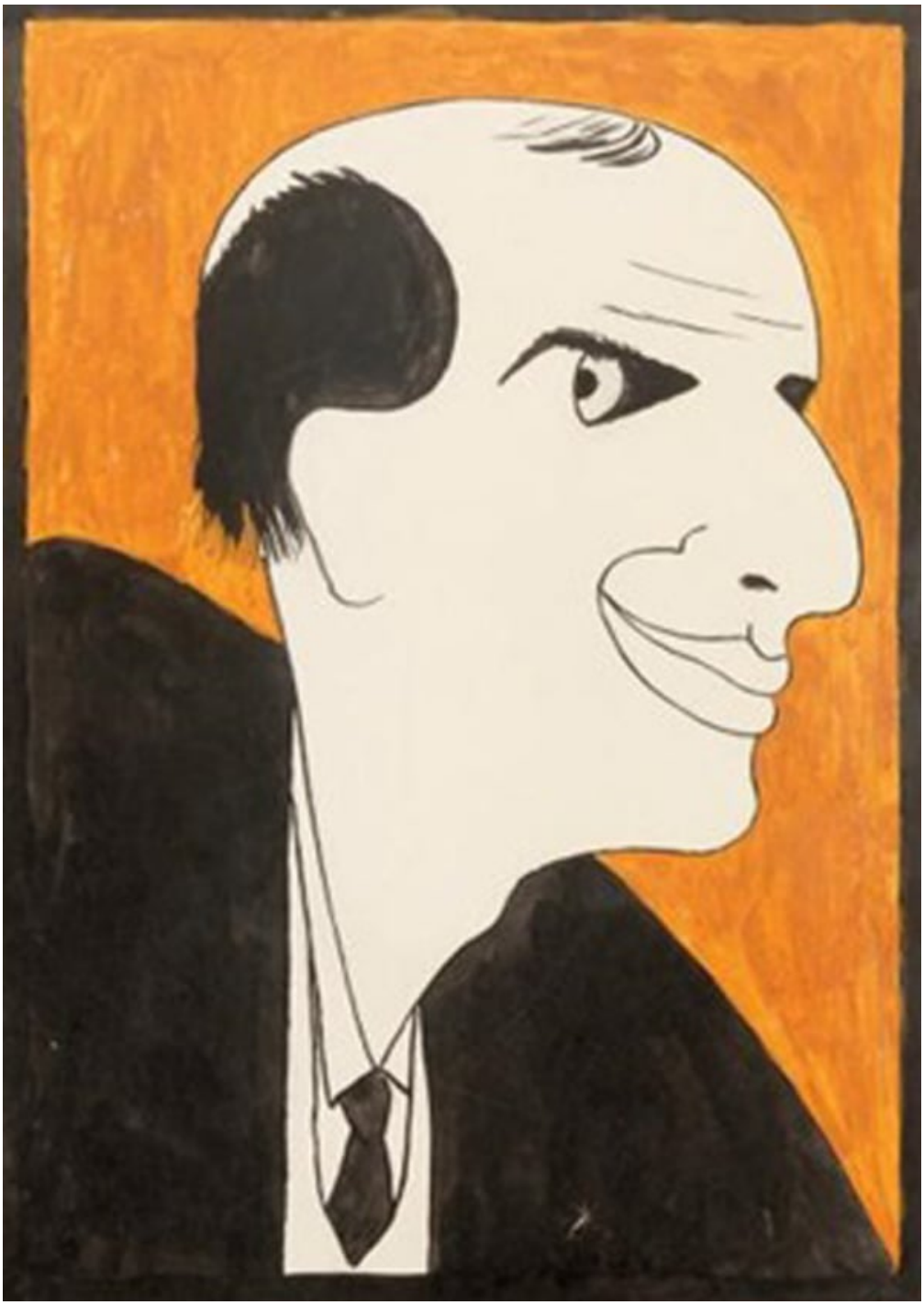
Marcel Schwob and the Subconscious World Below the Surface of the Sea

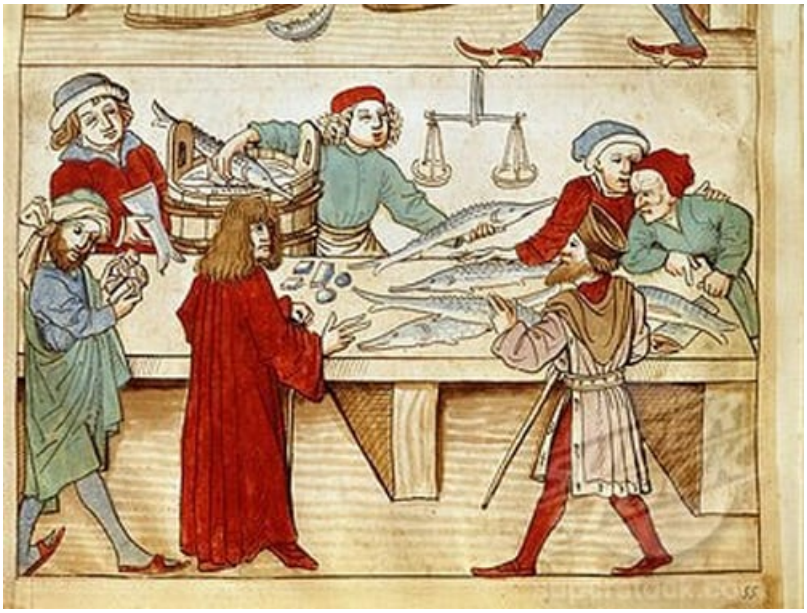
by Norman Simms (October 2018)



> *“Nos prairies, nos forêts de terre, dit Darwin, paraissent désertes et vides si on les compare à celles de la mer.” Et en effet, tous ceux qui courent sur les transparente mers des Indes sont saisis de la fantasmagorie que leur offre le fond. Elle est surtout surprenante par l’échange singulier que les plantes et les animaux font de leurs insignes naturels, de leur apparence.[1]* –Jules Michelet

> “The fields and forests of our dry land,” says Darwin, “appear sterile and empty, if we compare them with those of the sea.” And, in fact, all who traverse the marvellous transparent Indian seas are thrilled, stirred, startled, by the phantasmagoria that flashes up from their far clear depths. Especially surprising is the interchange between animal and vegetable life of their especial and characteristic appearances.[2]

Marcel (born Meyer André) Schwob (1867-1905) and his fellow student Georges Guieysse (1869-1889)[3] wrote a joint study of François Villon and his place in the vibrant poetry of the early fifteenth century *Etude sur l’Argot Français* (On French Argot) (1889). Though Guieysse committed suicide soon after publication of this book, Schwob spent the rest of his own short life studying Villon and the role of argot in modern French language and culture.[4] It is what the two young scholars said about street slang and its influence on the development of modern French literature, depth psychology and mentality[5] that gives us special insight into Schwob’s character and his place in literary history.[6]



At the end of the nineteenth century, most educated Europeans still knew little more about the hidden depths of their own minds than they did about the world below the surface of the oceans. For example, in Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, Professor Arronax is asked for his opinion about a giant whale sighted in various parts of the globe that was upsetting commercial shipping, before setting forth on his journey aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln on 30 April 1867. He could only say:

> The great depths of the ocean are entirely unknown to us. Soundings cannot reach them. What passes in those remote depths—what beings live, or can live, twelve or fifteen miles beneath the surface of the waters—what is the organization of those animals, we can scarcely conjecture.[7]

Similarly, in Victor Hugo's *Les Travailleurs de la mer* (*The Toilers of the Sea*),[8] written at approximately the same time, the narrator observes that fishermen from Gurnsey, sailors from other Channel Islands and fishmongers throughout Europe had virtually no knowledge about or interest in how and where those creatures lived before being dragged up in nets and brought to their markets to sell to the public. Until the hero of the novel Gilliat spends several weeks on a rocky outcrop in the middle of the British Channel, most of what was known was superficial, riddled with vague conjecture and

superstitious misinformation, and usually beyond the range of most people's curiosity. Gilliat cannot find words to describe what he experiences among the strange creatures and currents while trying to detach a steam engine caught on this tiny island—and what he discovers about himself during this adventure. He had a new perspective on his own unconscious mind but, of course, could not explain what he meant to himself or anyone else.

Like Gilliat, Alexander Selkirk (the model for Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe) was marooned for four and a half years on the island of Juan Fernandez. With none of Crusoe's middle-class pretentions or education, Selkirk went through a sea change during his isolation. Instead of attempting to reproduce the society he had lost by utilizing the bits and pieces of the wreck of the ship that threw Crusoe on his island, Selkirk started to see and feel and speculate about the small island where he had to adjust to the natural world, not vice versa. The modern biographer of this Scottish sailor, Diana Souhami, does not put words into his mouth or mind, but articulates his inchoate new consciousness. In fact, in 1709, at the time of his rescue, she has Selkirk reject precisely what Crusoe thought of himself, words placed in the speech of the rescuing ship's captain:

> Woodes Rogers called him the Governor of The Island and the Absolute Monarch. Selkirk could not explain that it was not like that. That The Island had governed him and was its own Monarch. That it would erupt again. That he had been subdued by the enfolding mountains and the unrelenting winds. That the true experience of being marooned was elusive, noumenal, that it was in his eyes perhaps but not his words. That The Island had cast him in on himself to the point where no time had passed, except

> for the silence between the breaking waves.[9]

In the second half of the nineteenth century technological advances raised new kinds of questions about the mind, what it could know and how, and the way it was organized.

In *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), Nathaniel Hawthorn tries to put together the forces of mesmerism, electricity, daguerreotype "sun-painting," telegraphy, steam trains, and imagery drawn from the phantasmagoria. At one point the narrator imagines the thinking brain as an emblem of a palace. It is a rhetorical figure, however, that must be deconstructed so that the mind is pictured beyond what can be seen, spoken of, or conceived:

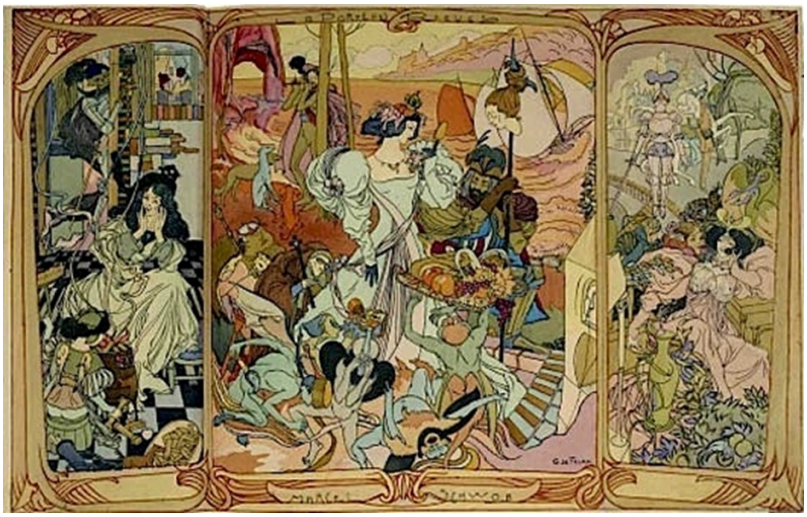
> With what fairer and nobler emblem could any man desire to shadow forth his character? Ah, but in some low and obscure nook—some narrow closet on the ground floor, shut, locked away; or beneath the marble pavement, in a stagnant water puddle, with the richest pattern of mosaicwork [*sic*] above—may lie a corpse, half decayed, and still decaying, and diffusing its death scent through the palace. The inhabitant will not be conscious of it, for it has long been his daily breath![10]

So close and yet so far, from the psychoanalytical ideas of repression of intolerable, repressed, and painful ideas, the unconscious as seething with unimaginable libidinal energies, in waves of deathly danger. Not yet, then, either the metaphor of an aquarium where the flora and fauna under the surface of the oceans could be viewed safely from without but at most as

water-closet known by its overwhelming stench and rotting powers.

The Mind as an Aquarium

> The hotel in Balbec is an immense and wonderful aquarium against whose wall of glass the working population of Balbec, the fishermen and also the tradesmen's families, clustering invisibly in the outer darkness, pressed their faces to watch, gently floating upon the golden eddies within, the luxurious life of its occupants, a thing as extraordinary to the poor as the life of strange fishes or molluscs . . .[11]



Schwob and Guieysse put together two important metaphors when dealing with the formation of the modern French language, the processes by which the argot of the neglected and forgotten people, like suppressed and misunderstood memories that surface in dreams and odd behaviours, and chemical changes in the medium of culture and consciousness, by which seemingly alien and threatening internal forces push their way into what is no longer familiar and constitutive—but rather uncanny and grotesque.[12] It is as though, as Marcel Proust narrates, the bizarre and unfashionable stare into the intellectual and social elite at a holiday resort the way superior people gaze at strange creatures in an aquarium. It

is a world turned inside out.

> This language has been decomposed and recomposed like a chemical substance, but it is not inanimate like salts and metals. It is constrained to live under special laws, and the phenomena which we note are the result of this constraint. [13]

The passage begins comparing the growth and development of this seemingly ephemeral non-literary language, *argot*—the dialect of uneducated people, hard-working folk, but also criminals, idle layabouts and other forgotten and anonymous men and women who swarmed in the early modern alleys and lanes of Paris—to a chemical process. From this perspective, the substance of the local dialects that mix among the many migrants who come from distant provinces and foreign lands to the capital at the end of the Middle Ages starts to break apart. Then the constituent fragments reassemble themselves in exciting ways: for there is a need to express novel ideas and unrecognizable feelings about unanticipated kinds of experiences, a burst of intellectual creativity that occurs outside the traditional authority of monarchy, church, and bourgeois and professional guilds.

The main constraint imposed on this emergent argot was the practical need for the people using it to understand one another and thus to communicate their own feelings and fears, while they sought to deceive and confuse outsiders, especially civil and judicial officials. Yet, what they meant by mutual understanding is not the same as scientific or philosophical logic, and their poetic energies did not disappear when the specific contexts and points of reference changed.

Schwob and his collaborator argued that in France, where only after the educational reforms of the 1880s did French of the Ile de France become the mother tongue for most people, its orthography and vocabulary standardized, but at the expense of regional, local and individual energy and inventiveness.[14] So, too, in the German-speaking lands of the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires conformity to urban elites crystallized late, again at the expense of the wide range of languages, dialects and argots that had energized speech and writing. Outsiders, like the German-writing Jew Franz Kafka in Prague, usually felt this loss most deeply.[15]

Nothing Ever is as it Seems to Be unless it is Something Else

> The real meaning of the plain text never resides in its literal, obvious meaning: the real meaning is carried by a second, parallel language, hidden but also conveyed by the first.[16]

Argot or jargon designates the spoken language of the *gueux* and the *gueuse*—the poor, the lower classes, the criminal gangs, the small professional groups, and other members of the "dangerous folk," homeless beggars, petty thieves, organized gangsters, wandering minstrels and jugglers. This new literary

language that self-consciously assimilates the argot and focuses on the forgotten and the anonymous, must be both flexible and tough, malleable enough to change as circumstances change but fixed enough to maintain some constancy and consistency of meaning as individuals and groups need to recall their experiences to one another.

> But in the late nineteenth century, artists and poets made "anti-languages" that used conventional language to criticize conventional language. They used conventional language as a weapon against itself, and as a weapon against a philistine bourgeois society and its bankrupt institutions.[17]

By definition, argot has to be independent of such external authority and yet, as it mediates older and newer groups, as well as new conglomerations of regional migrants, autonomous as well, it comes to define a new kind of emerging group. It excludes outsiders from learning things about the inner core that would be dangerous for them to know, yet appeals to artists and performers who come from the educated bourgeoisie.

Historically, as Schwob came to discover, just as the bourgeoisie was consolidating itself into a powerful and influential component of the modern world and developing its own educational and communications system to bind together a nation state, the argotic community, filled with aliens swarming across and through Europe was the first international culture to challenge the hegemony of the Latin-speaking Catholic Church. In France, they were often known as Coquillards, humble pilgrims on their way returning from Santiago de Compostella, marked by the cockle shell. They and similar outlaw gangs, known by some variant on this name that

took on criminal, sexually deviant, and politically subversive connotations, constituted a microcosm of what the post-Revolutionary society would become.[18]

By the time of Rabelais and the poets of Early Modern French literature, argot was drawn into the language of satires, picaresque novels, and comic romances. The older rhetorical categories and styles bumped against one another, congealed around the speech of ordinary people, and gradually became expressive of individual feelings and thoughts. Unconscious sensations of *self* came within the range of normative conversations, as decomposing patterns of formal behaviour fell apart.

> *Fun yídishe reyd ken men zikh nit ópvashn in tsen vasern.*
>
> Ten waters will not cleanse you of Jewish talk.
>
> —Yiddish proverb.[19]

Moreover, when Schwob argued that argot was a strong inner core to the dominant academic language by always refreshing and invigorating its range of tones, emotional subtlety, range of allusions and richness of ambiguity, he was describing the way in which Yiddish worked as a "jargon" for German, French, and other languages. It was an inner stimulant or resistance to academic and rhetorical, or later, to class-bound linguistic, dormancy. Argot, jargon, and a generic Jewish language constantly interacting with hegemonic controls provided the energy for individual expression.[20]

In other words, argot was not a small collection of deformed

and archaic terms, but a core of real language at the heart of the contextual speech that is always reacting to this symbiotic counter-text, something that great writers from Rabelais through Victor Hugo were quite aware of.[21]

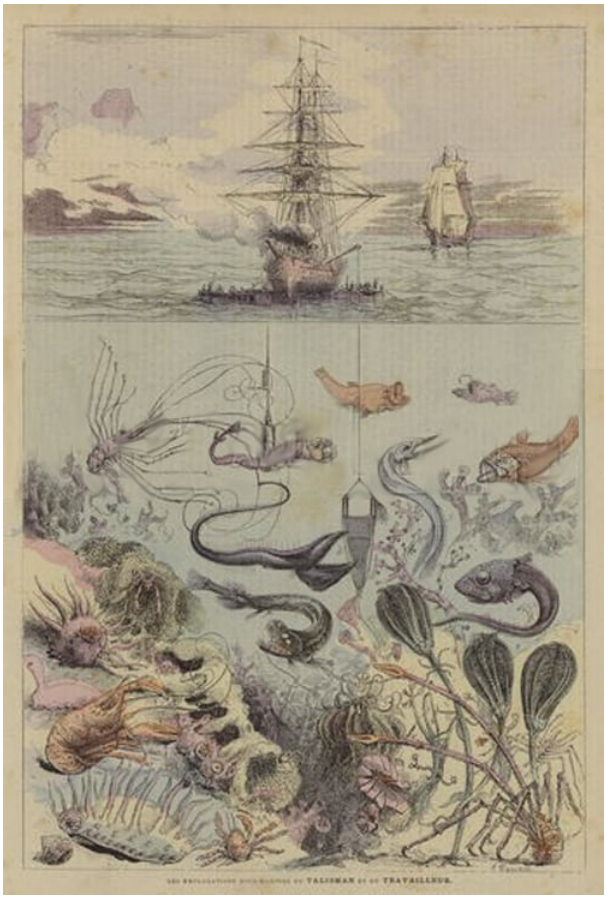
It is for this reason and by such means that, after Guieysse's death, Schwob continued the research into the history of French argot throughout his life. He was not what others thought he was, although occasionally he seemed to let the secret out, using the argot of others for the secret languages of his own family. He was, he once said, an *Archschlemiel*, that type of Jewish fool who is always blundering into the wrong place at the wrong time and disturbing the nice lives of those around him. The study of the Coquillards and François Villon was a trick, a mask, a hiding place for his own Jewishness, the colourful and subversive characters and their criminal activities serve as metaphors of the Judaism unseen or misinterpreted by his contemporaries and his subsequent commentators.[22]

According to de Meyer, when French audiences tried to make sense of Schwob's fictional writings and his self-presentation among the literati, these intellectuals and the academics of his time fumbled:

> *Nous voilà en présence d'un gigantesque jeu de transpositions, un entrelacement de tropes où cheque terme peut signifier son contraire.[23]*
>
> Here we are in the presence of a gigantic game of transpositions, an interweaving of tropes where each term could signify its contrary.

To be more accurate, let us substitute *grotesque* for *gigantic,* and keep in mind that in this trick of transpositions the ironic turns are not always contradictions or opposites, but more nuanced variations, shifts in focus and tonal dissonances. In the fact, the game is a palimpsest, that of hiding one meaning inside another, writing one context over several anti-texts and non-texts, and seeming to drift or fade away from signification altogether. Schwob does this *en catamini,* on the sly, with or without discretion. After all, one of the most distinguishing features of argot is its polysemiousness, its ability to carry many meanings at once, usually one that seems harmless and appropriate to the nominal situation and others that are less seemly, more dangerous, and highly shocking to the system.[24]

The Mysterious World Below Words of Consciousness



Schwob and Guieysse compared what they saw and heard to the dynamic and almost spontaneous evolutionary forces—only recently discovered barely a generation earlier by Darwin[25]. These forces were not yet refined through the science of genetics—driving this development to the very kind of chemical or organic processes that break down the barriers between the history of civilization, the development of dynamic psychology, and the role of Jewish thought in European culture before the Holocaust.

> The animals of the great oceanic depths collected by the expeditions of the *Travailleur* and the *Talisman* are eyeless, but on their bodies they have developed pigmented and phosphorescent spots.[26]

The scientific expeditions undertaken on the two steam ships mentioned were sponsored by the French Ministry of Public Education and occurred between 1880 and 1883.[27] New species of marine life were discovered living deep under the oceans where, in almost perpetual darkness, the creatures lost the ability to see but, in compensation, evolved chemically-glowing organs, allowing other living things that feed off them to locate them as prey.

At this point, the two young linguists drew an analogy between the evolution of the sea creatures and the development of Villon's argotic dialect.

> Likewise the argot, in the shallows where it moves, has lost certain linguistic faculties, and has developed others that take their place; deprived of the light of day, it has produced under the influence of the place that oppresses it a phosphoresce by which glow it lives and reproduced: synonymic derivation.[28]

Or, as David Suchoff puts it in regard to Franz Kafka's situation in the linguistic middle (muddle) of the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian Empire, where boundary-crossing in constituent states and in the local languages,

> This overtly political stance could then become the screen for the expansion of "small literatures," where writing could be "accepting of what is foreign only in reflection" (*Aufnahme des Fremden nur in der Spiegelung*)—an act that takes place critically, not in the "basement" (Keller) of canonical literary history but in "the full light of day: (*in vollem Licht*).[29] [italics added]

By "shallows," the two young authors of the study of argot in France, mean the racy, lively and dangerous environment of the early modern city, unprotected by feudal powers and unguided academic monitors.

Hence, many features of the old regional dialects and popular Latin could not survive the rapid changes and quick-thinking needed to function in a harsh life of catch-as-catch-can. Instead of such polished and sophisticated traditions of rhetoric, logic and poetic conventions, the street people—peddlers, whores, tradesmen, carriers, card-sharks, thieves, bullies, washer-women and so on—evolved their own short-cuts and secret locutions, slang expressions, terms of endearment and abuse, ways of measuring and evaluating the things in their lives. They were, like Selkirk, marooned in their own isolation from society—and, like the bohemian artists of the day found ways to communicate what had no words properly defined in the dictionary, no formal iconography whose history could be tabulated, and no acceptable institutional rituals of behaviour. The argot was, as with Selikirk, "elusive, noumenal . . . in [the] eyes but not in [. . .] words."

This new Parisian argot has a richness and diversity that a poet like François Villon could manipulate into his verse: not just many variations in synonyms, but a range of emotional tonalities and subtle allusions to the hostile forces arrayed against ordinary people every day of their lives.[30]

Meanwhile to the popular actors, artists, journalists, and writers with whom Marcel Schwob associated,[31] he seemed like a fish out of water, a Jew floundering around in the colourful aquarium that Marcel Proust imagined the fashionable soirées and aesthetic salons of the *fin de siècle*. One example from Proust describes a character:

> The Marquis de Palancy, his head turned sideways on his craning neck, his great round eye glued to the glass of

> his monocle, moved slowly around in the transparent gloom and appeared no more to see the public in the stalls than a fish that drifts by, unaware of the crowd of curious visitors, behind the glass wall of an aquarium. Occasionally he paused, venerable, wheezy and moss-covered, and the onlooker could not have told whether he was unwell, asleep, swimming, spawning or simply taking breath.[32]

Still further to the point, L.E. Böttiger writes of Proust's narrator:

> Early in *The Guermantes Way*, we find him lifting his eyes to gaze at an aquarium scene "amphibious men and women adapting themselves anew each evening to living in a different element from their day-time one, floated slowly to and fro in the rich liquid that after nightfall rose incessantly from the wells of the lamps to fill the rooms to the very brink of their outer walls of stone and glass, the displacement of their bodies sending oleaginous golden ripples through it.[33]

Very soon thereafter Böttiger remarks that

> the people in the opera boxes and the fish and sea plant of the aquarium being mixed to such an extent that they float together and you finally do not know whether he [Marcel the narrator] is describing the elegant plumes of the Princess or the corollas of subaqueous growths. And the aquarium returns in *The Fugitive* from his table in the hotel in Balbec he sees "all that populace crowded in the

> dark on the other side of the window, as in front of the luminous wall of an aquarium."[34]

So many argotic terms for the denizens of criminal, working class, and vagabond folk refer to fish—"*barbeaux, barbes et barbillons, goujons, brochets, harengs et merlans*"—a public ball or dancehall easily become an aquarium.[35]

But the image of the sea, its monsters and its hidden treasures, also is explicit in Marcel Schwob's own words as recorded in conversation with Willem Byvanck in 1891, when the Belgian visitor comes into the writer's studio crowded with books, tomes piled up on all the chairs and tables:

> *C'est ici comme dans les grands fonds sous-marins; on y voit des monstres qui devraient à jamais fuir la lumière du jour » ; « il poussa du pied dans un coin un gros in-folio ; « mais en revanche on y trouve des perles… »[36]*
>
> "Here it's like the very depths of the sea. You can see monsters who forever flee the light of day." He pushed into the corner with his foot a large folio volume. "But on the other hand, you can find some pearls here."

Through his long illness and peculiar habits Schwob is made analogous to Proust,[37] both authors swimming against the currents of their own time and nearly drowning,[38] and especially of being misperceived even by their closest and dearest friends. Misunderstood as important writers, as well as individuals suffering their way through the long diseases of their life, Proust the asthma that kept him isolated in a cork-ceiled bedroom, while Schwob was forever seeking a cure

to pneumonia and similar diseases of the lungs and chest.[39]

Fashionable Friends in the Literary Aquarium of the Night

> . . . pale spectres, terrible or smiling, dismal phantoms, uncouth masks, unknown faces, hydra-headed monsters, undefined shapes, reflections of moonlight where is no moon, vague fragments of monstrous forms. All these things which come and go in the troubled atmosphere of sleep, and to which men give the name of dreams, are, in truth, only realities invisible to those who walk about in the daylight world. The dream-world is the Aquarium of Night.[41]

Schwob was one of the earliest friends who came to the rescue of Colette when she was cooped up in virtual servitude writing books for her husband Willy. Schwob's "war mask of pale eyes and caustic tongue" belied his true friendship and generous heart. Yvonne Mitchell sums up his character, as manifest in this circle of artistes and real and pseudo-novelists, scientists, philosophers, and general all-around eccentrics:[42]

> He was a brilliant intellectual, one of the original Symbolists, an imaginative writer, a critic and an Anglophile.[43]

Joanna Richardson adds to his personality traits that

> He was a man of wide erudition and powerful imagination. He also had a flippant, ironic humour which delighted Colette.[44]

Yet this description hardly breaks the surface of who and what he was—and what he was to accomplish in his all-too-brief professional career. Like Franz Kafka and other Jews of the period, Schwob was a "peculiar" being, a talking animal, no more perceived to be a master of the civilized language than Dr. Johnson expected a dog to dance or a woman to think rationally.

If his friends and critics try to cut him down to size—as any uppity Jew deserves in a nation wracked with internal insecurities and racial prejudices—Schwob also shaped his life into a brief compass by whatever disease or diseases he seemed to suffer from year after year and his stories and essays were almost all edited away to as few words as possible. From the age of seventeen Schwob called his method *le cumul*. Unlike the English semantic zone which emphasizes what is cumulative,[45] the French, based on Latin roots, stresses simultaneity, as when a civil servant or political figure holds two or more offices or draws multiple salaries for the same job.

Schwob stripped away the seemingly permanent features of a person's appearance or personality, leaving the accidental and the trivial details in which their reality remained in different times and places, styles, and genres of recording. The cultural distances are vast between Schwob's recreated or fictional figures and their imaginary/imagined originals—centuries and millennia. Yet, as one sees in Talmudic discourses, backgrounds and foregrounds crystallize out of anecdotal memories, constructed homiletic exempla,

allegorical fantasies, and timeless moral or judicial pronouncements.

The *cumul*, then, is a stylistic device and a cultural habit of condensing meanings and rhetorical functions, deepening the range of implications, speaking in several discursive and generic spaces simultaneously. Citing Monique Jutrin, de Meyer argues:

> *Sa créativité, qu'il nomme "perversité", autorise le mensonge, qui, pour lui, déviant même une condition* sine qua non *de toute écriture de fiction.*[46]
>
> His creativeness, which he called a "perversity", legitimates the lie, which, for him becomes even the condition *sine qua non* of all fictional writing.

Not just fictional writing, but all creative writing, including essays, book reviews, and scholarly articles require ironic distancing between the things described or narrated and the texts produced, as well as the formulation of rational arguments and poetic enhancements. For Schwob to think at all, like the rabbis, he had to repeat and re-cast what he learned. But what he reproduced were not mere palimpsests, where a previous text is scraped away and a new composition inscribed over the never quite clean or smoothed-away parchment. But while Schwob sets forth this way of breaking down the boundaries between the positivist science of his own day and the Symbolist, decadent and mystifying aesthetics of the *fin-de-siècle* by adducing historical or imaginary classical authorities, the wit and insight manifest in the essays collected as *Spicilège*[47] (Gleanings) are much the Talmudic and midrashic techniques and the folk humour of Yiddish-

speaking Jews from Alsace he learned during the years he lived in Paris with his mother's brother Léon Cahun.[48]

Schwob's collections of stories are profound thoughts reduced to the background of cultural discourse, the intrusion of familiar speech into the rhetorical frames of philosophy.

> *Elle est la transposition, dans un langage autre que celui de l'art, des intentions que renferme l'œuvre d'art, et c'est comme l'inscription au fronton d'un temple qui donne le sens exact des bas-reliefs de sa décoration.[49]*

We have to translate this passage literally and then paraphrase it to begin to grasp its dynamic wit and its argotic dimensions. First the translation:

> It is the transposition, into a language other than that which art, with the intentions that enclose the work of art, and it is like the inscription on the façade of a temple that gives the exact sense of the bas-reliefs that decorate it.

Then the paraphrase that tries to catch the dynamic word-play and moral ambiguities of the text:

> It is the textual twisting and turning of one ordinary language into the artfulness of another whose intentions are to entrap and constrain the presuppositions of academic art and its fashionable variations. And this is

like the small curled up text inside the phylacteries worn by pious Jews. The *bas-relief*, instead of being a reference to a kind of slightly raised carving on slabs of stone that were fixed into the walls of the classical temple, now become the bottom-relief, laxative to a constipated mind behind (*derrière*) conscious wishes and explicit liturgical formulae.

Bound up on the Margins

> *Dans un contexte de rationalisation de la pensée, la défense de la littérature ne peut, pour Schwob, que passer par la littérature elle-même. Marginalisée, elle donne à rêver de ses marges. La dimension narrative de l'essai vise un rapport particulier à la sphère de connaissance où l'établissement des vérités empiriques se trouve doublé et subverti par un discours donnant accès à une réalité légendaire. Plus précisément, Schwob propose un art de la mémoire se développant dans un sentiment d'empathie a l'égard des figures négligées de l'histoire.*[50]

> In a context of rationalizing his thought, the defence of literature can, for Schwob, only be to pass through literature itself. Marginalized, it gives itself up to dream in its margins. The narrative dimension of the essay raises a particular rapport in the sphere of knowledge where the establishment of empirical truths find themselves doubled and subverted by a discourse giving access to a legendary reality by developing empathy in regard to neglected figures in history.

His models, never explicitly stated were, on the one hand, the rabbinical *midrash*—narrative, poetic, dialogic, and witty enhancements of sacred texts—recreated for psychological and aesthetic purposes. On the other, the phantasmagoria—a real or metaphorical display of light and shadows, emotional and cultural beams through various distorting mirrors and magic lanterns to evoke the feelings of myths and legends now discredited but still able to trigger memories of repressed pain and humiliation condensed into pathos-laden forms. These returns of the repressed would be the vital core of a new literature.[51] They would reconnect artists, writers, critics, historians, and scientists with the world they had lost, give voice to the lost children and make sense of the jargon and confusion of their recorded history—argot, tattoos, graffiti, empty and ruined graves.[52]

Yet, while Schwob was drawn into the circle of journalists, theatre personalities and novelists, he did not seem to be aware of how often they mocked him, made rude jokes about his Judaism, and showed no sympathy for his physical ailments. The rupture between him and his old friends was complete by 1900.[53] He was to friends like Leon Daudet, Jules Renard and the rest a phantasm disappearing into the mists of time.[54] He was already a skeleton.[55] His artistic accomplishments less understood than ever, they spoke of him as some kind of *escamoteur* (trickster or conjurer).[56]

> In February 1905, Colette's first friend from her earliest days in Paris, Marcel Schwob, died in his house in the Rue Saint-Louis-en l'Isle. He caught cold, in a few days was gone. "I saw him lying his coffin, thin and stiff, his arms laid straight alongside his body, his face on the little pillow very peaceful," Paul Léautaud wrote. "On his breast, *they* had placed a tiny branch of white lilac….We

> looked at him the last time. Then *they* shut him away”[57] (italics added).

So far as these commentators are concerned, they dressed his corpse like some typical fop or dandy and packed him off for disposal, as though he had no family, no community, no history, nothing other than the preposterous clown they saw.

But almost nobody seems to speak of his death or life in Jewish terms,[58] let alone his writing or his ideals. Michèle Sarde speaks of his “frazzled nerves and body” and “as one of those eccentric characters that thrived in the 1900s”.[59] Preposterous as he seemed and as painful as his life was to those who were his so-called friends, few critics, let alone his contemporaries, failed to take seriously his upbringing in an enlightened Jewish family, his key years of intellectual formation spent with his uncle Léon Cahun, and the allusive significance in his fascination with the argot and culture of the down-and-out, the marginalized[60] and the forgotten, as well as his loyalty to friends no matter how often they treated him poorly.

Conclusion: Lost in a Watery Wonderland

Late at night, and in the last pages of his memoirs,[61] Willem Byvanck walks home with Marcel Schwob who, like Virgil leading Dante, has introduced him to the cafes and bars of Paris, had conversations with and about the leading literary figures of the period. Schwob opens up about himself as never before. The two ghostly figures glide through the darkness of

the City of Light. Suddenly Marcel stops. He sees what he thinks is François Villon, the fifteenth-century poet of the forgotten and lost people and their argot. Just a short time before this apparition, Marcel had identified himself with a different phantom, Ahasuerus, the Wandering Jew[62]—a mythical image of himself that he then rejects, and speaks rather of Villon whose life and works he has studied ever since he and his friend Georges Guyiesse published their book on argot.

As Marcel Schwob and Willem Breyvack go through the shadowy streets of Paris, they seem to encounter not this quasi-mythical figure of the Wandering Jew, or even Marcel's first scholarly collaborator Guyiesse who could not face the realities of life; but rather Socrates, forever questioning and undermining the certainties of established elites. Then, on to the never-named but always implied founders of Judaism itself, Abraham who was told by God to "Get up go" (*Lekh l'chah*), leaving his father's family and profession as a maker of idols to find a Promised Land, and then Moses who left his home as the putative son of Pharaoh's daughter and heir apparent to the throne. Escaping into the desert with the nation of Israel where he eventually heard a voice in the burning bush, and reluctantly accepted the mission to lead his people back into the desert of wandering until they were to receive the Law and to enter the Promised Land. In each instance, they set the pattern to "*partir dans la nuit vers un avenir incertain…en route vers l'inconnu*"[63] (to depart in the night towards an uncertain future… on the way to the unknown).

Schwob's last collection of essays and stories, *Spicilège,* makes the tensions between science and literature, rational debate, and fictional embodiment into personalities "*parait dans un esprit de résistance à la marginalisation de*

littérature”[64] (appears in the spirit of resistance to the marginalization of literature). Leduc argues that

> *Schwob rêve d’une langue nomade qui se déroberait à toute tentative d’asseoir un sens unique.[65]*
>
> Schwob dreams of a wandering language that removes itself from every attempt to fix it in a unique sense.

Between 1896 and 1906, he kept writing regularly for his father’s newspapers. They were diurnal essays and comments on the daily news. The world was contracted into a miniature of itself, its tragedies miniscule, its perspective seen inside out.[66] He also collected and re-organized a small selection of creative essays he called *Spicilège*.[67]

In these gleanings he expressed not only his need to reconcile positivist science and impressionist art, but also to find the individuality of selfhood—like the crypto-Jew that Montaigne had invented in his *Essais.* These were creative attempts to trawl from the bottom of the oceans the life-forms until then forgotten or unrecognized. In the sense of fictional, legendary, and midrashic narratives, they are expressions of an unconscious world “twenty-thousand leagues below the sea,” formulated a language, an argot, that hides its own wit and oneiric phantoms. Rather than the transparency of language to the natural world of facts, Schwob invented a literary rhetoric outside of academic discourse that gave substance to thought and allowed ideas to vibrate beyond familiar tonalities. [68]

NOTES

[1] Jules Michelet, *La Mer*, 5^{em} ed., Livre II, « La Genèse de la mer », ch. IV “Fleur de sang” *(*Paris : Michel Lévy Frères, 1875) p. 50. Compare the discussion based on this and similar passages in Lionel Gossman, “Michelet and Natural History: The Alibi of Nature” in *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* Vol. 1345 No.3 (September 2001) pp. 283-333. See also Hiram Caton, “Getting our History Right: Six Errors about Darwin and his Influence” *Evolutionary Psychology* 5:1 (2007) 52-69.

[2] Jules Michelet, *The Sea* (Paris: Hachette and New York: Hudd & Carlton, 1861).

[3] Marie-Françoise Bastif-Lesourd, “Biographies d’amis de l’écrivain Breton Emile Souvestre” *Lesamisdesouvestre o*nline at https ://lesamisdesouvestre.wordpress.com/ pierre-eugene-guieysse-18013-1870. A schoolmate of Schwob’s at the lycée Henri IV, Georges had been a sickly and sensitive adolescent. The Guieysse and Schwob families lived in the same building at 63 Blvd St Michel and often holidayed together in Brittany. Marcel wrote the necrology for his friend in the Schwob family newspaper *Le Phare de la Loire* (24 May 1889).

[4] When a close friend and associate shoots himself in the heart, the impact on the youthful survivor is profound and marks the rest of his life. Commentators seem to dismiss this trauma in Schwob’s early years with the same nonchalance as they do the death of other close members of his family. It is as though, having set up Maurice as a kind of superficial buffoon, he really had no emotional or psychological life, whether it manifested itself neurotically in his own sustained

illness or artistically in the choice of subjects he wrote about or the style he developed for himself. At least de Meyer makes some effort to align Schwob's journalistic report on an execution by guillotine seen personally and a fictional account in one of his stories (*Marcel Schwob, Conteur de l'imaginaire*, pp. 27-30.

[5] Jean Graven, *L'argot et le tatouage des criminels : étude de criminologie sociale* (Neufchâtel : Editions de la Balconnière, 1962) p. 14.

[6] I am citing the translation made by Dylan Kenny in "Marcel Schwob and Moody History" JHI Blog (23 February 2015) online at http:jhblog.org/2015/02/23/marcel-schwob.

[7] Jules Verne, *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1869-1870), *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (London : Egmont Books, 2001) p. 18.

[8] The French original appeared in 1866. Victor Hugo, *Toilers of the Sea,* trans. Ernst Rhys (New York: D.P. Dutton and London: Dent & Sons, 1911). An alternative title sometimes is used: *Toilers of the Deep*.

[9] Diana Souhami, *Selkirk's Island* (London: Quercus, 2013) p. 112. The original date for this novel is 2001, again at that crucial demarcation line, and we therefor take the author's words about Selkirk's inability to articulate his own thoughts as indicative of the same kind of crisis Schwob experienced.

[10] Nathaniel Hawthorn, *The House of Seven Gables*, ed. Andre Norton (np: Aerie Books, 1988) p. 236.

[11] Marcel Proust, *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, cited by Clément Paradis, «From the Hotel to the Brothel: Proust's Capitalist Ballet» Clément Paradis (3 October 2015) online at http://www.clement.paradis.com/essays/2-15/10/from-the-hotel-t

o-the-brothel-prousts-capitalist ballet.

[12] Francis Carcot, «Preface» to Jean-Marie Cassagne and Pierre Devaux, *L'Argot du "Mileiu",* nouvelle edition, revue et augmentée. Paris: Albin Michel. 1948.

[13] Marcel Schwob and Georges Guyiesse, *Etude de l'argot française* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1889). The essay first appeared the previous year in *Memoires du Society de Paris*, tome VII.

[14] Staller, "Babel" pp. 333-334.

[15] Suchoff, "The Breakthrough to Jewish Languages" pp. 68, 72, etc.

[16] Staller, "Babel" 335.

[17] Staller, "Babel" 348.

[18] W.G.C. Byvanck, *Un Hollendais a Paris en 1891* (Paris: Perrin et C, 1892) pp. 221-222. Geertrudus Cornelis Willem Byvanck (1848-1925) came to Paris in 1891 to study the manuscript collections as part of his job with the National Library of the Netherlands, undertaking a major cataloguing project during the 1920s and 1930s See "Cataloguing the Illuminated Manuscripts of the Koninklijke Bibliotheek and the Museum Meermanno-Westreenlianum: From Card File to the World Wide Web" online at http://manuscripts.kb.nl/information.

[19] David Suchoff, "The Breakthrough to Jewish Languages: 'The Judgment'", Chapter 2, *Kafka's Jewish Languages: The Hidden Openness of Tradition* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012) p. 63.

[20] Bryvanck, *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891*, pp. 292.

[21] Bryvanck, *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891*, p. 293, note 1.

[22] In modern American culture, the Jewish music hall entertainer adopted or was forced to disguise himself in blackface (Eddie Cantor), play the "perfect fool"(Ed Wyn) or street clowns (The Marx Brothers or The Three Stooges) as a way of expressing his or her real self.

[23] Bernard de Meyer, *Marcel Schwob, Conteur de l'imaginaire*, PhD Thesis (Capetown, South Africa: University of Capetown, 2002) p. 60.

[24] De Meyer, *Marcel Schwob, Conteur de l'imaginaire*, p. 98.

[25]On the complexities of this statement, see A.N. Wilson, *Charles Darwin: Victorian Mythmaker* (London: John Murray, 2017).

[26] Cited by Dylan Kenny, "Marcel Schwob and Moody History" *JHI Blog* online at http://jhiblog.org/2015/02/23/marcel-schwob-and-moody-history

[27] The leaders of these investigations were Alphonse Milne-Edward (1835-1900), Edmond Perrier (1844-1921), E.-L. Bouvier (1856-1944) and Charles Gravier (1865-1937). List of relevant vessels and expedition leaders in «Details—Expéditions scientifiques du *Travailleur* et du *Talisman* pendant les années 1880, 1881, 1885, 1882, 1883, etc» online at https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/ bibliography/ 98313#/summary

[28] Kenny, "Marcel Schwob and Moody History".

[29] Suchoff, "The Breakthrough to Jewish Languages" p. 65.

[30] Natasha Staller, "Babel: Hermetic Languages, Universal Languages, and Anti-Languages in Fin de Siècle Parisian

Culture” *The Art Bulletin* 76:2 (1994) 334.

[31] Among them can be listed Catulle Mendès, Stéphane Mallarmé, Rémy de Gourmont, Henri de Régnier, Parul Verlaine, Claude Débussy, Jean de Tinan, Pierre Louÿs, Camille Flammarion : see Michèle Sarde, *Colette: Free and Unfettered*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Michel Joseph, 1978) p. 109. Originally, *Colette: Libre et Entravé* (Paris: Editions Stock, 1978).

[32] Cited in Inge Crosman Wimmers,”Proust’s Palimpsest: Multiple Frames of Reference in *A la recherche du temps perdu*” Chapter Four in *The Poetics of Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988).

[33] L.E. Böttiger, “Remembrance of Disease Lifelong: Marcel Proust and Medicine” *British Medical Journal* 267: 6496 (3 December 1983) p. 1690.

[34] Böttiger, “Remembrance of Disease Lifelong” p. 1690.

[35] Graven, *L’argot et le tatouage*, p. 17.

[36] Byvanck, *Un Hollendais a Paris en 1891,* p. 220.

[37] Bernard de Meyer considers Schwob had five years of relative calm in which to write his best and most influential works; *Marcel Schwob, Conteur de l’imaginaire*, p. 17.

[38] Suchoff, “The Breakthrough to Jewish Languages” p. 76. These diseases may, however, be taken in psychoanalytic terms as inverted symptoms for persistent problems in his nether regions of the body, the places below politeness, *die schändlichen Niederungen* (“the shameful lowlands of writing”).

[39] Suchoff, “The Breakthrough to Jewish Languages” p. 63.

[40] Caricature by Sacha Guitry, reproduced in Yvonne Mitchell, *Colette: A Taste for Life* (London: Weidenfeld and Niocolson, 1975) p. 41. Alexandre Georges Pierre Guitry (1885-1957). Under the occupation, Russian-born Guitry was probably more naïve than nasty, and occasionally able to support his Jewish colleagues.

[42] According to Sarde, "Schwob was enormously eccentric and cut a somewhat preposterous figure, going about everywhere with his Chinese nurse, the scholarly Ting, whom he had taken on after the closing of the Chinese Pavilion at the World's Fair and who acted as his manservant" (Sarde, *Colette: Free and Unfettered,* p. 125).

[43] Mitchell, *Colette; A Taste for Life,* p. 41.

[44] Joanna Richardson, *Colette* (New York: Dell, 1983) pp. 10-11.

[45] However, see what de Meyer says about Schwob the storyteller who prefers to add his own moral interpretations, descriptive details and literary or historical allusions to what has come before (*Conteur de l'imaginaire*, p. 58).

[46] De Meyer, *Marcel Schwob, Conteur de l'imaginaire*, p. 32.

[47] Marcel Schwob, *Spicilège* (Paris: Société du Mercure de France, 1896).

[48] Norman Simms, *Jews in an Illusion of Paradise: Dust and Ashes, Volume Two—Falling out of Place and into History* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017) pp. 14-16. Also see de Meyer, Marcel Schwob, *Conteur de l'imaginaire*, p. 59.

[49] Bryvanck, *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891,* p. 241.

[50] Simon Leduc, *Narrativité de l'essai : Les arts de la mémoire dans* Spicilège *de Marcel Schwob* (Université du Québec a Montréal : Mémoire présente comme exigence partielle de la Maîtrise en Etudes Littéraires, January 2010) p. v.

[51] Leduc, *Narrativité de l'essai,* p. 6.

[52] Leduc, *Narrativité de l'essai*, p. 7. These ideas hinted at in Leduc's thesis will be discussed at greater length in further essays on the writers Schwob mentions in his Gleanings, as well as in short studies of Charcot and the dreams and dances of hysteria that run parallel to the insights of Freud and other pioneering psychoanalysts.

[53] Jérusalem, « Stevenson, Schwob, Renard, Echenoz : des œuvres filiales ? » p. 6.

[54] Bryvanck, *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891,* p. 242.

[55] Christine Jérusalem, "Stevenson, Schwob, Renard, Echenoz: des œuvres filiales? "in *Retours à Marcel Schwob : D'un siècle à l'autre (1905-2005)* (Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1907) p. 6.

[56] Bryvanck, *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891*, p. 244.

[57] Sarde, *Colette: Free and Unfettered,* p. 236.

[58] De Meyer makes an occasional reference, but sees Schwob's Jewishness as at best an incidental background detail (*Conteur de l'imaginaire*, p. 12).

[59] Sarde, *Colette: Free and Unfettered*, p. 125.

[60] Karl D. Uitti, "Villon's 'Le Grand Testament' and the Poetics of Marginality" *Modern Philology* 93:2 (1995) 139-160.

[61] Bryvanck, *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891,* « Retour dans la nuit » pp.288-305.

[62] Henry Meige, *Le Juif-Errant a la Salpetrière: Etude sur certains névropathes voyageurs* (Paris: L. Bataille et C[ie], 1893).

[63] Bryvanck, *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891*, p. 304.

[64] Leduc, *Narrativité de l'essai*, p. 12.

[65] Leduc, *Narrativité de l'essai,* p. 34.

[66] Bryvanck, *Un Hollandais à Paris en 1891*, p. 253.

[67] Leduc, *Narrativité de l'essai*, p. 55.

[68] Leduc, *Narrativité de l'essai,* p. 3.

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