

Abstract

This article examines Michel Georges-Michel's 1924 novel *Les Montparnos* as a study of the myths circulating around the Montparnasse avant-garde of the 1920s, and their function in relation to art. Key amongst these myths is the idea of art as a religion, according to which avant-garde artists are conceived as secular saints and martyrs. While this notion of artist as saint is strongly present in early-twentieth-century biographies of Van Gogh, Georges-Michel explicitly relates his fictionalized version of Modigliani's life not to such recent models but rather to the Renaissance masters, and especially to Raphael, a link which is explained in terms of the post-war 'retour à l'ordre' in French artistic culture. The novel's references to Raphael as archetypal painter-lover are also related to its construction of a myth of the artist as virile and sexually prolific, and to its identification of creative and sexual impulses.

Key words: avant-garde, Bohemia, myth, Michel Georges-Michel, Modigliani, Raphael, retour à l'ordre, Montparnasse.

In the history of twentieth-century literature, Michel Georges-Michel (or, by his real name, Georges Dreyfus) is hardly a canonical figure, and is all but forgotten today. And yet, during a career spanning the first four decades of the century, Georges-Michel was a well-known and prolific *chroniqueur* and critic of art, theatre and dance, and author of a number of novels, including his 1924 text *Les Montparnos: roman de la bohème cosmopolite*. The latter was an immense success: it went through a quick succession of new editions,¹ was adapted for the theatre and staged at the Théâtre Antoine in 1927, was translated into English as *Left Bank* in 1931, and it inspired Jacques Becker's 1958 film *Les Amants de Montparnasse*. As such, Georges-Michel's text played a key role in propagating a myth of Montparnasse, and of the avant-garde artists who lived and worked there in the years following the Great War, which continues to haunt the popular imagination.² While his contribution to this cultural myth has been overlooked – as, accordingly, has his place alongside other literary portraitists of Montparnasse, such as André Salmon, Blaise Cendrars, or Ernest Hemingway – the aim of this essay is

not simply to rehabilitate Georges-Michel's work, nor to make a case for the value of such 'popular' works of art alongside canonical ones. I do, however, aim to take *Les Montparnos* seriously as a text which engages with the visual arts, and to examine the art-critical positions it articulates, focusing on the way in which they may correspond to stories that the avant-garde of the early twentieth century told about and to itself. In particular, I wish to show firstly that Georges-Michel's novel reflects the attempt by many factions of the avant-garde to reinscribe themselves within aesthetic traditions they had once rejected, as part of a broad post-war 'retour à l'ordre'; and secondly that it reflects the gender politics of the avant-garde, whose cult of virility effectively devalued and marginalized female creativity. Alongside an exploration of these themes, I also wish to bring out the role of myth in *Les Montparnos*, and in particular the ways in which myths of the avant-garde artist are generated, borrowed from other texts, and ultimately questioned in the novel. As we shall see, *Les Montparnos* is not simply a piece of mythmaking, but also a self-conscious exploration of the processes by which cultural myths are created, and their function in relation to art.

In a review of the 1929 Fasquelle edition of *Les Montparnos*, François Fosca took issue with the novel's singular mix of fact and fiction:

L'auteur n'a abouti qu'à un ouvrage boiteux, parce qu'il a fait se chevaucher deux plans différents, le plan du roman, c'est-à-dire celui de l'invention, et le plan du reportage, celui de la narration de l'exact. Ce n'est pas là, d'ailleurs, le seul défaut du livre. Écrit dans un style qui vise au pittoresque, et qui n'est que prétentieux, il dépeint la vie du Montparnasse selon l'esthétique du roman-feuilleton; et lorsqu'on y rencontre des personnages authentiques, ils sont tracés avec tant d'extravagance, qu'ils en sont méconnaissables. (Fosca, 1929: 134)

The novel is, as Fosca notes, partly based in fact, and features a number of real Montparnasse personalities such as Cendrars, Léger, Kisling, Picasso and the art dealer and poet Zborowski. The protagonist Modrulleau – a genial and original artist, who dares to flout Cubist orthodoxy, but whose talent is threatened by his alcoholism and goes unrecognized by the public, at least until after his tragic death – corresponds, at least in his broad outlines, to Modigliani, who had died in 1920. The artist's companion, nicknamed Haricot-Rouge after the food she distributes to starving artists, corresponds

roughly to Modigliani's partner Jeanne Hébuterne, who like her fictional avatar killed herself, and her unborn child with her, following her lover's death. What interests us here, however, is not the status of the novel as *roman à clef* or the question of how closely the story corresponds to the historical reality of Modigliani or Hébuterne's life.³ What is crucial for our purposes, rather – and what escapes Fosca's grasp – is the fact that the obfuscation of the line between reality and fiction is absolutely central to Georges-Michel's procedure. In the preface to the novel, he tells the reader, 'Comme dans la plupart de mes autres livres, il n'y a pas une ligne, pas un mot de ce roman qui ne relate un fait, une parole qui n'aient été vus ou entendus.' Having thus assured us of the text's authenticity, however, he goes on to maintain that, 'sauf ceux qui sont cités par leur nom, je n'ai dépeint personne particulièrement', and that Modrulleau and Haricot-Rouge in particular are 'des personnages synthétiques si l'on veut, chacun de plusieurs personnages du même milieu, du même esprit, mais fictifs'. The preface quickly moves, then, from insisting that everything in the novel is true or authentic, to maintaining that its main characters are 'avant tout de purs héros de romans' (Georges-Michel, 1976: 13). Thus, although one would usually expect such paratexts to clarify the text's relationship to historical reality, Georges-Michel's preface actually works to obscure the matter further, by making it apparent that we have no means of ascertaining which elements are 'true', and which are not. Its function, then, is to draw attention to the narrative's ambiguous position in a realm between fact and fiction, between reality and the imagination: the realm of myth. And in doing so, the preface situates the novel itself as one example of many types of text, or verbal discourse, about art and artists, which may or may not be 'true', but which Georges-Michel reveals nevertheless to play a fundamental role in the production and consumption of art.

Georges-Michel is extremely attentive to the various types of discourse circulating around avant-garde art, and which did the rounds of the Montparnasse café terraces, to the extent that some sections of *Les Montparnos* read as cut-and-paste collages of aesthetic musings:

Le but de l'art...

- L'art ne doit pas avoir de but...
- Tous les grands déforment, voient autrement...
- Les fous voient...
- Les surhumains voient...

- Un peintre fait toujours son portrait, quoi qu'il fasse...
- La section d'or, si Raphaël l'a connue?...
- On ne fait pas une cuisse de femme avec son cerveau...
- Nous apportons à Paris la semence du Monde... (1976: 215)

Of course, while part of the purpose of this kind of textual collage is to give the reader a sense of the energy and enthusiasm of contemporary aesthetic debate, the disconnectedness of these fragments gives one the impression of a group of painters and critics talking past one another, unable to arrive at a coherent position, and ultimately making little sense. This is in turn reflected in Modrulleau's own antipathy towards 'les froides gloses' of contemporary critics (Georges-Michel, 1976: 116), which he feels to be irrelevant to the practice of art itself, and his distaste for those painters who 'ne peuvent plus prendre un pinceau sans avoir rempli soixante pages d'algèbre' (1976: 119). And yet this rejection of art-theoretical discourse is countered by the novel's insistence that various types of talk, or stories about art, are absolutely central to art's appeal, and to its purchase and consumption. Haricot-Rouge, for instance, is initially drawn to art through her reading of 'la vie des peintres, de Michel-Ange à Cézanne' – hagiographical accounts that feed her idea that 'leur vie devait être plus belle et certainement plus haute que ce qu'elle savait de l'existence' (1976: 45). Her contact with art itself comes only later, and is of course mediated by the stories she has read.⁴ The success of the art dealer Afthalien, meanwhile, is seen to be closely bound up with his skill in spinning yarns about art, often manipulating the art-historical narrative to suit his purposes, and creating caricatured portraits of the artists themselves, 'sans vergogne ouvrant leur vie privée, leur misère, l'exagérant souvent' (1976: 60). Soutine, for instance, is portrayed by Afthalien as a naive, slightly deranged peasant who fits nicely into the mould of *peintre maudit* – a portrait that appeals to buyers and is used to justify the inflated price of his paintings. In a similar way, the newspaper accounts of Modrulleau's death, and the speeches at his graveside at the end of the novel, serve to consecrate the painter as a heroic avant-garde martyr, as in André Salmon's eulogy:

‘C'était un grand seigneur... Il portait en lui des puissances d'épopée... toute la gloire de vivre en surhomme, si un destin forcené fit de ce prince l'hôte des lieux

maudits ou des bouges... Dans son œuvre comme dans sa vie, le drame et l'idylle
s'allièrent au-dessus de la mort...' (1976: 278)

But within this pairing of 'œuvre' and 'vie', it is the latter, or rather the mythologized version of the latter, that really counts. During the 'ruée' of dealers who swoop in to profit from the painter's death, a 'monsieur Notaire, notaire' buys up Zborowski's stock of paintings without even viewing them, their commercial value guaranteed purely by their association with the artist whose story has been constructed in the tragic mode.

Clearly, there is an element of critique implicit in Georges-Michel's representation of such verbal portraits of the artist, which mediate the experience of art to the extent that the work is invaded, colonized and even partially constituted by verbal discourse: a work of art is, at least in part, what is said about it, and what is said about it often serves solely commercial ends. This may be true, to some extent, of all art, but as Paul Mann has argued, avant-garde art is especially immersed in discourse – its movements driven forward by theory rather than practice, its experience necessarily mediated and its value determined by the art-discourses that circulate around it (Mann, 1991: 6-7). Just as Mann's critical account of these discourses shows an awareness of its own inevitable contribution to the discursive economy governing the production and consumption of avant-garde art, *Les Montparnos* may be seen as just another portrait of the kind it critiques: a mythologized representation of the artist which repackages the reality of the contemporary art world and 'sells' it back to the reader-consumer in a more tragic and glamorous form. What saves Georges-Michel's novel from total complicity in the kind of cynical, commercially-motivated mythmaking it condemns is its self-consciousness – the way in which it draws attention to the role of stories about art in the appraisal of its value, both aesthetic and economic. This self-consciousness also operates via intertextual borrowings which point up the fact that *Les Montparnos* is in some respects simply a reiteration of an already well-established myth, and Modrulleau a modern incarnation of a more universal artistic 'type' deriving from Romanticism. As such, Georges-Michel's aim is not so much to get his reader to buy into the myth, or to swallow it wholesale, but to encourage a more critical awareness of the status of his text as a piece of mythmaking – a verbal narrative which may transform or deform reality – amongst so many others.

Les Montparnos borrows extensively from the tropes of the nineteenth-century art novel, and in particular from Zola's *L'Œuvre*: Modrulleau's betrayal of Haricot-Rouge with the rich, elegant

Princesse de Laurence, and the metaphorical freight of this betrayal as a corruption of the ideal values of art, recalls Claude Lantier's betrayal of Christine with the wealthy *cocotte* Irma Bécot (Zola, 1996: 356-58). Modrulleau's tragic end is also very much reminiscent of Zola's novel. But the dominant model for Georges-Michel's text is perhaps the insouciant Bohemia of Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. Indeed, when François Fosca witheringly referred to *Les Montparnos* as participating in 'l'esthétique du roman-feuilleton', he no doubt meant to liken it to trashy serialized fiction, but he may also have had Murger's text in mind, as one of the most famous examples of the *feuilleton* genre, which had recently been brought back into the public eye by the 1922 centenary of Murger's birth (Seigel, 1999: 367). Georges-Michel's characters inhabit an artistic Bohemia similar to that represented and popularized by Murger – a Bohemia characterized by poverty coupled with youthful high jinks, and with a debauched atelier party as its central episode. The broad similarity between the two texts is also highlighted by Georges-Michel's preface, where the author's emphasis on the authenticity of his narrative (however much this may be undermined subsequently) recalls Murger's insistence on the documentary value of his text as a series of 'études de mœurs' (Murger, 1988: 82).

There are, however, some crucial differences between *Les Montparnos* and *Scènes de la vie de bohème* – differences through which Georges-Michel raises the status of the Bohemian myth, and ultimately sets up the story of the artist as a kind of hagiography that moves beyond Murger's Bohemian picturesque. It is worth noting in the first instance that in Georges-Michel's novel, the identification of the artistic avant-garde with Bohemia is seen as a necessary one. The modern avant-garde artist is necessarily poor because society fails to understand his innovations, and it is only in posterity that his genius will be recognized: Modrulleau laments that 'ce siècle, ce temps, nous ont obligés à vivre comme des chiffonniers dans des quartiers lépreux' (Georges-Michel, 1976: 225). This of course stands in contrast to Murger's struggling artists, whose position in Bohemia is only temporary: following Mimi's tragic death, they realize that 'on peut être un poète ou un artiste véritable en se tenant les pieds chauds et en faisant ses trois repas', and the end of the novel sees them sensibly reintegrating the artistic mainstream in order to make a respectable bourgeois living (Murger, 1988: 375). Georges-Michel's artists thoroughly reject any such concerns, spurning commercial imperatives and sacrificing worldly glory and comforts for their art, which they treat as a mystical vocation: 'cette plus-que-religion qui nous donnait tout de suite le ciel' (1976: 113). This self-sacrifice is central to a conception of art as religion, according to which avant-garde painters are seen as prophets and martyrs,

working towards a radically new form of art which will only be fully realized after their lifetime. As Modrulleau himself puts it, the avant-garde artists of his time are ‘si désintéressés qu’ils ne travaillent même pas pour leur génération’:

Ils savent qu’en recommençant toute la peinture, ce n’est pas en dix ans, ni même en vingt ans qu’ils aboutiront. Mais ils préparent la voie, pour QUELQU’UN qui viendra. Oui, comme au Moyen Age, tous les primitifs, et Giotto, et Masaccio, et Signorelli préparèrent inconsciemment, et en brûlant leur vie, cette flamme entre les flammes hautes: Raphaël! nous, consciemment, nous donnons la nôtre pour celui qui, ramassant tous nos efforts en un faisceau divin, en illuminera le monde...
(1976: 38)

Within the framework of this messianic narrative, Modrulleau, as ‘le plus pur parmi les purs’ (1976: 44-45), ‘un seigneur parmi les siens’ (1976: 51), is the harbinger of this new artistic order, if not the messiah himself.

This metaphorical identification of art and religion is by no means original: Nathalie Heinich, for instance, has demonstrated that early-twentieth-century biographies of Van Gogh (which proliferated in this period, as the cult of the artist grew) tended to borrow elements from hagiography, and to exclude any elements of his life – such as his interest in commercial success – that did not support this myth of the artist as saint and martyr (Heinich, 1991: 59-92). Among the recurrent motifs of these biographical accounts, Heinich lists ‘le motif de la vocation’, the motif of ‘l’homme hors du commun’, ‘motif de l’isolement, de la marginalité, de l’inaptitude à la vie pratique, sociale, commerciale’, ‘motif de l’ascèse et de la pauvreté’, ‘motif du désintéressement’, ‘motif du détachement des biens terrestres et de l’élévation spirituelle’, ‘motif de l’incompréhension et de la méconnaissance par ses contemporains’, ‘motif, enfin, de l’accomplissement dans la postérité’ (1991: 63-64). All of these hallmarks apply equally well to Georges-Michel’s representation of Modrulleau-Modigliani. While this shows that *Les Montparnos* participates in a more general consecration of the artist as secular saint in the early twentieth century, and there is no doubt that Van Gogh is the paradigmatic case setting the tone for subsequent elaborations of this myth, Georges-Michel refers his hagiographical account not to such recent models, but rather to sources from the more distant past. If,

as Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz affirm in their sweeping historical account of recurring patterns in literary representations of the artist, motifs such as poverty and divine vocation have been more or less a constant in accounts of artists' lives ever since the Cinquecento (Kris and Kurz, 1979: 49 and 115), it is above all the potential connection between the early-twentieth-century avant-garde and the painters of the Renaissance that Georges-Michel wishes to privilege, as is evident from the passage cited above, where the new artistic messiah is likened to Raphael – his arrival, indeed, considered a second coming.

Les Montparnos is peppered with references to Raphael, who is revered by Modrulleau: 'seul Raphaël est Dieu', the painter proclaims (Georges-Michel, 1976: 145). Stylistically, Modrulleau's art is described as more primitive in form, and closer to earlier painters who prepared the way for Raphael – as is the case in Georges-Michel's critical writing on Modigliani, where the artist is situated as a 'descendant direct d'Andrea di Vanni, de Simone Martini et des peintres de l'École de Sienne' (Georges-Michel, 1945: 197; see also 1942: 171). Yet Raphael remains the model to which Modrulleau aspires. This link between 1920s avant-garde painting and the Renaissance may seem unlikely, and the combination of a search for a radically new pictorial language with the idolization of a Renaissance master paradoxical. It is only by considering this aspect of Georges-Michel's novel within its historical context – that of the post-war 'retour à l'ordre' – that it may be fully understood. As Kenneth Silver and others have shown (Silver, 1989; Laude, 2002), a large section of the artistic and literary landscape in France in the years following 1914 was profoundly shaped by the idea that a new kind of art would replace the aesthetic chaos and excesses of the pre-war years.⁵ This new art would establish a renewed connection with artistic tradition (particularly various forms of classicism), would restore a sense of measure and order, and above all would be French, freeing itself from the decadent influence of Germany that was thought to have blighted art before the war, and insisting on a renewed sense of national identity. Foreign painters in Paris during the war – particularly non-combatant painters such as Picasso – found themselves obliged to respond to this current of thought by integrating more traditional, classical elements into their painting. And for several years after the end of the war, critical accounts of the work of foreign painters – members of what André Warnod (1925) would baptize the 'École de Paris' – accordingly tended to emphasize their profound allegiance to France and to French culture, if not their actual Frenchness.⁶

The context of the 'retour à l'ordre' may go some way to explaining why Modigliani becomes a Frenchman in Georges-Michel's fictionalized portrayal, and why the author felt the need to

emphasize Cendrars' and Kisling's heroic wartime exploits in the opening chapter. It also helps to explain one of the novel's stranger episodes, in which Kisling travels to Berlin, where he enjoys a night on the town with a transsexual prostitute and ends up in the cellar of a nightclub. Here, drugged with a 'hyperesthésique' substance which heightens his senses, he witnesses the gruesome spectacle of his friend being tortured – his head cut open and his brain probed for the enjoyment of a crowd. Whether or not this episode is understood – within the frame of Georges-Michel's fictional narrative – to have 'really' occurred (and since Kisling's friend appears shortly afterwards to be alive and well, we can only assume that it was a hallucination), this gory, immoral spectacle is taken as an indication of the current state of German aesthetic sensibilities, reflecting the wild, decadent painting of 'Kokoschka et sa bande d'expressionnistes'. Kisling even goes so far as to suggest that if French avant-garde painters followed the lead of their German counterparts and abandoned the discipline of Cubism the ensuing chaos would be equivalent to 'la [...] cave où l'on triture les cervelles' (Georges-Michel, 1976: 168).

While Georges-Michel's novel suggests that German aesthetic influence is to be resisted, other foreign influences may be more welcome. Although he is French, Modrulleau's affinity with Italy is insisted upon through his trip to Rome, during which he discovers his artistic identity: he is to rebel against 'la religion du cube' (1976: 78) and find his own way, guided by the Italian masters. Again, this may be related to a historical context within which the dominant discourses on national identity privileged 'Latinity' (as opposed to barbaric German culture), and portrayed France not only as a natural ally to Italy but as the inheritor of the Italian Renaissance tradition (Silver, 1989: 93-95). Contemporary art-critical discourse in the post-war years often connected avant-garde artistic production to the Italian Renaissance, reading it, like Georges-Michel, as a kind of 'Renaissance d'aujourd'hui' (1976: 71). Furthermore, Raphael seems to have been particularly singled out amongst Renaissance painters as a model for the 'retour à l'ordre'. In the January 1921 issue of the Purist organ *L'Esprit nouveau*, the critic Bissière wrote:

Nous sommes à un moment de l'histoire de l'art où notre race ayant fourni un effort considérable, et ayant subi des convulsions incroyables, éprouve le désir de s'apaiser, de faire le total des trésors qu'elle a amassés. En un mot, nous aspirons à un Raphaël ou du moins à tout ce qu'il représente de certitude, d'ordre, de pureté, de spiritualité. (1921: 390)

André Derain also declared, in a direct echo of Modrulleau's proclamation cited earlier, that 'Raphaël seul est divin!' (Anon, 1921: 310) – as did Picasso, using almost exactly the same terms, according to Georges-Michel's numerous accounts of his conversations with the painter in Rome in 1917 (Georges-Michel, 1923: 33, 1926: 308, 1942: 20-21). Now, Derain and Picasso may simply have been expressing a personal aesthetic preference for Raphael over other Renaissance artists, and it may be that in *Les Montparnos* Georges-Michel is merely following their lead, concerned as he is that his novel should be based around authentic aesthetic pronouncements of the avant-garde. On the other hand, the choice of Raphael as an emblematic figure for Modrulleau and his contemporaries – rather than, say, Michelangelo, whose reputation as a maverick would make him a much more likely hero for the avant-garde – is far from neutral.⁷ As Bissière's article reveals, Raphael was synonymous with order and purity; that is, with stable qualities that were particularly valued after the chaos of the war. Furthermore, Carl Goldstein (2005) has shown that Raphael was strongly linked with the French academic tradition of painting, the emulation of his work having been a central part of training both at the Académie and, after the revolution, at the École des Beaux-Arts. Raphael was bound up with French artistic tradition, Goldstein claims, to the extent that he 'stood for French art as much as for Italian.' (2005: 237; see also Thuillier, 1984.) It was precisely because of this association with academic traditions that Raphael's critical fortunes faded in France in the late nineteenth century, a period in which the state-sponsored Salon, as the bastion of academic art, finally came to an end; equally, it was for the same reason that he enjoyed a revival during the post-war 'retour à l'ordre'.⁸ The fact that Georges-Michel chooses Raphael as an emblem of avant-garde production, then, testifies to the strength of his commitment to this post-war aesthetic agenda. The fictional artist Modrulleau is positioned as the inheritor of French academic traditions, his artistic identity, like that of the academically-sanctioned winners of the *Prix de Rome*, grounded in his return to Italian Renaissance sources, and especially to Raphael.

As we have seen, *Les Montparnos* may initially seem to be a celebration of cutting-edge artistic experimentation: Modrulleau and his colleagues aim to 'tout recommencer', to overturn established pictorial conventions and invent a new kind of art so radically different from all that has gone before that it will require the work of several generations to bring it to fruition. And yet this insistence on the innovations of the avant-garde is undercut by a more conservative discourse

emphasizing the value of aesthetic tradition. The novel may also claim, in its subtitle, to celebrate ‘la bohème cosmopolite’; yet it simultaneously privileges a Latin, and specifically French, artistic heritage. In this respect, Michel Georges-Michel’s portrayal of the post-war avant-garde is thoroughly shaped by the discursive climate of the period. This is pointed up by the inclusion, at the very beginning of the novel, of a lengthy excerpt from a newspaper article on Montparnasse, in which a fictional journalist, echoing many real conservative voices of the post-war period, characterizes avant-garde art as the work of foreigners, criminals and sexual deviants.⁹ The inclusion of this text functions to indicate what Georges-Michel, as a defender of the ‘Montparnos’, is up against; here is a hostile discourse on Montparnasse art to which his novel seeks to provide a response. And, just as Modrulleau seeks to placate rather than to fight the journalist whose text has insulted his friends, Georges-Michel’s novel takes on the conservative critics of Montparnasse and its art on their own terms: not by fighting or even by questioning their premises, but rather by emphasizing the avant-garde’s hitherto unsuspected commitment to the values of tradition and national identity.

References to Raphael recur throughout *Les Montparnos*, and as we have seen, these serve to connect Modrulleau-Modigliani’s avant-garde art to the Italian Renaissance, newly revalorized in the context of the post-war ‘retour à l’ordre’. However, these references also implicitly relate Georges-Michel’s narrative – and particularly the central coupling between Modrulleau and Haricot-Rouge – to the story of Raphael’s love affair with his model, La Fornarina. The story in question originates in Vasari’s biography of the artist, where a few short lines indicate the extent of Raphael’s extraordinary sexual appetites. His needs were such, Vasari tells us, that he was unable to work without his mistress, and one of Raphael’s patrons had to move La Fornarina into his palace, so that these needs could be fulfilled and his artistic production could proceed unhampered (2007: 245). Vasari’s account also attributes the artist’s untimely death to his sexual appetites: having overindulged in sexual pleasures with his mistress, Raphael contracted a fever, and since he was too embarrassed to tell his doctors the real cause of the illness, they gave him an inappropriate treatment and he died as a result (2007: 252). As Marie Lathers has shown, these details from Vasari were seized upon and reworked by nineteenth-century accounts of the painter’s life, in which ‘the myth of La Fornarina, the myth of the life-giving and death-provoking mistress-model’ was a central component (2001: 71; see also Lathers, 1998 and Thuillier, 1984: 25-26). These nineteenth-century re-elaborations of the Raphael myth also worked to produce a reinforced identification of sexual and creative energies, according to which artistic creation

was conceived as akin to procreation, and the artist as lover. This identification arguably finds its strongest expression in the avant-garde art of the early twentieth century, which implies a conception of the artist as earthy, virile and sexually prolific. Carol Duncan, for instance, has remarked on ‘the vogue for virility in early twentieth-century art’ (1993: 90) and has argued that pre-war avant-garde painting tends to assimilate women to nature, while giving men an individuality that situates them on the other side of the nature-civilisation dichotomy, thereby cementing the notion of artistic creation as an inherently male endeavour. Furthermore, Duncan reads Fauve paintings of female nudes as denying the subjectivity of the female subject, and effacing from her representation anything not relevant to the genital urge. As a result, Duncan asserts, such painting supports ‘the notion that the wellsprings of authentic art are fed by the streams of male libidinous energy’ and ‘the expectation that significant and vital content in *all* art presupposes the presence of male erotic energy’ (1993: 98).

Duncan’s seminal article, along with subsequent feminist criticism on avant-garde art (such as Nead, 1995, and Suleiman, 1990), is important in breaking the oft-assumed association between aesthetic and social progressivism: as the art-historical narrative tends to subsume avant-garde production into an inexorable march towards liberation, aspects of artistic practice that actually work to uphold entrenched social prejudices are swept to one side. Duncan’s account is also supported by anecdotal evidence that painters themselves associated the creative act with male sexuality: Renoir, for instance, was cited as saying that ‘I paint with my prick’, while Picasso conceived of painting in terms of lovemaking (Wilson, 2000: 96). What is important for our purposes, however, is the way in which *Les Montparnos* reflects this conjunction of aesthetics and gender politics, and uses references to Raphael, as the archetypal painter-lover, to underpin a myth of art as an activity closely bound up with male sexuality – and, therefore, only open to men.

Georges-Michel’s Modrulleau certainly fits into the mould of the vigorous and virile male painter. He is earthy – literally earthy, as ochre is the dominant colour in his paintings – and his manly physicality, ‘son beau corps musclé dont toute la poitrine haletait dans la large ouverture de la chemise’, is repeatedly exposed for the reader’s admiration (Georges-Michel, 1976: 44). Modrulleau’s muscular strength is such, indeed, that he is able single-handedly to haul a stone statue of Haricot-Rouge across Paris – a feat which, later in the novel, six men together are unable to repeat. His sexual magnetism, meanwhile, is exemplary of that of all painters: Georges-Michel tells us that women are ‘invinciblement attirées par leur odeur toute-puissante de rut’ (1976: 174). And yet, Modrulleau and

Haricot-Rouge's relationship remains chaste until their trip to Rome, where it is consummated in the name of art. It is at this point in the novel that the broader cultural identification of sexual and creative energies finds its most direct expression, as Modrulleau and Haricot-Rouge make love in order to create the new artistic messiah, 'Celui que nous attendons tous', to metaphorically give birth to a new art: 'elle s'ouvrait, douloureuse et désireuse, non de l'œuvre de chair, mais de création, de la création sublime du dieu de demain, elle!' (1976: 157) Sexual desire is thus sublimated as creative desire. This in turn allows Modrulleau's sexual profligacy to be squared with his supposed 'purity' (for he is, let us not forget, a saint-like figure as well as a lover): his affair with the Princesse de Laurence is justified by his belief that she, and not the humble Haricot-Rouge, will bear 'Celui qui viendra'. Sex, once again, is seen as necessary to – indeed, identical with – the 'sacred' task of artistic creation.

The female body thus becomes the site and medium of male artistic creation: Haricot-Rouge is 'le moule et le modèle' into which Modrulleau's dual artistic and sexual energies are channelled (1976: 139). And yet, Haricot-Rouge is not *merely* a model, a passive object of the active, creative male painter's gaze. Her humble origins as a grocer's daughter link her to Raphael's model, La Fornarina (a baker's daughter, as her name indicates), and in some respects she may be seen as a nostalgic throwback to the nineteenth-century *grisette* as she appears in Murger: an innocent and unassuming working-class girl whose role is to provide the artist with companionship and support. In other respects, however, she cuts a much more modern figure, for unlike Balzac's Gillette, the Goncourts' Manette, Zola's Christine or Murger's Mimi, this painter's companion is also an artist in her own right. Moreover, Haricot-Rouge is presented as a genuinely gifted artist: since she is self-taught, her style is somewhat naive, but this quality is valorized in Modrulleau's appraisal of her work, tinged with the primitivist emphasis on artistic instinct: 'Ah! c'est rude, c'est primitif: mais c'est juste, c'est courageux, c'est pensé, et pensé haut...' (1976: 31) Modrulleau values Haricot-Rouge's art to the extent that he insists she must evade the gender roles occupied by the female partners of other painters, in order to pursue her artistic endeavours, telling Zborowski:

Je ne veux pas qu'elle fasse rien d'autre que peindre, tu entends, même pas la cuisine chez toi. Elle ne sera pas une servante, ni une femme de boxon comme la plupart de celles qu'ils ont épousées, les autres, elle sera ma femme à moi...

(1976: 54)

Haricot-Rouge does continue to paint and draw throughout the novel – despite her tragic trajectory into destitution. And yet her creative activity is progressively sidelined and displaced by her role as mother-to-be and as companion to the ‘real’ artist, Modrulleau: *Les Montparnos* is his hagiography, not hers. Haricot-Rouge may not be subservient in the way that Modrulleau understands other artists’ companions to be – she may not be constrained by the domestic duties of a ‘servante’ or the sexual duties of a ‘femme de boxon’ – but, as the last phrase in the above passage indicates, her role as artist is nevertheless seen as very much secondary to her role as Modrulleau’s partner: ‘ma femme à moi’.

More generally, women in *Les Montparnos* are defined and morally judged by their service of, or their threat to, the male artist’s needs and ambitions. Modrulleau’s first companion keeps him under lock and key, in an echo of the controlling Manette Salomon; Haricot-Rouge ultimately disappoints since, despite her loyalty to Modrulleau, her poverty and lack of conventional beauty make her unworthy to carry ‘Celui qui viendra’; the Princesse de Laurence scuppers Modrulleau’s ambitions by aborting the child in whom he had placed his hopes for the future of art, and subsequently suffers a violent attack from the artist – an attack which the author does not explicitly ask us to condemn. Indeed, although by the end of the novel we may have little sympathy for Modrulleau, who has fallen into a delirious alcoholism and has cruelly abandoned Haricot-Rouge, Georges-Michel appears to solicit our approval for his violent revenge on the Princesse by suggesting that she has violated the religion of art: ‘La madone était allée faire étrangler le Jésus par le chirurgien louche’, we are told (1976: 198). Similarly, shortly before his premature death, Modrulleau bemoans his downfall in the following terms:

J’ai été la terre pétrie et prodigue, et j’ai enfanté le ciel. Et les putains de la terre ont versé l’eau de la chirurgie sur la flamme céleste que j’avais allumée... (1976: 269)

The ghost of La Fornarina, whose sexuality, according to the Raphael myth, simultaneously aided and threatened artistic creation, is arguably present here in Georges-Michel’s multiple representations of the artist and his women. Women are, on the one hand, essential to the male artist’s creation/procreation of the work of art, or to the metaphorical ‘enfantement’ in terms of which

Modrulleau imagines his creative act. But, as impure ‘putains’ unequal to the sacred cause of art, they also stand to bring it back down to earth from the lofty heights to which it aspires, and even to kill it.

As this last passage indicates, the end of *Les Montparnos* sees an apparently optimistic celebration of avant-garde art, and its mythologization in terms of a mystical vocation, give way to an overriding sense of failure. After Modrulleau dies and as Haricot-Rouge throws herself from the window of their studio, we are witness to another gory spectacle, in which her child, the hoped-for artistic messiah, emerges from her mangled body as a limp pile of meat: ‘Entre les jambes sanglantes, l’enfant divin sortait comme un immense saucisson nu, comme un immonde ver rouge de ce ventre écrasé’ (1976: 274). In an echo of the metaphorical identification of child and work of art in Zola’s *L’Œuvre*, where the death of the sickly child, Jacques, is representative of Claude’s failure to (pro)create artistically, Georges-Michel represents ‘Celui qui viendra’, the future of art, as still-born. But this is only one aspect of a broader pessimism: if, as Modrulleau claims, art is brought down by ‘les putains de la terre’, its prostitution is not driven solely by women, but by the market. The religion of art is seen to die as speculation on Modrulleau’s work commences in the wake of his death: indeed, in the final lines of the novel, we are told with precision for how much Modrulleau’s statue of Haricot-Rouge has been bought and sold, and given details of the next auction where we, as readers and consumers, might hope to put in our bids, the narrator’s matter-of-fact tone pointing up the reduction of rich aesthetic experience to monetary value. Commercial concerns are also seen to invade and compromise the integrity of Montparnasse as privileged artistic space:

Montparnasse allait f... le camp, comme la Butte. Et ce nom, au lieu d’évoquer le rude travail de ceux qui ‘venaient’, n’allait plus signifier qu’un lieu d’amusements, à faux artistes, à vraies grues, à chansonniers retardataires. (1976: 281)

Just as artistic Montmartre has died and subsists only as a myth, the death of Montparnasse as a hive of artistic creativity is seen to be imminent. Avant-garde artistic production will be replaced by mass entertainments and by peddlars of a myth – the myth of the old, authentic Montparnasse – that keep the consumers coming back for more. Once again, there is an irony in Michel Georges-Michel’s position here: if Montparnasse is dead, surely his own myth-making discourse is no different from that of the ‘chansonniers retardataires’ whom he criticizes. And surely his own concern, ultimately, is to put that

myth to commercial purposes, to use it to sell his own literary art. Indeed, as Georges-Michel's art criticism attests, he did not actually think that avant-garde art was doomed to fail: in texts such as *Les Grandes Époques de la peinture* (1945: 168-70), he does express the view that Cubism became too formulaic and stagnant (and this is reflected in *Les Montparnos*), but at no point does he reject avant-garde practice in general. It is tempting, on the basis of this, to attribute the tragic conclusion of *Les Montparnos*, in which Modrulleau's death becomes emblematic of the death of avant-garde art, to an awareness that tales of artistic success, effortlessly achieved, hold little appeal for the reader. What the novel supplies, instead, is a re-elaboration of the Romantic myth of the flawed genius, doomed to fail through the internal logic of the messianic narrative which, marked by the conventions of artistic hagiography, makes the artist an inevitable martyr to the avant-garde cause. The fact that Georges-Michel chooses to exploit this myth in his fiction of the Montparnasse avant-garde shows an awareness that, however outmoded it may seem nearly a century on from Balzac's Frenhofer, and in a period often viewed as a golden age of avant-garde experimentation, it still exerts a powerful appeal – and, ultimately, *sells*.

[6456 words]

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Notes

¹ Three editions were published by Fayard (1924), Fasquelle (1929), and Fayard again (1933). All citations refer to the most recent and widely available edition (1976).

² The popular myth of Montparnasse has been created and sustained not just by literary and artistic representations, but also, to a certain extent, by historical accounts: while some of these (Hewitt, 1996: 36-43; Fraquelli, 2002) present a factual analysis of the development of Montparnasse as a centre of artistic activity, others (Franck, 2002; Wiser, 1983) exploit a wealth of sensational anecdotes about its inhabitants, giving currency (intentionally or not) to myths of 'les années folles'. More generally, as

Maurice Berger (2004) and Griselda Pollock (1980) have argued (in relation to Modigliani and Van Gogh, respectively), biographical art history, which seeks to explain an artist's work in terms of his life, has often worked to support myths of the artist as a 'special' sort of character, fundamentally different from the rest of society.

³ As Jeanne Modigliani insisted (1961: 12), there is no reliable biography to which Georges-Michel's fictionalized version might be compared, since all narratives of Modigliani's life (even those provided by his own family) are infected with deformed, mythologized elements. This is certainly true of many of the first-hand accounts of Modigliani's life that were published by friends after his death: see, for example, the tragic overtones of Salmon's early accounts (1922 and 1926), and the funeral-apotheosis in Carco's 1927 memoir *De Montmartre au quartier latin* (1993: 214-15). Even Cendrars, in his 1948 *Bourlinguer*, cannot resist the hagiographical impulse, describing Modi as 'beau comme saint Jean-Baptiste' (2003: 211).

⁴ In an earlier text, *La Bohème canaille*, Georges-Michel similarly depicted the heroine as being seduced by tales of 'La Vie de Bohème' (1922: 5 and 8).

⁵ There were, of course, some dissenting voices: many artists associated with Dada and Surrealism did not participate in the 'retour à l'ordre', and many writers treated it with far more scepticism than Georges-Michel. See, for example, Aragon's scathing treatment of Picasso's return to classical form in his 1921 novel *Anicet* (2001: 202).

⁶ For instance, in his 1923 text *Picasso*, Cocteau describes the artist as 'un Espagnol, pourvu des plus vieilles recettes françaises (Chardin, Poussin, Le Nain, Corot)' (Cocteau, 1996: 26-27) and insists that 'Picasso est de chez nous. Il a mis toutes ses forces, toutes les ruses de sa race à l'école et au service de la France' (1996: 27n). Apollinaire had also taken pains to emphasize the Latin origins of Cubism as early as 1917 ('L'Origine du cubisme', in Apollinaire, 1991: 1342-43).

⁷ Apollinaire's 1912 article, 'De Michel-Ange à Picasso' (Apollinaire, 1991: 396-98) shows that Michelangelo was indeed a model for the pre-war avant-garde, before being displaced by Raphael in the post-war 'retour à l'ordre'.

⁸ For an account of Raphael's critical fortunes, see Chastel, 1995: 11-24.

⁹ One might compare this fictional attack on Montparnasse to Camille Mauclair's article from the late 1920s, 'Montparno' (Mauclair, 1930: 39-44), in which Montparnasse is dismissed as 'souillure de

Paris', a dangerous breeding ground for foreign influence, criminality and bad art. On cosmopolitan Montparnasse as a frequent target for conservatives fearful of the foreign threat to traditional French culture, see Rearick, 1997: 88-93.

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Katherine Shingler is Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in the Department of French and Francophone Studies, University of Nottingham. She completed her PhD, on the visual poetry of Mallarmé, Cendrars and Apollinaire, at the University of Bristol in 2007, and is currently working on a three year postdoctoral project tracing the development of the French art novel in the period 1900 to 1930. She is the author of several articles on text-image interactions, including ‘Perceiving text and image in Apollinaire’s Calligrammes’, *Paragraph*, 34.1 (March 2011), 66-85, and ‘An Art Novel for the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Blaise Cendrars’s *Dan Yack*’ (forthcoming in *French Studies*). She is also preparing an edited special issue of *Nottingham French Studies* on the topic of art in French fiction since 1900.

Corresponding author: Katherine Shingler, Department of French and Francophone Studies, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD, UK.

Email: katherine.shingler@nottingham.ac.uk