AS LIVELY MÖCK'D AS EVER: PLASTICITY AND THE AESTHETIC IMAGE OF LIFE

BY

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation contends with the treatment of the biological in literary representation, arguing that the biological lacunae particularly visible in critical practice are best redressed by a formal exploration of aesthetic images of life. Biology, as I will show, admits of contingency, spontaneity, and novelty at the level of its aesthetic representation in a manner entirely distinct from what might be gleaned from a critical practice focused exclusively on the annals of discursive history. I approach this dynamic as an isomorphism of symbolism and biology and argue that just as contemporary philosophy has, through the work of Catherine Malabou, traced the symbolization of the biological, aesthetic criticism should seek to trace the biologization of the symbolic, that is, should seek to trace the way biology imposes its presence as an ontological piece of representation. Working my way back from the prominent appearance of three specific tropes in naturalist texts, I demonstrate within this dynamic that the aesthetic image of life asserts its plasticity against an impossible transcendental alterity, an alterity too long taken for granted in critical practice.
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CHAPTER 1: LUSUS NATURAE AND NEW HISTORICISM

1.1 Greenblatt and Leontes

On a Monday afternoon in late September of 1988 Stephen Greenblatt made his way to a podium at the Smithsonian Institute's Poetics and Politics of Representation Conference. As he prepared to speak, he looked out at the audience and noticed with some astonishment the face of his first serious lover, a woman he met at university more than twenty-five years earlier and of whose death he had just read in an obituary. Fearing he “might be going mad,” he described the experience as being analogous to that of Leontes in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* “when he first sees the statue of Hermione” (Preface xv). The feeling resolved itself in another moment when he remembered that his former lover had a twin sister and that it must be she in attendance. After his presentation the twin confronted Greenblatt, and together they reminisced over diaries of the deceased partner. Greenblatt recounts the story many years later in the preface to a 2007 reissue of his essay collection *Learning to Curse* and concludes by shifting focus from the appearance of the twin to the textual medium of the diaries she presents. The “voice, the handwriting, the turns of phrase, the snatches of conversation recorded from so long before,” Greenblatt writes, “all conjured up what was now irrevocably past and slowly turned wonder into resonance” (Preface xv).

The paper Greenblatt presented that day, “Resonance and Wonder,” departed from the almost exclusively textual focus of New Historicism, the critical method he pioneered in the eighties in response to his formalist mentors. He and his Berkeley colleague Svetlana Alpers proposed that the restoration of historical anecdotes to artifacts powerfully recalls the voices of
the dead. For the anthropologists in attendance, Greenblatt and Alpers’ contributions were limited by their "conservative" conception of the museum as a venue for primarily visual display (Fischer 206).

New Historicists explicitly identify the use of anecdote as a “characteristic” tool in their critical repertoire, one that bridges aesthetic and political texts by integrating event and context (Greenblatt, Introduction 6-7). And since Greenblatt uses his own anecdote to historicize the now ubiquitous critical practices popularized by New Historicism, the story of the mistaken twin raises a number of questions. For the sake of recovering historical context, reconstructing flows of governmental and medical power, revealing the way contemporary ideological and political contradictions become manifest in literary subtexts, the practice of New Historicism characteristically juxtaposes literary and non-literary texts. These juxtapositions derive their narrative power from evocative anecdotes and the ability to infuse the otherwise performative work of literary interpretation with meticulously detailed description. In fields where New Historicism dominates thickly described anecdotes often extricate the practice of literary analysis from formal considerations of representation.

Opposing his work to that of Fredric Jameson, Greenblatt argues that, unlike Cultural Materialism, New Historicism fluidly connects but never collapses a working distinction between political and aesthetic texts ("Towards" 202). Yet if New Historicism’s notion of historical embeddedness subsumes without erasing the distinction between the aesthetic and the political, the same cannot be said of the way Greenblatt in his own anecdote treats the relationship between the aesthetic and the biological. The inclusion of the diaries at the end of the anecdote seems to deliberately confuse the source of historical resonance. Greenblatt neither
encountered his lost lover nor her ghost that day in the Smithsonian but her monozygotic twin. Substituting a moment of biological misidentification with a textual moment of identification, the anecdote retroactively forestalls consideration of biology’s role in recalling discursive history.

Greenblatt compares himself to Leontes from Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, who confronts a statue of his wife Hermione after sixteen years of penance for unjustly condemning her for infidelity, an act that resulted in both her and their son’s death. As Leontes beholds the statue, it transforms into his wife. To Greenblatt a dramatic imagining of vitality in the plastic arts must have seemed analogous to the theme of his paper on restoring historical resonance to visual artifacts. Greenblatt realizes that in the diegesis of *The Winter’s Tale* the statue and Hermione are magically one and the same. Greenblatt’s choice of literary analogy posits flesh and sculpture as metaphors for the relationship between a latent living discursive history and an inert ossified materiality. The two are reunited by the New Historicist’s efforts at representation.

But not only are the statue and Hermione one and the same in the diegesis, they are on stage as well. In any performance of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes' wonder would have resolved itself with Hermione slowly beginning to move again, the same actor breaking an imitation of classical statuary to resume the role. In the dramatic medium of *The Winter’s Tale*, therefore, materiality is not inert at all. Flesh serves as the medium of representation (flesh imitating sculpture imitating flesh); Hermione and her statue are biologically identical. The metaphors evoked in Greenblatt’s literary analogy, like those used to characterize the diaries the twin presents, actively confuse the role of biology in representation. When we reveal flesh to be both the subject and object of representation in Greenblatt’s anecdotes, in what manner can flesh be
read as bearing a connection to latent discursive history? And why, moreover, should latent discursive history evince less material inertia and more vitality than the flesh through which it is recalled?

Graham Harman once ventured the criticism that "New Historicism famously embeds the text in its cultural and material surroundings, thereby over-relationizing it" (183). The issue I would argue, however, concerns not merely the risk of New Historicism projecting contextual influence onto authors who resisted or even changed dominant contemporary discourses. New Historicism through an inherited political reflex irrationally circumscribes biology outside the domain of aesthetic representation entirely.

In a 1986 essay Greenblatt states his position directly as he contemplates the case of Martin Guerre, a sixteenth-century French peasant whose story had, at the time of writing, been recently popularized in a French novel and film adaptation. In the story Martin overcomes eight years of impotence to belatedly consummate his marriage, father a son, fall into conflict with his father, and abandon his family. Eight years later an imposter returns and lives for three years as Martin until a court challenge over a land dispute with his uncle leads to the revelation of his true identity. Greenblatt recounts the story at length to demonstrate what he feels represents “the bafflement of psychoanalytic interpretation by Renaissance culture” (176). The themes of oedipal transgression and impotence would seem to lend themselves to psychoanalysis. But a psychoanalytic approach, he argues, misapprehends the case of Martin Guerre in which, “the secure possession of one’s body is not the origin of identity but one of the consequences of the compulsive cultural stabilizing unusually visible in this story” (187). Appeals to biology, which Greenblatt defines as being exemplary of Freudian psychoanalytic practice, he argues, dissemble
renaissance selfhood by fixing identity in the body. Greenblatt, in a particularly crafty reading of Hobbes, argues:

There is no layer deeper, more authentic, than theatrical self-representation. This conception of the self does not deny the importance of the body . . . but it does not anchor personal identity in an inalienable biological continuity. (192)

Greenblatt defines his position against a disingenuously constructed contradictio in terminis, “inalienable biological continuity,” as if a concept of life could exist without the discontinuity of death. I will return to these strategic misreadings of Hobbes in Chapter Four. In any case, Greenblatt’s political gesture here is hard to mistake. He affirms an anti-essentialism using Shakespeare and the Elizabethan theater to allegorize and pit biological identity against a notion of “theatrical self-presentation” recovered in Hobbes. But even when New Historicism productively focuses attention on lost discursive histories, it confuses the justification for such appeals.

Does Greenblatt mean to illuminate the actual case of Martin Guerre or its aesthetic representation in the novel by Janet Lewis or the film by Daniel Vigne? Having focused so much attention on historical anecdotes from the actual case of Martin Guerre, Greenblatt’s analysis again belatedly and retroactively struggles to fix that analysis to a textual object. He thereby elides a needed distinction between historical notions of biological determinism and the real role of biology within aesthetic representation.

1.2 The Problematic

A fuller consideration of biology within literary representation must necessarily do more than simply attend to depictions of biology and biological determinism. Discussions of literary
naturalism (the genre most explicitly focused on representing biological forces in society) currently have two approaches available for investigating the tropes that typify the genre. On the one hand New Historicism, as I have discussed, analyzes the aesthetic representation of biology through readings of analogous moments in non-aesthetic texts in medicine, advertising, or the sciences. Corporate academic publishing even standardizes this as pedagogically useful. Norton and Broadview critical editions of Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* both include selections from Gilded-Age *tableaux vivants* handbooks in their appendixes to provide students with historical context for a depiction of the practice in a late chapter of the novel. This standardization risks reinforcing a critical practice in which non-aesthetic texts are mined for vividly detailed anecdotes against within which to present more anodyne observations.

Adopting new historicist critical techniques, one scholar of literary naturalism has, for example, read the desert setting of the final chapters of *McTeague* as a site of resistance to the “exclusionary logic of the nation-state” through vivid analysis of the 1872 Yellowstone Act and national park advertisements (Ache 177). In another example, pages of detailed explication of Gilded Age handbooks introduce a less sophisticated argument about the role of the male gaze in *The House of Mirth* (Chapman 27).

In his essay “The Language of the Stones: The Agency of the Inanimate in Literary Naturalism and New Materialism,” Kevin Trumpeter explores the other possible approach, arguing that we reread literary naturalism in the wake of the material turn in the humanities by applying post-humanist considerations to naturalist tropes. New Materialism, Latour’s actor-network theory, and object-oriented-ontology are each summarized in turn before Trumpeter turns his attention to the work of Dreiser and the depiction of inanimate agency in two key
scenes from *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy*. Although his theoretical survey is comprehensive, his approach risks creating a sort of theoretical toolkit that too simplistically applies these theorists to literary representation. And he sidesteps the question of what it means to explore these issues within literary representation, to interpret without any formal consideration of representation itself. At best the theoretical concepts are clearly presented and logically applied to their literary analogs. At worst, having confused literary tropes for their material referents and misunderstood the interventions made in the source theory, such criticism can only vaguely suggest that it helps rethink ideological problems in literary naturalism.

Trumpeter’s paper flounders however productively on just such a claim:

> new-materialist theory stands to profit from a reassessment of literary naturalism and . . . new-materialist insights might at the same time help American literary scholars return to naturalist works with a more refined and reenergized perspective on the genre’s perennial concerns. (227)

The “reenergized perspective” offered however repeats the same prejudices he rightly attributes to the “solipsistic implications of the linguistic turn” (226). Literary naturalism, Trumpeter concludes, provides a necessary corollary to new materialist criticism, a sage warning that the “enchantments of the inanimate world” must be considered next to the “darker side of the matter’s allure” (249). His analysis at first faithful to resisting the linguistic turn, quickly restores an all too familiar fear of an inhuman countermanding of agency.

monetary policies. An important elaboration of New Historicism in its heyday, *The Gold Standard* contains an arresting philosophical engagement with the question of representation, avoids all of the pitfalls described above, and, though it never treats the question of biology, carefully avoids making a perfunctory political gesture of anti-essentialism at biology’s expense. The extraordinary accomplishment of *The Gold Standard*, I will argue however, is the exception that proves the rule, that the biological lacunae particularly visible in the critical practices introduced by New Historicism are best redressed by examining the logic of literary naturalism.

For if biology plays only a deterministic part in symbolic activity, the concatenation of differences that manifest meaning in the brain and in language, then literary criticism can only ever adopt one of the two orientations described above. In the pages that follow I detail a specific schema that I suggest renders the relationship between the biological and the symbolic legible in the aesthetic image of life.

### 1.3 Representation and Biology

Biology, as I will show, admits of contingency, spontaneity, and novelty at the level of its aesthetic representation in a manner entirely distinct from what might be gleaned from the annals of discursive history. Claude Lévi-Strauss's insight into the apparent isomorphism of symbolism and cognitive models, explored throughout his body of work from his 1962 *The Savage Mind* onward, comes closest to understanding the aesthetic relationship between symbolism and biology. Structural analysis, Lévi-Strauss states succinctly in a late essay, “takes place in a continuum where empirical observation of the tiniest details of the natural world is inseparable from a reflection on the formal properties inherent in the mechanics of thinking" (*View* 217). In other words, binary oppositions appear in representations of nature because such oppositions
symbolically structure the biological act of cognition. As a result they constitute a continuum within which representation of the natural world is always already a reflection on the biological structure of thought.

The claim at first glance belies Lévi-Strauss's consideration of biology. It seems instead to echo his political commitment to recognizing that the acts of classification by remote tribal communities and those of modern science produce varied but not qualitatively different symbolic systems. But Lévi-Strauss fearlessly regarded the implications of his thought in neuroscience. As I will explore in greater detail in Chapter Two, his work considers a formal relationship between representation and biology: that we should see the structure of our minds in the way our minds symbolically order nature, that the perception of order in nature should reveal our own implicit ways of representing the biological structure of our minds, and that this reflexive isomorphism evinces not merely an abstract symbolic system, but one that is necessarily conditioned and overdetermined across cultures and civilizations by a formal, ahistorical, and real isomorphism between symbolism and biology.

It is no coincidence that the philosopher Catherine Malabou should turn in later work to this observation by Lévi-Strauss. Malabou’s dissertation under the guidance of Jacques Derrida defended Hegel from Heidegger’s destruction of metaphysics by recovering a concept of plasticity in the mature philosophical system of Hegel’s Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences. Heidegger’s concluding statements in Being and Time, it must be remembered, ushered in an end to metaphysics by arguing that Hegel represents the culmination of a long tradition going back to Aristotle in which a common notion of time persists as an understanding of presence, a sequence of nows (480-88; chs. 82-83). Heidegger persuasively showed that Hegel
develops this notion of time to the detriment of any conceptualization of the future; time cannot
preserve itself in Hegel’s system (483-84; ch. 82). Chronological time as a sequence of nows can,
Heidegger argues, only reconstitute the past.

Malabou counters that there is another understanding of time operative in Hegel; time as
the “‘happening’ of the concept” (Future 6). Malabou responds to the Heideggerian impasse in
Hegelian thought, by reading Heidegger’s interpretation of time in Hegel’s system as a
misunderstanding of the act of representation which conceptualizes through constitutive
synthetic moments. These moments themselves have a trajectory; representation produces
temporalization through the differentiation of its constitutive moments of conceptualization (a
process of exteriorization and interiorization). The greatly-simplified presentation that follows
refers to Hegel’s delineation of the structure of Representation (Vorstellung) as Erinnerung,
Einbildungskraft and Gedächtnis explicated in Encyclopedia III §§451-64. I have included my
own figures to help introduce the models of representation that structure the arguments that
follow (see fig. 1.1).

Representation in Hegel’s system comprises a tripartite psychological act that structures
conception. An initial act negates a perceived negativity. Through this process (negation of
negation) the imagined negativity assumes an external appearance. The subject apprehends this
negativity as external and universal and attempts to reconcile its externality. The external form of
negativity is finally reconciled to perception (interiorized) as if it were alienated from the initial
psychological act that exteriorized it.

Hegel’s concept of time, Malabou reminds us, is no different and is composed of several
determinate moments (Future 14). The concept of time emerges from the attempt to represent
space. This act of representation can be dissected as follows: a psychological act attempts to negate the undifferentiated character of exteriority, the act of negating differencelessness exteriorizes a provisional concept of the point. Apprehended in exteriority as both separate from and a part of undifferentiated exteriority, the point is reconciled as a now by the concept of time (Encyclopedia II 28-34; §§254-57).

Insofar as conceptual development happens inside material constraints, the future of a concept is, as Heidegger asserts, literally determined by past materiality. But this process is plastic Malabou counters, actively and contingently anticipating its future forms. An anxiety within materially-bounded representation produces a contingent mode of being toward the future. The tripartite structure of Malabou’s dissertation works with the goal of forming a concept of plasticity (Future 5). To do this Malabou examines three instances of representation in Hegel’s system to reveal a dynamic in which the reciprocal disposition of two developing concepts give and receive form from one another.

Transitioning into a formal discussion of representation always risks convolution in the beginning, and I am helped only slightly by those who have come before me. Fredric Jameson’s literary hermeneutic maps Hegelian representation onto a combination of A.J. Greimas’s semiotic square and Jacques Lacan’s L-scheme, as if Hegel’s own schema of representation were unsuited for semiotic analysis or schematization. Jameson once famously claimed that dialectical thought consisted principally in the elaboration of “dialectical sentences” (53). The oft-cited quote perpetuates the notion that dialectical method is best adhered to through an overwrought avoidance of ratiocinative writing. It is hard not to feel, especially after reading Malabou, that this tendency persists because of an over-emphasis on studying Hegel through his unrevised
1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* to the detriment of reading the three-volume *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, the propaedeutic Hegel himself created and revised until 1830 just before his death.

I am in any case emboldened by Malabou’s clear and nuanced attention to Hegel’s mature system. The only liberty I would argue that I have taken is a looser use of the term “concept,” which will not always refer to Hegel’s *Begriff*. I refer to concepts as including those constitutive synthetic moments in representation (*Vorstellung*) which are not yet technically concepts by Hegel’s definition. The term “synthetic,” it is worth noting here as I have in the Glossary, denotes a psychological moment of conceptualization in which the developing concept is not embodied in a medium of representation. I will briefly sketch the tripartite structure of Malabou’s dissertation since the structure of my own mirrors hers.

The first section of *The Future of Hegel* examines Hegel’s Anthropology (§§388–412 of *Encyclopedia III*) and shows that insofar as individuals can consciously choose habits that ultimately biologically alter their constitution, the psychological act of representation gives form to biology just as much as biology gives form to psychology. The second section examines the divine kenosis in Christian theology, the self-emptying of God through the incarnation, crucifixion, and the constitution of the Holy Spirit. The divine kenosis represented in Christian theology cannot be separated from an isomorphic alienation of the transcendental subject who experiences the discourse of reason in the Enlightenment as alienation. Malabou argues that Hegel attempts in both of these cases to read a structure of anticipation or “nonimpassivity” into subjectivity. The plastic capacity of this nonimpassivity means that subjects can, through representation, both temporalize and be affected by that temporalization. The third section of her
work examines plasticity through the isomorphism between philosophy and the reader, both of which have the capacity to be shaped by and to shape the other.

My analysis adapts the concept of plasticity for analysis of the aesthetic image of life. To adapt the concept of plasticity means that insofar as literary representation exhibits plastic properties in the act of conceptualizing biological forces it does so because such properties define the real disposition of biology in the part biology plays in representative understanding. In other words, adapted for aesthetic criticism, plasticity posits that the relationship between biology and symbolism is isomorphic.

I adopt Malabou’s reading of Vorstellung as a mode of plasticity to explore the relationship between biology and symbolism in the aesthetic image of life. Malabou’s concept of plasticity, I will argue in the chapters that follow, fundamentally alters any reading of alterity (otherness) in aesthetic criticism. Since the reencountered negativity is only a moment in the developing concept, alterity lacks the transcendental form it has in the work of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas. A properly materialist understanding of alterity could only be the temporal relationship of identity with itself.

1.4 Lusus Naturae

How can we remap these schema to instances of literary representation that, unlike the psychological act of Vorstellung, are necessarily figurative and already have sensuous textual form? Walter Benn Michaels analysis of the love of representation in The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism suggests a solution. In his commentary on the desire for gold in Frank Norris’s novel McTeague, Michaels appeals to William James who in a quoted passage asserts
that we love “natural objects that look as if they were artificial, or that mimic other objects” (qtd. in Michaels 156). Michaels extrapolates that,

It is as if we can love the sunset either as a sunset or as the representation of a painting. In this analysis of our love of representation, the mark of human agency is simultaneously produced, effaced, and reproduced: produced because we see in the sunset a representation, effaced because it turns out to be nature that is doing the representing, and reproduced because nature is representing something that was itself made by man. (157)

Michaels’s interpretation informs my own. I sketch here his central model that explains the love of representation (see fig. 1.2). Michaels accepts that nature cannot be subject of representation. Therefore the perception of representation in nature (the perception of nature as subject of representation) must be reconciled to perception as an illusion. William James uses the latin lusus naturae (sport of nature), often evoked in nineteenth-century freak shows, to name this phenomenon. The process of representation and the peculiar mode of alienation that occurs in confronting lusus naturae catalyzes a “primitive desire for mimesis” (158) that Michaels reads within the motives of different characters in literary naturalism. Breaking down Michaels’s analysis of representation into the individual acts that constitute the process in Hegel’s system, we can identify the negation of artifice (unnatural representation) as the initial moment of exteriorization. The negativity negated reappears as exterior, as the alienated product of consciousness. In this case the negation of unnatural representation (negated artifice) becomes the appearance of natural representation (lusus naturae), the illusion that nature acts as subject of representation.
According to Michaels, characters of literary naturalism are confronted with what seems like *lusus naturae* (e.g. the power of gold, the power of descriptions of gold) and are thereby forced to reconcile an act of authorless representation in nature. Since Michaels immediately dismisses the real possibility of this, the synthetic response to *lusus naturae* must be one that dispels the illusion of nature’s ability to represent. Reconciling this illusion, characters of naturalism come to understand the process of reification and develop a primitive desire for mimesis. This desire replaces the moment of alienation in Hegel’s schema with a demystification of reification.

Michaels inherits a Hegelian schema of representation indirectly through his use of Marx in *The Gold Standard*. The process of representation (*Vorstellung*) and its place in Hegel’s system functions synthetically, not figuratively. In other words the psychological act that forms concepts does not represent in the medium of language. Even though Michaels focuses on figurative reification, the reconciliation of *lusus naturae* in his discussion is synthetic.

In confronting *lusus naturae* and negating nature as subject of representation, characters of literary naturalism come to believe that an object “becomes what it is by representing itself.” Michaels argues that in the case of gold, the money form, and language itself, the belief that representation incarnates, coincides actually with “rightly recognizing the representation as an ontological piece of the thing.” Michaels even goes on to briefly consider whether it would be appropriate to afford this recognition in *McTeague* the status of a “populist demystification” (158, 159, 176).

Michaels’s reading, however, only applies to a handful of cases that coincide (like gold, the money form and language) with products of reification and appear as *lusus naturae*. 
Michaels’s schema of representation curiously works in other instances. Biological tropes in literary naturalism would seem least amenable to Michaels’s schema. Tropes like instinct, atavism, hermaphroditism and degeneracy should not, for the historical reasons Michaels provides, be able to resolve the external appearance of *lusus naturae* with a mode of recognition that rightly recognizes “representation as an ontological piece of the thing” (159). Indeed they should not fall into the same schema of representation at all unless representation is already an ontological piece of biology. And yet, as I will show in the chapters that follow, these tropes also follow the same logic, suggesting just that.

**1.5 The Itinerary**

The schema of representation I develop in the chapters that follow is indebted to Michaels’s insight. Representations of *lusus naturae* offer an opening for analysis since they force an author to conceptualize nature’s proper place in representation. The textual reconciliation of *lusus naturae*, always a conceptual disavowal, evinces the real existence of an overarching dynamic between symbolism and biology structuring the aesthetic act. I explore the reconciliation of *lusus naturae* through a synthetic moment I refer to as *presimilitude* (see fig. 1.3). Presimilitude literally means the appearance of representation before the possibility of representation. Since nature’s ability to act as subject of representation is intuitively rejected, the appearance of a *lusus naturae* (in order not to be misunderstood as an expression of natural will) can only be reconciled as a moment in which nature prefigures its future forms. In this way, the biological itself forces the determinate moment of negation through which the developing concept is formed and reinteriorized. The biological itself here plays an ontological role in representation.
In the next three chapters I work my way back from the prominent appearance of three specific forms of *lusus naturae* in naturalist texts to determine their moments of presimilitude and thereby delineate a larger dynamic in which symbolism and biology together structure literary representation. Within this dynamic the aesthetic image of life asserts its plasticity against an impossible transcendental alterity.

Chapter Two reads the *lusus naturae* of hermaphroditism in Émile Zola’s 1872 novel *La Curée*. Through a close reading of Zola I develop the concept of *vérité plastique* in which aesthetic representation presents identity as indivisible and calls attention to the materiality of identity’s emergence. I read *vérité plastique* against the transcendental symbolic economies presupposed by Derrida’s interrelated concepts of the trace, *l’abîme*, and supplementarity. I use the respective analyses of Lévi-Strauss and Malabou to decipher a mystery in Guillaume Apollinaire’s famous poem “Les Colchiques,” and I use both of their analyses of the poem to further introduce their understanding of the relationship between biology and symbolism. Because “Les Colchiques” represents a different form, historical period and genre it also provides a needed contrast to the naturalist texts that otherwise focus my analysis. The developing concept of hermaphroditism appears in both Apollinaire’s poem and Zola’s novel from the synthetic negation of deindividuation. Representing the impossibility of difference, hermaphroditism as *lusus naturae* is reconciled within the logic of both texts through a developing concept of decadence as presimilitude.

In Chapter Three I elaborate *presimilitude* further defining it against Derrida’s articulation of *l’avenir*. A reading of instinct as a *lusus naturae* in Frank Norris’s 1899 novel *McTeague* focuses this analysis. And a preliminary sketch of this reading explains the
hermeneutic potential of the schema I develop. The literary representation of biological force could proceed in any number of ways. *McTeague* negates the synthetic negativity of a biological talentlessness. From the frequently referenced volumes of *Allen’s Practical Dentist* described on the shelves, to the large gold tooth eventually purchased and displayed to solicit patients, the novel illustrates the protagonist’s anxiety that he might one day be revealed as an uneducated, talentless dentist. *McTeague*’s representation of biology engenders “instincts as ungovernable as the winds of heaven” as the externalized negation of this talentlessness. Once the conceptualization of instinct appears as a force acting externally against human motives, the novel must reconcile its external appearance in a moment of presimilitude. Presimilitude reworks the developing concept of instinct by interpreting it as a latent form of the future. The literary depiction of instinct becomes in the final chapters of the novel a depiction of atavism, a reversion to a previous evolutionary state. Instinct no longer signifies external biological force but a form of the future recovered from the past: “It was the old battle, old as the world, wide as the world” (Norris 326, 284). The perceived impossibility of biology becoming subject of representation rewrites the *lusus naturae* of instinct as a presimilitude i.e. atavism.

Chapter Four analyzes those instances, so common in naturalist tropes, in which a *lusus naturae* appears as the sovereign image of life. Using the figure of the leviathan in Frank Norris’s 1901 novel *The Octopus* as my guide, I bring my analysis of *vérité plastique* back to Derrida’s critique of ipseity, a notion of indivisible identity contingently attached to figures of sovereignty.

The figurative incarnations explored in each of these chapters are less important than the synthetic processes that unite them in the novel. I am arguing that insofar as literary
representation exhibits plastic properties in the act of conceptualizing biological forces like
instinct, it does so because such properties define the real disposition of biology in the part
biology plays in representative understanding, that biology is itself an ontological piece of
representation. Unlike other cognitive literary hermeneutics, I have no intention of exploring the
aesthetic act of representation outside the text itself. Instances of *lusus naturae* like face
pareidolia in nature (the tendency to see the representation of faces in a medium where
representation does not exist) have been shown to be an effect of the frontal cortex anticipating
patterns in its communication with the visual cortex (Jiangang 60). My analysis confines itself to
the literary embodiment of such processes.

To be clear the political value of literary naturalism benefits little from this analysis.
Naturalism still produces images of biological essentialism and determinism. And my work has
no interest in contriving a traditionally progressive reappraisal for a genre of marked political
ambiguity. Other genres also expend great effort on depictions of biology. For reasons that may
not yet be clear, if biology and symbolism are isomorphic, then all aesthetic depictions of
biology should embody that identity within the representational development of their concepts.
The prospect of supporting this alone compels the work that follows.
CHAPTER 2: VÉRITÉ PLASTIQUE AND THE MISE EN ABYME

2.1 Les Amours du beau Narcisse et de la nymphe Écho

1872’s La Curée, the second novel published in Émile Zola’s Les Rougon-Macquart, transposes the incestuous affair of Phaedra from antiquity to the Second Empire and the epicene appetites of Renée Saccard and her effete stepson Maxime. While Renée's husband Aristide busies himself, exploiting his position as surveying-clerk to speculate illegally on Haussmann’s planned boulevard and neighborhood renovations, the affair waxes and wanes.

In the novel’s penultimate chapter, the Saccards host a costume ball at which Aristide's business associate, a provincial prefect named Hupel de la Noue, stages tableaux vivants loosely based on the story of Narcissus and Echo from Ovid's Metamorphoses. Titled "Les Amours du beau Narcisse et de la nymphe Écho," Zola describes the production in detail over the course of the chapter. In the first tableau, Echo beseeches an unmoved Narcissus to capitulate to the influence of Venus in a grotto of flesh. In the second, Venus appeals to Plutus in a grotto of gold. Devoid of the first and second tableau's symbolic references to sex and greed, only the third tableau, in which Echo and Narcissus metamorphose into a block of marble and a flower respectively, “n’eut pas le succès franc des deux autres” ‘was not an unqualified success like the two others’ (553; Nelson 222; ch. 6).

Written four years after Zola identifies himself as a naturalist writer in the 1868 preface to Thérèse Raquin and eight years before his formulation of naturalism in Le Roman expérimental, the elaborate ekphrases and classical allusions that compose La Curée's climactic scene record a self-conscious reflection on literary naturalism’s developing philosophy of
representation. The scene lends itself well to an analysis that identifies the *tableaux* as a *mise en abyme* of the novel.

### 2.2 The Myth of the *Mise en Abyme*

In his seminal study of the *mise en abyme*, 1977’s *The Mirror in the Text*, Lucien Dällenbach briefly identifies the scene in Chapter Six as one of two notable *mise en abyme* in *La Curée* that demonstrate the incompatibility of the classical material to the form of the novel. Other scholars have worked to extend Dällenbach’s remarks to analyze the scene from *La Curée* as a *mise en abyme* (Noiray 69-77; Mouanda 35-45). On a general level of analysis *mise en abyme* (or *abîme*; the difference between *abyme* and *abîme* is only a matter of French spelling reform) names the act of setting a representation within a representation. The concept of the *mise en abyme*, first coined by André Gide, however, has gained nuances of meaning since it was first coined. *Abyme* technically refers to the center of an escutcheon. In discussions of heraldry *mise en abyme* therefore names the placement of an escutcheon inside an escutcheon. Directly translated it means to “set in the abyss.” The concept of the *mise en abyme* combines the two primary meanings of *abyme* as both reflection and abyss. To place into the *abyme* means therefore not only to place a representation into a representation, but to do so such that the medium of representation is revealed as being both bottomless and bounded, like the abyss that opens between two facing mirrors. *Mise en abyme* therefore carries with it a subtext about the symbolic as a medium of representation, namely that a system of differences, paradoxically both delimited and indefinite, undergirds the symbolic. Continental philosophies of language have explored variously this idea.
For the sake of pursuing his own schema, Dällenbach begins his work studying the *mise en abyme* by deliberately bracketing these nuances of the concept:

The word *abyme* here is a technical term. I shall not therefore speculate on its many connotations or hasten to give it a metaphysical meaning: instead of invoking Pascal’s ‘Gouffre’, the abyss of the Mystics, or Heidegger’s ‘Abgrund’, Ponge’s ‘objeu’ or Derrida’s ‘différance’, I shall rather refer to a treatise on heraldry: “‘Abyss’ (“Abîme”)—the heart of the shield. A figure is said to be “en abîme” when it is combined with other figures in the center of the shield, but does not touch any of these figures.’ (8)

Derrida’s discussion of *l’abîme*, however, has shaped the hermeneutic meanings of the concept in the past decades far more than Dällenbach’s work explicitly dedicated to the *mise en abyme*. In an uncommonly penetrable passage from *Of Grammatology*, Derrida explicates *l’abîme*. Given the contested history of Gayatri Spivak’s translation in its three forms, substantial criticism of her latest 2016 revision, and the deliberately misleading and erroneous insinuation by her detractors that Derrida seemingly never writes “il n’y a rien hors du texte” only ever “il n’y a pas de hors-texte,” I am providing my own translation below:

If we consider, in accordance with the axial proposition of this essay, that there is nothing outside the text [*il n’y a rien hors du texte*], our ultimate justification would be therefore the following: the concept of the supplement and the theory of writing designate, as is written often today, *en abyme*, textuality itself in the text of Rousseau. And we will see that *l’abîme* is not here an accident, happy or unhappy. An entire theory of the structural necessity of *l’abîme* will be formed
little by little in our reading; the indefinite process of supplementarity has always already entered into presence, always already inscribed there the space of repetition and cloning [dédoublement de soi]. The representation en abyme of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is born rather from l’abîme of representation, from the representation of the representation, etc. (my trans.; 233)

For Derrida l’abîme names a dynamic structurally necessary and unavoidable within the act of written representation. Derrida argues that when difference generates the meaning of a named concept, the concept latently maintains the oppositions against which it is formed. Since, according to Derrida, there is never one originary set of oppositions through which a concept is formed, the many latent oppositions supplement the concept without actually being present. He names this latency of oppositions supplementarity and the infiniteness of the chain of latent oppositions the trace. An understanding of supplementarity, Derrida argues, reveals the structural necessity of recognizing the medium of representation as l’abîme, as an infinite milieu of latent differences against which meaning is formed. For Derrida the form of the text delimits the infinite differences that comprise the “indefinite process” of supplementarity. Derrida maintains that the text and the trace are mutually exclusive; the trace is forever inconvertible into form. In this sense the infinite symbolic economy presupposed by the trace functions as a transcendental form of alterity, an immaterial a priori otherness against which meaning is formed and which remains forever latently other from the textual meaning it produces.

As a hermeneutic concept in literary criticism, the mise en abyme presupposes that all forms of aesthetic representation contain within themselves infinite manifestations of difference.
As such it represents the antithesis of the theoretical orientation I have elaborated so far, that aesthetic criticism should maintain a strict focus on the material delimitation of representation by focusing on an isomorphism between symbolism and biology.

My work counterposes this isomorphism to the transcendental symbolic economies presupposed by Derrida’s interrelated concepts of the trace, l’abîme, and supplementarity. I seek to establish the intelligibility of one specific schema of representation through which literary representations of biology demonstrate this isomorphism. This schema, as I explained in the preceding chapter, combines Hegel’s analysis of representation in the Encyclopedia with the work of Catherine Malabou and Walter Benn Michaels. In what follows, I demonstrate how my schema not only deepens our understanding of the isomorphism of symbolism and biology, but corrects a hermeneutic fallacy implicit in much criticism of the novel.

The tableau vivant may at first glance seem suited to analysis as a mise en abyme, especially when we consider those moments when such tableaux adopt the technique of pose plastique, to portray specific classical sculptures that themselves depict moments in literature, mythology or history. Moments of pose plastique are therefore examples of ekphrasis (the representation of one work of art through the medium of another) within a tableau vivant. A literary depiction of tableaux vivants in which pose plastique is used would lend itself to analysis as a complex mise en abyme, a succession of representations within other representations, like a set of matryoshka dolls. Even so, the materiality of the tableau, that of the sculpture that is imitated and that of the flesh through which it is represented, disrupts the philosophy of representation presupposed by the conceit of the mise en abyme. I will explore several examples of this disruption, including most notably a dimension of the final tableau in La Curée, a tableau
that literally contains a mirror representing the pond into which Maxime gazes at his reflection and imaginatively transforms into a flower. In contrast, the still water which reflects Narcissus in Ovid’s telling does not destabilize the boy’s identity by figuring an abyss of representation. The final tableau in Zola’s novel in fact represents the impossibility of transcendental alterity, the impossibility of ever being parted from one’s body.

La Curée develops hermaphroditism as a biological concept through which to organize its critique of the Second Empire. Zola names the concept during two early characterizations: that of Madame Sidonie and Maxime, Aristide’s sister and son. Madame Sidonie we are told,

“grâce au milieu dans lequel elle avait vieilli, à ce Paris où elle avait dû chercher le matin son pain noir du soir, le tempérament commun s’était déjeté pour produire cet hermaphrodisme étrange de la femme devenue être neutre, homme d’affaires et entremetteuse à la fois.” (373; ch. 2)

“thanks to the surroundings in which she had matured, thanks to Paris where each morning she had to buy her evening black bread, the common temperament had deviated from its course, producing this extraordinary hermaphrodisim of a woman grown sexless, businessman and procuress in one.” (Nelson 54)

Maxime is described as a “hermaphrodite étrange venu à son heure dans une société qui pourrissait” ‘a strange hermaphrodite making a timely entrance in a society that was rotting’ (425; Nelson 103; ch. 3). Following the schema of representation I proposed in Chapter One, La Curée’s conceptualization of hermaphroditism can be broken down into three stages to demonstrate the way biology imposes its presence as an ontological piece of representation (see fig. 2.1).
First, hermaphroditism as Zola portrays it conceptually emerges as a synthetic negation of deindividuation, the psychological fear of being assimilated into the social milieu. We see this most visibly in the character arc of Renée. Unlike Maxime and Madame Sidonie, whose hermaphroditism the novel presents as ready-formed, Zola traces Renée’s corruption step by step to structure the central plot of the novel. Everything, from the affair she initiates with her step-son to her increasingly extravagant costumes commissioned by the couturier Worms, acts aggressively to negate deindividuation, to overcome her petit bourgeois upbringing and distinguish herself among the newly monied classes of the Second Empire. The negation of a synthetic deindividuation produces not individuation but dividuation, a synthetic perception of coexistent division. Dividuation appears objectively in exteriority as a *lusus naturae*, a trick of nature; it appears as hermaphroditism, the biological state of coexistent division. Since hermaphroditism appears meaningful, and since nature’s ability to represent is intuitively rejected, the appearance of hermaphroditism (in order not to be misunderstood as an expression of natural will) can only be reconciled as a form of presimilitude. In other words, since nature’s only act of representation can be the prefiguring of its future forms, hermaphroditism must be reconciled as one of those forms. The appearance of hermaphroditism is thereby reconciled as a manifestation of decadence; Madame Sidonie and Maxime as hermaphrodites and eventually Renée herself prefigure the decline of a society “qui pourrissait.” The novel climaxes in Chapter Six in the scene of the *tableaux*, again anchoring its judgments of the Second Empire to the conceptualization of hermaphroditism.

One might object that a formal schema of representation unnecessarily complicates a simple biological metaphor. Without such an explanation, however, the connections among
Renée’s character arc, the description of Maxime as a hermaphrodite, and the moral judgement of Second Empire decadence appear biographically and historically contingent. The relationship between hermaphroditism and decadence would remain arbitrary, and complex political ideologies might be concocted to explain Zola’s otherwise unremarkable political and moral judgements.

2.3 Vérité Plastique

*Tableaux Vivants* have figured heavily in discussions of literary naturalism with Brian Seltzer once going so far as to claim that “if photography is the realist form of representation par excellence, taxidermy is the form of representation proper to naturalism” (170). Zola undertakes a textual translation of the *tableaux vivants*, and Hupel's *tableaux* translate Ovid's famous story into the performance conventions of the genre, including imitations of classical statuary known as *poses plastiques*; Pradier's group is explicitly mentioned. Priscilla Ferguson argues that, “the prefect-poet is, as Zola is not, the prisoner of this society. He can only proceed by allegory, whereas Zola . . . refuses the distancing classical allegory”(149). Ferguson's reading suggests that Zola uses Hupel de la Noue as a foil for his own representative commitments. As a prisoner of his society Hupel de la Noue translates Ovid using the costume conventions of *tableaux vivants*, while Zola translates the *tableaux* into the demystifyingly realistic prose descriptions that typify naturalism. Although Hupel de la Noue anxiously justifies the medium of the *tableaux* several times throughout the chapter as "plus noble" ‘more dignified’ and "plus près du beau antique” ‘nearer to the classical ideal’ than prose, Hupel's philosophy of representation and the political commitments of his piece do not directly contradict those Zola sets for himself (537; Nelson 207; ch. 6).
Zola described the novel as a “new Phaedra” (qtd. in Nelson xi). And even Hupel de la Noue’s intention to follow “la tentation de la chair [avec] la tentation de l’or” “the temptation of the flesh, [with] the temptation of riches’ reproduces, as Brian Nelson notes in his translation, the goal Zola sets for himself in the preface, in which he writes “la Curée est la note de l’or et de la chair” “The Kill is the note of gold and flesh” (548, 1583; Nelson 216, 3; ch. 6, Preface).

Furthermore, in both Zola’s novel and Hupel de la Noue’s tableaux, the spectacle of gold and flesh threaten to overwhelm the works' condemnation of Second Empire decadence. It might be more helpful to think of Hupel de la Noue’s tableaux, therefore, less as direct foils for naturalism, but rather as a moment in which Zola thematizes naturalism's philosophy of representation and its limits.

As the second novel published in the twenty-novel series, La Curée encapsulates the early formal goals of Les Rougon-Macquart to meticulously construct character arcs so as to scientifically demonstrate and thereby study a bipartite determinism composed of mixed hereditary and environmental forces. Rich metaphors and extended metonymic chains, inevitably mixing figurations, shape contiguous overlapping symbols. The twin themes of gold and flesh here represent each side of the dyad: the note of flesh the Rougon-Macquart bloodline, composed of three branches each with its own tendencies, and the note of gold representing the decadent modern social forces of the Second Empire. The twenty novel series begins and ends in the Provençal village of Plassans, but spans the metropole, the countryside, the mines and finally, before returning to Plassans, the battlefront where, in 1870 at the Battle of Sedan, the Empire fell. The fact that Renée, the character whose metamorphosis Zola depicts in La Curée, is not
biologically part of the series’ hereditary construct means that Zola must reimagine the biological components of her determinism.

Renée comes from a middle-class family headed by a staunch republican, a former judge who retired instead of taking part in the rise of the Second Empire. Educated away from home in a convent, Renée is raped and returns home pregnant. Her aunt with the help of a procuress arranges for a hasty marriage to Aristide Saccard, a Rougon who has changed his name to avoid political conflict with his brother. Aristide hastens his current wife’s death to marry Renée, obtaining a sizable dowry and some property with which to begin his speculations. Although Renée’s initial rape and subsequent corruption as a Saccard positions her decadence as an external imposition, the tableaux vivants scenes figure corruption as a biological latency.

The first tableau presents Renée as Echo and Maxime as Narcissus in a grotto where Venus attempts unsuccessfully to ignite the passion of the young man. The wife of a prominent financier, a notorious procuress, plays the role of Venus while other demi-mondaines portray Cupid, the Graces, and two unidentified lesbians demonstrating “la puissance de Vénus” ‘the extent of Venus’ power’ (544; Nelson 213). The narrow color scale from white to red effected across the costumes of the tableau’s minor characters “était douce, d’un rose général, d’un ton de chair” ‘was soft, generally pink, flesh-coloured’ (544; Nelson 213), blending the skin tones of the women with the color of the fabrics used and thereby imitating a uniform surface as though each figure were reproduced in one continuous piece of marble. The costume conventions described by Zola actively affect a deindividuation so as to draw attention to a seemingly uniform medium of representation. Flesh-colored descriptors extend throughout the chapter from the tableaux to
the oft-repeated flesh-colored dressing room in which Aristide realizes Renée and Maxime are having an affair.

Of course thematically the classical content depicted suits Zola’s description of the *poses plastiques*. In Book Three of the *Metamorphoses*, Echo and Narcissus eventually transform into stone and flower respectively, and the *tableaux*’s use of fabrics and rice powders to blend the skin and fabric of the secondary characters in this first *tableaux* foreshadows the techniques used later in the performance. But Ovid only briefly mentions the ultimate metamorphoses of Echo and Narcissus and dedicates more of the poem to describing their respective failures to obtain the objects of their desire. Echo cannot speak unless spoken to and can only compose her rejoinders from words already spoken. Unable to communicate through difference, Echo embodies the very antithesis of the Derridean trace.

Trapped in a love of his own reflection Narcissus similarly laments the impossibility of difference. Ovid in fact writes more on this aspect than on his metamorphosis, explaining that “spem sine corpore amat, corpus putat esse, quod umbra est” ‘he loves an unsubstantial hope [hope without body] and thinks that substance [body] which is only shadow’ (3.416-18; Miller 153). The words Narcissus imagines his reflection speak are only projections of difference onto his reflection. When Narcissus finally discovers that it is his reflection with which he has fallen in love, he laments the impossibility of difference, “o utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem!” ‘Oh, that I might be parted from my own body!’ (3.467; Miller 157). A hopeless desire for a *dedoublement de soi* foments the destructive loves of Echo and Narcissus; a cloning ineluctable within Derrida’s philosophy of representation, proves inaccessible in Ovid’s poem.
How do the biological elements that focus the act of literary representation in both Ovid’s poem and Zola’s description of costuming techniques condition a philosophical rejection of transcendental alterity? The intertextuality between tableaux and poem distracts from the way biology reminds both Zola and Ovid of the permanence of its presence as an ontological part of representation. In order to fully consummate his image of Maxime as a hermaphroditic creature, Zola and Hupel de la Noue by proxy choose not the story of Hermaphroditus (also contained in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*) but the story in which Narcissus, longing for an illusory alterity, can only metamorphose into a hermaphroditic flower.

Ovid describes Narcissus’s passion for the unobtainable form reflected back in the pool before him on three separate occasions: It appears as a reddish tint beneath the white of his skin, as a redness that flashes to the surface as he strikes himself on the chest in longing, and finally as a redness appearing no more under the white, vanishing as he shuts his eyes (3.491). Ovid translates the impossibility of difference as a gradual blending and erasure of color. A unitary, indivisible and inescapable identity, pushed toward an outside that does not exist, can only metamorphose.

Unlike the costume conventions of *poses plastiques* used for the minor characters, Hupel de la Noue chooses the costumes of Echo and Narcissus carefully to distinguish the primary drama of the foreground. In the first tableau, Maxime as Narcissus wears “un costume de chasseur idéal” ‘an ideal huntsman’s costume,’ directly representing the part, while Echo’s costume is “à elle seul, toute une allégorie” ‘an allegory in itself’ with each color, fabric and arrangement choice suggesting “des lieux retentissants où les voix de la Terre et de l’Air se répondent” ‘the resounding spots where the voices of the Earth and the Air reply to each
other’ (544; Nelson 213). Far from diminishing their vitality, the subtle color continuity effected among the demi-mondaines actually overshadows the more elaborate presentation of Echo and Narcissus:

Under the electric light, ingeniously directed at the stage from one of the garden windows, the gauze, the lace, all those light, diaphanous materials mingled so well with the shoulders and tights that the soft pinks seemed alive, and it was no longer possible to tell whether the ladies had not carried plastic truth so far as to strip themselves naked. (Nelson 213)

The term vérité plastique like its analogs in art criticism, here denotes something other than the costumes’ mere resemblance to plastic art mediums. Just as a sculptor might be said to release form from a marble prison, the concept of plasticity implied here names a dynamic which represents within material constraints without effecting a signifying difference. Vérité plastique as a term therefore suggests a realism (vérité) that emerges from the materiality of the medium. Its ability to denude echos one of the final passages of the novel in which Renée reflects on everything that has happened and feels as though she has been stripped naked.

In Hupel de la Noue's first tableau, the sensuous provocation of the fleshy hue threatens to denude the women in the same way that the enervating metamorphoses of Echo and Narcissus
will eventually denude each in turn. The “blancheurs rosées vivaient” ‘soft pinks seemed alive’ (544; Nelson 213; ch. 6) because the prurient conventions of poses plastiques transform the performing women into the semblance of dead matter and the inanimate fabric of their costumes into that of living flesh. Neither does skin mimic concrete nor fabric mimic flesh; rather the composition of the poses plastiques denudes precisely in the absence of a signifying difference, by a metamorphosis of identity within material constraints. The color continuity effected across fabric and flesh, skin and powder, vivifies in the complete collapse of difference.

When Hupel de la Noue compliments Madame d’Espanet, one of the women in the background, on her costume, she responds, “J’en ai un bien plus joli dessous!” ‘I've got a much prettier one underneath!’ We are told, “L’audace de cette plaisanterie étonna un instant le galant M. Hupel de la Noue; mais il se remit, et goûtant de plus en plus le mot, à mesure qu’il l’approfondissant” ‘the boldness of this joke took Monsieur Hupel de la Noue aback for a moment; but he recovered his composure, and appreciat[ed] the remark more and more as he read hidden subtleties into it’ (541-42; Nelson 211; ch. 6). Zola leaves us to imagine what Hupel de la Noue, at the height of his anxiety and excitement for his production reads into this comment, but Hupel returns to the comment again and again throughout the chapter until one of the men in attendance finally mocks his amusement and points out that Madame d’Espanet often says the same thing whenever complimented on her apparel. The anecdote makes essentialism a joke, not because essence is unstable, but because it is uniform.

The second tableau departs from Ovid's source material. Hupel de la Noue explains, “La nymphe Echo, voyant que Vénus est sans puissance sur le beau Narcisse, le conduit chez Plutus, dieu des richesses et des métaux précieux” ‘Echo, seeing that Venus has no power over
Narcissus, takes him to Plutus, the god of wealth and precious metals.’ With the same cast of demi-mondaines assuming new roles as personifications of Sapphire, Turquoise, Emerald, Topaz, Coral, and Silver respectively, Madame de Haffner, wife of a wealthy manufacturer turned politician, takes center stage as Gold, dressed in a gown made of freshly-minted twenty-franc pieces. Hupel de la Noue worries that he has “poussé peut-être un peu loin la licence poétique” ‘perhaps carried poetic licence too far’ with the “anachronisme hardi” ‘bold anachronism’ of coinage signifying the wealth of the Second Empire. The audience, inattentive to his embellishment of classical themes, was nevertheless beguiled by “La hardiesse des pièces de vingt francs, ce ruissellement de coffre-fort moderne tombé dans un coin de la mythologie grecque” ‘the audacity of the twenty-franc pieces, this stream of money from a modern safe that had fallen into a corner of Greek mythology’ (547-48, 547, 548, 549; Nelson 216, 216, 217, 217; ch. 6).

In the third tableau, however, the cast takes advantage of Hupel de la Noue’s momentary distraction. If the first tableau pushed the limits of “plastic truth” (vérité plastique), in the third tableau, “l’on avait poussé la vérité jusqu’à mettre une lame de vraie glace au fond du ruisseau” ‘realism had been carried so far that a piece of real looking-glass had been placed at the bottom of the pool’ (552; Nelson 221; ch. 6). With Venus and Plutus resuming their roles and the other women portraying nymphs, Echo and Narcissus metamorphose in the foreground. This time their costumes eschew the realism otherwise characterizing the scene, adopting instead those plastic techniques earlier reserved for the background. Maxime’s,

membres verdissaient, s’allongeaient, dans son costume collant de satin vert ; . . .

le buste, orné de larges pans de satin blanc, s’épanouissait en une corolle
merveilleuse... [et la] chevelure blonde de Maxime complétait l’illusion... ses longues frisures, des pistils jaunes au milieu de la blancheur des pétales. (553; ch. 6)

limbs became verdant, elongated, in his tight-fitting costume of green satin... his body, adorned with broad lappets of white satin, blossomed into a wondrous corolla... [and his] fair hair completed the illusion... his long curls set yellow pistils amid the whiteness of the petals.” (Nelson 221)

The plastic technique used to render the minor characters of the first tableau is here used to render the tableau's central metamorphoses. Renée’s costume also breaks with the allegory of the earlier tableaux. Covered in a rice powder that uniformly blends skin and fabric Renée sank, “au milieu du satin de sa jupe... pareil à un bloc de Paros... n’ayant plus de vivant, dans son corps figé de statue, que ses yeux de femme, des yeux qui luisaient” ‘into the satin of her skirt... like a block of Parian marble... retaining nothing of life in her cold sculptured body except her gleaming eyes’ (553; Nelson 221; ch. 6). Zola likens Renée, covered in rice powder to depict her transformation into marble, to a corpse. Although the effect on both Maxine and Renée is one of enervation, the technique of poses plastiques does not fully triumph in the end.

Plastic truth cannot refocus the tableau on Echo and Narcissus at the moment when a distraction removes Hupel de la Noue’s hand from the direction of his work. The tableau “n’eut pas le succès franc des deux autres” ‘was not an unqualified success like the two others.’ But Hupel de la Noue “s’y admirait, comme son Narcisse dans sa lame de glace” ‘admired himself in it, as did Narcissus in his piece of looking-glass.’ We are told “ces messieurs et ces dames, dont les esprits nets et pratiques avaient compris la grotte de la chair et la grotte de l’or, ne se
souciaient pas de descendre dans le complications mythologiques du préfet” ‘these ladies and gentlemen whose practical minds had understood the grotto of flesh and the grotto of gold were not interested in the Prefect's mythological explanations’ (553-54; Nelson 222; ch. 6).

*Vérité plastique* generates meaning not through difference but through the unity of a fluid, materially constrained identity. *Vérité plastique* mocks essentialism, not because essence is unstable in literary depictions of biology, as the logic of supplementarity would contend, but because it is uniform, lacking the operation of the trace as a manifestation of transcendental alterity. The isomorphism of symbolism and biology imposes itself, in the interest of producing a literary depiction of hermaphroditism, as a dynamic radically rejecting transcendental alterity.

After the *tableaux* conclude, Renée discovers Maxime's betrothal and blackmails him into retreating with her to a room upstairs. A few moments later Aristide walks in on them. Trained to take advantage of an opportunity wherever he finds one, the elder Saccard suppresses his rage at the sight of his wife and son together, and seeing that she had signed a deed of transfer for her remaining property picks it up. The husband exits with the son, ignoring the situation. Left alone Renée sinks into reflection:

Elle assistait à son long effarement, à ce tapage de l’or et de la chair qui était monté en elle . . . C’était comme une sève mauvaise ; elle lui avait lassé les membres, mis au cœur des excroissances de honteuses tendresses, fait pousser au cerveau des caprices de malade et de bête . . . Les pas des autres devaient avoir laissé là ces germes de poison, éclos à cette heure dans son sang, et que ses veines charriaient . . . elle ne voyait que ses cuisses roses, ses hanches roses, cette étrange femme de soie rose qu’elle avait devant elle, et dont la peau de fine étoffe,
aux mailles serrées, semblait faite pour des amours de pantins et de poupées. Elle
en était arrivée à cela, à être une grande poupée dont la poitrine déchirée ne laisse
échapper qu’un filet de son . . . Qui donc l’avait mise nue? (573-74; ch. 6)

She recalled her growing alarm, the cacophony of gold and flesh rising within
her . . . It was like a poisonous sap: it had weakened her limbs, grafted growths of
shameful affection on her heart, made sickly, bestial caprices sprout in her brain . .
. The footsteps of others must have left behind those poisonous seeds, which were
now germinating in her blood and circulating in her veins . . . she saw only her
pink thighs, her pink hips, that strange, pink silk woman standing before her,
whose skin of fine, closely woven silk seemed made for lovers’ of dolls and
puppets. She had come to that, to being a big doll from whose broken chest
escaped a thin trickle of sawdust . . . Who, then, had stripped her naked? (240)

The twin motifs of gold and flesh find expression here again as forces which, like the hothouse
and the flora within, have established themselves as dimensions of Renée, transforming her into
one uniform body, a plastic force that like those on display in Hupel de la Noue’s tableaux works
through the subtle establishment of a color continuity in the silk draping her body. Unlike the
poses plastiques, however, here this uniformity arrests the vitality it formally proffered.

2.4 Symbolism as the Image of Life

With his decision to cast Maxime as Narcissus, Hupel de la Noue’s tableaux incarnate
Zola’s description of the young man earlier in the novel as a, “hermaphrodite étrange venu à son
heure dans une société qui pourrissait” ‘a strange hermaphrodite making a timely entrance in a
society that was rotting’ (425; Nelson 103; ch. 3). Like most plants, the daffodil into which
Maxime as Narcissus evolves is a hermaphrodite. How does the biology of the daffodil remind Zola of its epicene ontology? Again the intertextuality of the ekphrasis itself distracts from La Curée’s developing conceptualization of hermaphroditism.

A mystery hidden in Guillaume Apollinaire’s famous poem “Les Colchiques” explains the role played by biology in developing La Curée’s concept of hermaphroditism. In 1983 Claude Lévi-Strauss investigated the inexplicable epithet Apollinaire attributes to the autumn crocuses describing them as “mères / Filles de leurs filles” ‘mothers / Daughters of their daughters’ (60; Sorrell 39; see Appendix A). Catherine Malabou responded to his essay in 2012.

Lévi-Strauss reviews several popular interpretations of the line that overlook the fact that botanically the colchicum has several peculiar characteristics. Without naming the botanical phenomenon, Lévi-Strauss points out that the colchicum is what is known as a hysteranthous plant, meaning that its leaves and seeds, unlike those of most other plants, develop after the blossoms. Furthermore, the blossom only contains the male organs. The female organ remains underground to the side of the generating corm or bulb, rising to the surface only when the leaves begin to develop many months later in spring. By the time those leaves too wither, the ovary ripens and produces a fruit in early summer. Lévi-Strauss remarks that "if the colchicum blossom is, strictly speaking, a hermaphrodite, then its hermaphroditism is special, since a maximum distance separates the male and female organs" (212). The temporal and spatial separation of the sexual organs only reinforce their superfluous function. The crocus usually reproduces asexually; the female reproductive organs clone themselves underground to the side of the corm, and each successive generation of crocus, a generation of clones, is produced half the measure of the corm, constituting a sequence of clones that move perpetually in one direction. Botanically
therefore, as both a hysteranthous and clonal plant, the colchicum confuses filiation such that the epithet begins to make sense. The tripartite morphology of the *colchicum autumanale* might be summarized as follows: in September the blossom appears with the male reproductive organs, in April the leaves appear and the ovary rises above the ground, in June the ovary ripens and produces a seed-bearing fruit. A mother might be considered the daughter of her daughters insofar as the leaves and ovary appear after the blossom, because the fruit is visible before the next blossom opens, or because, as a clone, each plant produced is genetically identical to every other.

Lévi-Strauss uncovers examples in early botanical literature that associate both the colchicum and similar plants with terms like "Filius-ante-patrem." He suggests that Apollinaire might not only have been familiar with these references, but may have also understood the larger mystical and theological discourses from which they were derived. Among these sources he includes pseudo-Augustinian texts about the Virgin Mary, the poetry of Chretien de Troyes and Dante, the *Mabinogion*, and medieval romance. Lévi-Strauss reads the line in the poem through the trope of auto-gendering, in which, for example, Christian theology refers to Mary as both the daughter of God and mother of God. The history of this discourse, clearly apprehended in the trinitarian play of filiation between father, mother, and son, but also present in even older sources, constitutes what Lévi-Strauss refers to as "the ethnographic context of these figures of thought" (215). Lévi-Strauss argues that aesthetic interpretation calls upon ethnographic context to “illuminate the nature of aesthetic feeling” and thereby dissociates it from the formal process to which it more appropriately belongs (218).
Having examined the botanical origin and ethnographic context of the epithet, he turns to the symbolic use of the epithet in the poem itself. The crocuses are poisoning the cows slowly who will gradually abandon the meadow to be slaughtered. Apollinaire compares the crocuses to the poisoning eyes of a lover. The crocuses, unlike the children or the cows, represent the only true sign in the poem because they have an explicit symbolic referent, the eyes of the poet’s lover. The crocuses, ever renewed by the cloning corm underground, form the resilient milieu in which the careless children temporarily live out their fleeting childhoods. This stability botanically comes at the cost of a spatial shift, the perpetual renewal of generations half the distance of the corm and a mode of pollination in which the female and male organs are separated at a maximum distance. The semantic stability of the crocuses, Lévi-Strauss argues, comes at the cost of a similar shift. Specifically, the signification of the eye/crocus sign stabilizes through a seemingly unstable formal gap in which poetically each side of the signifier/signified dyad shifts place. Lévi-Strauss argues:

this instability emerges in the poem: when Apollinaire describes the crocus as being ‘the color of a bruise’ and then as ‘the color of your eyelids,’ he is making the eyelids the signifier of the flowers, which are transformed from being the signifier of the eyelids into the signified. (217)

The lines he refers to are: “Le colchique couleur de cerne et de lilas / Y fleurit tes yeux sont comme cette fleur-là” (60). Both Lévi-Strauss’s and Malabou’s analyses of Apollinaire’s poem depend on identifying these lines as a reversal of poetic signification.

Lévi-Strauss therefore reaches the end of his analysis pointing to the fact that, of the three registers investigated (the botanical, ethnographic and symbolic) the botanical and the symbolic
explain equally well the epithet because, “structural analysis takes place in a continuum where empirical observation of the tiniest details of the natural world is inseparable from a reflection on the formal properties inherent in the mechanics of thinking” (217). Lévi-Strauss ends with the declaration that “our only hope of success is to call upon the exact sciences, the natural sciences, and the human sciences” instead of ethnography and history (218).

Malabou's response begins with the observation that, in situating the epithet as the structural nucleus of the poem and having provided this interpretation as the nucleus of structuralism itself, Lévi-Strauss thereby reformulates structuralism in the autumn of its reception, on the eve of deconstruction's rise. Doing so he, wittingly or not, suggests a new engendering of structuralism, a structuralism in which structure is understood as that which remains after the effects of deconstruction.

Malabou remarks that "what is truly vertiginous in Lévi-Strauss's analysis . . . is that the affirmation of the reversibility of the signified and the signifier is already in itself a deconstructive affirmation" (“Following Generation” 29). This reformation of structuralism might be read after deconstruction as a rejoinder to it. For even though Lévi-Strauss acknowledges the potential inversion of the signifier and signified he does so by showing that the confused filiation wrought by this reversibility manifests itself as a regenerative field of presence, a “presence that is somehow impossible to deconstruct, because it springs from its own deconstruction; a presence always renewed, because it holds the secret and power of its own cloning of itself” (“Following Generation” 29).

Malabou's work argues against the absolute inconvertibility of trace, the infinite chain of latent oppositions, and form, the structuring effected by those oppositions. Citing Levinas’s
declaration in *Otherwise Than Being*, that “the trace [is] inconvertible into forms,” Malabou situates Derrida’s insistence on this inconvertibility at the heart of deconstruction (Levinas 90). Derrida’s concern for avoiding originary assertions of essence, the dogma of a metaphysics of presence, necessitates understanding trace as that which escapes the form of language, goes beyond form and therefore has no originary point.

Unlike Derrida and Levinas, Malabou’s strict materialism engages the question of essence and attempts to, “think through and affirm the mutual convertibility of trace and form in an attempt to put an end to the dematerialization and demonetarization of contemporary philosophy” (*Plasticity* 45). Malabou is therefore concerned with the form left after deconstruction, an *a posteriori* form, a form that appears, not in response to a transcendental other or nothingness, but precisely when no other is present, when there exists no outside to the material such that flight can only take the form of metamorphosis within identity. In such instances alterity is not transcendental, but constitutes instead the temporal relationship of identity with itself.

On one level of structural analysis then, Malabou explains, “one single biological, poetic, and structuralist fact becomes clear: sometimes, the seed comes last, the seeding (*semence*), or seminal reason, appears after” (“Following Generation” 24). According to Malabou this reversibility anticipates Derrida in a way that is startling, considering Derrida’s critique of Lévi-Strauss in *Grammatology*. The biological model provided by the clone or twin helps us imagine a form of metamorphosis unbeholden to transcendental alterity. In the material delimitation of metamorphosis the reversibility of signifier and signified cannot escape in a play of signification, an ever-escaping trace predicated by an other outside language. Recognition of this convertibility
means that presence can become a “troubling permanence” (30). In other words, as Malabou puts it, “the question, consequently, is no longer one of knowing how to differentiate between two individuals who resemble each other but of knowing how to interrogate the way in which the same transfers itself to remain the same in the other” (“Following Generation” 33).

Against Derrida, Malabou shows here that form and trace are convertible, that within closed biological systems, within biological identity, difference can manifest and the biological can in such instances produce its own symbolization without recourse to a transcendental symbolic economy. In other words, according to Malabou, within a materially constrained symbolic economy like that of the body, the reversibility of the signifier constitutes the convertibility of trace and form, the dynamic she names plasticity.

Whereas Malabou reads her own development of plasticity as a slight correction of Derrida and Levinas solely concerned with this point (the question of whether trace and form are convertible), I argue throughout my study that such an adjustment has far broader implications and constitutes a radical negation of some of deconstruction’s central presumptions. Specifically I argue that the convertibility of trace and form, of plasticity, should best be approached as an isomorphism of symbolism and biology, not the reversal of signification. In doing so, my reading deepens the divide between plasticity and alterity, beyond Malabou’s own articulation of her work, situating this Levi-Straussian inheritance as the future of both Derrida and Malabou.

Elsewhere Malabou has argued that the “dialectical interplay” of the symbolic and biological "is inscribed within the body, not outside of it" (“King’s” 103). She proposes that, if we can affirm that plasticity inhabits the biological, that it opens, within organic life, a supplement of indeterminacy, a void, a floating entity, it is then possible to
claim that material life is not dependent, in its dynamic, upon a transcendental symbolic economy; that on the contrary, biological life creates or produces its own symbolization. (“King’s” 104)

But if this is true, and “biology produces its own symbolization,” would that not mean then that the biological properly speaking only constitutes an instantiation of the symbolic? If the biological is structured with the same gaps and voids as subjectivity, how can it fundamentally differ from the symbolic, differ enough to claim that there exists a “dialectical interplay” within the body of the biological and the symbolic? In order for the two to remain distinct we would have to imagine an instance in which the inverse might be the case. If “biological life creates or produces its own symbolization,” how might we imagine an instance in which symbolic life might be said to produce its own biologization? In what instances does the symbolic, in other words, transform from a system of unstable signifiers into a system of rigid figures that reinforce identity and presence, that eschew transcendental symbolic economies and alterity?

In imagining Renée’s biological determinism outside the hereditary construct of Les Rougon-Macquart, within the hothouse of the Second Empire, Zola comes to articulate the latency of her biological identity. It is not her corruption that Zola ultimately figures in the novel but precisely the recalcitrance of her petit-bourgeois genes; her pursuit of individuation, her desperate will to keep up with the Rougon blood, this condemns her. Just as Malabou has traced the symbolization of the biological, aesthetic criticism should seek to trace the biologization of the symbolic, that is, should seek to trace the way biology imposes its presence as an ontological piece of representation. Zola’s pursuit of vérité plastique in La Curée, provides just such an opening, revealing as it does the hermeneutic fallacy of the mise en abyme, revealing those
moments in which meaning is generated not from difference, but from the line of flight of
identity from itself.

Rather than reading, “Le colchique couleur de cerne et de lilas / Y fleurit tes yeux sont
comme cette fleur-là” as an unstable signifier, as a moment of reversal, might we not instead read
it as a moment of biological and symbolic isomorphism? Symbolism is the image of life; life is
the image of symbolism. If you substitute “history” for either predicate, the statement ceases to
be true. History neither constitutes the image of life nor does life constitute the image of history.
The isomorphism of biology and symbolism cannot be reduced to the formal dynamic of the
signifier, just as vérité plastique cannot be reduced to a mise en abyme.

For what does Lévi-Strauss really mean when he says "structural analysis takes place in a
continuum where empirical observation of the tiniest details of the natural world is inseparable
from a reflection on the formal properties inherent in the mechanics of thinking” (217)? He is
claiming that both scientific and historical contexts share the objective character of being
represented in concert with an implicit image of thought itself. This dynamic is analogous to that
experienced by Narcissus staring at his reflection and desiring an impossible separation of mind
and body. For are not all efforts at imagining a transcendental symbolic economy haunted by an
inner recognition of the impossibility of difference?
3.1 The Tableaux of *Les Rougon-Macquart*

Zola’s ekphrasis of *tableaux vivants* in *La Curée* discussed in the preceding chapter represents just one example of a formal device adopted in different ways throughout *Les Rougon-Macquart*. Insofar as we define a *tableau* as a literary device that didactically arranges the figures of a scene to mimic the composition of a visual form, several examples from Zola’s oeuvre illustrate that the device serves a broader role in literary naturalism. Many of these examples include allusions to the plastic arts and intertextual references back to *La Curée’s* ekphrasis of *tableaux vivants*. All include some figuration of the future, sanguine or social. I examine five of these *tableaux* in *Les Rougon-Macquart* before moving into an analysis of Frank Norris’s 1899 novel *McTeague*, one of the most explicit early adoptions of naturalism in American literature. To clearly sketch these scenes as well as their diegetic place in Zola’s twenty-novel series, I have chosen to recount them chronologically, drawing attention to details important for the analysis that follows.

In the concluding chapter of the first novel of *Les Rougon-Macquart*, 1871’s *La Fortune des Rougon*, the young Republican fighter Silvère chooses his virgin lover Miette’s tombstone as the site of his assassination. The “végétation noire” that had once solicited the couple with a bed of foliage in the cemetery where they met, tempting them unsuccessfully to sexually consummate their relationship, “rêvait, à cette heure, de boire le sang chaude de Silvère” ‘now longed to drink Silvère’s warm blood’ (312; Nelson 290-91; ch. 7). When the time finally comes, the gendarme fires and, “le crâne de l’enfant éclata comme une grenade mûre” ‘the child’s skull
burst open like a ripe pomegranate’ (314; Nelson 292-93; ch. 7). Another liquid now sates the
cemetery’s plant life; Silvère’s blood congeals in the epitaph. Vegetation figures both as the
benefactor of Silvère’s assassination and as a metaphor for his skull. The scene’s botanical
symbolism could be read as evincing slippage within its signification, just as Lévi-Strauss and
Malabou read a reversal of signification in Apollinaire’s figuration of a lover’s eyes and autumn
crocuses.

Yet in this image of an exploding skull Zola chooses grenade (pomegranate), the
etymological source for the military explosive of the same name. That a skull, a pomegranate,
and a grenade share the same semantic field is a product, neither of the imbrication of meanings
within this etymological history nor of some literary history of similar tropes. The botanical
properties of the pomegranate alone explains an isomorphism that is only retroactively registered
etymologically. The punica granatum contains seeds surrounded by juice-filled membranes
called arils, each of which is encased in a white membrane. These packed arils and the
surrounding white membrane physically resemble a fragmentary bomb and the grey and white
matter of the brain. What appears as three distinct semantic domains in a mixed metaphor can be
reconciled when diagramed as an isomorphism of symbolism and biology.

To begin with, the description of the vegetation as benefactor of Silvère’s assassination
appears in a passage in which the young man longs to be reunited with Miette. The vegetation
acts in the aesthetic depiction of this negation of synthetic negativity (the pain of two lovers’
separation) as a force ushering Silvère into death and reunion with Miette. In doing so, the novel
conceptualizes the negation of separation, not as unification but as fragmentation (unified
separation). In exterior biological form this fragmentation appears, in the dual figuration of the
vegetation, as a natural *grenade*, a *lusus naturae* which is then reconciled as the future form of Silvère’s skull, that is to say reconciled as death, the future image of life itself (see fig. 3.1).

This little simile in *Les Rougon-Macquart* resembles Lévi-Strauss’s playful title *La Pensée Sauvage*. In both *pensée* and *grenade*, vegetation and cognition share the same image. In a very literal sense both illustrate the project of this work, to render legible the isomorphism of symbolism and biology in literary representation: That we should see the structure of our minds in the way our minds symbolically order nature, that the perception of order in nature should reveal our own implicit ways of representing the biological structure of our minds, and that this reflexive isomorphism evinces not merely an abstract symbolic system, but one that is necessarily conditioned by a formal, ahistorical, and real isomorphism between symbolism and biology.

In the penultimate chapter of *Le Conquête de Plassans*, François Mouret sets fire to his former home, now overtaken by the conniving Abbé Faujas, his mother and their family. Awaking to the blaze, the mother screams for her son, crying “Ovide! Ovide!” (1200; ch. 22). The choice of the abbé’s rarely evoked first name signals the coming *tableau* with an intertextual reference to *La Curée*’s *tableaux vivants* based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The mother attempts to escape, summoning a superhuman strength to carry her incapacitated son on her back and even taking the time to dress him in his soutane. As they reach the stairs Mouret jumps on the abbé and together the three tumble down the stairs, the mother sinking her teeth into Mouret, drinking his blood as the house collapses around them.

In the final scene of *La Bête humaine* a fight breaks out between the protagonist Lantier, a train engineer, and his fireman, Pecqueux. Grappling with one another on the tiny metal bridge
that connects the train cars, the two are eventually sucked beneath its wheels and hacked to pieces. Their dismembered torsos, headless and armless, remain bound together between the tracks like sculptural relics from antiquity, like the torso of Diadumenus in the Louvre. The train hurtles into the night, unmanned, packed with human soldiers, “bétail humain . . . qu’on charriait au massacre” ‘human livestock . . . carted off to the slaughter’ (1329; Pearson 365; ch. 12). Zola concludes the novel with a rhetorical question: “N’allait-elle pas quand même à l’avenir, insoucieuse du sang répandu” ‘Was it not, after all, heading into the future, heedless of the blood that was spilled?’ (1331; Pearson 367; ch. 12).

In Le Docteur Pascal, the 1893 conclusion to Les Rougon-Macquart, Zola composes two contrasting tableaux, one in the middle, the other at the end of the novel. In the first, Adelaide Fouque, the 104 year-old matriarch of Les Rougon-Macquart’s three-branched family tree, sits in her room in the asylum at Les Tulettes with her fifteen-year-old great-great-grandson Charles, a “petit dauphin efféminé d’une antique race déchue” ‘effeminate little dauphin of an ancient and fallen race’ (965; Serrano 58; ch. 3). Charles is the son of Maxime from La Curée. Representing both an atavistic reincarnation of Adelaide and the culmination of degeneration biologically manifesting the family’s complicity with the Second Empire, the hemophiliac Charles can barely speak. His flesh is so weak that the faintest scratch will draw blood. Left alone together, the two invalids recreate the tableaux vivants from La Curée. The scene substitutes Echo for Adelaide and Maxime for his son Charles. Like Echo, Adelaide cannot meaningfully speak. As a hemorrhage releases a stream of blood from Charles’s nose, she tries, but can only weep silently staring at him as he dies in his sleep. Slowly drained of all its blood, the redness of his complexion fades to a light pink and finally into a complete whiteness like Narcissus. When the
rest of the family finally returns, Adelaide exclaims, “Le gendarme! Le gendarme!” a reference to the earlier deaths of both her lover and Silvère from La Fortune des Rougon (1105; ch. 9).

These scenes serve more than a morally didactic and melodramatic function in Zola’s novels. Each conceptualizes the future. Zola concludes Le Docteur Pascal with a scene juxtaposing the child of Pascal and Clotilde with a monument simultaneously erected in honor of the Rougons:

Un élan de ferveur maternelle monta du cœur de Clotilde, heureuse de sentir la petite bouche vorace la boire sans fin. C’était une prière, une invocation. À l’enfant inconnu, comme au dieu inconnu! À l’enfant qui allait être demain, au génie qui naissait peut-être, au messie que le prochain siècle attendait, qui tirerait les peuples de leur doute et de leur souffrance! Puisque la nation était à refaire, celui-ci ne venait-il pas pour cette besogne? (1219; ch. 14)

A transport of maternal fervor thrilled Clotilde’s heart, and she smiled seeing the little voracious mouth drinking her life. It was a prayer, an invocation, to the unknown child, as to the unknown God! To the child of the future, to the genius, perhaps, that was to be, to the Messiah that the coming century awaited, who would deliver the people from their doubt and their suffering! Since the nation was to be regenerated, had he not come for this work? (Serrano 341)

The child represents a biological defiance against the family’s complicity with the Second Empire, and expresses Zola’s enthusiastic pronatalism. Zola would become increasingly politically committed to combatting France’s depopulation in later years, publishing articles on the topic, working within the Third Republic’s institutional theorization of depopulation, and
even changing his aesthetic style to become more unequivocal in the literary expression of pronatalism in the unfinished *Quatre Évangiles* series of novels (Counter 194-99). Historical and biographical explications of Zola’s pronatalism, however, suffer from Zola’s strikingly bad and poorly-reasoned non-aesthetic writing and numerous inconsistencies between his aesthetic practice and its theorization.

### 3.2 Presimilitude

In the first chapter I introduced my schema for recognizing the way biology imposes its presence as an ontological piece of representation. I combined Hegel’s analysis of representation in the *Encyclopedia* with the work of Catherine Malabou and Walter Benn Michaels to read this as an isomorphism of biology and symbolism within literary representation. As a working-through in aesthetics of Malabou’s philosophical intervention, the second chapter counterposed this isomorphism to the transcendental symbolic economies presupposed by Derrida’s interrelated concepts of the trace, *l’abîme*, and supplementarity. What follows elaborates further the role of the future in this schema and what I refer to as *presimilitude*. I counter here again my analysis in meaningful ways to Derrida’s work, specifically his articulation of *l’avenir*.

Although Derrida dedicates no single work to developing his notion of the future, emphasis on the concept begins to appear in 1984 in two lectures given at Cornell and in other speeches given later that decade. The most frequently cited of his statements on the future appear in texts from the early to mid-nineties. These include *The Politics of Friendship*, *Archive Fever*, and *Specters of Marx*. Derrida repeatedly insists on the importance of understanding the future as that which is to come, emphasizing the French etymology of *l’avenir*, as *l’à-venir*, often translated, as it is in the passage the follows, as “the future-to-come.” The anticipation of and
orientation toward the future, here described as a question about the future, exceeds what could
be understood as presence:

This question arrives, if it arrives, it questions with regard to what will come in
the future-to-come. Turned toward the future, going toward it, it also comes from
it, it proceeds from [provient de] the future. It must therefore exceed any presence
as presence to itself. At least it has to make this presence possible only on the
basis of the movement of some disjointing, disjunction, or disproportion: in the
inadequation to self. (Specters xix)

Most importantly the future for Derrida is not therefore the temporal relationship of identity to
itself, but in fact demonstrates its very “inadequation to self.”

In contrast to Derrida, Malabou argues that “the future is not the absolutely invisible, a
subject of pure transcendence objecting to any anticipation at all, to any knowledge, to any
speech” (Future 184). Malabou proposes instead a notion of voir venir in amendment to
Derrida’s articulation of l’avenir. To voir venir is to simultaneously anticipate and be surprised
by the future that is to come. The future may be marked by an unexpected event, but it is
conditioned by and anticipated within the confines of materiality. If we can retain any
meaningful notion of alterity within such an understanding of the future, alterity as such can only
be, what I, extending the implications of Malabou’s work, describe as the temporal relationship
of material identity to itself in moments of plastic metamorphosis. Yet such a not-truly-other
alterity conceptually changes so much from forms popularized in the linguistic turn and earlier in
phenomenology that I, unlike Malabou, refuse to retain it as a meaningful term. As explained in
the preceding chapter, the term vérité plastique more appropriately names the generation of
meaning and form not through difference but through identity’s agonistic relationship to itself as fluid and materially constrained, like the emergence of form from a block of marble.

Semblances of alterity in the literary representation of life should be understood therefore as produced, not by différence, but by the isomorphism of symbolism and biology. As diagramed in the schema introduced in the first chapter, this isomorphism is traced as a flight of identity from itself. The movement of conceptualization produces seemingly distinct moments that can be reconciled as part of one process. To say that this is the flight of identity from itself towards an outside that does not exist, is not to affirm the hermeticism of the symbolic but of its isomorphism with biology.

The line of flight is a synthetic biologization. Since the product of this process appears meaningful (as a lusus naturae), and since nature’s ability to represent is intuitively rejected, the appearance of the lusus naturae (in order not to be misunderstood as an impossible expression of natural will) has to be reconciled to perception. Since nature’s only act of representation can be the prefiguring of its future forms, the lusus naturae is reconciled as one of those forms.

The future in the literary image of life, I argue, is therefore not a point of pure otherness, not l’avenir of Derrida, but an aspect of the materiality of presence that appears within the line of flight of identity from itself. Presimilitude names this moment in which the process of representation reconciles a lusus naturae as a prefigured future form.

The hermeneutic implications of this are manifold. Commonplace readings of xenophobia in McTeague, we shall see, misapprehend the function of alterity in the novel’s images of biological essentialism, entirely ignoring the way these images actually collapse into themselves drawing attention back to the materiality of their emergence.
3.3 McTeague’s Final Tableau

Five years before the publication of *McTeague*, a young Frank Norris submitted a summary of the central plot of his future novel to the graduate assistant overseeing his work in a Harvard English course. Absent the many naturalist embellishments that would come to define the novel and Norris’s short career as America’s own young Zola, the summary describes the plot in the simplest terms possible. An uneducated dentist loses his livelihood, becomes an alcoholic, kills his wife, and flees. Only one specific literary image from the finished novel makes it into this early summary, that of the concluding scene in which McTeague survives a fight with his pursuer only to find himself handcuffed to the man’s lifeless body miles from help (McElrath and Crisler 166-67).

This arresting image of indivisible bodies, which supplied the germ of inspiration for the young author’s first mature work, has divided criticism of it ever since. In an appraisal of Norris’s accomplishments shortly after his premature death in 1902, William Dean Howells famously described the scene as an indulgence “of rank melodrama” in an otherwise accomplished work (773). This sentiment would be echoed repeatedly by scholars for the next century, including notably Charles Walcutt in his influential study of naturalism (Walcutt 132). Even Erich von Stroheim’s famous silent film adaptation of the novel attempts to rework the material into a less nuanced moralism, adding a final act of empathy to the *tableau* in which McTeague releases the canary from its gilt prison and tries to set it free, though it lands apparently dead on the canteen. Keith Newlin suggests reading the final scene as borrowing “from melodrama the device of the *tableau*, a climactic silent arrangement of actors that offers a symbolic picture of the preceding conflict” (11). Newlin, however, is not the first to identify the
scene as a *tableau*. For more than half a century scholars have used the term *tableau* to name Norris’s aesthetic decision to end the novel with this scene (Culmsee 28; French 68; Wyatt 106).

Identifying the device as an element of melodrama, Newlin argues that “rather than simply accept, as the melodramatist does, the moral nature of people as an ethical given . . . the naturalists focus much of their narrative on the causal forces that determine behavior” (12). Naturalism reproduces the normative moral dualism of melodrama through the use of concrete didactic symbols. The symbols that compose the final *tableau* both reinforce the didactic function and recompose internal moral dilemmas as external symbols of environmental and biological forces.

The recovery of Norris’s early sketch, which omits any reference to naturalist tropes, as well as the scene’s negative critical reception, suggest that it represents an aesthetic lapse particular to Norris’s interpretation of Naturalism. Writing for the magazine *The Wave* in 1896, a twenty-six-year-old Norris, in an oft-cited passage, wrote:

> “Naturalism is a form of romanticism, not an inner circle of realism . . . That Zola’s work is not purely romantic as was Hugo’s, lies chiefly in the choice of Milieu. These great, terrible dramas no longer happen among the personnel of a feudal and Renaissance nobility . . . but among the lower—almost the lowest—classes . . . This is not romanticism—this drama of the people, working itself out in blood and ordure. It is not realism. It is a school by itself, unique, somber, powerful beyond words. It is naturalism.” (“Zola” 1108)

However we identify its aesthetic origins in melodrama, the use of the *tableau* as a formal device, as the opening examples from the Rougon Macquart show, is not idiomatic to Norris’s
understanding of Naturalism and in fact justifies the aesthetic composition of this final scene. And Norris himself once remarked on the “tremendous and terrible pictures” that define Zola’s style (“Zola’s Rome” 59).

In McTeague’s finished form, the titular protagonist practices an improvised dentistry in San Francisco, routinely pulling the teeth of his patients with his fingers. In an effort to control the violent sexual impulses he feels towards Trina, the cousin of his best friend Marcus, McTeague decides to marry her. Marcus reluctantly supports the union but soon resents his acquiescence when Trina wins the lottery. When he retaliates by revealing to the local authorities that McTeague never obtained a dental degree, McTeague must abandon his profession. The couple become increasingly destitute in an escalating cycle of abuse, McTeague’s temper exacerbated by alcohol and Trina’s extreme parsimony fostering an obsession with hoarding gold. McTeague rapes, and physically mutilates Trina, biting her fingers until they must be amputated. Eventually he kills her and travels to several small mining towns in rural California, constantly driven on by an instinct for self-preservation. Marcus pursues and confronts him in Death Valley where, on the verge of dehydration, McTeague kills Marcus only to discover that he has become handcuffed to the dead body. McTeague’s pet canary, half dead from the heat rests next to the two, twittering in a gilt cage.

Instinct figures prominently throughout McTeague. At the formal level of the isomorphism of symbolism and biology we can separate this representation into its constituent moments of conceptualization. McTeague negates his lack of an education repeatedly throughout the novel in the figure of the frequently described seven volumes of Allen’s Practical Dentist on his shelves, the gilded tooth, and his refinement of filling procedures. The negation of a synthetic
negativity (illiteracy) appears not as literacy, but as innateness taking the external biological form of an alienating animal instinct. The *lusus naturae* of instinct, as the appearance of agency and symbolism where none is presumed to exist (i.e. in nature) is reinteriorized and reconciled as a moment in which nature prefigures its future form, as a moment of presimilitude (see fig. 3.2).

The moment of presimilitude in *McTeague* is particularly interesting because the reconciliation of the *lusus naturae* of instinct is simultaneously the regeneration of the past, atavism, the biological reversion to previous evolutionary forms. Atavism reconciles instinct as the latency of abilities from previous evolutionary states.

### 3.4 The Canary and the Dog

Norris uses race to illustrate hereditary instinct and rarely duplicates racial caricatures within the novel’s ensemble of characters. German, Mexican, Jewish and the valorized English hereditary dispositions of the supporting characters are each in turn presented next to the violent dissipation of Norris’s Irish protagonist. Amid this exaggerated racial diversity, two animal figures appear in the novel illustrating instinct as well: the canary and the dog.

The final *tableau* in *McTeague* unites the novel’s representation of instinct and atavism in the image of McTeague’s pet canary. The popular association of miners with canaries, who were used in coal mines to warn of the presence of toxic gases, explains the canary’s inclusion. McTeague, a former miner, has at this point in the novel returned to his former profession after losing his dental practice. The novel represents McTeague’s instinct as atavism, the biological reversion to previous evolutionary forms. The atavistic incarnation of instinct instills in him a precognitive awareness of his pursuers that is thereby symbolized by the canary, an animal
whose legendary function is the forewarning of danger. Both end up trapped, McTeague handcuffed to Marcus, the canary in its gilt prison, their fates mirroring each other’s.

The novel uses the figure of the dog in multiform ways. Norris depicts McTeague as a dog, refers to the early dynamic between Trina and McTeague as that between a young girl and a St. Bernard, foreshadows McTeague and Marcus’s fight through the fight of two dogs, describes repeatedly a sculpture of a dog on McTeague’s mantle, and gives to the old Englishman, the only character with a gentle and productive instinct, the profession of a dog surgeon who specializes in running a dog hospital from the alley. As an avatar for the violent masculinities of McTeague and Marcus, the dog is a counterintuitive symbol to juxtapose with the canary.

Common readings of McTeague identify its representation of instinct as illustrative of xenophobic cultural fears. Yet the meanings of the novel’s interspecial and interracial symbols overlap so frequently that any argument based on their presumed reification must confront this aesthetic homogenization. Norris describes both McTeague and his neighbor Zerkow, in moments of violent atavistic regression, manifesting claw-like “prehensile fingers” that grasp at the horizon, collapsing the novel’s depiction of their important racial differences (293, 433, 554, 562; ch. 3, ch. 12, ch. 21). Zerkow kills another tenant earlier in the novel, and the act foreshadows McTeague killing Trina. If Norris defined them against a prominent non-immigrant character, one might argue that the novel still embodied xenophobic anxiety. Indeed, such anxiety is present in Norris’s education at Berkeley, Norris’s appreciation of the influence of Lombroso’s criminal psychology on Naturalism, and present throughout his non-aesthetic writings. The gradual erasure of difference between identities of course helps little in rehabilitating the novel politically, but it does dispel the notion that it is alterity that truly
generates the novel’s central anxieties. Such historical facts confuse what *McTeague* struggles through in producing its aesthetic images of life.

That a canary and a dog should come to share the same semantic plane too seems like an aesthetic lapse, a contingent mixing of metaphors perhaps explicable within the peculiarities of Norris’s historical milieu. Something happens, however, when the semblance of alterity is subjected to greater scrutiny. The canary (*serinus canaria*) actually acquires its name from its native habitat, the Canary Islands (*Las Islas Canarias*), named after its largest island *Gran Canaria*, an adaption of the original Latin name *insula canaria*—*island of dogs*. Pliny explains the origin of the name in Book Six of *Natural History*, recounting the expeditions of the Numidian king Juba a half-century earlier. According to Pliny:

> proximam ei Canarium vocari a multitudine canum ingentis magnitudinis (ex quibus perducti sunt Iubae duo); apparere ibi vestigia aedificiorum; cum omnes autem copia pomorum et avium omnis generis abundant . . . (6.37.205)

and next to it one named Canaria, from its multitude of dogs of a huge size (two of these were brought back for Juba). He said that in this island there are traces of buildings; that while they all have an abundant supply of fruit and of birds of every kind . . . (Rackham 491)

Pliny’s remark has provided the most exemplary statement on the Latin etymology at play in the naming of the islands, though differing accounts have been given for their non-Romance variants. Read in context, we see that the remark itself contains reference to the bird whose name embodies the future morphology of this denomination. But any search for reversibility in signification between *canis* and canary masks the plastic movement of metamorphosis that binds
these two figures in an ever-regenerating dyad. Only the isomorphism, not the reversibility, of symbolism and biology can explain the perpetual regeneration of a connection between the two and the inability for supplementarity to disengage from materiality into an ever escaping transcendental trace.

Biologists now believe that the dogs observed by Juba’s sailors were not indigenous to the island but were in fact variants of ancient Molossian hounds, introduced earlier in the region by Greek-speaking tribes (Freccero 52-53). These great dogs were the progenitors of today’s Tibetan and English mastiffs as well as the St. Bernard. Whatever breed of dog might have been observed on the island, the *presa canario* or Canary mastiff which now incarnates this etymology is a relatively recent pedigree, an attempt through cross-breeding with English and Spanish mastiff breeds to substantiate the legendary figure of the dog that gave the islands its name.

To obtain recognition from the Spanish Royal Canine Society, breeders of the Canary mastiff retroactively erased their efforts. The term *canaria*, retained in the name of the islands through the denomination of the bird that supplanted its Latin meaning, became the progenitor in turn of today’s enormous canary mastiff. The canary mastiff incarnates a connection once thought only a matter of etymology. The reversibility of the figure of the canary and that of the mastiff is not as significant as the fact that there is so little slippage in the regeneration of meaning between the two.

Neither the etymological connection nor the discursive history that effectively recorded for posterity the meaning of the island’s name play as important a role as the biological materiality through which the identity of a canary and dog are reproduced. We see this in the fact that Pliny’s statement also recorded the existence of the bird who would carry that denomination.
The actual existence of this bird, not the discursive recording of its existence, which has been forgotten and which goes without mention when the etymological history is recounted, kept the memory of Pliny’s constitutive denomination at play in the cultural memory of Canary Islanders such that they would then retroactively reproduce a dog to incarnate that connection, a dog whose very English name Canary mastiff reproduces as two terms what were formerly only morphological and semantic variations of one (canis/canary).

Norris includes the following detail to prefigure McTeague’s atavistic regression:

Unfortunately, Trina had cultivated tastes in McTeague which now could not be gratified . . . . He preferred Yale mixture in his pipe; Trina had made him come down to Mastiff, a five-cent tobacco with which he was once contented, but now abhorred. (463; ch. 15)

Mastiff tobacco canisters from the era actually included images of large English mastiffs. The detail resembles a deliberate attempt by the young Norris to self-consciously scatter images of dogs throughout the novel. Norris describes the “sounds of incessant mastication” in McTeague’s apartment building (384; ch. 9). And though there is no direct etymological connection between the two (mastication comes from the Greek μαστιγάω “to gnash the teeth”) the phonetic similarity of mastiff and mastication further consolidates the image of the dog as an avatar for the bête humaine dentist who extracts teeth with his fingers, “a great brute of a husband who bit [his wife] like a dog” (497; ch. 18). McTeague’s symbolization of the canary and the dog, lacking any immediate connection to the metamorphosis of canario, nevertheless reproduces, in the further aesthetic development of these symbols, evidence of this shared materiality in this specific image of a mastiff. The symbols are rather heavy-handedly chosen by Norris and do not indicate the
subconscious influence of a non-aesthetic discursive milieu. Nor should the choice of a canary and a dog to symbolize McTeague’s atavism be considered a mere accident and coincidence. We must seriously consider the isomorphism of symbolism and biology such that we can recognize, in two apparently random figures, a shared materiality, as real as any non-aesthetic discursive milieu studied by New Historicists, in which a dog and a bird produce the future image of the other.

3.5 The Line of Flight of Identity from Itself

Shortly before her marriage to McTeague, we learn that Trina practices her own little trade on the side, carving wooden animals for Noah’s ark sets sold in her Uncle Oelbermann’s toy store. Both her parsimony and her woodworking talent are attributed to her German-Swiss heritage:

Trina’s ancestors on both sides were German-Swiss, and some long-forgotten forefather of the sixteenth century, some worsted-legginged wood-carver of the Tyrol, had handed down the talent of the national industry, to reappear in this strangely distorted guise. (357; ch. 8)

Taking a single piece of straight-grained pine, Trina begins her work carving a crude shape of the figures, “roughly at first with the big blade; then [going] over it a second time with the little blade, more carefully” (357; ch. 8).

The plastic artistry of Trina’s craft, however, is augmented through the use of paints and glues. The straight-grained pine does not fully flesh out the materiality of the forms she creates:

. . . then I put in the ears and tail with a drop of glue and paint it with a nonpoisonous paint–Vandyke brown for the horses, foxes, and cows; slate gray
for the elephants and camels; burnt umber for the chickens, zebras, and so on; then, last, a dot of Chinese white for the eyes, and there you are, all finished. They sell for nine cents a dozen. Only I can’t make the manikins.”

“The manikins?”

“the little figures, you know—Noah and his wife, and Shem, and all the others.” It is true. Trina could not whittle them fast enough and cheap enough to compete with the turning lathe, that could throw off whole tribes of peoples of manikins while she was fashioning one family. (357; ch. 8)

A diligent producer of difference, Trina creates a semblance of diversity where none exists. Artificially deepening identity’s distance from itself, she applies “Chinese White” paint for the eyes and even pastes a “Made in France” sticker on the finished box. Nearly everything in fact is made by her alone: the ark, the animals, even the box. Only the sentient human figure escapes her trade in crude representation. In the reproduction of these “manikins” no single plastic artist can compete with the turning lathe that throws “off whole tribes of peoples.”

Norris connects the depiction of Trina as a plastic artist with the figure of the dog in an adjacent description of McTeague and Trina’s early playfulness with each other:

Trina took an infinite enjoyment in playing with McTeague’s great square-cut head, rumpling his hair till it stood on end, putting her fingers in his eyes, or stretching his ears out straight and watching the effect with her head on one side. It was like a little child playing with some gigantic, good-natured Saint Bernard. The simile identifies not just any dog, but a St. Bernard, a breed that shares the same ancestry as the Canary mastiff. Here we find finally the most concrete expression of the figure of the dog as
a figure of vérité plastique. Trina, the plastic artist, shapes McTeague’s face like a block of clay into the figure of the dog, his future form in the novel.

Malabou’s voir venir names an orientation toward the future conditioned by the impossibility of escaping the materiality of the present. She emphasizes the aleatory or contingent character of material metamorphosis to reclaim it from arguments of determinism. In literary representation, however, I have emphasized the ways in which this orientation toward the future is conditioned by and anticipated within the confines of materiality. Semblances of alterity in the literary representation of life can be reconciled as demonstrating the isomorphism of symbolism and biology. Presimilitude names the aesthetic moment of voir venir. The future in the literary image of life appears as vérité plastique, the generation of meaning and form not through difference but through identity’s agonistic relationship to itself as fluid and materially constrained. As I have argued, this refocuses interpretation on those literary moments in which these images collapse into themselves and draw attention back to the materiality of their emergence.

Trina’s plastic artistry both expresses and contains what little perception she has of her own situation and her future. By the end of the novel her fingers, subjected nightly to McTeague’s vicious biting are lacerated. They never heal and become only further inflamed and infected as she whittles away at the blocks of wood, shaping the wood with a jackknife and applying paint. Reflecting on her work Trina asks herself, “Where do all the toys go to? . . . The thousands and thousands of these Noah’s arks that I have made—horses and chickens and elephants—and always there never seems to be enough” (501-2; ch. 19).
Trina does not recognize herself, carved like these animals by a man who behaves like an animal when she stares at these wooden figures. She does not recognize her own future in her work, but she feels, without recognition, this very equation. This question, against the assertion of Derrida, does not arrive from a future-to-come, does not proceed from the future. It does not “exceed any presence as presence to itself.” It does not make this “presence possible on the basis of the movement of some disjoining, disjunction or disproportion.” This question is the future as the very equation of the self, a disaffected and instinctive mode of *voir venir* in which the future is the line of flight of identity from itself toward an outside, toward an alterity that does not exist.
CHAPTER 4: IPSEITY AND THE SOVEREIGN IMAGE OF LIFE

4.1 Canst thou draw out leviathan with an hook?

Norris concludes the opening chapter of his 1901 novel *The Octopus* with a *tableau* reminiscent of that which opens Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Hearing an approaching train and a pained bleating, Norris’s protagonist mounts a hill and discovers that the train has plowed through a flock of sheep where it breached the fence. For the novel’s aspiring poet Presley, “the pathos of it was beyond expression” (616; bk. 1, ch. 1). The free indirect discourse in the passage that follows depicts Presley’s anxiety of representation. Searching for homeric similes, hexameters, and metaphors that can perfectly render the moment, Presley’s mind, captured in the narration, produces a devouring vociferation. In Hardy’s novel an overzealous dog thoughtlessly directs a flock of sheep off a cliff. In Norris’s, an equally bestial yet unchallenged manifestation of sovereignty appears within Presley’s disgorging of metaphors, a figure that has for centuries been synonymous with theorizations of sovereignty in English statecraft, that of the leviathan:

Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel and steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus. (617; bk. 1, ch. 1)
Critics cite this sentence as an example of Norris’s “big bow-wow sentences” filled with “mixed metaphors” (McElrath and Crisler 176). Indeed, the two semicolons that separate an almost syllogistic sequence fail to syntactically subordinate any of the figures that appear. Norris represents the railroad “as the symbol of a vast power” itself described in bestial terms, a power which is then likened to the leviathan. And yet, whatever the aesthetic weaknesses of Norris’s style, the passage partakes in a long tradition of overwrought representation in political theory, a phenomenon that Derrida described as the “haunting of the sovereign by the beast and the beast by the sovereign” (Beast 18).

Hobbes symbolizes the biological and symbolic limit of political sovereignty in the figure of the leviathan as described in Job 41:33. The leviathan unites the fates of all into the body of one. This “Mortall God” is beholden to nothing on earth, “but because he is mortall, and subject to decay” has a natural limit set to his sovereignty (Leviathan 260, 496; ch. 17, ch. 28). The Octopus like many of Norris’s sources of inspiration in Les Rougon-Macquart, opposes the human embodiment of authority to a germinating “Force,” which nevertheless manifests itself as the biological limit of sovereignty. And although Walter Benn Michaels offers a Hobbesian reading of corporate personhood in The Octopus, we shall see that the novel itself works towards a different reconciliation of this fearsome lusus naturae. The Octopus adapts a naturalist trope emblematically explored in the central conceit of Germinal, the final passage of which appears in different forms throughout Les Rougon-Macquart including Le Docteur Pascal:

“Des hommes poussaient, une armée noire, vengeresse, qui germaient lentement dans les sillons, grandissant pour les récoltes du siècle futur, et dont la germination allait faire bientôt éclater la terre.” (Germinal 1591; pt. 7, ch. 6)
Men were springing up, a black avenging host was slowly germinating in the furrows, thrusting upwards for the harvests of future ages. And very soon their germination would crack the earth asunder. (Tancock 503-504)

In *The Octopus* the latent power of the germinating wheat and its vitalization of the railroad vanquishes the personal sovereignty of two former ranch owners, the owner of the railroad, his representative, and an unknown rapist. Norris personifies the sovereignty of the wheat as “The Force,” and the last of these figures, the rapist, as “The Other.” As competing manifestations of sovereignty, these two opposed terms, “Force” and “Other,” thematize the dynamic between plasticity and alterity hitherto traced in my analysis. As I have shown repeatedly, the aesthetic image of life asserts its plasticity against an impossible transcendental alterity.

**4.2 Ipseity**

In the first chapter I adapted Lévi-Strauss’s discovery that binary oppositions appear in representations of nature because such oppositions symbolically structure the biological act of cognition. In this continuum, Lévi-Strauss argues, the representation of the natural world is always already a reflection on the biological structure of thought. I approach such a continuum as an isomorphism of symbolism and biology, and argue that just as contemporary philosophy has, through the work of Catherine Malabou, traced the symbolization of the biological, aesthetic criticism should seek to trace the biologization of the symbolic, that is, should seek to trace the way biology imposes its presence as an ontological piece of representation. Representations of *lusus naturae* in texts offer an opening for analysis since they force an author to conceptualize nature’s proper place in representation. The textual reconciliation of *lusus naturae*, always a conceptual disavowal, evinces the real existence of such an isomorphism.
The second chapter distinguished this isomorphism from the transcendental symbolic economies presupposed by Derrida’s interrelated concepts of the trace, l’abîme, and supplementarity. In a reading of the lusus naturae of hermaphroditism I develop the concept of vérité plastique in which aesthetic representation presents identity as indivisible and calls attention to the materiality of identity’s emergence. In the third chapter I elaborated further the conceptual form taken by a reconciled lusus naturae in a text, what I refer to as presimilitude, defining it against Derrida’s articulation of l’avenir.

What follows therefore analyzes those instances, so common in naturalist tropes, in which a lusus naturae appears as the sovereign image of life. Derrida’s critique of sovereignty, if we recall, begins by naming and deconstructing a concept whose close relationship to vérité plastique should become readily apparent. Ipseity names an indivisible identity not subject to transcendental alterity. Derrida argues that political-theology’s mixing of bestial metaphors demonstrates the instability of ipseity. He explores ipseity’s connection to sovereignty in two texts: Rogues and the first volume of The Beast and the Sovereign, explaining,

Before any sovereignty of the state, of the nation-state, of the monarch, or, in democracy, of the people, ipseity names a principle of legitimate sovereignty, the accredited or recognized supremacy of a power or a force, a kratos or a cracy. (Rogues 12).

The sovereign, in the broadest sense of the term, is he who has the right and the strength to be and be recognized as himself, the same, properly the same as himself. . . . The concept of sovereignty will always imply the possibility of this
positionality, this thesis, this self-thesis, this autoposition of him who posits or posits himself as ipse, the (self-)same, oneself. (Beast 66-67)

According to Derrida, since a sovereign need not justify their defining use of force, sovereignty manifests itself as an indivisible identity protected from alterity and reciprocation. This quality of sovereignty, its ipseity, necessarily fashions the image of the sovereign into that of a beast whose inhuman identity excludes it from the domains of reciprocity and language. Derrida reads the instability of the beast’s supplementation of sovereignty and vice-versa as evidence of the contingent political consolidation of ipseity.

My work thus far has methodologically inverted Derrida’s insistence that, “Every time one puts an oppositional limit in question, far from concluding that there is identity, we must on the contrary multiply attention to differences, refine the analysis in a restructured field” (Beast 16). And in doing so I have shown again and again that the illusion of difference breaks down; the reversibility of signification demonstrates a plastic field of metamorphosis against which true alterity, true difference is but an illusion, within which a presence clones itself again and again.

Using The Octopus’s sovereign images of life as my guide, what follows therefore brings my analysis of vérité plastique back to Derrida’s critique of ipseity by multiplying attention to plasticity within identity, not difference, not alterity. In doing so I demonstrate that ipseity is, at least in the case of naturalism’s central trope, the sovereign image of life, apodictic to the aesthetic, not contingent to the political, act. In the formal terms of my schema, in other words, the aesthetically necessary presimilitude of this latent germinating force is itself a very specific form of ipseity, whose name I reserve until later in the analysis.
4.3 The Octopus

Based on the Mussel Slough Massacre that pitted California ranchers against the Southern Pacific Railroad monopoly, The Octopus struggles through the question of sovereignty in diverse ways. The novel begins Norris’s projected trilogy treating the natural force of wheat compelled forward through its life-cycle, from germ to harvest, to starving mouths in India and Europe. The second novel in the series, The Pit, was published posthumously in 1903 after Norris’s premature death from appendicitis the preceding year. The Pit follows the distribution of wheat through its speculation on the Chicago exchange, and the proposed third novel, The Wolf, would have followed its distribution to relieve a European or Asian famine.

The Octopus begins shortly after the wheat harvest with Presley biking south from Bonneville to Guadalajara. His trip introduces each of the novel’s characters and ranches in turn: Hooven a German tenant of Los Muertos Ranch run by Magnus Derrick, Magnus’s son Harran, Dyke, a recently fired engineer for the railroad, Annixter the young bachelor who owns Quien Sabe Ranch, Vanamee, a shepherd, and Father Sarria a mission priest. We also learn the stories of two individuals now buried in the mission cemetery Del La Cuesta and Angéle [sic] Varian. An old man describes the former owner of Los Muertos, De La Cuesta, attributing to him the very textbook definition of a sovereign: “He had the power of life and death over his people, and there was no law but his word” (593; bk. 1, ch. 1). Norris also tells the story of Vanamee’s former lover Angéle, her rape at the age of sixteen years earlier and her death giving birth to the resulting child. The rapist’s anonymity confers on him a spectral form of sovereignty, not unlike that of the monstrous train.
The Other had withdrawn into an impenetrable mystery. There he remained. He never was found; he never was so much as heard of. A legend arose about him, this prowler of the night, this strange, fearful figure, with an unseen face, swooping in there from out the darkness, come and gone in an instant, but leaving behind him a track of terror and death and rage and undying grief. (607; bk. 1, ch. 1)

Norris personifies the unknown rapist as “The Other.” As we will see shortly, the source of inspiration for Norris’s personification of “The Force” and “The Other” can be traced back at least four years earlier to a short story Frank Norris wrote for *The Wave*.

Over the course of the novel, Presley sheds an elitist aestheticism and Annixter an aloof bachelorhood to become politically committed to the cause of the ranchers against the railroad monopoly. Unsuccessful in legally challenging the railroad’s abuse of power, Magnus and Harran bribe their way into the Railroad Commission only to be betrayed by Magnus’s other son. Dyke is persuaded to violence by an anarchist saloonkeeper, and when all else fails the remaining ranchers attempt to defend their land from confiscation with guns. Annixter and Hooven die in the shootout; Magnus is seriously wounded. All of the ranchers must finally cede their autonomy to the railroad representative Behrman who remains miraculously unharmed, even when Presley throws a bomb through his window. Not content to simply divest the ranchers of their land, Behrman feigns concern for their condition, tending to their wounds and perversely baiting them into accepting menial positions. Their degradation feeds his desire for absolute power.

The moral and narrative momentum of the novel unexpectedly falters in the penultimate chapter. And though still more terrible scenes await the Hoovens and Derricks, Norris attempts to
write his way out of a purely tragic denouement. Presley visits San Francisco and, finding himself outside the railroad owner Shelgrim’s office, suddenly desires to “see, face to face, the man whose power was so vast, whose will was so resistless, whose potency for evil so limitless” (1032; bk. 2, ch. 8). In their meeting Shelgrim persuades Presley that the railroad built itself, the wheat grew itself, and that abstract forces like supply and demand override human will. The novel here commits fully to affirming a fetishism of commodities against Marxist epistemology, avoiding any demystification whereby human relations are revealed behind the apparent agentic capacities of things.

In the scenes that follow, Norris finally integrates Vanamee’s storyline into the novel’s central narrative. The lone shepherd Vanamee, Presley believes, has the power to psychically call out to others and beckon them without saying a word. Vanamee spends the first half of the novel mourning Angéle’s death eighteen years earlier. When Vanamee encounters Angéle’s fully grown daughter, he finally comes to terms with the tragedy and interprets the child as a rebirth: “Angéle or Angéle’s daughter, it was all one with him . . . Life, ever-renewed, alone existed. Time was naught; change was naught; all things were immortal but evil; all things eternal but grief” (888-89; bk. 2, ch. 3). The great leveling power of nature, with its semblance of death actually conceals an eternal state of perfection in which all evil is eventually cleared and reborn again as good. Norris thus belatedly reconciles the worldviews of Shelgrim, Vanamee and Presley with one another and in doing so attempts to define and justify his own. This has at least been the critical consensus, though scholars have tried to distance Presley from Norris. But McElrath’s appeal, for example, to recognize Norris’s use of free indirect discourse as constitutive of the opinions of specific characters and not necessarily the author helps little in
determining Norris’s exact stance. For if Presley does not represent Norris’s viewpoint, what are we to make of this very minor difference between Presley and Norris?

4.4 Homer and the Sovereign Image of life

Norris’s own equivocating political commitments and his attempt to fully reconcile his naturalist aesthetic in one epic vision, like that of his protagonist Presley, find self-conscious expression in *The Octopus*. Presley wants “to get back to that first clear-eyed view of things, to see as Homer saw . . .” He carries a copy of the *Odyssey* in his pocket, attends “Homeric” feasts, and lives in an apartment decorated almost solely with a reproduction of Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s 1885 painting “A Reading from Homer” (609, 979, 871; chs. 1.1, 2.6, 2.3). Representing aesthetic anxiety through an attachment to Homeric epic is of course itself a very old literary trope, extending as far back as Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. Yet the specific aesthetic demands made of Norris and Presley by the wheat, justify the novel’s Homeric obsession.

The distinction between epic forms made by Erich Auerbach in his famous opening chapter of *Mimesis* demystifies the novel’s classical inheritance. Auerbach argued that “the Homeric style knows only a foreground, only a uniformly illuminated, uniformly objective present” in which the whole history of the world exists synchronically within any reference, like that of Odysseus’s scar, without syntactic subordination or differentiation. Auerbach cites Schiller early in his analysis to explain that, “Homer’s goal [Zweck] is ‘already present in every point of his progress.’” The aesthetic superiority Auerbach reads in the Hebrew Bible is a product, he argues, of its narrative lacunae, its God that, unlike Zeus, “extends into depths,” a non-present background “permeated with the most unrelieved suspense and directed toward a
single goal [Ziel]” (5, 12). According to Auerbach, the externalization of a fully immanent presence renders Greek epic incapable of apprehending psychological interiority. Auerbach’s clear valorization of one epic form over the other, however, risks stripping his argument of the subtle yet important distinction made between these two forms. Namely, what are we to make of the operative difference (and we know this is crucial because he repeats these terms throughout his analysis) between an aesthetic image of sovereignty defined on the one hand by an always already present goal (Zweck) and one driven on the other by transcendental alterity toward a single goal (Ziel)? Attention to the different German connotations of these two terms (goal as purpose as opposed to goal as end) offers little immediate clarification. Nor does Auerbach simply repurpose the classical opposition between Zweck and Ziel that extends through German military theory back to Clausewitz. Between these two different formal dispositions towards τέλος, if the latter corresponds to some form of teleology, the former, of specific importance to us in understanding the novel’s appeal to Homeric form, becomes all the more foreign.

Working our way back from the leviathan as lusus naturae in the passage that began my analysis, we can decompose the figure into its constituent moments of conceptualization (see fig. 4.1). Presley negates the synthetic negativity of a perceived ineffability, he reencounters that negated negativity now exteriorized not as communicability, but as a devouring vociferation captured in the novel’s free indirect discourse, the “big bow-wow sentences” that themselves construct the appearance of the leviathan as a lusus naturae. The reconciliation of this lusus naturae, unlike many of those previously analyzed, is directly articulated in the explanations of Shelgrim, Vanamee, and Presley in the final chapters that have proved so dissatisfying for critics of the novel. Since nature’s ability to represent is again intuitively negated, the conceptual form
of presimilitude in *The Octopus*, the future form prefigured by this leviathan, is “The Force,” a state of harmony in which death and time are “naught,” in which all ends, all teleology is but the illusion of an ever-present intractable life.

The Force does not represent an entirely new semiotic position here in the novel. The term *entelechy* has a long history in philosophy from Aristotle to Leibniz, in the aesthetic theory of Kenneth Burke, the biology of Hans Driesch, and the recent new materialist philosophy of Jane Bennett. I would like to begin with the etymological meaning of the term, literally that which already exists in a state of τέλος. *Entelechy* names the immanent Zweck Auerbach uses to distinguish Homeric form from the teleology of the Hebrew Bible.

My reading of “The Force” as entelechy solves a number of long-standing hermeneutic questions about *The Octopus*. We shall see that it clarifies questions of Norris’s materialist philosophy, long debated specifically with respect to his mentorship at Berkeley. It also counters Walter Benn Michaels intriguing historical reading that *The Octopus* prefigures the abstraction of corporate personhood and its many logical contradictions in the figure of the wheat. Corporate unlike corporeal personhood exceeds the boundaries of the body and for that very reason struggles to articulate itself as either entirely composed of bodies or entirely unembodied. Michaels argues that “the novel’s central image of materiality is here converted into an emblem of the immaterial, a conversion authorized but the Pauline sermon of Father Sarria” (189-90). He argues that *The Octopus* presents a force of consumption so powerful that it exceeds any potential embodiment; the figure of the wheat as person without a body consolidates “the absolute insurance of Absolute idealism” (189). Michaels’s Hobbesian reading of the wheat, like Greenblatt’s of Martin Guerre, too readily dismisses a material recalcitrance to transcendental
form. His reading would at the very least benefit from a more careful semiotic distinction; corporate personhood may be contrary to corporeal personhood, but it is not therefore its contradictory, incorporeal personhood. His citation of the sermon of Father Sarria presents a number of problems. Although Vanamee later finds truth in Father Sarria’s paraphrase of Corinthians, his is not an immaterial reading of resurrection. Norris also clearly implies that the priest is actually Angéle’s rapist. And despite the many non-aesthetic texts Michaels draws into his argument, his reading also crucially omits an early short story in which Norris himself situates his philosophy with respect to The Octopus’s themes of sovereignty.

4.5 “The Puppets and the Puppy”

In “The Puppets and the Puppy,” a very short four-page story written in script form for The Wave in 1897, Norris personifies several toy figurines: a lead soldier, a doll, a mechanical rabbit, a queen’s bishop from a chessboard, and the wooden “Mannikin” of Japhet from a Noah’s Ark toy set. Together in the corner of a play-room, they contemplate the meaning of their existence. The story ends with the interruption of a fox terrier puppy. In an instant they are all destroyed, chewed and dashed about; some are thrown down the register to the furnace. Norris “disrespectfully dedicate[s]” the story to Annie Besant, the famous theosophist who had given a speech two weeks earlier at the San Francisco Metropolitan Temple (“Puppets” 268; McElrath 53).

Although critics cite the story as one of the most concise negotiations of Norris’s naturalist philosophy, their interpretations vary considerably (McElrath 51; Link 103; Davey 44). Joseph McElrath suggests that the story calls into question Donald Pizer’s influential reading, that Norris primarily adopts the views of his Berkeley professor Joseph LeConte. For if Norris
could so forcefully parody Besant, how then could he come to reconcile LeConte’s evolutionary theism? Eric Carl Link on the other hand reads the story’s discussion of theodicy as supporting the influence of LeConte.

Critics also ignore the dialogue’s connection with *McTeague*. Several symbols from Trina’s plastic artistry appear here in identical terms: the “non-poisonous paint,” the Noah’s Ark “manikin,” even the symbolic turning lathe against which Trina cannot compete features prominently in the end when the bishop reflects, “I owe my existence to the turning lathe. Did I ask to be turned?” (271). The bishop’s dialogue also prefigures the existential crisis of Presley in that both repeat the very same capitalized term, “Force” to explain their worldviews.

One point in particular seems to contradict McElrath’s reading of Norris’s philosophical distance from LeConte. Norris’s presumed representative, the bishop, also believes that this “Force” conveys a moral and rational order in which there is dignity in helping this “magnificent, incomprehensible aim.” The actions of the puppy that send the bishop plummeting toward the furnace may finally disabuse him of these notions, yet nothing in the text indicates a change of heart (“Puppets” 269-70). On the other hand, if we are to follow Link and read the story as a consideration of theodicy, identifying as he does “The Boy” with God, how do we explain the fact that the appearance of sovereignty in the story is actually a destructive irrational puppy?

In the dialogue, the skeptical bishop must defend his position of scientific materialism from the other toys who have adopted variants of Besant’s views. All save the bishop believe that “there is a Boy, and [they are] made in his image.” The bishop argues instead that “there is no Boy except that which exists in your own imagination . . . there is, perhaps, a certain Force that moves us from time to time.” The wooden Japhet believes in some form of reincarnation through
which he “shall have a white shellac finish instead of this base coating of non-poisonous paint, and [he] shall live forever in a Noah’s Ark of silver.” The lead soldier to whose interjection Norris adds the parenthetical remark “soliloquizing,” believes he will be “re-melted and recast [to] become a finer soldier . . . immortality [being] but the betterment of the race” (269-270).

That Norris four years before the publication of *The Octopus* deliberately opposed his materialism to this view clarifies at least one reading. *The Octopus* ends with a passage that includes the following: “Greed, cruelty, selfishness, and inhumanity are short-lived; the individual suffers, but the race goes on” (1098; conclusion). Michaels even suggests that Norris posits race here like the wheat (in his reading) as a metaphysical form of personhood (*Gold Standard* 190). And yet it is clear from the remark of the lead soldier that Norris found objectionable exactly this view in Besant’s theosophy. The sovereignty of the wheat never exceeds its material form; it never valorizes itself out of materiality. Entelechy not teleology motivates The Force. Far from guaranteeing its tyranny, The Force’s ipseity as entelechy, the indivisibility that defines its manifestation of sovereignty, prevents it from becoming, like Angéle’s rapist, a spectral, domineering form of transcendental alterity.

**4.6 Vanamee and Angéle**

Resolving the legacy of Romanticism in Norris’s work therefore becomes an ever more important task in any interpretation of *The Octopus*’s sovereign image of life. Norris himself described the Vanamee and Angéle subplot as “the most romantic thing I’ve yet done” (qtd in McElrath and Crisler 352). Norris introduces the subplot in the novel’s opening and develops it periodically in four subsequent chapters. Vanamee, having lost his position as shepherd for the sheep-raisers, supervises the harnessing and deployment of the plows in the day, contemplating
the sowing of the earth. In the evening he begins to mourn Angéle, “his grief recoiling upon him like the recoil of a vast and terrible engine” (683; bk. 1 ch. 4). Seeking comfort in the Mission garden where the former lovers would meet, he speaks with Father Sarria. Critics frequently cite Sarria’s paraphrase of Corinthians 15:36-38 here as directly representative of Vanamee’s and by proxy Norris’s worldviews (Michaels 189-90; Starr xxvii). But Vanamee refuses to accept a purely immaterial affirmation like that read into the Pauline metaphor:

I don’t want her changed. I don’t want her spiritualised, exalted, glorified, celestial . . . Her soul! That was beautiful, no doubt. But, again, it was something very vague, intangible, hardly more than a phrase. But the touch of her hand was real, the sound of her voice was real, the clasp of her arms about my neck was real. (690-91; bk. 1, ch. 4)

And though Vanamee trusts Father Sarria, Norris indicates throughout the novel that this Mexican priest is the actual rapist, a reading first persuasively made four decades ago (Burns 567-69). Sarria, like the men who will later partake in the mass slaughter of rabbits, Norris suggests in one of the novel’s notoriously racist passages, succumbs to the “degenerated blood of the Portuguese, Mexican, and mixed Spaniard” (978; bk. 2, ch. 6). The exchange that follows then clearly differentiates a naive Vanamee from Norris:

“Is there anything to tell, Father? Has any discovery been made, any suspicion developed, as to—the Other?”

The priest shook his head.

“Not a word, not a whisper. It is a mystery. It always will be.” (692; bk. 1, ch. 4)
What better way to cement the distinction between Vanamee’s searching materialism and Father Sarria’s Pauline counseling than by emphasizing Vanamee’s gullibility in the face of Sarria’s metaphysical evasion. The Other stares Vanamee in the face, hiding his identity through the projection of an ineluctable transcendental alterity.

Attention to the diegetic exposition of the Vanamee subplot also immediately clarifies Michaels’s mistaken interpretation of the novel’s figuration of the wheat. Norris uncharacteristically places the passage that Michaels cites within a dialogue, not the free indirect discourse, as if to call attention to Vanamee’s naivety as to the true state of affairs. Vanamee will not learn of the existence of Angéle’s daughter until much later in the novel. Vanamee at this point in the narrative instead believes that his psychic sixth-sense has picked up on her spirit lingering in the fields. He conveys the experience of calling out to this ghost with a gloss on the developing germination of the wheat:

> Can you imagine the first—the very first little quiver of life that the grain of wheat must feel after it is sown, when it answers to the call of the sun, down there in the dark of the earth, blind, deaf; the very first stir from the inert . . . long before the microscope could discover the slightest change,—when the shell first tightens with the first faint premonition of life? Well, it is something as illusive as that. (749; bk. 1, ch. 6)

Michaels cites the very same passage, forgetting its position in the narrative, forgetting the fact that Vanamee is still unaware that the presence felt is not illusive at all; it is not the presence of Angéle’s spirit but of her now matured daughter. Michaels asserts that, “The novel’s central image of materiality is here converted into an emblem of the immaterial . . . For in identifying
the germination of the wheat with the emergence of a spiritual out of a natural body, Norris describes production itself as the transcendence of the material” (189-90). And while *The Octopus* does fail to represent a solution to the forms of capitalist exploitation it depicts, Michaels’s political commitment here, in a manner characteristic of New Historicist criticism, produces an obvious mistake.

A close reading of the original passage from Corinthians, in which Paul uses the germinating wheat as an analogy for resurrection, does not contradict Vanamee’s materialist interpretation either. And Norris’s theological deliberation of this trope, so central in both his trilogy and in *Les Rougon-Macquart*, helps explicate its aesthetic role as the sovereign image of life. Father Sarria paraphrases Corinthians 15:36-38 and the first part of 44 early in the novel. Vanamee himself recites line 36 in his frustration speaking to a confused Presley, and lines 36-37 and 42-43 appear again much later as free indirect discourse when Vanamee finally meets the new Angéle. In line 36 Paul admonishes: “ἄφρων, σὺ ὃ σπείρεις οὐ ζωοποιεῖται ἐὰν μὴ ἀποθάνῃ” ‘Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die’ (*Epistles; New Testament*; 1 Cor. 15:36). In its translation as “quickening,” the verb ζωοποιεῖν (*to make alive*) may seem idiosyncratic to the biological analogy of the wheat. But ζωοποιεῖν agrees exclusively with neither the pre nor post resurrection bodily forms distinguished in Corinthians 15:44.

Norris tellingly omits the potentially immaterialist line 44 later in the novel. But the immateriality that Michaels reads into the King James translation is even less clear-cut in the original text: “σπείρεται σῶμα ψυχικόν, ἐγείρεται σῶμα πνευματικόν . . .” ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body . . .’ (1 Cor. 15:44). The two opposed adjectives ψυχικός and πνευματικός have accreted distinctions through two millennia of biblical exegesis (here
translated as “natural” and “spiritual”). But in the original Greek they are direct synonyms, a fact that has troubled close biblical readings for ages (Goodwin 73). Taking the same suffix ἰκός (related to) the root nouns ψυχή and πνεῦμα both literally denote a movement of air, and have been used interchangeably to mean an animating breath, the abstraction of life, or its metaphysical equivalents (soul or spirit). Stripped of the theological projection of différance, Paul’s admonishment to the Corinthians literally reads: “it is sown a breath-full body, it is raised a breath-full body.” That the later form should come to denote a body given breath (by the holy spirit) as opposed to one having its own animating breath has depended entirely on the metaphysical nuances accumulated in the Christian discursive tradition. Neither one is in any case less material than the other, and the latter’s immortality does not equate, as Michaels quickly assumes, to an immateriality.

When Vanamee develops a new respect for Sarria’s Corinthians paraphrase upon learning of the new Angéle, he clearly defines his interpretation as materialist. Norris also self-consciously delimits the legacy of Romanticism, with which he has struggled since his early days writing for The Wave. Angéle’s appearance fulfills Vanamee’s desire for a truly material resurrection:

Angéle or Angéle’s daughter, it was all one with him. It was She. Death was overcome. (888; bk. 2, ch. 3)

It was no longer a figment of his imagination, a creature of dreams that advanced to meet Vanamee. It was Reality—it was Angéle in the flesh, vital, sane, material . . . . Romance had vanished but better than romance was here . . . . Reality was better than Romance. (1087; bk. 2, ch. 9)
Like her mother, Angéle’s child grew up on the Seed ranch behind the mission where five hundred acres of flowers bloom, blanketing the valley in their perfume. Now eighteen, she possesses her mother’s physical attributes: her long blond hair, her full lips and slanted almond-shaped eyes. She has even been given her mother’s name.

Like the meadow of crocuses that in Apollinaire’s poem figure a regenerative field of presence, the flowers of the Seed ranch compose the material milieu for the novel’s renascent image of Angéle:

From out this life of flowers, this world of colour, this atmosphere oppressive with perfume, this darkness clogged and cloyed, and thickened with sweet odours, she came to him . . . the smell of the roses in her hair of gold, the aroma and the imperial red of the carnations in her lips . . . Her feet were redolent of hyacinth.

(888; bk. 2, ch. 3)

Norris appropriates directly several tropes from Zola, the description of Silvère and Miette from *La Fortune des Rougon* and that of the hothouse in *La Curée*. Angéle emerges from a floral materiality of which she is herself composed.

Her eyes are at one point described as, “violet blue, heavy lidded,” and later simply as “violet eyes, bizarre, oriental” and finally as a mirror for the flowers themselves: “the reflection of the violets in the profound dark blue of her eyes” (605, 615, 689; bk. 1, chs. 1, 4). Here again as I argued in my analysis of Apollinaire’s poem, the sliding figuration of the eyes produce only the semblance of *différance*. The eyes of a lost lover and their floral avatars do not switch places, they do not reveal an abyme of representation. They are rather isomorphic, reflecting as they do here the one in the other.
Despite Norris’s self-theorized engagement with Romanticism, the apparent Romantic borrowings of the Vanamee and Angéle subplot are, I would argue, in fact more consonant with the necessary aesthetic effects of the isomorphism of biology and symbolism. The trope of the reincarnated lover that Norris adopts here has many precedents. McElrath and Cristler make a tantalizingly unexplored reference to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “Ligeia” in their biography on Norris, describing the “gothic, ‘Ligeia’-like subplot of The Octopus” (352). In this 1838 story of the death and resurrection of a young woman appear themes that have featured prominently in my study. And though Norris himself wrote several gothic short stories in his youth, these specific themes appear in the absence of any evidence of intertextual borrowing, in the absence of generic justification. The aesthetic process of representing the text’s concepts demands them. As the corpse of another woman revivifies, metamorphosing into the long-deceased Ligeia, the transformations of death and resurrection are depicted through a subtly shifting color continuity from “a waness even more than that of marble,” a whiteness of statuary, to the fading rosy “hues of life” (362-363).

Ligeia’s hair, like that of Odysseus before her, curls in the manner of flower petals, setting “forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, ‘hyacinthine!’” (351). Norris too repeatedly attaches to Angéle this perennial floral symbol of resurrection, referring to her feet as “redolent of hyacinth” (690, 888; 1.4, 2.3). The apparently simple symbolic citation though disguises the deep conceptual linkages it provides. Ovid’s retelling of Hyacinthus’s accidental death at the hands of his lover Apollo connects the vérité plastique of Ligeia’s resurrection with the figure of the hyacinth in a manner that I believe would not have been consciously considered by Poe or Norris.
When the discus thrown by Apollo returns to strike Hyacinthus in the face, “expalluit aeque quam puer ipse deus” ‘the god grows deadly pale even as the boy’ (10.185-86; Miller 77). The color continuity of the god and the dying Spartan boy in his arms immediately registers the conceptual meaning of the myth, its deeply overlapping figurations of isomorphism. The boy will not descend into the underworld but remain a latent part of the material world, a flower that itself enshrines the isomorphism of symbolism and biology by recording on its petals an alpha and an iota, recording the very phonetic marks of Apollo’s cries.

More than simply epitomizing the dynamic I have schematized in the preceding chapters, the *Gladiolus illyricus*, whose distinctive coloring on its lower lip-like petals make it a more likely candidate than those flowers which now bear the name hyacinth, materially constitutes the oldest trace of that dynamic (Bernhardt 141). And this flower too prefigures the resurrection of a hero later in Ovid’s poem, the appearance of Ajax (᾿ϊάς) whose name itself then reappropriates the floral record of this phoneme, a figure who will then die and become again the hyacinth. Unlike Greenblatt feeling only fear and trembling that day in the Smithsonian, it is this that Vanamee reads into Angèle’s resurrection. As Ovid makes clear, and truly only Ovid could respond to Derrida so explicitly on this point, Apollo’s divine ipseity (“expalluit aeque quam puer *ipse* deus”) is not the contingent political manifestation of a tyrannical sovereign other, but the very identity of the sovereign with the other, the reciprocating moment of plasticity in which alterity disappears.
FIGURES

negation of negativity

exteriorization

exteriorized negativity

interiorization

ALIENATION
negativity interiorized as alienated thought

Figure 1.1 Representation (Vorstellung) in Hegel’s Encyclopedia

negation of artifice
(negation of unnatural representation)

exteriorization

appearance of natural representation (lusus naturae)

interiorization

RECOGNITION
desire for representation as ontological piece of the thing itself

Figure 1.2 Representation in Michaels’s The Gold Standard
Figure 1.3 The Aesthetic Image of Life

Figure 2.1 Hermaphroditism in *La Curée*

Figure 3.1 Silvère’s Assassination
Figure 3.2 Instinct in *McTeague*

Figure 4.1 Sovereignty in *The Octopus*
REFERENCES

Ach, Jada. “‘Left All Alone in This World’s Wilderness’: Queer Ecology, Desert Spaces, and Unmaking the Nation in Frank Norris’s McTeague.” *Western American Literature*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2016, pp. 175-197.


Following the practice of Lévi-Strauss and Malabou, I include the full text of Apollinaire’s poem for easy reference in this appendix:

Les Colchiques

Le pré est vénéneux mais joli en automne
Les vaches y paissant
Lentement s’empoisonnent
Le colchique couleur de cerne et de lilas
Y fleurit tes yeux sont comme cette fleur-là
Violâtres comme leur cerne et comme cet automne
Et ma vie pour tes yeux lentement s’empoisonne

Les enfants de l’école viennent avec fracas
Vêtus de hoquetons et jouant de l’harmonica
Ils cueillent les colchiques qui sont comme des mères
Filles de leurs filles et sont couleur de tes paupières
Qui battent comme les fleurs battent au vent dément

Le gardien du troupeau chante tout doucement
Tandis que lentes et meuglant les vaches abandonnent
Pour toujours ce grand pré mal fleuri par l’automne
### APPENDIX B: GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Word</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>l'abîme</em></td>
<td>the transcendental form taken by the trace</td>
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<tr>
<td>alterity</td>
<td>otherness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alterity (materialist)</td>
<td>the temporal relationship of identity to itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alterity (transcendental)</td>
<td>the inconvertibility of trace and form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>atavism</td>
<td>the reversion to a previous evolutionary form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>entelechy</td>
<td>being in a state of immanent perfection; here opposed to teleology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>form (materialist)</td>
<td>structure as the line of flight of identity from itself toward an outside that does not exist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>form (transcendental)</td>
<td>the unstable structuring effected by difference</td>
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<tr>
<td>ipseity</td>
<td>indivisible identity not subject to supplementarity or transcendental alterity</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>lusus naturae</em></td>
<td>a moment in which nature appears as subject of representation</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>mise en abyme</em></td>
<td>a hermeneutic fallacy in which the placement of a representation within another representation is claimed to reveal the existence of a transcendental symbolic economy</td>
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<tr>
<td>plasticity</td>
<td>the convertibility of trace and form</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Definition</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>presimilitude</td>
<td>the reconciliation of a <em>lusus naturae</em> as an instance of nature prefiguring its future form</td>
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<tr>
<td>sovereignty</td>
<td>absolute authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>synthetic</td>
<td>denoting a psychological moment of conceptualization in which the developing concept is not embodied in a medium of representation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>supplementarity</td>
<td>the latency of oppositions that supplement the concept without actually being present</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>tableau</em></td>
<td>a literary device that didactically arranges the figures of a scene to mimic the composition of a visual form</td>
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<tr>
<td>trace</td>
<td>the infiniteness of the chain of latent oppositions that generate meaning through difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>vérité plastique</em></td>
<td>a generation of meaning not through difference but through identity’s agonistic relationship to itself as fluid and materially constrained, like the emergence of form from a block of marble</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>voir venir</em></td>
<td>a mode of anticipating the temporal relationship of identity to itself</td>
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