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STRUCTURE IN OCTAVE MIRBEAU'S "LE JARDIN DES SUPPLICES"

Representative in style and in subject matter of the Literature of Decadence of the French *fin-de-siècle*, *Le Jardin des supplices* (1898) remains among Mirbeau's enduring novels.¹ In spite of the suggestive title, its history appears less stormy and free of the notoriety that surrounded the publication of such works as *Le Calvaire* (1887), *La 628-E-8* (1907), or *Le Foyer* (1909).² The book leaves the reader with a lasting impression. For many however, this impression may be negative, because the novel's subject and structure, and its seeming lack of unity raise many questions. Our attempt is to answer these questions by pointing out the complex relationship between structure and subject matter and by showing how the Frontispiece affects this relationship.

¹ O. Mirbeau, *Le Jardin des supplices* (Paris 1957). The pagination that follows the quotations in French refers to this edition. The novel was adapted for the stage as a *pièce à trois tableaux*, first on October 28, 1922, at the Théâtre du Grand Guignol, then at the Théâtre de Saint-Georges on March 29, 1929. In 1976, Toni Taffin and Jacqueline Kerry appeared in the title rôles in a screen adaptation by Pascal Lainé, and a *mise-en-scène* by Christian Gion.

² The first chapter of *Le Calvaire* (Paris 1887), appeared on September 15, 1886 in the influential journal, "La Nouvelle Revue". Mme Adam admired both author and novel. Still, as editor of the journal, she considered Mirbeau's treatment of the Franco-Prussian war, too painful for her readers and exercised her editorial privilege to delete the chapter in which a young Frenchman, having just killed a Prussian, passionately embraced him. Twenty years later, in 1907, Mme Hanska's daughter voiced in "Le Temps" (November 7, 1907) a protest against the publication of *La 628-E-8*, at press at that time. In this novel on the automobile Mme Hanska appears as the unfaithful wife who enjoys the friendship of the fashionable portrait painter, Jean Gigoux, while her ailing husband, Honoré de Balzac, dies with only a hired woman at his bedside. Told by Jean Gigoux to Mirbeau, the episode incriminated Mme Hanska even more than Victor Hugo's account of Balzac's death in *Choses vues* (1887). However reluctantly, Mirbeau announced in "Le Temps" (November 9, 1907), the decision to delete his Balzac. The following year, *Le Foyer* (written in collaboration with Thadée Natanson in 1908) became the object of a legal dispute between Mirbeau and the administration of the Comédie Française. Mirbeau won a small victory and the Comédie Française staged the play on December 7, 1908. The points of contention between author and administration of the theater included the portrayal of the main character, an academician who made personal use of funds appropriated for public charity.

Among the first to point to the novel's loose construction was Marcel Revon, according to whom the book announces other novels by the author, "faits de pièces et de morceaux."³ His remark suggests indirectly that with *Le Jardin des supplices*, Mirbeau departs from a solidly constructed novel in order to adopt a different format. Yet, Revon fails to see that the "bits" and "pieces" which enter into its composition, in spite of their heteroclitic nature, ultimately mold the novel into a homogenous work of art.

The division of the novel into three extremely uneven parts, the various settings and historical background, the presence of two narrators (one of whom is probably the author and who is totally eclipsed by two major parts of the novel) and the variety of color and tone—all these factors create the impression of a loosely-constructed novel. Other elements, however, give support to the contrary. For instance, the universal presence of crime dominates the entire book: intellectual crime in the Frontispiece, social and political crime in part I, the art of physical torture in Part II. The presence of the anonymous narrator also contributes to the unity of the novel, as does the metaphor announced by the title which is amply illustrated from cover to cover. The Frontispiece, on the other hand, in spite of its frontal position, serves not only as an introduction but, what is more important and often forgotten, it serves as the novel's conclusion as well. In this two-fold role, the Frontispiece plays an essential part in the structure and unity of the book.

The association of the garden with torture which is implied by the title and so vividly developed in Part II of the book, echoes throughout Mirbeau's private life, his novel and also his fictional universe. In his *Journal*, Edmond de Goncourt devoted an admirable page to the novelist's beautiful garden at Triel sur Seine.⁴ In letters to his friends, Mirbeau reveals himself an expert gardener who loved exotic flowers. He makes no reference to a garden in his first novel, *Le Calvaire*, however, the title brings to mind the garden setting of the Mount of Olives where Christ knew moments of profound anguish, and was soon followed by his crucifixion. Although the novelist never executed the project, he apparently had considered writing a sequel symbolically entitled „Resurrection”, suggestive of an optimism seldom found in his works. In „Le Concombre fugitif”, first published in a newspaper, was later included in the posthumous edition of *La Vache tachetée* (Paris:

³ M. Revon, O. Mirbeau, *Son Oeuvre* Paris 1924, p. 46. Other critics share Marcel Revon's opinion, including M. Schwartz, *Octave Mirbeau, Vie et Oeuvre* (The Hague 1966), p. 114. In *La Femme et ses paysages d'âme dans l'oeuvre romanesque d'Octave Mirbeau* (Thèse de doctorat, Pennsylvania State University, 1973), the present writer echoes the feelings of the critics suggesting that: "Le premier mouvement de l'oeuvre; le frontispice, n'appartient pas au récit proprement dit mais introduit le thème du meurtre, du sang et du sadisme qui dominera toute l'oeuvre" (p. 53). A re-examination of the work points to a greater unity of the novel.

⁴ E. et J. de Goncourt, *Journal. Mémoires de la vie littéraire 1895—1896*, Vol. XXI. Texte établi et annoté par Robert Ricatte, Monaco 1956, p. 77.

Flammarion, 1918), “Le père Hortus” speaks of difficulties he experiences in raising a rather common and popular vegetable. His rebellious cucumbers, endowed with human-like curiosity, play tricks on him by disappearing from the garden, in spite of the tall hedge that surrounds it. The cucumbers escape, according to the gardener, because they long for independence and freedom.

In *Sébastien Roch* (1890), we meet a gardener of a different kind, the priest-educator. The “Lycées” and “collèges” are “des univers en miniature”, sample gardens of torture, where sensitive young boys (such as Sébastien, student at the Jesuit school of Saint-François Xavier in the Morbihan) receive their painful initiation into adulthood. This relationship between garden and torture culminates in the metaphorical vision of the world and is seen as “un immense [...] un inexorable jardin des supplices” (p. 233). “Inexorable,” because there is nowhere to escape from it.

Mirbeau’s translators sometimes introduce an element of nationality into the Mirbelian garden, situating it in China. Under the influence of the brothers Goncourt, the late nineteenth century had experienced a renewed interest in the Orient. Therefore, *A Chinese Torture Garden* would have only enjoyed a greater popularity as a book, had the author taken advantage of such a title.⁵ Aside from geographical precision, the translated title evokes exotic qualities; it brings to mind an ancient civilization; it awakens our curiosity to the mysteries associated with it. The French title, on the other hand, in its utmost simplicity draws attention to an image, a garden, and an experience of torture. Without making allusion to national boundaries, it maintains a geographical spaciousness and freedom, which probably was intentional. The French title is in harmony with the entire book, not only with Part II of the novel where the action takes place in China. Indeed, the metaphor, suggested by the title, applies to the universe and to the book as a whole. What is more, the desire to transpose the experience of one individual into a universal experience is not only in harmony with a tradition common in French letters, it is also characteristic of pointing to the book’s homogeneity. The geographical spaciousness is closely related to the “anonymity” which surrounds the characters and which allows every reader to assume, in his turn, the characters’ roles.

No doubt a novel divided into three such extremely uneven parts invites criticism. The first and the shortest of the three, the Frontispiece, raises many questions. Does it contribute an important dimension to the book or is it nothing more than a mere introduction by the author which we may discard if we so choose without altering the essence of the book? Or to the contrary, if for inexplicable reasons, the author had omitted it, would the meaning and the structure of the novel have become distorted? If the latter is true, of what artistic value would the reader be deprived?

⁵ O. Mirbeau, *A Chinese Torture Garden*, Transl. Raymond Rudorff, New York 1969. For unknown reasons, the Frontispiece has been left out from this translation.

The Frontispiece contains information which is not available anywhere else in the book and is closely related to what follows. Here the author describes a Parisian literary salon where outstanding scientists and men of letters discuss various aspects of crime. When their interest turns to women, we are not surprised to see this predominantly elitist group attribute crime to them: "Mais les crimes les plus atroces sont presque toujours l'oeuvre de la femme . . . On y retrouve, à leur caractère de férocité, d'implacabilité, sa présence morale, sa pensée, son sexe" (p. XXI–XXII). To illustrate that "La femme a en elle une force cosmique d'élément, une force invincible de destruction, comme la nature," (p. XXIV), one of the participants proposes to share with those assembled in the "salon" a personal adventure of his own. Part I and II represent an account of this experience. However, before the Frontispiece comes to an end, the author relinquishes his role as narrator, assumes the pose of cynical listener, and seems to disappear from sight.

The setting, the tone and the mood of the novel change as we leave the *fin-de-siècle* atmosphere to enter the more naturalistic setting of Part I. Here the new narrator recalls his childhood and early adult life and provides us with his family background. His recollections go back to the French Revolution when his ancestors practiced the art of "doing others in," („l'art de mettre les gens dedans," p. 12) Years later, the narrator himself enters the political arena of the Third Republic, shares in its corruption until it becomes expedient to vanish from public view. A former fellow student who has become an important minister in the government, rescues him from a difficult situation by suggesting a brief exile by means of a diplomatic mission to the East—an offer the narrator accepts. On a ship bound for Ceylon, he meets Clara, an eccentric English woman to whom he feels strongly attracted and who persuades him to abandon his mission.

In Canton I own a palace amid marvelous gardens, where everything is conducive to a free life, and to love. What are you afraid of? What are you leaving behind? Who cares about you! When you don't love me any more, or when you are too unhappy [...] you'll go away!⁶

Love and freedom so temptingly offered prove not only irresistible but illusory, as the protagonist later discovers. At first, the peaceful and happy ocean trip gives the voyagers a feeling of rebirth. In this small group of travelers isolated in mid-ocean, the passengers begin to seek greater pleasure in images of violence, cannibalism, exotic firearms. They dream of perfecting the latter and of increasing their power to kill; their sophistication consists ultimately in being able only to annihilate men but to eliminate even the traces of their victims:

I have invented a bullet, [boasts one of the passengers]. I call it the Dum-Dum [...] You'd say it was the name of a fairy in one of Shakespeare's comedies. The fairy Dum-Dum!

⁶ O. Mirbeau, *Torture Garden*, New York 1948, p. 113. The pagination that follows the English quotations refers to this edition.

It enchants me. A laughing, light and quite blond fairy, hopping, dancing and bounding about amid the heather and the sunbeams [...] I sometimes wonder if it's not a tale out of Edgar Allen Poe or a dream of our Thomas de Quincey. But no, since I myself tested that admirable little Dum-Dum [...] The bullet had gone through [...] twelve bodies which, after the shot, were only twelve heaps of mangled flesh [...] (p. 96—98).

The superb seascape of blue skies and shimmering waters provides only a passing escape from the torture perpetrated here in the cannibalistic fantasies of the voyagers. The protagonist occasionally utters a weak protest of indignation but he remains, on the whole, a passive spectator and witness. This is not surprising. In fact, in the Frontispiece he had chosen to read from a prepared manuscript rather than to narrate his story, which indicates the hero's passivity. Furthermore, the act of reading betrays a greater complicity between narrator and reader and reminds us of Baudelaire's "hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère."⁷ Moreover, because the narrator has chosen to remain anonymous, every reader, in his turn, assumes the role of protagonist and also remains anonymous. Everyone who opens the book participates in the personal adventure of the anonymous hero whose experience becomes a universal one.

Mini-flashes fill a two-year gap that separates Part II from Part I. During these two years, the narrator has discovered love, yet another instrument of torture, from which he has vainly tried to extricate himself. Although Clara had said, "when you don't love me any more, or when you are unhappy [...] you'll go away" (p. 113), to allow her lover to be free, the offer proves unworkable. The hero is never free of his love from Clara. Yet, loving Clara as he does, he is nonetheless very unhappy in her company, and infinitely more so away from her. This explains why, after a short separation, he returns and, unsuspectingly, submits to the ultimate torture. In Part II, the final and by far the longest segment of the novel, the anonymous narrator and Clara go to see a magnificent museum known for its artistic means of torture.

The action in the Frontispiece and Part I encompasses a series of events which move at a relatively brisk pace between 1789 and 1890. In part II we suddenly come to a standstill as we live through what seems an endless visit to the torture garden. We are in China, yet the geographical location of the garden remains rather vague, perhaps intentionally so. In this garden maintained by the government, we find tortures lavishly displayed amid the most exotic and brilliant flora. Clara pays little attention to the natural beauty of the exotic vegetation while the narrator finds in it moments of relaxation and sometimes sheer delight. Once more we are immersed in a Baudelairean atmosphere of *Les fleurs du mal* with its two-fold meaning of evil and suffering, "ou les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent."⁸ This brilliant floral

⁷ Ch. Baudelaire, *Au Lecteur*, [in:] *Les Fleurs du mal*, Paris 1961, p. 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

spectacle serves to disguise and to increase simultaneously bodily torture and mental distress.

The endless spectacle which takes place every Wednesday lasts only a few hours. At its conclusion, Clara and her companion leave the garden. Except for the fact that Clara frequently returns to the museum, the novel offers no other information. However, since the events of Part II precede those of the Frontispiece, a re-reading of the latter becomes essential. The introduction, where we encounter the anonymous narrator for the first time, must now be examined in the role as the conclusion of the novel.

A writer who chooses to call "frontispiece" that which appears to be his prefatory remarks and prefers the word to more common headings such as "preface" or "introduction," betrays premeditation, intent and purpose. The italicized text and the pages numbered with Roman numerals used in the Frontispiece represent the standard practice in introductions. They separate typographically, so to speak, the introduction from the main body of the novel.⁹ Mirbeau goes one step further by dividing the book into two major time segments; the past (Part I and II) and the present. Indeed, the relatively recent events described in the Frontispiece unfold in a few hours time; what follows it represents a long flashback. At the end of the novel, when the reader re-reads the opening pages of the Frontispiece, the latter acquires a new dimension.

On the other hand, we may choose not to consider the Frontispiece an introduction but a part of an architectural construction, a "façade principale d'un grand édifice" (*Le Petit Robert*). Literature offers well-known works where an author uses architecture to introduce the reader to the emotional world of his novel. In Zola's *L'Assommoir* (1877) Gervaise's first contact with the house in the „rue de la Goutte d'Or," where she will eventually die, foreshadows her death. In describing the external structure of the "Pension Vauquer," Balzac introduces moral elements which he later amplifies in *Le Père Goriot*. As for Mirbeau, the reader who, unsuspectingly, opens his book, symbolically opens the door to the garden of tortures long before Clara and the anonymous narrator take him there. And what a garden the Chinese museum is In Part II, when the reader finally enters it, women rush in, fascinated, eager to share in the spectacle of torture. In the Frontispiece the exclusively male public is no less fascinated by crime. The Parisian „salon" and the Chinese museum differ in atmosphere, as well as in the practice of torture depending upon the participants. The exotic vegetation of the garden in China conceals and intensifies the agony inflicted upon body and mind.

⁹ *Le Livre comme objet*, [in:] *Repertoire II*, Paris 1964, p. 119, Michel Butor points out the unexploited wealth of the timbre and the "couleurs typographiques" such as the special use of roman and italic type faces. Possibly, under the influence of the poet Mallarmé, Mirbeau may have sensed this richness. He divided his novel typographically into the Frontispiece (the present), and into Parts I and I and II. Together, the latter represent a long flashback.

Nature and the instruments of torture remain conspicuously absent in the Parisian “salon”, where the art of inflicting pain has reached the sophistication and refinement of a more decadent society, foreseen by the Chinese artists-tormentors: “We have been conquered by mediocrity,” said one of them, “and the bourgeois spirit is triumphing everywhere . . .” (p. 190).

Since the novel is “open-ended”, it provides no further information about the protagonist once they leave the garden. However, in *Les Perles mortes* (Le Journal, Août 5, 1899), we see Clara Terpe returning to her native England, stricken with elephantiasis and her beautiful body distorted by swelling and pain. The disease which afflicts her body knows no geographical boundaries; no garden walls can immunize one against the intense suffering it brings. Clara Terpe’s fate is identical to that of her beautiful friend Annie, who in *Le Jardin des supplices* frequently visited the garden of tortures. Stricken with elephantiasis, Annie developed a passion for pearls, then took her life. Clara Terpe experiences the same symptoms. Her physical pain turns into moral anguish as she watches the pearls decompose mysteriously on contact with her own decaying flesh.

In withholding from the readers of *Le Jardin des supplices* the information which he later included in the short story, Mirbeau endowed Clara with mysterious and mythical qualities. As beautiful as Eve, as evil as Lilith, this modern Ariadne guides her lover (and the reader) through an earthly maze of tortures. She is “La Femme” in whom the potential for good exists, though Clara herself finds pleasure in seeing others suffer;

Et puisqu’il y a des supplices partout où il y a des hommes [...] je tâche de m’en accommoder et de m’en rejouir [...] (p. 159)

explains Clara at the time she initiated her lover into the art of torture.

As for the narrator, after the memorable visit to the garden we meet him in the Parisian literary “salon” described earlier by the author in the Frontispiece. Like Hortus’ cucumbers, which sought freedom in the world outside the garden and discovered pitfalls everywhere, the narrator escaped from the unbearable atmosphere of the Chinese torture garden and from Clara’s embrace only to find another impasse in Paris. Free from Clara and from physical pain, he seems, nevertheless, an anguished man. In observing the distinguished Europeans who surround him, we notice their resemblance to the Chinese tormentors. In the safety of the literary “salon” protected by walls like those of a garden, the prominent Europeans let their imagination freely explore crime. Indeed, the narrator cannot run away from torment or from anguish, because the entire universe is seen by Mirbeau as an “immense, inexorable torture garden,” timeless and spaceless, yet always situated in time and space (China, Europe), always “en situation”, as in Sartre’s *No Exit*. Still, the splendid nature of the Chinese torture garden afforded some consolation for the absence of natural beauty and color in Paris. The narrator soon finds a way to escape from Paris by taking his listeners

and readers to a world of tortures, describing its natural beauty with such vividness that we have the illusion of being there.

The Frontispiece leads us to conclude that the practice of "decapitation, strangulation, flaying and tearing of flesh ..." (p. 156), witnessed in the archetypal Chinese museum, still goes on in the West. While the skillful Chinese tormentors mutilated the human body with primitive instruments, the distinguished Europeans practice the art of "doing others in." Their crimes remain undetected, and the criminal free from punishment. One guest, in describing his own father, the "docteur Trépan," says:

Vous savez qu'il n'y a pas d'homme plus sociable, plus charmant que lui. Il n'y en a pas, non plus, dont la profession ait fait un assassin plus délibéré. (p. XV).

Someone else boasts of killing a man "d'une congestion cérébrale." No violence, no instruments of torture, nothing but a threat to strangle, followed by extreme shock, is needed to kill the victim. In short, Mirbeau's novel is a sampling of torture gardens: A Chinese museum, the French Revolution, the Third Republic with its corruption, an ocean voyage, a Parisian literary gathering. The contributions of the 20th century reaffirm the latter's solidarity with the past, giving the Mirbelian metaphor—the world seen as a vast garden of torture—its universal and timeless dimension. Like a frame around its picture, the Frontispiece encloses the novel and reminds us at the end that Mirbeau's world affords no salvation nor resurrection.

Dedicated to men at large, the novel offers fleeting sadistic pleasures, murder and blood, coated with irony, artifact and art. In a world where torture is perpetrated by means such as education, justice, government, politics, business and love, the anonymous narrator remains the tormentor and the victim.

My name matters little; it is the name of a man who has caused great suffering to others as well as to himself—even more to himself than to others ... (p. 39).

We enter into and we exit from the world of *Le Jardin des supplices* through the Frontispiece. Like a revolving door, it always leads us back to the museum where the art of gardening and the art of inflicting pain and moral anguish: find a "harmonious" co-existence in the most exotic, paradise-like setting "où la torture se multiplie [...] de tout le resplendissement qui l'environne" (p. 158). The Frontispiece occupies a privileged position; it is the essential key to Mirbeau's novel as art form; it serves to open and provisionally to close the open-ended novel; it gives the book a circular structure and the action a cyclic quality. Every time a reader opens the book, he re-enacts the ritual of the visit to the garden of tortures. Furthermore, every part of the novel contributes to illustrate the metaphor announced in the title. Without the Frontispiece all of these elements—the circular structure, the cyclic aspect of the action, the metaphorical dimension of the novel—are lost.

STRUKTURA „OGRODU UDREĆZEŃ” OKTAWA MIRBEAU

STRESZCZENIE

Pozorny brak jedności w obrębie *Ogródu udręczeń* O. Mirbeau (1898) oraz bogaty zestaw interakcji, w które uwikłana jest struktura dzieła wraz z jego „problemową materią”, rodzą wiele pytań. Zdaniem Marcela Revou książka ta stanowi zapowiedź dalszych dzieł O. Mirbeau, sztuk teatralnych i innych utworów. Przy tym wszystkim Revou wydaje się nie dostrzegać tego, że właśnie te różnorodne składniki w swej syntezie kształtują *Ogród udręczeń* jako całkowicie jednolite dzieło sztuki.

Trzy nierówne części, z jakich zbudowany jest *Ogród udręczeń*, mogą stanowić podstawę do stwierdzenia luźnej konstrukcji tego utworu. Z drugiej zaś strony atmosfera zbrodni dominująca w całym utworze oraz odczuwalna wszędzie obecność narratora kształtują narzucające się wrażenie jedności. Co więcej, bohater utworu ukarany jest w części wprowadzającej, która w istocie rzeczy stanowi ekspozycję dzieła i zawiera wstępną konkluzję całości. Ta podwójna rola sytuuje część wprowadzającą jako klucz do dzieła. Jej zwięzłość oraz zastosowanie specjalnego kroju czcionki (kursywa) mogą u czytelnika wytworzyć przekonanie, iż jest to de facto wprowadzenie będące własną wypowiedzią autora, podczas gdy w rzeczywistości jest to integralna, organicznie tożsama część całego utworu. Gdybyśmy przeto część tę opuścili, „metaforyczny wymiar” dzieła zostałby całkowicie zatracony. Obraz ogrodu zawarty w tytule uzyskuje sens metaforyczny w intencji autora, który cały świat widzi jako jeden olbrzymi ogród udręczeń. Co więcej, dzieło to w swym kształcie artystycznym stanowi dobitną ilustrację tej metafory rozplanowaną w poszczególnych częściach utworu zależnie od wyznaczonej jej roli w danej części.

Część wprowadzająca (współczesność) łącznie z częścią I (przeszłość) i częścią II (zejście w podziemie udręczeń) są obrazem, ilustracją zademonstrowanej przez Mirbeau wizji losu ludzkiego. Wszędzie udręka i ofiara, a Człowiek poszukuje sposobów na zwiększenie owych udręczeń (Część II), ponadto zaś wynajduje coraz to nowe sofistyczne usprawiedliwienie dla powiększenia swego arsenału tortur.

Część wprowadzająca może być zatem uznana za zasadniczy składnik dzieła zapowiadający i niejako rozgrywający rozwiązanie, w następstwie czego *Ogród udręczeń* jest powieścią o pozornie jedynie luźnej konstrukcji.

Przełożył Jan Trzynadłowski