The Grotesque in Jean Lorrain’s New
Byzantium: *Le Vice errant*

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It is a well documented if not generally well known fact that the word *grotesque* has evolved far beyond its etymology during the past two hundred years. Originally, in the decorative arts, it was conventional to apply the noun *grottesques* to ornamentation derived from frescoes and other embellishments that had been discovered in Rome in the grottoes or ruins of Titus’s palace during the late fifteenth century; and the term was originally spelled with two *r*’s. These bizarre ornaments, both the ancient Roman ones and their myriad imitations, were characteristically composed of divers motifs that, when superimposed, grafted on one another, or otherwise confused, struck the viewer as being illogical, amusing, absurd, or even distressing. In these decorative curiosities, referred to during the Renaissance as “artists’ dreams,” one often found, for example, a human figure, or part of it, evolving from some lower animal form which, in turn, appeared to be springing from a tree branch. The whole was frequently ensconced in wreaths of flowers, fruits, musical instruments, and birds. A surprisingly modern consciousness of the evolution of the term *grotesque* from such pictorial beginnings to its present-day banality is everywhere expressed in writings of the romantic period, so that the meanings attached to it today are scarcely novel or recent. For nearly two centuries now the noun *grotesque* has been losing ground in Western languages to the adjective, which is universally applied to anything that strikes us as absurd or incongruous. And so it is no abuse of the term to apply it to the fin-de-siècle lucubrations of Jean Lorrain, a novelist who reveled in paradox, whether in highly improbable dramatic concoctions or the most outrageous stylistic effects. Furthermore, in *Le Vice errant* Lorrain regularly labels “Byzantine” his and his hero’s efforts to graft beauty on ugliness, to surround the resulting improbable and monstrous hybrids with garlands of flowers springing from the luxuriance of an idealized Mediterranean setting.

One of the constants in this novel is the unrelenting juxtaposition of extremes on every conceivable level: structural, narrative, sociological, aesthetic, and so forth. To begin with the most general, we observe the extremes of romantic frenzy coupled with that sterile contemplation so typical of the
decadent attitude. Indeed, it is the curious mixing of the static and the active that sets Le Vice errant and its hero apart from Lorrain’s earlier efforts in the novel, Monsieur de Bougrelon and Monsieur de Phocas, and distinguishes it as well from several of its principal models, such as A rebours and Le Culte du moi. By taste and temperament Lorrain was much more inclined to follow a Barbey d’Aurevilly or an Elémir Bourges, and thus he strove instinctively, if not intellectually, to reconcile diametrically opposed principles (stasis/motion). He paid lip service to the concept of the beauty of inertia so assiduously advocated by Huysmans, Gustave Moreau, and the young Barrès, but in his deepest and most visceral reactions Lorrain always recognized the undeniable attraction of violent action so dear to romantic souls such as his mentor, Barbey d’Aurevilly.

If one can indeed speak of Lorrain’s efforts in the realm of the grotesque as having a Byzantine quality, this latter term must be taken only in the loosest historical and aesthetic sense. It is deemed appropriate in this study primarily because Lorrain himself uses it frequently in Le Vice errant and elsewhere, and secondly because it generally connotes, among many other things, a multiplicity of disparate influences and an interplay of different realms that lead to a fusion of extremes that some would dub crude, farfetched, or even monstrous. The crossroads of contradictory influences during the belle époque, a veritable New Byzantium, a hotbed of cross-pollination producing the most extraordinary flora and fauna, were, to Lorrain’s way of thinking, to be found on the French Riviera. This land of juxtapositions par excellence was Lorrain’s place of semiretirement and self-imposed exile from the turn of the century until his death in 1906. However, in this New Byzantium the aggressors and barbarian hordes—those idle rich and fortune seekers who flocked to Cannes, Nice, and Monte Carlo—were no longer the Turks, Arabs, or Huns, but Russian aristocrats whose opulence and wastefulness knew no bounds, British lords endowed with distinction even in perversity, overstuffed and puppetlike German nobles, and the American counterparts of all the foregoing, the “filthy” rich robber barons and their progeny. The list could be continued by mentioning astute if destitute Italians and calculating Balkan adventurers; many others would be required to complete the enumeration of demographic elements in the invading hordes. Thus constituted, Lorrain’s Riviera adds up to a heteroclite society reminiscent of the Byzantine Empire, a macrocosm faithfully mirrored in the microcosm of the villa and entourage of Prince Wladimir Noronsoff, hero of Le Vice errant.

Coming after the nauseous whiffs from the sewers of Octave Mirbeau’s Le Jardin des supplices, after the delectatio morbosa of the subjects popularized by such as Oscar Wilde, Maurice Barrès, Albert Samain, and Maurice Maeterlinck, Jean Lorrain was indeed somewhat foolhardy to attempt to “up the bid,” so to speak, in these chambers of horror and depravity. But he was not born and
reared a Norman for nothing, as his friend and literary executor Georges Normandy was fond of saying. Whatever the traits—virtues or vices—supposedly typical of Normans may be, Jean Lorrain was unquestionably endowed with a great measure of daring and bravado. And so, early in his novelistic endeavors, he grasped the necessity of avoiding the pitfalls of an exaggerated exoticism, whether historical or geographical, that might fail to arouse the jaded sensibilities of his reading public. Mirbeau's China, the Judaea depicted in Wilde's *Salomé*, even Flaubert's Carthage invite the reader to project into settings that are so far removed from him in manners and time as to appear to be almost pure fantasy. The reader's system of values and that extolled by the text have little or no common ground; the gaps of time and space are too great to be adequately bridged by the efforts of sluggish imaginations.

In *Le Vice errant*, however, as indeed in one of its principal models, *Le Crépuscule des dieux* (1884) by Élémir Bourges, stress is at once placed on certain aspects of the contemporary European world that, although they may be unfamiliar to the reader, nevertheless appear to be easy to admit of in various systems of values known to him and his society. Jean Lorrain, perhaps far better than most of his contemporaries in the French novel, was in tune with his reading public, thanks to his journalistic experience and the phenomenal success of his "Pall-Mall Semaine" in the Parisian newspaper *Le Journal*. As a reporter on the arts and a gossip columnist on all matters concerning high society—from which he was not entirely excluded, despite his ever-worsening reputation—Lorrain had learned to characterize the passing parade in brilliant but often biting and ludicrous terms. Perhaps the most important lesson of this apprenticeship for the mature novelist had been his recognition that through his eyes and pen his readers had delighted in living cosmopolitan and contemporary adventures, by proxy as it were.

When we consider *Le Vice errant* in the perspective of Lorrain's two best-known novels, *Monsieur de Bougrelon* and *Monsieur de Phocas*, it is at once obvious that he has a predilection for a central male protagonist whose habits and actions impress the reader as being grotesque. It is equally clear that a decided spirit of deep-seated rancor pervades *Le Vice errant*, and further that its complex architecture, the intensity of its lighting, and the variety of its themes take it far beyond the scope of the other two works. Yet *Le Vice errant* departs from them even more fundamentally by virtue of the great emphasis the author places on realistic geographical setting through the description of places, interior furnishings, and objects of many kinds. The Amsterdam and Paris settings of the two previous novels are perfunctory, resembling at times simple stage props. But in the palpable Mediterranean surroundings of *Le Vice errant*, the intrinsic beauty of places and the contrived beauty of artistic objects constitute an objective reality that ensures the desired contrast with the hero's deformed physique and personality. Realities such as these provide the condi-
tions needed to root this novel firmly in a soil from which the outrageous excesses dreamed up by Lorrain and his hero, Noronsoff, can spring. The setting, which is natural, is analogous then to the garlands we earlier spoke of in connection with the extravagant convolutions of grotesque decorative motifs: it sets off, it enhances that which appears to be most contrary to it, most unnatural.

This important geographic, even urban, dimension equates with a new dimension in social structures that the ailing and beleaguered Lorrain discovered on the Riviera after turning his back on a Paris he had dubbed "la ville empoisonnée." Prince Noronsoff, who constantly pushes one step further into extravagant conduct than did his literary elders, Des Esseintes (A rebours) and Charles d'Este (Le Crépuscule des dieux), rules like an enthroned monarch over his corner of this Mediterranean paradise. The word is not too strong: from his throne, a chaise percée strategically located in the baths of his villa, because he suffers from unrelenting intestinal disorders, Prince Noronsoff presides over a kind of cloaca maxima, that is to say over a stream of courtiers drawn from the heights and depths of Riviera society as Jean Lorrain conceived it in the cynicism and despair of his last years. This "Coin de Byzance," as the subtitle of the novel designates it, is none other than Nice and its surrounding area, a land of aching beauty both geographically and ethnically, but raped and polluted, as previously noted, by demonic groups of "invaders" who form the cast of an apocalyptic spectacle that serves as the field or backdrop for the mise en abyme of Prince Noronsoff's decline and fall. Such a setting is indeed fitting for what Lorrain calls "l'agonie d'une race"—that of the Noronsoffs—and it reflects on every hand the disintegration of Byzantium.

The grotesque character of this novel derives in large part from the ostentation and extravagance of the Russian colony on the Riviera whose fairest flower, Lorrain ironically states, is Wladimir Noronsoff. This detailed and highly unflattering study of a sick specimen delves into the background of neuroses that appear to be the result not only of a dissipated life but also of a weighty family heritage. The Noronsoff clan, since the Middle Ages, has been cursed with barbaric and criminal offspring; an evil spell cast by a vengeful gypsy many centuries past has periodically returned to plague members of the illustrious Russian family. And to all these woes Lorrain rather prophetically has added the influence of a certain Russian culture that seemed to him already to have spent itself and was indeed destined, as we know, to go into eclipse only a few years later. As though such an assortment of adverse factors were not enough, Lorrain adds to them for good (one might say grotesque) measure a Slavic temperament sullied with ennui and chronic, almost Baudelairean, spleen; the stigma of such a temperament transcends all notions of class distinction.

This central Russian focus is achieved through juxtaposition of other ethnic
groups, such as the Anglo-Saxon colony, whose mania and mores pale in comparison. The wealthy Lord Feredith, one of the principal English figures in this international pageant, is more bent on rehabilitating a disgraced poet and fellow countryman, Algernon Filde, than he is on displaying his wealth. Living on the fringes of these authentic aristocratic groups there is a bevy of other creatures whose titles are somewhat doubtful and whose wealth has long since disappeared. Some are Polish, like Countess Schoboleska. Lorrain has obviously modeled her after the intriguing Italian opera diva, La Belcredi, in *Le Crépuscule des dieux*. Both these intrepid heroines are excellent examples of the femme fatale, since they have but one goal in mind: to cajole their “masters” by lending their considerable talents to their masters’ every whim and thereby to triumph over the weak and dissolute male in the end. The ranks of this borderline aristocracy include other members such as the Hungarian adventuress called La Mariska. She distinguishes herself by standing up to Noronsoff and forcing him to a draw in their social jousts. Then there is “Doctor” Ytroff, of unknown origin, a veritable charlatan who ministers to the sick prince and other wealthy patients with the help of cheap amulets and old wives’ recipes. All the foregoing creatures have in common their intelligence, cunning, and extraordinary although disturbing beauty.

In a totally different social sphere the Byzantine palette of colors is intensified through the introduction of a cosmopolitan array of artists engaged to distract Noronsoff and dispel his boredom: dancers, actors, poets, singers of art songs, acrobats, jugglers, and so on. Representing a kind of Diaghilev *Ballet russe* before its time—*Le Vice errant* was first published in 1902—they add spice to stimulate the prince’s benumbed palate. All these artists and performers seek to obtain the favor of the wealthy and the powerful, and they market their talents with considerable spirit and success. By far the most brilliant member of this category is Algernon Filde, an English poet of real genius who is in disrepute in London because of his homosexuality. Filde demonstrates his many-faceted genius by conceiving and organizing exquisite artistic pageants, thereby assuring himself the patronage of the Riviera’s richest and most ambitious social climbers. At the opposite end of the artistic spectrum we encounter such pathetic creatures as the “human serpent,” a kind of circus performer who puts on a show during one of Noronsoff’s parties. By the very uncertainty of their social position, this conglomeration of performing artists amounts to a transition between the aristocratic groups previously mentioned and the common people of Nice, who appear only in the background but manage, nevertheless, to heighten the color in many a passage of this novel. The latter group is composed mainly of idlers, passersby, and what are so aptly called “rubbernecks.” Like the supernumeraries in a Cecil B. de Mille extravaganza, they are always to be seen when Noronsoff takes an outing and are always ready to ogle and to be astounded. Further still down the
ladder comes the category of shady and suspicious characters, and the list is quite a long one: urchins, beggars, gigolos, swindlers, bullies, panderers, prostitutes, usurers, pilferers, brothel keepers, and so on. Lorrain refers to them with undisguised admiration and affection as “la racaille” or “la tourbe.” They too actually make their way into Noronsoff’s stronghold perched high up on Mont Boron overlooking the Baie des Anges, seeking the crumbs of his legendary prodigality. Although these creatures generally remain in the background, theirs is a collective presence that occasionally threatens the precarious balance of forces by asserting itself as a mass, by intruding into the limelight, as in the near mutiny that breaks out during the abortive “Festival of Adonis” that Noronsoff’s courtiers had organized in an attempt to bolster the prince’s declining status as a party giver.

Sailors on shore leave in the port of Nice might be expected to belong to the category of racaille; in this novel, however, they depart from the stereotype and assume a major role as the characters Marius Robanol and Pierre Etchegaray. These two prototypes of the southern Frenchman, a Marseillais and a Basque, are the only “natives” who attain any measure of preeminence in the New Byzantium: “Fanfarons, communicatifs et hableurs, une joie dans leur œil luisant, la joie du matelot en bordée et du commerçant roublard en affaires, ils vont souriant aux servantes, l’air de pirates bons enfants. Tannés par les embruns, le teint cuit et robustes, ils ont gardé dans leurs prunelles le bleu profond de la Méditerranée et le gris changeant de l’océan; ils sentent le goudron, la liberté et le large” (p. 184). They are in every sense magnetic personalities, since they incarnate the charms of the land from which they spring. And Prince Wladimir loses no time in falling under their spell. They are not mercenary like all the others who frequent the prince’s retreat. The favors that befall them are accepted as providential; as for admiration, they are quite accustomed to that. Above all, their freedom of movement remains intact throughout the entire time of their favor at Noronsoff’s court. This fact alone would suffice to distinguish the two sailors from all the other favorites, including Countess Schoboleska, who invariably compromise themselves in this respect. This total freedom allows Marius and Pierre to disappear from the scene once the caprice that imposed them on the court has come to an end. These two healthy and seductive specimens incarnate the fundamental charm of the south, as Lorrain experienced it. Thanks to them and their robust natures, Noronsoff finally sees the ignominious character of all the others who contribute to his corruption through flattery, encouraging him in his bid for pleasure at any price. Such a formula would make a proper definition of Jean Lorrain’s conception of vice.

Incongruousness, that essential element of all that is grotesque, reigns supreme in both detail and concept throughout this Mediterranean mosaic. The color and pungency of sulphur blend with the scent of mimosa and heliotrope.
This novel is indeed a turn-of-the-century Satyricon, as Philippe Jullian has so aptly termed all of Lorrain’s work and career. And Lorrain himself underscores the analogies between the puppets in his novel and those who flit across the stage of Petronius’s famous narrative. In the banquets given by our Russian Trimalcion, exquisite truffle pâtés must share the table with an enormous and disturbing pastry construction from which a man emerges during the course of the festivities—stark naked. This for the benefit of guests who think they have already seen everything. Victor Hugo himself would have been obliged to give his approval to so faithful a realization of the principles extolled in his preface to *Cromwell*. On every hand in Lorrain’s novel the ugly and the beautiful travel side by side and sleep in the same bed.

Following the example first set by Huysmans, whom he admired and knew quite well for some ten years, Lorrain was bent on weaving important artistic elements into the fabric of his novel. He was not, however, to be satisfied with the awkward insertion of rather dry and static dissertations such as we find in many a page of *A rebours*. The artistic elements, Lorrain felt, must be associated as intimately as possible with the plot and action of the novel. This conviction and Lorrain’s determination to write an eventful narrative constitute unquestionable superiorities over the Huysmans novel, which was a “long shot,” as its author conceded, given the novelistic tradition up to that point and the almost universal desire of readers to be entertained as well as to be instructed. Lest it be supposed that Lorrain’s approach at incorporating art as a major structural and dramatic element in the novel was original, we must note that he appears to have drawn many of his ideas and techniques from Élémir Bourges. As early as 1884 Bourges had assigned to music, and specifically to Wagnerian music drama, a major role in the fabric and intrigue of his *Crepuscule des dieux*.

The most obvious analogous feature in *Le Vice errant* is eighteenth-century French painting, for Lorrain chose to have Prince Noronsoff embark on a foolhardy project destined to bring to life, quite literally, certain famous paintings by Fragonard: *L’Heureuse Illusion*, *L’Escarpolette*, and *Le Verrou*. And this recourse to art, which is the culmination of a series of frantic efforts to bolster Noronsoff’s worsening reputation as a barbarous débauché, succeeds in producing some of the most grotesque scenes in the entire novel. The plan is to dazzle the most snobbish members of the international set with an evening of gastronomic and visual delights such as they have never known. Wladimir would offer them living reconstructions of the three famous Fragonard paintings, reputed to be in the hands of an eccentric American collector whose villa, in nearby Grasse, is off limits to all the winter visitors on the Riviera, however exalted their fortunes and social standing. This event, then, promises to be a much-awaited revenge on the unapproachable collector, who has become the bête noire of all and sundry.
As a means of heightening suspense in the narrative this unusual plan succeeds, despite the fact that the event itself proves to be a dismal failure. Valiant efforts by the prince’s majordomo and several art specialists hired in Nice and Paris to mastermind the living reproductions of the Fragonard canvases do not result in the expected triumph. The chic public Wladimir has invited fails to materialize to witness a spectacle much more suggestive of art nouveau than the eighteenth-century aesthetic. To play the role of what Lorrain calls “les hommes jolis, pétulants et maniérés de Fragonard” the stage directors and specialists have chosen women in male costume, a solution regularly adopted in turn-of-the-century theatrical productions from Rostand to Richard Strauss.

This example of the travesti is symptomatic of a more general tendency in fin-de-siècle art, whether it be called décadent or art nouveau: namely that the ruling aesthetic principle seems obstinately bent on effeminizing the man and virilizing the woman. Traditional male traits, so sorely lacking in Noronsoff, are to be found abundantly in La Schoboleska, a most domineering woman who finally triumphs over the prince. But Lorrain, with a typically ironic twist, manages to have this strong woman’s apparent material victory directed toward ensuring the future welfare of her less-than-aggressive sons, two Adonis-like youths who have already been compromised by the prince and his court. This reversal of male and female roles is in itself incongruous enough to qualify as grotesque. It is, of course, hardly novel with Jean Lorrain, who, to some degree, was only following a trend very much in favor around 1880-90, the reasons for which are too numerous and too complex to examine here. The grotesque confusion of both moral and physical attributes of the sexes is frequently represented in the person of an ephebus whose appearance and manners invite doubt. One need only call to mind Saint Sébastien as represented by D’Annunzio, Debussy, and the boyish, flat-chested Ida Rubenstein; or the androgynous creatures invented by Joséphin (“Sâr”) Péladan for the edification of his Rosicrucian adepts; or the pale, listless heroes (heroïnes?) of certain pictures by Gustave Moreau. Other periods of French history show this confusion of the sexes following quite a different pattern. In the graphic arts of the grand siècle and even in interior furnishings of the régence and Louis XV styles a more robust and sanguine grotesque rears its head. Certain pieces of furniture executed by the master cabinetmaker Nicolas Heurtaut (1720–?), for example, are intricately carved and embellished with torsos of bearded old men sporting opulent breasts worthy of a young nurse-maid.

This type of grotesque, which depends on reversal and confusion of male and female attributes, is magnificently exemplified on the level of the temperament by Noronsoff’s own mother. The despotie old princess has learned to live with all manner of insult and injury coming from her raving and pleasure-mad
son; like a man she can "take it on the chin." The princess even endures disgrace and exile so long as La Schoboleska dominates Wladimir and rules over his demonic pursuits. Despite her advanced years and apparent calm, the old princess has a will as hard as steel and an inner passion worthy of her Italian forebears, the Borgias. She proves to be an adversary to reckon with, one who calculates like a chess player, knowing full well that with patience everything will come her way—everything, including death, which she had not reckoned on. Having finally recovered her powers over a Wladimir driven quite mad by pain and pleasure, she ends up becoming his victim.

During the closing pages of this abrasive novel the demented hero's outburst of rage against the tyrannical domination of his mother strongly suggests fictional sublimation on the author's part. This grotesque scene may well be read as the sensational confession of a man who, all his life, was chained to his mother, Mme Duval-Lorrain, whom he "kills" in this supposed and transposed description of one aspect of his personal drama. With an emotional intensity rare in his work, Jean Lorrain has dared to suggest the frustration and hatred that had so long been hidden under one of his most constant and successful masks, that of the loving and dutiful son. It is a mask he appears never to have taken off in real life, despite his frequent and notorious excursions off the beaten path of respectability.

The power of the final scenes in Le Vice errant derives from the unexpected resolution of forces that are so diametrically opposed and so incongruous that their juxtaposition fully deserves the label "grotesque." How can the reader suspect that a hero so consistently unattractive as Noronsoff has been will suddenly manage to touch his deeper emotions and engender compassion? Throughout the novel this Nero-like personage has exemplified depraved sentiments, eliciting ridicule and disgust from all quarters. How then has Lorrain managed the about-face in reader and narrator response? I believe it is by his decision to "force the dose" of grotesque ingredients to such a point that the intense spasms of the dying Noronsoff miraculously transform him by allowing him to attain truly heroic levels as the martyr of vice. He accedes to saintliness in much the same way a Jean Genet does, according to Sartre. Such an about-face might suggest transformation of the grotesque into the sublime; such, however, is not the case.

The final section of the novel, composed of several distinct scenes, builds to a paroxysmal climax in which release and resolution are heavily dependent on grotesque and even slapstick comedy effects. Noronsoff's last desperate acts are comparable to a last gasp, the ultimate spasm: "Dans un hoquet suprême il crachait enfin la vieille âme de Byzance trop longtemps attardée en lui" (p. 363). The extraordinary tragic intensity of these moments, particularly the imprecations hurled at his mother, is heightened or attenuated, depending on one's tastes and point of view, by the surprising detail of the mortal blow
sustained by Wladimir in a public marketplace at the hands of a fishwife, a femme fatale if ever there was one. She reacts violently to Noronsoff in defense of her boyfriend, a handsome fisherman whom Noronsoff has pursued all the way to home base. The consummate grotesqueness of this scene, in which the prince flounders to the pavement after having been slapped with a fish of the same name, ends en queue de poisson, as the French expression would have it:

C'était la première fois que Wladimir se risquait en pareil milieu. Il ne savait pas à qui il avait affaire; il ne voyait que son Tito. Il allait droit à lui et d'un ton de reproche: "Perché sei partito hieri? Forse nonsei contento di me, non sono stato sufficientemente generoso?"

Une formidable gifle était toute la réponse, une gifle pesante et gluante qui étoirdisait le prince et l'aplatissait, cassé en deux comme un fantoche, au milieu des merlans, des langoustes, des raies et des calamars de l'étal. La marchande de marée, empoignant une sole par la queue, en avait giflé le misérable. La poupée macabre et fardee qu'était Wladimir s'effondrait sur le coup, le Russe s'abattait tout de son long sur les dalles parmi les écailles et les vidanges, salué des huées de tout le marché. [P. 362]

So humiliating and comical an end does not, however, detract measurably from Noronsoff's demoniacal grandeur: quite to the contrary. Henceforth nothing can degrade one who is no longer degradable. Lorrain would like for him to elicit, if not admiration, at least the pity due to truly extravagant souls, those who have left the beaten paths (extravagare) and ventured far into the unknown. A dedicatory foreword included in the early editions of Le Vice errant, but later suppressed, eloquently expresses the compassion that Lorrain had felt in approaching the subject matter of this novel:

A l'hypocrisie et à la lâcheté humaines, à la féroce des honnêtes gens et à l'innocence des parvenus, aux défenseurs patentés de la vertu, aux souteneurs mariés, à tous ceux à qui la prostitution et la morale font des rentes, aux redresseurs de torts et aux épouseurs de filles, aux escarpes enrichis et aux matrones à qui la quarantaine a refait une virginité, aux détracteurs farouches de vices dont ils ont vécu, je dédie ces pages de tristesse et de luxure, la grande luxe dont ils ignorent la détresse affreuse et l'incurable ennui, convaincu et flatté d'avance des cris indignés que soulèvera chez eux la chronique navrante d'une effroyable usure d'âme.

Aux grands hommes de mon époque j'offre ce livre de pitié.

And so it becomes apparent that paradox presided over the genesis of this novel as well as over its realization. The true materials of the Byzantine grotesque are elements that strike us at first glance as being incompatible and irreconcilable; and Lorrain has exploited them according to a formula that suggests that his basic principle of composition is generation by shock. The Riviera, the New Byzantium according to him, is an Edenic setting that is particularly favorable, not only to plants that have been brought from the four corners of the earth, but also to the development of monsters of Noronsoff's ilk. It is the ideal theater, the chosen ground for all manner of predatory creatures
and, in a word, the dung heap most favorable to the development of the "fairest" flowers of neurosis and corruption.


3. Published respectively in 1897 and 1901. The Byzantine origin of the latter title is obvious, since Phocas was a well-known ruler of the empire.

4. See particularly Lorrain's "Barbey d'Aurevilly" in his Du temps que les bêtes parlaient (Paris: Courrier français, 1911), pp. 181–97; and the novel Monsieur de Bougrelon, whose hero was inspired by Barbey's eccentric attitudes and manners.


6. Many of these articles were published posthumously in book form under the title La Ville empoisonnée (Paris: Jean Crès, 1936).

7. The designation disappeared in later editions of the novel.


9. Lorrain was both dismayed and intrigued by Oscar Wilde’s recent fall and frequently alluded to him in his journal, in chronicles, and in the novels. A major character in Monsieur de Phocas, Claudius Ethal (note the overtones of “lethal” and “ether,” to which Lorrain was addicted), is a rather obvious hybrid suggesting both Wilde and the painter Whistler.


12. Emile Zola, though confused and deeply hurt by the “betrayal” implicit in the publication of A rebours, pretended to find something amusing in its meager intrigue and wrote to Huysmans about his concern lest the jewel-studded tortoise soil the Persian carpet. See Zola’s letter to Huysmans reproduced in Huysmans, Lettres inédites à Emile Zola, edited and annotated by Pierre Lambert (Geneva: Droz, 1953), p. 106 n.

13. Many novels of the variety labeled mœurs parisiennes had already set the tone. Prime examples are Rachilde, Monsieur Vénus, prefaced by Maurice Barrès (Paris: Félix Brossier, 1889); Paul Bonnetain, Charlot s’amuse (Brussels: Kistemaeckers, 1886); Dubut de Laforest, Le Gaga (Paris: Dentu, 1886); and idem, L’Homme de joie (Paris: Dentu, 1889).

14. See Joséphin Péladan’s “Ethopée” entitled La Décadence latine, particularly the novels Le Vice suprême, Istar, L’Androgynie, and Le Panthée.

15. Jean Lorrain is, of course, a pseudonym for Paul Duval. So totally did he become the personage of his mask that his mother and lifelong companion added the pseudonym to her own name and used it until her death, at the age of ninety-three, in 1926.