

JEUX DE MASSACRE

Collected by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet in a 1990 double volume, many of Octave Mirbeau's 1,400 contes cruels convey an impression that cruelty is not only a recurrent Mirbellian theme but is also the effect intended by his writing. In his texts, graphic descriptions of flayed Africans ("Maroquinerie"), drowned hunchbacks ("Un homme sensible"), tortured animals ("Le Crapaud," "La Mort du chien," "Pauvre Tom!"), decapitated, dismembered murder victims ("La Chambre close," "La Tête coupée") are interspersed with commentary on poetry, painting, and aesthetic sensibility in such a way that violence is associated, not only with nature's reproductive fertility, but also with the desire to create a work of art.

Reinforcing views informing his fiction from Le Calvaire to Dingo, Mirbeau's Contes cruels link humanity's ascension to a highly socialized, culturally sophisticated state with the evolution of aggression that paradoxically aims at making the text an instrument of revolutionary violence, one which Mirbeau envisions as being designed to overthrow an oppressive society and return it to a state of natural inexpressiveness. Having arrived at a point at which consumption of sanitized novels and plays becomes a prophylactic measure meant to suppress instinct and foster submissiveness ("La puissance des lumières"), society makes itself vulnerable to an anarchic literature of cruelty whose validation of natural impulses is misinterpreted as an intention to inflict suffering on an audience. The aggression expressed in Mirbeau's contes cruels is directed not only at a society that emasculates the independent, that exalts the stupid, crushes the poor, extinguishes intellectual curiosity, and punishes individualism. It also targets the literature that supports existing governments, as writing becomes a weapon with which other writing is attacked.

In Michel and Nivet's collection, pride of place is given in the "Frontispice" to a trio of stories featuring a familiar Mirbelian topos, the shooting gallery at country fairs, where villagers' atavistic fury is stirred by the challenge of shattering little figurines in a hail of bullets.¹ Detailed, life-like representations of carefully-dressed men, women, and children who suddenly appear and then try to run away, the targets excite greater passion when they more closely resemble the people shooting at them.

Mirbeau's enduring preoccupation with explosives, ammunition, artillery shells, "La Fée Dum-Dum," suggests his fascination with a military science of destruction that stands in opposition to the familiar thematic nexus of murder, nature, and female sexuality. As little puppets are smashed by rifle fire, frigates are obliterated by melinite shells, vessels dropping out of sight as if down "une trappe de féerie" ("En écoutant dans la rue" 41). In contrast with the messiness of natural death, rich in the leaking viscera, oozing brains, sticky blood, and fertilizing corruption that Mirbeau cruelly describes elsewhere, the cleanness of missile eradication leaves the perfection of nothingness. The ballistic complex defined in Mirbeau's writing, the fixation on shooting and annihilation becomes an integral component of the male creative drive, so that nothing is more shameful than the detumescent unreadiness of an army that has emptied its bullets, sold its gunpowder, and stands unready to fire on the enemy ("?", II, 277-8).

In Mirbeau's shooting gallery stories, he obfuscates the issue of the narrator's own bloodthirstiness by focusing instead on the hypocrisy of governments that sanction warfare and colonial genocide and yet insist on punishing murderers. Grotesquely arrayed in the demonizing rhetoric of Mirbeau's politics of radical individualism, the shooting gallery patrons and military weapons designers become the puppets Mirbeau aims to mow down. Injustice, xenophobia, insensitivity to suffering: each carefully crafted nemesis becomes "le petit bonhomme en carton qui passe et repasse" that enflames Mirbeau's indignation and becomes the object of his outrage.

It is important that those who kill with violence or indifference are not always the mayors, hunters, explorers, colonels, and land-owners that are Mirbeau's favorite targets. In "Divagations sur le meurtre," the theoretical rationalization of homicide on which the conversation centers is a point advanced by a Darwinian scientist, a philosopher, and a poet. Recounting a train-ride he had taken, the latter describes a repellent fellow-traveler who had entered his car and sat down facing him before falling asleep. Justifying the voluptuously exhilarating muscular urge to strangle the

passenger, the poet, in painstaking detail, cites the offensiveness of the man's gelatinous triple chin, his sweating forehead, and hairy, swollen hands, making ugliness a form of violence to which violence is a legitimate response. As murderous disgust is offered as a normal reaction to oppression and unsightliness, the aesthetic, moral, and political dimensions of Mirbeau's arguments become intertwined and entangled.

In "Les Mémoires de mon ami," the intradiegetic narrator, Charles L., recounts a dream which becomes an oneirical enactment of Mirbeau's own fears of political powerlessness and creative impotence, as L. describes a hunting scene in which his rifle fails to discharge: "Mon fusil ne part pas, mon fusil ne part jamais... J'ai beau presser sur la gâchette. En vain! Il ne part pas!" (623). Mortified, unmanned by his malfunctioning weapon, Mirbeau's narrator is mockingly contemplated by immobilized partridges and curious hares, becoming himself the object of their bemused and wondering gaze. As with the angry shooters who blame their bad aim on the targets they cannot hit – "[qui] s'encolèrent, non contre leur maladresse, mais contre la marionnette qu'ils ont manquée" ("L'école de l'assassinat" 37) – Mirbeau's ideological indignation is exacerbated by the indestructibility of the institutions he is intent on tearing down.

As this essay argues, Mirbeau's work is a form of creation fueled by destruction, writing produced as responsive condemnation of a society aspiring to stability and changelessness, as art seeks to restore a primordial state of continuous movement and mutation in which randomness, heat, and disorder make writing impossible. What is it, then, that petrifies Mirbeau's narrative persona, obstructing the ejaculatory expression of his righteous fury, shaming him into agraphia and silence? In his discussion of Mirbeau's materialist philosophy, Pierre Michel remarks on what must have been the appeal of Schopenhauerian detachment, the impassive equanimity of Nirvana.² As the killing grounds of the torture garden are beds filled with flowers, the object of Mirbeau's imprecations are those who promote man's enslavement to his "instinct génésique."

In Baudelaire, the shooting gallery lies adjacent to the graveyard, and marksmen, mistaking their ambitions and resentments for the real target, fail to recognize that the bulls-eye, "le seul vrai but" is "la détestable vie" ("Le Tir et le cimetière" 202). Suggesting the incompatibility of creation and copulation, Mirbeau's fiction stresses society's exploitation of man's sexual impulses as a strategy to keep him in chains. Adopting Schopenhauer's mysogyny, the "gynécophobie" imputed to him by Daudet ("Introduction: La Femme domine et torture l'homme," *Contes cruels II*, 10), Mirbeau deploras man's imprisonment in a world of unattainable objects and passions that cannot be satisfied, and so professes hostility "à l'égard de la femme considérée comme simple instrument de la nature" (Pierrot (80).

In Mirbeau, it is the phantasm of the missing female phallus that immobilizes man in a state of unproductive shock and fascination, leaving him frozen, "médusé." Woman is a yawning, destructive orifice like the abyss of La Fontaine-au-Grand-Pierre into which Mirbeau's "homme sensible" hurls his victims, their bodies falling forever into the darkness, never making the sound of impact when they hit a bottom that is not there. Different from the idealized nothingness produced by an artist whose work represents its own superfluity, the néant of women is inimical to creation. It is no coincidence that in "Les Mémoires de mon ami," the narrator's capacity to create a rich inner world is enhanced by his refusal to consummate his marriage to a gray, bony, nagging, flat-chested wife.

In "Les Mémoires de mon ami," the narrator's dread of castration is projected as his unexplained disgust for bare feet. Unlike Monsieur Ravour in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, a man fetishistically attached to what he knows does not exist, Charles L.'s phobia of loss and disintegration causes him to shrink from the intercourse that would leave him diminished like his sexual partner: "cauchemar angoissant et horrible de l'incomplet, de l'inachevé" (629). As Michel points out, Mirbeau cannot help but protest against what he acknowledges is inevitable, "lucidité désespérée, qui n'exclut pas l'engagement" (306). And so the fear of authorial incapacitation motivating his writing is formally embodied by the inchoate and confused structure of Mirbeau's unfinished works. As in *Dans le ciel*, where the text's open-endedness is mirrored by the incompleteness of Lucien's painting and the severing of his hand, "Les Mémoires de mon ami" represents the inability to advance the narrative by the protagonist's anxiety about walking on bare

feet.

Charles L.'s equation of the foot with the penis, with a horror of reproductive inconclusiveness, a helplessness to author something possessed of wholeness and integrity, explains his association of "pieds nus" with "les images [...] effarantes [...] de l'embryon... des analogies avec les larves, les foetus" (629). Paradoxically, it is not woman but the idea of the male member that induces fears of castration and impotence.

As Mirbeau's text expresses concern over the inability to discharge firearms, to expel venom from a pen, the vulnerability of the exposed foot threatens to impair mobility and stop time. In one story, a crowd of wretched Parisian commuters spends hours, days, standing on the sidewalk in the rain, "en attendant l'omnibus." In another of his dreams, Charles L. sees himself in a railway station where trains come and go, passengers get on and leave, and electric clocks stare down disdainfully. "Et je reste, toujours là, les pieds cloués au sol, immobile et nu – pourquoi nu? – devant des foules dont je sens peser sur moi les mille regards ironiques" (623). Metonymized as the unshod foot, L. is an exhibitionist embarrassed by the onlookers to whom he is exposed, an author emasculated by the audience he cannot escape. In his waking life, L. is a solitary figure whose manuscript is not intended for publication. Congress with women, like intercourse with readers, inhibits his ability to write or shoot or move. Thus, the anti-feminist rhetoric that Mirbeau's characters adopt is directly related to their activity as artists.

The hero of "Les Mémoires de mon ami" reconstructs a primal scene in which his matricidal violence is delegated to the father. A paroxysmal explosion of repressed rage directed at his mother, the conjugal sex act the child witnesses effects an oedipal displacement of the father by his son. Awakening one night, disoriented, in his parents' bedroom amidst a cacophony of creaking bed-springs and guttural cries, ("des voix qui ressemblaient à des gémissements et à des râles" [605]), L. projects his incestuous fantasies, his anger at the faithless mother, by appointing his father as a homicidal surrogate, making the warning he calls out an expression of desire: "Papan qui bat maman!... Papan qui tue maman!" (605). Yet the phantasm of nightmarish coitus that kills the mother also reintroduces the threat of mutilation, speechlessness, confinement, paralysis, and déchaussement.

A few pages later, in a recapitulation of the original scene, Charles describes what he characterizes as "la seule aventure dramatique de ma vie" (627), an event he associates with his barren marriage and the death of his mother-in-law. In contrast to the studiously apathetic attitude he cultivates toward his wife, narration of a murder excites pleasure and pride, as he eroticizes the story of violence just as he had banalized the reality of his marriage. Of the horrible sight he prepares to relate in loving detail, he says: "Vous comprendrez [...] que je mette une certaine coquetterie d'émotion, et même quelque orgueil à vous en faire le récit" (627).

As before, L. awakens in the night to the sound of muffled cries, "une voix de femme étouffée" (628), but, this time, the forbidden knowledge is sought out by the witness. Choking on the smell of passion's bloody, seminal foetor, "ignoble odeur d'huile brûlée" (628), he advances in the darkness, incantatorily repeating a phrase used by his mother when she had been obsessed by a need to see and understand: "Je veux en avoir le coeur net, je veux en avoir le coeur net!" (629). In the presence of the assaulted woman ("Papa qui bat maman"), the desire for knowledge combines with a need for cleanness, innocence, absolution – of love washed of the dirt of sex – in order to restore "le coeur net." But as understanding prevents recovery of childish illusions, barring L.'s retreat and confronting him with the reality of the castrated and castrating woman, he projects his horror of the severed male member as "le gros orteil du pied gauche [qui] eut [...] – faut-il l'écrire? – de grimaces, de véritables grimaces, ainsi qu'un visage" (630). From the unconsummated union with his wife to the vicarious murder of the mother, the compulsion to write, an increase in authorial coquetry, and the guilty manifestation of a kind of delectatio narrandi accompany L.'s rejection of sex and his brutalization of women.

Additionally, the desire "d'en avoir le coeur net" brings a discovery of secret things that carries over to Mirbeau's indictment of the whole corrupt apparatus of social hypocrisy, in which mother's are whores, and government leaders and heads of families are torturers and frauds. Disarmed by the spectacle of parental intercourse, L. at first refuses to believe and so stoops to

cover the woman's nakedness, picking up the corpse and returning it to bed. But later when he is imprisoned in the Dépôt, he retroactively experiences relief when realizing that the victim is dead and that the assassin is just, concluding that the rigid, unmoving cadaver is worthless and that the killer, still moving and alive, still in possession of the admirable qualities of "complaisance," "pauvreté," and "gaieté," is an alter ego he embraces: "Il faut être toujours pour ce qui vit," L. professes, "contre ce qui est mort" (654).

Abdication of the paternal role of law-giver, a secret attachment to the adulterous mother provoke L.'s hatred of a system rotten with licentiousness and treachery. On the last page of his manuscript, L. describes pausing in front of a shop window exhibiting a constellation of photographs of scantily dressed women, successful poets, and the judge who had humiliated him before he set him free. Conflation of the femme galante with the magistrate and author conveys L.'s vision of a society whose foundation is sex as commerce, whose mechanism of judicial self-preservation is ruthlessness and expediency, and whose propaganda organ is literature as an apologia for the values no one honors. In itself, the photograph, an iconographic reminder of the piéd nu, immobilizes the subject that it hypostasizes as important, good, and deserving of attention. Fixed and unchanging, it offers an endorsement of political conservatism as it argues against questioning the status quo and in favor of reverence and acceptance. Constructed as a shrine, the display consecrates capitalism as eroticized exchange, picturing the magistrature as priesthood, the literary world as peopled by proselytes and missionaries. But to Charles L. and Mirbeau, motionlessness signifies death, making them bar their door to "ce personnage étrange qui s'appelle Progrès" (654), whose name suggests the protected foot that walks forward toward self-betterment but whose recognized agenda is a perpetuation of the existing state of things.

In a reprise of the image with which Mirbeau's collection opened, Charles writes of his reflections while he stands waiting in the judge's chambers. These little, pink-skulled officials invested with the authority to send their fellow-men to the guillotine, are they really human beings with passions, families, houses, friends? "Sont-ils même vivants?" (656). Or are they puppet mechanisms built to perform a certain task, to execute a series of actions again and again and again? If so, they are like the figures L. had seen "sous les tentes d'un jeu de massacre, des fantoches, gonflés de son ou de crin, qui semblaient vivre, penser, aimer, comprendre [...]" (656).

Unarmed except with words, Mirbeau's narrator becomes an anarchist whose manuscript substitutes for the gun that fires at the judge, that aims to kill the nauseating, fleshy, gratuitous, self-satisfied, inhuman target that invites violence like the passenger on the train. Mirbeau's text must be an authentic weapon, his enemies real people, because there is no pleasure in blowing up simulacra in a pointless literary game: "Tuer du plâtre, ce n'est pas tuer de la vie, c'est même ne rien tuer du tout. Le plâtre ne se tord pas, ne râle pas, on ne peut obtenir de lui quelque chose qui ressemble à une convulsion d'agonie" ("L'école de l'assassinat" 36).

Identification of Mirbeau's ideological vehemence as a rifle, his text as the tir reinforces the idea of destruction and creation as a dialectic. Bits of plaster dust, dead bodies, shattered targets, utterly discredited arguments no longer heat the blood; the book containing an effectively argued position is a corpse that inspires only indifference or disgust. Mirbeau's existential dread is aroused not only by his zombie-adversary, the petit rentier, "quelque chose de mort qui marche, parle, digère, gesticule et pense, selon des mécanismes soigneusement calculés" ("Monsieur Quart" 481), something simulating movement and life but that, in being dead, does not require killing again. Victims of their incuriosity and automatism, they are like Isidore Buche ("La Première émotion"), a man who eats and works but never dreams, never looks up at the Louvre, Notre-Dame, the Panthéon, and whose one attempt at bringing to the surface a piscatory impulse from the river of his unconscious kills him a second time. True writers who have a purpose are unlike those immortalized as a statue or monument; rather, they are like the people decry by the mayor in "Monsieur Quart": "des philosophes et des savants qui troublent la vie des hommes" (482).

Horrrifying when represented as a castrating lamia like Clara in Le Jardin des supplices, the inachevé becomes the preferred form of the later Mirbellian text, the unperfected, uncompleted piece of writing that still requires work, still justifies the author's life. Charles L. does not want to fill the cemetery with gun-shot puppets and convincing theses. Rarely articulating his private

thoughts, leaving unpublished his anonymous memoirs, he refrains from committing suicide in order to turn into literature, but instead, as he says, goes on living “en état permanent de création” (588).

Mirbeau’s writing further attests to a profound distrust for the book on the shelf, the canonical work interred in the private archive. As one of Mirbeau’s many unproductive artists, L. is aware of the uncomfortable status that Elena Real has described: “Intenable position du sujet pour qui l’accomplissement du moi implique sa néantisation” (233). As in *A rebours*, the library becomes an environmental determinant of identity, where books, not opened and read, act as furniture or wallpaper. An envelope whose sides are leather bindings, the room becomes a text containing an occupant deciphered as a compilation of the titles he displays. As books read their owner, the bibliophile is metonymized as his acquisitions, confined by his holdings as an interpretation that equates the collector and collection.

Mirbeau’s predilection for the unfinished thing naturally entails an affinity for the ambiguous work whose meaning is always multiple, never reducible to a single analysis. In “Une Perquisition en 1894,” Mirbeau demonstrates an understanding of a reader-centered hermeneutic that turns literature into a mirror in which the audience sees themselves. Watching his house be ransacked by a police commissioner searching for incriminating documents, the narrator has his Larousse dictionary confiscated because it contains incendiary terms, his copy of *L’Imitation de Jésus-Christ* seized because Christ was a revolutionary. Busts are taken away because they can be hollowed out to hide weapons or contraband; books are impounded because they are made up of words that can mean anything. Subversive ideas, anti-government rhetoric, inflammatory, anarchist pamphlets, short-fused text-bombs become confounded with a literature of paranoia by the commissioner who sees chaos on every page. Scoured by a whirlwind of suspicion, the narrator’s domicile is evacuated of interpretable objects and equivocal images not produced as propaganda supporting the existing regime.

After his library-identity is dismantled, leaving the narrator nameless and homeless, the state-sponsored press reconstructs him as a monosemic text that captures, arraigns, and condemns him, condensing the volumes that were taken away into a simple, critical explanation that defines him against himself: “Les documents trouvés [...] permettent d’affirmer qu’on est enfin sur la voie d’un complot formidable” (290). Unwilling to withhold the pleasure afforded by the *inachevé*, the subjectively gratifying conjugation of event and interpretation, the press refrains from explaining the conspiracy and the police’s failure to apprehend the ringleader: “X... a été laissé en liberté. Qu’attend-on pour s’assurer de sa dangereuse personne? Mystère!” (290).

Mirbeau is therefore in agreement with l’Abbé Jules in recommending the destruction of books and the reestablishment of contact with life. In “Dépopulation,” the carpenter who comes to repair the narrator’s library denounces as senseless a population increase campaign waged by a government hostile to the idea of neo-natal care and infant nutrition. Punishing those who fail to reproduce at the state-recommended rate, the administration takes no steps to protect the health of those already born, already alive. Yet Mirbeau’s story ends, not with an affirmation of working-class common sense, but with a dismissal of the recorded wisdom of canonized authors. Contrasting with the tools with which the carpenter operates on the world are the dead, decorous volumes adorning the shelves of an intellectual like Mirbeau. Remote, inaccessible, irrelevant, the theories found in books are tools that those who need them cannot wield or use. Voltaire, Diderot, Rousseau, the precious dead entombed in their writings, are not reawakened by a reader who can benefit from their ideas. Perusing the titles, the carpenter concludes: “Oui, tout ça, c’est très beau... Mais à quoi ça sert-il?... L’idée dort dans les livres... La vérité et le bonheur n’en sortent jamais” (389).

Disaffection for soporific literature, flight from reading as narcosis reappears in *La 628-E8*, where Mirbeau foresakes the library for the highway, choosing motion over stasis, experience over objects, and space over place. Like the carpenter, he wants only to escape the trap of unopened books and closed rooms, aspires only to drive away from “la bibliothèque où les livres fermés dorment sur leurs rayons” and where his paintings “mettent de la mort sur les murs” (40).

It is Charles L.’s revulsion for bare feet that later manifests itself as Mirbeau’s intoxication with speed, disorientation, and irresponsibility. The paralyzed traveler who cannot board the train

that Mirbeau despised for its linear track and unsurprising itinerary puts on his rubber-soled shoes and propels himself out of the necropolis-museum: “mes semelles, sur les pavés, les trottoirs, rebondissent, devant moi, derrière moi, comme des balles de tennis” (53).

Governed by Freud’s pulsion de mort, every creature, every work of literature is teleologically drawn to a final state of motionlessness, quiescence, and completion. That is why what Mirbeau attacks is not just the finished thing but also the impulse to finish it. Even in the primitive shooting gallery, the targets represented vague fertility symbols, inchoate genitalia, “des pipes et des coques d’oeuf” (“L’école de l’assassinat” 36), organs producing embryos that are born and doomed to die. It is not surprising that Mirbeau’s later novels have been characterized as heralding “la mort du roman,”³ carrying within them the germ of literature’s mortality. What else could Mirbeau’s goal be but to avoid making his fiction into another autobiographical travel diary that functions as an obituary, whose last page is like the lid of a coffin containing the remains of its inspiration? Better that each work be open-ended and shocking, like Jules’ trunk that cracks open, disgorging pornographic images, or his casket, from which issues “un ricanement [...] qui sortait [...] de dessous la terre” (L’Abbé Jules 256). Refraining from looking in his rear-view mirror, the writer is a driver shot from the gun of each new enthusiasm. Seated in the bullet-car that crushes everything in its path, he hurtles down the road of an unmapped plot, scattering exclamation points, dead bodies, smashing judges, women, sentimental poets, Philistines, riddling dummies with the shrapnel of his invective, feeding carrion back into the matrix of moving, living things.

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Notes

¹The growing popularity of the tirs dominicaux is also remarked on by the philosopher in the Frontispice of Le Jardin des supplices, where a discussion among intellectuals touches on the ways that society can afford its members acceptable outlets for “l’émotion délicate et civilisatrice de l’assassinat” (27).

²Michel argues that, in Mirbeau’s opinion, “comme tout idéal, le bonheur est inaccessible et, tel un mirage, s’éloigne chaque fois que l’on croit s’en être rapproché. Face au tragique de notre condition,” he continues, Mirbeau “en arrive – comme l’abbé Jules – à souhaiter l’extinction de la conscience. Ce que les bouddhistes – évoqués avec sympathie dans les Lettres de l’Inde – appellent le Nirvana” (298).

³The term is used by Eléonore Roy-Reverzy in her essay “La 628-E8 ou la mort du roman,” Cahiers Octave Mirbeau 4(1997): 257-266.

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