

MLA 2007, December 27-30 in Chicago
Session organized by the Division on 19th-Century French Literature:

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“The Descent of Science”

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Thomas Paul Bonfiglio, “Biology, Race, and Language in Nineteenth-Century France”
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The configuration of language as organism in 19th century France served ethnocentric and race-based nationalist ideologies. Models from the nascent biological sciences, specifically from Cuvier and Darwin, became remapped onto language and generated theories of corporeal ownership. The bodily possession of language was at once nationalist and supra-national: it constructed Aryan/Indo-European as the parent language in order to separate Jews from Christians and thus served to strengthen anti-Semitic sentiments in 19th century France.

Stephen G. Alter, in *Darwinism and the Linguistic Image* (1999), demonstrates how easily the readership of the nineteenth century moved among parallel genealogical models while reading encyclopedias, dictionaries, and works on evolution. This phenomenon was especially visible in France. Maurice Olender, in *Les langues du paradis* (1989), noted that the western “discovery” of Sanskrit propelled the human sciences toward “une science raciale” that used linguistic paleontology to portray prehistoric society. Also, Eric Hobsbawm, in *The Age of Revolution 1789-1848*, noted that philology “was the first science which regarded evolution as its very core.”

Adolphe Pictet, in *Les origines indo-européennes ou les Aryas primitifs. Essai de paléontologie linguistique* (1859-1863), views language the way a paleontologist views fossils, as incomplete records of older forms that one can use to reconstruct common ancestors. He calls his endeavor “une paléontologie arienne.” This Aryan paleontology is to reveal a genetically superior prehistoric people destined to dominate the entire globe. The work is divided into five books: ethnography and geography, natural history, material civilization, social conditions, and intellectual, moral, and religious life. Here, nature becomes a model for understanding and enracinating Aryans and their language. This is a biolinguistic and ethnolinguistic framework, in which linguistic paleontology serves as an indication of paleo-anthropology. This contributed to the ethno-religious anxieties of European Christianity and came to be used as an implement of the most prejudiced form of anti-Semitism. Similarly, Ernest Renan, in *Histoire générale et système comparé des langues sémitiques* (1855), sees the Semitic languages as “statique et métallique:” they generated Judaism, a monotheistic religion incapable of evolution. Renan couches these prejudices in the biological metaphors of his era: Indo-European is organic and evolutionary and has thus generated pluralistic theologies and philosophies.

These ideas were appropriated in 1876 by Louis Jacolliot, who published *Les*

législateurs religieux: Manu, Moïse, Mahomet, in which he misuses evolutionary and racial science to fabricate an Indian origin for Judaism based upon the Indian caste system. The Aryans created European civilization and philosophy: the caste of untouchables produced Judaism. Jacolliot's ideas were very influential: Friedrich Nietzsche based his concepts of Aryan supremacy specifically upon Jacolliot and worked them into *On the Genealogy of Morality* (1888), a text that was appropriated by the interests of German fascism. Jacolliot, a notable figure at the fin-de-siècle, disappeared from French letters during the twentieth century but is currently undergoing a revisionist reception, most notably in the work of Daniel Caracostea (2003).

The organic theories of language in the 19th century are generally viewed as intellectual intuitions originating with Leibniz and Rousseau. This paper argues that models from the biological and evolutionary sciences were imported into philology in an act of ethnocentric euro-nationalism. They configured "our parent language," the primary source of the very act of self-expression, in a primitive genetic model as biological, corporeal, and natural and inherited by "our family" as a bodily *patrimoine*. This concept of language served to radically other the Semite.

Suzanne LaLonde, "La psychologie du darwinisme, l'autoportrait et la littérature intime au 19^{ème} siècle"

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Quand Emile Zola écrivait, il était sans doute vrai qu'il ne pouvait pas s'empêcher de mettre de l'hérédité lamarckienne dans ses œuvres. Bref, la culture littéraire française à la fin du 19^{ème} siècle était imbibée par les aspects scientifiques. Or la question qui se pose est de savoir si les écrivains et les artistes de cette époque ont été aussi influencés par le darwinisme et comment. Cette question reste encore plus pertinente étant donné la résistance au darwinisme qui régnait en France. Ce travail a pour but d'examiner le rapport entre l'autoportrait, la littérature intime et le darwinisme. Notamment, j'examine comment les théories de la sélection naturelle et la représentation progressive et graduelle de l'évolution ont influencé la psychologie de l'être humain moderne. J'avance l'idée que le darwinisme a provoqué une « descendance » de l'être humain au niveau psychologique qui se manifeste nettement dans l'autoportrait et la littérature intime du 19^{ème} siècle.

Jennifer K. Wolter, "À *Rebours* or *Against Nature*: Cross-Breeding Naturalism and Decadence"

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J.-K. Huysmans's *À Rebours* (1884) marks a reversal of naturalism immediately by its very title, translated as *Against Nature* or *Against the Grain*. In this novel hailed for ushering in the decadent movement of late nineteenth-century France, Huysmans goes against the nature of things and against nature itself. His break from the parentage of

naturalism, including his former association with Émile Zola and the Médan group, is evident alongside an evolution away from his own earlier naturalist writings. In *À Rebours*, the protagonist Des Esseintes creates a minutely detailed, artificial environment in which to live out his ideal, isolated existence. However, his situation eventually deteriorates, due in part to the hereditary degeneration of his family stock as presented in the “Notice” that precedes the narrative. These genetic influences reflect Zola’s naturalist theories and the studies of Darwin and Lucas, thus placing Huysmans’s novel within the naturalist tradition. Yet, the “Notice” also points to something more: the *fin-de-siècle* phenomenon of decadence, as the original exposition of a naturalist-inspired “tare héréditaire” becomes overshadowed by the ensuing eccentricities of Des Esseintes. Although Des Esseintes resists the modernity surrounding his manufactured retreat, he is reliant upon its science and upon nature to foster his unusual diversions, such as the genetically-manipulated flowers, which require scientific intervention in the materials provided by nature to achieve the desired result. Like these hybrid flowers, Huysmans’s *À Rebours* is a product of the cross-breeding of naturalism and decadence. The aestheticism of decadence appealed to Huysmans as an answer to the tedium of modern society as well as to the stagnation of naturalism. Yet, the fact that Huysmans resigns his hero to the inescapable fate of going back to that society at the end of *À Rebours* indicates the need to embrace modernity at the approach of the new century. That modernity includes a return to the laws of nature defended by contemporary science and naturalism.