

The Art of Verbalizing the Barking of a Dog :

Mirbeau's *Dans le ciel*

When chiseling an image or covering a canvas, Mirbeau's creative characters begin by trying to swallow the sky. In Mirbeau's impressionistic novel *Dans le ciel*, the sky is a topological representation of the artist's brain, blue space seething with diffuse inspirations, inchoate ideas, vaporous cloud-things that take form and then vanish, shredding into evanescent shapes that break apart in the air. The journey traced by Mirbeau's unfinished novel maps the broken passage from conception to expression – from an artist's idea to the object embodying it. Between the head and the hand – between heaven and earth – the transmission of beauty involves disconnection and loss. A panoramic display of fantastic potential unconcretized in images and unbounded by frames, the sky is a painting of the dynamics of change.

Published in serialized installments in *L'Echo de Paris* between September 1892 and May 1893, Mirbeau's uncompleted novel first appeared in its present form only after being edited and assembled by preeminent Mirbeau scholars Jean-François Nivet and Pierre Michel, who then finally released the work in 1989. A novel imbued with Mirbeau's fascination with the aesthetic of the Impressionists, whose cause he advanced in his journalistic writings, *Dans le ciel* marks a critical transition from the author's earlier autobiographical fictions to a more mature reflection on artistic expression as an impossible ideal. Embodying Mirbeau's conception of the self-annihilating art work, *Dans le ciel*, by virtue of its long unpublished status, foregrounds the author's uncoupling of creation from the production of objects. The novel shows that beauty untranslated into imagery can only be experientially located in the creative process itself: in the exaltation of the moment of inspiration and uplift, and in the suffering endured in the artist's failed effort to give form to his vision.

Dans le ciel is, therefore, a drama of creative paralysis occurring in an intermediate zone of expressive effort, between celestial afflatus and mediation in art. Unable to picture the magnificent thing he intuits, the artist incarnates his truncated vision as a body from which the refractory hand is cut off. The image which can never be adequately communicated, the narrative which can never be satisfactorily concluded is represented by the dismembered form of the artist who fails.

Like the symbolic self-blinding of a painter "réduit à crever ses toiles" (Michel and Nivet 479), the enactment of the artist's castrating frustration extends to the disfigurement of a text detached from its audience. But Mirbeau's novel does more than say what it regrets as unsayable, conveys more than the uncommunicability of what is expressed as inadequacy. Certainly, *Dans le ciel* stages the tragedy of an artist "[qui] ne pourra jamais parvenir à exprimer, avec les outils gauches et infidèles que sont la main et le cerveau, les beautés 'impalpables' et les mystères 'affolants' de la nature" (Nivet and Michel 478). However, by interrupting his narrative, Mirbeau ensures that its consequences are as inexhaustible as the possibilities for the unwritten scene that comes next. If inspiration is a cloud that condenses momentarily, then disintegrates again into the purity of azure, then the perfect book is one that is uncompromised and unwritten. "Dans ce contexte," as Marie-Françoise Montaubin writes, "le seul roman susceptible de toucher l'art est celui qui s'anéantit" (52).

Yet the impotence of Mirbeau's characters also suggests the productiveness of the author, just as the story of artistic failure may succeed in its relation. Even when amputated from its audience, Mirbeau's novel exists as a formalized expression of nostalgia for the unexpressed and the formless. As an embodiment of fragmentation, the book achieves its aims, offsetting the theme of mutilation with the completeness with which the text's objectives are realized. Like Mirbeau's preceding novels showcasing artists who, like Jean Mintié in *Le Calvaire* (1886), are incapacitated by self-doubt, their genius stunted by narrow-minded parents and soul-destroying pedagogues, *Dans le ciel* features creators whose eyes society has blinded and whose hands society has paralyzed. If the creative project moves from vision to execution, it is aborted when eyes turn from the beauty of the world and focus on a self seen as despicable or guilty. Art is undone when the hand no longer

reaches for an ennobling ideal but is used in a campaign of self-punishing aggression – when one hand grasps a blade with which to sever the other.

Mirbeau's artist characters all are awestruck by the boundless, infinitely remote vault of the spangled firmament. All glory in the ever-mutating richness of nature and natural forms. Yet all also despair at the paltriness of their talent, the arbitrarily immobilizing reduction of nature to the lifeless fixity of a finished work of art. A telluric equivalent of the psychotic, turbulent cloud-matrix of the sky, the *fumier* is beautiful in its generative instability. Even Mirbeau's internal narrator, the self-hating Georges, realizes that the individual is a transient, defective work of art, a fragile envelope in which life is enclosed for a season before reverting to its original status as "[un] petit tas de fumier, [une] menue pincée de pourriture [...] où tant de formes, charmantes, qui sait? tant d'organismes curieux, attendent de naître" (50).

The humiliated insignificance of an artist contemplating the passing clouds, his expressive power crushed by the enormity of the spectacle he beholds, is paradoxically counterbalanced by the acuity of his vision, by his keen awareness of the world's indescribable majesty. Mirbeau's artist is not disabled by the immensity of his subject but by the self-deprecating gaze that he redirects toward himself. Visionaries evaporated into their rapturous appreciation of the sky, they become larval beings when they train their eyes on their own worthlessness.

In the symbol of the eye, Mirbeau interweaves his social commentary with a meditation on the artist's unattainable ideal. Crippled not just by lack of talent, Mirbeau's hero is also rendered impotent by the eye of an unforgiving father whose hostility he internalizes. The self who acts spontaneously, moved unreflectively by beauty, is petrified by the censorious gaze of a father who sees and disapproves. Banished from a maternal Eden, the artist is also cast down from the sky when the sun, heaven's eye, relays the father's visual rebuke. As Gilbert Durand says: "Le surmoi est avant tout l'oeil du Père" (170), transforming the artist as a seer into an abject visual object. Mirbeau redefines the sky as an inhospitable visual field in which the hated son is an intruder who is both unwelcome and unworthy.

Belying the apparent thematic inconsistency of the novel, Mirbeau's denunciations of family and school directly influence his analysis of the unproductive artist. In Georges' autobiographical narrative, he gives the child's belated answer to the father's injunction against speaking. Uncomprehending and disdainful, Georges' father had reduced his son to silent mortification. Darkening the sunny sky of paternal love, he had opened his child's eyes to Pascal's black void of cosmic indifference.¹ Georges' ineffectual attempts at creative expression come in response to the withdrawal of parental involvement. Absent a loving family, Georges produces language objects as surrogate companions, "[des] mots [qui] deviennent des êtres, des personnages vivants, des personnages qui remuent, qui parlent, qui me parlent" (51). The first interruption in the circulus of inspiration and expression – between artistic vision and the course of a pen on the page – comes when the father's ironic gaze stops his son's hand from moving.

No longer satisfying any creative aim, the eye and hand become weapons used by a self-punishing artist. The self-critical regard produces shame and not images; the hand does the father's work of inflicting pain on the child. There is a masturbatory quality to Georges' soliloquizing self-disparagement which produces the same disgust as his compulsive self-fondling. If creativity depends on the cooperation of the artist's head and hand, the disconnection of his visual and manual activity comes early in Georges' life with his training as a drummer. Potentially a form of musical self-expression, drumming is reduced to mindless automatism and is itself a kind of artistic onanism. Deadening thought, diminishing consciousness, subordinating artistic self-awareness to an instinctual response to rhythm, drumming accompanies infantries off to slaughter on the battlefield. A former regimental drummer, Georges' instructor maintains that the instrument, if mastered, can be good "pour s'entretenir la main" (35). Drumsticks acquire a special phallic power since they possess, as Georges' father says, "la magie des baguettes de fées" (36). It is not surprising that Georges rejects the instrument his father gives him, that he chooses a pen over drumsticks, and reattaches manual application to creative thought.

Georges' apprenticeship as a drummer, for which he receives his family's praise, is recounted as a bewildering interval of nightmarish alienation. A protracted hallucinatory episode, it

culminates in the onset of meningitis, which Georges experiences as the sweet quiescence of Nirvana. Georges recalls that in his single public performance, his music had reassumed its sacred property, reestablishing the role of art as doxological or petitionary – as a penitential lamentation or a hymn of thanksgiving to God. Liquefying his brain, leaving him in a state of incompetent confusion, Georges' illness formalizes the status to which his father had relegated him. Georges' subsequent inability to author a text confirms his father's view of the boy as an invalid unfit for anything. The masturbatory sterility of Georges' pathological self-deprecation represents the voice of the father which the child internalizes.

Hypostatized as a vengeful divinity, Georges' father is further conflated with the parish's patron Saint Latuin, a figure famous for healing the sick, resurrecting the dead, and ridding the countryside of sanguinary Druids. During a procession celebrating the repatriation of Latuin's relics, Georges' drumming provides accompaniment to a canticle of prayer, a hymn pleading for mercy from an inexorable sky-god, a fantasmatic projection of Georges' terrible father: "*O père tendre/ Qui pourra rendre/ Les cieux plus doux?/ Saint Latuin, ce sera vous,/ Ce sera vous*" (39).

In Mirbeau's novel, aspiration to the celestial realm of beauty uncompromised by artistic expression is an act of oedipal insubordination for which the punishment is failure. Being blinded in one eye, suffering the amputation of one hand enacts the retributive castration which is the price one pays for attempting to dethrone God.

Throughout the novel, Mirbeau's use of theriomorphic imagery suggests his characters' sense of inferiority or their dreams of elevation, their retreat to a plane of animal servility or their wish to take wing and fly over the world. From the outset, the creator's ascensional ambition is represented by the vertical axis of the *pic* on which his abbey-home is situated. It is similarly suggested by the positional uprightiness of the standing body and the raised hand, and by the grace of birds that are unfettered by gravity and whose dominion is the sky. The solitary stone outcropping rising up towards the heavens is a singular landscape feature in a terrain of "tranquil plains" and therefore betokens the artist whose incongruous idealism makes him stand out among other men whose concerns are horizontal, flat, and vulgar. Crowned by an abandoned abbey, the peak is a head housing the ghosts of spiritual yearnings, a wish for sublimation and transcendence, a desire to escape into a motherland of light.

However, in Mirbeau's symbolic geography, elevation does not bring increasing knowledge and clarity. Instead, the higher one climbs, the more chaotic are one's thoughts, as he succumbs to an acrophobic vertigo that sucks him into the unfathomable abyss of space. Paradoxically, it is the sky, not the underworld, that is associated with what Durand calls "[le] grouillement de la larve, [...] ce mouvement anarchique" (76). A swarming chaos preexisting the work of Genesis, the sky is the dark place unorganized by God's Word. In Mirbeau's novel, the sky is the locus of catamorphic change, the place of instability and turmoil where human intelligence holds no sway. As Georges' brain is liquefied by meningitis, his lucidity is dissolved by his view of the sky, "un ciel immense, houleux comme une mer, un ciel fantastique, où sans cesse de monstrueuses formes, d'affolants faunes, d'indescriptibles flores, des architectures de cauchemar, s'élaborent, vagabondent et disparaissent" (22-3). The phylogenetic commingling of plant and animal cloud-formations reinforces the image of the sky as a world antedating God's Creation. There, diffuse energies were still not harnessed to the formation of named entities and stable beings.

The artist oriented upward desires reintegration into this matrix where once all bodies and images coalesced. The desired ascension into the heavens is an expression of a death wish, like Georges' longing to disintegrate into the manure heap of "charming forms." It involves a reaccession to the infinite which floods the artist's consciousness before engulfing him its oblitative immensity. Like mystics whose experience of the divine is inexpressible, Mirbeau's artists know that apprehension of their ideal would still their tongue and stop their hand. The higher they ascend, the more irresistible is the impulse to burrow underground and shut their eyes to their material, whose enormity exceeds the capacity to describe it. That is why Georges feels his sanity is threatened in his aerie, where his mind is scoured by winds, his eyes are quenched by sun, and his ability to produce images is overwhelmed by the turbulent flight of clouds. That is why he prefers the platitudinous realm of brutes, why he seeks asylum in an inn where the air is thick with cooking

grease and tobacco smoke, where intelligence is dimmed by incuriosity and brandy. Fearful of the transcendent which sucks him up into bottomless blue space, he envies the blindness of the autochthons who share his summit-home, wishing to resemble “les taupes du ciel” (30).

Humbled, Mirbeau’s prospective artists no longer emulate the uranic sky-father whose censorious eye discerns the child’s unoriginality and clumsiness. Instead, the lowly creature with whom the character identifies is the maternal spider that spins material issuing from her body. Karl Abraham, in commentary on “The Spider as a Dream Symbol,” remarks on the ambiguity of the insect as a signifier of genitality. While noting that “the long legs of a species of spider (Phalangium) [have been] interpreted as phallic symbols” (326), he claims that more often the spider represents the castrating progenetrix. Not a benevolent mother supplying needed nourishment and shelter, the spider becomes the devouring orifice represented by her black body. The orality of the child is thus displaced onto the mother, and the one who feeds is transformed into a predator that eats: “Vois-tu,” Georges imagines *la petite araignée* as saying, “dans la vie, il faut manger ou être mangé... Moi, j’aime mieux manger... Et c’est si amusant!” (59). The spider may seek the warming comfort that comes from Georges’ lamp, but like the sky-mole, it also hides its loathsome body in the shadows.

The winged artist ensnared by the arachnoid mother in her web (“Les mouches aiment le soleil, elles aiment la lumière, les fleurs, ce sont des poètes” [59]) also symbolizes the writer entangled in his work. The painter standing at his easel, the writer sitting at his table are like the woman at the spinning wheel – producing linen, tales, or images. As Harold Feldman writes: “our word History [...] comes from a Greek word for adorning or embellishing something, and both derive from ‘histos’ – a web, warp, or loom” (262).

While, in Mirbeau, the father is metonymized as the super-ego’s watchful eye, an angry gaze embodied by the hand that smites, the mother is the fertile source of the objects she engenders, figuring the artist transfixed by the narcissistic contemplation of his works – captured by his *canvas/toile* as in the *toile d’araignée*’s sticky filaments. The art work striving to capture an unrepresentable ideal becomes a product of the artist’s own complacent self-regard. Fusing the eye and visual object, it reveals the blinded visionary, confining him to the terrestrial plane of his imprisoning reflections. Regressing to the anal stage and the pleasurable manufacture of fecal matter, the artist impersonates the mother creating life from her body. Artistic labor therefore ceases to be disorderly and dirty, and instead is intellectualized, acquiring new “elements of oral masochism and female identification” (Feldman 270). Whereas the artist’s transcendent movement caused his dilation into nature, he is henceforth concentrated in the generative source of his material. With his eye fixed on the omphalos, the originary point of his production, he is like the spider symbolizing “cette absorption de l’être par son propre centre” (qtd. in Durand 115-116).

Georges, whose most perceptive comments involve the cause of the artist’s impotence, discerns in Lucien’s anguished eye an imprisonment of the sky, sees an unreachable blue infinity circumscribed by the painter’s field of vision: “son regard était pareil aux regards hallucinants des figures de ses toiles, il ressemblait aux ciels tourmentés et déments de ses paysages” (81). Failing to capture the boundless celestial arch within his canvas, the painter instead is miniaturized by his own paranoia, becoming the microscopic nothingness on which the firmament’s blue pupil trains its annihilating scorn. Rather than escaping and taking flight in a moment of soaring triumph, the artist is condemned to rediscover over and over again the monotonous expressions of his limitations. In correspondence by Monet, a possible model for the central character of Lucien, one sees the incurable dissatisfaction the artist felt with his own work. In these letters, as Steven Levine says, there is a nagging repetition of language which itself is expressive of a compulsion to repeat, to begin again and endlessly rework the same material, to add the slashing brushstroke that simultaneously destroys what it creates. “The contours of Monet’s circular dilemma,” writes Levine, “are further sketched in his sense of the elusiveness of the thing that is perfectly complete in all respects; his disdain for the merely approximate and for those who tolerate it” (114).

Inarticulate wordsmiths, handicapped image-manufacturers, Mirbeau’s artist characters all resemble Lucien in their wonderment at the glory of a world untranslatable into art. Lucien’s creative disability is projectively assigned to the vagabond beggars he encounters one day on the

road. A blind vagrant and his mute daughter, they are synecdochically identified as silent, vacant spaces, as sockets and mouths pure in their emptiness, echoing and seeing nothing. In their presence, Lucien comes to realize that the only perfect art work respects the flawlessness of its subject and forgoes the effort to express it. In Mirbeau's novel, the greatest masterpiece is a suspension of the creative process, an intuition of something beautiful without the attempt at mediation: *voir, sentir, comprendre* without the futility of the embodying gesture. Contemplating the cleanness of unspeaking lips and unseeing eyes ("ce regard firmamental," "cette bouche d'astralité" [110]), Lucien knows the highest vision is the one he cannot capture: "ma main," he says, "s'est refusée à peindre ce que je ressentais, ce que je comprenais *d'intérieur*" (110). Yet there may still be a narcissistic mirroring of the impotent artist in his blank canvas. Another *artiste sans faire*, Georges embodies in his unwritten book an identity that he characterizes as "cette chose inconcevable et peut-être unique: rien" (50).

More typical is Lucien's effort to paint the gorgeousness of his aesthetic vision, which he substitutes for the transcendent object he is powerless to render. In the plumage of the peacocks with which he fills his atelier – in the green and blue ocelli that constellate their feathers, objective beauty sees the artist and returns his admiring gaze. The tableau he imagines of peacocks crossing fields of pansies paranomastically expresses his artistic motto – to see and understand. Art marries thought with vision in a picture of transparent associational symbolism – of "[d]es paons accroupis dans les pensées, des paons marchant dans les pensées" (123).

Yet in Lucien's choice of subject matter, he betrays his own ideal – no longer elevating painting to a level of celestial perfection but cheapening it by recycling imagery from the pre-Raphaelites: the gaudy meretriciousness of chrysoprase and chalcedony, a morbid horticulture of tubercular orchids and expiring lilies, an art of doe-eyed androgynes "en robes semblables à des queues de paon" (117).

A facile materialization of beauty unreachable in the sky, the peacock is not a bird but a fowl that struts and screams. Another image of the impossible work unconfined by frames and pages, the genuine bird in Mirbeau expresses the freedom of flight. Becoming "un simple accessoire de l'aile" (Durand 144), it vaporizes in the sky, unbound by a body that can be pictured or described. Mirbeau's imagery recalls the "pteropsychology" of Gaston Bachelard, "où convergent l'aile, l'élévation, la pureté et la lumière (Durand 145). In Mirbeau, the counter-aesthetic impulse is the attempt to ground the bird, sully its immaculacy by caging it in images. Bad art imprisons beauty in the effort to give it form. A denizen of the air, the angel is changed into a swan before being murdered by the peacock-hunter who appears in *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899).

Made audible to Georges, brush strokes on canvas resemble rifle fire, *des coups de fusil* that bring down lofty, winged things. Despising men who shoot at swans, Georges marvels at their hatred: "L'homme ne peut souffrir que quelque chose de beau et de pur, quelque chose qui a des ailes, passe au-dessus de lui. Il a la haine de ce qui vole, et de ce qui chante (58).

As Lucien transposes the artist's vision as the ocellus-pattern on peacocks' feathers, seeing the beauty of the object reflected back at the viewer, Georges, the prospective writer, associates another bird with language – the swan believed to die when its flight is transformed into song. A target of hunter-Philistines, the swan with blood-stained wings "était l'image même de mon rêve, et mon rêve est mort," he says (58).

Despite the antipathy for religion evident in Mirbeau's writing, his evocation of art as Dolorism and of the artist as a crucified Christ is already apparent in *Le Calvaire*, the author's first full-length novel. Thus, the depiction of the creator tortured by the practice of his craft, the image of his workplace as a Calvary or *pic* on which God's son is executed establishes a well-developed thematic pattern in the irreverent author's work. Conversely, deflation of the novel's Christological message is accomplished by Mirbeau's ironizing the artist's messianic grandiosity, by the masochistic commitment to his romantic and creative tribulations. Still, in Georges' identification with the swan as a symbol of whiteness, grace, and poetry, Mirbeau reinforces the novel's emphasis on sublimation and disembodiment, refinement of art's material into the insubstantiality of its expression.

The process of rarefaction that changes the heaviness of earth into the buoyancy of air is the

goal of Mirbeau's artists, and their use of theriomorphic images as universal signifiers conveys their view that creativity involves the practice of symbolization. For Georges, the poet is his voice since he resembles the swan, which is its song, death-music born from sacrificing flesh to language that transcends it. The artist's crucifixion culminates with his performance of a swanlike death-song. As Herbert Whone writes, this song "is the original sound, French *son*, or Son of the Trinity: it is the Logos or Spoken Word, of which the lowest manifestation is the sound of the senses, a pale reflection. Thus, the original Sound, the essence of purity, dies at the birth of the physical world, giving way to an earthly sound, described in the myth as a death-song" (183).²

From this standpoint, Lucien's amputation of his hand is not punishment for a failure to grasp, not an act of frustration provoked by an inability to match seeing with rendering. Rather, it is an expression of guilt for indulging the sacrilegious impulse to reach up to the sky, an attempt to embody beauty in vulgar images and profane forms. Chained to the ground by flightless poetry and discordant music, Mirbeau's artist has no place in the sky. Lucien may profess to deny the artist's alienation from an unknowable nature which, he insists to Georges, "n'est qu'une combinaison idéale et multiforme de ton cerveau" (83). Yet his aesthetic subjectivism does nothing to bridge the gulf separating heaven and earth, and has no effect in bringing the artist closer to an unattainable ideal. Limited to the conventional instruments of banalized words and shopworn images – forced to utilize oils and ink, Mirbeau's painters and poets still long to mediate celestial vision in sublime expressions, replacing language with air, the breath from God's lips, exchanging images for sunlight, the sight from God's eyes. "Comprends-moi . . .," Lucien says. "Ce que je voudrais, ce serait rendre, rien que par de la lumière, rien que par des formes aériennes, flottantes, où l'on sentirait l'infini, l'espace sans limite, l'abîme céleste, ce serait rendre tout ce qui gémit, tout ce qui se plaint, tout ce qui souffre sur la terre... de l'invisible dans de l'impalpable..." (114).

In Mirbeau's novel, the idealized sky as a symbolic locus of purity, perfection, equanimity, and emptiness gives way to the phenomenological sky, a chaotic and turbulent space roiling with insane shapes that take form and disintegrate, a demented brain filled with obscene, unintelligible images. The isomorphism of eye, mind, painting, and sky contributes in the novel to the idea of art as a state of disorientation, inspiration preceding the concretizing of images as dead precipitates, the excremental byproduct of the dynamic creative process. Describing this confused state, Georges likens his consciousness to "un grand ciel immobile, que traversaient, de temps en temps, des vols d'oiseaux chimériques, des fuites de bêtes éperdues, métamorphoses de mes pensées en déroute" (90).

Fearful of everything, Georges associates artistic exaltation with episodes of transient psychosis ending in collapse and exhaustion, as in the aftermath of his bout of meningitis, when he had also succumbed to "des prostrations semblables à la mort" (90). Whereas Lucien is maddened by the inadequacies of creative expression, Georges suffers from the effort to rouse the fantastic creatures of his unfinished ideas, the haggard beasts and chimerical birds that are the embryonic forms of his disordered thoughts. Operating in the opposite sense of his idealistic friend, Georges projects transcendent inspirations into the perfunctoriness of his daily existence. Yet despite their differing orientations, both men confront the inevitable cheapening of something noble in both experience and art. In his relationship with Julia, his concierge's daughter, Georges fits the poignancy of his romantic feeling into the triteness of sentimental fiction. Supplying the melodramatic love stories that Julia asks to read, Georges constitutes himself as both their author and their hero, creator and star of "de beaux livres qui font pleurer" (91).

Julia's spurious virginity, her affected modesty and alarm temporarily rescue Georges from his loneliness and self-disgust. A dove comforting a swan, Julia's gaze comes to rest on him "comme un oiseau se pose sur une branche morte" (90). But as the artist's desecrating consciousness turns lilies into excrement, Georges' sentimental fiction gives way to experiential disenchantment. No longer the diaphanous angel of Georges' dream, Julia is identified with her sunken eyes, her livid complexion, her greasy collar, and carious teeth. Animalized by her mangy scalp and thinning hair, resembling "les poils des bêtes malades" (120), she is further regressed by being likened to the vegetable specimen that symbolizes the poetry-destroying commonness of life. Like a wilted gillyflower, Julia is equated with the banality of the image that Georges assigns her.

Whereas the peacock objectifies the gorgeousness of Lucien's artistic vision – the beautiful ocellus mirroring the appreciative eye – the miserable flower that Georges contemplates reflects the “pauvreté végétale” of his own sterile imagination (120). Creative insolvency changes the brightness and clarity associated with the sky into images of lethargy and gloom linked to chthonic inhabitants of a shadowy underworld, the blindness of moles, the implacable baying of earthbound dogs. Instead of projecting glorious blooms out of the soil and into the light, poetry is a flower that collapses into its own root system, as petals and dirt commingle in the *fumier* of undifferentiation.

In its trajectory, Mirbeau's narrative describes creation as an asymptotic approach of the artist and his ideal, a near-fusion of the seer and his vision. But ultimately, the sky and earth never meet. From the window of the abbey on the summit of the peak, the heavens appear just as dark and remote. Ironically, the central theriomorphic image that Mirbeau uses in his novel is one whose archetypal role is to escort men in their passage from one world to another, the dog as Anubis who, like Charon, “passe les morts de l'autre côté du fleuve infernal” (Durand 231). However, in Dans le ciel, the dog locates no bridge between life and afterlife but only barks because there is no point where the earth and sky intersect. With its traditional reputation for fidelity and companionship, the dog is associated with the master whom it never deserts, whose presence is as constant as the hardships its owner endures. Semiotically situating it *en abîme*, Mirbeau takes the existential lamentation of a dog barking at the sky and imputes it to Lucien, as an image of the artist's need to express the inexpressible. Inconsolable, the hound bays at the heavens “comme la voix même de la terre” precisely, as Georges says, because one cannot paint “l'aboi d'un chien” (113).

The preverbal sound of mourning – grief before and beyond words – the barking of a dog is a primary response to loss. Increasingly, psychoanalysis traces the origins of creative work to an original loss motivating recourse to image production and language use. Separated from his mother, deprived of the nourishment from her breast, the baby cries, but over time, oral distress gives way to what Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok call “un auto-remplissement phonatoire” (2620). The mother's absence, the child's empty mouth are subsequently experienced “comme cris et pleurs, remplissement différé, puis comme occasion d'appel, moyen de faire apparaître, langage” (262).

While evolving into the aesthetic delights of language, the compensatory pleasure of phonation never brings an end to mourning. Desires for a prelapsarian repatriation in the garden express the same impulse to move backward, from speaking to crying to reexperiencing the peace that accompanies a restoration of the lost object. No matter how elegant the commemoration of the departed loved one, no matter how beautiful the elegy that an original loss inspires, hunger for the object can never be cheated by art. From this perspective, every creation reenacts a celebration of the failure to unite the artist and his subject. The creator's goal is not a perfect representation of his ideal but possession of the object that he incorporates into himself. “Le vide de la bouche appelant en vain, pour se remplir, des paroles introjectives, redevient la bouche avide de nourriture d'avant la parole” (Abraham and Torok 263-4). This is the utopia of infantile satiety that Mirbeau's fiction often pictures: the orchard, its trees heavy with fruit, a cloudless sky illumined by sunlight, a boundless lake in whose waters one finds rest. Lucien's ambition to paint the barking of a dog seeks to communicate the anguish that motivates creation of an art work, the pain that comes from being unable to return. It is because the sky is far away, because living beings are tied to the ground that men cry and dogs bark. While paintings and poems may be the intended bridge connecting heaven and earth, they are only momentary complaints, expressions of dissatisfaction that give way to silence and that dissipate in space.

In his autobiographical manuscript, Georges relates his own experience of abandonment that ended in shrieks and wails. An anxiously materialistic mother who had fretted over the purchase of an expensive, new house, a contemptuously emasculating father bemused by his son's discovery of the principle of artesian wells had been carried off during a cholera outbreak. Recast in the role of a caregiver called upon to soothe his terrified children, Georges had watched his parents suffer and plead until they had finally stopped writhing on their “lits souillés de déjections” (66). Recalling the scenes of battlefield slaughter with which Mirbeau's early novel Sébastien Roch (1890) concludes, the death of Georges' parents conveys the writer's outrage at the pointlessness of human existence and its dehumanizing end. Echoing the “râles des deux chers moribonds,” Georges had reacted to

his parents' loss by barking like a dog: "je hurlai de longues plaintes, de longues et inutiles plaintes, comme un chien perdu dans la nuit" (66).

Dispelled in the air, lost "dans le ciel," Mirbeau's long-unpublished novel is another eloquently inarticulate cry of artistic impotence, a book whose objective existence acts as an oxymoronic "affirmation de l'essentielle résistance de l'art à toute incarnation" (Montaubin 48). Already in *Le Calvaire*, Mirbeau's fiction described the preemptive aborting of all artistic undertakings. Textual residue left from the effort to say the unsayable, Mirbeau's novel completes the impossible project to contain the *rien* of its subject. From Jean Mintié in *Le Calvaire*, whose self-awarded glory comes from fame earned by writing nothing – from L'Abbé Jules, eponymous hero of Mirbeau's second novel (1888), whose pedagogy eschews education and proscribes reading – to later works whose heroes are clean-burning mechanisms, carburetors mixing the fuel of life with a character's aggression (*La 628-E8* [1907]), Mirbeau's novels act as engines that expel nothing as exhaust. Seeking to realize his ideal of creation as destruction, Mirbeau replaces the domesticated dog that barks with the wild dingo that kills (*Dingo* [1913]).

If, as Pierre Michel says, *Dans le ciel* expresses "une philosophie préexistentialiste" (9), the dog's complaint is like the rock that Sisyphus must forever carry upward. Animals demeaned by their instincts and corporeity, victims, plaintiffs, and rebels must never succumb to silence and defeat but must raise up the burden of their noisy discontent and throw it in the face of God.

In *Dans le ciel*, Mirbeau further refines his principle of art as ascetic denudation by having his characters reject their work as formal expression. Freed from words and images, released from books which sleep, spellbound, on library shelves, artistic inspiration remains, in Mirbeau's novel, on the level of pain that cannot be voiced in words. Like a crying baby, the dog is a man incapable of speech and untainted by artifice. Uncontaminated by style, the barking of a dog is true. Until it dies, the dog-man standing on the earth projects its terror, rage, and confusion into the blue, in an upraised fist of sound that accuses. Loudly refusing reconciliation or surrender, he puts his art of defiance into the air. When his life is over, he melts back into the manure heap, an eternal brown firmament where all life commingles. A bed of undifferentiated matter, the earth mirrors the sky-cemetery where still-born inspiration decomposes like clouds. But in Mirbeau, there is no interval of silence or peace before new life takes form and another artist arises, launching up the stones of his angry revolt, giving wings to ideals that in vain he casts heavenward.

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Notes

¹Not having read Pascal, Georges still senses his fragile, infinitesimal being: "Je vois ces effroyables espaces de l'univers qui m'enferment," he writes, "et je me trouve attaché à un coin de cette vaste étendue, sans savoir pourquoi je suis plutôt placé en ce lieu qu'en un autre, ni pourquoi le peu de temps qui m'est donné à vivre m'est assigné à ce point, plutôt qu'à un autre, de toute l'éternité qui m'a précédé, et de toute celle qui suit. Je ne vois que des infinités de toutes parts, qui m'engloutissent comme un atome, et comme une ombre qui ne dure qu'un instant sans retour" (43-4).

²Durand makes similar comments on the swan: "Jung," he writes, "rapprochant le radical *svan* du sanscrit *svan* qui signifie bruire, va même jusqu'à conclure que le chant du cygne (*Schwan*), oiseau solaire, n'est que l'isomorphisme étymologique de la lumière et de la parole" (173).

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