

UTOPIANISM AND PERVERSION

IN MIRBEAU'S *LE JARDIN DES SUPPLICES*

Notorious for its “ultraviolence,”¹ Octave Mirbeau’s 1899 novel *Le Jardin des supplices* continues to elicit from audiences unusually intense reactions. “Ne l’a-t-on pas taxé,” as Pierre Michel asks, “d’immoralité, d’obscénité, et même de sadisme et de pornographie?” (132). Because of the unmatched explicitness of its descriptions of bloodletting, critics themselves are subjected to the torture of reading Mirbeau’s text. Apart from its graphic images of crucifixions, flayings, and rectal invasions by rats, Mirbeau’s tale also intrigues readers because of its political and psychological ambiguity, featuring, as it does, a “decadent/naturalist nexus of obsessional themes [which] attain such grotesque excess that readers find themselves wondering whether or not to consider the excess parodic” (Bernheimer 91-2).

Like the prisoners in the Chinese bagnio whose bodies are artfully cut up and rearranged in monstrous new configurations, Mirbeau’s narrative can also be dismantled into constituent fragments and then reassembled, “afin,” as Michel says, “d’en exposer séparément des morceaux qui, isolés, acquièrent une toute autre signification” (136). In Mirbeau’s novel, governments, like bodies and books, are susceptible to hypothetical disassembly. Rotten with cynicism and greed, societies can be decomposed so that their moral corruption may serve as a regenerative principle for their reformation as a future utopia.

What Bernheimer sees as a flaw in the novel, the structural fissure separating the story’s outdated political message from the author’s more engrossing fantasmatic concerns, may instead offer evidence of an underlying thematic complementarity. The polemical critique of an oppressive state ruled by militarists, charlatans, colonialists, and anti-Semites invites the salutary violence, the purifying destruction that would prepare the way for growth and renewal. Mirbeau, the anarchist, therefore recasts himself as a societal torturer, mirroring in his narrative the disintegration of a failed political apparatus that is broken down, cut to pieces with the saw of anti-positivist satire, burned by ideological vitriol, dismembered by attacks on disabling institutions. Repeatedly propounded by Clara, the novel’s central argument – that putrefaction fertilizes soil, that death excites a sexual response – is seemingly revalidated on the novel’s political level. As this essay argues, the Sadian violence that Clara advocates may reflect the anarchist’s disordering energies, since both aim to dissolve boundaries, shatter stable structures, break apart whole bodies into their separate parts, and overturn systems and values, thereby “reconstituting chaos from which a new kind of reality will be brought forth” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 393).

Torturers, as they are featured in Sade and Mirbeau, work toward the same goal as the anarchist, embracing destruction as a way to begin anew. In his study of utopian thinkers, psychologist Joel Whitebook traces the desire to reform society to the pervert’s rejecting his oedipal subordination to a phallically mature and authoritarian father. Rather than acknowledging his smallness and inferiority – rather than renouncing his wish for incestuous union with the mother – the pervert refuses his father as an ego ideal, one whom only time and maturation will allow him to emulate. The value of growth, self-betterment, patience, and effort required of the boy to become like his father can be found in Zola’s naturalist recognition of hereditary continuity, his affirmation of the importance of discipline, work, and progress. Unlike the positivist, who admits the possibility of success and invests in the promise of the future, the pervert is oriented toward a mythical past where time stands still and happiness is immediately available. Advocating the destruction of society’s hierarchical structure, he longs to return to an earlier, egalitarian way of life in which humility, labor, and delay do not stand in the way of instantaneous gratification. The pervert’s dream of an atemporal realm of infantile pleasure suggests that “the postulation of the origin-as-goal” [may] “*as such* [be] utopian” (Whitebook 427).

Superficially structured by the opposition between an Occidental model of government exploitation and injustice, and an Eastern model of instinct and spontaneity, Mirbeau’s novel stages

a conflict between what Bernheimer calls “bad decadence” – epitomized by “the negative, constricting qualities of European culture” – and “good decadence” – offering “the freedom of transgressive desire encouraged by Chinese culture” (95). However, all decadence, by definition, is situated at the end, so that Mirbeau’s narrative is condemned to follow an inverted chronology as his characters are motivated by retrospection, nostalgia, and self-blame.

Le Jardin des supplices begins when an initially emboldened and later chastened pervert incriminates the decadent world from which he has recently been emancipated and yet returns to at the end. As the novel opens with a Frontispiece featuring post-prandial conversation among academics, scientists, and philosophers, Mirbeau describes the typically decadent movement from consumption to expatriation, as the pleasures of the mouth change from the oral to the verbal. Yet discussion of racial, aesthetic, instinctual, and state-sanctioned murder also offers satisfactions that stimulate hunger for new aperitive objects. Full of dinner, the men enjoy talk that whets their appetite for more food, so when the intra-diagetic narrator prepares to tell his story of the Torture Garden, his host calls for additional oral objects, “demanda de nouveaux cigares et de nouvelles boissons” (178).

The premise of the novel is the desire by Clara’s lover to leave and then return to the Western world of politics and business – a world where pleasure is delayed and sublimated into discourse. The utopian aim of Mirbeau’s text initially seems to be the abolition of institutional mechanisms of corruption that promote criminal opportunists like Eugène Mortain and wizened procuresses like the ignominious Madame G. Mirbeau begins by targeting the perversion of traditional systems of exchange: prostitution that dispossesses women of their flesh as commodity, demagoguery that exalts Mortain’s vacuous grandiloquence, “son charabia parlé,” “la suicidante pluie du vocabulaire politique”, which echo and celebrate an “incompétence universelle” (194). Indeed, the reason that the narrator repatriates himself is that France is the place where he is able to talk. He abandons Clara’s paradise of ineffable delights and unspeakable horrors, exiles himself from the realm of primary narcissism because, as Whitebook says, eliminating “the gap between the ego and the ego ideal through immediate gratification would eliminate symbolization and the cultural achievements of which it is the basis” (431).

On the one hand, Mirbeau uses Clara to explore the consequences of an inexpressibly amnesiac fusion of subject and object. On the other, he uses the narrator to articulate the flaws in the patriarchal world of commerce, religion, and law. It is this thematic and structural division that discomfits Bernheimer, problematizing the meaning of Mirbeau’s text, which begins as a political allegory and ends as a thanatotic fantasy shaped by the author’s unconscious drives.

The pivotal moment in the novel comes precisely when the narrator reassesses the value of his speech. Having been conditioned to view language as a vehicle for imposture and self-inflation, he breaks down when talking to Clara, rejecting deception, tearfully admitting the spuriousness of his scientific mission to Ceylon, acknowledging the falseness of his credentials as an embryologist. Thus, the movement backward from an oedipally structured society based on hierarchy to a simpler world of spontaneity and instinct comes when the narrator identifies language with truth.

In her analysis of the sources of artistic creativity, Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel notes the prevalence of charlatanism among those she classifies as perverts. In the world of Eugène Mortain and his colleagues, there are no respectable fathers, no ego ideals worthy of embracing, no principled tradesmen, no honorable statesmen or reputable scientists. Duplicity and fraud are so commonplace that even the effort to cover them up is deemed unnecessary. No only does the son try to displace the father, “due,” as Chasseguet-Smirgel says, “to the faulty introjection and assimilation of the paternal attributes” (74). Additionally, as fathers are equated with government ministers who vaunt their dishonesty, the normal super-ego functions of supervision and censure are suspended. This is so because Mortain and his ilk inhabit a world of undisguised anality, in which concupiscence and money-lust are so pervasive that they no longer need to be masked or hidden. Political office-holders who crisscross their district, proclaiming “J’ai volé... j’ai volé” (185), trumpeting their corruption along roadsides and in town squares relativize truth’s value by proclaiming the truth of their dishonesty. Beloved of constituents whose thievery they consecrate, politician climb to ever higher positions in a government hierarchy while falsely asserting their

support of a democratic rule by liars.

The confusion of high and low, father and son, paternal phallus and fecal stick, virtue and money, intends restoration of an original state of horizontality and homogeneity, undifferentiation and disorder, free of law and inequality, the world to which the utopian anarchist longs to return. The removal of barriers and the violation of boundaries intend a mixture of subject and object, and, “in the case of murder,” an end of the separation of “the molecules in the body from each other” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 3). But as Mirbeau suggests, reestablishment of a primordial reign of love and death also entails the obsolescence of art, the elimination of literature, the end of his authorial practice, and the disappearance of language. Despite its scathing satirical indictment of French society sick with scandal and vice, enfeebled by the Panama affair and the Dreyfus controversy, Mirbeau could continue to work only in a decadent world of moral invalidism. Like the narrator, he must abandon the lush realm of peonies and peacocks, depart from a garden whose atrocity and beauty strike man dumb, in order to reenter the gray precincts of late nineteenth-century Europe, a society choking on cigar smoke and stale conversation.

When the narrator admits to Clara his elaborate imposture, confessing that he is not really a scientist dispatched to sift through the pelagic ooze in search of the primeval gastropod, he renounces the search for origins in his life and its narration. At first, the appeal of the truth is born of his attraction to Clara, as he chooses to replace Mortain’s mendacious bombast with the wordless satisfaction promised by sex with a beautiful confidante. What Schehr calls “nature’s general economy” (97) is opposed to the surplus economy of politics and business, where material reality is supplemented by its symbolic value as language and money. As sex and death sustain the biological circulus of putrefaction and new growth, in Europe, the same vital phenomena are culturally subsumed to the smooth operation of commerce and government. In the *Frontispiece*, murder and coitus are not primary activities but are cooked and served up as food for discussion. No longer identifying man as a lustful hunter in a pre-verbal jungle, the speakers argue that the impulse to mate and kill must be harnessed by politicians and industrialists to make profit for themselves and justify their own functions.

Like the peacock, utilized by Mirbeau as the symbol of symbolization, art is a parasite that feeds on death. Instead of succumbing to the pull of instinct and regressing to a state of action without speech, life without stagecraft, art kills death and resurrects it as a theme. No longer governed by the biological imperative of survival, Mirbeau’s intellectuals operate in an otiose realm of decadent language play, talking just to talk. Progression from consumption to speech, from oral objects to words, does not bring a disciplined acceptance of oedipal self-restraint but a perversion of the values that French society both hallows and mocks. Goal-directed behavior – designed to support a temporal dynamic that opposes a present of self-denial to a future of achievement – instead becomes the object of contemptuous auto-subversion. In the European world of swindlers and miscreants, the object of work is the ridicule of work. Once it is disconnected from its communicative purpose, language becomes a toy for the clever, a cocktail snack enjoyed with tobacco and brandy. Discussion of issues of life and death does not yield new insights or wisdom; it is undertaken for its own sake. “Ayant copieusement dîné,” the Darwinian scientist, the member of the Academy of Moral Sciences, a loquacious philosopher, and their gracious host begin their debate about murder, “à propos de je ne sais plus quoi,” the frame narrator says, “à propos de rien, sans doute” (165). Whereas killing, for Clara, is a powerful aphrodisiac, for the male partygoers, it assumes a recreational inconsequentiality.

In their conversation, the men go on to posit a logical, causal, and temporal inversion whereby the mechanisms of control exercised by society’s institutions preexist the crimes requiring an application of the law. Instead of protecting against homicide and rape, courts, police, and prisons are protected against the evidence of their uselessness by the prophylactic incidence of homicide and rape. Thus, the anarchist Mirbeau creates the character of the scholar, for whom murder provides indemnification against the lawlessness of freedom: “S’il n’y avait plus de meurtre, il n’y aurait plus de gouvernements d’aucune sorte, par ce fait admirable que le crime en général, le meurtre en particulier sont, non seulement leur excuse, mais leur unique raison d’être... Nous vivrions alors en pleine anarchie, ce qui ne peut se concevoir...” (165).

While one guest asserts the functional indispensability of crime as justification for establishing inequitable systems of punishment, another describes all law enforcement and judicial bureaucracies as an expense the poor incur to ensure the murderous impunity of the rich: “En cette affaire, comme en toutes autres, ce sont les petits qui paient pour les grands” (167). Murder is therefore as much an excuse for discussing murder as it is a reason for building jails. But only fools, as the guests concur, are ever apprehended, are ever locked inside the inflexibility of their arguments.

In *The Frontispiece*, debate itself becomes a mild form of sublimated violence. Artfully shaped and assigned to proponents who are cunningly embodied as talking dolls, each theory on the necessity of killing becomes a shooting gallery target blown apart by other figurines wielding the rifle of their forensic acumen. Murder in Mirbeau’s text emerges as the foundational subject and motivation for all legislation, all art, all discussion – an idea dressed in the changeable finery of language whose style is ideology, aesthetics, or religion.

In utopia, with the elimination of scarcity and want, abundance stifles words describing the object of desire. Acquiring and killing both cancel the painful sense of dualism, returning the subject to a state of contented self-possession. But in society, words make referents more distant and elusive, so the discussion about murder that entertains Mirbeau’s dilettantes is necessarily circular, pointless, and inconclusive, endlessly skirting with conjecture the truth that no one ever wants to capture.

On the other hand, orgasmic fusion with an object whose alterity is destroyed when taken into the self confers on murderers a demiurgic power enabling them to rival with God. Rather than naming and separating, dividing water and dry land, darkness and light, the killer restores an original state of indivisibility, becoming a divinity undiminished by the act of his creation. Synchronizing “la spasme de plaisir de l’un [...] avec le spasme de mort de l’autre” (166), the assassin is an artist whose medium is destruction.

There is a despairingly oxymoronic futility to debates about violence since language only sunders what murder unites. What the male conversationalists enjoy is the endless foreplay of speculation, discussions never put to death by knowledge, certainty, or consensus. Sex and murder, chaos and undifferentiation, are the origin and the *eschaton* – an egg incubated by culture, formed by repression, molded into neuroses that acquiesce to time and delay, that replace experiences of pleasure with articulations of desire. Lack is the point of departure of Mirbeau’s story, as the intradiagetic narrator, stung by jealousy and humiliation, accepts the sinecure Mortain offers him, and with his false credentials as a leading embryologist, sets off to find “l’*initium* protoplasmique de la vie organisée” (205). Departing from a world of logomachy, he travels back in time, to China, where murder is not a conversational hors d’oeuvre but a banquet whose copiousness kills the appetite for words. For the hungry, murder is not a matter of theory and conjecture. It exists in everyone, as one speaker says, “à l’état embryonnaire de désir” (174).

Engendered by conflict, structured by the temporal dynamic of character development and the elaboration of themes, Mirbeau’s tale, like all narratives, describes a voyage during which a hero, navigating the fictional shoals of self-ignorance and danger, embarks on a specious pretext. Borne on a ship of plot toward an unreachable destination, he is kept alive by the language expressing his fear and desire of entering port, since writing ends with satisfaction and the origin is the goal: “jamais, jamais n’arriver quelque part,” the narrator says yearningly. “Car arriver quelque part, c’est mourir!” (231). If, as Clara maintains, sex and death are complementary principles promoting change and rebirth, then the journey on board the *Saghalien*, the textual vessel Mirbeau captains, describes a metempsychosis taking the narrator from the cultural morbidity of Europe to the instinctual vigor of the Orient.

Morally, psychologically, and expressively revitalized, the narrator changes during his passage from Marseille to Ceylon, regressing to the pervert’s position of immaturity and self-deception, enjoying the sexual munificence of the maternally bountiful Clara, surrendering the sham pretense of his adult virility, basking in the emasculating endearments with which his mistress addresses him, as she calls him “Pauvre bébé,” “petit enfant” (235). It is by being with Clara that the narrator learns the wisdom of Mortain’s words, his affirmation that truthfulness impoverishes:

“L’honnêteté est inerte et stérile, elle ignore la mise en valeur des appétits et des ambitions” (203).

Paralleling the biological circulus connecting decaying bodies to luxuriant flowers is the economic circulus connecting shoddy merchandise to sellers’ profit. Like the oats that the narrator’s father soaks in water or mixes with gravel, Mortain’s oratory is weighted down with ponderous rhetoric. It is the incommensurability of commodity and value, verbiage and meaning – language interest accrued on investments in obfuscation – that sustains an economy founded on empty excess. The pervert, according to Chasseguet-Smirgel, inhabits a gilded world of deceptive idealizations that mask his insignificance and his excremental treasures. The gaseousness of Mortain’s speeches, disguising flatus as sweet eloquence, is like adulterated merchandise redeemed as the gold of the businessman’s gain. Poetry, politics, and commerce augment substance with style, truth with hyperbole, objects with adornment – like the screeching fowl metonymized as the gorgeousness of peacocks’ plumage. The lovelier the phraseology, as Mirbeau suggests, the emptier the message.

However, Mortain is not seduced by the passion of his demagoguery; merchants are not duped by the cleverness of their imposture. Clara is the true apologist of the pervert’s self-deceptiveness, praising open wounds and broken limbs as the raw material of poetry. In the Torture Garden, blood flows to enrich soil planted with hibiscus. In the surgeon’s amphitheater, on the operating table, blood is spilled to nourish the doctor’s sadistic cruelty: “L’art!... l’art!... le beau!... sais-tu ce que c’est?” the infamous Doctor Trépan asks his son. “Eh bien, mon garçon, le beau c’est un ventre de femme, ouvert, tout sanglant, avec des pinces dedans!” (173). From the physician’s hemostats to the torturer’s knives, the instruments used by artists, healers, executioners, and writers vary little, and their purpose is fundamentally the same.

Paradoxically, the more natural world is not the Chinese landscape of jasmine and gibbets, but Madame G.’s poisonous hothouse, in which only old age keeps the hostess from cultivating “la fleur du vice en son propre jardin” (198). As Christian Berg has argued, nature is an imaginary construct shaped by the subject’s ideology and belonging to the realm of desire.² Reflecting the viewing subject, it is trite to the blasé cynic; ungovernable to those afraid of their own atavism; beautiful to the pervert seeking to camouflage his anal sadism. As Chasseguet-Smirgel explains: “the need to idealize the environment, the scenery, seems to be quite fundamental for the pervert; everything that surrounds the Ego is like a mirror in which it is reflected” (95). Combining an ordering intelligence with aesthetic self-idealization, the garden also images the pervert by synthesizing art and nature, refining natural growth into the ingeniousness of horticulture, taking the original chaos of plant life and redeeming it as the geometry of rows of flowers.

At first, Mirbeau’s narrator, cynical as the result of a life of vice and hardship, considers nature a vulgar language merely adequate for its purposes. Like Huysmans’ *des Esseintes*, he regards mountain vistas, dappled meadows, infinite seascapes as a limited storehouse of images drawn on by visionaries and idiots alike. Unlike a library whose volumes are obscure and rare, nature is decipherable by everybody and is therefore redundant and hackneyed: “Son principal caractère,” as the narrator complains, “est qu’elle manque d’improvisation. Elle se répète constamment, n’ayant qu’une petite quantité de formes, de combinaisons et d’aspects qui se retrouvent, ça et là, à peu près pareils” (214).

Yet after falling under Clara’s spell, Mirbeau’s narrator assumes a fresher, more youthful perspective, as amorous sentimentality enriches his newly romanticized language – which, in turn, embellishes the natural world that it simultaneously creates and expresses. The narrator therefore starts from a typically decadent position of linguistic solipsism, condemned to live indoors because he has no words for describing nature. Identified with agriculture, an issue central in his failed electoral campaign, nature is equated with the money that his constituents make on crops: “De la betterave, encore de la betterave, toujours de la betterave!... Tel est ton programme,” as the minister advises his new candidate (184).

Of course, the practicality of beets and the poetry of jasmine are inflections of a language particular to each speaker, since the money earned by beet-farmers makes their world as golden and glorious as the splendid garden reflecting the love-intoxicated poet. For the narrator, the monochromatic dullness of parliamentary chambers and smoky gambling dens, the black and white monotony of texts, yields to the luminous hues brightening the objective reality that he has newly

rediscovered. Thus, in writing *Le Jardin des supplices*, Mirbeau reverses the trajectory of his narrative, turning the Oriental wonderland of indescribable experience back into the colorless European realm of words and books. Before Clara, the narrator says, there was only the poverty of fact, language leached of color by calculation and pragmatism: “A cette époque,” he says, “j’eusse été incapable de la moindre description poétique, le lyrisme m’étant venu, par la suite, avec l’amour” (214).

Yet Clara knows that poetry only involves more pleonastic excess, insulting bodies converted into effusive phraseology. In the Torture Garden, floridity is reembodyed as the flower, reconverting images into things – fulfilling the decadents’ dream of distilling whole books into single epithets, then concretizing the epithet as the object it describes. Floral names are essences, “tout un poème,” “tout un roman” (273), materializing language which, in Europe, is just vacuity and wind. Eugène Mortain’s tirades on the merchant marine and school reform – political speeches untainted by ideas – are compressed inside the commemorative titles invented by French gardeners, who name irises and narcissuses after generals and legislators: “*Le général Archinard*,” “*Le Triomphe du Président Félix Faure*” (272). In Mirbeau’s utopian paradise, nature is not segregated by pretentious diction, nor is reality linguistically colonized, since the poem is a flower, and the flower is a poem.

As Maurice Blanchot argues,³ objects earn the right to die when they are subjected to the violence of their transformation into literature. What Mirbeau proposes in his novel is a reversal of this process, whereby execution of the art work permits a rebirth of the object. Rather than structuring itself on cycles of destruction and regeneration, *Le Jardin des supplices* describes a dialectic of intimacy and divorce. Initially separating consumers and food, speakers and discourse, shooters and targets, eroticized bodies and carrion, Mirbeau later brings them back together, showing their underlying identity since what time disjoins eternity reunites.

According to Chasseguet-Smirgel, the Sadian pervert insists on tearing down institutions that hierarchize and divide because of his wish to undermine classificatory systems that disadvantage him, stressing his inferiority and littleness. Mirbeau’s anarchist endorses a similar rejection of oedipal models of authority whose laws are enforced by tyrannical fathers – presidents, professors, generals – victimizing those whose liberty they trample on. Linked to Mirbeau’s incrimination of the state is his affirmation of the rights of individuals. Institutions, like armies and schools, whose function depends on subordinating freedom to submissiveness, are patterned on the family: the original entity whose purpose is to prohibit and punish.

Sade’s deicidal ambition is reflected in Mirbeau’s attack on fathers as the original despots, capricious, cruel, and powerful figures who disallow incestuous union and parade their strength in order to belittle and castrate their sons. There is a clear oedipal motive in Mirbeau’s elision of authority and his elimination of parents, a desire to give power back to orphans so that they can be “librement élevés selon leur nature et leurs vrais besoins” (Carr 69). All anarchists envision overthrowing oppressors, abolishing systems that order and taxonomize, that separate people according to wealth, gender, ideology, or race. The anarchist, like the Sadian rebel, like Clara in the Torture Garden, is a perverse progenetrix fomenting destruction, engendering life from death – “a cruel and almighty mother, taking over the role of the originator of all creation, that of God himself. For this destruction represents the creation of a new dimension where undifferentiation, confusion and chaos prevail” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 5).

In Mirbeau’s novel, the desire to erase difference – the commitment to assimilation and mixture – strips off its mask of utopian humanitarianism in order to express itself as the instinctual urge to devour and kill. To borrow Bernheimer’s terms, “bad decadence” invests in the calcified European model of division and ranking. It murders at a distance. On the other hand, “good decadence” encourages the other to be eaten, surrounded, orally or coitally incorporated and taken into the self. The flaying of prisoners, a favorite torture technique used in the Chinese penal settlement, focuses on the removal of skin as a primary barrier. Identity, epidermis, body fluids leak out of porous envelopes, fertilizing the ground in which all life is rooted. Flowers are ephemeral forms that bloom for a day, perishable like people who are reabsorbed into gore-saturated humus, the arrival point and origin the narrator identifies with death. Mirbeau’s story operates in the same

way as the Torture Garden, which takes bodies recognizable by their boundaries and blends them together until there is nothing left but dirt.

The anarchist denunciation of government, the Sadian dethronement of God, the oedipal murder of fathers occur in “the universe of the *sacrilege*.” There, as Chasseguet-Smirgel says, everything “that is taboo, forbidden or sacred is devoured by the digestive tract, an enormous grinding machine disintegrating the molecules of the mass thus obtained in order to reduce it to excrement” (4).

On board the Saghalién, the narrator and Clara engage in conversation with two fellow-passengers, caricatural defenders of the decadent institutions that Mirbeau satirizes in the opening section of his novel. On the one hand, there is the embodiment of depersonalized violence, an English artillery officer proficient in the science of ballistics. On the other, there is an advocate of more intimately expressed aggression, a hapless French explorer given to situational anthropophagy. The cannibal explorer who appears in Le Jardin des supplices stands in a long line of Mirbellian characters who manage the anxiety of difference by killing and ingesting what seems uncontrollable and foreign. A buffoonish parody of the Sadian grinding machine, Captain Mauger in Le Journal d'une femme de chambre prides himself on his uncompromising omnivorousness, as he brags of eating flowers, crickets, rats, caterpillars, and garden snakes. Asserting the species privilege of dominating the plants and animals he devours, Mauger pacifies the natural world the way colonialists pacify indigenous peoples, not through genocidal slaughter but through primary oral aggression. The more exotic the life form, the more energetic the desire to eat it: “L’hiver surtout, par les grands froids, il passe des oiseaux inconnus [...]. On me les apporte... et je les mange... Je parie qu’il n’y a pas, dans le monde, un homme qui ait mangé autant de choses que moi” (108).

Consuming the meat of pet ferrets or the flesh of African tribesmen neutralizes the threat of alterity by turning others into food and food into the self. The oedipal emphasis on status and difference – in age, strength, sexual maturity, moral discrimination – should logically extend to colonialists, who accord superiority to themselves as civilizing fathers ordering the lives of their fractious children. However, Mirbeau’s French explorer is a reluctant anthropophage who dines on sinewy Italians and garlic-flavored Marseillais out of necessity, as a matter of survival: “on ne mange pas ça [...] par gourmandise,” he explains. “J’aime mieux le gigot de mouton, ou le beefsteak” (219).

The unenthusiastic cannibal in Le Jardin des supplices is only a pale precursor of General Archinard who, as he appears in Les Vingt et un jours d'un neurasthénique, is no longer an honorifically christened floral specimen, but the irrepressible perpetrator of colonial massacres allowing him to collect as trophies the skins of his victims. Inviting the narrator into the sanctuary of his private rooms, Archinard points to walls covered in “peaux de nègres,” noting the silky suppleness of female tegument that is fine enough, he claims, to be used for specialty leatherwork, in the manufacture of high-quality gloves, valises, and wallets. Like the explorer, Archinard turns up his nose at the idea of consuming African flesh: “le nègre n’est pas comestible,” he says; “il y en a même qui sont vénéneux” (115). But whether the other is internalized as food or the self is enshrined in a temple bound with body coverings, there is a centering of the subject that universalizes him as container and contents, that eliminates difference, making him omnipotent and omnipresent.

In Mirbeau’s novels, the utopian ideal of equality through sameness resembles the sadist/pervert’s goal of eliminating names and categories, returning to a primordial state of disorder. Clara, unlike her fastidious European counterparts, does not view the other with whom one copulates, whom one tortures or eats, as an enemy but a lover whose suffering deserves appreciation. In the “bad decadent’s” attack on corrupt institutions, violence is clean, targets are anonymous and remote. The warm intimacy of spilled blood, the scotophilic pleasure of examining body cavities and wounds, the glory of abjection and nakedness are made impossible by distance. When technology trumps art – when efficiency supersedes pleasure – the paradigm of the killer is the munitions expert, the designer of Dum Dum or Nib Nib shells, which vaporize victims, leaving no soil-enriching blood, no peacock food, no skin used for “maroquinerie.” The long-distance slaughter of anonymous collectivities reduced to “un tas de cendres, ou même une légère fumée

roussâtre” (223) effects what Emily Apter calls an “inversion of barbarism and civilization” as when “the master torturer bemoans the ‘waste of death,’ that is the killing *without* torture, characteristic of modern times” (102).

In the novel’s final section, there is a dizzyingly cinematic succession of alternately nightmarish and paradisaical settings. As Clara and her masochistic companion rush from place to place – from Clara’s garden with its golden kiosk and sparkling scarabs, past the harbor quays and markets teeming with fishmongers and meat vendors sounding gongs, hawking the carcasses of drowned dogs and bats impaled on spits, to the parched desolation of the outskirts of the bagnio, into the prison, past cells packed with starving inmates barking and howling, out into the sunshine and the magnificence of the garden designed by the celebrated botanist Li-Pe-Hang – characters and readers alike lose their sense of space and orientation. Heaven and hell blur; classifications collapse; everything flows into everything as the narrative topologically reenacts the dissolution of opposites: male and female, beauty and horror, good and evil.

Of course, the garden is a structured space divided by alleyways, bordered by canals, dotted with pools, expressing man’s ambition to rival with God and surpass the glory of Creation. But the alternation of benevolent Buddhas and blood-stained scaffolds, prayerful maidens and crucified prisoners, innocent blooms and carnivorous growths, effaces boundaries, undoing the principle of distinction and separation. As Chasseguet-Smirgel remarks: “In Greek, the meaning of ‘nomos’, the law, is ‘that which is divided into parts’. Thus we find that the principle of separation is the foundation of the law” (9). Here again, the anarchist’s goal of dismantling government is analogous to the pervert’s desire to sow disorder and foment confusion: “Subversion of the law, the parody of a religion devoted to the worship of God, seeks to reverse the way leading from indistinctness to separation and demarcation” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 10).

Structured by the rules of grammar and syntax, language also corrects the randomness of material reality, checking the sprawling, existential proliferation of bodies and things. The transformation of objects into words also fights “the anal-sadistic desire for muddle and confusion” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 8). On the one hand, the experiences of rapture and horror available in the Torture Garden are so extreme that they become virtually indescribable. Indeed, Mirbeau’s patient enumeration of floral specimens, his unflinchingly detailed descriptions of graphic tortures attest to a refusal to succumb to infantile autism and the surrender of language. After God created objects, drawing from the soil the living beings with which He peopled the world, He granted man the gift of speech and the prerogative of classifying: “So out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever man called every living creature, that was its name” (Genesis II, 19).

From the onomastic reenactment of physical creation as words and names to the artful reordering of the world in poetry glorying God, language carries on the divine work of dividing and structuring, counteracting the temptation of dumbness and reification. In one of the novel’s central episodes, Mirbeau illustrates the pervert’s anarchic impulse to reconvert words into referents, restoring a state of universal anonymity in which there are no more definitions and no more meanings. Lawrence Schehr notes that political torture intends the production of speech, the infliction of pain to extract information, while in the case of supplice, confessional disclosure is superfluous: “There is a difference between torture, before the speech act, and supplice, after the speech act but before death. [...] Torture is pain and action exchanged for words. With supplice there is no exchange” (112).

In a text in which nameless male characters are almost all operationally identified – as “celebrated writers,” “Darwinian scientists,” “amiable philosophers,” “master executioners” – the prisoner whom Clara and the narrator visit in the bagnio is a Poet metonymically reduced to the single feature that can be seen by outsiders: “la Face” (267). Locked inside a pestilential cage divided by bars and stone partitions, divorced from his history, deprived of his humanity and name, he is disconnected from his body by an iron collar that inhibits movement and leaves nothing visible except his head: “on eût dit d’effrayantes, de vivantes têtes de décapités posées sur des tables” (264). The versifier reduced to his face, then to the inarticulate cries, rattles, and snarls issuing from his mouth, is then reconverted into the material of his poem: a filthy, gangrenous body awaiting

execution, which will turn his corpse into fertilizer for the soil: “*La pourriture en qui réside la chaleur éternelle de la vie,*” as he had written in his poem *Les trois amies*” (269). Dehumanized by the treatment he receives at the hands of his jailers, the Poet is assimilated to his work, reabsorbed into the imagery that he no longer understands. Not an author, he is changed into the object of his creation. Fed on gobbets of sanious meat by women who frequent the prison, he becomes the rotten meat, the purulent flesh destined to feed the garden, the first and last consumer in the food chain.

The shamefulness of human corporeity is initially redeemed by the divinely awarded privilege of naming. As Adam, the first poet, had chosen the right terms to designate birds and beasts, so the writer unlocks the object’s meaning when he reveals it in his imagery. As God’s apprentice, the poet repeats the original act of dividing reality from language, suggesting the link between Creator and Creation with the exactness of his words. Yet the Sadian pervert restores the inexpressible gratuitousness of matter, and goes further by turning the Bestower of Names into the object that he designated, wiping away memory so that he forgets his name is Poet. The pervert’s collapsing of opposites extends to the separation of body and mind, the judge and the condemned. In the Torture Garden, only executioners enjoy the privilege of disclosing the essence of things. Associating copulation and corruption, Clara is like them in echoing the “materialistic reasoning of Sade when he speaks of [...] the equality of death and life and his denial of the body-soul dualism,” aiming thereby “to annihilate the universe of difference (the genital universe) and put in its place the anal universe in which all particles are equal and interchangeable” (Chasseguet-Smirgel 4).

In Mirbeau’s penal settlement, torture intends the customary elimination of the victim’s bodily self-control, the theft of his human dignity. This is the state reached when the prisoner becomes a machine operated by skilled technicians who elicit from his body a limited repertoire of involuntary, autonomic reactions: writhing, twitching, screaming. Poets reduced to barking, men who once symbolically expressed themselves in the language of clothes, are stripped of skin that remains attached by a thread – revealing them in their nakedness which, as with Adam, is the signifier of their guilt.

Clara’s panegyrics to the wholesomeness of natural eroticism contrast with the ejaculatory blood showers produced by the torture of the caress, a form of execution by masturbation. Her insistence on the eternal cycles of decay and regrowth is belied by instances of interruption in the food chain, as when the corpse of her friend Annie, disfigured by elephantiasis, is rejected by the scavengers to whom she gives her body up: “Elle voulait que son corps fût déchiré par le bec des vautours,” as Clara recalls [...] “Eh bien, les vautours refusèrent ce festin royal, qu’elle leur offrait... Ils s’éloignèrent, en poussant d’affreux cris, de son cadavre... Il fallut le brûler” (245).

The most exquisite, aristocratically applied procedure, as Clara says, is the torture of the bell. Whereas the punishments more commonly inflicted in the Torture Garden puncture the skin, producing gushes of blood that water the ground and mix flesh with dirt, the torture of the bell respects the integrity of the body’s surface, damaging organs from within, killing with vibrations, destroying by marking time, which is the most expert executioner. In the novel, Clara’s atemporal realm of instinct contrasts with the European world of money and language, of desires postponed. Structured by oedipal injunctions against immediate satisfaction, it requires that the boy wait so that he can grow up to resemble his father. But as Chasseguet-Smirgel says, the pervert rejects “dilatatory time” (34), another conceptual division opposing the experience of present frustration to the promise of future pleasure. The irony of Mirbeau’s story is that prisoners are not punished for criminal offences. Clara neither knows nor cares about the infractions the condemned have committed, since the pain of the victim and the pleasure of the spectator are justified on grounds that are aesthetic and metaphysical. The punishment for being born is to be put to death chronometrically, to be twisted and deformed by the marking of time’s passage. The punishment for sexual desire is to have desire fulfilled, as priapic dreams of tumescent longevity are enacted and sanctioned by the torture of the caress, and sodomist fantasies are murderously realized in the torture of the rat. The supplices inflicted in the Torture Garden reenact the torments of being alive – as exaggerated variations on the pleasures and sufferings of human corporeity.

Mirbeau’s novel also problematizes the issue of law, judgment, and the assignment of guilt, since criminality is a state of deviance and difference which cannot survive in the Sadian world of

muddle and confusion. In China, as in Europe, people who sentence others to death are murderers like those they execute, as divisive principles like right and wrong, good and evil, are subordinated to the unifying principles of power and pleasure. “Le gros patapouf” (296) who regales Clara with accounts of his professional virtuosity is a monster only if he is oppositionally defined in terms of abstractions like normality. There are flowers exuding the fragrance of innocence and thalictrums smelling like semen; there are blooms whose nacreous smoothness evokes the skin of a beautiful woman, and others suggesting histopathology – “semblables à des thorax ouverts de bêtes mortes” (302). In the realm of utopian perversion, the monster is one more thing that exists, evidence of what Clara praises as “la resplendissante et divine immortalité des choses” (302).

Of course, the Torture Garden Mirbeau creates is not a place of synthesis, where classifications have been eliminated and oppositions resolved. Most notably, the dualism of viewer and visual object is illustrated by the character of Clara herself, an embodiment of an exasperated form of scopophilia, what Emily Apter calls “a particular brand of dehumanized voyeurism” (114). Operation of the biological circulus of corruption and new growth is contrasted to the economic circulus of commodities recycled for profit: “Prendre quelque chose à quelqu’un et le repasser à un autre, en échange d’autant d’argent que l’on peut, ça, c’est du commerce,” as the narrator’s father advises (189).

What in the natural world is a mutation of forms becomes, in the garden of perversion, an artistic invention of new forms not encountered in nature, an institution of change not reflecting the dynamism of nature but counteracting and destroying nature. The Luciferian demiurge who would rival with God seeks to overturn Creation, not to marvel at the multifariousness of the world of created things. “Le gros patapouf” is not a judge standing above the transgressor he condemns but an artist separated from work whose purpose is to undo the work of God, changing men into women, sculpting human flesh in ways unimaginable.

Ultimately, the pervert’s objective is his own death, his incestuous merger with the maternity of the soil. On the other hand, the oedipal gardener dominates the ground he tills, living in time, waiting for the seeds he has planted to germinate, feeding the land with carrion, forcing it to yield fruit. Before God awarded him the prerogative of naming, man was inseparable from the prelapsarian garden he inhabited. It is to this state of indolent stasis that the pervert longs to return, where the art of torture and the art of fiction are not needed to enrich the soil with the blood of violence and the sweat of exertion. Donald Moss says that utopian figures “want ‘creative’ work to point toward an end in which the conditions making such work a necessity will have been rendered superfluous; [they] want to see a horizon on which is represented the last of a genre, its promises not only fulfilled, but exhausted” (13).

Commenting on Totem and Taboo, Whitebook claims that the utopian thinker and the pervert reject prohibitions against parricide and incest, whose acceptance is a precondition for life in civilized society. Oedipal taboos are unrecognized by utopians and perverts, who aim to rectify unfair distributions of power and wealth, denying to the poor the fruits of the garden. With its bipartite structure, Le Jardin des supplices illustrates the contradictory objectives to which the anarchist commits himself: one that identifies flaws in the oedipally structured system and resolves to correct injustices in order to benefit the disenfranchised; the other that postulates the irremediable oppressiveness of civilization itself, rejecting the law of the father, and invoking the individual’s right to resort to violence in order to counteract the institutional violence inflicted by the state. In Whitebook’s model, the first rebel “revolts ‘against some existing injustice’ and basically accepts the oedipally structured world of mutual renunciations, only objecting to the fact that the burden of these renunciations is not distributed equitably [...] The second type of rebel, on the other hand, rejects the entire oedipally structured framework itself. He does not seek a more equitable distribution of renunciations but an end to the system of renunciation altogether” (426).

At the end of Mirbeau’s novel, the question remains as to which of these two positions the author himself embraces, a question one must answer in order to define Mirbeau’s anarchist ideal. To begin with, the European system that rewards panderers and cheats is so vitiated that no piecemeal reform seems possible. In tracing individual alienation to “[le] joug déformant de la famille” (Carr 69), Mirbeau leaves little hope that cultural remediation can be successful if it targets

only religion, politics, or education. However, the utopian pervert's fantasy of narcissistic matriculation in the bosom of the garden is as deadly a mirage as the lie of representative democracy. Murder is the organizing principle of both the French and Chinese systems, the only difference being that, in the latter, killing is personal and intimate, whereas in the former, men are vaporized by long-range Dum Dum bullets, annihilated, as Clara says, by "tout ce qui rend la mort collective, administrative et bureaucratique" (289). Yet Mirbeau also rejects Clara's vision of an anal-sadistic world. While she compellingly expresses the need to shun hypocrisy and tear down barriers, while she paints a vivid picture of moribund societies transfused by the blood of sacrificial victims, Clara's image of sex and death does not show the way to the establishment of utopia.

Neither Sade nor Clara acknowledges death as a state of rest and immobility. Instead, corpses seethe with maggots, "un pullulement de vie vermiculaire," "larves immondes" that are the primal life form, not the simple organism sought by embryologists in the waters off the coast of Ceylon.

If Chasseguet-Smirgel's theory of perversion is correct, then utopia would recreate a state of immutable perfection, a world of pre-genital completeness in which the child enjoys the bliss of incestuous union with the mother. Oblivious of his impotence, the pervert refuses to acknowledge the need for change and, denying the truth of his inadequacy, seeks to bring time to a standstill. But the point of Mirbeau's narrative is that motion never stops, since the inhumation of one body allows the emergence of another. Clara's nervous prostration and hysterical collapse prefigure her recovery, analepsis, and later visits to the Torture Garden, escorted by another man who is the successor of the narrator. And the termination of the narrative as told to brandy-drinking listeners allows its subsequent relation by a former member of the audience. As Ki-Pei, the Chinese boatwoman who transports Clara to the brothel, says: "Et ce sera à recommencer!...Ce sera toujours à recommencer!" (335).

The purchase and resale of adulterated grain, retransmission of a story embellished with apochryphal details, disassembly and recreation of forms encountered in reality all articulate the impulse to reject a deathly status quo, to embark from home on voyages whose destination is unreachable. Mirbeau embraces the Sadian aim to engender ceaseless metamorphoses, breaking down existing structures, dissolving stable boundaries, returning flawed, imperfect bodies to their excremental formlessness. Literature becomes the grinding machine to which Chasseguet-Smirgel alludes, a crucible in which the tainted object is purified with fire. But unlike perverts who seek shelter in the eternity of the garden, protected against time's depredations by narcissistic self-delusion, Mirbeau's character presses forward out of dissatisfied impatience: "Ce n'est rien encore, mon chéri," as Clara urges on the narrator. "Avançons!..." (303).

Utopianism, for Mirbeau, is a principle of transformation which never admits there is a utopia where the struggle can be abandoned. As Moss explains, creative labor combines the dynamism of its processes and the static perfection of a final state toward which it endlessly is straining: "Its long and short-time ambition is to finish the job: to transform conditions so that more work will no longer be necessary. In this way," Moss concludes, "work contains a utopian impulse" (9). Oppressive oedipal structures may justify Mirbeau's revolt, motivating an overthrow of bad fathers posing as teachers, priests, and ministers. But completion of the project, destruction of the tyrant, attainment of the goal are thanatotic fantasies: "Car arriver quelque part, c'est mourir," had said the narrator. Mirbeau's characters shift uneasily in the casket of his books, like Clara, who imagines her foot pressed against the confines of her coffin – like l'Abbé Jules, who shakes the ground where his remains have been interred. Since Mirbeau's utopianism rejects art's mortuary changelessness, shuns the permanence of finished works so that their successor can destroy them, he makes fiction an instrument of torture and the author an executioner of the self.

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Notes

¹The term comes from Lawrence Schehr's essay "Mirbeau's Ultraviolence," in *SubStance* 27.86 (1998): 106.

²Nature, says Berg, is only "[un] mirage naturaliste" that accommodates an unlimited number of interpretive positions: "nature 'création de Dieu', nature 'salvatrice', nature 'tentatrice', nature 'loi nécessaire' ..." (35).

³”Dans la parole,” writes Blanchot, “meurt ce qui donne vie à la parole; la parole est la vie de cette mort, elle est ‘la vie qui porte la mort et se maintient en elle’” (316).

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