

## Evisceration: Exposing Internal Spaces in *La curée*

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Émile Zola's novel *La curée* (published in 1871 and commonly translated as *The Kill*) denounces the commercialism of the French Second Empire through the character of Aristide Saccard, who gained significant wealth as a result of his financial speculation of Haussmann's renovation of Paris. The novel is also a criticism of social manners, as it follows the decline of Saccard's wife Renée, who, like a modern Phaedra, has an affair with her stepson. As Zola notes in his preface to *La curée*, it "resounds with gold and flesh."<sup>1</sup> However, the constant references to the destruction of Paris also extend the significance of the novel and, as Jann Matlock notes, the Commune is a haunting presence throughout.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter will explore the way in which Zola integrates his condemnation of the defeat of the Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent civil war (the Commune) — which in his view

<sup>1</sup> "la note de l'or et de la chair" Zola's preface to the first edition cited by Jean Borie, Émile Zola, *La curée* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio classique, 1999), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Jann Matlock, "Everyday Ghosts: Zola's *La curée* in the Shadow of the Commune, 1871–72," *Romanic Review* 102, nos. 3–4 (2011): 321–47.

were a result of the politics of the Second Empire — with his reflections on family, womanhood and, more importantly, on sterility.<sup>3</sup> *La curée* is a novel about the violation of internal spaces, from the female womb to the household. Saccard's fortune is based firstly on the rape of Renée, since it is because of her ensuing pregnancy that she is given to him in marriage, and secondly on the back of Paris's symbolic pillage (*sac*) by the speculators. The initial violation recurs incessantly throughout the novel in symbolic form: on the level of the nation (invasion), the city (demolition), the family unit (destruction via incest), and motherhood (negated via sterility). To illustrate this, Zola develops two metaphors for the public exposure of private/internal space: the glasshouse and evisceration. In both cases, something that was formerly internal has been exposed as a criticism of the Second Empire's transgression of family values.

Whether through the feminized descriptions of disembowelled buildings or the flowers in a glasshouse depicted as sex organs — *La curée* extracts the female entrails and puts them on display.<sup>4</sup> These entrails represent both the internal parts of the belly and the reproductive organs, and, by metonymy, children (in French, children are referred to as the "fruits of entrails"). Torn from the body, exposed entrails become the symbol of aborted pregnancies.<sup>5</sup> In this context, the word "exposure" is understood in the sense of sacrifice.

3 Although a direct consequence of the Franco-Prussian war, the Commune, which took place from March 18 to May 28, 1871, was an armed conflict amongst the French.

4 Flowers are sexual organs. This is emphasized in *La curée*'s fourth chapter, when the plants are the screens into which the lovers are projecting their desire. Zola concludes this highly suggestive scene by saying that "It was the boundless copulation of the Hothouse" (Émile Zola, *The Kill*, trans. Brian Nelson [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008], 159).

5 While in *La curée* the image of the eviscerated woman is hinted at, the theme of the "flanc troué dans sa fécondité" is given full rein in *La terre*. The pregnant Françoise is killed by her sister by the blow of a scythe to her belly. See Émile Zola, *Les Rougon-Macquart: Histoire naturelle et sociale d'une famille sous le second Empire*, vol. 4, *La terre* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992), 1043.

In this chapter, a brief description of the figure of the bad mother and of women as exotic, sterile flowers is followed by an analysis of the way in which, by transforming Paris and Renée into "anatomical Venuses" (life-sized dolls with removable internal organs), the metaphor of evisceration is integral to the dialectic of violence and defiance, vis-à-vis the corrupted intimacy of the female body during the Second Empire.

In *La curée*, Zola condemns those Parisian women who leave their homes for the pleasures of public life. This movement of private life towards the public arena is a transgression of family values that leads to the increase in the number of bad mothers. The figure of the bad mother is typically outlined in three ways: the woman who neglects the education of her children; the woman who refuses to have children; and, the mother who aborts or gives birth to physically or mentally deformed children.<sup>6</sup> All these women, the potential mothers of the future nation, are considered by the nation to be sterile, in real or metaphorical terms, since a child who is raised poorly, sick, disabled or not born at all is of no social value.<sup>7</sup> These anxieties are embodied in the character of Renée, whose main crime is being the representative of aborted motherhood (another form of transgression because she does not fulfill her destiny of becoming a

<sup>6</sup> This corruption of the notion of motherhood was certainly considered to be the worst. Since 1865, the ruling classes had been concerned about the declining birth rate in France. "The nation is in danger!" (Catherine Rollet-Echalier, *La politique à l'égard de la petite enfance sous la IIIe République* [Paris: PUF, 1990], 109) exclaimed Doctor Boudet, echoing the Legislative Assembly's declaration in July 1792 in the face of the Austro-Prussian invasion. The concept of the nation, the fatherland, links the political community with its genealogy. The decline in the birth rate has ideological, political and demographic consequences, since the survival of the nation is at stake. During the Third Republic, the public authorities intervened much more in the private domain, as testified by numerous legal texts, parliamentary reports and works on social welfare (for a study into the birth rate in France during this period see *ibid.*, 27–67). Zola's work represents such concerns, which were exacerbated by the debacle of 1871. Zola's anxiety was mingled with another fear, that of the degeneration of the species, hence his concern with the mother that aborts.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, 122.

good mother). The act of rape to which she is victim and which leads to a miscarriage corresponds to the symbolic rape, at the end of the novel, which destroys the figure of woman as nature incarnate, that is, the mother, thus leading to the miscarriage of society.<sup>8</sup> Sterile, Renée is defiled and an agent of corruption: she is a monster.

In *La curée*, the woman as monster takes an apparently unexpected form — a horticultural hybrid of an exotic hothouse flower. However, at the time, it was a common metaphor. Just a few years after *La curée* was published, Edmond Texier summed up the anxieties of the period with regards to maternity and the female body by saying that the human species is becoming corrupted, metamorphosed, and losing its qualities.<sup>9</sup> Texier then compares women's appearances to a greenhouse and women's rotten intimacy (sex, womb) to a clinic (i.e., a disease).<sup>10</sup> The environment stigmatized by Texier is that of the great industrial town, constructed and directed by a bourgeoisie obsessed with money and appearances, and of which the greenhouse has become the symbol. By extension, the greenhouse becomes a common metaphor for describing an unhealthy artificial environment, a transparent environment that negates the possibility of intimacy.

There are numerous expressions during the Second Empire based on the image of the "hothouse." A "hothouse atmosphere" is used to evoke an intense and sensual atmosphere. An emotion that was "raised in a hothouse" is one that had developed in an exaggerated and over-indulgent way. "Living in a hothouse" implied someone living the life of a recluse. Women described as

8 Chapter 6, Renée has an epiphany about her condition and what happened to her. She realizes how her husband, Maxime and society have used her, have stripped her of everything. She looks at herself in a mirror and repeatedly asks herself the rhetorical question "who, then, has stripped her naked?" (Zola, *The Kill*, 240).

9 Edmond-Auguste Texier, *Les femmes et la fin du monde* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1877), iii.

10 "Ce monde féminin qui par ces côtés superficiels a l'air d'une serre chaude, par son intimité profonde et gangrenée est une clinique" (ibid.).

"hothouse flowers" and "hothouse atmosphere" were the most commonly used expressions. For Texier, the main problem is the destruction of the private, protected from the outside, household. Paris and the urban environment do not escape the comparison. The greenhouse is culture against nature, town against countryside. Paris appears as a greenhouse whose greenspaces are now little more than an artificial nature. Such an artificial space can only render unnatural the beings who live and grow there. Here, the fear of the species' degeneration is symbolized by a system founded on botanical metaphors: the greenhouse is the corrupting environment while the hybrid exotic flower represents the degenerated, denatured species. The greenhouse, a corrupted society, women as sterile flowers — Texier continues to develop in his essay a network of metaphors around the figure of the bad mother already in bloom in Zola's novel.

Indeed, in order to portray the desertion of the domestic setting for the public arena, Zola makes use of these horticultural metaphors. The emphasis on flowers as sexual organs and as a metonymy for women's sexuality grew with Linnaeus openly discussing the sexuality of plants. It continued to develop due to the passion for exotic flowers during the Second Empire. Those horticultural hybrids, which are paradoxically sterile, resemble enlarged genitals (natural plants are often a lot smaller and less colorful) and therefore make the sexual analogy even more ostensible.<sup>11</sup> During the same period, as demonstrated by Naomi Schor, post-revolutionary literature reveals a fear of the female body and of the sexual energy that it generates.<sup>12</sup> To ward off this energy, the author either has to make the female body disincarnate, Chateaubriand's allegorical woman, or make it hyper-

11 For more details see Aude Campmas, "Les fleurs de serre: entre science et littérature à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle," in *Visions/Revisions: Essays on Nineteenth-Century French Culture*, eds. N. Harkness, P. Rowe, T. Unwin and J. Yee (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003), 49–61.

12 Naomi Schor, "Triste Amérique: Atala and the Postrevolutionary Construction of Woman," in *Rebel Daughters: Women and the French Revolution*, eds. Sara E. Melzer and Leslie W. Rabine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 139–56.

incarnate, as with Zola's woman as animal (for example Nana). In both cases, there is a sort of "de-corporalization" that neutralizes the woman's body.

The post-Linnaean floral metaphor also contributes to the disembodiment of the female. It allows sexuality to be referred to in the form of euphemism: the young girl waiting for marriage in the same way as the flower awaits the bee. Towards the end of the century, with a sort of metaphorical zeal, the flower-sex becomes almost pornographic, loses its innocence and this over-sexualization is related to the loss of fertility, which has almost certainly to be considered as a denunciation of the dissolute morals of certain women in society, and as fear of the degeneration, or ultimate extinction, of the human race, a fear exacerbated by the debacle of 1870. In this period, there was a flowering of plant life which can be read as a metonymy of the woman reduced to a deadly sexual organ. The prime example is the vegetal *vagina dentata* of Huysmans's *À rebours* (*Against Nature*, 1884). An obvious pastiche of the descriptions in *La curée*, it reveals something that was merely embryonic in Zola's novel. In Chapter VIII of *À rebours*, the main character, Des Esseintes, having just contemplated an abundance of exotic plants bought from local horticulturists, succumbs to a nightmare, a hallucinatory vision of a woman as flower and virus:

He made a superhuman effort to free himself from the embrace, but with an irresistible gesture she held him in her arms, seizing hold of him, and he saw, his face haggard, the wild *Nidularium* blossoming between her upraised thighs, opening wide its sword-shaped petals above the bloody interior.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 81.

Although the center of the *Nidularium* looks generally like a flower, it is in fact a rosette of red bracts reminiscent of a vulva.<sup>14</sup> The Latin name given to this false flower, *nidularium* (from *nidus*, nest), implicitly emphasizes this shape. The scarlet leaves, rigid and serrated, add the final touch to the analogy of the vagina armed with teeth — all the more so since the word bract is borrowed from the Latin *bractea* meaning “metal leaf.” The reference to “sabre blades [*lames de sabre*],” a military paraphrase of *bractea*, reveals that Huysmans was in fact aware that this flower was not a flower at all, and therefore could not bear fruit. This real yet false exotic and aggressive flower is the grotesque archetype of the monstrous woman-flower that can be found in the literature of the Second Empire. For Zola, the dracaenas with their shiny blade-like leaves, the caladiums’ bloody caresses and the hibiscus flowers all foreshadow Huysmans’s *Nidularium*: “They resembled, it might have been imagined, the eager, sensual mouths of women, the red lips, soft and moist, of some colossal Messalina, bruised by kisses, and constantly renewed, with their hungry, bleeding smiles.”<sup>15</sup>

There are two other plants with which Renée is associated and which exemplify this fear of (unfertile) female sexuality. The first is the Chinese hibiscus, a sterile hybrid. The second is the poisonous tanghin of Madagascar (*Tanghinia venenifera*), which had an infamous reputation at the time. In 1872, the year of the publication of *La curée*, Blanchard described it in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*.<sup>16</sup> The tree was used to “establish” the guilt of a person when there were not enough proofs to condemn her/him. For this purpose, the poisonous seeds of the tree were absorbed by the accused. If he/she died, he/she was pronounced guilty; if he/she resisted the poison, he/she was considered innocent. When understanding her desire for Maxime, Renée absorbs some of the tree’s leaves, establishing a form of transcen-

<sup>14</sup> A bract is an intermediary between leaf and petal, differing generally from the leaf in both form and color.

<sup>15</sup> Zola, *The Kill*, 38.

<sup>16</sup> Émile Blanchard, “L’île de Madagascar,” *Revue des Deux Mondes* 101, Second Period, 42nd Year (Sep. 1, 1872): 204–20.

dental guilt. "Renée, her mind wandering, her mouth dry and parched, took between her lips a sprig of the tanghin tree that was level with her mouth, and sank her teeth into one of its bitter leaves."<sup>17</sup> As a degenerate, sterile woman, Renée is culpable in the eyes of society.

The flower is also considered monstrous because, like the anatomical Venus, it hides nothing and therefore denies the possibility of a reassuring interior. Dagonet reminds us that, according to the Ancients, the flowers exhibit their sexuality. Furthermore, no parts or organs are enveloped by other parts.<sup>18</sup> This image of the "indecent" flower fits with the idea of the exotic vegetation that channels all the fears and fantasies linked to the unknown, the untamed wildness of virgin forests, which at that time were considered places of unfettered primitive energy.

The environment in which these flowers develop is of fundamental importance. The hothouse, like the glass coffins and the eviscerated buildings leaves the interior on show. Worse still, the distinction between the outside and inside is blurred and with it the natural order. The glasshouse enables nature to invade domestic spaces. The phenomenon becomes noticeable from the beginning of the nineteenth century, reaching its height during the Second Empire. In 1805, during a visit to the house of an aristocrat, a naturalist returning from Vienna with Napoleon's army was surprised to find some non-native species normally too tender to survive the European climate. Until then, he had only seen such plants in hothouses in botanical gardens, or in their natural habitat.

Bory de Saint-Vincent's account is one of first descriptions of private, urban hothouses. It is contemporaneous with the first sales of glasshouses for domestic use and is therefore a useful point of reference. From an ecological point of view, these collections represent groups of plants that would be impossible in the wild. For an amateur botanist, the flowerbeds in the hothouse combine, in defiance of lines of longitude, elements

<sup>17</sup> Zola, *The Kill*, 40.

<sup>18</sup> François Dagonet, *Le catalogue de la vie* (Paris: PUF, 1970), 30.



that in nature would be separated by thousands of miles. Bory de Saint-Vincent describes this artificial "other-world" to his friend Leon Dufour, saying that he plans to sketch the "enchanted land" and then send a report of it to the botanical institute and the Jardin des Plantes.<sup>19</sup> For the naturalist, the greenhouse is an "enchanted land" reminiscent of the foreign places he has visited in the past, although Bory de Saint-Vincent does not refer to any specific geographical location. The reproduction of a generic tropical climate, rather than a defined place, is sufficient to ensure the survival of species originating from geographical areas that, in reality, are very far apart.

The originality of this environment, which lacks any definition, since it aims to create an average tropical climate, produces a strange impression; it defies geographical differences, but also rejects the distinction between internal and external space. The greenhouse is elsewhere, "other-worldly," both here and now, and yet nowhere in particular. The plants in this artificial habitat look natural: e.g., the coconut palms grow as in the Tropics. The greenhouse seems to be a place that is utopian yet real, and in which — although it is possible to distinguish between the here and there, the native from the non-native — the distinction between nature and culture is necessarily blurred.<sup>20</sup> However, glasshouses are not so much homes for flowers as hospitals for exotic plants. The routine of daily care protects a plant life that is both artificial and fragile, since it depends on this environment, and yet vivid and flamboyant because it has been forced, it is "a true work of art."<sup>21</sup>

19 Jean Baptiste Bory de Saint-Vincent, "Lettre à Léon Dufour, Vienne décembre 1805," in *Correspondance de Bory de Saint-Vincent*, ed. Philippe Lauzun (Agen: Maison d'édition et d'imprimerie moderne, 1908), 93.

20 See Michel Serres, *Jouvences sur Jules Verne* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1974), 151.

21 John Claudius Loudon and Charles Joseph Hullmandel, *The Green-house Companion: Comprising a General Course of Green-house and Conservatory Practice throughout the Year: A Natural Arrangement of all the Green-house Plants in Cultivation: With a Descriptive Catalogue of the Most Desirable to Form a Collection, Their Proper Soils, Modes of Propagation, Management, and References to Botanical Works in Which They Are Figured: Also, the*

During the early years of the century, this aspect had not been truly recognized, although the seeds were there. What Bory de Saint-Vincent observes, and which would be substantiated throughout the nineteenth century, is the osmosis between exotic vegetation and women in the private space:

Among others, I remember the boudoir of the countess C [...] whose sofa was surrounded by jasmine twining around daturas planted in soil, all on the first floor. It was reached from the bedroom by passing through thickets of African heathers, hydrangeas, camellias, then quite uncommon, and other prized shrubs, planted in beds bordered with violets, all colors of crocus, hyacinths and other flowers edged with grass. On the other side was the bathroom, elegantly placed under glass where papyrus and iris grew around the marble basin and the water pipes.<sup>22</sup>

The private life of women flourished amongst the plants. Since the Napoleonic Code was established (1804), women, like hot-house flowers, were beings that had to be protected and confined within interior spaces. Since public spaces were out of bounds, it is not surprising that the glasshouse, a controlled environment to thrive in, became the ultimate feminine space. Woman is nature: the glasshouse is nature controlled by man. Throughout the century, glasshouses became increasingly common and reached the height of popularity during Napoleon III's reign. The number of horticultural magazines, specialized dictionaries, and horticultural and glasshouse catalogues are evidence of this great public enthusiasm.<sup>23</sup> Monique Eleb-Vidal

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*Proper Treatment of Flowers in Rooms, and Bulbs in Water Glasses* (London: Printed for Harding, Triphook, and Lepard and John Harding, 1824), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Arthur Mangin, *Histoire des jardins chez tous les peuples, depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'à nos jours* (Tours: Alfred Mame et fils, 1883), 422.

<sup>23</sup> Glasshouses were erected in private houses. According to the catalogue of the Musée Nationale d'Histoire Naturelle, forty or so works were published between 1845 and 1900, for example, G. Delchevalerie, *Plantes de serre chaude et tempérée, constructions des serres, cultures, multiplications, etc.* (Paris: Li-

and Anne Debarre-Blanchard observe how the conservatory is as important for women as the drawing room or the boudoir. It is also a sign of upper-class status.<sup>24</sup>

The conservatory where Princess Mathilde, Napoleon III's cousin, held her famous *salon-serre*, was considered one of the high places of the Second Empire. The Goncourts described it thus: "With her somewhat barbaric taste, the Princess has scattered, amidst the most beautiful exotic plants in her *serre*, all sorts of furniture from every country, every period, every color and shape. It has the strangest appearance of a bric-à-brac in a rainforest."<sup>25</sup> It is not surprising then that, in *La curée*, the glass-house, frequented mostly by women, should become a metaphor for female intimacy, an unexplored, wild space.

Woman, flowers and botany are therefore at the heart of a network of associations leading towards a reflection on the hybrid, whose uncertain nature connects science and literature in texts that are themselves an amalgam. A composite monster, but also alive and very real, the sterile hybrid becomes the sign that foreshadows the decadence of modern society. In a context in which the culture of plant hybrids is seen as a perversion of the laws of nature (the sterility of the created species being proof in-

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brairie agricole de la Maison rustique, 1869); Jean-Baptiste-Louis Letellier, *Flore universelle: Plantes d'orangerie, de serres froide et tempérée* (Paris: 108 rue du faubourg Saint-Martin, 1851); Édouard Morren, *Plantes de serres: Exposition universelle, 1867, Paris* (Paris: Imprimerie et Librairie Administratives de Paul Dupont, 1867); and, Paul-Émile de Puydt, *Traité théorique et pratique de la culture des plantes de serre froide, orangerie et serre tempérées des jardiniers, précédé de notions pratiques de physiologie végétale et de physique horticole, et de conseils pour la construction des différentes serres* (Brussels: E. Tarlier, 1860). For more on this phenomenon see Monique Eleb-Vidal and Anne Debarre-Blanchard, *Architectures de la vie privée, maisons et mentalités, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*. Brussels: Archives d'architecture moderne éditions, 1989.

<sup>24</sup> Eleb-Vidal and Debarre-Blanchard, *Architectures de la vie privée*, 270–71. They quote Léonce Reynaud, *Traité d'architecture* (Paris: Dunod, 1863), 530–32.

<sup>25</sup> Edmond et Jules de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, Vol. 2, 25 décembre 1867 (Paris: Fasquelle et Flammarion, 1956). 391.

deed that hybridization goes against nature), the woman/flower is the ideal vehicle for anxieties about safeguarding heredity.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, man was considered an evolving species. Realization of this led to new ways of imagining man and woman, and reinforcing others. Built on the legacy of Christian tradition, woman was still the mother of all evils and thought to pass on these evils to future generations, but also now in a biological sense. She was responsible for the degradation of the species, either by passing on degenerate traits or because she refused to have children at all. The fear that the human species would fall into decline is symbolized by a system based on botanical metaphor. The greenhouse is the corrupting environment, while the exotic flower hybrid represents a degenerate and altered species. This monstrosity in plant form plays on the distinctions between external and internal spaces. This distinction is also consubstantial to the anatomical Venuses, which are the second metaphor about the anxiety generated by reproduction and the female body.<sup>26</sup>

In *La curée*, this criticism of the sterile woman and the desertion of family values and its consequences for the nation extends to the whole city, and the symbolic evisceration of women corresponds to the very real destruction of the buildings during Haussmann's public works program. The title of the novel is already an indication as to the significance of the notion of evisceration. In hunting, when the stag is killed, the *curée* is the moment when the intestines are given to the hunting dogs. According to tradition, the spoils are covered with a cloth before being revealed to the pack. This ritual is of primordial importance since it celebrates the act of evisceration, when that which was hidden inside the animal is exposed to view. *La curée* is founded on this violent act of exposure and appropriation.<sup>27</sup> In

<sup>26</sup> These flowers in the form of sexual organs form part of the fantasy of nature revealing itself before the scientist.

<sup>27</sup> Note that, during the Third Republic, the term is used to describe the Prussian invasion, the siege of Paris and the Commune. See, for example, Catulle Mendès, *Les 73 journées de la Commune (du 18 mars au 29 mai 1871)* (Paris: Lachaud, 1871), 284.

the very beginning of the novel, Saccard uses hunting terms in a powerful evocation of the violence suffered by the city: "There lay his fortune, in the cuts that his hand had made in the heart of Paris, and he had resolved to keep his plans to himself, knowing very well that when the spoils were divided there would be enough crows hovering over the disemboweled city."<sup>28</sup> His vision of the city as a body to be conquered, but also cut open, is close to that of Baron Haussmann, who says in his memoirs that he wanted to eviscerate the older quarters of Paris.<sup>29</sup> The choice of the term emphasizes the fact that the desire to explore the interior of the buildings is akin to the desire to explore inside the human body.

The evisceration that allows the internal spaces, that until then had been hidden from view, to be seen, draws on an erotic and morbid curiosity, similar to that which led to the foundation of museums of anatomy during the same period. In Chapter VII, the Board of Inquiry, which was inspecting the demolition site near the Place du Château d'eau (now Place de la République), included, amongst others, a doctor and a manufacturer of surgical instruments. The group is very excited by the sight of the "pallid entrails" or "pale insides" (*entrailles blafardes*).<sup>30</sup> During the inspection, which has all the appearance of a bawdy day out, the first anecdote to be told by one of the members is of his romantic memories on seeing the walls of his old bedroom. The eviscerated building immediately triggers the memory of a woman's belly. Then there is mention of Louis XV and his private parties, causing titillation among the visitors as they stand amidst the ruins of the "follies [*petites maisons*]."<sup>31</sup> During the visit, Saccard says that "You can look as long as you like, the ladies are gone," but for these gentlemen, in the midst of these vast eviscerated buildings, such women are their sole preoccu-

<sup>28</sup> Zola, *The Kill*, 70.

<sup>29</sup> Georges Eugène Haussmann, *Mémoires du Baron Haussmann*, Vol. 1 (Paris: V. Havard, 1890), 257.

<sup>30</sup> Zola, *The Kill*, 247; *La curée*, 319.

<sup>31</sup> In Louis XV's reign these "*petites maisons*" were places where private parties were held.

pation.<sup>32</sup> Their pleasure in observing the innards of the buildings is connected to the pleasure of opening up or penetrating the body. A whole set of connections — the doctor, the eviscerated city/body, the surgical instruments, sexuality and, above all, the second part of the chapter which, after the demolition, centers on the “the ‘end’ of a woman [*la fin d’une femme*], Renée”<sup>33</sup> — all point to the city being seen as an anatomical Venus, a wax model of the female form with removable parts, thus allowing the anatomical secrets of a woman’s abdomen to be explored.

Although the first wax anatomical models appeared in the eighteenth century — the most famous being those of Clemente Susini and Giuseppe Fusini — they were at the height of their popularity at fairs and in anatomical museums during the second part of the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup> These human-sized dolls usually lay in large glass coffins. Their fixed and languid pose amid satin sheets emphasized the erotico-morbid nature of the scene. It should be noted that after 1856, Place du Château d’eau was dominated by Pierre Spitzner’s famous Musée anatomique et ethnologique. Spitzner’s collection included a Venus that was ‘undressed’, one organ at a time, by a demonstrator in a white coat.<sup>35</sup> Around the model’s abdomen, there were four replica male hands cut off at the wrists. Together with those of the demonstrator, these hands, representative of the doctors, created the impression that a curée was being carried out on the woman’s body. The spoils were being literally handed out of this woman’s body: “to touch a woman has become, in ordinary parlance, a euphemism for her use as a sexual object [...]”<sup>36</sup> For the male

<sup>32</sup> Zola, *The Kill*, 252.

<sup>33</sup> Zola, *La curée*, 327. In the English translation, “She was breaking down” (Zola, *The Kill*, 254).

<sup>34</sup> Kathryn A. Hoffmann, “Sleeping Beauties in the Fairground: The Spitzner, Pedley and Chemisé Exhibits,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4, no. 2 (2006): 139–59.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Lemire, “Fortunes et infortunes de l’anatomie et des préparations anatomiques, naturelles et artificielles,” in *L’âme au corps: arts et sciences 1793–1993*, ed. Jean Clair (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 95.

<sup>36</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Inhibition, symptôme et angoisse*, trans. Michel Tort (Paris: PUF, 1978), 45.

spectator, the symbolic touching of these disembodied hands added a certain pleasure to the evisceration, which in this case is close to an act of rape.<sup>37</sup>

The chapter preceding the visit to the demolition sites is part and parcel of this sub-text about the anatomical Venuses. Renée is herself described as a toy, a doll that is violently stripped naked for the pleasure of men: "She had come to that, being a big doll from whose broken chest escaped a thin trickle of sawdust."<sup>38</sup> The novel operates on these levels of equivalence. Renée's death in Chapter VIII corresponds to a description of Paris aflame with the setting sun. In the context of the novel, the violation of the female body is inseparable from that of the moral values of the nation. The civil war is the negation of the family of which the patriarchal metonymy is the woman. The objectification of Renée as an eviscerated doll contributes to this twofold loss of interiority (spiritual and domestic), since the spiritual interiority of the woman is integral to the notion of the home (interior and family). The evisceration of the woman and the city eventually merge into one another:

On either side, great pieces of wall burst open by pickaxes, remained standing; tall, gutted buildings, displaying their pale insides, opened to the sky their wells stripped of stairs, their gaping rooms suspended in mid-air like the broken drawers of a big, ugly piece of furniture [...] On the bare walls, ribbons of flues rose side by side, lugubriously black and with sharp bends.<sup>39</sup>

In this description, Zola mixes architectural terms and those referring to clothing and the human body with a discourse on emptiness and violence. The female body, the spiritual and do-

37 In *Ouvrir Vénus*, Didi-Huberman devotes a chapter to anatomical Venuses in which he analyses how they functioned in the nineteenth century. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ouvrir Vénus: Nudité, rêve, cruauté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

38 Zola, *The Kill*, 240.

39 *Ibid.*, 247–48.

mestic spaces are destroyed in the same motion. However, the act of rape in *La curée* is polymorphous: it is hubris, which also means insult and excessiveness, as reflected by the reign of Napoleon III.

Basing his argument on the comparison between Second-Empire women and artificial, sterile hybrids, Zola makes *La curée* the beginning of a reflection on (in)fertility. The desertion of home and family and the rejection of motherhood in the hothouse that is Paris, and in which the distinction between the external and the internal is destroyed, give structure to this novel that was written when France was still occupied by Prussian troops, an occupation that was also seen as the rape of the nation. If *La curée* has been seen as a modern Phaedra, it is because it is a tragedy that still deals with dramas of heredity and lineage. The tragic scene is the exposed place where the true origins of the family are revealed.<sup>40</sup> In *La curée*, for those involved, it is a double revelation of original relationships with civil war and family being two sides of the same coin. *La curée* operates on the level of the tragic model: the evisceration of internal spaces (both sacrifice and revelation) allows recognition of the original relationships and their sins. At the end of the novel, when the sun is setting on Paris while Napoleon III disappears into the distance, Zola's final revelation is this: that the Commune was the *enfant maudit*, the accursed child of the Second Empire.

<sup>40</sup> On the family as a tragic setting see André Green, *Un œil en trop: Le complexe d'Édipe dans la tragédie* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969), 18.



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