LOST PARADISE

SYMBOLIST EUROPE

THE MONTREAL MUSEUM
OF FINE ARTS
Developments in the natural sciences in the second half of the nineteenth century provided fertile territory in the Symbolists' search for underlying truths—a deeper level of meaning in the world around them and an understanding of the hidden forces of life. Like the Naturalists before them, fin-de-siècle artists were influenced by new currents in evolutionary theory, the workings of the mind and medicine.

Louis Pasteur's germ theory of disease had been initiated as early as 1857 in his work on micro-organisms and fermentation, but its application to higher animals and man was not firmly established until twenty years later. By the early 1880s, an international revolution in bacteriology had taken place that laid the groundwork for the practice of modern medicine in the Western world. Pasteur had revealed an infinitely small yet infinitely powerful enemy to human survival: the microbe. By 1880, advances in the high-resolution oil-immersion microscope allowed a detailed study of the organic world hidden to the naked eye, and international teams of microbiologists competed to isolate and classify the tiny bacteria, protozoa and viruses that caused human disease.

In Germany, Robert Koch, who rivalled Pasteur himself in important new discoveries, was particularly instrumental in linking specific germs with resulting pathologies. By the turn of the century, the micro-organisms that caused some of the leading illnesses of the period, such as tuberculosis, typhoid fever, cholera, diphtheria and pneumonia, had been identified.

Discovering the relationship between germs and disease, however, did not necessarily lead to a cure. Despite the sensational updates in the press that kept the public informed on newly identified bacteria, the medical community seemed oddly impotent before this complex, unfolding world of rapidly multiplying organisms. In Gustav Klimt's mural *Medicine* (1901) for the University of Vienna, the powerlessness of curative science is suggested: Hygieia, goddess of health, holds forth a venomous-looking cup, while behind her, huddled humanity is united in suffering and grief under the surveillance of the skeleton Death.

Tuberculosis and syphilis were at all-time highs throughout Europe in the last decades of the century. In Michel Corday's *Venus* (1901), a story of syphilitic death, a medical doctor...
searches in vain for a curative serum at the Pasteur Institute. Drawing upon pre-existing medical notions, many, including some physicians, thought that diseases like syphilis and tuberculosis had an essential hereditary nature, and these beliefs became entangled with the newly revealed pathogenic germ.\(^6\) High infant death rates were of grave international concern, and plagues continued their relentless sweep across the continent. Des Esseintes, the central character of J.-K. Huysmans's \(A\) rebours (1884) and mentor to the Symbolist generation, gloomily meditated on the constancy of disease:

"After all, what did their lives amount to but impetigo, colic, fevers, measles in childhood; foul diseases, and unfaithful wives in manhood; and then, in old age, infirmities and death-agonies in workhouses or hospitals?"\(^{12}\)

Popularized at a time when degeneration theories spelled doom to ageing European races,\(^4\) and industrialization and the tensions of the urban environment were linked to nervous deterioration, germ theory of disease suggested a virulent external force ready to attack the weak and contributed to the late nineteenth-century obsession with morbid biology.

Borrowing from Romanticism’s fascination with disease and Realism’s sordid, tragic tales of modern civilization, the Symbolists explored the fears of their generation. Germs, morbid bodily processes and preoccupation with being ill went along with personal and social anxieties. In Symbolist art and literature, the spectre of early death often haunts the artist. The fin-de-siècle exploration of disease and decay was tied to the theme of social disintegration. Europe itself was sick and awaiting collapse, and the artist, with his finger on the invalid’s pulse, charted the relentless progress of its decline.

Coming of age by the mid-1880s, a phalanx of Pasteurian hygienists countered the ever-present, invisible microbe with the defence of prevention. Late nineteenth-century hygiene was an attempt at rational control in the face of nature, which indeed, horrific aspects of micro-organisms were popularized and, along with personal and social anxieties. In Symbolist art and literature, the spectre of early death often haunts the artist. The fin-de-siècle exploration of disease and decay was tied to the theme of social disintegration. Europe itself was sick and awaiting collapse, and the artist, with his finger on the invalid’s pulse, charted the relentless progress of its decline.

Coming of age by the mid-1880s, a phalanx of Pasteurian hygienists countered the ever-present, invisible microbe with the defence of prevention. Late nineteenth-century hygiene was an attempt at rational control in the face of nature, which indeed, horrific aspects of micro-organisms were popularized and, as physical and social distances collapsed, fear of contamination spread. Shared objects and spaces were considered a risk.

3. The concept that illness can be hereditary and insinuate itself in family lines has a neo-Lamarckian basis. Originating in France, this idea had wide appeal in the immediate pre-Pasteurian period and continued to be referred to in the late nineteenth century. For an introduction to the confusion of infectious and hereditary disease, see Stephen Kern, "Germs, Genes and Ideas", in \*Anatomy and Destiny: A Cultural History of the Human Body\* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), pp. 112-126.


6. The Pasteurian revolution had its political dimensions as well, most notably in France, where it was associated with ideas of fighting the enemy within, the
Crowds, foreigners and travellers were suspect. People on the fringes of society – the lower classes and prostitutes – were especially thought of as microbe-infested and liable to leave their germs behind.7

The city, with its compressed populations, was implicated as a true enemy to health. Between 1880 and 1913, the number of cities in Europe with a population over a hundred thousand rose from fourteen to forty-eight. Émile Verhaeren’s *Villes tentaculaires* (1895) depicts the late nineteenth-century image of the crowded, suffocating city, where death stalks the streets. Its antithesis is found in Jules Verne’s *Villes isolées* (1879), which envisions a healthful, microbe-free city with gleaming white walls. Thomas Mann, who came of age in Munich of the nineties, sets his *Death in Venice* in a city of stagnant waterways, where the overstrained novelist Aschenbach gradually succumbs to cholera as it creeps over the city.8 As an agent of communicable illness, the unsanitary city could suggest the diseased state of culture as a whole.

With the rise in urban population, the potential effect of crowd diseases grew more alarming. The Pasteurians published disaster statistics on the number of microbes per city street, and manufacturers capitalized on fin-de-siècle anxiety by promoting new devices to safeguard health. The Mallie water filter, for example, on view at the 1889 Exposition universelle in Paris, promised buyers that the microbes in household water would be reduced from 2,100 per cubic centimetre to zero, thereby preventing epidemic diseases.9

Crowd diseases are a result of germs quickly crossing populations and moving from one place to another, and epidemics were a major focus in the medical community. Plagues, a theme revived by Symbolism, are treated in the work of James Ensor, Arnold Böcklin, Félicien Rops and Max Klinger. Alfred Kubin’s *Cholera* gives visual form to the power of the mighty microbe, which gathers force as it travels.

Typhoid and cholera, both water-borne, were a serious form of contagion during the Symbolist period. Koch had isolated the cholera bacillus in 1883, when an outbreak in Egypt threatened Western Europe. Despite the social precautions taken, the disease began its insidious move once again and reached Europe by 1892. Two years earlier, echoing the lack of faith in medical science, Pierre Veber expressed the anxiety of his period in a short story in the Symbolist journal *La Revue blanche*.10 Having read about the outbreak of cholera that year in Asia Minor, his character consults up-to-date scientific literature – Bouillaud’s *Traité du choléra morbus*, Blondel, de Gendrin and the *Bulletin de la conférence sanitaire de Vienne* – and describes the stages of the disease in gruesome detail. Obsessed with the unstoppable progress of the “germs of destruction”, he implicates “the nomads who carry death in the folds of their garments”. Convinced of the disease’s ultimate advance, he tracks its

---

8. Hygienists had advocated cleaning up towns, digging drains, and increasing running water and the circulation of air even before the Pasteurian period, and significant advances had been made by mid-century in urban sanitation and water management. But it was in the concern for pure water, new housing regulations and the methods of disinfection gradually instituted towards the turn of the century that the move to apply bacteriology to hygiene was revealed.
9. Beginning with the 1874 congress in Vienna, international issues of public hygiene took on importance in Europe, with leadership gradually shifting to France. The language grew increasingly Pasteurian, with an emphasis on bacteriology. By 1912, thirteen more international congresses had taken place. The quality of water and necessity of better sewer systems were always an issue. Laboratories to test water and food were gradually set up in major cities.
westward journey from Afghanistan through Russia, and scoffs at the commission set up by the French government to halt the epidemic: "What foolishness! They are trying to stop the invisible, rein in the intangible. It is everywhere - in the water we drink, the air we breathe. I know that it is coming." Hypochondria gives way to the inevitable as he is choked on the streets of Paris by "the blue demon".11

Germ theory confirmed the Symbolist thinking that visible reality was an illusion and greater truth lay in hidden realms. The shadowy and blurred effects in the works of some Symbolists, such as Eugène Carriére and Odilon Redon, suggest a matter that is neither solid nor impermeable. Invisible microbes also implied insidious, malevolent forces in the world. In his satanic _Là-bas_, Huysmans wrote, "Space is peopled by microbes. Is it more surprising that space should also be crammed with spirits and larvae? Water and vinegar are alive with animalcules. Now why should not the air, inaccessible to the sight . . . swarm, like the other elements, with beings more or less corporeal, embryos more or less mature?"12

Crowd disease, with its micro-organisms multiplying in the bodies of sick individuals, spreading its symptoms to others, has its analogy in the interest taken in crowd psychology during this period. The popularization of germ theory and the study of mobs both arose in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The crowd as morbid, oppressive, anonymous or persecuting plays an important role in the work of Henry De Groux, Munch and Ensor, as in the latter's _Entry of Christ into Brussels_ (1888, J. Paul Getty Museum). Crowds were thought of by theorists in terms of a kind of collective pathology. The growing presence of socialism and anarchism had an analogy in crowd disease's threat to undermine the bourgeoisie. Crowds were like a spreading fever, a kind of plague. Hippolyte Taine, an early crowd theorist, would refer to crowds as bacterial infections. The discipline drew upon a number of popular scientific models, including anthropology and hypnosis, but the similarity of the language used to describe crowd behaviour with that used by the new wave of Pasteurian scientists to describe infectious disease is unmistakable. In a classic statement in the book that summarized his ideas on collective psychology, _La psychologie des foules_ (1895), Gustave Le Bon, the most important contributor to this field, wrote, "Ideas, sentiments, emotions and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes . . . Cerebral disorders like madness are contagious."12 Crowdy theory was popular in France, Belgium, Italy and other countries as well.14

Microbes also invaded private space. They could easily be transported on the skin, and the careful washing of the entire body was strongly promoted by hygienists. In art, the theme of bathing became increasingly important by the last two decades of the century.15 In 1886, Degas exhibited a set of bathers whose catalogue description read: "Series of nude women bathing, washing, drying and towelling themselves, or having their hair combed".16 In certain of Degas's works, plump matrons step from bath tubs, a luxury item in this period, to white towels held for them by their maids. Their poorer counterparts squat in shallow metal washtubs, twisting awkwardly to reach all areas of the body. Women were considered more germ-infested than men, and lower class women especially so. In _Certains_, Huysmans wrote that Degas's bathers conveyed the "moist horror of a body that no lotion can cleanse".17 Gauguin, Félix Vallotton, Renoir and Carriére all took up the subject of bathers. In Carriére's _After the Bath_, one woman carefully inspects the skin of another.

The importance of personal hygiene influenced the public bath movement. The idea of regeneration and health through the purity of water also contributed to a boom in health spas from 1880 to 1914. Seabathing, too, with its savage, ever-renewed waters, increased in popularity.

The domestic interior, with its dusty tabletops, drapes and dark corners, was considered an ominous breeding ground for microbes. There was a virtual horror of dust during this period. Dust carried with it smallpox, diphtheria, measles,

11. Many of those who persisted in doubting that tiny micro-organisms could bring about such utter devastation were silenced by the experience of Hamburg in 1892, where residents from one side of town who drew water from an antiquated system fell victim to cholera while the other side, benefiting from improvements, was spared.
12. J.-K. Huysmans, _Là-bas_ (Paris: Librairie Plon, n.d.); quoted in English from _Down There_, trans. Keene Wals (New York: Albert & Charles Boni, 1994), p. 142. The idea of the horrific microbe that controls man had currency in science fiction during this period as well. As early as 1883, Flaubert had envisioned writing a story about a microbe that outgrows the scientists who studies it and devours him. André Couvreur's occultist mad-scientist Dr. Tornada, in _Invasion of the Microbes_ (1908), develops the "micrococcal aspirator", which grows to enormous proportions and hounds for Paris captivating villages as it goes.
13. Gustave Le Bon, _La psychologie des foules_, 2nd edition (Paris: Alman, 1890), pp. 115-116. Le Bon was trained in medicine and assumed the position of a pathologist in his analysis. In 1881, he began publishing in _La revue scientifique_, one of the major organs of the Pasteurians.
14. Edmund Picard, editor of _L'Art moderne_ and supporter of Les XX, was one of the popularizers of crowd psychology in Belgium. The crowd figures prominently in his play _Le Jour_ (1887). A great admirer of Le Bon, he wrote his biography in 1900.
17. Ibid., p. 27.
scarletina and tuberculosis. Redon's *On the Backdrop of Our Nights*, God with His Knowing Finger Traces a Multiform Implacable Nightmare suggests dust's potential horrors as one sleeps. The images of Redon, a great admirer of Pasteur, are full of references to terrifying micro-organisms that could be transported by water or air.  

In Ensor's *Woman in Distress* (1882, Musée d'Orsay), the small figure of a woman sunk in bed lies in a dark room with thick carpeting and heavy drapes — the well-appointed bourgeois bedroom was now known to be a potential death chamber.

One of the most common and deadly diseases of the period, tuberculosis seemed to strike infants and young women most often. It was linked to as many as one in seven deaths by Koch, who isolated its bacillus early in 1882. Despite its bacterial origins, many persisted in believing it to be hereditary in nature. Munch for example, whose mother and sister died of tuberculosis, would blame his poor health on "pulmonary weakness" and often treats this illness in his work. Young female invalids, as in Ejnar Nielsen's *The Sick Girl*, are a common theme in Scandinavian Naturalism and Symbolism.

As tragic as the protected death of frail young women was another phenomenon common to the period: the high infant mortality rate. Especially critical in France, where it was tied to fears of infertility and national decline, it was a major problem throughout all of Europe, and at least one in ten children died in infancy. In 1886, eighteen hundred babies died in Paris alone. Some of the major causes of infant death were diphtheria, diarrhea and bronchopneumonia. The infant mortality rate was a top priority at international hygiene conferences, and many studies were devoted to infant disease at the end of the century.

By the mid-1880s, infant death was a prevalent theme in literature and art. In Zola's *L'Assommoir* (The Masterpiece, 1886), Claude Lantier obsessively paints his dead child. In 1885, the year his four-year-old son died of diphtheria, Carrière exhibited his first *Sick Child*. This may well have been an inspiration for Munch's *Sick Child* begun the same year, which the Norwegian artist would call his most important painting. Sick or dead children are a recurrent theme in the sculpture of George Minne. Charles Maurin's *Serum Treatment* (1895), celebrates the discovery of an antitoxin by Pasteur's follower Dr. Émile Pasteur.

---


female who transported the most dreaded viruses. In a prose poem in reference to Munch's The Kiss, August Strindberg wrote: "Kiss – The merging of two beings, of whom the lesser, like a carp, seems ready to engulf the larger, in the manner of vermin, microbes, vampires and women". 21

The female, especially the prostitute, could be a tempting trap of contamination. The untrustworthy femme fatale, a common Symbolist theme, found inspiration in the high anxiety associated with the possibility of contracting a venereal disease. Syphilis found numerous victims in the bohemian community, from Baudelaire to the young Picasso, whose lurid prostitutes in Les demoiselles d'Avignon (1907) have been interpreted as carriers of the disease. Although syphilis had haunted generations of Europeans, its golden age was the period from 1885 to 1914. 22 Confused medical theories implicated drinking glasses, towels and kissing. The fear of syphilis was so intense acute that it gave rise to the international phenomenon of "syphilophobia". Although by 1900 only three percent of actual deaths were attributed to syphilis – compared with tuberculosis, which sometimes claimed as much as twenty percent of the population – no disease was more dreaded. In 1899 and again in 1902, international congresses on syphilis and other venereal diseases were held in Brussels, with most European nations represented.

The prostitute, implicated as the foremost source of venereal contagion, was a growing presence on the streets of major European cities. 23 Attempts to regulate prostitution in supervised brothels where regular medical inspections were conducted met with limited success, for many prostitutes worked clandestinely. The prostitute seemed to be increasingly contaminating the upper classes as she circulated in society. 24

364

The merging of two beings, of whom the lesser, compared with tuberculosis, which sometimes claimed as sources of contagion. Movement of fertility. Physically weak or ignorant women, however, could be female in the late nineteenth century. Tied to her own biology, she was at her best as procreator, embodying nature's cycles of fertility. Physically weak or ignorant women, however, could be sources of contagion.

Less innocent than the homebound female invalid or the mother who needs tutoring in the care of her child is the venal

Roux, who appears like an Olympian god surrounded by mothers and infants.

Many of the micro-organisms that led to the rapid deterioration of young children were believed to be transported through diet. By 1890, infant consultations based on Pasteurian ideas were being instituted in France. The related "goutte de lait" movement, launched in 1892, encouraged mothers to breast-feed their own babies or use sterilized milk made available at low cost. "Goutte de lait" was part of the developing science of puericulture, which educated mothers and encouraged repeated office visits for young children. This movement had an enormous impact outside France. In 1905, the first international "goutte de lait" conference took place at the Pasteur Institute. In Jean Geoffroy's "Goutte de lait" Movement at the Dispensary in Belleville, the founders Doctors Variot, Budin and Pinard are shown at centre, as infants are weighed and mothers breast-feed or buy pasteurized milk. 25 The public attention called to infant care and survival, purity of diet and "mother's own milk" no doubt influenced the Symbolist maternity theme, which was popular by the nineties and can be found in the work of Maurice Denis, Giovanni Segantini and Léon Frédéric, among others.

Developments in the sciences, from Darwinism to an interest in hysteria, had provided a discourse on the role of the female in the late nineteenth century. Tied to her own biology, she was at her best as procreator, embodying nature's cycles of fertility. Physically weak or ignorant women, however, could be sources of contagion.

Less innocent than the homebound female invalid or the mother who needs tutoring in the care of her child is the venal

20. Pierre Budin was a major force behind the child welfare movement. By the time of his death in 1907, there were 407 puericulture clinics in France alone.
22. Although long suspected to be bacterial in nature, the spirochete of syphilis was isolated as late as 1905. Four years later, the highly toxic Salvarsan was developed by the German bacteriologist Paul Ehrlich and began to replace the uncertain mercury treatment. The latter involved a four-year regimen that included careful attention to diet and hygiene. By the 1940s, syphilis was treated with antibiotics.
24. Parent-Duchatelet's study of prostitutes in Paris in 1838 still had credibility in the late nineteenth century and was referred to outside of France. His famous analogy

Charles MAURIN
The Serum Treatment, 1895
Lyons, Musée des Hospices civils

364
Categories of prostitution also became hazy, for some working class women supplemented their income through occasional prostitution. As germ theory gained ground and people came to fear shared objects, all women whose jobs brought them into repeated contact with the public became a highly suspect source of infection. The fear of venereal disease also brought about a shift in groups of women who were sexually exploited and might carry syphilis. An example of this is the Viennese ‘altles Mädel’, memorialized in the plays of Arthur Schnitzler. Considered sexually safer than a streetwalker, these naïve working class women, tempted by the flattery of bourgeois gentlemen, were lured into an endless cycle of abandonment.

Because of the reality that untreated syphilis could affect the unborn child, as this disease began to assume a middle class identity, it became increasingly bound up with the fear of a hereditary legacy. Ibsen’s *Ghosts* (1881) is a play about hereditary syphilis. Oswald Alving, riddled with the illness he inherited from his father, eventually loses his mind. Obsessed with its deadly horrors, there were many who came to believe syphilis could even skip generations and suddenly reappear in yet a more virulent form. Tainted family lines and the contamination of innocents is a recurrent fin-de-siècle theme. Dread over the effects of syphilis contributed to the late nineteenth-century interest in biological monstrosities and progressive decomposition of the body – the microbe was also the agent of putrefaction.

*The Cycles of Life* 39
The hereditary aspect of syphilis was tied to the very notion of racial degeneration. In Eugène Brieux’s controversial play *Les avaries* (1901), a doctor warns a young syphilitic man against marrying and having children: “It is in the name of these innocents that I implore you; it is the future, the race that I am defending.”

Huysmans’s *Des Esseintes*, himself obsessed with this disease, implicates all of humanity:

“It all comes down to syphilis... in the end”...

And he had a sudden vision of unceasing torments inflicted on humanity by the virus of distant ages. Ever since the beginning of the world, from generation to generation, all living creatures had handed down the inexhaustible heritage, the everlasting disease that ravaged the ancestors of man and even ate into the bones of the old fossils that were being dug up at the present time.

Without ever abating, it had travelled down the ages, still raging to this day.

After pleading for his health, Oswald’s final words in *Ghosts* are, “Mother, give me the sun... the sun.” No longer just a romantic symbol of life and power, the sun was strongly promoted by Pasteurian hygienists from the last two decades of the century on as nature’s great prophylactic in killing infectious agents. Public buildings, from schools to hospitals, were to have more and larger windows. Vilhelm Hammershøi’s *Dust Moles Dancing in the Sunlight*, potentially harmful in a dark interior, are rendered innocuous by the flood of light that streams through the window. The sun was not only a destroyer of bacteria in the environment; in the mind of the public, it became associated with a vague understanding of the use of heat in sterilization processes, seemingly confirming a scientific basis for the action of sunlight on the body.

The quest for sunshine and microbe-free air fostered the fast-growing practice of taking an alpine cure. Pasteur himself had ascertained the low number of germs at high altitudes by climbing mountains to measure the number of microbes. The desire for regeneration of the body taxed by civilization and racial and family heredity, and constantly menaced by the silent, secret microbe, encouraged the escape into nature, with its light, open spaces and seaside. Science was reinforcing the idea that the great antidote for civilization and its ills was the healing power of nature itself.

Health and survival meant freedom from gloom and claustrophobic spaces. The rejection of the contaminated urban environment resulted in a series of reforms in workers’ living quarters as well as utopian housing schemes, such as

---

the garden city movement, that were influenced by bacteriology. By the early years of the twentieth century, there was a dramatic decline in deaths from some infectious diseases. Improvements in sanitary engineering, public health laws and housing regulations, the protection of water through purification and milk through pasteurization, and programmes of vaccination and bacteriological diagnosis all contributed to well-being, and the morbid fin-de-siècle fear of a world overwhelmed by contagion began to subside.

B. L.

I would like to thank the following people for their assistance in the preparation of this essay: Robert Rosenblum, Linda Nochlin, Richard Shryock, Thomas Kirchner, Stefan Germer, Joshua Cole, Karen Carter, Marina Neri and especially Laura Morowitz.