

What Would the Dreyfus Affair Have Been Without Octave Mirbeau?

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet essai se propose d'explorer la contribution de Mirbeau au mouvement dreyfusard de la fin des années 1890, en envisageant en particulier le renforcement de l'alliance entre ses différentes factions. De nombreux anarchistes et socialistes ont tout d'abord prétendu que la traduction en cour martiale d'un officier de cavalerie était une affaire interne à l'armée. D'autre part, ils considéraient qu'en dépit d'une possible injustice et d'attitudes antisémites, le Capitaine Dreyfus, qu'on avait accusé, condamné et dégradé, était un membre privilégié de la riche bourgeoisie dont le combat ne les intéressait pas. Mirbeau s'exprima avec éloquence dans L'Aurore, prit part à des réunions avec des intellectuels et afficha une persuasion morale vigoureuse qui encouragea un grand nombre à se joindre à l'alliance dreyfusarde. Il est permis de supposer que, sans lui, le camp des dreyfusards serait difficilement parvenu à obtenir un nombre suffisant de participants pour faire face aux procès Zola et Esterhazy ainsi qu'au second procès de Dreyfus. Nous avancerons que la contribution mirbellienne à l'Affaire Dreyfus consiste à avoir rapproché le camp anarchiste-socialiste de celui des modérés dreyfusards. Le roman Le Jardin des supplices (1899) fut le commentaire allégorique de l'Affaire Dreyfus par Mirbeau, l'expression de la réaction et de la pensée qu'inspira à l'écrivain ce moment historique et littéraire de la France moderne.

Octave Mirbeau was a novelist, an essayist, and an active member of the Dreyfusard literary circle. This paper will focus on his contribution to the Dreyfus Affair between 1897 and 1900. I would propose that his contribution was to help consolidate the radical socialist-anarchists and the more centrist Dreyfusard elements at this critical moment of the Dreyfus Affair. These were the years of Dreyfus's second military trial at Rennes,¹ Esterhazy's trial,² Zola's trial,³ Colonel Henry's suicide⁴ and the growing civil unrest that threatened to produce a military coup d'état⁵ in France.

¹ A second military trial took place at Rennes in the summer of 1899, and Mirbeau was there to report for *L'Aurore*. (see "Tout va bien," *L'Aurore* 22 June 1899). A new government under Waldeck-Rousseau was formed with a socialist Minister of Public Safety, Millerand, and with a Minister of War who was called "The Slaughterer of the Commune," General Gallifet. Mirbeau was revolted by the new condemnation of Dreyfus with "*circonstances atténuantes*."

² On January 11, 1898, the Commandant Waldeck Esterhazy (the true traitor of the Dreyfus Affair) was acquitted by a Court Martial, which was tantamount to a second conviction of Dreyfus after it had become evident that Esterhazy had written the famous *bordereau*. Two days later, Zola published "J'accuse" in *L'Aurore*.

³ As a result of "J'accuse," Zola was indicted for defamation of character and sentenced to a fine and prison. Zola exiled himself to London, and Mirbeau paid Zola's fine to the Court.

⁴ In August of 1898, the new Minister of War, Godefroy Cavaignac, learned that the document on which the Dreyfus conviction had been determined was a false one written by Colonel Henry. The Colonel was arrested but found "dead by suicide" in his prison cell on August 31, 1898. After this unexpected development a second trial was requested by Captain Dreyfus's wife.

⁵ Because of the unrest and bitter antagonisms caused by these vicissitudes as well as the inability to form a stable government, General Cavaignac led a military movement to take over the Republic. Mirbeau's essays warned of this potential military takeover if truth and justice were not to prevail in the Affair. He also painted a satirical false

Mirbeau's 1897 to 1900 journalistic pieces on the Dreyfus Affair were anthologized by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet.⁶ There are sixty-two newspaper essays – most from *L'Aurore*⁷ – in this collection. I will cite passages from those which I think are most exemplary.⁸ After a discussion of Mirbeau's newspaper articles, I will explain how the novel, *Le Jardin des supplices*, published in 1899, was Mirbeau's major literary reaction to the destructive violence of the Dreyfus Affair.

Mirbeau's entry into the Affair was late,⁹ because of the production of his play *Les Mauvais Bergers* and also, perhaps, because of his a priori disinterest in Dreyfus's plight. Why would a dedicated anarchist, like Mirbeau, concerned with injustice to exploited individuals of the lower classes, care at all about injustice inflicted on a rich, bourgeois, Jewish, military officer?¹⁰ Once the theatrical production of *Les Mauvais Bergers* ended, he turned his attention to the political drama that was playing out around him. It was also at this time that Zola wrote his essay, "M. Scheurer-Kestner,"¹¹ which stated clearly that the unwillingness of the Military Staff to take responsibility for the "judicial error" was the cause of the growing, dangerous political conflict that was destabilizing France.

A second point I will discuss in this essay is the nature of Mirbeau's change of heart about Jews, antisemitism, and Dreyfus himself. On reading about Octave Mirbeau, the product of provincial, Jesuit education who became an anarchist-novelist¹² – one wonders how and why he

encounter describing this danger in his essay, "Tout va bien," (*L'Aurore* 22 June 1899), in which his fictional friend, a naïve optimist, seeing the world in rose, is beaten up by a mob, crying: "Death to the Jews and the Republic. Long live the Army." The trial in Rennes, Esterhazy's acquittal, and Henry's suicide led President Loubet to overrule the military court and grant pardon to Dreyfus on September 19, 1899. That decision weakened the solidarity of the Dreyfus movement and produced bitterness and spite among its constituents. One group (Clémenceau, Labori and Picquart) felt that accepting it would neither restore Dreyfus' army rank nor allow the defense to pursue further redress against the guilty parties. The others (Mathieu Dreyfus, Millerand and Jaurès) felt it should be accepted for humanitarian reasons and also to restore calm to the French nation. A few years later, the government of Waldek-Rousseau prepared a law of Amnesty for all the participants in the Dreyfus Affair. It was ratified by both Chambers in December, 1900. Dreyfus himself was neither exonerated of the false accusations nor reintegrated into the Army until July 12, 1906.

⁶ See, Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, eds., *L'Affaire Dreyfus* (Paris: Librairie Séguier, 1991).

⁷ *L'Aurore* opened its pages to Mirbeau, Clémenceau's "brother in spirit," who had made his front page available for Zola's "J'accuse" eight months earlier. The exile of Zola was for Mirbeau the time to take action not just for Dreyfus but also for Picquart and Zola.

⁸ Mainly from "À un prolétaire" (*L'Aurore* 8 August 1898) and "Palinodies!" (*L'Aurore* 15 November 1898).

⁹ Henri Mitterand, *Zola*, vol. 3 (Paris : Fayard, 2002) 455: "Un autre a choisi publiquement son camp, le même que celui de Zola: Octave Mirbeau. Au lendemain de l'article sur le 'syndicat,' il a félicité son auteur: 'Admirable article, plus qu'une belle page [...] un acte d'un beau courage; Ça a été une émotion qui a fait frissonner tous les cœurs qui ne sont pas encore pourris.' Et il lui a rendu hommage en même temps qu'à Scheurer-Kestner, à trois jours de là, dans *Le Journal*. Les deux écrivains se retrouveront le 15 décembre au théâtre de la Renaissance, pour la première de la pièce de Mirbeau, au titre d'actualité, *Les Mauvais Bergers* à laquelle assistent ensemble Zola, Georges Charpentier et sa fille Jane." Three days after Zola published his *Figaro* article, "M. Scheurer-Kestner," Mirbeau entered the arena of the Affair with his text, "Chez l'illustre écrivain" (*L'Aurore* 28 November 1897).

¹⁰ Bernard Lazare, a fellow anarchist, had approached him in 1897, but Mirbeau was cautious about expressing opinions about a convicted officer, a privileged bourgeois, with no ties to the socialist revolution.

¹¹ *Le Figaro* 25 November 1897.

¹² Anarchism is defined negatively by a rejection of any form of power that exploits, alienates or kills an individual. Mirbeau expressed this position and sentiment in all of his writings from the very first to the last. It made no difference if the power were that of an institution, a family or one person. Thus, he denounced paternal power (*Dans le ciel*, 1892); power of the teacher (*Sébastien Roch*, 1890), priestly, magistral, governmental and industrial power (*Les Mauvais Bergers*, 1897); financial power (*Les Affaires sont les affaires*, 1903); and journalistic misinformation. His writing attempted to demystify these sources of iniquitous power by educating the reader about their unjust, corrupt and evil nature. Given this definition of anarchism, one might understand Mirbeau's moral outrage and feeling of

ended up in the Dreyfusard camp. What motivated him to move from solidarity with those who would cry “Mort aux Juifs!” to those who would cry “Vive Zola!”? This was a remarkable change of thinking at a time when rabid, undisguised antisemitism was present in all aspects of French life. The French Jew, who had been emancipated by the Restoration, found himself in a lose-lose situation – reviled by those on one side who accused him of being in control of the banks and the financial institutions and, on the other, by those who accused him of cosmopolitanism and an allegiance only to his own community and not to French society at large.

In 1897 Mirbeau’s Jewish anarchist friend and colleague, Bernard Lazare, explained the “judicial error” (better translated “miscarriage of justice”) of the Dreyfus case and tried to enlist him.¹³ Lazare used the political about-face of the highly respected Senator Scheurer-Kestner to convince his colleague. When Mirbeau finally took up the Dreyfusard banner, he wrote a text titled “Chez l’illustre écrivain” (*Le Journal* 28 November 1897), an imaginary gathering at the home of Paul Bourget,¹⁴ an acclaimed novelist from whom Mirbeau had been estranged for several years. At this gathering the fictional Bourget cries out:

- Et quand même Dreyfus serait innocent? Vociféra-t-il... il faudrait qu’il fût coupable quand même... il faudrait qu’il expiât, toujours... même le crime d’un autre... C’est une question de vie ou de mort pour la société et pour les admirables institutions qui nous régissent! *La société ne peut pas se tromper... Les conseils de guerre ne peuvent pas se tromper... L’innocence de Dreyfus serait la fin de tout!*¹⁵

This is an example of Mirbeau’s irony and cutting satire. In this passage he is the anarchist, praising the sanctity of the State and its institutions. Here, and in the other examples to follow, one can appreciate Mirbeau’s literary weapons put to good use as he describes the absurd and shocking statements from the mouths of contemporary notables.

In the essay, “Palinodies!” (*L’Aurore* 15 November 1898), Mirbeau defends himself against accusations of fickleness in abandoning antisemitic thinking in *Les Grimaces*, a journal for which he wrote in the early 1880’s. He admits to the accusation, stating fervently that he is no longer the person he was ten years ago, and hopes not to be the person that he is today in five or ten years. Changing one’s opinion is for him a sign of growth. Intransigence is for him a sign of intellectual death. He claims that the freedom to change one’s opinion is a fundamental human right. One can only admire the courage necessary to face the opposing public opinion.

Quoi d’étonnant de ce que je le sois devenu [antisémite] aussi?... Mon tort, en cette circonstance, vraiment bien parisienne, fut de conclure du particulier au général, et d’englober toute une race dans une réprobation qui eût dû rester strictement individuelle, à moins que je ne l’étendisse à beaucoup de Chrétiens qui sont parmi les plus détestables Juifs que je connaisse!...¹⁶

solidarity with Captain Dreyfus, despite his privileged position in a favoured social class and despite his identification as a Jew in a France tainted by organized, outspoken antisemitism.

¹³ Bernard Lazare, a symbolist poet and an anarchist, wrote the first complete treatise on “l’erreur judiciaire” concerning the Dreyfus Affair. He had written on the nature of antisemitism in Europe and had decried the pogroms taking place in Eastern Europe.

¹⁴ For Mirbeau, Paul Bourget, a very popular novelist, represented the unthinking voice of those who would support the Army’s decision at all costs.

¹⁵ *Le Journal* 28 November 1897.

¹⁶ *L’Aurore* 15 November 1898.

To understand Mirbeau's 1880's antisemitism, I would call your attention to his 1885 review of a novel by a popular Parisian novelist, Robert de Bonnières,¹⁷ who wrote about the *mœurs* of the Parisian *haute bourgeoisie* in the style of Proust. The novel, *Les Monach: roman parisien*, features a well-to-do Jewish family who become tenants in the *hôtel de ville* of a prominent Catholic family and describes the interesting bonds and conflicts that evolve, including a romantic relationship between their children. The Monachs are examples of Jews who wanted to assimilate into French society, in which they had become wealthy without becoming accepted. *Les Monach* shows the (not so) insidious way Jews worked their way into Parisian social life. Bonnières makes detailed, critical, pejorative comments about the different customs and social behaviors of these Jewish parvenus. This novel represents the fictional side of the very popular antisemitic literature, for which Drumont's *La France juive* was the best example of "scientific" positivism used for this purpose.¹⁸

Mirbeau's article on "*Les Monach et les juifs*" reveals his anarchist core that loathed the way large institutions could control and coerce the individual. His concluding remarks are not surprising, but rather expressions of his personal view of the world and not that of a mystically evolving philosemitism:

Moi aussi, effrayé par l'envahissement des Israélites dans notre politique, dans nos affaires, dans notre société, j'ai tenté un jour de sonner l'alarme. Je ne voulais pas croire que les juifs fussent si forts parce que nous étions si faibles, si grands parce que nous étions si petits, et s'ils prenaient notre place, c'est que nous la désertions.

Arthur Meyer, a journalist and newspaper owner, took over *Le Gaulois* in 1879 when Mirbeau was his personal secretary. At that time Mirbeau contributed articles to *Le Gaulois* under the pen names Gardéniac and Tout-Paris. He also edited *Les Grimaces* in the 1880's. These journals were politically Catholic and Bonapartist and were favorites in aristocratic and *haute bourgeoisie* society. Meyer was Jewish and attacked by the antisemitic press. He fought a duel with Drumont after Drumont published *La France juive* in 1886. Finally, Meyer himself became antisemitic, like those in his conservative circle, and was anti-Dreyfusard at the time of the Affair. By that time Mirbeau and he were violently opposed to each other's politics. Another conflict, perhaps more important in their embroil, was that Alice Regnault, ultimately Mirbeau's wife, was formerly Arthur Meyer's mistress. In "Palinodies!" Mirbeau talks about Arthur Meyer's influence on him. Mirbeau describes Meyer as charismatic, charming, and attractive: "On conviendra que rien n'était plus naturel, plus légitime, et d'une plus irréprochable psychologie. [...] M. Arthur Meyer avait ceci de mystérieusement attractif qu'il appelait l'antisémitisme, comme Jésus le miracle. Il y avait en lui, malgré lui, une telle force spontanée de propagande, que lui-même n'a pas pu y échapper" (*L'Aurore* 15 November 1898).

¹⁷ A minor novelist whom Mirbeau disliked. In 1891, Mirbeau defended Edmond de Goncourt against Bonnière's nasty article about the famous novelist and man of letters. Mirbeau's critique of *Les Monach* was published as "*Les Monach et les Juifs*" (*La France* 14 January 1885), under the column "Chroniques parisiennes."

¹⁸ *La France juive*, enormously popular (a sell-out in 1886, 114 editions published in the first year and 201 reprintings in all up to the 1990s), is very well written as it describes the subtle infiltration of Jewish ideas, institutions, and ownership into French society. It states that the old French values are being eroded and French financial control, stolen. It is a "scientific" diatribe against the Jewish race and predicts its eradication by a future leader who will not be bound by law. It was written at the time of economic crisis caused by the corruption revealed during the Panama Affair and the failure of the Banque Universelle. This period is well described in Zola's *L'Argent*. The legacy of Drumont's thinking was the proliferation of antisemitic publications in France's Third Republic, which had eased censorship law and, by extension, prepared the way for the Nazi Final Solution and Auschwitz. In his book there is a reference to Mirbeau, "un écrivain, dont le talent inégal a parfois des lueurs superbes, [...] [et qui] a tracé un saisissant tableau de ce monde qui ne songe devant une pareille catastrophe [la débâcle de Tonkin], qu'au plaisir et à l'argent." Édouard Drumont, *La France juive*, vol. 1 (Beyrouth: Édition Charlemagne, 1994) 359. This is an obviously antisemitic passage but the source for the Mirbeau quote is not given in Drumont.

J'ai reconnu depuis qu'il est parfaitement ridicule de jouer les Pierre l'Ermite¹⁹ en ce temps où l'on ne se passionne plus que pour les cabotins. J'ai reconnu que ce siècle épuisé de tout, épuisé de sang, de moelle et de cerveau, n'était plus à la lutte ni à la haine, la haine, ce dernier espoir des peuples qui s'en vont; j'ai reconnu qu'on ne savait même plus – est-ce ignorance ou bien progrès? – ce que c'était l'idée de patrie. Et en regardant l'élévation constante des juifs, par le travail, la ténacité et la foi, je me suis senti au cœur un grand découragement et une sorte d'admiration colère pour ce peuple vagabond et sublime qui a su faire de toutes les patries sa patrie, et qui monte chaque jour plus haut à mesure que nous dégringolons plus bas.²⁰

This is an expression of bitter defeatism in the midst of praise. One cannot but feel Mirbeau's general misanthropy rather than his selective hate directed toward Jews. He concludes, in a resigned, pragmatic fashion:

Je me suis dit qu'il fallait vivre avec lui, puisqu'il se mêle de plus en plus à notre race, et qu'on peut croire qu'il s'y fondra complètement, comme la vigne vit avec le phylloxéra, le malade avec la fièvre typhoïde et l'intelligence humaine avec le journalisme.²¹

This example of Mirbeau's writing, shows his preference for unexpected, surprise statements that are half tongue-in-cheek, but half-serious as well, taking a swipe at the press in general while defending the Jewish race. He ends with a personal homage to Joseph Reinach,²² lauding his ability to withstand criticism, ridicule and hostility in his steadfast support of Dreyfus's innocence. In this way he expresses his wish to be able to erase the nasty pages that he himself had written about Reinach at an earlier date.

Mirbeau's call to the moral conscience of France's socialist workers is heard in "À un prolétaire" (*L'Aurore* 8 August 1898).²³ He begins by a vitriolic attack on Jules Guesde,²⁴ leader of The Socialist Worker's Party, by telling his idealized proletarian reader that the Dreyfus

¹⁹ Pierre l'Ermite was an eleventh-century Franciscan cleric who preached for the First Crusade after Pope Urban's call to all Christians to save Jerusalem. Pierre used his power to defend Jewish communities from further attacks by the Crusaders. He was able to use financing from the Crusaders themselves to pay for reconstruction of damaged communities and to protect those from future repercussions of Urban's anti-Jewish propaganda.

²⁰ *La France* 14 January 1885.

²¹ *La France* 14 January 1885.

²² Joseph Reinach (1856-1921) was the first historian to write about The Dreyfus Affair. He was also Gambetta's Cabinet Chief and Editor of *La République française* (A pro-Gambetta publication). He served as Député from Les Basses-Alpes in 1889, but was defeated in 1898 when he presented as a Dreyfusard. He was one of the first, important political figures to be deeply engaged with the Dreyfusard Movement from May 1898 on. Because he was Jewish and supported the movement for a new Dreyfus trial, he was the victim of antisemitic denunciations.

²³ Before being a literary success Mirbeau had been a life-long journalist. He wrote for different newspapers over 40 years. In the *Aurore* (1898-1899) he wrote for a devoted readership. It was his newspaper of combat in which he was able to hammer away his basic conviction that the future of human intelligence and dignity was at stake. It was a fight to the finish between the drunken brutes of Rochefort and Boisdeffre and the noble heritage of Rabelais, Montaigne, Michelet, Hugo, Pasteur and Renan. In these articles he preached, to one and all who would listen, that, step by step, intellectuals and workers must come together to defend democratic principles of truth and justice.

²⁴ Jules Guesde (1845-1922), along with Paul Lafargue, was the head of the Socialist Workers Party (*le Parti Ouvrier Socialiste Français*). For him Dreyfus, even if he were innocent, was an enemy because of his social class. In his Manifesto (*Le Socialiste* 24 July 1898), Guesde declared that the Socialist Workers Party could not, short of treason to its cause, deviate from its own martial path and work for the cause of individuals seeking compensation for general wrongdoing. It was only after Colonel Henry's suicide that he came over to the Dreyfusard camp, a very critical move for the whole Dreyfusard alliance that is the key point of the present essay.

Affair does not concern him. Why should he, the exploited worker, involve himself with the judicial problem of a rich, privileged, bourgeois, military officer who is, furthermore, a Jew? He reminds the reader that Dreyfus is a member of a race that has committed an historical crime (namely, the murder of God) and must expiate even for an unjust condemnation by accepting a life of torture on Devil's Island. He quotes Guesde as having said the following:

- Mais considère tous ces gens qui défendent Dreyfus... [...] Il y a Reinach qui ne parlait jadis que de proscrire, fusiller, guillotiner... Il y a Scheurer-Kestner un patron d'usines!... [...] Il y a bien Zola, qui est révolutionnaire sans doute, mais pas selon l'Évangile de Karl Marx, en qui règne la vérité unique, et que je représente! Ce qu'ils défendent en Dreyfus, ce n'est pas Dreyfus innocent, c'est les uns, une caste sociale dont tu n'es pas, les autres, une race qui n'est pas la tienne... ceux-là, enfin, un méprisable idéal de littérateur où tu ne comptes pour rien, où tu n'es qu'un décor illusoire... Est-ce qu'ils te défendent toi?... Est-ce qu'ils te connaissent seulement? Quand, misérable et anonyme soldat, tu pourrissais dans les silos d'Afrique, quand pour un mot, pour un geste, pour rien, on te traînait devant les conseils de guerre et qu'on te ligotait au poteau, est-ce qu'ils ont protesté?... [...] Ils t'ignorent... Fais comme eux... Ignore-les aussi... Et passe ton chemin!²⁵

I think this is the critical point that Mirbeau makes about the injustice to Dreyfus that has been committed by the military, the political right, the antisemites, and the Church. It was injustice to an individual citizen deprived of his basic rights, accused falsely of treachery to his country, and punished inhumanely. The deprivation of an individual's liberty is a deprivation of freedom itself, and not just for him, but for all in a society. It is no longer a question of political-economic-religious class, but one of individual human rights:

Indifférent, d'abord, tu répondais à ceux qui s'inquiétaient, cette leçon apprise: "Moquons-nous de ce qu'ils font et disent... Ce sont des bourgeois qui se battent entre eux. Ce n'est pas notre affaire." Puis ton atavisme de servitudes reprenant le dessus, je t'ai entendu, hier, qui proclamais: "Oui, faut pas être un homme! Faut être un fameux lâche pour crier: Vive Zola!... Tas de gourdes." Et, demain, peut-être, au nom de la belle logique de M. Guesde,²⁶ tu feras cortège à Judet,²⁷ digne acolyte d'Esterhazy.²⁸

To sum up, here is Mirbeau's primal scream, expressed in this essay:

Par cette injustice l'Humanité est lésée en vous deux. Tu dois poursuivre la réparation, sans relâche, l'imposer par ta volonté et si on te la refuse, l'attacher par la force, au besoin. En le défendant, celui qu'oppriment toutes les forces brutales, toutes les passions d'une société déclinante, c'est toi que tu défends en lui, ce sont les tiens, c'est ton droit à la liberté, et à la vie, si précairement conquis, au prix de combien de sang! Il n'est donc pas

²⁵ *L'Aurore* 8 August 1898.

²⁶ Mirbeau puts Guesde into the group that includes Guérin and Déroulède, leaders of violent, antisemitic street militias.

²⁷ Ernest Judet, journalist, slandered the memory of Émile Zola's father in an article that denigrated Zola and was a reaction to "J'accuse." Zola wrote a defense of his father to exculpate him of the accusations.

²⁸ *L'Aurore* 8 August 1898. Esterhazy was the true author of *le bordereau* and the true traitor of the Dreyfus Affair.

bon que tu te désintéresses d'un abominable conflit où c'est la Justice, où c'est la Liberté où c'est la Vie qui sont en jeu et qu'on égorge ignominieusement dans un autre. Demain, c'est en toi qu'on les égorgera une fois de plus...²⁹

Here Mirbeau tells his readers that the tortured, bleeding Dreyfus is really everyone, all are potentially similar victims of injustice. It is his rallying cry for solidarity with the Dreyfusard movement, the realization that the so-called judicial error³⁰ – a true miscarriage of justice – was a crime against humanity. In the mind of the anarchist, the deprivation of an individual's rights by the State is the greatest possible crime, the true crime, the primal crime. It is embodied in Dreyfus, the bare human being, stripped of his military decorations, being tortured for a crime he did not commit. All of Mirbeau cries out against the oppression of the individual by the powerful social group, or institution. His life work was an outcry against injustices in the family, the Church, the schools, the Army, the banks, and government itself. This is the basis of his moral outrage that one feels in every one of his written works. It is found in the ironic paradoxes, the absurd encounters and the excessive behavior of his characters who all have an inherent misanthropic quality, a true mean streak. And so, Mirbeau carried the message of human solidarity to the organized working classes of France in a series of messages similar to the exhortation made by Zola to the youth and to the citizens of France.³¹ These essays were appeals to a universal humanity even though addressed specifically to French readers of the 1890s.

I would emphasize the historical fact that Jaurès³² himself finally came over to the Dreyfusard camp. Jaurès, former *député*, leader of the Socialist Workers' Party and a great national figure, was more influential than Mirbeau in consolidating the socialist workers' parties to work for retrial and rehabilitation in concert with the Dreyfusard movement. In any event, at this time Socialist antisemitism,³³ that had always equated Jews and capitalism, was put aside temporarily so that

²⁹ *L'Aurore* 8 August 1898.

³⁰ "Judicial error" is the euphemism for total corruption and cover-up of the crime by the *État-major* and its collaborators. It also has the English meaning of mistrial or miscarriage of justice.

³¹ The ethical message in each of Zola's pamphlets is discussed in Robert S. April, "Émile Zola's Moral Outrage: The Ethics of Whistle-Blowing Today and Then," *Conversations*, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals (2010): 71-83.

³² Jean Jaurès (1859-1914) was a famous French political figure. He was *agrégé de philosophie*, a twice-elected *député*, and a respected intellectual and author. In 1898 he published his treatise, "Les preuves," on the front pages of *La Petite République*. This book put forth factual evidence of Captain Dreyfus's innocence in a text that followed classical historical method. The summer 1898, turned out to be an eventful time in the Affair. Minister of War Cavaignac produced his own proof of Dreyfus's guilt before the *Chambre de Députés*. On August 30, 1898, Colonel Henry's forged documents were published. The next day, he suicided. Jaurès's text had included detailed technical discussion about the nature of the documents on which both Henry's and Cavaignac's false arguments were founded. Even after the Affair was over Jaurès remained a confirmed Dreyfusard. He founded, the newspaper *L'Humanité* in 1904 and the PSU in 1905. He was a great orator and rallied the socialist left to his words. Mirbeau was always critical of "State socialism" that he associated with Jaurès. For Mirbeau it was collectivism, the antithesis of individual freedom. For most of his earlier career Mirbeau saw himself at antipodes with Jaurès, but they reconciled during the Affair. Mirbeau was moved by Jaurès's support of Dreyfus's innocence in "Les Preuves." Mirbeau's call to "le prolétaire" to heed the words of Jaurès is the focal point of their reconciliation. Later Mirbeau worked at *L'Humanité* and published two articles monthly, but they split again at the time that Jaurès prioritized the fusion of the socialist party elements and went afield from the social and literary issues to which Mirbeau gave more importance. Jaurès's personal engagement in the Affair was opposed by the Socialist Party manifesto (Millerand, Viviani, Guesde, and Vaillant who wanted nothing to do with it).

³³ In *L'Esprit du judaïsme*, Bernard Henri Lévy observes, "l'antisémitisme [...] des guesdistes s'opposant au parti dreyfusard tenu pour l'incarnation de 'l'esprit banquier' et de 'l'esprit de mercantilisme' (*Le Réveil du Nord* 17 novembre 1897); c'est celui de tous ces socialistes qui tiennent Dreyfus lui-même pour le chef d'orchestre clandestin du grand parti des 'corbeaux rapaces' et des 'youtres de la finance et de la politique' (*La République sociale* 8 November

the radical Left could rally with the Dreyfusard movement in a common cause against the conservative, nationalist, clerical and military Right.

Notwithstanding the importance of Jaurès, Mirbeau's story in the Affair is, in part at least, another chapter in the complicated history of nineteenth-century antisemitism. It points out the historical mutations of antisemitic hate, which Zola compared to a virus that would destroy France if not controlled.³⁴ Mirbeau's France was infused with an organized antisemitism whose virulence is difficult for us to imagine today, a *modus vivendi* for many politicians, artists, and writers.³⁵

The morphing of antisemitism into its modern, contemporary form – the international movement of anti-Zionism and anti-Israel thinking among the intellectual left³⁶ – is the legacy of the anti-Dreyfusard movement. Octave Mirbeau's protests and change of heart are examples of courage and conviction that attempted to stem the tide and to change the course of human events. What have we learned from the Dreyfus Affair? What would have been its outcome without Octave Mirbeau?

Perhaps the historical outcome would not have been different. Perhaps the socialist-anarchist solidarity would have come about through Jaurès's engagement alone. Mirbeau's writings extol the importance of individual human rights at all costs. But, unlike his Dreyfusard associates, he could not reconcile freedom and justice with social order, because for him, France's social order was rotten to the core. He explained that point in his novel, *Le Jardin des supplices*, a work that contains obscene descriptions to portray what the author wants to say about "socially accepted" torture and murder. This is said to be Mirbeau's full literary comment about the Dreyfus Affair in the way that *Vérité* was Zola's.³⁷ Notwithstanding this statement about *Vérité* and *Le Jardin des supplices*, the two novels are quite different in format and in style. To illustrate this point I will now discuss in detail Mirbeau's 1899 novel.

Le Jardin des supplices

This novel was shocking for its time. It had four principal themes: corruption in all political institutions, institutionalized punishment for individual crimes, physical love and death, the intrinsic evil of female sexuality. Whatever Mirbeau's intentions were when writing it, he repeats the hypothesis that he states in the opening scenes – namely, that a principal activity of organized society is murder (in

1897) ou pour un pur prétexte utilisé par 'le groupe judaïsant et panamisant' pour 'lever à cette fontaine toutes les souillures d'Israël' (ce manifeste du 19 janvier 1898 est signé non seulement par Millerand, Viviani, Guesde et Sembat, mais par le grand Jean Jaurès et il paraît le lendemain, dans *La Petite République*); c'est ce socialisme des imbéciles qui assure n'avoir rien, vraiment rien, contre les Juifs mais tout, vraiment tout, contre un 'capitalisme juif' se servant du nom de Dreyfus pour se 'réhabiliter' et 'l'emporter' dans la bataille où il est engagé contre la noblesse chrétienne 'famélique' alliée à la frange 'cléricale' de la bourgeoisie (c'est toujours ce que dit le même manifeste signé donc, j'y insiste, par Guesde et les guesdistes mais aussi par un Jaurès dont la légende veut qu'il se soit tenu à l'écart de ce torrent de boue – eh, bien pas tout à fait...).” Bernard-Henri Lévy, *L'Esprit du judaïsme* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2016) 23-24.

³⁴ In "J'accuse" Zola warned that if not cured, the disease of antisemitism would kill great, liberal France.

³⁵ Willa Z. Silverman, *The Notorious Life of Gyp: Right-Wing Anarchist in Fin-de-Siècle France* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995) 77-81.

³⁶ Cécile Chambrud, "En France, l'antisémitisme 'du quotidien' s'est ancré et se propage" (*Le Monde* 11 February 2017).

³⁷ "Les événements de l'Affaire y paraissent, de manière plus ou moins importante, comme cadre fictionnel faisant cohabiter les personnages du roman avec les acteurs réels de l'événement présents sous leur véritable nom ou sous une clé transparente." Philippe Oriol, *L'Histoire de l'Affaire Dreyfus de 1894 à nos jours*, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2014) 1132.

all its forms). Although the novel begins in France it includes travel to China, a place of mystery and awe for French readers of the day. It is in the refined Chinese gardens that the graphic, obscene tortures are described. These punishments are so highly contrived, and frankly obscene, that they lead one to wonder whether the author intended his pages to be read only as outrageous parody and as not-so refined political satire?

Michel Delon's preface to the Gallimard edition³⁸ is an excellent literary analysis of the novel. Delon develops intertextual links with Zola's passages about sensual gardens, hothouses, and natural horticultural growth in scenes from *The Rougon-Macquart* – notably, from *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret* and *La Curée*. The scenes of steamy, super abundant flora, procreating, biological coupling, and the perverted human sexual encounters between Renée Saccard and her stepson, Maxime, as well as those of the tormented Abbé Mouret and his love, Albine, are cited. However, the principal difference is the upbeat, optimistic sensual beauty of Paradou compared to the incomparably grotesque scenes of death and decay in the Chinese garden. Delon relates Mirbeau's personal obsession with his own gardening to the minutely detailed descriptions of the Chinese flora. He gives a historical résumé of the contemporary French reader's interest in scenes of Oriental violence, torture, and sexual depravity – visualized against a background of refinement and civilized traditions. Delon also reminds us of the long tradition of fictional representation of sensual, libertine Oriental life beginning with Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* as well as works by lesser-known contemporaries of Mirbeau who also wrote about Chinese torture. Delon brings together under one great literary canopy well-known authors who write about refined violence and sexuality. These are Sade, Baudelaire, Poe, Huysmans, Gide, Freud, Malraux and Bataille.

The formal structure of *Le Jardin des supplices* is different from that of *Vérité*, Zola's last finished novel and a narrative that recounts the murder of a primary school student in a small French town. In *Vérité* the victim of false accusation is a young, Jewish school teacher. The accusation is made by the local police and church officials on flimsy evidence. The anti-semitic nature of the false accusation and the outcome of the novel present direct analogies to the events of the Dreyfus Affair. The analogy is transparent to the reader and needs little explanation. In the end, the novel is Zola's outright accusation of the Church for its suppression of open education, true freedom of expression and self-realization. He is especially harsh on clerical meddling in the private sanctity of marriage. For Zola these are society's impediments to liberation and a utopian society.

Le Jardin des supplices is of a complicated, different genre. It is part surrealistic, part naturalistic,³⁹ part *roman à thèse* but is also a *roman initiatique*. In the "Frontispiece" Mirbeau

³⁸ See Michel Delon, Préface, in Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

³⁹ A few sentences from Clara, who describes the death of her lover, Annie in response to the narrator who questions her after her night of love-making, will recall Zola's grotesque, naturalistic description of Nana's face as she dies of small pox in the last pages of *Nana*. See Robert S. April, "La mort de Nana. La petite vérole et la maladie infectieuse au temps de Zola," *Excavatio* 20.1-2 (2005): 163-76. Clara tells about Annie:

Ce fut quelque chose d'horrible, chéri! Annie est morte de la lèpre... de cette lèpre effrayante qu'on appelle l'éléphantiasis... Car tout est effrayant ici... l'amour, la maladie, la mort... et les fleurs!... Jamais je n'ai tant, tant pleuré, je vous assure... [...] Une nuit que nous revenions du fleuve, Annie se plaignit de très vives douleurs à la tête et aux reins. Le lendemain, son corps était tout couvert de petites taches pourprées... Sa peau, plus rose et d'une plus fine pulpe que la fleur de l'althœa, se durcit, s'épaissit, s'enfla, devint d'un gris cendré... de grosses tumeurs, de monstrueux tubercules la soulevèrent. C'était quelque chose d'épouvantable. Et le mal qui, d'abord, s'était attaqué aux jambes, gagna les cuisses, le ventre, les seins, le visage... Oh! Son visage, son visage!... Figurez-vous une poche énorme, une outre ignoble, toute grise, striée de sang brun... et qui pendait et qui se balançait au moindre mouvement de la

lets us listen to a conversation between intellectuals discussing the “law of murder” which they claim regulates all human dealings, a kind of natural law inherent in all human institutions – namely, the Church, the Army, the School, and the Government – all Mirbeau’s life-long *bêtes noires*. The proposition is offered that murder is a natural law that should not be perceived as exceptional in human life, but rather, to be expected as a natural, recurrent event. Two of the participants exclaim that human society takes charge of murder and delegates it to its constituent parts – controlling the extent of violence, but legitimizing it in industry, colonial business, war, hunting, and antisemitism. All present then accept the idea that murder is dangerous and must be regulated; and therefore, laws are put into place, thus providing satisfaction to society through trials, imprisonment – and the guillotine. When someone objects that a violent, unsuppressed desire to kill is not characteristic of those called “des esprits cultivés et des natures policées,”⁴⁰ the philosopher cites the example of the Dreyfus Affair. This is the only direct mention of the Dreyfus affair in the novel. Among the people in this class, he notes:

L’escrime, le duel, les sports violents, l’abominable tir aux pigeons, les courses de taureaux, les exercices variés du patriotisme, la chasse... toutes choses qui ne sont, en réalité que des régressions vers l’époque des antiques barbaries où l’homme – si l’on peut dire – était, en culture morale, pareil aux grands fauves qu’il poursuivait...⁴¹

Mirbeau says, perhaps jokingly, perhaps not, that if all these derivative forms of violence were outlawed, then, instead of

[...] courir le cerf, de servir le sanglier, de massacrer d’innocents volatiles dans les luzernes, soyez assuré que c’est à nos trousses que les “esprits cultivés” lanceraient leurs meutes, que c’est nous que les “natures policées” abattraient joyeusement, à coups de fusil, ce qu’ils ne manquent pas de faire quant ils ont le pouvoir d’une façon ou d’une autre, avec plus de décision et avec moins d’hypocrisie que les brutes... Ah! Ne souhaitons jamais la disparition du gibier de nos plaines et de nos forêts! Il est notre sauvegarde et, en quelque sorte, notre rançon. L’Affaire Dreyfus en est un exemple admirable, et jamais, je crois, la passion du meurtre et la joie de la chasse à l’homme, ne s’étaient aussi complètement et cyniquement étalées... Parmi les incidents extraordinaires et les faits monstrueux, auxquels, quotidiennement, depuis une année, elle donna lieu, celui de la poursuite, dans les rues de Nantes, de M. Grimaux, reste le plus caractéristique et tout à l’honneur des esprits cultivés et des natures policées, qui firent couvrir d’outrages et de menaces de mort, ce grand savant à qui nous devons les plus beaux travaux sur la chimie.⁴² Il faudra

malade... De ses yeux – ses yeux, cher amour! – on ne voyait plus qu’une mince boutonnière rougeâtre et suintante... Je me demande encore si c’est possible! Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991) 144.

⁴⁰ *Le Jardin des supplices* 50-51.

⁴¹ *Le Jardin des supplices* 50-51.

⁴² *Le Jardin des supplices* was published during the following, unforeseen developments of the Dreyfus Affair – between the first annulment of condemnation (June 3, 1899) of Dreyfus who then would be obliged to stand trial a second time. Zola’s return from self-exile in Great Britain and Dreyfus’s arrival from Devil’s Island on June 30, to be taken immediately to prison in Rennes. From August 7 to September 9, the Military Court met again in Rennes to condemn Dreyfus to 10 years in prison but because of “extenuating circumstances” the judgement was declared null and void. On September 19 Dreyfus was pardoned. *Le Jardin des supplices* was published at the beginning of summer 1899.

toujours se souvenir de ceci que le maire de Clisson, “esprit cultivé,” dans une lettre rendue publique, refusa l’entrée de sa ville à M. Grimaux et regretta que les lois modernes ne lui permissent point de le “pendre haut et court” comme il advenait des savants, aux belles époques des anciennes monarchies...⁴³

In the next part of the book “En mission” the narrator tells us about his boyhood in a provincial bourgeois society that was dominated by his father, first and foremost, and only later, by his friend, Eugène Mortain, a corrupt politician. He is controlled successively by each. His father raises him with the philosophy that the goal of business is to “fleece the customer.” His days in school are the refinement of this philosophy of making money at all costs. The narrator tells us that Eugène Mortain has the very soul of a politician. Mirbeau uses his text to denounce the state apparatus that allows unscrupulous politicians to become rich. Our narrator is brought up in a world where theft, dishonesty, and cruelty triumph. After the death of his father, he goes back to his friend, Mortain, who has since become a *ministre*. He is encouraged to enter a fixed, political contest in which he will lose for the benefit of Mortain, who now sends him away because he has become a political nuisance. The chosen mission is for him to do entomological research on the biology of a parasitic insect in Ceylon. Although he knows nothing about this subject, his assignment is to research the protoplasmic first steps in the generation of life itself. Mirbeau’s satiric sense of humor is present at each turn of thought. In this part of the novel he is ridiculing the politics of The Third Republic and the pretences of science when he sends the narrator on this mission to meet a famous (but very disappointing) “scientist” whose grandiose explanation of the protoplasmic secrets of life itself lets us know that we are listening to a crackpot in the body of a self-claimed scientist.

In the second part of the book, called, appropriately and finally, “Le Jardin des supplices,” Mirbeau makes a parody of crime and punishment. In this magnificent garden, death, suffering, blood and gore are everywhere present. They are part of daily life and are part of the institutionalized processes put in place by the Army, by Religion, and by the Law. He blames the judges, the priests, the soldiers, who, in their courtrooms, their churches and their army bases, work enthusiastically to do death’s work. Pithily, Mirbeau wrote an ironic dedication in the novel:

Aux Prêtres, aux Soldats, aux Juges, aux Hommes,
qui éduquent, dirigent, gouvernent les Hommes,
je dédie ces pages de Meurtre et de Sang.⁴⁴

On the sea passage to Ceylon, the narrator meets Clara, a liberated English woman, who will lead him by the hand into the sensual, exotic Garden of tortures which will add pain, blood, carnage, and death to the *luxe, calme, et volupté* of Baudelaire’s *voyage initiatique*. She introduces this anonymous, timorous, innocent narrator to the secrets of carnal love and sexual passion in the face of abject horror. On the level of parody, she will also be showing him the hidden face of colonization in the *Jardin* itself. Little more *exposition de texte* need be included here. The dedication (above) says it all.

I propose that this first encounter with Clara is a thematic pivotal point of the narration. It is the moment when the narrator makes his confession to Clara and reevaluates the trajectory of

⁴³ *Le Jardin des supplices* 50-51.

⁴⁴ *Le Jardin des supplices* 41.

his life. He admits his fraudulent identity and laments the concocted “scientific” mission to Ceylon, thus demystifying his false identity as a research embryologist on a scientific mission. He gives in now to personal regression, leaving the hierarchical structure of European society and moving into a primitive society based on passion, impulse, and spontaneity. He becomes an innocent baby in the clutches of Clara, the personification of the femme fatale, the temptress who first ate from the forbidden fruit of the biblical Garden and who has been, ever since, identified with sensuality, seduction and sin. In Clara’s world of the *Jardin des supplices* language itself will be the sole vehicle of truth. The narration, and the narrator, are swept up in the voluptuousness of Clara’s expression of love and lust against the background of florid, moist heat, sweat, blood, and the odors of putrefaction and death.

Mirbeau now moves his narration from the outer world of political satire to the inner world of primal emotions, developing a proto-surrealistic text. He uses detailed nomenclature to depict the exotic growth around him as he floats, dream-like, into the *Jardin* itself, passing through a luxuriant flora in which species of sensual foliage are named down to minute details. The reader feels himself transported to a voluptuous, steamy, hothouse like that in *La Curée*, where Renée Saccard and her stepson, Maxime, engage in their perverted encounters. The passages of floral luxuriance and force are also reminiscent of those in Zola’s in which the sensual, natural quality of Paradou, a *fin-de- siècle* Garden of Eden becomes the trysting place for Albine and Abbé Serge’s passionate, but forbidden, love.

Mirbeau’s garden passages allow him to make an obvious satirical comment about French justice and its punishment, when he compares the refinement of Chinese gardens to those at home:

Les Chinois sont des jardiniers incomparables, bien supérieurs à nos grossiers horticulteurs qui ne pensent qu’à détruire la beauté des plantes par d’irrespectueuses pratiques et de criminelles hybridations. Ceux-là sont de véritables malfaiteurs et je ne puis concevoir qu’on n’ait pas encore, au nom de la vie universelle, édictés des lois très sévères contre eux. Il me serait même agréable si on les guillotinaient sans pitié, de préférence à ces pâles assassins dont le “sélectionnisme” social est plutôt louable et généreux, puisque, la plupart du temps, il ne vise que des vieilles femmes très laides, et de très ignobles bourgeois lesquels sont un outrage perpétuel à la vie. Outre qu’ils ont poussé l’infamie jusqu’à difformer la grâce émouvante et si jolie des fleurs simples, nos jardiniers ont osé cette plaisanterie dégradante de [leur] donner [...] des noms de vieux généraux ou de politiciens déshonorés.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Compare the last chapter of Book III of *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret* in which Serge, the priest, has a vision of implacably growing nature pushing up to destroy the remains of the church, a moving, growing flora with a life force of its own:

Et jusqu’aux herbes elles-mêmes, ces herbes dont les brins séchés passaient sous la grand-porte, [...] s’avançant dans la nef, où elles soulevaient les dalles de leurs pinces puissantes. C’était l’émeute victorieuse, la nature révolutionnaire dressant des barricades avec des autels renversés, démolissant l’église qui lui jetait trop d’ombre depuis les siècles.” Émile Zola, *La Faute de l’abbé Mouret*, in *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1960) 1489;

or Chapter 15 of book II in which the garden is the Garden of Eden, resplendent with sensual flora:

The scenes in the garden itself emphasize the sado-masochistic relationship between the narrator and Clara, his lover, as she becomes excited at the unspeakably brutally realistic and detailed tortures witnessed at close range – such as, the punishment of the rat, the punishment of caresses, the clock punishment, and the artful dissections of living victims by the skilful torturer.⁴⁶ Clara explains clearly that these very refined deaths by slow torture are reserved for those victims of high status who have committed serious crimes against important people even though, by contrast, she also describes a horrid death to one victim who has done no more than steal a fish.

A particularly offensive example of Mirbeau's naturalistic style is the passage where Clara torments and tantalizes "The Face," her chosen victim, who was once her lover. He is condemned to the ordeal of the cave, in which he is fettered in a iron collar with leg chains, and left, starving, in a cage where he and fellow victims become savagely desperate before the pieces of rancid meat Clara brings on a plate, held before him while she recites her three-verse love poem. His fixed attention is rapt on the imminence of the morsel of rancid meat she has brought for them to fight over. She concludes the three verses with the following:

J'ai trois amies.
 Les cheveux de la troisième sont nattés et roulés sur sa tête.
 Et jamais ils n'ont connu la douceur des huiles parfumées.
 Sa face qui exprime la passion est difforme.
 Son corps est pareil à celui d'un porc.
 On la dirait toujours en colère.
 Toujours elle gronde et grogne.
 Ses seins et son ventre exhalent l'odeur du poisson.
 Elle est malpropre en toute sa personne.
 Elle mange de tout et boit à l'excès.
 Ses yeux ternes sont toujours chassieux.
 Et son lit est plus répugnant que le nid de la huppe.
 Et c'est celle-là que j'aime.

[...] ils disparurent derrière le frisson des feuilles remuées, et tout se calma. Ils entraient dans une paix délicieuse. C'était, au centre, un arbre noyé d'une ombre si lisse, qu'on ne pouvait en distinguer l'essence. Il avait une taille géante, un tronc qui respirait comme une poitrine, des branches qu'il étendait au loin, pareilles à des membres protecteurs. Il semblait bon, robuste, puissant, fécond: il était le doyen du jardin, le père de la forêt, l'orgueil des herbes, l'ami du soleil qui se levait et se couchait chaque jour sur sa cime." Zola 1404.

⁴⁶ In the punishment by caresses, the restrained victim is masturbated gently, but continuously until this pleasure, taken to its extreme, leads to agonizing pain and death. Here Mirbeau makes a double parallel between pleasure and torture. He makes the example that torture is inverted pleasure pushed to the limits of tolerance to end up as the most horrific agony. On the other hand, somewhere between the salon-bordello of Paris, with flower-covered young girls for those who like young flesh, and the flower boats of China, where after each visit we have an unconscious, frozen, hysterical Clara brought back by Ki-Pai, the reader realizes that Clara is one of those women who is damned to fall prey to "*la petite mort*" (the French word for post-orgasmic somnolence as well as hysterical trances) and has to be brought out of this state by special kinds of pleasures. I would point out here again that we never find true lasting pleasure from Mirbeau's sexual delights, which for him are simply steps on a path to a downward fall to the lower depths. All of this text conflates love and death, pleasure and destruction in what Mirbeau sees as the machinations of a criminally oriented society, itself wholly responsible for this fatal link.

Et celle-là je l'aime parce qu'il y a quelque chose de plus mystérieusement attirant que la beauté: c'est la pourriture.

La pourriture en qui réside la chaleur éternelle de la vie,

En qui s'élabore l'éternel renouvellement des métamorphoses!

J'ai trois amies...⁴⁷

Clara exclaims that the poor poet whom she loved no longer remembers her, her face, her words, or her mouth that she used to place on his. His mouth no longer produces human words and she chooses the best piece of her rotten offering to place before his mouth, shouting: "Mange, pauvre poète! [...] Mange, va!"⁴⁸ as she clings to the narrator, asking him to hold her and kiss her. When she looks up, she observes "the Face" who has overcome all the others and has shreds of meat hanging from his animal-like teeth. Although Clara is first excited by this vision, she is then overcome by sexual frenzy and collapse. She must leave the confines of the putrid, malodorous cages to seek "air" in the *Jardin des supplices* itself.

Mirbeau has constructed a novel using independent tales that are juxtaposed to form a work quite different from pure naturalism in the manner of Zola. Mirbeau's tales are not independent novellas, like those of Zola⁴⁹ but part of a larger triptych. The descriptive passages are not really true to life and are written to convey a dream-like quality. One might say that they are like impressionist paintings, insofar as they place a set of colors in juxtaposition without necessarily resolving the artistic dilemma that they have created. Some critics have explained that Mirbeau, journalist and pamphleteer, depended for a livelihood on the numbers of lines written for the newspapers which printed his serialized work. Thus, *Le Jardin des supplices* is, in fact, a putting together of small articles previously published in journals by Mirbeau on the subjects of the law of murder, political corruption, the Dreyfus affair, and Oriental mystery and refinement. It is a narrative construction that treats the subject of political corruption and injustice as well as Mirbeau's considerations on love, death, and female sexuality.

From a literary standpoint, Mirbeau has been labeled a decadent writer, like Baudelaire, who revolted against the genre of romanticism in his time. Mirbeau's revolt was lifelong and universal. He was the consummate anarchist who denounced and condemned all aspects of bourgeois social institutions but, in so doing, in *Le Jardin des supplices*, he leaves the reader without a remedy. Did he expect us to see in his tale a subsequent self-destruction of society's institutions? Was he predicting that there would be a self-destruct mode set into play by the dynamic of his novels? Would they necessarily bring about some futuristic utopian order once all had been reduced to nought?

It is obvious to the reader that Mirbeau was fixated on the love relationship between man and woman and that the female mystique was a subject of importance. His novel makes a direct link between passionate love and the death-urge. Can we assume that he wanted simply to make a dream-like ode to death, a thanatopia? Is the transient pleasure of love-making an antidote to man's cruelty? Mirbeau does not describe life itself as cruel. He never becomes self-pitying or hypochondriacal in the face of life's pathologies and the indignities of aging. He is critical of man and his affairs. He implies that the interference of parents, schools, church, army, banks, and governments is the source of pain, cruelty, and murder. His work does not suggest a remedy

⁴⁷ *Le Jardin des supplices* 177.

⁴⁸ *Le Jardin des supplices* 178.

⁴⁹ See Émile Zola, *Nouvelles noires* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2013); see also *Nouvelles roses* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2013).

for this dilemma. His message is one of destruction, degeneration, and death. Nothing will survive these experiences that cause Clara to fall into a state of *la belle hystérie*, where she must recuperate under the supervision of her female attendants, before she will emerge, to return with the narrator, or another lover, to the same scenario of love-making and death by torture. Is there in Mirbeau's text some suggestion that *la petite mort*, an everyday saying in the French vernacular, is well named for this repressed hidden link between sex and death? As for the sensual boat that floats with the unconscious Clara in her state of *petite mort*, are the women attendants facsimiles of altar maidens in a temple cult, or co-participants in a surrealistic brothel, where the shock of the sadistic torture, the carnage of the putrefied bodies, and the presence of opium all contribute to the atmosphere described in the final pages of the novel, which ends, without resolution.

For all these reasons I propose that for Mirbeau, the anarchist, the Dreyfus affair is just one example of Western cruelty and violence in a plethora of examples that seems endless. The novel does not present characters who are transcriptions of real actors in the Dreyfus drama. The narrator, the Mirbeau-like, innocent, timorous observer on a *voyage initiatique*, is not recognizable as Dreyfus, Picquart, Esterhazy, Reinach, Zola, or the General Staff itself. There is certainly no femme fatale, like Clara, in the Dreyfus cast of characters. If the unthinkable torments described in Mirbeau's Garden of Hell (my term) relate to the tortures sustained by the innocent Jewish captain on Devil's island, it is not directly apparent from the text itself. There was certainly nothing refined about Dreyfus's solitary confinement on the vermin-infested, sun-baked island in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

What moral lesson, if any, Mirbeau might be putting forward in *Le Jardin des supplices*? It seems that he never proposed (*à la Baudelaire*) that orgiastic pleasure was an antidote to society's cruelty. Even voluptuousness leads to nothing. There is in the end no satisfaction, only a state that resembles, or leads to, death itself. Is he implying that there are cycles of destruction and death that precede, in some mystical fashion, transfiguration and, ultimately, rebirth? Perhaps, but without illustrating the how of it all, Mirbeau fails to lead us to the point of equilibrium in the succession of violent, cruel events caused by the Army, the Church, the antisemitic sentiment, and the State itself – the total rot that is the *summum malum* for Mirbeau – the Dreyfus Affair. Mirbeau does not express joy, or even relief, at the knowledge that armistice was finally granted, Dreyfus was to be rehabilitated, and that things might be better going forward once the Combe laws brought about separation of Church and State in 1905. Mirbeau was never a militant anarchist who would himself go to the barricades to produce change. He was an ideological anarchist who infused his pamphlets, his newspaper articles, and his novels with his principles. This was Mirbeau's political engagement. He was an intellectual Dreyfusard of his time, involved personally with Émile Zola, the circumstances of Zola's trial, and the literary expression of Dreyfusard thinking.

In contrast to Mirbeau's objectives, Zola's literary goal was to reenact the drama in his novel, concluding in *Vérité* that putting an end to the Church's negative effect on women's rights while promoting education, and free thinking, would bring about a utopia in which truth and justice would prevail for all. The final scene in *Vérité* is the one in which grandfather, Marc, assembled with all his descendents, looks optimistically to the dawn of a new scientific century of human and agricultural fecundity in a new France, unfettered from the shackles of the Old Church. For Zola, Truth was on the march and nothing would stop it. If Mirbeau's literary objective is to be seen as utopian, it must be by omission only. That is, a utopian perspective has to be interpreted from what he does not say explicitly at the end of his novel. Might he be telling his reader that violence, destruction and death is the consequence of unconscious sexual drives exacerbated by society's institutions and their rules? In that sense one might classify his work as

psychological. Unlike Baudelaire, Mirbeau does not place a hidden Satan behind the curtain of his decadent scenes. Mirbeau, the anarchist, was also an atheist for whom religious symbolism was the hypocritical claptrap of the Church.

Can one conclude that Mirbeau's writing about the Dreyfus Affair is but a form of social parody? Is the reader supposed to laugh at the outrageous nature of much of his work, and nothing more? The excessively obscene dehumanization of the fictional, caged, starved, chained prisoners, struggling for the piece of rancid meat thrown by Clara is so repulsively horrid that it makes one wonder if this is supposed to be merely a colossal joke written to entertain a reader while, at the same time, bringing to mind the not so comic reality of Algerian colonial atrocities and the living putrefaction of Colonel Dreyfus in his solitary, vermin-ridden, sun-beaten stockade on Devil's Island. Whatever his ultimate intention, Mirbeau's prolific contributions do have a lasting, historical place in the Dreyfus Affair. He gave us essays and pamphlets and a literary novel that will be read from generation to generation, now that Pierre Michel and others have placed him in the light of literary inquiry after a long period outside the main focus of French letters. Octave Mirbeau was a loyal dreyfusard who stood squarely with those who opposed antisemitism, violent torture, false accusation, mystification, and suppression of individual human rights. Do we today have Mirbeau's courage and conviction to resist the subtle, politically correct forms of antisemitism, and other forms of hate described by Bernard Henri Levy in his recent book?⁵⁰ This is the hate that would attract certain elements back to the streets, if allowed, with banners unfurled, crying out, once again, "Death to the Jews!" or its contemporary equivalents.⁵¹

⁵⁰ "L'antisémitisme ne pouvait renaître qu'en se donnant des habits neufs. Il ne pouvait recommencer d'embraser les âmes et de mobiliser à grande échelle qu'en se dotant d'un discours nouveau. Et c'est bien ce qui se passe, là, depuis deux ou trois décennies, avec l'énonciation progressive d'un jeu de propositions qui sont, je le répète, assez neuves pour n'être pas trop compromises avec les scènes criminelles du passé et pour paraître bien en phase, surtout, avec la sensibilité, les émotions, les grandes préoccupations, voire le sentiment du Juste, du Vrai et du Bien en vigueur dans le moment nouveau." Lévy 31. And the author continues: "Telle est la forme générique de tout délire qui voudrait, à l'avenir, renouer avec l'heureux temps où l'on pouvait, en toute bonne conscience, défiler dans les rues de Paris, ou d'ailleurs, en criant, 'Mort aux Juifs!'" Lévy 36.

⁵¹ Cécile Chambraud, *Le Monde* 11 February 2017.