

Octave Mirbeau
Twenty-One Days of
a Neurasthenic

Translated by Justin Vicari



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Octave Mirbeau, author of The Torture Garden and Diary of a Chambermaid, wrote this scathing novel on the cusp of the twentieth century. Driven mad by modern life, Georges Vasseur leaves for a rest cure, where he encounters corrupt politicians, amnesiac coquettes, cheerfully sadistic killers, imperialist generals, and quack psychiatrists. Hypocrites are eternal, and not much has changed since Mirbeau wrote this acid portrait of his era.

Twenty-One Days of a Neurasthenic Details

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Sander says

Peasants are generally known as shrewd and cunning; political candidates, very often, as stupid. People have written novels, farces, even sociological treatises about this, all of which confirm these two fundamental truths. Now, it happens that some of these stupid candidates always manage to swindle the shrewd peasants in the end. They have an infallible method for doing this, which requires no intelligence, no preparatory research, no personal magnetism, nothing that you might expect from even the most lowly menial worker or the most senile civil servant. This method can be summed up in two words: make promises ... In order to win, a candidate need do nothing more than exploit- and ruthlessly exploit -the most persistent, stubborn, dogged mania of mankind: hope. Through hope, he can evoke and control the things that matter most in people's lives: their passions, vices, financial interests. Indeed, you could pose the following axiom as an iron law: "That candidate is always elected, who, during a given election campaign, utters the greatest number of promises and issues the greatest number of opinions-even, to some extent, opinions which he actually holds-no matter that these opinions, and the extent to which he holds them, are diametrically opposed to the voter's better interests." The form of surgery known as "pulling teeth"- demonstrated daily on the public squares, with less finesse, it's true, and certainly less rhetoric-goes by other names in the political arena: the constituents call it "voicing our will,", and the politician, "listening to the will of the people..." And the newspaper writers use even more hallowed, burnished, glowing names for this same process... And such are the amazing workings of the political machine in all "democratic societies" that for several thousand years now, the will of the people has been continuously voiced yet never heard, while the machinery itself turns and turns without the tiniest crack in their gears, or the slightest pause in their smooth operation. Everyone is happy, and things appear to run smoothly.

What is most amazing about the workings of universal suffrage is this: because the people believe themselves to be sovereign, not subject to the authority of any masters above them, you can promise them benefits they will never enjoy, and you never have to keep promises which, anyway, are beyond your power to deliver. In a perfect world, you might think it would be better to never make such promises in the first place, since it violates the democratic and supremely human rights belonging inalienably (or so we are told) to these poor voters, who spend their entire lives chasing after these promises the way gamblers chase windfalls or lovers chase heartbreak. But we are all like that, whether we vote or not... When we get something we want, we lose the euphoria that comes from desiring it... And we love nothing so much as the dream itself, the eternal, vain aspiration toward a nirvana that we rationally know is unattainable.

Therefore, the essential thing in any election is to promise the world, to promise far and wide, promise more than any of the other candidates do. The more impossible these promises are to deliver, and the more profoundly they speak to what the voters really need, the more effective they will be. The peasant wants nothing more than to cast his vote- which is to say, to surrender his power of choice, his freedom, and his life savings into the hands of the first moron or the first crook who comes along- and again and again he demands only that the promises he is given, in exchange for these things, are worthy of all the pain that he suffers. What he gets from those promises is, finally, the ultimate certainty that he is destined to be swindled, a duped pawn on the chessboard of life.

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from, Twenty-One Days of a Neurasthenic
by Octave Mirbeau

Agnesca says

Pas mal, bien écrit, mais...

Je l'ai acheté avec un bandeau "une cure de rire". Et effectivement le début semblait prometteur (un bourgeois qui doit partir en vacances à cause de son statut social, les vacances, le voyage, quelque chose dont on n'a pas forcément envie, mais qui se fait, qu'on se sent obligé de faire). Mais par la suite, c'est plutôt le côté "sombre" qui a dominé... Peinture de caractères humains peu sympathiques... Et plus trop de lien avec la cure à la montagne du début..

Donc avis mitigé

Brendan Connell says

I am not going to review the book here, but the translation.... Which, at this point I have to admit not having read the full length of, but enough I think I can comment. For the most part it is good, but one aspect, for me, really sort of dampens the pleasure of reading it. In the original, Mirbeau gives many people funny names. In the French, they work. But Vicari has made the mistake (not the first time a translator has) of translating some of these names, sometimes just slightly altering them, at other times completely "translating" them, so that he changes the feeling one would get from reading them in French (since they actually represent French people). Thus Clara Fistule unnecessarily becomes Clara Fistula, while Fardeau-Fardat becomes Cumberburden... etc. The translator should have just put a footnote explaining the joke of the name instead of trying to reproduce it in English. That said, this is an important book, so it is great that he did translate it. I just hope if he does translate more of Mirbeau's work, he could skip trying to replicate this aspect in the translation... So, 5 stars for the original book and 3 for the translation.

Ronald Morton says

On the other hand, how better could I spend my time than introducing you to some of my friends, some of the people with whom I rub elbows here, all day long? They're like most people, some grotesque, others merely repugnant; in short, perfect scum whom I would not recommend young ladies to read about.

At turns nihilistic and misanthropic, this a deeply funny little book. The quote above sums the book up well, the narrator begins to talk about someone he knows and then rambles on into some story or anecdote - typically exposing some hypocrisy or vanity or wrongdoing or the like - and yet it never gets old or wears, as each small story is impeccably crafted, and frequently witty. When not witty they're cynically biting or savage (hell, typically even then they are funny). I expect this was a fairly shocking book when it came it, even today it still has bite.

(Only tangentially related, but Mirbeau also wrote the book Torture Garden, which I presume is what Naked City named their album (12"?) after. If you haven't heard it, check it out [if you like extreme avant jazz noise weirdness / John Zorn]: <https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=ccyhnJo...>)

Orcun says

Imagine a man goes to Pyrenees to be cured by spa, but he encounters all the weird people he has escaped and hears many weird stories during these encounters. The book consists of: 1. framing story of chronically disturbed and melancholic George Vasseur; 2. the stories of the people he met; 3. the stories told by the people he met – in the end, we have a sum of somehow interconnected stories rather than a conventional novel. Two third of the book has superb satirical qualities: A parade of grotesque, half-crazy and really crazy characters, most of whom belong to upper class and that is fair enough to be the target of Mirbeau's rage. With a style witty and bleak at the same time, he mocks with aristocracy, bourgeoisie, politicians, militarists, colonialists, clerics, psychiatrists, etc. Basically, he hates everything in the right-wing – very pure and fair anger. And he tries to prove that the man outside is not different than the ones locked in madhouse; everyone has a gap to be filled by certain obsessions. Towards the end of the book, the stories become bleaker and creepier with a certain focus on misery and murder. There is still a morbid sense of humor, but the narrative is more naturalistic, or rather, decadent.

This book once again proved to me that Mirbeau is one of the great critics of society and one of the harshest satirists in the same league with Swift, Bierce and Saltykov-Schedrine. As the translator Vicari mentions in his preface, “hypocrites are eternal” and Mirbeau's all attacks (especially those on casual racism) are still valid.
