



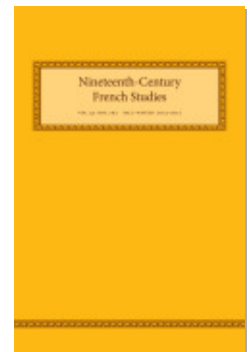
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Suffering for the Novel's Sake: Female "Mystical Substitution" in Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Un prêtre marié* and Bloy's *Le Désespéré*

WILLEMIJN DON

This essay analyzes Barbey d'Aurevilly's 1865 novel *Un prêtre marié* and *Le Désespéré* by Léon Bloy (1887) as literary case studies for the Catholic doctrine of vicarious suffering, or "mystical substitution." In these narratives, women's abject and self-inflicted suffering fails to obtain the desired, reparative result for the eponymous male characters. Such a failure sheds light on the paradoxical staging of a theological doctrine by Catholic novelists who appropriate women's mystical experience in order to articulate a relation to the Divine, which eludes verbal rendering, and yet positions them as masters of souls and bodies as well as literary and spiritual leaders.

No food but a communion wafer, for weeks and months on end; stigmata bleeding every Friday from noon until three o'clock; pus oozing out of numerous wounds: the blood and tears of Catholic women flow in nineteenth-century scientific inquiries, devotional booklets, iconography, statuary, and literary texts. Whether as the repulsive object of scorn and caricature or a holy source of fascination, religious women's afflicted and abject bodies captured the imagination of male writers and thinkers of nineteenth-century France. On one side of the ideological spectrum, following scientific positivism and a Naturalist framework, secular intellectuals scrutinized and sought a natural explanation for wounds that were said to be supernatural or miraculous. Mystical experience became almost synonymous with hysteria for Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot and his followers at the Salpêtrière hospital, as Jan Goldstein has shown ("The Hysteria Diagnosis" 235–36). On the other side, Catholics looked to provide an answer to freethinkers and often interpreted women's betrothing to redemptive suffering as the vicarious martyrdom of a saint bringing atonement for the ungodly French nation. Yet in depicting holy suffering, Cristina Mazzoni points out, Catholic writers such as Joris-Karl

Huysmans often adopted the secular terms and tools of the very scientists they attempted to combat (121).

Ostensibly, Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's novel *Un prêtre marié* (1865) and Léon Bloy's *Le Désespéré* (1887) center on a male protagonist and his struggles with faith and daily life. However, the reader discovers quickly that the titles of these novels hide the most important part of the plot, which focuses on the suffering of female characters who share abundantly in Christ's Calvary and, by doing so, attempt to secure God's mercy on behalf of their father or companion. When Barbey announced the topic of his novel in a letter to his friend Guillaume-Stanislas Trébutien, he described it as "la grande idée chrétienne de l'Expiation, qui selon moi, dans aucun livre, n'a été touchée [. . .] et que j'ai voulu pénétrer dans son dessous le plus intime" (*Lettres à Trébutien* 3: 334, 16 Sept. 1855). In addition, Barbey explains to Trébutien that his novel will serve as a demonstration to the "Démocrates littéraires que la littérature catholique peut avoir des romanciers intéressants, nouveaux, inattendus!" (3: 334). Using expiation and feminized vicarious suffering, which had become one of the supporting features of Catholic revivalism in nineteenth-century France, the novelist sought to turn his text into aesthetic and ethical evidence against "literary democrats." In this essay, I will analyze both Barbey's and Bloy's novels as literary case studies for the doctrine of vicarious, redemptive suffering, or "mystical substitution" as it was also known. The florid descriptions notwithstanding, women's abject suffering in these texts fails to obtain the desired, reparative result for the male protagonists. Moreover, these narratives shed light on the paradoxical novelistic staging of a theological doctrine, which benefits first and foremost those who fictionalize the Catholic idiom via women's bodies and seek to appear as the "nouveaux, inattendus" novelists of the *renouveau catholique* as Barbey reveals in his 1855 letter to Trébutien. When they build on the established Catholic traditions that "align women with the suffering body and endow their suffering with holiness" (Moore 14), the two male Catholic writers also seek to appropriate women's mystical experience and articulate a relation to the Divine that cannot be expressed in words, but which they (somewhat conflictingly) expose via the spectacularization of women's abject pain, and self-mutilation.

REVERSIBILITÉ AND VICARIOUS SUFFERING

The narrator of Barbey's novel *Un prêtre marié* is Rollon Langrune, a poet from Normandy and fictional representation of Barbey himself, who tells his story to an unnamed scribe, in response to the latter's fascination with a locket worn by a woman he loves. Jean Sombrevil is the novel's title

character, a scientist and former priest who “avait TUÉ DIEU, autant que l’homme, cette méchante petite bête de deux jours, peut tuer l’Éternel—en le reniant” (*Un prêtre marié* 51–52, original emphasis). To make matters worse, Sombreval has consummated his apostasy by getting married and fathering a child: a sickly baby girl named Calixte, born prematurely when her mother died after learning of her husband’s previous state. The baby survives, but continues to suffer from a mysterious illness that her father is unable to cure despite his best efforts as an experimental researcher. The novel is set in Sombreval’s native Normandy, where the villagers treat him and “le fruit de son crime” with suspicion and contempt.

Calixte’s suffering is interpreted in a theological light from the outset, as evidenced first of all by her name “triste et presque macéré [. . .] dans lequel il y a comme de la piété et du repentir” (59). The chalice, symbol of Christ’s suffering and the possibility of redemption, was used during the Eucharist by celebrants like her father “qui avait trouvé le néant au fond du calice où il avait bu le sang du Sauveur” (59). Although educated without any religion, Calixte, “prédisposée à la foi, et sa tête conformée pour croire tout aussi bien que pour comprendre” (63), accepted the doctrines of Catholicism as soon as she was exposed to them. Yet, the peasants and the narrator describe Calixte’s illness as “une maladie nerveuse—[un] mal inconnu, extraordinaire, un châtement de Dieu” (123). The child bears responsibility and is punished for her father’s apostasy; even Calixte herself, the narrator says, “était trop chrétienne pour admettre l’irresponsabilité des enfants dans le crime ou la faute des pères.”¹ The theological framework for this suffering is the concept of *réversibilité*, developed by Joseph de Maistre (1755–1821) and voiced in the novel by the clairvoyant La Malgaigne, Sombreval’s now eighty-year old wet-nurse (and former sorceress), who explains that Calixte’s suffering must restore the cosmic balance disturbed by Sombreval’s apostasy: “Elle meurt de son père comme on meurt d’un cancer au sein, cette fillette [. . .]. Il faut bien que les bons, les innocents et les justes payent pour les pécheurs dans cette vie ; car, s’ils ne payaient pas, qui donc, le jour des comptes, acquitterait la rançon des coupables devant le Seigneur ? . . .” (144). In La Malgaigne’s vision, Sombreval’s spiritual state is thus seen as the cause of Calixte’s physical, terminal illness, as if his debt were hers to pay.

The concept of vicarious suffering, the act of the innocent suffering for the guilty, had long been established in Christian theology and piety, but only became part of the Catholic mainstream in France in the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century.² Counterrevolutionary authors such as de Maistre, Louis de Bonald (1754–1840) and Pierre-Simon Ballanche (1776–1847) applied it to the martyrdom of Louis XVI, the aristocrats, and the clergy, and argued that it had the potential to atone for the sins of the impious

nation after the French Revolution. The doctrine was popularized by Antoine Blanc de Saint-Bonnet, a good friend of Barbey d'Aureville, in *De la douleur* (1849), a work read by a broad Catholic public. When Barbey attributes to La Malgaigne a statement regarding Calixte's expiation of her father's sin, he applies Blanc de Saint-Bonnet's description of cosmological *réversibilité* in his treatise on sorrow: "À la lumière de l'Infini, tous les hommes redeviennent les membres les uns des autres. Les mérites de chacun se répandent sur tous, dans ce mystérieux corps, par le canal de la réversibilité, véritable rétablissement de la circulation du sang de l'homme" (*De la douleur* 234). Suffering was the principal means by which a disciple of Christ could obtain merits for another member of the mystic body comprising all of humanity.

As many scholars have noted, the overwhelming majority of vicariously suffering victims described by hagiographers and novelists in the nineteenth century were women. Joris-Karl Huysmans's inventory of vicariously suffering saints in his eponymous text on the medieval Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam includes 247 women against forty-seven men.³ Female suffering in particular played a central role in certain strands of Dolorist Catholicism, for whom the appearance of the Virgin Mary as "celle qui pleure" at La Salette in 1846 resonated more than the smiling Immaculate Conception later encountered by Bernadette Soubirous in the 1858 Marian apparitions. The original model of vicarious suffering—Christ—was, however, male; so were the king and many members of the clergy and aristocrats described by de Maistre, as well as the implied addressee of Blanc de Saint-Bonnet's book. Yet the latter does address the prevalence of female suffering: "La douleur veut s'adresser à ces personnes dont le cœur expire de douceur et de sensibilité [. . .] Les êtres les plus sensibles seront particulièrement atteints; il faut bien qu'elle en fasse des saints! C'est ce qui explique pourquoi beaucoup de femmes ont tant souffert" (120). Nevertheless, Blanc de Saint-Bonnet also emphasizes that "grands hommes" are equally prone to suffering; it cultivates more love in them and softens their hearts (120), and it purifies the will and emotions and offers a pathway to the sublime and divine.

In their writings, women themselves do not necessarily conceive of their suffering in terms of substitutionary sacrifice. Thérèse Martin, who was known as Sainte Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus et de la Sainte-Face and was canonized in 1925, writes: "Je pensais aux âmes qui s'offrent comme victimes à la Justice de Dieu afin de détourner et d'attirer sur elles les châtements réservés aux coupables, cette offrande me semblait grande et généreuse, mais j'étais loin de me sentir portée à la faire" (MS A 84r). Rather than a victim of God's justice, she offers herself as a victim of his love. Another (later) example would be the Catholic convert Raïssa Maritain, Léon Bloy's goddaughter, who, as Brenna Moore has shown, understood her suffering in

the context of embodying Christ, but adopted and transformed models of suffering femininity: Maritain considered her suffering not so much as an atonement for others, but rather as a way to live closer to God (62).

Although the theological framework does not seem to restrict it to female saints, most of the nineteenth-century novels about vicarious suffering center on female characters.⁴ One of the sources for Barbey's novel was the story he heard about a priest who had fathered a sickly boy, as noted by Joyce Lowrie, who also connects the suffering described in the novel with Barbey's own debilitating migraines (75). Barbey's choice of a female suffering child for his fictional priest was thus deliberate, and follows the majority of texts on vicarious suffering.

STIGMATA AND CHRISTIAN MEDUSA: CALIXTE'S CASE

In Barbey's novel, the religious significance of Calixte's suffering is visible through a birthmark in the form of a cross on her forehead: "la croix méprisée, trahie, renversée par le prêtre impie et qui, s'élevant nettement entre les deux sourcils de sa fille, tatouait sa face, innocemment vengeresse, de l'idée de Dieu" (59). The scarlet headband she uses to cover her forehead—knowing that the cross makes her father uncomfortable—carries an equally religious symbolism: "On eût dit un cercle de sang figé—laissé là par de sublimes tortures—et on aurait pensé à ces Méduses chrétiennes dont le front ouvert verse du vrai sang sous les épines du couronnement mystique, comme nous en avons vu couler, en ces dernières années, du front déchiré des Stigmatisées du Tyrol. Elle aussi était stigmatisée!" (89). Calixte is associated with the stigmatized women who bled from wounds similar to Christ's pierced hands and feet, described and analyzed extensively in nineteenth-century texts.⁵ Calixte's portrait resembles that of the German stigmatized nun Anne-Catherine Emmerich, whose *Douloureuse Passion de Notre-Seigneur Jésus-Christ* Barbey had read in 1860 (Petit 1425). Adding to this contemporary Catholic reference, Barbey also Christianizes the pagan myth of the Medusa head: "foudroyé par ce signe muet jusqu'au fond de son être" (65), Calixte's father cannot bear to kiss or even look at the engraved cross on his daughter's forehead. The castrating threat of the Medusa and the sublime torture of the stigmata are united in an aesthetics of horror, a mystique characterized by violence and suffering.⁶

By inscribing Calixte's birthmark and illness in the Catholic tradition of stigmatization and expiation, the narrator gives it a new meaning. Whereas *stigmatisées* actively invited God to afflict them for the sake of others, Calixte herself has not asked to participate actively in her Savior's suffering, at least initially: the narrator acknowledges that Calixte's stigmatization "ne l'était

pas par l'amour qui a demandé à Dieu de partager ses blessures, mais par l'horreur involontaire d'une mère—morte d'horreur!" (89). The mother dies of horror, as if she has seen the Medusa head or the devil in person, and her mental state is supernaturally (and morbidly) transcribed onto the daughter's body, whose mysterious wounds ought to bring her and her father merit, erasing parts of his debt. The reinterpretation of Calixte's suffering illustrates how the doctrine of vicarious suffering assigned meaning to (female) suffering in daily life: although her birth was the involuntary result of her father's sin and her birthmark and illness are caused by her mother's horror, Calixte's suffering becomes a voluntary contribution to her father's salvation.

Both the novelistic rendering of vicarious suffering in Calixte's case and the discourse on intense bodily and mental pain in many real-life cases build on women's experience of suffering.⁷ Despite technological and scientific advances, as historian Bonnie Smith emphasizes, the powerful association of women and pain was still relevant to a large majority of women throughout the nineteenth century: many children still died at a very young age, and childbirth often resulted in the death of the mother. Their continued suffering explained in part women's persistent religiosity, Smith argues, since "reproduction predisposed them to a religious worldview" (95). Religion provided comfort for the particular suffering that women had to endure; a secular framework could not suffice in the same way. The doctrine of vicarious suffering could give them hope that it would be useful in some way, changing their passive suffering into an active contribution to redemption.

Although Calixte's suffering started involuntarily, she voluntarily takes on more. As her headdress indicates, she secretly belongs to the Carmelite Order, adhering to its strict rules of discipline, walking barefoot, and foregoing marriage, not wanting to continue "une race qui n'aurait pas dû naître" (173). She reveals her vocation to her neighbor Néel de Néhou only after he confesses his love for her, and she has started to love him "comme une vraie sœur" (177), although her actions seemed to indicate romantic feelings. Even though her choice signifies hardship, what is most difficult for her is that she is forced to remain outside of the community of the convent until her father's death or reinstatement as priest. Additionally, she hides her pain from her father for fear he will try to alleviate it, hoping that the duration of her martyrdom will bring her more merit: "La pensée qu'en souffrant pour lui elle ramènerait peut-être à Dieu l'âme de son père, et qu'elle faisait, s'il échappait à l'enfer, une partie de son purgatoire, lui fermait la bouche à toute plainte et y étendait l'héroïque sourire d'une résignation presque joyeuse" (162). Calixte's smile is not one of masochistic pleasure but of both resignation and heroism as she takes the salvation of her father upon herself. Her actions show that the doctrine of vicarious suffering is paradoxically

both victimizing and empowering, not just “through the voluntary espousal of [her] powerlessness,” in the words of Richard D. E. Burton (*Holy Tears* xvii), but also through her choice of more hardship.

Wet-nurse La Malgaigne explains Calixte’s suffering in general terms as the vicarious atonement of the righteous for the ungodly. Such is the expression of the doctrine used, for example, by Huysmans, who describes Carmelite convents as the “paratonnerres de la société” in his conversion novel *En route* (113), and the afflictions of the medieval Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam as atonement for the sins of her society. As both Griffiths (166) and Lowrie (84) have noted, Barbey’s representation of vicarious suffering in *Un prêtre marié* departs from the traditional interpretation of the doctrine, in that Calixte’s suffering does not have universal application, but is on behalf of one specific person: Calixte considers herself “marquée pour la mort et pour le rachat de l’âme de [s]on père” (169). He should then be the sole beneficiary of the merits she seeks to obtain through her suffering, as she goes through purgatory in his stead. Barbey’s narrative and ethical choice makes Calixte’s vicarious suffering all the more poignant, since only her father’s conversion could demonstrate its effectiveness.

Calixte’s first effort to convert her father consists of words: “Je prierai tant pour toi, mon père, que Dieu t’enverra la foi religieuse comme il me l’a envoyée” (65). However, in the eyes of the Norman narrator, this woman does not have the intellectual capacity to convince her father through words. Typical of Barbey’s attack on the Bas-bleus,⁸ Calixte is praised because her nervous illness has prevented her from becoming “une de ces viragos d’intelligence chez lesquelles [. . .] l’hypertrophie cérébrale déforme le sexe et produit la monstruosité” (61). Although her father accompanies her to “L’Église éloquente,” Catholic piety cannot reach the former priest, who could only be convinced by a tangible sign of God’s presence: “J’ai été jaloux du prêtre de Bolsène, à qui l’hostie saigna sur les mains, et je souhaitais toujours que ma foi ébranlée se raffermît dans la terreur d’un tel miracle” (196). Like many vicariously suffering women, Calixte understands that her words have limited power; as a result, the only choice she has is to save his soul by using her body.

Calixte’s vicarious sacrifice, described in such detail in the novel, ultimately does not result in the defrocked priest’s conversion, despite appearance to the contrary when he announces his desire to repent from his sins and return to the bosom of the church. The reader soon discovers that Sombreval has faked his conversion in an attempt to quell rumors of an incestuous relationship between him and his daughter. When the abbé Méautis, informed by mystical revelation, tells Calixte the truth, her illness worsens, and she dies without having seen her father again. Her final words,

“*Nous sommes condamnés!*” (403, original emphasis), even suggest that “au lieu d’arracher son père aux griffes infernales, c’est elle qui a été enveloppée par les ténèbres d’En-Bas,” according to Pierre Glaudes (136–37).

Sombreval shows his ultimately unrepentant heart in his reaction to Calixte’s death: “Je repousse avec horreur cette comédie, qui n’avait de sens que parce que je la jouais pour toi! Et je redeviens ce que j’étais! Je redeviens le Sombreval qui n’a jamais eu d’autre Dieu que toi!” (424). He digs her body up from the grave, rips the clothes from his daughter’s dead body, and covers it with *baisers* and *caresses* in a scene that shows, in the words of Josette Soutet, “le caractère pour le moins équivoque de son amour pour Calixte.”⁹ Sombreval finally takes his own life by walking into the lake, bearing Calixte’s corpse in his arms in an attempt to bind her fate to his. The excess and furor of this morbid scene shows Barbey’s “esthétique de l’horreur et du sang,” or his “esthétique du pire” (Johannessen 73); even though Néel is able to retrieve Calixte’s body from the lake, Sombreval’s violent gesture seems to submit Calixte to a second death, in an instance of exaggerated violence done to a corpse.

The novel’s conclusion, which leaves the priest condemned instead of saved, has solicited multiple interpretations. Griffiths, for example, blames Barbey for adding vicarious suffering to his “hotch-potch of Romantic decadence” because of his “essential incomprehension of the doctrine” (164). Others attribute Sombreval’s unrepentant heart to Barbey’s intransigent Catholicism, with its insistence on sin (Petit 1420), or argue that Barbey’s disconcerting conclusion is precisely what gives the reader access to the sublime (Séginger 69). All these explanations confirm the fact that, in not obtaining her stated goal, Calixte suffers in vain. Using the doctrine of vicarious suffering as a narrative device, Barbey enhances the dramatic tension provided by Calixte’s vicarious suffering by tying it to the conversion of one specific person. However, from the beginning, Sombreval’s ultimate perdition had been predicted by the voices in La Malgaigne’s head: “Vère! sa fille, la Sainte de Néhou, ne gagnera le ciel que pour elle, mais le père est réservé au feu” (243). Even though La Malgaigne herself also tries to prevent the realization of her prophecy, she tells the people around her that nobody can escape from fate.¹⁰ Sombreval remains unrepentant for consistency’s sake, and thus Calixte fails to obtain her father’s redemption. Sombreval’s conversion would have made the novel an edifying demonstration of the doctrine of vicarious suffering; instead, the author opts to follow the internal logic of the novel’s fictional universe.

Calixte’s suffering misses its theological purpose, but the spectacle of her suffering serves an aesthetic purpose. In the passages that detail her suffering, the heroine is often described as a spectacle, particularly during

the last stages of her illness: “À elle seule, Calixte était tout un spectacle, un spectacle étonnant et formidable, mais touchant aussi, touchant jusqu’aux larmes, car la jeune fille, la simple jeune fille, dans sa grâce incomparable, adoucissait en elle ce que la Beauté, l’Intelligence et la Sainteté y avaient, toute sa vie, versé de pathétique et de grandiose” (395). Many neighbors witnessed her terrifying fainting spells, somnambulism, and piercing shrieks (200), and her suffering reaches its climax after the revelation of her father’s pretense, when she offers “le spectacle des symptômes les plus alarmants et les plus compliqués” (380). Secular scientists such as Sombreval and the village doctor d’Ayre adopt the contemporary medical discourse of *névrose* and *hystérie*, to describe the spectacle of Calixte’s suffering, although they acknowledge that science cannot yet explain her case. On the other hand, both the abbé Méautis and the narrator offer a religious interpretation of Calixte’s body in pain, as the site where an otherwise hidden God manifests his presence. Both interpretations lead to the extensive, gruesome descriptions of the body in decay typical of Decadent literature, of which Barbey’s text can be considered an early example.

The spectacle of Calixte’s suffering continues even after her death, providing an even more powerful example of Barbey’s decadent aesthetics. Since Calixte’s fainting spells sometimes lasted for days, Néel de Néhou, who has not been able to let go of his unrequited love, verifies Calixte’s death by burning her feet with a hot iron:

Il approcha le fer rouge de ces pieds qu’il ne voyait qu’à travers ses larmes. Une fumée monta avec un bruit navrant, mais le corps de Calixte resta immobile; nulle artère ne s’y réveilla, nulle fibre n’y tressaillit. Néel, qui y cherchait la vie avec rage [. . .], brûlait avec un acharnement égaré les beaux pieds insensibles que le feu rongeaît, comme il aurait rongé une chair de fleur. Bourreau par tendresse, il s’enivrait de son action mêlée d’horreur et de volonté. (408)

As the narrator comments, Néel applies the stigmata to Calixte’s “Carmelite feet” that the abbé Méautis thought God would apply through a supernatural act (334). Yet Calixte’s stigmata come from Néel, and not from a supernatural source. They are applied after her death; even though her flesh burns, she does not suffer from it. Hence, her stigmatization cannot bring her merit and has no use in the economy of the narrative. Néel initially applies the iron to her feet in order to verify whether Calixte is still alive, which is why Johannessen does not consider this scene to be an example of Barbey’s “esthétique du pire” (73). However, Néel goes above and beyond this verification: when noticing that the burning of the flesh has no effect, he continues applying the iron to her feet in a “subtle mixture of sexual desire, sadism and perverted religiosity”

(Carter 61). His zeal only finds its equal in the florid descriptions of it given by the narrator. The image of Calixte's gratuitous stigmatization after her death thus illustrates her ineffectual vicarious suffering in the rest of the novel. Néel's burning of Calixte's feet is an image of the artist himself as he inscribes this suffering onto the female body, which in turn becomes the privileged site to display his morbid fascination with horror, decay, and sickness.

LE DÉSESPÉRÉ: SELF-INFLICTED SUFFERING?

Bloy was the secretary and disciple of Barbey d'Aureville, who made him read Blanc de Saint Bonnet's book.¹¹ Bloy's novel *Le Désespéré*, with its descriptions of Véronique's suffering and self-destruction, offers another illustration of the narrative exploitation of the doctrine of vicarious suffering. The well-named Véronique, who bears the name of the saint who wiped Christ's face on the *Via Dolorosa*, is a former prostitute rescued by Caïn-Joseph Marchenoir, a Catholic writer. In expiation of her sinful past, she lives a virtuous life of devotion and changes her name to Madeleine as a sign of her repentance. Refusing Marchenoir's advances because she renounced sexual love, in a gesture of self-deprecation she tells him: "Si vous avez le Malheur de désirer la pourriture qui me sert de corps, je vais demander à Dieu qu'il vous guérisse ou qu'il vous délivre de moi" (151). When her words and prayers do not have the desired effect, she disfigures herself by cutting off her hair and having her teeth pulled out, destroying her beauty in the hope that it will extinguish his love for her. She finally goes mad and is interned in an asylum.

Unlike Calixte's involuntary illness, Véronique's suffering in *Le Désespéré* is entirely self-inflicted. Rather than marrying her protector, she chooses to remain celibate, no matter what the cost, which even her confessor qualifies as "un zèle téméraire" (231). Her disfiguration substitutes Marchenoir's need of action with suffering of her own doing. Moreover, when she notices Marchenoir's professional difficulties, she exclaims: "Pauvre chère âme! [. . .], que ne puis-je prendre sur moi toute votre peine!" (350). She suffers vicariously for her protector, which Marchenoir recognizes as such: "elle souffre pour moi, dit-il, et non pour elle" (228).

As noted above, Catholic authors such as Huysmans and Bloy construct vicarious suffering as women's active contribution to salvation and redemption.¹² However, although Véronique's suffering is entirely self-inflicted, it is important to note that she does it in response to Marchenoir's letter in which he confesses his love and asks her to find a way to deter it: "Il faudrait construire quelque autre muraille mitoyenne qui montât jusqu'au septième ciel et qu'aucune trahison des sens ne pût entamer . . . Cherchez donc, chère trésorière d'héroïsme, c'est peut-être dans la direction du

martyre que vous découvrirez ce qu'il nous faut" (195). Rather than search for his own solution, Marchenoir makes Véronique responsible for eliminating his desire. Véronique's self-mutilation affects the two most significant signs of her agency, her sexual prowess and her speech: she cuts her long red hair and sells it to pay for the extraction of all of her teeth, described in what Burton calls "one of the most appalling scenes in the whole of French literature" (*Holy Tears* 231). The absence of teeth alters her voice and ability to speak (*Le Désespéré* 225): no longer able to whisper sweet words in the ears of her lovers, she can no longer maintain spiritual conversations. Instead, she relies entirely on Marchenoir for expressing her sentiments, which had already been the case before her self-sacrifice.

Véronique's prayers and mystical experience are mostly executed through tears and blood, without words: "Prière non formulée et intransposable sur le clavier de n'importe quel langage" (218). Her own voice, already hidden behind the narrator's disparaging remarks about her intelligence and reliance upon Marchenoir, is lost entirely through her disfiguration. It is, however, recuperated by her companion as well as the external narrator, who most often adopts Marchenoir's point of view: Marchenoir "était fier de sa Véronique, autant que d'un beau livre qu'il eût écrit. Et c'en était un vraiment sublime, en effet, que sa foi religieuse lui garantissait impérissable. Elle n'avait pas un sentiment, une pensée, ou même une parole, qu'elle ne tînt de lui" (148). The description of Véronique's suffering is indeed Marchenoir's work of art, and by extension it is Bloy's as well. The image is even more poignant since, as Glaudes points out, Marchenoir describes the pimp of one his previous mistresses as her "éditeur" (419). Véronique's body thus belongs to the one who has written her story; yet her vicarious suffering on behalf of the man who loves her remains just as useless as Calixte's attempt to save her father. Marchenoir's love grows in intensity, undeterred by her mutilated face, and his professional difficulties are far from resolved: his ferocious diatribes against the decadence of his contemporaries' texts go ignored, and monetary success remains elusive. Eventually, after having brought Véronique to an insane asylum, Marchenoir dies a miserable, lonely death. Whereas Véronique's existence is defined by vicarious suffering, it fails to bring a positive result for the protagonist, just like Calixte's suffering for her father remains fruitless.

VENTRILOQUIZED MYSTICS

Both novels display bodily suffering, yet rarely do we hear the women's own voices. Both Calixte and Véronique continually try to hide their suffering from their loved ones, and are unable to speak their own suffering: Calixte

exclaims, “Il faut tout cacher dans la vie!” (334). Her secret penitence stands in sharp contrast with the public spectacle of flagellation and prayer that accompanies Sombreal’s pretended repentance. Additionally, the contrast between Calixte’s hidden suffering and her father’s performance of repentance corresponds to the difference in gender roles. At the conclusion of the hagiological *Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam*, Huysmans points to the gendered aspect of vicarious suffering when observing that the victims all belong to the “sexe féminin”:

Dieu paraît, en effet, leur avoir plus spécialement réservé ce rôle de débitrices; les saints, eux, ont un rôle plus expansif, plus bruyant ; ils parcourent le monde, créent ou réforment des ordres, convertissent les idolâtres, agissent surtout par l'éloquence de la chaire, tandis que, plus passive, la femme, qui n'est pas revêtue d'ailleurs du caractère sacerdotal, se tord, en silence, sur un lit. (261)

There is a stark opposition between the active, authoritative, and eloquent male saints and the passive and powerless female victims who cannot be heard. Not only do the women hide their suffering, they are also unable to speak of it; intense pain, as Elaine Scarry points out in her study on the *Body in Pain*, “is language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates; as the self disintegrates, so that which would express and project the self is robbed of its source and its subject” (35). Suffering women depend therefore on the people around them to make their story public.

In her study of narratives on hysteria, Janet Beizer speaks of ventriloquy as “a metaphor to evoke the narrative process whereby woman’s speech is repressed in order to be expressed as inarticulate body language, which must then be dubbed by a male narrator” (9). Narratives of vicarious suffering suggest that this ventriloquy was adopted by Catholic authors as well: the story of the woman’s suffering must be told by male eyewitnesses and the narrator, since she can only express herself through inarticulate prayers and is subject to *névrose*, piercing shrieks, convulsions, blindness, and loss of consciousness. Male mediation needs to intervene, in order to give shape to women’s mystical religiosity and bodily experience. It is the male voice that either explains the women’s extra-ordinary bodily suffering as hysteria, or sanctifies it by interpreting it as a supernatural phenomenon, as “mysteria,” so to speak.

Like Véronique, whom Marchenoir describes as “cette habitante de l’autre rive” (365), Calixte receives visions and other signs through her inner, mystical experience: tangible evidence of God’s presence for which her

father had prayed. Yet, contrary to La Malgaigne who articulates her many prophecies and gives voice to her voices, Calixte cannot remember what she said during her visions, while Véronique can only quote a liturgical chant in Latin “distinctement, mais d’une voix désormais douce et plaintive” (362). Their prayers are related through the perspective of the enamored Marchenoir (in *Le Désespéré*), and Néel de Néhou (in *Un prêtre marié*), who also witnesses the external phenomena accompanying Calixte’s inner ecstasy during her last communion (410). The women’s inner, mystical experience remains hidden, however, and readers only have access to the outward, spectacular signs of their religious, mystical experience, such as levitation and suffering.

As Burton emphasizes, the men in the lives of the eleven women he studies were precisely among those who benefited most from the women’s vicarious suffering, “if only in the sense that they gave (and continued to give) inspiration, literary and/or spiritual, to men who did not go nearly as far along the Via Dolorosa as they did” (*Holy Tears* 249). Indeed, Véronique’s suffering provides an important part of the plot for an otherwise mostly plotless text, *Le Désespéré*, and the spectacle of Calixte’s mystical substitution, accompanied by violence and scandalous acts, is central to that of *Un prêtre marié*. The insistence on the women’s suffering as mystical substitution suggests another way in which the authors benefit from the display of female suffering: it is a way to give expression to the ineffable mystical experiences of unity with the Divine that cause and accompany it. The “nouveau” sought out by Barbey in his desire to construct an interesting Catholic novel resides not in tedious verbal expressions of virtue, but in descriptions of vicarious suffering that provoke readers’ interest and pity, and may initiate a conversion experience.

The doctrine of vicarious suffering applied to female characters in these novels by Barbey and Bloy generates a theological narrative that assigns meaning to everyday suffering that seems meaningless in itself. Not capable of convincing by words, the spiritual victim uses her body to convert or protect another protagonist, and adds to her suffering in order to earn more merit. Although the theology of vicarious suffering was mostly associated with right-wing Catholic writers in nineteenth-century France, a close examination of novels by secularist authors such as Zola reveals that female vicarious suffering is equally present in novels that also focus on pathology and quasi clinical analyses. For example, in *Lourdes*, the death of his mother enables priest Pierre Froment to apostatize and “convert” to secularism. The prevalence of this type of narrative suggests the powerful desire to provide a teleological explanation for suffering, and it situates the religious notion of sacrifice at the core of a secularizing society. In narratives that test the limits of rationality and annihilate the Naturalist project, the women suffer,

die, and disappear, and their blood, shrieks, and tears are transformed into words and books.

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NOTES

1. *Un prêtre marié* 107. The editors of the journal *Le Pays* in which *Un prêtre marié* first appeared as feuilleton disputed the orthodoxy of this degree of responsibility for a crime not shared by the child (*Un prêtre marié* 439n108).

2. For thorough explanations of the doctrine of vicarious suffering, see Griffiths, Burton *Blood in the City* 44–53 and *Holy Tears* xvi–xx, Moore 5–7, and Kane.

3. Huysmans 260. Likewise, Catholic neurologist Antoine Imbert-Gourbeyre's *La Stigmatisation, l'extase divine et les miracles de Lourdes: Réponse aux libres penseurs* (1873) accounts for 321 cases of stigmatization, of which 227 were women.

4. Paula Kane notes the same gendering of victim spirituality in post-World War I European and American Catholicism, despite the existence of certain schools of “victim priests” (113) and the “strenuous Nietzschean rhetoric” with which “great men” were called to become victim souls during World War II (95).

5. Marie de Moerl and Domenica Lazzari, both stigmatized around 1830, are described in Nicolas's *L'extatique et les stigmatisées du Tyrol actuellement vivantes*. Frank Bowman cites a number of nineteenth-century studies devoted to stigmatization, including a portion of Görres's *Mystique divine, naturelle et diabolique* (trans. 1861), and studies by positivist Alfred Maury (1835) and Catholic professor Imbert-Gourbeyre (1873 and 1894). Stigmatization was actually rare, Bowman concludes, despite its proliferation as “l'objet d'une certaine littérature d'édification, mais qui devait se rabattre sur des cas historiques ou étrangers” (24).

6. Although my reading is not a psychoanalytical one, we see that the text suggests the incestuous nature of Sombreal's love for his daughter. The sight of Calixte's blood-stained forehead, which can be considered a displaced sign of the bleeding vagina and therefore a sign *par excellence* of her femininity, has a castrating effect on Sombreal and serves as protection against his own incestuous desires.

7. Although multiple narratives, such as Huysmans's texts, stress the voluntary nature of vicarious suffering, Blanc de Saint-Bonnet's purpose in *La Douleur* was to “reconcil[e] man with the social lot in which he finds himself; his study of reversibility aims at consoling those who are already suffering by convincing them that this suffering may be of some use,” according to Griffiths (163).

8. See Barbey's *Les Bas-bleus*, volume five of his *Les Œuvres et les hommes au XIXe siècle*.

9. The villagers' suspicion of incest might not be entirely unfounded, notes Soutet: “le viol de la sépulture n'est pas sans faire songer à un viol tout court” (221).

10. *Un prêtre marié* 141. For a thorough analysis of the Malgaigne character, see Johannessen 58–154.
11. In a letter dated 14 August 1872 to Bloy, Barbey d'Aureville writes: "Hein? J'avais bien raison, n'est-ce pas? de vous vanter Saint-Bonnet? Grande tête et cœur plus grand encore!" (*Lettres de J. Barbey d'Aureville* 12). For Bloy's use and defense of vicarious suffering see Burton, *Holy Tears* 228–50.
12. See Burton *Holy Tears* xiii, as well as Robert Ziegler, who analyzes female suffering in the works of Eugène Vintras, Ernest Hello, Huysmans and Bloy (*Satanism* 116–81).

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