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First as Farce, Then as Tragedy: Louis Rossel and the Civil War in France¹

Introduction

In his study of the Commune published in 1936 Frank Jellinek devotes a chapter to the “coldly puritan” Louis Rossel. The author concludes that “it was chiefly due to the perpetual state of war, as well as to the personal ambitions of Cluseret, Rossel and Rigault, that more social legislation was not carried through [by the Commune].”² Lissagaray is far from fraternal in his opinion of Rossel, describing he who presided over the militarily disastrous first week of May 1871 as “the ambitious young man” who “slunk like a weasel out of this civil war into which he had heedlessly thrown himself.”³ In Marx’s interview with the *New York Herald* published on 3 August 1871—he would repudiate it shortly thereafter—Rossel was “apparemment un grand ambitieux.”⁴ That word again: ambitious. However, in her biography of Rossel, Edith Thomas puts forward the opposite thesis: stranger to ambition, enemy of all hierarchy, such was the somewhat perplexing character of Louis Rossel, blindly patriotic to a cause which, by his own admission, he struggled to understand.⁵

The purpose of this essay is not primarily to take issue with the accusations of bad faith levelled at Rossel by adversaries of every political persuasion. This would be to pay undue heed to the controversy which raged during the Commune itself regarding its democratic accountability. The main accusation of leading members of the Commune during his nine-day tenure of the War Min-

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² Frank Jellinek, *The Paris Commune of 1871*, (London: Victor Gollancz, 1937. Scribd digital edition), p. 455.

³ Prosper Olivier Lissagaray, *History of the Paris Commune of 1871*, trans. Eleanor Marx (New York: New Park Publications, 1976), n. pg. Online edition: <www.marxists.org/history/france/archive/lissagaray/>.

⁴ Karl Marx, “Deux Interviews de Karl Marx sur la Commune,” in: *Le Mouvement social*, Janvier—Mars 1962, no. 38, p. 18.

⁵ Edith Thomas, *Rossel: 1844–1871* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).

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istry was that Rossel failed to grasp the meaning of “citizen army,”⁶ a profound failing which, moreover, undermined his attempt to lead the National Guard against the Versailles army.

Rossel was a professional soldier and a graduate of engineering of the Ecole Polytechnique. Promoted in December 1870 to the rank of colonel—he had turned twenty-six that September—and appointed chief engineer of the military base at Nevers, Rossel would eventually “switch sides” during the national defence campaign and transfer his allegiance to Paris on 19 March 1871, placing himself “at the disposition of government forces.”⁷ In due course he would acquire a reputation as “ambitieux” by exceeding his military brief with political interventions (his handling of the Fort Issy affair being the key example) as well as through his secret meeting of 27 April, held in the Rue des Dames of the Batignolles, with Dombrowski, Wroblewski and Vuillaume, in which plans for a military dictatorship were discussed. Rossel, it can easily be argued, was the symbol of the Commune’s “failure”; its anti-Marxist, or anti-communist figure, a social authoritarian driven by a puritan petit-bourgeois morality.

There is little interest in trying to determine whether Rossel was a good or a bad guy—an “evil spirit”—revolutionary or reactionary, despite the fact that Thomas’s biography offers ample evidence of the former, and that personal ambition was the last thing on his mind when he rallied to the side of “government forces” the day after the popular uprising of 18 March, which is to say seven days prior to the municipal elections and nine days prior to the Commune’s first sitting. Rossel is a fascinating and essential character in the sense that he presents an alternative to the established Hegelian reading of tragedy, where the tragic hero is mired in false consciousness, thus leading him into irreconcilable conflict with a rival power, the negation of which precipitates his own downfall. Although undoubtedly it’s possible, and indeed rather straightforward, to read Rossel as a tragic hero, the more intriguing question is what precisely might

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⁶ Ibid., p. 298.

⁷ Rossel’s resignation letter, technically an act of desertion, was written on 19 March 1871, and addressed to “Monsieur le General Ministre de la guerre à Versailles” Adolphe Le Flô. See Louis Rossel, “Le 19 Mars” in: *Papiers posthumes*, 2nd edition (Paris: E. Lachaud, 1871), p. 82.

become of the *drama* of the Commune in the absence of ambition—of the *hubris* or Dionysian excess—we associate with Attic tragedy.⁸

La comédie humaine

Pride comes before a fall in Louis-Napoleon's declaration of war against Prussia on 18 July 1870. And yet the nature of the drama is far from clear at first. Napoleon I paves the way for his nephew's *hubris* and the latter's destiny to repeat the unfinished business of the French Empire. Historical materialism dictates that "Men make their own history" albeit not "under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past." Nonetheless in the case of the Franco-Prussian War one has good reason to question this formula. "Time passes. That is all. Make sense who may. I switch off."⁹ Beckett's listless and world-weary observation, thoroughly modern, shows scant faith in men's historic mission. To paraphrase Althusser, historical time is unhinged and uneven; an unconscious process without subject or goal.

Rossel will arrive at Metz on 4 August 1870 in the midst of the action. *In media res*. This is the first feature of the French farce: history has always already begun. It is *pre-given*. On arrival he immediately sets to work on building a line of fortifications.¹⁰ At the start of August, Metz is still some way back from the front line, which is frustrating for a young patriotic captain who, while stationed at Bourges, threatens to resign in order to enlist as a regular soldier. Such enthusiasm, in the words of his superior, is "uncalled for."¹¹ The drip feed of bad news begins to filter through that same evening: Douay at Wissembourg, Mac-Mahon at Fröeschwiller, Frossard at Forbach. Rossel senses disaster. In the absence of

⁸ While Aristotle emphasizes the suffering that elicits pity in the spectator, and through which he adapts to the substantive laws of the universe, Hegel sees suffering as the rational means through which the tragic hero transcends those laws and serves the march of history. Though I pay no attention to this important distinction in what follows, Aristotle's writing on tragedy goes to the heart of my thesis, as does Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet's conviction that tragedy as drama is inseparable from the birth pangs of a new constitution. In place of the democratic city-state of 5th century Athens I shall consider the Paris Commune of 1871.

⁹ Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 376.

¹⁰ The fortified belt of Metz would remain unfinished and only reach completion in the late 19th century i.e. after the Franco-Prussian War, once Metz had been annexed by Germany.

¹¹ Thomas, *Rossel: 1844–1871*, p. 192.

any joined-up strategy the Imperial Army begins to crumble, and with it the French Empire. In less than a month the Emperor will be a captive. Rossel will later recall the “absolute incompetence” of the gold-braided commanders ensconced in the local town hall, and a “blind incompetence confessed by the whole army; and, as I’m in the habit of pushing my deductions to the end, I was even thinking up ways to remove this whole clique prior to the battle of 14 August.”¹² Briefly Rossel describes his involvement in the fighting:

On 14 August we saw from the top of the Serpenoix ramparts the horizon from Saint-Julien to Queuleu illuminated by the fires of battle. On 16,¹³ the army passed through the Moselle and found the enemy before it. As soon as I had finished my shift—the arrival of convoys of the wounded announcing a large battle—I raced on horseback by way of Moulins and Châtel to the plateau of Gravelotte, where I participated in the action with a magnificently-commanded battery of machine guns.¹⁴

On 18 August, Rossel returns to the fighting at Gravelotte where the Army of the Rhine, commanded by Marshal Bazaine,¹⁵ is attempting to check the advance of the Prussian First and Second Armies. However, selfless courage is no match for absolute incompetence and, by 19 August, Gravelotte is lost and Bazaine is besieged at Metz.

The situation soon mutates into a microcosm of all the skulduggery and bad faith of the so-called National Defence Government, which will seize power and install itself at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris on 4 September, following Napoleon’s surrender at Sedan two days before. An imperial satellite torn out of orbit. In truth there is no government of France, no constitutional body, and so no chain

¹² Rossel, “Capitulation de Metz,” in: *Papiers posthumes*, pp. 10–11. [Letter to his father of 18 February 1871].

¹³ Rossel is describing the Battle of Mars-la-Tour, also known as Vionville, which began on the morning of 16 August and was a prelude to Gravelotte on 18. The battle was inconclusive and came to symbolize the indecision and unwillingness of French generals to take the fight to the enemy.

¹⁴ Rossel, “Capitulation de Metz,” pp. 11–12.

¹⁵ François Achille Bazaine (1811–1888) was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the French Army by Napoleon III in early August 1870. In August 1873 he was tried and found guilty of treason for his conduct during the Metz siege, though his death sentence was commuted to twenty years imprisonment.

of command operating between Paris and Metz in the immediate aftermath of the Empire's fall. The reigning absolute incompetence will last indefinitely and provide ample scope for treachery and duplicity. Even the citizens of Metz threaten revolt against the occupation of their city by a French Commander-in-Chief who, surreptitiously on 15 September, enters into negotiation with the Prussian monarchy and, on 19, Bismarck.¹⁶

Despite the fake disgust that will later be heaped on him by the French bourgeoisie, and which will guarantee his condemnation in a military show trial two years later, Bazaine's "treachery" is in actual fact no different from that of the National Defence Government. Jules Favre will begin negotiations with Bismarck on 18 September, having previously vowed publicly not to yield "an inch of French territory or a stone of its fortresses" to the Prussian invaders. The Janus-faced Minister of Foreign Affairs will continue to play the enemy against his own people, actively undermining the principle of national defence, before eventually pulling the rug from underneath his own War Ministry by signing an armistice on 28 January 1871, without so much as a word to its chief minister Léon Gambetta.

Staring defeat in the face Rossel's motto prefigures Beckett: "It might be impossible, but it's absolutely necessary."¹⁷ Fail better. On 6 October he swaps his military uniform for peasant garb and attempts to break through the Prussian lines. He is promptly caught and sent back to the city of intrigues, where the talk is of a move against Bazaine. Convinced of the necessity of a "radical change of command"—a mutiny—Rossel meets with two sympathetic generals but becomes wary of an Orléanist plot. The next day shifting loyalties expose the would-be conspirators and Rossel is summoned before Bazaine. Unlike Charles Delescluze, the veteran republican in whom he will discover a kindred spirit, Rossel is prone to black humour, and such is the tragicomedy of their meeting that it inspires the following dramatic reconstruction¹⁸:

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¹⁶ Thomas, *Rossel: 1844–1871*, p. 201.

¹⁷ Rossel, "Capitulation de Metz," p. 14.

¹⁸ From the following excerpt I have omitted Rossel's detailed commentary. Occasionally the speech is reported, rather than appearing in quotation marks, in which case I have improvised the dialogue myself.

BAZAINE is pacing his vast cabinet; MORNAY-SOULT and a CUIRASSIER stand either side of the fireplace. Enter ROSSEL in yellow boots and a military pea jacket

BAZAINE

What's with this attire! What's with this attire!

ROSSEL

I wasn't counting on the honour of being admitted before Your Excellency.

BAZAINE quickly regains his composure

BAZAINE

What are you going to do in the camps?

ROSSEL

Could you be more precise?

BAZAINE

The question is perfectly clear.

ROSSEL

Sometimes I go for walks out of town, as I've always done in the past.

BAZAINE

And what do you talk about when you're going for walks?

ROSSEL

I talk about all sorts of things, about the current situation, about what's happening.

BAZAINE

Describe what you mean.

ROSSEL

One hears and says so many things that it would take until tomorrow to repeat it all.

BAZAINE

So we'll be here until tomorrow. Describe what you mean.

ROSSEL

Inasmuch as the current situation is current, I have no dealings with it; only with the situations that preceded it. My preoccupations with military science don't date from yesterday. On examining my notes it's easy to confirm that I've been consistently dealing with these studies for several years. I'm doing nothing secretive...

BAZAINE

Have you spoken to generals and superior officers about the current situation?

ROSSEL

I've spoken about it with different officers.

BAZAINE

But you don't know them!

ROSSEL

I've spoken about it with people I know and with others I don't know.

BAZAINE

But you went to them intentionally?

ROSSEL

Intentionally for what, Marshal, sir?

BAZAINE

Intentionally to inform yourself of the intentions of these generals and what they plan on doing should certain circumstances arise... In case of a surrender which, thank God, no one has yet envisioned.

ROSSEL respectfully nods his head. BAZAINE goes to lean against the fireplace

You went to them intentionally, did you not?

ROSSEL

I went with no intention other than to appraise myself of what was happening. I see no likelihood of a mere captain being able to dictate a course of action to generals. An officer's conduct should give some indication as to whether he's neglecting his duties and wasting his time on intrigues.

BAZAINE

What's your *mission*?

ROSSEL

I am not on any mission. What mission would I have? Such an accusation demands a separate inquiry.

BAZAINE

But there's no accusation!

ROSSEL

I have but one preoccupation, which above all is to do my duty.

BAZAINE

I don't doubt that... Anyway, I'm frank; I'm questioning you frankly, answer me with equal frankness.

ROSSEL

That is what I have been endeavouring to do since you accorded me the honour of questioning me. Ask me questions, and I am entirely at your command in answering them as clearly as possible.¹⁹

In his record of the meeting Rossel provides the scene with ample direction, little of which I have retained, although the exchange is perfectly intelligible without it. There is nothing to read between the lines. This is the model for all diplomatic exchanges, all euphemistic dialogue between heads of state: a never-ending preamble. *A différend*.

Bazaine's hands are tied. To admit that he has lost the confidence of his generals, who by now are openly conspiring against him—which both he and Rossel know to be the case—is precisely what a commander-in-chief can never publicly admit. Such admission would oblige him to act (against “the enemy”), which, in the circumstances, is precisely what he cannot do, even if he wanted to, which most certainly he does not. Absolute incompetence means absolute impotence. *Nothing to be done... And what of it?* The dialogue on the “current situation” is of a piece with Estragon and Vladimir's exchanges in *Waiting for Godot*. Inasmuch as it's current, it's not Rossel's responsibility: a veiled swipe at Bazaine's inaction. Rossel only concerns himself with “the situations that preceded it,” which sounds like a second swipe at the Commander-in-Chief, inasmuch as it makes Rossel out to be always one step ahead.

In farce nothing is beyond a joke. At the end of the civil war in France its generals will place each other on trial in procedures resembling a game of musical chairs. The buck doesn't stop. Such is the second feature of farce: the state of exception and the power without accountability. Following the death sentence handed down by his military tribunal, Bazaine will petition Marshal MacMahon, another incompetent general of the Prussian campaign, aptly elected President of the Third Republic in May 1873, for clemency. However, in the “current situation” Bazaine prefers to do nothing. On 27 October the Commander-in-Chief of French Forces surrenders Metz with an army of 173,000 men, 1,570 canons, 137,000 breech-loading rifles and 123,000 miscellaneous weapons.²⁰ “Indeed,”

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¹⁹ Rossel, “Capitulation de Metz,” pp. 23–32.

²⁰ Thomas, *Rossel: 1844–1871*, p. 223.

notes Edith Thomas, “it was not the Prussians against whom the marshal intended to lead the war, but the republicans.”²¹

The Birth of Tragedy

Rossel is reconciled to the Apollonian myth to which Nietzsche, who spends the siege “beneath the walls of Metz”²² serving the Fatherland as a medical orderly, will devote much of his life to overturning. There is no republic worthy of a constitution until the war is won. But how does one go about combatting farce? For Beckett the *human* comedy is nothing of the kind.²³ This is the third feature of farce: bestiality, Dionysian excess. The spectator, the good Christian soul, need not be perturbed. Rossel however is neither a passive spectator nor one of the “people transformed, whose civic past and social status are completely forgotten.”²⁴ Owing to the monstrousness of the farce Rossel remains in limbo. On 1 November he arrives in Luxembourg and the next day leaves for Brussels. Fearing the pull of conflicting loyalties between army and country—this is the resistance after all—he writes to Gambetta, the War Minister at Tours, where military operations are headquartered, before departing for London to be with his family. Following a sojourn of three days he returns to France and catches the train to Tours, later lamenting “the disorder of our railways: the trains constantly stopped due to the disorganization of the service; two days to send the London mail from Dieppe to Tours; in the depots, at Mézidon, long lines of useless locomotives, cold and cast aside; the wagons piled up in the sidings, all the signs indicating that this mighty instrument of war was wasted on the government.” Rossel describes with his usual scorn the scene in Tours where “the roads were full of strange uniforms; everyone had gold braid on their hat, cap, jacket. Disorderly irregular soldiers roamed the town: what were they doing here?”²⁵ The proliferation of gold-braided uniforms will become a growing

²¹ Ibid., p. 226.

²² Friedrich Nietzsche, “An Attempt at Self-Criticism” in: *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Shaun Whiteside, ed. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 3.

²³ Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, eds. E. O’Brien and E. Fournier (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1992), p. 120: “Why *human* comedy? Why anything? Why bother about it?”

²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, p. 43.

²⁵ Rossel, “Le Gouvernement de Tours,” in: *Papiers posthumes*, pp. 46–7. [Letter to his father of February 1871].

source of irritation to this professional soldier. A *reformed* Apollo, not Dionysus, is what's called for. The Commune's decadent military chiefs will in Rossel's eyes adopt the same status as these "useless locomotives": a mighty instrument of war wasted on the government.

On his arrival in Tours Gambetta drops everything to receive Rossel, whose reputation precedes him. Gambetta is the nearly man of the Third Republic. The son of an Italian grocer from the southern town of Cahors, the French Minister is a silver-tongued and flamboyant lawyer who two years before had been unexpectedly thrust into the spotlight as defence counsel for Charles Delescluze. Although the case itself was unwinnable (the so-called *Affaire Baudin*²⁶ was a political show trial), Gambetta hammed it up like Gregory Peck in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, sweating like a sewer and laying into the Empire in a forty-five minute harangue that ended in a standing ovation.²⁷ In the *Reveil*, Delescluze would write of his counsel: "Logic, unparalleled joy of expression, dazzling inspiration, he lacked nothing; in a single breath he took on the appearance of orator and tribune. It's glorious news for France, it's an added strength for our glorious party."²⁸ And, in private correspondence: "Sir, we have no more need of Ledru: he is succeeded."²⁹ This is fine praise indeed from France's legendary Iron Man, who is typically as tight-lipped as Gambetta is effusive. But the republicans' dazzling apprentice will ultimately fail to live up to the weight of expectation.

In their meeting Gambetta asks Rossel where he wants to serve. Quite simply wherever his experience and qualifications might be best employed. Gambetta writes a letter of introduction to his colleague in the War Ministry, Charles de Freycinet, who, on receiving Rossel two days later, asks him exactly the same question. Rossel responds ironically that he would be happy to take up the post of Commander-in-Chief.³⁰ In the event de Freycinet sends him north on a "study mission," essentially a false errand to nothing. He spends a few days in Lille

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²⁶ In 1868 Delescluze launched a subscription for a statue in honour of Alphonse Baudin who on 3 December 1851 had been shot and killed while resisting Louis-Napoleon's coup d'état. Delescluze was immediately prosecuted.

²⁷ See Marcel Dessal's summary of the trial in *Un révolutionnaire jacobin, Charles Delescluze, 1809–1871* (Paris: Marcel Rivière et cie. 1952), pp. 230–38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 236.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 238n.

³⁰ Rossel, "Le Gouvernement de Tours," p. 49.

meeting lawyer-prefects and listless generals before running the gauntlet of “phantom Prussians,” the enemy nowhere to be seen, on the road to Mézières. In Arras he encounters deserters from the Battle of Amiens.³¹ “It was on my return,” he recalls, “that I saw how facetious these missions were.”

Arriving back in Tours at the beginning of December, Rossel learns of the loss of Orléans to the Prussians. Gambetta, meanwhile, is feeling the strain of third way politics. Caught between republicans and monarchists this *bon orateur* “was a flag rather than a chief [...] a sort of Louis XIII who didn’t have Richelieu. He was appointing and sacking prefects while the fortunes of France were being played in a marked game of cards.”³² And yet the “madness” of the human comedy, as the Prussian medical orderly would have it, need not be the symptom of decadence.³³ It might also be the symptom of a people perfectly optimistic in the face of a national disaster.

At midnight on 6 December Rossel meets Gambetta for what will turn out to be the last time. The talk is energetic and bold, albeit somewhat fantastical. Gambetta offers Rossel the Army of the Loire and instructs him to draw up plans; then, reconsidering, the camp at Saint-Omer “for experience”. Then the Loire again. They mull over the so-called *tiercement* strategy favoured by Napoleon where three separate units are amalgamated under a single regiment: “something similar to the creation of the half-brigades of 1794.” However, lacking an up-to-date report on military operations, Rossel declines a commander’s role. The discussion is put off until the next day, but when he returns “armed with a small sheet of tracing paper” the Minister is unavailable.³⁴ That evening Rossel meets General Vergne who offers him the post of Chief Engineer at Nevers, which he accepts “slightly through ill will.” In Nevers he is stationed far from the action and all decision-making. Gambetta no doubt breathes a sigh of relief. The atmosphere in camp is languid, ill-disciplined, a “menagerie” in which officers’ wives are free to lodge with their husbands.³⁵ His frustration mounts and letters to would-be allies confirm that in the current situation the sword is no mightier than the pen. Finally, in the second half of February, he concludes a

³¹ Ibid., p. 52.

³² Ibid., pp. 54–5.

³³ Nietzsche, “An Attempt at Self-Criticism,” p. 7.

³⁴ Rossel, “Le Gouvernement de Tours,” pp. 58–60.

³⁵ Thomas, *Rossel: 1844–1871*, p. 242.

letter to his father by noting laconically that the armistice with Prussia is signed and he is no longer a soldier. “Before long,” he predicts, “I will join you in Paris and either set out into politics in France, or enterprise in the United States, depending on how disgusted I am with our wretched country.”³⁶

All-out War

But Rossel is still thinking revolution. In a Homeric prophecy he writes: “As a general thesis, all-out defence cannot be harmful to a people. The error we are committing in making the peace is the same one which lost Carthage: a people well-off and a little sceptical is always seduced into committing this mistake; thus its victor has no more than to gently exploit it until ruin is complete.”³⁷ Concluding his private reflections: “We lack patience; we are making peace as rashly as we made war.”³⁸ Epic words indeed. In total, the Punic Wars between the Roman Republic and Carthage span 120 years. The siege of Carthage, during which the slaves were set free, marked the final episode of the third and final act, and during the course of which the entire city mutated into a giant military machine. The Greek historian Appian of Alexandria describes the scene:

Quickly all minds were filled with courage from this transformation. All the sacred places, the temples, and every other unoccupied space, were turned into workshops, where men and women worked together day and night without pause, taking their food by turns on a fixed schedule. Each day they made 100 shields, 300 swords, 1000 missiles for catapults, 500 darts and javelins, and as many catapults as they could. For strings to bend them the women cut off their hair for want of other fibres.³⁹

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The Carthaginians endured the siege for over two years before the Romans scaled the city walls. Appian describes the final bloody week of street-fighting. The city defenders rained missiles down on Roman soldiers, who pursued their foe onto the rooftops before setting fire to their houses, which soon came crashing to the ground, taking old men, women and children down with them. Under

³⁶ Rossel, “Le Gouvernement de Tours,” p. 61.

³⁷ Rossel, “La Lutte à Outrance,” in: *Papiers posthumes*, p. 76.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁹ Appian of Alexandria, *The Punic Wars*, trans. Horace White, Livius.org. (2005), § 93. Online edition: <www.livius.org/sources/content/appian/appian-the-punic-wars/>.

orders to make the roads passable for the Roman army, the street cleaners used axes and forks to remove the rubbish, and “tossed with these instruments the dead and the living together into holes in the ground, dragging them along like sticks and stones and turning them over with their iron tools.”

Trenches were filled with men. Some who were thrown in head foremost, with their legs sticking out of the ground, writhed a long time. Others fell with their feet downward and their heads above ground. Horses ran over them, crushing their faces and skulls, not purposely on the part of the riders, but in their head-long haste.⁴⁰

Once conquered 50,000 Carthaginians were sold into slavery and their city was razed to the ground. “Commencements are to be measured by the re-commencements they enable.”⁴¹

Is optimism bestowed through the tragic act? Or is the act simply the final involuntary gasp of a people prior to the moment of destruction and ruin? Such is the question of the Prussian medical orderly. For Rossel revolution and war are identical. Or at least the one is the coordinated means of carrying the other through to the end. In February he writes to Gambetta, who is no longer in charge at the War Ministry, having tendered his resignation on 6 February following his failure to reverse the armistice, which he and the left republicans had vigorously opposed. Rossel’s letter is laudatory and recriminatory by turns, betraying schoolboy petulance at the Minister’s downfall. And yet: “The Revolution is perhaps to be repeated.”⁴² Perhaps, indeed. One rather suspects that, had he lived, repeating the Revolution would have become a lifelong obsession for Rossel, as it did for Delescluze during his Odyssey of revolt to the margins of Empire. And yet, assuming the farce is always pre-given, the question is—*how to begin?*

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On 18 March the stalled revolution restarts in Montmartre and soon spreads all over Paris. Barricades are chaotically thrown up and “posters emerge like snails from a day of rain.”⁴³ The chief executive of the French government, Adolphe

⁴⁰ Ibid., § 129.

⁴¹ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 375.

⁴² Rossel, “Lettre à M. Gambetta,” in: *Papiers posthumes*, p. 79.

⁴³ Pierre Dominique, *La Commune de Paris* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1962), p. 77.

Thiers, flees to Versailles with his ministers, ordering the evacuation of the forts and the army. The Central Committee of the National Guard fills the void by seizing control of the ministries. “The members of the Central Committee,” reports the *Journal Officiel de la République française*, “are communists, Bonapartists and Prussians.”⁴⁴

On 19 March Rossel learns of the evacuation of the government and “40,000 troops in fine fettle. I would have had no inclination to throw myself into the insurrection,” he will later admit, “but for this last detail.”⁴⁵ The army had squandered its offensive advantage, “which is the only really favorable chance for an insurrectionary movement.” However, where others may detect nuance in this insurrectionary chance, in this “strong singularity,” Rossel sees uninterrupted continuity. Like Odysseus, Rossel is a recalcitrant adventurer who would rather fill his men’s ears with wax and be lashed to the mast of his ship than risk being seduced by Sirens. In his letter of resignation—a “chef-d’oeuvre” in the words of Edith Thomas—he announces his decision “to fall unhesitatingly in line alongside the party which hasn’t signed the peace and which isn’t counted among the ranks of generals guilty of surrenders.” On 20 March he arrives in Paris and in no time is appointed Senior Force Commander of the National Guard of the 17th Arrondissement at the Batignolles.⁴⁶ We are approaching the euphoric moment when on 26 March 1871 the Commune will be voted into power in municipal elections. But for Rossel, no less than for the Commune itself, the problems are only just beginning.

It has become fashionable to interpret the Commune as a Dionysian drama, a “political imaginary” that does away with the classical distinctions between audience, chorus and actors. By contrast Colonel Rossel is a thoroughly military man whose professionalism and insensitivity to the nuances of Parisian social life—to the art of seduction, so to speak— will lead him into bitter deadlock with the Commune, in whose democracy he sees nothing but incompetence and equivocation. Granted Rossel is a stranger to Paris, a wandering spirit whose sole motivating thought is to save the country from its squandering suitors. And yet it’s not so much a matter of *choosing* between a social revolution and a mil-

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⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴⁵ Rossel, “Mon Rôle Sous la Commune,” in: *Papiers posthumes*, p. 87.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 89.

itary one. The question for the Commune, and for us, is how to establish its revolutionary term and its constitution as such.

For example, consider the insurrection of 18 March in relation to the inaugural meeting of the Commune on 28 March. One assumes that the Federation of the National Guard, into whose hands the revolution falls like manna from heaven on 18, is the delegation which oversees the transition to an elected government on 28 March, at which point its provisional power is relinquished. And yet the question of executive power will prove to be a minefield from 28 March onwards. Where is the leadership? “I don’t know,” Rossel admits in retrospect, “if the Federation made the revolution of 18 March; but what’s certain is it suppressed [*confisqué*] this revolution and excluded the leading republicans from participating in its affairs, the most active members of the International, unless they belonged to the Federation’s hierarchy.

This is how conflicts arose from the beginning, between, on one hand, the mayors, deputies [*adjoints*], republicans and revolutionaries in certain arrondissements, and, on the other, battalion delegates forming the Conseil de legion or Arrondissement Committee. The latter suppressed, in the name of the Federation, the municipal powers, which it unintelligently and sometimes dishonestly exhausted.⁴⁷

Furthermore:

Once the elections were concluded it seemed all power had to return to the Commune. But nothing of the sort happened, and the same struggle continued between the delegates of the Commune and the Arrondissement Committee (Conseil de legion).⁴⁸

One might infer from this that the Commune was compromised by the Federation, which, in suppressing those republican and revolutionary voices that didn’t belong to the Federation’s hierarchy, downgraded the Commune’s egalitarian credentials. But the *social* composition of the Commune and the socialist principles which underlie it are the last thing on Rossel’s mind. It’s a matter of

⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 90–91.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 91.

establishing Apollo, not Dionysus. The point being made here is essentially that the 18 March revolution was rendered ineffective from the beginning by incompetent and interfering chiefs. Too many *chefs*. But then Rossel isn't telling us anything new. In fact, he repeats exactly the same story from 4 September and the fall of the Empire. And it will set the tone for the remainder of the war.

Call of the Sirens

War communism. Is there any other kind? All hitherto existing society is the history of war. All-out war? The Russian Revolution will arrive courtesy of the greatest chance, and yet is impossible—unthinkable—without the intervention of the Great War.

Once elected the Commune struggles to get down to business. Rossel describes with incomprehension the rolling election of battalion chiefs as “the veritable pitfall of the command.” And yet permanent war calls for permanent elections, since, as Marx will reflect on 30 May at the Commune's end: “The Communal Constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society.”⁴⁹ Active citizens, freed from the state parasite, become electors. This is where Rossel and the socialists, and indeed the bulk of the Jacobins, part company. Rossel gives us a sense of the Commune's “free movement” in describing his attempt, around 1 April, to retake Courbevoie and Neuilly⁵⁰ from the Versailles army:

I set out with seven battalions, which together made up around 2000 men, divided into three groups under the orders of Malon (member of the Commune), my second-in-command, and Gérardin (member of the Commune). At least two

⁴⁹ Karl Marx, “The Civil War in France, Address of the General Council of the International Working Men's Association” in: *Marx and Engels Collected Works, Vol. 22* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010. Digital edition), p. 333.

⁵⁰ The attack by the Versailles on Courbevoie took place on 2 April. Pierre Dominique claims that it resulted in 2000 casualties on the side of the *fédérés*. See Dominique, *La Commune de Paris*, p. 91. A war council was held at the Place Vendôme on 1 April which Rossel attended. The march on Versailles of 3 April would end disastrously and mark the turning point in the civil war. Arguably all subsequent engagements with the enemy were purely defensive, with no prospect of the Commune emerging from it victoriously.

battalions were completely drunk; others complained of not having eaten. The front of the column, which I was leading, followed me in an orderly manner, but the other battalions, whose officers lacked authority, were soon sitting down on the side of the road quarrelling and complaining; there were two or three panics before total disorder set in [...]; I did everything possible to achieve something until finally, seeing it was impossible to march these men toward the enemy, we resolved to take them back to town. But if it was impossible to march them forward it was even more impossible to turn them around.⁵¹

Rossel ends his recollection by noting that he was almost shot by his own troops on Asnières Bridge, though doesn't elaborate.

Should there be any room for disagreement between Rossel and Marx when it comes to the Communal Constitution? The immediate consequence of restoring freedom to the social body by eliminating its parasites is war. The state and the state-form represent a passing historical phase. The armistice between the French and "the Prussians" marks a short interval prior to the (re)commencement of the civil war on 18 March. Thereafter the state machinery is deactivated, if not smashed, and with it the discipline of a standing army. A fact Rossel takes personally. At least he will live long enough to tell the tale, unlike many less fortunate officers, victims of the ill-fated sorties at the start of April.⁵²

With his talk of all-out war Rossel will fail to yield to the Commune's democratic imperatives. His ears will remain sealed to the call of the sirens. Following the disastrous march on Versailles of 3 April he is appointed Chief of Staff to General Cluseret, the American Civil War veteran and newly-appointed as the Commune's War Delegate. Cluseret sets up a Court Martial and Rossel presides. The evening sittings soon prove a burden. Delegation is not his forte and at the War Ministry he suspects an unnamed officer of deliberately undermining his work.⁵³ As for the Court Martial "whose role was only to hand down death sentences,"⁵⁴ Rossel attempts to shore up military discipline. "All of the accused," he ob-

⁵¹ Rossel, "Mon Rôle Sous la Commune," pp. 96–7.

⁵² One thinks of Emile-Victor Duval, the Commune general, who on 4 April was captured with his regiment at Plateau de Châtillon, then shot; and Gustave Flourens, the Internationalist arrested by gendarmes and decapitated on 3 April at Ile de Gennevilliers.

⁵³ Rossel, "Mon Rôle Sous la Commune," p. 107.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 109.

serves, “were *fédérés* brought before the court for military crimes or infractions. The Court judged neither political causes nor causes of common law.”⁵⁵ However, his “greatest sacrifice” to the revolutionary cause hits a brick wall when the Commune’s Executive Commission begins to reverse the Court’s decisions. For example, the death sentence handed down on Girot, Commander of the 74th battalion, for having refused to march against the enemy, is commuted by the Commission to demotion and incarceration for the remainder of the war, based on the accused’s previous democratic good standing.⁵⁶ Constantly overruled by the Commission, Rossel resigns his presidency on 27 April.

Democracy prevails. Despite his resignation Rossel claims being at “the centre of an incoherent, diverse movement, and whose unconscious slogan was: ‘Save the Revolution by abolishing the Commune.’”⁵⁷ Heeding these “unconscious” voices he hastens to a secret meeting of generals on the Rue des Dames in the 17th arrondissement at which Dombrowski proposes a “new government” comprising Rossel as War Delegate; Charles Gérardin, his close friend and confidant, at Foreign Affairs (“in other words charged with preparing revolt in the provinces”); Dombrowski as Commander-in-Chief of the National Guard; and Dupont as Interior Minister, who at the time is combining his membership of the Commune with his assignment to the Committee of General Security.⁵⁸ A military dictatorship, in other words, Blanquist by design. Dupont rejects the idea and reports the incident to his superior, Raoul Rigault, the twenty five-year-old Metropolitan Chief of Police, who despite secretly approving of the plan places the conspirators under surveillance.

Might this revolution against the Revolution have brought victory against Versailles? Even if it had, which is highly improbable, one wonders at the cost. On 29 April, Cluseret is arrested on a charge of treason—“vulgar” in Rossel’s words, who will defend him—and Rossel is promptly appointed War Delegate in his place. On 1 May a Committee of Public Safety is set up on the initiative of Rossel and Gérardin. With military options fast running out, Rossel petitions Rigault in person. Although sympathetic to the idea of a dictatorship the Chief of Police

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⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

⁵⁶ Thomas, *Rossel: 1844–1871*, pp. 293–94.

⁵⁷ Rossel, p. 120.

⁵⁸ Thomas, *Rossel: 1844–1871*, pp. 312–13.

admits that without Blanqui, who has been in prison since 17 March, nothing can be done. The situation points toward an impasse with the National Guard's Central Committee, the Commune's Executive Commission and the Committee of Public Safety constantly at loggerheads and at each other's throats. For a supposedly centralized bureaucracy the Commune is by now a relatively monstrous and unruly assemblage operating at the height of farce, a fact perfectly illustrated by the Fort Issy affair, which will result in Rossel's resignation on 9 May.⁵⁹

By 7 May Rossel's military directives threaten the imposition of martial law;⁶⁰ or perhaps in being addressed to a citizen army one is already in place. How to discipline such an army? The practical consequences of attempting to impose such "discipline" is staring everybody in the face: all-out civil war. With this in mind one might dismiss Rossel's vague initiative for a Blanquist dictatorship as being totally impracticable in the circumstances.

Between Myth and the Law

A Hegelian reading of the tragedy of the Commune, read from the point of view of the tragic hero, the one who refuses to yield, reveals the struggle to transcend the false particularity of the state. It is a clash of competing claims to right through which the one divides into two. The Commune can only endure as the ideal city on condition of the destruction of everything the actually existing republic stands for. The price of the revolution, the Commune's pound of flesh, is extracted during the final week of May when the Versailles army enters Paris and slaughters everyone in sight, combatant and non-combatant alike. Through this merciless and perverse ritual, "unity" is restored. The Commune's moral victory is the "lost cause" which future generations will re-stage on the barricades.

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But one can also see things differently. "The only origin of tragedy," writes Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "is tragedy itself."⁶¹ What does this mean? That tragedy must be thought through the institutions and meanings that are peculiar to it. The context is not a given set of historical circumstances that account for the composi-

⁵⁹ Rossel will post the famous proclamation of 9 May—"The tricolor flies above Fort Issy abandoned yesterday by its garrison"—to accusations of "treason" from the Commune.

⁶⁰ Thomas, *Rossel: 1844–1871*, pp. 350–51.

⁶¹ Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 305.

tion of tragedies in 5th century Athens. Instead, the context is revealed through one's understanding of a society whose civic constitution is itself inferred from its dramatic form. What tragedy represents is precisely a mixed constitution whereby old-fangled beliefs and superstitions run headlong into the revolutionary legal discourse that will set about defining Athens anew. Tragedy needs to be thought through the structures of this dramatic setting, where at the annual Dionysia the spectacle confronts the citizens in the theatre of democracy.

"Tragedy is born," observes Jean-Pierre Vernant quoting Wilhelm Nestle, "when myth starts to be considered from the point of view of a citizen." But we must also assume that this "citizen" can only be constituted as such by his participation in the spectacle which awaits Athenians at the theatre. It is one thing to build a new society (Greek "democracy") on the ruins of the old ("aristocracy"). But what might it mean practically speaking to build a society from a drama whose "citizenship" is contained within this novel form of expression called tragedy? In this respect it might be foolish to consider Attic tragedy as providing its citizens with a moral education. In the words of Vidal-Naquet:

tragedy cannot be dissociated from the tragic *representation*. This involved a twofold confrontation: first, between the hero and the chorus and, second, between the chorus and the actors on the one hand and the city present on the tiered steps of the theater on the other.⁶²

Tragedy is not the *mode* through which the dramatist conveys his message to the audience. Nor crucially does it represent the unstoppable march of history and the seeds of a more rational order disseminated in the flawed actions of its hero. The farcical nature of the civil war in France, from 1870–71 (and to the present day!), is enough to dissuade us from reading the Commune as the rational kernel of this dialectic, the transcendence of the false particularity of the state. Instead, reading Vernant and Vidal-Naquet, tragedy and democracy *share the same mode*: they are the "city present," the assembly of its spectators in direct communication with the drama. Where the constitution depends on this civic gathering at the City of Dionysia the spectator might even be deemed a legislator.

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⁶² Ibid., p. 308.

In a partial sense the figure of Rossel represents the complications of tragedy's birth: its phantom pregnancy, the conundrum and the paradox of its term. The Commune of 1871 assumes the appearance of a singular tragedy. In taking Rossel as a model for this drama I have tried to problematize it in three overlapping points: 1) farce is pre-given, rendering its beginning and ending obscure (in passing, Aristotle shrouds the history of comedy and its media of imitation in mystery); 2) absolute incompetence and impotence in the face of arbitrary power, where men are represented as worse ("better worse" says Beckett) than in actual life; and 3) its divine comedy, an epic and false promise of redemption lacking temporal boundaries in which no one quits the stage as a friend.

And yet as tempting as it is to reject the Commune as tragedy in favour of its Dionysian performance, its unprecedented social revolution, such temptation may be misguided. What Rossel's involvement in the Commune brings into focus is instead the drama which is part and parcel of its communal constitution, the one whose full implementation is, perhaps ironically, all-out war. As Marx reminds us: "The Communal Constitution would have restored to the social body all the forces hitherto absorbed by the State parasite feeding upon, and clogging the free movement of, society." How the full restoration of communal power would have squared with the kind of Jacobin/Blanquist dictatorship envisaged by Rossel and Raoul Rigault in their meeting of 1 May is of course purely hypothetical in the circumstances. Certainly "the free movement of society" entails risks which threaten to destroy it. And yet given that "All of Greece is a stage, and every Greek's an actor,"⁶³ the people stands as the arbiter of its own pathos.

Like Eteocles in the *Seven against Thebes*, Rossel is the paradigm of virtue, facing down the hysteria of the chorus while calmly appraising the city's defences. But unlike Eteocles no miasma of *atē* will descend on him, and he will exit the stage at the time of his own choosing. On 10 May, following his resignation the previous day, and his famous request for "the honour of a cell at Mazas," Rossel is summoned before the Executive Commission. While the Commune deliberates on whether to try him for treason, he absconds from an antechamber of the Hôtel de Ville in the company of Gérardin, and the pair cross the Seine together by ministerial carriage. Rossel takes up residence at a hotel on the Boulevard

⁶³ Dorothy Wender, *Roman Poetry: From the Republic to the Silver Age* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1980), p. 138.

Saint-Germain. Far from having “slunk away like a weasel,” as Lissagaray snidely remarks, Rossel will host clandestine meetings with Delescluze, his successor at the War Ministry,⁶⁴ advising him on military strategy, while the rest of the Commune wastes no time in scapegoating him for the coming defeat. In spite of the desperation of Delescluze’s final stand, when on 25 May the latter is killed mounting the barricade of Boulevard Voltaire, neither he nor Rossel succumbs to the daemonic spirit. Finally captured on 7 June, and following a long and drawn out process in which the indignity of being judged by his military opponents is enough to make one wonder who is on trial—and who indeed is in power—Rossel is sentenced to death and executed by firing squad, alongside Ferré and the sergeant Bourgeois, on 28 November 1871.

⁶⁴ Marcel Dessal establishes Delescluze’s “frequent visits” to Rossel on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. See Dessal, p. 373.