FROM *TEXTE INACHEVÉ* TO *INTERPRÉTATION INTÉGRALE* :

THE CREATIVITY OF READING IN MIRBEAU'S *UN GENTILHOMME*

Every finished work of literature elicits from the critic a comprehensive hermeneutic gesture. When confronted with a self-contained plot, a resolved conflict, an array of understandable characters, the interpreter responds in accordance with his own quest for satisfaction, acting on an impulse to achieve what Dominick LaCapra calls "full narrative closure and theoretical totalization" (226). On the other hand, the uncompleted text sets readers on a different quest, launching them into extra-textual conjecture that can lead them anywhere and nowhere. A suspended narrative or elliptical intrigue, a bafflingly protean protagonist may frustrate the critic's task of completing the work through analysis. As the truncated work is mirrored in the reader, interpretation is inconclusive, nothing is made whole, and the text's capacity to signify remains limitless and uncircumscribed.

As fin-de-siècle novelist/playwright/firebrand Octave Mirbeau advanced in his career and his capacity for self-contradiction became more pronounced, he evolved an increasingly unrealizable aesthetic ideal of globalizing art, "un art enveloppant, incluant simultanément toutes les facettes des choses et des êtres" (Lair 42). It was an aesthetic that, in its refusal to compromise or choose, aimed to raise itself up, "se hisser jusqu'à ce niveau inconcevable, le tout" (Lair 31). Gravitating to the canvases of Monet, Mirbeau extolled the richness of the artist's vision, his ability to capture imperceptibly subtle nuances of light, his decomposition of objects into color. What was shrouded in fog was all at once illuminated by moonlight, so that nothing was fixed or familiar, so that everything became multiple, renewable, surprising, and fresh. The catholicity of Mirbeau's taste in literature, his ideological volatility, were traits defining an author who escaped definition, who fled the notion of self-consistency and unity.

Mirbeau knew that the writer identified with the clarity of his creation was exhausted and petrified, as irrefutable interpretations of his work became the inscription on his gravestone. For Mirbeau, the effort to finish was self-mutilating and impossible, as in Dans le ciel, where the painter Lucien's struggle to complete his picture leads him to cut off his hand.

In his later novels, Mirbeau consciously strove to violate the conventions of literary taxonomy, writing novels that portended "la mort du roman," penning travel diaries (La 628-E8) that questioned whether they were about travel or whether they were records of anything. Displaced by marauding animals (Dingo) and speeding machines, Mirbeau's narrator ceased to operate as the enunciatory center from which issued information that readers could process into explanation. Little by little, under the pressure to undergo "la mutation idéale […] qui ferait de l'artiste un homme total" (Lair 46-7), Mirbeau's narrative persona lost his value as a self-articulating consciousness that could be apprehended and recognized. Instead, the single speaking subject broke up into a multitude of voices, proliferating selves that were archaic remnants or idealized potentialities that expressed a desire to exist.

In their biography, Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet describe Mirbeau's project in terms of shrinkage and diminution, an epic work that, before it even started, had already dwindled down to the inchoate. "Tout d'abord, il a en chantier 'un grand roman qui aura pour titre Un Gentilhomme' et qui doit paraître en mai 1904 – comme si l'oeuvre était quasiment terminée, alors qu'elle était encore dans un état fort embryonnaire au regard du vaste project ambitionné naguère" (730). Yet perhaps in leaving unfulfilled the promise of his book, Mirbeau more pointedly defies readers' preconceptions about their relationship to the text. Published posthumously in 1920 through the efforts of Mirbeau's wife, Un Gentilhomme is an unfinished work that resists capsular interpretation, its chameleonic narrator a man who advances no opinions, has no political convictions, displays no foundational values that would facilitate audience identification.

Everything about Mirbeau's text works to upset expectations that reading is a transaction affording consumers the predictable satisfaction of self-discovery. In his novel, Mirbeau provides an illustration of what Hélène Cixous describes as the factitiousness of literary "character," a stable but

arbitrary entity that emerges solely "as the product of a repression of subjectivity" (Cixous 384). "The marketable form of literature," as Cixous concludes, "is closely related to that familiar, decipherable human sign that 'character' claims to be" (385).

In Un Gentilhomme, secretary-amanuensis Charles Varnat seeks to establish a relationship with his employer that mirrors the relationship between Mirbeau's audience and his story. Despite Varnat's pretensions to mimeticism and adaptability, the fact that he foregrounds himself as the focus of the narrative causes him to eclipse the gentleman who is the novel's title figure. Varnat's insistence on understanding the Marquis d'Ambrezy-Sérac, whom he projects as total presence -- wealthy, self-assured -- is predicated on an assumption that the gentleman's status makes him an object that others decipher, appraise, and admire. But the premise that interpreters are nothing until they are occupied by a text, that readers are empty until a character makes them full is belied by the relational nature of every character's identity in the novel.

Before assigning the Marquis the signifying prerogative that comes with prestige, charisma, and money, Varnat takes pains to identify himself complementarily as absence and dispossession. Nullity clothed in threadbare suits and obsequious language, Varnat is the fragile façade his confession demolishes. Varnat's self-impeaching narrative is an ecdysiast's performance, undressing him of the respectability he so earnestly pursues. Relating a story Mirbeau had told before, Varnat remembers going to school in a pair of his father's worn-out pants. Thin, stained, shiny, yellowing, full of holes through which his shirt tails protruded, the vieux pantalon du père becomes an exhibition of immodesty that makes the character who covets inconspicuousness and dignity into the spectacular object of others' derision. Afraid that a rip in his trousers will disclose, not his nakedness, but his non-existence, Varnat equates his character with "l'état de [s]a garde-robe" (59). The rich may still be there when they take off their clothes, but as Varnat reasons, "[p]lus on est pauvre, moins on a le droit d'être salement vêtu" (9).

But like a neutral reader, the unthinking, opinionless scribe uncontaminated by personality is a fiction that Mirbeau's fiction exposes. Even if Varnat's character is just a bubble rising to the surface of the unconscious, a perishable self formed only "to be, in the same instant, differentiated into a trans-subjective effervescence" (Cixous 387), he is still more than an empty vessel. Varnat is a mirror that accommodates, analyzes, anatomizes the other he images, producing flattery in exchange for trust and remuneration. In this way, Mirbeau's text models its audience, constructing the reader as a master at once mysterious and vain, singular yet multiple, peremptory but discrete.

On the other hand, on first encountering the Marquis in a state of undress, impressionistically disintegrated into a shimmering, dancing, hallucinatory image of wealth as unimaginable déshabillage, Varnat momentarily sees only inadequate signifiers that repeat and overlap. Collecting colored dots of nakedness into an image of the whole object he reflects, he turns stimuli into recognition: "je ne vis qu'un caleçon bleu, sur le caleçon bleu, une chemise bleue, sur la chemise bleue, un visage rouge, et sur le visage rouge des cheveux noirs. Et tout cela s'avança vers moi… C'était le marquis" (76). Recreating the text-reader relationship, Mirbeau's novel serves as the secretary to whom the audience's unconscious gives dictation. A mirror for hire, Varnat is charged with collating fragments of the consumer's identity into a complete, familiar, and pleasing picture. This is the transaction to which Cixous is alluding when she describes the reader as "entering into commerce with the book on condition that he be assured of getting paid back, that is, recompensed by another who is sufficiently similar to […] him […] that the reader is upheld, by comparison or in combination with a personage, in the representation he wishes to have of himself" (385).

Yet it is not just Varnat who is an unstable character. As Monique Bablon-Dubreuil has remarked, Mirbeau's "gentleman" is himself a figure in flux, metamorphosing from the genuine aristocrat of earlier times to the parvenu au château to the gentilhomme maquignon to the avant-garde anti-Semite. Bablon-Dubreuil rightly notes Mirbeau's nostalgic idealization of the imperiled aristocrat as an "espèce menacé," "une sorte de paradigme" (72), who structures narrative and stabilizes hierarchy. Operating "under the aegis of masterdom" (Cixous 384), such a character displays a regal transparency that affords readers a fixed point of reference by which to orient their reactions. Repressing awareness of the adventitiousness of fictional order and teleology, the

aristocrat exemplifies what Cixous sees as the benevolent despotism of the literary character, who projects into the text the sovereign interpreter identified by Freud as "His Majesty, the Ego" ("Creative Writing and Day-Dreaming" 441).

It is natural that Varnat impute to the Marquis a confident intelligibility that promises to facilitate a smooth relationship between the two. Thus, the reward for acknowledging the preeminence of "character" is the reader's reassurance that his hermeneutic task will be a simple one. In contrast to the secretary, whose torn pants threaten to reveal insignificance, the Marquis d'Amblezy-Sérac is nudity become meaning. Eager to organize and arrange an otherwise self-reading text, Varnat begins by emphasizing his own unremarkability: "je puis me résumer en ces deux mots: je suis médiocre et souple" (51). In this way, he underscores the energy, vitality, and colorful forcefulness of his employer, "la vie, l'intensité, le débordement de vie qui animait tout son être" (81).

It is significant that Varnat stops to point out the difference between the memoirs he is actually writing and the demystifying study of human irrationality that the observation of his employers has equipped him to compose. Discounting the volume he is in the middle of presenting, Varnat complains that past circumstances had not directed him "vers la littérature" (54). Ridiculing the classical conception of unity of character, the belief in "les règles d'une morale préétablie" (54), Varnat claims to have the insight necessary to depict man as he really is: changeable, unbalanced, illogical, impulsive, bewildering. Like the enthusiasm that sustains his authorial enterprise, the pleasure he takes in the performance of his job diminishes as he discovers that the Marquis is as vague and contradictory as the chaotic human animal whose nature is literature's true subject. "La vision fragmentée, désagrégée, que le narrateur donne de son objet d'étude," says Bablon-Dubreuil, "[…] exprime parfaitement, ensuite, les menaces de déclin à l'oeuvre dans le personnage" (85).

When Varnat first identifies himself, he is not bothered by the fact that the Marquis associates him with another Charles Varnat, an acquaintance d'Amblezy-Sérac had jovially mistreated at school ("ce que je lui ai flanqué de coups de pied au derrière, à cet animal-là!" [76]). Branded with the epithet of degradation, bearing the universal appellation of ignominy, Varnat is all the people ashamed to be themselves, the hungry man for whom a prostitute sells her body to buy food, a virtual male prostitute saved from ruin by his cowardice. Kicked, mocked, Varnat is the name of everyone who is the butt of others' laughter, the object of their abuse.

However, while Varnat may be too contemptible to be hypostasized as a character, he is insistent that the Marquis be recognizable as himself. Like a reader responsible for piecing together a miscellany of signifying elements, Varnat works to assemble the Marquis' identity from a jumble of public personas, confidential remarks, obscure personal correspondence. The frustration experienced by Varnat in his role as interpreter is exacerbated by a realization that the Marquis himself is not a person but a repertoire, not one but a cast of characters whose identities are like costumes. In the same way that Varnat had been the enunciatory instrument "d'un républicain athée, d'un bonapartiste militaire, […] d'un catholique ultramontain" (52), d'Amblezy-Sérac espouses the views, dons the apparel, and speaks the idiom of those to whom he ingratiates himself for reasons of electoral self-advancement. Varnat's conviction that the aristocrat is nudity as authenticity is shaken by the realization that the Marquis himself has a portmanteau identity, wears riding gear to impress admirers with his equestrianism, puts on peasant garb to remind voters that he is not too proud to wear "la blouse de France" (147).

Alternately aloof, vulgar, unforgiving, personable, the Marquis confounds Varnat with his tolerance of his gamekeeper's insubordination and incestuousness, with his political Machiavellianism, and his willingness to drink Calvados with supporters. A public figure whose identity is created as oeuvre d'art, he is a virtuoso at fakery: "Quel comédien!" Varnat marvels (148). But without a character as point de mire, the reader is left with no reflection. If Varnat sees himself as a partial, serial being whose actions are determined by "les affaires, les ambitions, la vanité stupide ou l'orgueil cruel d'un autre" (33), it is with regret that he finds himself mirrored in the Marquis, another actor who weds his role to its performance. Whereas Célestine had claimed to unmask her employers as hypocrites, "dont on arrache les voiles et qu'on montre à nu" (Le Journal d'une femme de chambre 34), Varnat rediscovers the multiplicity of his situational identity in the

variety of masks that the gentleman wears himself.

The hallucinatory procession of transient, freakish secondary characters that appears in Mirbeau's story is a fantastic representation of Varnat's desire for reification and security. It is for this reason that Mirbeau's unfinished work assumes the quality of a dream, with its directionlessness and seeming incoherence, its symbolic density and wish-fulfilling purpose. Stipulating the unknowability of other people, Varnat begins by soliciting the sympathy and patience of the readers he excludes: "Que le lecteur se montre indulgent à la futilité de ces premiers souvenirs […] et qu'il sache que ce n'est pas seulement pour lui que j'écris ces pages" (7). Confident only in himself as an interested consumer of his memoirs, Varnat makes his text a closed exercise in retrospection. But as it advances, the novel more clearly becomes a narrative of desultory experiences involving grotesque, caricatural representations of the protagonist's desire for structured relationships that afford inclusion and self-respect.

Having set out in the night to reconnoiter the grounds around the chateau, Varnat returns, feeling insignificant and humble, "si effacé, si perdu, petit reflet falot, errant comme une tache sur la somptuosité des murs" (25-6). Near the Inn Les Trois-Couronnes, Varnat glimpses through a window a wig-maker playing the accordion for his wife and two neighbors. Reminded of his childhood lessons in drumming, he likens the slackness of his early playing ("c'est trop mou… plus de nerfs, sapristi," complained his teacher [63]) with the wig-maker's sensual manipulation of his instrument. The scene the narrator voyeuristically observes is one of nightmarish intimacy, its participants lost in a trance of musical exaltation, "en proie à la plus violente crise d'idéal" (27). As the perruquier fingers the accordion, "grosse chenille verte," a collapsible phallus that expands and detumesces, his wife, "les seins libres et tombants, sous une camisole d'indienne mauve (27), sits nearby, transfixed, beatific, weeping. While Varnat defines professional relationships by his responses to a master's equivocal message, he views real expressions of passion as unclean and self-demeaning. References to the mawkish popular tune "Connais-tu le pays?" remind Varnat of his homelessness, his status as outsider peeping through windows, spying on demonstrations of intimacy as if he were witnessing a mystical vision or an untranslatable dream, "un rêve de blancheurs profondes et magiques" (27). Because others have wives and accordions with which to please them, Varnat feels oppressed by his state of dispossession.

An impediment to his effort at producing an identity that corresponds to the Marquis' is Varnat's realization that the gentleman also signifies with his clothes. Secretary and boss are not a complementary pair but two ends of a scale measuring skill at situational self-invention -– "une gamme," like the one that Mirbeau played, which made him, not an author who was organic, complete, and understandable, but "une succession d'avatars, des moins glorieux au plus gratifiant" (Lair 48).

An experienced observer trained in apprehending people and circumstances, Varnat easily deciphers the Marquis when he is home. Reading his furnishings, knickknacks, and tapestries, Varnat identifies "par une confession, l'orgueil un peu sot, l'ostentation vulgaire, le défaut de culture des maîtres du château" (75). But when d'Amblezy-Sérac departs on horseback to inspect his estate, arranging encounters with farmers, doctors, priests, political co-conspirators, the relationship between the Marquis and his secretary becomes triangulated and complex. In part because d'Amblezy-Sérac is a comédien who adjusts to the conversational demands of his interloctors, Varnat sees the Marquis' acquaintances as reflections of his employer's circumstantially determined role. Yet these relationships prove to be only variations on the one between the Marquis and his secretary. Situated en abyme, reader/text, aristocrat/subordinate, speaker/secretary form a chain of dyadic links requiring the subject to deploy what Varnat calls "l'ingéniosité polymorphe de mon intelligence" (154).

The reason that d'Amblezy-Sérac is disarmed by the cheerful intractability of gamekeeper, Victor Flamant, is that the latter's obliviousness to issues of rank and rules of propriety defines him as a person, not a persona. Unimpressed by authority and law, Flamant lives in a state of imperturbable amorality, rarely speaking, poaching the game he is charged with protecting, coupling with his daughter, Victorine, using his incest to articulate his economic and sexual self-sufficiency. Alone in his remote forest cabin, Flamant is already suspect to the highly socialized Varnat, for

whom the solitary individual is “quelque chose en dehors d’un homme” (132). Thus, the outlaw gamekeeper becomes an idealization of the gentleman, whose superiority should be so manifest that it requires no servility as confirmation. Impervious to pressures to conform, Flamant needs no appraisal by which to define himself referentially. Without an audience to limit him with their demands for self-reflection, Flamant is a man without an interpersonal identity. More than the poised, unembarrassed gentleman in his underwear, the loner frustrates Varnat’s impulse to analyze, setting himself outside the transactional frame of marketable identities. An exemplar of what Cixous describes as unbounded subjectivity, Flamant is more than a character since he is outside the human, projecting himself “into what does not yet exist, […] into the unheard-of” (Cixous 383).

Others of the d’Amblezy-Sérac’s contacts are fleeting, diminished, domesticated versions of the Marquis himself, smaller, simplified manifestations of the breezy, elusive figure d’Amblezy-Sérac seems in public. Reading for meaning, Varnat peoples the world of his narrative with embodiments of his longing for stable points of orientation, reducing the rich signifying potential of the Marquis by dissolving him into a collection of roles that mirror him in his acquaintances.

Appointed by the Marquis as editor of Le Cultivateur normand, Alcide Tourneroche, like his publication, becomes a propaganda organ for the anti-republicanism that d’Amblezy-Sérac adopts to further his political career. Mirbeau is careful to picture Tourneroche as another unprincipled opportunist like Varnat, quick to jettison old views in favor of others that are more advantageous, sweeping leftist brochures, pictures of scantily dressed dancers off his desk and replacing them with scapulars and rosaries. Whereas Varnat had believed that he could read the Marquis in his walnut furniture, d’Amblezy-Sérac expresses his identity through the people he hires to narrate him. To the extent that the fiction of the Marquis’ character is representative of the novel, the subject of Mirbeau’s text is the strategy by which it signifies. Indissociable from his insistence on commanding attention, harnessing popular sentiment, changing his mind, reinventing himself for purposes of expediency, d’Amblezy-Sérac is no one. Constant only in his inclination to inconstancy, he dissolves into a pointillist tableau, colored dots of momentary significance. Intent only on conditioning others to accept his mutability, the Marquis is the fertility of the polysemic text, the character who exposes his character as a mirage.

Tourneroche himself dispels the impression that one is knowable by his history. While Mirbeau despised the national treasures, canonical works of literature, and museum pieces that crushed aspiring artists beneath the weight of their aesthetic conservatism, Tourneroche liberates himself from the past by recasting it as a story that can by modified at the whim of the teller. Brandishing the camera as a tool of authoritative interpretation, Tourneroche exposes the ideological underpinning of representational realism, invalidating the idea that what is visible is what is true.

Marketing to clients their glamorized reflections, Tourneroche also assembles shocking collages, pictures of prostitutes juxtaposed with photographs of bishops and seminarians, "des têtes de prélats les plus connus à qui il donnait […] des rôles mouvementés et scabreux dans des scènes d’une intimité excessive” (158). Whereas the secretary’s nomadic existence makes him depend on employers to define a provisional identity, others are themselves because they stay where they belong, enjoying continuity based on a sense of self as topos. “[P]hotographe ambulant” (157), Tourneroche crisscrosses France “avec son appareil,” uprooting the subjects he recontextualizes as other people, overturning hierarchies, blurring boundaries, projecting clients into incongruous new settings, compiling albums as visual documentation of a disordered world.

In itself, the frequency of the Marquis’ sorties from the chateau foregrounds the emerging theme of itineracy as a force subversive of identity. Recombinant images of the Marquis carousing with peasants, upbraiding subordinates, cajoling a lecherous priest, patronizing a pious country doctor represent him as a collection of disconnected snapshots. Varnat, who had tried in vain to equate impecuniousness with alterity and riches with selfhood, realizes that the gentleman has the resources that allow him to be versatile.

The last of the supernumeraries to appear in Varnat’s narrative is the caricatural projection of the secretary’s desire to read nobility as ipseity, gold, monarchism, and self-possessiveness. Friend and fellow-royalist, Baron Grabbe is an aristocrat incapacitated by his refusal to stay home, a

man who, while jumping over a ditch on his horse, "s'était fendu le rectum" (153), and who, one night, after over-indulging in the Marquis' "fine champagne," pleads for "un c… en or pour le service du roy!" (153). Of course, the fixity of aurefaction is what Varnat believes the gentleman's status should confer, meaningfulness as currency repaying good interpretation. But the fantasy of the gleaming seamlessness of whole books gives way to a nightmare of fissuring, deciduousness, and porosity – disposable personas, rectal tears, self-fictionalization as disguise, suspended gestures, travel and writing as dispersal.

Toward the end, Varnat's narrative begins to founder as he is increasingly perplexed by the incoherence of d'Amblezy-Sérac's correspondence, his dilettantism, the banality of his ideas. A figure for the novel, the Marquis frustrates Varnat's hermeneutic practice, seeming shallow, elusive, unreadable, empty, "très ignorant, sans aucune lecture" (156).

The incompleteness of Mirbeau's text invites a theoretical dispersion that mimics the vagrancy of d'Amblezy-Sérac's existence. Unfitted with a gold-plated rectum, the end of Un Gentilhomme is another disturbing orifice out of which passes the infinite possibility of the next unwritten sentence. Mirbeau's strategy for approaching the ideal of global art is to stop writing, making a paucity of text provoke a super-abundance of interpretation. Schooled by Mirbeau's ambiguous work, the artists who make everything are revealed to be his readers.

Ultimately, d'Amblezy-Sérac mistakenly concurs with his secretary in linking the essence of who he is with the place that he is from. Instead of a horseman, the Marquis describes himself as a plant rooted in the soil of Sonneville: "j'éprouve comme une sensation pénible… presque douleureuse, d'arrachement, chaque fois que je pars d'ici" (166). Having no sense of situational history in Paris, he regards the capital as the setting for a part of his life's narrative that no one can author. Rather than defining himself as master of the interpersonal hunt, trapping others with his glib congeniality, he feels he is the prey of intrigues and responsibilities that must be managed, "sans quoi il me dévoreraient comme un lapin" (167). A procession of duties, worries, business and political concerns makes his future life as unimaginable to him as it evidently was to Mirbeau: "Non… c'est vrai… je n'en vois pas la fin" (167).

But there is no need for an end, and the Marquis' autochthonic nostalgia for castle and land proves as ephemeral as everything else about him. Departing from the ancestral domain for "le terrain de la lutte et de l'ambition" (168), d'Amblezy-Sérac breaks with the past to take possession of the city with its innumerable possibilities. With the decentering of the narrative comes the final explosion of the character of the Marquis. Already unstable and vagabond at home, he vanishes into a profusion of disposable selves shaped by the need of the moment. Popular for his fraudulence, he is universally significant, becoming the property of everyone.

Yet Varnat had long understood that the Marquis' name was legion. Hobnobbing with farmers at a country livestock show, drinking wine, slogging through dung, examining horses' withers, the Marquis had multiplied himself: "A lui seul il était toute la foire" (148). Mirbeau's reflection on l'inachèvement ends by exposing the conventions of narrative closure, character stability, and detectable authorial intent, showing that where writing stops, reading begins.

Duped by his own imposture, d'Amblezy-Sérac forgets that he is as many fictions as there are people who believe them: "comme tous les comédiens il finissait par croire à la réalité de ses rôles, et à les vivre" (148). A super-subjectivity in the sense Cixous defines it, the gentleman ceases to be a point of view, transcending the classificatory notions of character and identity, as his "I" becomes "always more than one, diverse, capable of being all those it will at one time be, a group acting together, a collection of singular beings that produce the enunciation" (Cixous 387). More than that,, Mirbeau's unfinished novel problematizes the issue of the enunciation itself, awarding everyone the right to follow the Marquis, with his "jarret souple" (170), up the vestibule's onyx stairs, permitting all his readers to write the next chapter of his story, inviting an unseen audience to produce wholeness as the fruit of their collaboration. As notoriety places the Marquis in the hands of the public, stealing an identity that is collectively refashioned, Mirbeau's starts the unfinishable process of moving to finish. Peripatetic and unassimilable like its title character, Un Gentilhomme describes the first step in the journey on the way to everything. Having been advised by the editor's note: "Ce roman est resté inachevé" (170), the reader embarks on the itinerary that is traced in

Mirbeau's work which, with its hero, marks "d'un commencement de légende fantastique son passage à travers les populations" (148).

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