

Octave Mirbeau's Cinerarium-novel : *L'Abbé Jules*

Despite his outbursts of paroxysmic rage, his violent displays of carnality and cruelty, Octave Mirbeau's hero L'Abbé Jules in many ways resembles his creator. Temperamentally volatile, given to sudden ideological about-faces, both author and character succeed in ridding themselves of the hobgoblin of self-consistency. Fixated on the horror and glory of human physicality, both are obsessed with exploring the taboo subjects of death and sex. Both insist on debunking institutional myths designed to camouflage man's animality and biological transience. With truculent derision, both denounce the futility of what J. S. Piven refers to as "human apotropaion" (231), cultural constructs that deny the ineluctability of man's mortality and reject "anything that threatens the human sense of narcissistic importance" (231).

For the most part, the message of Mirbeau's novel is a negative one, aimed at exposing the imposture perpetuated by doctors, judges, educators, and priests, dismantling the symbolic systems that culture creates in order to "provide their constituents with an account of the origin of the universe, a prescription for acceptable conduct in the context of socially delegated roles, and an explanation of what happens to people when they die that offers hope of immortality" (Solomon et al. 460). Yet the question remains whether, after unmasking the deceptions perpetrated by religion, law, and medicine, Mirbeau's text designates literature as a repository of meaning.

In conversations with his pupil and acolyte, Albert Dervelle, Jules cites fears of death as the source of his hostility to myths of metaphysical consolation and poetic euphemizations of humans beings' animal lust. "Dieu," says Jules, "ce n'est qu'une forme de la débauche d'amour" (485). Despite being raised in the numbingly uneventful town of Viantais, Dervelle suspects that no place is truly a refuge from accident and upheaval. Before Jules returns, Viantais is a sleepy village regulated by unalterable routine, structured by ancient familial and neighborhood discord, governed by religious and legal ritual that diverts attention from the fragility of flesh and the unpredictability of death. Albert's memories are of a depressing life of gray continuity where nothing interferes with traditional games of bog. Regular visits by family friends, the sharing of common complaints and mean-spirited gossip create an impression of life protected by boredom.

Yet, while Jules is a bomb that blows up fragile constructs built of denial, anxiety, and habit, Mirbeau shows that, in Viantais, the institutions intended to guard against disruption are already weakened from within. Symbolic systems disconnected from the meanings they are entrusted with communicating, medicine and religion are illusory safeguards subverted by a perversion of the language that articulates their goals. Albert's father, Dr. Dervelle, terrifies his son with references to the warm, liquid intimacy of gestation and birth, with descriptions of swelling, leaking, secreting female bodies to which he opposes the glittering cleanness of his obstetric idiom – precise, hard, sharp words like the surgical instruments he polishes before his family.

Jules himself is like a disease or a crime that mobilizes the defenses of Viantais's citizens. Previously divided by petty quarrels, the town's inhabitants unite in their condemnation of Jules. With his disdain for empty courtesies, his loathing of hypocrisy, Jules – godless priest and book-hating educator – rallies the townsfolk because he "undermines the strength of the death-denying psychological apparatus" on which they have come to depend (Solomon et al. 462). The same necrophobia that torments Jules inspires the inhabitants of Viantais to invest in institutions that deny the ephemerality and cheapness of life. Disrespecting ceremony and challenging authority, Jules upsets tradition and overturns hierarchy and so subverts the religion he purports to profess. As a cultural iconoclast, he tears down defenses that guard against fears of loss and indignity.

When Mirbeau finally shows Jules disembarking at the Coulanges train station, the renegade priest has already assumed the superhuman status of the malevolent beings thought to rain down cataclysms on primitive societies. Like thunderstorms and wild animals whose deprivations motivate the invention of gods who keep chaos at bay, Jules is a force of disorder, violence, and lawlessness that human communities are formed to combat.

Mirbeau's use of Albert Dervelle as his narrator allows Jules to be presented as the product of a child's pre-rational consciousness. In the magical world of a being whose mind is unstructured

by reason and prejudice, whose anxieties are unmitigated by liturgy and law, death and disaster loom in the form of a bogeyman, a flesh-eating gargoyle fashioned by folklore and nightmare. Abbé Jules, as Albert imagines him, is an agent of liberating horror. As he contemplates the demonic clown he projects, Albert feels himself shivering with “[une] peur attractive.” He imagines Jules resembling the sideshow freaks he had seen in a traveling carnival. “N’allais-je pas être, tout à coup, en présence d’un personnage prodigieux, incompréhensible, doué de facultés diaboliques, plus hallucinant mille fois que ce paillasse à perruque rouge, qui avalait des sabres et de l’étoupe enflammée, plus dangereux que ce nègre, mangeur d’enfants, qui montrait ses dents blanches dans un rire d’ogre affamé?” (336). In Albert’s production of colorful imagery, Mirbeau shows that fears of death and defenselessness not only motivate the establishment of stifling institutions but also inspire the creation of art.

In Mirbeau’s story, the true killer of childhood is not the mythical monster, but the stultifying influence of unloving parents and uninspiring teachers, with their coldness, silence, and indifference. The religion that should uplift is reduced to a dinner table booster seat, “cette exécration Vie des Saints,” Albert says, “qui me servait de siège” (332). However terrifying Jules appears in family legend, he enlarges a world shrunk by neglect and hopelessness. With his trickster’s supernatural cunning, he expands a universe in which he is capable of anything, bursting the confines of a dreary environment until “soudain [il] emplissait le ciel, plus massif [...] qu’une montagne” (336).

Since he is exposed to his father’s recitations of bloody operations, Albert’s imagination is subject to incisions, pierced by lancets, probed by forceps: “mes si beaux rêves d’oiseaux bleus et de fées merveilleuses se transformaient en un cauchemar chirurgical, où le pus ruisselait” (328). Women idealized as sensual constructs made of flowers, silk, lace, and caresses become, in the father’s professional idiom, a synecdochic collection of diseased organs and shameful body parts: cancers, tumors, placentas, and uteruses. Instead of being filled with fairies born of daydream, Albert’s mind is crammed with information on “les facultés puerpérales des bassins de toutes les femmes de Viantais” (328). In the Dervelle household, the surgical kit that the father uses to operate on mothers and babies supplies the weapons he wields to murder his son’s soul.

In Mr. Dervelle’s use of gynecological terminology, Mirbeau indicates how medicine’s institutional goals are undermined by abuses of technical language, as the science that heals becomes a vocabulary that injures. Enemy of parents and pedagogues, Mirbeau shows that Dr. Dervelle’s medical professionalism is also what disqualifies him from acting as a father.

Corresponding to the sanguinary exactitude of Dr. Dervelle’s description of surgical procedures is the limping obscurity of Judge Robin’s unintelligible pronouncements. Dependent on the clarity of its formulation, on the impartiality of its administration, the law is inseparable from its formal expression. Steeped in the minutiae of the *Code civil*, able to cite from memory the most recondite clauses, Judge Robin undercuts his “réputation de juriconsulte phénomène” (340) by issuing rulings in a gibberish that bewilders all hearers. Involuntarily transposing consonants – B’s for D’s and P’s for T’s – Robin reconverts the language of law into a mystifying ideolect whose tortuous constructions call attention to words and divert attention from meanings.

Litigants – like readers of Mirbeau’s novel – are immobilized by the character’s speech pathology, mesmerized by a glossolalia which, in their effort to translate it, serves to distance them from the substance of Robin’s utterances. Ordinarily arrayed in its ceremonial formality, legal language, as Judge Robin speaks it, is degraded to the level of an infant’s nonsense phonation, or associated with the argot of colloquial obscenity: “Quoi qu’m’chantez là, mossieu l’juge?” as one linguistically challenged appellant asks, “... C’est-y des saloperies?” (341).

Tellingly, Mirbeau’s narrator notes that none of Viantais’s defendants or plaintiffs is troubled by the obscurity of Robin’s pronouncements. Accustomed to bribing magistrates with baskets of food, inured to the opaqueness of legal discourse, citizens accept the ethical and linguistic perversion of an institution respected for its supposed fairness and clarity.

Like Mirbeau, Jules is a detractor of systems of meaning invalidated by people’s selfish hypocrisy. Like Mirbeau, Jules impugns religion and law as they are practiced by judges and priests, “deux monstruosités morales” (420). Jules questions the philosophical premises of death-denying

institutions designed to block awareness of life's incoherence, established to hide man's impermanence and weakness. Mr. Robin therefore becomes an embodiment and instrument of what Jules calls "on ne sait quelle irr elle justice," whose futility is demonstrated by "la loi  ternelle du Meurtre" (420).

Rude, intemperate, ugly, Jules, in his physical person and social demeanor, is a constant affront to the idea of decency. With his crude language and shocking behavior, he flouts rules of civility and violates codes of etiquette. Euphemistic notions of man's emotional complexity and spiritual grandeur are swept away by Jules, who tears down defenses that block recognition of people as "sentient pieces of breathing, defecating, menstruating, fornicating, expectorating, ejaculating meat" (Solomon et al. 459).

In creating the character of Jules, Mirbeau sketches out the dilemma of the anarchist, who, as an advocate of statelessness and personal liberty, describes a transitional position between the abolition of government and the founding of utopia. When adhering to the principle of individual responsibility, when exercising his role as the destroyer of myths, Jules demonstrates the anarchist's ruthless dispassion, exposing the fictions of romantic love, egalitarianism, justice, compassion, and fraternalism – lies that culture tells to keep the disadvantaged in thrall. Yet in professing a faith he admits is chimerical, Jules shows his ambivalence about idealizing theories that proclaim man's ability to progress toward enlightenment. Jules's Catholicism is essentially a masochistic expression of guilty disgust, a penitential system of self-directed violence meant to absolve him of the sin of being alive in a body.

In the initial sermon he delivers to the people of Viantais, Jules displays the same self-punishing sexual rage with which he masturbates in a locked room with his pornography collection. For Jules, commission of a sin is the same as its confession, as both provide a fleeting, self-incipulating release, a discharge of poison that affords a moment of respite. The disease of religion supplies both an etiology and cure, causing the repression it diagnoses and articulating precepts that offer momentarily relief. A slave to the God who condemns and forgives, Jules is a slave to the sex drive he sees as natural and horrifying. Victim of the mystifications he perpetrates on himself, Jules professes a faith that is alternately hypocritical and sincere. Longing for substance to underpin the empty language of literature, law, and liturgy, he dismisses these institutions and their hollow formulations.

As medicine denies that it loses its battle against sickness and death, religion and law are institutions that issue from a mourning disorder that represses life's disorder and brevity. As Freud comments in "Mourning and Melancholia," feelings of bereavement accompany, not only the death of a loved one, but also "the loss of some

abstraction" (125). As a symbolic system of rewards and sanctions, of restitution and retribution, religion emerges as a maladaptive denial of existential absurdity and pointlessness.

In the case of religion, as Piven remarks, the "loss of an abstraction can be mourned and even induce melancholia because it is soteriological" (232). It is significant that, for Jules, redemption of religion is predicated on redeeming religion's formulaic language. An act of verbal self-flagellation, Jules's confession from the pulpit is experienced by congregants as an act of homilectic aggression. Mendacity, hard-heartedness, concupiscence: each sin that Jules acknowledges is a word and a wound, a self-martyring reenactment of the Passion of Christ, an attack on the narcissistically healthy body of the faithful. Mirbeau's narrator describes the effect of Jules's self-accusation as a retrogressive movement toward man's primitive awareness of his physical frailty and fear of extinction. In his confession, Jules uses the language of religion to discredit the illusory consolations that religion is meant to provide.

Much of the indignation that Mirbeau communicates through Jules targets the incommensurability of an ideology and its expression. Judge Robin's phonological impairment makes justice the victim of his abuse of legal language. The pastoral message of the bishop who relies on Jules for counsel is a paradigm of the text that strives for perfect insignificance. Abhorring controversy, the bishop seeks to craft a flawlessly bland and empty allocution, a compilation of Scriptural commonplaces so trite that "les phrases qu'il allait  crire,  quivalussent   des pages blanches" (403).

Pouring over the draft of his mandate, the bishop excises all meaningful references, suppresses any formulation “qui pût être considérée comme une opinion” (359). Unlike Jules, whose speech is an assault – inflammatory, provocative, insulting – the bishop’s text aspires to euphonious vapidity.

In Mirbeau’s novel, medical, legal, and religious messages are couched in language that robs them of their communicative efficacy. Rather than being a maieutic agent fostering creative thought, Dr. Dervelle’s obstetric jargon stunts his son’s imagination. Judge Robin’s fractured articulation turns legal language into noise. What the bishop fears is what Mirbeau desires: development of an idiom that is confrontational, abrasive, stimulating, and thought-provoking. Words that rouse listeners from their existential slumber are combative words like those that the bishop finds terrifying: “phrases [...] casquées de fer, hérissées d’armes terribles, rangées en bataille” (360).

Jules’s campaign is against a religion that doles out narcotizing nostrums, that – rather than matching the terror of death with an evocation of the transcendent – puts the faithful to sleep with mild words and soothing messages. As the vicar delivers his encomium to the bishop, Jules erupts in a volcanic diatribe, spewing invective, castigating his brothers for accepting sinecures that relieve them of the need to do real work tending livestock and cleaning stables. Fulfilling the bishop’s deepest fears, Jules’s vitriolic speech shows how language can be used as an instrument of truth.

While Mirbeau’s negative message stresses verbal inflation, the formulaic speciousness and ritual monotony of utterances that mask the fear of death, he also shows that awareness of mortality may inspire creative work. Illusion production not only enslaves those who exchange freedom for security but also engenders great art that rejects biology and denies transience.

A breathtaking digression fracturing Mirbeau’s narrative, the story of Père Pamphile is perhaps the centerpiece of Mirbeau’s novel. A long meditation on delusional aesthetics, the tale of Père Pamphile acts, in Pierre Michel’s words, as “[une] composition en abyme [qui] tourne [...] complètement le dos à la linéarité habituelle aux récits” (1191, note 126). By interrupting conventional narrative flow, Mirbeau’s interpolation of the story of Pamphile destroys the illusion of fictive teleology, dispelling the belief that life can be rescued from its desultoriness by literature, which invests it with direction, structure, meaning, and closure. As Edward Jayne observes, books are like medicine and religion, in acting as ordering systems that protect against fears of chaos and mortality. “To [the] extent fiction provides temporary denial of the reader’s personal circumstances and capabilities, he engrosses himself in those works which afford this denial through their successful manipulation of experience” (135).

In the novel, Pamphile’s dream of rebuilding the chapel on the site of the ruins of the Abbey de Réno is immediately preceded by the account of Jules’s project to assemble a library. Replacing stones with books in the construction of his temple, Jules fantasizes about acquiring an enormous collection, raising a vertiginous tower of book-lined shelves interlinked by rolling ladders and infinite staircases, completing the project of incorporating the chaos of external reality into an edifice made of literature. The inevitability of loss and death, the unpredictability of experience can be mitigated when life is housed within the structures and boundaries of art. Jules and Pamphile seek to minimize the threat of disorder by using literature as architecture and architecture as literature, organizing space so that it contains and explains. In Mirbeau, the greater the horror is of life’s amorphousness, the more all-encompassing is the edifice housing it.

Built centuries ago, the Abbey de Réno had expanded beyond its original confines, as its outside walls receded until they merged with the horizon: “D’abord resserrée dans un étroit pourpris, composé de jardins potagers, d’un petit bois, de quelques prairies, l’abbaye étendit peu à peu ses possessions, englobant champs et forêts, étangs et villages, tout le pays, à perte de vue, autour d’elle” (384). Founded by Jean de Matha and Félix de Valois, the Order of the Trinitarians had originally been established to deliver Christians held in bondage by infidels. After the monks had been scattered and the chapel demolished during the Revolution of 1789, the Trinitarians, who returned to their sanctuary, had found their mission had become obsolete, and that ransoming the faithful from “corsaires barbaresques” had ceased to be necessary. Deprived of their purpose, unable to adapt, the brothers had finally dispersed for good, leaving the abandoned abbey in the hands of Pamphile as the solitary caretaker.

Mirbeau's story of Pamphile's life restages on the microcosmic level of the conventual grounds the drama of primitive man stranded in a wilderness of vegetal luxuriance, an Eden untended by any divine gardener. Crazed by the unfocused energies of his mystical fervor, Pamphile illustrates the fact that the illusion of utility is an indispensable component in an individual's self-esteem. Dedication to what is perceived as constructive work conjures away man's anxious awareness of the world's movement toward entropy and silence. Pamphile's zeal in rebuilding the chapel and reestablishing the Order shows the true purpose of all social institutions. As doctors depend on disease, and as judges require crime without which their work would be superfluous, so religion is instituted to sanction the sins whose commission is needed for religion to exist.

More honest than his brethren, Pamphile privileges religious art over the belief system that ostensibly inspires it. Since the Abbey de Réno must be rebuilt and the monks who lived there must be gathered together, the Trinitarians' institutional mission must also survive. God, health, and justice are imaginary referents that the language of culture insists must be genuine. Since doxology creates a divinity to praise – since statutes are written to prove that equity exists – resurrecting the Abbey should bring back the monks and revalidate their duty to liberate Christian hostages. Mirbeau uses Pamphile to show that institutions, denying their goal of self-perpetuation, instead claim that they are originally grounded in nature. Citing “l'histoire miraculeuse de son ordre,” Pamphile sees reassembling the monks as an essential part of his narrative: “il croyait que les captifs étaient un nécessaire et permanent produit de la nature, et qu'il y a des captifs comme il y a des arbres, du blé, des oiseaux” (386).

Having returned to an unorganized state of pure nature, Pamphile is abandoned in a place with no buildings, no co-religionists, and no rituals. Mirroring the dread of death as absence is the absent abbey whose reconstruction is a dream rather than an actual project. A prototypical utopianist like Mirbeau himself, Pamphile evolves a plan that is all the more magnificent for being unrealizable. Resplendent in its soaring granite spires, its polychromatic marble flooring, the rainbow fire of its sun-ignited stained glass windows, the Abbey de Réno is the perfect world that can be no more than an idea.

Already in *Le Calvaire*, Jean Mintié had established a correlation between the monument and the uncompleted art work to which the monument pays tribute. In Mirbeau's character's fantasmatic aesthetic, creativity is ennobled by its unproductiveness. Thus, the profundity of novels or the beauty of paintings is proven by the fact that they are too glorious to finish. In Mirbeau's conception of utopia, the sublimity of the artist's vision is confirmed by his inability to realize or embody it. Genius is failure, the masterpiece is nothing, since its perfection is uncompromised by being expressed.

As he had with Jean Mintié, Mirbeau associates Pamphile's greatness with his abjection, his threadbare clothes, his obsequious cunning being used in the service of an impossible goal. Cheating, wheedling, scheming, stooping to the most demeaning ruses, Pamphile displays an unscrupulousness that evidences his nobility. Mirbeau's narrator prescribes the reaction expected of readers not scandalized by Pamphile's servility: “les âmes clairvoyantes auraient pu y deviner un héroïsme supérieur” (390).

Like the anarchist's agenda, which restores individual liberty by discrediting the institutions which inhibit and shackle him, Pamphile begins with the removal of obstacles. Ultimately, for Mirbeau, creative energy is best utilized when it is directed at a program of hygienic destruction.

In *L'Abbé Jules*, Mirbeau outlines his aesthetic of creative annihilation, the beauty of obliterating what is fossilized and stifling. Lust, genius – life affirming passions – are most cleanly communicated through a wild dog's slaughter of chickens and sheep (*Dingo*), or through a racing automobile's flattening of “la faune de la rout.” (*La 628-E8*). Each artist's antecedents have already littered the countryside with bodies, and, in the interest of creative health, these dead artifacts must be cleared away. But the only genuine art work is the production of new hecatombs. So as Pamphile prepares the ground for the chapel's foundation, he turns his workplace into a battlefield strewn with mutilated trees: “troncs en l'air, râlant, appuyés sur leurs branches écrasées, comme sur des moignons” (388). Pamphile's construction of a temple entails the felling of forests, so when contemplating “le spectacle de cette destruction,” he pantingly repeats: “Je la bâtirai!” (388).

An ascetic expression of the art of self-divestiture, Pamphile's life aims at a demolition of ego, follows a humbling regimen of creative nihilism. With his patchwork greatcoat and dirty beard, Pamphile travels the globe, turning the mortification of homelessness into the glory of omnipresence. Picking coins with his teeth from the buttocks of atheists, he escapes moral, spatial, and occupational definition. After Jules is rebuffed in his effort to bully Pamphile into giving him money he plans to spend on his library, he later returns to find the anchorite dead, his remains intermingled with the rubble littering the work site. Scattered in the graveyard of his unfulfilled dream, Pamphile's flyblown cadaver is debris mixed with debris. Black blood, yellow pus, the green liquefaction of rotting muscle tissue, Pamphile is the filaments whose corruption nourishes the forest, regrowing the pine and chestnut trees he had cut down before. Set on soil manured by the decaying flesh of the worker, the ruined Abbey de Réno becomes the original "jardin des supplices." Watered by the sweat of exertion, fed on the substance of martyrdom, it is a bed that welcomes the vacant shell of a man tortured by obsession.

Jules's angry observations about the vanity of human and divine justice, their futility exposed by the "eternal law of Murder," is itself the profession of a situational philosophy. Jules's paean to instinct, spontaneity, and unrepression is revealed as another explanatory narrative, no more valid, no more cogent than Christianity or positivism. Hiding their faces from their inevitable death, Mirbeau's characters author fictions that convey outrage or bring solace. However, Mirbeau's works show that the more disinterested the undertaking, the less homicidal is the campaign to turn a dream into reality. As the architectural body of the brothers who built it, the Abbey dilapidates amidst the rotting shards of its last occupant. The bloody ideal against which Jules fulminates is a pretext for erecting sanctuaries, producing art works, writing novels, fashioning artifacts that outlive their creators for a while before returning to the generative matrix of the cemetery. Jules may assert: "La nature, ce n'est pas de rêver... c'est de vivre" (420), but when confronted with the world's irrationality and violence – when forced to contemplate the prospect of death – men can do nothing but embody dreams that, in time, come to nothing.

As with compilations of legal statutes, medical dictionaries, liturgical calendars, the more fully articulated a death-denying institution, the more harmful its effects on the people it regulates. When it is unharnessed to ideology, art is an innocuous expression of the illusions, dreams, and obsessions that govern an artist's short life. Even purer and more innocent is the unvoiced ideal, the fantasy uncompromised by an attempt to give it form. Because Pamphile's conception of the Trinitarian chapel is never realized, there is no new body requiring disposal. Unlike the cumbersome ruins of the Abbey de Réno, Pamphile's idealized chapel leaves behind no cadaver. It alone can truly rise into the heavens, filling the universe with a sanctuary that offers protection and peace. Nonexistent, it creates ubiquity from absence. "Le ciel était sa voûte," Mirbeau writes of Pamphile's dream edifice, "les montagnes ses autels, les forêts ses colonnes, l'Océan ses baptisères, le soleil son ostensor, et le vent ses orgues" (394).

In the aesthetic economy that Mirbeau elaborates, institutions are not only established to deny incoherence. Rather, unreason and violence are cultivated in order to justify the operation of institutions.¹ This is why Dr. Dervelle's descriptions of surgeries have the effect of disillusioning his son. This is also why Judge Robin's mispronounced words obscure the clarity of the law he is charged with upholding. For this reason, the Trinitarian Order requires the existence of captives whom they then can deliver from bondage. Likewise, the brotherhood's diaspora demands that Pamphile rebuild the chapel and reassemble the monks, just as Mirbeau requires injustice and oppression against which he can direct his anarchist's outrage. From this perspective, evil, isolation, and suffering are imaginary preconditions for the operation of the artist's imagination, and therefore belong to the nothingness inspiring creation. The excavation that Pamphile undertakes, the hole he digs for the chapel's foundation is filled with the corpse with which his life's work is crowned, as his dreams occupy a space "étroit et profond comme une fosse de cimetière" (417).

In Mirbeau's fiction, it is not the horticulturally tortured artificiality of the garden that is the beginning and the end, but the uncharted immensity of the forest into which disintegrating human artifacts are reabsorbed. A place of homogeneity and confusion, the forest is an *Urwelt* preexisting maps that locate and systems that explain. Thick with growth, unplumbed by vision, it is in the

forest where one gets lost. In the forest, there are no more medical, sacerdotal, or judicial authorities that shield against nature's randomness and cruelty, no walls that hold in order and keep out the darkness.

Since laws are promulgated by criminal tyrants, applied by bribe-taking judges and corrupt police officials, Mirbeau's anarchism may lead him to advocate abolishing laws. From *anarkos* to *anomos*, the elimination of government whose functions are codified in institutional language should free individuals by returning them to a state before the word. Then "anomie" would cease to signify the alienation that government causes and would instead suggest the instinctual liberty that culture aims to suppress.

The forest into which Pamphile's shredded body is reassimilated is the place of formlessness and namelessness that was there before the ordering work of human creation. In the forest, one regresses to the status of a primordium reengulfed in immemorial silence. The forest into which men and their constructs dissolve is the opposite of Jules's idealized library. Where the monument falls, it is replaced by the tree. From the grave of the writer there again grows a plant. At the end, Pamphile's dream of a firmamental sanctuary rising to the stars collapses and falls, leaving a forest floor covered with rocks, moss, and undergrowth. There, Jules "ne vit qu'un chaos de pierre de taille, de bois en grume" (395). Site of original confusion unstructured by language or law, "[c]e chaos," as Pierre Michel writes, "est à l'image d'un univers sans rime ni raison – par opposition au *cosmos*, univers organisé et harmonieux" (1191, note 127).

Through his characters, Mirbeau expresses nostalgia for an idealized childhood unadulterated by formal education and civic indoctrination. Like Jules, he imagines curing young men of culturally derived neurosis, disassembling "la mécanique poupée de la civilisation" and restoring "l'homme naturel, instinctif, gonflé de vie" (471). Social retrogression from government to statelessness entails a phylogenetic regression from human to vegetal. As Jules says to Albert: "Le mieux est donc de diminuer le mal [...] en te rapprochant des bêtes, des plantes, des fleurs" (470).

In Mirbeau, the embrace of oblivion, acceptance of one's disappearance from others' memories bespeaks a courageous affirmation of life that transcends the self. Whereas it is cowardice that prompts construction of a monument that denies death by concealing it behind the mortuary grandeur of marble, one's own return to nothingness celebrates the life of everything. Reversion to anonymity ensures the fertility of chaos in which everything commingles before it is separated and named.

One of Mirbeau's heroes' most cherished illusions is of nature as a maternal cradle offering security and rest. Succumbing to suicidal ideation, they welcome surrender, hoping to break off the fight, to lay down their weapons, and vanish in the forest. The disease of life, communicated by selfishness, symptomatized by disgusting corporeity, is cured by death which delivers sufferers from guilt. In a recurring fantasm, Mirbeau's characters are drawn to the cleanness of extinction, when they can shed reproductive organs associated with shame and remorse. When fire burns away the sin of personality, the character manifests what Bachelard calls the Empedocles Complex: "Love, death and fire are united at the same moment. Through its sacrifice in the heart of the flames, the mayfly gives us a lesson in eternity. This total death which leaves no traces is the guarantee that our whole person has departed for the beyond. To lose everything in order to gain everything. The lesson taught by the fire is clear" (17).

Like cremation scattering ash in the cemetery of the air, atomization reconverts a fornicating something into the wordlessness, whiteness, and perfection of a nothing. In Mirbeau, death denial means a refusal of Clara's model of the fertility of the torture garden, a rejection of corruption, the pullulation of maggots whose swarming proliferation frustrates the desire for finality and absence.

Over time, Jules represses the memory of Pamphile's gelatinous body parts, the pestilential stench of putrefaction, the larval growth that death promotes. In the forest, death does not turn into slime and stink and flies, but is elided and forgotten, returning to a state outside of language. For Jules, life is a disgraceful thing, not an opportunity to win glory, and those who live the best are those whose passing goes unnoticed. Jean Mintié's dream of erecting a monument to books he never writes extends to Jules's ideal of lives that are anonymous and discrete. To Albert, Jules describes

the noblest existence as empty narrative, a text effaced by modesty, by the inattention of its readers: “Et tout le monde, ignorant ta vie, ignorera ta mort... Tu seras pareil à ces jolis animaux, dont on ne retrouve jamais la carcasse, et qui disparaissent, volatilisés dans les choses” (471).

The finest novelist is one whose work is a cadaver lost forever; the greatest book is one which – if, by some misfortune, it is produced – simply vanishes and never touches an audience with its taint. The ideal of life as untold story, of death as self-evaporation, of art as undone work is expressed with an increasing poverty of language, with Jules and Mintié approaching a kind of lexical nirvana, in which the specificity of vocabulary dissolves in imprecision, “dans les choses.”

Jules recommends that men submit to the rhythms of the world, that their instinctual coupling follow the law of Eros that joins together, and their relinquishment of self submit to Thanatos that sunders. Mintié’s excuse for creative insolvency becomes, for Jules, an aesthetic of unproductiveness, in his oxymoronic exhortation to “fabriquer un Rien” (471). As with the anarchist who celebrates the art of demolition, the master’s works embody a self-abnegating inexpressiveness, humbling the individual who magnifies the totality of nature. There is no longer the clumsy dualism of creators and their objects, when the moment of self-realization changes an artist into his work whose perfection is signaled by its disappearance into everything.

Of course, Jules’s metaphysical pedagogy, his lessons on instinct, life, and happiness are often contradicted by longstanding personal practices. He may take the books that Albert brings and throw them “dans l’espace” (468), yet he continues to retreat to the secret precincts of his library. Jules’s professed ideal is to tear down social walls and conceptual barriers, to promote things’ intermingling in space uncircumscribed by prejudice. But in practice, Jules still structures his life by anxiety and repression, fetishizing containers in which he keeps his treasured, shameful objects. If institutions are established to deny human vulnerability, civilized man fears above all else that he may lose his sense of guilt, which he values for authorizing a belief in morality and meaning.

In the novel, Mirbeau’s hero deplores literature as a product of neurosis. Yet there is also the terrible irony that Mirbeau’s own text may be included in libraries housing books whose message he condemns. In the same way that Jules collects the works of Spinoza and Auguste Comte, Mirbeau collects the social ills that his fiction combats. As his career advanced, Mirbeau increasingly shunned bibliophilia, art collection, construction of museums as cults of the dead. It was the misoneists Mirbeau execrated who venerated the carcasses of old works, insisting on the unalterability of the Comédie Française repertory. Embalmers and taxidermists, they refused to bury finished artifacts, and their attachment to old art prevented the exercise of fresh creativity.

Already in L’Abbé Jules, there is a metonymic link between society, its institutions, and the formal expression of its principles. Paintings, sculptures, novels are like an artist’s deciduous body parts, dead epidermis sloughed off as part of the skin’s regeneration. The art works that a creator sheds and that disperse into his audience are little corpses mourned in the instant of their passing, as their surrender enriches the recipient on whom they are bestowed. Like Abbé Jules, the book collector is an invalid wedded to his disease, so that perusing Indiana reactivates symptoms whose remission only lasts as long as George Sand’s book is unopened. Reading from the novel, Albert experiences hallucinations, sees Jules exhibit respiratory distress, succumb to involuntary muscle contractions, indulge in convulsive masturbatory impulses that Mirbeau’s narrator describes as painful and debilitating.

Death denial interrupts the cyclical processes of formation and dissolution, diminishing life by divorcing it from its end and culmination. Like medicine, whose impossible goal is vanquishing mortality, like law whose pathological aim is curing spontaneity with discipline, literature takes the disorder of human imagination and locks it inside the coffin walls of the bindings of a book. A sick, contagious body, the text contaminates readers who, in consuming it, become infected bodies in their turn. Law books, medical texts, compilations of religious dogma serve to standardize meaning, discourage free interpretation, and ensure that teachings are propagated by an unquestioning, servile priesthood.

In the forest, the living tree displays its rich, exuberant verdure, but in society, it is cut down, turned into pulp made into pages that are finally sewn together like a shroud that wraps a corpse. Art replaces green leaves with the “feuilles mortes” of a novel (483). After a reader internalizes texts

with their unnatural imagery and unhealthy messages, he becomes the morbid embodiment of his library. Jules executes a perverted reenactment of nature's dialectic of corruption and regrowth, as he simulates creation by assembling his collection, then purges himself of literature's pathogenic influence, asserting: "il faudrait détruire [...] cet affreux livre de mon coeur" (483).

As he continues his instruction of Albert, Jules becomes more vociferous in denouncing, not only cultural institutions, but also their pictorial and linguistic expression. As extreme instance of sublimation, mysticism exacerbates the deviant expression of sexual desire, which is idealized by artists as romantic love. "Entremetteuses de l'amour," organized religions work hand in hand with the arts in spreading the poison of perverted instincts. Unlike killing, which is natural, the practice of torture is an art form, and "les poètes [qui] n'ont chanté que l'amour, les arts [qui] n'ont exalté que l'amour" (485) apply instruments of torture to the body of the love-slave. Replacing objects of desire with erotic imagery, the poet prizes creativity, values his salaciously suggestive lyricism more than mistresses whom he loves less than his descriptive virtuosity. Jules, who hates himself for displaying the entire spectrum of perversions, exhibits erethism instead of lust, prefers pornography to women, is susceptible to "le mysticisme des prières et l'onanisme moral des adorations" (485). In the interest of denying death, men recoil from life's immediacy. What they worship are objects that, at one time, were vibrant, bright, and beautiful, but were later vacated of energy and turned into artful simulacrums. Life is whiteness, insignificance, empty pages, nature before words sully it, an eglantine unsmearred by poets' "caca" (473).

Comparing art to excrement, Jules stresses the superfluity of objects remaining after creation ends with the evacuation of works as waste. In Mirbeau, art memorializes the life it destroys. Yet genius can be manifested in the moment of denial, in the instant man rejects his animality and transience and draws on the energy needed to transform maladaptation into art. Acquiescence to the reality of biology and loss brings an experience of disillusionment that is fundamentally anaesthetic. The construction of cathedrals, the production of great literature often comes from an insistence on adorning reality with fiction. The ingenuity of self-deception sustains the creative undertaking, as man's unwillingness to admit to his incomprehension and aloneness inspires him to fashion great masterpieces and manufacture great lies.

In spite of his indictment of culture and his praise of nature, Jules finds value in the religion and art he claims to despise. While refusing to administer extreme unction to a dying girl, Jules still consoles her with the promise of the divine presence, reassuring her that her last breath, "C'est Dieu qui vient vers vous" (492). Despite his impeachment of literature, he undertakes his own writing project, the ambiguously entitled *Semences de vie*, "un ouvrage de philosophie religieuse," in which Christ repudiates the blind embodiment of perverted human justice, and embraces "la Folie," as the mother of creativity.

It is neither the flight from death nor the denial of reproductive servitude that Jules laments but rather a submission to institutions that cripple those they claim to protect. If righteousness is found in a rejection of the world's cruelty, if beauty is revealed in the denial of disorder, spirituality is manifested in affirming human dignity, and true art is born from the creative impulse to produce it. However, once longings for transcendence congeal as orthodoxy's dogma, once creativity is frozen as fixed aesthetic principles, the vitality of art gives way to the deadness of artifacts.

In Mirbeau, the work memorializes the death of what inspires it. In Jules's formulation, the truly meaningful afflatus comes with the desire to produce ("fabriquer") and the abolition of the product ("Rien"). Ultimately, like a cenotaph, the art work signifies by its emptiness, since in giving form to the idea, the idea is evacuated. As Rico Franses writes of monuments: "One mourns the loss of an object one never possessed" (4).

In Jules's affiliation with the priesthood, he exchanges epistemological denial for experiential self-denial, rehearsing death in the renunciation of companionship and pleasure. If, for Mirbeau's character, creative work is a heroic *mise à mort*, the most meaningful endeavor is the performance of one's passing. Unlike assembling medical treatises or compiling legal volumes – coffins containing death which, when opened, spread more death – Jules prepares to die as a process of self-emptying. In Mirbeau's telling association, the casket in which the priest is buried is identified with the trunk containing his pornography.

Throughout the novel, Mirbeau shows that repression breeds hysteria. What is hidden, kept secret, forbidden as taboo engenders a conjectural phantasmagoria of images and stories, more frightening and alluring than what is concealed. The first thing Jules produces is the mystery of his years spent in the capital: “Qu’a-t-il pu fabriquer à Paris?” as Dr. Dervelle asks unceasingly.

Before his arrival in Viantais, Jules’s identity is like his trunk, an unknown thing eliciting the artistic work of speculation, depicting him as a monster, a mythical beast like the creature that Victoire, the Dervelles’ cook, imagines living in Jules’s case, with its “museau [...] long comme une broche, une queue comme un plumeau, et des jambes, bonté divine! des jambes comme des pelles à feu!” (453).

In one respect, Jules’s interment offsets the dissemination of toxic literature, since – different from the book which contaminates its readers – the casket is buried, and the corpse sickens no one. On the other hand, since inhumation is a metaphor for repression, Jules’s subterranean body does not rest silently in the ground but haunts survivors’ minds with its “ricanement lointain” (515).

For Jules, the act of mortuary hygiene is his disposal of the trunk, which is set on fire and symbolically enacts the cremation of its owner. With the incineration of the container and the ventilation of its contents, Jules posthumously accomplishes the lifting of repression, undoing the damage that social institutions had done in life. In a whirlwind arabesque of images of buttocks, breasts, and penises, the danse macabre becomes a model of the authentic art work, which exists in the fleeting time of its self-annihilation.

Like many of Mirbeau’s novels, Jules’s flame-enveloped trunk is valuable for the truthfulness of the secrets it releases: “tout un fouillis de corps emmêlés, de ruts sataniques, de pédérasies extravagantes, auxquels le feu, qui les recoquevillait, donnait des mouvements extraordinaires” (514). Mirbeau’s novel is meant to disappear in the expression of its message, wedding loss to creativity as with the burning of Jules’s trunk. As Marie-Pierre Vanseveren and Albert Rombeaut write: “La malle retient et semble pourtant être liée à la perte, au deuil. Ou à une nouvelle manière de conserver par dissipation. Malle-sarcophage qui dévore ce qu’on lui donne à garder” (144).

Mirbeau ends his novel by describing the snicker audible from underground, a reference to the comprehensive failure of repression. Along with Jules’s body, the townspeople bury the fears of their mortality, denying their venality, hypocrisy, and cowardice. Jules himself enjoys a derisory immortality by surviving in his testament, in which he bequeathes his worldly fortune to the first priest who will defrock himself. Jules’s final text proves that one thing is everlasting: human selfishness and greed that pose as piety and principle.

In itself, Jules’s will exemplifies the paradoxical status of Mirbeau’s work, in which creation is accomplished through its simultaneous dismantling. The unmasking of impostors, the exposure of charlatans is a destructive act whose goal is to “fabriquer un Rien.” But along with the anarchist’s aim of doing away with frauds and tyrants, there is the utopian idealist’s dream whose realization leaves no product. From the ruins of the abbey, Pamphile had planned to build a chapel, a structure whose perfection was assured by not existing. From the rubble of his home, he had raised the edifice of his vision. In Mirbeau, consummation and conflagration are the end points of creation, since completion of the work should bring its transformation into ashes. There is the swirl of flaming pages that dissipate in the air, then are extinguished and again come to rest on the forest floor. Phoenix-like, Mirbeau’s novel is born of its condemnation of literature, as he tells of a man inscribed by cultural teachings found in books, and who frees himself of their influence by burning the book of his heart.

Robert ZIEGLER
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Notes

¹A similar position is advanced by the Darwinian scientist in the Frontispiece to Le Jardin des supplices. As he says, “le meurtre est la base même de nos institutions sociales [et] par conséquent la nécessité la plus impérieuse de la vie civilisée... S’il n’y avait plus de meurtre, il n’y

aurait plus de gouvernements d'aucune sorte, par ce fait admirable que le crime en général, le meurtre en particulier sont, non seulement leur excuse, mais leur unique raison d'être" (165).

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