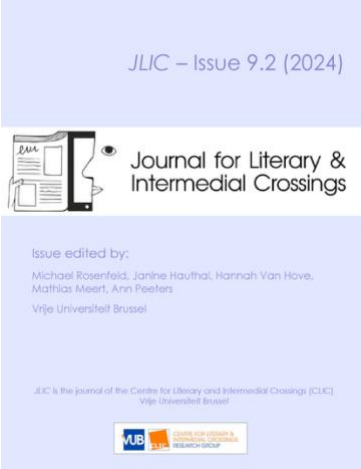

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Henning Hufnagel - University of Zürich

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Mirrors Without End: Gender, Verse, and Temporality in *femmes sans tain* (1975), an Iconotext by Régine Deforges, Irina Ionesco, and Renée Vivien

Henning Hufnagel

University of Zürich

A peculiar genre of books briefly blossomed during the 1970s: large formats combining erotic photographs with literary texts. The best-known work among them is *certainly Rêves de jeunes filles* (1971) by David Hamilton with texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet, the most notorious *Temple aux miroirs* (1977) by Irina Ionesco, also with texts by Robbe-Grillet, in which Ionesco compiled photos of her 12-year-old daughter in eroticised poses. The most interesting work of this kind is probably *femmes sans tain* (Bernard Letu et Secle, 1975), and not only because the book is entirely made by women, two of whom – unlike in all the other such books, in which women are only in front of or also behind the camera – rise to speak.

The book begins with an introduction by Régine Deforges, the first female publisher in France. The first book she published was, controversially, Louis Aragon's *Le con d'Irène* and later on, too, she concentrated on erotic texts. This introduction describes Deforges's rediscovery of *fin de siècle* author Renée Vivien through Colette's memoir *Le pur et l'impur*, which, according to its epigraph, focuses on "ces plaisirs qu'on nomme, à la légère, physiques". This is followed by metrically bound poems by the British but French-writing author Renée Vivien, who was rediscovered in the 1970s as an identification figure of the emerging LGBT movement. Deforges also presents her as such. Interspersed between the poems are black-and-white photographs by Irina Ionesco of (more or less) undressed (adult) women, often made up like dolls or Pierrots and hidden behind veils, among flowers and under jewellery and crucifixes. My contribution reads the text, using a term by Peter Wagner, as an "iconotext" or, in the sense of Michele Cometa, as a "phototext": a text that only constitutes its full meaning in the combination of the symbolic and the iconic medium, a combination whose complexity in this case is further increased by the fact that it is a pluriauctorial text by three women who, moreover, fashion a position and role for themselves in male-dominated fields: Deforges in publishing, Ionesco among erotic photographers, Renée Vivien among *les poètes*. In Vivien's and Ionesco's case, there is furthermore the crossing of linguistic and cultural borders.

I pay special attention to the interplay between fluctuating gender constructions on the one hand and the strict form of verse and black-and-white photographs on the other, and especially to the entanglement of temporal levels: Vivien refers in her texts to the ancient Sappho, Ionesco in her pictures to the iconography of *décadence* and Deforges to its later reflection in Colette and in the present of the 1970s, which rediscovered the epoch both scholarly and in popular culture. These infinite reflections of the different levels of the book in each other even include the material design of the book: it is bound in violet silk as if it were taken from the library of Des Esseintes – with violet being a significant colour in Vivien's private mythology and at the same time the symbolic colour of Colette's *garçonne* lesbians of the 1920s.

Keywords: iconotext, francophonie, gender, women-writers, photography

The Strangest Book You Might Have Ever Seen

When Dorian Gray, towards the end of chapter X of Oscar Wilde's nearly eponymous novel, looks for distraction, he picks up a curious, unnamed "yellow book"[1] sent to him by Lord Henry, his mentor and corruptor, and quickly begins, rather than to earnestly read, to "turn over the leaves":

> After a few minutes he became absorbed. It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. (186)

You could be forgiven if you came to a judgement similar to Dorian's, looking at another curious book – the one at the centre of this essay. It is a book of another conspicuous colour, bound, as it is, in mellow violet moiré silk, yet on no account anonymous, with its title page adorned by no less than three names. You might come to call it, too, the 'strangest book that you had ever seen' – and *seen* rather than *read*, as, 'turning over the leaves', one surely would rather *leaf* through this book than feel compelled to read it line by line. That book is enigmatically entitled *femmes sans tain* (I will come back to that), with every word in lower case, followed by the explanative subtitle *poèmes de*[2]*,* and a triad of woman's names: on the left Irina Ionesco (1930-2022), in the middle and set a little higher on the page, in the continuation of '*poèmes de',* Renée Vivien (1877-1909) and, to the right at the same level as Ionesco: Régine Deforges (1935-2014). All their delicate, calligraphic letters are set in a bright light blue, clashing somewhat with the violet of its wavy, animated background. Below the names, are set three oval lockets containing black-and-white portrait photographs of the three women named above, with Renée Vivien's again stretching higher, being a little larger, than the other ones.

[1] This mysterious book is, of course, as Wilde himself states in a letter to E.W. Pratt of April 15th, 1892, a reference to Joris Karl Huysmans' *À rebours* (1884) (cf. Wilde *The Complete Letters* 524; cf. also Berg 2001).
[2] 'poems by'. All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.

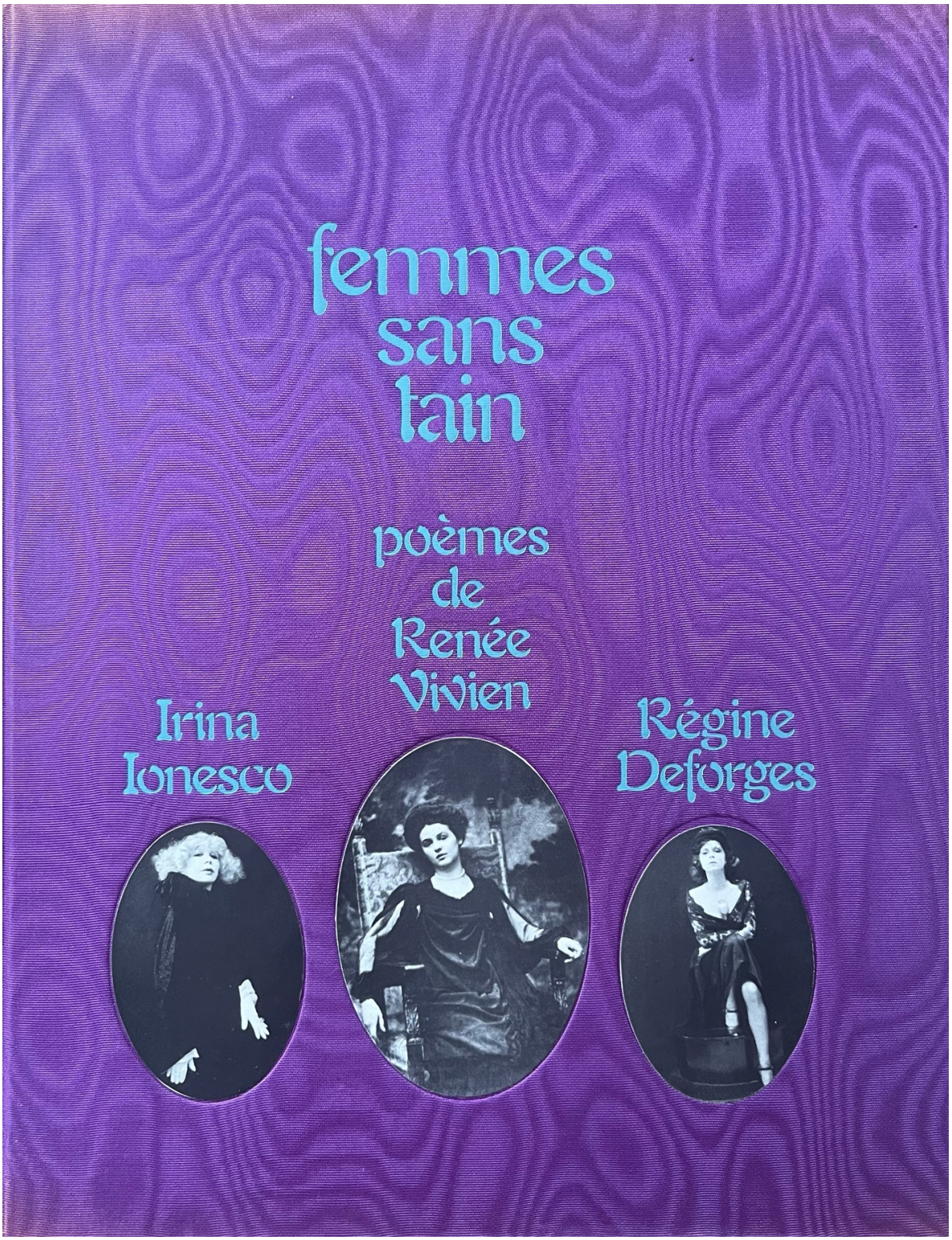

Fig. 1: *femmes sans tain*, Bernard Letu et Secle, 1975 – cover, reproduced with kind permission of Letu Books, Geneva.

The photographs set the tone to what follows when one opens the book: a sequence of texts and pictures. This inter- or cross-medial, 'iconotextual' or 'phototextual' setup explains why a reader would rather leaf through this book, oscillating between looking and reading, and reading the images as much as looking at the texts, and not only because of the former being richly textured and the latter presented quite iconically.

To be precise, *femmes sans tain*, published in 1975 and never republished, consists of a short, three-page prose introduction by Régine Deforges, followed by 21 mostly full-page black-and-white photographs. These are large images, as the volume is In-4°, measuring 24 x 30cm, and the 21 photographs alternate with a slightly higher and certainly more symbolic number of poems – 24 – of varying length and form, set in large fonts. The poems are anthologically chosen from four of Vivien's collections: *Études et preludes* (1901), *Cendres et poussières* (1902), *Évocations* (1903), and *Chansons pour mon ombre* (1907), and are cross-referenced, when applicable, with their respective re-publications, especially in *Poèmes* (1909). Constituting a most peculiar ensemble, these three distinct parts are authored, respectively, by the three women cited above: Régine Deforges, Irina Ionesco, and Renée Vivien. Deforges was a feminist author and the first woman in France to run a publishing house (founded not long before, in 1968), specialising in eroticism and controversy (though leaving the publication of this volume to Bernard Letu, a gallerist and librarian based in neutral Geneva). Ionesco constitutes that rare female figure among erotic photographers. She was born in Paris of Romanian circus artist immigrant parents and is most infamous rather than famous for her nude pictures of her prepubescent daughter Eva. These had appeared in *Playboy* and *Penthouse* and, most hypocritically, on the cover of German news magazine *Der Spiegel* (22 May 1977), under the title "Die verkauften Lolitas. Kinder auf dem Sex-Markt"[3]. The third woman is Vivien, the British-born, French-writing *fin de siècle* pseudonymous poetess and erudite translator of Sappho whose real name is Pauline Mary Tarn. I call her a *fin de siècle* author because of her dominant motives and linguistic patterns, though she published all of her nearly twenty books in the first decade of the 20th century, coinciding with the last nine feverish years of her life. Vivien died young and long had been forgotten, being at odds, as a woman and a non-national, with the most common prerequisites of canonization, at odds arguably also as a woman who self-avowedly "aimait les femmes"[4], as Deforges writes, suggesting precisely that reason: "Alors pourquoi ce silence, pourquoi cet oubli? Ce poème apporte, peut-être[,] une réponse"[5]: a poem lamenting that women do not seem allowed to love beauty, but are condemned "aux laideurs masculines"[6] (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges, without page numbers, yet p. 5). Anyway, Vivien had been swept away, like all except the highest

[3] 'The sold Lolitas. Children on the sex market'
[4] 'loved women'
[5] 'So why this silence, why this oblivion? This poem perhaps provides an answer'
[6] 'to male ugliness'

echelons of pre-war literature, by the avant-gardes and removed from anthologies, established by male scholars at the time.

In the 1970s, Vivien just began to re-emerge as an identification figure of the then-budding LGBT movement,[7] as had begun to re-emerge from its aesthetic purgatory the culture, art, and literature of '*décadence*'[8], spurred on perhaps by a 'postmodern', sympathetic sense of the end or, at least, the impasse of modernism and intellectually justified, if necessity be, by the bittersweet conscience of "Camp", as famously formulated by Susan Sontag in 1964.[9]

The exterior of the book with its three inserted photographs makes it peculiar not only as a bibliographic rarity. It signals its 'in between' status between text and image, author and pluriauctoriality. That oscillation puts it in an ambiguous "twilight" – a term that plays an important role within and for the book, as I will show. The medial and generic peculiarity of the book, as visible already on its cover page, highlights only a further peculiarity, even precarity, constituted by the fact that the book is made by three women fashioning a position and role for themselves in male-dominated fields: Deforges in publishing, Ionesco among erotic photographers, and Renée Vivien among the poets in the all-male-dominated society before World War One. In Vivien's and Ionesco's case, this precarity is further enhanced by the crossing of linguistic and cultural borders; in Vivien's, further still, by her marginal and marginalized sexual orientation.

It is, however, not only the photographs on the cover that prepare the specificities of the book's inside. The extravagant, luxurious exterior, too, foreshadows the interior; the book's materiality conforms to its material. And that is true with regard to both what one might once have called its formal and its content side. The volume lavishly operates with *blancs*, with white, empty spaces. It consists of 96 pages, yet only half of them, only the *recto*, not the *verso* bear letters or images, apart from the foreword, and even most of the *recto* pages with the poems are half-empty. They only contain a sonnet, a little *chanson* (song) or, particularly, a couple of quatrains consisting of short *octosyllabes*, verses consisting of eight syllables. This was Théophile Gautier's meter for his aestheticist *Émaux et camées* (1852), chosen explicitly to mark a difference and divergence from the most common of French poetry, the traditional twelve-syllable *alexandrin* that Vivien, too, uses for most of her poems. There are white spaces above the horizontal, 'landscape' photographic formats, too, but most significantly within Ionesco's photographs themselves. There, white forms – faces, cloths, and flowers mainly – stand

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[7] Vivien has since seen a scholarly renaissance, beginning with the edition of her *Poésies complètes* precisely in Deforges' publishing house (Vivien 1986), mostly in the field of women and gender studies, yet also beyond, see, in particular, the two edited volumes Albert 2009 and Albert 2012 and, most recently, the special issue of *Sextant* about "Intellectuel·les *queer*. Collaborations (1880-1920)" (Rosenfeld), where Vivien is a *passim* presence. See in particular the article dedicated to Vivien by Camille Islert in that special issue as well as her published *thèse* (Islert).

[8] 'Decadence'

[9] Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" later became part of her début collection of essays, *Against Interpretation* (Sontag 275-292).

out against the invariably black background, the exact opposite of the verses' black letters standing out against the white page.

On the content side, the silky violet exterior of the book creates a temporal entanglement between the 1970s of its material production and the 1900s of its poetic components, posing as a precious book that could have been taken from the library of Joris-Karl Huysmans' decadent hero, the duke Jean des Esseintes. In the same entangled way, Ionesco's photographs heavily hark back to the iconography of *décadence*, featuring more or less undressed adult women, more or less drowned in or under veils, laces, crochet dresses with perforated patterns reminiscent of decorative openwork, occasionally also fur and feathers, necklaces, sacral jewellery and, time and again, as already mentioned, flowers, arranged exclusively in hermetically sealed interiors. (Her daughter Eva figures but twice in the book, once fully dressed, in a brocade mantle, even with a flamboyant chapeau, once only with her collaged head.) As in the "yellow book" of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, they constitute a procession "in exquisite raiment" (Wilde 186), i.e. in a literally archaic garb and thus an out-of-its-own-time appearance, interspersed with "the delicate sound of" metrically bound verses, showing off, if not "the sins", certainly the sinuousness of an artificial, re-created, represented world.

If *femmes sans tain* seems quite unique, it is, however, no *hapax*. The book is part of an odd genre that briefly blossomed during the 1970s, mainly in France, but usually translated and, at times, sold in huge numbers in other languages – English, German –, too: large formats combining erotic photographs with literary texts, seeing collaborations between photographers from David Hamilton to Jacques Bourboulon and writers from Alain Robbe-Grillet to Léopold Sédar Senghor, even to Serge Gainsbourg.

Before I briefly characterise this genre – and point out *femme sans tain*'s nevertheless unique position within it, elaborating on its enigmatic title –, I will illustrate and refocus the concepts of 'phototext' and 'iconotext', designating a pluri-medial artifact that only constitutes its full meaning in the combination of characteristics of the symbolic and the iconic medium. In this context, I tentatively propose to conceive of the medial interaction in iconotexts in analogy to how Sergei Eisenstein conceptualizes filmic montage: as an open, not fully controllable process. In the case of *femmes sans tain*, the complexity of the combination is further increased, as indicated, by the fact that the plurality of media corresponds with a plurality of authors, and, all the more so, female authors.

I will then show how the 'collaboration' of the three women, working in at least two different epochs and focussing on at least three different 'time zones', creates an entanglement of temporal levels: Vivien refers in her texts not only to the contemporary parks and interiors so frequent in decadent or symbolist literature, but strategically to Antiquity, too. Ionesco refers, as we have seen, in her pictures to the very iconography of *décadence* and Deforges in her preface to its later reflection in the 1940s, namely in Colette's memoirs, and in the present of the 1970s. These infinite reflections of the different levels of the book in each other include its material design with its violet binding, as I

indicated, yet even in still another way: Violet is a significant colour in Vivien's private mythology and at the same time the symbolic colour of not only Colette's *garçonne*[10] lesbians of the 1920s.

In the final part of my essay, I analyse how this temporal entanglement with its mirror effects runs parallel to fluctuating gender constructions. Gender is presented in an ambiguous, metamorphosing "twilight", producing a constant tension and interplay with the strict form of both verse and black-and-white photographs: Ionesco transforms the body into a jigsaw, into the clear-cut elements of a collage, while Vivien stages a Wagnerian-sounding 'twilight of the genders' in a sharp, crystalline form reminiscent of the epigrammatic tradition, bathing, however, the form itself in an ambiguous light.

Iconotexts and Phototexts

The term 'iconotext', understood as a term designating a double-coded 'text' in the broad sense of semiotics, on the page of which there are both verbal and visual signs – words and images –, seems to have been coined in 1990 by Alain Montandon. Michael Nerlich applied the term immediately to a combination of verbal text and photographic images, so that he also could have baptised this particular combination of two distinct, specific media a 'phototext'. Whoever might have created this term and when – it gains traction only a decade later, in the 2000s (Bryant, Hughes and Noble, von Steinaecker), albeit in a sometimes metaphorical, even confused sense.

Ari J. Blatt, for example, in his 2009 essay envisaging "to clarify our understanding of what a phototext is and does" (108), lumps together, among others, what he calls "narrative photographs" on the one hand and "photographically engaged works of literature" (113) respectively "phototextual fictions" (116) on the other. The latter are, in parallel to Montandon's understanding of iconotexts, material combinations of texts and photographs within the same artistic product, mostly books, as represented, most famously, at least in recent times, by the works of W.G. Sebald, yet pioneered in the very *fin de siècle*, by Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte* (1892), a pre-text of sorts, in a different intermedial crossing, of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), and later continued by André Breton's *Nadja* (1928/1963).

Yet Blatt deals also with photographs of (mostly closed) books, of libraries and people caught in the act of reading. These photographs thus *represent* the textual medium within the photographic medium, rather than realize an interaction between the media – however to be conceptualized, and I will come back to that, too. I therefore believe these instances to be better understood in the terminology of intermediality, as forms of 'intermedial reference', as theorized by Irina Rajewsky (16-17).

Blatt tries to define "narrative photographs" citing as examples Gregory Crewdson's large-scale digital prints depicting unsettling scenes from *unheimlich* homes in suburbia

[10] 'flapper', tomboy

or Melanie Pullen's even larger "High Fashion Crime Scenes" of women in shades of Prada and puddles of blood (114-115) – and one could already think of Cindy Sherman's suggestive black-and-white "Untitled Film Stills" (1977-1980). Blatt's "narrative photographs" seem to be 'phototexts' because of their storytelling qualities. Yet, storytelling is, of course, neither a language-bound nor a medial characteristic (who would qualify a ballet as a 'moving' or 'moto-text'?). In fact, already the large-scale format of Blatt's examples rather point to a postmodern take on the venerable tradition of history painting, once considered the highest genre of art, at least until the French Revolution, and thus reminiscent of the conception of painting as *ut pictura poesis* or, indeed more correctly, *ut poesis pictura*: the conception of painting as parallel to poetry, and parallel because also rhetorically structured. This was the aesthetic default position since Humanism (see the classical study by Lee).

Metaphorical usages may have been driven by one of the first and most influential systematic reflections on the interaction between the verbal and the visual medium under the sign of iconotextuality: Peter Wagner's introduction into his edited volume *Icons – Texts – Iconotexts* (1996). There, Wagner famously states: "iconotext refers to an artifact in which the verbal and the visual signs mingle to produce rhetoric that depends on the co-presence of words and images" (16). Yet, as I have written elsewhere, even if, at first, this definition seems quite straightforward, harking apparently back to Montandon, a closer look reveals that 'co-presence', for Wagner, means not co-presence materially on the page, but consciously in the readers' minds (Hufnagel 77-78). Wagner applies the term iconotext "not only to works which really show the interpenetration of words and images in a concrete sense [...] but also to such art works in which one medium in only implied (e.g., the reference to a painting in a fictional text)" (16).

So, as in Blatt, here, too: inflating the *corpus* of potential iconotexts nearly *ad infinitium*, thus reducing the analytic value of his concept, Wagner conflates the actual *combination* of media with *representation* of one medium in another one, with *reference*, citation of and even allusion to one medium in another (see his *Moby Dick* and David's Horatii example, in Wagner 15), with the *transfer* from one medium to another (as, e.g., a screen adaptation of a novel) and with the *simulation* of one medium in another (as in 'musical' or 'cinematographic writing', for example). They are more precisely dealt with, again, drawing on, and differentiating further, Rajewsky's analytic distinctions (15-18).

That is why it seems sensible – particularly in the present context – to adopt, by and large, Michele Cometa's both restrictive and differentiated notion of phototext. Cometa discusses as phototexts only works characterised by the material co-presence of the linguistic verbal and the photographic visual, combined trough different 'rhetorics of layout' (the uncommon plural is his: "retoriche del layout" in Cometa 78). And he stresses the subversive, de-hierarchizing and re-hierarchizing potentials of the combination of these two particular media (73): the 'spiritual' and the 'mechanical' medium, the poetic medium of genius and the mass-productive medium of the machine (productive, i.e.

poetic etymologically, but without the halo of emphasis around a creator). These subversive effects are in line with the *topoi* that have accompanied photography since its invention and never have completely disappeared; for Pierre Bourdieu, for example, photography is the perfect middle-brow art. Cometa notes that literary theory has for a long time eschewed to come to terms with even the existence of literary phototexts, let alone canonized the genre (69).

This aspect of questioning common hierarchies is all the more relevant when considering the sub-genre of erotic phototext and especially our particular phototext co-authored by three women. The addition of literary texts to erotic photographs in the 1970s, in any case, seems not least aimed at ennobling images of questionable reputation, as it is the case in a not completely dissimilar, in a certain way even double intermedial crossing: Guido Crepax' *fumetto* or graphic novel adaptation of Pauline Réage's controversial *Histoire d'O* – in its exclusive 1975 edition by the Milanese publishing house Franco Maria Ricci (in 900 numbered and signed copies, on laid paper, in French throughout, despite its Italian origin) benefiting from introductions by both Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet.

Before I explore the erotic phototext genre, let me add a thought about how the interaction between the media in an iconotext or phototext could be described in its most general and succinct form. In the literature, you find generally two ways: one polemic, one irenic. W.J.T. Mitchell writes about a "struggle for territory" (43), Wagner even about "a warfare in a medium and between the media" (15); for Alain Montandon, an iconotext exposes at least the "irréducibilité d'une difference" (6).[11] Mieke Bal, on the contrary, and not surprisingly, as she writes about an epoch when the premodern *ut pictura poesis* conception still held sway, rather sees a continuous intertwinement between the verbal and the visual (5); Thomas von Steinaecker even detects a 'dialogue' (10). If the war metaphor seems excessive, so does the nearly all-purpose, here quaintly anthropomorphic, even sentimental metaphor of dialogue. If the latter way stresses the successful enhancement of a communicative message by the juxtaposition, or parallelism, of two media (as best visible, perhaps, in premodern *emblemata*), the former seems to focus, equally unilaterally, on the aporetic, deconstructive effects of such a juxtaposition.

Of course, the specifics of interaction and the effects of juxtaposition vary greatly, just as their forms do, depending on what Cometa calls the 'rhetorics of layout': on how an image is embedded into a text or vice versa; on the way, position, and number, amongst others, of references, analogies, discrepancies between verbal and visual signs. Ionesco's photographs, for example, are far more loosely connected to Vivien's poems, written seven decades earlier and always separated from them by one blank page, than, say, the photographs inserted right into the midst of Sebald's texts that evoke situations, persons, and objects analogous or even identical to those depicted.

[11] 'irreducibility of a difference'

According to von Steinaecker, the function of the photographs in Sebald's works, especially in the early *Schwindel. Gefühle* (1990) and *Die Ringe des Saturn* (1995), consists in confirming, believably or not, what the texts state and claim, developing a dense web – a 'texture' – of analogies and associations between the two media (250-263).

Looking for a neutral, comprising way, I would, tentatively, propose to conceive of the medial interaction in iconotexts in analogy to how Sergei Eisenstein conceptualizes filmic montage. Eisenstein makes comparisons with the surprising semantic results, at least for Europeans, produced by the combination of ideographic Asian characters. From an intermedial point of view, one could also note the ambiguous nature of certain such characters, representing variably sounds and ideas: it makes them at the same time similar to both synthetic words and holistic images. Eisenstein writes, in an expressionistically varied typography:

> […] *in my view montage is not an idea composed of successive shots stuck together but an idea that DERIVES from the collision between two shots that are independent of one another* […]. As in Japanese hieroglyphics in which two independent ideographic characters ('shots') are juxtaposed and *explode* into a concept. (163-164)

This interaction is an open process, characterized by indetermination, quite in Umberto Eco's sense, and it is – thinking of collisions and explosions – to a certain extend an even uncontrollable process; its impact depends on the inner structure, the 'chemistry' of the active components, resulting in a smaller or a bigger bang.

The Erotic Phototexts of the 1970s

The times, they are forever a-changing, to vary Bob Dylan: In the 1970s, there was a curious *kairos* in France for erotic books that signalled the high-end and high-brow status of taste and sophistication their authors strived for by combining (self-declaredly) artistic erotic photographs with consecrated avantgarde or, at least, off-mainstream literary texts, using large formats, hardbacks and, sometimes, precious materials, referring to the tradition of the *livre d'artiste*, the book as an artwork, decidedly a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (for this tradition, see generally Schmitz-Emans).

The best-known (and best-selling) works among them are certainly *Rêves de jeunes filles* (1971) and *Les Demoiselles d'Hamilton* (1972) by David Hamilton, presenting his – then hugely popular – signature teenage girls or underage-appearing young women in soft focus, paired with texts by Alain Robbe-Grillet. The most notorious is *Temple aux miroirs* (1977) by Irina Ionesco, also with texts by Robbe-Grillet, in which Ionesco compiled photos of her then, at most, barely 12-year-old daughter in eroticised poses.

For another volume, Serge Gainsbourg, the author of double-edged, provocative pop-songs (remember France Gall and phallic lollipops, in 1966), contributed three sonnets to dozens of sun-drenched photographs by Jacques Bourboulon, published under the title *Des corps naturels* (1980), and the choice of the revered form of the sonnet seems a clear strategy for heightening the brow, not only, here, with respect to the

photographer's work, but even primarily the singer-songwriter's, assuming the role of the bard.

1986 sees the publication of *Black Ladies*, a collection of nude photographs of African women by the German, Paris-based photographer Uwe Ommer. Léopold Sédar Senghor contributed a preface and a number of sensuous poems to this volume. Senghor was probably the internationally most high-profile black poet at that time, six years after retiring from the presidency of Senegal, and three years after having been elected, as the first writer born in Africa, among the forty 'Immortals' of the *Académie française*.

Ommer's case is particularly interesting, as some ten years later, in 1995, he published another volume identically entitled *Black Ladies*, still presenting photographs of nude women of colour, yet, as it seems, without using any of the pictures from 1986, and accompanied also by completely new texts. Now they are written by a woman, the feminist, Cameroon-born novelist Calixthe Beyala. It seems as if Ommer had wanted to take his distances from Senghor – and Senghor' views on women and gender, that were becoming more and more old-fashioned and less and less accepted; one of his biographers, for example, writes, in 2005, and apparently still approvingly, with regard to Senghor's attitudes: "La femme est sa muse. Au fond, ça l'amuse" (Dijan 85).[12]

The most interesting work of this genre is certainly *femmes sans tain*. It is the only book entirely made by women, two of whom rise to speak – unlike in all the other such books, in which only men are behind the words and women are only in front of the camera, with Ionesco's lone exception, yet, if one thinks of how she treated her daughter, probably the photographer with the cruellest, most impassive eye. The other exception, of course, is the 'recanting' second *Black Ladies*; it marks, indeed, not only chronologically, the end of the historical moment of the genre.

The Subversion of the Voyeur's Gaze and Words: the Title of the Book

In the volumes of the genre I have outlined, the women are looked at, are objects of the gaze, and a by far dominantly male gaze, in the by far more male-dominated world of the 1970s and early 1980s. The women are further fixed and fixated by the words of the male writers commenting literarily, in a more or less cybernetic montage, on the photographs. That – "prima le immagini, poi le parole", to adapt a formula of the early modern *paragone* between the arts: 'first the pictures, then the words', leads to the second particularity of *femmes sans tain*: the temporal order between – and within – words and images.

But let us stick for a moment with the gaze, as it seems to me that the gaze the women are exposed to is reflected – and, in a certain way, *literally* reflected and thus *de*flected – in the strange, punning title of the book: The formula *femmes sans tain* is modelled on 'glace sans tain', which designates a semi-transparent, one-way, spy or

[12] 'Woman is his muse. Basically, it [sic] is an amusement'

voyeur's mirror (Robbe-Grillet claimed to have one of these in his bureau in the Éditions de Minuit). It is a mirror without ("sans") the second layer of tin and mercury which makes a looking-glass non-transparent both ways.

The combination of a woman with a mirror – a woman looking at herself in a moment of intimacy – is a classic voyeuristic *dispositive*, to borrow Foucault's term; its name in art history is "The Toilet of Venus", a much-practised topic, from Antiquity to Titian, Rubens, and Velázquez to its brutal banalisation by Hans Bellmer.

Amongst Ionesco's 21 photographs in *femmes sans tain*, only one contains a mirror, showing a clearly adult – and clearly dressed – woman contemplating her face, covered by a large white, translucent veil, in a small, hand-held mirror, somewhat like Balthus's dressed and un-veiled minor in his painting *Les Beaux jours* (1944/45). Significantly, directly behind the woman's head, there is a smallish reproduction of a Renaissance painting attached to the wall, showing a nude woman lying on a bed, mirroring the photographed woman: As her, she is lying on the blankets; as her, she is visible only from the thighs upwards; and as hers, the painted woman's head and breast are covered by the veil, touching, however, not her body, but her body's visual representation. Indeed, the two women nearly touch each other at her heads, in mirror-image-like symmetry: the photographically represented woman and the painterly represented woman, secondarily represented within the photographic representation, on a tertiary-level reproduction of the painting.

In the painting, the woman is seen covering her groin with one hand, like a *Venus pudica*, extending her other hand in a communicative, perhaps supplicating gesture. This outstretched hand is, again, in mirror-image-like symmetry with the photographed woman's hand holding the mirror, while her other hand, the double of the hand on the pudenda, is almost invisible, resting, fingers opened, relaxed under the veil. The expression on the woman's face is languorous, languishing, corroborating somewhat the supplicative character of the painted woman's gesture. She does not smile, as Balthus' figure faintly does.

Fig. 2: 'Woman with mirror', untitled photograph from *femmes sans tain*, reproduced with kind permission of Letu Books, Geneva.

What do we make of these mirror-effects? In Ionesco's photograph, we do not see the woman's reflection in the looking-glass, unlike in most of the "Toilet of Venus" paintings. In these images, the viewer sees, both literally and metaphorically, a double image: the woman and his desire of her. In contrast, in the *femmes sans tain* image, the woman does not let us see what she sees – herself. Ionesco's image, thus, is, exactly, an inverted *glace sans tain*. It is a one-way mirror that does not let the voyeur's gaze in, but excludes it, as not the voyeur sees the woman in the mirror, but only the woman herself. Yet, Ionesco's image poses as a common voyeur's mirror, even as a common looking-glass with its double image, as the photographed, dressed woman is mirrored by the painted – and desirably nude – woman in the background.

This photograph works just as Vivien's texts that evade male desire formulating another, contrarian, self-reflective desire. Even if this female desire of women constantly chastises itself, as it is constantly linked, in the poems, with death and renunciation, through a 'queer' take on that typical decadent *concetto*, it also disorientates, displaces, excludes the common male desire, just as the *glace sans tain* excludes the gaze, reflecting it back on those trying to look through – in this particular, subtly reversed use, on those believing to look at something else than their own desirous projections.

Yet, might the allusion to the voyeur's mirror in the title not simply point to the voyeuristic viewing of the theatrically made-up and presented women, with or without clothes, 'sequestered', as Robbe-Grillet might say, in their windowless interiors stuffed with laces and flowers, and thus without hiding from that view? It could, certainly in the other photographs. It could, in their sequence, if it were not, however, for this one picture, the only one, as I said, containing a mirror, that object-epithet of the voyeur, excluding there, as I have shown, the voyeur's gaze. But it cannot at all in the phototext juxtaposing Ionesco's photographs and Vivien's poems: the poems' desiring female voice without the desire for a man nor a man's desire is a men-and-their-gaze-excluding *femme sans tain – sans stain*, one might even read, thinking of the English titles of several of Vivien's poems in the book, as *Twilight* or *Let the Dead bury their Dead* – 'pure' in her all-effacing entwinement of love and death, sapping, exploding even, through juxtaposition, the male voyeur's gaze.

This point – subversive deviation – is further underscored by the 'rhetorics of layout': The photograph is the second of the book, not the first, what could have been judged as not sophisticated enough. Put in the first position, the image would have set the tone too obviously, but, through its second place, it deviates, reverses the perspective of the voyeur commonly, unreflectingly assumed when opening the book. There is a deviating 'swerve' not dissimilar in the layout of the poems, too. As I mentioned, there are 24 poems interspersed between the 21 photographs, yet the sequence of one page of photography, one blank page, one page of poetry, one further blank page is never altered. Three exceptional times, there are two poems sharing one page: first after five photographs, then after the eleventh photograph, thus after six more photos, and last after photograph number 18, thus after seven more, eschewing the simplest regularity or

rather setting a game of tempo or rhythmic spacing of two poems with intervals of 5-6-7 photographs.

The image of the woman with her mirror follows the photograph of a woman's bust in a circle of roses and of ferns whose tips point, like spearheads, towards the woman's mask-like face of a hairless Pierrot, Pierrot's typical tears hanging as drop-shaped crystals under her eyes raised to the sky. A black scarf, merging with the black background, makes it look as if the head had been severed from the décolleté, like that of Medusa, another *fin de siècle* stereotype – Mario Praz's first chapter of his classic *La Carne, la morte e il diavolo nella letteratura romantica* (published in translation under the English title *The Romantic Agony*), notably, is dedicated to "La bellezza medusea"[13] (31) –, and Medusa is present also in other photographs, there, with lace surrounding the faces, alluding more to the imagery of Belgian Symbolist painter Fernand Khnopff. If Medusa has since become a feminist trope, probably this aspect was already subcutaneously present in the 1970s.

The image of the woman with her mirror follows the first poem, entitled *Lassitude*[14]. It already displays what turn out to be leitmotivs for the subsequent poems: the transition from life to sleep to death, intoxicating flowers, transferred sentiment, and suppressed suffering: "Je dormirai ce soir d'un large et doux sommeil. / Fermez les lourds rideaux, tenez les portes closes […] // Posez, sur la blancheur d'un oreiller profond, / Ces mortuaires fleurs dont le parfum obsède", to cite the first two verses of the first two stanzas (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 11) [15].

If the interior sealed by closed curtains of the second verse is a visual leitmotiv, too, as already mentioned, the photograph is followed, in turn, by a not less programmatic poem: *Sonnet féminin*[16]. This poem contains all the keywords of "La Sapho française"'s desire, as *Les Nouvelles littéraires* called Vivien in an article commemorating her in 1933 (Le Dantec). These keywords are further highlighted by their position; they function as rhymes: "lyres lesbiennes", "nudités païennes", "odes saphiques", "strophes érotiques", and "Mytilène"[17], rhyming with "légère haleine"[18], to which "[l]a blanche volupté des vierges amoureuses"[19] is compared, rhyming, in turn, with "tes étranges mains creuses"[20], the three elements of hollowness, whiteness, and virginity suggesting, evidently, a non-reproductive, 'sterile', lesbian desire (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 15). In such a programmatic context, the photograph of the 'glace sans tain' woman with the mirror is bestowed with a programmatic value, too.

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[13] 'Medusa's beauty'
[14] 'Weariness'
[15] 'Tonight I shall sleep a deep and sweet sleep / Close the heavy curtains, keep the doors shut [...] // Lay, on the whiteness of a deep pillow, / These mortuary flowers with their haunting perfume'.
[16] 'Female sonnet'
[17] 'Lesbian lyres', 'pagan nudes', 'sapphic odes', 'erotic stanzas' and 'Myrtilène'
[18] 'slight breath'
[19] 'The white voluptuousness of virgins in love'
[20] 'your strange hollow hands'

Many of Vivien's 'sapphic' keywords, however, would have been associated, by Vivien's contemporaries, primarily with a male author: Pierre Louÿs who, in 1895, had published *Les Chansons de Bilitis*[21], an alleged translation of the Greek poems of a made-up ancient poetess friend of Sappho, allegedly rediscovered by a German archaeologist named preposterously G. Heim – a name sounding like 'Geheim', i.e. 'secret' (Skucha 115). The second part of these *Chansons*, for example, is entitled "Élégies à Mytilène"[22] (Louÿs 59).

The components of Louÿs' literary hoax are some 140 prose poems, each in four little 'strophes'. The prose poem is a *modern* form (think of Baudelaire's *Spleen de Paris*), yet in line with Louÿs' intended sham, pretending his book to be an erudite edition, complete with notes (in the first edition) and a critical bibliography (in the subsequent editions), necessitating a precise and thus a prose translation. Vivien, on the contrary, inserts these keywords of a particular Antiquity into verse and rhyme, inserts them into the sonnet form, marking the aesthetic distance of stylization, at the antipodes of Louÿs' purported translation of historic immediacy by erudition. Paradoxically, though, exactly by this aesthetic distancing, she enhances their poetic efficacy: Resetting them into the unequivocally aesthetic realm, Vivien reclaims Sapho's 'legacy' for a female author again.

There is even more: as I mentioned, Vivien evokes ancient poetry in the sonnet form, originating in the Middle Ages. She uses those keywords of Antiquity, as mentioned, even as rhymes, thus in a post-antique function, unknown to ancient poetry. Thereby, she entangles different epochs, while Louÿs keeps them separate through the fiction of his erudite framework. That leads again – and now for good – to the second particularity of *femmes sans tain* I stressed: the temporal order between – and within – words and images.

Temporal Entanglements

In all the other books I characterized above, the texts are posterior to the images; they *accompany* the images in the sense that they were written for the sake of the pre-existent photographs. For example, on the last page of *Rêves de jeunes filles*, Hamilton duly acknowledges the magazines where his photos had previously appeared. He explicitly names three German publications, among them the still-active *Stern*, then circulating in around two million copies weekly. Internationally, the magazine is perhaps best known for its bungled publication of the *faux* Hitler diaries in 1983, and that may point to an ingrained will to sensation possibly present also in its nexus with Hamilton.

Ionesco's pictures, in contrast, are obviously posterior to Vivien's poems. It is not clear, though, whether Ionesco composed her pictures after actually reading Vivien's

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[21] 'Songs of Bilitis'
[22] 'Elegies at Mytilene'

poems. Deforges writes in her preface that "Irina Ionesco a remarquablement compris l'univers de Renée Vivien qui est très proche du sien […]. Je suis sûre que Renée Vivien reconnaîtrait ses amantes parmi les belles d'Irina Ionesco" (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 7)[23]. This seems to confirm, at least with its first phrase, the posteriority to a reading. Just a year earlier, however, Ionesco had published her first book, entitled *Liliacées langoureuses aux parfums d'Arabie* [24], containing 25 photographs without any words besides an introduction by the writer and erotomaniac André Pieyre de Mandiargues, a lifelong friend of legendary Henri Cartier-Bresson. Not only does *Liliacées langoureuses* present itself in the same vein as *femmes sans tain* (brown moiré silk binding), but its photographs evidently depict some of the same models and definitely use many of the same props, too. The images of both books might therefore have originated in the same process of work. In any case, those 'fading flowers' channel the same scented *air du temps* as the volume published some twelve months later.

Yet, the temporal entanglement operating in *femmes sans tain* does not exclusively possess a retrospective vector, pointing back to the *fin de siècle*. It goes in multiple directions, forsaking comfortable, backwards-looking nostalgia in favour of a *motus animae* without preconditioned time or space: it has the drive of an a-temporal u-topia. That is the main contribution of the preface to the volume. There, Régine Deforges recounts how she discovered Renée Vivien, reading Colette's later recollection of the poet in her memoir *Le Pur et l'impur* (1941), already mirroring the 1900s in the 1940s, reflected now in the 1970s. According to the epigraph of its first version, from 1932, taken from Colette's own *Le Blé en herbe* (1923), *Le Pur et l'impur* focuses on "ces plaisirs qu'on nomme, à la légère, physiques"[25] (Colette cover page) – a very timely, much discussed and much experimented topic in those years after the 'summer of love'.

Entitling her preface "Une femme m'apparut…"[26], complete with this pointed mark of ellipsis, Deforges stresses the abrupt, transformative, 'epiphanic' character of her discovery. Yet, at the same time, she links it right to the past, explaining that this, *Une femme m'apparut*…, is the title of a novel of Vivien's (indeed, the only one not co-written with her lover Hélène de Zuylen, who published with her under the shared pseudonym Paule Riversdale) (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 5). Deforges would go on to reedit that novel in her publishing house two years later.

Deforges cites, right at the beginning of her text, Colette's rendering of Vivien's both crude and naïve "manière de parler de l'amour physique"[27] and her both comic and touching foreign accent – "flanquant de l'h anglaise toutes les dentales: 'Ah! Mon [sic] pethit Coletthe, que cetthe vie est déghoutanthe!' et *qui éclatait de rire* pour masquer

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[23] 'Irina Ionesco has a remarkable understanding of Renée Vivien's world, which is very similar to her own. I am sure that Renée Vivien would recognise her lovers among Irina Ionesco's beauties'
[24] 'Languorous lilies with Arabian scents'
[25] 'those pleasures we lightly call physical'
[26] 'A woman appeared before me'
[27] 'way of talking about corporeal love'

son désespoir profond"[28] (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 5). Deforges, thus, evokes primarily Vivien's voice, the ephemeral attribute of the present. Deforges evokes her as a breathing, talking, living being, making the long-dead poet the contemporary of the actual readers – even if the first 'contact' of these readers has been Vivien's period photograph in the medallion on the cover that shows her in still another, even mixed temporal distance, seated, as she is seen to be, in an ancient chair, with the exuberant hairdo and costume of a Baroque Roman princess and the tender inclined face of a Florentine Renaissance Madonna.

The Twilight of the Genders

Those temporal entanglements with its mirror effects run parallel to fluctuating gender constructions, epitomised most concisely in the poem entitled *Twilight* (in English, as already mentioned, the poem is in French). The ambivalent moment between night and day is, however, just one of many ambiguous, dichotomies-dissolving figures of transition present in the volume. Such figures are constituted, not least, by many of the beings populating the poems, as *Les Revenants*, *La Faunesse* and *Ondine*,[29] mixing life and death, human and animal. In *Twilight*, the figures of transition are openly inflected in the sense of gender and sexuality, making the others appear, at least partially, as its metaphors.

Twilight receives its prominent position, again, just like the photograph of the woman with the mirror, through the 'rhetorics of layout', being collocated right in the middle of the volume, yet again with the characteristic, deviating 'swerve': *Twilight* is the fourteenth poem, not the twelfth, following the twelfth photograph, not the eleventh, which would have marked the exact centre.

The gender aspect is strengthened, phototextually, by Ionesco's female faces rendered gender-ambivalent by the heavy mask-like, Pierrot-like make-up, harking back to that key *fin de siècle* trope of the outsider: just think of the Pierrots by Deburau, Laforgue, or Régamey. Preceding *Twilight* directly and directly following the *La Faunesse* poem, there is a photograph of such a face surrounded by an animal mass of fur. Earlier, we find a photograph of a Pierrot's face, surrounded by a halo of flowers, unequivocally Pierrot not least because of the character's typical skullcap, though with inversed colours: white, here, instead of the traditional black. Still, it also recalls a Saint John the Baptist for a broad, blade-like palm-leaf placed under the cheek, the Baptist acting, as an actual woman, as his own Salomé.

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[28] 'flanking all the dentals with the English h: 'Ah! My little Coletthe boy [sic], how disgusting this life is!' and *bursting out laughing* to mask her deep despair'

[29] 'The revenants', 'The female faun' and 'Water nymph'

Fig. 3: 'Pierrot the Baptist', untitled photograph from *femmes sans tain*, reproduced with kind permission of Letu Books, Geneva.

Earlier still, we see what is probably the most significant image of this series: a Pierrot face surrounded by Medusa-reminiscent lacework, crowned by an artificial flower, resting on a japonaiserie-like pillow amongst lilies and chrysanthemums. That androgynous face, however, is attached to an explicitly female body, lying there, nude, as if in a coffin, with a crucifix stretching its arms over the surprised breasts and a diamond flower, a jewellery openwork, placed on the still visible pubic hair (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 45, 53, 37). One of the woman's hands and arms is covered by a long opera glove, the other holds a shiny, artificial rose, as if it were the prop from Richard Strauss' 1911 opera *Der Rosenkavalier*[30]. There, the silver rose is a pledge presented to the bride, and consistently, in the following poem, there is a bride to be greeted – Death: "J'attends, ô Bien-Aimée!"[31], as goes the first hemistich of *Sonnet à la Mort* [32] (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 39).

[30] 'The Rose-Bearer'
[31] 'I am waiting, o Beloved'
[32] 'Sonnet to Death'

Fig. 4: 'Pierrot Rose-Bearer', untitled photograph from *femmes sans tain*, reproduced with kind permission of Letu Books, Geneva.

These ambivalent figures are in a certain productive tension to the strictness of the austere medium of black and white photography, intensified still by Ionesco's personal style. Ionesco works with sharp contrasts, drowning out in deep black flatness the spatiality of her studio where she photographed her scenes and models. The woman with the mirror is a rare exception. The shadows around the figures are so deep that the heads or other parts often seem to have been severed from the bodies, for example, amongst many others, in the first photograph of the book or that of the Baptist-like Pierrot. Ionesco cuts, in a certain way, her material into a visual alphabet that can be combinatorically rearranged and permutated, like a universal jigsaw, with its recurring veils, identical shawls and same necklaces, comprising also body parts. In this respect, the last photograph is particularly significant, showing, as mentioned, Eva Ionesco's head in a collage, put upon a pool of blackness. In that way, the gender ambiguity of the nude

female body with the Pierrot face appears as an extension of these combinatorics, without recurring to transitional tones of shades of grey.

In her texts, Vivien follows a different strategy. *Twilight* stages its dissolution of gender dichotomies in a particularly subtle way, implicating its crystalline formal structure. To do so, the poem develops ambiguities and oscillations on several levels. The poem consists of six stanzas, consisting uncommonly of only two verses. *Twilight* is one of those short poems I mentioned that leave half a page blank, and the short, multiple stanzas multiply the blanks further (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 55). The twelve verses of *Twilight* are alexandrines, the French meter most common for the last 800 years, each of them made up of twelve metrical syllables. Yet, Vivien sheds, on this common form, a less common light: a twilight, I dare say, oscillating between stanza, verse and hemistich.

According to the general rules of versification, an alexandrine is divided by a caesura into two halves of six syllables each, just as the twelve verses of the poem are grouped into six stanzas of two verses each. So, the stanzas resemble what one could call double, 'grand' alexandrines, coupling its two halves vertically, rather than horizontally, as the normal, single alexandrine does with its halves. That thought might seem less far-fetched if one considers that Mallarmé, in *Un coup de dés* (1897), used the shadowy line in the middle of the double page as a prosodical tool, a caesura to articulate his grand verses, and distributed their parts and hemistiches, in various ways, vertically and, operating with still another category, in different typographies. Experiments with verses in space were not uncommon on *fin de siècle* poetry pages; think of *vers libres*, too, even if Vivien's is more of a thought experiment with verses and maths. The mathematical formula of *Twilight*, so to speak, is 6 x 2 x 2 x 6, constituting a perfect symmetry between stanza and verse, micro- and macrolevel, and thus, if you consider their hierarchical relation, it constitutes the beginning of a fractal, that vertiginous wonder of geometry.

That strict recurrence of the identical in the different may be mirrored in the strictness traditionally associated with the distich, the ancient form of epigrammatic poetry, concisely formulating a single, pointed thought. Each of Vivien's stanzas, indeed, forms a single syntactic arc; only one verse of the twelve can grammatically stand alone, the others all depend for correctness and meaning on their partner. These are not intellectual, gnomic verses, as one would associate with epigrams. Yet, the key verbs of the third and fourth stanza, the only ones that see the speaker in an active role, are verbs of intellectual inquiry: "interroger" and "contempler"[33], staging a second oscillation between this intellectual state of mind – at the centre of the poem – and the emotive state of "O mes rêves" and "mon étranger amour" [34] that frame the poem – they are its first respectively its last words (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 55).

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[33] 'wonder' and 'contemplate'
[34] 'oh my dreams' and 'my strange love'

Even if treatises on French versification employ the terms 'distique' or 'couplet de deux vers'[35], they do not consider two rhyming verses a strophe, and two-line-poems are very rare in French literature, even in epigrammatic poetry. Generally, French epigrams and epitaphs take the form of un-strophic 4- to 10-liners. The last form is called *dizain*[36] (Elwert 147-148, 151). Accordingly, Vivien's poem *Épitaphe* takes up that form.

Yet, Vivien's two-line stanzas are epigrammatically closed upon themselves, developing each an oxymoronic point or *concetto*: the flower made of ash, the double light that fails to enlighten the mind, the chiasm of clarity and night, darkness and day. Yet, the poem, as a whole, has the simplicity of a song, creating a third form of oscillation. That accessibility is produced by the thrice repetition of the hemistiches "les clartés de la nuit" and "les ténèbres du jour"[37], appearing first in the second stanza, then repeated inversely in the middle of the poem and repeated again at its end; the whole second stanza returns there as a refrain:

Ô mes rêves, voici l'heure équivoque et tendre
Du crépuscule, éclos tel une fleur de cendre.

Les clartés de la nuit, les ténèbres du jour
Ont la complexité de mon étrange amour.

Sous le charme pervers de la lumière double,
Le regard de mon âme interroge et se trouble.

Je contemple, tandis que l'Énigme me fuit,
Les ténèbres du jour, les clartés de la nuit.

L'ambigu de ton corps s'alambique et s'affine
Dans son ardeur stérile et sa grâce androgyne.

Les clartés de la nuit, les ténèbres du jour
Ont la complexité de mon étrange amour… (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 55)

O my dreams, this is the tender, equivocal hour
Of twilight, blooming like a flower of ashes.

The light of night, the darkness of day
Have the complexity of my strange love.

Under the perverse spell of double light,
The gaze of my soul wonders and is troubled.

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[35] 'couplet'
[36] 'ten-liner'
[37] 'the light of night' and 'the darkness of day'

I contemplate, while the Enigma flees from me,
The darkness of day, the light of night.

The ambiguity of your body is distilled and refined
In its sterile ardour and its androgynous grace.

The light of night, the darkness of day
Have the complexity of my strange love...

Such oscillations between epigrammatic rhetorical strictness and emotional song-like simplicity are possible, of course, only working within the boundaries of traditional versification: dichotomies can be questioned only if they are operative in the first place.

There may be, however, still another reason for why Vivien opts for traditional versification instead of following the vogue of *verslibrisme*[38]. In an official report for the minister of education on *Le mouvement poétique français de 1867 à 1900*[39], the polygraph Abraham Catulle Mendès denigrates Symbolism and in particular *verslibrisme* as the invention of foreigners writing in French, imposing alien, particularly Germanic laws of prosody upon French language (Mendès 150-152, 190-192). Vivien, the foreigner, striving for citizenship in the French Republic of Letters, sticks with tradition – and is ultimately penalized for it, damaging her prospects of canonization in the eyes of both the avantgardes and a, for a long time, teleologically-minded literary history.

And what about the 'sapphic' side of this exclusion, as Deforges surmised, and its presence in *Twilight*? In Deforges' piece of evidence, the poem cited in her preface, man is substituted by woman; in *Sonnet féminin*, culminating in "La blanche volupté des vierges amoureuse"[40], everything male is simply absent. In still another variant, in *Amazone*, the male "amants" or lovers provide satisfaction exactly by being eliminated, "le spasme suprême" being "[p]lus terrible et plus beau que le spasme de l'amour"[41] (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 34). *Twilight*, in contrast, paints a deliberately blurred, *chiaroscuro* image, opting not for substitution, absence or elimination of one dichotomic element, but for their transitional and changing co-presence in "complexité"[42], the keyword recurring in the refrain. This co-presence is emblematized by the oxymora; its transitional character is emblematized by the inversion of the recurring hemistiches of the second in the fourth stanza, before, changing again, they come full circle as refrain in the sixth stanza.

This complex and ephemeral co-presence of contraries makes them lose their dichotomic, i.e. operational, structuring value; the intellectual movement of "interroger" and "contempler", indeed, does not lead to a resolution of the "énigme" (Vivien, Ionesco and Deforges 55). This co-presence is described in the terms of an alchemical refinement:

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[38] 'free verse'
[39] 'The evolution of French poetry between 1867 and 1900'
[40] 'The white voluptuousness of virgins in love'
[41] 'the supreme spasm' being 'more terrible and more beautiful than the spasm of love'
[42] 'complexity'

"L'ambigu de ton corps s'alambique et s'affine"[43]. Significantly, this verse, dealing with the ambiguous, double appearance of a single body is the only single verse of the poem that grammatically can stand alone: It is two in one, and self-sufficient.

Yet, as such an experiment in alchemical refinement, it is not a redemptive return to a presumed origin, as in Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, his *Twilight of the Gods*, where the cursed ring of power, made from the Rhinegold, returns from the hands of men – Alberich, Wotan, Siegfried, Hagen – via Brünnhilde, the woman-warrior Valkyrie, to the Rhinemaidens who return it, to the musical leitmotiv of Redemption, similar to that of Love, to the bosom of the Rhine, pure again (in German: 'rein'). They take it to where it was, undifferentiated, in the beginning. Vivien's title, on the contrary, is *Twilight*, not *Dämmerung*, translational alchemy of words, not the original German, nor the identical French of the poem itself. That *Twilight* is, just as the natural phenomenon, a multiplication of differences, not its merger in one.

Conclusion: Photographed Icons

Closing the book now, we take a last look at its violet binding. The infinite reflections of the different levels of the book in each other – medial, temporal, thematical, sometimes in the same sense, sometimes in a varied one – do include the material design of the book. The violet binding is not only a textile reminder of the luxuries of *fin de siècle*. It is intimately significant for Renée Vivien herself, who tellingly published a book entitled *Du vert au violet* (1903)[44], staging, with that title, a transition from one symbolic colour of *fin de siècle* – think of Oscar Wilde's green carnation – to another, personally symbolic one. These flowers are a recurrent feature of her poems. So, in *femmes sans tain*, too, especially in the funeral *Épitaphe*, where it is the last word. And a posthumous volume of Vivien's poems, published in 1910, bears the title *Dans un coin de Violettes*[45] – on a purple cover, albeit paper, not silk.

It has been said that this obsession with violets is an ever-mourning homage at Vivien's young-deceased childhood friend Violet Shillito. It is also a nexus with Sappho in whose poetry violets figure particularly in garlands for young women. Yet, in a temporal entanglement similar to that in the book's interior, the violet colour points not only back to Sappho's Antiquity, but from the *fin de siècle* also forward to the 1920s, to the androgynous, often bisexual or lesbian, strong, self-determined *garçonnes* with short, bobbed hair and flat breasts, like silent-movie film star Louise Brooks, like the athletic Violette – *sic* – Morris, or like the masculine duchess de la Salle, painted by Tamara de Lempicka in 1925, with black-violet hair. These are icons of a female empowerment after the end of Vivien's pre-war world. Before that war and after the next one, Vivien, Ionesco, and Deforges, too, each in her different field, for the better or, in Ionesco's case, for the

[43] 'The ambiguity of your body is distilled and refined'
[44] 'from green to violet'
[45] 'in a corner of violets'

worse, are such icons of empowerment, and as such iconic figures they are photographed, figuring in the medallions of *femme sans tain*'s cover. That is why I call this curious book, even if it is precisely a phototext, emphatically an iconotext.

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