

## Fetishist Art in Mirbeau's *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*

Heir to the late 19<sup>th</sup>-century positivist tradition, Octave Mirbeau authored his most important works of fiction at a time when scientific theory seemed to have supplanted magic thinking. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud claims that humanity's evolution paralleled the development of the individual and that, having abandoned his earlier narcissistic position, man had achieved genuine psychological maturity. After progressing through the animistic and religious stages of thinking, mankind had embraced "the scientific view of the universe," which, Freud says, "no longer affords any room for human omnipotence" since men had "acknowledged their smallness and submitted resignedly to death and to the other necessities of nature" (88).

Identifying a phase in which "the ego is not master in its own house" (*New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* 1933), Freud proclaims, as Joel Whitebook says, that the "*decentration of the subject*" was "*a major step forward in the 'project of enlightenment'*" ("The Autonomous Individual" 105-6). But as Whitebook argues further, rather than relinquishing the view of a monarchic ego enthroned in the psyche, Freud's scientist still affirms the limitlessness of his intelligence and ability, regarding technology, instead of religion, as the instrument of world control. "*As technique,*" writes Whitebook, "*modern science, far from surmounting omnipotence, constitutes one of its major vehicles*" ("The Autonomous Individual" 108-9).

In his later novels like *Les Vingt et un jours d'un neurasthénique* (1901), Mirbeau derides the positivist science-god. Satirizing the megalomaniacal delusions of physician/wizards like Doctor Triceps and Fardeau-Fardet, Mirbeau mocks their aspirations to perfect diagnostic acuity, disproves their boasts about the infallible information yielded by x-ray technology. The iconoclastic aim of Mirbeau's mature works is evident in his caricatural representation of demiurgic surgeons and psychiatrists, in his deflation of the vatic pretensions of knowledge-traders like the self-styled gnostic, Weil-See in *La 628-E8* (1907). In these books, Mirbeau's goal is to restore the humility of the decentered subject, whose ignorance reopens the possibility of psychic growth, intellectual inquiry, and creative accomplishment.

Enacted in Mirbeau's most famous novel, *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900), is an attack on the ego whose claim to mastery in its house is countered by unconscious forces embodied in the chambermaid who also works there. Representing the fragmented state of a subject whose identity is in bits and pieces, the chambermaid figures the anarchic ego resistant to integration, an unstable self that still is susceptible to change and self-renewal.

Naturalism, whose sweeping epistemological goals were often the target of Mirbeau's satire, sought to achieve the same comprehensive explanatory clarity as did late 19<sup>th</sup>-century scientific discourse. Rejecting the imprecision of literature and art as systems of representation, the naturalists assumed a fundamentally defensive posture, displaying, as Cyndy Hendershot says, "the sense of inferiority experienced by non-scientists saturated with scientific terminology" (19). Disregarding evidence of their intellectual limitations and theoretical powerlessness, naturalist artists used science as a fetish that simultaneously enabled them to acknowledge and conceal the defectiveness of their methodology. Equating the health of society with the competence of the novelist/physician, Zola adopted the view of writing as a healing and reparative activity. Because he proposed to fix the social ills that were the subject of his book, the wounded author sought to cure himself through works that were an act of disavowal.

With its epic sweep, the globalizing breadth of its worldview, and the putative inerrancy of its objectivist approach, the *Rougon-Macquart* stands as the model of a literature aspiring to comprehensiveness. Opposing the existential desultoriness of experience, the fragmentation and disorderliness of the world, Zola proposes the naturalist text with its pretensions to synthesizing clarity. Denying the meaninglessness of life that it replaces with fiction's structured narrative, the naturalist desires to move outside of time, establishing a utopian state of integrity and harmony.

Unlike Zola's works, Mirbeau's novel is a self-dismantling device, a performance staged by a decentered subject who alternately acknowledges and blinds himself to the mechanisms of illusion. Laying out the heroine's own strategies of self-deception, *Le Journal d'une femme de*

chambre chronicles a series of losses, successive experiences of separation and exile from what Whitebook calls a “fusional utopia” (*Perversion and Utopia* 48). By taking the fetish as its central figure, Mirbeau’s novel diagnoses the pathological denial of castration which is the hallmark of naturalist art.

Different from the scientific ego that is master in its house, Célestine’s identity is informed by her vagrancy and marginality. Topologically suggested by her life of nomadic dereliction, Célestine is not a finished character but an unstable aggregate of situational personas, serial roles fashioned and discarded by her employers. Never having received the positive mirroring of a loving parent’s gaze, Célestine is starved of healthy narcissism and so is reduced to being a shattered reflection of her exploitative mistresses. Appreciative employers are rare in Célestine’s experience, so when she enters the service of an elderly mother of a frail, tubercular son, the woman’s goodness and consideration have a transfigurative effect: “Non seulement le miroir attesta que j’étais devenue subitement plus belle, mais mon coeur me cria que j’étais réellement meilleure,” as Célestine writes in her journal (149).

Daughter of a drowned Breton fisherman and his abusive, alcoholic widow, Célestine is the child of no one. Without an acceptable maternal imago on which to model her identity, Célestine – like her journal – is an epidodic, broken entity that is reassembled by her employers. As servants are prized for their obsequiousness and loyalty, valued for the psittacistic repetition of their master’s views, Célestine is stripped of her sense of self, robbed of her humanity, reshaped into “quelque chose d’intermédiaire entre un chien et un perroquet” (145).

Deriving its unity from the disconnectedness of its heroine’s self-narrative, Mirbeau’s novel defines art, not as an instrument of explanatory coherence, but as an expression of loss and a movement toward rediscovery. Revealing the dialectical interplay of dismantling and reconstruction, Mirbeau’s text respects the disorganization of the diary it claims to be based on. Since he refuses to dilute “la force triste” of the apochryphal servant’s manuscript, Mirbeau rejects the function of naturalist art as restorative and healing. Declining to change the story of a psychologically damaged, itinerant servant girl into his own seamless narrative, Mirbeau refrains from exchanging life’s complexity for “de la simple littérature” (29).

As Célestine’s career is structured as a series of arrivals and departures, work experiences ending with her gratuitous antagonism of employers, she defines her self and story as self-destructive apparatuses – incapable of adjustment, stability, or balance. Provoking the indignation of mistresses who banish her from their house, she disintegrates her narrative into a jumble of unrelated memories and personal observations. She subjects herself again and again to the trauma of disunion which, as Jean-François Rabain asserts, is at the heart of “le scénario fétichiste,” whose function is “de *dénier toute souffrance de séparation*” (1637).

Reconsecrated by Luis Bunuel’s celebrated film adaptation, the notorious episode involving the boot-fetishist, Monsieur Ravour, establishes in Mirbeau’s novel the centrality of the themes of castration, disfigurement, loss, and disavowal. Neat as a pin, impeccably dressed, polished like the environmental fetish of his house and furnishings (“astiqués à fond, cirés, vernis” [37]), Monsieur Ravour is a textbook example of a fetishist driven by mutilation anxiety. Unwilling, Freud says, to relinquish “his belief that women have a phallus” (“Fetishism” 64), Ravour replaces the missing body part with another having a similar shape and smell, exchanging the object for its covering, the foot for chambermaid’s “chers bottines.” Castration fears may be amplified by the prospect of losing the mother altogether, creating an absence filled by the servant with her versatile identity. Reestablishment of the dyadic mother/son relationship comes with Ravour’s positional submissiveness, his masochistic self-abasement: “Il s’agenouilla,” Célestine writes, “baisa mes bottines, les pétrit de ses doigts fébriles” (39). In Mirbeau’s brief scene, he suggests a colorful array of fetishist behaviors: fantasmatic stroking of the imaginary phallus, clitoral polishing of a maternal surrogate’s footwear, all mirrored by the obsessive self-sequestering of the old gentleman whose self-waxing masturbation occurs behind the closed door of his bedroom.

In order to alleviate the subject’s castration fears, he imagines reequipping the mother with the organ that she lacks. Restoration of the mother’s corporeal integrity intends a re-creation of the original indivisibility of the infant and the caregiver, his mouth and her breast. From this

perspective, the fetish acquires a deeper, earlier oral value, as a substitute, not for the absent phallus, but for the mother as an unavailable source of nurture. Citing Winnicott, Rabain argues that fetishism may represent “la persistance de l’usage d’un objet qui remonte à l’expérience infantile et qui est du domaine transitionnel universel.” For the fetishist, it is “le sein [qui] est donc potentiellement le ‘phallus maternel’” (1636).

Yet since every fetishistic act entails a splitting of the ego, acknowledgement of the castration that the subject simultaneously denies, Monsieur Ravour’s oral satisfaction is accompanied by an angry realization that satisfaction is impossible. Dental aggression offsets labial pleasure, as biting separates the fetishist from the object of oral merger. When Célestine discovers her employer dead of apoplexy in his bed, her boot is so firmly fixed in Ravour’s clenched teeth that she must use a razor in order to dislodge it.

If one adopts a more generalized definition, Mirbeau’s novel can be seen as universalizing the theme of fetishism as a defense against the pain of loss. Fears of abandonment and helplessness are the cause of fetishism as a mourning disorder, one which, as Rabain argues, “est moins lié à la menace de la castration par le père, qu’il n’est une organisation défensive liée à l’angoisse de perdre la mère” (1639). An apotropaic object, the fetish is utilized to protect against what Joseph Smith calls the “mourning of everyday life” (136). While psychologists like Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel have noted the relationship between perversion and aestheticism,<sup>1</sup> Mirbeau makes an important contribution by identifying the construction of the fetish as itself a creative act.

Compelled to endure a life of humiliation and homelessness, Célestine responds to her sense of fragmentation by writing a journal in which memory mends what experience has broken. Even as she mirrors her directionless existence in the episodic diary she faithfully writes, by remembering adversity and keeping her journal, Célestine gains control over events which had caused her unhappiness. As Freud notes, the compulsion to repeat unpleasurable experience redeems the person who was initially the victim of circumstance.<sup>2</sup> Authorship, for Célestine, empowers and elevates, transforming life’s servant into the master of her art.

From this standpoint, Célestine’s diary becomes itself a kind of fetish, masking the writer’s awareness of her professional subordination, enabling her to disavow her powerlessness and shame. Obligated to work under a succession of sexually predatory, abusive parent surrogates, she rejects her identity as a reflection of unloving mistresses in order to mirror herself in her journal as a whole and complete subject. As if corresponding to the fetishist’s fears of anatomical incompleteness, Célestine’s occupational fragmentation defines her as monstrous and subhuman: “quelqu’un de disparate, fabriqué de pièces et de morceaux qui ne peuvent s’ajuster l’un dans l’autre, se juxtaposer l’un à l’autre” (176). Originating nowhere, belonging nowhere, she is characterized by her anonymity, her undefinability, and lack. Identity formation becomes the inaugural creative act, a collaboration beginning when her employers rename her Marie, and ending when her suffocating role as a domestic provokes the insubordination that causes her dismissal.

Mirbeau’s chambermaid is always an interloper trespassing in the house where another’s ego is the master. In her writing and service, Célestine’s work is structured by building and destroying, authoring herself through the demolition of employers whose imposture and perversions her narrative unmasks. Each mistress is initially proposed as a worthy mother surrogate – disciplined, virtuous, principled, indulgent – then is exposed as a fraud who is cheap and self-degrading. Maternal desacralization repeats the experience of loss that Célestine undergoes every time she quits her job.

Extending the unacceptable truth of female castration, deidealization of the mother prompts recourse to the fetish as an object substituting for the missing body part or devalued person. Célestine herself exhibits a constellation of behaviors reminiscent of the male fetishist’s proclivities: attention to the feet, manipulation of undergarments important for their contiguity to the genitals, caressing of furs suggestive of pubic hair, handling of intimate apparel and accessories as symbolic replacements for the phallus, which the fetishist knows and does not know is non-existent. Célestine’s fetishistic ambivalence is motivated by a wish simultaneously to rehabilitate and defile the bad mother. Pleasure arises from the delusional conviction that silks, lace, adornments, and fragrances make the defective mistress whole, transforming the hateful impostor

into a genuine, loving mother. “J’aime,” Célestine writes, “à jouer avec les chemises de nuit, les chiffons et les rubans, tripoter les lingerie, les chapeaux, les dentelles, les fourrures, frotter mes maîtresses après le bain, les poudrer, poncer leurs pieds, parfumer leurs poitrines, oxygéner leurs chevelures, les connaître, enfin” (64).

The women whose bodies Célestine beautifies also have characters that she sullies. Célestine’s fetishism is accompanied by anal aggression that reemerges with the truth she endeavors to bury. Tactile and olfactory stimuli – satiny lingerie, bottles of perfume – are offset by evidence of decay and the stench of corruption, as undressing the mistress becomes an act that sanctifies and profanes. The knowledge that Célestine acquires does not bring a sense of confidence or mastery, only the coprophilic satisfaction of exposing the filth underneath.

As Mirbeau’s heroine is constantly engaged in building and tearing down a succession of functional personas, she also participates in the hieratic worship of women whose falseness she takes pleasure in uncovering. Feelings of disillusionment and betrayal explain why Célestine associates her self-exalting mistresses with images of poison, feces, putridity, and necrosis. Since loveliness, generosity, integrality, and protectiveness are symbolic of the phallus she discovers is missing, the consoling fiction she tells herself is a lie replaced by the text of revenge.

Mirbeau’s novel is filled with similar incidents of cheating, trickery, and stagecraft, representations of people and things purporting to be undamaged or complete, and that are subsequently shown to be disfigured and unclean. The presumption of connubial complementarity – of husbands and wives as two halves of a whole – is contradicted by the conjugal defaulting of both the Lanlaire, the couple who, in the novel, are Célestine’s primary employers. Suffering from some unspecified sexual dysfunction or genital abnormality, Madame Lanlaire abstains from her spousal duties. And when she asks her confessor “si elle pouvait *tricher* avec son mari” (61), she is forbidden to have recourse to oral or manual stimulation unless she contributes to the upkeep of the altar of the Virgin.

Indeed, the plenitude of heterosexual genitality as the foundation of marital bliss is the first illusion that Célestine’s experience dispels. Unable to see that she is a fetishist like Rabout, Célestine fails to recognize the creativity of perversion. Wondering why people depend on prostheses, sexual aids, masturbation instruments, leather boots, decontextualized part-objects as substitutes for whole people, she asks: “Et où vont-ils chercher toutes leurs imaginations, quand c’est si simple, quand c’est si bon de s’aimer gentiment... comme tout le monde...” (40).

Of course, Célestine’s disingenuous question ignores the fact that normality impoverishes while deviancy enriches, offering a plethora of improvisational possibility. Throughout the novel, Mirbeau mounts a multi-pronged attack on political conservatism and sexual convention, decrying the myth of utopian stability, the immutability of things deemed unchangeable and perfect. Indisputable like laws governing a harmonious world, the formula for healthy sex diminishes what it standardizes. In Mirbeau’s novel, creativity and pleasure are derived from using substitutes, resituating objects in unfamiliar settings, breaking what is whole and reassembling the pieces.

The instability of the fetish comes from the fact that it is portable, susceptible to recontextualization in unlimited new ways. In an adumbration of Mirbeau’s panegyric to the automobile, Célestine’s journal, while documenting the mobility of the writer, shows how metonymy and movement redefine the object and its user. Mirbeau first literalizes the fetish by equating it with the phallus, then metaphorizes it by setting it in incongruous positions. As a symbol of the subject’s prerogative to symbolize, the movable phallus represents the freedom to reinterpret. The consummate anarchist act is the subversion of institutional definitions, castration of those who wield the power to legislate and enforce meaning.

In a colorful anecdote, Célestine recounts a train trip taken with her mistress, a journey interrupted by a rigorous customs inspection. Foreshadowing [La 628-E8](#) and Mirbeau’s reflection on the topological symbolism of *la douane*, this episode [explores](#) the policing of body boundaries, the skin of national frontiers where crossing points are orifices, sites of commodity or sexual interchange. At the bottom of an expensive trunk covered “en peau de truie” (the container analogue of the physical person of its owner), the customs officer finds a velvet jewel case nestled in a bed of lingerie. Confirmation of the functional castration of the husband, the jewel case holds a dildo

whose existence is inadmissible, evidence of the usurpation of man's signifying power by the wife who, fetishistically, is restored to autonomy and wholeness.

A first utterance in the *lingua franca* whose meaning is universally accessible, the phallic woman is like a magic word combining expression and significance. Lacking nothing, she crosses borders, punctures surfaces, transgresses limits. Circulating freely, she is universal currency, a ubiquitous sign of the perfection of pre-oedipal indivisibility. Yet since the fetish must negate the secret it affirms, the woman cannot say that she has the power to say everything and so is reduced to being violated by the *douanier's* rough hands, as he reconverts the talisman into another *bijou indiscret*. Mobile, complete, unbounded by national identity, the uncastrated female traveler is the potential founder of utopia. But the *version intégrale* of unexpurgated female narrative proves to be a fake whose true creator is Mirbeau, the male author. The dildo-wielding woman is reappropriated by male readers, whose interpretation makes whole the mutilated text. "Fallait le dire que vous étiez veuve," the agent scoffs (131).

Yet even if idealism is delusional and paradise is a hoax, the impulse to establish one inspires every artistic undertaking. Destruction is the precondition to each fresh creative enterprise. Indeed, Mirbeau's novel is structured by the repeated need to discredit myths of immutability and completeness. Nation, social class, gender, religion: all issue from systems of explanatory synthesis yet are only fetishistic disavowals of people's vulnerability and separateness.

The other portable phallus showcased in Célestine's diary is the detached member of a priapic gargoyle that falls off the church of Port-Lançon. Framed by a keenly observant, erudite commentary on the building's architectural history, Célestine's story is itself an incongruous bit of narrative – its significance affected by disconnection from its surroundings. Conveyed in the tale of the movable stone phallus is the issue of the transferability of interpretive power. It is castration that encourages the creative hermeneutic response, both in the removal of the erect member of the leering demon overlooking the sanctuary, and in the unwriting of the symbolic text that originally covered the building. Once adorned with a Rabelaisian display of allegorically ribald figures, vagrant saints, and hybrid monsters, the church is a palimpsest scratched clean by erosion and vandalism. Scandalized by the devil's granite tumescence, the deacon, with hammer in hand, had broken off the offending organ which had fallen onto a pathway where a devout parishioner had discovered it. Mistaking it for a sacred object, she had enshrined it in her home, erecting a makeshift altar flanked by vases filled with artificial flowers, laying it on a red velvet pillow, so that the reliquary case succeeds the dildo box as a container of the talismanic signifier. As is suggested by Célestine's account, the paternal phallus leaves everyone mute, inspiring awe or disgust so intense that its enormity strikes witnesses dumb. Yet when taken out of its context, it loses none of its iconic or magical power, but confers on possessors a new eloquence with which they express its personal meaning.

Throughout Mirbeau's novel there is a rich array of precariously full communicative instruments, comprehensive systems of explanatory exegesis – from the original stone grimoire covering the Port-Lançon Church, the hate-filled nationalist ideology embraced by Joseph and his anti-Semitic brethren, to the Lanlaires' hyper-cathected collection of silver plate, including the 25,000-franc Louis XVI cruet stand, also kept in a chest lined with "velours rouge" (237), material fetishized because of its contiguity with objects of power. Dazzled by the brilliance of its incontrovertible meaning, Mirbeau's character is frozen in a position of unquestioning adoration. A functionally castrated reader, he is cut off from interpretive freedom, since meaning resides in things that dictate their method of use.

In her journal, Célestine describes the transfixed wonderment elicited by the spectacle of the total object. Yet every time perfection is embodied, its meretriciousness is revealed, and it is identified as just another illusion of the phallic mother. Practiced in the art of emasculating demystification, Célestine is expert in exposing the fatuousness of self-exalting males. But in the presence of Joseph, she is left pensive and disarmed, aroused by the scent of his brutishness and violence, "une sorte d'atmosphère sexuelle, âcre, terrible ou grisante, dont certaines femmes subissent, même malgré elles, la forte hantise" (187). More than his hairy chest and oxlike neck, it is Joseph's impenetrability that Célestine responds to. Accustomed to undressing mistresses of their

virtuous façade, she also unmask men who pose as confident sexual conquerors. Infirm by insecurity or conceit, they are inept Lotharios, ineffectual Don Juans – endearing, sickly babies like the consumptive Monsieur Georges or hirsute buffoons like the fumbling Lanlaire.

Impervious to Célestine's sexual blandishments, Joseph is different from other men. Despite his hyperbolic masculinity, Joseph does not resort to seduction's empty rhetoric. It is because Joseph does not speak that his identity remains a mystery. Like the customs officer who insists that the woman open up her jewel box, Célestine is driven by a need to experience visual certainty. Possessing "cette auréole de mystère, ce prestige de l'inconnu" (193), Joseph retains the majesty of the uncastrated male – hard, unreadable, unfeeling, self-sufficient. Célestine's curiosity effects an exchange of gender roles, as Joseph becomes the virgin whom the woman cannot penetrate, the unviolated thing one fears and wishes to unlock: "Il doit posséder de nombreux secrets," as Célestine surmises, "mais il les cache jalousement [...] comme on renferme des trésors dans un coffre de fer, armé de barres solides et de mystérieux verrous" (193-4).

Unwilling to accept her excluded subjectivity, Célestine reverts to her customary practice of reading as *déshabillage*. For her, knowledge is acquired by invading private spaces, rifling through personal articles kept in a dressing room or boudoir, handling the fetish that hides the user's incompleteness. "Je soupirais après les armoires, pleines de linge odorantes, les garde-robes où bouffent les taffetas, où craquent les satins" (267). Yet time elapses, and Joseph becomes no more familiar or approachable, only adding to the mystery of the esoteric text of his identity.

In a typically Mirbellian characterization of women's sanguinary prurience, he shows Célestine enflamed by the thought of Joseph's criminality, intrigued by the belief that he is the mysterious assailant who raped, mutilated, and killed a 12-year old girl. Violence only adds to the luster of Célestine's image of Joseph as the integral male who is destructive without motivation. Yet in Joseph's sadistic exsanguination of ducks slaughtered for dinner, in his evisceration of a child, in his strident anti-Semitism, he shows himself to be susceptible to the same castration fears that inspire a longing for utopia. Joseph's strategy for obviating threats of dismemberment and loss is preemptive and repetitive, reinflicting wounds on the bodies of those already wounded. Joseph masters his horror of female castration by making a second cut, by becoming the agent of mutilation and not its helpless discoverer. He blocks his anxious identification with victims by victimizing them again in a manner he controls. The vaginal opening in "la petit Claire" is mirrored by the gash that Joseph makes on the "petit ventre ouvert d'un coup de couteau" (178).

It is significant that the targets of Joseph's hostility and aggression display weaknesses that he projectively assigns to his own person: breaches in the skin, exclusion from the social body, consignment to the outer world of the poor, the Jews, the children. The enemy, as Jerrold Post observes, "is an object that is available to serve as a reservoir for all the negated aspects of the self" (28). Joseph's fantasy is to establish a utopian microcosm in the autarchy of the Cherbourg café, where provision of food and drink ensures the acquisition of food and drink, where servants become proprietors who rule over a stable, structured world. The mistress is valued less for her anarchic sexuality than for her ability to bring in customers, promote business, and increase profit. For Joseph, Célestine represents an incompleteness that completes. "Vous êtes une bonne femme, Célestine... une femme d'ordre," as he says (287).

Joseph's antipathy for Jews comes from a similar desire to personally injure those whom circumstance has injured. Perpetrating acts of redundant aggression, Joseph castrates the child castrated by her gender, seeks to cast out the Jew whom society has marginalized. Joseph's anti-Semitism derives from a view of the nation, not as a fusional utopia, not as a place of incorporative assimilation that turns outsiders into citizens. Joseph's homeland is not the good mother that feeds, forgives, and shelters, but a woman vulnerable to attacks like those that Joseph commits himself. Already defiled by the unwise hospitality she offers itinerant cosmopolitans, interlopers unrooted in her nurturing soil, France is the polluted mother who must be revirginized. The utopian ideal toward which the fetishist is striving is patterned on an original world of stability and satisfaction. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century positivist's emphasis on progress and improvement masks an underlying, regressive orientation toward infantilism. The quest for an ideal world maps a journey toward a maternal Eden. As Freud says, the goal of life "must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living

entity has [...] departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 45).

In his image of the nation as telluric mother, Joseph hypostatizes France as the uncastrated woman whose integrity is protected by devoted, watchful children, their vigilance ensuring they are spared the trauma of mutilation. The incision Joseph makes reflects Claire’s genital incompleteness, as disembowelment repeats castration, and the guilty child is punished twice. Circumcised, despised Jews are metonymized as “bouts coupés” (137), inciting the same defensive rage in Joseph as do girls. Inured to the experience of loss, cut off from the mother and her bounty, Jews are starvelings and pariahs relegated to the outside. The fate the Jew has chosen is the fate imposed on him by anti-Semites, so that the stereotypical vagabond, the citizen of nowhere, is obliged to relive forever the journey from homecoming to banishment – like Dreyfus shuttling back and forth between France and Devil’s Island. Mirroring himself in the disadvantaged and excluded, Joseph identifies the handicap from which the downtrodden are suffering and then reinflicts the same wound so that it not be done to him.

Regarding Joseph as a paradigm of close-mindedness and bigotry, Célestine transforms Joseph’s meaninglessness into a rich source of conjecture. She disavows the reality of Joseph as blank page and substitutes the fetish of her fascinated speculation. Where there is nothing, Célestine creates her hypotheses as works of art. Reverting to her customary hermeneutic practice, she endeavors to read Joseph as his secret places and private articles. Like her mistresses’ dressing rooms, their armoires stuffed with taffetas and silks – like their countertops arrayed with peroxyde and perfumes – Joseph is his room, synechdochic evidence hidden in a drawer. But after she searches through his quarters, the emptiness of his personal space extends to Célestine’s description. Unspeaking like its absent occupant, the room communicates its impersonal blandness to the neutrality of Célestine’s inventory of Joseph’s personal effects: the portrait of Déroulède, the ordinary devotional bric-a-brac, the drawers containing seed packages, floor polishing ingredients, and dormouse traps. Not a coy, flirtatious woman who exhibits and then conceals, Joseph’s room is public space that is accessible to anyone: “Les clés sont sur les meubles et sur les placards; pas un tiroir n’est fermé” (294).

The more absolute the vacancy, the more paralyzing the castration threat, the more urgent is the need to substitute the fetish. In Joseph’s room, things are stripped of their signifying power or are reduced to the banality of their functional use value. Joseph’s bed is where he sleeps; his closet is where he keeps his shoes: “Joseph communique à tout ce qu’il touche son impénétrabilité... Les objets qu’il possède sont muets, comme sa bouche, intraversables comme ses yeux” (295).

Like the fetishist who, in responding to the reality of maternal castration, creates an illusion that consoles, Célestine converts experience into narrative. As his interpreter, Célestine transvalues Joseph’s nothingness into everything, conferring on him the magical properties of the fetish as an object of veneration. After she accuses Joseph of killing Claire, he kisses Célestine violently: “Je me souviens avoir vu, dans un petit salon, chez la comtesse Fardin, une sorte d’idole hindoue, d’une grande beauté horrible et neutrière... Joseph, à ce moment, lui ressemblait...” as Célestine writes” (377).

Like a merciless god, Joseph destroys without reason, displaying the capricious cruelty of a being answerable to no one. *Monstre sacré*, he perpetrates abominations whose enormity situates him outside the purview of laws, police, and prisons. Célestine tries to reason that Joseph’s theft of the Lanlares’ silver is meant to rectify the injustice done by the powerful to the weak. But the virulence of his anti-Semitism, the brutality of his child murder elevate his violence to the level of the metaphysical. Not emasculated by the littleness of protocols and rules, Joseph is a whole man uncompromised and undomesticated by society. His crime, says Célestine, “a quelque chose de violent, de solennel, de justicier, de religieux,” which, while appalling, still inspires in her a certain admiration (372). A retributive Yahweh, Joseph is the oedipal father who castrates his male children. Assuming the filial role in her relationship with Joseph, Célestine entertains desires that are incestuous and sacrilegious.

An explanatory instrument that illumines Joseph’s mystery, Célestine’s journal becomes a fetish that repairs the injury it denies. Two halves of a defective whole, the couple mirror one

another, using their complementary fit to ease the pain of separation – “puisque nos deux âmes sont pareilles,” as Joseph proclaims (377). Joseph, the inscrutable, the unspeaking, and unmutated is reflected in the journal into which he is incorporated. The diary/fetish therefore “represents the paternal phallus, which,” as George Zavitzjanos writes in a controversial affirmation applicable to Mirbeau’s heroine, “is a woman’s ego ideal” (424).

One can argue that Mirbeau’s anarchism is the political expression of his interest in freeing things to signify in new ways. Decontextualized, the fetish loses its limiting use value – so that the boot no longer serves as just a covering for the foot, and the journal no longer simply records the perfunctoriness of daily life. The nineteenth century witnessed the triumph of an impoverishing utilitarianism that defined “the property relationship between people and their possessions [as] primarily one of Cartesian rationality,” as Russell Belk has argued (17). Pragmatist materialism consecrated the belief in the object’s functionality, its specific use and purpose. But even in the phenomenon of collecting, objects acquired a fetishistic value, counteracting what Max Weber described as science’s “Disenchantment of the world” (qtd. in Belk 17).

Since fetishism reinvests objects with their original magic properties, the first creative act is to resituate the object, reenacting the loss accompanying the thing’s disconnection from its purpose. Art’s foundational moment restages the destructive gesture of the anarchist, who dismantles the totalitarian systems that mass-produce consumers for whom meanings are always standardized, unquestionable, and changeless.

In Mirbeau’s novel, identity is destabilized and intersubjectivity is renegotiated: Célestine is not Célestine when she enters the service of an employer who, in response to onomastic fetishism, insists on renaming her Marie. A caricatural pastiche of the mistresses she despises, Célestine fashions a new self from the debris of her obsolete personas. This patchwork identity is reproduced and objectified on paper, in a diary assembled from stationery stolen from different women. Pieces of Célestine, “tantôt rose, tantôt bleu pâle” (33), make up a colorful collage of transient attitudes and self-images, forming the *quelqu’un de disparate* that is the essence of the domestic. Like the unintegrated state of the infant before he undergoes the mirror stage, Mirbeau’s novel and his heroine’s narrative describe no discernable story arc, have no teleological direction, achieve no explanatory dénouement. Another anarchist subversion of science’s claim to synthesizing unity, the text is an impressionistic farrago of reminiscence and social commentary, “une juxtaposition de souvenirs pêle-mêle,” writes Pierre Michel, “[qui] ne présente ni cohérence, ni continuité, et reste ouvert sur un futur incertain, ce qui convient admirablement à une vision non-finalisante de l’univers” (349).

Mirbeau’s rejection of utopia as an ordered, stable world reflects his aversion for any fiction supplying sense and resolution. Metaphorizing literature as a vast digestive apparatus – consuming unintelligible events, expelling explanatory narrative – Mirbeau ridicules le capitaine Mauger as the anxious omnivor who manages his fear of the adventitious and unknown by trying to eat everything, including ferrets and rare birds. Unlike Mauger’s alimentary model which processes and assimilates, Mirbeau’s novel repeats the breaking up of unrelated but constituent episodes. If the future is a mirage of stagnant happiness and harmony, the present is the terrorist’s bomb exploding the illusion of a balanced self, destroying the safe place that it should occupy in a world of clarity and reason. Only the past supplies the building blocks of identity as narrative, remnants of a life left over from self-deception and forgetting.

Once Célestine stops getting letters from acquaintances in Paris – fresh mnemonic fragments collected and sent to her by others – she is exiled to a dormant time of monotony and solitude, in which the snoring of the Lanlaire’s scullery maid conveys “les écoeulements du présent.” But when, like the portable phallus, her memories are arranged in new configurations, they are revitalized and enriched, potentially signifying anything. Alone in her room, Célestine disintegrates her past, “afin de reconstituer avec ses morceaux épars l’illusion d’un avenir” (144).

Mirbeau therefore makes a link between decontextualization and fetishism, as both liberate the object from its consensually ratified meaning. The perceived reality of the mother’s genital defectiveness is superseded by the subject’s need to assert his invulnerability to castration. Since truth is subordinated to disavowal and desire, the fetish object is separated from its recognized use

value, invested by the subject with talismanic power. Dispelling the myth that meaning actually inheres in things themselves, fetishism takes away the prerogative to interpret from a controlling collectivity and restores it to the creative individual.

The ruling class, insisting that everything belongs in its own place, asserts the tautological evidence of majority opinion. Masters tell the truth because their power makes it so, and Joseph thinks that people who give false testimony against Dreyfus rehabilitate their lies by the justice of their cause. As with the infant who hallucinates the absent mother's breast, the fetishist who adopts an object as a defense against castration, the artist produces images as the manufacture of illusion. When things again can signify whatever people wish they signify, the world is delivered of "possession rationality" and objects are "remystified," reendowed with magic power (Belk 19).

Mirbeau's political and aesthetic aims seem to dovetail in this endeavor, as governments are targeted as oppressive meaning-giving entities. The underclass is denied the right to narrate and interpret, the disadvantaged forbidden to speak against the wealthy who exploit them. As a justice of the peace points out to Célestine: "Que deviendrait la société si un domestique pouvait avoir raison d'un maître?... Il n'y aurait plus de société, Mademoiselle... ce serait l'anarchie..." (261-2).

Capitalism's economic psychology that prescribes how things are used, science's totalitarian epistemology that defines what things must mean are the underpinnings of the system that the anarchist attacks. With its ambitious program of sexual, semiotic, and political subversion, Le Journal d'une femme de chambre aims to break down existing structures and recreate an earlier state of disorganization and ambiguity. Society can be freed of the rigidity of hierarchy when the discourse of the powerful can be contradicted by a chambermaid. In his novel, Mirbeau challenges the ideology of plutocrats and gnosticrats who defend a society founded on an illusory plenitude and changelessness.

Whereas, for fetishists, castration fears motivate creation of the object, for scientists, aristocrats, and government officials, the fear of loss militates against production of the art work. Seeking to return the world to its original disordered statelessness, the anarchist disengages people from the convictions that imprison them. Of course, as Zola's *Souvarine*, another anarchist, remarks, workers like the lottery-winning hatmakers from Marseille want nothing more than to join the middle class they claimed to hate.<sup>3</sup>

Mirbeau's novel ends by undermining the principle of closure, disproving that the successful are entitled to have the last word. Now a sexy café hostess whose *décolletage* draws in customers, Célestine becomes a bourgeoisie who disparages her servants. Decontextualized, the silver service stolen from the Lanlaires destroys the identity of one privileged couple in order to shape the identity of another one. Joseph's blank inscrutability gives way to dapper self-assurance, but he is still the unknowable other who had always fascinated Célestine: "Jamais je ne saurai rien de Joseph," as she writes, "jamais je ne connaîtrai le mystère de sa vie... Et c'est peut-être cet inconnu qui m'attache tant à lui" (383).

Signifying the emptiness that fetishes conceal, Joseph represents the uncertainty that motivates creation. Lost convictions, like anxiety caused by the prospect of castration, occasion recourse to every work of art denying nescience and death. The rich man and the scientist may pose as masters of the universe, but they are susceptible to contradiction by terrorists and servants. Repeatedly exposing the shocking reality of castration, Mirbeau's anarchistic text restores the disorder of existence. Toppling governments, dismantling systems that purport to explain and reassure, Mirbeau's goal is the *tabula rasa*, the self-unwriting novel. Like the empty page on which incongruous images combine, on which fetishist illusion dispels the evidence of reality, the velvet bed is where a gargoyle penis becomes the relic of a saint.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See Chasseguet-Smirgel's chapter on "Aestheticism, Creation and Perversion" in Creativity and Perversion (New York: Norton, 1984), 89-100.

<sup>2</sup>The re-experiencing of traumatic events, in dream or in the imagination, allows the subject to move from “a *passive* situation,” in which he was “overpowered by the experience,” to a position in which he can take “an *active* part. These efforts,” writes Freud, “might be put down to an instinct for mastery that was acting independently of whether the memory was in itself pleasurable or not” (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 15).

<sup>3</sup>“Comprends-tu ça, toi,” asks Souvarine, “ces ouvriers chapeliers de Marseille qui ont gagné le gros lot de cent milles francs, et qui, tout de suite, ont acheté de la rente, en déclarant qu’ils allaient vivre sans rien faire!... Oui, c’est votre idée, à vous tous, les ouvriers français, déterrer un trésor, pour le manger seul ensuite, dans un coin d’égotisme et de fainéantise [...] Jamais vous ne serez dignes du bonheur, tant que vous aurez quelque chose à vous, et que votre haine des bourgeois viendra uniquement de votre besoin enragé d’être des bourgeois à leur place” (419).

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