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Between the jubilation of triumph and the pain of defeat: the Franco-Prussian War narrated by French puppet theaters¹

The war of 1870-1871 is associated in the French collective memory with the lost battle of Sedan and the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, but also with the foundation of the Third Republic. The defeat of the old France on the one hand and the birth of the new France on the other make the representation of this war particularly challenging. How to erase the humiliating conditions of the peace treaty and to extract the jubilation of triumph from pain and disappointment? To strengthen itself, the Third Republic created heroes. Popular imagery in the last third of the 19th century portrayed war through the uniforms and battles rather than through suffering and death (Martin, Henryot 50), aiming to represent the military defeat as a moral victory and emphasize the heroism of the French soldiers. The puppet plays,

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L'Bataille ed Querriu by Édouard David² and *Les Prussiens en France* by André Guérin³, written during the Third Republic, are marked by the same naivety of image and the same desire to rewrite History.

Vive la France! Inventing victory

A first look at the dramatic structures of these plays reveals that they both end with the victory of the French army: Polichinelle in *Les Prussiens en France* kills all the Prussians, Lafleur in *L'Bataille ed Querriu* defeats the enemy and is decorated by the general. This paradoxical relationship with recent historical reality, completely opposed to the image of a triumphant France, is intriguing. A close examination of the dramatic strategies that were used by the authors will enable us to see how the narrative of "victory" was built, and thus to reflect on the dialogue that these plays maintain within their historical context.

André Guérin's play proposes a fanciful version of the war with a complex approach to victory. It opens with Polichinelle saying that his house has been burnt down by the Prussians. Polichinelle wants to enlist but only to save himself from starvation not because he seeks revenge. This is how he finds himself standing guard, replacing the Cantinière who herself has replaced a soldier killed by the Prussians. When the enemy arrives, Polichinelle puts up a fight, killing everyone, including Bismarck and the Prussian king, Wilhelm I. Guérin chooses to rewrite history so that France wins the Franco-Prussian war, even if it is only on the puppet stage. This victory, it is important to emphasize, has no precise geographical or chronological reference point. The dramatic structure of the play— a series of fights ending with the triumph of Polichinelle and the devil taking away the bodies of the Prussians— suggests

² The exact date of the play's writing is unknown. However, it can be assumed that it was created in the 1880s. It was first published in 1891. For a long time it was performed by the Amiens puppeteer Casimir Clabaut, known as Zacharia, in the Théâtre du Franc Picard.

³ The play was probably written in the late 19th century. It is possible that it was performed in Bordeaux by the Théâtre de Saint-Antoine of which André-Paul-Julien Guérin was director.

that Guérin wanted to compensate for the disappointment of defeat in the real war by victory in its puppet version.

In Édouard David's play, the naïve image of victory is given a regional color. Lafleur goes from Querrieu to Amiens to retrieve his wife's hat.⁴ His friend Blaise, who is following him, thinks that he is going to enlist. Lafleur does not understand what it means to enlist, moreover he does not even know that there is a war ("What do you mean, there is the war⁵..." (David 3)), but he follows his friend's example and becomes a soldier. Soon Lafleur and Blaise catch a Prussian spy. For their faithful service, they are congratulated by General Faidherbe, who, however, lets the spy go, because "the French are more generous than the Germans"⁶ (David 7). In the second act, the front lines come even closer to Lafleur. It is no longer rumors of "a whole host of regiments of brigands who were camped on on the Houssolé mountains"⁷ (David 2), or a spy caught in the forest, this time it is the Prussians themselves that he has to face. The first to encounter the enemy is Cathérine, Lafleur's wife, who flees Querrieu after the Prussians attack and is kidnapped by Prussian soldiers. Lafleur, who hears her cries of distress, does not manage to arrive in time to save her. The colonel and his men appear, ready to fight. Preoccupied with his wife's fate, Lafleur does not immediately understand what is going on. The war becomes a reality for him when he hears that the enemy is close to the Somme bay. But he only enters the battle when he thinks that his wife Cathérine is dead. The play ends with the victory of the French Army and the "resurrection" of Cathérine. Lafleur is rewarded by General Faidherbe to the sound of the *Marseillaise* and the soldiers sing: "Brave child of Picardy/ Your day of glory has come"⁸ (David 20). Victory is thus treated as the culmination of Lafleur's long process of initiation into the war.

⁴ « ch' bonnet dé [s'fanme] ».

⁵ « Kmeint, y gno la guerre... »

⁶ « ...les Français plus généreux que les Allemands... »

⁷ « ...tout einne ribanbelle ed régimeint d'brigands qui z'étoient campés su chés montagnes ed la Houssolé... »

⁸ « Brave enfant de la Picardie/ Ton jour de gloire est arrivé ».

In this way the author achieves a double objective. He modernizes a character of the Picard puppet theater who traditionally represents an 18th century valet, and in doing so, he transforms Lafleur into an image with which his audience, the local population who never had more than a vague idea of what was happening outside their region and who had very little connection with the national idea of the Franco-Prussian war, can easily identify.

What are we fighting for? Giving voice to disappointment

David actually makes a direct connection between the victory and the creation of a national hero in the character of Lafleur. At the beginning, Lafleur exists in a parallel universe. The gap between Lafleur and the war is emphasized by the language in which he expresses himself. Unlike the soldiers, whether French or Prussian, he speaks in a regional dialect. Thus, through language, Édouard David makes a distinction between the regional and the national, between the local population for whom words like République and Paris have little meaning, and the soldiers who represent the war that is taking place beyond. At first sight, war enables the two worlds, that of Picardy and that of France, to be brought closer together:

Each time that against the enemies

We have to fight

We see the children of our country

Running all together

Yes, all of them, filled with zeal

Imitating Lafleur

We'll defend France

Because, by gad,

What every Picard wants

Is to give them a beating.⁹ (David 9)

But Lafleur is not fighting for France. The question: *what are we fighting for?* is the pivot around which the plot of David's play is built. Blaise explains to the naïve Lafleur that one becomes a soldier when one's country is threatened by war. But Lafleur does not want to be a soldier. His enlistment is only given meaning when he sees the danger to himself: the Prussians have taken his wife. If he is ready to die, it is not for the Fatherland but rather to avenge Cathérine whom he believes to be dead. David's war hero is a poor peasant whose only concern is to save his little world from destruction.

André Guérin goes much further in his play by putting words full of disillusionment into the mouth of La Grenade, the soldier who is killed by the enemy at the beginning of the play :

Me, a poor soldier of 1870 and 71, see how you are fooled. We do not know why we are fighting, ask the soldiers who you are fighting for. One will answer: "To defend my country", the other "For my freedom", well I'll tell you, we fought for the King of Prussia and that's the truth, and we are fighting for the King of Prussia.¹⁰ (Guérin 3)

Guérin may here be quoting veterans' private conversations. Emperor Napoleon III failed to lead his nation to victory. The soldiers felt that they were fighting to enable the enemy to win and unify Germany, and that all their losses were for nothing. After this manifesto spoken from the perspective of a veteran, La Grenade returns to the time of the war and to his sentinel role and sings "To die for the Fatherland/ Is the most beautiful fate, the most worthy of

⁹ « Chaqu' fois contre les ennemis /Qu'il nous faudra se battre/On verra z'enfants d'otr'pays/Accourir quatre à quatre/Oui tous, plein d'ardeur/Imitant Lafleur/Nous défendrons la France/Car, nom d'un pétard/C'que d'mand' tout Picard/C'est d' leur flanquer une danse. »

¹⁰ « Moi, pauvre soldat de 1870 et 71, comme l'on te trompe. Nous nous battons nous ne savons pas pourquoi, demandez aux soldats pour qui vous battez vous ? On vous répondra ; Pour défendre mon pays, l'autre Pour ma liberté, et bien moi je vais vous le dire nous nous sommes battus pour le roi de Prusse et voilà la vérité et nous nous battons pour le roi de Prusse ».

envy.”¹¹ (Guérin 3) How much bitter irony there is in this and how meaningless his death looks in the light of what was said before.

Both David and Guérin take up a position against war in general and the Franco-Prussian War in particular. The war, says Blaise to Lafleur, "is a great massacre of innocent people, but the difference is that if you miss your shot, your enemies will try not to miss theirs.”¹² (David 5-6) Lafleur's later definition of war is even more poignant: “That's what war is, we slaughter without seeing each other, you might receive a bad blow, without knowing who is sending it to you.”¹³ (David 16) It is worth remembering that David chose as his subject the battle of La Halue, which took place at the end of 1870 and whose victory for the French army was a Pyrrhic one: thousands of French soldiers were wounded, killed and imprisoned.

Is war a puppet play?

The particularity of the two plays is in the intersection of two narratives, that of victory and defeat, treated on two different levels. Victory is a puppet show where the main character Lafleur or Polichinelle beats all enemies in the best traditions of popular puppet theatre. Defeat is in the background as a distant lament that haunts the festive atmosphere of the play. It is realistic and human. Each of our authors has a different dramatic orchestration of the war. Édouard David prefers the gradual approach of the war; whereas André Guérin chooses a violent, almost mechanical rhythm of the battles. However, for the two authors, the use of puppets allows them to create brutal images of battle and to push the violence of fighting to an extreme. Moreover, the aesthetics of the puppet enables the image of the triumphant battle to be reinforced. Thus, André Guérin uses the classical structure of a

¹¹ « Mourir pour la Patrie, mourir pour la Patrie / C'est le sort le plus beau le plus digne d'envie ». This is the quote from the chorus of the song *Le Chant des Girodins*.

¹² « ...c'est un grand massacre de z'innocent, mais à l'différence qu'o vous renvoie la balle si vous manquez vot coup e z'ennemi y tachtent de n'pas manquer l'leur. »

¹³ « Ch'est cho la guerre o s'bersille sans s'vir mais ch'est qu'o r'chuv'rait bien sin prêt sans savoér tch'est-ch' qui vous l'envoée. »

Polichinelle play to show that a French soldier cannot be defeated, and Édouard David's Lafleur stays on his feet after a mortal injury: "my iron strings still work."¹⁴ (David 18) But perhaps reference to the puppet also has a critical dimension. Are Guérin or David trying to portray the image of toy soldiers? The ambivalent dramatic structure of their plays, which oscillates between a naïve image of victory and criticism of war, suggests that this may not be so far-fetched.

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¹⁴ «...mes fils ed fer y fonctionnent't ».