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Matthew Creasy and Jennifer Higgins

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Goldsmiths
UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, 'Vox Populi' (1880)
A New, Annotated Translation

Matthew Creasy and Jennifer Higgins

Jean-Marie-Mathias-Philippe-Auguste, Comte de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam (1838–1889) first published 'Vox Populi', the short text translated here, in the magazine *L'Étoile française* during December 1880. He republished it in *La Comédie humaine* a year later, before gathering it into the collection *Contes cruels*, published by Calmann Lévy in February 1883.

It appears there as the third story in the collection and the editors of the Pléiade edition suggest this positioning was intended to signal the variety of forms deployed across the collection as a whole.¹ For this work is more frequently referred to as a poem in prose, rather than a 'conte' or story. As well as its brevity, 'Vox Populi' is characterised by a set of repeating motifs and phrases. At the heart of its narrative lies the beggar's cry: 'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!', which is repeated six times in the course of the text. (One biographer suggests that the story was inspired by an actual encounter with one such beggar in Paris.) But Villiers also repeats (with variations) references to the setting and Parisian crowds, as 'Vox Populi' surveys key political developments between 1868 and 1880. The interplay of difference and repetition at these points measures the cowardice and fickleness of the general population in Paris as they respond with fear or enthusiasm to each successive change of regime.

As such, 'Vox Populi' has much in common with the 'point-scoring against the bourgeois' that Gerri Kimber has identified as characteristic of *Contes cruels* as a whole.² But this dense pattern of repeating motifs prompts Des Esseintes, the protagonist of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) to have 'Vox Populi' reprinted in his own anthology of poems in prose. This fictional character praises Villiers's text as 'une pièce superbement frappée dans un style d'or, à l'effigie de Leconte de Lisle et de Flaubert' [a piece superbly struck out in a golden style, in the effigy of Leconte de Lisle and Flaubert].³ Huysmans's treatment of 'Vox Populi' positions it within literary lineage that includes the prose poems in Charles Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), as well as

the lapidary concision of Gustave Flaubert. (Indeed, Villiers alludes to Baudelaire's poem, 'Les Aveugles' and draws on its sentiments.) The enthusiasm of Des Esseintes, then, suggests that 'Vox Populi' might be considered a finely wrought work of decadence or aestheticism, seemingly above the vacillations of the crowds it describes.

As Helen Abbott points out, however, there need be no contradiction between poetry and satire here. Rather, she observes, repetition is intrinsic both to the politics and the music of this text – its status as prose poetry is not at odds with its satirical bite.⁴ This sense of concision and compression is hard to capture in translation, but it also accounts for the continuing appeal of this work across the ages.

¹ Auguste de Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Pierre-Georges Castex and Jean-Marie Bellefroid (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1986).

² Gerri Kimber, 'Hidden Assassin: Subverting the Bourgeois in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Contes cruels*', *French Studies E-Journal*, 1 (2005), 1–9.

³ Joris-Karl Huysmans, *À rebours*, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Lucien Descaves, 23 vols (Paris: Crès, 1928–1934), VII, p. 259. Our own translation.

⁴ Helen Abbott, 'Politics or Poetics? The Battle Cry of the Refrain in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's "Vox Populi"', *Romance Studies*, 26.2 (2008), 126–35.

Vox Populi¹

To M. Leconte de Lisle²

The Prussian soldier makes his coffee in a dark lantern.
– Sergeant Hoff³

That day saw a great parade on the Champs-Élysées!

It is now twelve insufferable years since that spectacle.⁴ Summer sunlight splintered its long golden arrows upon the roofs and domes of the ancient capital. Dazzling reflections flashed from myriad windows: bathed in a powdery light, the people thronged the streets to see the army.

Before the railings of the parvis at Notre-Dame,⁵ on a high wooden stool, sat the ancient Beggar, the doyen of Parisian Poverty, whose mournful, ashen face was riven by a network of wrinkles the colour of dirt. Sitting cross-legged under black rags, his hands joined beneath the official notice attesting to his blindness, he lent a ghostly air to the *Te Deum* of the celebrations taking place around him.

Wasn't everyone in this crowd his neighbour? Weren't the joyous passers-by his brothers? A member of the Human Race for sure! Besides, living in the shadow of this sovereign portal he hadn't lost everything: the State recognized his right to be blind.

As the owner of this title and beneficiary of the respectability conferred by his official occupation of this place and the alms it promised, and, as a registered voter, he was practically our equal, even if he lacked a little Light.

And this man, a kind of lingering presence among the living, uttered from time to time a monotonous complaint – the outward articulation of the deep sigh that was his whole life.

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

Around him, beneath the powerful vibrations dropping from the belfry – *outside*, out there, beyond the wall of his eyes – from the stamping of the cavalry, from the bursts of bugle calls, from the cheers mixed with salvos from the Invalides and fierce cries of command, from the clash of steel, from the thunder of drums marking time for interminable processions of infantry, a distant rumble of glory reached him. His acute hearing even picked out flotillas of heavily fringed banners brushing against breastplates. A thousand flashes of sensation, all vague and indistinct, were born within the understanding of the old prisoner of darkness. A second sight told him what was setting the hearts and minds of the City on fire.

And, hypnotized, as always, by the glamour which they find in strokes of good luck and audacity, the people offered up this fashionable prayer with a shout:

'Long live the Emperor!'

But, amidst the lulls within this tempest of triumph, a faint voice rose from near the mystical railings. The old man sat, his head thrown back against the pillory of his bars, rolling his vacant orbs towards the sky, forgotten by the people whose true prayer he alone seemed to express – the prayer that lay hidden beneath their cheers, a secret, private prayer, – and he, the intercessionary prophet, chanted like a psalm his now mysterious phrase:

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

*

That day saw a great parade on the Champs-Élysées!

It is now *ten* fleeting years since those sunny celebrations! Same sounds, same voices, same smoke! And yet the tumult of public joy was somewhat muted. A shadow haunted everyone's eyes. The usual salvos fired from the grounds of the Prytaneum⁶ reverberated this time with the distant

roar of the batteries at our forts. And the people were already straining their ears, trying to make out answering fire from the approaching enemy guns in the echoes.

The governor passed by, directing his smiles at all and sundry, guided by the ambling trot of his fine horse.⁷ Reassured by the confidence that a well-turned-out uniform always inspires, the people alternated between patriotic songs and the military applause with which they honoured this soldier's presence.

But the syllables of their previous impassioned cheer had changed; the frenzied people offered up this fashionable prayer:

'Long live the Republic!'

And over there, near the sublime portal, you could still make out the solitary voice of Lazarus. This Mouthpiece for the unspoken thoughts of the people did not change; he didn't veer from his old, rigid lamentation.

The true soul of these festivities, lifting his extinguished eyes to the heavens, he cried out, during the silences, in the tone of one making an observation:

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

*

That day saw a great parade on the Champs-Élysées!

It is now *nine* insupportable years since that clouded sunshine!

Oh! Same rumblings! Same clash of arms! Same whinnying! Even more muted than the previous year but shrill, nevertheless.

'Long live the Commune!' the people proclaimed to the passing wind.

And the voice of that secular Chosen One, the representative of the Unfortunate, was still to be heard, over there at the holy portal, repeating its corrective refrain to the one idea of these people. Tilting his head up towards the sky, he groaned in the shadows:

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

*

And two moons later, accompanied by the dying vibrations of the tocsin whilst the Generalissimo in charge of the regular forces of the State reviewed his two hundred thousand rifles, still smoking, alas, from the sad civil war, the terrified people, with one eye on the buildings burning in the distance, cried:

'Long live the Marshal!'⁸

Down there, by the salubrious enclosure, the immutable Voice, the voice of that veteran of human Poverty, repeated his machine-like, dolorous and pitiless obscuration:

'Please, take pity on a poor blind man!'

*

And, since then, from year to year, from parade to parade, from clamour to clamour, whatever name the people have hurled up into space with their cheers, anyone listening attentively to the sounds of the earth can always make out, amidst the loudest of the revolutionary shouts and bellicose celebrations that follow, the distant Voice, the *true* Voice, the intimate Voice of the terrible, symbolic Beggar! – the Night Watchman who keeps the exact hour of the People – the incorruptible custodian of the citizens' conscience, the one who pieces together the Crowd's occult prayer and encapsulates its sighs.

The Inflexible Pontiff of Fraternity, this Official bearer of physical blindness, has never ceased, in his role as unconscious intercessor, to invoke divine charity for his brothers in thought.

And when the People, drunk on fanfares, bells and fusillades, troubled by this din of flattery, endeavour vainly to disguise from themselves their own true prayer, under whatever mendacious syllables of enthusiasm, this man, the Beggar, face turned to the Heavens, arms uplifted, groping in the depths of his Shadows, stretches up in the eternal threshold of the Church – and, in a voice that is ever more piteous, but that seems to travel beyond the stars, still calls out his prophetic corrective:

‘Please, take pity on a poor blind man!’

¹ From the maxim, *Vox populi, vox Dei*: ‘The voice of the People is the voice of God’. Gustave Flaubert used the full phrase as an epigraph to his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues* (written c. 1879).

² Villiers was a friend and admirer of the French poet, Charles Marie René Leconte de Lisle (1818–1894), who was a leading figure in the Parnassian movement in Paris.

³ This epigraph probably derives from the siege of Paris during 1870. A dark lantern includes a slide or other arrangement by which the light emitted can be concealed. The Editors of the Pléiade edition of Villiers’s works suggest that this joke about rendering a dark lantern useless by employing it as a cafetière may have a symbolic value.

⁴ Given the first publication of ‘Vox Populi’ in 1880, this probably refers to celebrations for the birthday of Emperor Napoleon III during August 1868.

⁵ A ‘parvis’ is an enclosed area in front of a church or cathedral. During the 1850s and 60s Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann cleared the area around the Cathedral of Notre Dame, widening the square in front of it. Villiers’s beggar is probably imagined as sitting by the railings installed before the great front portals of the cathedral.

⁶ The military college in Paris.

⁷ The crowd cheer General Louis-Jules Trochu (1815–1896), appointed Governor of Paris in 1870 to conduct its defence in the face of the collapse of the Second Empire and imminent invasion by the Prussians.

⁸ Marshal Patrice de Mac Mahon (1808–1893). In May 1871, he bloodily suppressed the revolutionary government known as the Commune, set up by Parisian radicals in response to the surrender of the French government to Prussia. Mac Mahon became President of the Third French Republic between 1873 and 1879.