

The Cross and the Pedestal in Mirbeau's Le Calvaire

In Octave Mirbeau's inaugural novel *Le Calvaire* (1886), the author defines an economy of creation wherein women produce the raw material of suffering and babies, which men fashion into adults and the works of art that are their children. In *Le Calvaire*, Mirbeau sketches one of his foundational aesthetic tenets: that women, rooted in and working through nature, are the generative principle of life. Yet by initiating cycles of procreation and decay, gestation and corruption, they are also in a position to overwhelm male efforts at artistic self-creation.

It is a commonplace in Mirbeau criticism to remark on the recurrent theme of death's fertility, the enriching of maternal soil with the blood of lovers, convicts, and writers. An embodiment of man's intelligence, the poem, the canvas, or sculpture is an expression of creativity subject to the disintegrating forces of female nature, which threatens to engulf everything in the abyssal orifice from which all existence springs. Since, in Mirbeau, castration fears predominate over what Erich Fromm calls womb-envy, one might not expect Mirbeau to liken artists' labor to women's child-bearing role. Indeed, there is evidence that Mirbeau believed, as Harold Feldman writes, that "[m]en did not take over and develop culture as an imitation of a female biological function but as a continuation of cultural creations already initiated by women" (266).

Readers of Le Calvaire cannot help but notice instances in Mintié's narrative of idyllic sentimentalism, where nature is portrayed as a locus of beneficence, sanctuary, peace, and bounty. These images stand in contrast to descriptions of depletion and barrenness characterizing the hero's childhood estate, where a dilapidated abbey is surrounded by "une pelouse teigneuse, deux sorbiers chétifs," and a muddy pond haunted by the spectral shapes of "carpes maigres" (122). Because of the sickliness of his natural environment, it is not surprising that Mintié later dreams of an idealized Normandy blanketed with verdure, covered with purple orchards, golden with "belles moissons qui mûrissaient au soleil" (302). Corresponding to the devitalized landscape of his youth is Mintié's death-desiring mother, a languorous, bedridden figure presiding over a world conveying what Jean-Luc Planchais calls an "épuisement ontologique" (166).

An unnurturing progenetrix and inhospitable nature leave Mirbeau's hero feeling feeble and exposed – anxious to redefine his identity as an anagrammatic cure for his vulnerability and aloneness, giving Mintié the experience of what is protective – of what is "intime." From the beginning of Le Calvaire, images of fertile earth, provident caregivers, security, protection, and abundance are presented as consoling fictions authored and consumed by men, illusory homelands that they return to only in their minds.

Already in Mirbeau's novel, women and nature are situated below the level of language and intelligibility. Comprised of events in their pure adventitiousness, meaningless life is gendered as female, making the senseless things that happen the first offspring of the mother of heartbreak. Insignificant and accidental, Mintié's birth is initially a phenomenon of nature, and is only secondarily redeemed by male interpretation. What, for the parents, is a godsend conferring generational continuity is, for the child, a fall into mortality, as Mintié's arrival in the world is a narrative act marked by erroneous exegesis. Converted by male relatives into symbols, birth is equated with life's inexhaustibility, associated with material abundance, valued as the sweet milk of the dependable breast. Thus, the happy event is celebrated by Mintié's uncle, who marks the occasion by distributing coins and candy to less fortunate neighborhood children. Optimistically affirmed as a cause for joy, birth is incorporated into male narrative as a substitute for the mother, providing for all oral needs, donating all the confections and money that bountiful life is expected to supply.

However, the life Mintié leads does not unfold on a sun-dappled meadow or a fertile plain. Instead, like a battlefield in the war of the sexes or the sweeping expanse traversed by the majestic Prussian scout, Mintié's wretched existence plays out on the horizontal axis of biological ineluctability. Flat terrain unrelieved by the heroic topography of human striving and accomplishment, life moves from the darkness of the birth canal to the darkness of the tomb.

Suggested by Zola's despairing principle of genetic determinism, the family past is a thread, a bond, an uncut cord pulling the child back into the abyss of hereditary neurosis and generational disability. As sinners and weavers, women fashion the fabric of a baneful destiny, a fatality that ties and cannot be severed by the skills of male conquerors.

For Mirbeau, war should not be waged against arbitrarily designated national enemies, but against the internal death drive that aims at a relinquishment of the struggle, an extinction of desire, and a return to a state of rest. Redemptive suffering endured on le calvaire is the creative work done by an artist lashed to a cross that stands above a supine landscape of passivity and resignation. Pain is given meaning in works done by a man, works that sunder the ropes binding him to a world of hopelessness and repetition, climaxing with an experience of spiritual and aesthetic transcendence that delivers him from the plain of temporal loss and existential futility. The Christological connotations of the title of Mirbeau's novel are illumined by an observation made by Gilbert Durand: "Tout appel au Souverain céleste," he writes, "se fait contre les liens, tout baptême ou illumination consiste pour l'homme à 'déliier', 'déchirer,' les liens et les voiles d'irréalité" (188).

At the start, Jean Mintié's self-victimizing weakness is connected to an unfathomable maternal past governed by a longing for insentience. It is the same appetite for nothingness that draws Madame Mintié to the kiss of the flame, that impels her to chase a sickle-wielding farmhand, beseeching: "Mort, ô mort bienheureuse, prends-moi, emporte-moi" (126). In Mirbeau's novel, the inherited hunger for self-annihilation is equated with the principle of its transmission. The generational ties that kill recall the rope that Mintié's grandmother used to tie the noose with which she hanged herself, as her cadaver, with its blackened face, dangled "légèrement dans le vide" (128). Even sheltering mothers who give birth inherit a yearning for extinction: "these guardians of life," Freud writes in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, "were originally the myrmidons of death" (614).

The link that binds a child to his maternal antecedents perpetuates a tendency on the part of all living organisms to "return to an earlier state of things" (615). Thus, the umbilicus stretching out across the generations is a weapon used by life against itself, "une longue chaîne de suicidés, partie de la nuit profonde" (Le Calvaire 127). In Mirbeau, death is stronger than symbol production, the attraction of oblivion more powerful than male efforts to refine experience into art. Fêted by showers of "bonbons" and "liards" (121), Mintié's birth incurs the misfortune of being alive, telescoping ends into beginnings, culminating in the death of one of the children fighting for his share of sweets and coins, as he trips and fractures his skull on a sharp stone and dies the following day. A similar tragedy befalls the uncle who, punished for his largesse, contracts the typhoid fever to which he succumbs a few weeks later.

Mirbeau's opening chapter opposes the derisory scope of little male aggression to the irresistible force of female destruction – things' internal orientation toward inorganicism. Monsieur Mintié's rage against cats and birds is as unmotivated as the murderous xenophobia and anti-Semitism seen in other characters in Mirbeau. Later in the Frontispiece to Le Jardin des supplices, Mirbeau will elaborate on the difference between men's recreational bloodletting, their ideological cruelty, and the cosmically oblitative energies channeled by women as the agents of nature. Whether it is Monsieur Mintié's exasperation with stray animals or the shooting gallery customers who shatter plaster figurines with gunfire, men express the frustrations they cathartically alleviate by blowing up symbolic enemies that they fabricate themselves. Harnessing these impulses in the name of patriotism or racial purity becomes the objective of colonialists, anti-Dreyfusards, and warmongers. But no matter how violent the campaigns men undertake, they are nothing in comparison to the operation of the female death instinct.

Countering life's tendency toward randomness and disorder is the aesthetic that Mirbeau outlines in his novel, the artistic expression of men's insistence on the permanence of their memories and the solidity of their artifacts. The structuring activity of male intelligence is manifested in Mirbeau by a taxonomic interest in dividing, creating hierarchy, affirming men's nominative authority. Opposing the anarchy of the natural world, the creative endeavor is predicated

on the specificity of the law and the clarity of language, as *nomos*, the noun “names a person, place or thing, [...] takes it out of chaos and confusion and gives it a definition” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 9).

In Le Calvaire, Mirbeau shows the maternal pull of suicidal agraphia as being conveyed by Mintié’s lapses into linguistic flaccidity and lexical imprecision – his nominative exactitude drowned out by “la musique divine des choses.” Mintié’s mystically sensual expiration in the bosom of the Virgin is accompanied by a fall into expressive vagueness. The subject’s mastery of objects, his ability to identify them gives way to the power of things to signify as their fragrance, their texture, and musicality. “Et ce langage inexprimé,” Mintié wonders, “qui coulait dans mon âme d’enfant des tendresses ineffables [...], ce langage plus parfumé que le parfum des roses, ce langage n’était-il point le langage divin de l’amour?” (188).

As the mistress/garden/graveyard fills the speaker’s mouth with the earth of paradise, repatriation comes only with a relinquishment of expressive art. In Le Jardin des supplices, Mirbeau’s narrator resists the temptation of inexpressiveness, opposes to the silence prescribed by Clara, the gorgeous death-flower, the intelligence-affirming exactness of his botanical vocabulary. In place of the unspeaking cemetery-soil of the torture garden there is the narrator’s detailed list of specialized floral specimens: “épimèdes,” hémérocailles,” “opuntias,” “oenothères” (274) – a bouquet of floral labels whose rarity contrasts with the linguistic impoverishment caused by immersion in nature, with its “douceur infinie, la poésie inexprimablement édenique” (274).

In Le Calvaire, the painting, the autobiographical narrative, and especially the statue are celebrated as artifacts surviving the final dissolution of creativity in the female bed of quiescence and sleep. Mintié asserts the operation of a causality and design that rescues events from their desultoriness, that confers on them a new teleological purpose. The suffering inflicted by women becomes the inspirational stuff of art, the motivation for Mintié’s narrative, and the subject of his text. A messenger of death heralding the end of language, pain is recuperated by the victim when he invests it in an economy of creation. The soteriological efficacy of Mintié’s religion of heroic martyrdom gives new meaning to his experience and brings salvation to his readers. Resurrecting the humiliated male and rejected lover, suffering transmutes self-disgust into the edifying material of Mintié’s gospel of masochism.

Devoted to chronicling the protagonist’s unhappy childhood, the opening chapter of Le Calvaire depicts Mintié’s mother as a thanatotic principle of self-destruction. Convinced she has communicated to her son the same world-weariness that makes her long for death, Madame Mintié is the dark orifice into which energy and meaning fall and disappear. Paralleling the fantasmatic activation of the child’s castration fears, Mintié’s glimpse of his mother’s nakedness is accompanied by a mutilation of his power to communicate. Thereafter, Mintié’s narrative links paradisaical visions of nature with the writer’s descriptive incapacitation, as cuts in the text reflect the genital incompleteness of the woman that inspired it. As he is prepared for his bath, Mintié’s nudity – the child’s “langes dénoués” (132) – mirror the opening of the mother’s peignoir. Transferring the empty place on the her body onto her son, she infects him with her morbidity, as her kisses “[lui] communiquaient les germes de son mal” (134).

Projected as the black bathtub tile, the “quelque chose de terrible” that makes the child hide his face is what eliminates the richness of his vocabulary and swallows the diversity of his words. In place of Mintié’s nuanced language, there is the bottomless black hole, what Célestine, in Le Journal d’une femme de chambre, refers to as la chose.

For the adult Mintié, insignificant experience is redeemed by investing in its narrative reconstruction. Like the fetishist who denies maternal castration, Mintié overvalues symbolic substitutes for the empty space of genital elision. From the artist’s lips come insightful words that deny the message of annihilation, the message of death issuing from the vaginal vestibule, from the vulval labiae imaged in Lirat’s painting: “un ventre hideux et vrai... une tête de mort [...] vivante [...] avide, goulue, toute en lèvres” (202). Like the fetishist who alternates between self-delusion and recognition, Mintié acknowledges the imposture that he perpetrates on himself.

Confessing his strategy of plagiarism, the oedipal impersonation and rivalry with authors whose style he copies, Mintié affirms the nullity of his writing and the emptiness of its subject. Authorial fathers conferring a spurious legitimacy on the son who would displace them, Spenser, Scribe, Rousseau, Hugo, and Poe supply language that Mintié steals and claims as his own. Like the bibliomaniac who dreams of appropriating the generative potency of authors whose works he collects, the plagiarist attaches fetish value to another's text, endowing it with the "magical powers of an ego quality [...] which builds [his] self-esteem and reduces anxiety by allowing [him] to feel that [he] participates in the power, intelligence or historical significance of the author" (Weiner 220-1).

Mintié feels doubly threatened with being unmanned, left black and blank like the bathtub tile, incapable of displaying the paternal virility of genuine artistic talent. Lirat's jealous contempt for artists anointed by Salon juries intends the same castration of the father as does Mintié's usurpation of the power and fame of established writers. But his plagiaristic hoax is doomed to fail, prompting Mintié to proclaim his ambition to author an authentic work fashioned from his own substance and expressed in his own words. As suffering transmutes humiliating experience into heroic narrative, life, as unprocessed material, is infused with new intelligibility. Distilled into the ink used to describe it, the blood of heartbreak covers pages with words that admonish future generations. Realized as a book, Mintié's thought would be pain made into language: "elle secoue sur les pages douleureuses des morceaux de [sa] chair et des gouttes de [son] sang; [ses] nerfs y résonnent, comme des cordes du violon sous l'archet d'un divin musicien" (187).

In Mintié's formulation, his crucified body is still a text inscribed by a divine author, still the instrument from which God draws exquisite harmonies. The marriage of unhappy life to an art of edification is still not celebrated in an epithalamium whose author is Mintié himself. Before the scoria of imitativeness is fired away in the crucible of anguished passion for Juliette Roux, Mintié regards writing as a penitential exercise. Its only function is to deliver him from the misery of existence, enabling him to complete the passage from the blessed inexpressiveness of infancy to a mystical reimmersion in "the divine music of things." Before his liaison with Juliette, he still envies the brutishness, dormancy, and self-complacency of stupid people: "Ah! l'impassible sérénité!" he exclaims. "Ah! l'éternel contentement de soi-même des médiocres" (187).

In Mintié's conception of an artistic theodicy, the passion of a lover is modelled on the Passion of Christ. Evil, adversity, the shame of sex addiction are redeemed of their status as circumstantial misfortunes by being recuperated as material for salvational creation. The prostrate, death-seeking mother is no longer the origin and end of things, but instead is reinterpreted as an icon fashioned by a male worshipper. The generative principle of death, Madame Mintié dies to be reborn in her son's production of the sacred image of the mother.

In Mintié's narrative, the figure representing the indestructible artifact, the victorious transcendence of life's organicism is the statue that transforms the human likeness into art. Seen from this viewpoint, Mintié's inaugural creative act is purely a perceptual one, resurrecting the biological mother and making her immaculate in the son's visualization of the plaster image of the Mother of God. More than implying the self-deification of the visionary child, the conflation of mother and Virgin exchanges transience for immortality, makes the lasting artifact the creative offspring of the male child.

In his fantasy of a unitive merger, Mintié imputes to the Virgin the same incommunicable goodness that robs the child of speech. The time of mortality and loss, olfactorily manifested as the stench of putrefaction, gives way to the odor of sanctity, a perfumed eternity redolent "d'encens et de myrrhe" (140). If the original work of art is the infant's hallucination of the absent mother,¹ Mintié's hyperdulia is his first creative inspiration. Through mourning, Mintié is sexually aroused, interacting with the statue he adopts as a mother-substitute, one with whom he imagines coupling through the medium of his sketching. Art becomes an instrument used for remedying loss, art that resurrects the dead – not as nature's shabby plagiarism – but as an ideal that Mintié fathers and with

which he creatively engages. He notes his unwillingness to leave the Virgin: “C’était comme un besoin de possession, un désir violent de la prendre [...]. J’eus l’idée de la dessiner: avec quel amour, il est impossible de vous l’imaginer!” (140).

Pierre Michel remarks on the mysterious identity of the unnamed interlocutor in this passage, incongruous, as Michel says, because the existence of this addressee supposes “que le récit [...] est destiné à quelqu’un qui ne se nomme pas” (“Notes,” 1149). Perhaps this unnamed audience is the community of male writers whom Mintié brings to life when he leaves the indescribable plenitude of nature, death, and mothers, in order to enter the world of interpersonal discourse. At the same time that the creative “I” gives birth to the work of art, it also engenders its consumers and the fellow artists who understand it.

Having identified the statue as a figure that withstands the disintegrative energies of biology and time – its verticality symbolizing pride in successful male achievement – Mintié takes the next step and defines men as both producers and subjects of the creative work. As the languid, disengaged caregiver is replaced by the silver-spangled statue of the Virgin, the neglected son also rediscovers himself in his healthy, cherished counterpart, the rosy infant on whom the Mother’s ecstatic gaze is trained forever. Even the iconographic stereotype suggests the immutability of the image, its imperviousness to change and the vicissitudes of interpretation. Yet the universality of the image is also an impediment to originality, preventing the artist from representing his subject in new ways. Protective, loving, immortal, the statue of the Virgin corrects Madame Mintié’s faulty embodiment of the maternal. But in order for the son to complete his reappropriation of the art work, it is necessary that the image made be an image of himself.

Highlighted as the symbol from which the novel draws its title, the calvaire defines the axial structure of the narrative. Dominating the flat plane of decay and sleep is the heroic uprightiness of the cross. On the cross, the seemingly gratuitous suffering inflicted by women is reutilized as material in expiatory art whose production changes the victim into a savior. Straight and indomitable, the cross is like a statue, as both convert bodies into images, and the randomness of experience into the clarity of its meaning. Covered with drops of blood and pieces of flesh, the page is the site of Mintié’s crucifixion, the place, where, in agony, he washes away his own sins and the sins of his readers. Raised up by the teleological purpose of his creation, Mintié escapes the horizontality of biology. Once a tree, the cross becomes a monument – “si l’arbre devient colonne,” as Durand writes, “la colonne à son tour devient statue [...].” Thus, “le rôle métamorphosant du végétal est [...] de prolonger ou de suggérer la prolongation de la vie humaine. Le verticalisme facilite beaucoup ce ‘circuit’ entre le niveau végétal et le niveau humain, car son vecteur vient renforcer encore les images de résurrection et de triomphe” (395).

In Mirbeau’s notorious second chapter, where he evokes atrocities committed in the name of patriotism and proclaims solidarity with war’s victims, Mintié learns that women are not the only agents of death. It is not only sexual passion but also nationalist ideology that causes the uprooting of ancient trees, the desecration of nature, the profanation of man’s creation – not only mistresses but zealots who are “criminels iconoclastes, brûleurs de tableaux, démolisseurs de statues” (Préface à la neuvième édition du Calvaire 120).

In its most coherent form, Mintié’s religion of rehabilitative suffering opposes Sade’s glorification of confusion and lawlessness. Mirbeau’s later embrace of anarchy has nothing to do with celebrating the chaos preexisting Genesis. The division of dry land and water, darkness and light, things and their names contrasts with the violation of taboos against bestiality and incest. While Sade prescribes overthrowing the positional and moral opposition of high and low, repression and instinct, art classifies, abstracting itself from the stuff of creation to which it gives beauty and form. In Mirbeau’s excoriation of war, he shows Sade’s violation of body boundaries, his programmatic endorsement of violence and degradation as being exacerbated by the hypocritical insistence on arbitrary divisions – between Prussian and Frenchman, officer and infantryman, soldier and civilian.

In the same way that Mintié's dead mother is rehabilitated by association with the Virgin as a divine model of nurturing dependability, Mintié's image of the unheroic soldier is redeemed by his vision of the majestic Prussian horseman, another ideal Mintié embodies as a "statue équestre de bronze" (167). Silhouetted against the dawn-flooded vastness of the plain, the majestic verticality of the rider makes him appear gigantic. The polychromatic richness of the aureoreal landscape, pink and blue, imbues the scene with an epic sweep of cinematic grandeur. Incorporated as the hero of Mintié's conjectural narrative, the enemy soldier becomes an everyman, an autochthon of all nations, a fraternal image of Mirbeau's protagonist. In Mintié's mind, the Prussian is visualized as taking leave of wife and daughter, departing from a home intimately furnished with a paper-cutter and rocking horse. In Mintié's imagination, the awful Hun whom French troops envision as sowing devastation, incinerating peasant huts, disemboweling babies, is euphemized as a brother. It is a more benign but no more plausible fiction than the one that Mintié's compatriots generate.

Ultimately, the moral and aesthetic dimension of Le Calvaire is structured by a rigorous gender opposition, distinguishing the homosocial world of warfare and art from the nightmare sexual battlefield on which sanguinary maenads make up an unstoppable conquering army. Mirbeau's pacifism in part springs from a recognition that men are ill-equipped for violence. Unless it is harnessed to the chaos-seeking female energy inhering in living things, male aggression, in Mirbeau, is small in scale and ineffectual in practice, like Father Mintié's shooting of cats and birds, like Mintié's petulant, skull-smashing attack on Juliette's pet dog, Spy. Soldiers in Le Calvaire enjoy a solidarity that supersedes nationalistic fervor and transcends cultural difference, not because they are stalwart fighters, but because they are pawns of sadistic generals or playthings of rapacious mistresses. In Mirbeau, men come together in the shared experience of their victimization.

Mesmerized by women represented as aposiopeses, black bathtub tiles, genital lacunae, blank pages of unwritten narrative, a misogynist like Lirat joins with Mintié in his credulous admiration of feminine pulchritude and fashion. It is only in Mintié's imagination that men prevail in the war between the sexes, only there that a pathetic, suicidal specimen like Mintié can be iconographically immortalized as a victor sculpted in marble or cast in bronze. Heroic statuary remedies the indignity done to men in naturalist fiction, where the idea of male pride and prowess is unromanticized and demythified.

At the end of Le Calvaire, the ragtag remains of the Le Mans regiment is replaced by the city's routed battalion of lovers. Stronger than the virile, serene Prussian rider is an army of women resplendent in their feathered hats and colored dresses, furies whose enemies line the Bois de Boulogne avenue with their corpses. Humiliated, Mintié sees himself as one of the defeated, imagining "des régiments de la conquête, s'abattre, ivres de pillage, sur Paris vaincu" (298).

In the passage that scandalized readers who considered themselves patriots, Mirbeau describes Mintié's embrace of the fallen enemy, bestowing a kiss on the Prussian's bloody, drool-streaked face. In a simultaneous expression of fraternal identification and aesthetic narcissism, Mintié's act marks the completion of his conversion of battlefield experience into utopian narrative. Like the unidentified fellow-man who is addressed in Mintié's narrative, the soldier becomes a reflection of the writer who imagines him, a character fashioned in the image of his author/ father, a multiple "vous" generated by a single creative "je."

The love that Mintié claims to feel springs from pride taken in creativity. The literary redemption of experiential degradation raises up the victim, conferring a godlike majesty on a writer who suffers for his craft, who consents to be nailed to the cross of his book in order to rescue his readers. In his aspiration to destroy hellish brothels glowing with lust and fire, filled with writhing shadows of the damned, Mintié is motivated less by a wish to redeem his brothers than by a hunger for the glory that his verbal mastery affords. Acting on a desire "d'évangéliser les malheureuses créatures qui croupissent dans le vice" (289), Mintié preaches his religion of art to effect his own salvation. Once anchored in soil irrigated with tears, the crucifix ceases to be a tree, an organic, living thing, in order to become a monument its builder erects in honor of his self-awarded

immortality.

At first, Mintié's literary ambition is fired by the same death drive that changes sexual desire from a principle of regeneration into a devouring, destructive force. Rather than originating in the creative imagination, Mintié conceives his future works as being inspired by hunger for Juliette: "les chefs d'oeuvres naîtraient de ses yeux," as he surmises. Born of lust and desperation, prolificacy would be an instrument of loss – as comedies, dramas, novels, overflowing from bookstores, would disappear, sold for money used to buy the furniture and clothes consumed in the furnace of Juliette's greed. Rather than creating like a god whose works ensure his disciples' salvation, Mintié would write as an expression of alienation: "comme un forçat, je travaillerai" (280).

In propounding the new doctrine of redemptive male creation, Mintié begins by proscribing the iconolatrous practices of earlier times, contesting nature religions based on self-immolation and ego death, discouraging identity dispersal in the totality of living things, abjuring the silence that brings peace in favor of a language that empowers. In the battle of the sexes, oedipal desires that first had authorized a cult of "la mère divinisée" had emasculated a priesthood left "sans ongles, sans dents, brutes et domptés, sur le canapé de la maîtresse" (176). Effected by processes of natural metempsychosis, the mother as poison flower wilts, dies, returns to the earth before reappearing as her avatar in the bloom of the murderous love goddess. This is the figure unmasked in Lirat's nightmare canvas, the Biblical harlot – voracious, flabby-thighed, adored by old men in fur-lined coats, their eyes revulsed in a mockery of religious ecstasy.

As Eléonore Roy-Reverzy remarks, Mintié is an artist whose sole product is his suffering, a martyr offering only "l'inutile sacrifice d'un hypothétique talent" (32). It is the enormity of woman's wantonness and evil that enables their male victims to deify themselves, re-creating the relation of savior and she-devil, "tout comme le rapport du masochiste à son bourreau" (30).

The religious paradigm is reinforced by a definition of the artist whose parturition labor ends with the emergence of a work that renders the mother superfluous in her child-bearing role. God, the Father, begets God, the Son, whose art reenacts the work of Genesis, thereby eliminating the mother as life's generative matrix. The disciples saved by consuming Mintié's sacramental narrative form an exclusively male society whose goal is its self-perpetuation, effecting "a spiritual or social rebirth through the father or a community of fathers" (Feldman 267). Yet Mintié's view of parthenogenetic art is a problematic one, depending on the fantasmatic occultation of text and baby. If the pain of sexual longing is likened to the agony of childbirth, both conclude with a miscarriage, with suppression of the object, with production of the "Rien," which l'Abbé Jules deems so extraordinary (*L'Abbé Jules* 470). Mintié is revealed as a spurious progenitor: "Artiste sans faire, à l'instar des personnages de Huysmans, il est cependant artiste pour vivre et souffrir" (Roy-Reverzy 28). The monument that Mintié dreams of erecting would pay tribute to his glory and commemorate the loss of the art work whose production permits attainment of immortality.

In *Le Calvaire*, there is nothing immune to the thanatropic movement of living things toward quiescence, nothing impervious to the corrosive forces of cowardice and desire that leave corpses littering beds and battlefields. Like raw experience that dies in order to be reborn as its fictionalization, the suffering artist perishes, returning as the author of his autobiography. A trafficker in myths, he creates, not texts, but their reception, not art, but the adulation bestowed by future generations. Mirbeau's novel shows the protagonist appropriating and using in his own interest the central symbol of the statue-monument to proclaim art's victory over time. Majestically representing man's triumph over ephemerality, the monument, like the crucifix, is planted in death and constructed out of grief. Like the creative infertility it symbolizes, it embodies failure as achievement. "Symptoms and monuments both begin with loss," as Peter Homans writes, "and both seek to soften the loss by building structures within the context of the activity of mourning" (271).

In bypassing the labor of creation, Mintié – "artiste sans faire"—seeks to author posterity and bequeath celebrity to himself. Ensuring the unassailability of a reputation based on books he never writes, he imagines substituting praise for the actual work he cannot finish. Mintié's most concerted

effort may intend replacing the statue of the Virgin with an image of himself, shattering the idol before which helpless worshippers lie abject and prostrate. Only the destroyer of old creeds can herald the coming of the new messiah. Only the one imitating woman's work can usurp the mother's role, by giving birth to beauty and audience acclaim.

After he replaces the image of the beatific Madonna cradling a male infant "sans ongles et sans dents," Mintié's battlefield theophany presents him with the image of a powerful conqueror in the figure of the Prussian horseman. Yet Mintié also sees this man as a messianic rival who must be shot so that Mintié can take his place himself. However, the act of re-creating the self as God can never be completed, since the self-styled Christlike novelist cannot escape the phenomenal world, cannot rise above the terrestrial plane of lechery and failure and enter a celestial realm of inexpressible perfection. As Mirbeau's later writings attest, utopia is another disabling maternal sanctuary, a place where "artistes engagés" are rendered obsolete, as mankind's universal happiness makes literature superfluous. This is why Mintié prefers the symbol of the crucifix, representing, as it does, the interminable Passion of the savior, which never ends with death and an indescribable resurrection. This is why Mintié projects himself as a suffering redeemer – imprisoned in the body, denied any real transcendence.

However, since Mintié never writes, the cross ceases to act as the site of symbolization. It no longer marks the point where speaking man beholds a divinity beyond language. Instead, like the unwritten book, it exists solely as an object whose indestructibility situates eternity in matter. There is no longer an expiatory transformation of sinful writers into literature, since Mintié escapes mortality by attaining fame directly – never writing books that earn the esteem of future generations. A denial of oblivion, a refusal of transience, the monument calls an audience to mourn the absence of the art work while paradoxically celebrating the artist who achieves fame for doing nothing. In the presence of the grandeur of the uncompleted work, the collectivity of readers whom Mintié identifies as "vous" come together with the narrator to recall the loss of his creation. "Monuments," Homans says, "take shape in society in response to [...] mourning done together" (277). Not his book, Mintié's masterpiece is an apotheosized self that does not hang from the cross but is immortalized in statuary: "Je me voyais déjà, dans la postérité, en bronze, en marbre, hissé sur des colonnes et des piédestaux symboliques" (283).

At the conclusion of the novel, Mirbeau's protagonist catches a glimpse of his erstwhile friend and mentor, Lirat, consorting with his mistress. With the unmasking of the art father, the old god is cast down, and the hypocritical Lirat gives way to his disciple. In spite of learning the imposture of Lirat's polemical misogyny, Mintié promulgates a new creed in which women are excluded – in which men are the only gods, officiants, and practitioners.

Critics of Mirbeau's novel have remarked on Mintié's oedipally derived feelings of inferiority, subservience, and rivalry with Lirat. It is not surprising that the revelation of Lirat's hypocrisy and falseness acts as a symbolic murder of the father that activates fantasies of repatriation, a wish to re-enter the lost sanctuary of the mother-garden. Given the fact that Lirat, "le Père a déserté les cieux [et] que le sacrifice de son fils est dénué de sens" (Roy-Reverzy 32), Mintié seeks a place where there are no more words, only the "divine music of things."

Metonymized as the richly fruited Normand motherland, Madame Mintié reappears in pastoral images of pre-human brutishness and repose, a haven where the writer abandons his craft in order to experience an inexpressible nirvana. Here again, language disappears, dissolved in the ambient vagueness of sweet perfumes. Words once put out of the mouth become the pasturage that fills it. And pre-oedipal longings for return, conveyed by a castrated vocabulary, emphasize littleness, weakness, passivity, as Mintié is identified with "les fleurettes [qui] balancèrent, au bout de leurs tiges, leurs corolles menues," and then evaporates into a whirlwind of birds scattering into the dreamer's unconscious.

In the novel's final passage, the tone changes, and Mintié describes the terrible eschatological consequences of his redemptive aesthetic. Pregnant with the text he never delivers, Mintié had

initially sought to supplant the mother in her childbearing role. Then, modelling himself on a savior transubstantiated as the eucharist of his mortified flesh, he had consented to be torn apart and distributed as food to men left hungry by an unnurturing caregiver. Gone is the mother who gives birth and who feeds, replaced by a self-begetting son who himself becomes aliment.

In a nightmarish image of a derisory Parousia, Mintié imagines returning to the streets of the capital, which before he had envisioned as filled with the corpses of men fallen in the battle of love. In the fleshless skeletons of “spectres fous” (303), Mintié multiplies himself as his victimized followers, those who would be redeemed by consuming his narrative – those whose souls, once saved, as Mintié says, would allow “le rachat de la mienne” (203). In a distant apocalypse, Mintié contemplates the sacramental remains of the hallowed dead, shattered vertebral columns, ancient skulls, dry bones ringing as they fall to the pavement. Fragments of bodies are broken apart like crumbs given worshippers in a mockery of the Communion feast, as their mystical transports resemble the convulsions of their “fièvre homicide” (303). Having fought over the “immondes charognes” of their despicable mistresses, they compete for bits of their savior’s flesh, a cadaver left twisted, repulsive, yet holy by the sexual torture that changes a man into an artist.

Like the writer objectified as his glory, the sculptor is re-created as his monument, a triumphant Pygmalion whose statue is a narcissistic reflection of himself. Yet the image of Mintié’s sublimation of suffering into art, and the artist into his renown, is not the one that closes the novel. At the end, the Christ who is jeered, spat on, and scourged is replaced by men still “fouettés par le plaisir” (303). There is no irresistible thrust carrying heavenward an author killed by lust and resurrected by literature. There are no works etherealized as their celebrity or immortalized as monuments. The only loss that Mintié mourns is the literary masterpiece he was incapable of siring. Instead of being enshrined in a pantheon of immortals, Mintié remains on earth in the aspect of his suffering materialized. The “immonde charogne” is the narrative he gives in offering to his followers – the book he hands them, saying: “Take, eat; this is my body” (Matthew 26. 26).

Notes

¹As Joseph M. Smith claims, every “work of art [...] ultimately recapitulates original loss and celebrates the original imagistic recreation of the mother.

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