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Interpreting the title: What is stored inside Anatole France's *L'Étui de nacre*

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Abstract. The title of a literary work is the first and, often, the last step into author-reader communication, be it a separate text or a collection. Sometimes its interpretation can be deliberately complicated by the author. This paper analyses the title of Anatole France's cycle *L'Étui de nacre* as an example of such case. We argue that this title is cryptic and, in the absence of the author's comments, needs interpretation from the reader. To understand the title and its function, we look at its both parts (*étui* and *nacre*) in the context of various discourses and traditions (myths, religions), paying special attention to France's own works, in order to find a clue to the cryptic title. Although the image of a container could be used as a traditional metaphor for a collection of literary works, France's choice of the lexeme makes this hardly conceivable as the word *étui* requires a complement which is missing from the title, so it is not known what the container is designed for, not to mention whether it is empty or full, open or closed, etc. Thus, the image of a container, important for France's oeuvre, becomes significant in itself, as it continuously appears in all the parts of the cycle, acquiring several distinct meanings of keeping, secrecy, and memory. France also implies several ideas related to mother-of-pearl, being attracted by its aesthetic and literary associations, as well as its polysemy and ambiguity, the awareness of which is obvious from the analysis of his prose. The religious associations of the image that are often used to refer to Logos foreground the very idea of baptism and draw the reader's attention to characters' names in the cycle. Its mythological potential is realised differently in the parts devoted to different cultures ranging from Venus to Virgin Mary, and ultimately to the woman in general. *Nacre* also introduces the image of pearl, which France traces in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which, through a complex net of associations, embodies a universal verity comprised of numerous individual and often conflicting truths. The semes that are foregrounded in the cycle with the help of the title are those of whiteness and oscillation, with a background of meanings from several cultures. This is especially important for France, as the stories of *L'Étui de nacre* show the same objects or actions from different angles, and the author's position is hardly conceivable. Both parts of the title can serve as references to myth and Christianity, as well as to several central concepts of the cycle, such as the complex nature of femininity, the relations between love and death, reason and faith, and the meaning of history. The intentionally elusive image implied by the title aims to reflect the ambiguity of these concepts, the unattainability of an ultimate and exclusive interpretation of the author's position.

Keywords: title of literary work, cryptic titles, prosaic cycle, image, pearl in literature, container in literature, Anatole France, *L'Étui de nacre*

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Introduction

Titling a literary work is probably one of the most important stages in the author's communication with the reader [1. P. 2], the first chance to convey the message, to form the reader's attitude. Due to their strong position within a literary text, titles "serve to link a text with its audience, in a linkage which is variable on both sides" [2. P. XXXV]. Among the textual and paratextual elements of a literary work, the title arguably presents the widest opportunities for interpretation because, although being a part of the text, it is an independent element [3. P. 1–8]. It is natural that theoretical and practical issues related to titles permanently attract scholars' attention. The scope of theoretical questions comprises the status of the title, its structure, its relations with the text, titles' hierarchy and taxonomy [4; 5]. Practical concerns involve the history of intitulation, construing the meanings of particular titles, establishing their origins, studying the effect of titles on books popularity, etc. [6; 7].

From the text interpretation perspective, the title is both a clue to the text and an element that has to be deciphered. It is explained by the fact that the title is able to considerably complicate the text semantics as it connects the named text to the outside world [5. P. 14]. This connection, not always a straightforward one, often requires interpretation. The situation is complicated by the status of the title, as "the title is equal to neither a word nor a phrase, nor a sentence, nor an elliptical statement in connection with its grammatical, semantic and stylistic features" [8. P. 161].

When it comes to titles of a collection rather than a single work, the name performs even a wider range of functions as it refers to all its parts in order to unite them [9]. Unfortunately, titles of collections or ensembles of texts have not received much attention yet, although the mechanisms of titling are obviously different in this case. Cycles' names can be generated in various ways. They usually appear after several separate texts have been united by the author, but occasionally may be given before the cycle is finished. For example, Charles de Coster, while finishing *Légendes flamandes* (1857), was looking for a fourth story to complete the whole. Titles may be given not only by the author but by the editor or publisher, typically when the cycle is collected by the latter (*Leyendas* by Gustavo Bécquer, 1871). Titles may change with time, as authors alter the structure of the cycle or its message, as it happened with Washington Irving's initial *Alhambra* (1832) receiving the title *Tales of the Alhambra* in the second edition (1851), which stressed the narrative element of the collection. Still, notwithstanding the title origin, the reader eventually faces it and has to link it with the whole work as well as with each of its parts.

A title may relate to the cycle constituents in various ways. While separate works of fiction are commonly called eponymously, collections naturally use

other types of ‘synecdochic’ or ‘metonymic’ [2. P. XXXIV] titles. For instance, it is a common case when cycles acquire toponymic or generic identification, or both, like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales* (1837) or Gottfried Keller’s *Zürichen Novellen* (1889). Alternatively, cycles are named after one of the stories: *Balthasar* by Anatole France (1889), *The Trimmed Lamp* by O. Henry (1907). Though infrequently, authors can use ‘allusive titles’, which ‘depend on our collective memory’ [10. P. 163], referring to their own work¹ or a piece by another writer.²

However, there are cases when none of the options is chosen. Then a title may foreground an image, metaphor, setting, which is often explained in the preface or introduction. To illustrate, in *The Casuarina Tree* (1926), Somerset Maugham clarifies the reasons for choosing this title: otherwise, it would require a reader to do research into the topic. The most complicated case is when the cycle is named in a seemingly unrelated, ‘vague’ manner.³ One quite a common way of doing it is naming a cycle with a plural noun, which will express the idea of a collection: *Émaux et camées* by Théophile Gautier (1852), *Les Fleurs du mal* by Charles Baudelaire (1857), *Opavshie listya* by Vasily Rozanov (1915), *Orientalisms* by Somerset Maugham (1899). In Elena Afonina’s classification, the title in such collections refers to the ‘plurality of episodes’ [9. P. 10].

In this paper we analyse another type of the title, which, in our opinion, has been overlooked. It is a metaphor of a container.⁴ Such is, for example, Eleanor Farjeon’s *The Old Nurse’s Stocking Basket* (1931), where the Nurse tells a new tale to children each time she mends a new pair of their stockings. Vsevolod Rozhdestvensky’s *Shkatulka pamyati* (*A Casket of Memory*, 1972) unites stories different both stylistically and genre-wise by explaining that they all come from the writer’s diary. In the above-mentioned book by Rozanov each volume is named ‘khorob’.⁵ Another example is Sergey Dovlatov’s collection *Chemodan* (*Suitcase*, 1986), where the suitcase serves a memory-invoking tool.⁶ A vivid illustration of this type is Anatole France’s prosaic cycle *L’Étui de nacre* (1892). Unlike the examples above, France does not explain his choice and the purpose of this container, which also complicates the title. Marie-Claire Bancquart, the editor of the most authoritative France’s *Œuvres* (1984–1994), identifies the need for clarification but does not go into much detail: “As far as we know, Anatole France never explained the title of *L’Étui de nacre*. It makes one imagine a minute precious box locking an array of various painted scenes or several small

¹ *Une Larme du diable* by Théophile Gautier (1839) is a self-reference to the play with the same name.

² Cf. Vladislav Khodasevich’s *Schastliviy domik* (*A Happy Home*, 1922), a citation from Alexander Pushkin’s poem *Domovomu* (*To the Homegod*, 1819).

³ ‘Vague’ titles are seen as belonging to the twentieth-century tradition, especially that of absurd. Most attention is attracted by names of novels (*The Name of the Rose* by Umberto Eco, *L’Automne à Pékin* by Boris Vian, etc.).

⁴ The ‘compartmental’ function of the title is briefly mentioned in [11. P. 12].

⁵ an obsolete Russian word which denotes a container that is used to be carried by peddlers.

⁶ For more information, see [12].

interconnected objects <...>. This title suggests a collection of fine work and accomplished taste, which can give birth to a dream or nostalgia without a claim of any greatness" [13. P. 1387].

From this perspective, the title referring to a container sustains the unity of the parts. Afonina, attempting to establish a connection between the role of the title and the absence / presence of framing elements, such as preface, argues that in cycles where such elements are missing, the role of the title heightens as it fulfils the explanatory function. In this case the title is often a metaphor [9. P. 28]. However, there are other meanings behind the image, which will be discussed later.

L'Étui de nacre is a result of thorough work on the text and the sequence of stories, most of which initially appeared in periodicals in 1889–1891. Another large part came as selected and altered chapters from France's earlier and presumably unsuccessful novel *Les Autels de la peur* (1884) set during the French Bourgeois Revolution. When afterwards France broke the novel into separate stories, he placed them at the end of *L'Étui de nacre*, thus distorting the chronological order of his material, as the beginning of the cycle presents legends from the Late Antiquity followed by stories from modern life (obviously, the 1880s). Such disparity meant that the cycle's integrity had to be provided by means other than chronology. And it is so, as the three generic and temporal layers of the cycle develop the same concepts (religion, love, sovereignty, memory, and several others) and include a wide range of recurring images, ideas, and plot elements [14. P. 124–135]. Also, the collection demonstrates an evident cyclic structure: the final story dwells on the theme of oblivion and ways of recording history, central for the opening story.

It is worth mentioning that the titles of separate stories within the collection are quite conventional. Most of them are either eponymic (*Gestas*, *Leslie Wood*), or refer to the protagonist (*Le Procureur de Judée*, *Le Petit Soldat de plomb*), or add a generic attribute (*Légende des saintes Oliverie et Liberette*, *Memoires d'un volontaire*). In one of the titles, *Amicus et Célestin*, the names form an opposition. A smaller group of stories are entitled with the reference to the central event or its time (*La Messe des ombres*, *Anecdote de floréal, an II*), which may also bear symbolic meaning (*L'Aube*). Only one story is called with a descriptive noun phrase (*La Mort accordée*), which is also easily deciphered within the text.

Still, never once throughout the cycle does France use the expression *l'étui de nacre* or any of its components or derivatives, which is a rare case – explicit or implicit reiteration of the title is almost inevitable in a literary work. That makes the title cryptic, or, in Gerard Genette's terms, demonstrates "a provocative absence of thematic relevance" [15. P. 713]. It seems, though, that a stylist like France would never have chosen a title without a special intention. It is more likely that the absence of the imagery connected with pearls, even where it would be only natural, was a deliberate act. In this case, construing the title may help to disclose the author's message.¹

¹ A similar mechanism is observed by Ulrich Schneider in James Joyce's *Dubliners* (though, concerning the titles of individual stories), where numerous interpretations of the titles

The present paper analyses the title of *L'Étui de nacre* within the context of different discourses and traditions focusing on the images of a casket and mother-of-pearl. As the title denotes a compound, in the text it is fragmented into constituents, so we will first look at the image of container in culture and establish its meaning with regards to France's oeuvre and the particular cycle. Then, we will outline the mythological, cultural and religious background to the image of mother-of-pearl¹ in order to see how it is used in France's cycle. Also, we will search for the clues in France's prose where these images occur. These steps will allow us to suggest some interpretations to the title.

The paper has two objectives. The first, practical one, is deciphering the meaning of France's ensemble title and suggesting its possible interpretations. Although the title is often a key or cipher to the cycle [17. P. 85], it sometimes needs a clue itself [18. P. 256]. The way we attain this objective is linked to our belief that the textual element that presents a cipher should have a clue in the texts related to it. In France's work, loaded with numerous connections to other works of art, it is reasonable to seek for a key in the culture of his time. In other cases, however, it would be more worthwhile to use the 'concrete' approach developed by Dmitry Likhachev [19. P. 7–8], when a clue is to be found in drafts, manuscripts, etc.² We believe that the algorithm we are using could be applied to some other texts.

The second, theoretical, objective is to clarify how 'cryptic' [20. P. 219] titles, an example of which is *L'Étui de nacre*, contribute to a cycle's integrity and what extra meanings they may add. The paper also establishes a possible connection between the title and the cycle realised on a supra-textual level. France in his cycle exploits such possibilities of image creation in a highly sophisticated manner.

Container in literature and culture

Metaphors related to containers pervade human life as a way of structuring reality [21]. The image of a container, one of the basic metaphorical concepts [22. P. 152], is definitely ambiguous [23. P. 19]. An attempt to generalise the semantic potential of the container image in French literature was made by Gaston Bachelard in the 1950s [24]. Although the philosopher does not aim to develop an exhaustive classification of the possible meanings, he pinpoints several important semes inherent in *des images du secret*. According to Bachelard, a container, be it a cupboard, a casket, or a box, indicates the sphere of soul's secret life, mystery, recollections, and something of high value, as they are opposed to open space in their function: storing and hiding from the idle view.

"are made possible through the absence of an explicit reference to the title in the context" [16. P. 410].

¹ As the image of pearl (*perle*) is almost inseparable from that of mother-of-pearl (*nacre*), we will take into account both words.

² As Bancquart claims, no manuscripts of the cycles can be found [13. P. 1405].

The end of the nineteenth century was an epoch of interest in everything old, especially in search of artefacts related to exotic cultures and epochs. France himself reflected this interest in his works: Pigeonneau has devoted his life to “l’archéologie égyptienne” (*M. Pigeonneau*), Sylvestre Bonnard collects rare books (*Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard*), Miss Bell keeps a large collection of bells (*Le Lys rouge*), and so on. The catalogue of the National Library of France contains many references to ancient objects discovered and displayed in the second half of the nineteenth century, together with their cases (*étui*), which shows the tendency of the age to appreciate and collect exotic objects. At the same time, many medieval containers had lost their original purpose, which could not be restored [25. P. 69]. Thus, containers also presented a mystery for the descendants.

On the whole, Anatole France’s characters tend to collect valuable things and expose them to everyone’s view. On the other hand, many lead a secret life, which results in creating images of close space meant to keep their mysteries. Thus, France’s works are abundant with names of different containers that altogether create an opposition between hollow and deep lives. For instance, in *Le Lys rouge*, enormous collections of bells, books, baubelots are displayed in numerous *armoires*, on *bahus*, while a secret letter is kept within *de son coffre à bijoux* [26. T. 2. P. 515]. The most vivid satirical image is that of a cupboard for storing evidence against Dreyfus, which turns into a whole edifice in *L’Île des pingouins*. No one knows what is kept inside, and the revelation of the contents leads to a scandalous failure of the case.

The choice of the word *étui* for the title of the cycle seems to be of high importance. First, it is far less specific in meaning than, for example, *coffer* or *coffret*. To illustrate, Diderot’s encyclopedia states that “les différentes especes d’étuis sont en si grand nombre, qu’il seroit impossible de les décrire toutes” [27. P. 97]. *Étui* may contain a hat, little scissors, needles, épée; it may be large or small, be made of wood, cardboard, gold, silver, ivory. However, it always has a particular purpose that dictates its properties.

The word *étui* does not frequently occur in France’s works. When it does, France always indicates the function of the container, naming the things stored inside – *cigarettes* [26. T. 2. P. 519], *ciseaux* [26. T. 2. P. 262], *doublons*, *ducassons*, *nobles à la rose et autres belles pièces d’or* [26. T. 2. P. 319]. In these contexts *étui* stores something personal, tangible, but conventional. In one case, *étui* belonging to children contains *choses inimaginables* [28]. Not naming the objects may be accounted to the fact that children value things in a way different from that of adults, so these objects may not be specified.

However, in *L’Étui de nacre* the container is completely devoid of any function. When France deprives this image of its function, it becomes extremely vague and speculative, just as the image of *tour d’ivoire*, which, according to Shapin’s precise expression, has always been a pure ‘figure of speech’ [29. P. 1]. *L’Étui de nacre* is likely to arouse very different associations depending on the reader’s background.

The second reason for opting the word *étui* is the semantic potential related to literary texts as *étui* has been known to refer to a sort of case for books. Those cases typically protected bindings of such books as the Bible, or stored almanacs. The meaning of the word *étui* started to absorb the meaning of such a binding, which is revealed in a later tradition to call collections of stories with the names of containers.¹

The image of a box is also special because it requires some additional information about its being close or open. Since France never clarifies this question as well as its purpose (or it being empty or even emptied), it adds to the ambiguity and vagueness of the image.

It seems necessary to look at the scope of containers and the attitude to them in France's cycle, as well as to the values expressed with the help of different containers. The cycle abounds with containers in a wide sense, as all the stories depict some dwellings, typically secluded and protected from an idle view, be it a cave, a villa, a convent, an apartment. The concept of seclusion and isolation is nuclear for the cycle, as it is frequently discussed by the characters and supported by other images, smaller in size and thus more conceivable, which will be analysed further.

On the level of ideas, seclusion is expressed with saint hermits from the first part, lonely secular people of the second part, and separated lovers (hiding or imprisoned) in the third part. All of them choose their seclusion consciously, even if reluctantly.

Containment images related to seclusion are various (a basket, a cupboard, an envelope, a drawer, a beehive, etc.), but some of them are recurring. Those are the images of a coffin and a bottle, which can acquire opposite meanings as they can be open or closed, empty or full. On the plot level, the motifs of opening and closing, filling and emptying reiterate. To illustrate, Célestin frees the trees from fairies, while Amicus fills the church with flowers. Euphrosine is awarded with a cup (an empty object), while her suitor offers her caskets full of wonderful things, which she rejects. Whereas Barnabe can fit his scarce belongings into any container (such as a rolled carpet), the monks seclude themselves into a monastery.² Soldiers of the republic in the third part constantly break or empty bottles, while women keep letters in secretaries, etc.

Another concept connected to container image is that of a secret. Most personages have something to hide: Lamia seems to conceal his love to Magdalene, Catherine Fontaine her past love affair, Leslie Wood his meetings with the deceased spouse; Scolastica keeps her chastity in secret, Euphrosine hides her identity, and the women of the third part have naturally much to conceal in order to save their lives. Secrets may be related to religious values; for example,

¹ For example, Mrs. Blencoe, *The Casket. A miscellany, consisting of unpublished poems* (1829); Innokenty Annensky, *Kiparisovy larets* (1910); Karin Wimmer, *Märchen-Schatulle* (2019).

² In this context, body also may be treated as a container. For the saints, it should be kept intact.

Célestin is unwilling to share secrets with Amicus as he thinks the fawn will not be able to perceive them, and Pontius mentions a prophet who intended to show the Samaritans the sacred vessels hidden in Mount Gerizim:

Un homme de la plèbe, puissant par la parole, comme il s'en trouve beaucoup en Syrie, persuada aux Samaritains de s'assembler en armes sur le mont Gazim, qui passe en ce pays pour un lieu saint, et il promit de découvrir à leurs yeux les vases sacrés qu'un héros éponyme, ou plutôt un dieu indigène, nommé Moïse, y avait cachés, aux temps antiques d'Évandre et d'Énée, notre père. Sur cette assurance, les Samaritains se révoltèrent [26. T. 1. P. 880].

In the first part, a secret is mostly kept with the help of a dwelling and is related to the seclusion concept, but gradually the two concepts are distinguished and the image is realised as a tangible object. While seclusion becomes not a free choice but a necessity, the idea of a secret is developed as the lives now depend on it being kept. As a secret becomes material, it is easier to uncover and use it as evidence, it needs protection in the form of a container. The images expressing the concept of a secret are an envelope that keeps a letter, a cabinet, a folder with law cases, a niche between mattresses, and a confessional.

Containers not only help to hide, but also enable a person to keep and remember. The third concept related to containers is that of memory, which is vital for most characters who recollect their lives throughout the narratives. They mostly live in the past rather than in the present or future. In the first part, memory is embodied with the images of a cultural text – literature, architecture. It means that memory is not individual, but targeted at the descendants: the witnesses rely on a written word, constructed church, etc. In *Sainte Euphrosine*, the heroine's father keeps only memories instead of any palpable proofs of his gone fortune. Barnabe maintains a tradition of an older juggler. In the second part, recollections are aimed at a person: the village doctor does not intend his journal for anybody; Catherine Fontaine recalls her love affair in full isolation; Gestas wants to name all his sins within the confessional walls to a priest only. In the third part, physical memory (in the form of letters) has to be destroyed and memories should be imprinted on the mind. The book and the literal culture are replaced by the acacia tree, which, apart from witnessing lovers' meetings, bears traces of their vows. Thus, memory becomes individual and dies with the character's demise.

The concept of memory is in fact the most important as the two framing stories of the cycle are devoted to memory and oblivion. *Le Procureur de Judée* and *Le Petit soldat de plomb* oppose a written record of history and an oral tradition: while Lamia hands down his memories only for himself, Pilate is interested in the next generations' opinions; his narrative almost literary coincides with Flavius Josephus' historical accounts. Voltaire's description of the Battle of Fontenoy contradicts Tulip's narration, and the latter reproaches the narrator that he does not know how to write history. Thus, the veracity of any form of memory is questioned.

Le Petit soldat de plomb" also presents the climax of containment images, as the story starts with enumerating abundant containers that are kept inside a cupboard, a larger container: "...J'entendis très distinctement trois coups frappés sur la glace d'une vitrine qui est à côté de mon lit et dans laquelle vivent

pêle-mêle des figurines en porcelaine de Saxe ou en biscuit de Sèvres, des statuettes en terre cuite de Tanagra ou de Myrina, des petits bronzes de la Renaissance, des ivoires japonais, des verres de Venise, des tasses de Chine, des boîtes en vernis Martin, des plateaux de laque, des coffrets d'émail; enfin, mille riens que je vénère par fétichisme et qu'anime pour moi le souvenir des heures riantes ou mélancolique... [26. T. 1. P. 1017].

France's *étui*, whose content is not specified (or forgotten), seems to be an ideal, universal container that can be instantiated in different objects. No definite answer to what kind of container is denoted, or what is stored inside, or whether it is closed or open, can be given. As Genette puts it, "the ambiguity can <...> be targeted by the title formula itself, by the presence of one or several words with double meaning" [15. P. 714]. The same idea of an elusive truth is expressed with the second component of the title, *nacre*.

Pearl in literature and culture

The other element of the title, *nacre*, is similarly complicated for interpretation. One of the reasons is its close connection with pearl, which shares its major properties and develops from the same material as the shell that covers it. Naturally, perception of the two substances in culture is characterised with a high degree of consistency. For European culture pearl and mother-of-pearl have traditionally been alien materials brought from overseas, and the difficulty in procuring them increased their value. They have been mainly appreciated for their unique quality of pearlescent shimmer, opalescence and subtle shifts of hues [30], which, in fact, is an optical illusion.

A thorough analysis of the cultural meaning and origins of pearl is provided by Friedrich Ohly, although the researcher does not go into analysing French culture and literature [31]. Ohly explores a noticeable variety of cultural sources and identifies several traditions and changes that the image has undergone. One of his major findings is the ambivalence of the material. First of all, pearl combines the features of inanimate and animate nature, bordering between the world of animals and that of gems. Secondly, pearl is born of an earthly and low substance to become a beautiful object of heavenly purity. These properties call for explanations and result in the occurrence of pearl and mother-of-pearl in different cultures and religions, providing the substances with a range of associations. Thus, pearl is considerably polysemantic.

Mythological systems explain the emergence of pearl in a number of ways. The Islamic world ascribes pearl's creation to the tears that Adam and Eve wept over the death of Abel or to angelic tears. The *Physiologus* gives another version of the origin – a result of marriage between heaven and earth. Then, according to Greek authors, pearl was born from a lightning. Myths also link pearls to Aphrodite / Venus, as her birth from foam resembles that of pearls, and this precious stone is used as an attribute and a metaphor for the goddess. All these

interpretations demonstrate the heavenly, divine origin of pearl, which continues to exist in the earthly world.¹

Pearl plays an important role in Christianity and is a highly complicated symbol [32]. A theology of pearl's origin in heaven was developed in the early Christianity by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Ephraim the Syrian as an illustration of Virginal Conception. As Ohly points out, Clement perceived pearl as an image for the Incarnation and for the Immaculate Conception, presenting "the topos of the luminous logos-pearl in the flesh of a clam" [31. P. 36]. Conceived and growing within mussels, pearls afterwards became an ideal child of the high (heaven) and the low (earth). Pearl came to designate the Divine Logos itself, which resulted in the emergence of some expressions and meanings to the word in different languages.² It seems natural that modern researchers have used optical metaphors of oscillation when discussing the philosophy of name, starting with Pavel Florensky [33. P. 87, 95].

Then, mother-of-pearl and pearl commenced to refer to the Virgin Mary through the idea of Immaculate Conception (which in culture led to a surprising link between Mary and Venus) and to Her Son. "A pearl also represents the luminous and most pure Jesus who was born by the Virgin from divine thunderbolt. For, like the pearl, born in flesh and shell and dampness, a body is moist and extremely shiny and full of pneuma. The God-Logos is spiritual light incarnate, sending His rays through a luminous and moist body" [30. P. 46–47].

Not only are mother-of-pearl and pearl used as a metaphor for the central concepts of Christianity, the materials are actually exploited for religious purposes, for example, to cover sculptures of Christ "where it [mother-of-pearl] figures the oscillation between life and death and simultaneously alludes to rebirth and/or virginal conception" [30. P. 37]. Pearls are often used to decorate sacred treasure objects [31], while mother-of-pearl frequently serves for covering portable relic containers [30. P. 39], or for making strings of beads.

It seems that in *L'Étui de nacre* this connection between mother-of-pearl and religion is of greatest importance. To start with, the acts of baptising and naming are crucial for all parts of the cycle. In the first one, it is revealed in changing names when accepting a different confession. In the second one, the name reveals or hides some truth about a personage. For example, the name of the main character in *Gestas* openly links him to the Bible and complicates associations with the figure of Paul Verlaine, who inspired the image. In the final part, the names of different characters are shards of one name from the earlier novel. Thus, Fanny d'Avenay from *Les Autels de la peur* turns into Sophie in *L'Aube* or Pauline de Luzy, while the plot stays the same. In brief, Logos plays a vital role in the whole cycle's poetics.

¹ We do not here consider other meanings of pearl, for instance, the way it is used in *sèlam*, Turkish flower language, which was actively perceived by the European culture of the 18th and 19th centuries (*Lady Montagu's Letters*, 1763), where pearl (*inge*) refers to youth.

² Cast pearls before swine; a pearl of wisdom; a pearl of great price, etc.

The mythological meaning of pearl is equally important in the cycle. The first part, whose stories are set in the times of early Christianity, is full of allusions to female goddesses. Quite naturally, the opposition (or, rather, interaction) here lies between the new religion and the Greek and Roman paganism. Remarkably, it is Venus who is most frequently mentioned among ancient gods. In *Le Procureur de Judée*, Pontius erroneously relates Jewish religion to Venus's cult: "Toutefois, je crois qu'ils ont anciennement adoré Vénus. Car encore aujourd'hui les femmes présentent à l'autel des colombes pour victimes et tu sais comme moi que des marchands, établis sous les portiques du temple, vendent des couples de ces oiseaux pour le sacrifice" [26. T. 1. P. 886].

In *Amycus et Célestin* the hermit builds his chapel on the site of a ruined Venus temple. The title character of *Sainte Euphrosine*, when disguised as a man, reminds a passer-by of young Eros, who is also mentioned in *Scolastica*, where Silvanus attributes the rosebush on the graves of Scolastica and her spouse to the powers of this god rather than Christ. Venus or Eros do not appear in *La Légende des saintes Oliverie et Liberette*, instead, Artemis is mentioned, sharing certain features with Venus and the Virgin Mary: "Elle se nomme Diane, et son pied d'argent effleure, sous les pâles clartés de la lune, le thym des montagnes. Elle n'a pas dédaigné de recevoir dans son lit d'hyacinthes fleuries des bergers et des chasseurs comme nous. Pourtant elle est toujours vierge" [26. T. 1. P. 897].

Thus, every story of the first part of *L'Étui de nacre* features a feminine goddess, who embodies nature in its fertility, youth, and love. Interestingly, these stories also deal with the image of Jesus Christ rather than Mary, as the female characters search for His divine marriage. The God of Christianity is masculine, as opposed to the feminine pagan goddesses, and the numerous heroines (an unnamed Jewish woman, presumably Magdalene, Scolastica, Saint Euphrosine, Oliverie and Liberette) reject their feminine nature in search of Christ's divine love.

The system changes in *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*, which shows the triumph of the Virgin Mary, who is worshiped by the main character and the monks. This image recurs in *Gestas*: the old drunkard prays to Mary in a moment of repentance. Thus, the other pearl-related figure is introduced, and Her image reminds considerably of the goddess in the earlier stories: She is the icon of femininity, the ideal woman giving love and consolation, though retaining a gallant hue. At the same time, two of the tales in this part do not mention either Venus or Mary, although they are dedicated to love and religion. These are *La Messe des ombres* and *Leslie Wood*. Both stories deal with the motif of love after death: the protagonists lose their beloved to find them mystically, in both cases such reunion brings about their death. This plot can be related to the myth of Venus and Adonis, so the mythological allusion takes place at the level of the plot rather than through imagery.

Mythological allusions to a feminine goddess become even more subtle in the third, revolutionary part of *L'Étui de nacre*. The text is remarkably devoid of Christian or pagan images, even though the characters may be connected with religion (as in *Memoires d'un volontaire*) or declare their faith (*L'Aube*). It seems that their attitude to religion is more intellectual, and they are eager to use

religious ideas (on a par with philosophy and poetry) as instruments to build a new world. Thus, the heroine of *L'Aube* appeals to the Bible and Rousseau with equal ease. Despite their inexplicitness, mythological allusions retain their position, and yet again they are connected with the female characters. The heroines of the stories are beautiful women who inspire strong love, in two cases they have little sons (whose angelic appearance reminds of Eros). They may also find themselves in situations related to ancient rituals. For instance, Pauline de Luzy pretends to have been making love to her guest in order to hide her neighbour from Jacobins, bringing to the reader's mind the practice of sexual sacrifice to female goddesses (including Aphrodite). In *Anecdote de floréal*, an II prisoners carve their lovers' names and leave love poems on the bark of an acacia tree in the yard, in the same way as peasants acted with the fairy tree in *Amycus et Célestin*. Moreover, the tragic plots of several stories, where the heroines reject love and then suffer or perish, can be compared to myths of Venus' revenge to those who refused to love.

Nacre and perle in Anatole France's prose

The Larousse dictionary of 1905 provides one meaning of the word *nacre*: "Matière blanche, à relets irisés, qui forme l'intérieur de certaines coquilles et s'emploie en tabletterie" [34. P. 393], and numerous meanings of *perle*, among them many technical ones. Apart from the main meaning ("Concrétion brillante, dure, arrondie, qui se forme dans certains coquillages bivalves, par une extravation de la nacre" [34. P. 792]), by the end of the nineteenth century the word *perle* had developed some poetic and figurative meanings: dent très blanche; goutte d'un liquid élimpide; personne très estimable; chose d'un grand prix; petits ornements d'email, de verre, de métal. Besides, there came about several expressions in which the word is used: *enfiler des perles*, *jeter des perles devant les pourceaux*, *gris de perle* [Ibid.]. Some of them originate from older sources (e.g. the Bible), but remarkably retain the word 'perle', which is not the case in all European languages.

Inside *L'Étui de nacre*, the word *nacre* is never used, and a participle *perlé* occurs once, within the story *Le Jongleur de Notre Dame*, with the context being traditionally Christian and related to the Virgin Mary. "Marbode la représentait assise dans une chaire, le front ceint d'un nimbe à orbe perlé. Et il avait soin que les plis de la robe couvrissent les pieds de celle dont le prophète a dit: 'Ma bien-aimée est comme un jardin clos'" [26. T. 1. P. 921].

To understand what France means by *nacre* in the title of the cycle, it is vital to see how he uses this word in his oeuvre. Having analysed France's works, we have identified those in which the words *nacre* and *perle* (in the first meaning) are of importance.

First of all, *perle* and *nacre* are used literally – to denote jewelry, usually within a phrase *un collier de perles* [26. T. 3. P. 802; 26. T. 4. P. 319]. Other expressions of this kind are *les agrafes de perles* [26. T. 4. P. 295], *la canne de*

nacre [26. T. 4. P. 483]. Pearls usually decorate women's hair and garments [26. T. 4. P. 90; 26. T. 4. P. 926]. The words *nacre* / *perle* may acquire opposite connotations: they either arouse a feeling of joy due to their purity and beauty [26. T. 1. P. 633], or irritation in case they indicate vanity, especially when saints amply decorate themselves with pearls [26. T. 4. P. 33; 26. T. 4. P. 351].

Very rarely are *perle* and *nacre* attributed to men, in which case it is the colour that matters. M. Bergeret regrets that his tie is not as white as it used to be and “les boutons de *nacre* dans les boutonnières agrandies par un long usage” [26. T. 2. P. 897]. The white colour in this context becomes synonymous to youth, vivacity, hope. The colour is also emphasised in several cases when *nacre* refers to the whiteness of the skin [26. T. 2. P. 461; 26. T. 4. P. 307].

The substances also possess magic qualities. Sometimes *perle* becomes an attribute of a fairy: “hennin à deux cornes, que *des perles* d'un bel orient rendait clair et lumineux comme le croissant de la lune” [26. T. 1. P. 209], or of a magical world. *L'Abeille*, which describes two magical locations, those of Undines and gnomes, is abundant with pearls and shells. No matter how beautiful and precious pearls may be, they are opposed to intangible values of love and devotion, which win in the end. However, *perle* and *nacre* can be used as attributes to saints and the Virgin Mary: “Petite et noire, couronnée de gemmes, dans un manteau resplendissant d'or, de pierreries et de *perles*, elle tenait sur ses genoux son Enfant qui, noir comme elle, passait la tête par une fente de son manteaux” [26. T. 4. P. 265].

One of conventional meanings of *perle*, that of a rarity, is quite typical of France,¹ although in the majority of cases the word is used ironically. Its occurrence in *Le Crime de Sylvestre Bonnard* is particularly interesting: it denotes a masterpiece, a book pleasant for the soul and the eye. In this context, it is significant that the book meant is the collection of Saints' lives: “Oh! le manuscrit de la *Légende dorée*! *Une perle*, Excellence, un rubis, un diamant! Deux miniatures si parfaites qu'elles font entrevoir le paradis. Quelle suavité! Ces couleurs ravies à la corolle des fleurs font un miel pour les yeux!” [26. T. 1. P. 186]. At the same time, books are reevaluated in the course of the narrative, and the word *perle* is tinted with an ironic hue.

The Christianity theme occurs in the same book, when the word *perle* is used to characterise the painting of a religious plot – *Une Adoration des bergers*, and also in *L'Humaine tragédie*: “Il se nomme Lucide et il est bien nommé, car c'est *une perle de patience*” [26. T. 2. P. 643]; “a pauvreté ... est *une perle précieuse*” [26. T. 2. P. 649].

The white colour of *perle* and its connection with Christianity is accentuated in *Thaïs*, when doves are compared to pearls: “Le long des toits de brique des colombes formaient une file de *perles*” [26. T. 1. P. 862]. Through the colour of white, pearl is connected to the image of Thaïs on her dying bed (“Thaïs reposait toute *blanche*” [26. T. 1. P. 862]), which appears in the same passage.

¹ “L'Île des pingouins”, “Le Lys rouge”, “Histoire de la Duchesse de Cigogne et de M. de Boulingrin”.

Also, a pearl is a metaphor for a star, though complicated, as stars and constellations are presented in a mythological way: “Levez les yeux, mon fils, et voyez sur votre tête le Chariot de David qui, traîné par Mizar et ses deux compagnes illustres, tourne autour du pôle; Arcturus, Véga de la Lyre, l’Épi de la Vierge, la Couronne d’Ariane, et sa perle charmante. Ce sont des soleils” [26. T. 2. P. 69]. The connection with heaven is revealed in *Le Lys rouge*, while the city of Venice is being described: “Oui, à Venise, le ciel est coloriste ... l’air de Venise ... sème des perles. Le ciel... jette dans l’espace irisé ses perles et ses cristaux” [26. T. 2. P. 379].

Interestingly, France creates some audial images with the help of *perle*: “Cependant René Chartier, qui jouait Joconde, se tenait immobile, le cou allongé comme un tuyau, soucieux uniquement du velours et des perles de sa voix, grave et même un peu somber” [26. T. 3. P. 282]; “Et leur rire venait, à travers la large voie, aux oreilles de Remi, comme un bruissement à peine perceptible de perles remuée” [26. T. 1. P. 106]. In *Balthazar*, it is used to describe a fountain, and again *perle* is exploited with both audial and visual traits: “a reine de Saba les reçut dans une cour rafraîchie par des jets d’eau parfumée qui retombaient en perles avec un murmure clair” [26. T. 1. P. 588].

There are several cases when France’s personages explicitly reveal their awareness of the cultural tradition behind pearls, for instance, when d’Astarac mentions an Arabian fable involving pearls: “comme le coq de la fable arabe dédaigna la perle tombée dans son grain” [26. T. 2. P. 62]. A mythological allusion is clear from *Le Livre de mon ami*: “Prenons le conte le plus simple de tous, cette histoire d’une jeune fille qui laisse échapper de sa bouche deux roses, deux perles et deux diamants. Cette jeune fille est l’aurore qui fait éclore les fleurs et les baigne de rosée et de lumière” [26. T. 1. P. 574]. In *La Rôtisserie*, d’Astarac suggests his own version of pearl origin: those are salamanders’ teeth: “Les Salamandres n’ont point de dents, à proprement parler. Mais leurs gencives sont garnies de deux rangs de perles, très blanches et très brillantes, qui donnent à leur sourire une grâce inconcevable. Sachez encore que ces perles sont de la lumière durcie” [26. T. 2. P. 45].

To sum up, France uses the words *perle* and *nacre* conventionally, but in the complex of meanings accrued by the image, and this polysemy can be equally well exploited in the title of the cycle in question.

In our opinion, yet another key to the understanding of the pearl image, unique to France, may be found in *L’Humaine tragédie*, which explicitly dwells on the image of pearl in Fra Giovanni’s dream. This image, in its turn, is a tribute to Dante and Goethe. France construes white colour as the colour of pearl, which stresses Goethe’s finding of the constituents of white. Pearl becomes an allegory of truth: “Alors la roue parut toute blanche. Et elle passait en éclat l’astre limpide où le Florentin vit dans la rosée Béatrice. Et l’on eût dit qu’un ange, ayant essuyé la perle éternelle pour en ôter les taches, l’avait posée sur la terre, tant la roue ressemblait à la lune qui, au plus haut du ciel, brille un peu voilée par la gaze des nuées légères” [26. T. 2. P. 676].

At the same time, this image of *la perle éternelle* is a quotation from a French translation of Dante's *Paradise*, and its development. France implies that there is no single truth; only taken together, individual verities become a universal truth:

Contemple la Vérité blanche que tu désirais connaître. Et sache qu'elle est faite de toutes les vérités contraires, en même façon que de toutes les couleurs est composé le blanc. Et cela, les enfants de Viterbe le savent, pour avoir fait tourner sur l'aire du marché des toupies bariolées. Mais les docteurs de Bologne n'ont point deviné les raisons de cette apparence. Or en chacune de ces devises était une part de la Vérité, et de toutes se forme la devise véritable" [26. T. 2. P. 676].

The fact that France refers to Dante is proved by another instance of his quoting. In *Le Lys rouge* Prince chooses to read aloud a passage from *The Divine Comedy* (Paradise, 2), quoting precisely the line which includes the phrase *la perle éternelle*: "Au dedans d'elle nous reçut *la perle éternelle*..." [26. T. 2. P. 438]. It demonstrates France's attention to this image in Dante's poem.

To summarise this part, the words *nacre* and *perle* often occur in the context of the feminine that can refer either to the Virgin Mary, Christian saints, pagan goddesses, or earthly women. It is obvious that France stresses the link between pearls and heaven, and is attracted by the concept of pearl as embodying the universal verity through comprising conflicting truths.

We have noticed that, despite the numerous mythological allusions typical of pearl, the images of *perle* and *nacre* are surprisingly absent from the text of *L'Étui de nacre*. From this perspective, it seems interesting to analyse France's usage of colours in the text of the cycle, especially of the colour white, which was traditionally associated with pearl in his own oeuvre and in the contemporary poetry. It is evident that, rather than colours, the text operates mostly with the concept of brightness (usually in the landscapes) and radiance (e.g. through the concept of light). The colour white itself also occurs in many parts of the cycle, and its usage definitely bears a systemic character.

The first thing that can be observed here is the ambivalence of the colour, as it is used in a number of distinct oppositions. Thus, in the cycle, it is associated not only with youth, but also with the old age. A remarkable example is the opposing pair of young Amycus with his *dents blanches* [26. T. 1. P. 893] and old Célestin with *sourcils blancs* [26. T. 1. P. 892] and *barbe blanche* [26. T. 1. P. 894]. Throughout the cycle, the grey hair of the older characters such as Leslie Wood (*favoris blancs* [26. T. 1. P. 931]) and Catherine Fontaine (*cheveux blancs* [26. T. 1. P. 925]), and the fair hair of the young (*blanche Pannychis* [26. T. 1. P. 1019]) are referred to as *white*.

Secondly, white forms the opposition of purity and sin. The colour is linked with the virgin characters of the first part: *blanche licorne* (1-900) in *Légende des saintes Oliverie et Liberette*, white statues in *Le Jongleur de Notre-Dame*: "À ses pieds, deux petites figures nues et toutes blanches se tenaient dans une attitude suppliante. C'étaient des âmes qui imploraient, pour leur salut et non, certes, en vain, sa toute-puissante intercession" [26. T. 1. P. 921]. Gestas pleads: "Mon bon monsieur le curé, donnez-moi de quoi vous avez, de l'eau pure, une robe blanche et des ailes pour ma pauvre âme" [26. T. 1. P. 944]. At the same time, white

accompanies the image of hatred: “C’était un petit homme à grosse tête dont les paroles passaient en sifflant entre deux lèvres blanches et quatre dents jaunes” [26. T. 1. P. 958]. Colour (white or unspecified) becomes a way to disguise nature – to cover skin (“Fardées et peintes, sentant le nard et la myrrhe, macérées dans les aromates, leur chair est d’un goût rare et délicieux” [26. T. 1. P. 888]) or hair (“leur poudre n’est pas d’un blanc assez pur” [26. T. 1. P. 983]).

White is also the colour of ceremony and uniform, and, through the clothing of a priest (“surplis blanc d’un prêtre” [26. T. 1. P. 944] in *Gestas*) and the soldiers’ uniform [26. T. 1. P. 988; 26. T. 1. P. 990; 26. T. 1. P. 1017], it is included into an opposition between church and army, peace and war, religion and politics.

Finally, the very conflict of life and death is also rendered through white. White is the colour of dawn (“l’aube blanchit la fenêtre” [26. T. 1. P. 940]), of bridal clothing [26. T. 1. P. 907] and thus of hope. But it is also the colour of death as it is presented in *Leslie Wood* (“Et c’est l’âme désolée que je m’agenouillai au pied du lit où mon Annie reposait sous une croix de roses, muette, blanche, et les pâles violettes de la mort sur les joues” [26. T. 1. P. 939]) and *Le Manuscrit d’un medecin de village*: “...Je m’imaginai que j’étais depuis longtemps, depuis très longtemps, dans cette salle basse, devant ce lit de cotonnade blanche, et que les mois, les années s’écoulaient sans que je fisse un mouvement” [26. T. 1. P. 953].

Another function of white in *L’Étui de nacre* is focusing the narration. It often marks the central images of the stories, many of which have symbolic meaning. Such is the colour of the unicorn in *La Légende des saintes Oliverie at Liberette* or of the envelope in *Le Perquisition*, the colour of which is mentioned thrice (“Blanc sur le tapis rouge” [26. T. 1. P. 1015; 26. T. 1. P. 1016]). These two episodes, which come from different parts of the cycle, introduce the concept of miracle and salvation, though the concepts themselves are interpreted differently.

Quite frequently, when white appears in the crucial moments of the narration, it is accompanied by other colours. Such are the striped clothes of Ampere in *Le Manuscrit d’un medecin de village* (“une veste rayée de rose et de blanc” [26. T. 1. P. 954]), of Sophie in *L’Aube* (“robe à raies blanches et roses” [26. T. 1. P. 991]). A very bright image comes from *Amycus et Célestin*. Here the egg as a symbol of new life connects polytheism and Christianity: “J’ai rêvé de nids et d’œufs, d’œufs blancs, tiquetés de brun”, sings a lark [26. T. 1. P. 891]. New life is not purely white, but combines colours. Remarkably, this image can be directly connected with the title as it shares some properties with both pearl and container, which has to be opened to continue the circle of life.

In other words, the central images of *L’Étui de nacre* are marked not with white alone, but with a synthesis of different hues, which reminds of nacre, whose changing colour unites different shades in one oscillating image. This again brings us back to France’s understanding of Dante’s *perle* and Goethe’s idea of white as the synthesis of all colours. So, the *nacre* of the title can be seen as a symbol of truth, eternal and ever changing, which allows different interpretations and is extremely hard to perceive as a whole. As the stories of the cycle constantly

oppose different systems of values, religions, attitudes, France's choice of the allegory is understandable.

Interpretations

We argue that, when naming his cycle *L'Étui de nacre*, France implied several ideas related to container and mother-of-pearl. He could be attracted by the aesthetic and literary contexts in which they occurred, as well as their polysemy and ambiguity. The phrase itself may relate to both tangible and intangible objects and denote a number of things.

The first way to interpret the title is through its connection to femininity, which was traditional for the French literature of the epoch. Female characters occupy the central position in most of the stories of the cycle and stand out as objects of awe and admiration. Mother-of-pearl, with its ambivalent virginal-sensuous associations, embodies the nature of woman as it is depicted in *L'Étui de nacre*. All the central female characters are related to both Venus and Mary, combining the earthly and the spiritual. This parallel uncovers another conflict of the cycle, the one between polytheism and monotheism, which are shown as deeply interrelated. Finally, a more modern interpretation of pearl as a metaphor for death and resurrection also stresses the link between love and death, love after death and eternal life achieved through love, which is found in different parts of the cycle.

Another obvious interpretation is that of a container, both natural (a shell) and man-made (a storage box). As a shell, the cycle embraces its stories, which in this case are compared to a pearl. As we have seen, the image of a pearl traditionally refers to the Word, in its divine and poetic function. Through the Christian usage, the title may also remind of a box for keeping sacred things. These things can mean the universal truth, or Logos (which brings back the pearl metaphor for the Word), but they can also mean precious objects, namely ideas which are cherished by the writer as an individual. The image of *L'Étui de nacre* as a storage box is not devoid of aesthetic perceptions, through its connection with gems. These perceptions must have been very important for France as a stylist and admirer of all things beautiful. Such interpretations also allow the title to unite the different time layers of the cycle, as a mother-of-pearl casket can store sacred relics from the early Christianity, as well as jewels during the French Revolution or pills in the modern times.

There is still a third interpretation, more personal, which links the cycle to France's understanding of Dante's symbol of pearl. As pearlescent colour unites seemingly opposite and contrasting hues, various contrasting concepts form the plot and its structure in *L'Étui de nacre*. What seems conflicting to people (e.g. different religions, forms of government, philosophical systems, opposition of mysticism and medicine) turns out to be perfectly compatible. Moreover, it is unfeasible to explain life and its mysteries from the extremes of any single doctrine. This message, implied in most stories of the cycle, is thus supported by

the symbolic meaning of the title.¹ Oscillation may also indicate different edges of an image, be that a saint, an elderly hermit, or a terror victim.

The variety of meanings of the word *nacre* itself and the relation between the title and the text seem to arise from the ambiguity of the contents. The stories of *L'Étui de nacre* show the same objects or actions from different angles, and the author's position is hardly conceivable. The eternal shimmer and deceptive simplicity of mother-of-pearl accompanied by the mystery of the container well suit this quality of the text and make this image a perfect metaphor for the whole work. We believe that the container metaphor ciphers what Yulia Babicheva refers to as "the dialectics of the writer's soul" [35. P. 63], as it reflects the author's attitudes and values first and foremost.

Speaking about cryptic titles in general, France's example, though being quite rare, reveals some mechanisms of writer-text-reader interaction. Difficulties in the title interpretation, according to Lev Barlas, are caused by the absence of a direct link between the surface and the deep structures of the title [36. P. 84]. We have tried to restore this link by looking for the semantic constituents of the title within the text of the stories. As a cryptic title does not have a definite 'signifié' within the text, its semantic potential is considerably augmented. Instead of deploying one image, the title is related to a whole complex of images which are interconnected via the title. In fact, the very connection between them becomes possible due to their functioning within the cycle. Thus, the title creates a certain semantic field which may be realised as images and motifs that connect the plots of different stories and determine the emergence of a new plot.

In his book on title, Giancarlo Maiorino argues that titles "create zones of transaction between readers and writers as well as zones of transition between literary traditions" [1. P. 2]. It is obvious that cryptic titles heighten the role of the reader as they generate numerous, potentially endless, associations that dictate the perception of a cycle as a whole. It is up to the reader to trace the links between the images and discover various implied meanings. As a result, the author loses some degree of control over the message conveyance. It is natural that writers, when choosing cryptic titles, tend to offset this loss of authority by including a preface and explaining the title. France's rejection of this strategy is conscious and may be attributed to his position as a philosopher and the message of the cycle: valuing individual truth over the set authority.

¹ One more possible interpretation of the title is a parallel to the image of *tour d'ivoire*. The image of *tour d'ivoire*, which first appeared in the Biblical Song of Solomon, traditionally referred to the Virgin Mary. Later it developed a different meaning and denoted isolation and sacred status of poetry and arts (see [29]). It is obvious that France knew the roots and meaning of the image, quoting the Song of Solomon in the cycle and it being part of the world culture. The expression *l'étui de nacre* has the same structure and the meaning of its components as *tour d'ivoire*. Moreover, it is focusing on the same property – the white colour of the denoted object. Then, it could be supposed that it may have a similar meaning. However, this hypothesis needs further verification.

Conclusion

The analysed title, on the one hand, belongs to the category of cryptic titles and, on the other hand, employs a container image. As such, it is connected with the concepts of secrecy, seclusion and memory storage, which many of the cycle's images and plots stem from. However, France deprives *l'étui* of its pragmatic function, and, as an expression of a pure idea, it becomes highly ambiguous. As for *nacre*, France implies several aspects related to mother-of-pearl – white colour, shimmering, associations with different religious traditions. The writer seems to be attracted by its polysemy and ambiguity, frequently using the image in other works that may be treated as a cipher to the cycle's title. Both parts of the title contribute to the idea of the challenge of capturing impalpable truth. Thus, *L'Étui de nacre* may imply that the cycle should be treated as an ambivalent one, whether its message is religious or philosophic, ethical or aesthetical, Christian or secular. The stories of the cycle demonstrate different viewpoints on a number of ideas and phenomena, and it is difficult to identify the narrator's position. The task of interpreting the message shifts to the reader who dares to open this enigmatic casket.

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