

# “Octave Mirbeau between Émile Zola and Vincent van Gogh: A New Aesthetics?”

John McDowell and Carolyn Snipes-Hoyt  
Burman University

## RÉSUMÉ

*Le groupement de Zola, van Gogh and Mirbeau offre un exemple unique des relations étroites qui peuvent se tisser entre lecture, peinture et écriture. Avant de devenir peintre, van Gogh se nourrit insatiablement de culture contemporaine, en particulier des œuvres du peintre Jean-François Millet et des romans de la série des Rougon-Macquart d'Émile Zola. Mirbeau fut non seulement un contemporain de Zola qui fit partie du cercle d'écrivains qui entourèrent le romancier à ses débuts, mais il fut aussi, comme le “Maître de Médan,” critique d'art et l'un des premiers à être fasciné par la façon dont van Gogh approchait la représentation visuelle. Seulement quelques mois après la mort de l'artiste, Mirbeau écrivit ainsi un article au sujet de van Gogh et de ses œuvres dans l'Écho de Paris (1891). Un an plus tard (1892-1893), il publia dans le même journal et sous forme de feuilleton, son roman Dans le ciel, consacré à un peintre dont les ambitions artistiques et l'état mental se font l'écho, en la déformant, de la situation de van Gogh peu de temps avant sa mort. Les œuvres non-fictionnelles et fictionnelles de Mirbeau explorent la façon dont la rencontre de l'écrivain avec la peinture de van Gogh joua un rôle dans le développement de ses objectifs littéraires et esthétiques et lui permit de distinguer ses œuvres du naturalisme zolien et d'autres courants contemporains, tout en incorporant certains de leurs aspects. À partir de l'exemple de Mirbeau, nous montrerons comment lecture, peinture et écriture interagissent et se fertilisent mutuellement, rendant possibles, dans ce cas précis, de nouvelles pistes de réflexion. Le terme “fertiliser” est ici de toute importance puisque l'acte de planter des graines et d'encourager leur germination, qui est dépeint dans les œuvres de van Gogh et Zola, constitue un trope important pour l'écriture de Mirbeau. Cet acte renvoie en effet au rôle que les arts jouent dans la vie de ceux qui les pratiquent ou qui s'en nourrissent, et il invite à changer les approches esthétiques et la réception de celles-ci.*

## Abstract

*The grouping of Zola, van Gogh and Mirbeau provides a unique example of the interrelationship that exists among reading, painting, and writing. Before van Gogh became a painter himself, he was an avid consumer of contemporary culture, in particular the works of the peasant painter Jean-François Millet and Émile Zola's Rougon-Macquart novels. Not only a contemporary of Émile Zola and part of his early circle of writers, but also an art critic like the “Maître de Médan,” Mirbeau happened to be one of the first to be fascinated by van Gogh's approach to visual representation. Mirbeau wrote an article for the Écho de Paris (1891) about van Gogh and his work, only a few months after the artist's death. A year after that (1892-1893), in the same newspaper, Mirbeau published his serialized novelistic work, titled Dans le ciel, about a painter whose artistic undertakings and mental state echo, with distortion, van Gogh's situation leading*

*up to his death. Mirbeau's non-fictional writing and fictional work explore how the writer's encounter with van Gogh's paintings played a role in the development of his own literary and aesthetic goals, enabling him to distinguish his works from Zolian naturalism and other contemporary trends, yet incorporating certain aspects from them. Through the example of Mirbeau, we will show how reading, painting, and writing interconnect to cross fertilize each other and, in this case, enable new lines of thinking to develop. The word "fertilize" is important here, since the act of sowing seeds and encouraging their germination, present in the works of van Gogh and Zola, becomes an important trope in Mirbeau's writing for the role that the arts play in the lives of those who create or consume them as well as for change to occur in aesthetic approaches and their reception.*

The grouping of Zola, van Gogh and Mirbeau provides a unique example of the interrelationship that exists among reading, painting, and writing. Van Gogh was always an avid reader, but once he determined to make his way as an artist, he became interested not only in the work of contemporary painters depicting the common people, such as Millet, but also in current developments in social awareness, such as Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels;<sup>1</sup> as for Mirbeau, he was fascinated by van Gogh's approach to visual representation as a formulation of the role of art in a world where photography was becoming commonplace. While van Gogh recognized the value of contemporary movements, such as naturalism and impressionism, he distanced himself from both, taking his own path in his quest for meaning in the representation of nature and life.

Mirbeau was a charter member of Zola's naturalistic group of writers, *le groupe de Médan*, and contributed, as did Zola, contemporary art criticism to widely read newspapers, defending the impressionists in the face of their initial institutional rejection. Although Mirbeau was not one of the first to take up the campaign, he made a special effort early on to promote relatively unknown and under-appreciated artists, including Gauguin and van Gogh.<sup>2</sup> After becoming familiar with the works of van Gogh – he had seen some at a retrospective of his paintings, which was organized in 1891 at the Salon des Indépendants in Paris, not long after the death of the artist on July 29 of 1890,<sup>3</sup> Mirbeau wrote an article for the *Écho de Paris* about the painter and his work, published on March 31 1891. At that time, Mirbeau also purchased two of van Gogh's paintings (from Père Tanguy): *Les Iris* and *Les Tournesols*.<sup>4</sup> A year after that (1892-1893), in the same newspaper, the writer published *Dans le ciel*, his serialized novel about a painter whose work and mental state echo, with distortion, Vincent van Gogh's situation leading up to his death.

We begin with the role of reading in van Gogh's quest as a painter, his familiarity with the Bible, and his interest in Zola's *Rougon-Macquart* novels. We continue with Mirbeau's immediate reception of van Gogh, in his non-fictional and fictional writing, and explore how the writer's encounter with the paintings played a role in the development of his own literary and aesthetic goals, enabling him in turn to distinguish further his works from Zolian naturalism and other contemporary trends. Through *the example of Zola/van Gogh/Mirbeau*, we would like to show how reading, painting, and writing cross fertilize each other, in this instance, enabling new lines of thinking to develop; the word "fertilize" is important here, since the act of sowing seeds and

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<sup>1</sup> See article by Patrick S. Cable, "Zola and Millet through the Eyes of van Gogh," *Excavatio*, 20 (2005): 49-58.

<sup>2</sup> See Denys Riout, "Mirbeau critique d'art," in *Un moderne: Octave Mirbeau*, Pierre Michel, éd. (Paris: Eurédit, 2004) 253-64, 259.

<sup>3</sup> *Dictionnaire Octave Mirbeau*, entry by Laurence Tartreau-Zeller, "Van Gogh, Vincent (1853-1890)," accessed 4 Dec. 2021 < [http://mirbeau.asso.fr/dicomirbeau/index.php?option=com\\_glossary&id=455](http://mirbeau.asso.fr/dicomirbeau/index.php?option=com_glossary&id=455)>.

<sup>4</sup> Riout 259.

encouraging their germination becomes an important trope, in this case for the role the arts play in the lives of those who create or consume them as well as for change to occur in aesthetic approaches and their reception.

## Vincent van Gogh, the reader

It has been well established that van Gogh, all his life, was a voracious reader. Early on, his reading was largely focused on the Bible and other religious texts but, as he was becoming an artist, he readily branched out into reading a wide range of authors: Dutch, French, and English. What can be gleaned from his letters is that in a span of “some eighteen years, he mentions at least 150 authors and around 800 literary works.”<sup>5</sup> Literature, especially novels, helped him get through many of his setbacks in life. He read Keats, George Eliot, Hans Christian Andersen, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Hugo, Balzac, Voltaire, Shakespeare, Dickens and, of course, Zola. “Reading books is like looking at paintings: without doubting, without hesitating, with self-assurance, one must find beautiful that which is beautiful,” Vincent wrote in a letter to his brother Theo, 5 August 1881.<sup>6</sup>

No doubt in part due to van Gogh’s Calvinist upbringing with a preacher father whom he revered, the painter’s reading and understanding of the Bible was extensive. In his letters he quotes some 823 different Biblical texts – mostly from the New Testament (528) and the Psalms (90).<sup>7</sup> Considering the volume and range of his reading, tracing lines of literary influence, other than the Bible, becomes a daunting task!<sup>8</sup> The situation is complicated not only by the range of his reading, but also because “[h]is life and work were in constant transition, fragmented by geographical relocation [...]”<sup>9</sup>

The critic Wouter van der Veen concludes that van Gogh’s “independence of mind” was “one of the foundations of his creative genius” and that “he *assimilated* the literary material that came his way according to his own interests.”<sup>10</sup> As a result, while van Gogh discovered, studied, and incorporated techniques of various ideas and artistic movements of the time including naturalism, impressionism, and symbolism (Gauguin), he “never conformed to any school of thought, movement, school or particular religious dogma.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, a van Gogh painting is readily and easily recognized as a *van Gogh* (especially after 1886). Van der Veen argues that “[h]e was not a realist, nor a naturalist, symbolist, post-impressionist, Calvinist, socialist, republican, revolutionary or anarchist.”<sup>12</sup> This is not to say, however, that there is not a whole range of artists and authors who left their mark and thus shaped and molded his thought and style. He was, as has been argued not shaped *by* but shaped *through* his voracious reading and his study of authors and

<sup>5</sup> Wouter van der Veen, *Van Gogh, a Literary Mind: Literature in the Correspondence of Vincent Van Gogh*. (Zwolle: Waanders, 2009) 7.

<sup>6</sup> Letter no. 170, <<http://vangoghletters.org>>. This is the electronic version of *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters, The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, vols. 1-6, Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten, and Nienke Bakker, eds. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009). Henceforth all references to van Gogh’s letters (translated into English) will be to the online source, accessed 4 Dec. 2021.

<sup>7</sup> This number includes one use of Ecclesiasticus from The Apocrypha. Van Gogh quotes many texts more than once. See vol. 6 of *Vincent van Gogh: The Letters, The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*.

<sup>8</sup> The text to note in this context is Wouter van der Veen, cited above. See pages 1 ff.

<sup>9</sup> James Gaillard Romaine, “Van Gogh’s Dilemma: Caught between Mythology and Art,” *Art Journal* 57.1 (1998): 85.

<sup>10</sup> Van der Veen 13.

<sup>11</sup> Van der Veen 13.

<sup>12</sup> Van der Veen 13.

artists.<sup>13</sup> This study will examine how van Gogh's "naturalism" and his religious temperament interlock to inform much of his later work. Although van Gogh's aspirations to be a pastor failed and although his ideas about religion and his conception of God changed, he nonetheless retained a religious sensibility throughout his life that becomes synthesized with what is essentially a religious symbolist (romanticized) view of nature, separate from the symbolist movements in England and France.

Reading Zola and other French authors does shape the way van Gogh sees the world: for instance, he writes in a letter to Theo in 1883 that "[t]here are sometimes passages in Balzac and Zola – in *Père Goriot*, for example – in which one finds a degree of passion in *words* that's white-hot." Van Gogh certainly emulated Zola's "passion for words" and transformed it into a "passion for paint." Van Gogh continues, "I sometimes think about experimenting with a completely different way of working, namely daring and risking more,"<sup>14</sup> which, of course, he does.

One of van Gogh's often discussed paintings, *Nature morte avec Bible (Still Life with Bible)*,<sup>15</sup> completed in 1885, helps highlight the interconnectedness of reading, writing, and painting which we are examining (see Figure 1):



Figure 1. Vincent van Gogh *Nature morte avec Bible (Still Life with Bible)*, 1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)<sup>16</sup>

The painting has been interpreted as Vincent, the son, situated between the imposing heritage and presence of his father, represented by the large Bible, and the secular Zola, represented by the more brightly painted and dog-eared edition of Zola's *La Joie de vivre*. In fact, according to Nordenfalk,

<sup>13</sup> Van der Veen 13-14.

<sup>14</sup> Letter to Theo, Thursday, 8 February 1883, no. 310.

<sup>15</sup> Most often, the titles of van Gogh's paintings will be given first in French and English and then only in English.

<sup>16</sup> Source of image, accessed 5 Dec. 2021 < <https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0008V1962> >.

it was “modern French literature that had opened his eyes to the narrowness of his father’s Calvinistic view of life.”<sup>17</sup>

In an effort to understand the painting itself, van Gogh’s biographers, Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, write:

Vincent’s fanatic brush found significance everywhere. He designated the yellow novel as Zola’s *La Joie de vivre* and with provocative care lettered in its title, author, and place of publication – Paris. In a few strokes, he captured its dog-eared cover and well-worn pages – a challenge to his father’s flawless, formal Bible. The yellow defiance of Zola elicited a violent response. [...] But the text [the Bible] answered back. The words of Isaiah in front of him were well known to Vincent: “He is despised and rejected of men: a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”<sup>18</sup>

The painting is thus not merely a “still life” but also a highly symbolic painting of van Gogh’s own life. He would certainly have identified with the words from the book of Isaiah while longing for *la joie de vivre*.

All his life, van Gogh identified with and painted peasants, and it is in this regard one finds his affinity with Zola, particularly the novels, *La Terre* and *Germinal*.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, “[i]t went against the grain for him to paint or draw what he could not actually see, but had to imagine.”<sup>20</sup> His insistence on valuing nature and on painting what he observed is often filtered through the lens of deeply felt religious sentiment. As Patrick Shaw Cable points out, “van Gogh was blissfully unaware of certain contrasts between the romantic/realist painter Millet and the scientific/naturalist ... Zola” and of the fact that Zola “would likely have condemned Millet’s biblically-endowed peasants [...] as [...] ‘mystical naturalism.’”<sup>21</sup>

Van Gogh’s confidence in his own direction grew and he came to terms with the influence of his religious sensibility. Kermit Swiler Champa notes:

Prior to 1887, van Gogh had been in a sense the ‘perfect’ reader of Zola’s *L’Œuvre*, largely because (a) he was an avid Zola fan and (b) because he was a marginally well-informed outsider in terms of the history of impressionist painting. Once he became a *very* well-informed insider, his respect for Zola’s book lessened considerably. (103)

To be clear, however, Champa also notes that van Gogh “never lost his respect for Zola’s overall literary mission,” which was to present the “spectacle of life.”<sup>22</sup> For van Gogh, the “spectacle of life” included a deeply felt religious sensibility even if that sensibility was no longer or not necessarily orthodox.

In a very real sense, van Gogh also never lost that part of himself that wished to preach. Early on (1876), he wrote:

<sup>17</sup> Carl Nordenfalk, “Van Gogh and Literature,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 10 (1947): 142.

<sup>18</sup> Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Van Gogh: The Life* (New York: Random House, 2012) 464.

<sup>19</sup> See Nordenfalk 133.

<sup>20</sup> Nordenfalk 134.

<sup>21</sup> Cable 55.

<sup>22</sup> Kermit Swiler Champa, *Masterpiece Studies: Manet, Zola, van Gogh, and Monet* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 1994) 103.

And when each of us goes back to the daily things and daily duties let us not forget that things are not what they seem, that God by the things of daily life teacheth us higher things, that our life is a pilgrim's progress, and that we are strangers on the earth, but that we have a God and father who preserveth strangers, – and that we are all brethren.<sup>23</sup>

Things did change. His biographers note that, by 1881, Vincent had a rather acrimonious break with his father and denounced his stern religion and that “he repudiated the special authority of the Bible.”<sup>24</sup> Gregory J. Walters remarks that “[w]hen Vincent left the ministry, he left the church of his father and uncle, but also ‘revelational faith,’ a faith tied to religious traditions based on authority [...]”.<sup>25</sup> It seems, however, that van Gogh’s repudiation did not fully hold as evidenced by later letters and paintings, but that he shifted to using art to console, according to the psychiatrist and philosopher Karl Jaspers.<sup>26</sup>

There is consensus that van Gogh’s first major painting is *Les Mangeurs de pommes de terre* (*The Potato Eaters*, *De Aardappeleters* 1885), a Zola-influenced work with its muted, almost monochrome palette and gritty rendition of peasant life. In a letter to Theo, he expresses his thoughts on the painting:

You see, I really have wanted to make it so that people get the idea that these folk, who are eating their potatoes by the light of their little lamp, have tilled the earth themselves with these hands they are putting in the dish, and so it speaks of manual labour and – that they have thus honestly *earned* their food.”<sup>27</sup>

The painting can be seen as “sacramental in its effect,” as Jody Sund has commented.<sup>28</sup> Earlier, in a letter to Theo from 1883, when speaking of Théodore Rousseau’s *Lisière de forêt: Effet de matin* (*The Forest of Fontainebleau: Morning; Landscape, with Cattle Drinking*), van Gogh quotes Zola’s famous line: “The dramatic effect of these paintings is something that helps us to understand ‘a corner of nature seen through a temperament’.”<sup>29</sup> Van Gogh’s temperament was undoubtedly religious. In a letter to Theo he writes, “And it does me good to do what’s *difficult*. That doesn’t stop me having a tremendous need for, shall I say the word – for religion – so I go outside at night to paint the stars [...]”.<sup>30</sup>

*The Potato Eaters* was not the success that van Gogh hoped it would be. He was behind the times so that “[w]hen [he] set out to establish himself in Paris in 1886 he had to make up for lost ground. He succeeded in doing so, but the next step, which entailed a rejection of the old

<sup>23</sup> Vincent van Gogh, “Van Gogh’s First Sunday Sermon: 29 October 1876, ‘I Am a Stranger on the Earth...’,” accessed 4 Dec. 2021 <<http://www.vggallery.com/misc/sermon.htm>>.

<sup>24</sup> Naifeh and White Smith 247.

<sup>25</sup> Gregory J. Walters, “Jaspers’ Pathographic Analysis of van Gogh,” *Van Gogh Among the Philosophers: Painting, Thinking, Being*, David P. Nichols, ed. (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2018) 25.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in Gregory J. Walters 32; van der Veen 7. The cited work from Jaspers is *Strindberg and van Gogh: An Attempt at a Pathographic Analysis with Reference to Parallel Cases of Swedenborg and Hölderlin*, tr. Oskar Grunow and David Woloshin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977).

<sup>27</sup> Letter to Theo, 30 April 1885 no. 497.

<sup>28</sup> Judy Sund, *True to Temperament: Van Gogh and French Naturalist Literature* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 665.

<sup>29</sup> Van Gogh quotes from Zola’s *Mes Haines*. 11 July 1883, letter no. 361 and note 9. Zola’s famous definition of a work of art, in the original: “Une œuvre d’art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament.”

<sup>30</sup> Van Gogh, end of September 1888, letter no. 691.

principles of art, was one he found impossible to take. He clung to old, realist ideas [...].”<sup>31</sup> Although schooled in and connected with the realist tradition, van Gogh’s “realism,” filtered by his religious sensitivities, may also be seen as idealist, even romantic, but this does “not alter the fact that he made revolutionary paintings.”<sup>32</sup>

### *Le Semeur [The Sower]*

In fact, van Gogh was a great admirer of the realist artist, Jean-Francois Millet. He particularly held in high regard Millet’s *Le Semeur (The Sower)*, painted in 1850 and shown in Paris at the Salon of 1850-1851. The work “firmly established Millet’s reputation for portrayals of agrarian life [...]. *The Sower* quickly became an icon of revolutionary realism – one that was marked by ‘biblical grandeur’.”<sup>33</sup> The image of Millet that van Gogh formed and held to all his life was of “an almost saintly man and an unmistakably – if unconventionally – religious artist.”<sup>34</sup> He made several sketches of Millet’s painting.



Figure 2. Jean-François Millet, *Le Semeur*, 1850, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston <sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Evert van Uitert, “Van Gogh’s Concept of His Œuvre,” *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 12.4 (1981): 74.

<sup>32</sup> Van Uitert 74.

<sup>33</sup> Sund 662

<sup>34</sup> Sund 663.

<sup>35</sup> The Art Story, “Jean-François Millet Painter,” accessed 4 December 2021.  
< <https://www.theartstory.org/artist/millet-jean-francois/artworks/> >.



Van Gogh, in concert with a good deal of nineteenth-century theology, naturalized religion. While van Gogh had once especially devoted himself solely to painting, he had “little interest in dogmatic problems [of] theology” of his time.<sup>36</sup> He does, however, seem to have absorbed the widely held notion, that nature was “God’s second book,” that God, the Creator, is made manifest, or may be seen, in His creation. In the Netherlands, the Reverend Eliza Laurillard’s popular books, *Geen Dag Zonder God* and *Met Jezus in de natuur* advocated the ways one can see the divine in nature through viewing many of the images van Gogh used: the plowman, the rain, the sky (stars of heaven), sun and rain, wheat, the sower, the reaper, darkness and light, for example.<sup>37</sup> In England, the famed preacher Charles Spurgeon also espoused similar views in his sermons.<sup>38</sup>

Van Gogh’s *Le Semeur* (*The Sower*, Figure 3) does, on one level, show a peasant farmer sowing his field. While the scene is naturalistic and one the artist no doubt observed, it is also clearly impressionistic – especially in its use of colour. A few years earlier, late October 1885, van Gogh wrote to Theo: “If you think this a dangerous tendency towards romanticism, a betrayal of ‘realism’ – painting from the imagination – having a greater love for the colourist’s palette than for nature, well then, so be it.” He continues in the same letter:

Romance and romanticism are our era, and one must have imagination, sentiment in painting. HAPPILY, realism and naturalism are not free of them. Zola creates, but doesn’t hold a *mirror* up to things, creates them *amazingly*, but creates, *poetizes*. That’s why it’s so good. So much for naturalism and realism, which are NONETHELESS related to romanticism.”<sup>39</sup>

The painting is also clearly full of religious references and symbolism, although not overtly. Sund comments that “[r]eligious themes had been more or less banished from French avant-garde painting in the 1870s and 1880s, and though the pictorial presentation of well-known Biblical episodes continued to engage numerous mainstream artists, many progressive critics had long since denounced their efforts.”<sup>40</sup> Yet some “sought to broaden the definition of the inspirational to include art that addressed social issues and humanistic concerns.”<sup>41</sup> Of note here, especially regarding *The Sower* paintings, is the opinion of art critic Théophile Thoré (better known as Théophile Thoré-Bürger) during the first half of the nineteenth century. He wrote: “Art ought to be as *human* as possible. The more an artist has transformed exterior reality, the more he has put himself into his work, the more he has elevated the image toward the ideal that every man hides in his heart, and the closer he has come to the poetic.”<sup>42</sup> Van Gogh “esteemed” Thoré-Bürger’s writing and it fitted in well with his own temperament and feelings.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Tsukasa Kōdera, *Vincent van Gogh: Christianity Versus Nature* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1990) 9.

<sup>37</sup> Kōdera 22.

<sup>38</sup> His posthumously published collection of sermons, for example, *Teachings of Nature in the Kingdom of Grace* is still in print and available on Amazon, (independently published, 2018). See also Kōdera 22.

<sup>39</sup> Letter to Theo, on or about 28 October 1885 no. 537. Emphasis in the text.

<sup>40</sup> Sund 667.

<sup>41</sup> Sund 667.

<sup>42</sup> Qtd. in Sund 668.

<sup>43</sup> See Sund 668.





Figure 3. Vincent van Gogh, *Le Semeur*, 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)<sup>44</sup>

Thus we must take into consideration, as does Sund, not only van Gogh's religious background and sensibility, his depth of feeling, his reading and the internalization of the naturalist concern for the reality of peasant life, but also his encounter with the new techniques and colour of the impressionists and the influence of Millet and then Gauguin: "Van Gogh conceived his own *Sower* as a hybrid in which the 'symbolic language' of color heightened the impact of an already-pregnant Realist motif."<sup>45</sup> Alina N. Feld comments that "[t]he materiality of the world represented in Van Gogh's art is illuminated from within and operates its own transfiguration in a paradoxical movement of immanence cum transcendence."<sup>46</sup> Feld argues using the philosophers Karl Jaspers, Heidegger, Derrida, and Thomas Altizer for Van Gogh's having "theological relevance [...] in late modernity" – even when "traditional theodicy is radically inappropriate."<sup>47</sup>

In executing this version of *The Sower*, van Gogh subsumes the "Christian message in the portrayal of rural labour,"<sup>48</sup> remarks Sund. The "Christian message" – symbolically, the figure of the "sower" represents Christ – is rather easily decoded, but this easy association is complicated by the highly probable fact that van Gogh also saw himself as a sower of seed.<sup>49</sup> In *The Sower* (the second one, painted in November of 1888), the sun in position behind the figure may also serve visually as a halo (Figure 3). How intentional this was on van Gogh's part is difficult to prove.<sup>50</sup> Tsukasa Kōdera has observed that the "iconographical function of the church motif in [van Gogh's] Dutch periods was taken over by the sun after the Paris period."<sup>51</sup> In paintings like

<sup>44</sup> In English, known as *The Sower*, 1889. <<https://www.vincentvangogh.org/>> accessed 4 Dec. 2021, in addition to the image: <<https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0029V1962>>

<sup>45</sup> Sund 668.

<sup>46</sup> Alina N. Feld, "Van Gogh's Dark Illuminations: *The End of Art or the Art of the End*," in *Van Gogh Among the Philosophers: Painting, Thinking, Being*, David P. Nichols, ed. (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018) 215.

<sup>47</sup> F.W. J. Shelling's theology of "God's dark nature" is evoked here. See Feld 215.

<sup>48</sup> Sund 667.

<sup>49</sup> Van Uitert 236.

<sup>50</sup> See Kōdera 31.

<sup>51</sup> Kōdera 30.

*The Sower* and *Wheat Field with Reaper* (*Champ de blé avec faucheur*, 1889), “the sun occupies the place that had previously belonged to a church.”<sup>52</sup> The evidence also shows that the tree in van Gogh’s *The Sower* is related to Gauguin’s *Vision après le sermon* (*Vision after the Sermon*).<sup>53</sup> Van Gogh’s biographers note that “Vincent embraced Gauguin’s Symbolist sympathies and promised to make his own image ‘more subtle – more like music’.”<sup>54</sup>

Tree images also have a long symbolic association with the Christian Cross, as Sund remarks:

Working outside the bounds of traditional religious narrative, van Gogh effectively evoked the holy, drawing inspiration not only from earlier art [Millet], but from the Bible itself – wherein Christ “works in the living spirit and the living flesh (making) men instead of statues.” Guided by this example, van Gogh rendered the human quasi-divine. His letters to Bernard indicate that he considered *The Sower* an appropriate response to the metaphorical language of the Bible, and a satisfying expression of his own Christianity.<sup>55</sup>

What one then has in the painting *The Sower*, and in other of van Gogh’s paintings, particularly *Faucheur* and *Champ de blé avec une faucheuse au soleil levant* (*The Reaper* and *The Reaper with Sickle*) – both completed in September of 1889 – is a van Goghian synthesis of various yet specific, influences. Some see in van Gogh a kind of substitution, a form of transubstantiation – his life is art, and his art is life transcendent. Nichols recognizes the spiritual dimension in these works: “Although he abandons his original desire to paint Christ, saints, and angels, his religious impulse, forged long before in the crucible of the Calvinist parsonage of Zundert, surfaces with equal strength in the simplicity of objects and scenery.”<sup>56</sup> Or, as Kōdera comments, van Gogh’s “artistic identity” becomes “ambiguous,” at least towards the latter part of his life, due to the fact that van Gogh, a “northern romantic,” with a religiously infused romantic view of nature, also had “a French Post-Impressionist style.”<sup>57</sup> This perspective on van Gogh is an appropriate way to sum-up a complex yet compelling artist. Sund succinctly states the situation when she says: “Van Gogh painted reality in a way that affirmed the supernatural.”<sup>58</sup>

## Octave Mirbeau and Vincent van Gogh

The occasion for the writing of Mirbeau’s article in the *Écho de Paris* was, as mentioned, his having seen paintings by van Gogh at the Exposition des Indépendants (organized in 1891 especially for the impressionists and other artists who could not be considered “classical”), at the Pavillon de la Ville de Paris. Mirbeau was struck by van Gogh’s work, as revealed by his exclamatory discursive mode: “une belle flamme de génie”; “ce peintre magnifiquement doué”; “les tableaux exposés en ce moment [...] paraissent très supérieurs, en intensité de vision, en

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<sup>52</sup> Kōdera 30.

<sup>53</sup> Kōdera 31.

<sup>54</sup> Naifeh and Smith 624-25.

<sup>55</sup> Sund 668.

<sup>56</sup> David P. Nichols, “Van Gogh in Tragic Portraiture: Jaspers, Bataille, Heidegger,” in *Van Gogh Among the Philosophers: Painting, Thinking, Being*, David P. Nichols, ed. (Lanham MD: Lexington Books, 2018) 186.

<sup>57</sup> Kōdera 26.

<sup>58</sup> Sund 671.

richesse d'expression, en puissance de style, à tout ce qui les entoure.”<sup>59</sup> Mirbeau comments also on van Gogh's *Le Semeur* (following Millet), but “rendu surhumainement beau” by the Dutch artist. Even though this is a copy, Mirbeau applauds van Gogh's rendering, in which “le mouvement s'accroît, la vision s'élargit, la ligne s'amplifie jusqu'à la signification du symbole.”<sup>60</sup> Van Gogh introduces something personal, and the painting takes on a new grandeur. Mirbeau notes that the painter is not absorbed in nature, but rather he has absorbed nature into himself. He has forced nature to become supple, to mold itself into the forms of his own thought. Mirbeau calls this van Gogh's “style” and claims that it is an affirmation of the painter's personality. Everything under his paintbrush is given a strange life, independent of the actual subject he is painting – life that is in him and that he is.<sup>61</sup>

Van Gogh's artistic style and subject matter in fact feed into Mirbeau's ideas about literature and his view of artistic endeavour. We now propose to expand on and illustrate how many of the aesthetic considerations put forward in the article Mirbeau wrote for the *Écho de Paris* are evoked in *Dans le ciel*, which Pierre Michel referred to at one point as a “roman avorté”<sup>62</sup> and which was serialized in the same newspaper the year after the article: nature as subject matter; the genius of the artist; the strength of conception and style based on the personality of the artist; the “strange life” given to the subjects. In this examination, a focus is on the significance attributed to the representation of the sower, given the interest shown by both Mirbeau and van Gogh in this agrarian and Biblical figure.

In Mirbeau's text, *Dans le ciel*, several of van Gogh's paintings are described or alluded to, some as works by the character Lucien, who has much in common with the Dutch painter. The narrative situation is threefold: the initial anonymous narrator of the novel introduces another narrator, Georges, a potential writer and, to a large extent, Mirbeau's *porte-parole*, who expresses sustained concern for his artist friend Lucien's mental state, while he himself suffers from existential angst and self-doubts. At times, Georges (the second narrator) quotes the third narrator, Lucien, who rants and raves, in speech and letters. Perhaps dissatisfied with the pessimism of a work produced during a dark period in his life, Mirbeau never published this serialized narrative as a monograph.<sup>63</sup> Even the “échevelés et torturés” landscapes (n. 12, 1168) which appear in Georges's stream of consciousness descriptions remind the reader of van Gogh's paintings, as if his sensitivity and depression are anticipating the emotional impact of his contact with Lucien, the fictitious painter.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Octave Mirbeau, “Vincent van Gogh,” *Des artistes*, préface Hubert Juin (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1986) 130-31.

<sup>60</sup> Mirbeau, “Vincent van Gogh” 135.

<sup>61</sup> My paraphrasing in English, of Mirbeau, “Vincent van Gogh” 136. An earlier article on Vincent van Gogh appeared in January of 1890, titled “Les Isolés: Vincent van Gogh,” by Émile Aurier, in *Le Mercure de France*. See Riout 259. However, Mirbeau's laudatory article was the first to appear on van Gogh in “la grande presse.” See also Laurence Tartreau-Zeller, “Van Gogh, l'idéal de Mirbeau. Van Gogh face à la critique,” accessed 4 Dec. 2021

< <https://mirbeau.asso.fr/darticlesfrançais/Tartreau-Zeller-vangogh.pdf>. >

<sup>62</sup> Pierre Michel, ed., Introduction, *Œuvres romanesques Octave Mirbeau*, vol. 2, *Dans le ciel* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 2001) 14. Further references to this edition of *Dans le ciel* (its introduction and notes by Pierre Michel included) will be given parenthetically in the text of the essay, with the designation *DLC* for Mirbeau's text.

<sup>63</sup> P. Michel suggests several reasons why Mirbeau did not publish this work as a monograph, noting especially the fact that he wrote it in one go, with no pre-established plan. Nevertheless, P. Michel praises it as “un texte fascinant” (16).

<sup>64</sup> P. Michel makes this comment about Georges's descriptions of landscapes (n. 12, 1168), even before the character meets up with his childhood acquaintance Lucien, now an adult and an artist.

A description from Chapter 1 not only reiterates the theme of the sky (which begins on the first page and echoes the title of the novel), but also connects clearly with the violent skies in van Gogh's paintings and more generally with the nightmarish quality of some of his landscapes:

Et l'on semble perdu dans ce ciel, emporté dans ce ciel, un ciel immense, houleux comme une mer, un ciel fantastique, où sans cesse de monstrueuses formes, d'affolants faunes, d'indescriptibles flores, des architectures de cauchemar, s'élaborent, vagabondent et disparaissent. (*DLC* 22-23)

In fact, *Dans le ciel* stands as a refutation on several levels of traditional and contemporary novelistic norms rejected by Mirbeau, because of their failure, in his estimation, to record "life" as it is. He makes it clear that he abhors various contemporary currents and gives reasons in his copious journalistic writing. He has issues with bourgeois society, to begin with, and its efforts to uniformize, to force people into a mold by means of its institutions, such as the family, formal education and the media, where brainwashing takes place.<sup>65</sup>

Some of the "painterly" references to the sky are clearly connected to Blaise Pascal's conception of the insignificance of the human being in face of the vastness of the universe, although they do not serve here as proof for the existence of God. They heighten the existential angst Georges is experiencing, for the sky is empty, as critics have noted. After the death of his parents, he directs his sight "vers ce ciel, vers ce gouffre épouvantant de l'infini" (51).<sup>66</sup> The references to skies are reminiscent of those in specific paintings by van Gogh, such as *Les Oliviers*, *La Nuit étoilée* or *Le Semeur* (See Figure 3):

Et je crois bien qu'il y avait de la folie éparse en ses toiles. C'étaient des arbres, dans le soleil couchant, avec des branches tordues et rouges comme des flammes; ou bien d'étranges nuits, des plaines invisibles, des silhouettes échevelées et vagabondes, sous des tournolements d'étoiles, les danses de lune ivre et blafarde qui faisaient ressembler le ciel aux salles en clameurs d'un bastringue. (*DLC* 79)

The references to and obsession with the sky, the point of departure in this work, are related not only to the narrator's existential angst, but also to his artist-friend's unstable mental condition.

The narrator grapples with a sense of uselessness and indirection and finds himself in a depressive frame of mind after his parents' death. This situation gives rise to verbal incontinence, in which he tells his life story, emoting at every phase. Yet, he listens intently to the moods of his artist friend Lucien and hangs on his every word when he talks about art, equating all types of artists – those who paint, sculpt, write, compose music: "Pourtant, je crois bien que tous les arts se ressemblent... Écrire, ou peindre, ou mouler, ou combiner les sons..." (*DLC* 78) He insists that Georges, who has a desire to write, is also an artist.

This discussion leads to Lucien's consideration of what it is to make art. All art is "la même douleur" (*DLC* 78). Making art is not to start over doing what others have already done; it is to make what the artist sees with his/her eyes, senses emotionally, understands intellectually. He repeats: "Voir, sentir, comprendre." Of course, one must express, as well. Taking a cue from Lucien's speaking out for the arts, Georges feels a fear growing in him: "Est-ce que l'art, c'était

<sup>65</sup> Contemporary media at the time would have included the press, the theatre, café-concerts, popular novels, and advertising. See Pierre Michel, ed. and introduction with the title "L'esthétique de Mirbeau critique littéraire," in *Octave Mirbeau Combats littéraires* (Lausanne, Suisse: L'Âge d'Homme, 2006) 7-21, 8.

<sup>66</sup> Edvard Munch's famous painting illustrating this anxious state of mind, *The Scream*, was created in 1893. This frame of mind could also be detected in Lucien's obsession with painting "l'aboi d'un chien" (*DLC* 90)!

vraiment cette torture, cet enfer?” (*DLC* 81-82). He had decided that creativity would be for him a pacifying occupation, a relief for his pain (“un grand apaisement”). But he is fascinated, too, by all he experiences in Lucien’s studio, and fails to understand why “[il] n’osai[t] pas fuir non plus, retenu malgré [lui], par [il] ne sai[t] quel mystérieux et horrible plaisir, au supplice d’être là” (*DLC* 82) – a kind of pre-Freudian pain/pleasure experience. This attitude gives rise to the expression of feelings and fantasies, such as disgust and visions of horror. Lucien then begins his tirade on the creation of an artistic production, its process. To the more naïve Georges, he emphasizes two things: (1) “le caractère de ce qu’on peint” and (2) “le métier” (*DLC* 82). It will be useful to explore what is meant by these two terms, in that order, especially with relationship to Mirbeau’s views on contemporary trends and the role of the arts.

By “caractère,” Lucien means the drawing, or original conception. He makes it clear that an artist cannot replicate nature exactly; the artist needs to decide for him/herself what the subject looks like – that is, via metaphor or simile. Yet, Mirbeau, like van Gogh, distances himself from the credo of the contemporary symbolists and pre-Raphaelites in France and England. Speaking of these artists, Lucien exclaims: “Ah! qu’ils m’ont fait du mal ces esthètes de malheur, quand ils prêchaient, de leur voix fleurie, l’horreur de la nature, [...]. Car ça n’est pas autre chose que leur idéal dont ils ont empoisonné toute une génération?” (*DLC* 117).<sup>67</sup> Rather than embracing the vibrancy of nature, they distance themselves from life itself through an arcane symbolic language and stilted representation. Lucien exclaims, for example, about paintings like *La Princesse Sabra*, by Edward Burne-Jones: “Ah! Leurs saintes émaciées et longues comme des gaules à pêche, leurs galantes qui marchent sans jambes, qui regardent sans yeux, qui parlent sans bouche, qui aiment sans sexe [...].” (*DLC* 117).

Indeed, what Lucien means by “caractère” is that artists make the representation their own, they personalize it. The actual object has no meaning by itself and what is personal for the artist, as it turns out, will resonate with the viewer. Like van Gogh, Mirbeau leans at times towards Biblical references and symbols that have a personal significance: both cite the New Testament Parable of the Sower (*DLC* 109-10) and Mirbeau refers to Onan of the Old Testament (*DLC* 34). Furthermore, Mirbeau’s character Georges fantasizes about the way an object like the easel in Lucien’s studio evokes “d’atroces crucifiés” (*DLC* 82), an image Lucien endorses as a representation of the artist’s hallucinatory suffering: “Un chevalet comme une croix, comme un gibet! .... Bravo! c’est ça, c’est le caractère!... Tu as donné à cet objet, qui n’est rien, qui n’a pas une existence réelle, la forme des terreurs de ton esprit! ....” (*DLC* 83).

As mentioned earlier, critics have noticed the way van Gogh uses the sun, in *The Sower*, as a sort of halo for the rural figure, making him saintly, thus elevating the humble figure and heightening the impact – or making a comment about himself. Cable notes that van Gogh’s admiration of Millet and his representation of rural figures is illustrative of the younger artist’s “conflation of art and religion,” as a way of combatting his biological father’s “hypocritical religiosity.”<sup>68</sup> Although considered a symbolist, as noted, Gauguin played a role in van Gogh’s choice of religious subjects.<sup>69</sup> And what aligns both van Gogh and Gauguin to Zolian naturalism

<sup>67</sup> See also P. Michel, n. 6, 1182: “Il s’agit des symbolistes et des pré-raphaélites.”

<sup>68</sup> Cable 50.

<sup>69</sup> Cable notes: “[...] the visual artist he most frequently discussed – after Paul Gauguin, [van Gogh’s] close friend and colleague – was realist painter Jean-François Millet” (49). Gauguin joined van Gogh in Arles, in October of 1888, and van Gogh was familiar with *Vision après le sermon* (*Vision after the Sermon*, with pious Breton women imagining Jacob wrestling with the angel as they bow their heads in prayer). When he returned to Pont-Aven, in Brittany, Gauguin painted *Le Christ jaune* (*The Yellow Christ*, end of 1889). Articles accessed 3 Dec. 2021:

is their choice to depict simple, ordinary people – an agricultural figure like the sower of seeds falls into this category, whether or not the religious aspect is highlighted. The fictitious artist Lucien insists acutely on depicting nature and this includes those who live closer to the natural world. Lucien's Zolian focus on ordinary people is the same as van Gogh's, in Mirbeau's analysis, and this preference is in line with the author's avowed aesthetic approach as well (*DLC* 99-100; n. 5 and 12, 1179).

As for the "métier," this term would refer to the artist's skill and technique – or style. This aspect of artistic creation is perhaps what distinguishes van Gogh and Mirbeau most starkly from current trends, such as naturalism, impressionism, and symbolism, yet does not entirely exclude their techniques. Van Gogh's "risk" in ignoring traditional artistic practices, would be going beyond the impressionists in his focus on the material aspects of painting – the paint itself, colour, and brushstrokes –, in addition to the distortion of forms. Lucien exhorts Georges: "Exagéré! ... mais l'art, imbécile, c'est une exagération... L'exagération c'est une façon de sentir, de comprendre..." (80). These elements enable the artist to bring emotion and personal viewpoint into the work in a new way.

Mirbeau regrets the lack of concrete materials used in the plastic arts and the physical connections artists have with their work. He deplores the fact that the writer's medium of "words" may serve to create distance, since it carries preconceived notions of rhetorical norms and other conventions. Pierre Michel explains Mirbeau's point of view: "[S]i le travail du peintre et du sculpteur est 'ennobli' par 'le côté ouvrier', rien de tel 'avec la littérature', qui ne mouline que des phrases: 'Il n'y a pas de belle matière à manier, pas de main d'œuvre', écrit-il à Jules Huret."<sup>70</sup> Lucien calls his work "la pioche," using an expression that points to the very concrete tool used for physical slogging away (*DLC* 79). Yet Mirbeau respects the conventions of respectable language, interspersed with expressions used in conversation, it must be noted, disdaining both the most elegant registers and popular jargon.

Mirbeau does bring a major technique to French novelistic prose through his use of the "intra-hétéro-diegetic" narrator or narrators, as Francesco Fiorentino has noted.<sup>71</sup> Along with their role in dialogue, the narrators experience the series of events firsthand, exposing in their discourse emotional reactions, inner ponderings, and obsessions, which most often replicate and develop the author's own attitudes. In this way, the author Mirbeau goes "deep into nature," as Lucien suggests, rather than give merely an exhaustive account of external observations:

À mesure que je pénètre plus profond dans la nature, dans l'inexprimable et surnaturel mystère qu'est la nature, j'éprouve combien je suis faible et impuissant devant de telles beautés. La nature, on peut encore la concevoir vaguement, avec son cerveau, peut-être, mais l'exprimer avec cet outil gauche, lourde et infidèle qu'est la main, voilà ce qui est, je crois, au-dessus des forces humaines. (99)

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< [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision\\_After\\_the\\_Sermon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision_After_the_Sermon) > and < [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Yellow\\_Christ](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Yellow_Christ) >.

<sup>70</sup> Octave Mirbeau, qtd. in P. Michel, "L'esthétique de Mirbeau critique littéraire," 18. Mirbeau is quoted here in a letter to Jules Huret, 23 October 1891 (collected in vol. 2, *Correspondance générale*).

<sup>71</sup> See article by Francesco Fiorentino, "Les figures de l'énonciation ou comment peut-on échapper au naturalisme?", *Les Paradoxes d'Octave Mirbeau*, Marie-Bernard Bat, Pierre Glaudes and Émilie Sermadiras, eds. (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019) 15-27, especially 20 and 22.

In fact, Lucien will cut off his hand, rather than an ear like van Gogh, and he will bleed to death from the act of desperation.<sup>72</sup>

As for Lucien's use of the term "métier," it refers to the skill, or the demands of the profession. Immediately, the character moves in his discussion of "métier" to theory, colour theory. He says you may look at a garden full of flowers of all colours and notice the lack of harmony, which a traditional artist may want to correct. Here, Lucien's insistence on colour theory does resemble that of the impressionists. He argues: "Dans la nature, c'est toujours beau" (*DLC* 82-83). Nature lacks theories, he claims, but he goes on to equate "la nature" with "lumière" (in connection with colour). Tentatively, he calls it an "operation [...] chimique" (83), but then backs up and explains. Nature displays invisible juxtapositions of slight changes from one tone to another. To achieve an approximate, but necessary, harmony, the painter must see and reconstitute this invisible passage on his canvas. Lucien asserts that this can only be done by dividing the tone, a major insight of impressionist artists, which van Gogh also puts into practice.

Via Lucien, Mirbeau criticizes naturalism – "Les naturalistes font rire" (83) –, since this aesthetic approach purports to represent only what is observable to the disinterested eye. Art, according to Lucien, is not to establish that two plus two equals four. Art should seek out the hidden beauty in things. Be mysterious/opaque, he advises Georges: "L'obscurité est la parure suprême de l'art..." It is only professors who write clearly; they fail to understand that all is mystery and that mystery is not expressed as a clever use of words ("un calembour") or a marriage contract (*DLC* 114).

Returning to the discussion of "caractère" in order to touch on other important aesthetic considerations, we would like to notice how Mirbeau's Biblical imagery overlaps with van Gogh's and how they differ. The references to the figure of the New Testament Sower and Onan lead to further insights into Mirbeau's ideas about the role of the arts. Both van Gogh's and Mirbeau's recourse to Biblical imagery is distinct from that of symbolist artist Gustave Moreau, for example, who illustrates the stories of Salomé (*L'Apparition*, 1874-1876) or Samson and Delilah (*Samson et Dalila*, 1882), works featuring the unique and the elegant, for an elitist viewership, rather than the everyday for a wider public.<sup>73</sup>

Specifically, van Gogh's sower, as described in *Dans le ciel* and in Mirbeau's other writing, evokes a network of associations, as he is not only a member of the rural working class who conjures up Biblical imagery, but can also be viewed as an allegory for the artistic endeavour. This figure forces an association with the Biblical Onan whose "seed" falls to the ground and produces nothing.<sup>74</sup> Mirbeau's narrator George bemoans his failure to find love and fulfillment, and the fact that his impulse to procreate (also code, as it turns out, for "create art") has come to nothing:

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<sup>72</sup> Zola's artist, Claude Lantier in *L'Œuvre* (1886) also accuses his "guilty" hand. Samuel Lair insists on the probability that Mirbeau has in mind, to some extent, Zola's artist figure in his novel *L'Œuvre* (1886), in the writing of *Dans le ciel*, in addition to van Gogh (and possibly Monet or Rops). Another important influence would be the exuberance and disjointed style in the first works of Paul Claudel, *Tête d'Or* and *La Ville*, which Mirbeau had become familiar with by the beginning of 1892. See Samuel Lair, *Mirbeau et le mythe de la nature* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003) 148-49.

<sup>73</sup> In an article titled "Une heure chez Rodin" (*Le Journal*, 8 juillet 1900), Mirbeau states: "Chez Moreau, tout est mort, parce que tout y est factice. [...] Car la puissance et la beauté, ce n'est pas les avalanches de gemmes, et les étoffes de pourpre, et les flaques de sang [...]" Qtd. in *Octave Mirbeau. Combats esthétiques*, vol. 2, eds. Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet (Paris: Séguier, 1993) 268-72, 270.

<sup>74</sup> For Mirbeau, Christ's Parable of the Sower (Matthew 13:3-7) relates to the Old Testament story of Onan (Genesis 38: 9), who practiced *coitus interruptus*, although the term "onanism" commonly refers to masturbation. Here is the parable, from Matthew, in the New International Version:



Malgré ma timidité, je jouai la comédie des effusions, des enthousiasmes, j'eus des folies d'embrassements, qui me divertirent et me soulagèrent un moment. Mais l'onanisme n'éteint pas les ardeurs génésiques, il les surexcite, et les fait dévier vers l'inassouvi. (DLC 34)

And Lucien, “qui ne couche qu'avec [s]a peinture” (DLC 85),<sup>75</sup> alternates between moments of ecstasy about the night, for example, and periods of deep depression, revealing his self-doubt. Thus, he writes to Georges expressing his desire for artistic fulfillment in terms of sex and progeniture, with in mind the Biblical figures of the sower and Onan:

Décidément, je me suis trompé. J'ai eu souvent l'orgueil de croire que j'étais, que je pouvais devenir un artiste. J'étais fou. Je ne suis rien, rien *qu'un inutile semeur de graines mortes*. Rien ne germe, rien jamais ne germera des semences que je suis las, las et dégoûté d'avoir jetées dans le vent, comme le triste et infécond Onan. On dirait qu'il suffise que ma main les touche, ces semences d'art et de vie, pour en pourrir le germe! (DLC 109-10) (emphasis mine)

The relationship between Lucien and Georges seems at times to portray Mirbeau carrying on a conversation with himself. Georges admits that he is infused with Lucien's ideas when he tries to write: “[C]'est Lucien que je retrouvais au fond des choses que je tentais de décrire, des idées que j'essayais d'exprimer [...]” (89).

The references to the sower, the labour of the gardener, and the planting of seeds in *Dans le ciel* figure the obsession of both narrators with the creative impulse and its results, as illustrated in the reference to Lucien's description of a fictitious work of art titled *Le Fumier* (*Fertilizer/Manure*):

C'est tout simplement un champ, à l'automne, au moment des labours, et au milieu, un gros tas de fumier... [...] C'est d'un mystère! Figure-toi ... un tas d'ordures, d'abord [...], et puis, quand on cligne de l'œil, voilà que le tas s'anime, grandit, se soulève, grouille, devient vivant... [...] C'est une folie de germination merveilleuse, une féerie de flores, de faunes, de chevelures, un éclatement de vie splendide! (DLC 88)

Éléonore Reverzy calls this a “[p]roclamation d'une esthétique” on the part of Mirbeau, who illustrates in this work how poetry and literature can be created even from the grotesque and rotteness, with the account of Georges's brief affair with the unwashed and sickly daughter of the concierges in his Parisian apartment building.<sup>76</sup> It should be noted that the obsession with “fumier” that Reverzy traces in the novels that follow *Dans le ciel* and that begins with Mirbeau's staggering

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“[...] a farmer went out to sow his seed.<sup>4</sup> As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up.<sup>5</sup> Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow.<sup>6</sup> But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.<sup>7</sup> Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.” (NIV)

<sup>75</sup> When he wants to work alone, Lucien exclaims: “Je n'aime point qu'on me voie forniquer avec l'art!...” (DLC 110).

<sup>76</sup> Éléonore Reverzy, “Mirbeau et le roman: de l'importance du fumier. De *Dans le ciel* (1891) aux *21 Jours d'un neurasthénique* (1901),” in *Octave Mirbeau: Un Moderne*, Pierre Michel, éd. (Paris: Eurédit, 2004) 97-106, 99.

Reverzy traces this obsession with “fumier” at least as far back at Gustave Flaubert, who defined the artist, in a letter to Louise Colet, “comme une pompe, [avec] en lui un grand tuyau qui descend aux entrailles des choses [...] aspire et fait jaillir au soleil en gerbes géantes ce qui était plat sous terre et qu'on ne voyait pas.” Letter from 25 June 1853, qtd. in Reverzy 97.

encounter with van Gogh's paintings and his obsession, in particular, with *The Sower*, then plays a major role in his next novel: *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899).

Lucien fills Georges with aesthetic ideas, perhaps enabling him to carry on, albeit in pain, after the artist's demise. In a moment of ecstasy, Lucien claims: "J'ai besoin de crier mes idées; sans cela le travail m'est une intolérable souffrance. Il faut que je me vide de tout ce qui m'opresse [...]" (DLC 113). He summons Georges to help him sow "la graine de soleil [qu'ils] sèmeront[t] tout le long du terrain," resulting in huge sunflowers "effarées en plein dans le ciel" (DLC 113). Earlier, Lucien reflects on the worth of the arts and letters, with another twist on the metaphorical planting of seeds – essential for the creation of good citizens: "[L'homme] a un cerveau qui le rend toujours redoutable, car il peut penser, il peut rêver, là germe et florit l'idée de la rédemption humaine, là s'épanouit la fleur de la révolte" (DLC 100) (my emphasis).<sup>77</sup>

Along these lines, the image of the sower in van Gogh's painting reveals another level of meaning for Mirbeau: his recurring theme of education. Georges, in telling his life story, castigates the "Prudhomesque" dogmatism of formal education and compares it to the droppings of flies on a plaster statuette his mother had bought (DLC 54). Those "chiures de mouches" seem to him exactly like the teacher's lessons, in that they are stubborn splotches gradually covering his little personality – with their daily deposit of excrement: "Ces chiures de mouche me représentaient exactement les leçons du professeur, et j'avais la conscience que ma petite personnalité disparaissait, peu à peu, sous ce dépôt excrémental et quotidien" (DLC 55). We could compare this excrement, which produces nothing and is detrimental to the development of the child, to the "fumier" that is the source of life and living things and is essential for growth to occur.

In writing a novel with a "priest trope" (*L'Abbé Jules*) and then one with an "artist trope" (*Dans le ciel*), Mirbeau followed in the footsteps of Émile Zola, once his rival and sounding board, who had written *La Faute de l'abbé Mouret* and *L'Œuvre*. He has also been inspired by Zola's novel *Germinal* (1885) and the positive organicist meaning associated with the title and the ending.<sup>78</sup> The coal miners' efforts to bring about change in their working conditions and salaries resulted in a tragic outcome for many, but their efforts may make the future brighter for the next generation of workers. They planted the seeds of a new way of looking at the employer-employee relationship. In 1895, Mirbeau would write, again with recourse to the trope of seeds and planting:

Aujourd'hui l'action doit se réfugier dans le livre [...]. C'est dans le livre seul que, dégagée des contingences malsaines et multiples qui l'annihilent et l'étouffent, elle peut trouver le terrain propre à la germination des idées qu'elle sème. [...] Les idées demeurent et pullulent: semées, elles germent; germées, elle fleurissent. Et l'humanité vient les cueillir, ces fleurs, pour en faire les gerbes de joie de son futur affranchissement.<sup>79</sup> (my emphasis)

Mirbeau uses the term "affranchissement," etymologically related to the freeing of slaves, as a corollary to the attainment of a level of informed decision-making and personhood for all classes – an aspect of the socialist ideal. For this reason, it was important that artistic production speak to

<sup>77</sup> According to P. Michel, this passage in full constitutes an anarchist criticism of the State (n. 10, 1179) and, I would add, shows hope for the education and liberation of ordinary people. It follows Lucien's encomium on the strengths and miseries of the common people he meets.

<sup>78</sup> And Mirbeau would create a play, *Les Mauvais Bergers* (first performed in December of 1897 at the Théâtre de la Renaissance) dealing with a miners' strike.

<sup>79</sup> Qtd. in P. Michel, "L'esthétique de Mirbeau critique littéraire" (8-9), from an article by Mirbeau titled "Clémenceau," which appeared in *Le Journal*, 11 mars 1895.

the wider public, and not just to an elite circle. This was Mirbeau's mandate, and interestingly, it had been van Gogh's mandate as well, and for the artist especially it has now been amply fulfilled.

In 1885, Mirbeau had considered Victor Hugo the best example of a writer concerned with emancipating the masses of marginalized individuals. He also admired Russian novelists Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky, because they succeeded in bringing about a real cultural revolution with their novels *War and Peace* and *The Idiot*.<sup>80</sup> When Mirbeau read and became enthusiastic about Zola's *Germinal*, he was alerted to the scale of the social problem. These readings inspired him to begin to think about solutions, according to P. Michel and J.-F. Nivet.<sup>81</sup> Although Mirbeau had deplored many aspects of naturalism, including what he considered its "pseudo-scientific" basis and its focus on minute surface descriptions, he claimed that Zola himself had gone beyond his own naturalist prescriptions<sup>82</sup> and praised many of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels for their social engagement, as we have seen. In fact, Mirbeau comes full circle and collaborates with Zola during the Dreyfus Affair and beyond, involving himself in a concrete way to encourage social change.

After *Dans le ciel*, Mirbeau published *Le Jardin des supplices* (1899), a novel full of mystery and based on visions of terror, perhaps the result, as least partially, of his engagement with van Gogh's paintings. His writing has become distinctly different from a naturalism that focuses on exteriors; he set out on his own path, to uncover society's inconsistencies in his own way, showing that describing "life as it is" can go deeper than exhaustive surface description, into the depths of human imagination and irrationality, appealing thus to the reader's sensitivity to suggestive representations.

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<sup>80</sup> P. Michel, "L'esthétique de Mirbeau critique littéraire" 9.

<sup>81</sup> Pierre Michel and Jean-François Nivet, Préface, in *Octave Mirbeau. Combats politiques* (Paris: Séguier, 1990) 5-36, 13.

<sup>82</sup> "Très critique [...] pour le naturalisme, Mirbeau faisait une exception pour Zola, qui, selon lui, tournait le dos à la doctrine naturaliste," Pierre Michel et Jean-François Nivet, eds., *Octave Mirbeau. Combats esthétiques*, vol. 2 (Paris: Séguier, 1993) note 10, 366. See also Pierre Michel, "Mirbeau et Zola," *Cahiers naturalistes* 64 (1990).