

---

Robert Ziegler. *The Nothing Machine: The Fiction of Octave Mirbeau*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 250p.

BARBARA PETROSKY  
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH AT JOHNSTOWN

Octave Mirbeau (1848-1917) was very different from the Decadent writers of his time because he rejected their ideas of preservation, mummification, and love for the past. In this in-depth and intelligently written study of the fiction of Mirbeau, Robert Ziegler uses the image of the machine and explains that the fiction of Mirbeau is perceived as a “Nothing Machine” which creates a fragmented writing directed toward the future. Ziegler’s essay is divided into three parts titled The Statue, The Matrix, and The Nothing Machine. His essays include a summary of each novel and a psychoanalytical study of their main characters.

The first part of the essay, which analyzes the works of Mirbeau in chronological order, looks at *Le Calvaire*, *L’Abbé Jules*, and *Sébastien Roch*. In the novel *Le Calvaire* (1886), Mirbeau’s portrayal of women in general and especially the mother gives to his work a misogynistic element. Mirbeau’s anarchism, a fundamental part of both his life and his writing, is already here present, though it will be more so in the following novels. The second novel Ziegler discusses is *L’Abbé Jules* (1887). The main character of this novel is Jules, an abbot, who is an anarchist and who is compared to a disease by the people living in his town. According to Ziegler, Mirbeau puts forth in this novel what would be a principal element of his philosophy: that the best writer is the one whose work is lost forever, and the greatest book is the one which is lost and never reaches the readers. In the third novel of this first part titled *Sébastien Roch* (1888), Mirbeau depicts a solitary boy who lost his mother at birth and who has a very difficult relationship with his father. Having been sent to a Jesuit school, Sébastien is seduced by the evil Père de Kern who rapes him. Like Mirbeau’s other early heroes Sébastien is an unproductive artist. The novel ends with Sébastien’s death, which Ziegler sees as Mirbeau’s message that in order to be free a character must act like a “Nothing Machine,” destroying his fake personas.

Part II addresses four novels, *Dans le ciel*, *Un Gentilhomme*—both published after the death of Mirbeau—*Le Jardin des supplices*, and *Journal d’une femme de chambre*. *Dans le ciel* (1893) discusses the inability of the artist to bring a creative project to fruition and ends with one of the main characters, inspired by Monet, cutting his own hand in despair. Ziegler looks at Mirbeau’s idea that an image can never be adequately communicated. Ziegler then studies *Un Gentilhomme* (1920) an unfinished work inspired by Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. The subject of the story is the artwork’s incompleteness. The main character Varnat, is a poor artist who becomes the secretary of an aristocrat in order to survive much the same way Mirbeau did

---

when he was himself a younger man. Ziegler continues in this chapter his in-depth study of Mirbeau's characters and describes Varnat as Mirbeau's first ancillary character who discovers his employer's perversions and misdeeds. *Un Gentilhomme* clarifies the central idea of Mirbeau's philosophy, that the human subject is very complex and the only way to describe it is to portray him in a *texte inachevé*. According to Mirbeau, excrement and literature should be valued as fertilizer that brings a new beginning. For the anarchist Mirbeau, destruction is never a conclusion; on the contrary, it can be the impetus for a new beginning. This idea of life emerging from death is present in Mirbeau's next novel, *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899). In this novel, the torture represents the anarchist's purification of a rotten society. In his study of *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900) Ziegler concentrates on the idea of the demystification of institutions. He also looks at Mirbeau's distaste for and criticism of Naturalism. Ziegler does point out that Mirbeau, despite his rejection of the movement of Naturalism, admired Zola as a political figure. In his discussion of *Célestine*, Ziegler is interested in the idea that the maid is not a finished character but an accumulation of different personas.

In the last part of his essay Ziegler studies Mirbeau's last novels, *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*, *La 628-E8*, and *Dingo*. The critic explains that by 1901, Mirbeau was a very rich and famous writer in France. In *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique*, published the same year, Mirbeau starts to subordinate his story's message to the dynamics of its relation. This idea is present in his two last novels, *La 628-E8* (1907) and *Dingo* (1913). *La 628-E8* is centered on the narrator's automobile. In this more scientific text, Mirbeau abandons characters and plot, and examines scientific topics such as density and velocity. When he wrote his last novel, *Dingo*, Mirbeau was sick and needed the help of a secretary to finish it. This novel evokes a dog, a wild creature whose only preoccupations are to kill and to feed. As in his previous novel about cars, Ziegler explains that this novel shows the disappearance of the narrator and the emergence of a non-human protagonist. The critic cleverly connects this vanishing of the narrator to Mirbeau's declining health and approaching death.

According to Ziegler, Mirbeau can be viewed as a writer ahead of his time in particular regarding his ideas on pollution and ecology. *The Nothing Machine: The Fiction of Octave Mirbeau* is a well-developed and comprehensive psychoanalytical study of Mirbeau's novels. Ziegler aims to bring to the reader a better understanding of the main idea present in Mirbeau's works which is that there is a fecundity to be found in death and that the waste should not be wasted. ✱