

Introduction

MIRBEAU AND PROSTITUTION

An unsuspected work

The publication of *L'Amour de la femme vénale*, Octave Mirbeau's pamphlet on prostitution, is bound to cause surprise. It was, until now, completely unknown, its existence unsuspected by the "mirbeaologist" I have been for some twenty-five years. Then, because the French text by Mirbeau – if ever published in a French review – had not been discovered, I was obliged to retranslate a foreign translation back into French, in an exercise one is not required to undertake every day. Finally, this retranslation does not come from English or German, nor from Italian, Spanish or Russian, languages in which many Mirbeau articles or interviews have appeared, but from a language that is rare, even exotic in our eyes: Bulgarian.

It was indeed a Bulgarian historian, Niko Nikov, who, when delivering at Anger's Mirbeau Colloquium a paper on the writer's reception in Bulgaria, first advised me of a 24- page pamphlet that appeared under Mirbeau's signature (without a mention of his first name) in Sofia's National Library. This pamphlet, entitled *Liubovta na prodajnata jena*, was published in 1922 – five years after Mirbeau's death – in Plovdiv, by Spolouka (meaning "godsend" in Bulgarian). But, much to my surprise, that work was completely unknown to me, did not appear in any inventory of Mirbeau's articles, nor was mentioned by any of the specialists of that time. This raises a number of problems.

First: is the work, translated from French, as specified on the front page, really one produced by the writer of *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*? Reading the translation, done at my request by Alexandre-Léon Lévy, convinced me right away that the text was doubtless by Mirbeau. In it we find all the issues dearest to Mirbeau, his cardinal values, his aesthetic principles, and, despite the double translation which multiplies the risk of errors or approximations, we can easily recognise Mirbeau's style, his words, his taste for period (?) and the rhythm of his sentences.

Second: how did this text reach the Plovdiv publisher after Mirbeau's death? Many hypotheses are possible. First, it could be the late translation of a series of articles published at the beginning of the century in a French or a Belgian review. That would not be impossible, and some day we might find the original version, which could then be compared to this retranslation... However, it is unlikely that it could have escaped the attention of the hundreds of literary or historical researchers, who have gone through the press of that time.

We also can imagine this is a Bulgarian translation of a Russian translation of a long article Mirbeau could have sent, around 1908 or 1910, to a Russian intellectual or anarchist review. It seems indeed that half of Mirbeau's works that have been published in Bulgaria were translated, not from French, but from Russian, a language very close to Bulgarian. Moreover, after the resounding success in Russia of *Les Affaires sont les affaires* – six translations were produced at the time – Mirbeau became, in that country, one of the most famous Western intellectuals, and all his works were translated between 1903 and 1908. His tireless denunciation of the Tsar's crimes and his unfailing support of the Russian revolutionaries' cause (on January 30th 1905, he successfully initiated an international writers' and artists' petition to demand the release of Maxim Gorki) – made him one of the few people with whom the *intelligentsia* of the left and the extreme left entered into contact². In those circumstances, it would not be surprising if some review published certain of his articles. Prevented by circumstance from going through Russian newspapers and collections of reviews, I was not able to discover that hypothetical series of texts written directly for (published originally in?) Russia, like(perhaps?) before Zola's contributions to Saint-Petersburg's *Le Messager de l'Europe*. Only ex-Soviet Union researchers could see that inquiry through to completion. It could, of course, be objected that the text is one identified as having been "translated from French". But that point does not exclude the possibility that the translation from French was made from Russian.

There is a third hypothesis: wouldn't a Bulgarian publisher himself have asked the great anarchist polemicist for an analysis of prostitution? According to Niko Nikov's paper, there was a strong French influence in Bulgaria at the beginning of the century. In Bulgaria, a French-speaking and francophile community saw France as a bastion of human rights that counteracted the influence of the German and Russian empires. Highly regarded among the intellectuals of the left, with their anarchist, socialist and "Tolstoist" tendencies, Mirbeau was considered the writer most capable of outmatching Zola's naturalism. The theory is quite possible. However, a difficulty crops up right away: if that hypothesis is correct, why did the text not appear while Mirbeau was still alive? Maybe the succession of bloody wars enveloping Bulgaria from 1913 on, and the subsequent reinforcement of censorship may explain this anomaly. If that hypothesis were valid, we could conclude that Mirbeau's essay appeared very late: at the end of 1912 or the beginning of 1913, at a time when he was increasingly sick and unable to write. This piece could even be his swan song, since *Goha le simple*'s preface, from 1916, was not written by him. There is another plausible explanation: the articles could have been published in a Bulgarian review while Mirbeau was alive, around 1909 or 1910, and could have been put together in a small volume only twelve years later. Only Bulgarian researchers would be able to confirm that hypothesis.

However that may be, we face a third problem: the genre of the book, which is unusual in Mirbeau's work. Of course, since he started at *L'Ordre de Paris* in 1872, he had been fascinated by social issues. But he almost always dealt with them in a lively literary form – in the novel, tale, short story, dialogue, or report – either with the demystifying humour evident in the imaginary interviews he was a specialist in crafting; or in conformity with the strict, compulsory format of the daily chronicle (300 lines). There, the serious issue had to be addressed in an engaging way, with a great many anecdotes about the goings-on in Paris. Only then would it be accepted by editors such as Arthur Meyer, from *Le Gaulois*, and by readers disinclined to serious thinking. In brief, the dissertation was not our polemicist's cup of tea, having retained from his 'hellish' years at the Jesuit school in Vannes³ a deep hatred of anything reminding him of rhetoric. In those circumstances, why would he have chosen, and so late, to deal with the issue of prostitution in a form that he so loathed?

However, even if the essay's form is unusual for Mirbeau, it is not one completely absent from his work. It was used for the first time in 1895, when Ferdinand Brunetière, epitome of the classic and classificatory mind, and editor of the archaic, fusty and (by Mirbeau) much derided *Revue des deux mondes*, decided to everybody's surprise to ask the latter for a forty-page dissertation on the universal exhibitions. Mirbeau bravely set to work, and completed the painful chore, which was published on December 15th 1895, and heralded by Stéphane Mallarmé, who proclaimed his admiration for this amazing feat⁴.

Three other examples suggest that Mirbeau felt comfortable with the form which seemed so poorly suited to his creative genius. First, at the end of 1900, Mirbeau published in *Le Journal* six articles on the issue of depopulation, denouncing pronatalist policy⁵. Then he produced two long articles, also divided in duly numbered parts, that appeared in 1905 in Finot's *Revue*. Here he glorifies Maillol and seeks to destroy once and for all the Institut and the academicists⁶, proving that, when the issue was close to his heart, he chose the form that seemed the most favourable to his ideas. And prostitution, for a long time, had been a most important issue to him.

Mirbeau and prostitution

When he was young, Mirbeau spent many long, painful years in a little village of the Orne, Rémalard. There intellectual emptiness, lack of privacy from snooping neighbors, and the repression of sexual needs had been conducive to neurosis⁷. One of the leitmotifs of his hair-raising *Lettres à Alfred Bansard*⁸ was precisely the impossibility – to which he was condemned by his father – of sowing his wild oats and relieving his too long contained sexual ardour. He even concluded (pleasantly?) that he could have tried (prosecuted?) his father for the "deterioration of his person" (this doesn't translate comfortably into English) since he forced his son to stay in a forsaken provincial hole where, "given the lack of individuals", "the balance necessary" to his "hot-blooded nature" could not be preserved⁹. Once granted an *exeat*, Mirbeau escaped to Paris, the "modern

Babylon”, where “individuals” were not missing, and where, instead of attending to his law studies, he did the rounds of local dancehalls and the tarts’ (prostitutes?) furnished rooms.

In Paris, Mirbeau discovered the draconian laws that regulated prostitution, on every level of the social scale. There he was seduced by a beautiful young woman with a name from Tasso, Herminie, whose “Leonardo da Vinci face”, “blonde hair”, “pink lips” and voice “to conserve” (not idiomatic – to conserve what? I don’t follow here) raised him into the heavens, before returning him to prosaic reality: “But 50 francs is expensive, it is very expensive...”¹⁰ When he was eager for “seraphic” love, he found that a woman’s smile and the beauty of her body had a value that fluctuated according to the (horrible) law of supply and demand.

Not long afterwards, Mirbeau met the pretty Popo, who revealed to him a destiny worthy of Arsène Houssaye’s novels. Seduced and abandoned by a “clerk”, she ended up in the streets, was about to commit suicide, when she was saved *in extremis* by “some moustaches”, whereupon she found her road to Damascus: “Since then she knocks about, she knocks about on roses path. (roses path? a path of roses? a rosy path?),” but only on the surface, because, as the young Octave added prudently: “Watch the thorns!”¹¹ When he returned to Paris in 1872, as the private secretary of Dugué de la Fauconnerie, if refer to his confidences to Edmond de Goncourt – unconfirmed, it is true (this phrase is unclear; do you mean “according to the unconfirmed reports he made in confidence to Edmond de Goncourt), – he kept on consorting with his lady friends. The Parisian tarts held no more mystery for him, and he was well aware of the problems of prostitution.

So, when in March 1977, the publication of *La Fille Élisa* plunged the Tartuffes of Mac Mahon’s moral order into turmoil, Mirbeau seized the opportunity to call his readers’ attention to the “despair” they passed by every day without seeing it. Indifferent to the protests of the imperialist party, he expressed unambiguously in the Bonapartist *L’Ordre* his admiration for a novelist courageous enough to “look Medusa in the face” and willing to carry out a “revolution that is going to be a good one”... When it came to prostitution, the truth was, “awkward”, “vile” and “repulsive”; but, as Mirbeau says, “we have no right to ignore the misery, the shame, the crime, the sorrow of the people”, for we can progress “towards a better state” only through “the attentive and continuous study of social realities”. Burying one’s head in the sand was the worst solution. And prostitution was “at the same time the most appalling misery, the most horrifying shame, the most atrocious crime, the most intense sorrow”¹². According to Mirbeau, it was essential to “display (lay out?) this issue on the dissecting table” and to show “its vices, its shames, its miseries and its crimes”, in order finally to “make society look at itself and loathe itself”¹³, without the usual “sentimentalism” or the usual allegations of “pornography”. Defining the writer’s mission, which he was to embrace from then on, Mirbeau strived to “constrain the willfully blind to see” and worked at contributing to “the continuous effort (to move) towards a better state.” Mirbeau expressed his indignation at the hypocrisy of the “podgy gentlemen who had a wife onto the street and a mistress onto the yard (not idiomatic)”, and who passed by the prostitute “with disgust, as if we had a right, in social matters, to have disgust and loathing”¹⁴.

Mirbeau’s revolt against the iniquitous social order and his compassion for the victims of prostitution would last all his life. These feelings were even more powerful since he was aware of sharing the “miseries” and “shames” of those involved. During that period, Mirbeau did indeed lead the life of a “proletarian of letters”¹⁵, being forced to hire out his mind and pen like the prostitute who sells her charms. He composed for successive employers political editorials, speeches, private letters, in which he was required to blindly serve their interests and promote their ideas without having the right “to live for his own”. In *Un Gentilhomme*, an important novel which was unfortunately left unfinished, Mirbeau expressed the bitterness and disgust caused by this slavery, which, to him, was even worse than domestic service, since it required one to “renounce his personality and his conscience” and agree to “the complete abnegation of the self in the most essential things of one’s inner life”¹⁶.

This parallel between two forms of prostitution, the one of the body and the one of the mind, (which is characteristic of the anarchists, - what is characteristic of anarchists? I don’t follow here) is pointedly developed in an episode of *Un Gentilhomme*, in which we see the narrator, an unemployed intellectual, forced by hunger to accept the propositions of a “generous female

procurer” and to put himself at the disposal of a debauched and respectable old gentlemen”¹⁷. Unable, at the last minute, to perform his job, he resigned himself to a function that better suited his talents, but that disgusted him all the same: being a private secretary. Manual and intellectual proletarians, street and Parisian press prostitutes, all were miserable creatures who faced the struggle for life in a Darwinian society. They had no other choice than to sell to the highest bidder whatever in them had trade value, delivering themselves to any willing buyer on the slave market. Mirbeau would not cease from that time on to denounce the abominations of a mercenary society, where everything was bought and sold: titles, decorations and works of art, intelligence, talent and conscience¹⁸.

From those years of political and journalistic prostitution, in which the naturally rebellious Mirbeau was reduced to serving reactionaries (Bonapartists, then legitimists), he retained a memory of the humiliations he had to expiate at the highest level, by starting very “tolstoyically”(there’s got to be another word. Maybe omit?) his “redemption” from 1884-1885 on¹⁹. But by then he was better placed to understand what his sisters in misery had to endure, and therefore showed “a great pity and a great love for the poor whores who lurked in the friendly darkness”²⁰.

Should we then be surprised if the two women who followed one the other in Mirbeau’s life and in his heart were courtesans? The first one, Judith Vimmer, who inspired *Le Calvaire*’s Juliette Roux, belonged to the classical type of the featherbrained tart, superficial, unconsciously cruel, given to an often childish thoughtlessness and reckless profligacy. To afford an expensive lifestyle, Mirbeau was condemned to work a lot, notably as a ghost-writer²¹, and started in the meantime a small-time speculator carrier (what is a speculator carrier? A career as a speculator?), serving the interests of Edmond Joubert, Paribas’ vice-president. But, after the Union Générale crashed at the end of January 1888, there ceased to be masses of gold, and Mirbeau soon was very much indebted. The chronic infidelities of his girlfriend, always looking for men and money, ended by making their liaison impossible: hadn’t he smashed the skull of Judith’s dog in a fit of jealousy? In *Le Calvaire*, his double Jean Mintié takes revenge on the animal in order to avoid giving in to the temptation to strangle his mistress... Frightened by the monster that lay dormant inside of him, Octave retreated to the wilds of Brittany, to Audierne, where he regained his strength and calm from his contact with redemptive nature²².

But when he turned to Paris seven months later, determined to redeem himself under the influence of Tolstoy, an author he had just discovered, it was only to fall into the clutches of Alice Regnault²³, who dragged him in a “nasty business”, in which he had nothing to gain, but much to lose, the Gyp affair²⁴! But instead of weakening their relationship, this cruel misadventure, which caused them to have the police on their heels and to live in a continuous anguish for two years, only contributed to bringing them closer. So much so that he ended by marrying Alice secretly, on May 25th 1887 in Westminster’s registry office, which at the same time alienated him for good from the hypocritical and homicidal “good society” he loathed and would not cease to unmask with vengeful jubilation.

Alice Regnault was much different from her lady colleagues. Thrifty rather than extravagant, Alice had wisely invested in the property business the huge incomes she had earned from her Parisian successes at a time – the 1870’s – when she was one of the young République’s darlings, together with Valtesse de la Bigne and Blanche d’Antigny. In 1881, she put an end to her courtesan carrier (? – career as a courtesan). Like her new lover, she started her “redemption,” hoping to restore her image (or reputation) with the pen (she worked for *Le Gaulois*, where she frequented Octave, and wrote two novels) and with the brush (like Sarah Bernhardt and Blanche Pierson, she exhibited in the Salon, and Mirbeau introduced her to Impressionism). In brief, she offered, superficially, a perfect example of rehabilitation. She was, however, still unfavorably regarded by “good-thinking people” – for instance, Julia Daudet always refused to receive her – yet society’s hypocritical dislike for Alice did not cease to disgust our Don Quixote, always in quest of the absolute. To that is added the fact that, when Alice was not even twenty-five years old, her son – born from a first marriage – was taken away from her because of her dissolute life; this son died far away from her twenty-five years later. We can understand even better Octave’s disgust for all the “honest bastards” whom he would from now on work to “cat-lick (? Cat-lick? Not a phrase that

makes sense to me) with vitriol”, according to the strong phrase of Élémer Bourges²⁵.

It is obvious that this union, partly forged by circumstance, was based on a misunderstanding. Whereas, for Octave, redemption implied commitment to work in the interest of Justice, Truth and Beauty²⁶, for Alice, it meant achieving the middle-class respectability Mirbeau tried desperately to unmask. The gap between them grew deeper, until, during a long and painful crisis that reached its highest level in 1894, he was tempted by suicide or madness as a way out from this conjugal hell, which inspired him in his writing of *Vieux ménages* and *Mémoires pour un avocat*²⁷, both merciless indictments of his wife. Twenty-five years later, the gulf between the husband and wife was evident to all. After the death of the great pacifist, Mirbeau’s widow, the only administrator of his posthumous glory, sought to complete her rehabilitation by having the renegade Gustave Hervé concoct a document entitled “Octave Mirbeau’s Political Legacy”, a nauseating patriotic forgery that has helped to blur the image of the antimilitarist and anarchist lampoonist²⁸.

For these reasons, one may think that perhaps, beyond the circumstantial reasons, beyond the will to expiate, even beyond the Tolstoian (spelling?) desire (announcing *Resurrection*) to contribute to the sinner’s redemption, there were, in the relationship that started in autumn 1884, unsuspected motives on which *L’Amour de la femme vénale* might shed new light. When, in chapter V, Mirbeau brings up the wonder of spiritual love in the prostitute’s mind, a woman willing to do anything she can to give happiness to the man she loves, it is tempting to say he probably felt that type of fascination, at least at the beginning of his affair with the beautiful Alice. For a man forever traumatised by rape²⁹, and who, despite his progressivism, still saw sex as a “filth”, a promiscuous woman claiming to look for redemption could favourably spiritualise their affair. It is more likely that, given Octave’s strong “sexual nature,” he didn’t fail to be frustrated by his companion’s lack of passion. Despite his discretion, a letter to Camille Pissarro³⁰ and most of all the *Mémoires pour un avocat*³¹ shed light on this sexual frustration, by which, according to analyses done on *L’Abbé Jules*, we could explain the erotic fantasies that appear throughout Mirbeau’s work and that come to a head with *Le Jardin des supplices*...

A subversive analysis

In all his literary and journalistic work, the independent and libertarian Octave Mirbeau undertook to open the eyes of his contemporaries and to enflame the conscience of the “naive souls”, those who had not yet been completely desensitized by social and cultural conditioning. Taking part in the same “revolution of the look” as Monet and Rodin, “the great gods of [his] heart”, Mirbeau developed a true aesthetic of revelation, in order to expose beings and things, middle-class values and institutions, as they are, and not as we have been conditioned to see them. This was necessary for the simple reason that between our eye and reality are interposed many distorting and blinding lenses: the “layers of corrosive prejudice” accumulated by what we call “education.”³²

And, for the one who undertook to demystify the mighty, the prostitute – like the maid, Celestine – was of incomparable interest to Mirbeau. Being aware, through her professional experience, of the hidden side the middle-class, discovering the brute who lay dormant in every man, even the most elegantly dressed and best-mannered ones, she could not be fooled by their high-flown words, by their professions of “morality” and “virtue” with which they disguised their hypocrisy. By her simple existence, by her objective assessment of those who claimed to be “honest people”, she removed the mask that concealed their villainy, thereby revealing their true nature. Their speech and behaviour then appeared in their true colours: they were “mere posturings”, to borrow a phrase from Pascal.

This is why prostitutes, his sisters in misery, were helpful in the great battle Mirbeau had undertaken against the “giants” who appropriated the world to themselves. Without knowing it, prostitutes themselves were potential “anarchists”! It was therefore important to begin their rehabilitation and to undermine the prejudices that clouded so many people’s judgment, even those who should have been sympathetic (anarchists, socialists, trade unionists, left-wing intellectuals, and the first feminists). This was obviously the primary aim of Mirbeau’s pamphlet.

Mirbeau, therefore, set out to represent and defend the poor prostitute, depicting her as worthy of our compassion, our gratitude and our admiration for her courage, her innocence and her paradoxical spirituality. In this, he followed Tolstoy, and also Dostoevsky, with whom he had much in common.³³ In his work, Mirbeau performed a scathing analysis of middle-class society, whose “morality” was only a monstrous and homicidal hypocrisy. It was “the power of money” (the title used in the Russian translation of Mirbeau’s immortal comedy *Les Affaires sont les affaires*) that governed society, that converted women into merchandise, and that discarded anything without trade value. The venal woman only took into account the body – not as it was made by nature to perpetuate mankind, but as man’s desire had redefined it, so that supply was adjusted to demand...

And yet, paradoxically, society decreed that the prostitute’s body, which it subjected to slavery and whose “production” it supervised, should be regarded as despicable and should disappear from the sight of “honest people”. Society benefited from the shameless exploitation it pretended to condemn in the name of “moral” principles. Another contradiction: whereas matrimonial “dealing” seemed “moral” to upstanding citizens, the business of the street-walker shocked their sensibility, demonstrating that there was a rule for one and a different rule for the other...

Mirbeau, therefore, had no trouble discrediting the arguments of “the champions of prudery” and the self-proclaimed philanthropists whose disgraceful acts he had never ceased to denounce³⁴. But he harbored no illusions, for he knew that the prejudices on the subject of prostitutes were deep-rooted, as is revealed in the final pessimistic lines of his text. He nonetheless imagined a more optimistic future, a future of which he painted a surprisingly modern picture in his text. There he shows how prostitutes will inevitably benefit from women’s struggle for emancipation, how they will be recognised as workers themselves, having the same rights, guarantees, and social and moral advantages as those enjoyed in other professions. In 1994, we had not yet reached that point, but we are progressing in that direction, and the prostitutes’ movement, in France and elsewhere, continues to make this claim.

L’Amour de la femme vénale is a fascinating text also because of its deep and subtle analysis of the war between the sexes, a conflict exemplified in the relationship between the prostitute and her client. Mirbeau’s approach is an original one. First of all, he abstains from over-simplification, and, while rehabilitating the prostitute, he does not strive to idealise her or to propose her as an example. In the same way, if he succeeds in explaining the affection that the “whore” feels for her “ponce” (not a familiar word in American English!), he refrains from downplaying the villainy of her client, that “human hyena”.

Moreover, while analysing social determinism (what social determinism? I don’t follow here), and the image that the prostitute and customer have of each other, Mirbeau also considers objective factors, economical and social ones, as well as subjective ones, like the individual imagination.

Finally, Mirbeau rejects simplistic conceptions of human nature, and, in the name of clarity and intelligibility, emphasises the complexities, mysteries, and contradictions that tear apart men and women. Following his discovery of Dostoyevsky and *The Idiot* in 1887, Mirbeau came to understand that man is tormented by qualms (?) of conscience, that he can be at the same time good and bad, honest and pervert (perverted, perverse?), generous and cruel, sincere and deceitful, lucid and (self-deluding?)³⁵. Instead of satisfying himself with ready-made ideas and reassuring prejudices, Mirbeau allows us to see ourselves as the “changeable and diverse” beings, whose nuanced richness may nonetheless be disconcerting.

At the end of this brief presentation, we are more than ever convinced that, despite difficulties posed by of the double translation of Mirbeau’s text, this incisive and subtle work – where Mirbeau’s anarchism harmonises with the inspiration of the great Russians, will supply for many readers a stimulating and enriching experience. This is why we take the risk of publishing the text of a great French writer translated from Bulgarian...

Pierre MICHEL
(translated by Bérangère de Grandpré)

- 2 On the relationship between “Mirbeau and Russia”, see our paper in the proceedings of the colloquium *Voix d’ouest en Europe, souffles d’Europe en ouest*, Presses de l’Université d’Angers, 1993, pp. 461-479.
- 3 On that “hell”, see chapter II of the biography *Octave Mirbeau, l’imprécateur au cœur fidèle*, by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, Librairie Séguier, 1990. Mirbeau’s experiences at the Jesuit school are related in fictionalised form in his autobiographical novel *Sébastien Roch* (1890).
- 4 Article collected in Mirbeau’s *Combats esthétiques*, Éditions Séguier, 1993, volume II, pp. 107-159.
- 5 Two of those articles are collected in *Combats pour l’enfant*, Ivan Davy, Vauchrétien, 1990, pp. 195-206.
- 6 Articles collected in *Combats esthétiques*, volume II, pp. 374-416.
- 7 See “La Névrose au village”, in *Chroniques du Diable*, to be published by Belles Lettres. Also see my paper on “Octave Mirbeau de Rémalard”, in the proceedings of the colloquium *Octave Mirbeau* of Saint-Michel priory in Crouettes, Éd. Du Demi-Cercle, 1994, pp. 19-34.
- 8 Published through my own efforts by Éditions du Limon, Montpellier, 1989.
- 9 *Lettres à Alfred Bansart des Bois*, loc. cit., p. 68.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 97-98.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 124.
- 12 *L’Ordre de Paris*, “La Fille Élisa”, March 25th 1877 (collected in *Cahiers Goncourt*, n°2, 1994).
- 13 *L’Ordre de Paris*, “La Fille Élisa”, March 29th 1877 (*ibid.*).
- 14 *Ibid.*, March 25th 1877.
- 15 On that entire period, see chapters V to VIII of our biography of Mirbeau, *op. cit.* This Mirbeau phrase “proletarian of letters”, “prolétaire de lettres” in French, appears in *Les Grimaces* of December 15th 1883.
- 16 *Un Gentilhomme*, Flammarion, 1920, p. 32.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 55.
- 18 The most powerful denunciation is found in *Les Affaires sont les affaires* in 1903 (a comedy collected in Mirbeau’s *Théâtre*, Eurédit, 2003). But many articles from the *Grimaces*, in 1883, and a great many of artistic, literary and theatre chronicles are dedicated to condemning the villainy of a triumphant mercantile system.
- 19 On that “redemption”, see chapters IX to XII of our biography (*op. cit.*).
- 20 *Combats pour l’enfant*, loc. cit., p. 106.
- 21 For years, Mirbeau happened to work as a ghost-writer for many employers. He wrote *Lettres de l’Inde* (Éd. de l’Échoppe, Caen, 1991), novels (notably *L’Écuyère* and *La Belle Madame Le Vassart*), and short stories (among which *Noces pariennes*, *Amours cocasses*). See our paper “Quand Mirbeau faisait ‘le nègre’”, in the proceedings of the Crouettes colloquium on Mirbeau, loc. cit., pp. 81-101.
- 22 On that trip, see chapter VIII of Mirbeau’s biography, *op. cit.*
- 23 On Alice, see Pierre Michel’s monograph, *Alice Regnault, épouse Mirbeau, À l’Écart*, 1993.
- 24 See Pierre Michel’s article, “Octave Mirbeau et l’affaire Gyp”, in *Littératures*, Toulouse, n° 26, spring 1992, pp. 209-220.
- 25 In an unreleased letter Élémer Bourges sent to Mirbeau – probably from June 1901 and dealing with *Vieux ménages* (Hayoit collection).
- 26 Besides his *Combats esthétiques* and his *Combats pour l’enfant*, loc. cit., see his *Combats politiques*, Séguier, 1990, his articles on the Dreyfus affair, in *L’Affaire Dreyfus*, Séguier, 1991, and his *Combats littéraires*, Séguier, 1995.
- 27 *Vieux Ménages* is a one act play, created (performed?) in December 1894, and collected in Mirbeau’s *Théâtre* (loc.cit.). *Mémoires pour un avocat* was published in *Le Journal* in autumn 1894 and has been collected in *Contes cruels*, Séguier, 1990, volume II, pp. 80-112.
- 28 On that “patriotic forgery”, see chapter XXIV of our biography, loc. cit., and *Combats politiques*, loc. cit., pp. 265-273.
- 29 He was most likely raped by his study master in Vannes college, the Jesuit Stanislas Du Lac, who would become the confessor of the high État-Major and would be the damned soul of the anti-Dreyfuses during the Dreyfus affair. In *Sébastien Roch*, Du Lac is named de Kern.
- 30 In a letter of January 1893, about a beautiful Italian woman, he writes he has “neither the age nor the taste for those illusions” (*Correspondance avec Camille Pissarro*, Éd. Du Lérot, Tusson, 1990, p. 136).
- 31 See *Contes cruels*, volume II, pp. 111-112. The narrator tries without success to arouse his mistress’ desire, who sees sex as “filth”: “I have given up to make that lifeless body quiver, whose marble insensitivity will never be warmed by any heat.”
- 32 Those phrases are from *Dans le ciel*, L’Échoppe, Caen, 1989, p. 60. On his criticism of education both within the family and at school, see our edition of *Combats pour l’enfant*, loc. cit.
- 33 Most of all, we have to notice the very precise influence of one of Dostoyevsky’s novels, published in 1864 and translated in French by Bienstock in 1909, *Notes from Underground*. The notes identify these points of convergence, truly noted by Alexandre-Léon Lévy.
- 34 See in particular *Le Foyer*, a comedy which denounces the business activities of charities and false philanthropy (collected in his *Théâtre*, loc. cit.). Also see text 12 in *Combats pour l’enfant*.

3⁵ On that conception of mankind, inherited from the Russian novelists, see his letter to Tolstoy, *Lettre à Léon Tolstoï*, of April 1903 (Éditions À l'Écart, Reims, 1991).