

Stivale on Saminadayar-Perrin (2013)

Saminadayar-Perrin, Corinne. *Jules Vallès*. Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 2013. Pp. 427. ISBN: 978-2-07-045584-6

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The Folio Biographies series in which this volume by Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin appears makes available a vast collection of lives, from Alexander the Great to Stephen Zweig, by way of Buddha, James Dean, Geronimo, and Jacques Tati. So Jules Vallès's appearance in this eclectic crew is neither altogether necessary, nor altogether surprising. Saminadayar-Perrin's rendering of his life is workmanlike, thorough, and in certain spots, quite illuminating, having the distinct merit of detailing carefully the limits posed on such a biographical work by the focal author's autobiographical fiction and journalism. What makes Saminadayar-Perrin's book so valuable is the way that she negotiates two sides of quite an important divide: "Plus radicalement, l'écrivain est à la fois une personnalité singulière et le produit du milieu littéraire où il évolue: deux dimensions aussi inséparables que le recto et le verso d'une feuille de papier" (21). Saminadayar-Perrin's strategy is, of course, to avail herself of the myriad details that Vallès provides in his prolific autobiographical work, but also to counterbalance as much as possible this self-centered output, as it were, with living testimony (epistolary and memorial as well as journalistic) from a broad range of sources contemporary to Vallès, friends and enemies alike.

In this way, Saminadayar-Perrin covers an important chronological range, from the July Monarchy under which Vallès was born and into the Third Republic of the 1880s, when Vallès died (1885). The steps of this coverage are as follows: first, the slow and sometimes painful formation of Vallès's literary career, from his rural origins (in and around Saint-Étienne) and education, through the explosion of 1848, then the cruel repression of the 1851 coup d'état and the even more devastating early years of the Second Empire (chapters one to five); then, the crucial period of apprenticeship, between 1857 and 1869, in different aspects of journalistic and literary production, during which Vallès built a reputation as an unflinching polemicist as well as a searing caricaturist, skewering the political idols and pretensions of his era (chapters six to eight); then, the period of "débâcle" (the Franco-Prussian War and collapse of the Second Empire) and the violent upheaval and rupture of the Paris Commune, in which Vallès took an extremely active part (chapters nine and ten); then, the very painful years of exile in London until 1880 (chapter eleven); and finally, the last five years before Vallès's death during which he was at once consecrated as a living myth and yet persecuted by the lingering opponents (mainly, the police) of such an uncompromising Republican voice (chapter twelve).

As an avid reader of Vallès's *oeuvre*, I heartily recommend Saminadayar-Perrin's book to anyone seeking a greater understanding not just of Vallès, but of the era in which he lived. Especially illuminating is the central section on Vallès's apprenticeship where Saminadayar-Perrin clearly shows the logical progression of Vallès's efforts as he at once sought his voice and best form of expression while also moving from journal to journal, and thereby producing one volume of essays after another. Somewhat disappointing, though, is the final chapter, which I feel gives rather brief treatment of his literary achievements, notably completion of the Jacques Vingtras trilogy with *L'Insurgé*. However, this biography is quite an achievement, and all the more so given the worthy attention given to such an uncompromising and still poorly recognized writer.

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