



Helen Craske



Arbitrating the Arbitrary? Taste in Rachilde's Fin-de-Siècle Book Reviews

*[Arbitrer l'arbitraire? Le goût selon
Rachilde dans ses comptes rendus fin de siècle]*

Abstract

During the first decade of her *Mercure de France* book review column, Rachilde evolved from an avant-garde provocatrice to an established literary figure. While denigrating bourgeois taste and traditional critical authority, Rachilde asserted the critic's duty to champion literary underdogs and to defend readers from mediocre works. She used the 'Romans' column to assert an alternative vision of literary value and to re-position herself in the wake of Decadence and Symbolism.

Résumé

Pendant la première décennie de sa chronique littéraire au *Mercure de France*, Rachilde est devenue une figure établie, après une période de provocation avant-gardiste. En dénigrant le goût bourgeois et l'autorité critique traditionnelle, Rachilde a affirmé qu'il était son devoir, comme critique, de soutenir les auteurs moins reconnus et de défendre ses lecteurs contre les ouvrages médiocres. Elle a utilisé ses comptes rendus pour revendiquer une vision non-conformiste de la valeur littéraire et pour se repositionner au crépuscule de la décadence et du symbolisme.

Key Words

Rachilde, *Mercure de France*, literary criticism, fin-de-siècle, Decadence

Best known for writing risqué Decadent fiction, Rachilde – like many of her contemporaries – made a position and name for herself in the columns of newspapers, reviews, and magazines. Through these media, she published an array of short fiction, articles, and serialized novels.¹ The most significant part of Rachilde’s journalistic output came through her involvement in the *Mercure de France* (1890–1965), a review founded and edited by her husband, Alfred Vallette, alongside a group of budding writers and journalists.² Publishing a wide selection of literary production, the *Mercure* became one of the most reputable sources of journalistic criticism and scholarship at the turn of the century. Within only a few years, it featured articles on artistic and literary endeavours from within France to across Europe, and increasingly on other intellectual domains, including the social and natural sciences.³ As a regular contributor to this wide-ranging enterprise, and as *patronne* hosting the periodical’s weekly *salon*, Rachilde had regular contact with, and influence over, the communities that constellated around the *Mercure*. From the start of its existence, she contributed short stories, prose poems, plays, and literary criticism. The latter took the form of book reviews, which initially appeared anonymously, signed “***” (1890–1893), and subsequently under her usual pseudonym (1894–1896)⁴. Rachilde’s early experience in literary criticism paved the way for a long-term position at the review: from April 1896 she oversaw the “Romans” column of the *Revue du Mois* (later the *Revue de la Quinzaine*), and did so for almost thirty years. This article investigates Rachilde’s book reviews during the column’s first decade, circa 1896–1906: a period that marked the writer’s transition from an avant-garde *provocatrice* to a more established literary figure. Situating Rachilde’s polemical literary tastes against the backdrop of pre-existing critical traditions, I employ close reading to consider how she used the column to question notions of literary value and to re-position herself in the wake of Decadence and Symbolism. My work complements and extends previous criticism, which has typically focused on analysing

Rachilde's book reviewing practice biographically, or on providing summaries of her *comptes rendus*' key tendencies (Dauphiné, 1991, 275–88 and 1992, 17–28; Holmes, 2001, 50–5; Lair, 2007, 231–60). Above all, I emphasize Rachilde's role as an arbiter of literary taste: a position simultaneously founded upon her earlier notoriety and seeking to transcend it.

Arbitrating Taste: Critical Ethics

Unlike many of her colleagues, such as fellow *Mercur*e contributor Remy de Gourmont, Rachilde did not write theoretical articles about literature or criticism. Instead, she reflected on these topics sporadically in her column, sometimes through standalone sections in the opening or closing lines, and sometimes through asides embedded within the reviews themselves. These comments reveal Rachilde's ambivalence towards her position as a critic – a term she repeatedly rejected, such as in the following remark: “Moi, je ne fais pas de critique, je ne veux pas savoir qu'on fait de la critique, je lis, je suis touché ou je suis furieux [*sic*]” (*Mercur*e de France [henceforth: *Mercur*e], December 1896, 562). It is noteworthy that Rachilde uses the masculine gender in her self-positioning statement, as if to channel the authority of the (traditionally male) critic's role while simultaneously undermining it. The switching of gender agreement recurs in Rachilde's writing, most clearly in her novel *Monsieur Vénus* (1884). Generally speaking, in the *Romans* column, Rachilde used the masculine to convey assertiveness, as seen in this example, and the feminine to convey (usually faux-) modesty or self-denigration – as seen in a later example, below. While reinforcing gender stereotypes with such usage, Rachilde ultimately blurred these distinctions by presenting both approaches with ironic distance. Beyond the question of gender, Rachilde's appeal to visceral emotion and gut feeling contributed to wider fin-de-siècle discussions about critical authority, which played out through an ongoing conflict between dogmatic and impressionistic criticism. The former, associated with

Ferdinand Brunetière, assessed literary production according to normative values, which were often ethically or morally inflected, and pronounced judgements considered rational and objective. The latter, associated with Anatole France and Jules Lemaitre, emphasized the impression that a work of art gives to a specific individual, thereby asserting the relativity of literary value and the subjective nature of all interpretation (Nordmann, 2001, 113–19 and 153–4; Vêrilhac, 2010, 86–7). Many avant-garde writers of the period penned vitriol against the older generation of officially recognized critics in mainstream newspapers and reviews, because the latter’s conservative dogmatism acted as a barrier to the former’s artistic success and recognition. This tension helped to feed the fin-de-siècle boom in little magazines, such as the *Mercure de France*, which offered alternative forms of legitimacy (Leroy and Sabiani, 1998, 259; Millot, 2004, 500). That said, the Symbolist avant-garde, of which Rachilde was undoubtedly a part, did not completely reject dogmatism in favour of impressionism. Instead, they strove to synthesize the two approaches by rejecting the normative values promoted by dogmatism while insisting on the critic’s passionate and partial conviction (Vêrilhac, 2014, 138–40).⁵ This position reflected Charles Baudelaire’s earlier view of criticism, expressed in the *Salon de 1846*: “pour être juste, c’est-à-dire pour avoir sa raison d’être, la critique doit être partielle, passionnée, politique, c’est-à-dire faite à un point de vue exclusif, mais au point de vue qui ouvre le plus d’horizons” (Baudelaire, 1992, 78).

We can see Rachilde drawing on this critical inheritance through her assertion of partiality and insistence on the more individualistic, and implicitly less authoritative, status of reader: “je lis”. In the quotation cited above, she aligns criticism with subjective taste by announcing the stark distinction between personal likes and dislikes: “je suis touché ou je suis furieux”. As a critic, Rachilde juxtaposed sympathy/praise and antipathy/condemnation, suggesting that the former posed the greatest danger:

le Monsieur préposé à la critique des romans m'a toujours paru un étrangleur de profession, se montrât-il d'humeur louangeuse. Tirer six lignes à bout portant sur un ouvrage de six cents pages, [...] l'envoyer dans l'éternité avec une jolie grâce de clown inconscient, n'est-ce pas le crime le plus bouffon que l'on puisse commettre [...]? Or, me voici à mon tour (du diable si je sais pourquoi) devant l'étal, où, boucher d'occasion, sinon criminel de race, je vais désarticuler les membres de la Chimère! (*Mercur*e, May 1896, 283)

By using vocabularies linking ridicule to crime, Rachilde proposes a self-reflexive, half-playful and half-despairing, condemnation of the reviewer's role. Her tongue-in-cheek parenthetical aside further highlights the ambivalence of this vision. In particular, the final exclamation asserts the critic's inability to communicate the ineffable qualities of a work of art without destroying them. This emphasis on ineffability, epitomized by the unattainable "Chimère", recurs throughout Rachilde's reviews, when she suppresses description and analysis, supposedly leaving critical judgement to the reader, who is implicitly encouraged to read the book independently.⁶

By expressing the difficulties of doing justice to "tasteful" or well-written literature, Rachilde implies that it is more appropriate for a critic to concentrate, instead, on condemning its unworthy counterpart. Recurrent attacks against particular *bêtes noires* – such as adultery novels, psychological case studies, and moralising prefaces – inscribes Rachilde's reviewing into the "critique d'humeur" tradition employed by *pamphlétaire*-style journalist-writers such as Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, Léon Bloy, Jules Vallès, and Octave Mirbeau (Melmoux-Montaubin, 2003). Decades earlier, Émile Zola had promoted a similar approach in *Mes Haines* (1866): "La haine est sainte. Elle est l'indignation des cœurs forts et puissants, le dédain militant de ceux que fâchent la médiocrité et la sottise" (Zola, 1923, 1). Considering Zola's influence in this intellectual context, it is ironic – and not without precedent in Symbolist circles – that one of Rachilde's most

detested *bêtes noires* is the father of Naturalism himself (Vérilhac, 2010, 35). Rachilde's antipathy towards Zola is evident in her vituperative reviews of his later works, the Four Gospels tetralogy: *Paris* (*Mercure*, April 1898, 237–40), *Fécondité* (*Mercure*, November 1898, 485–94), *Travail* (*Mercure*, June 1901, 751–2), and *Vérité* (*Mercure*, April 1903, 185–6). One of Rachilde's most eye-watering comments about Zola appears in the opening line of her *Vérité* review: "Ce sont les 750 dernières pages d'un puissant écrivain qui est mort au moins trois ou six livres trop tard" (*Mercure*, April 1903, 185). This concise put-down reflected the anti-Naturalist position typical of Rachilde's literary milieu, while developing her critical style and personality. In this way, Rachilde's adoption of indignation and disdain reformulated a heterogeneous critical inheritance, which she manipulated in order to create a recognisable critical persona, an extension of her authorial 'ethos' or 'posture', and to encourage readerly identification through shared antipathies.⁷

Alongside partiality, found chiefly in the form of antipathy, Rachilde cited diligence as another key principle, which she juxtaposed with the unethical practices of mainstream critics. In the concluding paragraphs of the February 1900 *Romans* column, Rachilde apologized for a typographical error in the previous issue, suggesting that the mistake was caused by overwork. She used the apology as an opportunity to contrast her critical honesty with the practices of more self-serving critics:

En imitant les critiques plus éclairés que moi qui se croient *le droit du choix* et qui opèrent un triage avant de lire, je ferai sans doute des articles plus intéressants au seul point de vue de ma réputation de chroniqueur, mais alors... combien de jeunes auteurs, ou simplement d'auteurs oubliés, ne seraient jamais lus! [...] J'ai voulu et je veux encore lutter de toutes mes forces contre cet abus... social. (*Mercure*, February 1900, 460)

In this section, Rachilde depicts herself as a champion of the literary underdog, rejecting the prejudices of a select group in order to give younger and forgotten writers a chance to be considered fairly. She suggests that this approach requires a level of self-sacrifice, not only because critical diligence requires time and effort, but also because selectivity implies “taste” in an authoritative sense, and would have facilitated the expression of her own virtuosity as a critic. However, Rachilde’s claims to an unbiased approach, without any form of pre-selection, should be taken with a pinch of salt. As Nelly Sanchez has noted, the works occupying the predominant opening position in Rachilde’s reviews were usually those published by the *Mercur*e itself (Sanchez, 2009, 57–8). The openness to new talent promoted by Rachilde, and indeed the *Mercur*e more generally, was not completely impartial, since it sought to counterbalance perceived critical prejudices by promoting its own contributors (Silve, 1987, 14; Bertran, 1960, 354; Kalantzis, 2013, 69). The review was therefore no less biased than its mainstream competitors, but simply relied on a different set of prejudices, in order to constitute a clearly identifiable alternative space for new talent.

These caveats aside, the amount of books Rachilde reviewed is a testament to the dedication required to consume recently published works at the turn of the century. It is therefore unsurprising that Rachilde emphasized the physical effort of getting through the piles (“tas”) and floods (“flots”) of novels on her desk (*Mercur*e, July 1903, 175; *Mercur*e, September 1903, 736). She depicted book reviewing as punishment or torture, referring to the sweat-inducing labour involved in reading longer novels, such as Albert Lantoiné’s *La Caserne*: “On a l’impression, en fermant ce volume, de tenir un boulet. C’est très lourd, très dense, très rugueux. On est écrasé de fatigue. J’ai mis trois jours à lire cela et [...] c’est tout un travail” (*Mercur*e, January 1899, 166). “Travail” here evokes not only employed labour, but also notions of pain, suffering, and torture found in the Old French term, derived from the Latin “tripalium”.

The analogy between reviewing and imprisonment returns two years later, when Rachilde refers to her “fonctions de condamné aux lectures forcées” in a review of Paul Bourget’s *Le Fantôme* (*Mercure*, April 1901, 186). The phrasing here brings to mind the controversy surrounding Oscar Wilde’s imprisonment and condemnation to hard labour (“travaux forcés”) in 1895, which Rachilde and her colleagues repeatedly denounced (Erber, 1996, 570–9; Dierkes-Thrun, 220–41). By describing literary criticism in this way, Rachilde used Wilde’s symbolic value as a way of placing herself in the role of a literary martyr, suffering her daily toil in order to promote true art.⁸

In Rachilde’s view, the critic faced further difficulty due to the overproduction of substandard novels by venal publishers – a phenomenon that, after Sainte-Beuve’s 1839 article decrying “industrial” literature, was a common target of nineteenth-century literary journalism. She suggested that success, in the context of profit-oriented publishing, depended purely on the fluctuating tastes of a fickle readership. A notable example of this was Henryk Sienkiewicz, known for his international bestseller *Quo Vadis*, first serialized in the *Gazeta Polska*, 1895–6, and translated into French in 1899. The sheer quantity of his novels, published in quick succession, facilitated a vituperative attack against publishers, described as idiotic and venal “mouton[s] de Panurge” churning out substandard novels like clockwork (*Mercure*, January 1901, 167). Rachilde compared Sienkiewicz’s novels to undigestible foodstuffs – “C’est une inondation, une bouillie qui s’écoule en nappe épaisse” – and French publishing methods to the ejection of bodily fluids: “Ils veulent avoir leur Sienkiewicz, ils en éternuent ce nom à toute boutique pleine et ils le vomissent à flot sur tous les coins de la France” (*Mercure*, January 1901, 168). A similarly abject depiction reappears two years later, when Rachilde bemoans the democratization of literary production, condemning the publishers who inundate the market with writings by “toute la plèbe” – a

publishing strategy which works against their best interests: “Les éditeurs éditent en dormant; ils avalent, digèrent et rendent tout ce qu’on leur donne. C’est la course à la faillite joyeuse. [...] Tout leur semble bon, beau, et un peu écrit” (*Mercur*e, September 1903, 736). The comparison of publication to defecation, much like sneezing and vomiting, is clearly intended to arouse disgust – or *distaste* – while scatological humour further denigrates the object of critique.¹⁰ According to Rachilde, it is precisely the publishers’ lack of artistic knowledge, taste, and discernment that leads them to promote aesthetically worthless material: everything passes through the publishers’ digestive system without requiring selectivity.

Although Rachilde’s rhetoric is deliberately hyperbolic, her vision of “la faillite joyeuse” is not without foundation, as Leroy and Sabiani demonstrate in their literary history of Belle Époque¹¹ France. What is clear, however, is that by denigrating the role of publishers in market saturation, Rachilde, like Sainte-Beuve before her, placed herself in a privileged position as a filter and barrier against the floods of mediocre works. When reviewing Louis de Romeuf’s novel *L’Entravé*, Rachilde describes herself as a rabid guard dog protecting the reader from the terrible novels swamping the marketplace:

je suis un [...] brave chien à l’attache devenu presque enragé devant l’étrange régal qu’on lui sert chaque quinzaine, animal fidèle inutilement, rendu furieux par les mixtures bizarres qu’on lui offre, tous ces poisons d’essences supérieures dont on lui sature la cervelle sous prétexte de combinaisons artistiques, et, cette fois, je tire sur ma chaîne, je vais aboyer d’une manière délirante... ne dussé-je être entendu que d’autres braves chiens, aussi bêtes et aussi naïvement enragés que moi. (*Mercur*e, 15 May 1906, 253)

This animalistic self-image depicts a sense of protectiveness allied with righteous anger, seen through Rachilde’s use of the adjectives

“brave” and “fidèle” on the one hand, and “enragé” and “furieux” on the other. Food analogies, like the references to digestion cited above, evoke the noxious influence of bad literature. Notably, Rachilde suggests that only a select few individuals will take heed of her warnings. These readers are, by implication, her writer-critic peers: “d’autres braves chiens”, who are condemned to a similar treatment. In this way, Rachilde both asserts and undermines her power to form public taste more generally. Much like her image of literary martyrdom, Rachilde’s guard dog analogy emphasizes the dual nature of reviewing as both a thankless task and a necessary duty. Channelling a form of avant-garde elitism, this conflicting vision reflected Rachilde’s evolving aesthetic tastes and marked her consolidated position in the literary field.

Changing Taste: Influence and Position

Rachilde’s role as a literary mediator included the capacity to influence her readership, guiding their reception of individual works, however loosely or mock-humbly. It also involved a similar relationship of influence over her writer-peers, whose works are the column’s object of study. This latter relationship develops through her use of address to, and dialogue with, the authors she reviewed. For example, in a postscript at the end of the January 1898 column, Rachilde admonishes writers who send their works to her directly, rather than sending them to the review’s offices:

Je réponds une fois pour toutes aux lettres de ceux qui m’envoient directement leurs livres: il n’est pas besoin de me signaler tel ou tel ouvrage: tous les volumes que je reçois par l’intermédiaire du *Mercury*, avec ou sans dédicaces, sont lus entièrement, et si je ne puis faire de comptes rendus plus longs, on ne doit en accuser que l’abondance effrayante de la matière. (*Mercury*, January 1898, 231)

By insisting on the *Mercury* as an intermediary, Rachilde places

distance between herself and other authors: an elevated position which strengthens the sense that her good opinion is being sought after. In this episode, the writers' "dédicaces" (either printed dedications or handwritten inscriptions) perform literary flattery and persuasion, exemplifying attempts at buying her sympathy – a strategy to which Rachilde claims impartial indifference. Yet this insistence also amounts to self-justification, for the accusation implicit in the authors' letters is that Rachilde does not in fact read every book she is sent through the *Mercur*e in their entirety – an accusation whose probable, or at least partial, truth Rachilde indirectly confirms by her defensiveness on the topic. In addition to such general comments, Rachilde occasionally included reciprocal epistolary exchanges between herself and particular authors. These exchanges framed the latter's attempts to justify their works as a presumptuous response to her critique. We see this when Rachilde re-asserts her view of Louis Dumont's plagiarism of Pierre Louÿs's *Aphrodite* in *La Chimère* (*Mercur*e, February 1902, 486), and when she responds to Jacques Daurelle's attempt to correct her opinion of *La Troisième Héloïse*: "je suis heureuse de l'avoir provoquée par mon personnel aveuglement" (*Mercur*e, 1 October 1906, 417). Rachilde's use of the feminine agreement here exemplifies how she ironized a position of (mock-)self-denigration by aligning femininity with inferior judgement ("aveuglement"). Clearly, the column's readers are not meant to give credence to Rachilde's humility in such instances. Rather, such *mises en scène* reaffirm Rachilde's status as a judge-like figure whose benevolent condescension was sought after, and whose negative pronouncements were influential enough to induce authors to contest them.

As someone well-versed in the joint processes of writing literary material and seeking its publication, Rachilde had a working knowledge of the literary field and personal experience of its vicissitudes. Despite repeatedly emphasising the act of reading in her reviews, Rachilde's capacity to influence others' taste through the means of the *Romans* column was largely predicated on her

reputation as a writer. Far from disregarding or denying this reputation, Rachilde included self-critical comments on tendencies found in her own writing, usually associated with the Decadent literary school. In December 1899, for example, Rachilde addressed a younger writer, Louis d'Herdy, whose works' titles alone proved her influence: *Monsieur Antinoüs et Madame Sapho* (1899) and *L'Homme-Sirène* (1899). In her review of the latter, Rachilde wryly declared that d'Herdy had surpassed her early *succès de scandale*:

Je suis vraiment touché [*sic*] de voir avec quelle charmante sollicitude (et... combien plus de talent) l'auteur me suit... sur un terrain... assez dangereux quand on n'a pas l'habitude de s'y mouvoir. Seulement il a tort d'illustrer ses œuvres. Ça devient beaucoup plus grave quand on met son portrait sur la couverture. (*Mercure*, December 1899, 763)

This appraisal of d'Herdy's novel is ambiguous, since the parenthetical aside, as well as the adjectives "touché" and "charmante", can be read as back-handed compliments. Furthermore, Rachilde implicitly depicts herself as a literary trendsetter whose maturity allows her to offer guidance to a younger writer following in her footsteps. In particular, she criticizes the novel's front cover image, which she interprets as the novelist's self-portrait. I suggest that this comment functions as a veiled reference (or *clin d'oeil*) to criticism Rachilde herself received regarding the presence of autobiographical material in her early works, such as *Monsieur Vénus* (1884) and *À mort* (1886). The latter was hotly contested by Rachilde's peers as an example of autobiographical exhibitionism: a strategic self-presentation used to incite readers' prurient interest in the supposedly 'perverse' details of Rachilde's private life (Hawthorne, 2001, 13; Finn, 2005). By admonishing Louis d'Herdy for a similar tendency, Rachilde appropriated and redirected her former critics' arguments, while reflecting upon the impact of earlier trends and controversies, from a position of maturity and experience.

In her criticism, Rachilde expressed doubts regarding her celebrity as a Decadent writer, opposing the novelty of her earlier iconoclasm with a more measured approach in her advancing years. This appears most clearly when she reviews the republished version of *Monsieur Vénus* in 1902:

Ce mauvais livre fut la plus grande, je devrais dire la seule folie de mes vingt ans [...]. Je n'ai jamais renié mes œuvres, mauvaises ou bonnes. Je ferai semblant de croire que je suis ravie de cette réédition. Ce volume n'est, d'ailleurs, pas plus mal écrit que n'importe quel volume léger de la vingtième année de beaucoup d'auteurs sérieux en vogue. [...] Maintenant, le bruit court qu'il existe de nombreux *Monsieur Vénus*, dont je puis me déclarer le père naturel [...]. Il y a des écoles de renoncement à la virilité en littérature... et autres lieux. Je fus bon prophète. Mais, chose bien étrange, c'est moi qui ai reçu toutes les injures, toutes les malédictions, et eux qui bénéficient de mes studieux efforts de novateur! (*Mercur*e, December 1902, 755–6)

Rachilde here combines self-denigration with self-justification, acknowledging the poor quality of her most famous work and citing her youth to excuse it. While questioning the novel's aesthetic value, she asserts its influence over subsequent literary trends and its contribution to her status as a prophet and innovator in gender-bending and sexually transgressive literature. The phrase “et autres lieux”, preceded by suggestive ellipses, hints at Rachilde's knowledge of real-life homoeroticism, whether through personal experience or that of her friendship circle.¹² It is precisely this association with sexual transgression that the author simultaneously celebrates and bemoans, when she depicts herself as a pariah suffering for the benefit of future writers (“[ceux] qui bénéficient de [ses] studieux efforts de novateur”). Such writers may not wish to acknowledge her literary parentage, as is suggested by the term “père naturel” – a

pun on the term “fils naturel” – which evokes taboos surrounding illegitimacy. However, by asserting this lineage, the columnist reinstates her position and reflects on the changing attitudes towards formerly divisive literary territory.

While proclaiming her influence, Rachilde used the *Mercury* book reviews to shift away from the Decadent style prevalent in her early works. As Anita Staroń has suggested, this process reflects Rachilde’s broader aesthetic trajectory, which moved from Decadence to Symbolism in the 1890s, and subsequently towards an increased interest in the “roman d’aventure” at the turn of the twentieth century (Staroń, 2015, 103). Around this period, Rachilde openly mocked Decadence as a passé literary movement, for example when she reviewed Renée Vivien’s *Une femme m’apparut*:

Les tortillements des phrases, les lettres majuscules à propos de tout et de rien, le vieux style dit *décadent* mort d’hier déjà horriblement pourri, et la pluie des androgynes, [...] tout cela sent l’héroïne de la Passade de Willy, qui tenterait de se faire prendre au sérieux. (*Mercury*, May 1904, 470)

By announcing the death of Decadence, Rachilde distanced herself from its perceived eccentricities, while deriding the work of a well-respected female writer whose notoriety matched, and therefore competed with, her own. She also participated in a broader evolution of aesthetic values, dating from around 1895 onwards, when marginal writers started to promote literary force and energy as a remedy to the perceived sterilizing effect of Decadence and Symbolism (Citti, 1987, 70–5, and Décaudin, 1960, 31). Claiming to reject navel-gazing literature dominated by “androgynes” and “éphèbes”, Rachilde valorized a hyper-masculinized aesthetic of vigour. For example, when reviewing Rudyard Kipling’s *Stalky et Cie*, Rachilde imagines the world ruled by a forceful elite, “la race des tigres”: “On mangerait tous les professeurs au repas du matin et les neurasthéniques se serviraient le soir pour le dessert, avec bouquet

de thym ou couronnes de verveines, histoire de leur procurer une dernière joie sentimentale” (*Mercure*, May 1903, 480). Rachilde satirizes the excesses of a Decadent artistic temperament, with its tendency to over-intellectualization, here depicted by the bouquets and floral crowns offered to the “neurasthéniques” to alleviate their impending doom. In opposition to Decadent effeminacy, Rachilde praised the masculine vitality in Kipling’s work, which relies on the destruction of weaker elements: “Rudyard Kipling [...] ne s’inquiète pas beaucoup des infirmes et n’a pas l’art d’étaler perpétuellement des plaies [...]. Chez lui on est des hommes sains. On reçoit des coups et on en rend” (*Mercure*, May 1902, 479). In a later review of Kipling’s story collection *Sur le mur de la ville* (1903), which was published by the *Mercure*’s *maison d’édition*, Rachilde implies that not all readers can stomach the English author’s work: “Il nous donne du sang, de la belle viande et secoue parfois sur ce repas un peu rouge le voile bleuâtre du rêve. [...] Malheur aux estomacs faibles!” (*Mercure*, November 1903, 479). The language of taste and disgust merge to promote a blend of vigorous down-to-earth literature with a hint of idealist reverie (“le voile bleuâtre du rêve”), which suggests that the boundary between Decadent individualism and the literary vigour associated with Kipling was not so clear-cut after all.¹³

Rachilde’s fin-de-siècle literary position was largely indebted to her notoriety as a Decadent author. Having reached her forties and a new career stage, however, Rachilde sought to distance herself from aspects of her media image that risked undermining this influence. She did so in a way that valorized forms of masculinized aesthetic extremity, as opposed to the perceived weakness of an outdated and effeminized literary school. This shift was less paradoxical than it may appear, since a heightened self-awareness and ironic self-denigration were already key tendencies of Decadent literature, associated with the culture of little magazines in which Rachilde had been involved throughout the 1880s and 1890s. However, the key difference between Rachilde’s earlier forays into playful self-

presentation in *petites revues* and her later contribution to the *Mercure de France* was the increasing cultural recognition afforded to the latter. By blending the self-doubting and self-parodying elements of Decadent and avant-garde media culture with an assertive approach facilitated by a stable journalistic position, Rachilde highlighted the paradox at the heart of literary criticism, which ultimately seeks to arbitrate the arbitrary.

Merton College, University of Oxford

¹ Rachilde published works in avant-garde little magazines – including *Le Décadent*, *Le Scapin*, *Panurge*, and *Le Zig-Zag* – and in titillating illustrated reviews such as *Le Fin de Siècle* and *Don Juan*.

² The other ten founders were: Albert Aurier, Jean Court, Louis Denise, Édouard Dubus, Louis Dumur, Remy de Gourmont, Julien Leclerq, Ernest Raynaud, Jules Renard, and Albert Samain (Forrestier, 1992, 4).

³ On the *Mercure*'s evolution, influence, and success, see Forestier, 1992, 3–6; Décaudin, 1992, 7–16; Silve, 1986 and 1987; and Kalantzis, 2013, 60–75.

⁴ We can identify “***” from the presence of stylistic ticks that mirror Rachilde's later critical writing, as well as from evidence found in Jean Lorrain's correspondence. In 1893, Rachilde's longstanding colleague and friend wrote to thank her for a positive review of his recently published work, *Sonyeuse*, which had appeared in the *Mercure* and was signed “***” (Lorrain, 2006, 97–8). Alfred Vallette confirmed that the signature “***” belonged to a single contributor, so we can attribute all of these reviews to Rachilde (*Mercure*, May 1892, 73).

⁵ In *La Jeune Critique des petites revues symbolistes*, Yoan VÉRILHAC provides a table delineating the tendencies associated with dogmatic and impressionist criticism. He suggests that “la jeune critique” was dogmatic in tone, style, and ethics, while propounding impressionist principles (VÉRILHAC, 2010, 109–110).

⁶ See, for example, reviews of Eugène Morel's *La Prisonnière* (*Mercure*, December 1900, 792) and Georgette Leblanc's *Le Choix de la vie* (*Mercure*, July 1904, 194–5).

⁷ Referred to by recent Francophone critics as “ethos” or “posture”, a writer's self-image conveys authority and credibility. It is constructed both

within authors' works and through shared knowledge that is external to their written production. (Amossy, 2009, para. 22, and Meizoz, 2007, p. 28).

⁸ Wilde compared the artist figure, and himself, to Christ in a letter to Alfred Douglas, written during his imprisonment and published posthumously as *De profundis* (Wilde, 1996, 55–69).

⁹ In “La Littérature industrielle”, Sainte-Beuve denounced the influence of venal press practices, notably advertising (or “l’annonce”), on French literary criticism, and announced the death of bookselling as a result of readers’ boredom with the mass of overproduced material available (Sainte-Beuve, 1839, 682 and 685).

¹⁰ Alison Deutsch discusses a comparable use of abjection or disgust in the food analogies found in nineteenth-century art criticism (Deutsch, 2015, 25).

¹¹ Leroy and Sabiani discuss the crisis in bookselling due to market saturation (1998, 20, 23 and 26), which encouraged publishers to be conservative and publish only known talent (1998, 252).

¹² On Rachilde’s friendships with homosexual men, see Hawthorne, 2001, 181–2.

¹³ On the cult of energy associated with English authors (notably Lord Byron, the Brontë sisters, and Rudyard Kipling), as well as the implicit weakness within English jingoism, see Citti, 1987, 177.

Works cited

Amossy, R., “La double nature de l’image d’auteur”, *Argumentation et Analyse du Discours* 3 (2009), NP, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/aad.662>.

Baudelaire, C., *Critique d’art; suivi de Critique musicale*, ed. C. Brunet (Paris: Gallimard, 1992).

Bertran, A. H. S., “‘Mercure de France’: The Birth of a Publishing House”, *The French Review* 33, n°4 (1960), 351–8.

Citti, P., *Contre la décadence* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1987).

Dauphiné, C., “Rachilde et le ‘Mercure’”, *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France* 92 (1992), 17–28.

—, “Rachilde ou de l’acrobatie critique”, *Bulletin de l’Association*

- Guillaume Budé* 3 (1991), 275–88.
- , *Rachilde: femme de lettres 1900* (Périgueux: Pierre Fanlac, 1985).
- Décaudin, M., “Le “Mercure de France”: filiations et orientations”, *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France* 92 (1992), 7–16.
- , *La Crise des valeurs symbolistes* (Toulouse, Éditions Privat, 1960).
- Deutsch, A., “Good Taste: Metaphor and Materiality in Nineteenth-Century Art Criticism”, *Object: Graduate Research and Reviews in the History of Art and Visual Culture* 17 (2015), 9–32.
- Dierkes-Thrun, P., “Oscar Wilde, Rachilde, and the Mercure de France”, in *Wilde’s Other Worlds*, ed. M. F. Davis and P. Dierkes-Thrun (Oxford: Routledge, 2018), 220–41.
- Erber, N., “The French Trials of Oscar Wilde”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6 (1996), 549–88.
- Finn, M., “Imagining Rachilde: Decadence and the roman à clefs”, *French Forum* 30 (2005), 81–96.
- Forrestier, L., “Présentation”, *Revue d’Histoire littéraire de la France* 92 (1992), 3–6.
- Hawthorne, M., *Rachilde and French Women’s Authorship: From Decadence to Modernism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001).
- Holmes, D., *Rachilde: Decadence, Gender, and the Woman Writer* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).
- Kalantzis, A., “The ‘Little Magazine’ as publishing success”, in *Oxford Critical & Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, ed. P. Brooker, A. Thacker, et al., Vol. III, Pt 1. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 60–75.
- Lair, S., “Rachilde et ses « Mercuriales »”, *Studia Romanica Posnaniensia* 34 (2007), 231–60.
- Leroy, G. and Sabiani, J., *La Vie littéraire à la Belle époque* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1998).
- Lorrain, J., *Correspondances*, ed. J. de Palacio (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006).
- Meizoz, J., *Postures littéraires. Mises en scène modernes de l’auteur* (Geneva: Slaktine Érudition, 2007).

- Melmoux-Montaubin, M.-F., *L'Écrivain-journaliste au XIX^e siècle: un mutant des lettres* (Saint-Etienne: Cahiers intempestifs, 2003).
- Mercur de France* (Paris, 1890–1965).
- Millot, H., “Discours critique et posture manifestataire dans les petites revues littéraires de la fin du XIX^e siècle”, in *Presse et plumes: journalisme et littérature au XIX^e siècle*, ed. M.-E. Thérénty and A. Vaillant, Alain (Paris: Nouveau Monde Éditions, 2004), 499–510.
- Nordmann, J.-T., *La Critique littéraire française au XIX^e siècle (1800–1914)* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 2001).
- Sainte-Beuve, C. A., ‘La Littérature industrielle’, *Revue des deux mondes* 19 (1839), 675–91.
- Sanchez, N., “Rachilde, critique littéraire au *Mercur de France*” in *Femmes et critique(s): Lettres, Arts, Cinéma*, ed. M. Andrin, L. Brogniez et al (Namur: Presses Universitaires de Namur, 2009), 55–74.
- Silve, E., “Les premières heures du *Mercur de France*”, *La Revue des revues* 3 (1987), 12–17.
- , “Rachilde et Alfred Vallette et la fondation du *Mercur de France*”, *La Revue des revues* 2 (1986), 13–16.
- Staroń, A., *Au Carrefour des esthétiques: Rachilde et son écriture romanesque, 1880–1913* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2015).
- Vérilhac, Y., “Le critique, l’écrivain: fusion des emplois et redéfinition des rapports dans la jeune critique symboliste”, in *L’Anti-critique des écrivains au XIX^e siècle*, *Elseneur* 28, ed. J. Anselmini and B. Diaz (Caen: Presses universitaires de Caen, 2014), 135–46.
- , *La Jeune Critique des petites revues symbolistes* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l’université de Saint-Etienne, 2010).
- Wilde, O., *De profundis* (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1996).
- Zola, E., *Mes haines: causeries littéraires et artistiques; Mon salon (1866); Édouard Manet: étude biographique et critique* (Paris: Fasquelle, 1923).