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Georges Eekhoud, *Escal-Vigor* (1899): A New Translation

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Introductory Notes

Georges Eekhoud's *Escal-Vigor*, first serialised in 1898 in the *Mercure de France* as 'Le Comte de la Digue' and published in full the following year, is a homoerotic and decadent novel that has only been translated into English once in the century since its publication.¹ The fairy-tale-like story follows Henry de Kehlmark, a young aristocrat who returns to his ancestral home of Escal-Vigor on the mythical island of Smaragdis, somewhere off the coast of the Low Countries. There he falls in love with the shepherd Guidon Govaertz, provoking the wrath of the villagers: in the novel's dénouement, Guidon is murdered by a mob of local women, and Kehlmark dies of a broken heart alongside his beloved.

Although to modern readers such a tale may seem poignant but hardly scandalous, the novel provoked a storm of controversy. Much like his French decadent contemporary Rachilde with *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), Eekhoud was prosecuted in 1900 for the perceived salaciousness of *Escal-Vigor*, whose unapologetically positive depiction of male homosexual desire scandalised both the courts and salons.² Reception among his decadent peers was sharply divided. Rachilde told readers of the *Mercure de France* that the book 'nous représente encore un hors les lois naturelles' [represents for us another rebel fighting against the natural order],³ while Jean Lorrain condemned it as 'un mauvais livre qui sent l'ozone et le soufre d'un soir d'orage et l'haleine dangereuse du berger de feu' [a wicked book that smells of ozone and sulphur on a stormy night, and the dangerous breath of the fire shepherd].⁴ As Mirande Lucien observes, Lorrain may have intended this as a warning, though given his notorious taste for scandal, it could equally be read as a compliment.⁵

This turbulence did little to generate commercial success. As Michael Rosenfeld notes, the very decision to translate the novel was ‘une décision engagée’ [a deliberate political choice],⁶ while Catherine Gravet and Émile van Balberghe likewise remark that ‘le militantisme “gay” d’Eekhoud, après le procès, est surtout diffusé à l’étranger’ [Eekhoud’s gay activism would be especially disseminated abroad following his trial].⁷ The choice of Charles Carrington as editor of the 1909 English edition (the translator remains unknown) was no accident.⁸ Carrington, pursued into exile from Britain for his salacious and pornographic publications, had become acquainted with Eekhoud, and the translation reflected their shared commitment to challenging censorship.⁹

Scholars have long debated the extent to which *Escal-Vigor* belongs to decadence. Mirande Lucien insists that ‘par sa composition, *Escal-Vigor* est sans doute la moins décadente des œuvres d’Eekhoud’ [in terms of composition, *Escal-Vigor* is without a doubt the least decadent of Eekhoud’s works], pointing to its more linear narrative and pared-down style.¹⁰ Yet Eekhoud himself is firmly situated within the decadent tradition. Philippe Chavasse locates his work at a distinctly Belgian cultural crossroads, shaped ‘non seulement de Zola et des décadents, des symbolistes français et belges [...] mais aussi de [...] Barrès, d’Oscar Wilde, de Magnus Hirschfeld, de Wagner [...] et de bien d’autres encore’ [not only by Zola and the decadents, and by French and Belgian symbolists, but also by Barrès, Oscar Wilde, Magnus Hirschfeld, Wagner, and many others].¹¹ Paul Gorceix likewise observes that Belgian fin-de-siècle literature blurred its two dominant modes – naturalism and symbolism – ‘jusqu’à se confondre parfois’ [to the point of confusion at times].¹²

This ambiguity is itself typical of decadence. Clara Sadoun-Édouard reminds us that Jean de Palacio ranked *Escal-Vigor* among works worthy of a decadent bookshelf, and she identifies many of the novel’s decadent markers, such as ‘sa fascination pour la boue, les personnages d’aristocrate dégénérés ou esthètes’ [its fascination with filth and its presentation of degenerate aristocrats or aesthetes].¹³ Eric Lorio likewise notes that while the novel is often ‘riche en violence et en sensualité’ [rich in violence and sensuality], its style is also revolutionary: ‘S’éloignant de la

pureté de la langue, il adopte un vocabulaire truculent, coloré, émaillé d'expressions populaires, qui donne aux tableaux qu'il dépeint un grand accent de vérité' [Moving away from linguistic purity, he adopts a colourful, earthy vocabulary peppered with popular expressions, which gives the scenes he depicts a strong sense of authenticity].¹⁴

Perhaps the most overtly decadent element of *Escal-Vigor* is its inset tale of the 'Berger de Feu' (Fire Shepherd), the fairy tale within the fairy tale, condemned/praised by Jean Lorrain, and which I have chosen to translate here. Used as an expository device to allow Kehlmark and Guidon to admit their feelings to one another, the story recounts how Gérard, a feral shepherd, falls in love with Étienne, his adopted brother. When Étienne's parents attempt to marry him to a cousin, Gérard's jealousy erupts; he burns down the family home with the parents and fiancée inside, seizes Étienne, and ultimately perishes with him in a storm of fire. The parallels with the main plot are unmistakable (Kehlmark/Gérard and Guidon/Étienne) but the tale also foreshadows the novel's tragic end. More than a rustic interlude, it stages a decadent doubling in which folklore and 'real life' collapse into each other.¹⁵ Gérard embodies the marginal outsider so central to decadent fiction: sexually ambiguous, Dionysian in his instincts. The tale culminates in ecstatic destruction, whereby erotic desire and annihilation merge into sublime martyrdom. As such, it functions as a decadent parable of outlawed desire exalted by its own ruin, an additional layer to Eekhoud's social critique and literary activism.

Translator's Note

Carrington's 1909 edition remains readable and faithful to 'the French of George [*sic*] Eekhoud', but its archaic register reflects its time and often mutes the text's homoerotic sensuality.¹⁶ In this translation I have aimed for a modern, accessible idiom that captures the emotion of the original while preserving nuance, aligning with a contemporary queer-affirmative reading. While Carrington occasionally strays closer to paraphrase, I have sought fidelity to Eekhoud's language, expanding only as needed for anglophone readers.

Escal-Vigor (1899)

Georges Eekhoud

[Chapter IV: Henry de Kehlmark and his protégé, Guidon Govaertz are sitting on the dyke, overlooking the countryside, when a cloud formation reminds Henry of the legend of the Fire Shepherd.]

‘Do you know the real story of the Fire Shepherd you were talking about earlier ... I can’t help but think that people have gotten it wrong. I’ve thought about it and have come up with a more accurate version... I have listened to the voices of the haunted landscape, on nights just like this, preferably in those heather-dusted nooks, where sadness used to reign even more sorrowfully than elsewhere, where the plain and the horizon distilled their heavy melancholy and their restless slumber. Some of the details of the landscape take on a poignant, almost fateful significance, as you will have noticed while tending your sheep. It’s almost as if nature was suffering from remorse. The clouds stop and their funeral procession gathers over a pool destined for a drowning, for a theatre of crime and suicide... My dear boy, so many good resolutions have been overturned by weather like that... It’s much better to avoid your own mishap by thinking of other people’s misfortunes... I’ve even come to sympathise with the fate of Cain’s damned brother. I pity him, not his victims... I find him beautiful and attractive, but also sinister... But I’m talking nonsense, and telling you stories to scare you, like old women do at night by the fire...’

‘No, no; please go on; you’re such a good storyteller, your words are so meaningful; your language often moves me to tears and claws at my heart.’

‘So be it. The time is right... and since we’re in a good place, I must tell you how much I identify with the suffering of the fiery shepherd. He has long haunted the violet, nocturnal heather of my soul... I often find myself, to my surprise, prowling in spirit at his side, among his sulphurous flock, guided by the gestures of his staff reddened by hellfire, bitten at the heels by his black and red dog which resembles a half-burnt ember, an ember from the eternal furnace; the dog which shares his master’s fate, finds half of its body once more engulfed in flames when the other half has returned to a lifelike appearance...

[Henry begins his tale:]

This is what these spirits have told me: Once upon a time, long, long ago, Gérard was the shepherd of a couple of old, miserly peasants who lived in a remote and isolated region of Brabant, covered in heaths and steppes like down there in Klaarvatsch. Nobody knew where he had come from. When he was discovered for the first time, he may have been fifteen years old; he ran about scantily clad; he looked like a wild animal, and he had to be taught to speak, like a child. Chancing their arm, the old misers had him baptised, and, having taken him into their service, trained him to graze their flock. He only cost them his pittance, which was quite frugal, and by taking him in they could pretend they had done a good deed.

Although nobody knew which woodland creatures had given birth to him, and even though he was rejected by most people, Mother Nature must have undoubtedly cherished this wild boy because he never seemed to age but rather became ever more strong and handsome. He was

a tall boy, with such long, unruly locks that tawny curls fell constantly over his forehead and his heavenly eyes, which seemed to contain the infinite depths of eternity.

No matter how much they tried to educate him in the ways of religion, he never found much meaning in our pageantry and narrow rituals. Simple nature remained his role model and his advisor. In other words, he only listened to his own instincts.

However, late in life, his master and mistress had a child, a sickly little boy they called Étienne, or affectionately Tiennet for short. As his parents were too old to care for him, Gérard raised him, starting by choosing two of his favourite sheep as wetnurses. Tiennet grew into a chubby, rosy child, as pretty as a cherub. Gérard continued to keep the best milk from his flock for him, as well as the sweetest fruits, and eggs from woodpigeons and pheasants. He loved him like no one had ever loved another person – his poor, wild heart had never been able to share the treasures it had hoarded for so long. Tiennet chirped like a bird; he was as fair as Gérard was dark; and the little one ordered the big, fierce boy around. The selfish and fastidious couple let them roam around and live together.

Whenever they would bathe in the Démer river, Gérard would admire Tiennet's slender, graceful body; he couldn't think of anything as pleasurable as embracing his supple, warm body, of carrying him in his arms forever and far away, into the depths of the woods where they would end up rolling among the ferns and the mosses. Gérard would tickle Tiennet by running his lips over his pink skin. The child would laugh and try to escape, kicking his tiny feet or landing blows on the strong flanks of the strong boy, who was only too happy to take these blows instead of caresses...

This brief, pastoral romance lasted until the day Tiennet's parents were visited by two cousins accompanied by Wanna, a fair girl of Tiennet's age, as brisk and lively as a clear frosty dawn, and as enticing as a wild strawberry. The parents on both sides agreed to marry the children, who had taken an instant liking to each other.

From the moment that little Wanna arrived, Gérard, in spite of his strength, was saddened by the attention his little Tiennet would pay to his gentle cousin. Tiennet was a spoiled child who only loved Gérard as he would have loved a loyal and docile dog, an amiable playmate who was ready to humour all of his whims. Gérard would look at Wanna with dark, murderous eyes, but the little blonde girl laughed it off and to spite him, being mischievous and shrewd, she would often kidnap Tiennet, or run away to hide so that he would join her far from the jealous boy.

Gérard, at the end of his tether, urged his friend not to marry. Tiennet laughed in his face.

'Are you crazy, my dear friend? It's the law of nature. Look at the animals on our farm, look at the wild beasts in the woods!'

'Oh for pity's sake! I don't know what I feel, but I want you all to myself, without sharing... Why should we copy the animals, and do as others do? Are we not enough? Do you think you'll ever be as loved by anyone as much as I love you? As far as we're concerned, let's stop bringing more creatures into the world – aren't there enough already? Let's live for ourselves, for us alone. Tiennet, please; it's you that I want, all to myself, and you alone. I don't know what you are, if you're a man like any other; but to me you're incomparable... Oh, why did she have to come between us? No, I'm not explaining myself well... Your bewildered eyes are killing me... Listen, my whole body aches when I know you're with her. An awful heat runs through my blood. Your entwined hands furrow gently into my breast and slash at my heart with their nails. Oh, my little Tiennet, I die when I think that she'll kiss your lips, and that she'll take you far away from here and that I will have to give you up forever to this thief of my life...'

Tiennet smiled, a little ruefully all the same, trying to reason with him.

'You big fool, my feelings for you won't change. Don't you see, am I not still the same? We will still see each other as we have always done. You will follow me with her...'

But the poor shepherd couldn't see reason.

As the fatal day approached, Gérard withered away, lost his appetite, lost all love for the things he used to take joy in, neglected his flock, and his behaviour even became so worrying that his masters sent him to the parish priest. Perhaps he had been cursed! Shepherds are known to be witches, and so vulnerable to the curses of their own kind. Gérard, candid as ever, simply told the priest of his deep sadness. However, no sooner had Gérard begun to speak than the holy man growled, 'Begone, cursed man! Your presence stinks... I don't know what's keeping me from handing you over to the magistrate¹⁷ of my Lord, the Duke of Brabant... and from having you burned in the town square, as they do to your kind... get out of here at once. Your crime has cut you off from the community of the faithful... No one can absolve you but the Pope of Rome himself! Throw yourself at his feet... You have only sinned in thought so far – that's the only reason why I'm not calling down the flames of the purifying pyre on your cursed flesh right now!'

Gerard returned to his masters' house, unashamed but more desperate than ever. He was careful not to recount in detail what had happened between the minister of God and himself, but allowed himself to declare that he would undertake a long pilgrimage to atone for a deadly sin... He would set out that very night, when everyone was asleep, to avoid any indiscreet or curious onlookers... For one last favour, he asked Tiennet to accompany him for a while as he left their cottage. Wanna urged her fiancé to stay, but Tiennet took pity on his friend, and, faced with the prospect of never seeing him ever again, he was gripped by the lingering and tender memories of days gone by...

'Brother, what have you done, that is so serious for you to leave us?' Tiennet asked his loyal friend several times as they walked away. But the other boy remained silent, staring at him forlornly and shaking his head.

They walked for a long time, their hearts in their throats, without exchanging a single word; but when they reached the crossroads where they were to embrace for one last time, Gérard suddenly turned around and showed Tiennet a red glow on the horizon, in the direction from where they had set off.

Then, with a wild laugh, he said, 'Look, it's the old couples' house that is burning, and Wanna, your Wanna – is burning along with them! ... Now you belong to me forever!'

And he frantically embraced the young man who struggled to get free from him.

'Gérard! You're scaring me! Help! A madman¹⁸ is throttling me!'

'You're mine; I am the one who gave you life. I am more than your mother, don't you get it; that's why I'm more to you than any other woman should ever be!... You asked for the secret reason of why I was leaving... you are about to find out. Their priest has cursed me. I am doomed to the eternal fire. Well, I am rushing to plunge myself into that fire in anticipation, but not before suckling on the very source of your life, not before feasting on your cherry-red lips, those succulent fruits that will quench my thirst eternally in the heart of that infernal furnace. You're mine! Mine!'

Suddenly a storm broke out, while the wretch cried out to heaven for vengeance.

'Ah', he rejoiced, 'flames of punishment, be my pyre of joy! Oh Nature, burn me, consume me! Whether you come, as they say, from God, or from the Devil, what does it matter to me? Come, unite us in death!... Rise up, beautiful storm of deliverance! I have nothing else to lose, the fiery torrents will be a cool, clear stream upon my flesh, compared to the love that devours and has driven me to despair!... Come!'

And the damned man held Tiennet against his heart, held him so hard he could hardly breathe, pressed his lips to his and did not let go until the fire from heaven had enveloped them both...

At this point of his tragic recitation, Kehlmark's voice faded to a whisper, as if he were breathing his last breath.

'Oh, my dear boy', he moaned, falling at the young shepherd's feet, 'I love you madly, I love you as much as Gérard loved Tiennet.'

'I love you too, dear master; with all my heart', Guidon replied, throwing his arms around his neck. 'I am yours, and yours alone without sharing... Have you only realised this now? Do whatever you want with me!'

'I only had to see you', Kehlmark sighed, 'to feel compassion for your unrecognised and proudly virginal beauty. My love came from that compassion.'

'Me too', stuttered the young Govaert, 'I only had to see you to guess that you were sad and strong, and my devotion for you came from my worry for you!'

'The hateful way your father spoke of you', the earl¹⁹ continued, 'made me feel sorry for you, and your sister's disdainful pout, the malice in her gaze, made you shine in my eyes with a permanently transfigured light. I did not dare declare my feelings before seeing you again, and I pretended to be indifferent to confuse your family and those overly abrupt friends of yours, whom I prevented that very evening from harassing you, simply by approaching their rowdy gang. My boy, the chosen one of my life!'

The lightning didn't strike them, but they heard a muffled cry, a sob, a rustling in the bushes behind them. Two indistinct figures fled into the darkness.

'Someone was listening to us!' said Kehlmark, who had now stood up and was scrutinising the thick darkness.

'Who cares? I am yours', Guidon whispered, pulling him close to him and snuggling up against his warm chest. 'You are everything to me, and I don't believe in fire from heaven! Before you, nobody had ever said a kind word to me... I had known only cruelty and harshness... You are my master and my love. Do what you want with me... your lips!'²⁰

Escal-Vigor (1899)

Georges Eekhoud

Connais-tu l'histoire véritable du Berger de Feu dont tu parlais tout à l'heure... J'ai tout lieu de croire qu'on la raconte mal... Je devine et me suggère une version plus exacte... J'ai confessé les paysages hantés, par des soirs analogues à celui-ci, de préférence ces coins de bruyère, où la tristesse régnait encore plus navrante qu'ailleurs, où la plaine et l'horizon quintessenciaient leur mélancolie lourde et leur ombrageux sommeil. Certains détails du paysage contractent, tu l'auras remarqué en gardant tes moutons, une signification poignante, presque fatidique. La nature paraît souffrir de remords. Les nuées arrêtent et accumulent leurs funèbres cortèges au-dessus d'une mare prédestinée à une noyade, à un théâtre de crime et de suicide...

Cher petit, que de bonnes résolutions ont chaviré par des temps pareils... Mieux vaut alors conjurer son propre danger en songeant aux catastrophes d'autrui... J'ai fini par compatir au sort du damné frère de Caïn. C'est lui que je plains et non plus ses victimes... Je le trouve superbe et attirant quoique sinistre... Mais je te raconte des bêtises, et te narre des histoires à faire peur, comme les bonnes femmes à la veillée...

— Non, non ; continuez ; vous contez si bien et vous mettez tant de choses dans des paroles ordinaires ; souvent votre langage me tire des larmes et du sang.

— Soit. L'heure est propice... Et puisque nous sommes si bien ici, il me tarde de te dire à quel point je participe à la détresse du pâtre ardent. Depuis longtemps il hante jusqu'à l'obsession la bruyère violette et nocturne de mon âme... Je me surprends à rôder en esprit à ses côtés, parmi ses ouailles sulfureuses, sous les gestes de sa houlette rougie par la géhenne, mordu aux talons par son chien noir et rouge comme un tison à moitié consumé, un tison de la fournaise éternelle ; le chien qui partage le sort de son maître et dont la moitié du corps recommence à flamber quand l'autre a repris une apparence de vie...

Voici ce que m'ont confié ces fantômes :

Il y a bien, bien longtemps, Gérard était le berger d'un couple de paysans vieux et avarés, isolés dans un pays perdu de Brabant, fait de garigues et de steppes comme là-bas à Klaarvatsch. On ne savait d'où il était venu. Quand on le découvrit pour la première fois, il pouvait avoir quinze ans ; il courait à peine vêtu ; ses allures étaient celles d'un jeune fauve et il fallut lui apprendre à parler comme à un enfant. À tout hasard, les vieux avarés le firent baptiser et, l'ayant pris à leur service, le dressèrent à pâtre leurs ouailles. Il ne leur coûtait que sa pitance, pis que frugale, et en le recueillant, ils eurent l'air de faire une bonne action.

Sans doute la mère nature chérissait ce libre garçon, car, engendré on ne sait par quelles créatures sylvestres, répudié par les hommes, il semblait ne point vieillir et devenait de plus en plus robuste et beau. C'était un grand garçon si chevelu que des boucles fauves lui retombaient constamment sur le front et sur ses yeux divins où semblaient se condenser l'infini et l'éternité.

On eut beau le catéchiser, il n'attacha jamais grande importance à nos momeries et à nos rites étroits. La simple nature demeura son modèle et sa conseillère. En d'autres termes, il n'écoula que ses instincts.

Cependant, sur le tard, bien âgés déjà, ses maîtres eurent un enfant, un tout chétif garçonnet auquel ils donnèrent le nom d'Étienne. Comme les parents étaient trop vieux pour le choyer, ce fut Gérard qui l'éleva en commençant par lui choisir pour nourrices deux de ses brebis favorites.

Tiennet poussa, devint un enfant potelé, rose, joli comme un chérubin. Gérard continuait à lui réserver le meilleur lait de ses ouailles, les fruits aromatiques, les œufs des ramiers et des faisans. Il l'adorait comme aucun être humain n'en adora un autre, son pauvre cœur de sauvage n'ayant jamais pu dépenser les trésors d'affection qu'il accumulait. Tiennet gazouillait comme un oiseau ; il était aussi blond que l'autre était brun ; et le petiot commandait au grand garçon farouche. Les vieux égoïstes et maniaques les laissèrent vaguer et vivre ensemble.

Lorsqu'ils se baignaient dans le Démer, Gérard admirait ce jeune corps svelte et gracieux ; et il ne connaissait point plaisir comparable à celui d'enlacer ce corps souple et tiède, de l'emporter dans ses bras, très longtemps et très loin, jusqu'au fond des bois où ils finissaient par rouler parmi les fougères et les mousses. Gérard chatouillait Tiennet en promenant ses lèvres sur sa peau rose. Et l'enfant riait, essayait de se dérober, ruait de ses petons et allongeait des tapes sur les flancs robustes du grand qui acceptait des coups pour des caresses...

Cette idylle dura jusqu'au jour où les parents de Tiennet reçurent la visite de deux cousins accompagnés de Wanna, une fillette blonde, de l'âge de Tiennet, guillerette et piquante comme une aube de claire gelée, appétissante comme une fraise des bois. Les vieux, de part et d'autre, convinrent de marier les enfants qui s'étaient plu d'emblée.

Dès l'arrivée de la petite Wanna, le grand Gérard était devenu tout triste à cause de l'attention que son petit Tiennet témoignait à sa gentille cousine. Tiennet, enfant gâté, n'aimait Gérard que comme il eût aimé un chien fidèle et docile, complaisant partenaire de ses jeux, prêt à passer par tous ses caprices. Gérard regardait Wanna avec des yeux sombres, des yeux homicides, mais la blondine se moquait du sauvage et pour le contrarier, espiègle et fine, elle enlevait le plus souvent Tiennet, ou courait se cacher pour qu'il la rejoignît loin du jaloux.

Gérard, à bout de patience, adjura son ami de ne pas se marier. Tiennet lui rit au nez. Es-tu fou, mon grand chéri ? C'est la loi de la nature. Vois les bêtes de notre ferme, vois les fauves des bois ! ...

— Oh pitié ! je ne sais ce que j'éprouve, mais je te veux pour moi seul, sans partage... Pourquoi imiter les bêtes, et faire comme les autres ? Ne nous suffisons-nous point ? Penses-tu être jamais aimé comme par ton Gérard ? Suspendons, en ce qui nous concerne, la création prolifique. Ne naît-il point assez de créatures ? Vivons pour nous deux, pour nous seuls. Tiennet, pitié ; c'est toi que je veux, tout à moi, toi seul. J'ignore ce que tu es, si tu es un homme comme les autres ; tu m'es incomparable... Oh ! qu'avait-elle besoin de venir entre nous ? Non, je m'explique mal... Tes yeux étonnés me tuent... Écoute, j'ai mal par tout le corps quand je te sais avec elle. Une chaleur mauvaise me circule dans le sang. Vos mains unies fouillent tout doucement sous ma poitrine pour me lacérer le cœur de leurs ongles. Oh, mon Tiennet, j'expire en songeant qu'elle t'embrassera sur les lèvres, qu'elle t'enlèvera loin d'ici et qu'il me faudra te céder pour toujours à cette voleuse de ma vie...

Tiennet souriait, un peu marri toutefois, s'efforçant de le rendre raisonnable : « Grand fou, mes sentiments pour toi ne changeront pas. Vois, ne suis-je pas toujours le même ? Nous nous rapprocherons comme par le passé. Tu me suivras avec elle... »

Mais la raison ne revenait pas au pauvre berger.

À mesure que la date fatale approchait Gérard dépérissait, perdait l'appétit, boudait tout ce qu'il célébrait autrefois, négligeait son troupeau, et ses allures devinrent même si inquiétantes que ses maîtres l'envoyèrent chez le curé. Peut-être lui avait-on jeté un sort ! les bergers sont tous un peu sorciers et exposés, eux-mêmes, aux maléfices de leurs pareils. Le candide Gérard raconta simplement sa profonde peine au prêtre. Au premier mot que le saint homme en entendit : « Va-t'en, maudit, gronda-t-il. Ta présence empeste... Je ne sais ce qui me retient de te livrer au drossard de monseigneur le duc de Brabant... et de te faire brûler sur le Grand Marché comme on fait à

ceux de ton espèce... tu partiras sur-le-champ. Ton crime t'a retranché de la communauté des fidèles... Nul ne peut t'absoudre que le pape de Rome ! Jette-toi à ses pieds... Tu n'as encore péché qu'en pensée. C'est même pourquoi je n'appelle point sur ta chair maudite les flammes du bûcher purificateur !

Gérard retourna auprès de ses maîtres, sans honte mais plus désespéré que jamais. Il se garda bien de raconter par le menu ce qui s'était passé entre le ministre de Dieu et lui, mais il se borna à déclarer qu'il allait entreprendre un long pèlerinage pour expier un péché trop capital... Cette nuit même il se mettrait en route, quand tous dormiraient, pour ne point rencontrer d'indiscrets et de curieux... Comme faveur suprême, il sollicita de Tiennet qu'il l'accompagnât jusqu'à une certaine distance de leur chaumière. Wanna voulut retenir son fiancé, mais Tiennet eut pitié de son ami, et, devant la perspective d'une séparation peut-être éternelle, il se rappela leur longue et absolue tendresse de jadis...

— Frère, quelle est la faute si grave qui t'exile ? demanda à plusieurs reprises Tiennet, en cheminant, à son féal. Mais l'autre se taisait et se bornait à le regarder longuement et à hocher la tête.

Ils marchèrent longtemps, le cœur étreint, sans échanger un mot ; mais quand ils atteignirent le carrefour où ils devaient s'embrasser pour la dernière fois, tout à coup, Gérard tourna les talons et montra à Tiennet une lueur rouge à l'horizon, du côté d'où ils étaient partis.

Alors, avec un rire sauvage : « Regarde, dit-il, c'est la maison des vieux qui flambe, et Wanna, ta Wanna brûle avec eux !... À présent, tu m'appartiens pour toujours !

Et il étreignit avec frénésie le jeune homme qui se débattait :

— Gérard ! Tu me fais peur ! Au secours ! Au loup-garou ! Il m'égorge...

— À moi ; c'est moi qui t'ai donné la vie. Je suis plus que ta mère, entends-tu ; donc plus que devrait être n'importe quelle femme !... Tu demandais la cause secrète de mon départ... Tu vas la savoir. Leur prêtre m'a maudit. Je suis voué au feu éternel. Eh bien, je cours me plonger par anticipation dans ce feu, mais après avoir aspiré jusqu'aux sources de ta vie, après m'être repu des groseilles de tes lèvres, ce fruit succulent qui me désaltérera éternellement au sein de la fournaise infernale !... À moi, à moi !...

Un orage subit se déchaîna, tandis que le misérable criait ainsi vengeance au ciel.

— Ah, jubilait-il, feu du châtiment, sois mon feu de joie ! Ô Nature, brûle-moi, consume-moi ! Que tu viennes, comme ils disent, de Dieu, ou que tu émanes du Diable, que m'importe ! Viens, réunis-nous dans la mort !... Lève-toi, bel orage de la délivrance ! Je n'ai plus rien à perdre, les torrents de feu seront ruisseau frais et limpide sur ma chair, comparés à l'amour qui me dévore et qui m'a désespéré !... Viens !...

Et le maudit pressa Tiennet contre son cœur, le pressa à l'étouffer, colla ses lèvres aux siennes, ne les en détacha plus, jusqu'à ce que le feu du ciel les eût enveloppés tous deux...

En ce point de cette improvisation pathétique, la voix de Kehlmark s'éteignit en un murmure comparable à un râle.

— Oh! mon doux enfant, gémit-il, en tombant aux pieds du petit pâtre, je t'aime éperdument, je t'aime autant que Gérard aimait Tiennet.

— Moi, je vous aime aussi, cher maître ; et cela de toutes mes forces répondit Guidon en lui jetant les bras au cou. Je suis à vous, à vous seul et sans partage... Est-ce seulement d'à présent que vous le savez ? Faites de moi tout ce que vous voudrez !...

— Je n'eus qu'à te voir, soupira Kehlmark, pour compatir à ta beauté méconnue et fièrement vierge. Mon amour naquit de cette compassion.

— Et moi, mon cher maître, balbutia le petit Govaertz, je n'eus qu'à vous voir pour vous deviner triste et redoutable, et ma dévotion s'engendra de mon anxiété !...

— Le mal prétendu que ton père disait de toi, reprenait le Dykgrave, décida de ma sympathie, et la moue dédaigneuse de ta sœur, la malveillance de son regard, t'illuminèrent désormais à mes yeux d'une permanente lumière de transfiguration !... Je n'osai me déclarer avant de t'avoir revu et je feignis de l'indifférence pour dérouter les tiens et ces camarades trop brusques que j'empêchai le même soir, rien qu'en me rapprochant de leur turbulent essaim, de te harceler, mon enfant, l' élu de ma vie !...

L'éclair ne les frappa point, mais ils entendirent un cri sourd, un sanglot, un froissement dans les broussailles derrière eux. Deux silhouettes indistinctes fuyaient par les ténèbres.

— On nous écoutait ! dit Kehlmark qui s'était mis debout et qui scrutait l'ombre épaisse.

— Qu'importe, je suis à vous, murmurait Guidon en l'attirant à lui et en se blottissant frileusement contre sa poitrine. Vous êtes tout pour moi, et je ne crois pas au feu du ciel ! Avant toi, personne ne m'avait dit la seule bonne parole... Je n'avais su que méchancetés et rudesses... Tu es mon maître et mon amour. Fais de moi ce que tu veux... Tes lèvres !... (106-114).

My thanks to friends and colleagues Ms Marie Hervieu (professeur agrégé) and Ms Veronica Szafranski, as well as the anonymous reviewer and the editors for their comments and feedback on this translation.

¹ Michael Rosenfeld, 'Escal Vigor – A Novel from the French of George Eekhoud. Comment traduire l'innommable', in *Traduire la littérature belge francophone. Itinéraires des œuvres et des personnes*, ed. by Béatrice Costa and Catherine Grevet (Éditions UMONS, 2016), pp. 25–40. Rosenfeld notes that two English editions of *Escal-Vigor* have been published, although both are essentially identical. The first appeared in 1909, published by Charles Carrington as *Escal Vigor – A Novel from the French of George Eekhoud* (Brussels: The Gutenberg Press); the full text is available online here: https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Escal_Vigor [last accessed 17/08/2025]. The second edition, published in the United States in the 1930s as *A Strange Love. A Novel of Abnormal Passion* (New York: Panurge Press, 1930), does not differ significantly in translation.

² Cf. Jacques Detemmerman, 'Le Procès d'Escal-Vigor', in 'Le Naturalisme et les lettres françaises de Belgique', ed. by Paul Delsemme and Raymond Trousson, *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles*, 4-5 (1984), pp. 141-169.

³ Rachilde, 'Escal-Vigor ("Le Comte de la Digue") par Georges Eekhoud, "Revue du mois"', *Mercur de France*, 2 (1899), p. 466. All translations are my own unless stated otherwise.

⁴ Jean Lorrain in a letter to Georges Eekhoud, dated 09/03/1899 and found in Eekhoud's copy of Lorrain's *Contes pour lire à la chandelle*, Archives et Musée de la Littérature, Brussels, MLA 1524.

⁵ Mirande Lucien, *Eekhoud le raunke* (Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1999), p. 124. For more on Lorrain's ambiguity, see Mathew Rickard, *Against the Grain: The Poetics of Non-Normative Masculinity in Decadent French Literature* (Peter Lang, 2021), p. 64.

⁶ Rosenfeld, p. 28.

⁷ Catherine Gravet and Émile van Balberghe, "'Cher brutal ami de mon cœur." Quelques notes à propos de trois lettres et de quatre envois inédits de Max Waller à Georges Eekhoud', *Francophonica*, 10 (2001), pp. 37-60 (p. 51).

⁸ Rosenfeld, p. 39.

⁹ Rosenfeld, p. 28. See also Rachel Potter, 'Obscene Modernism and the Trade in Salacious Books', *Modernism/Modernity*, 16.1 (2009), pp. 87-104 (p. 98).

¹⁰ Lucien, p. 124.

¹¹ Philippe Chavasse, 'Georges Eekhoud et son terroir incarné', *Excavatio*, 25 (2015), pp. 1-11, p. 3, https://sites.ualberta.ca/~aizen/archive/articles/v25/PDF3_Chavasse.pdf [accessed 30/07/2025].

¹² Paul Gorceix, *La Belgique fin-de-siècle* (Éditions Complexes, 1997), p. 38. Note here the blurring of Naturalism and Symbolism, similar to Arthur Symons's observation of Impressionism and Symbolism as branches of the Decadent movement ('The Decadent Movement in Literature', *Harper's Magazine* (November 1893), p. 862).

¹³ Clara Sadoun-Édouard, 'La Décadence en Belgique (1880-1910): Le plongeon dans la *plage fondante*' (projet d'article), *René Maizeroy: Pistes et enquêtes*, 11/07/21, <https://rmaizeroy.hypotheses.org/category/decadence>, [accessed 30/06/25].

¹⁴ Eric Lorio, ed., *Escal-Vigor* [1899] by Georges Eekhoud (UltraLetters, 2015), p. iv. All quotes and extracts are taken from this edition unless stated otherwise, with citations integrated into the text.

¹⁵ This use of folkloric foreshadowing is evident in the fate of Saint Olfgar, who is ‘martyrisé avec toutes sortes d’inventions cannibalesques’ (tortured with all sorts of cannibalistic inventions) by the women of the island, ‘comme les bacchantes avec Orphée’ (like the Bacchantes with Orpheus). Guidon’s death at their hands occurs on the Feast of Saint Olfgar. (pp. 6-7).

¹⁶ Rosenfeld observes that the 1909 translation, while openly celebrating homosexuality and thus flouting British law, simultaneously reflects contemporary medico-legal discourse through its use of the term ‘unnatural’. Interestingly, this term is applied not to homosexuality itself but to the rape of Blandine, Kehlmark’s ward, and to the marriage of his parents, who had claimed they did not wish to have children. Words related to homosexual ‘sin’, such as ‘bougre’ and ‘infâme’ remain relatively unchanged as ‘bugger’ and ‘infamous’. Rosenfeld concludes:

‘La traduction du roman s’avère fidèle à l’originel et aux intentions de son auteur, exprimant « l’amour sans nom » de la seule façon possible au tournant du siècle : par l’usage d’euphémismes ambigus, compris par les seules initiés, ou par des termes de condamnation qui sont plus une mise en accusation des esprits étroits qu’un jugement péjoratif sur les homosexuels’ [The translation of the novel proves to be faithful to the original and to the intentions of its author, expressing ‘the nameless love’ in the only way possible at the turn of the century: by using ambiguous euphemisms, understood only by initiates, or through terms of condemnation which are more an accusation of narrow minds rather than a pejorative judgment of homosexuals] (Rosenfeld, p. 39).

Were I to translate the full text, I would, as in line with my intentions outlined here, seek to modernise these terms in line with a queer-affirmative reading, while providing notes to readers.

¹⁷ The term *drossard* in the original text refers to a noble bailiff or officer of justice in parts of the Low Countries and German regions during the Middle Ages. While maintained in the 1909 Carrington translation, I have modernized the term to ‘magistrate’ for contemporary readership. Cf. ‘DROSSARD, DROSSART, subst. masc.’, CNRTL – Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, CNRS: <https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/drossard> [consulted 17/08/2025].

¹⁸ Eekhoud refers to a ‘loup-garou’, rendered as ‘wolfman’ in 1909. Although usually translated as ‘werewolf’, the term can metaphorically denote a person or entity that inspires fear, or a simple call for help, hence my modulation here. Cf. ‘LOUP-GAROU, subst. masc.’, CNRTL <<https://www.cnrtl.fr/definition/loup-garou>> [accessed 17 August 2025].

¹⁹ The title ‘dykgrave’ situates Henry de Kehlmark in the Low Countries. The novel describes Smaragdis, the Kehlmarks’ demesne, as culturally Celtic, Germanic, or Scandinavian:

Smaragdis ou l’île smaragdine dépend du royaume mi-germain et mi-celtique de Kerlingalande. À l’origine du commerce occidental, une colonie de marchands hanséates s’y fixa. Les Kehlmark prétendaient descendre des rois de mer ou vikings danois’ [Smaragdis or the Emerald Isle is part of the half-Germanic, half-Celtic kingdom of Kerlingalande. At the dawn of Western trade, a colony of Hanseatic merchants settled there. The Kehlmarks claimed descent from kings of the sea or Danish Vikings] (p. 1).

Equally, one Kehlmark resided in the city of ‘Anvers’ [Antwerp (p. 2)]. The Dutch term ‘dykgrave’ or ‘dikjgraaf’ literally translates as ‘count/earl of the dyke’, historically denoting the highest-ranking local official of the newly created Beemster polder (reclaimed land) north of Amsterdam (Alison M. Kettering, ‘Master of the New Land: Rembrandt’s Portrait of Dijkgraaf Dirck van Os’, *Oud Holland*, 130.1–2 (2017), pp. 15–36 (p. 15)). For readability, I adopt the British equivalent ‘earl’, mirroring Eekhoud’s original title of the novel in serialisation, ‘Le Comte de la Digue’.

²⁰ In the original text, Eekhoud juxtaposes the French pronouns ‘vous’ and ‘tu’, creating increased intimacy between Guidon Govaertz and Henry de Kehlmark, who until this point have been master and protégé, rather than explicit lovers, paralleling the fairytale of the Fire Shepherd and the secondary characters Gérard and Étienne. Anthony Slide observes that the 1930s American translation, almost identical to the 1909 edition, retains archaic English throughout (*Lost Gay Novels: A Reference Guide to Fifty Works from the First Half of the Twentieth Century* (Harrington Park Press, 2003), p. 75). Rosenfeld suggests that one example of this archaic register can be found in this episode, with ‘vous’ rendered as ‘you/your’ and ‘tu’ as ‘thou/thy’ (*Escal Vigor*, p. 37), a reminder of English’s former T-V distinction. As throughout, I have sacrificed this unique pronominal distinction from the French in favour of a modernised, streamlined English text.