

Les Enfants risibles: comic portrayals of childhood in French fiction

John Parkin

University of Bristol
j.parkin@bristol.ac.uk

Familles, je vous hais!
Gide, *Les Nourritures terrestres*

That children amuse can scarcely be denied, but on what terms they do so is an open question, as dependent on stimulus as on response. When a child paints a picture, one's reaction may be to laugh derisively at their ineptitude, but more often will one smile indulgently at their curious vision of the world. As adults in gestation, do they not remain creditable in their struggles to imitate the grown-ups of whom they so often remain comical caricatures, they being, like every caricature, incongruous as at once like and unlike the thing they reflect? However to complete the fragile equation of incongruity plus pleasure equals humour, where do we find the bonus of pleasure which confirms children's humorous quality? It may indeed lie in some mental triumph we achieve over them, but that seems a rare and, in many cases, unworthy reaction; proof if proof were needed that the aggressive theory of humour is at best partial.¹ Are we laughing aggressively when Alice wonders what is the use of a book without any pictures or conversations? Surely it is more fruitful if not more appropriate to take her attitude on board and head off to Wonderland or through the looking glass with her as our guide, not our target.

In mentally criticising her sister's reading matter, Alice betrayed a simplified perspective that defies adult common sense, but one whose appeal is well summarised as follows, «On tente de renouer avec la naïveté de l'enfant qu'on n'est plus» (Feuerhahn 1993: 135; We try to reconnect with the child we no longer are), and it is frequently discernible in the autobiographical accounts of childhood that novelists have so often composed. In particular, I recall the four French authors: Jules Vallès in *L'Enfant* (1879), Georges Duhamel in the early volumes of his *Chronique des Pasquier*, composed between 1933 and 1943, Hervé Bazin in *Vipère au poing* (1948), the celebrated attack on a sadistic mother which helped earn him the *grand prix de l'humour noir* in 1968, and, finally, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, famous both for his fiction and for his outrageously anti-Semitic pamphlets, but who provides, in *Mort à crédit* (1936), an unforgettable portrait of a disaffected youngster emerging from the Parisian petty bourgeoisie of the early 20th century.

The four differ markedly in their mentality and their politics and, in one case, in the periods during which they were active. Vallès gained enormous prestige as a journalist under the Second Empire and as a politician during the Paris Commune, and, while his anarchist beliefs and activities may have lacked theoretical definition, his sympathy for the people was rewarded by a massive popular turnout on the occasion of his funeral in 1885. Céline, by

contrast, was a virulent racist, pro-Nazi in the political views he expressed both pre-war and during the Occupation, after which he was forced into some years of exile prior to an amnesty granted in 1951. Duhamel also lived through the Occupation, though his anti-Nazi sympathies were made clear in a series of articles that antagonised the German authorities who banned publication of his works (Lafay, 1998: 16; Santelli 1947:54), though they refrained from imprisoning or deporting him. His often professed love of humanity, a «foi fondée sur l'homme» (Danset et Maunoury 2000: 139) that one might consider outdated, also contrasts with Céline's apparent misanthropy—the Marxist Nizan detected a contempt for humanity in *Mort à crédit*, and, while Duhamel delighted in the company of his own children (Knapp 1972: 100), Céline shunned his daughter's wedding in 1942 and neglected the grandchild she gave him months later (Vitoux 1988: 371). Unlike either Céline or Duhamel, Bazin was active in the French Resistance, and like Vallès retained left-wing sympathies throughout his life, though never joining the Communist Party. Much of his fiction centres on the issues and problems of family life (he was married four times and sired seven children), and his personality was marked by a strong nostalgia for childhood. What all four writers share is a strong bias against the values and attitudes upheld by their parents and which they attack in various ways using the ingenuous perspective of their protagonists, and the oedipal implications of this trend are all too obvious: Céline's Ferdinand comes close to strangling his father, Bazin's Jean Rezeau fails in an attempt to drown his mother.

Somewhat influenced by Dickens (Zimmermann 1998: 237), whose literary preoccupation with childhood was at the time unrivalled (Boehm 2013: 2), Vallès shared his awareness and so helped initiate an entire trend within French fiction,² using *L'Enfant* in part as a moral tale or even pamphlet (Dupuy 1931: 245) in defence, as his dedication puts it, of all those who have wept in the family or were beaten by their parents, as indeed he seems to have been. Witness the first paragraph where his fictional surrogate Jacques announces that he was whipped a lot, particularly by his mother, and in a house where no-one laughed: «A la maison, l'on ne rit jamais» (Vallès 1969 770; at home, we never laugh). The technique is clear: one is steered from the beginning to adopt the victim-child's point of view and to side with him against the clan of adults, comprising father, mother, teachers, if not in the end all authority figures: Vallès's revolutionary politics have often been seen, not least at his instigation, as a broadening of his childhood revolt (Werlen 2006: 17). Meanwhile, the attack on the mother is an interesting theme, paralleled in two other of my chosen writers.

Vallès's harridan matriarch, deemed phallic by some (Zimmermann 1998: 43), finds pleasure in denying her offspring the food he likes and the money he has been given, and her punishments are both gratuitous and sadistic; indeed his first memory is of a spanking she delivered. Is she, however, too bad to be true—a point equally relevant to Bazin?³ Perhaps so, but for the purposes of humour we (or certainly I) are prepared to accept the over-simplification because of the comic scenes it facilitates. One striking example is his family's late arrival in Orléans, as an untrusting Madame Vingtras (based of course on Madame Vallès) takes them on a wild-goose-chase for accommodation that ultimately leaves them desolate and in pitch dark under the unrecognised statue of Jeanne d'Arc in the Place du Martroi. The boy Jacques may declare «Je ne puis pas rire» (Vallès 1969: 921; I cannot laugh), but the same cannot be said of the reader. On the other hand, even prior to their leaving Saint-Etienne for Nantes, their new home town, the boy avows that whilst he has had to weep under blows unjustly delivered, he has also laughed at the stupidities and lies uttered by «les grandes personnes» (914).

In truth, and fortunately for its literary quality and effect, the novel is not just a tale of parental oppression. Indeed, the very journey down the Loire changes the family dynamic, particularly when the mother falls ill, so allowing the boy and his father to bond in a context of freedom: they eat, game and drink with companions, prior to a less than fortunate arrival in

their new home. Otherwise there are holidays at his aunt's, where a tumultuous family eat to their hearts' content, digging one another in the ribs and laughing like big babies («de gros bébés»: 808), or he rolls in the summer fields, having fun fights with the pig-breeder's son or enjoying the sight of his girl cousins' legs. Then there is the chronotope of the traditional feast-day, such as the *reinage* in his aunt's village,⁴ where all classes and generations mix in a spirit of Rabelaisian gaiety, or the festival of Mardi Gras in Saint-Etienne, where again he evades the maternal eye and joins a street gang with his catapult, determined to defend their bonfire against a set of rivals, though the childish escapade ends badly, with him injured and (interestingly) speechless. Having fallen while running from the threat of adult reprisals, he remains for some days bedridden and sick, and mute for longer than is medically warranted; thus he will at least be temporarily spared further thrashings.

In its later chapters, the humour of *L'Enfant* is mitigated as Jacques emerges into full adolescence, and the balance in his story moves from comic fiction towards psychological case-study, though both patterns do remain traceable throughout. Alongside the amusement supplied by a naïve narrator, Vallès scholars have noted a degree of masochistic delight in his accounts of that narrator's sufferings (Zimmermann 1998: 43 and 206), while the guilt complex generated within the child of an unhappy home is also perceptible: unable to regard his father's saint's day as in any way special, he concludes that «Je suis sans doute un mauvais fils» (Vallès 1969: 816; probably I am a bad son). Nevertheless, there is ample scope for seeing Vallès as an accomplished humourist,⁵ and therefore *L'Enfant* as a comic novel, and the responses I would specifically underline are as follows.

Firstly an enjoyment of the child's-eye view as he observes situations that we see differently, while still admiring his ingenuousness and ingenuity in accommodating to them. In this case, even his self-deprecation affords a bonus of amusement, as when he is given five francs for running an errand to one of his father's acquaintances, but decides that the sum must be returned, lest it turn him into a beggar («un petit mendiant»: 868). Secondly, a siding with him against the opposing clan of adults even if these risk being distorted beyond credibility: fortunately the caricatures of his mother and father are not without nuance, as we come to see them as consciously motivated adults, but the fundamental clan-based satire of young versus old, and therefore, given reader complicity, of us versus them, remains appreciable till the end. Finally, there is the delight in irresponsibility, enhanced by chronotopes such as the journey, the inn, the playing field and the open street, where Jacques' rebellion is conducted for its own sake, like that of his literary hero Cartouche⁶ or the Panurge with whom he quite aptly compares himself (Redfern 1992: 182).

Jumping into the 20th century we see Hervé Bazin produce, in his first and perhaps most famous work, a pattern indeed very similar. *Vipère au poing* recounts a childhood vitiated by a vixen mother nicknamed Folcoche, whose sole aim in life appears to be the systematic persecution of her three sons, more particularly the elder two, and more particularly still the protagonist Jean, surrogate of Bazin himself and certainly an intelligent and resourceful boy, if not a fully likeable one. That nuance is important since the last the author would want is for Jean Rezeau, by his own claim a saintly infant, to be throughout his life too good to be true. Nevertheless, when he first encounters his mother on her return from China to take over the household, his attempt to embrace her ends immediately with him being slapped in the face and knocked flat on the ground beside the train which has borne her to them. So, as in *L'Enfant*, the clan division of children versus parents is rapidly drawn, and it would be a rare reader who would find himself siding with the latter. Folcoche is described as having three enemies: moths, spinach and her children, and by the end of the first year of her reign it is stated that the latter had lost all faith in the values that should underlie parental authority; a significant marker in their development: «Un an après la prise du pouvoir par notre mère,

nous n'avions plus aucune foi dans la justice des nôtres» (Bazin 1948: 56; one year after our mother's accession we no longer had any faith in the justice of our family).

So, the story of their education is caricatured as a tale of rebellion and revenge, punctuated by moments of black humour, as when the mother is hospitalised, to the delight of her offspring, who chant, and within their father's hearing, «Folcoche va crever!» (106; Folcoche is going to croak), by periods of relaxation, as when the same father takes his elder sons on a journey round the provinces, and conversation begins with the famous exchange, «Où peut-on être mieux qu'au sein de sa famille?», answer «Partout ailleurs»,⁷ and by an interesting series of laughs which clash with the fundamentally alienating chronotope of the family home.

One of these is the gust of Homeric mirth which occurs when the boys' first tutor (a priest like all his successors) is sacked for sexual impropriety, though not with them. He guffaws in response and then declares, «Mais oui, mon bon monsieur, je quitte votre maison de fous [...] Vos haricots rouges commençaient à m'écœurer [...] et le parfum des chaussettes de vos enfants, ces petites bêtes puantes [...] Je vous laisse sous la férule de Folcoche» (72; Yes my good sir, I'm leaving your madhouse. Your red beans were beginning to turn my stomach, like the scent of your kids' socks, those stinking little beasts. I leave you under the rod of Folcoche). Another comes, comically enough, from the barn owls who have, the narrator imagines, been listening amusedly to the father's pretentious and reactionary opinions. A third moment of laughter is delivered by Toussaint Templerot, a worldly and good-living priest, World War I comrade to M. Rezeau but with whom he forms a telling contrast. Having gorged the three males at his table during their holiday trip, he serves up a final drop of liquor, only to see Jean collapse as a result: «Le colosse, en riant aux larmes, m'emporta dans ses bras, me déposa au creux d'un immense lit de campagne tout mou, tout chaud, où je m'endormis aussitôt» (143; the giant, crying with laughter, lifted me in his arms and set me down in the hollow of a huge soft cosy rustic bed where I instantly fell asleep).

These bouts of hilarity are vital in negating the black humour which does certainly punctuate the text: for instance, in one memorable escapade the boys plan to drown their mother, though, like any anti-hero, she has a remarkable capacity for survival which would remain operative almost throughout the two further volumes in which Bazin would have her figure. Nevertheless, as is ever the case with *humour noir*, we remain free to abandon our human kindness, even to wish death on the scapegoat Folcoche, and simultaneously enjoy the bonus of irresponsibility we thus share with her kids. Alternatively, the mockery attributed to the barn owls well exemplifies what the French term *le rire jaune*, namely a hollow laughter which in this instance gains significant connotations: Bazin's rebellion, like that of Vallès, had a political spin-off as he veered to the left in his adult life.⁸ Furthermore, the Templerot scene, whose atmosphere of jollity and abundance the author likens to the land of Cockaigne, provides an antidote to the realm of Folcoche not unlike the journey episode in *L'Enfant*: when the shrew is away, her brood can play.

And play they do, desacralising the local churches by scribbling on their walls, stealing their keys and even shitting in the confessionals. Moreover, and as is easily seen, their play lacks in some measure the innocence evident in the child Jacques Vingtras, scholars having noted a certain vindictiveness and even admiration that link Jean Rezeau with his insufferable mother. She herself raises the point—«Tu me détestes, je le sais. Pourtant [...] il n'y a aucun de mes fils qui me ressemble plus que toi» (91; You detest me, I know. Still there is no son of mine more like me than you)—and the effect is in part to emphasise the contrast of an effete father with another phallic female, a further comical incongruity, but also to deromanticise the protagonist, an important element within Bazin's process of characterisation. He thus admitted a preference for flawed characters—«Il vaut mieux montrer des salauds» (Crant 1974: 260; It's better to portray swine)—a trend driven to extremes when, in the final chapter

of *Vipère*, the boy makes hatred into his raison d'être: «Haïr, c'est s'affirmer. Je suis, je vis, j'attaque, je détruis» (Bazin 1948: 263; To hate is to assert oneself. I am, I live, I attack, I destroy), which statement of adolescent rebellion pertinently supports the view that he is as yet only a «demi-révolté» (Anglade 1962: 153).

The boy will certainly outgrow this attitude, but only when establishing his own family in *La Mort du Petit Cheval*, *Vipère's* sequel, where he concludes by basing his life's project on joy rather than odium. In the meantime, his childhood escapades, whether conducted alone or set within a sometimes uneasy fraternal clan, significantly dubbed the «Cartel des Gosses» (Bazin 1948: 119; the clique of the youngsters), do retain some of that guileless appeal identified by Feuerhahn. The saintly six-year-old, horrified that he has not crossed himself correctly, expiates his sin by self-harming in secret, while years later Jean's sexual awakening, one patently more daring than the sly glances of Vingtras, still has to confront a sublime ignorance concerning female anatomy: is the vagina set vertically or horizontally on the body, say of Madeleine, the village girl with whom he loses his virginity? Innocence on this scale provides a marked contrast with the absurdities of a childhood vitiated by a sadistic mother and the vengeful desires inspired in her son, while preserving some traces of the nostalgia motivating an author whose ideal of happiness purportedly remained «une éternelle enfance» (Anglade 1962: 223): whether conscious or not, an echo of Dickens is again discernible.⁹

Georges Duhamel (1884-1966) was a generation older than Bazin (1911-1996) and a writer whose highly traditional mode of fiction led to a loss of popularity in the era of experimental novels and the *nouveau roman*.¹⁰ That, however, concerns me less than the fact that in the *Chronique des Pasquier*, and particularly its first volume *Le Notaire du Havre*, he produced his own account of a difficult childhood, but one where the enemy figure is the father, Raymond Pasquier, a domineering, opinionated, philandering reactionary, but one supported throughout his life by a long-suffering, loving, home-making spouse. What bonds them is mutual need, their family life and an endless predicament concerning a legacy to be delivered by the eponymous notary in Le Havre, whose handling of the affair could and ultimately does, at least in part, secure their finances.

The oedipal pattern of filial enmity is here more traditional in being directed against the paterfamilias. However, the narrator-protagonist Laurent Pasquier, yet again based on his author, announces early on that his aim is neither to punish nor to preach («J'écris ces mémoires non pour édifier ou châtier qui que ce soit»: Duhamel 1933: 32-3; I am writing these memoirs not to enlighten or to punish anyone at all),¹¹ though one could in fact forgive him either recourse. For, from the start, the father is portrayed as selfish, greedy, miserly, irascible, impatient, self-righteous and pretentious, examples being his one-time desire to adopt the nobiliary particle by calling himself Du Pasquier, and his refusal to admit that they live in a cul de sac—theirs has to be the *rue Vandamme*. Nor is he above denouncing ugliness wherever he finds it, bald men and nose-pickers included, while also game to censure a man who dares to yawn in public («Allons, monsieur [...] vous n'avez donc pas honte de nous montrer tout ce que vous avez dans la bouche?»: 140; Come sir, have you no shame in showing us all that you've got in your mouth?), or to use his whistle to interrupt a theatrical performance which he claims is defending immorality. Otherwise, and more significantly, he becomes a symbol of the complacent ideology of the 19th century whereby science would solve the world's problems: in due course, and after long efforts (he is not an especially intelligent man), he will manage like Duhamel's own father to become a qualified if less than prosperous doctor.

Meanwhile, and for the duration of several volumes, the stuff of the narrative remains the relationship between an initially innocent child, Laurent, and this ridiculous, and indeed largely contemptible parent, Duhamel creating a continuous incongruity between the point of

view of the mature narrator and that of the boy he once was. In particular, we note the son's confused awareness of family troubles overheard from his bed at night, plus his eventual loss of faith in his dad, which comes not when he uncovers his adultery, as will occur in a later volume, but when he learns that the man has false teeth. Having always found him so young and handsome, he has now glimpsed the old man he would one day become, despite his efforts to conceal the same from his family.

That family is numerous, comprising in the end five children, though Pasquier père always professed to have admired more the two others who died in infancy. Opposition to the parents is, however, less evident than among the Rezeau children, Duhamel, preferring, unlike Vallès and Bazin, to stress the clan nature of the family, a point fully consonant with the loving portrayal of his own kin (Duhamel 1922: *passim.*). They are united rather than divided, be it in their relative poverty, say at the end of chapter 14 where the mother decides henceforth to dispense with lodgers, or in their relative security, as the book concludes with the receipt of a diminished sum from the *notaire*: «Nous repartions, brisés, déçus, saouls de fatigue et de souffrances [...] pour d'autres combats» (Duhamel 1933: 280; Broken, disillusioned, drunk with fatigue and suffering, we moved on to other struggles). So the comical clash of generations within the novel can shift in focus from the scapegoated father to a congeries of grotesque outsiders like the vicious M. Wasselin, with his obsessive yearning to change jobs, Mme Courtois, who cheats Laurent at cards while insistently referring to him in the feminine, or her clearly senile brother, victim of an insatiable need to sit on the Pasquiers' piano-stool and make it creak so as to prove that he is not deaf.

That the children begin to laugh at him in secret («à la dérobée»: 260) need scarcely surprise us, but the pattern ensures that the novel is punctuated rather than dominated by satires of a ridiculous father with whom, as in the case of Folcoche, the narrator's relationship is not unambiguous: in the third volume of the *Chronique des Pasquier*, Joseph, Laurent's elder brother, will note how similar is the latter to Raymond (Duhamel 1934: 40-1). Absurd and monstrous in his faults, irresponsibly “pursuing his pleasures and indulging his temper” (Carter 1948: 286), the father is, moreover, capable of rising above them, coaxing our guilty admiration as he defies a no-trespassing sign on a family walk, or earning a more genuine esteem when, in a scene of Jovian wrath, he sees off the landlord come to expel the ill-fated Wasselin family whose father has been gaoled. The episode is memorable not least for its evocation of one of Europe's greatest comic heroes («Il a toujours été maigre, mais il était en ce temps-là, presque aussi maigre que l'illustre gentilhomme de la Manche»: Duhamel 1933: 268; He had always been skinny, but at that time he was almost as skinny as the famous gentleman from La Mancha). The incongruous appeal of this Balzacian figure has not passed unnoticed; for Santelli he is at once «extraordinaire» but «sympathique» (Santelli 1947: 119), as his children might well have concurred.

They are, after all, but children, hence their delight in the chronotope of the open street with its varied odours and activities, a straight reference to Duhamel's own attachment to his Parisian upbringing. Hence also Laurent's infantile fantasies concerning the shadowy *notaire* whom he imagines stalking round their home at night, plus his associated illusion concerning the meaning of Le Havre: «Un havre ... C'est l'endroit où il y a le Notaire» (127; A harbour, it's where the lawyer lives), a reply, that, coming in class from a somnolent Laurent, is treated with significant indulgence by his geography teacher. He knows that children bear with them many hidden concerns («toutes sortes de soucis cachés») which one does best to respect, however amusing one may find them.

Finally Céline, weirdly aberrant in his political opinions,¹² not to mention his family relationships, but a man certainly capable of great comic writing, the vast majority of which derives yet again from a caricatured distortion of his own life. After the great success of *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932), he determined in *Mort à crédit* to write the story of his

childhood, situated largely in one of the old artisanal and commercial arcades of central Paris, a chronotope vitiated by poverty and filth, plus the envy and spite of the neighbours. This environment offers few of the delights of street life as enjoyed by Jacques Vingtras and the Pasquier kids. Moreover, within the family one notes again the clan division of child vs. parents, generated in this case by mistreatments stemming from both father and mother, though the former's are far worse: «De mon côté je préfère personne. Pour les gueulements et la connerie, je les trouve pareils ... Elle cogne moins fort, mais plus souvent. Lequel que j'aimerais mieux qu'on tue ? Je crois que c'est encore mon papa» (Céline 1981: 564; As for me, I prefer neither one. They are just the same in their yelling and their dumbness. She hits less hard but oftener. Which would I like to have killed? I guess it would still be my Dad).

One can well see why, for this *papa* is a petty tyrant similar to the Pasquier father, being violently ill-tempered and domineering at home but ill at ease in society, mendacious, jealous of the child he mistreats, and, interestingly given Céline's own politics, vituperatively hostile to all the classic targets of the Right, including Jews and Freemasons (688-9). So the scapegoat figure is set up for our mirthful rejection, and one may well feel inclined, here as in all these novels, to join the child's side in a perpetual conflict of generations, even though the protagonist Ferdinand has enough unpleasant characteristics to render such a choice problematic. With vile personal habits including a filthy bottom and a taste for voyeurism and masturbation, also lazy and uncooperative both at home and at work, he has been judged "unmitigatedly in the wrong by any normal standards" (Fraser 1967: 106), and in one crucial episode, like the Rezeau children, even comes close to actually killing his parent. Can one therefore legitimately turn him into a *pharmakos* in reverse, that is, a (comic) hero with whom one identifies at the expense of the entire world?¹³ Only perhaps by suspending a good number of value judgments in favour of a clan-based satire against the oldsters *per se*.

And, much like the Pasquiers' neighbours, these oldsters, be they inside or outside the family, do form a clan that is easily mocked. The shopkeepers in the *passage* are as unprepossessing as the urine-flooded street they inhabit, in particular taking petty delight in the crises they overhear from Ferdinand's home. Then, among his relations we meet the flirty womanising uncle Arthur who seeks to beguile his mother Clémence, the gaily self-indulgent aunt Héléne who makes a fortune by whoring in St Petersburg, the crazy uncle Rodolphe who sleeps for days beside his wife's corpse, plus the maternal uncle Edouard, an enthusiastic if disaster-prone motorist, but throughout Ferdinand's childhood his good-hearted redeemer and a character far less easily seen in negative terms. More fully characterised is the oddball J. P. Merrywin, head of a language school where the boy is sent to learn English. Dressing like a clown, patrolling the countryside on his tricycle, and ugly to a point perhaps exaggerated by Ferdinand's jealousy, he forms a bizarre pairing with his wife, the one genuine beauty in the whole book, and that more absurdly still when, just prior to her suicide, she throws herself on her pupil and they make frantic and incongruous love. After all, he is still young enough to be her child and, despite being her pupil for weeks, has never actually spoken to her.

Then there is the yet more memorable crank Roger-Martin Courtial des Pereires for whom Ferdinand is sent to work after the assault on his father. An acquaintance of Edouard, the man is owner of the *Zélé*, a somewhat outdated balloon used for public displays, and editor of *Le Génitron*, a magazine for inventors, both of which enterprises fail, though perhaps less catastrophically than the farm where he planned as a last resort to grow electrically forced potatoes. Self-deluding in his undertakings and impractical despite his interests, also sly, mean, cowardly, addicted to gambling and masochistic whippings, Courtial could be seen as another example of Céline's disgust with humanity, an attitude which amply feeds the black humour abounding in the novel. One intuitively advances that the attempt at experimental agronomy will fail, but not, perhaps, that its owner will in consequence blow his own head off. That said, the description of his decapitated corpse is a high point of

humour noir, as challenging to one's sensibility as the details of Ferdinand's defecations and vomiting: «Il avait plus de chasses du tout... Ils étaient sautés... Son nez était comme à l'envers... C'est plus qu'un trou sa figure», etc. (Céline 1981: 104; His peepers were totally gone. They'd burst out. His nose was like upside down. His face was just a hole).

What is remarkable, however, is the reaction of his wife. Another grotesque individual, moustachioed and bearded since her hysterectomy and given to pipe-smoking and violent denunciations of her husband, she collapses into near hysteria over his dead body, addressing it with classic endearments like «mon chou» and «mon pauvre amour» (my dear, my poor love). Like many a married couple they have been bonded far more deeply than one might infer from outward appearances, and for all his faults one could say the same of Ferdinand. He has seen through Courtial, but never deserts him, remaining dutiful in helping to take care of his cadaver, and we might also have appreciated his indulgence towards his final classmate at the language school, the severely retarded Jonkind, addicted to pyromania, thieving and a ferocious delight in football, but accompanied on their long walks by Ferdinand alone. Another outright lunatic is the insane Chanoine Fleury whose plans for the exploration of underwater treasures seal the fate of the *Génitron*: he is a conman known to the police and violently detained by them at the very moment when the scheme was to come to fruition. Even so, when he turns up, unexpectedly but farcically, at the farm after Courtial's death, Ferdinand at least secures and indeed pays for his return to Paris.

Once back in the capital, and now victim of a virtual nervous breakdown, the lad is taken in by the caring uncle Edouard, who shelters and consoles him, sharing the most genuinely positive relationship depicted in the novel, one further proof that Céline's anti-humanism has firm limits.¹⁴ The contrast with Duhamel, proponent if not victim of a vapid humanism (Zéphir 1971: 4), is more than striking. The clan Pasquier survives its ordeals intact; at the end of *Mort à crédit*, Ferdinand's family is dislocated, perhaps permanently. Laurent will struggle throughout the remaining volumes of the *Chronique* to achieve outstanding success as a research scientist; Ferdinand, as adult narrator, rejects his own medical vocation as «cette merde» (Céline 1981: 511; that shit), while his childhood personality has been marked by faults, in particular sexual, to which his duhamélien counterpart grows up seemingly immune.

The said contrast may even have been conscious,¹⁵ but it is not total. Threatened by a similarly impossible father, and faced by a comparable assemblage of weirdoes in the older generation at large, both boys struggle to cope, but with an ineptitude that may have us smile with a humour of recognition both at their simplified view of the world and at their inadequate preparation for handling it. Otherwise, like Jacques Vingtras, Ferdinand can escape into chronotopes where he can express himself on his own terms, even if, encouraged by his urchin companion Popaul, this might lead him into prostitution with paedophiles and does indeed lead him into trouble when he uses his chum's catapult to smash a public clock. The echo of the Mardi gras scene in *L'Enfant* is compelling, while the naughtiness has its own appeal, tempting us once more to side with Ferdinand against the adults who punish him on the spot, and the father who unleashes a hurricane of reprisal once he returns home.

Popaul, rightly seen as a false friend, has abandoned him to his fate, but his pal admits to the reader that there were other issues, including the attitudes and irresponsibility induced by their urban rambling («l'air [...] et la vadrouille»: 605; fresh air and strolling), and, with redeeming honesty, he seeks no excuses. Boys will be boys, after all, and indeed girls will be girls, witness the brief adventure Ferdinand has with Gwendoline, a lass he met en route to the Merrywins, and with whom he enjoys a grotesque night-time courtship significantly sited after a harbourside fair. The depiction of an English Saturday night seems at first rankly unattractive («la foule était dense, et marron et onduleuse avec une odeur de vase et de tabac et d'anthracite»: 705; the crowd was thick, brown and snaky with a smell of mud, tobacco and coal), but it is not unappealing to Ferdinand: «Ça me plaît bien moi l'endroit du quai...

l'espèce de foire et les gens vagues» (706; For me I like the quayside, the kind of fair and the dubious people), and having been served a copious fry-up by his companion, he entrusts her with his suitcase and then resumes his *vadrouille* only to return hours later with her still waiting, all stock sold bar a small piece of cheese which they share before moving off to enjoy more intimate adventures. He never speaks to Gwendoline, having had enough words within the family, but their final parting hours later at the college door remains affectionate and to a degree affecting, while at the same time comical both to the bystanders and themselves: she is in tears and he consoling, but «on se bidonnait tous pour finir, tellement tout ça devenait con» (718; We all ended up killing ourselves laughing, it all got so daft).

To conclude, in all cases we are dealing with a dysfunctional family in which the child (always a boy) struggles, and to varying degrees fails, to come to terms with a parent or parents ridiculous in their self-interest and lack of consideration. So they become targets in a value-based satire driven to various conclusions but whose value basis remains the same, namely the need for a love within the family that includes a degree of indulgence towards children. As readers we are expected to share these attitudes, surely not a hard task, while in the meantime being invited to sympathise with the younger generation in a clan-based satire which, particularly in Céline and Bazin, targets the oldsters on any terms, even to the point of homicide, which, with its attendant leaven of black humour, has us laughing guiltily if indeed we laugh at all. Moreover, in all cases we encounter a genuine and even gratuitous human bonding of the protagonist with various empathic souls (Jacques Vingtras with his girl cousins, Jean Rezeau with Templerot, etc.) which cuts across clan barriers, reaching to a common human instinct apparent even in Céline. One cannot thus simply conclude that “Céline’s people [...] make war against one another using spite and treachery” (Slochower 1944: 335),¹⁶ witness his prelude to *Mort à crédit* where the mature narrator pauses to regret the death of his concierge Madame Bérengé recalled as «une douce et gentille et fidèle amie» (Céline 1981: 511; A sweet, kind and faithful friend).

Moreover, the boys themselves remain stubbornly able to survive, and indeed to escape at various times into chronotopes where their own comical self-expression can emerge, even if it has Jean Rezeau collapse in a drunken stupor or Ferdinand endure the frantic embraces of Nora Merrywin or of Gwendoline. These are, if not golden moments, then, at least cherished memories which connect variously with our own sometimes uncomprehending discovery of adult life. To that extent, thank heavens, the child lives on in all of us.

Notes

¹ See Gruner 1997 for a modern attempt to generalise the aggression theory.

² Dupuy (1931: 405) places *L'Enfant* second in a chronological list of over 150 novels treating the child, this “personnage nouveau”, and which spreads over fifty years from 1876 to include Daudet, Anatole France, Proust, Giraudoux, Alain Fournier, Gide and Duhamel.

³ Arvin (1939: 380) finds Vallès’s caricatures unfittingly exaggerated.

⁴ The term denotes a custom long-established in many French provinces, but particularly the Auvergne, whereby the local saint was celebrated with a procession, sporting contests, a banquet and an auctioning of the title of king or queen for the day. The essentially rural tradition continued long through the 19th century.

⁵ See A. Stil in Vallès 1985: 6: «Ce rire a mille formes et facettes, amer, ému, tendre, indigné, nerveux au bord de la témérité, etc.» (The laughter has a thousand shapes and angles: bitter, emotive, tender, indignant, nervous to the point of effrontery.)

⁶ Cartouche was a master criminal, tortured and executed in 1721, but whose exploits rapidly spawned a legend sustained into the 20th century in the form of songs, poems, plays and television adaptations.

⁷ Bazin (1948: 133); Where can one be better than in the bosom of the family? Answer: anywhere at all. François Truffaut uses this joke in his short film *Antoine et Colette* (1962).

⁸ See Crant 1995: 89.

⁹ See Dickens (1948: 147): “What happiness (I thought) [...] never growing older, never growing wiser, children ever.”

¹⁰ In the tribute volume *Georges Duhamel 1884-1966*, Pierre-Henri Simon opines that his brand of *humanisme* seemed outdated in the post-war era (Anon. 185), while Arlette Lafay 1998: 16 notes the political hostility engendered by his reluctance to censure collaborationist writers.

¹¹ The point is mitigated, however, when the narrator declares in chapter 13 that acrimony and animosity (*rancune* and *ressentiment*) did figure within his initial motivation (190).

¹² Hewitt (2003: 31-2) notes how contemporary writers expressed doubts about the sincerity of his anti-Semitic pamphlets but also reviews some of his undoubtedly collaborationist and anti-Jewish wartime activities.

¹³ On the origins and application of this term, see Frye 1957: 48.

¹⁴ Contrast Redfern 2006: 81 for whom «L’humour de Céline [...] est anti-bonhomie, anti-charme» (Céline’s humour is anti-jovial, counter-charming).

¹⁵ See Lafay 1994: 87, on Céline’s attitude toward Duhamel.

¹⁶ An interesting example of this bonding comes at the end of an epic and rightly famous bout of vomiting to which Ferdinand falls victim on his family’s ill-fated day-trip to southern England. He voids his stomach only to be covered by the retchings of a fellow passenger which bring on further spasms. Yet they clutch to one another and embrace, throwing up in each other’s mouths despite the efforts of her husband and his father to pull them apart: «Ils comprendront jamais les choses» (Céline 1981: 624: they will never get it); but we just might.

References

- Anglade, J. (1962). *Hervé Bazin*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Anon. (1967). *Georges Duhamel 1884-1966*. Paris: Mercure de France.
- Arvin, N. C. (1939). ‘Jules Vallès’. *French Review* 12 (5), pp. 376-390.
- Bazin, H. (1948). *Vipère au poing*. Paris: Grasset.
- Boehm, K. (2013). *Charles Dickens and the Sciences of Childhood*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carter, B. G. (1948). ‘The classical aspects of Duhamel’s pessimism’. *French Review* 12 (5), pp. 283-289.
- Céline, L. – F. (1981). *Mort à crédit*, in *Romans*, vol 1. Paris: Gallimard.
- Crant, P.A. (1974). ‘Un entretien avec Hervé Bazin’. *French Review* 47 (6), pp. 254-260.
- Crant, P. A. (1995). *Hervé Bazin. Social Reflections in Fiction*. Knoxville TN: New Paradigm Press.
- Danset, F. and P. Maunoury (eds.). (2000). *Georges Duhamel parmi nous*. Cergy-Pontoise: Valhermeil.
- Dickens, C. (1948). *David Copperfield*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Duhamel, G. (1922). *Les Plaisirs et les Jeux*. Paris: Mercure de France.
- Duhamel, G. (1933). *Le Notaire du Havre*. Paris: Mercure de France.

- Duhamel, G. (1934). *Vue de la terre promise*. Paris: Mercure de France.
- Dupuy, A. (1931). *Un Personnage nouveau du roman français: L'Enfant*. Paris: Hachette.
- Feuerhahn, N. (1993). *Le Comique et l'enfance*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Fraser, J. (1967). 'The darkest journey: Céline's Death on the instalment plan'. *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 8 (1), pp. 96-110.
- Frye, N. (1957). *Anatomy of Criticism*. London: OUP.
- Gruner, C. R. (1997). *The Game of Humor*. London: Transaction Publishers.
- Hewitt, N. (2003). 'Céline: The Success of the *Monstre Sacré* in Postwar France'. *Substance* 32 (3), pp. 29-42.
- Knapp, B. L. (1972). *Georges Duhamel*. New York: Twayne.
- Lafay, A. (1994). 'Voyage au bout de l'enfer'. *Autrement* 142, pp. 85-91.
- Lafay, A. (1998). *Duhamel revisité*. Paris: Minard.
- Redfern, W. (2006). '« Tu Charries!» L'Exagération chez Vallès et Céline'. *Revue de lectures et d'études vallésiennes* 36, pp. 75-87.
- Redfern, W. (1992). *Feet First: Jules Vallès*. Glasgow: University of Glasgow Press.
- Santelli, C. (1947). *Georges Duhamel: l'homme, l'œuvre*. Paris: Bordas.
- Slochower, H. (1944). 'Satanism in Céline', *Books Abroad* 8 (4), pp. 332-337.
- Vallès, J. (1969). *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1. Paris: Le Club Diderot.
- Vallès, J. (1985). *Le Bachelier*. Paris: Le Livre de Poche.
- Vitoux, F. (1988). *La Vie de Céline*. Paris: Grasset.
- Werlen, D. (2006). *Étude sur Jules Vallès, L'enfant*. Paris: Ellipses.
- Zéphir, J. J. (1971). *Duhamel devant la critique contemporaine*. Paris: Archives des Lettres Modernes.
- Zimmermann, D. (1998). *Jules Vallès l'irrégulier*. Paris: Le Cherche midi.