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A Loser: Octave Mirbeau's Evolution from Populist Right to Libertarian Left

"All I had to do was to say no."¹

Abstract

This paper is centred on the political turning-point in the life of Octave Mirbeau, best known as an anarchist journalist, novelist and playwright. Mirbeau's first political affiliation was to Bonapartism (in the 1870s). In the early 1880s he appeared to be growing closer to some of the ideas of the New Right, and in particular wrote some anti-Semitic material. However, in the period 1883–87 he moved to a clear commitment to anarchism. This paper analyses the multidimensional nature of this turning point, at once cultural, aesthetic, personal and political, and considers the nature of Mirbeau's anarchism. The most important aspect seems to have been anarchism's openness to the themes of aesthetic freedom and experimentation.

Keywords: *Mirbeau, anarchism, aesthetics, Bonapartism, Impressionism, anti-Semitism*

Introduction

Octave Mirbeau (1848–1917) has been remembered in at least three different ways. Firstly, as a prominent defender of the Dreyfusard cause in the 1890s, for which he contributed a stream of powerfully eloquent articles and speeches.² Secondly, as a type of proto-surrealist: Mirbeau was the author of the *Journal d'une femme de chambre* (The Diary of a Chambermaid), the novel which provided the plot for Luis Buñuel's celebrated film of the same name. Lastly, he has achieved a type of notoriety for his bizarre and disturbing novel, *Le Jardin des supplices* (The Torture Garden), often understood as an example of sado-masochistic pornography but probably intended as a type of political metaphor,

1 Octave Mirbeau: Un Raté, in: Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet (eds.): *Contes Cruels*: Tome II, Paris 1990, pp. 423–428.

2 Octave Mirbeau/Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet (eds.): *L'Affaire Dreyfus*, Paris 1991.

a sort of fore-runner of Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*.³ These three quite different images suggest a host of political identities, from a generous libertarian republican humanism, through a deliberately confrontational anarchism, highlighting the sexual and social hypocrisy of French society, to some form of political decadence. Mirbeau is undoubtedly a figure who is difficult to classify politically. From the mid-1880s, however, he demonstrated a sustained commitment to anarchism, which can be seen in his close friendship with figures such as Camille Pissarro and Jean Grave, and his consistent participation in and support for the anarchist press. He produced essays such as *La Grève des Electeurs* (The Voters' Strike, 1888), and successful plays such as the anti-capitalist *Les affaires sont les affaires* (Business is Business, 1903) and *Le Foyer* (The Hearth, 1908), a critique of charitable institutions. He sprang to the defence of marginalised figures such as Paul Robin (a libertarian educationalist) and Oscar Wilde. But alongside this anarchist tendency, Mirbeau kept close connections with other political currents: he admired both the socialist Jean Jaurès and the republican Georges Clemenceau for their activism during the Dreyfus Affair, and expressed sympathy for their political initiatives in the years that followed. Rather than agonising over Mirbeau's precise political identity, it is probably more useful to remember the context within which he worked. Coherent political parties were slow to develop in France (arguably, the first modern political party was not formed until 1901). The rise of the labour movement, the invention of modern anti-Semitism, the creation of the New Right, and the political polarisation created by the over-riding Republican drive to introduce anti-clerical measures were all factors which distorted and tangled forms of political commitment in France: for these reasons, Mirbeau's shifting and eclectic political commitments could well be seen as typical of his time rather than as exceptional. He could be compared with contemporaries such as Georges Sorel, Victor Serge and William Morris whose political trajectories also traverse the neat lines subsequently drawn out by political parties. Mirbeau's writing was as varied as his political passions: he wrote political journalism, artistic commentaries, travel-writing, book reviews, plays, short stories and novels. Sometimes his journalism reads like short stories, sometimes his tales read like newspaper articles.

In this contribution I will concentrate on a particular episode in Mirbeau's life: his political and personal crisis in the mid-1880s, when he broke with the right-wing groups that he had worked for, and espoused a new political independence. To understand this turning point fully, I will first sketch some details of his early life.

3 On Mirbeau's political values, see Sharif Gemie: Octave Mirbeau and the Changing Nature of Right-Wing Political Culture, in: *International Review of Social History* 43 (1998), pp. 111–135.

A Loser

One of the first short stories which Mirbeau published under his real name was entitled *A Loser* (Un Raté), first published in June 1882. The tale was clearly autobiographical: it described the life of literary hack, a member of the cultural proletariat. Such figures were notorious in the underworld of French literature, and originated with the slow emergence of a public sphere in France in the eighteenth century.⁴ Writers as celebrated as Balzac and Diderot began their careers in this manner, writing for whoever would pay them, and usually paid by the line. In a precarious financial position, they were unable to argue with their literary bosses. This type of work imposed anonymity on the hack writer: firstly, in the obvious sense that the writer's works were never published under his real name but, secondly, in a deeper sense that the writer gained no proper identity from their labours. The first words in Mirbeau's tale are: "Where did he come from? Who were his family?" This literary proletarian had lost his cultural, political and biological roots and seemed simply to drift through French culture.

A Loser also seems to suggest a solution to the hack's dilemma: "All I had to do was to say no". Saying no, however, while pushed down into a subordinate position was difficult. In Mirbeau's story, the hack can see that he has not succeeded, that there was no possibility of his success and that the success of others was based on his constant subordination. It was easy to realise that the structures of the literary world and its great names were exploiting him: it was far more difficult to say no to them.

In his own life, Mirbeau tried to say no several times. But his ideas were confused and contradictory, and his attempts to gain his autonomy were easily stifled. It seems likely that his quick sympathy for the exploited and his keen sensitivity for the difficulties felt by those ordinary people who lived in the shadows dates from this period.

Mirbeau's first writing was hack work for right-wing political parties: often for Bonapartists, but also for conservative monarchists and sometimes for the new right-wing radicals. The views he expressed in these texts were, of course, not chosen by him freely: yet he was allowed a degree of autonomy in the manner in which he framed his employer's views, and one can see some consistent themes emerging – themes which sometimes even continue into his later works. In this essay, I will consider Mirbeau's early writing at face value: even if they do not reveal *his* real ideas, they still express ideas in a coherent manner, and they suggest his political attitudes.

If we accept that often these early texts do not express his "real" ideas, this still leaves a deeper problem: what were his "real" ideas? Did Mirbeau actually have any? It seems

4 On the origins of this literary sub-sphere, see Robert Darnton: *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime*. Cambridge/Massachusetts 1982. See also Sharif Gemie: *Authors, Markets and Cultural Politics in the fin-de-siècle*, in: *Modern and Contemporary France* 4:1 (1996), pp. 41–50.

likely that the most important part in this process of saying no was not Mirbeau's resignation from the ranks of the right and his engagement with left-wing groups, but his struggle to find and to develop a truly ethical core in his writing. Pierre Michel, the most prominent of contemporary Mirbeau scholars, has noted that Mirbeau's greatest struggle was "against himself".⁵ In this essay, I consider the first round in that struggle.

The Young Mirbeau

The earliest surviving texts written by Mirbeau are some letters to a friend which he wrote from a Jesuit-run boarding school in Brittany. These cover the period from 1862 to 1874, from Mirbeau's teenage years to his early twenties. They record some of the Mirbeau's first political ideas. As Pierre Michel has noted, there are signs of his republican sympathies, even while the Bonapartist Second Empire (1852–70) dominated French political culture. Mirbeau declares himself to be "a child of the Revolution" and he throws in an insult about Louis Veuillot, a prominent and extremely conservative Catholic thinker, calling him the church's "poodle".⁶ But one can also read other political and cultural themes in these letters. The young Mirbeau was scared of conscription, a practice which he associated with "ferocious republican virtues": a phrase which suggests hostility to the republican tradition.⁷ In reality, rather than political commitment, the strongest theme in these letters is something far more basic: a simple home-sickness. Mirbeau missed his mother and sister: "It's sad to eat without the sweet voice of your mother, and without a hug from your sister."⁸ He felt lonely and isolated in the bigger framework of the Vannes boarding school, alienated from its rules, its timetables and its "cursed clock".⁹ A sentence from a letter dated September 1865 is revealing: "I need the invigorating air of our land [pays], of Rémalard and its rustic steeple; I need my family and my dear friends to bring water from the fountain to my dried-out stalks."¹⁰ In these early texts one can find rudimentary traces of various political and cultural attitudes: alongside something like a youthful republicanism, there is his love of his home, his region and its steeple, a warm affection for his family, and something resembling hatred for the larger, institutional world represented by the boarding school. These sentiments recall some of the feelings recorded in Mirbeau's later semi-autobiographical novel, *Sébastien Roche* (published in

5 Pierre Michel: *Les Combats d'Octave Mirbeau*, Besançon 1995, p. 11.

6 Octave Mirbeau: *Lettres à Alfred Bansard des Bois* (edited by Pierre Michel), Montpellier 1989, pp. 104; 160.

7 During the Second Empire it was possible for the children of the rich to be bought out of conscription. Mirbeau was finally conscripted during the Franco-Prussian war (1870–71).

8 Octave Mirbeau: *Lettres à Alfred Bansard des Bois*, pp. 38–39.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

1890), in which the hero felt out of place when travelling for the first time in a first-class train compartment on his way to a boarding school. The other older boys fire questions at him: "Are you from a noble family? [...] Are you for the Count de Chambord [the legitimist pretender] or for the Usurper [Napoleon III]?"¹¹ Significantly, the young Sébastien does not know what answer to give: it is easy to imagine the young Mirbeau acting in a similar manner.

These early texts do not provide conclusive evidence for any early political commitment by the young Mirbeau. Instead of a clear direction, one finds a series of negations: Mirbeau expresses hostility to his boarding school, to conscription, to the Church, to war. Alexandre Levy has noted that the writing style in these letters is "uneven and contradictory": the same can be said for their political values.¹² The most important development that these early letters record is Mirbeau's gradual disengagement from his family and their world. He refused to accept his father's choice of career for him (as a legal clerk), and he grew more distant from the rural provincial culture. A letter from July 1869 suggested how he was changing. He here discusses the town of Angoulême:

A charming, friendly town, easy and comfortable to live in, and full of lovely girls. They say, also, that it's a rotten borough, sick with bourgeois-ism. That's a shame, as bourgeois-ism, in women above all, makes one forget beauty... This sickness is not unique to the women of Angoulême; it is unfortunately shared by all provincial women. It is only in Paris... But I don't know what Paris is capable of... It is the great cure, or the great poison.¹³

The theme of Paris dominates Mirbeau's last letters to Alfred Besnard: he was clearly fascinated – and worried – by what this great city might contain.

Mirbeau and Bonapartism

Mirbeau began to work for Bonapartist leaders in the first years of the Third Republic. At first sight, this seems like a strange choice: was it not self-evident that, with the advent of the Republic in 1870, the Bonapartists were a spent force? For this confused, ambitious young man, full of negative feelings, Bonapartism was like a life jacket. In a sense, it was also a practical choice: through Bonapartism, Mirbeau managed to avoid being a legal clerk in a provincial town, and he found his way to Paris.

11 Octave Mirbeau: Sébastien Roche, in: *Les Romans Autobiographiques*, edited by Roman and Patrick Wald Lasowski, Paris 1991, pp. 677–1089, p. 729.

12 Alexandre Levy: *Mirbeau Épistolier: Lettres à Alfred Bansard*, in: Pierre Michel (eds.): *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau 4* (1997), pp. 33–46, p. 33.

13 Octave Mirbeau: *Lettres à Alfred Bansard des Bois*, p. 145.

To a young man from the provinces, like Mirbeau, the Bonapartists looked like rulers. Even after Napoleon III's rule ended in 1870, Bonapartist networks continued to control political life in many French regions, and Bonapartist notables remained prestigious local figures.¹⁴ Moreover, the Republic was not solidly rooted. Following the declaration of the Third Republic in September 1870, the General Election in 1871 saw a monarchist majority elected. Many believed that France was caught in a type of political cycle: looking back at events in 1804 (the creation of the First Empire), and 1852 (the Second Empire), they thought that the creation of the Third Republic must inevitably be followed by a return to a Bonapartist Empire. Republicans themselves freely admitted their fears for the future: in the extremely closely-fought General Elections of 1876 and 1877 their candidates finally won majorities in the Chamber of Deputies, but it was by no means certain that they would survive for long. Mirbeau, writing in 1878, noted gleefully how the slightest rumour was still sufficient to create alarm in their ranks.¹⁵

While Republicans seemed worried, Bonapartists were optimistic. In bye-elections from 1872 to 1875 they won a number of striking victories.¹⁶ More importantly, they were open to new ideas. No official Bonapartist party had been created during the Second Empire: instead, the regime used a system of inducement and intimidation to create "official" candidates at elections. In the 1870s, Bonapartist leaders began to discuss the creation of true political organisation. They considered the groups to whom they could appeal: these included workers disillusioned with the Republic after the horrific massacres at the end of the Paris Commune in May 1871. Many Bonapartists also acknowledged the need for a democratic mandate, although they preferred the use of referenda for these purposes rather than elections. These innovations required some form of appeal to a mass audience. In 1874 Bonapartists were well-prepared, for they controlled 71 provincial papers.¹⁷ Mirbeau participated in this organisational and cultural renewal of Bonapartism. He worked for the leading Bonapartist organiser, Dugué de la Fauconnerie, and wrote a pamphlet for him entitled *The Slanders Against the Empire*. According to one historian, no less than one and three-quarter million copies of this text were distributed in 1875.¹⁸

While there was no Bonapartist breakthrough in the elections, there was evidence of their steady progress. In 1876, 75 deputies could be defined as Bonapartist; in 1877 there were 104.¹⁹ There were signs that the French population were responding to their

14 On this point see the observations by Raymond Huard: *La Naissance du parti politique en France*, Paris 1996, p. 192.

15 Octave Mirbeau: *Chroniques Ariégoises*, edited by Jean Philippe, Labarre 1998, p. 96.

16 Bernard Ménager: *Les Napoléon du Peuple*, Paris 1988, p. 297.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 276.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 276.

19 Estimates in Robert David Anderson: *France 1870–1914*, London 1977, p. 164.

appeal. In May 1874 the Imperial Prince Roland Bonaparte celebrated his 16th birthday: 900 people travelled to his house to celebrate the event, and over 300,000 people sent him letters of congratulation.²⁰ Rather than the fall of the Second Empire ending their political presence, the socio-political trends it initiated seemed to continue after 1870: Bonapartism was still gaining votes in in the west of France and in the countryside.²¹ While the Bonapartists were far from winning the general elections, they could legitimately consider themselves as the largest party on the French right: partly simply because the political organisation of their monarchist rivals was so poor.

This brief review of evidence shows that Mirbeau probably did not consider Bonapartism a lost cause in the early 1870s: he could well have believed that it represented the future of France. Moreover, it had developed into a flexible political ideology which allowed Mirbeau, even while writing as a paid hack, to express some of the nascent political themes which concerned him. His loose but vague commitment to the principles of 1789 was acceptable to his Bonapartist paymasters. Rather than denying that legacy, Bonapartism was presented as a reform of revolutionary tradition. Mirbeau's own treatment of this theme is striking. "The Empire", he observed, "is a continuation of the Revolution, but of a tamed Revolution, softened by the whip of authority".²² Mirbeau opposed both "divine right" and "barricades": a neat presentation of Bonapartism as a middle-of-the-road political culture.²³

Some continuity in his ideas is obvious: he expressed concern about conscription in his early letters to Bansard, and his experience as a conscript in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–71 gave him a lasting hatred of war. As a Bonapartist hack writer he criticised republican militarism, arguing that Napoleon III had not wanted war, but he been dragged into it by the "often blind patriotism of the masses".²⁴ In his letters, he had complained about the regulations and the timetable of his boarding school; as a Bonapartist hack he criticised the republicans' abstract, mechanical approach to politics: they saw "a man as just a voting card, as a machine to create deputies".²⁵ In his letters he had mocked provincial "bourgeois-ism"; in his hack work he continued to express the same vague, ill-defined opposition to the bourgeois spirit. Writing for the leading Bonapartist daily *L'Ordre*, he contributed a regular column on the arts. In one of these articles he described the reactions of a bourgeois to a picture by the Impressionist painter Manet: "You will see

20 Bernard Ménéger: *Les Napoléon du Peuple* p. 294.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 308.

22 Octave Mirbeau: *Chroniques Ariégoises*, p. 95.

23 Octave Mirbeau: *Premières Chroniques Esthétiques*, edited by Pierre Michel, Angers 1996, p. 230.

24 Octave Mirbeau: *Les Calomnies Contre l'Empire*, in: Pierre Michel (eds.): *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau* 6 (1999), pp. 185–206 (p. 192).

25 Octave Mirbeau: *Chroniques Ariégoises*, p. 93.

a truly wonderful sight: if our bourgeois has hair, his hair will stand on end like the bristles of a hedgehog; if he is bald, he will mutter ‘traitor’, ‘wretch’ and even ‘lyrical poet’.”²⁶

There was, however, one significant new element in his thinking: an open and explicit appeal to an elite, a theme which probably can be seen as genuinely Bonapartist in character. Discussing a picture by Desboutin, Mirbeau notes that the bourgeois will not like it, but “in painting as in literature [...] it is the elite who flock to the remarkable works, even when they are misunderstood by the masses.”²⁷ Mirbeau evoked this elite several times in his Bonapartist writing. Its exact identity remained vague: it obviously was not the detested bourgeoisie, but neither was it the old aristocracy. Mirbeau defined it by its relation to culture: “Art belongs to everyone. [It is the basis] for an aristocracy which is open to all, even to aristocrats.”²⁸ Mirbeau’s texts suggest an image of an elite that was anti-bourgeois, modern, tolerant and humanist: perhaps this was also how he understood Bonapartism working in French society.

On the other hand, Mirbeau condemned the Third Republic as forming the framework through which an illegitimate elite ruled France. One finds the same vagueness in his identification of this elite: they were to be distrusted like “all that is inferior, vile and shameful”.²⁹ The only people who ever profited from the Republic were “the schemers, the talkers [...] the drunks, the lazy, the people engaged in dodgy trades”.³⁰ Domination by this elite produced a situation of general corruption. Mirbeau once again cited examples from the cultural world: he referred to the highly prestigious annual art exhibition known as “the Salon”. Here, he complained, the jury which decided whether or not to accept a picture had been formed from “little oligarchies created by pure whim or by the most undemocratic forms of favouritism.”³¹ From time to time Mirbeau inevitably described this malign elite as “bourgeois”: “The Republic is the triumph of the bourgeoisie over the people” – a formula which at first seems to suggest a quasi-Marxist, class-based of the Republic, until one reads the next phrases – “of the great over the little, the fat over the thin”.³² In other words, Mirbeau’s early use of the term “bourgeois” is intended principally as a moral judgement: it does not indicate a class-based understanding of French society, and was quite acceptable to his Bonapartist pay-masters.

26 Octave Mirbeau: *Premières Chroniques Esthétiques*, p. 85.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 66.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

29 Octave Mirbeau: *Chroniques Ariégoises*, p. 95.

30 Octave Mirbeau: *Les Calomnies Contre l’Empire*, p. 201.

31 Octave Mirbeau: *Premières Chroniques Esthétiques*, p. 230.

32 Octave Mirbeau: *Chroniques Ariégoises*, p. III. On this vague, romantic anti-bourgeois feeling, see Paul Lidsky: *Les Écrivains Contre la Commune*, Paris 1982 and Sharif Gemie: *Balzac and the Moral Crisis of the July Monarchy*, in: *European History Quarterly* 19:4 (1989), pp. 469–94.

In his texts dating from before 1884, Mirbeau writes frequently about Paris. This theme was already present in his letters to Alfred Bansaard, even before Mirbeau had actually visited Paris. There was a clear sense of worried anticipation in his formula that Paris would be “a great cure or a great poison”. In the late 1870s, he seems to turn against the capital, and – writing in the prestigious Bonapartist daily, *Le Gaulois* – he raged against this city, inhabited by anaemics, depressives, and morphine addicts.³³

Frayed nerves: that's Paris. Paris, its existence taken up with struggles, burnt by fevers, the rush to get rich and to enjoy; Paris, with its population that passes, panting, possessed by a whirlwind of interests and ambitions that collide with each other, that crash and struggle with a great clamour; a ferocious and savage fight, where the victory goes to the strong, to those who will it, to the tense. Examine these men that chance (say some) or will (say others) have carried above the crowd, those who started with nothing and who arrive at everything: they're all hysterical [*nerveux*]. Because today, in our thin, sickly democracy, nerves have become the basis of power: not a calm power, exercised with a manly composure, but a worried power, troubled, a slave to the passions, like a woman.³⁴

The first tales published under his own name continued with this theme: Mirbeau decried the false, empty marriages of Parisians,³⁵ and he sketched out a bitter picture of a typical Parisian *soirée*, complete with “bored, unhealthy, pale” young ladies, and young girls with their “equivocal smiles”: these were places where “you had to be seen, and that was enough”. “Fake situations, socially unbalanced, with unchecked vices, low greed, immoral transactions: all the flowers of corruption germinate there, mix together, are displayed there, grow there and enrich themselves in the heat of the Parisian compost heap.”³⁶

While it is impossible to identify a coherent political philosophy in these early publications from the 1870s and early 1880s, there are some consistent themes that stretch from Mirbeau's first letters to Bansaard to his tales and articles in the national press: one can see his growing hostility to the Third Republic, tempered sometimes by a lingering respect

33 Octave Mirbeau: *Paris Déshabillé*, edited by Jean-François Nivet/Pierre Michel, Paris 1991, *passim*.

34 Octave Mirbeau: *Paris Déshabillé*, p. 24.

35 See: *Le Numéro 24*, in: *Contes Cruels*, vol. 2, edited by Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet, Paris 1991, pp. 15–22.

36 *Nocturne parisien*, in: *Contes Cruels II*, pp. 429–434 (p. 431).

for the Republican tradition of the Second Republic (1848–52),³⁷ a vague anti-bourgeois sentiment, a deep concern for public morality, a rather uncertain affection for the provinces and a growing sense of disgust with the corruption of Paris. With the exception of Mirbeau's verbal allegiance to a form of republican tradition, all these themes were commonplace among the classic thinkers of the French right. In fact, there was only one element from right-wing political culture that Mirbeau seemed to lack: a love for a specific French *pays* [a region or land]. In nearly every case, the prominent thinkers of the right would contrast their chosen *pays* with the corruption of Paris, presenting this region as a model of old-fashioned virtues which resisted the effects of the Republican state. Perhaps one of the first examples of this formula was devised by the great Catholic and monarchist writer François-René de Chateaubriand who, in 1822, looked back nostalgically to the great anti-Republican rising in the Vendée in 1793. He considered that during the Revolution

La Vendée stayed Christian and Catholic; therefore, the monarchist spirit still survived in this corner of France. God seemed to have preserved this model of society to teach us how a people to whom God has given laws is stronger than a people who legislate for themselves.³⁸

Others followed. For Léon Daudet, it was the villages of Provence which represented this counter-model, for Pierre Loti, the French Basque Country or the villages of Brittany,³⁹ for Barrès, who represented an ultra-right wing form of republicanism, the grass-roots patriotism of Alsace.

It is easy to see how this formula worked: it allowed right-wing thinkers to proclaim their loyalty to a “real” France, and to decry the current French government, represented by the capital, as a type of anti-France which failed embody the true virtues of the nation.

Where was Mirbeau's *pays*?

37 Octave Mirbeau: *Chroniques Ariégoises*, p. 92.

38 François Chateaubriand: *De la Vendée*, La Rochelle 1990, p. 31. On the place of La Vendée in French history, see Chapter 4 of Sharif Gemie: *French Revolutions: 1815–1914*, Edinburgh 1999, pp. 63–88.

39 On Loti, see Sharif Gemie: *Loti, Orientalism and the French Colonial Experience*, in: *Journal of European Area Studies* 8:2 (2000), pp. 149–66.

In Search of a *Pays*

This formula brings us back to the key challenge set by Mirbeau's tale: how to say no. For most right-wing writers, saying no to Parisian modernity meant saying yes to some idealised, romanticised image of France, drawn from a particular region. At some points in the 1870s and early 1880s Mirbeau seems to be toying with this formula. While working as a Bonapartist in the southern department of the Ariège in 1876, he seemed to glimpse a Bonapartist *pays*: "We voted for de Saint-Paul [the Bonapartist candidate] because we love de Saint-Paul, because we trust him, because he was always first in line to defend our interests, because he is a true son of the Ariège, an honour for the Ariège."⁴⁰

One small but significant point in the above passage is that Mirbeau uses the first person plural: this suggests a community with which he can identify. Two years later, when Baron Gaston de Saint-Paul died, Mirbeau's commentary suggested a similar image of a moral community united in its grief:

The public sense of grief is heart-rending: any stranger who arrived here could not fail to feel an emotion in their heart [as they saw] the anguish of an entire *pays*. It is rare to find a man whose death can cause real tears and so much sincere grief in the heart of the people.⁴¹

Such expressions draw Mirbeau closer to Chateaubriand's idealisation of La Vendée, but Mirbeau stops there. The examples are very unusual, and atypical of his style. It is as if he considers the formula, and then rejects it. Even his Bonapartist propaganda is more forceful in its denunciation of Republican immorality than in his assertion of Bonapartist community.

The second occasion on which Mirbeau approaches this theme is in his collection of short stories, *Lettres de ma chaumière* (Letters from my Cottage), published in 1885. Here, Mirbeau's position is clearer: these tales were written as a response to Alphonse Daudet's *Lettres de mon moulin* (Letters from my Windmill), first published in 1869. Daudet's short stories carried no clear political message, but his images of the bucolic calm of the southern French countryside contributed to a regionalistic pride in the Provence. The harsh, amoral sketches of Mirbeau's *Lettres* present no comforting images for right-wing dreamers of idyllic villages.

The peasant, like everyone else, wants to be part of their century. Like everyone else, they accept this dizzy madness in which everything is collapsing. One could even say

40 Octave Mirbeau: *Chroniques Ariégoises*, p. 110.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 127.

that there are no more peasants [...] The temptation represented by the towns' lazy lifestyles have in a way uprooted them from the soil.⁴²

This blunt refusal to idealise a rural community may be politically significant for Mirbeau's evolution: it was the equivalent of a rejection of one of the favoured formulas of the right.

In the 1880s and 1890s Mirbeau visited Brittany frequently, and the region features often in his writing. At times, Mirbeau suggests that this region represents values which were opposite or contrary to those of Paris. In his first full-length novel, *Le Calvaire* (The Calvary) published in 1886, the suffering hero leaves Paris and searches for a cure in Brittany, where "the air is pure, nature superb and the men are strong and good-hearted".⁴³ But the hero's respite is only temporary: his girlfriend finds him, and he is drawn back into the hell of Paris. Mirbeau's later writing on the region certainly indicates a consistent fascination with Brittany, but never an idealisation. Instead, Mirbeau sees the region through republican spectacles, as an area which is "a thousand leagues away from all civilisation".⁴⁴ He repeats *clichés* concerning the exploitation of the peasant by the priest and the aristocrat; he sees a certain exoticism in the region, above all in its extravagant Catholic rituals, but he fails to note its new social movements, such as the development of militant trade unionism in Saint-Nazaire and the growth of innovative Christian-Democrat movements.⁴⁵ Brittany may have fascinated Mirbeau, but it would never be his *pays*.

Finally, the last possible candidate for Mirbeau's *pays* was an imaginary one: among all the volumes of his writing, one can find a single example of a brief utopian sketch, *Royaume à Vendre* (Kingdom for Sale, 1883). Mirbeau's utopia was characterised by the absence of all the aspects of Parisian corruption which he appeared to despise: no papers, no pubs, no women.⁴⁶ Mirbeau's choice of these three targets is revealing. The press represented the most intense form of the cultural capitalism which so constrained our "loser"; pubs (or "cabarets") were the most flagrant example of the decline of elite culture into the newly commercially-orientated mass culture; and women, unfortunately, represented for this young misogynist the social zone in which money, passion and hypocrisy met, symbolised above all in the networks of prostitution which criss-crossed the cap-

42 *Le tripot aux champs*, in: *Contes Cruels I*, pp. 66–75.

43 *Le Calvaire*, in: *Les Roman Autobiographiques*, edited by Roman and Patrick Wald Lasowski, Paris 1991, pp. 7–336, p. 215.

44 *Paysage Breton*, in: Jean-François Nivet (ed.): *Croquis Bretons*, Rezé 1993, p. 65.

45 On the political exchanges between Brittany and Paris, see Sharif Gemie: *Brittany: The Invisible Nation, 1750–1950*, Cardiff 2007.

46 *Royaume à Vendre*, in: Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet (eds.): *Combats Politiques*, Paris 1990, pp. 51–56, p. 55.

ital.⁴⁷ However, the utopia does not last. King Mirbeau has a moment of weakness: "I created bureaucrats, and I gave women to my people." His kingdom falls.

Mirbeau never found his *pays*: not in the Bonapartist Ariège, not in rural Brittany and not even in his imagination. Unable to find a counter-model to Parisian modernity, he was unable to follow the classic lines of thought of the French right. And even in during his period of hack journalism, he frequently drew attention to the weaknesses of the traditional resources of the French right. When the Legitimist Pretender, the Count of Chambord, died in August 1883, Mirbeau proclaimed his grief at this loss, but also asked whether the Count was not "too fine a soul, too intelligent a man, too generous a heart to reign over us".⁴⁸ "Where is he, the man that we're waiting for?"⁴⁹ he cried. In his anti-Semitic *L'invasion* he asked: "Is there still, truly, a French society in Paris, and has a single Frenchman survived?"⁵⁰ These sound more like statements of despair with the forms that right-wing politics had taken in France rather than calls for some form of Bonapartist renewal.

The Radical Right

In 1883 Mirbeau briefly edited a review, *Les Grimaces*. This marked the last stage of Mirbeau's collaboration with the forces of the right. Here, while enjoying a greater degree of autonomy than before, Mirbeau was still required to produce anti-Republican arguments. *Les Grimaces* was marked by two tendencies: a wish to produce some sustained studies concerning Republican corruption, and a desire to shock the reader. It included an *Ode to Cholera*, in which Mirbeau called on the plague to devastate corrupt France.⁵¹ With his work on *Les Grimaces*, Mirbeau seemed to have left the confines of the classic, traditionalist, church-and-king right, and to be evolving towards the populism of the new right which emerged in France in the 1880s and 1890s, particularly during the political struggles of the Dreyfus Affair. In these movements populist and racist, and specifically anti-Semitic, themes circulated. The identification of the Jew as enemy worked to allow a renovation of the *pays*-against-Paris formula: now the entire nation of France

47 On the sexual politics of Mirbeau's work, see Sharif Gemie: Mirbeau and the Politics of Misogyny, *Journal of European Studies* 31:1 (2001), pp. 71–98. Mirbeau's own quite astonishing essay on prostitution is: *L'Amour de la Femme Venale*, translated by Alexandre Levy, Paris 1997.

48 Cited by Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet: Octave Mirbeau: L'imprécateur au Cœur Fidèle, Paris 1990, p. 167.

49 Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet (eds.): *Combats Politiques*, pp. 57–64, p. 68.

50 *Ibid.*, pp. 65–71 (p. 70).

51 Octave Mirbeau: *Ode au Choléra* in *Combats Politiques* (edited by Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet), Paris 1990, pp. 57–64.

could be identified as a *pays*, and the tiny minority of forty thousand or so Jews could be identified as the common enemy of the entire nation.⁵²

Mirbeau seems to have had a long-standing interest in the presence of Jews in France. Some of his writing on this theme in the years 1879–81 appears relatively innocent. In one passage he even seems to identify and to accept a general tendency towards assimilation. Soon no one will prescribe “the slightest difference between a Jew, a Mohammedan and an orthodox [Christian]. There will be no races, just men. Amen.”⁵³ But, with hindsight, one can question what was motivating him. Here, it should be remembered that the dominant tendency among French Jews was towards assimilation. In general, Jews were grateful for the promise of civic equality offered to them by the French Revolution, and many responded with a form of hyper-French patriotism. As a result, a particular strand of assimilated French Jews achieved some success in gaining posts in the civil service.⁵⁴ A revealing maxim circulated among such Jews: they would “Jews indoors, French citizens outside”. For these assimilated Jews, Judaism had become a private matter, no longer to be displayed to others, while their loyalty to the French Republic was to be demonstrated in public. Mirbeau’s early texts suggest a challenge to this stance: simply by describing them as a community in their own right, Mirbeau was suggesting that their assimilation was less than complete. Mirbeau’s approach suggested that of an urban explorer, coming across a previously undiscovered exotic group: they were people “about who one knows little”.⁵⁵ The same texts suggest points and arguments which could be re-used in future polemics. Mirbeau over-estimates numbers, claiming that thirty-five thousand Jews lived in Paris.⁵⁶ He notes the Jews’ “spirit of solidarity [...] which creates the power of Israelism, and which has won for them, despite the small numbers in their ranks, such a considerable place in today’s society”.⁵⁷ While not describing the Jews as

- 52 On the political uses of anti-Semitism, see the substantial research in J.-M. Mayeur: *Les Congrès Nationaux de la Démocratie Chrétienne à Lyon (1896–1897–1898)*, in: *Revue d’Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine* 9 (1962), pp. 171–206. See also Chapter 11 of Sharif Gemie: *French Revolutions: 1815–1914*, pp. 220–248.
- 53 Octave Mirbeau: *La Journée Parisienne: Les Pâques Israélites*, in: Pierre Michel (eds.): *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau* 6 (1999), pp. 225–27, p. 227.
- 54 On the history of this strand of French-Jewish culture, see Pierre Birnbaum: *Les Fous de la République: Histoire Politique des Juifs d’Etat de Gambetta à Vichy*, Paris 1992; and Pierre Simon-Nahun: *French Judaism*, in: A. Prost and G. Vincent (eds.): *A History of Private Life*, vol. 5, Cambridge Massachusetts 1991, pp. 347–78.
- 55 Octave Mirbeau: *La Journée Parisienne: Yom Kippur*, in: Pierre Michel (eds.): *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau* 6 (1999), pp. 228–229.
- 56 Octave Mirbeau: *La Journée Parisienne: Le Premier de l’an Israélite*, in: Pierre Michel (eds.): *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau* 6 (1999), pp. 213–16, p. 214. “Israelite” was a term commonly used by French assimilated Jews to describe themselves.
- 57 Octave Mirbeau: *La Journée parisienne: Le Premier de l’an Israélite*, p. 215.

conspiracy against France, one can see how these observations could have contributed to such an image: his writing suggests differences between Jews and ordinary French people, whereby the Jew is just a bit more clever, just a bit better organised than the simpler, perhaps more honest, French person. In the same set of texts, Mirbeau rehearses the stereotype of the beautiful Jewess who “has conquered one of the best places in society by her all-powerful beauty. She can be found everywhere today, even in the most exclusive circles.”⁵⁸ His writing includes several references to the Rothschilds, thereby creating a connection between Jews and extreme wealth in the minds of his readers. In these years, there is little that is explicitly anti-Semitic about Mirbeau's writing, but he does suggest that there are unusual features about French Jews, and that their apparently prominent place in French society is a question which demands an answer.

A few years later, Mirbeau was – briefly – an energetic and willing participant in the re-making of anti-Semitism, as it was transformed from a religious prejudice into a form of social and political critique. The anti-Semitic polemics which he wrote for *Les Grimaces* are probably the most shameful texts of all his writing:

Paris, town of the distant masses, prostitute-city who gives herself to whoever pays, is no longer the capital of France. It is the anonymous capital of all men who have no nation and no name ... [it is invaded by] foreign commerce, [from] the dusty bazaars of the Orient, the despised ghettos of Germany.

At their head, on the throne, was the Jewish Baron Rothschild, who represented “the base instincts, the greedy instincts, the corruption [...] [of] the people”.⁵⁹ He led a crowd of Germans, Greeks, Egyptians and Levantines from “every corner of the Orient, crowding in for the great kill”.⁶⁰ Paris had been transformed: it had become “the Paris of deals, luxury and pleasure, it has become their Paris, within which we are no longer tolerated.”⁶¹ Such ugly ideas are clearly typical of late nineteenth century anti-Semitism, within which Jews are stigmatised as both the symbol and the cause of all the resented aspects of cultural and social modernity.

58 Octave Mirbeau: *La Journée Parisienne*, p. 220.

59 *L'invasion*, p. 65.

60 *L'invasion*, p. 66.

61 *L'invasion*, p. 68.

At the Crossroads

Why did Mirbeau change his political opinions? After all, the late 1880s was a good time to begin a career in far-right politics in France: it is the period that Zeev Sternhell has identified as the intellectual beginnings of Fascism;⁶² it is the period when Mirbeau's contemporary, Edouard Drumont, transformed anti-Semitism from a religious prejudice into a political ideology: he founded the world's first anti-Semitic daily, *La Libre Parole* (the Free Word) in 1892. Like Mirbeau, Drumont's first political stance was a defence of a good old Paris, a human community, against the modernisation represented by Haussmann's urban renovation. The similarities between Drumont's ideas and those expressed by Mirbeau in the 1880s are obvious. How did Mirbeau, the anti-Semite of 1883, become the Dreyfusard of 1898?

There is no single event or text which can be cited as the key to Mirbeau's change of heart. Rather, to follow our metaphor of the crossroads, several factors combined. One qualification needs to be made immediately: Mirbeau's virulently anti-Semitic phase did not last long. The political and literary experiment of *Les Grimaces* lasted one summer (1883), and following these vitriolic essays, Mirbeau's writing returns to a calmer tone. A new girlfriend, Alice Regnault, appears to have forced Mirbeau to re-consider his work and his status: both Regnault and Mirbeau shared a desire to live honestly. (Unfortunately, in later years it became obvious that they had different interpretations of the concept: Regnault, with a shady past in the sex trade, sought bourgeois respectability; Mirbeau sought an ethical autonomy, a quest which would lead him to the anarchists.) They were married in May 1887.⁶³

Other forces were clearly also in play. Mirbeau's consistent admiration for artistic creation as a zone of freedom led him to play a prominent role in championing the Impressionists. Obviously, it is hard to translate this stance directly into terms of political commitment, but it seems that Mirbeau was deeply inspired by them: firstly, their cool, modern vision of the urban landscape, their love of nature, their wry scepticism for social procedures: all of these suggested a different tone to Mirbeau from the furious polemics of *Les Grimaces*. But, secondly, it seems that Mirbeau also admired them as a model of human community. He noted their connections and interactions, their encouragement of each other's work, their shared research into the culture of urban modernity and their commitment to the integrity of their work, despite criticisms and insults from many: all these features impressed him as an ethical model. This may seem an odd basis for an anarchist political philosophy, but Mirbeau was not alone in projecting a form of politi-

62 See Zeev Sternhell: *Ni Droite Ni Gauche: L'Idéologie Fasciste en France*, Paris 1983.

63 Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet: *Octave Mirbeau: L'Imprécateur au Cœur Fidèle*, p. 321.

cal values onto groups like the Impressionists.⁶⁴ While Mirbeau never made any detailed studies of the labour movement, the new ethical tone of his work led him to express more sympathy for the daily suffering of the poor in France:⁶⁵ for these reasons he was impressed by Emile Zola's *Germinal*.⁶⁶ His visits to Brittany continued, and it is clear that he found it impossible to idealise the region as a rural idyll, inhabited by benevolent aristocrats, wise priests and grateful peasants: instead, he saw ignorance, exploitation, corruption and despair. While always holding back from expressing a simple faith in the Republic's project to modernise France, Mirbeau was certainly tempering his hostility to the Republic.

Another perspective may have come to Mirbeau through his work on his three semi-autobiographical novels, published between 1886 and 1890. All three of these consider the process of education, which Mirbeau considered to be a cruel, violent process which left young people warped. The conceptual importance of this point is that it drew Mirbeau away from simple generalisations of good and bad people in society, and suggested a more subtle and complex picture of the social creation of morality, in which Mirbeau's anger should be directed at those in positions of power and responsibility rather than stigmatising particular social groups as evil.

The final piece in the jigsaw is probably Boulangism, that strange, incoherent political movement which briefly erupted in France 1886–89. Here, a group of disillusioned aristocrats seized on a talented general with a gift for public speaking, and – manipulating events behind the scenes – managed to create a new type of anti-Republicanism, one which could appeal to a working-class audience, one which could even speak the language of democracy while proposing some form (never actually defined) of authoritarian rule. Many on the right were fascinated by this spectacle: for some, like Maurice Barrès (1862–1923) this was the turning-point which would define their future political careers.⁶⁷ Mirbeau never seems to have felt any admiration at all for Boulanger: “He was Bonapartist, then *Orléaniste* [a form of mildly liberal monarchism]; today he is Repub-

64 On this question of art and political values, see Richard D. Sonn: *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin-de-siècle France*, France 1989. Similar issues are dramatised in Emile Zola's novel *Oeuvre* (published in 1886 and re-printed many times in both French and English). More generally, on models for anarchist politics, see Sharif Gemie: *Counter-Community: An Aspect of Anarchist Political Culture*, in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 29 (1994), pp. 349–67.

65 See his *Tableaux de misère* in Octave Mirbeau: *Ode au Choléra* in *Combats Politiques*, pp. 100–108.

66 Octave Mirbeau: *Un article de M. Zola*, in: Pierre Michel (eds.): *Cahiers Octave Mirbeau* 1 (1994), pp. 164–170.

67 On Boulangism, see Zeev Sternhell: *Ni Droite Ni Gauche* and Patrick H. Hutton: *Popular Boulangism and the Advent of Mass Politics in France* in: *Journal of Contemporary History* 11 (1976), pp. 85–106.

lican.”⁶⁸ Rather than resembling the forward-looking, ethical elite that he had admired in his Bonapartist days, Mirbeau always saw Boulanger as an agent of corruption and debasement. Furthermore, anti-militarism seems to have been one of Mirbeau’s most consistent attitudes: from his fear of conscription in the 1860s, through his miserable experiences as a conscript during the Franco-Prussian war (which he recorded in a lightly fictionalised form in *Le Calvaire*, 1886), to his anger with the political role of the army during the Dreyfus Affair, Mirbeau always opposed militarism. Perhaps he simply could not countenance supporting a movement led by a General? He was certainly appalled by the opportunism with which the right acted during the years in which Boulangism seemed to be growing.

Mirbeau finally left the Bonapartist press in 1887, and thereafter published in his own name. His explicitly political interventions remained rare for most of the 1890s, although one can find an articulate and brave defence of Oscar Wilde, published in July 1895;⁶⁹ and some well-written, thoughtful considerations on the brief flurry of anarchist terrorism in France in 1892–94.⁷⁰ During the Dreyfus Affair, some of the anti-Semitic anti-Dreyfusards attempted to embarrass Mirbeau by re-printing selections from his anti-Semitic work from the early 1880s. Why he had changed, they asked: the implication was that he had been bought off by the Jews. Mirbeau’s reply was simply outstanding: “Considering the successive discoveries concerning what now appears to him as the truth, this man is now willing to repudiate, one by one, the lies in which those terrible chains of education, of the family, the priests and the state held him for so long, as a prisoner of himself.”⁷¹

Conclusion

Whether Mirbeau ever won his struggle with himself is open to question. During the Dreyfus Affair, or shortly afterwards, he appears to have suffered some form of breakdown, which left him much weaker. The number of texts that he produced each year shrank, although even in this later period he produced some extremely original dramatic works.⁷²

The fascinating point about Mirbeau’s shift from right to left is that it unrolled within the cultural sphere. Mirbeau’s interest in the labour movement, in parliamentary politics or in foundational political events like the Paris Commune were relatively limited.

68 Octave Mirbeau: Boulanger in *Combats politiques*, pp. 93–100, p. 97.

69 Octave Mirbeau: *Sur un Livre*, in: Octave Mirbeau: *Combats Littéraires*, Angers 2006, pp. 408–11.

70 Collected in Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet (eds.): *Combats Politiques*.

71 *Palinodies!*, in: Pierre Michel/Jean-François Nivet (eds.): *Combats Politiques*, pp. 203–209, p. 204.

72 See Richard Hand: *Octave Mirbeau: Two Plays: Business is Business and Charity*, London 2012.

Throughout his lifetime, the Dreyfus Affair was the only example of a major political crisis really gripping his attention. He was interested in daily life, but significantly it is Célestine, the chamber-maid in *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, not a more typical proletarian, who is his fullest representation of the problems of French society. His passions and his thinking were more concerned with cultural politics than with political culture. However, within this apparently abstract, distant, apolitical sphere, Mirbeau's commitment is highly politicised. The struggle between the hack-writer and his rich employer, depicted in his short story *A Loser*, comes to take the appearance of a class struggle. In one sense, this is an individualistic struggle: Mirbeau wishes to achieve a position of autonomy which would allow him to write in an honest manner, as an ethically-informed individual. On the other hand, Mirbeau clearly understands it as a collective issue. The importance of the Impressionists is precisely that they represent – for Mirbeau – a collective endeavour with political and cultural implications for the whole of French society.

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