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À la Recherche d'un Dieu Perdu:

Recreating Religion in *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*

*La Tentation de Saint Antoine* is “un livre qui fait peur,” according to Flaubert scholar Jeanne Bem (13). Indeed, it is a monstrous text that presents us with multiple characters and an amalgam of heresies and temptations. Confusion further stems from the difference in versions: one version of the text was written in 1848, a second version was partially published in 1856, and the final version appeared in 1874. The monstrosity resides lastly in the form of the text: we wonder how to define the genre of *La Tentation*. Flaubert first conceived of it as a play, perhaps even a puppet play, but the *didascalies* read more like descriptions in a novel and are impossible to act out.[1]

In *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, Flaubert rewrites the legend of Saint Anthony, an Egyptian hermit around the turn of the fourth century, who was afflicted by many devils with temptations of boredom, laziness and phantoms of women. In the original version of the legend, described by Church father Athanasius, the saint overcomes his temptations gloriously. It is not surprising that Flaubert's interpretation of Antoine's struggle with temptations is radically different from the one presented by Athanasius. While the title of Flaubert's text implies an ultimate victory (Antoine is still considered to be a *saint*), one wonders if Antoine finally wins the battle.

Although it is clear that religious themes play a central role in *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, interpretations of its significance differ. Is this a text in which religion only serves as a

pretext to write about temptation, sexual sin, and bizarre heresies and fantasies? Is it important that the text features a Christian saint, or could it have been any figure from ancient mythology? I will argue that the text, which is Decadent in its form, engages with the concerns that are at the heart of the nineteenth century: religion and modernity. I will examine how the text portrays the insufficiency of traditional Christianity, and the way in which it attempts to recreate spirituality in an age of disenchantment. While *La Tentation* can be seen as an attempt to deconstruct the premises of Christianity, the text nevertheless hints at the persistence of religious practices and at the need for something more than pure matter.

### **Religion in the nineteenth century**

The quest for religious experience is not a central theme to Flaubert's famous novels. Emma Bovary goes through some religious phases and has a priest at her bedside when she dies, but her religiosity is portrayed more as a temporary pose than as a deep inner conviction. L'abbé Bournisien can only exchange platitudes, and as for Homais, he is a believer in the religion of progress:

Je crois en l'Être suprême, à un Créateur, quel qu'il soit, peu m'importe, qui nous a placés ici-bas pour remplir nos devoirs de citoyen et de père de famille [...]  
 Mon Dieu, à moi, c'est le Dieu de Socrate, de Franklin, de Voltaire et de Béranger! Je suis pour la *Profession de foi du vicaire savoyard* et les éternels principes de 1789! (*Madame Bovary* 141)

Homais expresses the faith of the Enlightenment that many considered to be archetypical for the nineteenth century.[2] The predominant story in the historiography of the nineteenth century, the post-revolutionary era that had witnessed the killing of God's representative on earth, was for a

long time that of secularization, of disenchantment. The nineteenth century was the age of scientific progress, of Auguste Comte and Darwin, of a Church that lost its position in the public square, of the death of God as proclaimed by Nietzsche's madman in *The Gay Science* (1882). However, more recent studies have challenged this view of the nineteenth century as an age of secularization. Focusing more on the experience of individuals, research emphasized that religious experience and belief in miracles were much more widespread and existential than a study of the Church as institution would make us believe.[3] Religious practices still preoccupied a large part of the population, and far from abolishing religion altogether, many anti-clericalists looked for alternative ways to fulfill their desire for spiritual experience. The exploration of oriental religions and occultism, as well as the search for a new basis of new political theories, is a manifestation of this quest.[4]

The persistence of religiosity is even obvious in the text that became synonymous with the declaration of the death of God: Nietzsche's parable of the madman. When this man announces that God is dead, the people around him do not understand what he is saying and stare at him in astonishment. The madman acknowledges that religion, the idea of God, still exists and that believers are still worshiping in cathedrals. Moreover, he observes that the world has grown darker and colder, and the cadaver of God can still be smelled. According to the madman, human beings cannot yet accept the death of God. They still feel the need for spiritual experience, and that is why God is still being served.

Nietzsche's parable of the madman was in fact not the first text that described the death of God. This idea and the despair it caused among the people were already present in the literary texts of the early nineteenth century. In Nerval's sonnet "Le Christ aux Oliviers" (1844) it is Christ himself who discovers that God does not exist and proclaims it to his disciples.

Furthermore, the sonnet bears a citation from Jean-Paul Richter as its epitaph: “Dieu est mort! Le ciel est vide!...” (Nerval 439). Many novels focus on the nostalgia for the lost religion, for a challenged faith in God, for example Chateaubriand’s *René*, Musset’s *La Confession d’un enfant du siècle* and Nerval’s own novella *Aurélia*.<sup>[5]</sup> Other novels feature a reinterpretation of the Christian faith, or embark on a quest for a new meaning of life. The mystical socialism of Pierre Leroux inspires George Sand to write *Spiridon* and *Consuelo*. Balzac is preoccupied with Swedenborg, occultism and mysticism. Indeed, authors and their works often take the place that is left empty by priests and their sermons.<sup>[6]</sup> All these phenomena point to a persisting need for religious experience.<sup>[7]</sup>

Flaubert himself, in his *Souvenirs, notes et pensées intimes* (1840), vocalizes a desire for religious practices when he writes:

Je voudrais bien être mystique ; il doit y avoir de belles voluptés à croire au paradis, à se noyer dans [les] flots d'encens - à s'anéantir au pied de la Croix, à se réfugier sous les ailes de la colombe [...]. C'est une belle vie que celle des saints, j'aurais voulu mourir martyr et s'il y a un Dieu bon, un Dieu le père de Jésus, qu'il m'envoie sa grâce, son esprit, je le recevrai et je me prosternerai. (Qtd. in Unwin 76)

Flaubert did not believe God really existed, but he saw the beauty and the attraction of serving the good Lord. In *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* Flaubert imagined what it is like to be a mystic. But the life of a saint is not always characterized by a blissful state of service to God. So what temptations and contradictions would a believer encounter when confronting his faith with reality and science? That is the experiment conducted in *La Tentation*. *La Tentation* is not

Flaubert's only text with a religious theme. Indeed, many of his early writings, such as *Rêve d'enfer* (1837) and *Smarh* (1839), are mystical texts.

*La Tentation de Saint Antoine* cannot solely be considered as an early mystical text coming out of romanticism.[8] Flaubert first starts writing *La Tentation* in 1848, reworks it over the course of 30 years, and finally publishes it in 1874, after his major works *Madame Bovary* (1856) and *L'Éducation sentimentale* (1869). But mysticism in nineteenth century literature is not bound to Romanticism alone – the preoccupation with religion returns in the Decadent literature at the end of the century. Religious experience in Decadent literature is once again not bound to traditional Catholicism, but manifests itself in the portrayal of heresies, occultism and Satanism.

Flaubert places his text in the tradition of the legends about tempted saints. Writing about temptation had always been popular in religious painting and literature, because it sanctioned writing about the sins of the flesh, of which the sexual sin was the most interesting to describe. But even though the influence of the Church diminished during the nineteenth century, biblical stories about sinful men and women and legends about tempted saints remained a privileged form in Decadent literature.

The popularity of temptation stories can first of all be explained by the fact that authors are fascinated by the problem of Evil. The preoccupation with Evil can be related to the death of God: if God does not exist, how are Good and Evil to be defined? Does something like absolute Evil still exist? Evil can be explored in stories of tempted saints or wretched sinners who are in the end saved by grace. [9] It also manifests itself in the representation of the *femme fatale*, the emblematic woman who radiates insatiable sexual pleasure and who seduces those around her and desires their fall and castration. One particularly popular story was that of Salome, King

Herod's stepdaughter who by performing her sexually provocative dancing for the king's vassals obtained the head of John the Baptist.[10]

The second main reason for the multiple rewritings of biblical stories and Christian legends is the fact that they were in fact a highly codified genre: a saint is tempted, overcomes these temptations, gets his reward and goes back to his devout life. This kind of codification was extremely present in Decadent writings: in opposition to naturalism with its claim to faithful reproduction of nature, Decadence emphasized the artificial. Taking a familiar myth or story as subject matter immediately drew attention to the fact that this was the reproduction of a story based on a legendary or mythical past, one that was known to be fictional, as opposed to a story based on reality. In summary, in the Decadent rewriting, legends are no longer considered to be edifying or moral, but they are used rather as genre.

Although the height of Decadence in literature only arrived in 1884 with the publication of Huysmans' *À rebours*, we will see that *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* shares many characteristics with Decadent texts. *La Tentation* is based on an existing legend, and Flaubert adheres to the traditional form of temptation writing.[11] Accounts of tempted saints usually not only describe corporal temptations, which can be very present in writings about hermits — they also portray the doubts the saints wrestle with: what if the Bible is not true and Jesus is not the Son of God? This can be characterized as the temptation of the mind. And finally, the ultimate temptation is that of the soul: if the former temptations do not work, Satan himself will arrive at the scene and command his subject to worship him. In what follows, we will consecutively study the three traditional forms of temptation that Antoine is presented with in Flaubert's text. We will see that the nature of the temptations and the ambiguity of the final victory places Flaubert's text at the heart of the questions of modernity and religion in nineteenth century writing. The

religion of Flaubert's saint is finally no more than an empty form, because in the end he no longer believes God exists.

### **Temptation of the body**

Flaubert's Antoine is a hermit, who lives in the desert and deprives himself of food and sexual relationships. The temptations of the body manifest themselves as visions of luxurious tables filled with appealing food served by beautiful women who attack his chastity. In two instances, Antoine is approached by a *femme fatale*. The first woman is the biblical figure of the Queen of Sheba who came to Jerusalem to see Salomon. In this first encounter with the *femme fatale*, Flaubert follows the traditional pattern of temptation writing. When the Queen tries to play on Antoine's desire for luxury, at first he does not react. However, when she prompts him to look her in the eyes in order to find the lady of his choice, he does so "malgré lui" (84). The saint wavers, but he does not give in to the temptation: at the climax of the Queen's discourse, when she is about to undress, Antoine turns to his God for deliverance of temptation. He makes the sign of the cross, and that is enough to send the Queen away.

The sexual temptation, however, comes back at the end of the text, and this time, there is no mention of any help from God. This time, the *femme fatale* presents herself in a double form: a young woman who represents pleasure, and an old lady who represents death. Antoine wants to flee from the scene, but the ladies do not want to let him go, and "[il] reste immobile entre les deux, les considérant" (222). They present him with two alternative forms of escaping his ascetic lifestyle. Antoine is most tempted by death, although he is afraid of committing a sin if he kills himself (218). For physical love, he feels no desire (220). Finally, the two figures melt into one body:

une tête de mort, avec une couronne des roses. Elle domine un torse de femme d'une blancheur nacrée. En dessous, un linceul étoilé de points d'or fait comme une queue ; - et tout le corps ondule, à la manière d'un ver gigantesque qui se tiendrait debout. La vision s'atténue, disparaît. (224)

The monstrous body, which combines luxury and death, finally disappears. Antoine himself analyses the vision in the following terms: "Encore une fois c'était le diable, et sous son double aspect : l'esprit de fornication et l'esprit de destruction. Aucun des deux ne m'épouvante. Je repousse le bonheur, et je me sens éternel" (224). Antoine is not scared of the devil and his temptations, and even death no longer repulses him, for he realizes death is only an illusion ("La mort n'est qu'une illusion," 224). Yet it is interesting to note that Antoine does not do anything to make it disappear: he does not make the sign of the cross; there is no mention of prayer or cry for help, no victory in the name of the Lord; the vision fades all by itself.

When studying the temptations of the body more closely, one notes that for Antoine, the biggest temptation of the flesh never resides in the physical encounter with women. Both appearances of the *femme fatale* are triggered by the memory of Ammonaria, a childhood friend. In the first instance, Antoine chastises himself for his "soulèvements de la chair" (76) in the name of Ammonaria, but the pleasure he experiences only increases: "Mais voilà qu'un chatouillement me parcourt. Quel supplice! Quelles délices! Ce sont comme des baisers" (77). At the end of the text, Antoine imagines how Ammonaria takes off her clothes and lies down on "la tiède mosaïque," which gives him pleasure (218). The temptation of the flesh is never based on a direct vision of reality, but it is always mediated by Antoine's fantasies.[12]

Thus, it appears that Antoine can control his body by his mind, or at least he struggles to do so, like every hermit. The temptation of the body is then subordinated to the temptation of

Antoine's mind: if his mind is filled with obedience to God, he will be able to defy the temptations that arise in his fantasies, and his faith will be his strongest weapon against temptation. But as we have seen, there is no more mention of God and the cross in order to overcome temptations at the end of the text. Is Antoine's mind still filled with the fear of God, or does he not believe in God anymore? The omission of God in the temptation of the body seems to indicate the latter, and that is why we will next study how Antoine deals with the temptations of the mind and the soul.

### **Temptation of the mind**

When the Queen of Sheba and her entourage leave the scene, one person stays behind. He first seems like a little boy, but he will continue to grow during the text and will take on epic dimensions at the end. His name is Hilarion, former disciple of Antoine but now the one who represents the temptation of the mind: he initiates Antoine in the intellectual doubt about the truth of Christianity. Hilarion is an interesting character who does not figure in the first and second version of the text, although one could say that he is only the personification of 'la logique' in these versions. His proposals remind one of Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, published in 1863, so between the second and third version of *La Tentation*. The publication of Renan's text was surrounded by a huge controversy, because while he adhered to the traditional form of writings about the life of Jesus, the content of his text completely reversed the traditional image of Jesus: Renan applied the method of historical criticism to the Gospels. It is true that 'la logique' in the first and second version of *La Tentation* vocalized rational doubts about Christianity. However, the systematic critique of the Gospels that is Hilarion's main point in this section does not figure in these versions.

Antoine first does not want to hear Hilarion's questioning of his great examples and his way of living. Hilarion rebukes him for falling back into his habitual sin:

Voilà que tu retombes dans ton péché d'habitude, la paresse. L'ignorance est l'écume de l'orgueil. On dit: 'ma conviction est faite, pourquoi discuter?' et on méprise les docteurs, les philosophes, la tradition, et jusqu'au texte de la loi qu'on ignore. Crois-tu tenir la sagesse dans ta main ? (92)

Hilarion accuses Antoine of being lazy; he does not want to hear any doubts and that way he will not even have to try to answer them. Later, Antoine will confess that he often has the same doubts as Hilarion, that they are always present in his thoughts; but that he keeps trying to silence them ('écraser' is the term he uses on page 95).

Hilarion propagates a different solution for these doubts: trying to understand God is superior to trying to influence God by being a hermit. Antoine needs to listen to other believers: "La religion seule n'explique pas tout ; ... il faut, pour son salut, communiquer avec ses frères, - ou bien l'église, l'assemblée des fidèles, ne serait qu'un mot, - et écouter toutes les raisons, ne dédaigner rien, ni personne" (92). Hilarion's plea for listening to the community of believers sounds orthodox, but he takes the community of believers in a very broad sense: it includes the different heresies originating in Christianity. By exploring all the different opinions believers have on dogma, Hilarion promises, "la face de l'Inconnu se dévoilera!" (96)

The description of all the different heresies reads like the representation of an apocalyptic fantasy world. Antoine is repulsed by the predominance of sex in some heresies, and wonders how people can believe other ridiculous doctrines. But in the end, he realizes that all heresies seek to know God in some way: "C'est vers Dieu qu'ils prétendent se diriger par toutes ces voies! De quel droit les maudire, moi qui trébuche dans la mienne?" (133). The description of all

the different heresies ultimately has only one purpose: to show that the doctrine merely serves the impulses of the people. Every heresy also has its own claim to truth: there is a Gospel of Thomas, of Eve, of Judas, and so on. But in the end, they are the same thing expressed in different ways. That is why, in seeing all those different doctrines, Antoine starts to doubt the absolute truth of his own version of Christianity.

The vision then goes even further: the description of the different religions by the different gods further illustrates the fundamental unity of ‘the religious phenomenon.’ Buddha, for example, tells his story, and Hilarion emphasizes the resemblance of Buddhism and Christianity by quoting appropriate passages from the Gospels that originally referred to Jesus. The fish-god Oannès of the old Babylon, the bestial gods preoccupied by incest and sex, and the gods of the Olympus all make their appearance before Antoine. Then the voice of the Old Testament God resounds: “J’étais le Dieu des armées, le Seigneur, le Seigneur Dieu” (204). In the Bible, the voice of God is synonymous with God himself – no one can ever see Him. The God of the Old Testament, the Father of Jesus-Christ, in whom Antoine believed, is no more than a god among others. When all gods have left the scene, Antoine observes: “Tous sont passés” (205). This assertion could mean “we’ve seen all of them” but in this context it probably means: “they all belong to the past.”[13] This statement includes Antoine’s own God: like all the others, he is a god of a distant, mythical past who does not exist anymore.[14]

At this point, Flaubert’s text departs from the traditional writing of the temptation: the saint has not only been tempted and has wavered as a result of this temptation, but he has succumbed to the temptation of the mind. It is clear that this defeat has important consequences for the interpretation of the rest of the text: if the saint’s conclusion is that his God does not exist, he is no longer a saint. He has succumbed to the most important temptation, which removes the

reason for his resistance to temptations altogether. Yet, the question can be asked whether Antoine's realization that God does not exist is a permanent state of mind. Even in traditional writings the temptation can be so strong that the saint temporarily stumbles in his faith, but in the end that faith would be restored and the soul of the saint redeemed. The question that remains is what happens to Antoine's soul? As we will see, the nature of the final redemption in Flaubert's text is far too ambiguous to declare a final victory.

### **Temptation of the soul**

Antoine has been convinced that his religion is not superior to other religions, but that it, like the other religions, belongs to the past. However, when all gods disappear, there is one supernatural figure left: Satan, who now tries to tempt Antoine's soul. Hilarion asks Antoine if he wants to see the devil and Antoine is overcome by his curiosity:

Sa terreur augmente, son envie devient démesurée. 'Si je le voyais pourtant... si je le voyais ? ...' Puis, dans un spasme de colère : 'l'horreur que j'en ai m'en débarrassera pour toujours ! Oui !' Un pied fourchu se montre. Antoine a regret. Mais le diable l'a jeté sur ses cornes, et l'enlève. (206)

Hilarion is transformed into the devil, or perhaps he was the devil all along. In the earlier versions of the text, the devil took Antoine by surprise. In the third version, however, it is Antoine himself who invites the devil. Even if he later regrets the consequences, he must acknowledge that he has invited the devil by a conscious act. His desire to see the devil can be compared to Faust's transaction with the devil – a resemblance that is marked even more by the fact that Hilarion introduces himself as "La Science" (206).[15]

However, like the bystanders to whom Nietzsche's madman announces God's death, Antoine is not ready to accept the consequences of the death of his God. When the devil takes him on a flight through the universe, Antoine still searches for traces of God, but the devil shows him the truth: "Les choses ne t'arrivent que par l'intermédiaire de ton esprit. [...] Es-tu même sûr de voir ? es-tu même sûr de vivre?" (215). His spiritual experiences, his temptations, the devil says, are all projections of his mind; only the infinite exists, which causes Antoine to shiver in the glacial cold he feels (214).[16] Satan then tries to step into Antoine's need for a Being to worship: "Adore-moi donc ! Et maudis le fantôme que tu nommes Dieu!" (215). Antoine refuses to do so: he lifts his eyes in a last sign of hope. Is this a religious triumph, an imitation of Christ who did not worship the devil? If this is a sign of his persisting faith, it is however very weak. One could also say that Antoine has incorporated the devil's education: if God is no more than a projection of his mind, he does not need to worship the devil either. The latter interpretation is confirmed by Antoine's realization that his prayers have become intolerable and his heart has been hardened (216). As we have seen before, Antoine does not invoke his religion to make the final vision of the *femme fatale*, which immediately follows his encounter with the devil, disappear. The last sign of hope has faded.

### **Mind and Matter**

When Antoine is left alone by the devil and by luxury and death, he has one more vision: all matter becomes one – plants and stones, diamonds and eyes – and he realizes he is no longer afraid. In his ecstasy, Antoine expresses his last wish:

J'ai envie de voler, de nager, d'aboyer, de beugler, de hurler. Je voudrais avoir des ailes, une carapace, une écorce, souffler de la fumée, porter une trompe, tordre

mon corps, me diviser partout, être en tout, m'émaner avec les odeurs, me développer comme les plantes, couler comme l'eau, vibrer comme le son, briller comme la lumière, me blottir sur toutes les formes, pénétrer chaque atome, descendre jusqu' au fond de la matière, - être la matière ! (236)

The interpretation of this final scene has been the subject of many debates. Henri Mazel considers qualifies Antoine's wish as the "vœu impie" of an intellectual (642), as the supreme sin of eating from "l'arbre de la science" (639). On the contrary, in Foucault's opinion, Antoine finally renounces his intelligence by abasing himself to "la stupide sainteté des choses" (189).

Antoine's wish to "become matter" echoes the materialist philosophy of the eighteenth century, as propagated for example by Diderot and D'Holbach, following Spinoza.[17] Materialism rejects the Cartesian opposition between body and mind – what defines man is only 'matière,' body. It is clear that this vision of man is contrary not only to Descartes' view but also to the Christian view of human beings, which defines man as having a body and a soul. Materialist philosophy was strongly condemned by the Church, and the word 'materialist' was used as a synonym for atheist. The fact that Antoine wants to become matter hence stresses once more that he gives away his soul and can no longer be considered a saint. If there is a victory, it is that of the devil whose doctrines Antoine has incorporated.

Antoine has, in the words of Mazel, "eaten from the tree of science" in recognizing the truth of materialist philosophy. However, Antoine's animal-like behavior hardly favors an ultimate triumph of science and philosophy, but rather emphasizes his dehumanization. In the temptations of the flesh, we noticed that Antoine was never attracted by the physical appearance of women but that all his physical pleasures passed through his mind. What ultimately defined Antoine as the lonely hermit was his capacity of envisioning both the comforting presence of his

faith and the disturbing manifestations of temptation. When the temptations take over, Antoine recognizes the insufficiency of Christianity. But rather than constructing a new basis for a life without religion, Antoine renounces intelligence altogether. His incapability to assume his deeds and his freedom once again echoes that of the bystanders in Nietzsche's parable of the madman.

The interpretation of Antoine's wish to "become matter" as a renouncement of soul and mind also enables us to explain the final, ambiguous vision: the face of Jesus Christ appears in the sun. Mazel contends that this is a sign of God's approval and of the saint's ultimate victory; Antoine has ultimately never doubted divine grace (643). However, Antoine himself observed his God, Jehovah, in the parade of the disappearing gods and recognized the truth about the universe shown to him by the devil, which can only be characterized as doubting God's grace—how can God be gracious if he doesn't even exist, if grace is but a construction of the believer's mind? A key to the interpretation of Christ's apparition is the promise Hilarion makes to Antoine: if he searches for the truth, the face of the Unknown will be revealed to him (96). The apparition of 'la face de l'Inconnu' after Antoine's wish confirms his realization: he is only matter.

And then, according to the final phrase of the text, Saint Anthony goes back to his devout life: "Antoine fait le signe de la croix et se remet en prière" (237). Why does the saint do this, after all those tribulations and temptations? The return to prayer could indicate a triumph, but the value of this triumph remains to be seen. By ending the text with Antoine's return to a pious state of mind, Flaubert certainly adheres to the traditional form of temptation legends: the saint stumbles, he almost succumbs, but in the end his faith triumphs. In Flaubert's narrative, however, this form is completely empty. Antoine has realized he is only matter and that religion is a projection of his mind, and the text confirms that this is a true observation. Indeed, as Unwin

argues, “les tentations d'Antoine aboutissent à une vision du Christ qui justifie seulement en apparence sa lutte [...] le saint semblerait émerger victorieux de sa lutte non pas, comme le dit la légende chrétienne, parce qu'il a résisté à la tentation, mais justement parce qu'il a capitulé” (74-5). Decadent writing may use traditional legends and myths, but the artist will always rewrite and reinterpret them. The overarching story in the texts of *fin de siècle* France is not one of triumph and victory, but one of decay and loss - of Decadence.

But Antoine's return to prayer can also be interpreted as a recreation of religion. Through his temptations, the comparative study of heresies and world religions, by selling his soul to the devil and becoming one with matter, Antoine has become convinced that his religion, Christianity, is insufficient. And yet, he goes back to his religious forms. Antoine finally recreates spirituality, because he still feels the need the worship something. Even though he realizes that the God whom he worships does not exist, he is not prepared to take control over his own life, just as the bystanders in Nietzsche's parable are unable to assume their deeds completely.

One could even say that Antoine's return to prayer is a *mise en abyme* of Decadent writing itself. Just like Antoine's return to an empty form, the desire of artifice in Decadent art emphasizes that nature alone cannot satisfy the human being. He still needs an escape from this world, because, in Nietzsche's words, he cannot assume the deed he has done. People look to the horizon that they have wiped clean with a sponge, and are overtaken by a feeling of loneliness and despair. In Decadent literature, this escape from the world is created by a multitude of heresies, mythologies and artifice.

In conclusion, reading *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* as a Decadent text helps us to understand its monstrous form. The legendary figure of Antoine has become comparable to the disenchanting person of the modern era. He has endured the temptations of body, mind and soul. Although Antoine is not a prototypical intellectual person, the temptation of the mind proves in the end to be the most important reason that he succumbs to the temptations: he starts to doubt the truth of orthodox Christianity and realizes that all religions are in fact ways to serve God. In the end, God himself does not even exist, nor does Satan, but they are all projections of the believer's mind.

And yet, as we have seen, the nineteenth century cannot simply be summarized as an age of secularization. Although the power of the Church declines, spirituality in all sorts of forms (superstition, Satanism, magnetism, the belief in miracles) continues to exist. After Antoine realizes he is only matter, which according to the text is a true observation, he renounces his intelligence, and then he goes back to his prayers. His final act is an empty form that nevertheless demonstrates that although he believes that God is dead, Antoine is not yet ready to assume this realization. He still feels the need to worship something.

## Notes

1. Cf. Claudine Gothot-Mersch's "Introduction" to her edition of *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, p.8-9.
2. The negative portrayal of l'abbé Bournisien certainly indicates Flaubert's anti-clericalist attitude in this novel. However, the 'scientist' Homais is not portrayed in a more positive light than l'abbé Bournisien. The fact that he mentions Béranger, the popular singer, on the same level with the great philosophers gives one indication of how superficial his supposedly scientific attitude really is. It would be too simple to interpret the novel as an outright condemnation of religion in favor of positive science.
3. For an evaluation of historical research on religion, see Thomas Kselman's article "Challenging Dechristianization: the Historiography of Religion in Modern France." He mentions for example Ruth Harris' book *Lourdes: Body and Spirit in the Secular Age*, which not only studies the way the Church reacted to the appearances in Lourdes, but also "allows us to engage with the religious beliefs and feelings at the core of the pilgrimage" (136).
4. Philippe Muray describes the importance of the occult in the development of socialism.
5. Paul Bénichou describes Nerval's reaction to 'God's death' in the following terms: "La place devenue vide, et qui ne doit à aucun prix le rester : c'est l'image qui est au cœur des rêves théologiques de Nerval. Mais comment la remplir ?" (373)
6. The reference for the study of the author's role in the nineteenth century is of course Paul Bénichou, who describes the initial optimism about this role in *Le Sacre des écrivains*, an optimism that is eventually replaced by disillusion (*L'Ecole du désenchantement*).
7. In this paper, I focus on religious experience in the nineteenth century. But Mircea Eliade would argue that the quest for religious experience still exists in the twentieth century person: he

argues that persisting rituals and the anguish before death come from modern man's desire for spirituality (24, 231).

8. The opposition between a Romantic and Realist period in Flaubert's literary production has been disputed by Eric Gans, who argues that the development of Flaubert's characters stems from the author's own maturity, not from his supposed adherence to a literary school (11).

9. Huysmans' *Là-Bas* is another example of a text that describes the redemption of a sinner through extensive portrayals of his sins.

10. More than thousand versions of this story were published in Europe between 1870 and 1920, according to Charles Bernheimer who qualifies this phenomenon as "Salomania" (104). Flaubert published his own version, "Hérodias," one of the *Trois Contes*, in 1877.

1. Or rather, *La Tentation* is based on the representation of an existing legend: Flaubert is first inspired to write his text after seeing Pieter Bruegel's painting of the subject.

2. Of course we must not forget that none of the temptations are in reality present before Antoine. The artificial character of the text is underscored by the fact that all temptations come to Antoine in a vision, even the *femmes fatales*. However, unlike the *femmes fatales*, Ammonaria is never presented as a character in the text. She is only present in Antoine's thoughts, not in his visions. Hence, the memories present a kind of artificiality in the second degree.

13. Jeanne Bem notes that while the heretics describe their theories in the present, all the gods describe their identity and their deeds in the past and lament the absence of the faithful (65). The gods do not even believe in their own existence in modern times.

4. This conclusion is supported by Foucault: "La disparition des fantômes les plus contraires à sa foi, loin de confirmer l'ermite dans sa religion, la détruit peu à peu et finalement la dérobe. En s'entretenant les hérétiques dissipent la vérité ; et les dieux mourant enveloppent dans leur nuit un

fragment de l'image du vrai Dieu" (188). As we will see, Antoine ultimately loses his faith in the Christian god altogether.

Unpublished pages from the 1874 manuscript show that Flaubert originally wanted to include an appearance of Jesus Christ in the parade of gods. It is unclear why he decided not to publish them, although if published they would probably have provoked too many accusations of blasphemy. ("Documents" in *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, 271-2)

5. Interestingly, as Henri Mazel notes, *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* in its final version was published in 1874, exactly 100 years after the publication of Goethe's *Faust*. (643) Claudine Gothot-Mersch traces the influence of Goethe's *Faust*, which Flaubert considered "le démesuré chef-d'oeuvre," on *La Tentation* in her introduction to the edition of the text (23).

6. The parallel between the words of Nietzsche's madman and those Antoine uses to describe his state of mind is emphasized by Eugenio Donato (26).

17. For more on the influence of Spinoza's philosophy on *La Tentation de Saint Antoine*, see Unwin, pages 66-72

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