



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

“These Christs that die upon the barricades”

Citation for published version:

Holland, O 2022, ““These Christs that die upon the barricades”: Victorian Responses to the Paris Commune”, *BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History*.
<https://branchcollective.org/?ps_articles=owen-holland-these-christs-that-die-upon-the-barricades-victorian-responses-to-the-paris-commune>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

BRANCH: Britain, Representation, and Nineteenth-Century History

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Owen Holland, “These Christs that die upon the barricades’:

Victorian Responses to the Paris Commune”

Abstract

The Paris Commune of 1871 provoked several different kinds of reaction in Victorian Britain during the *fin de siècle*. William Morris and Oscar Wilde (amongst others) celebrated the Commune in their poetry and political writings, re-assessing the event’s meaning in the context of the 1880s socialist revival, while the republicanism of Algernon Charles Swinburne led him to adopt a more hostile attitude in the immediate aftermath of the revolution. Several other writers sought to think through their confusion in response to the Commune, including John Ruskin, Gerard Manley Hopkins and George Gissing, but they all did so against the consistent pressure of conservative reaction, exerted in the form of periodical and newspaper commentary, and sensationalised misrepresentation of the Communards’ deeds and aims. This article surveys some of the main contours of the Commune’s discursive afterlives in Britain, arguing that the British response was characterised by multiple forms of political and aesthetic contestation.




The Paris Commune was a short-lived workers’ insurrection which saw  Paris govern itself in the form of an autonomous revolutionary commune for a period of seventy-two days between 18 March and 28 May 1871. In the words of one of the Commune’s foremost English defenders, the Communards attempted to “establish society on the basis of the freedom of labour” (Morris 23.74) and they drew support from large sections of the Parisian working class. The Commune emerged in the wake of a punishing Prussian siege of [Paris](#) during the Franco-Prussian war, which had been concluded by armistice on 26 January 1871, though its origins can be traced further back.^[1] During the war, a group of bourgeois republican politicians, gathered around General Louis Jules Trochu and Léon Gambetta, formed a Government of National Defence and seized the opportunity to establish the Third French Republic on 4 September 1870 after the abdication of the Emperor Napoleon III. Many Parisians were incandescent at what they perceived as the government’s betrayal of the country, and this fractious conjuncture created conditions in which the Communards’ revolutionary aspirations found widespread popular support.




Figure 1. Barricade of the Paris Commune at Place Blanche. This file is licensed under the Creative Commons CCo 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

The French political scene at this time was sharply polarised into various competing camps: moderate bourgeois republicans in support of the Third Republic were opposed by two rival monarchist factions (Legitimists and Orleanists), who differently hoped to undo the legacy of the Revolution of 1789, while the former Emperor Napoleon retained

some pockets of support. In [Paris](#) and a few other major cities, including 


[Lyon](#) and  [Marseille](#), the Communards challenged the Government of National Defence and the succeeding administration of Adolphe Thiers from the left, and the Commune uprising in [Paris](#) was triggered on 18 March by the government's ill-fated

attempt to seize the cannons of the National Guard in  [Montmartre](#). Parisian women fraternised with the troops who had been sent to seize the cannons, and the ensuing breakdown in military discipline provoked a more general popular insurrection which compelled the government to retreat to Versailles, thereby giving the Central Committee of the National Guard an opportunity to take control of [Paris](#) until the Commune was

officially proclaimed on 28 March. From  [Versailles](#), Thiers rallied the forces of reaction and gathered together the recently defeated remnants of the French army whom he sent to crush the short-lived experiment in communal self-government in late May.

I



Weighing the world-historical significance of the Parisian *événements*, Karl Marx commented in a letter to the German socialist Ludwig Kugelmann, dated 17 April 1871, that “a new point of departure, of importance in world history, has been gained” (Marx to Kugelmann 199). In his pamphlet, *The Civil War in France*, published in London on behalf of the General Council of the International Workingmen’s Association shortly after the Commune was violently suppressed, Marx elaborated that the Commune was a “thoroughly expansive political form” and argued that its “true secret” lay in the fact that it was “essentially a working-class government, the produce of the struggle of the producing against the appropriating class, the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of Labour” (*Civil War in France* 20). Marx celebrated the unprecedented character of the Commune and argued that the historical experience of proletarian class struggle had led to the discovery of a new political form that not only accentuated the antagonism between capital and labour but also pointed to the possibility of its ultimate supersession. One prominent historian acknowledges that the Commune’s “actual history is overlaid by the enormously

powerful myth it generated, both in  France itself and (through Karl Marx) in the international socialist movement,” adding that the Commune was “more formidable as a symbol than as a fact” (Hobsbawm 200). Eric Hobsbawm’s remarks offer an important reminder that all subsequent narrativisations of the Commune enter a contested and ideologically fraught historiographical terrain. Peter Starr (following the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre) suggests that the Commune also elicited a form of productive “revolutionary confusion” in many quarters (6). According to Starr, Lefebvre’s association of “confusion with festivity and the lived experience of revolutionary passion” allowed him to insist on “the power of confused yet profound images” and to foreground “confusion’s link to a necessary futurity” (6, 18–19). This “confusion,” insofar as it migrated across the Channel, manifested itself (with varying degrees of legibility) in the work of several writers in late-Victorian Britain, including John Ruskin, Oscar Wilde, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Algernon Charles Swinburne, Eliza Lynn Linton, and several others. Not all of these writers picked up the red thread spooled out by the Commune and not all of them can be discussed at sufficient length in a short article such as this; in fact, it might be more appropriate to speak of the writers who responded to the Commune in Britain as being stretched out at different points along Ariadne’s thread, as they sought to negotiate from a distance the ethical complexities and labyrinthine political dilemmas of the revolution.

Marx’s pamphlet, meanwhile, produced a rather different kind of confusion in the British press. A correspondent for the *Saturday Review* accused the pamphlet’s author of practising “the worst style of composition” and argued that Marx’s polemical proposition that Adolphe Thiers, rather than the Communards, bore primary responsibility for the death of Archbishop Darboy was an exercise in sophistical quibbling (“Apology of the International” 791). Unwilling to let such a slur pass unanswered, Marx replied in a letter to the *Examiner*, dated 2 September, in which he responded to the “shouts of indignation on the part of the London press” by citing Eugène Fondeville’s testimony that the Archbishop himself happened to share Marx’s view of the matter (“The Commune and Archbishop Darboy” 873).^[2] Elsewhere, William Stigand, a frequent contributor to the *Edinburgh Review*, discussed Marx’s pamphlet and insisted with reference to the International that “there never has existed, perhaps, since the origin of civilisation, a society as to whose character and working it is so important to come to a just understanding” (526). Stigand believed that the International had played a leading role in instigating the Commune, which he derided, in part, because of the Communards’ “Vandalism in the way of burning public and private edifices,” suggesting that “there is every reason to believe that they intended to destroy

the whole city” (559). Partly in anticipation of such responses, Marx was scathingly ironic about those commentators (the “bourgeoisie of the whole world”) who were “convulsed by horror at the desecration of brick and mortar” while they looked “complacently upon the wholesale massacres after the battle” (*Civil War in France* 31).^[3]

During the intense fighting of the Bloody Week in which the Commune was brutally put down, many parts of [Paris](#) were destroyed or seriously damaged, including prominent

public buildings like the  [Hôtel de Ville](#) and the  [Tuileries Palace](#). The ruins of the [Tuileries](#) were left to stand for nearly a decade, inscribing the physical legacy of the Communard insurrection into the city’s very topography. As Scott McCracken and Michelle Coghlan have discussed, this aspect of the Commune’s afterlife caught the imagination of Henry James. He had visited [Paris](#) in 1872 and commented in a letter to his brother on the visible “gashes and scars of the spring of 1871”

(*Complete Letters* 1.114). He also observed that “beneath all this neatness and coquetry, you seem to smell the Commune suppressed, but seething” (*Complete Letters* 1.114). In his 1903 novel *The Ambassadors*, Lambert Strether’s encounter with the absent presence of the [Tuileries](#), as he traverses the space where the [Palace](#) once stood, kindles the ruminative workings of his “historic sense” (*The Ambassadors* 59). As McCracken puts it, James’s novel attests to the “paradoxical presence of the Commune as absence” which, in turn, signals his deployment of “an aesthetic that engages with the rupture between memory and history that anticipates that of [James’s] modernist successors” (72). With regard to the physical site itself, Coghlan writes that “the [Tuileries](#) largely came to stand in for the ruins of [Paris](#)” and adds that “for many observers the [Tuileries](#) ruins seemed most acutely to testify to the crimes of the Commune” (112). Photographic images of the ruins circulated widely and, as Colette Wilson points out, these were seen by many as “the depiction of the results of a calculated attack on the monarchy or the nation by an immoral, inebriated, mentally disturbed horde of murderous barbarians” (183).

Yet the images of the ruined [Palace](#) were more ideologically ambiguous than that, and, as Wilson points out, they could equally “be read by those sympathetic to the Commune [...] as representing the inevitable, justifiable even, destruction of a decadent regime” (179). It is in this context that one should read the Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin’s celebration of the picturesque character of the ruins. After the [Palace](#) was eventually cleared, Kropotkin recalled the aesthetic appeal of the expunged ruinscape, commenting in the Russian edition of his *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (1898–99):

In 1878 its ruins, which were already becoming overgrown with new vegetation, were the most beautiful ruin in [Paris](#). Even aside from the historical significance of these ruins—how fine it is that in at least one city of Europe the dwelling-place of emperors should be a scenic ruin—they were actually extraordinarily picturesque. (226–27)

In an image reminiscent of the opening chapter of Richard Jefferies’s *After London* (1885), Kropotkin imagines the prospect that the “young plant life” might begin to take “possession of the cracked walls,” which would have made them become “more and more artistically resplendent” (227). Kropotkin’s memory of the vanished ruin simultaneously affirms the history of revolutionary struggle encoded within the ruinscape and offers an implicit protest against the bourgeois attempt to erase that history.

Oscar Wilde shared Kropotkin’s sentiments about the ruined [Palace](#). When Wilde visited [Paris](#) in 1883, over a decade after the Commune’s fall, Wilde’s first biographer Robert Sherard reported his comment, on passing the ruins of the [Tuileries](#), that each “little blackened stone” was, for him, “a chapter in the Bible of Democracy” (35). Like Kropotkin, Wilde was clearly mindful of the “historical significance” of the ruins and identified the iconoclastically violent character of the revolution with a vibrant

democratic impetus. And like the Communard novelist Jules Vallès (to borrow Richard Maxwell's words), Wilde "entertains the thought that arson, since it isn't the end of the world, might not be a bad idea" (Maxwell 218). In Wilde's 1891 essay "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," he wrote in similar terms that "the very violence of a revolution may make the public grand and splendid for a moment," partly because "behind the barricade there may be much that is noble and heroic" (309). The essay moves towards a conclusion which celebrates anarchic individualism together with a radical version of Christianity, depicting Christ as a figure "who resists society absolutely" (317), though the mode of resistance envisaged by Wilde is really a kind of ascetic withdrawal. The concluding paragraphs of Wilde's essay thus recall the text of his 1881 "Sonnet to Liberty," in which Wilde's speaker similarly invokes "these Christs that die upon the barricades," before ambivalently adding: "God knows it I am with them, in some things" (*Poems* 3).

Wilde was not the only *fin-de-siècle* writer to hint at a Christological identification between Jesus and the Communard insurgents. Far more explicitly than Wilde, Eliza Lynn Linton's 1872 novel *The True History of Joshua Davidson*—later re-titled *The True History of Joshua Davidson, Christian and Communist*—tells the story of an itinerant carpenter who seeks to live as Jesus would have lived were he alive during the nineteenth century. In London, Joshua moves in the orbit of the First International, which he sees as "a means of class-advancement by peaceable and noble efforts" but entertains "no dream of barricades and high places taken by assault" (Linton 146). Yet when he travels to [Paris](#) to fight with the Commune, he sides unequivocally with the "leaders of the Commune [who] were fighting singly at the barricades" even as he intercedes with a group of rank-and-file Communards in an effort to prevent them killing their hostages (249). Joshua himself does not die upon the barricade; he is instead martyred after his return to England, where he seeks to proselytise the Communards' cause, only to be trampled under the feet of a congregation whose passions have been aroused by a conservative clergyman, Vicar Grand. Joshua had agreed to debate the priest of his childhood parish, but Grand uses the opportunity to denounce Joshua's allegedly blasphemous comparison between Christ and the Parisian revolutionaries, stirring up a moral panic amongst the crowd to a point where they set upon Joshua and kick him to death (ironically abandoning their professed Christian principles in the process). Linton's novel is one of the earliest and most sympathetic fictional representations of the Commune to have appeared in Britain: it can be said to have initiated a minor sub-genre of historical romance fiction insofar as it elicited a wide number of fictionalised ripostes in which the Communards tend to appear in a rather more unfavourable light.^[4] Linton, on the other hand, like Wilde, celebrated the nobility and heroism of the barricade. Throughout the nineteenth century, as Eric Hazan writes, the barricade was an important "*symbolic form of insurrection*: to unpave a street, overturn a cart, pile up furniture, is to give a signal, to show one's determination to fight, and fight together" (123). In Linton's novel, Joshua exclaims from the top of a gun-barrel during the fighting: "The work that the Commune [...] pledged itself to do [...] was to help on the freedom of the working classes, by proving to the world their nobility and power of self-government" (250). In this respect, Joshua's rhetoric echoes the arguments put forward by Marx in *The Civil War in France*. For Marx, the Commune initiated a rupture in the sequence of nineteenth-century revolutions, which led him to make an important claim about the novelty of the Commune as a "completely new historical [creation]" (*Civil War in France* 19). The Commune was not so much a re-enactment of 1793 as an initiation of a new *kind* of revolution. According to Marx, "this was the first revolution in which the working class was openly acknowledged as the only class capable of social initiative, even by the great bulk of the [Paris](#) middle class" (21). Plain Parisian workers, Marx writes, "for the first time dared to infringe upon the Governmental privilege of their 'natural superiors'" (21). In this sense, the Commune's very "working existence" (23)

denaturalised a set of entrenched ideas about the relationship between political power and class identity, and Linton's novel contributes towards that denaturalisation by subverting the dominant religious ideology of Victorian Britain, claiming kinship between the revolutionary Commune and Christian values of justice and compassion.

II

In Kristin Ross's account of Marx's thinking on this point, she writes that the Commune was a "working laboratory of political inventions, improvised on the spot or hobbled together out of past scenarios and phrases, reconfigured as need be" (11). Its novelty, as Ross implies here, was thus palimpsestic. Amongst other things, the Communards' insurgency "resurrected" the barricade, as Walter Benjamin put it in "Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century," and the barricade, as Benjamin writes elsewhere, "had revolutionary tradition on its side" (*Arcades* 12; "Paris of the Second Empire" 5). If the Commune was, *pace* Marx, a moment of inauguration, then it was also, paradoxically, the historical finale of a certain form of professional-conspiratorial revolutionary voluntarism. Auguste Blanqui, whom Benjamin describes as the "most important of the [Paris](#) barricade chiefs," ("Paris of the Second Empire" 6) spent the entirety of the Commune languishing in prison and responded to its defeat with what Benjamin characterises as an "unconditional surrender" (*Arcades* 112) to bourgeois society, so much so that "resignation without hope is the last word of [this] great revolutionary" (*Arcades* 26). In one of the fragments included in Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, the French art critic Jean Cassou writes that, during the Bloody Week, the Communards' decision to dig in around a defence of local neighbourhoods and the "traditional barricade" represented the "last cry of Blanquism, the supreme leap of the nineteenth century" (792–93). If the Commune was the beginning of one historical sequence, as Marx argued, it was also the end of another: the Commune briefly rekindled the romance of the barricade, while the Versailles performed its last rites.

This partly helps to explain the indeterminacy of reference in Wilde's poems of the Commune, which allude to the concrete historical experience of 1871 as well as a longer history of revolutionary insurrection and barricade fighting. In his "Sonnet to Liberty," Wilde's speaker identifies his or her "wildest passions" with "the roar of [Liberty's] Democracies / Thy reigns of Terror, thy great Anarchies" (*Poems* 3). A later poem in the same *Eleutheria* sequence, titled "Louis Napoleon," imagines the defeated Napoleon III descending to the underworld to inform his ancestor, the "eagle of Austerlitz," Napoleon Bonaparte, of [France](#)'s military defeat in the Franco-Prussian war, which, in turn, helped to bring about the Commune (12). Wilde's poem is clearly in dialogue with Algernon Charles Swinburne's "The Descent into Hell," dated 9 January 1873 (the date of Napoleon III's death). In this poem, the penultimate poem in Swinburne's *Diræ* sequence, the speaker celebrates the fact that "Hell yawns on him whose life was as a word / Uttered by death in hate of heaven and light, / A curse now dumb upon the lips of night" (*Songs of Two Nations* 76). Wilde's speaker, meanwhile, implores Louis Napoleon to

go down

To tell the mighty Sire of thy race
That [France](#) hath kissed the mouth of Liberty,
And found it sweeter than his honied bees,
And that the giant wave Democracy
Breaks on the shores where Kings lay couched at ease. (*Poems* 12)

Echoing his passing comment on the ruined [Tuileries](#), Wilde here identifies the Commune with a wave of democratic fervour, though he simultaneously casts his historical imagination back to the Napoleonic wars at the other end of the century. Wilde and Swinburne both wrote in the wake of Robert Browning's far more extensive and equally scathing treatment of Louis Napoleon in his late blank verse dramatic monologue *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau, Saviour of Society*, first published in

December 1871. Browning's speaker, a thinly-disguised avatar for Louis Napoleon, retrospectively meditates on the dubious nature of his own claims to political power as against the equally dubious principle of hereditary monarchy and divine right, leading him to reflect that

A far worse evil stank beneath the sun
When some legitimate blockhead managed so
Matters that high time was to interfere,
Though interference came from hell itself
And not the blind mad miserable mob
Happily ruled so long by pillow-luck
And divine right,—by lies in short, not truth. (142)

In an attempt at self-justification, the Prince reflects on the chaos that engulfed the monarchy of Louis XVI (the "legitimate blockhead") during the Revolution of the late eighteenth century. The irony which he appears not to notice, however, and to which Browning here draws attention, is that many hostile observers in both Britain and [France](#) regarded the political upheaval consequent upon Napoleon III's own abdication in just such terms: not simply an "interference" from the "blind mad miserable mob" but an emanation from the infernal depths. While Browning himself probably did not regard the Commune as being "from hell itself," neither did he sympathise with the revolution: he wrote in a letter of May 1871 that "I have no pity (*sympathy*, indeed) for anybody in [France](#) now revealed to view—Thiers is as contemptible as the Commune" (*Dearest Isa* 360). His poem *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau*, meanwhile, relies upon the reader's assumed knowledge of the palimpsestic patterns of return and repetition on display in the history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century [France](#)'s cycles of revolution and counter-revolution.

Wilde's shorter poem, "Louis Napoleon," much like his "Sonnet to Liberty," where the speaker identifies with (pluralised) "reigns of Terror," similarly recalls the full breadth of French revolutionary history, though he does so in a rather more affirmative register. Wilde's speaker implicitly links [France](#)'s sweet kiss on "the mouth of Liberty" to the latest Communard iteration of the country's tradition of militant insurrection and egalitarian political violence. Wilde's identification here is twofold: it is, at one level, a clear statement of sympathy for the Parisian Communards; at the same time, it recalls a much earlier generation of British Romantic poets who had been lyrically enthused by the emergence of revolution across the Channel. In a letter to Lord Byron, written on 6 September 1816, Percy Bysshe Shelley invoked "the master theme of the epoch in which we live—the French Revolution" (1.504). Shelley was a belated enthusiast and partisan of the Revolution, and his comment gives a reasonable indication of the extent to which the British literature and culture of the early nineteenth century was affected by political events in France and the various discursive formations produced by the Revolution.^[5] The Commune's influence in Britain has received rather less attention than the Revolution of the late eighteenth century, though it would be hard to claim that the Commune of 1871 constituted a "master theme of the epoch" in quite the same way. The British response to the Commune went together with related *fin-de-siècle* anxieties about imperial over-stretch, degeneration, and the intensification of class antagonism during the mid-century agitations for parliamentary reform (Beaumont 134–40), and the Commune itself was seen by some, contra Marx, as merely the latest instantiation of a process that could be traced back to the French Revolution.

As Daniel Pick writes, conservative commentators (on both sides of the Channel) tended to think that the "French Revolution bequeathed a process of degeneration which reached its apotheosis in the Franco-Prussian War and the Paris Commune" (72). Such commentators, according to Pick, invested their "[c]oncern at the unhappy repetition of revolution [...] in the image of disorderly reproduction" (40). Peter Starr points to the

influence of these ideas in Emile Zola's *La Débâcle* (1892)—Zola's novel of the Franco-Prussian war and the Commune—and suggests that the impetus to write the novel arose from Zola's "desire to 'contain' and 'master' the deep-seated (and ultimately unmasterable) 'political confusion and historical disorientation' occasioned by the *année terrible*" (52). In Britain, meanwhile, the very familiarity of the spectre of continental, particularly French, political upheaval meant that the events of 1871 were read back by many observers onto a history that includes the upheavals of 1789–93, 1830, and 1848.

III

The Commune also attracted significant attention in its own right, including from some of the period's most notable poets, whose reactions, as suggested above, ran the gamut from affirmation to condemnation, with a range of confused and bewildered responses in between. One of the Commune's most forthright defenders in Britain was the revolutionary socialist poet William Morris, whose thirteen-book narrative poem *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1885–86) offers a powerful imaginative expression of belated solidarity with the Parisian Communards. Like Joshua Davidson, Morris's protagonist, Richard, travels to [Paris](#), along with his unnamed wife and her lover, Arthur, to fight with the Communards at the same time as he struggles to accept the transfer of his wife's affections to another man. As Richard comments in the poem's penultimate book: "Well, many a thing we learned, but we learned not how to prevail / O'er the brutal war-machine, the ruthless grinder of bale; / By the bourgeois world it was made, for the bourgeois world" (*Three Works* 173). Richard's companions perish in the encounter with the bourgeois "war-machine" and he returns to England alone, vowing to transmit the "true tale" of the Commune to "the new generation [that] shall be," spreading "The deeds of the helpers of menfolk to every age and clime, / The deeds of the cursed and the conquered that were wise before their time" (174).

In vowing to tell the "true tale" of the Commune, Richard signals his awareness of the heavily contested nature of representations of the Commune, but his own partisan loyalties are unmistakably clear, as were Morris's. Anne Janowitz writes that Morris's poetic reconstruction of the Commune enabled him to "make palpable not only the contemporary political links between the Commune and the struggle for socialism in Britain, but also the connections between the values of the Commune and a set of values already deep in a British communitarian tradition"—a tradition that Janowitz identifies in the poetry of the Chartist movement (175). Morris's exploration of Richard's experience during the Commune also consolidates what Florence Boos regards as a form of "revolutionary commitment [that] is deepened by tragic loss" (165). At the same time, the poem, which was first published in the revolutionary Socialist League's *Commonweal* journal, played a more active and dynamic role in the culture of militant commemoration which saw the Commune become an important symbol for the emergent socialist movement throughout Europe and beyond.^[6]

Others responded in a rather more confused register. During the immediate aftermath of the Commune, Gerard Manley Hopkins admitted in an August 1871 letter to Robert Bridges that "I must tell you I am always thinking of the Communist future," and he went on to add: "I am afraid some great revolution is not far off. Horrible to say, in a manner I am a Communist" (1.209). Bridges appears to have been so shocked by this admission on Hopkins's part that he neglected to reply, and the letter went unanswered for three years, whereupon it fell to Hopkins to renew the correspondence. The events in [Paris](#) led John Ruskin to profess a similarly ambivalent self-identification with the Commune, when he declared that "I am myself a Communist of the old school—reddest also of the red" (27.116). In the July letter of *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin expressed puzzlement at the "fighting in [Paris](#)" and dilated upon the "Parisian notion of Communism" (27.116). In

response to reports about the burning of  [Louvre](#), he added, sardonically, that


we Communists of the old school think that our property belongs to everybody, and everybody's property to us; so of course I thought the [Louvre](#) belonged as much to me, being an Art Professor, to ask whether I wanted it burnt down. (27.117)

Reports that the Communards had burned down the [Louvre](#) proved to be unfounded, and were, in fact, part of the widespread circulation of what another English observer (and eye-witness) described as "false news" (Leighton 163). John Merriman, a contemporary historian of the Commune, writes that the Commune's Federation of Artists was, in fact, deeply "concerned with protecting the artistic treasures of the [Louvre](#) from being damaged by Versaillais shells" (69). Nevertheless, the circulation of false reports—including Ruskin's amplification of such claims—helped to establish the Communards' reputation in the popular imagination as uncivilised philistines, ready to sacrifice even the collection of the [Louvre](#) in defence of their political ideas.


Taken in by such rumours, Swinburne's response to the Commune is especially notable for its hostility and knee-jerk intransigence. In a letter to William Michael Rossetti, he commented:

I may say to you [...] that so far from objecting to the infliction of death on the incendiaries of the [Louvre](#) I should wish to have them proclaimed [...] not merely "hors la loi" but "hors l'humanité," and a law passed throughout the world authorising any citizen of any nation to take their lives with impunity and assurance of national thanks—to shoot them down wherever met like dogs. (2.146)

Swinburne invokes humanity here in order to rationalise the taking of human life in the name of culture. It would be hard to find a more unmitigated expression of class animosity that, for Swinburne, apparently overrides the Communard insurgents' claims to even the most basic human dignity. That the letter is dated 1 June 1871, several days after the Versaillais soldiers had committed widespread atrocities in retaking [Paris](#) from the Communards, only heightens the effect of Swinburne's unabashed disclosure of these authoritarian reflexes. Swinburne appears to have concurred with the widespread reactionary characterisation of the Communards as cultural philistines and barbarians who, in taking [Paris](#), were thought to have stormed the citadel of bourgeois civilisation. Writing in the *Edinburgh Review*, the journalist Henry Reeve described the revolutionary upheaval as "the most awful spectacle that the world has witnessed since the invasion of the barbarians" (255). Echoing this view, John Leighton suggested

that [Paris](#) under the Commune was "like  [Rome](#) after the barbarians had overrun it" (372), while the future Conservative prime minister Lord Salisbury wrote anonymously in the conservative *Quarterly Review* that the Commune's "permanent triumph would have been the death-blow of civilisation" (564).

Even allowing for the fact that Swinburne's reaction is likely to have been swayed by the proliferation of false reports about Communard violence that were circulating in newspapers, it remains somewhat surprising that he adopted such a reactionary position given his fervent support for the Italian republican politics of Giuseppe Mazzini, whose

cause he had championed since his time as a student in  [Oxford](#) during the late 1850s, and for whom he had written an Ode which remained unpublished in Swinburne's lifetime.^[7] Given these political predilections, Swinburne's poetry inevitably attracted the kind of notoriety that led some to mistake him, ironically enough, for a Communard sympathiser. For instance, the philosopher and literary critic Thomas Spencer Baynes published a review essay on Swinburne's poetry, in which he derided *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871)—a volume that Swinburne had dedicated to Mazzini—because of its anarchic libertarianism. Swinburne's unrestrained conception of freedom, according to Baynes, could only lead to "the overthrow of all law and order, of all existing moral rules and established government" (97). Baynes went on to charge

Swinburne with the aim of seeking to destroy all “positive institutions, political and religious” in order to “substitute in their place the aggregate of ungoverned impulse and passion known as the Red Republic” (97). It did not mend matters for Baynes that Swinburne’s poetry “is derived from the corrupted school of French art and French poetry, which, with other influences traceable to a common root, has contributed to the temporary ruin of the finest country and the most gifted people in Europe” (99). In this respect, at least, Baynes identified Swinburne as a dangerous radical whose political and aesthetic commitments shared a “common root” with those of the Communards. Baynes’s attack on Swinburne was shrill and polemical, but he got rather muddled about the terms. In his dedication to Mazzini in *Songs Before Sunrise*, Swinburne had, indeed,



proclaimed that [Italy](#)’s voice might one day “awake from the tomb / England, and [France](#) from her prison, / Sisters, a star by a star” (*Songs Before Sunrise* v). In making this clarion call for liberty, Swinburne joined a number of British poets who expressed sympathy with the republican and ostensibly radical politics of the Italian Risorgimento, as had Arthur Hugh Clough and the Brownings some decades earlier. Upon the advent of the Commune, however, the continental republicanism of the Risorgimento, which had worried a number of conservative-minded commentators in Britain, merged, in Baynes’s mind, into a much larger threat to the “existing order” which, as he rather hyperbolically put it, “would, [...] if successful, [...] prove fatal to art, literature, and civilisation itself” (99).^[8] He identifies the embodiment of this threat, strangely enough, in Swinburne’s poetry, and in “the principles of the school which Mr. Swinburne represents” (99). Just as tellingly, Baynes asserts that “the condition of [France](#), and especially [Paris](#), during the last three months and at the present time, is the best possible commentary on the political principles more obscurely enunciated in ‘Songs before Sunrise’” (98). This would doubtless have come as something of a shock to Swinburne, who had been at pains to condemn the Communards in no uncertain terms in his correspondence with Rossetti, dated a month or so before the appearance of Baynes’s review article.

Notwithstanding Baynes’s evident mystification, Swinburne’s hostility to the Commune is less surprising if one reads it in conjunction with Mazzini’s own reaction to the revolution. Both Mazzini and Giuseppe Garibaldi, the spiritual and political leaders of Italian republicanism, responded in broadly positive terms to the establishment of the French Republic on 4 September 1870 and initially remained neutral about the advent of the Commune, but Mazzini swiftly turned to denounce it because he deemed the Communards’ “irreligious theory of the *rights* of man, of the sovereignty of the individual” to be insufficiently attuned to the true location of “sovereignty [...] in God and his moral law” (“The Commune in Paris” 317).^[9] Swinburne followed Mazzini’s developing position closely and was moved to publish an *Ode on the Proclamation of the French Republic* (1870). In a subsequent letter to Rossetti, dated 14 June 1871, Swinburne asks whether Rossetti had seen “Mazzini’s *last* and admirable article on the Commune and the [National] Assembly in the *Roma del Popolo*,” adding that it offers a “precise definition of the proper attitude for republicans at such a time” (*Letters* 2.150). Mazzini had established this periodical in March 1871, and it was here that the majority of his articles attacking the Commune appeared between April and July 1871. Swinburne’s identification with the ideological milieu of Mazzini’s republicanism, which he had supported since the 1850s, and his evident familiarity with Mazzini’s evolving response to the Commune, suggests that he readily imbibed his idol’s antipathy towards what Mazzini regarded as “grido del pazzo che pone fuoco alla propria pira sotto gli occhi dell’invasore straniero contro il qualenon ha saputo combattere” [the cry of a madman who sets fire to his own pyre under the eyes of the foreign invader against whom he was unable to fight] (“Il Comune e Assemblea” 118). For Mazzini, the Commune reminded him of “le più orrende visioni dell’Inferno Dantesco” [the most

horrible visions of Dante's Hell] (118). He wrote in slightly more temperate terms in an earlier article published in the *Contemporary Review* in April 1871, where he argued that "the Parisian Commune is contrary to the best tendencies of both [France](#) and Europe; it is false to the Republican ideal from which it sprang, and it will not succeed" ("The Commune in Paris" 314).^[10] Construing the Commune as an unwelcome outgrowth of his own republican political orientation, and in an ironic foreshadowing of Baynes's attack on Swinburne, Mazzini also asserted that the Communards' federative form of social organisation, if fully realised, would lead to the "destruction of all that gives sacredness to the idea of nationality" and "of all mission in aid of progressive civilization" (311). In contrast to Marx's affirmation of the Commune's world-historical novelty, Mazzini argued that the Communards' programme "does not *inaugurate a new era*; is not *the end of the old world*, but is merely the latest consequence of the old principle of individualism" (315).

There was no widespread socialist movement in Britain when the Commune emerged, and the outermost flank of the radical left was represented by the republican movement, gathered around Charles Bradlaugh's *National Reformer*, as well as some other prominent Radical voices. Unlike the Comtean Positivists, including Frederic Harrison and Edward Spencer Beesly—both of whom publicly defended the Commune—republicans in Britain tended to share Mazzini's scepticism towards the Parisian revolutionaries. Where the Commune met with support amongst the British working class during the 1870s, this did not "go beyond the traditional Whig-Liberal support for overseas constitutional movements," as Eugenio Biagini has persuasively shown (67). As Bradlaugh's biographer (who worked in the ambulance service during the Commune) puts it: "Bradlaugh maintained a very reserved attitude during the whole of the agitation consequent on the Communal rising in [Paris](#). He never advocated the cause of the Commune; the most he did was to urge that the Parisians should be allowed fair play" (Headingley 259). Headingley's publisher, Remington, brought out George Gissing's first novel in the same year as the Bradlaugh biography appeared. Gissing was clearly attuned to this climate of republican moderation in the face of the Commune since the protagonist of *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), the young printer Arthur Golding, frequents a Radical Club in Crown Street and finds himself deeply enthused by the re-establishment of the French Republic in September 1870 (as were Bradlaugh and Mazzini), but he remains strangely silent about the subsequent events of the Commune. Even more tellingly, Gissing presents the revolutionary fervour of the novel's only Communard sympathiser, John Pether, as a consequence of mental derangement. In this respect, Gissing's novelistic representation of the republican milieu of the 1870s is broadly in keeping with Jonathan Parry's assessment that British republicanism in this period "was often a shorthand all-purpose cry for the better representation of working-class interests in politics in the aftermath of 1867" but stopped well short of endorsing the revolutionary agenda of the Communards (297).

Even so, the Commune appears to have opened up a new cleavage in the ranks of republican sympathisers. Swinburne's correspondent, William Michael Rossetti, described himself in a letter to Keningale Robert Cook, dated 9 July 1871, as "a republican," but then immediately qualified this statement by adding that he was, in fact, "an *ultrarepublican*, siding with the Paris Commune etc" (275). He wrote to Walt Whitman on the same day, acknowledging that "[his] own sympathy (far unlike that of most Englishmen) was very strongly with the Commune—i.e. with extreme, democratic, and progressive republicanism" (Rossetti 274). Rossetti clearly felt the need to add these adjectival qualifiers ("*ultra*," "extreme," "progressive") because he could no longer be confident in republicanism per se. Though Rossetti himself did not graduate into the socialist movement of the 1880s, his comments anticipate a broader process of political realignment in the ensuing decades, which saw militant socialist organisations, such as the Social Democratic Federation and the Socialist League, rise to prominence at the

same time as they claimed the mantle of the Communards' struggle, while republican groupings fell into relative abeyance.

Unlike Rossetti, Swinburne's response to the Commune, clearly influenced by Mazzini's interpretation of the event, appears to have led him decisively into the camp of reaction. As Julia Saville has shown, Swinburne was ruthless in his condemnation of Louis Napoleon, whom he parodied as "an effect of immaculate 'misconception,'" and he extended this critique to encompass "radical attacks on orthodox Christianity (Roman Catholicism in [France](#) and [Italy](#), the established church and Puritanism in England)" (*Victorian Soul-Talk* 223), much in the manner that Linton and Wilde adopted Christological strategies in their defences of the Commune. For Swinburne, however, the Commune had a more infernal character, circumscribing what Saville describes as his "special contribution to the cause of democratic freedom" within certain limits (*Victorian Soul-Talk* 224). Mindful of the polymorphous diversity of republican traditions, Saville notes that Swinburne's "civic soul-talk" evolved from a "hybrid republicanism" that blended "inherited civic republicanism—shaped by his patrician, landowning background—with learned radicalism" (*Victorian Soul-Talk* 224). In keeping with a wider trend of republican ambivalence about the class politics of the Commune, Swinburne's radicalism was considerably tested by the events in [Paris](#). In his above-quoted letter to Rossetti of 1 June, he sketched the outlines of a position which identifies the revolutionary aspirations of the Commune with an existential threat to culture, broadly defined. Paradoxically, Swinburne's position resembles the view that Baynes identified as the main source of the hyperbolic threat he associated with Swinburne's verse, namely that it could "prove fatal to art, literature, and civilisation itself." Swinburne's own response to the events in [Paris](#) retrenched around a similarly reactionary position, the terms of which, in figuring the Commune as a menace to civilisation, mirrored the very terms in which his writing was attacked by conservative commentators like Baynes, who saw in Swinburne a representative of everything that Swinburne himself took to be execrable about the Commune. This concatenation of conservative and liberal positions, predicated on mutual misrecognition, demonstrates the extent to which the Commune provoked almost identical responses from observers who cleaved to ostensibly opposed ideological (and aesthetic) outlooks—from the intransigent and reactionary conservatism of Baynes to the ostensibly radical and republican liberalism of Swinburne. Both were unwittingly united in staking out the common ground of a nascent anti-communist discourse, which, in its essential contours, was far more widely distributed amongst many writers of the Victorian *fin de siècle*.

IV

One such writer was Edmund Gosse, who published an admiring obituary of Alfred Tennyson in the *New Review* in November 1892, in which he allowed himself a revealing reference to (relatively) recent history, writing that

What I dread, what I have long dreaded, is the eruption of a sort of Commune in literature. At no period could the danger of such an outbreak of rebellion against tradition be so great as during the reaction which must follow the death of our most illustrious writer. (520–21)

Gosse, who was a firm friend of Swinburne, refers only briefly to the Commune, but his comment suggests the way in which this acute and localised episode of class struggle continued to haunt his ruminations on the literary landscape of late-Victorian Britain two decades after the event itself. In imagining the potential crisis of cultural authority following Tennyson's death, Gosse's mind, it seems, turned instinctively to the Commune as a byword for levelling "rebellion against tradition." Gosse's decision to take the death of Tennyson as an occasion to voice his fears about cultural democratisation, with explicit reference to the Commune, was particularly apt, not least because Tennyson was strongly identified with English conservative reaction to the threat of continental

revolutions, in both their political and aesthetic guises. In the epilogue “To the Queen,” which first appeared in Strahan’s 1873 Imperial Library edition of Tennyson’s works as an addition to his long cycle of poems, *Idylls of the King* (1859, 1870, 1885), Tennyson’s speaker warned against “Art with poisonous honey stol’n from [France](#)” (*Works* 535)—a coded reference to the aestheticism associated with the poetry of Swinburne, whose “Memorial Verses” for Théophile Gautier, the French instigator of *l’art pour l’art*, had appeared in January 1873.^[11] Tennyson appears, in this guise, as a defender of a traditionalist aesthetic set against the formal experimentalism he identifies with continental “signs of storm”; Tennyson also invokes this motif in connection with the image of dispossessed “Labour, with a groan and not a voice” (535), echoing Lord Salisbury’s discussion of the Commune, in which he warned about “storm-signals upon a neighbouring soil” (550).

In Gosse’s obituary of Tennyson, he looked to the poet as just as much a bastion of political conservatism, in which capacity his verse had been mobilised by some British writers in the wake of the Commune. Writing in the same issue of the *Edinburgh Review* in which Baynes’s hostile review of Swinburne appeared, Henry Reeve associated “the climax of the history of the Commune of Paris” with the following lines from canto 127 of Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850):

Well roars the storm to those that hear
A deeper voice across the storm,

Proclaiming social truth shall spread
And justice, ev’n tho’ thrice again
The red fool-fury of the Seine
Should pile her barricades with dead.

.....

The fortress crashes from on high,
The brute earth lightens to the sky,
And the vast Æon sinks in blood
Encompass’d by the fires of hell. (255)^[12]

As Reeve explains at the beginning of his article, his interest in French history led him to associate “the extraordinary events which have recently occurred in the capital of [France](#)” with “scenes of the French Revolution,” where he found “the operation of uniform causes, and very often a repetition of the same results” (250). Reeve imagines the Commune as an instance of repetition, finding thereby a rhetorical means of rendering it knowable and less threatening, even though Reeve also regarded the Commune, somewhat hyperbolically, as “the most tremendous catastrophe in the history of man” (253). Reeve’s invocation of Tennyson complements this rhetorical strategy in offering a comforting and conveniently canonical vision of providential security, enabling Reeve to assert that the “world’s history” is presided over by “eternal justice and almighty power”, as would many of the sentimental novelists who turned out three-decker novels about the Commune with remarkable frequency during the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s (254). In the third volume of John Leith Veitch’s *King Lazarus* (1881), for instance, the narrator proclaims at one point that the “tremendous record” of the Commune’s last days “had been transferred to the books of the Recording Angel, and was a horror of the past” (*Derwent* 3.119). In a much later example of the sub-genre, the narrator of William Barry’s single-volume novel *The Dayspring* (1904) comments that the novel’s repentant Communard, Henry Guiron, gazes in silence at the destruction wrought during the Commune’s last days as if it were “a spectacle which he felt to be his own Day of Judgement” (316). Barry was a Catholic priest and professor of philosophy at

Birmingham Theological College between 1873 and 1877 who wrote several novels in the course of a long career. Likewise, a particularly contrived turn in the plot of James F. Cobb's *Workman and Soldier* leads one of the characters to "[pour] out his heart in gratitude to that loving Father, who had so providentially ordered the course of events" (300–301). Cobb also quotes Tennyson to similar effect as Reeve, taking a three-line snatch from "The Marriage of Geraint" in *Idylls of the King* as an epigraph to the melodramatic antepenultimate chapter titled "Through Flames to the Rescue" (304). Reeve and Cobb look to Tennyson as an authoritative touchstone of counter-revolutionary stability and order. Reeve's invocation of *In Memoriam* after the fall of the Commune redeploys and resituates Tennyson's repudiation of "The red fool-fury of the Seine" for a new historical moment. Tennyson began writing the poem in 1833, within weeks of Arthur Hallam's death, and Timothy Peltason notes that most of the poem's elegiac fragments "had probably been written in 1842", but they were not gathered together until its anonymous publication in May 1850 (4). With these dates in mind, it is possible that the lines quoted by Reeve offer a glancing allusion to the July Revolution of 1830, which overthrew the Bourbon dynasty and installed a constitutional monarchy in its place. It is difficult to reconcile this possibility with the phrase "thrice again" which seemingly identifies the forward-looking proclamation of "social truth" and "justice" with a backward glance at the sequence of three revolutions from 1789 to 1848, via 1830, though it is also possible that Tennyson had in mind the short-lived republican uprising of June 1832, during which barricades sprang up again in [Paris](#) and clustered around the insurgents' stronghold in the Faubourg Saint-Martin. Tennyson claimed that he had finished this section of the poem before 1848, which would rule out any reference to the February revolution of 1848 or the June rising of the [Paris](#) proletariat, though the editors of the Clarendon edition of *In Memoriam* note that "Tennyson's memory in later years was often imperfect" (Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, eds, Shatto and Shaw 139).^[13]

The attempt to identify a precise historical referent for these lines is, in any case, something of a fool's errand, and Reeve's quotation of them in the wake of the Commune only confirms their referential instability. It does not necessarily matter which *particular* revolutionary insurgency Tennyson might have had in mind because his formulation presents itself as a response to revolution *in general*, partly in recognition that the phenomenon of revolution, as Tennyson's speaker tellingly augurs, is one that is liable to recur. These lines, then, draw revolution and repetition into a relationship of suggested inexorability that nonetheless serves to confirm the speaker's faith in a gradualist teleology of social amelioration. Tennyson's speaker frames his expression of personal grief against the stormy course of world-historical events, which he then incorporates into an evolutionary vision of progress, renouncing the "red fool-fury" of revolution. In laying claim to the supposedly unassailable virtues associated with abstract nouns like "truth" and "justice," Tennyson's speaker implies that an unspecified voice (that of God or perhaps nature) will trumpet the cause of these virtues in despite of the storm of revolution, leaving readers to infer that the telos of social evolution will be reached even in the teeth of insurrectionary upheaval.

The conservative impetus of this orientation is self-evident, and it is equally clear, irrespective of the confusion concerning dates, that after the fall of the Commune Reeve invokes Tennyson as a touchstone for conservative reaction against the threat of continental revolution. Reeve's quotation of Tennyson in this context thereby integrates the Commune into a recognisable, pre-existing history of French revolutionary upheaval, linking it to a knowably familiar framework that renders it both less novel and less of a threat because of its conformity to a pre-established pattern: the Commune was like the "recurrence of a well-known drama," as Reeve puts it (256). Writing shortly after the Commune's one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary, Robert Barrie Rose noted that the Communards were at odds amongst themselves about whether they were "quite consciously setting to work to complete the unfinished business of 1789" (13–14), as in

the case of the neo-Jacobins and the Blanquists, or whether they were instead inaugurating a new *form* of revolutionary struggle under the auspices of the dictatorship of the proletariat, as Marx would assert in *The Civil War in France*.^[14] In a more recent discussion of the ideological fissures that existed within the Commune, William Clare Roberts writes that “The Blanquists and Jacobins [...] speak associationism in a political dialect, and look back to 1792,” while the “Proudhonians—and the socialists of the International Working Men’s Association in general—speak associationism in a social and economic dialect, and look forward to the liquidation and reformation of society” (175). Insofar as there is a meaningful distinction between these two dispositions, the point, in this context, is not to adjudicate between them but to recognise the way in which they established an interpretative horizon for later responses to the Commune: was it an instance of rupture or repetition, a moment of inauguration or recurrence, a reanimation of a pre-existing revolutionary tradition or the foundation of a new one? Roberts points to the partial unreliability of these oppositions in noting that most Communards, in fact, “spoke both dialects fluently, and switched between the two without any notice” (175). Those opposed to the Commune, however, were particularly keen to see the Commune as an instance of repetition for the reasons discussed above. Reeve’s invocation of Tennyson, one might add, is consistent with a wider pattern that would remain evident in later British responses to the Commune, which sought to contain Marx’s interpretative wager about the Commune’s world-historical novelty through a discursive strategy of *refamiliarisation*. More often than not, this went together with the suggestion that the Communards acted solely as a consequence of nihilistic *ressentiment*. Reeve is again representative when he writes that the “creed” of the International is “simply this—that the old social order must be destroyed, and destroyed by their hands” (253). He described the Commune as having committed “acts of vengeance of so diabolical a character, that even the crimes of the Commune of 1792 pale before them” (285). This interpretative paradigm of *refamiliarisation* and *ressentiment* would remain dominant for later writers including Gissing, James, and H.G. Wells in their otherwise markedly different literary engagements with the question of social revolution.^[15]

For at least some of the writers discussed here, however, the Commune offered a more unsettling challenge to preconceived assumptions and ideas. Following the Communard journalist and revolutionary socialist Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, William Clare Roberts characterises the Commune not as a government but as a (figurative) barricade because, unlike a government, which is “homeostatic and aspires to permanence,” a barricade “is for now and just a little while longer” and is thus “necessarily temporary and temporizing” insofar as it “staves off finality, one minute at a time” (Roberts 180–81). Writers in Britain (and elsewhere) continued to take up positions on either side of this barricade in the months, years, and decades after the Commune’s defeat. The limited duration of the Commune lent it an intensity that attracted commentary from many different quarters, though this did not belie the possibility of subsequent return and reanimation, hence the need to understand its origins and motivations; as a correspondent for the *Saturday Review* put it in the immediate aftermath of the Commune: “what has been may be again; and the subversion of society has henceforth the advantage of a precedent” (“Apology of the International Association” 792). Socialists, by contrast, looked to the Communard revolution as a beacon of hope and a foundational moment of transnational political struggle, while liberals and conservatives tended to regard it as a dangerous threat to civilisation. That the Commune continued to generate such polemical disagreement decades after its defeat is part of what Kristin Ross describes as its “*survie*” or “life beyond life” (6). Assessing the question of duration from a different perspective, Frank Ruda writes that “[the Commune] did not last historically, but it will last forever trans-historically, since it demonstrated, it offered a historical proof of the real possibility of political emancipation,” proving that “what was

deemed impossible was in fact possible, since it found a form in which the impossible could take place and shape” (211). The Commune’s British afterlife, as briefly reconstructed here, bears out Ruda’s argument, at least insofar as writers of multifarious ideological hues found themselves reckoning with an event that, even if it was not fully legible, commanded attention and persistent efforts to parse its meaning. In this respect—much like the many Communard exiles who found refuge in London—the Commune made its way into British culture during the late-Victorian period under various different guises: it was an unprecedented threat to the very “fabric of civilisation” (Salisbury 550); it was a sphinx-like riddle “so tantalizing to the bourgeois mind” (Marx, *Civil War in France*, 15); but it was also an emblem of coming proletarian democracy that had demonstrated, even in defeat, the real possibility of an alternative to the status quo of capitalist domination.

published March 2022

Owen Holland is Associate Professor in the Department of Literature at XJTU. His first monograph, *William Morris’s Utopianism: Propaganda, Politics and Prefiguration*, was published with Palgrave in 2017, and he has also edited a selection of Morris’s political writings for Verso. His next book, *Literature and Revolution: British Responses to the Paris Commune of 1871*, is forthcoming with Rutgers University Press.

HOW TO CITE THIS BRANCH ENTRY (MLA format)

Holland, Owen. “These Christs that die upon the barricades”: Victorian Responses to the Paris Commune.” *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. Ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*. Web. [Here, add your last date of access to BRANCH].

WORKS CITED

- “Apology of the International Association.” *Saturday Review*, vol. 31, no. 817, 24 June 1871, pp. 791–92.
- Armstrong, Isobel. *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics*. Routledge, 1993.
- Bayly, Christopher A., and Eugenio F. Biagini, editors. *Giuseppe Mazzini and the Globalization of Democratic Nationalism, 1830–1920*. Oxford UP, 2008.
- Baynes, Thomas Spencer. “Swinburne’s Poems.” *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 134, no. 273, July 1871, pp. 71–99.
- Beaumont, Matthew. *Utopia Ltd.: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870–1900*. 2nd ed., Haymarket, 2009.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, Belknap P of Harvard U, 1999.
- . “The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire.” *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Belknap P of Harvard U 2003, pp. 3–92.
- Biagini, Eugenio F. *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880*. Cambridge UP, 1992.
- Boos, Florence S. “Narrative Design in *The Pilgrims of Hope*.” *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*, edited by Florence S. Boos and Carole G. Silver, U of Missouri P, 1990, pp. 147–66.
- Browning, Robert. *Dearest Isa: Robert Browning’s Letters to Isabella Blagden*. Edited by Edward C. McAleer, Greenwood Press, 1951.
- . *Prince Hohenstiel-Schwangau: Saviour of Society*. London, Smith, Elder, and Company, 1871.
- Carter, Nick, editor. *Britain, Ireland and the Italian Risorgimento*. Palgrave, 2015.
- Cobb, James F. *Workman and Soldier: A Tale of Paris Life during the Siege and the Rule of the Commune*. London, Griffith and Farran, 1880.
- Coghlan, J. Michelle. *Sensational Internationalism: The Paris Commune and the Remapping of American Memory in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Edinburgh UP, 2016.
- Dalotel, Alain, et al. *Aux origines de la Commune: Le Mouvement des Reunions Publiques a Paris, 1868–1870*. F. Maspero, 1980.
- Derwent, Leith. *King Lazarus: A Novel*. 3 vols., London, Richard Bentley and Son, 1881.
- Gosse, Edmund. “Tennyson.” *New Review*, vol. 7, no. 42, November 1892, pp. 513–23.
- . *The Life of Algernon Charles Swinburne*. Macmillan, 1917.
- Haupt, Georges. “The Commune as Symbol and Example.” *Aspects of International Socialism 1871–1941: Essays by Georges Haupt*, translated by Peter Fawcett, with a Preface by Eric Hobsbawm, 2nd ed., Cambridge UP, 2010, pp. 23–47.

- Hazan, Eric. *A History of the Barricade*. Translated by David Fernbach, Verso, 2015.
- Headingley, Adolphe S. *The Biography of Charles Bradlaugh*. London, Remington, 1880.
- Hill, Robert W., editor. *Tennyson's Poetry*. 2nd ed., W.W. Norton, 1999.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875*. Abacus, 2000.
- Holland, Owen. *Literature and Revolution: British Responses to the Paris Commune of 1871*. Rutgers UP, 2022.
- Hopkins, Gerard Manley. *The Collected Works of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Edited by R.K.R. Thornton et al., 7 vols., Oxford UP, 2013.
- Hughes, Linda K. “Frater Ave’? Tennyson and Swinburne.” *Tennyson Among the Poets: Bicentenary Essays*, edited by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and Seamus Perry, Oxford UP, 2009, pp. 296–314.
- James, Henry. *The Complete Letters of Henry James, 1872–1876*. Edited by Pierre A. Walker and Greg W. Zacharias, 3 vols., U of Nebraska P, 2008.
- . *The Ambassadors*. Methuen, 1903.
- Janowitz, Anne. “The Pilgrims of Hope: William Morris and the Dialectic of Romanticism.” *Cultural Politics at the Fin de Siècle*, edited by Sally Ledger and Scott McCracken, Cambridge UP, 1995, pp. 160–83.
- Kropotkin, Peter. *The Conquest of Bread and Other Writings*. Edited by Marshall S. Shatz, Cambridge UP, 2005.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *La Proclamation de la Commune*. Gallimard, 1965.
- Leighton, John. *Paris Under the Commune; or, The Seventy-Three Days of the Second Siege*. 3rd ed., London, Bradbury, Evans, 1871.
- Linton, Eliza Lynn. *The True History of Joshua Davidson, Christian and Communist*. London, Chatto & Windus, 1874.
- [Marx, Karl]. *The Civil War in France*. 3rd rev. ed., High Holborn, Edward Truelove, 1871.
- . “The Commune and Archbishop Darboy.” *Examiner*, no. 3318, 2 September 1871, 873.
- Marx, Karl to Ludwig Kugelmann, 17 April 1871. *The Paris Commune of 1871: The View from the Left*, edited by Eugene Schulkind and Jonathan Cape, 1971, pp. 198–99.
- Maxwell, Richard. *The Historical Novel in Europe, 1650–1950*. Cambridge UP, 2009.
- Mazzini, Giuseppe. “Il Comune e Assemblea.” *La Roma de Popolo*, vol. 1, no. 15, 7 June 1871, 118–19.
- . “The Commune in Paris.” *The Contemporary Review*, vol. 17, April 1871, pp. 307–18.
- Morris, William. *The Collected Works of William Morris*. 24 vols., edited by May Morris, Longmans, Green and Co., 1910–1915.
- McCracken, Scott. “The Author as Arsonist: Henry James and the Paris Commune.” *Modernism/modernity*, vol. 21, no. 1, January 2014, pp. 71–87.
- Merriman, John. *Massacre: The Life and Death of the Paris Commune of 1871*. Yale UP, 2014.
- Parry, Jonathan. *The Politics of Patriotism: English Liberalism, National Identity and Europe, 1830–1886*. Cambridge UP, 2006.
- Peltason, Timothy. *Reading “In Memoriam.”* Princeton UP, 1985.
- Pick, Daniel. *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, c.1848–1918*, 2nd ed. Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Ravindranathan, T. R. “The Paris Commune and the First International in Italy: Republicanism versus Socialism, 1871–1872.” *The International History Review*, vol. 3, no. 4, October 1981, pp. 482–516.
- Recchia, Stefano, and Nadia Urbinati. “Introduction: Giuseppe Mazzini’s International Political Thought.” *A Cosmopolitanism of Nations: Giuseppe Mazzini’s Writings on Democracy, Nation Building, and International Relations*. Edited by Stefano Recchia and Nadia Urbinati, Princeton UP, 2009.
- [Reeve, Henry]. “Communal France.” *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 134, no. 273, July 1872, pp. 250–90.
- Roberts, William Clare. “« Une barricade, non un gouvernement » Contrasting Views of Association in the Paris Commune.” *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, Special Issue: La Commune n’est pas morte, vol. 49, nos. 3–4, spring-summer 2021, pp. 173–88.
- Rose, R. B. “The Paris Commune: The Last Episode of the French Revolution or the First Dictatorship of the Proletariat?” *Paradigm for Revolution? The Paris Commune 1871–1971*, edited by Eugene Kamenka, Australian National UP, 1972, pp. 12–29.
- Ross, Kristin. *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. Verso, 2015.
- Rossetti, William Michael. *Selected Letters of William Michael Rossetti*. Edited by Roger W. Peattie, Pennsylvania State UP 1990.
- Ruda, Frank. “How to Organize Emancipation: The Paris Commune.” *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, Special Issue: La Commune n’est pas morte, vol. 49, nos. 3–4, spring-summer 2021, pp. 206–17.
- Ruskin, John. *The Works of John Ruskin*. Edited by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols., George Allen, 1903–1912.

- [Salisbury, Lord]. "The Commune and the Internationale." *Quarterly Review*, vol. 131, no. 262, October 1871, pp. 549–80.
- Saville, Julia F. "Cosmopolitan Republican Swinburne, the Immersive Poet as Public Moralizer." *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 47, no. 4, 2009, pp. 691–713.
- . *Victorian Soul-Talk: Poetry, Democracy, and the Body-Politic*. Palgrave, 2017.
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe. *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*. Edited by Frederick L. Jones, 2 vols., Clarendon Press, 1964.
- Sherard, Robert H. *Oscar Wilde: The Story of An Unhappy Friendship*. Greening, 1905.
- Starr, Peter. *Commemorating Trauma: The Paris Commune and its Cultural Aftermath*. Fordham UP, 2006.
- [Stigand, William]. "The Commune of Paris." *Edinburgh Review*, vol. 134, no. 274, October 1871, pp. 511–63.
- Swinburne, Algernon Charles. *Songs Before Sunrise*. 2nd ed., London, F.S. Ellis, 1871.
- . *Songs of Two Nations*. London, Chatto & Windus, 1875.
- . *The Swinburne Letters*. Edited by Cecil Y. Lang, 6 vols., Yale UP, 1959–62.
- [Tennyson, Alfred]. *In Memoriam*. London, Edward Moxon, 1850.
- . *In Memoriam*. Edited by Matthew Rowlinson, Broadview Press, 2014.
- . *In Memoriam*. Edited by Susan Shatto and Marion Shaw, Clarendon Press, 1982.
- . *The Works of Alfred Tennyson, Poet Laureate*. London, C. Kegan Paul, 1878.
- Weiner, Stephanie Kuduk. *Republican Politics and English Poetry, 1789–1874*. Palgrave, 2005.
- Wilde, Oscar. *Poems*. London, David Bogue, 1881.
- . "The Soul of Man Under Socialism." *Fortnightly Review*, vol. 49, no. 340, February 1891, pp. 292–319.
- Wilson, Colette E. *Paris and the Commune 1871–78: The Politics of Forgetting*. Manchester UP, 2007.

ENDNOTES

- [1] For more information, see Dalotel et al.
- [2] Marx added that "at the time of the execution of the hostages the Communal government had already ceased to exist, and ought, therefore, no longer to be held responsible for that event" ("The Commune and Archbishop Darboy" 873). Fondeville, a self-described householder in the town of St Macaire, had offered a legal deposition in which he testified to having visited the Archbishop on several occasions shortly before his execution, whereupon he found that "[Darboy] places the full responsibility for his detention on the government of Versailles; he accuses it, above all, of sacrificing the hostages to reserve itself a sort of right to take reprisals in the future" ("The Commune and Archbishop Darboy" 873).
- [3] According to Stigand, "the horrors of the closing scenes of the Commune were so great as to be [...] not suitable for detailed description" (563).
- [4] In chronological order, this group of English and American novels includes: Edward Bulwer Lytton's *The Parisians* (1872–74), Alexandra Orr's *The Twins of Saint Marcel* (1872), Maria M. Grant's *Lescar, The Universalist* (1874), Matilda Betham-Edwards's *Brother Gabriel* (1878), Charles Quentin's *Through the Storm* (1880), James F. Cobb's *Workman and Soldier* (1880), Mrs John Waters's *A Young Girl's Adventures in Paris during the Commune* (1881), Leith Derwent's *King Lazarus* (1881), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Under the Red Flag* (1883), Anne Thackeray Ritchie's *Mrs Dymond* (1885), Henry F. Keenan's *Trajan: The History of a Sentimental Young Man* (1885), William Westall's *Her Two Millions* (1887), George Alfred Henty's *A Woman of the Commune* (1895), Francis Henry Gribble's *The Red Spell* (1895), Edward King's *The Red Terror* (1895), Robert W. Chambers's *The Red Republic* (1895), Eugene C. Savidge's *The American in Paris* (1896), Herbert Hayens's *Paris at Bay* (1897), John Oxenham's *Under the Iron Flail* (1902), and William Barry's *The Dayspring* (1903).
- [5] The critical literature on this topic is predictably vast. For discussion of British responses to the French Revolution, see Ronald Paulson, *Representations of Revolution, 1789–1820*, Yale UP, 1983; Ian R. Christie, *Stress and Stability in Late Eighteenth-Century Britain: Reflections on the British Avoidance of Revolution*, Clarendon Press, 1984; Ceri Crossley and Ian Small, editors, *The French Revolution and British Culture*, Oxford UP, 1989; Keith Hanley and Raman Selden, editors, *Revolution and English Romanticism: Politics and Rhetoric*, St. Martin's Press, 1990; Kelvin Everest, editor, *Revolution in Writing: British Literary Responses to the French Revolution*, Open UP, 1991; Mark Philp, editor, *The French Revolution and British Popular Politics*, Cambridge UP, 1991; Colin Lucas, editor, *Rewriting the French Revolution*, Clarendon, 1991; Alison Yarrington and Kelvin Everest, editors, *Reflections of Revolution: Images of Romanticism*, Routledge, 1993; M.O.

Grenby, *The Anti-Jacobin Novel: British Conservatism and the French Revolution*, Cambridge UP, 2001; Andrew M. Stauffer, *Anger, Revolution, and Romanticism*, Cambridge UP, 2005; Kevin Gilmartin, *Writing Against Revolution: Literary Conservatism in Britain, 1790–1832*, Cambridge UP, 2007.

[6] See Haupt for more information.

[7] For Swinburne's devotion to Mazzini, see Gosse, 41–42, 54–55, 165–66. For discussion of Swinburne's cosmopolitan republicanism and its influence on his poetics, see Saville, "Cosmopolitan Republican Swinburne: the Immersive Poet as Public Moralist"; Weiner, 157–76; and Armstrong, 402–19.

[8] For a discussion of British and Irish responses to the Risorgimento, see Carter.

[9] For a detailed discussion of the ideological debates in Italy triggered by the Commune, see Ravindranathan. In Mazzini's view, the Commune precipitated a rupture between Italian republicanism and the socialist politics advocated by the First International. For Mazzini's hostility to the Commune, owing to its perceived godlessness and immorality, see Ravindranathan, 485–86. See also Recchia and Urbinati, 6; and Bayly and Biagini.

[10] Were Swinburne to have read this article, he might have been disturbed to encounter Mazzini's attack on aestheticism: "Just as about a third of century since, the youth of that day rebelled against the pedantic rules of art, long enforced in the name of Greek and Roman models, and gave themselves up to a blind worship of the empty and immoral formula of *art for art's sake*, denying the sole true formula—*art for the sake of human progress*—our camp is threatened at the present day by the formula of *action for action's sake*, the danger of which is so much the more grave as the aim we seek is vaster and more important" ("The Commune is Paris" 308).

[11] For fuller discussion of Tennyson's vexed attitude towards Swinburne, see Hughes 299.

[12] Reeve slightly misquotes the lines and attributes them as follows: "Tennyson's 'In Memoriam,' CXXXV". In the 1850 Edward Moxon edition of *In Memoriam*, the lines appear in canto 125 (Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, 195–96). Tennyson added a new canto 59 in the fourth edition of 1851, and he added a new canto 39 in 1868, meaning that, in the authoritative version of the text, the lines quoted by Reeve appear in canto 127.

[13] Subsequent editors have not reached any consensus about the precise referent of the "red fool-fury" which Tennyson disclaims. Robert W. Hill detects a definite allusion to the revolution of 1830 (Hill, ed., 285), while Matthew Rowlinson suggests that the lines refer to the "three revolutionary years in France: 1789, 1830, and 1848" (Tennyson, *In Memoriam*, ed. Rowlinson 138).

[14] For Rose, the "existence of a specifically proletarian class-consciousness was [...] a factor which distinguished the Commune from the French Revolution of 1789 and from those of 1830 and 1848" (Rose 19).

[15] For a fuller discussion of the ways in which Gissing, James, and Wells differently responded to the Commune, see Holland.