

Decadent Masks

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Biography as Mask: Marcel Schwob's *Vies imaginaries*

An accomplished philologist, student of the criminal argot of the medieval underworld, translator of Crawford, Shakespeare, and Defoe, Marcel Schwob was a polymathic changeling whose prodigious erudition unlocked the mystery of other people's lives. Nowhere is this quality more evident than in *Vies imaginaries*, Schwob's fanciful collection of thumbnail biographies, first published by Fasquelle in 1896.

In the long unpublished narrative that concludes *Vies imaginaries*, Morphiel is a demi-god whose task is to adorn humans with their hair. While he operates in a workshop alongside nose-designers and navel-makers, he is supervised by Avathar, "le demiurge en chef." Yet before Morphiel exists, there is the amorphousness of primary substances. And before Avathar is appointed to oversee the laboratory, there is the anonymity of a Creator still universalized as anyone. Each time a god produces, he is constrained by what he fashions, diminished by abandoning the realm of indecision. Similarly, the biographer is bounded by his choices: "Sitôt que l'Être suprême eut résolu de créer, les dieux eux-mêmes subirent la loi de leurs créations."

As with God, who in creating the world, relinquishes the prerogative to make others, the biographer practices an art form that forecloses options. "Le romancier choisit," as Georges Trembley says of Schwob. "Sur la nécessité de l'élimination, Schwob est catégorique." As with God, who remains infinite only as long as he uncompromised by creation, the biographer's work is a form of limitation, moving from unity to particularization culminating in an identification of uniqueness: "Ainsi l'idéal du biographe serait de différencier infiniment" (Préface, *Vies imaginaries*). Unlike the divinity whose omnipotence depends on inspirations that go unrealized, the writer actualizes, and in making something, dooms something else to go unmade. While stressing the pleasure of writing fictional biographies as transient identities, Schwob's texts are also oriented toward an imagined anteriority – before his identity crystallized as an invalid Jewish scholar, before the versatility of the child at play yielded to the creative sclerosis of the adult at work, and before the imaginary lives that waited to be lived turned into a single authorial life made real in the act of writing.

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"Nous, nos tours, ce sont nos livres!":
Edmond de Goncourt Dons a Clown Costume

On Saturday, April 6, 1878, Edmond de Goncourt writes in his *Journal* that he couldn't help but respond to Mme Charpentier, who had chastised him for not coming to her Friday *soirée*, that circus clowns don't remove their costumes and leave a circus performance when they have finished their numbers. On the contrary, they are obligated to stay until the very end. So, too, writers, he explains, who cannot readily leave their literary creations. On a very literal level, Goncourt's use of the clown analogy reflects his immersion in and extensive documentation of

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the world of the circus during the preparation of his novel *Les Frères Zemganno*, which would appear a year later to the month (April 30, 1879). On a deeper level, the two acrobats of the title are said to represent the powerful bond between the two Goncourt brothers, the younger of whom had died nine years earlier. Those scholars who reject the dominance of the semi-autobiographical nature of the novel turn their attention to the work as a performative exploration of the Goncourt brothers' creative process and artistic innovation.

While both approaches obtain, the circus figures would then be nothing more than masks—or "uniforms," to use the term Goncourt offers Mme Charpentier—that he donned for this particular novel, and that, once the entire "performance" is finished, he would exchange for the *uniforme du monde*, the one needed for attending Mme Charpentier's *soirées*. However, the circus acrobat as figure was not one that was abandoned with the publication of *Les Frères Zemganno*. The Goncourt brothers' fascination with and appreciation of the talent of circus performers dated easily as far back as 1859 when they attended a performance that may have included the début of Jules Léotard and his introduction of the flying trapeze into the circus repertoire. In 1894, two years before his death, Edmond was still going to the circus and experiencing the same enthusiasm before that which he called "le vrai spectacle." The association that the Goncourt brothers felt between great circus artistes and themselves was both more professionally visceral—"Nous les voyons . . . avec un remuement d'entrailles"—and more organic—"comme si ces gens étaient de notre race" (November 21, 1859). Connections of "race" transcend the merely allegorical to include a shared class experience, one that emerges in the common assumption at the time that great acrobats enjoy a quasi-aristocratic lineage (they come from circus "dynasties" like the Franconis, who served as the *documents humains* of Edmond's research for the novel). The incomparable taste and distinction of which the Goncourt brothers' boast in the *Journal* along with their work as historians, art critics, and collectors of fine art of the 18th century function as extensions of their cultivation of their aristocratic birth, however minor. This paper will explore the dimensions that the cult of aristocracy assumes in this novel.

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African Masquerade: "Cléopold" in the Congo

Neither Belgian King Léopold II (1835-1909), nor his supposed mistress, celebrated French dancer Cléo de Mérode (1875-1966), ever set foot in Africa. Yet the couple, called "Cléopold" by the satirical press, figured frequently in caricatures that seem set in Léopold's Congo. With no documentary or reportorial pretense whatsoever, these representations plunge headlong into the realm of the imaginary. Curious transpositions abound: Léopold appears as slave driver, local chieftain, or great ape, and young native girls as European ballerinas; whips replace the king's scepter, or grass skirts the dancer's tutu. As identities morph wildly, this corpus sets into motion an elaborate African masquerade.

These images were produced during roughly the decade surrounding 1900, a period marked by the height of European colonial expansion, and emergence of modern show business stardom. Within the richly phantasmatic space of an imagined Congo, they conjugate the cruelest of European colonialist autocrats, and a key prototype of later celebrity icons. The fanciful juxtaposition of these emblematic figures yields a suggestive nexus of entertainment, exploitation, eroticism, exoticism, race, and power. After teasing out these strands of meaning

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through several representative images, this paper will conclude with a different but revealingly related representation: a monument to Léopold in the former Léopoldville that, in transporting the Belgian king and his paramour to African soil, by sculptural proxy, expresses more emphatically still the ideological, sexual, and racial stakes underlying the imaginary presence of “Cléopold” in the Congo.

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La Mort de Philae: The Decadence of Loti’s “Egyptian Letters”

Pierre Loti supported Egyptian independence after the 1882 British occupation, partially out of solidarity with a friend, Moustafa Kamel Pacha, newspaper publisher and founder of the Egyptian National Party. When Loti planned a fourteen-week visit of Egypt—his longest personal journey—Egyptian nationalists treated him royally, expecting him to champion their cause. Yet the resulting book, *La Mort de Philæ* (1909), was strikingly apolitical. Although dedicated to Egyptian nationalism, Loti’s book cast a deathly pall over the country. Influenced by decadent aesthetics, his descriptions focused less on the living country of his travels than on the macabre realm of his imagination.

This essay examines the tensions among tourism, nationalism, and decadence in *La Mort de Philæ*, arguing that Loti’s decadent depiction of Egypt—itself a form of imperialism—undercut his intended support of the nationalist cause. Instead of writing a novel, in which he could have characterized the daily struggles of the Egyptians with whom he interacted, Loti’s decision to publish essays (appearing serially in French and Egyptian papers as “Lettres d’Egypte”) obliged him to adopt the outsider’s viewpoint. The result is a gorgeous and atmospheric piece of literature that reflects the mysterious Egypt of his imagination while propagating fictions about modern Egypt. The pathos of this decadent mask, however, was effective. The best-selling *Mort de Philæ* brought international attention to Egypt as it informed readers about antiquities threatened by colonial rule. Loti’s seemingly straightforward travel essays thus raise important questions about identity, representation, and the social responsibility of literature.