A Mass-Produced Muse: Gender and Late-Victorian Urban Developments in George Du Maurier's *Trilby*

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Abstract:
This paper examines the gender dimension of several issues emerging in the context of the fin-de-siècle urban setting through a discussion of George Du Maurier's popular novel *Trilby*. Set in bohemian Paris, the novel's female protagonist Trilby, initially a highly hybrid character, is gradually turned into a domestic creature in order to be protected from the lures and temptations of the city. Later hypnotized by the evil Svengali, she is then transformed into an outstanding diva, La Svengali, and as a female performer she arouses insatiable feelings of passion and desire in her audience. The paper examines the ways in which the heroine and her associations with the city engage with various ideological formations, including the cult of domesticity, the paradigm of the pastoral tradition, and the Romantic conception of artistic genius. Trilby's transformation into a metropolitan celebrity also highlights several developments in the late nineteenth-century city, including new technologies of display, changing modes of consumption, a burgeoning mass culture, as well as a preoccupation with the commodity. Du Maurier's best-seller may teach us contemporary readers about the ways in which the issue of gender and the position of women constitute one of the fault lines in the development of urban modernity.

1 In his novel *Trilby*, published in 1894, George du Maurier weaves a seemingly simple plot into a highly complex narrative: Trilby, a tone-deaf washerwoman and artist's model in Paris, mesmerized by the evil musician Svengali, becomes the most celebrated diva of European metropolises, while she is at the complete mercy of the composer. This plot scenario, at first sight a tale of extreme female subjugation, managed to capture the fin-de-siècle imagination and quickly achieved best-seller status. What is more, it generated an unprecedented number of parodies, adaptations and spin-off products in its wake.[1] It is tempting to speculate as to which aspects of the novel triggered this sweeping success, and conversely, why it is no longer part of the Victorian canon. Certainly, though, one may argue that *Trilby* managed to respond to the possibilities as well as anxieties that emerged during the turbulent period of late-Victorian culture and its impact on the development of urban modernity. For the purpose of this article, I will focus on only one out of the numerous crossroads this novel occupies: the intersection of the fin-de-siècle urban setting and "the ideological working of gender".[2]

[1] For an account of the novel's astonishing reception history, see Jenkins, and Gilder and Gilder.
[2] The term refers to Mary Poovey's study of mid-Victorian society; this analysis is greatly indebted to her method of discussing representations of gender as a site on which contradictory ideological meanings are ascribed and contested.

2 In *Trilby*, the cosmopolitan city is variously configured as a carnivalesque space of plurality and collectivity, as well as the quintessential environment for a burgeoning mass consumerism and commodity culture. On the other hand, several ideological formations are pitted against this urban setting: the cult of domesticity, the paradigm of the pastoral tradition, and the Romantic conception of artistic genius. These oppositions not only separate the city from what lies outside or beyond it, but also structure the urban environment itself. In my discussion of the novel, I will attempt to show how the female protagonist consistently traverses the very fine line separating these divisions. Du Maurier's novel may thus teach us contemporary readers about the ways in which the issue of gender and the position of women constitute one of the fault lines in the development of urban modernity.

3 Scholarship on late-Victorian fiction has produced numerous fruitful discussions of women's increasing visibility in urban spaces and their participation in public activities. This has entailed, among others, the critical resurrection of non-canonical women writers and their engagement with the urban environment, as well as the equally important task of identifying female personas and fictional characters as active agents exercising mobility and spectatorship in the urban arena, like female renditions of the modern flâneur. On the surface, Du Maurier's novel does not fit easily with either goal of this feminist agenda – Trilby does not possess the same spatial and scopic freedom as the *flâneuse*, nor is she a progressive and confident New Woman; instead, what we witness is her transformation from a celestial artists' muse into a "singing machine," who in both cases remains at the mercy of men and does not have an apparent will of her own. Nevertheless, Trilby exposes some of the underlying mechanisms behind the cultural developments of late-Victorian urban modernity, de-stabilizing the accepted notions about women's proper place and role within the urban milieu, and what is more, challenging master-narratives about artistic production. She does so perhaps more subtly, but at least as profoundly, as her more autonomous and independent fictional sisters.[3] Hence, this article attempts to make a case that, compelling as it is to look for more obviously empowered female figures, different forms of representation and their symbolic importance also warrant attention if we want to address the complex reverberations emerging from the intersection of gender and urban space. This approach is part of a wider critical effort to account for a variety of different roles women play in the city and in public life.

[3] Not every critic has viewed *Trilby* as a story of female victimization or dependence – most famously, Nina Auerbach has argued that Trilby could be seen as a triumphal heroine of infinite capacities. Auerbach nevertheless does not explicitly discuss Trilby's presence in the urban environment; my analysis also departs from her overly optimistic reading and aims to discuss Trilby as a highly ambiguous figure.

4 For the purpose of this article, I only focus on one such role: the female public performer (in this case, the singer). Musical activity and stage performance are obviously highly laden with gender connotations, and they also highlight the dangers women encountered when venturing outside the private realm. Outside of the shelter of the private drawing rooms, female singers in concert halls and opera houses exposed themselves to the public gaze, and thus violated prohibitions against self-display. Besides, the female performer was also believed to arouse feelings of passion and desire in the male spectator, at the expense of such sentiments as piety and modesty. As it will be shown though, Trilby's domain as a performer is not confined to the concert hall. Thanks to her extraordinary fame, highly coveted reproductions of her image also proliferate in various other spaces of the city, calling attention to the sweeping changes regarding display and spectacle at the end of the nineteenth century.

5 Historians and social critics have characterized the period spanning 1850 to World War I as turbulent on several fronts – anxieties concerning gender and national identity, the decline of imperial power, challenges to traditional values and family structures are only some of the most-cited concerns of this period. By setting his novel in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, Du Maurier choses a city that is, arguably, more suitable for the narrative than London or any other European metropolis of the time. Napoleon III's Second Empire was a site that captured the dissolution of age-old certainties at its most extreme with permanent landmarks and buildings disappearing overnight. As the narrator of *Trilby* remarks, in Baron Haussman's Paris "there was a mania for demolition and remolition" (187). The French metropolis is a perfect setting to capture the sense of turbulence characterizing this era, since the changes were perhaps more prominent in its visual landscape than in any other European metropolis. In Paris, change was not merely "in the air," so to speak, but thanks to Hausmann's radical re-structuring, it was also inscribed on the architectural body of the city itself.[4]

6 The novel opens with the description of a bohemian household of three British painters. Serving both as a studio and a home, this semi-private space is where most of the novel's first takes place. Yet in many ways, the gender relations that unfold within its walls will be later replicated on a larger scale, and in this sense, it could also be seen as a microcosm of the city. The three male painters come from respectable families, and all three live the somehow infantile existence of aspiring young artists, which is exemplified, for

[4] Another possible reason behind the choice of setting might be that it allows the author to play upon the romanticized conceptions of Parisian bohemia (a topos that Du Maurier fully exploits).

instance, by the nicknames they give to each other: Taffy, the Laird, and Little Billee. They occupy a "temporal space" that, according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is the defining feature of bohemia: "a developmental stage" where "the young, male bourgeois literary subject was required to navigate his way through his homosexual panic" towards a more heterosexual trajectory (193). Taffy and the Laird act as the more parental figure for the fragile, naive Little Billee, whose "girlish purity of mind" make them feel "as fond of the boy as they could be" (8). Homosexuality is constantly repudiated in the novel and is never even considered as a possibility. In fact, by the end of the novel, Taffy and the Laird have achieved that mature, consolidated bourgeois identity that Sedgwick describes as the objective of bohemia.

7 Little Billee, on the other hand, is not only patronized by the two older painters, but his effeminate appearance and fragile disposition are also set against the robust and energetic character of Trilby. The narrator remarks that "she would have made a singularly handsome boy" (12), and, indeed, the inversion of gender roles between Trilby and Little Billee runs through the whole novel as a subtext. While her origins and background will be closely scrutinized later in the novel, it is worth recalling the first impression she makes on the three painters, and, by implication, on the reader. Trilby, who works as a professional artist's model, enters the apartment dressed in a military coat and wearing a pair of oversized male slippers. From the very beginning, Trilby takes up the role of a poser, albeit unconsciously. When she arrives at the artists' studio, she immediately sits down on the model-throne, starts eating from a paper parcel, and rolls a cigarette, while the other occupants of the room observe her as if she was modelling.[5] It is only the first of the numerous poses that she will take up in the course of the novel (the next time she comes to the studio, she takes on the persona of a *grisette*). Trilby constantly poses even when she is not doing her job, and this is all the more significant inasmuch as the first posing we witness takes place in the private space of the artists' household, as it thus flouts one of the culturally prescribed roles for women in the private sphere. Assuming that one of the basic tenets of domestic ideology is its association between the figure of the domestic woman on the one hand, and the principles of originality, sincerity and the "real" on the other, then Trilby's posing automatically violates the domestic doctrine. With her various acts of impersonation and eccentricities, Trilby fails to adhere to this feminine ideal of authenticity, and instead turns the artists' masculine

[5] Besides the three painters, Svengali and his fellow-musician Gecko are also present in this introductory scene. Although he only rises to prominence in the second half of the novel. Svengali's presence in the narrative is crucial from the beginning, not least because he functions as a foil to the three painters, and Little Billee in particular. As this early scene foreshadows, all five of these male characters will eventually fall in love with Trilby, but whereas the painters' (and Gecko's) affection is associated with brotherly respect and platonic admiration, Svengali's attraction is from the beginning drawn by lust and sexual desire.</

household into a theatrical stage of imitation and artificiality. These performances also foreshadow her subsequent public posing in the novel's second part.

8 Much to their disappointment, the three painters learn that not only does Trilby occasionally model for nude paintings, but that "she had all the virtues but one" (32) – meaning that she is also sexually experienced. They regard her promiscuity as a result of her having been corrupted, and more specifically, as the effect of a corruption inflicted upon her by the city. Paris is presented as "the most corrupt city on earth" (98), and at various points the narrative suggests that the metropolis is detrimental to an otherwise uncontaminated femininity. Accordingly, when alone with the three painters, Trilby was "absolutely 'like a lady.' [...] But enter a Frenchman or two, and a transformation effected itself immediately" (59). From the outset, Trilby is positioned at the axis between respectability and contamination, also evident from her hybrid origins: Trilby is the daughter of an Irish dean and a Scotch-English woman who worked as a barmaid in Paris; and while Trilby herself is fluent in both English and French, her English "was more or less that of her father, a highly-educated man," whereas her French "was that of the Quartier Latin – droll, slangy, piquant, quaint, picturesque – quite the reverse of ungainly, but in which there was scarcely a turn of phrase that would not stamp the speaker as being hopelessly, emphatically 'no lady!'" (59) The narrative thus sets up an opposition between Frenchness on the one hand, associated with Trilby's mother and the city, and Englishness on the other hand, linked to her father as well as the painters, whose studio is meant to protect Trilby from the wickedness of urban life. Curiously though, while Frenchness is associated with Paris, it is not London that comes to stand for Englishness – the metropolis by nature is too cosmopolitan to become nationally emblematic. Instead, Englishness is metonymically mapped onto the provinces, expressed through Little Billee's longing "that Trilby could be turned into a young lady – say the vicar's daughter in a little Devonshire village – his sister's friend and co-teacher at the Sunday school, a simple, pure, and pious maiden of gentle birth" (30). Indeed, it is when he goes back to his village in Devon that Little Billee later becomes a nationally acclaimed artist, the most respectable English painter. Nationality, gender, social status and the rural-urban divide are thus all inextricably linked in the novel.

9 The discovery that her femininity has been tainted by her promiscuity eventually prompts the three painters to turn Trilby into a lady through what could be seen as a domesticating enterprise. Trilby does not protest this development, in fact, the painters' patronizing attitude seem to correspond to her original desire to join the household in search of brotherly affection. She becomes the artists' personal cook, housemaid and nurse at the

expense of her modelling in the studios of Paris through an act of benevolent incarceration in the studio. From the beginning, Taffy, the Laird and Little Billee posit themselves as Trilby's saviours, whose benign guidance is supposed to help and shelter her: "They would even frame little plans whereby she might better herself in life, and avoid the many snares and pitfalls that would beset her lonely path in the Quartier Latin when they were gone" (66). The quasi-domestic space of their studio is meant to provide a safe haven from the temptations and lures of the city, and it is here that Trilby's cultivation takes place – or rather, the cultivation of some of her characteristics at the expense of others. In their attempt to turn a grisette of the city into a respectable lady, the three artists try to suppress Trilby's French/urban side and nourish her Englishness. This process, however, inadvertently exposes their endeavour as encouraging performance. It is the way she speaks, the clothes she wears, and the books she reads (Dickens, Thackeray, Walter Scott) thanks to which Trilby "grew more English every day" (58); however, Taffy, the Laird and Little Billee treat her as if her "ladyness" had been there all along, waiting to be discovered, and it is only the contaminating forces of the city that have turned her into a fallen woman. As Little Billee claims already after the first encounter, regardless of her behaviour Trilby's true essence lies elsewhere: "It makes me sick to think she sits for the figure. I'm sure she's quite a lady" (18). Even when Taffy remarks that "she looks like a grande dame masquerading as a grisette" (81), the language of performance ("masquerade") is immediately undermined by the presumption that regardless of her appearance, Trilby's 'real' identity as an English lady is preserved nevertheless. But even after the artists' pedagogical project to develop her English femininity has supposedly been completed, occasionally she still displays some traits of the French grisette: when they take her to a ball, she looks so graceful that "she might have been the daughter of an English dean – until she undertook to teach the Laird some favourite cancan steps. And then the Laird himself, it must be admitted, no longer looked like the son of a worthy, God-fearing, Sabbath-keeping Scotch writer to the signet" (64). It is as if at these moments of spontaneous outburst, outside of the bonds of the studio and under the public gaze, Trilby de-naturalized not only the notion of her own essence, but also the seemingly stable identity of those around her.

10 The artists, by contrast, display a radically different mode of mobility and spectatorship, one that stands in stark contrast to Trilby's confinement to their apartment. Situated in the Quartier Latin, the studio gives access to a panoramic view of Paris, so that when Little Billee gazes out of the window, "the top of nearly all Paris lay before him" (7). Providing a bird's eye-view of the city, the studio is thus akin to a nineteenth-century version

of the de Certeauian World Trade Centre, allowing the viewer to read the supposedly transparent text of the city, "to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (de Certeau 92). When the artists occasionally descend from their studio to the Parisian streets, their movement in the city is reminiscent of yet another quintessential trope of masculine urban spectatorship – the practice of *flânerie*. Like the Baudelairean/Benjaminian *flâneur*, they stroll the city streets at a leisurely pace, treating Paris as if it was "a playground" (26). Their interest lies in the ephemeral, at the same time converting the fleeting moment into an axiom of universal experience: "they would gaze at the glowing sky and all it glowed upon […] and would try to express themselves to the effect that life was uncommonly well worth living in that particular city at that particular time of the day and year and century" (23). Confronted with the urban mass, they furthermore possess the epistemological confidence of the *flâneur*, evident from their attempt to read the social status of the inhabitants from their outer appearance: they would "gaze, but quite without base envy, at the smart people coming back from the Bois de Boulogne. […] And our three musketeers of the brush would speculate on the vanity of wealth and rank and fashion" (23-24). Their speculations are characteristic of the journalistic genre of physiologies, which Benjamin has described as the prototypical form of "urban" literature – removed from the crowd, and classifying people into identifiable types, authors of physiologies as well as Du Maurier's artists try to give a sense of intelligibility to the unfamiliar urban environment.

11 And yet, the narrative problematizes the detached mode of observation that is viewed as the prerogative of the *flâneur*. In the same passage quoted above, the text offers a description of a radically different mode of urban spectatorship – one that is not predicated upon distance and indifference, but allure and desire. As the three artists stop by a pastry shop, the narrator describes how

> they would stare with greedy eyes at the window of the great corner pastry-cook, and marvel at the beautiful assortment of bonbons, pralines, dragées, marrons glacés – saccharine, crystalline substances of all kinds and colours, as charming to look at as an illumination; precious stones, delicately-frosted sweets, pearls and diamonds so arranged as to melt in the mouth; especially, at this particular time of the year, the monstrous Easter-egg, of enchanting hue, enshrined like costly jewels in caskets of satin and gold. (23)

Rather than give an account of disinterested observation, the passage displays an insatiable, and almost sexualized, appetite. Instead of a mere inventory of things, we are confronted with objects that point beyond themselves; like an "illumination," they hold the promise of revealing something significant. It is hard not to notice how these objects become fetishized

through the description, as if to parallel the fetishization of Trilby's body parts that will later feature as an important feature of the novel. Sweets are figured in the language of jewellery, and the section almost reads like an advertisement – in this respect anticipating the commodity fetishism that becomes a prominent theme in the second part of the novel. This mode of representation is particularly suitable for the description of city life: at the same time as one's sense of self gets diminished amidst the rapid stimuli of the city, objects acquire a heightened significance. As commodities, they take on the function of seemingly filling the void created by urban life.

12 Alongside the project of turning Trilby into a domestic creature through the process of marking her off from the corrupt forces of the city, we also witness a parallel development of Trilby's transformation from an ordinary washerwoman into an artist's muse. This aspect is significant inasmuch as the mechanism governing this development (i.e. the operation of fetishization, as it will be shown) prefigures the process through which Trilby will be later elevated into the position of a metropolitan celebrity. Trilby, the artist's *ideal* in the first part of the novel, later re-emerges as the *idol* of the city, and it is essentially the same principle that is at work behind her role as an object of adoration both in private and in public.

13 Of the three painters, it is Little Billee who stands out as the only great artist: his "sense of all that was sweet and beautiful in nature [...] amounted to true genius" (8). In contrast to Taffy and the Laird, who are mediocre painters at best, Little Billee does not imitate others and is not interested in other people's pictures. His 'originality,' in turn, has much to do with 'origins,' and his philosophy of art has a lot in common with the Romantic notion of aesthetics: true beauty originates in nature, and it is the role of the artist to reveal this transcendental beauty through artistic creation. This artistic credo is further crystallized by his encounter with Trilby. Prompted by his romantic admiration, he sets out to scrutinize Trilby's body in order to see what he could salvage for his idea of universal beauty. Curiously enough, he finds that it is Trilby's "pair of over-perfect feet" (32) that is exquisite and perfectly proportioned enough to reveal the timeless beauty of perfect forms. The essence of her feet will eventually outshine the base reality – as a result, Trilby is turned into a Petrarchan Laura, whose celestial features are supposed to lead the artist to the purest form of beauty.

14 At the same time, it is crucial that Little Billee disregards the less attractive features of Trilby's body, which are incongruous with the perfection of her feet. Her big teeth, her robust figure, freckled complexion and broad features must be ignored so that they do not interfere with the ideal artistic frame. In short, her feet are metonymically severed from the

heterogeneity of her body in order to fulfil the function of the greatest metonymic chain of substitutions – the fetish. As Emily Apter notes, "fetishism records the trajectory of an idée fixe or noumen in search of its materialist twin" (4). It is precisely this trajectory that Little Billee is compelled to follow, but interestingly enough, the novel does not present foot fetish as a sexualized activity, but rather as an artistic feature. When he spontaneously draws a sketch of Trilby's foot on the studio's wall, it is instantly called "the work of a master" (18), a "petit chef-d'ouvre" (21). Little Billee does not substitute Trilby's feet for the phallus, but for his idea of timeless beauty – in other words, sexuality and the fetish in the narrative are constantly aestheticized. Artistic creation, as conceived by the narrator and Little Billee, must efface all materiality, bodily features and sexuality in order to achieve perfection.

15 Even as she is posited as Little Billee's muse, thus by association a passive object, Trilby nevertheless challenges this idea of transcendental art, and in fact tries to participate in the artistic creation herself. Upon her first visit, she gently mocks Taffy's realistic painting by saying, "That chiffonier's basket isn't hitched high enough. [...] And he's got the wrong sabots, and the wrong lantern; it's *all* wrong" (17) – the implication being that it is not accurate enough. At her second visit, she brings a few objects to help Taffy correct his painting: "I've brought you these objects of art and virtue to make the peace with you. They're the real thing, you know. [...] This is how it's put on. Do you see? If *you*'ll put it on I'll fasten it for you, and show you how to hold the lantern and handle the pick. [...] Père Martin will pose for you in person, if you like" (28). Whereas in this instance, Trilby's critique is directed at Taffy's paintings, her suggestions in fact also violate Little Billee's axioms concerning artistic genius in several ways. By bringing the "real things," she calls attention to the material aspects of art, and stresses the fact that artistic creation inevitably starts with the study of real-life objects. Furthermore, by suggesting that Père Martin, the rag-picker who has lent her the objects, could pose for Taffy, she undermines the notion of divine inspiration, since according to her reasoning, any rag-picker could invigorate Taffy's imagination as long as he approximates the type of person the painter wants to represent. Perhaps the most provocative assertion, however, is that Taffy himself could try on the basket and thus occupy the position of the model. Not only would then Taffy the artist transform into an urban inhabitant of utmost wretchedness and destitution (i.e. the rag-picker, yet another emblematic figure in Benjamin's writings on the city), but the distance between the sovereign creator and the muse would also be suddenly violated – the artist could no longer hide behind his canvas, but would be implicated in the process of posing and performance himself.

16 The idyll of the bohemian household as well as Little Billee and Trilby's blossoming romance is eventually halted by an act of motherly intervention – Little Billee's mother, unable to accept the news of engagement between her respectable middle-class son and a woman of questionable background, hastens to Paris to break off the engagement. Whereas the three painters have regarded Trilby as an essentially innocent girl corrupted by the ways of urban living, Mrs. Bagot is convinced that her son's fiancée herself is the embodiment of corruption. As she exclaims, Little Billee "has been with us all his life, till he came to this wicked, cursed city" (112), and in addition to the evilness of Paris, she considers Trilby to be the source of her son's downfall, rather than someone who has also fallen victim to the vile city: she thinks of Trilby "as a wanton and perilous siren, an unchaste and unprincipled and most dangerous daughter of Heth" (249). The dangers of the city and uncontained femininity are aligned in these accusations, and it is only one of the several instances of women being likened to sirens, as if eager to lure guileless men unable to resist them.

17 As she is lamenting the choice of her son's beloved, Mrs. Bagot is desperately trying to pin down Trilby's origins. Subjecting Taffy to incessant questioning over Trilby's characteristics ("'Is she English?'" "'Is she a Protestant or a Roman Catholic?'" "'An English governess, or something of that sort?'"; 111), in the end she articulates what seems to be the pivotal moment of her interrogation: "'Is she a lady, Mr Wynne?'" Taffy, however, is perplexed by this apparently straightforward question: "'A lady?' said Taffy; 'a – it so much depends upon what that word exactly means, you know; things are so – a – so different here'" (111). His bewilderment points to a semantic confusion ruling the city; whereas a definition of respectable femininity might be taken for granted in Mrs. Bagot's small village, the implicit moral code governing who counts as a lady is thrown into disarray in the urban environment. Rather than obvious or taken for granted, the notion of knowable, unified femininity is thus presented as unstable and a matter of interpretation in the urban context.

18 As a result of Mrs. Bagot's interference, the engagement comes to naught, and Trilby leaves Paris and temporarily disappears from the narrative. Little Billee, in turn, suffers a nervous breakdown. In order to foster his recovery, he is relocated to his native village, and it is here that his career as one of the most celebrated painters of the country begins. The countryside, with "the dearest mother, the dearest sister in the world, in the dearest little seaside village" (156) is hyperbolically romanticized in this interlude, and it is as if the narrative was struggling hard to revive the pastoral tradition so central to the nineteenth-century realist novel. As well-documented by Raymond Williams and others, this paradigm of the pastoral was posited as a pre-industrial haven removed from the evils of urban life, and

constructed as a realm of stability and freedom contrasted with the impersonality and instrumentality of the city. If Little Billee "was as innocent and pure-minded as any girl" (112) prior to his adventures in Paris, then this narrative excursion can be seen as an attempt to retrieve this primordial bliss.

19 Just as in the ideology of domesticity the private sphere is presided over by a female guardian, so is the pastoral tradition activated by the figure of a woman. With both elements positioned outside the instrumental relations of the urban arena, women as well as the pastoral haven supposedly occupy the position of the rescuer in relation to the masculine subject. In Du Maurier's novel, this female figure is epitomized by the vicar's daughter, Alice, "a simple, pure, and pious maiden of gentle birth" (131). The contrast between Alice and Trilby could not be more pronounced, and in order to accentuate this disparity, Alice is effectively infantilized: "that dear, weak, delicate shape, so cherishable, so perishable" (163). Having developed an infatuation for her, Little Billee is convinced that Alice is meant to be his saviour: "Alice alone, in all the world, has got the healing touch for me now" (162). Nonetheless, the narrative does not convincingly revive this nostalgically evoked pastoral refuge. In the end Little Billee is forced to abandon his plans of marrying the vicar's daughter and living a simple life in the countryside – partly because the ideas he has adopted in the city are too progressive for this way of living (he reads Darwin on the train back to the village), but there is also a sense in which once he has experienced the intense passion for Trilby in the context of the urban setting, there is no turning back to the pastoral and the naïve simplicity of Alice.

20 Consequently, the narrative returns to the urban environment, but whereas the first part centres on bohemian life in Paris, the section following the pastoral episode is filtered through Trilby's relationship to Svengali, and lifts her out from the artists' household to the grand stages of various European cities. If Little Billee is the embodiment of the 'true artist,' which the narrative repeatedly connects to Englishness, provinciality and bourgeois values, then the other components of the set of oppositions described earlier – city life, vulgarity, cosmopolitanism, and, by implication, Jewishness[6] are epitomized by the figure of Svengali. Moreover, if Little Billee stands for artistic genius, then Svengali is the incarnation of the pseudo-genius of imitation, and whereas the foundation of Little Billee's art is divine inspiration, the key to Svengali's bravura performance is technique. His art is not constituted

[6] Among others, Neil R.Davison and Jonathan H. Grossman discuss the significance of Svengali's Jewishness. Interestingly, Little Billee also possesses a "tinge" of Jewishness (6), which supposedly makes his art even more attractive, whereas Svengali is described as an "Oriental Israelite Hebrew Jew" (223) – the narrative thus posits "too much" Jewishness as excessive and threatening.

by a transcendental universal; instead, he takes any simple melody, and renders it 'beautiful' through his technical tricks: he "fugued and cannoned and counterpointed and battledored and shuttlecocked it, high and low, soft and loud, in minor, in pizzicato, and in sordino – adagio, andante, allegretto, scherzo – and exhausted all its possibilities of beauty" (19). And in contrast to Little Billee, whose paintings are meant to be contemplated, Svengali creates only short-lived effects and plays on his audience's emotions: "Scraps, snatches, short melodies, meant to fetch, to charm immediately, or to melt or sadden or madden just for a moment" (11).

21 Svengali is portrayed as essentially the artist of the city, which is implicitly associated with cheapness, coarseness, and lack of taste. Although he is famous for his masterly performance, his base material is ultimately trivial: "tunes of the café concert, tunes of the nursery, the shop-parlour, the guard-room, the schoolroom, the pothouse, the slum" (38). His territory remains the popular; unlike Little Billee, Svengali cannot master "the highest and best" of his art. Instead, "he had to draw the line just above Chopin" (38) – his talents are limited, and are relegated to the realm of low culture. In the nineteenth-century urban landscape, it is the opening up of new markets such as café concerts and music-halls (precisely Svengali's domain) that enabled the rapid expansion of a commercialized concert world, and since he is rejected from the high-status world of music, Svengali earns his livelihood by playing for a few pennies in these spaces of popular entertainment. It is also through his manipulation through hypnosis, rather than thanks to his artistic talents that Svengali eventually manages to turn Trilby into a celebrated diva.

22 Svengali's attitude towards Trilby is more explicitly objectifying than that of the three painters, and the process of compartmentalizing Trilby's body launched by Little Billee in the name of romantic affection is taken up by Svengali in a more violent way. Again, certain segments of her body are singled out for attention and subjected to extensive scrutiny. With the aid of a pair of opera glasses, for instance, Svengali sets out to examine her inner cavities, describing them in architectural, biological and musical terms: the roof of her mouth is "like the dome of the Panthéon," her throat "like the middle porch of St. Sulpice," her tongue "like the leaf of a pink peony," and the bridge of her nose "like the belly of a Stradivarius" (46-47). The description of Trilby's inner spaces makes them look enormous and grotesque, and is not entirely without sexual undertones. On two occasions, he whispers a chilling story into Trilby's ears, an act that is described by the narrator as "love-making" (69). In both cases, it is a tale of complete objectification, a nightmarish scenario of what will happen if Trilby does not yield to Svengali's attempts at seduction. In the first case, Svengali envisions Trilby's

decaying body displayed to the public behind a big plate-glass window; in the second, her skeleton is exhibited in a mahogany glass case in a medical museum. The fact that in these tales the public gazes at Trilby's remains through glass seems to be crucial. Glass technology, utilized by exhibition places as well as department stores, became an essential component of the nineteenth-century city, creating a sense of theatricality, and displaying items in a more attractive guise. And even though neither scenario features a commercial space such as the department store, in fact the two cautionary tales towards the beginning of the novel are extreme versions of what happens to Trilby when she finally does succumb to Svengali: the images of her decomposing body behind the glass are analogous to her two-dimensional, mass-produced photograph behind a shop window in the second part of the novel.

23 This latter part of the novel focuses on Trilby's transformation into a "world-wide colossal celebrity," La Svengali (248). The mystery behind her transformation is explained only at the end of the novel: Trilby, who used to be tone-deaf, has been hypnotized by Svengali, and turned into an outstanding celebrity. Although situated in a larger realist context, this part of the novel carries decidedly Gothic overtones, with Svengali the demon-artist depicted as "a sticky, haunting, long, lean, uncanny, black spider-cat" (66), and the effect Trilby has on her audience described as "strange and uncanny; [...] so oppressive, so anxious, so momentous" (190). With its focus on effect and external phenomena rather than origins and internal character, the Gothic is a particularly suitable mode to capture Trilby's metamorphosis. Far from being obsessed with the *sources* of the uncanny, the reader's anxiety is instead displaced onto the external element (in this case, mesmerism), and the villain (Svengali). But insofar as the Gothic elements are embedded in a realist framework, the effect is rather bewildering: we, as readers, feel as though we are familiar with Trilby the ordinary washerwoman, as well as Trilby the sisterly figure to the three painters, and yet we know nothing about La Svengali – as she appears and disappears in the de-familiarized space of the city, Trilby/La Svengali is a complete enigma.

24 In Du Maurier's urban landscape, three different but not unrelated forces are pitted against each other, and Trilby in her various incarnations is implicated in all three of them. On the one hand, we find the guardians of high culture, eager to ward off the incursions of what they see as vulgar or low art. These, on the other hand, are in a constant struggle with the collective, innovative and anonymous developments inherent to city life, whose effect in turn is to desacralize the notion of autonomous art. Finally, the process of commodification is eager to cash in on the monetary value of either of the previous two. The battle between these

forces is played out over a single site when after five years, the three painters return to Paris, and decide to re-visit their old studio:

> All over the walls were caricatures in charcoal and white chalk, with more or less incomprehensible legends; very vulgar and trivial and coarse, some of them, and pointless for trois Angliches.
> But among these (touching to relate) they found, under a square of plate-glass that had been fixed on the wall by means of an oak frame, Little Billee's old black-and-white-and-red chalk sketch of Trilby's left foot, as fresh as it had been done only yesterday! Over it was written: 'Souvenir de la Grande Trilby, par W. B. (Litrebili)' (181)

Both the plate-glass and the inscription can be seen as part of an attempt to attribute the sketch of Trilby's foot to the private genius of Little Billee; marked by a signature and set apart in its frame from the rest of the wall, the drawing is designated as the artist's exclusive property. Nevertheless, the surrounding caricatures are encroaching upon this framed foot, and it is as if the traces of these heterogeneous, carnivalesque voices were threatening to overwhelm the product of the unitary genius. The image is thus caught between the competing frames of individual and social possession, and at the same time it is reducible to neither. Finally, there is an attempt on the Laird's part to turn the drawing into an object that enters the market as a commodity – as the three painters are leaving the studio, the Laird rushes back to announce that he would like to buy that particular wall, and enquires about its price. His attempt at the acquisition of the drawing through monetary transaction introduces the item into yet another route of circulation – that of exchange values.

25 Similarly, the popular craze turns Trilby/La Svengali into an object of consumption on a mass scale as representations of her on stage become the most sought-after products. The urban environment provides ample sites and technologies for the public to consume her image. Casts of her feet are sold at Brucciani's[7], so that Little Billee's private fetishization gets replicated on a mass scale. Crowds gather in front of the Stereoscopic Company to gaze at images that show her "in all sizes and costumes" (222). Photos of La Svengali are displayed in shop-windows; ironically, the best-selling image is the one in which she is wearing a Greek dress, with her left foot on a little stool. This is Little Billee's idealized image of transcendental beauty, but in a highly choreographed version, and turned into a publicity poster. Initially, when the three artists see her perform on stage, the Laird has doubts as to whether La Svengali is really identical with Trilby, and at this point the semantic confusion referred to earlier is expanded by a sense of visual confusion. Curiously enough, in

[7] In 1864, Brucciani opened a London-based business that manufactured plaster casts of classical and Renaissance sculpture for commercial purposes (Haskell and Penny 117-23).

this image-saturated world of the city, it is through the filter of a representation that this bewilderment is resolved and Trilby's identity is re-affirmed – when the three of them see a photo of her foot in a display window, Little Billee exclaims, "*The foot! Now* have you got any doubts?" The Laird agrees that it is indeed Trilby, and "they all go in and purchase largely" (222). In the end, it is only her foot (or rather, its representation) by which she can be recognized – in other words, the metonymic substitution has entirely eclipsed the whole. Paradoxically, it is what used to be the mark of her uniqueness that now makes her easily reproducible. And instead of looking for a merely aesthetic experience, the three artists now feel compelled to *own* her image. The fact that they purchase largely, however, points to the fact that they cannot have their desires fulfilled. In this respect it is useful to recall Rachel Bowlby's analysis of the gender dynamics surrounding consumerism: whereas on the surface, the consumer/commodity relation might easily fit in with the dominant gender paradigm of the masculine subject taking possession of the passive feminine object, this model gets complicated once we consider the fact that the consumer is virtually dependent on the commodity's promise to complement his or her identity and selfhood: "The consumer is not (just) an active appropriator of objects for sale. His or her entire identity, the constitution of the self as a social subject, a "citizen of consumer society," depends on the acquisition of appropriate subjects. […] There is thus a clear sense in which the consumer is not so much possessor of as possessed by the commodities […] The boundaries of subject and object, active and passive, owner and owned, unique and general, break down in this endless reflexive interplay of consumer and consumed" (28-29). Accordingly, there is no clear separation between masculine and feminine positions in the dynamics between the urban crowd and Trilby/La Svengali (and her representations) – the consumers drawn to her image end up capitulating to her lure as much as they appropriate her.

26 As La Svengali is consumed by the devouring urban public, the gender connotations governing consumption are thus revealed to be highly complex. Similarly, gender issues also play a significant role in the impact of her performances on the audience. As a diva, La Svengali is a figure akin to a femme fatale and becomes the centripetal force of her environment. Everyone, regardless of their class or social status, is drawn to her. In contrast to Little Billee's idealized, non-material image of Trilby, La Svengali is described in highly sexualized terms. The music coming from her mouth is like liquid oozing from her monumental body, "like a clear, purling, crystal stream that gurgles and foams and bubbles along" (199). Having seen her performance, Taffy, the Laird and Little Billee feel that "they must drink of that bubbling fountain once more – *coûte que coûte*" (208). Adored by the

urban crowds, the figure of La Svengali is turned into a public fountain, creating an insatiable appetite that can never be satisfied completely, while holding up the illusory promise of fulfilment that in fact gets endlessly deferred.

27 The language of mesmerism is particularly suitable for dramatizing the forces behind commodity fetishism; in fact, Marx himself often resorts to metaphors of transcendence in his analysis of the commodity: he speaks of "the mystical character of commodities" (164) and describes it as "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties" (163). In the novel, Trilby is depicted as if controlled by larger forces; she is likened to a "singing-machine" and "an organ to play upon" (275). Viewed from this angle, her objectification could not be more extreme, and rather than a subject deprived of her agency, in this sense it might be more appropriate to describe her as an object come to life, akin to Marx's example of the table that stands on its head.

28 Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to regard Du Maurier's heroine as the embodiment of complete objectification, even as she displays a complete loss of self-determination in front of her audience, and representations of her are voraciously devoured by the urban crowd. Trilby/La Svengali is a highly ambiguous figure, combining the more sinister elements of commodification and standardization with some of the positive elements of mass production and entertainment. Whereas in the first part of the novel, Trilby is frozen into timeless immobility via Little Billee's idealization, Svengali re-mobilizes the multiple facets of her identity. Earlier in the novel, Svengali established his fame thanks to his ability to perform music in a variety of ways. Correspondingly, La Svengali can sing the most trivial tune in different registers, each time adopting a different persona, and consequently triggering extreme emotions in the audience. In this sense, her ever-changing personality corresponds to the commodity's essential plasticity. The excessive repetition and the heightened emotions, however, threaten to empty her performance of any meaning; as one member of the audience remarks, "I couldn't tell 'God save the Queen' from 'Pop goes the Weasel'" (154-55). In semiotic terms, La Svengali is a pure signifier, entirely severed from the referent, the peak of her performance being a reduction *ad absurdum*: "un impromptu de Chopin, sans paroles" (188), that is, performed entirely without words. Like Warhol's "Diamond Shoes" in Fredric Jameson's discussion, she is unable to refer to anything outside of herself, and signals an artifice that, to quote Jameson, fails to operate as "a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality" (8). Yet in a less pessimistic reading, Trilby/La Svengali thereby also de-stabilizes the notion of the male genius, and disrupts the protocol defining the proper ways of consuming art: after a long description of sentimental images that La Svengali's performance

conjures up in the audience's imagination, the narrator remarks, "Chopin, it is true, may have meant something quite different" (198) – ultimately, however, it does not really seem to matter what the creator of the music meant, and in this sense, Trilby renders Chopin aesthetically available to everyone.

29 Viewed from this angle, Trilby/La Svengali desacrilizes the concept of male genius, and even in the process of consumption, there is more at work than her merely being reduced to the passive component. Furthermore, her performance unites her audience, annihilating national and class boundaries. Even though the French are presented as vehemently anti-German, when La Svengali sings a song about a German Fräulein, the Parisian audience is moved to tears. Dukes, lords, and common people are equally enchanted by her; she sings in private salons as well as on the street – in this respect, she symbolizes the egalitarian aspects of mass culture. In addition, Trilby surpasses both of her 'masters' in terms of glory and significance. Svengali dies of a heart attack during one of her performances, and although Little Billee outlives her by a short period of time, his importance both as an artist and as a character is completely diminished by the end of the novel, so that even his mother refers to him as "a little obscure art student" and a "penniless and insignificant [...] nobody" (248). At the same time, Mrs. Bagot, previously portrayed as Trilby's staunchest critic, cannot help but submit to Trilby's charm, and finds herself "worshipping this fast-fading lily" (248). Whereas a great number of pages are devoted to Trilby's last days, Little Billee's death is relegated to a single paragraph, and he quietly passes from the text without further reference. By contrast, Trilby/La Svengali leaves an ineffaceable mark on the urban environment, an excess that cannot be easily tamed. Trilby is restored to the private space of her bedroom during her last days, but this act of re-domestication is only achieved through a great effort to keep the urban crowd at bay. As news of her dying reach the public, she receives a flood of responses: there are "endless letters and telegrams from all parts of Europe," "disinterested offers of service," "beggings for an interview from famous *impresarios*," as well as a "constant rolling of carriages up to the door" (247). La Svengali's admirers literally try to cross the threshold separating them from their object of fascination, so that the urban crowd in its various carnations must be barred from entrance in order for Trilby to be protected from the extreme emotions stirred by her public performance.

30 Against the background of the visual, material and technological conditions of the late-Victorian city, the narrative manages to lend its heroine visibility and stage her on the urban platform. Even if at times this leads to disturbing consequences, the figure of Trilby/La Svengali shifts back and forth between the two-fold potential of her urban presence. While

prone to sexualisation and commodification, she simultaneously dislodges the power of a number of ideological formations seeking to keep women in place. Du Maurier's metropolitan landscape exhibits several oppositions in a dynamic interaction with each other, all of them highly implicated in the question of gender – public/private, urban/pastoral, mass-produced/authentic – and with Trilby/La Svengali traversing the line separating the various domains, all the while remaining irreducible to any one of them.

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