

Frontispiece. Gustave Moreau. *The Toilette* (circa 1885-90).  
The Bridgestone Museum of Art, Ishibashi Foundation, Tokyo.

## Destruction and the Gift

GENEVIÈVE SICOTTE

IN his book *Degeneration*, Nordau criticized the writers of his time for their 'insatiable desire to accumulate useless trifles,'<sup>1</sup> a desire which, according to him, was the sign of a collector, fetishist, and typically degenerate neurosis. Indeed, despite their love of abstraction, Symbolist authors give a great deal of importance to objects. Beginning with the first theoretical essays, Symbolists assert that works of literature must always be mediated by the physical world.<sup>2</sup> In the words of Jean Moréas, the idea 'must never let itself be deprived of the sumptuous zimarras of exterior analogies'; in his opinion, physical phenomena, or objects, must be described not in and for themselves (as Realism and Naturalism would have it), but because they allow the reader to have a better grasp of the Idea which would otherwise remain inexpressible.<sup>3</sup> Gustave Kahn, for his part, calls for the 'objectification of the subjective'<sup>4</sup> through a process that involves, among other things, the multiplication of objects, which become essential indications of subjectivity and interiority. For George-Albert Aurier<sup>5</sup> as well, 'objects cannot have value as mere objects. They can only appear as signs. They are the letters of an immense alphabet that only the man of genius knows how to write with.' These signs, Aurier continues, lack the ability to become autonomous and must always remain in the service of the idea: 'to write one's thoughts, and one's poems, with these signs — remembering that the sign, though indispensable, is nothing in and of itself and that the idea alone is everything — this is the task of the artist, whose eye has been able to discern the hypostases of tangible objects.'<sup>6</sup> Thus the authors of the time appropriate the world of objects. However, Symbolist objects, unlike the supposedly trivial artifacts of Realism and Naturalism, are replete with meaning, and this is why Symbolist texts abound with trinkets, fine fabrics, jewels and treasure chests, which appear not as referential icons of the physical world, but rather as signs to be decoded, entry points for the reader into the non-material world of art.

However, this idealist conception of the object must be met with caution, and even skepticism. When objects begin to multiply within the texts, they form a reality that is linked referentially and by definition to the physical world. Symbolism attempts to surmount the banalities of Naturalism, but finds itself creating another world which, though distinct, is nevertheless engaged in a dynamic dialogue with reality. Symbolist objects can therefore

be examined in terms of their significance in the concrete world: how do they compare to other objects; what sort of materiality or *décor* do they form; what is their use, their circulation, their value? The literary texts provide answers to these questions, even if their authors claim not to. Whether they will it or not, they are immersed in the social discourse and practices of their time.<sup>7</sup>

This skepticism towards the idealistic declarations of the Symbolists becomes even more crucial when it is taken into account the fact that, while objects are proliferating in the literary texts, they are also becoming more and more numerous in the real world. It is precisely in the last decades of the nineteenth century that what will eventually become known as 'consumer society' is coming to existence.<sup>8</sup> For various demographic and technological reasons, the general quality of life improves, a fact that leads to an increase in buying power, the development of credit, and of course the creation of new needs. This leads to a multiplication of objects. In bourgeois homes, in newspapers and catalogues, in the aisles of the *grands magasins*, a new display of materiality is rampant. These new objects are mass-produced, circulate on a large scale, and conform to the logics of fashion and merchandise. In this context, their existence and evaluation becomes dependent upon their economic status.

The hypothesis thus is that Symbolist texts, when they present a whole gallery of trinkets to the reader, are anchored in contemporary preoccupations about objects and consumption, and that the representations proposed by certain of these texts criticize the emergent dominance of a culture of economic transactions. This criticism is manifest in a variety of forms within the texts of authors of the *fin de siècle*. Some writers portray extravagant objects in an attempt to create an aestheticized, elitist type of merchandise, reserved for the use of a select few. Others, and in particular those termed the Decadents, favour 'negativised' objects, marked by sickness and death, in an attempt to create an anti-merchandise that cannot be bought.<sup>9</sup> Finally, certain authors only invoke luxury objects in order to destroy them or give them away. This last type of representation abound in the works of French and Belgian Symbolists Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Stéphane Mallarmé, Joséphin Péladan and Georges Rodenbach. This study will demonstrate that this strategy of destruction circumvents and subverts the way objects are evaluated and put into circulation into the modern capitalist economy.

### Out of this world: Precious objects in Mallarmé and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam

The motif of sacrifice and the destruction of riches appears in the writing of one of the pioneers of symbolism, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam. Since Villiers himself embodied the tragic figure of the impoverished nobleman — he was in fact a count and claimed to have rights over the throne of Greece — it could be argued that his literary production was marked by personal experience. Nonetheless, this immediacy does not preclude the presence of other levels of signification. His texts are in dialogue with the social discourse of the time, and convey significance that goes beyond autobiography: or to put it more precisely, the theme of the economy is one whose impact is felt precisely in the conjunction of the often-conflicting personal and social spheres.

Villiers approaches the motif of the sacrifice of precious objects most directly in *Axël*.<sup>10</sup> The play, whose mythic setting was influenced by Wagnerism, had a great influence on future Symbolist authors. It is a fable of destitution, written in a hieratic and mystical tone. *Axël*, the count of Auërsperg, lives on an estate wherein is buried a lost treasure, hidden deep within the 'inviolable receptacle' of the forest. This treasure would be his by right of his noble lineage but, committed as he is to a spiritual path of detachment, he has forbidden anyone to search for the treasure, or ever to speak of it again. In the same way, he devotes himself to a celibate life of chastity, renouncing carnal pleasures. However this spiritual path proves to be full of pitfalls, and the whole play hinges on the temptations which the hero must resist. The pivotal moment in the play centres on a double hardship, putting the main character to the 'trial by gold and love'<sup>11</sup>. Whilst in isolation in a cave, *Axël* meets Sara, the woman with whom he will fall in love, and who will find the treasure before his very eyes. In this scene, Villiers textualises the dichotomy between the spiritual individual and economic realities, a conflict that he resolves by the sacrifice of transient temporal values.

From a textual point of view, the treasure is the subject of an unusual enunciative and rhetorical treatment. Its description is developed over the course of a lengthy stage direction, one of the longest in the play, extending over several pages. As such the enunciation of this passage is not delegated to one of the characters, but rather belongs to that elusive presence that might be termed the narrator of the play.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, Villiers does not limit this intervention to a description of the setting or props, and the stylistic working of the passage extends far beyond the illustrative possibilities of

staging. This complexity grants a crucial importance to this stage direction: if it is the narrator who is the authority here, it is because this moment touches on some key issues of the play.

Hidden in a dark and mysterious cave, discovered through Sara's occult powers, the treasure seems at first to lie outside the bounds of the physical world. However a contrast soon emerges between the treasure itself and the antithetically dark and still space of the cave in which it is discovered. Through poeticized rhetoric, the description articulates the three distinct semantic fields of movement, light and liquidity. The treasure abruptly brought into daylight surges forth with 'a scintillating torrent of gems, a rustling rain of diamonds and, a moment later, slithering gems of all colours, bathed in lights, a myriad of brilliants with lighted facets, more ponderous diamond necklaces, countless flaming jewels, pearls.' Later in the passage, a 'torrential rustling stream of lights,' 'thundering and ringing cataracts of gold coin' flow towards Sara. The systematic use of a lexicon of brilliance and heat, as well as metaphors of movement, noise and liquidity, situate the treasure not in the dark and cold mineral realm of stones, but rather in the realm of fire. This treasure is not fixed in history or in secrecy, but is instead dynamic, in the grip of a strong circulatory motion, a sort of autonomous movement. Indeed the treasure does not really belong to the chthonian, secret world of the underground — it aspires to return to the surface and to reintegrate itself into the world. Even Sara's intended use of the treasure situates it in the realm of circulation; she wants to return it to Germany and in so doing, place it back into an economic, worldly dimension. However, what follows in the story is a different set of events.

Tempted by earthly riches, pulled towards the physical, his soul 'laden with the mental weight of this gold,' Axël seems to be swayed towards the abandonment of his lofty beliefs.<sup>13</sup> He also succumbs to Sara's charms and declares his love for her. Yet, simultaneously, he transcends temptation and convinces Sara that their love should remain pure and that the treasure should be allowed to fade back into oblivion: 'What is the point of being like cowardly humankind, our former brothers, and buying the effigies of dreams with this drachma of gold — oboli of Styx — which scintillates between our triumphant hands!'<sup>14</sup> They must reject earthly forms of possession because 'Man carries into death only what he renounces in life. What makes this treasure valuable is in us.'<sup>15</sup> The majestic treasure must remain useless to stay positive, it returns forever to obscurity and its location remains secret. All movement towards the greater economical circuit stops here. This sacrificial logic extends even further, as the lovers give themselves up to death; the

treasure returns to obscurity and its location remains secret. Gold will not have been consumed, and love will not have been consummated.

The treasure and its precious objects thus play a crucial role in Villiers' text and are in fact the driving motif of the play, but their presence is negative or shadowed, since they are destined to be sacrificed. This 'extraordinary negative logic,' to use Jean-Paul Sartre's expression,<sup>16</sup> can also be found in Stéphane Mallarmé. The world of Mallarmé is populated by bibelots, fabrics, trinkets or gold, and indeed many of his poems are gifts by themselves, or were written on the offering of a fan or a box of *fruits glacés*. The theme appears not only in relation with objets but as well on an abstract level, for instance in the poem aptly titled 'Aumône.'<sup>17</sup>

In 'Aumône,' money is evoked only to be wasted in frivolous spending. Giving a coin to a beggar, the poet urges his protégé to use the pouch of 'precious metal' to indulge his vices — alcoholism, opium addiction, lustfulness. He even suggests that the beggar should in turn give the money away to light 'a candle to a saint in whom you still have faith'. The poem ends on a rather counter-discursive and ironic note: 'and above all don't go, brother, and buy any bread'. Any utilitarian use of the money would commodify the gift and would return the beggar to a position of being dominated, whereas pure spending is an act of pleasure that can bring freedom to the beggar and reintegrate him into real humanity.

The famous 'Sonnet en x' also explores, on a different level, the motif of the gift and of giving. It depicts a sitting room devoid of people but inhabited by mysterious objects, and repeatedly employs stylistic processes and a lexical field that denote absence. The most significant object in the poem is the 'ptyx'. The name of this object corresponds to nothing in the French vocabulary, although it echoes the rare word 'pyx', which designates a small box used to carry the consecrated host in the Christian tradition. Mallarmé, certainly aware of this connotation, nevertheless devised the ptyx as a simple verbal form, an empty box intended to preserve the rhyme of his sonnet and to emphasize the importance of the 'Styx' phonetically. He even wrote to a correspondent to ask whether the term already had a recognized meaning: 'I am told that it does not exist in any other language, and I am glad of this, for I much prefer the invocative power of creating it by the magic of rhyme.'<sup>18</sup> Despite its relative semantic indeterminacy, the ptyx in the poem signifies a trinket that might have been placed upon credenzas: Is it a vase, a box or, as the context suggests, a funerary urn? Perhaps the more important question resides in understanding that the poem leaves the reader in suspense as to the



Edouard Manet. *Stéphane Mallarmé* (1876) Musée d'Orsay, Paris.  
Réunion des Musée Nationaux/ Art Resource, New York. Photo credit: Herve Lewandowski.

word's meaning. Its indeterminacy is, in fact, an integral part of its meaning. The object is defined by its very absence, since it is actually *not* there, upon the credenza — it is an 'abolished bibelot' which was absent before it even existed, missing, like its owner who 'has gone to draw tears from the Styx'.<sup>19</sup> Thus absence becomes the fabric itself of the poem, an absence that is by the power of words transformed into a sort of ghostly presence: the reader creates for himself a mental image of what could have been. The *ptyx* is empty both in narrative function (it has disappeared, absorbed into the realm of the dead) and in its verbal construction (it is designated by a word that does not exist, a mere phonetic form). The *ptyx* and the other precious objects in the poem — the credenza, the motif of unicorns and nixes, the gold, the facing window and mirror — depict a negative décor which could have existed, in an agonizing world where silence and death reign supreme. Although this climate could be disquieting or morbid, it becomes in fact full of serene mystery and hidden meaning. By virtue of their presence-absence, and also because language does not quite achieve a representation or an understanding of them, Mallarméan precious objects create a universe that could not emerge from a realist description. The aesthetical function wins over the referential one, as, in 'Aumône', wasting had to be preferred to useful spending. The poem describes precious objects not in order to engage them in the circulation of merchandise, but rather to create through them a parallel universe, dedicated entirely to Beauty.

The representations of objects in 'Aumône' and the 'Sonnet en x' align with a Mallarméan 'theory of value,' elucidated, for example, in the text entitled 'Gold'.<sup>20</sup> The principal theme of this text in prose, inspired by the speculations and failures linked to the Panama scandal, is money. The poet describes the money stockpiled in bank safes, that '[h]ighly vain universal deity with neither exterior nor pomp'.<sup>21</sup> Scorning this kind of value, which for him is valueless, Mallarmé prefers the gold of a sunset that, in a 'liquefaction of treasure runs, gleams on the horizon'.<sup>22</sup> For him, millions signify nothing: 'Currency, that terrible precision instrument, clean to the conscience, loses any meaning'.<sup>23</sup> The greater a number is, moving 'towards the improbable,' the more zeros it has: 'signifying that its total is spiritually equal to nothing, almost'.<sup>24</sup> The only riches worth seeking, the only gold whose sparkle never fades, is that of words: 'the gift occurs, in the writer, of amassing radiant clarity with the words he proffers, such as Truth and Beauty'.<sup>25</sup> This text elucidates that for Mallarmé, the gold in banks, which has market value is — for this very reason — devoid of real value and meaning. Literature, on the other hand, is another form of gold, a paradoxical treasure that gains its value by being given away. In fact the gold in banks becomes a literary subject



precisely from the moment it is wasted and lost. Since money is the new god of the modern society, it must be spent splendidly and ostentatiously and should not be confined 'to the shadows of iron coffers and pockets.'<sup>26</sup>

Thus Villiers and Mallarmé introduce precious objects that only remain positive if they stay, in some sense, out of the world. Villiers ends *Axël* with the sacrifice of the treasure and the glorious death of the main character. Mallarmé proceeds, on a different level, to a similar sacrifice, representing gold or precious bibelots only to erase them, to depict their absence or to give them away. These precious objects are thus defined by their destruction, and in some cases their essential link to death — but a positive death that is a mystical accomplishment. Their owners, for their part, covet not the possession, but the gift. The motif of the object linked to sacrifice occurs in other works of Symbolist literature, with interesting variations that allow the discovery of further significance. What happens especially when the opposite situation arises, and precious objects are coveted, appropriated or put into circulation?

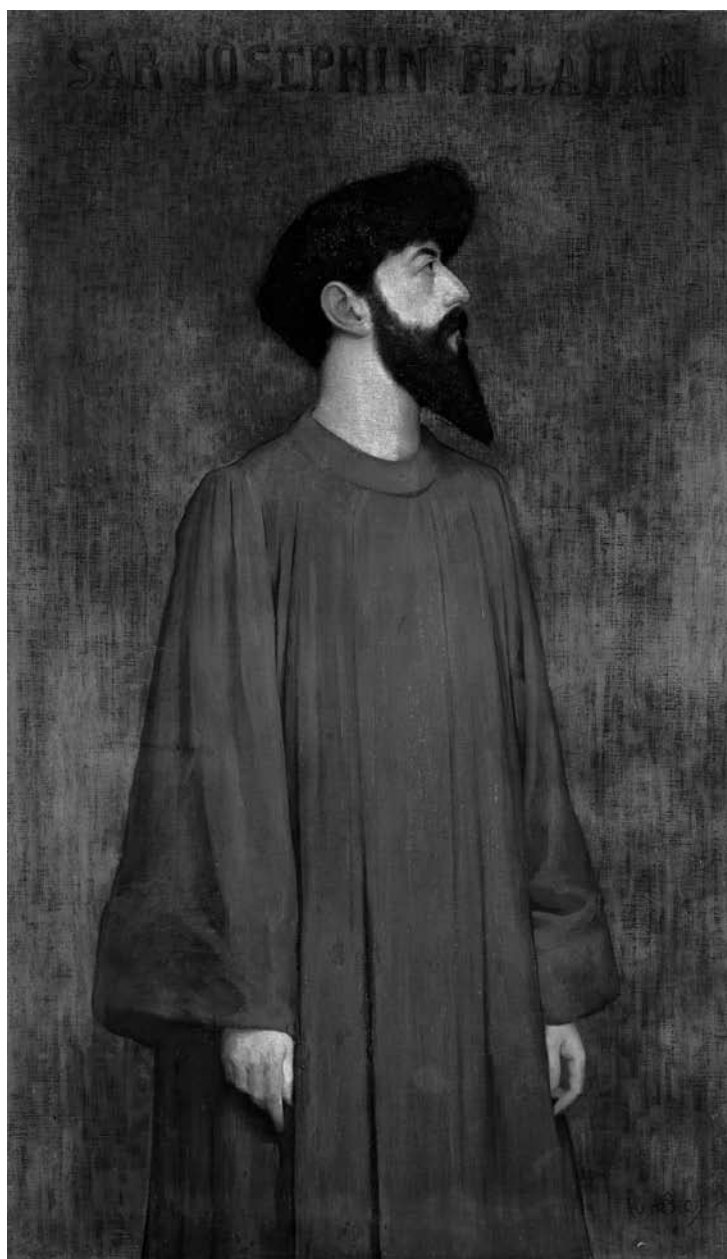
### **Negative Objects: Péladan and Rodenbach**

Joséphin Péladan, in *Les amants de Pise* (1912)<sup>27</sup>, takes up the scenario explored by Villiers but transposes it to modern day Italy. Beyond the specific influence of Villiers, this proximity reflects the wider resonance of Villiers' scenario in the imagination of the period. Péladan's novel tells the story of the Count della Gherardesca, a penniless nobleman living in Pisa in a magnificent but crumbling palace full of inestimably valuable antiques, paintings of ancestors, finely carved chests, and costly clothing, a residence whose walls encloses a secret treasure that no one has been able to find. Although the Count is ruined, he refuses to sell any of his possessions, preferring to live a monastic life that saves him from the mercantilism of the century. He also refuses to marry lest the purity of his family line be tainted. But the arrival of an unexpected visitor will change his life drastically.

Simone is a young Parisian who has undertaken a journey to Italy destined to console her from the premature death of a beloved husband. She opportunely sprains a leg while in Pisa, and is rescued by the servant of the count who introduces her to the secret world of the Gherardesca mansion. There she eventually meets the Count and the two fall in love. From that moment, the lovers lead an existence separate from the rest of the world: hidden within the house, they enact a sort of theatre of shadows night after night, wearing the dignified clothing of the ancestors, sitting on finely carved

furniture and eating and drinking from precious vessels and china. Their love grows, and the Count proposes to his lover. She accepts — but the Count, crazy with distress at the thought of not being able to offer her better than a life of poverty, begins to search frantically for the hidden treasure, to the sorrow of Simone who, for her part, would be happy to continue the same existence of poverty among treasures. After tearing apart nearly all the walls in the house and finally destroying a precious fresco behind which it is hidden, the Count discovers the treasure: jewels, precious gems, trinkets and pieces of gold tumble from their secular hiding place. But at the very moment he finally has the riches in his hands, the Count della Gherardesca goes mad. The end of the novel shows him sitting on the ground, his mind completely gone, playing at marbles with the precious stones of the treasure which has, from that moment on, become useless. Clearly, this novel is based on an echo in reverse of the story of *Axël*. The precious object, instead of being given away, destroyed, or sacrificed, is appropriated, and from then on becomes a destructive force.

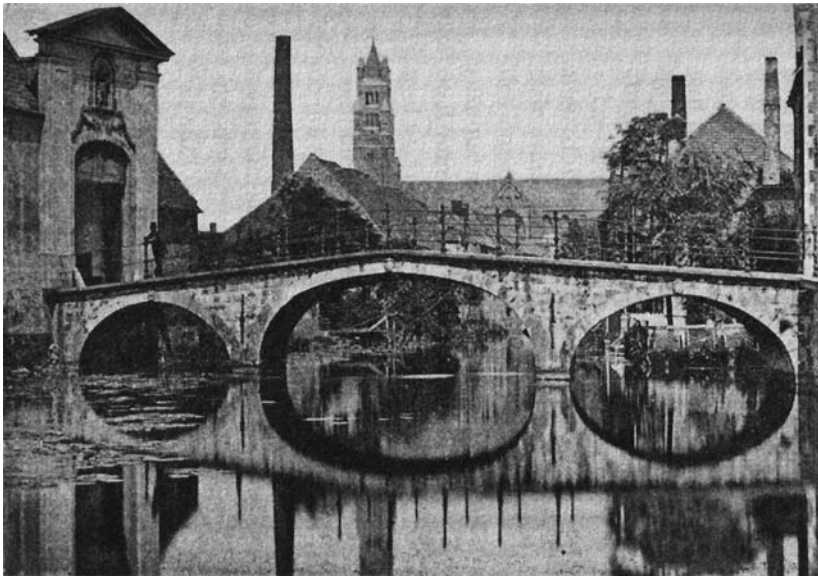
Such a traumatic reversal also constitutes a main theme of Georges Rodenbach's novel, *Bruges-la-Morte*.<sup>28</sup> After the death of his wife, Hugues Viane moves to Bruges, a former prosperous city where only churches and Beguine convents remain. He leads a solitary life there, victim of an interminable grief. Viane is consumed with memories of his lost wife, and here, again, objects take on such importance that they become veritable fetishes. He keeps her dresses in a trunk, where they grow faded but retain their value in his eyes because they are a testament to the fashion of another time. He does not touch the furniture in his living room because he still sees the imprint of his wife's body on the couch where she used to sit. Most significantly, he preserves the dead woman's hair in a glass case, a heavy golden braid of it, and he 'honours' this relic each evening (it must be noted here that the French word for 'to honour' has a second, sexual connotation, in addition to the sacred sense of the word). All these objects are distinguished by absence, and derive meaning and value precisely from the sort of sweet death that they evoke. Kept away from the passage of time by their protective shields, carrying the transcendental values of the sacred (the glass case is explicitly compared to a reliquary, and its content is likewise the remnant of a saint), they belong to the same family of objects as the treasure of Villiers or the décor of Mallarmé's poems. Their place is not in the secular economy, but in the realm of spirituality. But in Rodenbach's world, a negative twist will arise, causing the dresses and especially the hair in its glass case to play a crucial role in the narrative unfolding of the book.



Alexandre Séon. *Le Sâr Josèphin Pèladan* (1891). Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon. Photo credit: ©MBA Lyon/Alain Basset.

In the course of one of his long, introspective walks through the city of Bruges, Viane meets Jane Scott, a dancer who seems to be the exact double of his dead wife. He attempts to enter into a romantic relationship with her, an illusion that ill-fatedly attempts to resurrect the woman he lost. One day Viane has Jane try on his wife's dresses, and she bursts out laughing to see herself 'in this get-up'<sup>29</sup> — she refuses the fiction of this substitution of personalities that deprives her of her own identity, but above all she rejects the non-temporality of dressing in clothes from another era. The widower realizes that Jane is a horrific *doppelgänger*, a bastardised version of the woman he so idealized. He suddenly sees her as vulgar, as someone who laughs too loud and is shamelessly and overly sexualized. The story ends when, during a religious procession, Jane enacts the ultimate profanity by opening the glass case which holds the dead woman's hair — a sacrilegious action which leads to Viane strangling her with the braid.

So it is that bringing precious relics into the world of circulation, and especially into greedy and vulgar hands, leads necessarily to disaster. These relics — the precious stones of the Count della Gherardesca, as much as the golden braid in its glass reliquary — need to be kept in suspended animation,



*Photograph of Bruges* from Georges Rodenbach *Bruges-la-Morte* (1892). Courtesy of Editions Flammarion, GF (1998).

protected from the temporal world. Precious objects that circulate quickly become degraded, or turn unlucky or evil. Count della Gherardesca and Hugues Viane would have done better to renounce the modern world, as Axël did — if they had, they would have been able to pursue their fetishist commemoration indefinitely.

### **A critique of commercialism and a vision of literature**

The four authors analyzed here offer, through variations of affirmation and destruction, a systematic representation of precious objects. Jewels, gold, precious stones, the ptyx, furniture, dresses, and the braid of hair in its glass case all present an elaborate vision of luxurious décor, resonant with the lavish elegance of the fin-de-siècle bourgeois home. However, the comparison with the bourgeois world ends there; these Symbolist objects are defined positively by their absence, their destruction, and by being given away or renounced. It remains to consider why these representations are so prolific within fin-de-siècle writing: ultimately what is the significance of these representations of Symbolist objects?

It could obviously be said that this insistence on sacrifice takes up some religious themes and narratives based upon poverty and renunciation, themes and narratives that are here shifted on a literary and esthetical level. In this new age of modernity, transcendence, or what is left of it, tends to be associated with art. But this metaphysical interpretation of the sacrifice motif, however valid, leaves me unsatisfied because it tends to confirm the vision of art as a sacred and 'pure' practice having little to do with the real world, a vision that is certainly put forward by the works analyzed here, but that we contemporary critics do not have to believe without nuances. It seems that a subtle dialog occurs between this sacrificial motif and some representations of the social discourse about economy, money, consumerism and merchandize.

The hypothesis then is that the representation of precious objects in the fin de siècle and especially Symbolist literature can be better understood if examined in relation to the practices and conceptions prevailing in the economic world of the last decades of the nineteenth century. With the advent of what will come to be called consumer society, the social world is more and more perceived as a vast marketplace. The hegemonic social discourse of the time recognizes the omnipotence of economic exchange value and considers money and growth as primary goals. The gestures of buying, exchanging, and putting into circulation — in short, of possessing

objects — are signs of participation in this economic order. In contrast, Symbolist texts, with their emphasis upon dispossession, seem to reject this economic order by imagining a world where luxury and riches can only be given or renounced. Even though Symbolist objects are luxury items, they are thus not reducible to their monetary value. Escaping the dynamics of commodification inherent to modern capitalism, refusing to approve the possessive stance that seems to define the contemporary consumer, these literary objects divert the economical discourse and use it to their own means, which is to reveal the futility of wealth.

However, if the literary works analyzed here are based solely on such a refusal, it could be argued that their purpose is very limited and has nothing to do with a direct criticism of the economic system of their society or even with the creation of a true counter-discourse. Indeed, the theme of renunciation of wealth would only serve to validate and explain the difficult economic position of modern writers, because they, too, must sacrifice money for love of their art — at least according to the accepted ideas on the subject — with the result of confining them into the realm of metaphysical preoccupations. But these literary works, by virtue of their *æsthetization* processes, put forward a discourse that is much more politically committed than it seems and that does not constitute a validation of the economic inferiority of the artist. Their economic representations specifically shed light on the illusion inherent in the quest for luxury, and reveal in this process an essential mechanism of the emerging consumer society.

To have a better grasp on this specific contribution of literary texts, a note about the development and signification of luxury in practices and discourses may be necessary at this stage. In response to the general mercantilization of the emerging consumer society, certain new practices take place among the bourgeoisie, with the goal of creating (at least on a symbolical level) a relationship to objects that is non-utilitarian. Hand-made objects, collections of all sorts, albums and keepsakes, needlework, family heirlooms, travel souvenirs, exotic artefacts, trinkets and luxury objects form a new category of objects that are valued precisely because they seem not to participate in the modern market commodity culture.<sup>30</sup> These objects are prized for their subjective value that (up to a certain point) seems to nullify both their use-value and their exchange-value. They are considered precious because of their history, their origin, their luxury or their beauty — all things that reputedly cannot be exchanged or commodified. By attributing value to this type of object — ones that are beyond commerce, that cannot be assigned a price and therefore cannot be sold — the bourgeoisie, a social

class whose very existence depends upon the new habits of circulation of merchandise, dreams of something beyond the economy. Luxurious or ostentatious consumption certainly existed before in history, but at this time it takes on a whole new meaning. It is no longer simply a sign of prestige or social distinction, but becomes an indication of one's ideological position: luxury permits the bourgeois to imagine that objects can be lifted out of their commercial, serialized, industrial dimension, giving the feeling that one is not defined by the workings of the market. The character of the aesthete, who fancies objects that are irreducible to their mercantile dimension, is born of this dream and could thus be seen as a mere extension of the figure of the bourgeois collector.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, the attempt to create objects that are beyond the commercial seems bound to fail, since the market seamlessly assimilates new consumer



August Macke. *Fashion Shop (Modegeschäft)* (1913). LWL-Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte (Westfälisches Landesmuseum). Photo credit: LWL-Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte Münster/Sabine Ahlbrand-Dornseif.

practices. Soon the collector's antique is mass-produced, family jewels pass through the hands of usurers, exotic artifacts are imported by specialized dealers, and even the most original, expensive luxury becomes outdated and clichéd, and must be replaced. The practices associated with objects that are supposedly beyond commerce are thus touched by an aporia: they are based on the desire to transcend the market system, but in fact they only reproduce, by way of non-utilitarian merchandise, the same mechanisms they wish to obviate. In this sense, the freedom they propose is illusory. Nevertheless, from the bourgeois point of view, these practices are not problematic, because they help to uphold the illusion of freedom in the face of the all-encompassing market.

The literary texts discussed here, for their part, seem to be able to problematize this relationship to merchandize and to ask questions that would otherwise remain unarticulated in the general social discourse. From the outset, these texts represent objects that are so valuable that they cannot be reduced to a monetary value; they are impossible to buy or sell. In this way these objects assert their refusal to belong to the market. Yet as objects of luxury, useless and precious, these objects could be seen as affirming the bourgeois illusion of a space beyond the market. But because they are destroyed and given away, they do not belong to a dynamic of possession. Rather they use the economic discourse for their own means, to demonstrate the inanity of wealth. As for the objects that return to the world of circulation, like the Count's treasure or Rodenbach's golden braid, they serve as a sort of moral, even metaphysical, admonition. Symbolist trinkets are valuable not because of market sanctions, nor even because they present themselves as being beyond money or the economy, but because they enact the gesture of the gift. In the Symbolist world, when objects are not given, they become negative once again, either absorbed by the market or as operating as portents of death. Thus they reveal the illusory nature of the freedom that luxury objects pretend to offer. They show the aporia of bourgeois luxury, which always returns to the circulation of the market, and propose instead what could be called, to use a term popularized by Marcel Mauss, a *potlatch*: a ritualistic gift that ends in the destruction of what is given.<sup>32</sup>

This strategy has aesthetic and ideological consequences for the position art holds in society, as seen by the artists of the *fin de siècle*. The precious trinkets that abound in the texts of the time echo the position of the work of art itself — they are the symbolic representation, or, more precisely, the metonymic representation of art. These trinkets, as art itself, are seen as useless objects,



devoid of functional value, with a decorative character that only lends them a (dubious) exchange value. They constitute marginal merchandise, similar to art, which may be taken more seriously by society, but is simultaneously more problematic. Thus the general presence of precious trinkets in fin-de-siècle writing indicates that the work of art must be considered as a useless and precious luxury, like a sort of refined super-merchandise, reserved for the elite. But voluntary sacrifice, the gestures of giving and of dispossession, affect Symbolist objects, enacting a transformative effect on their meanings: literature abdicates luxury, and in this way attempts to reach a point where it is no longer reducible to its economic value or to its marketable status. To become precious, literature strips itself of all ostentation, deriving its value from the gift of itself. The work of art thus becomes not a deluxe super-merchandise item, but an artefact that, although defined by economics, has the upper hand on the system because it occupies the powerful end of the exchange relationship, that of the giver.

This sacrificial representation of precious objects is then ultimately a criticism and a questioning of the power of economy over art. Market value ceases to be a totalizing system that dictates and summarizes all human realities, since art can resist being transformed into merchandise. In this new and daring framework, artists see themselves as being no longer dominated by economics, as in the romantic age, but as the officiants of a potlatch of magnificent giving. This ritualistic gift has the characteristic of being impersonal and without direct reciprocity. As such, it puts the artist in a position of symbolic superiority, above or away from any economical interest. It is not a coincidence that this representation arises at a this historical moment: it is precisely because art becomes more and more susceptible to commodification and risks being transformed into a merchandize that this representation becomes necessary and meaningful. The motif of the sacrifice of precious objects should then be explained not only in the framework of an idealistic and metaphysical literature. It reasserts an essential question of modernity (and of post-modernity as well), that of the ever-growing hold of the economy over human realities.

#### ENDNOTES

1 The author wishes to acknowledge financial support from the Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et la culture (FQRSC) and from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). This paper and all cited quotations, unless otherwise indicated, were translated from the French by Jessica Moore.

Max Nordau, *Degeneration* [1892], translated from the Second Edition of the German Work (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), ser. Bison Book, p. 27.

2 On that subject see Laurent Jenny, *La fin de l'intériorité: théorie de l'expression et invention esthétique dans les avant-gardes françaises (1885-1935)*, (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), pp. 16-18.

3 See Jean Moréas, 'Manifeste du Symbolisme', *Le Figaro*, supplément littéraire, 18 September 1886, pp. 150-151.

4 "Le but essentiel de notre art est d'objectiver le subjectif (l'extériorisation de l'Idée) au lieu de subjectiver l'objectif (la nature vue à travers un tempérament)"; Gustave Kahn, quoted by Paul Adam in *Symbolistes et Décadents* (Exeter: University of Exeter, 1989), ser. Textes Littéraires, LXX, ed. by Keith Cameron, p. 6.

5 George-Albert Aurier, 'Le symbolisme en peinture', in *Textes critiques: 1889-1892: De l'impressionnisme au symbolisme* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1995), ser. Beaux-Arts Histoire, ed. by Denis Mellier, Marie-Karine Schnaub and Pierre Wat, p. 33.

6 Ibid.

7 On the concept of 'social discourse', see Marc Angenot, *1889: Un état du discours social* (Longueuil: Le Préambule, 1989).

8 See Whitney Walton, *France at the Crystal Palace: Bourgeois Taste and Artisan Manufacture in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), and Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France*, (Los Angeles, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982).

9 See Geneviève Sicotte, "Le luxe et l'horreur. Sur quelques objets précieux de la littérature fin de siècle", *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, 29:1-2, (autumn-winter 2000-2001), pp. 138-153.

10 The completed work was published in 1885, but extensive excerpts had circulated before. Auguste Villiers de L'Isle-Adam, *Axël*, trans. by Marilyn Gaddis Rose (Dublin: The Dolmen Press, 1970).

11 *Axël*, p. 143.

12 Villiers seems to have retained the lesson of Flaubert and his *Tentation de saint Antoine* (1874), a text that relies precisely upon the blurring of the lines between what Aristotle termed *mimesis* and *diegesis*.

- 13 *Axël*, p. 135.
- 14 *Axël*, p. 169.
- 15 *Axël*, p. 172.
- 16 See Jean-Paul Sartre, *La lucidité et sa face d'ombre* (Paris: Gallimard, NRF, 1986), ser. Arcades, p. 164.
- 17 *Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poems*, trans. by C.F. MacIntyre (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 17-19.
- 18 Translated by Jessica Moore from Stéphane Mallarmé: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mondor and Georges Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard, nrf, 1945), ser. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 65, p. 1483.
- 19 *Stéphane Mallarmé: Selected Poems*, p. 85
- 20 Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Gold' in *Divagations: The author's 1897 arrangement; together with 'Autobiographie' and 'Music and Letters'*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (United States of America: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 255.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 256.
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 Joséphin Péladan, *Les amants de Pise* (Paris: Flammarion, 1912), ser. Les drames de la conscience, éd. by Ernest Flammarion.
- 28 See Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte* [1892] (Belgium: Éditions Actes Sud/Labor, 1989), ser. Babel.
- 29 Georges Rodenbach, *Bruges-la-Morte*, p. 55.
- 30 See Manuel Charpy, 'L'ordre des choses: sur quelques traits de la culture matérielle bourgeoise parisienne: 1830-1914', *Revue d'histoire du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 34 (2007/1), 105-28 (p. 110).
- 31 On the subject of identity and objects in the bourgeois interior, see Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- 32 See Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur le don: forme et raison de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2007), ser. Quadrige, Grands textes, pp. 141-142.

