Nematollahy on Roulin and Saminadayar-Perrin, editors (2017)


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Published once a year since 2001, the journal Autour de Vallès replaced Roger Bellet’s Les Amis de Jules Vallès and explores not merely the work of the author of L’Insurgé but also the historical, political and cultural contexts of the period that shed light on it. The present volume is dedicated to “alternative forms of history.” Contributors argue that the disillusionments in the aftermath of 1848, the coup d’état of 1851, and the advent of the Second Empire shattered belief in progress, universal humanism, and the very concept of historical becoming, thus questioning humanity’s capacity to grasp and transform its own destiny. Is history nothing but the accumulation of catastrophes and the endless return of the same? They suggest that the profound political and cultural crisis ushered in by the Second Empire resulted in the decline and end of dominant forms of the writing of history.

The Second Empire occupies a period between the great Romantic historiography of the years of Restauration and July Monarchy and the more scientific historical schools that emerge at the end of the century. As a result, it witnessed the development of alternative forms of history which could span both historical and literary writings. The very experience of time underwent a mutation, and as Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin shows in her introductory essay, whether fragmented or pulverized or mere void, time became in this period nothing but an emptiness vécu, as these years are portrayed in Flaubert’s L’Éducation sentimentale. In the same period, Michelet could write that “L’histoire de France est écroulée” (7). Like the Goncourt brothers, he too became increasingly interested in material history—fashion, furniture, and other bric-à-brac of history—a tendency that appeared to some as an atrophying of the past and the fragmentation of history into so many incomprehensible and confusing details. Writing of the Salon of 1855, art critics similarly complained that in contemporary painting “Le luxe frivole des accessoires envahit la place que la représentation de l’histoire devrait occuper” (10). The historical novel of the period revealed the same symptoms, and Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, like György Lukács many years later, criticized Flaubert’s Salammbo for its hyper-representation of surface matter that displaced the study of the spirit of past civilizations. The Goncourt brothers themselves condemned Michelet’s late style, “style haché, coupé, tronçonné” (10) as a symptom of the decadence of historical writing. They decried his unhealthy immersion in a history devoid of meaning which, instead of reconstructing the past, consists of glimpses of its decomposing corpse.

To this epistemological crisis was added the reality of censorship after the coup d’état. The primary cause of the crisis, the Empire, could not be mentioned. Writers and historians were thus pressed into new channels and alternative forms in order to grapple with the fundamental problems posed by the times. Michelet turned to the exploration of phenomena hitherto placed outside of History: the material life of the poor and the peasants (the sorcerer is a poor woman absent from official history). Or he could transfer his pre-occupations onto accounts of nature (in L’Oiseau or La Montagne) as Olivier Ritz suggests in one of the essays in the volume.

Metaphorization, allegorization, and displacement are only some of the strategies explored in this collection of essays on alternative histories written between 1848 and 1871. In Laurent Angard’s essay, Dumas’s account of the conquest of Cahors by Henri IV and his accession to the throne in Les Quarante-cing can be read as an analysis of the upheavals and turmoil under the July Monarchy. Caroline Julliot, on the other hand, reveals how Champfleury abandoned the terrain of realism and critique in favor of the subversive power of laughter, using the history of caricature as a political weapon and. Christine Pouzoulet shows the intricate ways in which Edgar Quinet’s Les Révolutions d’Italie reflects and refracts the historian’s own ideas on the situation of contemporary France and the relations between democracy and the Church in the nineteenth century.

Most interesting however, at least to this reader, were the essays opening and closing the volume. The subtle analysis of Nerval’s Les Nuits d’octobre by Filip Kekus shows it to be a counter-narrative to the official versions of the accounts of the Emperor’s travels in the French countryside in the autumn of 1852 as they appeared in the official press. Far from the Romantic visionary who took refuge in his dreams and fantasies, as the author of Aurélie is often presented, Kekus reveals him to be an alert and engaged writer in whose work the political and cultural realities of the time could only pierce through the censors by being shrouded in the veil of dream. Les Nuits d’octobre and Hugo’s Les Châtiments indeed complement and complete each other, in Kekus’s words, “dans la manière exceptionnelle en leur temps qu’ils ont de réassigner une dimension éthique à l’écriture” (38). The four essays closing the volume take on, more explicitly, Vallès’s own relation to history. Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin asks if Vallès’s rejection of the past—of the cults of great men, great books, of heroes and past
revolutions—extends to a wholesale dismissal of History. The Second Empire manufactured its own myths and versions of history. The censorship forestalled the possibility of responding with counter-histories. Vallès’s answer was carnivalesque language and biographies of the marginalized and the réfractaires through a “contre-histoire burlesque” (269). Igor Krtolica’s more theoretical analysis comes to a similar conclusion through a very different reading, and sees Vallès’s humor (which can be assimilated to a form of carnivalesque writing) as a way of overcoming the dichotomies of the real and the imaginary, of fiction and reality. Arouna Coulibaly and Cécile Robelin address the question of L’Insurge’s relation to the history of the Commune. The novel treads the borderline of fiction and history, but Vallès’s writing eschews official history and instead presents the past in all its discontinuity and strangeness, refusing to imbue it with coherence and morality. An important reminder for our own time, where politics and political readings have all but eclipsed the aesthetic that—as this volume shows—needs not necessarily degenerate into sterile formalisms.

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