

POLITICS OR POETICS? THE BATTLE CRY OF THE REFRAIN IN VILLIERS DE L'ISLE-ADAM'S 'VOX POPULI'

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Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's prose poem, 'Vox populi', shows the author drawing a close-knit relationship between the collapse of political regimes and the perceived crisis in poetic production during the nineteenth century in France. His distaste for the public who continue to feign allegiance to each successive governing power provides an insight into Villiers's own conception of power. He proposes a more indirect and subterfugal means of establishing authoritative longevity as binaries of stability and instability are played out through a particular stylistic trait: the refrain. By exploring the aesthetic background and precedents for using refrains in prose poetry, my analysis seeks to establish whether the refrain in Villiers's 'Vox populi' becomes a battle cry in order to rally support for the poetic cause. By garnering support in the form of Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé, does Villiers foretell the return to power of the poetic regime by preying on the conscience of the public who have hitherto been blinded or deafened by the bombast of unstable political regimes?

The eclectic nature of the range of genres that makes up Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Contes cruels*, published in 1883, makes it difficult to assess their poeticity.¹ As Suzanne Bernard points out, 'les *Contes* ont souvent été qualifiés de *poèmes en prose* par la critique contemporaine', implying that Villiers himself perceived them as short stories and not prose poems.² Yet the fact that Villiers's inspiration evidently draws from Poe and Baudelaire suggests that it is legitimate to consider the collection to be an admixture of prose poems and tales of the fantastic. When 'Vox populi' was first published in December 1880 in *L'Étoile française*, Villiers's work was not yet widely known. His fan-base consisted mainly of his circle of friends, including of course Mallarmé (to whom I shall turn later). By the time Huysmans published *À Rebours* in 1884, Villiers's work was becoming more widely read. Huysmans describes 'Vox populi' in chapter sixteen of his novel as 'une pièce superbement frappé dans un style d'or'.³ This 'golden style' — and all the connotations and Baudelairean and Mallarméan resonances that such a description entails — is both eclectic and elusive, however.⁴ Des Esseintes, in *À Rebours*, has included 'Vox populi' in an 'anthologie du poème en prose' which he has had printed.⁵ This designation of 'Vox populi' as a prose poem (potentially contrary to Villiers's own title of *Contes*) reveals the inherent tensions of the

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form which spill out beyond the bounds of genre definitions in order to question the nature of the stability, authority, and perceived value of literary texts. As a number of scholars have elaborated, the prose poem finds itself 'implicated in a structure of power' within a battle between poetics and politics.⁶ Both a poetic and a political agenda are voiced by Villiers in 'Vox populi', inviting the reader to consider the very politics of the text's poetics. He does this, in part, through a particular stylistic trait familiar to such important poetic figures as Poe, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé: the refrain. Since the refrain has its roots in song, and is traditionally afforded an important place also in political songs, it is clear that the refrain for Villiers has a particular status in terms of poetic politics. The political significance of the refrain in 'Vox populi' lies in the fact that it becomes a battle cry in order to rally support for the poetic cause. At an important juncture in poetic history, Villiers uses a prose poem in order to challenge the dominance of unpoetic prose as the preserve of political discourse.

'Vox populi' poeticises the political backdrop of the 1860s and 1870s in France. The narrative is placed in the heart of Paris, where a blind man is to be found each day begging for alms outside Notre-Dame:

Assis, devant la grille du parvis Notre-Dame, sur un haut pliant de bois, — et les genoux croisés en de noirs haillons —, le centenaire Mendiant, doyen de la Misère de Paris —, face de deuil au teint de cendre, peau sillonnée de rides couleur de terre —, mains jointes sous l'écrêteau qui consacrait légalement sa cécité, offrait son aspect d'ombre au *Te Deum* de la fête environnante. (p. 562)

The detailed description of the beggar's tawdry physical disposition sets up a stark contrast to the apparent joyfulness of those who surround him. This antithetical posture — between the beggar and the crowd — is at the heart of the narrative of this prose poem, and is further endorsed by Villiers's acute awareness of the power of the human voice in the context of a politically-fuelled scene. The opposition that Villiers sets up between 'voix' (that of the beggar) and 'vociférations' (those of the crowd) forms the founding basis of a politico-poetic battle for authority within this prose poem. The crowd shout out political slogans, whilst the beggar intones a poetic refrain.

The opposition is played out, first of all, on a level of dynamics, from the loud cries of the public to the unheard voice of the blind beggar: The voice of one man against the voice of the crowd. Villiers plays with the presupposition that the crowd's voice (or 'vociférations') will naturally be louder because they combine the voices of many; the implication is that the combined force of so many voices will inevitably be heard. By contrast, it should not be possible to hear the voice of the blind beggar, which is the voice of only one feeble, ageing man. That this voice, notwithstanding its supposedly quiet dynamic (described, for example, as 'une sourdine', p. 563), becomes the most persistent, and the most memorable, voice of this prose poem, demonstrates Villiers's belief in the power of the refrain. The supposed powerful volume of the crowd's voice is not enough to ensure a stability of power. Each political regime that they praise with their *vivats* ('Vive l'Empereur!', 'Vive la République!', 'Vive la Commune!', 'Vive le Maréchal!') ultimately sees its power crumble. By contrast, the refrain of the blind beggar ('Prenez pitié d'un pauvre aveugle, s'il vous plaît!'), which persistently makes itself heard at the end of each of the five sections of the poem, and twice within the penultimate section (totalling six instances), is the only voice which retains any power or authoritative longevity ('au plus fort', p. 564).

The opposition between the solo voice of the beggar and the plural voice of the crowd is further reinforced, particularly in the opening section, by the contrast between darkness and light. The crowd is reflected in the windows of the Parisian streets from which dazzling flashes ('éblouissements', p. 562) emanate, bathing the crowd in a dusty light ('poudreuse lumière', p. 562). The beggar, however, is dressed in black rags ('noirs haillons', p. 562) and bears a shadowy disposition ('aspect d'ombre', p. 562). However, just as Villiers distorts the logic of the opposition of dynamic level, rendering the quietest, lonely voice the most powerful, so too does he reinforce the irony of the supposed enlightenment of the crowd. The unenlightened voices of this poem turn out to be those of the crowd.

Whilst these oppositions serve to establish the narrative drive of irony that is central to this prose poem, the contrasts that Villiers sets up do not, however, fully reveal the incisive nature of his poetic politics. The contrasts between volume and lighting which are enacted in the opening section are, after all, poetic commonplaces. The overt resonances that this prose poem has with Baudelaire's sonnet 'Les Aveugles' reminds the reader that such contrasts have already been exploited in Baudelaire's poem. The eyes of the blind in Baudelaire's sonnet are devoid of 'la divine étincelle' and 'traversent le noir illimité', and they are the 'frère du silence éternel', distinct from the noise of the city which the poetic voice addresses: 'autour de nous tu chantes, ris et beugles'.⁷ Villiers sets out these same commonplace oppositions in order to reinforce, perhaps paradoxically, the unity of purpose that underlies both the beggar and his fellow Parisians:

Les passants, n'étaient-ce pas ses frères? À coup sûr, Espèce humaine! D'ailleurs, cet hôte du
souverain portail n'était pas dénué de tout bien: l'État lui avait reconnu le droit d'être aveugle.
Propriétaire de ce titre [...] c'était notre égal. (p. 562)

The egalitarian approach to common civic values (which hints so clearly at the revolutionary slogan of 'liberté, égalité, fraternité') serves to reduce the gulf that separates the beggar from the crowd. In fact the positioning of the beggar at the entrance to the 'souverain portail' of Notre-Dame suggests that he is the one who will be able assist them in finding their way through their current political confusion (if only they would listen to him). The beggar is treated as an inferior outcast whose words go unheeded, yet whose political status they recognise as their fraternal equal. That is to say, the crowd adhere to the political, universal ideal of equal rights, and yet the ideal has not (yet) been fully realised in French society. The repeated insistence of the muted words that the beggar utters in 'Vox populi' — 'Prenez pitié d'un pauvre aveugle, s'il vous plaît!' — increasingly serves as a poetic refrain which has an underlying political purpose: to unite the crowd with the marginalised symbolic figure of the aged, blind beggar in order to achieve a true, stable equality of purpose and to realise a political ideal. The refrain becomes a battle cry, in the form of a new political slogan, which seeks to confirm this purpose of unification. Would not the tradition of the refrain imply, after all, that this is the moment where a solo voice is reinforced by the unison voices of others, where all voices sing together as one?

The politics of the refrain: bidding time

The temporal patternings of Villiers's narrative place the prose poem specifically amongst the political upheavals of the mid-nineteenth century in France. 1868, first of all, sets the scene of the Second Empire, under Louis-Napoléon. 1870 rears its head with the

upheavals of the Franco-Prussian war followed by the Third Republic under Thiers. 1871 follows with the Commune and the leadership of Maréchal MacMahon, elected President two years later. Although Villiers himself does not specify either dates or names, the anaphoric phrases 'Voici douze ans', 'Voici dix ans', 'Voici neuf ans' (Villiers's italics) allow the reader to deduce the relevant political regimes from the date of publication of the prose poem (1880). These specific temporal pointers, which mark the instability of successive political regimes and serve as a reminder of the precarious nature of political power or authority (and the crowd's misguided faith therein), allow Villiers to trace a further thematic throughout his poem, that of the unrelenting sameness of political battles. Irrespective of which particular leader is in charge, the public react — in Villiers's poem at least — in the same way; with noisy adulation: 'mêmes rumeurs! mêmes fracas d'armes! mêmes hennissements!' (p. 564). The willingness of Villiers's Parisian public to change their political allegiance, to shout out a new *vivat* at each new political juncture, indicates that the noise they make ('vociférations') masks an underlying truth. The public feign allegiance and adulation where, in truth, they remain persistently 'troublé[s] par ces vacarmes flatteurs' (p. 565).

The implications of the crowd's language are such that they find themselves caught up in the struggle between ideology and reality. The desire for a united, stable political regime remains unchanged, and whilst each new political regime repeats this same desire, it fails to bring it to fruition. Politics thereby becomes clichéd. Nonetheless, the crowd remains blind to this political repetition and continues to yearn for an almost mystical ideal which forever eludes them. Villiers portrays this ideal as 'l'unique pensée de ce peuple' which later becomes a 'prière occulte' (p. 564). As a persistent symbol of this occult desire, the beggar utters an unchanging refrain which the crowd seem unable — or unwilling — to hear. Their inability to hear his refrain does not, however, deter him from repeating his incessant dictum. He bides his time until such a moment as the public might recognise their political disillusionment and turn their attention, instead, to the cause that he advocates. Although Villiers describes the beggar through numerous hyperbolic *tourmures* (for example, 'centenaire Mendiant', 'doyen de la Misère de Paris', 'Propriétaire de titre', 'vieux homme', 'Le Diseur de l'arrière-pensée populaire', 'séculaire Élu de l'Infortune', 'vétérane de l'humaine Misère', 'Veilleur de nuit', 'Pontife inflexible de la Fraternité', or 'Titulaire autorisé de la cécité physique'), his dictum remains immutable. He holds steadfast to his cause in the knowledge that one day his message will be heard and understood, positioning himself not simply on a stool outside Notre-Dame, but also in the midst of an interregnum. The time has not yet come for the truth of his prophecy ('sa rectification de prophète', p. 565) to be revealed to the public at large, but in persisting with his battle cry, he suggests that there is another political possibility beyond the unsettled and unsettling politics so symptomatic of the preceding years. The regime that the beggar proposes is one which is steadfast in its purpose. It seeks to unite the public under the banner of its own hidden desires ('le vœu caché sous les hurrahs, le vœu secret et personnel', p. 563). It recognises the crowd's yearning for universal stability, and acknowledges that their attempts to find such stability have been profoundly misguided. It proposes, then, a different authoritative position from that of emperors, presidents, or even kings, by instating poetry as its governing force.

The poetics of the refrain: making truth count

Of course by suggesting that Villiers proposes poetry as a governing power in 'Vox populi', certain assumptions have been made that require clarification. First of all, that the words

that the beggar utters are necessarily a refrain. Secondly, that the refrain is necessarily political. And thirdly, that the refrain is necessarily poetic. Villiers himself confirms the beggar's dictum as a refrain by describing it himself as a 'refrain rectificateur de l'unique pensée de ce peuple' (p. 564). These words also confirm the refrain's political agenda by reinforcing the notion that the beggar seeks to set public opinion straight. However, does a refrain necessarily imply poetry or poetics? The answer to this question is more oblique, particularly given the uncertain status of the prose poem form in which we find the beggar's refrain. By turning to aesthetic arguments underlying poetic production in nineteenth-century France, the refrain emerges as an important marker of poeticity in the way that it engages with the complex effects of repetition.

A structural repetitive device, refrains in poetry recall poetry's heritage as song. In the nineteenth century in France, the aesthetic current circulating amongst poets sought to reassert poetry's status in relation to music (an aesthetic dilemma that was never, and in fact could never be, resolved). For poets at this time, the refrain is considered to be both a countable repetitive device and a patent musical trait. In his analysis of Poe, for example, Baudelaire explores the twofold nature of the refrain, suggesting that Poe's refrains create a 'plaisir mathématique et musical' (II: 335). Baudelaire goes on to say that:

le refrain est susceptible d'applications infiniment variées. [...] Il [Poe] fait souvent un usage heureux des répétitions du même vers ou de plusieurs vers, retours obstinés de phrases qui simulent les obsessions de la mélancolie ou de l'idée fixe — du refrain pur et simple, mais amené en situation de plusieurs manières différentes — du refrain-variante qui joue de l'indolence et la distraction. (II: 336)

Villiers was, of course, familiar with Poe's work, and was known to have recited his poems, especially 'The Raven' (probably in the Baudelaire translation) with its mutable end of stanza refrain, 'rien de plus' or 'jamais plus'.⁸ In Baudelaire's analysis of Poe, two types of refrain emerge: exact repetition or repetition with variants.

The precedent for both types of refrain used specifically in the context of prose poetry in France is to be found in Mallarmé's work, in two poems dating from 1864. 'Le Démon de l'analogie', explores the phrase 'La Pénultième est morte', and 'Frisson d'hiver', uses parenthetical asides that serve as quasi-refrains by virtue of their typographic layout on the page: '(De singulières ombres pendent aux vitres usées)', '(Je vois des toiles d'araignées au haut des grandes croisées)', '(Ne songe pas aux toiles d'araignées qui tremblent au haut des grandes croisées)', '(Ces toiles d'araignées grelottent au haut des grandes croisées)'.⁹ Villiers's 'Vox populi' exploits both techniques of the 'refrain pur' and the 'refrain-variante'. The immutable eight words of the beggar's plea ('Prenez pitié d'un pauvre aveugle, s'il vous plaît!') is not the only instance of a direct line repetition in 'Vox populi'. The opening phrase of the prose poem 'Grande revue aux Champs-Élysées, ce jour-là' is reiterated directly at two further instances within the poem. Mutated refrains appear in the form of the temporal patternings mentioned above of 'Voici [...] ans ...', words which immediately follow the 'Grande revue' lines, and also in the reiterated *vivats* where the political leader who is the subject of the public's admiration is altered according to the relative temporal frame of reference. Remembering, however, that the refrain has its roots in song, and therefore in the possibility of a group joining their voices together in unison, it would seem that the only true refrains (rather than simply repetition) within 'Vox populi' are the two

which are supposedly spoken out loud. These are the beggar's plea and the *vivats* of the crowd.

It is these two types of refrain, the immutable plea and the mutable *vivats* that I shall consider in more detail. Only one of the two refrains is able to create a lasting poetic impression in 'Vox populi', and it is the beggar's plea. Whilst I do not suggest that the refrain is a *necessary* property of poetry, or that *every* refrain is necessarily poetic, this particular unaltered refrain silently sings of its own poetic nature by the twelve syllables that make up the phrase, intensified by the alliteration on the letter 'p': 'Prenez pitié d'un pauvre aveugle, s'il vous plaît!' Whilst its status as a poetic alexandrine is uncertain (not least of all because of the problematic scansion of the caesural division), Villiers hints at the possibility of it counting as poetry by drawing attention to the line's syllabic make-up, declaring it to be a: 'syllabisation évidente du profond soupir de toute sa vie' (p. 562). Of course, as Villiers also knows, the assumption that counting twelve syllables necessarily equals poetry is precarious. This means that the beggar's refrain is only unstable as poetry if poeticity is defined simply on the basis of a syllabic count. Villiers also questions the possible poeticity of the crowd's *vivats* by referring to *their* syllabic make-up: 'les syllabes de l'ancien vivat' (p. 563). However, he specifically points out that the crowd's error was to put too much faith in these syllables, writing in the closing paragraph that the crowd had uttered: 'n'importe quelles syllabes mensongèrement enthousiastes' (p. 565). Theirs, then, is a flawed poetry because they placed too much faith in the syllabic make-up of their refrain, whereas the beggar's refrain is an astute poetry which is aware that its force lies in a revived understanding of poeticity that goes beyond traditional metrical rules.

So Villiers uses astute means in order to reinstate poetry as a governing power, to overcome and to assuage the instabilities that stem from false systems, such as the varying regimes of old-fashioned poetry (signalled by the term 'ancien') and of acclaimed governmental authorities. Villiers does not set out to win over his public with flashy, epideictic rhetoric which is ultimately without substance or authority. His tactic is to repeatedly state the truth of poetry, even though its truth is difficult to discern. The fact that it is not easy to recognise the poeticity of the beggar's refrain is an inherent part of its persuasive force. The quieter dynamic is a welcome contrast to the political bombast that the crowd have repeatedly endured. Moreover, the immutability of the refrain, persistently murmured on the lips of one who is not fully accepted as their equal, mirrors their own underlying aspirations for universal stability. However, only those members of the public who are able to attune themselves to listen attentively to their 'vœu véritable' (p. 565), to their innermost thoughts and desires, will be able then to discover the steadfast power that they secretly yearn for. That power is the power of true poetry.

Questions of genre and questions of leadership

Whilst Villiers, like Baudelaire and Mallarmé, is aware that poetry has entered a period of crisis and uncertainty (particularly in terms of form, status, and potential audience), he does not lose sight of its underlying potential. By choosing a blind beggar as the leader of his political campaign for the reinstatement of poetry, Villiers draws attention to the fact that it is the public who have lost sight of what they ultimately yearn for, not the supposedly unseeing beggar. Furthermore, the inevitable result of the beggar's blindness is that he is endowed with an 'ouïe suraiguë' (p. 563). Villiers reminds the reader that 'ceux qui écoutent,

attentivement, les bruits de la terre' (p. 564) are able to interpret and understand the symbolically-charged refrain of the beggar who prophesies the future regime of poetry. Is it not, therefore, a profound irony that the beggar has been granted permission to beg by the State precisely because he is blind? Although 'l'État lui avait reconnu le droit d'être aveugle' (p. 562), they were unable to recognise the political significance of his blindness. Villiers foretells the return to power of the poetic regime by preying on the conscience of the public who have, themselves, been both blinded and deafened by the illusory bombast of unstable political regimes.

This confirms an aesthetic position which is common to Mallarmé: although Villiers's ideas about the status of poetry may be difficult to grasp, he is anti-elitist and does not seek only to attract a chosen elite to his politico-poetic cause. The public may have been hitherto misled by flawed leaders, but this does not imply that they are incapable, ultimately, of becoming adherents of the poetic regime. As Patrick McGuinness has commented in relation to Villiers's dramatic works:

Like Mallarmé and Maeterlinck, Villiers does not subscribe to the dismissive élitism of many of his Symbolist successors. For him, 'La Foule' is never left out of the dramatic enterprise, and though the degeneration of public taste is nowhere more evident than in theatre, it is through theatre that it can be regenerated.¹⁰

Villiers's affinity for the theatre, together with the fact that Villiers was more widely recognised as a dramatist rather than a poet begins to problematise the notion of poetry or poeticity that he seems to advocate in 'Vox populi'. Although Villiers composed verse poetry, and evidently ventured into the prose poem form, he is not specifically renowned as a poet. Why then, in 'Vox populi', does he propose poetry as the political regime that the public secretly yearn for? And who was to be the governor or leader of this poetic regime? In order to answer these questions, I turn, once again, to Villiers's friend Mallarmé.

In his eulogy on Villiers, given during a lecture tour of Belgium in February 1890, six months after his friend's death, Mallarmé not only pays homage to his dead friend, but also declares him to be 'Un génie!' who had one sole purpose: 'Ce qu'il voulait, ce survenu, en effet, je pense sérieusement que c'était: régner' (II: 113–14). Mallarmé goes on to say that Villiers believed there was a vacancy that left 'un trône, celui de Grèce' unfilled. That Villiers aspired to inhabit the Grecian throne, that of the poets' Parnassus, seems, on the surface, to be a vainglorious ambition. Mallarmé's eulogy, however, does not criticise Villiers for having such an ambition. The members of the literary circles in which Villiers moved welcomed the fact that someone was willing to take on a very difficult mantle, as Mallarmé suggests: 'Éclair, oui, cette réminiscence brillera selon la mémoire de chacun, n'est-ce pas? François Coppée, Dierx, Heredia, Paul Verlaine, rappelez-vous et Catulle Mendès. Un génie! nous le comprîmes tel' (II: 114). Villiers's aspiration to occupy the throne of poetry may seem perplexing for a man who produced more work in prose than in verse form, and who achieved greater renown as a dramatist than poet. It is Mallarmé who proposes a solution to this conundrum, by suggesting that since writers like Villiers, Maeterlinck and himself find themselves in the midst of a period of poetic uncertainty — 'la vieille métrique française (je n'ose ajouter, la poésie) subit, à l'instant qu'il est, une crise merveilleuse' — Villiers's brave endeavour 'fournit le point de repère entre la refonte,

toute d'audace, romantique, et la liberté' (II: 115–16). Villiers's political ambition, to reinstate poetry, then, demonstrates a willingness to take on the mantle of poetry's potential, aware that the time has not yet come for poetry to prosper (again). Villiers does not propose himself as the ultimate, totalitarian, absolute authority on poetry; rather he is willing to take up the position of all-seeing 'voyant' or 'prophète' amidst the blindness of the public. He persistently foretells the return of poetic glory to those who are willing to listen attentively to the persuasive battle cry of his persistent refrain.

The power of the refrain

One final assumption, however, remains to be addressed: that the beggar's refrain, 'Prenez pitié d'un pauvre aveugle, s'il vous plaît!', is necessarily powerful. The words of the refrain are, after all, profoundly formulaic and banal, and are repeated verbatim six times in the poem. This raises the question: How can something so seemingly clichéd be capable of being powerful? This question is especially problematic in the context of a political environment which has itself become overburdened by clichéd formulae such as the *vivats* so joyfully proclaimed by the crowd. How, then, can the beggar's refrain be any more potent than other (political) clichés? The refrain's subtle poetic status, in the verse-line mould made popular by Hugo (which would scan the line according to a 4/4/4 division, rather than the traditional 6/6 division), and with its alliterative patternings, corresponds to the understated content of its words. The words themselves are ordinary, everyday words, and differ somewhat from the indirect, suggestive language typically found in the work of Symbolist poets. Yet this is Villiers's ploy; he is careful not to over-state the refrain's status both in terms of metrical structure and lexical content. In order to promote the return to power of poetry, he refuses oppressive, self-aggrandising rhetorical pomp and opts for a cliché. The implications of this decision are both political and poetic.

In the first instance, Villiers expresses a refusal of oppressive power which would dictate a course of action to the public. His decision to use words that the public will understand suggests a desire to avoid hierarchical power struggles (so symptomatic of the recent French history alluded to in the prose poem) in favour of a more egalitarian approach ('c'était notre égal', p. 562). The idea, then, is to use words of a common value in order to create a common source of power, thereby 'enabling words with the power of framing a common world', to borrow from Jacques Rancière's analysis of the politics of literature.¹¹ The significance of the conventional, traditional turn of phrase in Villiers's prose poem, then, follows the logic of the Baudelairean notion of the 'poncif'. As Baudelaire suggests in the *Salon de 1846*, although a 'grand artiste' may disdain clichéd repetitions, he cannot remain immune from them.¹² In fact, as Baudelaire so famously writes in his *Fusées*, 'Créer un poncif, c'est le génie' (I: 662). What we find in Villiers's poem is a commonplace figure (the blind beggar) speaking a commonplace turn of phrase (the refrain), creating an image so pitiable that the demands that are made reveal an underlying genius. The crowd may fail to recognise the futility of supporting each successive body governing France, but the beggar repeatedly speaks a brilliant truth which thereby discloses the understated power of his poetic refrain. Moreover, through the genius of carefully-deployed poetry masked in a clichéd repetition, the beggar's refrain breaks the stifling, negative cycle of political repetition through which the crowd misguidedly assumed they would achieve their yearned-for goal of universal stability.

There remains, however, a potentially negative aspect to Villiers's politico-poetic ambitions in 'Vox populi', and this is expressed in the closing lines of the poem. Like many of his contemporaries — Mallarmé in particular, but also Rimbaud, for example — Villiers aspired to restore power to poetry by reasserting its everyday significance.¹³ Yet this aspiration is set against the backdrop of a century of political turmoil in which the everyday was increasingly disrupted. In particular, the significance of the words that the crowd shout out at each political juncture became increasingly empty, and this endangered the significance of all words. Since the crowd were blithely able to substitute 'République' for 'Empereur', and 'Commune' for 'République', and 'Maréchal' for 'Commune', as if each term were a convertible alternative for its preceding term, Villiers recognises that if they were ever to proclaim 'Vive la Poésie!', it would be just as empty of value as each of the other terms. Moreover, this disruption of signification is not simply a late-nineteenth-century French phenomenon; Marx had already identified this tendency in relation to the 1848 upheavals, with its roots in the 1789 revolution.¹⁴ In order to break this cycle of substitution, poetry has an important, but profoundly difficult, role to play. Villiers recognises this difficulty in the closing paragraph of 'Vox populi', contrasting the crowd's persistent enthusiasm for whatever political cause they may be praising to the beggar's increasing distress at their inability to hear him:

Et, lorsque enivré de fanfares, de cloches et d'artillerie, le Peuple, troublé par ces vacarmes flatteurs, essaye en vain de se masquer à lui-même son vœu véritable, sous n'importe quelles syllabes mensongèrement enthousiastes, le Mendiant, lui, la face au Ciel, les bras levés, à tâtons, dans ses grandes ténèbres, se dresse au seuil éternel de l'Église, — et, d'une voix de plus en plus lamentable, mais qui semble porter au-delà des étoiles, continue de crier sa rectification de prophète: 'Prenez pitié d'un pauvre aveugle, s'il vous plaît!' (p. 565)

Notwithstanding his attempts to become the true 'vox populi' who speaks for a unified body proclaiming the return to power of poetry, the beggar's supposedly powerful poetic refrain seems to go — for the most part — unnoticed. Yet the battle cry which seeks to rally support for the poetic cause has at least been voiced, and this, it seems, is Villiers's principal aim. Whilst he recognises that he is writing in the midst of a poetic interregnum, he has not (yet) lost faith in the poetic cause that he advocates. It is for this reason that Mallarmé admires Villiers's attempts to serve as poetry's spokesperson; for, although the voice of the blind beggar in Villiers's prose poem may have struggled to make itself heard, with the publication of the *Contes cruels*, Villiers's own voice was reaching a much wider audience than ever before.

¹ Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Alan Raitt, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 1, 562–65. All references to 'Vox populi' are from this edition.

² Suzanne Bernard, *Le Poème en prose de Baudelaire jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Nizet, 1959), p. 357.

³ Huysmans, *À Rebours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), p. 226.

⁴ Roger Pearson's analysis of the 'gold standard of Poetry' in relation to Mallarmé's work suggests that poetry is the 'common currency of social and political debate' which 'restores the worn-out currency of everyday language'. "'Les Chiffres et les Lettres': Mallarmé's "Or" and the Gold Standard of Poetry', *Dix-neuf*, 2 (2004), 44–60 (p. 45; p. 55).

⁵ Huysmans, *À Rebours* (Paris: Flammarion, 1994), p. 226.

⁶ Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 274. Suzanne Bernard also describes the prose poem as an 'instrument du pouvoir', p. 765.

⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1975–1976), I, 92. All references to Baudelaire are from this edition. Villiers's familiarity with this poem is also evidenced by his decision to use the fourth line of Baudelaire's poem ('Dardant on ne sait où leurs globes ténébreux') as an epigraph to introduce another *conte* entitled 'À s'y méprendre!'

⁸ See citation from Roujon's diary in Villiers, *Œuvres complètes*, I, 1348–49.

⁹ Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Bertrand Marchal, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1998–2003), I, 416–418; 415–416. All references to Mallarmé are from this edition. Both prose poems date from the Tournon period, 1864. 'Frisson d'hiver' was first published in 1867, under the title 'Causerie d'hiver' in *La Revue des Lettres et des Arts*, a journal edited by Villiers and Armand Gouzien. 'Le Démon de l'analogie' was published initially in 1874 under the title 'La Pénultième' in *La Revue du Monde nouveau*.

¹⁰ Patrick McGuinness, *Maurice Maeterlinck and The Making of Modern Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 53.

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, 'The Politics of Literature', *SubStance*, 33 (2004), 10–24 (p. 13).

¹² Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, II, 468. On the notion of immunity, see Jennifer Phillips, "'Vox populi, vox dei": Baudelaire's Uncommon Use of Commonplace in the *Salon de 1846*', *French Forum*, 31 (2006), 21–39 (p. 35).

¹³ According to Jacques Rancière, who suggests that Rimbaud, writing 'in the times of the Parisian revolutionary Commune', acted as the vanguard for the poetic cause: 'This politics of literature enhanced the dream of a new body that would give voice to this reappropriation of the power of common poetry and historicity written on any door panel or any silly refrain'. 'The Politics of Literature', pp. 22–23.

¹⁴ See Nathaniel Wing, *The Limits of Narrative: Essays on Baudelaire, Flaubert, Rimbaud and Mallarmé* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 118.