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Unpacking His Library: Robert de Montesquiou and the Esthetics of the Book in *Fin-de-siècle* France¹

WILLA Z. SILVERMAN

“. . . que furent les volumes/Par moi vêtus d'étoffe et mis en un écrin?"

—Robert de Montesquiou, "Prière du Relieur," *Prières de tous* (1902)

"O bliss of the collector, bliss of the man of leisure!"

—Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting" (1931)

In the image of its legendary owner, the poet, aesthete, and dandy *extraordinaire* Robert de Montesquiou, the posthumous sale of his library in April 1923 and April 1924 at the Hôtel Drouot became a notorious literary and society happening. As its three-volume sale catalog, prefaced by Maurice Barrès and embellished with engravings of Montesquiou's distinctive bat emblem, attests, the collection of 3727 volumes, manuscripts, and bindings belonging to this "bibliophile distingué" (Lièvre 369) featured many gems.² These included, for example, a five-volume, 1678 edition of La Fontaine's *Fables* (31, first sale; N.a.f. 15229), which fetched one of the sale's highest prices.³ What created an even greater stir, however, was the insertion of letters and dedications to Montesquiou in several hundred of the volumes by contemporary authors, and their subsequent sale. Some of these items revealed highly personal, often embarrassing details of authors' lives, as with the 95 letters and other documents describing the final years of Verlaine.⁴ Others exposed the attitudes of exaggerated obsequiousness and delirious admiration often bestowed on the count by those in the rarefied salons and *cénacles* he frequented.

A notable bibliophilic, literary, and society event, then, the sale also occasioned public reflection on the possible deeper significance of this library. What, as Pierre Lièvre mused in the columns of *La Revue Hebdomadaire*, did Montesquiou's library *show*? One set of answers to this question, in fact the one most frequently developed by Montesquiou's contemporaries, leads into the

domain of literary relations and literary history. In this view, the many volumes in the library by Marcel Schwob, Remy de Gourmont, Georges Rodenbach, Pierre Louÿs, Stéphane Mallarmé, and others in their circle, all bearing laudatory inscriptions from the authors, are revealing indicators of Montesquiou's importance as a poet and esthetic guide for the Symbolists. A related set of answers to the question of the library's documentary significance opens onto literary biography. Focusing exclusively on the numerous *dédicaces* to Montesquiou, this approach attempts to tease out, as one critic suggested, their layers of "courtoisie . . . bienséance . . . intérêt . . . toutes sortes de convenances et d'obligations . . ." as well as their "moquerie secrète" and their "ironie déguisée" (Lièvre 370), in order to probe the complex poses that Montesquiou and many of those in his literary, artistic, and society orbits adopted toward one another.

The study of Montesquiou's library may thus hold great value for literary historians and biographers seeking to study his position within a literary network or to clarify the nature of his relations with other writers.⁵ However, it is also possible to propose a less traditional "reading" of Montesquiou's library from the combined perspectives of both the history of the book and esthetics. For book historians, especially those interested in one of its crucial components, the history of reading, the catalog of a personal library can be a privileged document. It can serve, as Robert Darnton suggests, as a "profile of a reader," allowing us to "inspect the furnishings" of a reader's mind ("History of Reading," 162) – even if readers rarely read all the books in their libraries, as the many volumes with uncut pages in the Montesquiou catalog attest. Personal libraries such as Montesquiou's, in conjunction with other documents, may also help clarify not only what, where, and when individuals read, but also how they were affected by their readings (Darnton, "History of Books," 134).

In Montesquiou's case, these questions of social practices and *mentalités* cannot easily be separated from a consideration of his esthetics. Both his library and his attitudes toward the printed word and its physical *supports* – not only binding, paper, illustration, and typography, but also the furniture and accoutrements of reading – conveyed his conception of beauty. Like his passion for Gallé vases, Lalique perfume bottles, and Japanese floral arrangements, his personal variety of bibliophilia reveals his fascination with the suggestive powers of interiors and their furnishings, his taste for original and unique objects, and his promotion of the decorative arts and of luxury craftsmanship as they pertained to the book. A study of his bibliophilia, an area of his esthetic pursuits that has received surprisingly scant attention from critics,⁶ lends further support to the recent reappraisal of his role as a foremost esthetic guide and educator of his contemporaries.⁷ No longer simply an icon of *fin-de-siècle*

decadence, derided for his bad poetry and ridiculous vanity. Montesquiou has now emerged, in Antoine Bertrand's words, as "un extraordinaire 'animateur' de la vie artistique de son temps" (774), even as "un prodigieux initiateur de la civilisation moderne" (775). In the end, unpacking Montesquiou's library (to borrow a formulation from Walter Benjamin) – and also taking a look at related correspondence, memoirs, accounts by contemporaries, iconography, and other documents – can reveal much about this notable reader, designer, recipient, giver, and of course, writer of books, and about the connection between his book-related social practices and his esthetics.

BOOKS

As detailed in its sale catalog, the contents of Montesquiou's library, while remarkably diverse, are nevertheless dominated by works of prose and poetry by his contemporaries. Also represented, however, are "auteurs anciens," foreign literature, history, and memoirs, literary criticism, fine arts, illustrated books, and "sciences diverses" (Bertrand 801-07). But an expanded, annotated version of the catalog exists in the 96 of 369 volumes of Montesquiou's papers and related documents devoted exclusively to his library. Most likely constituted after his death by his secretary, Henri Pinard, these volumes are now housed in the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Into what closely resemble scrapbooks, each notice from the printed sale catalog has been cut and pasted sequentially. Following each notice are documents belonging to Montesquiou – iconography, letters, notes, his own writings – which appear to illuminate the significance specific books held for him. A reading of the sale catalog and its documentary intertexts, contained in the scrapbooks, helps identify several often overlapping criteria influencing a book's worth for Montesquiou: its authorship, its usefulness as an *instrument de travail*, its provenance, and its uniqueness as a material object.

Montesquiou often valued – or disparaged – a book because of his relationship to its author. Thus, for example, catalog descriptions of first editions of works by Octave Mirbeau, whom Montesquiou admired, alternate in the scrapbook with photographs of Mirbeau, correspondence between Mirbeau and Montesquiou, the count's notes on Mirbeau, and the text of Montesquiou's flattering poem about the author of *Le Jardin des supplices* (492-93, first sale; N.a.f. 15250). Yet while these *pièces annexes* sometimes echo the cordial tone of an author's dedication of a book to Montesquiou, as in the case of Mirbeau, at other times they sharply undercut a flattering dedication. A particularly stinging example of this discordance is the notice concerning *Saphyr*, an 1897 novel by the Catholic writer Charles Buet, dedicated to Montesquiou "en témoignage de sincère et vive sympathie littéraire." Following Buet's deferent dedication,

noted in the sale catalog, is this elliptical, damning verse, included in the scrapbook: “Buet/Puait” (884, second sale; N.a.f. 15295). Some books thus connoted for Montesquiou the friendship, complicity, professional admiration – or disdain – he felt toward their living authors; they embody a private pendant to the type of public, verbal fawning or trashing for which Montesquiou was notorious. Other books clearly earned a place in his library because of his veneration for their deceased authors. Notices for two dozen volumes by Victor Hugo, for instance, are followed in the scrapbooks by portraits of Hugo and his daughter Adèle, letters from Judith Gautier to Montesquiou praising Hugo, and copies of Fauré’s musical settings of Hugo’s poems (1495-1508, second sale; N.a.f. 15306).

Montesquiou’s attachment to many volumes in his library thus derived from his affection for their authors, a feeling often enhanced when these books were gifts, as were at least 700 volumes in his collection. His relationship to other works was primarily utilitarian. Known for amassing documentation before undertaking a writing project (Bertrand 731), he appears to have used these works as *instruments de travail*. Thus the title “Le Laboratoire du poète” aptly designates the 27 scrapbooks devoted to works in Montesquiou’s library on Japanese art, on fashion, music, painting, theater, *fêtes*, *arts de la table*, and other of the many passions he wrote about (N.a.f. 15265-N.a.f. 15292). At least 17 volumes on Versailles in Montesquiou’s library, for example, including seventeenth- and eighteenth-century works on the château, its gardens, fountains, kitchens, and architecture, buttressed in the scrapbooks by several hundred photographs and engravings of the château from Montesquiou’s collection (652-59, first sale; N.a.f. 15267) helped the poet craft his 93 “sonnets historiques” about Versailles, published as *Les Perles rouges* (1899). Similarly, works on olfactory pleasures, such as *Des odeurs des parfums et des cosmétiques* (1877), likely provided background reading for the report he delivered on the perfume exhibit at the 1900 Paris *Exposition universelle*, later entitled *Pays des aromates* (644-51, first sale; N.a.f. 15266). A dozen works on gemstones, among them Nicolas Boscheron’s 1788 *Dictionnaire des diamants, rubis, perles et généralement de tout ce qui est compris sous le titre de Pierreries* (660, first sale; N.a.f. 15268) provided sustenance for Montesquiou’s dithyrambic writings on the master jewelers René Lalique and Henri Vever, whose own three-volume work on *La Bijouterie française au XIX^e s.* (1900) belonged to Montesquiou’s library.⁸ And guides to cultivating roses and orchids likely served as documentation for Montesquiou’s writings on one of his foremost protégés (and sometimes collaborator), the glassmaker and *ébéniste* Emile Gallé, whose own 1894 work on floriculture the count possessed as well (645, first sale; N.a.f. 1526). Indeed, the extraordinary diversity and eclecticism of his book collection,

as Antoine Bertrand notes, bear the marks of an “insatiable consommateur d’esthétiques” (45). If these volumes on royal châteaux, rare perfumes, Sèvres porcelain, Ming dynasty vases, diamonds, rubies, and the like, were useful to Montesquiou the writer, perhaps too, like his own writings, they served as substitute objects for the real ones, coveted yet inaccessible. Possessing these books for his own pleasure, a pleasure then multiplied through the inclusion in his library of his own works on these topics, allowed him to constitute a “musée imaginaire” (Bertrand 46) as both stimulus and recompense. In addition, his *evi-dent* materialism marked him as quite an idiosyncratic champion of Symbolism, which generally upheld writing (and all art) as a replacement for the material world.

A third determinant of a book’s value for Montesquiou was its provenance. A standard parameter for nineteenth-century bibliophiles (Viardot 387–88), the notion of distinguished provenance and its historical, sentimental, and esthetic connotations had special resonance for the comte de Montesquiou-Fezensac. Enraptured by the mystique of his own lineage, this descendant of Merovingian warlords devoted both the first volume of his memoirs, *Les Pas effacés*, and the first 25 volumes of his papers, to the *seigneurs* de Montesquiou. The symbolic charge of the family name also resided, for Montesquiou, in its books: in the Bible inherited from his grandfather Anatole (68, first sale; N.a.f. 15231), in the first edition of *Voyages de Gulliver*, with vignettes by Grandville, leagued by his father Thierry and bearing his cachet (80, first sale; N.a.f. 15231), and in about a dozen volumes in Montesquiou’s library that had belonged to Gontran, Emery, and others in his clan (Bertrand 806). In his memoirs, Montesquiou describes the ecstasy he experienced as a young *lycéen* when aristocratic and bibliophilic pedigree merged in his grandfather’s decision to bestow on him “un très précieux petit livre du dix-huitième siècle” (*Pas* 1: 173), just discovered in Anatole’s library and which his grandson admired “religieusement.” The rarity and singularity of this “bibelot” (173) – “orné de gravures avant toute lettre, par Moreau le Jeune, relié en maroquin citron, avec gardes en tabis rose” (173) – compounded by its conferral on the young man by his strange yet majestic “aïeul,” a poet himself, made him feel “[une] exceptionnelle jouissance de se voir attribuer, avec une miraculeuse facilité qui la rend plus belle, une chose que j’admiraais avec une exstase refrénée” (174).

As this anecdote tellingly reveals, the impeccable aristocratic pedigree of the volumes from the Montesquiou family library provoked in their subsequent owner a *frisson*. So, too, did the impeccable esthetic credentials of the thirty-seven volumes in Montesquiou’s collection previously owned by the Goncourt brothers, and most likely purchased at the 1897 sale of their library, another notable date for *fin-de-siècle* bibliophiles.⁹ For Montesquiou, status and identity

were conferred on these volumes by virtue of the consecrating power of their previous owners, whom he fervently admired. And this status was enhanced by several additional criteria: the rarity of many of the volumes (a 1725 work on dance by Rameau [661, first sale; N.a.f. 15268]); the combined distinction of both owner and author of a text (a two-volume *chefs-d'œuvre* by Shakespeare was additionally valuable, as the inscription indicates, as a *livre de prix* “accordé à l'élève de Goncourt pour son excellente conduite et sa constante application pendant le 1er et 2e semestre de l'année classique et scolaire 1836-37, 1837-38” [1715, second sale; N.a.f. 15317]); and, finally, marks and traces of the Goncourts' possession, such as their *ex-libris*, signature, and handwritten dedications.

A cluster of values both bibliophilic and esthetic, then – the importance of distinguished filiation, rarity, uniqueness, suggestibility – made the criterion of provenance especially important for Montesquiou. In addition, he may have appreciated the fragmentary, evocative nature of a single volume or volumes detached from an illustrious library. The lone book he had acquired from the royal library of Marie Leczinska took its place alongside other notable “fragments” in his possession – locks of hair from Napoleon and Byron, a sketch of Jeanne Duval's eyes by Baudelaire and of the comtesse Greffulhe's chin by La Gandara, a mold of the feet of the comtesse de Castiglione and a piece of lead from her coffin (Bertrand 89).¹⁰ Together, they constituted a reliquary, in which fragments conveyed the beauty and power of the whole, inspiring a type of reverie evoked by Montesquiou in his “*Prière des objets*”:

Une buire en morceaux ne meurt pas tout entière,
Les marbres effrités ne sont pas tous défunts:
Peut-être un faible esprit déserte la matière
Lorsque l'on brise un vase où brûlaient des parfums.

Prières de tous, XLIV

DECORS

Tokens of relationships or tools of the trade, books were perhaps above all, for Montesquiou, objects, whose worth was enhanced by their inclusion in highly suggestive, stimulating interior spaces. He summarized the goal of his esthetic experiments concerning objects in this way: “le groupement des objets, dans une association, presque dans une conversation ingénieuse, et parfois saisissante, qui réveille l'appétit des yeux, et se communique à l'âme, voilà ce que je me mis à rechercher d'instinct” (*Pas* 2: 94). His interest in the psychological and allegorical powers of decors, capable of eliciting the feeling of “l'ivresse, toujours renouvelée, d'un mangeur de haschich” (2: 94), owed much to his

readings of Poe, Baudelaire, and especially Edmond de Goncourt, on the role of furniture as sensual and creative stimulus. Indeed, Goncourt's 1881 *La Maison d'un artiste* became Montesquiou's breviary, "cent fois feuillet[é]" (2: 102) by the poet.¹¹ Permeated with what Goncourt described as "la tendresse presque humaine pour les choses" (3; italics in original), *La Maison d'un artiste* championed the interior as a solitary, masculine space, a haven from the "vie de combativité" (2) and its attendant feelings of ennui that Goncourt found inherent in modern urban life (1-3). Whether as stimulants or sedatives, interior spaces offered what Montesquiou himself deemed "une vertu thérapeutique" (*Pas* 2: 123).

Montesquiou's own esthetics of interior design, elaborated most fully in a piece entitled "Le Mobilier libre," was indicative as well of the *fin-de-siècle* craze for interior decoration. The flourishing of the "arts de vivre" had several roots, including the development of elite notions of comfort and conspicuous consumption, and the revival of the decorative arts (Bertrand 55-62). "L'art de l'ameublement," asserted Montesquiou, resided in novelty, in the mingling of old and new, and in "*le groupement subtil et disert*" ("Mobilier" 164; italics in original) of the stunning array of objects he collected as a passionate *bibelotier*.¹² Furniture would innovate, he continued, in its attention to "la couleur, doucement dosée" (165) and above all in its evocation of "quelque chose de symbolique et de pensif, de par le décor variant et commentant un texte, une idée" (165-66).

Montesquiou's self-described "fureur des arrangements décoratifs, des appartements ornés, des installations magnifiques" (*Pas* 2: 88), on which he lavished "plusieurs petites fortunes" (88) – necessitating the sale by his father of valuable heirloom jewelry, part of Robert's inheritance (*Pas* 2: 94) – is detailed in one of the principal sections of his memoirs, entitled "Mes Demeures." The importance, in *Les Pas effacés*, of Montesquiou's *demeures* seems equivalent to that accorded, in his personal papers, to his books: indeed, "Sa Bibliothèque" is the title designating roughly a quarter of them. How, then, did Montesquiou conceive of the highly charged symbolic spaces where habitations and books met, and whose very functions suggest creativity, imagination, evasion, and solitude: the library?

Montesquiou's first library belonged to his private suite in the family's *hôtel* on the quai d'Orsay, his home until 1889. This "appartement légendaire," "ce miroir de mon âme" (*Pas* 2: 97), as he deemed it, was also "une sorte de laboratoire d'expérimentation esthétique" (Bertrand 75), with each room harmonizing colors, bibelots, satins, silks, honeysuckles, and his trademark blue hydrangeas, in a type of *synesthésie*. The influence of medieval and pre-Raphaelite motifs – Montesquiou had met William Morris, Burne-Jones, and

Whistler during his first trip to England, in the mid-1880s – was on display, as was that of *japonisme* and craftsmanship, encountered at the 1878 *Exposition universelle*. Throughout the house traditional and modern objects, themes, and techniques commingled. The library was reminiscent of, perhaps even modeled on, Whistler's Peacock Room, designed in 1876-77 for Frederick Leyland of London. In this "oratoire," as Montesquiou called his library, "les murs étaient revêtus d'un cuir vert et or, frappé de plumes de paon sans doute chargées de représenter les cent yeux du savoir" (*Pas* 2: 111). Japanese masks and a portrait of Montesquiou adorned the walls, while the room also boasted a marble column supporting a sculpted head, two armchairs, Oriental rugs, a lectern, a writing table, and a green-leather covered box for his yet-unpublished manuscripts, a gift from the comtesse Greffulhe. An elaborate *canapé de lecture* commissioned by Montesquiou in England was covered in gilded leather decorated with a Japanese-influenced dragonfly, butterfly, and chrysanthemum motif and fitted with a writing desk.¹³ The books themselves were contained in cases along the walls (Bertrand 67).

With its shimmering, lacquered leather walls and its peacock-eye motif, not only was this library meant to stimulate the intellectual work and inspiration associated with writing and reading, but it was also meant to serve as an emblem of these intellectual activities.¹⁴ "Bound" in leather, this room was to be "read." In this sense the room functioned much like the books it contained, like the mottos Montesquiou had inscribed on lintels in his apartment, and even like the socks and ties he displayed in his dressing room and which, in an allusion to works produced by the celebrated family of Dutch printers, were "pliées et rangées comme des elzévir, dans des bibliothèques de luxe" (*Pas* 2: 122). His leather-bound room recalls the hermetically-sealed space of des Esseintes (his literary double, according to some), who in *A rebours* had resolved "en fin de compte à faire relier ses murs comme des livres, avec du maroquin" (74).¹⁵ Acknowledging the textual nature of his decors, Montesquiou wrote, "je tiens de telles fantaisies murales et mobilières, pour des écritures, à la fois littéraires et musicales" (*Pas* 2: 112; italics in original). Conversely, if a room, for Montesquiou, could be read like a book, a book could be inhabited like a room, as suggested by the division of the poems comprising his *Hortensias bleus* into a series of "chambres."

Montesquiou's subsequent libraries did not match the grandeur of his first one on the quai d'Orsay. From 1889 to 1893 his apartment in Passy was a mecca of *haut japonisme*, complete with Japanese gardens. Touring these during a July 1891 visit, Edmond de Goncourt found a structure that was "une sorte de serre bibliothèque des livres préférés par Montesquiou, en même temps qu'un petit musée des portraits de leurs auteurs" (*Journal* 606), including the brothers

themselves. And in the neo-classical Pavillon des Muses in Neuilly, site of many of Montesquiou's most spectacular fêtes between 1899 and 1909, the library became a repository for Montesquiou's notable collector's items. Visiting the pavilion with its owner, the journalist, Lucien Corpechot, recalled having contemplated there "la cage où Michelet regardait vivre l'oiseau qu'il décrivait. Je touchai respectueusement la guitare de Marceline Desbordes-Valmore; et dans une sorte de sanctuaire je m'émus devant le moulage des pieds de la Castiglione" (39). For his final residence at the Palais Rose in Le Vésinet, Montesquiou built a separate building to house his books, which he named L'Hermitage.

The most noteworthy objects in Montesquiou's library were, of course, the books themselves. Their rarity, luxuriousness, and beauty constituted a final criterion of value for their owner. Fascinated by all stages of book production, as the scrapbooks in his collection devoted to bindings, illustration, and book arts attest (N.a.f. 15232, 15292, 15318-319), Montesquiou was especially sensitive to what Goncourt described as the "seduction" (*Maison* 346) exercised by a book's *parure*, its binding.¹⁶ His library contained at least ten extremely rare bindings as well as a substantial category of books on the topic, including a dedicated copy of *L'Ornementation des livres modernes* (1889) by the renowned binder Marius-Michel (797, first sale; N.a.f.15292). Another standard parameter for nineteenth-century bibliophiles, luxury bindings served both to preserve and singularize individual copies of books, while rendering homage to their authors. In addition, for status-seeking members of the social elite, the intricate leather inlays and gold-tooling of Marius-Michel and others took their place alongside flasks by Gallé, jewels by Lalique, and perfumes by Klotz as examples of *haut-de-gamme* craftsmanship.¹⁷

But Montesquiou was neither an ordinary bibliophile nor merely a conspicuously consuming aristocrat. Instead, he served as patron, albeit an often self-serving one, to a new generation of binders. In so doing, he both responded to and galvanized the turn of the century revival of the arts of the book, on display in numerous *fin-de-siècle* exhibits of book production, both state-sponsored and privately-organized (such as the ground-breaking 1896 exhibit held in Siegfried Bing's gallery, L'Art Nouveau).¹⁸ The renewed importance of binding was proclaimed by the *bibliomane* Octave Uzanne in his 1897 manifesto, *La Nouvelle Bibliopolis*. Deriding the "morne banalité" (191-92) of earlier bindings, Uzanne and others called on exterior decorators of books to innovate.¹⁹ This *art nouveau* of binding, they insisted, should adorn not old classics, but new literature, specifically that of the Symbolists. The suggestive content of Symbolist literature would harmonize with the emblematic nature

of its container. To these writers, he urged, “ouvrons largement nos bibliothèques” (xix-xx).

Défense et illustration of Uzanne’s precepts, Montesquiou’s library contained a substantial category of works on binding and numerous works by nineteenth-century authors that he had bound by the master artisan, Charles Meunier (1866-1948).²⁰ Meunier had apprenticed with Marius-Michel, whose ornamental floral style and leather inlays he adopted. Yet the apprentice soon set up shop for himself in a stylish boutique near the Madeleine, signaling through this move to the *beaux quartiers* the new autonomy of deluxe books as a separate sector of the book market. Here, Montesquiou often brought select groups of friends to observe the binder at work (Clermont-Tonnerre 76-77). Some of them became his clients; Edmond de Goncourt, for one, commented favorably on unusual bindings Meunier had created for him, “aux gardes faites avec des soieries anciennes ramassées par moi à droite et à gauche. C’est vraiment une ornementation de livres très charmante” (*Journal* 1015). Reverting to a traditional model of binder-printer-publisher (notably of several of Montesquiou’s own works), Meunier founded an influential revue devoted to book arts, *L’Œuvre et l’image* (1900-03).²¹ This “apôtre de la reliure emblématique” (Flety 128) produced limited luxury editions of works by Baudelaire, Huysmans, Louÿs and Verlaine, illustrated by artists such as Carlos Schwabe, Albert Robida, and others.²² For each of these he created bindings that harmonized with the work’s themes, drawing on a vast repertory of motifs and symbols from botany, zoology, architecture, theology, and mythology.

Montesquiou’s writings on Meunier, their correspondence, and the bindings themselves, offer clues about why Montesquiou elevated this “artisan-artiste” above other binders. Extolling Meunier’s talents in verse in *Les Paroles diaprées* (1910), Montesquiou exhorted Meunier to do no less than endow books with life by giving them material form: “Quand vous habillez notre Livre/ S’il est mortel, faites-le vivre/Sous la ciselure du cuir” (LXIV). Six years later, in a laudatory essay on Meunier entitled “Le Moulin du livre,” Montesquiou returned to the theme of the binder as creator and dream-maker. Much like the work of a decorator of interiors, who conveyed and encased an idea through the use of suggestive material objects, the task of the binder, for Montesquiou, was also to “vêtir nos rêves” (272). Indeed, he asserted, “ce minotier si habile à bluter des farines de génie” (272), had succeeded in creating “des sacs ingénieusement brodés de tous les décors imaginables” (272). These highly ornate bindings, with their proliferation of symbolic floral and animal motifs and their multiple polychrome panels, are really emblematic *décors*, decorative schemes as well as suggestive settings for the ideas contained within. Finally, their striking colors and esthetic of *parure* echoed Montesquiou’s taste for ornamentation in many

areas of his life, including his clothing, mannerisms, handwriting, and fêtes. Meunier clearly considered Montesquiou a trailblazer too (as well as a *mécène*), someone who could give book arts, in Meunier's words, "un nouvel essor," by using his "grande influence littéraire et artistique" to draw to it "un élément nouveau recruté parmi les gens riches à tendance artistique" (letter, 2 June 1903, in N.a.f. 15292, ff. 78-79).

The most notable example of the collaboration between Montesquiou and Meunier is the binding for the poet's first published work, the one which in his view "sans doute . . . renferme le plus de moi-même" (*Pas* 2: 100): *Les Chauves-Souris* (1892). This cover is one of several striking bat-themed objects and events Montesquiou inspired or helped design, including a lamp and *flacon* by Gallé (*Pas* 2: 296), musical settings of the poems by the pianist Léon Delafosse (presented at Madeleine Lemaire's salon), and recitals of the poems by Sarah Bernhardt and by Julia Bartet of the Comédie française (Bertrand 810).²³ For this, his first publication, Montesquiou explained, "[r]ien ne fut épargné pour cette présentation . . . les raffinements typographiques et autres" (*Pas* 2: 210). A preface by Leconte de Lisle was solicited by the author "dans le but de lui assurer un prestige d'un ordre plus relevé" (210). Meunier's cover of gray and blood-red morocco leather, with shimmering silver and gold tones and platinum stars bedecking the back cover, was reserved for a private edition of 100 copies, printed on luxurious Van Gelder paper with a watermarked bat motif, and presented in a special case to the count's inner circle. To receive this *objet rarissime*, André Hallays reported in the *Journal des Débats*, "il fallait . . . avoir été élu par un décret nominatif de l'auteur lui-même."²⁴ On having a copy of the volume bestowed on him, Whistler wrote to Montesquiou, "[l]e beau volume nous est revenu! – et nous paraît plus merveilleux que jamais" (qtd. in Newton 184). Octave Mirbeau, equally thrilled to have received this "volume exceptionnel et fastueux," offered his readers the following description in *Le Figaro*:

A chaque feuillet du livre, une chauve-souris se filigrane dans le papier, dont le grain est doux aux doigts qui le retournent, comme de la peau de femme! Nul fleuron, nulle vignette, nul cul-de-lampe, nul ornement par où s'avère, si lourdement, l'ordinaire incompétence, en éditierie, des éditeurs. Le goût qui présida à l'ameublement de ce livre fut exquis.

A copy, of course, belonged to Montesquiou's library as well, as did sumptuously bound copies of all his works (N.a.f. 15293), for as Walter Benjamin notes: "[o]f all the ways of acquiring books, writing them oneself is regarded as the most praiseworthy method" (61).

Montesquiou's elevation of *Les Chauves-Souris* and other works in his collection to the status of art objects brings us back to questions of reading practices evoked at the beginning of this essay. To what extent did these magnificent bindings rival, even trump, the texts contained within? To what extent might they have inhibited, rather than enhanced, this writer's experience as a reader? Were these objects, for him, primarily bibelots or texts? The invasion of text by decoration – “le côté bibelot, fanfreluche” (Clermont-Tonnerre 38) of Montesquiou's work – bothered at least one reader to such an extent that he questioned the integrity and quality of both the poet and his work: “Au premier vol de ses *Chauves-souris* en velours violet,” mused Remy de Gourmont, “la question fut très sérieusement posée de savoir si M. de Montesquiou était un poète ou un amateur de poésie et si la vie mondaine se pouvait concilier avec le culte des Neuf Muses . . .” (233).²⁵ Questions of Montesquiou's talents aside, the collapsing of boundaries between art, decor, and life that characterized his esthetic found expression in the books he created, where binding and text harmonized, and where text and image merged in watermarked paper covered with bats, themselves creatures located on the murky border between night and day, bird and beast. This esthetic of permeability, in turn, forced new ways of appropriating texts. While the questions of why and how people have read historically are notoriously difficult to answer, at the least one might conclude that Montesquiou read, wrote, and coveted books to satisfy his craving for beautiful objects, and that the cognitive, material, and esthetic dimensions of reading seemed, for him, inseparable. What mattered to him, above all, was that “un vers fut un objet d'art” (Clermont-Tonnerre 38).

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NOTES

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2 A deluxe edition of this catalog was published in 1924 by La Maison du Bibliophile, a small press operating in tandem with the bookstore of the same name and run by Maurice Escoffier, who organized the Montesquiou sale.

- 3 The first number in parentheses refers to the item number in the sale catalog, the second to the call number given by the Bibliothèque nationale de France to the scrapbook in which the book or document in question is described, often through the addition of supplementary material from Montesquiou's collection.
- 4 This collection brought the sale's highest price. A limited edition, containing copies of some of the documents, was published as *L'Agonie de Paul Verlaine* (N.a.f. 15261).
- 5 See, for example, the six scrapbooks detailing Montesquiou's relationship with Proust (N.a.f. 15252-57).
- 6 While Antoine Bertrand offers a statistical breakdown of the composition of Montesquiou's library in his "Documents annexes" (801-06), he provides no sustained analysis of its contents.
- 7 Two fairly recent exhibits have examined Montesquiou's importance as both theorist and practitioner of new esthetic ideals at the *fin de siècle*. See Edgar Munhall, ed., *Whistler and Montesquiou: The Butterfly and the Bat* (New York: The Frick Collection, 1995) and Philippe Thiébaud, ed., *Robert de Montesquiou ou l'art de paraître* (1999).
- 8 Montesquiou's copy of Veber's book was one of 50 printed as an "édition de luxe" (666, first sale; N.a.f. 15268). Montesquiou dedicated a poem in *Les Paroles diaprées* to Veber and included many images of his jewelry in his scrapbooks.
- 9 Montesquiou's library contained 98 volumes from other collections, about a quarter of which had belonged (until his death in 1905) to his lover, Gabriel de Yturri.
- 10 *Office de la semaine Sainte, en Latin et en François à l'usage de Rome et de Paris dédié à la Reine* (Paris, 1728) (81, first sale; N.a.f. 15232).
- 11 Goncourt's esthetic of interior decoration influenced many of his contemporaries. According to Lucien Corpechot: "Nous vivions encore sous l'impression de la *Maison d'un artiste* et il entraînait bien de la littérature dans notre prédilection pour certains arrangements et dans notre esthétique du mobilier" (37). Tellingly, one of the first Montesquiou-Goncourt meetings, in April 1887, involved a book. As recounted by Goncourt: "Ce soir, en prenant un coupé à Passy . . . je rencontre le jeune Montesquiou-Fezensac, dans la correction d'une de ses toilettes *symboliques*, suprêmement *chic*, et tenant à la main une sorte de paroissien. Et me tendant le petit livre très bien relié, il me dit: 'Regardez quel est mon bréviaire . . . Et certes, je ne croyais pas vous rencontrer!' Le petit livre est une *Madame Gervaisais* de la petite édition Charpentier . . ." (*Journal* 28).
- 12 However, Montesquiou later wondered whether this esthetic of bric-à-brac was not in fact "une hérésie que ces assemblages d'anachronismes, et s'il n'y avait pas lieu de leur préférer ceux d'un même style, que je voyais apprécier par mes timorés cohabitants" (*Pas* 2: 112).

13 For a description and photograph of this *canapé de lecture*, see “*Art nouveau – Arts décoratifs – Tableaux modernes – Canapé de lecture de Robert de Montesquiou.*” Vente aux enchères publiques, Hôtel des Ventes, Neuilly, 16 mai 1995.

14 Montesquiou was fascinated by the illusory effects of treated leather when used in interior decoration. In one room in his first apartment, gold filigree on red leather walls created “spider webs” (*Pas* 2: 11-12). In another, gilded leather walls “faisaient chatoyer ces parois et trompaient ainsi un peu sur les proportions de la pièce” (2: 114). And in yet another, silver-toned leather made one wall shimmer like the moon (2:117).

15 *A rebours* closely resembles the book that obsessed another literary dandy, Dorian Gray, who in Oscar Wilde’s 1891 novel “procured from Paris no less than nine large-paper copies of the first edition, and had them bound in different colours, so that they might suit his various moods . . .” (141).

16 “Que je plains les lettrés qui ne sont pas sensibles à la séduction d’une reliure, dont l’œil n’est pas amusé par la bijouterie d’une dorure sur un maroquin, et qui n’éprouvent pas . . . une certaine délectation physique à toucher de leurs doigts, à palper, à manier une de ces peaux du Levant si moelleusement assouplies!” (*Maison* 346-47).

17 In Montesquiou’s view: “il n’y a de beaux objets que les objets faits, comme on dit, ‘à la main,’ surtout quand ils luttent contre une difficulté d’exécution qui les rend plus précieux et plus rares” (*Pas* 2: 114). See also Clermont-Tonnerre (56-57) on the celebrated artisans employed by Montesquiou.

18 Much like the World’s Fairs held in Paris in 1878, 1889, and 1900, the goal of these state-organized and sponsored book exhibits, such as the 1894 Exposition internationale industrielle, scientifique, littéraire, artistique, rétrospective et moderne du livre et des industries du papier, held in the Palais de l’Industrie, was to showcase French industrial, technological, and commercial prowess as they applied to what the political class of the Third Republic considered an important motor of progress and democracy: the book and print culture in general. At the same time, these exhibits attracted the public through a wealth of displays of fans, stamps, paper money, posters, newspapers, rare books, and bindings. Additionally, the French Section of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair featured a large exhibit of books bound by the prominent binder Léon Gruel, while the 1900 World’s Fair featured a “Section de la Librairie” (Crauzat 11-19). See Henri Bouchot, “Exposition universelle de 1889: La décoration du livre,” *Revue des Arts Décoratifs* x (1889-1890): 155-60 and 185-91; J. Rosengarten, *The Paris Book Exhibition of 1894* (Philadelphia, 1895); G. Tissandier, “L’Exposition du livre au Palais de l’Industrie, à Paris,” *La Nature* 1894 (2): 314-15.

19 In *La Revue Blanche* E. Cousturier railed against “la décadence artistique du livre orné” (42) in France, compared with the English example, and called on French artists and artisans to seek out “des voies renouvelées” (43).

20 Among the books bound by Meunier in Montesquiou's collection were André Chenier's *Les Bucoliques* (122, first sale; N.a.f. 15235) and Flaubert's *Salammbô* (126, first sale; N.a.f. 15235).

21 Meunier published (and bound) Montesquiou's copies of his *Prières de tous: Huit dizaines d'un chapelet rythmique* (1902) with drawings by Madeleine Lemaire (see Montesquiou and Meunier's correspondence; N.a.f. 15135) and *Le Chancelier des fleurs: Douze stations d'amitié* (1907) (824, second sale; N.a.f. 15293).

22 Evaluations of Meunier's talent in this area, however, are mixed. One critic notes that "[d]ans sa course au symbole à tout prix, C. Meunier a souvent heurté le grotesque: il lui est même arrivé de choir dans le mauvais goût" (Crauzat 36).

23 For Montesquiou's sketches of bats and preliminary designs for the binding and watermarked paper for *Les Chauves-Souris*, see N.a.f. 15110.

24 In Montesquiou's words: "j'avais fait imprimer [mes "Chauves-Souris"] à petit nombre, sur un beau papier Van Gelder, commandé par moi dans cette célèbre maison hollandaise, avec une noctule comme filigrane, et une sorte de brochage en deux tons, au même décor" (*Pas* 2: 196). This binding is included in *Catalogue de livres modernes ornés de reliures artistiques exécutées par Charles Meunier et provenant de sa bibliothèque particulière* (Paris: Librairie Henri Leclerc, 1908) 21. Aside from this private edition, a first illustrated edition of 300 copies featured a cover drawing of bats in flight by La Gandara, additional bat drawings by Whistler and Yamamoto, and covers of silver-gray and yellow silk with motifs of bats, stars, and crescent moons (Thiébaud 12). See also, on *Les Chauves-Souris*, N.a.f. 15110.

25 On the relation between text and decoration in *Les Chauves-Souris*, see Pascale MacGarry, "Le Bijou et la chauve-souris: une enveloppe de Robert de Montesquiou." *Littérature* 72 (Dec. 1988): 115-16.

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