

PSEUDONYMITY, AGGRESSION, AND PLAY IN *LA MARÉCHALE*

Every pseudonymous creation is an act of oedipal aggression. By rejecting a paternal identity that demands to be honored and perpetuated, the author who writes under an assumed name seeks to free himself from responsibility to the past. When the writer who claims authorship affixes his signature to a work, he authenticates it and recognizes it as his own child. More than the genealogical marker that links a father to his offspring, the signature traces the provenance of a text that is the writer's identity made object. Artistic creation is thus an act of self-begetting. In his work, an author forbidden to choose his own parents is able to remake himself as the project that inspired him, as an idea wanting expression, as a child that asks to be born.

However, the bastard text sired by an author who denies paternity is an anarchic, fraudulent thing lacking an identity that has been structured by a father. Written for material gain, in the interest of buying food or making money, it is produced in response to needs for the security a mother can provide. Authoring a pseudonymous work is a primary process activity done in lawless defiance of the super-ego and its supervisory control. When it is issued under an assumed name, the text can lay claim to any lineage. Rather than being the offspring of a single, acknowledged creator, it becomes the accidental child of a multitude of promiscuous influences, the anonymous consequence of its own intertextuality. Fathered by everyone, it is accountable for nothing, and the themes it articulates and the ideological positions it takes are just so many masks drawing attention to the same illegitimacy they work to conceal. An object that disrespects its maker, the pseudonymous work betrays an impudence mirroring the impunity with which its author professes views that are unattributable to him. Renouncing a father in whose voice it need not speak, it invokes a spurious autonomy, expressing points without fear of contradiction, signifying anything without the risk of spouting nonsense.

In a foundational 1958 study of identity disorders, Phyllis Greenacre describes the impostor in terms that are applicable to pseudonymous writing. Unable to detach from an over-protective, often suffocating mother, the impostor entertains delusional fantasies of self-authorship, assuming a false name, disavowing patrilineal history, fictionalizing a past that supports his sense of limitlessness and omnipotence. "By placing the child in a position of definite superiority to the father – either through the mother's attitude alone, or by fate through the death or desertion of the father – there is set a potentially serious imbalance of the oedipal relationship, the child being able to assume an uncontested supersedence over its father" (Greenacre 369). Beyond allowing the author to invent disposable personas, pseudonymous creation expresses parricidal aggression and asserts an infantile desire for identity-changing and boundless universality.

Taking as its focus Octave Mirbeau's pseudonymously authored 1883 roman nègre, *La Maréchale*, this essay examines the psychological motivations and aesthetic consequences of acts of fictional inauthenticity. While Mirbeau was able to satisfy basic needs for food and survival by authoring such romans alimentaires, pseudonymous authorship also permitted him to shirk the limiting responsibility of singularity and selfhood, freeing him of the incapacitating super-ego requirements that had robbed him of his creativity. It is clear that, for Mirbeau, the primary relationship was the one existing between the situational identity of the writer of a given volume and a self-proliferating subjectivity whose potential names were beyond counting. In Mirbeau's case, the signatory for each work inevitably became the nègre enslaved by the demands of unity of voice. For Mirbeau, there were two choices. On the one hand, he could sell his talents to "riches amateurs en mal de notoriété" (Michel, "Octave Mirbeau romancier," 67) and thereby purchase the pleasure of producing words that had no source. Or by appointing himself as his own slave-driver and judge, Mirbeau could succumb to the crippling inhibitions that, rather than allowing him to write under his own name, prevented him from writing altogether. As Pierre Michel says: "quand [Mirbeau] sera son propre maître, et qu'il signera toute sa copie, il sera paralysé bien souvent par le sentiment de sa propre impuissance, parce qu'il tendra ses filets trop haut, comme disait Stendahl" ("Octave Mirbeau romancier" 68).

In Michel's account, Mirbeau developed a strategy for capitalizing on the notoriety he had

earned as a journalist-pamphleteer. Determining that it was “préférable d’écrire pour le compte d’autrui plutôt que pour son propre compte” (“Octave Mirbeau romancier” 67), Mirbeau elected to cash in on his reputation by marketing anonymity instead of his name. Learning to divorce writing from point of view, Mirbeau, at age 24, arrived in Paris where he began writing columns for the Bonapartist newspaper L’Ordre de Paris, professing opinions often antithetical to his own. Commodification of editorial texts as pure exercises in argumentation allowed Mirbeau to earn money by writing pieces that impressed his employer with their polemical fire but that, to Mirbeau himself, were ideologically neutral studies whose passion was counterfeit. “[M]achine à louange et à éreintement, comme la fille publique machine à plaisir,”¹ the columnist-for-hire is disengaged from his work, detached from his reader, as the provocatively cool textual body, like the prostitute’s flesh, is pimped by editors, handled by readers, and yet remains unsullied despite being offered up to everyone. Before occupying the identity of another, the impostor vacates the self, separates from a work that has no value except as a gaudy show. In Mirbeau’s posthumously published novel, Un Gentilhomme, personal secretary Charles Varnat describes a similar evacuation of a self subsumed to his master’s. Likening “domesticité” to “négritude,” Varnat experiences what he calls “l’abandon total de soi-même dans les choses les plus essentielles de la vie intérieure” (32). Before describing the untenanted identities of amanuenses and chambermaids, however, Mirbeau showed himself to be an overcrowded structure occupied by a succession of nameless narrators, those migrating through a book deserted by an author who no longer held the deed.

Yet despite enduring his humiliating relegation to the “prolétaire de lettres,” Mirbeau also benefited from selling his services to charlatan belletrists. “Faisant le trottoir,” Mirbeau could, at the same time, engage in the “divine prostitution” that Baudelaire had praised, losing himself in the multitudes, donning the stylistic costumes of Zola, Goncourt, or Stendahl before taking them off at the end of a novel.² The ludic production of disposable authorial personas must have been a liberating experience for a man whose super-ego formation had been disturbed by the harmful influence of an overbearing father and by a school full of austere, perhaps sexually predatory Jesuit educators.

In their biography, Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet chronicle Mirbeau’s unhappy sojourn at the collège Saint-François-Xavier in Vannes, documenting events that culminated in what they call “le meurtre d’une âme d’enfant” (31). Not coincidentally, psychiatrist and literary critic Leonard Shengold uses the term “soul murder” to refer to the molestation or abuse of a child, particularly when such experiences come at the hands of a parent. Models of circumspection, Michel and Nivet refrain from concluding that Mirbeau had been the victim of a seduction and rape similar to those he recounts in the story of his fictional counterpart Sébastien Roch. Nevertheless, the circumstances surrounding Mirbeau’s dismissal, the campaign of silence, evasion, and denial waged by school officials, the disappearance of school records relevant to the incident invite conjecture, to say the least. The possibility that Mirbeau conflated the illustrious sermonizer, père Du Lac, with the unctuous despoiler of children, the fictional père de Kern, is suggested by the similarities in their names and their roles at the school. “L’hypothèse est bien séduisante,” as Michel and Nivet conclude (44).

Yet given Mirbeau’s impugning of institutional authority, given his anathema for fathers as law-givers, military leaders, politicians, and heads of households – given Mirbeau’s rejection of paternal mechanisms of regimentation, coercion, and punishment, it is tempting to assimilate the Jesuit fathers at Saint-François-Xavier with Mirbeau’s biological father, Dr. Ladislav Mirbeau, “[h]omme d’ordre, zélateur de l’autorité et de la hiérarchie,” as Michel and Nivet characterize him (29). Rather than the ineffectual, delinquent, or dead father whose absence facilitates his displacement by the son in the oedipal relationship, it is the selfishness of a father “tout prêt à sacrifier son fils” (29) that might have prompted the parricidal project at the heart of Mirbeau’s fiction. Indirectly responsible for the soul murder Mirbeau might have suffered at the school in Vannes, Ladislav could be dishonored by the son’s relinquishment of his name. Even the decision to exile Mirbeau to the prestigious Jesuit institution had been intended to magnify the father’s name at the expense of his son’s, as Ladislav had sought to advance his budding political career – as “conseiller municipal,” “adjoint au maire,” and “conseiller d’arrondissement” – by boasting of his son’s enrollment in a

school where Mirbeau was held up to scorn by classmates for his non-aristocratic lineage.

In *La Maréchale*, defiance of super-ego demands that celebrity take precedence over profit and pleasure is coupled with Mirbeau's characterization of fathers as philanderers and mothers as misers and dupes. Broadening the scope of his social criticism to include attacks on all institutions stressing order over creativity, conformity over individuality, Mirbeau's fiction begins, not untypically, with an arraignment of the family. Child of his parents, Mirbeau expresses the fantasy of being author of himself, assigning temporary paternity to the writers who inspired him. Additionally, Mirbeau recreates Ladislas, who had sacrificed his son's innocence to his vanity and ambition, in the person of the duc de Varèse, whose daughter chooses an odious marriage partner in order to safeguard her father's fortune and reputation. As Mirbeau substitutes Narcissus for Jehovah in the ritual reenactment of the martyrdom of a child, both Mirbeau and Chantal de Varèse are likened to "Isaac sacrifié par son père Abraham pour obéir à l'ordre de son dieu" (Michel, "Introduction, *La Maréchale* 997). Projected on Chantal as the naïve piety and dutiful Christian submissiveness of the obedient daughter, Mirbeau's anti-clericalism, inspired by the Jesuits, reemerges in *La Maréchale*, where a bad father introjected as a pitiless god demands from his child a surrender of innocence and a loss of virginity.

In many respects, the pseudonymous author is the opposite of the impostor who usurps the glory of the illustrious man. Strident, exhibitionistic, self-exalting, insistent on basking in unmerited attention, the impostor seeks to eclipse the people he deceives, his loud voice drowning out the words of those who would expose or contradict him. Even when merged with André Bertéra/Alain Bauquenne, the signatory who had commissioned Mirbeau's writing of the novel, the latter remains anonymous, identifying with a cipher of whom, as Michel says, "nous ne savons rien," and who, after the publication of the books he did not author, "disparaît complètement des annales" ("Quand Mirbeau faisait 'le nègre'" 85).

In another strategy designed to undermine the father's authority, Mirbeau rejects the convention of the narrative voice as a clear enunciatory center from which reliable information issues. In *La Maréchale*, a multitude of often unidentifiable voices address the reader, uninformed speakers, intra- and extra-diegetic narrators who may be involved in or detached from the stories they relate. Diffused into crowds as the often inaccurate expression of popular opinion, the narrative voice is a collective one, a speaker unaccountable for the veracity of his message.

In Mirbeau's novel, the decentering of the narrative is especially obvious in the beginning and at the end. In the opening scene, set at the theater, Mirbeau recycles the conventional observation that, in a society given to shallowness and self-display, notoriety supersedes achievement, and the spectacle becomes an audience that contemplates itself: "Il y eut un frémissement dans la salle. Le balcon se bougeait, lorgnant de côté, pendant que l'orchestre, lui, se retournait carrément" (990).³ An inverted Cornelian drama, Mirbeau's novel showcases a hero whose weakness of character determines the tragic magnitude of his undoing. As in Corneille, the aristocratic name is both a burden and an incentive, a pledge by the present to uphold the illustriousness of the past. By assuming the name, the child accepts his duty to the father, acquiescing to his confinement in a prison of expectations, renouncing the project of free self-authorship so that he can obediently re-stage the glorious drama of his family's history. In Mirbeau's text, the duc de Varèse is a vacillating, weak-willed, and self-indulgent man, a character overshadowed by the portrait of his father that hangs on his mother's wall. By emphasizing the moral insignificance of the Duke, Mirbeau suggests that the true imposture is the counterfeiting of one's ancestors, the failure to contest beliefs that one is "le double de son père" (1000).

While Ladislas Mirbeau had broken with tradition in becoming a doctor, Mirbeau experienced the sense of professional continuity that had weighed heavily on his childhood. In his family, grandparents, uncles – all notaries – had, for generations, performed work whose purpose was to ensure legitimacy, succession, and the uninterrupted retransmission of what was entitled by the name. By choosing to write, Mirbeau had substituted the inauthentic documents of fiction for contracts and deeds. In surrendering the author's right to his signed work, he freed himself from the family's preoccupation with property as identity. "L'omniprésence du notariat, tant du côté paternel que du côté maternel, finira par devenir obsessionnelle quand Octave atteindra l'âge des grandes

décisions” (Michel and Nivet 23). When he relocated to Paris and took a job as a journalist, Mirbeau seized an opportunity for rebirth. Since his home in Rémalard had become a place in which the project of self-creation was obstructed -- since escape from the jail of filial obedience seemed impossible there -- Mirbeau’s emergence from the “cercueil notorial” (qtd in “Quand Mirbeau faisait ‘le nègre’” 81), had opened up a range of options to do anything and be anyone.

La Maréchale thus examines the unattributed utterance, the unsigned text, as both an expression of bad faith and an act of personal emancipation. Circulation of slander and innuendo was the business of journals like those where Mirbeau was employed. Corresponding to the disorienting proliferation of unfamiliar characters in the opening scene, tuxedo-wearing gossip-mongers speculating on their friends’ marital infidelities, is the dissemination of stories in papers like Le Moustique, which had reported on an encounter between the Duke’s mistress and his wife. The propagation of untraceable ideas and anonymous viewpoints makes the accuracy of information unverifiable. When everyone speaks and no one claims credit, rumor takes the place of the subverted institution of authorship.

The plot of La Maréchale follows the stages by which the duc de Varèse brings disgrace upon himself and his family. The metonymic/onomastic confusion of person and name in part explains the recklessness with which the Duke divests himself of his inheritance: the fortune, respect, and self-esteem that compelled him to be his father’s double. As the Duke squanders honor and money, his mother, la Maréchale, is an embodiment of avarice. Hard-hearted, vindictive, unmoving, “araignée tapie dans sa soupente de pauvresse” (Michel, “Introduction,” La Maréchale 972), she gathers everything unto herself, acquires properties and evicts tenants from the buildings that she owns. Colorful tales of heroism and derring-do evoked by the Duke’s name are offset by the Maréchale’s signature as authorization of transactions. Even the heedlessness with which the Duke seduces under-age girls pays a kind of perverse tribute to the father’s memory, recalling his motto “J’en ris.” The Maréchale’s horror of aristocratic profligacy drives her to empty buildings of their occupants and her heart of compassion. So while the lurid account of Varèse’s decline into ignominy is signed by his misdeeds, the dry text of his mother’s lovelessness is written out “sans titre, d’une grande écriture commerciale à peine tremblée, barrée en dessous d’un parafe” (994). Objectification of the self as a prise de possession suggests a miserly impulse to substitute acquisition for creation. But when Mirbeau consents to be Alain Bauquenne’s nègre instead of Ladislas Mirbeau’s son, the hireling’s emolument pays the debt of the child’s legacy.

To whom can paternity of La Maréchale be assigned? To Bauquenne or Mirbeau? Perhaps to Alphonse Daudet, whose stylistic trademarks Mirbeau playfully adopts: apostrophes to the reader, chapters bearing title headings, a fanciful intrigue, an implausibly sunny ending? Pastiche as literary impersonation may be motivated by admiration or derision. Michel regards Mirbeau’s pseudonymous early works as expressions of an unstable literary identity. Lacking the confidence to be himself or speak in his own voice, Mirbeau, in Michel’s opinion, could mimic Zola in La Belle Madame de Vassart or Stendahl in La Duchesse Ghislane. Aping masters whose techniques he borrowed, Mirbeau wrote under assumed names as part of a training regimen that prepared him to lay claim to books he would later sign himself, readying him, as Michel says in his flattering formulation, “comme un sportif de haut niveau, pour pouvoir, par la suite, voler de ses propres ailes” (“Octave Mirbeau romancier” 69). However, it may be disingenuous to suggest that decoupling style and identity, content and expression, was simply a stage in Mirbeau’s maturational development. Expressing himself in the persiflage of theater-goers, using the sly idiom of society gossip columnists, talking in the stilted language of coach-drivers, lapsing into confidential addresses to his characters, “pren[ant] à témoin le lecteur” (Michel, “Notes,” La Maréchale, 1261), Mirbeau moves from the impersonal anonymity of collective self-expression to a conversational intimacy that the conventions of fiction should preclude. Whose is the teasing voice that speaks to Chantal de Varèse, defying her to stifle her suitor’s protestations of love? (1061) Who reminds the audience that coachmen do not mind their bosses’ daughters, in an à part that is situated in the coachman’s own diary? (1119). If Mirbeau is an impostor who counterfeits Daudet, Daudet is not the only father Mirbeau makes sport of in his narrative. Style, then, is the password enabling Mirbeau to migrate from writer to writer, animating false identities that collapse when he abandons

them. Taking names, adopting techniques that he discards when he is finished, Mirbeau uses aliases that permit him to be anyone and no one, since, as the coachman, in quoting Buffon, remarks: "le style, c'est l'homme même" (1019).

One of the novel's central themes is unfaithfulness to the past, the generational disjuncture between fathers and sons. Preserved in picture frames or excavated from archeological sites, the precious detritus of history is profaned by being assimilated to modern imitations. As the duc de Varèse is inculpated for being both similar to and different from his father, Chantal feels at once flattered and embarrassed by being likened to the sea-foam-born Aphrodite Anadyomène as she appears in her lover's pastel sketch. For Chantal and her grandfather, the museum/workshop used for reconstruction of Greek sculpture, for repair of the architectural remains of ancient Eleusis is not a laboratory for scientific study but a site for love trysts, a romantic hideaway decorated with painted oceans, candy-colored rocks, and trompe l'oeil horizons. Like old M. Baccaris communing in seclusion with "ses amours fragiles, bronzes, marbres et terres cuites" (1012), Chantal mocks the paternal respectability of history by using it as a backdrop for narratives of seduction. For her and her grandfather, Greek artifacts are employed as stage props, and a chariot of victory is converted to a wedding carriage. In their conversations, Greek words are adopted as terms of endearment, the serious text of the past is trivialized as a modern-day epithalamium, and careless pseudonymity replaces accurate identification.

Unauthenticated by his name, Mirbeau's intrigue loses its seriousness: the drama of the Duke's descent into suicidal infamy, the prospect of his vernal daughter's despoliation by the vile, obese Varon-Bey convey no sense of urgency. Framed in the opening scene as a theatrical spectacle to which no one pays attention, the story references its own fictional inconsequentiality. Malefactors are destroyed, misers and lechers suffer miraculous heart failures, as the gladdening deaths of villains prepare the way for a rehabilitation of the misguided and a triumph of virtuous innocents. Absence of the true name authorizes the sacrifice of verisimilitude and an abandonment of the real. The writer who would later become an unflinching chronicler of the rape of children (Sébastien Roch), the miseries of sexual obsession and the monstrosity of war (Le Calvaire) is free as Alain Bauquenne to picture virgins rescued by their protective stars and guardian angels. By murdering the father as unpalatable truth, Mirbeau retreats into fabulism and the consolations of make-believe.

One may understate the implausibility of the novel's happy ending, alleging that the plot obeys its own internal dynamic and that the evil characters are brought down by their own tragic flaw (hamartia). One may emphasize the story's edifying message, arguing "que le véritable bonheur n'est pas dans la satisfaction de la vanité, de la cupidité ou de la lubricité, mais dans l'honnêteté, la vie modeste et tranquille" (Michel, "Introduction," La Maréchale 975). La Maréchale may be killed by the coldness in which she is petrified by her greed, "cristallisé dans sa haine" (1113). But her son, whose reputation leaks away in his dissolute obliviousness, is saved by un coup de théâtre, and Chantal, on the verge of being swallowed up by the adipous lechery of Varon-Bey, is spared deflowering by a miracle of the kind at which the irreligious Mirbeau would certainly have scoffed.

Yet if the pseudonymous writer is an improbable agent of benevolent destiny, his work retains a formal and thematic symmetry that makes it worthier of his name. Mirbeau's social criticism envelopes both the hypocrisy of corrupt aristocrats and the venal, scandal-trafficking sensationalism of the press that exposes them. He attacks both the dehumanizing avarice of la Maréchale and the calculating practice of charity as business conducted by the baronne Simier. Offsetting the acquisitiveness of one is the counterfeit generosity of the other, as the Baroness collects orphans, flood and fire victims on whom to bestow her sanctimonious beneficence. When the true name of charity is false piety and selfishness, the imposture that Alain Bauquenne signed extends from the book's authorship to its subject. Cheerful in its insincerity, the tone of Mirbeau's novel is one of light-hearted sarcasm. Commedia dell'Arte apotheoses of young lovers and their chastened parents, providential thunderbolts blasting malefactors invite an incredulous reaction on the part of readers, who, like the Duke's father, say "J'en ris!" or, like la Maréchale, who witnesses tragedy and sneers "Je m'en moque!" (1116).

While motivated by a need for money, Mirbeau's use of pseudonyms was also no doubt

prompted by oedipal fantasies of killing his father by rejecting his name. By association with the Jesuits to whom he had entrusted his son, Ladislas Mirbeau had perpetrated the crime of soul murder (“sexual abuse at the hands of [...] parents or of parental substitutes” [Shengold 534]), the account of which is later transcribed in the tale of Sébastien Roch. Isaac to his father’s Abraham, Mirbeau had been an innocent sacrificed to his father’s vanity and so had assimilated himself to his female counterpart, Chantal de Varèse, as a vierge à vendre whose eleventh-hour rescue had never taken place. Yet as circumstances changed and Mirbeau matured as an artist, he resumed writing under his own name, resurrecting the discredited father, reestablishing links to his familial past. Inconsiderate, feckless, and arrogant, the duc de Varèse is a humble, diminished man by the end of Mirbeau’s book – “assagi de partout, rapetissé à sa maigrelette santé” (1135). But he is no object of opprobrium, no monster as was his mother. In La Maréchale, Mirbeau’s ambivalence toward his father is evidenced by his splitting the paternal Imago into the figure of la Maréchale, the truly unnatural parent, and her son, an irresponsible father but also a victim of mistreatment himself.

In Mirbeau’s text, the duc de Varèse is spared the spectacular death visited on the other villains. While the loss of his reputation and sexual charisma are ego wounds inflicted on an identity sullied by his crimes (“cette fange répandue sur le nom de Varèse exécré” [1114]), he survives as a reformed version of his overweening self. Indeed, the Duke may be the instrument of authorial retribution, murdering his mother with indignation, filling her with outrage so great that it stops her heart, provoking her maid to scream at him accusingly “parricide!” (1118). Yet despite her foolishness and sentimental religiosity, it is Chantal de Varèse who is the true heroine, as her goodness effects the salvation of her compromised progenitor. As Mirbeau ironically suggests, it is forgiveness of the father that is the most castrating revenge.

Having begun by circulating the ubiquitous hot breath of rumor, Mirbeau’s narrative concludes by speaking in the voice of the wind. “Poetic animism” in the style of Daudet (Michel, “Notes,” La Maréchale 1271), the dialogue between the plane trees and the breeze recaptures the tenor of the conversations at the theater -- prying, indiscreet, inquiring into others’ business. “Hou! Hou!” gasps the wind after chasing Chantal’s carriage. “Heu! Heu!” sigh the plane trees, when a gust lifts the curtain, affording a glimpse of the passengers inside: a pretty young girl and her bespectacled, red-haired governess.

Authorial identity once authenticated by the signature is multiplied as others’ names, scattered to the winds as the symbol of the omnipresence of unknown voices. As a figure for the pure ideological neutrality of messages without content, the wind is most audible when it blows through other things. Those like Alain Bauquenne/ André Bertéra -- mysterious, undocumented figures whose fate is unrecorded -- are like trees through which Mirbeau blows so that he enables them to resonate. Innocuous zephyrs themselves, other writers inflate Mirbeau momentarily, inspiring him with their ideas before they vanish again into the empty sky.

Are Mirbeau’s romans nègres simply studies in the ephemerality of literary influence? At the end of Les Vingt et un jours d’un neurasthénique, Mirbeau’s narrator remonstrates with his friend, the pessimist Roger Fresselou, about the effects of the wind as afflatus. Other people’s thoughts and insights are passing disturbances in the atmosphere; they have no lasting effect, in Fresselou’s opinion. Ideas are winds that shake a tree, causing its leaves to tremble. But then the calm returns, “l’arbre redevient immobile comme avant... Il n’y a rien de changé.” Disagreeing, Mirbeau’s narrator says the wind is full; it is a dynamic force that transforms and inseminates: “Le vent est plein de germes, il transporte les pollens, charrie les graines... il féconde” (369).

The freedom to experiment with the themes and styles of his fellow-writers was itself a fecundating experience for the fledgling novelist. At the end, it does not matter if warblers, wind, and trees chatter of Chantal’s approaching wedding. Adumbrations of the serious themes that would become the mature writer’s trademark appear in La Maréchale: religious hypocrisy, unmotivated cruelty, lust, “le monstrueux égoïsme des classes dominantes,” society’s incurable materialism, “son culte du veau d’or” (Michel, “Quand Mirbeau faisait ‘le nègre’” 95). As they would in subsequent novels, the same inflexible laws of a despairing realism structure the depiction of a world in which goodness is infirmed by stupidity, and vice is usually triumphant. It is ironic that the same rage that fueled Mirbeau’s oedipal project to reject the paternal past should have also inspired him to

experiment with the multiple fictions made available in the present, motivating his love of self-contradiction and his indulgence in palinodic inconsistencies. Nègres may pretend to speak in the voice of their masters; impostors may steal the words to which their true selves do not entitle them. Similarly, the pseudonymous author wails and soughs, whispers and insinuates, blasts and laughs like the wind. Originating everywhere, he is Echo and Proteus, the polyphonic harmony of all the people he mimics. Writing under their names, in their voices, with their styles, Mirbeau makes music, “il fait ses gammes” (Michel, “Quand Mirbeau faisait ‘le nègre’” 99). Having moved from the trauma of soul murder to the emancipating play of authorship without responsibility, Mirbeau sells his name and, with the wages he earns, purchases a new freedom -- the freedom to fantasy and invention, implausibility and optimism, the joy of drawing on vast repertoires of imaginary lives.

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Notes

¹Octave Mirbeau, “Le Chantage,” Les Grimaces, September 29, 1883, qtd. in Michel, “Quand mirbeau faisait ‘le nègre,’” 101.

²Michel enumerates the writers who influenced Mirbeau during his career as a pseudonymous author: “Balzac, Barbey, les Goncourt, Benjamin Constant, Daudet, et probablement beaucoup d’autres, ont été lus et médités et sont mis intelligemment à contribution” (“Octave Mirbeau romancier” 69).

³Dans sa “Journée parisienne” du 22 avril 1881, dans Le Gaulois, Mirbeau-Tout-Paris montrait que le public allait au théâtre pour des quantités de raisons – s’exhiber, potiner, lorgner, etc. – qui n’avaient rien à voir avec l’art dramatique” (Michel, “Notes,” La Maréchale 1259).

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