

## Przybos on Ziegler (2015)

Ziegler, Robert. *Octave Mirbeau's Fictions of the Transcendental*. U of Delaware P, 2015, pp. 211, ISBN 978-1-61149-561-4

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*Octave Mirbeau's Fictions of the Transcendental* is the sole book-length study to trace the spiritual trajectory of Mirbeau, an author best known for his relentless struggle for social and political justice. Conceived as a complement to and an expansion of Ziegler's previous book on Mirbeau, *The Nothing Machine* (2007), in which he discussed Mirbeau's ideological, social, and political "engagement" as reflected in his literary output, *Fictions of the Transcendental* examines a neglected aspect of Mirbeau's writing—his metaphysical quests. In order to uncover how, according to Mirbeau, the state of transcendence can be achieved, Ziegler submits Mirbeau's fictional characters to a close examination. The book is divided into four chapters which represent different approaches that Mirbeau adopted in his search for a secular metaphysics or "higher states of consciousness that elevate the individual out of the misery of existence" (2).

In chapter one, "The Pardoner," Ziegler discusses the early autobiographical novels, *Le Calvaire* (1886), *L'Abbé Jules* (1888), and *Sébastien Roch* (1890). Ziegler studies the intricate interconnection of religion, sexuality, and guilt. Drawing chiefly on Sigmund Freud's Eros and Thanatos, Buddhist quietude, and Arthur Schopenhauer's ideal of indifference, Ziegler examines an unhappy lover persecuted by a sadistic mistress in *Le Calvaire*, a priest tormented by strictures of celibacy in *L'Abbé Jules*, and an adolescent drawn to self annihilation after a childhood trauma inflicted by a rapist priest in *Sébastien Roch*. Ziegler argues persuasively that in these novels Mirbeau explores the relationship between suffering, forgiveness, and redemption in an effort to achieve a semblance of transcendence.

Chapter two, "The Seer," closely examines *Dans le ciel*, a novel published posthumously in 1989 that features a succession of first-person narrators. These narrators include Georges, a writer, and Lucien, a painter partly modeled on Claude Monet. Using the character of Lucien who unsuccessfully struggles to capture light and movement on canvas, Ziegler describes "the metaphysical quest for meaning and the artistic search for beauty" (83). He depicts Mirbeau's artists as estranged from divinity, but longing for transcendence, thus making *Dans le Ciel* a chronicle of creative impotence.

Chapter three, "The Stranger," analyzes Mirbeau's most popular novels—*Le Jardin des supplices* (1899) and *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre* (1900)—to uncover twisted paths leading to a transcendence of sorts. Ziegler argues that in *Le Jardin des supplices*, tortures "performed" in a blood-soaked garden should be viewed as necessary to the eternal cycle of metempsychosis, involving people, birds, and plants. In his analysis of *Le Journal d'une femme de chambre*, Ziegler focuses on the role that unresolved crimes, well-kept secrets, and impenetrable characters play in creating an atmosphere of mystery. In the face of unexplained and unexplainable events the non-believer Célestine reverts to a devotional automatism, and to journal keeping. She does so to cope with a world where hierarchical order has collapsed and moral certainties have disappeared. Ziegler postulates that "the anguish born of experiences of nothingness" (126) is an incentive to produce personal theologies and to engage in creative activities such as diary keeping.

Chapter four, "The Brother," discusses Mirbeau's late fiction in which the quest for the transcendental is characterized by Ziegler as an "astonished contemplation" (134) of people and beings. Georges Vasseur, the itinerant narrator of unrelated anecdotes that compose *Les 21 jours d'un neurasthénique* (1901), is a vacationer propelled by an interest in the people he meets in his wanderings. This curiosity is analyzed by Ziegler as a precondition for fraternalism and open-mindedness that lead the narrator to "an experience of transcendence by mingling with everything, by losing oneself in 'le grand tout'" (142). In *La 628-E8* (1907), Ziegler examines speed and flight, made possible by car travel. The narrator's euphoric drive through Belgium, Holland, and Germany is likened to the ever-accelerating process of *theosis*, defined as "a divinization that never attains its goal, never reaches its destination" (150). In analyzing *Dingo* (1913) Ziegler focuses on the relationship between an erudite narrator and his Australian wild dog that prompts the master to abandon anthropocentrism. The narrator rejects the rigidity of academic science and recognizes the inability of Western culture to grasp the absolute. Ziegler argues that for the narrator to gaze into Dingo's eyes "is to part the curtain hiding the secrets of the supernatural" (174).

This extremely rich and complex book is perhaps best suited to connoisseurs of Octave Mirbeau's multifaceted literary production. Anyone who has not read Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet's monumental *Octave Mirbeau: L'imprécateur au coeur fidèle* and is unaware of Mirbeau's high-voltage personality, radical political engagement, and fiery journalism in the cause of oppressed minorities, including women, children, and the Jews, may not fully appreciate the importance of Ziegler's latest project: to subject to close analysis elements in Mirbeau's fiction that point to the writer's concern about attaining

transcendence of sorts, be it moral, philosophical or artistic. A more experienced student of Mirbeau's œuvre will read Ziegler's latest book with immense gratitude that so much has been detected and skillfully examined through a psychoanalytical lens that had not been systematically applied to this prolific and prodigious author of fin-de-siècle France.

Mirbeau's spiritual meanderings, as uncovered by Ziegler, invite the reader to reflect upon the relationship between longing for transcendence and fiction writing in general. Indeed, Ziegler's most original insight is that while penning iconoclastic novels best known for their condemnation of French society and "defense of the forsaken, the poor, and the forgotten," Mirbeau repeatedly "turned his gaze toward the sky, seeking to discover the qualities in men that drew them to selflessness, transcendence, and beauty" (3). Ultimately, Mirbeau's case, masterfully analyzed by Ziegler in *The Nothing Machine* and *Octave Mirbeau's Fictions of the Transcendental*, serves as a caution to scholars who would content themselves with applying simple political grids to the writings of firebrand authors.

**Volume:** 45.1-2

**Year:**

- 2016