

## Prussian “Monsters” and “Pigs”: Representations of Germans in French *Fin-de-Siècle* Short Fiction

Jean-François Fournier  
Appalachian State University

The present work addresses the reinvention of the French perception of Germans in short stories of the *fin-de-siècle* in a context of trauma caused by France’s crushing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71. The *idée fixe* of the enemy illustrated in paintings, caricatures, and literature—particularly in short stories published in the press over decades after the conflict—expresses more than a simple need for revenge for the loss of Alsace and Lorraine. In 1813, when Madame de Staël published *De l’Allemagne*, the French looked down on Germany as a political and cultural dwarf. The *fin-de-siècle* tales see the light of day in an intellectual context that is diametrically opposed to the one of the beginning of the century. The perspective on Germany is extremely different, as is made manifest for instance by Ernest Renan’s essay *La réforme intellectuelle et morale* (1871). In the aftermath of defeat, Germany enjoyed the status of France’s cultural benchmark and antagonist. Respectful of that new rank, tales take part in the definition of the French self through oppositions to the supreme other, the German. If literary portraits of Germans in the popular press are unquestionably exaggerated, they feed and revisit stereotypes in order to help French readers cope with the agonizing defeat. From a French perspective, I wish to understand the politico-cultural logic at work behind such representations of the erstwhile enemy.

The tales analyzed below depict interactions between German troops and French citizens during the conflict, save for one piece that relates postbellum events. Its composition happens only years later and resorts to diegetic flashbacks. Unlike that of Victor Hugo’s *L’année terrible* (1872), the production of these pieces does not occur in the spur of the moment, as the invasion unfolds in front of the writers’ eyes. With the exception of Alphonse Daudet’s *Contes du lundi* (1872), the production and first publication in the daily and weekly press of wartime pieces by Octave Mirbeau, Guy de Maupassant, and Léon Bloy took place at least a decade after the end of the conflict. Even if the patriotic and emotional fire has somewhat cooled, one objective of the tales is to astound the reader by sensitive events in a brief format. Two decades after the conflict, press fiction could still successfully resort to dramatic wartime renditions to keep readers away from rival

publications. In the tales, the war of 1870 assuredly retains its tragic appeal, as the mystery of why the country so completely collapsed in defeat within a few months remains intact.

In a recent book dedicated to depictions of Germany in French literature, Wolfgang Leiner dedicates an important section to the nineteenth century. One chapter titled “Das Ende der deutschen Idylle” (“The End of the German Idyll”) addresses the disappearance of the myth of an ethereal Germany, thereby creating space for contingents of clumsy, dull-witted Bavarians and stiff Prussian officers (187-203). In the wake of that reassessment, fiction after the Franco-Prussian War reflects an almost unbridgeable change in the perception of the other.

On a more practical level, the new literary depictions of Germans do not embrace realistic imperatives but rather a revanchist attitude: “Dass diese Bilder in dem hier betrachteten Zeitabschnitt nicht immer Ergebnis eines Bemühens um Wahrheit sind, sondern ihre Existenz einem Bedürfnis nach Revanche verdanken, liegt oft genug klar auf der Hand” (193).<sup>1</sup> Leiner sees for example in “Mademoiselle Fifi”<sup>2</sup> by Maupassant an attempt to let off chauvinistic steam through the crude representation of wanton brutality in Prussian aristocracy. Images of Germans achieve a therapeutic function in the text by offering vicarious revenge. For instance, the murder of a sadistic officer at the hands of a woman serves such a purpose. It is difficult to dismiss such a utilitarian element of revenge (or call for revenge) in fiction, when the former enemy appears capable of blatantly outrageous behaviors.

Leiner’s analysis can benefit from the reading of a wider corpus of texts of the *fin-de-siècle*. The revanchist function and the denunciation of racial drifts are undeniable in the literature of the last decades of the nineteenth century, but one must not forget to include the short stories published in the press, as they assume a specular role by means of a strong series of antitheses. Exposing the faults of an enemy serves a purpose of self-definition by the French precisely through the display of what they are not.

Characteristics of the literary caricatures offered in the tales consist of a debasement of the enemy and, to an extreme degree, of a questioning of their humanity. A first discursive line about the opponent takes root in animal and grotesque realism. The reader witnesses a becoming-animal, but with no positive line of flight. Far from any promising potentiality in meaning, the metamorphosis of the enemy relies only on the classical superiority of mankind over animals. To understand the actual meaning of such degraded portrayals, it is first necessary to replace them in the wake of a French Romantic myth of Germany.

During an exile caused by her opposition to Napoleon I, Germaine de Staël set about compiling her impressions of the intellectual and cultural life in Germany. In her work, the goal is not chiefly to criticize France from the exterior or to sing undue praises of her host country. Madame de Staël seeks instead to acquaint her fellow citizens with neighbors scorned for centuries as being unrefined. She does that by showing the worthy intellectual achievements of which they are capable, especially in the artistic domain. The resulting book came into existence in 1813, when Germans did not arouse much interest and concern among the French audience still accustomed to Napoleonic victories and

---

<sup>1</sup> “The fact is often obvious that these images from the examined period do not always strive to reach the truth, but rather owe their existence to a need for revenge.” My translation.

<sup>2</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1882.

convinced of their cultural ascendance. Success among French Romantics in the 1820s corrected a modest inception, and over the next decades *De l'Allemagne* became the chief reference on Germany and its culture, both endowed with a breath of fresh air. Germans formerly existed in the French imaginary as fierce mercenaries (*reîtres*) on the payroll of various European armies. Madame de Staël's text strongly influenced the perception of Germans, for it shed light on dominant traits of German psychology. Leaving aside the question of the accuracy of those depictions, Madame de Staël left a lasting impression. Fifty years and a major conflict against France and the Zollverein under the aegis of Prussia would be necessary for the French to once again revise the perception of their neighbors.

Conceding a lack of political unity and cultural uniformity, *De l'Allemagne* instead draws the attention of readers to several general traits of the Germanic world. For example, rejecting old prejudices among the French of that time and dismissing the alleged lack of intelligence of their neighbors, the author argues that German people are endowed with a proclivity for intellectual work. She praises such an ability more specifically by granting her hosts a natural inclination toward literary and philosophical questions served by an undeniable diligence: "La puissance du travail et de la réflexion est ... l'un des traits distinctifs de la nation allemande. Elle est naturellement littéraire et philosophique..." (57). *De l'Allemagne* salutes the contemporary achievements of German Romanticism in literature and idealism in philosophy, at a time when authors such as Kant, Fichte, Goethe, and Schiller remained nearly unknown in France.

A key trait attributed to her hosts establishes a divergence of temperament between the two peoples: "C'est l'imagination, plus que l'esprit, qui caractérise les Allemands" (57). If Germaine de Staël sees great potential for creativity in both worlds, the two cultures exert their aptitude toward elevation differently. The German faculty of representation that leads to artistic creativity lies in contrast to French wit, associated with the idea of the lightness and swiftness of mind. If the German thinker is not as mercurial as the French salon dweller, he can nonetheless not only travel upward to the sphere of ideals, but also dig deeply into the realm of concepts. That explains why Madame de Staël sees Germans as generally less frivolous than their French counterparts.

Such depictions outlived the French Romantics to become commonplace, for roughly a half-century later in *Le dictionnaire des idées reçues* (1911), Gustave Flaubert qualifies the Germans as "Peuple de rêveurs (vieux)" (304). The conflict had not yet taken place on battlefields since the innocuous cliché of Romantic reverie still prevailed; however, ironically enough, the parenthetical nuance that follows shows that such judgment would possibly have to be re-evaluated. Idealism, or the fondness for inhabiting dreams, and daydreaming, as the activity of being lost in one's reverie, joined a traditional ethnographic vein exploited by writers for centuries.<sup>3</sup> Germaine de Staël takes over with observations of poor spontaneity and dexterity in action: "Les Allemands, à quelques exceptions près, sont peu capables de réussir dans tout ce qui exige de l'adresse et de l'habileté: tout les inquiète, tout les embarrasse, et ils ont autant besoin de méthode dans les actions que d'indépendance dans les idées" (63). Those attributes of diligence, clumsiness, and reverie remained intact in the French mind at the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71.

---

<sup>3</sup> See Hugues Marquis (283-84).

Subsequent to contact between the populations and the occupiers, however, several French writers would of course transform those perceptions of Germans.

In *L'année terrible*, published in 1872, Hugo writes his first poems in a tone far from hostile toward the Prussian opponent. Even when the foreign troops tighten their hold of wide parts of the country, Hugo offers a heroic and powerful depiction of the victor: "Aucune nation n'est plus grande que toi" (36). Germany is still the country of music and of poetic reverie,<sup>4</sup> a correspondence for which other writers will rebuke Hugo on grounds of a lack of patriotism. It is only when the people of the capital are driven to extremes to survive that the tone of reverence for a dreamlike, spiritual Germany progressively fades away, and the poems come to take a darker, more ominous glance at the attacking troops. The opponent has become a mere barbaric horde accused of plundering and raping the feminized capital and country. Through defeat, Hugo sees France as the paragon of civilization, whereas Germany plunges into barbarism.<sup>5</sup>

Following the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, images of Germans drift toward the lower areas along a vertical axis of human dignity. In a significant number of short stories, German characters seem to lose what makes them fully human. An animalization and grotesque nature contribute either to belittle the enemy and render it less frightening or to explain its behavior. Several German characters therefore do not appear as authentic human beings, as if the alleged distance from mankind could explain the deeds committed by the troops. Bestiality emerges as a characteristic of the whole country. Through the use of synecdoche, parts of the animal body emerge and leave the reader to guess the whole nature of the victor. In "L'obstacle" by Bloy,<sup>6</sup> the narrator relates the desperate defense of Le Mans by French troops in the middle of January 1871. Therein, weather conditions are terrible, while snow is written to perpetrate its homicidal role as if coming out of the snouts and nostrils of a victorious Germany ("mufles ou ... naseaux de toute cette Allemagne victorieuse" [57]). Such a synecdoche causes Germany to metaphorically appear as an indistinct bovine herd, if not as murderous bulls. The tone of the tale is indubitably not satirical and Germany emerges as a threatening mass.

Threat also manifests through the predatory behaviors of individuals. Similarly to drawn caricatures of the period and of the First World War, Prussians are not associated with their national emblem, the royal or imperial eagle, but mostly with the pig. Tales very often exemplify the hyperactive libido of the troops, and the pig becomes the adequate animal for such representations, for it is considered unrefined and impure. In "Les créanciers de l'État,"<sup>7</sup> Bloy introduces us to a Prussian colonel ready for sexual intercourse

---

<sup>4</sup> "La musique est ton souffle ; âme, harmonie, encens" (37).

<sup>5</sup> In the poem "À qui la victoire définitive ?" Hugo prophesizes that German strength will surrender to a kind of progress embodied in French higher culture: "... c'est nous qui prendrons l'Allemagne. Écoutez : / ... / Voir chez nous les esprits marcher, lire nos livres, / Respirer l'air profond dont nos penseurs sont ivres, / C'est rendre à son insu son épée au progrès" (71). The judgment is not based only on purely intellectual grounds, but also on political ones with a strong emphasis on ideals of justice and freedom (72). In September 1870, Napoleon III "le Petit" abdicated, and France embraced the republic as its official political regime from the balcony of the city hall in Paris. In January 1871, Wilhelm I was proclaimed German emperor in Versailles.

<sup>6</sup> The tale was originally published in the periodical *Gil Blas* in 1888 and later in the book *Sueur de sang* in 1893.

<sup>7</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1893.

after slaughtering the population of a French village. Summoned to satisfy the sexual appetite of the officer, the young Solange Thibaut offers a disgusted rejection: "Sale cochon ! répondit la fille, me prends-tu pour une truie, par hasard" (181). The distinction between the population and the predators could not be more obvious than in that tale.

In "Saint-Antoine,"<sup>8</sup> Maupassant offers a different angle to the animal metamorphosis when a Prussian soldier becomes the pet of a wily Normandy farmer. The first encounter between the two characters establishes a connection between the heaviness and complexion of the German and his apparent psychological limitations: "Le père Antoine, devenu pâle, regarda son Prussien. C'était un gros garçon à la chair grasse et blanche, aux yeux bleus, au poil blond, barbu jusqu'aux pommettes, qui semblait idiot, timide et bon enfant" (773). The tale offers a progressive transformation of the soldier into a pig under the fascinated glance of the Frenchman. The closer the relationship with the Prussian, the fuller the animalization, as the German is fattened and pinched on his thighs. Antoine walks him around the village so that other farmers may admire his increased weight: "Tenez, v'là mon cochon, r'gardez-moi s'il engraisse, c't'animal-là" (774). Antoine's "pig" patiently gives in to the game until a drinking binge turns to open hostility. After a fight, the Prussian is murdered by Antoine with a pitchfork and buried in a manure pit. The occurrence shows that the domestication of the enemy cannot be fully achieved; French citizens try to adopt Germans, whose wild instincts return to the surface and lead to death.

Pigs and bovines are not thought to be noble animals, and their link with the livestock and lower biological needs is clear. Such needs are emphasized and even hyperbolized in the occupying troops and reflect their primitive nature. In that regard, "Les créanciers de l'État" recounts the tribulations of the population of an invaded village including massacres, rapes, and looting by the Prussians. Bloy's embarrassing satire does not spare the local bourgeoisie, who tremble more because of their expected accommodation and feeding of the troops than of the surrounding atrocities. The satirical effect is reinforced by the amplified bodily needs of the victors: "Arrivée des Prussiens, retour de la chasse. Il ne faudrait pas trop compter sur leur douceur. — *Fleisch ! Vine ! Cognition ! Bien manger ! Bien couvrir ! Bien abreuver !*" (179-80). The text mocks the bourgeoisie who do not want to share their food and comfort to assuage part of the rage of the invaders on the population. Bloy seems to relish the sarcastic vein in which stinginess meets disproportionate appetites and physiological needs. The invaders are characters with gargantuan needs, and Bloy makes no exception for their leader, as all of them have boundless appetites: "... Messieurs les Prussiens ont combattu toute la journée pour l'Allemagne, pour leur Empereur plein de saucisses et pour l'Évangile de leur Empereur" (180). Like his people, the German emperor is represented as stuffed with sausage, an obviously unrefined food for the French, which once more associates the country's bellicose drives with enormous lower appetites.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1883.

<sup>9</sup> Such representations are not original in the sense that the French press had already represented German soldiers and their leaders gorging on food and territories for almost two decades. For Michael E. Nolan, those negative representations of Germans published by Bloy are partly outdated by 1893 (29-30).

In “Un épouvantable huissier,”<sup>10</sup> the same author expresses similar ravenous cravings in an epigraph borrowed from fourteenth-century chronicler Jean Froissart, which depicts the Germans as greedier than pagans and Saracens (122). The tale details a quasi-Rabelaisian inventory of a looting of the village of S...: “Beurre, pommes de terre, café, chocolat, sucre, vin, eau-de-vie, volailles, lapins et chats, tout leur est bon, rafle complète. L’Allemagne s’empiffre à crever” (124). The food variety engenders an impression of indiscriminate accumulation by an enemy prone to satisfy its appetite with cats. Such a stockpile of goods clearly puts the emphasis on quantity rather than quality, the impression of which is reinforced by a register of vocabulary that is deliberately colloquial. German troops do not feed but instead stuff themselves to death. Once the disproportionate stuffing is done, the evacuation leaves the city entirely ravaged:

Les Prussiens décampèrent à huit heures du matin, laissant leurs crottes, quelques maisons incendiées et brûlant encore, quelques habitants discourtois estropiés ou massacrés, soixante-dix-sept femmes ou filles excessivement violées, et l’annonce délicieuse d’une seconde multitude qui n’attendait que leur départ pour les remplacer. (126)

In that passage, Bloy delivers another accumulation in correlation with the German occupation. In the place of innocuous goods, violent acts and destruction plague the village and aim to instill a dramatic vein in the narration. Derision, however, counterbalances the emotional tone by means of the scatological detail of excrements left by the occupying forces. In spite of their thematic differences, both accumulations create effects of grotesque realism.

In *Rabelais and His World*, Mikhail Bakhtin provides a reading of Rabelais’s work through a description of its roots in folk culture. He develops the key notion of grotesque realism that relies upon the “degradation . . . , the lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19-20). That characterization of German appetites falls to some extent into the category of a grotesque realism because of the degradation that fiction operates on the refined Romantic myth of Germany. Madame de Staël’s inscription of German elites in the unearthly realms of poetic and philosophical meditation is there brought back to the most profane domain of bodily appetites.

In relation to its comic aspect, Bakhtin establishes a significant difference between grotesque realism and modern satire, in the sense that the former, far from opposing the object of mockery, rejuvenates it as part of the cosmos. Grotesque laughter grants its regenerative powers to the world in a festive context (21). Even if the festive and cosmic aspects mentioned by Bakhtin in the economy of the popular culture are missing in Bloy’s and Maupassant’s texts, the images proposed in the tales achieve a part of the rejuvenating process. The two writers use the presence of dark humor in the process of grotesque fictional representation to avert deep anxiety even if the reader is not literally in a world of carnival. It is as if writers sought to exorcise trauma through a language of reversal: the permutation of the lower aspects of the reality and of the upper strata of the myth.

---

<sup>10</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1893.

In some occurrences, the degradation of the myth takes a more superficial aspect. In “La salamandre vampire,”<sup>11</sup> Bloy provides an explanation for the brutality of the Germans that relies on the resurfacing of atavistic instincts that connect them to the Visigoth tribe that ruined the Roman Empire. The narrator mentions a racial instinct that cannot be softened in spite of centuries of attempts at civilizing the populations. The reason is that Germans are forever children who understand neither the message behind physical discipline imposed on them by their leaders nor the cryptic babble of their philosophers, both because of a childlike psychology: “... la lourde puérité de ce peuple allemand que la trique de tous ses maîtres et le bavardage de tous ses pédants ne put jamais assouplir” (230). Germans are defined by Bloy as a childlike race incapable of extracting itself from the muck of its barbaric origins.<sup>12</sup> Later in the tale, the infantilization of the enemy enters into a relationship with the abovementioned animalization when the Prussians bury one of their youngest officers in a pig trough (238).

*Fin-de-siècle* tales relate the boundaries of human nature to the question of glance and appropriation. In some ways, humanity simply lies in the eye of the beholder, especially when expectations of atrocities create an unbridgeable distance from the opponent. In “La pipe de cidre,”<sup>13</sup> Mirbeau gives a Prussian a death and burial so original that the reader is tempted to regard the victim as a museum specimen. The title of the piece is a direct reference to the barrel of cider in which the farmer Lormeau, on a sudden whim, has left the soldier to rest for seventeen years after murdering him during the first period of the invasion in 1870. Puzzled by his murderous action and motives, Lormeau confesses to the narrator: “Enfin je ne sais pas pourquoi... Je saisis ma fourche à deux mains, et de toutes mes forces, avec rage, je frappe l’homme... L’homme tombe... Et je l’achève en lui enfonçant ma fourche dans la poitrine... C’est drôle tout de même, ces choses-là...” (351). Such disclosure by Lormeau illustrates the primal inclination toward murder that Mirbeau sees as the blind driving force within every human being.<sup>14</sup> “La pipe de cidre” is no patriotic piece insisting on the misdeeds of invaders, but rather an illustration of the general ruthlessness of mankind, even regarding the collateral victims of a conflict.

Lormeau’s confession offers an interesting twist to a plot that reminds the reader of the final one in Maupassant’s tale “Saint-Antoine.” In both tales, a farmer kills and needs to dispose of a German soldier. In his moment of inebriation, the farmer enjoys the fact that he deceived the Prussians and becomes proud of his resourcefulness. There is also the realization of how darkly comic his stratagem is, since the improvised disassembling and reassembling of a cider vat becomes the most astute way to conceal the corpse. It is with pride that Lormeau confesses: “. . . il y a un homme dans cette pipe-là, dans le cidre-là... un homme qui est gros... un homme, si tant est qu’un Prussien, sauf vot’ respect, soye un homme, comme vous, comme moi, comme tout le monde...” (349). The hesitation of the

---

<sup>11</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1893.

<sup>12</sup> Even so, Nolan notes that, at the time, “The traditional dichotomy of civilization and barbarism was turned on its head, and dynamic barbarism was now considered a force superior to decadent civilization in a world where the racial struggle for survival predominated” (26).

<sup>13</sup> First published in 1887 in *Le Gaulois*.

<sup>14</sup> See in “L’école de l’assassinat”: “Le besoin de tuer naît chez l’homme avec le besoin de manger et se confond avec lui. Ce besoin instinctif, qui est la base, le moteur de tous les organismes vivants, l’éducation le développe au lieu de le réfréner . . .” (38).

farmer in front of the human nature of the Prussian soldier is significant as the reader enters the domain of science and social prestige. The soldier has become the subject of an experiment, and his preservation in alcohol transforms him into a specimen of a cabinet of curiosities so popular in the eighteenth century. Lormeau proudly holds on to his Prussian, as a collector would with a rare and exotic creature in formaldehyde.

Lormeau's excitement is concretely visible in the number of exclamations in his account of the event. The humorous tone prevails, as direct responsibility and lack of scruples seem to be in conflict in the mental space of the protagonist. The reader does not know whether the farmer regrets his action, because of his hesitation with respect to the human status of his victim. Derision eventually prevails when the referent of faith is desecrated and the grotesque resurfaces: "On ne pourra toujours pas dire que celui-là n'a pas été baptisé!" (350). Here, the grotesque element consists more of a mixture of lower and superior realities than of a direct mention of lower functions. That element becomes more obvious when the postman, ignorant of the whole story and invited by Lormeau to taste the cider, expresses *with all due respect* that the beverage slightly tastes of leather.

The reference to baptism is relevant to the clichés of Prussians as heirs of the hordes of heathens that spread across on the Roman world during the first centuries. In "Noël prussien,"<sup>15</sup> Bloy refers to the Prussians as "hérétiques victorieux" (89). For that Catholic author, Germans cannot follow the path of civilization because of an inclination for evil practices dating back to the Reformation. Unsurprisingly, in a majority of tales of *Sueur de sang*, Prussians troops are accused of creating hell on Earth.

German troops are attacked for their lack of humanity when they perform atrocities sanctified in the name of God. In the tale "Noël prussien," the abbot Courtemanche has to absolve a group of kneeling cannibals (95). The association of the enemy with anthropophagic practices shows that Prussia breaks one of the supreme taboos in civilization. Such transgression is reinforced in "À la table des vainqueurs,"<sup>16</sup> when a German general accidentally eats the heart of his son, cooked by a French woman to avenge her loss. The subsequent reaction from the officer is totally unexpected: "Il se mit à rire doucement..., très doucement..., *gute französische Küche! PONNE GOUISSINE FRENTZÈSE!*" (108). Satanic laughs put a darker veil on the grotesque depiction of the Germans seen so far.

Grotesque realism is articulated around a vertical axis of representations. Yet, the opposition of the French to the Germans is also manifest on a horizontal axis that carries the symbolic opposition attached to physical characteristics. In "La mère Sauvage"<sup>17</sup> by Maupassant, the eponymous widow is hosting four Prussians soldiers when she receives a letter announcing the death of her son on the front line. The contrast between her son and the four guests is all the more notable as it crystalizes her hatred: "C'étaient quatre gros garçons à la chair blonde, à la barbe blonde, aux yeux bleus, demeurés gras malgré les fatigues qu'ils avaient endurées déjà, et bons enfants, bien qu'en pays conquis" (1219). Their blond hairiness, plumpness, and pale complexion—almost pig-like in appearance—strike the reader as a provocation for the mother whose son has antithetic physical

---

<sup>15</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1892.

<sup>16</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1893.

<sup>17</sup> First published in *Le Gaulois* in 1884.



characteristics: “. . . au nez crochu, aux yeux bruns, à la forte moustache qui faisait sur sa lèvre un bourrelet de poils noirs” (1219). Everything in the description contributes to contrast the two youths.

German tones are ominous. On several occasions, blue is mentioned in regard to the eyes of the enemy,<sup>18</sup> which could simply be a common anecdotal trait, if it were not also a symbolically rich link with Germania and with Germany. In a fascinating book dedicated to the color, Michel Pastoureau explains that blue has historically been associated with barbarians in both the eyes and on the body. Caesar mentions, for example, in *The Gallic Wars* that Germanic tribes used to paint their bodies blue to intimidate their enemies. Blue eyes were moreover associated with depravity and barbarism.

Of course, the symbolism of the color blue in the Western world has evolved over centuries. Among Romantics, the tint acquired several positive qualities: active, warm, and full of light. It enjoyed growing popularity in Germany in emulation of Goethe's *Werther* (Pastoureau 121). The phenomenon spread over the Germanic realm, and blue turned into a crucial color during the nineteenth century in fashion, art (with the new blue of Prussia), and politics. That said, in the French unconscious, the color seems to have kept its intimate ties to the Germanic world. The tales centered on the war of 1870 contain numerous allusions to the color blue, especially in the eyes of the opponent, as if they expressed a blend of dreamlike melancholy and cold brutality. For instance, in “Mademoiselle Fifi,”<sup>19</sup> the description of Major von Kelweingstein follows such a direction: “Il avait des yeux bleus, froids et doux, une joue fendue d'un coup de sabre dans la guerre d'Autriche . . .” (386). The dreamlike light carried by blue eyes seems to bear a mysterious message, as it conceals brutality behind apparent softness.

The issue of German humanity goes beyond simple physicality when French writers put the emphasis on the dynamic of the occupying troops. In that respect, Prussian troops are seen in a contradictory manner. On the one hand, they are a dark horde (“masse noire” [“Boule de suif” 84]), a disorganized swarm falling like a plague on France. On the other, they are invading waves (“flots envahisseurs” [“Boule de suif” 84]), an overwhelming and unstructured mass of assailants. Those metaphors, stamped with the force of natural phenomena, create a mixed effect of anonymity, disorganized profusion, and overwhelming force in the rendering of the enemy.

The discipline and order of the Germans, however are regularly appended to the collection of Prussian stereotypes. In Maupassant's “Boule de suif” (1880), the contingent that takes possession of Rouen displays “inflexible discipline” (86). Earlier in the tale, troops translate that discipline into harsh rhythmic music: “. . . l'armée allemande arrivait, déroulant ses bataillons qui faisaient sonner les pavés sous leur pas dur et rythmé” (84). Discomfort among the French for a perceived mechanical contamination transpires in such aversion for German discipline; the troops are not only organized, but they also reveal an absence of free will, which makes them behave like puppets.

A contradiction in the depiction of the invaders prevails, since in the German army, automated discipline and natural disorder coexist. In that dual character of an artificial and

---

<sup>18</sup> For example in “Mademoiselle Fifi” (386), “Saint-Antoine” (773), and “La mère Sauvage” (1219) by Maupassant.

<sup>19</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1882.

natural catastrophe, it is moreover the perception of unwavering Germanic determination that frightens the French. Questioning humanity in their former enemies starts with the belief in life as an exercise of freedom and spontaneity in the individual.<sup>20</sup> Such an impression also explains why Prussian soldiers are often represented as ruthless and cruel. It is as if their psychology excludes all conscience in action and is hinged on a perfectly oiled mechanism. In “Mademoiselle Fifi,” average soldiers are described as automatons: “Comme on grattait à la porte, le commandant cria d’ouvrir, et un homme, un de leurs soldats automates, apparut dans l’ouverture...” (386). Officers do not receive greater appreciation since Mademoiselle Fifi, the destructive Prussian officer and future victim of a prostitute, is described as “violent comme une arme à feu” (386). A warrior described as being as violent as a firearm is a mere extension of his tool and definitely not a morally responsible human being.

What French writers offer in their depictions of German opponents is fundamentally a confrontation with inhuman brutality, not only because of an active animalistic behavior, as shown above, but more as a consequence of a purely mechanical interiority. If Prussians burn, kill, rape, and destroy, it is because their inner selves are hollow except for a ravaging mechanical force. Such an opinion might raise questions among the French about the reasons for their defeat at the hands of brainless automatons. An answer to such questions emerges in Bloy’s tale “Bismarck chez Louis XIV”<sup>21</sup>: “L’orgueil national ne pouvant admettre que la France ait été vaincue par de simples brutes, on s’est trop facilement habitué chez nous à considérer en Bismarck un individu colossal, d’une ampleur de génie quasi surhumaine” (208).

Such personal genius nonetheless hardly extends to all German people. According to Hugo, for instance, France alone projects the radiance of human spirit and grandeur of civilization. The victory of Germany appears as an aberration difficult to accept in terms of its geopolitical implications in Europe, one that can be sanitized only in the realm of ideas. For Hugo in *L’année terrible*, it is France’s responsibility to enlighten Germany, since the new empire is in awe of its republican victim: “Belluaire imbécile entré chez un esprit, / Il est la bête. Il voit l’idéal qui sourit, / Il tremble, et n’ayant pu le tuer, il l’adore” (72). Hugo’s understanding of the new situation between France and Germany follows the paradigm of the enraptured victor. Since the French cannot agree to the total triumph of brutish force, a change of the rules of the conflict after the fact may favor cultural success over military victory.

Such triumph logically starts in fiction, with the sympathy borne by a conqueror’s acknowledging that the conquered land has something to teach in terms of values and civility. The narrative voice in “Boule de suif” details with sarcasm the expectations of the French population caught in a game imposed by their German guests: “Dans beaucoup de familles l’officier prussien mangeait à table. Il était parfois bien élevé, et, par politesse, plaignait la France, disait sa répugnance en prenant part à cette guerre” (85). Maupassant indirectly answers Hugo in this tale by showing the absurdity of placing civility as an

---

<sup>20</sup> In a sense, German troops illustrate an effect of “mécánisation de la vie,” which Henri Bergson mentions in *Le rire*. The consequences of this process can be comic or tragic depending on the context, but what they lead to is a surrender of what makes humans really human, that is, freedom.

<sup>21</sup> First published in *Gil Blas* in 1893.

essentially French virtue on a pedestal, when its importance in a context of war is purely anecdotal.

Another significant example of the German troops' being evaluated in the light of a French system of values is their general mastery of the vernacular language. Irrespective of the actual truth of a general poor use of French by the Prussians, such an assessment reveals much more about the relationship of the French to their own language than about the ability of their opponents. The tale titled "La dernière classe"<sup>22</sup> by Alphonse Daudet is meaningful with respect to the *génie de la langue*. The story consists of a report made by a young Alsatian of his last day of class in French following the integration of Alsace and Lorraine to the Reich and the adoption of German as the official language. His teacher, M. Hamel, conducts a final mission of resistance during his last lesson of French grammar. Behind the obvious *pathos* added to the story, an opinion stands out that is shared at the time by a large number of French citizens: "... M. Hamel se mit à nous parler de la langue française, disant que c'était la plus belle langue du monde, la plus claire, la plus solide : qu'il fallait la garder entre nous et ne jamais l'oublier..." (16). All of those intrinsic qualities of the French language do not appear as a revelation, since French was the international language of the eighteenth century and dominated part of the following one. What is meaningful, however, is the assumption of the sacrosanct nature of the language. After Berlin's *diktat* to impose German over French in the annexed provinces, French writers retrospectively waged a war on the linguistic battlefield where an interaction takes place between civilians and troops.

The equation between linguistic expertise in French and the alleged level of civilization is, at this point, not difficult to establish. The well-known etymology of *barbare* dates back to antiquity, when the by-product of an onomatopoeia expressing a vague babbling, *bárbaroi* designated individuals who could not speak Greek. During and after the war of 1870, the French also call the Germans "barbares" inasmuch as their use of French was deemed inappropriate. This certainly explains why a number of German soldiers of the tales appear ridiculous when pronouncing French in a guttural manner, or worse, frightening when speaking a foreign language that no civilian understands. The native fetish for language manifests through mockery: "Bas chôli, ça... Bas chôli" (44) says a Prussian officer to express his disapproval to the child Stenne in Daudet's "L'enfant espion." In "Boule de suif," in spite of his bad manners, the officer is an educated man, whose linguistic ability does not exclude some stiffness: "Il invita en français d'Alsacien les voyageurs à sortir, disant d'un ton raide : « Foulez-vous tescentre, messieurs et tames ? »" (98). Internal communication among the German troops is otherwise qualified as incomprehensible "baragouin" or "charabia" usually shouted by authoritative voices.

The military retains no exclusive privilege regarding the ridicule attached to the German language in the tales. The character of Otto de Schwanthaler, a painstakingly articulate scholar, incurs the ridicule of satire for the opposite reason than for his fellow citizens of the army. In Daudet's "La pendule de Bougival,"<sup>23</sup> the educated German world is the target of mockery for the clumsiness and long-windedness of its idiom, the pompousness of its prose, and the triviality of its objects of study. The narrator of this war

---

<sup>22</sup> First published in *Contes du lundi* in 1873.

<sup>23</sup> First published in *Contes du lundi* in 1873.

tale describes the meticulous transportation of a Parisian clock to Bavaria, where the object wreaks havoc with the meticulously regulated lives of the denizens of Munich. The artifact also whets the scholarly interest of Schwanthaler who decides to expose in a study how the clock reflects the congenial lightness and unreliability of the French. His essay titled *Paradoxe sur les pendules* includes the following abstract:

... étude philosophico-humoristique en six cents pages où il est traité de l'influence des pendules sur la vie des peuples, et logiquement démontré qu'une nation assez folle pour régler l'emploi de son temps sur des chronomètres aussi détraqués que cette petite pendule de Bougival devait s'attendre à toutes les catastrophes, ainsi qu'un navire qui s'en irait en mer avec une boussole désorientée. (80)

The satire of German academia resorts to a French translation conveying the verbose pedantry and pompousness of academic German. For Daudet, that trait certainly implies that Germans cannot express themselves regarding any topic without using heavy rhetorical artillery, as they do on regular battlefields.

Satirical representations deal with human types, since they are more readily available to convey a comic potential. Regarding the depictions of German troops during the two decades after the war of 1870-71, Nolan writes, "The absence of a well-defined individual character contrasted, of course, with the heroic French soldiers and civilians who were forced to submit in the face of the overwhelming human, or subhuman, flood" (30). I agree that descriptions of the foreign soldiers remain vague and provide readers with human types. In my view, however, such a situation is not as exclusive as it originally seems, since the French characters also illustrate types—for example, the sly Normand farmer, the hypocritical *notable*, or the spunky prostitute. In addition to that balance, short fiction also follows an imperative of length. The briefness of the pieces pushes toward impromptu caricatures when it comes to psychological portraits, for obvious reasons of format. The main axis followed by those caricatures of Germans, as I have shown, mixes Romantic lines with rougher touches coming from an older tradition through a process of grotesque degradation. Since the depictions of Germans are almost all negative or distant in *fin-de-siècle* fiction, the question does not primarily lie in how objective or accurate they are, but rather in what they say about the French themselves. The nature of a foil is indeed to provide, one touch at a time, a definition of one's own identity, even if it comes through exaggerated traits of fictional characters.

Such depth in an encounter with the former enemy was simply not possible at the time, because of the primary urgency to redefine an identity in crisis. The short stories published in the press serialized the characters. Decades after the Second World War, those encounters took place in literary formats that allowed more insight. Novels such as *Suite française* (2004) by Irène Némirovsky or *Le silence de la mer* (1942) by Vercors, to name only a few, afforded more space for an actual experience of desire or rejection of invaders, and the substance of the characters benefited from the variety of emotions at play, thereby giving more space for Germans to exist in French fiction.

## Works Cited

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984. Print.
- Bloy, Léon. "À la table des vainqueurs." *Sueur de sang*. Talence: Arbre vengeur, 2010. 98-109. Print.
- . "Bismarck chez Louis XIV." *Sueur de sang*. Talence: Arbre vengeur, 2010. 204-15. Print.
- . "Les créanciers de l'État." *Sueur de sang*. Talence: Arbre vengeur, 2010. 171-83. Print.
- . "Un épouvantable huissier." *Sueur de sang*. Talence: Arbre vengeur, 2010. 122-32. Print.
- . "Noël prussien." *Sueur de sang*. Talence: Arbre vengeur, 2010. 86-97. Print.
- . "L'obstacle." *Sueur de sang*. Talence: Arbre vengeur, 2010. 55-63. Print.
- . "La salamandre vampire." *Sueur de sang*. Talence: Arbre vengeur, 2010. 230-40. Print.
- Daudet, Alphonse. "La dernière classe : Récit d'un petit alsacien." *Contes du lundi*. Paris: Nelson, 1963. 11-19. Print.
- . "L'enfant espion." *Contes du lundi*. Paris: Nelson, 1963. 36-48. Print.
- . "La pendule de Bougival : De Bougival à Munich." *Contes du lundi*. Paris: Nelson, 1963. 78-87. Print.
- Flaubert, Gustave. "Allemands." *Le dictionnaire des idées reçues. Œuvres complètes*. Ed. Bernard Masson. Vol. 2. Paris: Seuil, 1964. 304. Print.
- Hugo, Victor. *L'année terrible*. Paris: Seghers, 1971. Print.
- Leiner, Wolfgang. *Das Deutschlandbild in der französischen Literatur*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989. Print.
- Marquis, Hugues. "Aux origines de la germanophobie : La vision de l'Allemand en France aux XVII<sup>e</sup>-XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles." *Revue historique* 286.580 (1991): 283-94. Print.
- Maupassant, Guy de. "Boule de suif." *Contes et nouvelles*. Ed. Louis Forestier. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1974. 83-121. Print.
- . "Mademoiselle Fifi." *Contes et nouvelles*. Ed. Louis Forestier. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1974. 385-97. Print.
- . "La mère Sauvage." *Contes et nouvelles*. Ed. Louis Forestier. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1974. 1217-24. Print.
- . "Saint-Antoine." *Contes et nouvelles*. Ed. Louis Forestier. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1974. 772-79. Print.
- Mirbeau, Octave. "L'école de l'assassinat." *Contes cruels*. Ed. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivert. Vol. 1. Paris: Belles Lettres/Archimbaud, 2000. 35-39. Print.
- . "La pipe de cidre." *Contes cruels*. Ed. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivert. Vol. 1. Paris: Belles Lettres/Archimbaud, 2000. 347-53. Print.
- Nolan, Michael E. *The Inverted Mirror: Mythologizing the Enemy in France and Germany, 1898-1914*. New York: Berghahn, 2005. Print.
- Pastoureau, Michel. *Bleu : Histoire d'une couleur*. Paris: Seuil, 2000. Print.
- Staël, Germaine de. *De l'Allemagne*. Ed. Simone Balayé. Vol. 1. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1968. Print.