Persée et Andromède, ou le plus heureux des trois

Persée et Andromède differs from the preceding tales in two important ways. First, it has a more complex narrative structure, of which we become aware only at the very end: in a surprising epilogue, the narrator and a member of his audience discuss the truth of the story just told. As we shall see, this dialogue reflects back upon the story through its content and as a narrative device is consistent with the self-reflexive nature of parody: the narrator becomes a character in the story itself. This turn is all the more unexpected because the text gives no prior indication of it; the story appears to be in the authorial third-person omniscient, until the epilogue introduces the narrator himself, and thereby reminds us that the parody is a story told rather than an experience lived. In this way, it carries out the merciless lesson of the genre; it denies us at the last moment the relief that accompanies a normal dénouement and thwarts the most basic literary trust, by which we willingly accept the authority and veracity of the omniscient point of view. The epilogue to Persée et Andromède forces us not only to acknowledge that the story is a fiction (the devices of parody within the story would alone accomplish this) but, more radically, to question the truth of the metafiction, the epilogue itself. It realizes in a highly sophisticated form the self-reflexivity described in chapter 1, whereby the parody challenges the very message of the genre (i.e. the scepticism that it maintains about the truth and authority of
representations). Moreover, it carries out a main objective of parody, literary regeneration: in its ending, the story creates another story which encompasses it and features the parodist as a character. In closing the work, it uncovers a new one, like parody itself, which in seeming to end a tradition actually renews and transforms it.

Second, although *Salomé* and *Le Miracle des Roses* revolve around a heroine, and *Lohengrin* gives Elsa at least half the stage, only *Persée et Andromède* features a heroine comparable to Laforgue's otherwise unparallelled heroines. She is not, like Salomé, a charlatan Decadent poet, nor, like Ruth, a macabre and sadistic nèvropathe; nor even, like Elsa, a simple Eternal Feminine. In *Persée et Andromède*, the text expresses the psychology of the heroine. We know her every thought, whim, desire; we hear her private lamentations, witness her solitary caprices, follow her into her secret hideaways. Only with Hamlet and Pan do we have such intimate relations, and the likeness is significant: Andromède is to a great extent the female counterpart to Laforgue's two most distinctive heroes, the feminine version of the stock 1880s sensibility that suffers from ennui, *taedium vitae*, and especially, the loneliness of a life without love.

Andromède resembles Laforgue's heroes also in her very character. Like Hamlet, she is moody, egotistical, impatient, perpetually impulsive and restless, tormented by ennui, and overwhelmed by a sense of futility. She spends her time gazing out at the sea, despairs of its awesome immensity, and answers its laments with her own wounded-animal moans. She capriciously changes her mind from one moment to the next, galloping round the island, stopping abruptly to admire her image in her mirror-pool and immediately despairing of how ordinary and "sans distinction" (257), or tormenting the Dragon and then embracing him "selon sa câlinerie familière" (252). She longs to be cured of her ennui, her illness, her wound, her child's "bobo," her intolerable solitude. Like Pan in the final tale, Andromède is starved for love, and all her thoughts, feelings, and actions derive from the unfulfilled desire of the adolescent. "Aimer! aimer! crie la pauvre Andromède" (254): desire for love is the source of her ennui, a budding sixth sense
forever frustrated, to which nothing responds (263). Like Hamlet’s sixth sense, “ce sens de l’infini,” Andromède’s desire for love is also a desire for the Infinite, as the cosmological poem which she recites in part two makes clear: for the Laforguian imagination, these constitute one and the same impulse, the human aspiration toward the Ideal.

Andromède is not simply Hamlet or Pan in the form of a delightfully thin jeune fille, however. She represents (or, through the story, comes to represent) the feminine ideal of Laforgue’s imagination, the appropriate companion for the poet-hero, with his metaphysical and sexual doubts on the one hand, and his sentimental “bon coeur” on the other. The Decadent heroes of the Moralités are all exaggerations of this figure, with their conflicting pessimism and sentimentality. However, this story features a more moderate example, a former nihilist who has suffered, and in so doing has learned his lesson: the Dragon, who, through misfortune, has discovered the truth about life and is thus worthy of being reborn. Andromède’s adolescent crisis corresponds to his former puerile revolt against life, and her jeune fille’s ennui to his own more metaphysically inspired pessimism. But if Laforgue represents the female variety of the Decadent mal as personal and sexual, and the male variety as metaphysical, he takes care to establish the identity of the two: it is a source of humor in Hamlet and Pan, who confuse them constantly, and in Persée et Andromède it constitutes the wisdom of life that the Dragon expresses in his “petit poème sacré,” as we shall see. With her fierce independence and pride, her sentimental loyalty, and her Laforguian “grand coeur” (274), Andromède is an excellent match for the Dragon; she will accordingly follow his example and, in the face of sorrow, learn the truth which has lain all the while unnoticed before her eyes.

Like the other characters, these two are exaggerations: the touching humor with which they are treated and the fairy-tale quality of the story itself make this clear. But the exaggeration expresses a fantasy and although living in our fantasies may bring us the unfortunate fate of Salomé or Hamlet, keeping them at a distance as ideals to be approached may rather bring us the wisdom of the Dragon: “L’Homme n’est qu’un insecte sous les cieux; mais
qu'il se respecte, et il est bien Dieu" (263). Andromède est la vision de Laforgue de la femme moderne idéale, (comme le monstre est celle du homme) une solution comiquement charmante à la relation problématique des sexes dans le monde contemporain; et l'optimiste histoire est une déclaration douce de foi dans la puissance de la vie pour apporter une mesure de bonheur humain. Si le moral de l'histoire est que le monstre peut miraculeusement sortir vainqueur, peut-être que l'idéal monstrueux de l'histoire elle-même peut aussi nous surprendre et devenir réalité.

La histoire de Persée et Andrômeda vient d'une source appropriée pour un parodie de la sorte de Laforgue, Ovide's *Metamorphoses* (IV, 604—803), lui-même une réécriture ludique des légendes. En réponse à une oracle, la princesse éthiopienne Andrômeda devait être donnée en sacrifice à un monstre marin envoyé par Neptune pour ravager le pays pour punir l'insolence de sa mère, Cassiopeia, qui avait vanté que elle était aussi belle que les Néréides. Andrômeda était ainsi attachée à une roche et exposée, mais fut sauvée par Persée, qui arriva sur le cheval ailé Pégase, né du sang de la Gorgone Méduse. Persée avait tué Méduse, et ainsi il porta sur son bouclier le symbole de sa victoire, la tête redoutable, avec sa puissance de pétrifier tout sur qui elle regardait. Après avoir vaincu le monstre et épousé Andrômeda, Persée plus tard tourna la tête de la Gorgone contre Phineas, à qui Andrômeda avait été autrefois fiancée, et aussi contre Polydectes, qui refusa de croire que Persée avait tué l'animal. Certaines scènes de l'histoire sont des sujets conventionnels dans les arts visuels: Persée montre à Andrômeda la tête de la Gorgone dans un miroir, Andrômeda liée à la roche, et en particulier Persée libérant Andrômeda, interprétée par de tels maîtres que Veronese, Titien, Guercino, Rubens, Coype et Puget, le dernier avec un exemple fameux au Louvre. Il y a des preuves que Laforgue lui-même a fait un croquis du sujet pendant son temps à l'École des Beaux-Arts, comme il le mentionne dans ses notes.  

Mais le parodie de Laforgue ne se tient pas à la version donnée par le titre; dans la légende de Persée et Andrômeda, il intègre celle de la Belle et la Bête, ce qui garantit que l'autre sera à chaque fois parodiquement à l'échec. Le sujet central de l'histoire du type traditionnel...
story—*Perseus delivering Andromeda*—has no function in the parody, for Persée does not deliver Andromède and does not even need to do so: she is not the Dragon’s prisoner but his darling little ward, whom he has reared from infancy on a faraway desert isle. She calls him uncle (251), teacher, friend, foster father (275); and the closest that he can come to being her captor is in a parody of a cliché: “Tant que je vivrai, je serai votre geôlier sans peur et sans reproche” (265). This jailer is really, according to the conventional *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche*, a knight. Laforgue’s parody reverses the traditional situation: it is the Dragon who needs to be delivered, not only from his monster’s exterior, but also from the captive tyranny of Andromède’s “passagères lubies de croissance” (275), her incessant demands, her impulsive volte-face, her unpredictable adolescent coups de tête (277).

Andromède does need to be delivered, however, in another, more modern sense: “Où va-t-elle ainsi, ô puberté, puberté! par le vent et les dunes, avec ces abois de blessée?” (255). Andromède longs to be freed of her maidenhood, her solitude, exorcise her “poor being,” cure her virginal “wound.” Laforgue’s Persée is incapable of doing this, for he is an outrageous egotist, cocksure, petulant and rude, “le petit chéri des dieux” (270) with affected speech and manner, a “vilain héros d’Opéra-comique” (275), as Andromède puts it, merely a parody of a hero. Only the Monster-poet, “homme distingué qui a eu des malheurs,” can save Andromède and win her, but she must free him first by her kiss, liberating the fine young man from his shimmering monster’s skin. Laforgue’s ideal love is a reciprocal affair; Andromède is delivered from the lonely rock of her virginity, but only by loving the Dragon truly, for himself alone.

Unlike the preceding stories, *Persée et Andromède* carries no telling epigraph; however, its subtitle provides the first parodic deformation, which signals the parody and indicates its other, unnamed model. “Le Plus Heureux des Trois” is the title of a vaudeville play by Labiche. Its plot bears no relation to Laforgue’s *Moralité*, but placing its title alongside *Persée et Andromède* casts the ancient legend into comic light, creating a vaudeville *Perseus and Andromeda*, as it were. More importantly, the subtitle has proverbial echoes, as
in the famous *moralité* of La Fontaine: "le plus âne des trois n'est pas celui qu'on pense," which intertextually provides the natural, though unstated, sequel ("n'est pas celui qu'on pense"). The subtitle calls attention to the suppressed character of the three, the one "of whom we would not think" in a story of Perseus and Andromeda—the Monster-Dragon. It immediately signals the parody, for by alluding to him as the luckiest of the three, it inverts the story, making the defeated villain of the original the victorious hero of the parody, in a manner typical of the genre. It also identifies the second model, since the most obvious story in which a dragon triumphs happily is *La Belle et la Bête*. Indeed, in a parody, the winner is precisely not the one that we expect, for it is the purpose of parodic distortion to disappoint our expectations. This fundamental principle of the genre actually constitutes the moral of the *Moralité* itself, stated explicitly in the final line: the disdained Monster was worthy of being the luckiest of the three. *Persée et Andromède*, ou le plus heureux des trois thus offers an apologia for parody itself; the lesson of the story is that of parody in general. Laforgue makes this point clear throughout by presenting the characters' destinies as plots of pre-established stories: following the plot, changing the plot, fixing the plot, parodying the plot are all bound up in questions of will and self-knowledge. The story explores metaphorically not only the dangers of imitation but the importance, in art and life, of interpretation and transformation. Destiny may be fulfilled, but it can nevertheless be altered and choices made; and life, like a good parody, may turn out as we least expect.

The Story

The story consists of three parts followed by the epilogue. In the first two, we discover the remote, isolated setting of the island and witness a typical day in the life of its two inhabitants, Andromède and the Monster-Dragon. The third section contains the major episodes of the parody: Persée arrives on his winged horse and slays the Dragon, but is chased away by Andromède, who wants none of him; the Dragon then metamorphoses into "un jeune homme accompli" (277) by the power of her kiss.
Part one opens with a highly subjective description of the setting: the lonely island and the sea, immense, indifferent, mysterious, monotonous, resistant to man: "Bref, pas l'étoffe d'une amie (oh, vraiment! renoncer à cette idée, et même à l'espoir de partager ses rancunes après confidences, si seul à seul qu'on soit depuis des temps avec elle)" (249). This curious parenthetical remark immediately points to the parody: the sea, which in the original produced the enemy Monster to devour her, here itself functions as the enemy ("pas l'étoffe d'une amie"), keeping Andromède prisoner and ignoring her unhappy moans with its uncaring vastness and impenetrability. But the parenthetical aside renders "amie" ambiguous and introduces a point of view appropriate, rather, to the Dragon: is Andromède the stuff of which a beloved is made, or will he have to give up the idea after all this time spent alone with her on the island? Laforgue uses the parodic signal to hint at the second model and thus provides us from the beginning with the foremost tension of the story.

The initial impression of overwhelming monotony is belied by an extraordinary metaphorical richness: the frothing of the waves compared to a flock of sheep that swim, go under, reappear; the winds frolicking above them, whipping up the spume in iridescent spray; the ray of sunshine on the waves creating a rainbow, like a bright dolphin that surfaces and then plunges back again into the water. But the contradiction only communicates all the more clearly Andromède's problem: the figures of these comparisons disappear literally back into the depths from which they arose. They are the products of her active imagination, always projecting beyond what is at hand a world that will never reach her own, like the sheep "qui jamais n'arrivent" and the dolphin that, no sooner spotted, disappears from sight. On this desert island surrounded by an unending expanse of ocean "à perte de vue," where time is measured by the regular migration of screeching, untamable birds, Andromède lives enough in her imagination to be dissatisfied with her reality, as each new hope fades into the overall gray of the sky or drowns in the monotonous rolling of the waves.

We meet Laforgue's Andromeda not in the traditional pose—bound to the rock and exposed to the elements—but lying com-
fortably on her stomach and propped up on her elbows, in a pro-
tected inlet harboring two caves padded in eiderdown and algae.
In the ignorance and innocence of her solitary existence, this child
of nature is "irréprochablement nue," and "n'a pas la face et les
mains plus ou moins blanches que le reste du corps" (255), but
rather an even, healthy tan all over, of the same terra-cotta color.
Laforgue's comical allusion to the mottled consequences of wear-
ing clothes distinguishes Andromède from the ordinary jeune fille,
whose face and hands are more exposed than the rest of her person,
or shaded by protective hat and gloves. His heroine, rather, is tall,
thin, and angular with proud, straight, hips and long legs on which
she bounds around the island like a stilt bird among the marshes
(255). Her long neck balances a small childish head with a rich
fleece of silky red hair down to her knees. She has two childish
"hints" of breasts, which the narrative comically attributes, in a
parenthetical aside, to her wild existence in the open air: "(et
quand et comment auraient-ils pu se former, toujours à aller ainsi
contre le vent, le vent salé du large et contre les douches furieuse-
ment glaciées des vagues?)" (256). Even her eyes reflect her sur-
roundings: sometimes, like Hamlet's and Ruth's, as piercing as a
sea bird's, sometimes taking on the colorless gray of the sea itself,
with all the monotony contained in those "eaux quotidiennes"
(256).

Andromède's freedom from the constraints that civilization
places on a normal jeune fille has also had a significant effect on her
personality. She speaks her mind and takes no pains to conceal her
feelings, a trait later to serve her well in getting rid of Persée.
Proud, obstinate, and headstrong, she is at home with the ele-
ments, braves the most violent waves even as they toss her, in a
stupor, onto the beach, and scrambles fearlessly up and down the
cliffs. But whereas she may formerly have enjoyed her uninhibited
life on the remote island, lately she has been experiencing some
inexplicable "palpitations de cœur" (261) that make her behave un-
predictably. Like Hamlet, she is restless and inconsistent, and can-
not keep to one activity long enough to carry it out; she thinks of
ending her misery by drowning herself in the sea (258), jabbing
herself with a bit of flint (263), or simply wasting away (264), but
ultimately lacks the spirit to do so. All her thoughts center on freedom: in a desperate effort to escape the lonely existence of the island, she pelts the migratory sea birds that pass overhead with stones from a slingshot to arrest one and have it carry her away. Laforgue describes her metonymically in terms of her condition: this "puberté sauvageonne" (255) is coming of age, and as there is no one else about, she takes her adolescent crisis out on her old friend and guardian, the Dragon.

Laforgue has converted Ovid’s ferocious Dragon into a mild, kindly creature who suffers Andromède’s growing pains with the patience of a saint. He retains from his legendary predecessor his association with the sea, although Laforgue comically transfers this to his luxurious exterior: a skin shimmering with all the precious jewels of underwater Golcondas, lashes fringed with variegated cartilaginous trim, large eyes of a watery glaucous color. He speaks with “une voix d’homme distingué qui a eu des malheurs” (251), the first signal of his association with Beauty and the Beast. He is a “gentleman accompli, savant industrieux, poète disert” (274), who, changed into a dragon as punishment by the gods of life for preaching a doctrine of nihilism in the groves of Arcadia, has seen through illusion to nothingness, achieved the wisdom of resignation, and returned to the values of life, love, and self-respect. The text makes his new position clear in a comically appropriate comparison. The Monster polishes pebbles for Andromède’s catapult, “— tel le sage Spinoza devait polir ses verres de lunettes” (255), an allusion to Spinoza’s well-known trade as a lens-maker; but the humor, and the telling dash, expose the false pretense, point to the real source of comparison—not the polishing but the wisdom of resignation. The Monster has the acceptant philosophy of the man considered the prototype of Schopenhauer and Hartmann. His sacred poem, recited by Andromède in part two, will in fact translate Spinozian pantheism into the more contemporary Hartmanonian system of the Unconscious. Laforgue makes the connection indirectly, by a detour through the polishing motif common to both: a method appropriate to parody, which does similarly on a larger scale, using a trivial likeness to produce humor, and thus to lead the reader to the real connection between the parody and the work parodied.
The Monster-poet puts his literary talents to use by giving Andromède a distinctive version of *Pyramus and Thisbe*:

Le Monstre croit à propos de prendre la voix de fausset de cette pauvre enfant qui mue, pour riair ses doléances romanesques, et il commence d'un ton détaché:
— *Pyrame et Thisbé*. Il était une fois . . .
— Non! non! pas d'histoires mortes, ou je me tue! (254)

The story-within-a-story is here specifically a parody: the serious, tragic legend told comically as a fairy tale in Andromède's falsetto voice, and intended to mock her "doléances romanesques." As we have seen in chapter 1, the parody-within-the-parody functions as a model for the larger story. This example is all the more significant in that both come from the same source, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* IV. The Dragon-poet who takes *Metamorphoses* IV as the material for a parody represents that other poet who uses an episode from the same book, the parodist himself. Moreover this scene reflects the parodist's ambivalent attitude (mocking and admiring) toward the target: the Monster makes fun of Andromède, whom he nevertheless loves dearly. She, on the other hand, is insensitive to parody and misses the joke completely, as her threatening to imitate the story's tragic outcome attests. She suffers from the conventional parodic problem, taking stories as models to follow in life, not, like the Monster, to transform into other fictions. Her adolescent egoism keeps her from seeing that the solution to her "doléances romanesques" lies not in the romanesque version but in a parody. Indeed, having learned her lesson, she will follow the Thisbe model only parodically: upon seeing her dead lover she will kill herself only with remorse, and will give him the regenerative kiss.

Andromède displays no greater skill in interpreting the riddle by which the Dragon communicates her parodic, *Belle et la Bête* destiny:

— O Monstre, ô Dragon, tu dis que tu m'aimes, et tu ne peux rien pour moi. Tu vois que je dépéris d'ennui et tu n'y peux rien. Comme je t'aimerais si tu pouvais me guérir, faire quelque chose!
— O noble Andromède, fille du roi d'Ethiopie! le Dragon malgré lui, le pauvre Monstre ne peut te répondre que par un cercle vicieux: Je ne te...
guérirai que lorsque tu m’aimeras, car c’est en m’aimant que tu me
guériras.
— Toujours le même rébus fatidique! Mais quand je te dis que je t’aime
bien! (252f.)

Andromède does not see the obvious: she cannot decipher the
riddle although the solution literally stares her in the face. She
longs for society (253) even while the answer to her yearning lies—
or crouches—in the cave next door. Not until the Monster is lost
will she recognize her feelings for him and acknowledge the cause
of her blindness: “oh, curiosité trois fois funeste!” (275), her fatal
curiosity for a world other than her own. Here she rebels against
the “destinée” (253) that keeps her on the island. But the Dragon’s
answer presents the peculiar dilemma of parody: which destiny of
the two will ultimately unfold? Which story will prevail, Perseus and
Andromède or Beauty and the Beast? The Monster’s alternative sug-
gests not only the play of texts by which all parody operates but
also the particular message of this one: perhaps destiny, like the
story, may be tampered with after all, and, as the subtitle suggests,
the one least expected come out the winner.

Andromède has two principal outlets for her hypertrophic ado-
lescent energies. The first, a natural basin of water carved into the
top of the cliff, serves her as a mirror into which she gazes at her
image. She is a modern female Narcissus, with a bit less pride but
the same egoism and self-ignorance:

... elle cherche à approfondir le sérieux de ses yeux; et ses yeux ne se
départent pas de leur profondeur. Mais sa bouche! Elle ne se lasse pas
d’adorer l’innocente éclosion de sa bouche. Oh! qui comprendra jamais
sa bouche? ...

... Mais elle a beau se mirer! Tout comme elle-même, son visage
attend toujours, sérieux et lointain. (256f.)

The lesson of the mirror remains ever the same and Andromède,
unlike Narcissus, knows why. She even wishes she could be an-
other in order to be able to look into her own eyes, “les interroger,”
“les épier,” “rêver de leur secret.” Andromède does not under-
stand that she will know herself only when she turns away and
toward another. But already the knowledge is being forced upon
her: the rain troubles the purity of her mirror, as the death of the
Monster will later shake her egoism.
Andromède's second answer to her growing pains involves erotically therapeutic encounters with the elements. Lying on her back in the wet sand, she abandons herself to the waves ("Les yeux clos, Andromède la reçoit ferme, avec un long sanglot d'égorgée," 258) and the rain showers ("et toute gémissante sous la grande rumeur diluvienne, elle reçoit l'averse," 259), but these satisfy her adolescent's desire only momentarily. Her final attempt to "exorcise" herself (260) with one of the passing sea birds produces a brilliant parody of her traditional posture:

Elle pousse un long piaulement d'appel, et s'affaisse contre le roc, les bras en croix, et ferme les yeux. Oh! que cet oiseau fonde sur sa petite personne prométhéenne exposée là par des dieux, et, perché sur ses genoux, commence, d'un bec implacablement salutaire, à lui retirer le brûlant noyau de son bobo. (260)

"Prométhéenne," apparently incongruous for this story, clues the reader in to the parody: Laforgue diverts the adjective from its sense of human grandeur and enterprise to allude more literally to the specific situation of Prometheus himself, bound, like Andromède, to the rock. But if Andromède, watching the great bird, resembles the original Andromeda observing the arrival of Pegasus, Laforgue deals us yet another parodic blow, for her explicit fantasies belong to a different mythological story altogether: the bird that tore out Prometheus' liver here becomes, in Andromède's hopeful imagination, the swan ravishing Leda. Laforgue freely integrates the stories, transforming the Prometheus and Leda ones into metaphors that clarify the parody. The reference to Prometheus both deforms and identifies Andromède's episode; the allusion to Leda interprets the sexual nature of Andromède's captivity and the particular deliverance of the "bec salutaire" which she awaits.

But the answer to Andromède's loneliness lies in yet another "légende" (261), the Dragon's "petit poème sacré." Laforgue transforms Poe's _La Vérité sur le cas de M. Valdemar_ according to Decadent evolutionary theories and produces the ludicrously appropriate title _La Vérité sur le Cas de Tout._ Laforgue plays on Hartmann's identification of the Unconscious with the All (Tout, Un-Tout, Tout-Un): Poe's tale of a doctor's efforts to explore the unconscious mind of a corpse immediately after death becomes a cos-
mological poem in which the Unconscious provides the truth about everything. It parodically reduces evolutionary metaphysics to eleven basic axioms reflecting the wisdom of acceptance: “Au commencement était l’Amour, loi organisatrice universelle, inconsciente, infaillible. Et c’est, immanente aux tourbillons solidaires des phénomènes, l’aspiration infinie à l’Idéal” (261). Love is the logos of this Gospel, the unconscious law which governs the universe, and reflects man’s aspiration toward the ideal.

According to the poem, the impulse toward the ideal objectifies itself in worlds that are born, develop, and then disintegrate to make room for new ones. The place of the earth in this overall pattern is relatively insignificant, merely a miniature reflex of some monumental “Grande Evolution Inconsciente dans le Temps” (262). But the Dragon’s poem subverts this pessimism and denies the importance of the cosmic pattern by affirming sentimentally that the negligeable earth is nevertheless all that we have to satisfy our human senses:

Mais la bonne Terre descendue du Soleil nous est tout, parce que nous avons cinq sens, et que toute la Terre y répond. O succulences, émerveillements plastiques, senteurs, rumeurs, étonnements à perte de vue, Amour! O vie à moi!

L’Homme n’est qu’un insecte sous les cieux; mais qu’il se respecte, et il est bien Dieu. Un spasme de la créature vaut toute la nature. (263)

Laforgue converts this review of fin-de-siècle pessimistic cosmology to a moral for the Decadent himself: it asserts the power of love to redeem human existence from insignificance. This commonsensical wisdom is the lesson that our former nihilist, the Dragon, has learned over the years of his punishment. The poem follows the pessimism of Decadence through to its despairing conclusion and finds that the only way out is to turn back to standard, commonplace human values of love and self-respect.

Andromède once again does not appreciate the message. “Ce n’est que la douceur des leçons apprises” (263): it offers the temporary comfort of an old lesson learned by heart but not the peace of mind of a lesson learned. She thinks it inadequate to her situation, for though life may satisfy the five senses, she has a sixth sense to which nothing responds. The real meaning of the poem escapes
her: her pubescent sixth sense can indeed be satisfied, and by the fundamental law of life which the poem describes. Her hopes for love will be fulfilled not by appealing to an uncaring sky and sea or to her own frustrating imagination, but rather by understanding her reality, reading her own story rightly.

The opening of part three teases the reader with a false conclusion relevant to the parody: returning home for the customary evening routine of watching the sunset, Andromède finds that the Monster has disappeared and, in despair, bitterly reproaches herself for having tormented him. Laforgue inserts the dénouement of Beauty and the Beast into Perseus and Andromeda too early, before the latter has properly started up (Perseus himself has not yet appeared). But the Monster comes back; the false dénouement signals the parody, points specifically to the source of its distortion (La Belle et la Bête), and previews Andromède’s later, proper self-reproach. Laforgue shows that the story can be interrupted, rearranged, mixed and matched, and thus exposes the procedures of his own parody.

Before bringing in Persée, Laforgue includes an elaborate parody of the stock Romantic sunset. In keeping with the Decadent target, his sunset is a theatrical show staged by expert technicians and “artificiers,” and parodically presents the ambiguous spectacle of a monarch’s execution. The imperial Turkish “Sublime Porte” here becomes the gate through which the pasha retreats into death, and the sun into night. The scaffolding and sets go up, the lighting is given its final touches, the curtains are opened, but the setting of the triumphal march is parodically a slaughterhouse: “l’abattoir est prêt.”

L’Astre Pacha,
Son Eminence Rouge,
En simarre de débâcles,
Descend, mortellement triomphal,
Durant des minutes, par la Sublime Porte!
Et le voilà qui gît sur le flanc, tout marbré de stigmates atrabilaires.
Vite, quelqu’un pousse du pied cette citrouille crevée, et alors! . . .
Adieu paniers, vendanges sont faites! (266)

The splendid sun becomes through this vulgarizing ritual first a humiliated victim mottled with the wounds of the stigmata, and
then that ludicrous and traditionally parodic vegetable, a broken pumpkin,\textsuperscript{12} kicked by some disdainful foot over the edge of the horizon into nothingness. The confusion that ensues, as the court rapidly empties, further metamorphoses into the rapid flight of an army, surprised by the fall of the sun-king and the subsequent invasion of night. The parodic sunset, so similar to those of Laforgue’s \textit{Derniers Vers},\textsuperscript{13} not only reflects the larger parody but also has significance for interpreting it, for it acts out an axiom from the Dragon’s poem: “(Mais comme rien n’est plus chatouilleux aux organismes supérieurs que se sentir mourir tout en sachant qu’il n’en sera rien, le crépuscule et l’automne, le drame du soleil et de la mort sont esthétiques par excellence)” (261). Indeed, this supreme aesthetic moment has the proper effect on both characters, the pleasure of feeling oneself die while knowing that one is not, the principle of love in its aesthetic manifestation.\textsuperscript{14} But the sun’s dubious glory, represented by the process of vulgarization (from royal oriental pasha to ludicrous pumpkin, from court scene to one of panic and pillage), reflects the ambiguous experience of love itself: this source of human pleasure is also man’s unromantic concession to the superiority of Nature.

Laforgue finally introduces the long-awaited third person, the Persée of the title: “Oh! bénis soient les dieux qui envoient, juste au moment voulu, un troisième personnage” (267). The formula to the gods is incongruous in a story where the nineteenth-century Unconscious has had more than its due share of exposure. But the humor calls attention to the idea of a governing force, a higher plan implied by “juste au moment voulu.” The moment is right because, unless something happens, Andromède and the Dragon will merely retire and then “recommencer une journée pareille” (267), and the story will become merely the routine pattern of life on the island. But in a tale of \textit{Persée et Andromède}, we need a Persée; in a story of “le plus heureux des trois,” we need a “troisième personnage”: the beneficent gods are actually the plot of the original story. In keeping with the parody, however, this essential character will be utterly superfluous. Persée’s arrival seems to put the story on its proper course, but this is deceptive. The parody of the \textit{Metamorphoses} will contain some metamorphosing of its own, of
Persée et Andromède

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the Dragon into a fine young man, and Perseus and Andromeda into Beauty and the Beast: le plus heureux des trois n'est pas celui qu'on pense.

One has the disturbing impression that Persée et Andromède will dispense entirely with the central episode of the legend, Perseus' killing of the Dragon, for Laforgue's hero, with a mere "Allez, hop! à Cythère," seems content to whisk his fiancée away without fighting him at all. But the Dragon does not permit the story to end so easily, or so differently from the plots that he knows: Persée cannot take away Andromède without killing him first, as he has told us, and thus he summons up his traditional monster's qualities and launches a conventional attack, rearing ferociously, breathing fire, and recalling Persée to his role. Once again, however, the plot is interrupted, for Persée stops short of stabbing his enemy and opts for an untraditional (and more lethal) solution, the Gorgon's head:

Persée l'empoigne par cette chevelure dont les nœuds bleus jaspés d'or lui font de nouveaux bracelets et la présente au Dragon en criant à Andromède: Vous, baissez les yeux!
Mais, ô prodige, le charme n'opère pas.
Il ne veut pas opérer, le charme!
Par un effort inouï, en effet, la Gorgone a fermé ses yeux pétrotificateurs. (270ff.)

In the most remarkable parodic twist of the story, the fearsome and inescapable Gorgon head will not work its charm. Persée is such a parody of his heroic predecessor that even his most reliable weapon fails him at the crucial moment, serving only to add more bracelets to his already foppishly bedecked arms. The Gorgon's action is "inouï" precisely because it is parodic: the head figured not in the original legend of Perseus and Andromeda, but only in one of Perseus's later adventures. Persée gets what he deserves: if he ignores tradition, he must expect others to do the same. The willfulness of the Gorgon to defy his expectations might have prepared him for Andromède's rebellious and equally unexpected refusal to accompany him later on, but does not: Persée remains the model of a bad reader, a lesson to the reader of the parody.

Exploiting the creative implications of parody, Laforgue makes
this distortion the material of another one, ultimately creating another story; the Gorgon closes her eyes because she has recognized the Monster as her old friend and neighbor, from the days when he was guardian of the Hesperides and she lived nearby with her sisters. The legendary Gorgon Medusa indeed lived with her sisters near the Hesperides, but the Dragon that kept watch over the gardens belongs rather to the legend of Heracles, who killed it and escaped with the celebrated golden apples. Mingling the two stories in this way reflects the procedure of this parody, which integrates its two models by their common elements of Monster and maiden. It also comically recalls the Ovidian original, which links all the important stories of mythology into a continuous narrative, however tenuous the connection. Laforgue insists on this later, when the Dragon, after his rebirth, tells his past history, encompassing several legends that involve a dragon, from the guardian of the Hesperides killed by Heracles, to the guardian of the golden fleece slaughtered by Jason, to the guardian of Andromeda. In addition to reminding us of the *Metamorphoses* model, the dragon’s tale reflects on the story itself: the Monster’s history of metamorphosis makes him especially eligible for a further one, into “un jeune homme accompli.”

The parodic significance of the Gorgon’s refusal is brought out by the reactions of Persée and Andromède themselves:

> Persée attend toujours, le bras tendu, ne s’apercevant de rien. Le contraste est un peu trop grotesque entre le geste brave et magistral qu’il a pris ainsi et le raté de la chose; et la sauvage petite Andromède n’a pu retenir un certain sourire; un certain sourire que Persée surprend! (271)

Here Laforgue gives us in miniature the procedure of the larger parody and the reaction that it should provoke. The grotesque contrast between Persée’s magisterial gesture and the utter failure of his effort reflects the disparity between the legendary original and the parody’s distortion, “le raté de la chose.” This time Andromède understands the parody rightly and has the proper response: she cannot keep from smiling, a model for the reader himself.

Persée’s failure with the Gorgon makes him resort to his traditional weapon, the sword. With characteristic theatricality, he kills
the Monster easily, but gets carried away with the importance of his role:

Le Monstre est mort. Mais Persée est trop excité, malgré l’infaillibilité de sa victoire, et il faut qu’il s’acharne sur le défunt! et le larde de balafres! et lui crève les yeux! et le massacre, jusqu’à ce qu’Andromède l’arrête.
— Assez, assez; vous voyez bien qu’il est mort. (272)

The allusion to the infallibility of Persée’s victory reminds us that it is not only definitive—the Dragon is really dead—but also predetermined by the plot of the original: he need not be so violent, for his triumph is already ensured by the legend. But Persée wants greater honors than the ones already reserved for him, and this excessive egoism will cause him to lose his prize. There is no objection to changing the story, but, as the Gorgon proved earlier, the other characters may do likewise, notably the heroine, who here chases him unceremoniously out of her life:

— Allez-vous-en! allez-vous-en! Vous me faites horreur! J’aime mieux mourir seule, allez-vous-en, vous vous êtes trompé d’adresse” (273). Persée has got the wrong address, having landed in a parody where things do not turn out as they ought. Natural Andromède is too wild and independent to fit into the easy, elegant atmosphere that produces such an opéra-comique hero as himself. Persée is just as glad to be relieved of his role, and merely pays the insult back in kind: “Vous n’avez déjà pas une peau si soignée” (274). But we do not need him to tell us that Andromède’s skin is not so “soignée”; her even, weathered, terra-cotta tan was described early on with admiration. Persée’s intended insult is actually the utmost mark of approval, thus guaranteeing the inversion of the parody: Persée departs and the Monster emerges as the hero; Beauty and the Beast takes over from Persée and Andromède.

Indeed, Andromède’s remorse at the Monster’s death makes her admit her love for him and administer the Beauty and the Beast kiss. He in turn tells her his life story: this “Dragon à trois têtes” (276) is the dragon of every legend that includes one. As we have seen, this reflects comically the procedure of the Metamorphoses themselves, but also suggests the creative function of parody and its capacity to renew literary tradition: with the loss of his third and last head at the hands of Persée, the Monster’s life story should end
but does not. It is miraculously transformed and continued, like
the parody’s model (or indeed its target) which seems to die but is
reborn. Parody deals the supposedly final blow and gives the re­
generative kiss: it is less like Persée than Andromède, who plays at
tormenting the Dragon and then puts her arms affectionately
round his neck. Here, the Dragon’s fate functions as a direct meta­
phor for the parody at hand as well, which appears to draw to a
close but is unexpectedly continued in the epilogue.

Andromède is so overwhelmed by the Monster’s metamorphosis
and the parodic turn of events that she at first risks having one of
her recurrent “coups de tête” (277). But the story has had its ef­
effect. She accepts the Dragon’s practical wisdom that life must be
lived, however many surprises it entails along the way: “Mais il
faut bien vivre, et vivre cette vie, quelque grands yeux étonnés
qu’elle vous fasse ouvrir à chaque tournant de route” (277). She has
learned her lesson, and that of parody generally, which likewise
surprises the reader at every turn but must be accepted and fol­
lowed, with the faith that in the end there will be, if not a moral to
explain it, as here, at least a modicum of pleasure in the reading.

The heroine’s reaction here is important, for it prepares us for
the most startling “tournant de route” of the narrative thus far. As
the new couple lands in Ethiopia, home of Andromède’s father, we
are forced, by an extraordinary parenthetical aside, to abandon the
story altogether:

Et [ils] abordèrent le troisième jour en Ethiopie, où régnait l’inconsola­
ble père d’Andromède (je laisse à penser sa joie). (278)

Although we have witnessed a great deal of authorial intervention
over the course of the story, we are not prepared for the casual
appearance of this parenthetical “je,” for we have nowhere encoun­
tered the first-person singular outside the direct speeches of the
characters themselves. Here the story-within-the-story first identi­
fies itself; the narrator drops his mask of authorial omniscience and
becomes a character. With this interruption of the narrative just as
it seems to approach its end, we are denied both the reality and
finality of the story; the events which we witnessed were actually a
tale recited, and we must suffer the frustration of not seeing it reach
the happy conclusion toward which it is heading. We are left to imagine the joy of Andromède's father at this reunion, but the text refuses to affirm it and thus leaves us ever imagining. Moreover, if we have learned the lesson of the parody, we must imagine the unimaginable, the unexpected, the unconventional, the "inouï" (271), the parodic: the story has a future beyond this apparent ending, and it may not be as we expect. The parody invites the reader to be an author too, and perhaps even to follow the example of that other reader-author, the parodist.

But tearing us from the lovers and putting us in a present which, according to the conventions of narrative, we had willingly suspended, the "je" serves as a bridge between the story and the epilogue. This presents a polite gathering to which we might easily belong, for the narrator discusses the story which he has just told, and which we have just read. Outside the context of parody, the relation of the epilogue to the story is unclear and its content puzzling; however, read in terms of the self-reflexive and specifically self-critical function described in chapter 1, it becomes a commentary on the preceding tale and, even more importantly, on itself:

— Ah! ça, mon cher monsieur Amyot de l'Epinal, vous nous la baillez belle avec votre histoire! s'écria la princesse d'U.E. (en ramenant un peu son châle, car cette splendide nuit était fraîche). Moi qui avais donné tout autrement mon cœur à cette aventure de Persée et Andromède! Je ne vous chicanerai pas sur la façon dont vous avez travesti ce pauvre Persée. (Je vous le pardonne en faveur de la main de maitre dont vous m'avez flattée, à l'antique, s'entend, sous les traits d'Andromède). Mais le dénouement de l'histoire! Qu'est-ce que ce Monstre à qui nul ne s'était intéressé jusqu'ici? Et puis, cher monsieur Amyot de l'Epinal, levez donc un peu les yeux vers la carte céleste de la nuit. Ce couple de nébuleuses, là-bas, près de Cassiopée, ne l'appelle-t-on pas Persée et Andromède? tandis que tout là-bas, cette file sinueuse d'étoiles, c'est, avec son air de paria, la constellation du Dragon, qui vivote entre la Grande Ourse et la Petite Ourse, ses pareils mal léchés? . . .

— Chère U . . . , cela ne prouve rien. Les cieux sont sereins et conventionnels; autant vaudrait dire que vos yeux sont simplement bruns (vous ne le voudriez pas). Non; car voyez de même, d'autre part, là-bas, près de la Lyre, qui est ma constellation, n'est-ce pas le Cygne, qui est la constellation de Lohengrin et a la forme d'une croix en souvenir de Parsifal?
Et cependant vous avouerez que moi et ma Lyre n'avons rien à voir avec Lohengrin et Parsifal?
— C'est vrai, c'est paraboliquement vrai. Mais il n'y a jamais moyen de discuter et de s'instruire avec vous. Allons, rentrons prendre le thé. Ah! à propos, et la moralité? J'oublie toujours la moralité . . .
— La voici:

Jeunes filles, regardez-y à deux fois
Avant de dédaigner un pauvre monstre.
Ainsi que cette histoire vous le montrè;
Celui-ci était digne d'être le plus heureux des trois. (278f.)

The narrator's name itself reflects significantly on the story and is crucial for interpreting the epilogue: as the famous translator of Plutarch's Moralia and the Ethiopica of Heliodorus, Amyot provides an appropriate precedent for this teller of an Histoire éthiopienne, itself a Moralité. But our Amyot may be distinguished from his Renaissance ancestor by his family name, which in the nineteenth century could not fail to recall the most famous product of that region, the popular images d'Epinal. "Amyot de l'Epinal" thus alludes to the parody: an Ethiopian story and moral work, translated from the ancient into a popularized, and trivialized, version. The narrator is a parodist, and his words should thus be taken as critically as those of the parody itself.

The Princess begins by scolding the narrator for trying to deceive the audience with his unorthodox version of the legend ("Ah! ça, mon cher monsieur Amyot de l'Epinal, vous nous la baillez belle avec votre histoire!"). She knows the original Persée et Andromède and objects to the triumph of the Monster at the end of this one. The parody is false, merely a deception, because of its infidelity to the original. To support her view of its falsity, she cites the version of this legend written in the night sky: the nebulas Persée and Andromède form a couple on one side of the heavens, while far from them is located the appropriately sinuous constellation of the Dragon, looking the part of the outcast ("avec son air de paria"). Clearly the Princess thinks that this astronomical separation is definitive and should remain authoritative; the Monster should not win Andromède. The night sky contains the true version, consistent with her knowledge of the original.
But the Princess weakens her case considerably by her strange reference to the two Bears. Without it, we would attribute the Dragon’s “pariah look” to his separation from Perseus and Andromeda. However, the Princess evokes the Bears as further proof that the Dragon is a real outcast (and therefore unworthy of Andromeda): he keeps like company, the Bears are “ses pareils mal léchés.” She thus betrays the fatal flaw in her reasoning which is inspired by nothing more than a cliché. For the Princess, the Dragon belongs with the Bears because he is un ours mal léché, an unpolished, uncouth individual. Her belief in the truth value of the stars’ story rests on a cliché; it is no more or less true than the version which she has just heard and condemned for its falsity and deception.

The narrator’s response aims at defending his unorthodox version by discrediting the one told in the heavens (“cela ne prouve rien”): that one is conventional, and the conventional story is not always true. To prove his point, he calls upon another story told similarly in the sky: his constellation, Lyra, is close to Cygnus, the constellation of Lohengrin in the form of a cross reminiscent of Parsifal (just as the Dragon is near the Bears, and Perseus near Andromeda). However, to show that this proximity signifies no real relation, and may in fact be false and deceptive, he poses a rhetorical question demonstrating that he and his Lyra have nothing to do with Lohengrin and Parsifal (“Et cependant vous avouerez que moi et ma Lyre n’avons rien à voir avec Lohengrin et Parsifal?”). The narrator argues not for the truth of his unusual version, the parody, but merely for the possible falsity of the conventional one. Both may in fact be false, fictions, but the conventional one is not truer than the parody.

The Princess is obliged to agree (“c’est vrai, c’est paraboliquement vrai”); the narrator’s constellation example has the truth of a parable. But the adverb, usually reserved for the geometric sense of “parabole” (parabola), calls attention to the term. A parable is, according to the Biblical formula, impenetrable for those who do not believe, intelligible for those who do. If, as she here somewhat petulantly admits, the Princess is unable to learn from the narrator, it is because she has not learned the lesson of the parody itself. She
who sees herself "à l'antique" in that other princess of the story, Andromède, has not reached her same wisdom, that is, the knowledge that life and stories are a series of surprises which must be accepted and met, "quelques grands yeux étonnés qu'elle vous fasse ouvrir à chaque tournant de route." The Princess is vain enough to see Andromède as a version of herself, but foolish enough to miss the moral of her story. As with Andromède before her education, the egoism of the Princess is a barrier to understanding both herself and stories. Small wonder that she "always forgets the moral."

The rhyming moralité, with its formulaic resemblance to poésie populaire, expresses the lesson that Andromède herself learned; but it holds a particular warning for the Princess, who disdains that most conspicuous monster of all, the parody itself, which, after Perseus and Andromeda and Beauty and the Beast, unexpectedly turns out, like the Monster, to be "le plus heureux des trois" and to have a life of its own.

By placing us readers in the company of the Princess hearing the story, Laforgue makes us see ourselves in her, and in this way issues a warning. A parody is only deceptive and false for those who take stories to be real, as the Princess did the tale told in the sky. We should learn the lesson of this story, and of parody generally, and take them all as fictions, to be told and even, like this one, retold. The rhyming moral itself implies the possibility of alternative versions: "un pauvre monstre," of which "cette histoire" and "celui-ci" are merely a particular case; other monsters, other parodies, remain to be created and may even survive their models.

But the parody has also taught us, through its structure and the narrator's name, to doubt the narrator himself. He is a parodist, and his words should be interpreted critically, however much they agree with the sceptical message of the genre—that stories are fictions and must not be taken as true or final. Indeed, in a radical turnaround that questions this, the very message of parody, Laforgue includes a final irony which ensures the parody's relentless criticism of itself. The narrator's confident assertion that the skies are unreliable for measuring truth, on the grounds that he and his Lyra have nothing to do with Lohengrin and Parsifal, is called into question by the easy and conspicuous pun on "Lyre": on the con-

"Lyre": on the con-
trary, the parodist's lyre has certainly had something to do with Lohengrin and Parsifal, just two stories previously, in the obviously related title, *Lohengrin, fils de Parsifal*. Perhaps proximity *does* signify a relation, after all, and the parodist's point about the falsity of stories is wrong. Moreover, his reasoning may be not simply faulty but, worse still, deliberately specious, and his intentions as deceptive as those of which the Princess first accused him. The parody refuses to make the charge openly; the narrator is, after all, distinct from the parodist of the other stories, and his point made in the ambiguous negative-interrogative form. But, given the highly contrived parallel, the connection cannot be missed, and the parody thus undermines itself. Laforgue takes the scepticism of parody to its furthest extreme, casting into doubt not only the truth of the original, but, more radically, the very scepticism of the parody. He thus creates the most monstrous *tournant de route* to confront even the sophisticated reader of parody, who with wide-eyed surprise can only carry on, taking the story as a fiction, even if it turns out to be *true*. 