Chapter 4

The Commune in Exile:
Urban Insurrection and the Production of International Space

Scott McCracken

In Chapter 11 of J.- K. Huysmans' *A Rebours* (1884) (usually translated as *Against Nature*), Des Esseintes, its reclusive hero, inspired by reading Charles Dickens, leaves home with the intention of visiting London. He never arrives. Instead, he succeeds in experiencing the whole of London, England, and English culture, in Paris, without even getting on the train. Wearing a suit made in London, and placing 'a small bowler on his head', he envelops himself in a 'flax-blue Inverness cape' and sets off in grey, wet (typically English) weather.[1] He buys a guidebook and calls into a restaurant that serves English food and drink. Surrounded by English men and women, he starts to think he is in a novel by Dickens. With time before his train leaves, he moves on to an English-style tavern, where he eats a meal of haddock, stilton, and rhubarb tart, washed down with two pints of ale, followed by coffee laced with gin.[2] Satiated, he starts to lose his desire to travel: 'What was the point of moving, when one could travel so splendidly just sitting in a chair. Wasn't he in London now, surrounded by London's smells, atmosphere, inhabitants, food and utensils?'. He decides: 'In fact, I have experienced and seen what I wanted to experience and see. Ever since leaving home I've been steeped in English life'.[3] Returning home to Fontenay 'with his trunks, packages, suitcases, rugs, umbrellas, and walking sticks', he feels 'as physical exhausted and morally spent as a man who comes home after a long and hazardous journey'.[4]

Des Esseintes' trip is normally seen as a classic example of aestheticism, just one example of many where the self-obsessed hero values sensation over the real. As the book that supposedly corrupts Dorian Gray, *A Rebours* is usually read as a novel in which life imitates art, but it might also

1 Joris-Karl Huysmans, *Against Nature*, ed. Nicholas White, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 104.
2 Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 108–12.
3 Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 114.
4 Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 114.

be read otherwise. Des Esseintes' strange encounter with 'an instalment of London that he was being paid in Paris; a rain-swept, gigantic measureless London', is a telling moment in a gradual process where the particularity of the individual nineteenth-century city was displaced by a more abstract and international sense of the urban: not *a* city, but citi*ness*.[5] Paris, as 'Capital of Modernity' or 'Capital of the Nineteenth Century', played a leading role in this process of and Huysmans' tale can be related more closely to that city's history than might be expected.[6]

Fourteen years before the publication of *A Rebours*, Paris had been subject to two sieges. In 1870, the Prussians had sealed off the city for one hundred and thirty-five days. All experience of the outside world had become virtual, as Parisians sought to survive on the dwindling resources that remained within the city's walls. In the Spring of 1871, the Paris Commune held out in defiance of both the Prussians and the French national government. Des Esseintes' inward turn seems to offer a surreal reinvention of an exclusively urban existence, but his aborted trip also suggest something else: that there was no longer any need to travel to London, because Paris, with its new 'anti-Parisian', 'commercial character' no longer was Paris.[7] Instead, urban experience has been internationalized. All cities have become one city. Paris is already London, and London itself an unnecessary destination, because, it too is Paris – even the 'dreadful weather' is the same.[8]

This transformation of urban space is often explained in terms of the internationalisation of capital; and there is no doubt that this was a key factor. The Great Exhibitions of the period marked important chapters in the development of cities as nodes in networks of economic relations. The two Paris Exhibitions that preceded *A Rebours* in 1867 and 1878 were key moments in the development of such spaces, and, as cultural historians have shown, 'exhibition space' rapidly

---

5 Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 106. For a survey of this process see Scott McCracken, 'Imagining the Modernist City', in *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, ed. Peter Brooker et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 637–54.

6 See David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003); Walter Benjamin, 'Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings 1935-38*, ed. Howard Eiland et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, 4 vols. (Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), volume 3.

7 Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 107.

8 Huysmans, *Against Nature*, 106.

became part of the ordinary experience of shops, restaurants, cafés, and street life in big cities.[9] But the internationalization of capital was only one side of the story. As Des Esseintes inspiration, Dickens, already knew and as Sally Ledger makes clear in her remarkable work of criticism, *Dickens and the Popular Imagination*, the history of large cities was also the history of the majority of their inhabitants, the urban poor.[10] The nineteenth-century city was haunted by the ever-present threat of popular insurrection, and this threat, no less than its actuality, shaped the imagination of what the city was and what it might become. In a volume dedicated to a scholar whose work insisted on giving urban popular radicalism the attention it deserved, it only seems appropriate to devote a chapter to the impact of urban insurrection on late nineteenth-century culture. In what follows, I look at the work of three Frenchmen who did escape to London, exiles from reaction and war: the historian, Prosper Lissagaray, the poet Paul Verlaine, and the artist Claude Monet. Although using different forms and media, the impact of the Commune can be seen in the work all three. Together, their works register the extent to which the threat of insurrection influenced the nineteenth and subsequently the twentieth-century urban imagination.

The Commune took place only four years after the Paris Exhibition of 1867. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin cites sources that show that even such international showcases of capitalist wealth involved workers' delegations.[11] Following shortly after the Paris Exhibition of 1867, the Commune was an international event in itself: a kind of revolutionary Great Exhibition. It drew Italian and Polish nationalists and Hungarian, Russian, and English socialists, to its defence. Algerian militiamen, unwillingly co-opted into the Franco-Prussian War, decided to throw in their lot with the Parisians rather than their colonial masters. Unlike the Prussian siege, Paris was not completely cut

9 On the impact of the great exhibitions see Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle 1851-1914* (London: Verso, 1991). For the impact of exhibition culture on the city street see Scott McCracken, *Masculinities, Modernist Fiction, and the Urban Public Sphere* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 89–144.

10 See Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). On Dickens' response to the Great Exhibition of 1851 and his discursive construction of an alternative sense of 'the People', see, in particular, 193-4. On Dickens and Paris see Colin Jones, 'French Crossings I: A Tale of Two Cities', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 20 (2010): 1-26.

11 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 182, 186–88.

off. The Commune briefly attracted an international community of radicals, then, when it fell, a reverse process of internationalization occurred. During *la semaine sanglante*—the last 'Bloody Week' of May 1871—more than 20,000 men, women, and children were killed as the French government's troops moved across Paris, closing in on the working-class strongholds of Bellevue and Montmartre. Thousands more Parisians and their supporters were imprisoned or transported to the Pacific. Those who escaped were scattered across Europe to Brussels, Geneva, and London, unable to return until Léon Gambetta's amnesty of 1880. In a few short months, large numbers of people had had been drawn in to Paris then, just as quickly, they and are large share of its original inhabitants had been expelled.

Three key themes can be identified in the history, literature, and art of exile, written and painted in Geneva, Brussels, and London after the Commune. First, writers and artists cultivated an aesthetic of distance. Seen from afar, it was possible to gain new perspectives on the city's size and complexity. Second, there was a kind of mirroring effect, where Paris was reflected in the city of exile, producing a kind of urban kaleidoscope. In the case of London and Paris, the particularity of each capital was blurred, creating a new, more abstract sense of the urban. Finally, there was a process of temporal juxtaposition, where the joyful spring days before *la semaine sanglante* were compared with its tragic aftermath. Here the act of memorialization had two functions: to remember the dead; but also to remember the potential in what had been lost, and with it the possibility of a future utopian city, in which the hopes of the Commune might yet be fulfilled.

Prosper Lissagaray, *History of the Commune 1871*

Prosper Olivier Lissagaray was reputed to be the last man on the barricades when the Commune fell. He describes the moment in his *History of the Commune 1871*, but perhaps out of modesty does not name himself:

> The last barricade of the day of May was in the Rue Ramponeau. For a quarter of an hour a single Federal defended it. Thrice he broke the staff of the Versailles flag hoisted on the barricade of the Rue de Paris. As a reward for his courage, this last soldier of the Commune succeeded in escaping.[12]

After eluding French government forces, '*les Versaillais*' (so-called because the French government had fled to Versailles after the uprising), Lissagaray fled into exile in London, where he began work on his history. First published in French in Brussels in 1876, *History of the Commune 1871* is in most respects a standard nineteenth-century narrative history, but it shares important elements of its production and form with other examples of the literature of exile. The history was a product of an engagement with the city of exile as well as the city that was its ostensible subject. In Lissagaray's case, it was also the product of another kind of engagement, with the young Eleanor Marx, who had promised to marry him. She worked with him on the history, helping Lissagaray to source documents and distribute the book, although she was not a named author.[13] Collaboration continued with her translation and introduction, published in London in 1886.[14] Thus, both texts, French and English, were the result of a process of movement, distance, and dialogue, and, in the case of the 1886 version, translation. As we shall see, some of these conditions of production are brought to representation in the text.

Although Lissagaray's history is written in a romantic style, it is scrupulous, not to say cautious, with the facts, careful not to record anything that cannot be documented. Lissagaray continued to research and update it for twenty-five years.[15] The first editions cover the period from the declaration of the Third Republic to the massacres, imprisonment, and deportations that followed the Commune's fall. From the perspective of a work of exile, perhaps the most striking

12 Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871*, trans. Eleanor Marx (London: Reeves and Turner, 1886), 379.

13 Lissagaray became engaged to Eleanor in 1872, when she was seventeen and he was thirty-four. The Marx family never really approved of the relationship, which eventually ended after nine years. See Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx: Family Life (1855-1883)*, vol. 1 (Lawrence and Wishart, 1972), 144–61; and René Bidouze, *Lissagaray, La Plume et L'épeé* (Paris: Les Éditions Ouvrières, 1991), 119.

14 A later English edition incorporating Lissagaray's revisions appeared in 1898. See Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 1:159.

15 See Kapp, *Eleanor Marx*, 1:159.

chapter is, 'Paris on the Eve of Death', which describes the evening of Sunday, 21 May 1871, the night before *la semaine sanglante*. The situation of the narrator is clearly that of a participant, but at the same time, the chapter's grandiloquent opening paragraph addresses an international audience, specifically the reader situated at a distance, outside Paris, seeking to draw him or her into the city, which, thanks to the revolution, has become the focus of the world:

> The Paris of the Commune has but three days more to live; let us engrave upon our memory her luminous physiognomy.
>
> He who has breathed in thy life that fiery fever of modern history, who has panted on thy boulevards and wept in thy faubourgs, who has sung to the morning of thy revolutions and a few weeks after bathed his hands in powder behind thy barricades, he who can hear from beneath thy stones the voices of the martyrs of sublime ideas and read in every one of thy streets a date of human progress, even he does less justice to thy original grandeur than the stranger, though a Philistine, who came to glance at thee during the days of the Commune. The attraction of rebellious Paris was so strong that men hurried thither from America to behold this spectacle unprecedented in the world's history — the greatest town of the European continent in the hands of the proletarians. Even the pusillanimous were drawn towards her.[16]

It is typical of this double view of Paris, both from within and from outside the city, that the perspective of the 'stranger', is more valid than that of the native Parisian; and this 'external' perspective is not only that of the revised and translated version, the point is made as strongly and somewhat differently in the French of the 1876 edition: '*celui pour qui chacune de tes artères est un rameau nerveux, celui-là ne te rend pas justice encore, ô grand Paris, s'il ne t'a pas vu du dehors*' ('he for whom each of thy arteries is part of his nervous system, even he does not do thee justice, oh great Paris, until he has seen thee from the outside').[17] '*Paris rebelle*', revolutionary Paris, is more than itself. It is, to

16 Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871*, 293.
17 Prosper Lissagaray, *Histoire de la Commune de Paris* (Brussels: Librarie Contemporaine de Henri Kistemaeckers, 1876),

borrow Huysmans on London, 'a gigantic measureless' Paris, which requires an external view to register its transformation into something new.

This double perspective of the insider/outsider is continued in the next paragraph using the device of a visitor from the provinces who asks to be shown the truth of the city:

> In the first days of May one of our friends arrived — one of the most timid men of the timid provinces. His kith and kin had escorted him on his departure, tears in their eyes, as though he were descending into the infernal regions. He said to us, 'What truth is there in all the rumours spread about?' 'Well, come and search all the recesses of the den.'[18]

There follows a tour, where the reader, following the timid visitor, is given a panoramic, or more precisely a dioramic (because we move through the city, rather than it revolving around us), sweep through the city. The tour begins at the Bastille and ends at the Palais des Tuileries, both symbolic locations in French revolutionary history. We are plunged into the hubbub of the streets, where newsboys hawking pro and anti-Communard papers and the kiosks selling political caricatures are experienced up close. The viewpoint is then pulled back to survey the funeral processions of those who have fallen in the Commune's defence: 'Let us follow those catafalques that are being taken up the Rue de la Roquette, and enter with them into the Père Lachaise cemetery', before focusing in again on the widow of lieutenant Châtelet of the 61st who: 'presses her children in her arms, and says to them, 'Remember and cry with me, "Vive la République! Vive la Commune!"'[19]

The reader is then taken on circular journey, past the Mairie of the Eleventh Arrondissement in the heart of working-class Paris, back through the Place de la Bastille 'gay, animated by the gingerbread fair', past a demonstration for peace, past the Opera and the Bourse, 'surmounted by the red flag', past the Louvre, open and undamaged, despite the accusations from 'Versaillese [sic] journals' that 'the Commune is selling the national collections to foreigners', into 'the zone of battle', via the Champs-Elysées to where Dombrowski, the Polish nationalist general is directing the

---

321; my translation.

18 Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871*, 293.

19 Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871*, 294-95.

defence under fire.[20] Then back again, past co-operative enterprises and, as the afternoon becomes evening, through crowds going to the theatre, churches put to new uses where 'the Revolution mounts the pulpits', and feminist speakers at a women's club, to a public concert in the Palais des Tuileries in aid of the widows and orphans of the Commune.[21]

The text's double perspective is temporal as well as spatial. A proleptic commemoration of those who are about to fall in the massacres of the week to come is figured in the funeral procession to the Père Lachaise cemetery, which was to be the site of one of the Communards' last stands and the location of a mass grave. The wall in the cemetery against which Communards were shot is now known as '*le mur des fédérés*', a plain, unadorned memorial to the Commune, featuring a lone plaque: 'Aux Morts de la Commune 21-28 Mai 1871'. Thus, the concert in aid of bereaved families anticipates the work of memorialization to come, of which Lissagaray's history was an early example. But this temporality of before and after is situated within a perspective that uses distance to encompass the Paris Commune as a whole, in all its political, social, and economic complexity.

There was nothing new in 1876 in the use of perspective to bring the growing and unruly nineteenth-century city to representation. What is new in the texts produced by Lissagaray and Eleanor Marx, despite their overblown language of romantic Jacobinism, is a sense of something closer to the modernism that comes after the Paris Commune: the notion that space and time have to be compressed and then expanded to capture not just a particular city, but a new concept of the urban: not *a* city, but citi*ness*. The idea of commemoration, which, with its Victorian 'widows and orphans', might seem over sentimental in the context of later 'impersonal' modernisms was important, since the Commune was subject to what Colette Wilson calls 'the politics of forgetting': the strict censorship in the years that followed of any reminders of its memory.[22] However, Lissagaray's *History of the Commune 1871* also registers something beyond the concrete: an abstract concept of the city as it might be. This promise (or threat, depending on one's political perspective)

20 Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871*, 295-99.
21 Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871*, 300-302.
22 Colette E. Wilson, *Paris and the Commune, 1871-78: The Politics of Forgetting* (Manchester University Press, 2007).

persisted despite the destruction of the Commune. The violent compression of space and time through war and revolution had opened up the future.

Paul Verlaine, *Romances sans paroles*

When Paul Verlaine's fourth collection of poems, *Romances sans paroles*, was published in 1874, he asked his friend, Edmond Lepelletier, to send a copy to Lissagaray in London.[23] Like Lissagaray, Verlaine had been a supporter of the Commune and had spent time in the community of political exiles in London. Although, there is a world of difference between the romantic style of *History of the Commune 1871* and the lyricism of *Romances sans paroles*, the change in Verlaine's poetry after 1871, like Lissagaray's history, was the product of the turmoil of the Commune and its aftermath, which for Verlaine involved the fear of persecution by the victorious *Versaillais*, a passionate affair, and an often frantic oscillation between cities. Both works were produced in flight, and both incorporate some of the themes that characterised the Communard writing of exile.

Verlaine was working at the Hôtel de Ville, Paris's town hall, when the Commune was declared on 18 March 1871. At that point, he had written three collections of poetry, two of which had been published, one of which was to come out in 1872, but had not achieved the distinctive style that was to mark him out from his contemporaries. After the Commune's declaration, he refused to decamp to Versailles with the supporters of the national government, accepting instead the job of chief-censor of anti-Communard newspapers, a policy that, as we have seen from Lissagaray description of Paris, was less than successful. He managed to escape *la semaine sanglante*, fleeing first to the Pas-de-Calais, but then returning to Paris, where he took refuge with his wife's family. The next four years of Verlaine's life were spent moving in and out of France, Belgium and England. The threat of persecution for his Communard sympathies was just one of the reasons he never returned to Paris for long. He was also escaping an unhappy marriage. From September 1871,

23 Edmond Lepelletier, *Paul Verlaine His Life—His Work*, trans. E. M. Lang (London: Laurie, 1909), 315. The other recipients were to be '[Camille] Barrère . . .Swinburne, and . . . Barjau, French newsagent, Frith Street, Soho".

he was involved in a relationship with the poet and fellow support of the Commune, Arthur Rimbaud.[24] The affair with Rimbaud was turbulent, characterized by the alcoholism and violence that had been the hallmark of all Verlaine's previous personal relationships, but there is no doubt about the influence the two poets had on each other's work. Rimbaud's biographer, Graham Robb, claims that even their handwriting started to become indistinguishable.

Although biographical readings of Verlaine's work are not unusual, even were we to accept them as the last word, it would be difficult to disentangle the personal and political. The relationship with Rimbaud, for example, meant diverse things to Verlaine. Rimbaud identified strongly with the Commune, even while he considered it to have been too cautious, and included same-sex love as part of a more general revolt against bourgeois values.[25] Verlaine's passion for Rimbaud was as a lover, an artist, and a fellow radical. In July 1872, the couple eloped to Belgium. There they socialized with the exiled Communards associated with the newspaper *La Bombe* in Brussels.[26] Verlaine even seems to have considered writing his own history of the Commune.[27] In September, they moved on to London, the other great centre of exile. Here, they quickly moved into a flat vacated by the Communard journalist Eugène Vermersch, thus entering directly into a network of exiles and pro-Communards that extended to all of radical London, including Lissagaray and the Marx circle.

It is from this period and these journeys that *Romance sans paroles* emerges. The collection is in four sections. The first nine poems, 'Ariettes oubliées' date from the period before Verlaine left Paris. The second section, 'Paysages Belges' dates from the time spent in Belgium. The poem 'Birds in the Night' is given a section of its own and is the first of a series of poems with English titles, the rest of which, in the section 'Aquarelles' ('Watercolours'), were written in London. The last poem, 'Beams', was apparently written on the Dover to Ostend ferry on 4 April 1873.

---

24 For an account of the relationship between Rimbaud's poetry and the Commune see Kristin Ross's superb study, *The Emergence of Social Space* (London: Verso, 2008).
25 Graham Robb, *Rimbaud* (London: Picador, 2000), 138–43.
26 Robb, *Rimbaud* , 174.
27 Robb, *Rimbaud* , 175.

However, Verlaine's movements and border-crossings were actually even more frequent than this four-part division suggests. He left Paris with Rimbaud on 18 July 1872 and went to Charleroi in Belgium, then Brussels. On 22 July, his wife Mathilde came to find him, and he went back with her as far as the Belgian-French border, when he suddenly abandoned her to rejoin Rimbaud and return to Brussels. On 7 September both poets embarked for Dover from Ostend. In December Rimbaud went back to France, but Verlaine stayed in London. Rimbaud returned to London in January 1873, and they travelled to Ostend in April. Verlaine stayed in Belgium until May, when Rimbaud rejoined him, and they both went back to London. Verlaine left London again on 3 July and went to Brussels. On 10 July Verlaine shot Rimbaud during a drunken argument and in August was condemned to two years in prison. *Romances sans paroles* was published in 1874 while he was still incarcerated at Mons in Belgium.

The London poems were therefore the product of a period of frenetic activity and Yves-Alain Favre argues that *Romances sans paroles* marked a 'decisive rupture' with his earlier work.[28] As the title, 'Romances without words', implies, the poems' musicality is as important as their meaning. None is overtly political, but the formal 'rupture' is associated with a new uncertainty about identity. The first of the 'English' (i.e. written in French with English titles) poems, 'Birds in the Night', locates itself at the end as written on the way to London, in international waters: 'Bruxelles, Londres, septembre-octobre 72'. Although critics usually assume that the poem was addressed to Verlaine's wife, Mathilde, whom he had left on the Belgian-French border, relationship to place is also an important theme. At the time of writing Verlaine had to choose between French and German nationality as he had been born in Lorraine, annexed in the Franco-Prussian War, and the poem features an uncertain sense of national identity. The narrator describes himself as:

un bon soldat

Blessé qui s'en va dormir à jamais

28 Paul Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, ed. Yves-Alain Favre (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1992), v.

Plein d'amour pour quelque pays ingrat.

a good soldier

Wounded who will go to sleep for ever

Full of love for some ungrateful country.

He compares the addressee to 'ma Patrie':

N'êtes vous donc pas toujours ma Patrie,

Aussi jeune, aussi folle que la France?

Are you not therefore always my fatherland,

As young, as mad as France?

And imagines himself drowning at sea:

je suis le pauvre navire

Qui court démâté parmi la tempête

Et, ne voyant pas Notre-Dame luire

Pour l'engouffrement en priant s'apprête

I am the poor ship

Which runs without its mast amidst the tempest

And, not seeing Notre-Dame shine

Praying, prepares himself to be engulfed.[29]

Rejected by his lover and his country, who become one in the poem's imagery, the poet situates himself not inside or outside 'la Patrie', but on the border between languages, countries, and nationality, as well as between marriage and 'sinful' (same-sex) desires. The English title seems to position the text in London, but the French verse suggests a valediction from a distance. The images of drowning put the narrator between ports. The unconfessed sinner is threatened with hell, but the narrator-poet is defiant, finding a political, sexual, and religious 'red ecstasy' is in his situation:

Par instants je meurs la mort du pécheur[30]
Qui se sait damné, s'il n'est confessé
Et, perdant l'espoir de nul confesseur
Se tord dans l'Enfer, qu'il a devancé.

Ô mais! par instants, j'ai l'extase rouge
Du premier chrétien, sous la dent rapace.
Qui rit à Jésus temoin, sans que bouge
Un poil de sa chair, un nerf de sa face!

At times I die the death of the sinner
Who knows himself damned if he does not confess
And losing hope of any confessor
Writhes in the hell he has already reached.

O but! At other times, I experience the red ecstasy

29 Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 90–91; my translation.
30 *'pécheur'* (sinner) puns on *pêcheur* (fisherman), also liable to be drowned.

Of the first Christian, about to be torn to pieces.

Who laughs with Jesus, without turning

A hair, without moving a muscle of his face.[31]

'Birds in the Night' can be read as transitional poem in several senses. It marks the passage between Belgium and England, but also the deep waters where identity becomes uncertain. The next section of *Romance sans paroles* 'Aquarelles', opens with two impressionist poems, 'Green' and 'Spleen', which have also been read as addressed to Mathilde, but this interpretation is too narrowly biographical, exile might as well be the theme. The third poem, 'Streets', is quite different. In two parts, the first, located in Soho, where the French community in London was concentrated, consists of four tercets, each preceded and then followed by the refrain 'Dansons la gigue!'

STREETS

I

Dansons la gigue!

J'aimais surtout ses jolis yeux,
Plus clairs que l'étoile des cieux,
J'aimais ses yeux malicieux.

Dansons la gigue!

Elle avait des façons vraiment
De désoler un pauvre amant,

31 Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 91; my translation.

Que c'en était vraiment charmant!

Dansons la gigue!

Mais je trouve encore meilleur

Le baiser de sa bouche en fleur,

Depuis qu'elle est morte à mon coeur.

Dansons la gigue!

Je me souviens, je me souviens

Des heures et des entretiens,

Et c'est le meilleur de mes biens.

Dansons la gigue!

Soho.

Let's dance the jig!

I used to love her pretty eyes,

Brighter than the star of the skies,

I used to love her mischievous eyes.

Let's dance the jig!

She really had ways

To distress a poor lover

How charming that was!

Let's dance the jig!

But I find still better

The kiss of her blossoming mouth

Since she has been dead in my heart.

Let's dance the jig!

I remember, I remember

The moments and the conversations,

And this is the best of my possessions.

Let's dance the jig!

Soho[32]

Contrasted with the tercets' theme of lost love, the refrain indicates a kind of forced gaiety, a contrast emphasised by the triple rhyme, which gives the mournful subject a somewhat flippant, cynical tone. The double perspective of the city discussed above in relation to Lissagaray's *History*, is again present here. The streets of the poem's title and the dance, the jig (an English popular form), are clearly placed in London, specifically in Soho; but the contrast between dancing in the streets

32 Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 92; my translation.

and she who 'is dead in my heart' suggests a double perspective on Paris: before and after the Commune; before the wild joy of insurrection and after the pain of loss. The combination suggests not so much joy as a desperate desire to forget, thwarted by reminders that appear spontaneously in the city streets.

This political reading certainly illuminates the fantastical second part of the poem, which is located in Paddington:

II

Ô la rivière dans la rue!
Fantastiquement apparue
Derrière un mur haut de cinq pieds,
Elle roule sans un murmure
Son onde opaque et pourtant pure,
Par les faubourgs pacifiés.

La chaussée est très large, en sorte
Que l'eau jaune comme une morte
Dévale ample et sans nuls espoirs
De rien refléter que la brume,
Même alors que l'aurore allume
Les cottages jaune et noirs.

Paddington

O the river in the road!
Which appeared fantastically

Behind a wall, five feet high,

It rolls without a murmur

Its opaque and yet pure wave,

Through the pacified faubourgs.

The road is very broad, such

That the water, yellow like a dead woman

Hurtles full and without any hope of

Reflecting anything but the fog,

Even as dawn lights up

The yellow and black cottages.

Paddington[33]

Once again, the poem's vocabulary signifies a double perspective, London's 'streets' contrast with '*la chausée*' and Parisian '*faubourgs'*, the 'cottages' and English fog with French verse. The politics are not overt, but it is interesting to read 'Streets II' against another poem, 'Des Morts', which was written in London at the same time, but published in Eugène Vermersch's London-based Communard newspaper *L'avenir* on 13 November 1872.[34] 'Des Morts' ('Of the Dead') is a pointed elegy to those who died in the insurrections of 1832 and 1834. In the poem, the martyrs of the revolution die '*contents, le drapeau rouge au poing*' ('happy, clutching the red flag').[35] The historical parallel with the Commune's dead is unmistakeable and certainly would not have been lost on *L'avenir*'s audience. However, as a historical poem, 'Des Morts' would have been out of place in the *Romances sans paroles* and in any case, its politics would have led to the collection's censorship in France.[36] Nonetheless, it

33 Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 92-93; my translation.
34 Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 868.
35 Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 600.
36 In the same letter to Lepelletier cited above, Verlaine also asks for a letter from Camille Barrès, but asks that 'he avoid

offers a useful intertext to the collection. In 'Streets II', while '*la brume*' is clearly London fog and the location the basin of the Regent's canal, the deathly course of the river, with its 'yellow water', also recalls *la semaine sanglante*. The words '*comme une morte*', ('like a dead woman'), pun on '*commune morte*' ('dead commune'). The use of '*faubourgs*', a word that has no exact English equivalent,[37] in '*faubourgs pacifiés*', is more appropriate to the crushed Parisian neighbourhoods, the working-class districts of Montmartre and Belleville, than to Paddington, with its 'yellow and black cottages'.

In this context, the '*mur haut de cinq pieds*' ('wall, five feet high'), takes on a more sinister meaning. Again, 'Des Morts' provides a useful reference point. That poem opens with locations of the massacres of the 1830s: the Cloître Saint-Merry, and the rue Transnonain (subject of a famous picture by Honoré Daumier), where the wall has been washed and re-plastered to cover up its use in the reprisals after the insurrection of June 1832.

Ô Cloître Saint-Merry funèbre! sombres rues!
Je ne foule jamais votre morne pavé
Sans frissonner devant les affres apparues.

Toujours ton mur en vain recrépit et lavé,
Ô maison Transnonain, coin maudit, angle infâme,
Saignera, monstrueux, dans mon coeur soulevé.

O funereal Cloister Saint-Merry! Sombre streets!
I never tread your dismal cobbles
Without shuddering before the torments conjured up.

Your wall is still replastered and washed in vain

carefully any Communist allusion or any compromising name' (Lepelletier, *Paul Verlaine*, 315).
37 Eleanor Marx for example used the French word rather than attempting to translate it.

O house of Transonain, accursed spot, infamous corner,

Which will bleed dreadfully in my leaping heart.[38]

Although, in his communications with Lepelletier, Verlaine recalled a specific wall in Paddington,[39] read against 'Des Morts', the wall in 'Streets' recalls '*le mur des fédérés*' and the massacre in Père Lachaise cemetery alluded to by Lissagaray.

The two parts of 'Streets' oscillate between joy and death, Paris and London. The poems collected in *Romances sans paroles* explore new forms that are able to engage with a new experience of the city as an international space. Although the production of such spaces is one of the results of the internationalization of capital and its markets, the Paris Commune was a dramatic example of the role urban insurrection played in new, modernist, ways of seeing the city. The threat of insurrection embodied in the memory of the Commune persists as an idea of what the city might become, and, as an idea of the possible, rather than the actual, this idea necessarily exceeds the reality of any one city.

Claude Monet, *Impression, Sunrise*

The final poem in *Romances sans paroles*, 'Beams', is located on board a specific ferry, the *Comtesse-de-Flandre*, on which Verlaine travelled back to Ostend from Dover on 4 April 1873. Through the image of a woman, who is perhaps the ship, the Comtesse, the poem relates the experience of movement with the play of light of sea and sun:

Elle voulut aller sur les flots de la mer,

Et comme un vent bénin soufflait une embellie

Nous nous prêtames tous à sa belle folie,

Et nous voilà marchant par le chemin amer.

38 Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 600.
39 Lepelletier, *Paul Verlaine*, 314.

Le soleil luisait haut dans le ciel calme et lisse,

Et dans ses cheveux blond c'étaient des rayons d'or,

Si bien que nous suivons son pas plus calme encor

Que le déroulement des vagues, ô delice!

Des oiseaux blancs volaient alentour mollement

Et des voiles au loin s'inclinaient toute blanches

She wanted to go on the waves of the sea

And like a benign wind that parts the clouds

We all embrace her beautiful madness

And we are there, walking along the bitter path.

The sun was shining high in the smooth, calm sky

And there were rays of gold in her blond hair,

So that we followed her step, still more calm

Than the rolling of the waves, o delight!

White birds flew around listlessly

And the all-white sails tilted in the distance.[40]

Verlaine's poems, particularly in this the 'watercolours' section of the volume, are often described as 'impressionist'. Although the word had not yet been coined when he wrote them, there are grounds for connecting Verlaine's experience of flight and exile with Impressionism. Two key figures in what was to become the Impressionist movement also spent time in London in the early 1870s, then

[40] Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 94.

travelled back to France when peace returned. Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet left France for London not because of the Commune, although Pissarro, who was a committed anarchist, sympathized with it, but because of the Franco-Prussian war. There they worked on the techniques that were to become famous in the following decades. It is interesting to compare Verlaine's poem 'Green', written in London in 1872, with Monet's *Green Park*, painted in London 1870-1871.[41]

Voici des fruits, des fleurs, des feuilles et des branches,

Et puis voici mon coeur qui ne bat que pour vous.

Here are the fruits, the flowers, the leaves and the branches,

And then here is my heart, which only beats for you.[42]

In Verlaine's verse, the '*voici*' (here is/here are) presents natural objects alongside his heart, which 'only beats for you'. In Monet's painting, the perspective of green grass and sky, with the city in the distance is comparable to his later 'impressions' of Paris. In fact, without the title it would be difficult to guess which city is being represented. Poet and painter present an impression where if the location can be deduced, the technique is transferable. The 'impression' blurs the boundaries between places and nations. Yet, while Verlaine's Communard sympathies can be read into his poetry, Monet's sympathies were less militant and his art has usually been seen as, at best, apolitical.[43] The urban pastoral of *Green Park* seems far removed and unconcerned with the bloodletting in Paris, yet it was painted in exile from war and revolution and it seems fair to ask to what extent French history 1870-1871, including the Commune, impacted on its creation.

In retrospect, the emergence of Impressionism as a named movement has more often been seen as an example of cultural conservatism in the Paris of the Third Republic than a revolutionary

41 Claude Monet, Green Park (1870-71), Philadelphia Museum of Art, http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/104454.html. <accessed 3 September 2013>

42 Verlaine, *Oeuvres Poétiques Complètes*, 91.

43 Albert Boime cites Monet's only recorded comment on the Commune: a note to Pissarro about a mistaken report on the execution of Gustave Courbet: 'You will have doubtless learned of the death of poor Courbet shot without trial. What shameful conduct that of Versailles, it is frightful and makes me ill. I don't have the heart for anything. It's all heartbreaking' (*Art and the French Commune* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 50).

movement. The critic T. J. Clark uses a rather complex double negative to express this view (which he does not share):

> A critic unfriendly to that painting, and particularly to its claim of strict optic neutrality might be disposed to put the connection thus: It seems that only when the city had been systematically occupied by the bourgeoisie, and made quite ruthlessly to represent that class's rule, can it be taken by painters to be an appropriate and purely visual subject for their art.[44]

But, as another art critic, Albert Boime, has pointed out, there is a strange absence in Clark's formulation. Despite his military imagery, Clark only mentions the Commune in passing, focussing his comments instead on the relationship between the Impressionists and the modernisation of Paris during the Second Empire by Baron Haussmann.[45] During the 1850 and 1860s, Haussmann had built grand boulevards, instituted street lighting as standard, and evicted the insurrection-inclined Parisian working class from the centre to the Eastern part of the city. His modernisation represented an earlier and less bloody bourgeois 'occupation' than that which followed the fall of the Commune, when Paris was systematically *re*-occupied by the French government forces from West to East.

Boime, in his book on art and the Commune, takes the position of Clark's putative critic, 'unfriendly to that painting' to argue that the Impressionists acted as a kind of cleansing agent for the Third Republic, producing light, airy, paintings which not only adopt an 'optical neutrality', but also carefully side-line visible reminders of the Commune: the ruined buildings, the bullet-ridden walls, and the disappearance by firing squad, imprisonment, transportation and exile, of the skilled working class.

---

44 T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 23.

45 Boime, *Art and the French Commune*, 3.

Boime's prime example is one of Monet's studies of the gardens of the Tuileries, painted in 1876.[46] As we have seen from Lissagaray's tour of the Commune, the Palais des Tuileries, formerly the seat of Napoleon III, had become under the Commune a venue for patriotic concerts.[47] During *la semaine sanglante* the palace had been burned down by the Communards, ostensibly to impede the advance of *les Versaillais*, although the act was as much about the symbolic destruction of the home of the monarchy in the centre of Paris as a military decision.[48] In Monet's studies, which were painted from a room above the park on the rue de Rivoli, the ruins of the central part of the palace, are barely visible. The perspective, although more elevated, is similar to that of *Green Park*, with the gardens themselves in the foreground, peopled by 'impressions' of people and the Left Bank in the distance beyond the Seine. The vision of a green space in the city is the same in both paintings, creating a similar concept of the modern urban, which can apply to London or Paris. In the Paris painting, however, we can see the corner of the palace, the Pavillon de Flore, which still stands, but only a small portion of the burnt-out central section that had closed off the cour du Carrousel, which was left an eyesore and object of great political debates until it was demolished and removed in 1883.[49] Boime's proposes that Monet sanitises the view: 'Monet clearly avoided displaying the ruins by relegating them to a remote corner and focusing on the vast garden area between the old palace and the place de la Concorde'.[50] In cleaning up for the bourgeoisie, 'Monet's task, like that of the gardener, was to rake over the traces of the hated insurgents'.[51]

There is an obvious riposte to this contention. If Monet wanted to get on with the 'house-cleaning necessary to re-establish order', why did he include the controversial building at all?[52] He could have angled the perspective slightly to the right so that only the gardens were visible. Instead,

---

46 Claude Monet, *Les Tuileries*, Musée Marmottan, Paris.

47 For a comprehensive history of the palace, see Guillaume Fonkenell, *Le Palais Des Tuileries* (Editions Honoré Clair, 2010).

48 According to the historian Jean-Pierre Babelon, '*le palais disparaît précisément parce qu'il est reconnu comme un lieu de la mémoire*' ('the palace disappeared precisely because it is recognised as a place of memory') (Babelon, 'Le Louvre', in *Les Lieux De Mémoire*, 7 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 2: 194).

49 Fonkenell, *Le Palais Des Tuileries*, 201–212.

50 Boime, *Art and the French Commune*, 68.

51 Boime, *Art and the French Commune*, 68.

52 Boime, *Art and the French Commune*, 73.

he includes not just the building, but also a small section of the ruins in the middle of the right hand side of the painting. This register of at least a hint of the destruction provoked by the fall of the Commune suggests a deliberate visual provocation, at least to those who know what they are looking for, which invites interpretation. Offering an alternative defence of Impressionism, T. J. Clark (to counter the critic 'unfriendly' to Impressionism above) points out that far from being attracted to Haussmannite perspectives, the pre-Commune 'Impressionists' were drawn to spaces that exemplified what he calls the 'the city's arbitrary and unfinished character'.[53]

In this context, Boime's argument seems, if not entirely wrong, then to lack nuance. Monet's inclusion of the ruins should be read in relation to the idea of the city as a work in process. The perspective that consigns those ruins to the edge of the painting relates to the same techniques of distancing and juxtaposition found in *Histoire de la Commune 1871* and *Romance sans paroles*. As for the revolutionary Lissagaray, Paris is best conceived from a distance. As for the poet, Verlaine, Monet's technique invites the viewer to see not one city, but two. If Monet's London paintings appear indistinguishable in style from his paintings of Paris, it is because the comparison is not between particular cities, but between different examples of the urban as a new and distinct idea.

Thus, to find the Commune in that idea we need to look not at individual cities nor at individual paintings, but across cities and across paintings. For example, Monet's first studies of the Palace of Westminster, painted during his exile,[54] might be read not just innovative studies of atmosphere and light, but a silent commentary on the insurrection in the French capital, which pits London, as bourgeois, Parliamentary, democratic and peaceful, against war-torn, insurrectionary France. With this new angle in mind, we can turn to what is perhaps Monet's most famous painting, *Impression, sunrise* (*Impression, soleil levant*).[55] One of two studies of the harbour at Le Havre painted on his return to France in 1872, the painting of the Channel port (which was also Monet's home town)

---

[53] T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 24.
[54] It is of course a subject to which he returns later in his career.
[55] Monet, *Impression, Sunrise* (*Impression, soleil levant*), Musée Marmottan Monet, http://www.marmottan.fr/uk/claude_monet_-musee-2517 <accessed 3 September 2013>

depicts a crossing point between Paris and London and therefore a perfect place to represent the point at which they meet.

Impression, sunrise has a special place in the history of visual Impressionism. It is usually identified as the picture exhibited in 1874 that triggered Louis Leroy's satirical article in *Le Charivari*, which used the term 'impressionism' for the first time.[56] More abstract than anything Monet had painted up to this point, the painting depicts a fiery sun rising through a smoky fog, leaving a bloody stain on the water. Given its date and location, it is difficult not to interpret the painting in relation to the war and revolution from which Monet had fled. The orange sun is suggestive of the fires that burnt across Paris, including the conflagration that engulfed the Palais des Tuileries. The black outlines of the ships suggest the burnt-out ruins, while the reflection of the rising sun courses like a river of blood towards the viewer.[57] At the same time, the painting is an exercise in visual abstraction located at a point between cities, so that it cannot be easily tied to either Paris or London. Instead, Monet's most experimental painting to date is best understood not as an impression of one place, but as a glimpse that takes its inspiration from the relationship between two cities, at the point where both cities are in dialogue with one another.

This dialogue makes it difficult to read either Monet's London paintings or his post-exile paintings of Paris as straightforward representations of bourgeois life. The politics of visual Impressionism are complex, but if Monet was, as Boime suggests, attempting to clear up after the Commune, he was also engaging with an abstract idea of the urban as an evolving concept, one that saw urban life not just as it is, but as it might be. The Commune played a key role in this new urban

---

56 For an account of the exhibition see Paul Tucker, 'The First Impressionist Exhibition and Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*: a Tale of Timing, Commerce, and Patriotism', *Art History* 7.4 (1984), 465–76. As the catalogue for the exhibition is unclear, we cannot be absolutely certain whether Leroy's article was sparked by the painting usually known as *Impression, Sunrise* or a less well-known painting of the harbour, completed at the same time. I follow convention and treat the better known picture, *Impression, sunrise* in the Musée Marmottan, as the key work. The less well-known painting is in a private collection in Paris and is seldom reproduced. Reproductions of both paintings can be found in John Rewald's history of Impressionism, but Rewald reverses the titles, calling the famous painting in the Marmottan *Impression, Setting Sun* and giving the name "Impression, Sunrise" to the other, less well-known study. See Rewald, *The History of Impressionism*, third edition (London: Secker and Warburg, 1980), 339, n.23).

57 Tucker agrees that the painting makes reference to the war, but sees it as a patriotic statement (Tucker, 'The First Impressionist Exhibition and Monet's *Impression, Sunrise*'.

imaginary. Both the threat of insurrection during the Second Empire and the visual reminders of revolution that lingered in the 1870s provoked the image of an alternative city as well as an alternative world. The idea of revolution was more present in the modernist city than we normally assume.[58]

Conclusion

If we return to *À Rebours*, it is worth reminding ourselves that its author was not at all in sympathy with the Commune; and in fact moved with the national government to Versailles at its declaration. Nevertheless, des Esseintes' experience of the modern city's capacity to produce international spaces, even taken at the level of a *jeu d'esprit*, is not without its antecedents. In the examples above, Lissagaray reaches towards a new sense of perspective that allows him to capture the city at the very instant before catastrophe and yet to preserve some of that moment's hope. Through the experience of exile, Verlaine's poetry finds a new distinctive form at the fractures between nationalities, languages, and sexualities. The emergence of something new in Monet's painting occurs in the context of an enforced movement between cities. Even if the new sense of space found in all three can be interpreted as in terms of a developing and inevitable process of internationalisation, the shock of the Commune had an impact. Hidden in *A Rebours*, where the experience of international space is internalized, apparently abolishing the need for travel, there is more than a consumerist imaginary. The secret of the modernist city as transformational space lies in a concentration not just of goods, but of an increasing and increasingly cosmopolitan urban population, 'the People', whom Ledger puts centre stage in *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination*.[59] As the author to whom Des Esseintes owed his vision of London already knew, present in the urban imaginary is a richer, darker

58 See Matthew Beaumont's fine study for an account of the utopian and dystopian visions the Commune inspired in England: *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870-1900* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

59 See Sally Ledger, *Dickens*, passim. A sense of the centrality of the aspirations of working class to nineteenth-century culture is no less present in Ledger's work on Mark Rutherford, the New Woman, and Ibsen.

vision: a foreboding, sometimes hopeful, sometimes fearful, that the People might (and at any moment) reclaim those spaces for themselves.