchical world resting on the discipline established by reverence to intelligence and to the spiritual poise and aesthetic and moral superiority of a new aristocracy – themselves.'²⁹

As an artist, Villiers reckoned himself to be morally superior to the bourgeois on four main counts. Firstly, his scorn for them stemmed from a disdain of the mundane and common, and his frustration with the reading and publishing world with which he dealt, in that it would not recognize, or only grudgingly so, his literary genius. George Moore wrote of Villiers: 'He has no talent whatever, only genius, and that is why he is a *raté*.'³⁰ Peter Bürgisser has also noted this problem which was fundamental to the acceptance of Villiers's works: 'Car si Villiers a beaucoup de génie, trop de génie peut-être, il n'a aucun talent: or, dans le monde, c'est le talent qui fait le succès du génie.'³¹ Indeed, genius was not recognized as a positive attribute in the nineteenth century. Shearer West's study of the period indicates that the nineteenth-century psychologists Moreau de Tours and Cesare Lombroso both argued that genius was merely a symptom of insanity.³² Villiers however despised those without a vital spark of creativity, who viewed their talent only as a means of earning money, like Alicia Clary in *L'Ève future*,

²⁹ Graña, *Bohemian/Bourgeois*, p. 69.

³⁰ George Moore, *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 7, cited in Raitt, *VMS*, p. 38.

³¹ Peter Bürgisser, *La Double Illusion de l'Or et de l'Amour chez Villiers de L'Isle-Adam* (Berne: Lang, 1969), p. 11.

³² See Shearer West, *Fin de siècle* (New York: Overlook Press, 1994), p. 64.

whose voice, 'épandant son enchantement d'or sur toute syllable, n'[était] qu'un instrument vide: c[était], à sons sens, un gagne-pain' (I, 802).

A second area in which Villiers vehemently reproached the bourgeois was in their deliberate and sustained ignorance of what he considered to be the major questions of life, including the question of what happens after death. Villiers felt that the middle classes in France were so preoccupied with the pettiness of worldly and financial worries that they had no time, energy, or even inclination to devote to more serious philosophical issues. One of Villiers's main purposes in writing was to raise awareness of the necessity to consider these questions.

Thirdly, and linked to this second point, is the fact that Villiers felt frustrated that many bourgeois avoided showing their true feelings, but hid behind a protective mask of the expected norm. Alan Raitt, in his biographical account of Villiers's life, writes that 'one of Villiers's regular complaints against the bourgeois mentality was that it was deeply afraid of genuine emotion'.³³ Seemingly contradictory to this statement is the claim made by Anne Le Feuvre in her study *La Poétique de la récitation* that Villiers disliked the direct expression of emotion, and preferred silence as a means of communication.³⁴ However, speech itself can often act as a mask, hiding deeply hidden sentiment. The words people say can become so clichéd that they are rendered powerless and inane. This is the experience of the deaf female character of 'L'Inconnue' (*Contes cruels*) who anticipates all that her admirer wants to say to her. This can be contrasted with Maximilien de W***'s refusal to express fully in speech his feelings before the emotional flippancy of his lover Lucienne Émery in 'Sentimentalisme' (*Contes cruels*). She does not hesitate to express her erroneous appraisal of his artistic temperament as being cold to personal sentiment. She leaves

³³ Raitt, *Life of*, p. 148.

³⁴ Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 154.

him for another man, and that evening, Maximilien commits suicide: his silence is a more dignified expression of the deeper emotions of which he is possessed.

Lastly, Villiers nurtured a deep resentment and hatred of the bourgeois because of his dependence on them as a writer. In the age of industrialization, the rising bourgeoisie also became a growing consumer class. Apart from being consumers of luxury goods and utility products, the middle classes were also now consumers of pieces of writing, whether they appeared in books, or were printed as articles, short stories or serialized novels in newspapers and periodicals. Literature had become a commodity, a marketable product like any other.

A Marxist critique of nineteenth-century consumerism would highlight an ever-growing split between the consumer and the producer.³⁵ Although this is usually related to utility products and luxury goods, it can also be applied to literature: a growth in bourgeois readership led to a split between the reader-consumer and the writer-producer. Authors like Villiers were often *not* writing for their ideal reader or ideal consumer, that is, an artist sharing the same world views as themselves. They were in fact caught in a vicious circle, writing to please people for whom they felt no natural affinity, in order to continue making a living.

Villiers felt great frustration at poets who wrote in order to please the general public, often in opposition to the standard which governed his own view of artistic integrity. These writers would use facile formulae to appeal to the common sentiment for financial gain. Villiers derides this style in a short satirical piece, '[Le Talenteux]', which did not appear in any of his collections. The poet/narrator of this piece puts a popular public sentiment into an alexandrine, in order to win acclamation: '*Donnez-moi de l'argent puisque j'aime ma mère!*' (II, 998).

³⁵ See Brantlinger, 'Mass Media/Culture', pp. 98-114 (p. 100).

Yet Villiers could not ignore the monetary power with which the bourgeois were vested, and the fact that he too was in some way dependent on their financial support of what he produced. The large number of his tales which appeared in the French press during his lifetime bears witness to this. However, his abundant use of satire and linguistic games tells a different story: he was at once trying to please his bourgeois readership, while at the same time attempting to undermine it. For Villiers, and many others of his generation and temperament, writing became a subversive weapon, carrying its own encoded language:

Pure intellectual symbolism was to take the place of the old social symbolism of possessions. In an economically mobile society the intellectual must retain his identity and his position by making ideas inaccessible to the masses. Since goods and even luxuries were now available to them, thought and art should be made rare, precious and, in their own way, expensive.³⁶

The bourgeois for Villiers represented two kinds of loss, relating to his hatred of them. First of all, the rise of the bourgeois class meant the loss of the position in society that the Villiers family had long held. Secondly, the bourgeois vision of the world, a refusal to consider serious issues in life, and an avoidance of feeling or expressing any real emotion, was incompatible with Villiers's philosophical and spiritual vision. This, along with a preoccupation with pecuniary needs and interests, meant for Villiers a loss in society of the idealism for which he strove.

The use of the theme of death in the tales is of paramount importance in highlighting these instances of loss. Villiers shows through the attitude of the bourgeoisie to death that they are out of touch with his kind of spiritual philosophy. Secondly, he attempts to shock the bourgeois, through a direct confrontation with the

reality of death, into a consideration of a wider view of life outside the accumulation of wealth and prestige.³⁷ Thirdly, he shows that because of the deliberate ignorance of the bourgeois in relation to these greater questions, they have in fact entered a state of spiritual death-in-life. Lastly, he warns the reader that this state of spiritual death is dangerous, not just for the afflicted bourgeoisie themselves, but for those around them and in contact with them.

³⁶ Graña, *Bohemian/Bourgeois*, p. 110.

³⁷ C.f. the desire to 'épater le bourgeois', originally attributed to Baudelaire. See *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. by Elizabeth Knowles, 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 57.

2.3 Bourgeois Thoughts on Death

In his study on literature and death, Michel Picard argues that most of the time, when people speak of death, they are in fact talking about something else: 'La "mort" en général, cela n'existe tout simplement pas. Aussi bien, quand on parle d'Elle, parle-t-on à peu près toujours d'autre chose.'³⁸ Often, when death is spoken of, it is to life that the speaker is referring. This may either be the life a person now deceased had led, the possibility of life after death, or indeed, the possibility that there is no afterlife. Villiers felt deeply the necessity for a serious philosophical consideration of these latter two hypotheses, either that there is life after death, or that there is not. This stemmed primarily not from deep-rooted religious concerns, but because a discussion of this nature would allow for an acknowledgement of the existence of a spiritual world, something in which he strongly believed. However, he saw the bourgeoisie as a group of people who sought to ignore just such a serious consideration of the question of death, hence denying the possibility that there could be more to life than the mundane and ordinary. As Léon Bloy affirmed in his re-appraisal of Villiers's work: 'Le Bourgeois, le "Tueur de cygnes", ainsi que le nommait notre poète, n'aime pas qu'on lui rappelle le cimetière. Il n'est pas lyrique, lui, il ne rêve pas, il ne croit pas qu'on se réveille dans les sépulcres.'³⁹ For those who seek to make money and better themselves, whose goal is earthly comfort and the accumulation of material possessions, death is one of the first issues to be swept metaphorically under the carpet, since 'la mort nous fait douter de la raison d'être de l'être, et tôt ou tard chuchote à l'oreille de l'homme: *A quoi bon?*'⁴⁰

³⁸ Picard, *Littérature/mort*, p. 187.

³⁹ Léon Bloy, 'La Résurrection de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam', in *Œuvres de Léon Bloy*, 7 vols, ed. by Joseph Ballery and Jacques Petit ([Paris]: Mercure de France, 1963-75), iv (1965), 315-28 (p. 321). 'La Résurrection/Villiers' was first published in 1906.

⁴⁰ Jankélévitch, *La Mort*, pp. 71-72.

However, Villiers shows in his writing that he perceived there to be an inherent and close connection between a person's quality of life and their attitude towards death. In the tale 'L'Élu des rêves', the main protagonist scorns the fear and mediocrity of his two friends who warn him not to go to the aid and comfort of a dying man heard through the door. After helping the invalid, the poet then becomes his heir, acceding to a vast fortune which allows him to follow his dreams and settle in a castle-like palace in India. At one point in the tale, he asks of his former friends:

De quelle utilité, pour ce moribond, ces deux farceurs ont-ils été?... D'aucune.
C'était bien la peine de se moquer de mon rêve, pour aller s'effrayer d'une
ombre, et revenir du Réel en se bouchant le nez! (II, 710)

As this short story shows, Villiers felt that touching death was to touch reality: an awareness of death led to a deeper sense of the value of life. In *Isis*, the young novelist wrote that:

La vie importante est celle dont les actions ne troublent pas notre dignité,
renforcent le sentiment sublime de notre espérance, nous donnent la sérénité
intérieure et nous autorisent, par cela même, à prendre confiance dans la mort.
(I, 112)

Therefore, Villiers felt that it was important to live one's life in the knowledge of death. In fact, death was intrinsically linked to life, and the way a person conducted their earthly affairs. Claire Lenoir could not take confidence in death, because, having been unfaithful to her husband in life, she had not found his forgiveness before he died.

It is precisely for this that Villiers rebukes the bourgeois mentality, since it refuses to think directly about death, its consequences, and its implications for life.

Martin Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, notes the ‘temptation to cover up from oneself one’s ownmost Being-towards-death’, or in other words, to deny death:

This evasive concealment in the face of death dominates everydayness so stubbornly that, in Being with one another, the ‘neighbours’ often still keep talking the ‘dying person’ into the belief that he will escape death and soon return to the tranquillized everydayness of the world of his concern.⁴¹

This evasion of death has a negative effect on a person, since it ‘alienates Dasein from its ownmost non-relational potentiality-for-Being’,⁴² thus rendering it an ‘inauthentic Being-towards-death’.⁴³ Though Heidegger does not label this alienated and inauthentic Dasein ‘bourgeois’, it is clear that his description of this being caught in ‘everydayness’ fits Villiers’s own conception of the mediocre and inane bourgeois.

A person’s attitude to death, and the impact that this has on their life, can be seen as a defining aspect of their character. In his *Pensées éparses*, Villiers wrote: ‘Je me fous de la littérature. Je ne crois qu’à la vie éternelle’ (II, 1005). For Villiers, death is a central concern and a unifying theme in his work. However, the bourgeoisie do not regard death in the same light at all. When they do consider it, it is seen as an inconvenience, as in ‘L’Inquiéteur’ (*Histoires insolites*), and as such must be overcome by human ingenuity or positivist science. At other times, the middle classes reduce death to terms they understand, such as monetary concerns.

The bourgeois fear of expressing genuine emotion helps to explain why death was avoided or sanitized in thought or conversation by the white-collar middle class. The results of unchecked grief and a bourgeois reaction to it are effectively demonstrated in the tale ‘L’Inquiéteur’. Here, death is seen as an inconvenience to the

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 297.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 298.

smooth running of modern life. The tale is written from the point of view of an 'homme du siècle', who describes the recent outbreak of 'une sorte de courant de nervosisme-élégiaque pénétr[ant] les tempéraments' caused by 'une véritable épidémie de sensibilité' (II, 323). Newspapers report that husbands and lovers are finding themselves 'annihilés par l'émotion jusqu'à se laisser choir dans la fosse de leurs chères défunes' (II, 323). This state of affairs threatens 'le bon ordre et les convenances' of the bourgeois (II, 323).

The tale then describes the more specific circumstances surrounding M. Juste Romain, founding president of the 'Académie libre des Innovateurs-à-outrance' (II, 323). This society had attempted to rectify the situation by inventing a machine for burying people mechanically, rather than by hand. However, after five months of conjugal bliss, M. Juste Romain himself has just lost his wife. The tale follows the inventor/entrepreneur as he takes part in his spouse's funeral procession, where he himself nearly succumbs to a display of wild and passionate grief. However, just at the critical moment, a young man of around twenty appears, inconsolable and also in mourning dress. At first, Romain thinks this is a young relative of his late wife, but he eventually surmises that he had been her lover. From then on, Romain maintains his composure.

When he arrives home, a letter is awaiting him from the director of Funeral Services, explaining that the young man at the graveside was an 'inquiéteur', hired to divert attention and grief away from mourning spouses. At first, after resigning from the Académie libre des Innovateurs-à-outrance, Romain wishes to challenge both the Director of Funeral Services and the Minister of the Interior to a duel. However, the tale ends with the rhetorical question, 'Mais le temps et la réflexion n'arrangent-ils pas

⁴³ Ibid., p. 303.

toutes choses?', and the reader is left to surmise that after some thought on the matter, the widower actually approved of the intervention of the 'inquiéteur' (II, 328).

The inconvenience of mourning has been quashed by the disquieting appearance of the young man who leads the emotional widower to question the cause of his grief, and to allow an equilibrium of good sense to return. However, Villiers as author can himself be seen as an 'inquiéteur', in exactly the opposite sense.⁴⁴ He portrays scenes which are out of the ordinary, in order to encourage his bourgeois readers to look away from the mundane, the Heideggerian 'everydayness', and to allow themselves to be genuinely stirred by their own emotion. Hence they will participate more fully in 'real life', as they shed their protective emotional mask.

'L'Inquiéteur' describes the application of human ingenuity to the occurrence of death. However, the unwanted results of grief can also be overcome by science. 'L'Appareil pour l'analyse chimique du dernier soupir' (*Contes cruels*) describes the marvellous invention of professor Schneitzoëffer (junior) of Nuremberg (Bavaria) which allows children to grieve for their parents without pain:

Heureux siècle! – Au lit de mort, maintenant, quelle consolation pour les parents de songer que ces doux êtres – trop aimés! – ne perdront plus le temps – le temps, qui est de l'argent! – en flux inutiles des glandes lacrymales. (I, 670)

This tale exhibits the skill of Villiers's satire, as he enthusiastically adopts the voice of a thoroughly modern positivist: the narrator adopts as a motto in every circumstance, 'Du calme! – Du calme. – Du calme' (I, 671). However, the underlying ridiculous and slightly disconcerting nature of children measuring the chemical content

⁴⁴ C.f. the title of Bertrand Vibert's study *Villiers l'inquiéteur*.

of their parents' breath as they sleep, in preparation for the drawing of their final breath, is evident. Science is seen to be triumphing over natural human emotion.

In 'Le Jeu des Grâces' (*Histoires insolites*), however, death is reduced by the bourgeois to monetary terms. Madame Rousselin is a beautiful widow, a 'perle bourgeoise', who had loved her husband (II, 249). Every fortnight, she and her children go to hang funeral wreaths at his tomb. However, Madame Rousselin soon notices how quickly these wreaths wither, and couples this observation with a note of their expense. Since she is a 'femme d'ordre, chez qui le sentiment n'excluait pas le très légitime calcul d'une ménagère', she buys a few dozen artificial rings of flowers for her husband's grave (II, 250). These wreaths are 'inoxydables, obtenues par le procédé galvanoplastique, résistantes même à l'oubli' (II, 250). The bourgeois common sense of order and moderation has therefore won over sentimental feelings, and this is put forward as an example of 'la sentimentalité moderne' (II, 251).

The bourgeoisie thus did not see death in the same light as Villiers, and as such were the objects of his satirical scorn. However, he was unwilling to allow matters to remain as they were, and used the theme of death in his tales in order to provoke a reaction to it.

2.4 Shocking the Bourgeois with Death: The Macabre

Apart from subtly undermining the bourgeois in the tales with his biting satire, Villiers uses another and more direct means to shake his enemy from his position of complacency: in several instances, Villiers confronts the bourgeois with the stark and often macabre reality of death. He opposes culture (the bourgeois) with nature (death), in the hope that culture may lose its protective artificiality and be reconciled with the truth of its reality. He chooses death as the theme to use for this task, since it is a universal phenomenon, which at times brings fear and a sense of the mystery of the unknown: 'Mais c'est surtout quand le bourgeois se trouve en présence de la mort qu'il perd tout contrôle, puisque la mort le met dans l'impossibilité de nier l'existence d'un autre monde.'⁴⁵ Alicia Clary's reaction to death is typical of that of the bourgeois class: 'Le phénomène de la Mort la choque beaucoup. Cela, par exemple, lui semble un excès qu'elle ne comprend pas: cela "ne lui paraît plus de notre temps". Voilà l'ensemble de ses "idées mystiques"' (I, 812).

Villiers presents a confrontation between a bourgeois and the frightening reality of death in the tale 'Les Phantasmes de M. Redoux' (*Histoires insolites*). Redoux is described as a fairly typical middle-class business and family man. He had been a mayor in 'une localité du Centre', and was to go on to occupy a position in a government Chamber (II, 262). However, Redoux, in spite of his outstanding bourgeois credentials and social position, is not free from troublesome thoughts and fantasies:

[II] n'échappait cependant pas plus que d'autres, lorsqu'il était seul et s'absorbait en soi-même, à la hantise de certaines phantasmes qui, parfois, surgissent dans les cervelles des plus pondérés industriels. Ces cervelles, au

⁴⁵ Raitt, *VMS*, pp. 173-74.

dire des aliénistes, une fois hors des affaires, sont des mondes mystérieux,
souvent même assez effrayants. (II, 262)

However, since M. Redoux wanted on no account to experience in reality what he sometimes imagined, he followed a strict diet, which especially prohibited him from consuming excessive amounts of alcohol. This aided him in an avoidance of the realization of his secret desires. He also quickly dissipated these thoughts 'lorsque la moindre incidence de la vie réelle venait, de son heurt, le réveiller' (II, 262). Redoux's idea of 'la vie réelle', the world of business, differed from Villiers's conception of reality, which included the possibility of spirituality.

On the evening in question in the tale, Redoux was in London, and had just concluded an advantageous deal with a merchant. Perhaps this was why he did not notice the effect that the port, sherry, ale, and champagne were having on his emotional balance, encouraging him to follow his feelings instead of repressing them. On his way home, Redoux ventured into Madame Tussaud's, the famous waxwork museum. There, in the middle of a raised platform dominating the Chamber of Horrors, was the guillotine allegedly used in the execution of the French king Louis XVI. Redoux felt an immediate sympathy for the 'roi-martyr' (II, 263). After discovering that the person to whom he had been unburdening his sympathetic feelings was in fact a waxwork, Redoux is inspired to pretend that he too is a 'faux-passant', in order that he might stay in the museum overnight (II, 265).

When he is alone in the museum, he allows the full force of his sentiment to flow. Tears roll down his cheeks as he pictures the scene. The cruelty of Villiers's biting satire is made manifest as he presents Redoux aligning himself with the unfortunate king: 'Un père de famille ... en comprend un autre! ... Ton forfait ne fut que d'être roi ... Mais, après tout, moi, JE FUS BIEN MAIRE!' (II, 265). It is of course

ridiculous to compare an executed eighteenth-century monarch with a comfortable and successful nineteenth-century businessman, even if he had been a mayor. Villiers is highlighting the misplaced and audacious pride which he saw in the rising middle classes. He is also demonstrating his aristocratic, royalist sympathies.

However, the deceased king has his revenge, as a movement of Redoux causes a mechanism in the guillotine to click into place, and he is caught, unable to move, convinced that the blade could descend at any moment. His hair and beard whiten, and he ages by ten years overnight. When he is found in the morning by the museum staff, he learns that the blade had been removed for further restoration, and that he could quite easily have freed himself from the position in which he was held.

However, instead of seeking to reflect deeply on this experience, Redoux strongly resists any thought of a possible lesson to be learnt, apart from the fact that he must never again stray from his strict regime. Thoughts of the nearness and the indiscriminate nature of death are far from Redoux's mind, and on his return to Paris, he speaks not a word of his adventures in London. Even when faced quite literally with the possibility of death, so much so that his body displays the physical effects of his ordeal, Redoux returns to his bourgeois lifestyle, and refuses to allow himself to consider again anything out of his ordinary circle of experience.

Apart from using death as a means of provoking the bourgeois, it is also evident that the fatal instant itself held a strong fascination for Villiers. Many of his tales are centred around the use of the guillotine, for example 'Le Convive des dernières fêtes' (*Contes cruels*), 'Le Secret de l'échafaud' (*L'Amour suprême*), and 'Ce Mahoin!' (*Histoires insolites*). Alan Raitt argues that anything which takes away from the majesty of death sends Villiers into a furore,⁴⁶ and his reaction to the modernization of the guillotine demonstrates this. In 'Le Réalisme dans la peine de mort' from the collection

Chez les passants, Villiers vociferously protests against the introduction of the new kind of guillotine, the 'louisette'. This new form of execution had done away with the platform which had previously raised the execution party above the crowd: 'Quoi! plus d'échafaud?... Non. Les sept marches sont supprimées. Signe des temps. Guillotine de progrès' (II, 450). Villiers's nostalgia for a previous era is clearly seen as he laments the fact that an age-old tradition has been rejected due to the dictates of progress: 'Pour lui épargner quelques secondes d'angoisses inutiles, NOUS avons supprimé des marches d'un Moyen Âge aujourd'hui démodé, ce qui réduit la peine au *strict nécessaire*' (II, 451).

Villiers obviously feels that the bourgeois desire to reduce even a guillotine, 'la mort apprivoisée',⁴⁷ to what is *strictly* necessary has serious moral consequences: 'L'ombre que projette cette lame terne sur nos pâleurs nous donne à tous des airs de complices: pour peu qu'on y touche encore d'une ligne, cela va sentir l'assassinat!' (II, 454). In fact, he argues for a total abandonment of this form of death sentence, rather than the enforcement of it in these present circumstances.

The macabre, then, is presented in the tales firstly because of Villiers's own personal attraction to the subject. The use of the guillotine was a topical issue of the day, and it is very likely that much of the author's readership shared his interest in it. However, Villiers primarily attempts to confront bourgeois contentment with macabre situations in order to shock them and to encourage a response. As will be shown in the next section, he felt that the bourgeois were often in a state of emotional and spiritual numbness that was itself akin to a state of death.

⁴⁶ Raitt, *VMS*, p. 205.

⁴⁷ Jean Decottignies, *Villiers le taciturne* (Lille: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1983), p. 90.

2.5 Bourgeois Death

The theme of death in Villiers's tales is not simply a topic of discussion, or a means of shocking delicate and protected sensibilities. He also uses it as a symbol of the loss of a form of spiritual life in the bourgeois soul: he presents the hard-working middle classes as being in a state of living death. Failing to grasp what is not directly in front of them, they no longer seem to seek for anything in life more than money, and a slightly higher position in the social pecking order. Devoid of peripheral vision, they can relate only to concrete reality. This is in direct opposition to people of a more spiritual disposition, who are prepared to accept even what they cannot physically see:

L'homme charnel pense seulement à ce qu'il voit. Mais l'homme profond, voyant les présents, pense aux absents, pense à ce qu'il ne voit pas, et qui n'est pas là, et qui peut-être n'existe absolument pas, voit donc, à sa manière, ce qu'il ne voit pas, voit l'invisible par une vue de l'esprit.⁴⁸

John Milton, presented in Villiers's tale 'Les Filles de Milton' as a symbol of a true artist, cries out that 'entre ces prétendus poètes, je suis comme un vivant parmi les morts!' (II, 705). These 'prétendus poètes' are those who write only empty words with no thought behind them: 'Qu'importe! [...] la pensée seule vivra, – car au fond des choses, il n'y a ni mots ni phrases, ni rien autre chose que ce qui anime ces voiles!' (II, 705). Words are only veils, and if there is no substance, no real thought behind them, then they have no life force, and are themselves merely covering an emptiness or a death inside.

⁴⁸ Jankélévitch, *La Mort*, p. 48.

Thus, the first way in which Villiers exposes the bourgeois soul as being devoid of life is the mindless repetition without substance which can be seen both in their actions and in their words. Michel Picard argues that the automatism of repetition signals a temporal equivalent to the intemporal 'mort-état'.⁴⁹ In other words, gross repetition in the temporal realm, that is, everyday, earthly life, points to a state of death in an intemporal realm, that of the spirit. In this way, people who are given to endless repetition can be seen as being spiritually dead.

In Villiers's tales, the bourgeois are often identified by their repetition of phrases which, because of their familiarity, have lost any sense of meaning. Lord Ewald refers to this phenomenon in relation to Alicia Clary in *L'Ève future*:

C'est un genre de démente qui porte les malades à redire, même pendant le sommeil, des mots d'un aspect 'important' et qui leur semble donner, *par leur seul énoncé*, du 'poids' à la vie. Par exemple, les mots: *sérieux! – positif! – bon sens...* etc., proférés *quand même*, à tout hasard! (I, 809)

The same can be said of the citation and recitation of other people's phrases by the bourgeois. Anne Le Feuvre argues that the bourgeois are machines principally because they recite, and speaks of Tribulat Bonhomet as being afflicted with a citation mania.⁵⁰

The bourgeois are also seen to repeat actions in a machine-like manner, without reflection. Indeed, the applause of a bourgeois audience is replaced with a mechanically reproduced sound in 'La Machine à Gloire'. In a reflective critical work originally published in 1927, René Guénon highlights the link between man and the machines he had invented to improve the quality of his life:

⁴⁹ Picard, *Littérature/mort*, p. 174.

⁵⁰ Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, pp. 125, 123.

En voulant dominer la matière et la ployer à leur usage, les hommes n'ont réussi qu'à s'en faire les esclaves [...]: non seulement ils ont borné leurs ambitions intellectuelles, s'il est encore permis de se servir de ce mot en pareil cas, à inventer et à construire des machines, mais ils ont fini par devenir véritablement machines eux-mêmes.⁵¹

Bourgeois speech and behaviour are therefore seen to have a machine-like 'accablante uniformité', with no room for the unpredictable.⁵² This loss of a creative life force is symbolized by death:

Les morts ne peuvent que répéter indéfiniment pour nous les gestes et les paroles de leur vie; ils ne peuvent pas en inventer d'autres; nous ne pouvons pas les faire sortir du cercle terrifiant, du déjà vu, déjà dit, déjà vécu.⁵³

Therefore, rather than mastering death through scientific instruments and their own ingenuity, the bourgeois have in fact themselves been overcome by it. The narrator of 'A s'y méprendre!' (*Contes cruels*) describes a drizzly November day when he was preoccupied with thoughts of a business meeting he had to attend. While he was sheltering from the rain, he noticed a square building 'd'aspect bourgeois' with 'un certain air d'hospitalité cordiale qui [lui] rasséréna l'esprit' (I, 628). He describes seeing several individuals with fixed eyes, appearing to be in meditation. However, no thought was visible in their gaze, and the narrator came to realize that he was in a house whose hostess herself was Death.

⁵¹ René Guénon, *La Crise du monde moderne* ([Paris]: Idées-Gallimard, 1979), p. 138, cited in Robert Bessède, 'Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et la modernité', in *Continuités et ruptures dans l'histoire et la littérature*, ed. by Michèle Weil, Halina Suwala, and Dominique Triaire (Paris: Champion; Geneva: Slatkine, 1998), pp. 195-205 (p. 196).

⁵² Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 115.

⁵³ Anne Ubersfeld, 'Kantor ou la parole de la mort', in *La Mort dans le texte*, ed. by Gilles Ernst (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1988), pp. 245-63 (p. 258).

When the narrator takes a carriage to the Stock Exchange to attend his meeting, he has the impression that he is entering the same building, housing the same people, with the same vacant expressions on their faces. Just as Milton spoke of the emptiness of words with no thought behind them, the same hypothesis is here being applied to human beings. Hence a link is established between those dead in a physical way, in a morgue, and those dead in the loss of an awareness of conscience and spirituality, in the business world. The narrator concludes that 'certes, pour échapper aux obsessions de l'insupportable conscience, la plupart de ceux qui occupaient la salle avaient, depuis longtemps, assassiné leurs "âmes", espérant, ainsi, un peu plus de bien-être' (I, 630).

If a person has lost the creative life within him or herself which allows them to break out of the monotony of their bourgeois existence, then they are reduced to a repetition of routine and a recitation of dialogue. This means that they are not only in a state of metaphysical death, but also that in order to continue operating, they become like an actor who performs the motions of life, without actually taking pleasure from being alive. Thus, there is a connection established in Villiers's writing between theatricality and a certain mode of bourgeois living:

C'est dire que le théâtre est métaphore et symbole d'une théâtralité générale, dont les effets pourront être observés dans la 'vie' et reversés jusque sur le théâtre lui-même [...]. Comédien, bourgeois: lequel sert de modèle à l'autre? La confusion est soigneusement entretenue par Villiers.⁵⁴

In 'Sombre récit, conteur plus sombre' (*Contes cruels*), an account of a duel is being given during a meal for authors of drama. This tragic tale is listened to, and even told, as if it were a stage production. The narrator, M. D***, had difficulty at first in grasping the reality of the fact that his friend Raoul had requested him to be a second in

a duel: 'Alors, seulement, je m'aperçus qu'il me parlait d'une chose de la vie! De la vie réelle! – Je restai abasourdi' (I, 688).

When Raoul dies, his story-telling friend is completely detached from the tragedy of the situation. Indeed, he cannot restrain himself from clapping at the performance: 'Roide, sans fausse position, – pas de pose! – VRAI, comme toujours, il était là! [...] Je ne savais plus de quoi il était question!!! Je confondais! – J'applaudissais! Je... je voulais le rappeler' (I, 692).

M. D*** cannot relate to this event as if it were real life: he transposes it onto the stage. In fact, he is surprised that he could encounter such dispassionate serenity outside a theatre:

M. de Saint-Sever était, tout bonnement, magnifique. On eût dit qu'il était en scène! Je l'admirais. J'avais cru jusqu'alors qu'on ne trouvait de ces sangs-froids-là que sur les planches. (I, 691)

Villiers is exposing the practice of those dramatists who, instead of gaining inspiration from what one sees in life and adapting it to be shown on stage, are inspired by what is presented in a theatre, and who interpret life according to it. Thus, their lives are devoid of real action and real emotion, as they are living at one step's remove from reality.

A second tale which illustrates this link between an actor, symbol of the bourgeois, and a living death, is 'Le Désir d'être un homme' (*Contes cruels*). This is the tale of Chaudval, a successful thespian, who catches sight of himself in a mirror one night, just as midnight has struck in the Stock Exchange. He notices that he is ageing, and there is a desire in him to 'prendre congé pour toujours' (I, 659). He realizes

⁵⁴ Vibert, *L'Inquiéteur*, p. 164.

however that while he has been acting out human emotions, he has not experienced any genuine sentiment himself:

Voici près d'un demi-siècle que je représente, que je joue les passions des autres sans jamais les éprouver, – car, au fond, je n'ai jamais rien éprouvé, moi.
– Je ne suis donc le semblable de ces 'autres' que pour rire! – Je ne suis donc qu'une ombre? (I, 660-61)

A distinction is clearly made between truly feeling passion and emotion, and merely acting it out. Chaudval questions whether or not he is a ghost, the strong inference being that without the sensation of true and deep emotion, there is no life. Perhaps, then, the bourgeois fear of genuine emotion is actually the fear to live.

Chaudval, however, is determined to experience life in his retirement. He knows that to do this, he must feel some emotion, and chooses remorse. After setting fire to a large apartment block, causing the deaths of several people in it, the actor retreats to a lighthouse of which he has become keeper, looking forward to the feeling of sorrowful regret which he feels sure will soon be coursing through his veins. However, the ghosts which Chaudval hoped to see do not appear, and he dies '*sans comprendre qu'il était, lui-même, ce qu'il cherchait*' (I, 665). Indeed, his first name, *Esprit*, should give the reader a clue as to his fate.

This tale paints the situation of the bourgeois in a bleak light: even an attempt to break out of the death to which the loss in emotional life has led ends in ignorance and failure. However, the final element in this deathly portrayal of the bourgeois is yet more sinister.

2.6 The Bourgeois Causing Death: The Danger of the Bourgeois

The ultimate danger in the bourgeois soul is that apart from being dead itself, it can also so infect the souls of others that they too enter the fatal state of spiritual non-being: the bourgeois can be the cause of death in another person's soul. This can happen both wittingly and unwittingly on the part of the ill-fated middle classes, and Villiers's work provides examples of both.

In the play *La Révolte*, the heroine Élisabeth finds that she has become powerless to appreciate the finer things in life, stifled by four years of marriage to Félix, a businessman who has no other fault than that he is 'sérieux en affaires' (I, 388). However, Villiers's arch-enemy Tribulat Bonhomet is much more sinister. He is a swan-killer, a man who deliberately exterminates these beautiful birds in order to hear their final song. He also proposes the deliberate extermination of all artists by enticing them to stay in an earthquake danger-zone. In the cases of these two eminent bourgeois, Félix and Bonhomet, the men not only embody themselves the kind of bourgeois metaphysical death that Villiers felt was rife in his time, but are also agents of that same death.

La Révolte was completed in 1869, and the first reading that Villiers gave of it was to Richard Wagner and his wife Cosima on 25 July of the same year. This was when he was visiting the German composer along with Catulle Mendès and Judith Gautier on his way to Munich to the Universal Fine Arts Exhibition. The play was first performed to an unappreciative audience on 6 May 1870 at the Théâtre du Vaudeville. It had a warmer reception at the Odéon in December 1896, and in 1914 was added to the repertory of the Comédie-Française.

La Révolte revolves around the characters of Élisabeth and her husband Félix. The drama takes place 'à Paris, dans les temps modernes' (I, 385). Félix is a banker.

He has been married to Élisabeth for four years, and is pleased with the outcome of this match: his fortune has tripled since she has become involved in the business. He displays several characteristics of a thoroughly modern bourgeois. His speech is dotted with a host of bland phrases and idioms, such as 'les affaires avant tout', 'positivement', and 'le Sens-Commun' (I, 389, 392). He also has the bourgeois habit of relating every topic of conversation to money, whether it be, for example, his marriage, the countryside, or the theatre: 'Je ne déteste pas la campagne, une fois le temps. Elle inspire des idées fraîches, souvent lucratives. C'est comme le théâtre' (I, 390).

Élisabeth rebukes him for being immune to a contemplation of the mysteries of the universe, including death: 'Je sais bien que le mystérieux univers ne fera naître éternellement sur vos lèvres qu'un sourire frais et reposé (car rien ne fut jamais triste ou mystérieux pour vous, même la Science, ni même la Mort!)' (I, 397). Félix in fact condemns himself by his own words, for preferring mediocrity to a spirit of adventure: 'Je n'aime pas les montagnes trop hautes, ni dans les personnes ni dans la nature. Je préfère, en toute chose, une modération honnête. Si l'on veut être... sublime... qu'on le soit, du moins, avec discrétion!' (I, 391).

An opposition is therefore established between Félix and his wife Élisabeth. She, at twenty-seven years old, is much younger than he is at forty. She has also retained a strong sense of justice and conscience. This is demonstrated at the start, even before she explains why she is leaving Félix, in her reaction to the repossession of a poor family's furniture. While Félix adamantly states that 'il faut être sérieux en affaires', Élisabeth does not wish to deprive the family of their only possessions (I, 388). She is also careful to leave Félix with exactly the money that is due him: 'En un mot, j'ai payé ma dette sociale' (I, 393). She has been faithful to her husband, and is outraged when he suggests that she is leaving because she has a lover.

Before her marriage, Élisabeth was interested in life beyond the mundane and ordinary, in 'les souffles sacrés de la Vie' (I, 405). She married Félix out of filial duty, and remained with him because of her respect for conjugal fidelity, even when she discovered that he did not relate at all to her ideals. However, as Élisabeth explains her desire to leave, the language she uses in her interpretation of life in this bourgeois milieu is filled with imagery relating to death. She talks of her 'jeunesse assassinée', and of having been 'ensevelie dans ce tombeau' (I, 400, 406). Life with Félix is literally killing her: 'Enfin! J'étouffe ici, moi! Je meurs de mon vivant!' (I, 397). When Félix asks his wife what she wants, she cries out, 'Je veux vivre!' (I, 397).⁵⁵

Élisabeth wishes to leave now in order to put together again the life that she once had: a life that was not weighed down with thoughts of business and money. However, there are strong clues in this first scene that she will not succeed, because she herself seems to have been saturated so deeply with the spirit of death which emanates from Félix: 'Tenez, mon cœur a saigné goutte à goutte tout son amour!... Je suis une morte: je glacerais ma fille en l'embrassant' (I, 402-03). On her return later that night, it is clear that Élisabeth too has succumbed to the same fate as the businessmen in 'À s'y méprendre', that of a living death: 'Trop tard: je n'ai plus d'âme. [...] Enfin, je me trouvais comme les autres!' (I, 405).

It has been too late to flee the pervading and obtrusive force of bourgeois Common Sense, and Élisabeth has lost the access she once had into 'le recueillement sublime' (I, 405). She also no longer understands either art or silence, the silence of expressed emotion: 'Je ne comprends plus les exaltations de l'Art, ni les apaisements du Silence' (I, 406).

⁵⁵ This same cry is uttered by Axël to Maître Janus in *Axël* (II, 632). Though this is spoken in a different context, it shows that the desire for life is a central theme in relation to Villiers's heroes and heroines.

It is her husband Félix who has been the instrument of this death in Élisabeth's soul. She labels him as a 'meurtrier', and exclaims: 'Je suis rivée à un malheureux qui m'a tuée. Le mort a saisi la vivante!' (I, 406). The implications of this statement are clear. Félix was already a 'mort', a person dead to the higher things in life. Though Élisabeth was once a person with ideals and spirituality, the force of death resident in Félix has overcome her.

The weight of the knowledge of Élisabeth's destiny is set against Félix's incomprehension of what has happened this night to his wife. He believes that she has recovered from her bout of madness, and is now won over by Common Sense. Indeed, upon her return, Élisabeth attempts to adopt bourgeois phraseology, though she questions its use, demonstrating her resignation to her status: 'Et quand je pense, mon ami, que je parlais de vous quitter au moment de la balance du semestre!... Enfin, cela n'avait pas le sens commun?' (I, 407).

However, as serious as the consequences of Félix's actions and influence are, there is an impression that his is an unwitting oppression, as there is no direct malice intended on the part of the banker towards his wife. As Bertrand Vibert postulates in his critical edition of *La Révolte*, Félix is not actually bad. He loves his wife, and is not brutal or cynical, but simply mediocre.⁵⁶ However, the same is not true of Tribulat Bonhomet, Villiers's creation embodying the spirit of the bourgeois at its most sinister and dangerous. He is, according to Bornecque,

Le symbole secret et l'inspirateur invisible de ces 'passants' et de ces vibrations humaines que Villiers dénonce: tapi au cœur de chacun et chacune, il incarne le termite du siècle, au profond duquel, jour après jour, et assise après assise, il ronge toute naïve grandeur et tout vrai progrès – aussi acharné à démolir que le

⁵⁶ Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, *La Révolte*, ed. by Bertrand Vibert (Grenoble: Université Stendhal, 1998), pp. 87-88.

protestaire à le combattre jusqu'au bout, dût-il être le seul et le dernier des bouges.⁵⁷

Bonhomet first appeared in the short story 'Claire Lenoir', which was published in *La Revue des lettres et des arts* in 1867. Villiers added to the exploits of this character over the years, with a further three tales associated with him, plus a collection of his sayings and thoughts, in *Tribulat Bonhomet*, which was published in May 1887.

There is a cruelty involved in Bonhomet's persecution of those who do not conform to his sense of 'common sense', which is not seen in Félix. This cruelty is best demonstrated in the tale 'Le Tueur de cygnes' (*Tribulat Bonhomet*). The reader is told that the music of the song of the dying swan alone 'depuis qu'il l'avait entendue, l'aidait à supporter les déceptions de la vie et tout autre ne lui semblait plus que du charivari, du "Wagner"' (II, 133). There is on the surface a difficulty in understanding Bonhomet's appreciation of the song of the dying swans, birds which are likened to the band of artistic creators among whose ranks Villiers was proud to number himself. Could it be that this epitome of the bourgeois soul is underneath actually tuned to the same melodic pulse of inspiration which Villiers longed to hear and to be heard? However, it was in the terror, and the *death* of the swans that Bonhomet delighted: he understood only the 'TIMBRE' of the voices 'qui vocalisaient la Mort comme une mélodie' (II, 136). It was not the beauty of the song itself which attracted Bonhomet, but the reason for it: the death of the swan/artist. This is why he only understands the tone of the voices, because it is one of distress, and of the knowledge of approaching death.

His diligence and carefulness to position himself near the swans, which he knows he is about to provoke to the point of death, is therefore rendered sadistic. He generally takes up to two and a half hours to make the twenty paces to the pond. He

⁵⁷ Bornecque, *Créateur/visionnaire*, p. 114.

then causes ripples to form in the water with infinite care, so that they are enough to cause deep unease, but are of insufficient size to allow the black swan to throw the stone it holds in its beak, which would warn its feathered brothers of the impending danger. The cruelty of Bonhomet is dark and deep, pitted against the swans whose white colour alludes to their innocence:

Mais, en leur délicatesse infinie, ils souffraient en silence, comme le veilleur, – ne pouvant s'enfuir, *puisque la pierre n'était pas jetée!* Et tous les cœurs de ces blancs exilés se mettaient à battre des coups de sourde agonie, – *intelligibles et distincts* pour l'oreille ravie de l'excellent docteur qui [...] se délectait, en des prurits incomparables, de la terrifiante sensation que son immobilité leur faisait subir. (II, 135)

Bonhomet's black humour in the situation is chilling: “Qu'il est doux d'encourager les artistes!” se disait-il tout bas' (II, 135).

This is surely torture, not by hope this time, but by hopelessness.⁵⁸ Indeed, among the sayings of Bonhomet that Villiers leaves to posterity, there is a positivist meditation on the scientific merits of torture: ‘C'est dommage que je n'aie pas vécu pendant qu'on donnait la torture, car en servant la loi, j'eusse fait avancer la Science’ (II, 228). It is clear however in the case of the swans that Bonhomet is not serving Science, but is rather gratifying the desires of the darker side of his own nature as he delights in the death of the artistic soul. His enthusiasm for torturous death is reminiscent of that of Baron Saturne in the tale ‘Le Convive des dernières fêtes’ (*Contes cruels*). The Baron had begun to watch torture scenes in the oriental world, and had become so obsessed by them that it developed into a recognized disease.

⁵⁸ Villiers penned a tale called ‘La Torture par l'espérance’ which features in his *Nouveaux Contes cruels* (OC II, 361-66).

However, Villiers is quick to show that the swan/artists have a moral victory. While Bonhomet is left listening to a melody he does not fully understand, the swans are being released to find a higher destiny: 'Alors, l'âme des cygnes expirants s'exhalait, oublieuse du bon docteur, en un chant d'immortel espoir, de délivrance et d'amour, vers des Cieux inconnus' (II, 135). The swans are experiencing regeneration through death.

'Le Tueur de cygnes' is a metaphoric exposition of Bonhomet's desire for the death of an artist's soul. However, an open demonstration of this can be seen in the next tale in the collection, 'Motion du Dr Tribulat Bonhomet touchant l'utilisation des tremblements de terre'. This short story was inspired by the very topical subject of earthquakes which had struck in northern Italy and the area around Nice in February and March 1887. Bonhomet is first of all outraged by the fact that these natural phenomena are still occurring in a scientific age: 'Comment d'aussi mélodramatiques phénomènes peuvent-ils encore se produire au milieu de nos civilisations constitutionnelles et régulières? Cela ne répugne-t-il pas au Sens-commun!' (II, 138). Indeed, Bonhomet seems to place himself in the role of the Divine in his desire to control the movement of these natural forces: 'Sinon la Science, qui est tout, absolument tout, finirait par ne plus sembler qu'un leurre – nous assimilant, autant dire, à des jouets de la Mécanique-céleste: ce qui est inadmissible' (II, 138).

Bonhomet then goes on to speak of artists, whom he sees as enemies of Progress. While he and others like him offer them rewards of honour and prestige, cover them with gold, and are warm and friendly to them, these actions are not the mirror of their interior thoughts, which are those of scorn and hatred. Bonhomet's solution is to build huge granite edifices on the sites of predicted earthquakes, and invite these dreamers to live there: 'De cette façon, ces périodiques interventions de l'Absurde, ces sursauts des dernières forces aveugles de la Nature seront utilisés et rationalisés' (II, 140).

Bonhomet's goal is to destroy the same passion and sentimentality in people that Villiers sought to inspire in them. In 'Le Banquet des éventualistes', Bonhomet's restrictive philosophy is again brought into play, as he proposes a law allowing music halls and drinking-houses to remain open until 2am. This will mean the dispersal of a threatening revolutionary crowd, and extinguish the danger of anarchists and dynamite:

En quinze années, l'on obtient, ainsi, une exemplaire population de songe-
creux, dont la force morale et physique se dilue, chaque soir, jusqu'aux deux
tiers de la nuit, au milieu d'une brume de nicotine, en vaines et stériles
crispations de poings. (II, 143)

Thus, civil rest and obedience will be guaranteed, along with long-lasting governments.

While Félix in *La Révolte* shows himself to be ignorant of the deathly disease he carries, Tribulat Bonhomet is wholly aware, motivated, and predetermined. Yet Villiers has invested much of himself in this character. He wrote to Mallarmé in 1867, around the time of the publication of 'Claire Lenoir': 'oui, je me flatte d'avoir enfin trouvé le chemin de son cœur, au bourgeois! Je l'ai incarné pour l'assassiner plus à loisir et plus sûrement'.⁵⁹ In incarnating the bourgeois, it seems as if Villiers were enjoying an inversion of his own noble sentiment. This can be seen in a comparison of Villiers's disparagement of the bourgeois expressed in a letter to Mallarmé, and Bonhomet's disregard of artists. In his letter, Villiers reveals his desire to use hypocrisy as a means of undermining the strength of the bourgeois:

Le fait est que je ferai du bourgeois, si Dieu me prête vie, ce que Voltaire a fait
des *cléricaux*, Rousseau des gentilshommes et Molières des médecins. [...] Et

⁵⁹ CG I, 113 (postmarked 27 September 1867).

naturellement, moi j'ai l'air de les aimer et de les porter aux nues, en les tuant
comme des coqs.⁶⁰

However, Tribulat Bonhomet, in his motion concerning the use of earthquakes in the
destruction of artists, also refers to the same two-faced tactic:

Certes, je n'en disconviens pas, nous les décorons [les artistes], nous les
couvrons d'or, nous les rassurons de démonstrations admiratives et chaudement
sympathiques; mais, au fond, nous savons très bien que nous les méprisons et
haïssons comme la boue de nos souliers. (I, 139)

There is something almost sinister about the same metaphorical weapon being used with
so much verve in two such different and opposing sets of circumstances. Anne Le
Feuvre labels Bonhomet as Villiers's 'double noir',⁶¹ and Bertrand Vibert also affirms
the great extent to which the writer was influenced by his creation. With reference to
Bonhomet's 'Profession de foi' (II, 232), Vibert writes: 'Celui qui a pu écrire de
pareilles lignes se savait nécessairement "contaminé" par Bonhomet'.⁶² This
contamination signals a further point of danger in relation to the bourgeois figure: an
unhealthy fascination with him, from which even the author himself was not entirely
free.

⁶⁰ CG I, 99 (postmarked 11 September 1866).

⁶¹ Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 315.

⁶² Vibert, *L'Inquiéteur*, p. 189.

Conclusion

The presentation of the bourgeois in the tales and in *La Révolte* is therefore not at all favourable. Not only are they perceived as being in a state of death themselves, but they are also seen to cause the same kind of death in others. Villiers, however, is intent on manipulating his bourgeois readership. He takes on the voices and personae of enthusiastic bourgeois positivists, in order to ridicule them more effectively. This is best seen in accounts of scientific advancement, such as 'L'Affichage céleste' (*Contes cruels*) and 'Le Traitement du docteur Tristan' (*Contes cruels*). He also aims to shock them through the use of the macabre.

However, modern critics have to question whether or not Villiers was wholly justified in the cruelty of his portrayal of the middle classes contemporary to him. His is a literary exposition, and although he used factual events, like the earthquakes of 1887 which inspired the 'Motion du Dr Tribulat Bonhomet touchant l'utilisation des tremblements de terre' (*Tribulat Bonhomet*), he was not constrained by them. He sees the bourgeoisie as the cause of a reversal of values in society. For example, the prostitute Olympe in 'Les Demoiselles de Bienfilâtre' (*Contes cruels*) almost enters eternal perdition because she has a lover who does not pay her as her clients do. She is therefore neglecting her filial responsibility to earn money to support her ageing parents. Her redemption comes when her lover enters at her deathbed to deliver the money he would have owed her as a client. Similarly, in 'Les Amies de pension' (*Nouveaux Contes cruels*), the prostitute Georgette's relationship with Félicienne's 'ami de cœur' is forgiven when Félicienne discovers that he is paying Georgette (II, 357). In the first tale, love for its own sake is considered a wrongful personal indulgence, while in the second, infidelity does not exist while there is an exchange of funds taking place.

Villiers is surely exaggerating the lowering of moral standards, and the supreme importance placed on the value of money in his day. While his presentation of bourgeois values rings true in part, his aristocratic and artistic prejudice may have led him to treat them more harshly than they deserved. Villiers was part of a vociferous minority of people who were unhappy with much of the social progress of the nineteenth century: 'As living conditions improved for many, others found that life was becoming more difficult. Because the latter were often highly articulate, their views impressed their time – and our memories of it.'⁶³

The rise of the bourgeois class for Villiers meant the loss of his once privileged position in society, and of the possibility of a wide acceptance of his idealistic, illusionist philosophy. Indeed, the very existence of his philosophy of illusionism stems from the fact that Villiers viewed the world with such horror that he felt the need to escape from it. In some ways, the bourgeois were surely used by Villiers as a scapegoat for his failure to find the success he so greatly desired as a dramatist, and for his lack of financial freedom, causing him to be unable to live as he wished. Yet while it is true that the bourgeois did create a climate which was not well-disposed towards Villiers's idealism, the writer himself had his own weaknesses and eccentricities which hindered his professional progress.⁶⁴

The bourgeois incarnated what Villiers most disliked about his century: the elevation of cold reason above the emotions, a detachment from the natural world, and

⁶³ Weber, *France, Fds*, p. 14.

⁶⁴ See e.g. Raitt, *Life of*, p. 179. The following episode took place at a reading of *Le Nouveau Monde* to the manager of a theatre in Bordeaux in August/September 1877:

'With the intention of explaining to Godfrin the arrangement of the setting, he started jumping around the room, knocking over seats, pulling armchairs about, snatching down the swords from a little panoply hanging on the wall and accompanying his wild gestures with a stream of disconnected phrases and incomprehensible words.'

Then he caught sight of the piano, struck a few chords, and started singing and reciting in a sepulchral voice. Godfrin was greatly alarmed at this performance [...]. Villiers then stopped long enough to ask Godfrin if he was following the symbolism, and the manager found the courage to ask him to read more calmly.

Raitt uses and quotes from Pontavice's *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam* ([Paris]: Savine, 1893).

perhaps above all, the reduction of even noble principles, like love and honour, to monetary terms. In his tales, and in the play *La Révolte*, Villiers clearly uses the theme of death, ever-present in his work, to highlight but also to counter-attack the loss of the nobility of position and of spirit which he felt had been incurred. The values of the bourgeois were in direct confrontation with the values of the writer's world. The next chapter of this thesis examines an open revolt and refusal to conform, as characters choose death themselves in order to avoid being polluted by literary brothers and sisters of Tribulat Bonhomet.

Chapter Three

Resistance

Ainsi elle était partie! ... Où donc! ... Vivre maintenant? – Pour quoi faire?... C'était impossible, absurde. (I, 555)

This cry of existential despair is uttered by the comte d'Athol in 'Véra' at the start of Villiers's *Contes cruels*. Athol's wife has died, but instead of accepting her passing, the count resists the knowledge of her death by constructing a world of illusion. Athol thereby demonstrates in part the principle of regeneration through death, as he causes his wife, or rather his memory of her, to live again, thus defying for a time at least the menace of the grave.

As has already been established in relation to the *Premières Poésies*, Villiers wrote about the loss of religious, emotional, and political stability in his time through imagery of death. In his short stories, Villiers observes, berates, and satirizes people whom he felt had succumbed to a form of metaphysical death through their refusal to recognize the impact of these losses that had taken place in society. However, there is evidence of a reaction more favoured by Villiers to the problem of bourgeois death and loss in life in his more lengthy works of literature. These are works in which he more clearly puts forward his own philosophy, and with whose protagonists he more clearly identifies. This reaction to death and loss is that exemplified by the comte d'Athol in 'Véra': resistance.

In the short story 'Claire Lenoir', Claire's husband Césaire puts forward his own views on the topic of life and death:

Ouvrez maintenant les physiologistes : – Bécлар définit la Vie, l'organisme en action, et la Mort, l'organisme au repos. – Le premier mot de Bichat est celui-ci: la Vie est l'ensemble des fonctions qui résistent à la Mort. (II, 194)

Life, then, resists death. This is true both for physical death, as in the case of the comte d'Athol's wife, Véra, and for the metaphysical death of the bourgeois. In both of these cases, while there is death in conformity, inaction, and rest, there is life in resistance. Villiers expected that people who desired to live rather than merely to exist should strive against a mindless acceptance of bourgeois mundanity. His approval of this resistance is echoed in the words of the old and wise duc Forsiani to his young protégé Wilhelm de Strally-d'Anthas in *Isis*: 'Vous vous attendez à des hommes, à des femmes, à des jeunes gens? Ceux qui nient les spectres ne connaissent pas le monde. Mais passons. Vous êtes d'étoffe à résister; cela suffit' (I, 107).

In Villiers's philosophy, there are two possible means of resistance to the absurdity of bourgeois existence, and to the metaphysical death involved in a passive participation in daily life: hedonistic pleasure-seeking, and a solitary, spiritual detachment from the affairs of this world. Thus, the central characters in Villiers's work fall into two distinct camps according to their choice of resistance to bourgeois death. The first group includes those such as Hermosa, Elën, and Morgane, while in the second are numbered Don Juan, Tullia Fabriana, Sione de Saintos, and later, Axël and Sara.

In the conclusion to his study *Le Chrétien malgré lui*, Sylvain Simon also identifies two distinct character types in Villiers's work, relating them to two different facets of the author's own personality:

Il n'y a pas un Villiers, mais deux. De nombreux témoins et critiques, à commencer par Gourmont, avait remarqué chez lui la cohabitation d'un satiriste (railleur, 'exorciste du Réel', ironiste, etc.) et d'un romantique (rêveur, 'porteur de l'Idéal', exalté, etc.).¹

¹ Simon, *Chrétien malgré lui*, p. 234.

Simon's interpretations of the two sides to Villiers and his characters strongly reflect the division of character groupings as I have set them out, according to their chosen means of resistance to bourgeois death. The first side to Villiers is one that seeks out glory and pleasure:

Le premier Villiers est un jeune Prométhée, un don Juan, un Faust: rempli d'un légitime orgueil, il aspire à la gloire, il se sent sûr de lui et dominateur, il rêve de conquérir le trône de la Pensée ou celui du monde [...]. Il veut vivre, et intensément, il veut épuiser les richesses de cette terre, il veut escalader toutes les cimes.²

The second manifests itself in a withdrawal and separation from society at large:

Le second Villiers dédaigne avec mépris ces jouissances tristes et illusives. La condition de l'homme lui paraît misérable, la puissance de Dieu infinie, le progrès humain faux et dérisoire, le mystère de l'être insondable, la mort omniprésente. Il rêve de s'ensevelir dans une retraite solitaire, loin de la tourbe humaine, le cœur humble et les yeux pleins de ciel.³

It is the existence of these two character types, representing two different means of resistance to the death present in bourgeois life, that this chapter seeks to explore. The first type has a passionate drive and zeal for worldly power, pleasure, and success, while the second retreats from the same. The first method of resistance can be labelled 'hedonism', and the second 'claustration'. For the purposes of this study, I look at 'Hermosa' from the *Premières Poésies*, and an early novel entitled *Isis*, while also taking into consideration characters from two middle dramas, *Elèn* and *Le Prétendant*,

² Ibid., p. 236.

³ Ibid., p. 236.

and a short story entitled 'L'Amour suprême'. In each case, I trace how these characters attempt to resist the death-in-life state of the bourgeois, and measure how far they succeed in doing so. This is important because it shows that there was a consistent desire for resistance throughout Villiers's writings, which was, however, not fully realized until Sara and Axël's decision to commit suicide in *Axël*. This chapter provides a contextual background against which to set both Lord Ewald's, and Axël and Sara's decisions for death, which are exposed in later chapters.

3.1 Living Life to the Full: Hedonism as Resistance of Death

Characters who choose a lifestyle of hedonism live life to excess in order to resist the bourgeois death of inaction and passivity in life. They reflect the Promethean side of Villiers's personality, seeking after earthly glory and intensity of living. The first of them is Hermosa, who gives her name to the long lyric poem in Villiers's *Premières Poésies*. Elën and Morgane, main protagonists in the dramas *Elën* and *Le Prétendant* respectively, are also hedonistic heroines.

i. Hermosa

'Hermosa' is one of the most important pieces of writing in Villiers's *Premières Poésies*. Much of its value for the reader, at least in relation to this thesis, lies in the fact that it demonstrates both a hedonistic and a claustral approach to the problem of bourgeois death. This proves that these reactions to life and death, denoting different facets of Villiers's personality, were present even in the work of his youth. This section deals with the character of Hermosa, who represents the choice of hedonistic living.

Hermosa's decision to live life to the full is made immediately after the passing away of her father, and hence it bears a direct reaction to death and the loss incurred as a result of it. Previous to this, Hermosa had abstained from sensual pleasures, refusing to join the villagers in their evening dances. However, she now rejects the offers of help she receives from personified figures of Faith and Virtue, and takes instead the emblem of Sensuality as her own. She therefore directly rejects a life of religious claustration, solitude, and meditation, in favour of a life of hedonism. Her desire is to live before she dies: 'Ne pouvait-elle aussi vivre avant de mourir?' (I, 25). She learns how to shrug her shoulders before the boredom of mundane existence, and lives out her dreams in

defiance of the menace of the grave. Before Axël and Sara reject the possibility of their fantastic voyages, Hermosa has already experienced them in reality with her lover Don Juan:⁴

Ils allaient, sans souci de la fosse profonde,
Épuisant au hasard les bonheurs de ce monde,
Les sources de la joie et de la volupté.
Cadix les vit voguer sur une onde amoureuse,
Puis Gênes la Superbe et Palerme l'Heureuse,
Naples et son golfe enchanté. (I, 28)

Hermosa is mindless of death and of the possibility of an afterlife. Her thinking is wholly based on her sensual, earthbound appetite, and she has no interest in spiritual matters. The description of her existence is one of fantastic disorder, that of 'masques, flambeaux, palais, femmes, fleurs' (I, 29).

With the departure of Don Juan, Hermosa suffers another disappointment in life, similar to the death of her father. However, this merely serves to reinforce the principle of hedonistic self-satisfaction she has chosen. She now rejects all other codes of living except that of seeking for her own pleasure:

Un seul but désormais détermina sa vie:
Épuiser à longs traits les coupes d'ambroise,
Les délires sans freins, les larges voluptés;
Ne chercher dans l'amour aucune autre espérance
Que celle du plaisir, et s'abstraire en silence
Du reste des réalités. (I, 55)

⁴ The *Premières Poésies* were published in 1859, while *Axël*, according to the editors of Villiers's *Œuvres complètes*, was begun around the end of the summer of 1869. It was not published in its entirety until January 1890. See *OC* II, 1441-61.

However, ironically, Hermosa's choice of hedonistic living does not leave her free from the effects of death. When she first takes her decision to follow Sensuality, the features on her face are changed almost instantly. Within a day, 'la mort l'avait déjà marqué de son nuage, / La volupté de sa pâleur!' (I, 27). This is the external evidence of an internal, moral death which has taken place within her. It is different to the death-in-life state of the bourgeois, in that it has not come about through boredom, but through a lack of spiritual ideal. Villiers championed visionaries who sought for an ideal that touched the absolute in its magnitude, and of which the focus was directed outwards, away from the limitations of the character in question. However, Hermosa seeks an ideal which concerns only herself, and is wholly sensual and earthbound. In her lack of true spiritual ambition, Hermosa does not live up to the full moral stature of Villierian heroines, and it is because of this that she is marked with death.

The image of death in relation to Hermosa gathers strength after the departure of Don Juan, when she is linked with the sea, which, coupled with images of darkness and vultures, is itself a strong metaphor for the grave:⁵

Nos vains mots, les douleurs, les peines, les regrets,
L'effleuraient sans laisser sur elle plus de trace
Que le vol des vautours n'en laisse à la surface
De l'Océan aux noirs secrets. (I, 54)

As well as bearing the mark of death on her facial features, Hermosa also dies physically at the end of the poem. However, in contrast to the bourgeois who has an inherent fear of the cessation of his mortal existence, Hermosa gladly accepts the approach of the angel of death. Her desire has been granted. She wished to live before she dies, has

⁵ N.B. The sea, a complicated and ambiguous literary image, can also be used as a metaphor for sex and life.

done so, and therefore has no regrets in leaving life: 'Déjà! dit-elle; eh bien, l'ange de l'épouvante / Peut venir, j'ai vécu, j'attends, je suis contente' (I, 59). Hermosa dies under the emblem of Sensuality which she has chosen, taking a physical pleasure in the fact that death has come to her early, hence preserving her beauty: 'Regardez! Je meurs jeune et cela me console, / Au moins je meurs dans ma beauté' (I, 59).

Therefore, Hermosa's choice to live for pleasure, triggered by the loss of her father, has brought her freedom from the conformist death of the bourgeois in the routine of daily life, though she is still touched by an internal, moral death. However, in her avoidance of bourgeois mundanity and of a fear of death, Hermosa demonstrates a measure of success in the realm of hedonistic living.

ii. Elën

Elën, published in 1865, was the first of Villiers's works of drama to appear in print. Like the *Premières Poésies*, *Elën* displays the strong influence of late French Romanticism. Though the play was not performed in the author's lifetime, it was staged in the Théâtre Libre in Paris by the actor and director Paul Laroche in 1895.⁶ It is a work of Villiers's youth and displays weaknesses in dramatic effect. However, it is based on a strong Villierian theme and one to which he would return, that is, the loss of a higher goal in life through an indulgence of the desire to love. This theme had already appeared in embryo in *Isis*, and would resurface in works such as *Morgane* and even in *Axël*.

Elën is presented as a character type very much in the mould of Hermosa, and there are many similarities between them. Like Hermosa, Elën is young and possesses great beauty. For those who fall under her spell, she is a woman next to whom 'la plupart des autres femmes ne méritent plus l'attention' (I, 208). However, also like

Hermosa, Elën was brought up in the solitude of the forest, and the picture painted of her childhood is one of purity and innocence, something to which she herself alludes: 'J'étais humble et j'avais une foi toute pure; j'étais une fille ingénue, et je m'attardais avec amour dans le silence des bois; j'aimais bien y promener ma robe blanche à la manière des fées' (I, 228). Elën also follows the lead of Hermosa in the fact that in adulthood she chooses to lead a life of hedonistic pleasure. Like Hermosa, Elën also has many lovers, and likes to give 'des bals [...] brillants toutes les nuits' (I, 206).

However, this lifestyle causes Elën much more unhappiness than it did Hermosa. Unlike her counterpart in the *Premières Poésies*, the courtesan of this early drama is unable to shrug off the waves of lassitude and ennui which threaten to encompass her. Instead, the first appearance of Elën in the action of the play sees her running away from her own ball in order to escape the men who tirelessly fall in love with her: 'J'ai fui, cela m'étouffait!... [...]. Comme leurs paroles étaient fades et humiliantes! Un tour de valse et l'on m'aime: c'est affreux' (I, 218). Samuel's chaste passion for Elën is destined to become as much of a burden to her as that of her previous lover, the chevalier de Rosenthal, of whom she exclaims: 'Ah! j'ai le chagrin de me croire aimée de ce jeune homme, en effet' (I, 224). In this monotony of love and lovers, there is in Elën a strong suggestion of the death associated with bourgeois routine. Although Elën's daily grind is different from that, for example, of the businessmen in 'À s'y méprendre', it has still brought her into a state of boredom from which she cannot escape: 'Quel ennui profond!... Quelle amertume! Ne pouvoir gagner une heure d'oubli!' (I, 226). Indeed, this hope of forgetting the deathly dullness of her existence plays a strong part in the motivation behind Elën's seduction of Samuel Wissler:

⁶ N.B. Paul Larochelle also 'recited' *Axël* at the Théâtre de la Gaîté in February 1894.

Je vais l'aimer trois jours sans qu'il sache mon nom; je veux l'aimer simplement, ce jeune homme, et puis je m'en irai, je le laisserai seul avec mon souvenir. Ainsi je resterai pure et respectée dans l'âme de quelqu'un sur la terre. (I, 219)

Elën, therefore, does not escape a death-like state of ennui in life. There is also a physical mark of death on her face, suggesting that she suffers from the same lack of spiritual vision as did Hermosa. Samuel tells her that 'l'expression de [son] visage ferait penser que le sentiment d'un deuil ancien et inconsolable a voilé [sa] destinée [...]. [Son] âme est comme les fleurs qui ne s'ouvrent que le soir' (I, 228). Andréas de Rosenthal also earlier describes her to Madame de Wahlburg as a 'jeune femme dont les sens atteignent l'horizon de la Mort' (I, 210). He also likens her charms to the first rays of light in an October sun. This is a divergence from conventional love imagery; indeed, it is a reversal of it. Love in literature is traditionally associated with the spring, and with the first opening of buds on trees and flowers. Here, it is replaced by images of autumn, winter, and dusk. This is doubly unusual in light of Elën's youth, since these three phenomena usually represent the approach of old age and death.

Samuel proclaims in the end that Elën has never lived: 'cette femme n'a jamais fait partie des vivants' (I, 245). While the description of her existence in youth does suggest that at one time, she may have lived in the sense that Samuel intends, that is, in innocence and purity, it is true that in the course of the action of the play, Elën is strongly marked by death, the death of repetition of routine, strongly related to bourgeois death, and the moral death of a visionless hedonist. Indeed, in the wake of her prototype from the *Premières Poésies*, Elën also dies physically at the end of the drama, poisoned by the jealous Madame de Wahlburg, thus also fulfilling Hermosa's desire to 'mourir jeune et dans un palais' (I, 55).

Elën accepts this death and pardons her servant Tannucio who has betrayed her, though she does not experience the same pleasure as did Hermosa in dying young. Elën's emotion is primarily one of regret: 'C'est dommage, la vie était belle encore!' (I, 234). However, this sadness relates to her death, and is not an indication of remorse at the hedonistic lifestyle she has chosen. Indeed, she promenades around the ballroom with a smile, instructing the other revellers to 'continue[r] la fête' (I, 234).

Elën and Hermosa are both early philosophical creations of Villiers who represent that part of him which desires to live for pleasure. Both characters die physically, and display signs of death on their faces which betray the corruption that has taken place within them. They attain varying degrees of success in their desire to resist the stultifying effects of life's boredom, but neither regrets the hedonism of which they become symbols in the work of their author-creator.

iii. Morgane

Morgane is the central character in a drama entitled *Le Prétendant*. Villiers worked on this play between 1875-76, although it was not finally published until 1965 when it was also publicly performed for the first time, not in the theatre, but on French television.⁷ *Le Prétendant* is a much more refined and dramatically pleasing version of *Morgane*, a play published in Brittany in 1866, and written between 1865-66, making it slightly posterior to *Elën*.

Morgane herself is a female character modelled along the same lines as Elën and Hermosa. She too lives a life above the ordinary and mundane, resisting in her case conformity to the political régime of her time. Although this resistance does not take the form of sensuality and promiscuity as in the cases of Hermosa and Elën, Morgane is

⁷ The director of this televised version of the play was Alain Boudet. It was also performed on French radio in 1966, this time directed by Jean-Jacques Vierne. See *OC* I, 1105.

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included in this section on hedonistic living because her aspirations are still very much centred on the possibilities of power offered to her on this earth. Her ruling desire, at least at the start of the drama, is to find herself on the throne of the kingdom of the Deux-Siciles. Later, this political passion is coupled with her emotional desire for Sergius d'Albamah, with whom she falls in love.

The Marquis d'Ast, who later dies at Morgane's command, sums up the substance of her being as he discerned it the first time he met her in Naples: 'Je compris le dédain, l'ambition et l'énergie de votre âme, et ce grand rêve de puissance qui vous dévorait' (I, 269). Indeed, the grasping and seeking after power within Morgane is even stronger than her desire for love. She is totally unwilling to be dissuaded from pursuing political glory and prestige for the sake of her feelings for Sergius, as she explains to him in an impassioned outburst: 'J'ai la fièvre du trône!' (I, 282). Sergius gives a short 'Invitation au voyage', which can be likened to Sara's dream of the life of love and pleasure possible for herself and Axël.⁸ However, also like that of Sara, Sergius's invitation to live only for the enjoyment of love is unsuccessful. Morgane loves him passionately, but her political ambition is also great, and she will sacrifice everything else to these ends: 'Non, périsse tout, excepté notre amour, plutôt qu'une mort inglorieuse!... Nous vaincrons, te dis-je, et l'heure va sonner!' (I, 283).

Morgane is driven by this desire for supremacy. Emma Harte, her rival both politically and emotionally, recognizes the strength of her love for Sergius, and sees in it a sign of greatness: 'Pour être capable d'un tel aveuglement, elle doit aimer plus que moi... elle est donc plus grande que moi' (I, 344). Sergius also recognizes the quality of greatness in the desire to rule and love which he shares with Morgane, as he reassures her on the point of their death:

Aussi bien nous étions fatigués de ce monde, de ses aurores banales, de son midi brûlant et de ses misérables nuits!... Puisque la pourpre royale nous est refusée par le sort, que ce soit notre sang qui nous en couvre. Nous étions trop grands pour la vie! (I, 370)

Like *Hermosa* and *Elën*, *Morgane* is free from the bourgeois fear of physical death. When she is first captured in Act IV after the revelation of *Sergius*'s seeming betrayal of her, she accepts death coldly: 'Il ne me déplaît pas, d'ailleurs, de mourir seule et oubliée' (I, 345). Villiers describes her in the stage directions as appearing sublime on the scaffold (I, 346). This ceremony, however, is interrupted, and when she is finally executed with *Sergius* at the end of the play, *Morgane* is glad to be united with her lover in the grave: 'Je meurs avec toi, sans regrets' (I, 370). Love here is deeply associated with, and indeed, finds its ultimate expression in death.

Like *Hermosa*, *Morgane* resists and rises above what could have been a mundane and banal existence. Like both *Hermosa* and *Elën*, she combats the conformity of her time through an excess of passionate living. However, in *Morgane*'s case, this passion is largely directed towards the political arena, a different sphere of life from that of the first two heroines considered. Also unlike *Hermosa* and *Elën*, *Morgane* does not display outward physical signs of a metaphysical, moral death within her. *Morgane*'s passion and drive are directed outwards, and her vision extends beyond her own capabilities. As she remains true to this ideal, she guards an integrity of heart and purity of being unknown to *Hermosa* or *Elën*. She refuses to succumb to *Emma Harte*'s terms of surrender, and this refusal is reinforced by the action of her sister *Sione*, who destroys the document in which they appear. *Morgane* has therefore not sullied her earthly glory and thus dies with honour. Indeed, she embraces death freely. The promise of life cannot be used by *Emma Lyonna Hamilton* as a weapon of manipulation, invested with

⁸ See *OC* II, 666-69.

political and emotional bargaining power. Thus, in a sense, Emma's power is considerably weakened, as the fear of death has been overcome by this deeply ambitious and hedonistic female.

All three of these female characters, Hermosa, Elën, and Morgane, are examples of the choice of hedonistic living. This lifestyle, though it brings them physical death, is a means of resisting the death of inaction in thought and deed of the bourgeois, though for Hermosa and Elën, it does bring them an internal, moral death. These three heroines also successfully reflect a Promethean side to Villiers himself, who aspired to great literary glory.

3.2 Chosen Metaphysical Death: Clausturation

The second means of resistance to the pervasive death resulting from an acceptance of dull, daily routine is that of clausturation, shutting oneself away from the world. This is the way of life favoured by Villiers's spiritually elect, the characters with whom he felt most affinity. The choice of clausturation reflects the second, deeply contemplative side to Villiers. This part of him yearns to retreat from society, and give himself over to solitude and his own thoughts. This was a common theme among writers of the time. In his valedictory lecture on Villiers given in Belgium in February 1890, Mallarmé describes himself as 'un homme, au rêve habitué',⁹ and in his 'Après-midi d'un faune', the faun/poet is so caught up in his dreams that he is unable to distinguish between illusion and reality.¹⁰ Huysmans's *Des Esseintes* seeks a more material escape: he hopes that his own aesthetic fulfilment will come about at Fontenay, the provincial retreat to which he decamps from Paris in *A Rebours*. Several of Villiers's characters aspire to a similar kind of spiritual hideaway, for example Elisabeth in the play *La Révolte*, who desires to flee 'loin d'ici [...]. Au lieu d'être séquestrée derrière les grilles de ce bureau, je vais me cloîtrer dans cette bonne retraite lointaine' (I, 401).

In isolating themselves from society, characters hope to rise above the struggles, trials, and ennui of everyday life, and find 'l'évasion dans ce monde idéal, mais plus réel que l'autre, que l'on porte en soi'.¹¹ However, clausturation in itself represents a symbolic, metaphysical death, a disappearance from a familiar world. This is seen in the conclusion to Villiers's short story 'Véra', which opened this chapter. One critic sums it up thus: 'L'Amour a donc vaincu la Mort qui est devenue la Vie, mais, pour

⁹ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam*, ed. by Alan Raitt (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991), p. 3.

¹⁰ Mallarmé, *Poésies*, pp. 35-39.

¹¹ Guy Michaud, *Message poétique du symbolisme*, 3 vols (Paris: Nizet, 1947), I, 86.

renaître, il a fallu mourir, et à la disparition physique de Véra correspond la claustration volontaire du comte dans son château.’¹²

There is therefore a reversal of values. The death represented by claustration is one that leads to life, in the kindling of the fires of illusion and the ideal. This is what distinguishes it from the metaphysical death experienced by the bourgeois: claustral death is positively chosen, and represents an attempt to search for and to find the ideal, whereas bourgeois death comes upon a person unawares, and means the end of any hope of living on an ideal plane of life. Bourgeois death, then, is not regenerative, whereas claustral death can be, if a character successfully finds a form of ideal life through their claustration.

Villiers himself speaks of this kind of death which brings life in his correspondence with Judith Gautier. The following excerpt is taken from a letter written around the time of his liaison with Anna Eyre Powell in January 1874:

– Les êtres divins, – c’est-à-dire ceux qui prennent cette attitude intérieure tout naturellement, – n’ont pas à se préoccuper du reste; et il n’y a pas d’autre grandeur intellectuelle que le tout puissant ennui sauvé par la vue de l’univers en général et de nos apparents semblables en particulier. Heureux donc les morts, comme nous, qui sommes irrévillables! même défunts.¹³

Villiers makes it clear that this death is regenerative, as he warns Judith, ‘il ne faudra pas lui dire que nous sommes morts, afin de revivre nous-mêmes, parfois, dans les candeurs splendides’.¹⁴ The terminology of this letter suggests that the theme of death leading to regeneration was important to Villiers at that time. In it is contained the idea

¹² Florence Giard, ‘Images/valeur/mort’, 50-73 (p. 54).

¹³ *CG I*, 181 [January 1874]. Anna Eyre Powell was an English heiress of Irish extraction to whom Villiers almost became engaged in January 1874. It is thought that the character of Alicia Clary in *L’Ève future* is based on her. See Raitt, *Life of*, pp. 138-45.

¹⁴ *CG I*, 182.

of a spiritual clausturation, which consisted of an intellectual detachment from and observance of the comings and goings of other people.

This kind of spiritual disengagement is present in Villiers's literature, most notably in the character of Tullia Fabriana in *Isis*. Fabriana succeeds in her quest for power through her separation from society. However, it is not always the case that a character finds success in their clausturation.

3.2.1 Claustal Failures

Apart from being a means of reaching an ideal in life, claustation is also indicative of the failure of finding such an ideal. Such is the case with the two characters in this section, Don Juan and Samuel Wissler. Both of these men were seeking an ideal, and as such, had the potential of being successful initiates, those of Villiers's elect do actually triumph over the death present in their society. However, both have failed in their attempt to reach this goal, and their spiritual separation has become a lonely and worthless exile.

i. Don Juan

Don Juan is not traditionally presented as an exponent of the virtues of spiritual retreats. He is more usually thought of as a great literary lover, and as such, would normally fit into the hedonistic bracket. However, in Villiers's 'Hermosa', Don Juan is a solitary seeker after truth and wisdom. After experiencing multiple relationships, he now seeks only one, which he hopes will satisfy the desire for the absolute within him. His quest, which began with carnal appetite and self-indulgence, has therefore become spiritual. He has resisted an acceptance of dull human existence, and has set himself to find his ideal in love. Hermosa was to be the apex and goal of his search. However, she proved not to be the fulfilment of being for which he had hoped. As such, Don Juan has failed in his quest and the ideal world is now cut off from him.

Don Juan's failure has led to a disillusionment with life and an awareness of the finality of death. He shares the same pessimistic view as the Biblical writer of Ecclesiastes, that life is vanity if it merely ends in the grave. Even the wisest of men must die, and their works will be meaningless:

Certe, il est noble et beau de vouloir; mais, en somme,

Une œuvre que produit la volonté d'un homme

Peut-elle durer bien longtemps? (I, 39)

He therefore wishes to retreat from the world, or rather from society and human contact.

This is similar to the form of claustration that Tullia Fabriana, Lord Ewald, Axël, and others attain:

Vivre dans mon manoir; quitter les aventures;

Garder, insouciant, d'inutiles armures;

De ce vaste univers être un froid spectateur. (I, 47)

However, unlike most of these later Villierian characters, Don Juan chooses this retreat due to the failure of his attempt to find the ideal. For Fabriana and Axël, isolation from the world at large is part of their quest for a spiritual absolute, and not an expression of despair at their inability to attain it.

Don Juan's failure to reach his goal means that a form of metaphysical death takes place in his being. Different from bourgeois, hedonistic, and successful claustral death, this is a spiritual death of separation and failure. Don Juan's heart is described as a 'sépulcre sourd', and like Axël, he is drawn towards suicide (I, 52). However, the motivation of these two characters is different. For Axël, death represents release and victory in the moment his dreams of finding the ideal are realized. For Don Juan, the temptation of suicide stems from his own failure, and the feelings of lassitude which follow: 'À quoi bon! C'est la loi de notre destinée. / C'est tout simple de n'être plus' (I, 36).

Don Juan feels keenly the separation from a paradise from which he has been exiled. He is the first of Villiers's characters to slip and fall from the attainment of their

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ideal, and as such is condemned to a spiritual death. Don Juan fittingly aligns himself with Cain, the first of Adam's sons to fall short of his spiritual inheritance, and is destined to wander the earth as an aimless soul.

ii. Samuel Wissler

The clearest exposition given by a Villierian character of the principle of regeneration through death comes from Samuel Wissler. Samuel is the young student seduced and ruined by the courtesan in the drama *Elèn*. Although his attempt to keep his soul pure ends in failure, he begins the play as one of Villiers's elect who has every possibility of finding the ideal he seeks. In the first act he uses a pastoral illustration to explain the quest of those who resist death and seek immortality. He likens his position to that of a seed in the ground which is seeking to become a plant and grow beyond the darkness of the earth: '[Le Germe] meurt; mais sa foi victorieuse lui survit! [...] il monte avec l'aide de la mort, et, à travers les angoisses, enfin le voilà qui s'épanouit au Soleil!' (I, 216).¹⁵ Just as the seed acts by faith in, and not knowledge of, sunlight and life beyond the earth, he too is acting in faith of immortality, and in determination not to succumb to the temptations of the world. His desire is to resist and hence defeat death: 'La Mort n'est qu'une fille de la Nature; il faut résister à la Nature pour surmonter la Mort; la lutte deviendra la substance des choses espérées' (I, 216).

Although the imagery in this parable is strongly Biblical,¹⁶ the resistance that Samuel has chosen is not that of religious claustration, but rather a solitary search after truth and a separation from the world. Samuel is president of the student body of Dresden, but he refuses to join the other young people in their revelling on the night of

¹⁵ Note that this germination imagery also features as a central metaphor in Zola's naturalist novel *Germinal*, first published in 1885. In *Elèn*, Wissler uses it in relation to himself as an individual, indicating his hopes for his own spiritual development, while for Zola, it is a metaphor for the rising of the labour movement.

¹⁶ C.f. Samuel's words and choice of imagery with those of Christ: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.' John 12. 24, King James Version.

his return. There is a sobriety in his approach to life, which is contrasted with the libertarian attitudes of his friend Goetz. However, Samuel's search for life on a higher plane of existence than that of sensuality and frivolity means that he enjoys a freedom of spirit which Goetz neither shares nor understands: 'Je suis prince d'une nuit plus grande; j'ai le cœur plein de liberté: je puis m'endormir dans la solitude' (I, 218). In the matter of love, Samuel desires to guard the integrity of his heart in order to keep the freedom he has attained: 'J'ai le cœur neuf, et si j'avais le temps d'aimer comme vous autres, il me faudrait mon égale ou la solitude. Mais je veux garder la pureté de mon âme: c'est ma liberté' (I, 215). Indeed, this freedom is also the gateway to his possibility of immortality. He scorns those who fall prey to females like Elën and rebukes Goetz for his sensual nature: 'Celui qui aime une telle créature mérite qu'elle lui mette le pied, tôt ou tard, sur le cœur et sur le front' (I, 214).

It is Elën, however, who pinpoints the weakness of Samuel's nature, which will lead to his downfall: 'Je devine, sous tous ses compliments, un caractère maussade, indécis et inquiet. Il ne sait rien de l'amour et ne fait qu'analyser, au lieu de se laisser vivre' (I, 230). At the start of the play, Samuel's idealistic principles are untried and unproven, and like all initiates, he must undergo a test, in his case of love. In this he fails, falling into two traps. Firstly, he allows himself to indulge in sensual pleasure, thereby cutting himself off from spiritual life. Secondly, he projects onto Elën his own idea of love, rather than perceiving the reality of her true nature. This second problem in love is one which preoccupied Villiers for much of his life, and can be seen in the fate of the comte d'Athol in 'Véra', in Lord Ewald in *L'Ève future*, and even in Axël himself, who refuses to continue living and to love Sara, for fear that the reality of life may not live up to their dream of its possibilities.

Samuel is also increasingly associated with death in the play, although the import of the imagery changes. At first, Samuel seeks after a regenerative, claustral

death through his separation from the world around him. This is when he speaks of the seed dying in the ground, which is associated with his search for the ideal. However, the death with which Samuel is ultimately associated is that of a person fallen from grace. It is not the victorious end of one who has triumphed over doubt, but of one duped by carnal pleasures. The mood of Samuel's dream of his voyage with Maria/Elën in the regions of the underworld is an eerie reversal of the optimism of the projected pleasure journeys of Hermosa and Don Juan in the *Premières Poésies*, Morgane and Sergius in *Le Prétendant*, and Sara and Axël in *Axël*. Maria depicts the stagnant countryside as being a reflection of Samuel's soul, now filled with despair because he has fallen from his ideal. As Maria sings, she acknowledges the possibility of immortality once open to Samuel's spirit: 'Longtemps son vol puissant fut l'honneur des cieux: dans ses regards dormaient des rêves éternels' (I, 238). However, Samuel fell from the ideal because of his relationship with Elën: 'Il s'attarda, par une soirée d'orgueil, d'amour et de triomphe: et la nuit foudroya ce mage de l'Éther' (I, 238).

Samuel describes himself as falling to the level of life. This is the life of earthly boredom and monotonous existence, the slow death from which both he and Elën in different ways were attempting to escape: 'Je suis tombé jusqu'à la vie. Ô fiertés perdues! je suis le fantôme de ce que j'étais' (I, 244). The possibility of immortality is now denied to him, and he must suffer in living without this hope. He bids farewell to his student friends, and leaves to be forgotten by them. He now desires 'L'exil! la prière! la nuit!' (I, 246). At the end of the play, Samuel joins the race of Cain, and like Don Juan in *Hermosa*, he is destined to be a wanderer, eternally aware of the destiny he has missed.

3.2.2 Regenerative Clausturation

Don Juan and Samuel Wissler fail in their resistance of death. Their clausturation is not regenerative, and leads to despair. However, there are those who choose a life of contemplative separation and who do succeed in reaching their goal. The first of these is Tullia Fabriana, who it is thought will later renounce her position as an elect through her love for Wilhelm.¹⁷ However, at the point at which the reader first meets her in *Isis*, she has triumphed over her own human nature, and is living in a state of occult spiritual power. The other two characters in this section who succeed in their separation are those who choose a religious clausturation. They are Sione de Saintos from the play *Le Prétendant*, and Lysiane D'Aubelleyne from the short story 'L'Amour suprême'. This section acknowledges their success, and also again recognizes the concept of death as a principle of regeneration coming into practice.

i. Occult Clausturation: Tullia Fabriana

In his lifetime, Villiers felt a pull between orthodox Catholicism and less traditional philosophies such as Hegelianism. Therefore, the clausturation towards which his characters often leaned was not always religious in a traditional Western European sense, but rather a search for spiritual knowledge in a manner alien to the teachings of the Christian Church. Tullia Fabriana is one such character who seeks power in this way. She is the central character in Villiers's novel *Isis*. This work, which appeared in August 1862, was intended to form part of a larger series of philosophical novels whose future publication had been announced in the *Premières Poésies* in 1859.

There is a mix of Hegelianism and occultism within *Isis*. These systems of thought merge to point to existence on a level above that of acceptance and conformity

to the state of death-in-life present in bourgeois society. Tullia Fabriana is the embodiment of this mix of ideology, having passed through various states of incarnation including the Egyptian goddess Isis, and the ancient queen Cleopatra. She is drawn to a form of claustration which is occult in nature. This begins in a physical way with Fabriana shutting herself away in her castle, but it becomes a spiritual exercise, as Forsiani warns Wilhelm: 'Vous allez être mis [...] en présence d'une femme d'un esprit hors ligne et d'une influence exceptionnelle. [...] On essaie de la circonvenir, mais elle cache son âme et sa pensée avec un inviolable talent' (I, 108).

Even in childhood, Tullia was a mysterious and detached infant: 'Son enfance fut silencieuse comme le rêve, et elle s'éleva dans l'ombre' (I, 130). She rejected Roman Catholicism around the age of fifteen, leaving her prayer room in tears one evening. She stopped practising religion shortly after. She then began to consult books of mysterious and occult origins, like Sara in *Axël*, and like Villiers himself, who came across influential occult writings mainly during his stays at the abbey of Solesmes, firstly in 1862 and later in 1866.¹⁸ Many of Villiers's friends were also interested in the occult, for example Mendès, Marras, and even Huysmans.¹⁹

After the death of her parents, Tullia Fabriana chose to live in complete isolation:

Satisfaite de l'état peu dépendant où sa naissance l'avait placée, elle avait pris le parti de vivre dans une concentration égoïste. L'isolement lui suffisait. Elle était parvenue, peu à peu, sans apparente résolution, à voiler sa vie véritable le plus hermétiquement possible. (I, 120)

Though she later opened her palace for balls and at times attended social functions, she did not ever fully enter into the social life of the town, or indeed of the state. This

¹⁷ For example, see *OC* I, 1046, 1051.

¹⁸ After his 1862 visit to Solesmes, Villiers advised Baudelaire to read Goërrès's *La Mystique* and docteur Sepp's *La Vie de Jésus-Christ*. See *CG* I, 53 [September/October 1862].

choice of isolation from the world and resistance of social contact opened to her the possibility of a life of spiritual power and perception.

Like all Villiers's elect, Tullia's choice of the means of resistance of bourgeois death comprises not merely a negative rejection of the banality of everyday life, but a positive search for the ideal.

Il lui semblait qu'elle distinguait, sans efforts, le point où les profondeurs de la vie banale vont s'enchaîner aux rêves d'un monde invisible, de sorte que les détails de chaque jour, devenus définis, avaient une signification lointaine pour son âme. (I, 155)

However, in Fabriana's case, the clausturation she has chosen in order to escape the banality of life is itself strongly associated with death. Duc Forsiani tells Wilhelm that due to the impenetrable nature of Tullia's soul, there is no longer any evidence that she actually exists: 'Rien. [...] La grâce ondoyait dans ses mouvements, la force courait dans ses membres sains et purs, la beauté l'enveloppait tout entière de son manteau royal, mais nulle porte ouverte sur la pensée, nuls vestiges de l'existence' (I, 127). The same explanation is given for the failure of the birds of Death to dissuade Fabriana from embarking on a night-time excursion to the underworld of the poor:

Ah! c'est qu'elle éprouvait parfois le grand vertige d'elle-même; elle le sentait bien: ce qui lui restait d'humain pouvait la quitter à chaque instant; elle ne tenait presque plus à la terre, et elle n'existait pas en vérité. (I, 175)

Therefore, though Tullia Fabriana is free from a death-like participation in the ordinary life of the bourgeois, there is still death associated with her, since her thought and spiritual life are so deeply hidden that there are no longer any obvious signs that she

¹⁹ Huysmans's *Là-bas*, first published in 1891, is a novel which explores the world of the occult.

exists. However, this kind of claustral death leads to life, and also to great power. As the events of the novel unfold, the reader learns that Tullia is merely waiting for the person through whom she can fulfil her ideal. It is ironic that the ambition of one who strives so hard to remain isolated from society should be to rule over that same society, but Fabriana is looking for a man whom she can place on the throne of Sicily, and through whom she can reign. When she realizes that Wilhelm is this person, she prepares herself to 'live' again. Her soul will no longer be hidden as she engages once more with the world: 'Essayons de rappeler les choses et les fantômes, puisque je vais vivre!' (I, 182).

Tullia will once more emerge into earthly life. However, she will be immune to the death of the bourgeoisie, whom she labels as ghosts. The claustral death she has undergone has been regenerative, as she now exists on a higher plane of life than that of those around her. Indeed, Fabriana is also capable of bringing and inspiring life in others. She helps to heal and cure the poor and the sick of the town, and Forsiani advises Wilhelm that if he gains her favour, 'si vous la touchez, si elle vous admet dans son intimité, elle vous fera *vivre*, dans la haute acception du mot' (I, 118). Although she is at this point untried and untested, like Samuel Wissler, and like Axël and Sara before they have suffered the temptations of love and gold, Tullia Fabriana's victory over death is manifest, and she has thus far achieved success in her claustration.

ii. Religious Clausturation

Tullia Fabriana has chosen a form of claustration which is occult in nature. However, Villiers also presents in his work a more traditional picture of separation from society: that of entry into a convent. Villiers came from a monarchist background and had a strong Roman Catholic upbringing, himself experiencing two religious retreats in his youth at the abbey of Solesmes, in 1862 and 1863. His life ended in a Catholic

institution run by the monks of Saint-Jean-de-Dieu in Paris. Therefore, religious issues were deeply familiar to him. Religious claustration is a theme which appears throughout his work. It is an option open to Hermosa in the *Premières Poésies*. It appears intermittently as a subject in tales like 'Soeur Natalia' (*Nouveaux Contes cruels*). It is also present in Villiers's dramatic works, in *Le Prétendant* and *Le Nouveau Monde*, and of course forms an episode in the action of *Axël*.

There is much morbid imagery surrounding Villiers's presentation of entry into convent life. In *Le Prétendant*, the Queen refers to the convent that Sione de Santos wishes to enter as being a 'sombre demeure et dont les grilles ressemblent à celles d'une prison' (I, 306). Of course, this is in a way a prophetic statement for the main protagonists Morgane and Sergius, since it is in this convent that they will be interned prior to their execution. Therefore, it is also in a very real sense for them a tomb, and the gateway of escape from earthly life. San Vaënza says to Morgane as she enters the gates, 'Regardez autour de vous. [...] C'est votre tombeau', and Emma Harte also later refers to it as their tomb (I, 350, 369).

In *Le Nouveau Monde*, Ruth Moore sees the solution to her unhappy marriage to Lord Cecil as entry into a convent. She uses the same sort of language as Samuel Wissler in *Elèn* to describe what she seeks in this solitary exile: 'J'allais vers le silence, l'oubli et la prière' (I, 436). Since Wissler sought a form of separation which was not religious, this is an indication that Villiers did not clearly distinguish between different ways of seeking for the ideal. For him, they were all paths leading towards the same destination. However, this silent habitation is portrayed in a largely negative light in *Le Nouveau Monde*. For example, when Ruth's sister Mary denounces life in the castle as 'un isolement ... morose', Ruth says that '[elle] l'échanger[a], bientôt, pour une solitude plus austère encore', meaning a convent cell (I, 421). Indeed, the atmosphere in the gloomy castle itself is likened to that of a monastery by Lord Cecil: 'Eh bien, milady, la

solitude en ce manoir familial est aussi profonde et aussi religieuse que sous les arceaux des monastères. Priez ici!' (I, 436). Ruth, as she is leaving it, refers to it as a 'tombeau', which again is a word much associated with monastic institutions (I, 442).

However, far from being dull and gloomy, the two examples of religious claustration examined here are positive instances of regenerative success. The 'death' of religious claustration is shown to be wholly different from the bourgeois state of death-in-life: the first brings renewed spiritual life, while the second destroys it. We see this in the experiences of the two characters to be studied here: Sione de Saintos, who joins a religious order in *Le Prétendant*, and Lysiane d'Aubelleyne, who takes similar vows in the tale 'L'Amour suprême'.

a) Sione de Saintos

Sione is the quieter and more reflective sister of the tempestuous and ambitious Morgane in Villiers's play *Le Prétendant*. Sione also has ambition, but this leans in the direction of convent life, which she enters in the course of the play.

Sione's decision to enter a convent comes after her disappointment in love with Sergius d'Albamah. However, there is an ambiguity in Sione's love for Sergius. When she first appears in the play, she is presented as being in a state of great sadness. Indeed, the page Leone remarks on her approach, 'C'est la jeune comtesse; oui, c'est elle! Toujours cette tristesse!' (I, 274). She has no interest in the activities Leone suggests to her, nor even in the flowers she has picked for Morgane. She seems to be entering the convent because of the distress caused to her by her chaste passion for d'Albamah:

Et vous ne savez pas ce que j'ai souffert à cause de lui! [...] Oh! les premiers temps, ce fut une obsession! Je ne savais ce que j'avais; par moments, l'air me manquait; je ne pouvais respirer: je me cachais pour pleurer tout à mon aise.

(I, 277)

Later however, Sione states that it is God alone she loves. She was attracted to Sergius only because of certain qualities of the Divine he displayed in his comportment:

Le courage, la grandeur, l'héroïsme sont des lueurs divines: je les admire en ce chevalier, parce que j'ai la seule passion du Dieu dont elles sont le voile et qui les inspire dans le cœur. (I, 352)

This could be an inconsistency on the part of Villiers, or it could point to a quality of naiveté in the character of Sione, who herself claims to have become childlike in her manner and reasoning.

The imagery surrounding entry into the convent is closely related to death. Sione herself, when speaking of her desire to enter monastic life, indicates that she views it as a form of death: 'Je vais me consacrer à la mort, dès ce monde' (I, 275). Even before she enters the convent, it is clear that some sort of transaction involving death has already taken place within her: 'Je ne suis pas faite pour vivre. J'ai d'autres espoirs' (I, 279). Similarly, when she meets Sergius, she confesses, 'je ne suis plus de ce monde et je n'y suis pas à ma place' (I, 330). As she speaks with Morgane, Sione reveals that she feels she is not made for life: she will not marry anyone, even the man she once loved.

However, this death imagery is to be viewed in a positive light, that of regeneration. Sione's death is symbolic: she is no longer part of the affairs of this world. It is clear that she is happy in this choice. Even the hedonistic Morgane tells her that 'ta résolution ne me surprend pas. Si elle est sérieuse, tu seras libre' (I, 279).

The imagery relating to Sione's view of her relationship with God is also strongly tied not only to the theme of death, but also that of love. God has taken the place of a human lover in Sione's life, so it is fitting that just as mortal lovers ideally find themselves ultimately united in death, so the symbolic death of Sione in her

withdrawal from the world and the affairs of everyday life also means that she meets with her ideal, which is the Divine. For Sione, God has become her husband: 'J'appartiens à Dieu seul! C'est lui qui est mon époux et mon amant' (I, 352). Therefore, the death that Sione chooses is successful and has regenerative qualities. It stands in opposition to the metaphysical death of the bourgeois, since it brings new life and spiritual vision, while the bourgeois are drawn deeper and deeper into a form of spiritual death.

b. Lysiane D'Aubelleyne

The tale 'L'Amour suprême' is the opening piece of Villiers's second collection of short stories published in 1886 entitled *L'Amour suprême*. It recounts the final meeting of the narrator and Mademoiselle Lysiane D'Aubelleyne. She bears in her Christian name the flower, a symbol of purity, with which she is linked in the course of the tale: 'Elle se détachait comme un lys sur les ténèbres étoilées' (II, 10). This also links Lysiane with the Virgin Mary, who is associated with the lily in Christian iconography. The narrator had known her previously during his adolescence in Brittany. However, unknown to him, Lysiane is on the eve of taking her vows as a nun, and is undergoing the temptations of the world, according to Carmelite custom.

The picture painted of religious life in relation to what secular life holds for Mademoiselle d'Aubelleyne is much more positive than what has been described elsewhere. Indeed, here it is earthly life which is shaded by a tarnished and negative hue. Amid the luxury and pleasures of the ball the narrator is attending, he describes his own dissatisfaction with it and the death it holds for him: 'En résumé, la fête me paraissait un bal de fantômes' (II, 4). The monarchist narrator also feels a lassitude as regards his own presence there: 'Au brusque souvenir du roi dans l'exil, il me vint des pensers de deuil, une tristesse de vivre et le regret de me trouver, moi aussi, le passant

de cette fête' (II, 5). This prepares the reader for Lysiane's view of earthly pleasures and joys:

Oh! [...] quelle est la joie, selon le monde, qui ne s'épuise – et ne se nie, par conséquent, elle-même – dans sa propre satiété? [...] Que sont des plaisirs qui ne se réalisent jamais, sinon mêlés d'un essentiel remords? (II, 9)

Therefore, she sees her entry into the convent as a glorious release from the tedium of existence:

Cette heure qui sonne n'est pour moi qu'un bruit de chaînes qui se brisent, emportant loin d'ici toute mon âme délivrée!... non seulement loin de cette fête, mais hors de ce monde sensible, où nous ne sommes, nous-mêmes, que des apparences et dont je vais enfin me détacher à jamais. (II, 8)

Unlike Ruth Moore and Sione de Santos, Lysiane is not a 'désenchantée' (II, 8). Although she lost her mother at an early age, she has not otherwise suffered disappointment in love or life, but is simply refusing to engage in the affairs and joys of this world which she sees as being insufficient to satisfy her desire: 'Pour moi, c'est vivre qui serait désertter' (II, 10). Lysiane speaks with 'une voix d'élue' (II, 10). She is seeking the same immortal ideal of the absolute as are Don Juan, Tullia Fabriana and Samuel Wissler, but in her case, she seeks it through a religious claustral life.

As with Sione and Ruth Moore, and later with Sara in *Axël*, the imagery surrounding Lysiane's taking of the vows is filled with symbols of death. In the chapel, the nuns sing a mass for the dead before a coffin covered with a white sheet. The priest asks 'si quelque victime voulait s'unir au Dieu dont il allait offrir l'éternel sacrifice' (II, 12). However, the atmosphere is one of light and not of darkness. The ceremony takes place in the day-time, and not at night as in *Axël*, and Lysiane is not coerced into

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this commitment, but rather accepts gladly to 'baigner [ses] yeux dans cette lumière intérieure dont l'humble Dieu crucifié daigne, par sa grâce! embraser [son] âme' (II, 10).

Therefore, though Lysiane dies a symbolic death, her act of faith is to be rewarded as she emerges into a union with the Divine in a world of light, love, and joy. There is also a suggestion that the narrator himself could partake of the new life Lysiane is experiencing. After all, the love she inspires in him is not carnal, but chaste and pure, like that of Sergius and Sione:

Et – comme autrefois! – je sentais que c'était *seulement* la transparence de son âme qui me séduisait en cette jeune femme! [...] Et que toute passionnelle pensée, à sa vue, me serait toujours d'un mille fois moins attrayant que le simple et fraternel partage de sa tristesse et de sa foi. (II, 7)

It seems that these potential earthly lovers, Lysiane and the narrator, may meet again in an afterlife, as he interprets a look which passes between them as 'un rendez-vous éternel promis par cette âme de lumière' (II, 13).

Therefore, Lysiane d'Aubelleyne finds fulfilment and happiness in her choice to resist the world and retreat into convent life. The death she undergoes in entering the convent signifies not the end of life, like that of the bourgeois, but rather the beginning of a new existence, a doorway into the ideal. She may also be responsible for the regeneration of another life, as she is party, it seems, to the promise of an eternal meeting.

Conclusion

There are, then, in Villiers's work, examples of the outworking of two forms of resistance to the bourgeois state of death-in-life. The first involves characters like Hermosa who choose to live life to excess and to squeeze out of their existence every opportunity for pleasure or personal ambition. These people are successful to varying degrees, Hermosa and Morgane managing to avoid the ennui besetting the bourgeois, while Elën succumbs to it. Hermosa and Elën also suffer a moral death inside themselves. However, all three of these hedonistic heroines preserve their beauty and, to a certain extent, their legend, by dying physically at a young age. This in itself is a form of immortality and victory over death, as the memory of them lives on.

The second instance of life resisting death, this time through another form of death, can be seen in the various forms of claustration which are presented in Villiers's work. Claustration can merely entail an inner separation from other people, as in the cases of Don Juan and Samuel Wissler, or it can lead to a physical severance from society, as it does with Sione de Santos and Lysiane d'Aubelleyne. It can follow occult paths, as with Tullia Fabriana, or it can also take the form of an orthodox religious separation in convent life.

Those who choose to resist death and seek their ideal in this way find success or failure on various levels. Don Juan and Samuel Wissler have the opportunity of joining the ranks of those of Villiers's elect who succeed in their spiritual quests. However, both fail in their endeavours, and their self-imposed exiles betray the feelings of despair and isolation that they both feel. Tullia Fabriana, is successful, and finds real power in her regenerative life of separation from society. Similarly, Sione de Santos and Lysiane d'Aubelleyne are both confident that the death which they undertake to suffer in the convent will lead to joy on earth and eternal life in the heavens. This form of

metaphysical death differs from that of the bourgeois, in that it brings new life, and not spiritual death.

These two forms of resistance, hedonism and clausturation, often feature together in Villiers's work and the tension between them can provide a basis of dramatic contrast. For example, the lifestyle of the hedonistic Hermosa, and her reaction to death and disappointment, is set against that of Don Juan in the *Premières Poésies*. The pleasure-seeking of Elën is contrasted with the naïve seriousness and studiousness of Samuel Wissler in *Elën*, and the reactions to love and life of Morgane and Sione in *Le Prétendant* are radically different.

These two responses to death, as has already been intimated, can be linked to two different facets of Villiers's own personality, the one *rêveur*, the other *railleur*. They are also, however, classic and consistent approaches to death through the ages. In his study *L'Homme devant la mort*, Philippe Ariès affirms that 'le sentiment de la présence de la mort dans la vie a suscité deux réponses: d'une part l'ascétisme chrétien, d'autre part un humanisme encore chrétien, mais déjà engagé dans la voie de la laïcisation'.²⁰

Ariès is writing about a time in history towards the end of the Middle Ages, but his statement is also relevant to the *fin de siècle* in nineteenth-century France. The first response, Christian asceticism, had become in nineteenth-century literature any form of ascetic life, and the humanism had not only become secularized but was now hedonistic. The condition of man had hardly changed, and his response to and resistance of death had also remained in a consistent pattern.

Villiers's personal philosophy is concerned very much with a search for an ideal world which exists beyond and behind everyday reality. This was one of the most powerful ideas he borrowed from the thinking of Hegel: 'Il y a un monde idéal qui

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enveloppe le monde de la réalité sensible, qui en fait le fond et la substance.’²¹ The resistance of life in opposition to death often takes the form of a search for an ideal, such as that of Sensuality (Hermosa), Love (Don Juan), or Power (Morgane). Personality types can therefore be distinguished in relation to the ideal they are seeking. This is a conclusion reached by Samuel Wissler in the play *Elèn*: ‘C’est une question de préférence d’idéal qui fait les différences humaines’ (I, 216).

For Villiers, the ideal that is sought is not of great importance, as long as it is sought and found. Césaire Lenoir urges Tribulat Bonhomet in ‘Claire Lenoir’, ‘puisqu’il faut que nous choisissons, choisissons le mieux possible! Et puisque la Croyance est la seule base de toutes les réalités, préférons Dieu’ (II, 191). Therefore, there is little hierarchy in the means of resistance, as long as a resistance takes place and reaches towards the highest possible form of success. Success in claustral death means regeneration, and it is towards this that Villiers strove in *L’Ève future*, and exemplified in *Axël*. The works considered in this chapter demonstrate the early and intermediate stages of this resistance which can lead to regeneration.

²⁰ Ariès, *Homme/mort*, pp. 129-30.

²¹ Augusto Véra, *Introduction à la philosophie de Hegel* (Paris: [n. pub.], 1864), p. 110. Cited in *OC* II, 1172.

Chapter Four

Villiers's Fatal Men and Women

The first chapter of this thesis examined the poet's distress at his sense of the loss of religious faith, political stability, and emotional well-being in Villiers's *Premières Poésies*. The second then went on to establish the existence of a state of spiritual death in one section of society, the bourgeoisie, for whom Villiers envisaged little hope of regeneration. The last chapter looked at the resistance that some characters offered to this same bourgeois death. This resistance was made primarily through their lifestyles, either those of hedonistic excess or clausturation. The focus of this present chapter shifts to the character types that these lifestyles produced, and to the *fin-de-siècle* relationship forged between men and women, as seen in the literary work of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam.

Villiers has often been accused by his critics of being anachronistic, of remaining within the framework of Romanticism rather than moving fully into *fin-de-siècle* decadence, and there is a danger that he may be relegated to the ranks of "petit romantique" égaré à la fin du siècle'.¹ However, I have already shown in relation to his short stories that Villiers not only followed the literary currents of his time, but was actually in the avant-garde of the establishment of this genre, fashioning, developing, and artistically honing it in the French press. Another area of literary craftsmanship in which Villiers demonstrates his contemporaneity is his presentation of male and female characters. In keeping with the artistic period in which he was active, the women Villiers presents are most often strong and cruel *femmes fatales*. In contrast, the men often display *fin-de-siècle* weaknesses of physique, psychological make-up, and temperament.

In works of Romanticism, it was the male who held sway in the balance of power between the sexes. The archetypal male in the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was a fatal rebel in the mould of Lord Byron, destined to

¹ Vibert, *L'Inquisiteur*, p. 10. Here, Vibert too is arguing against derogatory accusations regarding Villiers's strong Romantic heritage.

die, but in doing so, destined also to take pleasure in destroying the women with whom he came into contact.² However, by the late nineteenth century, when Villiers was writing, this dichotomy of power had changed. It was now the female who had become dominant, and who had a fatal effect on the man with whom she formed a liaison:

The function of the flame which attracts and burns is exercised, in the first half of the century, by the Fatal Man (the Byronic hero), in the second half by the Fatal Woman; the moth destined for sacrifice is in the first case the woman, in the second the man.³

This role reversal in the presentation of men and women in literature and art reflects what was occurring in society at that time not only in France but also across Europe. The industrial and scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century, coupled with the loss of religious faith, resulted in the centrality and importance of man's place in the world coming into question. Once viewed as the guardian of the creative work of God on earth, man and his labours were being rendered redundant, or so it seemed, by the advent of the machine. When so much physical work could be completed mechanically, a new emphasis was laid on the powers of the mind. Even man's social position in France was in a state of flux: those aristocratic in birth had fallen, the bourgeois were gaining power, and a new aristocracy, that of intellectual and artistic integrity was being formed. At the same time, the new pressures and demands of city life tended to cause most individuals to be lost in the collective bracket of 'the mob', or the crowd.⁴

Margaret Waller argues in *The Male Malady* that 'with the crisis of paternal authority symbolized by the decapitation of the king – the ultimate father figure – the

² This is the opinion of Mario Praz in *The Romantic Agony*, 2nd edn, trans. by Angus Davidson (London: Oxford University Press, 1951). See especially Chapter III, section 11, 'The Fatal Man of the Romantics', pp. 74-76. This seminal work was first published in 1933.

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post-revolutionary era represents a key moment in the development of modern patriarchal power'.⁵ It seems, however, in the *fin de siècle*, that far from developing, modern patriarchal power was fast diminishing and being lost to the ascendant female. Castration and decapitation, symbolizing the loss of male power, are key themes in the art and literature of the late nineteenth century. Gustave Moreau's paintings of Salomé dancing to bring about the execution of John the Baptist made Herod's step-daughter into a *fin-de-siècle* icon.⁶ As has already been made clear in Chapter 2, Villiers himself manifested a strong interest in execution scenes, which form the basis of some of his more macabre short stories.

However, if the position of the male both in art and in real life (and the nineteenth century saw these coming ever closer together) was weakened and in decline, that of the female was becoming stronger. There were numerous new laws introduced in the nineteenth century which raised the social status of woman and secured for her a more stable position in society. One such ruling was the separation of goods law, of which Villiers's own mother took advantage in 1843. She was finally granted a legal separation of her wealth from that of her husband in August 1846. Free secondary level education was introduced for women in the early 1880s, and divorce was also legalized in 1884. By the end of the century, the foundations laid with regard to female emancipation had advanced to such a degree that the women's rights congress of 1896 even had female suffrage on its agenda for discussion.⁷

Men, however, already threatened by machinery and technology, interpreted this partial emancipation of woman as another menacing sign of their own demise, and

³ Ibid., p. 206.

⁴ N.B. p. 183 of this thesis, where the 'meute bourgeoise' are identified as a category of society.

⁵ Margaret Waller, *The Male Malady: Fictions of Impotence in the French Romantic Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993), p. 2.

⁶ See Moreau's *L'Apparition* and *Salomé dansant devant Hérode*, both exhibited at the 1876 Salon. The original watercolour of *L'Apparition* can be found in the Louvre, while *Salomé dansant devant Hérode* is in the L. A. County Museum of Arts, California. Sketches for and other versions of these paintings can be seen in the Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris.

another step on the road to the total loss of their own supremacy in the relationship between the sexes:

One effect of this increasing significance of women in public life was that men again came to question what the nature of women was. For many men, seeing women's increasing non-maternal and non-conjugal significance resulted in fear and anxiety. Women outside their traditional, imposed roles appeared as a threat to them, as an evil force promising to destroy established institutions, rights and privileges.⁸

Rational-thinking men of science attempted to reassert their own position while undermining that of women by reinterpreting the female's physical and psychological make-up in the light of modern sciences:

Measured by new modern scientific methods (those of craniology, the measurement of cranium sizes; or by the methods of criminal anthropology, the study of inherited stigmata or bodily signs), Woman could be diagnosed and defined as a species inherently inferior in intelligence, as having innate criminal tendencies.⁹

Men who made statements like this were fighting to regain their position of dominance by using the very weapons of modernity which had freed women from constraint in the first place.

⁷ See Jennifer Birkett, *The Sins of the Fathers: Decadence in France 1870-1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), pp. 12-13.

⁸ Reinhold Heller, 'Some Observations concerning Grim Ladies, Dominating Women, and Frightened Men around 1900', in *The Earthly Chimera and the Femme Fatale: Fear of Woman in Nineteenth-Century Art*, catalogue produced for an exhibition held at the David and Alfred Smart Gallery, University of Chicago, 20 May-21 June, 1981, ed. by R. Heller (Chicago: David and Alfred Smart Gallery, University of Chicago, [1981]), pp. 7-13 (p. 9).

⁹ Rebecca Stott, *The Fabrication of the Late-Victorian Femme Fatale: The Kiss Of Death* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 24.

However, another group of males not only accepted the ascendance of the *femme fatale* but also welcomed this type of woman embodying evil and disruption, so widely represented in *fin-de-siècle* literature and art. The fatal woman came not only to inspire writers and artists with fear, but also to exert a deep attraction over them.

One of the most important male/female dichotomies to affect the *fin de siècle* was that of Adam and Eve. The legend of the Fall of man was reinterpreted in order to highlight the carnality of the female and the spirituality of the male. Man, in the figure of the artist, was seen to be seeking after an absolute spiritual and physical purity, while woman, like Eve in the Garden of Eden, was causing him to fall again and again because of the temptation she presented to him.

Sigmund Freud named the depths of the female mind ‘the dark continent’, and his Viennese counterpart Otto Weininger analysed these depths in his study *Sex and Character*, published in 1903.¹⁰ Reinhold Heller summarizes Weininger’s conclusions in his own words:

Man (M) and woman (W) differed essentially insofar as W lacked all ability for logical and ethical thought; incapable of forming true intellectual concepts, incapable of thinking ethically and rationally, W must therefore lack a soul, must lack individual personality, must lack a significant ego. Only in her sexuality and sensuality, the only properties characterizing her, does W gain existence. [...] By causing the will for lust to triumph over the will for moral value and virtue, W then lowers M to her own level, thereby destroying his proper M-nature, robbing him of his humanity, robbing him of his ego. In her sensuality and sexuality, therefore, woman possessed the power to kill man by depriving him of his spiritual capabilities and existence.¹¹

¹⁰ See Stott, *Fabrication/Femme*, p. 27.

¹¹ Heller, ‘Some Observations’, pp. 7-13 (p. 10).

While man is essentially spiritual, woman is at her root carnal and fleshly. She therefore becomes fatal to her male counterpart in her capacity to distract him from the pursuit of his spiritual ideal.

It was this relationship between a *femme fatale* and an *homme fatal*, each destined to destruction, that of all human relationships was most closely linked to death in the *fin de siècle*. This chapter examines Villiers's male and female characters, noting how closely they conform to late-nineteenth-century archetypes. It also explores the presentation of the male/female dichotomy in Villiers's work, and question whether it symbolizes complete degeneration or whether there is a suggestion of regeneration. Works to be considered in this chapter are a selection of Villiers's major pieces of writing up to but not including *L'Ève future* and *Axël*, specifically 'Hermosa', *Isis*, *Elën*, and *Le Prétendant*.

4.1 Femmes fatales

The archetype of the fatal woman became firmly established during the last part of the nineteenth century.¹² However, as Mario Praz points out, and as can be seen from the historical and mythological figures Villiers and others often chose to represent, the concept of a cruel and deadly female was not new:

There have always existed Fatal Women both in mythology and in literature, since mythology and literature are imaginative reflections of the various aspects of real life, and real life has always provided more or less complete examples of arrogant and cruel female characters.¹³

Villiers himself produced literary portraits of two such arrogant and cruel real-life females, Lady Emma Lyonna Harte Hamilton and Queen Isabeau de Bavière. These studies were written in response to a request made in 1876 by the editor Albert Lacroix for inserts for a series entitled *Les Grandes Amoureuses*. The women featured appear elsewhere in Villiers's fiction, Emma Lyonna in *Le Prétendant*, and Isabeau in a short story from the *Contes cruels* entitled 'La Reine Ysabeau'.

This strongly suggests that Villiers was indeed fascinated by the *femme fatale* type, a woman embodying cruelty and fatality in her actions towards men. This section will examine five fated women from his work: Hermosa, Tullia Fabriana, Elën, Morgane, and Emma Lyonna Harte. After observing their key characteristics, the position of the *femme fatale* will be ascertained as regards the literary metaphor of death.

¹² N.B. The French term *femme fatale* means 'fated' as well as 'fatal' woman. The same application of the adjective 'fatal' applies to *hommes fatals*, who are themselves fated as well as being fatal to others.

¹³ Praz, *Romantic Agony*, p. 189.

The strongest element in the make-up of the *femme fatale* is physical beauty, as outlined by Joy Newton: '[her] most striking feature is immense beauty, often not specifically defined, though vigorously attested by its effect on the onlooker [...]. In literature this deliberate vagueness allows each reader to bring to the character his or her own conception of the ideal'.¹⁴ A quest for the ideal was part of the late nineteenth century's search for spirituality, and it became a key theme in the literature and art of the period, as seen for example in Mallarmé's metaphorical quest for the *azur*. One of the strongest fears relating to the carnal *femme fatale* was that she would masquerade as the ideal, and so distract and divert writers and artists from their spiritual occupations. Villiers himself was very much attracted by the concept of ideal and absolute beauty, and this is a theme which appears throughout his work in his presentation of women.

In 'Hermosa', the long lyric poem of the *Premières Poésies*, Villiers describes Hermosa as being 'sidéralement belle', and later emphasizes 'l'idéal de sa beauté' (I, 21, 27). Of Tullia Fabriana in *Isis*, Forsiani states that 'il est difficile de se figurer une femme plus belle' (I, 108). On being woken by Elën in *Elën*, the courtesan's beauty is the first thing that comes to Samuel Wissler's attention: 'Hein?... Qu'est-ce? (*Après un profond silence*) Oh! comme vous êtes belle' (I, 219). This is also exactly the sentiment expressed by the page Leone as he first catches sight of Morgane in *Le Prétendant*: 'Ô Dieu! [...] Comme elle est belle!' (I, 258). Emma Lyonna Harte is also described as possessing a 'beauté séduisante' (I, 268).

The possession of great beauty would naturally distinguish one from other, more ordinary mortals, and this is precisely another attribute of the *femme fatale* highlighted by Joy Newton: 'The *femme fatale* is usually presented as a dominant figure, often elevated by social status so that her inaccessibility acts as a further stimulus to male

¹⁴ Joy Newton, 'More about Eve: Aspects of the *femme fatale* in Literature and Art in 19th Century France', *Essays in French Literature*, 28 (November 1991), 23-35 (pp. 26-27).

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desire.’¹⁵ This female domination can stem from social hierarchy or physical positioning, and is often intensified through sheer psychological strength of will. Its purpose is to elevate her above the crowd, both socially and physically, so that not only does she stimulate male desire, but is also a worthy object of it, untainted by and separate from the bourgeois mob. Thus, beauty is not only a physical, but also a spiritual attribute.

Just as the intellect became the basis for a new type of artistic aristocracy in the *fin de siècle*, so a woman’s beauty and determination to succeed were social tools for the *femme fatale* to raise her status. This is seen even in characters who are not born into high-ranking society. Hermosa is the daughter of a Spanish bandit, but she eventually moves in the society of counts and lords, and fulfils her desire to die young and in a palace, wearing ‘son diadème / D’incroyables beautés’ (I, 55-56).

Emma Lyonna Harte is not born of noble stock, but through her marriage to Lord Hamilton, she too bears a title, and comes to dominate the court of Deux-Siciles. Similarly, the courtesan Elën does not enter the world either rich or noble, but becomes so through the wealth of her suitors and lovers, and in her death falls ‘en reine au milieu de [son] royaume’ (I, 234).

Tullia Fabriana’s family tree presents a more convincing picture of conventional nobility. She is the offspring of two branches of the same insurrectionist family, and her father was an eminent Venetian nobleman. However, even discounting this ancestry, Fabriana has a queenly status of her own: she is ‘la reine du vertige et des ténèbres’ (I, 154).

The credentials of an aristocratic lineage are one way of rendering the female unattainable and inaccessible. However, as well as socially raising her profile, Villiers

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 29.

often physically elevates the position of the *femme fatale* in relation to other characters.

This can give her the appearance of a statue, an object to be adored and worshipped.

Hermosa is portrayed in just this kind of pose at count Antonio's ball:

Sur un socle de bronze, au fond du péristyle,
Une femme, debout, se dressait... immobile.
À ses pieds tournoyaient les vivants radieux.
Accoudée au chambranle auprès de la pénombre,
Dans un profond regard elle unissait, dans l'ombre,
Les feux du bal, la nuit des cieux (I, 20).

The *femme fatale*'s resemblance to statues is due not only to her physical elevation, but also to the colouring of her skin and the moulding of her features. When Forsiani is describing Tullia Fabriana to Wilhelm, he outlines her as being 'une blonde, avec un teint blanc comme cette statue' (I, 108). Fabriana's physical shape is also described as having been sculpted like that of a statue: 'Les formes de la femme se sculptaient d'elles-mêmes sur le marbre de ce corps de vierge' (I, 127). Even the expression on her face is as if carved in stone. This dates from the evening she was struck by lightning: 'Depuis cette nuit extraordinaire, ses traits avaient pris l'expression d'une tranquillité de statue' (I, 153).

Imagery involving statues with regard to women points to the unattainability of the female character in question, and suggests an eternal, enduring quality in her being. However, if the external features appear as if chiselled in marble, this suggests also the carving of an internal heart of stone. Far from exuding love and warmth, there is often an inner emotional coldness and a detachment from issues of sentiment and compassion within the *femme fatale*.

This chilly temperament is revealed in *Hermosa*, where it is also strongly related to statue imagery:

Muse, quel admirable et rare privilège!
 Elle haussait, d'instinct, ses épaules de neige
 Devant ce que la vie offre d'ennuis impurs;
 Elle accueillait, statue aux formes souveraines,
 D'un sourire écrasant les misères humaines
 Et les chagrins des jours obscurs. (I, 54)

In *Isis*, Tullia Fabriana remains unmoved by the crying of the sick children she holds in her arms: 'Était-ce donc sa faute si les douleurs mêmes ne pouvaient troubler son âme?' (I, 176). Tannuccio describes Elën as 'mille fois dédaigneuse' in the first act of *Elën*, and in the second act, she tries hard to feel some kind of positive emotion for Samuel: 'Qu'ai-je donc fait à Dieu?... Je voudrais secouer ces heures indignes comme une toilette usée!... (*Après un profond soupir.*) Essayons encore une fois! Peut-être serai-je touchée un instant; ce serait une consolation... si cela console' (I, 207, 226-27).

Coldness also indicates a steely steadfastness of opinion, as is demonstrated in the self-assured confidence of Tullia Fabriana: 'L'absence d'indécision dans le regard et dans la tenue, qualité qui, généralement, spécialise les femmes de cette saison, se pressentait si magnétiquement dans sa beauté, que sa vue seule glaçait les fadeurs sur les lèvres' (I, 123). Even in *Le Prétendant*, which presents passionate and greatly motivated women, there is still a great deal of imagery involving emotional coldness. Sione intimates of Emma Lyonna that 'on dit qu'elle montre peu ce qu'elle éprouve et qu'elle est toujours froide et souriante!' (I, 278). Indeed, as Sergius and Morgane are about to be shot at the end of the play, Lady Hamilton looks on dispassionately: 'Je ne suis plus qu'une statue sculptée au mur de leur tombeau et je les regarde mourir' (I, 369).

This emotional coldness affects not only the female in question, but also the male with whom she comes into contact, for example, Wilhelm de Strally d'Anthas in *Isis*: 'Pendant que Fabriana parlait, Wilhelm était devenu la proie d'un phénomène d'une froide horreur' (I, 158). However, it is not only the male who experiences a sense of discomfort in relation to the detached sensibility of the *femme fatale*. Her lack of ability to feel or express emotion is part of the fatality of the fatal woman: 'The "femme fatale" represents an ideal and a curse to men, but above all the superior woman suffers in her cool solitude. Being a mere image, although ideally beautiful, is inhuman.'¹⁶

Coldness is associated with the snow, and hence with the colour white, which itself is often associated with purity. In the *fin de siècle*, the more positive quality of purity was seen as a threatening state of being because of the near vogue for sterility. Childlessness was one of the obsessions of the *fin-de-siècle* male, partly because of an aristocratic fear of the dying out of family lines. This issue was relevant to Villiers himself, who had an illegitimate son with his housekeeper Marie Dantine. Villiers recognized the boy as his, and secured his future on his deathbed, through his marriage to the washerwoman. However, this boy, Victor, or 'Totor', as he was affectionately known, died in his teens, meaning the end of Villiers's particular family line. This was especially significant in the aristocracy, where there was a title and a position of social standing to safeguard and pass on.

Another reason why sterility was in vogue was the simultaneous attraction and repulsion experienced by the *fin-de-siècle* male in relation to the possibility of sexual relations. As a carnal being, the artist/writer was naturally deeply attracted by a woman's physical beauty. However, the diversion of a physical relationship with a female would destroy his hope of spiritual purity. On the other hand, a woman who

¹⁶ Linn B. Konrad, 'The Woman's Role in Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's Search for the Ideal', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 13 (1985), 113-25 (p. 117).

appeared cold and who was endowed with an intense spiritual and physical purity could perhaps help the *fin-de-siècle* aesthete in his search for the ideal. A chaste woman was therefore a symbol both of male frustration and hope, of death and of regeneration.

The colour white, then, is associated with an abstinence from sexual relations, hence with childlessness and sterility.¹⁷ In the case of Hermosa, a cold whiteness points primarily to a lack of feeling and compassion, as well as to sterility: 'Elle ignore pourtant les amours d'ici-bas: / Son cœur semblait glacé dans sa blanche poitrine' (I, 23).

Tullia Fabriana has never been known or suspected to have had a lover: 'On ne lui a jamais connu ni soupçonné d'amants' (I, 108). Samuel prizes what he conceives to be the purity of Maria/Elén. Still under her spell, he praises her character to his friend Goetz, as she was able to wait for her dream of love throughout much of her youth, 'sans recevoir du monde une seule ombre sur son front de vierge et conservant sa blancheur de cygne et d'hermine' (I, 241).

Another aspect of the nature of the *femme fatale* is that she is prone to a state bordering on somnambulism: 'Although at times short on specific detail, the face of the *femme fatale* is often described as having an almost somnambulistic expression with half-closed eyes and parted lips, as if rapt in contemplation of some inner world of private thought and shunning all that is external'.¹⁸ Some of Villiers's fated women also display this phenomenon. Hermosa is lost in her thought as the narrator observes her at the duke's ball: 'Elle semblait, perdue ainsi dans sa pensée, / l'ange nocturne des humains' (I, 21). As she is considering and then rejecting the offer of the life of religious faith, the reader learns that 'Hermosa se taisait comme lorsqu'on sommeille' (I, 25). Later, when she is waiting for and thinking about Don Juan at the start of the

¹⁷ See for example Mallarmé's poem 'Hérodiade' (*Poésies*, pp. 27-34), which presents a young girl caught in the cold and overbearing whiteness of sterility.

¹⁸ Newton, 'More about Eve', 23-35 (p. 27).

second song, Hermosa is in 'cette demi-veille / Où l'idéal survit au désir qui sommeille' (I, 32). Tullia Fabriana too follows a strict diet and spends her days reading in the library, where 'elle ne prononçait jamais une parole: ses yeux demi-fermés ne brillaient pas' (I, 150).

The *femme fatale* belonged to an era which was generally considered to be decadent in morals, attitudes, and lifestyle. This was reflected both in the art and literature of the time. Thus, a fatal woman of the late nineteenth century was often attired in clothes and jewellery that displayed wealth and status to the point of excess. Though Villiers's strong female characters are perhaps not as luxuriously attired as, for example, Gustave Moreau's bejewelled Salomé, they do generally exude an aura of decadent luxury and exoticism, both in their milieu as well as in their dress and behaviour.

Villiers's Hermosa spends her time at luxurious Venetian balls, while Tullia Fabriana lives in a palace of 'richesse et tranquillité [*sic*]' (I, 128). The plot of *Le Prétendant* of course centres around an attempt to overthrow the royal family, and it is carnival time in Naples when the revolutionaries make their move. This helps to create an atmosphere of decadent excess. Even the description of the unwelcoming fortress of Città-Lazzara is steeped in lavish detail: Morgane's room contains a Venetian mirror, an ebony bed, rich curtains fringed with gold, and luxurious furniture including a marble table.

Elën too lives in an atmosphere of decadence, throwing parties each night. However, the description of the palace where Rosenthal first met her evokes and prefigures in its atmosphere Samuel's dream of his journey with Maria along the stagnant waters of hell: Rosenthal met Elën in a 'sombre et antique palais, aux environs de la Ville éternelle. Des étangs dormaient à peu de distance de ses murailles, et ce

voisinage en approfondissait l'isolement' (I, 210). This is decadence carried to the extreme, beyond any aesthetic attraction, into degeneration and death.

The exotic is also present in the description of the *femme fatale* in Villiers's work. For example, the expression on the courtesan Elën's face reminds Rosenthal of oriental forests, and he is well aware of the exotic attraction of her beauty:

Et je remarquais sa beauté, l'éclat de sa pâleur créole, la distinction de ses traits, les bruns reflets de sa chevelure. Des senteurs de lianes dorées émanaient de sa démarche, son corps était baigné du riche parfum de savanes... Oh! son visage magnifiquement fatal!... Je l'ai perdu. (I, 210).

This is a spatial exoticism, since it regards lands distant to the writer. However, there can also be a temporal exoticism, as characters or places are displaced and distant in time. Villiers often situated his writing in the past. He ends 'Hermosa' by lamenting the fact that the balls and luxuriant decadence he has been describing are now no longer part of present time: 'Ô Venise! aujourd'hui ces choses-là sont mortes!' (I, 58). Elën was born in Florence, a town which 'ne brill[e] que du passé' (I, 231), while the action of *Le Prétendant* takes place at the end of the eighteenth century, more than fifty years before the time Villiers was writing. It is however the character of Tullia Fabriana who best demonstrates the principle of a temporal exoticism, along with mysticism, since she is presented as being the reincarnation of many female potentates dating back to the Egyptian goddess Isis.

It was made clear at the start of this section on the *femme fatale* that there have always been examples of fatal women in mythology and literature. In the *fin de siècle*, there was often a concerted backward focus on these mythological figures for inspiration as models of female cruelty. The ultimate archetype after Eve became Salomé as

painted by Gustave Moreau. Others however also held sway, and are referred to either directly or more often indirectly by Villiers.

Moreau represented many mythological fatal and fated women in painting apart from Salomé for whom he is best known. One of these is Helen of Troy, the Grecian demigoddess who caused so many deaths because of her adultery. As Moreau has painted her in more than one instance, she is pictured towering above the bloodied bodies of the men who have died to rescue her.¹⁹ In Villiers's *Premières Poésies*, Hermosa is seen in a position of ascendancy representing a danger for those who are beneath her:

Jeunes gens qui valsez aux pieds de cette femme,
Prenez garde de voir les gouffres de son âme!
Valsez, valsez toujours! ne la regardez pas...
Il semble, tant elle est au-dessus de ce monde
Qu'elle écoute, au milieu d'une extase profonde,
Le bruit sourd des chars du trépas! (I, 23)

In this stance and attitude of mind, she is like the beautiful Helen as Moreau painted her. She is also like Medusa, in that the reader is warned by the narrator not to look at her: perhaps, like the ancient Gorgon sister, the mere sight of her causes death.

Comparison can also be drawn between Hermosa and Delilah. In Part II of the poem, Hermosa asks for the secret of Don Juan in return for a kiss: 'Un seul de mes baisers, un seul de mes sourires, / Vaut le secret de mon amant' (I, 31). This is similar to the Old Testament story of Samson, who was plagued by his wife to reveal the secret

¹⁹ See for example *Hélène sur les ramparts de Troie* (1880: Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris); *Hélène à la porte Scée* (c. 1880: Musée Gustave Moreau, Paris); *Hélène sous les murs de Troie* (c. 1885: Musée du Louvre, Paris).

of his strength. The Judge of Israel ultimately paid for this with his life, while Don Juan also sacrifices his hope of finding the ideal.

Tullia Fabriana in *Isis* is described as being ‘un Génie aux conceptions vertigineuses, doué de l’énergie d’un Prométhée ou d’un Lucifer’ (I, 128). Later, she is seen as a ‘belle vierge prométhéenne’ (I, 149). It is to be noted that these are masculine characters with whom Fabriana is being aligned. This is perhaps because in her intense spirituality, Tullia Fabriana is in fact closer to the archetypal *fin-de-siècle* male rather than the female. It is also true that the *femme fatale* often exhibited aspects of personality more traditionally associated with the male than the female.

Tullia Fabriana is a character who enjoys masculine leisure pursuits such as studying, and especially sword-fighting. It is symbolic that she hears with interest about her father’s skills in swordsmanship while she is engaged in the activity of embroidery. She then lays aside this traditionally feminine occupation for a masculine one, and the next day asks him to teach her fencing. Surprised by her persistence and skill, her father keeps these lessons secret, and they fight by torchlight in one of the caves underneath the palace. In this, Tullia Fabriana is a direct literary cousin of the female fencer Hauteclair Stassin in Barbey D’Aurevilly’s tale ‘Le Bonheur dans le crime’.²⁰ Hauteclair is also instructed in this art by her father.

Among the female characters studied in this chapter, there are those who have a great desire for power, both politically and personally. Hermosa is ‘maîtresse d’elle-même’ (I, 56), with power over her past: she has literally thrown it away. Tullia Fabriana, Morgane, and Emma Harte, desire to rule. In *Isis*, Forsiani informs Wilhelm that even now, Fabriana holds the power of life and death over most of the potentates of

²⁰ ‘Le Bonheur dans le crime’ forms part of Barbey’s collection of short stories *Les Diaboliques*, which was first published in 1874.

Europe. However, through Wilhelm she desires to extend her reign of influence over the whole world.

The main dramatic thrust of the plot of *Le Prétendant* is the struggle for power between Morgane and Emma Lyonna Harte. Morgane strongly desires to be on the throne of the kingdom of the Deux-Siciles, and has been plotting for years to this end, gathering the men she can trust and waiting for the one through whom her dream of power can be fulfilled. However, Emma Lyonna wishes to retain the position of influence she holds in the Neapolitan court, and she attempts to block Morgane's revolt at every move. Indeed, the play begins with Morgane having been sent to the fortress of Città-Lazzara by Emma Harte, because she rightly suspects her enemy to be plotting against the throne. In the third act, when the revolution is about to begin, Lady Hamilton says of Morgane, 'C'est elle qui nous surveille. Une seule personne, ici, peut se défendre contre sa pénétration et son intrépidité, je vous assure' (I, 304). This single person capable of offering a defence against the ingenuity of Morgane is of course Emma Lyonna herself. Both women are driven by ambition, and are equally determined to succeed:

Nous sommes profondes et mortelles, toutes deux!... C'est un duel, où va se risquer un royaume, sur des paroles plus fines que l'acier, plus violentes que des coups de canon, plus sinistres et plus vagues que l'océan et les ténèbres!... Soit!... À nous deux. (Lady Hamilton, I, 337)

There is then a deep danger involved in contact with and between *fin-de-siècle* women, which is both fatal and intensely attractive to men. In *Elèn*, the page Tannucio describes Elèn's rival in love: 'Mme de Walzburg!... Oui, c'est une violente amazone, attrayante comme les dangers inconnus' (I, 205). In *Le Prétendant*, Lady Hamilton

rightly accuses Morgane of being a dangerous enemy: 'Vous êtes une adversaire dangereuse, Morgane: on ne peut lutter contre vous' (I, 302).

Another way in which fated women assume masculine roles and character traits is that they have become prone to the melancholy and solitary ennui which also deeply besets the male of the nineteenth century. Tullia Fabriana lives her life in solitude, and Sione, Morgane's younger sister in *Le Prétendant*, carries an aura of sadness with her. However, it is Elën who suffers most deeply from this intense boredom. She is wearied by the lovers who give their hearts to her and who ask for nothing in return except to be loved. This, of course, Elën finds impossible to do. Samuel, while still under her spell, remarks on the great sadness which weighs down upon the courtesan: 'L'expression de ton visage ferait penser que le sentiment d'un deuil ancien et inconsolable a voilé ta destinée' (I, 228). This melancholy also has a deep effect on the young student, as he reveals in conversation with Elën:

Rappelle-toi notre pâleur subite, hier soir, au sortir de cette chapelle en ruine!...
[...] Tu t'appuyais à mon bras, défaillante et malade de vivre. [...] Souviens-toi
quelles impressions inconnues d'inquiétude et de stupeur vinrent nous troubler,
nous opprimer lentement, par degrés invisibles. Ce fut, pour moi, je ne puis
dire quel mouvement de la mémoire, nerveux et sinistre. (I, 228)

Another quality of the *femme fatale* present in Villiers's work is that of great passion, which is often symbolized in *fin-de-siècle* art and literature by the proximity of the woman to a wild animal or to the moving of natural forces. This identifies her with nature and the material world, while man remains aligned with the spiritual.

Hermosa, in the second song of her long lyric poem, is pictured lying on a tiger skin. This pose will later be taken up by other *fin-de-siècle femmes fatales*, for example, Salammbô in Flaubert's novel bearing her name, and Clara in Octave Mirbeau's *Le*

Jardin des supplices.²¹ In the description of Tullia Fabriana's room in chapter twelve of Villiers's *Isis*, it too has lion and tiger skins on the floor. Fabriana also survives being struck by lightning but is transformed, gaining a deeper mysterious power from that night.

When Rosenthal begins to speak about Elën, the imagery he uses combines pictures of wildlife with the exotic: 'Les transparences de ses rêves ornaient ses regards; ils inspiraient des sensations de forêts orientales; il y avait des lions et des serpents dans les solitudes de cette femme!' (I, 210).

Passion runs deep in *Le Prétendant*. Lady Hamilton is deeply motivated by her love for Sergius: 'Tu m'as fasciné comme l'inconnu! tu es l'étranger! Vois, j'ai tout bravé pour venir te dire, même inutilement, que je t'aime, Sergius!' (I, 328). Sione relates that Emma Lyonna even broke the perfume phial in her hand when she heard that Sergius had left the palace of the Saintos.

However, it is Morgane, out of all these fated and fatal females, who displays most clearly the passionate qualities of the *femme fatale*, and those which were to instil fear in a weakened male. She is strongly associated with nature in the violence of its natural force. She relates the incident of a storm which broke upon Sione and herself when they were out riding one day: 'Le fracas fut si violent que la douce enfant s'évanouit. Comme le tonnerre roulait ses globes de feu, je me pris d'impatience... Je le poursuivis et je le chassai à coups de cravache' (I, 256). Later, when she escapes from Città-Lazzara with Sergius, she hastens to go out into the storm. She claws at the cushions like a cat in an expression of her love for Sergius, but also of her thirst for

²¹ After performing religious rites in Chapter 3 of the novel, Salammbô falls back onto 'un petit lit d'ivoire, couvert de peaux de lynx avec des coussins en plume de perroquet' in Gustave Flaubert, *Salammbô* ([Paris]: Pocket, 1995), pp. 77, 81. *Salammbô* was first published in 1862. See also Octave Mirbeau's later novel: 'Je regardai Clara. Divinement calme et jolie, [...] elle était mollement couchée sur une peau de tigre. [...] Un chien du Laos, aux poils rouges, dormait auprès d'elle, le museau sur sa cuisse, une patte sur son sein.' Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* ([Paris]: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1986), p. 139. *Le Jardin* was first published in its entirety in 1899.

political power. However, perhaps the most shocking incident in this play is when Morgane drinks wine as if it were the blood of the woman whom Sergius had been tempted to love:

Regarde ce vin! comme il est rouge! comme il roule sa poupre mystérieusement... Écoute! Je songe à cette femme, à cette ombre, à cette jeune fille que tu pouvais aimer et je regarde ce vin! (*Rembrunie.*) Oui, je comprends l'idée sombre des poètes! Je crois que c'est du sang!... (*Se renversant, avec mollesse, et buvant.*) Je bois, cependant!... avec Délices!

(I, 282)

The final aspect of the *femme fatale* is that she causes death. The third section of this chapter focuses specifically on the relationship between the female and her lover, and the death which it brings in its wake. However, even outside of this close relationship, Villiers's fatal women are responsible for the deaths of others.

Tullia Fabriana in *Isis* is very much prepared to deal a fatal blow to any unwelcome intruder in her home. The high castle walls are a defence in themselves. Added to this are the wired doors with alarm bells connected to the servant Xoryl's room. There is also a trap door in the corridor which, 'en soi, jetait une ombre de mort et de saisissement sur l'asiatique splendeur de ces longues draperies lamées' (I, 167). Outside in the garden there are dogs and gigantic armed Negroes with orders to destroy those who trespass on the property.

Fabriana herself dresses as a knight when she rides out on her nocturnal missions of mercy to the poor and sick of the countryside, and is armed with a sword and pistols. She is even prepared to precipitate her own death, and carries on her person an emerald ring, 'cet anneau qui contient pour [elle] la nuit où personne ne travaille plus' (I, 184).

This instrument of suicide, a common *fin-de-siècle* literary device, is actually used by Axël and Sara to carry their death-wish to its conclusion.²²

Both Morgane and Lady Hamilton in *Le Prétendant* are guilty of causing the deaths of those who conspire against them. When Morgane is threatened by D'Ast in the first act, she has no hesitation in shooting him, and is only prevented from administering this lethal blow by the fact that the marquis has tampered with her weapon, causing it to be ineffective. D'Ast indeed accuses her of having a rival executed, 'c'est-à-dire étrangler dans un cachot de Saint-Érasme, par un bravo florentin nommé Ruffo, et déguisé en moine'. This rival was 'la comtesse portugaise Concepcion Souza, qui avait porté de l'ombrage à [son] ascendant sur le duc de Poleastro' (I, 270). Emma Lyonna, of course, orchestrates the failure of the revolutionary plot of Morgane and Sergius, and is present at their execution. Like Tullia Fabriana, she too possesses a piece of jewellery containing a fatal poison:

Je possédais un mince joyau espagnol dont m'avait fait présent Lord Graham; c'était une petite boucle en airain; le bijou, dans les circonstances où nous sommes, se plaçait, invisible, derrière l'oreille. Si les mains étaient liées, on soulevait doucement son épaule, on y appuyait la tête, et à l'aide d'une petite pression de bas en haut, on s'échappait, foudroyée, de la vie, à l'instant même: voyez! je m'en suis démunie. (I, 335)

In many respects, therefore, the way in which Villiers presents his female characters strongly reflects the image of the late-nineteenth-century *femme fatale*. Though, of course, there was no written blueprint at the time of what should constitute a fatal woman, there are easily pinpointed attributes common to female literary characters

²² For another example of this device being used in *fin-de-siècle* literature, see Jean Lorrain's *Monsieur de Phocas*, first published in its entirety in 1901, where the scheming painter Claudius Ethal eventually dies after being forced to consume the poison contained in his ring.

from the *fin-de-siècle* period, and Villiers's women are no exception to this general trend. There was a definite regeneration of the image of womanhood in the late nineteenth century. Transformed from being a victim of male dominance, she could now stand alone as a person in her own right, an object of beauty, ambition, and strength of character. In art and literature, she was vested with a power of her own, power to choose her destiny, and to affect that of her male counterpart.

4.2 Hommes fatals

If it is true to say that the image of womankind was given a fresh impetus in the *fin de siècle* and that females were now ascending to a position of dominance, it must also be true that males had suffered loss in the balance of power between the sexes. The fatal man of Romanticism was full of strength and vitality, enough both for himself, and for the woman to whom he had attached himself. However, in *The Male Malady*, Margaret Waller sees a new version of masculinity springing up at the start of the nineteenth century in the character of Chateaubriand's René. René is beset by world-weariness or *mal du siècle*, which Waller identifies as being a specifically male malady, and he unfortunately becomes the model for a whole generation of men.²³ Waller certifies her opinion by backing it up with evidence from the memoirs of Chateaubriand himself:

An entire family of René poets and René prose writers proliferated: lamentable and disjointed language was all one ever heard; all they ever discussed were winds and storms, mysterious sorrows delivered up to the clouds and dark of night. There wasn't a single callow youth just out of school who didn't dream he was the most unfortunate of men; not one lad of sixteen who hadn't exhausted his life, who didn't believe himself tormented by his genius.²⁴

Villiers himself can certainly be seen as one such tormented youth, as his *Premières Poésies* show.

²³ Waller, *Male Malady*, pp. 2, 5.

²⁴ Chateaubriand, *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), I, 462. Cited and trans. by Waller in *Male Malady*, p. 9. Of course, Chateaubriand was a writer, not a sociologist, and he can hardly claim to be unbiased when speaking of the influence of his own work. However, he did have an undeniable impact on nineteenth-century French literature.

The position of dominance of the nineteenth-century male in society had been usurped by progress, and he could no longer be confident in the strength of his own ability as an individual:

Freedom was to bring power to the masses, and with mass-power and democracy, it was bound to foster mass-production, the totalitarian State, indoctrination, the triumph of the machine, from the house (that *machine à habiter*) down to every aspect of culture (spoon-fed culture); in a word man's fall, from the position of a protagonist (hero) to that of a mere pawn, the 'poor muddled maddened mundane animal' of Auden's verse, a prey 'to wilful authority and blind accident'.²⁵

Men had lost the state of self-confident assurance which had so possessed them throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and now found themselves in a position of weakness. Just as Villiers's female characters fall into the bracket of the *fin-de-siècle femme fatale*, his male protagonists also bear many late-nineteenth-century character traits. However, there is also a suspicion in some of lingering traits of the Romantic hero, as if Villiers could not quite relinquish his vision of male power and dominance. This section looks at the male characters from the same works examined in the *femme fatale* section, this time focusing on Don Juan, Wilhelm de Strally-d'Anthas, Samuel Wissler, and Sergius d'Albamah. Through an examination of their defining qualities, I piece together what constituted the *fin-de-siècle* male archetype for Villiers. However, first to be addressed is the exception to the rule, the quality seen in some of Villiers's heroes which belongs more in Romantic literature than in the *fin de siècle*: male energy and action.

²⁵ Mario Praz, *The Neurotic in Literature* ([Melbourne]: Melbourne University Press, 1965), p. 10.

It was common in the *fin de siècle* to present males in states of inaction:

In painting as in literature the male figure is presented as a thinker, not a doer and is frequently depicted in works of art incarnating Moreau's ideal of 'la belle inertie', at a moment of confrontation or contemplation, not action.²⁶

This lies in contrast to what had gone before: the dashing movement and heroism of Romanticism. Mario Praz makes clear the distinction between Romanticism and the decadent *fin de siècle* through an analogy with painting:

Delacroix, as a painter, was fiery and dramatic; Gustave Moreau strove to be cold and static. The former painted gestures, the latter attitudes. [...] They are highly representative of the moral atmosphere of the two periods in which they flourished – of Romanticism, with its fury of frenzied action, and of Decadence, with its sterile contemplation.²⁷

Yet Villiers's male protagonists do not fully conform to the 'belle inertie' type. Some of them are full of energy, and display the force and vitality of the Romantic hero. Don Juan is a knight of epic romance. He appears by moonlight with fur hat and sword. He is evidently an accomplished horseman, and is also a hunter, seen in the fact that in the second section of the poem, Hermosa is pictured lying on the hide of a tiger that has fallen prey to his shot.

However, in Villiers's poem, Don Juan is at heart a 'thinker' rather than a 'doer': he cannot comprehend the point of life if there is death alone at the end of it. Similarly, he cannot find anything of satisfaction enough to fill the gap created by his failure to find the ideal.

²⁶ Newton, 'More about Eve', 23-35 (p. 32).

²⁷ Praz, *Romantic Agony*, p. 289.

Wilhelm de Strally-d'Anthas in *Isis* is also a mixture of *fin-de-siècle* sensitivity and Romantic action. He is of athletic build: 'Il était bien fait; sa haute taille, la souplesse de ses mouvements annonçaient une vigueur développée et des muscles d'athlète' (I, 194).

However, it is Sergius d'Albamah, claimant to the throne in *Le Prétendant*, who displays the most energy. His courage and resilience impress Morgane when she first meets him at Città-Lazzara. Though he has been a prisoner of war for a year in the fortress, his voice can be heard in song above the noise of the storm. He has a proud spirit, refusing to drink wine while he is not a free man, and is unafraid to face death: 'De quelque manière qu'elle se présente, les hommes comme moi savent en rire et la braver' (I, 261). His actions and his attitude towards his fate at the end of the play do not give the lie to this bold statement. There is an inherent conceit in Sergius which is not unattractive, and harks back to the utter self-confidence of the Romantic man:

Une fois dehors, une fois ressuscité, j'irai jusqu'où ma pensée me portera. [...]
Il n'est pas de sommet que je ne tenterai, sans hésitation, au mépris de toute loi de la force organisée! Quand bien même il s'agirait de renverser un trône ou de le conquérir, si j'ai cet idéal, je ne reculerai pas; et qui sait?... peut-être ne serais-je pas le premier de ma race. (I, 260)

Even when he is about to die, he refuses to recognize any other kingship save his own.

In this audacious pride, and in the fact that Sergius was co-leader of a revolution, he fits strongly into the mould of a Romantic hero. There is, however, a clashing of two literary cultures in the character of Sergius d'Albamah, as the decadence of the *fin de siècle* is also present. The revolution in which he was involved was after all instigated, led, and scuppered by a woman whose plan and orders Sergius and others were following. It is also clear that as a Romantic hero, Sergius is at times quite out of

place among other characters. When the plotters first meet him, Montecelli remarks, 'On se croirait au Moyen Âge en l'écoutant!' (I, 297). Similarly, when the revolt begins and Sergius reveals his kingly identity, Lord Acton does not at first appear to take him seriously: 'Que veut dire ceci?... Est-ce une énigme de carnaval?' (I, 319).

Sergius is a hero born out of his time in an age which is moving into modernity. Villiers has taken the mood of the *fin de siècle* in France and transposed it onto Naples at the end of the eighteenth century. Like the heroes of Shakespearean tragedy, the strength of this man will be undermined by a single fatal flaw. Lady Hamilton predicts to him that like 'les aventuriers fatals, les héros inconnus, les princes sombres', he will be 'vaincu par le grain de sable!' (I, 311-12). Even in light of the potential of all his resources and energy, Sergius is still at the mercy of the hands of fate, and in the end is powerless to change the course of his own destiny. As such, he demonstrates an intermediate state between that of the Romantic fatal man, and the *fin-de-siècle homme fatal*.

Such an intermediate state is also visible in the nobility with which Villierian heroes are vested. Like the *femmes fatales*, the male heroes in Villiers's work are often of aristocratic descent. Don Juan is 'un cavalier qui passait dans la plaine', returning to his feudal manor (I, 27). Wilhelm de Strally-d'Anthas in *Isis* bears the title of count, and the reader is informed that his mother 'était de l'une des plus illustres maisons d'Italie' (I, 103). Samuel Wissler, the male protagonist who succumbs to the seduction of the courtesan Elën, is also descended from nobility, as he tells her: 'Je suis le baron de Wissler; mon château n'est pas éloigné de plus de trente lieues' (I, 231).

Sergius, the main male character in *Le Prétendant*, can claim not only to belong to the nobility, but also to be of royal descent. Morgane suspects this when she first comes across him in the fortress of Città-Lazzara: 'il me paraît de l'étoffe des rois' (I, 265). He certainly behaves like a king when he is first introduced to the men at the

centre of the plot to establish him on the throne, in his demand that they swear allegiance to him: 'Jurez-moi fidélité, soumission et dévouement jusqu'à la mort, sur votre honneur et sur votre salut de chrétiens et de gentilshommes' (I, 297). Later, he reveals his credentials as the revolt truly begins: 'Je suis Sergius Sigismond d'Albamah, prince et duc de Souabe et de Franconie, arrière-petit-fils de Conrad V, l'empereur d'Allemagne!' (I, 319).

However, just as the *femme fatale* possessed a nobility of beauty, the artist and *fin-de-siècle* male too were redefined as having a nobility of sentiment and intelligence. In *Bohemian versus Bourgeois*, César Graña makes mention of a legal amendment proposed to the French Chamber of Deputies in March 1847 which would, in his words, 'grant political rights to intellectuals without taking into account their social station and would, in effect, recognize intelligence as a social rank in itself'.²⁸ With the loss of status of the French aristocracy, a new nobility was being generated by men of letters. This new elite was being composed from the ranks of writers and artists, the ultimate representative being the Baudelairean Dandy, who embodied 'the spiritual exclusivism of the cultural *déclassé* in a democratic age, the last (and wholly intellectual) glimmer of the aristocratic tradition before it was overtaken by spiritually pre-empted equalitarianism'.²⁹ This explains why there often appeared a gap in the literature of Villiers's time, between those characters who were distinguished by this nobility of sentiment, and those who were not: 'La partition du public en deux franges, les élus et la meute bourgeoise, est commune à Villiers et au mouvement symboliste.'³⁰

Fictional *fin-de-siècle* male characters reflect this new form of noble sensitivity. The best example of it in Villiers's early work is seen in Wilhelm de Strally d'Anthas in

²⁸ Graña, *Bohemian/Bourgeois*, p. 139.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁰ Jean-Paul Gourevitch, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, ou l'univers de la transgression* (Paris: Seghers, 1971), p. 39.

Isis. He is an aristocrat by birth, but he also shows that he has a distinct nobility of nature:

Autrefois un pareil enfant représentait la plus haute affirmation de la dignité humaine. Il fallait des siècles pour arriver à produire son individualité. C'était une résultante des hauts faits et de l'intègre probité d'une série d'aïeux dont la glorieuse histoire et les vertus domestiques s'évoquaient à son nom. (I, 194)

Another defining feature of the *fin-de-siècle* male is his physical appearance, which is often refined and elegant. These are qualities associated with the dandy and feminine beauty rather than assertive masculinity.

Wilhelm's 'belle physionomie' is noted when he appears at the ball in the first chapter of *Isis* (I, 103). There is a fuller physical description given of him on his clandestine meeting with Forsiani in Florence: 'Pour Wilhelm, c'était un splendide jeune homme, ayant de longs cheveux bouclés et noirs, un air de douceur et d'insouciance, un teint pâle et de beaux yeux' (I, 105). Like the Baudelairean dandy, he also takes obvious care in the selection of his wardrobe:

L'élégance est une force. Il portait, suivant les modes admirables de ce temps, un costume de velours noir brodé à la ceinture de fines passementeries d'or et une épée choisie. La plume blanche de sa toque était fixée par une pierre précieuse. (I, 193)

Samuel Wissler in *Elën* also exemplifies a *fin-de-siècle* male beauty. He is described by his friend Goetz as a 'jeune homme d'environ vingt-six ans, d'une physionomie grave, intelligente et douce' (I, 212-13).

Youthful looks, denoting innocence and often belying the actual age of the character in question, are another hallmark of the *fin-de-siècle* decadent. In 'Hermosa',

the narrator says of Don Juan that 'son visage semblait d'un tout jeune homme encore' (I, 27). In *Isis*, Wilhelm is only seventeen years old, and possesses the smile of a child: 'Comme pour adoucir la sévère beauté de son visage, son sourire était d'une modestie et d'une timidité d'enfant. [...] Enfin le comte Wilhelm semblait n'avoir aucune pensée qui ne fût bonne et ingénue' (I, 194). Samuel Wissler in *Le Prétendant* is described by Tannuccio as 'un enfant!' (I, 232). The youthfulness of the *fin-de-siècle* male emphasizes his weakness and vulnerability in relation to the cold, dispassionate, and experienced *femme fatale*.

The *homme fatal* is therefore open to attack from his female counterpart. However, he also has weaknesses of his own which serve to limit the strength of his resources. For example, the fated male of the late nineteenth century can be possessed of great passion for the female to whom he is attached. However, this is often a narcissistic conceit, as he projects his own desires for the ideal onto a woman. Moreover, because of the failure of his quest to find the ideal, the *fin-de-siècle* male is incapacitated by extreme sadness, a melancholy leading eventually to complete inertia. This sadness was to become one of the defining criteria of the new nobility which sprang up in artistic circles at the end of the nineteenth century.

Don Juan feels this melancholy very deeply. At times, he frightens Hermosa with the sight of the depths of his soul. As she observes him in Venice, he exudes a majestic sadness:

Quelque secret sans nom penchait ta tête sombre;

Tu regardais le vide, impassible, dans l'ombre,

Comme un Dieu des festins maudits. (I, 33)

Hermosa perceives that

[...] la tristesse suprême

Consacrait [sa] fierté; comme un noir diadème

Le désespoir [le] couronnait. (I, 33-34)

There is an air of sadness too enveloping the old courtier Forsiani in *Isis*: ‘Son visage noble et fier, que les symptômes de la vieillesse prochaine rehaussaient de gravité, paraissait empreint de mélancolie’ (I, 105). In *Elën*, Samuel Wissler has an air of seriousness which excludes frivolity. Goetz asks him: ‘Toujours grave?... Toujours enseveli dans les profondes pensées?... Toujours en bonne fortune avec la déesse Raison?’ (I, 214).

Another character trait common to the *fin-de-siècle* male is a sense of intense aloneness. At times, this is manifested in the simple solitude in which the character in question indulges. However, there is often a literal, physical exile involved. Many Villierian heroes who have instigated a search for the ideal and failed in it have actually chosen to engage in a form of exile. For example, Villiers’s Don Juan feels exiled from a paradise for which he has an intense thirst, and he leaves Hermosa to be a wanderer on the earth.

Wilhelm admits to Forsiani in *Isis* that he is alone in the world: he is an orphan, like Tullia Fabriana. In *Elën*, Samuel tells Goetz even before he has met his beloved Maria that he has been touched by a feeling of exile in his life, particularly in his search for the ideal:

L’idéal! – Je l’ai cherché longtemps. Sombre et soucieux, j’ai connu la honte de vivre... Oui, la souffrance a distrait longtemps mon orgueil solitaire; j’ai profondément douté de l’invisible. – Alors, je me souviens, j’habitais les plages du Nord comme un exilé. L’inquiétude du ciel me travaillait. (I, 215)

At the end of the play, when he has become aware of the deep deception of Elën, Samuel gives his sword to Goetz, and chooses to leave for an exile of forgetting.

Rosenthal too has chosen to live a life of exile in Iceland after his encounter with the courtesan:

Le pays que j'ai choisi pour exil est en rapport avec moi-même, et mon cœur
est une nuit d'hiver. [...] Je vais vivre dans une cabane, de la vie des pêcheurs.
J'en ai assez de la terre. (I, 212)

Even the energetic Sergius d'Albamah describes himself as 'un exilé, [un] captif inconnu' (I, 263).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the weakened state of the *fin-de-siècle* male, his final defining attribute is that he still wishes to be in control. This is demonstrated in 'Hermosa' where Don Juan is determined to fashion his lover in the shape of his own narcissistic choosing and desire:

Je cherchai ton enfant, ton chef-d'œuvre, ô nature,
Afin de recréer son âme simple et pure
Avec l'âme de mes amours! (I, 50)

While this Promethean form of male domination was possible in Romanticism and before, when man was invested with real psychological and social power over his female companion, it is no longer wholly successful in *fin-de-siècle* literature, where the woman is now gaining dominance. The male then is doubly weakened by the strength of his desire and the realization of his own impotence:

Her counterpart is the Artist (always male), who casts himself in the double role of Pygmalion, victim and creator of her beauty. She is the image of his desire,

that inevitably destroys him; because his desire is to bend the whole world to his will, though he knows he has lost the power to do so. This gap between ambition and ability spawns neurosis, in all its forms.³¹

The *fin-de-siècle* male hero has therefore become a neurotic, obsessed by the attainment of a goal he can no longer achieve.

Mario Praz points to the advent of the neurotic in literature as the beginning of a veritable crisis of the hero. The true hero then begins to disappear from the novel, 'giving way to an uncertain character, morally neither entirely good nor entirely bad, intellectually a stranger to the society in the midst of which he lives, without the energy for open rebellion'.³² This shows how the *fin-de-siècle* dandy of the late nineteenth century prepared the way in literature for the appearance of indifferent heroes such as Camus's Meursault in *L'Étranger*.³³ The *fin-de-siècle* male has become a weakened individual, incapable of being truly happy or of taking control of his own destiny. He is also very much dominated by the *femme fatale*, and their relationship is one which often leads to his death.

³¹ Birkett, *Sins/Fathers*, p. 4.

³² Praz, *Neurotic*, p. 8.

³³ *L'Étranger* was first published by Gallimard in 1942.

4.3 The Gender Divide: Sex and Death in Villiers

Since gender is a system of meaning that is fundamentally relational, the two sexes derive their meaning not only from any intrinsic properties but from the ways that they are mutually defined.³⁴

The *fin-de-siècle* male and female archetypes found in Villiers's work have been defined through an examination of their intrinsic properties: character traits that relate to each as individuals. However, the relationship between the two is equally important for this study. There was a veritable obsession among writers and artists of the late nineteenth century which drew together images of sex and death. Villiers too was part of this literary culture, and the combination of sex with death is a common feature in his shorter works as well as in his longer plays and novels. For example, in the short story 'Akèdysséril' (*L'Amour suprême*), the young royal lovers are bound together and die in an ecstasy of physical embrace.

Along with the masculine search for the spiritual and the alignment of woman with the physical in the *fin de siècle*, there came a horror of physical contact between men and women. The battle for spirituality was transposed onto the male/female relationship, which was one not of harmony but of discord. Instead of being joined together in an idyllic unity, men and women remained quite separate and hostile figures: 'The self-images mirrored in the looking-glass world of decadent art are those of distinct, solitary egos: male and female locked in heroic conflict.'³⁵

However, in this psychological battle of the sexes, the female is the stronger party. Even physically, the *fin-de-siècle* male is weaker than his female counterpart, whose goal is his destruction:

³⁴ Waller, *Male Malady*, p. 4.

³⁵ Birkett, *Sins/Fathers*, p. 4.

In accordance with this conception of the Fatal Woman, the lover is usually a youth, and maintains a passive attitude; he is obscure, and inferior either in condition or in physical exuberance to the woman, who stands in the same relation to him as do the female spider, the praying mantis, &c., to their respective males.³⁶

Because of the physical weakening of the male and the growth in strength of the female, another aspect of the decadent *fin-de-siècle* relationship between the sexes is that they grow to resemble one another physically. The *femme fatale* is endowed with an ill-defined yet almost supernatural beauty and begins to take on a male bodily shape. The *fin-de-siècle* male in turn becomes more feminine in his looks until it is virtually impossible to distinguish between male and female since both have become equally androgynous:

An essential hallmark of this form of degeneration is the effacing of sexual characteristics: effeminate men and manly women. The more nervous a population is, the more common girls are with talent and generally male spiritual characteristics.³⁷

As has already been shown, many of the women in Villiers's work exhibit male characteristics, for example, Tullia Fabriana in her pursuit of a scholarly life, and her swordsmanship. Villiers's males also possess a feminine beauty of fine features, elegant clothes, and pale skin.

The outworking of the principles of sex and death, and of female domination of the male, can be observed in the four texts already cited in this chapter. Here, it is evident that the female either directly or indirectly causes the death of the male, in the

³⁶ Praz, *Romantic Agony*, p. 205.

³⁷ P. J. Möbius, *Ueber de physiologischen Schwachsinn des Weibes*, 3rd edn (Halle, 1901), p. 53, cited in Heller, 'Some Observations', pp. 7-13 (p. 11).

loss of his own self-will. However, in one of the cases at least, there is a moral victory over the fear of death, as characters positively choose to end their lives rather than live in an ignoble manner.

In 'Hermosa', the first work examined in this chapter, the heroine of the poem claims to possess the power of life and death over her lover as she threatens, 'je peux faire, ainsi qu'une Sirène, / Mourir d'amour! si je le veux' (I, 31). It is to a metaphysical death that she condemns Don Juan as he leaves for a state of exile, no longer willing to be part of this world. Even outside this particular relationship with Hermosa however, Don Juan regards love and death as being intrinsically linked. When he speaks of his despair to Hermosa, he tells her he looks at the grave without hate and without desire, 'comme une ombre suprême où dorment les amours' (I, 34). Later, he draws a further analogy between them: 'Ah! l'heure des amours est l'heure des fantômes' (I, 49).

The whole experience of love and of a relationship with a female has been darkened for Don Juan by his failure to find any happiness or fulfilment in it. Villiers has presented him as a *fin-de-siècle* decadent, disillusioned and broken by his inability to reach his ideal.

The attractions of the *femme fatale* were considerable to the *fin-de-siècle* male. They were, however, often fatal lures, leading ultimately to death. When Wilhelm de Strally d'Anthas first meets Tullia Fabriana in *Isis*, he says with deep sadness, 'Comme je l'aime déjà, comme je l'aime à en mourir!' (I, 163). Fabriana, however, is determined to use their relationship to her own ends. It is she who has chosen Wilhelm as a young man to be moulded to her own designs, in order to fulfil the destiny she seeks:

Ce n'était pas un homme, – un homme ayant cinq à six mille ans de croyances
dans les veines et qui, se supposant penser seul, n'accepterait la Force que pour

se distraire? [...] C'était un enfant que je désirais: des yeux fiers, un sang riche, un front pur, une conscience, oui, c'était cela. (I, 189)

It is clear from this passage that in the relationship between Fabriana and Wilhelm, it is she who is ultimately in control. She is watching and discerning the depths of the young man's soul in her interviews with him:

Elle abaissa lentement son regard sur lui; ce fut une décision. [...] Son âme planait au milieu de ses pensées comme un aigle dans les ténèbres; mais sûre d'amener d'une façon bienséante l'instant qu'elle désirait, elle jugea très inutile de le différer. (I, 195)

The balance of psychological power in *Isis* has swung from the domain of the male to that of the female, and it is she who is now dominant.

At the start of the drama *Elën*, Samuel Wissler emphasizes the non-compatibility of the spiritual and the physical. He is adamant that the sensual, fallen women with whom his friend Goetz associates are fatal to the thinking man, and argues convincingly for the existence of the dichotomy of the carnal female and spiritual male:

Vous admettez au partage de votre existence des cœurs tombés, des esprits nuls, des âmes méchantes, vous dont le front pense magnifiquement! Une femme, dis-tu? Celui qui accepte, ne fût-ce qu'une heure, l'amour d'une pareille folle, s'expose à perdre le sens de bien des choses élevées. J'ai le cœur neuf, et si j'avais le temps d'aimer comme vous autres, il me faudrait mon égale ou la solitude. Mais je veux garder la pureté de mon âme: c'est ma liberté. Pas de souillures à la pensée! Les luttes chastes augmentent sa puissance lucide: il faut écarter avec résolution ce qui cherche à l'assombrir. (I, 215)

Samuel further reinforces the link between a male/female relationship and the grave by asserting the impossibility of finding his ideal woman elsewhere than in death: 'je ne pouvais découvrir, je le sentais bien, hélas! un idéal digne de moi, que dans les royaumes de la mort' (I, 215). This is coincidental, since in Act III, he describes the place where he found himself in dream with Maria as being a compartment in hell. She was the ideal he believed to be worthy of himself, but she deceived him and has brought him into a state of death, as she herself recognizes in his dream:

Je suis la fille de cet Érèbe! – Tu cherchais l'immortalité? Tu la demandais autrefois?... Regarde! Reconnais-toi dans cette nature! Reconnais tes pensées dans ces grandes fleurs maudites!... Ces eaux, et cette terre, et ces collines, c'est ton cœur dans l'épouvante!... Tu as douté à cause de la beauté d'une créature?... Reconnais ton âme dans ce ciel interdit!... Nous sommes ici à jamais, sans savoir où nous sommes, sans nous aimer, sans nous souvenir!...
La voilà!... la voilà, l'Immortalité! (I, 239)

Samuel has made the mistake of imposing his own image of an ideal woman on the form of Elën. However, the courtesan was not as she appeared to be, and the love which Samuel had cultivated within his heart has turned to death.

There are also signals previous to this in the drama that Samuel is destined to die in some way as a result of his love for Maria/Elën. While the servants are discussing the newcomer in a room in Elën's palace, they remark on the paleness of his face, which they link to the pallor of love and of death:

CARMEN: La pâleur de l'amour!

TANNUCIO, *pensif*: Si belle, qu'on eût dit celle de la mort.

(I, 222)

Rosenthal, the indirect cause of Elën's death, also suffers through his relationship with her. Madame de Wahlburg explains his position to her rival Elën: 'Veuillez bien entendre, madame; ce jeune homme a pour vous une passion qui le fait mourir' (I, 224). Andréas himself has already revealed to Wahlburg the extent of the damage that has been done. He is a man who, like Lord Ewald in *L'Ève future*, is capable of loving only once: 'Mon cœur est mort: je suis de ceux qui ne peuvent aimer qu'une fois' (I, 212). Rosenthal, therefore, as well as Samuel, has been fatally damaged by his relationship with Elën.

In *Le Prétendant*, the final work studied in this chapter, the attentions of Morgane have a deadly affect not only on Sergius, her avowed lover, but also on Leone, her servant-boy. When this young man first enters into her employ after the death of his former master the marquis d'Ast, he is content simply to be near her, whilst recognizing at the same time the danger she presents to him: 'Aimer!... cela suffit. Je suis heureux de mon sort. Je puis voir son visage qui me fait mourir' (I, 274).

This direct link established between love and death is further reinforced through the fate of the character of Leone in Act IV. Just as Morgane is about to be placed on the scaffold, she embraces him in cognizance of his fidelity and courage. Her enemies, however, imagine that she is whispering instructions to the page and shoot him, mortally wounding the boy. Leone smiles at Morgane: 'C'est à cause de vous; ne me plaignez pas', while Morgane realizes that she has been the cause of his death: 'Adieu, cœur pur, cher enfant que j'ai regardé trop tard, tout occupée des traîtres, et que mon premier baiser fait mourir!' (I, 346).

Sergius d'Albamah too finds that the love which Morgane inspires within him is a love which could well lead to death:

Morgane, je vous contemple, vous par qui je suis libre!... Je voudrais faire tenir les joies et les triomphes dans un de vos instants; je me perds dans un de

vos regards et je donnerais toutes nos espérances sublimes, simplement pour mourir le front sur vos genoux!... (I, 281)

When Morgane realizes that the struggle for power is over, she desires to retreat into death with Sergius. When Emma Lyonna Hamilton attempts to persuade her to sign terms of surrender, Morgane refuses, answering both for herself and for Sergius: 'je suis sûre qu'il a préféré avec moi, dans la terre humide et noire, la couche sombre que je vais lui offrir tout à l'heure' (I, 358). Sergius himself is equally defiant to Emma Lyonna, choosing death gladly rather than surrender, and refusing to believe that Morgane has yielded to her rival: 'Je pense qu'elle est impatiente comme moi de mourir, surtout si elle vous a entendue!... Nous sommes prisonniers, il est naturel que la mort suive la défaite, voilà tout' (I, 365).

Indeed, death plays an integral part in the consummation of the relationship between Sergius and Morgane, and is strongly related to marital imagery. In the last part of the play, Morgane confuses the announcement of their execution with wedding bells: 'Sergius, entends-tu cette cloche? Ce sont nos fiançailles qui sonnent!' (I, 369). Morgane is unafraid of death, and like Hermosa, does not regret leaving this world: 'Un dernier baiser, Sergius! Notre âme est comme un beau soir d'exil!... Je meurs avec toi, sans regrets.' (I, 370). However, unlike Hermosa, she dies *with* her lover, and there is a spiritual union of the couple in death. Morgane refers to 'notre âme' as being the joined soul of herself and Sergius, and she consistently expresses her desire to be united with her lover in death: 'tout à l'heure son âme et la mienne s'embrasseront dans la nuit' (I, 359).

Therefore, in the case of Morgane and Sergius, a victory over death has been won, since the fear of the fatal instant and of what may follow it have been taken away: neither Morgane nor her lover are afraid to die. However, it is less easy to ascertain whether or not this sense of victory over death extends to regeneration. Certainly, Sione

holds up a cross to the lovers as the soldiers kneel to take aim and shoot them: 'Regardez, amis... Voici la route!' (I, 371). Similarly, after the fatal shots sound, the abbess prays for the race of the kings of this world, 'dont le dernier descendant paraît en ce moment devant Dieu!' (I, 372). It is clear that these two religious figures believe that Sergius and Morgane will participate in a regenerative afterlife. However, the lovers themselves give little indication of a belief or a hope in this: their focus is instead on the union of their souls in death. It is possible that this union could last beyond the grave, and Morgane at one point asserts to Sione that 'moi aussi, je crois à une vie éternelle' (I, 354). However, the lovers speak more about death itself than what may or may not come after it.

The issue of regeneration, therefore, is ambiguous in relation to these two Villierian lovers: it can neither be proved nor disproved whether they will enter into an afterlife together. What is clear, however, is that they deeply desire death as a union of their souls. In this, Sergius and Morgane are prototypes of Sara and Axël, willingly choosing to die a glorious death rather than accept the rather inglorious life that is offered to them. This concept is the theme of love and death carried to its limit, as the archetypal male and female are both utterly destroyed in a fatal union of the sexes.

Conclusion

It is now clear that the *fin-de-siècle* archetypes of fatal woman and fallen man are strongly present in Villiers's work. The female has won a position of psychological dominance over the male, and the relationship between the two often leads to death, both that of the female and of the male.

However, despite the apparent strength of the *femme fatale*, she often does not, and in some ways cannot, act alone in Villiers's work. Tullia Fabriana in *Isis* has spent all her years and energy in seeking after the ideal, but she realizes she cannot accomplish this goal by herself: 'Chacun regarde un idéal; chacun doit tout faire, tout braver, tout sacrifier pour l'accomplir; mais, en soi-même, il ne faut pas tenir à l'accomplir' (I, 188). She has been waiting for the right person, Wilhelm, through whom she can accomplish it. Though she will ultimately be in control of everything that comes to this young man, Fabriana desires that power, at least in the eyes of the world, should rest in his hands: 'À lui, donc, sceptres, hochets et couronnes glorieuses! À lui puissance, amour, jeunesse et tressaillements éperdus! [...] Son trône, assis sur la lutte souterraine que je soutiendrai, couvrira l'Italie, et, de là... ce ne sera point la première fois que l'Italie s'étendra sur le globe' (I, 192-93).

Morgane, who is perhaps the strongest and most passionate of Villiers's female characters, deeply desires to reign at the Neapolitan court and has been plotting for years to this end. However, like Tullia Fabriana, she too has been waiting and seeking for the right person, through whom she can fulfil her wishes: 'Il me fallait un bras sur lequel m'appuyer, non par défaillance, mais par attitude, et je crois que je viens de le trouver' (I, 264).

It is clear that Villiers allows his female characters to enjoy some of the fatal strength of the *femme fatale*: many of his male protagonists are strongly attracted by

women who will ruin and destroy them. However, this author is unwilling and unable to concede that all power should go to the female, and in many cases she stands in need of a man on whom she can lean.

In his essay in *Jeering Dreamers*, Pascal Rollet argues that the desire to immobilize woman is omnipresent in Villiers's work.³⁸ While the women in the works studied in this chapter are not moulded on the forms of statues, as is Alicia Clary in *L'Ève future*, it is true that their male counterparts strongly desire to retain the image first conceived of them, for example Don Juan of Hermosa, and Samuel Wissler of Maria/Elën. In this way, their image remains unchanged, hence immobile.

Many of Villiers's *femmes fatales* are also rendered physically immobile through death. Three out of the five women referred to in this chapter are dead by the end of the work in which they appear. Death is of course the ultimate means by which a woman is immobilized and prevented from changing further. She can also gain a degree of immortality, as the truth of her existence becomes legend. However, the surviving male gains power over a dead female, since to a certain extent, he can create a myth around the memory of her: it is much easier to maintain an illusion when reality is no longer present. Therefore, although the *femme fatale* is strong in Villiers's work, she is not fully autonomous, and the male retains a measure of power over her.

³⁸ Pascal Rollet, "Inflexions d'une féminité surnaturelle": la voix résistante de *L'Ève future* de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam', in *Jeering Dreamers: Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's 'L'Ève future' at our Fin de Siècle: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by John Anzalone (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996) pp. 87-102 (p. 90).

Chapter Five

Death and Loss in *L'Ève future*

The final two works to be looked at in this thesis are both works of Villiers's literary maturity. In them, themes previously touched on are drawn together and developed, while philosophical questions which have appeared throughout Villiers's corpus are once again opened up, this time with some kind of resolution in sight. Although both *L'Ève future* and *Axël* could be considered to be unfinished, they present the reader with a culmination of the author's production as a writer and are a zenith point of his thought.¹ Both have proven themselves to be seminal works, *L'Ève future* being one of the first French science-fiction novels, and *Axël* providing a wealth of inspiration to future Symbolists such as the Belgian playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, whose dramas strongly reflect the mysterious atmosphere of Villiers's last play. In both *L'Ève future* and *Axël*, issues of death and loss, life and regeneration, are brought to a head. These works present two different possible solutions to the problem of 'le sentiment de la présence de la mort dans la vie'.² The final resolution will come in the last act of *Axël*, but *L'Ève future* explores one avenue of possible resistance and overcoming of death, both actual and metaphorical, physical and metaphysical. It is on this novel that this chapter is focused.

L'Ève future is the second and last novel that Villiers wrote.³ It was eventually published in full in 1886 by Maurice de Brunhoff in Paris, although all of it except the final chapter was printed in *La Vie moderne* between 18 July 1885 and 17 March 1886. Excerpts had also appeared in *Le Gaulois* in September 1880, and in *L'Étoile française* from 14 December 1880 to 4 February 1881.

The scope of the novel passes from the sublime to the ridiculous. It is dedicated 'Aux rêveurs, aux railleurs', indicating at first glance that it will cater for the likes and dislikes of two distinctly different types of eminently Villierian reader: the visionaries

¹ Note that Villiers was clearly undecided as to the ending of *L'Ève future*, changing it several times, and even withdrawing the final chapter from publication in *La Vie moderne* in 1886. He was redrafting *Axël* even on his deathbed.

² Ariès, *Homme/mort*, p. 129.

who strive towards the possibilities of the ideal, and those who cynically mock the promises of this world and the next, regarding them both with scornful derision (I, 766). However, these two categories of 'dreamer' and 'derider' are not mutually exclusive. As the title of a recent collection of essays suggests, one can be a 'jeering dreamer', scorning the possibilities of this world whilst lauding those of the next.⁴

There is a strong element of the fantastic in *L'Ève future*. Léon Bloy, writing in the early twentieth century, labelled it a 'livre de magicien, splendide et désespéré, incompréhensible totalement pour une génération qui a tout oublié de l'Invisible et de l'Impalpable'.⁵ The seemingly impossible core of its plot, the creation of an android to take the place of a human being, was an important theme in nineteenth-century European literature. Recent comparative studies have linked Villiers's *L'Ève future* with E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.⁶ These three texts represent an application of modern technology to the fantasy of the Pygmalion myth in the nineteenth century.⁷ However, the inclusion of fantasy does not exclude philosophical depth. Villiers himself referred to *L'Ève future* as an 'œuvre d'Art-métaphysique',⁸ a work where he would joke no longer.⁹ These epithets certainly do suggest that Villiers, at the time of publication at least, believed *L'Ève future* to be a work of both aesthetic and metaphysical significance. Not only was it to be a work of Art, but it was also to point to planes of spiritual discovery.

³ Villiers's first novel was *Isis*, published in 1862.

⁴ The collection being referred to is *Jeering Dreamers: Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's 'L'Ève future' at our Fin de Siècle: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by John Anzalone (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996).

⁵ Bloy, 'La Resurrection/Villiers', IV, 315-28 (p. 326).

⁶ See e.g. Hubert Desmarests, *Création littéraire et créatures artificielles: 'L'Ève future', 'Frankenstein', 'Le Marchand de sable' ou le je(u) du miroir* (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999); *L'Homme artificiel: les artifices de l'écriture? Hoffmann, Mary Shelley, Villiers de L'Isle-Adam*, ed. by Béatrice Didier and Gwenhaël Ponnau (Paris: SEDES, 1999). These texts are linked to the insertion of *L'Ève future* on the French Agrégation examination syllabus in the year 2000, since Villiers's novel featured on a comparative paper with *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Le Marchand de sable* (*Der Sandmann*, 1816).

⁷ C.f. also the film *A. I. Artificial Intelligence*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Warner Bros. 2001. Its success suggests that this is a formula which is still capable of capturing the imagination of the public in the twenty-first century.

⁸ *Avis au lecteur, L'Ève future, OC I, 765.*

⁹ *CG I, 262* (letter written to Jean Marras, February 1879: 'pour la première fois de ma vie, je n'y plaisante plus').

This is a novel where opposites collide and where boundaries, pushed to their limits, become blurred. Bertrand Vibert maintains that while Villiers's work as a whole is concerned with notions of illusion and reality, the two become so confused in *L'Ève future* that they are virtually indistinguishable one from the other. This is clear, he argues, from Edison's own words: 'Nul ne sait où commence l'illusion, ni en quoi consiste la Réalité' (I, 789).¹⁰ Jacques Noiray had previously touched on this argument by claiming that the change of meaning that comes about in *L'Ève future* through typographic effects such as italicization is 'chargé d'exprimer les rapports entre les domaines de la réalité et de l'illusion'.¹¹

A number of other critics attempt to situate the dramatic interest of *L'Ève future* in the tension created by the co-existence of two opposites. Michel Picard sees Villiers's vision of Science in the construction of Hadaly as representing 'la liaison entre le possible et le Merveilleux'.¹² Rodolphe Gasché on the other hand views Hadaly as a philosophical scandal, in that she is an intermediary creation, hanging between Nothingness and Being.¹³ Ross Chambers highlights Villiers's desire to have mystery from beyond the boundaries of the known reveal itself now.¹⁴ Annie Petit sees in the character of Edison a double presentation both of the power of science, and of its vanities and threats,¹⁵ while Gayle Zachmann, again referring to the use of science and technology, speaks of Villiers's conversion of mass culture into high art in *L'Ève future*.¹⁶ Alongside this substantial critical discourse, I would also argue that *L'Ève*

¹⁰ Vibert, *L'Inquisiteur*, pp. 35, 38.

¹¹ Jacques Noiray, 'La Typographie expressive de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam. L'Exemple de "L'Ève future"', *Modernités* 4 (Bordeaux: Presses Universitaires de Bordeaux, 1992), 61-78 (p. 71).

¹² Michel Picard, 'Notes sur le fantastique de Villiers de L'Isle-Adam', *Revue des sciences humaines*, 95 (1959), 315-26 (p. 316).

¹³ Rodolphe Gasché, 'The Stelliferous Fold: On Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future*', *Studies in Romanticism*, 22 (1983), 293-327 (p. 309).

¹⁴ Ross Chambers, "'De grands yeux dans l'obscurité": regard scientifique et vision occulte dans *Claire Lenoir* et *L'Ève future*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 9 (1972), 308-25 (p. 310).

¹⁵ Annie Petit, 'La Science en procès: Edison et *L'Ève future*', *Romantisme*, 69 (1990), 61-77 (p. 61).

¹⁶ Gayle Zachmann 'Derision and Lucidity: Savoirs and Machinations à Gloire in *L'Ève future*', *Romance Quarterly*, 47 (2000), 145-56 (p. 153). I would question Zachmann's argument here, since at the time of the novel's original publication, the type of technology which features in it was not yet part of mass culture.

future is a transitional text which presents a struggle and partial resolution between choices leading to death or regeneration. This is a philosophical drama, in which the two main male characters initially represent two different viewpoints relating to a predicament fundamental to a *fin-de-siècle* aesthete and *homme fatal*: the undeniable existence of unbearable artificiality in life, especially that associated with female deception. When faced with the problem of Evelyn Habal's artifice, Edison chooses to put forward a regenerative solution involving absolute artificiality in the creation of Hadaly. Ewald, on the other hand, at the start of the novel has chosen death as a response to the artificiality in Alicia Clary, although he is later dissuaded from taking this extreme course of action by Edison's Faustian proposition.

This chapter on *L'Ève future* examines the significance of themes and images of loss, death, and regeneration as they are presented in the novel. Is there an effective solution mapped out to the problem of loss in modern life? What is the outlook of the main characters as regards this problem at the start, and at the end of the novel? Can we come to any conclusion? Before an attempt is made to answer these questions, however, it is useful both to situate *L'Ève future* as regards themes and character types touched on previously in this thesis, and to investigate the environment and atmosphere in which the novel is set.

5.1 Contextualizing *L'Ève future*

L'Ève future is one of the culminating points of Villiers's work. As Gwenhaël Ponnau argues, it is 'à la fois le point de rencontre et le point d'aboutissement de tous les aspects développés dans les textes brefs de Villiers et dans ses pièces de théâtre'.¹⁷ There are a number of concepts and themes present in it which have been highlighted previously in this thesis. The novel begins with several chapters which have been seen by some critics as being superfluous to the plot, but which are in fact important in setting the scene of a world that has lost belief in God.¹⁸ The charismatic scientific entrepreneur Edison is sitting alone in his study meditating on the usefulness of his recent inventions and discoveries, but lamenting the fact that they could not have been used in ancient times to perform such outstanding feats as recording the voice of the Divine. 'Qu'ai-je à phonographier, aujourd'hui, sur la terre?', grumbles Edison in an ecclesiastic manner, lamenting the fact that religious faith could have been made so much easier with the evidence that his instruments could have produced (I, 776). Thus, the note of theological doubt, the loss of a certainty of knowledge of God which appears throughout Villiers's corpus, is sounded again here at the start of *L'Ève future*, casting a shadow of religious lack over the whole novel. This religious vacuum in fact forms a very important backdrop to *L'Ève future* since it provides a forum where the creation of an artificial human being can be considered. In a world of religious faith and reverence, mankind's creation of an android to take the place of a real female would have been both forbidden and unthinkable, but the void in terms of belief means that this undertaking is possible.

¹⁷ Gwenhaël Ponnau, '*L'Ève future*', ou *l'œuvre en question* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2000), p. 29.

¹⁸ For example, Willian T. Conroy Jnr thinks Edison's philosophical meditations at the start fulfil an important function, but are altogether too lengthy, in his *Villiers*, p. 115.

The theme of the impossibility of personal love which was present in the *Premières Poésies* and later seen in the relationships of characters like Samuel Wissler and Sione de Saintos, plays a large role here again in the plot of *L'Ève future*. Ewald has fallen in love with a person who is completely incompatible with him. Alicia Clary is an aspiring singer from a recently ennobled family, while Ewald is from the old order of aristocracy. Initially attracted to her because of the sublime quality of her beauty (she resembles the statue of the Venus Victrix in the Louvre), Ewald is now repelled by her essentially bourgeois nature and positivist personality. Moreover, like other Villierian heroes, he knows that his one chance of happiness in this area of life has now been lost, since he confides to Edison, 'j'ai dans l'être de n'aimer qu'une fois' (I, 819).¹⁹ The introduction of Hadaly is in fact a way of rescuing Ewald from this unfortunate situation.

The bourgeois type encountered in Chapter 2 of this thesis, and so strongly satirized in Villiers's tales, is present again in *L'Ève future* in the figure of Alicia Clary. Alicia is portrayed as an Absolute Bourgeois to rival Tribulat Bonhomet.²⁰ As a professional singer, she is a woman who is prostituting Art by gaining financially from it while remaining completely unaware of its beauty or significance. Like the businessmen portrayed in 'À s'y méprendre!' (*Contes cruels*), she is seen as a walking corpse, devoid of any sentiment of what is true, noble, and of higher substance than everyday mediocrity in life. Indeed, Lord Ewald calls her a 'fantôme', a sphinx without an enigma, in his presentation of her to Edison (I, 807).

The fact that such a forthright bourgeois character is so strongly portrayed is reminiscent of the mood of many of Villiers's short stories. This is indicative of the

¹⁹ Ewald follows in the long line of Villierian heroes who only love once, such as Samuel Wissler.

²⁰ See Annette Michelson's 'On the Eve of the Future: The Reasonable Facsimile and the Philosophical Toy', *October*, 29 (1984), 3-21 (p. 7). Michelson labels the spirit of Alicia Clary that of the Absolute Bourgeois, embodied above all in Tribulat Bonhomet.

origins of the novel: *L'Ève future* originally grew out of a tale entitled 'Le Sosie'.²¹

This tale carries the same strongly satirical tone of some of Villiers's fantastic short stories based on modern technological advances such as 'L'Appareil pour l'analyse chimique du dernier soupir' (*Contes cruels*), which highlight both Villiers's interest in and scorn of modern science. This mixture of interest and scorn of course relates back to the original dedicatees of the novel, the jeerers and the dreamers.

Many of the instruments and gadgets that appear in *L'Ève future* had been exhibited at the 1878 Exposition Universelle in Paris. For example, Edison's phonograph was demonstrated there for the first time in France. The American inventor also exhibited telephones, mechanical birds, wigs giving the illusion of real hair, life-like dolls, and artificial flowers seemingly more real than natural ones.²² Villiers was interested, however, not just in the mundane use of modern science, but in its wider possibilities, and its application to philosophical and metaphysical ends.

L'Ève future also reminds the reader of Villiers's fascination with the macabre, again most clearly seen in the tales. The severed arm which appears at the start and the end of the novel is a macabre symbol of the potential of science in its application to human reproduction. This limb is in fact not properly human at all, but an artificial creation from Edison's laboratory workshop. It is a symbol of what is to come for Lord Ewald in the shape of Hadaly. The bracelet in the shape of a snake on the arm is a sign of the curative properties of Edison's technology. Referring to the Biblical legend of the serpent Moses lifted up in the desert, the snake is still a symbol of medical beneficence today. It fits too with the homeopathic nature of Hadaly as a cure for Ewald's condition.²³ Just as Moses raised up a bronze serpent in order to heal the

²¹ Fragments of 'Le Sosie' can be read in *OC* I, 1464-69.

²² See Ponnau, *L'Œuvre en question*, p. 18. All of these inventions feature in *L'Ève future*.

²³ On Edison's homœopathic remedy, see Noiray, *Le Laboratoire de l'idéal*, p. 92. He argues that Edison uses the principle of homeopathy, the use of like to treat like, in the solution he maps out to Ewald's problem. Instead of fighting against Ewald's desire for a perfect woman, Edison fulfils it in the creation of Hadaly.

Israelites of the effects of a plague of snakes in the wilderness, so Hadaly is a means of treating poison with poison for Ewald: she seems in fact to be the fulfilment of his desires, rather than the means of cooling them. However, the snake is also paradoxically a symbol of evil, as it can represent the Edenic serpent who initially caused the Fall of man.

Claustration, one of the forms of resistance previously discussed to modern bourgeois existence, is seen in *L'Ève future* in the lifestyles of the two main male characters. Both Edison and Ewald have shut themselves away from the outside world, the former in his mansion and laboratory in Menlo Park, and the latter in his English manor, Athelwold.

There are also strong archetypal *hommes fatals* and *femmes fatales* as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. Many of the main characters in *L'Ève future* can be identified with characters who appear elsewhere in Villiers's work. Lord Ewald is a fine example of a *fin-de-siècle homme fatal*. Descended from English aristocracy, he is described as being a 'jeune homme de vingt-sept à vingt-huit ans, de haute taille et d'une rare beauté virile' (I, 790). Like Wilhelm de Strally d'Anthas in *Isis*, Ewald is a mixture of elegance and athleticism: 'Il était vêtu d'une si profonde élégance qu'il eût été impossible de dire en quoi elle consistait. Les lignes de sa personne laissaient deviner des muscles d'une exceptionnelle solidité' (I, 790). Villiers likens him to Don Juan in his first presentation to the reader, but like the great lover in 'Hermosa', the lord is beset with a 'mélancolie grave et hautaine dont l'ombre atteste toujours un désespoir' (I, 791). At the end of Book I, Ewald likens himself to Achilles: 'Moi, je pars. Achille mourut bien d'une blessure au talon!' (I, 820). This is reminiscent of the picture Emma Lyonna Harte paints of Sergius in *Le Prétendant*, who despite his seeming strength will be overcome by a grain of sand.²⁴ Like many archetypal *hommes fatals*, Ewald is

²⁴ Cf. Lady Hamilton's prediction regarding Sergius in *Le Prétendant*, cited on p. 182 of this thesis, that he will be 'vaincu par le grain de sable!' (I, 311-12).

considering suicide, his will to live having been broken by the banality of Alicia's being and the impossibility of their romance.

In this sense, that she threatens at least to cause the death of the man to whom she is attached, Alicia Clary can be seen as a *femme fatale*. Ewald is aware that his death-wish is born from the disappointment caused to him by Alicia: 'Les joies que cette vivante morose m'a prodiguées furent plus amères que la mort. Son baiser n'éveille en moi que le goût du suicide' (I, 815). Her resemblance to the statue of the Venus de Milo renders her supremely beautiful. Yet sublime beauty and likeness to marble forms are both attributes of the *femme fatale*. Alicia is ultimately seen by Lord Ewald as being utterly deceitful, since her beauty is merely a mask hiding a moral vacuity.

What Alicia Clary is to Lord Ewald, Evelyn Habal was to Edward Anderson. Anderson was a childhood friend of Edison's who fell party to an adulterous relationship with the sinister dancer, Evelyn Habal. Evelyn is a strong *femme fatale* figure, and contact with her eventually brought the former businessman to his decline and death. She is an attractive young woman at first glance, as Edison's first cinematic projection of her shows. Her surname, though, the reader is told, means 'vanity' in Iranian, and when stripped of the outer signs of this feminine pride, her make-up, wigs, dentures, and corsets, Evelyn is revealed to be an ugly harpy.

In his presentation of Evelyn, Villiers is subverting a treatise on art and artifice constructed by Charles Baudelaire, who wrote in a chapter entitled 'Éloge du maquillage' in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* that women ought to use make-up in order to improve upon their natural state of being:

La femme est bien dans son droit, et même accomplit une espèce de devoir en s'appliquant à paraître magique et surnaturelle [...]. Elle doit donc emprunter à

tous les arts les moyens de s'élever au-dessus de la nature pour mieux
subjuguier les cœurs et frapper les esprits.²⁵

Villiers further reinforces the link between himself and Baudelaire by entitling the chapter in which Evelyn appears on screen 'Danse macabre' (I, 897).²⁶ Baudelaire saw the use of make-up as a positive step which enhanced the appearance of woman. However, *L'Ève future* demonstrates the danger of this approach. The artifice which Evelyn Habal applied to her physical body has in fact become an illusion which hides the reality of the ugliness of her physical and moral being. Like Alicia Clary, the attractiveness of Evelyn's exterior show is a deception. In Alicia's case, it hides a banal moral emptiness; in Evelyn's, it covers a seductive evil. Both of these deceptions are potentially fatal: Ewald is on the verge of suicide, while Edward Anderson is actually dead.

Evelyn Habal, however, becomes the inspiration behind another female character in *L'Ève future*: Hadaly. Hadaly is the electro-magnetic android Edison creates in order to address the *fin-de-siècle* problem epitomized in the relationship between Edward Anderson and Evelyn Habal, and mirrored by that of Ewald and Alicia: the ruin of men of noble stature by evil, manipulative, and deceptive women. Edison interprets the arrival of the suicidal Ewald in Menlo Park as a fitting occasion to wake Hadaly: 'Tiens, murmura-t-il, si, par hasard, c'était ce voyageur qui doit éveiller Hadaly!' (I, 782). The scientist proposes to use the android in order to provide a solution to the dilemma faced by Ewald in the strange mixture of sublime beauty and banal bourgeois temperament in Alicia Clary. Ewald exclaims in desperation, 'Ah! qui

²⁵ Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne: Constantin Guys*, in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, with the collaboration of Jean Ziegler, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975-76), II (1976), 683-724 (pp. 716-17).

²⁶ This is the title of a poem from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. The epigraph to this chapter is taken from another poem in this collection, entitled 'Confession'.

m'ôtera cette âme de ce corps!', leading to Edison's later reply, 'Eh bien, C'EST MOI!' (I, 814, 820).

While Edison asserts that Alicia would be '*l'Idéal féminin pour les trois quarts de l'Humanité moderne*', Ewald is literally dying from contact and contamination with her (I, 814). For the English aristocrat, it is Hadaly who is going to be his ideal. The body of Alicia will be moulded onto her, while her soul will be merely a reflection of his own. Thus, she will become an ideal object, not in her own right, but as a reflection of narcissistic male desire: 'Eh bien! l'Andréide, avons-nous dit, n'est que les premières heures de l'Amour immobilisées, – l'heure de l'Idéale à jamais faite prisonnière' (I, 916). Aided by the power of illusion, Ewald will transpose his conception of ideal love onto the empty being that is Hadaly.²⁷ Thus he will in a sense create his own ideal female partner. Both Edison and Ewald therefore enjoy a creative power in this novel, Edison in relation to Hadaly's exterior appearance, and Ewald, her interior animation.

It is clear, then, that *L'Ève future* represents a sense of continuity in terms of the focus of Villiers's work. Ewald is clearly an *homme fatal* in the mould of Wilhelm d'Anthas and Samuel Wissler, while Evelyn Habal is a destructive *femme fatale* who reminds the reader of Hermosa and Emma Lyonna Harte. The loss of religious belief, a failed romance, and anti-philistinism are once again strong themes. However, an investigation of the setting of the novel will reveal a milieu where all is not as it seems, and in which questions of life, death, and regeneration can effectively be examined.

²⁷ C.f. what Lisa Lowe says about Flaubert's oriental woman, whom Flaubert equates with a machine, just as Hadaly is a machine:

The representation 'la femme orientale' is a metonymy of an invented opposite to an imagined European masculinity, an otherness whose referent is not femininity but rather the construction of masculinity based upon the notion of masculine desire.

See Lisa Lowe, 'Nationalism and Exoticism: Nineteenth-Century Others in Flaubert's *Salammbô* and *L'Éducation sentimentale*', in *Macropolitics of Nineteenth-Century Literature: Nationalism, Exoticism, Imperialism*, ed. by Jonathan Arac and Harriet Rivto (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), pp. 213-42 (p. 215).

5.2 The Construction of a World of Colliding Opposites

Villiers's work influenced, either directly or indirectly, many early Symbolists, as Alan Raitt's groundbreaking *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste* shows. Symbolism is, broadly speaking, a literature and art of abstract ideas, represented by concrete signs or symbols. The kinds of environment in which Symbolist works are set are often abstract worlds which seem set apart in time, devoid of cultural references or signposts, such as the misty kingdom of Allemonde in Maurice Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1892).²⁸ The setting is often also enclosed: Allemonde is hemmed in on one side by the sea and on the others by thick, impenetrable forests. This enclosed referential vacuum facilitates the examination of ideas in an objective manner in an environment which bears little or no resemblance to the milieu with which the reader or spectator is familiar.

This may seem to have little to do with *L'Ève future*, which is set in a very definite, recognizable time and place, that is, Edison's home in Menlo Park in Villiers's own present time, towards the end of the nineteenth century. However, one of Villiers's main aims in writing was to provoke thought, 'faire penser' being the motto of the periodical, *La Revue des lettres et des arts*, which he co-founded and edited.²⁹ There are serious philosophical issues relating to life and death being raised in this novel. The epigraph to the whole book, 'Transitoriis quære æterna' – through the transitory, seek the eternal – surely alludes to the revelation of the ideal behind everyday objects that was so much part of the quest of Symbolism (I, 763). Transitory elements in life become a means of pointing the way to the intransitory: Evelyn Habal comes to

²⁸ Maeterlinck was especially influenced by Villiers, describing him as 'l'homme providentiel qui, au moment prévu par je ne sais quelle bienveillance du hasard, devait orienter et fixer ma destinée'. Maurice Maeterlinck, *Bulles bleues* (Monaco: Éditions du Rocher, 1948), pp. 195-96, cited in *Maeterlinck: Pelléas et Mélisande, Les Aveugles, L'Intruse, Intérieur*, ed. by Leighton Hodson (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1999), p. xi.

represent the guile of which all women are capable, while Hadaly becomes a medium for Sowana, an occult spirit.

The setting and atmosphere of *L'Ève future* is therefore one which is at once familiar and unfamiliar to the reader, and there is often a disconcerting collision of opposing circumstances or phenomena. For example, there is a clash of past, present, and future time in the novel. There is a collision of life and death, illusion and reality, and science and the supernatural. When opposites collide and merge into each other, there is uncertainty created around the point at which they meet. Concrete boundaries become fluid, and the area between is a new existential space with which the reader has yet to familiarize him or herself. This instability which is always in the background of *L'Ève future* forms the basis of a new and mystical environment, one which appears to be familiar but which in fact is not. It is this sense of mystery that relates *L'Ève future* to Symbolist literature, and provides a forum for the questioning of ideas. In the same way that a referential void is created in the abstract setting of much Symbolist literature, so the uncertainty in the actual environment of *L'Ève future* means that the reader is unsettled and ready not merely to accept the action of the novel, but also to question it.

In her article on Villiers's *L'Ève future* and the problem of personal identity, Carol De Dobay Rifelj argues convincingly that 'in order to make plausible the reproduction of a person, Villiers creates doubts about the personal identity of human beings in the first place'.³⁰ She then demonstrates that the personal identities of characters in *L'Ève future* are not stable and fixed, but rather that there is a fluidity between them. Villiers questions the concrete nature of personal identity 'by breaking down the borders between persons, emphasizing the fictionality of the self, and finally

²⁹ *La Revue des lettres et des arts* was founded by Villiers and Armand Gouzien in October 1867, and appeared until March 1868.

³⁰ Carol de Dobay Rifelj, 'La Machine Humaine: Villiers's *L'Ève future* and the Problem of Personal Identity', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 20 (1992), 430-51 (p. 430).

turning to the occult as an explanation that passes our understanding'.³¹ In the same way, I would argue that Villiers breaks down barriers between past and present, life and death, illusion and reality, and science and the supernatural in the plot and setting of *L'Ève future* in order that the reader might question the surface nature of the novel, and discover what lies underneath.

There is, for example, in *L'Ève future*, a deliberate mixture of moods and thoughts associated with the past, the present, and the future. Lord Ewald is strongly associated with the past. He belongs to an old social order, that of the aristocracy, which recognizes values such as transcendental beauty which have lost their worth in a world of bourgeois politics and self-motivated concerns. Ewald is strongly attracted to Alicia Clary because of her resemblance to the sublime statue of the Venus de Milo. However, Alicia belongs very much in the present time, and relates this resemblance not to a disinterested appreciation of the aesthetic worth of her beauty, but to its utilitarian value. If the statue is visited in a museum, Alicia reasons, then she is likely to have SUCCESS. This refers back to a question Edison posed at the start of the novel regarding bourgeois appreciation of art: 'si je place, – voyons, – la *Joconde* de Léonard de Vinci devant les prunelles [...] de certains bourgeois de toutes nationalités, [...] parviendrai-je jamais à leur faire *voir* CE qu'ils regarderont?' (I, 777). Alicia sees herself in a bourgeois light, as a person likely to make money from her talent: she looks at her being on the surface, but does not perceive the depths. The relationship between Ewald and Alicia therefore not only foregrounds the difference between aristocrat and bourgeois, but also through this the opposition of the past and the present, the aesthetic and the utilitarian.

Ewald's home, the manor of Athelwold in Staffordshire, England, seems to be lost in the past. Indeed, it prefigures the atmosphere of Symbolist drama in that it is a 'brumeux domaine, entouré de forêts de pins, de lacs déserts et de vastes rochers'

³¹ Riflej, '*La Machine Humaine*', p. 447.

(I, 852). There is a large room in the castle in which the furniture dates from the reign of Queen Elisabeth I. Lord Ewald has also taken care to fill it with marvellous works of art and precious ornaments. This room, which ‘ne porte à l’esprit que du passé’, is destined to be Hadaly’s bridal chamber (I, 852). Ewald’s manor is, Edison considers, ‘le milieu qui convient le mieux à l’Andréide’, because, as he explains, ‘là, seulement, Hadaly sera comme une mystérieuse somnambule, errante autour des lacs ou sur les bruyères interdites’ (I, 853). Therefore, the scientific being of the future is to have her ideal home in the domain of the past.

There is a similar collision of the past and the future in Edison’s home and laboratory in Menlo Park. A strong comparison can be drawn between Athelwold and Edison’s large cottage, an isolated place ‘que ses attenances font ressembler à un château perdu sous les arbres’ (I, 781). Moreover, the laboratory where Hadaly is created lies underground, in caves which formed part of an Indian burial chamber. Again, a place of isolation, enclosed in a forest and rooted in the past, is the place of the conception, both cerebral and physical, of Hadaly, the android of the future.

Hadaly herself in fact embodies the collision of past and future. She is to be a future Eve, or a ‘Tomorrow’s Eve’, as the title of a recent English translation suggests.³² Thus, she bears within her the future: she is a technological being of Villiers’s tomorrow. However, the inclusion of ‘Eve’ in her name also aligns her with ancient, Biblical time. Deborah Conyngham argues that she is at once past and future,³³ while Marie Lathers puts forward the idea that Hadaly’s involvement with photosculpture, the art of sculpting from a photo, means that she is a mixture of ‘both ancient [sculpture] and modern [photography], classical and Romantic, past and present, a superposition of contrasting images produced by photosculpture’.³⁴

³² Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, *Tomorrow’s Eve*, trans. by Robert Martin Adams (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2001).

³³ Conyngham, *Silence éloquent*, p. 14.

³⁴ Marie Lathers, *Æsthetics of Artifice*, p. 55.

However, the inclusion of the fictionalized character representation of Thomas Alva Edison situates *L'Ève future* very much in Villiers's present. Edison was of course still alive at the time of the writing and publication of *L'Ève future*, and the description of him in the opening pages of the novel is written in the present tense: 'Edison est un homme de quarante-deux ans' (I, 767).³⁵ Many of the American inventor's discoveries are included in the novel, for instance, the phonograph, the telephone, and the electric light bulb. There are also other products of an industrial and technological age which create and add to an atmosphere of modernity, such as train travel, photography, and the newspaper press and reporters.

However, many of these technological marvels had only recently appeared before the French public, and though many people may have had a general knowledge of their existence, they were not widely seen in their homes. Therefore, the idea of such a wide-ranging *application* of science in the domestic sphere points not to the present time, but to the future.

Also belonging to future time is the cinematic projection of Evelyn Habal, complete with soundtrack. Although the possibility of cinema, or successive photography was being discussed in the last part of the nineteenth century, it was not until 19 March 1895, almost ten years after the publication of *L'Ève future*, that the Lumière brothers shot their first film, *Sortie d'usine*, in Lyon, France.³⁶ Even then, the Lumière brothers' film was in black and white, not colour like Edison's projection of Evelyn Habal, and it did not include an integral musical soundtrack.

This confusion of time, of the past, present, and future, serves to disconcert the reader. While there is a veil of truth and contemporaneity over the novel, it is clear that in a sense this is a mythical time, neither wholly present, nor past, nor future. This

³⁵ Edison was born in 1847 and died in 1931. *L'Ève future* was published in 1886. Note, then, that Villiers's estimation of Edison's age was, in fact, inaccurate at the time of *L'Ève future*'s publication.

³⁶ *Sortie d'usine* was among about ten films shown in Paris on 28 December 1895 by the Lumière brothers, in what is reckoned to be the world's first public film screening.

temporal ambiguity aids both the fantastic and realist elements in the novel. There are parts of *L'Ève future* to and in which the nineteenth-century reader could relate and believe, such as train travel and the intrusion of the press into people's lives. However, there is also a strong fantastic thread in the novel which most of Villiers's nineteenth-century readership would have accepted only in their imaginations, for instance the use of the phonograph, and Evelyn Habal's cinematic projection.

This mixture of times also reflects very much the *fin-de-siècle* world itself, a world which was moving into the modernity of the industrial and post-industrial age, but which was still rooted in the traditions and culture of the past. It also surely indicates the strong presence of the author, Villiers himself, who as an aristocrat was intensely proud of the old social order to which he belonged, and yet was also greatly fascinated by the possibilities of the technology of the future.

The paradox of time settings in the novel is mirrored in the construction of the main protagonists. The most striking of these is Hadaly, who indeed embodies many of the paradoxes found in the novel, one of the first titles for the story being 'L'Andréide paradoxale de M. Edison'. Perhaps the most important dichotomy found in Edison's android, at least in relation to the focus of this thesis, is the juxtaposition of images of life and death surrounding her.

Hadaly is a new Eve, a symbol of life. Just as in the Biblical legend Adam's wife is the mother of human creation, so Hadaly is originally intended to be the first of many artificial androids. She is to bring a new lease of life to Lord Ewald by turning him away from his suicidal despondency and embodying his conception of an ideal female. The task of her successors will be to save mankind from the threat of destruction posed by *femmes fatales* like Evelyn Habal. Therefore, Hadaly strongly belongs in the sphere of life.

Yet as Jacques Noiray argues in *Le Romancier et la machine*, Hadaly is born of death.³⁷ Her existence springs from the defunct relationship between Edward Anderson and Evelyn Habal, both now dead. The reason for her awakening is the averted death of Lord Ewald. Hadaly travels in a luxurious coffin lined with black satin: Marie Lathers describes her as a ‘technological mummy’.³⁸ She is able to administer death herself, armed with a dagger at her waist, and must be destroyed completely on the occasion of Lord Ewald’s own death. The reader can also surmise that the relationship with her that Ewald agrees to undertake will not lead to a production of new life but will be sterile, ending only in death.

Therefore, in terms of iconography of life and death, Hadaly is a Janus figure, at once looking forward to new life, while at the same time being bound to death as a *raison d’être* and a destiny. The figure of Hadaly, however, also foregrounds a debate on the nature of illusion and reality which is in fact central not only to *L’Ève future*, but also to Villiers’s whole corpus.³⁹ The dilemma of Ewald before Hadaly of a lover opposite an illusion of love created by his own desire is the same as that faced by the comte d’Athol in the short story ‘Véra’ (*Contes cruels*). Indeed, the similarity between the proper nouns ‘Athol’, the count’s name, and ‘Athelwold’, Ewald’s manor, suggests a further link between them.

Hadaly is presented as a real and objective entity. Much of the novel is in fact taken up with detailed descriptions of her interior mechanics and exterior cosmetics. Edison takes great pains to show how Hadaly really does work: she is a talking doll, unlike Véra who is at best a ghostly apparition and at worst a mere figment of the comte d’Athol’s imagination.

³⁷ Jacques Noiray, *Romancier/machine*, II, 371.

³⁸ Lathers, *Æsthetics of Artifice*, p. 64.

³⁹ See Vibert, *L’Inquisiteur*, p. 35: ‘Et pourtant son œuvre est construite à partir des notions d’“illusion” et de “réalité”’.

However, in order to function properly, Hadaly must be animated by the aristocrat's willingness to substitute her for Alicia. It is actually neither the automaton nor the actress that Ewald loves, but his own conception of an ideal woman. He is to project his desire for love and his concept of what the soul of Alicia should contain, that is, perfection in love, into the empty ideals chamber of the android. Thus Hadaly, a real mechanical object, is to contain what is actually an abstract illusion of Ewald's perfect female. Ewald originally asked for Alicia's malignant soul to be removed from her perfect body, but this is not in fact what has happened. The body of Alicia has been transposed onto a construction that as yet has no soul, so that the English lord can infuse her with his own. It is therefore wrong to view Hadaly as an independent being, since she is simply a reflection of the deepest desires of the English lord. Ewald is to substitute the disappointing and deceptive reality of Alicia for Hadaly, a perfect illusion, and to 'préférer désormais à la mensongère, médiocre et toujours changeante Réalité, une positive, prestigieuse et toujours fidèle Illusion. Chimère pour chimère, péché pour péché, fumée pour fumée, – *pourquoi donc pas?*' (I, 952). Evelyn Habal, with her illusionary, artificial, and therefore imperfect beauty, is therefore the model for Hadaly, whose beauty is a perfect illusion.

Hadaly also demonstrates a meeting of the worlds of science and the supernatural. When new products of a scientific and technological age were first introduced in the Western world in the nineteenth century, they were generally greeted with a universal mistrust, and were largely associated with the supernatural.⁴⁰ For example, the phonograph was at first seen as a means of conjuring back a dead person.⁴¹

Hadaly in some ways exemplifies this fear.

⁴⁰ See Felicia Miller Frank, *The Mechanical Song: Women, Voice and the Artificial in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 149. She argues that the fusion of the scientific with the supernatural was normal at the time.

⁴¹ See 'Edison's Recorded Angel', in *Jeering Dreamers: Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's 'L'Ève future' at our Fin de Siècle: A Collection of Essays*, ed. by John Anzalone (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 141-166 (p. 144), where Felicia Miller Frank refers to an article published in the *Semaine du clergé* in 1877, the year the phonograph was invented, which explains it as a 'conjuración du mort'.

There was also however a strong fascination in the nineteenth century with the supernatural. The practice of holding séances had been introduced to France from the United States in the 1850s, and many people from different social classes were drawn to attend them.⁴² Occult societies were formed, such as Joséphin Péladan's right-wing Catholic order of the Rose et la Croix. Villiers himself wrote about the pseudo-scientific experiments of the English spiritist William Crookes in his 'Les Expériences du docteur Crookes' (*L'Amour suprême*), while tales like 'Claire Lenoir' (*Tribulat Bonhomet*) and 'L'Intersigne' (*Contes cruels*) have clearly occult overtones. The character of Sowana in *L'Ève future* is indicative of Villiers's continuing interest in the occult. She is a supernatural spirit who takes up residence firstly in the body of the hysteric Mrs Any Anderson, then in the android, Hadaly. It was thought that hysterics attained a degree of supernatural voyance that allowed them to be mediums for spirits.

Sowana, through Mrs Anderson, is instrumental in Edison's preparation of Hadaly as a perfect copy of Alicia. However, by the time the android, object of science, is ready to be either accepted or rejected by Lord Ewald, the supernatural spirit is dwelling within her. It is Sowana within Hadaly who appeals to Ewald to let her live, or rather to help her to die.

Hadaly, therefore, animated by electro-magnetism, has a strong element of the supernatural occult within her. However, quite apart from demonstrating elements of the supernatural, Hadaly is also a marvel of science. She is literally a walking phonograph, a mechanical masterpiece demonstrating a practical application of up-to-the-minute technology. She has phonographs in her lungs, and mercury is pumped around her body in place of blood to help her to balance. The help of the best specialist dentist and wigmaker is required for the android's teeth and hair. Edison stipulates that they must match Nature, and refrain from improving on it, the inference being of course that man's technology is now capable of surpassing natural creation.

⁴² See West, *Fds*, p. 107.

Ross Chambers sees the severed arm that appears first in Book I as a symbol of the enigmas of illusionism, and also the ambiguity of the whole text. It is a construction of science which points to the supernatural, 'se prolongeant par un vide apparent, mais répondant tout de même au contact humain, [...] elle suggère finalement, non seulement l'absence de référent du signe, mais aussi une présence'.⁴³ This same relationship between science and the supernatural is later mirrored in Hadaly.

Finally, reinforcing the reader's sense of colliding opposites in terms of the setting and characters in the novel, there is in the writing style of *L'Ève future* a cacophony of narrative exchanges ranging from decadent Romanticism to science fiction.⁴⁴ Just as in and around the creation of Hadaly there is a blurring of distinctions between real and illusionary, scientific and supernatural, so there is a merging of literary styles within the novel.

Several features of *L'Ève future* point to its debt to gothic Romance. The image of the misty forests surrounding both Ewald's castle and Edison's laboratory evoke an atmosphere best described as neo-Gothic. The scene outside in the gardens of Menlo Park, on a stormy autumnal night which hosts a lunar eclipse, could equally be labelled neo-Gothic. The narrative of the love-stricken lord who finds happiness in an ideal female has a strong element of Romance in it. There are also touches of satirical realism, such as Villiers's portrayal of the thieving detectives being caught out and photographed by Edison's own camera at the gates of Menlo Park.

However, there is a new style of literature that Villiers is pioneering in *L'Ève future*, perhaps without even being conscious of it. *L'Ève future* is among the first French science fiction novels to appear in the late nineteenth century, along perhaps with those of Jules Verne. Verne was another French author who began to write in this

⁴³ Ross Chambers, *L'Ange et l'automate: variations sur le mythe de l'actrice de Nerval à Proust* (Paris: Minard, 1971), p. 48.

⁴⁴ See Desmarests, *Création littéraire*, p. 143, where he argues that Hadaly is a creation of a new genre, the *roman sphinx*.

genre, for example his *20 000 lieues sous les mers* (1869), and *Le Château des Carpathes* (1892), which is often cited in comparative studies with *L'Ève future*.⁴⁵ Villiers's detailed description of Edison's laboratory and inventions, added to his long cataloguing of the workings of Hadaly, clearly give the novel some kind of relation to a scientific genre. However, since modern science was relatively new in the nineteenth century, writing about it was also a new phenomenon. Apart from constructing factual reports on the possibilities of scientific advances, authors like Villiers and Verne wrote imaginatively about where it could lead mankind.

The mixture of literary styles within *L'Ève future* strongly reflects the era to which it belongs. Literature in general in the *fin de siècle* was seen to be decadent. No one particular style was adopted and used, but many styles mutated and fused into one another: 'Ni drame ni roman, ni poème en prose ni récit fantastique, ni conte philosophique ni fantaisie satirique, mais tout cela en même temps, *L'Ève future* échappe à tous les genres, excède toute définition'.⁴⁶ Thus, *L'Ève future* is a product of the *fin de siècle* not just in terms of technology, but also as an example of literature. Indeed, the whole element of paradox in the background and milieu of the novel is a reflection of the changing culture of the late nineteenth century.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Chambers, *Ange/automate*, pp. 32-40, and Marilyn Gaddis Rose's article on 'Two Misogynist Novels: A Feminist Reading of Villiers and Verne', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 9 (1980-81), 117-23.

⁴⁶ Noiray, *Le Laboratoire de l'idéal*, p. 155.

5.3 Life, Death, and the Supernatural in *L'Ève future*

It has already been argued that the disconcerting nature of the background and milieu in *L'Ève future* provides a forum for the discussion of philosophical questions. The creation of an artificial android to take the place of, and indeed, be preferred above a real human being, is a serious issue, and one which relates strongly to the loss of stable religious belief and faith. Also important is the question of the symbolism of death in the novel.

L'Ève future begins with Edison bemoaning the lack of religious faith in his own time, wishing he could have used his scientific discoveries to prove definitively the existence of God. The creation of Hadaly is, as Ewald understands, the result of a deep love for humanity and a great cry of despair (I, 925). It is also, however, an act to tempt a response from the heavens. Ewald is sensitive to the blasphematory nature of Edison's creation of an artificial woman. Indeed, the Promethean aspect of the novel is stressed all along. When Lord Ewald first comprehends Edison's plan to substitute an artificial woman for a real one, he declares pensively, 'Mais entreprendre la création d'un tel être [...], il me semble que ce serait tenter... *Dieu*' (I, 838).

Edison himself recognizes the danger of this project, and before Ewald chooses to be part of the experiment, advises the English lord in no uncertain terms that in his place, the scientist would chose suicide: 'Je me brûlerai la cervelle' (I, 845). As the novel progresses, the reader realizes along with Ewald that his acceptance of Edison's proposal will have more serious consequences than he first imagined: 'Lord Ewald ne tarda pas à s'apercevoir, d'ailleurs, qu'il s'était engagé dans une aventure beaucoup plus sombre qu'il ne l'avait pensé' (I, 944).

Jacques Noiray argues that Hadaly, as a being born of death, is destined to die herself. He likens her destruction to that of a heretic or a witch in the fierce fire which

breaks out on board the passenger ship the *Wonderful*.⁴⁷ The loss of life to which Noiray refers as causing the birth of the android is Ewald's averted suicide. However, I would add another fatality to this: that of Edward Anderson. It was after all Edison's investigation of the circumstances of his childhood friend's death which led him to Evelyn Habal, and gave him the idea of creating an absolutely artificial being. However, Edison originally intended that Hadaly be the first of many mechanical dolls. She was to divert and annul adulterous male passion with the purpose of safeguarding marriage, thus avoiding a repetition of the tragic circumstances around the demise of figures like Edward Anderson. Hadaly, therefore, as well as being an icon of death, is a symbol of life. She carries within her a dichotomy: she is born of death, but is destined to bring life. This begs the question: can two negatives make a positive? Can two instances of death lead to life being created? This is the fundamental conundrum that Edison attempts to solve in his creation of artificial life.

On the surface, Hadaly appears to embody perfectly the outworking of the principle of regeneration through death. The result of the death of one man, averting the death of another, she promises to bring a new and ideal life. It will be a life sustained by an illusion: Lord Ewald will have to agree to comply with the illusion that Hadaly is a real person, and not just an object onto which his desire for ideal love has been conferred. Conversely however, complete submission to this illusion will mean an end to disillusionment for the lord. No longer trying to balance and rationalize the co-existence of Alicia's exterior beauty with her interior banality, Lord Ewald will be free in the happy knowledge that he is taking part in a sublime illusion.

However, far from being an undisputed symbol of life, Hadaly is surrounded by imagery of death. Before she first appears to Lord Ewald in Edison's laboratory, the inventor closes the shutters, locks the door, and breaks off all telephonic communication with the outside world except for the line to New York. 'Nous voici séparés quelque

⁴⁷ Noiray, *Romancier/machine*, p. 371.

peu du monde des vivants!', he declares in triumph, suggesting that Hadaly does not form part of the land of the living and indeed, that there is a need for her to be at a distance from it (I, 826). The only people who actually see her in the novel are Edison, Ewald, and the hysteric Mrs Any Anderson/Sowana. It is clear that Edison is keen to shut her away from the outside world. This is one of the advantages both of the scientist's laboratory with the burial chamber underneath, and of Ewald's isolated manor.

There is a strong element of death-like symbolism in the physical appearance of the android. From the time that Ewald is first introduced to Hadaly in the laboratory until she appears to him in the likeness of Alicia Clary, there is a dark mourning veil over her face: 'La vision semblait avoir un visage de ténèbres' (I, 828). This veil reaches to her waist, while down her sides is also a black material. This gives her the appearance of a bereaved widow, or a figure certainly associated with death. The pearls on her forehead, however, along with the white metal and shape of her body, suggest a maidenly, indeed bridal appearance, which sits uneasily with the rest of her widow-like costume.

The permanent abode of Hadaly in Menlo Park is underneath Edison's own laboratory, in Indian burial caves. In explaining the reason for this, Edison again stresses his desire to keep Hadaly strictly secret: 'Vous comprenez, je ne pouvais pas laisser l'Idéal à la portée de tout le monde' (I, 866). Yet it does seem strange that an ideal and new Eve who will be the saving of mankind does not reside in a realm of light, associated with divine and heavenly spheres, but rather in the dark underground: 'Descendons! reprit Edison, puisque, décidément, il paraît que pour trouver l'Idéal, il faut d'abord passer par le royaume des taupes' (I, 867). This again underlines the irreligious nature of the novel and of Edison's undertaking to create an artificial form of life. In contrast to the human life created by God which lives above ground and is

warmed by the sun, Edison's artificial life is hidden underground, and has an artificial, man-made sun to warm it and illuminate its surroundings: the electric light bulb.

However, the image of going underground in order to find the ideal is also very strongly linked to the theme of regeneration through death. In order to find his ideal, Ewald must undergo a symbolic death, acted out in his descent into the earth. He must leave behind any vestige of religious scruple and conception of a conventional romantic relationship, and be ready to accept himself as creator and master of the new female life which he has just awakened.

Perhaps the most striking symbol of death associated with Edison's mechanical doll is the coffin in which she is to travel to England: Hadaly, Edison informs an incredulous Ewald, 'ne voyage en mer qu'à la manière des mortes' (I, 851). It is a heavy ebony coffin, lined with black satin, which is to be her dowry to Ewald: 'C'est là sa dot' (I, 851). Again, it is quite astounding that a creation intended to bring new life should be so intrinsically linked to an object so closely associated with death. Moreover, it is exceedingly disturbing that as her contribution to what really amounts to a marital relationship with Lord Ewald, she should bring a coffin. It is indicative of her final fate, and also perhaps of the prospects of the relationship itself: it will not produce new life, but will end in death.

It is clear, then, that the main thrust of the discourse between life and death in *L'Ève future* is centred on Hadaly. However, in analysing the significance of Edison's Faustian creation in relation to the theme of death, it is important to make a distinction between Hadaly the mechanical doll and marvel of science, and Sowana, the supernatural spirit who comes to inhabit her.

Hadaly is the scientific android that Edison creates. It is Hadaly's interior mechanical workings that Edison describes in such detail to Ewald in Book V of the novel. It is on Hadaly's phonographic lungs that the words of the great philosophers

and poets of the century will be inscribed, and it is onto Hadaly's physical exterior that the body of Alicia will be grafted.

Sowana, the reader discovers in Book I of *L'Ève future*, is the 'nom de sommeil' of Mrs Any Anderson (I, 774). After her husband's death, Mrs Anderson became a hysteric. This hysteria manifested itself in the fact that she would spend much time in a somnambulistic trance, and when in such a state of trance, Mrs Anderson requested to be known by the name 'Sowana'. However, there is much evidence in the novel to suggest that Sowana and Mrs Anderson have in fact two separate and distinct identities. Edison explains this to Ewald:

Et ceci d'autant plus volontiers que l'être moral qui m'apparaît en Mistress Anderson, à l'état de veille, et celui qui m'apparaît, dans la profondeur magnétique, semblent absolument différents. Au lieu de la femme très simple, si digne, si intelligente, même, – mais de vues, après tout, fort limitées, – que je connais en elle, – voici qu'au souffle de ce sommeil il s'en révèle une tout autre, multiple et inconnue! (I, 1005)

It is clear that the inventor is somewhat disconcerted by his lack of knowledge and understanding regarding the relationship between Edward Anderson's wife and Sowana, as he admits to Ewald: 'si je connais Mistress Anderson, *je vous atteste QUE JE NE CONNAIS PAS SOWANA!*' (I, 1007).

It is Sowana in the body of Any Anderson who helps Edison first of all in the construction of Hadaly, and then in the moulding of Alicia's frame onto her. Alicia herself describes Sowana/Mrs Anderson as 'une femme très pâle, *entre deux âges*, peu parleuse, toujours en deuil, ayant dû être fort belle: ses yeux sont constamment fermés, au point que la couleur en demeure inconnue. Cependant, elle y voit clair!' (I, 1002). It seems that Sowana, as a spirit from 'ces régions sans bornes dont l'Homme ne peut

entrevoir les pâles frontières qu'entre certains songes et certains sommeils', first used the body of Any Anderson in order to construct the android, and then came to inhabit it once it was finished and ready to be accepted or rejected by Ewald (I, 990). It is to be noted that Edison discovers the dead body of Mrs Anderson immediately after the departure of the English lord from Menlo Park, as if Sowana has discarded it now that she can operate within Hadaly. This of course takes the reader into the realm of the supernatural, which is what Sowana fully intends. When Edison speaks with her about the android after Lord Ewald has initially agreed to participate in the experiment, she assures him, 'Oh! ce n'est rien encore! [...] *après l'incarnation* ce sera surnaturel' (I, 969).

The leaning towards the supernatural and the occult in the novel through the character of Sowana stands in opposition to the science of Edison. The inventor is clearly at a loss in his understanding of and control over the android. Pascal Rollet has rightly labelled Hadaly as a creation which has escaped its creator.⁴⁸ When one day Sowana sends Hadaly to Edison, unbidden by him, he is clearly shocked and seized with a terrible fear: 'L'œuvre effrayait l'ouvrier', he explains (I, 1006). Indeed, there is a strong suggestion that it was actually Sowana, and not Edison, who all along was responsible for the construction of Hadaly. From the now completed body of the android, Sowana explains to Ewald: 'Je m'appelais en la pensée de qui me créait, de sorte qu'en croyant seulement agir de lui-même il m'obéissait aussi obscurément' (I, 990). Thus, not only was Sowana in charge of a large part of the work in the construction of the android, but she is also suggesting here that she guided the thoughts of Edison himself.

There is certainly a very clear link between Hadaly and Sowana. However, the distinction between the two is made obvious in their attitude towards life and death. Hadaly the mechanical android does not place any particular importance on living.

When Edison tells her that the time has come for her to live, she murmurs in reply 'Oh! je ne tiens pas à vivre!' (I, 828). Later, Edison interprets the stance of Hadaly with her hands in front of her face as that of 'l'enfant qui va naître: elle se cache le front devant la vie' (I, 906). In contrast, Sowana's impassioned address to nature after Ewald's initial rejection of her, expresses both her strong desire to live, but also to die: ' – hélas! si je pouvais vivre! Si je possédais la vie! Oh! que c'est bon de vivre! Heureux ceux qui palpitent! [...] Pouvoir, seulement, mourir!' (I, 996). Both Hadaly and Sowana stand outside of normal human existence: what is normally termed 'life'. The former does not wish to participate in it, while the latter desires not only to live, but also to die, rightly recognizing that death is a universal human phenomenon which forms part of the whole experience of living. Sowana utters her desire for life and death whilst inside the mechanical construction of Hadaly, thereby demonstrating that she dominates the android in the same way that she has dominated its creator, Edison.

Yet in accepting the illusion of love created by Hadaly/Sowana, Lord Ewald must agree to turn his back on life, and accept a claustal death of enclosure in his manor of Athelwold. Sowana begs him to 'laisse[r] les vivants s'enfermer, à l'étroit de leurs foyers, en des paroles et des sourires' (I, 993). When he eventually accepts Hadaly, Ewald is ready to meet this condition: 'je résous de m'enfermer avec toi, ténébreuse idole! Je donne ma démission de vivant – et que le siècle passe!' (I, 997).

Therefore, here as elsewhere in Villiers's work, the principle of regeneration through death is shown to be a strong theme: in order to find a life of ideal happiness with Hadaly, Ewald agrees to a symbolic, claustal death. It is, however, astounding that the object in the novel which is intended to bring new life should be so manifestly fashioned and eventually wholly controlled by a spirit of death, Sowana.

⁴⁸ Rollet, 'Voix résistante', pp. 87-102 (p. 87).

Conclusion

It is clear that the principles of loss, death, and regeneration are made manifest in the relationship between Hadaly/Sowana and Lord Ewald. Ewald has suffered loss in his life: the loss of the possibility of finding a truly satisfying love relationship. He is one of Villiers's noble elite who loves only once, and has squandered this chance of happiness by forming a liaison with Alicia Clary. In her physical looks, Alicia is an ideal female in terms of what Ewald desires, but her positivistic, bourgeois personality and outlook on life render her incompatible with the nobleman, aristocratic in nature as well as in name. Therefore, he chooses a suicide's death, and his purpose in visiting Edison in Menlo Park is to wish his friend and former protégé a final farewell. However, Edison offers him the prospect of regeneration: a new way of dealing with the problem of Alicia, through Hadaly and illusionism. In order for this regenerative relationship to work, though, Ewald must accept in some way to enter into a symbolic death, a life lived in isolation in his castle, separated from the land of the living. It is only through this death that new life with Hadaly will be possible.

Hadaly herself is not mortal and therefore will not 'die' physically. Ewald is instructed by Edison to destroy her upon his own death. In his initial explanations of what the android will mean to the English lord, Edison says that she will be Alicia, 'revêtue d'une sorte d'immortalité' (I, 823). She will no longer be a woman, but an angel, no longer reality, but the ideal. Therefore, by giving life to Hadaly, Edison has in some way conquered death.

Yet this whole venture ends in failure. Both Hadaly/Sowana and Alicia are destroyed as the result of a fire that breaks out on board the ship *Wonderful*. The somnambulistic hysteric Mrs Any Anderson is also dead, which leaves Edison and Ewald alone, Edison to think and Ewald to mourn his loss, partaking of a claustral death

wholly different to the one he had originally envisaged. Instead of enjoying a regenerated life with Hadaly, he is now condemned to the spiritual death of a Villierian failed hero, like Don Juan and Samuel Wissler.

One of Edison's original intentions was to break the silence of the heavens, and by his sheer audacity to force God to reveal himself through his intervention. If the project with Hadaly had been successful, then there would have been a significant disruption of natural order, which would have signalled a challenge launched to divine authority. God alone would no longer have been sole creator of life, but man also would have proved himself capable of the creation of another form of existence. Both Edison and Ewald recognize the Promethean nature of their undertaking: the being would have been to them 'CE QUE NOUS SOMMES À DIEU' (I, 836).

However, the novel ends as it began, with Edison sitting in silence, alone with his thoughts. He had already decided that he would not attempt to produce any more androids after Hadaly, but this task is now rendered virtually impossible anyway with the death of Mrs Anderson signifying the withdrawal of the help of Sowana. The inventor wished to break the silence of the heavens but has not succeeded: although the android was destroyed in mysterious circumstances on board ship, there was no evidence either to confirm or disprove that divine intervention had indeed taken place. This is still a world of loss, which the deaths of Hadaly, Alicia, and Mrs Anderson only serve further to reinforce.

In relation to the questions posed at the start of this chapter as regards imagery of loss, death, and regeneration, there is a thoroughly modern solution mapped out to the problem of loss in modern life: the creation of new and artificial life, which will not itself die, but will have to be destroyed. However, although there is a brief moment when it looks as though this solution is going to be effective, Edison's android is ultimately destroyed, taking with it Ewald's hopes for happiness. A form of

regeneration, through the actual death of Edward Anderson and the symbolic death of Ewald, has once more been instigated, but it has ended in failure. It is now up to the last work for study, *Axël*, to prove whether or not this principle can finally work in Villiers's literature.

Chapter Six

The Regenerative Principle in *Axël*

A*xël* is the last of Villiers's works to be considered in terms of the themes of death, loss, and regeneration in this thesis. It is a play that stands alongside the novel *L'Ève future* as one of his most important publications, in that it is highly representative of the changing currents of thought of the author in the later years of his life. It is also a work of Villiers's literary maturity. Just as the *Premières Poésies* show where this author began, *Axël* shows where his work ends. In the lecture he delivered in Belgium in 1890, Mallarmé describes it as Villiers's testament,¹ while in his study on the author's life and work, Jacques-Henry Bornecque argues that *Axël* represents 'sinon l'expression totale, du moins la suprême aspiration d'une vie pensante'.²

Although death appears as a theme throughout Villiers's writings, *Axël* is the most substantial of his works to be so wholly focused on this sombre subject. Parts of it are very much based on an esoteric principle of regeneration through death. At the start of his article on the significance of suicide in *Axël*, Bornecque outlines three possible 'orders' of self-inflicted death. Though he rightly places more emphasis on the third of these deaths, 'le suicide métaphysique', the first is also present in the play. The main characters, Sara and Axël, are offered life on a higher plane of existence in religious and occult environments respectively. However, in order to attain this, both must choose a symbolic death, or in Bornecque's words, 'le suicide par carence physique'.³ The two young heroes reject this claustal death, only later to choose a suicide which Bornecque sees as an adventure into new spiritual worlds: 'Or Axël n'est pas, avant tout, un déserteur éperdu de cette Terre [... :] il veut être un explorateur de planètes inconnues'.⁴

The purpose of this chapter is to investigate whether Axël's death is in fact regenerative, or if it is a simple act of auto-destruction.

¹ Mallarmé, *Villiers*, p. 27.

² Bornecque, *Créateur/visionnaire*, pp. 121-22.

³ Jacques-Henry Bornecque, 'La Valeur du suicide dans *Axël* et ses résonances spirituelles', *A Rebours*, 48 (1989), 91-124 (pp. 91-92).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 91-124 (p. 118).

The first complete version of *Axël* to be published appeared in *La Jeune France* from November 1885 to June 1886. Parts of it were also printed in various journals: *La Renaissance littéraire et artistique* (1872), *La Vie artistique* (October 1882), *La Vie militaire* (12 July 1884), *La Revue indépendante* (April 1887), and *Gil Blas* (28 June 1887). The final version was published by Quantin in January 1890, almost six months after Villiers's death. It was an important piece of work for the author. He began writing it around 1869, and was still labouring over its revisions on his deathbed some twenty years later. On no other work did he spend such a long period of time. The editors of his *Œuvres complètes* surmise what it meant to him:

Inlassablement repris et remanié pendant les deux tiers de sa vie de créateur, *Axël* représentait pour Villiers une somme, à laquelle il voulait incorporer toute son expérience d'artiste, de penseur et d'homme. *Axël* est bien, comme l'a dit Stéphane Mallarmé, son testament: s'il a voué à cette œuvre de prédilection un labeur aussi persévérant, aussi acharné, c'est qu'il était conscient de travailler à son 'tombeau', au monument où il serait enfermé tout entier, et qui témoignerait après sa mort qu'il n'avait pas vécu en vain.⁵

One of the reasons why Villiers took so long over this text was the confusion in it created by an incoherent mix of occult and religious doctrines. Throughout much of his lifetime, Villiers acted as something of a philosophic butterfly, alighting on abstract ideas from systems of thought that interested him, and then merging them together to create his own illusionist theories. When he began to write *Axël* as a relatively young man, Villiers was interested in philosophies and spiritual practices alien to those of the Roman Catholic tradition in which he had been raised. From the manuscripts that remain, and from the version of *Le Monde religieux* that was printed in *La Renaissance littéraire et artistique* in 1872, it is clear that Villiers originally intended the play to

have an anti-clerical feel to it, and to favour esoteric occult teaching over that of the Christian church. A rejection of the religious world would be followed by that of occult claustration. Temptations both of gold and of love would be overcome, and the play would end in the double suicide of the main characters, with maître Janus, a teacher of hidden knowledge, declaring in restrained but nevertheless triumphant approval, 'Oh! les délivrés!' (II, 1489).

However, as he grew older, Villiers sought to return again to Christian orthodoxy, and consequently set about revising this play which represented his life's work. A review of the manuscripts published in his complete works shows that Villiers succeeded at least in reworking the third part of the drama in his last years of life.⁶ In this revised *Monde occulte*, Axël recognizes that Janus's esoteric asceticism is a religion without God, and chooses to remain with the faith of his ancestors: 'Je choisis de rester chrétien' (II, 1514). Although Villiers was constrained by health and time in his revisions of the fourth and final part of *Axël*, there are in existence manuscripts where the Auërsperg count speaks to Sara of faith in Jesus Christ.⁷ It is unclear what the reworked Christian ending may have been. However, Émile Drougard has speculated that a Christian Axël, separated from Maître Janus, desires to use the treasure to charitable ends as a means of expiating his guilt over the murdered Commander. He converts Sara to Christianity and both leave the castle crypt to enter monastic life.⁸ Although this seems far-fetched in light of the original deeply occult nature of the play, this hypothesis does at least highlight the difficulty Villiers had in reconciling Catholic orthodoxy with his obvious desire for freedom and experiment in spiritual matters.

Axël enjoyed a good reception by Symbolist authors when it was published posthumously in 1890, and has since been recognized as 'l'une des premières

⁵ Raitt/Castex, *OC* II, 1409.

⁶ See *OC* II, 1512-20.

⁷ See *ibid.*, 1518-19.

⁸ Émile Drougard, 'Le vrai sens d'*Axël*', in *La Grande Revue*, April 1930. Summarised in *OC* II, 1520.

[manifestations] de la nouvelle dramaturgie symboliste'.⁹ The ambiguities of its setting, both temporally and geographically, suited these emerging literati who were attracted towards a work which took place in neither a distinct time nor location. Moreover, *Axël's* influence also spread even beyond France and into the twentieth century. Edmund Wilson's study *Axël's Castle*, published first in 1931, is a work of literary criticism which analyses the work of writers like James Joyce, W.B. Yeats, and T. S. Eliot, who he claims are rooted in late-nineteenth-century French Symbolism. In the work of each, Wilson traces the archetypal Symbolist hero back to Axël: 'It will easily be seen that this super-dreamer of Villiers's is the type of all the heroes of the Symbolists, of our day as well as of his'.¹⁰

However, despite the initial enthusiasm for it, and somewhat undermining the strength of the compliment later paid to it by Wilson, the play's popularity largely dwindled as the first flush of Symbolist youth and zeal diminished. It was performed in the Théâtre de la Gaîté on 26 and 27 February 1894 by Paul Larochelle,¹¹ but was not seen again in France until 1962, when it was staged at the Studio des Champs-Élysées, directed by Antoine Bourseiller. It was also adapted and appeared on French television in 1970, and was heard on the radio in France in 1950, and in Britain in 1956.

Axël is the product of the convergence of many interests and influences which affected the writer. First of all, it has clear Christian overtones. The whole principle of renouncement and of death bringing forth new life, as seen in the regenerative offers of both the Archdeacon and Maître Janus (II, 553, 644), can be related to the Biblical parable of the seed of wheat falling into the ground.¹² Thus are presented in this play both religious and occult paths of regeneration, both of which are rejected.

⁹ Raitt/Castex, *OC* II, 1411.

¹⁰ Edmund Wilson, *Axël's Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870-1930* (London: Collins, 1962), p. 210.

¹¹ N.B. Paul Larochelle also later staged *Elën* in the Théâtre Libre in Paris, in 1895.

¹² C.f. these words of Christ: 'Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone: but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit.' John 12. 24, King James Version. I

The action of the play also closely follows the Christian calendar, while at the same time subverting it. The first part takes place at Christmas while the rest of the events occur at Easter. Axël dies just before dawn on Easter day, ostensibly to forge a new future for humanity: 'Puisse la race humaine', he says, 'désabusée de ses vaines chimères [...] puisse-t-elle finir, en s'enfuyant indifférente, à notre exemple, sans t'adresser même un adieu' (II, 676-77). It seems that Villiers was relating his character's death to that of Christ. In a society where faith in God was becoming increasingly obsolete, at least among intellectuals, man himself can be seen as having to carve out his own salvation. Axël, seen in this light, is a new Messianic figure, in contrast to that of the Christian church: 'Comme Tullia Fabiana, Axël pourrait être ainsi une esquisse d'anti-Christ. Son suicide avec Sara aurait donc valeur d'exemple universel: c'est le signe nouveau qui s'oppose à la Résurrection.'¹³

This kind of analogy reflects the strong anti-clerical feelings which were dominant for a large part of Villiers's adult life. Another product of this sentiment is the presentation of the clerical office-bearers in *Le Monde religieux*, the first part of *Axël*. Both the archdeacon and the abbess demonstrate a naïve cruelty towards Sara, prescribing both solitary confinement and physical suffering as a means of persuading the young maiden in their care to enter the convent for good.

However, Villiers goes further than anti-clericalism in this play, in presenting what is in many ways an occult drama. Maître Janus can be seen very much as a magus figure, with Axël his young initiate. Indeed, Frantisek Deak argues that '*Axël* still contains elements of a romantic metaphysical melodrama, a pseudohistorical romantic

have previously related this Biblical image to one evoked by Samuel Wissler. See chapter 3, p. 138 (footnote 16) of this thesis.

¹³ Simon, *Chrétien malgré lui*, p. 204.

Note also the similarity between Axël portrayed in this light, and the character of Meursault, from Camus's *L'Étranger*. In the preface to the first American translation of the novel (1955), Camus wrote: *On ne se tromperait donc pas beaucoup en lisant dans 'L'Étranger' l'histoire d'un homme qui, sans aucune attitude héroïque, accepte de mourir pour la vérité. Il m'est arrivé de dire aussi, et toujours paradoxalement, que j'avais essayé de figurer dans mon personnage le seul christ que nous méritions.* See *Albert Camus: Théâtre, récits, nouvelles*, ed. by Roger Quilliot (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), pp. 1920-21.

play, and a discursive thesis play, but its organizing structure, its semantic gesture, lies within the act and philosophy of initiation'.¹⁴ It seems that the action of the whole play has been orchestrated by the young nobleman's mysterious tutor in order to bring Sara and Axël together to accomplish some occult work. When Sara arrives in the castle, the magus acknowledges approvingly that 'le Voile et le Manteau, tous deux renonciateurs, se sont croisés: l'Œuvre s'accomplit' (II, 646).

Villiers also makes use of Rosicrucian imagery in *Axël*. The basis for this is the fact that the abbey where Sara has spent most of her life had been occupied three hundred years previously by an ancient sect of the Rose-Croix. This sect had left books which Sara has read, and their influence has obviously affected her. At one point, for example, she lays the rose she has carried on her journey on the cross of her dagger. A sixteenth-century religious cult, Rosicrucianism enjoyed a renewal of interest in late-nineteenth-century France due largely to Sâr Péladan, a Roman Catholic who was greatly attracted to occult teaching. He organized the first of seven Salons de la Rose et la Croix in March 1892.

Another factor which impinges on *Axël*'s status as an occult drama is the artistic debt it owes to Goethe's *Faust*. Villiers was interested in the theme of *Faust* throughout his lifetime, and the character of the German scholar was to leave a profound mark on many of his male characters: 'Comme Goethe son Faust, Villiers avait porté très jeune en lui la prescience et la nostalgie encore informulée d'un tel personnage représentatif du nouveau surhomme.'¹⁵

A 'Chanson' from what Villiers hoped would be his own *Faust* appeared in the *Premières Poésies* in 1859. Although Villiers did not actually write a full-length French version of this drama, the editors of his complete works outline in their accompanying notes how 'vers la fin de sa vie, *L'Ève future* apparaît comme une version de la légende

¹⁴ Frantisek Deak, *Symbolist Theater: The Formation of an Avant-Garde* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 45.

faustienne'.¹⁶ This hypothesis is backed up by Anne Le Feuvre, who labels Edison along with Axël as a Faustian figure.¹⁷ However, it is *Axël* which bears the strongest resemblance to Goethe's legendary play: 'Mais c'est bien dans *Axël* qu'est le plus fortement marquée la continuité de son inspiration avec celle de *Faust*.'¹⁸ Like that of Faust, the story of Axël is that of a young, sincere, and intelligent man who is led into esoterism by a supernatural being.

The final great external influence on *Axël* is the work of Richard Wagner. Wagner was present in Paris from 1860-61 to direct rehearsals for *Tannhäuser* at the Opéra, and in 1860, he organized three concerts at the Théâtre des Italiens. It is unclear whether or not Villiers attended these performances, though he did write around this time to Baudelaire, who himself had penned a pamphlet entitled 'Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* à Paris': 'Je me suis rencontré avec vous au sujet de Wagner, et je vous jouerai Tannhaeuser [*sic*] quand je serai installé dans votre voisinage.'¹⁹ In 1869 and 1870, Villiers journeyed with Catulle Mendès and Judith Gautier to Germany and Switzerland to meet with the composer himself, and to experience some of his productions. Indeed, Alan Raitt and Pierre-Georges Castex suggest that Villiers began writing *Axël* between these two visits. They even put forward the notion that Villiers's final play can be seen as a homage to Wagner.²⁰ Villiers had previously composed a eulogy of sorts to the musician in his tale 'La Légende moderne' from the *Histoires insolites*. In it, a penniless young stranger in Paris is expounding to a benefactor his vision of the theatre he would build, and the hoards of people that would flock to it. The stranger is Wagner himself, with his theatre being that of Bayreuth in German Bavaria, to which many enthusiasts, including of course Villiers himself, made pilgrimage.

¹⁵ Bornecque, *Créateur/visionnaire*, p. 120.

¹⁶ Raitt/Castex, *OC* II, 1412.

¹⁷ Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 383.

¹⁸ Raitt/Castex, *OC* II, 1412.

¹⁹ Letter from Villiers to Charles Baudelaire, *CG* I, 46 [1861]. Baudelaire's 'Richard Wagner et *Tannhäuser* à Paris' was first published in May 1861.

²⁰ See *OC* II, 1414.

The strands of Wagner's work which have been interwoven with those of *Axël* have been outlined in detail in Alan Raitt's *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam et le mouvement symboliste*.²¹ Most important for the purposes of this thesis is the theme of *Liebestod*, the choice to die made by lovers who see it as the only possible means of securing their future happiness. The *Liebestod* theme is most closely outworked in *Tristan und Isolde*. Wagner took the subjects and story-line for this opera from a Celtic legend, with which Villiers may well have identified, being conscious of his roots in Celtic Brittany.

However, the product of Villiers's obvious admiration for Richard Wagner did not merely entail the borrowing of individual characters and themes. Villiers was interested in the German composer's ideas on art in general, and hence was keen to inaugurate a form of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* on the French stage. The influence of this 'total art' theory meant that Villiers was desirous that his play should not only be lyrically effective and phonically pleasing, but should also be a visual work of art. This explains the extended stage directions referring to scenery and characters' costumes. In addition, Villiers includes music in this play to heighten the dramatic import of the action. For example, just after Sara has rejected the monastic life the archdeacon has offered her, a choir begins to sing joyfully of the coming of Christmas (II, 554-55). At the end of the play, a chorus of the military servants sing of the death of the old world (II, 669-70), while the woodsmen sing in celebration of the marriage of Ukko and Luisa Glück (II, 676). These songs come just before and just after Axël and Sara celebrate their union of death. With this evidence in mind, it is easy to see why critics like Guy Michaud have argued that '*Axël* [...] offrait pourtant une sorte de transposition de Wagner sur la scène française, avec son lyrisme, son ampleur – parfois grandiloquente – , son symbolisme de légende'.²²

²¹ See the chapter on Wagner in Raitt, *VMS*, pp. 101-42, especially pp. 124-41.

²² Michaud, *Message poétique*, III, 435-36.

Villiers was undoubtedly determined to implement Wagnerian thought on art. The question of Wagner's influence on Villiers also relates, however, to the question of whether or not *Axël* was written to be read or performed. Many of the Wagnerian elements of the play render its performance problematic, for example the lengthy philosophical dialogue, along with the long and informative stage directions and the inclusion of music. Even Villiers's devoted friend Mallarmé was of the opinion that *Axël* would have to be cut dramatically in order to appear on stage. He approved of the cuts made in Paul Laroche's 1894 version: 'Dame, on ne peut présenter *Axël* au public dans les conditions *natives* du livre.'²³

In his study on Symbolist theatre, Frantisek Deak affirms that

In its final version, *Axël* is a play written for reading. It is an example of an armchair drama, or better still an example of a tragedy that through continuous rewriting eventually loses its theatrical aspect and becomes a poetic and philosophical work intended for contemplation and not for performance.²⁴

This view may well have been informed by Deak's reading of Alan Raitt, who also observes that Villiers's final play was eventually written for a theatre of the future, such as that of Wagner:

Ses déclarations contradictoires sur *Axël* et le théâtre laissent entendre qu'il considère son drame comme injouable sur les scènes de son temps mais qu'il envisage, comme un idéal très lointain, sa représentation éventuelle dans un théâtre dont l'esprit se serait entièrement renouvelé (avec le sous-entendu: tel qu'il existe à Bayreuth).²⁵

²³ Mallarmé cited in *OC* II, 1540. This is from an interview by G. Docquois, which was originally published in *Le Journal* on 19 February 1894.

²⁴ Deak, *Symbolist Theater*, p. 56.

The theme of death is of utmost importance in this drama. It affects the character construction, infiltrates the atmosphere and the settings, and especially impinges upon the relationship between Axël and Sara. It is fitting that *Axël* should appear at the end of this thesis, since it displays and draws to a close much of what has been discussed and demonstrated previously.

²⁵ Raitt, *VMS*, p. 125.

6.1 Death in Life: Characterization in *Axël*

There are at times striking similarities among various characters who appear in Villiers's work. This includes the five protagonists in *Axël* whose existence is central to the plot: Axël and Sara themselves; Ukko, Axël's faithful young servant; Commander Kaspar, who comes from the Prussian court; and Janus, the magus figure who guides Axël and Sara to the fulfilment of their destiny. All of these characters have literary relations in previous Villierian works. They are also linked to varying degrees with the central theme of death in the play.

Axël is in many respects a *fin-de-siècle homme fatal*, vulnerable to the attacks of the seemingly all-powerful fatal female. However, this young nobleman shows none of the moral and physical weakness of a Des Esseintes figure: he is outraged when Kaspar suggests he indulge in the pleasures of adultery (II, 606). Axël is formed in the same mould as many other Villierian heroes who have a lofty conception of affairs of the heart and who will only love once.

Like Wilhelm de Strally d'Anthas and Sergius d'Albamah before him, Axël possesses great physical force. At his first appearance in the play, he is described as being 'd'une très haute taille et d'une admirable beauté virile' (II, 591). Moreover, the stage directions also indicate that 'l'élégance musculeuse et les proportions de sa personne annoncent une puissante force corporelle' (II, 591). When he finally enters into combat with Kaspar, his bodily force is described as being 'svelte, athlétique, onduleuse' (II, 628). Indeed, there is an almost savage quality in Axël's strength. He is a hunter, carrying a rifle at his shoulder and an axe at his belt, and he is said by one of his servants to be able to kill wild animals with his bare hands: 'Tu sais fort bien que notre jeune seigneur est d'une vigueur telle qu'il étouffe les loups, d'une seule étreinte à la gorge, sans daigner tirer son couteau de chasse' (Hartwig, II, 568).

Like Tullia Fabriana in *Isis*, Axël is also accomplished in the more refined art of sword-fighting, as Gotthold testifies with pride: ‘J’en étais fier, moi! comme le jour où j’eus l’honneur de lui mettre un fleuret au poing pour la première fois. – Et j’ose croire qu’aujourd’hui monseigneur est, certes, l’une des plus dangereuses épées de l’Allemagne, sinon la plus redoutable’ (II, 566).

Like Villiers himself, Axël is immensely proud of his family and ancestry. He ‘avait l’air d’un jeune lion qui porte sa race dans ses yeux’ (II, 566). One of the reasons why he so strongly resists Kaspar’s desire to find the hidden treasure is to protect the honour of his father who was responsible in the first place for its presence in the Auërsperg castle grounds. This act of filial and ancestral loyalty can be likened to that of Villiers himself, who fought the *Perrinet Leclerc* court case from 1875-77 on behalf of his forbear Jehan de Villiers.²⁶

This mixture of great physical dominance and family pride is more reminiscent of the Romantic hero than the pitifully decadent *homme fatal*. Indeed, the play has been described as one of the last manifestations of ‘la grande floraison du théâtre romantique’.²⁷ However, Axël is also a young apprentice of asceticism, and in this, rather than because of his physical prowess, he belongs in the *fin de siècle*. In many ways mirroring the relationship of Wilhelm de Strally d’Anthas with Tullia Fabriana, and in some respects that of Lord Ewald with Edison, Axël is being initiated into an occult doctrine and lifestyle by his tutor, Maître Janus. He fasts for entire days, and is seemingly uninterested in the pleasures of youth, instead spending his time poring over ancient manuscripts. Perhaps this studious asceticism explains the pallor of his face.

²⁶ *Perrinet Leclerc* was a melodrama set in France in the fifteenth century, at the time when Villiers’s ancestor Jean de Villiers led the soldiers of the duke of Burgundy into Paris. Villiers felt that it portrayed his ancestor as a traitor, and objected to it being included in the repertory of the Théâtre du Châtelet in July 1875. However, modern critics largely agree that this was an over-reaction on the author’s part, since none of the characters in the play are particularly honourable, and Jean de Villiers is certainly no worse than the rest.

See *OC* II, 1709; Raitt, *Life of*, pp. 160-62, 170-73.

²⁷ Raitt/Castex, *OC* II, 1411.

Kaspar describes him as being 'de mine un peu fatale' (II, 577), and at one point, he actually frightens one of his old servants with the colour of his skin.

Like a Shakespearean Hamlet, Axël is dressed in black. He loves silence, and stands in total opposition to the noisy self-interest of the modern bourgeois, represented by Kaspar. Their final clash seems almost a relief to Axël, who had up until this point been treating the Commander with courtesy and hospitality on account of the honour once paid to the court official by his father. Glad to have the pretence stripped away, he asks: 'Quel autre sincère contact fut jamais possible, entre nous, que celui des épées?' (II, 605).

One of the main attributes of the *fin-de-siècle homme fatal* was his inability to dominate and master his female counterpart. It seems at first that Axël is going to prove to suffer from this weakness of character. He is at once struck by Sara's mysterious beauty, and attempts to harm her: 'Toi, je veux voir la couleur de ton sang!' (II, 655). However, like sister Laudation in the convent, he cannot strike her. Later, he feels a 'soif de [la] contempler inanimée', but again fails in the outworking of his murderous threat as Sara, throwing her arms around his neck, shouts triumphantly, 'Non. Voici des chaînes plus lourdes!' (II, 658). Axël has become her prisoner, and she is to him a 'vision dont [il] voudrai[t] mourir' (II, 661). It seems that Axël is set to die the death of a fatal man. He has also succumbed to the Villierian misfortune of projecting his own desire onto the form of Sara, just as Ewald projected his concept of an ideal woman onto Hadaly.

However, Axël ultimately reasserts himself, and refuses to be drawn into the conventional death of an *homme fatal*, ironically by choosing to end his life first. Of course, it could be argued that Sara was still ultimately responsible for the double suicide, in that Axël may not have chosen death if it had not been for her. However, it is he who initiates the suicide pact. Sara is at first uncomprehending, and then fearful:

‘Non! c’est impossible!... Ce n’est plus véritable! – C’est inhumain plutôt même que surhumain! Mon amant! pardonne! j’ai peur! Tu me donnes le vertige. – Oh! je défendrai la vie!’ (II, 673). While Sara wishes for life and tries to dissuade her lover with her words, Axël is intent on carrying out his resolve on the instant. It is his vision that he succeeds in imposing onto the mind of Sara, and she submits to his will to die. Therefore, the relationship of a dominant male affecting the destiny of an overcome female is partly re-established in the reversal of the balance of physical and psychological power between these last two great Villierian lovers.

Sara herself follows in a long line of Villierian *femmes fatales*. She bears their traits and is the ultimate inspiration behind an irresistible death-wish in the man she loves. Like Hermosa and Tullia Fabriana, Sara is very beautiful. There is also an unknown element in her attraction which spells danger. In the stage directions in the first part, she is described as having ‘un visage d’une beauté mystérieuse’ (II, 533). Axël himself also exclaims before her: ‘Ô beauté d’une forêt sous la foudre!’ (II, 655). This aligns Sara, like Morgane in *Le Prétendant*, with the unpredictable turbulence of the natural world.

Sara’s hair is long and dark, and in the first part is studded with orange blossom. Her feminine allure is also enhanced with the use of jewellery. When she appears in the religious world, she is wearing a pearl and opal necklace. This is sold on her journey, but as she confronts Axël in the final part of the play, she is adorned with a large diamond necklace which she has chosen from the treasure she has found. This again reflects back on Gustave Moreau’s idea that the *femme fatale* should be adorned with a ‘richesse nécessaire’.²⁸

²⁸ See Jean Paladilhe and José Pierre, *Gustave Moreau; Gustave Moreau au regard changeant des générations* (Paris: Hazan, 1971), pp. 26-29, where Jean Paladilhe discusses Moreau’s search for both ‘la richesse nécessaire’, and ‘la belle inertie’.

Like that of Axël, Sara's skin is very pale. The abbess describes her as 'haute et blanche comme un cierge pascal', and the servants comment on the pallor of her visage as she enters the castle (II, 540). She is also statue-like in her poise and bearing. As she is on the point of renouncing the life of religious asceticism offered her, Villiers translates the impassibility of her countenance into the language of sculpted effigies: 'Son visage est comme sculpté dans la pierre' (II, 547). Indeed, at several points in the drama, Sara is seen in a statuesque pose, or is pictured beside statues. For example, the first time she appears in the play, she enters alone and stands still for a moment with her arms crossed and her eyes closed while the abbess observes her in silence.

When she actually finds the treasure in the crypt of Axël's castle, she is pictured at one moment in the middle of a vast and glittering pile of jewellery, riches, and precious stones. She is leaning on an old statue of a knight, still very pale, and with her eyes closed once more. Sara is the kind of woman to be revered amongst men. As Janus says to Axël in Part III in reply to his wish not to become a figure carved in stone, 'l'univers ne se prosterne que devant les statues' (II, 634).

In stillness, Sara appears to be statuesque. In her motion, however, like the *femme fatale*, she is somnambulist. This is noted in the convent, where the abbess remarks to the archdeacon, 'Ne l'avez-vous pas vue souvent, comme moi, marcher sous les arceaux du cloître, concentrée et comme perdue dans on ne sait quel rêve taciturne?' (II, 542-43). She is also often described as having 'les paupières baissées' (II, 553, 654).

Sara is a virginal heroine. In *Le Monde religieux*, she is presented as a chaste bride of Christ wearing a white robe, although by the time she meets Axël in Part IV, her outer garment is black. The relationship between Sara and Axël is never consummated: she dies as his chosen bride, before they have come together in a physical union. In a wider perspective, this reflects the *fin-de-siècle* anxiety regarding sterility, coupled with

a fear of sexual relations. Axël, however, finds this quality inherently attractive, and refers to her as his 'liliale épousée! [...] [sa] vierge!' (II, 671).

Ultimately, however, there is a sinister side to Sara's beauty and allure. The archdeacon recoils in horror as she renounces her religious vows: 'Ta beauté, c'est de l'enfer qui apparaî: tes cheveux te tentent! tes regards sont des éclairs de scandale!' (II, 558). However, it is Sara herself who reveals the full extent of her fatal cruelty and even the Satanic nature of her beauty, as she confronts Axël:

Sais-tu ce que tu refuses! Toutes les faveurs des autres femmes ne valent pas mes cruautés! Je suis la plus sombre des vierges. Je crois me souvenir d'avoir fait tomber des anges. Hélas! des fleurs et des enfants sont morts de mon ombre. [...] Oh! t'ensevelir en ma blancheur, où tu laisseras ton âme comme une fleur perdue sous la neige! Te voiler de mes cheveux où tu respirais l'esprit des roses mortes!... Cède. Je te ferai pâlir sous les joies amères; j'aurai de la clémence pour toi, lorsque tu seras dans ces supplices!... (II, 658-59)

There is a savagery in this outburst which is hard to reconcile with the maiden's later capitulation to her lover. It is as if in this instant, Sara is embodying and enunciating the cruelty of the entire female gender, just as perhaps Hadaly contained all that was ideal about a woman. Sara equates herself with absolute evil: like the Devil himself, she claims to have caused angels to fall from heaven. She has been responsible for the deaths of flowers and of children. This refers to the fading of the rose she carried with her on her journey, and to sister Aloyse, who also seemed to fall under her spell. Though Sara later becomes submissive to Axël and ultimately dies at his command, the strength of her desire for sadistic cruelty here is overwhelming. Bornecque speaks rightly, then, of Villiers uniting 'les deux types de femme: l'ange et le démon, la voyance et la passion, l'amour sublime et la sublime inconscience, en cette

Sara de Maupers qui représente peut-être le plus enivrant abrégé d'infinis crée [*sic*] par un poète'.²⁹

Sara and Axël are the main characters in *Axël*, and it is through them that the death theme is most strikingly manifested. However, there are three other characters who are significant to the message and action of the drama.

The first of these is Axël's young servant, Ukko. He acts as a literary foil to his master, and his relationship with Luïsa Glück mirrors that of Axël and Sara. His loyalty to and affection for the young Auërsperg nobleman are quite apparent. He is deeply distressed when the count announces his departure from the castle: 'Quoi! tu ne m'emmènes pas? Tu ne m'emmènes pas? [...] Ô mon maître!' (II, 650). Indeed, the young page is presented almost as Axël's double. He is 'plus muet que son ombre' in the silence of the hunting chase, being the only servant whose company Axël will accept on these expeditions (II, 568). Even Kaspar is sensitive to the close relationship between Axël and his page, describing Ukko as an 'enfant' who 'est l'âme damnée de son maître' (II, 575). The young servant stands immediately behind Axël's chair as the count and the Commander talk, as if in faithful guardianship over his master's life. Moreover, it is Ukko who has been ordered by Axël to take his place as lord of the castle in the event that the last of the Auërsperg nobility does not return.

The link between the relationship of Axël and Sara and that of Ukko and Luïsa is obvious. In her article published in the proceedings of the conference that took place in 1989 to mark the centenary of Villiers's death, Marta Giné Janer commented on this close mirroring of characters, linking Ukko with what she terms the 'belles âmes' of German Romanticism:

²⁹ Bornecque, *Créateur/visionnaire*, pp. 53-54.

La lecture des pièces théâtrales de Villiers nous fait découvrir des personnages qui, sans intervenir directement dans l'action, ajoutent de nouveaux éléments à la philosophie de Villiers; des personnages aux traits enfantins, tantôt naïfs, tantôt sombres, mais dont la jeune nature s'épanche et fait contraste avec l'existence des protagonistes: je pense à Xoryl, Sione, Mary et Henri de Vaudreuil, Ukko et sa fiancée, créations parallèles à celles de Tullia, Morgane, lady Cecil et Stephen Ashwell, Axël et Sara.³⁰

The picture of the happiness found by Ukko and Luïsa in natural terms acts as a counterpoint tableau to the deaths of Sara and Axël. Ukko therefore represents the possibility of earthly happiness, outside of occult teaching and existential angst. He and Luïsa marry as Axël and Sara die, and it is he who will now carry on the line of Auërsperg.

Commander Kaspar d'Auërsperg is a second minor character who is nonetheless important to the plot of the drama. Kaspar attends the Prussian court, and he has come to the Black Forest to negotiate with Axël over some inheritance money to which both were entitled. It is clear what Kaspar represents in this text: 'Je m'appelle *la vie réelle*, entends-tu?', he intimates to Auërsperg (II, 598). Although Kaspar claims to represent *real life*, he is in fact living in the same kind of death as were the businessmen and actors studied in Chapter 2 of this thesis. Comparable to Tribulat Bonhomet in Villiers's earlier tales, Kaspar represents all that Villiers finds distasteful about the middle classes. Through the mouthpiece of Axël, Villiers uses the example of Kaspar to highlight three main areas in which he holds the bourgeois in contempt.

The first of these is the obsession with money, and the constant desire to gain more. Kaspar urges Axël to seek after riches, but the folly of this advice is revealed in the count's scornful response: 'Tu m'exhortais à "chercher fortune", t'offrant comme

³⁰ Marta Giné Janer, 'Entre les "belles âmes" de Schiller et un romantisme noir', in *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam cent ans après (1889-1989)*, ed. by Michel Crouzet and Alan Raitt (Paris: SEDES, 1990),

exemple à suivre: or, l'instant après, tu m'avouais ta ruine!' (II, 606). Kaspar also seeks money in comparatively small amounts, which signals to Villiers a lack of true ambition and vision. Sara and Axël both *renounce* wealth on a relatively small scale in order to find it in unimaginable quantities: Sara signs over her estate to the convent, while Axël willingly allows Kaspar to have the whole share of what is left to them by their deceased relation.

The second area in which Villiers, through the words of Axël, denigrates the small-mindedness of the bourgeois is that of wisdom and knowledge. Axël resents Kaspar's dismissal of the occult and mystic science of which he is an initiate, especially when measured against the Commander's chosen topics of conversation. Axël asks him,

Cependant, par quels si avantageux sujets de causerie remplaces-tu, si souvent, l'intérêt que comportent, peut-être, ces choses? Par le grave examen des épices d'une sauce ou par des cantiques sur la saveur d'un pâté! – Vraiment, pour insignifiant que puisse être, à ton juger, l'objet de mes études favorites, l'on ne voit guère en quoi j'ai dû, ce soir, tant gagner en t'écouter. (II, 606)

Thirdly, Axël brings into question Kaspar's whole concept of love. Villiers has often been accused of misogyny, for instance in his portrayal of womankind in *L'Ève future* where the only acceptable female is artificial and man-made.³¹ However, this seemingly chauvinistic attitude stems essentially from too high a conception of femininity rather than too low: Villiers was constantly looking for an ideal female companion, and held the qualities of such a woman in high regard. But the kind of

pp. 123-31 (p. 123).

³¹ See for example Marilyn Gaddis Rose's article, 'Two Misogynist Novels: A Feminist Reading of Villiers and Verne', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 9 (1980-81), 117-23.

relationship and the pleasures to which Kaspar refers are far from these, and Axël once again in his reply echoes the moral sentiment of the author:

– Ah! d'écœurantes joies: celles du vil adultère. En sorte que, sous le toit sacré de ma mère, tu me faisais rougir, et qu'à ce moment je me suis senti comme honteux, devant ces chastes fleurs, de la hideuse façon dont tu les as respirées.

(II, 606)

Axël also comments on Kaspar's ungentlemanly behaviour, in the fact that he shows no concern for one of the castle's servants who is caught in the raging storm outside. Finally, the Auërsperg heir reprimands the Commander for mocking 'le deuil, l'âge et la gloire' of the family home and the inheritance it represents, while Kaspar himself is embroiled in merely 'le néant de mille intrigues risibles [...] en la diversité de princières antichambres' (II, 607).

In Axël's eyes, Kaspar condemns himself by his own words, aligning himself wholly with his own time: 'Je me contente, moi, monsieur, d'être un homme doué de quelque raison, de ne dater que du siècle où j'existe, – d'être, seulement, un homme d'*aujourd'hui*' (II, 621). The Commander is used by Villiers to show Axël's reaction to the era in which he lives. His death will also later be fruitfully contrasted with that of the young Auërsperg count.

The last character who greatly affects the plot of this drama is Maître Janus. Janus appears mainly in the *Monde occulte* section of the play, which gives a strong clue as to his function in *Axël*. He is the most developed of Villiers's magus figures, whose purpose is to initiate their disciples into a higher sphere of existence. One such other figure was Tullia Fabriana in *Isis*, whose plan it was to train Wilhelm in occult philosophy in order to attain political power. Indeed, *Isis* has been described by Max

Daireaux as the prelude to *Axël*, though it was published almost twenty years previously.³²

Janus fulfils two main functions in this drama: firstly, he is Axël's tutor, and secondly, he oversees the action of the play. Janus was bequeathed the tutelage of the young nobleman by the previous comte d'Auërsperg on his deathbed. Axël has since transferred his filial respect to his teacher, and spends much time in his company in the study of esoteric manuscripts. It is through Janus that the call comes to the young man to accept the Light, Hope, and Life of occult doctrine. Axël however rejects this form of existence.

Maître Janus's second role in the play however both encompasses and accommodates this renouncement. It seems that Janus has actually engineered the events taking place in *Axël* from centuries past. Sara and Axël's families share the same blason, a winged death's head. This goes back, as the Archdeacon recounts in Part I, to the time of the Crusades when the heads of the two families were stationed at the same military outpost. At this time, 'un "mage", qui assistait le conseil secret du prince égyptien, sut convaincre les deux chevaliers de substituer ces mystérieux sphinx d'or aux deux lions qui supportaient leur écusson commun' (II, 539). There is every evidence in the text to suggest that the magus was in fact Janus.³³

It seems that Janus was aware of the sudden and unexpected death of Axël's father almost the moment it happened, arriving at the dawn of the very day he passed away. He was also indirectly responsible for Sara's arrival at the castle, since he sent her Axël's mother's diary. Indeed, it also transpires that Janus had foreknowledge both of Axël's rejection of a life of occult asceticism, and of the choice he and Sara will

³² Max Daireaux, *Villiers de L'Isle-Adam: l'homme et l'œuvre avec des documents inédits* (Paris: Brouwer, 1936), p. 421.

³³ For example, Janus refers to Sara and Axël as 'la dualité finale des deux races, *élues par moi*, du fond des âges' (II, 633), my italics. This is quoted more fully on p. 254 of this thesis.

make of a suicide's death. This can be deduced from his words as he watches Axël immediately after the death of Kaspar:

C'est bien l'Heure. – elle aussi va venir, celle qui renonça l'idéal Divin pour le secret de l'Or, comme tu vas renoncer, tout à l'heure, à tes sublimes finalités, pour ce méprisable secret. Voici donc en présence la dualité finale des deux races, élues par moi, du fond des âges, *pour que soit vaincue, par la simple et virginale Humanité, la double illusion de l'Or et de l'Amour*, – c'est-à-dire pour que soit fondée, en un point de Devenir, la vertu d'un Signe nouveau.
(II, 633)

Therefore, Janus is at once an enigmatic and extremely powerful character. His physical appearance attests to vigour, but also to ambiguity. He is 'd'une stature élevée et de proportions admirables' (II, 630). However, he is difficult to place: 'Sa physionomie, aux traits purs, ne semble pas celle d'un homme de nos siècles ni de nos contrées' (II, 630). Axël's servants note that he has not aged, despite his long stay in the castle: 'À propos... observes-tu que maître Janus ne vieillit pas, Hartwig? – Voilà bien des années, pourtant, qu'il est ici!' (II, 569). His hair is brown and only lightly silvered, and he seems to be only about fifty years old, possessing 'une sorte de puissante, d'éternelle jeunesse corporelle' (II, 630-31). His clothing too sends out ambiguous signals. His black uniform-like garb at first suggests that he had been a military doctor in the Hungarian army, but several other details indicate that 'c'est le vêtement d'un cavalier toujours prêt à de longs voyages' (II, 631).

In short, Janus seems to be unreachable and untouchable. He is a stranger in the castle, despite the number of years of his habitation there. The servants feel uneasy in his presence, despite his care for them, as Miklaus tries to explain: 'J'avoue qu'il a quelque chose en lui, ce maître Janus, qui retient l'affection. Sa manière de faire le bien

glace ses obligés' (II, 569). The character of Janus, in his capacity as tutor and guardian to Axël, deeply affects the atmosphere of the whole castle. This, as I demonstrate in the next section, is also vitally important to the import of the drama.

6.2 Atmosphere, Milieu, Setting

The message of a play is conveyed not just through the characters, through their actions and dialogue, but also in its setting. The milieu in which a drama takes place often matches and reinforces the central themes of the plot. I propose that *Axël*, more than any other Villierian work, is dominated by an atmosphere of death. This atmosphere is created not only by what various characters say and do, but also has a direct correlation with the location and scenery which form a backdrop to it.

Most of the action of *Axël* takes place in a lonely and isolated fort in the middle of the German Black Forest. However, the setting for *Le Monde religieux* in Part I is a convent in the north of France. These two milieux share some common characteristics in terms of ambience. Firstly, all of the action of the play takes place at night: the last part ends just as the dawn is breaking. The two buildings themselves are old, almost timeless structures, and they are both places of silence, enclosure, and death.

The convent where Sara has spent her life since the death of her parents is situated in the ‘confins du littoral de l’ancienne Flandre française’ (II, 532). It is an old abbey. Although its exact age is not given, it has stood there for at least three hundred years, since the abbess mentions the fact that ‘une secte très ancienne des Rose-Croix, il y a trois siècles, occupa, durant une guerre, cette abbaye’ (II, 540-41). *Axël*’s castle too is ‘un très vieux château fort [...] isolé au milieu du Schwarzwald’ (II, 532), and the room in which the second and third parts of the drama take place ‘est d’une profondeur qui donne l’impression d’une bâtisse datant des premiers temps du Moyen Âge’ (II, 562).

The aged nature of the buildings themselves is reinforced by the furnishings and decor of the two settings. The first part takes place in a formal church setting, with choir stalls, altars, incense holders, and a white marble throne. This gives an air of

stately dignity and long-standing religious tradition, rooted in the past. However, it is to a tradition of a different kind that the furnishings of Axël's castle refer. There are dusty folios on the chimney of the large room in which the count entertains Kaspar. On shelves next to them are found distilling equipment, astral spheres, and old clay lamps, along with large bones of extinct animal species and dried herbs. This helps to create the impression that this is a place used for some kind of scientific study and experiment. The temperature inside the room is cold, although it is warm outside. The military servants enter it only on days of ceremony, though it is used more frequently by maître Janus.

Therefore, although the convent, a place of religious devotion, and the castle, a centre of occult interest and investigation, stand by their very nature in opposition to each other, Villiers also allows for many similarities between them. This aids the mirroring of Sara and Axël's rejections of 'la Lumière, l'Espérance et la Vie' (II, 553, 644). Peter Bürgisser points out the confusion of orthodox Christianity and occultism in *Axël*, linking it to the fact that it was one of the goals of Éliphas Lévi, author of *Dogme et rituel de la haute magie*, to reconcile Catholicism with magic science. He argues that Villiers, along with Lévi, was also trying to integrate two worlds he no longer wished to oppose.³⁴ Alan Raitt also argues that there is no essential difference in the philosophies of the archdeacon and Janus, who were both trying to unite basic tenets of Hegelianism, occultism, and illusionism.³⁵

Since the setting for most of the play is Axël's castle, it is into this environment that the reader or spectator has the clearest insight. It seems that the castle, along with its inhabitants, is slowly dying. The three military servants are in the throes of extreme old age: Ukko says to them, 'Vous avez tantôt trois siècles, à vos trois' (II, 572). They are all dressed in military fashion and wear an iron Cross, reminding Kaspar of 'un beau

³⁴ Bürgisser, *Double Illusion*, pp 62-63.

³⁵ Raitt, *VMS*, pp. 205-06.

champ de bataille, un bel hiver et une belle mort' (II, 576). When Zacharius appears, Kaspar exclaims, 'Ah çà! mais... il a cent ans, ce garçon!' (II, 580).

The furnishings and decor in the castle suggest a mood of morbid decay. The portraits on the walls are fading, while the bronze armour on display, dating from the time of the first Crusades, is rusting. The velvet cushions are worn, with faded gold tassels. It is as if the castle, though it exists in the present, is in fact inhabited by the past. Indeed, at one point, Miklaus, one of the servants, exclaims, 'C'est hanté ici!' (II, 564). This haunting of the present by the past affects the sense of the passing of time in the castle. 'Ici, l'on est en retard de trois cents ans, montre en main', remarks Kaspar in the great banqueting hall (II, 577). Even the forest around the dwelling-place is affected by the anachronistic atmosphere. It is still administered on a feudal system of government with Axël at the head, as he describes to Kaspar:

Vous êtes en cette unique Forêt dont la nuit couvre cent lieues. Elle est peuplée de vingt mille forestiers, aux dangereuses carabines, – anciens soldats nés d'un sang qui m'est héréditairement fidèle. J'y veille, central, en un très vieux logis de pierre, qui repoussa trois sièges déjà. (II, 622)

This confusion of time on a broad scale, that is, spanning centuries, is also accompanied by smaller indications of temporal ambiguity. As Axël and the Commander talk, Kaspar, hearing the chimes in the bell tower, comments on 'cette heure bizarre qui sonne' (II, 595). He is informed by Axël that it is merely the wind that is making the bell ring, hence confusing the passing not only of years but also of mere hours and minutes.

The castle's inhabitants also move in uncertain temporal realms. William T. Conroy Jnr comments on their anachronistic existence: 'They move in a legendary world of shadow, darkness, and medieval arches, where, despite the announced time of

1828, the spirit of the nineteenth century has not yet penetrated.’³⁶ Ukko, Axël’s personal servant and hunting companion, is only seventeen years old, but is described by Hartwig as ‘ce page d’autrefois’ (II, 566), while Axël himself is referred to by Kaspar as ‘ce jeune héros d’un autre âge’ (II, 577). Ukko actually means ‘old man’ in Finnish.³⁷ When he announces his engagement to Luïsa Glück, who Hartwig remembers as having been born ‘avant-hier’, the near hundred-year-old Gotthold offers to be his ‘garçon d’honneur’ (II, 574). Conversely, maître Janus himself, who seems to loom over the atmosphere of the castle, does not appear to age at all: his eyes ‘ne semblent pas être ceux d’un homme de ce siècle’ (II, 569). The whole atmosphere is one of stagnation, decay, and death, as if the castle and its inhabitants are buried and lost in the past. It is Kaspar, representing ‘*la vie réelle*’, who seems to be out of place and time in these feudal surroundings (II, 598).

The negative atmosphere deepens in both Sara’s convent and Axël’s castle as the reader or spectator realizes that they are both places of silence, privation, and essentially of absence. Sara has undergone ‘le jeûne, le cachot et le silence’ in order to break the proud nature of her spirit (II, 664). The experience of her male counterpart matches hers in these three areas. Axël is described by his servants as being ‘sobre jusqu’à jeûner des jours entiers’ (II, 567). He is a young man who ‘se prive de toutes les joies de son âge [... et] use ses meilleurs années à veiller, là, dans la tour, – et tant de nuits! – sous les lampes d’étude, penché sur de vieux manuscrits, en compagnie du docteur!’ (II, 567). It is also said the he ‘n’aime que le silence’ (II, 568). Though he is later greatly affected by a re-awoken desire for the buried gold, he firstly makes it clear to Kaspar that silence is worth more to him than the treasure the Commander is enticing him to seek: ‘Le silence de la grande Forêt [...] n’est pas à vendre: il m’est plus cher que toutes paroles:

³⁶ Conroy Jnr, *Villiers*, p. 139.

³⁷ See Le Feuvre, *Poétique/récitation*, p. 302.

c'est un bien sacré, dont je n'entends pas qu'on m'exproprie et dont l'or de vos banquets ne m'indemniserait pas' (II, 616).

Both the castle, then, and the convent, are places of absence, absence of self-indulgence, of noisy and idle chatter, and of human company. There is also an absence of parents and family: both Sara and Axël are orphans. This means that both spent their formative years in the company of adults who attempted to exert strong influence over their lives, Sara in the convent, and Axël with maître Janus. It also means for both of them that they relate the idea of family to death. Axël's mother appears in the final part of the drama in statue form, while Sara at one point admits: 'J'ai aussi une famille de marbre, dans un manoir, au nord de France' (II, 662). This familiarity with the concept of death related to their families may have some import on the lovers' suicides.

Finally, the convent and the castle are also places of enclosure. Sara describes the place from where she has come to Axël as a 'prison sainte' (II, 664). Indeed, after she has renounced a life of religious asceticism, the archdeacon assures her, 'Tu ne sortiras pas! – L'autorité des hommes protégerait, aujourd'hui, ton évasion, je le sais: – tu ne t'évaderas pas' (II, 557). Similarly, Axël's castle is enclosed by thick, almost impenetrable forests, and after the young count has killed Kaspar and inherited from him the 'vieilles soifs de voluptés, de puissance et d'orgueil', he describes his home as a 'donjon perdu' (II, 633).

Both of these enclosed, prison-like places however have an inner chamber which is doubly sealed from the outside world: 'à l'intérieur d'un lieu déjà clos est privilégié un deuxième lieu aussi circonscrit'.³⁸ In the convent, this second enclosure is the chapel, while in the castle, the same purpose is fulfilled by the crypt. A descent into these two inner sanctuaries could represent a Freudian exploration of the subconscious. Indeed, Peter Bürgisser speaks of the subconscious, spiritual value of the treasure

³⁸ Maire-Catherine Huet-Brichard, 'Axël ou la tragédie de la création', in *Chemins ouverts*, ed. by Sylvie Vignes (Toulouse: Presses Universitaires du Mirail, 1995), pp. 141-48 (p. 147).

hidden underground: 'Ainsi pour Villiers, le trésor symbolise un ensemble de possibilités latentes dans leur état prénatal.'³⁹ Huet-Brichard speaks of a search for asylum: 'Le texte peut ainsi se lire comme la quête de l'asile absolu'.⁴⁰ The existence of the inner chambers, however, also emphasizes the secret and precious nature of what is contained within them. Like Hadaly in *L'Ève future*, kept safe in the Indian burial chamber under Edison's laboratory, the treasure is hidden in a crypt in Axël's castle. There are striking similarities between the significance of Hadaly and that of the treasure: 'Ce qui valait pour le trésor d'Axël vaut également pour ce "trésor de femmes" que représente Hadaly: sa réalisation terrestre limiterait sa valeur immortelle, monnaierait cet or sublime.'⁴¹ Indeed, *L'Ève future* as a whole can be seen 'sur divers points, comme le prélude dans l'irrationnel souverain. Tous deux [*L'Ève future* et *Axël*] sont comme deux satellites dont les trajectoires et courbes se recoupent parfois soudain.'⁴²

Of course, the ultimate enclosure is that of being shut away in a tomb, and both of the two main settings in *Axël* are referred to as tomb-like places. The abbess tells Sara, 'Ma fille, vous êtes une lampe dans un tombeau' (II, 534). Similarly, Kaspar exhorts Axël to 'sor[tir] de ce tombeau suranné!' (II, 599). Once again, this adds to the mysterious air of death and decay which hangs especially around the castle.

Ironically, from the tomb within this tomb is to come a dazzling and sparkling treasure, seemingly inconceivable in its worth and value. It could lead to a future of intense and boundless happiness for Axël and Sara. However, they reject this path, and instead choose to commit suicide, almost on the instant. Thus, the legend of the treasure remains safe, and is joined by the bodies of Axël and Sara. The metaphysical significance of the treasure, hidden from human eyes, is now linked with the

³⁹ Bürgisser, *Double Illusion*, p. 41.

⁴⁰ Huet-Brichard, 'Tragédie/création', pp. 141-48 (p. 147).

⁴¹ Bürgisser, *Double Illusion*, p. 104.

metaphysical significance of the deaths chosen by Axël and Sara. It is clear that the deaths of the lovers, coming as they do in the concluding moments of the play, are significant for the whole message of *Axël*. It is this significance of the theme of death and suicide that will now be examined.

⁴² Bornecque, 'Valeur du suicide', 91-124 (p. 105). C.f. pp. 252-53 of this thesis, where I note that Max Daireaux viewed *Isis* as a prelude to *Axël*.

6.3 Victory over Death in Axël

Sara and Axël meet in the final part of this drama, *Le Monde passionnel*. They find themselves in an extremely fortunate position. They have both renounced the ascetic lifestyles imposed on them to a greater or lesser extent from outside forces: Sara was placed in the convent at the age of seven, and Axël has never known any father figure other than maître Janus. They are now therefore free to make their own choice about the path they are to take in life, without the interference of family (both are orphans), or tutelary advice (both are renouncers).

This freedom is in a sense a metaphysical possession for the lovers. However, Sara and Axël also own great physical wealth. Sara has found the treasure on the Auërsperg estate, hidden by Axël's father, and lost to Prussia at the time of the Napoleonic wars. As her 'Invitation au voyage' suggests, these unthinkable riches give Sara and Axël almost boundless possibilities for their future life together. Sara is greatly drawn to exoticism, whether it be that of the East, the South, or the North. Her desire and call to Axël is to travel, to see and enjoy all that the world has to offer, and to live for beauty and pleasure. This is much like the path of hedonistic excess chosen by Hermosa and Don Juan in Villiers's *Premières Poésies*. However, despite the appeal of its exoticism, this Baudelairean travel invitation will be rejected by Axël in favour of 'l'option suprême' of suicide (II, 671).

The young Auërsperg count argues that Sara's portrayal of this life has been so inspiring and so beautiful that to live it out in actuality would only serve to disappoint the two young lovers. He says of their dreams, 'À quoi bon les réaliser?... ils sont si beaux!' (II, 671). Once again, Villiers's philosophy of illusionism is manifesting itself, as Axël argues that the mere concept, or the illusion of this abundant existence is more satisfying than would be the material reality of it: 'Toutes les réalités, demain, que

seraient-elles, en comparaison des mirages que nous venons de vivre?’ (II, 671-72). It is in fact the Earth, representing natural life, ‘qui est devenue l’Illusion!’ (II, 672). The reader or spectator begins now to realize the extent of the influence which maître Janus has had on Axël, as this line of thought relates to an argument previously used by the magus figure: ‘De quoi vivent les vivants, sinon des mirages, d’espoirs vils, toujours déçus?’ (II, 638). Even though Axël has renounced occult asceticism, the language and logic of Janus is woven like a fine thread throughout his dialogue in *Le Monde passionnel*. This is more evidence backing up Janus’s inference that he planned the final end from the start, and shows that despite his renunciation, Axël is not free from the influence of his former tutor.

Earlier in the play, maître Janus had advised Axël that all of life was in fact an illusion, and that it was up to him to choose the best possible one: ‘Puisque tu ne sortiras pas de l’illusion que tu te feras de l’univers, choisis la plus divine’ (II, 641). Janus has also already argued that the full possession of what Sara has just dreamed would be impossible:

Si, par impossible, tu pouvais, un moment, embrasser l’omnivision du monde, ce serait encore une illusion l’instant d’après, puisque l’univers change – comme tu changes toi-même – à chaque battement de tes veines, – et qu’ainsi son Apparaître, quel qu’il puisse être, n’est, en principe, que fictif, mobile, illusoire, insaisissable. (II, 640-41)

In *Le Monde occulte*, Janus attempted to persuade Axël to renounce life and to die, either figuratively or literally, in order to conquer the illusion of life and gain what he ultimately desired:

Car les entités vibrent en l'infinie gestation de ce qui les totalise, et la Mort met au monde-absolu. Ton existence n'est que l'agitation de ton être en l'occulte utérus où s'élabore ton futur définitif, ta conception décisive, – le devoir de te reconquérir sur le monde. (II, 640)

Janus argues that each act of life causes a measure of death: 'Chaque fois que tu "aimes"', he says, 'tu meurs d'autant' (II, 638). Desire succumbed to becomes a bondage: 'Attiré par les aimants du Désir, attract originel, si tu leur cèdes, tu épaisis les liens pénétrants qui t'enveloppent' (II, 637). However, death, if chosen, leads to liberty and power: 'Pénétré de ton Idéal, passé toi-même en lui, trempé dans les flammes- astrales, rénové par les épreuves, tu seras l'essentiel contemplateur de ton irradiation' (II, 643). Though Axël initially rejects Janus's offer of regenerative, occult initiation, his thoughts and reasoning about the suicide he finally chooses are very much coloured by Janus's philosophy.

There is also in the thoughts of Axël a reflection of those of the archdeacon in Part I of the drama, as he urges Sara to make a resolute decision to undergo the death of a religious initiate, 'car l'éternité, dit excellemment saint Thomas, n'est que la pleine possession de soi-même en un seul et même instant' (II, 548). This is exactly why Axël chooses to die. In the early hours of the dawn in the crypt of his castle, he possesses a love that is still chaste, pure, and not yet disappointed, along with boundless wealth. In his own words, he tells Sara that 'l'homme n'emporte dans la mort que ce qu'il renonça de posséder dans la vie' (II, 674). Sara and Axël have already renounced asceticism, and the secrets and power of a mystic life. Now, in their rejections both of unsullied human love and an untold quantity of treasure, they believe themselves to be fixing, in that instant of eternity spoken of by the archdeacon, a richness of being brought about by those things they have renounced.

This is the happy inverse of the significance of the death of Kaspar. Axël's loyal servant Ukko is indignantly reluctant to give 'le titre de *mort* à qui mérita trop peu celui de vivant' (II, 648). The Commander renounced nothing in his life. He fought Axël in order to live, driven by his thirst for material possessions and his carnal, earthbound appetite. Therefore, in contrast to the deaths of the noble lovers, that of Kaspar is meaningless, as Axël proclaims: 'Passant, tu es passé. [...] Rien ne t'*appela*, jamais, de l'Au-delà du monde! Et tu t'es accompli. Tu tombes au profond de la Mort comme une pierre dans le vide, – sans attirance et sans but' (II, 630).

Kaspar did not intend to die, and there was nothing at all attractive in death for him. There was no indication in the imagery that surrounded him, or in his language, that death was to be his fate in this play. The same is not true for Sara and Axël. From their first appearances in the drama, these two central characters have been associated with morbid imagery. The previous section of this chapter has highlighted the dark atmosphere of both Sara's convent and Axël's castle. The characters themselves are both dressed in black when they meet, and through their surroundings and previous experiences are already strongly linked with fatality.

It seems that the most meaningful relationships in which Sara is engaged are linked with death. In the convent, she spends time with sister Aloyse in 'l'allée des sépultures' (II, 537). Indeed, the illicit power that Sara holds over the weaker sister extends even to death, as Aloyse states, 'Si tu veux que je meure, je mourrai' (II, 537). Aloyse is tempted almost without knowing it by 'les ravissements et les enivrances de l'Enfer' (II, 538). Later, there is more insight given into this relationship by Sara, as she begs Axël not to destroy the convent 'au nom d'une toute jeune fille, aussi pâle que nous, mais pareille aux séraphins de l'exil – et dont le cœur, consumé de l'amour natal, était si épris de sacrifices... qu'il me donna la fleur de ses rêves candides, préférant se perdre à se garder!' (II, 664). Aloyse has become dangerously infatuated with Sara: 'Le

visage, l'extraordinaire beauté de mademoiselle de Maupers ont fasciné très profondément sœur Aloyse' (II, 543). The archdeacon takes this very seriously: 'Prenez garde! – Ceci tient des envoûtements anciens! Les immondes fièvres de la Terre et du Sang dégagent de mornes fumées qui épaississent l'air de l'âme et cachent absolument, tout à coup, la face de Dieu' (II, 543-44).

Sara's leisure activities in the convent extend to the study of occult texts and to walking in the shaded gardens. The abbess had to stop her playing the organ because it was too mournful, though Sara regrets the loss of 'des orgues qui, sous mes doigts, ont pleuré de si lourds sanglots!' (II, 664).

The place where Sara and Axël finally meet is of course a crypt beneath the castle. Axël clearly relates strongly to the ultimate fate of those who have lived and died before him as he addresses the tombs of his ancestors: 'Cendres, je suis la veille de ce que vous êtes' (II, 651). He also recognizes the mortal fallibility of his beloved Sara, describing her pale feet as '[la] gloire des marbres futurs' (II, 666). Sara has previously made reference to her marble family in the north of France. She also addresses the statue of Axël's dead mother as if it were a living being: 'Madame, vous le voyez: je donne à votre enfant tout ce que je suis' (II, 662).

Therefore, as Sara and Axël come together and fall in love, they are surrounded by larger than life *memento mori*, reminders of death and of the brevity of human existence. However, even before this, the renuncements which both these characters make are veiled with images of death.

This is more especially true of the ceremony which Sara undergoes in the convent in order to become a nun. She is described by the archdeacon as being 'déjà morte pour la terre' (II, 548). As she approaches the altar, she stretches out fully before it and is covered by a white 'drap mortuaire' (II, 547). The archdeacon asks, 'Est-il une âme, ici, qui veuille crucifier sa vie mortelle en se liant pour jamais au divin sacrifice

que je vais offrir?’ (II, 547). It is therefore a symbolic death that Sara undergoes in the convent. However, it is also intended to be regenerative, like that of Lysiane d’Aubelleyne in ‘L’Amour suprême’ (*L’Amour suprême*). The choir sings in Latin of living again, and sister Aloyse cries out ‘Resurgam!’ [I shall live!] as she sprinkles holy water on the covering veil (II, 547).

Axël too is invited by maître Janus to undergo a form of death as part of his initiation into the occult world in Part III. However, like that of Sara, this death is also regenerative. Janus advises him to ‘consacre-toi sur les brasiers d’amour de la Science-auguste pour y mourir, en ascète, de la mort des phénix’ (II, 638). Like Tullia Fabriana in *Isis*, Axël would then have the potential to influence world events, as Janus describes:

Voici que, tout à coup, ces élus de l’Esprit sentent effluer d’eux-mêmes ou leur provenir de toutes parts, dans la vastitude, mille et mille invisibles fils vibrants en lesquels court leur Volonté sur les événements du monde, sur les phases des destins, des empires, sur l’influente lueur des astres, sur les forces déchaînées des éléments! (II, 641-42)

This regenerative act would also render Axël ‘inaccessible aux appels de la Mort et de la Vie’ (II, 643). As maître Janus has said earlier, ‘les Mages réels, s’ils dédaignent de vivre, – se dispensent aussi de mourir’ (II, 636).

However, Axël’s mind has been made up even before his discussion with maître Janus. The death of Kaspar has had a strange and destabilizing effect on the young count. The secret of the hidden treasure which he had hitherto buried deep in his mind has now risen to the surface and has become the object of a burning desire within him. He describes himself as having woken from a pale and chaste dream, hearing the call of Life on his youth. It is this call that he chooses to answer at first, and not that of Janus: ‘Quelque chose s’est passé qui m’a rappelé sur la terre. Je le sens en moi, je veux

vivre!’ (II, 632); ‘Ce mort m’a scandalisé,... le sang peut-être... N’importe! Je veux rompre cette chaîne et goûter à la vie!’ (II, 633).

As the two renouncers meet, they are destined to fall in love, but also to die. Hence, the *fin-de-siècle* coupling of images of sex and death is once again prominent. It is most apparent in *Le Monde passionnel* in the union of Sara and Axël. As with the rest of the play, this scene takes place in the darkness of night. Even before a word has been uttered by either of them, Sara has fired two pistol shots at Axël and he has raised his dagger to wound her. Later, he attempts to kill her using heavy iron chains. By this time, though, it is too late, as Sara’s own arms locked around his neck have become a more effective and deadly weapon.

Axël recognizes the capacity of carnal love to impact upon the moral strength and resolve of a person. This is one of the reasons why he insists that he and Sara end their lives that very night, before any further contact takes place between them: he knows that ‘demain, [il] serai[t] le prisonnier de [son] corps splendide!’ (II, 674).

The ring used as a token of engagement by the couple contains a fatal poison of which the lovers eventually avail themselves (II, 657). Wedlock for this *fin-de-siècle* couple will therefore lead not to life but to death. Sara and Axël die ‘échangeant sur leurs lèvres le souffle suprême’, thus ensuring that at the very instant of mortality there is a physical union (II, 677). The last tableauxque image in the play is therefore that of the marriage of sex and death.

This fatal union of Sara and Axël can be fruitfully contrasted with the marriage of Axël’s servant Ukko and the woodsman’s daughter, Luïsa Glück. Axël and Ukko begin the play with very different attitudes towards love. The Auërsperg count tells Sara, ‘Je suis *celui qui ne veut pas aimer*’ (II, 657), and his second attempt on her life is made in order to prevent amorous desire from springing up between them: ‘C’est pour t’oublier que je vais devenir ton bourreau!’, exclaims Axël to Sara in the crypt (II, 658).

However, Ukko very much desires to love and to find happiness in the companionship of Luïsa, as he tells the other servants: 'J'ai dans l'âme un désir si délicieux d'elle, que je ne peux pas respirer, tant j'en suis amoureux, et tant je l'aime! [...] Je suis... je suis heureux!' (II, 574). Theirs is a pastoral, fairy-tale romance. Indeed, Ukko describes Luïsa as 'une petite fée' (II, 573). Even their dogs become friends, and Luïsa's surname is German for 'happiness'.

Ukko and Luïsa are about to marry just as Axël and Sara die. At the end of the play, the songs of the woodsmen, the military servants, and Ukko, are heard mingling in the distance as the dawn begins to break. Sara pronounces a word of blessing on Ukko and Luïsa at Axël's request: 'Ô vous, les insoucieux, qui chantez, là-bas, sur la colline... soyez bénis!' (II, 676). It is clear that Axël and Sara regard them in a positive light. Ukko and Luïsa represent the honest, earthy existence of sincere and upright people. Axël refers to them as 'des enfants qui s'épousent' (II, 676), and in the words of the playwright himself at the end of the drama, they form part of 'le bourdonnement de la Vie' (II, 677).⁴³

However, the fatal gesture of Sara and Axël shows that they are determined to rise above the trappings of this same earthly life, no matter the appeal of its abundance or happiness. All along, Axël has been presented as a character with qualities above the ordinary. Kaspar remarked on it with regard to the count's feudal-type reign in the forest: 'Ces éhontées convictions ne sont que surhumaines, monsieur' (II, 619). However, it is as the question of suicide arises that the fruits of a 'superhuman' strength of conviction in Axël ultimately show themselves. 'Ce sont là des paroles surhumaines', says Sara in response to Axël's desire to die, 'comment oser les comprendre!' (II, 672). Later, when she does understand what her lover means, Sara cries, 'Ah! c'est presque divin! Tu veux mourir' (II, 673). Axël, however, is resolved:

⁴³ C.f. the end of Balzac's *Le Père Goriot*, where Rastignac refers to Paris as a 'ruche bourdonnant [sic]'. Balzac, *Le Père Goriot* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1995), p. 354. *Goriot* was first published in 1834.

'Ce n'est pas une folie: tous les dieux qu'adora l'Humanité l'ont accompli avant nous, sûrs d'un Ciel, du ciel de leurs êtres!' (II, 673). Therefore, Axël has become not only superhuman, but also Promethean in his perception of life. In the absence of any vestige of faith in God, Axël himself takes charge of his own destiny, choosing the moment at which he will die. The paradise he seeks is not a Christian heaven ('Ciel' with an upper-case 'C'), but rather lies within his own being ('ciel' with a lower-case 'c'). Axël has become not just heroic, but god-like in his mental processes and assumption of his own authority. He has become someone to be revered, respected, and followed. In the same way that Edison originally wished Hadaly to be the first of many dolls to change the course of human destiny, Axël desires that his death be an example to the human race. Janus spoke of a 'Signe nouveau' (II, 633), and Axël, addressing the earth at the end of the play, wishes that

La race humaine, désabusée de ses vaines chimères, de ses vains désespoirs, et de tous les mensonges qui éblouissent les yeux faits pour s'éteindre [...] oui, puisse-t-elle finir, en s'enfuyant indifférente, à notre exemple, sans t'adresser même un adieu. (II, 676-77)

It is a striking feature of Villiers's work that death is often presented in a positive, rather than a negative light, and nowhere is this more apparent than at the end of this drama: 'La valeur du suicide interdit donc de l'assimiler à un acte d'auto-destruction nihiliste, puisque bien au contraire, il constitue un ultime degré d'accomplissement'.⁴⁴ Sara and Axël have found their ideal, both in the quantity of the gold and the quality of the love they possess. They die in order to preserve the unique nature of this ideal, so that it is not tarnished, lessened, or spoiled by reality. Therefore, death in their case is ideally victorious and triumphant. However, the remit of this

⁴⁴ Vibert, *l'Inquiéteur*, p. 85.

thesis does not merely end at victory and accomplishment in death, but extends to regeneration. The question must now be asked if the suicides of Sara and Axël are regenerative.

This is a question which is very difficult to answer with any degree of certainty, and critical opinion on the matter is mixed. There are those who believe the lovers' deaths to have regenerative qualities: 'parce que les deux amants découvrent que l'éternité est contenue dans l'instant, ils sont prêts à mourir car la mort n'est pas vécue comme anéantissement mais comme renaissance'.⁴⁵ However, other critics see in Sara and Axël's deaths a total negation of the principles of life, as it is sacrificed for the ideal: 'leur suicide est aussi une Bonne Nouvelle: l'idéal peut être plus fort que la vie'.⁴⁶ In Parts I and III, Sara and Axël both reject regenerative deaths, in religious and occult environments respectively. They accept suicide in Part IV, though there is no mention here of 'La Lumière, L'Espérance, et la Vie',⁴⁷ which was a previous indication that regeneration could take place.

Villiers himself spoke of a fifth part to *Axël* entitled *Le Monde astral*, which would have come after *Le Monde passionnel*, and which would most likely have been centred on the experiences of Sara and Axël in a regenerated afterlife.⁴⁸ However, since no manuscripts of *Le Monde astral* have been found, it can be discounted as a reliable source of evidence. It is the text itself, and the remaining manuscripts, which will provide clues as to whether or not Villiers intended his readership to believe that regeneration would take place.

⁴⁵ Huet-Brichard, 'Tragédie/création', pp. 141-48 (p. 148).

⁴⁶ Simon, *Chrétien malgré lui*, p. 204. N.B. I have also previously cited Simon on p. 237 of this thesis, who argues that the suicide of Axël with Sara is a 'signe nouveau qui s'oppose à la Résurrection'.

⁴⁷ See *OC* II 553, 644.

⁴⁸ This is noted by the journalist Hugues Le Roux, who interviewed Villiers in 1888. Jacques-Henry Bornecque also attests, in the preface to his edition of *Axël*, that according to unedited proofs, Villiers had intended to write five parts to the drama. See *OC* II, 1459.

The earliest manuscripts in existence are reckoned to date back to before 1872, when *Le Monde religieux* was published in *La Renaissance artistique et littéraire*.⁴⁹ In these fragments, it is clear that Axël views his suicide as being regenerative. In answer to Sara(h)'s question, 'Et si tu ne trouvais que le Néant?', Axël states that 'il est trop tard pour le néant. Si peu que je sois, ce que j'ai été est ineffaçable. Le néant ne peut plus être absolu pour moi!... Je sens briller mon âme au-dessus de toutes les nuits!' (II, 1467). He also speaks of meeting with others in death:

Ceux que je vais trouver, s'ils sont dignes de moi, m'accueilleront en frères!
Ils ne peuvent être plus tristes que les humains. Et s'ils le sont, j'emporte avec moi la force de les franchir, comme je franchis ce monde, en le poussant du pied. L'idéal est infini. (II, 1467)

Here, it is clear that Axël believes not only in some form of existence after death, but also in a progression in this existence: if those whom he finds are unworthy of him, he will simply move on to new planes of discovery. Indeed, just as he is about to die in this version of the drama, Axël speaks of a Baudelairean search for something new, and of launching out towards the infinite and the absolute:⁵⁰

Salut à vous, maintenant, étoiles solennelles! Je pars, avec vos magnifiques adieux, pour de nouveaux couchants et pour de nouvelles aurores! [...] Je vais à la découverte de l'impossible! Ceint des flammes de mes rêves, je vais trouver les choses obscures! [...] Rentré en possession de moi-même, je m'ensevelis dans mon triomphe et sur mes ailes victorieuses je m'échappe de

⁴⁹ See *OC* II, 1464. In these earliest manuscripts, the heroine's name is spelt 'Sarah', and not 'Sara'.

⁵⁰ C.f. Axël's desire for novelty expressed here, and the same sentiment found at the end of Baudelaire's poem 'Le Voyage':

O Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l'ancre!
[...] Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*

Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964), p. 155.

Therefore, in these earliest manuscripts, a regenerated existence is clearly envisaged after death. Indeed, even in the final version of the text, Axël's family motto points to the hope of life after death: 'Altius resurgere spero gemmatus' (II, 539) is rendered in French by the Pléiade editors as 'Orné de gemmes, j'espère ressusciter plus haut!' (II, 1546). The shared coat of arms that the families of Axël and Sara hold in common is also itself an indication of the possibility of regeneration through death. It is a winged death's head: the skull represents death, while the wings on either side suggest spirituality, hence a spiritual renewal through death.⁵² This coat of arms features on Sara's ring, chosen by the lovers as a symbol of their union and as the instrument of their death.

Thus, while there is no explicit reference to regeneration as regards Sara and Axël's suicides in the definitive text, it was clearly previously envisaged. What perhaps remains of this principle is the lack of fear with which death is approached by the lovers. In this fearlessness concerning it, the lovers have gained a strong victory over death, even if that death itself may not be regenerative.

⁵¹ 'L'Incréé' could be a reference to God, but it is more likely to refer to the ideal world of absolutes, which is not necessarily Christian. In the finished version of the play, Axël asserts that 'la Lumière-incréée, tout homme l'appelle simplement Dieu'. However, Janus refutes this explanation, speaking of 'cette *Lumière* qui pénètre, reconnaît et réfléchit l'Esprit substantiel des choses, l'esprit d'universalité entre les choses' (II, 636).

⁵² Variations on the winged death's head increasingly featured in the work of many *fin-de-siècle* artists. See especially the work of Odilon Redon, e.g. the lithographs 'Gnôme', 'Limbes' from his collection *Dans le rêve* (1879: Art Institute of Chicago).

Conclusion

J. A. Hiddleston, writing about the profusion of suicide in nineteenth-century literature, argues that '[the] aristocratic detachment from the vulgar business of living was to find perhaps its silliest expression in Villiers de L'Isle-Adam's *Axël*'.⁵³ However, Villiers did not intend the ending of his play to be seen as at all frivolous: the suicides of Axël and Sara, coming as they do in the closing moments of the drama, are obviously of central importance to the whole play.⁵⁴ The lives of the main protagonists are at risk at several moments throughout the drama. Sara could have died from her excessively Spartan treatment in the convent, while Axël could have been killed by Kaspar. When they first meet in the crypt, each attempts to inflict a fatal wound on the other. It is actually Sara who first mentions suicide as an option, resolving to end her life if Axël will accept the treasure as a gift from her. However, this death would have had little of the sense of accomplishment attached to the final suicides, since the treasure, exposed to the world, would have lost its mysterious 'valeur sous-naturel',⁵⁵ and Axël would have had none of his superhuman strength of character.

In the deaths that they *do* choose, the lovers preserve the value of the treasure, the ideal quality of their dreams, and the integrity of their own relationship together: none of these three phenomena are sullied by the disappointments of reality.⁵⁶ These suicides therefore manifest the preservation of the ideal at the ultimate cost. Though

⁵³ J. A. Hiddleston, 'Literature and Suicide', in *The Play of Terror in Nineteenth-Century France*, ed. by John T. Booker and Allan H. Pasco (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Press, 1997), pp. 209-25 (p. 210).

⁵⁴ C.f. Albert Camus in the opening paragraph of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967), p. 15 (first published in 1942):

Il n'y qu'un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux: c'est le suicide. Juger que la vie vaut ou ne vaut pas la peine d'être vécue, c'est répondre à la question fondamentale de la philosophie. Le reste, si le monde a trois dimensions, si l'esprit a neuf ou douze catégories, vient ensuite.

⁵⁵ Bürgisser, *Double Illusion*, p. 66.

⁵⁶ The interference of reality in the perfection of an ideal is a constant Villierian concept. See, for example, duc Forsiani relating the story of Tullia Fabriana in *Isis*: 'Oh! le monde visible! la chose qui trouble, malgré sa contingence insignifiante!', *OC* I, 151.

there is no direct evidence for regeneration in the final published text, death in this play is still positively sought, and as such, becomes gain to those who find it.

However, before it becomes gain, death in this play is also a symbol of loss. The suicides of Axël and Sara manifest the loss of religious faith, since this kind of death is expressly forbidden in the Christian canon of scripture. The area of natural human love is also closed to the lovers in death, while their suicides symbolize the loss of a whole stratum of society: Sara and Axël represent the remnants of the nobility in the Auërsperg castle, and with them dies a whole class, that of Villiers's beloved aristocracy.

Villiers intended this to be a new sign for humanity. Thus, it is in *Axël* that the Promethean gesture of Edison and Ewald is finally carried to completion: the product of the scientist and the aristocrat in *L'Ève future* is destroyed, while Axël actually takes to its ultimate conclusion his challenge to heavenly authority. In this final play, the process of loss itself becomes gain, and death, though it is not necessarily regenerative, signals a victory, rather than defeat.

Summary and Conclusions

Death, Loss, and Regeneration in the Works of

Villiers de L'Isle-Adam

Death may have been a taboo subject throughout most of the twentieth century, but it was certainly not so in the nineteenth. It is vitally important in Villiers's work. While he may have varied the genre, style, or format of his writing, and while his reputation may have evolved from being that of an outdated Romantic to that of a pioneer of Symbolist literature, this one theme remains constant throughout his publications. In this thesis, I have conducted a thorough critical investigation of this foundation stone of Villierian writing, on the basis of its use and value as a literary metaphor. This task has been accomplished through close textual analysis, which has considered various different facets of the operation of the theme of death within the work.

I stated clearly in the introduction to this thesis, with reference to hypotheses put forward by Joseph H. Smith and Michel Picard, that death in literature can be indicative of an attitude of mourning emanating from the writer, and also of a mastery, or *maîtrise* of that sentiment of mourning.¹ Death is thus both a symbol of loss and a means of regeneration, gaining victory over that loss. My study then proceeded to focus on the themes of death as loss and death as regeneration in the works of Villiers de L'Isle-Adam.

Villiers's *Premières Poésies* mark the starting-point of his literary career, and are useful in establishing the literary and cultural preoccupations of the writer as a young man. I have identified and categorized, in the *Premières Poésies*, the three main areas of loss which appear throughout Villiers's body of work, indicating also that loss is a central topos throughout Villiers's whole literary production.

The loss of stable religious belief, indicated by a rich profusion of death imagery in the *Premières Poésies*, is the subject of the lament of Edison at the start of *L'Ève future*. Indeed, religious lack is a creative force in this novel, in that it generates an

¹ See pp. 14, 17 of this thesis.

atmosphere in which the Promethean construction of an artificial form of life is rendered possible. The occult overtones of this prose work, and more especially of the drama *Axël*, represent an attempt to fill the spiritual, social, and cultural gap left by the demise and rejection of Christianity in the Western world in the nineteenth century. It is, thus, a type of mastery of and victory over it.

The model of the loss of belief in a lasting and satisfying love relationship is established in Villiers's first poems. It is present throughout his work, as seen in the failed romances of characters like Hermosa and Don Juan, and Samuel Wissler and Elën. Love, in Villiers, often ends in death, whether that be literal or symbolic. Thus, Lysiane d'Aubelleyne retreats into a convent, Sergius and Morgane are shot, Hadaly drowns, and Sara and Axël choose death themselves. However, death itself is often positively chosen, rather than being a negative option, or an event to be avoided at all costs. This positive desire for death is a hallmark of Villiers's work.

The loss of Villiers's social status as an esteemed and moneyed aristocrat is mourned in the *Premières Poésies* and elsewhere. Villiers almost always writes about characters from distinctly prestigious, upper class backgrounds, as if he were vicariously enjoying wealth and position through them.² This was one means of overcoming the loss of status suffered by himself and his family. Another means of combating this, however, involved the promotion of a self-proclaimed intellectual nobility championed by Villiers and others of his generation.

Apart from assessing the impact of cultural loss in the gamut of Villiers's work, I also identified and examined the different kinds of metaphysical deaths which Villierian characters experience. Among the most striking of these is that of the bourgeois, whom Villiers viewed with great contempt. He presented them as being spiritually dead themselves, in that they remained unaware of the creative side of life

² The exception to this rule occurs in the short stories, where Villiers ridicules the bourgeois by adopting their voice and social station.

greatly valued by *fin-de-siècle* artists and writers. Moreover, they actually caused this same death, either wittingly or unwittingly, in the lives of others.

In direct contrast to this form of metaphysical death is that of characters who resist this bourgeois death through claustration. Characters who choose this form of resistance are removed from the world, and this state of absence is akin to that of death. For some, this is a highly successful venture: Tullia Fabriana is immensely powerful, and Sione de Santos and Lysiane d'Aubelleyne find great happiness in religious orders. However, for others, like Don Juan and Samuel Wissler, separation from society signals a failure to find their ideal, and their hopes of happiness are dashed.

A third kind of metaphysical death is seen in the lives of Hermosa and Elën. In the strength of their desire to resist bourgeois mundanity, these two *femmes fatales* have sought for an ideal that is wholly earthbound and sensual. They have thus broken a Villierian moral code, that the ideal should be something extraordinary and absolute, and as such, bear a physical mark of death on them, signifying their internal corruption.

I break new ground in my analysis of the archetypal male and female characters constructed by Villiers, proving conclusively their relation to *fin-de-siècle* aesthetics, thus demonstrating one aspect of Villiers's contemporaneity and relevance to the late-nineteenth-century period. This is the first such account providing an in-depth analysis and comparison of these literary and artistic icons in Villiers studies. Of greatest importance in relation to the *femme fatale*, *homme fatal*, and my current topic of investigation, is the close association which existed between sex and death in the *fin de siècle*. I show how often in Villiers's work the female is the cause of death in the male, and also draw attention to the possibility of a regenerative principle in operation in the deaths of Sergius and Morgane.

The final two chapters of this thesis examine Villiers's two seminal works in light of principles of death, loss, and regeneration. After establishing the fact that the

concept of loss is present in both of these works, I argue that both also illustrate an attempt to apply the principle of regeneration through death in literature. I prove that *L'Ève future* and *Axël* bring to a climax the use of the theme of death in Villiers's works, through a completion of the cycle of loss, and a victory won over death itself.

In order to triumph over the banal state of death-in-life offered to him by Alicia, Lord Ewald must agree to live out a type of cessation of existence in the clausturation he is to undergo in his manor of Athelwold. Even before being properly introduced to the android, he must enact a symbolic death in his descent to the underground burial chamber that is her home. This has the possibility of being a regenerative death, since Ewald intends that he and Hadaly should share a new life together in his English manor of Athelwold. However, this plan is thwarted with the death of Hadaly on board the ship *Wonderful*. What had seemed like a project of regeneration is now impossible to implement.

In *Axël*, both of the main characters *reject* the metaphysical, claustral, regenerative deaths that are offered to them in order to choose a suicide that has no guarantees of being regenerative. However, what is so striking about this final act is the strong determination with which it is chosen. Axël's final answer to loss in life is death, but a death that is not defeatist, but rather victorious and noble.

This all relates to the use of the death theme *within* Villiers's work. However, the focus of this comprehensive study can be widened to enable the critical reader to reassess Villiers within a literary and cultural context. Villiers is often accused of being an outdated Romantic, but the hedonistic deaths of Hermosa, Morgane, and Sergius, belong rather in the tradition of classical literature: they simply close the plot and resolve the narrative.³ There is none of the spleen and melancholy, the self-obsession and ridiculous pride of Romanticism and beyond. These posturings are however found

³ See p. 15 of this thesis, on death in the classic tradition.

in the metaphysical deaths of characters like Don Juan, Samuel Wissler, and even Lord Ewald, who proudly accept and embrace an attitude of mourning, choosing to remain aloof and separated from the rest of humanity.

There is not found in Villiers's writings, however, the degrading death-lust of Decadent literature. Decadent death had lost the sheen of beautiful and peaceful repose that was present in Romanticism, and had become grotesque and painful. Emma Bovary's demise in Flaubert's novel is a good example of this, since the reader is presented with two views of the heroine's death: the Romantic, peaceful one she imagines for herself, and its hideous and frightening reality. However, Madame Bovary's tragic and distressing end is not mirrored in the work of Villiers. Even the execution accounts which feature in the more macabre of his tales do not focus on the reality of the physical suffering of the victim. When suffering is portrayed, it is of a more psychological nature, such as that in 'La Torture par espérance' (*Nouveaux Contes cruels*).⁴ Death imagery in Villiers's work, therefore, while it may be classical and Romantic, is not Decadent.

Axël, of course, provides the reader with an example of Symbolist death. There is not the exhibitionist, attention-drawing element of Romanticism in the suicides of Sara and Axël: in the end, no-one else is present to witness their deaths, or even to know afterwards that they have actually taken place. This morbid act, made so much a public gesture in Romanticism, has once again been returned to the private sphere.

However, *Axël* also contains examples of classical and Romantic death. The murder of Kaspar is a classical means of plot closure. The temptation of gold has in this first instance been overcome by Axël. Kaspar is now superfluous to the dramatic narrative, and is neatly disposed of in death. The death that Sara proposes for herself at the start of Part IV of the play bears elements of Romantic suicide. Again, it would have

⁴ In this tale, a Jewish rabbi arrested during the Spanish Inquisition faces the torment of having his hard-won hopes for escape dashed just as he reaches the outer walls of his prison.

been a public gesture, enacted before Axël, and offered in pride. It would not have been regenerative, and would have borne none of the mystery of Symbolism.

All of these factors support my contention that an understanding of the operation of the theme of death in Villiers's works illumines the reader's comprehension of his whole corpus, not just in itself, but in relation to a wider literary context. Moreover, death is a unifying strand of Villiers's work, linking his work across time periods and generic classification, from his Romantic poetry to his Symbolist drama. Issues of loss raised in the *Premières Poésies*, manifested in abundant death imagery, appear throughout Villiers's corpus, and are finally resolved in the last act of *Axël*.

It is true that in literature and in life, death is, in many ways, a weapon of power. Sociological studies indicate that in every culture and society, power rests with the group which holds and wields an authority over the deaths of others. This is a concept articulated by Jean Baudrillard in his *Échange symbolique et la mort*: 'c'est dans la manipulation, dans l'administration de la mort que le pouvoir se fonde en dernière instance'.⁵ This is true both for the taking of another's life, and for the ending of one's own existence. A pertinent example is indicated by Baudrillard, who asserts that there is an increased rate of suicide in prisons where the death penalty is no longer enforced, as convicted men and women perpetrate one final act of rebellion against a society which has rejected and condemned them: 'On exécute de moins en moins dans les prisons, mais on s'y suicide de plus en plus: acte de *détournement* de la mort institutionnelle et de retournement contre le système qui l'impose'.⁶

Writing itself is an empowering experience, giving a person the capacity to express their own thoughts and to construct their own world, to reshape reality to their own wishes. This is precisely what Villiers does in his own personal philosophical system of illusionism. Moreover, the inclusion of the theme of death in Villiers's work

⁵ Baudrillard, *Échange symbolique*, p. 201.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 267.

is a second means of empowerment within this vehicle of expression itself already vested with a measure of potency. For example, through the metaphysical death chosen by those, like Tullia Fabriana and Lysiane d'Aubelleynne, who retreat from society to the solitude of a claustral existence, Villiers is rejecting and rebelling against the dominant culture of his time. As with the fate of the prisoners whom Baudrillard observes, the double suicide of Sara and Axël in the last act of *Axël* is an act of defiance directed towards the religious, romantic, and social status quo of Villiers's time, and his frustration at his inability to find any satisfaction in it.

This thesis has traced the development of the theme of death as it appears throughout Villiers's work, and provides a wealth of contextual knowledge from which to work. There is room, however, for much more comparative study. The proliferation of death imagery was not individual to Villiers, but was symptomatic of the mind-set of many writers in late-nineteenth-century Europe. Villiers's work has already been profitably compared with that of Jules Verne, Mary Shelley, and E.T.A. Hoffmann, but there are other authors with whom he could be fruitfully juxtaposed. For example, George Sand, whose novel *Indiana* (1832) bears a strong resemblance to Villiers's *Axël*. Both the novel and the drama feature the 'suicides' of the central characters, and in both, the life-ending acts are carefully thought through and reasoned out before they are actually committed. However, Ralph and Indiana in Sand's novel survive, while Axël and Sara die.

Much more could also be done to trace the influence of Villiers on early Symbolists. Maurice Maeterlinck publicly declared the artistic debt he owed to Villiers,⁷ and more could be done to trace elements of Villiers's influence on his work. Another Belgian Symbolist, Georges Rodenbach, published a novel in 1892 which takes as its starting-point circumstances identical to those which open 'Véra', the death of a

⁷ See p. 211 of this thesis.

much-loved wife.⁸ *Bruges-la-morte* could also be compared with *L'Ève future*, since both are concerned with female identity, and the replacement of one woman with another who bears a striking resemblance to her.

Finally, the Villierian hero could be compared with the twentieth-century disaffected male in literature. I have already mentioned Meursault in Camus's *L'Étranger* in relation to *Axel*.⁹ Edmund Wilson's assertion that Villiers affected literary protagonists in the early 1930s could also be reassessed, in light of the critical distance that now separates us both from Villiers and from Wilson himself.¹⁰

Writing, as I asserted at the start of this thesis, is a means by which a writer can triumph over death. Villiers's own modest literary immortality has been sealed. The passing of his complete works into Gallimard's Pléiade editions in 1986, and the use of *L'Ève future* as a text on the Agrégation exam syllabus have ensured this. Thus, a writer who for almost a century was relegated to the margins of French literature is now moving towards the centre. This particular project has elucidated the question of the innovation and conformity of Villiers's work as a *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon through the study of a single theme. Overall, it facilitates a deeper understanding of how Villiers's power as a writer has evolved through the near alchemical transformation of loss into new life, which is the triumph of the human spirit over circumstance.

⁸ Villiers conferred with Rodenbach in 1886 about a possible lecture tour in Belgium. See Raitt, *Life of*, p. 300.

⁹ See p. 237 of this thesis.

¹⁰ See p. 236 of this thesis.

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