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# Portraits of the Artist's Self translating Alexandre Vialatte's Battling le ténébreux

Frances Egan

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Cultures du Monde Anglophone)

Thèse de doctorat en études anglophones (traductologie)

Frances EGAN

# Portraits of the Artist's Self

Translating Alexandre Vialatte's *Battling le  
ténébreux*

Thèse dirigée par Claire Davison, Véronique Duché et Henry Méra

Soutenue le 18 juin 2019

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# Résumé

## **Portraits du soi de l'artiste : *Battling le ténébreux* d'Alexandre Vialatte en traduction**

Alexandre Vialatte (1901-1971) se définissait de son vivant comme « notoirement méconnu ». Les ambiguïtés de l'écrivain-traducteur l'ont relégué en marge de la littérature française, mais elles suscitent de façon paradoxale une attention critique modeste aujourd'hui. Son premier roman *Battling le ténébreux ou la mue périlleuse* (1928) – roman d'apprentissage peu étudié et encore inédit en anglais – incarne parfaitement la qualité inclassable de l'auteur. Cette thèse se concentre sur le fait que Vialatte était traducteur ; elle avance l'hypothèse qu'une rencontre précaire entre les cultures française et allemande façonne *Battling* et, en parallèle, elle examine l'idée d'une identité « en traduction ».

À ce titre, nous adoptons une « lecture traductionnelle » du texte où la pratique de la traduction (vers l'anglais) alimente une étude littéraire. En raison de la nature interdisciplinaire de la traduction, nous nous appuyons non seulement sur la traductologie, mais aussi sur la littérature comparée, la création littéraire et les études féministes, afin de donner corps à un espace polyphonique et créatif entre sujets et cultures. Notre analyse du texte porte sur la « mue périlleuse » du héros moderniste et s'organise autour de deux rencontres intersubjectives : tandis que le protagoniste du roman rencontre son objet de désir (une femme allemande) et se trouve déstabilisé, le traducteur rencontre l'écrivain pour problématiser le texte original. À travers ces deux affrontements, nous bouleversons les dichotomies de soi et autre, original et traduction, pour finalement imaginer une identité plurielle et éthique en traduction.

**Mots-clés** : traduction, identité, soi, autre, féminisme, modernisme, créativité

# Abstract

## **Portraits of the Artist's Self: Translating Alexandre Vialatte's *Battling le ténébreux***

Alexandre Vialatte's (1901-1971) self-proclaimed label – 'notoirement méconnu' – continues to define him today. The writer-translator's incongruities have relegated him to the margins of the French literary canon yet paradoxically attract a modest academic following. His first novel *Battling le ténébreux ou la mue périlleuse* (1928) – a little-studied and currently untranslated coming of age tale – exemplifies the rich placelessness that defines the author. This thesis contextualises *Battling* in light of Vialatte's position as translator. It suggests the text is informed by an uneasy encounter between French and German cultures and geographies and, in parallel, it investigates the very notion of an identity 'in translation'.

This thesis adopts a translational approach whereby my own process translating *Battling* into English frames a literary study of the text. Given the multifaceted nature of translation, such an approach is interdisciplinary: it draws not only from translation studies (both theory and practice), but also from comparative literature, creative writing, and feminist studies, to map a polyphonous and multifaceted space between subjects and cultures. The analysis centres on the modernist hero's 'mue périlleuse', or coming of age, and structures itself around two intersubjective encounters; as Vialatte's protagonist meets his foreign and feminine Other to find insecurity, translator meets writer to problematise the original text. Through these two encounters, this thesis works to unsettle the binaries of self and other, original and translation, to ultimately present a plural and ethical identity in translation.

**Key words:** translation, identity, self, other, feminism, modernism, creativity

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# Prologue

## The Beau Brooding Byronic Ténébreux

As I translate Alexandre Vialatte's 1928 novel *Battling le ténébreux ou la mue périlleuse*<sup>1</sup> into English, I keep thinking about the title. What does it mean? And how can I possibly reproduce its ambiguities and intertextuality in English? They say you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but I rather like judging this one by its title. Everything is contained in those seven words.

First. *Battling le ténébreux*. The title sounds foreign, in any language; it is ambiguous and evocative, multiple and non-definitive. The language switch, with the strangeness of 'battling' in French, destabilises our reading. Once we know the story, we recognise the hero's nickname 'Battling' and can read the title as a classic epithet along the lines of *Jude the Obscure* (1895) and *Simon le pathétique* (1918). We see that the character *is* the 'ténébreux'. But is he the Romantic 'beau ténébreux' or the devil rising from the shadows? Should I title the novel *Battling the Brooding, the Melancholy, the Saturnine*? Or rather *Battling the Dark One*? And why did the author choose such a strange and foreign name? Perhaps Vialatte named his hero after a boxer? Battling Siki (1897-1925) was a famous French-Senegalese boxer at the time,

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<sup>1</sup> The shortening '*Battling*' is used throughout to refer to the novel, 'Battling' to its protagonist.

Louis Hémon used the name for his English fighter in the novel *Battling Malone, pugiliste* (1925) and Buster Keaton released a film a couple of years earlier featuring a boxer by the name of Alfred ‘Battling’ Butler. Or perhaps the term comes from the old German ‘batte’ meaning ‘to bat’, or ‘batteln’, ‘to battle’. From the perspective of English, the gerund ‘battling’ favours a verbal phrase. *Battling the Darkness*: a struggle for or against something dark, mysterious, evil, even beautiful. But the text rarely draws from English.

Given the wealth of possible interpretations, *ténébreux* – qui manque de clarté, d’intelligibilité, qui mériterait des éclaircissements’ (TLFi)<sup>2</sup> – almost seems to mark the title’s own wilful obscurity.<sup>3</sup> Its lack of clarity forces us to consider all the nuances, delve into different languages and rethink the meaning of familiar words. This definition of ‘ténébreux’, arising from a language as alluring as it is ambiguous, houses Vialatte’s conflicted modern subject.

*Ou*. A little alternative for the reader: *La Mue périlleuse*. The novel’s subtitle most obviously refers to Battling’s fraught coming of age. ‘Mue’ is first defined as the renewal of skin, hair or feathers due to growth, age, or living conditions. Sloughing, moulting or shedding in English. *The Perilous Metamorphosis*? I like the wink to Franz Kafka, and the animalism of ‘metamorphosis’. But in humans, ‘mue’ also refers to ‘coming of age’ and, in boys, the moment in puberty when one’s voice breaks. I consider ‘shaky’ for the hint of a teenager’s wobbly voice: *The Shaky Coming of age*. Terrible title. Together with any adjective along the ‘perilous’,

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<sup>2</sup> Trésor de la langue française informatisé.

<sup>3</sup> All definitions marked ‘Larousse’ come from Editions Larousse *Dictionnaire de français en ligne* unless otherwise noted.

‘precarious’, ‘dangerous’ lines, ‘coming of age’ becomes unwieldy. Battling, too, is uncomfortable in his own skin. His strong body and brutish physicality are at odds with his sentimentality, his Romantic ideals conflict with his inner desires and modern vulgarity. The text tells us that the nickname Battling<sup>4</sup> is for ‘son allure souple et lourde à la fois de brute paisible’ (Vialatte, *Battling* 57).<sup>5</sup> This elusive and oxymoronic explanation – supple and heavy, brutish and peaceful – exemplifies the conflicted nature of Battling’s character and the difficulty he has *being* in the world. Vialatte’s text is the construction or rather the deconstruction of Battling’s self, his heart and soul exiled into a foreign but resonating prose, his singularity multiplied and layered.

But this ‘mue’ is also Vialatte’s. For the term has figurative application; it equally designates change at a societal level. A literary ‘coming of age’: the rupture wreaked by the avant-garde post World War One (post-WWI). At a time when none of the previous models of the self could adequately express the experience of being, *Battling* grasps around for something new. Divided between German *Romantik* and French *modernité*, between pre-war nostalgia and post-war reality, it collages and parodies the Romantic ‘I’, a modernist collective, projections of the Other. This thesis presents Battling’s (anti) coming of age as an allegory for a doomed quest for national identity in the interwar period.<sup>6</sup> The character’s ‘mue périlleuse’ is the text’s search

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<sup>4</sup> His real name is Fernand Larache but he is rarely referred to as such.

<sup>5</sup> Citations from *Battling* are hereafter referenced simply by page number in parentheses.

<sup>6</sup> References to ‘post-war’ refer throughout the thesis to the period following World War One unless otherwise noted. I use the term ‘interwar’ as a marker of this time for us looking back today. The premonition that comes with such a term is, however, anachronistic; Vialatte’s experience of the period would not have come with such predestination. To explore this line of reflection, I look at the

for a modern subject fit to inhabit a senseless era – a search that is self-conscious, metafictional, sceptical. It is this *how* of writing the self that encapsulates the thrust of *Battling* and of my research.<sup>7</sup>

According to Henri Meschonnic (*Critique* 33), literature is the subject's medium in a battle against the unknown and, as per Susan Stewart (1), poetry is the subject's defence against darkness. If language is our weapon in an ongoing battle for knowledge and identity, a materiality with which to light up the tenebrous unknown that surrounds us, does Vialatte's title only announce an epithet – Battling as the dark, handsome hero – or does the ambiguity allow for a larger battle of words against darkness? By way of the *beau ténébreux*, as I will explore in Chapter One, Vialatte enters a tradition of writers and artists searching for meaning and identity. The Romantic archetype's changing form expresses a *becoming* in writing in which one never becomes – the hero is never fully defined, objectified, stable (Deleuze and Parnet 8–16). *Beau ténébreux*: a *beautiful obscurity* of language with which to paint the self.

Writer Christopher Isherwood (1904-1986) famously notes in his 'Berlin Diary' from 1930:

I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking.  
Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the

---

rift between writer's and translator's perceptions of post-war/interwar in the last chapter *Any where out of the world*.

<sup>7</sup> I use the term 'self' throughout this thesis to refer to the very essence of the 'I' and the 'me', that elusive something that writers and theorists have long tried to define, write, understand (see Mansfield 1; Leary and Tangney 6, 72). To a different end, I use 'identity' to refer to the traits and characteristics that define who one is. These traits, significantly for my exploration of translation as producing identities, are 'orienting, they provide a meaning-making lens' (Leary and Tangney 69).

kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed (243).

I am not passive, but I do want to be the camera with its shutter open. I know I need to develop the photo with a title in English and a translation of the novel, but here, in this thesis, I articulate the middle, the in-between, the developing not the developed. And it is in the dialogue between original and translation, mapping the possibilities for the text in English, that the eponymous Battling's unresolved identity takes shape. With a view to different times, voices, languages, the mythical self of Vialatte's text materialises: a self without origin, divided and multiplied across the ages, unhoused from language.



# Introduction

Les « intraduisibles » – non pas ce qu'on  
ne traduit pas, mais ce qu'on ne cesse pas  
de (ne pas) traduire.

– BARBARA CASSIN

*Vocabulaire européen des philosophes*

Translation is most interesting when it doesn't quite work. Or rather, when it works differently. When we come across *les intraduisibles*, when the poetry that one language creates resists formulation in another. When we hover around the perfect solution for days, flipping things this way and that, sensing an epiphany just out of reach. The process is rich, inflationary, illuminating. As with my efforts to translate *Battling*'s title, the act of translating delineates the original yet makes what was apparently simple more complex. Translation maps out potential meanings, unpacks ambiguities, traces intertextual resonances, pinpoints underlying networks, and adds alternate lines of enquiry. It both defines and problematises the identity of the literary text.

This thesis is structured around my own process translating Alexandre Vialatte's heretofore untranslated novel *Battling le ténébreux ou la mue périlleuse* into English. Its end goal, however, is not the smooth reproduction of the original. Instead my focus is on the obstacles themselves and what they tell us about the text. From the rich space between original and translation, Vialatte's context and my own, I consider

how we can use translation for a study of literature: both to see the original and to see/perform it differently. In keeping with the very nature of translation and the wide-ranging application of its study today, this thesis is multifaceted. It crosses disciplines, bringing together Translation Studies, Comparative Literature, Creative Writing and Feminist Studies. Its theory is practice-based but also metaphorical. Its structure is layered, polyphonous and relational. And it positions translation not as inhibited but as ebullient and unbridled.

A reading of the case study *Battling* through the lens of translation forms the bulk of the thesis. By articulating the interdiscursive space between original and translation, writer and translator, I unpack the text and its representations of the self in the interwar period. Through its difference from the original, translation both reveals and problematises what *is*, showing how it might be otherwise. A reading in translation works then towards the heterogeneity, instability and polyphony that forms any literary text. *Battling*, as the product of a writer-translator torn between cultures, languages, wars, presents the perfect case study.

From this study of the text itself, this thesis investigates how translation produces identity. My translational reading is self-reflexive; in parallel, I interrogate the translating relationship and the conditions of cultural exchange. How do we make meaning in translation, in the bridging of cultures, where the text belongs to one subject, language, time, but also to another? In recent years, translation has been used as a metaphor for identity, an identity which suggests a fragile union between self and other. What is interesting about translation is that it uproots the original from its context and brings it into a new frame of reference, but it does not erase its origins. It brings together cultures but does not resolve them; it is always unfinished, ripe for

retranslation. Translation presents then a selfhood that is characterised by perpetual exchange and renegotiation, insecurity but also growth.

Early in Vialatte's novel, a foreign artist named Erna Schnorr arrives in the fictional small French town from Berlin. The (anti) hero Battling falls in love with her. He projects fulfilment onto her foreign figure and depends on her for self-realisation. But in her liminality Erna perverts what this French schoolboy wants for himself; where he seeks stability, she reflects plurality and insecurity. Hearts are broken. Chaos ensues. I find myself fascinated by, and identifying with, Erna's character. We are both foreign (to Vialatte's text), female, Other; existing on the margins of *Battling*, we unsettle the male hero, the original, the singularity of the self. Writer meets translator, hero meets love interest: these two encounters represent parallel intersubjective battles for identity: textual and ontological respectively. Both are characterised by negotiation, not resolution or distinction, and take place in translation.

Framed by these two encounters, my thesis asks the overarching question: how does translation produce identity in the in-between spaces? American philosopher William James (1842-1910) said that 'we ought to say a feeling of "and", a feeling of "if", a feeling of "but", and a feeling of "by", quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold.' This research endeavours to embrace the feelings of 'and', 'if', 'but' and 'by' to document the dialogue between writer and translator. From here, it draws a portrait of text that spans cultures, languages, voices, times, and a portrait of self that is situated and embodied, plural and fragmented. And it argues that translation is our mode of connection with alterity where the unresolved encounter is identity itself.

The thesis structure consists of an introductory chapter followed by two parts, *The Self* and *The Other?*, each containing two chapters. Chapter One, *Identity in Translation*, outlines my approach to the text, to translation and to a study of the self. It begins with *A Context in Placelessness: Vialatte and Battling* to introduce the case study. This segment establishes both Alexandre Vialatte and his first novel as outside the French canon – hovering between French and German traditions in a strange and plural space – and proposes a home for this little-studied author and text in translation. Chapter One goes on to present the theoretical framework that drives my approach in *Translational Reading*. This framework consists, on the one hand, of a close reading of *Battling* through the lens of translation and, on the other, of a reflection on the process itself: how a text takes form in-between, and how the writer and translator are themselves translated. Chapter One concludes with *Portraits of the Self: A Brief History*. Through an exploration of possible English translations for the title *Battling le ténébreux*, carrying on from the prologue, this final section of Chapter One introduces the models of the self with which the text wars. Its translational reading of the title serves as a microcosm for my approach throughout the thesis.

Parts One and Two follow: *The Self* and *The Other?* Given that this thesis treats translation as relational, its structure is arranged around the people, or the artists, as per the title, that partake. Part One, *The Self*, focuses on the eponymous Battling and the writer Vialatte. Part Two, *The Other?*, reflects and destabilises the singularity of Part One's self. It paints the *other* portraits – Erna (eternal feminine?) and myself, translator – to render this an intersubjective negotiation of identity in translation: ontological (Battling-Erna) and textual (writer-translator). Each part opens with a brief and creative snapshot of these figures, introducing the artists who will

participate in this translational encounter, and each chapter begins with an extract of my translation of the novel to set the scene. As such, this thesis takes on a polyphonous and experimental quality that works to express the destabilising yet fertile space of translation.

Part One begins with Chapter Two, *The Great Battling*, which centres on the fictional hero. It opens with a translated extract to introduce Battling in all his contradiction and anachronism and goes on to explore the text's uneasy nostalgia for the Romantic 'I'. Presenting a collage of satirised passages, Chapter One reveals the text's deconstruction of a Romantic model of the self. How does the Romantic hero fare in this post-WWI, anti-coming of age tale? Accompanying Battling's quest for identity is Vialatte's own hesitation between tradition and modernity. *Hunting Horns* turns to the writer behind the text through an analysis of the novel's epigraph (from 'Cours de chasse') and preface. Guillaume Apollinaire's poem neatly represents a nostalgic 'I' of memory and unreal pasts, romanticised and layered in fiction.

Chapter Three, *The Unhomeliness of Coming of age*, positions Battling as a mere figurehead for a collective modernist subjectivity. A translated passage on interwar art introduces the chapter which aligns the precariousness of *Battling's* adolescence with a strangeness of being. Here, the text's efforts to exteriorise a schoolboy imaginary – through caricature, dreamscapes, visual uncertainty – represent the period's drive to aestheticise the subconscious, the irrational, the uncanny. How does a modernist unhomeliness frame Battling and the schoolboys' imaginary? Part One concludes with *The Writer Unhoused* which contextualises this unhomeliness from the perspective of Vialatte's status as a writer-translator and the period's crisis of representation. It reads the schoolboy imaginary as a product of a writer between

worlds, between French and German, post-war and pre-war, *modernité* and *Romantik*.

In Part Two, the metatranslational element that I introduce in the framework emerges. If my analysis of *Battling* is informed, even from the outset, by the prospect of translation – the promised trajectory opens the text to a rereading and foregrounds those aspects already within the original that appeal to translation – my active involvement in the production of meaning as translator, my intimacy with the text and my authority over it, becomes explicit in the final two chapters.

Chapter Four, *Figurehead of Our Hope*, positions the French-German love interest and artist Erna Schnorr as mirror to the text's male and displaced post-war self. A translated passage depicts her entrance into the narrative by her picture in magazines. Conceived through the lens of the schoolboy imaginary, Erna is myth, image, art, desire – an exoticised eternal feminine who represents all thing Other to the universal and French male self. Or is she? This chapter concentrates on Erna's incongruity in this role – who/what does she, in fact, reflect? In parallel with Erna's distorted reflection of the male self, is translation's reflection of Vialatte's text. Chapter Four closes with *Pieces of Raspberry Pie* which delves into my own personal search for definition in translation and, in so doing, takes on a creative and subjective form. From the Romantic quest for wholeness to a modernist defamiliarisation and Translation Studies today, it examines what it is that makes a translational reading so productive and asks the question: to what extent does the Other offer definition to *Battling's* quest for self?

Finally, Chapter Five, *Any where out of the world*,<sup>1</sup> travels through the looking glass to frame Erna as a subject with her own agency and corporeality, outside the French imaginary. Opening the chapter, a translated extract shows the self-other binary flickering in Erna's interactions with Manuel. Here, Erna is the artist, creator of the text's aesthetic, even if she remains objectified. This chapter positions Erna's transnationality (between French and German) and liminality (between subject and object) as the heart of the text's self. What sort of identity can translation present for this text and its afterlives? Chapter Five finishes with *Marriage: What is it Good For?* which draws on Feminist Translation Studies to likewise flip and problematise the self-other binary in the writer-translator relationship. Again, this metatranslational section is personal in tone; adopting a feminist lens, it works towards the embodied and gendered nature of translation. It suggests that, where Vialatte's intention meets my habitus, *Battling* takes on meaning outside any neat classification, time period or national literature.

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<sup>1</sup> The title comes from Charles Baudelaire's famous poem 'Any where out of the world' (from the collection *Petits poèmes en prose*, published posthumously in 1869). Baudelaire used the English but erroneously wrote 'anywhere' as two words.

# 1

## Identity in Translation

### **A Context in Placelessness: Vialatte and *Battling***

Writer-translator Alexandre Vialatte (1901-1971) is difficult to classify. He is both behind and ahead of his time, both belonging to French literature and outside of it (Schaffner, 'Vialatte, Laforgue' 309). He is Catholic and irreverent, lyrical and grotesque, anti-intellectual with a taste for formalism; contradiction swirls around any attempt to encapsulate his authorial identity (Jourde, *Opérette* 10–12). Given Vialatte's affection for mocking both modernism and the conservative small-town bourgeoisie, we might label him a postmodern traditionalist. And if any of these statements at first seem empty – how can he be both behind and ahead of his time? – they nonetheless suit this author who revels in the uncertain and makes it his business to write it. An author whose very last magazine column ended on this ambiguous note: 'Notre civilisation glisse sur les peaux de banane. C'est le présent. Est-ce



vraiment l'avenir ?'<sup>1</sup> This statement from 1971 announces a relationship with time and societal chaos remarkably like that which permeates Vialatte's writing of *Battling* post-World War I.

The literature gives Vialatte a diverse array of predecessors. Depending on the argument, he might follow the fantastic as per E.T.A. Hoffman (1776-1822), German Romanticism after Clemens Brentano (1778-1842), or rather post-Romanticism after Gérard de Nerval (1808-1855),<sup>2</sup> the absurd grotesquery of Alfred Jarry (1873-1907), the poetic fantasy of his fellow Germanophile Jean Giraudoux (1882-1944), or even the French modernism of Marcel Proust (1871-1922). Not to mention the looming shadow of Franz Kafka (1883-1924). In any event, Vialatte's work sits well outside the French canon. Equally a translator from the German, Vialatte belongs to a rare breed of writers better known for their translations than for their own fiction. He notably introduced Franz Kafka to the French, translating the bulk of his oeuvre, together with works by Friedrich Nietzsche and Bertolt Brecht. Much of the literature on Vialatte focuses on his lengthy and intimate involvement with Kafka's work: his translations<sup>3</sup> and, more recently, as I'll look at in Chapter Three, Kafka's influence on Vialatte's own writing.

Vialatte's prolific columns are his other claim to fame; he wrote for such diverse publications as *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, *Réalités*, *Le Crapouillot*, even *Elle*.

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<sup>1</sup> From the last (unpublished) column Vialatte wrote for *La Montagne*. A shorter version was published in the *Spectacle du Monde*, in May 1971 just before Vialatte's death, under the title 'Civilisation de l'épluchure'. This piece closes the recent volume *Résumons-nous* (1308).

<sup>2</sup> Vialatte's style is often associated with Nerval's description in *Aurélia* (25): 'l'épanchement du songe dans la vie réelle' (Schaffner 'Années vingt' 215).

<sup>3</sup> Vialatte's free translations divided audiences: were they flawed or *belles infidèles*? Milan Kundera notably explores this in *Les Testaments trahis*.

His most well-known text today is probably *Chroniques de la Montagne*: a collection of columns that he wrote for the Clermont-Ferrand daily *La Montagne* between 1952 and 1971. Vialatte's fictional contribution, however, was sporadic. He published only three novels over his lifetime, *Battling le ténébreux ou la mue périlleuse* (1928), *Le Fidèle berger* (1942) and *Les Fruits du Congo* (1951). These, along with a string of posthumous titles, have settled into relative obscurity. His most celebrated *Les Fruits du Congo* was in the running for the Prix Goncourt and is his only work in English translation. *Fruit of the Congo*, translated liberally with abundant omissions by Robin Chancellor in 1954, is now dated and long out of print in English.

The difficulty in classifying Vialatte's authorial identity has likely contributed to his marginalisation (Jourde, *Opérette* 10). That, along with the fact that he himself did not set much store by such matters, delighting in the self-given label – 'notoirement méconnu' – and displaying a general indifference towards the literary institution and his legitimisation as a writer (Auclerc 445–46). Yet, with that in mind, Vialatte's oddities are equally why he attracts a modest academic following today. While his mentor Henri Pourrat (1887-1959), for example, was much more easily classifiable as father of the Auvergne, writer of pastoral poetry, and accordingly had much more success, Vialatte garners more critical attention today. In the twenty-first century of displacement, plurality and anti-classifications, 'ses interrogations, ses ambitions et ses doutes sont restés les nôtres' (Schaffner, 'Années vingt' 218). Since the nineteen nineties, several posthumous titles by Vialatte have been released, and a prize established in his name; the Prix Alexandre Vialatte awards a French writer whose

elegant prose and vivid spirit are a source of reader pleasure.<sup>4</sup> A number of academic works dedicated to Vialatte have also been published.<sup>5</sup> The ambivalence of Vialatte's fiction leaves something to unpack, flip around and hold under a new light – it also appeals to translation.

*Battling* is Vialatte's first novel. While it has all the makings of a cult Bildungsroman – almost a French *Catcher in the Rye* – it never quite found its target audience. Like J.D. Salinger's 1951 classic, it is an anti-coming of age story, full of teenage alienation. Published a quarter of a century earlier than the American bestseller, *Battling* comes with Freudian psychoanalysis and traces of the fantastic and the absurd. The tale follows a trio of schoolboys – protagonist Battling, carefree Manuel, and the inconspicuous, unnamed narrator – as they fight the institution, dream up other worlds, and obsess over a strange French-German artist Erna Schnorr who arrives in their unremarkable small town. Battling watches on bitterly as Manuel wins Erna over, wallowing in memories of a loveless childhood, and retreating to a dark and bizarre inner world that he constructs from fiction. Rather than mature, Battling becomes increasingly estranged from the world and himself as the narrative progresses.

What is interesting about *Battling* is the way that, like its author, it unites a diverse array of influences: it is 'une sorte de roman total,' Pierre Jourde explains, 'à la fois complainte populaire, clownerie métaphysique, récit mythologique, roman noir,

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<sup>4</sup> Some notable winners include Réjean Ducharme (1991), Philippe Jaenada (1997), Olivia Rosenthal (2011) and Eric Chevillard (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Not only academic articles but full-length books on Vialatte's fiction have appeared since the mid-nineties, see notably Pierre Jourde's *Opérette*, Alain Schaffner's *Porte-plume* and Christian Moncelet and Dany Hadjadj's (eds.) *Au miroir*.

Bildungsroman etc' (*Opérette* 218). Different genres run through the text, parodied and collaged. The intertextuality is diverse, across periods and trans-European. The whole comes together in the strange aesthetic that runs through the bulk of Vialatte's fictional oeuvre and that is the focus of much of the growing line of academic literature. His lyrical prose fashions shadowy worlds constructed of fragmented images, memories, illusions, fantasies, and art – the dreaminess cut into, at times, by farce and grotesquery. The result is a melange of real and imaginary and a rapidly switching tone, often between humour and melancholy. Critics describe Vialatte's inimitable style as alternately nostalgic, melancholic, comic, mischievous, vibrant and colourful. Rather than 'novels', these texts fit loosely into the bounds of Jean Yves-Tadié's 'récit poétique'. They have narrative arcs but a fluid treatment of time and a modern and free style (Hadjadj 170).

Just as we cannot situate the author, we cannot situate his fictional worlds; a hesitation of person and place characterises Vialatte's oeuvre. In *Battling*, as in much of his fiction, the setting is small-town France, but its precise location is difficult to put a finger on: is it the Auvergne, Alsace, or the other side of the Rhine? Is it somewhere beyond, in a nowhere, a fantasy? The place seems uncannily familiar, somewhere known yet distant and exotic at the same time. One of Vialatte's characters Luc de Capri described this best : 'si vous faites quelque chose, il faut que ce soit le folklore d'un pays qui n'existe pas ; il faut que ce soit copié sur un modèle absent, traduit d'une langue que nul ne parle' (*Camille* 166). And who inhabits this strange place? Vialatte's focus is adolescence, that period of transition between childhood and adulthood, filled with possibilities perhaps but equally pervaded by an uneasiness in the world. His characters are frequently between worlds (Smadja 384):

subjects lost, confused by their environment, warring with their language. Shadows, strangers, puppets, doppelgängers and caricatures prevail.

As I introduced in the prologue, and will expand in *Portraits of the Self*, Battling – the outsider with a strange name who will never be at home in the world – is the heart and soul of Vialatte’s first novel. His anti-arrival narrative stands for the text’s desire for unity; instead of finding self, it finds the anxiety of the epoch. Battling’s search for meaning is framed through his encounter with the foreign and feminine Other, Erna Schnorr, artist from Berlin. Battling and his friends construct Erna as an exotic, mythical being who symbolises a desirable but unattainable wholeness. But any longing for wholeness filters through the text’s riotous plurality, its jubilation in the unhomeliness between France and Germany post-war; this is a translator’s portrayal of being.

In some ways, *Battling* follows several *romans d’apprentissage* of its time. The nostalgia for an irretrievable innocence (often associated with a time prior to World War One), for a schoolboy’s freedom and, above all, for first love, pervades such novels as Valéry Larbaud’s *Fermina Márquez* (1911), Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913) and Raymond Radiguet’s *Le Diable au corps* (1923). In each case, a narrator looks back at his schoolboy years as an adult; in *Le Grand Meaulnes*, as I’ll explore in detail in Chapter Two, the hero is, like Battling, a mysterious figure in the distance – himself an Other – and the search for identity is reconstructed, divided and unreliable.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the encounter with the foreign that defines *Battling*

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<sup>6</sup> Larbaud’s unnamed narrator also looks back on his youth and tells the story of three boys, one of which, Joanny Léniot, shares some remarkable similarities with Battling. The active guessing at, and

similarly defines *Fermina Márquez* – there too, as I’ll look at in Chapters Three and Four, the French scene is marked by the international. Yet despite these common threads, the hybrid nature of *Battling* stands out: its coherence is more fragile than these other texts, its setting more dislocated, its metafictionality and intertextuality more explicit. If Vialatte’s novel presents, on the one hand, a timeless and translatable tale of the uneasiness of adolescence, it also offers a novel and historic snapshot of the modernist crisis of the self.

While diverging significantly in tone from *Battling* and its string of nostalgic predecessors, Jean Cocteau’s *Les Enfants terribles*, published later in the interwar period in 1929, presents a thoroughly modern tale of adolescence. Like *Battling*, *Les Enfants terribles* brings together diverse elements to foreground the irreality, magic, and darkness of youth. In a letter to Cocteau in 1929 just after the novel’s release, Vialatte thoroughly praises *Les Enfants terribles*. He is impressed, at this time of categorising writing into distinct schools of the avant-garde, by its ‘équilibre supérieur’ (‘Lettre’ 289):

Parce qu’il y a en plus l’humour et la fantaisie et cent mille choses qui ajoutent des parfums difficiles à isoler. Et tout se tient. Les romantiques n’avaient réussi qu’à entrelarder le comique et la tragédie ; là tout est ensemble et fondu vraiment, combiné (pas mélangé), comme dans la vie. Et ça donne la poésie. Je ne comprends pas qu’on songe à parler d’avant-garde et à nommer des écoles devant des choses aussi jaillies, aussi parfaites ; l’âme et le calcul n’y sont qu’un. (‘Lettre’ 290)

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reconstructing of, the story is however missing in *Fermina Márquez* – the narrator has much more access into his classmates’ thoughts and feelings – and there is no singular hero in the distance.

Such a mix of genres, influences and tones – or not a mix rather, since the elements remain distinct and thus unsettle the whole in their proximity – creates the poetry to which Vialatte himself aspires. He mentions that the Romantics only succeeded in combining comedy and tragedy – Cocteau achieves so much more. This quote is significant for the Romantic thread that runs through *Battling*. Both the novel and this thesis are structured around a post-Romantic self-other divide and, as I will explore in detail in Chapter Two, the text frequently looks back to the Romantic ‘I’. From within the post-war context, however, Romanticism makes up simply one element – and an element that is out of place and satirically reconstructed – of a greater, and more modern, whole. It is the not-quite fitting of many pieces, and particularly of many subjectivities as I will examine in *Portraits of the Self*, that makes this singular novel what it is.

Working with Vialatte’s ambiguities, then, this thesis positions *Battling* in light of its author’s displacement from French literature. As a writer-translator, Vialatte inhabited the metaphorical space between French and German languages and literary traditions, and, for a long time, as a French expatriate in Germany, the geographical space between, in Rhineland. He wrote *Battling* during his German years while homesick for France – more than his other novels, Vialatte’s first maps an encounter with that which lies beyond the Rhine. This thesis is not interested in equating the author’s life with his fiction, and stamping it with autobiographical labels, but rather in examining *Battling*’s subjects and fictional worlds as visions in translation. I look at the text’s aesthetic as a translated memory of an old France and of French adolescence, written from post-war Germany. The text’s fragile coherence makes sense in view of a transnational intertextuality, and the narrative’s setting and

characters take on significance as products of a writer-translator between worlds. The essence of *Battling* is the meeting between French and German, neither category distinct nor homogenous; it is Battling's confrontation with Erna's otherness that gives the mythical hero his insecurity.

Adding to the earlier repertoire, then, is Vialatte the modernist. *Battling* is a study of subjectivity and displacement, and Vialatte's aesthetic is a mythologised, folklore take on unhousedness.<sup>7</sup> The Anglophone conception of modernism, or rather of modernisms plural, encompasses what are more commonly divided within a French context into discrete schools (Gobbers 16, Oberhuber et al. 15). To use the framework of 'modernisme', then, is to emphasise 'la circulation des idées et des lieux de sociabilité entre l'Angleterre et l'Europe "continentale" au début du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle' and, subsequently, to adopt 'une perspective d'élargissement des frontières, tant sur le plan de la sphère géographique que dans le domaine des genres (littéraires, artistiques et médiatiques) et du *gender*' (Oberhuber et al. 15, 16). Such an approach aligns with the work of this thesis and, importantly, with its reading of *Battling*; the focus is here a bringing-together and a transgression of national borders that creates in its volatility.

In his same letter to Cocteau, Vialatte expresses his desire to use the small town and the foreign to achieve that which *Les Enfants terribles* realises with its Parisian backdrop ('Lettre' 290). And in fact, *Battling* negotiates the modernist crisis of the self and of representation within an unfamiliar setting – not amongst the masses and

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<sup>7</sup> I'll look at this in Chapter Three from the perspective of Sigmund Freud's *unheimlich*, or uncanny, and its relation to modernism and the writer in exile whom George Steiner characterised as 'unhoused'.



cityscapes. In Vialatte's work, 'la crise du sujet et la mise en question de l'être dans le langage, caractéristiques du roman moderne, sont inséparables [...] du pittoresque le plus provincial' (Jourde, *Opérette* 11). The youthful avant-garde of the nineteen-twenties bizarrely enters the timelessness of the countryside in *Battling*, with its unchanged small-town bourgeoisie: the everyman clashes with the modern, old France clashes with a German foreignness. To portray a true strangeness of being, Vialatte sought to transpose 'le réel dans l'imaginaire' (*Correspondance* 2 49). By romanticising experience through memory, nostalgia, fantasy, and above all a never-ending feeling of elsewhere, *Battling*'s unnamed town and anti-hero emerge mythical and remote. Outside time and space, the modern subject is here dislocated, translated, without origin.

With this last attempt to encapsulate his authorial identity, I place Vialatte very much in his time; it is almost as though he is at home in the period precisely because he is not quite contained within a French national literature. Is *Battling* too a study of the modern subject, wandering across languages and experiencing a corresponding lack of absolute truth? Perhaps, and perhaps some of this reading is personal bias. Rather than the right-wing anti-intellectual following in the wake of the rumoured antisemite Jean Giraudoux, I would prefer the rustic but modern Vialatte, the eccentric but progressive. That could be the danger in an author of such ambivalence – can we twist and turn this Auvergnat to our every, subjective whim? And is it the lens of English, of Anglophone modernism, of translation, that colours my reading?

## **Translational Reading: A Framework**

Translation equals communication, we used to say. Equals conveying the same message to a different audience. Its goal is equivalence, substitution. We need it to be so, if we are to read the translation as the original, by the author, sounding as though it were not a translation. But Walter Benjamin presented an alternate vision of the translator's task. He told us that the goal did not have to be communication of same, that languages might rather be illuminating in their difference. Cultures too, of course, as Translation Studies came to later. Today, translation might even be *about* difference. About conceptualising, writing, articulating, understanding difference.

There will always be a view of translation as a straight transfer of information. In the English-speaking world at least – outside the realms of the progressive and the experimental – a translation is generally a success if we do not know it is a translation (Venuti 1–6). It is praised if it reads naturally in the target language and is often critiqued as though the original author wrote the words as they appear on the page. In that case, the translation is a seamless substitute for the original; it says the same thing, or should aspire to do so, just through a different medium.

In recent times, Translation Studies has recognised that equivalence is both impossible and undesirable. More and more, research is about what differences between original and translation can tell us – recognising and embracing difference means that translation can be used as a tool for analysis. Theorists have used translation to analyze literary movements on a macro scale (see Lefevere) and to analyze text on a micro scale, as I'll come to shortly in *Close Reading*. Comparing translation to original reveals the period's trends and the culture's politics, as well as the crux of an individual literary work, complete with its difficulties and singularities.

In post-colonial and feminist studies, translation has been used to both reveal and redress power imbalances in language and to conceptualise difference. On a more metaphorical note, translation and the concept of cultural translation, has become a popular lens through which to conceive the dynamics of a world literature, wherein writers and texts are constantly on the move, without neat origins or national identities.

This research presents a translational reading of Alexandre Vialatte's novel *Battling le ténébreux*. The process of translating *Battling* into English and documenting the inter-subjective exchange between writer and translator frames the analysis. This is about the small-scale, the process, the unfinished, the subjective. Not a complete English translation by a third person – there aren't any translations of *Battling*, even if this were the goal – but my own process of *translating*. This is about using the encounter with another in language whose foreign voice renders words unfamiliar yet enriching, whose narrative offers ideas from outside our culture and our time.

Historically, the translator's experience of rummaging around in the in-between, searching for words and clarity, has served primarily to reproduce the original. All the flow, mess, possibilities and ideas must be contained and fixed in writing the author's intention in the new context. But this research argues that a study of the translation process equally has application outside itself. As the 'most intimate act of reading' (Spivak, *Outside* 183) and the only form of reading which manifests as writing and writing alone (Meschonnic, *Poétique* 223), translation offers a unique perspective on the literary text. We can document this inter-subjective (re)writing – interrogating form, unpacking and repacking poetics, probing politics and

recontextualising – not only as a means to a translation decision, but for a study of literature which is equally a study of difference in language.

### *Complementarity of Languages*

Such an approach begins, like so many others in Translation Studies, with Walter Benjamin's influential 1923 preface to his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens* (1861): 'The Task of the Translator' (*Illuminations*).<sup>8</sup> Here, Benjamin presents translation as a sophisticated exploration of poetics. Rather than trying to discover and transfer the meaning of a text to a new audience, translation thrives off that element of literature which is 'the unfathomable, the mysterious, the "poetic"' (70). In Benjamin's transcendental theory, the original text is itself incomplete and it appeals to translation. Given the different 'modes of intention' of different languages, each translation adds another fragment to a greater mythical whole. It enlightens precisely by its difference from the original and it fosters the growth of those languages that it acts between. The task of the translator is then to 'release in his own language that pure language which is under the spell of another, to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work' (80). Through translation, we aspire towards a perfect language, full and true. While Benjamin's transcendental and universal whole has been replaced with situatedness, which I'll come to shortly in *The Cultural Turn*, his notion of the complementary nature of

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<sup>8</sup> I read Benjamin's essay on translation in English translation.

languages lives on in comparative studies today and presents the value in a translational reading of literature.

In his seminal text *L'Amitié* (1971), Maurice Blanchot (70-72) echoes Benjamin's notion that the translator's task is founded in difference. Literary language is fundamentally strange, he says, it speaks to the possibility of being written otherwise, in another tongue. Translation reveals then the otherness already inherent to the original – the text's identity entails alterity. Around this same time, George Steiner in *After Babel* resumed Benjamin's exploration of translation as a study of the ambiguous, indeterminate and mysterious significance of language, of the delicate balance between content and form (497). For Steiner, every act of understanding involves translation and any theory of translation is inescapably associated with a theory of language. Using the unattainable ideal as a construct, Steiner has the translator flitting around the text's deep significance, again and again. We never accomplish the ideal, but this process of repetition is not tautological (318). Steiner considers translation illuminating for a couple of reasons. For one, the 'interpretive act is inherently inflationary: it proclaims that "there is more here than meets the eye" and that "the accord between content and executive form is closer, more delicate than had been observed hitherto"' (316–17). For two, we always use difference – in this case, the foreign tongue – to see what *is*. Steiner designates translation as the 'most graphic' of these relations which reveal 'existence in history' and 'the claim to recognisable identity (style)' (318). Since then, Steiner's penetrative metaphor of translation's hermeneutic value has been labelled patriarchal and reliant on universal meaning (Simon, *Gender* 144). If Steiner imagined the translator entering the text

and extracting its meaning, today we recognise that there is no single or static meaning to be found in translation and factor in our positionality.

Nevertheless, it remains the encounter with otherness which makes what *is*. Since Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), modern linguistic theory has believed that a sign only has meaning through its difference from other signs. Jacques Derrida's notion of 'différance', to differ and defer, takes this further by adding the variable of time (*Marges* 9–14). Not only does meaning arise from the difference between a sign and all the others but also from the difference between a sign and itself, at all the other points in time. In Derrida's theory, it is only 'à partir de la présence qu'il diffère et en vue de la présence différée qu'on vise à se réapproprier' (9). In translation, inter-lingual differences supplement intra-lingual differences and the original text enters a relation with another. The very existence of a translation is such that the original no longer means what it once did, its language transformed over time and another face made visible by translation. Translation then reveals the text but never in its 'original' state.

Derrida took it upon himself to 'translate' Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'. Far from being a translation in any conventional sense, Derrida's essay 'Des tours de Babel' (1985) winds around Maurice de Gandillac's French translation of the original German *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers/ La Tâche du traducteur* to expand and often redirect Benjamin's ideas. Derrida decides that the best means he has at his disposal of tackling the myth of Babel is through translating the translation of another text on translation. He unashamedly admits that 'Benjamin, on le sait, ne pousse pas les choses dans le sens où je les traduis moi-même...' (219, 238). Derrida's 'translation' cleverly applies the theory that the source text itself proposes;

it complements Benjamin's writing with new metaphors presented by the French language, showing other possibilities of the text, and uses translation to theorise. Indeed, he hijacks Benjamin's ideas to make a new point. In later years, feminist approaches picked up from Derrida's irreverence. By establishing 'new conditions of authorisation', Derrida offered a means to translator agency (Simon, *Gender* 94–95).

While Derrida's version is the extreme, any text will inevitably take on a new form in translation, to suit a different language, a different context and culture. Clive Scott uses the analogy of a landscape filled with buildings. The translator sees the source text at 'an angle from which, on its publication, it could not be seen, across a landscape of buildings which has not yet come into existence and has never, in perception, assumed this particular disposition' ('Translation' 33). Translation is growth: 'an interaction in a new context, a new reading, a new writing' (St-Pierre 6), another angle of the landscape, a virtual view, impossible at the time of the original's writing. Like critical and theoretical studies, future texts, and adaptations, translations continue the original's work in its 'afterlife', reflecting the original, albeit with some distortion.

In 1997, Marilyn Gaddis Rose established the concept of stereoscopic reading. Following more abstract theories of translation like those above, she advocated for a parallel reading of source and target texts as a means of literary analysis. More than being complementary, translation and criticism are, Rose argues, inseparable: 'a critical reading of literature entails a theoretical – analytical – approach to translation' (73). Alongside its translation, the text's edges and possibilities take shape. 'The translation provides the most clearly demarcated circumferences,' she writes,

‘rendering visible or visualisable the richer contents enclosed’ (7). At the same time, almost paradoxically, questions and confusion spout where superficial first impressions offered clarity (3–4). Words become ambiguous, assumed meanings questionable; one’s thoughts, feelings, ideas, sensations are suddenly bipolar and complex.

In the same year, writer-translator Tim Parks proposed a ‘literary approach to translation’ and a ‘translation approach to literature’ (*Translating* 14). Parks analyses divergences between English modernists texts and their Italian translations to shed light on the originals and on the nature of translation. Key to his method is the belief that those areas that are problematic to translation reveal the ‘artistic vision’ of the original (144). In a circular process, this deep understanding of the text also informs translation, so that the complications of the literary text at hand dictate the translator’s strategy instead of any static or binary understanding of translation theory. While the focus there is on finished translations by third parties, Parks also wrote an essay for *The London Review of Books* on his own experience translating Roberto Calasso’s *Ka*. He articulates the translator’s thought process in an almost stream of consciousness style, the tangents the translation takes him on illuminating the sticky potentiality of the text’s language. Parks describes the original and the translation as ‘carved, or conjured out of this precariousness: a thousand sensations and pressures, a surface buzz of words – the consciousness’ (‘Prajapati’).

Many translators write essays or ‘translator diaries’ which document the space between original and translation; there, in that bridging of languages and subject, they find meaning. Lydia Davis, for example, kept a ‘Proust diary’ when she translated *The Way by Swann’s*, an extract of which is published in *The Literary*



*Review* ('Problem Sentence'). Through a single sentence, and its resistance and appeal to translation, she unpacks Proust's poetics. What such translator diaries have in common is the inflationary; one sentence of the original can give rise to pages of discussion even if, ultimately, it must result in one sentence of translation. Where the translator's own language bounces off the original, words are strange and possible, tangents spring, sounds collide. The obstacles to translation and their potential solutions offer a framework within which to approach and unpack the complexities of the literary text, not only as product but as ongoing cultural process. We do not want to miss the mess in the middle.

This thesis does not intend to relegate translation to a mere mode of commentary for a previous and greater text, but rather to include translation as part of a study of literature. If earlier translation theories believed in the original's static meaning, there to be defined and extracted, this research focuses on translation's capacity to produce meaning by bringing together languages, cultures, times, subjects. The translation of Iranian journalist Behrouz Boochani's book *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018) presents a good example.<sup>9</sup> Boochani was a prisoner on Manus island<sup>10</sup> and he sent his story to translator Omid Tofighian on the Australian mainland in drips and drabs via text message. The two, translator and writer, together with other collaborators, would discuss the text as they went and, in the process, Boochani's tale grew, mutated, sprawled. In his translator's note, Tofighian writes of

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<sup>9</sup> In the conclusion, I return to this translation project, and its complex ethics, to summarise my study of producing identity in the in-between spaces.

<sup>10</sup> The Manus Regional Processing Centre, in Papua New Guinea, was one of Australia's offshore centres for processing claims of asylum. The centre closed in 2017 but many of the former detainees, including Boochani, remain on the island, unable to come to Australia.

a collective project to reveal the torture of the detention centre to those elsewhere. The example of *No Friend* makes manifest the movement that is inherent to any translation project. For what does it mean to define the original text, to find the underlying vision? Reading in translation already entails the evolution of the original and an awareness of the importance of reader positionality. Similarly, this thesis does not seek to define the original but, if less explicitly than in *No Friend*, to make it grow.

In a more experimental take on the translator diary, Lydia Davis writes a piece on previous translations of *Madame Bovary* for the *Paris Review* ('Some Notes'). There, she draws from other's translations and possible translations and tangents on translation, to tell the tale of Madame Bovary through an array of voices, from different times and positionalities, inspired by different approaches. On a larger scale, Kate Briggs writes the wonderfully vast *This Little Art* (2017). Her book on the art of literary translation draws from her experience translating Roland Barthes but tells a much larger story. 'Do translations!' she says simply (58), countering the advice she herself received as a junior scholar. For Briggs, translation is a necessity and a means of making connections, as she does so skilfully in her own book:

I look about me for all the small contacts translation makes: putting one book literally in touch with another, their faces smashed against each other in the pile by my bed. Or on my desk. Or, with less pressure: the one leaning into the other, supporting the other, on my shelves. (59)

Flitting lightly from English to French to German, to a retelling of *The Magic Mountain*, to Barthes' lectures, to herself, to Dorothy Bussy teaching André Gide English – 'Chère amie', 'Dear Gide', 'Dearest Gide', 'Dear and beloved'... (79) –

Briggs makes poetry, analyses literature, theorises and philosophises. For we can use translation, this thesis argues, to talk about literature in its largest, most transnational, time-travelling sense.

### *The Cultural Turn*

In the nineties, the ‘cultural turn’ in Translation Studies shifted attention away from the value in linguistic complementarity and towards the importance of the inevitable difference between original and translation. As Sandra Bermann writes, ‘with a steady eye to the diversity of the world’s languages and cultures, the idea of a “perfect” translation – one that duplicates another text, that would lose or gain nothing – would have to be considered incoherent’ (440). And not only incoherent, but undesirable. A cultural exchange, by definition, cannot be about equivalence. In this age of globalisation, multiculturalism, and world literature, national literatures are more fluid and less isolated than in the past. It is difficult to read within a culture and language, without regard to any others. But how does the text inhabit this new world literature for comparative studies? How does its circulation and transformation through translation define it?

Translation can eat up minority cultures, construing them all through the majority culture’s frame of reference. It can smooth out differences or fetishise the Other so that, as Gayatri Spivak writes, ‘the literature by a woman in Palestine begins to resemble, in the feel of its prose, something by a man in Taiwan’ (*Outside* 182). The cultural turn, largely influenced by post-colonialism, shed light on the importance of language hierarchies, hybridity and translator positioning (see Bassnett and

Lefevere). Moreover, it altered the very notion of ‘difference’ in translation; it was no longer between twos and no longer static. Today, we talk about difference within each language and culture, and difference that forms the very entities involved. As Homi Bhabha describes, ‘the boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing’ (5). Translation informs and expresses the constantly changing relationship we have with alterity and with ourselves.

Within the framework of a world literature, recognising the untranslatable is perhaps most important. We do not really translate at all, but rather we fail, again and again, revealing and enriching as we cross back and forth. In her book, *Against a World Literature*, Emily Apter advocates for ‘an approach to literary comparatism that recognises the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability’ (4). To avoid simplistic readings of a text in a world literature, translation cannot be the seamless and invisible substitution of texts in different languages to make them equal and accessible to all. It is the stumbling along, and recognising that stumbling, that uncovers the politics of difference which form and transform the literary text.

Translation shares many parallels with comparative literature. A translational reading of literature, like a comparative one, ‘brings to the study of single texts and cultures awareness of other texts and cultures, making it possible to illuminate artistic performances more richly, more variously, more contrastively than is possible in a single field’ (Ahearn and Weinstein 77). Sandra Bermann aligns the translator comparing ‘Brot’ and ‘pain’ with the narratologist who works between similar novellas; both pursuits involve ‘endless encounters, new connections’ and do their work in the “and” zone’ (443). Rather than comparing texts, the translator compares

the text and itself, or its afterlife. This brings us back to the ‘stereoscopic’ reading discussed above but ensures that translation’s sensitivity to language and style is accompanied by a sensitivity to ‘situatedness’. Bermann argues that translation is an ‘indispensable partner’ in regard to the ‘specifics of the text, to its deep language and cultural context, to the theoretical questions these pose, as well as to the worldly range of transmissions and political situatedness’ (443). No language is just a set of words, easily replaceable with any other. In the nineties, Susan Bassnett announced the end of Comparative Literature as a discipline. She suggested that Translation Studies, with its more fluid conception of national literatures and its work in the in-between spaces, represented the way forward for a study of literature in a globalised world (160–61).

### *Close Reading*

My analysis of *Battling* is dictated by my own process of translating the text into English. Using the comparative value of translation, and the examples of those above, I conduct a close-reading of key extracts of the original alongside my translation, or rather potential translations. The methodology adapts Marilyn Gaddis-Rose’s ‘stereoscopic’ reading and Tim Parks’ ‘translational approach to literature’ to a process-based analysis. At the micro level, words are marked by their translatability, appearing thick, ambiguous, material. What are the possible options here, and how do they each correspond to the many complications of the French? Those sounds that fit together just so – what is their effect and how might I reproduce it? Or, on the other hand, when Vialatte’s prose inevitably transforms, even perverts, in translation, what do we discover?

At a more macro level, translation meets original in a negotiation across times, cultures, ideologies. Where does this nineteenth-twentieth, French-German text fit, in English in the twenty-first century? The postcolonial concerns that are central to contemporary translation theory do not play a large part in this project. French and English are both majority languages and Alexandre Vialatte is a privileged white writer from metropolitan France – I am not the coloniser of his work. I do, however, adopt a feminist lens, which I'll come to shortly, and I make sure to theorise both Vialatte's and my positionality. My close reading of the text includes of course contextualisation and historicisation; differences between a text and its translation offer not only stylistic and poetic insight, but also cultural and political. Unsurprisingly, Vialatte exoticises minority cultures and women in *Battling*. How can we use the obstacles to the text's translation into contemporary Anglophone literature for a nuanced conception of Vialatte's culture and our own?

By responding to the constant flow of questions – micro and macro – that arise in the translation process, the themes and underlying tensions of *Battling* materialise. Not, perhaps, as it once was, but as it can be, in its afterlife now that new buildings fill the landscape. While the translator's diary presents a useful starting point, this research goes beyond that; it is above all a literary study. My approach draws from those theorists above who use the difference inherent to translation for a study of literature and it takes inspiration from the more experimental translation diaries that focus not only on strategies to reproduce effect but on the implications of the very obstacles that prevent us from doing so. The findings of my translation diary feed a structured analysis of the text according to the overarching theme of finding self.

## *Self or Other?*

Beyond a close reading of *Battling*, I examine the very process for a conceptual study of identity ‘in translation’. This self-reflexive element to the thesis is structured around the parallel relations between writer and translator, Battling and Erna Schnorr. By aligning the translator’s search for definition in translation with the hero’s quest for ontological identity, I unpack the popular self-other binary and present a fluid identity, characterised by the encounter itself, through my translation practice.

‘Translation in its western, Kantian version,’ Eva Karpinski writes, ‘means “turning the other into something like the self”’ (34). The German Romantics famously framed translation as the enrichment of the self through the other. With the nationalistic tendencies of German society at the time, translation offered a means to introduce the Other’s ideas into German culture. By packaging the voice of the Other neatly into German words, transforming and appropriating, the culture of the self expanded and evolved (Berman, *Epreuve* 72–86, 126). At the level of the individual, the translator found meaning through her encounter with another in language.<sup>11</sup> She could find her own words, and her own identity, by taking another’s.

Contemporary translation theory shies away from the appropriation or assimilation of other into self but retains the metaphor. As we saw above with post-colonial studies, translation aims now to recognise cultural and linguistic differences rather than smooth them out and colonise the other or pervert it through the lens of the self. In the eighties, Antoine Berman proclaimed that we have an ethical responsibility to

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<sup>11</sup> I use the feminine pronouns (‘she’ and ‘her’) as default throughout the thesis. This follows the feminist ethics of translation that my project adopts and that I will shortly introduce.

‘reconnaître et [...] recevoir l’Autre en tant qu’Autre’ (‘Auberge’ 74). Where Berman asks us to accept the other as other subject, not our object, Gayatri Spivak goes further, pointing to the translator’s ethical responsibility towards the ‘trace of the other in the self’ (*Outside* 179). This formulation blurs the lines between self and other; rather than stable and distinct identities, they are reversible and heterogenous. Spivak does not want us to recognise other as other but to recognise other in self. Paul Ricœur similarly problematises the dichotomy. We inhabit the language of the other, he says, and we house the other in our words (*Sur* 20). Following these theories, translation opens a ‘third space’ between the absolutes of sameness and difference (Karpinski 11).

In the process of translating *Battling*, I wonder, is the text mine or Vialatte’s? Does it belong to French literature or to English, to Vialatte’s post-war or to my vision today of his time as interwar? And are these categories even useful? If it is a mix, as such theories of translation dictate, how does Vialatte’s story make itself at home in my words?

What is interesting about translation metaphorically is its ability to interrogate the problems with a self-other binary, and to present a more fragile, permeable, moveable model of self. Cultural translation, led by Homi Bhabha in the nineties, conceptualises both texts and people in today’s global world, where origins are fuzzy, national identities are hybridised, language is plural. If we cannot achieve a stable identity, nor find a clear distinction between self and other, the focus moves from definition and product to encounter and process. Berman suggests that translation’s fundamental essence ‘est d’être ouverture, dialogue, métissage, décentrement. Elle est mise en rapport, ou elle n’est rien’ (*Epreuve* 16). Translation is the ‘mode of



connection and exchange' between self and other; in the act of bringing together, it expresses the movement that is integral to identity formation (Karpinski 29). The very definition of self has thus evolved. Clive Scott describes translation as 'the transformation of other into self, where the transformative process itself is what counts, is what must remain visible, is both process and project' ('Translation' 3–4). While this at first suggests an imperialist vision of translation, enriching the self through the other, the aim is not mastery but a recognition of self as perpetual exchange.

Translation is about unfinished business, retranslations, back and forth, rewriting. Rather than resolving or duplicating the original, translation expresses the relation and proliferation, the meeting not becoming that I introduce in the prologue. By uprooting the original text and superposing it upon a new frame of reference, translation writes a transnational, transtemporal identity. It is the 'and' of identity, the formless form, the evidence of irresolution (Nouss 249). Paschalis Nikolaou says that translation is like (auto)biography (20–24). He suggests we:

become aware of its (auto)biographical facets, acknowledge the transferences taking place in its acts, contextualise the self that is also translated in one's 'target text', and arrive, through wider disclosures of a creative subjectivity at work, at new understandings of its practices that are also understandings of the self. (24)

Where each translation is a fleeting and highly individual anchoring of ideas, the translator's reading – which is also a (re)writing – articulates this indeterminacy and subjectivity. Translation entails an intimate engagement with a language that is not the translator's own, but neither is it wholly other. In this process, fragments of self and other come together to achieve unity in text. The translator finds meaning, the

receiving literature swells with new forms of expression, the original text gains definition and takes on different angles in the translator's voice. By documenting the dialogue, we can see the movement and encounter that is identity formation.

### *The (Feminist) Translator's Turn*

To draw from translation practice in such a way, to articulate a complex and ethical identity, we must engage with the translating subject. We must recognise the translator as an active participant in the production of meaning and critically reflect on her positionality. When the goal of translation was equivalence – the text to be read as though it were the original – the translator had to be invisible. She could not enter the text but rather crouched behind the author and smoothed the way for a new reader to receive the original expression (Nikolaou and Kyritsi 20). On paper the result was ostensibly quite neat: two texts, copies, one subjectivity. The author was in both, the translator in hiding. Today, the focus on the figure of the translator has made visible the intersubjective nature of translation and foregrounded the importance of the translating relationship.<sup>12</sup> No automat in a vacuum, the translator possesses agency, ideology, gender, politics, and works from within a habitus. Far from being invisible, she creates meaning, performing the text anew, and must herself be theorised.

The translator's turn owes much to feminist studies for its questioning of universals and interrogation of situatedness, its rejection of fidelity and countering of

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<sup>12</sup> See the sociological turn in Translation Studies as outlined in Wolf and Fukari.

hierarchies. Sherry Simon presents the commonalities between translation and feminism:

Both are tools for a critical understanding of difference as it is represented in language. The most compelling questions for both fields remain: how are social, sexual and historical differences expressed in language and how can these differences be transferred across languages?  
(*Gender* 8–9)

Sherry Simon was one of several feminist translation theorists to come out of a Canadian hub in the eighties.<sup>13</sup> Since then, the field has evolved to become more intersectional, but the feminist translating subject's ethics remain. Within a feminist framework, the translator announces her position outright, theorising her position and critically examining her relationship with text and author. She may flaunt her agency and endeavour to make otherness visible, but she is aware of her own subjectivity. Instead of replacing the male self with a new universal, the feminist translating subject participates in meaning, conceptualising her position in relation to others, but not seeking to become authority, master, coloniser. She does not seek, either, to reduce woman to a homogenous category, in opposition to man, but to embrace plurality. Engaging with the feminist translating subject prompts recognition of translation as intersubjective and makes visible the embodied nature – not only gendered but also cultured, political, historical – of the participants (Tissot 30). The so-called 'feminist' model is in fact a model for translation 'tout court' (Sardin 19).

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<sup>13</sup> See notably the work of Luise Von Flotow, Barbara Godard, Susanne de Lotbinière-Harwood.

From the in-between, aware of her position, the feminist translating subject can document the ‘interdiscursive production of meaning’ that takes place in translation (Godard 69). Feminist translators who have written on the translation process often include a humanist element, alongside the textual. While rare, these diaries offer valuable accounts of ‘the creative discomforts of working relationships’ between (generally male) writers and (generally female) translators (Simon 4). Within such a context, the female translator inevitably turns to herself: to her role and her position. Translation is here relational – a study of people, as well as texts. Jean Starr Untermyer delivered a lecture in 1946, ‘Is Translation an Art or a Science’, on her experience working with Herman Broch during World War Two in her essay. She tells us: ‘the first and final axiom for a translator might well be this: the translator should himself be translated’ (qtd. in Simon, *Gender* 75).

### *Translating Ourselves*

In this study of translation, I first translate myself. For it is by using the relational nature of translation – in a complex dynamic between subjects and cultures – that this thesis reflects on the self-other conceptualisation of identity in translation. Such an approach is certainly not without its problems. Why should I include myself in a study of Vialatte’s text? Will my analysis be too subjective, too positioned within Anglophone literature, too personal? My answer to these questions is, first, that the translating subject is present in any event, best to theorise her position. And second, that the object of this research is producing identity in translation – my analysis of *Battling* works precisely *through* its inter-subjective nature. In this intimate, dialogic thesis, the translator participates in meaning-making.

This research employs then a feminist model of the translating subject. It does not matter, specifically, that I am a female translator working with the text of a male author – although that does augment the question of authority inherent to any study in translation – but it does matter that identity is key to this research. Through a feminist ethics of translation, this thesis dehierarchises the ostensibly universal male self in *Battling* and the authority of the writer and the original text. As the Other – woman, foreigner, translator – pushes back, asserting her agency as subject, intersubjective encounters replace the independent male hero and French text. From a space of uncertain boundaries and cross-fertilisation, we can problematise the self-other binary for a more complex articulation of identity. Text and self, both systems of relations, both taking shape in translation.

And it is here that Vialatte's placelessness perhaps finally manages to define him. In translation, *Battling* is neither here nor there; it does not have a time or place, a language, a clean origin or arrival. In the dialogue between, self and other blur for a complex, transnational, translingual, past-present literary text. As it evades these neat binaries, translation pulls *Battling* into an in-between space, moving it outside French literature and outside time. Here, its singular subjects and aesthetic take shape as a poeticisation of the in-between. Because if *Battling* – at once too old-fashioned and too progressive to be readily admitted into the French canon – belongs in the interwar period it is precisely because of its inability to really *be* any one thing. The two strands of my research are then one and the same: an analysis of *Battling* and an investigation into translated identity – translation works towards the text's 'étrangeté d'origine' (Blanchot 71). This is a novel awaiting the new reading that contemporary

anglophone culture – with its theories of cultural translation, complex personhood and feminism – can give.

### **Portraits of the Self: A Brief History**

You might know the dark brooding hero as the ‘beau ténébreux’, the ‘Byronic hero’, the ‘beltenebros’. Colin Firth coming out of the lake in his wet shirt. Changing with culture and era, the basic scaffolding of this trope prevails. But the year is 1928 and war has changed the state of art in France. As literature delights in the subject’s self-estrangement, the hero flounders without national identity, unity, or a language to call his own. Who then is the dark hero in Alexandre Vialatte’s *Battling*? And who will he become today, recontextualised in contemporary English?

In the prologue, I used the title’s resistance to translation to present both the case study and my research. Here, I go a little further, adopting the translational reading outlined above for a study of the ‘ténébreux’ epithet. In my efforts to find an English title for *Battling le ténébreux*, I trace a trail of trans-European intertexts. Through mistranslation, non-translation, and potential English translations, comes a vision of the layers that inform Vialatte’s anti-hero. Translation serves then to frame a brief literary history of different models of the self.

The *TLFi* (*Trésor de la langue française informatisé*) gives two nominative definitions for ‘ténébreux’ which can pertain to a character as *the* ‘ténébreux’. The first comes from the late medieval chivalric romance *Amadís de Gaula*:<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> First known version is dated 1508 but copies likely existed as far back as late thirteenth century.

Jeune homme cherchant à séduire les femmes par un comportement taciturne ou mélancolique cher aux romantiques. *En partic., plaisant. Beau ténébreux.* [réf. au récit chevaleresque d'Amadis de Gaule qui se retira dans la solitude par dépit amoureux].

*Amadís de Gaula* tells a tale of brave knights and beautiful damsels. Amadís is a mysterious knight who cries over his love Oriana and calls himself 'Beltenebros' in a time of suffering and madness. The Spanish 'Beltenebros' slides smoothly into the French 'Beau ténébreux' so that this character, fierce in battle, but sensitive in love, brings into being the archetype of the French romantic hero.

English editions of *Amadís de Gaula* mostly keep the Spanish 'Beltenebros'. The only translations I could find ('Beautiful Obscure' and 'Fair Forlorn'<sup>15</sup>) have slipped into obscurity. Without any consistent signifier, the intertext gets lost in English literature; in French, however, 'beau ténébreux' still conjures the romantic hero today. The trope may have changed with time, literary movements and film – for my French housemate, strangely enough, the 'beau ténébreux' is a 'Latino Keanu Reeves' – but the history remains behind the words. Even if one might apply 'beau ténébreux' to Hollywood and vampire films today, the rich literary path from Spanish chivalry is not severed.

In English, a similar trope exists but by different words, with different associations. 'Byronic hero', for example, immediately springs to mind. Battling possesses the

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<sup>15</sup> Glossed this way in the Robert Southey translation *Amadis of Gaul* (136). Also referred to as 'beautiful obscure' (185) in Tobias Smollett's translation of *Don Quixote* (originally published in 1755). Interestingly, 'Fair Forlorn' feels much lighter than its *tenebrous* counterpart and is female connoted more than male.

torturous tension of apparent opposites common to Lord Byron's archetype. Not only savage and tender, this 'brute paisible' (57) is unaffected and all pretence, disdainful and sincere, full of life and ultimately lifeless.<sup>16</sup> But Vialatte's Battling cannot be Byronic. Even if the melancholy lover resigned to suffering remains, the origins and intertextual resonances that Byron brings with him are all wrong. The Gothic eclipses the chivalrous and Heathcliff and Rochester overshadow the Spanish knight. Perhaps something more general? I could label Battling 'the Romantic', 'the Melancholy', 'the Brooding'? Which words will form this alienated Romantic in English today?

The second *TLFi* definition comes from Gérard de Nerval's celebrated poem 'El desdichado' from his collection *Les Chimères* (1854): 'Homme à l'air sombre et mélancolique. "Je suis le ténébreux, le veuf, l'inconsolé / Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie."' The poem continues: 'Ma seule étoile est morte, – et mon luth constellé / Porte le soleil noir de la Mélancolie' (*Filles* lines 3-4). A French reader will almost invariably hear Nerval's 'je suis le ténébreux' behind Vialatte's title. Nerval's speaker is less the chivalrous hero and more the condemned, tortured soul – even the devil lurking in the depths of hell.

The story goes that Nerval identified with Walter Scott's mysterious knight in the 1820 classic *Ivanhoe: A Romance*. Disowned by his parents, Scott's Ivanhoe wears a shield emblazoned with the Spanish 'El desdichado', translated rather liberally by Scott as 'the disinherited'. Given the literal meaning of the Spanish, Ivanhoe is

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<sup>16</sup> 'Je le connais, mon Battling ; avec ses airs de réaliste méprisant, il en souffrirait horriblement' (87); 'Et cependant, sous ce mépris général du sentiment, du lyrisme, du romanesque et des femmes, il cachait la plus grande candeur' (53).



unfortunate and unhappy as well as disowned. The associations that come with the Spanish culture's strong tradition of chivalry render this descriptor richer than a French or English equivalent, more evocative and exotic. By keeping the Spanish and this intertext, Nerval too attaches himself to the chivalric tradition, and specifically to a knight, lost in language and without heritage.

Delving a tiny bit deeper into this trail of chivalric Romance, Miguel de Cervantes categorically transformed the genre with his parody *Don Quixote* (1605). *Amadís de Gaula*'s Beltenebros is a favourite of Don Quixote who, in his disenchantment with the contemporary world, idolises past knights and escapes into Romantic fiction. Rather than continuing the heroic nature of the *beau ténébreux*, Cervantes' landmark text makes him ridiculous. The portrayal of Don Quixote's deluded desire to right the world through an old-fashioned battle – the windmill famously serving as evil-incarnate – renders the naivety of the original trope inaccessible. The brave knight can no longer exist and is rather a fool for being out of his time, but neither can he be forgotten or let go. The hero remains but forever transformed as a new subject with different demons to fight.

Nerval's 'El desdichado' transforms the *beau ténébreux*'s battle from one against knights and external, concrete enemies, towards a battle of the self. The problem of the subject (ignoring a few earlier outliers like Michel de Montaigne) arose with the Enlightenment (Mansfield 14). Previously, the individual and his or her inner feeling was rarely a topic of reflection or of treatment in literature. But the concept of subjectivity – the individual's unique perception of the world – resulted in increased curiosity in the individual and a corresponding rethinking of truth. Literature turned

to the subject's singular experience of the world in an endeavour to materialise one's existence and make inner truth outer.

Nerval himself was fighting elusive demons in an internal struggle with madness. Like his speaker, he wore the 'soleil noir de la Mélancolie' and this bright torment culminated in his committing suicide. Nerval's fiction, as he describes in his preface to *Les Filles du feu* (1854), a letter to Alexandre Dumas, was not a game but an obsession or a 'vertige' in which he searched the labyrinth of his own imaginary for some kind of self-identity (iv). In the process, he merged fiction and reality, favoured imagination over reason and identified strongly with his characters and with mythical figures from the past. In the same preface, he associates himself with the 'beau ténébreux' and the 'deshérité':

Ainsi, moi, le brillant comédien naguère, le prince ignoré, l'amant mystérieux, le deshérité, le banni de liesse, le beau ténébreux, adoré des marquises comme des présidentes, moi, le favori bien indigne de madame Bouvillon, je n'ai pas été mieux traité que ce pauvre Ragotin, un poétereau de province, un robin ! (vi)

While the first line of 'El desdichado', 'Je suis le ténébreux', appears at first so definitive, the identities go on and on. This ostensibly self-affirming poem is precisely the opposite: a representation of division and uncertainty. The title of this collection *Les Chimères* designates an impossible project, founded in fancy, illusion, imagination – something on par with Don Quixote's quest. But the term also signifies

‘chimera’, that changing being ‘composé de parties disparates, formant un ensemble sans unite’ (*Larousse*).<sup>17</sup> Nerval journeys towards the fanciful illusion of a whole.

Like *Amadís de Gaula*’s ‘beltenebros’, Nerval’s ‘ténébreux’ varies considerably in English translation. I found endless different options based on darkness/dark one, shadows, gloom, saturnine, and more contemporary free translations such as ‘twilight-blacked’.<sup>18</sup> Not only is the ténébreux uncertain as to his identity in Nerval’s French (‘le veuf, l’inconsolé...’) but the speaker is divided and multiplied in translation. Where are the *beau ténébreux*’s foundations amongst this rich array of façades? And how can I choose one term in English, tearing apart the very contradiction that forms an uneasy coherence in Battling’s self? Perhaps I should title the novel: *Battling the Disinherited*.

The early Romantics wanted to believe a secure self was there for the seeking. Jean-Jacques Rousseau notably called for communion with nature to find this elusive self in his *Confessions* (1782). Man may be lost, compromised by society and the external world, but he can be found. With the nineteenth century however, came a fracturing of the self and a fundamental distrust in one’s inner impulses and desires. Being as he was fascinated by a tormented being of dreams and madness, Nerval anticipated the divide between rational and irrational and was a precursor to the surrealists who wanted to make material the subconscious.<sup>19</sup> Nerval turned the *beau ténébreux*

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<sup>17</sup> All definitions marked ‘*Larousse*’ come from Editions Larousse *Dictionnaire de français en ligne* unless otherwise noted.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, ‘I am shadow’ (Hooven), ‘I’m the gloomy man’ (Stone 28), ‘I am saturnine’ (Roudiez 140), ‘Twilight-blacked I am’ (Le).

<sup>19</sup> André Breton himself credits Nerval in the first surrealist manifesto, citing his use of the term ‘supernaturalisme’ in the preface to *Les Filles du feu*.

inwards yet did not let go of a nostalgia for old-fashioned adventure and tangible enemies.

If literature had traditionally worked with one's drive for definition, the modernist's loss of a belief in any perfect representation or stable and secure self resulted in a new goal. The subject in literature no longer sought its absolute but rather strived to depict a real confusion and chaos (Enderwitz 13). Shortly after Nerval's, 'El desdichado', Arthur Rimbaud ushered in post-Baudelarian *modernité*<sup>20</sup> with his landmark statement 'je est un autre' (1871). Rimbaud's work attempted to 'seize self in the migration between material and mental worlds' and the swaying thoughts and conflicted emotion that overflowed produced a 'smouldering and uncontainable "je"' (Harrow 12, 61). His very language challenged assumptions of a whole and secure subject.

At the turn of the century, Sigmund Freud's work marked a split subjectivity between conscious and subconscious. If the unspoken and repressed had long fascinated writers, the emergence of psychoanalysis, in particular, gave it a framework. The hero's inner darkness is in Freudian terms the id – the primitive, sexual and aggressive aspects that wreak havoc on the subject if not reined in by the conscious. For Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), this was the Dionysian. D.H. Lawrence's heroes in *The Rainbow* (1915) and its sequel *Women in Love* (1920), held such a darkness within them, as did Joseph Conrad's Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) (Newton 122–25). At this time, the self was still that of the white man – his darkness rose up around supposedly inferior beings; women for Lawrence, primitive Africans

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<sup>20</sup> *Les Fleurs du mal* was published in 1857.

for Conrad. The latter showcases a hidden darkness inside all of us which the wilderness of the Congo threatens to unleash. In French, Conrad's 'darkness' becomes 'des ténèbres' – *Au cœur des ténèbres* (1925) – perhaps these are Battling's demons.

Battling represses his emotion beneath brutish cynicism and eyes that know how to lie but the exoticised and monstrous love-interest Erna Schnorr destabilises his fragile balance. He, the subject, she, the object? Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770-1831) reconfigured man's modern tragedy as a conflict of values. The primordial conflict occurs between man's primitive nature, hidden beneath clothes and evolution, and his more spiritual ideals (Newton 70–71). And while most since Aristotle have endeavoured to subdue humanity's inner darkness, some, like Nietzsche, wished to indulge it (Poole 61). Like Nerval, Battling would like to fight concrete enemies. But if he spends his free time playing the bugle and dreaming of war, his tragedy comes from an irreconcilability between bodily desire and higher ideals. Around Erna, Battling's sexuality thus far repressed threatens to overwhelm him: a horrifying yet thrilling prospect. The title could follow Conrad's – *Heart of Darkness* to *Battling the Darkness* – but the epithet is lost in translation.

By the time of *Battling*'s publication in 1928, even a dualistic self assumed too much unity (Izenberg 285–86). Automatic writing, stream of consciousness, Dada and surrealism emerged in the aftermath of the war; these movements strove to materialise those pieces of oneself not known to, or understood by, one's own consciousness – perhaps art could surpass the subject. Literature, as it was and had been, could not hope to write the chaos of subjective experience. The modernists experimented with form to 'make it new' as per Ezra Pound; writing could at least

confront the inadequacies of language and depict a vivid, if strange and uncertain, version of oneself in the world. According to Virginia Woolf in 1925, the modernists' writing asked the questions: 'is life like this? Must all novels be like this?' ('Modern Fiction'). The *beau ténébreux*'s quest for meaning and selfhood had come to include an experience of words that was alien and indeterminate, his existential crisis compounded by language. 'Modernist melancholia,' Anne Enderwitz says, 'is not only historical but also textual: it is a melancholia of signification and meaning as much as a melancholia of lost origins and empty iterations' (4). I might title the novel: *Battling the Melancholy*. I like that melancholy is an adjective and a noun, open for some ambiguity, and I like that, in translation, we come to the inadequacies of representation which equally fuel our hero's confusion of identity. *Battling*'s title would then reflect the sadness of both existential angst and linguistic uncertainty.

But where have Battling's trans-European origins gone? The productive tension of the character, and of Vialatte's literary intention, comes from the co-existing multiplicity and multilingualism of the *ténébreux*'s chronology. Through this term, Vialatte attaches *Battling* to this literature of melancholy heroes who roam Europe, tilting at windmills and fighting illusions, in search of meaning and identity. Battling is the mythical figurehead and the text's exploration of different subjectivities is a metafictional manifestation of the unresolved business of self-making. Itself disinherited, Vialatte's text contains a struggle against worn-out archetypes and old-fashioned tradition while simultaneously lamenting its own anachronism. I try maintaining the intertextuality with 'ténébreux'. *Battling the Tenebrous*? But, in English, 'tenebrous' does not conjure the hero of the chivalric Romance or the nineteenth century divided self.

In any case, every possible version of this title in translation sounds too cleanly 'English'. In French, the foreignness of the hero's name destabilises the epithet and thus the hero's identity. Perhaps I could nickname Battling 'Combattant'. *Combattant the Obscure*. A name fitting to a knight, to a soldier, and a fight fitting to the period post-WWI. I want the title in English to be all things, but of course it's always incomplete – each finished translation is only a temporary fix, a momentary reconciliation that can always be altered and reinterpreted. For now, I content myself with the meandering discussion above. And I realise that the goal of this thesis is not to fix the text's meaning in English. I want to find *a* title (the temptation the challenge poses is too strong), but the end result has become less important than the journey. Why I chose this word, why such and such interpretation was correct, why one should foreignise and not domesticate; these questions are not so relevant to my research. Instead, I look at the encounter: the meeting between writer and translator across languages, texts, times, cultures, ideologies that produces meaning.

The different chapters of the thesis – moving from French and German Romantic conceptions of self, to the modern 'je est un autre' and avant-garde modes of self-expression, to projections of the other and more contemporary self-other couplings, reversings and intertwining – illustrate *Battling's* proliferation of subjectivities. This discussion of the text's title reveals the underlying plurality and alienation of the hero but, outside the singular Romantic or exiled modernist, comes a larger vision: a model of identity formed from the bringing together of perspectives. The text's narration positions old and new side by side, crosses cultures, refuses to allow any one character, except the unnamed and inconsequential narrator, to inhabit the 'I', and resists neat gender oppositions in its depictions of hero and heroine. This thesis

examines then the way in which *Battling* participates in the modernist endeavour to represent ‘nouveaux modèles identitaires’ which privilege ‘le brouillage des frontières : génériques, artistiques, médiatiques, genrées.’ (Oberhuber et al. 19).

Reading *Battling in and as translation* – and introducing more contemporary models of identity – I hope to give the text a new lease of life. To respond to my earlier hesitation about twisting Vialatte’s authorial identity to the whims of a contemporary Anglophone habitus; of course, I do, to a certain extent. But it does not follow that such a reading of *Battling* is undeserving. Every text exists in relation to other texts, to other selves, ready to be read and written again, ready to be retranslated. And *Battling in* particular appeals to this lack of stable, self-sufficient identity – that is precisely what the text is about. To rephrase my earlier question, it is not what the text *becomes* in translation but rather what it *is* once we recognise the fact of its translation. From here stems my study of *Battling le ténébreux ou la mue périlleuse* as a search for the interwar self, from the perspective of the translator.



# Part One: The Self

We begin Part One with portraits of a Romantic and his Writer. I briefly inhabit the protagonist's and the author's viewpoints to give voice to the intersubjective negotiation that frames this thesis. Each is constructed, of course, from my own habitus, and from my reading of *Battling*. Such fabrication is part of the translation process: the translator endeavours to take on the writer's perspective and to (re)write his hero. In the portraits to come, I play this out in all its creativity.

## Portrait of a Romantic

*The Romantic stands in the lush grounds around the large house, gazing upon Nature. How tall and imposing he is, how grand. His soul is heavy; he feels things deeply. His imagination soars on the wind across the fields. His hair is dark, his eyes are dark, his expression is dark. O to know that depth of feeling, to think those thoughts. Suddenly, a bright shimmer catches The Romantic's eye. In the window of the house, a woman in white appears like a vision. A goddess! The woman's pale figure seems to float behind the glass, lit up in the afternoon sunshine, calling to The Romantic. Why, it must be She! The mystery woman come to save him.*

*Swept up in the strong breeze of his Sentiment, The Romantic rushes home to put pen to feeling. If the goddess does not hear his heart, he will go mad. For beneath his strong stature, The Romantic is a kitten in the face of love. His bravery on bygone battlefields, clad in glorious gilt armour, was nothing before this yearning to be loved, accepted, fulfilled. O she of hair so long and fair! The Romantic burns with poetry. He is an Artist, a creator, bursting with lyricism and inspiration.*

*Or is he? The Romantic cannot find his words. The poetry that sang to him a moment ago is suddenly abhorrent. Are his words True? Or are they – shock, horror – overly sentimental, even obscene? His language feels wrong in his tongue, detached from his soul. Who is he kidding, he is no Werther. The mystery woman will laugh at him, despise him. But why should he care, anyway? Who is she that would refuse his lewd lines. He pictures the goddess ugly and strange. She is a monster. A whore.*

*The Romantic yearns to be a hero of old, a chevalier fighting concrete battles. Those men knew their own minds and their purpose. They knew how to woo a girl. Abandoning any thought of sleep, The Romantic runs into the Night, heart racing. He looks up to the stars, so majestic, so infinite. They will save him. He surrenders to their darkness, seeking comfort in their sweet song. It is surely here, in the blank canvas of the Night, that he will find himself. But the poetic atmosphere does nothing to dampen The Romantic's desperation. No longer alone, voices echo in the night. Caricatures, fictional characters and grotesque doppelgängers parade across the field. Rather than find inner truth, the Romantic's self divides and multiplies, exiled from any 'I' or 'me'. There is no meaning, no true self. I am – am I? The Romantic meets his end.*

## Portrait of a Writer

*The Writer sits at his desk, holding his dip pen loosely, hand resting on the blank paper as he gazes out the window. The year is 1927. Marcel Proust's *Le Temps retrouvé* has just been published, along with Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and Herman Hesse's *Der Steppenwolf*. Literature is thick with explorations of the self and the subconscious. Multilingual, exiled and transnational protagonists have dethroned universal heroes. As artists from around the world swarm to Montparnasse, sourcing cheap rent, *The Writer* moves to Germany. He lives and works on the borders of French and German society, translating for the military, translating Franz Kafka, depicting German society for periodicals, and editing a bilingual, cross-cultural review. Steeped in the German language and its literature, *The Writer* watches as the country darkens. Already, World War Two looms menacingly on the horizon.*

*As he looks out his window in Mainz, *The Writer* thinks back to his adolescence in the French countryside. Those were the days, the glorious days of innocence, freedom and friendship, when the sun always shone. The green rolling pastures of *The Writer's* youth materialise before his eyes, replacing the tangible gloom outside that heralds another German winter. *The Writer* remembers roaming the hills with his brother and their friend, the three of them reading poetry and dreaming big dreams. Their hearts were thick with pith and their souls lyrical; verse dripped from the ends of their tongues as they apostrophised the clouds. Nature was alive: the poplar trees, with their long shadows in the low light, were like great tall people swaying softly in the grass. *The Writer* sighs. Growing up on German Romantic literature, he had indulged in dreams of the extraordinary and the beyond. The stories had promised a magical union with nature, a poetic and true inner self, and a national identity. But such beliefs had long since blackened and mutated; Romanticism's nationalistic tendencies were beginning to turn sour with the arrival of fascism.*

*Pushing his glasses back up his nose and turning to the blank white page before him, *The Writer* imagines the darkly magical realms of his novel and writes a Romantic in a modern world. The chivalrous and poetic French hero exists only in retrospect – an identity constructed of nostalgia, patriotism and quashed beliefs. Into this French novel of formation go trans-European origins and self-conscious intertexts. As *The Romantic* seeks his identity, *The Writer* deconstructs it and multiplies it in layers of deception. A search for truth finds holes and satire, the arrival of the foreign feminine Other destabilises rather than reinforces, small-town France is pervaded by urban Berlin, and death is more comic than tragic. The novel's pages form the pieces of a new and plural subjectivity.*

# 2

## The Great Battling

### **'Il se jouait sa comédie avec un sérieux terrible'** A translation<sup>1</sup>

Erna Schnorr frequently kept us busy at the four o'clock break for we had got into the habit, the previous summer, of watching her emerge over the wall of her garden shortly before five. Following some splendid days at the start of March, we had resumed our sentimental surveillance and were often to be found looking towards the Contades' house for that symbolic silhouette that the winter had denied us. She rarely let us see her, but still we continued, day after day, as persistent as prisoners in a popular song, to summon her form into the bleak horizon as though it were a precious sign of fate: from where the fog, split into tall columns, patrolled slowly across the lake in the morning, to where the rainbow sprung when it had rained.

While the principal had Manuel in the dock, I launched into a passionate conversation with Battling on the subject of the lady of the pond. He could see

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<sup>1</sup> From *Battling* (50-54). See Appendix: Extract 1 for source text.

her on Thursdays and Sundays, at her window or in the garden, when he stayed at the Contades' house.

'So, Battling, have you seen Erna Schnorr again?'

'Ah,' he said, 'there's a woman who likes what she gets.'

'How do you know?'

'Erna?' he said, 'oh come on, she's an out-and-out whore...'

Oh Battling, how we should despise you for such a remark. Poor Battling who adored Erna Schnorr deep within his strange soul... he rejected her desperately, with an unrelenting insolence, his only defence the pain he was causing himself. He was at a cruel age, full of misconceptions and misplaced pride, an age of terrible suffering, the kind we deny even to ourselves; being his own worst critic – demanding, uncompromising and utterly focused – he played his comedic part with a terrifying earnestness. Like the Spartan child who let the fox hidden beneath his cloak devour his insides rather than let it be seen, he would prefer to deny his love, his deadly disease, rather than admit defeat. For at that age, adults do not allow you the emotions of man, and friends – cruel to others because they are cruel to themselves – expose everything except victory to ridicule.

A wrong to fix a wrong: Battling's world had been founded on falsehoods. And that is why, out one night with a cousin on leave, in some dive bathed in red light and smelling of cigarette smoke and cheap soap, he fancied he knew the woman he paid and took from the misconception a genuine contempt for the opposite sex coupled with an irritating desire which reared its head around Erna Schnorr. He told himself that at least the affair had given him Experience, but he was proud of it only periodically and with certain friends. The rudeness that he had adopted as his ordinary tone masked an extreme prudishness, a boy-like prudishness unknown to even the most well-behaved little girls, a prudishness which pertained not to matters of the body, but to matters of the soul. His secrets were bolted shut. God had given him a swollen, cumbersome soul and charged him to get through life as best he could. He lugged it with a heavy, resigned step, gritting his teeth, short of breath – like a soldier lugs his backpack at the end of a march. Whenever he thought someone might see, he would cover his soul with his hand and congratulate himself on his cunning, thinking he could hide it.

Always first in mathematics, he would write measly little compositions for French class, stringing together shrivelled truisms from a literature textbook like a garland of chestnuts. ‘The sloppiness of this work astounds me, Larache,’ the teacher, Tourlaize, would say. ‘Couldn’t you have had an opinion of your own?’ And he did have them, opinions of his own, more than any of us, whatever Tourlaize saw. But his fear of coming across naïve or lyrical must have outweighed the embarrassment that having the attention of the whole class drawn to the particularly alarming woodenness of his literary aspiration would have brought on. As it happens, he held writers to the same standards he set for himself. One day, when we had to ‘compare the attitudes of La Fontaine and Victor Hugo towards childhood’, he said to me: ‘Tourlaize is an idiot. How does he expect us to know what Victor Hugo thinks about children?’

‘Oh I don’t know, look at his poems about them, about Jeanne, about the boy killed on the barricades, the “family circle”... there are plenty to choose from!’ ‘Naturally,’ said Battling, ‘and? what does that prove? Do you really think people like that write what they believe? They write like that because that is how one writes. What do you want them to say? They couldn’t very well put what they think in the books that they write, could they. I could waffle on prettily about love and melancholy too.’

‘Go on, Battling! That’d give Tourlaize something to think about.’

‘Oh, I couldn’t!’ Battling said.

I’ve only ever seen such an expression of embarrassment, disgust and appalled propriety on an English mouth. Battling would go on seeing all literature as the pretentious exercise of people full of preposterous affectations; he considered every expression of feeling to be a tasteless and insufferable ostentation. Nothing embarrassed him as cruelly as having to read a lyrical passage out loud – he would snigger, blush, be overcome by the shame, the disgust: ‘so phony!’ And yet, beneath this general disdain for sentimentality, lyricism, fancy and women, lay an immense naivety. Paradoxically, it was the total absence of cynicism which made him appear suspicious and rude: a little cynicism – his views on writers were not so wrong – goes a long way toward grace and abandon. Such as he was, he wrestled as best he could with the contradictions of adolescence, ashamed of his big feelings, proud of his budding flaws, and born what’s more with a breed of spirit so bitter and reticent that he enjoyed inflicting and receiving pain and was capable of terrible acts.

If truth be told, since the summer holidays, he appeared to have become a little more civilised. He no longer seemed so aggressive in his conviction that to keep one's nails neatly cut was a folly beyond bearing, hell, he took care of his own, he combed his hair, he had even, so it would seem, committed two questionable activities and resisted the urge to brag – I only managed to piece them together from what I heard from Manuel, under oath of secrecy mind you, who had heard from Erna Schnorr herself. Indiscernible on the surface, these holiday antics worked away at the great Battling's interminably romantic soul, like quiet ripples in the depths, without ever a trace coming to light in the calm eyes of an adolescent who knew how to lie.

# The Great Battling

Mais un homme qui a fait une fois un bond dans le paradis, comment pourrait-il s'accommoder ensuite de la vie de tout le monde ?

– ALAIN-FOURNIER

*Le Grand Meaulnes*

Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter – tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther... And one fine morning –

– F. SCOTT FITZGERALD

*The Great Gatsby*

In the passage above, the narrator tells us the protagonist Battling is disdainful of the 'romanesque'. He thinks himself a realist, he scoffs at lyricism and true love. But, at the same time, his soul is 'romanesque', deep down inside.<sup>2</sup> In French, definitions of 'romanesque' stem from what characterises the novel, the *roman*, and its characters. As an adjective, we could say 'novelistic' in English, but the term is too technical. 'Fictional'? But the novel here is the sensationalised novel of old; adventure and

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<sup>2</sup> 'Et cependant, sous ce mépris général du sentiment, du lyrisme, du romanesque et des femmes, il cachait la plus grande candeur' (53); '...le fond, malgré tout romanesque, de son âme' (54).



romance are assumed, the tale necessarily larger than life. As well as the characters of novels, ‘romanesque’ equally designates dreamers and sentimentalists: real world people drifting on clouds of fancy. ‘Romantic’ is perhaps the best option – adjective and noun – but it’s far from perfect. Capital ‘R’ Romantic is too specific, not to mention anachronistic, and lower case ‘r’ is likely to evoke a contemporary and sappy ‘romantic’ with its connotations of love and idealism.

In this chapter, I look at the text’s writing of the *romanesque* self: the dreamer within the reality of the text’s fictional world and the character of the novel. As I introduced in the prologue, the great Battling is assembled of perspectives, times, languages: his anachronistic trans-European origins both piece him together and fracture him. Just as I wonder what ‘romanesque’ means in English literature today, *Battling* interrogates what it is to be the fictional hero in 1928, and what it is to write his myth. To this end, the text distances the reader from the hero’s tale. We can never fully absorb ourselves in Battling’s plight because we are outside of it; we see the construction, the performance, the fraudulence. But then Battling too is outside – not self but other?

This chapter takes the Romantic model of the self as a starting point. As part of the text’s self-conscious treatment of the fictional hero, it engages with the inaccessible, and here outmoded, Romantic ‘I’. To describe Battling’s efforts to play a Romantic hero – gallant, lyrical, singular – the narrator explicitly calls upon Heinrich Heine, and his sceptical breed of late German Romanticism, and Victor Hugo, king of French Romanticism. This chapter begins, then, in its first segment *Building the Man*, with the Romantic tradition of the Bildungsroman and the way in which *Battling* subverts the genre’s drive for unity. The next segment *A Doppelgänger?* explores

Battling's repressed darkness through the lens of a modern revival of the Gothic, then *The Lyric* analyses the sudden and incongruous bliss that overcomes the hero when he believes himself to have found his inner poetry. Finally, in *The Sweet Song of the Romantic Night*, we see how moonlight and nightingales fail to enchant either hero or reader; here, the Romantic night serves as backdrop for an amusing metafictional battle between Battling and the great Victor Hugo, or between the text and an essentialist self.

These layers, this chapter argues, show the hero duplicated, translated, exiled, with no origin or foundation. The text's portrait of Battling is wilfully deceptive, its language of inner feeling so sentimental as to ring false. Following Gerard de Nerval's problematic 'je suis' and Arthur Rimbaud's 'je est un autre' that we discussed in Chapter One: *Portrait of the Self*, is Vialatte's dislocated subject, expressed by a troop of floating and inhabitable 'I's. In the last part of the chapter, *Hunting Horns*, I turn to the writer's war with his own inner lyric. Vialatte's nostalgia for a storytelling of old vies with his post-war present to inform his construction of *Battling*.

## Building the Man

The text's exploration of the *romanesque* is framed through adolescence. It is during that uncertain period of transition and formation/*Bildung*, that the hero, torn between the immaturity of childhood and the 'emotions of man' (51), best embodies this struggle. In *Battling*, adolescence comes tinged with nostalgia, poetry and fantasy. The narrator looks longingly back on his youth and his friends Battling and Manuel from the harsh reality of adulthood, post-WWI. As he reconstructs that time and those people as moments and characters of fiction, adolescence takes on a magical unreality.

The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines the Bildungsroman as 'a kind of novel that follows the development of the hero or heroine from childhood or adolescence into adulthood, through a troubled quest for identity.' In the traditional version, the individual confronts a difficult world and learns how to fit in with society, discovering who he is in the process of becoming an adult. But there are variations. Some stretch the definition to those novels whose hero does not find resolution in adulthood (Faflak and Wright 166). *Battling* is only sometimes defined as a Bildungsroman or *roman d'apprentissage* (Schaffner, *Porte-plume* 103; Jourde, *Opérette* 218). Battling does not evolve in any productive way as the tale progresses and he does not move from childhood to adolescence. Moreover, the Bildungsroman, arising as it does from the Romantic period, has historically assumed the possibility of a 'coherent and autonomous self' (Bolaki 10). In *Battling*, any quest for identity is told with the prescience that such a quest is futile. The genre is so pervasive, however, that 'even those novels that clearly are not Bildungsromane or novels of formation are perceived against this conceptual horizon' (Moretti and Sbragia 15). It

is useful, for this text, to speak of an anti-Bildungsroman, or perhaps a deconstructed Bildungsroman. The text does not seek selfhood so much as it pretends to and thus reveals the flaws.

The German 'Bildung' is difficult to translate; in English, it generally becomes 'education' or 'formation'. But the term is not static. *Bildung* is 'à la fois un processus et son résultat' (73 *Epreuve*) – like the similar sounding 'building' in English, as Stella Bolaki notes (20). *Battling* presents an interrogation of this *building* of the self in fiction. And it does so through art. For the text is also a Künstlerroman, an artist's novel. Any journey towards selfhood takes place in art's 'otherworldly place within the world' (Varsamopoulou xii).

The above extract from the novel dubs the protagonist 'le grand Battling'. In English translation, 'the great Battling' immediately brings to mind F. Scott Fitzgerald's celebrated novel, *The Great Gatsby*, its resonance inevitable for an Anglophone reader. The link is an interesting one, given the trail of intertextuality that exists through these characters. *The Great Gatsby* (1925),<sup>3</sup> published three years before *Battling*, apparently took inspiration for its plot and its title from Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913).<sup>4</sup> This book was equally a favourite of Vialatte's and is often cited as *Battling*'s precursor. While, in some ways, the three texts are not at all alike, their narration and their protagonists share important commonalities. In all, the narrator is a secondary character, a friend to the hero who constructs and guesses at his story. The narrator of *Battling* pieces together his story ('reconstituer' 54) as does

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<sup>3</sup> 1926 in French translation.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, articles by Gabel, Dugdale et Barnes in the *Paris Review* and the *Guardian*.

the narrator of *Le Grand Meaulnes*: ‘j’ai dû reprendre moi-même et reconstituer toute cette partie de son histoire’ (Alain-Fournier part 3.15). *Gatsby*, *Meaulnes* and *Battling* are all hopeless romantics. They loom large in the distance of the storytelling, as mysterious figures, dreaming while the narrator looks on with his ordinary and more reasonable personality. Unable to rein these heroes in, the narrator admires them from afar and fears for their downfall.

The epithet of ‘The Great’ that ties these texts together is lost in their official translations. *Le Grand Meaulnes* did not become ‘The Great Meaulnes’ in English, owing to the boy’s obscure name (Gopnik vii–viii) – a not dissimilar obstacle to that impeding my own translation of the title *Battling*. Instead, *Meaulnes* became a whole host of other titles (*The Lost Estate*, *The Lost Domain*, *The Wanderer*) none of which became well-known to an Anglophone audience. *The Great Gatsby* almost took its place then, in English, and in French became *Gatsby le magnifique* to hold its own and lose the mirror between the two. *Battling* ties neatly into this tradition that literary language may hide but that translation reveals: The Great Meaulnes, The Great Gatsby, The Great Battling, Battling le ténébreux.

It is in part owing to this type of narration that our hero Battling is a divided subject. In the above extract, the narrator delves into Battling’s feelings and motives while playing his classmate, a fellow schoolboy not privy to such matters. Who is the protagonist, really? Perspectives circle around to contribute to a mythology of self, full of different strategies for depicting *being*, none of them complete, none of them aiming to be definitive. Moreover, it is not the hero who is the ‘I’ but the insignificant, and in the case of *Battling* nameless, narrator who tells the story of another.

In *Battling*, as in *Le Grand Meaulnes* and *The Great Gatsby*, this portrait-making comes with a tense ambivalence. The narrator belongs to the ordinary folk; he is firmly planted in the world and ahead in time, an adult looking back on the chaos. The painting of Battling's portrait is then equally what tears him apart: the narrator's realism, wisdom and ordinariness collides with Battling's sentimentalism, youth and otherworldliness. Rather than returning to Romanticism, Vialatte's game entails portraying characters who struggle with 'un romantisme quasi pathologique' (Coyault 340). Like *Le Grand Meaulnes* and *The Great Gatsby*, this is, at least in part, a tale of what happens to the Romantic in a modern world.

Battling's division drives the narrative. He is both inside looking out and outside looking in, doubled and confused. His strategy, as we are told in the translated passage that opens this chapter, is to play 'sa comédie avec un sérieux terrible' (51). At first, I translate 'jouer sa comédie' with 'he played his part' seeing as the French simply signifies putting on an act or playing a role. But I lose the opposition between 'comédie' and 'sérieux'. With 'comedic part' and 'earnestness' ('he played his comedic part with a terrifying earnestness'), the sentence becomes unwieldy and the contrast in English remains less evident than in the French. Battling's presentation of himself to the world is a serious comedy: a theatrical performance wherein he is both actor and spectator. In stark opposition to its sincere predecessor *Le Grand Meaulnes*, *Battling* enjoys a metafictional game and delights in mocking both its protagonist and itself. Battling's own emotions are disgusting to him – his 'maladie mortelle', or 'deadly disease' (51) – and he hides them like the Spartan child who kept the fox

hidden beneath his clothes even as it ate his insides.<sup>5</sup> Successful disguise is better than living. Battling's 'defeat', or undoing/*défaire*, would be to expose the fragments and multiplicity of his selves; the Romantic hero's misguided goal to retain a coherent 'I' is killing him.

To explain his complexes as a teenager, the narrator returns to a segment on Battling's childhood (58-75). As well as constructing Battling's self, the text deconstructs it according to Freudian psychoanalysis. For Sigmund Freud, it was the 'childhood drama of love, hate and jealousy in relation to one's parents – the Oedipus complex – which set the scene for the adult's later affective life' (Anderson 58). Writing the self involves digging up these memories of childhood. Battling grew up with the full set of problematic parental relations. Unloved and abused by his father, he was later abandoned by his parents and adopted by a sinister fatherly figure. In his misery and need for affection, he funneled his emotions into perverted feelings for the family's maid. The text presents this retrospective and storied version of Battling's past to account for his repressed desire which reawakens around Erna. In this neat light, it was his loveless childhood which set him up to use women as an outlet for his self-loathing and pent up sexuality, and which so irreparably divided his inner and outer faces.

Any story of the past is restructured from the present, any written self a fiction. Linda Anderson, speaking of autobiography, says that 'it is not that a unified self was once available and can be rediscovered in past autobiographies; there is a sense in which

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<sup>5</sup> As the narrator says in the translation that opens this chapter, referring to no. 35 of Plutarch's 'Various Sayings of Spartans to Fame Unknown' (234A-B).

it always was a historical and ideological construct, an effect of discourse' (58). While *Battling* is fiction, this fabrication of the protagonist's self, written in layers of story without origin, is the heart of the text. More than what becomes of the Romantic, *Battling* is about what becomes of the Romantic's quest, the Bildungsroman, the novel of identity, in the modernist period. It is about how the search for self deforms, turns to satire, becomes pieces of self-conscious collage. Rather than unity or product, we see division, doubles, puppets, foreign selves. We see Battling engage with his inner lyricism but sceptically, we see his yearning for the romanesque as an ironic desire to be a hero of fiction. Through the narrator, we share Battling's dislocation from himself and from the lyrical 'I'; we too look back, from today, from Anglophone literature, with scepticism and nostalgia.

Returning one last time to the opening translated extract, Battling asks 'do you really think people like that write what they believe? They write like that because that is how one writes' (53). The boys have been told to compare Victor Hugo's and Jean de la Fontaine's views on childhood; Battling doesn't see how he could learn anything from reading their fiction. Likewise, the text constantly reminds the reader that this is a romanticised, poeticised self, manipulated through writing, through false sincerity and self-deception. In the following passages, the narrator turns the protagonist and his damsel – an ordinary schoolboy and a failed, small-town singer, performing at a seedy bar – into star-crossed lovers, ready for some epic tragedy, a misadventure in the woods, a theatrical farce. The text offers a collage of formulaic portraits of a hero, satirised and lined up side by side. The reader must confront the lies of the fictional self and, with Battling's potential personas front and centre, its lack of any singular origin. For this is a tale about different modes of representation.



In the end, if it isn't possible for Battling to really *be* someone neat and cogitable, and if his layers inevitably distort through writing, perhaps the fictional self is the only way. After all, the text's hero has the 'calm eyes of an adolescent who [knows] how to lie' (54). Battling exists *only* as the *romanesque*; there was never anything 'real' to begin with, no self to try to paint with words.

### **A Doppelgänger?**

When Battling discovers that Erna prefers his classmate Manuel, he turns his attention to the singer Céline. The boys consider Céline to be far from Erna's equal: she is common rather than extraordinary, local rather than exotic, low-brow rather than cultured. Nevertheless, Battling's capacity for self-deception is almost enough that he manages to enjoy their rosy summer date. The narrator begins with a disclaimer about the accuracy of his depiction of Battling and goes on to show him morphing into a beast. In this modernist text, the hero of old can only exist ridiculed, parodied, satirised: a caricature of himself. Who is the great Battling here?

En tout cas, quand il fut rasé, brossé, ciré, nettoyé, peigné, il répandait une bonne odeur sympathique de savon de Marseille et de chair saine ; ses muscles gonflaient son complet gris devenu trop petit depuis l'année précédente, et sa marche souple de chien hargneux donnait à sa force une allure inquiétante. On l'imaginait assez bien égorgeant Céline à la nuit tombante au pied d'un tas de foin pour satisfaire aux exigences métaphysiques d'un dieu barbare, tandis qu'un parfum de résine monte des bois surchauffés. Un drame où se fussent mêlés le sang tiède, la passion fumante, la silhouette des meules, et, sans doute, quelque grande lune pourpre propre à satisfaire les traditions, à dramatiser les ombres et sécher d'horreur la bouche des spectateurs.

Ce fut beaucoup moins pathétique. (131)

Whatever the case, once he was shaved, brushed, waxed, cleaned, combed, he gave off a nice strong smell of *savon de Marseille* and wholesome flesh; his muscles inflated the grey suit that he had outgrown the year before and his springy step, resembling a vicious dog's, lent an alarming pace to his strength. You could easily imagine him slitting Céline's throat at the foot of a haystack at nightfall to meet the metaphysical demands of some barbaric god, while a sweet smell of resin rose from overheated woods. A tragedy blending warm blood, steaming passion, the silhouette of haystacks, and no doubt some big crimson moon to fulfil tradition, animate the shadows and dry the mouths of the spectators with horror.

It was all a lot less tragic than that.

*Drame, dramatiser les ombres, pathétique, spectateurs.* Any translation of the above extract immediately faces the problem of genre. None of these terms transfer smoothly into twenty-first century English; are we talking about drama? Melodrama? Pathos? Tragedy? And whose notion of genre are we playing with? Genre is a social and intertextual force based on shared conventions and accordingly it changes with culture, literary tradition and time (Frow 111). In this passage, Vialatte alludes generally to a literature of terror; the concept is universal, but the particulars depend on a culture's fears and repressed desires, or taboos, at a moment in time as well as on how that culture depicts those fears and desires in the arts (Punter 181, 188-189). Continuity in genre names can hide such changes (Frow 141). Translating the French 'drame' to the English 'drama', 'pathétique' to 'pathetic', 'fantastique' to 'fantastic' (or even 'fantasy') would be far more misleading than representative. Severed somewhat as contemporary Anglophone literature is from the classical tradition of theatre, harking back to Aristotle, today's 'drama' seems too sterile, too serious, and

‘pathetic’ rarely refers to the moving and emotional nature of the Greek pathos. On the other hand, if I keep these terms in translation, the reader could make the jump herself.

Before hazarding an answer to such questions, their very presence points to what is important: the passage’s preoccupation with genre. Genre names are thrown in offhandedly in this chapter of the novel which is a mishmash of the exaggerated and the dramatic. Evidently, Vialatte is not writing any kind of literature of terror but has merely incorporated this passage for effect: a genre within a genre. I consider the translation of ‘*dramatiser les ombres*’: dramatise, exaggerate, animate, sensationalise? I like ‘sensationalise’ for the smooth flow of *s*’s in ‘sensationalise the shadows’; it compensates for the lack of *p*’s further on in my translation of ‘*pourpre propre*’. But I’m wary of losing the formal aspect of the theatrical contained in ‘*dramatiser*’. The French reminds the reader that this is not an event but a performance, a spectacle as distinct from real life, or rather from a life considered real within its fictional world. ‘Animate’ is perhaps best, for the original meaning of ‘drama’ as action: the term makes the shadows come alive.

And who are the spectators? The French ‘spectateur’ readily denotes a member of the audience at the theatre, continuing the staged and performative nature of this portrait of Battling. Given its cognate in contemporary English more commonly refers to sport, ‘audience’ is perhaps the better translation. Within the context of theatre, however, ‘spectator’ evokes a classical tradition of old-fashioned melodrama and artifice, the thrill of the terrible. The term equally takes us back to Battling as the passive observer of his own life. There is a doubling here; the hero is outside himself, playing a role, while the narrator guesses at his emotions in this triangular ‘I’.

Making sure to distinguish this ‘drame’ from the rest of the tale, the narrator assures us that such whimsy is unlike the truth of the scene that follows. Yet as the chapter goes on, we see this is just one *mise en abyme* of many. In this first digression from the usual relaying of events, the innocent schoolboy, smelling of ‘savon de Marseille’ and ‘wholesome flesh’, suddenly transforms into beast. We see what Battling might be in an alternate genre, at the hand of another pen, another time. The ‘savon de Marseille’ is a common detail, not out of place in the Gothic or fantasy traditions where the writer sets up the realism of the world which will then be infiltrated by the unreal. But instead of ‘clean’ we have ‘wholesome/ healthy flesh’. All this shaving, brushing, waxing – which is interestingly passive, ‘*quand il fut*’ – prepares Battling for his perversion into a horrifying *doppelgänger*. Not clean but *cleaned*. A boy being prepared for a tainted world? A hero being groomed by his writer? Either way, Battling’s wholesome and heavy soul is here corrupted; filled with dark repressed desires, his muscles explode out of his all too human attire.

This is melodrama, romance, pathos – an ill-defined mix in a sensational version of events. Instead of ‘drama’ I write ‘tragedy’ in translation, to evoke the darkness of the tale. But there’s more to it than that. Battling is menacing and violent, more a villain than a hero, and more a werewolf than a boy. His muscles do not only bulge *inside* his suit, as I translate at first, but act *upon* it: ‘*gonflait son complet gris*’. Inflate his suit, swell up its sleeves, balloon out. With supernatural forces afoot, this canine creature roams the woods to meet the metaphysical demands of some god. Beast, blood, passion, moon, woods; these images evoke the emotion, fear and suspense of a thousand other tales. Parodying that vulgar cousin to Romanticism, Vialatte delights in a Gothic-style dramatisation of the hero’s innermost fears and desires.

In the fancy of the narrator's imagination, a peaceful village setting – revealed later to be the neat lawn next to the small-town's river – transforms into a wild landscape. As Battling and Céline take a midday stroll, 'un parfum de résine monte des bois surchauffés'. I want the reader today to access the genre cues, so that they feel the mood from another time and place. 'Parfum' begs to be 'sweet smell' in translation to conjure the sickly-sweet wrongness that lies behind the original. Here, the clash of dark murderousness with saccharine romance, along with the sticky sap oozing from the tree, gives a familiar eeriness despite a not so familiar choice of fragrance. 'Bois surchauffés' is perhaps more problematic, where 'surchauffé' not only refers to temperature but, as per the *TLFi* definition: 'fortement agité, excité, exalté; qui est empreint d'une agitation, d'une exaltation extrême. *Imagination, tête surchauffée; esprits surchauffés.*' I considered 'withering woods' in translation – for the wink to Emily Brontë - or something equally clichéd, cadaverous, intertextual. But the strange-sounding 'overheated woods' equally suggests an 'overheated' imagination. Tim Parks says that 'inevitably translation draws us to where the writer's choices are both mysterious and mystery-making' (*Translating* 86). If it is the odd collocations that are most significant, this is Vialatte's not-so-subtle declaration of his game.

Full of hyperbole and overdone tropes, this extract deals in formulaic fiction. The French subjunctive complicates my translation. I translate 'un drame où se fussent mêlés' with 'a tragedy blending' but I wonder about the 'probably' embedded in the original. English resists the plethora of 'must have been', 'seems', 'appears', and 'no doubt' that keep cropping up and making my translation sound overdone and badly written. But these are all part of the guesswork; the narrator reminds us that he does not know his hero's mind. In this case, the subjunctive implies that a story of this

nature would inevitably involve warm blood and wild landscapes because all such stories are the same. ‘No doubt’ there is a ‘big crimson moon’ as well. In pandering to the stereotypes of an English lyrical tradition, this ‘grande lune pourpre’ becomes the rich red of blood. Trying to find unity within my English translation inevitably entails interpretation. Along with the ‘withering’ and the dry mouths, comes a burning passage of steaming passions, hot blood, smells, and violence in an eerie countryside: evidence of the text’s overheated imagination.

Even if there is no explicit mention of werewolves or supernatural phenomena, the comic allusion to a Gothic tradition conjures up other exaggerated and fantastical images from previous and parallel texts. The Gothic genre has historically been considered especially conventional and readily identifiable through common tropes.<sup>6</sup> Eve Sedgwick outlines the important features of the genre’s *mise en scène*, many of which recall the above passage:

A wild landscape... the trembling sensibility of the heroine and the impetuosity of her lover... a tyrannical older man with the piercing glance... the poisonous effects of guilt and shame... nocturnal landscapes and dreams. (9)

The ostensibly formulaic nature perfectly suits Vialatte’s purpose. From his twentieth-century habitus, he engages with the popular and contemporary rebirth of the Gothic, employing the genre’s tropes in a self-conscious collage.<sup>7</sup> This passage

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<sup>6</sup> Spooner and McEvoy define the Gothic in less reductive terms. If the genre has traditionally been treated as confined to late eighteenth/early nineteenth-century English literature, and as following a specific formula, contemporary theory offers more sophisticated definitions that stretch to include works outside this period that engage with themes of fear, fantasy v reality, the recurring past, transgression and decay (1).

<sup>7</sup> In Vialatte’s time, German expressionist cinema, in particular, revived some Gothic themes. *Nosferatu*, F. W. Murnau’s take on Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), was notably released in 1922.

in the text intends to stand immediately at odds from the rest of *Battling's* tale, delighting in its excess.

The Gothic tradition had its roots in opposition to realism (Punter 182–86). With the juxtaposed genres Vialatte lays out in this chapter, the text offers a sort of miniature literary history to this effect. The Gothic or fantastic writer wanted to portray something more inexplicable than realism. Coming from the perspective that realist writing smoothed out the mystery and disunity of life into a neat chronological narrative, the Gothic writer combined disparate influences in an often-convoluted style. Pathos, drama, tragedy, sensationalism, supernaturalism and myth came together to portray a more ambiguous, unknown, discordant reality.

[The Gothic] seeks to express truth through the use of other modes and genres – poetic prose, the recapture of tragedy, expressionistic writing, the revival of legend, the formation of quasi-myths – in order to demonstrate that the individual's involvement with the world is not merely linear but is composed of moments with resonances and depths which can only be captured through the disruptive power of extensive metaphor and symbolism (188).

While such stories are not really 'real' and, on the contrary, we see them as less real, neither are they fantasy. Vialatte intends to bring out the sensational nature of the genre, not allowing it to establish validity through its own world, but at the same time he foregrounds the alternatives to the everyday and, through *Battling's* doppelgänger, as we'll soon see, the alternatives to writing a stabilised narrative of the fictional self.

The Gothic hero, according to William Hughes' *Historical Dictionary of Gothic Literature*, is what the traditional hero 'might have been' had he strayed from a more virtuous path (126). We see him cast out, destined to struggle on the margins of

society, perhaps roaming the moors for eternity without hope for redemption or fulfilment. Like the *beau ténébreux*, the Gothic hero is wrought with inner darkness, but rather than fight his twisted desires, he succumbs. For the reader, the Gothic hero is exciting. Rather than embodying good or evil, this hero, with his moral ambivalence, could equally be considered the villain.

The doppelgänger presents a means of depicting such ambivalence, where self is also other, good and bad are separate and same, identity is split, and transgression can be indulged.<sup>8</sup> Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) presents perhaps the archetypal Gothic doppelgänger. Victor Frankenstein and his creation are reflection of the same self. But who is good, who is evil? The appearance of the muscular and seductive Battling is of course far removed from Shelley's hero/villain and any doppelgänger in *Battling* is a mere creature of the narrator's imagination; this is a modernist text, not a Gothic one. Nonetheless, Vialatte draws from these tropes to play in the hesitation between Battling's (real) self and his alternatives. According to Hughes' portrait, the Gothic hero/villain's downfall comes from giving in to a side that exists within us all: 'the reader fears,' he writes, 'those latent qualities within the self that are exposed in exaggeration through the Gothic hero' (126). The extract from *Battling* above portrays the protagonist as he would be if he were to let loose his perverted view of pain and desire, embracing those parts of himself he seeks so desperately to deny.

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<sup>8</sup> E.T.A Hoffmann, a writer influential to Vialatte's work, notably used the doppelgänger motif in *Die Elixiere des Teufels* [The Devil's Elixirs] (1815) to give his hero, a monk, the means to a depraved personality.



The text reminds us, however, that such a portrayal is only a game. Beginning by declaring his ignorance of Battling's true feelings, the narrator gives the possible depths of Battling's fears, desires, and fantasies – an angry, repressed teenager, on a date with the wrong girl – comic expression in this brief and parodic translated passage. Where the Gothic and fantastic make us question what is real – they give the supernatural credence in their fictional worlds not to convince us that monsters exist but to show us that something lies under the surface – *Battling* does not work towards a hidden truth.<sup>9</sup> It treats such diversions self-consciously so that the doppelgänger presents more than doubling. Here, the text's fragmented intertextuality 'permet une réflexion sur le texte, placé ainsi dans une double perspective : relationnelle (échanges entre les textes) et transformationnelle (modification réciproque des textes qui se trouvent dans cette relation d'échange)' (Samoyault 49). The villain – unreal within *Battling*'s fictional world – exists in relation to the tame schoolboy self, and both transform in their new, ironic context. A dark self still assumes some fundamental essence ready to be given free rein in romanticised fiction. The collage of styles with which the narrator portrays Battling, however, opposes the existence of any such essence and the tongue-in-cheek approach laughs at any sincere attempt to portray it.

As soon as the all-too-human Battling returns, in a bundle of nerves and sixteen-year-old testosterone, we are hit with the disappointments and failures of ordinary life. Battling does not gouge open Céline's throat and sensually suck her blood but is

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<sup>9</sup> Later in the novel, as I'll cover in Chapter Three, Vialatte uses the doppelgänger motif more concretely to portray Battling, Manuel, and other characters of this previously real world, as grotesque versions of themselves.

forced to examine the seat of her pants for grass stains, glimpsing her hidden curves in the only way that he will ever manage. The date floundering, Battling tries desperately to think of something witty and romantic to say on the way to lunch to woo his girl and disguise his naivety. Paradoxically, our villainous hero suddenly wishes he were a character in a novel; characters of fiction, he thinks, are ‘blessed with brilliant brainwaves ten times a page’ (132). His ‘real’ self – which one, if any, is real? – spends all its time trying to find who he is in fiction – perhaps the words of others from novels or magazines will be able to express how he really feels.

### **The Lyric**

La feuille du tilleul a la forme d’un cœur,  
dit Henri Heine. (134)

When his own words do not come, Battling remembers a line from a trashy paperback: ‘O Ninette if only your heart would tend to the wounds made by your eyes’ (133). He admits it’s a little old-fashioned, perhaps too sentimental, but declares it perfect for the occasion – he only needs to get himself into a lyrical state of mind. And in fact, everything rests on whether Battling can find his inner lyricism. Only then, will he be able to make his feelings known and woo the girl. Only then, will he be rid of this feeling that he is outside himself and be able to yield to the overwhelming passion of the lyric. In the above passage, constructed as they were through the hero’s dark repressed feeling, events took a horrifying turn; in the next, everything is cheerfully pink, too pink, tainted by the sincerity of a tipsy teenage boy who has fooled himself into thinking he is in love. Here, Céline no longer appears the common, uncultured consolation prize but a classical beauty, in a classical poem.

A poetic and idealistic inner consciousness takes over to overlay the scene. But who is speaking? The narrator interrupts his usual storytelling from time to time with some Romantic lyricism of his own. Adding a poetic touch, he communes with nature and paints a sweet song of the night. Describing Céline's childhood, for example, the narrator says, 'elle avait connu en ces temps lointains la montagne où broutent les chèvres, les aliziers vernis au tournant des grand-routes, et, le soir, l'ombre des peupliers dispersés qui s'avance en tremblant sur les prairies' (132). The 'shadow cast by scattered poplars as they creep flutteringly across the meadow' presents a Romantic conception of nature, interjecting in *Battling's* narrative. This is a metaleptic lyric 'I' without a foundational individual self (Blasing 5).

It is no coincidence that Battling finds his inner lyricism, as we see in the next passage, on the path lined with linden trees: 'the leaf of the linden-tree has the shape of a heart, says Heinrich Heine' (134). And perhaps it does, but then so do a lot of leaves. While the natural properties of the linden presumably launched its symbolism – the heart-shaped leaves, shady boughs and heady fragrance no doubt evoke some romantic sentiment – the term's significance comes only partly from the physical form of the linden which exists in real life. The rest comes from the self-referential nature of literature whereby meaning travels through the filter of a trail of fictional universes leaving only an illusion of reality in its wake (Barthes). Like the genre names in the earlier part of this chapter, the narrator's use of Heine's name – rather than spouting the piece of trivia himself – has a performative function. The word no longer signifies the signified but triggers the whole weight of a national lyrical tradition. Suddenly the weight of German Romanticism and Heinrich Heine's post-romantic scepticism infiltrates the text.

Heine's vision of the linden tree draws from Achim von Arnim's and Clemens Brentano's collection of poems *Des Knaben Wunderhorn* [The Boy's Magic Horn] (1805). The collection – in which young lovers bear their souls beneath linden-trees – idealises German Romanticism and tradition, the simple pleasures of nature and, according to Heine in 1834, evokes the 'heartbeat of the German people':

It [*The Boy's Magic Horn*] contains the fairest flowers of the German spirit, and whoever wishes to know the lovable side of the German people should read these folksongs. The book is lying before me at this very moment, and I feel as if I were smelling the fragrance of German linden trees. For the linden plays a leading role in these songs; in its shade lovers talk in the evenings; it is their favorite tree, perhaps because the linden leaf has the shape of a human heart. This comment was once made by a German poet who is my favorite, namely myself. On the title page of that book is a boy blowing his horn, and if a German in a foreign land looks long at this picture, he fancies he hears the most familiar tones, and homesickness might steal upon him... ('Romantic School' 84, 83–84)

Heine was in exile in Paris at the time and saw himself as a bit of a mediator between the two nations. From foreign lands, he himself looked back on the linden as both a symbol of the German nation and of a Romantic tradition now in demise. The English translation writes 'a German in a foreign land' but Heine, who also wrote the text in French, says 'un pauvre Allemand jeté en pays étranger' (*De l'Allemagne* 316). A poor German cast into a foreign land and a foreign tongue.

If a contemporaneous German hears the heartbeat of his people and smells the romance of the linden tree, what of the French? And what of readers of my English translation of *Battling* today? The Romantic lyric aspired to the universal; the speaker's 'I' professed individual feeling that anyone could identify with and relate

to. Ignorant of race, gender, culture, and time, the speaker assumed to address all, man to man. It became then a virtual subjectivity, 'a metaleptic figure,' as Motlu Blasing writes, 'an Apollonian illusion of an "individual" projected upon' (5, 45). The lyric 'I' is everyone and no one. But in which community can everyone relate? To participate in the ritualistic discourse and join the song, to feel the speaker's emotion as one's own, knowledge of the language and culture is paramount. What happens, then, when the audience is outside?

Through its metafictional treatment of Heine, *Battling* distances itself from German Romanticism but also *translates* it into a French tradition so that the reader can keep one foot in its lyrical tradition. 'Linden' becomes 'tilleul' and 'Heinrich' becomes 'Henri'. The text translates the German poet who equally translated himself. Heine tells the tongue-in-cheek story of how he came to be called 'Monsieur Un Rien' during his exile in Paris:

Here in France immediately on my arrival in Paris my German name 'Heinrich' was translated into 'Henri,' and I had to adapt myself to it and had even so to style myself here in this country, for the word Heinrich is not pleasing to Frenchmen and the French do make everything in the world pleasant for themselves. Even the name 'Henri Heine' they were unable to pronounce, and most of them called me M. Enri Enn: many contracted this to Enrienne and some called me M. Un Rien. (*Memoirs* 39)

Heine's reputation in Germany was problematic; his work was not well received by the authorities and even banned for a period of time. The humorous title in French meant Heine's new audience did not connect the slander Monsieur Heine received in Germany with their own 'Monsieur Un Rien', protecting his identity but at the same

time reducing him to ‘nothing’ in France (Plass 135–36). In any case, as the French styled Heine to themselves, Vialatte translates his post-romantic game into *Battling*. Historically, the lyric was considered not mimesis but pure subjectivity, or a mimesis of feeling rather than any objective reality. Coming to terms with his own subjectivity, the Romantic, in Hegelian terms, aspired above all to make the inner self outer, to absorb the world and stamp it with his consciousness (Culler 2). The pursuit was a solitary one: an inward search for truth involving an individual man with nature. However, at the same time, the poet was inevitably aware of his audience and could not avoid an element of performativity. The Romantic lyric then toed the line between sincerity and the possibility of fraudulence, between deep absorption and a self-conscious theatricality.

Heine’s work is famous for foregrounding this tension in the lyric ‘I’ between sincerity and scepticism. He felt himself a true poet – he had discovered his inner lyric – and considered his project to be the constitution of the self in language. But he came to such a project too late. Heine could not commit to making his inner self outer without acknowledging the impossibility of such an endeavour as well as the fraudulence beneath any guise of sincerity: such was his ‘Zerrissenheit’ or disunity (Pinkard 398–400; Sammons 204–05). Given the inevitability of failure, Heine proceeded to carry on but wilfully ‘mask’ and fictionalise’ his inner self (Sammons 161). Adopting a post-romantic irony, Heine’s work plays with theatricality versus absorption.

Heine took the Romantic motif and incorporated it into his own poetry and criticism, stamping the linden with his reputation. In his poem ‘New Spring 31’,<sup>10</sup> he writes of two lovers enjoying a fine spring evening. The moonlight filters through the linden blossoms, intoxicating them, and onto the lovers.

If thou lookest on the lime-leaf,  
Thou a heart’s form wilt discover;  
Therefore are the lindens ever  
Chosen seats of each fond lover. (Poems lines 9-12)

As the poem goes on we see that even within a perfect and beautiful love story, the girl fantasises about someplace else, about an antithesis of snow, bitter wind and sleigh bells. These might be love poems, but they belong to Heine’s second volume of poetry which heralded a change in his aesthetic: more contemporary, filled with disillusionment. Do we believe this lyrical voice is sincere? Heine’s game was to indulge in the lyric but also interject with reminders that both he and the reader may be deceiving themselves (Pinkard 400–01). In his *Confessions* (1854), Heine grandly declares: ‘with me the old German lyric school ends; while with me, at the same time, the modern lyric school of Germany begins’ (284)

It is Heine’s particular blend of lyricism which infiltrates Vialatte’s passage: that of a poet in the depths of the post-romantic crisis, using Romantic tradition but also subverting it, wanting poetic truth but also sceptical of it. In *Battling*, Heine’s crisis is another step removed, the lyric even more self-conscious, its presence intertextual. The tropes of Romantic irony – ‘lyrical love, the spontaneous self, impassioned

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Neuer Frühling 31’ published in *Neue Gedichte* [New Poems] 1844.

idealism, natural harmony, the spell of innocence, intuitions of perfection, the imagination of wonder, heroic dreams of liberation, spiritual transcendence, the vision of the infinite' (Gurewitch 5) – appear but metafictionally. Battling tells us outright that he must ready himself to participate in the lyrical tradition (133). He cannot throw himself into the moment and into the illusion of making an inner truth outer, without both beginning from a position outside and appearing a fool. His efforts to get back that absorption and participate in the virtual 'I' play out and satirise the lyric's ambivalence and fundamental conflict for us.

### *Antony and Cleopatra*

Battling adorns Céline with one of the heart-shaped linden leaves and from then on it serves as a symbol of the lyricism clouding his judgment of her, creating this deceptive vision of beauty and perfection. Battling finds himself deep within the passion of the Romantic lyric and its 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings':<sup>11</sup>

Le civet de lapin donna du courage au garçon qui se mit enfin à regarder sa voisine ; elle avait les plus beaux yeux du monde, bruns et dorés comme la rivière où naviguaient deux petites périssoires ; il songea à la fin du sonnet de Heredia sur Antoine et Cléopâtre ; décidément l'emphase lui venait... Céline prenait une belle couleur rouge sous l'influence du vin mousseux ; sous son menton un présage de ride posait une ombre ; de songer au déclin de cette chair splendide Battling éprouva une sorte d'émotion ; il essuya d'un baiser léger une goutte de sueur qui perlait sur la nuque de Céline ; Céline réclama une fine et Battling dut aussi en boire une ; elle en réclama bien d'autres, et Battling finit par reconnaître qu'il ne pensait plus du tout à Erna Schnorr.

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<sup>11</sup> As William Wordsworth wrote in 1800 his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*.



Qu'elle était belle Céline, au dessert ! Elle avait des lèvres épaisses qui la rendaient à la fois désirable et dédaigneuse, des bras blancs comme de la neige et une voix qui vous raclait un peu la peau ; elle avait chaud ; l'odeur de sa chair montait d'elle comme pour élargir sa présence et l'imposer. Il lui passa le bras autour de la taille, elle lui écrasa les lèvres de sa bouche, elle avait une petite moustache adorable qui chatouilla voluptueusement Battling.

C'est ça l'amour, pensa-t-il dans son lyrisme. C'est la première fois que cette femme embrasse sincèrement quelqu'un. (134-135)

The rabbit stew gave the young man the courage to at last look at his companion: she was dressed all in white and had the most beautiful eyes in the world, brown and gold like the river along which sailed two small cockleshells. Just like the end of Heredia's sonnet on Antony and Cleopatra, he thought, clearly in the mood for its grandiosity. Under the effects of the sparkling wine, Céline had turned a beautiful red. The beginnings of a wrinkle cast a shadow under her chin – O to think of the decline of that splendid flesh! With a soft kiss he caught a droplet of sweat as it pearly down the nape of Céline's neck. Céline called for a brandy and Battling had to have one too. She called for many more and suddenly Battling realised he was no longer thinking about Erna Schnorr. Oh how she was serene, Céline, at dessert! With her plump lips, both desirable and disdainful, her arms that were white like the snow and her voice that grated across the skin. The smell of her warm body surrounded him, magnifying her presence. He put his arm around her waist and she flattened his lips with her mouth, her adorable little moustache tickling Battling deliciously.

Now that is what you call love, he thought in his lyricism. That is the first time this woman has kissed someone sincerely.

The humour of the passage comes from the deluded manner in which Battling perceives the events. To aggrandise the ordinary date, he compares it to José-Maria de Heredia's (1842-1905) poem 'Antoine et Cléopâtre'.<sup>12</sup>

Et sur elle courbé, l'ardent Imperator  
Vit dans ses larges yeux étoilés de points d'or  
Toute une mer immense où fuyaient des galères. (Lines 12-14)

The lunch is no longer a banal affair between the coarse Céline and the pathetic schoolboy Battling, but a grand tragedy between star-crossed lovers. The narrator announces the incongruous comparison with a straight-face ('décidément, l'emphase lui venait') despite the immense discrepancy in scale. The 'périssaires' in *Battling* replace the 'galères' of Heredia's poem and the 'rivière', the 'mer immense'. In translation, I couldn't help but lose the cute amount of danger held in 'périssaires' where the 'périssable' contained within the term indicates the quick-to-capsize, non-durable quality of the small canoe-like boat. The amusing parallel between these two stories foretells the inevitable fall, albeit minor when juxtaposed against the tragic end of Antony and Cleopatra, which awaits Battling.

Beginning with the absurd comparison between Céline's and Cleopatra's beauty ('les plus beaux yeux du monde, bruns et dorés' = 'étoilés de points d'or'), Vialatte goes on to subvert stereotypes of classic femininity. The lyrical goggles that Battling has put on have skewed his vision. Terms which beg to become less fanciful in translation ('présage de ride', 'sueur qui perlait') point to the caprice of the original. 'Sweat that dripped' or 'droplets pearling'? 'Beginnings of a wrinkle'? Or 'omens' and

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<sup>12</sup> Originally published in *Les Trophées* (1893).

‘portents’, foreshadowing. The conspicuousness of ‘présage’ in such a context adds to our overall impression of a grandiose impending doom and ‘perlait’, being such a floral descriptor for ‘sweat’, builds on the erroneously romantic depiction of what is a common dalliance.

I want to incorporate this satirical tone in the form of the passage as well as the content. It cries out for an old-fashioned and over-the-top take on lyricism. I struggle with ‘de songer au déclin de cette chair splendide Battling éprouva une sorte d’émotion’ for a while. What *sort* of emotion? And what intensity? Translation tends to interpret and clarify (Berman, ‘Auberge’ 52-56), but perhaps the thrust here is precisely the lack of specifics, the fact that Battling’s lyricism has made him emotional. I try for something equally elusive. ‘Battling felt something?’ or ‘thinking about the decline of this splendid flesh overwhelmed Battling with feeling?’. I like this second attempt better, but it qualifies the intensity and does not flow in English; the combination of the semi-colon and the infinitive/ gerund upset the lyrical whimsy. In the end, I decide that less is more: ‘Oh to think of the decline of that splendid flesh!’ I like the exaggerated sentimentality of the line and its implication of devastating emotion without expressly articulating it; my translation does not try to make inner feeling outer.

Rhyme and alliteration follow in the original, along with the fairy tale-like ‘white as snow’, to increase the irony of the passage. Vialatte’s intentionally flowery prose clashes with the drunken and bodily nature of the actual events. ‘Qu’elle était belle Céline, au dessert !’ How she was ‘beautiful’ ? Lovely, charming, pretty, serene? It’s a shame to lose ‘beautiful’ but the rhyme is important, so I go with ‘serene’: ‘how she was serene, Céline, at dessert.’ ‘Serene’ describes Celine’s coarse, drunken

charm even less appropriately than 'belle' and thus the term keeps the incongruity which draws our attention to Battling's rose-coloured glasses. To maintain the momentum of the rhyme, I work in some simple, run on sentences in English, cutting a few 'elle avait,' 'elle avait'. Instead of 'she had thick lips,' for example, I translate 'with her thick lips', and instead of 'she was hot, the smell of her body', 'the smell of her warm body'.

Hot body, thick lips, red colour. It is tempting to prettify or at least attenuate such lines in translation. Warm body, plump lips, blush. The 'rouge' of Céline's complexion rings of make-up in English: an ugly redness or a delicate blush? I am wary of standardising in translation so that this ode to Céline becomes one of conventional beauty; the essence of course is in Battling's self-deception. Stamping Battling's inner consciousness over the scene, the narrator portrays Céline in such a fashion with a straight-face, as though these are perfectly normal descriptors of womanly sensuality. As though adorable moustaches flattening Battling's mouth are soft feminine lips kissing, as though hot sweaty flesh is splendid. It pulls us out of the lyricism with its discordance, with its incongruous virility. Below Battling's grandeur and romance, we see drunkenness ('elle en réclama bien d'autres' 135) – Céline red-faced and sweating in a village restaurant, and common people awkwardly kissing. This here, as Battling declares, is love (135). Sincere unadulterated spontaneous romantic lyrical love.

The scene calls to mind Arthur Rimbaud's poem 'Roman'<sup>13</sup> which begins and ends with the 'tilleul' alongside the frivolity of youth.

On n'est pas sérieux quand on a dix-sept ans

Et qu'on a des tilleuls verts sur la promenade. (Lines 31-32)

The poem calls itself a 'novel' in four chapters; it is the story of an immature summer romance with its all-powerful and illusory infatuation. As in *Battling*, the atmosphere is dreamlike and sensory, pervaded by a fancy-free feeling of contentment. High on Nature and the scent of linden trees, the young man falls in 'love', suddenly and inconceivably. Here and in *Battling*, the love attaches itself intertextually to stories, theatre, opera or lyricism – from *Antony and Cleopatra* to *Robinson Crusoe* – and grows more powerful and, in *Battling* more incongruous, as a result. But is this lyricism? Or just ordinary youthfulness – a schoolboy drunk and fooling himself? In both cases, the speaker is outside *and* within such overwhelming feelings; the modern lyric knows that his sonnets will likely fall flat but nonetheless indulges in the illusion.

Tilleul, Linden, linden, lime-leaf. The motif moves in language. As 'Linden' translates into 'tilleul', the song picks up other melodies such as Rimbaud's 'Roman'. Through Heine's translation into French, the reader of *Battling* can still participate in the ritualistic discourse of the lyric, singing the song if only for its irony. But what about in English translation? Theoretically, I could translate the French 'tilleul' as either 'lime' or 'linden'. 'Linden' means nothing to me, evoking far less than the rich scent of German Romanticism. 'Lime', I find out, is confusingly unrelated to the

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<sup>13</sup> Originally published in *Cahier de Douai* (1870).

citrus fruit. Perhaps 'lime' will bring a hint of English Romanticism to some Anglophone readers, carrying Samuel Taylor Coleridge along with his 'This Lime-Tree Bower My Prison' (1797)? I look up some English translations of Heine so as not to lose the intertextuality which holds the term's significance. In the above 'New Spring' the translator alternates between using 'lime' for the leaves and 'linden' for the tree, but overall 'linden' seems the more common.

'Linden', in English, comes itself from German Romanticism. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, 'the recent currency of the word [Linden] is probably due to its use in translations of German romance, as an adoption of German Linden plural of Linde, or as the first element in the comb. Lindenbaum = "linden-tree"'. And 'lime' likely evolved from 'Linde'. In English, the terms exist predominantly in relation to a distant German Romantic tradition. 'Henri', too, I revert to 'Heinrich'; the French disappears and the English reader, left with the German language, cannot project herself onto this virtual subjectivity, only refer back. The lyric no longer speaks since its trigger is untranslatable, trapped in a different context and time. Reading *Battling* in English translation increases our detachment from the lyric 'I'. If the reader can work out the rules, translation pushes Vialatte's game even further. Heine's high German was accused of being theatrical; the focus on language meant the voice must have been affected – it couldn't have come from the heart (Pinkard 399). Similarly, in translation, language becomes a barrier which calls attention to the fiction and interrupts the spell.

Contemporary theories of the lyric factor in the fictionality of the speaker; the 'I' is not simply an individual in time but a character within text (Culler 2). As well as the song, the reader can then engage with the directions for performance: the poetics and

the metafictional. Can we the readers, by ‘readying ourselves to take the plunge’ like Battling, convince ourselves to adopt a lyrical state of mind? Or does only the façade remain? As *Battling* explores the insincerity of the lyric, revealing the divided self, translation brings to light not just twos but layers upon layers. The mythical self of the text is revealed to be disarmingly modern, without origin or sincere self. Voices echo and deceive across time and place to disrupt any apparent security of the lyrical self. Here, in translation, *Battling*’s layers of deception are enough that it no longer has to strive for any foundational self.

### **The Sweet Song of the Romantic Night**

Les tilleuls de la cour du collège  
distillaient une honnête odeur de tisane  
qu’on prenait pour le parfum de la lune,  
des étoiles et de la bourgeoisie. (142)

Tilleul. Tisane. Marcel Proust’s madeleine and the poetry of remembering. Lime-blossom tea. Herbal tea. Infusion. Linden tea. On Battling’s date with Céline, the ‘tilleul’ was a symbol of the sincerity, ironic or not, of the Romantic lyric – here the smell is ‘honest’. It is the fragrance of the moon, the stars *and* the bourgeoisie. An incongruous trio: the linden trees outside in the melancholy night and the bourgeoisie with their cosy middle-class tea tucked indoors. And who decides to take the scent – ‘qu’on prenait pour’ (142) – of the linden for the fragrance of the moon and the stars, such Romantic things? ‘Qu’on prenait pour...’: ‘that *we* take for’, ‘that *anyone* would take for’, ‘that *might have been*’? The metaleptic lyric speaker, reimagined in Vialatte’s prose, appears again, absorbing the outer and stamping it with inner consciousness (Ben-Merre xvi). In this scene, the text continues its exposé of the

Romantic self, presenting a vision of the night that is steeped in that dying ‘fairy land of Romanticism’, the kind that Heine declared in 1853 gave ‘full sway to all the sweet extravagances, to all the intoxication of moonlight, to all the blooming, nightingale-like fancies’ (‘Confessions’ 284).

After his date with Céline, Battling accompanies her back to her house and comes across Manuel’s diary sitting on the table. He discovers that Manuel, who had taken Erna from him, had also been with Céline. Suddenly repulsed by Céline and loathing himself, Battling rushes out of the house without explanation. Abandoned in a state of undress, Céline releases a string of insults out the window: ‘F... moi le camp, eh purée ! pedzouille ! F... moi le camp que j’tai assez vu. Va faire l’amour avec des catins’ (141). Alone, in the depths of despair, Battling goes out into the good night; perhaps there he can find himself. Following the sort of essentialist Romantic self that Jean-Jacques Rousseau conceived in his *Confessions* (1782), the Romantic need only ward off the influence of bourgeois society and be by oneself in quiet contemplation to find inner peace. But far from finding answers or solace, Battling comes across the infuriating statue of Victor Hugo. In this modernist text, the great French Romantic appears in a metafictional cameo and serves as a punching bag upon whom Battling can unleash his rage.

Sous la lune, à la porte du collège, la statue de Victor Hugo attendait Battling de pied ferme. Sa grande ombre s’allongeait sur la petite place de la fontaine toute pavée de cailloux gris : quatre réverbères anciens introduisaient de la bonhomie dans cette nuit tiède : la fontaine chantait sur un air de chanson populaire ; les étoiles brillaient comme dans un vieux Noël ; M. et Mme Denis, fenêtres closes, ronflaient à tous les étages, la tête entourée d’un foulard ; le chat de la mère Michel faisait



le gros dos sur une gouttière, et les tilleuls de la cour du collège distillaient une honnête odeur de tisane qu'on prenait pour le parfum de la lune, des étoiles et de la bourgeoisie. La douceur de cette atmosphère ne put rien contre la fureur désespérée du pauvre Battling. Ce Victor Hugo dédaigneux, compassé comme un maître d'école, semblait le narguer du haut de la porte ; il le rendit responsable ; il lui tendit le poing rageusement :

- Toi, quand je te dirai adieu, vieille tarte...

Il fut obligé de rire lui-même de la spontanéité de son geste, de la sincérité de cette haine qu'il avait accumulée pendant six ans contre un caillou. Quand il eut franchi la porte, il se retourna encore, en riant à voix haute, d'un rire qui venait des nerfs et qui sonnait faux ; tout lui revenait à la tête, Céline, Erna, Manuel, le collègue... Maintenant Victor Hugo se présentait à contre-jour dans les étoiles, formidable et majestueux ; il lui cria sa rage impuissante :

- Vieille noix, vieux débris, vieille punaise... F... moi le camp, eh purée ! pedzouille ! F... moi le camp que j'tai assez vu. Va faire l'amour avec des catins, je le dirai à ton instituteur (142-143).

In the moonlight, at the school gates, the statue of Victor Hugo stood ready and waiting for Battling. Its long shadow stretched across the small fountain square, paved with grey cobblestones. Four old street lamps lent some cheer to the mild night. The fountain sang along to a popular song, the stars shone like in Christmases past, Monsieur and Madame Denis, windows closed, were snoring on every storey, heads wrapped in scarves, Mother Michel's cat arched its back on the rooftops, and the linden trees in the school yard exuded an honest smell of lime-blossom tea that seemed to stand for the scent of the moon, the stars and the bourgeoisie. The sweetness of the atmosphere did nothing to dampen the desperate rage of poor Battling. This haughty Victor Hugo, stiff as a schoolmaster, seemed to mock him from above the gates. He blamed him, shaking his fists in fury:

‘You! When I say goodbye to you, you old fool...’

He had to laugh at himself, at the impulsiveness of the gesture, at the genuineness of the hate that had built up in him over the past six years for a stone. Once he had entered the gates, he turned back, laughing out loud, a laugh made hollow by nerves. It was all coming back to him, Céline, Erna, Manuel, the school... Now Victor Hugo stood against the light of the stars, majestic and formidable. He cried out in helpless rage:

‘Old nut, old geezer, old coot! Beat it! Bah what a hick! Beat it, I’ve had it with you. Go make love to some strumpets, I’ll tell your teacher on you.’

In the sweet night of the Romantic, the action plays out beneath the moon (‘sous la lune’) or, more naturally in English, ‘in the moonlight’. The moonlight gives a pale glow to the scene, with its shadowy beauty, and with that mysterious hue that it inevitably casts over an otherwise ordinary setting. In the square, the statue of Victor Hugo waits for Battling ‘de pied ferme’. The French suggests that Hugo waits resolutely, with conviction, no matter what, and with the bravery that one needs to hold one’s ground before an enemy. ‘Lay in wait’? But it’s a statue – better that he stand. ‘Stood waiting’? Not ominous enough. Combined with the ‘narguer’ that follows, the language suggests a confrontation between Battling and Hugo. With the subject being inanimate, the firmness of foot and the active verb contained in a literal translation of ‘attendre de pied ferme’ takes on a humorous note. The language personifies the rock who perhaps waits not because he is resolute but because he is cold, hard stone, lifeless and rooted to the earth. I go with ‘stood ready and waiting’ to convey the active aggression that Battling feels. In the French, Hugo’s shadow is ‘grande’ and the square is ‘petite’. In translation the square can stay ‘small’, but the ‘big’ or ‘great’ shadow begs to be ‘long’. The shift points to the opposition between

Hugo's towering form and the square's meagre earthly dimensions. 'His long shadow' or 'its [the statue's] long shadow'? Despite losing the neat contrast, Hugo's 'long' shadow in English imbibes him with influence and enduring legacy.

Equally lighting up the night are the 'quatre réverbères anciens [qui] introduisaient de la bonhomie dans cette nuit tiède'. Again, the language personifies the night; now the street lamps add a dash of 'bonhomie' to the atmosphere: a friendliness or, literally, a goodness of man. The lamps are old and, like with Hugo, and the 'vieux Noël' that follows, the language conjures a nostalgia for bygone times and former tradition. For 'bonhomie', I write 'cheer' in English, to complement the jovial, man-made feeling, evoking Christmas spirit and noisy banter. The fountain then joins the party, beginning to sing: 'la fontaine chantait sur un air de chanson populaire'. Chantait chanson. Air populaire. Sing song. Shone, along. I want to maintain the lilting language in English, like the flow of water in a fountain: 'sang along to a popular song; the stars shone'. And some rhymes. Tea bourgeoisie. As the fountain in the text sings, the words themselves produce a lullaby, lulling the bourgeoisie to sleep. The rhythmic language of this scene, with its delight in the night – stars twinkling, and water springing – takes us back to those German Romantic folksongs that so fascinated Heine.

'Vieux Noël': an 'old Christmas'? Or an 'old Christmas *carol*' The above passage is in fact formed from a hotchpotch of old songs. Perhaps 'Christmases past' to bring Charles Dickens' voice into the mix? 'M. et Mme Denis' was a popular song in the

late 18th century.<sup>14</sup> Its subtitle – ‘souvenirs nocturnes’ – announces the plot: a couple in bed at night, remembering when they were young and deeply in love. The song ends with the two fast asleep and snoring, safe from the dark wet night. In the above passage, Monsieur and Madame Denis, who ‘ronflaient à tous les étages’, are equally sound asleep. Translation encourages the addition of some pronouns to this fragmented sentence – where the ‘fenêtres closes’ and ‘la tête entourée dans un foulard’ are suspended in clauses and separate from any subject – to connect the things to the people. Whose windows, whose heads? But the impersonal nature suggests that Monsieur and Madame Denis, in their comic rather than grandiose song, stand for all the ordinary bourgeoisie: all windows are closed, in a universal night. Snores, floors. Schnorr. Snoring, storey: ‘snoring on every storey’. The English adds texture and the alliteration, together with the short and even clauses that form the passage, imitates the comforting regularity of human snores. The bourgeoisie, fast asleep, eyes shut, join the song that sings a magical night outside and an ordinary night within.

As with the couple, Mother Michel is not a character in the text, but comes straight out of a famous French nursery rhyme: Mother Michel has lost her cat. The cat becomes the neighbourhood cat for all neighbourhoods, a cliché atop the rooftops in any sleepy French village, timeless, sung again in a new present. The rhyme became popular in the 1820s and this reference adds to the cosy sing song quality of the passage, with characters that are both individual and universal, representatives

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<sup>14</sup> Song by Marc-Antoine Désaugiers (1742-1793). It was then made into a one act *opéra comique* to the music of Jacques Offenbach, first performed in 1862.

of routine players in an ordinary night in a French village. Should I make this something else in English? Perhaps 'Old Mother Hubbard'? But this is a French night, headed by Victor Hugo. Mère Michel's cat 'faisait le gros dos sur une gouttière', and the 'gouttière' – the gutter – adds to the stereotype for, in French, the gutter is the source of the stray cat's name: 'chat de gouttière'. But where is this cat in English? Our stray cat, the 'alley cat', comes from the alleyways. But an alley does not evoke the same romance as a French roof, with its chimney tops, and the cat only a dark silhouette against the moon. I interpret the cliché perhaps, in translation, by putting the cat on a *rooftop* to conjure the fancy and melancholy of this night. To make it a Romantic French night essentialised from the outside.

Finally, we have Victor Hugo's song. Hugo is not simply the statue but is equally the intertextual legacy that looms behind the passage's sweet words of melancholy. Hugo himself explored the soft side of the night in 'Nuits de juin' (1840), for example. And there is something Hugolian in the words – the rhythm of the two octosyllables: 'formidable et majestueux' (143) – that Vialatte uses to describe the great man. The narrator takes us into Hugo's poetry in a pastiche. This passage offers another piece in *Battling's* collage, another change in the storytelling to here construct a Romantic night. Whose voice lights up the night? The characters of these other songs intrude self-consciously into *Battling's* narrative to come together in a metafictional and untimely song. As with the doppelgänger and the lyric, we are both hearing the song and outside: seeing its distance from us, its chord changes and conductor, its comedy and flaws.

Where above *Battling* tried to adopt a lyrical state of mind, here the sweet song of the night is telling him to find peace within himself in the darkness. Society is

indoors, and he the hero alone outside. The Romantic fascination with a congruence between mind and nature finds its perfect vessel in the night. While some Romantics concentrated on the menace of darkness, (from whence comes the Gothic, the macabre, the vampirists) more commonly the night offered a pleasant soothing sensation arising from the tranquil mystery of nature. In the unstructured space of the night, one can journey into the self; the cover of darkness, and the relief from the business of the day, gives the hero space for contemplation (Furst 513). In some ways, then, the night offers peace, but in others, the inner reflection, with its inevitable surfacing of difficult emotions, equates the night with turmoil and melancholy.

In this personified state – with the animation of the fountain, the statue, the sky, the lamps – the night of the above passage becomes a physical presence able to console. The focus on the visceral and the sensory, on the lullaby, means one need not think only feel and the language of the text subconsciously pervades one's spirit. Therein lies the opportunity for communion between the hero and nature, whereby the night invades Battling's mood. But Battling is not the Romantic hero captivated in its sweet embrace; like the reader, he has a foot outside the song. The *douceur* – softness, gentleness, kindness, mildness, sweetness – of the night does not help Battling (142). 'Ne put rien contre', 'could do nothing to counter'? 'could not dampen' Battling's despair. 'Dampen' springs naturally from this passage filled with smells, lukewarm atmospheres and fragrant teas, and adds to the sensory nature of the passage. But this metaleptic lyric that works to enchant is not our hero; Battling does not find himself in the night – there is no essential self to be found.

Victor Hugo plays the Romantic standing before the modernist hero. The narration accords Hugo a godliness, with all the pretention and majesty of the scholastic institution and the literary canon. He is ‘à contre-jour *dans* les étoiles’ in the above translation (143). Not ‘against the light of the stars’ but ‘against the light, *in* the stars’? Hugo’s *long* shadow rises high above the gates, haughty with the weight of the academy, in the sky. In Harold Bloom’s seminal *Anxiety of Influence*, poetic influence is the ‘history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist’ (30).<sup>15</sup> Within this fictional world, Battling creates his own Victor Hugo, equipped with pomp and tradition. Once incorporated into our own literary world, ‘the mighty dead return,’ Bloom says, ‘but they return in our colours, and speaking in our voices’ (41). Battling gives Hugo the flaws he needs to hate him and to feel superior to him.

To pull this overblown image of Hugo down to earth and subvert Romantic tradition, Battling throws those same obscene insults that first came from Céline at the statue: ‘Vieille tarte’ (142), he yells, ‘F... moi le camp que j’t’ai assez vu. Va faire l’amour avec les catins’ (143). Battling’s expletives sharply interrupt this pastiche of a Romantic night. He uses ‘tu’ to address Hugo, refusing to credit him with any respect. Fool, geezer, old coot. Hick. Floozy, strumpet? The slang is so out of place with the rest of the passage and feels dated in comparison to the eternal Romantic; its historicity pulls us from the timeless song. Clashing with Hugo’s poetry, the insults

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<sup>15</sup> Bloom’s work is problematic in contemporary literary studies. His vision of greatness, supposedly transcending culture to be universal, includes only the male Western canon. His *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) is nonetheless relevant here in terms of the way Vialatte, in 1928, engages with Victor Hugo as god-like.

miss their mark, sounding hollow and comic, and are censored (as signalled by the ellipses of the original that I struggle to reproduce in English). Agnès Spiquel notes that Vialatte's treatment of Hugo is always tinged with humour and complicity:

Cet humour constant ne relève pas de la récusation ou du meurtre du père, mais bien plutôt d'une libération salutaire par rapport à la grande ombre, qui n'exclut nullement une complicité joyeuse avec la truculence, ce plaisir des mots et l'enchantement des choses, le sens de l'humour aussi, que l'on trouve chez Hugo. (299)

The swerve in tone that accompanies Battling's insults adds to the text's exteriority to the Romantic tradition. The Romantic is out of place within *Battling* – or is Battling, and *Battling*, the one out of place?

The language of the passage conveys an underlying view that any attempt to remove Hugo from his throne would be ridiculous. Hugo dwells amongst the Gods, as cold, enduring stone, and is thus well beyond the reproach of mere earthly beings. The chapter ends with Battling dreaming of Victor Hugo belittling him with the same words: 'Va-t'en purée, je le dirai à ton instituteur' (145). Bloom cites Hugo as an example, amongst Milton and Goethe, of one of those few sub-gods who manage to avoid literature's natural revisionism. The dream scene's role reversal indicates that Hugo still has the power and Battling was only kidding himself. Any attempt to appropriate him, either by Battling or Vialatte, is tied up in the successor's fear of the predecessor's judgement.

Maybe the Romantics do take Battling in the end. While he does not find himself in the night, he ultimately surrenders to its abyss. The Romantics also associated the enchanting pull of night with death; if the struggles of life offered little meaning,



death provided a relief in nothingness and the Absolute. Yet Battling's death offers more an absurd anticlimax than a grand exit. Why does the text spend so much time on the Romantic self only to laugh in its face? *Battling* works precisely in this place of revision. Any longing for a foundational self is quickly satirised, any absorption in the hero's plight quickly theatricalised. Through Battling's doppelgängers and the collage of genres, we see the amusing efforts of the narrator to exteriorise Battling's inner self in prose. And this is the self the text tells us we can strive for: a modern subjectivity multiplied and divided across languages, torn between literary traditions and times, echoes coming together in fiction.

## Hunting Horns

Passons, passons, puisque tout passe

Nous nous retournerons souvent...

– GUILLAUME APOLLINAIRE

'Cors de chasse'

*Battling* opens with this epigraph from Guillaume Apollinaire. The poem, 'Cors de chasse', is about memory. It is about looking back while life keeps moving forward – a recognition of transience. The poem ends with the sound of horns dying on the wind: 'Les souvenirs sont cors de chasse/ Dont meurt le bruit parmi le vent' (lines 11, 12). Here, the *Wunderhorn* of German Romanticism that we saw in *The Lyric* meets the hunting horn, in France, which conjures old-fashioned chivalry and nobility. Rather than evoking the gritty side of dirt and death, the horn in art is an instrument of the 'cultural hunt', as Raymond Monelle calls it (35). We see nobility and ceremony, heroes and well-dressed privilege. The horn neatly encapsulates a romanticised representation of the past, and of war, wrapped in beautified ritual. It

sounds a literary melancholy for Apollinaire's speaker who roams the realms of the stage.

The poem, first published in 1912 in *Les Soirées de Paris*, evokes the end of a love affair with sadness and nostalgia. Apollinaire had parted ways with the artist Marie Laurencin and here he dramatises his personal sentiment. He writes of theatre and pathos, of Thomas de Quincey and his doomed love, of pre-destined tragedy. One man's remembered love enters a collective memory through drama and literary sentiment. Life is a story, grand and poetic, and the fleeting sound on the breeze of this individual's melancholy joins the collective song of the lyric.

The epigraph neatly symbolises Vialatte's writing of a mythical self. To close this chapter, I connect *Battling* with Vialatte's memory of another time, romanticised and poeticised into a collective song. As an adult in the modernist period post-war, Vialatte writes his nostalgia for youth, for a time when war was distant and abstract, for an old France, for a lyrical 'I', once sincere and essential. The result is an unreal past which can exist only from a modern present, and a mythical self – the eponymous Battling – who is not of any time. Both constructed and problematised through this looking back, Battling is without source origin or singular self.

Vialatte begins the story with a preface, introducing his own lyrical 'I'. He dedicates *Battling* to his brother and late friend Paul Pourrat and precedes the narrative with a lyrical letter to Paul. Paul died from tuberculosis about five years prior to the publication of *Battling*, after serving in World War One as a second lieutenant. Vialatte reminisces over their shared childhood and summons the memory of Paul, both the warmth of his teenage smile and the emptiness of his cold body in the military hospital.

There is an unmistakable connection between the preface and the novel. Both involve a trio of schoolboys roaming the countryside around small-town France, filled with the vigour and extraordinary dreams of youth. In both, the 'I' of the narrator looks back at what life was before the tragic passing of one of the crew, conjuring a distant brightness from within the darkness of war. The style is similar, the tone elegiac, the atmosphere that of a dream. Embedded as it is in the paratext of Battling's fictional world, we cannot take the 'I' of the preface for the author Vialatte himself. Yet the smooth transition from the 'I' of the preface to the 'I' of Battling's narrator must be by design. Whether he plays a game or not, Vialatte puts himself in his fiction. Far from autobiographical, *Battling* draws nonetheless on Vialatte's memories of a war-time adolescence to universalise and immortalise individual feeling in fiction.

Vialatte's efforts to portray a modern subject follow on from Apollinaire's. Apollinaire called on poets to 'invent a language for modernity, a language suitable, in Joyce's phrase, to the "velocity of modern life", specifically one that could evoke crowd and nation as the lyric had not done before' (Levenson 143). English translations of 'Cors de chasse' vary significantly. Donald Revell's version curiously translates 'Passons, passons, puisque tout passe' with 'We hurry since everything hurries' (159). While I prefer a more standard translation (such as Roger Shattuck's 'On, on, since all must pass' 131), Revell's interpretation emphasises the sensation of a hurried modernity juxtaposing a remembered past. He writes 'archaic horns' too, rather than 'hunting horns', clearly distinguishing an ancient past from the present. For the poem foregrounds the disconnect between the sound of a classic and chivalrous imaginary at our backs and the feel of Charles Baudelaire's fast-paced *modernité* that sweeps us away. But what of the hunt itself? The 'cors'/'corps'

homonym of the French is lost in English. Hunted body. Hunting horn. The epigraph signals the unspoken World War One narrative that lurks behind *Battling*.

Vialatte recontextualises and builds on the sentiment of passing, where love and feeling has fallen behind the speed of the modern post-war present and left only nostalgia. Interestingly, Vialatte alters the poem, replacing Apollinaire's first-person singular '*je me retournerai souvent*' with the plural '*nous nous retournerons souvent*'. The 'I' has become 'we'. In 'Cors de chasse', everyone is moving forward, the masses swarming onward, but the speaker distinguishes himself from the crowd, and from the audience, with his 'I'. He alone looks back, an individual among the rest, of singular feeling, yet in concert. In Vialatte's version, there is no singular subjectivity, only the collective; the reader takes part in turning back and remembering, and the voice is a constellation without an 'I'.

Like the song of Apollinaire's horn dying on the breeze, Vialatte's preface is lyrical. The following brief extract encapsulates the style of the preface which is all feeling and memory, sounds and patterns, pieced together in disconnected fragments. In this sensory collage of life, the moments of the preface confuse, defying chronology and death, and the emotion conjured lies outside time. Paul is alive and dead, and within the memories of the past lies the future. Addressing his friend - 'tu' - beyond the grave, Vialatte recalls here the roads of their youth and the fringe of green fields:

Qu'il y avait d'espoir sur les routes, et de tournants, et de grands signes,  
et d'appels, et de voix qui passaient. Quand c'était vraiment trop beau,  
vieux Paul, alors, tout secoué d'un lyrisme, tu plantais rudement ton  
bâton dans l'herbe épaisse, tu rigolais jusqu'aux oreilles et tu récitais ce  
Froissart dont l'étoffe te semblait riche et la sève nourrissante : « Et les  
blés étoient drus au royaume de France... » (16)

How there was hope, on those roads, and bends, and big signs, and calls, and voices that passed. When it was truly too perfect, old boy, only then, trembling with lyricism, you would plant your stick roughly in the thick grass, you would grin from ear to ear and you would recite that Froissart with its pith you thought so rich and its juices so vital: ‘Et les blés étoient drus au royaume de France...’

The repetitive sentence structure, ‘qu’il y avait’... ‘quand c’était’, or ‘how there was... when it was’, gives shape to the song, wherein unknown and unembodied voices contribute to its chorus. The road begins a motif throughout the novel; not as a road localised in place and time, but as the winding and fictional life of the text, outside time and outside singular subjectivity, a journey to somewhere else. In his correspondence to Henri Pourrat in 1924, Vialatte writes about ‘l’espoir ... sur les routes’, referring, in that specific case, to the road to Berlin (*Correspondance* 3 58). Here, the roads of Vialatte’s memory, of paths from France to Germany, of the country highways of his childhood in the Auvergne, drift into a larger memory – less specific, available for projection upon by others.

Vialatte, his brother and Paul ran through the woods and apostrophised the mountains. An inner richness burned in them and words burst from their veins to join the breeze, harmonising with that thick grass and with nature in all its abundance. In this extract, Vialatte remembers Paul’s passion for the language of Jean Froissart (1337-1405).<sup>16</sup> Paul thought the ‘étouffe’ of Froissart’s words rich, and its ‘sève’, ‘nourrissant’. ‘Étoffe’ might be fabric, material, or cloth, but I maintain the natural life imagery in English with ‘pith’. I like that ‘pith’, as a term to describe expression

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<sup>16</sup> Exact dates unknown.

or the essence of something, comes from the spongy insides of fruits and plants. In French, 'la sève de la jeunesse' describes the vigour of youth. I translate 'sève' with 'juices' so that a youthful life force merges with the fluid of sap and of nature. For it is in communing with nature that the boys find their lyricism.

The old French follows: 'Et les blés étoient drus au royaume de France'. How to translate such a line which, through its intertextuality, form and content, evokes a different France of chevaliers, medieval and prospering? The old language and alexandrine verse express a different experience of being; standard English would smooth out the significance of form. Back then, in those words, the wheat was always abundant. Like Paul's view of Froissart's time and lyricism, Vialatte's depiction of his childhood is mythical and idealised. It is a time that memory declares 'too perfect' or 'too beautiful'. The rich pith of Froissart's past meets Vialatte's poetry in that circular, winding route that is the timeless tradition of the lyric. The writer can never truly write the present. Here beneath the lyrical subject lies a constellation of voices, brought together through the rich juices of the human language. But it is all too perfect. Hearing the call of the hunting horn in the distance, we turn towards an unreal past that can always be heard but will never be recovered. Over time, the *cor de chasse* became an instrument of military music rather than of the hunt. The motif signals not only fond memories but the darkness and sadness of the nostalgia that comes with war. Things have changed that render the past irrevocable, if in fact it was ever how we remembered it. The call of the past is already broken by its present.

Born in 1901, Vialatte lived his teenage years through World War One. In his correspondence to Henri Pourrat at that time, he mentions the war on occasion but as a distant fact, something that happens elsewhere and to others, conceived through

schoolboy landmarks of terms and holidays.<sup>17</sup> He notes the inward-looking quality of his own lyricism in 1917: ‘mon lyrisme m’emporte et je ne puis m’arrêter. Je cesse donc et je vous entretiens des événements de la guerre’ (*Correspondance 1* 63). Vialatte’s inner lyric continues on separately, and regardless of, the outside world. When he writes *Battling* (1927-1928), adulthood has come and with it the reality of war and the death of Paul. In the novel, however, war exists once again in the distance; through the lens of a fictional adolescence, it is envisaged ‘de l’arrière et totalement déréalisée’ (Milkovitch-Rioux 45). *Battling* follows the form of Jean Yves-Tadié’s ‘récit poétique’, entering a mythical domain (11). Its fictional world is closed to the outside, in a kind of idealised bubble filled with nature and outside time. War and death play a fantastical role, hovering in the distance as representation rather than reality, serving as a gloomy lens through which we see the schoolboys’ existence. While the dark realities of adulthood cannot infiltrate the teenage dream for much of the narrative, the tendrils of future crises writhe their way into Vialatte’s telling.

Within this closed world, the text’s mythical self is a creature of poetry, of language and song. As Tadié writes, ‘le héros du récit poétique est à la fois le sujet d’une quête et le sujet d’une phrase ; porteur d’un désir inassouvi, il s’éveille au cœur de la « prose sensuelle » ...’ (46). With Vialatte’s and the narrator’s ‘I’ telling the tale of another – someone immortalised, dead, fictionalised, forever young – comes the ephemeral *Battling*, made of pieces, memories, dislocated voices, a connection of

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<sup>17</sup> On 4 February 1917, he writes, ‘la fin de la guerre, si elle pouvait finir avec des grandes vacances...’ (qtd. in *Correspondances 1* 44).

past and present. As a teenager, Battling lives in a fantastical world of possibility, but his character is equally imbued with forewarning. His youth is weighed down by the writer who struggles for expression amidst the post-war crisis of meaning.

Battling learns to play military music on his *clairon*, or bugle, after school. His horn follows Apollinaire's, joining the song of old-school chivalry that is mere memory and myth for the new modern subject. It joins the song of *The Boy's Magic Horn* too, and of Gustav Mahler's music to those German poems produced later in 1905. From Vialatte's present, the horn sounds the myth of the 'brute paisible', the chevalier, the *beau ténébreux*: a nostalgic call to an unattainable self through the song of the lyric. As we saw throughout this chapter *The Great Battling*, the text problematises that same lyrical 'I' that it draws upon. Apollinaire's language of modernity also entailed 'the release of experience into heterogeneity and discontinuity' (Levenson 143). *Battling* is not about the 'je' of the Romantic lyric but about the lack of any foundational self. Any sense of a neat individual speaker expressing the truth of his inner self announces its deception. If the rural backwater of the novel's setting stands still, peaceful and unchanging, Battling – multiplied and divided across the ages into an uneasy 'we' – flails in crisis, unable to feel at home in his world.

The text's mythical subject is not only without origin in time but without origin in language, unhomely in his want for national identity. Battling's *clairon* is equally a *cor de chasse*, a bugle, a *parforcehorn*, a flugelhorn, forming and transforming in translation. Interestingly, the German translation of the French 'cor de chasse' – 'parforcehorn' – retains the French 'par force'. Again calling upon a noble and idealised vision of the hunt, the German language appeals to the luxurious associations of the French language and culture of the epoch to signify this horn (J.



D. Wilson 170). In the final part of the next chapter, *The Writer Unhoused*, I present Vialatte as not only calling upon Froissart and French horns but also on the ‘parforcehorn’ – a symbol of that vision of France, and of battle, romanticised from the outside. Exposing the subject’s dislocation and plurality, *Battling* is a call to an unreal French self – beyond tradition, we hear it softly in the wind.

# 3

## The Unhomeliness of Coming of Age

### **‘La caricature n’est pas de l’art, c’est de l’anarchie’**

#### A translation<sup>1</sup>

Clair-de-Lune, the caretaker – a melancholy import from the main industrial town who sold Menier chocolates at break and rang the bell to divide the time – came up to the half-open door, his belly sheathed in a blue apron:

‘Feracci is wanted in the principal’s office.’

Feracci assumed the disdainful expression time-honoured by senior boys, put down his pen, threw back his long black hair to expose a noble brow, and made a show of taking his time getting up. He did his best to appear thoroughly exasperated as he left the study hall.

‘Back to work’, announced Rétine, and the heads turned back to their books.

On the landing, in front of the principal’s door, an araucaria held sway in a smell of wax-polish. A baby smeared with sweets hid behind an umbrella stand.

‘Enter’, came a curt voice.

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<sup>1</sup> From *Battling* (27-34). See Appendix: Extract 2 for source text.

Sunlight glistened over glass displays holding rows of preserved butterflies, purple stones and old books. In the middle, the principal sat behind a yellow desk, his torso tilted back against a curved armchair and his hooked nose supporting a large smooth forehead as a flying buttress supports a vault. He had a blond moustache, black tails, a wing collar that left his active Adam's apple bare, and celluloid cuffs that he pushed up from time to time. The head supervisor, taking down figures in a fat book in a corner of the room, looked up for a moment without moving his head, then finished writing a number, put down his pen, and settled back in his chair so he could contribute to the meeting with his manner. He wore long yellow shoes that shone like the floor, with a severe toe and horizontal creases on the vamp. His moustache planted two brick-red commas beneath flushed cheeks, and his eyebrows were like two fat red caterpillars at rest.

Silence descended over the room and, with it, the gravity of a court case. I'm going to be tried, thought Manuel, seeing the supervisor's gesture, tried in the name of the preserved butterflies, the purple stones and the old books, in the name of the enamelled cast iron umbrella stand, the baby smeared with sweets and the domesticated araucaria.

The principal let the silence do its work. He had moved his armchair back a little further, crossed his legs and pushed his left thumb through the armhole of his waistcoat. Eyebrows raised, head tilted back and to the side, he looked at his right hand which was holding the pince-nez that he tapped against the side of the desk.

Manuel stiffened, irritated, ripe for insolence. He didn't like the principal because he had long thin arms that he used to telegraph his speech and he enunciated the silent 'e' of his words as he struck the last syllable. He wanted to ward off the gravity that his superior was brewing with silence.

'You sent for me, Monsieur.'

(Feracci never said, 'Monsieur le principal', like the other students and the majority of teachers, to avoid, as he put it, subscribing to 'the customs of the tribe'.) The principal was still. He stopped tapping the pince-nez, raised his eyebrows a little higher, and turned to look at the supervisor. With a bitter smile, the supervisor nodded his head mechanically. When he stopped his bobbing, nothing could be heard. The principal turned his head to Manuel, looked him in

the eye at last and vigorously wrinkled his nose, revealing the very high beginnings of his moustache.

‘You smell of tobacco, Feracci. Have you been smoking?’

He spoke dispassionately, like a man who observes.

‘Yes, Monsieur.’

Manuel had spent the four o’clock break ‘Chez Aristide’ shooting pool with Damour.

‘And you have the nerve to tell me to my face...’

‘You asked,’ Manuel cut in, ‘I won’t lie.’

He was suddenly hit by a cold rage brought on by the principal’s theatrics, a need to be insolent, to be in the bad books. He would have preferred a clean and categorical ‘telling off’ but he sensed that the principal was instead carefully preparing perfect phrases, that he was playing a part as easy as it was cheap just to please himself and the scarlet idiot following his example in the corner.

‘Indeed!’ said the principal, tilting his head forward, a little taken aback. ‘There are two types of sincerity, my dear boy: candour and cynicism. Do you know in which category I put yours?’

He had opened his arms wide over the general affirmation, raised his index finger at the cynicism and the candour, and posed the question slowly, with a nod of his head, assuming an expression of utmost curiosity. Manuel contained his irritation.

‘It is a question of little interest, Monsieur,’ he replied, with calculated exasperation.

Never had a student dared to display such insolence. But why push him over the edge? By now he was fed up. They could expel him, mete out whichever academic disgrace – he still wouldn’t play along with this pretentious pontificator, pretending not to see how ludicrously out of proportion such theatrics were with the grounds for accusation.

Meanwhile, the principal affected a new wave of calm. The supervisor looked disapprovingly at Manuel, seeming to say: ‘why make things worse for yourself?’ The principal glanced at the supervisor, raising his eyebrows as before. The supervisor nodded his head again with the same bitter smile, and the principal turned back to the culprit.

‘It is a question which will be of interest Saturday afternoon at four o’clock. Since we have all agreed that you do not lie, you will explain, Monsieur Feracci,

with that fine candour of yours, you will explain, I say, without fuss, what you were doing last night at a quarter past two, in – if I am not mistaken – the streets of the old town, instead of sleeping peacefully in your good father’s house like a sensible boy.’

Manuel trembled. He had not expected such a question. Who, then, had managed to spot him? He hesitated before answering.

‘It is a question which concerns only my father.’

‘And of course, with your fine candour, you will have informed your good father about your late-night whims?’

Manuel succumbed to the urge to brag. ‘My father does not concern himself with trifles. He has a whole host of demands upon his time. I only speak to him of my plans when I need money.’

But the principal was not that stupid. He had seen Monsieur Feracci, the antique dealer on rue Magenta, in the course of the afternoon and had made some discreet enquiries.

‘Naturally,’ he replied. ‘Monsieur Feracci would not be the first father to be mistaken about his son, would he? And now, what have we here?’

He had taken a rather tragic watercolour in the vein of Grosz out of his blotter: in a crudely playful portrait, a doddering Baladier sat slumped in a pink armchair, his jacket’s twelve pockets and dog-head buttons making him the very picture of Mediocrity. With a bag of flowers between his legs, he was blowing on a pathetic-looking daisy and, in this spirit of heavy-handed frivolity, plucking its petals like Gretchen in *Faust*. A completely naked Madame Vachette took centre stage at a counter overwrought by pretentious woodwork. With a few cruelly chosen details – the indentations from the corset, the streaks of the stays, the bright red vessels on her face, a colourful ribbon around her neck – her body had been transformed into an utterly obscene nude, misshapen, pitiful, repulsive. A cupid lay flat on its stomach atop a cloud in the sky, solemnly playing the trombone. The piece, set off by pale mauve, acid green and glandular pink, was entitled ‘Marivaudage’ and signed with Feracci’s initials. He had managed to convey all the disgust of our demanding youth.

‘It’s a caricature.’

‘It is even, if I am not mistaken, your caricature of Monsieur Baladier,’ said the principal.

‘And do not take that as a compliment. A caricature with which you aspire to give free rein to an obscene fiction? A silly caricature. You are proud of it, Feracci, are you not? And therein,’ he added violently, ‘therein lies what I cannot tolerate! What gives you the right, Feracci, not even a high school graduate, still wet behind the ears, to shamefully ridicule one of your schoolmasters, a teacher who has shown you kindness to the point of weakness, to spinelessly scorn a man who has earned his qualifications through sheer hard work, qualifications that you, taking this road, will never hold, you little twit, with your misplaced disdain, an honest man who practices with dignity a profession venerable above all others, that of an educator, a man who, if he looks to be on his last legs, has only his job to thank, and the resignation that comes from educating ungrateful boys. Ridiculed by a kid. A snotty-nosed kid!’ He repeated this several times to thoroughly humiliate Manuel.

‘Exactly, Feracci, a snotty-nosed kid. Is your pride injured? A real man would not have stooped to such an act. If only you could call it art. But it seems that your notion of art is as absurd as your conduct – you spurn beauty for pornography. I noticed half a dozen silly magazines in your desk dedicated to the aesthetics of three or four revolutionary lowlifes who have come from across the Rhine to destroy the French sense of the noble and the beautiful. Do not be surprised to find them gone – I am confiscating them. Oh, in the name of art, of truth, we could do many things, but I forbid you to speak of it, anarchist, you will dirty it. Art lifts up the soul, the spirit, the emotions; it does not crudely transcribe the soul’s lowest instincts, or elicit foul laughter, debauchery, revolt. Would you call these filthy sketches art? Sketches by worthless painters who, incapable of speaking to the noble regions of the human heart, appeal to the most ignoble and contemptuous qualities of an instinct they got from the Bolsheviks? These obscene and morbid images? Caricature is not art, it is anarchy. Before you play the artist, boy, learn a little about life, and before that, get a diploma. But you are so far from that path. What will you do in life without your baccalaureate? I know your type, pathetic creatures, wretched worms who spend their time at high school smoking in the toilets and scorning their schoolmasters. There were three in my cohort: the first went bankrupt and blew off his head, the second is vegetating because he couldn’t get a job in the civil service, and the third has become an antimilitarist. It’s a slippery slope, dear boy. For some time, Feracci, we have noticed a tendency in you to play the

grown man, the maverick, to think yourself a cut above the rest, and to offer the worst possible example to classmates over whom your influence surprises me. You speak to your teachers with a rude carelessness, you stroll the corridors, hands in pockets, with the nonchalance of an idle office manager, and you are found smoking, playing cards, in cafés, in bars of disrepute, where I, a man of forty, would blush to enter. Do not deny it, the deputy judge has seen you. That is all going to stop, my boy, take heed. Your air of insolent superiority is not welcome here. Saturday afternoon, Feracci, at twenty past four, in this office, you will appear before a disciplinary committee to answer for your late-night jaunt and your conduct in town, your cowardly insolence with regard to Monsieur Baladier and your attitude towards me. Your good father will be notified this very evening and, in the meantime – take this down, if you will, Monsieur Trottier – consider yourself on detention until Sunday, without prejudice to what will follow. You're dismissed.'

## The Unhomeliness of Coming of Age

J'appelle monstre toute originale  
inépuisable beauté.

– ALFRD JARRY

'Les Monstres'

In 1896 Alfred Jarry's play *Ubu roi* opened in Paris with the now famous exclamation: 'Merdre!' The French word for 'shit', significantly misspelt with an extra 'r', introduces the stomach-churning, nonsensical riot that is to come. Typical of Jarry's wordplay, 'merdre' stands for all that is unnamable, and begins what Christian Prigent calls Ubu's 'voix venue de la merde' (334). Drawing from the lower instincts of humanity, particularly scatology, Jarry modifies obscenities – hence the interpolated 'r' in 'merde' – for a defamiliarised language that nevertheless encapsulates what it feels like to be a schoolboy: uncertain in one's body, filled with unhinged desire, uncomfortable with rules and with established (that is, adult) language and forms of representation. Jarry's style purposefully opposes the language taught at *lycée* and replaces it with a subjective language that more fittingly expresses schoolboy culture, or 'culture potachique' (Prigent 330–31; Béhar 16, 98–99). With the liberation of form and the embracing of taboo that came from adopting a schoolboy perspective, *Ubu roi* paved the way for the *théâtre de l'absurde* and the twentieth century avant-garde.



Jarry's infamous play rocked the bourgeois version of the world. Following the nineteenth century decadent poets, Jarry wished to 'épater le bourgeois' and designed the monster Ubu to reflect all that is wrong with middle-class society. Ubu busies himself not just with 'merdre' but with 'pataphysics', the science of imaginary solutions and 'phynance', finance gone mad in a money hungry world. Jarry's inspiration for Ubu famously came from his high school physics teacher, Monsieur Herbert, who, to his teenage self, represented the quintessential ordinary and repulsive bourgeois. As 'merde' became 'merdre', 'Herbert' became 'Ubu', his human form mutating with his name. Following Jarry's project to reveal the world differently, he liberated not just language from form but visuals; Ubu is a puppet of building blocks, absurdly mashed together. Jarry deliberately used familiar and historical objects to form Ubu, objects which would resonate with the audience but in an unnerving and comedic manner (Fell 27–28). Would the bourgeoisie recognise themselves?

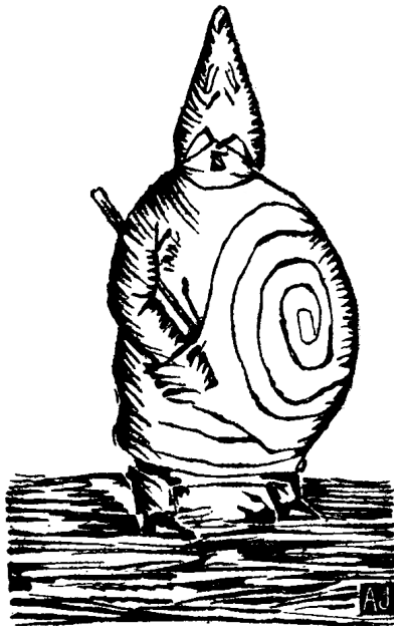


Fig. 1 Jarry, Alfred. 'Véritable portrait de Monsieur Ubu.' 1896.

Ubu enters *Battling*'s narrative, squelching in the mud around the *Mexico City* inn where the schoolboy trio, Battling, Manuel and the narrator, go to escape the adult world and the rigid frame of the establishment. At the head of a motley crew of invented characters, he roams in their schoolboy imaginary. With Ubu by their side, the boys can give free reign to all that is irreverent and absurd, shocking and liberating, violent and all too real. He serves as a sort of class talisman; just as Jarry constructed Ubu from Monsieur Herbert, *Battling*'s schoolboys portray their own teachers as the banal bourgeois enemy. Where Monsieur Herbert represented for Jarry 'tout le grotesque qui fût au monde' (*Ubu* 8),<sup>2</sup> the trio associate their maths teacher, Monsieur Baladier, with 'tous les dégoûts de [leur] jeunesse exigeante' (32). Pronouncing Baladier blind to a true version of the world, they ironically dub him 'Rétine'. The trio want to experience disturbing wonders but Baladier reins over their adolescence, embodying earthly mediocrity and refuting the imaginary (25); for youth with youth's dreams, the blindness of adulthood is disgusting.

The intertextual presence of Ubu enables *Battling* to continue a dialogue, resuming and transforming Jarry's *culture potachique* and giving voice to its own schoolboy subjectivity. While Vialatte takes a very different stylistic approach, he equally uses the lens of adolescence to depict a dark strangeness of being which is fitting to its epoch. In the last chapter, we saw the eponymous Battling striving to embody the Romantic 'I' and failing pathetically; here a schoolboy 'we' engages with the modernist crisis of the self and interwar modes of representation. Together, the boys

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<sup>2</sup> From introductory remarks before performance.

see things differently – they are the artists and it is their disgust that Rétine represents, the disgust of a collective youth. In this period of engaged art, *Battling* associates a schoolboy imaginary with the avant-garde and the boys' teachers with the bourgeois establishment: it is an 'us against them' narrative. Detached from the accepted way of things amid their *culture potachique*, the boys see the messy edges and possibilities of the world through dreams, fantasies, vulgarity, desire – the teachers are blind.

In this chapter, I position *Battling*'s portrayal of adolescence as representative of the unhomely existence of the modern subject. I examine the schoolboys' creative outlets from the perspective of modernist art; the first segment, *Caricatures and culture potachique*, dissects Manuel's caricature of his teacher and the next, *Between Dog and Wolf*, turns to the trio's collective dreamscape. I argue, in *Outside Ourselves*, that these modes of expression represent efforts to portray a dislocated interiority fitting to the epoch. Finally, in *The Writer Unhoused*, I link the strangeness of existence that pervades *Battling* with Vialatte's fascination with German Romanticism; the outmoded movement does not smoothly translate into this post-WWI *roman d'apprentissage*.

## Caricatures and culture potachique

The heads of the pupils are black between the white handles of their ears. The teacher's chest floats in the air above the steam from the stove, small and insignificant in the distance. Architectural building blocks with supports and vaults form the head of the principal whose hand moves as though detached from his body. The supervisor, with red commas for a moustache and caterpillars for eyebrows, nods his head in the corner like a pendulum, bobbing up and down. Shapes pile atop one another like in a cubist painting in *Battling's* classrooms. People and things move geometrically, perspective alters our view and atmospheres and moods are material: thick like paint, smooth like sculptures. When the principal orders Manuel to his office because of an obscene caricature he drew of Rétine, the reprimand quickly turns into a metafictional debate on modernist art. Not only does the text's prose play with interwar modes of representation but Manuel's caricature is steeped in expressionism.

In this 'us against them' narrative, the principal is the authoritarian state. He fights for the establishment, for classic art and the French sense of the noble and the beautiful. Manuel wants to do things differently – current aesthetics cannot adequately represent the experience of being. He is the cultural Bolshevik, the anarchist, embracing foreign influence, revealing hidden violence and making it new. Rétine, alongside love interest Madame Vachette, serves as Manuel's subject. Their portraits introduce the text's delight in the strangeness of ordinary man. The modern subject has entered the masses and become nondescript, one of many. Yet in Vialatte's œuvre, 'il [l'homme moderne] devient étrange par sa banalité même, particulier par son absence de particularité' (Jourde, Introduction xiii). Anne-Laure

Milcent goes further to describe this ordinariness typical of Vialatte's depiction of being as a monstrosity. She describes Monsieur Panado, a character from *Les Fruits du Congo* who shares traits with Rétine, as 'Monsieur tout le monde', but his banality is far from comforting; he incarnates rather the monstrous inside the everyman (79).

When we first meet Baladier and Madame Vachette, these townfolk in *Battling*, the sounds around them are rich and thick and plump.<sup>3</sup> Baladier buys his tobacco from Madame Vachette and the two enjoy the small things in her shop: the faint blush that comes from flirting, the cosy warmth of a wood stove. They represent the buttoned-up bourgeoisie, unfulfilled and inhibited; Baladier teases Madame Vachette at one point for her 'Freudian repression' (24). At this stage, however, the narrator presents the mediocrity of day-to-day bourgeois existence in an affectionate, if mocking, tone:

La conversation prenait alors quelque chose de joufflu, de confortable, et, dans la chaleur du poêle, la vie valait d'être vécue. L'existence acquérait une épaisseur particulière ; l'amitié, la conversation, la belle humeur, le zouave du Job lui donnaient une saveur nourrissante. (23)

And so the conversation took on a cosy quality, like chubby cheeks, and, in the warmth of the stove, life was worth living. Existence acquired a certain thickness – friendship, conversation, high spirits and the Zouave on the Job cigarettes gave it a rich flavour.

'Quelque chose de joufflu.' A plump quality, a cosiness. Or is it more than that? A human plumpness. This feeling of chubby cheeks, this fullness of person, becomes important when later contrasted with a bourgeois emptiness. Existence is 'thick' here,

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<sup>3</sup> Alongside this plumpness, the name 'Vachette' itself rings of 'vache' – a resonance that is lost in translation.

not empty. Or is it ‘deep’ or ‘rich’? ‘Richness’ flows more naturally and couples neatly with ‘saveur nourrissante’ – for these ordinary old townsfolk, life has found a flavour which feeds the soul. A ‘relish’. But I cannot repeat ‘rich’: ‘richness of existence’, ‘rich flavour’. I’m struck by the lack of synonyms for ‘rich’ in this sense in English – creamy, full, robust? Perhaps the focus should rather be on the depth and materiality of existence. The strangeness of ‘thickness’ in this context is also what gives the text’s language its iconicity and I’m wary, more than ever with Vialatte’s vivid prose, of translation’s inherently standardising tendency (Toury 303–04). To preserve the underlying network of signification (Berman, ‘Auberge’ 61–62), and perhaps compensate for my failure to reproduce those neat v’s (‘vie valait... vécue’), I spatter some similarly thick terms elsewhere. Are the ‘Picaduros mafflus’ (23) that we see Baladier buy at Madame Vachette’s just before this extract ‘fat’ cigars, for example, or ‘plump’, with the cute round sounds that come with it? Are the ‘toréadors avantageux’ (23) printed on the tobacco packet ‘superior’, ‘self-satisfied’, ‘supercilious’, or rather ‘puffed up’? In translation, I want the toreadors to prance across the label, their chests puffed out with these swollen signifiers.

When we switch to the schoolboys’ perspective, however, the small-town warmth that surrounds Baladier and Madame Vachette evaporates. As a schoolmaster destroying dreams, Baladier mutates into Rétine and becomes slippery and thin, weaselly instead of plump. ‘En face de cet homme sans fantaisie qui niait l’imagination par sa seule présence,’ the narrator relates, ‘nous dissimulions nos âmes encombrantes sous des sourires sans sincérité’ (25). All those slippery s’s – the sounds have changed. ‘Insincere smiles’? English works just as well. Baladier is like a scarecrow, the narrator says, ‘mou’ and ‘banal’ (25). At first, I translate ‘mou’ as

‘meek’, but I wonder about ‘limp’ or ‘floppy’. Opposing the chubby cheeks above is this straw emptiness.

Like Jarry’s distortion of Monsieur Herbert, Manuel brings out the ugly side of the bourgeoisie in his caricature of Rétine and Madame Vachette. Both are slumped or slouched in their chairs – ‘affaissé’ and ‘avachi’. But are they simply weary or is there something more? Translation demands interpretation. Perhaps, instead of ‘slumped’, Baladier and Madame Vachette are sagging, drooping, crumpled, rumples, shapeless. The schoolboy lens dehumanises the mediocre bourgeoisie into spiritless shells of beings. As we see in Manuel’s depiction below, in the eyes of youth, adults are simply withered bodies with no imagination or wonder left inside them:

Il avait sorti de son buvard une aquarelle assez tragique exécutée dans le genre de Gross ; on y voyait un Baladier définitivement gâteux affaissé dans un fauteuil rose ; avec les douze poches de sa veste et ses boutons à tête de chien, il semblait personnifier le concept Médiocre sur un mode lourdement badin ; cette impression de frivolité pesante était accrue par un sac de fleurs qu’il tenait entre ses jambes et par une marguerite assez lamentable qu’il effeuillait en soufflant dessus comme la dame de la librairie Larousse ; Mme Vachette, complètement nue, trônait à un comptoir surchargé d’ébénisteries prétentieuses ; des détails cruellement choisis, la déformation du corset, les zébrures des baleines, des couperoses soulignées, un ruban vif autour du cou, faisaient de son corps un nu absolument obscène, avachi, miteux et repoussant. En haut, à plat ventre sur un nuage, un petit Amour jouait du trombone avec componction. Le tout, rehaussé de mauve pâle, de vert acide, et de rose glande, s’intitulait « Marivaudage » et se trouvait signé des initiales de

Feracci. Il avait réussi à mettre là-dedans tous les dégoûts de notre jeunesse exigeante. (31-32)<sup>4</sup>

He had taken a rather tragic watercolour in the vein of Grosz out of his blotter: in a crudely playful portrait, a doddering Baladier sat slumped in a pink armchair, his jacket's twelve pockets and dog-head buttons making him the very picture of Mediocrity. With a bag of flowers between his legs, he was blowing on a pathetic-looking daisy and, in this spirit of heavy-handed frivolity, plucking its petals like Gretchen in Faust. A completely naked Madame Vachette took centre stage at a counter overwrought by pretentious woodwork. With a few cruelly chosen details – the indentations from the corset, the streaks of the stays, the bright red vessels on her face, a colourful ribbon around her neck – her body had been transformed into an utterly obscene nude, misshapen, pitiful, repulsive. A cupid lay flat on its stomach atop a cloud in the sky, solemnly playing the trombone. The piece, set off by pale mauve, acid green and glandular pink, was entitled 'Marivaudage' and signed with Feracci's initials. He had managed to convey all the disgust of our demanding youth.

Manuel's rather tragic watercolour resembles the work of George Grosz. Born Georg Ehrenfried Groß (1893-1959), Grosz was a German expressionist painter and member of the Berlin Dada group. Active in the nineteen-twenties, Grosz depicted Berlin and the Weimar Republic as modern urban settings filled with violence, sex and businessmen, and he targeted the bourgeoisie.<sup>5</sup> He often used caricature and

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<sup>4</sup> This translated extract comes from the same passage that opens this chapter: 'La caricature n'est pas de l'art, c'est de l'anarchie'. It is present again here, this time with original and translation side by side, as a reference for the close reading to come. Such small-scale repetition occurs also in Chapters Four and Five.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, 'Attack on the Bourgeoisie' (1920), 'Mirror of the Bourgeoisie' (1925), 'Married Couple' (1930).



watercolour in a deliberately ugly and provocative aesthetic to expose the unspoken and unseen realities of a cruel humanity: a grotesque representation of a gruesome time. Manuel follows his lead, as does the harsh and angular form of the French prose that describes the sketch: ‘une aquarelle assez tragique exécutée...’. Through this allusion to Grosz, cosmopolitan concerns from across the Rhine infiltrate *Battling*’s timeless small-town setting and its classic conceptions of art.

The debate between the principal and Manuel finds itself firmly planted then in the interwar period, between France and Germany, amidst the avant-garde revolt against the authoritative power of controlling states. The principal’s attack on progressive and foreign art from across the Rhine comes at a time of fierce nationalism. Germany in the nineteen-twenties saw the rise of the fascist state and of Adolf Hitler and, correspondingly, a wave of politically engaged art. Vehemently anti-fascist, Grosz changed the spelling of his name – Georg to George, and phoneticised the German ß to Grosz – in opposition to German nationalism. Vialatte spells ‘Gross’ with a double ‘s’, presumably following the French spelling of the German ß, but in English the strange ‘sz’, which we now transcribe with ‘ss’, retains something of the artist’s singularity and discomfort in his German language.

As the principal’s minion, Baladier represents one of the masses, ordinary and repulsive. Manuel portrays Baladier as ‘définitivement gâteux’. Senile, soft in the head, off with the fairies. Doddering. Definitely doddering? I’m tempted to cut the adverb which feels out of place. But does ‘définitivement’ signal ‘forever’, or ‘by definition’ – the very essence of Baladier. The movement that comes with ‘doddering’ alone adds a macabre iconicity to our image of Rétime. Just as the supervisor nods away mechanically like a puppet (29), Baladier is an empty vessel,

carrying on without question in a senseless world. In his wretched old age, Baladier returns to infancy. We pity this man, who does not even get a ‘bouquet’ or a ‘bunch’ of flowers but a ‘bag’ and who insensibly holds on to hope for love by blowing on and plucking the petals of a miserable daisy like the Larousse lady – ‘je sème à tout vent’. But the publishing house’s lady famously blows on a daffodil, not a daisy. Manuel’s sketch rather calls to mind the daisy oracle. He loves me, he loves me not. *Il m’aime, un peu, beaucoup, passionnément, à la folie, pas du tout.* His modernist piece is a collage, a mix of intertexts reworked in a new context. The youthful image of the childish and hopeful daisy oracle, along with the elegance of the Larousse icon, mutates into disgust and despair as it is applied to Baladier’s character. I do not want to lose the incongruity of this love story in translation – the Larousse icon will likely disorient an English reader. Perhaps I could refer to Gretchen in *Faust* (1808, 1832), playing out the famous daisy scene in the garden? I lose the collage of intertexts but gain Goethe’s devil playing havoc with human lust. Manuel’s exaggerated sentimentalism finds its outlet in Baladier as a young girl.

Madame Vachette is equally pathetic, presiding regally over her tobacco counter. The French verb, ‘trôner’ denotes sitting on the throne or taking centre stage in the picture. Her ‘queenly’ bearing contrasts deliciously with her naked and repulsive appearance. Starting with ‘déformation du corset’, Madame Vachette’s appearance swells with studied word choices. The ‘marks’ left by the corset, the ‘indentation’? The French exaggerates the problem with ‘déformation’: deformity? disfigurement? Bodily decay comes to the surface while the model, completely oblivious, poses proudly. Her ‘zébrures des baleines’ or, in English, ‘streaks of the stays’, follow as the next cruelly *chosen* detail. In English, I try to tie together this absurd and repulsive

list with sounds ('streaks... stays') but the French terms, considered through possible English translations – 'whalebone', 'zebra stripes' – evoke something animalistic. While the bourgeoisie try to hide their depravity, Manuel exposes it. Madame Vachette's naked body, red and misshapen, is nonetheless wrapped in a bow like a puppy, complete with cute animal imagery: the veneer of misplaced bourgeois pride. Overall, this take on Madame Vachette, 'faisait de son corps un nu absolument obscène.' No longer simply 'naked', she has been turned into a 'nude', made a work of Art. The text reminds us that we must choose a perspective and transform reality into art, not simply replicate it. And while Baladier is the epitome of mediocrity, Madame Vachette is 'absolument obscène'. 'Utterly obscene' reads more naturally in English but what Manuel seeks is the absolute. Madame Vachette's fleshy form is the incarnation of youth's disgust.

The whole painting is similarly overdone. Manuel's depiction of Baladier as mediocrity is 'lourdement badin' and its 'frivolité pesante' is then only 'accrue'. 'Heavily playful', 'weighty frivolity'. We are weighed down with light-heartedness. The oxymorons are even starker in English, where the 'heavy' and 'weighty' lend a seriousness to Manuel's pursuit that is comic. But a better translation of 'lourdement' and 'pesant' would also connote the unsubtle nature of the pen or paintbrush that comes out more in the French. Not just heavy but heavy-handed, not just weighty but unwieldy, clumsy or crude. An 'écrivain pesant', as the *Larousse* offers, is one 'qui manque d'agilité, de vivacité'. 'Crudely playful'? 'Heavy-handed frivolity'? The oxymorons are tautological. I play around with the syntax of this sentence, the superfluous terms, semi-colons and passive phrasing, like so often, sounding themselves cumbersome and unwieldy in English. The problem points to the irony in

the narrator's description – the text's language imitates the tone of the caricature. As the bourgeoisie prance and posture, the narrator peppers his prose with pretentious-sounding adjectives. Madame Vachette presides over her counter and the text describes it with long adjectives and rare nouns whose sounds bump into each other in their floridity: 'surchargé d'ébénisteries prétentieuses.' A pretentious façade but crumpled within.

A trio of revolting colours – pale mauve, acid green and 'glandular' pink – tops off this lovely ensemble. Rehaussé. Enhances it, lifts, boosts, invigorates. I like 'sets off'; it does not portray quite the same enhancing extent of 'rehaussé' but still produces an incongruent support. Colours which, according to any traditional aesthetic criteria, could only further spoil a work, shine in the narrator's straight-faced enthusiasm. Just as the deference shown to an obscene Madame Vachette presumes her a classic beauty enthroned centre stage, and just as the gravity and contrition of Cupid's playing treats this farce as a classic love story, these colours, rotting with the bodies that they accentuate, ostensibly prettify the piece. The throne, the bright ribbon, the garish colours, the counter; these elements emphasise the very flaws that they vainly endeavour to disguise. Like Jarry, Manuel shows the bourgeoisie anew, using caricature to reflect that which a classic aesthetic would hide. By including the posturing of his teachers, their game of self-deception is front and centre; Manuel's expressionist style attacks any denial of the ugly side of humanity.

To encapsulate his intention, Manuel entitles the piece 'Marivaudage'. 'Marivaudage', after Pierre de Marivaux (1688-1763), denotes both a delicate exchange in a romantic context and an affected writing style (*TLFi*). The two

definitions are somewhat contradictory. A subtle expression of emotion – sometimes called a ‘metaphysics of love-making’<sup>6</sup> and described as the art of wrestling the nuances of feeling into language (Neuhäuser 34) – or prose lacking subtlety? I consider ‘flirting’, ‘banter’ and ‘gallantry’ in English, along with ‘posing’ or ‘posturing’. Options like ‘sweet nothings’ and ‘smooth talk’ are better, connoting the romantic side and the emptiness. I’m tempted to keep ‘marivaudage’ in translation. The term has infiltrated the English language and is defined by the *OED* as ‘exaggerated sentiment expressed in affected language, after the style of Marivaux; a verbose and affected style.’ But only the affectation remains, and in fact, Marivaux’s linguistic play and stylistic affectation had a purpose – to get at that which is normally unsaid, predominantly in terms of matters of the heart (Deloffre 8). By its title, Manuel’s piece is about the *language* of feeling, the efforts at expression: seduction through language.

Opposing modes of expression form the crux of this ‘us against them’ narrative. Absurdly, Manuel does not like the principal precisely because of the way he telegraphs his speech and enunciates the silent ‘e’ of his words as he strikes the last syllable (28-29). A small reason, but a significant one. Caricature takes on different significance then for the two groups. While youth is disgusted by the ordinariness of adulthood and old age, the teachers are revolted by such frank and exaggerated depictions of a truth one would rather gloss over. Mediocrity might be repulsive to the schoolboys, but it is something to aspire to for the principal – if only everyone

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<sup>6</sup> 1911 Encyclopaedia Britannica entry.

would toe the line like Rétine. The question is: does caricature expose ugly truths or is it anarchy, as the principal would have us believe?

The term ‘caricature’ denotes a grotesque representation, exaggerating characteristic features, but can also be described as an unfaithful representation of reality (*OED*, *Larousse*). As the text delves into the problem of representation post-war, it explores modes of depicting an external reality. Expressionism, as exhibited in the work of Grosz, aims to foreground the subjective. It portrays raw feeling – desire and fear – with all its accompanying impurities and imperfections. Within the context of war, power, prostitution and violence, the expressionist aesthetic was often ugly and stark. Yet any distortion or exaggeration intended precisely to reflect a real if violent experience of being. Manuel’s schoolboy vision of the world, aligned with the avant-garde, stands for the potential for meaning in new forms of art, not despite but because of obscenity and abstraction.

If Manuel wants to expose the underbelly of society, to put the raw and messy into material form, the principal wants to bury it. The principal’s definition of caricature is more in line with an *OED* citation from 1850 which describes the mode as ‘a thorough destruction of beauty and regularity.’<sup>7</sup> He would prefer an aesthetically pleasing depiction and considers the artistic ideal a static concept which does not move with the concerns of the period and which represents only one, potentially superficial, aspect of reality. It is his opinion that Manuel, with his exaggerated sentiment and obscenity, has not yet learned to contain reality through neat and

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<sup>7</sup> In K. O. Müller *Ancient Art* trans. by J. Leitch.

accepted forms of representation. Art does not have to be true to life, or to feeling, but merely to a conceived notion of truth and beauty.

The principal's diatribe against Manuel's work, targeting progressive movements such as expressionism and Dada, finds its answer in the Other coming in from across the Rhine to infect the state of the noble and the beautiful in France.<sup>8</sup> The Bolsheviks take a particular hit. Officially referring to the Russian Social Democratic Party, many in right wing Germany used the term Bolshevik to refer to subversion of any kind.<sup>9</sup> And in fact, Grosz, according to his son, was labelled cultural Bolshevik number one (Gayford). No matter the differences between progressive art movements, the label Bolshevik endeavoured to dismiss all that arty communist nonsense in a neatly confined package. If France, and its art, is to remain pure, foreign influence must be resisted above all.

As the principal goes on and on, he fills his lecture with appeals to the name of things, to established referents, to signifiers. I find myself writing 'name' and 'call' over and over, trying to avoid repetition. *Would you call these filthy sketches art? You mistake beauty for pornography. Oh, in the name of art and truth. If only you could call yourself a man* (33). Art, according to the principal, is an established signifier, with an associated institution and tradition. If insurgents such as Manuel designate experimental and obscene works as art, conventional or historical understandings of representation will evolve. With labels like Art and Truth on his side, Manuel could ruin everything. The French declares that he will 'le souiller' (33): taint it, tarnish it,

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<sup>8</sup> '... voyous révolutionnaires venus d'outre Rhin pour annihiler en France le sens du noble et du beau' (33).

<sup>9</sup> Adolf Hitler, for example, writes a chapter on Bolshevism in *Mein Kampf* (1925).

sticky or soil or muddy it with his little kid fingers. The principal clings to language as a static and familiar entity capable of categorising the world into middle-class order, simplifying difficult feelings and eradicating taboo. But where he wishes to squeeze existence into neat little packages, the schoolboys want to open up language and open France's borders – the two come hand in hand. And as we see throughout the text, the schoolboy perspective trumps a repressed bourgeois blindness. *Battling* wields the riotous lens of adolescence, equating it with the avant-garde, to portray a strange, messy and crude existence – an existence that is not quite homely.

### **Between Dog and Wolf**

The world of Jarry's *Ubu roi* is similarly messy. Jarry is famous for opening up interpretation through defamiliarised language. In his preface 'Linteau' to *Les Minutes de sable* (1894), he proposes a crossroads of meaning which unleashes ideas in the wide interpretive gap between writer and listener (iii-iv). Where others take the established road, Jarry constructs his own 'cruel perpendicular' (Prigent 331–32). Going against expectations and recognised norms, he forces reconsideration through the malleability of words and sounds as well as visuals and silhouettes. Just as children disregard semantics in favour of funny sounds in their mouths, Jarry explores the possibility in nonsense (333). Interested in the arbitrary relation between signifier and signified, his neologisms make the familiar absurd.

Jarry is an important figure of the avant-garde and often labelled a precursor to the surrealists (see Aspley 264). His favouring of the form of language and visuals over semantics, of intuition and perception over logic anticipated twentieth-century experimentation. In 1929, Walter Benjamin describes the avant-gardists – conflating



Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism – as playing ‘passionate phonetic and graphical transformational games’ in the ‘magical’ realm of words; ‘language takes precedence,’ he writes of surrealism, ‘not only before meaning. Also before the self’ (‘Surrealism’ 52, 48). Automatic writing and stream of consciousness prevailed post-war; the subconscious and irrational promised a reality that had not yet been harnessed in art. At last the ‘suppressed other of the bourgeois self’ – that chaos underneath the neat façade of consciousness, rules and suits – could come out to play (Izenberg 285).

The surrealists, in particular, believed the subconscious and the dream more powerful and more real than conscious reflection and rationality. In a statement influential to surrealism, Pierre Reverdy claimed in 1918 that poetic image was a creation of the mind, not mimetic of the real. In 1924, André Breton incorporates this notion in his first surrealist manifesto (claiming Jarry as one of the friends of the movement) but also problematises the distinction. For the dream is not unreal. Why should the intuitive, suppressed and chaotic parts of existence be any less valid or important – in fact they should be more, he argues – than established representations of an external reality (*Manifestes* 18-20)?

In Jarry’s *Ubu roi*, this chaos of meaning is unleashed in a Poland that he disconcertingly qualifies as ‘Nulle Part’, or ‘Nowhere’ (*Ubu* 10).<sup>10</sup> This Poland is a ‘mythic’ and ‘dismembered’ place which ‘refuses to imply that meaning is elsewhere or anywhere; the demand is to confront what is present, not what is absent’ (Levenson 32). If we were going to attain an ideal, or Absolute, it would be outside time and

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<sup>10</sup> In the program distributed to the audience for the first performance.

outside the educational system (Béhar 279–80). But considering we are within, any absurdity and ambiguity are precisely that which Jarry aspires to; a meaning which shocks, questions and shows otherwise is the only meaning there is. Ubu enters *Battling*'s narrative in the text's own 'Nulle Part'. On Thursday afternoons when the trio don't have school, they go to the *Mexico City* inn situated on the outskirts of town at the bottom of a green valley. There, bathed in an exoticised vision of the Americas, they can escape the controlling eyes of their teachers and the banality of the bourgeoisie to embrace the fancy and possibility of darkness. There, categories exist to be dispelled and the messiness of life and the irrational are to be embraced. Their schoolboy imaginary runs wild, filled with poetry, fiction, taboo. Reality takes the form of art. Silhouettes, shapes, sounds and sensations come before any 'objective' representation, and horrifying yet wondrous things hover in the haze of twilight.

On those Thursday evenings at *Mexico City*, the fields become a 'marge extraterrestre' (95). As opposed to Jarry's Nulle Part, *Battling*'s 'marge extraterrestre' seems on first impressions to suggest there is meaning elsewhere. The starry realms perhaps hold the answers, however impossible to reach or confront head on. But is this *Battling*'s Romantic beyond or just an ordinary seen through the eyes of a schoolboy avant-garde?

Les premières heures du soir, lavant le monde des réalités diurnes, dégageaient de la campagne visionnaire une sorte de mythologie rustique qui renouvelait la planète pour notre usage personnel. Bien que les éléments traditionnels de la féerie n'eussent absolument rien à voir dans ces histoires, il se passait là entre chien et loup d'étranges choses... (93)

The early hours of the evening, cleansing the world of daytime realities, used to extract a rustic mythology from the dreamy countryside which renewed the world for our personal use. While our stories were nothing like traditional fairy tales, something strange happened between dog and wolf...

The darkness eradicates the ordinary of daylight and ‘renouvelait la planète pour notre usage personnel.’ At first, I translate ‘renouvelait la planète’ as ‘transformed the realm’. The Romantic conception of otherworldliness and far off places instinctively infiltrates my interpretation. But, in fact, ‘renewed’ or ‘rejuvenated’ would be better, and ‘planet’, ‘world’ or ‘earth’. *Battling*’s ‘marge extraterrestre’ is not elsewhere, it is simply on the border of a small town. Discontented with the adult way of things, the schoolboys remain in the same place but adopt a different lens. Without the overlay of ordinary distinctions and established truths, the landscape is defamiliarised, its creative energy unleashed. And the narrator uses ‘notre’; this is a collective subjectivity, a ‘we’ who sees.

The twilight does strange things to visual perception. The French ‘entre chien et loup’, comes from the Latin idiom ‘intra hora vespertina inter canem et lupum’ which denotes twilight; at dusk, the shepherd might confuse the sheep dog with the wolf who wants to attack his flock. Simply translating this as ‘twilight’ loses something important – I want the reader to experience twilight as the wonder between dog and wolf. From whence werewolves come perhaps. For what happens in that moment of visual uncertainty? The emptiness and shadows of the night offer the perfect vessel to fill with the subject’s imagination and the night becomes both a ‘stage and state of mind’ (Bronfen 53, 66). Visions, phantoms, fears and repressions come out to play

with all their ambiguities, unruly desires, and slippery meanings. But does the subjective make this night in *Battling* any less real?

The 'marge extraterrestre' is of course a margin, a border, a fringe; it represents the loss of distinctions between life and death, waking and dreaming, real and unreal. The art of *Battling*, according to André Malraux upon its publication in 1928, is not its dream world, but its elimination of the movement between dream and reality, and the standard hierarchy between the two (84).<sup>11</sup> With blurred boundaries comes a corresponding uncertainty of meaning filled with double takes, intellectual doubt and confused vision. In his second manifesto (1929), Breton announces that 'tout porte à croire qu'il existe un certain point de l'esprit d'où la vie et la mort, le réel et l'imaginaire, le passé et le futur, le communicable et l'incommunicable, le haut et le bas cessent d'être perçus contradictoirement' (*Second* 1). The surrealist aim was to find the point where such categories lost their distinctions. *Battling* is not a surrealist text, but it approaches a similar intent. As Alain Schaffner says, Vialatte aspires to a perspective which 'excède le réalisme' – there is something very real between dog and wolf ('Années vingt' 205).

With the external chaos of the period, fantasy, dream, and phantasmagoria were looking more and more real. 'It is as if the monstrous reality of the war had blotted out the reality of the world,' Hermann Broch writes in *The Sleepwalkers* (1931-32). 'Fantasy has become logical reality, but reality evolves the most a-logical phantasmagoria' (chap.xii). In *Battling*, the narrator looks back on the text's schoolboy fringe from adulthood, at its youthful unreality from a dark reality. War

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<sup>11</sup> Originally published in December of 1928 in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*.

has come, many of the narrator's friends are dead, and the trio's shared adolescence is a mere memory. A future death infiltrates the life of the extraterrestrial fringe; it tiptoes across the valley, blowing its dirty breath over the grass and lurking in the shadows.

Depuis ce temps, plusieurs d'entre nous sont entrés dans la tombe étroite, dans le garde-à-vous solennel de l'au-delà. Le vieux gentleman sauvage de la vallée saugrenue ne pourra plus ressusciter pour les survivants les fantasmagories aimables de cette époque ; l'ombre des camarades disparus, ceux pour qui le ciel de cinq heures a peut-être tenu ses promesses, a envahi cette marge extraterrestre des prairies de *Mexico*, et ce sont des sortilèges plus tristes qui hantent à la première étoile ces pelouses inspirées. (95)

Since then, several among us have entered the narrow grave, in the solemn stand-to of the beyond. The wild old gentleman of the peculiar valley can no longer revive for the survivors the friendly phantasmagorias of old; the shadow of fallen friends, those for whom the five o'clock sky perhaps kept its promises, has crept over this extraterrestrial fringe that lies in the meadows of the *Mexico City*, and sadder are the spells which haunt the inspired lawns at the first star.

Here, women sleep symmetrically ('deux femmes se couchèrent à ses pieds, symétriquement,' 186) and a sentry box is horizontal, tipped ominously onto its side to look like a coffin ('guérite horizontale,' 95). Tombs are narrow, and death has soldiers standing stiff to attention. Like Ubu's own form, the extraterrestrial fringe – its creatures and landscape – is made of piles of familiar shapes, deconstructed and reconstructed out of context to alter perspective for new significance. The

‘gentleman’ of the valley is one such figure.<sup>12</sup> Deconstructable and inhuman, he wears a cloak that changes colour with the sky and has ears for different occasions. In the above passage, he goes by the title, ‘le vieux gentleman sauvage de la vallée saugrenue’. In French, the chiasmus, ‘sau... va’, ‘va... sau’, gives the phrase coherence; the sonorous repetition ties the unusual collocations together. But in English, the ‘wild old gentleman of the peculiar valley’ sounds laboured and contradictory. ‘Uncivilised gentleman’? Savage, barbaric, primitive, reclusive? None of the sounds tie the phrase together in translation. Likewise, the adjectives ‘strange’, ‘peculiar’, ‘absurd’, ‘illogical’ do not fit with ‘valley’ either in French or in English. Like in Jarry’s work, both shapes and sounds appear to come before semantics.

But on closer inspection, a sense of normalcy infiltrates the initial discord. Humanity’s animalism and civilisation, as well as nature’s wilderness and peace, co-exist in a tense sort of harmony. In Jarry’s work, the garden serves as a hallucinatory device; the garden’s ‘odd mixture of extreme formality, wilderness and misshapen grotesquerie reinforces the atmosphere of dream’ (Fell 46). In *Battling*, the descriptions of nature, and particularly of grass, bestow the earth with an unusual visionary potential.<sup>13</sup> The valleys and fields are ‘saugrenu’ – peculiar, curious or strange – and the tended lawns are somehow mystic and miraculous in their man-made order.<sup>14</sup> These collocations, unfamiliar in French as in English, beg to be standardised in translation; I’m wary of translatese. But like the savagery of the gentleman and of refined society, the garden or lawn has tendencies towards both the

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<sup>12</sup> The use of a calque from English is rare in this text.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Campagne visionnaire’ (93).

<sup>14</sup> ‘Pelouses inspirées’ (95), ‘gazons miraculeux’ (95).

wild and tame and contains a tension that is primed for infusion of the supernatural. Rather than distinctly divided, the irrational shows itself within the rational, the dream within the waking night. The extra-terrestrial fringe opens such volatility and undecidability and tips the ordinary in favour of the extraordinary. Even neat lawns contain inner secrets and potential for psychic visions; the order is only a façade. In *Battling*'s hallucinatory world, savagery and wilderness lie beneath the cover of grass, and obscenity and arbitrary rules beneath bourgeois refinement.

The boys used to watch phantasmagorias projected across the fields. In the late eighteenth century, 'phantasmagoria' referred to a form of popular theatre whereby magic lanterns created horrifying images on a screen – a spine-chilling thrill for the public. Since then, the term has evolved, the external spectacle gradually replaced with the spectre of the mind (Castle 29). Late Romantics such as Gérard de Nerval, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Edgar Allan Poe used the visual to explore the inner psyche (Gunning 81). By mixing optics with the imaginary, they could blur the distinctions between rational and irrational, subconscious and external. Illusion and prestidigitation flourished – such distorted, ambiguous and indirect visuals provoked intellectual uncertainty and roused suspicion as to the very nature of perception (74).

With modernism, a new fascination with phantasmagoria emerged; the imaginary was just as important to the period as 'bricks and mortar' (4-5). Benjamin warns against dismissing 'the poetic rapture of starry nights' for the subject's imaginary and dreams are not unreal – they are paramount (*Work* 58). Drawing from Charles Baudelaire's work on the 'flâneur' and Louis Aragon's *Les Paysans de Paris* (1926), Benjamin associated phantasmagoria with urban dreamscapes. He paints Paris'

arcades as a collective cosmopolitan consciousness, unnoticed during the day, enticing and menacing at night:

Our waking existence likewise is a land which, at certain hidden points, leads down into the underworld – a land full of inconspicuous places from which dreams arise. All day long, suspecting nothing, we pass them by, but no sooner has sleep come than we are groping our way back to lose ourselves in the dark corridors. By day, the labyrinth of urban dwelling resembles consciousness; the arcades (which are galleries leading into the city's past) issue unremarked on to the streets. At night, however, under the tenebrous mass of the houses, their denser darkness protrudes like a threat, and the nocturnal pedestrian hurries past – unless, that is, we have emboldened him to turn into a narrow lane. (*Arcades Project* 84)

Just as the urban of Grosz' Berlin infiltrates *Battling's* classroom, so too does the waking night of the city. In the extraterrestrial fringe, the boys' collective imaginary projects onto the night to transform the landscape into 'a visual and spatial spectacle' (Gunning 1). Elizabeth Bronfen calls this an 'extimate' experience. With the cover of darkness, and the corresponding loss of 'real' external contours, the night enables a 'refracted subjective' (53, 62) It is not fairies and elves that the boys struggle to perceive but a haunting magic representative of the violence, death and horror they feel within themselves.

As the cold stiff bodies of the dead disintegrate beneath the ground, solemn and straight in narrow boxes, their shadows roam the skies of *Battling's* fringe dark and free. The text reads 'l'ombre des camarades disparus' (95) – the focus is not the friends but the shadow, and one shadow only, no individuals. With Vialatte's recontextualisation of Ubu in *Battling*, comes Jarry's interest in the shadow or



silhouette, signifying the parallel to an ordered world in the light of day (Fell 151). Filled with one's imaginary and fear, the shadow holds much more sinister potential than its corresponding object or subject. If the object is solid and fixed, the shadow is unstable, malleable, and primed for projection of the subjective.

Does the passage from *Battling* refer to the shadow of classmates, friends, or comrades-in-arms? I wonder about 'camarades' (95) in translation; the French could denote any one. And should I translate 'envahi' as 'crept over' like a shadow would, or as 'invaded' like war? There is a violence and aggression that accompanies this darkness; as the night eats up the day, spitting it out as a coalesced and eerie mass, the stark realities of war and death merge with these schoolboy dreams, and the future with the present of the text. In the end, I write 'fallen friends' – friends for the intimacy of the schoolboy crew but 'fallen', over 'vanished' or 'passed', to militarise the phrase. Then again, 'disparus' also suggests whereabouts unknown: soldiers missing-in-action or beings now absent from the land of the living. Not dead so much as simply outside the realms of ordinary perception. Pierre Jourde writes that Vialatte uses the shadow to show that, whatever we do, will always remain outside ourselves: 'elles [les ombres] nous jettent hors de nous, errant à la surface du monde, sans lieu fixe et sans demeure' (*Opérette* 76–77). Perhaps, more than representing death, the shadow stands for subjects dislocated, doubled, forever estranged from themselves in life. *Battling*'s characters 'veulent être leur non-être, ils veulent, c'est "l'optique du romanesque", être un autre' (92).

## Outside Ourselves: Nonsense or a Sense of/for the Epoch?

Many years after the schoolboys' adolescence, the narrator returns to the extraterrestrial fringe on the outskirts of *Battling's* small town one last time. At this point, *Battling* is long dead, and Manuel has joined the army. In the foggy twilight, the narrator sees Ubu and his old friends together in the fields around *Mexico City*. Jarry's monster no longer belongs to the boys' imaginary – he has transformed the text's reality. *Battling* and Manuel, having joined Ubu and his strange world of dehumanised figures, appear as doubles of themselves. Their uncanny appearance is even more absurd within the framework of this previously 'ordinary' *roman d'apprentissage* – what is real and what is not? This final scene in *Battling* presents not only a dualistic uncertainty of self, which already assumes too much unity, but an almost postmodern treatment of the unhomely subject, in a collage which announces its fictionality.

Dans la nuit, de la haie qui bordait le champ, j'ai vu sortir un homme étrange et maladroit chargé d'un paquet cylindrique ; son fond de pantalon, un damier noir et blanc, tombait sur ses jambes grêles qui supportaient un gros ventre ; il était fait comme les bouteilles de Bénédictine sur les caricatures de Sem. Il regarda d'un air inquiet dans tous les sens comme un homme qui veut s'assurer d'être seul. Il ne me vit pas dans mon coin. Il n'arrivait pas à se dépêtrer de sa haie où il restait pris par ses pattes grêles comme une ronce dans un buisson ; ses sabots s'engluaient dans la terre molle ; alors il alluma sa tête en poire aux yeux loufoques, et je reconnus le père Ubu ; il était en bras de chemise et portait un tablier bleu ; son crâne pointu s'entourait d'un halo jaune. Quand il fut sorti de la haie, il remonta le Riou lentement, en arrachant ses pieds à la glèbe ; j'avais peur qu'il n'allât s'éteindre comme un ver luisant effarouché. (185-186)

In the night, out of the hedge bordering the field, I saw a strange and awkward man emerge carrying a cylindrical package; the seat of his pants, chequered black and white, fell across the skinny legs that supported his fat belly; he was made like a bottle of Benedictine in a Sem caricature. He looked around nervously in every direction like someone who wants to make sure he is alone. He didn't see me in my corner. He appeared unable to extricate himself from the hedge where his skinny pins were caught like a bramble in a blackberry bush; his sabots were stuck in the wet earth; he lit up his pear-shaped head and crazy eyes and I recognised Père Ubu; he was in shirt sleeves and wore a blue apron; his pointy head was encircled by a yellow halo. Once he had freed himself from the hedge, he started slowly up the Riou, unsticking his feet from the earth; I worried he was going to turn himself off like a frightened glow worm.

Into the night he came. That would have been such a neat beginning, a line worthy of Ubu's entrance in this strange and final night. *They Came by Night. It Came at Night.* Crime and horror film titles. So eerie. But I cannot cut 'j'ai vu'; the narrator sees Ubu come into the world of *Battling*, he does not simply come. The language suggests that the events of this extraterrestrial fringe are again mere products of visual uncertainty. I wonder about 'dans la nuit' too. 'At night' is the more straightforward choice but I like the romantic feeling of entering a night, as though it were a place. In, into. And I do not want to alter the syntax so that *night* does not come first. Ubu is a creature of the night – he exists nowhere else.

Ubu's entrance is awkward more than frightening. He emerges from the hedge in a pile of geometric shapes which together give an impression of abstract forms and lines, of blocks toppled haphazardly atop one another. He is 'chargé d'un paquet cylindrique': 'carrying a cylindrical packet'? Or 'laden with', 'weighed down with'?

The encumbered or overloaded nature of the French complements our picture of this ‘*homme maladroit*’. Shapes carrying shapes. Black and white squares adorning the base of his pants: ‘chequered’? or ‘chessboard’ to evoke the arbitrary rules of a game? Ubu’s tummy is a ‘*bouteille de Bénédicte*’ – caricatured, like Manuel’s sketch of Rétine – and his head both a ‘*crâne pointu*’ and ‘*tête en poire*’. I translate a ‘pear-shaped head’ but perhaps a ‘pear head’ would be better or a ‘pear for a head’. Rather than possessing an overriding human form, Ubu is first a hotchpotch of his collaged materials.

Jarry’s original construction of Ubu, according to Jill Fell, satires traditional ekphrastic poetry (27-28). Vialatte’s reference to caricature, as he recontextualises Ubu in his own work, announces the distortion of shape important to the passage. To turn his bourgeois physics teacher into a monster, Jarry combined the ‘beautiful’ spherical form with a cruel pointed-head, reminiscent of the hoods of the Spanish Inquisitors or the KKK<sup>15</sup> and capable of concealing all manner of horrors (27-28). Conventional shapes and familiar forms, according to Jarry, confine and restrict meaning. To access any deeper signification, creative energy must be freed from those usual forms. Starting from a perceptual rather than a conceptual basis, Jarry’s meaning comes from silhouettes and outlines more than ideas (33).

As well as from objects, Ubu’s form comes from animalistic traits. Here, he is a lowly worm, primitive and stuck to the vile mud. His limbs are not quite human. The French refers to his legs as ‘*sabots*’ and ‘*pattes*’. Does ‘*sabots*’ refer to the type of shoe, to clogs, or rather to trotters or hooves? I look at some pictures of Ubu online – small

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<sup>15</sup> The Spanish Inquisition was established in 1478, the first Klan in 1865.

neat shoes poke out beneath his big belly. And ‘pattes’: paw, hoof, mitt, leg? What sort of creature is this? Man or animal? Monster? Vialatte maintains this ambivalence with his word choices and I do not want to interpret them in translation, to pick a side. I wonder about ‘pins’ as slang for ‘legs’. We use the term for people but at the same time it adds to Ubu’s shapes – rolling pins support his belly in this childish sketch.

The borderline between human and monster is precisely Ubu’s genius. Jarry wanted the repulsive, violent and grotesque nature of Ubu to reflect all that is repressed within man. The bourgeoisie, rather than see some foreign and external horror, see the barbarity within themselves, inexpertly disguised. The text describes his head as a ‘crâne pointu’ (186) which I translate as ‘pointy head’ but could it also be ‘skull’ or ‘cranium’? The choice of ‘crâne’ seems to favour the internal: the animal skeleton of man more than his mind, soul or character. Jarry wanted the bourgeois audience of *Ubu roi* to behold themselves, so human, but so savage, on the stage. Their repressed desires would rear their heads and mouths in Ubu’s monstrous but familiar shapes.

In *Battling*, Ubu assumes the form imagined for him by the schoolboy trio when they were alive. The pear head and crazy eyes which light up are features of the Ubu lamp Manuel makes in the cemetery workshop.<sup>16</sup> He carries Battling’s bugle and his outfit, with its ‘bras de chemise’ and ‘tablier bleu’, resembles Clair de Lune’s, the caretaker at the school (27) – the imaginary and real worlds of the text have merged. With Ubu

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<sup>16</sup> ‘L’Ubu électrique soutenait de son bras-nageoire un parapluie de soie rouge qui formait abat-jour et une tête piriforme qui distribuait la lumière à travers de gros yeux loufoques’ (103).

comes the mutation of the characters around him into others of themselves. Not only are his fellow imaginary figures concocted of defamiliarised shapes – the old gentleman, for example, and the Sachem who is ‘too long’ and ‘too old’ (186) – but the school principal appears as a colourful cup and ball and, most importantly, Manuel and Battling are doppelgängers of their ordinary selves. As the passage goes on, we see that Manuel is caricatured and stylised and, as he moves closer to the shadow, his form becomes harder and harder to make out until he resembles a pile of laundry.<sup>17</sup> As for Battling, the narrator describes his shadow as though it were a human; it totters and wobbles as if walking and wears Battling’s clothes: ‘elle [l’ombre] était vêtue comme Battling aux grandes vacances’ (187). His person is again a grotesque construction of shapes: his chest a coconut burst open and his head a rubber ball, smooth and grey. In the fringe are only shadows and doubles, no secure or singular selves.

On the one hand, these figures of *Battling*’s extra-terrestrial fringe are willfully artificial. Appropriating the tone of *Ubu roi*, the text renders the schoolboys not characters but puppets – subjects robotised in a strange world, like their teachers are depicted throughout. Jarry wanted to put strings on his actors to announce the real as performance, the humans as marionettes. He delighted in stylised language, vocalised in monotone voices and played out before a pathetic set. *Battling*’s final night is a similarly absurd puppet show, staged and manipulated, and equipped with fantastic silhouettes. But on the other hand, for the audience watching Jarry’s production, such a parade of soulless and inanimate puppets provokes an uneasy and indescribable

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<sup>17</sup> ‘A mesure qu’il approchait de l’ombre, son image se ternissait de plus en plus’ (186).

sensation which is not purely artificial. The strange disconnect in voice and in body in *Ubu roi* highlights the robotic thing, socialised into order, which packages our inner being, emotion and soul (Fell 141). Such devices, blurring animate and inanimate, force questions of what it is to be human.

In *Battling*, we have the same strange sensation that this is our world, and it isn't. Both at home and unhomey, housed and unhoused. The figures resemble characters that we know but they are not quite right, and their uncanny similarity renders them horrifying. Battling and Manuel's beautiful youth has become comically grotesque: who are these creatures that so resemble the narrator's friends? The fringe aims to fill us with uncertainty: alive or dead, animate or inanimate, dream or reality? These unstable categories, which account for a dynamic ambivalence in the text and provoke a peculiar sensation in the reader,<sup>18</sup> belong to Sigmund Freud's uncanny.

Freud's 1919 essay *Das Unheimliche* [The Uncanny] describes the psychological phenomenon prompted by an encounter with something unfamiliar yet somehow familiar.<sup>19</sup> He starts from the German term 'heimlich', or 'homely'. 'On the one hand', he says, 'heimlich signifies what is familiar and agreeable, and on the other, what is concealed and kept out of sight' (224–25). Its apparent opposite, the 'unheimlich' stands for the unhomey, unfamiliar, strange, but also that which 'ought to have remained secret but has come to light'.<sup>20</sup> An interesting overlap of the terms occurs where something private of ours, hidden within us, and strange to us, comes to light: both homely and unhomey. From this, Freud deduces that the sensation of

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<sup>18</sup> See Tzvetan Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (originally published in 1970).

<sup>19</sup> Credits Ernst Jentsch's work on the topic in 1906.

<sup>20</sup> Draws from the work of Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling.

the uncanny comes from facing something we had previously repressed, something we used to know but which our consciousness has deliberately forgotten. The familiarity comes from the idea of recurrence and repetition: hidden pieces of ourselves occasionally emerge from the depths strange and new.

In the case of society, the uncanny hovers around beliefs that, while once commonly accepted, have since been surmounted. In dreams, Freud's subject of interest, we often experience the uncanny. With our defences down, repressed material from our subconscious easily infiltrates our dreams, albeit in bizarre and disguised form ('On Dreams' 114-115). The dead represent the quintessential uncanny. Society may have debunked superstitions of spirits, haunted houses and apparitions, yet fear of, and fascination with, the dead remains ('Uncanny' 241-45). Even if we hope to see the departed, we are terrified by the idea of its possibility, and ostensibly sure of its impossibility. The soul was the original doppelgänger. At a time of faith and belief in the afterlife, the soul reassuringly signaled the subject's immortality (235). With societal loss of faith, however, the soul and thus the double, became a horrifying premonition of death (236).<sup>21</sup> In the light of the fringe's magic lantern, the characters in *Battling* have become their shadows. Not only is Battling in particular linked to death by being reduced to a shadow, but death is also linked to the strange unreality of being in life where we are forever outside ourselves (Jourde, *Opérette* 89).

For Freud, this kind of dislocation and estrangement from oneself signified a pathology to be treated.<sup>22</sup> He believed in a knowable and stable subject with clear

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<sup>21</sup> Here Freud draws from Heinrich Heine.

<sup>22</sup> The relationship between dreams and mental derangement, for example, that he looks at in 'The Interpretation of Dreams'.



divisions between conscious and subconscious (Mansfield 80–81). The uncanny was evidence of a mere slip up, an entrance of the irrational and the dreaming into a stable subject's mind. Repressed material that entered the subject's consciousness should be worked through and overcome to restore the proper boundaries. In Freud's theory, figures such as doubles, spirits, corpses, or any other duplication of the ordinary self were thus manifestations of the insecure subject.

The modernist state of unhousedness that I mention in *A Context in Placelessness: Vialatte and Battling* rings of Freud's *unheimlich*. But for the modernists, the strange sensation was not something to overcome but rather something to portray. Tapping into the subconscious was both productive and necessary; the surrealists, in particular, delighted in the wonder of words that sprung forth without conscious reflection. They considered the images and poetry that emerged not only beautiful but revelatory – connections were made between previously disparate things. The surrealists' optimism, however, was not unmitigated. They also wanted to unleash the nightmare of the subconscious upon daytime reality (Mansfield 35–36). From a political perspective, in this period of *art engagé*, to harness the irrational was to counter any deceptive depiction of order in a senseless world. In the aftermath of World War One, at a time of dictators and strict controls, rations and economic depression, contrastingly loose and brazen trends flourished in art. Dada and surrealism portrayed nonsense and dream, such things more fitting to the epoch, albeit counterintuitively, than established mimetic practice.

Jarry anticipated the twentieth-century avant-garde by suggesting that the external world was itself absurd. The things that Ubu holds so dearly reveal the farce contained in that which is assumed rational, purposeful and logically represented. His

‘pataphysics’, that science of impossible solutions, delights in non-knowledge, insignificance and the absence of meaning, while his ‘phynance’ exhibits the lemming-like quality of idiotic masses, money-hungry and conformist. Similarly, the absurdity of Ubu’s entrance in *Battling* exposes the game-like quality of an external world weighed down with arbitrary rules and illusory stakes. The subjects of the extraterrestrial fringe are made of toys – the cup and ball, the chessboard pattern, the grey rubber ball – but any game is macabre and unsettling within the context.

Jarry’s monstrous style similarly negates meaning. He twists and laughs at the terms that bind us to ludicrous and static referents. In opposition to a deceptively well-organised and meaningful linguistic system, Jarry foregrounds the disconnect between word and thing, the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and signified (Prigent 340). Like the nonsense language of writers like Lewis Carroll, he embraces contradiction and systems of opposite values which cancel each other out. Jarry’s intent seems to be to foster the ludicrous nature of this world that *is* ‘pataphysics’ and ‘phynance’, whether one confronts it or not. Let us wreak havoc with established expectations and take pleasure in shocking and breaking taboos. Let us redo the fiction of our lives, gnash our teeth, grin absurd smiles, and speak of shit. For what else is left?

Vialatte, too, turns to humour. If all else fails, best to laugh at an absurd world: ‘il faut rire de la loufoquerie de ce monde, rire de cette manière stupide qu’ont les hommes de s’enfermer dans des particularités, et en même temps il faut les aimer ainsi’ (Jourde, Introduction xi). *Battling*’s extraterrestrial fringe in some ways appears to show a defeatist withdrawal from a difficult and arbitrary world, an escape. Turning away from the problems of modernity – the loss of faith, authoritarian rule,

wariness at urbanisation – it looks back towards the mythical, the nocturnal and fantastic. In the darkness of the inter-war period, the text depicts a subject not negotiating a cruel and absurd modern world but denying it. The characters in *Battling* turn to fiction, poetry and dreams to either cleanse the world of reality or deride and parody it while enjoying the ride.

Yet this landscape of schoolboy fancy exists both because of and in opposition to the strangeness of reality and the insecurity of self in the epoch. Here, the irrational cosies up to the rational and reality comes packaged in the productive language of dreams with its confused imagery, absurdity, metaphor and poetry. And, just as in Freud's dream language, real contradiction and feeling lie beneath any absurdity ('On Dreams' 106). Those childish and primitive parts of being human, normally so well concealed in the bourgeois costume, materialise in the trio's teenage world; the schoolboys spend their days sloshing about in the fears and desires that adults wish to forget. Uncannily like life but tipped to be oh-so-horrifying, *Battling's* fringe enchantingly shakes accepted representations, the strangeness in the darkness expressing the unnaturalness of being.

Both Jarry and Vialatte use the disorientation of coming of age to portray the modern subject's unhomeliness. What better than adolescence – boys uncomfortable in their bodies, filled with unhinged desires and uncertain identities – to blur the rational and the irrational, the waking and dreaming. Unlike Jarry, Vialatte does not subscribe to nonsense words but he does prioritise form and relish strange collocations. *Battling* abounds with words that seem to clash but also somehow resonate. Where Jarry's *voix de merde* disguises his lyrical impulse in satire and obscenity (Fell 78), Vialatte relishes the poetic, filling it with unbridled fantasy and conflicting emotion. His

flowing descriptions lie side by side with vulgar schoolboy dialogue, in a discordant and subversive mishmash. This too is the reality of youth: whimsical schoolboys stuck in bodily puberty. And just as teenagers might second-guess any sincerity with the declaration that it's all a joke, Vialatte announces, with Ubu's entrance, that *Battling's* reality is only fiction. The fringe paints how the schoolboy *isn't* in the world. Not firmly, and not yet. And it makes us wonder not only what is real but also what it means to come of age (Sestanovich): in life but also in literature.

Here, I equate *Battling's* schoolboy experience of being with the modern construction of selfhood. Michael Saler qualifies modernity as 'unheimlich' saying that it consists precisely in this 'sense that the self is not rooted or at home with itself' (194) and Gerald Izenberg asserts that the 'radical mutability of the self underlies the ever-present possibility of uncanny self-estrangement' (289). The period was filled with selves upon selves, multiplying and dividing. And this insecure self is also confused in time. Freud's definition of the uncanny is temporal; the strange feeling of familiar and unfamiliar comes from something known that has returned, and that does not quite make sense in the present. In the midst of cultural reflection and tension between old and new, the modern subject is homeless in the present, haunted by the past: outside language, text, nation, time.

Where Freud wanted to resolve the insecure subject, *Battling* relishes it. For we never really come of age. Battling the Romantic yearned for a knowable self and neat distinctions between self and other, real and not real. But where he wanted clear divides, adolescence and modernism threw the opposite at him. While he worries he will lose himself, the text tells us he was never found. For what is Battling's tragedy is Vialatte's aesthetic. In the fringe, the irrational is complementary to the rational

rather than separate to and a threat towards. This final night delights in Battling's estrangement from himself, flaunts the bewitching doubling. At last, the subject exalts in uncertainty and the text in haunted undecidability (Pleasance 76–78). Towards the end of *Le Grand Meaulnes*, with Meaulnes' departure, the narrator declares he would like to teach his students that the grass is not always greener: 'je leur enseignerais à trouver le bonheur qui est tout près d'eux et qui n'en a pas l'air' (part 3.2). The otherness is inside, and the beyond exists in the fiction of our lives and our minds. The fringe's label of 'extra-terrestrial' seems named for Battling's sake. Battling wanted to escape into fantasy, but he did not want that fantasy to be real.

Jarry, Henri Béhar writes, borrows from an incongruous array of cultures and turns the blend into gold:

Et comme l'achimiste à qui le temps indiffère, [il] place ces chefs-d'œuvre d'emblée dans l'éternité en se jouant de l'anachronisme, en télescopant les civilisations et les cultures afin d'imposer le livre à venir, celui qu'on trouvera toujours nouveau puisqu'il embraye l'imagination vers des sphères inconnues. (290)

His wilful anachronism and collage rejuvenate and push us towards 'sphères inconnues'. Similarly, *Battling's* placelessness, as I introduced in Chapter One, comes from a bringing-together. The whole does not fit into Vialatte's time or French literature but nonetheless appeals eternally to new readings, showing the way to those 'sphères inconnues'. Where Walter Benjamin's arcades presented a collective consciousness of the city, realised in the present but collated from many voices and times, *Battling's* schoolboy fringe paints a landscape for its dislocated writer and his artists: a map for the geographically uncertain, a montage for the crisis of

representation. This painting, as we'll see in Chapter Five, leads us to the text's artistic ideal.

Ubu's is the final sounding of the horn. At the end of the novel, he takes a bugle like Battling's out of his pocket and makes the call to fancy ('réveil en fantaisie' 188); instead of coming alive, however, his minions collapse limp and lifeless. 'Alors je tuerai tout le monde et je m'en irai,' père Ubu declares in *Ubu roi* (52). He had come to ravage the fiction of unchallenged realities and to expose ugly truths but now his work was done (Prigent 346). Ubu has likewise worked his magic in *Battling*. He gave voice or vision to those things which hover intangibly and indecipherably in the shadows and with his departure comes the end of Vialatte's riotous tale. If you shine a torch directly on a glow worm, it will switch off and hide; similarly, Ubu's presence vanishes in the spotlight.<sup>23</sup> When he finally turns out his light, we can no longer see any depth: 'il ne restait plus qu'un champ blanchâtre,' *Battling*'s narrator concludes, 'dont la nuit brouillait les reliefs' (188). Without Ubu, there is no shadow and there is no *culture potachique* to fill the darkness with the wondrous unhomeliness of being. It is only in the twilight, in that hesitation between dog and wolf, that we can hope to catch a glimpse of the landscape and ourselves.

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<sup>23</sup> 'J'avais peur qu'il allât s'éteindre comme un ver luisant effarouché' (186).

## The Writer Unhoused

I have been dislocated from my own centre of the world, and that world has been shifted away from my centre. There is no longer a straight axis anchoring my imagination; it begins to oscillate, and I rotate around it unsteadily.

– EVA HOFFMAN

*Lost in Translation*

If it were possible to bridge the distance between me and Italian, I would stop writing in that language.

– JHUMPA LAHIRI

*In Other Words*

### *Kafka's Translator*

If anyone is known for making the ordinary strange, it's Franz Kafka. And for a long time, the label most ascribed to Alexandre Vialatte was Kafka's translator. Vialatte translated a number of his novels into French and in fact introduced Kafka's work to France before it was well established in Germany. Today, when asked about my PhD in a social setting, I often introduce Vialatte this way to spark some kind of recognition – Kafka offers a name upon which most people can offer an opinion. If the two writers have little of the surface in common, in essentials, they are not so different. Both Vialatte and Kafka reflect the subject's relationship with reality, not reality itself (Schaffner, *Porte-plume* 140), and that relationship is fraught – the modern subject is unhomely in their words (Besson, *Complainte* 66).

We should not assume, however, that it is Kafka that lurks behind Vialatte's poetic worlds of *dépaysement*. Alain Schaffner notably reminds us that Vialatte developed

his aesthetic before becoming acquainted with Kafka's work ('Idée fausse' 62). Vialatte discovered Kafka between 1925 and 1926 and began translating his work in 1927, around the time of writing *Battling*.<sup>24</sup> Yet even if *Battling* was his first novel, his writing had long reflected an established aesthetic, an aesthetic which Schaffner attributes, not to Kafka, but to Vialatte's fascination with German Romanticism ('Années vingt' 205). Kafka may not have influenced Vialatte's writing, but he did influence his reality. In 1927, Vialatte describes himself as living in a Kafka novel.<sup>25</sup> The world has become strange, just like Kafka's fiction. But which comes first, an objective external reality or a subjective and distorted fiction? By Vialatte's account, when Kafka found himself out of place in the world, he changed our vision of it, influencing life more than the other way around:

Qui se fût jamais avisé, avant les songes de Kafka, que la vie ressemblât à un roman de Kafka ? D'autant plus que c'est faux. Mais c'est la vie qui a tort, depuis qu'il a fait son portrait. Kafka a gagné son pari : incapable de s'adapter, il a désadapté la vie. Il lui a fait croire qu'elle lui ressemblait. Elle en a persuadé toute une génération. (*Mon Kafka* 27)

Vialatte too thought it only worth writing something that he alone could write (Besson, *Complainte* 169–70). He considered literature to be about an individual encounter with the world, and with words, rather than any objective mimesis – about imagination before realism. He positions the essence of Kafka's work in what it is to be human. In his 'Prière d'insérer pour *Le Procès*' (1933), Vialatte writes, 'c'est

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<sup>24</sup> He started with a few extracts of *Das Schloss/Le Château* for the *Revue Rhénane* and, in 1927, moved onto *Die Verwandlung/La Métamorphose*, published in French translation in the NRF early the next year.

<sup>25</sup> In a letter to Henri Pourrat on 28 October 1927, he writes, 'je me fais l'impression de vivre dans un roman de Kafka' (qtd. in *Correspondances* 3 210).



l'homme qui bout dans la marmite de Kafka. Il y mijote minutieusement dans le bouillon ténébreux de l'angoisse, mais l'humour fait sauter le couvercle en sifflant et trace dans l'air, en lettres bleues, des formules cabalistiques.' It is man, too, who boils in *Battling's* pot.

Kafka's self-portrayed 'spiritual exile' is often equated with his estranging fiction (Harman 68). He was raised in Prague on German culture and the German language. He learnt Czech but never belonged to the Czech community. His German identity was made problematic by his Jewishness and his Jewishness problematic by his modern intellectualism.<sup>26</sup> Kafka was unhoused from language, identity, community, place. Vialatte, on the other hand, is not your typical writer in exile – his unhomeliness is more elusive. He is generally ascribed a strong Auvergnat identity. He was a patriot, lover of the French countryside, sporty, gentlemanly, in possession of a strong sense of home and family: the antithesis of the unhoused modernist (Besson, *Complainte* 67). And yet, at least at the time of writing *Battling*, Vialatte was immersed in German culture, and had lived in Germany for six years. More of a cohabiter, Vialatte integrated both homes into his life and could always look back to a homeland. But his beloved France could not remain the same, coloured by the dislocation and plurality that was so pivotal to modernism.

More than focusing on any overt Kafka influence, this final section of Part One, *The Self*, investigates the role of Vialatte's position between French and German languages and cultures on *Battling*. How does his status as a translator, living between France and Germany, inhabiting German Romanticism in the time of French

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<sup>26</sup> See *Encyclopedia Britannica* online entry, revised 2017.

modernity, influence the strangeness of being that the text circles around? My reading of *Battling*, and its unhomeliness, is through this lens of Vialatte the translator. I present the text as an expression of the modernist crisis of the self that is both fed and expressed through a plurality of cultures, languages, homes.

While a hazy nostalgia pervades all Vialatte's fiction, warping time and rendering the setting unreal, the productive displacement of the German notably runs through *Battling*. Vialatte wrote *Battling* in two brief bursts of a matter of weeks. Beginning in November 1927 in Mainz, he finished the novel quickly in early 1928 when he spent a few happy weeks staying with his cousins in the Loire Valley. After finishing a full draft, Vialatte crossed back over the Rhine once more: it is a text of the in-between. In the previous chapter, Apollinaire's hunting horns sounded a call to an unreal self, remembered and romanticised but without historical origin. In this chapter, the outside time meets an outside place. *Battling*'s call to a French national identity is conceived through the lens of transnationalism, its call to language through multilingualism, and its call to an Auvergnat self through the movement that blurs home.

### *Writers in Exile*

George Steiner characterised the modernists as 'unhoused and wanderers across languages' (*Extraterritorial* 11). With the turmoil following World War One and the arrival of modern forms of transportation and communication, the epoch, and its literature, was defined by physical flux. Many of the canonical writers of the period moved elsewhere, either from necessity or of their own volition. While writers-in-

exile have existed since Classic times, never had there been such incidence of voluntary and enforced emigration, and never so temporarily, with such ease of return. For the first time, emigration or expatriation was often equated with coming home, with coming and going, and with bringing one's home elsewhere (Englund and Olsson 6). More than before, one could be at home in many places or none, in a mesh of cultures, languages and literary traditions.

This estrangement of writer and language had become both typical and necessary for literary writing in the period. In *Languages in Exile*, Axel Englund writes:

No great writer can remain a merely local mind, unwilling to question the relevance of the particular places from which he writes, or to extend the radius of their presence, or to estrange and exile himself, so to speak, at some point in his search for metaphor, from immediate circumstance.  
(280)

The encounter with a new language, culture, and place meant an encounter with oneself in another language. Identity and meaning had become in-dissociable from language and the resultant plurality prompted disorientation and questioning, but also creativity. For the expatriate, writing was a point of intersection. In the process of reconciling maternal and acquired language, the writer experienced the gap between language and identity, between self and other, in a space that was not only 'bewildering and difficult' but also 'aesthetically fertile' (Englund and Olsson 1).

With a foreign language, one could foreground the subject's disorientation, unhousing the self from its homely materiality, and also materialise another version of the world, bright in its strangeness. 'Writing poetry is in itself translating,' Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva writes in a letter to Rainer Maria Rilke in 1926. 'No language

is the mother tongue,' she goes on, 'writing poetry is rewriting it' (169). Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky introduced the idea of 'ostranenie', or defamiliarisation, in 1917. He says that 'art exists in order to restore the sensation of life' and he posits the strangeness of poetic language as that which enables us to perceive the world anew (162). It is by twisting language – departing from the everyday, turning to nonsense, neologisms, unusual collocations, poetry – that we arrive at that threshold of the legible that is art. For Shklovsky, and as he quotes, for Aristotle, a foreign language is often behind the strange wonder of art (171). For what is foreignness but strangeness? Foreignness is that which does not belong, which comes from elsewhere or outside, and as such it often appears unfamiliar, acting as almost a welcome barrier to automatic or instinctive understanding.

Many modernists speak similarly of the effect of a foreign language. Virginia Woolf, for example, referring to Maupassant, says: 'not from any merit of his own, he gives us that little fillip which we get from reading a language whose edges have not been smoothed for us by daily use' ('Phases' 126). Marcel Proust also famously champions a foreignness of language in 1905, if not an actual foreign language, saying that 'les beaux livres sont écrits dans une sorte de langue étrangère' (289–90). To be in foreign languages and to write in foreign languages respectively fed and expressed modernism's crisis of meaning. Linguistic difference co-existed perfectly with the loss of any absolute truth or inherent self. How could there be any singular truth when each language made meaning differently (Englund and Olsson 8)? Writers continued to call upon language but actively flaunted its inadequacies to portray a complex and senseless human experience.

### *The German years*

Vialatte considered Germany to be the ‘pays romantique par excellence’ (Coyault 339). As a teenager, he filled his head with German Romanticism and fantasy, reading E.T.A. Hoffmann, Heinrich Heine, Clemens Brentano, and indulging in dreams of the beyond (Besson, Préface 7). After studying German at university, he moved to the other side of the Rhine at the age of twenty-one and stayed for seven years, including a year in Berlin for military service. In different capacities as an editor, writer and translator, Vialatte worked in the space between French and German literatures. He began as editor for the newly established magazine *Revue Rhénane* in Mainz whose goal, significantly, was to become ‘un lieu de rencontre littéraire, artistique et intellectuel entre la culture française et la culture allemande’ (Etienne 119). During these German years, he translated from German into French, including Bertolt Brecht’s *Trommeln in der Nacht/ Tambour dans la nuit*, wrote articles on Herman Hesse, professed his admiration for Thomas Mann, and of course discovered Kafka.

Shortly after moving to the Rhine region, however, Vialatte’s teenage ‘dreams of *dépayement*’ were disillusioned (Besson, Préface 7–10). He arrived in Speyer during Carnival, when everything appeared wondrous and supernatural, festive and new. But Germany quickly lost its grass is greener appeal. In June 1922, shortly after arriving, he writes: ‘quelle pauvre chose c’est que la meilleure couleur locale et comme quoi tout n’est qu’imagination...’ (*Correspondance* 2 132). The things that seemed strange and beautiful from France were almost dull in reality. Disappointed, Vialatte concludes in the same letter that only change, travel and movement can

renew one's capacity for astonishment in order to see the world anew. It's not the place that is important – there is no beyond – but the beholder and the mode of seeing.

As Germany reveals its true colours to an on-site Vialatte, his snapshots of German life in magazine columns and letters home quickly become criticisms.<sup>27</sup> Not only was Vialatte's perception of the nation changing but so too was Germany itself. With the rise of the fascist state and the brewing war, spirits were low, depression and suicide rife, the market and political situation volatile. And the Romanticism that had once been so appealing had mutated under the lens of modernism and nationalist politics. In his letters to Pourrat in 1922 and 1923, Vialatte had changed his tune towards this nation who had read too much Hoffman and was living in misery. He scorns the Romantics ('Je bêche [ô contradiction] les romantiques') and writes that Germany's rivers 'charrient les cadavres d'enfants romantiques' (*Correspondance* 2 265, 194). Those supernatural creatures in the night that had once offered such thrill and emotion, such life, now represented something to fear and run from – better to take cover in the warmth of the Auvergne sunshine.

The German Romantic thread that weaves its way through *Battling* finds its home in the trio's construction of the extraterrestrial fringe. A bizarre incarnation in the French countryside, this fringe does not fit the style of the hazy dream world of the novel's predecessor *Le Grand Meaulnes*. But neither does it fit a German Romantic imaginary. Vialatte writes the tale as he is living the horrors of German nationalism

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<sup>27</sup> Vialatte painted a portrait of Germany between the wars for various French and German magazines (not only the *Revue Rhénane* but other publications such as the *Intransigeant* and the *Crapouillot*) as well as in letters home to friends and family. A collection of these articles was published much later as the *Bananes de Königsberg* (1985).

and as his nostalgia for a Romantic 'I' – already long discounted by the modernist unhomely self – is waning. Any fascination with Romanticism enters *Battling* mutated, out of place, intertextual, remembered. The imaginary that infiltrates the narrative is not that of an individual speaker but of a collective. Joining the schoolboy subjectivity that makes visible *Battling*'s fringe is an intertextual collage of voices, lost in time and language, liberated from origin and form.

As Vialatte announces the end of Romantic mystery and the beginning of an industrialised, transparent and prosaic future, he designates Berlin its last site in Europe. When he was there for military training in 1925, he wrote:

Car s'il reste en Europe un rempart du mystère, un bastion du fantastique, une façade d'occulte, c'est l'Allemagne. Berlin, maison neuve et hantée, banque aux employés somnambules. Au garde-à-vous devant les impératifs inéluctables, le peuple attend les consignes du merveilleux de pied ferme ; les mots d'ordre subsistent. L'idée de tout ce qui peut mettre en rapport avec l'infini... (*Correspondance* 371)

Any lingering Romanticism had become urban. And as we saw in *Battling*, this cosmopolitanism infiltrates the French country town. The fictional artist Erna Schnorr and the real-life George Grosz arrive from Berlin, dubbed cultural Bolsheviks, and the shadowy possibilities of the extraterrestrial fringe resemble the dreamscape of Benjamin's Parisian arcades, or the haunted buildings of the German capital. The fringe's phantasmagorias represent in part the 'last bastion of the fantastic' but, more and more, the unreality of France and Germany between the wars.

For Vialatte had been to the elsewhere and found only disillusionment. He had discovered that there was no such thing as couleur locale and that the novelty and

mystery – those fickle items of the imagination – that precedes really knowing a place were all that counted. A rich awareness of the relativity of place informs Vialatte's columns and correspondence; his writing broadcasts the fact that experience is personal and that there are no absolutes. Germany always appears in relation to France, and German culture from the perspective of French. At the same time, France takes on a romanticised aspect in Vialatte's columns, and French culture emerges as a shining beacon amongst the shadows. With the nostalgia of a writer away from home, he lumps Paris, Lyon and various small Auvergne towns in the same tongue-in-cheek list and proclaims these places as the adventures brimming with local colour (*Correspondance* 2 193). The humble Auvergne, in particular, grows into a great, self-conscious fantasy of itself, a memory of distant familiarity.

Shortly before *Battling*, Vialatte worked on another novel called the *Roman rhéнан*.<sup>28</sup> He describes its atmosphere in a letter to Joseph Desaymard in 1926: 'Berlin, l'Auvergne, les vieux collègues derrière le transparent des missions militaires : vous connaissez l'atmosphère (il n'y a qu'à transposer le Portugal). Et le Rhin couvert de pêcheries métaphysiques' (*Correspondance* 3 95). An array of places comes together to create a strange setting which feels uncannily familiar. In the *Roman rhéнан*, Vialatte plays with perspective to render Germany ordinary and France, Other and exotic. These kinds of games problematise the idea of home; the elusive concept exists in neither place and both, in illusion and disillusion. *Battling's* setting too is

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<sup>28</sup> These beginnings of the *Roman rhéнан* were published posthumously as *La Complainte des enfants frivoles* (1999).



unhomely. The Romantic lens is broken but Vialatte uses it anyway. Since there is no elsewhere, he turns the strange fantasy back onto France.

Vialatte wanted to be home, but home, and its language, had forever shifted. He describes his experience of living elsewhere as both difficult and illuminating. ‘Quinze ans de France valent moins,’ he writes to Desaynard in 1924, ‘... pour l’enrichissement intérieur que cinq ans de n’importe où ; on paie peut-être un peu cher ce qu’on apprend, mais on vit davantage’ (qtd. in *Correspondance* 2 18). We pay a price, but we live more. Tsvetaeva said that ‘the reason one becomes a poet... is to avoid being French, Russian etc., in order to be everything’ (170). Likewise, Vialatte’s dislocation from a ‘French identity’ is important for a reading of *Battling*’s treatment of an unknowable and plural self. We will always be strangers to ourselves, best to be aware and to embrace it. ‘Je m’interroge toujours et me découvre des tas de choses,’ Vialatte writes in 1924, ‘il faut s’habituer à soi-même. Je me suis un voisin impossible’ (*Correspondance* 3 60).

Vialatte belongs to the troop of authors, so common in the period, with a translingual authorial identity. At first glance *Battling* is a French *roman d’apprentissage*, a coming of age tale wrapped in the pretty package of the *récit poétique*. Descending from Alain-Fournier’s *Le Grand Meaulnes* or Valéry Larbaud’s *Fermina Márquez*, it depicts a dreamer unfit for this world who obsesses over an unattainable woman and seeks meaning beyond ordinary life. But on closer inspection, things feel a little off-key. Strange pieces push their way into this French novel of formation and intertexts interrupt the closed world of the *récit poétique*. German references abound, French-German tensions run high, and the unforgettable Erna Schnorr floats beguilingly in the distance as an incongruous object of desire. Vialatte writes in

French, his maternal language, but it is a French transformed by a knowledge of other languages and cultures. Spatters of Erna's German appear in the text, but more important is the foreignness of the French itself. Filled with strange collocations, Vialatte's prose could itself be translated. Of his own writing, Vialatte says in Berlin, 'on passe toujours à côté de ce qu'on veut dire ; comme on passe toujours à côté de soi' (*Correspondance* 3 82). Yet somehow the 'déstabilisation du sens' in *Battling* comes together in 'une instabilité soigneusement concertée' (Smadja 401).

The infiltration of the outside world alone is not uncommon for the coming-of-age novel of the modernist period, particularly following World War One. Significantly, *Fermina Márquez* shares *Battling*'s fascination for the foreign, even in 1911. Set on the edge of Paris, rather than in a rural backwater like *Battling*, Larbaud's novel is populated with Latin American students, one of whom is the enchanting and exotic love interest Fermina. Nevertheless, *Fermina Márquez* does not lose its integrity as a result of this cosmopolitanism but rather bases its fictional world upon it. *Battling*, on the other hand, portrays the experience of dislocation.

This thesis attributes the text's placelessness to the construction of a French adolescence from a bleak adult Germany, and from German literature. The text's geography is uncertain, mapped in a translated space, and its characters are unhoused subjects of their epoch. The boys' adolescence – informed by nostalgia more than reality – both poeticises and destabilises the representation of being. Their teenage eyes construct a memory of France from across the Rhine, and of course from a darker, war-menaced future; what the text seeks to represent has since been brutally devastated. *Battling*'s mythical setting and mythical self, then, can exist only from

elsewhere – it is a *translation* whose origins have been rocked by the turmoil of the age.

# Part Two: The Other?

Part Two begins with the Other portraits. Eternal Feminine and Translator: both so often voiceless, both existing in relation to someone else. As I endeavour to occupy these perspectives – one of them my own – I wonder, is our story still that of the Romantic and his Writer? And can we even things out a little to hear both sides of the intersubjective encounter? Part Two intends to do just that.

## Portrait of the Eternal Feminine

*The Eternal Feminine is enchanting. She is everywhere, she is everything. She floats around The Romantic as a vision in white. Blonde of hair, blue of eyes, The Eternal Feminine looks as though she might blow away on the wind, so light and ethereal is she. When The Romantic broods in the veggie patch, she wafts across the tomato plants; when he stares pensively into space, she rises above the garden wall like the Madonna. The Eternal Feminine is a symbol of hope; she offers the possibility of fulfilment. Not only a creature of the sky, she is just as happy in water. All shiny surfaces and long wet hair, she is a sleek and slippery siren, equal parts enchanting and dangerous. Like the shape of water, her form changes to fit the vessel.*

*The Eternal Feminine and The Romantic share an intimate connection. The Romantic does not even need to hear her voice to know what she thinks; their souls are so wedded. She is the source of The Romantic's inspiration – it is she who lies behind his poetry and his paintings. She is Art. The Eternal Feminine also stirs The Romantic's desire. She makes him come alive, his manly form quivering with excitement. And thus aroused, The Romantic can achieve great things, he can create, he can reach sublimation. She feels nothing herself but, not to worry, she incites great feeling in The Romantic.*

*Despite this intimacy, The Eternal Feminine must remain forever a stranger. She is just out of reach, not quite knowable or attainable. Foreign and exotic, she comes from somewhere far away. She looks like a creature of Scandinavian mythology and her tongue is not The Romantic's, nor is her world. It must be this way, since The Eternal Feminine is The Romantic's Other. Her image comes from his imagination, from his fantasies, from his reading. Her words form in his language, her behaviour and form bend with his projection.*

*But does this Eternal Feminine confirm The Romantic's identity or break it? As his reflection, she offers no stable or singular identity to our dear hero. Her appearance, language, behaviour; none of it satisfies the image The Romantic wants for himself. Her plural identity repels his projections. It is in The Eternal Feminine's smiles and her hair, in her gaze, that The Romantic drowns.*

## Portrait of a Translator

*The Translator works at a computer in 2018. It's a Sunday and she is working on an English translation of The Writer's novel for her PhD. She sits at a desk in a room marked by the current Scandinavian trend: succulents, industrial lamps, light woods. A sketch of Paris' rooftops sits unhung on the desk, some old French books line the windowsill, the gleam of a Kindle brings us into the 21st century. The Translator has the air-conditioning on: it's a hot Australian summer. The Writer's book is open before her on the desk. It's all whimsy and lyricism. The words are excited, energetic, the images vivid. Nostalgia for a simple being, at one with nature, and for adolescent dreams and possibilities, pervades the text.*

*Sitting between the original and the reader, The Translator tries to inhabit The Writer's shoes, seeing the text in the language, time and culture within which it made sense. But at the same time, she is aware of the orange Bensimon tennis shoes she is wearing, bought last year on the other side of the world. She is aware of the terraced skyline of Melbourne's inner north out her window. The internet on her laptop and the global tapping of keys. How will this text speak in her English, to a twenty-first century Anglophone audience? The Translator wonders if The Writer's book is too old-fashioned. Too French. And too Romantic. She doesn't think much of souls herself, nor of the adjectives and adverbs The Writer uses – too many, she thinks, and too focused on the miraculous and the esoteric. Plus, she is annoyed at the sexism of The Writer with his outdated Romantic hero and his unattainable goddess. Why can't the woman be the subject, the active hero type, the point of focalisation? Why can't it be the muse, for once, who is allowed to wallow in her own navel-gazing?*

*But better to critically engage with past literature than deny it. And, in any case, The Translator wonders if there might not be more to The Writer's novel. Perhaps the text's subversion of Romanticism outweighs its nostalgia. After all, this Eternal Feminine is modern. She does not confirm The Romantic's identity; she fractures it. And the bizarre set of influences comes together in a story The Translator hasn't heard before.*

*She turns her pen to the battle at hand: between domesticating the foreign – making the French accessible, occasionally changing a reference, explicating context, making it suit its new literary home – and foreignising the domestic – retaining the strangeness, the distance, the nostalgia: it is Other within the English words. As she negotiates this cross-cultural space, The Translator wonders if she has lost sight of the text and its characters as they were. But what does that mean – to see them as they were? Translating The Writer's novel will inevitably show it anew. Better not to miss the exchange.*

# 4

## Figurehead of Our Hope

**'Elle avait sur un corps de nageuse une tête étrange et géniale de femme laide'** A translation<sup>1</sup>

In the *Querschnitt*, the *Crapouillot* and a few other richly-illustrated magazines of the international art scene, you could find Erna Schnorr's picture: her clean lines, rounded forehead, thick lips and pale eyes awakening visions of Scandinavia. She seemed made to live on a Nordic beach or in a well-polished red house swallowed up by a snowy plain. On top of her swimmer's body, she had the strange and remarkable head of an ugly woman, but it was so well washed, so even, so fresh, so firm and so smooth that you would not want it any other way. In between a photo of a team from Oxford and one of three writers in their sixties kneeling on a busy beach, was one of her wolf-dog sitting on a bench in the Tiergarten; Erna herself was pictured training for a swimming

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<sup>1</sup> From *Battling* (37-45). See Appendix: Extract 3 for source text.

championship on a page with a jiu jitsu instructor and working in her studio in Charlottenburg, between a black deity and a sailing ship, wearing a white coat like a small modest nurse. She had run into some legal trouble with her first art dealer, Max Schelling, and her caricature had appeared all over the literary magazines; for a time, Erna was the talk of the town. She had come to attain, if not popularity, at least the admiration of the professional elite and the respect of the critics. Her work with sheet metal would hardly have set her apart from the many others but for the element of spontaneity amongst the artificiality which made her work unique: hers was the perilous edge of art, a wondrous balance between the real and the impossible. The elegance of her designs and the strangeness of the light dazzled like a Norwegian tale. With visions plucked from another world, Erna had created an alternate reality and was exploiting it for her pleasure. This childish spontaneity had seduced a bigwig businessman, then a few amateurs, and finally won over the critics. Philipp Carton, head of the Swabian school of poetry, had parted ways with the intellectual set to found a 'Pure Miracle' group in her honour, Schuhmacher, the expressionist, had stopped painting severed hands snowing over aces of clubs, and the youngest Hartmann, burning his idols, had proclaimed in a memorable interview at the Roemer Kaffee that there was as much pretext to painting in this episode as in an impeccably white pipe resting on an irrefutably blue bracket. Such thinking – with the stipulation of certain conditions of course – led to the definition of 'pictorial episodism' and to the two schools 'Transcendental Episodism' and 'Episodic Secession'. The eloquent voices of art-speak discussed idealist constructivism, pure psyche, plastic states and the chromatic heights of anecdotal interstellarism in the most stylish watering holes. Those were the golden days of Colour. But Erna, rather than concerning herself with the exhaustive list of nouns set in motion by her painting, had gotten on with her work. Her Children of the Zodiac piece had sold for thirty thousand marks. There, on the doorstep of a rundown house, two children played naked in the dust with a cat; above them the Milky Way spanned the sky like a river and Pisces, the two fish, sailed along brightly like side-by-side gondolas. What Jammes had done in the realm of poetry for old magazines, she had done in the realm of colour for pictures of mythology and natural history. She had realised the ultimate childhood dream that you get from reading schoolbooks. Her narrow yet admirable success gave the dealers reason to hope.



It was around this time in her artistic career that she arrived in our small town one summer evening to claim the inheritance left to her by a great-great-aunt on her mother's side, for she was the daughter of a French woman whose family used to live in the area. The big lake which extended behind the Contades' (Battling's cousins and guardians) house, had seduced her by virtue of some secret charm – a childhood memory perhaps? – which rendered its waters particularly dear. She often said, so it seemed, that 'all poetry came from the water'. Could it be that this water, which for all its beauty was rather ordinary, had managed to strike a chord in her soul? Or was some other factor at play? I myself had no idea. A whim? A hunger for experience? One must accept things as they come and artists as they are. The highways were so beautiful, there was so much hope in their bold turns, so much mystery and promise that you expected to happen upon some allegorical figure at any moment – Love, Sport, Truth. Not dressed in antique peplos, symbols of power in their hands, but splendid, naked, fierce, as you see them in these provinces running through the woods in the countryside. Had it not been for Safety, or Moderation...? In a pinch, Nostalgia would do.

Had Erna Schnorr, the 'transcendental episodist', been taken in by such exotic charm? Had she bumped into one of these figures at dusk, when she was walking around the lake? Perhaps Harmony, less costly than at Potsdam, Nostalgia, less hungry than at Nordoney, or Truth, more eloquent than in the *Berliner Tageblatt*, had ensnared her. Whatever the case, she had stayed. She had rented an apartment at the Contades' house and settled in with her trunk and her tubes of paint. She lived on salads and did not appear to want to leave. Hypotheses and bold conjecture spread through the small town.

Many spoke ill of the foreigner and, contrary to what one might think, Erna Schnorr took it to heart. Tired of the compliments, the admiration and the society of eccentrics and people of taste, she seemed to set store only by middle-class life, the little things, the little people, the esteem of a humble public servant, the friendship of a shopkeeper. She dreamt of an ordinary life like a small-town telephonist dreams of becoming a film star. The bourgeois existence appeared to her a sort of impossible ideal, extravagant and desirable, reserved for a demanding and chosen few who despise celebrities. She would have liked to embroider cushions from time to time with Madame Rambert, the postman's wife, under a gas ceiling light as an aroma of leek soup

escaped from the kitchen. Poor Erna. In spite of the ugliness that the townsfolk generously allowed her, she represented such a rare and thus precious element that mothers feared their sons' exposure to her charms. What's more, the semi-cultured bourgeoisie would commonly bad-mouth paintings that Cassierer had secured in advance, calling them 'daubs' with a small smile of superiority, and admirers of Madame Rivière, the region's muse, would talk about her in a state of almost sincere hilarity. The day that Manuel dared protest to his mother: 'but Mademoiselle Schnorr does extraordinary things', Madame Feracci pointed out in a pinched tone that there were certain conniving women out there who knew exactly how to take in young people, that artists were wastrels, bohemians and bad housewives, that they wore coats worth six thousand francs and lived on potato salad, that boys who fell for affectation were simpletons, that good manners were deceptive and didn't make a good home, that her brother-in-law, the clerk at the Seine Prefecture, had known a so-called 'actress' who used to be a dishwasher, and that, obviously, Manuel had no affection for his parents.

Once they had ostracised Erna Schnorr, the townsfolk took exception to a solitude that they declared proud. If her foreignness had at first led to some eager friendships rooted in curiosity, such camaraderie had quickly turned sour once word got around that her life held no hidden secrets and that she didn't care to be controlled. The cloak-and-dagger atmosphere that these ladies kept up under the guise of friendship prevented them from making the faux pas that would have provided pleasing fodder for their ordinary conversations. They would not have been upset then to see the 'actress' ensnared by one of the lewd suitors the town had charitably ascribed to her, the deputy judge, for example, or some other prospect whose love life possessed a certain colourful credibility. Almost a year had passed since Erna arrived in our town when she fell rather seriously ill. Being superstitious, she refused the care of Dr Barabragne on the grounds that he wasn't German (something the ladies found highly suspicious) and, still in the throes of illness, left for Berlin where Madame Rivière's coterie declared she would secretly give birth. Erna wondered why she had had so many visitors while she was ill and reproached herself for having misjudged the sincerity of her former friends – it had only taken misfortune to rediscover their goodwill. She was ashamed at the hardness of her heart but could not understand why everyone kept complimenting her on her plumpness when she had lost several kilos: a product of the allegations made by Madame Rivière's Tuesday

ladies. Manuel, who thought Erna rather thin when she passed by the place du Marché one day, inspired this despairing remark from his mother: 'I see that you are beyond help, my poor boy'. And later that night Madame Feracci opened her heart into Madame Chaussade's bosom in return for some gentle grumbling on the misdemeanours of the young Paul Chaussade, who was studying law in Paris. All this was happening around the time that there was a big push on those Tuesdays with Madame Rivière to reach a unanimous vote on the name of the colourful culprit. After wavering over the deputy judge, the balance was poised to tip, bypassing the property inspector to land in favour of the lieutenant of police. Manuel should settle the matter – such a tender-aged hero was positively heart-warming. Mind you, Madame Chaussade brought some discretion to her technique; she simply spread the word that the young man was a rather dangerous boy, not that she could attest to his having got up to mischief, but he did appear to have his uncle Seygrolles' temperament, and everyone – just between us, of course – knew for a fact that this uncle Seygrolles put it about with the village petticoats and 'made bastards all over the map', at least according to the strong language of Madame Chasles, the notary's widow, who didn't beat about the bush. Madame Chasles – a very honest person, to be sure, but one whose jovial and hot-headed temperament steered her towards men of manifest masculinity and had apparently led her, at another time, to cheerfully cheat on her notary with a captain of musketeers – felt a sort of esteem for this pale and wilful boy whom she would previously have taken for more of your budding vegetarian anarchist. She liked flamboyant characters who sinned recklessly with robust women, as long as they followed a fairly traditional pattern and stayed within the bounds of accepted practice. Without exactly denying Manuel's merits, Madame Chasles declared that he might have done better, for his first tumble, 'to have it off with Céline', a beautiful girl from the quartier des Tanneurs who sang at the *Alhambra* – and this view, relayed to the young man via unnamed channels, must have somehow made its way into his head. But the other townswomen warned their daughters and so it was that Manuel and Mademoiselle Schnorr entered into the minds of all those young ladies as pariahs from whom to keep one's distance: Manuel playing the friendly rogue, Erna Schnorr, the competition, playing the hideous reprobate... O Erna, standing atop the wall crowned with Virginia creeper, just like, in the clear sky of the four o'clock break, the figurehead of our hope.

## Figurehead of Our Hope

Tour à tour alliée, ennemie, elle [l'éternel féminin] apparaît comme le chaos ténébreux d'où sourd la vie, comme cette vie-même, et comme l'au-delà vers lequel elle tend...

– SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

*Le Deuxième sexe*

The stereotype is the Eternal Feminine. She is the Sexual Object sought by all men, and by all women. She is of neither sex, for she herself has no sex at all. Her value is solely attested by the demand she excites in others. All she must contribute is her existence. She need achieve nothing, for she is the reward of achievement.

– GERMAINE GREER

*The Female Eunuch*

Erna Schnorr emerges above the schoolgrounds like a 'figurehead of hope' for the schoolboys of *Battling*. A sophisticated painter from Berlin with a strange name, German accent and Nordic appearance, Erna is nothing like the French women of the text's small-town setting. She is a liminal figure; born in Germany, she moves to the French town to collect her inheritance from her mother's French ancestors. Sick of Berlin's trendy intellectual set, Erna wants nothing more than to settle in and become one of the small-town bourgeoisie: a crocheting, gossiping housewife who dies in

anonymity. But everything about her resists conformity. To the townsfolk, Erna will always be an outsider. Her appearance, behaviour and tongue make her unsuited to village life.

Our vision of Erna is from the perspective of the schoolboys. *Why did she move here? Did you know she was an artist? I heard she was a whore* (40-41, 51). The novel's main trio rush to idolise her, positioning her as the exotic Other to their collective self whose myth encapsulates everything missing from their lives. The narrator pieces together snippets from Battling's and Manuel's visions of Erna, as well as the general rumours around town, and their collective surveillance; they spy on her from the schoolyard. While we occasionally get insight into Erna's worries and desires, a series of male fantasies form the large part of her image. Made up of an array of stereotypes which struggle to confine her, Erna emerges mythical and illusory. The narrator tells us that he couldn't possibly form an accurate picture of her character (109); within the French imaginary with which she was created, Erna is not meant to be understood but rather to remain permanently Other. It is only outside of this that she might be conceivable.

From a distance, and from the schoolboys' perspective, Erna represents the eternal feminine: an idealised and timeless vision of woman. They are the fanciful crew on a ship travelling towards supernatural stations; she is the symbolic silhouette at the helm. They on the ground; she above the wall, in the window, white against darkness. They physical, grotty teenagers, full of feeling; she clean, pure, artform, photograph, image. They many; she one. They the universal male self; she life-giver, muse, Nature.

Fronting the schoolboy trio, as we saw in Chapters Two and Three, Battling serves as the tenebrous, melancholy hero who construes Erna Schnorr as the solution to his unhappy existence. He thinks himself the Artist, the man, the Romantic. The *Bildung*/building of Battling's self that frames the novel entails a journey through foreignness, as Antoine Berman describes it, 'pour accéder à ce qui, sous le voile d'un devenir-autre, est en vérité un devenir-soi...' (*Epreuve* 74).<sup>2</sup> Imagining himself out in the world, in love with another, Battling projects a deeply personal quest onto Erna's foreign figure, fearing and idolising her myth from within a closed French context. The text indulges in its protagonist's objectification of Erna, but it does so ironically. With her strange appearance, far from the typical older French woman who serves as a plot device for the male hero's coming of age,<sup>3</sup> Erna's character serves to satirise outdated notions of the veiled Isis and eternal feminine.

What this chapter investigates is the way in which Erna fails to comply with the representations to which the boys are habituated. It begins in the first segment, *The Eternal Feminine*, by positioning Erna as object to the male subject and goes on to argue that Erna's cultural, aesthetic and linguistic liminality serves as the point of problematisation to the mythical interwar self of Vialatte's text. Looking into Erna's reflection, Battling finds plurality and alienation; her position between French and German worlds confuses the Romantic's quest for a national self. In Chapter Five, I turn to the traces the text leaves of Erna's own subjectivity as historical woman artist.

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<sup>2</sup> As I cover in Chapter Two.

<sup>3</sup> In 1923, Raymond Radiguet's *Le Diable au corps*, in which the teenage boy falls for the married and beautiful woman Marthe, presented a landmark adolescent boy-older woman narrative for *Battling's* time, as did Colette's *Le Blé en herbe*. I look into representations of these women later in the chapter.

But in this chapter, as the figurehead of hope, her strange aesthetic dictates the image of woman with which the modernist (male) self paints his own insecure identity. To examine this aesthetic, I analyse pictures of Erna in magazines in *The Centrefold*, an erotic vision conjured by Battling in *Her Pale Form in the Gloom* and, lastly, poetry written from hero to muse in *Ode to Ugliness*. The final and metatranslational segment of this chapter, *Pieces of Raspberry Pie*, moves outside the narrative to relate Erna's reflection of Battling to translation's reflection of the original text.

### **The Eternal Feminine**

Erna's strangeness, her remote exotic appeal, but also her harsh untouchability, start from her name itself. *Erna Schnorr*. The sounds are so foreign within the French. *Where does she come from*, Battling and his friends wonder? Perhaps Erna's name is inspired by the old Nordic text *Snorra Edda*, written by Snorri Sturluson, from the 1200s. This collection of Nordic mythology and Scandinavian poetry wraps Erna in the dreamy mystery that she demands. She is from Berlin, but her myth arises from a generalised elsewhere across the Rhine, north and Germanic. Erna is at home in the water, blond and pale. A Scandinavian siren: singing, tempting, dangerous to her beholders. *Keep away from her*, the mothers say to their sons (45). She is Lorelei sitting high on a rock above the Rhine, bewitching sailors as 'she combs her golden hair'<sup>4</sup> and causing them to crash into the rocks.<sup>5</sup> She is Germanic goddesses 'aux

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<sup>4</sup> From Mark Twain's translation (published in *A Tramp* 1880) of Heinrich Heine's poem 'Die Loreley' (1824).

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Clemens Brentano's myth of Lorelei in 'Zu Bacharach am Rheine' (1801).

cheveux verts qui incantent l'été' that travel into French literature with Guillaume Apollinaire's 'Rhénanes'.<sup>6</sup>

Or perhaps Erna's name follows Richard Wagner's leading lady, Malvina Schnorr, the actress who played Isolde. Wagner conceived of woman for man's sublimation; *Tristan und Isolde* (1865) presented the epitome of the coupling required for the male protagonist's realisation (Emslie 36). Malvina Schnorr and Wagner were friends until the death of her husband. When she became lonely and troubled, Wagner broke ties with her, dismissing her a mad woman, jealous and wanting to marry him (Newman 3–37).<sup>7</sup> *She's German, strange ways, keeps to herself*, the townsfolk say of Erna. *Why isn't she married?*

In Jean Giraudoux's *Siegfried et le Limousin* (1922), the nurse Eva von Schwanhofer cares for and baptises protagonist Siegfried in Germany; she is life-giver and source of salvation. *Eva von Schwanhofer. Erna Schnorr*. Pierre d'Almeida sees Erna as incorporating the traits not only of Eva, connected by their names, but of various female characters in Giraudoux's novel. Erna represents an ensemble of women from a text that Vialatte himself considered as possessing the German soul (355–56).

The erotic poetic lure of Erna's inaccessible name is symbolic of her role as eternal feminine. The term 'eternal feminine' ('Ewig-Weibliche') as an object to inspire man's transcendence was made famous by Goethe's *Faust* (Part I 1808, Part II 1832).<sup>8</sup> As Erna, assembled of a collection of Germanic stereotypes, appears before

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<sup>6</sup> Line 12 of 'Nuit rhénane' from the Rhénanes collection in *Alcools* (1913).

<sup>7</sup> Ernest Newman's seminal biography on Wagner was originally published in 1937 (this volume).

<sup>8</sup> Vialatte in fact translated some of Goethe's work and, given his background in German literature and German Romanticism, had access to a different Goethe than his French contemporaries who most likely read Goethe's oeuvre through the lens of French Romanticism.



Battling, so too did an ensemble of women surround Faust and ultimately offer him salvation. Together, in all their multiplicity and lack of individuality, these women converged into an idealised and essentialist concept of woman conceived from the perspective of man (Tutter 25). Following *Faust*, the eternal feminine, far from any flesh and blood figure, is Nature and the source of all life. Her role within the narrative is confined to inspiring the male hero; she is ‘the one that pulls us by example onwards and upwards,’ morally and spiritually superior (Emslie 35). Over the ages, the trope has taken on different forms to suit each period’s patriarchal fears and desires.

The German Romantics cultivated the myth of the eternal feminine as a symbol of the unattainable sublime. In Immanuel Kant’s definition, the sublime is the otherness outside the self that has the power to destroy the ‘I’ completely; it has an ethereal appeal which attracts as well as frightens. Male thinkers and artists have often conceptualised the sublime through the veiled goddess Isis; fearful and wondrous, she encapsulates an unattainable truth to be eternally pursued (Battersby 1–16). Thus, everything unknown or lacking in the male self comes conceptualised and wrapped in a pretty – or repulsive – and externalised womanly package. It’s important, however, to distinguish between this ‘feminine’ sublime and real woman. Kant said that woman should be beautiful, not awe-inspiring like the sublime. The symbol is feminine simply because it is Other, and accessible, only to the (white and Western) male self. Encountering an awful otherness, the male self is challenged. While Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805) posited that a man strong enough to behold such truths could lift Isis’ veil to see horrors beyond, Kant maintained that she could never be

unveiled (Battersby 9–10). Either way, the lifting of the veil signifies the hero's quest for identity, his apprenticeship and purpose.

The veiled Isis as eternal feminine enters French literature through the German Romantics. The symbol appears frequently in Gerard de Nerval's work, for example, including here, in *Aurélia* (1855), amid the haze of the speaker's madness:

Il me semblait que la déesse m'apparaissait, me disant : 'Je suis la même que Marie, la même que ta mère, la même aussi que sous toutes les formes tu as toujours aimée. À chacune de tes épreuves, j'ai quitté l'un des masques dont je voile mes traits, et bientôt tu me verras telle que je suis...' (101-102)

If only he could see beneath the final veil, he might know himself. In Arthur Rimbaud's *Illuminations* (1872-1873, published 1886), a goddess incarnates the dawn of the poem 'Aube', again travelling from the German into the French. Rimbaud's 'wasserfall blond', with hair of sun and water, tempts the speaker with her veils, and he raises them one by one.<sup>9</sup> *Battling hated that he desired Erna with her strange foreigner's mask* (56).

Feminist thinkers have since dispelled the ideal vision of woman that is the eternal feminine. Simone de Beauvoir famously challenged the representation of woman as Other to a universal male self. In her seminal text *Le deuxième sexe* (1949), she dismantled literary representations that, by objectifying through the male gaze and flattening with two-dimensional tropes, confined woman to this symbolic role. And how close is idealising to debasing? Paul Cézanne's painting 'L'éternel féminin'

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<sup>9</sup> 'Je levai un à un les voiles.'

(1877) shows a woman naked and surrounded by men. More than worshipping, they appear aggressive, and the woman's eyes are only red sockets. *Was Erna mocking him?* Battling wondered. *He wanted to beat her, humiliate her* (57). Many feminist theories have since countered the anti-fleshy, anti-female nature of the eternal feminine, which I'll explore more in Chapter Five. For woman to flee the bounds of the eternal feminine – hated and adored – she must be a subject herself, thick with agency, depth and body.

The women in Vialatte's work have not occupied a large place in the academic literature on his fiction. While mentioned in passing, they are rarely the subject of criticism. This is owing, no doubt, to the mythical, unreal nature of his female characters. Rarely possessing their own agency, they are formed from stereotype and dream, and exist in the narrative solely for the male's journey. Vialatte's focus is adolescence and the women are then creatures of schoolboy fantasy, 'nées du regard des adolescents frivoles qui les façonnent au gré de leur désir' – they embody the ambiguity and fragility of adolescence (Hadjadj 169, 171). Erna Schnorr is one of two exceptions that Dany Hadjadj refers to in a rare article on these female characters: *rêves de femmes. Femmes de rêve*. Erna has a backstory, a narrative arc (albeit bizarre and ironically told), some fears and desires of her own and is a renowned artist. Nonetheless, she too occupies the realm of myth. Is this woman for all women, multiple and one, everywhere? Or a singular woman without equal, real and embodied?

## The Centrefold

Erna enters the narrative not as a character of the boys' fictional world but as a figure outside – she belongs to the realm of writing, photography and art. The narrator introduces her by her pictures in avant-garde magazines, as representation rather than physical woman. Even though Erna is in the media for her own impressive artwork, it is the schoolboys who think themselves the artists, looking at the magazines and objectifying her image. The reader is constantly reminded to identify with the beholder:

Dans le *Querschnitt*, le *Crapouillot* et quelques autres magazines bien illustrés de tendances internationales, on pouvait voir le portrait d'Erna Schnorr, ses lignes nettes, son front bombé, ses lèvres épaisses et ses yeux pâles qui autorisaient à inventer toutes les Scandinavies. On la sentait faite pour habiter des plages nordiques ou des maisons rouges bien astiquées, perdues dans des plaines de neige. Elle avait sur un corps de nageuse une tête étrange et géniale de femme laide ; mais c'était quelque chose de si bien lavé, de si uni, de si frais, de si ferme et de si lisse qu'on ne la désirait pas autrement. Entre la photo d'une équipe d'Oxford et celle de trois écrivains sexagénaires à genoux sur une plage fréquentée, on avait pu voir son chien-loup assis sur un banc du Tiergarten ; on avait pu la voir elle-même, sur la même page qu'un professeur de jiu-jitsu, travaillant un championnat de natation ; elle s'était révélée aussi en blouse blanche, entre un fétiche nègre et un voilier, pareille à une petite infirmière modeste, dans son atelier de Charlottenbourg. (37)<sup>10</sup>

In the *Querschnitt*, the *Crapouillot* and a few other richly-illustrated magazines of the international art scene, you could find Erna Schnorr's

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<sup>10</sup> This extract comes from the translation that opens this chapter ('Elle avait sur un corps de nageuse une tête étrange et géniale de femme laide'); it is present again here for the close reading.

picture: her clean lines, rounded forehead, thick lips and pale eyes awakening visions of Scandinavia. She seemed made to live on a Nordic beach or in a well-polished red house swallowed up by a snowy plain. On top of her swimmer's body, she had the strange and remarkable head of an ugly woman, but it was so well washed, so even, so fresh, so firm and so smooth that you would not want it any other way. In between a photo of a team from Oxford and one of three writers in their sixties kneeling on a busy beach, was one of her wolf-dog sitting on a bench in the Tiergarten; Erna herself was pictured training for a swimming championship on a page with a jiu jitsu instructor and working in her studio in Charlottenburg, between a black mascot and a sailing ship, wearing a white coat like a small modest nurse.

The long sentences in French, where 'on' is the subject, pose problems in translation. As always, English forces interpretation of the pronoun 'on'. I could translate the repeated phrasing 'on pouvait/avait pu voir' with 'one could see', 'you could see', 'we could see'. So often, 'one' suggests the wrong tone in English, too stiff and formal, and 'we' confines the subject to the schoolboys. Perhaps 'you'? But later in the novel the narrator uses 'you' to address Battling from beyond the grave. I instinctively write 'find' in English rather than 'see', even though the passage is very visual. The boys seek Erna, wanting to know her, but they do so through her image. The most appealing option in translation is to avoid the 'on pouvait voir' structure altogether and make Erna, or rather Erna's picture, the subject of the sentence. For without an active subject and verb the prose is long and flat in English. I play around with this, but I cannot make the sentence work with Erna in the active position; the passage is too descriptive, and the subject would have to change awkwardly from her wolf-dog to Erna herself. I do add the verb 'to work' because the rhythm of my translation demands some kind of symmetry between the picture of Erna 'training'

for her swimming championship and the picture of Erna in her studio. Rather than just *being*, passively, in her white coat, my English translation has Erna *working*.

Interestingly, the resistance of the French to an active reformulation points to the crux of our introduction to Erna. The phrasing forces the reader to take up the male viewing position; for all its apparent neutrality, the French 'on' is here gendered, as is Erna's position in the very sentence structure. My grammatical war with the passage is equally an ideological one: the ostensibly neutral French syntax invites a feminist rereading/ translation.<sup>11</sup> The original passage is not about Erna but about the gaze, about *looking at* not *looked-at*.

Erna is pictured in magazines: modern, photographed and replicable. The magazine was home to a new conception of woman for the twentieth century, one who worked, wore pants, cut her hair, had freedom over herself and her body (Holmes and Tarr 15). In France, the Belle Epoque brought with it the myth of the elegant Parisian woman who was liberated and autonomous, active in the workforce. And in the *Années Folles*, the period in which *Battling* is set, the working woman became only more common, as did women writers and artists. But if on the surface it seemed that the beautiful ideal of muse and passive female object was over, the reality was more complex. This sophisticated Parisienne rarely held positions of power or participated in the intellectual elite, and she was likely legally and financially dependent on a man. Moreover, her image was caught as much as ever in the male imaginary (Antle

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<sup>11</sup> This line of enquiry could be pursued further but goes beyond the scope of this chapter which works towards a reading of the text and of the character Erna Schnorr.

9-11). The timeless and inanimate eternal feminine had simply taken on a new incarnation.

Even if Erna features in the magazine playing sports, active, praised for her achievements in the art world and treated amongst the intellectual elite, her image offers a series of fantasies for the male beholder to lose himself in. First, she is *la sportive* as a strong swimmer, then sublime like a Scandinavian siren, and finally petite in her studio, a care-giver like a modest nurse dressed in white. All around are others in action, pictures of sporting teams and writers on busy beaches; Erna too is many, featuring on page upon page, but always alone, independent and dazzling with strange brightness. Erna's portrait is found in the magazines *Der Querschnitt* and *Le Crapouillot*. Both were avant-garde, artistic and liberal, not blind to the independent woman. The 1922 cover of *Le Crapouillot*, for example, satirises the traditional image of Adam and Eve to promote female agency in both sexuality and artistry (Birnbaum 177–78). Eve is nude but with short hair, heels, and a confident posture, while Adam is outdated, old and primitively protecting his dignity with a leaf. While ostensibly about female emancipation, this image of woman stays within the male-dictated confines of female beauty and behaviour.

Significantly, *Der Querschnitt* and *Le Crapouillot* are German and French magazines respectively – they foreground Erna's transnationality. *Der Querschnitt* is representative of the flourishing arts culture during the *Goldene Zwanziger* [Golden Twenties] in Weimar Germany; like Erna, the publication came out of Berlin, a hub for intellectuals and avant-garde artists. *Le Crapouillot* – the French side to Erna's coin – began as a 'journal de tranchées' in France in the First World War and later morphed into an arts and literature magazine, adopting the title: 'arts, lettres et

spectacles.’<sup>12</sup> I struggle to translate the first line: ‘magazines bien illustrés de tendances internationales’. ‘Richly-illustrated magazines’ is not bad, but with the uncoupling of the collocation ‘magazines illustrés’, the ‘illustrés’ acts instead on the ‘tendances internationales’. The wordplay aligns colour with worldliness so that the reader credits the international nature with the richness of the publications. I play around with ‘splashed/ decorated/blazoned with international trends’ for a while, to evoke headlines on magazines and reproduce this coupling. But it doesn’t really mean anything. I change tack, separating ‘illustrated’ from ‘international’ and explicating the artiness of the magazines for the contemporary reader: ‘richly-illustrated magazines of the international art scene’. But is this too dry, too unambiguous? As we soon see, Erna’s brightness comes precisely from this glossy non-conformist world that circulates on an international stage. Being both French and German, Erna’s image emerges irregular and appealing, outside national identities.

The schoolboys frame Erna’s foreign appearance as their new aesthetic.<sup>13</sup> In the tradition of male beholder and female muse, the woman in art is rendered feminine icon or illusion, a mere vessel for the male subject. The narrator decorporealises Erna’s form with ekphrastic language. Erna’s ‘lignes nettes’ and ‘front bombé’ (37) evoke a sculpture or texturised painting. I translate ‘son front bombé’ with ‘her rounded forehead’ but a more misshapen term in line with the exaggerated features of the expressionists could also apply, ‘bulging’, for example, or ‘protruding’. Like

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<sup>12</sup> The tone was satirical, depicting horrors with humour during the war and publishing non-conformist art and progressive opinions later. Vialatte himself wrote for *Le Crapouillot*, portraying an ironic picture of German life in the inter-war period.

<sup>13</sup> See Fig. 2 below for an image from the period (for the avant-garde magazine *Rhythm*) that seems to perfectly encapsulate Erna’s depth, colour and modernist shapes.



classical artistic depictions of the female figure, Erna's body is transformed into cultural object – she is a *nude* rather than a naked woman (Ussher 3). But the aesthetic is not Classic. Erna has the head of an ugly woman on top of her swimmer's body – the French reads 'sur un corps de nageuse une tête' where 'a body' continues a façade of objectivity and an abstractness of person. These harsh and ugly building blocks echo modernist depictions in which 'the body, freed from cosy roundness, could appear in terms of stylised geometry with harsh lines and stiff angles' (Levenson 46). Erna fits visually into German expressionism, or cubist collage – exoticised and geometrised like Picasso's women in 'Les Femmes d'Alger' (1911) – with the body broken up in art. With her smooth surfaces and geometric shapes, she seems to have depth even on the page. But does this depiction challenge traditional representations of woman as Other or simply reinterpret the Other for the (male) avant-garde artist?



Fig. 2 Fergusson, J.D. 'Rhythm.' 1911.

It is Erna's beholder, looking into her pale eyes, who constructs her image. The French, 'ses yeux pâles qui autorisaient à inventer,' neatly sidesteps the question of agency. I'm wary of adding a subject in English, with a translation such as: 'allows one to invent', 'makes you think of', 'gives us permission to imagine'. The beholder looks into Erna's eyes and sees *her* giving permission. Does the passive looked-at *authorize* with her gaze? Or does the beholder assume that Erna's body, her image, is there for his purposes, allowing him to dream? I settle on the similarly slippery 'awakening visions' in English, trying to keep the problematic entitlement of the French. The viewer imagines 'toutes les Scandinavies'. I wrestle with 'Scandinavies' in translation – what does this term mean? 'Chinoiserie' comes to mind but the construction is slightly different. 'Visions of Scandinavia'? 'Scandinavian fantasies'? Vialatte's neologism, in the plural, suggests a bringing together of difference, of multiplicity, into one construct. Given that Scandinavia is elsewhere, the term connotes a fantasy of appropriated northern stereotypes, constructed from within the French context. This Nordic cliché is encapsulated by the red house in the snow; it mimics the architectural nature of the description of Erna's person and continues her foreign aura – such a house remains forever in the distance, its brightness summoning the eye but eluding one's approach. While Erna's image is everywhere, in print, art and fantasy, the beholder finds no stable, concrete or singular self, no body. Formed of stereotypes of faraway places, Erna represents the foreign world imagined by the schoolboys from within the French text: discernible on the horizon but forever out of reach.

More than objectifying woman for man's identity, this description implies the creation of woman for the artist's sublimation. Erna was *made for* ('faite pour') a

Nordic beach, and her house above is described as well-polished ('bien astiquée'); a 'shiny' red house would sound more natural in English but 'well-polished' pulls the reader back to its construction, the creation of the sculpture, the invention of Erna's fantasy. For the man who considers himself artist, eternal feminine merges with muse, promising inspiration.

The Romantics saw art as the way to sublimation, a sort of medium for man to be on par with the Gods. For Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), it was art that served to take man through the veil and, for Friedrich Nietzsche, even if art was an illusion, the artist achieved liberation through aesthetics (Battersby 166). Where woman represented the sublime, man aspired through art to subjugate it. Battling writes the poetry and makes the art, using Erna for inspiration to reach a union beyond himself, and Erna acts as the medium: poem, sculpture, painting. The text holds on to the suspicion, held by Oscar Wilde among others, that art influences life more than the other way around.<sup>14</sup> Like Pygmalion who fell in love with his own sculpture, the boys want to mould Erna to their desires. They may not create her, but they create the version of her that we see in Vialatte's text, and it is here that they love her. Following Pygmalion's lead, Battling becomes infatuated with an artistic construct of Erna rather than a bodily woman. Pygmalion was not interested in women in real life yet fell in love with his statue when it was so beautiful and 'realistic'. What does it mean that the male hero thinks his own image of woman to be the most desirable and even the most real?

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<sup>14</sup> Wilde famously writes that 'life imitates art far more than Art imitates life' in his essay *The Decay of Lying*, originally published in 1891.

Erna's image takes on the shape of water, changing according to her beholder's desires. Returning to the above translation, the pools of emotion in Erna's eyes announce her aqueous nature. She has the body of a swimmer, her head is so well washed, she lives by a pond and believes that 'toute poésie vient des eaux' (40). In this schoolboy fantasy, the small-town pond transforms into a remote Nordic beach and the Contades' house becomes shiny and red, 'perdue dans des plaines de neige' (37). The repeating p's in the French, I change to s's in translation, increasing the slippery sonority that surrounds Erna with 'swallowed up in snowy plains'. Simone de Beauvoir writes that 'si la femme a été si souvent comparée à l'eau, c'est entre autres parce qu'elle est le miroir où le Narcisse mâle se contemple' (Beauvoir 304). It is tempting then to read Erna as reflecting Battling, his self-projection of alterity, *ténébreuse* to *ténébreux*.

The great Romantic artist uses woman to create an image with which to express the mystery of his own identity (Boyer 3). In his contact with the world, he looks not outwards to others and objective experience but inwards, seeking mirrors of himself (Montandon 27). Woman represents that space between image and idea, that answer to the male artist's identity which is 'à la fois insaisissable et obsédante, fugitive et inquiétante' (Boyer 10). Erna incarnates this elusive portrait for the great Battling, a portrait which not only fascinates but also repulses.

Returning once more to the extract above, the incongruous adjective 'géniale' associates Erna's unfamiliar ugliness with something magnificent, like the 'jolie

laide' more commonly employed in English than in its original French.<sup>15</sup> Do I translate 'laide' as 'plain', like the unattractive woman of English literature, particularly in the Victorian era? Or ugly? Society prefers the euphemism. Female ugliness horrifies the male beholder; it is a trait synonymous with the witch or villain but not the passive *looked-at*. Erna's ugliness, however, is not homely; it is wondrous and somehow *right* as a result. The sentence ends, 'qu'on ne la désirait pas autrement' – a sexual aspect equally exists behind this gaze. The French 'désirer' translates most naturally as 'want', but I do not want to lose the 'desire'. *Wouldn't have you any other way*. It is for the boys to choose Erna's form and they create a perverse curiosity.

Those women who did not fit stereotypes of male desire in the period inspired anti-feminist caricature (Chenut 437–52). Ostensibly, a woman could work, drive an automobile, play sports. She could, when Vialatte wrote *Battling* in the *Années Folles*, even dress as a boy. But the woman who shed male-dictated visions of beauty, provided for herself, and occupied positions that were rightfully men's, was far from widely accepted (Pinson 17). Ambition, practical attire, and strong opinions fed an alternative trope: the manly, monstrous feminist (Chenut 442). This picked up from the nineteenth-century stereotype of the 'bas-bleus' for the intellectual woman, widely caricatured by famous cartoonists such as Honoré Daumier. Only in part real female emancipation, such images were equally male projections but, this time, of fear rather than desire (Holmes and Tarr 15). Linda Worley argues, however, that the

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<sup>15</sup> A woman whose face is attractive despite having ugly features (*Oxford Dictionaries* online).

ugly heroine escapes the eternal feminine. It is the female subject's very lack of beauty which makes room for individuality. Like Leo Tolstoy's famous aphorism – 'all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way' – an ugly ideal, Worley says, does not replace the beauty ideal (369–77).

Significantly, in contrast to France, Germany indulged in more diverse representations of women in the period, and German literature has a stronger tradition of ugly heroines than do French or English (Wright 5; Branland 197–200). Erna is masculine, strong and ugly – repulsive but also perfect. In her disconnect from the representations of women in art and literature to which the boys are habituated, she presents a destabilising Other to the schoolboys. In part, this takes her outside the eternal feminine's two-dimensions, and in Chapter Five, I examine Erna on her own terms as subject. But for the most part, Erna's image, constructed by the schoolboys, tells us a lot more about masculinities and the text's quest for a (male) self, than it does about women (Boyer 9).

Far from classical French conventions of beauty and any established feminine aesthetic,<sup>16</sup> Erna's irregular form gestures to the schoolboys' desire for foreignness, for that which cannot quite be conceived of within the French imaginary. The schoolgirl Fermina Márquez has a similar exotic appeal in Valery Larbaud's novel, fascinating a group of schoolboys – her 'chevaliers' – from afar: 'vraiment,' the narrator says, 'elle faisait penser à tous les bonheurs de la vie' (46, 28). Like Erna for Battling, Fermina is untouchable before the miserable and ambitious Joanny Léniot,

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<sup>16</sup> The archetypal Madame Arnoux, for example, in Gustave Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* (1869) or, in the interwar period, Marthe in *Le Diable au corps*.

and it is her foreign language and strange name that signify her attraction.<sup>17</sup> Both boys, blind to the subject herself, create an image of woman formed of their own desires, but where Erna is strange, Fermina is objectively beautiful, and where Erna is representation, Fermina is physical.

In *Battling*, Erna Schnorr's portrayal is linked to the hero's dislocated search for identity and the text's depiction of competing subjectivities. As modernist art with its perspectives and angles, its depth and its fleshiness, as photo upon photo, reproduced without original, and as culturally liminal, Erna offers a foundationally plural reflection to the universal male self of the period. For the text's allegorical quest, these strange and multiple projections of Erna announce a conception of self that has moved away from essentialist and nationalist theories and towards fragmented and transnational identities. In the next passage, we see Erna as the manifestation not only of a new aesthetic for the male artist, but of Battling's repressed desire and split subjectivity. Her image is the wandering and divided modernist's construction of his Other, not the Romantic's.

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<sup>17</sup> 'Cette voix, basse et fervente, juste un peu étrangère, à laquelle il mêlait sa propre voix, aisément, délicieusement, comme on respire' and, from the schoolboy Camille Moûtier's perspective : 'dans ce prénom étranger : Fermina, il voyait quelque chose d'admirable ; ce prénom résumait pour lui toute la beauté du monde' (Larbaud 84, 113).

## **Her Pale Form in the Gloom**

The schoolboys spy on Erna during their afternoon breaks. Staring longingly towards the Contades' house from the schoolgrounds, they wait for a glimpse of her pale figure above the garden wall. Battling continues this sentimental surveillance, as they call it, around the clock (50). Not only is he the most desperate of the trio but he has ample opportunity for spying when he stays with his cousins at the Contades' house on Tuesdays and Thursdays. In this scene, Battling is roaming around in the garden outside Erna's window and imagines her as a vision before him. This is his version of Erna Schnorr: a manifestation of his bodily desire. Unable to tolerate his own company and his repressed lust, he unleashes his frustration upon Erna as sexual object:

Battling rôdait donc dans le jardin, abandonné à sa propre société qu'il trouvait pesante, exigeante et dure, et qu'il n'aimait pas. Une bouffée de vent chaud passa sur les tomates ; il revit ce jeudi de novembre où Émile, le verbe haut et la pipe à la bouche, l'avait emmené d'autorité dans le Quartier-Vieux, il sentit une vague de sang plus lourde battre ses veines, et, du fond de son désir, il vit monter aux récréations du collège, sur le mur couronné de vigne vierge, la forme mince et ferme d'Erna Schnorr, ses yeux gris un peu bridés, ses lèvres pâles, ce masque curieux d'étrangère qu'il s'en voulait de désirer tout en le trouvant laid ; elle lui sembla passer tout près, ironique et transparente, devant les plates-bandes de tomates ; mais ce n'était que le froissement de l'air autour des feuilles, le désir qui montait de la terre sèche, crevassée par la chaleur. Il regarda vers la fenêtre d'Erna ; il imagina dans cette ombre sa forme blanche, et il rougit ; il aurait voulu la battre, l'humilier ; il s'imaginait toujours laid, stupide et gauche, et il n'osait penser aux femmes qu'avec cette timidité méchante des gens qui ont peur qu'elles se moquent d'eux... (56-57)



Battling was hanging around in the garden, left to his own company, which felt heavy, demanding, hard, and for which he had no liking. A gust of hot wind swept across the tomatoes. He thought back to that Thursday in November, when Emile, taking a haughty tone, pipe in his mouth, had dragged him off to the Old Quarter. A heavy wave of blood buffeted his veins, and, from the depths of his desire, he saw, just as at break, the slender and firm form of Erna Schnorr rise above the wall crowned with Virginia creeper, her grey slightly slanted eyes, her pale lips, and that strange foreigner's mask which he hated himself for desiring even as he thought it ugly. She seemed to float right past him, mocking and transparent, in front of the tomato bed. But it was only the rustling of the breeze against the leaves, the desire which rose from the dry earth, split open by heat. He looked over at Erna's window, pictured her pale form in the gloom, and blushed. Imagining himself forever ugly, stupid and gauche, he wanted to beat her, humiliate her – he didn't dare think about women except with the horrid self-consciousness that accompanies a fear of being mocked...

Battling is the primitive, earthly animal to Erna's lofty and spiritual eternal feminine. He 'hangs around' the garden thinking about her, or does he 'prowl' or 'roam', as the French 'rôdait' could equally suggest? Should I interpret Battling as the beast, like he was when his muscles popped out of his shirt in Chapter Two, like a werewolf beneath a full moon? A physicality of emotion and a weightiness of feeling pervade this passage. Battling finds his own company to be 'pesante, exigeante et dure'. Heavy, demanding and hard. Or 'difficult'? I want to translate 'dure' as materially hard so that these emotions take up space in English. They are thick, pushing inside Battling's head so that he feels constricted. In Chapter Two, I introduced Battling as the great Battling, figure of the Romantic novel. There too, he had a heavy heart, a cumbersome soul. His character is one of oversentimentality, exaggerated feeling and

youthful excess. In contrast to Erna, Battling believes himself alone to be weighed down by the weight of the world – it is his heavy feelings which form the crux of the tale.

A mess of Freudian repression, Battling triggers this fantasy of Erna by thinking back to his experience at a brothel in town. The French tells us that his older, worldlier cousin Emile took him out for a night of debauchery and wouldn't take no for an answer ('emmené d'autorité'). I'm tempted to emphasise Battling's heavy heart in translation, to play up the parody of the male hero's melancholy. Perhaps Emile could 'drag Battling off' in English, his body heavy like a sack of stones. Remembering that night, Battling feels 'une vague de sang plus lourde battre ses veines': 'a heavy wave of blood buffet his veins'? 'Buffet' evokes waves crashing against the sand which strike 'repeatedly and violently; batter', according to the *OED*. I like the aggression in this, copying the 'battre' of the French. And the sounds. Battling, battre, batter, buffet, bouffées. But it's not quite natural; blood generally throbs *inside* one's veins rather than crashes *against* them. And is liquid heavy or is it thick? Battling's feelings do not run inside his body but attack it. When I follow the punctuation of the French, the semi-colons flatten my translation in contemporary English, and the 'he feels' softens the impact. I try changing the subject from Battling to blood. 'A gust of hot wind swept across the tomatoes. Stop. A heavy wave of blood buffeted his veins.' I want this passage to be active and hard like Battling's feelings. I translate 'du fond (de son désir)' with the 'depths'. Battling seems to be drowning in the violent ocean of his own emotion.

So often Vialatte delays announcing the object of his sentences. Fragmented images pile up, picture upon picture, until we get to the crux of what is underneath. Here, the

many clauses serve as the wall – the earthly reality getting in the way – that hides Erna from view until at last she emerges from behind this wordy description of physical detail: the heavy wave of blood, the depths of desire, at break, over the wall, Battling seeing, the form... Erna Schnorr. Like Battling, the reader is then desperate to find her, to know her, to get under Erna's layers. She finally appears above a wall prettily crowned with 'vigne vierge'. In English, 'vigne vierge' becomes the plainer 'Virginia creeper'. I wish I could write 'virgin vines' for the sounds and the imagery. The French term for the plant seems to encapsulate the double-edged tone of this passage. The creeper is incredibly fertile, but its flowers are difficult to see; small and camouflaged in the rest of the greenery, they spread fragrance and nectar, attracting bees. At the same time, 'vierge' works with the passage's imagery to evoke the virgin Mary. The language of the original imitates the arrival of a spiritual vision, carried on the wind, by the wholesome and inspirational capacity of nature. Erna is the icon Madonna, appearing fleetingly before Battling, but also a sexual object, fertile, potent in Battling's teenage lust, reduced to her womanliness.

Erna's appearance characterises Battling's treatment of his Other. Her light colours, grey eyes and pale lips fit with her being not quite there or conceivable. Erna's 'yeux bridés' I translate as 'slanted' for its outdated associations with an exotic Eastern woman. The text draws on the sexual trope of the day to add another piece to its image of Erna, the whole an incongruous array of stereotypes which designate an indeterminate elsewhere in the shape of woman. In French, 'bridés' is also defined as: 'contenir quelque chose, désirs, imagination' (*Larousse*). Does Battling see something wondrous and wild within Erna that she conceals from view? Covering her fantastical inner spirit is Erna's 'masque curieux d'étrangère' which Battling both

abhors and desires. 'Mask' feels laboured in English, but I wonder if 'curious' and 'mask' point to the thrust of this characterisation. It is not so much Erna's image that is important as the fact that Battling sees her disguised, possessing yet concealing some truth. A French boy before a foreigner, his primitive desires find their outlet in a constructed, alien façade. To him, she is the goddess Isis; Battling thinks he will be whole, and everything will make sense, if he could only get beneath Erna's veils to find the answers.

As product of the male gaze, Erna is on the one hand a light, untouchable Other, mesmerising as a symbol of relief and ascendance outside the self. But this picture of chasteness, encapsulating the purity of the Madonna and the transcendence of the sublime, coexists with Erna as sexual object. Her repulsive appearance symbolises Battling's repressed desires, his inability to accept his own sexuality. As woman and foreigner, inferior and secondary, Erna is typical of the exotic and feminine other who marks the conflict between the male hero's idealistic values and repressed sexuality. In a famous passage in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche says that 'once [civilised men] go outside, where the strange, the *stranger* is found, they are not much better than uncaged beasts of prey' (40). In his view, the encounter with the foreign enables a freeing of the male's inner self – that darkness, id, ténèbres prevalent in modernist literature that we saw in Chapter Three – normally constrained within the frame of society. Reader and translator of Nietzsche, Vialatte deems the German philosopher the influence behind Battling's 'Ode to ugliness' which we will come to shortly. Faced with his wild and untameable side, Battling feels both pleasure and disgust, and perceives Erna accordingly.

In psychoanalytic theory, the male gaze perceives the woman on screen and in art as a source of both pleasure and fear (Mulvey). The viewer finds the female subject sexually appealing but also identifies with the image before him and the woman's difference rouses the repressed and primordial fear of castration.<sup>18</sup> Here, Erna exists as object through Battling's eyes, and through the filter of his teenage lust and self-loathing. She is bright white but also shadowed, pure and unattainable but also disgusting. At the same time, he cannot help but acknowledge Erna's own inwardness and will. As Battling imagines her, she looks back at him appraisingly, ironically. Battling is aware of the person Erna who critiques his being as he constructs hers, conscious of his gaze. As Laura Mulvey writes, 'the look, pleasurable in form, can be threatening in content, and it is woman as representation/image that crystallises this paradox' (10). Erna's image is a projection of this conflict within Battling.

Awareness of her subjectivity shatters his projection and Battling's fantasy evaporates. This heavenly illusion of Erna, untouchable from earth, was only the leaves and the earth – mere nature. I interpret the French 'passer tout près' with the less subtle 'float right past him'. As opposed to Battling's mass, muscle, heart, Erna is the wind, drifting over the tomato beds; she might escape between Battling's fingertips at any moment. We are back to the Romantic 'I', finding himself alone in the woods, communing with the trees and hearing his words in the bubbling creek. Or, in this case, surrounded by virgin vines and *pommes d'amour*. Prettily destroying the vision, the French reads 'ce n'était que le froissement de l'air autour des feuilles, le désir qui montait de la terre sèche, crevassée par la chaleur'. To reproduce some

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<sup>18</sup> Mulvey draws from Jacques Lacan's examination of mirrors and subjectivity.

of the flow of the original, I repeat the sounds of ‘breeze’, ‘leaves’ and ‘heat’ in English: ‘it was only the rustling of the breeze against the leaves, the desire which rose from the dry earth, split open by heat’. In translation, the sentence feels dry: this crackling, crunchy, hot earth. ‘Crevassée’ I translate with ‘split open’ to work with the sexualised nature of the passage. The violence of Battling’s feeling splits the earth, splits the Nature that is personified by woman. He the self, Erna the eternal feminine that surrounds and destabilises his identity.

Battling turns then to where the real Erna might be and imagines her in the dark shadow of her window (57). The emotions that his projection provoke make him want to punish her. He would have liked to beat Erna, humiliate her, to lash out with the rage of a man who fears he will be rejected. Having conceptualised woman as the eternal feminine, the male hero will inevitably meet a disconnect when faced with any flesh and blood reality (Emslie 38–39). Battling is unable to reconcile Erna’s will against his own. In Mulvey’s theory of the gaze, the male viewer, to deal with the anxiety he feels before his sexual other, fetishises and reduces the woman to mere object or voyeuristically opts to control, punish or save her. Battling reduces Erna to image. Framed in the window, she is a white shape in the darkness; her silhouette evokes a painting, white and black, two-dimensional. But in his anxiety over being subjugated by Erna, he also wants to cause her harm.<sup>19</sup> Battling’s troubled view of women conjures illusions of Erna as mystical vision as well as sadistic victim, all in the name of love.

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<sup>19</sup> He has ‘une sorte de génie amer qui le porter à aimer la souffrance que l’on reçoit ou que l’on cause’ (54).

## Ode to Ugliness

On the wave of his feelings for Erna, Battling writes the stomach churning ‘Hymne à la laideur’ [Ode to Ugliness]. When he sees Erna, he feels something beyond language, that otherworldliness only representable in art : ‘il se sentait bizarrement emporté par un sentiment plus grand que lui, et, quand le vent passait sur sa bouche sèche, une exaltation le gonflait’ (77). Erna is the catalyst that takes the hero outside himself. He makes a bouquet of roses to go with his poem, gnawing into the flowers with his teeth and tasting their ‘suc amer et parfumé, le goût même de son amour et de sa peine’ (78). Battling then attaches the poem to the bunch and throws it into Erna’s window as though the words were a piece of his soul, released from his body by his meeting with woman.

The schoolboys discuss Battling’s poem, but we never see it. His construction of Erna – the key to his own image – lies outside the text, the emotion outside the French language. We are told the ode sounds like Walt Whitman in translation (77, 81),<sup>20</sup> with a touch of Nietzsche and of Rimbaud’s ‘Bateau ivre’. Baudelaire’s ‘Hymne à la beauté’<sup>21</sup> surely plays a part in this ‘Hymne à la laideur’ too.

Que tu viennes du ciel ou de l’enfer, qu’importe,  
Ô Beauté ! monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénu !  
Si ton œil, ton souris, ton pied, m’ouvrent la porte  
D’un Infini que j’aime et n’ai jamais connu ? (lines 21-24)

Baudelaire famously presented a vision of beauty which broke from tradition. Here, he uses long-time mistress Jeanne Duval to embody his aesthetic. Beautiful does not

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<sup>20</sup> ‘On aurait dit une traduction d’un poète étranger’ (77).

<sup>21</sup> Published in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857).

mean good, for Baudelaire, it is morally indifferent: ‘De Satan ou de Dieu, qu’importe ? Ange ou Sirène’ (25). His vision of woman was notoriously ambivalent. He idealised and debased woman, putting her on a pedestal and highly sexualising her, adoring and hating. Often labelled misogynistic, Baudelaire nonetheless depicted highly individual women (Lloyd 94). Moving away from nationalist aesthetics and an old universal, Baudelaire considered the strange to be the new beauty: ‘l’irrégularité, c’est à dire l’inattendu, la surprise, l’étonnement sont une partie essentielle et la caractéristique de la beauté’ (*Fusées* 31). Duval was a Haitian actress and dancer, Baudelaire’s ‘Black Venus’. Rather than indulge in simple exoticism, however, Baudelaire advocated for an appreciation of the irregular wherein the viewer must travel out into the world and other himself (Murphy 30–32). Just as Battling’s poem to Erna sounds like translatese, her otherness is individual and strange, her aesthetic conceived in translation.

To Battling’s dismay, Erna rejects the ode, saying that she does not like insolent boys. What Battling saw as the expression of an all-encompassing Romantic love was closer to teenage frustration at unsatisfied desire. The text parodies Battling’s sentiment; if he treats the task with the utmost sincerity, imagining the ode to finally encapsulate the depth of his melancholy and confusion, we see a ludicrous version of sublimation in poetry. And when Erna does not accept Battling’s advances, and goes against his construction of her, he would rather abandon all hope at meaning than see her as another subject. His war is with himself, blinded in his nostalgia for the Romantic ‘I’, waiting for definition and confirmation.

But what is interesting, as we saw in Chapter Two and will take further in the next and final chapter, is Battling’s own lack of selfhood. Where the narrator of *Le Diable*



*au corps*, for example, has the power to fashion the love interest to his perspective from the privileged position of 'I' and storyteller (Blot-Labarrère 198-199), Battling's wilful reduction of Erna is not in fact the text's. Virginia Woolf writes, in 1929, that 'women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size... take it away and man may die...' (*Room* 45, 47). Erna is Other only to the blind and naïve schoolboy who cannot see outside his closed French world. The reader, who has access to the array of perspectives represented in *Battling*, sees that Erna is herself the artist, that she resists her objectification, and that her mystery is simply her foreignness as portrayed through the limited perspective of the schoolboys. According to Simone de Beauvoir, even if man invented woman, she equally exists outside his invention (305) – who then is the enigmatic Erna Schnorr outside of Battling's imaginary?

## Pieces of Raspberry Pie

Seeking a Romantic wholeness, Battling looked for himself through Erna. Interestingly, the Romantics saw *translation* as a means to wholeness. Through an encounter with foreignness, they could enrich the self, achieve the *Bildung*, and work towards that ‘subjectivité infinie’ (Berman, *Epreuve* 130).<sup>22</sup> This vision of translation played out on a national scale, at the level of culture, literature, language, but also on an individual one. Meeting another in language was like finding pieces of one’s own identity to add to a greater puzzle. By inhabiting a strange yet familiar personality – by ‘stealing souls’<sup>23</sup> – the Romantics could travel closer to the inconceivable borders of the self and the mysterious otherness around (Raimondo). The possibilities of oneself in a foreign language offered ideas and words beyond the everyday so that the translator had access to previously latent resources and could map previously unrepresentable areas.

Walter Benjamin’s vision of translation followed the transcendental nature of German Romanticism. Since languages work in different ways, each translation adds another fragment to a mythical whole – different pieces of the pie. In Battling’s quest, Erna, in her liminality and multiplicity, reflected transnational selves instead of offering him the sublimation he desired. Likewise, my translation adds a piece to Vialatte’s text. But does it offer wholeness or division, answers or ambiguity?

Stealing souls may have lost its appeal, but the Romantic’s foregrounding of the translator’s imaginary nevertheless has contemporary application. The translator’s

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<sup>22</sup> See, more generally, the chapters ‘La Bildung et l’exigence de la traduction’ (72-86) and ‘Révolution romantique et versabilité infinie’ (111-139).

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Yves Masson on Gerard de Nerval’s approach to translation, qtd. in Raimondo.

experience of language, finding definition and ambiguity, can frame a study of the literary work. But where the Romantic translator yearned to go beyond language, today's translator – in a contemporary view of literature where the reader is 'partial' and 'positioned' – simply brings cultures together to add something new to a study of the work and to the receiving literature (Simon, *Gender* 166). Moreover, where the Romantic wanted to grow the self against the outside, the contemporary translator recognises the Other as other subject. I will look at the power-dynamics and ethics of translation more in Chapter Five, but for now, in this final part of Chapter Four, *Pieces of Raspberry Pie*, I investigate the richness of the translator's experience. Beginning with *Baguettes*, this segment diverges a little from a close reading of *Battling* to explore my own experience in translation more generally (my *mue?*), in the space between French and English. Through my story, I investigate the othering of self in a foreign language that this thesis circles around. My French-English joins Vialatte's German-French as I, the translator, follow Erna into the narrative.

### *Baguettes*

'Remember to give them baguettes with their sushi,' my boss said. I was in my early twenties then, standing behind the purple takeaway counter of *Resto sushi's* in an effort to improve my French. I smiled and nodded but couldn't make any sense of it. Baguettes. Sushi. I tried turning the words around, moving them slowly across my tongue, piling them atop one another. Some suits walked in from Strasbourg's European Parliament across the road. I couldn't see any baguettes.

Baguette:

1. Long and flexible baton. The conductor's baguette.
2. Oriental utensil.
3. Long and thin bread.

*Magic baguette.* Wand for magic spells.

The French dictionary<sup>24</sup> reveals that 'baguette' refers to the long, thin, slightly rounded shape of the breadstick. It probably comes from the Latin 'baculum' meaning baton. I was surprised to learn that 'baguette' did not only signify 'bread' but also 'magic wand', 'chopsticks', even 'legs', like we might say 'pins' in English. These objects, without any connection in English, come together in French, joined only by their neatly-curved shape. And beside the French, the English suddenly appears nonsensical. Why 'chopsticks'? What do they chop? Chop chop. Hurry. Chow chow.

Having grown up monolingual, I wanted to learn to be myself in a foreign language. I liked the way French sidled up against English and pushed it over a little. Suddenly, my native tongue loomed larger and more bizarre. Bazaar. Buzzard. Budgerigar. The languages swirled in patterns, each wanting to infuse the other, and the link between sign and signifier was looser (Hoffman 106). In her book, *Lost in Translation* (1989), Eva Hoffmann describes herself as 'the sum of [her] languages' (245). I like the word 'sum' here. Does adding French atop English make more? Does German's entrance

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<sup>24</sup> For the dictionary entries here in *Pieces of Raspberry Pie* and in the section *Marriage: What is it Good For?* ('baguette', 'cabbage', 'host'), I use my own translations of the French definitions from *Multidictionnaire de la langue française*. I specifically wanted basic definitions here, short and sharp from my macbook in-built dictionary, and I translate the French literally into English to show the disconnect.

into *Battling*'s narrative make it thicker? Then again, Hoffmann's story isn't about finding self in language, it's about losing it.

Being in French made me aware of both division and multiplicity. I was suddenly 'Australian' and 'australienne' – the two were not the same but neither were they different. In French, I am gendered, in English I am not. French designates me either 'madame' or 'mademoiselle'; there is no new-fangled 'Ms.', separate from the tradition of marriage. In French, I am lower-case; my identity is smaller on the page and occasionally carries the remnants of exoticised cliché, of surfers and kangaroos. 'Australienne' is strange within its language: an uncommon signifier, a remote signified. 'Australian', on the other hand, is a word from the inside; it holds the possibility of a little more individuality, less an image made. Erna too is foreign inside the French. Her name 'Schnorr' is not at home but unhoused. Her identity is plural but also stereotyped. Erna symbolises the othering of the self that Vialatte circles around in *Battling*.

Clive Scott says that languages are permeable and that translation serves to make them more and more translatable (*Translating* 5). The twos – German and French in the text, French and English outside of it – are not neat but rather problematise distinct identities and fill gaps. Of course, no maternal language is ever an island to begin with; each is influenced by all the others, by differences, loans, translations that have taken place between it and others over the ages. Sashimi, bon appétit, lunch, soja, tulips: the words of *Resto sushi*'s. To which language do these belong? 'Soja' alone comes from ancient Chinese, the Satsuma dialect of Japanese, through Dutch to French, and to English. On the menu is printed 'tulips', spelt without the 'e'. The English term – associated in Strasbourg with all that is youthful and hip, and thus

fitting to this neon restaurant – designates the flower-shaped Japanese delight in French.

*Resto sushi's* fired me a couple of months later. I don't know if it was the baguettes or the fact that I bluffed the addresses on the takeaway orders. Boulevard d'Anvers. Un verre. Boulevard Leblois. Le bois. A drink. The wood. The street names were a mess of abstract sounds in the telephone. The words had no edges. I didn't think it fair that a restaurant who so bafflingly spelt its name '*Resto sushi's*' (why the apostrophe?) should be intolerant of my own linguistic failings. But it didn't matter. I wanted to do something else: learn to translate.

### *Flammkuchen*

When I started my PhD, as PhD candidate and doctorante, I wanted to find the perfect book to translate. I raced through pages upon pages. Being in Melbourne where it's difficult to find books in any language except English, I bought ebooks on Amazon, ordered inter-library loans, and had old copies from the Book Depository shipped express. I thought I'd know it when I saw it. I wanted the words to be what *I* would say in English if I wrote a novel. The voice resonating, the politics right, the style fitting my fancy. I wasn't sure if I wanted to find myself in a foreign language or to find someone else. Translating is a strange mix – the writer's voice meeting mine.

After a time rustling around in the V section of the library: Valéry, Paul; Verne, Jules; Vian, Boris... I came to Vialatte, Alexandre and his novel *Battling le ténébreux*. It ticked all my boxes. It was a coming of age story (everyone can relate to those), not yet translated (I wanted to introduce a new author to English) and written in the

twenties (my period of choice). I figured that any contemporary of Marcel Proust, André Breton, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, would write something meaty enough to last the test of time. Battling was a sort of French *Catcher in the Rye*, only weirder. It had more psychological torment and smelled faintly of surrealism; its school ground was hazy and dream-like. I liked the language which was poetic without being poetry, the sentiment which was so over-the-top as to seem clever. I was putty in the hands of Battling's whimsy and Romanticism. This was the one!

I devoted myself to Vialatte's text, spending all my time in its pages, listening to its words. His language felt soft in my ears, but distant; its flow and fragmented lines belonged elsewhere. If the French was opaque and frustrating, it also 'tingle[d] and sparkle[d]' (Woolf, 'Phases' 126). Uprooting *Battling's* prose and planting it elsewhere made it bulky, thought-provoking. Its shapes had so much definition, its sounds were marked by their difference from English. I didn't want to cut straight to what was in the box, I wanted to deal with the pretty pink wrapping – there was something in resistance.

Vialatte's own status as translator fascinated me and centred my study. I could see evidence of this background everywhere in the text; his position on the borders of French and German informed the tale. I didn't know German, but I knew Alsace. My experience in France had begun with Strasbourg. A French city? A German name. Its nationality changed with war and with peace. There was a large German population, a language, Alsatian, that sounded far from French. I had two German housemates and one French, my friends were international, some working at the European parliament. La Petite France downtown, with its medieval architecture belonging to the Rhine region, also went by the name 'Gerberviertel' (the tanners'

district). And Flammkuchen was on every second city corner. Or was it tarte flambée?

### *Cabbage*

When Manuel gets into a heated debate with the principal, in the scene I study in Chapter Three, the principal warns him that if he keeps on as he is, idling in corridors, smiling dismissively at teachers, smoking in toilets, he will end up 'planter ses choux' (34), planting cabbages.

Cabbage:

1. Vegetable

*Cabbage end.* Young child.

*Cabbage with cream.* Little cakes in the shape of a cabbage.

On the surface, cabbage is easy to translate. French has 'chou', English has 'cabbage'. But the cabbage has so much more significance in French than it does in English. A term of endearment, an item of legend and folklore, of failure, or even being lost at sea. My friend Emilie threatened to make me some cream cabbage last week. Cream puff, alas. Those round, green, humble vegetables, krauty and crunchy, have started following me in my sleep. 'Planter ses choux' refers to withdrawing from the daily grind of city life and retiring to the countryside. Vegetating perhaps, as an insult. Mindless in a rural backwater. I can see Manuel – the cool, dark Napoleonic figure – deep in the French countryside as his classmates go off to university. The sun shining, his head is the tightly layered leaves of a cabbage like Claude Lorraine's *L'homme à tête de*



*chou*. Chop the head of the cabbage. Surrealism weaves its strange trail through the text.

When Vialatte was writing *Battling*, homesick for his beloved France, he wrote in his letters that he yearned for a country where ‘le désespoir d’amour did not make one hungry for choucroute’ (*Correspondance* 2 194). What better than cabbage for woes of the heart. Sauerkraut. Cabbage crust? Sour chou? Like in English, being homesick in French is physical – ‘mal du pays’: sickness of the country, the nation, the land. Like you would say ‘mal à la tête’. But French has another word to describe the condition of being away. ‘Dépaysement’: the state of being out of country. Rather than homesick, ‘dépaysement’ refers of course to the disorientation felt when living the strangeness of foreign lands. Vialatte too, was running from cabbages. In the same letter, he describes dreaming of chou when he wanted patisseries, romanticism when he wanted reason, the Rhine when he wanted the Dore and the bridge of Beaucaire.

Any fascination with othering oneself comes with loneliness and insecurity, comes with a longing for place. Both *Battling* and Erna yearn for home. But where *Battling* finds his in Vialatte’s prose, Erna remains out of place within the narrative itself. She wants to be a part of its story, to fit into its words, to shape herself to the French bourgeoisie. She wants to disappear in the many and the same but cannot. Erna’s otherness, however, is equally her brightness in the tale. Having altered the vision of the international art world, she settles into *Battling*’s small town with her ‘tubes de couleurs’ (41). Where English would say ‘paints’, French says ‘tubes of colours’. So pretty, so rich and evocative in its unfamiliarity. Vialatte’s art too has its origins in the foreign. *Battling* springs from the plurality and instability that comes from this

self in translation. For where the Romantics met themselves in another language to find wholeness, the modernists found food for the period's crisis of the self and of representation. Writing, where words were both true and productively destabilising, offered a medium with which to depict *and* experience a strangeness of being.

What is it about an encounter with a language that is alien to oneself? Never fully at home, the translator is unhoused from language. Metaphors of translators as 'in-between', as 'and', as 'métissage' abound. The translator is forever on the outside, with a foot in many worlds, not quite fitting in: an acrobat in mid-air flitting lightly between in Virginia Woolf's darting words (*Essays* 44). Untameable but malleable, the language of both the modernist and the translator is a tool with which to construct the desired other, willingly self-othering to escape the confines of the domestic.

Heinz Wismann says that the translator exists in a state of 'réflexion' more than 'identification'. (39). From the in-between, she *is* and *feels* both, her identity detached from a maternal language, her selves multiple. Perhaps the translator is out at sea. Pulitzer prize winner Jhumpa Lahiri learnt Italian as an adult and stopped wanting to write fiction in English. She says, 'on the one hand I'm aware of the oceano, in every sense, between me and italiano. On the other, of the distacco between me and inglese' (129). In the in-between, neither language is home anymore since the origin, too, has become 'Autre' (Wismann 39). Seeing language through this strange otherness invites an experience of literature that is plural and open, beyond the everyday, just as art demands.

### *Croissants and Corn Bread*

After a conference presentation at Paris 3, I was hovering next to the tables of mini croissants and escargots when another doctorant came up to me to comment on my accent. I had just finished a presentation on *Battling*'s link to Gérard de Nerval's famous line: 'Je suis le ténébreux'. I was swept up in the layers of translation piled over and over each other, in a trail of intertexts. The unconsolated. El desdichado. Walter Scott. The déshérité. Amadís de Gaula. Beltenebros. The hero Battling tied up in a tradition of Romantic heroes and chivalrous knights. A tradition connected by translation, as I explore in the prologue, or rather by its absence. This PhD student said that hearing my presentation made him think of T.S. Eliot reading 'The Waste Land' when he quotes Nerval: 'Le prince d'Aquitaine à la tour abolie'. The sound of my voice had triggered Battling's jump to English modernism. Funny that it was Eliot. My French was not Australian but Anglophone, the differences within English smoothed out in their generalised otherness.

I wondered then if the tangents of English and of its literature could take the text and my analysis in a productive direction. Like the speaker of 'The Wasteland', Battling is constructed of multiple voices: divided, layered, lost. In Eliot's work and my reading *Battling* through translation, there is no singular self or absolute meaning. Where the very crux of the text is the problematisation of self, the ambivalence that comes from divergences between original and translation is in fact desirable. Is it in translation that we can problematise an ostensibly neat French national identity for *Battling*? André Malraux praised *Battling* at the time of its release but said it was a shame Erna's character was German and Manuel's caricature was inspired by Grosz

(84). To me, this is the very essence of the text, not an unfortunate aside. What would *Battling* be without Erna Schnorr's otherness?

I'm often tempted to translate terms of endearment ('mon vieux', 87, 91) between the schoolboys with an 'old boy' here and an 'old sport' there. *Battling* has a hint of the F. Scott Fitzgerald about it already. When Battling exclaims 'quel chiqué' (53) – he is revolted at the thought of reading a particularly lyrical and sentimental passage out loud in class – I want him to say 'phony' in English. I cannot help but associate this blasé, disdainful figure with the quintessential all-American schoolboy Holden Caulfield. Love him or hate him, Holden defines the male coming of age genre in the receiving Anglo-American literature. Perhaps this is Battling's American self, another angle to his mythical *tenebrous* figure. Does Holden's catchphrase offer a swagger that fits, and even adds to, Battling's 'peaceful brute' (57) image? Or is it anachronistic and culturally discordant to make this French boy in the nineteen twenties speak in J.D. Salinger's tongue?<sup>25</sup>

A few days after 'old sport' and 'phony', I find myself considering 'top bloke' as a translation for 'chic type' (89). My translation criss-crosses Englishes: American, British, Australian. The writing project will generally dictate the English of the translation. It depends on the publisher, the audience, the suitability of recontextualisation. An openly Australian translation would limit the audience somewhat. British or American English? But are they the only two choices? What of

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<sup>25</sup> 'Phony' dates back to the nineteenth century but Salinger's infamous use of the term in 1951 makes it feel later.

a world English? With globalisation and the domination of English, its influences are so diverse. How can we divide them so neatly? My English, yours, hers.

When I was at the Bread Loaf Translators' Conference in Vermont last year, I met translator Bill Johnson. In a cafeteria smelling of corn bread and swarming with Americans, he commented that my accent was as screwed up as his. Later on, when he gave his talk on his process of translating the Polish classic *Pan Tadeusz* (1834) by Adam Mickiewicz, he said he translated into his own breed of English. It had traces of his background in England, of his family and their turns of phrase growing up, and tinges of his current life in the US. If you don't like its irregularities, he said, I don't care. This is my translation of *Pan Tadeusz*. Similarly, Michael Hofmann describes his experience of translation, searching through his own personal repertoire of words – British and American, remnants of German – as similar to autobiography. 'Auto-graphy', he labels it: 'turning out my pockets, Schwitters-style, a bus ticket, a scrap of newspaper, a fag-packet, a page torn out of a diary.'

Translation reveals the hiccups in neat dividing lines between languages as well as the very act of exchange. Here I am mish-mashing Englishes seemingly at a whim in my translation of *Battling*. I'm using Hofmann's 'molten, mongrel English,' the one he believes, incidentally, is 'the genius and proclivity of the language anyway.' And it occurs to me that *Battling*'s array of influences – which appeal to different Englishes – could be so fittingly depicted in a multilingual translation which announces its cultural and historical confusion outright. A translation which presents the crossing of time and space for a modern, cross-fertilising, transnational representation of self. One that foregrounds that meeting place of self with Erna's

otherness, the clash of culture and tradition. Perhaps that would be the text's unattainable ideal.

### *Tobacco*

Untranslatable words sometimes pop up on social media. Fernweh: the German for feeling homesick for a place you've never been to. Tsundoku: the Japanese for buying books and never reading them. It seems as if these things explain something missing from English, something that was always sort of there but couldn't be properly felt without its word, its signifier. Similarly, in *Battling*, Vialatte circles around that which cannot quite be conceived of in French. Barbara Cassin wrote a *Dictionnaire des intraduisibles*. The untranslatable, for her, is 'non pas ce qu'on ne traduit pas, mais ce qu'on ne cesse pas de (ne pas) traduire' (xvii). What is important is that which we never stop translating. Over and over, this way and that way. Traduire translate.

I flit around 'pénombre' for about an hour. It's far from untranslatable yet I cannot get it right. The context is the dimly-lit mason's shed where Manuel and Erna meet (99), perhaps at dusk, but not necessarily. The French evokes a semi-darkness, the home of shadows and possibilities, of cosy lamp light, a hint of romance; Manuel and Erna are sensual figures. Explanatory words like 'half-darkness' sound stiff and literary words like 'eventide' and 'gloaming' sound forced. A 'literal' translation takes me to 'penumbra', words of Latinate origin so much more ordinary, as always, in French than in English. I look up the definition; in English it's a technical term about shadow edges and physics. I text my partner who does physics and doesn't like dim lighting (it's a topic which inspires a disproportionate disgust from him). He

might know which word fits, I think. But he doesn't realise that I need all the angles to be right, the sounds and the etymology, the syllables and semantics slipping neatly into the puzzle. I give up on that. Perhaps I need to reorder the sentence, change its focus.

In her version of the translator's diary, *The Subversive Scribe*, Susanne Jill Levine describes her realisation at 'how much richer the process [of translation] was than the final product' (xiii). Once the translator has made her choices, the text is closed. But the process, winding around the bits that don't work – the untranslatable, the political, the intertextual – allows the reader, she continues, 'a more intimate knowledge of the literary work, and of the languages and cultures involved in the dialogue between original and translation.' Rather than erasing difference by finding a smooth transfer of equivalents, it's much more fun to see the shifts. Better depth than replacement, ambiguity than unquestioned truths. Better liminality than a reductive yet neatly defined identity.

Context-based words ostensibly offer a simple binary choice to the translator: foreignise or domesticate? That age-old problem of whether to bring the reader to the text or bring the text to the reader. But the solutions to such problems are not so interesting for the translation theorist today – better the exploratory process in the middle, the hesitation of other and self. The schoolboys' teacher 'Rétine' gets his 'paquet de gris' from the tobacconist (22). Packet of grey. I wish I could keep the 'grey' in English. It adds to the soft monotony that this teacher embodies, his nickname 'Rétine' an ironic marker of his blindness to the colour of the world. Funnily enough, it's the literal translation into English that reinstates the well-worn French term with its imagery. In France, the 'paquet de gris' has taken on a mythical

value; nicknamed ‘gros cul’ and featuring in art, it signifies many before a colour. The ‘gris’ began as ‘tabac de troupe’, distributed free to soldiers to increase morale. In World War One, Scaferlati produced the ‘caporal’ (corporal) brand of ‘gris’. Rétine’s tobacco evokes mediocrity – this is a popular tobacco for the common man – and the distant war that backdrops *Battling*. Together with Rétine’s unchanging outfits, this neat ‘packet of grey’ clashes with Erna’s colour: the everyman to the other, the static France to the dynamic.

### *Pie*

If *Battling*’s appeal to wholeness subjugates Erna to a universal male self, in parallel, the original text’s desire for realisation in other languages establishes its primacy over its translations. I worry that using translation for this interpretive work in my thesis detracts from the autonomy and creative potential of the target text. Walter Benjamin’s notion of the original text’s appeal to translation, however, supposed that absolute truths and universals were desirable, rather than exclusionary and deceptive. My translational reading does not define the ‘original’ – we no longer believe there is truly an original to be found – it shows it otherwise. Françoise Lavocat discusses the hermeneutic value of comparatism through defamiliarisation:

La défamiliarisation me paraît une voix moyenne, proprement herméneutique, par laquelle est prise en considération la situation historique du chercheur mais où l’ambition est moins de restituer le sens originel et ultime d’une œuvre que de la faire voir autrement, grâce au décentrement de



la perspective opérée par sa mise en relation avec d'autres œuvres et d'autres cultures.

Translation's interpretive potential comes from the transformation it entails. Any reflection of the 'original' self offers an image which is already other: 'the other does not refer back to the same [...] but to a radically different other, a subject constantly changing in its discursivity and historicity' (Nouss 246). Erna does not refer back to Battling but shows the self otherwise.

Likewise, I do not wish to be the Other to Vialatte's self. To perpetuate the trope of the invisible, bodiless, feminine translator who serves the authority of the original. This research posits that translation constructs meaning, whether via literary criticism or rewriting. It is the production between writer and translator – across languages, cultures, times – which makes translation valuable in a study of literature and the meeting between Erna and the schoolboys that feeds Vialatte's text. In the next and final chapter, I look at this inter-subjective dialogue. Edith Grossman called it marriage.

# 5

## Any where out of the world

### **'Ses visions semblaient venir d'un autre monde'** A translation<sup>1</sup>

When Erna returned to the small town after her consultation with Doctor Meyer-Fehr in Berlin, she had quite convinced herself that she was going to die within the fortnight. She donned her womanly stubbornness and willed with all her might to be buried here. I mentioned that she considered the vacuous life of a small town to be an extravagant, desirable and rare thing which – having spent all her time, no matter how she strived towards solitude, in the society of eccentrics, adventurers, snobs, aesthetes, contradictory critics, madcap artists, the demanding and sharply-dressed – she had not yet had the chance to experience. She wanted to make up ground after death and finally partake in the ordinary lot, in the society of confectioners, milliners, lowly civil servants, honest shopkeepers and retired postmen. Chateaubriand's tombstone made her skin crawl in her proud solitude. She wanted instead to slot discretely in

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<sup>1</sup> From *Battling* (97-106). See Appendix: Extract 4 for source text.

amongst the ordinary dead, extending her aversion to the anonymous person who might have discerned her grave. There, she vowed to be accepted by the society of this small town who wanted nothing to do with her in life, and to become a dull member mentioned no more than any other.

So, one night, she walked up the sad little street which lead to the cemetery, in a half working-class, half farming neighbourhood. On their doorsteps, the busybodies shimmering with tulle watched from over their glasses saying: ‘*someone*’s taking a walk ...’, or others: ‘need a bit of everything to make a world’, and still more: ‘you know, my poor dear, in the end the Germans are just like us’. Closer to the cemetery the houses became further apart, separated by great landscapes overrun by the first shadow of the evening. On the second to last of these buildings, behind a courtyard cluttered with blocks of granite and big stones, was Manuel’s uncle’s sign – ‘Victor Feracci, Monumental Mason, Funeral Monuments’ – with cracks in the plaster and the paint on the letters flaking off. Erna walked across the yard, entered a dark passageway, came out in a second yard and found herself abruptly in the middle of the countryside. A soft darkness surrounded her and, with it, a benevolent wilderness, an elevated melancholy. It seemed as if time had disintegrated on those slopes, that you had seen them somewhere before, in a dream maybe or a previous life, and that they contained the indecipherable key to happiness – another world was within reach, outside space and time. A road continued down until a white junction, where the *Mexico City*’s façade left a splash of gold in the haze. The fleet-footed evening had already begun to fill the valleys with shadow, the peaks were suddenly more mysterious, and dots lit up the hollows. The bitter smell of a juniper or the mysterious bend in a road was all it took to whisk your soul into unidentified kingdoms where unwritten characters roamed in costumes from ancient times. It was the hour that treasure hunters readied themselves to leave the countryside, that charitable men working hard in the modest cottage of a dead friend’s family felt the weight of their sacrifice, that boys keeping watch over the body of a friend in an abyss faced distress and hunger – it was the hour of the Romantic mountain. To escape such spells took the vain death of a confectioner.

The yard was full of sizable stones. To the right, Erna saw a huge shed punctured with big bay windows, like a gallery of paintings on the skyline. She entered a semi-darkness filled with white shapes, crosses, statues, and elaborate

monuments, all made by Victor Feracci, the most sought-after mason in town. A young man in white overalls was standing against the light, looking out the window. The sound of her steps made him turn – he had Italian eyes and a large smooth forehead which caught the light. Once he had completely turned towards her, she could only see his shirt and his eyes.

She explained that she was there for a tombstone.

‘Ok, Madame. I’ll speak to my uncle about it tomorrow morning.’

‘I’ll need something made with stucco, alabaster, marble and reinforced concrete, with inscriptions, gilding, bas-reliefs, extras, something awfully pretentious, Rococo scrolls, flourishes, shells, so as to go unnoticed. You see what I mean? A proud merchant’s tombstone.’

‘We could make you model number one,’ said Manuel smiling, ‘like on Monsieur Sauvaize’s grave, the big nurseryman.’

‘Oh, yes! Like Monsieur Sauvaize’s, exactly. I would have so liked to marry a nurseryman. Add a glass casing, some gilded zinc urns with pearl flowers, a prie-dieu and a complicated sprinkler.’

‘Why not? And a neon billboard? The electrician can organise that for you.’

‘No,’ she replied with a smile, ‘I want a tombstone like the others from around here. Could you do that for me? Rather quickly?’

‘Not me, Madame, but dare I say, we have here a few workers with impressively bad taste who can see at first glance the blunders required and commit them immediately. It is an instinct that they do not discuss, but it comes greatly appreciated, people seek them out, and, if you go ahead with this idea, you will be truly spoilt. But...’

Erna suddenly looked remarkably like her picture from the *Querschnitt*.

‘... But is this a tombstone for Erna Schnorr?’

‘How do you know who I am?’ she asked.

It bothered her that the villagers, like spies, were so well acquainted with her business.

‘By your pictures in the *Querschnitt*.’

Then again, his information did not come from crude sources. It irked her less now to have been recognised by this boy who bore a resemblance to Napoleon, but thinner, feverish looking, and too pale – he would make an excellent medium. He looked exactly like Julius Koerner, the Cirque Busch spiritualist. She could use him.

‘Any relation to the antique dealer on rue Magenta?’

‘He’s my father. He sold you a Dürer. He also showed me a colour reproduction of your *Children of the Zodiac*. You’re lucky to be able to do such things.’

‘The reproduction isn’t very good’, she said. ‘Its value is a bit lost. And anyway, I have more beautiful paintings now. You could come see them if you like.’

‘Thank you, mademoiselle.’

She studied him with curiosity, shamelessly, at once like a lizard in a window and an excellent catch. In her place, a French woman would have seemed coy or brazen, but in Erna, you sensed rather a scientific curiosity coupled with childish pleasure. Embarrassed, Manuel flicked on the power for something to do. Washed of its rich semi-darkness, the shed suddenly appeared stiff and shabby, and a feeling of luxury and elasticity, along with a nice smell, emanated from Erna amongst the cold stones. Manuel pictured the dancers in furs who go to see the Tramp in the gold-digger’s hut.

There was nothing left to say really, and yet she stayed. Manuel felt the beginnings of something else. What should he say, or do, to not appear too idiotic? On the off chance, and even though this tombstone order did not seem very serious to him, he declared, to shift the silence:

‘If I may, mademoiselle, I will stop by next Thursday afternoon to give you my uncle’s response and present some potential models.’

‘Certainly.’ The light was shining on four planks of pine in a corner on which sat some terracotta statuettes and busts of modelling clay. Erna looked at them with interest.

‘What strange creatures, over there,’ she said. ‘Did your uncle make them?’

‘No,’ replied Manuel, ‘that was me, Madame.’

He was embarrassed that a stranger’s eye had penetrated the intimacy of his sculptural imaginings but was flattered by Erna’s smile. The statuettes were designed to amuse his friends. Caricatures of the principal and the sub-prefect sat beside unicorns, fantastic creatures formed with geometric shapes, a serpentine Salome dancing for a puffy Herod, and even Père Ubu lampooned in the shape of a penguin – an entire extravagant and ludicrous little world whose fantastic realism amused Erna.

‘The French have such an imagination,’ she confirmed. ‘What is that?’

‘It’s Père Ubu.’

‘Who’s that?’

‘A professor of physics who sat on the throne of Poland,’ he declared with a smile. ‘A true character, bloodthirsty and brilliant. Mythical, like Don Quixote, if you will. He’s the class talisman.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘He’s delightful.’

She caressed Ubu’s belly. It was smooth like a sea monster.

‘I have him as an electric lamp too.’ He went to get the electric Ubu from a shelf. Ubu’s arm-fin propped up an umbrella in red silk that formed the lampshade, and a pear-shaped head emitted light through big wild eyes. Erna turned off the ceiling lights. They were left in a surreal half-light under the transcendental surveillance of Père Ubu who swelled like a frog beneath his umbrella.

‘Give me the lamp,’ said Erna, ‘and I will give you a watercolour.’

‘Oh! Thank you,’ said Manuel.

He was pleased with this exchange that linked him to the foreigner whose work he so admired and that introduced the friendly turn the conversation was taking. Erna was looking at a sketch.

‘It’s for a statue of Monsieur Barat,’ explained Manuel, ‘a past student at our school. He made a fortune in the isles in cocoa, and when he died he bequeathed a large sum to the hospice and set up a philosophy prize for the students, a silver medal whose design has already been settled: on one side the great Barat enterprise, like the company logo with forced perspective, and on the other, the Barat head and shoulders, with a colonial helmet and bushy beard, ready to attest to the superiority of the company’s products. A circular inscription reads ‘Honour Philosophy’. The sculptor Chougoueyrand made the mock-up and the municipal council was absolutely thrilled. To thank Barat for his generosity, they’re going to dedicate a small statue to him and name a street Emile Barat. The statue has been put out to tender, and Chougoueyrand is bound to get this commission too because he practices ‘psychological sculpture’, it’s his forte. I made this mock-up for fun. The stand will be a beautiful cocoa tin, as true as a photo advertisement, with Barat on top in a loincloth lifting weights with two smaller tins – if I hollowed them out, it would make a candelabra to the glory of cocoa. If I had had a model, I might have tried to enter seriously, something allegorical, even if that’s generally a bit tasteless, but perhaps a beautiful Negress, stylised... my father had some magnificent masks which could have helped... and some tropical bas-reliefs... there are so many pretty motifs of

exotic fruits. But it's hard to find black models around here. Even white models.'

'Why not?' said Erna who had let him rattle on without interrupting, 'a handsome boy like yourself...'

He guessed that if her words had carried an ulterior motive she would have looked at him hypocritically, so he didn't dare reply with a provocation. He blushed slightly and kept the conversation on strictly professional terms, chiding himself for not having found something friendlier to say.

'It's frustrating, not having a model. To get around it, I'm forced to use caricature, like this Salome which ideally would not have been comic. I had no choice.'

'You have to work,' she said. 'When I think of the time I lost. Have you been sculpting for long?'

'I've always come to have a bit of fun in my uncle's workshop. But there's nothing new to learn here.'

'You will come to my place,' she said. 'I will introduce you to Stelle. He will give you some tips.'

That Erna was addressing him in this friendly tone left Manuel in awe. The ugliness, or rather the strangeness, of the Berliner's face had completely disappeared. And anyway, was she even ugly? In the strange light given off by Père Ubu, she appeared mysterious, soft, luxurious, and perfect. Manuel cast his mind to Baudelaire's 'Invitation to the journey'. And perhaps he wouldn't have minded that the poet had envisaged luxury as the bedfellow of love. Manuel had some dark-haired cousins in Marseille, with long black eyelashes, who got around in quiet automobiles and had spoken to him a little of life. Women remarked on their Roman profiles, their nonchalance and their fine hands... Now, he no longer felt annoyed.

'The road is full of potholes, mademoiselle, allow me to accompany you.' He was already taking charge.

'But of course.'

He took off his apron, washed his hands and they left.

The next day, this harmless stroll had become a public scandal.

## Any where out of the world

Nous voilà en présence de quelque chose  
d'unique, une révolte de la nature : une  
femme de génie ?

– OCTAVE MIRBEAU, Art Critic<sup>2</sup>

Was Camille Claudel (1864-1943) a female genius as art critic Octave Mirbeau ironically dared to suggest? Did such a thing even exist? Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Claudel's magnificent sculptures turned heads in the male-dominated art world. The 'petite Claudel' with her provincial accent and beautiful eyes, had somehow created art on par with man's (Edmond de Goncourt qtd. in Ayrat-Clause 108).<sup>3</sup> For even more than the rest of the art world, sculpture was a masculine pursuit. Not wishing to be relegated to the derogatory position of 'woman artist', Claudel fought to occupy the mainstream (or male sphere) and was recognised by the patriarchal elite (Ryan 168). Yet like so many women artists, Claudel's reputation was dictated by her relation to man. Over her artistic career loomed the shadow of famous mentor Auguste Rodin. While each inspired the other, Claudel also served as Rodin's student, assistant, protégée and muse: the secondary artist,

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<sup>2</sup> Mirbeau's article from 1895, a satirical dialogue between himself and the imaginary and naïve friend 'Kariste', praises Claudel and showcases the conditions for women artists at the time.

<sup>3</sup> Goncourt's comments (originally published in *Journal*. 8 March 1894, vol. III, 929) are much less tongue-in-cheek than Mirbeau's and represent the condescending treatment towards women artists that was typical of the period.



even if Rodin was the more conservative. Rodin appreciated Claudel's talent but remained her superior in the eyes of the art world. When the relationship between the two broke down, Claudel found herself rapidly on the outside. The freedom and opportunity she had experienced while associated with Rodin had been exceptional and was not sustainable without his support (Delbée 159). While the separation transpired in part from Claudel's need to distinguish herself from the great Rodin, it resulted in her exclusion from the art world. Much of her work went unrecognised and she lived out the last thirty years of her life in a mental asylum.

Claudiel may have wished to join the male sphere, but her genius comes partly from her difference from it. Claudel is known for her depiction of female sexuality and for changing the dynamic in representations of heterosexual couples. 'Her achievement,' Angela Ryan writes, 'is due in part to her representation both of the female body and of the male-female couple in a de-commodified mode, through the construction of intimacy or eroticism freed of stereotypical "male gaze" voyeurism' (Ryan 168). Claudel presented a vision of gendered interactions which challenged the status quo.

In Erna Schnorr, Vialatte portrays a rare woman artist, a female genius, no less, like Camille Claudel. Her paintings depict other worlds and elude description in words; she has a heavenly genius on par with the gods. Significantly, like Claudel, it is only upon entering the male-dominated art world that Erna is respected. She has had to distinguish herself as exceptional among her sex, her work far from those 'feminine' paintings of still lifes and pretty flowers. From her uneasy position of woman artist, Erna's character establishes the link between the art within *Battling's* narrative and Vialatte's art in writing it (Smadja 386). The otherworldly of her work – that

something wondrous and foreign that we access through the French but never quite grasp – frames the text’s quest for self.

Yet as woman and foreigner, as Other, Erna’s journey as artist is not *Battling*’s tale. Neither the muse nor the veiled Isis were traditionally subjects themselves and Erna exists in the main narrative via her relation to man; as we saw in the previous chapter, she fascinates the schoolboys and serves as eternal feminine to the eponymous Battling. Beginning with the writer Vialatte, *Battling*’s men draw on Erna as their muse. Her liminality – defying representation from a single angle or with any one technique, material, national literary tradition or language – calls out to be captured in art. Despite her genius, the schoolboys see Erna for her exteriority and use her to find an aesthetic within which to capture the otherness outside themselves.

This chapter recentres Erna’s character at the heart of *Battling*. For if the text positions her on the margins, it is not because she is insignificant, but because it wills us to alter our perspective. Erna may be the foreign, feminine Other, plot device to the hero’s coming of age, but she also reflects the author – she is subject, agent, manipulator – and her work represents the text’s artistic ideal (Schaffner, *Porte-plume* 107). This chapter examines, first, Erna’s cultural liminality as it troubles the primacy of the French schoolboy self in *But Where Did She Spring From*, second, her art as it reshapes the French scene in *Reflections of the Otherworldly* and, third, her womanhood as it destabilises the universal male artist and his individual pursuit for meaning in *Ténébreux and Ténébreuse*. From here, drawing on feminist and translational models of identity to dehierarchise the male self and the French national respectively, it goes *Through the Looking Glass* to present a final and relational portrait of *Battling*’s interwar artist. In the last and metatranslational part of the

chapter, *Marriage: What is it Good For?*, I turn to a parallel clash of artists. As I the translator meet Vialatte the writer, I problematise the binaries of woman and man, other and self, in my search for *Battling*'s identity in English translation today.

### **But Where Did She Spring From?**

To the schoolboys, Erna comes from another literary tradition; she does not fit into their dream world, led by Alfred Jarry's Père Ubu as mascot, and constructed from reading the French poets Jules Laforgue and Paul-Jean Toulet (93). While she must remain Other to fulfil her role as the eternal feminine, she equally appeals to translation. To them, she evokes the strange French verse of Charles Baudelaire or Arthur Rimbaud but also something irreconcilably foreign, something translated, like *Battling*'s ode.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the narrative, the trio try to place Erna in an array of trans-European intertexts. They want to make her conform to established representations, and Erna herself yearns to be an ordinary French woman, neatly confined within the language and the tradition. Yet all attempts to do so meet with a perverse resistance. The text suggests that Erna occupies another world, somewhere accessed not even by the author. Outside *Battling*'s French imaginary – in which Erna has been placed, translated, but does not belong – she has another existence. We have only to find her.

In the translated extract that opens this chapter, Erna, under the mistaken belief that she will die an untimely death, goes to the cemetery to speak with the monumental

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<sup>4</sup> See previous discussion in the segment *Ode to Ugliness* of Chapter Four.

mason, Manuel's uncle, about a tombstone. She happens upon Manuel who often spends his spare time in the workshop creating strange figurines, sculptures and other paraphernalia, including a lamp in the shape of Père Ubu. Wishing to fit in with the town's bourgeoisie in death, Erna has her mind set on an ugly and overly ornate design, full of decorative flourishes and different materials like the local nurseryman's. She dictates her order to Manuel and together they discuss her requirements with mock solemnity, finding common ground in their bemusement at the unsubtle tastes of the French bourgeoisie.

It is in Manuel's interactions with Erna – as we saw in Chapter Four, Battling cannot conceive of Erna outside her relation to himself – that we see flickers of her own subjectivity. Like Battling, Manuel seeks an aesthetic with which to contain Erna; confronted by her alterity, by her gendered and cultural difference, he tries to translate her into terms he understands. But where Erna was only a symbol to Battling, with Manuel she has a voice, agency and female sexuality. And in fact, later in the novel, the two have an affair – the exotic eternal feminine is no longer untouchable and the subject-object interactions are here more complex.<sup>5</sup> In the following scene, Manuel is intimidated by Erna the artist and thrown off guard by Erna the woman; she does not fit the feminine stereotype he expects but rather turns her regard on him. Who is the artist and who is the muse? Manuel finds himself having to adjust his behaviour to Erna's; the two of them go out to meet each other, both translating and translated.

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<sup>5</sup> Manuel is more like the hero, labelled 'Don Juan' by his teacher (Radiguet 10), in *Le Diable au corps* who gets to know the seemingly unattainable woman and realises she is not what he had imagined.

Elle le dévisageait avec curiosité, sans gêne, à la fois comme un lézard dans une vitrine et comme une excellente occasion. Une Française, à sa place, aurait eu l'air coquette ou effrontée ; chez elle on avait plutôt l'impression d'une curiosité scientifique jointe à un plaisir enfantin. Manuel fut un peu gêné ; il tourna le bouton électrique pour se donner une contenance. Le hangar, subitement nettoyé des richesses de son clair-obscur, prit une allure pauvre et rigide ; Erna Schnorr, au milieu de ces pierres froides, procurait une sensation de luxe, d'élasticité, de bonne odeur ; il songea aux danseuses en fourrures qui viennent voir Charlot dans la cabane du chercheur d'or. (101-102)<sup>6</sup>

She studied him with curiosity, shamelessly, at once like a lizard in a window and an excellent catch. In her place, a French woman would have seemed coy or brazen, but in Erna, you sensed rather a scientific curiosity coupled with childish pleasure. Embarrassed, Manuel flicked on the power for something to do. Washed of its rich semi-darkness, the shed suddenly appeared stiff and shabby, and a feeling of luxury and elasticity, along with a nice smell, emanated from Erna amongst the cold stones. Manuel pictured the dancers in furs who go to see the Tramp in the gold-digger's hut.<sup>7</sup>

Manuel, who is 'gêné', watches Erna staring at him 'sans gêne'. Uneasy and at ease. Uncomfortable and comfortable. Embarrassed and unembarrassed. I want to maintain the clean opposition of the French in translation: one relaxed, the other squirming under the gaze. None of these quite work. The most obvious translation for Manuel's 'gêné' is 'embarrassed' but the repetition of 'unembarrassed' and 'embarrassed' is not subtle enough for English: such like-terms do not fit so close

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<sup>6</sup> This extract comes from the translation that opens this chapter ('Ses visions semblaient venir d'un autre monde'); it is present again here for the close reading to come.

<sup>7</sup> Refers to Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush* as I'll cover shortly.

together. In any case, none of these options are quite right. As per the *Larousse* definition of ‘sans gêne’ – ‘manière d’agir de quelqu’un qui n’observe pas les règles habituelles de la politesse’ – Erna is rudely going against the normal French way of things. I want the descriptor to convey the fact that Erna *should* be embarrassed. Yet she is outside; she does not have to follow the rules.

I drop the opposition and go with ‘embarrassed’ and ‘shamelessly’. ‘Shamelessly’ maintains a moral element and brings with it the undertones of sexual desire that fit with this zoological metaphor. A lizard in a window and an excellent catch; this meeting between Manuel and Erna is one-part scientific study, the other part attraction. A naturalist and the animal behind the glass or predator and prey? Either way, even if we see the scene through Manuel’s perspective, Erna, the other, has Manuel, the subject, pinned beneath her gaze.

Manuel compares Erna to a French woman: ‘une Française, à sa place’ would do this, but ‘chez elle’... What to do with ‘chez’ in English? My best solution is to focus on Erna specifically, ‘in Erna, you sensed...’ But accompanied by ‘une Française’, ‘chez elle’ equally evokes nationalist connotations and home. The two cultures clash in their stereotypes: the coquettish French woman and the objective, distant German. Erna’s transnationality confuses this French boy who does not maintain his dominance against a feminine German, or French-German, Other.

Virginia Woolf paints a female outsider as the artist in *Between the Acts* (1941). Like Erna, Miss La Trobe is constructed of rumour.

But where did she spring from? With that name she wasn’t presumably pure English. From the Channel Islands perhaps? Only her eyes and something about her always made Mrs. Bingham suspect that she had

Russian blood in her. ‘Those deep-set eyes; that very square jaw’... Outwardly she was swarthy, sturdy and thick set; strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand; and used rather strong language – perhaps, then, she wasn’t altogether a lady? (*Between* 37)

Miss La Trobe’s appearance is strange, her name – is it French? She is not feminine but strong, sturdy, masculine; her sexuality is uncertain. Both hers and Erna’s origins and motivations are unclear, their names and appearances out of place in their texts. Just foreign or somewhere otherworldly? Woman or male genius? It is Miss La Trobe’s outsider status that allows her leverage as artist in the backward town. She runs the town’s pageant: a public performance with everyone involved. As director of the play, Miss La Trobe is the mastermind behind the text’s aesthetic – the pageant pulls the novel and its characters together.

Erna too gains leeway through her foreignness. These two women, Miss La Trobe and Erna Schnorr, both occupying a translated space, have more hope of being the artist, the subject and creator – they are not confined within the text’s time and culture. In *Battling*, the French singer Céline serves as Erna’s antithesis. When *Battling* cannot have Mademoiselle Schnorr, Céline is his consolation prize. She is the regular woman; an inferior artist, seductive and objectified, Céline is seen by the local gossips as the perfect woman for Manuel’s first sexual encounter, someone insignificant to help him become a man. Conversely, Erna, the outsider, has been picked up and placed where she does not belong. What is important is the text’s choosing to paint someone who exists outside its bounds. This strange dance between Manuel and Erna is the meeting place between French and German, where Erna’s Germanness hits the French imaginary and does not smoothly translate. The

encounter is not about distancing French-German, man-woman, self-other through polarities but confusing them.

This confusion of self and other between Manuel and Erna in the above extract takes place in the 'clair-obscur' of the cemetery's shed (101). Light-dark. Chiaroscuro. The French evokes both semi-darkness and the art technique 'chiaroscuro': darkness with a focus of light. Artists have historically used chiaroscuro for the contrast that shows volume, dimension and perspective. With its shadows and angles, its rich possibility, the 'clair-obscur' overlays this scene with the ambiguity of art. In English, we use the Italian term. If I translate the French into Italian, it becomes only the art, losing its ability to describe the state of the shed and becoming specialised and noble instead of ordinary. But without the art, I'm left with a bare semi-darkness, a low or dim light, more than a painting. It was in the 'pénombre' too, that Erna could be the artist (99-101). When she first arrived, Manuel recognised Erna by her pictures in magazines; in the shadowy light, the resemblance was uncanny. There, we gained rare access into Erna's thoughts who was pleased to be recognised by her artist profiles, not by rumours around town, and who had a brief opportunity to play the creator's role – to be the artist behind the text's aesthetic, drawing on her own muse. Upon spotting Manuel in the corner of the shed against the light, bright in his white shirt, Erna noted that he would make an excellent medium. His Italian background within this French context, along with his stance and complexion, made her think of Napoleon Bonaparte. In this half-light, Erna Schnorr might be the subject.

But with the lights on, Manuel continues trying to find an aesthetic for Erna. I struggle again with neat opposition in translation. The French syntax in the above extract cleanly contrasts the shed which is 'pauvre et rigide' with Erna Schnorr who



oozes ‘luxe et élasticité’ (101). I lose this symmetry when I rearrange the sentence in translation for flow: ‘washed of its rich semi-darkness, the shed suddenly appeared stiff and shabby, and a feeling of luxury and elasticity, along with a nice smell, emanated from Erna amongst the cold stones’. I wonder if I need to highlight the opposition then between these strange ekphrastic adjectives: poor versus rich, stiff versus elastic. Such peculiar opposites. On the one hand, we have restrictions and hard lines, without room for interpretation or flexibility, and on the other, we have the plural and evocative qualities of art. Erna is again woman, image, other. As with Battling’s Baudelairean ode from Chapter Four, Erna luxuriously represents the otherworldly – encapsulated in a feminine aesthetic – that Manuel seeks. But as subject, if we conceive of Erna outside the text, with her own agency, these strange adjectives seem to point to her intermediality. She will not be contained within the two-dimensional paper and the French prose; she is changeable, rich, multiple.

From ‘clair-obscur’ to black and white film. At first, Manuel imagines Erna in Charlie Chaplin’s film *The Gold Rush* (1925). She reminds him of the luxurious women in furs who are so out of place in the Tramp’s stark hut. I wonder about the translatability of meaning in a silent film without language. Chaplin himself resisted the talkies, writing in *The Times* that the silent picture ‘is a universal means of expression. Talking pictures necessarily have a limited field, they are held down to the particular tongues of particular races.’ Erna is the dream, the archetypal female figure as object of desire, extraordinary to the world’s ordinary. Perhaps this needs no translation and is simply understandable the world over? Then again, even here, the French ‘Charlot’ differs from the English ‘Tramp’. Charlot/Chaplin: Chaplin’s character merges with his person in the French.

The fact that Erna's exotic irregularity, which the boys at first declared ugly, is here luxurious and rich, signals a shift in traditional conceptions of beauty. With the avant-garde having dispensed of convention and experimentation having prompted aesthetic debate, Erna's strange shapes can emerge wondrous and beautiful. When Erna moves to a corner of the mason's shed and steps into the light cast by Manuel's Ubu lamp, the foreignness of the Berliner's face, as the narrator describes it, appears not ugly but perfect (105). Just as Jarry's play *Ubu roi* (1896) was a turning point for twentieth century theatre and absurdity, Ubu's presence in *Battling* alters the aesthetic through which we see. Its strangeness discards preconceptions and obliges us to question socialised meaning.



Fig. 3 Matisse, Henri. 'Luxe, calme et volupté.' 1904.

In Ubu's light, Erna's appearance makes Manuel think of Baudelaire's 'L'Invitation au voyage' (105). The famous poem from *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) evokes the appeal of travelling to a distant and unreachable place across the seas which assumes the luxurious image of a woman – 'Au pays qui te ressemble' (line 6). We are back to Baudelaire's ambivalent beauty and strange new cosmopolitan aesthetic. As this exotic construct, Erna is 'douce' and 'luxueuse'. Gentle, sweet or soft? I choose 'soft' for Erna's materiality. 'Luxe' is a bit trickier: 'Luxe calme et volupté' (14, 28, 42).<sup>8</sup> That well-known refrain from Baudelaire's poem is translated differently each time: 'luxury and voluptuousness' (Millay 76-77); '... beauty, wealth, pleasure' (Campbell 70-71). Through Baudelaire's vision of a distant paradise, Erna enters the French imaginary that Manuel shares with his friends. And Manuel wonders if Erna was ever really ugly, or simply foreign.<sup>9</sup> Just one of us, but from elsewhere. This mythical construct offers the characters, who do not leave their French habitus, an opulent picture of Erna; for Baudelaire offers only the 'invitation to the journey', not the journey itself.

Baudelaire's other famous invitation to travel in 'Any where out of the world' expresses a similar sense of elsewhere from within. The outside expressed in these English words of the French poem exists paradoxically only for those in, and remaining in, Paris. Any desire to translate Erna's Otherness comes hand in hand with an acknowledged unwillingness to demystify, a last cling to exoticism. Without her foreign mystery, the eternal feminine would cease to inspire desire from within

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<sup>8</sup> See Fig. 3 for Henri Matisse's vision of 'Luxe, calme et volupté'.

<sup>9</sup> 'La laideur, ou plutôt l'étrangeté du visage de la Berlinoise, avait complètement disparu ; et puis était-elle vraiment laide ?' (105)

the French. And, what would remain, in any case, if we were to peel back the illusion of a trope that exists as pure enigma?

If Walter Benjamin's arcades, as we saw in Chapter Three, show the construction of history, the polyphony of voices, the layers of time that come together in a historical present, so too does his vision of translation. In his famous theory, it is important to see the original through its afterlife, to enjoy the glass roof that lets the light in (Simon, 'Paris Arcades' 75). While the men of *Battling* can only see Erna translated into their terms, construed as the eternal feminine, the text points to that something eluding them. Erna's appeal to translation does not entail her smooth integration into *Battling*'s world; she retains traces of an elsewhere. Battling's ode to Erna sounds like something by a translated poet and Manuel imagines her in a foreign aesthetic conceived by French literature. Moreover, her German language leaves the soft hint of an accent behind in her almost perfect French,<sup>10</sup> and a very occasional 'Gott sei Dank!' (153).

Erna wills us, then, already within Vialatte's prose, to read her outside. So what if, instead of negotiating Erna on the schoolboys' terms, we travel out to meet her, Othering ourselves? This is my point of access to the text. Being as she is external to *Battling* and its conventions, Erna appeals to its afterlife, to the modern. I come at *Battling* from another time again, another culture and ideology, wielding another language. Vialatte might have conceived Erna as the other, but she gets away from

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<sup>10</sup> 'Elle parlait un français assez pur, d'une voix basse, en fermant certains è ouverts et en roulant un peu les r, avec précaution, comme des meubles de prix' (179).

him, leading us to another world. Let us go out into that elsewhere, into that new present, where Erna is subject, self, artist – where she can be realised.

### **Reflections of the Otherworldly**

Hers was the perilous edge of art, a wondrous balance between the real and the impossible. (38)

Occupying the margins of the text, Erna takes inspiration from outside the French imaginary for her art. She captivates the international scene and attracts a string of followers from amongst the most trailblazing of the avant-garde. Her work uses sheet metal to offer visions of ‘une autre planète’ (38). ‘L’élégance de son dessin et l’étrangeté de ses éclairages,’ the narrator tells us, ‘surprenaient comme un conte norvégien’ (38). *Élégance, étrangeté, éclairage*. The sonority of the e’s foregrounds the brightness of this Norwegian vision that surprises expressed within the French poetics. Just as Manuel’s schoolboy aspirations that we saw in Chapter Three were inspired by the ‘Bolsheviks’ and those from across the Rhine, Erna’s work heralds a changing aesthetic in France. Forgoing nationalism and classicism, Erna brings the outside in – or takes the inside out – to offer a wondrous strangeness to an art scene that has found itself suddenly open to new visions of beauty. Her practice is in France, but its origin is an indiscernible elsewhere; like her person, Erna’s art is only accessible by its translation into the text.

Writers have historically used the *Künstlerroman*, the artist’s novel, to navigate their own journey. For that reason, it is often a first novel. Through the creation of an artist protagonist and fictional world, the author can explore his practice – its challenges,

motivations, aesthetic – and comment on representation more generally (Pavlovski 133–34). Erna’s art reflects Vialatte’s artistic ideal. As she toes a thin line between tradition and avant-garde, foreign and French, strange and unnatural, she offers that ‘prodige d’équilibre’ between real and impossible to which Vialatte himself aspires in his creation of *Battling*’s fictional world (Smadja 386).

What sets Erna’s particular type of ‘sheet-metal painting’ apart in this time of ugly and artificial modernity is her ‘spontanéité dans l’artificiel’ (38). Despite its modern materials, her work is unaffected and returns to nature and the simple things. This spontaneity fits neatly beside the deliberately opaque language that the text uses to classify it. Neither the villagers nor the artistic elite fully understand Erna’s work, but attempt to describe and confine it nonetheless. Members of various art movements – stamped with buzzwords of the time such as ‘Episodisme Transcendantal’ and ‘Sécession Episodique’ – try to encapsulate Erna’s work with words but fail (38). Vialatte makes fun of such attempts, relishing the pretention of ‘les spécialistes éloquents de la *peinture parlée* [qui] discutèrent du constructivisme idéaliste, du psychisme pur, des états plastiques et des vertiges chromatiques de l’interstellarisme anecdotique dans les abreuvoirs les plus fringants’ (38-39). With hollow jargon and convoluted phrasing, the text mocks any attempt to use ordinary (French) language to describe something that must remain forever beyond it.

*Peinture parlée*. Spoken painting, art-speak, painted word. Speaking a painting or painting with words? Like those trying to capture Erna’s art in words, Vialatte enjoyed ‘peinture parlée’, or ‘spoken painting’, himself and delighted in a strange style of ekphrasis. Among his many talents was art critic and some of his columns on modern art sound remarkably similar to the text’s mocking of Erna’s critics.

Vialatte focuses on the inexpressible nature of art yet attempts, even so, to ‘saisir le merveilleux’ (Desthomas 227). In his correspondence to Henri Pourrat in 1923, Vialatte announces his incompetence as art critic and thus his supreme confidence.<sup>11</sup> For Vialatte does not think it possible to succeed. Or rather, the success is in the ‘how’ of the failure. His mocking is affectionate; he does not take issue with ‘peinture parlée’ but rather with the idea of taking such an endeavour seriously. With detachment and humour, however, this kind of ekphrasis can stumble on new tangents and savour the strange nonsense that materialises.

I translate ‘peinture parlée’ as ‘art speak’ to embrace Vialatte’s appeal to the modern and evoke the pleasurable pretention that he suggests lies in such a pursuit. And Erna’s success sits neatly within this context. In contrast to Battling, she has a sort of tongue-in-cheek ambition; she no longer believes art will conquer life’s problems, or offer her transcendence, but carries on all the same. While the eloquent critics bandy about stylish but empty words in slippery watering holes, Erna ignores the buzz of her public persona and does not attempt to capture her practice in language. They, amusing in their utter earnestness, she, reaching the strange and wondrous without fuss. The *Künstlerroman* enjoyed a renewed popularity in the modernist period. Where the German Romantics turned to art for sublimation and answers, the modernists turned to art for its ambiguity. With faith in social order, government and religion waning, art presented the only kind of meaning there was (Kern 42). Deep within modernism’s crisis of self and representation lay a lingering need then to

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<sup>11</sup> ‘J’ai fait ma critique d’art avec cette assurance qu’autorise seule l’incompétence la plus absolue’ (qtd. in *Correspondance* 2 254).

believe in art and continue to practise. Erna captures the kind of unimaginable that eludes Battling all along: an unimaginable tinged with irony that befits the period and Vialatte's own aspirations in writing *Battling*.

This was around the time of the 1925 Great Exhibition in Paris when the Art Deco movement emerged. Suddenly expensive, shiny surfaces, luxury and modern cityscapes were all the rage. Erna's sheet-metal paintings, with their never-before-seen colour, add to the reflective surfaces of her person; artist and art offer a mass of mirrors to her beholders. Erna is the Other who reconfigures the viewpoint. Like Miss La Trobe's town pageant which holds up a surface for the public to look into – her direction of the performance shapes the spectators' vision of history and themselves – Erna's artwork deflects the male gaze away from her person and towards a third space. She redirects the gaze to the outside, beyond France, modifying the stale and monochrome perspective that pervades the small town.

In parallel, Vialatte brings Germany into his text to portray a foreign art and artist in his French *roman d'artiste*. Erna Schnorr is both his model – material, intermedial, transnational – and his artist, creating something beyond words. In each instance, the essence seems to elude the French poetics. Which brings us to *painted word*. Vialatte's appetite for 'peinture parlée' resembles his portraiture of the interwar artist in *Battling*'s prose. He critiques art with literary texts<sup>12</sup> and writes fiction with

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<sup>12</sup> For example, Vialatte writes in 'Exposition à Mayence des toiles de Müller-Tenckhoff,' *Revue Rhénane*, no. 11&12, 1923, pp. 694-695 : 'Il suffirait d'une brume, d'un détail un peu flou pour que certaine toile nous transportât sous les latitudes du sentiment chères à Alain-Fournier' (qtd. in *Correspondance* 2 254).



paintings; representation to representation, Vialatte eludes a foundational origin or concrete signified. The aesthetic – for both artist and art – is in translation.

### **Ténébreux and Ténébreuse**

In 1807, when novels by, or about, the woman artist were rare, Madame de Staël (1766-1817) wrote a famous exception in the creative and flamboyant *Corinne* of *Corinne ou l'Italie* (Lewis 7–8). A reflection of Madame de Staël herself, Corinne incarnated the traits of the traditional male Romantic hero: free-spirited, living utmost, her drama her own. Significantly, de Staël would soon after publish the landmark text *De l'Allemagne* (1813) and introduce a picture of German Romanticism into France. Corinne's myth, travelling from German through French into English, offered an archetype for a new depiction of the woman artist in the Victorian era (9-10). Even if she met a tragic end, woman could perhaps be the hero. But in recent years, some have criticised *Corinne* for being unrealistic – why depict an established woman artist who is accepted by the community when such a thing was far from representing the dire conditions for women at the time?<sup>13</sup> Does writing a successful woman, and thus offering a model to future generations, make it possible? Or does it erase the conflict inherent in the very identity of woman artist? And is there a danger in having woman simply step into the shoes of the male Romantic trope without questioning its very foundation?

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<sup>13</sup> Evy Varsamopoulou (4-5) looks at such criticism in detail, specifically from Nancy Miller *Performances of the Gaze* (1988) and Christine Battersby *Gender and Genius* (1989).

The *Künstlerroman* is first and foremost about the artist; art frames a journey towards self-realisation (Montandon 25). Some studies reduce this to the autobiographical, but Evy Varsamopoulou labels it ‘a fable of creative subjectivity’ (Varsamopoulou xvii). The writer self-consciously packages a personal journey into narrative form so that the genre represents, as Gail Houston puts it, the art of self-making (213). The *Künstlerroman* is then commonly metaliterary: ‘what does it mean (for something) to become writing,’ such novels ask, ‘(for someone, a woman) to become a writer?’ (Varsamopoulou xxiv). Amidst the uncertainty of the modernist period, the *Künstlerroman* represented not so much the art of self-making but of self-problematizing. As we just saw in *Reflections of the Otherworldly*, Erna’s art reflects the aesthetic within which Vialatte frames this coming of age tale, but her character is Other: woman cannot play in the mainstream and cannot stand for the universal. Why choose a woman, then, a foreigner, to incarnate the artist? And how does the text’s portrayal of Erna as foreign female genius impact its quest for self?

*Le ténébreux*. Like the *Bildungsroman*, the *Künstlerroman* has historically been written by a (white) man and has featured a male protagonist. In his genius, the artist is elevated above the banality of the everyman and the bourgeoisie; he aspires, following German Romanticism, to things beyond, to spirituality, the absolute, the sublime (Serat 147-148). While he may find his isolation difficult at times, the hero is ultimately rewarded by finding truth in the other world of art. This character and narrative forms the trope of the lonely Romantic artist – later, in the interwar period, the modernist exile – who engages in an individual and egocentric quest for self-expression.

Battling appears to play this role with abandon. Following the mythology of the post-romantic hero, Battling's journey for self frames the narrative. As the quintessential Romantic artist, he imagines himself estranged from society and rebels against the norms of the literary canon and the educational establishment to find refuge in poetry and imagination. But Battling's quest is naïve, and his artistic pursuits are anachronistic. The text uses his aspirations to showcase the fate of the Romantic sublime in a modernist context. While Battling yearns for the absolute, putting his faith in an illusion, the reader looks on in amused pity. His poetry is a flop; he is not the great artist of the text, but a child, flailing in nostalgia and ending in absurd – rather than grave – tragedy.

*La ténébreuse*. Unmarried and independent, alienated from society yet longing to be part of it, Erna seems to replace Battling to incarnate the great Romantic. But while she is the superior artist, she comes from a position of otherness not of self. Her journey is not *Battling's* and she should not, the time implies, presume to play the universal subject aspiring to truth and transcendence. For in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, women were encouraged to negate their individuality and foster a domestic identity, not a public one (Mahlendorf 148). If the male hero who followed his dreams was noble and important, his quest deemed worthy by society, the woman artist, born to serve her man and her family, was out of place; in the *Künstlerrinroman*, the female artist's novel, self-realisation and ambition are not praise-worthy but almost criminal (DuPlessis 216).

Like Battling, Erna feels alienated from society, but her impression is grounded in reality, not constructed, as his is, simply from 'le vif sentiment de sa singularité' (Montandon 30). As a woman living alone in her thirties, Erna attracts unwanted

attention. *She will corrupt our sons*, the townsfolk worry. *Who does she think she is, that 'actress'?* (45,42)<sup>14</sup> The ladies in town ostracise her then declare her solitude scandalous. Erna's portrayal is informed by the binary conflict between domestic and artistic life that typically framed the woman artist's novel in the nineteenth century (DuPlessis 215–23). *Artists make poor housewives*, the ladies whisper in the village streets (42).

Virginia Woolf famously foregrounded the privilege required to be the artist, a privilege, even then between the wars, not available to women (*Room*).<sup>15</sup> Only those with the economic, educational and societal freedom of the white man could strive for self-fulfilment through art. Erna's success conflicts with her position as a woman in *Battling's* small town. She is unable to concentrate solely on her art without consideration to money or family, and her gender is more important to the narrative than her work. For woman, art cannot conquer all; other aspects of life – family, love, society – threaten with tragedy and failure.

Feminist studies have revived interest in the woman artist in fiction, a subject which has historically received little attention. In France, in particular, literature on the artist's novel often works from the assumption that that artist is a man; it therefore misses the problem of an ostensible universal (Gély 173). A study of the woman artist exposes the plethora of obstacles faced by those outside the male trope and illustrates how the artist functions *in* and *with* society, rather than *above* it. By turning our

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<sup>14</sup> We came across the townsfolk's opinions of Erna in the translation that opened Chapter Four: 'Elle avait sur un corps de nageuse une tête étrange et géniale de femme laide'. I refer to these pages again now to illustrate her treatment as a woman artist.

<sup>15</sup> Or, of course, to anyone but the white man. The issue of minority and queer cultures is, however, beyond the scope of this thesis.

attention to the woman artist, we can see how one might pursue art differently (Hankins 391–94). In the twentieth century, for example, some women writers presented the female character’s work as a labour of love or a collective activity and positioned ethics as more important than aesthetics (DuPlessis 221–23). Revisionist readings of the woman artist in fiction similarly reframe any ‘failure’ to occupy man’s ivory tower as simple difference and concentrate on the specifics of the art itself to avoid presenting a new ‘feminine’ universal to replace the masculine (Gély 174).

The old universal, conceived by the male-dominated art world, reduced woman and her art to an essentialist notion of ‘feminine’ and accordingly confined her to a separate and inferior stage. Immanuel Kant’s famous and gendered conception of the artist lingered: man, with his ‘deep understanding’, could aspire to great things, to spiritual ascendance through art, while woman, with her ‘beautiful understanding’, could only hope to divert. In the interwar period, the mainstream art world viewed bourgeois women as lovely girls painting pretty little things; lacking the true inspiration of men, they depicted a version of the world that was pleasing but had no technical innovation (Birnbaum 13–15).<sup>16</sup> But what do ‘feminine’ art and ‘feminine’ artist entail? And why should they be *less than*?<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In *Le Diable au corps*, Marthe’s minor “aquarelles” and her interest in “fleurs stylisées” are likewise deemed “ridicules” by the narrator (31).

<sup>17</sup> In *Gender*, Sherry Simon highlights an interesting point re the French ‘féminin’ versus the English ‘feminine’. Both terms reduce women into a homogenous category, but the term has more perjorative connotations in English (103).

According to Pierre d'Almeida, real-life artist Marie Laurencin lurks behind Erna's depiction in *Battling* (356).<sup>18</sup> Laurencin (1883-1956) was one of the few renowned female cubist painters, associated with the Pablo Picasso group and with Dadaism. Her work is known for being feminine: taking inspiration from the ancient Greek nymphs, Laurencin depicts pale, gentle, soft figures, close to nature. She is also known for being Guillaume Apollinaire's lover. Despite her talent and renown, Apollinaire showed condescension towards Laurencin and her work: 'she's like a little sun,' he said, 'a feminine version of myself. She's a true Parisian, with all the adorable little ways of a Paris child' (qtd. in Birnbaum 2). Laurencin's brilliance gets lost in her perceived femininity.

In *Battling*, the critics are 'seduced' by Erna's art and attribute it with an adorable childishness similar to that ascribed to Laurencin by Apollinaire ('cette spontan  it   enfantine avait s  duit un vieux crocodile...' 38). But if this label seems condescending, Erna's work is far from inferior in its difference from the male-dominated mainstream and rather leads the avant-garde. Her paintings exhibit the 'naturalness' commonly associated with women's art, but the upshot is innovation more than simply pleasing imagery; she had done 'for pictures of mythology and natural history,' the narrator tells us, 'what Jammes<sup>19</sup> had done in the realm of poetry for old magazines' (39). In part, Erna's art troubles this essentialist notion of

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<sup>18</sup> Continuing his expos   of the links between Erna Schnorr and Jean Giraudoux's female characters, Pierre d'Almeida connects Erna to Marie Laurencin via Genevi  ve Prat in *Siegfried et le Limousin* (1922).

<sup>19</sup> This quote, which we also saw in the translation that opened Chapter Four ('Elle avait sur un corps de nageuse une t  te   trange et g  niale de femme laide'), refers to French poet Francis Jammes (1868-1938) who Vialatte himself admired.

‘feminine’ but it equally puts into question her sex: did woman have to become man to create?

Any serious artistic aspirations between the wars retained the trace of the nineteenth century’s labels ‘unnatural and unwomanly’ (Lewis 2). The successful woman was often attributed an ‘ambiguous sexuality’ as though such achievements were not possible from an ordinary member of the ‘fairer sex’ (Ayrat-Clouse 108). Erna’s genius and her work with sheet metal belongs, like Claudel’s did, in the traditionally masculine domain; it is her womanhood that is out of place. Moreover, Erna’s person unsettles the feminine stereotype of the French woman. Where Giraudoux’s Geneviève Prat, who is more explicitly based on Laurencin, is delicate and weak, Erna is strong and ugly, independent and horrifying. The ladies in town announce Erna’s morals shady and, when she and Manuel embark on an affair, dub her the ‘hideous reprobate’ and Manuel the ‘endearing rogue’ (45). The woman artist of the time appeared to have a choice: retain her womanhood and accept failure, objectification, and inferiority, or excel and be banished to the sidelines, unwanted by society and surrendering what then characterised one’s identity as a woman.

Erna’s depiction in *Battling* illustrates what it was to be a woman artist in the interwar period rebelling against established gender roles, but it also interrogates the very stereotypes that maintained these roles. Constructed as she is through the male gaze and townsfolk rumour, Erna’s character is more caricature than real woman. Just as Battling’s fear and desire, and potentially the writer’s latent chauvinism (Hadjadj 179), projects an image of Erna as eternal feminine, woman before artist, the village ladies reduce her to a licentious and dangerous ‘actress’ (42). Yet Erna’s portrayal as foreign woman comes with the trace of a world outside her objectification and the

French imaginary (as we saw in Erna's interactions with Manuel in *But Where Did She Spring From?*) and her portrayal as maligned woman artist comes with evidence of her acceptance and agency elsewhere. In Berlin, and internationally, Erna is established, respected: a modern artist. There, the specifics of her art no doubt speak, and her person is surely complex. These aspects of Erna's character do not have a place within *Battling's* small-town walls, but if we look closely, as this chapter endeavours to do, we can catch a glimmer of them in the margins.

Erna clashes with the eponymous Battling and upsets the way things were: in the town, in French literature, in the art world, in depictions of the self. What does it mean that she is the genius, not him? What is important, I argue, is Erna's introduction into *Battling's* world, into a place and a tale in which she does not belong. The text uses her character to showcase a tension between modernity and tradition, German woman and French schoolboys, avant-garde female artist and self-conscious, outdated male Romantic. We can see her as simply Other or we can alter our perspective and read, from the encounter, a final portrait of the interwar artist's self.



## Through the Looking Glass

In the Belle Epoque, era of performers, dancers and actresses, the female star was born (Antle 8-9). She was both powerful, attracting crowds to the theatres by her reputation alone, and financially independent. But in a war between the seemingly mutually exclusive entities of woman and artist, the star was defined first and foremost by her womanhood. It was her objectification that enabled and perpetuated her position – she was the eternal feminine turned subject. The audience could no longer ignore the female star’s subjectivity and the female star was conscious of, and even invited, her objectification. She wielded her sexual power along with her creative force like Medusa before the impotent male onlooker (Lewis 206) – the *sujet-objet de désir* had arrived (Desanti 14). Like the stars of the Belle Epoque, Erna is subject and object. She is both artist accessing the sublime and the feminine (not woman) incarnating it for the male protagonists. Her cultural and gendered liminality unsettles the schoolboys of *Battling*, blurring the self-other, man-woman, French-German distinctions on which they depend and confusing the image reflected in *Battling*’s mirror of the artist’s self. Is this really Narcissus and his double, Simone de Beauvoir’s man and woman, as I suggest in Chapter Four?

The mirror device challenges any singular or static or identity. ‘L’altérité et l’infini,’ Liliane Louvel writes, ‘objets du questionnement identitaire, sont mis en scène, dans un face à face du moi avec ses doubles qui limitent et menacent son expérience des limites’ (32). It reflects an infinite back and forth, in a mise en abyme of who is who, which am I; the mirror disturbs any neat binary of active-looking and passive-looked-at. Moreover, even if the identity constructed by the mirror appears at first neat and stable, it is inevitably deceptive. Any reflection offers only a singular and fleeting

image of the subject, reduced into one plane – turn the mirror and you see something else (Braun 18–19). In *Sexes et parentés* (1987), Luce Irigaray calls for a reworking of the mirror theory of subjectivity developed by Jacques Lacan. Irigaray exposes the bias towards woman as object, even by women themselves. Historically, women have looked in the mirror to see themselves as simple exteriority: ‘le miroir signifie,’ Irigaray writes, ‘la constitution d’un(e) autre fabriqué(e) que je vais proposer comme enjeu de séduction à ma place’ (*Sexes* 77).

The text’s depiction of Erna focuses on her exteriority. Even as an internationally renowned artist, she remains, like the female star, object before subject: she is muse for the male artists and her own work seduces the critics. But just as Irigaray calls for a recognition of female selfhood in the looking glass, Erna seeks her fully-fleshed character. This chapter concludes by drawing on feminist and translational models of identity to frame Erna not as (gendered and cultural) Other but as *Other subject* in the text’s allegorical coming of age.

Theories of the self have always been deeply connected to the not-self – either the world outside or the Other. The Romantic ‘I’ sought to distinguish itself from, if not master, this otherness to find unity and stability. In the process, patriarchal conceptions of the self subjugated woman and minority cultures and have since been deemed imperialistic. Battling’s quest for self relies on such a premise: he the subject, Erna the object and muse. But we have already seen how Battling too could be considered Other. And that is precisely what is interesting about Vialatte’s novel. With its depiction of multiple perspectives and its adoption of different models of the self come variations on who is Other – we can see each character as subject and object.

In the seventies, canonical French feminists, notably Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous, emerged to counter the universal male 'I' which had previously been assumed to stand for all the rest. Despite widely differing approaches, feminist conceptions of the self resist imperialism and neat distinctions between self and other. They focus on process not product and, beginning as they do from a marginal position, plurality and heterogeneity not singularity and security.<sup>20</sup> If inherent contradiction disturbed the phallogentric view of the self which sought homogeneity and knowable resolution – the Battlings of the world, alone and seeking self-fulfilment – feminine language and culture exulted in difference and embraced ambiguity (Mansfield 71–72).<sup>21</sup>

Erna's character divides, multiplies, and distorts the very foundation of this Künstlerroman's quest for self. Above, her cultural liminality unsettled Manuel, and her status as female genius, subject-object, denied the great Battling his pedestal. The young man's post-Romantic coming of age has lost its universality: there can be no neatly defined French national identity without an awareness of other cultures, no man alone without recognition of woman's subjectivity. Feminist models of identity, in contrast with the Romantic 'I', do not begin with a self alone in the world, confronting nature or an object. Rather, given that woman was traditionally other, they conceive of subjectivity by one's relationship with other subjects. No subject is confined to the state of object for the benefit of a universal, yet exclusive, self, and

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<sup>20</sup> See notably Kristeva's work on abjection in *Pouvoirs* and Irigaray's *Ce sexe*.

<sup>21</sup> From the perspective of contemporary theory, these second wave feminist models overemphasise binary difference and ignore the specifics of race, privilege, culture – we do not want a new feminine universal to replace the old. From these theories, however, came identity as heterogenous, unstable and relational.

the self-other relation becomes reversible (Wawrzinek 28–29). As Luce Irigaray writes, ‘pour ne faire qu’un n’est-il pas nécessaire que nous fassions d’abord *deux* ?’ (‘Sur’ 117) How can we be ourselves without our relation to others?

As woman, Erna does not replace the male ‘I’ – she remains the not-self, depicted by her relation to men – but destabilises it, pushing against the eponymous Battling and the collective schoolboy subjectivity. The text does not switch the binary then, positioning Erna as male Romantic, but presents an unresolved encounter. Within a feminist framework, this encounter takes place between embodied subjects, each aware of sexual difference (Irigaray, ‘Sur’ 116; Zylinska 100). Where patriarchal conceptions of the self conceived of a sterile ‘I’, seeking to define himself against a feminine sublime in the higher realms of transcendence, feminist models deal in the physical and corporeal realms of our relations with others. Manuel and Erna present one such example: in the dim and sensual light of the cemetery shed, they negotiate identity. Neither subject is autonomous but rather reconfigures, renegotiates, reasserts itself through this relation. And within an ethical and dehierarchised feminist model, each works not to appropriate the Other but to identify with the Other subject.

Erna’s otherness as woman runs parallel to her otherness as foreigner. Acting in a similar manner to her femininity, her Germanness does not replace the primary French self and the French artist’s imaginary in *Battling* but clashes against it, and infiltrates it, modifying our viewpoint through her outsider’s vision of the otherworldly. A translational model of identity then complements the feminist. The schoolboys are confronted not only by Erna’s womanhood as artist but by her cultural difference. As they attempt to understand, woo, and aestheticise Mademoiselle

Schnorr, they bring her into their world. Battling, in particular, appropriates and fetishises her Otherness.

Conceiving of identity 'in translation', despite appearances, is useful for negotiating alterity *without* translating the Other into our frame of reference. As Joanne Zylinska writes, 'the stranger is, paradoxically, very much like me, but also infinitely different, so my task consists in accepting and respecting this alterity without trying to translate it into familiar and secure terms' (100). Given that translation establishes the mode of connection and exchange between self and other (Karpinski 29), it offers a metaphorical model for how best to conceive of ourselves through our relations with others. Like feminist models, identity 'in translation' is concerned then with an intersubjective construction of self – there cannot only be an 'I'. Both frameworks seek to bring together and avoid hierarchy and hard borders (Simon, *Gender* 8–9).

Fronting the cultural translation paradigm which emerged in the nineties, Homi Bhabha proposed conceptualising identity via the in-between spaces and the 'articulation of cultural differences' (2). His theory of a third space makes plain that the bottom line in any sort of translated identity is 'and's not 'I's. This is of course a constant theme as we saw in Chapter One with Sandra Bermann's 'and zone'. Together, such translational models work to replace universals, homogenous categorisation and hegemonic relationships with situated, specific and ethical constructions of identity (Santaemilia 20).

At the centre of this coming of age novel is an intersubjective encounter in translation: German meets French in a strange dance between embodied and gendered subjects. And in fact, it is Erna Schnorr who best incarnates the elusive self that the text seeks. As a product of her translation into Vialatte's French text, and her

construction through the lens of the schoolboys' trans-European imaginary, Erna exists not alone but by her relation to foreign others, she is neither distinct nor stable, but estranged and unresolved. Translingual and transnational subjects offer a means of depicting the innate instability of self – a source of fascination to the modernists and to Vialatte – and problematising reductive categorisation. Nomad, expatriate, traveller, writer-in-exile: these identities disrupt the neat confines of national, linguistic, cultural and literary boundaries to offer fluid models of subjectivity (Karpinski 27–28). For with 'and's comes instability and performativity, comes a manifestation of the perpetual exchange.

Ultimately, *Battling* offers no nationalist or knowable subject but rather Erna's foreignness, contrasted with, and experienced through, the collective French schoolboy self. It is this encounter, more than Battling's solo post-Romantic coming of age, that the text circles around. A wondrous meeting with alterity characterises the artist's experience throughout *Battling*; the artist does not, however, find neat definition against the outside but rather welcomes otherness in, reconfigures identity and experiences a strange plurality of being. Erna's depiction epitomises this uncertain yet productive state; between self and other, at home and unhomely, she represents what it is to *be* in translation.

The schoolboy lens with which we predominantly see Erna, however, exoticises her Otherness. It deals in archetypes, constructs, fantasies and art to form a non-tangible and dream-like woman of foreign lands. Yet we demystify the wondrous feminine other – and indeed the text suggests that we do – by exposing, and then reversing, her construction through the French male lens. A translational *reading* of identity, in a similar sense to the *writing* of a transnational character, can dissolve problematic

self-other narratives and destabilise monolingual versions of identity (Cronin 348–51; R. Wilson 107–11). In Bhabha’s third space of translation, the categories within which the text feigns to confine Erna blur; she is subject and object, artist and muse, French and German, translating and translated. Rather than ideal beauty or grotesque monster, Erna simply expresses the strange realness of people that eludes language and looks alternately luxurious and ugly as it wavers in the light.

In a final twist, this extraordinary creature is not granted her wish to become a part of the small-town French bourgeoisie in death. Fittingly, for this woman artist, Erna had always craved monotony and finds it in family life. She marries her German doctor and becomes ordinary, looking after her husband and his twelve pink children. Her catchphrase, in French with only the tiniest trace of an accent, has become: ‘C’est très simple et ça n’a pas d’importance’ (179,188). Meanwhile, unable to reconcile his ideal with reality, Battling commits suicide and pips Erna at the post. Her florid tombstone – an expression of the dull inside and pretentious façade of the bourgeoisie – is in fact bestowed to the young anti-hero. Vialatte offers his outdated Romantic a ludicrous end, a comic death marked by an overly ornate tombstone, and his woman artist a life suitable to the period’s established gender roles. The pervasive irony, however, seems to hint at how things might be otherwise, how we might read this tale later, in more modern times, in translation.

The meeting of subjects in *Battling*’s writing of the self is also a meeting of artists. Erna’s femininity and foreignness problematise the individual Romantic quest for sublimation in art and replace it with a collective creativity. In the next section *Marriage: What is it Good For?*, I relish another unresolved collaboration between artists, this time between writer and translator. And I work towards that same

unimaginable that Erna's art represents and that Vialatte's pursues. Where her aesthetic brings the outside in but foregrounds an absence of definable origin, my access to *Battling* is doomed to be through my own contemporaneity. From my vision of the *interwar*, I will never reach the text's *post-war* landscape. My inability to write the translation that Vialatte's text seeks, however, comes with an upside; I can approach its art.

### **Marriage: What is it Good For?**

#### *Man and Woman*

Edith Grossman said literary translation was like marriage.

I've had the kind of argument with a text that arises when your domestic partner is recalcitrant, stubborn, unapproachable, incomprehensible, and unwilling to cooperate or compromise. I have, at times, been prepared to pack a bag and go to a hotel, but fortunately the spat never developed into a separation or a divorce.

I like the metaphor, in a way. Its intimacy is right: translation is relational. I spend all my time trying to work out Vialatte's voice, what he is about, what he is trying to say. Sometimes, it feels as though he is purposefully keeping something from me. Sometimes, I think, he's wrong and I'm right. But he won't give in. Is this a heteronormative marriage between a man and a woman, I wonder? And am I the stereotyped woman in the relationship, doing the emotional labour, chipping away the layers of the enigmatic and authoritative man? Is Vialatte the man? Original, authoritative, superior. Waiting to be pulled out of his shell and fulfilled.



Historically, translation theory has been both gendered and binary. Two people, two texts, meeting in language. The woman was the translation, or the translator, working for the realisation of the man, the writer, or the original. As a woman, she should be invisible; we want the translation to *be* the author's text, to be fluent, to speak in his voice. 'Both woman and translation,' writes Manuela Palacios, 'are expected to pass unnoticed for the sake of a superior good: the male, the family or the nation in woman's case; in the case of translation, for the sake of the original creation or the dominant ideology among the reading public' (2). Modesty, fidelity, discretion; these are the qualities valued in translation.

We come then to double standards. 'Like women, the adage goes, translations should be either beautiful or faithful' (Chamberlain 455–56). Translations that take a lot of liberties but sound pretty are called 'belles infidèles'. Beautiful unfaithful. In French, the word 'traduction' is feminine, so it's always 'belle', not 'beau'. The translation can wander but it may be punished for betrayal; the original (and the man?) is held to no such standard.

Following anthropological theories of translation as self and other, I had always assumed that I was the Other. But perhaps this meeting was not so heteronormative, and the self-other binary was reversible. Or the two were indistinguishable? Perhaps the other was part of the self. Perhaps there was a woman and a woman and a man or a man. Perhaps there were many.

Like the feminist conceptions of identity that we saw above – subject meets subject in a respectful and sensual encounter – feminist theories of translation are equally amorous. As well as marriage, translation has been labelled a 'rencontre amoureuse' and an 'erotic' meeting which should 'facilitate love' (Sardin, para.24; Spivak,

*Outside* 179–200 drawing from Irigaray). Drawing from Melanie Klein's psychoanalysis, Gayatri Spivak suggests that translation does not take place 'from language to language, but from body to ethical semiosis, [in] that incessant shuttle that is a life' (*Death* 18). Literature does not exist without the human element, without its gendered, political, cultured subjects. Rather than reduced to man and woman, and to universals, these meetings are specific and individual, situated in time. Common to contemporary feminist theories of translation too is an understanding that the relation is not one to one (Martin 33). Texts are not so distinct or tangible in translation: this is a polyamorous, polyphonic marriage.

In *Battling's* quest for self, Erna first appears to serve as the alterity with which the schoolboys interact and define themselves through/by/against. But by tilting the mirror, we readily discover a contemporary reversibility and problematisation of the self-other binary. Battling is hardly the universal self, and Erna is not simply the eternal feminine but a subject too: a woman in translation, not a wondrous other, meeting the schoolboys in an unresolved encounter. In parallel, in my quest for a translated text, for *Battling's* identity in my contemporary English, I participate in an intersubjective encounter. Eva Karpinski compares textuality and subjectivity:

The text and the self is each a system of relations rather than a self-identical presence, understood as processes rather than products. Both textuality and subjectivity are posited as effects of what Derrida calls *différance*, that is, of the continuous movement of difference and deferral in language, which destabilises the work of signification and signature, making meaning plural and not reducible to the intentions of its presumed 'originators' or signatories. Moreover, recontextualised through reading, texts and selves are vulnerable to further transformations and reframings and consequently must be seen as performative rather than reflective. (7)

As Erna meets the French schoolboy imaginary, Vialatte's words meet mine to present a fleeting meaning, a performance. But how do I find definition in this negotiation, in this confrontation between translation and original? Should I be submissive or dominating, wield my agency or bow before the writer's? And which bit is me? To whom do *Battling's* words belong, to which language and time?

### *Woman and Man*

Yet another teenage boy lost in the world, Battling pins all his hopes and problems on an unattainable woman and falls into despair when his love goes unrequited. Like all dark, mysterious heroes, his cynical façade covers insides gooey with sentiment. We indulge the wallowing male hero who, as we saw in Chapter One, will bravely hide the fox until he is eaten by his feelings. Meanwhile, Manuel thinks himself a bit of an artist and wants to sculpt 'une belle négresse' (104). He wants to have his model hold pineapples or wear tropical fruits – the typical exoticisation of small-town nineteen-twenties France.

It did not take long to fall out of love. Why had I chosen to translate a man? A white, French heterosexual man from the past. A man who wrote Romantic male heroes and stereotyped women. Perhaps, like the interwar artists, I had wanted to separate myself from the insignificant and sentimental women painting still-lives that were pretty but had no technical innovation? After my initial infatuation with *Battling*, I had developed delayed-onset dead-white-male syndrome. Authors that had always fit the bill had suddenly become unworthy of my attention and automatically repulsive. The condition hit me late but hard, well into my twenties and long after I'd lauded praise

on Ernest Hemingway, Charles Bukowski and William Faulkner. Making *Battling* my own embarrassed me. I wanted to change it. Keep only the pieces that pleased me in translation. The humour, dreaminess, and debates on modernist art could stay. In the seventies, feminist translators, particularly in Quebec, brought to light the political and gendered nature of translation that had so long been left unchallenged. They wanted to tilt the mirror the other way. Make translation the self, the authority, appropriating the other. The early feminist translators called themselves interventionists. They ‘hijacked’ texts, appropriating them to their own agendas (from defaulting to ‘her’ rather than ‘his’, to feminist wordplay: ‘herstory’ not ‘history’), they translated women writers who had previously been overlooked by a male-biased canon and they recovered feminist agendas lost by previous translations (the first English translator of Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* was told to cut her ‘verbal diarrhoea’) (Gray).

If I was dissatisfied at being the Other, should I appropriate *Battling*? Modernise it, rewrite it, make Erna the hero, the universal. Announce myself a feminist translator? I wondered if I could translate ‘négresse’ with ‘black woman’? Even ‘woman of colour’? And what about changing her portrayal? Translation theory has always struggled to coincide with practice (Federici 20); the implications of such choices are complex. ‘Woman of colour’ is ridiculous in its anachronism, bizarre in the words of this author that are not my own. ‘Black woman’ is better yet still seeks to censor *Battling* for the contemporary reader. I do not wish to eliminate the exoticisation that is a pivotal part of reading and engaging with the writer’s culture and imaginary. Translation is, after all, about seeing alterity. ‘Négresse’ should be easy to translate; English borrowed the word from the French. But I cannot simply translate ‘négresse’

as ‘Negress’ either. The term was much more acceptable then; a seemingly ‘direct’ translation would overstate the exoticisation. I do not wish to fall into the trap of judging the writer for crimes that did not yet exist.

Translation uproots the text from its original language, culture and time. No longer belonging to a specific moment in history, the translated text crosses time and space to come into a different frame of reference, in a world history (Lianeri and Zajko 13). By superposing the original on an elsewhere, translation problematises the text’s identity. In his book *Régimes d’historicité*, François Hartog presents a Berlin ravaged by the fall of the wall as a visible manifestation of the present. He asks how we are to live in the present – what should we destroy, preserve, reconstruct, and how (11–32)?

I jump to ‘nègre’, getting off track: ‘ghost writer’. If woman was the translator, the ‘belle infidèle’, condemned for betraying her man, the black man was the ghost writer, telling the story of someone whiter and more important. ‘Nègre’ is now deemed insulting and has largely been replaced with ‘prête-plume’. Surely it isn’t a bad thing to eradicate the language of oppression, even if it means making invisible the term’s history?

*Pride and Prejudice*

‘Your defect is a propensity to hate everybody.’

‘And yours,’ he replied with a smile, ‘is wilfully to misunderstand them.’

– JANE AUSTEN

*Pride and Prejudice*

For a long time, I couldn’t find Vialatte’s words in my own. In English, *Battling*’s poetry and whimsy came out pretentious and contrived. There was too much inner psyche, too much soul, too many adjectives. His semi-colons stamped themselves all over my work, not at home. They flattened the tone, distracted the reader, announced the text as old-fashioned and difficult. Vialatte kept describing nature in transcendental terms, even the grass was ‘visionnaire’ and ‘miraculeux’. Surely grass could just be grass. ‘L’herbe verte’ at most. But I knew there was something in there, a voice taunting me, eluding me. I would work this partner out.

However much I wanted to chop and change *Battling*, I felt smothered by the primacy of Vialatte’s text, suffocated by my duty to do its bidding. I couldn’t allow myself to eliminate the adverbs, those dreaded adverbs that have come to represent the epitome of bad writing in contemporary English. I spent some time on a long sentence on page fifty-seven which traversed ten lines and was filled with semi-colons. Battling has been rejected by Erna and is ashamed that he cared enough about her good opinion that morning to put on his Sunday best. Symbolically, he discovers that his bright white shoes have been sullied by a big pink strawberry stain: ‘... alors il songea au soin inutile qu’il avait pris inconsciemment de se faire beau pour l’étrangère, – maintenant il en comprenait la raison...’. At first, I followed the punctuation to a

point: ‘...then he thought back to the unnecessary care he had unconsciously taken when he dressed up for the foreigner, – now he understood why...’ But I was wary of losing Vialatte’s humour. So much of *Battling* is about making fun of itself. The prose is all flourish and ponce, overwrought woodwork, cumbersome souls and miraculous nature: a contrived sentimentalism that goes so badly for its protagonist. I did not want readers to see the text with its purple prose as representative of an old-fashioned French. In earnest.

When Erna orders her tombstone from Manuel in the passage that opens this chapter, the floridness of the desired French design bounces incongruously off her character. Where the gilded urns and ornate materials so suited the local nurseryman, they clash with the outsider Erna and the absurd aesthetic favoured by the small-town French bourgeoisie comes to the fore. My English does something similar. It bumps into Vialatte’s French to foreground the text’s Frenchness. A stereotyped French, essentialised from the outside. When I described *Battling* to an editor at an independent US publishing house, he remarked that it sounded ‘very French’. But what does sounding French sound like and what makes it *very* French?

The early feminist translators received a lot of criticism. For one, the appropriation of another’s work was seen as misrepresentative and aggressive. In their defence, José Santaemilia reminds us, the interventionists did announce their intentions outright, playing the game upfront and working in collaboration, or with the permission of, the authors of the original text (25). But for two, their ‘feminist’ approach sometimes fell into the trap of essentialising in the other direction (20). Were they simply switching a binary without problematising it, creating a new

feminine universal to replace the old? And a 'feminine' which was unaware of differences amongst women: of privilege, culture, individual circumstance.

Was I the self and Vialatte the Other? Stereotyping, appropriating, wilfully misunderstanding? Following Damien Tissot's feminist ethics of translation means 'recognis[ing] and embrac[ing] difference without fetishising' (41). France is not a third world country of course; I am not colonising Vialatte or misrepresenting a minority. Yet English, as the dominant language of today, has the power to be uninterested in, and dismissive of, that which is 'very French'. By selecting texts and influencing their transmission, the Anglophone literary scene can be gatekeeper, as the editor is above, of that which reaches a global audience (Venuti 6). In the present climate, then, no matter the gendered identities at play, the English translator can hardly be considered a simple Other, submissive to a writer who is voiceless in a global and contemporary scene.

If I do wield power, I have no wish to reduce Vialatte to an outdated stereotype. To appeal to an anachronistic Romantic version of France, constructed from the outside: of intellectualism, the *ville des lumières*, of Balzac and Flaubert. I do not want to lump Vialatte in with the other dead white men as though there were no cultural difference or individuality within, as though such literature were obsolete. Translation is useful precisely to avoid such reductivism. It reveals the situatedness of its players, problematising identities, cutting through misrepresentations, and constructing culture in the exchange (Tissot 30). As translators, we must subject ourselves to otherness: occupy the writer's habitus, adopt his/her voice and authority and, in turn, avoid misrepresenting the original as a fantasy of itself, a stereotype. It is *other* only in the way that we see it as self too.



My supervisor tells me that a bit of disillusionment is useful. Easier to be critical if you do not fall too hard in love with the text. Now that the rose-coloured glasses of infatuation have faded, I can reflect on *Battling* constructively from my position today. Perhaps I cannot pick and choose what to keep, but I can factor in my own presence, consider where our language collides, and how *Battling* fits into, and can grow in, English and contemporary theory. I had to play Vialatte's game in a way my new audience would understand. I turned back to the sentence on page fifty-seven and cut it into four. The semi-colon is not the same in English today as it was then, I thought, a period would do: 'he thought back to how he had unconsciously dressed up for the foreigner – now he understood why.' I rejoiced in changing 'the unnecessary care he had unconsciously taken when he dressed up' to 'how he had unconsciously dressed up'. So satisfying to cut those pesky superfluous words and put the punch back in the English prose. Wasn't the 'unnecessary care' implied in the 'dressing up'?

Vialatte's humour comes from laughing at an idea of French constructed from the outside. He gives us a German lens through Erna's otherness: a transnationalism that reflects back on a reduced notion of Frenchness. *Battling* isn't 'very French' – it satirises 'very French' within the French. And even then, it is only in English that we might conceive it thus; in French it's almost 'German'. *Battling*'s home keeps moving into another language, one that we're not currently in. At least I could stereotype the French within the English in a way that the reader saw it was the author's game, not his identity. That way, I thought, the contemporary anglophone reader would not reduce Vialatte to a vague vision of old-fashioned Frenchness but would laugh with him.

For *Battling* is not its obsolete post-Romantic hero. The text's modernism bounces against an older world, parodying the poor protagonist and laughing at the bourgeoisie stuck in their ways. Erna too is already feminist and subversive. Vialatte wields her character as an antidote to a closed French world in the countryside, one previously unaware of the foreign, and of the woman artist. Just as Vialatte is himself on the outside – a translator away from the hub of Paris, his work 'méconnu' – *Battling* is already uprooted, outside itself. The text has a heroine and it calls to translation.

*Can we go it alone?*

To be in love with someone means believing that to be in someone else's presence is the only means of being completely yourself.

– CHRIS KRAUS

*I Love Dick*

Despite the criticism of the feminist translation of the seventies, the movement, along with the cultural turn, served to highlight the political nature of translation. Given that translation works through ideology and not above it, contemporary studies advocate to theorise the translator's position and the subjective nature of the role. However objective we may want a translation to be – without individual ideologies, values, ethics – it continues to filter through the lens of our habitus. Moreover, these movements irrevocably altered the rules of the game. Instead of striving for objectivity and neat and definitive representations, translation changed its focus to bringing together differences and confronting them, to engaging with the politics and

conditions of cultural exchange. It is of course difference which makes translation both necessary and possible.

After a while, I realised I had the metaphor wrong. The original was not the man, the translation the woman. While the two are partners, translation is also the process. All mirrors and reflection, translation is the link between self and other. It may not be marriage, or romantic love, but it is a relationship between people and cultures. And it is here that identities form. For one, translation obliges us to engage intimately with a different way of seeing the world, not to ignore or simply replicate it, but to spar with and extend it. And for two, 'translation unwittingly forces us to question and critically analyse ourselves and the way we relate to our own cultures' (Wallace 73). It is in her liminality that Erna encapsulates an identity that is uncertain, multiple and interpersonal. In parallel, as I scramble around in Vialatte's words, feeling their strangeness and trying to make them mine, the value is in the confrontation. Oftentimes, it is when I want to pack my bags and head to the hotel that the process of translation is most enlightening.

'She shouldn't stalk him,' Sarah Ruden says, 'giving in to fantasies about how much the two of them have in common and how much she deserves from him.' Apparently, women are better at translating the classics. It's a one-sided game; those dead white males don't give us a lot. While I spent all this time engaging with Vialatte's text, he was unaware of my existence. And wouldn't care for me if he were. Ruden says that as translators we shouldn't pretend our relationship with the text is one of mutual love and understanding, but rather be prepared put the work in and get little in return: women are better at unrequited love. But in Benjamin's theory of translation, the

original is waiting for its translator; and wasn't Vialatte's text too seemingly aware that it could be written otherwise?

For a long time, I had thought that I was finding the original in translation. I thought that when I heard Vialatte's words in my English, I was approaching some deep underlying intention. In George Steiner's terms, this would have been penetrating the text to take its essence out. Through my portrayal of Rétine in English, I thought I could feel his personality. Spry, schoolmasterly chic, handlebar moustache, nondescript, jaded. The words conjured such an image. But more of an old-school English professor came to mind than a French one. Or rather a mix: English traits bearing the name Rétine, an anachronistic man in a French schoolground, coming to life through the lens of today.

When I turned my attention to Erna, reversing self and other, it became clear that there was never a true 'original'. Erna was not defining the original male self but meeting it, problematising its universality, pluralising it. Similarly, my translation is not about Vialatte's original alone, but about my habitus meeting his. If I had started by thinking that I was using my Otherness and my position as an outsider to analyse the original, that was never really the goal. To translate is not to be the woman devoting herself to a static and superior original, imbued with a singular and findable meaning, but to take part in the encounter and study the movement of literature, where *Battling* is already other.

Homi Bhabha says that it is by forming the bridge that the places on either side materialise (1–13). And Sherry Simon declares that translation has 'less to do with *finding* the cultural inscription of a term than in *reconstructing* its value' (*Gender* 138). No singular, foundational self ever existed against the otherness, waiting to be

found. The focus, in contemporary (feminist) theories of translation, is on the creation of new knowledge and the production of identity with each encounter (Castro and Ergun xi). In this relational model, the ‘past-present’ replaces the present and the transnational the national (Bhabha 11).

But how to put all this into the translated text? Our increased engagement with the translating subject so often manifests in paratexts, translator’s introductions, explications, glosses, articles – less often, in the translation itself. I had spent all this time unpacking Erna’s character and rereading the feminine subject. But could I make her the Other subject to Battling’s object in my translation? Could I reduce the text’s stereotypes? Or was it precisely by bringing *Battling* to a new audience, reading through a different lens, that Erna would gain depth and agency, and Vialatte’s writing of identity would be rendered intersubjective?

These questions lead us to the central paradox of translation. We will inevitably read *Battling* differently today; we cannot access the original. But from that difference comes new knowledge. As the text takes form in English, it enriches the receiving literature and reflects back on its origins, performing Vialatte’s portraits of the post-war self according to a new frame of reference. The insurmountable rift, however, that remains between these landscapes deserves our attention. For it is here that identities form and that translation makes bridges with the unknowable.

And so the tale of my relationship with Alexandre Vialatte. Here, I can write Godard’s ‘interdiscursive production of meaning’, that I introduce in Chapter One, and inform readers of ‘*how* differences and similarities between cultures and languages affect *what* is finally transmitted’ (Levine xv). Here, I can document that very unimaginable space that Vialatte too worked towards. For the original was only

ever a memory, destined to be written and read elsewhere. *Battling* expresses the author's fascination with that which was inconceivable from his own position, from a French imaginary, from his time postwar. We can read the text today then, in translation, as it always yearned to be read.

Paul Ricœur uses translation to present a new model for contemporary European identity based on linguistic hospitality. Translation, he writes, 'consiste à se transporter dans le domaine de la langue de l'autre, d'habiter chez l'autre, afin de le reconduire chez soi à titre d'hôte invité' ('Responsabilité' 136). Transience and plurality here win out over nationalism. I notice the English translator translates Ricœur's 'hôte invité' – 'invited host' – as 'guest' (*Oneself* 109).

Host:

Person who receives hospitality.

Person who gives hospitality.

The French dictionary gives two precisely opposite definitions. 'Host' signifies both 'host' and 'guest'. Who then am I encountering in translation? Is it not 'we who ventriloquise' (Beard)? This thesis does not wish to make clean distinctions between self and other but rather to recognise the interchangeability, the cross-influence, the relation, the othering of ourselves. We translate to be translated (Levine v).

## Conclusion

I begin this conclusion with a jump in time, space and genre to a very different tale of translation. In Chapter One *Translational Reading*, I introduced Behrouz Boochani's *No Friend But the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* (2018) as an example of a shared narrative in translation. Boochani worked closely with translator Omid Tofighian; they sent messages back and forth between Farsi and English, Manus island and the Australian mainland, and the original and translation grew in tandem. In the finished product, Tofighian's translator notes bookend Boochani's story and the whole comes together in a polyphonous text that bridges and multiplies. If this project appears at first far removed from a study of translating Alexandre Vialatte's 1928 French novel, any apparent disconnect closes this thesis on the note that pervades it throughout. For it has been in the rift – which is also a bringing-together – between interwar France and Australia today that I have aspired to produce meaning and identity.

Tofighian says that in his experience translating *No Friend* he engaged not only with what Boochani 'knew' but with his 'way of knowing' ('Behrouz' 533–35). Boochani's account came from a different manner of thinking, from his own background, from an approach that could not have spouted from the big island, the centre. Tofighian describes Australia and Manus as two islands, polar opposites:

One island kills vision, creativity and knowledge – it imprisons thought. The other island fosters vision, creativity and knowledge – it is a land where the mind is free.

The first island is the settler-colonial state called Australia, and the prisoners are the settlers.

The second island contains Manus Prison, and knowledge resides there with the incarcerated refugees. ('Translator's Reflections' 360)

Two sets of knowledge, each surrounded by water. The larger cutting off the smaller, attempting to silence it; the smaller physically closed and yet creatively open. While the ethics of such storytelling are especially complex – we have a responsibility to regard Manus island as part of Australia – the extremes of this project nonetheless highlight some more general translation truths. Translation reveals that ours is not the only way; there are alternate narratives. It brings the margins inside the centre to change our frame of reference, performing meaning otherwise. As process more than product, collective more than individual, translation informs the production and reception of literature.

A friend suggested I read Tofighian's translator's note. She was interested in how he presented translation as an active part of the original text, in how the collaboration between writer and translator in turn informed Boochani's writing of *No Friend*. There, the distinctions between writer and translator, Farsi and English, original and translation, were small. There, the original grew through its translation, not abstractly in the Walter Benjamin sense, but concretely. I responded that this was what translation always was, or should aspire to be, and that it was precisely what my thesis was about. She nodded, but I could see that she was unconvinced. And it's true that I was not participating in meaning-making in the way Tofighian was. I was



translating *Battling* long after the original text was finished; Vialatte was dead, the author unaware of my toiling with his work, and the English was separate, belonging to another time and context. My translation took form as the original remained apparently unchanged. Despite all that, it is the active production of meaning in a translated space that encapsulates the essence of this research. I just had to show how it was there.

Contemporary translation theory aims to go beyond binaries. Instead of original and translation, it proposes intersection, plurality, heterogeneity. Instead of a one-to-one interaction, it suggests indistinct boundaries between texts and cross-fertilisation. From there, we can speak of identity ‘in translation’ as self meeting other in a reversible, fluid, ongoing exchange. Foreignising practices, experimental translations and multilingual writing perform this dialogue in the final product; they show the heterogeneity of the single literary text, the otherness within the self. But more standard translations, those that appear monolingual and homogenous, often hide the rich irresolution of process. Whatever the possibilities of theory, translation practice routinely takes the debate back to two distinct entities. Ultimately, there are two texts; I can see them on the bookshelf. One in French, by the writer, the other in English, by the writer (translated), a source culture and a target, an origin and an arrival, a discrete self and Other. If we argue against binaries, it is surely because we start from the assumption that they are there.

The vision of translation that *No Friend* brings to light and that drives this present thesis can often recede from view in the final product. As I write of heterogeneity, of a foreignness that destabilises our reading of *Battling*, of wide-ranging allusions and fragile coherence, my translation of Vialatte’s text comes out ordered, monolingual

– English takes over, swamping the text. As I document the uneasy dialogue between writer and translator in this thesis – or between myself and Erna Schnorr, between Heinrich Heine, Arthur Rimbaud and Vialatte – my translation conceals the exchange, selecting individual options from among the many, fixing interpretation, and smoothing out any disputes. As I theorise my own position, and the way it meets Vialatte’s, the translated text carries little of myself or my habitus. The English words are all my own, but they work to refer back to Vialatte’s story; they do not try to modernise, feminise, anglicise or make Australian. While translation is present, the reader may not see the negotiation with another *way of knowing* that informs the very words on the page.

It feels fraudulent somehow to speak of translation without a finished text, to not package a product and hand it to the reader all neat and gift-wrapped. For however much I interrogate *Battling* through process, and revel in a dialogue, in theory, in a study of literature, it is ultimately the translated text that must speak. Isn’t it? But there are twos – original and translation – and then there is translation as process: the link between texts, the mode of exchange, the activity. Translation wherein the binaries are most manifestly upset, and we engage with the cross-fertilisation, the otherness within. It is here, through process, theory and practice, that this thesis has played out, making explicit that which the finished translation alone sometimes fails to convey. This research performs the blurring between original and translation to construct new meaning in a study of literature, it questions authority, inserts the translator in the storytelling, problematises the original culture and our own. It takes on the very fragmented form – interdisciplinary, trans-, process and product, polyphonous – in which translation thrives.

In the introduction, I said that this project was not about what *Battling* became in translation but about what *Battling* was when we recognised its translation. In fact, it's both. Through a translational reading of *Battling*, this thesis has unpacked the original text: words, poetics, context, culture, history. But the original has itself evolved, superimposed on a new frame of reference, just as Vialatte's *post-war* has become *interwar* from where I'm reading. This is a study of literature which recognises the movement behind any text, despite apparent outward unity, and which resolves to problematise any static or singular identity. *Battling* was always amassed of pieces. Collaborative, derivative, heterogenous, the original text's fragile coherence comes from a set of relations. As the outside world enters the text's small French town, war infiltrates the closed schoolboy imaginary, the modern pervades the timeless, *modernité* irrevocably alters *Romantik*, and the *outré-Rhin* creeps across the border. The schoolboys' encounter with Erna Schnorr is representative of the text's intention as a whole; through this meeting with alterity, *Battling* paints the perpetual (re)negotiation of ontological and textual identity. German meets French and France meets Germany; translation informs and reveals this unplaceable novel which French literature has long pushed to the sidelines.

To depict an unhomeliness of being, Vialatte paints an array of layered subjectivities in *Battling* which my chapters framed through four portraits of the artist's self: the singular Romantic, a collective imaginary, projections of the Other, and the Other, reversed, as self. The underlying theme that pervades each is the encounter with alterity. First, the eponymous *Battling* is estranged in language, the lyrical 'I' separate, self-conscious, performative. Second, the artists of the avant-garde meet themselves in a foreign language and are unhoused from national identity and tongue;

here they experience the severing of signifier and signified. Third, the Romantic hero projects himself onto the eternal feminine, seeking identity in exotic love interest Erna Schnorr. And finally, self becomes Other and Other becomes self; the foreign female genius renders the text's quest for identity intersubjective.

These encounters with alterity fail in the traditional *Bildung* sense. The self does not grow and expand against the otherness outside but welcomes it within to the detriment of stability and singularity. As a modernist writer-translator, Vialatte offers his hero no wholeness in the beyond, but a plural and insecure identity, traversing language and time. And, most importantly, there is no singular hero. Through the perspective of contemporary theory and a notion of translation that has evolved significantly since the German Romantics, I have reframed the text's journey towards otherness for identity and foregrounded alternate subjectivities.

Together with a reading of *Battling* in translation to analyse text and self, as above, this thesis equally theorised the very process. As *Battling becomes* in English translation, Vialatte's text is kind of the same and kind of different. This identity 'in translation' problematises distinct and stable conceptions of national literatures: French and German and English. It introduces otherness to the self and shows it already there, unsettling the binaries of original-translation, (male)writer-(female)translator, self-other. This research proposes then that we view the translator as an active participant in the production of meaning and theorise the dialogue between original and translation for a study of literature in this globalised world.

More conceptually, in ontological terms, a translated identity, as exemplified by Erna Schnorr, presents a means of depicting the relational nature of identity and the innate instability of the self. Furthermore, it upsets reductive categorisation: French

national, Romantic hero, exotic woman, eternal feminine. Pivoting from these portraits of *Battling*'s artist's self, this research has conceived of a contemporary identity in translation: an intersubjective encounter between embodied and situated subjects, each actively translating and passively translated.

In writer-translator Idra Novey's novel *Ways to Disappear* (2016), a translator is the protagonist. Novey was sick of seeing translators represented as inhibited – a portrayal which did not adequately represent for her the audacity of the translator who goes out into the world and *others* herself – and wrote a vibrant, complex character in translator Emma Neufeld. The translator's invisibility on the page, for Novey, is not something to be lamented but embraced: 'you're both at the centre of it and up against the wall,' she explains in an interview. 'It's kind of a beautiful freedom' (qtd. in Bausells). In this thesis too, the translator is the protagonist. She has aspired to inhabit another *way of knowing* and reconfigure our viewpoint as Tofighian did by showing Manus within Australia rather than dissociated from. As Vialatte did by occupying the margins of French literature in *Battling* so as to perform it otherwise. Perhaps we need the translator to be protagonist a little more often in the future: not to be front and centre but to give voice to the outside and break down the walls.

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## Appendix: Source Text Extracts

### Extract 1: 'Il se jouait sa comédie avec un sérieux terrible'<sup>1</sup>

Erna Schnorr nous occupait souvent à la récréation de quatre heures, car nous avions pris l'habitude, l'été de l'année précédente, de la voir apparaître un peu avant cinq heures au-dessus du mur de son jardin. Depuis le début de mars où il y avait eu des jours superbes, nous avions repris nos observations sentimentales et nous regardions souvent du côté de la maison des Contade pour retrouver cette silhouette symbolique dont l'hiver nous avait privés. Elle ne se laissait revoir que rarement, mais nous nous obstinions tous les jours, avec la fidélité des prisonniers dans les chansons populaires, à fouiller l'horizon décevant auquel nous réclamions son image comme un signe précieux du destin, là-bas, du côté où, le matin, les brouillards de l'étang patrouillaient lentement, séparés en hautes colonnes, du côté où naissait l'arc-en-ciel quand il avait plu. Tandis que le principal tenait Manuel sur la sellette, je m'étais lancé avec Battling dans une conversation passionnante au sujet de la dame de l'étang. Il pouvait la voir jeudis et dimanches, à sa fenêtre ou dans le jardin, puisqu'il passait ces journées dans la maison des Contade.

Alors, Battling, tu as revu Erna Schnorr ?

– Ah ! dit-il, en voilà une qui s'en paye !

– Comment le sais-tu ?

– Elle ? fit-il ; mais c'est une grue finie !...

Oh ! Battling, qu'il faudrait te haïr pour ce mot ; misérable Battling qui adorais Erna Schnorr dans le secret de ton âme étrange ... Il la reniait éperdument, avec une grossièreté acharnée ; son excuse était dans le mal qu'il se faisait à lui-même. Il était à un âge cruel, plein d'idées fausses et d'orgueils déplacés, l'âge

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<sup>1</sup> From *Battling* (50-54).

des pires souffrances, celles qu'on se nie à soi-même ; il se jouait sa comédie avec un sérieux terrible, en étant le spectateur le mieux placé, un spectateur difficile, intransigeant et sans distractions ; pareil à cet enfant spartiate qui se laissait dévorer les entrailles par le renard caché sous sa tunique plutôt que de le laisser voir, il aimait mieux nier son amour, sa maladie mortelle, que d'avouer sa défaite, car, devant les adultes, on n'a pas le droit à cet âge-là d'avoir des sentiments d'homme, et, devant les camarades, cruels aux autres parce qu'ils le sont à eux-mêmes, la victoire seule sauve des railleries.

L'erreur vient au secours de l'erreur ; Battling était donc soutenu par un monde d'idées fausses. C'est ainsi qu'ayant donné de l'argent à une femme un soir d'escapade, avec un cousin venu en permission, dans quelque local à lanterne rouge qui sentait le caporal ordinaire et la savonnette à trois sous, il croyait connaître la femme et puisait dans cette illusion un mépris sincère de l'autre sexe joint à un désir irritant qui se réveillait à propos d'Erna Schnorr. Il pensait avoir acquis l'Expérience au prix de cette aventure dont il n'était pourtant fier que par moments, avec certains camarades. Car la grossièreté qu'il avait adoptée comme ton ordinaire était destinée à cacher une pudeur extrême, une de ces pudeurs de garçon telles que les fillettes les plus sages ne les connaissent peut-être pas, une pudeur qui ne s'applique pas aux choses du corps, mais à celles de l'âme. Ses secrets étaient fermés à triple tour. Il avait une âme hypertrophique et encombrante avec laquelle Dieu l'avait chargé de se débrouiller dans la vie comme il pourrait ; il la traînait comme un sac de fantassin sur la fin d'une marche, d'un pas lourd et résigné, en serrant les dents, le souffle court ; il s'imaginait pouvoir arriver à la cacher ; s'il pensait qu'on risquait de la voir, il mettait la main devant et se félicitait de sa ruse.

Toujours premier en mathématiques, il écrivait de pauvres petits devoirs de français, en enfilant des banalités ratatinées de manuel littéraire comme un chapelet de châtaignes sèches. « Comme c'est pauvre, ce devoir, Larache ! » lui disait Tourlaize, le professeur. « Vous ne pourriez pas avoir une opinion personnelle ? » Il en avait, plus que nous tous, des opinions personnelles, bien que Tourlaize ne s'en soit jamais aperçu. Mais il craignait en les exprimant de paraître naïf ou lyrique ce qui l'eût gêné plus encore que de voir l'attention de la classe attirée sur la sécheresse particulièrement inquiétante de ses inspirations littéraires. Il jugeait d'ailleurs les écrivains d'après lui-même. Un jour qu'on nous avait donné à « comparer les opinions de La Fontaine et de Victor Hugo

sur l'enfance », il me dit : « Il est idiot, Tourlaize. Comment veux-tu savoir ce que Victor Hugo pensait des enfants ? – Regarde dans le bouquin les poèmes qui ont trait à eux, à Jeanne, au gamin qui est tué sur les barricades, au “cercle de famille” ... Je ne sais pas ; il y en a assez ! – Naturellement, fit Battling, et puis ? Qu'est-ce que ça prouve ? Tu te figures qu'ils écrivaient ce qu'ils pensaient, ces gens-là ? Ils écrivaient ça comme ça parce que c'est comme ça qu'on écrit. Qu'est-ce que tu voulais qu'ils disent ? On ne va tout de même pas mettre ce qu'on pense dans les livres qu'on écrit ! Moi aussi, je pourrais faire de belles tartines sur l'amour et la mélancolie !... – Vas-y, Battling ! Tu en boucheras un coin à Tourlaize. – Ah ! on ne fait pas ça », dit Battling. Je n'ai retrouvé cette expression de gêne, de dégoût et de pudeur scandalisée que sur la bouche des Anglais. Battling considérait toute la littérature comme l'exercice prétentieux de gens pleins d'affectations ridicules ; toute expression du sentiment lui semblait une préciosité insupportable et de mauvais goût. Rien ne le gênait aussi cruellement que d'être obligé de lire à haute voix un passage lyrique ; il ricanait, il rougissait, il n'en pouvait plus de dégoût, de honte :

« Quel chiqué ! »

Et cependant, sous ce mépris général du sentiment, du lyrisme, du romanesque et des femmes, il cachait la plus grande candeur. C'était même cette totale absence de cynisme qui le rendait en apparence méfiant et grossier : un peu de cynisme – son opinion sur les écrivains n'était pas si fausse – permet plus de grâce et d'abandon. Tel quel, il se débattait comme il pouvait parmi les contradictions de l'adolescence, honteux de ses grands sentiments, et fier de ses défauts acquis, possédant d'ailleurs de naissance une sorte de génie amer et taciturne qui le portait à aimer la souffrance que l'on reçoit ou que l'on cause, et capable d'actes singuliers.

A vrai dire, depuis les dernières grandes vacances, il semblait se civiliser un peu ; il ne paraissait plus estimer d'une façon aussi provocante qu'il y a une sorte de ridicule insupportable à tenir ses ongles bien coupés ; il soignait les siens ; il peignait ses cheveux ; il avait même eu, paraît-il, deux audaces dont il ne s'était pas vanté, mais que Manuel m'avait apprises sous le sceau du secret, les tenant d'Erna Schnorr elle-même, et j'avais pu facilement reconstituer ces aventures de vacances du grand Battling, aventures dont rien n'avait transparu à la surface, remous invisibles qui travaillaient durement, sourdement le fond,

malgré tout romanesque, de son âme, sans que rien s'en dévoilât jamais dans ses yeux calmes d'adolescent qui savait mentir.

## **Extract 2: 'La caricature n'est pas de l'art, c'est de l'anarchie'<sup>2</sup>**

Clair-de-Lune, le concierge – mélancolique importation du chef-lieu industriel – qui vendait du chocolat Menier aux récréations et sonnait la cloche pour diviser le temps, passa par la porte entr'ouverte son ventre gainé d'un tablier bleu :

– On demande Feracci chez Monsieur le Principal.

Feracci prit l'expression dédaigneuse de circonstance à partir du « premier bachot », posa sa plume, rejeta en arrière de longs cheveux noirs qui découvrirent un front noble, et se leva avec une lenteur voulue. Il tâcha d'avoir en sortant de l'étude un air complètement excédé.

– Travaillons, déclara Rétine ; et les têtes revinrent sur les cahiers.

Sur le palier, devant la porte du principal, un araucaria présidait dans une odeur d'encaustique. Un bébé barbouillé de confiture se cacha derrière le porte parapluie. Une voix sèche cria : « Entrez. »

La lumière faisait briller des vitrines où s'alignaient des papillons morts, des pierres mauves et de vieux livres. Au milieu, derrière un bureau jaune, le principal se tenait assis, le buste renversé en arrière sur le dossier d'un fauteuil rond ; son nez busqué soutenait un grand front chauve comme un contrefort soutient une voûte ; il avait des moustaches blondes, une jaquette noire, un col cassé qui laissait nue la pomme d'Adam, très mobile, et des manchettes en celluloïd qu'il faisait remonter de temps en temps. Le surveillant général notait des chiffres sur un gros livre, dans un coin de la pièce ; il releva un instant les yeux sans bouger la tête, puis il finit d'écrire un nombre, posa sa plume et se carra sur sa chaise pour participer par son attitude à l'entrevue. Il avait de longs souliers jaunes qui brillaient comme le plancher, avec un bout très dur, et des plis transversaux entre le bout et la tige. Sa moustache posait deux virgules

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<sup>2</sup> From *Battling* (27-34).

brique sous ses joues pourpres, et ses sourcils avaient l'air de deux grosses chenilles rousses au repos.

Quelque chose de solennel s'introduisait dans la pièce à la faveur du silence, une atmosphère de tribunal.

« Je vais être jugé, pensa Manuel en voyant le geste du surveillant, jugé au nom des papillons morts, des cailloux mauves et des vieux livres, au nom du porte parapluie en fonte émaillée, du bébé barbouillé de confiture et de l'araucaria domestiqué. »

Le principal laissait agir le silence. Il avait reculé un peu plus son fauteuil, croisé les jambes et passé le pouce gauche dans l'entournure de son gilet ; les sourcils levés très haut, la tête penchée en arrière et inclinée sur le côté, il regardait sa main droite avec laquelle il tenait son lorgnon et tapotait sur le bord du bureau. Manuel commençait à se raidir, énervé, prêt à l'insolence. Il n'aimait pas le principal parce qu'il avait de grands bras maigres avec lesquels il télégraphiait en parlant et parce qu'il détachait les *e* muets en faisant sonner la dernière syllabe de ses mots. Il voulut conjurer la solennité que son supérieur préparait par le silence :

– Vous m'avez fait appeler, Monsieur.

(Feracci ne disait jamais : « Monsieur le Principal », comme les autres élèves et la plupart des maîtres, pour ne pas contracter, disait-il, « les mœurs de la tribu ».) Le principal bougea à peine ; il arrêta le mouvement du lorgnon, haussa un peu plus les sourcils et tourna les yeux vers le surveillant général. Le surveillant général hochait la tête automatiquement avec un sourire amer. Puis il arrêta son mouvement de pendule et on n'entendit plus rien dans la salle. Alors, le principal ramena la tête dans la direction de Manuel, baissa enfin les yeux sur lui et plissa fortement les narines ; on vit que sa moustache naissait très haut dans le nez.

– Vous sentez le tabac, Feracci. Vous avez fumé ?

Il parlait sans passion, comme un homme qui constate.

– Oui, Monsieur.

Manuel avait passé la récréation de quatre heures « chez Aristide », à faire un billard avec Damour.

– Et vous avez le front de venir me dire en face...

– Vous m'interrogez ; je ne mens pas, coupa Manuel.

Il s'était senti tout d'un coup une sorte de rage froide provoquée par la mise en scène du principal, un besoin d'être insolent, de se faire mal voir. Il aurait voulu une « engueulade » nette et catégorique ; il sentait au contraire que le principal préparait lentement des phrases parfaites, jouait un rôle sans difficulté comme sans mérite pour se plaire à lui-même et à l'idiot écarlate qui prenait modèle dans son coin.

– Vraiment ! fit le principal un peu interloqué en ramenant la tête en avant. Mon petit ami, il y a deux sortes de sincérités : la franchise et le cynisme. Savez-vous dans quelle catégorie je range la vôtre ?

Il avait ouvert largement les bras sur l'affirmation générale, levé l'index sur le cynisme et la franchise, et posé la question lentement, avec un hochement de tête, en prenant l'expression de la curiosité la plus vive. Manuel contint son énervement pour répondre d'un ton intentionnellement excédé :

– C'est une question sans intérêt, Monsieur.

Jamais élève ne s'était permis pareille insolence. Mais pourquoi le poussait-on à bout ? A la fin il en avait assez ; qu'on le renvoyât, qu'on lui infligeât toutes les hontes scolaires, mais il ne voulait pas faire le jeu de ce phraseur prétentieux, se donner l'air de ne pas sentir le ridicule de la disproportion de cette mise en scène avec le motif de l'accusation.

Le principal affecta d'ailleurs une recrudescence de calme. Le surveillant eut pour Manuel un regard de reproche qui voulait dire : « A quoi bon aggraver votre cas ? » Le principal haussa les sourcils comme précédemment pour regarder le surveillant. Le surveillant hocha de nouveau la tête avec le même sourire amer, et le principal se retourna vers le coupable.

– C'est une question qui aura de l'intérêt samedi soir à quatre heures. Nous disions donc que vous ne mentez pas ; et vous allez nous expliquer, Monsieur Feracci, avec cette belle franchise qui vous caractérise, vous allez nous expliquer, dis-je, d'une façon nette, ce que vous faisiez cette nuit à deux heures et quart, si je ne me trompe, dans les rues de la vieille ville, au lieu de dormir tranquillement dans la maison de Monsieur votre père, comme tous les garçons sérieux.

Manuel tressaillit. Il n'était pas préparé à une question pareille. Qui donc avait pu l'apercevoir ? Il répondit au bout d'un instant :

– C'est une question qui ne regarde que mon père.

– Et sans doute, avec votre belle franchise, avez-vous prévenu Monsieur votre père de vos fantaisies nocturnes ?

Manuel sacrifia au besoin de se crâner :

– Mon père ne s’occupe pas de bagatelles. Il a une foule d’affaires importantes qui le réclament. Je ne lui parle de mes sorties nocturnes que quand j’ai besoin d’argent.

Mais le principal n’était pas si bête. Il avait vu M. Feracci, l’antiquaire de la rue Magenta, dans le courant de l’après-midi, et s’était renseigné discrètement.

– C’est tout naturel, répondit-il. D’ailleurs, M. Feracci ne serait pas le premier père à se tromper sur son fils. Et maintenant, qu’est-ce que ceci ?

Il avait sorti de son buvard une aquarelle assez tragique exécutée dans le genre de Gross ; on y voyait un Baladier définitivement gâteux affaissé dans un fauteuil rose ; avec les douze poches de sa veste et ses boutons à tête de chien, il semblait personnifier le concept Médiocre sur un mode lourdement badin ; cette impression de frivolité pesante était accrue par un sac de fleurs qu’il tenait entre ses jambes et par une marguerite assez lamentable qu’il effeuillait en soufflant dessus comme la dame de la librairie Larousse ; Mme Vachette, complètement nue, trônait à un comptoir surchargé d’ébénisteries prétentieuses ; des détails cruellement choisis, la déformation du corset, les zébrures des baleines, des couperoses soulignées, un ruban vif autour du cou, faisaient de son corps un nu absolument obscène, avachi, miteux et repoussant. En haut, à plat ventre sur un nuage, un petit Amour jouait du trombone avec componction. Le tout, rehaussé de mauve pâle, de vert acide, et de rose glande, s’intitulait « *Marivaudage* » et se trouvait signé des initiales de Feracci. Il avait réussi à mettre là-dedans tous les dégoûts de notre jeunesse exigeante.

– C’est une caricature que j’ai faite.

– C’est même, si je ne me trompe, la caricature de M. Baladier, dit le principal. Et je ne vous en fais pas mon compliment. Une caricature avec laquelle vous prétendez donner cours à une fable obscène ? une caricature stupide. Vous en êtes fier, n’est-ce pas, Feracci ? Et voilà, ajouta-t-il violemment, voilà ce que je ne saurais souffrir ! Que vous vous permettiez, vous, Feracci, moitié de bachelier, encore mal sec derrière les oreilles, de ridiculiser basement l’un de vos maîtres, un répétiteur qui se montre bon pour vous jusqu’à la faiblesse, de bafouer lâchement un homme qui a conquis à la force du poignet des diplômés auxquels, en prenant ce chemin, vous n’arriverez jamais, petit imbécile, avec

vos airs de dédain déplacés ; un honnête homme qui exerce dignement une profession vénérable entre toutes, celle de l'éducateur, et qui, s'il peut vous faire l'effet d'un être usé, ne soit sa fatigue qu'au travail, à la lassitude de former des gamins ingrats. Ridiculisé par un gosse ! un morveux !

Il répéta plusieurs fois le mot pour bien humilier Manuel.

– Parfaitement, Feracci, un morveux ! Votre orgueil proteste ? Un homme digne de ce nom n'aurait pas eu la bassesse de se livrer au geste que vous avez commis. Si encore vous pouviez vous réclamer de l'art ! Mais vous m'avez l'air d'avoir sur l'art des conceptions aussi saugrenues que votre conduite : vous méprisez le beau pour la pornographie ; j'ai constaté dans votre pupitre la présence d'une demi-douzaine de revues stupides consacrées à l'esthétique de trois ou quatre voyous révolutionnaires venus d'outre-Rhin pour annihiler en France le sens du noble et du beau. Vous ne vous étonnez pas de leur disparition ; je les confisque. Ah ! au nom de l'Art, du vrai, on peut bien des choses ; mais je vous défends d'en parler, pétroleur : vous le souillez. L'art, c'est l'élévation de l'âme, de l'esprit et des sentiments ; ce n'est pas la grossière transcription des instincts les plus bas de l'âme, la provocation au rire le plus vil, à la débauche, à la révolution. Appellerez-vous artistiques ces sales ébauches de peintres stériles qui, incapables de parler aux nobles régions du cœur humain, s'adressent à ce que l'instinct dévié d'un public bolcheviste a de plus ignoble et de plus haineux ? Ces images obscènes et morbides ? La caricature n'est pas de l'art, c'est de l'anarchie. Avant de jouer les artistes, gamin, apprenez à connaître la vie, et méritez d'abord vos diplômes. Mais vous n'en prenez guère le chemin. Que ferez-vous dans l'existence sans votre baccalauréat ? J'en ai connu, de ces créatures lamentables, de ces larves inquiètes, qui passaient leur temps de collègue à fumer aux cabinets et à bafouer leurs maîtres ; ils étaient trois dans ma section ; le premier, après avoir fait faillite, s'est fait sauter la cervelle ; le second plante ses choux misérablement faute de pouvoir accéder aux carrières administratives ; le troisième est devenu antimilitariste ; c'est une pente ; cette pente, vous la prenez. On remarque chez vous depuis quelque temps, Feracci, une tendance à vouloir jouer l'homme fait, à trancher de l'indépendant, de l'esprit supérieur, et à donner le pire exemple à vos camarades sur lesquels votre influence me surprend. On vous rencontre dans les couloirs, les mains dans les poches, vous promenant avec la nonchalance d'un chef de bureau désœuvré ; vous parlez à vos maîtres sur un



ton de négligence impolie ; on vous découvre fumant, jouant aux cartes, dans des cafés, des estaminets louches où je rougirais, moi, homme de quarante ans, de pénétrer. Ne niez pas ; monsieur le juge suppléant vous y a vu. Tout cela va cesser, mon garçon, prenez-en note ; vos petits airs de supériorité insolente ne sont pas de mise ici. Samedi soir, Feracci, à quatre heures vingt, dans ce bureau, vous viendrez comparaître devant le Conseil de Discipline pour répondre de votre sortie nocturne et de votre tenue en ville, de votre lâche insolence envers M. Baladier et de votre attitude à mon égard. Monsieur votre père sera avisé ce soir même ; en attendant, – notez, s’il vous plaît, Monsieur Trottier – vous pouvez vous considérer comme consigné pour dimanche, sans préjudice de ce qui suivra. Allez.

### **Extract 3: ‘Elle avait sur un corps de nageuse une tête étrange et géniale de femme laide’<sup>3</sup>**

Dans le *Querschnitt*, le *Crapouillot* et quelques autres magazines bien illustrés de tendances internationales, on pouvait voir le portrait d’Erna Schnorr, ses lignes nettes, son front bombé, ses lèvres épaisses et ses yeux pâles qui autorisaient à inventer toutes les Scandinavies. On la sentait faite pour habiter des plages nordiques ou des maisons rouges bien astiquées, perdues dans des plaines de neige. Elle avait sur un corps de nageuse une tête étrange et géniale de femme laide ; mais c’était quelque chose de si bien lavé, de si uni, de si frais, de si ferme et de si lisse qu’on ne la désirait pas autrement. Entre la photo d’une équipe d’Oxford et celle de trois écrivains sexagénaires à genoux sur une plage fréquentée, on avait pu voir son chien-loup assis sur un banc du Tiergarten ; on avait pu la voir elle-même, sur la même page qu’un professeur de jiu-jitsu, travaillant un championnat de natation ; elle s’était révélée aussi en blouse blanche, entre un fétiche nègre et un voilier, pareille à une petite infirmière modeste, dans son atelier de Charlottenbourg. Elle avait eu avec Max Schelling, son premier marchand de tableaux, un procès à propos duquel sa caricature avait

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<sup>3</sup> From *Battling* (37-45).

paru dans les journaux littéraires ; bref elle avait défrayé un temps l'information. Elle venait de parvenir, sinon à la popularité, du moins à l'admiration de l'élite professionnelle et à la considération de la critique. Elle peignait un peu dans le genre tôle découpée, ce qui ne l'eût pas distinguée de bien d'autres, mais avec une spontanéité dans l'artificiel qui faisait de ses toiles des choses uniques : une limite périlleuse de l'art, un prodige d'équilibre entre le réel et l'impossible. L'élégance de son dessin et l'étrangeté de ses éclairages surprenaient comme un conte norvégien ; ses visions semblaient venir d'un autre monde ; elle s'était inventé une planète et l'exploitait pour son plaisir. Cette spontanéité enfantine avait séduit un vieux crocodile du commerce, suivi de quelques amateurs, puis la critique avait été conquise. Philipp Carton, chef de l'école souabe, avait renié en son honneur le groupe intellectualiste pour fonder celui du « Miracle Pur » ; Schuhmacher, l'expressionniste, avait cessé de peindre des mains coupées neigeant sur des as de trèfle ; Hartmann le cadet, brûlant ses idoles, avait déclaré dans une interview restée célèbre au Roemer Kaffee qu'il pouvait y avoir prétexte à peinture dans l'épisode aussi bien que dans une pipe impeccablement blanche posée sur équerre irréfutablement bleue, à certaines conditions toutefois qui amenèrent à la définition raisonnée de l'épisodesisme pictural, d'où naquirent les deux écoles de l'Episodesisme Transcendantal et de la Sécession Episodesique. Les spécialistes éloquentes de la peinture parlée discutèrent du constructivisme idéaliste, du psychisme pur, des états plastiques et des vertiges chromatiques de l'interstellarisme anecdotique dans les abreuvoirs les plus fringants. Ce furent de grands jours pour la Couleur. Erna cependant, sans s'inquiéter des substantifs plus ou moins exhaustifs mis en circulation par sa peinture, avait poursuivi son travail. Sa toile des *Enfants du Zodiaque* s'était vendue trente mille marks ; on y voyait au seuil d'une maison misérable deux enfants nus jouant dans la poussière avec un chat, sous un ciel traversé par une voie lactée semblable à un fleuve où les Poissons voguaient brillamment comme des gondoles parallèles. Elle avait fait dans le domaine de la couleur, pour les images de la mythologie et de l'histoire naturelle, ce que Jammes avait réussi pour les vieux magazines dans le domaine de la poésie ; elle avait réalisé le rêve même que l'enfance bâtit en regardant des livres scolaires. Sa réussite, étroite peut-être, mais admirable, autorisait les espoirs des marchands.

C'était environ vers cette époque de sa carrière qu'elle avait débarqué un soir d'été dans notre petite ville pour recueillir l'héritage d'une arrière-grand-tante maternelle, car elle était fille d'une Française dont la famille avait habité autrefois notre pays. Le grand étang qui s'étendait derrière la maison des Contade, cousins et correspondants de Battling, l'avait séduite en vertu de je ne sais quel charme secret qui lui rendait ses eaux particulièrement chères, un souvenir d'enfance peut-être ; elle disait souvent, paraît-il : « Toute poésie vient des eaux. » Celles-là, qui, pour être belles, n'en étaient pas moins assez banales, surent-elles toucher dans son âme une fibre cachée ? Quelque autre raison jouait-elle ? Pour ma part, je n'en ai point connu. Le caprice ? le désir d'une expérience ? Il faut accepter les événements comme ils viennent et les artistes comme ils sont. Les grand-routes étaient si belles, il y avait tant d'espoir dans leurs tournants hardis, tant de mystère et de promesse ; on s'attendait à chaque instant à rencontrer quelque figure allégorique – l'Amour, le Sport, la Vérité –, non point dans un péplum antique, avec des attributs plein les mains, mais superbes, nus, farouches, et tels qu'en ces provinces on peut les voir courant les bois. N'eût-ce été que la Sécurité, la Mesure ... A la rigueur on se serait contenté de la Nostalgie.

Erna Schnorr, l'« épisodiste transcendante », s'était-elle laissée prendre à leur charme exotique ? En avait-elle heurté quelqu'une à la nuit tombante, en se promenant au bord de l'étang ? L'Harmonie, moins coûteuse qu'à Potsdam, la Nostalgie, moins affamée qu'à Nordorney, la Vérité, plus éloquente que dans le *Berliner Tageblatt*, l'avaient peut-être prise au piège. En tout cas, elle était restée. Elle avait loué un appartement chez les Contade ; elle s'y était installée avec sa malle et ses tubes de couleurs ; elle y vivait de salades de légumes et semblait ne point vouloir partir. La petite ville se répandait en hypothèses et en suppositions hardies.

On y disait le plus grand mal de l'étrangère. Contrairement à ce qu'on aurait pu croire, Erna Schnorr en avait souffert beaucoup, car, blasée sur les compliments, l'admiration et la société des raffinés et des excentriques, elle semblait n'attacher de prix qu'à la vie bourgeoise, aux petites choses, aux petites gens, à la considération des fonctionnaires modestes, à l'amitié des marchands au détail ; elle rêvait de la vie banale comme une téléphoniste de sous-préfecture rêve de devenir étoile de cinéma. L'existence bourgeoise lui apparaissait comme une sorte d'idéal impossible, extrêmement extravagant et désirable, réservé à un

petit nombre d'élus difficiles qui méprisent les célébrités. Elle aurait voulu pouvoir de temps en temps broder des coussins avec Mme Rambert, la femme du receveur des postes, sous la suspension du gaz, tandis qu'une odeur de soupe aux poireaux s'échappe par la porte de la cuisine. Pauvre Erna ! Malgré la laideur qu'on lui reconnaissait généreusement, elle représentait dans cette ville un élément si rare et partant si précieux que les mères redoutaient son contact pour leurs grands fils. Les bourgeois semi-cultivés de l'endroit traitaient d'ailleurs couramment de croûtes avec un petit sourire de supériorité des toiles que Cassierer s'assurait d'avance, et les admiratrices de Mme Rivière, la muse départementale, s'entretenaient à son sujet dans un état d'hilarité presque sincère. Le jour où Manuel osa déclarer à sa mère : « Mais elle fait des choses remarquables, Mademoiselle Schnorr ! », Mme Feracci constata d'un ton pincé qu'il y avait des femmes bien intrigantes et qui savaient bien prendre les jeunes gens, que les artistes étaient des gaspilleuses, des bohémiennes et des ménagères pitoyables, qu'elles mettent des manteaux de six mille francs et se nourrissent de pommes de terre en salade, que les garçons sont des nigauds qui se laissent prendre aux belles manières, que les belles manières sont trompeuses et ne font pas les bonnes maisons, que son beau-frère, le rédacteur à la Préfecture de la Seine, avait connu une de ces « actrices » qui était une ancienne laveuse de vaisselle, et qu'elle voyait bien que Manuel n'avait pas d'affection pour ses parents.

Après avoir mis Erna Schnorr en quarantaine, on lui faisait grief d'un isolement qu'on déclarait orgueilleux ; car, si sa qualité d'étrangère lui avait valu dans les premiers temps quelques amitiés enthousiastes à base de curiosité, ces sympathies s'étaient vite transformées en rancunes impitoyables dès qu'on s'était aperçu qu'il n'y avait pas de mystère à percer dans son existence ou qu'elle ne tenait pas à se laisser contrôler. L'atmosphère d'espionnage vigilant que ces dames entretenaient entre elles sous le prétexte de l'amitié les préservait généralement des faux pas qui eussent alimenté plus agréablement leurs conversations ordinaires. Elles n'auraient donc pas été fâchées de voir l'« actrice » tomber dans les rets d'un des soupirants lubriques qu'on lui prêtait charitablement, le juge suppléant, par exemple, ou tel autre dont les activités amoureuses eussent un caractère de vraisemblance pittoresque. Or il y avait déjà près d'un an qu'Erna Schnorr était arrivée dans notre ville quand elle fit une assez grave maladie ; superstitieuse, elle ne voulut consulter que son médecin

d'Allemagne ; elle refusa donc les soins du docteur Barbaragne, ce qui sembla hautement suspect à ces dames, et partit, à peine remise, pour Berlin, où la société de Mme Rivière déclara qu'elle allait secrètement accoucher. Erna se demanda pourquoi tout le monde, au moment de sa maladie, lui avait fait tant de visites ; elle se reprocha d'avoir mal jugé la sincérité de ses anciennes amies ; il avait suffi du malheur pour retrouver leurs sympathies ; elle s'en voulut de la dureté de son cœur, mais n'arriva jamais à comprendre pourquoi tout le monde la félicitait de son embonpoint alors qu'elle avait perdu plusieurs kilos ; c'était un effet naturel de la suggestion entretenue par les mardis de Mme Rivière. Manuel, qui avait trouvé Erna plutôt maigrie un jour qu'elle passait sur la place du Marché, s'attira cette remarque désespérée de sa mère : « Je vois bien que tu es incurable, mon pauvre enfant. » Et Mme Feracci s'épancha le soir même dans le sein de Mme Chaussade en échange de quelques menues doléances sur les frasques du jeune Paul Chaussade qui faisait son droit à Paris. Or ceci se passait vers l'époque où l'on se préoccupait fort, aux mardis de Mme Rivière, de réunir l'unanimité des voix sur le nom d'un coupable pittoresque et où la balance hésitante, après avoir fait bonne mesure à monsieur le juge suppléant, s'appêtait, négligeant le contrôleur des hypothèques, à pencher en faveur du lieutenant de gendarmerie. Manuel devait trancher la question ; un héros d'un âge aussi tendre semblait tout à fait touchant. Mme Chaussade apporta d'ailleurs de la discrétion dans sa méthode ; elle se contenta de répandre le bruit que le jeune homme était un garçon assez dangereux, non point qu'elle affirmât qu'il eût fait de grosses sottises, mais qu'il semblait devoir tenir du tempérament de son oncle Seygrolles, et que chacun – nous sommes entre nous, bien entendu – savait pertinemment que cet oncle Seygrolles courait les cotillons des villages et « faisait des bâtards dans tous les coins », suivant la forte expression de Mme Chasles, la veuve du notaire, qui ne laissait pas son franc-parler au portemanteau. Mme Chasles, fort honnête personne d'ailleurs, mais que son tempérament jovial et sanguin portait à admirer de préférence les virilités prouvées et qui vous eût, en d'autres temps, gaillardement trompé son tabellion avec un capitaine de mousquetaires, en conçut une sorte d'estime pour ce garçon pâle et volontaire dans lequel elle avait plutôt discerné jusque-là le germe d'un anarchiste végétarien ; elle aimait les gens hauts en couleur qui pèchent hardiment avec des femmes robustes, par une sorte de spécialisation traditionnelle, en restant dans le cadre des usages reçus. Mme Chasles, sans nier

toutefois les mérites de Manuel, déclara donc qu'il eût mieux fait, pour son premier combat, « d'aller trousseur la Céline », une belle fille du quartier des Tanneurs qui chantait à l'*Alhambra* – et cette opinion rapportée au jeune homme par des voies anonymes devait d'ailleurs faire du chemin dans son esprit –, mais les autres dames de la ville firent la leçon à leurs filles, de sorte que Manuel et Mlle Schnorr passèrent dans l'opinion de toutes ces demoiselles pour des réprouvés à tenir à l'écart : Manuel jouait le rôle du réprouvé sympathique, Erna Schnorr, la concurrence, le rôle du réprouvé hideux ...

O Erna, debout sur le mur de vigne vierge, à la récréation de quatre heures, pareille, dans le ciel limpide, à la figure de proue de notre espoir...

#### **Extract 4: 'Ses visions semblaient venir d'un autre monde'<sup>4</sup>**

Quand Erna était revenue de Berlin dans la petite ville après son entrevue avec le docteur Meyer-Fehr, elle était bien persuadée qu'elle allait mourir dans la quinzaine. Elle y mettait un entêtement de femme et voulait à toute force se faire enterrer ici. J'ai déjà dit qu'elle considérait l'existence végétative des sous-préfectures comme une chose extravagante, désirable et rare, qu'elle n'avait pas eu la chance de connaître, ayant passé toute sa vie, quoi qu'elle fit pour conserver sa solitude, dans la société d'excentriques, d'aventuriers, de snobs, d'esthètes, de critiques à paradoxes, d'artistes un peu loufoques, de difficiles et de raffinés. Elle voulut se rattraper après sa mort ; elle souhaita de partager au moins dans la tombe la société, le sort moyen, des confiseurs, des chapeliers, des petits fonctionnaires, des commerçants honorables et des receveurs retraités. Le tombeau de Chateaubriand lui fit horreur dans sa solitude orgueilleuse ; elle voulait se caser discrètement parmi des morts au passé médiocre, haïssant jusqu'à l'anonymat qui aurait pu distinguer sa tombe ; là enfin, il faudrait bien qu'elle fût acceptée par la société de la petite ville qui semblait ne pas vouloir d'elle de son vivant ; elle en deviendrait un membre banal dont personne ne parle plus que des autres.

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<sup>4</sup> From *Battling* (97-106).

Un soir donc, elle monta la petite rue triste qui mène vers le cimetière, dans un faubourg mi-ouvrier, mi- paysan, et les commères qui perlaient du tulle sur le pas de leurs portes la regardaient passer par-dessus leurs lunettes en disant : « Y en a qui se promènent... », d'autres : « Faut bien de tout pour faire un monde », d'autres encore : « Les Allemands, vois-tu, ma pauvre, au fond, c'est du monde comme nous. » En approchant du cimetière, on voyait les maisons s'espacer, séparées par de grands paysages gagnés par la première ombre du soir. Sur l'avant-dernière de ces bâtisses, derrière une cour encombrée de blocs de granit et de grosses pierres, elle lut l'enseigne de l'oncle de Manuel : « Victor Feracci, Marbrier, Monuments Funèbres » ; il y avait des lézardes dans le plâtre, et la peinture des lettres s'écaillait ; elle traversa la cour, entra dans un couloir sombre, déboucha dans une deuxième cour, et se trouva brusquement devant la pleine campagne. Il s'en dégageait une atmosphère de douceur sombre, de sauvagerie bienveillante, de haute mélancolie ; on éprouvait l'impression que le temps s'abolissait sur ces pentes, qu'on les avait vues quelque part, en rêve ou dans une vie précédente, qu'elles contenaient le secret indéchiffrable d'un bonheur. On se sentait au bord d'un autre monde, en dehors de l'espace et du temps. Une route descendait jusqu'à une bifurcation blanche, près de laquelle la devanture de Mexico posait une flaque d'or dans le flou. Le soir qui va vite comblait déjà d'ombre les vallées, les cimes devenaient plus énigmatiques et des points s'allumaient dans les creux. L'odeur amère d'un genévrier, le tournant mystérieux d'une route, vous introduisaient brusquement l'âme dans des royaumes inidentifiés. Des personnages qu'on ne trouve décrits dans aucun livre devaient rôder par les domaines avec des costumes de l'ancien temps ; c'était l'heure où les chasseurs de trésor se préparent à partir en campagne, où les hommes charitables qui se dévouent dans des chaumières pour la famille d'un ami mort sentent tout le poids de leur sacrifice, où les garçons qui veillent dans un précipice sur le cadavre d'un camarade voient venir la détresse et la faim : c'était l'heure de la montagne romantique. Pour échapper à ces sortilèges, il fallait mourir de la mort vaniteuse des confiseurs.

La cour était pleine de pierres de taille. À droite, Erna vit un hangar immense crevé par de grandes baies vitrées, pareilles, sur cet horizon, à une galerie de tableaux. Elle entra ; la pénombre était pleine de formes blanches, de croix, de statues, de monuments riches ; Victor Feracci était le marbrier le plus recherché de la ville. Un jeune homme se tenait debout, en blouse blanche, à contre-jour ;

il regardait par une fenêtre ; le bruit des pas le fit se retourner ; il avait des yeux d'Italien, un grand front lisse qui accrocha la lumière au passage ; quand il fut complètement tourné vers elle, elle ne vit plus que sa blouse et ses yeux.

Elle expliqua qu'elle venait pour un tombeau.

– Bien, Madame. J'en parlerai à mon oncle, demain matin.

– Il me faudrait quelque chose en stuc, en albâtre, en marbre et en béton armé ; avec des inscriptions, des dorures, des bas-reliefs et des surcharges, quelque chose d'horriblement prétentieux, des volutes rococo, des fioritures, des coquilles ; c'est pour passer inaperçu. Vous voyez bien ce que je veux dire ? Un tombeau de négociant orgueilleux.

– On pourrait vous faire, dit Manuel en souriant, le modèle numéro un, comme sur la tombe de M. Sauvaize, le gros pépiniériste ?

– Oh ! oui ! comme pour M. Sauvaize, exactement. J'aurais tant voulu épouser un pépiniériste. Ajoutez donc une cage en verre, des urnes en zinc doré avec des fleurs en perles, un prie-Dieu et un arrosoir compliqué.

– Pourquoi pas ? Et une réclame lumineuse ; l'électricien vous arrangera ça.

– Non, répondit-elle avec un sourire ; c'est pour avoir un tombeau pareil à ceux d'ici. Pourriez-vous me le faire ? Assez vite ?

– Pas moi, madame ; mais nous avons ici, j'ose le dire, des ouvriers d'un mauvais goût surprenant ; ils aperçoivent du premier coup la faute à faire, et ils la commettent immédiatement ; c'est un instinct qu'ils ne discutent pas ; aussi on les apprécie beaucoup, on les recherche, et, si vous persistez dans votre idée, vous serez vraiment gâtée ; mais ...

Erna s'était mise d'une façon subite à ressembler étonnamment à son portrait du *Querschnitt*.

– ... Mais est-ce là un tombeau pour Erna Schnorr ?

– Comment me connaissez-vous ? demanda-t-elle.

Cet air renseigné des gens de la petite ville l'agaçait comme un espionnage.

– Par vos portraits du *Querschnitt*.

Tout de même. Ses renseignements ne venaient pas du cru. Il lui déplaisait moins maintenant d'avoir été reconnue par ce garçon qui ressemblait à Bonaparte, en plus maigre ; ce regard fiévreux, ce teint trop pâle ... ; on en ferait peut-être un excellent médium. Décidément, il avait tout à fait la tête de Julius Koerner, le spirite du Cirque Busch ; on pouvait l'utiliser.

– Vous êtes parent de l'antiquaire de la rue Magenta ?



– C’est mon père. Il vous a vendu un Dürer. Il m’a fait voir une reproduction en couleurs de vos *Enfants du Zodiaque*. Vous êtes heureuse de pouvoir faire des choses pareilles.

– La reproduction n’est pas très bonne, dit-elle.

Les valeurs sont un peu perdues. Et puis, maintenant, j’ai des toiles plus belles. Vous viendrez les voir si vous voulez.

– Merci, Mademoiselle.

Elle le dévisageait avec curiosité, sans gêne, à la fois comme un lézard dans une vitrine et comme une excellente occasion. Une Française, à sa place, aurait eu l’air coquette ou effrontée ; chez elle on avait plutôt l’impression d’une curiosité scientifique jointe à un plaisir enfantin. Manuel fut un peu gêné ; il tourna le bouton électrique pour se donner une contenance. Le hangar, subitement nettoyé des richesses de son clair-obscur, prit une allure pauvre et rigide ; Erna Schnorr, au milieu de ces pierres froides, procurait une sensation de luxe, d’élasticité, de bonne odeur ; il songea aux danseuses en fourrures qui viennent voir Charlot dans la cabane du chercheur d’or.

Ils n’avaient en somme plus rien à dire, et cependant elle restait là ; Manuel sentit qu’autre chose commençait. Que fallait-il dire, ou faire, pour n’avoir pas l’air trop nigaud ? À tout hasard, et bien que cette commande de tombeau ne lui parût pas bien sérieuse, il déclara pour meubler le silence :

– Si vous permettez, Mademoiselle, je passerai jeudi prochain dans l’après-midi pour vous donner la réponse de mon oncle et vous proposer les modèles qu’il pourrait faire exécuter.

– C’est entendu.

La lumière éclairait dans un coin quatre rayons de bois de sapin garnis de statuettes en terre cuite et de bustes en pâte à modeler. Erna les regarda avec intérêt.

– C’est amusant, ces choses-là, dit-elle. C’est votre oncle qui les fait ?

– Non, répondit Manuel, c’est moi, Madame.

Il était gêné qu’un œil étranger pénétrât dans l’intimité de ses imaginations sculpturales, mais flatté du sourire d’Erna. Ces statuettes étaient destinées à amuser les camarades ; il y avait là les caricatures du principal, du sous-préfet, un père Ubu traité en forme de pingouin, des animaux fantastiques modelés d’une façon géométrique, des licornes, une Salomé serpentine dansant pour un

Hérode mafflu, tout un petit monde assez extravagant et burlesque dont la fantaisie réaliste amusait Erna.

– Les Français ont l’imagination plastique, affirma-t-elle. Quel est celui-là ?

– C’est le père Ubu.

– Qui est-ce ?

– Un professeur de physique qui a occupé le trône de Pologne, déclara-t-il en souriant. Un monsieur fantasque, sanguinaire et complètement tapé. Un personnage légendaire ; comme Don Quichotte, si vous voulez.

C’est le fétiche de la classe.

– Ah ! fit-elle. Il est charmant.

Elle caressa le ventre du père Ubu qui était lisse comme un monstre marin.

– Je l’ai aussi en lampe électrique.

Il alla prendre l’Ubu électrique sur un rayon ; l’Ubu électrique soutenait de son bras-nageoire un parapluie de soie rouge qui formait abat-jour et une tête piriforme qui distribuait la lumière à travers de gros yeux loufoques. Erna éteignit les lampes du plafond. Ils restèrent dans le clair-obscur fantastique sous la surveillance transcendante du père Ubu qui s’arrondissait sous son parapluie comme une grenouille.

– Faites-moi cadeau de la lampe, dit Erna, je vous donnerai une aquarelle.

– Oh ! merci, fit Manuel.

Il était heureux de cet échange qui le liait à l’étrangère dont il admirait les œuvres et à laquelle il était reconnaissant du tour amical que prenait la conversation. Erna regardait une ébauche.

– C’est le monument de M. Barat, expliqua Manuel. Un ancien élève du collège ; il a fait fortune aux Îles, dans le cacao, et en mourant il a légué un gros capital à l’hospice et fondé un prix de philosophie pour les élèves du collège, une médaille d’argent dont le modèle est déjà accepté : d’un côté les grands établissements Barat, comme sur les vignettes de ses boîtes, avec des perspectives truquées, et de l’autre Barat en buste, avec un casque colonial et une grande barbe, prêt à attester que ses produits sont les meilleurs ; une inscription en auréole : « Honneur à la Philosophie ». C’est Chougoueyrand, le sculpteur, qui a établi la maquette ; le Conseil municipal était complètement emballé. On va dédier à Barat, pour le remercier de ses générosités, un petit monument sur la Grand-Place et une rue Emile Barat. Le monument a été mis au concours, et c’est encore Chougoueyrand qui aura la commande, parce qu’il

pratique la « sculpture psychologique », c'est son bateau. Moi, j'ai fait cette maquette pour m'amuser : le socle, ce sera une belle boîte de cacao, fidèle comme une photographie-réclame ; et là-dessus un Barat en pagne faisant des haltères avec deux autres boîtes plus petites ; en les creusant, ça pourra donner un candélabre à la gloire du cacao. Si j'avais eu un modèle, j'aurais peut-être essayé de concourir sérieusement ; quelque chose d'allégorique, bien que ce soit en général un peu fade ; mais une belle négresse, assez stylisée... ; mon père a des masques magnifiques qui m'auraient aidé... ; et des bas-reliefs avec des choses tropicales ; il y a de jolis motifs dans les fruits exotiques. Mais pour trouver des modèles ici, des négresses ! et même des blanches !

– Pourquoi pas ? dit Erna qui le laissait aller sans l'interrompre ; quand on est joli garçon...

Elle l'avait regardé bien en face. Il s'imagina que, si elle avait mis une arrière-pensée dans ses paroles, elle l'aurait regardé hypocritement ; il n'osa donc pas répondre comme à une provocation. Il rougit un peu, embarrassé, et laissa la question sur le plan professionnel en se reprochant de n'avoir même pas su trouver quelque chose d'aimable à dire.

– Pas de modèle, c'est bien gênant ; je suis forcé, pour m'en tirer, de tourner la difficulté en faisant une caricature, comme cette Salomé que je n'aurais pas voulue humoristique. J'ai bien été obligé.

– Il faut travailler, dit-elle. Quand je pense au temps que j'ai perdu ! Il y a longtemps que vous modelez ?

– Je suis toujours venu m'amuser dans l'atelier de mon oncle. Mais il n'y a rien à y apprendre.

– Vous viendrez chez moi, dit-elle. Je vous ferai connaître Stelle. Il vous donnera des conseils.

Qu'Erna Schnorr le traitât sur ce ton amical, Manuel en restait émerveillé. La laideur, ou plutôt l'étrangeté du visage de la Berlinoise, avait complètement disparu ; et puis était-elle vraiment laide ? Dans la lumière confuse que répandait le père Ubu, elle apparaissait mystérieuse, douce, luxueuse et parfaite ; Manuel songeait à l'*Invitation* de Baudelaire. Et peut-être ne lui déplaisait-il pas que le poète eût songé à parler du luxe en même temps que de l'amour. Manuel avait à Marseille des cousins bruns, avec de longs cils noirs, qui se promenaient dans des automobiles silencieuses et qui lui avaient un peu parlé

de la vie ; les dames remarquaient leurs profils d'imperators, leur nonchalance et leurs mains fines... Maintenant, il ne se sentait plus gêné.

– La rue est pleine de trous, Mademoiselle ; permettez-moi de vous accompagner.

Il ordonnait déjà.

– Mais bien sûr !

Il enleva sa blouse, se lava les mains et ils partirent. Le lendemain, cette promenade inoffensive constituait un scandale public.

## Résumé

### Portraits du soi de l'artiste : *Battling le ténébreux* d'Alexandre Vialatte en traduction

Alexandre Vialatte (1901-1971) se définissait de son vivant comme « notoirement méconnu ». Les ambiguïtés de l'écrivain-traducteur l'ont relégué en marge de la littérature française, mais elles suscitent de façon paradoxale une attention critique modeste. Son premier roman *Battling le ténébreux ou la mue périlleuse* (1928) – roman d'apprentissage peu étudié et encore inédit en anglais – incarne parfaitement la qualité inclassable de l'auteur. Cette thèse se concentre sur le fait que Vialatte était traducteur ; elle avance l'hypothèse qu'une rencontre précaire entre les cultures française et allemande façonne *Battling* et, en parallèle, elle examine l'idée d'une identité « en traduction ». À ce titre, nous adoptons une « lecture traductionnelle » du texte où la pratique de la traduction (vers l'anglais) alimente une étude littéraire. En raison de la nature interdisciplinaire de la traduction, nous nous appuyons non seulement sur la traductologie, mais aussi sur la littérature comparée, la création littéraire et les études féministes, afin de donner corps à un espace polyphonique et créatif entre sujets et cultures. Notre analyse du texte porte sur la « mue périlleuse » du héros moderniste et s'organise autour de deux rencontres intersubjectives : tandis que le protagoniste du roman rencontre son objet de désir (une femme allemande) et se trouve déstabilisé, le traducteur rencontre l'écrivain pour problématiser le texte original. À travers ces deux affrontements, nous bouleversons les dichotomies de soi et autre, original et traduction, pour finalement imaginer une identité plurielle et éthique en traduction.

**Mots-clés** : traduction, identité, soi, autre, féminisme, modernisme, créativité

## Abstract

### Portraits of the Artist's Self: Translating Alexandre Vialatte's *Battling le ténébreux*

Alexandre Vialatte's (1901-1971) self-proclaimed label – 'notoirement méconnu' – continues to define him today. The writer-translator's incongruities have relegated him to the margins of the French literary canon yet paradoxically attract a modest academic following. His first novel *Battling le ténébreux ou la mue périlleuse* (1928) – a little-studied and currently untranslated coming of age tale – exemplifies the rich placelessness that defines the author. This thesis contextualises *Battling* in light of Vialatte's position as translator. It suggests the text is informed by an uneasy encounter between French and German cultures and geographies and, in parallel, it investigates the very notion of an identity 'in translation'. This thesis adopts a translational approach whereby my own process translating *Battling* into English frames a literary study of the text. Given the multifaceted nature of translation, such an approach is interdisciplinary: it draws not only from translation studies (both theory and practice), but also from comparative literature, creative writing, and feminist studies, to map a polyphonous and multifaceted space between subjects and cultures. The analysis centres on the modernist hero's 'mue périlleuse', or coming of age, and structures itself around two intersubjective encounters; as Vialatte's protagonist meets his foreign and feminine Other to find insecurity, translator meets writer to problematise the original text. Through these two encounters, this thesis works to unsettle the binaries of self and other, original and translation, to ultimately present a plural and ethical identity in translation.

**Key words**: translation, identity, self, other, feminism, modernism, creativity

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