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LOUISE ACKERMANN'S MONSTROUS NATURE

RAYMOND WILLIAMS DESCRIBES "NATURE" as "perhaps the most complex word in the language";¹ "culture," by contrast, is only "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language." What makes nature so singularly complicated? Nature defined as "the essential quality and character of something" actually complicates by simplifying, begging multiple and open-ended questions precisely by assigning closed and unitary answers. And nature defined as *telos* or divinity, "the inherent force which directs . . . the world," complicates by clashing with nature defined as the arbitrary manifestation of "the material world itself."

Since Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième sexe* in 1949, such complications have been exploited in interrogations of the nature of *femininity*. De Beauvoir asserts that nature is no more immutably given than "la réalité historique,"² as illustrated by the precept "On ne naît pas femme: on le devient" (2:14). This attempt to redefine nature as a form of repressive culture contrasts with the political idealization of nature in the modern origins of French feminism. In the "Déclaration des droits de la femme," Olympe de Gouges argued that nature is a haven from patriarchal culture: "Parcours la nature dans toute sa grandeur, . . . et donne-moi, si tu l'oses, l'exemple de cet empire tyrannique."³ The two poles of de Beauvoir's paradigmatic critique of "natural" femininity and de Gouge's paradigmatic alliance of the rights of woman with nature, however, are inadequate to frame the disturbingly complex gender politics of nature in the work of the poet Louise Ackermann (1813–1890).

Ackermann's original claim to fame was precisely her deviation from nature through her alleged "monstrosity"—the monstrosity of her blasphemous dramas of God, nature, and man in the nihilistic throes of a cosmic family romance. Her *Poésies philosophiques*, published in 1871 when she was 57, were brought to the attention of the literary public belatedly and sensation-ally in an 1873 review by Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly. Barbey raved that Ackermann's poems had the appalling fascination of "une monstruosité. Certes! Je n'hésite pas à le dire, du fond de ma foi religieuse outragée, une telle poésie est une monstruosité . . . La femme qui a écrit ces terribles choses. . . est tout à la fois un monstre et un prodige,—un prodige par le talent et un monstre par la pensée. Un monstre!"⁴ He claimed that the incompatibility between innovative literary intelligence and femininity actually "exploded" the woman in Ackermann: "un monstre et un prodige, voilà le double fulminate qui a fait sauter la femme dans Madame Ackermann; car, de la femme, chez elle, . . . il n'y en a plus" (165).

This identification of Ackermann as monster was consistent with the Western tradition of borrowing from natural history to dramatize women's intellectual activity in terms of unnatural ontology. Although the epithets applied to her by Barbey and others may read like taunts challenging the modern reader to defend Ackermann, it is significant that she herself appropriated the monster prototype.⁵ In a short piece entitled "La Femme," she herself theorized the female literary monster: "Le bas-bleu n'en est pas moins un être contre nature, un monstre dans toute l'acception du mot."⁶ The critic who reprinted this "morceau" from Ackermann's intimate writings, the comte d'Haussonville, dismissed the incongruity of such a misogynist identification by assuming that Ackermann excepted herself from it: "Sans doute elle ne se tenait pour un monstre dans aucune des acceptions du mot, mais à ces règles générales on fait toujours exception pour soi-même."

But there is evidence on the contrary that women writers from Ackermann's era commonly viewed women writers, in their monstrosity, as exceptions to the rule of an even less desirable natural femininity. Claude Dauphiné has demonstrated that although Ackermann's contemporary Rachilde disliked most literary women, she expressed her approval of a couple of exceptions, notably Colette, with a symbolism of crossbreeding and hybridization suggestive of monstrosity. According to Rachilde, Colette's character Claudine was not "une femme de lettres ni même une femme tout court!" but was born "seule, sans espèce et sans famille, de l'accouplement fortuit d'un Dieu brutal comme Eros et d'une pauvre bête errante. . ."⁷ René Néré in Colette's *La Vagabonde* was likewise for Rachilde "D'une espèce animale bien supérieure à l'espèce humaine" (61). Colette herself allegedly perpetuated this discourse of implicit monstrosity when referring to the possibility of maternity: "Un enfant, moi! . . . Sûr, si j'accouchais de quelque chose, ce serait d'un bébé-bête, poilu, tigré, les pattes molles et les griffes déjà dures. . ."⁸ Ackermann similarly spoke of her own literary creation in terms of the nonviability of her productions in a state of nature. If she were a novelist, she reflected, "Mes personnages ne seraient certainement pas nés viables. Et cependant ce genre semble être le domaine naturel des plumes féminines."⁸

According to Marie-Hélène Huet in *Monstrous Imagination*, monstrosity has been linked since ancient times to the power of feminine imagination to transgress the mimetic transmission of masculinity in reproduction. Reproduction, in which the male brain was attributed a seminal power, was thought to be skewed when the mother's mental activity around the time of conception distorted the natural imprint of resemblance between the paternal spirit and the new soul:

. . . a remarkably persistent line of thought argued that monstrous progeny resulted from the disorder of the maternal imagination. Instead of reproducing the father's image, as nature commands, the monstrous child

bore witness to the violent desires that moved the mother at the time of conception or during pregnancy. . . . The monster thus erased paternity and proclaimed the dangerous power of the female imagination.⁹

Huet documents that in the work of Aristotle, deviation from a masculine “generic type” or nature was a form of monstrosity inherent to the female condition: “‘The first beginning of this deviation is when a female is formed instead of a male, though this indeed is a necessity required by nature, since the race of creatures which are separated into male and female has got to be kept in being; . . .’” (3). Huet points to the parallelism between monstrosity and femininity as “two exceptions to another tenet of Aristotelian doctrine, namely that ‘like produces like.’” According to this logic, Aristotle can be considered a theorist of reproductive as well as artistic mimesis, with the female body functioning as a symbol both of representation and the failure of representation: like producing *unlike*.

The critic Michael Taussig refers to the history of the womb as a symbol of mimesis itself, noting the “association, at once obvious and bizarre, of the womb as the mimetic organ par excellence, mysteriously underscoring in the submerged and constant body of the mother the dual meaning of reproduction as birthing and reproduction as replication.”¹⁰ Because mimesis is often viewed as the reproduction of nature, does the woman writer’s “monstrous” deviation from nature also beg assessment as a deviation from the classical ideal of mimesis?

Huet claims that “The monster and the woman thus find themselves on the same side, the side of *dissimilarity*” (3). Dissimilarity can be viewed as a figure for the rupture of mimetic paternal identity. Huet notes, “Since she herself is on the side of the dissimilar, it was argued, the female appears to be destined by nature to contribute more figures of dissimilarity.”

But for Ackermann, the horrifying side of woman is the side of *similarity*. The passage on the blue stocking, quoted earlier, reads in its entirety:

La femme est un être inférieur dont la principale fonction est la reproduction de l’espèce. Malheureusement elle ne peut accomplir son oeuvre toute seule, il lui faut un collaborateur. Tous ses désirs, tous ses efforts ne vont qu’à l’obtenir. Elle est un instrument aveugle entre les mains de la nature, dont elle seconde admirablement les desseins. Mais comme celle-ci a soin d’éviter les prodigalités inutiles, elle a refusé à la femme toute sérieuse capacité intellectuelle. On ne peut concevoir ni mettre au monde de deux côtés à la fois. Quelques femmes ont pu, il est vrai, se rencontrer qui se sont posées en artistes, en écrivains, et qui ont même produit des oeuvres distinguées, mais le bas-bleu n’en est pas moins un être contre nature, *un monstre dans toute l’acception du mot*.

While the monster traditionally goes against nature by conceiving differently, for Ackermann the real monster—not the blue stocking, but the mother—

goes *with* nature. It is the woman who limits herself to conceiving reproductively who most viscerally inspires horror and scorn as "an inferior being," a "blind instrument of nature" whose role is "to second." Even in this secondary role she needs "a collaborator," upon whom she will depend and dote compulsively.

For Ackermann, reproductive woman is the absolute opposite of the original, again highlighting the analogy between reproduction and mimesis. She is the mindlessly proliferating supplement, the inordinately self-replicating effect of the cause, the slave endlessly hungry to generate more slaves. She is the epitome of the principle of "like producing like," but the likeness is monstrous rather than ideal. She is mimesis, but mimesis as an infinity of clones rather than perfect representation of truth.

In Ackermann's formulation, the explicit monstrosity of the *bas bleu* is actually a struggle against the *implicit* monstrosity of woman as reproductive vessel. The woman writer, unlike reproductive woman, may be "un être contre nature," but her resistance to nature is a resistance to the principle of "like producing like" as the blind and inferior submission to the repetition of the species. Since it is impossible to "conceive or produce from two directions at once," she insists on conceiving and producing from a direction she considers to be at odds with the reproduction of the species: literary reproduction.

In this willful sterility, the woman writer tries to escape a destiny that she finds monstrous by seeking relief from the monstrosity of nature as a reproductive principle. But she also thereby incarnates another traditional aspect of monstrosity: Huet notes that "monstrosity is linked to the general fear of sterility. . . . Monsters were traditionally thought to be sterile either because Nature, in its wisdom, did not allow the infinite reproduction of deformities, or because it refrained from allowing legitimate issue to a mother's illegitimate desires" (236).

Ackermann herself entered into marriage only with the understanding that it would be "un mariage de convenance morale."¹¹ She had never foreseen that she would love or marry: "Je me serais donc passée sans peine de tout amour dans ma vie." Despite the fact that her brief union with Paul Ackermann turned out to be a happy one, she maintained a skeptical view of marriage and children, commenting in her *Pensées d'une solitaire* that in reproduction, "Ce n'est le plus souvent qu'un besoin de finir et un désir de commencer qui se rencontrent" (13). On paper at least, she identified with giving birth only in terms of bringing thoughts to life in writing: "Notre esprit est plein d'embryons de pensées dont quelques-unes auraient chance de vivre si nous les mettions au monde. La seule manière d'arriver à une heureuse délivrance, ce serait de les écrire" (46). The sterility of the prototypical monster was, for Ackermann, a logical rejection of woman as a pawn to similarity—the similarity of nature.

This model of the woman writer therefore represents a double subversion of Aristotelian mimesis as the logic of like producing like. First, her biologi-

cal sex hybridizes the “natural” reproductive transmission of masculine nature. Secondly, she chooses artistic reproduction over or in addition to species reproduction—and so her artistic reproductions go against nature in its patriarchal conception.

Can we distinguish this “feminine” implosion of the tautology of likeness that is arguably at the heart of the classical conception of mimesis from artistic experimentation in general? Barbey made much of the oxymoronic status of the woman writer as both “monstre et prodige,” but his repetition of that expression suggests a play on the Latin root of “monster”: *monstrum* or “prodigy.” In the space of literary production, even the negative connotations of monstrosity as fabulous hybridity, grotesque abnormality, excessive size, and the capacity to inspire horror beg the question of the desirability of monstrosity’s opposite. It is hard to imagine what a writer in the modern period would have to gain from the prodigious ordinariness, the perfect generic status, of non-monstrosity—representing the banal, the integral, the normal, the well-formed, the sized to scale, the pleasant.

The monstrosity of the woman writer in fact puts her in an ironic relationship of likeness with the already deviant creative “ontology” of her male literary counterparts. Victor Hugo was so anxious to be a monster that he invented an “Acte d’accusation” in order to be able to concede triumphantly, “Je suis ce monstre énorme.”¹² For Arthur Rimbaud the oracular function of the “je” as an “autre” depended on the monster. The familiar imperative that “il faut être voyant, se faire *voyant*”¹³ is actually preceded by a statement of necessary agency of monstrosity: “il s’agit de faire l’âme monstrueuse.” Perhaps this is a prerequisite for the era envisioned by Rimbaud in which “la femme . . . sera poète, elle aussi!” (13–14). If the poet must be a monster, in other words, and if woman is always already a monster, perhaps woman must be a poet.

Can male and female writers be monsters together without annulling the conditions of their monstrosity? Or does such an ungendered collectivity amount to a new form of monstrous hybridity? Can one have a monstrosity that is the same as the other’s monstrosity without monstrosity morphing into convention, the norm? Is “good”¹⁴ monstrosity even a prerequisite for modern literary production?

But Ackermann’s oblique identification with a positive monstrosity was not a euphoric identification with self-aggrandizing modern avant-gardism. On the contrary, it was a commitment to critique of nature. Ackermann’s poetry tries to sterilize the epistemology of nature as a feminine force complicit with the reproduction of theocentric patriarchy.

“Nature” in French naturalist texts of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was often used as a polite expression for God. This metonymic relationship between God and nature is evident in a complicated gloss on the meaning of the word nature by Cuvier, an heir to Buffon, the naturalist whose

work and teaching generated tremendous interest in the world of letters at precisely the period of Ackermann's initiation into it:

Dans notre langue et dans la plupart des autres, le mot NATURE signifie: tantôt, les propriétés qu'un être tient de naissance, par opposition à celle qu'il peut devoir à l'art; tantôt, l'ensemble des êtres qui composent l'univers; tantôt enfin, les lois qui régissent ces êtres. C'est surtout dans ce dernier sens que l'on a coutume de personnifier la nature et d'employer par respect son nom pour celui de son auteur.¹⁵

For Cuvier, God is the personification of nature, because God is the "author" of natural creation.

Nature was a lifelong scholarly and poetic preoccupation for Ackermann. Although she acknowledged that evolutionary thought and German philosophy influenced the pessimism of her poetry, Ackermann also insisted that her nihilistic view of nature had been in place since her adolescence and that it was "personal." In *Ma Vie*, she writes: "Plusieurs critiques ont naturellement attribué mon pessimisme à l'influence qu'aurait exercée sur moi la philosophie allemande. Mes vues sur la destinée humaine remontent, hélas! bien plus haut et me sont tout à fait personnelles" (xxii). She goes on to cite a poem she had written in 1830. Called "L'Homme," it concludes with this cheery couplet: "Ton oeil se ferma enfin du sommeil de la tombe; / Réjouis-toi, vieillard, c'est ton premier bonheur" (xxiii). For a contemporary reader, such lines might indeed seem to reflect a purely personal and depressive nature. But in the nineteenth century, the interrelatedness of ideas of human nature, scientific nature, and the divine make it necessary to consider the possibility that negative views of *any kind of nature* are signs of theological critique. How does Ackermann's trope of the literary woman as an unnatural monster reflect her poetics of monstrous divinity?

Literature in Ackermann's upbringing was the site of a familial conflict between the fatalism of the eighteenth century rationalist tradition and the valorization of literary perfection harmonious with religious faith. In the autobiographical essay *Ma Vie*, Ackermann, who was called "Victorine" rather than "Louise" as a girl, describes childhood days spent impatiently waiting for her parents to begin their evening ritual of reading aloud from seventeenth-century *belles lettres*. Despite this communal preoccupation with books, the family remained divided between two cultural stances: her father's "voltairian" resistance to religion, and her mother's insistence, because of what Ackermann described as a "strong awareness of worldly conventions," on initiating her children into religious observance.

In early adolescence Ackermann was placed in a provincial religious pension to prepare for her first communion, and there she flirted with a mystical vocation. This vocation was nipped in the bud by her father's objections, bolstered by gifts of Enlightenment texts. She returned home where, after a peri-

od of time, it was arranged through a maternal cousin that she would attend a pension in Paris. She moved to the pension in 1829, when she was fifteen. The professor of literature in this establishment, Biscarat, was an intimate friend of the Hugo family. He provided Ackermann with a steady stream of texts by the German, English, and French romantics. Ackermann began writing poetry, and was lavishly encouraged by the headmistress of the school. Biscarat also introduced her to a mentorship by correspondence with Victor Hugo himself.¹⁶

But out of the wealth of literary sources available to her as a girl, Ackermann cites not Hugo or Byron as the greatest influences on the development of her thinking, but Buffon's *Époques de la nature*: "Une traduction de Platon m'enchantait, mais la plume demeura aux *Époques de la nature*, de Buffon; ce livre m'élargit tout à coup l'horizon" (*Ma Vie* vi).

Why the *Époques de la nature*? Certainly it is a work that has little to say about the female sex. Balzac, also formatively influenced by Buffon, would point out Buffon's lack of interest in gender in the 1834 "Avant-propos" to his *Comédie humaine*: "Quand Buffon peignait le lion, il achevait la lionne en quelques phrases; tandis que, dans la société, la femme ne se trouve pas toujours être la femelle du mâle."¹⁷ On the other hand, through a perhaps unintended philosophical fatalism implied by Buffon's vision of nature, the *Époques de la nature* presented new twists on the conflict between Enlightenment values and religion that had polarized Ackermann's parents. The *Biographie universelle* of 1844 notes, "Peintre et secrétaire de la nature, M. Buffon eût été moins célébré, si contre son intention il n'avait dessiné des plans de création où le matérialisme et le fatalisme ont cru trouver des appuis à leurs systèmes."¹⁸

Buffon's attempt to account for the variety of species in the *Époques* does seem calculated to sow an uneasy sense of a cruel God bent on reproducing the species at any price. He defines nature as "le système des lois établies par le Créateur,"¹⁹ and these divine laws justify slavery and violence, as in the empire of man over animal: "L'homme change l'état naturel des animaux en les forçant à lui obéir, et les faisant servir à son usage: un animal domestique est un esclave dont on s'amuse, dont on se sert, dont on abuse, qu'on altère, qu'on dépayse et que l'on dénature . . ." (2:1). This negative tyranny is described with such incongruous alliterative poetry that it suggests philosophical resistance. But Buffon goes on to rationalize this *empire* as a gift from God, legitimate and revolution-proof: "L'empire de l'homme sur les animaux est un empire légitime qu'aucune révolution ne peut détruire: c'est . . . un don de Dieu."

For Buffon, God's laws also spell the nullity of the individual to the extent that these laws work above all in favor of the reproduction of beings that resemble each other sufficiently to be able to reproduce in their turn. Buffon defines specieshood as a principle of *reproduction compounded by resemblance*, a sort of reproductive mimesis. He was in fact criticized in the Romantic era for not distinguishing between likeness and procreation: "il mêle deux choses distinctes, le fait de la *reproduction* et le fait de la *ressemblance*."²⁰

Buffon refers to reproduction as "cette faculté de *produire son semblable*" (1:116 [my italics]), "cette espèce d'unité toujours subsistante," "cette vertu procréatrice." His formulations on specieshood read like a rhetorical treatise on wildly generative analogy. According to Buffon the reproductive faculty common to animals and vegetables surpasses the human ability to conceive of analogy, a point that seems to situate biological reproduction and rhetoric on the same continuum of likeness: "c'est la faculté commune à tous deux de se reproduire, . . . qui suppose plus d'analogie et de choses semblables que nous ne pouvons l'imaginer" (1:120). Because of the primacy Buffon assigns to the reproduction of likeness, the individual means nothing compared with the importance of the species: "Un individu, de quelque espèce qu'il soit, n'est rien dans l'univers; cent individus, mille, ne sont encore rien: les espèces sont les seuls êtres de la nature" (1:52).

Did Ackermann as an adolescent in Paris read Buffon as a *critic* of nature, finding in his formulae the words for her aversion to woman's role as the agent of nature's reproductive designs? Buffon's descriptions of the primacy of the species recall Ackermann's later description of woman as "un instrument aveugle entre les mains de la nature, dont elle seconde admirablement les desseins" ("Madame Ackermann d'après des lettres" 350). Buffon's discussion of reproduction is occasionally characterized by the same tone of horror at mimetic proliferation that one finds in Ackermann's work: "A quoi se rapporte donc ce grand appareil des générations, cette immense profusion de germes, dont il en avorte mille et mille pour un qui réussit? Qu'est-ce que cette propagation, cette multiplication des êtres, qui, se détruisant et se renouvelant sans cesse, n'offrent toujours que la même scène?" (1:54). If one applies Buffon's schema of nature as the voracious reproduction of likeness to the sphere of divine creation, it approximates Ackermann's critique of theocentrism.

There was a long gap between Ackermann's early poetic production, influenced by Buffon, and her mature poetic production, influenced by Darwin. By 1831, Ackermann had returned to her family in the countryside, where she suffered the loss of a kindred spirit in the death of her father. She was subsequently cut off from her literary relationships. In *Ma Vie* she explains that "Il régnait dans ma famille, à côté d'un penchant très prononcé pour la littérature, d'invincibles préjugés contre les gens de lettres. Les relations littéraires me furent donc interdites" (xi). But by 1838, when it had become clear to her mother that Ackermann was determined not to circulate in "le monde," the scholarly young woman was granted permission to travel to Berlin and live for a year with friends who ran a girls' school. Berlin was "la ville de mes rêves," a place where "Les questions philosophiques et littéraires passionaient seules les esprits" (xii-xiii). Now fluent in German, she immersed herself in Hegel and Schelling. At the end of the allotted year she returned to Paris, and two years later her mother died. She reflects with dubious emphasis on her mother's role in preventing her from becoming a woman of letters: "C'est à elle que

je dois de ne pas être devenue *de lettres*. Je ne saurais lui en avoir trop de reconnaissance" (xiii).

Ackermann then returned to her friends in Germany, where she met the young French philological and literary scholar whom she would subsequently marry, Paul Ackermann. (When she took her husband's family name, she also changed her first name, "Victorine," to her middle name, "Louise.") She abandoned her own studies to consecrate herself "toute entière" to her husband's work. Of her poetry, "il n'en était plus question"; she never even revealed to her husband that she was an "ex-Muse" (xvi).

Less than two years into their marriage, Paul Ackermann died. A bereft Louise moved to Nice to be near a married sister, and bought an old monastical property on an isolated hillside with extraordinary views. Until the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war she lived there in seclusion, overseeing her gardens, reading and writing. Her reading included the great figures of scientific and positivist modernity, such as Comte, Littré, and Darwin. Darwin above all appears to have brought her back full circle to her earlier reading of Buffon. Darwin articulated that while "it is difficult to avoid personifying the word Nature [as God],"²¹ it is "improbable that any part [of nature] should have been suddenly produced perfect" (59–60)—a rejection of nature as the material proof of creationism. Ackermann described her encounter with evolutionary thought as a poetic revelation: "Les côtés poétiques de cette conception des choses ne m'échappaient pas non plus. Par ses révélations, la science venait de créer un nouvel état d'âme . . . où la poésie avait évidemment beau jeu" (*Ma Vie* xix).

In all of the most sustained philosophical poems in the 1871 *Poésies philosophiques*, Ackermann problematizes, through the technique of anthropomorphic rhetoric, the relationship between the theological past and the materialist future of nature. In "Prométhée," "La Nature à l'homme," "L'Homme à la nature," and "Pascal," Ackermann defies nature as a means of defying God, and vice versa. As I have previously analyzed "Pascal" at length, I will focus here on "Prométhée," "La Nature à l'homme," and "L'Homme à la nature."²²

"Prométhée,"²³ written in 1865 and dedicated to the woman writer Daniel Stern, is narrated in the first person by a Prometheus who, chained to a rock and tormented by a vulture, narrates an invective against God. "God" is not, in this case, the Judeo-Christian God, of course, but Jupiter. But it is in fact characteristic of Ackermann's theological critique that the gods are replaceable: they are all personifications of the human rationalizations of sadistic nature as divinity. (In "Pascal" for instance, a poem that aims to "dévoiler la foi, monstrueuse et stérile" [*Poésies* 142], Ackermann constructs a parallel between the mythical Sphinx and "la croix sinistre.")

Prometheus taunts Jupiter that his bodily pain is only a "simulacre vain" (*Poésies philosophiques* 98). His real pain, his "seul vautour," is a frightening

knowledge: the recognition that divine "hatred" has sown "seeds of misery" into man's flesh and blood. "Pourtant, ô Jupiter, l'homme est ta créature; / C'est toi qui l'as conçu, c'est toi qui l'as formé, / Cet être déplorable, infirme, désarmé, . . ." (99). Prometheus asserts that Jupiter's creation of man was no more than an abandonment of man to a murderous nature: "Tu savais que l'aveugle Nature / Dans son indifférence allait l'ensevelir."

Nature and God in this vision are not precisely the same thing, as a chronological divide between divine creation (before) and natural existence (after) separate them, but they are nevertheless complicit. God refuses to endow man with the resources, the divine "étincelle," that would prevent man, mere clay, from falling victim to nature's penchant for burials.

Prometheus's response to this foreclosure of man's destiny was the theft of the spark of life, which he used to fire man ("cet obscur limon") into another kind of vessel, a vessel of reason in the form of doubt: "La raison s'affermir, le doute est prêt à naître. / Enhardis à ce point d'interroger leur maître. . ." (101). Prometheus is revenged against God by the fact that man, armed with doubt, will deny God's existence: "Au lieu de l'accuser, ton auguste victime / Niera son oppresseur!" God, denied, will melt back into the mire of nature, representing no more than the collusion of force and chance: "Pour tout Dieu désormais, . . . un couple aveugle et morne, / La Force et le Hasard" (102).

Despite the newfound atheism of man, Prometheus, a demigod himself, concludes the poem with the perception that his God and his torturer are one and the same, an identification which suggests the active existence of God: "Et j'aurai reconnu, pour comble de torture, / Un Dieu dans mon bourreau" (103). In the end, the careless horrors of nature are not quite as awesome as the malicious negligence of a creator god. Prometheus is endowed with a perverse kind of faith in that he "believes" in the primacy of an evil affect, an anthropomorphic agency.

The poems "La Nature à l'homme" (1865) and "L'Homme à la nature" (1871) also rely on first-person narration for the expression of bitter lamentation in a dialogue between a sufferer (man) and his tormentor (nature). But here nature is personified and expresses herself first, defending herself against man's complaints.

In nature's account of the history of creation, man's boundless pride prompts him to offer himself up as the creation of all creations: "Homme, tu m'as crié: Repose-toi, Nature; / Ton oeuvre est close: je suis né!" (*Poésies* 103). But nature scoffs at the idea that man could be the end point of her labor: "L'atome humain pourrait entraver mon essor?" (104).

But in relation to man's egotism, nature has one primordial and fatal watchword, the watchword of evolution: "J'aspire!" (105). Her teleological yearnings are pathologically maternal: "Que fais-je donc, sinon préparer mes entrailles / pour ce suprême enfantement?" She is the "mère idolâtre" (106) of an unborn son, a fantasized "chef-d'oeuvre," for whom Christ is clearly the

messianic prototype ("un seul enfant qui n'est pas né," "ce fils de mes vœux"). Nature here has no inherent desire to play the role of the wicked stepmother, as she is so often cast by Ackermann, but is motivated by "L'amour qui couve en moi." Imagining always that this perfect son has been conceived, nature as the "nourrice en délire" (107), rips open the "voile" of her own flesh, the flesh that covers and hides him. "Je le déchire: / Me découvrir c'est me livrer." But despite this self-mutilating tearing of the veil of nature, the unborn remains a dream, whereas the men who have been born, "ô multitude, essaim!," remain mere clay: "Tu ne seras jamais dans mes mains créatrices / Que de l'argile à repêtrir" (108).

The relationship of religion to nature in this disturbing poem of evolutionary baby lust is the inverse of that in "Prométhée"; nature and god are again situated on a continuum of mythological existence, but here it is nature who longs to deliver God. Nature's maternal and religious cult guarantees the suffering and insignificance of man.

Anthropomorphism in "La Nature à l'homme," as in "Prométhée," is necessary to the expression of the modality of belief that makes divine creation and natural creation indissociable. Nature and the divine *believe in each other* and need each other for their own greedy and careless purposes.

In the second part of the poem, "L'Homme à la nature," man asks "implacable nature" to go ahead and destroy the "moule humain" (109), once and for all. Nature, according to man, overestimates the sublime potential of her own fecundity: "La distance est trop grande et trop profond l'abîme / Entre ta pensée et tes flancs" (110). In the wake of man's miserable existence, nature would watch, ravished, "D'autres créations éclore à grands essaims, / Ton idée éclater en formes de vie / Plus dociles à tes desseins . . ." (109). But this would not mean that "Lui, ton espoir, ta chimère" (110) would in fact come into being. Nature would like to be a mother ("A l'oeuvre! Il s'agit d'enfanter" [111]), yet her maternal strivings are canceled out by her impatient sacrifice of her existing offspring in the quest to deliver the elusive perfect one: "Je meurs et Lui ne naîtra pas."

Man views the "Créatrice" (113) as ungrateful for his infatuation with her powers. Man is the suitor of nature, and he is also the mimetic apparatus that reflects the abstraction of nature into a recognizable personification.

Ne suis-je point encore seul à te trouver belle
J'ai compté tes trésors, j'atteste ton pouvoir,
Et mon intelligence, ô Nature éternelle!
T'as tendu ton premier miroir. (112)

Not only does man admire his abortive maternal progenitor, he makes the cult of nature into an art, holding up the mimetic mirror of his intelligence to her charms. But man switches from the mimetic adoration to the cursing of nature

("Sois maudite, ô marâtre!"[114]) when he realizes that nature will never stop her cycles long enough to grant him enough of the eternity necessary to create a *chef-d'oeuvre* of representation: "En retour je n'obtiens que dédain et qu'offense" (112).

This conversion of the idealistic mimetic mirror into pure negativity reflects Ackermann's own subordination of mimetic technique in poetry to epistemological critique. Ackermann does not "paint" nature, she blasts it. But she was haunted by the paradox that nature's reproductive squandering of man flies in the face of man's reciprocal mimetic "creation" of nature. In *Pensées d'une solitaire*, she meditated:

L'homme semble disparaître, et pourtant c'est lui qui est le dépositaire unique des images, le miroir où viennent aboutir tous les rayons des choses. Le monde n'existe que quand il s'est reflété dans ses yeux, dans sa pensée. Ce n'est qu'en passant par ses sens et son intelligence que la nature se revêt de formes. (45)

How could man be destroyed by what he had created? How could man be created by that over which he had mimetic agency? How could man's sense of the beautiful produce that which would undermine the possibility of artistic perfection? Ackermann does not attempt to resolve these questions. She simply allows the contradictory proliferation of the agents of conflict in a sort of cosmic family romance. Throughout her poems, nature and God believe in, conceal, and reveal each other. But Nature never quite gives birth to God, and God is only an angry and careless progenitor of nature. Man becomes an atheist while watching nature try to dig God out of her belly. But nature is only subject to representation because man has already reproduced her. In the end, creation is invariably unsatisfying: man can't do it right, God won't do it right, and nature does it too much and for all the wrong reasons. Cause and effect, original and copy, subject and object, beginning and end are profoundly scrambled in a hideous teleological melodrama.

Ackermann's goal in her poetic exposé of the cultural collusion between masculine God and feminine nature is simple and startling: she is laying out a welcome mat for the end of the world. In *Pensées d'une solitaire*, she ruminates that "Ce n'est pas à la porte de l'enfer, mais à celle de la vie qu'il faudrait écrire: *Lasciate ogni speranza*" (65). She would never want to be in God's place; "Ne pas pouvoir cesser d'être, quel supplice!" (28). Her advice to humanity is not oriented toward progress but toward death: "Je ne dirai pas à l'humanité: progresse; je lui dirai: meurs; car aucun progrès ne l'arrachera jamais aux misères de la condition terrestre" (37). One must therefore question the "positiviste" label applied to her work early on by Caro and others,²⁴ as her few "positive" reflections, such as "La foi disparaît devant la science" (*Pensées d'une solitaire* 33), are part of a larger requiem for theocentrism. Ackermann's affiliations to the decadence of Baudelaire or Huysmans are just

as strong as her affiliations to the positivism of Littré or Comte, as is perhaps most obvious in her notion of “une providence à rebours” (32).

The mimetic imperative of both God and nature, the ethos of “like producing like,” is unredeemed in Ackermann’s schema by its *doppelgänger* relationship to man’s artistic ambitions. This may be due to the situation of woman as the fall guy in the mimetic cycle, the literal enabler, the “virtuous” womb. Rather than advocating change in woman’s role in Western culture—the feminist approach—the misanthropic Ackermann promotes ending Western culture by sterilizing the feminine model of its reproduction or replication. But the loathing of the mother that animates Ackermann’s critique of nature is inseparable from her loathing of the patriarchal God.

For Ackermann, nature’s endless evolutionary need to start over disproves the Creationist paradigm and reveals divine authorship as fatuity, at best: “A chaque création, Dieu s’est applaudi de son oeuvre; il l’a trouvée bonne. Le besoin de progrès qui se manifeste dans la Nature et donne de l’impulsion à l’univers est en contradiction flagrante avec la satisfaction qu’a éprouvée le créateur” (*Pensées d’une solitaire* 36–37). The coupling of nature’s reproductive promiscuity and God’s fatuous and brutal institutions make it possible for Ackermann to extricate herself from all paradigms of authority in the mimetic sphere. For her there is no mimetic model of literary creation that is not a capitulation to the baseness of reproduction, whether the reproduction of models of perverse authority, reproduction as the compulsion to replicate, or reproduction as procreation. Without the “mating” of God and nature, man would begin to be freed from his enslaved existence as the image of an anthropomorphism. But under the regime of faith that yokes the two together, “Les dévots sont des poltrons, les dévots sont des lâches. Prosternés devant un Dieu inique et capricieux, ils n’ont qu’un but, qu’une pensée: le fléchir à tout prix” (65–66).

It is in this light that Ackermann identified with monstrosity. Her case exemplifies the nonheroic and antinarcissistic origins of the “species” of the modern woman writer. For Ackermann, becoming a poet necessitated a willful straying into abnormality and loathfulness for the purposes of a monstrous freedom that was not a utopian freedom.

In twentieth century feminism, de Beauvoir’s formulation that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” has been credited with making “all gender . . . , by definition, unnatural.”²⁵ It is startling to find that Ackermann’s husband had published a book on poetics that began with an attack on a famous formulation by Boileau on the origins of the poet: “‘qu’on naît poète et qu’on ne le devient pas.’”²⁶ For Paul Ackermann one is not born, but rather becomes, a poet. Or at least one *can* become a poet, if one is not too identified with nature, as he claims is most often the case for women: “Leur âme est poétique, mais trop identifiée avec la nature pour pouvoir la peindre” (13). He may not have known it, but no one represents the late nineteenth-century naturalist

poetics of *becoming a woman poet* better—or rather, more “unnaturally”—than Louise Ackermann.

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1. Raymond Williams, “Nature,” *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford UP, 1976) 219.
2. Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction,” *Le Deuxième sexe*, 2 vols. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1949) 1:18.
3. Olympe de Gouges, “Les droits de la femme” in *Opinions de femmes: de la veille au lendemain de la révolution française* (Paris: Côté-femmes, 1989) 50.
4. Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, “Madame Ackermann,” *Les Poètes* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1893) 164–165. This text was originally published as “Poésies philosophiques, par Madame Ackermann” in *Le Constitutionnel*, 28 April 1873. Further references to this and all other works cited more than once will be identified parenthetically by page, unless otherwise noted.
5. In my 1994 “Gender and the Aesthetic of ‘le Mal’: Louise Ackermann’s *Poésies philosophiques*,” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 23 (1994–1995), I questioned Barbey’s assertion of the “sterility” of Ackermann’s poetic vision. In the present article, rather than contesting the misogynist logic of Ackermann’s nineteenth-century readers, I attempt to locate, historicize, and interpret paradigms of sterile and monstrous nature within Ackermann’s own work.
6. Gabriel Paul Othenin de Cléron, comte d’Haussonville, “Mme Ackermann d’après des lettres et des papiers inédits,” *Revue des deux mondes* 106 (Nov. 1891): 350.
7. Claude Dauphiné, *Rachilde: Femme de lettres, 1900* (Périgueux: P. Fanlac, 1985) 59.
8. Louise Ackermann, *Pensées d’une solitaire* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1903) 53.
9. Marie-Hélène Huet, “Introduction,” *Monstrous Imagination* (Harvard UP: Cambridge, MA: 1993) 1.
10. Michael Taussig, “Spacing Out,” *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 35.
11. Louise Ackermann, *Oeuvres de L. Ackermann: Ma Vie—Premières poésie—Poésies philosophiques* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1885) xv.
12. Victor Hugo, “Réponse à un acte d’accusation,” *Les Contemplations* (Paris: Presses Pocket, 1966) 71–74.
13. Arthur Rimbaud, Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871, *Collected Poems*, ed. Olivier Bernard (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1962) 10.
14. The problem of desirable monstrosity is especially irrepressible in view of the compound nature of misogyny and advocacy, insult and praise, in the nineteenth-century reception of women writers’ work. Anyone who has researched the negative treatment of nineteenth-century women writers has undoubtedly also come across myriad examples of the remarkable interest of nineteenth-century male writers in their female colleagues. The fact that a given woman writer—for instance, the poet Louisa Siefert from Lyon—has been entirely excluded from the literary canon in the twentieth-century in no way indicates that she was not read and mentored and supported financially and even occasionally taught in the classroom by male writers who did gain a place in the canon. Louisa Siefert’s correspondence contains a plethora of supportive testimonials by writers including Émile Deschamps, Victor Hugo, Théodore de Banville, Auguste Vacquerie, Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Charles Asselineau, and Edgar Quinet, and as we will see, Ackermann herself was mentored by Victor Hugo during her adolescence. See Louisa Siefert, *Souvenirs rassemblés par sa mère, Poésies inédites* (Paris: G. Fischbacher, 1881).
15. Georges Cuvier, *Le Règne animal distribué d’après son organisation* (Paris: Deterville, 1817) 1: 1–2.
16. “Le professeur était si enchanté de mes compositions, de certains vers surtout, qu’il les portait tout chauds à Victor Hugo. Le grand poète lui-même n’a pas dédaigné de donner des conseils sur le rythme à la pensionnaire; je ne les ai jamais oubliés” (*Ma Vie* viii).
17. Honoré de Balzac, “Avant-propos” à la *Comédie humaine* (Paris: Michel Lévy Frères, 1859) 3.

18. "Buffon (Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de)," *Biographie universelle, ou Dictionnaire historique*, éd. F.-X. de Feller et M. Pérennès (Paris: Méquignon Junior et J. Leroux / Gaume Frères, 1844) 3: 12.
19. Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, "De la Nature: Première vue," *Oeuvres choisies de Buffon*, 2 vols. (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, 1865) 1: 43.
20. P. Flourens, *Cuvier: Histoire de ses travaux* (Paris: Paulin, 1845) 297.
21. Charles Darwin, "Natural Selection; or the Survival of the Fittest," *The Origin of Species* (New York: Penguin Books, 1958) 89.
22. Unless otherwise specified, all references to Ackermann's poetry will be to *Poésies (Première poésies—Poésies philosophiques)* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1877).
23. References to "Prométhée" are to *Poésies philosophiques* (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1884) 96–103.
24. See E.-M. Caro, "La Poésie philosophique dans les nouvelles écoles: Un Poète positiviste," *Revue des deux mondes* May 1874: 241–262.
25. Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*" in *Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century*, ed. Hélène Vivienne Wenzel, *Yale French Studies* 72 (1986) 35.
26. Paul Ackermann, *Du Principe de la poésie et de l'éducation du poète* (Paris: Brockhaus & Avenarius, 1841) 1.