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Octave Mirbeau (February 16, 1848-February 16, 1917)

A Biographical Sketch

Bob Helms

1999

Octave Henri Marie Mirbeau was born on February 16, 1848 in Trevieres, in the department Calvados, in Normandy. His father was a doctor, but many of his forebearers were public notaries. At age eleven he was sent to Vannes to be educated by the Jesuits. He was raped by priests during his time there. In 1870 he joined the "Army of the Loire," fought in the Franco-Prussian War as a lieutenant, and was wounded once. After the war he became a journalist for monarchist newspapers, writing art and theater criticism as well as reactionary political articles. In the late 1870s and early 80s, he held local political office (something like a deputy police commissioner).and worked on the Paris Stock Exchange.

In 1885 Mirbeau was converted to anarchism, and remained a firm believer in that philosophy until his death. Continuously writing articles for anarchist periodicals, he was from the Late 1880s well-known as one of the leading anarchist men of letters. He knew Jean Grave, Zo D'Axa, Sebastien Faure, and Felix Feneon, all prominent anarchist figures that he passionately defended during the fa-

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mous “Trial of the Thirty” in 1894. During the Dreyfus Affair of 1897–98, Mirbeau was among the most prominent Dreyfusards in France, and the affair was in fact the underlying inspiration for his fourth novel, *The Torture Garden* (1899), which offers perhaps one of the ugliest illustrations of Government and the motives thereof ever written in any language.

Mirbeau was a very important critic of Art and Literature. He is credited with the discovery of the Belgian writer Maurice Maeterlinck, and he contributed substantially to the careers of Camille Pissarro, August Rodin, Paul Signac, Claude Monet, Maximilien Luce, and other important artists of the time.

Very little of Mirbeau’s work was translated into English during the author’s lifetime. In 1901, the American anarchist Benjamin Tucker attempted to publish his own translation of the novel *A Chambermaid’s Diary*, but the US Postal Service, under the puritanical guidance of Anthony Comstock, put a stop to it on grounds of obscenity. Tucker deleted some of the book’s best passages and released a sadly abridged edition. Even much later film versions have a drastically altered ending for this story, since the original is so extremely cynical. Mirbeau’s play about a ruthless millionaire, *Business is Business*, was produced on the New York stage in 1904, but with some changes of plot. Even so, it was regarded by American mainstream critics as “too French,” and “exaggerated.”

From 1887 Mirbeau was married to Alice Regnault, who is remembered by her husband’s biographers in unflattering terms. She was an actress of debatable talent but undisputed beauty, who was very shrewd with money. She was a very expensive prostitute behind the scenes during her acting career. At the end of her husband’s life she alledged that he had switched his position on the war and had become a patriot. He had done no such thing.

Aside from the approximately 1,200 short stories and articles that marked his long career, Mirbeau’s major works are his three autobiographical novels *Le Calvaire*, *L’Abbe Jules*, and *Sebastien Roche*, and later, *The Diary of a Chambermaid*, *The Torture Garden*,

In The Sky, and *La 628-E8*. He was a naturalist to the extreme, devoting long passages to descriptions of vegetation at every opportunity. His associations with this school of literature date from early in his writing career. Of the novels, *Abbe Jules*, about a renegade priest, and *The Torture Garden* are the most explicit and powerful expressions of anarchist thought that one could imagine. Mirbeau’s plays are mostly dark comedies, and include *Business is Business*, *The Foyer*, *The Bad Shepherds*, *The Epidemic*, and *Scruples*.

Mirbeau was a founding member of the *Academie Goncourt*, which has been, since its creation in 1896, the most revered of the French literary societies, and is composed of ten members who give annual prizes to the best volume of imaginative prose. Today, the *Academie* plans to restore the old anarchist’s tombstone to its original state.

Mirbeau was, throughout the thirty-two years of his anarchist period, intensely antimilitarist and anticlerical. Among his other causes were feminism, the abolition of child labor, the fight against Russian Tzarism and the repression of Japanese dissidents, abolition of capital punishment, defending the rights of working people and their unions, and the defense of libertarian education.

After the turn of the century Mirbeau was a wealthy man, and was sometimes called the “red millionaire.” Unfortunately his health was to start failing him around 1912. He suffered from depression since childhood, sometimes staring into the foliage of his garden for weeks at a time, and when he started to suffer from strokes, and then the general hopelessness of war, he declined rapidly. World War I demoralized and saddened Mirbeau, although he remained firmly antimilitarist. He died on his 69th birthday in 1917.

Today there is a Mirbeau Renaissance taking place in France, with all of his work coming back into print, and there is a lively society devoted to studying it. His play *Business is Business* made a triumphal return to the Paris stage in 1995. His novels are again being translated and published in English, some for the first time.