



## Animal Narrative in Octave Mirbeau's *Dingo*

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In the choice of material and the artful arrangement of events—in the establishment of the authority of an enlightened narrator, the provision of a dénouement that delivers synthesizing meaning—the novelist's assignments are many and complex. The writer is entrusted with choosing an edifying story while orchestrating and explaining material that must simultaneously be pleasing. Yet if there is a constant theme emerging from Octave Mirbeau's later fiction, it is the need to subvert the principle of narrative control. Even as early as *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* [1900], Mirbeau had problematised the univocal reliability of a single, central storyteller, cobbling together a text which, as Jean-François Nivet and Pierre Michel maintain, is 'une juxtaposition de récits sans autre liens les uns avec les autres que le simple désir arbitraire du narrateur' (679). Indeed, Célestine had described herself as a fragmentary being, a hybrid belonging neither to the bourgeoisie nor the working class, a self-contradictory creature, part parrot and part dog, a woman whose sexuality was both apologetically conventional and confoundingly heterodox, and an occasional lesbian-sado-masochist displaying a combination of necrophilic and fetishist proclivities.

Uncertain whether Célestine's journal is intended for an external audience or whether it is a private narrative addressed by the diarist to herself, Mirbeau's readers are similarly unaware of the novel's lineage and provenance. Is Célestine a fictional heroine invented by the novelist? Or was she a personal acquaintance and confidante whose autobiography is genuine? Either her words have the documentary authority of a behind-the-scenes observer, or they are stylistically falsified by a literary intermediary, who corrupts her journal 'en y mettant du mien', as Mirbeau writes. Deficient in truth value, unclear as to its source, generically heterogeneous, lacking in continuity, Mirbeau's novel is as deliberately unclassifiable as its heroine.

Consistent with the anarchistic views that he professed, Mirbeau's early novels (*Le Calvaire*, 1886; *L'Abbé Jules*, 1888; *Sébastien Roch*, 1890) had served a fundamentally denunciatory purpose, impugning the authority of parents, clerics, and educators. Conspuing, polemicizing, refuting, satirizing, Mirbeau's fiction was offered as an argumentative counter-discourse that depended on the enemies it purported to combat. For this reason, it left unresolved the problem often bedeviling the anarchist, namely what constructive, positive steps one takes when social evils have been eliminated.

Distrustful of all institutional authority, Mirbeau shrank from exercising the role of a self-assured narrator whose insights and explanations could guide audiences through the existential tangle of unaestheticised reality. Muddying the distinction between autobiography and fiction, Mirbeau strips his novels of their epistemological pretensions, choosing instead to use his writing, as Pierre Michel asserts, 'comme un moyen de rendre sensible la fondamentale ambivalence de toutes choses au lieu de n'en donner qu'une vision unilatérale, mutilante et mensongère' ('Mirbeau et l'autofiction' 128).

Having refused to give an artificial ordering to experiential chaos, Mirbeau also declined to structure his writings according to accustomed story form. Unwilling to impose his organizing consciousness on artistically unprocessed life, he began to experiment with assigning the narrative role to a host of natural, inhuman, animal, and mechanical sources. When it is no longer Mirbeau's narrative self that determines plot direction, his story ceases to express authorial mastery and wisdom. It no longer appears to be a product of the writer's creativity, an intellectual reworking of the formless stuff of his existence. When Mirbeau's attention is drawn to something by his chauffeur or his dog—when the narrative path is laid out by the nocturnal expeditions of a dingo or is obliged to follow the highway system along which his vehicle is traveling, the material does not come from the narrator but from the world that he occupies. It is not an idea that he transmits but an adventure that he discovers, not an insight he communicates but a story that he finds.

Published in serialised installments in *Le Journal* beginning in February 1913, *Dingo* carries on Mirbeau's project to rework traditional novelistic form. After authoring his 'roman automobile' (*La 628-E 8* 1907), Mirbeau had adopted the idea of entrusting his narrative to an animal: '*Ça me changera des hommes*', as he had written in a letter to Francis Jourdain (cited in Michel, Introduction, 615). In part, Mirbeau uses the wild dog as an intermediary to exact revenge on the xenophobic populace of Cormeilles-en-Vexin where, for four years, he had lived in 'un immense hôtel du XVIIIe siècle qualifié de *château* par les autochtones' (Michel, Introduction, 618). Having recourse to the

dingo as an instrument of salutary terrorism, Mirbeau repays the inhospitality of his countrymen by engaging in vicarious animal attacks on avaricious peasants, venal shopkeepers, and corrupt municipal officials. What particularises Mirbeau's identification with his theriomorphic hero is his dual objective: both to engage in fantasies of proxy violence against the natives who had mistreated him and to relinquish personal and human direction of the narrative he delivers.

Given Mirbeau's antipathy for institutional systems of education that stifle individuality and pervert instinct, it is not surprising that, late in his career, he began to shun didacticism and to avoid the enunciatory centrality of a privileged subject. In more mature novels like *Dingo*, Mirbeau assumes a marginal position of ironic self-deprecation, one consistent with his condemnation of egocentrism, ethnocentrism, and anthropocentrism, his controverting the presumed superiority of the Frenchman, the self, and the human being. Since the person who relates is the person who instructs, Mirbeau's narrator begins by reporting what others say, so that in *Dingo*, he talks for his dog or infers what his dog is saying. Reproducing the music of nature or the throbbing of machinery, he allows the monotonous drone of a narrator to be drowned out by the polyphony of the universe.

Already evident in Mirbeau's ambivalent relinquishment of narrative authority to Célestine is a view of fiction as being more than a vehicle for social criticism. By delegating the storytelling agency to others, Mirbeau renounces the artifice of plot construction in order to go where his subject leads him. The newly constructive, informational value deriving from Mirbeau's novels comes, not from the wisdom he imparts, but from the truths that others tell him. The writer's eclipsing by his material is especially evident in *Dingo*, where, as Enda McCaffrey comments, 'c'est le mouvement créé par le chien lui-même qui contribue à faire disparaître le narrateur' (72).

In Mirbeau's celebration of primitivity and wildness, he structures the narrative as an alternating deflation of traditional repositories of knowledge and a rehabilitation of the dispossessed whose insights go unvoiced. In *La 628-E8*, Mirbeau had interrupted the chronicle of his automobile tour of Europe in order to comment on Belgian aviculture or the inadequacy of Amsterdam's sewage disposal. Promoting a sense of disorientation, simultaneity, and ubiquitousness, he became the motorist's moving consciousness flooded by intense impressions, the attention of a self no longer particularised by one viewpoint. In this vagabond account, Mirbeau's emphasis on confusion and amazement creates the image of a narrator whose perspective is refreshed by new experience. Unconfined to the jail of a limiting subjectivity, Mirbeau practices a ventriloquistic identification with his material. A cyborg welded to his vehicle,

Mirbeau speaks in the voice of a speed-crazed traveler, half man and half machine, not a fragile human emitting a monotonous opinion, but 'la force de l'élément' that burns fuel to create movement.

In *Dingo*, the trajectory of the narrative is no longer determined by the quality of paved surfaces but is mapped by the murderous forays of the wolfish predator. Knowledge need no longer be conveyed through human speech or writing but may emanate from the natural world that Mirbeau inhabits with other beings. Mirbeau argues against science's dismissal of interspecies communication, 'based largely on the linguicentric Cartesian assumption that, lacking the ability to use symbols, nonhuman animals are qualitatively distinct from humans' (Sanders 406). Indeed, it is because Dingo is nonhuman, unproficient in symbol usage, that Mirbeau adopts this grotesque neonate as his storytelling agent.

Arriving one fateful day some nine years earlier—delivered in a black pine crate by the bibulous courier Vincent Péqueux—Dingo is an unwanted gift, an unwelcome disruption of Mirbeau's life. A springboard for Mirbeau's tale, this inaugural event is not precipitated by a storyteller exercising narrative control but issues from an irrational world governed by misfortune and contingency. Frustrating the narrator's accession to a position of masterful logocentrality, Dingo's appearance manifests the influence of disorder and accident. In *Dingo*, humans no longer structure existence with their discourse. Barking dogs, the voice of chaos, drown out man's explanatory reasoning, and uncivilised animal narrative goes wherever it may go. With Dingo's displacement of a human narrator as the novel's structuring agent, Mirbeau unsettles reader expectations about traditional fiction's form and function. Who chooses the novel's theme? Who imparts information? Who decides the direction of a narrative, ensuring its orderly sequentiality? Whose consciousness delivers intelligible intersubjective exchanges, sorting out a miscellany of characters occupying a disorderly fictional world? Who recapitulates and summarises material after organizing it as a story, changing undomesticated experience into a narrative with closure and meaning? Conflating the dog, its arrival, and its revolutionizing effect on his life, Mirbeau equates his novel and the eponymous hero so that the writer is subordinated to his subject. Embodying experience untainted by reflection, Dingo becomes an expressive vehicle for life prior to its refinement into literature.

Initially, Mirbeau assimilates the animal to a car, as an instrument of transformative self-renewal whose dimensions can be measured and whose operation can be analyzed. Mirbeau begins his appraisal of Dingo with a morphological examination of the creature's head and body, the inharmonious adjustment of its parts, its undeveloped musculature, and its rudimentary motor

skills. As Mirbeau had anatomised the organic arrangement of his automobile, its steel lungs and electrical innervation, he assesses the admirable machinery of the dog, its 'raison d'être supérieure, inconnue de lui, raison d'équilibre physiologique, d'ajustage mécanique, de canalisation musculaire, d'endurance' (651). Despite mocking the pretentious jargon of scientists like Sir Edward Herpet, donor of Mirbeau's dingo, he, too, asserts explanatory mastery over his subject, exercising control over the animal by caging it in the detail of his zoological description. As Herpet had followed the gift of the dog with an explanatory letter, classifying Dingo, 'son mécanisme et la manière de m'en servir', as Mirbeau says (640), the animal is viewed as an instrument put at the disposal of its user. However, while a person steers his vehicle, the dingo eludes man's control, leading his master on frantic, nocturnal marauding escapades. Guided by instinct rather than by maps and planned itineraries, Dingo takes Mirbeau's narrative to unpredictable destinations.

Following Herpet, Mirbeau uses science in an effort to replace the richness of phenomena with the smallness of their explanation. Like the delivery box filled with animal excrement and a bone, classificatory discourse is a coffin whose contents are suffocated by clarity. Resembling the delivery crate, pictured as a cradle and a casket, science is a system of tautological explanation that moves from identifying an embryonic problem to providing a thanatologic answer.

Of course, in emphasizing the dryness of technical, scholarly language, in discussing the effects of a monopolistic narrator, Mirbeau himself is trapped in a box of scientific terminology, making the limitations of conventional narrative the subject of his own sometimes conventional narrative. Conjecture about dogs' vocabulary, their expressive body movement—about canine intuition and animal epistemology—is adapted to fit the single medium available to Mirbeau. His innovation is to go beyond the ironic, self-referencing disparagement of literary language in an attempt to experiment in sympathetic animal narrative. With its structural randomness and abrupt changes in narrative focus, Mirbeau's text follows the moving spotlight of the dingo's attention, tracing the undefinable pattern of the dingo's attractions and antipathies, delivering knowledge obtained outside the usual channels of naturalist observation and analysis.

Using satire, Mirbeau sets out to undo the work of science that fences wild behaviour inside a system of taxonomic nomenclature. Neither wolf nor dog, Dingo is a composite creature similar to the author, whose work is neither novel nor autobiography, but a member of the mongrel species of auto-fiction, whose classificatory value, as Pierre Michel says, is to 'effacer les frontières des genres

narratifs' (121). Unlike the chambermaid, hybridised by her working-class origins and bourgeois aspirations, Dingo remains uncastrated by the master who rechristens him. Science's goal—to civilise raw experience using definition and description—takes the aleatory singularity of an unfamiliar entity and neutralises its foreignness by grouping it with like others. As Anselm Strauss remarks: 'To name is to know and the extent of the knowing is dependent on the extent of the naming' (20). Replacing the feral alterity of the wolf with the recognizable servility of a dog, the master names an animal, and with his word, creates a pet.

Linguistic naturalization of a wild thing follows a path of increasingly narrow differentiations: from species to order to family; from dog to my dog; from the complexity of a mechanism to a guidebook on how to use it. However, Mirbeau attempts to return from the one to the many, naming his dingo Dingo, revoking science's nominative authority, collapsing the walls created by definitions, noting that the word *dingo* expresses the failure to contain its referent. Neither altogether institutionalised nor entirely anarchic, Mirbeau's novel is written in dingo language. An idiom that eludes capture, it resists appropriation by master-users, frustrates programs of education, escapes from classificatory pens, refuses to obey, and is unwilling to be housebroken. Like the Malaysian word defining a dingo as what it is not, Mirbeau's animal communicates by drawing on its inhumanly accurate repertory of barks, growls, glances, and postures: 'une langue ingénieuse, concise, pittoresque et qui dit bien ce qu'elle veut dire' (641).

In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note that there is never one wolf, only packs. Incapable of catching the animal or grasping what it symbolises, the hunter is afforded an 'instant apprehension of a generic multiplicity: wolves' (27). Unlike zoological families, bands of wolves are unstable, uncountable, constantly reconfiguring collectivities unstructured by hierarchy. As Deleuze and Guattari point out, Freud was unable to understand the Wolf-Man as a fluid, changing welter of libidinal impulses beyond the analyst's nosological reach, and so insisted on capturing the fragmentariness of the man inside the fixity of a diagnosis. 'Thus, when there is no unity in the thing, there is at least unity and identity in the word' (27).

Mirbeau's readers are familiar with his strategies for dismantling fixed definitions, impermeable classifications, stable identifications and names that contain a knowable self, rigorous designations of literary genres that order and divide, notions of character that house a fictional being within a pattern of recognizable behaviours and beliefs. When Dingo rampages through forests and barnyards, Mirbeau's novel showcases a hero that runs away from the author. Unbounded by Mirbeau's direction and his readers' understanding,

Dingo roams free, becoming a unity that disintegrates into multiplicity. 'Lines of flight or of deterritorialization, becoming-wolf, becoming inhuman, deterritorialised intensities: that is what multiplicity is' (Deleuze and Guattari 32).

Sometimes Mirbeau, unable to cure himself of the wish to domesticate and master, derives comic effect from self-satirizing descriptions of his efforts to fence in his uncivilised pet. Then Dingo is attractive, not because of his spontaneity and violence, but because of the challenge he poses to his owner to humanise him. For Mirbeau, the more savage the material, the more glorious the literature that tames it. In the words of encouragement that conclude Herpet's letter, he recommends following the same program of behavioural engineering and educational deformation that Mirbeau had decried in his autobiographical novels. 'Elevez-le bien', Herpet says about Dingo, 'surveillez-le bien, étudiez-le bien' (645). Yet what Mirbeau enjoys are his dog's resistance to discipline, his inscrutability and unresponsiveness to instruction and training. Dogs that are the most carefully supervised and raised are the ones who heed their masters' commands. They are the ones that come when they are called by their owners and then are flattened by the tires of an oncoming automobile.

With his love of novelty and change, Mirbeau could not help but be fascinated by dogs that compensated for a lack of longevity with lives of intensity and action. Unlike humans, decaying in the lethargic time of their habits, dogs 'brûlent les étapes de la vie, et ils courent très vite, comme des fous, vers la vieillesse et vers la mort' (663). Accelerating out of the clumsiness of infancy, Dingo enters the adolescence of Mirbeau's novel, where the author's assimilation of animal wisdom is projectively described as his pet's education. The homologous mirroring of Dingo's learning and Mirbeau's unlearning determines the regressive orientation of the narrative—away from culture and back toward nature. When not perverted by education, taste is not aesthetic because it remains gustatory. For Dingo, as Mirbeau says, 'la beauté des choses, c'est leur comestibilité' (653).

In place of intellectual growth, there is muscular development. In place of an assimilation of ideas, there is the swallowing of objects. In the same way that Dingo laughingly rejects foodstuffs adulterated with chemical additives, he shuns Empire sofas upholstered in glaring reds and greens. Eschewing Rousseau's insistence on austerity, Dingo shows a fondness for cooked meat and down pillows. While having a sophisticated palate and gourmet tastes, Dingo uncovers from beneath piles of dead leaves 'd'innommables ordures' (655) and so instructs his teacher how to be both animal and human, how to combine the passive pleasure of eating with the aggressive purposefulness of hunting.

Mirbeau downplays Dingo's linguistic shortcomings by indulging in what John Archer calls the 'human tendency to project feelings and thoughts onto animals' (252). Those who think like Archer view this over-attribution of intelligence to animals as motivating dog-owners to engage in dialogues with their pets, imaginary exchanges consisting of 'short utterances, with many imperatives and questions, repetitions, simple sentences' (Archer 252). Mirbeau goes further, imputing a greater linguistic versatility to dogs than to people, remarking that canines understand all human languages while humans can speak no word of dog. Canine polyglottism, sensitivity to their master's vocal inflections, facial expressions, and mood restructure the language relationship between dogs and people to the advantage of the former.

Passages in which Mirbeau credits dogs with fluency in Russian, Hindustani, Telegu, and German underscore his own expressive limitations. In so doing, Mirbeau suggests that the informational value of his text depends on minimizing his narrative's misrepresentation of animal intelligence. Mirbeau's comments about dogs' linguistic proficiency establish an inverse correlation between knowledge and expressiveness, so that the more eloquent the delivery, the more hollow the message. It is because dogs cannot talk that their wisdom is great.

In Mirbeau's novel of expressive self-derogation, he empties his plot of cultured, rich, educated characters whose language spreads lies, so that he can people his story with indigents and vagabonds whose simplicity assimilates them to dogs. Escorted by Mirbeau's cook, Marie, into the squalid hamlet of Ponteilles-en-Barcis, Dingo mingles with an undifferentiated populace of roving bands of dogs, subhuman shopkeepers, brutish municipal employees, 'des troupes d'oies et de dindons', a phylogenetic assortment of bestial humans and personified animals: 'peuplades sauvages primitives [où] les choses [...] prenaient instantanément—les choses, les bêtes, et les gens—un caractère de déformation démesurément tragique' (66).

Of course, such literary deformations are caused by the author's inability to fit himself to his subject. The gap between Mirbeau's intellectual, ethical, and linguistic refinement and the coarseness of his animal and human characters is what explains the anarchic emancipation of the story from its teller. As it progresses, Mirbeau's narrative increasingly focuses on the author's inability to domesticate his material.

When Dingo is introduced to the local villagers, he inspires uneasiness and perplexity. Refusing the butcher woman's offer of a lump of sugar, Dingo is identified as an uncanny subject, as unreadable to the townspeople as he is to Mirbeau's audience. Dingo's frequent escapes from Mirbeau's narrative, his

chapter-long absences, his disappearance into a textual wilderness of disconnected anecdotes and unrelated social commentary confirm the impression of the author's relinquishment of control over his exuberant canine hero. Rather than producing an artistically falsified conventional narrative, Mirbeau finds a novel plot device, sets it free, and then follows it.

In the story, Dingo's multiplication as thieving notaries, murderous vagrants, and taciturn poachers defines him as Deleuze and Guattari's wolf-become-pack. Mirbeau's provincial bestiary pictures plant, animal, and human life as existing in primitive homogeneity. Language ceases to be a uniquely human faculty, as Mayor Théophile Lagniaud, after engaging in solitary debate about the desirability of bringing a train service to the village, resumes 'ses divers colloques avec les poules, les oies et les boutiquières' before returning 'chez lui, à petit pas' (672). Normally formalised by walls preventing interspecies communication, the distinctions between wild and tame animals, farmers and livestock are blurred. Dovecotes, stables, chicken coops, houses, shops, places of worship offer indiscriminate asylum to all creatures, as the village church, its tabernacle defiled by pigeon dung, is assimilated to Noah's ark with its innumerable pairs of zoomorphic cargo. Universalised as all organic life, Dingo represents the superiority of animal culture over the brutishness of human instinct.

Repeatedly Mirbeau emphasises his countrymen's deviation from behavioural norms, their transgression of rules of decency. Driven by impatient greed, local tavernkeeper, Evariste Jaulin, conspires to bring about his mother's death as he weakens the cement support for the barn loft where she is made to sleep. Metonymised as an appellation without ancestral derivation, Jaulin becomes a fungible component of his role as drink-provider. Changeless and timeless, he is an ahistorical necessity, a generic barkeeper whose indispensability particularises him as his name. In the same way that Mirbeau's dingo is Dingo, the local publican operates as a pack-become-wolf: 'Même pour ses camarades d'enfance, Jaulin est Jaulin, brièvement, simplement, comme Dieu est Dieu' (675).

Building on lore about peasant incest and cruelty, Mirbeau transforms his human characters into matricidal beasts, an animal mass unorganised by intelligence or virtue. A degraded species made classless by the interbreeding consequences of their promiscuity and materialism, Ponteilles's population is like its dogs, an ignoble, copulating menagerie of rat-faced scroungers, sluts, bastards, and pariahs, 'nomades louches', 'réductions bouffonnes de loups, d'hyènes et de lions', 'chiens sans race et sans métier' (683). Like a medieval town square swarming with mendicants, bishops, pickpockets, and lords,

Ponteilles's dog world is preyed upon by the violent and the homeless, policed by shepherds and Bas-Rouges, a breed ennobled and perverted by being inculcated with human values.

Not privy to the mayor's conversations with chickens and geese, Mirbeau reports the argument between the Bas-Rouges and Dingo, characterizing it as a dialogue of sublimation and instinct. Neurotic products of a repressive civilization—'très disciplinés, un peu tristes, ennemis des vains amusements, réfractaires à toute fantaisie' (684)—the Bas-Rouges embody a super-ego that forbids. More human than their lubricious owners, they are animals absolved of their animality, dogs trained in their own alienation. Staging a conversation between superintendance and spontaneity, order and lawlessness, Mirbeau re-creates the same exchange when he tries later to teach his dingo obedience. While Mirbeau functions as the voice of social institutions that denature, Dingo expresses the anarchist inclination of an author who, as McCaffrey writes, 'incarne dans le chien, et dans sa primitivité, une résistance à toute conformité politique et sociale' (69).

If Bas-Rouges are animals re-educated to resemble the author, Mirbeau is an artist who has forgotten how to act like a dog. Life's raw material—like sheep over which one keeps watch—can be an object from which one remains abstemiously disengaged. It can offer a lesson in renunciation and discipline, or it can be a source of pleasure, as food to be consumed.

In the dialogue between culture and nature, Mirbeau divides himself between id-driven impulses to kill and eat and controlled inclinations toward sublimation and creation. In order to dramatise the predicament of man, the civilised animal, Mirbeau chooses to give voice to both his warring halves. But it is only by surrendering the prerogative to devour his prey that the hunter learns how to speak, filling his mouth with words instead of the meat that he craves. For Dingo, who says of sheep, 'Eh bien, moi, je les égorge' (686), there should be no movement from comestible to verbal objects. It is only by relinquishing instinctual behaviour, by guarding things instead of swallowing them, that one acquires language, describing the world instead of incorporating it. It is this original loss that enables an animal to be civilised, stripping it of its status as a lone hunter in order to attach it to a collectivity of unhappy speakers, affiliating it with what Abraham and Torok describe as 'une communauté de bouches vides' (263).

Unlike humans—often deceived by power, perfume, money, and glibness—dogs are adept at deciphering personal character. Seemingly incapable of self-appraisal, animals are devoid of narcissism. They appreciate furniture for its comfort rather than for its elegant design, enjoy eating food rather than admiring its culinary presentation. In Dingo's repertoire of growls,

barks, whimpers, and grunts, there is no word for beauty, 'et s'il employa ce malencontreux vocable', Mirbeau says, 'ce fut toujours avec une parfaite ingénuité' (653-54).

Unlike animals whose clairvoyance depends on symbolic illiteracy, Mirbeau and his human peers read the natural world as an anthropomorphic reflection of themselves. Despite Mirbeau's claims to the contrary, a dog may be an occasional aesthete, susceptible to death-by-ugliness as befell Mirbeau's terrier in Noirmoutiers. An impressionable creature fond of beribboned poodles, Mirbeau's dog had awakened from a dream of beauty to the shocking spectacle of a neighbor lady whose mustache and tangled hair had strangled its bark and stopped its heart.

For Mirbeau himself, animals are theriomorphic expressions of human characteristics, like his cat, Miche, whose Baudelairean languorousness and treacherous sensuality made her a common symbolic embodiment of her owner's misogynistic fascination. With their lucidity clouded by vanity, people's responses to others are conditioned by faulty self-representations. Attending to information arriving from a complex network of channels, a person reacts to others as to projections of his own insecurities. The other is as unreadable as coffee grounds in a cup, as the striations on a marble or the procession of clouds across the sky. He is as unfathomable as the bottomless black pool of a dog's eyes, a mystery whose richness supplies the motivation to create: 'Il n'y a que l'ignorance de la vie', Mirbeau writes, 'de la vie que, faute de la comprendre, les poètes ont peuplée de songes puérils et de mensonges à dormir debout' (665).

It is by re-learning lost animal wisdom that Mirbeau tries to avoid making his work another childish daydream or soporific lie. Not needing to empty his mouth of prey in order to fill it with words, Dingo can ignore the casuistry of status, the subtle language of respectability, wealth, and clothes. Instead, he is able to interpret others according to their smell. '[A]n animal, archaic faculty, but one that is necessary for preservation, touching as it does the very sources of life', smell has 'close links with appetite, desire, and all of sexuality', and therefore, as Annick Le Guérer claims, has long been subject to repression, 'for smelling and sniffing are bestial' (447).

For dogs, the nose knows, and olfaction delivers information. As bipedalism distanced man from the earth and its scents, the incest taboo sundered the child's intimate bond with his mother, removing him from the intimate smells of excrement, blood, and sweat, requiring him to fill with language the space separating him from bodies. Civilization brought a forgetting of the olfactory pleasure Freud called *Riechlust*, causing old objects

of desire to turn into new sources of disgust. But dogs, undeceived by masquerades of intimidation and seduction, engage in pheromonal communication whose information is reliable.

Without the unmotivated connection of words and referents, the language of smells is somatically universal, promoting proximity and contact between addressee and sender. The vocabulary of animals, body odors transmit confessional messages that audiences are often reluctant to heed. Unmediated statements about estrus or menstruation, smells are disclosures stifled with fragrances and soap. But whereas human language is the language of rationalization and hypocrisy, olfactory language is truth made intelligible.

Adopting his master's sympathy for the disenfranchised, Dingo spurns decent people whose cleanliness is aphonic and gravitates to a transient populace of pungent, unwashed outcasts. When Mirbeau asks an acquaintance about Dingo's predilection for the poor, the friend responds simply: 'il aime tout ce qui sent mauvais' (691). Greeting the 'mendiants, chemineaux, vagabonds affamés' who stop at Mirbeau's gate (691), Dingo answers the wayfarer's malodorousness with happy noises of recognition, 'un léger roulement de la gorge, une sorte de ronron très doux' (691). With sounds answering smells, the need for symbolic language is circumvented, so that in dog speech, the message becomes indissociable from its expression.

An olfactory signature guaranteeing the identity of the sender, body odor encapsulates individuality and character. Thrusting muzzles into crotches, making the acquaintance of canine peers with nose-to-anus salutations, dogs change emunctory passages into channels of communication, using sensory organs as organs of expression. Mirbeau is different from multi-lingual dogs, capable of understanding masters from all nations, and so is limited to interpreting Dingo's speech with admiring conjecture. In Mirbeau's narrative, Dingo's laconic statements are translated into their wordy French equivalent, as the complexity of the formulation risks making the message more inaccurate. Uncomplicated by humans' narcissistic dualism, their resolution into gazers and images, speakers and eloquence, ideas and style, animals utilise an expressive form that is adequate to its purpose.

This is why Mirbeau, adjusting form to content, chooses to let his subject, Dingo, guide him through the story of his life. Perplexed by the seeming directionlessness of Mirbeau's plot, its detours and digressions, readers may repeat Nestor Roqueplan's question as cited by Baudelaire: 'Où vont les chiens?' Stopping to wonder at an insect, urinate on a lamp post, decipher the scatographic message left by a fellow dog on the sidewalk, Dingo follows a narrative path that seems to zigzag haphazardly. The innovation that Mirbeau

accomplishes is not to offer facile answers to the enigma Dingo poses. What is Dingo saying? Where is Dingo going? In his novel, Mirbeau surmises but never reaches a conclusion. Suggesting the groping inaccuracy of human communication, Mirbeau appreciates the beauty and richness of an elliptical canine idiom. He respects the nuanced intersubjectivity uniting dog and owner by occasionally losing track of Dingo so that his mystery cannot be impoverished with explanation.

Like every organism, Dingo finishes the narrative journey of mortality, emerging from the coffin of the delivery crate to enter the burial hole at the foot of Mirbeau's oak tree. As the destiny of a dog is to live and move until it dies, the novel's eponymous hero determines the book's trajectory and length.

While Mirbeau guesses but never elucidates the meaning of Dingo's vocalizations, his tail wagging, and postural expressions, what he learns from observing animals is the pride and dishonesty of men. Dingo's fidelity, intuitiveness, candor, and good sense offer compelling lessons in the inconstancy of human friendships, the vanity of human art, the faultiness of human judgment. Despite his murderous deprivations and imperviousness to training, Dingo is a companion Mirbeau prefers to all his anthropomorphic counterparts. The plain but powerful message to be derived from Mirbeau's novel is that a human is more bestial than the beasts he treats so inhumanely.

In pursuit of its more traditional goals, Mirbeau's text makes a familiar indictment of institutions that pervert instinct, that sanctify a culture extolling asceticism and encouraging a flight from corporeity and life. Religious teachings promote hysteria and masochistic guilt, as the Abbé Jules discovered. As Tacitus noted, a society structured by an unequal distribution of wealth creates hatred, encouraging the poor to act obsequiously toward the rich. But as Mirbeau says: 'Dingo n'avait pas lu Tacite' (690).

A modest anthropology of small French village life, Mirbeau's novel adopts the dog's perspective to record its citizens' foibles more naturally. Antipathetic characters are those most alienated from their animal qualities, whose animal appetites are served by duplicitous human cunning. Conversely, in the animal menagerie of transients, laborers, and poachers, Dingo finds human kin who share his directness and simplicity. Crowned by society's adulation, scientists, artists, and public officials are the frauds whose criminality is detected by the exquisite forensic instrument of Dingo's nose.

In the novel, Mirbeau intimates that the subjects of zoological investigation are the features of animal behaviour scientists find most disturbing in themselves. Man's descendancy from apes suggests a potential for atavism that the scientist works to neutralise with explanatory scholarship. The threat of

reverting from technical language use to the oral aggressiveness of primates—of going from speaking to biting—is the subject of Edward Herpett's monograph, *La Dentition des Grands Singes*. The verbosity of scholarly publishing identifies it as a defense, a strategy civilised man adopts in order to speak instead of kill.

Mirbeau's other scientist friend, Edouard Legrel, is an entomologist specializing in the myology of spiders. In the narrowness of Legrel's research, Mirbeau satirises the irrelevance of science, its focus on minutiae, on topics of microscopic interest. More importantly, in Legrel's work, he arrests the insect's darting motion, life's swarming pullulation that Mirbeau associates with fertility—like the squirming maggots in the blood pool described in *Le Jardin des supplices*. In *Dingo*, as in Mirbeau's other works, sudden bursts of random movement are reminiscent of the chaos from which humanity evolved, the undifferentiated confusion preexisting God's Creation, when all life forms intermingled and animal species were unseparated. Mirbeau's conception of creativity depends on periodic reintegration into this primordial muddle, dispersal in the manure heap from which individual forms emerge. Unpredictable, ceaseless motion, the blending of man and animal, male and female characterise this state of original hybridization. For the anarchist Mirbeau, restoration of this confusion is a precondition to new creation, as destruction comes before rebuilding. This impulse betrays a demiurgic wish to undo the work of God, disassembling divine work and replacing it with human art. In Mirbeau, monuments embody a wish for the indestructibility of marble while larval movement inspires fears of instability.

In Legrel's arachnologic studies, he keeps his subjects in glass enclosures, inhibiting spiders' movement by studying myology, trying to understand experience by replacing life with vivisection. But Mirbeau's novel demolishes science's taxonomic walls, as his unclassifiable hero, that is neither dog nor wolf, eludes capture and continues on his peripatetic journey. Inquillism, expressed as the owning of a pet, conveys the same desire to civilise the instincts, as lust and violence, projectively assigned to housebred animals, should be exorcised and mastered, made obedient and tractable. Conversely, Dingo's disregard for civilization's rules reflects the hostility of his master toward proscriptive institutions. Dingo's interspecies straddling of the canine/lupine barrier is reflected in the identification of the animal and man so that a composite Mirbeau/Dingo despises poseurs and impostors, and spurns the material and moral benefits of European culture.

The return to namelessness and unity is articulated in the novel by Mirbeau's insistence on boundary transgression. When Mirbeau takes his dog to visit his friend Legrel, the scientist's daughter wishes to introduce Dingo to her pet

sheep. But there is no paradisaical lying down of the lion and the lamb, no bloodless coexistence of predator and prey. The derivative designation of animals as pets, whose nominative uniformity should foster harmony and peace, gives way to the primitive clash of the hunter and the hunted, and Dingo rips the throat out of his defenseless ovine counterpart.

As an incarnation of savagery, Dingo expresses Mirbeau's failure to sublimate aggression and transform existence into literature. In his letter, Edward Herpet had predicted an approaching cultural decadence represented by the spectacle of dingoes left to waste away in zoos. Herpet's long description of dingoes' classification and behaviour had been a cage of explanation in which science confined exotic fauna. But in response, Mirbeau writes as a way to frustrate Herpet's project, opposing to the science that imprisons life the art that liberates.

If Mirbeau's animal fiction expresses freedom from control, it is empty of sentimentalism and pictures violence with dispassion. Dingo's pleasing disobedience and independent spirit are counterbalanced by the ferocity with which he goes on killing rampages. 'C'est que Dingo n'est pas seulement un de ces '*bons chiens*' chantés par Baudelaire [...] Il est aussi', as Pierre Michel says, 'un grand carnassier, qui a autant besoin de carnage que de liberté et de grand air, et qui ne tue pas seulement pour se nourrir [...] mais aussi et surtout par plaisir' (Introduction 623).

Dingoes' superiority to humans lies in their spontaneity and artlessness. Dogs do not premeditate; they are not conceited or acquisitive. With recklessness and profligacy, they live in the moment: 'Est-ce que j'économise, moi?' Dingo inquires of his master (721). In the novel, Mirbeau uses Dingo to comment on creativity and art as byproducts of a culture of anality and necrophilia. Unlike artists who stop to mirror themselves in their productions, animals do not admire their kill or their virtuosity as predators. In Dingo's murdering sprees, he may seem to move from butchery to cygenetics, from hunting alone to joining dogs in their pursuit of a stag, from mangling prey to aligning it by size and species on the ground. But it is Herpet who takes credit for discovering the origins of the *tableau de chasse*, since the predator forgets his work in his hurry to continue. Animals do not economise or surround themselves with fetish trophies; they do not enshrine cadavers or adorn themselves by putting on their victims' skins. Nostalgic for the hot blood of the ecstatic instant of the kill, Dingo sinks his teeth into mink stoles and sable furs in an attack on the mausoleum art of a culture of the dead.

For Mirbeau, art is a voodoo charm that captivates the soul, bewitching the creator with love for the beautiful death that he fashions. Mirbeau's

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dilettante acquaintance, the painter Pierre Barque, regards his friends as fauna to be caged inside his canvases, *zèbres* whose exoticism can be domesticated by his talent. A caricature of Dingo, he hunts tirelessly for subjects that his art can capture and transform into images of hares. The creatures Dingo slaughters are left to wither in Barque's portraiture, so when the painter undertakes his work on a picture of Mirbeau's pet, first projecting 'sur la toile la tache énorme d'un chien-lièvre' (841), he finds his subject is resistant to its conversion into imagery. Life fights back against an aesthetic of stasis and morbidity, and Dingo runs away with his deadly metonymic likeness. Having sniffed the painting and substituted the dog's nose for the artist's paintbrush, Dingo 'saisit la toile dans sa gueule et l'agita violemment, comme il avait fait autrefois des fourrures qu'il déchiqueta' (841). Barque reaches to stop the thief he had tried imprisoning in his portrait, but like the hero that escapes from Mirbeau's narrative control, Barque's material eludes him: 'déjà Dingo avait fui' (842).

Chased out of Ponteilles by the baying pack of angry citizens, Mirbeau relocates with Dingo to Paris, where the dog that literature could not tame is slowly poisoned by acculturation. Once an expression of jubilantly anarchic life that had raced ahead, overflowing the container in which art would have put him, Dingo begins to decline, as age and resignation slow his movements, weaken his muscles, and curl him up in hopeless docility on Mirbeau's floor. Where Mirbeau's lessons in civic mindedness had gone unheard, Dingo is made sick by affection for his masters. Where reason failed, love kills. So when Mirbeau's wife takes to bed in the aftermath of a riding accident, Dingo falls ill sympathetically, contracting jaundice. Unresponsive to threats and persuasion, Dingo is domesticated by loyalty.

In his prime, Dingo had been an expertly crafted machine of destruction: precision, volatility, élan, muscle, passion, a force of oblitative hygiene that had scoured barnyards of fowl and emptied forests of partridges. Like Mirbeau's ideal novel, sanitizing its material by annihilating it, Dingo had passed and left nothing behind but reverberation and turbulence. Ballistic motion like cars and bullets, Dingo is a hurtling narrative that careens towards its amnesiac conclusion. '[U]n chien épatant', as the laborer Pierre Piscot calls him, Dingo runs, and where he has been, there are no rabbits, no birds. 'Pour tout dire', Piscot says, il n'a pus rien de rien' (803).

Once Dingo is contaminated by exposure to humanity, his vehemence cools, his wildness moderates, and his speed diminishes. Like a writer wielding his pen with prudent circumspection, Dingo 'lève la patte... mais sans ostentation' (820). Made well-behaved by advancing age, Dingo loses his diabolical aggressiveness, but the only devil inside him is the one that human beings saw

there. So when Dingo works to suppress the wild dog of the bush country, '[i]l tenta de tuer en lui le dingo, le vieil homme' (820).

Like rare predators introduced into zoological treatises, or quick spiders paralyzed by myologic analysis, Dingo is cured of his enthusiasm for life by being subjected to a veterinarian's diagnosis. Dogs do not suffer from irrationality or rabies; 'il n'y a pas de chiens enragés', says the doctor, whereupon he hands Mirbeau a certificate verifying Dingo's health.

In its final, limping paragraphs, Mirbeau's narrative no longer exhibits the vitality of its satirical verve, is no longer animated by its hero's fugitive unrestraint. With the lustre of its stylistic coat growing dull, the elasticity of muscles growing flaccid, emaciated, the skeleton of its elegiac structure showing through, wasting away to a last few pages, Dingo ends and is transformed into *Dingo*. Having completed the trip from birth to extinction, Dingo is returned to the crate from which Mirbeau had extracted him, 'la boîte de sapin noirci, le menu cercueil d'enfant' (851).

Both coffin and corpse, Mirbeau's finished book is an object whose inertia attests to its evacuation of the life it contained. The eloquence of Mirbeau's necrological tribute to the vanished breath of his dog and the inspiration for his narrative is evidenced by the neutrality of his tone, the style that turns colorless when his protagonists starts to die. Mirbeau's story does not rise to an eschatological crescendo; it does not aspire to immortalise its subject or its glory. When a human being dies, it is impossible to accept: there must be something more than its biological finality. But as Mirbeau says, when a dog-book ends, it means no more than itself.

True art, Mirbeau believes, should not celebrate the exhaustion of its premise. The cadaver of a completed novel should not be commemorated with a monument. Because death should be unaccompanied by agitation or fanfare, a mourner can only note the disappearance of ephemeral forms and their reabsorption in the manure pile. Dingo had been killed by being humanised in literature, so it is right that the author not be the one interring the body, but rather Dingo's anthropomorphic twin, Flamant, the poacher. '[U]n être de silence et de nuit', Flamant had the tawny color of a predator, the stealth, the abyssal eyes, the pricked ears of a hunter, 'les narines [qui] battaient sans cesse au vent comme celles des chiens' (833).

Between the ceremonial grandeur of a famous man's obsequies, and what the Abbé Jules describes as the disintegration of carrion in forests, there is the dignified account of a life turned into art. It is fitting that the hunter give thanks to his prey, that the novelist acknowledge the material he consumes. When Flamant shoulders the body and disappears behind the house, he

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consigns Dingo's remains to the empty grave on Mirbeau's page. No granite or marble is set over the hole, only earth whose disturbance soon will no longer be evident. What Mirbeau leaves readers is not the wisdom he gathered, not knowledge objectified as funerary art, but reflections on how a dog changed his notion of fiction. No symmetrical alignment of corpses on paper, Mirbeau's novel ceases resembling a *tableau de chasse*. Accustomed to mastering an animal subject, Mirbeau surrenders control so that he can learn from his dog—so that the immediacy of experience not pass away into meaning, but so that literature can be revived with the heat and violence of life.

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