Toward Death and Perfection

in Octave Mirbeau's Sébastien Roch

Along with issuing an indictment of institutions that poison innocence and corrupt natural goodness, Octave Mirbeau's controversial 1890 novel, Sébastien Roch, also offers a detailed analysis of the psychological and social development of an individual human subject. An author best known for his breathtaking ideological about-faces, his embrace of anti-Semitism and later vehement defense of Dreyfus, his support of Jean Grave and the burgeoning anarchist movement, and his ringing defense of the Impressionists and other avant-garde artists, Mirbeau also deserves attention for his penetrating insights into the psychological phenomena that characterized fin-de-siècle France. Mirbeau's fiction sheds light on an era riven by contradictory impulses, at once solicited by utopian aspirations and dominated by the death drive.

In Sébastien Roch, Mirbeau begins by presenting a character who lives outside of neurosis-breeding civilization altogether. Prior to the crystallization of his identity, Sébastien is unspoiled by the influences that pervert instincts, and so the novel's eponymous hero retains the spontaneity and peaceful unreflectiveness that another of Mirbeau's heroes, L'Abbé Jules, recommends to the student in his charge, saying that the happiest children are the simplest ones, those most closely resembling plants and flowers. Before Sébastien is uprooted from his home, he is a true autochthon, an indigenous vegetable specimen, not yet a genuine human. Filled with vigor, irrigated by the rich sap of untainted youth, he is blessed with the robust mindlessness of a healthy shrub, endowed with "la grâce élastique des jeunes arbustes qui ont poussé […] dans les terres

fertiles" (547). Spared the pain of self-awareness, he is inseparable from the sun and soil that nourish him, part of the river, trees and grasses that are his shelter and his playground. Sébastien is not a subject capable of authoring a self-narrative, but an organism on which external stimuli impinge, a body engaged in the play of muscles, the discharge of energy, harmonious in the indivisibility of his primitive consciousness and its object.

Mirbeau insists on Sébastien's imperviousness to thought. Undisturbed by any "impulsion cérébrale," any "phénomène de spiritualité," – unplanted by even "les premiers semences de vie intellectuelle" (548) – he is one with his environment, no different from the streams and woods and fields in which his life of unrepression seems to unfold in eternity. Blessed with "la candeur introublée d'[une] végétale vie" (547), Sébastien enjoys the wholeness preexisting the individual's resolution into a speaking subject and his history.

In his novel, Mirbeau equates the formation of an adult with the murder of the child, as the cultural being emerges with the destruction of his natural counterpart. In his early years, Sébastien benefits from his father's selfish inattention, as paternal neglect allows him to continue in his plantlike state, unassimilated to the dusty ironmongery that fills his father's store. The decision to send Sébastien to a prestigious Jesuit school is motivated by father Roch's desire to experience the imaginary glory of proxy association with the scions of aristocrats. Having never been inculcated with society's foundational values, Sébastien is at first unaffected by his father's wish to embellish his self-image in a child accepted at an exclusive school. Yet when father Roch begins looking at Sébastien as his narcissistic image, the boy suffers the first pains of alienation.

One aspect of the oedipal drama staged in Mirbeau's book is the need to kill the progenitor who seeks a rebirth in his offspring. In A Child Is Being Killed, Serge Leclaire relates the subject's first suicidal impulses to a need to eradicate the idealized figure that parents project onto their children. Before Sébastien is taught the soul-destroying principles of inequality and privilege – before he is seduced and sodomized by a man entrusted with his moral education – he learns from his father that self-interest often masquerades as generosity. For Sébastien to be himself, he must first put to death the image in which his father adores himself as a filial double. In Leclaire's words: "*The child to be killed*, the child to be glorified, is *the representation of the primary narcissistic representative*. Accursed and universally shared, it is part of everyone's inheritance: the object of a murder as imperative as it is impossible" (10).

Only later when he is expelled from Saint François-Xavier does Sébastien realize that his relationship with his father has been a fraud. No genuine intersubjectivity had structured their exchanges, and the feelings of estrangement Sébastien experiences when leaving home do not extend to his father, who does not see Sébastien as a person. After Sébastien is accused of a homosexual dalliance with a schoolmate and is returned to his native village, his father soon exhausts his vituperative wrath. At this point, he begins to treat his son as if he were absent or invisible. Having failed to discharge his role as the parent's narcissistic representative, Sébastien is denied the status of an autonomous entity and is murdered as the actual child. As he comments: "J'étais pour mon père une vanité, la promesse d'une élévation sociale […] je n'existais pas par moi-même; c'est lui qui existait ou plutôt réexistait par moi. Il ne m'aimait pas; il s'aimait en moi […] Du jour où rien de ce qu'il avait rêvé pour lui, et non pour moi, ne put se réaliser, je redevins ce que j'étais réellement, c'est-à-dire rien" (714).

Mirbeau's fiction is filled with references to the production of a nothing, in this case, the *rien* that is the exterminated subjectivity of a character. Children, Jews, and vagrants – the people who are colonized and changed into simulacra of their oppressors – have their identities destroyed so that their original selves can be assimilated by their masters. This is the model of an autocracy built on self-love and intolerance, a world where super-ego functions are draconically enforced, and where the punishment for difference is relentlessly exacted. In this realm, only missionaries, teachers, generals, fathers, judges, and police officials are permitted to exist.

In the garden of undifferentiation where Sébastien thrived like a plant, there was the euphony of natural sounds, the music of wind and flowing water. Deracination from the maternal bed had introduced him to the experience of discord, banishing him to the domain of language and loss. As in preceding novels, Mirbeau structures his narrative on gender oppositions, picturing mothers as figures of fullness, silence, insentience, and timelessness, and fathers as speakers whose words identify and separate. On the mantel, the photograph of a placid woman who had died in childbirth situates Sébastien's mother in a shadowy, lacustral landscape of stagnant tranquillity. Immutable in her mortuary serenity, Madame Roch is the woman who has always been dead. Forever untouched by aging and upheaval, she fulfills the euthanasic promise of painlessness and peace. The delicate woman with her "visage effacé" (558) acts as a monument to transience, a reminder of life from which one is blessedly delivered. Eventually, the blurred likeness of the mother dissolves in her environmental symbol, bathing her in a Lethean waterworld in which forgetting drowns the dead. Like the consoling image that l'Abbé Jules creates of an aqueous afterlife, Madame Roch is metonymized as a shoreless uterus, a place of

quiescence and repose, where one floats "sur le lac immense, le lac qui ne finit pas et qui est sans fond" (L'Abbé Jules [1888] 499).

Appearing against a background of unfathomable woods and paradisaical mountains, Madame Roch wears a gown patterned with funeral flowers, suggesting a death both distant and intimate, integrating her into the gallery of symbolist Ophelias that constellate Mirbeau's early work. Figures of fog and melancholy, silence and idealism, these "virginités exsangues," as Jean-Luc Planchais describes them, stand in contrast to sharp-clawed maenads, women like the sanguinary Clara in Le Jardin des supplices, who embody "l'élément anarchique aux pulsions en accord avec la nature" (172).

The thanatotic mother, "vierge de douleur" (555), stills pain, obeying the Nirvana principle which had guided Madame Mintié, the suicidal progenetrix in Mirbeau's inaugural novel, Le Calvaire (1886), a woman who had begotten life only as its merciful liberation. Identified with "l'idée de la mort [qui] descendait en lui, endormeuse et berceuse" (588), Madame Roch synthesizes Sébastien's recollection of all the fortunate deceased, becoming a memory that soothes and anaesthetizes, that cradles and pacifies.

Inextricably linked with his sententiousness and bombast, Monsieur Roch issues demands that his child repeat the father's name: "Joseph, Hippolyte, Elphège, Roch" (548). While Madame Roch commemorates a loss whose sorrow she assuages, Sébastien's father calls attention to the ridiculous disproportion between his insignificant ideas and their grandiloquent expression. Insisting on the majesty of patronymy, the paraphrastic self-referentiality of his language underscores the gap between the fullness of the world and the emptiness of his language – "Un abîme, ce que j'appelle!" (556). Subverting the purpose of his harangues, he turns meaningful speech into the noises heard in nature. Sébastien listens no more carefully to his father's droning tirades that he

had “au ronflement du vent dans les arbres, ou bien au glouglou de l’eau, coulant sans cesse, par le robinet de la fontaine municipale” (555).

Despite mocking the pompous solemnity of the father’s authority and name, Mirbeau still associates Roch with his son’s exile to the realm of the symbolic. Nowhere more clearly does Mirbeau delineate the parents’ differing roles as they orient their child toward death and dispossession. In the maternal figure of Madame Roch, Mirbeau illustrates the death drive as Freud defines it in Beyond the Pleasure Principle: the tendency by all living organisms to move to a state of immobility and extinction, in obedience to to the Nirvana principle – as a response to “the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli” (Freud 67).

In father Roch, Mirbeau shows how the death instinct redirects the subject toward language, destroying the primary object which is forbidden or unattainable, then replacing it with words which formalize its loss. Since Sébastien is denied incestuous union with the mother, prevented from immersing himself in an abyssal lake of stillness, he is relegated to the realm of the symbolic where the father holds dominion. There he can only mourn the loss of the object he possessed. This, then, is the death drive in the sense Lacan explains it, renunciation of “the maternal thing [which] is a complete nothingness, a true a priori, the unnameable, the unassimilable.” As Donna Lopez writes, “it is that body of the Other from which an immense development will have to take place for a subject to be born. Man speaks, and through that speech something becomes separated and lost” (18).

Like other of Mirbeau’s early heroes, Sébastien is an unproductive artist, a narrator who is irremediably alienated from his language. His unrealizable artistic project expresses a desire for death and nothingness. Objectified in his works, he conveys a wish for immortality that masks a longing for the timelessness of instinct and unrepression.

Creativity becomes an expression of the goal of self-annihilation, as the project to "fabriquer un rien" is always governed by the Nirvana principle. Leaving a cadaver/monument which is inanimate and thus imperishable, the act of suicide offers evidence of true artistic genius.

Father Roch also expresses Mirbeau's characters' most deep-seated urges by ceremonially staging Jean Mintié's fantasy of building a memorial to absence. Hallowing the absurdity of his meaningless existence, he builds his grave as a monument to his denial of death and to the emptiness of his life. In his quest to triumph over ephemerality and accident, Roch erects a temple of narcissism. Having fenced off "un vaste terrain" accessed by an ironwork staircase wrought with wreaths of roses, he excavates a sepulcher overlooked by a granite stone inscribed with an epitaph lacking only the date of his demise. No longer an "artiste sans faire," Roch recalls Jean Mintié by proleptically reproducing himself as a monument to his future corpse.

Mirbeau structures the story of Sébastien and the formation of his identity on the dialectical alternation of births and deaths. Uprooted from the maternal soil, Sébastien reacts to the trauma of birth and accession to subjecthood as if to a cataclysm. Banishment from the realm of primary narcissism comes with a discovery of "l'horreur de la réalité révelée" (559); entry into the world of time, desire, and regret comes with a development of the language expressing them, as his identity crystallizes at the moment of "cette séparation de lui-même" (553). Once Sébastien is resituated in the illusory domain of projection and remembrance, his satisfaction with the present gives way to longings for an idealized future. Adjustment to the reality principle brings a rejection of reality, and culminates instead with "le rêve d'un au-delà" (554). An embodiment of the peace of narcosis, the mother is succeeded by neurosis-breeding Jesuit fathers, and

Sébastien's relegation to a wasteland of suffering, loss, and change is marked by father Roch's decision to remove the yellowing photograph of his wife and replace it with a clock: "il faudra que je remonte ta pauvre mère dans ma chambre, et que je mette, à sa place, une pendule!" (558).

The paternal manifestation of the death instinct converts mothers into hours, taking away the object which it commemorates in words. Susceptible to the disturbance of temporal dislocation, the child – once a plant whose existence was one of "insouciance tranquille" (558) – becomes a plant henceforth aware of its immobilizing limitations. "Tandis qu'il végétait, misérable, à d'autres étaient réservées des joies, des beautés, des magnificences" (559). The shabbiness of Eden is belatedly exposed, as Sébastien's confinement to the village, to his father's squalid shop, and his gossiping neighbors' provincialism is revealed for the first time. Once the unexamined backdrop of contentment in Pervenchères is illumined by the spotlight of Sébastien's critical appraisal, it is shown as cramped and dirty, a paradise revealed to be a prison.

No sooner is ego formation completed than it is subject to disintegration, fragmentation, and erosion. Gone is the infant's illusion of fullness and omnipotence; lost is his invunerability to temporal despoliation. In his reflections in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Freud says that death is not natural, but that it comes from cellular division, from the separation of self and flesh – from the split of "the soma, the body apart from the substance concerned with sex and inheritance – and an immortal portion – the germ plasm, which is concerned with […] reproduction" (55).

Freud's observations help to clarify Mirbeau's views on time, death, and self. Most clearly articulated in Le Jardin des supplices (1899), the distinction Mirbeau makes between the body as the locus of identity and impersonal life, eternally regenerated

through cycles of corruption and rebirth, opposes the impermanence of forms and the indestructibility of what animates them. In Le Jardin des supplices, Clara's nymphomaniacal sadism expresses, not a morbid attraction to death, but an affirmation of life everlasting through reproduction, decay, and renewal. In l'Abbé Jules's formulation, to *fabriquer un rien* means reliquishing a corporeal self, asserting the nothingness of individual organisms, whose death is what enriches life's generative matrix.

Applying libido theory to his conception of immortality, Freud says that unicellular life forms "take […] other cells as their object" (60), as their conjugation acts as a model of the coupling of more complex organisms. Accordingly, "the libido of our sexual instincts would coincide with the Eros of poets" in serving as the force "which holds all living things together" (60-1).

In Mirbeau, the death drive is evidenced by the pull of dissolution and vaporization, and is the genuine principle of Thanatos sundering what the libido had joined together. It responds to what Freud describes as "*a need to return to an earlier state of things*" (69), to restore the state of primordial confusion from which the first gastropod emerged, to recreate the original undifferentiation that preexisted all forms and identities. Before the self is born as a name, the individual is inseparable from his place. As the holothurian is the warmth of the pelagic ooze, so the flower is the flowerbed. Thus, when Sébastien is asked who he is, he equates his identity with the place of his origin, repeating miserably to Guy de Kerdaniel, "je suis de Pervenchères" (591).

In Mirbeau's fiction, the movement from unity to complexity, from singularity to multiplicity is always accompanied by the sense of a disabling loss, triggering wishes for liquefaction or atomization, a resolution of the self into infinitely small particles of smoke or vapor dissipating into the boundlessness of the sea or the maternity of the air. When a

schoolmate, Guy de Kerdaniel, hears that Sébastien's father is a hardware seller, he reacts with jeering incredulity, convoking his aristocrating friends who scoff and snicker: "Qunicailler! … hou! hou! (586). Chased from the illusory security of the school grounds as he had been torn from the nurturing humus of his native village, Sébastien feels transported from civilization to wilderness, from ordered society to hostile nature, where he recoils from the menacing snarls of "bêtes fauves" (586). Discovery of the reality of social stratification and hierarchy recapitulates Sébastien's experience of the separation of words from things, the division of humanity into similar and dissimilar, the existence of value gradients and taxonomies distinguishing the powerful from the weak. Guy de Kerdaniel's question "Es-tu noble?" (581) opens Sébastien's eyes to the truth of a broken, unbalanced universe organized according to rules of privilege and dispossession, acceptance and exclusion. The backward movement from natural harmony to jungle atavism encourages fantasies of a phylogenetic regression: from animal ancestors back to the peace of the plant world, a tranquil burial in the grave soil of the telluric mother-garden.

In a suicidal fugue, Sébastien sets off in search of the sea, embarking on an hallucinatory walk into the landscape in his mother's photograph, past lakes stippled with reeds, toward a chasm of light, "un gouffre giratoire et candide" (589), into which the sufferer descends, spiralling in a gentle vertigo until his consciousness goes black. Sébastien's journey to oblivion takes him from the fragmented world of names and classifications back to the water realm of the mother, past ponds encircled by rushes, toward a welcoming orifice exuding the pungent tang "des fermentations paludéennes" (589), where the child decomposes in vegetable corruption.

Approaching death, Sébastien experiences a strange olfactory acuity, activated by the scent of mildew associated with his mother, evoking the connection of liquid women and temporal stagnation. The bed in which the flower decays exudes the pungency of rotting leaves, the astringent smell of rain-soaked grass. From the coitus of earth and water comes an "atmosphère […] lourde d'odeurs acescantes et de véneneux parfums" (590). Yielding to the temptation of immersion in the sea, inhumation in the earth allows Sébastien to flee from life's inhospitable terrain with its wounding topography, its surface pocked by traps, jagged with protruding obstacles. Instead, Sébastien walks onto a plain smoothed by resignation, a place inviting recumbency and sleep: "une prairie s'étendait, plane, unie, d'un vert argenté. Au milieu de la prairie, une nappe d'eau luisait, toute blanche, sans un reflet" (590).

In his autobiographical fiction, Mirbeau's landscapes of suicide convey this sense of unfathomable peace. Bottomless yet flat, intimate yet boundless, they take the immensity of the elements and make of them a shelter. Blackness, emptiness represent the breaking off of discourse, an aposiopesis into which the character falls back into silence. The ellipses fracturing the continuity of Mirbeau's narrative are abyssal punctuation gaps into which even confident speakers may stumble, holes in the fabric of meaning, tears in the garment of communication covering the nakedness of futility and death. For one tired of being mocked and exploited, these interstices can widen, receiving the sufferer in a place of silence and surrender. The *espace vide* in Mirbeau's text represents a break in the character's explanatory narrative and an opening onto the soundless night preexisting the genesis of his language.

Acquiescence to the Nirvana principle conveys more in Mirbeau's novel than a desire to reduce the quantity of tension until a state of rest is reached. Born as himself,

acceding to the self-awareness of a subject, Sébastien acquires an identity already informed by the past, preliminarily shaped by the narcissistic ambition of his father. As Freud writes: "The child shall fulfill those wishful dreams of the parents which they never carried out – the boy shall become a great man and a hero in the father's place" (qtd. In Leclaire 12-13). Sébastien can enjoy no real freedom as long as he must embody his father's ideal. Generationally transmitted, the selfish goals, distorted viewpoints, and crippling fears of one's predecessors create a child who is not a new being but a sickly composite of his parents. For him, identity formation means liquidating the debt of the past.

This is the same lesson given by the Buddhist sage Sumangala in Mirbeau's Lettres de l'Inde, a work which discusses the experience of Nirvana in a religious and not a psychoanalytic sense. One accedes to true selfhood, in Sumangala's view, only after ridding the mind "de tout le détritus de préjugés ataviques que l'évolution de ses ancêtres a laissé dans les formes de son cerveau" (45). Otherwise, the cycle of deaths and rebirths continues to propagate the sins and errors of the fathers. Echoing naturalist theory, according to which the child is hereditarily imprinted by the genetic legacy of his antecedents, Sumangala argues that each individual, "comme tout animal, étant sujet à cette évolution, subit les lois de la forme, de telle sorte que, lorsqu'il vient au monde, il a dans tout son être une marque prédestinée de bien ou de mal" (44). From the Buddhist standpoint, completion of the oedipal project means killing the father so that the child is purged of ancestral prejudice, satisfying incestuous desires for the mother, who no longer represents the generative principle of life but promises the annihilating rest in which one experiences "[une] cessation de la soif de renaître" (p. 102, note 61).

At Saint-François-Xavier, Sébastien again discovers his antipathy for the dissonant language of the fathers, his revulsion for cacophonous Latin texts celebrating bloodthirsty warriors and merciless gods. Rather than military histories and despairing theologies, Sébastien prefers the uplifting religious music of Haendel, Bach, and Porpora. Unlike the minatory language of fathers, which forbids and punishes, music is a wordless medium undivided into meaning and expression. In sacred music, God is no longer a saturnine ogre devouring the bones of wayward children, but is feminized, haloed by forgiveness. Mother of beauty, music is a goddess constellated with flowers and stars. From the mystical harmonies he hears in the school chapel, Sébastien grasps the inexhaustibility of life, the source of being in its multifariousness and bounty. Unable to experience the enlightenment of Nirvana, the quiescence of nothingness, Sébastien nonetheless understands in music the eternal propagation of forms, lives taking shape and then dissolving, creating a chain of being stretching back to a point before time, an endless succession of past lives assuming their place in "la suite sans fin des immortelles metempsychoses" (618-19).

Immersed in an acoustic sea of aesthetic rapture, Sébastien associates the swelling of the organ music, the soaring of choral voices, with the ocean whose terrible glory had crushed him with its grandeur. In the susurrus of calm waters, the unfurling of waves, the thunder of storms smashing ships, Sébastien resonates with the sonority of the music he hears, becoming a drop in its liquid immensity. Finding release in a loss of boundaries, he emerges from Mass, "comme il était revenu de la mer, anéanti, chancelant, et gardant de longues heures le goût de salure fort et grisant dont s'étaient saturées ses lèvres" (619).

Enveloped in a symphony of the elements, Sébastien learns a new language whose sense is intuitively evident. Having rejected the wounding idiom of schoolmasters, and

their message of contumely and desolation, Sébastien swims in an ocean whose waters encourage a reciprocal orality – drinking the drinker, swallowing the nursing child in the cradling swells of its aqueous body. Joel Whitebook notes the sonorous origins of the oceanic feeling, the intra-uterine bliss of undiffferentiation. In the beginning, Whitebook writes, the "mother's voice – with its particular melody, rhythm, and timbre," together with "her heartbeat in the womb – not to mention the lullaby – *precedes the father's word*, that is to say, linguistic communication, and serves as a transitional object to soften the pain of the emerging separation between mother and child." It is the mother's voice, as Whitebook adds, that is "a fundamental source of music" (35).

Translated into sound, Sébastien's fantasies of oral union are later opposed to his inability to ingurgitate the Eucharist, the comestible body of an implacable divinity who terrifies the child with his bristling beard, his mountain-shaking voice, and his blood-injected eyes, "[une] sorte de maniaque et tout-puissant bandit, qui ne se plaisait qu'à tuer" (607). Holding God in his mouth, Sébastien feels as if he himself is being crushed, masticated, torn to bits in the inexorable machinery of a religion of anger and unforgiveness. Stressing the homology of speaking and eating, Mirbeau's scene suggests the unassimilability of Catholic ritual and doctrine. With the communication wafer lodged in his throat, Sébastien is filled with panic and mortification: "Tout, autour de lui, tourna: la chapelle, les officiants, les enfants du choeur, les cierges, le tabernacle, tout rouge, ouvert, devant lui, comme une mâchoire de monstre" (631).

Repelled by the school curriculum of rebarbitative Latin texts and Old Testament theology, Sébastien is receptive to the linguistic blandishments of the soft-spoken Père de Kern. With his languourous mien, expiring gaze, and despondently mellifluous voice, Father Kern acts as a male counterpart of the deceased mother. Steeping Sébastien in the

writings of Lamartine and Chateaubriand, the Jesuit reintroduces a mother associated with tragic landscapes, melancholy imagery, sublimely ineffable things, the elegiac celebration of love and loss. Different from father Roch with his windy disquisitions, le Père de Kern speaks in a soothing hush, consoling the mourner with sweet words of treacherously tender ambiguity. Inducing inexpressible longings for the irretrievable body of the lost beloved, Sébastien's teacher suggests "les pénitentes ivresses, les étreintes aériennes, les mysticismes désespérés, où l'idée de l'amour s'accompagne de l'idée de la mort" (643).

Responsive to a symbolist aesthetic evoking a celestial reality toward which words reach in vain, Sébastien is easily convinced by de Kern's assimilation of love to music. A liquefying epithalamium celebrating the wedding of sound and feeling, music is resurrective in restoring an original state of fullness.

While he is inexplicably apprehensive in the priest's presence, Sébastien's fears are mitigated by the voluptuous pleasure he derives from de Kern's comforting voice and enervating messages. Fantasies of embracing the dead mother as the body of the wounded, bleeding Christ infuse his adolescent sensuality with spiritual aspirations for immortality.

Mirbeau links Sébastien's labyrinthine journey to the Jesuit's lair with the irreversibility of the damage he will suffer at his teacher's hands. Detailing the interminable passage to de Kern's bedroom, Mirbeau describes a disorienting nightmare descent down vertiginous staircases, along blind and darkened corridors, past flickering lanterns, ending at a place from which the child cannot turn back. The Jesuit's etherealized language, his "ardentes extases divines" (657) are belied by the profane physical objects in the room: the glass of liqueur used to lower the student's inhibitions,

the glowing ember of a cigarette that burns in the darkness. The climax of the rape scene is signalled in the narrative by a hiatus which represents the unbridgeable juncture between an experience of soul murder and the banality of its aftermath.

The ellipses on the page also mark a reevaluation of language use by the hero of Mirbeau's novel. Whereas Sébastien had once longed for unmediated access to things unabstracted by words, his victimization confers on him the status of a writer for whom narrative serves an explanatory or self-exculpatory function. An instrument of self-incrimination or a tool for unavailing ratiocination, Sébastien's words aim to make sense of senselessness, to reason inexplicable moral deviancy. In Pervenchères, Sébastien had lived in a sensorium, attuned to the music of rain and wind. First torn out of the soil and then alienated from the interpersonal world of comradeship and trust, Sébastien retreats into a mind filled with guilt and rage, a solipsistic realm of nightmare and projection,

The symbolic dimension of Mirbeau's text becomes richer after the unrelated episode of sodomy in the dormitory. After he is awakened to the existence of aberrancy and evil, Sébastien repeats his discovery of monstrosity by entering a world of monsters. In the domain of language, dissimulation, and hypocrisy, wickedness poses as propriety; predatoriness masks itself as solicitude and gentleness. Tormented by a belief in his complicity in the assault, Sébastien is astonished that his depravity is not visibly evident: "Dis-moi si je te fais horreur," as he persistently asks his uncomprehending friend Bolorec (666). Punished by feelings of ostracism and ugliness, Sébastien resembles the pilgrims who flock to Sainte-Anne d'Auray, deformed pariahs seeking miraculous absolution. Despite unblemished faces and healthy bodies, sinner and sinned against join the processional phantasmagoria of hydrocephalics and lupus-sufferers parading their oozing wounds and abcessed stumps. In Sébastien's vision of the verminous travelers to

the pilgrimage site, he links reality and appearance, moral turpitude and physical repulsiveness. For Sébastien, hallucination is a visual language that always tells the truth.

Having learned the painful lesson that words effect the loss of referents, he then discovers the disturbing reality of the autonomous language of lies. There is no correlation between le Père de Kern's verbal suavity and his marauding intentions. Experiencing the phenomenal world of school outings and instructional sessions as a fever-bred illusion, Sébastien retreats to a more accurate representation of his personal reality, in which naked, wanton, drunken boys – faces twisted in a lascivious rictus – file laughing into the Jesuit's bedroom.

Damaged in his libidinal investment in people and things, Sébastien is stricken with self-loathing, crippled by apathy. Discredited as objects of desire, women are projected as rapacious, nymphomaniacal devourers, repulsive and terrifying. For Sébastien, guilty appetites incur imaginary punishments, as his attraction and revulsion for a neighbor girl Marguerite Lecautel cause him to visualize her as having been polluted and diseased, as he projects his sinful lust on her body already "couvert d'immonde souillures" (671).

Repatriated in Pervenchères, Sébastien completes the backward journey from the institutional to the familial world, from society to solitude. Failing to fulfill his father's dream of vicariously fraternizing with aristocrats, he is discredited in his role as the parent's narcissistic double. Ironically, the movement from culture to nature is accomplished when the boy withdraws from the realm of ambition, work, and time. Whereas, oblivious, the flower lives in harmony with its environment, Sébastien can only spend days filled with otiose monotony. Disenchanted with humanity, he has no professional objectives, is not oriented toward a future of conquest or achievement.

The intermittency of Sebastien's efforts at authoring a self-narrative that would confer on life's desultoriness a fictive teleology only underscores the pathological indifference he feels toward everything. The present moment in which the flower blooms, fed by earth and kissed by sun, bears no likeness to the dead time of self-hatred and despair. Sébastien's disengagement from reality is suggested by his writing and masturbation, with their simultaneous distancing of referents and women. The compulsive, dreary onanism exhibited by Mirbeau's heroes is not motivated by a morbid, self-directed quest for pleasure but by a pursuit of the torpor following a mechanically triggered orgasm. Ritual involvement in solitary practices brings "un redoublement de tristesse, de dégoûts, et de remords violents" (711), as the contrition, regret, and shame that le Père de Kern had never demonstrated are retargeted at the victim who tries to purge his misplaced guilt.

Sébastien's lurid hallucinations and masturbatory fantasies express a wish to regain control over an experience of helplessness. Reliving unpleasurable situations manifests the compulsion to repeat, which as Freud says, aims at removing the subject from his passive role as victim and enabling him to act in accordance with his "instinct for mastery" (15).

Exiled from the domain of natural phenomena, Sébastien acquires an awareness of troubling social issues. He cultivates a lugubrious aestheticism, a sensivity to vulgarity, and manifests a sterile outrage over oppression and injustice. Once a natural organism, he complains of having been "transplanté dans un autre milieu" (709), when he withdraws to his bedroom with its ugly floral wallpaper, becoming a flower sadly contemplating ugly images of flowers. The most serious consequence of his experience of violation is Sébastien's moral incapacitation, his paralyzing apathy. For Sébastien, what is

symptomatic of the operation of the Nirvana principle is his attraction to senescence, overripeness, and decay. His efforts to rejoin the mother in a distant, tranquil waterscape give way to his desire to possess her in her repellent physical aspect. Because of the Jesuit's depradations, life holds no interest for Sébastien, who shrinks in horror from Marguerite and her precocious sexual advances. The incest fantasies Mirbeau shows as underlying Sébastien's death drive, the quest for peaceful dormancy in the arms of Madame Roch, are complemented by the necrophilic promise of wrinkled female faces, drooping female flesh, graying female hair. Sébastien directs his attention toward Madame Lecautel, not her daughter, toward a lost beloved reembodied as her physical deterioration. For Sébastien, possessing the dead mother requires embracing what is dying.

Sébastien discontinues writing after having sex with Marguerite, becoming disenchanted with reality as it is reworked into narrative just as he lost interest in reality as he experienced it directly. At the conclusion, it is circumstances that reassimilate the disaffected youth, reawakening him to the immediacy of momentous world events. As father Roch had used Sébastien to experience second-hand celebrity, Sébastien enjoys simulated passions and vicarious involvement by participating in the ideological campaigns of his friend Bolorec. Disabled by lassitude and guilt, Sébastien admires his schoolmate's revolutionary fervor, his anarchistic vehemence, his willingness to bomb and burn and murder.

The outbreak of war ushers in a spurious new democracy, as the sons of hardware merchants, doctors, and aristocrats are conscripted without prejudice. Yet with the abolition of the civilian hierarchy of social class and history comes the establishment of the military order of authority, rank, and grade. In place of shabby nobles with their

dilapidated castles, there are officers dispatching rich and poor indiscriminately to the slaughter. The battlefield narrative with which the novel closes illustrates Mirbeau's longstanding polemical positions. The profligate waste of life justified by xenophobic nationalism, an unromanticized view of war depicting chaos, fear, and butchery, the practical subordination of ideological concerns to the violence of combat with its terror and confusion: this is the reality Mirbeau shows, one stripped of sentimentality and glory.

The novel's conclusion also shows the dialectical interplay between the characters' utopian aspirations and their subjection to the death instinct. As Mirbeau's career advanced, the complementary relationship between an ideal world and a peaceful graveyard became ever more apparent. Cancellation of tension, reduction of excitation – hallmarks of the Nirvana principle – seemed increasingly indistinguishable from the flawlessness, balance, and changelessness of utopia.

While psychologists have questioned the viability of the death drive, Freud himself proposes a link between life's end and its beginning, making comments that may illumine the message of Mirbeau's novel. The stasis of inorganicism to which all life seeks to revert differs little from the stability of an imagined, perfect world. Ultimately, Freud abandons his *instinct toward perfection*, the view that there is a force "at work in human beings, which has brought them to their present high level of […] ethical sublimation and which may be expected to watch over their evolution into supermen" (50). Freud's musings led him to posit a circular developmental path whereby, in eliminating repression, society restores the satisfaction that existed before repression was originally imposed. Utopian desires like Mirbeau's may be informed by the death instinct, future goals modeled on an impulse to re-create an earlier state: "The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a

primary experience of satisfaction," as Freud writes (50-1). Mirbeau's novel therefore illustrates a familiar psychoanalytic theory – that man's most distant aspirations arise from his rootedness in a past toward which he forever is traveling back, and that his ideal of future happiness is determined by his history, by a need to return "to an earlier state of things," as Freud supposed.

In Mirbeau's novel, the prototype of the revolutionary utopian is Sébastien's school friend Bolorec, the revenge-hungry anarchist whose inchoate ideas of a world without injustice make him seem like a child. In the unintelligible letter he sends Sébastien, he writes cryptically, incoherently, alluding vaguely to the secret political meetings he attends, where discussion ranges over plans of hygienic terrorism. Both in its strategy and objectives, Bolorec's plan of violent action aims at realizing a nebulous utopian ideal, "une grand chose" (720) whose perfection comes from its indescribability. The circular course of the instincts that is described in Beyond the Pleasure Principle is the same as the path that Mibeau charts: from the happy inarticulateness of childhood unrepression to the inexpressible satisfaction experienced in an impossible utopia. Freud's idea of the movement toward biological complexity – from monocellular to multicellular – is reflected in Mirbeau's novel in the utopian ideal of cultural diversity, the aggregation of peoples no longer divided by nationalist hatred. But as Freud gave up the theory of the instinct toward perfection, Mirbeau concedes the impracticability of his vision of utopia.

At the end of Sébastien Roch, scenes of carnage and confusion replace the image of pastoral tranquillity with which the novel opened. There is no progression toward world harmony, no sense of the "ethical sublimation" that would mark man's evolution toward the status of a superman. Instead, the combat scenes recall Sébastien's suicidal

fantasies, his wish for dispersal, vaporization, disintegration into nothingness. The message Mirbeau sends is that one fashions an identity only by dismantling the counterfeit selves produced so that others can exploit them. Sébastien accession to subjecthood revealed the necessity of killing the narcissistic double that father Roch had sought to substitute for his son. Institutions that perverted the instinctual being found in nature created new simulacra: the diligent student, the obedient offspring, the dutiful citizen, the martyred soldier. To be free, the subject must exterminate these spurious personas whose purpose is to tolerate the abusive violence of their makers.

In Sébastien's quest for autonomy, he redirects his violence inward, so that emancipation from the enlaving roles assigned by fathers, teachers, and officers, is achievable by suicide, since the true self is a no one. Sébastien Roch is another of Mirbeau's texts that ends with images of burning, the hero's incineration and transformation into wind-borne ashes. Expressed before as a desire for *la volatilisation de tout son être*, his need to vanish from before Guy de Kerdaniel's withering gaze, Sébastien's wish for death had initially been a wish to blow away, "s'évaporer dans l'air comme une fumée," as Mirbeau writes (582).

At the end, his body torn by bullets, Sébastien recedes into the smoke, becoming, not a particle absorbed by the maternal universality of the world, but part of the choking condensation produced by battlefield destruction. When Sébastien disappears, it is not into the ocean's welcoming uterus. Instead, he fades into the muddle of shattered cannons, fallen corpses, disemboweled horses, screams dissolving into silence. Opposing the character's wish for the original quiescence of an object, for a time before the word had been divided from *la chose*, there is the opaqueness of an unnatural world ruled by chaos and injustice. Mirbeau ends the story of his hero's linguistic construction of the self

by stressing the obstruction of vision by smoke from smoldering corpses and burning houses. Powerless to show the horrible reality of the present, Mirbeau's text conveys impossible longings for a utopian ideal, where satisfaction empties mouths of words and fills them with the plenitude of things.

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