

**Abraham Catulle Mendès: The Poet For Whom  
the String Snaps: Reading Culture Through A Phantasmagoria**

Norman Simms

*Mais après les apothéoses de l'opium, les puérités fantasmagories du hachich et les excitations ou la langueur délicieuses de la morphine leurs nerfs, leurs sens tout leur être,—comme une corde, trop tendue, rompt et choit—défaillie plus irrémédiablement en une désolation plus profonde ; et s'ils vivent encore,—on nomme cela vivre!—c'est qu'ils n'osent pas mourir.<sup>1</sup>*

But after the apotheoses of opium, the puerilities of hashish and the delicious exaltations or lows of morphine, their nerves, their senses, their whole being—like a string stretched too tight, that snaps and falls—into a swoon more irremediable than the most profound despair; and yet they live—they call this living!—because they dare not die.<sup>2</sup>

Before I begin to discuss a poet, librettist, novelist and drama critic who was once extremely well-known and whose death caused quite a sensation in Paris and the rest of the world, let me explain briefly how I will shape such a discussion—as a phantasmagoria.<sup>3</sup> This kind of reading of culture and history has confused reviewers (few as there have been) of my last few books; they find it tortuous, bizarre, and confusing. What they want is plain and clear, history or sociology, and yet the persons chosen for my discussion are not at all clear in the historical record and their works have been mostly made inaccessible for reasons that are not at all plain. It would be easy to say that someone like Catulle Mendès was the victim of anti-Semitism because, in certain ways, he was and still is. But to say he was a Jew and therefore was misunderstood or despised by a snobbish Jew-hating band of critics and literary historians can only be part of the story because Mendès was not always sure what it meant to be Jewish and did not always want to be identified as such.<sup>4</sup> He was also a Sephardic Jew, a product of Portuguese-Jewish traditions, and, though at his funeral, Portuguese cultural groups sought to claim him as one of their own, most commentators at best mention this aspect of his character only in passing, not as something to be explored and analysed, just as his Jewishness is stated because of his family background and therefore cannot be denied, and yet it seems to mean nothing in their evaluation of his many achievements.<sup>5</sup> Putting the details of his life through the phantasmagoria, using this very nineteenth-century term for a set of phenomena—smoke and mirrors, to be sure, but also music, projected images, and a variety of tricks from the magical theatres popular at the time—makes of it a machine for seeing, knowing and remembering. The *fantasmagorie*, like the twists of the kaleidoscope, the tricks of photography and the cinematic games of Georges Méliès, break up ordinary means of perception, reassemble them into illusions of reality or dream, and create new frames in which understanding can take place.

If you are unwilling to play this game, then probably you should read no further. If I tell you that this swirling play of lenses comes close to rabbinical midrash and you are offended by Jewish humour, then here is another reason to close the book and read no further. For

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everyone else, here we go. Yes, even though I have not yet told you enough to know who Catulle Mendès was, because it is better that we leap into the midst of things.

### **Baptized on the Street**

*...la responsabilité de cette situation revient au juif. Il représente l'homme indélicat qui cherche à pénétrer les salons aristocrates.... Cette indélicate se retrouve sans ses manières ; grossier, laid et difficilement compréhensible, Gyp le décrit comme un personnage inassimilable.<sup>6</sup>*

...the responsibility for this situation always comes back to the Jew. He represents the insensitive man who seeks to penetrate aristocratic salons... This insensitivity reveals itself in his manners: gross, ugly and hard to understand, Gyp describes him as an inassimilable person.

Adrien Bertrand, shortly after the start of the twentieth century, recounts in a brief critical biography of Abraham Catulle Mendès, in an offhand way, as a kind of passing joke, how two and a half-year-old Catulle was baptized while on holiday with his parents in Bologna, Italy visiting with the Rothschilds to celebrate Passover.

*Il sortit de chez eux avant ses parents, avec sa bonne. Un moine mendiant qui l'avait souvent rencontré dans le quartier s'approcha de lui... Mendès le voit encore, avec son froc et son tronc à cliquette qui représentait la Vierge d'un côté, le Diable de l'autre, et vous offrant l'une ou l'autre face—, selon qu'on lui avait fait la charité ou non—Le moine s'empara de lui, et, brusquement, dans l'eau d'une fontaine proche, le baptisa !<sup>7</sup>*

He ran out of the house before his parents with his nursemaid. A mendicant monk who had often met him in the neighborhood approached him... Mendès saw him again, with his cloak and his poor-box and rattle which depicted the Virgin on side, the Devil on the other, and showing you one or the other face, depending on whether you gave charity or not—The monk grabbed hold of him roughly and baptized him in a nearby fountain!

The biographer does not identify young blond-haired<sup>8</sup> Catulle as a cherub-faced Jewish boy, but does indicate that his mother was a Catholic, and then only implicitly hinting at the father Tibulle Mendès and his unnamed grandfather as Jews, in particular, Sephardim, whose Latin names also suggest their typical openness to classical and Mediterranean cultures.<sup>9</sup> Born into a wealthy home of Portuguese-Jewish bankers, whose friendship with the Rothschild family and their holidays together in Italy further tell us what the author of this laudatory pamphlet do not, that these assimilated Jews, with a Christian wife and mother, still belong to the Jewish community,<sup>10</sup> young Catulle was throughout his life more vulnerable than he dared say or perhaps knew. How far that is true can be found, not in the sympathetic commentators and not even in those who try to remain neutral about his life, but the anti-Semites, even of the relatively mild order, they tell us things the others are too nice or shy to say; they say things those others are too afraid or discriminating to say, and thus they reveal aspects of the subjects of their discourse often do not know about. For example, Vance Thomson remarks:

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“He had long, golden hair and a long beard, like a young rabbi,”<sup>11</sup> Then he adds: “He had little Hebraic gestures”,<sup>12</sup> and he had a defect “which may be racial”: or at more length, Thomson rambles—“He has no faith in himself. His talent is not self-centered; it does not revolve on its own pivot. He is never triumphantly himself.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, for this unself-conscious anti-Semite, looking at the man in 1900, nine years before his mysterious death, Mendès’ life is “very tragic; it is the eternal tragedy of the talent that would be genius.”<sup>14</sup>

For this reason, the story of the Italian mendicant who frightens passers-by in the street with his clackers and holy pictures underplays the nastiness of the nineteenth-century Catholic Church and the dangerous ambiguity of Catulle Mendès’ place in a world still implicitly Christian and wary of intruders, especially those who do not look different enough to be safe to contemplate from afar. The future poet did not know how unacceptable he appeared to others nor what tell-tale gestures, attitudes and imaginings he projected into a society increasingly anti-Semitic in a racial sense. Though in this anecdote young Catulle is an innocent, the scenario is a set-up, as the monk has already noticed the child in the quarter and has waiting for an opportunity to pounce. But what it portends—at least symbolically—in Catulle’s life, has to be inferred, partly by rading backwards from the actual accident that ends the poet’s life so tragically, and partly by reading his stories, plays and criticism as indicators of his hidden identity. Bertrand leaves the event incomplete, deliberately or out of ignorance and insensitivity.<sup>15</sup> He does not tell the reader how the father and mother of young Catulle or someone else from the Rothschild house managed to get out in time to prevent a more serious outcome. This kind of incident was anything but a joke at the time and there were major scandals in the mid-nineteenth century when bigoted, unscrupulous clerics forcibly immersed Jewish children in the baptismal font, then kidnapped them on the grounds that they were now Christians and could not under canon law be permitted to stay with their parents; these unfortunates were placed in monastic houses to be brought up as Catholics and many were so brain-washed they refused later to return to their original homes and instead became anti-Semites themselves. The most infamous case was that of young Edgardo Mortara in June 1858, a six-year old boy seized from his father’s arms by two officers of the Inquisition; the Holy Office claimed that little Edgardo had been secretly baptized by a household servant who feared that when the boy being ill he would have gone to hell without this impromptu sacrament. By papal law no matter how criminal may have been the servant girl’s act, the waters of the sacrament were efficacious and the boy therefore legally Catholic. The pope responsible was Pius IX (reigned 1846-1878) who subsequently brought the child up himself in the Vatican and fought off all attempts by the Jewish parents to redeem him: many heads of state and diplomats pleaded with the pontiff to release the child but to no avail.

Even further, Bertrand hardly mentions anything about Mendès’ Jewish background or about the implications of his Jewishness for his career as a poet, essayists, dramatist and intellectual. Thus when he suddenly tells this anecdote of the forced conversion—and faux

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baptism—it must be seen to represent something else in the character of the writer about whom he is telling the life story.<sup>16</sup> There must be something that the biographer cannot put into discursive language either because he has no conceptual language to deal with such matters or because, in the context of the new racial anti-Semitism that is rising rapidly in France and the rest of Europe, he feels he must suppress. The story of the mendicant monk on the streets of Bologna ready to pounce on vulnerable little Jewish children represents an example of old fashioned religious bigotry within the Church<sup>17</sup> Perhaps he wished to show how peculiar Jews are, when even rich and influential bankers, like the Rothschilds and the Mendès family run out into the street to rescue a child from a begging friar. For us, however, the episode stands as a warning at the very beginning of his life, at least implicitly, to the dangers that surrounded Catulle Mendès all his life when he ventured into what he assumed would be the tolerant, liberal circle of French intellectuals he hoped to be a part of, if not a leader.<sup>18</sup>

### How Seriously do we Read his Fantastic Tales and Life?

*Cette dimension “fumiste” de l’œuvre de Mendès est sans doute l’une des plus méconnues. Elle domine une grande part d’un des derniers recueils de l’écrivain.<sup>19</sup>*

This dimension of « mystification » in Mendès’ work is without a doubt one of the most misunderstood. It dominates a great part of the writer’s last collections.

But if one earlier biographer gets himself caught up in a knot of contradictions and incomplete thoughts about Mendès’ background, thirty years later a young graduate student has no hesitations about inscribing what surely were the usual caricatures, slanders and misunderstandings of the poet’s Jewishness. John Jex Martin submitted his MA dissertation at Loyola University of Chicago, a Catholic institution, in 1940, and his racial and religious libels went through without question.<sup>20</sup> For instance, despite his family’s efforts to educate young Abraham, as he was still called at home, in a thoroughly French manner—and in the German and Italian mode as well, since the family moved when Mendès was seven to Germany and then to Italy, only returning to Toulouse when he was twelve years old—Martin describes both the father and son as displaying “the usual talents of [their] race”<sup>21</sup> and their “racial inheritance.”<sup>22</sup> On the positive side, these characteristics are a devotion to education and a loyalty to their religious heritage; on the negative, Martin says:

His surprising vitality, his barbaric tastes, his sentimentality, his exoticism, his adaptability to established forms, were all Jewish traits which he shared with his contemporaries, Porto-Riche and Halévy.<sup>23</sup>

Translated, these terms describe Jews as nervous and unstable, “oriental” and bizarre, overly emotional, lacking in classical virility and self-control, constantly imitating those around them—a kind of chameleon or Zelig (the Woody Allen character who appears

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inconspicuously in every major event of his life time recorded on film). What usually happens when non-Jewish critics or those dismissive of Judaism examine the events, personality-traits and accomplishments of a writer such as those we are examining in this essay is that they do not know how to catch the tones of the rabbinic wit and social self-mockery that often appears, the understatement that are misread as clear, flat confessions of belief contrary to the facts and the traditions, and the jokes that are missed altogether: thus especially about Mendès the author of fantastic, cruel, erotic and grotesque tales, all—or many—of which display a clear sense of what Vauthier remarkably picks up as examples of “humour noir,” black humor.<sup>24</sup>

Once he comes to Paris, “toujours charmeur”<sup>25</sup> (always the charmer) Mendès meets up with young Romantic enthusiasts similar to himself and, thanks to his energy and wealth, is able to win their favour by his poetry and become a leader through his starting of small magazines. But then he oversteps the proper boundaries known almost instinctively by his fellows, the non-Jewish young poets and the older mentors of their wild antics, and has to spend a year in prison for publishing immodest and indecent work; the actual charge is “outrage aux mœurs et à la religion”<sup>26</sup> (insult to morals and religion). This leads to his father cutting off his generous allowance and forcing the young man to live on his wits. Although a few years later, his father relented and returned some of his annual stipend to him, on condition that he study in Germany for a year, his output in the later periods of youth and middle-age were mixed: a lot of mediocre poetry, many plays and essays of some importance due to the collaborations this work opened up, and short and longer fiction that earned him money and may, as we shall see, be of lasting interest because of his sensitivity and insight.

Nevertheless, his career can be seen as retreat from real and imagined forces ranged against him: an escape into the fantasy life of poetry, drama and novels that, in the end, could not rescue him from these anxieties. Nor could marriage provide safe haven for more serious work: his first wife, Judith, daughter of the famous critic Théophile Gautier—who did not even deign to attend the couple’s wedding in 1866—ended in acrimony since, though the bride and groom shared enthusiasms for excesses of the period, such as Wagner and fantastic poetry, she could not give up her attachment to her mother—the former dancer and singing star Carlotta Grisi<sup>27</sup>—and he could not abide by her intractable nature, desiring in his domestic life to have the *shalom ha-bayit*, the peace of a well-ordered Jewish home, no matter how eccentric he could be amongst his literary friends.<sup>28</sup> The marriage was formally dissolved in 1878. Judith always claimed he had ruined her life. Meanwhile, making herself eternally infamous through an extremely tight-laced waistline, she became the last great love of Richard Wagner before Cosima.<sup>29</sup>

Although he may have been having an ephemeral relationship with another young woman in the same year as his marriage to Judith, by 1869 Mendès entered into a long-term liaison with the Irish composer Augusta Holmès and moved in with her. They produced eight children, the three daughters<sup>30</sup>—Huguette, Claudine, Hélyonne and Marthienne who are represented in

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Renoir's famous painting of "Les Filles de Catulle Mendès" (1888) and four sons: Raphaël, Marcel, Raymond and Robert.

His second wife, whom he married in 1897 and had one son, Jean-Primice, was Jane Primitive Mette (1867-1955). She had been a disciple of Victor Hugo and thereafter a successful poet in her own right. This marriage seemed to prove more amenable, Jane outliving Mendès by many years before she died in 1955. The *New York Times* described Catulle's young bride as a "versatile poet" but then its columnist spends more time on her appearance than on her character or achievements. She was

...petite and abnormally pale, of the type that the symbolist painters have brought into fashion, with the long side bands of hair of Cléo de Mérode.<sup>31</sup>

It is clear why the older man should have been attracted by this young woman but not why she should have consented to becoming his wife. They had what we probably would call an open marriage, husband and wife often living apart, having their own sexual affairs, and yet remaining devoted to one another. For instance, on 16 April 1909, a few months after Catulle Mendès' death (to be discussed below) a duel was fought in the Parc des Princes between the novelist and critic Charles Henri Hirsch<sup>32</sup> and F.T. Marinetti, the Italian Futurist leader and dramatist. One unnamed contemporary source says that "Hirsch had not only been very critical of Marinetti's play *Le Roi Bombance*, but had suggested that Marinetti was having an affair with Jane Catulle Mendès."<sup>33</sup> Marinetti, wounding Hirsch in the arm to the point where he could fight no more, was declared the winner, both revelling in the publicity generated in the press. Not surprisingly,<sup>34</sup> the fullest account of the duel is given in a New Zealand newspaper, *The Evening Post* for 2 June 1909, from which the following excerpts are reproduced below:

The combatants were MM. Charles Henri Hirsch, the novelist and dramatic critic, and F.T. Marinetti, the Franco-Italian poet and playwright. Their desperate fight was a result of an altercation during the performance of M. Marinetti's play "Le Roi Bombance."

In the first encounter M. Marinetti was pricked in the right wrist, but the blade did not penetrate deeply. The next nine bouts were of an exciting and desperate character, each combatant making furious attempts to place the other hors de combat...for all the world like fighting cocks.... In the eleventh encounter M. Hirsch was wounded in the right forearm, the cut being three-quarters of an inch deep. The second called a halt, but M. Hirsch insisted on the duel proceeding.... After the twelfth encounter, it became obvious that M. Hirsch, owing to the stiffness of his wounded arm, was unable properly to use his sword. In view of his manifest inferiority the second insisted that the duel should cease

M. Hirsch's wound is of a rather serious character.

Only now does *The Evening Standard* see fit to explain the background of the Italian's aesthetic movement, showing that it is a precursor of what became known as Fascism.

M. Marinetti, who edits the Milan review *Poesia*, is the founder of a movement known as "Futurism." He preaches a philosophy of energy and the violent life, urges destruction of all bonds with the past, and exalts the splendour of unbridled passion and power."

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There is nothing, however, to this article about the scandalous accusation of an affair between Marinetti and Mendès' wife Jane. Such outright lies and nasty innuendos dog Catulle's career, without anyone taking the time to ask why the once fair-haired cherub became in effect the most despised man in Paris—at least by a certain type of critic and commentator, the anti-Semite. Other sources indicate that shortly after Mendès' death, Marinetti published his manifesto on Futurism in *Le Figaro* (20 February) and a month later in April occurred the duel in Parc au Princes.

Then explaining who Jane Catulle Mendès was, this same facetious blog writer adds:

Jane Catulle Mendès was, however, not just someone's wife and mistress. She was also a writer. In fact, she was a prize-winning poet in her time, but she seems to have been forgotten by literary history.

The cynical arrogance of the establishment still plays up when either the wife or the husband are mentioned in literary journals in France and elsewhere. Whether it stems from anti-Semitism perhaps is moot. The derision and dismissal of the two remains nevertheless. A few years ago, when a rare copy of Jane's memorial poem to the son she lost in 1917 during the Great War came up for sale,<sup>35</sup> an unnamed commentator describing the book could not resist the old canard about Catulle Mendès being known as "l'immonde Mendès" ("shitty little Mendès") and one having "une cervelle de couille" ("balls for brains"). Adding insult to injury—taking the occasion of a mother's grief for a twenty-year-old son Primice killed at the front—the blog writer says that when she died in 1955, Jane left behind her a small oeuvre of poetry "encore plus oubliable que celle de son mari" ("even more forgettable than that of her husband"). And then the *coup de grace*, he says of the train accident that killed Catulle, it was "à son image: un peu ridicule" ("a fitting image: a bit ridiculous"). Even this long after their deaths, the literary establishment can still not take either him or his wife seriously.

### The Most Despised and Wickedest Man in Paris<sup>36</sup>

M. Mendes is of medium size. His hair and beard are of a soft, brown hue, and silky. His manners are graceful and rather showy. Occasionally you see him at the National Library in the Rue Richelieu. When there, he engages the attendants to bring him armloads of books, he begins to make a few notes, friends come, and, in his quick, nervous way, he hurries off for the day, and forgets to accomplish that for which he came. At a premiere, he often appears with his hat and clothes rumpled, his beard untrimmed, as if he had been in a lost mood for a week.<sup>37</sup>

How a man looks to himself is one thing, how to his fellows, especially to his enemies is another. Not that clothes make the man or the features of his face, but that a person lives in a world of appearances, where his gestures and the tones of his voice often convey more and other than he intends or is aware of. Moreover, too often when trying to understand the subjects of our own studies, we lose the physical being and his or her impact on the world by

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concentrating on those texts we analyse and interpret. The first passage above seems positive, sensitive and sympathetic. So here is another depiction by a contemporary of his, one that is less sympathetic:

*Avec son jeune visage apollonien, et son menton ombrage d'un léger duvet frissonnant que n'a jamais touché à raser, rien n'empêcherait ce jeune poète d'avoir été le prince Charmant d'un des contes de Mme d'Aulnoy, ou, mieux encore, d'avoir été dans la Sicile sacrée, à l'ombre des grêles cyprès et du lierre noir, Damète ou le bouvier Daphnis, jouant de la Syrinx et chantant une chanson bucolique alternée, si ses yeux perçants et calmes, et sa lèvre féminine, résolue, d'une grâce un peu dédaigneuse, n'indiqueraient tous les appétits modernes d'un héros de Balzac. Son front droit, bien construit, que les sourcils coupent d'une ligne horizontale, est couronné d'une chevelure blonde démesurée, frisée naturellement, et longue comme une perruque à la Louis XIV. C'est sans doute d'une pareille chevelure dorée, ensoleillée et lumineuse, qu'était coiffé le fils de la Muse Calliope, quand cet excellent musicien démangeait les arbres tout venus par un procédé élégant et économique, dont il n'a malheureusement pas lègué le secret à nos jardinières actuels.*<sup>38</sup>

With his young Apollonian face, and his chin shadowed by a light shivering duvet that has never been touched by a razor. Nothing would prevent this young poet from being taken for a Prince Charming in one of Mme d'Aulnoy's fairy tales; or better yet, to have been in sacred Sicily in the shade of storm-ravaged Cypress tree and blackened ivy, Damœtus or the churl Daphnis playing on his syrinx and singing the alternating refrains of a bucolic song., if his piercing and calm eyes and his determined feminine lips and slightly disdainful grin did not reveal his modern appetites, like a Balzacian hero. His strong features, well-constructed, and as long as a Louis XIV wig. It is without a doubt that with such a head of golden hair, glinting sun-like and luminous, with which the son of Calliope the Muse was adorned, when that excellent musician set the trees in motion through some elegant and economic process, a secret not bequeathed unfortunately to our modern gardeners.<sup>39</sup>

The first description of Catulle Mendès captures the mature man in the fullness of his career and life a dozen years before his untimely death.<sup>40</sup> He is seen as somewhat absent-minded, careless of his appearance, but also nervous and easily distracted. The second, penned a few days after his unreal, attempts to recall him in his youthful beauty and vigor, as the young poet beginning his career in Paris. He is an odd mixture of romantic and antique beauty and modern cynicism, almost godlike and yet impish in his vanity. He seems to be one of the creatures from his own fantastic poetry and short stories. Both accounts are nevertheless view him as warm and likeable. Yet there were many negative views about him then and now, people who saw him as a dangerous egotist and a womanizer, and typecast him, if not always consciously, as an archetypal Jewish interloper and manipulator, someone who parleyed his small talents into a big reputation. Once he was out of the way, they need no longer take him seriously.<sup>41</sup>

What kind of a person Catulle Mendès was—or seemed to his non-Jewish contemporaries to have been—is indicated by an anecdote told by Colette many years later in “Le Journal de Colette” which she published in *La République* on 15 December 1933. Again I have to call on the anonymous blogger<sup>42</sup> of “Poisonous Pens” who assiduously ferrets out these ephemeral reports and posts them with his own comments in order give a sense, a flavour of Le Belle Époque in France.<sup>43</sup>

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Colette recalled her first encounter with the world of journalism in the 1890s, visiting the offices of [the] newspaper *L'Echo de Paris* where her then husband, Henri Gauthier-Villars, the infamous “Willy,” worked.<sup>44</sup> She gives a vivid critique of the dingy, gas-lit offices on the rue du Croissant filled with

*L'odeur d'encre, d'hommes, de gros tabac, de boue mouillée et de bière... Catulle Mendès écrivait ses articles en parlant, en fumant, en invectivant, en buvant du Mariani...*<sup>45</sup>

the smell of ink, men, wholesale [cheap] tobacco, wet dirt and beer... Catulle Mendès wrote his reviews while talking, smoking, railing against something, and drinking Mariani

In the long perspective of literary history, it is not for his poetry, novels or dramas that he is remembered. Mendès plays a strong part through his collaborative efforts, writing the script for musical comedies, penning the librettos for opera and providing competent plays for the stage over a long period of time. He almost always is mentioned in literary histories in association with some important actor, singer, composer or great musical performer, as someone incidental to the important figures being discussed.<sup>46</sup>

### **The Vigil, the Funeral Cortège and the Burial in the Cimetière de Montparnasse**

In his *Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* Nietzsche says that music scatters pictures like sparks, though its nature is such that its pictures are different in kind from those which may have sponsored them.<sup>47</sup>

The death of Catulle Mendès was at once a tragedy and a type of farcical descent into Underworld, a phantasmagoria of exploded visions and shattered symphonies, one that also saw the delayed fulfilment of a dream he had ten years prior to the event itself, as well as the actualization of the kind of phantasmagoric stories he was publishing throughout his writing career. In other words, it combines different kinds of knowledge that he came to embody—from dreams, fiction, and real-life experiences, all of which could not deny his own identity as a Portuguese-Jew he inherited from his father and which, though his mother was a French Catholic, he found a key determinant in how he saw the world, tried to translate that world into poetry and fiction, and haunted his unconscious life as manifest in dreams. In this section of the book, however, I want to close the account of his life by describing his funeral, particularly at how it was conducted, who participated, and what it came to mean.

Not only is it important to know what Catulle Mendès did and who he met with on the day he died, but it is also illuminating to see who sat with body through the night before his funeral, who attended the procession that marched through the Place de la Concorde on a relatively mid and cloudy winter's day, and who was there in the cemetery of Montparnasse when his casket was lowered into its grave. These people constitute for the most part his closest and

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most loyal friends, the kind of men and women he associated with and felt most comfortable with in his final years.

*Le Figaro* (10 February) describes the vigil kept over the body of Catulle Mendès on 9 February 1909, the night before his funeral procession:

*Le corps de Catulle Mendès a été veillé, la nuit dernière, par Mme Catulle Mendès, qui surmontant sa douleur, a voulu rester auprès du corps de son mari, avec Mme du Bar, sœur du poète, et Mme Barbusse, sa fille. De fidèles amis avaient réclamé l'honneur d'être aussi de cette veille funèbre. MM. Léon Dierx, le graveur Fernand Desmoulins, Gustave Kahn, Saint-Pol-Roux, Adrien Bertrand, Mmes Gustave Kahn, Saint-Pol-Roux, Benassi ont confondu, pendant cette nuit, leurs regrets et leurs larmes.*

The body of Catulle Mendès was attended last night by Mme Catulle Mendès who, overcoming her grief, wished to stay beside her husband's corpse, along with the poet's sister Mme du Bar, and Mme Barbusse, her daughter. Several close friends also wished the honor of this funeral vigil. MM. Léon Dierx, the engraver Fernand Desmoulins, Gustave Kahn, Saint-Pol-Roux, Adrien Bertrand, and Mmes Kahn, Saint-Pol-Roux, Benassi mixed their sadness with tears during the night.

It is important to identify these nine people, in addition to the widow herself, so that it is clear who were closest to the dead man, and to recognize as well that an all-night vigil over the deceased's corpse prior to the funeral is a Christian not a common Jewish custom. They were mainly long-time friends of Catulle Mendès from his early days as a symbolist poet and editor, but also more recent friends and colleagues associated with his various literary, theatrical and bibliophilic interests.<sup>48</sup>

- Mme du Bar: so far unknown.
- Mme Barbusse and her daughter. Madam Barbusse was Catulle Mendès's daughter (painted by Renoir in the portrait of "Catulle Mendès and his Daughters") who had married the novelist Henri Barbusse (1873-1935). In his youth, Henri published verses in honor of Catulle Mendès.<sup>49</sup> Mendès prepared Barbusse to become editor of the magazine *Je Sais Tout* in 1910. He came into his own as a novelist during the Great War with *Le Feu* (known in English as "Under Fire") which won the Prix Goncourt for that same year. He was a fervent Communist.<sup>50</sup>
- Léon Dierx seems to have been in charge of the funeral arrangements as it formed into a cortege and as it unfolded in the cemetery. He was also put in charge of a plan decided upon by the group of friends participating in the burial to take up a subscription for a monument in honor of Catulle Mendès.<sup>51</sup>
- Fernand Desmoulins (1853-1914) was the engraver who illustrated many of Catulle Mendès's books. His work shows a certain mediumesque style of ghostly images produced in a semi-trance-like state. He and Mendès dabbled in automatic writing. Like many other artists of the fin-de-siècle, he mixed spiritualism with aestheticism, something that fascinated Mendès,<sup>52</sup> at the same time as he treated it with irony and self-mockery.<sup>53</sup>
- Gustave Kahn (1859-1936) and his wife Rachel. Poet and novelist, Gustave began as a Romantic, Parnassian and Symbolist and moved increasingly towards social issues. Though he, like Mendès and other intellectual and aesthetic young Jews, seems to have cut his ties with his family heritage, with the Dreyfus Affair he emerged as an activist on the falsely-accused Captain's side, cooperating with Catulle Mendès in the well-appreciated Saturday Poetry Readings—where he also recited passages from Zola—to raise money for the cause, and was attacked for his stand by Barrès and Picqu and accused of being part of the nefarious but non-existent Syndicat or conspiracy. Though still not involved in religious matters, he

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later became editor of the Zionist magazine *Menorah*.<sup>54</sup> He also published *Terre d'Israel*.<sup>55</sup> On Madam Kahn's role in these events, see below.

- Saint-Pol-Roux and his wife, Amélie Belorgey. Pierre-Paul Roux (1861-1940), born in Marseilles, came to Paris as a young man and became part of the group of Symbolists that included Catulle Mendès and Léon Dierx and continued through the 1880 and 90s to associate with these avant garde poets but by 1898 he could not stand the pettiness of criticism around him and so went into voluntary exile. He moved near his wife's family in Britany where he lived until he was shot by a Nazi soldier early in the Second World War. He is one of the forgotten poets of the age.<sup>56</sup>
- Adrien Bertrand (1888-1917). A journalist before the Great War, he wrote for Paris-Midi and L'Homme libre, and began his own magazine, *Les Chimères*. Though a pacifist, he volunteered for service, was wounded by mortar fire in October 1914, and died three years later. In 1916 his novel *L'Appel du sol* won the Prix Goncourt. His biography of Mendès appeared a year before the railroad accident.
- Benassi: The most likely candidate here is Domenico "Memo" Benassi (1891-1957), an Italian actor, eighteen at the time of Mendès' funeral, but perhaps, if in Paris at the time, attracted to a playwright he much respected and admired. Memo later became well-known in cinema.

Another small group offered to join those who sat up all night, thus indicting respect, love or interest in the recently deceased figure. These included:

- Mme Edmond Rostand and her son Maurice. The famous playwright and actor sent his regrets because on the same day he had attend another funeral, that of Coquelin, whose death was announced in the same edition of *Le Figaro* as Mendès; the loss of this actor at a crucial moment in the production of a play meant he had to remain in the theatre and take his place.<sup>57</sup>
- M. and Mme Jean Richepin. Jean (born August-Jules) Richepin (1849-1926), noted poet, playwright and short-story-writer was a long-time friend of Mendès. This Madame Richepin was his second wife, the former Madame Louis Ganner, the composer; she was a young Polish beauty named Stempowska.
- M. and Mme Marcel Ballot. Ballot was a literary critic for *Le Figaro*.
- Mme Pierre Dauze. She was the wife of Pierre Dauze, otherwise known as Paul Louis Dreyfus-Bing (1852-1913), a well-known bibliophile.

The next day those who formed the contingent of pall-bearers, another public and formal act, were a virtual who's who of French celebrities:

- Leon Dierx, "fidèle` ami du defunt"<sup>58</sup> (a faithful friend of the deceased): discussed above.
- Jean Richepin discussed above
- Jules Claretie. Jules Arsène Arnaud Claretie (1840-1913) was director of the Théâtre Française and had been a journalist and critic.
- Paul Hervieu (1840-1913), member of the Académie Française, was a novelist, essayist and literary critic.
- George Lecomte (1867-1958) was a novelist, essayist and playwright and since 1908 president of the Société des Gens de Lettres.
- Eugène Fasquelle (1863-1952), co-founder of the publishing house Charpentier & Fasquelle (which eventually became Charpentier and in 1959 Grasset, distributed books by many of the great names in French literature, including Catulle Mendès.
- Gustave Kahn: discussed above.
- Saint-Pol-Roux : discussed above.

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- Adolphe Brisson (1860-1925), journalist and drama critic, turned to politics as anti-Semitism came to the fore and was praised by the Jewish press for his forthright positions.

Those who spoke formal farewells at the graveside ceremonies were there in an official capacity, as well as showing their personal loyalty:

- Jean Richepin: discussed above.
- Georges Lecomte (1867-1958), dramatist and essayist, was President of the Société des gens des lettres in 1908.
- Adolphe Brisson: discussed above.
- Marcel Ballot: discussed above.
- Edmond Haraucourt (1856-1941), early poetic friend of Mendès, murdered by the Nazis in 1941.
- Alexis Lauze. Charles-Alexis Lauze, author of *Pyschose hallucinatoire chronique* (1914).
- Gustave Kahn: discussed above.

A poem by Robert Zévaco was read by Albert Lambert, fils. The poem by the young Russian writer was probably “A un poète mort”. Albert Lambert (1865-1941), always known as fils, was a well-known actor on stage and later on screen; he murdered by the Nazis in 1941. Not all these persons mentioned were Jews, of course, but there was an unexpectedly large number of fellow Jews in attendance, some long-time friends, some relatively recent colleagues, and a few recent admirers of the dead man.

According to a press photograph,<sup>59</sup> Catulle Mendès was given a large funeral procession through the Place de Concorde three days later on Wednesday, 10 February. As this was rather an elaborate affair, it is surprising it took so little time to organize the cortège and other matters. If Catulle Mendès had made contingency plans—although most commentators assume “il était en plein santé” (in good health) at the time of his accident, he may have suspected that at his age it was time to add a codicil to his will to ensure a Jewish-style burial<sup>60</sup>—which Mme Jane Mendès knew about, including his wish to be buried according to Jewish custom as soon as possible after death—at the age of 68 he was an elderly gentleman by the standards of the time—then the brief interlude between the accident and interment is understandable. The suggestion made in this essay is that Mendès had long showed a morbid interest in his own inevitable demise, thought about such an ending within the same ambit of themes and images to be found in his writings, and may also have had a sense that the conclusion to his life was coming on sooner than anyone suspected. If he contemplated hastening that ending, there is no clear evidence...only a lingering suspicion.

All of Monday was taken up with official investigations and autopsies, leaving only Tuesday to make preparations for the public funeral and securing the plot at Montparnasse Cemetery.

Another feature of the public funeral procession that marked it as both secular and Christian, rather than specifically Jewish, is the presence of “tant de couronnes de gerbes de fleurs” (so many wreaths and bundles of flowers) and the need of an extra wagon (*char*) to transport

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them all, along with the hearse (*corbillard*), also piled high with flowers.<sup>61</sup> Two horses, cloaked in black caparisons, with flowery headdresses also walked in the cortège, as can be seen in the photograph. Large numbers of men walked behind the two vehicles, while a less formal group, including women, walked alongside. Nor can we let slip by without notice, the report in *Le Figaro* of 10 February, that among the many wreaths piled high on the funeral wagon and hearse, was at least one decorated with a ribbon in the national colors of Portugal inscribed “Les Lettrés Portugaise à Catulle Mendès.”

### **His Phantasmagoric Premontions and Dreams**

On the night of the dress rehearsal he sat in a box between his wife and sons. The audience and the orchestra applauded at the end. He did not know what it was all about. Catulle Mendès pushed him forward and then Chabrier put his hand on his heart and wept. Paralysis of the brain gave him death in life. What was left of his spirit departed from his body September 13, 1894.<sup>62</sup>

Fifteen years before his bizarre death in the railway tunnel, Catulle Mendès helped a friend, the composer Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894), walk out on to the stage to receive a standing ovation from the audience for his new three-act Wagnerian-style opera *Gwendoline*.<sup>63</sup> Already far gone in his dementia, the great musician was barely aware of what was happening, but his dear friend and collaborator in providing librettos for operas, musical comedies and other stage productions, ensured that this night would be one for the public and the performers to show their final appreciation of the great man. But in a sense, this little event was a premonition of Mendès’s own sudden demise, a figurative enactment of his life as a man, though popular in his own time, at the same already just one of the crowd to be mentioned when journalists, cultural commentators and later historians give a background to the authors, artists and composers who they are really interested in and consider the great figures of the last half of the nineteenth century.

In another sense, Mendès was aware, at least in his dreams, of this condition of being part of the fading past as the new century hove into view. Thus, writing about the tunnel accident brings to Waleffe’s mind a dinner party at the Café Américain ten years earlier (in 1899) at which Catulle Mendès spoke of a nightmare he had recently had. He reportedly said:

Oh! my friends! I had an abominable dream last night. I had fallen from a train and was lying on my back in the middle of a deserted moonlit field. I lay on the rail, in agony in a pool of blood. Far from any help, I suffered the interminable agony of death. It was atrocious! That’s how I died.<sup>64</sup>

Like so many of his own *Contes erotiques* and other *fin-de-siècle* tales of grotesque death and mutilation, the dream or premonition manifests a terror and a wish to suffer in an extremely painful way. Though Israel casually calls Mendès a “delightful weaver of modern romances,”<sup>65</sup> there is far more to his prose fiction than mere delight. In his stories and

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novels, he showed an understanding of deep forces of darkness at work in both individuals and nations, not only expressing his own troubled soul after so many years of frustration to achieve a degree of recognition that would be lasting but also internalizing the hatred and intolerance that had begun to show itself in the Dreyfus Affair and would manifest on a world-wide scale in the decades following the Great War.

Reading backwards, the three interesting facts that leap off the pages of the newspaper and other accounts by his friends concerning his mental status are, first, that Mendès was feeling melancholy and perhaps tired and a little tipsy before he got on the train; second, that he was in the midst of writing a play about Napoleon, most likely Bonaparte rather than Napoleon III; third, that after a full day rehearsing his forthcoming play, *l'Impératrice*;<sup>66</sup> fourth, that he had had dinner the night before with his close friend the Baron Oppenheim; and fifth, that he lived near the Château in Saint-Germain-en-Laye. As further testimonies will show, this lapse into an incipient form of mental illness was more than just fashionable fin-de-siècle gloom or the existential angst that went under the name of Jewish melancholia.

### **Jewish *Morbidezza* or Temporary Madness**

...Pordenone...has in flesh tints, especially in chiaroscuro, a peculiar warmth and tenderness (*morbidezza*, mellowness) such as no other of the school possesses.<sup>67</sup>

Mason outlines Mendès's mature personality as expressed through his writings "his lust for the ineffable, his Jewish melancholy, his hopeless romanticism," and then expands to say "He hated details, loved the vague and the distant, nursed his melancholy and was devoted to his cult of passion." While the first and third expressions of *fin-de-siècle* vagueness and idealism can be found in most of the artists and writers around Mendès, the stress on his moodiness and depression are seen as particularly Jewish qualities. Such a sense of pessimism, morose thoughts and depression were attributed to the typical Jewish personality, not out of an understanding of any religious or rabbinical traditions. One journalist claims that he heard Mendès remark around ten years earlier—about the time of the dream reported by de Waleffe above:

And the remarkable thing is that writing becomes harder for me the older I grow and the more I write. Now, to-night, I am to do thirty lines for the Journal about a little play at la Cigale. You cannot believe how those thirty lines haunt me. I do not feel that now I can possibly do them. I haven't the slightest idea what I shall say. I assure you I am thoroughly unstrung about it.<sup>68</sup>

Did that string finally snap on the night when, after so much work and too much drink, he suddenly woke up on the midnight train from Paris back to Saint Germaine-en-Laye?

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Catulle Mendès, *Mephistophela*, p. 253. In this novel of same-sex female passion and despair, to be discussed later, Mendès describes the nightmarish vision of an orgiastic excess by the title character as she tries to lose herself after realizing the emptiness of her loveless life. This note, like many others, makes statements that help bind together the threads of this book. That seem relegated to a minor position at the bottom of the page and compressed into small print should make readers aware of the dialogue between the various strands of my argument back and forth between the main text and the annotated remarks, a kind of reading not only typical of rabbinical discourses, but reproducing of the fate of these figures who thought they were entering the paradise of celebrity and remembrance but actually passed through the shadowy valley of misunderstanding and oblivion.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

<sup>3</sup> Norman Simms, “The Phantasmagoria of Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism” *Mentalities/Mentalités* 24:2 (2010) 52-64 and further discussions in *Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus: In the Phantasmagoria* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> You would think that neither Mendès himself nor any of his friends knew of or used his first name Abraham because it would have called attention to his Jewishness, but his anti-Semitic enemies did, as well as the ambiguous philo-Semites like Léon Bloy who, in 1864, wrote about “M. Abraham Catulle”; cited in Eric Vauthier, “Catulle Mendès, nouvelliste cruel de la Décadence,” *Annales de Filologia Française* no 14 (2005-2006) p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> Again, while virtually no mention is ever made by his critics—positive or negative—of his Portuguese connections through his father’s family and modern historians consider the passing reference when establishing his origins, as we shall see later the Portuguese community in France was sufficiently moved at Mendès’ funeral to take a prominent role in the cortège. In other words, much about the man and his Jewishness has been distorted, trivialized or wiped away in the history of his life and influence. These aspects of his personality and character remain, however, part of the ghosts, revenants and dreamy phantoms that surround his biography, just as he stands out amongst the Decadents, Symbolists, and other poetic movements of his time by his own sense of the “psychopathologique” (see Vauthier. “Catulle Mendès, nouvelliste cruel” p. 244. On his interest in Charcot and other psychologists at the end of the nineteenth century, see also p. 246.

<sup>6</sup> Olivier de Brabois, *Gyp : Comtesse de Mirabeau-Martel 1849-1932. Pasionaria nationalise, homme de lettres et femme du monde* (Paris : Publibook, 2002) p. 163. Gyp, the pen name of Sibylle Gabrielle Marie Anoinette de Riquetti de Mirabeau was once described herself to the magistrate in the slander trial of Emile Zola following *J'accuse* that opened up the Dreyfus Affair as an anti-Semite, was a novelist of note, with pornographic tendencies.

<sup>7</sup> Adrien Bertrand, *Catulle Mendès*, deuxième édition (Paris: E. Sansot & C<sup>ie</sup>, 1908) p. 9.

<sup>8</sup> Alain Rusenholz, “Les sectateurs de l’idéal, ou les contemporains fin de siècle!” *Le Paris d’Alain Rusenholz* (November 2012) online at <http://www.alain.rusenholz.net/2012/11/les-sectateurs-de-lideal-ou-les>

<sup>9</sup> On the other hand James Gibbon Huneker, writing a review of the opera *La Reine Fiamette*, for the *New York Times* (25 January 1919), shows no hesitation in the describing the librettist, at least in his youth when he was one of the most promising of Parnassian group, in this way: “This brilliant young poet of Jewish origin and nicknamed because of his personal beauty ‘the Portuguese Christ’ as Daudet (David) was known as the ‘Christ of the Midi.’” Here we have Mendès identified as Jewish, Portuguese and—remarkably and ambiguously, if not ironically—as a “beautiful” image of Christ!

<sup>10</sup> Of him, Vance Thomson says he was “a speculative Israelite not without guile” and Tibulle Mendès passed on to his son Catulle sufficient entrepreneurial skills to keep funding magazines, journals and newspapers “not one of which has survived” (*French Portraits*, p. 80).

<sup>11</sup> Thomson, *French Portraits*, p. 75. But compare this to “that blond, pathetic head of Christ” (p. 76). Also see what Joanna Richardson reports in her biography, Colette (New York: Laurel, 1983) “He looked at the same time, it is said, like a lymphatic Christ and like a turbot” (p. 12).

<sup>12</sup> Thomson, *French Portraits*, p. 76.

<sup>13</sup> Thomson, *French Portraits*, p. 83.

<sup>14</sup> Thomson, *French Portraits*, p. 84. Alain Rusenholz, “Les sectateurs de l’idéal, ou les contemporains fin de siècle!” *Le Paris d’Alain Rusenholz* (November 2012) online at <http://www.alain.rusenholz.net/2012/11/les-sectateurs-de-lideal-ou-les>

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<sup>15</sup> No other biographer seems to notice the episode, let alone to make any sense of it in the trajectory of the writer's life.

<sup>16</sup> On the other hand James Gibbon Huneker, writing a review of the opera *La Reine Fiamette*, for the *New York Times* (25 January 1919), shows no hesitation in the describing the librettist, at least in his youth when he was one of the most promising of Parnassian group, in this way: "This brilliant young poet of Jewish origin and nicknamed because of his personal beauty 'the Portuguese Christ' as Daudet (David) was known as the 'Christ of the Midi.'"

<sup>17</sup> For a modern versions of the story, see David I. Kertzer, *The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* (New York: Knopf/Random House, 1998) and according to online puffery "*The Kidnapping of Edgardo Mortara* has been made into a play by Pulitzer and Oscar winning playwright, Alfred Uhry. It opened at Hartford Stage in 2002. A new version of the play will be performed at the Guthrie Theater, in Minneapolis, from Nov. 4 to Dec. 17, 2006." When commenting on these texts, including another version of the tale told in dramatic form, a spokesman for the Catholic Church argued that if it offended modern sensibilities to read of a small boy baptized to save his soul and removed from his Jewish parents, then what does one make of the way little Jewish boys are unwillingly put into danger of extreme of painful disfigurement and infection and even death through circumcision. On this forced and hostile analogy, see Retta Blaney's review of Brad Levinson's play in "Ritual, Faith and a Case of Kidnapping," *National Catholic Reporter* (21 March 2003) on line at [http://www.natath.org/NCR\\_Online/archives/032103/032103](http://www.natath.org/NCR_Online/archives/032103/032103).

<sup>18</sup> Colette recalls working with him as a journalist, especially how he could start to write as soon as he sat down at his desk, and no matter what was going on around him, he kept scribbling, the blasé attitude of the true professional; see Colette, *My Apprenticeships* (1936) trans. Helen Beauclerk and *Music Hall Sidelights* (1913 and 1936), trans. Anne-Marie Callamachi, published together by Penguin (Harmondsworth, 1967) pp. 43-44.

<sup>19</sup> Vauthier, "Catulle Mendès, nouvelliste cruel" p. 246, 24.

<sup>20</sup> John Jex Martin, *Catulle Mendès, a Critical Study* (1940) Master's Thesis, Paper 473 available online at [http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc\\_theses/473](http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_theses/473).

<sup>21</sup> Martin, *Catulle Mendès*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Martin, *Catulle Mendès*, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> Martin, *Catulle Mendès*, pp. 11-13.

<sup>24</sup> Vauthier, "Catulle Mendès, nouvelliste cruel" p. 246, n. 24. Yet the paradoxical juxtaposition of positive and negative qualities in his more mature work continues in the terms that Huneker used in his review of *La Reine de Fiametta*: "His fecundity and versatility were enormous and while much of his work may be classed with the scatological outpourings of Armande Sylvestre, he was the greater of the pair (*New York Times*, 25 January 1919). Paul Armande Sylvestre (1837-1901) was a poet and short-story writer. Though Sylvestre authored such collections as *Contes pantagruéliques et gallants* (1884) and *Le Livre de joyeusetés* (1884), he was respectable enough to inducted into the Legion d'Honneur in 1886 and to be appointed Inspector of Fine Arts in 1892.

<sup>25</sup> Rusenholz, « Les sectateurs de l'idéal, »

<sup>26</sup> Martin, *Catulle Mendès*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup> She was born Caronna Adela Giuseppina Maria Grisi (1819-1899) and was recognized early for her talents and thus taken from her humble Neopolitan home to the flashy life of Paris ballet. She also became the long-time mistress of Théophile Gautier. See "Sogno di Ballerina: Ballerina Carlotta Grisi" online at [xoomer.virgilio.it/lillial2004/Grisi](http://xoomer.virgilio.it/lillial2004/Grisi). The whole Grisi family were theatrical and her career took her in many parts of Europe for the opera, ballet and other theatrical venues. Judith Gautier seems to have inherited more of her mother's Italian temperament than her father's relative stability.

<sup>28</sup> In its obituary notice, *The American Hebrew* said: "He married Judith, a daughter of Théophile Gautier, but neither were adapted to matrimony, and they soon separated" which seems a fairer view of their problems than the more recent enthusiasm for his first wife's shifting of all blame on to Mendès. Other writers, such as Gautier himself and Paul Bourget, fictionalized the acrimonious relationship in their novels, not necessarily with any greater understanding.

<sup>29</sup> She also gained a reputation as a poet in her own right and a scholar in Oriental languages, literature and culture.

<sup>30</sup> Some sources suggest a ninth child who died in infancy.

<sup>31</sup> Under the heading "Letter from Paris", the report is subtitled "Chivot's Death and Catulle Mendès's Marriage—Gyp and her Career". *The New York Times* (9 October 1897). Cléopatra Diane de Mérode (1875-1966) was one of those beautiful ballerinas who became famous during the Belle Epoque both for "her face and her feet"; her father was an Austrian aristocrat from a Belgian family and a respected landscape painter. She

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was often the subject of Degas and Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings. In 1895, at the age of 22, she had an alleged liaison with the elderly King Leopold II of Belgium, a *cause célèbre* in Paris. However, though known for her trend-setting hair-dos, "the chignon, with the hair arranged low over the ears", she continued as a dancer into her fifties, particularly in Vienna, where she became a friend of Gustav Klimt. See *Blog of an Art Admirer*, "Cleo de Merode: La Belle Epoque Beauty" online at [www.artistsandart.org/.../cleo-de-merode-la-belle-epoques-beauty](http://www.artistsandart.org/.../cleo-de-merode-la-belle-epoques-beauty); and the blog Reflection in Verse and prose: Musings about Dance and Life "Cleo de Merode—French Dancer and Muse" (24 December 2012) online at [reflectionsinverse.blogspot.com/.../cleo-de-merode-french-dancer-and-muse](http://reflectionsinverse.blogspot.com/.../cleo-de-merode-french-dancer-and-muse).

<sup>32</sup> For background on Hirsch and his bohemian life in Montmartre among writers such as Francis Carco, Max Jacob, Apollinaire and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, see Jean-Jacques Bedu, *Francis Carco au cœur de la bohème* (Paris: Editions du Rocher, 2001) pp. 141-148.

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous, "What do the Bristol Rovers, the Tour de France, aggressive Futurists, and forgotten female poets have in common?" *Poisonous Pens: Belle Époque Media Culture* (2 December 2013) online at <http://poisonouspens.wordpress.com/tag/catulle-mendes>. See also « Marinetti e il Futurismo » online at [http://www.internetculturale.it/opencms/opensms/it/pagine/mostra/pagina\\_897](http://www.internetculturale.it/opencms/opensms/it/pagine/mostra/pagina_897).

<sup>34</sup> It is not surprising for several reasons, as we shall show when several other newspapers from New Zealand and Australia prove interesting sources of information in regard to these "forgotten" people and events: (1) provincial and colonial media are often more willing to present reports from overseas without understanding the sensitivities observed by metropolitan newspapers and magazines or (2) fully grasping the implications of the facts and rumors they put in print. (3) Eccentric editors, re-writers, and readers may show an interest in off-beat information—scandal, violent crimes, colourful characters—taken in their stride by sophisticated journalists and audiences. (4) At the turn of the century, in the Antipodes, as well as other odd places out of the mainstream of culture, at time moreover before articulate local interests were crystallized, exiled intellectuals and unruly heirs to great families found themselves at the bottom of the world and yet wishing to keep abreast of current affairs at home and to participate at a distance in new ideas and aesthetic movements.

<sup>35</sup> Jane Catulle-Mendès, *La Prière sur l'enfant mort*, 3<sup>ème</sup> ed. Paris : A. Lamerre, 1921. The dedication page reads: "A mon enfant adoré| PRIMICE CATULLE MENDES| engagé volontaire en 1914| décès pour la France |a vingt ans| le 23 avril 1917" (To my adored son Primice Catulle Mendès enrolled voluntarily in 1914, died for France at the age of twenty on 23 April 1917). For a resume and several extracts from the book, see J.F. Jagielski, "Catulle-Mendès, Jane (1867-1955), Temoignages de 1914-1918 (26 November 2008) online at <http://www.crid1418.org/temoignages/2008/11/26/catulle-mendes-jane-1867-1955>. This article discusses the importance of Madame Mendès witness to the loss of her son and other young martyrs and her heroic effort to retrieve the body and give it a fitting memorial. That this small book went into a third edition tells us something about the feelings the poem evoked ; that she continued to carry the Mendès name tells us something else about his mother's character, quite in contrast to the grudge-bearing first wife, Judith Gautier.

<sup>36</sup> Thomson, *French Portraits*, p. 75.

<sup>37</sup> Stuart Henry, *Hours with Famous Parisians* (Chicago: Way and Williams, 1897) p. 59. Born Henry Stuart Oliver (1860-1920) was a journalist and penned these and other sketches for magazines in New York and London; they are somewhat fanciful and impressionistic.

<sup>38</sup> Stuart Henry, *Hours with Famous Parisians* (Chicago: Way and Williams, 1897) p. 59. Born Henry Stuart Oliver (1860-1920), he was a journalist and penned these and other sketches for magazines in New York and London; they are somewhat fanciful and impressionistic, but all the same give the aura or atmosphere of the times.

<sup>39</sup> Theodore de Banville, *Les Annales politiques et littéraires* (14 février 1909) p. 156; available at *Les Amateurs de Remy de Gourmont* online at <http://www.remydegourmont.org/rg/necrologues/mendes>. (my translation).

<sup>40</sup> Another contemporary of the original Parnassians, Lepelletier, recalls his introduction as "a rough-headed poet, whose appearance had the effect of a dawn, viz., the brilliant and sparkling Catulle Mendès: refinement in ringlets" (William Aspenwall Bradley, *French Etchers of the Second Empire* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin and Cambridge: The Riverside press, 1916) p. 44. Interestingly, the etcher adds, Mendès "was credited in those days with the vices of which he was probably ignorant, and the talent of which he had already showed signs, was not properly appreciated" (Bradley, p. 44). And there it is again, that persistent theme that runs like a red thread through this book: "not properly appreciated."

<sup>41</sup> One blogger typically writes: "Mendès is one of those curious figures who seems best remembered now for his tendency to pop up in other, more important, writers; essays, letters, journals and memoirs than for anything he actually accomplished himself....He appears to have known everyone there was to know and gone

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everywhere there was to go in Parisian literary and theatrical society of the period, but despite that ubiquity, he also seems to have been held in considerable disdain by many of his fellow writers. Maybe it was due to the fact that he was the of a banker, maybe because of his Jewish extraction, maybe jealousy at his youthful good looks...or perhaps better writers just resented the fact that he seemed able always to always get his frequently mediocre and sometimes blatantly imitative work published and often wrote for the major newspapers of the day” (Anonymous, “Catulle Mendès: ‘The Chapel of the Abyss’, Library Thing 13 August 2013 online at <http://www.librarything.com/com/topic/18164>).

<sup>42</sup> As I remarked about the pertinence of provincial and colonial newspapers as sources of information that professional historians consider beneath their dignity to write about or whose validity is highly questionable and yet do create that flavour and lived existential atmosphere hard to capture in archival documentation, contemporary bloggers use the internet in ways that often yield surprising and exciting results: precisely because there is no editorial control over what is reproduced, stated or juxtaposed, configurations with important suggestive power are thrown up, old and new prejudices exposed for study, and minor persons, events and ideas are put into focus. As in rabbinical midrashim, the peculiarity, the eccentric and trivial eccentricity even of spelling, syntax or allusion may justly become the fulcrum for highly significant discussions.

<sup>44</sup> Willy was a slick manipulator who got many needy young writers to compose, polish and put together a series of novels which he then published under his own name. Among these so-called “slaves” or “niggers” was none other than Colette herself who presented him with notebooks full of her memories of her childhood in the provinces, scribbles that became the highly successful Claudine novels—and only after Willy’s death to put her name on the title page. See Michèle Sarde, *Colette: A Biography*, trans. Richard Miller (London: Michael Joseph, 1978) pp. 103 ff.

<sup>45</sup> “Want to be a successful nineteenth-century writer? Get high on Mariani” *Poisonous Pens* (16 August 2013) online at [poisonouspens.wordpress.com/tag/catulle-mendes](http://poisonouspens.wordpress.com/tag/catulle-mendes).

<sup>46</sup> I have called this the phenomenon of Incidentalism in which Jews are only mentioned as incidental to important people or events or accomplishments.

<sup>47</sup> Bruno Walter, *Gustav Mahler, A Study* (1936), trans. from German by Lotte Walter Scott (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1958) p. 98. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie: Versuch einer Selbstkritik* (1872), stressing the inner examination of the philosopher’s or artist’s own soul but when republished in 1886 it had a different subtitle: *Hellenism and Pessimism (Griechentum und Pessimismus)*, now emphasizing the melancholia of the age and the philosopher’s identification with a lost civilization. In the longer chapter that this essay forms a section of—and the book on Jews who mistook their attempted assimilation into the Gentile world of the late nineteenth century for acceptance—I explain the kabbalistic significance of Nietzsche’s figure of the sparks, here singled out by Bruno Walter. The sparks also link up with the notion of the *Urlicht*, the originary light spoken of by Walter on the next page of his study on his master Mahler, and which I discuss at length in my third book on Alfred Dreyfus, *Alfred and Lucie Dreyfus in the Phantasmagoria*. This explosion and scattering of sparks is also related to George Sand’s remembrance of her first awakening to the creative imagination, for which she has no other word to describe the phenomena she experiences than the dialect term *orblute*, a mixture of will-o-the-wisp and optical illusion in a blinding flash of sunlight refracted off a shining roof. This is not quite what Catulle Mendès experienced when he suddenly awoke for the last time to the light at the end of the tunnel in Saint-Germain-en-Laye in 1909.

<sup>48</sup> The report in *le Figaro* for the next day (11 February 1909), this timed signed by Serge Basset, provides more details, including the speeches given by various friends and dignitaries, and a much longer list of people attending and participating in the funeral rites. Unfortunately because the online version of the newspaper has been carelessly scanned not all the names are legible. I have attempted to integrate the two newspaper accounts, along with other details gleaned from other sources, not to give a definitive history of the event, but to suggest the depth of feelings, public and private, exhibited for the deceased. Not all his friends and colleagues were in attendance because of sickness, old age, or business away from Paris.

<sup>49</sup> They were reprinted as *Pleureuses: poésies d’Henri Barbusse* by Flammarion in 1920.

<sup>50</sup> Walter P. Weaver, *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century, 1900-1950* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999) p. 374, n. 9.

<sup>51</sup> On the early career of Léon Dierx as an engraver and etcher amongst the formative group of Parnassians, see Bradley, *French Etchers of the Second Empire*, pp. 42, 55-57. The monument—a bust of Catulle Mendès on a

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memorial plinth set on a three-stepped pedestal in the cemetery—was finally inaugurated in 1913. Three news photographs taken by the Agence Meurisse and now posted by *Gallica* of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France website show (1) Mme Catulle Mendès and Jean Richepin arm in arm entering the cemetery for the inauguration, (2) Georges Courteline delivering his “discours” before a large crowd of onlookers, and (3) Mme Daniel Lesueur reading her speech on behalf of the Société des Gens de Lettres before the same group of attendees.

<sup>52</sup> Mendès is often mentioned in regard to the spiritualist revival at the close of the nineteenth century in Joël Goffin, *Le secret de Bruges-la-Morte* (2 February 2011) online at [bruges-la-morte.net](http://bruges-la-morte.net).

<sup>53</sup> Djohar Si Ahmed, “La traverse spirite de Fernand Desmoulin : Le “Paranormal”, nous n’y croyons pas, nous l’étudions » extracted from the author’s *Comment penser paranormal* (Paris : L’Harmattan, 2006) online at [www.metapsychique.org/La-traversee-spirite-de-Fernand-Desmoulin](http://www.metapsychique.org/La-traversee-spirite-de-Fernand-Desmoulin).

<sup>54</sup> Charles Reich, “Gustave Kahn, Juif lorrain, poète symboliste, sioniste et socialiste » online at [judaisme.sdv.fr/perso/gustkahn/index.htm](http://judaisme.sdv.fr/perso/gustkahn/index.htm).

<sup>55</sup> Subtitled “Contes Juifs” (Paris: Fasquelle, 1933).

<sup>56</sup> “Biographie de Saint-Pol-Roux » *Je Suis Mort.com*, No. 2760.

<sup>57</sup> Why wasn’t Sarah Bernhardt, who naturally falls into this cluster of theatrical friends of Mendès, there for the funeral? One reason is that she may still have been in a pique after a contretemps she had with Mendès over his play seven years earlier in 1902. Sarah asked the playwright for his then new play *Sainte Thérèse*, which he granted, but then asked for back when he discovered she would be in London at the agreed-on date for its opening. They exchanged a series of letters, in a sequence of mounting bitterness, until he published them all in *Le Temps* and claimed the moral high ground. Sarah said she would never forgive him, while he said it was silly of them to quarrel when they loved each other so, and he would wait patiently “repentance in her dear, royal, cruel heart.” See the *Buffalo Courier* (16 March 1902), the unsigned report datelined Paris for the previous day, and reprinted in many newspapers around the world. More likely, however, the Great Sarah was on tour in northern Europe.

<sup>58</sup> This and other designations in French come from *Mercure de France* (1 June 1909) pp. 760-761. *Parisienne Photographie* AEML

<sup>59</sup> For in addition to word-texts from the archives, we must learn to use photographs and other illustrated materials, sometimes to identify the people, places and events in question, but also, and especially with non-realistic images, the imagination of the of mentality we are trying to understand. If it were not for the caption below the reproduced photograph in the newspaper, this image of the funeral cortege might be that of any other great person of the time: and that is exactly the point—Catulle Mendès, to us virtually an unknown, was a respected celebrity artist of his day for whom everything just short of a state memorial was arranged.

<sup>60</sup> *Mercure de France* (1 June 1909) pp. 760-761. Apparently the only medical condition he was known to have suffered in the weeks and months before his death was a case of otitis (*otite*), inflammation of the ear, about ten days earlier; cp. “La Mort de Catulle Mendès”, *Le Figaro*, 10 February 1909. Though the newspaper records “une surdité passagère” (a transient deafness) that might have explained why Mendès awoke confused in the train tunnel, but this infection might also have caused continuing problems with balance and therefore it is something the doctors and the police should have taken into account.

<sup>61</sup> *Mercure de France* (1 June 1909) 761.

<sup>62</sup> Philip Hale, “Chabrier the Man” *Boston Symphony Orchestra, Programme of the Fifth Rehearsal and Concert, with Historical and Descriptive Notes by Philip Hale* (Boston: C.A. Ellis, 1912) p. 310.

<sup>63</sup> *Gwendoline, opéra en trois actes; poème de Catulle Mendès, traduction allemande du Dr Félix Vogt; musique de Emmanuel Chabrier, Partition piano et chant réduite par André messenger* (Paris : Enoch Frères et Costallat, n.d.).

<sup>64</sup> Maurice de Waleffe, *Quand Paris était un Paradis : Memoires 1900-1939* (Paris : Denoel, 1947) . Further discussion in the long chapter based on this essay.

<sup>65</sup> Israel Cohen, *Jewish Life in Modern Times* (London: Methuen & Co., 1914) online at <http://www.ibiblio.org/Yiddish/Book/Cohen/gencul>. Cohen (1879-1961) argues that rather than just playing a minor and often passive role in the development of modern European culture, the Jew, from the medieval period onwards, “co-operated in the dissemination of knowledge and the advancement of science in Europe, distinguishing himself particularly in the fields of philosophy, medicine, astronomy, and exploration. Despite the rising energy of anti-Semitism, before the debacle of World War I and the Shoah in World War II, Jews felt them safe enough to make such sweeping generalizations, attempting to convince themselves that history was on their side.”

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<sup>66</sup> Martin, *Catulle Mendès*, p. 291. Discussion of the writer's last decade of plays, novels, and short stories and their relevance to his career and disclosure of his psychology will be deferred to the book of which this essay forms a part.

<sup>67</sup> Burkhardt, *The Cicerone*, p. 202. Burkhardt is talking about the early sixteenth-century painter Giovanni Antonio (Licinio Regillo da) Pordenone (ca. 1483-1539). What is important here is the sense of *morbidezza* that in English tends always towards the pathological, diseased, gruesome, and horrible, yet in Italian encompasses the senses of what is soft, mellow and smooth. Peculiar as it may be to transpose the term into the context of Jewish character and personality, when dealing with creative geniuses, many things are possible. In the case of Mendès, "warmth and tenderness" in the effect of *chiaroscuro* in his life and death, the term seems appropriate.

<sup>68</sup> Henry, *Hours with Famous Parisians*, p. 63

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