Catalyst Review

Literature and Revolution: British Responses to the Paris Commune of 1871 by Owen Holland (Rutgers University Press, 2022)

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In late June and early July 2023 riots broke out across different districts in France, triggered by the police killing in Nanterre of a teenager, Nahel Merzouk, whose family were of Algerian origin. 45,000 extra police were deployed, buses were torched, and in a suburb of Paris a local mayor's house was ramraided with a burning vehicle, in an incident described by authorities as an "assassination attempt". Most modern cultures experience periods of civil disturbance and riot, but the events in France in 2023 led many commentators, on all sides of the political divide, to characterise this as something like war. At the very least, these events are clearly symptomatic of fault lines which run deep into French society and political culture. However it suppresses or contains this outbreak of violence, the French republic will have to confront its legacy of systemic and institutional racism if it is going to avoid repetition.

These historical moments when civil order is suspended, when the political edifice trembles and flinches, are almost always instructive in hindsight. The causes, events, and ramifications are pored over by journalists, and lawmakers shore up the edifice with specific legislation, often as repressive as they can get away with dependent on the contemporary political culture. Just occasionally lessons are learned, and social, cultural, and political attitudes shift to address, at least in part, the original grievances. However, when the threat to the social fabric offers a coherent alternative political model, when civil disobedience is organised and militarised, then these historical moments have resonance at a much greater order of magnitude. And when the capital city of a nation is occupied by a revolutionary government the effects transcend borders and resonate internationally.

Owen Holland's admirable volume unpacks one example of this resonance: the British literary response to the Paris Commune of 1871. Britain's shock at the events in a neighbouring nation just twenty-one miles across the water may have been tempered by comparable precedents, but the French Revolution had occurred almost a century previous, and 1848's Europe-wide revolutionary conflagration was politically various in its nature. It is a historical commonplace that the former influenced British literary Romanticism, and that the latter triggered the suppression of British Chartism and the dissolution of its attendant working-class radical writing culture. But the British literary response to the Commune has not been comprehensively studied until now.

Early in Holland's book he quotes from Chris R. Vanden Bossche's 1991 volume *Carlyle and the Search for Authority* in relation to the nineteenth-century commentator's *The French Revolution: A History* (1837). He neglects, however, to refer to Vanden Bossche's 2014 book, *Reform Acts: Chartism, Social Agency and the Victorian Novel 1832-1867*, which can be seen as a more historically expansive domestic treatment of the effects of political change on mainstream fiction which nevertheless covers some of the same methodological ground as Holland's work. This is not to suggest a Bloomian anxiety of influence, but rather to note that the reading of "canonical" or "middling" Victorian literature through specific political events is a welcome trend from which rich seams can be mined, and Holland's work is very much part of this turn.

Like Bossche, Holland is interested in the literary space between political events, in the chronological and imaginary senses, but he notes the added cultural complexity represented by Paris's identity as a simultaneous centre of political democracy, cultural richness, and architectural opulence. Where the

perceptions of these aspects of Paris contend in the British imaginary after the Commune, there are interesting frictions. But it is also the case that, whatever the political sympathies of the writer, each literary response offers its own set of moral and political parameters attendant on the variables presented by character developments and narrative arcs. Holland offers something like a thesis statement which suggests the general social effect of this:

> It is an important contention of this book that the choices made by such figures reveal something significant not only about the particularities of the cultural response to the Commune in Britain but also about the way in which these figures conceived of literature's relationship to the prospect of social revolution (both past and future) and the way in which self-consciously literary endeavours might unconsciously work to mobilize or contain such possibilities.[1]

Holland is impressively consistent in his own particular methodology, enabling fresh local readings of individual texts, and a convincing overview which offers an integrated, politically revealing interpretation of a relatively discrete literary phenomenon. The sympathies and anxieties of individual writers are uncovered and unpacked, but this is also an opportunity for a broader examination the literary imaginary of late-nineteenth century Britain. The Paris Commune, or its fictionalised remembrance, brings into focus a range of tropes which reveal confused xenophobia, class prejudice, and a deep-seated fear of political instability spreading virally across the English Channel. Revolution is figured as politically naïve and reductive, suppressing individualism, and distorting natural gender roles. Some of these fictions may amount to little more than romantic or adventurous wish fulfilments at a literary level, but they nevertheless contribute to the public understanding of contemporary and recent historical events. Even broadly sympathetic reimaginings of the Commune reflected cultural attitudes to an event which, as Holland writes "disturbed a whole set of psychic, cultural, and intellectual investments in the status quo".[2]

The broadly chronological approach of this text provides an illuminating historical account of the way British literature evolved in its responses to the Commune. Sometimes this evolution was characterised by initial sympathy (often more romantic than sincerely political) which developed into patronising disapproval, or even vitriolic condemnation and revulsion. And sometimes, as in the case with Mary Elizabeth Braddon and others, this shift occurred within the imagination of an individual writer. After her initial sympathy with the broad political aims of the commune (in line with her professed admiration for Émile Zola), Holland identifies in Braddon's 1883 short novel *Under the Red Flag* strong elements of Nietzschean *ressentiment* in relation to the Communards, a chief aspect of which is a tendency to reduction to the point of dehumanisation.

However, perhaps the most ideologically telling narrative trope in Braddon's novel is represented by the treatment of its protagonist, Gaston Mortemar, who is extended "a limited kind of imaginative sympathy [as] an individual of vacillating revolutionary sensibility […] who ultimately quails before the prospect of thoroughgoing social revolution".[3] Holland also recognises this type of moral justification for eventual acceptance of the dominant ideology in Margaret Oliphant's *A Beleaguered City* (1880) and Anne Thackeray Ritchie's *Mrs Dymond* (1885). This fictionalised rehabilitation of radicalism echoes earlier treatments of ultimately sympathetic Chartist protagonists in works by Elizabeth Gaskell, George Eliot, and Charles Kingsley.

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[1] Owen Holland, *Literature and Revolution: British Responses to the Paris Commune of 1871* (Rutgers University Press, 2022), p.8.
[2] *Ibid*., p.182.
[3] *Ibid*., p.54.

The ideologeme of *ressentiment* is also identified as a 'persistent keynote' in Henry James's *The Princess Casamassima* (1886), H. G. Wells's *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), and George Gissing's first published novel *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), as Holland uncovers often peculiarly subjective treatments of recent history which reveal more about the writers' political sensibilities than the real events or actors represented, often indirectly, in the fiction. Written responses to the Commune allowed for sometimes irresponsible engagements with myth and fantasy in the service of self-righteous moralising. As early as 1871 the contemporary French critic Théophile Gautier, in his *Tableaux de Siège: Paris 1870-1871*, fantasised about what would have happened had the Communards seized the Venus de Milo from the Louvre. The event did not occur, but Gautier nevertheless assures the reader that they would have "sold her or broken her up as being a proof of human genius offensive to levelling stupidity".[4]

Gautier's aestheticism was an important influence on Algernon Charles Swinburne, who in a letter to William Michael Rossetti also written just days after events of the Bloody Week, suggested that in the case of the (Communard) "incendiaries of the Louvre … a law [should be] passed throughout the world authorizing any citizen of any nation to take their lives with impunity and assurance of national thanks – to shoot them down wherever met like dogs".[5] Strikingly, it is the threat to cultural heritage which provokes enough outrage to justify dehumanisation the perpetrators, even as the atrocities of the Versaillais soldiers against their fellow citizens were being widely reported. In fact, fires set in the Louvre and Notre Dame were put out before any significant damage could occur.

Inevitably, the use of fire as a fictional device to symbolise revolution's destructive and haphazard nature figures extensively in the texts studied here. It is notable that they often ignore available evidence that many fires across Paris during the suppression of the Bloody Week were caused incidentally by artillery or set by the Versaillais as well as the Communards. Neither do they recognise that the figure of the female arsonists, the *pétroleuses*, depicted in mythically dramatic newspaper illustrations, was largely just that: a myth.

Holland is particularly interesting in the way he extends the historical work of Carolyn J. Eichner and Gay Gullickson on the role of women during the Commune, perhaps exemplified by the magnificent Louise Michel (1830-1905).[6] There is a fascinating link made between the journalistic commentary of the Paris correspondent of the *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine* in 1871 and Mary Elizabeth Braddon's subsequent depiction of one of her female Communard characters in *Under the Red Flag*. The correspondent, heir to the by-then deceased Isabella Beeton's visits to Paris in the early 1860s for the magazine, horrifies themself by imagining (á la Gautier) that one of the *pétroleuses* might conceal petroleum in a milk bottle thereby, as Holland notes, causing "a fluid associated with mothering and nurture [to be] replaced with a liquid of incendiary nature".[7] Holland then identifies a similar "lactic anxiety" in Braddon when she makes her rather obviously named fictional *pétroleuse,* Suzon *Michel*, the owner of a *crèmerie.*

One of the fascinating aspects of the British cultural response to the Commune is that in the immediate aftermath it was deeply coloured by the presence of Communard refugees in London. In the wake of the brutality of the Bloody Week and the subsequent reprisals many refugees were

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[4] *Ibid*., p.7.
[5] *Ibid*., p.6.
[6] In a completely different context, this reviewer had the pleasure of translating a fine 1865 poem by Michel on the subject of the effect of the Cotton Blockade on the workers of Rouen.
https://cottonfaminepoetry.exeter.ac.uk/database/poem.html?id=unknown_1865-10_louise-michel
[7] Holland, p.49.

welcomed in Britain, and some were housed with British families, eventually settling in the country, and successfully plying their previous trades. Beyond the qualified political sympathy of writers including John Ruskin and Eliza Lynn Linton (whose 1872 novel *The True History of Joshua Davidson, Christian and Communist* is compared here with Edward Bulwer Lytton's clunkily reactionary, and ultimately unfinished, *The Parisians* [1872-74]), real human sympathy for the sufferers of the events in Paris in the spring of 1871 was based on widespread knowledge of the disproportionate and chaotic response of the Versaillais.

The tension between this reality and the fictional depiction of Communards in some texts was never more palpable, however, than when revolutionaries were characterised as animalistic subterranean creatures, evident across several texts (including Bulwer Lytton's) which featured scenes of pre-revolutionary conspiracy spiced with internationalist radicalism. In a chapter subsection on *The Parisians* entitled "Revolution from Below" Holland notes that "[t]he idea of the underground, as both a figurative space of potential political sedition and a literal, physical network of catacombs that ran beneath the city, occupies an important place in popular understandings of Paris's history as a city of revolution"[8]. He traces echoes of Bulwer Lytton's spatial allegorizing of class politics, which originated in his 1871 science fiction effort *The Coming Race*, through subsequent texts including H.G Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), and E. M. Forster's short story "The Machine Stops" (1909). In this, and in other places, Holland demonstrates the strength of his thesis regarding the relationship of literature to the threat of social revolution in the broader sense. Just as politically moderate literature paints social revolution as reductive, it simplifies the causes and processes of revolution in its narratives in order to obscure its real objectives.

Two substantial poems examined in the sixth chapter, Alfred Austin's *The Human Tragedy* (only part of which treats the Commune) and William Morris's *The Pilgrims of Hope*, might be seen to span the political spectrum in that they were written respectively by an avowed conservative and an avowed socialist. In a subsection of this chapter entitled "The Poetics of Martyrdom in Fin-de-Siècle Socialist Verse" radical periodical poetic culture is also discussed. However, the literary field could be widened still further. Holland's examples do not substantially span the class spectrum, and it is certain that poetic responses to the Commune will have been written by working-class writers in local newspaper poetry columns. Of course, the research methodology for this kind of study would be entirely different from Holland's project, and therefore the omission is entirely understandable. Nevertheless, a truly comprehensive study of the cultural response to a "revolution from below" would include examples of "history from below", and it would certainly be instructive to examine the thoughts and feelings of amateur poets and ordinary people whose briefer occasional responses are not tempered by commercial imperatives. The political mobility of the short poem form might reveal variety which counters the reductive tendencies of the fictional plot device. Where narrative literature might reach for what Holland describes as "an accurately textured and full "realistic" representation of revolutionary motivation and practice", poetry largely evades historical responsibility and attempts to reflect emotional truths.[9] Perhaps a deep dive into the vast repositories of British local newspaper poetry from the years and months after the Commune might reveal an affective corollary to the fictional response which has been delineated here.

British cultural responses to French political revolts of whatever magnitude are always fascinating, even if they are depressingly consistent in their xenophobic stereotyping. Terms such as 'passion', or even the less equivocal 'hot-bloodedness' are rarely far from the surface of media reportage, and

[8] *Ibid*., p.22
[9] *Ibid*., p.181.

these inevitably inform less ephemeral representations in literature. England shocked Europe with its carefully legislated decapitation of Charles I in 1649, but since then the UK has defined itself as a milder and more considered body politic than its continental neighbour. The French Revolution, the Paris Commune, the *gilet jaunes* protests from 2018, and France's current political unrest have all in similar ways but with varying resonance provided British commentators with perceived benchmarks of extremity. Even as the UK's post-Brexit economic status impoverishes a greater proportion of its population than any of its international comparators, British culture clings to an often-unreasonable reasonableness in its political responses. Deep within the British collective psyche, these responses are calibrated against French politics, and the responses in Holland's book are just one part of this long-running historical effect.

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