

## Sexological Decadence: The Gynophobic Visions of Octave Mirbeau

by Emily Apter

If a genre can be defined by the parodies it inspires, then decadence received its consummate articulation in the writings of Octave Mirbeau (1848–1917). Hardly the decadent, Mirbeau was a turn-of-the-century pundit whose style combined psychosexual realism and sociological naturalism within literary forms as diverse as the comedy of manners, the muckraking political essay, the newspaper chronicle, the art review, the short story, and the novel. Mirbeau used the decadent mode as the butt of satire in at least three thematic areas. When hallucinatory visions of a gangrenous nature overtook his fancy (and since he was a long-time opium addict such visions frequently invaded his texts, particularly *The Torture Garden*, 1899), these botanical contortions are a pastiche of the “flowers of evil” tradition extending from Baudelaire to J.-K. Huysmans. Second, in writing about domestic interiors (*Le Calvaire*, 1886; *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, 1900), Mirbeau seemed to revel in creating in prose grotesque renderings comparable to *art nouveau* — often considered to be the decadent design fashion par excellence, with its claustrophobic, tendril-choked walls and hysterical, panfeminine decorative forms. Third, in his art criticism (the best of which helped to launch impressionist painting), Mirbeau spent considerable energy targeting the Pre-Raphaelites as an anemic, sterile, socially parasitical aesthetic movement. Edward Burne-Jones and Dante Gabriel Rossetti were used as models for a caricatural personage called “Kariste,” invented for a series of satirical pieces published in the widely circulated daily *Le Journal*. Like *A Rebours*’s Des Esseintes, Kariste is a predictably effete character: androgynous, impotent, and constantly in pursuit of *recherché* aesthetic pleasures.<sup>1</sup>

Botanical dystopia, *art nouveau*, Pre-Raphaelite painting — these topoi, often interconnected by a virulent strand of antifeminism, consistently served as sites of a parodic counterdiscourse of decadence. But with the introduction of antifeminism, the question of parody becomes more complicated. Mirbeau’s misogyny, anchored in an auto-

biography that included a putatively tortured relationship with his wife, the one-time *cocotte* Alice Regnault, led him to invent what was perhaps a not-so-parodic form of decadentist representation, although here one needs to broaden the parameters according to which decadence itself is traditionally theorized to include contemporary gender critique.<sup>2</sup> In his dark portraits of sexual psychology, specifically the sadomasochistic encounters between men and women (or, on occasion, men and boys), Mirbeau was among those French turn-of-the-century writers who fomented a distinct form of what might be characterized as sexological decadence. From his *contes* and earliest novel, *Le Calvaire*, to his most popular work of fiction, a docudrama of female domestic service entitled *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, Mirbeau portrayed the sexes as locked into a murderous master/slave dynamic in which the male partner invariably finished off the victim. The short stories published in this volume — “Poor Tom!” (1886), “The Octogenarian” (1887), “Dead Pearls” (1898), “The Ring” (1899), and “Clotilde and I” (1899) — all employ sordid rituals of masculine humiliation as devised by emotionally indifferent femmes fatales. These early texts may be read as preparatory sketches or rehearsals for Mirbeau’s Orientalist chef-d’oeuvre of male masochism, *The Torture Garden*, in which lurid descriptions of carnal subjection are anchored in feminine cruelty.

In defining Mirbeau’s decadence in terms of late nineteenth-century sexology and in situating his oeuvre within the history of sexuality and psychoanalysis, it may be useful to recall with Foucault that Mirbeau came of age in a period marked by “the birth of the clinic.” Mirbeau published the lion’s share of his writings between 1880 and 1905. From the 1870s on, modern psychology, psychiatry, and psychoanalysis evolved out of medicine and philosophy, drawing in turn for case studies and behavioral documentation on a literary archive of late realist and naturalist writings by Flaubert, Zola, Huysmans, Edmond and Jules de Goncourt, Guy de Maupassant, Alphonse and Léon Daudet, Léon Hennique, and Mirbeau, among many others of equal or lesser reputation.<sup>3</sup> As the influential psychologist Théodule Ribot wrote in his *La Psychologie des sentiments* (1896), literature afforded indispensable records of behavioral curiosities of new interest to the human sciences:

Sexual instinct remains the center around which everything gravitates; nothing would exist without passing through it; character, imagination, vanity, imitation, fashion, time, place, and many other individual circumstances or social influences, give to love, as emotion or passion, a plasticity

without limits: it is up to the novelists to describe all its forms, a task which they have not failed to achieve.<sup>4</sup>

In a letter to Claude Monet, Mirbeau provided a negative inverse complement to Ribot's statement when he gave personal voice to the *homme de lettres's* inferiority complex in the face of scientific progress:

While the natural sciences are discovering worlds and are on their way to clear-cutting paths through that which obscures the sources of life, while they interrogate the infinity of space and the eternity of matter, plumbing the primordial mucosity from which we hail in the depths of the sea, literature, for its part, is still moaning the same two or three stupid, artificial, conventional sentiments, mired in metaphysical errors, stupefied by the false poetry of idiotic and barbaric pantheism. And what is most terrible of all, is my own total impotence in climbing out of this intellectual morass, this lie, this abjection. I see clearly what needs to be done, but am incapable of its execution. It would necessitate a whole new education; chemistry, anatomy, geology, paleontology, embryology would have to be learned.<sup>5</sup>

Mirbeau's self-doubt and contemptuous fulmination against literature notwithstanding, he did, along with Remy de Gourmont, Maurice Maeterlinck, and Paul Bourget, among others, develop a stylistics of the "physic" or "physiology" of love that suited the vogue of positivism and disciplinary syncretism in this period.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that sexual psychology informed the work of doctors and writers alike comes as no surprise when one considers the close web of social connections that brought together celebrated individuals from medical and literary milieus. Flaubert grew up breathing the atmosphere of the operating table as the son of a renowned physician whose residence was located directly on hospital premises. The clinical research on mania, hypnosis, and hysteria by, respectively, the doctors Paul Moreau de Tours, Hippolyte Bernheim, and Jean-Martin Charcot was discussed with fervent interest in Parisian literary salons, and Charcot himself as an intimate of Alphonse Daudet and the Goncourts. Maupassant and Léon Daudet frequented Charcot's lectures on hysteria at the Salpêtrière while Henri Cazalis, a doctor with literary pretensions of his own, allowed his pen name "Lahors" to be anagrammatically encrypted in Maupassant's récit of autohypnosis and hallucination, *Le Horla*. Mirbeau's father, Ladislas-François, breaking with the family profession of notary, practised medicine, although he never

obtained the degrees that would have allowed him to assume the title of doctor. A threatening portrait of the paternal medical Imago was painted by Mirbeau in *L'Abbé Jules* (1888), in which a young boy is haunted by his father's nightly display of gore-encrusted surgical instruments. Later, in *Les 21 Jours d'un neurasthénique* (1901), the sadism of patriarchal doctors unifies a sequence of chilling vignettes.<sup>7</sup> Patients become guinea pigs in gruesome operations involving the "sculpting" of human flesh (a variant of this image may be detected in the macabre vision of the "art" of sculpture in "The Octogenarian"); the body's vital substances are vampirically sapped and transfused (as in "The Ring," excerpted here from *Les 21 Jours*); and syphilitic running sores are allowed to fester, disfiguring female beauty (as in "Dead Pearls").

These concrete points of contact between doctors and writers are interesting insofar as they chart less visible literary encounters between medicine and literature: nodes of experimentation in the fusion of pathography (pathological case histories), clinical or anatomical detailism, the diegesis of philosophical pessimism, evolutionary entropy and national decline, suspense plots of heuristic detection, the family melodrama of hereditary taints, and the discursive rendering of disease, sexual "vice," and psychic disorder in relation to the popular social themes of prostitution, homosexuality, *lumpen* oppression, and violent crime. Work on the social pathology of class hierarchy by Gabriel de Tarde (specifically his theory of contagious behavioral imitations from above to below entitled *Les Lois de l'imitation* [1895]) together with the translation into French of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia sexualis* (1886) and Max Nordau's *Degeneration* (1893) also served to buttress the sociomedical underpinnings of that ethos of sexual obsession pervading decadent movements in every aesthetic medium. Mirbeau's particular articulation of sexological decadence matched the catalog of specialty vices offered by Krafft-Ebing to the politics of right-wing and subsequently left-wing, class hatred. If, as the contemporary psychoanalyst Robert Stoller has surmised, perversion is the erotic expression of hatred, then Mirbeau's vitriolic, sado-erotic prose works may be held up as exemplifying this theory in a literary mode.<sup>8</sup>

### Sex and Anarchy

Mirbeau's biography is marked by two lines of force, the one political, the other erotological, both conjoined in the combustive narrative rhythms of his fiction. Born to a Norman family of modest means and Bonapartist sympathies, Mirbeau's mother, Eugénie Dubosq, was reputed to be sickly in temperament and haunted by morbid fantasies.

His father, an authoritarian *ultra*, sent Mirbeau to the Jesuit Collège de Vannes from which he was expelled in 1863 for reasons that remain obscure. In his autobiographical novel *Sébastien Roch* (1890), Mirbeau included a disturbing (homophobic) homosexual rape scene that, according to the speculations of his most recent biographers, Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, may have been grounded in a real incident that required institutional hushing up. More plausible is the hypothesis that Mirbeau was sent home for his intractable rebelliousness of character. As a young *révolté*, who conspires with his friend Bolorec to blow up the school, the fictional Sébastien Roch exhibits anarchist tendencies that Mirbeau would later affirm in prefacing a classic of anarchist polemic, Jean Grave's *La Société mourante et l'anarchie* (1893). In the novel, Roch's dispositional propensity to erotic decadence — which leads him to respond to the advances of his Jesuit tutor in the first place — is inextricably bound to his attraction and repulsion toward authority figures. Taunted on the playground for being the son of a shopkeeper, the alienated Roch is propelled into the arms of his seducer, Father de Kern, who is portrayed as a predator lying in wait for his susceptible quarry much like the greed-driven capitalist baiting the poor and disenfranchised caricatured by Mirbeau in his political journalism. The seeds of Roch's furious class consciousness are thus sown in tandem with the coming to consciousness of sexual shame and the resulting emotion vented through a language of venom hurled at the "bad object."

Mirbeau came to anarchism from the opposite pole of the political spectrum.<sup>9</sup> Accused of being a deserter from the army during the Franco-Prussian War (a charge that he eventually had cleared), he muffled his disgrace and disillusionment with *la défaite* by turning his energies to journalism. He began his career in 1872, contributing articles on art and theater to *L'Ordre*, a Bonapartist newspaper, but throughout the 1870s he turned his attention increasingly to right-wing political causes aired in regular columns in *Le Gaulois*, *La France*, *Paris-Journal*, and *Le Figaro*. In 1883 he cofounded a reactionary weekly entitled *Les Grimaces* with Etienne Grosclaude, Paul Hervieu, and Alfred Capus. Honing his reputation (similar to that of Jules Vallès) as a master of provocation, imprecation, and invective, he concentrated his bile in an unrelenting volley of anti-Semitic broadsides, vilifying the Rothschilds, accusing the French state of prostituting itself to Jewish banking interests, and even slandering rivals such as the notoriously anti-Semitic Alphonse Daudet by insinuating that his original "Israelite" name had been Davidet or "little David."

Mirbeau completed a radical political about-face during the Dreyfus affair, although he had already begun to drift toward anarchism and socialism in the 1880s. His long-standing anticlericalism and aversion to the army, his identification with the poor and distaste for charity, his contempt for bourgeois values and temperamental *s'enfoutisme*, made him receptive to the anarchist and republican sympathies of many artists and intellectuals in his circle. In 1892 he published a defense of Ravachol (François Koenigstein), interpreting the terrorist bombing for which he was tried as an important strike against economic and social injustice. Stirred by Zola's "J'accuse" to join the camp of Dreyfus supporters, he fought the opposition on the journalistic front, unleashing a torrent of heated articles attacking noted anti-Dreyfusards, who in turn responded in kind, embarrassing him with the republication in *La Libre Parole* of his early anti-Semitic *Grimaces* pieces. Mirbeau's indictment of the nationally endorsed scapegoating of Dreyfus, Colonel Picquart, and Zola passed from the pamphlet into fiction with *The Torture Garden*, where, in the preamble, a group of natural philosophers expound on the murderous human instinct for persecuting the stigmatized, outcast, racially marked other. In the novel that follows, this allegory of predator and prey is carried over into a misogynist plot structure in which Clara, a Pre-Raphaelite hetaera of sublime cruelty, nourishes her erotic appetites on the spectacle of Chinese tortures applied to dehumanized prisoners.<sup>10</sup>

Fascinated by the submerged eroticism within psychic destitution and political victimage, Mirbeau often concentrated his interrogation of eros and power in portrayals of the decadent subject. If, in the personage of *The Garden's* Clara, Mirbeau investigated female vampirism within the decadent framework of an Orientalist garden that conjures up Giverny painted by Hieronymous Bosch, in *Sébastien Roch*, he explored the sexual politics of pederasty through a character study of the protagonist, whose febrile nervous system, rocked by music and romantic poetry, conforms to the type of feminized male enshrined by mauve and yellow literature and lampooned by its more homophobic foes. (As Elaine Showalter reminds us, "'Decadence' was also a fin-de-siècle euphemism for homosexuality."<sup>11</sup>) Sébastien's seduction by Father de Kern is couched in a medicalized rhetoric of decadence, accenting the twin fin-de-siècle obsessions of "devirilization" and "demoralization":

Little by little, Sébastien entered into an enervating and voluptuous atmosphere where, under that veil of divine love masking all carnal exaltations,

all sensual irritations, all organic depravities that rise from the virgin sex to the sullied brain, he lost day by day, hour by hour, without feeling it, without seeing it, the orientation of his moral equilibrium, the health of his spirit, the uprightness of his instinct. He did not resist, he could not resist the demoralization of his little soul, so skillfully saturated with poetry, chloroformed with idealism, vanquished by solvent, by the divilizing morphine of untenable caresses.<sup>12</sup>

Like a deranged patient struggling against a medical orderly, Roch's "natural instinct" is derailed, drugged, and "vanquished" by the enemy, rendering him, after the fatal act is committed, a paradigm of psychic evacuation, a spirit usurped and conquered:

Now Sébastien was on the edge of the bed, half-undressed, annihilated, alone. Alone? . . . not a single moral impression subsisted in his spirit. He felt a lassitude in the vertebrae, a thirst that parched his throat, a general prostration in his limbs and flesh, which suffered no other perception of feeling, not even interior suffering. (*SR*, pp. 211–12)

It is this outer reach of existential abnegation — the moment where subjective identity deserts itself and becomes enslaved without consciousness of its subjugated condition — that Mirbeau consistently sought to decry with horror, whether he was portraying the rural migrant's acceptance of exploitation, the colonial subject's capitulation to the colonizer, the resignation of servant girls to the sexual demands of their employers, or, as was most often the case with Mirbeau, the "crime" of male fealty to a heartless, domineering mistress.

### Male Masochism<sup>13</sup>

Mirbeau, as was stated earlier, reverted to the drama of moral male masochism over and over again (a perversion, according to Gilles Deleuze, saturated, unlike sadism, with aestheticism).<sup>14</sup> His first novel, *Le Calvaire*, based on the story of his financially ruinous affair with a woman known mysteriously as "Judith," examined the psychological conversion of pleasure into suffering at the hands of a woman (the "oral mother") on whom the paternal investment of a crushing ego-ideal has been aberrantly conferred:

In our bedroom, in the evening, the lovely childish games disappeared. Love marked Juliette's face with an indefinable quality of austerity, reserve, and savagery as well; it transfigured her. She was depraved; her passion, on

the contrary, showed itself to be robust and healthy, and in her embraces, there was a kind of formidable nobility, the roaring heroism of wild beasts. Her belly vibrated as if in the throes of dreadful maternities.

My happiness lasted for a very short time. . . . My happiness? . . . It was an extraordinary thing really, that never, never, could I experience pleasure with complete joy, anxiety always came to disturb my short-lived intoxications. Disarmed, and without strength to combat suffering, I was uncertain and timorous in my happiness, as I would be all my life. Was this a particular tendency in my character? a perversion of my senses? . . . or does happiness in fact, deceive everyone in the world, just as it did me, and is it not just a more refined and persecution-driven form of universal suffering?<sup>15</sup>

Such perspicacious self-analysis serves in no way to curtail feminine hegemony. Each time Jean Mintié seeks to possess his mistress Juliette Roux (an endeavor doomed to failure from the outset), he is forced to rub his nose in the glaring evidence of her deceptions. Cold, aloof, imperious, and voracious, this "mother who enjoys" (to borrow a phrase from Helene Deutsche) flashes the mirror of the death instinct whenever she makes love to her male vassal. In exploring the economy of love in one of its most morbid incarnations, Mirbeau presaged the dark expressionist theme of *Lustmord*, as if theorizing in prose the contagious proximity between male abjection and the desire for murder. On a night when Juliette refuses to sleep with him, Jean's frustrated passion immediately translates into an impulse to murder her:

Not a single muscle of her body trembled at my prayers. Her neck especially exasperated me. Between her trailing wisps of hair I now saw the head of an ironic beast, eyes that provoked me, a mouth that stuck out its tongue. And I was tempted to bring my hands to the neck, to labor it with my fingers, making blood spurt.

— Juliette! I cried.

And my fingers, contracted, hooked like wire, advanced, despite myself, ready to pounce on this neck, impatient to tear it to pieces. (*C*, p. 184)

Fantasies of attack remain, of course, at the level of fantasy for the moral masochist, their violence turned inward in the form of enhanced self-loathing. The short stories and novellas written at roughly the same time as *Le Calvaire* may be read as so many endless iterations of masculine auto-revulsion and self-dispossession: When, as in "Poor Tom!," the narrator is coerced by his wife to shoot his beloved, mangy dog, the poor animal's hideous expiration at the feet of his master

hauntingly reproduces the suicide of the protagonist's soul and his abject prostration to a feminine will. Masculine pride is dissolved, along with life's blood itself, in "The Ring," in which a senile old fool, obsessed by the insane desire to offer to his mistress a jewel made of iron extracted from his own blood, makes a contemptible sacrifice of himself to a woman impatient for his death. And in "Clotilde and I," the reader winces each time the narrator stoops lower to placate a creature possessed of unreasonable whims. "Clotilde and I" is particularly close to *Le Calvaire* in its treatment of what might be dubbed "sartorial sadism" (a particularly refined torture for the masochist, one might say!). As in the case of Clotilde, Juliette's single-minded devotion to her wardrobe carries with it a castratory menace, with each article of clothing resembling a potential weapon:

When Juliette dressed, she became hard, almost ferocious. The fold of her brow cut her skin like a scar. She spoke only in broken phrases, lost her temper, and appeared bent on destruction. Around her, the room was pillaged: open drawers, skirts stranded all over the rug, fans pulled out of their cases, scattered on chairs, lorgnettes wandering over the furniture, muslin billowing in corners, fallen flowers, towels reddened with makeup, gloves, stockings, veils hung from the branches of the chandelier. (C, pp. 195-96)

Attended to by her maid Célestine, whose "soft and flaccid hands," wandering over her body, "seem made for fondling dirty things," Juliette flaunts her latent lesbian eroticism in front of Jean, as if to add an extra injury to his pain (C, p. 196). Here she anticipates the scandalous persona of Alice Mirbeau, rumored to have been, prior to becoming Mirbeau's wife, a famous Parisian courtesan who delighted in sapphic *partouzes*. The story of Alice, imbricated in the story of Mirbeau's masochism, unfurls in turn into the story of Mirbeau the decadent, because his writing of female sexuality was inseparable from his parodies of decadence and femininity in art nouveau.

### Alice Regnault

Born Augustine Toulet, Alice Regnault became famous toward the end of the Second Empire as an actress at the Bouffes-Parisiens. When Mirbeau began his liaison with her in 1884 she was the widow of a shopkeeper named Jean-Louis Renard and the mother of a son who died at the age of twenty-five. Mirbeau and Regnault married in 1887 shortly after the "Gyp affair," in which the Boulangist woman of letters

Gyp (Countess de Martel) let it be known in a *roman à clef* entitled *Le Druide* that she suspected Alice Regnault of being the veiled assailant who had attacked her with vitriol on the Champs-Élysées in 1884. Mirbeau became embroiled in the affair when Gyp attempted to block his literary career and a vituperative round of accusations and anonymous letters landed them all repeatedly in court. Bad press continually followed Alice: an enterprising businesswoman, she was thought to have become rich by investing the ill-gotten gains of her profession as a *femme galante* on the stock market. Suffice it to say, Mirbeau had to live down scores of nasty *potins* concerning his wife's emasculating character and exotic sexual appetites, as in the famous story about the "groupe de Carpeaux" recorded by Edmond de Goncourt in his journal. According to Edmond, the story originated from a *Variétés* actor named Dupuis who bragged about his "*coucheries avec toutes les femmes de Paris*":

Among his stories, there were terrible ones concerning the wife of Mirbeau, the above mentioned Alice Regnault. He recounts that one day, during the time that she was his mistress, she stayed for a very long time in her dressing room with a woman who, she told him, had made *pipi* in her hand, thus making him suspect (a suspicion later confirmed), that she had a taste for women. From that day on, one or the other of them would pick up a woman at the theater with whom they would bed down as a threesome. He added that one night, Monsieur Dupuis, on lifting the bedclothes and seeing bodies enlaced, had exclaimed: "Hullo, the Carpeaux group!" and from that day on it became the adopted expression, and the two lovers would say to each other, "Shall we do the Carpeaux group tonight?"<sup>16</sup>

Alice's biography clearly deserves more than salacious gossip. An author in her own right, she published several novels, the most successful one about a high-class *horizontale* entitled *Mademoiselle Pomme* (1886). It enjoyed considerable success in its day and affords a rather rare glimpse into the life and secret travails of a *demimondaine* from a woman's point of view.

One of the major obstacles to discussing Regnault's relationship to Mirbeau has been her treatment at the hands of male biographers. Reginald Carr, Hubert Juin, Jean-François Nivet, and Pierre Michel all seem to join the ranks of her more hostile contemporaries in adopting a condemnatory attitude, treating as self-evident the assumption that she was to blame for a conjugal crisis leading to Mirbeau's black depressions, sexual addictions, gynophobia,<sup>17</sup> and bouts of artistic

impotence. In his novellas *Mémoires pour un avocat* and *Dans le ciel*, in many respects extended versions of "Clotilde and I," Mirbeau allegedly took his revenge. Marital life is depicted as a succession of debilitating offensives on a male ego that is inevitably shattered and permanently shackled. It is, of course, difficult to distinguish what was apocryphal and what was apparently a real need on Mirbeau's part for a dominatrix as a psychosexual companion. Certainly it appears from accounts by male friends alienated by Alice (notably Pissarro, Monet, and Rodin) that she was materialistic and manipulative. But it appears equally certain that Mirbeau himself suffered from a familiar syndrome (clearly compatible with moral masochism) characterized by the psychoanalyst Joan Riviere as "delusional hate." After reminding the reader of the keen sense of pleasure and gratification that often accompanies aggression, Riviere argued with evident common sense:

Feelings of grudge and grievance too — the idea that "nobody helps me" — develops as a projection from an unconscious knowledge of one's own laziness and meanness towards others. This projection, when it gets too strong a hold and is not checked by goodwill and insight, is the kernel of most forms of delusional insanity, in which other people are felt to be robbing, poisoning, or conspiring against one.<sup>18</sup>

If we were to isolate one shared character trait in Mirbeau's anti-heroines, it would have to be their conspiratorial dedication to dismantling male mastery. Mirbeau seems to have imagined the world of heterosexual erotic intimacy as a postfeminist nightmare in which female autonomy threatens masculine moral and material survival. The "cruelty" of Mirbeau's *contes cruels* is thus invariably coded as feminine; however, by the same token, the reader is continually reminded that from this cruelty the narrator consistently derives his most intense masochistic pleasure.

### Psychology and Style

Mirbeau, it would seem, sublimated the contortions of his own masochistic case history in literary allegories of denaturalization, be it a deregulated nature itself or its corollaries in gender, art, and design. In his travelogue of an automobile ride through Belgium and Holland in 1900, *La 628-E8*, the narrator characterizes the Dutch Bradenbrager-Hof as a "caravanserai of Western art nouveau." In this palace of "Modern Style," where "nothing was round, square, oval, oblong, triangular, vertical or horizontal" but where everything "turned, circled,

curved, twisted, rolled, folded, unfurled, and suddenly tumbled down," nature has run amok.<sup>19</sup> Hirsute nymphs, angry poppies, and sunflowers perched on the moldings like parrots form a monstrous frieze, while a larval excrescence spills over walls, doors, and floor. The "perverse" capriciousness of the female character is similarly presaged in "Clotilde and I" in the art nouveau design of a lover's boudoir: chairs resemble guinea fowl, and the patterned walls appear covered in "spilled intestines" (p. 998). This description seems to herald Paul Morand's castigation of Modern Style as a kind of "infection" that pervaded the arts and literature alike: "the pieces of furniture resembled those illnesses studied by the psychologists, clinicians of the age."<sup>20</sup>

Like Colette, who describes Modern Style in her memoirs as a lapse in French taste that came and went through the period of her youth with a bevy of sirens, glutinous jewels, and tendril-covered cabinets, Mirbeau experimented in *La 628-E8* with the personified imagery of art nouveau. Electricity performs the cakewalk, the cancan, the Boston trot, and the dance of Saint-Guy; furniture totters on drunken legs, and the balustrades, seeming to speak, appear to be held up by "frenetic sarabands of question marks."

Once again, it was the doctor/psychiatrist Jean-Martin Charcot who may have provided Mirbeau with a model for conflating art, psychology, and style.<sup>21</sup> Mimicking the dramatic passionate attitudes of religious mystics and nymphomaniacs, Charcot's (trained) female patients were, in a sense, the living embodiments of *psychologie nouvelle*, and as such they helped to code the visual representation of unconscious desires and psychic disturbances as feminine. The art nouveau sprite, struggling against a capsule of tentacular vines or pinned to a pair of wings (as in René-Jules Lalique's female-butterfly brooch of 1902); the seated bourgeoisie swallowed up by the decorative pattern of her wallpaper; the *femme-fleur* elongated and incorporated into the fluted stem of a vase, her identity merged with the dark forces of a tormented nature (as in Charles-Emile Jonchery's lampstand nymph of 1897); the medievalized mad virgins posed atop cabinets or kneeling at the base of display cases (Rupert Carabin's grotesque carved-wood furniture); the proliferation of variegated butterflies and snapdragons fossilized on jewelry, cabinetry, lighting fixtures, and ordinary *meubles*, or the "nervous and coquettish thistle," which, according to the master art nouveau craftsman Emile Gallé, constituted the very "signature" of his native city Nancy, all these diabolical transmutations of woman into hysterical artifact point to the troubling way in which the fin-de-siècle female, venerated as goddess of the foyer and erotic curiosity, was

symbolically entomologized within the domestic interior.

Just as Charcot appears to have woven the figures of female hysteria into the zigzags and arabesques of his interior designs, so Mirbeau set up a libidinal nexus crossing furniture and the feminine.<sup>22</sup> Passion and destruction are expressed through the medium of feminized domestic objects. In *Mémoires pour un avocat* the narrator's avaricious wife treats him like a piece of furniture, an inert and passive investment. In *Dans le ciel*, published for the first time in 1990, Mirbeau conjugates the misshapen forms of Modern Style *meubles* with sexual inhibition. His suicidal painter protagonist, modeled after Van Gogh and Pissarro, diagnoses the fact that aesthetic taste in furniture has gone awry as a symptom of the fin-de-siècle crisis of masculinity: "Do you know why they make such prodigiously ugly furniture today, charged with sculptures and ornaments so hideous that they make a refined man vomit? Oh! dear God, it is simply because the craftsmen no longer know their trade. They are no more capable of fashioning an elegant line than of establishing beautiful harmony of proportion. So they opt for giving not a fig for decor. . . . I'm just like these craftsmen! It's in order to mask my own impotence that I go looking for crazy forms that kill me, and you know, my young friend, they do kill me!"<sup>23</sup>

Mirbeau thus elided his phobia of women with his phobia of art nouveau, developing a language of "deviant" female forms that seemed to take their inspiration from the intoxicating arcs and swirls of the design movement that he criticized. In this vision, he anticipated Walter Benjamin, who noted in his arcades project that the strange "perversity" of Modern Style lay in the way in which it thematized "the depraved woman."<sup>24</sup>

When evoking his cherished theme of female depravity, Mirbeau folded the art nouveau aesthetic into a pastiche of decadence, alternately grotesque and comic. In "Dead Pearls" (akin in its decadent Orientalism to *The Torture Garden* and comparable to Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), the symptoms of Clara Terpe's sudden, ghastly illness resemble the signs of bodily degeneration ascribed to art nouveau and decadence alike by their detractors:

Little by little, her body was covered in brown spots, her complexion, of so rare a texture, of such translucent mother-of-pearl, toughened, cracked, and became ashen in tone. Finally, it was as if there was some kind of growth, like the burgeoning of fat tubers lifting the gnarled, horny skin, which shortly thereafter exfoliated like dead bark. Her hands became two foul packets of ruined skin; her nose, tumefied like a soft pouch, soon

invaded her entire face, obstructing it hideously, with its purplish sack, oozing and hanging down. (P. 991)

An equally grisly portrayal of the aging female body surfaces in "The Octogenarian," which allegorizes the dark side of sculpture's metamorphosis of live flesh into dead art, as Mirbeau discovered one day on visiting Rodin's studio. An eighty-two-year-old woman, forced to pose for Rodin by her ignominious son, is presented in Mirbeau's fictive version with literary modeling effects:<sup>25</sup>

Immobile as a statue, her back was bent; her head, its hair rough and sparse, bowed against the right shoulder, in a sorrowful gesture. Her hands, and part of her forearms, were plunged between tightly squeezed thighs to hide the lower abdomen, throwing a pall of dark shadow over the pitiable nakedness of her sex. And, on the chalk-covered walls, in this atmosphere of plaster, among the cold white casts encumbering the studio, this bruised old flesh seemed yellower, with greenish highlights, lending it the smooth tones and warm patina of ancient ivory. (P. 988)

Petrified in stone by shame, the old woman assumes the posture of *mater dolorosa*, but instead of remaining a poignant equivalent of sculpture in words, Mirbeau carries the evocation of her body's grotesque ruination so far that the story veers into misogynist, aestheticist caricature. In the end, the disgrace of female aging comes more to the fore than the moral cruelty of son to mother or artist to model.

Hystericized, perverse, and denatured, female sexuality took its place as the anchor and continual point of return in Mirbeau's poetics of sexological decadence. In the current context of rethinking decadence, Mirbeau's gynophobic violence, couched in a personal history of passions that included an equal violence of political conviction ("anarcho-masochism"?), might be reevaluated as a crucial constituent of the decadent movement in France. With his pathologization of eroticism and politicization of sexual power struggles, he added a modern, turn-of-the-century twist to fin-de-siècle portraits of morbid, unnatural love. And with his grotesque, parodic renderings of stylistic aestheticism, Mirbeau gave decadence a kind of second life or second chance as a humorous refashioning of its former incarnations.

## NOTES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own. Kariste's harangues typically target the well-worn decadent themes of deviant sexuality and denatured art, as in the following:

Ah, they give me pain, these aesthetes of ill fortune, when they preach in their flowery voices the horror of nature and life, the uselessness of drawing, the return of art to the primitivism of the Papous, to embryonic forms, to larval existence! ... Ah! their princesses with spindle-shanked bodies and faces like poisonous flowers who pass on staircases of cloud, on terraces of sickly moons, in gowns of galvanized steel! Ah! their lovers, emaciated, and elongated like fishing rods, their lovers who walk without legs, look without eyes, speak without a mouth, who love without a sex, and who, under mechanically cut foliage, raise their flat hands, broken at the wrist by an eternal flexion! And their heroes who stink of sodomy, neurosis, and syphilis! ... Instead of working methodically, learning to draw a beautiful movement of nature, a beautiful life form, instead of looking for the simple and grand, I finished by thinking that the violent contrast, the deformed, was all there was of art! (Octave Mirbeau, "Des lys! des lys!" *Le Journal*, April 7, 1895; reprinted in *Des artistes* [Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1986])

2. Although the treatment of the "decadent" life and work of authors such as Oscar Wilde has been retheorized within gay, lesbian, and gender studies (e.g., by Eve Kosovskiy Sedgwick, Richard Dellamora, Margory Garber, Elaine Showalter, and Charles Bernheimer), there remains considerable work to be done on the aesthetic reframing of decadence to include recent redefinitions of gender ambivalence. Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony*, trans. Angus Davidson (Meridian, 1956), and Richard Gilman, *Decadence: The Strange Life of an Epithet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979) still remain unmatched in contemporary scholarship on decadence, and their work obviously predates the flood of gender studies.

3. For a discussion of decadence that focuses on the historical relations among psychology, social science, and literature, see Eugen Weber, "Decadence?," in his *France: Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1986).

4. Théodule Ribot, *La Psychologie des sentiments* (Paris: Alcan, 1896), p. 253.

5. Unedited letter from Mirbeau to Monet, published in *Les Cahiers d'aujourd'hui* 9 (1923), as cited in Martin Schwarz, *Octave Mirbeau, vie et oeuvre* (Paris: Mouton, 1966), pp. 192–93.

6. See, e.g., Remy de Gourmont's *Physique de l'amour: Essai sur l'instinct sexuel* (Paris, 1900) and Paul Bourget's *Physiologie de l'amour moderne* (Paris, 1906).

7. Léon Daudet's *Les Morticoles* (Paris, 1894), a dark satire of Charcot's Salpêtrière and a medical dystopia containing thoroughly gruesome episodes, bears an interesting comparison to *Les 21 Jours d'un neurasthénique*.

8. Robert J. Stoller, *Perverstion* (New York: Pantheon, 1975), p. 4, writes, "Perverstion, the erotic form of hatred, is a fantasy, usually acted out but occasionally restricted to a daydream (either self-produced or packaged by others — that is, pornography). It is a habitual, preferred aberration necessary for one's full satisfaction, primarily motivated by hostility." Stoller reconsiders this passage in the context of further reflections on perversion and aggression in *Observing the Erotic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 8.

9. For more on Mirbeau's anarchism, see Reg Carr, *Anarchism in France: The Case of Octave Mirbeau* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1977).

10. For a close reading of *The Torture Garden* in terms of these issues, see my "Hysterical Vision: The Scopophilic Garden from Monet to Mirbeau," in Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

11. Elaine Showalter, *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (New York: Viking, 1990), p. 171.

12. Octave Mirbeau, *Sébastien Roch* (Paris: Union Générale des Éditions, 1977), p. 203. Subsequent references are noted in the text as *SR*.

13. For an illuminating discussion of masochism that both clarifies and criticizes some of the distinctions traditionally made in psychoanalysis between male and female masochism and that reviews the categories established by Freud of "erotogenic," "feminine," and "moral" masochism, see Kaja Silverman, "Masochism and Male Subjectivity," in her *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992). Freud's notion of "moral masochism" ("an erotic attachment to the superego") is helpfully glossed by Silverman, who characterizes it as "a situation where the ego comes to take pleasure in the pain inflicted upon it by the super-ego — where fear of punishment gives way to the wish for it, and where cruelty and discipline come to stand for love" (p. 195).

14. Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," in *Masochism* (New York: Zone, 1991), p. 134. Deleuze writes: "There is an aestheticism in masochism, while sadism is hostile to the aesthetic attitude." Deleuze's notion of aestheticism rests on the masochistic subject's active fantasy of a maternal phallus, his disavowal of maternal castration, and his "icy imagination" of an idealized, mythical maternal Imago.

15. Octave Mirbeau, *Le Calvaire* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1986), pp. 162–63. All further references to this work will appear in the text, abbreviated as *C*.

16. "The Carpeaux group" refers to the famous sculpture *La danse* (1869) in which a male "genius" is encircled by a group of female dancers and *putti*. The sculpture stood on the facade of Garnier's Paris Opera and aroused much public controversy. Vandalized with a dousing of ink, the Catholic press inveighed against its lasciviousness (the female figures were criticized for their realism and resemblance to modern *filles de joie*). For a fascinating historical, political, and social analysis of the genesis and reception of *La danse*, see Anne Middleton Wagner, "Art and Propriety," in her *Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux: Sculptor of the Second Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986).



This anecdote is included in Edmond de Goncourt's entry for November 21, 1889. See Edmond de Goncourt, *Journal: Mémoires de la vie littéraire*, 1851-1896, vol. 3 (Paris: Laffont, 1989), pp. 350-51. This anecdote seems to ironically foreshadow Proust's coded use of lover's discourse, as when Swann and Odette agree to "*faire catleya*."

17. Léon Daudet wrote of Mirbeau, "Il est, comme Rabelais, *gynécophobe*." See "Octave Mirbeau," *Candide*, October 29, 1936, as cited by Michel and Nivet in their preface to *Octave Mirbeau: Contes Cruels*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie Séguier, 1990), p. 10.

18. Joan Riviere, "Hate, Greed and Aggression," in Athol Hughes (ed.), *The Inner World and Joan Riviere: Collected Papers 1920-1958* (London: Karnac, 1991), p. 187.

19. Octave Mirbeau, *La 628-E8* (Paris: Bibliothèque Charpentier, 1908), p. 328.

20. Paul Morand, *Paris 1900* (Paris: Les Editions de France, 1931), p. 102.

21. For a full discussion of Charcot in this regard, see Debora Silverman, *Art Nouveau in Fin-de-Siècle France: Politics, Psychology and Style* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989).

22. Together with his wife and daughter, Charcot set up a workshop to produce his designs for the interior decoration of his own home. It was stylistically eclectic, close in spirit to a Shakespearian stage set with its sculpted bas-reliefs, massive wall hangings, and dark *moblier*, idiosyncratic in its museal display of family memorabilia. Charcot's apartment was perceived by his contemporaries (Freud among them) as a kind of strange domestic fantasy involving the transmogrification of femininity into furniture.

23. Octave Mirbeau, *Dans le ciel* (Caen: L'Echoppe, 1990), p. 130.

24. Walter Benjamin, *Paris, Capitale du XIXe siècle. Le Livre des passages* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1989), p. 573.

25. Edmond de Goncourt relates Mirbeau's discovery of the real-life source for "The Octogenarian" in Rodin's studio:

Octave Mirbeau came to see me today. Soon the conversation turned to Rodin. It was enthusiasm, warm words for his exhibit, for his two old women in a grotto, those two women with shriveled breasts, and no more sex at all, who, I believe, are called *The Springs Have Dried Up*. On this topic, he told me that he had come upon Rodin modeling an admirable thing based on an eighty-two-year-old woman, something even more superior than *The Springs Have Dried Up*, and which, several days later, when he asked what had become of his clay, the sculptor told him he had broken. . . . Since then, he had felt a certain remorse at the destruction of a work praised by Mirbeau and had made the two old women that were exhibited.

For the rest, the story of the eighty-two-year-old model is rather curious. She was the mother of an Italian model, who had come there on foot to see him before she died, and the son had said to her: "Mama, I'll kick you out of the house if you don't pose." And he had proposed her to Rodin without telling him that she was his mother. (Goncourt, *Journal*, July 3, 1889, vol. 3, pp. 290-91)