

# Sino Evil – See No Evil: Graphic Violence in Octave Mirbeau and Judith Gautier

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## RÉSUMÉ

*La fiction naturaliste est une source particulièrement fertile en représentations de la douleur et des attaques cruelles susceptibles d'être endurées par le corps humain. Si *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899) d'Octave Mirbeau en est un exemple relativement connu, *Le Dragon impérial* (1869), un bestseller de Judith Gautier, fille aînée de Théophile Gautier, est voué aujourd'hui à une obscurité relative. Cet essai s'attache à corriger cette situation en examinant la parenté particulière et jusqu'ici inexplorée qui unit les deux auteurs. Il s'avère que tous deux accordent une position prééminente au sang, à l'horreur et au macabre et qu'ils envisagent la violence comme la pierre d'angle de la beauté esthétique. Alors que Zola et ses confrères orientalistes considèrent le Japon comme l'incarnation de l'Orient, Mirbeau et Gautier lui préfèrent la Chine, qu'ils imaginent comme un site privilégié informé par la mort.*

*À la lumière de la notion de plaisir du texte mise en avant par Roland Barthes, nous examinerons plusieurs scènes de violence et de torture tirées du *Jardin des supplices* de Mirbeau et du *Dragon impérial* de Gautier aux fins de déterminer les relations que de telles représentations présupposent entre auteur, lecteur et texte. Plus précisément, nous chercherons à mettre en avant la position problématique du lecteur qui se trouve tout à la fois dans la situation d'un sadique prenant indirectement plaisir à la souffrance qu'il est forcé de confronter et dans celle d'un masochiste qui se complaît aux manipulations de l'auteur. Enfin, nous souhaitons démontrer comment ces œuvres explorent, par des voies différentes, le point de vue de Michel Foucault, selon lequel la specularité fait partie inhérente du "supplice."*

Naturalist fiction is a particularly fruitful source of representations of pain and cruel attacks on the human body. The colonial conflicts, violent wars, and revolutions that characterize the nineteenth century, coupled with France's interest in the more macabre aspects of Catholicism's cult of suffering, and Decadent literature's interest in death and decay, inspired a gruesome fascination with scenes of extreme violence, torture, cruelty, and pain.<sup>1</sup> While Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899) is a relatively well-known example, Judith Gautier's *Le Dragon impérial* (1869), a bestseller by the eldest daughter of Théophile Gautier, remains in relative obscurity today.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Hannah Thompson, "Savage Poetry: Torture and Cruelty in Mirbeau and Barbey d'Aurevilly," *French Studies* 64.4 (2010): 410-11.

<sup>2</sup> For Zeigler, the exploration of the issue of sadism and violence at its most extreme is what gave Mirbeau's novel its notoriety and earned it the reputation as a lurid and grisly fin-de-siècle masterpiece. See Robert E. Zeigler, "Hunting the Peacock: The Pursuit of Non-Reflective Experience in Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices*," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 12.4 (1984): 165. There are signs that Gautier is stepping out of obscurity. Garnier republished her complete works in 2011 and the first-ever international colloquium honoring her took place at the Sorbonne in November 2017. In fact, she and Mirbeau share the year 2017 as the centenary of their death.

I aim to correct this situation by examining the two authors' special yet hitherto unexplored kinship.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, both accord a prominent place to gore, gruesomeness, and the macabre. Both see violence as the mainstay of aesthetic beauty. Whereas Zola and his Orientalist group considered Japan as the embodiment of the East, Mirbeau and Gautier prefer China, as a privileged site where death is a constant, and where, in contrast to the corrupt logic of the West, the association of violence with art is based not on reasoned explanation as to the origins of the death drive, but rather on the simple necessity of death in life and the ubiquity of its presence among all things living.<sup>4</sup>

By examining several scenes of violence and torture in Mirbeau's *Jardin* and Gautier's *Dragon* in light of Roland Barthes's notions of readerly pleasure, I seek to offer insights into the relationships between author, reader and text that such representations foreground. More specifically, I will show how the reader is problematically positioned as both sadist, vicariously enjoying the suffering he or she is forced to witness, and masochist, taking pleasure in the authors' manipulations. Finally, I seek to demonstrate how these works explore in different ways Michel Foucault's contention that specularly is an integral part of the process of "supplice."<sup>5</sup>

Mirbeau's narrative of colonial barbarity is a painful text both to read and write about. Critics rightly view it as a scathing condemnation of the degeneration within Western society at the end of the nineteenth century and of the state's hypocrisy and corruption as manifested in the Dreyfus Affair.<sup>6</sup> The Frontispiece serves to illustrate this corruption by staging a debate between a group of prominent Frenchmen on the legislation of murder, while the second part contains uncomfortably graphic descriptions of the range of methods by which the Chinese authorities torture and execute their citizens. Mirbeau's nameless narrator, a young Frenchman sent to the East on a bogus "scientific" mission (bearing false credentials as an eminent "embryologist" researching the origins of life), provides an unflinchingly detailed account of what happens in the Torture Garden, a lugubrious Eden built quite literally with the blood of 30,000 coolies and fertilized with the cadavers of its victims. As he is led through the garden by his British lover, Clara, the pleasure that she gains from the scenes of pain and suffering is evoked in unmistakably sexual terms: "Un frémissement, que je connaissais pour être l'avant-coureur du spasme, parcourut tout son corps" (213-14).<sup>7</sup> Hence, the two main characters, a Frenchman and an English woman, can be understood as representing the two major colonial empires of France and Britain.

Judith Gautier stands out among Orientalists in several ways – as a rare woman among men, as a French writer highly skilled in the Chinese language, and as one offering a different take on hegemony.<sup>8</sup> Typically, Orientalist texts are informed by imperialism and influenced by the Western frame of reference. The central assumption is the creation of an East-West dichotomy, a

<sup>3</sup> This is the first essay that explores the affinity between Mirbeau and Gautier. His ties to other writers of his day, including Huysmans, Zola, Vallès, Poe, Léautaud, and Gide has been explored to varying degrees in recent years. The following book, however, includes chapters on both Gautier and Mirbeau and their concept of torture: Antonio Leiva Domingue and Muriel Détrie, eds., *Le Supplice oriental dans la littérature et les arts* (Lyon: Les éditions du Murmure, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> See Enda McCaffrey, *Octave Mirbeau's Literary and Intellectual Evolution as a French Writer, 1880-1914* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2000) 55.

<sup>5</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973) and Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir: naissance de la prison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> McCaffrey 44.

<sup>7</sup> Quotations are taken from Octave Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris: Bibliothèque-Charpentier, 1919). Henceforth page numbers will only appear in the text.

<sup>8</sup> The fact that Edward Saïd, in his groundbreaking work *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, 1978), makes no mention of nineteenth-century women Orientalists (he treats Théophile Gautier, but not Judith) suggests she is unique in this respect, as a rare woman among men.

dominated-dominator polarity. But Gautier's fiction relies instead on original Middle and Far Eastern textual material combined with an unusual narrating voice. Rather than create Western traveler-narrators, as Mirbeau does, she permits Oriental narrators to tell the tale directly. Her attempt is thus to remove the authorial voice of the Western writer in order to lend credibility to the story and present the East on its own terms. Hence, her texts present a different take on colonialism in their concentration on civil wars (in this case between Chinese and Tartar tribes), and in their movement away from Mirbeau's Franco-centric vision and explicit political satire.<sup>9</sup>

Her best-selling first novel, *Le Dragon impérial*, published when she was only twenty-three years old, is a case in point as probably the first French novel to have an exclusively Chinese plot, including setting and characters. The work combines elements of the picaresque novel and the medieval quest story, alternating portrayals of the majestic beauty of China, and romantic love and honor with very violent, bloody depictions of battle and torture. Praised by Mallarmé as "une grande merveille," and by Anatole France as a sustained poem, admired by Flaubert and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam as well, it is based on the ancient Chinese superstition that when a person's shadow takes the shape of a dragon, that person is destined to become the next emperor, unless someone breaks the silence and reveals the sign.<sup>10</sup> Then not only will the person not become emperor, but chaos will reign and terrible misfortunes occur. From this ancient proverb, Gautier spins a rich tapestry taking place during the reign of the Manchu Emperor Kang-Si (1662-1722). Ta-Kiang, the young peasant whose shadow takes the shape of a dragon, is destined to supplant Kang-Si, and together with his fiancée and friend, the poet Ko-Li-Tsin, he sets out toward Peking to fulfill his quest.<sup>11</sup>

Their arrival in the tumultuous capital is chronicled in a spectacular fifteen-page word painting. Here, the political clash between Chinese and Tartar is expressed in the depiction of the very structure of the city itself, in the collision of the elegant *Cité tartare* with the sordid *Cité chinoise*. The three protagonists pursue their odyssey from stinking, squalor-filled neighborhoods to opulent ones where sumptuously clad citizens are carried in sedan chairs by coolies among the delicately carved ivory, gold, silver and bejeweled art objects.<sup>12</sup> The complex meanderings of the endless mud streets control and contain violence at the same time as they give it expression. Violence is imprinted on the streets themselves, as the crushing multitudes, even the shopkeepers, struggle against the onslaught of black smoke and stifling, fetid smells emanating from the ramshackle hovels and shops, and from the vermin-infested piles of bric-à-brac and debris of all types (24-25).<sup>13</sup> A cacophony of sounds assaults the travelers: screeching vendors, animals making their wants known in loud and vibrant registers, high-pitched tones of strolling instrumentalists, jugglers, mimes, orators, monks, and even camels join the *mêlée*.<sup>14</sup> Gruesome images play a significant role in Gautier's verbal canvas. In noisy marketplaces, suspended in birdcages above various

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<sup>9</sup> See Elizabeth Goldsmith, "Lifting the Veil: Images of the Exotic in Judith Gautier's Novels (1845-1917)," diss., Brandeis University, 1994, 24-25. In fact, of her five Orientalist novels only one, *La Conquête du Paradis* (1890), contains developed Western characters.

<sup>10</sup> See Stéphane Mallarmé, *Correspondance, 1862-1871* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959) 307; Anatole France, *La Vie littéraire. Quatrième série* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1889) 136; and Domingue and Détrie 37.

<sup>11</sup> Goldsmith 25-26.

<sup>12</sup> See Bettina L. Knapp, *Judith Gautier: Writer, Orientalist, Musicologist, Feminist: A Literary Biography* (Lanham: Hamilton Books, 2004) 84.

<sup>13</sup> Quotations are taken from Judith Gautier, *Le Dragon impérial* (Paris: Lemerre, 1869). Henceforth page numbers will only appear in the text.

<sup>14</sup> Knapp 83.

foodstuffs, the bloody, decapitated heads of recently executed criminals serve as terrifying examples to the oppressed masses:

[...] au-dessus des victuailles, dans des cages d'osier suspendues à des poteaux, apparaissent, hideuses, des têtes de criminels, récemment exécutés; souvent les cages sont brisées, effondrées, et les têtes, retenues seulement par leurs nattes, se balancent horriblement, verdâtres, grimaçantes, effroyables. (22)

Similarly, Mirbeau's text paints a quest narrative, a geographic journey of discovery culminating in the viewing of horrific tableaux. In fact, the story's structure follows a series of passages and crossings, over bridges, in steamers and sampans.<sup>15</sup> Just as Gautier's heroes make their way through the sordid streets of Peking, in a description spanning fifteen pages and culminating in the hideous heads, so too Mirbeau takes his time evoking the dramatic build-up to his scenes of torture in the form of his protagonists' intermediary stop in Ceylon, then their circuitous, twenty-page journey through a Chinese city unbearable in its heat and overwhelming in its assault on the senses:

[...] de gros marchands, [...] hurlant et tapant sur des gongs, pour attirer les clients, débitent des charognes de toutes sortes: rats morts, chiens noyés, quartiers de cerfs et de chevaux, purulentes volailles, entassés, pêle-mêle, dans de larges bassines de bronze. (150)

In true masochistic fashion, Clara actually enjoys this dreadful promenade so much that she prolongs it by refusing the public transportation available to wealthy people like herself.<sup>16</sup> In fact, her weekly walk to the prison to feed the felons has become her life's mission, a sort of pilgrimage, and the narrator's revulsion contrasts with her excited anticipation of the show they are about to see. Before the visit, she regales the narrator with accounts of the past tortures that she has witnessed and enjoyed. Nearing the prison, she seeks out the experience of violation so that she can feel other people's otherness enter into her, so she can absorb it and make it her own.<sup>17</sup> Thus her exhilaration in the swell of the crowd surging forward is expressed in erotic terms:

Clara, elle, se jetait au plus fort de la mêlée. Elle subissait le brutal contact et, pour ainsi dire, le viol de cette foule, avec un plaisir passionné... Un moment, elle s'écria, glorieusement: Vois, chéri... ma robe est toute déchirée... C'est délicieux! (152).

And upon arrival, she continues her odyssey of desire, leading the narrator through the fetid, cavernous corridors of cells housing the starving inmates, up into the sunlight of the garden, and onward toward the sound of the bell.

Unlike Clara, the narrator appears on the surface not to have an erotic investment in what he sees. Though clearly attracted to Clara, he is an unwilling visitor to the garden and spends the second part of the book trying to convince her to leave. But, however repelled he is by the scenes of suffering, his repulsion is not strong enough to prevent him from describing his experiences in

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<sup>15</sup> Zeigler 163.

<sup>16</sup> For Byrne, the elitism of aesthetic torture and the pleasure it incites are reinforced by the use of expensive and rare commodities associated with the upper classes. See Romana Byrne, "Sadistic Aestheticism: Walter Pater and Octave Mirbeau," *Criticism* 57.3 (2010): 416.

<sup>17</sup> Zeigler 172.

detail, as in this passage where his voyeuristic inclinations take over and he simply cannot resist peering through the foliage at the horrors:

Clara, avidement regarda. Et, malgré moi, malgré ma sincère résolution de désormais fermer les yeux au spectacle maudit, attiré par cet étrange aimant de l'horreur, vaincu par cet invincible vertige des curiosités abominables, moi aussi, entre les feuillages et les treillages, je regardai. (253)

And at the end of the discussion of the aesthetics of murder in the "Frontispiece," he offers to share his as yet unpublished account of his visit to China. His disingenuous modesty fails to mask his morbid enthusiasm for the horrors he has witnessed. Indeed, in the following citation, the call for more cigars and drinks adds a note of indulgent pleasure to the gathering of men, underlining the gentlemen's club atmosphere. By introducing the possibility of gratification, moreover, this preamble unites the narrator's audience, which includes, of course, the novel's reader:<sup>18</sup>

[...] avec une visible satisfaction de soi-même, l'homme à la figure ravagée sortit de sa poche un rouleau de papier qu'il déplia soigneusement: - J'ai écrit, dit-il, le récit de cette partie de ma vie... Longtemps, j'ai hésité à le publier, et j'hésite encore. Je voudrais vous le lire, à vous qui êtes des hommes et qui ne craignez pas de pénétrer au plus noir des mystères humains... Puissiez-vous pourtant en supporter l'horreur sanglante!... Cela s'appelle *Le Jardin des supplices*... Notre hôte demanda de nouveaux cigares et de nouvelles boissons... (xxvii- xxviii)

For Barthes, the reader's desires are aroused by the texts he or she reads and aspects of the reader's sexual identity, such as sadistic or masochistic impulses, are also mobilized by the reading encounter. In *Le Plaisir du texte*, he describes the narrative suspense on which realist texts depend through the image of the striptease, suggesting that masochism is defined by scenes of waiting and suspense, the masochist being aroused precisely by the deferral of pleasure.<sup>19</sup> I would like to suggest, therefore, that both texts use scenes of deferral as a strategy for creating readerly pleasure. Deferral of course enhances the possibility of gratification, thereby aligning the reader with the vicarious sadistic pleasure covertly felt, I would argue, by the narrators, and openly felt by Clara. Again, she describes her torture-viewing pleasure in overtly sexual terms:

Et l'homme poussait d'affreux cris de douleur... Puis le soldat recommençait... Il recommença quinze fois!... Et il me semblait que la badine entrait, à chaque coup, dans mes reins... C'était atroce et très doux!... Embrasse-moi, cher amour... embrasse-moi, donc! (163)

In fact, both works appeal to the reader's sado-masochistic tendencies by inviting him or her to enjoy and appreciate the horrors on display, thereby inscribing him or her at the locus of voyeur.<sup>20</sup>

The obsessive repetition of graphic images, a technique widely used in porn and horror films, is another strategy for creating readerly pleasure. In fact, critics like Lawrence Schehr

<sup>18</sup> Thompson 411-412.

<sup>19</sup> Barthes 20.

<sup>20</sup> See Lawrence Schehr, "Mirbeau's Ultraviolence," *Substance* 27.86 (1998): 110.

have used the cinematic terms “freeze-frame tableaux” to describe the horrors on display here.<sup>21</sup> The gruesome heads mentioned earlier form a visual motif repeated throughout Gautier’s text – in the remarkable resemblance between Ta-Kiang and one of the heads, in the staircase scene with the decapitated heads of the statues of the gods, in the bloody dénouement when the main characters slit their own throats, in the final smiling expression on the severed head of the poet, and in the horrific images filling the final pages: “Des monticules formés de corps sanglants et des monceaux de têtes grimaçantes bosselaient lugubrement la place” (300).

Mirbeau too, greatly exploits its artistic possibilities of decapitation. In the garden, gallows tower above the floral abundance like giant trees: “Et, de cet enchantement floral, se dressaient des échafauds, des appareils de crucifixion... Des oiseaux y vocalisaient leurs chansons d’amour...” (219-20). Indeed, images of beheading find expression in the flowers themselves: “Les nymphées et les nélumbiums étalaient sur l’eau dorée leurs grosses fleurs épanouies qui me firent l’effet de têtes coupées et flottantes...” (287). Decapitation is central to the first prison tableau, the captives’ necks being held in such wide iron collars that it is impossible for the spectators to see their bodies, giving the eerie impression of live, severed heads placed on tabletops: “Le col serré dans un carreau si large qu’il était impossible de voir les corps, on eût dit d’effrayantes, de vivantes têtes de décapités posées sur des tables” (173).

This scene references an ancient mode of Chinese corporal punishment also feared by Gautier’s poet, the “cangue” or Chinese pillory.<sup>22</sup> Here, as we see in Figure 1,<sup>23</sup> the huge collar, like Mirbeau’s tabletops mentioned in the previous paragraph, isolates the head from the rest of the body, giving the illusion of decapitation. Used until the early twentieth century, the method combined physical pain and humiliation (the victim is forced to beg for food as he cannot feed himself) with a text written on the collar, a label typically stating the name, address, and crime of the prisoner.



Figure 1

<sup>21</sup> Schehr 111.

<sup>22</sup> Gautier references the “cangue” three times in her text, see pages 55, 90, and 152.

<sup>23</sup> Web. 4 Feb. 2018 <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cangue>>.

Only the spectators can decipher the story, as the text is illegible to the victim, due to the restrictions on his movement. Thus, like Mirbeau's imprisoned poet who cannot read his own poetry, the victim of the cangue cannot read his own story. This suggests two important characteristics of torture. First, it is an effort to objectify the victim by divorcing him from his connection to language. Secondly, it depends on a spectator or reader to give it meaning. Interestingly, both authors feature text in the form of gold inscriptions, as part of the ritual of torture. Mirbeau's inscriptions are painted on his bell, while Gautier's appear on the walls of her interrogation room. Again the fact that the victim cannot decipher them, at least not without tremendous effort, indicates that they are designed primarily to enhance the enjoyment of the spectator, or reader.

Both authors poeticize carnage through the obsessive repetition of two colors, red and white, hence exploiting the artistic possibilities of blood in its mingling with numerous white objects: bones, skulls, alabaster, ivory, porcelain, sand, pearls, flowers, hair, snow, swans, white peacocks, a white deer, a stork, the moon. Gautier writes: "[...] les têtes des vieillards, s'entr'ouvrent et pleurent du sang sur leurs barbes blanches [...]" (216). And "Le Chef était sanglant et superbe; il s'agenouilla au milieu de la salle, tachant de rouge les dalles d'albâtre" (292). The novel opens with the image of the increasingly whitening light cast on the expanding horizon at dawn and closes with a blood-red sunset. "Ça et là, sur l'azur pâle du ciel, il semblait qu'on vît des éclaboussures de sang" (312).

Similarly, having reached the outskirts of "The Red City," the three protagonists marvel at the impressive ramparts, pavilions, vaulted galleries, superimposed terraces, and stately cannons – all seemingly ablaze in the sunset's red glow (19). In this way, the text is punctuated with the colors of red and white as blood mingles with skulls and broken bones, washes over the horizon, over alabaster floors and staircases, and soaks women's pearls and old men's beards. In the novel's final scene, the poet re-evokes the red/white color motif as he inscribes his philosophical poem on a white wall in the blood of his fellow rebels. In so doing, he underlines the double meaning of "graphic" violence as both "extreme" violence and "written" violence: "Pendant que Ko-Li-Tsin trempant son doigt, comme un pinceau, dans le sang des vaincus, traçait de nobles caractères sur le mur d'une maison, la foule s'était silencieusement rapprochée, et lisait" (311). His hand is thus compared to a paintbrush; and blood, the ultimate emblem of violence, becomes oil paint or watercolor, the human body itself an artistic medium.

Mirbeau too uses the Manichean contrast of red and white, particularly in the scene of the bell. Here, white peacocks, some speckled with blood, gather in the blood-soaked sand surrounding the giant circle of torture, that happens to be half red, and half white: "Du milieu de ce cirque rouge et blanc, la cloche était sinistre à voir" (269). And the roly-poly executioner, beaming with pride in his creativity, chooses ivory as the ultimate material in drawing the comparison between torturer and sculptor: "[...] Savoir tuer!... C'est-à-dire travailler la chair humaine, comme un sculpteur sa glaise ou son morceau d'ivoire [...]" (227). Emblems of red dragons mark the main entrance to the prison while every shade of red is rendered in the descriptions of human blood in its mingling with white jasmine: "[...] tout un outillage de sacrifice et de torture étalait du sang, ici séché et noirâtre, là, gluant et rouge [...]. Du sang encore étoilait de rouge la blancheur des jasmins [...]" (258). Violently beautiful, these flowers reflect their sadistic union of grotesque corporeality and beautiful form through their blood-like color. Finally, other elements linking both texts are red and white peonies, flowers native to Asia, the favorite flower of the Chinese according to Mirbeau, and the predominant vegetation in his garden: "[...] les pivoines étaient bien réellement les fées, les reines miraculeuses de ce miraculeux jardin. Partout où le regard se posait, il rencontrait une pivoine" (211).

The authors' juxtaposition of the colors red and white affirms their desire to make an artistic statement on both formal and semantic levels. In Chinese culture, the color red is the traditional color of weddings, and is generally forbidden at funerals, as it symbolizes good luck, joy, and happiness. Blood, moreover, is intimately linked to the notion of "qi," translating as "energy" or "life force." The Ancient Chinese believed that we inherit our essence from our father and blood from our mother, both vital to human life. And the very life force and energy, "qi," is closely associated with blood. White, on the other hand, represents fulfillment, mourning, and death, and is the predominant color at obsequies.<sup>24</sup> Thus, these hues are not only striking visually, but also suggest the writers' desire to affirm and juxtapose the contrasting forces of life and death.

Both authors depict scenes involving the torture of a poet, again, explicitly linking graphic violence with the acts of reading, writing, and artistic creation. In fact, Gautier's poet is the victim in virtually all of the torture scenes. The novelist creates a delay of gratification in her elaborate description of the instruments of torture, thereby making the reader wait for the main event. An entire paragraph is devoted to the interrogator's chair, with its finely embroidered depiction of Tang, a bright blue lion engaged in the ferocious act of devouring the Sun (101). Red silk lanterns cast an eerie glow on the multitude of spiral staircases, while highlighting the wisdom of the philosophers inscribed on the walls in gold characters. For the poet, torture proves a tremendous spark to creativity, so much so that his aesthetic pleasure actually trumps his excruciating pain. When brutally interrogated, he responds with wit, sarcasm, and above all, spontaneous verse – the latter proving particularly maddening for his henchmen: “- On ne te demande pas de vers, dit le juge en fronçant les sourcils. - C'est une largesse que je vous fais” (102).

Readers are given descriptions of the poet's head held tightly by a cord around his neck while his torturers, after failing to extract a confession from him, proceed to nail small bamboo blades under his fingernails and toenails. Again, violence and aesthetics are fused: when the blades are nailed into each of his fingertips, the act of reading becomes a balm that quells his instinct to cry out in pain:

Les bourreaux frappèrent avec de petits maillets sur les lames de bambou, qui enfoncèrent cruellement dans les doigts du poète. Il crispa ses orteils, ouvrit sa bouche, mais il lisait les sentences des philosophes en or sur le mur noir. (104)

When his fingers spout five vermilion streams of blood, he compares his hand to the famous alabaster fountain of the Yu-Min-Ué gardens, again underlining the red/white color motif, while offering his torturers a detailed verbal ekphrasis complete with statuary (104-05). At the sight of the spurting blood, one of his executioners, in a state of sadistic ecstasy, grabs hold of his knife and starts piercing holes all over his body. The poet's facial contractions convey intense pain, yet his humor and dedication to his art again relieve him, at least momentarily, from the pulsating throbs attacking his body.<sup>25</sup> When they pour molten tar into his gaping wounds, he asks only for time to think and something to write with: “Donne-moi donc de quoi écrire et laisse-moi songer” (106). And when beaten on his kidneys with a burning-hot flexible steel strip, he faints, screaming

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<sup>24</sup> See the following Internet articles: “Relationship of Qi and Blood – Vital Substances in TCM,” Web. 4 Feb. 2018 <<https://www.sacredlotus.com/go/foundations-chinese-medicine/get/relationship-of-qi-blood-in-tcm>> and “Symbolism of Colours, Associations of The Five Elements, Chinese Beliefs, and Feng Shui,” Web. Oct. 31 2017 <[http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese\\_Customs/colours.htm](http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/Chinese_Customs/colours.htm)>.

<sup>25</sup> Knapp 89.

his agony: this is the mind's way of preventing him from betraying his stoically imposed muteness.<sup>26</sup> In this way, intense pain is seen as a spark to creativity, and as such, is constantly abstracted and turned into art.

Here, the readerly pleasure evoked is complex. First, the reader, the only person present in the torture chamber other than the henchmen and victim, functions as spectator, as a voyeur invited to enjoy the gory display. Secondly, the lucid poet, given that he both reads and writes in the scene, functions as the dual image of both reader and writer. As such, we are invited to identify with him and share in his pleasure in both roles – that of the passive reader and that of the more active writer who successfully turns the tables on his executioners. Finally, Gautier's use of humor helps to mitigate the violence, to make it bearable, even enjoyable. In this sense, her gore, combined with dark humor, at times anticipates the works of Sam Peckinpah and Quentin Tarantino.<sup>27</sup>

Mirbeau's poet, Clara's favorite prisoner, provides a total contrast, rendering his scene of an artist's strife infinitely more difficult to read. The long, dark corridor leading to his cell is filled with overwhelmingly foul odors and agonizing cries, a hauntingly suspenseful scene in which we only hear and smell the prisoners before seeing them. Once arrived at the rows of inmates, Mirbeau underlines the visual nature of the spectacle, describing it as an "infernal parade": "Vivement, je tournai la tête... L'infernal défilé commençait" (172). Formerly a prominent and respected artist and a visitor to Clara's home, the poet loses all semblance of humanity, as a result of his consignment to a cage with five others. As he and his fellow victims grab for the horrible victuals put before them, they become the equivalent of the pieces themselves: "Ce ne fut plus que des torsos nus, mêlés, soudés l'un à l'autre, étreints par de longs bras maigres, déchirés par des mâchoires et des griffes... et des faces tordues s'arrachant la viande!..." (182-83). Compared to psychotic animals, like sharks in a feeding madness, these humans have been reduced to nothing more than mechanics of bodies in motion, a frenzy that produces, in the mind of the observer, an orgiastic frenzy of lust.<sup>28</sup> The fact that he cannot speak intelligibly, merely barks like a dog, and no longer even recognizes his poetry as poetry, suggests that his total loss of humanity can be explained by his total loss of connection to language.

Here, Clara's sadistic cruelty is shocking. She purposely withholds the food until she is done reciting his poem, knowing perfectly well that he has no capacity of understanding. Then instead of throwing enough meat into the cage to feed all of the prisoners, she gives the poet only one piece, knowing that the others will fight him for it. And again, her pleasure is expressed in overtly sexual terms: "Embrasse-moi. Caresse-moi... C'est horrible!... C'est trop horrible!..." (183). Clearly, Clara and her companion function as the image of the reader and Mirbeau inscribes us at

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<sup>26</sup> Knapp 89.

<sup>27</sup> Long before Tarantino, Peckinpah staged action scenes as an extended slow motion catharsis of revenge-fueled violence. See Laurent Bouzereau, *Ultraviolent Movies: From Sam Peckinpah to Quentin Tarantino* (New York: Citadel, 2000). I mention these two filmmakers because they are known for combining graphic violence with dark humor. Specifically, I have in mind Tarantino's torture scene with the actors Ving Rhames and Bruce Willis in *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Like Gautier's torture scene with the poet, it is extremely violent, but also darkly humorous. Here too, Peckinpah's gritty and controversial Western *The Wild Bunch* (1969), comes to mind – a movie that combines bloody gun battles (one with a machine gun), with laughter and a certain glee in killing. We see a similar joy in Gautier's staircase scene, when the giddy warrior poet pauses for a moment to appreciate the carnage, forgetting his pain and losing himself in the enjoyment of his creative battle strategies. Hit in the shoulder, he rips the arrow out with his teeth, spits it out with relish, and rejoins the fray (128). This scene in turn brings to mind Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* (2009), where a group of warrior Jews joyously gains bloody revenge on a theater full of Nazis.

<sup>28</sup> Schehr 115-116.

the locus of sadistic voyeur.<sup>29</sup> The possibility that the reader might be aroused by the victims' pain renders the experience of reading *Le Jardin des supplices* a problematic and uncomfortable one, and explains in part why most critics refuse to discuss openly the horrors on display. Indeed, most scholars seem anxious to avoid any suggestion that their engagement with *Le Jardin des supplices* be interpreted as an erotic investment in the text.<sup>30</sup>

In conclusion, both Gautier and Mirbeau, with their pages of gorgeous beauty coupled with unspeakable violence push naturalism into the realm of decadence. Their embellishment of death in aesthetic garb is not a cheap and flamboyant attack on the drabness of naturalism, nor is it an extravagant way of undermining the folly of scientific research into the death drive. Rather, as we have seen, these writers see art as a celebration of the centrality of death in the cycle of existence.<sup>31</sup> Both see mythical China as a privileged site of pure, heightened sensation, as a place where instinctive impulses can be expressed with impunity, and as a unique blend of elegance and brutality. Indeed, both understand torture as a highly artistic endeavor, thereby supporting Foucault's contention that the mechanisms of torture, in conforming to a specific set of predetermined rules, mirror the mechanisms of artistic creation. Both affirm therefore Foucault's notion that "supplice" depends on the presence of a viewing public. Without spectators, torture becomes meaningless, like a book without a reader.<sup>32</sup> The reader's implication in a complex network of desire makes both texts a privileged site for the discussion of author-reader relations.<sup>33</sup>

Though thirty years separate the publication of these books, there is some evidence that the two authors knew each other, if only slightly. In May of 1910, a sudden vacancy at the prestigious Goncourt Academy produced at least eight replacement candidates, including Paul Claudel and Léon Bloy. When the news of her election reached Judith Gautier, the first woman to have achieved this distinction, she declared that she did not know any of the Academicians who had chosen her, except Lucien Descaves, whom she had seen twice, and Octave Mirbeau, whom she had sometimes glimpsed.<sup>34</sup> Mirbeau's vote for Gautier is the only known affirmation of his appreciation of her work. Whatever their personal connections, it is time we explore the unique affinity between these two novelists whose unusual works constantly consolidate and confirm the inseparable links between violence and representation.

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<sup>29</sup> Schehr 110.

<sup>30</sup> Thompson 412.

<sup>31</sup> McCaffrey 59.

<sup>32</sup> Schehr 110.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson 412-13.

<sup>34</sup> See Joanna Richardson, *Judith Gautier: A Biography* (London: Quartet Books, 1986) 223.