

Browning on McGuinness (2015)

McGuinness, Patrick. *Poetry and Radical Politics in Fin de siècle France: From Anarchism to Action Française*. Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 289, ISBN 9780198706106

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Combining close reading with broad theoretical questions, Patrick McGuinness's latest book is a thorough, lively, and multidimensional study of the relation, or rather relations, between poetry and radical politics. The plural, *relations*, is crucial. Situating its objects of study—Romanticism, Symbolism, Decadence, anarchism, the *École romane*, and the rise of the radical right—within their cultural and historical context, the introduction and five chapters analyze how each movement articulates those relations in their own particular way. Together they provide a detailed map of fin-de-siècle poetry, politics, and culture. McGuinness not only guides readers through much of the nineteenth century—not just its *fin*, as its title suggests—but, more broadly, steers them through the intricacies of how poetry and politics engage, disengage, interpolate, mine, pillage, bolster, deconstruct, and piece each other back together. Impressive as this is, the real depth of his insights comes as he puts these movements into dialogue. Each one comes to bear on the others, mutually enriching our understanding of each and adding another dimension to the multidirectional play between poetry and radical politics.

The introduction pits Théophile Gautier's preface to *Émaux et Camées* against Victor Hugo's "Réponse à un acte d'accusation" to set up two poles within a broad topography of poetry and radical politics. With an original take on Gautier's canonical poem, McGuinness shows Gautier as *forgeron*, closing the window onto the outside world only to transform it more effectively. Gautier hammers out his *émaux et camées*—"pressure converted into resistance"—from the very violence that the window transmits and closes. Gautier thus serves as a model in which "aesthetic retreat and isolation do not mean aesthetic autonomy, and often mean the opposite" (10). If Gautier counterintuitively reveals the political pressure inherent in the turn away from politics, Hugo does just the opposite. He loudly declaims the conjunction of Romanticism and revolution only to undermine it performatively: "Oui, je suis ce Danton! Je suis ce Robespierre!" Hugo famously thunders. But, as McGuinness points out, the verb could be either *être* or *suivre*, thereby begging the question: does poetry lead the revolution or simply follow it (coming after it and following its orders)? Or, as Paul Lafargue would later put it: is poetry the phrasal equivalent of the revolutionary hero or the quixotic (anti-)hero of the empty phrase? The "Romantic legacy" of these two positions resonates through subsequent chapters, each taking up and enriching in its own way the tensions that animate the various iterations of poetry and radical politics.

Chapter one analyzes the Decadent movement, particularly Anatole Baju's magazine *Le Décadent*, in order to situate Jean Moréas's *manifeste* in a novel context. Chapter two explores the relation between Symbolism and anarchism, focusing on the paradoxical movement by which Symbolist poetry retreats from politics just as Symbolist prose becomes more overtly and radically political. Chapter three, the strongest of the book, extends the analysis of poetry's many broken windows to Stéphane Mallarmé, particularly his engagement with Laurent Tailhade and the anarchist bombing of the 1890s. Astute close readings ground a refreshing analysis on par with Mallarmé's own clever and keenly perceptive play with homologies between poetry and anarchist *propagande par le fait*. McGuinness reads Mallarmé's relation to radical politics through the image of a stained glass window: "its wholeness is a result of, and a *victory over*, brokenness" (179). He concludes making the case for Mallarmé's poetry as a "dynamic and ongoing life/art recycling project" (180), more pragmatic than canonical readings allow. Chapter four and five examine the *école romane* and Charles Maurras's relation to it. They argue that the *école* is worthy of greater attention because it enriches our appreciation of Symbolism and the reactionary right under Maurras and *L'Action française*. The guiding question here is how poetry gets "reinvested" (241) in cultural politics. If Hugo provides the allegory of revolution, Maurras gives us the allegory of reaction, feeding on and redirecting the very energies that drive Hugo's poetic revolution as well as Symbolism's fascination with anarchism.

Such schematic distillation cannot, however, do justice to the wealth of insight, nimble textual analysis, and breadth the book offers readers. Although it does indeed develop a larger theory of the relations between poetry and radical politics, it does so with only passing references to major theorists such as Slavoj Žižek, Pierre Bourdieu, and Jean-Paul Sartre. While some readers will certainly appreciate this, it may leave others wanting more theoretical engagement. Nonetheless, scholars interested in fin-de-siècle poetry and politics and non-specialists interested in a context-based theoretical articulation of the relations between poetry and politics will find much to provoke further question and analysis.

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