Laforgue's *Lohengrin*, written during the height of *wagnérisme* in 1886, leaves no doubt as to the work on which it is based: Wagner's opera of the same name. The title contains the first parodic deformation, a qualifying epithet, which both undermines and affirms the relation of the story to the parodied work. This identifies the original, while simultaneously distinguishing the parody from it, and also indicates the Wagnerian source by the spelling of "Parsifal." Moreover, "fils de Parsifal" defines Lohengrin with respect to his famous father and thus reminds us directly that this parody, and parody in general, is a generation of "sons," or at least a second generation, deriving its identity from its relation to an established authority whose traits are preserved within it. Laforgue plays on this analogy, however, for *Lohengrin, fils de Parsifal* is actually the "son" not of Wagner's *Parsifal* but of his *Lohengrin*. Finally, as we shall see, "fils de Parsifal" has an important and ironic role in the parody, for it provides the hero with an escape: when the parodic Lohengrin fails to live up to his role and carry through his mission, he conveniently remembers his epithet and passes the burden on to his more effective and reliable father.

Wagner's *Lohengrin* was not produced in Paris until May of 1887, only three months before Laforgue's death. Despite the French cult of Wagner at this time, therefore, the work was less well-known than the parody might suggest. As his letters and notebooks attest, however, Laforgue had seen numerous productions
of Wagnerian opera, including *Lohengrin*, during his years in Germany, and allusions to the story appear in his poetry from 1883 onward. More importantly, the controversy over staging a production of *Lohengrin* in Paris made the work a *cause célèbre* of the Decadent movement from 1885 to 1887. “La question Lohengrin” inspired countless articles, including an entire issue of the *Revue wagnérienne* directed by Laforgue’s friends Dujardin and Wyzewa. The work was seen to embody a prominent concern, and cliché, of the period, the protest of the sensitive artist against a rationalist world, and was adopted as a symbol of the new tendencies in art. The special relevance of this work to the Decadent imagination made it a particularly appropriate vehicle for Laforguian parody. The legendary hero, Knight of the Swan—devoted to virtue and righteousness, his true kingdom the sky, and his primary attribute one of the most prominent images of Decadent art—becomes, with only a slight nudge from the parodist, a Decadent idealist committed to purity, freedom, and, disastrously for Elsa, chastity. The catastrophic wedding night of the original provides the ideal setting for a parodic treatment of that favorite Decadent (and Laforguian) theme, the relation between the sexes.

In *Lohengrin*, Laforgue makes fun of the stock pessimistic attitudes of the late nineteenth century toward women and sex, as described in chapter 2. Elsa embodies the famous Eternal Feminine, the involuntary and unconscious accomplice of Nature in its programme of self-perpetuation; she is accordingly committed to the goal of procreation, and all her efforts aim to persuade Lohengrin to do what is, for her at least, *la plus naturelle des choses* on their wedding night. She is adorably flirtatious, vainly proud of her beauty, a coquette, more interested in fixing her hair and face than declaiming on the injustice of her misfortune. She is skillful at contriving to land in the arms of a reluctant Lohengrin, although in return she receives not the desired caress but only the “paroles bien senties” (151) of a sensitive and chaste poet. She is especially proud of her swanlike neck which, for obvious reasons, particularly appeals to Lohengrin. She is completely closed to otherworldly considerations, the “responsabilités transcendantes” (159) that morbidly obsess the hero: she is merely a “jeune fille” (137), a “pauvre
personne du sexe" (129), an "esclave séculaire et sans malice" (163), bored with the "cultes platoniques" (149) of her fellow vestals and their idol, the moon, which she scornfully dismisses as "une marâtre, une glabre idole de vieux" (139). In a parody of Schopenhaucrian language, the narrator imagines that she may even be a spy for the Ideal, who will be rewarded on the day of reckoning in a female afterlife according to the number and quality of dupes whom she tricked into working for the Ideal during her lifetime (163).

Although she professes to love music ("tu sais, j'adore la musique, moi!" 139), her only songs are little girls' rounds, neither example of which reassures Lohengrin about her motives: the first is on the theme of Samson and Delilah, the second on a young girl's painful desire for love. She does not understand Latin ("Je ne suis pas si pédante que cela!" 137), and justifies her ignorance by a cliché from an old school manual: "Il paraît que le latin dans les mots brave l'honnêteté, je l'ai lu dans un vieil almanach" (137). Recycling and trivializing Boileau's famous line in this way calls attention to the methods (however more deliberate) of the larger parody and also serves a particular purpose in it: its prescription means that Elsa is immune to the "Crescite et multiplicamini" issued forth so suggestively and, for Lohengrin, terrifyingly, by the organ at the wedding. Elsa does not need to know Latin: crescite et multiplicamini is part of her natural female understanding.

Lohengrin, on the other hand, represents in the extreme the Decadent hero's attitude toward women: he is eager to love as a way to the metaphysical Ideal, but is fully aware of its deception, which through women dupes men into submitting to the ongoing process of nature. He is obsessed with purity and venerates such stock Decadent images as the moon, the Milky Way, silence, whiteness, and night. This is a knight of the most literal shining ("radieuse," 129) armor, a pure crystal one; he rides a snow-white swan, an "avalanche fait cygne" (129), as a less parodie knight would a white horse ("chevauché," 129). He is terrified at the prospect of sexual union with Elsa, whom he prefers to regard as a virtuous "rosière" and a "divin spécimen humain" (135), the oxymoron comically embodying the contradiction: if Elsa fits his image of the divine, she
will nevertheless turn out all too human a specimen. His only contribution to the singing is a morbid variation on the already depressing "Roi de Thulé." He cannot stop his teeth from chattering during the marriage ceremony (137), and spends the wedding night trying to avoid his marital duties. He tries to prepare himself by running through his mind the cliché of nineteenth-century moral relativism, "tout est permis"—Hamlet's excuse for gratuitous brutality here applied to a different sacrilege, sex. Even her swanlike neck cannot divert his attention from his Schopenhauerian preoccupations: her Adam's apple reminds him of the Fall of Man, "les plus mauvais jours de notre histoire" (169). Conscious of the deception by which the rest of humanity is manipulated, Lohengrin, true follower of Schopenhauer, resists love and pledges himself to the most rigorous chastity, a literal mariage blanc for this lover of things white. At heart, the man who, by his own admission, is "un peu hypocondre par nature" (133), who considers himself an artist and a man of genius, who, in a comical revision of a set formula, is the lily rather than the dieu fait homme, is in fact still a lily, or rather a virgin as, in the end, he undergoes his own literal Assumption into the heavens. Elsa can only look on in dismay as Lohengrin's earnest prayer comes true, and his pillow miraculously metamorphoses into a swan to carry him off into the sky, a parodic version of Flaubert's St. Julien.

Accordingly, the dialogue between the two lovers is throughout a comical exercise in misunderstanding and failed communication. Elsa searches for compliments, Lohengrin dodges the issue; he expresses a sexual fear, she answers with an inanely literal cliché. He hears the deathly sound of an owl hooting in the night, she the murmur of germination (153); to his association of the villa with the common grave ("Cette Villa-Nuptiale sent la fosse commune," 153)—sexual union is the demeaning fate of all mankind—she replies with a consoling "nous sommes tous mortels"; to his reservation that she is "un personnage avec qui il faut compter" (143), she returns an optimistic "Mais les bons comptes font les bons amis." She loves the moonlight for its effect on his appearance; he admires it for uplifting the soul (143). Where he trembles at the threshold
of the nuptial villa, she claps her hands with glee to find themselves at last *chez eux* (145).

Laforgue gives the story a major parodic twist by making Lohengrin's role in the order of the Grail not to protect the lady's name and honor and defend the cause of virtue, but to achieve the emancipation of women. He is a self-professed feminist whose main task is to lead future crusades for the liberation of women, that is, free them from their Schopenhauerian enslavement to Nature and redeem the "petite soeur humaine et si terre à terre," the earthly, and all too earthy, sister (173). He accordingly descends from the sky in order to learn "la vérité sur la Jeune Fille" (165) in preparation for his future mission. But with high irony, Laforgue keeps Lohengrin's crusade well in the future: far from learning the truth about the *Jeune Fille*, he fails even to understand his chosen one and reveals himself a victim of the most standard Decadent attitudes. So little does he know Elsa that, after a disastrous evening of misunderstandings, he confuses her with his swan and his pillow. As his final prayer makes clear, Lohengrin wants an Elsa who is as soft as the pillow, as pure as the swan, as white as both, and most importantly, like the swan, "ne chantant jamais," especially those disturbing "rondes de petites filles" with their insinuating, and for him morbid, reminders of his marital duty.

Lohengrin's failure with Elsa does not augur well for his role in the women's crusade; the only sign of his liberal attitudes in the entire story is his declared intention to ask for Elsa's hand from her mother rather than her father (133), but Laforgue ironically thwarts even this token effort by making her an orphan. Indeed, Lohengrin ends by leaving the plan of female emancipation to his father, Parsifal, the relation happily preserved in the "fils de Parsifal" addition to the title. The parodie hero fails in even a parodie mission: returning to the heights of the Schopenhauerian "Métaphysique de l'Amour" (173), to the land of meditative freedom and "glaciers miroirs," he imprisons himself in the very attitudes that it was his knightly purpose to dispell. His ideal land is the self-reflecting one of egoism, at once his *raison d'être* and the cause of his problem; Laforgue thus portrays the character of an entire movement, whose egoism is a source of being, and likewise an utter human failure.
The Epigraph

As with the preceding tales, Laforgue introduces Lohengrin with an epigraph to guide our interpretation:

A côté de son cher corps endormi, que d’heures des nuits j’ai veillé, cherchant pourquoi il voulait tant s’évader de la réalité.

A. Rimbaud

Taken literally, the epigraph relates directly to the parody through its central themes, the lovers and the escape from reality; Elsa becomes the speaker, kept awake wondering why Lohengrin so wishes to flee reality. Even before the story begins to unfold, the epigraph thus identifies Lohengrin’s real (though unexpressed) desire—evasion—and its tragi-comic consequence: the two lovers perpetually doomed to mutual misunderstanding. It presents the main theme of the story to follow, but in the past tense, as though spoken after the events of the story have taken place.

The source of the epigraph suggests its more complex relation to the story. Rimbaud was consistently associated with Decadence in the period; relative to the story, the epigraph thus provides a Decadent commentary upon Decadence, as does the parody itself. Moreover, it functions as a kind of parody-within-the-parody, for its source, Rimbaud’s “Vierge folle” (“Délires I,” Une Saison en enfer), itself transforms the Gospel episode of the Divine Bridegroom and the Foolish Virgins. Rimbaud’s foolish virgin is enslaved rather than an infernal bridegroom reminiscent of Lohengrin himself: “Je n’aime pas les femmes. L’Amour est à réinventer, on le sait; ... Je suis de race lointaine: mes pères étaient Scandinaves”; like Laforgue’s hero, he wishes to change life by making women his “bonnes camarades”; unlike Lohengrin, however, he knows that he must one day depart for a faraway land. The virgin, submitted to his will while understanding neither him nor his ideal, prays that, if he must disappear miraculously, she may know of it: “Un jour peut-être il disparaîtra merveilleusement; mais il faut que je sache, s’il doit remonter à un ciel, que je voie un peu l’assomption de mon petit ami!”

The parallel between the poem and Laforgue’s parody is striking: both end with a reference to the assumption of the hero. The
epigraph thus provides a clue to the outcome of the parody, in which the hero is taken up into the sky as the foolish virgin of “Vierge folle” imagines her master will be. *Lohengrin* realizes the Assumption that is only projected in the source of the epigraph. But Lohengrin’s assumption is a comically spectacular one, a trivialized version of the revolt embodied in Rimbaud’s poem, whose hero departs in order to convert others: Lohengrin’s “revolt” consists of a childlike, terrified escape from a reality, and specifically a sexuality, to which he cannot reconcile himself. His flight is an abdication (or at least an evasion) of his duty, not, as for the infernal bridegroom, a fulfillment of it. The epigraph thus provides at the start, and from within, a model which the parody then transforms. But if Laforgue thus mocks the revolutionary aspects of Decadence, its canon of purity, idealism, evasion, and Schopenhauerian misogyny, he nevertheless reminds us that it is these very aspects which the parody celebrates and recalls, as the speaker of the epigraph does here. Indeed, *Lohengrin* ends by alluding to a “certaine petite fête de l’Assomption” (173), celebrated regularly by poets on similar evenings. As I have argued in chapter 1, the parody mocks its target and itself but ensures a further version, thereby extending them into the future, just as the epigraph rewrites the Gospel story and in turn gives rise to the parody.

The Story

The plot follows the general lines of Wagner’s: part 1 includes the assembly scene and the accusation of Elsa, her prayer to the knight in shining armor who will champion her, the sounding of the summons, the arrival of Lohengrin, and the marriage ceremony; part 2 dramatizes the wedding night and its final catastrophe. Laforgue alters the story considerably, however, in accordance with the new context and purposes of the parody. In both works, Elsa is accused of having a lover; but whereas in Wagner (as well as in the legend from which his version derives) this is merely the alleged motive for the offense with which she is charged—murdering her brother—it here becomes the offense itself: Elsa the vestal virgin has betrayed the cult of the moon by her sexual relations with Lohengrin and is brought to trial for her transgression.
The wedding night is troubled not by doubt planted in her mind by her two enemies (Laforgue omits the whole Wagnerian subplot involving Frederick and his sorceress wife, Ortrud, who out of jealousy conspire to bring Elsa to ruin), but rather by the ludicrous disagreements between the lovers. In Wagner, the swan is metamorphosed into Elsa’s brother at the end; Laforgue instead metamorphoses Lohengrin’s pillow into the swan, which then carries him back to the land of his father. The final flight of the swan, returning Lohengrin to the land of the Grail, comes from the pre-Wagnerian version of the story by Wolfram. In this way, Laforgue confronts Wagner’s version with the one that inspired it and thus calls attention to the parody, itself based on an earlier work. Moreover, he uses this parodic signal as a vehicle of parodic meaning: the swan arises purely out of Lohengrin’s pillow and the force of his will, and his departure represents not the tragic failure of faith and love, but the comical failure of Lohengrin to deal with the reality of sex. Wagner’s hero consoles his beloved by restoring to her her lost brother; Laforgue’s merely returns to his former existence, leaving Elsa to an unidentified fate, with only the suggestion of the epigraph to remind us of her lonely future.

The most blatant alteration to the plot concerns Lohengrin’s identity, for Laforgue immediately violates the most central and traditional feature of the story in all its versions: the proscription on the hero’s name. As in the legends of Cupid and Psyche, and Jupiter and Semele, Elsa is forbidden ever to ask her lover’s name, and the fatal events of the ending ensue from her doubt and her consequent failure to keep her promise. Laforgue draws particular attention to the parody by making Lohengrin’s first words to the assembly state his name and origins:

... J’arrive tout droit du Saint-Graal. Parsifal est mon père, je n’ai jamais connu ma mère. Je suis Lohengrin, le Chevalier-Errant, le lys des croisades futures pour l’émancipation de la Femme. Mais, en attendant, j’étais trop malheureux dans les bureaux de mon père. (Je suis un peu hypocondre par nature.) (133)

In breaking the primary convention of the story, the hero’s first words also provide a clue to his unusual behavior to follow. “Je n’ai jamais connu ma mère”: this clause, included so casually, like-
wise explains his parenthetical hypochondria, that Decadent syn-
onym of spleen and ennui, and his attachment to the Ideal. Lohengrin's anguished sexuality is due to the fact that he never knew his mother. Indeed, in the final apotheosis, he will become a child again: "tel un enfant, un incurable enfant, je vous dis" (171). Laforgue treated this theme frequently, explicitly relating the loss of the speaker's mother to his desire for love and his poetic propen-
sities and thus reconciling the Romantic cliché of the orphan-
poet-hero with the psychological interests of the late-nineteenth century. Lohengrin wants a mother, and thus he turns to Elsa, to his pillow, and finally to the swan, which alone can fill the role and carry him back to the unthreatening egoism of childhood.

The scene opens on a public square, set for a "soir de Grand Sacrifice" (107); Wagner's assembly of nobles is transformed into a society of vestal virgins and a "Concile Blanc" of high priests of the moon, and Elsa's trial for murder into a sacrifice to the goddess of the night sky. The bells prophetically toll Elsa's likely fate in a parodic Nae Irae. The setting reflects the stock Decadent ideals of sterility, darkness, cold, stillness, silence, and the chaste moon: the crowd of onlookers is, in a Laforguian invention, "albement ivre"; the vestals dress entirely in white; the platforms are "inviolable drapées de linge" and the balconies with shrouds (109); the sacred bird is the white gull (111); the rose window of the "Basilique du Silence" has a "tombale efflorescence" (109); the moon casts a pale cold light on the chalky façades. Elsa complains of being a pariah among bourgeois (127), but the cliché applies only parodically to her situation, for they are actually Decadent to the core, and she a typical Laforguian bourgeoisie.

The stock liturgical metaphor of Decadence dominates part one. It is particularly appropriate to Laforgue's parody, for in addition to its Decadent associations it has medieval ones too: in the relation of the Grail theme to secular love (as in the Lohengrin story), and in the Christian tradition of love as a communion and of communion as the symbol of the love between man and God. Laforgue applies liturgical formulas to that pagan goddess of purity and chastity, the moon, and describes the marriage ceremony as a communion ritual and the wedding night in the terms of the Cath-
Lohengrin, fils de Parsifal

Olig Mass. Sexual union, from the hero's point of view, is not just a sacrifice but, more parodically, a sacrilege.

The priests and vestals do not keep the cult of the Virgin consistent with the medieval context of the original, but worship another chaste lady, Notre-Dame la Lune. Laforgue parodically replaces the virgin queen of heaven with the Romantic virgin queen of the night heavens. He insists on this connection, and thus on the distortion, by applying religious, and specifically Marian, terms to the moon, or altering them to fit it. The "Salve regina, mater misericordia" literally salutes the moon's rising but is deformed to a more appropriate "Salve regina des Lys": the "implacable" moon is hardly a merciful mother and indeed represents the purity and chastity of the lily, as docs Lohengrin himself, the "lys des croisades futures pour l'émancipation de la Femme," and the "Lys fait homme." The moon carries the epithet of the Virgin, "Immaculée Conception," and a "hail Mary" parodies the "Je vous salue, Vierge Marie, pleine de grâce," to suit the nocturnal, sterile character of the lunar Virgin: "Je vous salue, Vierge des nuits, pleine de glace." Such a clear parody-within-the-parody not only reminds the reader of the status of the story as a whole, but also signals the target, the "religion" of Decadence here represented by the ludicrous high priest who utters it, and later by Lohengrin himself. Her appearance in the sky is greeted by an abridged version of Palestrina's Stabat, a comically literal "there she stood." Laforgue never tells us what was expurgated from this version of the traditional prayer commemorating the sorrows of Mary at the Cross, but we may assume that it has to do with the part significantly omitted from the title, "mater dolorosa." Laforgue's moon may hardly be associated with motherhood, however chaste a maternal model she may follow; and far from suffering herself, she rather instills it in others, especially in reluctant vestals like Elsa.

Laforgue also applies to the moon epithets traditionally associated with Christ, and deforms them to suit the parodic context. The "hostie du salut" or salutaris hostia becomes a more ominous "hostie du Léthé," the pun playing literally on the appearance of the moon's host-like white disc in the night sky and, ironically, on the Decadent's notion of salvation, death. With an echo of the
Christian transfiguration, she is a “miroir transfigurant” (111), whose light quite literally transforms the scene, while serving the cherished decadent function of the narcissistic mirror, as do the “glaciers miroirs” to which Lohengrin returns at the end. Her eucharist-like face (“hostie,” 111) on the “ciboire” of the ocean provides a visual image of the marriage sacrifice to take place shortly in the cathedral square. But Laforgue derides this object of idolatry by comparing it to a more contemporary and highly incongruous one, the helium balloon, “quelque expérience aérostatique des temps nouveaux (oui, une lune naïve en son énormité comme un ballon lâché!)” (109). The moon also represents the figurative death to which the Decadent aspires, the mystical tranquility of the Unconscious. Lohengrin’s flight into the sky may, as he prays, take him “par-delà les berges de la Voie Lactée et les giboulées d’étoiles, et le cap fallacieux du Soleil, vers le Saint Graal” (173), but one senses that he may end up at the moon, that symbol and harbor of death, egoism, purity, and unconscious bliss, “notre maîtresse à tous” (125).

The sacrifice begins with the rite of the Vestals. With a certain “coquetterie bien excusable” (113) that parodically borders on striptease, they expose their young breasts, “comme autant d’hosties, comme autant d’aspirantes lunes” to the caress of the moon’s sacred ray, “venu de si loin à travers les infranchissables lagunes de la mer” (115). The narrative comically calls attention to this phrase by repeating it verbatim from the High Priest’s prayer; what eventually crosses the supposedly “infranchissables lagunes” of the sea is Lohengrin himself. One begins to understand Elsa’s fall; her experience as a vestal, caressed by the moonlight from across the water, has well prepared her for it. The chariest maid is prodigal enough / If she unmask her beauty to the moon.

The accusation against Elsa is absurdly precious, full of comical euphemisms, periphrasis, and double entendres:

Elsa, Vestale assermentée, gardienne des Mystères, des philtres, des formules, et du froment des brioches nuptiales, qu’as-tu fait de la clef de ton répertoire? Ah! ah! tes seins savent une autre caresse que celle si lointaine de la lune, ta chair est inoculée d’une autre science que le culte; des mains profanes ont dénoué ta ceinture et brisé le sceau de tes petites solitudes! (117)
It finally trails off into an unfinished “Dans la nuit du . . . etc, etc.” The narrative neglects to elaborate not only because the accusation consists only of suspicions (117), but also because we already know about her vision of the shining knight from the original story. The incomplete accusation reminds us conspicuously of the parody’s dependence on a familiar model, and accordingly develops the parodic distortion instead, Elsa’s fall from innocence.

Stripped of her symbolic cult costume, her chastity buried with it in the “nécropoles sous-marines” (119), Elsa stands before the crowd, exposed not à nu, but in a peculiarly Decadent gown, itself an eloquent emblem of her crime:

Ce qui fait qu’Elsa apparaît en fiancée, au bon peuple. — Oh! intéressante et promise, en longue blême robe étoilée de bas en haut d’œils de plume de paon (noir, bleu, or, vert, comme on sait, mais il est beau de le rappeler), épaules nues, bras angéliquement laissés à leur nudité, la taille prise juste au-dessous de ses jeunes seins par une large ceinture bleue d’où pend une plume de paon à l’œil plus magnifique encore, et sur ce joyau d’œil central la pauvre tient pudiquement croisées ses petites mains aux longues mitaines bleues! (119-121)

Like Ruth and, as we shall see, Salomé, Elsa is associated with one of the most prominent of Decadent images, the peacock-feather eye. The narrative leaves no doubt as to its sexual connotations: she appears “en fiancée”; she keeps her hands folded “pudiquement” over the huge eye, the “joyau d’œil central” hanging from her belt, recalling the “ceinture dénouée” (117) of her solitude evoked earlier; the narrator’s parenthetical aside suggests a voyeuristic pleasure in recalling their variegated color. The punishment promised for her thus fits the crime: burning out her eyes (119) reflects the fate of the sexual peacock-feather ones and thus becomes a symbolic sterilization, an appropriate sacrifice to the violated cult of the chaste moon.

The horn having been sounded, and no response returned, Elsa interrupts the normal course of the story by decisively taking matters into her own hands and summoning Lohengrin herself. Her prayer contains many of the lover’s clichés that Laforgue employed in his late poems, and to readers familiar with these the parody clearly parodies his own work. Even without this knowledge, however, Elsa’s prayer proclaims itself a parody, first, by its exagge-
rated catalogue of lovers' clichés and, second, by its comical puns and double entendres. It includes the stock qualities of the Laforgueian lady: her succulent eyes, her eighteen years, her moon-like elbows, her "bouche triste." She uses the traditional formulas of the adoring lady: she is mad with love, has heart flutter, promises to follow him around crazily, will shine in his light, is at his mercy; she is a flower, a servant, a jewel, the Sulamite of the Song of Songs. Many of these Laforgue deforms slightly so as to create a comically sexual innuendo:

Ah! j'ai la chair encore toute évanouie de votre vision et (mettant la main sur son cœur) mon petit cratère m'en fait mal, et je m'en ai découvert des tas de trésors! Car votre fantaisie, si noble, sera toute ma pudeur, savez-vous... Dites, venez m'assumer, vous ne vous en mordrez certainement pas les doigts. — Angelus! Angelus! Je suis la Sulamite! Je n'ai que la pruderie d'une fleur...

Tenez, je vais vous l'avouer, le goût de ma robe vous fera éclorer mainte papille famélique!...

Oh! Je vous comprenez d'avance! Oh! Je vous en suivrai partout avec des yeux fous! Et je resterai si constamment suspendue à la lumière de votre front que j'en oublierai de vieillir; oui, j'irai si enchâssée dans votre sillon de lumière, que j'en deviendrai un petit diamant que l'âge ne sau­rait entamer! (125-29)

Laforgue increases the irony by making the ludicrous prayer work, as all look on in amazement—including the moon itself—:

De l'horizon, au ras des flots résignés, dans l'enchantement de la Plein­Lune écarquillée, s'avançait, merveilleusement et le col en proue, un grandissime cygne lumineux, chevauché d'un éphèbe, en armure radieuse, tendant les bras, sublime de confiances inconnues, vers le Rivage-Tribunal!... (129)

The curious metaphor of the swan's neck as a prow alludes playfully to the original, in which Lohengrin arrives riding not atop the swan but in a boat pulled by one. The parodic image simultaneously preserves and distorts the original by transferring the boat's prow to the swan. Laforgue comically extends the metaphor by making the swan depart like a boat, "à pleines voiles" (133). This does not merely signal the parody by recalling the original, but also provides Laforgue with an appropriate and significant pun: when Lohengrin sends the swan back to the land of the Grail, the nar-
The swan replaces the literal “vaisseau” that Lohengrin should have had with him and, parodically, did not. Moreover the pun is ironic, for Lohengrin’s “sublime way” of burning his ships does not burn them at all: the swan comes back later and carries him away into the sky.

Laforgue makes the relatively minor episode of Lohengrin’s adieu to the swan a crucial factor for understanding the hero’s psychology, his relations with Elsa, and the real role of the swan in the story. It suggests for the first time the connection between Elsa and the swan in Lohengrin’s imagination, which will motivate the fantastic parodie ending. He affectionately calls the swan his “petit coeur,” a term more appropriate to Elsa, and associates Elsa’s beauty with her “col de cygne” (133), that quality which reminds him of the swan. Indeed his greatest disappointment will be to discover that she is not a swan at all but rather “un personnage, un personnage avec qui il faut compter” (143). Although the swan disappears from the action until its dramatic reentry at the end, it remains in Lohengrin’s image of the ideal woman. He simply trades the swan for Elsa, and if the disaster of their wedding night persuades him that he has made a bad deal, there is no objection to another exchange; he has only to revoke her and be united once again with the swan. Elsa certainly cannot take its place, particularly as a “cygne quadrige” (131), carrying him back to his sterile Ideal.

The marriage ceremony rehearses the sexual union meant to take place afterward. “La pure nappe est mise! Voici la brioche. Dites-vous: voici ma chair et voici mon sang” (135): the sacrifice of the Mass, with the wedding bells chiming the alarm (“tocsins,” 135) prefigures the sacrifice of the lovers to follow. The parodie nature of the ceremony is signalled by the sexual associations of the liturgical imagery, transforming the sacred ritual into a sacrilege (“cela se déroule à grand renfort de sacré,” 137). Lohengrin and Elsa kneel at the altar, as they had earlier fallen to their knees to acknowledge their love (135), and take communion “éperdument” (137); Lohengrin’s despairing “larmes lustrales” replace the more traditional nuptial lustration; the wedding hymn urges them to spur their “hanches défaillantes” (139). The famous Wagnerian
wedding march to which they file out becomes a suggestive “Allez enfants, la nappe est mise,” thus confirming the sexual connotations of the earlier “set table,” the nuptial altar. The rhyme “Oh! la nappe / Des agapes!” completes the metaphor with the Christian “agape,” the love feast, evoking with significant irony the Last Supper. The sacrifice is accomplished: the two lovers go off to be martyred for the cause of Nature on the cross of love, or to what the narrative more discreetly calls their “duo.” The metaphor of the duet reminds us of the parodied work, Wagner’s opera, where a duet would be appropriate; here it is ironic, for the duet of the lovers will be inharmonious and the two parts totally out of step. The moonlit scene outside prophetically proclaims the failure of the marriage before it has even begun: “L’éblouissante hostie est au zénith! Et l’on aurait presque envie de détacher les gondoles pour aller là-bas, sur l’eau miroir, capturer avec un filet son immobile image si en hostie éblouissante!” (141). “Presque envie”: escape to the moon will soon become Lohengrin’s all-consuming desire, and ultimately a reality.

The second half of the story takes place in the Villa-Nuptiale, a bizarre honeymoon establishment reserved for newlyweds in their first week. Like the lonely tower of Hamlet (6f.), it stands forgotten on an inlet in an artificial garden, a labyrinth of flowered paths; the nuptial chamber is a gothic garret, its windows giving out onto the “solitudes” (159) of the sea. Its interior contains all the long corridors and spiral staircases of Decadent psychology and represents the aquarium-like, unconscious chambers of the human sexual imagination that Laforgue depicted elsewhere in similar terms, notably in Salomé. In it one encounters sonorous, echoing, labyrinthine corridors lined with Baudelairean twisted yew trees, the lonely, hollow echo of fountains dripping onto marble terraces, white peacocks strutting about in the moonlight, spiral staircases, empty rooms, mirrors with the names and dates of earlier nuptial victims engraved on them. Lohengrin’s fears are projected onto the decor, with its images of strangeness and death: the weather-vane is not the traditional cock, but an ominous and parodic Baudelairean cat that meows.

The parodic marriage consummation takes place in two stages. A preliminary bathing in an ornamental pool rehearses the experi-
ence of the bridal bed itself: they enter “édéniquement nus” and lie down (“s’étendre”) “comme dans des couvertures idéales” (147); Elsa is in the water up to her neck (149), as she will be in the fur covers of the bed. She fits in perfectly with the sexual aquatic atmosphere: her hair, let down and spread about her on the surface of the water, is compared to seaweed and makes her head appear an “inhumaine fleur lacustre” (149) on the stem (“tige,” 149) of her neck. This bathing preview does not augur well for the real thing: while Elsa stretches her slim figure, Lohengrin, with his legs “trop croisées,” maintains a discreet “pose sofalesque” (147), a Laforguian invention that ludicrously expresses the hero’s pudeur; his assurance of love takes the form of a cordial handshake. Although Elsa has an almost asexual physique (with which no Decadent could quarrel)—firm hips, long legs, a flat chest—the reader is nevertheless reminded in a parenthesis of the more threatening qualities of the sensuous female: “Eisa s’étirant sous la lune, maigre, toute en lignes dures et gauches (Je hais ces inflexions molles qui coulent d’avance par la satiété à la pourriture), hanches fières, jambes à galoper par les haras pierreux; et le buste droit sans honte de ses deux seins si peu joufflus qu’elle pourrait les cacher sous des soucoupes” (147).

As often in Laforguian parody, the seeming objectivity of the third-person narrative is broken by the intervention of this “je,” who reminds us remarkably of Lohengrin. Supposedly outside the story with the reader, the narrator in this way appears to participate in it enough to resemble the hero. The parody may in fact be one of those commemorative celebrations by Lohengrinian poets to which the final line alludes.

The scene in the nuptial chamber provides the occasion for a brilliant parody of Decadent attitudes toward women, as Lohengrin launches a vicious attack on the Eternal Feminine:

— L’Eternel féminin! voilà, petite sœur, ce que c’est que t’avoir laissé faire humanité à part. Et si nous nous mettions, nous, à organiser l’Eternel masculin?
— Oh, allez! c’est fait . . .
— Et les hommes de génie! Pourquoi les faites-vous souffrir tout particulièrement, les hommes de génie? D’où, cet instinct qui confond le penseur à certaines heures? . . .
— Je ne sais pas, puisque c’est un instinct.
— Eh bien, c’est pour leur faire suer des chefs d’oeuvre, que vous les
faîtes particulièrement souffrir! Vous savez que c'est surtout les chefs
d’oeuvre hallucinés de ces malheureux qui vous redorent à chaque géné-
ration votre blason pour mieux attirer la génération suivante à vos
filles.
— Eh bien? puisque tout le monde y gagne! . . . (161)

Ironically, just when he identifies the situation from which women
should be emancipated, this future crusader proves himself sin-
gularly uninterested in doing so, and instead he proposes to ar-
range an “Eternel masculin” with which to combat the enemy.25

The parody of course implies that he need only model it on him-
self. Indeed, in this dialogue Lohengrin reveals his thoroughly
Decadent prejudices. In a Schopenhauerian move, he accuses
women of inspiring artists in order to extend the species and keep
the process going, making them sweat out masterpieces that will
ensnare future generations of men for future generations of wom-
en.26 The move is a play on the stock Decadent themes that art
perpetuates and extends the illusion and deception of love, and that
women inspire the artist, the work being a product of unfulfilled
desire. Laforgue treats his hero with effective irony, for Lohen-
grin, presenting himself as the type of literary homme de génie that
he here describes, has produced no such “chefs-d’oeuvre halluci-
nés” in Elsa’s honor, but only a parody of panegyric, a diatribe. The
cliché “redorer son blason,” with its heraldic associations, is appro-
priate to his knightly station but in no way describes his behavior.
The parodic hero cannot even produce the Decadent poet’s habitu-
al consolation for his anti-procreative attitudes, a work of art, a
“chef-d’oeuvre halluciné,” except perhaps the parody that is his life
story; the narrative indeed suggests that the whole experience in
the Villa may be “une nuit d’hallucination” (161, emphasis mine).
Lohengrin is not quite a suffering man of genius; he is but a parody
of one.

In another parody of Schopenhauerian attitudes, Laforgue makes
his hero insult Elsa’s slim hips for not proclaiming their procreative
intentions honestly:

. . . je déteste en toi ceci, que, ayant des hanches sèches, bref anti-mater-
nelles, tu marches cependant avec ce dandinement perpétuel de petit
mammifère délesté depuis quelques jours à peine des kilos de ses cou-
ches (qu’est-ce qui vous fait rire?), oui, dis-je, ce dandinement, comme
touétonnée de se trouver si légère après neuf mois de corvée, et t'en allant plus légère que nature, comme profitant de ta légèreté d'entr'acte, avant que ça recommence, et faisant môme de ce dansement de délivrance un appât à de prochains obérateurs! Moi, j'appelle ça de l'aberration, de la légèreté. Tu saisis? (167–169)

Her "anti-maternal" hips nevertheless move with a sway that expresses the buoyant freedom of one until only recently weighted down with child; they thus impertinently use this temporary freedom to lure future "encumberers." The humor derives not only from the parodic exaggeration and distortion, notably the absurdity of the argument, but also from the verbal play, the echo of obérateurs in aberration and the pun on légèreté. And in case we do not know how to take it, the parody provides us with the proper reaction in Lohengrin's parenthetical aside, conspicuous for its ambiguous "vous" in a paragraph otherwise exclusively in "tu": "qu'est-ce qui vous fait rire?"

The exchange of songs, meant as a diversion from their endless quarrelling, actually increases the tension and prepares the rupture of the ending. The songs are parodies in themselves and thus reflect the larger structure of the story. The famous epithalamium that opens Wagner's final act is here directly replaced by Elsa's more ominous ballad of Samson and Delilah, filled out by a proverbial formula unlikely to placate Laforgue's hero:

Samson a cru en Dalila,
Ah, dansons, dansons à la ronde!
La plus belle fille du monde
Ne peut donner que ce qu'elle a.

— Qui vous a appris cela? Si vous saviez quelque chose de moins épitaphalame. (163)

Her eyes raised not "au ciel" but, appropriately, only as far as the "ciel de lit," Elsa also sings a variation on the popular song, "Tu t'en vas et tu nous quittes," a strophe straight out of Laforgue's own "Complainte des pianos," embodying the ennui of the jeune fille without love:

Tu t'en vas, et tu nous laisses,
Tu nous laisses et tu t'en vas.
Défaire et refaire ses tresses,
Broder d'éternels canevas. (163)
Laforgue recycles his own verses in the parody, to which they are remarkably relevant—Lohengrin will indeed follow the prescription of the song and abandon Elsa at the end—and thus reflects the procedure of parody itself. In doing so, he also suggests the self-parodic nature of the genre: if the parodist’s own verses can be reused in the parody, perhaps his other work, the parody, may be treated likewise.

In his turn, Lohengrin provides a morbid version of Gounod’s (and Goethe’s) “Roi de Thulé”:

*Oh! la fenêtre de la salle nuptiale éclata follement sous un cyclone de féerie lunaire! et voici que l’oreiller, changé en cygne, éploya ses ailes impérieuses et, chevauché du jeune Lohengrin, s’enleva et vers la liberté méditative cingla en spirales sidérales, cingla sur les lagunes désolées de...*

The song is more “exemplaire” than merely in accent, however, for like Elsa’s, it directly reflects the story; here we find the white swan, the swanboat (“voilier”), and the “lacs immaculés” which return in the “mers immaculées” of Lohengrin’s final prayer (173). This parody-within-the-parody in fact plays a crucial role: it lets out the truth about the hero (“n’aima qu’un cygne aux blanches ailes”), prefigures the finale (Lohengrin’s flight on his “voilier” swan into the “lacs immaculés” of the sky), and suggests the important relation, thus far unstated, between his final flight and spiritual death.

Indeed, in the last scene, Lohengrin, having failed miserably in his mission, reverts to a psychological childhood; the embrace that, in a more mature individual, should have been for Elsa’s “col de cygne” is here given to the pillow. In answer to his prayer, the pillow metamorphoses into his beloved and unsullied symbol of purity—and escape—the taciturn swan, “pâle et ne chantant jamais” (171). Laforgue plays on the tradition that a swan sings before its death: Lohengrin’s swan is not only immortal but provides significant contrast to Elsa, whose chatter and singing remind him of her terrifying femininity and his own conjugal duties.
The capital letters signal the parody and its object; returning to the “altitudes de la Métaphysique de l’Amour,” Lohengrin reverts to the most pessimistic and Decadent attitude possible, precisely chapter 44 of Schopenhauer’s main work, which carries this title, and in which love is never physical, only metaphysical. Lohengrin retreats into the “glaciers miroirs” of sterility and egoism, in contrast to the mirrors of the Villa-Nuptiale which record its victims and their dates (159). The hero triumphs, but only by disappearing forever into the deathly limitations of the self.

Laforgue makes the lesson embodied in the hero a lesson of nineteenth-century literature as well. Decadent attitudes to women, sexuality, and procreation may lead not only to moral sterility but also to silence, Lohengrin’s silent, frozen atmosphere of liberté méditative. But the story suggests that a way out of such silence may lie in a form that mocks, subverts, and transforms these attitudes, that is, in a parody like this one, which saves Lohengrin from the oblivion of his remote lunar exile:

Et c’est depuis lors, qu’à de pareilles nuits des poètes célèbrent froidement et inviolablement dans leur front certaine petite fête de l’Assomption. (173)

This line returns us to the opening line: “Oh, qu’ils sont irréparables, même en imagination seulement, les soirs des Grands Sacrifices!” (107, emphasis mine). The events of the story represent one of those “irréparables” evenings, which the parodist revives “dans [son] front” (173) or “en imagination seulement” (107). He is one of the poets suggested in the final line, who on similar evenings has had his own celebration, commemorating, in the particular way that parody does, the ongoing Lohengrinian problem, the perpetual fear of giving oneself to love. Moreover, the plural forms and “pareilles” imply that the process does not end here. In a manner consistent with the self-reflexivity of parody, Laforgue’s extends its story further; the parodic assumption of this Virgin gives rise to future celebrations, and presumably future parodies, thus ensuring both the progress and continuity of the traditions it embodies.