

Disgust-Melancholia as a Mood of Modernity: Naturalistic Constellations of Melancholia in J.-K. Huysmans' *À vau-l'eau*, Émile Zola's *Nana* and Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*

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RÉSUMÉ

Nous nous proposons dans cet essai d'explorer les formes de la mélancolie dans l'écriture naturaliste et d'étudier en particulier l'intersection de la mélancolie et du dégoût, deux émotions inhérentes au mal du siècle, souvent évoquées et décrites dans la littérature naturaliste. Sur la base de trois études de cas provenant des littératures française et nordique – À vau-l'eau (1882) de Joris-Karl Huysmans, Nana (1880) d'Émile Zola et Gengangere [Ghosts/Les Revenants] (1881) d'Henrik Ibsen – nous examinerons les variations diverses que donne à lire cette poétique du “dégoût-mélancolie” caractéristique du naturalisme. C'est ainsi qu'en fonction du type de naturalisme et du contexte culturel, la combinaison de la tristesse et du rejet se manifeste sous la forme des images de l'ennui dans la comédie noire d'Huysmans, du baroque et de la vanitas dans Nana, et des visions pessimistes de la dépression et la mort chez Ibsen. Néanmoins, comme le rappelle Jonathan Flatley (2008), toutes les mélancolies ne sont pas dépressives. La mélancolie de Huysmans et celle de Zola rejoignent le courant de la mélancolie anti-dépressive, tandis que la mélancolie dépressive imprègne surtout le naturalisme nordique, comme en témoignent la résignation et le pessimisme existentiels dans Les Revenants d'Ibsen. Pourtant, ces deux formes de mélancolie expriment chacune un mécontentement face aux résultats de la modernité, produisant ainsi une critique de cette dernière qu'elles rejettent.

A mapping of the nineteenth-century emotional landscape leads one inevitably to be faced with varied constellations of melancholia. Even though the notion of melancholia holds a long cultural history stemming from clinical definitions and ideas of physiological imbalances (too much black bile or *melaina-kole*), astrological misfortune (born under the sign of Saturn) or failures of faith (the sin of *acedia* or sloth),¹ the long nineteenth century reconfigures existing conceptions into a package of new melancholias and melancholic vocabularies that saturate the literature of the era: *le soleil noir* (Nerval), *le mal du siècle* (Musset), *le spleen* (Baudelaire), *l'ennui* (Baudelaire, Flaubert). We find a variety of versions ranging from dreamy and soft feelings of *tristesse* clustering with pleasure and comforting nostalgia (Chateaubriand and Hugo)² to more reactive melancholias, such as Baudelaire's angry spleen, or the Flaubertian ironic laughter against the hollowness of human life. The main characteristics of melancholia – a sense of loss and a feeling of grief – are even increasingly reflected in the affective atmosphere of a *fin de siècle* fraught with fears of

¹ See Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, USA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2008) 13.

² “La mélancolie, c'est le bonheur d'être triste,” as Victor Hugo wrote in *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (1866).

degeneration and a sense of ending of the Western culture. Modernity, as discussed by Matei Calinescu, is essentially defined in terms of a new linear time-consciousness.³ This idea of modernity, with its painful acknowledgement of the irreversibility of time, is inevitably accompanied by the idea of loss, and grief over that loss. This sense of loss is frequently paired with a painful nostalgia for the stability and continuity of the supposed cyclical pre-modern time. If melancholia, as Jonathan Flatley has argued, can be considered central to the affective atmosphere of modernity, it travels between attachments to *le temps perdu* and grief over the present, and reflects fears of the modern.⁴

The various understandings of melancholia have changed through time, but the basic cluster of symptoms it describes has remained relatively consistent: melancholia is entangled with sadness, grief, fear, anxiety, affective withdrawal and loss of interest.⁵ Readings of Baudelaire, Gautier and Nerval have demonstrated how these aspects of melancholia vary and manifest themselves in diverse genres and works of nineteenth-century authors.⁶ In this essay I focus on forms of melancholia specific to naturalism and study the overlapping of melancholia and disgust in particular, two central emotions depicted and evoked in naturalist fiction. In my reading of three case studies across French and Nordic literature – Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À vau-l'eau* (translated as *Drifting*, 1882) Zola's *Nana* (1880) and Henrik Ibsen's *Gengangere* (translated as *Ghosts*, 1881) – I explore the nature of naturalist melancholia and study its specific relationship to the emotion of disgust. The idea of withdrawal and rejection, which is embedded in both the emotion of disgust and the feeling of melancholia, prompts a cluster of peculiar emotions in naturalist fiction. In my reading I demonstrate how this combination of sadness and rejection undergoes various transformations in different cultural contexts, from Huysmans's black comedy to *Nana*'s imagery of baroque *vanitas* and, further, to Ibsen's resigned visions of death. Not all melancholias are depressive, Jonathan Flatley reminds us: "[...] if by melancholia we mean an emotional attachment to something or someone lost, such dwelling on loss need not produce depression, that combination of incommunicable sorrow and isolating grief [...]" ; "in fact, some melancholias are the opposite of depressing, functioning as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world."⁷ According to Flatley, Baudelaire's poetry exemplifies this reactive type of melancholia, as it renders a state in which one is aware of and angry about the losses one has suffered.⁸ Huysmans's and Zola's novels are inscribed in this Baudelairian tradition, whereas depressive feelings of resignation and existential pessimism permeate Ibsen's *Ghosts*. However, the critical potential of negative emotions encompasses both depressive and anti-depressive melancholias and further extends to Nordic naturalism, which employs the naturalist disgust-melancholia as an aesthetics of negation, to voice dissatisfaction with the condition of modernity.

While it is beyond the scope of this article, an investigation of this constellation of emotions also makes it possible to reconsider the role of emotions in the poetics of naturalism, in which

³ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 13.

⁴ "[T]he problem with loss, with the loss that cannot be mourned, is common to the experience of modernity in general." Flatley 9-10.

⁵ Flatley 1.

⁶ See, for example, Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide. Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976); Ross Chambers, *The Writing of Melancholy. Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993) and Flatley (2008).

⁷ See Flatley 1 and Chambers 33.

⁸ Flatley 6.

disgust and melancholia constitute central components. Emotions contribute to naturalism's aesthetic ideal of documenting real life and to the creation of reality effects which are characteristic of naturalist fiction.⁹ Disgust is an emotion, which is frequently experienced in a concrete way, thus providing an access to reality;¹⁰ melancholia facilitates creative contemplation and can produce new knowledge about the physical world. On the contrary, in the light of melancholia, the disgust of naturalism, an emblem of Zolian and the Goncourtian naturalisms, manifests itself not only as ugly but tends toward an aesthetics of beauty. The melancholic aspects of *Nana*, for instance, are indicative of the Zolian project of finding style and grandeur in topics considered disgusting, vulgar, shameful, and low.

Between Vomiting and Laughing: Huysmans's *À vau-l'eau*

In literary history, *À vau-l'eau* has remained in the shadow of *À rebours* (1884, translated as *Against the Grain*), the bible of decadence, which sparked Huysmans's international fame as one of the fathers of the decadent movement. *À vau-l'eau*, characterized by Robert Kopp as “condensé du premier Huysmans,”¹¹ is anchored in the practices of naturalism, while contributing to the aesthetic transformation that is taking place in Huysmans's work in the early 1880s. Its minimalist plot depicting a solitary man who wanders around in Paris and Parisian restaurants in search of a decent meal is inscribed in the Flaubertian aesthetics of “un livre sur rien” – banality, ennui, and repetition. With its series of ridiculous non-events and lack of action, *À vau-l'eau* features an anti-hero who epitomizes the naturalist aesthetics of mediocrity; monsieur Folantin is a humble clerk at the Ministry of the Interior (as was Huysmans in real life), whose quest for happiness always ends in failure. Yet this “Ulysse de gargotes,” as Maupassant called him in his critique of the novel in *Le Gaulois*,¹² transforms the miserable odyssey of a beefsteak into an aesthetics of absurdity, thus paving the way for the transmission of naturalist banality into high modernism. And, conversely, it points to the modernist qualities of naturalism.

If there is a need to identify a founding text for a literary disgust-melancholia, Huysmans's *À vau-l'eau* certainly stands out among the prototypes for this naturalist constellation of negative emotions. Both melancholia and disgust are explicitly named feelings and emotions in *À vau-l'eau*, recurring multiple times in the narrative. The combination is even evoked at the very beginning, which features Folantin in a restaurant seated at a table cluttered with plates of congealed leftovers and faced with the “désolant fromage” of Roquefort, resembling a wretched piece of Marseille soap. The digestion of this “Roquefort avarié” – a scene in which Maupassant saw a particular reality effect – then extends to the digestion of the disgusting miseries of life.¹³ The solitary, bizarre dinners and sickening meals which need spice to cover the putridness of food –

⁹ Proponents of the philosophy of emotion have demonstrated the great intuitive power of emotions, which tend to influence people's views of the world, as well as their values and goals. On emotions and the reality effect, see Riikka Rossi, “Writing Disgust, Writing Realities. The Complexity of Negative Emotions in Émile Zola's *Nana*,” in eds. Ingeborg Jandl, Susanne Knaller, Sabine Schönfeller, and Gudrun Tockner, *Writing Emotions. Theoretical Concepts and Selected Case Studies in Literature* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017) 277-94.

¹⁰ On evoking disgust and the reality effect, see Rossi (2017) 284.

¹¹ Robert Kopp, “*À vau-l'eau*. Introduction,” *Joris-Karl Huysmans, Romans I* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2005) 479-89; 479.

¹² Guy de Maupassant, “En lisant,” *Le Gaulois* 9 mars 1882. On the reception of *À vau-l'eau*, see also Brendan King, “Introduction” to Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Drifting*, translated by Brendan King (Sawtry: Deladus, 2017).

¹³ In his review in *Le Gaulois* Maupassant wrote: “[L]e Roquefort avarié de M. Folantin fait courir en ma bouche des frémissements sinistres de remémorance.”

“la moutarde masquant le goût faisandé des viandes et attisant la froide lessive des sauces”¹⁴ – encapsulate the banality of life, prompting in Folantin feelings of repulsion and hopelessness: “À force d’évoquer toute la séquelle de ces souvenirs, M. Folantin tomba dans une affreuse mélancolie.”¹⁵ All in all, the novella travels between two edges of brutal life-weariness, from the depressive dinner of the first scene, with the remark “cette vie est intolérable,”¹⁶ to the declaration of Schopenhauerian pessimism at the end of the novel: “seul le pire arrive.”¹⁷

While Kopp argues that Huysmans is “par excellence, un auteur du mal de siècle, du spleen, de la mélancolie,”¹⁸ the melancholia of *À vau-l’eau* differs markedly from the earlier romanticized versions of sweet and soft expressions of grief. As Zola outlined in his letter to Huysmans, a particular sharpness in *À vau-l’eau* is condensed in the cruelty of melancholia pervading the entire novella: “[...] le parti pris du sujet lui donne une acuité particulière. Cela est d’une abominable cruauté dans la mélancolie.”¹⁹ In keeping with the naturalist aesthetics of banality, melancholia, the classic “noble” and “sublime” emotion, is transformed into an “ugly feeling,” in Sianne Ngai’s terms: we may speak of an unprestigious negative affect which fails to offer the satisfaction of cathartic purification and has no specific object.²⁰ Instead, Folantin’s feeling of melancholia lends itself to a petrifying flatness and permanence: “la tristesse de M. Folantin ne se dissipa; il se laissait aller à vau-l’eau, incapable de réagir contre ce spleen qui l’écrasait.”²¹ In its anti-Americanism and aesthetics of negation, Huysmans’s novella echoes Herman Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener* (1853), the story of Wall Street, which Ngai considers a key example of the aesthetics of ugly feelings, expressing a critical rejection of the weariness of modernity. While writing *À vau-l’eau*, Huysmans felt “disgusted by Paris,” “the sacred city,” which in the novel fuels both concrete and existential disgust, creating deadening experiences of banality.²²

The ugliness of Folantin’s “tristesse” is concretized by the way his experience of melancholia is linked to the emotion of disgust. A concrete, food-oriented, primitive form of disgust is elaborated throughout the novel. The protagonist wanders from one restaurant to another, from Rive Droite to Rive Gauche to find a meal, yet the food he finds only makes him feel nausea and results in a feeling of melancholia:

¹⁴ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Romans I* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2005) 498.

¹⁵ Huysmans 498.

¹⁶ Huysmans 492.

¹⁷ Huysmans 525.

¹⁸ Kopp 481.

¹⁹ Letter to Huysmans, 27 January 1882, in *Émile Zola. Correspondance*, eds. B. H. Bakker, Dorothy E. Speirs, and John A. Walker (Montréal and Paris: Presses Universitaires de Montréal and Éditions CNRS, 1983) 258.

²⁰ In *Ugly Feelings*, Ngai explores “ugly feelings” which, in comparison with the Aristotelian idea of “aesthetic emotions” are explicitly moral and non-cathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release. These feelings usually have no specific object, but instead are defined by flatness or on-goingness, and coma, after this word entirely opposed to the “suddenness” on which Aristotle’s aesthetics of fear depends. See Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, USA, and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2005) 6-7.

²¹ Huysmans 499.

²² “[C]ar le dégoût de Paris me vient, par époque, moi qui n’aimais au fond que cette sacrée ville.” A Letter to Camille Lemonnier, 27 September 1881. See J.-K. Huysmans. *Lettres inédites à Camille Lemonnier*, publiées et annotées par Gustave Vanwelkenhuyzen (Genève: Droz, 1957) 101.

Il y dîna quelques jours, et sa faim, déjà rabrouée par les graillonnants effluves de la pièce, se refusa à entamer des viandes insipides, encore affadies par les cataplasmes des chicorées et des épinards. [...] C'était mauvais, c'était cher et surtout c'était attristant.²³

Huysmans's *À vau-l'eau* is illustrative of the nature of disgust as an emotion, which easily moves from concrete to abstract forms of rejection, including social and existential aversion.²⁴ Food disgust generally represents the protective function, which according to Darwin evolved from the system of distaste: disgust guards the body against dangerous food and infection.²⁵ In the context of naturalism, however, disgust as a protective concern turns into destruction, in accordance with the naturalist entropic poetics of dissolution and degeneration.²⁶ In *À vau-l'eau*, the specific area of disgust with food which is emphasized articulates the wider existential and philosophical concerns underlying in the novel. Folantin's disgust regarding food ultimately suggests a fundamental loss of life appetite and illustrates melancholia as rejection, an existential disgust for life. The disappointing food substantiates disillusionment of life and leads to spiritual apathy. In *ennui*, disgust becomes self-referential: what is rejected is not an alien indigestible entity, but life in general.²⁷

If melancholia, traditionally, is an emotion of geniuses and great men, supposed to encourage mysterious capacities for great achievement,²⁸ Huysmans's novella eventually tends towards a parody of this sublime version of melancholia. As C. G. Shenton has argued, *À vau-l'eau* offers a version of Gidian *sotie*: stylization and schematization in a short, ironic narrative; ridiculous, marionette-like characters who are caricatures of a certain attitude or a certain absurd situation; a mechanical plot that lists the events and tells the story of derive in a tight thematic network, constantly referring to a moral schema.²⁹ The overwhelming disgust and melancholia in *À vau-l'eau*, with its catalogue of Schopenhauerian clichés and images of the "célibataire français"³⁰ of the era, are transformed into a black comedy, triggering a macabre laughter directed toward the pessimism and decay depicted in the novel.

The conversion of disgust into laughter in *À vau-l'eau* exemplifies the primal interconnection of laughter and disgust. As Winfried Menninghaus has argued, perhaps counterintuitively, laughter and disgust are strongly intertwined. Laughing at something, as an act of expulsion, resembles the act of rejecting, of vomiting in disgust.³¹ Both disgust and laughter are complementary ways of admitting an alterity that otherwise would fall prey to repression. According to this view both laughing and vomiting represent an overcoming of disgust. At the same time, it is this very movement between vomiting and laughing that points to modernism: the avant-garde quality of *À vau-l'eau* resides in its satiric qualities. The acknowledgement of Huysmans by surrealists, notably by André Breton in *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1939) is indicative of this leap towards modernist

²³ Huysmans 500.

²⁴ On the nature of disgust, see Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Clark McCauley. "Disgust," in eds. David Sander and Klaus R. Scherer, *The Oxford Companion to Emotion and Affective Sciences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) 121-22.

²⁵ See Rozin et al. 121-22.

²⁶ On the entropic poetics of naturalism, see David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

²⁷ Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust. The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation*, translated by Howard Eiland and Joel Golb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003 [1999]) 147.

²⁸ See Flatley 35.

²⁹ C. G. Shenton, "À vau-l'eau: a naturalist *sotie*," *Modern Language Review* 2 (April 1977): 300-09, 301.

³⁰ On the figure of the *célibataire*, see Jean Borie, *Le Célibataire français* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2002).

³¹ Menninghaus 10-11.

aesthetics. As in Knut Hamsun's *Sult* (translated as *Hunger*, 1890), in *À vau-l'eau* the double domain of the oral – the human mouth being both the site of human ingestion and utterance – becomes the symbol of the search for a new modernist aesthetics.³²

Nana*: from ennui to baroque *vanitas

In Zola's œuvre, it is certainly *La Joie de vivre* (1884), which most explicitly manifests the *fin-de-siècle* discourses of melancholia. With its description of despair and all-pervading ennui, anchored to a Schopenhauerian ethos of metaphysical void, the novel presents another child of the century. Lazare, as docteur Cazenove diagnoses, joins the hopeless generation of the era: "Oui, c'est la maladie de la fin du siècle, vous êtes des Werther retournés."³³ Yet, as Reinhard Kuhn has later pointed out, Lazare distances himself from the romantic ennui of Werthers and Renés, and instead represents new heroes of doubt, a disillusionment grown out of scientism and philosophical pessimism, even nihilism.³⁴ What is interesting in this new form of melancholia is the way it clusters with disgust. In his despair Lazare is almost incapable of experiencing any emotion, but he feels keenly disgusted with life: at the heart of his grief, there is a poisonous languor, "un ennui lourd, continu, qui sortait de tout comme l'eau trouble d'une source empoisonnée," or, as termed more clearly, "le dégoût de la vie."³⁵ The metaphysical withdrawal and rejection of life that saturates Huysmans's *À vau-l'eau*, colours *La Joie de vivre*, too, although the affective tone of Zola's novel is less satiric and lends itself to a gloomier depiction of depression.

Besides *La Joie de vivre*, other novels of *Les Rougon-Macquart* illustrate the naturalistic constellation of disgust-melancholia and its various aspects. *Nana*, for instance, offers an interesting example. The feeling of melancholia is perhaps not generally attached to this novel, which has been acknowledged for its magnetic, theatrical poetics of baroque, its ambiguity and eroticism, and its effects of carnival, which embody the frenzied excesses of life in the Second Empire.³⁶ However, viewed from the perspective of disgust-melancholia outlined above, *Nana*, a novel, which eventually became the archetype of naturalism as immoral "disgust-literature," also serves to exemplify the naturalist alliance of disgust and melancholia.³⁷ The novel moves between the description of vital desires and feelings of lethargic ennui, emotional fatigue reminiscent of Baudelaire and Flaubert. What is more, we find a melancholic dimension not only underlying, but also stemming from *Nana*'s frenetic story-world, nourished by the aesthetics of excess and the novel's baroque grandeur: the idea of vanity-melancholy, which is inscribed in *Nana*'s narrative of perishable beauty and the futility of life.³⁸ This melancholic counter-narrative underlying the novel *Nana* becomes allied with the experience of disgust triggered by excess of life and provides a contrast to the turmoil of the Empire, voicing a critical rejection of the society the novel depicts.

³² On Hamsun's *Sult*, see Riikka Rossi, "The Everyday in Nordic Modernism. Knut Hamsun's *Sult* and Maria Jotuni's *Arkielämä*," *Scandinavian Studies* 82.4 (2010): 417–38.

³³ Émile Zola, *La Joie de vivre* (Paris: Pocket, 1999) 237.

³⁴ Kuhn 274-75.

³⁵ Zola, *La Joie de vivre* 261, 113.

³⁶ On the previous readings of *Nana*, see David Baguley, *Zola et les genres* (Glasgow: The University of Glasgow Press, 1993), Anna Gural-Migdal, *L'Écrit-Écran des Rougon-Macquart. Conceptions iconiques et filmiques du roman chez Zola*, (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2013) and Éléonore Reverzy, *Nana d'Émile Zola* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008).

³⁷ See Rossi 277–94.

³⁸ "Life as theatre" has been considered a central metaphor of the baroque period. See Baguley (1993) 70.

The feeling of ennui, the pervasive emotional element in Flaubert's naturalism, is salient in the depiction of Nana's own experience.³⁹ Although the figure of Nana lacks the self-reflection typical of tragic heroes, as Roland Barthes has argued,⁴⁰ Zola's narrative unveils Nana's loneliness and boredom. Expressions such as "ennui" and "s'ennuyer" are frequently used in *Nana*, referring her feelings of apathy. Ironically, while men are tortured by their obsession with and desire for the courtesan herself, Nana lives the splendour of Paris, yet succumbs to feelings of dullness and stupor. Instead of splendour, Zola presents the monotony and banality of the life of a courtesan:

Cependant, dans son luxe, au milieu de cette cour, Nana s'ennuyait à crever. Elle avait des hommes pour toutes les minutes de la nuit, et de l'argent jusque dans les tiroirs de sa toilette, mêlé aux peignes et aux brosses; mais ça ne la contentait plus, elle sentait comme un vide quelque part, un trou qui la faisait bâiller.⁴¹

Nana achieves everything she desires but the constant satisfaction results in feelings of emptiness. We may speak of a lethargic resignation and weariness, together with an existential nausea and disgust at the monotony of life:

Les jours où son enfant ne l'occupait pas, Nana retombait dans la monotonie bruyante de son existence, promenades au Bois, premières représentations, dîners et soupers à la Maison d'Or ou au Café anglais, puis tous les lieux publics, tous les spectacles où la foule se ruait, Mabilles, les revues, les courses. Et elle gardait quand même ce trou d'oisiveté bête, qui lui donnait comme des crampes d'estomac. Malgré les continuelles toquades qu'elle avait au cœur, elle s'étirait les bras, dès qu'elle était seule, dans un geste de fatigue immense. La solitude l'attristait tout de suite, car elle s'y retrouvait avec le vide et l'ennui d'elle-même.⁴²

In the same way as in Huysmans's *À vau-l'eau*, disgust-melancholia ranges from psychic distress to changes in bodily experience: for Nana, the empty void of idleness feels physically disgusting, eliciting "stomach cramps." The depiction of Nana's fatigue, "l'oisiveté bête" quoted above echoes the melancholic reverie of the young ladies in *Les Demoiselles des bords de la Seine (été)* (1857) by Gustave Courbet. This painting, which has been interpreted as a portrayal of two prostitutes or courtesans, represents two women relaxing in a secluded spot on a summer day.⁴³ The tired atmosphere dominating Courbet's portrait, tinged with a strange combination of laziness, lethargy and eroticism, reminds viewers of the sinful aspects of melancholia: the deadly sin of *acedia*, the lack of interest culminating in a disgust concerning anything to do with the spiritual.⁴⁴

³⁹ On ennui in Flaubert, see Kuhn 259-69.

⁴⁰ Barthes considers *Nana* as an epic rather than a tragic novel, since the figure of Nana lacks the power of understanding present in tragic heroes, remaining a pure instrument of decay: Roland Barthes, "The Man-eater" (1955), in *Critical Essays on Emile Zola*, ed. David Baguley (Boston: C.K. Hall & Co, 1986) 90-91.

⁴¹ Émile Zola, *Nana* (Paris: L'Aventurine, 2001) 259.

⁴² Zola, *Nana* 260-61.

⁴³ On the interpretation of *Les Demoiselles*, see Michael Fried, *Courbet's Realism* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990) 194.

⁴⁴ On the notion of *acedia*, see Kuhn 40.

In *Nana* the sense of dejection and torpor extend the experiences of the “crowds” depicted in the novel.⁴⁵ The all-pervading *ennui* becomes indicative of the falseness of the ambient bourgeois society. Nana’s dinner, for instance, which she organizes after the success in *Le Théâtre des Variétés*, epitomizes her boredom with the life that she pursues. The dinner scene taking place *à minuit*, offers us a Zolian transformation of the demon of the noontide motif, which is susceptible of eliciting an onslaught of torpor. In Nana’s dinner, there is neither appetite for food nor for a party, and the diners are tired: “Par moments, des paupières se fermaient, des visages devenaient terreux; c’était crevant, comme toujours, selon le mot de Vandevres.”⁴⁶ The celebration finally ends with the expression of feelings of disgust and foolishness: “une ivresse morne, d’une bêtise à pleurer envahissait le salon, invinciblement.”⁴⁷

In Zola’s *Nana*, the blending of melancholia and disgust is thus clearly indicated by the named emotions depicted in the novel. But this constellation of emotions is also evoked in the novel in a more oblique way and linked to rejection triggered by the aesthetics of excess central to the novel. The tendency towards amplification and exaggeration that characterizes Zola’s œuvre in general, is particularly salient in *Nana*, a baroque novel, in which stylistic choices foster themes of excess and extravagance. As shown by Baguley, the narrative favours the baroque tropes of hyperbole and asyndeton as rhetorical devices, comprising repeated catalogue-like descriptive sections and lists.⁴⁸ This baroque rhetoric of amplification is paired with Nana’s obsessions with objects, her manic desire for luxury – an obsession that turns into a decadent adoration of artificiality and kitsch. Her apartment is filled with sugary scents and perfumes; she loves sweets, imitation jewels and cheap *bric-à-brac*, which all end up as detritus. As Nana achieves fame and fortune, the material obsession evolves into blind wastage. The mania and excess, however, lead to the deadening experiences of melancholia and disgust. The domain of the disgusting is not limited to contamination alone, in that pure sweetness and pure beauty can also prevent pleasure and invite rejection: what is merely pleasant and beautiful becomes vomitive – *Ekel*.⁴⁹ What is new, chic and delicate becomes repulsive; chaotic living turns into the sickening experience of nausea. The aesthetic of excess saturates Nana’s apartment on Rue Villiers, with its grotesquely decorated bedroom; her “temple,” with its bed of gold and silver and a byzantine imitation altar, provocatively mixes objects of sexuality and religion, triggering fear in her lovers.

The baroque aspect in *Nana* extends to the thematic of *vanitas vanitatum*, evoking the seventeenth-century idea of melancholia: the transience of life. Nana, constantly mirroring herself, is reminiscent of the seventeenth-century artistic representations of vanity, which portray a young woman admiring herself at her vanity table.⁵⁰ The futility of pleasure and the inevitability of death are powerfully epitomized in the final chapter, which condenses the disgust-melancholia elaborated in the novel. There is, as Eléonore Reverzy reminds us, a royal grandeur in Nana’s famous death scene, recalling historical representations of the death of a king, evoking the grandeur of faded perfection.⁵¹ If Nana is an allegory of the nation, the ending of the novel suggests a melancholic vision: the frenzied splendor of the Second Empire is turned into a kind of rejection

⁴⁵ I use the term “crowd” here to refer to Naomi Schor’s idea of Zola’s crowd in *Zola’s Crowds* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁴⁶ Zola, *Nana* 88.

⁴⁷ Zola, *Nana* 102.

⁴⁸ Baguley (1993) 70.

⁴⁹ See Menninghaus 36.

⁵⁰ On vanity pictures, see Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy. Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art* (London: Nelson, 1964) 376-91.

⁵¹ Reverzy 127.

of the endgame it describes. Before the discovery of the prostitute in putrefaction, Zola's narrative alludes, for the last time, to the furtive pleasures of the Parisian night world, by depicting twilight in dusky streets, "crépuscule du soir," a Baudelairian theme of corruption.⁵² Grief over the devastation then captures those present at Nana's deathbed, viewing the celebration of death in the decomposing body, whose corruption is coupled with an apocalyptic vision – the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war outside.⁵³ The certainty of death is tangibly encapsulated in the final scene of Nana's contaminated beauty, evoking dread and despair in her spectator audience, and reminding them of the essential truth underlined in the novel: *memento mori*.

Ghosts: depression and a sense of the tragic

Discourses of melancholia have since Antiquity expressed ideas of clinical depression before the modern term came into use. But, as discussed by Flatley, the nineteenth-century culture of modernity generated a new kind of politicized and anti-depressive version of melancholia, which fostered the productive elements of the classical notion and transformed them into a new kind of politicized, transgressive, and active version of melancholia exemplified by Baudelairian *spleen*. Ross Chambers has also argued that melancholic writing is not necessarily writing that thematizes sadness, but rather the decentering and the vaporization of being, as in Baudelairian melancholia, which he claims is linked to repressed anger.⁵⁴ In the context of French literature, this tendency of converting melancholia into anti-depressive non-melancholias, or even into laughter as in the case of Huysmans, reflects, perhaps, a specific cultural mindscape. As Julia Kristeva writes in *Soleil noir*: "Cependant, la mélancolie n'est pas française – [l]e ton gaulois, renaissant et éclairé est à la plaisanterie, à l'érotique et à la rhétorique plus qu'au nihilisme. Pascal, Rousseau et Nerval font triste figure et... exception."⁵⁵

Indeed, emotions and feelings translate affective patterns and structures of feeling bound to history and culture and to embodied experiences of time and space. When moving from the French context towards the North, naturalist disgust-melancholia achieves new tones. In Nordic naturalism the extreme forms of aestheticism, artificiality, or misogyny are rare, but life-weariness and pessimism are strong.⁵⁶ Emotional withdrawal is tinged with sadness, despair and existential anxiety. This version can be exemplified by Ibsen's plays, for instance. As Toril Moi writes, many of Ibsen's best plays explore the isolation, loneliness, and loss of meaning in modernity.⁵⁷ The depressive descent into an abyss of sorrow which, according to Kristeva, lays claim upon us to the extent that we lose all interest in words, actions and even life itself,⁵⁸ forms a central affective core in Ibsen's drama. This resigned vision manifests itself in the negation of idealism, which often leads to death-dealing and destructive skepticism featured in the playwright's

⁵² On the Baudelairian portrayal of twilight," see Chambers 139, 225. The quote in Zola's *Nana*: "Un crépuscule tombait, une heure lourde et mélancolique, avec l'enfoncement déjà obscur des avenues, que les feux des becs de gaz ne piquaient pas encore de leurs étincelles vives." Zola, *Nana* 368.

⁵³ "Une tristesse peu à peu la serrait à la gorge, comme si une mélancolie profonde eût monté de cette foule hurlante." Zola, *Nana* 375.

⁵⁴ Chambers 33.

⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Soleil Noir* (Paris: Folio, 1987) 16.

⁵⁶ Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus, "Decadence in Nordic Literature: An Overview," in *Nordic Literature of Decadence*, eds. Pirjo Lyytikäinen, Riikka Rossi, Viola Parente-Čapková, and Mirjam Hinrikus (New York: Routledge, forthcoming in 2019) 3-37, 27.

⁵⁷ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) 34.

⁵⁸ Kristeva 13.

world.⁵⁹ The naturalist quest for truth turns into the recognition of reality as a trap and a lie. The characters' tendencies toward decay lead to suicide, a recurrent motif in Ibsen's important plays from *Vildanden* (1884, translated as *The Wild Duck*) to *Hedda Gabler* (1891) and *Rosmersholm* (1886).

In Ibsen's plays, the melancholic vision of modernity is accompanied by a sense of the tragic: a feeling of an inexplicable fatality, which pervades life and destroys it. As shown by Yves Chevrel, Ibsen's dramas are tragedies adapted to modern conditions, although mythic ideas of tragic fatality and God's will have been replaced by new myths of the scientific worldview.⁶⁰ The sense of tragic fatality is fueled by the inevitable determination of milieu and heredity. At the same time, the idea of biological degeneration lends itself to psychic disintegration. The hereditary taint extends to inherited feelings and beliefs and emotional and psychological obstacles, which occupy the present and prevent an individual's authentic self-realization. Often, the past appears as a manifold burden haunting the present. To quote Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*, the "ghosts" represent "all kinds of defunct theories, all sorts of defunct beliefs, and things like that. It is not that they actually *live* on in us; they are simply lodged there, and we cannot get rid of them."⁶¹

Ghosts – Ibsen's most naturalistic play, which also inspired Zola⁶² – builds on this depressive melancholia entwined with a sense of the tragic. As in many of Ibsen's plays, *Ghosts* sets out an exploration of unresolved, past conflicts which gives rise to a new crisis in the present. The drama focusses on a middle-aged widow named Helen Alving and her son Oswald, an artist who returns home from Paris – the joyful south. Oswald feels tired, but it is not a question of ordinary tiredness; instead, it turns out that Oswald has inherited his father's syphilis and lost his artistic talents. Oswald falls into depression and feelings of disgust: the inherited syphilis, "horribly revolting," feels like "a living death."⁶³ Many other ugly truths of the past now come to light. Mrs. Alving, barely after a year of the marriage with Oswald's father, ran away from her licentious husband to be consoled by the hypocritical pastor Manders. While Oswald tries to regain the lost "joy of life" in falling in love with the Alving's servant, Regine, the effort is doomed to failure as it suggests the horror of incest: Regine is revealed to be Oswald's half-sister, the adulterous child of the late Mr. Alving, one of the "ghosts" of the past haunting the present.

All in all, *Ghosts* represents melancholia as a kind of metaphysical despair attached to the tragic loss of meaning. In *Ghosts* the lack of sunshine, the classic emblem of melancholia, is both concrete and abstract. Ideas of *mal du siècle* are coupled with views of the dark North as the "natural" realm of the *soleil noir*. "A gloomy fjord landscape, shrouded in steady rain"⁶⁴ provides the background for the action, which enacts a resigned vision of the hollowness of great reputations, provincialism and the suppression of individual freedom.⁶⁵ Moreover, the pessimism of *Ghosts* blends with ideas of the dark North as a realm of melancholia, not only for its constant rain, but

⁵⁹ See Moi 5.

⁶⁰ See Yves Chevrel, *Le Théâtre européen de la fin du XIXe siècle et le modèle tragique grec* (Athènes: Kentro neollênikôn ereunôn, 1999).

⁶¹ Henrik Ibsen, *Four Major Plays*, translated by James Mc Farlane and Jens Arup (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 126.

⁶² *Ghosts*, as performed in André Antoine's Théâtre libre, inspired Zola while writing *Docteur Pascal* (1893). See Jean Borie, "Zola et Ibsen," *Les Cahiers naturalistes* 55 (1981): 10-22.

⁶³ Ibsen 137.

⁶⁴ Ibsen 91.

⁶⁵ Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen, vol. 2, The Farewell to Poetry 1864-1882* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis) 299.

also for the rigor of Protestantism, to which Kristeva also refers as a source of melancholia.⁶⁶ Oswald, lacking “the joy of life” and missing “the sun,” feels paralyzed by the melancholia of the Protestant North, where people “are brought up to believe that work is a curse, and a sort of punishment for their sins; and that life is some kind of miserable affair, which the sooner we are done with the better for everybody.”⁶⁷ Oswald’s anxiety finally leads to madness. The drama ends with a scene in which Oswald calls desperately for the sun: “Mother, give me the sun,” Oswald asks his mother, sitting motionless in the armchair, repeating dully, “The sun...The sun.”⁶⁸ But Mrs. Alving stiffens in horror. The melancholia of *Ghosts* is transformed into an uncanny dread of life, a kind of death drive haunting the vital joy of life. Ideas of repression and projection, which circulate in *Ghosts*, as well as the anxious relationship of the mother and the son, are indicative of how Ibsen’s world anticipates Freudian ideas of subconscious drives and themes of Oedipal guilt. It is not a coincidence that Freud was fascinated by Ibsen.⁶⁹ As discussed by Flatley, Freud’s theory of melancholia and mourning appears a symptomatically modern text.⁷⁰

Concluding remarks

An investigation of various expressions of loathing and angst in Huysmans, Zola and Ibsen demonstrates how melancholia and its different constellations are inscribed in the poetics of emotions in naturalism and lend themselves, specifically, to an examination of the cluster of disgust and melancholia. Huysmans’s *À vau-l’eau* provides a founding text, which, by linking food disgust with a loss of life appetite demonstrates the primal connection between disgust and melancholia; Zola’s *Nana*, on the contrary, illustrates the entwinement of the Zolian aesthetic of baroque excess, disgust, and melancholia; and Ibsen’s *Ghosts* returns to melancholia as an abyss of sorrow and elaborates the Freudian notion of the death drive. In all these case studies, disgust-melancholia manifests itself as an ugly feeling, which offers neither therapeutic solutions nor the satisfaction of catharsis in the Aristotelian sense. However, we may speak of the homeopathic function of negative emotions on another level: the critical potential, here, stems from its disturbing legacy and the impact of negative emotions rather than from a cathartic release or purification, as in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy. In sum, both non-depressive and depressive melancholias express a discontent with the results of modernity and manifest a critical reconsideration of the modernity they negate.

⁶⁶ Luther was a melancholic, Kristeva reminds us. Kristeva 131.

⁶⁷ Ibsen 147.

⁶⁸ Ibsen 163.

⁶⁹ Freud dealt with Ibsen in his essay on the figure of Rebecca West in *Rosmersholm*. According to Freud, Rebecca exemplified the idea of Oedipal guilt. See Moi 295.

⁷⁰ Flatley 31.