

CHILDREN OF THE WIND :

OCTAVE MIRBEAU AND THE DREAM OF ORIGINALITY

In an era noted for producing literature on incest, masturbation, and impotence,¹ it is not surprising that the principle of generative energy should have often been assigned to art. As the library/museum became the preferred Decadent topos, authors fond of flaunting their deviancy tended to write fiction that resembled them, books that, as Barbara Spackman says, “flaunt their intertextuality” (34). Cut off from the people he despised, the self-sequestering Decadent aesthete identified himself as the product of literature, claiming his issue as a book uninspired by experience and lacking effect on the world of social reality. Witnessing the collapse of binary oppositions that defined originality against plagiarism, influence against inspiration, object against representation, the Decadents developed an aesthetic that fostered sameness, cultivated infertility, and equated writing with childbearing. As the provenance of each Decadent work became increasingly uncertain and remote, its progeny appeared more anemic, etiolated, devitalized, starved for infusions of fresh blood that came only from intercourse with the real. Associated with the barrenness of the dead book, Decadent creation was shaped by an impulse to replace sex with art, coitus with authorship of texts that reproduced nothing but themselves.

Perhaps more than any of his contemporaries, the temperamentally impassioned Octave Mirbeau professed disgust for the kind of sterilizing Decadent literature that divorced itself from life. Sickened by the glut of cultural waste, Mirbeau wrote books that both denounced and exacerbated the congested state of a literary world over-filled with works that offered reflections on themselves. Composed in an often impenetrable style, choked with neologisms, recondite allusions, esoteric ideas, the Decadent novel was its author’s pampered, pedigreed orchid-daughter, a fragile creature protected from degrading inspection by the public and safeguarded against “les salissantes curiosités des foules” (Huysmans, Là-bas II, 109). Refusing congress with their audience, Decadent writers defined the relationship with their work as a closed, unnatural, illicit one, as Huysmans’ Durtal announces his discovery of the sin of Pygmalionism, in which “le père viole sa fille d’âme” (Là-bas II, 35), and so is able to enjoy the textual child produced and possessed by him alone.

For Mirbeau, returning to a state of healthy creativity required abandonment or eradication of an endogamous literary world in which cultural artifacts bred facsimile versions of themselves. Prevalent Decadent notions of racial exhaustion, of society’s suffocation beneath the weight of its accumulated artistic production haunted Mirbeau and motivated fantasies of the reinvigorating detergency of revolutionary violence.

Mirbeau’s early autobiographical fictions (Le Calvaire, 1886; L’Abbé Jules, 1888; Sébastien Roch, 1890) pictured a world of unspoiled, vegetal innocence in which adolescent boys

saw their innocence perverted by the deleterious influence of army, Church, and school. But as his ideas matured, Mirbeau began to situate his narratives in an over-ripe society whose members had already lost their procreative powers, where heterosexual health had given way to the sadism and erotomania of Clara in Le Jardin des supplices (1899) and the drooling pathology of the boot-fetishist, Monsieur Rabour, in Le Journal d'une femme de chambre (1900). Analphabetically vigorous children, like Sébastien Roch, once undifferentiated from the clear brooks and flexible saplings in the midst of which they grew, gave way to the fallow, stooped, and rachitic Louis-Pilate Tarabustin in "En traitement" (1897), "avorton déformé et pourri de scrofules," "dernier spécimen d'humanité tératologique" (Contes cruels II, 538).

While describing the inexorable movement toward racial doom, Mirbeau often indulges in a tonic celebration of the inhuman. While La 628-E8 (1907) traces the ballistic journey of an exuberant motorist racing across Europe, crushing livestock beneath his tires, Dingo (1913) offers a panegyric to the marauding wild dog that ignores his master's lessons in French radical socialism, jumps the fence, and takes to the countryside, where he empties forests of partridges and rips out the throats of sheep. Mirbeau's longing for the "apparition spontanée, évolutionnaire et inéluctable d'une société harmonique dans l'avenir" (Carr 66) is offset by a cynical encomium to atavism that allows him to equate progress with running over children with his automobile and define nature as the ravening carnivoracity of the Australian bush dog and the torture-loving woman.

Pessimistic about humanity's future, disappointed with the efficacy of his own craft, disillusioned with the nostalgic view of nature that he had come to realize was itself an ideological construct, Mirbeau not only emulated his Decadent peers in picturing a society sick from sophistication but also wrote works that defined themselves as symptoms of the cultural morbidity he diagnosed. Discussing a few of the stories recently collected by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet under the title Contes cruels, this essay argues that Mirbeau identifies the sole viable function of art as a condemnation of art. Published at various times over the course of Mirbeau's career as a journalist, these tales reintroduce the Decadents' conflation of baby and book. In them, Mirbeau describes the impasse reached by the fin-de-siècle writer who is forced to define the survival potential of his work in terms of its contraceptive/infanticidal property, as literature thrives when life withers, and the birth of the text depends on the death of a child.

In "Solitude" (1889), Mirbeau begins by linking the senescence of a culture with the richness of its artistic production, suggesting that the intertextual legacy of any new work renders it old from the outset. So saturated is society with propaganda extolling interdependence and literacy that a desire for the solitude that reactivates memory and brings self-awareness can only inspire guilt born of indulging forbidden regressive fantasies. Socialized man is already an institutionally authored work oblivious to its message, so when Mirbeau's character Lucien returns to his childhood home,

he cannot recognize the place he had imagined in terms of conventional pastoral imagery. Nonplused by the discovery that “ses souvenirs d’enfance” are different from “les sujets de narration française, que ses professeurs, au collège, lui donnaient à traiter” (I, 188), he finds his house is an unfamiliar place filled with uncomfortable chairs, threatened with an invasion by owls. Like des Esseintes, he feels a sense of estrangement from the disturbing faces seen in the ancestral portrait gallery, wild, illiterate men, “fantômes des rustres lourds” with their “mâchoires de bêtes” (I, 186). An impression of genealogical continuity, the ability to mirror the self in images of one’s forebears, is not a function of heredity but of reading, as Mirbeau observes.

Alone in his drafty salon with its cold walls and wind-rattled windows, Lucien spends his days alone with his boredom. Without the reassuring ambiance supplied by newspapers and novels, he begins to treat his body as a Decadent text that discloses its pathology. Examining his saliva and stool for signs of the disease of self-knowledge, his scatomatic readings orient him toward the stuff of the body rather than the products of the mind. Removed from the influence of journalists and professors, “il eut des éveils de conscience, des lueurs farouches de réflexion” (I, 189). Morbid isolation generates thought, altruism, creativity, Lucien realizes, “signes indéniables de sa déchéance morale, de sa dégradation intellectuelle” (190). Since reality is a second-order version of its popular description, civilized man rarely experiences a tree or a field, gravitating instead to “la nature virgilienne” (188). Shunning the raw materiality of wood and soil, he consumes “une poésie de romance qu’il trouvait très belle” (188). Different from culture, which is advanced, mature, and late, nature is crude and remote. And so when Lucien is seized by the urge to do good and help others, he is shocked by his atavism: “Je redeviens primordial! se disait-il avec épouvante... Je redeviens préhistorique” (189).

Experiences of alienation like those plaguing the asylum inmate in “Un fou” (1895), a man who projects his identity as a blue butterfly that flies beyond his reach, who signs over his capacity to think to a tailor in exchange for a suit, shows the self to be an unstable construct collaboratively authored by creditors, critics, psychiatrists, policemen — power-wielders who generate epistemologies that disallow eccentricity and independence. In both stories, the protagonist internalizes society’s normalizing judgment of artistic inspiration as transient psychosis controllable only by institutionalization or by the voluntary resumption of interpersonal behaviors that cure individualism and foster assimilation.

In Le Jardin des supplices, Mirbeau links women to instinct and violence, but in his contes he shows that the Church and government sanction marriage in a way that provides a safe outlet for prehistoric impulses. As warfare legitimizes murder, connubiality tames lust, containing libidinal overflows in the reservoir of matrimony, so that citizens, not troubled by strains of heavenly music or by intuitions of the sublime, can couple and sleep. Fearing ostracism from respectable salons,

Lucien resolves to return to the world and look for a wife. Going to bed while outside the storm of natural appetites howls at his door, Lucien hears only a soothing epithalamium: “il rêva à des choses nuptiales et régulières” (I, 191). Mirbeau shows that society’s progress toward stability is crowned by coital routine. The fruits of marriage are not children but literature extolling pronatalism, fictional endorsements of fertility that increase in number as population decreases.

Together with “Solitude,” “La Puissances des lumières” (1888) makes up a complementary pair. Whereas in the former, the protagonist turns to childhood memories, forsaking literature and people in favor of a regimen of lonely, bookless celibacy, the latter begins in the aftermath of a wedding as the narrator relates the cultural formation of his wife.

The blithe complacency with which Mirbeau’s character describes the foundation of his marital satisfaction (“Le secret de notre bonheur,” he confides, “il est uniquement dans l’éducation littéraire de ma femme” [I, 135]) underscores the insipidity of the authors Mirbeau despised and rehabilitates those whose reputedly insalubrious books threatened to soil the white page of a spouse’s mind. While Lucien’s withdrawal from society had effected his disassembly as a cultural construct, the pubescent girl is portrayed as a vessel filled with edifying fictions that discourage infidelity and female sexual initiative.

During his courtship of Claire, the narrator inculcates in his fiancée an appreciation of virginity in a romance set against a backdrop of “fleurs silvestres et [...] jeunes mousses aimées des rosées matinales” (I, 137). Perfumed vaginal calyxes, the patriarchal tumescence of the “chêne séculaire” convey a timeless innocence to pastoral descriptions of the joys of copulation which, when experienced by the newly-weds, are hidden behind a chaste “voile spiritualiste” that paraleptically calls attention to the sex that is concealed.

Following the act of consummation marked by a hiatus in the narrative, the husband continues describing his wife’s program of sexual and literary development, one which he notes is modified to accommodate “un libéralisme nouveau que comportait la nouvelle situation de Claire” (I, 139). Replacing the clergyman as moral advisor are the two hundred literary critics regularly consulted by the narrator, unimpeachable models of sound judgment who guide the couple away from “les ignominies du Théâtre Libre” and toward plays that glorify civic and spousal virtue.

Reversing the cultural trajectory that had taken Lucien out of the world, plunging him into a jungle of anti-social animality, the social assimilation of the narrator and Claire deadens their senses, elevates them out of the body, and gives them wings carrying them up “jusqu’à Dieu” (I, 140). Yet while she is nourished by paeans to domesticity, Clara’s marriage is barren, and she conceives nothing. Awakening one night in the midst of a storm like the one that had raged during Lucien’s dream of nuptial things, Claire calls out to her spouse that she hears a baby crying. Carrying man’s seed and an infant’s voice, the wind is inseminating nature depositing the fruit that

it bears. Repressing even the hysterical pregnancy caused by the husband's censorship of the traumatic dépucelage, Claire gives birth to Mirbeau's story of a baby, a foundling left on the doorstep by an evil fairy princess. But rather than infant flesh delivered by the mother, it is only the word of the father that is born, a hypothetical child given the name Frédéric by the narrator who entitles the text that he and his wife never write. Glorious patronymy, divine intelligence, "la puissance des lumières," the nominative authority of the male transforming matter into language make literature the man's baby, as Mirbeau's narrative substitutes for the fruit of his characters' childless union. Sex as inevitable misfortune and baseness is the matrix from which issues literature born of shame, so that, for Mirbeau's hero, "la souffrance née de la passion malheureuse l'a fait accoucher de son talent" (Saulquin 192).

Intuiting the critical notion that naming kills the object, Mirbeau writes of things eclipsed and destroyed by their designations. Already anathema, "le crapaud" in Mirbeau's tale by the same name (1885) is changed from an animal into a signifier of opprobrium and horror. No longer defined by its beneficial destruction of slugs, snails, caterpillars, and insects, the toad is not an agent but the object of the censorious language of those who find it disgusting. With its pustular yellowness, the warty, viscous, batrachian offensiveness of its skin, its oblique, awkward movements, its association with malarial swamps, the toad's ugliness provokes abuse that crushes it like the stones thrown by passers-by. But, unlike Dingo, where Mirbeau's narrator resisted the anthropomorphism that hid the creature behind its symbolism, "Le Crapaud" shows the toad-lover personifying the animal he recreates in his image, imputing to it a soul, the capacity to communicate and think. Opposing the lowliness of the beast to the self-aggrandizement of man, the narrator judges the judges of the toad, reading it as the moral of a fable on human pride, understanding the animal's humbleness as the complement of his own perspicacity and tolerance.

Having avoided implying an onomastic equivalence between breed and exemplar, having named his dingo Dingo, Mirbeau's narrator personalizes his relationship with the toad, addressing it as Michel, domesticating it with a diet of currants, grubs, and flies. "Mirbeau [qui] va refuser les conventions de la taxonomie comme celles de la description" (Dufief 283) shows his narrator giving the toad a name, defining it in such a way that it is neither word nor being, a creature that is neither free nor enslaved, neither benign nor accursed. The nauseating semiotic slipperiness of the toad elicits the revulsion displayed by the scientist in Mirbeau's story who strives to petrify ambiguity as knowledge, freezing the toad that he reawakens when he thaws it. As with Rabelais' paroles gelées that solidify noise as something to be handled, classification desiccates and immobilizes the slimy object, expanding a small thing into three volumes in quarto published on the scholar's cryogenic research.

As Dingo also shows, pets engaged with their masters in imaginary dialogs, animals that are

caressed, over-fed, understood, conditioned to respond to commands and bribes, schooled in language, change into sluggish embodiments of their owners' narcissism and warm-heartedness, becoming sick and still, lusterless and dry, like words on a page. Having been experimentally frozen as its name, the toad is at first "impatient et frémissant comme un chien qui sent approcher son maître" (I, 84), then becomes wrinkled, flaccid, dull-eyed, before finally returning to a state of amorphous putrefaction, "[un] corps en bouillie" (I, 85) pierced by a hazel twig as if impaled on the writer's pen. Like the baby born of the wind, the fetal amphibian swimming in the amniotic water of a puddle shrivels and disappears when it is turned into a word.

Artistic creation is a mortuary science that discards the "enfant mort" that it uses up. Mirbeau's story bearing that title (1887) describes an aesthetics of necrophilia that pathologizes the normal mourning response, whereby a grieving subject tries to recover the lost object as its image. Opening with a picture of the celebrated painter Eruez contemplating the beautiful corpse of his son, Mirbeau's text presents itself as a tableau whose subject is art as murder. Even as his sorrow overwhelms him, Mirbeau's character arranges the body as the subject of a new canvas, a study in white, haloing the boy's head with a diadem of flowers, strewing the bed with roses and lilacs. A self-incriminating jeremiad, Eruez's complaint identifies art as the cause of the death of his son and wife, loved ones whose life was drawn away to resuscitate his painting. As the pain of loss supplies inspiration to immortalize the object, the artist kills what he values in order to stir the emotions that sustain his creativity.

In a masochistic economy of productive suffering, the self-induced exaltation of bereavement turns the artist's perfunctory work ("métier odieux et vain," "plate chimère" [I, 114]) into a distillation of imperishable beauty, exchanging the banality of transitory mourning for the "poèmes éternels" (I, 114) of inspirational images. "Mon petit Georges! c'est moi qui t'ai tué!" Eruez cries out (I, 115), recalling other Decadent aesthetes aroused by the delicate translucency of tubercular children's skin, violets and blues, the subtle palette of decomposition, flowers of wilting flesh preserved as the incorruptibility of their representation.² Child murder begets a masterpiece of which its author can be proud: "La beauté de ça, hein?... Non, mais l'étrange de ça?... La finesse, la délicatesse de ça!" (I, 115). Killed by the artist's self-absorption, Eruez's victims are replaced by his paintings of them, as his studio becomes the chambre mortuaire, the family portrait gallery, and the salon d'exposition. The artist thus renews himself by siring texts and pictures that he puts to death again and again, reinvigorating the lineage he traces back to himself, patriarchal stock from which spring the lovely, ephemeral likenesses, the frail descendants whose short lives adorn him.

In a misoneist society that abhors originality, Mirbeau dreams of the new book, the immaculate child untainted by influence. Without heredity or history, it would sunder the patrilineal chain shackling it to the dead, interrupting the genealogical transmission of energy as inspiration,

blood as ink, disturbances as their explanation, Eros as culture, the storm as a stillborn baby. Like the narrator in Marcel Schwob's Le Livre de Monelle (1895), a literate man also disillusioned with erudition, Mirbeau's characters aspire to learn ignorance, practice spontaneity, cultivate a capacity for surprise.³ Everything made or born, freighted with genetic ballast, burdened by a designer's plan, indebted to benefactors for its derivative existence is denied the prerogative to sign itself as a work of art. Forswearing Huysmans' idea of an author's incestuous coupling with his work, Mirbeau rejects traditional plots that engender every page as the narrative progeny of preceding ones, creating each episode to be free, uncircumscribed by the demands of logic, structure, and continuity imposed by parent chapters. Drawn to found stories and abandoned children, Mirbeau resists the temptation to aestheticize.

In "Tatou" (1896), Mirbeau again illustrates the artist's impulse to freeze the toad, vivisect an anomalous life form that is murdered by scientific love. Mirbeau's story opens by replacing the mother with the placeuse, "paquet de chair croulante, et sourire baveux de proxénète" (I, 208), as the intimacy of childbearing is succeeded by the impersonal promiscuity of job assignment. Rather than employing the child-for-hire in pedophilic sex chores or "des rudes travaux de basse-cour" (I, 208), the narrator installs the girl in his home as a collectible or pet, a fetish object whose incompleteness is remedied by his artistic appraisal. Ignorant of her birthplace, oblivious of her past, Tatou is a "bibelot précieux," a "petit chien" (I, 208) esteemed for her deficiencies.

Rather than disputing the employer/father's right to name, Tatou's exotic soubriquet obscures her origin and the narrator's destination, as the musicality of the phoneme extends an invitation au voyage: "nom étrange et lointain, nom qui sentait la paillette, le bananier et le pamplemousse, et dont elle ne savait d'où il lui venait, ni qui le lui avait donné" (I, 208-9). Compounding the baneful effects of religion, school, and family, Tatou's upbringing in a prison-hospice had robbed her of her spirit, stifling it in a vitiated atmosphere of flagstones, tiny coffins, and rote prayers exhaled from the dried flowers of nuns' bloodless lips. Despite being raped by old men and beaten by shrews, Tatou remains clean and empty, a vessel unstained by semen, bruises, turpitude, or rage: "Rien ne mordait sur le cristal de son âme" (I, 210).

But as Mirbeau's stories demonstrate, there is no precedence accorded to unpainted canvases or nameless beings. Children and objects already exist as themselves before being stripped of their meaning and refashioned as works bearing the signature of their creator. A bird wasting away in the cage of her master's analytical solicitude, Tatou is treasured as an exotic knickknack and so resembles the imaginary infant born of reading, the toad robbed of vitality by being turned into a monograph. Translated into narrative, Tatou is exiled from experience. Homesick for the innocence of the object's unself-consciousness, she longs for the whiteness of insignificance. Describing her illness as a process of discoloration, the narrator watches as Tatou is bled of the vibrant yellow of

grapefruit, bananas, and sunshine, fading into the monochromatic blankness of the still unwritten page.

Having been imprinted by his Naturalist forbears, Mirbeau himself acknowledges that birth is an inscription, body writing etched with the letters of heredity, ink, like Tatou's name, that is cut into the flesh. Like Schwob's Monelle, who seeks repatriation in the indescribable white kingdom, Tatou turns toward her beginning, a place of candor, milk, silence, and sleep.⁴ And when, in a spasm, she dies and changes back into her name, the necrological account of her passage on the earth attests to its superfluity. Unable to rewrite an old text, the narrator admits to the defaulting of his imagination, entitling Tatou's story with the name he had not chosen.

Barred from origins, the artist is denied originality. The elusive meaning of Tatou's name, the mystery written on her skin is the surface of a palimpsest scratched clean of secondary texts. It is the girl before she is violated, paper before the pen touches it, white canvas uncovered by color or design. Different from Mirbeau's story, Tatou is delicate and impermanent; before she become a title, she escapes her body, becoming fresh, mobile, uncapturable, audible only for a moment as "une voix [...] pure comme le souffle de la brise dans une nuit d'été sur une fleur" (I, 211)

One might think that children delivered by the wind, exhaled as a breath's caress are the fruit of creative love that is freed of matter and the laws of its degradation. Unsullied by culture's black language, Tatou can only return to the place from which she had set out. Yet Mirbeau's stories suggest that babies and books are always spurious beginnings. Mirbeau's derision targets those for whom self-reproduction as a son or an art work is meant to ensure continuity, telescoping an infirm past into a present stripped of its novelty. Unable to purge itself of the residue of intertextual or hereditary influence, no work can be said to possess the purity of originality. Since it cannot unburden itself of history, art at best achieves an illusion of difference, adopting mechanisms for disavowing parentage, forgetting ancestry, avoiding retrospection.

Equating crate, cradle, coffin, and classification, Mirbeau describes how Dingo arrives in a box accompanied by a letter from his sender, Sir Edward Herpet. Reduced to a set of taxonomically immobilizing adverbs that explain him "[p]hysiologiquement, histologiquement, ostéologiquement, paléontologiquement, historiquement" (Dingo 13), Dingo manages to defy training and master disobedience as his rampages define his essence as mayhem and motion. Mirbeau admires the dog for the same reason he loves his automobile: for its inhumanity and recklessness. Once creativity is objectified as something to be held, perused, shelved, and catalogued, it is penned inside bindings and walls of consensual interpretation, growing weak, listless, like a cified dog, a toad with a name, a car in the garage. Rather than duplicating themselves as their progeny, Mirbeau's heroes aspire to occupy the energizing atmosphere of "l'espace mouvant" (La 628-E8 182), to live, as one says, "en état permanent de création" ("Les Mémoires de mon ami" [1899], Contes cruels II, 588).

Since it is impossible to go back and expunge the past, Mirbeau is always departing, and as the propeller starts to spin and churn the water, as the ignition sparks and the road unspools, the engine of the text roars into motion, expelling no exhaust of poisonous language, delighting the writer who realizes “que le vent coupe, en marche, les mots toujours si inutiles” (La 628-E8 162). Take away the chassis, the musculature, the sleek engineering of the car and the dog, and they become the wind. Powerful, uncontrollable, they are like the experiences they afford, “*remuant, grouillant, passant, changeant, vertigineux, illimité, infini...*” (La 628-E8 40).

Novels formerly boxed in by a need for closure give way to jubilant, episodic narratives that begin and end arbitrarily, interrupting an itinerary that continues after its description is finished. Chronicling fugue states marked by disorientation and transience, Mirbeau’s later works move off in all directions at once. Rootless, ubiquitous, resisting the impulse to stop and convey meaning, they display “cette tendance à l’inachèvement [qui] signifie[...] le refus d’une réalité une et stable et exprime[...] au-delà cette dispersion du moi dans les choses” (Roy-Reverzy 263). As the writer is diminished when he is contained in a child or concentrated in his name, his completed work is always a truncated thing, segmenting the creative journey whose destination is everywhere. As Lucien realizes in Mirbeau’s unfinished novel Dans le ciel, when the artist’s work is done, he has no recourse but to cut off his hand.

Self-contradiction, tempestuousness, vehemence, inconsistency, volatility, fire, zeal: the epithets housing Mirbeau also have doors that set him free, so that each work becomes a palinode in which he retracts what he said before.⁵ Billowing through Mirbeau’s fiction, the gales of outrage scouring out the dross of self-satisfaction make books written as monuments to the author, children sired to carry on the father’s name into debris left by the wind that the wind blows away. Once it is stigmatized as surplus, congestion, excrement, the finished work is fuel burned to create more works, an object feeding the fire of creativity that annihilates. The erstwhile anti-Semite who became a partisan of Dreyfus, the woman-hater and anti-militarist who lived in a state of constant ideological exaltation seethed with anger he directed at the causes he once espoused. Old beliefs, calcified personas all are obstacles standing in the way of the blast of the storm.

With the penning of the incipit, Mirbeau’s story incorporates the germ of its corruption. Having once filled her lungs with the stale air of human iniquity, Tatou already begins evaporating into the colorlessness of her last breath, exhaling her soul in the word that Mirbeau writes: “mimologisme de l’expiration complète” (Bachelard 273). Unable to eradicate existing evil or demolish the institutions that perpetuated it, Mirbeau rages against his powerlessness to start again. With his frustration kindled by confinement in a society blind to injustice, a culture drowning in the excess of its artistic waste, he strives to free himself of the clutter of his own works whose abundance prevents him from adopting new ways of thinking. Mirbeau dreams of harnessing

destructive energy in a way that will carry off museum curators, academic novelists, apologists for the status quo, becoming a slaughter machine like the automobile that smashes the products of creation and plows them off the roadway. While its death may be air expelled, a soul breathed out at the end of a story, no one knows the birthplace of the wind. Shrieking, restless, clean, immaterial, it is impatience to move on, fury given voice. In the wind, as Bachelard writes, “tout s’anime, rien ne s’arrête. Le mouvement crée l’être, l’air tourbillonnant crée les étoiles, le cri donne des images, le cri donne la parole, la pensée. Par la colère, le monde est créé comme une provocation. La colère fonde l’être dynamique. La colère est l’acte commençant” (258).

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Notes

¹See Catulle Mendès, Zo’har (1886); Paul Bonnetain, Charlot s’amuse (1888); J.-K. Huysmans, A rebours (1884).

²Most conspicuous among the necrophilic artists featured in Decadent fiction is Claudius Ethal in Jean Lorrain’s Monsieur de Phocas (1901), a painter whose favorite subjects are consumptive adolescent boys and cancerous women.

³“Ne t’étonne de rien par la comparaison du souvenir,” Monelle advises; “étonne-toi de tout par la nouveauté de l’ignorance.

Etonne-toi de toute chose; car toute chose est différente dans la vie semblable dans la mort.

Bâti dans les différences; détruit dans les similitudes” (19).

⁴“Voici,” Monelle says in addressing Schwob’s narrator, “et tu verras le royaume, mais je ne sais si tu y entreras. Car je suis difficile à comprendre, sauf pour ceux qui ne comprennent pas; et je suis difficile à saisir, sauf pour ceux qui ne saisissent plus; et je suis difficile à reconnaître, sauf pour ceux qui n’ont point de souvenir. En vérité, voici que tu m’as, et tu ne m’as plus” (86).

⁵As Mirbeau writes in a November, 15, 1898 article in L’Aurore, “j’ai donné, je l’avoue, le plus déplorable exemple d’inconsistance qui se puisse voir,” adding “c’est aussi la seule certitude par quoi je sente réellement que je suis resté d’accord avec moi-même” (cited in Combats politiques, ed. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet [Paris: Séguier, 1990] 203, 204).

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