

Gender Expression and the “Natural” World in Camille Lemonnier’s *Quand j’étais homme: Cahiers d’une femme*

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RÉSUMÉ

Autrefois surnommé le “Zola de la Belgique” par ses contemporains, Camille Lemonnier (1844-1913) passa d’une esthétique naturaliste à une esthétique de la décadence dans la dernière décennie du XIXe siècle, avant d’explorer la fiction naturaliste vers la fin de sa vie. En dépit toutefois de ce cheminement au travers de ces trois périodes d’écriture qu’on a coutume de lui attribuer, l’écrivain continua, dans ses dernières œuvres, à dialoguer avec les discours naturalistes. C’est ainsi que dans le roman naturaliste Quand j’étais homme: Cahiers d’une femme (1907), Lemonnier revoit les principes zoliens de l’hérédité et du libre arbitre sous l’angle d’une préoccupation avec la nature et d’un modèle progressiste de différence sexuelle.

Lorqu’on l’envisage dans le contexte de la transformation esthétique de l’auteur au fil des décennies, ce roman féministe porte en effet la marque de l’engagement prolongé de Lemonnier avec les tendances naturalistes de ses œuvres antérieures et son questionnement ultérieur des piliers de la pensée naturaliste: le déterminisme social et héréditaire. En mettant en avant une vision renouvelée des instincts et une humanité interconnectée fondée sur le modèle naturaliste, le roman Quand j’étais homme, souvent négligé par la critique, met en lumière les limites des discours naturalistes français et informe les idées reçues quant à la trajectoire littéraire de Lemonnier et ses contributions continues à une forme de naturalisme belge.

Though once dubbed the “Zola of Belgium” by his contemporaries, Camille Lemonnier (1844-1913), like many of his literary peers, transitioned away from naturalism towards a decadent aesthetic in the last decade of the nineteenth century. While novels such as *Le Possédé* (1890) and *L’Homme en amour* (1897) marked this shift from his seminal naturalist work *Un mâle* (1881), Lemonnier’s stylistic and thematic trajectory soon evolved towards naturalist literature, a genre that intersected in many ways with Belgian naturalism. Despite these three commonly perceived periods during his writing career, Lemonnier nonetheless continued to engage with naturalist discourses in his latter works. Specifically, appearing in close temporal proximity to his other texts that pay homage to the natural world,¹ *Quand j’étais homme: Cahiers d’une femme* (1907) markedly problematizes traditional French naturalist discourses on sexual difference, heredity and free will through its preoccupation with nature. In addition, the novel proposes a relatively progressive conception of gender expression that challenges conventional biological discourses and instead

¹ These titles include *L’Île vierge* (1897), *Adam et Ève* (1899), *Au Cœur frais de la forêt* (1900), and *Le Vent des moulins* (1901). The naturalist journal *La Revue naturaliste* also published Lemonnier’s “Notes de carnet” in November of 1900.

privileges the social influences of sexual difference. For decadence specialist Jean de Palacio, the novel embodies Lemonnier’s shift to a new and distinct period of literary creation, and is “une œuvre de transition ou de synthèse entre deux moments de la carrière de l’écrivain. C’est à ce titre qu’il garde tout son intérêt.”² Certainly this unique text is representative of Lemonnier’s continually evolving aesthetic, but its interest does not end there. When considered in the context of the author’s aesthetic transformation over the decades, this naturist novel serves as testimony to Lemonnier’s prolonged involvement with the naturalist trends of his earlier works and his subsequent interrogation of the pillars of Zola’s naturalist thought: social and hereditary determinism. In promoting a revised vision of instinctive drive and interconnected humanity based on the naturist model, the often overlooked *Quand j’étais homme* brings to light the limitations of French naturalist discourses and informs critics’ received ideas about Lemonnier’s literary progression and his contributions to a uniquely Belgian aesthetic.³

Though one of his lesser known works today, *Quand j’étais homme*, received enormous attention at the time of publication and was hailed by the literary journal *Le Thyrses* as “un des plus beaux et des plus utiles romans féministes qui soient.”⁴ The novel’s resistance to innate, biological understandings of sexual difference and its compassionate portrayal of working-class women and the sexual aggression that they endure would rank it among works promoting a feminist ideology at the turn of the century. Written in the first person from the female protagonist’s perspective, the text documents with great empathy the emotional, physical and economic hardships of eighteen-year-old French orphan Andrée Piègre and her struggles to support herself financially in France’s vice-ridden capital city. Fed up with the continual threat of sexual violence, gender discrimination and hostile work conditions, Andrée decides to take advantage of her natural androgyny and assumes a male identity through cross-dressing. While passing as a man allows her to navigate the Parisian boulevards with newly enjoyed autonomy and self-assurance, the most noteworthy freedom that she experiences in this novel takes place not in the artificial and depraved landscape of the city but rather in the natural and restorative scenery of the countryside. Indeed, Andrée’s intermittent excursions to the countryside trigger an existential, if not spiritual, awareness about her gender identification, her ultimate decision to have a child, and how she negotiates her place in both the city and natural world. At the heart of Lemonnier’s city/countryside dichotomy lies a progressive interrogation of the ostensible “natural” order of sexual difference and a condemnation of the corrupting forces of (French) urban life. Specifically, Andrée’s transcendent ruminations about the earth and its natural landscapes mirror Lemonnier’s own dismantling of normative, essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity. Yet the novel’s relevance lies well beyond its inherent feminism and non-normative depiction of gender expression. These feminist themes, when coupled with a naturist backdrop, provide a space within the novel for Lemonnier to promote a renewed vision of Belgian fiction that breaks from French naturalism.

² Jean de Palacio, “Camille Lemonnier, ou la confusion des sexes,” *Naturalismes*, Special Issue of *Nord* 30 (1977): 37.

³ The novel was once hailed as “l’un des plus beaux [livres] – l’un des plus audacieux aussi – qu’ait écrits Camille Lemonnier” (Philippe-Emmanuel Glaser, *Le Mouvement littéraire (petite chronique des lettres):1907* [Paris: Ollendorff, 1908] 207). In her study on Belgian naturalism, Anne-Françoise Luc briefly discusses the novel in a chapter examining feminist themes in Lemonnier’s works (*Le Naturalisme belge* [Bruxelles: Éditions Labor, 1990]). However, besides Jean de Palacio’s article on gender transgression in Lemonnier’s novels (cited above), there exists no in-depth scholarly analysis dedicated to *Quand j’étais homme*.

⁴ François-Charles Morisseaux, Review of *Quand j’étais homme: Cahiers d’une femme*, by Camille Lemonnier, *Le Thyrses* 9 (1907-1908): 89.

“Soyons-nous”: Belgian Naturalism, Naturism and Lemonnier

Quand j'étais homme is a hybrid of a text with elements that are reminiscent of both naturist and naturalist fiction. These overlaps may not be surprising given naturalism's influence on the birth of naturist poetics in France in the 1890s, as well as Émile Zola's contributions to the movement's development. More specifically, Belgian naturalism's distinct thematic and stylistic characteristics made it particularly inclined to espouse naturism's intersecting principles. In the latter decades of the nineteenth century, many Belgian naturalists distanced themselves from their French counterparts and envisioned fictional portrayals that were true to their own unique cultural and linguistic history. In its first issue in 1881, the Belgian journal *La Jeune Belgique*, which frequently published naturalist texts, called upon its younger readers to promote a literary aesthetic that was independent from that of the hexagon: “Qu'ils montrent qu'il y a une jeune Belgique, comme il y a une jeune France, et qu'avec nous ils prennent pour devise: Soyons-nous.”⁵ This famous declaration of literary and cultural autonomy embodied Belgian naturalists' quest for a literary identity that distinguished them from the traditional Zolian school. With its illustrious “style coruscant” and abundant use of neologisms, archaisms and provincial expressions, Belgian naturalism's syntactical idiosyncrasies signaled a departure from Médan's purely observational and factual narrative techniques.⁶ Like Lemonnier's *Quand j'étais homme*, many Belgian naturalist works expressed an interest in the role of hereditary and environmental influences. However, Belgian writers such as Lemonnier did not adhere to the rigidity of the French naturalist doctrine. Paul Delsemme remarks, “[c]omme leurs homologues français, les naturalistes belges appliquèrent certaines croyances scientifiques: les lois de l'hérédité, l'influence du milieu; mais ils se gardèrent du dogmatisme qui empêche l'observateur d'écouter ses intuitions et de réagir selon son tempérament.”⁷ Along these lines, Belgian works strayed from the pessimism characteristic of French naturalism. Instead, they celebrated a regionalism that privileged Flemish landscapes and heritage in a way reminiscent of the renowned pictorial portrayals of Flanders in the visual arts of previous centuries. As Philippe Chavasse notes, “[u]n lien est très vite établi en Belgique entre le naturalisme et le tempérament flamand. La nouvelle esthétique évoque les grands maîtres de la peinture flamande, la minutie dans la représentation des décors et des personnages d'un Jérôme Bosch ou d'un Gérard David, la vitalité d'un Rubens ou d'un Jordaens.”⁸ With their vivid portrayals of Belgium's rural inhabitants in novels such as Lemonnier's *Un mâle* (1881) or Georges Eekhoud's *Kees Doorik* (1883), Belgian naturalist fiction prefigured in many ways the naturist aesthetic that writers would soon articulate in France.⁹

In response to the perceived decadence and decline of modern society, naturism promoted a return to the simplicity and purity of nature and rejected the abstract mysticism of Symbolism. In 1896, the year before creating the *Revue naturiste* with poet Saint-Georges de Bouhélier, author Maurice Le Blond outlined these tenets in his *Essai sur le naturisme*: “Dans l'étreinte universelle,” he wrote, “nous voulons rajeunir notre individu. Nous revenons vers la Nature. Nous recherchons l'émotion

⁵ Quoted by Paul Gorceix, *Fin de siècle et symbolisme en Belgique* (Bruxelles: Éditions Complexe, 1998) 18.

⁶ For an extremely detailed illustration of these stylistic characteristics in Belgian naturalist fiction, see pages 53-68 of Paul Delsemme, “Le mouvement naturaliste dans le cadre des relations littéraires entre la France et la Belgique francophone,” *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles* 4-5 (1984).

⁷ Delsemme 9.

⁸ Philippe Chavasse, “Dérive naturaliste: *L'Homme en amour*,” *Excavatio* 14.1-2 (2001): 231. Paul Gorceix also adds to this list Lemonnier's contemporaries, Émile Claus and Constantin Meunier. See Gorceix 23.

⁹ For an additional study on the distinctiveness of Belgian naturalism, see Luc's *Le Naturalisme belge*.

saine et divine. Nous nous moquons de l’art pour l’Art [*sic*] et de ces questions si vaines et stériles.”¹⁰ The following year, just shortly before *La Revue naturaliste*’s inaugural issue appeared, *Le Figaro* printed Bouhéliier’s *Manifeste naturiste*, launching the nascent movement into the mainstream. It then quickly gained momentum and benefited from Zola’s unwavering encouragement. In November of 1897, *La Plume* dedicated a special issue to naturism and featured an interview between the founding father of naturalism and an unknown Dutch journalist, E. Den Dulk. In this conversation, Zola lauded the emerging literary aesthetic of naturism and professed his full support of the new generation of poets and novelists: “La tentative de Saint-Georges de Bouhéliier doit réussir tôt ou tard, parce que ce jeune homme a pris le vrai chemin. [. . .] Ce que de Bouhéliier a très bien compris, c’est qu’il était forcé de prendre une tout autre route que la génération qui le précédait.”¹¹ Zola concluded the interview with an enthusiastic endorsement and promised, “[j]e soutiendrai [les naturistes] de tout mon pouvoir.”¹² Zola continued to associate himself with naturism’s evolution and maintained a correspondence with both Bouhéliier and Le Blond, who later married the French naturalist writer’s daughter in 1908.¹³

However, Zola’s initial presence in the development of naturism led some to conflate it erroneously with naturalism and the co-founders quickly laid out the major distinctions between the two movements. In his *Essai sur le naturisme*, Le Blond devotes an entire chapter to the contrasting themes and aesthetics of naturism and naturalism. Though a great admirer of Zola, Le Blond finds fault in naturalism’s privileging of detached observation over emotive immersion. He acknowledges the two movements’ common interest in contemplating what is “natural,” but underscores their differing approaches:

C’est un savant qui contemple et ausculte la nature, qui assiste à ses vibrations et à son spectacle, comme un expérimentateur devant ses cornues. Mais le naturiste s’oppose au naturaliste, en ce qu’à l’observation il préfère l’émotion. Sacrifiant la documentation exacte, il estime davantage les sites éternels. Il est moins pittoresque, mais plus sublime et néglige les individus pour les archétypes.¹⁴

For Le Blond, the naturalist’s limitations lie in his inability to expand his study of the individual to include the larger, archetypal elements of his surroundings. Specifically for fiction, contemplation of the “natural world” demands a recognition of external influences that go beyond the protagonist’s immediate milieu and hereditary influences. In a word, the naturist novel considers its characters in the context of a larger, interconnected natural world that holds its own poetic value. “L’art n’est plus, comme l’a promulgué le chef du naturalisme, la Nature vue à travers un tempérament,” continues Le Blond, “c’est la Nature elle-même qui se volatilise, se transverbe ou s’immobilise, selon que le musicien, le poète ou le peintre l’envisage.”¹⁵ Naturist fiction deviates from naturalism’s emphasis on the individual’s

¹⁰ Maurice Le Blond, *Essai sur le naturisme* (Paris: Édition du Mercure de France, 1896) 14.

¹¹ E. Den Dulk, “L’Opinion de M. Émile Zola,” *La Plume* 205 (1897): 681.

¹² Den Dulk 682. There is some speculation regarding the authenticity of this interview. John Christie’s graphological study of the original manuscript has led him to conclude that Bouhéliier, and not Zola, submitted the piece for *La Plume* (John Christie, “‘An Interview with Émile Zola’: An Unpublished Manuscript by Saint-Georges de Bouhéliier,” *Nottingham French Studies* 11.2 [1972]: 45-52).

¹³ For a discussion of the letters exchanged between the three writers, see John Christie, “Naturalisme et Naturisme: Les relations d’Émile Zola avec Saint-Georges de Bouhéliier et Maurice Leblond,” *Nottingham French Studies* 2.2 (1963): 11-24.

¹⁴ Le Blond 119.

¹⁵ Le Blond 126.

drives, albeit instinctive or hereditary. For the naturalist, Nature itself takes precedence as an active, vital force to observe and contemplate.

Lemonnier also recognized the aesthetic appeals of naturism in the latter years of his literary production. In his introductory essay to *La Plume's* 1897 special issue on naturism, he commended Bouhéliier's contributions to the movement and their powerful effect on his own sensibilities:

Quand cet écrivain abondant et ingénieux, délicat et somptueux, dans un langage à dessin allégorique, me parle de l'été et des moissons, du fleuve et de la petite maison sous les vignes, je comprends bien ce qu'il y a de merveilleux et d'éternel sous ces images. Elles ne sont que des apparences et des reflets; elles sont de légers et mobiles miroirs où passent des aspects d'univers. Comme des paraboles, elles énoncent un sens de la nature et de la vie.¹⁶

For Lemonnier, naturism represented the possibility for a new poetic that evoked an eternal interconnectedness of the natural world and recalled the major trends of Belgian naturalism. In the same year, Lemonnier published *L'Île vierge*, one of several of his naturalist novels that appeared in the next decade. His identification with both Bouhéliier and Le Blond was almost spiritual: "Ils sont ma famille intellectuelle; je vibre en eux d'une vie intense et magnifique."¹⁷ Lemonnier spoke of an interconnectedness between the three writers that remarkably prefigured his unique depictions of the universality of both nature and humanity in *Quand j'étais homme*.

In many ways, the themes of Lemonnier's novel evoke those of classic French naturalist fiction. Upon first glance, *Quand j'étais homme* is a typical experimental novel in which both author and reader examine an individual's responses to a particular conflict and context: the continued threat of poverty and violence for a single woman in Paris. In addition, like many naturalists, the author devotes a substantial section of the text to observing the living conditions of the popular classes, including prostitutes. As he did in his prototypical naturalist novel *Un mâle*, he also places a large emphasis on Andrée's instinctive drives and hereditary makeup and how they govern her relationship with both the city and countryside. However, though Lemonnier seems to draw from naturalist thought, he also problematizes the French naturalist model of fiction and puts forth conceptions of heredity and instinct that privilege the naturalist principle of the universal. Notably, unlike many other novels of Belgian naturalist fiction, Lemonnier's work does not feature his country's unique landscape as a backdrop. Given the novel's challenge to French naturalist conventions, choosing to set it in France is anything but coincidental. In transposing his storyline to France's cultural capital and its countryside, Lemonnier blatantly gestures towards a critical engagement with the principles of the Médan school. Specifically, in associating Andrée's unconventional gender expression with the harmonious interconnectedness of the natural world, Lemonnier proposes an alternative discourse to French naturalist trends that draws attention to Belgium's independent literary identity.

Nature and Gender Expression

Quand j'étais homme is structured around a juxtaposition between the city and the countryside, and for the androgynous Andrée, these contrasting surroundings impact how she experiences her own gender expression. Originally from the small town of Vernon but forced by circumstance to

¹⁶ Camille Lemonnier, "Pages préliminaires," *La Plume* 205 (1897): 649.

¹⁷ Lemonnier, "Pages préliminaires" 650.

support herself in Paris, Andrée longs for an escape from the dangers and depravities of the urban setting. Indeed, amidst her financial, emotional and physical trials in the capital city and before assuming a male identity, the protagonist finds comfort reminiscing about her childhood in Vernon’s countryside and the physical autonomy that the rural setting provided. Specific to these ruminations of her provincial upbringing is also a marked longing for its refusal of gender constraints. “[J]’aimais mieux jouer avec les garçons qu’avec les filles,”¹⁸ she fondly recollects about growing up in Vernon. In remembering her physical dominance over a male childhood friend, Andrée expresses a nostalgia for this break from gender norms: “Là bas [*sic*] à Vernon, on jouait ensemble. Lui en ai-je fichu des taloches! J’étais un vrai diable. Aux barres, j’étais la plus forte. Même je jouais au saute-mouton, les jupes ramassées dans les jambes... Je n’ai pas beaucoup de sentiment d’avoir été fille... Un garçon fendu, disait de moi M. Despugunon, un ami de la maison” (182-83). Never fully at ease navigating the urban streets under the constraints of conventional femininity, Andrée associates the countryside with the gender non-conformity that is not available to her in Paris.¹⁹

Though Andrée associates the countryside with a rewarding escape from normative femininity, she also embraces her feminine ancestry from provincial Vernon. It is especially during her most difficult times that the unconventional Andrée, paradoxically perhaps, finds comfort in the ostensibly feminine virtue that she inherited from the women in her family:

J’avais hérité des femmes de la famille l’instinct de la propreté morale en même temps que l’énergie. Leur sang m’avait été transmis avec les parcelles de droiture qu’il charriait et qui les avaient faites elles-mêmes courageuses et nettes dans la vie. Que de fois, dans les passes mauvaises, je sentis qu’elles n’étaient pas mortes, qu’elles revivaient en moi et autour de moi! Et des voix me disaient: “Ne crains rien, nous sommes là!” l’une si douce, un peu triste, comme la voix des personnes qui ont souffert; l’autre, brève, résolue, avec cet accent de la campagne que la ‘mé’ n’avait jamais perdu. Quel réconfort c’était là dans mon abandon! (160)

Lemonnier’s gesture towards a traditional naturalist discourse of heredity – centered on blood and morality – relies on Andrée’s recognition and celebration of an inherent femininity. However, this constructive, dynamic heredity is a far cry from Zola’s fatalistic “tare héréditaire.” In embracing her ancestors’ feminine presence in her hereditary makeup, Andrée also rejoices in life’s cyclic nature and hints at a nascent understanding of her own procreative responsibility. As the passage continues, she exults, “[o]n ne mourait donc pas tout entier! Quelque chose subsistait qui passait dans les enfants et qui recommençait la vie par delà la mort! Et je leur répondais, je leur criais du fond de moi: ‘Comment ne serais-je pas digne de vous, puisque moi, c’est encore vous!’ C’était cela, le vrai miracle” (160-61). With its emphasis on genetic endurance and the immortality provided by feminine procreation, this noteworthy passage recalls Belgian naturalism’s emphasis

¹⁸ Camille Lemonnier, *Quand j’étais homme: Cahiers d’une femme* (Paris: Louis-Michaud, 1907) 22. All subsequent citations are from this edition and are noted in parentheses.

¹⁹ From the gender-bending Rakma in *Le Possédé* or the hardy Germaine in *Un mâle*, so-called “masculine” women appear throughout Lemonnier’s *œuvre* and evoke the emblematic Flemish women historically depicted in Belgian paintings. Paul Gorceix tracks this thematic trend to Lemonnier’s earlier writing in art criticism: “Faut-il rappeler que Camille Lemonnier s’était appliqué, dès 1869, dans *Nos Flamands*, à construire l’identité de l’art en Belgique sur le stéréotype d’une Flandre vue à travers les modèles de Rubens, ces ‘colosses sublimes’ aux musculatures puissantes, et au miroir de la peinture de Jordaens et de Steen” (20).

on a cultural heritage. Indeed, Andrée's reflections conclude with a self-comparison to animal life and her vital place in the ecological community: "je me secouais, je faisais tomber la petite défaillance et je repartais comme la minuscule fourmi, quelquefois écrasée sous le pas énorme de la vie et me ramassant après, refilant par la grande savane" (160-61). Through this allegory, Lemonnier adds a naturist component to an otherwise naturalist discourse and thus proposes a revised Belgian model of heredity that is based on an interconnectedness with all life forms. This perceived interconnectedness, though originating for Andrée in the countryside, will eventually extend into the city when she assumes a masculine identity and reflects on the symbiotic elements of urban life.²⁰

Free Will and the City

The novel's opposition of the menacing, artificial landscape of the city with the comforting, natural scenery of the countryside is complicated by Andrée's encounters while passing as a man.²¹ It is while navigating the city in masculine attire that these two worlds symbolically collide. Dressing as a man to escape the unrelenting threats of sexual assault, the protagonist finds a new solace in the urban world that she now considers as its own ecosphere:

[D]ans ma joie d'être cette fois réellement libre, les heures me semblaient trop brèves pour jouir de toute la sensation inconnue qui me venait de la rue, du fleuve, des foules; je ne finissais pas d'aller le nez au vent comme une fourmi court sous l'herbe, faisant à mon tour ma petite rumeur de vie dans la jungle où rugissait la grande faune humaine. Je battis le pavé en tous sens; je grimpai aux omnibus; je pris vraiment possession de ce Paris où tenait un monde. (242)

Once again comparing herself to an ant in a larger natural system, Andrée's new vision of the capital city is framed in the context of ecosystems. This vision, as well as the merging of these two contrasting spheres, are a result of Andrée's newfound autonomy and self-assurance as a man on the city streets. Indeed, the freedom from the constant threat of sexual violence allows Andrée to traverse the Parisian space with an animal instinct and ease previously confined to rural life:

Il me sembla que c'était la première fois que j'assistais à cette fête quotidienne du boulevard éclairé de longs cordons de gaz [. . .]. Une femme voit ce qu'on l'a habituée à voir: un homme au contraire voit ce qu'il voit et j'étais maintenant un homme. Je fendais les groupes, j'entraais au cœur de toute cette humanité dense, comme d'un coup de nageoire le poisson joue et se meut à travers les profondeurs liquides. C'était là pour moi une sensation toute neuve qui m'agrandissait les yeux et me communiquait des sens que je n'avais pas eus avant. (239)

²⁰ This notion of a universal and interconnected humanity is a recurring theme in many of Lemonnier's naturist works. See Isabelle Krzywkowski's discussion of the enduring presence of original ancestry in the aptly titled *Adam et Ève* and *Au Cœur frais de la forêt* (Isabelle Krzywkowski, "Camille Lemonnier: du 'Jardin de la Mort' au rêve de l'âge d'or," *Naturalismes* 17-28).

²¹ For a discussion of the juxtaposition of the city (civilization) and the country ("l'antithèse de la société") in Lemonnier's works, see Krzywkowski.

Like a sea creature enjoying playful maneuvering, Andrée now navigates the stimulations of the urban landscape with unprecedented leisure and delight. The protagonist’s new encounters with city life – made possible by passing as a man – result in a greater awareness of the precariousness of gender expression. More specifically, Andrée’s progressive reflections are rooted in a social constructionist understanding of gender norms (“une femme voit ce qu’on l’a habituée à voir”). As she observes, “[j]’avais à peine changé de sexe et déjà ma mentalité était différente” (240). Because these meditations occur alongside the symbolic union of country and city life for Andrée, Lemonnier suggests a reconceptualization of the seeming “natural” order of gender roles. In other words, in complicating the country/city dichotomy and allowing these two spheres to merge, the writer uses naturalist themes to bring to light the very arbitrariness of normative notions of masculinity and femininity that are based strictly on biological difference.

Andrée’s passing as a man leads her to reconsider normative, essentialist notions about sexual difference. These new perceptions also provide a space to negotiate otherwise predetermined roles in conventional naturalist fiction. Upon first adopting masculine attire, Andrée identifies the learned dynamics of gender expression. She notes, “c’était un apprentissage à faire. Après avoir été vingt ans fille, on ne s’improvise pas immédiatement garçon” (238). Andrée’s use of the verb “s’improviser” brings to light what contemporary theorists would call the performative characteristics of normative masculinity and femininity.²² With some practice, the protagonist soon masters the art of passing as a man:

J’avais acquis une grande sûreté dans les actes de ma vie d’homme. [. . .] Cet homme à cause duquel j’avais renoncé à mon sexe et que, par nécessité de lutter sur son propre terrain, j’étais devenu moi-même, je le fus naturellement au point qu’il ne m’était plus nécessaire de m’observer. [. . .] Je sus boire quand il fallut [. . .]. J’avais appris à marcher du buste, les épaules hautes, au lieu de marcher des reins, comme font les femmes. Je n’étais plus une femme que pour moi. (299)

In simulating masculinity, Andrée asserts an agency that directly challenges the limits of an innate or “natural” conception of sexual difference. Indeed, as she successfully passes as a man and is no longer recognizable to old friends, she reflects on the fleeting influence of nature on gender expression. “La vie qui avait fait de moi un homme, décidément était plus forte que la nature qui m’avait donné le sexe de la femme” (300), she concludes. In opposing the unbounded potential of acquired experience with the restrictions of biological, inborn traits, Lemonnier strays from naturalist trends that promote discourses on predeterminism. Instead, through Andrée’s experiences and ruminations about gender expression, the novelist allows for the possibility of self-determination and a break from the constrictions of biology and social circumstance. In basing his progressive conceptualization of gender on the protagonist’s own capacity to reposition herself in the world as she chooses, Lemonnier refutes the Zolian disavowal of free will and individual agency.

²² Gender performativity was famously theorized by Judith Butler in 1990 in her work *Gender Trouble*. According to Butler, “acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* [New York: Routledge, 1999] 173, original emphasis).

A Return to Nature

In spite of the new social and financial advantages afforded to Andrée in the capital city, her most transcendental moments occur in the countryside. On Sundays, the protagonist escapes the clamor and chaos of the urban landscape and retreats to the rivers and meadows of Paris' rural environs. As we have seen, Andrée has always acknowledged an affinity with the natural world. Now, however, her encounter with the countryside is marked by a spiritual identification with the organisms that surround her that is typical of naturalist literature:

La grande vie du monde m'enveloppait: je sentais sous moi battre quelque chose de lourd et de fort comme le cœur de la terre. Oui, oui, voilà la vérité; c'était bien le courant des forces éternelles qui passait en moi, comme il passait dans la terre, les arbres, le ciel et tout l'univers. [. . .] Je voyais si loin en moi que j'en avais presque peur. (263)

Andrée's awareness of the inherent connections between life forms recalls her previous contemplations on the enduring influence of her female lineage, perpetually present in the form of an innate moral compass. Here, however, she expands these notions of heredity to include all forms of natural life and their immortal interconnectedness: "Je passais les mains sur mon cœur et je me disais: 'Il bat comme la terre. Elle et moi nous sommes une même chose'" (263). Certainly, heredity is an established theme of naturalist fiction. However, Andrée's celebration of the unifying harmony of varied life forms marks a clear distinction from preceding works of the literary tradition in France that tend to focus on ancestral heritage through a pessimistic and fatalistic lens. In addition, Andrée refutes the rigid doctrine of hereditary determinism characteristic of naturalist thought. Instead, through these meditative moments in nature, she reflects on both the influence of her heritage and the limitless possibilities of her own free will: "J'en suis venue à croire qu'on reçoit de ses ascendants la substance comme le boulanger reçoit du meunier sa farine; mais c'est à lui à la pétrir comme c'est à nous à faire notre vie. L'éducation, la leçon à l'école n'est que le point de départ: il faut ensuite se faire à soi-même sa conscience, sa morale, sa religion, et son Dieu" (264). In this pivotal passage, Andrée proclaims her freedom and responsibility in shaping her personal destiny, regardless of biological or environmental circumstances. Through his heroine's contemplative experiences in nature, Lemonnier thus further distances himself from the notion of predeterminism typical of the Zolian novel.

These meditative encounters with the natural world are paradoxically made possible because of the male privilege that Andrée now enjoys in the city. Previously, the countryside's appeal to the protagonist was based primarily on an aesthetic appreciation for rural scenery: "j'avais aimé la campagne parce qu'elle est verte et fraîche; je n'avais jamais pensé au-delà" (263). Now, however, Andrée's newfound autonomy opens her eyes to the spiritual possibilities of the countryside:

Je crois réellement que ce fut ma vie nouvelle, ma vie libre, active et solitaire qui fut cause que je commençai à penser ainsi par moi-même. Quand vient le matin, il n'y a d'abord qu'une petite clarté qui descend d'entre les nuages, comme l'eau d'une pommelle d'arrosoir; et puis c'est un fleuve, toutes les écluses du monde ne peuvent plus le comprimer. N'est-ce pas ce qui arrive chez l'homme, une fois qu'il a ouvert son esprit à la vérité? (264)

In the same ways that she navigates the city with a new sense of independence and pleasure, Andrée now openly and freely experiences nature as a site for transformative insight and enlightenment.

Ironically perhaps, these revelatory moments allow Andrée to recognize and embrace her greatest internal impulse: to have a child. “Jamais le monde ne m’avait paru aussi beau et je lui parlais, il me répondait,” she notes. “Il y avait encore de jeunes feuilles aux bouleaux; je me souviens d’avoir pensé: ‘Les feuilles viennent aux arbres comme les petits enfants.’ Et au fond de moi, je songeais que moi aussi, j’aurais pu avoir un petit enfant” (263-64). Andrée’s reflections on procreation in nature mark a decisive moment in her existential quest regarding her gender expression and spiritual place in both society and the larger natural world. It is not long after this defining episode that the protagonist suspends her cross-dressing and espouses her feminine, i.e., maternal, self. These existential revelations, set off by her time in the countryside, have thus allowed Andrée to determine her personal function in the societal and ecological spheres. In addition, they have allowed Lemonnier to distinguish his autonomous and self-determining heroine from her Zolian fictional counterparts. Yet they also signal a return to traditional discourses that conflate nature with conventional femininity and motherhood. For, prior to her transformative time in the countryside, the androgynous Andrée expressed aversion at the idea of having a child: “j’aimerais mieux une poupée que des enfants,” she stated to a friend. “Et puis, vous savez, je suis restée garçon” (43). Though nature has brought Andrée closer to her own inherent femininity, this perceived discursive shift to biological conceptions of gender is best understood in the larger context of Belgian naturalism. A closer examination of the rehabilitative properties of his countryside reveals that in adhering to naturalist and essentialist discourses on femininity, Lemonnier also remains faithful to Belgian naturalism’s emphasis on a unique national heritage.

Indeed, in spite of Lemonnier’s unconventional depiction of gender identity, the novel seems to conclude with a promotion of normative conceptions of femininity. However, Andrée’s apparent contradictory discussion of her innate gender expression points to a continued depiction of the natural world’s restorative properties that contrast with the pernicious influences of civilization. As Paul Gorceix explains, this characterization is common to various novels in the author’s *œuvre*: “Lemonnier prône le retour à la nature comme le seul salut de la communauté urbaine.”²³ In *Quand j’étais homme*, Andrée’s identification with an innate femininity is linked to a recuperative return to a rural setting. Though Andrée benefits socially and financially from her ability to pass as a man in Parisian society, her maternal longing for a child eventually leads her to reassume her identity as a woman. Now invoking her inherent, biological femininity, the protagonist reflects on her procreative calling and concludes, “sous mes habits d’homme, je demeurais une femme, avec le ventre et le sein qui sont faits pour donner l’amour et la vie” (306). Given her apparent androgyny and ease in adopting normative markers of masculinity, Andrée’s reflections in the passages seem to be, at first glance, a contradiction to the novel’s otherwise progressive depictions of the fluidity of sexual difference. “Une femme est la loi, l’éternelle loi qui fait sortir d’un ovule la continuité des races,” (306) she adds. These meditations about women’s procreative duties also parallel Andrée’s previous celebration of her feminine ancestry and its enduring contribution to the cycle of life. Andrée notes, “toute femme porte en elle son enfant bien avant qu’il n’ait été conçu de son lit avec l’homme. Quand il vient enfin, son cri est le même qu’elle entendit, depuis des centaines de mille ans, au fond de sa prédestination d’être le recommencement de la genèse” (306-07). Though these comments about maternal instinct and procreative responsibility suggest a return to conventional notions of femininity, they are also a reminder of Andrée’s awareness of her larger role in the natural world. For Lemonnier and his fellow Belgium naturalists, this awareness can only occur in the countryside, a setting far removed from the depravity of urban civilization.

²³ Gorceix 23. In his discussion of Lemonnier’s *L’Homme en amour* (1897), Philippe Chavasse also underscores the novel’s depiction of civilization as a corrupting and damaging force (“Dérive naturaliste”).

In her subsequent discussion about her pregnancy, Andrée contrasts a farmer's preliminary and transient work in his field with a mother's enduring and vital role in prenatal development. Through this allegory, she also justifies her brief sexual encounter with the biological father of her child, an unknown worker whom she will never see again:

Le laboureur entre dans le champ et il fend le sol; le vendangeur pénètre dans la vigne et il fait saigner le raisin. Mais l'un et l'autre ne sont que des passants et avant eux il y avait la terre. Qu'importe leur nom pour le geste qu'ils doivent faire si, pendant des mois, c'est ensuite à la mère de travailler pour amener la semence à terme. (307)

Though Andrée's initial remarks on female reproductive obligations in this section seem to echo many conventional discourses on femininity, her comparison here points instead to a celebration of womanhood and procreative autonomy. The male partner's role in procreation is a fleeting one, and as the farmer's labor is eclipsed by the soil's indispensable sustenance, the paternal figure's contribution is nearly negligible against a mother's intrinsic care. Once again relating her purpose to the natural world, Andrée assumes a parental role that challenges normative gender categories: she anticipates being both a mother *and* a father to her child. "Je fus ainsi moralement le père et la mère de mon enfant: il sortit de mes deux sexes," (308) she declares. Andrée's ultimate conflation of womanhood and maternity ("le vœu ardent des entrailles me rendit femme" [308]) is thus complicated by her concurrent assertion of a feminine and masculine identity. Appropriately, Andrée subsequently leaves Paris and returns to the countryside, a setting consistently conducive to non-normative gender expression. For Andrée, this rehabilitation from the corruptive elements of Parisian life (sexual violence, gender discrimination and inhumane working conditions) means a commitment to continuing her ancestral lineage. The novel thus comes full circle: just as she was free to express her androgyny as a child in Vernon's rural landscape, Andrée's final return to the countryside allows her to uninhibitedly assume both maternal and paternal roles as a parent while celebrating her heritage.

This unique conclusion complicates French naturalist discourses on sexual difference and fatalistic determinism. Despite Andrée's embracing of an inherent femininity, her final reflections signal an unconventional realization of motherhood that still allows her to celebrate both her rural ancestry and gender non-conformity. Because Andrée's most transformative moments are linked to encounters with her natural surroundings, Lemonnier promotes a vision of Belgian naturalism that celebrates the restorative value of the countryside over the injurious properties of the (French) city. *Quand j'étais homme* thus breaks from the literary trends of conventional naturalism, as Andrée signals in one of the text's self-referential moments. In explaining her decision to have a child and assume dual parental roles, the French protagonist hints at a deviation from her country's contemporary novel: "Non, ce n'étaient pas les livres qui m'avaient appris cela. Ceux que j'avais lus étaient d'un esprit bien différent" (264). Through this prominent *mise en abyme*, Andrée gestures towards the text's revised conceptions of sexual difference, heredity and free will. In this regard, *Quand j'étais homme* is an innovative work in which Lemonnier brings conflicting discourses about gender and genre into contact to generate a model of fiction that is unique to the Belgian tradition.