Although many writers were contaminated by syphilis in nineteenth-century France, few used the disease to transcribe into words the physical and psychological torments it put them through. Drawing on Elaine Scarry and Joanna Bourke’s contemporary theories of pain expression, this chapter will take as its focal point Alphonse Daudet’s first-person written account of syphilis in order to examine the relationship between pain and the expressive capacity of language. Daudet’s personal reflections, which seek to convey a sense of the embodied experience of actual sufferers of syphilis in nineteenth-century France, will be read in the light of Maupassant’s suggestion that the pain of syphilis defies articulation in human language. Maupassant and Daudet’s accounts thus represent two conflicting attempts to find the words to capture the bodily agony and mental torture engendered by the disease that Alain Corbin has argued was most closely associated with ‘le morbide’ in the nineteenth century.2 While, as we shall see, Maupassant claims that words cannot express the raw realities of syphilis-induced pain, Daudet’s notebook on life with syphilis, La Doulou, suggests that the experience of suffering from a painful disease need not render the patient speechless. By unravelling the multifaceted representations of pain through an examination of the key metaphorical paradigms in La Doulou, our analysis will propose that it is the use of figurative language that permits the sufferer to communicate his lived experience of syphilis and, in the process, offer a richly-textured account of the painful effects of syphilis to complement the many medical narratives of the disease in nineteenth-century France. However, we will also question whether Daudet’s attempts to draw pain into explanatory realms, where it is embellished by the

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use of metaphorical and figurative language, may, in fact, have the effect of diminishing the visceral qualities of his account of the realities of life with the tertiary stages of ‘la grosse vérole’. In this way, we will reflect on what La Doulou tells us about the complex relationship between pain and writing whereby, on the one hand, pain acts as an incitement to writing, and on the other, it presents a significant creative challenge to writers who seek to express, communicate, and capture it.

‘Literary Syphilitics’

Associated with sexual temptations, deadly pleasures, decadence, and socio-scientific anxieties concerning contamination and contagion, syphilis is a distinguishing feature of the fictional landscape of nineteenth-century France and provides an entry point into literary reflections on life’s mortiferous pleasures. The STD of its day, it provoked fear and yet, at the same time, a morbid attraction, as we see in the erotically alluring woman of Baudelaire’s ‘À une Passante’, where the poet notes: ‘Dans son œil, ciel livide où germe l’ouragan, / La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.’ Paris’s international reputation as the nineteenth-century capital of vice and depravity captivated many writers of the time, including Baudelaire, who not only succumbed to the city’s carnal, sensual, and sexual temptations, but saw in them some of the constituent elements of modernity, including decomposition, decay, rot, and putrefaction. As des Esseintes, the morbid hero of Huysmans’s À Rebours, puts it in his characterization of the socio-cultural climate of the time, ‘Tout n’est que syphilis’. However, syphilis was also endowed with an idealized image:

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5 Joris-Karl Huysmans, À Rebours (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), p. 193. As Susan Sontag notes in Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors (London and New York: Penguin, 1991), ‘throughout the nineteenth century, disease metaphors became more virulent, preposterous, demagogic, to the extent that disease became synonymous with anything that was deemed ‘unnatural’ or unhealthy. In this context, it is hardly surprising that the (often decadent) fin-de-siècle spirit places such emphasis on the aesthetics of disease, for ‘disease’, in Sontag’s