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William SERMAN, *La Commune de Paris (1871)*, Paris (Fayard) 1986, 621 p.

The enduring fascination of the Paris Commune derives largely from the intense polemics that have always surrounded it. Either the communards are grandly praised as heroic freedom fighters who took up arms against tyranny and injustice; or they are tirelessly vilified as marauders and assassins who undermined the fledgling French republic and threatened the nation with anarchy. William Serman's objective is to free this story from such ideologically motivated hyperbole, while at the same time bringing to bear on it the results of recent research. He does not quite adopt a neutral stance, however, since the avowed hero of his tale is »the small people of Paris«, by which he means the »thousands of men, women, and children whom misery and war pushed to revolt« (p. 10). The narrative is thus told mostly from their point of view, and in the end the reader is left with a keen sense of their tragedy. Serman thereby attempts to do for the Commune of 1871 what Michelet once did for the Revolution of 1789.

He describes Paris as a city of small enterprises that were fragile and constantly on the verge of bankruptcy. It was actually two cities, socially segregated between the wealthy West End and the sprawling disease-infested working-class districts of the eastern rim. The capital had no presiding mayor, whose function it might have been to reconcile these diverse elements. Rather, it was administered by the Prefect of the Seine, representing the national government, and the Municipal Council of Paris, popularly elected. Hence the sides were already drawn before the onset of war and the inglorious collapse of the Second Empire.

None of this commentary overstrains for originality. Nor are there surprises in Serman's analysis of the reasons for insurrection. He confirms the strong influence of Proudhon and the relative weakness of the International, the widespread hostility to etatism in any form, the republicanization of public opinion before 1870, and yet the general indifference to social issues. He finds that most Parisians were little inclined to follow revolutionary leaders – until chaos and confusion ensued from sudden military defeat. The Commune was a child of war. It was not so much an affirmation as an expression of despair, defiance, and exasperated patriotism. It was also in vain. Serman makes unmistakably clear that the military circumstances were hopeless from the beginning, something the »communeux« (he prefers that early designation) only reluctantly came to realize. The garrison could defend the walls but not successfully attack the enemy. Meanwhile, entirely surrounding the combat zone was a ring of 180,000 German troops, prepared and able to contain any eventuality. Beyond, moreover, lay the indifferent or hostile provinces of the French countryside. Paris was isolated, and the uprising resembled nothing so much as a mutiny at sea, with Adolphe Thiers cast as a Gallic Captain Bligh.

Serman handles these matters capably, and he is especially adept at portraying the military complications, the final assault by the Army of Versailles, and the futile resistance that ended in the cemetery of Père Lachaise. Yet he must leave much to the imagination. How many devoted supporters gathered at the Hôtel de Ville on 28 March 1871: was it 20,000? 60,000? or 200,000? Serman is helpless to say. He estimates the true partisans of the Commune at 300,000, but he is unspecific about how many of them actually carried rifles in defense. He thus resorts repeatedly to the passive voice, so that one reads in a single paragraph: »On pressent...on prend conscience...on reconnaît...on admet...on éprouve« (p. 314). We must wonder just who is this *on*. Fortunately, the meticulous investigation of Jacques Rougerie is incorporated by Serman to aid in identification of the dissidents. Yet he avoids making more of a pattern than his evidence warrants, and the account appropriately concludes with references to internal conflict, disorganization, irresponsibility, improvisation, and chronic indiscipline. Because the ultimate military verdict was foregone, the main battle of the Paris Commune was with itself, and that too was lost.

For this thorough and disabused assessment we have every reason to be grateful. But it is

necessary to mention two important limitations of its apparatus. First, the book contains no footnotes and therefore, despite the length, it never escapes the realm of an essay. The reader cannot be certain of Serman's sources nor of why he chose one version of the story over another. What the narrative gains in fluidity it therefore sacrifices through frequent ambiguity. Necessarily the book retains the character of an interim report. Second, the bibliography contains almost exclusively a listing of secondary works in French. Serman takes little note of scholarship in other languages. The level of his understanding might have been lifted by consulting any number of Anglo-Saxon historians: Michael Howard, David Pinkney, Patrick Hutton, Bernard Moss, and others. Still more disturbing is the failure to employ German authors such as Gerhard Ritter, Lothar Gall, or Josef Becker, to name but three. Of what value is it to speculate blindly for several pages about Bismarck's intentions concerning the Commune when that issue has been carefully considered in several works already published?

If such criticism is unavoidably severe, it does not negate the essential competence and fairmindedness of Serman's treatment. He has reached the heart of the matter, and he has set the story straight.

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Gudrun LOSTER-SCHNEIDER, *Der Erzähler Fontane – Seine politischen Positionen in den Jahren 1864–1898 und ihre ästhetische Vermittlung*, Tübingen (Gunter Narr Verlag) 1986, 326 p. (Mannheimer Beiträge zur Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft, 11).

L'auteur de ce volume – le 11<sup>e</sup> des »Mannheimer Beiträge zur Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaft« – prend pour point de départ la contradiction entre l'intérêt que Fontane a porté à la politique et le caractère réputé »apolitique« de son œuvre. La recherche, nous dit l'auteur, n'a fourni jusqu'ici que des réponses insuffisantes et contradictoires à un certain nombre de problèmes litigieux tels que l'attitude de l'écrivain face aux événements de son époque, ou la question de savoir s'il a ou non considéré comme incompatibles la politique et la littérature. Le livre se propose donc de prouver l'identité profonde de l'une et de l'autre et d'ouvrir la voie à une réflexion nouvelle sur l'œuvre de Fontane (p. 39).

L'ouvrage comprend essentiellement une analyse des conceptions de Fontane sur l'évolution politique et sociale de son temps, suivie d'une brève étude des procédés littéraires mis en œuvre. Il s'efforce de préciser un certain nombre de points, grâce à une étude très fouillée et fortement documentée des divers écrits de Fontane, notamment de sa correspondance. De la masse de détails que l'auteur a accumulés, nous nous proposons de dégager quelques idées majeures, quelques grandes orientations idéologiques qui nous paraissent particulièrement caractéristiques.

Au premier chef, la position de Fontane concernant l'unification allemande et le sentiment national. »Pour Fontane, la valeur politique suprême est l'Etat national allemand« (p. 258). Comme beaucoup de libéraux, il a souhaité en 1848 la dissolution de la Prusse dans un grand Etat unitaire. Mais après l'échec de la révolution, il s'oriente comme Treitschke, et en totale opposition avec Storm, vers une justification de la mission prussienne en Allemagne, tout en maintenant ses réserves envers le prussianisme et le militarisme. Car en tant qu'intellectuel, Fontane pensa toujours que la culture allemande seule pourrait permettre le développement d'une authentique identité nationale. Cela dit, il a considéré avant 1871 la politique de force bismarckienne comme inévitable, dans la mesure où elle correspondait à une nécessité historique. G. Loster-Schneider définit le nationalisme de Fontane comme »défensif plutôt qu'agressif« (p. 55). Peu de traces chez lui du chauvinisme étroit de beaucoup de ses contemporains allemands. Ses voyages et ses séjours à l'étranger lui avaient donné un certain sens du relatif, sans que toutefois il ait été entièrement exempt des préjugés et stéréotypes