

OXFORD

PATRICK MCGUINNESS



POETRY & RADICAL POLITICS IN FIN DE SIÈCLE FRANCE

From Anarchism to Action française

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In memory of Malcolm Bowie (1943–2007)
and Alan Raitt (1930–2006)

From the beginning it's all been said,
all done, the steps we'll take, our words,
the prints on the path, the print on the page.

It's the mist that blunts them, the type
that furs them over. From the beginning
it's all been said, still the hardest task remains:

finding who to say it to.

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I was very lucky to be taught as a graduate student, and encouraged as a young academic, by Alan Raitt and Malcolm Bowie, who in their different ways shaped not just how I read literature but the pleasure I get from teaching and thinking about it. With such advantages, I should have done better and I should have done more, but this book is dedicated to their memories, fondly and with admiration.

P.McG.

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Introduction

Poetry, Politics, and the Legacies of Romanticism

Surely the poet is monarch of the clouds.
He hovers, like a lemon-colored kite,
over spring afternoons in the nineteenth century
while Marx in the library gloom

studies the birth rate of the weavers of Tilsit
and that gentle man Bakunin,
home after fingerfucking the countess,
applies his numb hands
to the making of bombs.¹

Robert Hass, 'The Nineteenth
Century as a Song'

On every poem which looks like a poem is a sign which reads:
This road does not go through to action; fictitious.²

John Crowe Ransom, 'Poetry: A Note on Ontology'

L'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur! l'Azur!³

Stéphane Mallarmé, 'L'Azur'

Robert Hass introduces some deceptively large themes into his rangy, whimsical-seeming poem about the relations between poetry and politics in the second half of the nineteenth century. 'The Nineteenth Century as a Song' appeared in Hass's first book, *Field Guide*, published in 1973 in a context—the anti-Vietnam War protests—that is as conducive to

¹ Robert Hass, 'The Nineteenth Century as a Song', *Field Guide. With a new preface by the author* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 33.

² John Crowe Ransom, 'Poetry: A Note on Ontology', *The World's Body* (New York: Scribners, 1938), p. 131.

³ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, i (Paris: Pléiade, 1998), p. 15.

meditating on the relationship between poetry and politics as it is to reaching no firm conclusions about it. Hass's poem, for all its playfulness, rings true in part because it is infused with a sense that whatever connections exist between poetry and politics, they cannot be traced in straightforward ways. But the connections are there, the poem seems to say, like those between the kite and the ground it appears to deny: the tautening and slackening of the string, and the rising and dipping of the kite, are related, however much the kite may seem to float away and the string to disappear against the sky.

Hass chooses the nineteenth century, and it is not idly chosen. The figures who people this poem—Baudelaire, Verlaine, Swinburne, Tennyson, Bakunin, and Marx—are there precisely because they seem to play out that relationship between the airy kite and the string that keeps it, we might say, *grounded*. We have Bakunin at his bomb, Marx at his statistics, the revolutionary impulse split between destroying the world in order to rebuild it ('The destructive urge is also a creative urge'—Bakunin) and explaining the world in order to transform it ('The philosophers have only interpreted the world . . . The point, however, is to change it'—Marx). Then, at the opposite end—or what looks like the opposite end—we have Baudelaire and Verlaine and Swinburne, poets whose predilection for the 'Azur!' seems a world away from the earthier concerns of the revolutionaries whose contemporaries they are.

And as anyone who has ever flown a kite knows, those eddies and graceful swirls, those wind-riding, rippling swoops, and ducking dives, are the work not just of the air but of the ground: the loosening and tautening of the kite string that produces that graceful, organized freedom we call form. That string is only intermittently visible, at moments when it catches the sun or stands out in contrast against its background; fine but strong, it binds the ground and the air in a tension of illusory antinomies, illusory autonomies.

This is not an unhelpful way of seeing the situation of lyric poetry in the late nineteenth century, and especially the poetry which at first sight seems to have least to do with the world of politics, in the specific sense of political action and political consciousness, but also in the more numinous senses of cultural politics, political ideology, or even politicized language. Hass's poem plays on the vertical and the horizontal axes, the vertical being the axis of lyric—of escape, of uplift and all those 'élévations' and 'azurs' that haunt nineteenth-century poetry—and the horizontal, the axis of the ground and of the *grounded*: of prose, of the novel, and especially the Naturalist or realist novels. These are crude distinctions, but they are good openers onto the questions we will explore in this book, because they help us envisage the different ways in which poetry and prose in the late nineteenth century express their own and each other's relationship with

their time and their place. The one rises, refines, and escapes, climbs the ladder of its own aspiration; the other observes, stays 'close to the ground', incorporates and includes, seeks to span time and place rather than to pierce through them.

But if things were that simple, they would be dull. Hass uses the image of the poet hovering—*planer* would be the French word—to suggest a still point, an effortless command of height, a defiance of gravity. But he undermines it too. The kite only hovers because it is being pulled back; it stays up and stays still because of the ground as much as the air. That freedom, or that illusion of freedom (of, in artistic terms, autonomy), is precisely what is at stake. And what about that word, 'Surely'? Is it assertion (*surely!*) or question (*surely?* . . . *surely?*), a statement of certainty or a cry for reassurance?

Those nineteenth-century poetic fantasies of height and perspective, the 'bird's eye' view, are rarely comfortable ones. As for the urge to incorporate and include, it too is haunted by its own impossibility—escape from the world and complete immersion in it are equally unattainable. The writer who wants to write about everything and the writer who wants to write about nothing (Flaubert's dream of a 'livre sur rien' . . .) are equally doomed, but at least the writer who wants to write about everything can make a start. The most visionary nineteenth-century French poets are the ones whose poems register the discomfort and precariousness of vision, not its comfortable Olympian sweep: Vigny, Baudelaire, Banville, Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Laforgue, and others may be poets of vertiginous elevation, but they are also poets of the shaky purchase, the unsteady foothold, the teetering pinnacle. Hass evokes perhaps the best-known poem about the poet's unfittedness for ordinary life, Baudelaire's 'L'Albatros', and even that schoolroom French-lesson staple is more complex than it appears.

This is because Baudelaire is less the poet of height and lyric uplift than the consummate poet of gravity: what goes up must come down. However much the lyric poet heads azure-wards, kicks back the ground he rises from, he always returns, always falls back. The lyric poet is less a bird, in fact, than a balloonist, jettisoning anything that might impede his rise, and rising—yes, for a time. But because lyric, like the balloon, is powered by air, by breath, it also exhausts itself in ascent. Lyric poetry *runs out of puff*, but that is also its beauty, because it is only on the descent that you really stop and look, to notice that what you saw getting smaller and smaller as you rose becomes larger and larger as you fall. Whether you're straddling the soft clouds or in an attic garret scratching the paper with your nib, gravity is the enemy. But it is also material for poetry, its subject. Lyric poetry knows that too, and it's part of its essential double bluff: the stalled flights, the aborted ascents, become guarantees of the

poetry's success. Poetry loves the failure of transcendence, which is the marker of the authenticity of the need to fly, and thus better than flight itself (which is a marker, merely, of the ability to fly), because it is a fitter subject and a more various one. You may aspire to vision through ascent, but it's knowledge through descent that gives you the best lines. As for transcendence (and anyway: transcendence of what?), it becomes the space it leaves for its own failure to happen, a failure which makes mere success seem paltry. As Mallarmé said, and proudly: 'Mais [. . .] ratés . . . nous le sommes tous!⁴ ('Failures? . . . but we are all failures!'). In a poem called 'The Trumpeter Swan', Robin Robertson puts it with a memorable grace when he writes:

You can learn how to fly, see all the edges
soften and blur, but you can't hold on
to the height you find,
you can never be taught how to fall.⁵

We think of all those Symbolist poems, paeans of impotence, anthems of sterility, failure-fetishizing celebrations of purity. But they are also, and more than this, a dance of language around the cleared space where transcendence used to be, performed to an empty arena where once there sat a public. It is a poetry which has lost both its centre and its circumference. Symbolism's inwardness may be read as a sort of elegy: both for a public and for a fit subject. The echoing spaces of Symbolist literature—empty rooms, walled gardens, haunted stages—emphasize that: voice resonating after audience, a sound outlasting both its hearing and the contexts of its being heard. The Symbolist poem arrives too late at the place of its hearing, just as, correlatively in the world of public taste, genre supremacy, publishing economics, and artistic movement-formation, the Symbolist poet finds himself writing too late for a readership. If the Symbolist poet imagines being read, it is not by a collective but by an individual, with the poem's gestures of privacy endorsed and replayed by the reader's. Symbolist theatre is the place the poets go to in order to keep alive their fantasies of reaching a public, and we know, from Symbolist plays themselves (with the possible exception of Maeterlinck), with what result: empty auditoria, refused scripts (not to mention scripts—like Mallarmé's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, 'non pas possible au théâtre mais exigeant le théâtre'—that pre-emptively refuse themselves for theatre),

⁴ Camille Mauclair, *Mallarmé chez lui* (Paris: Grasset, 1935), p. 100.

⁵ Robin Robertson, *Sailing the Forest. Selected Poems* (London: Picador, 2014), p. 92.

scathing reviews, incomprehension, and short performance seasons. Hugo, Vigny, even Baudelaire and Gautier, could be sure of being read, however badly, of being heard if only to be rejected, but the Symbolist (and to some extent the Decadent) is experiencing marginality and marginalization which, until then, poetry had never known.

Hass's poem asks about the connections between poetry, and specifically lyric poetry, and politics, the kind of politics that shape or change the world; between the clouds and the ground, the words of the poem and the statistics in the library, the fingers that hold the pen and the fingers that make the bomb. In this book I explore those questions in so far as they affect the poetry and poetic thought of the Symbolist and Decadent avant-garde and their immediate successors. This is not a book about the political leanings or the allegiances of individual poets or movements (such books exist already), but about the ways in which poetry and poetic thought relate to the radical politics of left and right in the period between 1884 (the launch of *Le Décadent* magazine by Anatole Baju) and 1898 (the foundation of *Action française*). Much of the poetry I discuss has little in terms of political 'content', and is confined to Symbolist, Decadent, and avant-garde writing; this writing is not topical, does not refer to current events and practical politics, and has only a stylized or tangential relation to questions of social justice. Yet it has a form of engagement which requires elucidation, not least because to elucidate it puts back into question the very idea of *engagement* in the Sartrean sense, which we might describe, with convenient vagueness (and using Camus's formulation), as *solidarity with one's times*. There exists plenty of overtly political verse, but it is not produced by the writers we will study, though, as we shall see, our writers make plenty of political statements outside their poetry.

Moreover, evoking social injustice in itself need not be political, or even be intended to provoke action, let alone thought that might be termed political or might terminate, however far down the line, in action. In case we forget this, William Empson, in the opening pages of *Some Versions of Pastoral*, reminds us. Describing some famous lines by Thomas Gray, he writes:

Gray's *Elegy* is an odd case of poetry with latent political ideas:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark, unfathomed caves of ocean bear;
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

What this means, as the context makes clear, is that eighteenth-century England had no scholarship system or *carrière ouverte aux talents*. This is

stated as pathetic, but the reader is put into a mood where one would not try to alter it.⁶

What Empson remarks, in his typically witty, languidly penetrating way, is that political *content* does not in itself make a poem political, especially if, as here, the poem invests lyrically in the pathos of a situation rather than in any impetus to redress or change it. Apart from being very funny, the line 'the reader is put into a mood where one would not try to alter it' reminds us that it is possible for a poem to render its political or social charge inert, that it can take the political out of politics. This is as true of *agitprop* poetry as it is of melancholy lyric poetry, though by a different route—the route, we could say, of trying too hard, of what Keats called its 'palpable design upon us'. (The question of what a poem's 'impalpable design' upon us might be is another matter, and a vaster one.) In a similar vein to Empson, Donald Davie, in an essay on 'Oliver Goldsmith as Monarchist', published in Robert von Hallberg's *Politics and Poetic Value*, compares two poems by Goldsmith, the famous 'The Deserted Village' and the lesser-known 'The Traveller', and finds one political and the other not. In 'The Deserted Village', Goldsmith condemns (or does he simply regret?) rural depopulation in the face of economic inequality, consumerism, emigration, and enclosure (we might profitably compare Goldsmith with Verhaeren here, attending to Verhaeren's *Les Campagnes hallucinées* and *Les Villes tentaculaires*, written over a century later, and dealing with the consequences of industrialization in Belgium, and ask the same question). Davie finds that 'The Deserted Village' prescribes no remedy for the state of affairs that it deplores, and so puts no reader under any obligation to do anything about it.⁷ 'The Traveller', by contrast, does prescribe a remedy—more power to the monarch—and is thus 'political'.

The issue is well put in *Politics and Poetic Value* by Jed Rasula in his essay 'The Politics of, the Politics in'. He is writing about modern American poetry, and notably about the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry that emerged in the 1970s, but the distinction holds; the context is not so different, and is useful for us here: *of* or *in*? The question is all the more pertinent as Rasula and other contributors to the volume are concerned with the relationship of avant-garde poetry to poetic theory, and of avant-garde poetry to 'the' public. Charles Altieri for instance, in his tellingly titled 'Without Consequences is No Politics', asserts that the 'claim

⁶ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966 [1935]), pp. 11–12.

⁷ Robert von Hallberg (ed.), *Politics and Poetic Value* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 99.

to an oppositional politics actually resists those accommodations to a collective that are the precondition of effective social action',⁸ while Rasula contends that it is wrong to 'stipulate for poetry a role in public life that is commensurate with its concessions to public discourse'.⁹ These questions seem familiar, and we will encounter them throughout this study, though it is no spoiler to say, at this early stage, that I am more interested in exploring them than I am capable of answering them.

The image I found most helpful in approaching my subject was the kite string, and the way, as one watches, that it slips into and out of view, gives the illusion of the kite's autonomy but also makes visible its boundedness. This book tries to follow the kite string and to account for what happens along it.

My study explores the relationship between poetry and poetic theory in the late nineteenth century and the culture of radical politics in its broadest sense: ideas, theories, actions, and discourses, but also the productive misinterpretations, the political and pseudo-political poses, the ideological dilettantism, and the sloganeering that go into creating an aesthetic-political climate. It also examines the way in which the language of poetry—its critical, polemical, theoretical language—is inflected by the language of politics, and how the least political-seeming poetry and poetic debates reflect many of the preoccupations, uncertainties, and prejudices of their time. I deliberately choose the noisiest and most visible politics, and the quietest and least visible poetry, focusing, poetically, on the poetry of Symbolism and its offshoots, and politically on the radical or extreme politics of left and right—categories which, it is well to remember early on, are not actually used by those who subscribe to them, since 'left' and 'right' do not become accepted terms until later. Indeed in this context we might profitably replace the idea of a political spectrum, in which two extremes (left and right) are joined together by gradations or attenuations of strength, clarity, and conviction, with something more like a dramatically unsettled compass, whose needle sweeps jerkily and unsystematically across its dial.

The period under discussion—roughly speaking, the early 1880s to the late 1890s—covers the beginning of the Symbolist and Decadent period and ends on the edge of the twentieth century. It begins with the experimental, post-Commune poetics of Decadence, riven as they are with unexpected reactionary elements, moves through the highly politicized but poetically apolitical (or so it seems) Symbolist movement, and ends with the overtly reactionary poetics of the little-studied *école*

⁸ Hallberg (ed.), *Politics and Poetic Value*, p. 307.

⁹ Hallberg (ed.), *Politics and Poetic Value*, p. 317.

romane, where the young Charles Maurras made his first impressions on the French literary scene.

There are key players whose work, but also whose auras and reputations, will be invoked: a freshly dead Victor Hugo (and Victor Hugo feels freshly dead for about 50 years after dying) looms as the image of the poet who, as Mallarmé puts it in his evocatively titled ‘Crise de vers’, ‘confisqua chez qui pense, discourt ou narre, presque le droit de s’énoncer’¹⁰ (confiscated from whomever thinks, speaks, or narrates almost the right to enounce himself). The idea of confiscated speech is an interesting one, because it touches on several anxieties: of influence and literary succession (Mallarmé’s ‘Symphonie littéraire’ being a prime example of that anxiety and how to overcome it: by necessary immersion), but also the idea of something taken away, something withdrawn; an imposed silence not unlike a form of censorship, which, as we know, merely leads to ever-greater resourcefulness on the part of those who wish to smuggle their material past the censor. Mallarmé may also be alluding to Symbolism’s poetics of the unspoken, the secret and the indirect, and the productively thwarted nature of their relation to the world: as if the fulfilment of language came at the cost of alienation from what language tries to approach: a masterful abdication of mastery. Mallarmé himself is examined in Chapter 3, as a poet and critic who provides, in his essay on Laurent Tailhade, one of the late nineteenth century’s most spectacular defences of poetry’s paradoxically entangled autonomy. Charles Maurras becomes important, as he channels the reactionary elements of the Symbolist and Decadent avant-gardes into a literary microcosm of reactionary modernism. Another purpose of this book is to do justice to lesser-known poets such as Jean Moréas, Gustave Kahn, Saint-Pol-Roux, Francis Vielé-Griffin, Pierre Quillard, and others who contribute so much to their epoch but who have gradually been sieved out of it as literary criticism focuses more and more on the big names. The book aims, of course, to say some new things, but it is also intended to restore some lost contexts and to make fresh connections between ideas, works, and intellectual currents we thought we knew already.

POETRY AND BROKEN WINDOWS I: THÉOPHILE GAUTIER

There is always a risk of simplifying matters when we take two poems—and by prolific and often contradictory poets at that—as

¹⁰ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Bertrand Marchal, ii (Paris: Pléiade, 2003), p. 205.

somehow representative of their eras or their ideas, but it is worth the caricature, if only to provide the reader with something to disagree with early on.

The first poem to draw on is straightforward enough: Gautier's preface to *Emaux et camées*, in which the poet lays proud claim to his creative isolation, to the purity of the work of art, 'fraîche oasis où l'art respire' (fresh oasis where art breathes). The poem begins 'Pendant les guerres de l'empire, / Goethe, au bruit du canon brutal, / Fit *le Divan occidental*' (During the wars of Empire, / Goethe, to the sound of the brutal canon, / Made the *West-Eastern Divan*), and ends:

Sans prendre garde à l'ouragan
Qui fouettait mes vitres fermées,
Moi, j'ai fait *Émaux et Camées*.¹¹

Without paying heed to the storm / That whipped my closed windows, /
Me, I made *Enamels and Cameos*.

Privacy throws down the gauntlet to the public sphere: the individual artist closes the windows on history. There may be storms outside—wars, crashes, political instability, in short a continuity of chaos—but the poet has sealed himself off. Of course, we may read this, and we would be right, as a sort of manifesto of retreat—a paradoxical genre but a noble one. It shrugs the world off. But we would also miss a great deal if we left it at that. After all, the enamels and cameos are not just feats of craft and intricacy, triumphs of small-scale perfection braced in proud contrast to the epic and the grandiloquent. They also resist the tyranny of greatness, and have a certain arrogant modesty about them. They may be glazed and impermeable, but more importantly they contain their own story of extremity, strength, even violence. They may be, as Gautier writes in that other great manifesto poem, 'L'Art', a 'rêve flottant' (a floating dream), but it is a floating dream that must be 'scellé' or sealed, in the 'bloc résistant' (resistant block). What is crucial about Gautier's aesthetic is not that it is merely about beauty, or that it promotes perfection to the status of an absolute, or that (allegedly) it sees beauty as the only end, but rather that it implies a struggle with matter, a hard-won, endlessly renewed battle against the material's innate inadequacies. This is why Gautier inspired modernists such as Pound and Eliot: art must be hard, constraining, painful; even, where it needs to be, unnatural. Gautier is attractive to modernist poets because he is a poet of stringent process. Beneath that urbane and nonchalant tone, behind its elegant bibelots and refined trinketry, Gautier's poem puts forward an

¹¹ Théophile Gautier, *Emaux et camées* (Paris: Didier, 1852).

aesthetic of hardness and force: language is there to be melted, smelted, fired, sculpted, planed, bent, moulded, and compressed. Poetry is not plucked from the air or drawn from the soul to be laid into ready song, but hewn from the undifferentiated mass of language that means nothing and is in itself nothing. The little cameo that emerges from this process has primal energy locked into it; it vibrates with stillness; it is a micro-drama but also an elemental drama: solid, liquid, fire, it represents chaos into form, shape from shapelessness, deliquescence into contour. This is what makes Gautier's poems so different from the congealed pageantry of the Parnassians: that sense of the poems emerging from a furnace but already cooling as we read, soft on the eye but hard to the touch.

And what of the closed window? Gautier's poem may certainly be read as refusing the world, and though we must assume that the door too is shut, it's the window that he talks about, its glass 'fouetté'—whipped—by the 'ouragan' outside. The storm must be audible, and its consequences visible, for the full effect of its renunciation to be appreciated: the world must be known, its pressures felt, its attractions toyed with, for its rejection to work. There must be tension outside as well as in. The specific 'ouragan' Gautier refers to is the prolonged instability and violent crises of the Second Republic between 1848 and 1851, but the allusion to Goethe withdrawing from Weimar's travails into an 'oasis' of Eastern poetry (Nisami, whom Goethe read and Gautier mentions here, was also writing against a dramatically unstable backdrop) suggests that Gautier has in mind an altogether more general 'ouragan', the sort Harold Macmillan is reputed to have called, with a winning weariness, 'events, dear boy, events'. But there is also in Gautier an intimation that the turmoil and the energy outside the window have their reflection or their counterparts in the compressed energies of those *émaux* and *camées* taking shape inside the sealed room. The poem savours its aloofness, tastes the uncontaminated water of its own oasis. But does it not in some way also imply that the 'ouragan' of artistic creation and the 'ouragan' of political and social upheaval bear some relationship with each other? Both are channellings of energy, and both are caught between form and formlessness, chaos and order, compression and overspill, and they confront each other across a sheet of glass. They are in relation, but what sort of relation?

Even in retreat, one is bound to one's pursuer, since retreat is always defined by what one is retreating from. That is obvious: aesthetic retreat and isolation do not mean aesthetic autonomy, and often mean the opposite—that is one of the themes of this book, and there will be plenty of examples of it. One such example is the way in which the Symbolists write poems about empty rooms, closed gardens, and delicate furniture during a period of external turmoil: the 'ouragan' outside the

window or beyond the luxuriously papered walls of the Symbolist interior. Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *A rebours* is an example of the kind of retreat, the false autonomy, and doomed isolation of one aspect of the Decadent-Symbolist quest. In the case of Des Esseintes, he simply reproduces—inwardly regurgitates, in fact—all the materialism, vulgarity, and crudity he seeks to escape.

The 'oasis' may just as easily turn out to be a mirage—certainly the moralizing gists of the great *fin de siècle* decadent novels such as *A rebours* and *Bruges-la-morte* are based on exactly this premise. And in any case, the best oases are mirages, certainly for the kinds of poets we are dealing with here, for whom impossibility functions as a stringent quality-control mechanism for their ideas, and unattainability as an endorsement-through-annihilation of their aspirations. Many Symbolist poems, like many Symbolist paintings, are fallbacks into the swaddled, sealed-off, hermetic interior, but are also conditioned by the press of public events and by the pressure of public language, from which the Symbolists are increasingly in retreat, but which they also coveted and dispersed into other areas, such as poetic theory, literary polemic, and theatre. Symbolist polemic is noisy and assertive in prose and reviewing, while Symbolist politics are radical. Only the poetry is quiet.

Though poetry is of course Symbolism's central genre, its canonical contribution to literature and ideas, what would happen if it were thought of as, also, its aberrant genre, the only area of its literary profile (its 'generic portfolio', we could say) which was not immersed in the world, caught up in events, full of worldly and excitingly 'impure' energies? This might be to view Symbolism the wrong way round, but not by any means the wrong way. Perhaps Symbolist *poetry* is actually atypical of Symbolism? Is the Symbolist poem, with its sealed rooms and quasi-private language, its conveyor belt of tropes (*lys, ennui, lassitude*) turning slowly like unclaimed baggage at an airport, in fact a constantly reiterated elegy for a time when poetry and public language were one? Is that mournful wake-music of Symbolist poetry a funeral oration pronounced over the coffin of a once-shared language? By contrast, might Symbolist prose, with its theories, polemics, declarations, and manifestos, in fact be at once a vestigial memory of poetry's lost centrality and an attempt to retain some part of it through other means?

This is perhaps far-fetched, but it helps at least to focus our attention on the odd way in which the Symbolists take stock of the 'ouragan' in their prose and polemic, in their essays and public pronouncements, and in their frequent adherence to forms of radical politics which put them on a par—in terms of 'engagement'—with other highly political intellectuals of the period. Some of the Symbolists, such as Verhaeren, Kahn,

and Quillard, even finish up firmly in the ranks of *art social*, sensible and realistic progressives and active socialists. But in their poems they all too often appear to be on Gautier's side in terms of the 'oasis' of art.

But Gautier's poem is playing with us, playing with its own aspiration to escape, by setting up its own mirage, as it were, and offering it to us as an oasis: the perfect crafted artwork, free of all contexts, and invoking the insistent, violent pressure of those very contexts. Those enamels and cameos are models of pressure converted into resistance, in turn converted back into pressure, and so on, infinitely. Each gains from the other—the poetic enamels and cameos gain in hardness from the game of repulsion they play with the world outside, while the world outside gains in ferocity, in insistence, in noise, from the way in which it is kept at bay. That is their relation, of repelling magnets, and that is where their energy resides. Gautier's is a kind of face-off between two equally strong forces, inner and outer, locked into mutually upholding and mutually invigorating stalemate.

The storm outside and the artistic haven inside are separated by a window, a mere pane of glass, and there is in general a great deal of glass in this book. This is because glass—broken or intact, windows closed and open, stained glass, or shop windows—plays an important role in the way poetry expresses its imaginative space in the late nineteenth century. From Baudelaire's 'Mauvais vitrier' to Gautier's 'vitre fermée', via Laforgue's 'aquariums', the sweating greenhouses of Maeterlinck's *Serres chaudes*, the glassy reflections in the dead water of Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-morte*, or Verhaeren's canals reflecting the broken factory windows of an industrial migrant population, glass provides a rich variety of tropes. Symbolism creates a poetics of glass that is complex and subtle, and frequently bound up with its relationship to the world—as it were—'outside'. Fragility, reflectiveness, and opportunities for inwardness and narcissism . . . glass has all the qualities necessary to express a genre of writing increasingly cut off from the world, a hothoused exotic trapped in its own microclimate. As Symbolist poetry becomes increasingly self-contemplative, it also takes on more and more of the critical language—the metalanguage—of explanation and commentary, and builds this into the body of its verse. The pun is already there in Mallarmé's 'Vierge vers à ne designer que la coupe' (the virgin verse designating only the cup/*coupe*), where the *vers* invokes *verre* and the *coupe* of champagne in turn invokes the *coupe* of versification, and are resolved into *univers*. This is what we might call narcissism of genre, where the poet has progressed from contemplating himself to producing, for meta-contemplation, verse that contemplates its own workings and contemplates itself doing so.

In the preface to *Albertus* (dated October 1832), Gautier suavely taunts his reader with another fenestral statement. Talking of himself as author, two years after the installation of the July Monarchy and three months after the failed Paris insurrection so dramatically described by Victor Hugo in *Les Misérables* (1862), Gautier writes:

Il n'a vu du monde que ce que l'on en voit par la fenêtre, et il n'a pas eu envie d'en voir davantage. Il n'a aucune couleur politique; il n'est ni rouge, ni blanc, ni même tricolore; il n'est rien, il ne s'aperçoit des révolutions que lorsque les balles cassent les vitres.¹²

He has seen of the world only what can be seen from the window, and he has had no desire to see any more. He has no political hue; he is neither red nor white nor even tricolour; he is nothing, he notices revolutions only when the bullets break his windows.

The preface to *Albertus* is held to be one of the main manifestos of 'art for art's sake', and Gautier (or rather his prefatory persona, less an author than an author-as-author, or an author-engaged-in-being-an-author, which are rather different) here performs the classic apolitical operation: carefully specifying the contexts he does not care about. To elide something (in this case politics) is not the same as itemizing what you intend to ignore, producing, in a sense, its negative inventory. And besides, we ask ourselves, what happens when the windows get broken?

If Gautier seems to celebrate a poetics of retreat but disturbs the idea of retreat by injecting the possibility of compelling forces keeping each other tensely at bay, then Hugo's 'Réponse à un acte d'accusation' may do the opposite. Hugo's poem appears to declaim poetry's complete immersion in radical political processes and the poet's centrality to those processes, but in fact does something altogether more modest and self-undermining.

POETRY AND BROKEN WINDOWS II: VICTOR HUGO

'Réponse à un acte d'accusation' is perhaps the most famous of all poetic interventions in and with the language of politics. Hugo wrote it in 1854, but dated it 1834 in order to appear as if he had been revolutionary since his early thirties; (he had not). It, too, is a poem that establishes a position from which to speak of the events of 1848 and after, and it does so by invoking the 'original' revolutionary events and their symbolic moments.

¹² Théophile Gautier, *Albertus* (Paris: Paulin, 1883), p. I.

It is published in *Les Contemplations*, *Livre premier* and appears four years after Gautier's *Emaux et camées*. Where Gautier's poem closes the window on the 'ouragan' (the word turns up in Hugo's poem too), Hugo's claims to speak from within it; and this not just from the point of view, or point of voice, of the Poet, but personally, biographically, *Hugolically*. Hugo would like to be the 'ouragan', and there is little evidence to suggest he did not genuinely think he was: as Jean Cocteau put it, Victor Hugo finished up mistaking himself for Victor Hugo. This was when he was not, as here, mistaking himself for revolutionary leaders: 'Oui, je suis ce Danton! Je suis ce Robespierre!'¹³ (Yes, I am that Danton! I am that Robespierre), he announces in line 141, and the cynic (always a useful companion in poems like this) would enjoy the irony that the present participles of *suivre*, to follow, and of *être*, to be, are identical: is he the leader or is he following the leader?

'Je fis une tempête au fond de l'encrier'¹⁴ (I made a storm in the depths of the inkwell), writes Hugo, and it is a superb image: Gautier's 'ouragan' stays outside, but Hugo's 'tempête' is in the inkwell. For Hugo, the poet makes the weather, as the phrase goes, and the weather is the poem. Yet the very grandiosity of that image is also its undermining, especially when we recall that the phrase 'une tempête dans un verre d'eau' (a storm in a glass of water) is the French equivalent of our storm in a teacup. That duality—grandeur and bathos intertwined—is very Hugolian, his trademark overreaching, and that facet of his persona that probably terrified his successors more even than his prodigious talent: his refusal to be stalled by self-irony, even when he needed it most. But the point about Hugo is that he doesn't care: he is already onto the next metaphor, the next feat of grandiloquent self-likening. These images in Hugo—the storm, the Bastille, the freed serfs of language, the unshackled words, and the toppled tyrants of prosodic regulation—are not there to be paused over and pressed or tested; they are stepping stones in a journey whose justification is momentum itself rather than any propositional destination.

In Valéry's famous definition of poetry, the poet is the one who tests the word, tests its limits, and hovers over its precariousness, as a walker tests the give of the plank he uses to cross the void. The Symbolists are in many ways the products of Hugo, products of their retreat from Hugo's comfort with words, but also from his confidence in public language—the Symbolist *je* is not a social *je* and their *nous* is not a collective one. In a Symbolist poem, the *je* is the Symbolist poet, and the *nous* is either a group

¹³ Victor Hugo, *Œuvres complètes. Poésie V. Les Contemplations I. Autrefois* (Paris: Hetzel, 1882), p. 32.

¹⁴ Hugo, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 29.

of Symbolist poets or a brace of Symbolist readers. In Valéryan terms they hover on the plank, and in the best of the poets, the plank becomes supple as a diving board: giving but never breaking. Hugo's game by contrast is to cross from one end of the plank to the other, not to put its plankiness to the test.

'Je sortis du collège', 'j'ouvris les yeux', 'je vins', 'je m'écriai', 'je fis', 'je mis' . . . the poem lays claim to a collective vision, but its whole gesture is individuating, the first person pronoun and those dynamic verbs driving the lines along. The word *je* occurs 38 times; the word *moi* five times, and *j'ai* 20. It is hard to think of a poem, even one of Hugo's, so thoroughly riveted with the grammar of the ego. This is the double bind of the poet in politics—the ego and the crowd, especially at issue when those politics (and that literature) are based on equality and levelling out. Hugo's first person pronoun is charged and substantiated by verbs of action: very different from Symbolism, where personal pronouns are stunned or vaporized by verbs of stasis, evacuation, or dissipation. Hugo identifies History with Himself, and with himself *as poet*. The line 'Alors, brigand, je vins'¹⁵ echoes—*appropriates* would be a better word—the famous line by Boileau invoking Malherbe, the initiator of Renaissance classicism: 'Alors, Malherbe vint'. Hugo here posits himself as the founder of Romanticism, and indeed the point of 'Réponse' is to sketch out the analogy between political revolution and literary Romanticism: 'je fis souffler un vent révolutionnaire', 'je mis un bonnet rouge au vieux dictionnaire'.¹⁶ Hugo's poem sings democracy in poetry, but that democracy is brought by the individual: *je* recurs, never allowing us to forget that while the result may be collective, the action, the dynamic, is individual.

To see 'Réponse' as connected with all the rest of Hugo's treatments in prose and poetry of political and revolutionary themes makes it unmanageable, and for the moment I want to focus in a basic way on what the poem says and what the poem does, which turn out to be two rather different things. This is a poem that haunts subsequent engagements between poets and the political or public sphere, and it is important to an understanding not just of what the Symbolists were in retreat from, but of what, later, writers such as Maurras would see as part of the Romantic package that needed to be rejected.

If this is the *réponse*, then what exactly is the *accusation*? In other words, if this is the answer, then what is the question?

The first thing to note about the poem is its length: 344 lines. Hugo does not limit himself to vague or one-off metaphorical statements of

¹⁵ Hugo, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 29.

¹⁶ Hugo, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 29.

poetic or political liberation. He explores their apparent seamless exhaustively; his metaphors are detailed, layered, almost miraculously suited—or presented as suited—to the political. The poem seems to be telling us that politics and poetry ‘rhyme’, just like ‘révolutionnaire’ and ‘dictionnaire’; that they endorse each other, that they dovetail; that, as they say in carpentry, they ‘marry’: in short, that they share a language. It’s an unproblematic relationship in Hugo’s poem; where in Gautier’s there’s a dynamic of repulsion and separation being played out between inner/outer, art/reality, culture/politics, the pristine aesthetic product and its circumambient tumult, in Hugo’s poem art is in the centre of that tumult, and the Poet is at the epicentre. Or so it appears: in Hugo the poem’s surface is busy and *accidenté*, full of grand effusive verbs, but its premise is wholly stable and un-self-questioning. There is no tension, though the illusion of tension is provided by the overheating engine of the verse, the driving verbs of action, the plays of opposition, the dynamic incorporative syntax, the rhetorical overdrive, and the bursting lists of attributes and forces, as well as by a row of straw targets: the aristocracy, the Bastille, the monarchy, etc. The poem is bursting with comfort.

The same cynic I invoked earlier would perhaps argue that in this poem politics is made into a tool, a means of making claims for perceived advances in poetry based around the loosening of constraints, the equalization of poetic subjects and themes, and the de-hierarchization of language. Hugo’s poem asserts poetry’s right to borrow from the political, democratic, and revolutionary discourses (and doesn’t appear to distinguish between them), and stakes a claim to poetry’s joint ownership of that discourse. Poetic and political freedom are presented as analogous, homologous even, and yet, though his poem seems to celebrate the moment when poetry comes into possession of the same language as politics, it is also clear that poetry does so *after* politics: ‘Grâce à toi, progrès saint, la Révolution / Vibre aujourd’hui dans l’air, dans la voix, dans le livre’¹⁷ (Thanks to you, blessed Progress, the Revolution / Vibrates today in the air, in the voice, in the book). The tone of the poem, as well as its rhetorical acceleration, would suggest that poetry is in the vanguard of political progress; but its more sober propositional *content* suggests that it comes to the scene enthusiastically but late, tardy in action but rhetorically well-prepared. This is where the more careful, cagey, bet-hedging dimension of this rousing poem emerges.

On the one hand, the poem seems to say that Poetry freely takes from Politics, but on the other, that Poetry owes its own ‘liberation’ to the social and political liberation that came before it. It is delayed, it is a

¹⁷ Hugo, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 34–5.

follower rather than a leader—there is what the French call a *décalage*, a sort of lapse of time before poetry can be ‘in time’. While the poem’s analogies and metaphors drive home the idea of poetry and politics being intertwined or even fused, the poem’s narrative, its underlying admission, is that the two are separate, or at any rate more separate than the poem’s surface of assertion allows. Moreover, the exchange is all one-way: politics gives to poetry, enables it, so the poem tells us, to refashion itself (through the good offices of the heroic Poet-as-Revolutionary). What it gives to poetry is a language of liberation and a fund of analogies and homologies for the poet to apply with breathtaking confidence to the contents of his inkwell and to the scratchings of his nib. But what does politics get in return? On this showing, not much.

Hugo’s ‘Réponse’ is in fact resoundingly modest about poetry’s scope. After all, the more traditional role of the poet, especially the Romantic poet, is to be the vanguard, the prophet, the ‘unacknowledged’ (in other words, noisily *self*-acknowledged) legislator, rather than the *post facto* assessor of change, staking a claim to a victory already won. But here he is the linguistic carpet-bagger of revolution. The real prophet is in advance, not *en retard*; he sketches out in language what will happen, does not wait until something has happened so he can put it into language. The prophetic tense, the vatic mode, like the tense of Utopia, is the future, not the *passé simple* that dominates Hugo’s ‘Réponse’. Hugo’s poem, for all its grandiloquence, is making a much more modest claim than the traditional Romantic claim, but its modesty is well-camouflaged—the bottom line is that poetry comes late, that it is not, or not always, ‘on time’, let alone ‘in time’. This poem, through its fast-moving, verb-driven narrative, masks the fact that it is really on the wrong side of the event it claims to be part of: it is all aftermath. It yearns for the present tense, the tense of poetic-political synchronicity, and for the future tense to project itself ahead; but what it gets, or what it gives us, is the past. In ‘Réponse’, the Poet has arrived too late, and it’s precisely *because* no one is accusing him of anything that he needs to defend himself.

‘Grâce à toi, progrès saint’, Hugo writes: Progress, moving in a linear fashion, draws poetry into its sweep. But poetry is not its motor, merely part of the ground that it covers.¹⁸ In any case, the tension in Hugo’s poem between the collective liberation he celebrates and the relentless individualism, self-assertion, and egotism with which it is done (‘C’est moi’, ‘c’est moi’. . .) nicely captures the ambivalence of poetry’s relationship with

¹⁸ For an excellent account of Hugo’s notion of ‘Progress’, see Katherine Lunn-Rockliffe, ‘Progress as Idea and Image in Hugo’s “La Force des choses”’, *Dix-neuf*, 13/1 (2009), pp. 36–54.

politics: to what extent can the poet really claim common cause with the masses, to what extent can the individual 'speak for' or 'speak about' the collective? 'Réponse' is caught between its epic ambitions and its lyric nature: that it resolves them to its own satisfaction does not mean that it resolves them.

'Réponse' wants to tell, or sing, the collective, but succeeds in elevating the individual, which is in fact its true aim, though presented as a by-product. Hugo's poem raises these questions precisely because it blithely doesn't seem to care about the answer—it's not a poem at odds with itself. Unlike the Gautier poem, which seems to be about stasis but is in fact tense, locked into tension, one might say, the Hugo poem, for all its powerful verbs and illusory conflicts, is, at base, stunned by its own satisfaction.

There is also an important suggestion that poetry itself may not be able to do all these heroic things, but the poet (or rather 'The Poet') can, especially if that poet is Victor Hugo—indeed, there are moments here when we suspect that Hugo is claiming that the Poet as individual is more than poetry itself, but that is a separate question. The scenes of revolution in politics and in poetry may be collective—public spaces and public language—but the motor force is individual, this poem suggests. Is 'Réponse' really part of what the historian Jean Maitron calls, referring to literature's taking up the mantle of revolution in the nineteenth century, a '1789 littéraire'? It is certainly part of a *rhetorical* 1789. And when the poet writes as if he had received a warrant for his arrest, is it an act of solidarity with those who risked their lives and freedoms for revolutionary ideals, or an appropriation of their sacrifices in poetry's endless hunger for new tropes and new metaphors to burn as lyric fuel?

There is something of the swashbuckling action-hero in Hugo's self-presentation here too: like a character from a Dumas novel, Hugo imagines himself leaping from one heroic act to the next, against a rhetorical film set of Cecil B. de Mille-like extravagance. Here more than ever one feels the truth and precision of Valéry's comment: 'Hugo prenait des mots énormes . . . mais il les maniait sans effort / si aisément qu'il donne l'impression qu'ils sont vides' (Hugo took enormous words . . . but handled them without effort / with such ease that he made them look empty). 'Et ils le furent. Farouche—Infini—Immensité',¹⁹ Valéry adds, treating the Romantic stock-in-trade like so many bulky but hollow theatrical (or film studio) props. Yes, but politics too tosses the big words around like stage props, and so—unexpectedly and precisely *because*

¹⁹ Paul Valéry, *Ego Scriptor. Et Petits Poèmes abstraits*, ed. Judith Robinson-Valéry (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), p. 100.

of its resounding hollowness, its lack of connection to the political—‘Réponse’ is a more political poem after all, and this is part of its double bluff: the hollowness that disqualifies it from being political is precisely what, later on in the process, recuperates it for politics, makes it political once again. By faking its politics, it attains to exactly the sort of propulsive vacuity we associate with political discourse. Paradox? Not really, because part of our confusion here is that we assume that politics is action. But politics is also, and perhaps more so, language: manifesto, declaration, exhortation, persuasion, assertion. This will only become more obvious as the twentieth century’s artistic movements borrow from politics in order to launch their assaults on taste. Hugo knows that, and his deep understanding of that fact is precisely why his politics seem at once completely naive and thoroughly, convolutedly, triple-bluffingly, sophisticated.

We can see why Paul Lafargue, author of the 1880 *Droit à la paresse* and Marx’s son-in-law, wrote, in *La Légende de Victor Hugo* in 1885 (Lafargue wasted no time in penning his polemic—Hugo died that May), that ‘Hugo fut en effet un héros de la phrase’.²⁰ That statement, intended by Lafargue as unambiguous condemnation in an essay attacking Hugo’s hypocrisy and self-regard (Lafargue focuses principally on Hugo’s greed and materialism), might in a different context have been a positive assessment: Hugo as literary fellow-traveller, advancing the same cause in a different realm, bringing politics and poetry into alignment. In fact, Lafargue uses the term ‘héros de la phrase’ to claim the opposite, to drive a wedge between duplicitous and self-centred poetry and genuine action, between rhetoric and reality. Despite his lacerating contempt for Hugo, Lafargue makes an important comment on the passage of radical or revolutionary language from day-to-day politics into poetry:

La révolution de 1848 lança dans la langue honnête et modérée un peu-ple nouveau de mots; depuis la réaction littéraire commencée sous le consulat, ils dormaient dans les discours, les pamphlets, les journaux et les proclamations de la grande époque révolutionnaire et ne s’aventuraient en plein jour que timidement, dans le langage populaire. Les bravaches du romantisme, les Janin, les Gauthier [*sic*], reculèrent épouvantés; mais Hugo ne cligna pas de l’œil, il empoigna les substantifs et les adjectifs horribles, qui envahissaient la langue écrite dans les journaux et parlée à la tribune des assemblées populaires; et prestidigitateur merveilleux il jongla à étourdir les badauds, avec les immortels principes de 1789 et les mots teints encore du sang des nobles et des prêtres.²¹

²⁰ Paul Lafargue, *La Légende de Victor Hugo* (Paris: J. Jacques, 1902 [1885]), p. 43.

²¹ Lafargue, *La Légende de Victor Hugo*, p. 43.

The 1848 revolution launched into straightforward and moderate language a new population of words; since the literary reaction begun under the consulate, they slept in language, in pamphlets, newspapers and proclamations of the the great revolutionary era, and ventured only timidly into open view in popular language. The braggarts of Romanticism, the Janins and the Gauthiers [*sic*], retreated from them, terrified; but Hugo didn't blink, he grabbed hold of the terrifying substantives and adjectives that had invaded the written language of newspapers and the spoken language of popular meetings; and, splendid conjuror that he was, he juggled to amaze the crowd with the immortal principles of 1789 and words still red from the blood of priests and aristocrats.

Lafargue's claim is persuasive. We hardly need to impute the same grasping cynicism as he imputes to Hugo to see this: the transfer and incorporation of radical language from its original place in revolutionary discourse into a poetry that arrives after the revolutionary event. The disparaging reference to juggling (which pre-emptively echoes Valéry's later claim that Hugo handled heavy words lightly) also has enough truth in it to guard us from taking Hugo's verbal 'revolution' at face value.

Though an *ad hominem* attack on Hugo of the kind frequently found in the immediate aftermath of his death, the epithet 'héros de la phrase' might stand as emblematic of the ambiguity of the relationship between poetry and politics in the late nineteenth century: on the one hand it can designate experimental or liberal literary practices, the breaking-down of literary hierarchies, and solidarity between committed writers and men and women of action; on the other hand it can imply the hypocrisy, vanity, and duplicity of writers, with literature as a self-involved sideshow, a fringe festival of jugglers, fire-eaters, and face-painters, greedily feeding genuine political and social issues into its fantasies. The charge of being gesture radicals, heroes of the soundbite, is one that is frequently levelled against Hugo's successors in their dealings with the world of politics, and Hugo's status is importantly ambiguous: to some he represents the immersion of literature into the social struggle; to others he symbolizes all that is wrong with the self-indulgent strutting intellectual. What is also significant, as we shall see, is that Hugo becomes a bogeyman both for the radical left and for the radical right.

There are even some windows in Hugo's poem—broken of course: 'L'imagination, tapageuse aux cent voix, / Qui casse des carreaux dans l'esprit des bourgeois' (The imagination, noisy and with a hundred voices, / Which breaks windows in the minds of the bourgeois). One wonders whether there may be a sly, comradely dig at Gautier's 'vitres fermées' here, and if Hugo imagines his Romantic friend and rival huddling over his caméos while he himself lobs 'pavés' up through his pristine windows. Hugo's