

## The Mood of Defeat

I'm in the mood for dancing, romancing

Ooh I'm giving it all tonight

I'm in the mood for chancing

I feel like dancing

Ooh so come on and hold me tight<sup>1</sup>

I'm in the mood for love simply because you're near me

Funny but when you're near me, I'm in the mood for love.

Heaven is in your eyes, bright as the stars we're under,

Oh, is it any wonder, I'm in the mood for love.<sup>2</sup>

The Nolan sisters are in the mood for dancing. Ella Fitzgerald is in the mood for love. Glen Miller is just in the mood. But if sexual yearning is the most common theme in popular music, the mood of defeat is as significant a point of register in contemporary culture. The slumped bodies of the losing team, the forced dignity of the politician ejected from office, the grainy shots of prisoners of war behind barbed wire are all familiar images with which we can connect, investing our own feelings of pain, exhaustion, and humiliation or, alternatively, triumph, scorn, and aggression. If the mood of love is felt physically, transforming itself into rhythm and movement, so too is the mood of defeat; but whereas the sensations of desire are visual – ‘Heaven is in your eyes/Bright as the stars we are under’ – and tactile – ‘so come on and hold me tight’ – the sensations of defeat are olfactory and gustatory. We smell it. We taste its bitterness. Touring the burnt-out ruins left after the defeat of the Paris Commune, Henry James, found ‘in all things a vague aftertaste of gunpowder’<sup>3</sup> and wrote to his brother: ‘Beneath

---

<sup>1</sup> The Nolan Sisters, ‘I’m in the Mood for Dancing’ (1979).

<sup>2</sup> Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Field, ‘I’m in the Mood for Love’ (1935).

<sup>3</sup> Henry James, *Transatlantic Sketches* (Boston: J. R. Osgood, 1875), p.99.

all this neatness & coquetry, you seem to smell the Commune suppressed, but seething'.<sup>4</sup> Defeat is debilitating. It feels like a physical weight. Knees buckle like those of the *Seleção*, as the German team fired goal after goal into the Brazilian net in the semi-finals of the 2014 World Cup. After overthrow of the French Second Republic in the coup d'état of 1851, Jacques Vingtras, the hero of Jules Vallès's novel, *Le Bachelier* (1881), retreats from the barricades: 'by holding on to walls, by dragging my feet, by holding my drooping, leaden head in my hands'.<sup>5</sup> Overwhelming other sensations, defeat shuts them out. Time comes to a standstill and the vanquished become deaf and blind to hope.

As David Wellbery argues in his account of the history of the concept of *Stimmung* in German philosophy, the power of mood/atmosphere/attunement stems first from the fact that it is a 'total quality' nonetheless experienced as an 'individual encounter':<sup>6</sup> the mood meets 'the subject's state of self, making apparent how one is and how one will become'. Second, moods are 'not only modes of our psychic inner life, but also atmospheres, which surround us'.<sup>7</sup> They consist of

an interaction of many elements, which is felt collectively. Moods have an integrative function with regard to objects and their properties. They combine into self-contained wholes, without specifying the rules for this synthesis.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, moods have a communicative dimension. The communication of a mood proceeds:

through suggestion, it is infectious; but it operates below the threshold of rational explanation (so is deniable, easy to repudiate), resulting in a common field of orientations, attitudes,

---

<sup>4</sup> Henry James, *The Complete Letters of Henry James 1872-1876* Vol.1 (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), p.114.

<sup>5</sup> Jules Vallès, *Le Bachelier* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p.148 (my translation).

<sup>6</sup> David Wellbery, 'Stimmung', in K. Bark et. al. (eds), *Historisches Wörterbuch ästhetische Grundbegriffe* Vol.5. *Postmoderne Synästhesie* (Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 2003), p.704. For a suggestive account of how mood analysis might work in cultural studies see Ben Highmore, 'Feeling Our Way: Mood in Cultural Studies', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 10, 4 (December, 2013), 427-438.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.705.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

dispositions, which is nevertheless unstable, because not secured by expressly symbolised norms.<sup>9</sup>

If it is the instability of moods that makes them dangerous (and dangerously ‘infectious’), then it is their lack of specified ‘rules’ and ‘expressly symbolised norms’ which means that being ‘misattuned’ or ‘not in the mood’<sup>10</sup> can be such an alienating as well as physically and emotionally debilitating experience. To experience the mood of defeat is to feel personally the pain of loss in the face of the collective joy of your foe, at a time when those who share your mood can offer you no consolation, because they are, like you, bowed down by their own misery.

Yet, despite its debilitating physical effects, numerous historians, philosophers and writers have found the experience of defeat to be a good starting point for thought. The German historian, Reinhart Koselleck, who fought at Stalingrad, writes that while the victors can lay claim to long-term trends such as divine providence, nationalism, real socialism, or freedom:

This does not apply to the vanquished. Their first primary experience is that everything happened differently from how it was planned or hoped. If they reflect methodologically at all, they face a greater burden of proof to explain why something happened in this and not the anticipated way. If history is made in the short run by the victors, historical gains in knowledge stem in the long run from the vanquished.<sup>11</sup>

While not going as far as to say that ‘every history written by the vanquished is therefore more

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> See Sara Ahmed in this issue.

<sup>11</sup> Reinhart Koselleck, ‘Transformations of Experience and Methodological Change: A Historical-Anthropological Essay’, in *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Jobst Welge (Stanford CA.: Stanford University Press, 2002), p.76.

insightful',<sup>12</sup> Koselleck argues that the long-term view with its greater 'epistemological potential'<sup>13</sup> appeals to the defeated because it is in their interests. He offers a long list of historians whose work gained from the experience of defeat, including Thucydides, Polybius, Augustine, Machiavelli, the philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment and Marx: who 'wrote *as* a person who was vanquished, if not *like* someone vanquished'.<sup>14</sup> Those interested in analysing the defeat of the Left in the early twenty-first century, a defeat widely acknowledged by many who support the cause,<sup>15</sup> might want to add Lenin, Antonio Gramsci, Trotsky, Isaac Deutscher, not forgetting Walter Benjamin, who wrote in 'On Concept of History': 'The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.'<sup>16</sup> But for Koselleck, as important as personal experience is the development of a methodology that might overcome the dominant preoccupations of the present: 'a methodologically verifiable analysis of long-term structural changes that transcend all individual experiences'.<sup>17</sup>

Koselleck's call for methodology invites the vanquished to distance themselves from defeat's debilitating after-effects and to analyse its causes. But the requirement for distance evades the interesting question of how far analysis of defeat represses, but is still shaped by, the original mood of defeat: a vital question for those interested in the defeat of the Left, as the experience of revolution can easily be dismissed as an emotional, infantile outburst. This is the case in what is perhaps the most comprehensive historical study of defeat: Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Culture of Defeat: On National*

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.77.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.82.

<sup>15</sup> See Perry Anderson, "Renewals," *New Left Review* 1, 2 (February 2000): 5–24; also Anderson on Eric Hobsbawm, Perry Anderson, "Confronting Defeat," *London Review of Books* (October 17, 2002); Timothy Bewes, and Jeremy Gilbert, "Politics after Defeat," in *Cultural Capitalism: Politics after New Labour* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2000), 1–19; Goran Therborn, "After Dialectics: Radical Social Theory in a Post-Communist World," *New Left Review* no. 43 (February 2007): 63–114; Slavoj Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes* (London: Verso, 2008); Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London; New York: Verso, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1938-40*, Vol.4, H. Eiland and M. W. Jennings (eds), trans. Edmund and Others Jephcott, (Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), p.391.

<sup>17</sup> Koselleck, op. cit, p.83.

*Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*. Schivelbusch defines the insurrections that often follow national defeat, for example the Paris Commune in 1871 or the Spartacist uprising in Berlin in 1919, as ‘delusional’ or ‘dream’ states, which stand in the way of national ‘recovery’, which he defines as a return to reason through an acceptance. Schivelbusch’s insistence on a national frame occludes alternative narratives of ‘victory’, subjugation, and defeat that either operate within national boundaries or transcend them in ways that call a collective national identity into question. The most telling example is his description of the Paris Commune as a moment of ‘madness’ in his chapter on the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-1871.<sup>18</sup> As a class-based, urban insurrection, the Paris Commune does not fit into Schivelbusch’s narrative of a long national rivalry between France and Germany. Nor can his narrative cope with the international character of the Commune and the international impact of its defeat. It drew in a diverse alliance of Russian, Hungarian, American, and English socialists, and Polish and Italian nationalists, including stranded Algerian militiamen, who chose to throw in their lot with the Commune than the official French government. When it fell, its exiles created communities in Brussels, London, and Geneva, and its political legacy reverberated across national boundaries and throughout the revolutionary history of the twentieth century. As if to illustrate this, not only was Lenin buried in a Communard flag, but the Soviet Union even sent another rescued Communard standard into orbit.

The example of the Paris Commune still yields gains in knowledge for the Left because it remains difficult to categorise and its impact exceeds easily defined boundaries of time and space. As Schivelbusch’s attempt shows, it cannot easily be reconciled with a coherent narrative of national ‘recovery’. Instead the event and its aftermath, when between twenty and thirty thousand Parisians were massacred by French government troops and hastily buried in mass graves, persists as an emotional supplement that has to be contained or dismissed. However, although Schivelbusch follows in a long line of conservative commentators, there is an alternative tradition. In what follows, I compare Schivelbusch’s treatment of the Commune with a reading of the Communard, Jules Vallès’s semi-

---

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning and Recovery*, (London: Granta, 2003), p.112.

autobiographical novel series, the Vingtras trilogy (1878-1882). A few dates are useful as background.

February 1848	Overthrow of the July monarchy of Louis-Philippe and establishment of the Second Republic.
June 1848	Socialist uprising in Paris is brutally suppressed.
December 1851	Overthrow of the Second Republic in a coup d'état by Louis Napoleon Bonaparte (nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte I).
1852	Louis Napoleon Bonaparte III declared Emperor of the Second Empire.
July 1870	Outbreak of Franco-Prussian War.
September 1870	Defeat of the French at the Battle of Sedan. Napoleon III is captured and the Third Republic is declared in Paris. First siege of Paris by the Prussians.
January 1871	Paris falls to the Prussians.
March 1871	Uprising in Paris. Declaration of the Paris Commune and the start of the second siege of Paris by French government forces based in Versailles.
May 1871	Bloody Week, and the defeat of the Paris Commune.

Jules Vallès was a supporter of the Second Republic, an active dissident during the Second Empire, and a prominent Communard. He served on the Commune's Central Committee and was editor of one of the most popular Communard newspapers, *Le cri du peuple*. He escaped Paris amidst the massacres that followed the Commune's downfall and his three volume autobiographical sequence was conceived and largely written while he was living in London between 1872 and 1880 as an attempt to engage with the experiences of defeat and exile. Unlike Zola's better known novel about the Franco-Prussian war, *Le Débâcle* (1892), the Vingtras trilogy is unwaveringly pro-Commune. In *Le Débâcle*, Zola pits the solid and conservative soldier, Jean Macquart, against his distant relative, the unstable Maurice Levasseur. Jean Macquart ends up fighting with the Versaillese army that retakes Paris for the French government. Levasseur supports the Commune and is eventually killed by Macquart. Arguably, Zola's characterisation of Levasseur helps to establish the association between the Commune and the idea of

mental aberration that Schivelbusch perpetuates.

Unlike Zola, Vallès makes no attempt to distance or contain the emotional consequences of defeat. On the contrary, the core structure of feeling that informs and shapes his narrative is the mood of personal unhappiness he experienced first in his provincial childhood. This evocation of misery and misattunement becomes the touchstone against which all subsequent setbacks and depressive states are measured. Instead of a narrative of recovery, Vallès's trilogy offers a model of how it might be possible to use misattunement to think through the mood of defeat. His use of as a resource for resistance has implications for how we think about defeat now, and not just in terms of the relationship between the past and the present, but also for how view the future. However, before looking at the Vingtras trilogy in more detail, Schivelbusch's study deserves more attention.

### **Schivelbusch and the Defeat of Nations**

*The Culture of Defeat* (first published in German in 2001) comprises three case studies: the American Civil War; the Franco-Prussian War; and the First World War; with an epilogue on the collapse of the Soviet Union, including a paragraph on 9/11. Schivelbusch describes his approach as 'defeat empathy' or 'an empathetic philosophy of defeat',<sup>19</sup> an approach that puts him at odds with Walter Benjamin, for whom empathy is the opposite of historical materialism.<sup>20</sup> Schivelbusch's method is as much psycho-mythographic as historiographical: '[w]hat neurosis is to the individual, the creation of myths is to the collective'.<sup>21</sup> He identifies eight phases in the collective psychology of defeat: Dreamland; Awakening; Unworthy Victories; Losers in Battle, Winners in Spirit; Revenge and *Revanche*; Renewal; Learning from the Victor.<sup>22</sup> 'Dreamland' describes an initial sense of liberation, during which the ruling regime is blamed for losing, and the anger directed towards it provides a distraction from the shame of defeat. Schivelbusch suggests the 'Dreamland' scenario represents the fall of the tyrant-father and the

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.26.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, *Selected Writings 1938-1940*, Vol.4. p.391.

<sup>21</sup> Schivelbusch, op. cit, p.26.

<sup>22</sup> A ninth, 'Unconditional Surrender' is only relevant in certain conflicts., such as the Second World War.

emancipation of the motherland, helped by her sons. He describes the Paris Commune and the Spartacist insurrection in Berlin in 1919 as 'Dreamland' scenarios. During 'Awakening', resentment towards the external enemy re-emerges and the initial sense of elation recedes. The revolutionaries who had seemed to represent a new age are now blamed for betraying the nation. The enemy's 'unworthy' victory is seen as a trick, achieved by unfair means against a more honourable foe. Defeated militarily, the vanquished represent themselves as spiritually superior:

In the wake of every forced capitulation, therefore, a new struggle begins, a kind of ethical and juridical *levée en masse* in which the loser, casting himself as the personification of defiled purity, tries to score a 'moral victory' over the winner.<sup>23</sup>

In this atmosphere, the desire for revenge or *revanche* (a gentlemanly settling of accounts) grows; but this is counteracted by a sense that war has purified the nation and it can grow anew (Renewal). The nation represents itself as a moral leader, which has learnt from its experience. Implicitly or explicitly, however, a process of recovery begins, when the vanquished start to attune themselves to the mood of the victors, engaging in a 'complex, multivalent process of assimilation and cultural adaptation'.<sup>24</sup>

Schivelbusch's account of the defeat of the American South is his best chapter. It describes in great detail the myths and illusions cultivated by the South, which drew on narratives of defeat as different as those of Milton and Walter Scott. However, in the United States reconciliation between the two sides was aided by the fact that it had been a war within rather than between nations. As there was no revolutionary uprising in the wake of the South's defeat, the transition to reconciliation on both sides proceeded relatively smoothly, without the 'emotional' disruption caused by the Commune or the various Bolshevik-inspired uprisings in Germany after the First World War. As I have already suggested,

---

<sup>23</sup> Schivelbusch, *op. cit.*, p.18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34. Schivelbusch compares this process to what Thorstein Veblen describes in the sphere of technology and economics as 'borrowing'.



these cause problems for Schivelbusch's typology of defeat.

The closest Schivelbusch comes to accepting that there might be an alternative to his narratives of national identity come in his chapter on the Franco-Prussian war. His understanding of the war is largely retrospective. He positions it at the start of the long national rivalry between Germany and France that saw three major conflicts: 1870-1871; 1914-1918; and 1939-1945. The idea that the Commune might be understood in relation to an alternative revolutionary history is dismissed even while Schivelbusch accepts that, at least to begin with, the French themselves read the Franco-Prussian war through the mythology of the French revolution. Of the declaration of the Third Republic, he writes:

the reenactment of revolution erased the experience of defeat, or at least pushed it to the back of people's minds. Once again, only Napoleon had been defeated, not the nation, and the shame of Sedan disappeared with him into a German prison. The revolution on the other hand, and the republic it created were the guarantors of ultimate victory. Of that everyone was certain.<sup>25</sup>

Following this line of argument, Schivelbusch perceives the continued resistance of the working-class districts of the city when Paris capitulated to the Prussian siege on 28 January 1871 as a form of national insanity:

The rebellion of the Paris Commune, the third phase of the 1870-71 war, was thus not just the first great battle between social classes, as history has recorded it, and certainly not the harbinger of world revolution, as it was stylized in Communist mythology. Rather, the Paris Commune melded the entire history of revolutionary and class struggle into a single great

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.109.

phantasm that drew on the memories of heroism and sacrifice of the Parisian people, from the triumph of 1792 to the defeat of 1848. Only if we see in this light – as the culmination of decades-old enmity – can the passion and the hatred with which the war was waged on both sides be properly understood: only from this perspective can one comprehend the quality of madness that seemed to grip the Communards and government forces alike during the eight weeks of the uprising, a madness noted by those few contemporaries who managed to retain their impartial judgement.<sup>26</sup>

Although he does not deny an alternative narrative of class conflict, that narrative only exists as an affective supplement to the larger narrative of national competition. In this larger narrative, the Commune's greatest claim, its most heroic moment, was that it was that part of France that was most loyal to the idea of the nation. There is no denying that the legacy of the Commune has been fought over by nationalists, conservatives, liberals, socialists, communists, and anarchists. Schivelbusch describes some of these appropriations in the period between 1871 and 1914, but in his narrative they remain stages on the way to the next great war of nations. On that road, the Commune can only be a deviation into dysfunction and aberration, essentially out of tune with the new mood.

From the perspective of the second decade of the twenty-first century, two things are recognisable in Schivelbusch's framing of the Commune. First, almost all the phases of the mood of defeat he documents are applicable to today's Left: the enduring belief that defeat was the result of trickery or the betrayal of its leaders; the desire to bury the father figures of the 'old Left'; the conviction of moral superiority; the strident desire to rectify injustice; the deferral of the settling of accounts to 'an indefinite Messianic future';<sup>27</sup> the nostalgic recall of the Lost Cause. The disavowal of former leaders that characterises the defeated nation, the 'expression of triumph over the deposed humiliated father-

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, p.112.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.26.

tyrant' is reflected in the Left's disavowal of its own past as irrelevant or unpalatable: the labour movement, Stalinism, welfarism, paternalism. Following Schivelbusch terms, the consolation sought by the defeated nation in a hedonistic sense of liberation might be compared with the Left's embrace of consumerism in the 1980s; and the defeated nation's learning from the victor compared with social democracy's final reconciliation with market society.

A second perspective, however, might note how Schivelbusch reproduces in relation to the Commune the post-Cold War ideology that elevated liberal democracy and market capitalism as the norm against which the political extremes of Left and Right in the twentieth century were both seen as aberrations. Communism, like the Commune, was assigned to an abject location in a new symbolic world order.<sup>28</sup> This is the logic of the victors. As Koselleck points out, the defeated start from a different place. Looking back at a lifetime of political defeats from London in the 1870s, Jules Vallès was faced with the problem of how to think through a sense of defeat that felt, in Wellbery's words, both like 'a total quality' and a 'personal encounter'. The result was the three novels that made up the Vingtras trilogy.

### **The Vingtras Trilogy**

Vallès sequence of autobiographical novels was conceived in political and personal unhappiness. Begun in exile in London they followed the death of Vallès ten-month-old daughter in 1875. The first volume, *L'Enfant (The Child)*, narrates his unhappy childhood in provincial France in the 1830s and 1840s. It was published first in 1878 as a feuilleton in *Le Siècle* with the title *Jacques Vingtras* under the pseudonym La Chassaude, and as a book, *Jacques Vingtras (L'Enfant)*, the following year. The second volume, *Le Bachelier (The Graduate)*, which narrates his experiences as a student in Paris in the early 1850s, appeared first in 1879 in *La révolution française*, as *Jacques Vingtras, Les Mémoires d'un Révolté*, under the name of Jean de la Rue. In 1880, Vallès returned to Paris under the amnesty for Communards and it was published as book with the new title of *Jacques Vingtras II. Le Bachelier* in 1881. The final volume,

---

<sup>28</sup> Interestingly, Communism has persisted as an unexpected and, to the victors of the Cold War, rather shocking, mood of nostalgia. See Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille (eds), *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (New York, Oxford: Berghahn, 2010).

*L'Insurgé*, (*The Insurgent*) which covers the period leading up to the Commune and ends with its defeat, was first published in 1882 in *La Nouvelle Revue* and only appeared posthumously as a book in 1886, after Vallès' early death, brought on by diabetes in 1885.

Only the first and the third volumes of the trilogy have been translated into English, *L'Enfant* as *The Child* in 2005 and *L'Insurgé* as *The Insurrectionist* in 1971. Vallès' use of Parisian slang, particularly in *Le Bachelier* and *L'Insurgé*, make his work difficult to translate and neither of the English versions is particularly good at communicating Vallès' economical prose, honed during his years as a dissident journalist. One distinctive, and untranslatable, feature of the novels, is his use of *passé composé*, that is the past tense as it is spoken, rather than the literary *passé simple*, which was the standard form for novels in the period and long after. Albert Camus' use of the *passé composé* in *L'Étranger* is a famous twentieth-century exception in the French literary canon. In the quotations below I have given the page numbers of the published translation where available, but have attempted my own version where I think aspects of the original have been lost unnecessarily. Specifically, where the translations have changed Vallès' use of the present tense to the past I have changed it back to convey the immediacy of the original.

### ***L'Enfant***

It is tempting, if anachronistic, to describe *L'Enfant*, the first volume of Vallès' Vingtras trilogy, as an early example of the misery memoir. However, the context in which Vallès was writing was very different from that described by Roger Luckhurst in his chapter devoted to the recent boom in memoir in *The Trauma Question*.<sup>29</sup> Luckhurst describes how the genre of the 'trauma memoir' that emerged in the 1990s centres 'on precisely that moment which escapes self-apprehension'.<sup>30</sup> For Vallès, I will argue, there is no single moment of trauma, the mood of defeat is better explored using Raymond Williams's

---

<sup>29</sup> Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), pp.117-146.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p.118.

concept of ‘structure of feeling’.<sup>31</sup> This structure of feeling, which takes its shape from the experience of childhood unhappiness, becomes the mood through which all subsequent personal and political setbacks are experienced, including the fall of the Commune; but it is not defined by the conditions of its first appearance. Vallès locates in childhood a particular structure of unhappy feeling, a mode of experience that is both identifiable and in process. This mood then becomes a touchstone in the narrative, often returned to, a deeply felt reminder of the misery against which he is rebelling, but also, paradoxically, because it engenders rebellion, a resource that enables him to keep the future open.

The opening paragraph of *L'Enfant* gives a good sense of how this structure of unhappy feeling is represented. Even where the present tense is used to represent the immediacy of the young Vingtras's pain, humour intervenes to distance the child's misery, so that his subjective experience is configured in relation to a future where it might be understood. *L'Enfant* opens:

Was I fed by my mother? Was it a peasant woman who gave me milk? I don't know.

Whatever the breast I bit, I don't remember a single caress when I was little; I wasn't cosseted, patted, smothered in kisses; I was whipped a lot.

My mother says that children shouldn't be spoiled, and she whips me every morning; at midday when she doesn't have time in the morning, rarely later than four.

Mademoiselle Balendreau puts grease on me.

She's a good woman of fifty years. She lives above us. At first she was happy enough; as she has no clock, it was a way to tell the time. ‘Zing! Zing! Thwack! Thwack!’ – ‘Ah! The little thing is getting whipped, it is time for my café au lait.’

But one day, when I had quickly lifted up my coattail to relieve the pain in the open air, she saw me, and took pity on my behind.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1965), pp.64-88.

<sup>32</sup> Jules Vallès, *The Child*, trans. Douglas Parmée (New York: New York Review Books, 2005), p.5 (translation modified).

Written in London, the influence of Dickens, whom Vallès much admired, is evident here, specifically Pip's experience of being brought up 'by hand' in *Great Expectations*. The young Jacques Vingtras's experience reflects that of the figure of the orphan or the unfortunate child as Raymond Williams describes it in Dickens's novels, the child: 'comes to transcend the system to which he refers and to embody many of the deepest feelings in the real experience of the time'.<sup>33</sup> Jacques' misattunement with his family,<sup>34</sup> which he experiences as a sensorium of pain mixed with the smell of coffee and the soothing application of grease, reflects a larger social context of rural poverty and an education system that stifles rather than emancipates.

Jacques' father works as a teacher on very low wages. He inflicts beatings and the rigid, classical curriculum favoured in the 1840s on his son and the other pupils, because he sees it as their only route into the middle classes. Intellectually and physically restless, the son is far from convinced the pain he has to go through is worth it. The novel's dedication reads:

To All Those  
Who Died Of Boredom At College  
Or  
Were Reduced To Tears In Their Family,  
Who, During Their Childhood  
Were Tyrannised By Their Teachers  
Or  
Were Beaten By Their Parents<sup>35</sup>

---

Jules Vallès, *L'Enfant* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), p.40.

<sup>33</sup> Williams, op. cit, p.85.

<sup>34</sup> See Sarah Ahmed on Daniel Stern's theory of childhood misattunement in this issue.

<sup>35</sup> Vallès, *The Child*, op. cit, p.4 (translation altered); Vallès, *L'Enfant*, op. cit, p.37.

A dedication that is echoed in the slightly more humorous version found in the second volume, *Le Bachelier*:

To Those  
Who  
Fed On Greek And Latin  
Died Of Hunger<sup>36</sup>

and parallels that of the third, *L'Insurgé*:

To The Dead of 1871.  
To All Those  
Who, Victims of Social Injustice  
Took Arms Against a Badly Made World  
And Formed,  
Under The Flag of The Commune  
The Great Federation of Sorrows [*douleurs*]<sup>37</sup>

However, as important as the presence of *la douleur* (which might be translated as pain, suffering, or sorrow) is to the experience Vallès narrates, unhappiness is not something to be overcome, or recovered from. Rather it has to be physically inhabited in order to recruit it to the struggle against the social and political causes of pain. As Sara Ahmed suggests, the imperative to be happy, which Ahmed finds in its shortest form in the parental injunction, 'I just want you to be happy', can itself be

---

<sup>36</sup> Vallès, *Le Bachelier*, op.cit, p.21. All quotations from *Le Bachelier* are my translation.

<sup>37</sup> Jules Vallès, *The Insurrectionist (L'insurgé)* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p.xxi (translation altered); Jules Vallès, *L'insurgé* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1986), p.4.

oppressive.<sup>38</sup> The acceptance, or even the embrace, of unhappiness registers a wish to live otherwise, a protest against the existing conditions of happiness: ‘the freedom to be unhappy’.<sup>39</sup> We might compare Ahmed’s description of an oppressive regime of happiness with Schivelbusch’s insistence that the defeated nation must, eventually, recover. Both injunctions, to recover and to be happy, require an attunement with the existing order of things that privileges certain ways of living and excludes others. For both the nation and the child who has been taught to leave unhappiness behind, certain aspects of the past have to be forgotten or represented as deviations on the road to a happy existence. In the Vingtras trilogy, Vallès refuses to recover from his unhappy childhood. He insists instead on dwelling on (and dwelling in) its mood in order to compare his misattunement as a child with the political alienation he feels under the Second Empire. Frequent comparisons in the second volumes indicate the relationship between his personal suffering and social and political oppression. The Vingtras trilogy suggests not so much Koselleck’s historical methodology of distance as a narrative method that seeks to hold and preserve the unstable ‘field of orientations, attitudes, dispositions’ that constitutes a mood in order to turn it against the conditions of its production.

In effect, *la douleur* is transformed into revolt. Vingtras first experiences the excitement of revolutionary politics at the end of *L’Enfant*, during a brief period at a school in Paris in 1848. There, he starts to educate himself and through reading begins to connect the experience of ordinary people in the first French revolution with his own family and the suffering of the Parisian working class with his own childhood:

To see that they were simple people, like my grand parents, that their hands were scarred like my uncles’; to see that the women were like the poor to whom we used to give money in the street, noticing that they had children dragging behind them; to hear them speak like us, like old Fabre, like old Mother Vincent, like me; it did something to me, and I was moved from the

---

<sup>38</sup> Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p.93.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, p.193.



soles of my feet to the roots of my hair.

This time there wasn't any Latin. They were saying: We're hungry! We want to be free!

I'd eaten too much bitter bread at home. I'd been too brutalized by my family not to be moved by their cries.<sup>40</sup>

His reading prompts him to remember fragments from his childhood that had meant nothing at the time:

I found myself remembering words heard at wakes, songs I'd heard sung in the fields, the names of Robespierre or Bonaparte at the end of refrains sung in dialect, and an old man – very old – with white hair who lived at the end of the village and who was called the Madman. Sometimes he'd put a red cap on his white head and sit staring at the ashes of his fire.<sup>41</sup>

The process of gathering together the dispersed vestiges of revolution acts not just to bolster his own growing political consciousness, but also to forge a relationship between his unhappy childhood and the forgotten, scattered hopes of the people in the places where he grew up. What had appeared aberrant, like the old man, now makes new sense of the past. The Proustian structure of Vingtras's *mémoire involontaire* will not be lost on anyone familiar with *A la recherche perdu*; but the point perhaps is not so much that Vallès representation of the eruption of the past into the present predates that of Marcel Proust by three decades, rather that revolution is modernity in its most concentrated form: an explosion in time and space, which leaves its shards scattered across French history. Written in the Belle Epoque, one reading of *A la recherche* might be as one of the most sophisticated allegories of France's revolutionary history, which, even when it is repressed, can never be completely forgotten.<sup>42</sup> In Vallès work, the unhappy child, cut off, as he sees it, from the popular sources of happiness that exist all

---

<sup>40</sup> Jules Vallès, *The Child*, op. cit, pp.297-98 (translation modified); Jules Vallès, *L'Enfant*, op. cit, pp.370-71.

<sup>41</sup> Vallès, *The Child*, op. cit, p.298 (translation modified); Vallès, *L'Enfant*, op. cit, p.371.

<sup>42</sup> On Proust and revolution see: Michael Sprinker, *History and Ideology in Proust: A La Recherche Perdu and the French Republic* (London: Verso, 1998), pp.154-185.

around him, has to recreate those connections by political means in adulthood – rediscovering in the prison spaces of his childhood the vestiges of past hopes that might still promise future transformation.

Each of the novels in the trilogy takes a different approach to the problem. *L'Enfant* maps out a topography of discipline and punishment from which the young Vingtras yearns to escape. Misery is represented as a form of imprisonment, tied to location and circumstance in chapters such as ‘The Family’, ‘School’, ‘The Small Town’. In *Le Bachelier*, he escapes to Paris, but his hopes for the greater freedom the Second Republic might afford are quickly dashed by the December coup of 1851 and the declaration of the Second Empire. This new experience of defeat is represented as a kind of temporal arrest. As history comes to a standstill, all that seems left for the young Vingtras is a ‘cowardly’ (*lâche*) – cowardice is a key word in *Le Bachelier* – attunement with the new order, a return to the prison of his childhood.

### ***Le Bachelier***

The Paris of the Second Republic at first promises that transformation. In the first part of *Le Bachelier*, Vingtras and his student friends live in a joyful state of freedom, despite their poverty, reliving the French Revolution, adopting its heroes, and rehearsing its controversies. As it turns out their excitement is illusory, the bloody suppression of the socialist uprising of June 1848 has already alienated the Parisian working class, who refuse to come to the Second Republic’s aid when Louis Napoleon Bonaparte launches his coup in December 1851. Vingtras’s enthusiasm for the barricades finds no echo amongst ordinary Parisians. One worker shouts sarcastically in language that deliberately mocks Vingtras’s romanticisation of the people: ‘Young bourgeois, is it your father or your uncle who shot us down and deported us in June?’<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Jules Vallès, *Le Bachelier*, op. cit, p.147.

The defeat of 1851 crushes Vingtras's youthful hopes, inflicting a mood of despair he experiences as a physical weight on his body: 'my legs refuse to work ... my right arm is as heavy as if attached to a ball and chain'.<sup>44</sup>

It's finished... finished... The cry of revolt will never be raised again!

I go back in, my brain shuts down, my heart broken, staggering like a felled ox in the hot blood of the slaughterhouse.<sup>45</sup>

Not only do the feelings 'of pain and shame' (*de douleur et de honte*)<sup>46</sup> return him to the sense of powerlessness he experienced as a child (he is still only eighteen), but he has to endure the ignominy of returning home for his own safety: back to the original location of his unhappiness. This sense of being stuck is reinforced by two duels that occur: one at the end of *L'Enfant* and the other at the end of *Le Bachelier*. While the first is in defence of his father and represents a kind of revolt against the conditions under which the family lives, the second is with one of his closest friends and comrades and represents a revolution turned in on itself. Vingtras's overwhelming feeling at the end of *Le Bachelier* is of cowardice (*lâcheté*) and failure: a sense he must inevitably submit to bourgeois life. The novel ends with an overheard conversation:

'You remember Vingtras, the one who only wanted to thrash teachers and burn schools?..'

'Yes.'

'Well he's become an assistant in a school.'

'What a coward!' [*Sacré lâche!*]<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.148.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p.149.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, p.150.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid, p.445.

However, seen in relation to the trilogy as a whole, Vingtras's return to depression and despair is structural rather than inevitable. Unhappiness is part of the structure of oppression, exemplified by the educational system which seems to be the only thing he is qualified for. If the end of *Le Bachelier* sees him stuck in time, the events of the final novel of the series, *L'Insurgé*, are experienced as a rapid present. Conventional narration is dropped altogether in favour of a series of juxtaposed events that stand out from time: moments of illumination that light the way to the main event of the Commune. Revolution is experienced through a mood in which the now has a physical presence. This time the encounter between self and (revolutionary) mood is felt not as a closing down but as a heightening of the senses, so that the self opens out into a new world of possibility.

### ***L'Insurgé***

Cowardice, (*lâcheté* – literally 'letting go'), therefore signifies more than a moral commentary on Vingtras's personal bravery. At the end of *Le Bachelier* what has been let go is not the self, but its connection with (and fidelity to) the possibility of the 'social Republic' (*la République sociale*) for which he has fought. The opening line of the final novel of the trilogy problematises that sense of cowardice: 'Perhaps it's true that I am a coward'.<sup>48</sup> Activism against the Second Empire and the prospect of revolt offer the opportunity to live differently, not to let go. Once Vingtras returns to political activism, *L'Insurgé* narrates a rapid present, cutting between vivid events. These break the circle of depression that characterised *Le Bachelier* by focusing on the instant. Historically significant dates are given, but often episodes are just titled 'Evening' or 'Midnight'. Sometimes no indication of the time is given at all, as in the following description of a public reading of Victor Hugo's tragic drama *Hernani*,<sup>49</sup> performed as a protest against the Second Empire:

---

<sup>48</sup> Valès, *The Insurrectionist (L'insurgé)*, op. cit, p.1 (translation modified). Valès, *L'insurgé*, op. cit, p.25.

<sup>49</sup> The tragedy is set in the Spanish court in the sixteenth century. Its significance lies in Hugo's status as an opponent of the Second Empire rather than its content.

Public readings are in vogue. Beauvallet<sup>50</sup> is to do *Hernani* at the Casino-Cadet.

A solemn meeting! A great attraction! A protest against the Empire in honour of the author of *Châtiments*!<sup>51</sup>

But, as in the circus, they need an artist of an inferior breed, a clown or an ape, one who, after the main event, occupies the stage while people put on their hats and call for their carriages.

They offer to let me play the ape. I accepted.<sup>52</sup>

Typically, with the exception of the final sentence, the account is written in the present tense, but the sense of immediacy that it conveys is undercut by the self-deprecating first-person narrative, where Vingtras punctures any sense of heroic resistance by drawing attention to his own clownish participation in the event.

Vallès's insertion of himself, as Vingtras, into events in which he actually had a part, reinscribes the unhappy subject as foolish player in the drama of the events leading up to the Commune. Still carrying the sense of inadequacy that has dogged him since his childhood, Vingtras appears physically clumsy, awkward, uncertain, and impetuous.

This mode continues up until the declaration of the Commune itself, but after the uprising the style changes. Vallès borrows directly from his own journalism to render the new mood. If the almost certain prospect of defeat never goes away, a heightened sense of a present full of possibility stands as a vindication of the unhappy mood he has always carried with him. The Commune represents an alternative way of living, an enhanced quality of life, where the knowledge of having been in revolt promises to surpass the likelihood of defeat.

---

<sup>50</sup> A famous actor.

<sup>51</sup> A collection of Hugo's poems that criticised the Second Empire.

<sup>52</sup> Vallès, *The Insurrectionist (L'insurgé)*, p.20.

The following passage in the novel, for example, is taken directly from an article in Vallès's newspaper, *Le Cri du Peuple*, published on 28 March 1871:

*March 26*

What a day!

The clear, warm sun that gilds the mouth of the cannon, the smell of flowers, the ripple of the flags, the murmur of this revolution passing by, as peaceful and lovely as a blue river; the thrills, the lights, the brass bands, the glints of bronze, the flame of hope, the scent of honour, all intoxicate the victorious republican army with pride and joy.<sup>53</sup>

The sights, sounds, smells, touch and taste of revolution are all invoked for a 'victory' which, as Schivelbusch would rightly point out, was illusory. The 'victorious republican army' had not defeated the Prussians, who remained invested to the east of the city. It would be slaughtered a few weeks later not by the invaders, but by French government troops. From a political point of view, however, the ability to preserve a revolutionary mood belongs to a different narrative: the history of setbacks and defeats suffered by French republicans throughout the nineteenth century. The elision of that narrative in Schivelbusch's study places affect outside history, but the result is also to elide a more complex debate within the Commune about what a good society, a 'social Republic' might look like.

As a member of the socialist '*Minorité*' on the Commune's Council, Vallès argued against the more bloodthirsty Jacobin majority for as bloodless a revolution as possible. This persistent lack of attunement is conveyed in an unsettling account of an execution towards the end of *L'insurgé*, where humour is used to unsettle any clear sense of moral right or necessity:

---

<sup>53</sup> Vallès, *The Insurrectionist (L'insurgé)*, p.166 (translation modified). Vallès, *L'insurgé*, pp.323-324.

Noise in the courtyard.

I lean out of the window. A man without a hat, bourgeois by his dress, was choosing a comfortable position, his back against the wall. A place to die.

‘Am I all right there?’

‘Yes.’

‘Fire!’

He has fallen... he moves.

A pistol shot in the ear. This time he doesn’t move.

My teeth begin to chatter.

‘You’re not going to be sick just because we swatted a fly?’ says Trinquet,<sup>54</sup> coming back upstairs wiping his revolver.<sup>55</sup>

The absurdity of the condemned man finding a ‘comfortable’ and convenient place in which to be shot, communicates Vingtras’s own discomfort with the deed. Like George Orwell’s account of a man avoiding a puddle on his way to be hanged,<sup>56</sup> the apparent desire to co-operate in his own death, ‘Am I all right there’ (*‘Suis-je bien là’*), humanise the victim, making him more than Trinquet’s ‘fly’.

There is a comparable scene a few days later, when Vingtras eludes capture by disguising himself as an ambulance driver. He is angered by a French government officer’s callous attitude to the corpses of the ordinary Parisians they have killed:

---

<sup>54</sup> Alexis Trinquet, a prominent Commune, transported to New Caledonia for his part in the Commune.

<sup>55</sup> Valès, *The Insurrectionist*, op. cit, p.408 (translation modified); Valès, *L’insurgé*, op. cit, p.408.

<sup>56</sup> In his essay/short story ‘A Hanging’ (1931).

‘Have we any wounded? We don’t do wounded!’ A warrant officer said to me, ‘And ours have the regiment’s surgeons, who direct them to special locations. But if you want to take away these carcasses, you’d be doing us a real favour; they’ve been stinking up the place for two days’

He shut up... luckily! I was seeing red.<sup>57</sup>

Both responses can be traced back to the opening paragraph of *L’Enfant*. In each, suffering is placed in the context of everyday norms to which the narrator is not attuned: in the first case, the firing squad versus ‘a comfortable position’; in the second, mass-murder as a disposal problem. But what began with experiences as regular and ordinary as Mme. Balendreau’s morning coffee has become, by the end of *L’Insurgé*, a matter of political choice. If *Le Bachelier* seemed to suggest that resistance was futile, the Commune, with all its mistakes and disorganisation, demonstrates that there is a side worth fighting for, even if defeat is almost certain.

## Conclusion

The end of *L’Insurgé* does not leave much hope for the future, but it does leave the future open.

Crossing the border to safety, Vingtras looks back at the sky over France:

I have just crossed a stream that marks the border.

They won’t get me! And I will still be able to be with the people, if the people are thrown back into the street and hounded down in battle.

I look at the sky over where I sense Paris to be.

It’s a harsh blue with red clouds. Like a huge worker’s smock, soaked in blood.<sup>58</sup>

This openness, an open defiance, is the opposite of Schivelbusch’s concept of recovery. The fragmented episodes that accelerate with increasing urgency through the Bloody Week and Vingtras’s

---

<sup>57</sup> Valès, *The Insurrectionist*, op. cit, p.223 (translated modified). Valès, *L’insurgé*, op. cit, p.423.

<sup>58</sup> Valès, *The Insurrectionist*, p.228 (translation modified). Valès, *L’insurgé*, p.431.



escape keep both the past and the future in process. Movement and scatter are opposed to the static topography of Vingtras's childhood. Acceleration is opposed to the slowing down and arrest of time in *Le Bachelier*. Leaving Vingtras still in the present (in the present tense) and in movement, just pausing to look back, maintains that sense of motion towards the uncertainty of what is to come rather than the inevitability of what has been left behind.

Even so, almost every aspect of *L'insurgé* might be diagnosed as a symptom of the delusions Schivelbusch sees as typical of defeat. Its fragmented form and heightened intensity could be read as hallucination or a delusional state. The nebulous nature of 'mood' means it is always 'deniable' and cannot offer stable readings, and the mood of defeat is no different. If we return to the original paradox with which I started, that the mood of defeat can be both debilitating and good to think with, then Schivelbusch focuses only on one side of defeat: its negative effects, from which we need to recover. For Vallès on the other hand, the uncertainty and instability offered by the mood of defeat generate a long-term productivity. Defeat is not something to be surmounted, but to be lived through and thought through. Only then can its structure of feeling be reconfigured as a narrative structure. The mournful pleasures of the Vingtras trilogy emerge from a full immersion in the experience of defeat, followed by a reconfiguration of its mood in relation to time and space. In *L'Enfant* this means laying out a topography of misery. In *Le Bachelier*, the structure is of arrested time. In *L'Insurgé* the narrative privileges the illuminated intensity of the now, creating an atmosphere Walter Benjamin's would describe as *Geistesgegenwart*, a heightened consciousness of the present.<sup>59</sup> The Vingtras trilogy suggests that in order to think through defeat, it is not enough to develop the historical methodology of distance Koselleck advises, you have, like Glen Miller, Ella Fitzgerald, and the Nolan sisters, to get into its mood, to feel its rhythms and flows. To feel, smell and taste it. Only then is it possible think it through its origins, to defy its inevitability, and to resist the determinations of the victor's truth on the

---

<sup>59</sup> See for example, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia', in H. Eiland, M. W. Jennings, G. Smith (eds), *Selected Writings 1927-34*, Vol.2, (Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), pp.217-218.

future. And only after that work is done, can we promise ourselves a different mood: a mood for dancing, for chancing, and for love.