

Kerr, G. (2019) Shattering the middle ground: violence and the imperatives of reportage in Félix Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes*. *Contemporary French Civilization*, 44(4), pp. 311-331. (doi: [10.3828/cfc.2019.18](https://doi.org/10.3828/cfc.2019.18)).

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Deposited on: 30 January 2019

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ABSTRACTS

Shattering the middle ground: violence and the imperatives of reportage in Félix

Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes*

ENGLISH

Félix Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes* are a selection of witty and darkly subversive rewritings of news agency reports which he produced for a column appearing in the daily newspaper *Le Matin* in 1906. Although Fénéon was principally known to *belle époque* readers for his art criticism, these *faits divers* are notable for their highly distinctive treatment of the aporia of violence. Situating the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* in the long wake of the 1894 Procès des Trente, this article firstly explores the subtle ways in which these texts reflect pervasive anxieties about militant anarchism and the extension of criminality into new geographical and social *milieux*. Secondly, adopting a word-and-image approach, it contends that Fénéon's implicit emphasis on the difficulty of accounting for violence in verbal terms merits comparison with features of the graphic art of his contemporary Félix Vallotton, arguing that both artist and writer present an acerbic critique of an emergent *journalisme d'information* and the values of reportorial objectivity.

FRANÇAIS

Rédigées pour une rubrique paraissant dans le quotidien *Le Matin* en 1906, les *Nouvelles en trois lignes* de Félix Fénéon sont constituées de textes provenant de la réécriture satirique et subversive de dépêches d'agence. Bien que Fénéon fût principalement connu auprès du lectorat de la Belle Époque en qualité de critique d'art, ces faits divers se distinguent par un

traitement singulier de l'aporie de la violence. Tout en insistant sur l'importance du Procès des Trente de 1894 pour une analyse des *Nouvelles en trois lignes*, cet article évalue la grande subtilité avec laquelle ces textes brefs se font l'écho d'une inquiétude généralisée à l'égard de l'anarchisme militant et de l'extension de la criminalité dans de nouveaux secteurs géographiques et sociaux. Deuxièmement, en adoptant une approche à la fois textuelle et visuelle, cet article soutient que la mise en évidence par Fénéon de la difficulté de rendre compte verbalement de cette violence peut être rapprochée de certains aspects de l'œuvre graphique de son contemporain Félix Vallotton. Tous deux, en effet, effectuent une critique acerbe de la presse à grande diffusion et des prétentions à l'objectivité du journalisme, en plein développement à cette époque.

ARTICLE

Shattering the middle ground: violence and the imperatives of reportage in Félix

Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes*

Among the more fertile strands of recent work within nineteenth-century French studies is that which concerns the relations between literature and the institution of the press. Led by scholars such as Guillaume Pinson and Marie-Ève Thérenty, and drawing on earlier studies by Marc Angenot, this research explores questions of genetics, intertextuality, sociocriticism, and the category of the everyday, while also enriching contemporary understanding of the poetics of realism. As Pinson argues, the nineteenth century is characterised by the emergence of what he terms an “imaginaire médiatique”, that is, a particular set of ideas and representations which frame the experience of a public increasingly immersed within the newspaper’s commentary on the social world (11). One contention issuing from such scholarship is thus that, dating from the emergence of the modern press, reality has undergone a process of mediatisation; in other words, it has become knowable and consumable primarily through media representations. At issue here, then, is what Edmund Birch, commenting on the work of Benedict Anderson, describes as the notion “that the media fabricates, constructs, organises a certain version of the everyday, the coherence of which must ultimately be imagined (or, rather, experienced in imagination) by the reader” (6). A key development in the newspaper’s growing purchase on social reality came at the *fin-de-siècle* in the form of the emergence of the *presse d’information*. Exemplified by titles such as *Le Petit Journal* (1863), or *Le Matin* (1884), this new strand of periodical privileged values of reportage, factual information, and *actualité*, and, with the popularization of the telegram, much of its content was sourced from news agency dispatches such as Havas. The programme outlined in the first issue of the daily *Le Matin* is, in this respect, indicative:

Le Matin sera un journal singulier ; un journal qui n'aura aucune opinion politique ; un journal qui ne sera inféodé à aucune banque, et qui ne vendra son patronage à aucune affaire ; un journal qui ne dépendra d'aucune coterie littéraire ; un journal qui n'appartiendra à aucune école artistique ; un journal d'informations télégraphiques universelles et vraies ; un journal ennemi du scandale ; un journal honnête, hardi et absolument indépendant. (1884)

By contrast with its counterpart, the *journal d'opinion*, the *journal d'information* adopts an editorially neutral position to which, it is argued in this article, can be assigned the spatial metaphor of a middle ground or *terrain d'entente*. Notionally uncoloured by any ideological orientation, the *journal d'information* minimises commentary and emphasises instead criteria of universality, veracity and objectivity. In this way it purports to connect more readily to the experience of the everyman.

The *Nouvelles en trois lignes*, which provide the focus of the present article, are a selection of witty and darkly subversive rewritings of news agency reports which aesthete, anarchist and art critic Félix Fénéon produced for a column appearing in *Le Matin*, and which, it is argued here, subtly contest the founding values of the journal as outlined in the above programme. Running from May 1906 to the end of that year, these anonymously authored micronarratives seem deeply removed from the concerns of the art critical writing for which Fénéon was best known, given his status as a regular contributor to publications such as *Le Chat noir*, *La Revue indépendante* or *L'Art moderne*. The *Nouvelles en trois lignes* abound in diverse instances of quotidian violence: domestic disputes and spousal violence, road and railway accidents, suicides, strikes and so on. Fénéon had already experimented with these themes in his column *Hourras, tollés et rires maigres* for Zo d'Axa's anarchist weekly newspaper *L'En-dehors*, as, for instance, in the following example: "Ces républiques sud-américaines – si décriées –, elles sont parfois de bon exemple: Juan Omevedo, général et planteur, et qui, à ce double titre, avait mérité le surnom l'Hyène, a été exécuté par ses ouvriers, le 18 avril, dans les rues de Las Feques, à ce même double titre. (1^{er} Mai 1892)"

(Fénéon 1970 2, 899).” However, the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* exhibit a much more highly compressed structure than the writer’s earlier efforts. Totalling over 1200 in number, these variously amplified *faits divers* draw on dispatches attributed to the Havas news Agency, as well as telegrams (*dépêches particulières* or ‘D.p.’, as they are designated in the columns of *Le Matin*) and letters sent in a private capacity from sources around the country. Though, as Wolfgang Asholt notes, in a survey of differing published editions of the *Nouvelles* compiled by Jean Paulhan, Joan U. Halperin and Patrick and Roman Wald Lasowski, in the absence of a manuscript, it remains difficult to say with absolute certainty if all of the *Nouvelles* included in these different editions can conclusively be attributed to Fénéon (510).¹ In these circumstances, it seems sensible also to exercise caution with regard to the authenticity of every one of the hundreds of epistolary and telegraphic sources of the *Nouvelles*. These caveats aside, the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* remain remarkable for their artful (re-)arrangement of the reported events’ constitutive elements: names, locations, dates, and so on. In a manner consistent with the objectives of the emergent *journalisme d’information* in which *Le Matin* played a leading role, the author of the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* enacts the reportorial compulsion to particularize through the naming of protagonists and the assignment of motive. As Marie-Ève Thériault explains, *Le Matin* “prétend offrir un journalisme “objectif” et, pour ce faire, privilégier le fait sur le commentaire, la chose vue sur la parole, l’information sur l’opinion, le *scoop* sur le feuilleton et le reportage sur la chronique” (57). Yet, as this article argues, whether it be in their thematic preoccupations or in the subversive textual devices they deploy, the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* exploit violence as a means to playfully upset the above reportorial conventions, and indeed to delay, withhold or even precipitate narrative closure.

‘UNE VIOLENCE [...] IMPRÉVISIBLE, INCONTRÔLABLE, INASSIMILABLE’

Though detailed studies of Fénéon's micronarratives are few in number, notable article-length analyses include those by Daniel Grojnowski (1991) and Jean-Pierre Bertrand (1997), both of whom attend to Fénéon's caustic humour and syntactical artistry in the context of developments in mass communication and the stylistics of the press dispatch. Jean-Pierre Bernard, meanwhile, adopts a more thematically-based approach which considers the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* and other examples of Fénéon's journalism in the light of the author's anarchist views (1997). Drawing on aspects of the approaches adopted in these studies, the present article argues that Fénéon's micronarratives offer a subtle and far-reaching critique of the values of the emergent mass press and the latter's escalating purchase on social experience.

Over a decade prior to the publication of the *Nouvelles en trois lignes*, Fénéon had appeared before the courts along with a group of anarchist sympathisers who included the militants Jean Grave and Émile Pouget, and the painters Ivan Aguéli and Maximilien Luce. The first half of the 1890s had been marked by the bombings and assassinations with which the anarchist movement came to be associated in the public mindset, most notably following the laying of explosives by Émile Henry and Ravachol, and the Italian Sante Geronimo Caserio's assassination of President Sadi Carnot (Merriman). The subsequent enforcement of the *lois scélérates* saw Fénéon and his fellow accused charged with "association de malfaiteurs"; detonators and a quantity of mercury had been found in Fénéon's possession at his workplace at the War Ministry. Though it led to Fénéon's ultimate acquittal, the resulting Procès des Trente of 1894 points to some abiding anxieties over criminality and the nature of political dissidence in *belle époque* society, as Uri Eisenzweig has shown in his book *Fictions de l'anarchisme* (10); indeed, throughout the period, *délinquance* and militant anti-authoritarianism are habitually conflated in journalistic and judicial discourses, as is captured succinctly in a remark by the public prosecutor Fabre at the 1913 trial of the Bonnot gang, a

group of anarchists responsible for automobile armed robberies: “L’anarchie est une longue suite de crimes et délits de droit commun” (Kalifa 161). The approach adopted here is more draws on Eisenzweig’s suggestive account of the terrorist attacks of this period as “une forme de violence sans précédent: aveugle, absurde, incompréhensible dans ses origines comme dans sa finalité et, de ce fait, imprévisible, incontrôlable, inassimilable” (10). Substituting electoral politics for *la propagande par le fait*, Eisenzweig argues that the anarchists determined to subvert representational convention, in literary as much as in electoral terms; theirs was a “rejet radical et absolu de toute médiation sociale” (11). It is not the purpose of the present article to account for Fénéon’s avowed anarchist sympathies², but Eisenzweig’s notion of a kind of violence which resists assimilation according to habitual categories of understanding is one which is of persistent relevance to the project of the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* some ten years later, albeit in the form of a more tacit *hantise* which shadows the inscription of meaning in mercurial and unsettling ways.

Undoubtedly, anarchist violence is directly thematised in some of the *nouvelles*, just as it had been in *Hourras*, *tollés et rires maigres*, and Fénéon is careful to insist on the elusiveness of the authors of these acts: “Ayant trouvé sur son seuil un engin suspect, l’imprimeur Friquet, d’Aubusson, a déposé une plainte contre inconnu. (*Dép. part.*)” (Fénéon 1990, 40). However, my argument here is neither that the *nouvelles* can be taken as a straightforward expression of an anarchist outlook, nor that their motivation lies solely in the lingering memory of the violence of the *ère des attentats*. Rather, both the *Nouvelles* and the attacks can themselves be situated within a longer reflexion which addresses modernity’s characteristically unsettled response to historical violence. A defining feature of the experience of modernity, as Debarati Sanyal has argued in an important study, is that History “situates us in contradictory relations to the causes, deployments and effects of violence – as witnesses and victims, to be sure, but also as accomplices, bystanders, and executioners” (

Sanyal 15). The point is of particular significance in the context of the present article, when one considers that the policy of institutions such as the *presse d'information* is, implicitly at least, by dint of its claims to objectivity and to an unfalteringly neutral editorial position, to assuage or conceal such inherently contradictory facets of modern experience. And it is all the more so important for a discussion of the author of the *Nouvelles en trois lignes*, who, as we shall see later in this article, was extremely conscious of the contestatory potency of obstructing the reportorial drive towards the identification of protagonists and the parsing of cause and effect.

According to Sanyal, the violence of modernity finds its counterpart in a distinctively oppositional literary mode whose markers are irony, self-reflexivity and laughter. Such a mode begins with the poet of a text such as “L’Héautontimorouménos”, Charles Baudelaire, who “envisioned violence, not as a monolithic force wielded by identifiable perpetrators, but as a complex and dynamic operation that takes place at multiple sites and through diverse media” (2). While Sanyal’s analysis takes in a range of writings by authors such as Rachilde, Albert Camus and Virginie Despentes, each of whom engages with Baudelaire’s oppositional legacy, the present article proposes Fénéon’s *Nouvelles en trois lignes* as a potential addition to this genealogy, since it betrays a comparable concern with violence as just such an anonymous, non-monolithic force.

Thus, although some of the *nouvelles* explicitly evoke militant anarchist action, the majority of Fénéon’s narratives are inhabited by a more abiding sense of disquiet related to that “spatial paranoia” which Patrick McGuinness sees as peculiar to Symbolist writing dating from the period of the attacks of the 1890s (810). Though sharing in its obscure origins, what the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* deal in would seem to be the obverse of the internal unease identified by McGuinness; while the interiors of Materlinck and Mallarmé, with their attenuation of human presence are characterised by “a peculiar Symbolist species

of tremulous, menacing unhappening” (810), it is arguably the *outside* which in Fénéon’s *Nouvelles* most obviously carries a connotation of threat, albeit one which seems to emanate from everywhere and nowhere in particular. By 1906, the specifically terrorist menace had diminished, although the effects of the attacks continued to be felt, as Jean-Pierre Bernard writes: “En France, la vague d’attentats une fois retombée, la psychose de l’attentat, la peur de la bombe, mèche et dynamite sévirent pendant une bonne décennie” (165). Key, here, is the sense of a persistent anxiety, not with respect to a substantial, named anarchist threat but with the lingering potential of the latter, that is, with the instruments and the effects of devastating physical force.

It is in this way that the protagonists of the micronarratives seem perpetually exposed to a very excess of happening; Fénéon’s column-fillers appeal to a more diffuse sentiment of foreboding wherein individuals appear worryingly prey to the vagaries of place and moment:

Hier soir, rue Saint-Bon, V. Choine, 15 ans, a reçu dans la cuisse une balle qui a dû être tirée – pourquoi? – d’une maison voisine. (71)

- Cassant la vitre du wagon, une pierre a crevé l’œil à un voyageur, train Bayonne-Toulouse. On stoppa. Plus personne (71)

Long before Roland Barthes’s assertion that the *fait divers* displays an aberrant causality and an inherently spectacular quality,³ examples such as these mark out their protagonists’ terrain as one of anonymous threat or risk. That terrain is not simply the physical outdoors of streets, riverbanks and railway crossings, but also pertains to the kinds of exteriority connoted in the placenames of colony, region and suburb which situate the action of so many entries.

Journalistic convention dictates that colonial placenames deemed unfamiliar (“Aïn-el-Turk (Oran)” (117); “Joinville, près Bida” (126)) and their regional counterparts (“Vagney (Vosges)” (113); ‘Cléden (Finistère)” (114)) require directive parentheses or other kinds of

qualification;⁴ the insinuation here is that such places belong to a worryingly alien outside, where subaltern figures of vagabonds⁵ and Arabs⁶ may lurk. Likewise, an earlier cultural imaginary had situated crime within the inner city, with the latter's connotations of disease and secrecy. However, as the recurrence of place names such as Saint-Denis, Courbevoie and Argenteuil shows, the *belle époque* marks an evolution of this anxiety, as fears over urban growth and social change combine to create a fixation with a new kind of crime reaching into the suburbs of the capital.⁷ A new imaginary of risk emerges in which habitual spatial parameters are subject to displacement.

Fénéon was exceptionally alert to the functioning of those parameters in the public consciousness and adept at manipulating them, as is shown in the transcript of his trial during the Procès des Trente. Under questioning by the chairman of the court with regard to the detonators which were found to be in his possession, the critic manages, with exceptional agility and drollery, to mock the former's attempts to physically pinpoint his activities and whereabouts:

Le président de la Cour : « Vous avez dit que vous croyiez que ces détonateurs n'étaient pas des engins explosifs. Monsieur Girard a fait des expériences prouvant qu'ils étaient dangereux. »

F. F. : « Cela prouve que je me trompais. »

Le Président de la Cour : « il est établi que vous vous entouriez de Cohen et d'Orthiz. »

F. F. : « Pour entourer quelqu'un, il faut au moins trois personnes. (Rires). »

Le Président de la Cour : « On vous a vu causer avec des anarchistes derrière un réverbère. »

F. F. : « Pouvez-vous me dire, Monsieur le Président, où ça se trouve derrière un réverbère ? »

Le Président du Cour : « Interrogé pendant l'instruction, votre mère a déclaré que votre père les avait trouvés dans la rue. »

F. F. : « Cela se peut bien. »

Le Président de la Cour : « Cela ne se peut pas. On ne trouve pas des détonateurs dans la rue. »

F. F. : « Le juge d'instruction m'a demandé comment il se faisait qu'au lieu de les emporter au ministère, je n'eusse pas jeté ces tubes par la fenêtre. Cela démontre qu'on pouvait les trouver dans la rue. (Rires). » (qtd. in Kairos)

In his efforts to establish a line of questioning on the basis of causal logic, to assign motive and context, and, ultimately, to identify the guilty party in the case, the chairman finds himself continuously wrong-footed by the defendant's wry display. Fénéon's disdainful, equivocating responses regarding the details of his whereabouts and those of gas lamps, streets and windows, serve to underscore the semantic artifice that facilitates common-sense judgments in trial protocol. As Jean-Pierre Bertrand notes, in an observation which could pertain as much to the court transcript above as to Fénéon's journalistic activity, "tout l'art [de Fénéon] consiste à rapprocher ce qui dans le réel est distinct et éloigné, donc à rendre perméables nos catégories d'entendement" (100). The rhetorical antics which he displayed at his trial, moreover, bear some comparison with the terse wit on display at the micro-level of his prose. Yet the latter is not a simple quirk of an authorial style, but accomplishes a subversive purpose, that of obstructing the functioning of common sense. As Daniel Grojnowski has argued in his *Aux Commencements du rire moderne*, aphoristic modes of expression feature significantly in the humour of the *fin-de-siècle*, where whimsical tautologies and pithy, circular forms of reasoning are frequent: "Habités par le projet d'agir sur l'interlocuteur, de le dérouter, de le provoquer, de transformer – parfois radicalement – sa perception du monde, les aphorismes sont, en leurs réussites les plus éclatantes, des énoncés exploratoires [...]. Par le pouvoir du langage, la logique de l'argumentation, ils se plaisent à dérouter le bon sens" (143). In this way, the droll, equivocating rhetoric adopted by Fénéon at his trial has its stylistic counterpart in the *Nouvelles* in the displacement of the syntactical parameters of the *dépêche d'agence* and the disruption of its semantic mechanisms.

THE AESTHETICS OF DISASTER

Instances of this kind of syntactical meddling abound in the narratives. In the following examples, erratic alignments of subject and predicate wryly enact the peril to which various unlucky individuals find themselves exposed:

Blessé à la tête, légèrement, croyait-il, Kremer, de Pont-à-Mousson, travailla quelques heures encore, puis tomba mort. (*Dép. part.*) (42)

Son képi de forestier s'étant envolé, Christian, qui dévalait en char la pente de Vologne (Vosges), sauta et, tombant, se tua. (*Havas.*) (69)

L'alpiniste Preisweck chancelle, se ressaisit, enfin dégringola par bonds: chute mortelle que l'on regardait de Chamonix (*Havas.*) (112)

In the first two examples, the apparently desultory arrangement of adjectival clause, adverb, verb, subject pronoun, proper name and so on reflect an accumulation of circumstances which mirrors the trajectory of the unsuspecting Kremer and Christian as they lurch, literally and stylistically, towards their *chute brève*. The heaping up of accessory informational content in initial clauses has the effect of delaying the identification of the protagonist in each case; these examples are thus at considerable stylistic remove from the inverted pyramid model of journalistic writing which offered a model for the *dépêches* and which privileges the most substantially newsworthy aspects of a story (the who, what, when, where, and why) over ancillary detail (Palmer 199). The effect of this eschewal of norms of coordination or subordination is that of dynamizing, not to say, dynamiting, the mechanics of the sentence. More broadly, it serves to cast suspicion on the epistemological authority normally invested in this kind of informational proposition. As Mallarmé remarked tersely of Fénéon in the wake of the latter's arrest: 'Il n'y avait pas pour Fénéon de meilleurs détonateurs que ses articles' (qtd. in Eisenzweig 197).

That the third citation in the previous selection alludes to the presence of an observing public at the moment of the unfortunate climber's plummet is significant, as it points to a fascination which we encounter elsewhere in Fénéon's work with what Daniel Grojnowski, in his discussion of the writer in *Aux Commencements du rire moderne*, refers to as "l'esthétisation du désastre" (150). In the vignette entitled "L'Incendie" which he supplied for the 1896 anthology *Badauderies parisiennes*, Fénéon offers a darkly witty account of a fire in the capital, and the reaction of an audience of gawkers eager to share in its drama (161-64). The short piece is one of a wide range of contributions to a volume prefaced by Octave Uzanne by *Revue Blanche* collaborators, many of which offer a satirical take on aspects of daily life in the capital. As the alarm is raised in "L'Incendie", horns are sounded and crowds surge forward unpredictably through the streets at the slightest rumour of the fire, however illusory. The disaster is staged as a spectacle that is aesthetic in the first instance: Fénéon's art critical eye is in evidence, for example, as the narrator compares aspects of the scene to works by the Polish realist painter Józef Chełmoński and the Spanish artist Ulpiano Checa; the outline of firefighters' ladders against walls are likened to "lignes d'esquisse" (162), and the narrator alludes to the color-rich (if morally questionable) visual pleasures of observing the conflagration: "Ces nuits-là, d'incendie, on s'appuierait à une balustrade, au haut des rampes de la butte Montmartre, s'halluciner un peu, évoquer des feux historiques, une ville toute qui flambe, ou simplement s'intéresser à ces teintes variantes, à ces jeux de banderoles pourpres, bleues, citrines, vertes, surtout quand brûlent des magasins de décors" (163-64).⁸ More broadly, however, there are allusions to the fire's mediated status which (mis)shapes the ways in which it is commonly perceived. Thirsty though they are to behold "des actes mémorables" (163), some of the bands of onlookers are ultimately thwarted in their intent; they are "tristes de constater une fois de plus qu'ils ne seront jamais sur le théâtre de nul événement, qu'ils vivront toujours avec douze heures de retard, sinon plus: le temps,

pour les journaux, de racoler des renseignements, d'ailleurs controuvés" (162). Though at the outset, it had seemed to promise to "restituer au mot "incendie" une vertu terrifiante qu'il n'a plus dans le vocabulaire d'un Parisien" (161), this 'fire' thus in fact further underscores the weakening of common perceptions articulated through discourse; over the course of this brief account, it is revealed as merely a tissue of constructions, as "L'Incendie" illustrates how gossip, press fabrication and aesthetic representations shape the production of social experience.⁹

ACTS OF DESIGNATION, ACTS OF OBFUSCATION

This intuition of the sudden deficiency of the proper name as emerges from "L'Incendie" is also encountered in different ways in the *Nouvelles en trois lignes*. It may, for instance, connect to a failure of memory: "Une jeune femme était assise par terre, à Choisy-le-Roi. Seul mot d'identité que son amnésie lui permit de dire: "Modèle"" (48). Adopting ironic distance from conventions of reference and identification, Fénéon summons a conspicuous "car-crash of nomenclature", to borrow a formulation by Julian Barnes (para. 13 of 20), such as in the following example: "Costel trinquait. Piquet, Bilon, Nibot filèrent avec son sapin. Ils liquidèrent le cheval, burent, et à Clichy, furent coffrés" (133). Or, as is fitting of a writer ("celui qui silence", in Alfred Jarry's terms (1: 562)) of whose journalistic contributions many went unattributed, Fénéon betrays a fascination with the victims of suicide. Insofar as the unidentified corpse is unanswerable for its condition, its accessory characteristics may titillate and frustrate various kinds of readerly desire (as in the first instance below, via the brief, titillating mention of the delicateness of the young woman's underwear). However, what the examples below (the latter two rendered in *style télégraphique*) speak to most actively is a social desire for identification:

Une jeune brune au costume tailleur noir, et dont le linge, très fin, était marqué M. B. F., a été repêchée au pont de Saint-Cloud. (143)

Un homme d'une trentaine d'années s'est suicidé dans un hôtel de Mâcon. « Ne cherchez pas mon nom », a-t-il écrit. (*Dép. part.*) (64)

Deux noyés trouvés à Suresnes et au Mesnil-le-Roi. Sur l'un, papiers au nom de J. Villaume; sur l'autre, deux mouchoirs marqués L. (74)

Nuls papiers mais une bourse en or marquée A. W. et 5 francs sur le gentleman qu'un bûcheron de Vélizy découvrit, à l'odeur, pendu. (138)

In these and other examples, references to certificates, papers, tattoos, and even the initials sewn into underwear underscore how the imperatives of reportage mirror those of forensic science, given that both are embedded in a paradigm of identification. As Gérard Noiriel notes, the documentation of individual identities is a fundamental condition of the familial and social bond (4); much as is the attribution of names. Identification is thus the first, necessary act to be accomplished before the social bond can be re-affirmed in a society marked by the existence of a centralised administration and the institution of identity papers, as the Mâcon hotel guest's last request indirectly anticipates.

Yet if many of the *Nouvelles* attest to how embedded the pursuit of written traces of the individual is in the *fin-de-siècle* imaginary, others allude subtly to the limits of the accompanying emphasis on the identifying function of writing itself. In this connection, Fénéon seems keen to exploit some peculiar qualities of the pronoun, and we find the latter densely clustered in the final clauses of the following examples:

Comme Poulet, de la police de Choisy-le-Roi, voulait l'arrêter, Marquet lui arracha son sabre et l'en perça de joue en joue. (103)

Allumé par son fils, 5 ans, un pétard à signaux de train éclata sous les jupes de Mme Roger, à Clichy: le ravage y fut considérable. (126)

Une machine à battre happa Mme Peccavi, de Mercy-le-Haut (M. –et –M.). On démonta celle-là pour dégager celle-ci. Morte. (109)

Barcantier, du Kremlin, qui s'était jeté à l'eau, essaya vainement d'étrangler, aidé de son danois, un importun qui l'en tirait. (122)

Though they ostensibly serve the demands of narrative concision, each of these entries seems moreover to exploit a peculiarity of the pronoun, insofar as the latter is paradoxically both particularizing *and* anonymizing: the “l'en perça” of the first example perhaps inviting a momentary confusion of action and agent; the vague “y” of the second appearing to mock a prudish disinclination to lead the reader beneath Mme Roger's skirt; the conflation of human and machine – “celle-là” and “celle-ci” – in the third example suggesting the precipitate brutality of mechanized labour; and in the last example, the sudden, desperate tragi-comic tussle of the suicidal Barcantier, hound and would-be rescuer being heightened by the reader's own momentary disentangling of subject and object. Such apparent desire to trigger equivocation over action, object and agent, and the nature of the relations between them, goes to the core of the project of the *Nouvelles en trois lignes*.

Indeed, the text's particular treatment of the demonstrative pronoun merits consideration from this perspective. Deictics such as ‘ce’ or ‘ici’, or ‘aujourd’hui’ refer by ostension ‘concomitant à l'instance de discours contenant l'indicateur de personne’ (Benveniste 253). The peculiar characteristic of the pronoun is in this way that it only derives its discursive referent from the circumstances of its use. In some of the *Nouvelles en trois lignes*, deictisation appears to betoken a sudden inadequacy of the verbal account of an event,

since the very act of pointing or designation is coincident with what amounts to a veiling or obscuring of the referent:

En sentinelle, la nuit, au fort de Gondreville, près Toul, le réserviste Alison, du 156^e, tomba des remparts et ce lui fut mortel. (*Dép. part.*) (105)

Sous la tente, près d'Aïn-Fakroun, une 6-ans arabe a été carbonisée par la foudre, à côté de sa mère que cela rendit folle. (*Dép. part.*) (123)

Here, the somewhat loose “ce” of “ce lui fut mortel”, despite its matter-of-fact brevity, underscores the obscurity surrounding the circumstances and ultimate significance of the reservist Alison’s death; meanwhile, in the second example, the tellingly imprecise “cela” conveys something of the unspeakable horror of trauma. This is an event which cannot be reduced to its constituent elements: the intimate setting among impoverished colonial subjects, the child victim, charred body, and lightning strike. Marking what is in effect a sudden retraction of qualifying detail, the demonstrative pronoun here would seem to allude to the limits of reportorial discourse.

VALLOTTON: PICTORIAL ANALOGIES

Fénéon’s apparent attention to those limits merits comparison, at this point, with features of his art critical prose. Writing on the art of Paul Signac in an essay which appeared in *Les Hommes d’aujourd’hui* in May 1890, Fénéon stressed what he saw as the singularly abstractive qualities of the Neo-Impressionist painter’s *peinture optique*. Signac, Fénéon wrote, was adept at creating “les exemplaires spécimens d’un art à grand développement décoratif, qui sacrifie l’anecdote à l’arabesque, la nomenclature à la synthèse” (Fénéon 1970 1, 177). Signac’s *pointillisme*, with its apparent subordination of linear outline to a pictorial

technique based on the systematic juxtaposition of color spots, seemed in turn to necessitate a corresponding shift in emphasis within the verbal account of the viewer's experience.

Prompted by the new painting's reliance on an optical illusion on the part of the viewer to produce the blending of primary colors, Fénéon invokes the diminishing relevance of *nomenclature* in the work of Signac. Similarly, the Nabi Édouard Vuillard's painting "L'Album" possessed a quality which Fénéon claimed it shared with other leading painters of the time: "le dessin, ou la détermination des objets, n'a dans les tableaux que sa valeur plastique d'arabesque. Le plaisir de nommer les objets intervient sans doute dans celui que donnent les images, mais il n'en est pas l'essentiel, qui est abstrait" (Fénéon 1970 1, 258).

Fénéon himself would deploy multiple expressive strategies to suggest just such a kind of aesthetic response. In a short passage dating from 1886 devoted to Monet's paintings of the cliffs at Étretat, he displays many of those verbal idiosyncracies which, as Joan U. Halperin has shown (1980), can be considered as typical of the critic: amongst them a preference for pronominal verbs, verbal adjectives such as "surgissants" and "térébrées" and the absence of the article:

Etretat surtout sollicite ce mariniste; il se complaît à ces blocs surgissants, à ces masses térébrées, à ces abrupts remparts d'où s'élancent, comme des trompes, des arcs-boutants de granit. *L'Aiguille d'Etretat* —et, voilures bleutées à peine, de volantes barquettes s'invertissent crûment dans cette nappe dont le violet se mue là-bas en verts glaceux, précurseurs de bleus hésitants et d'incarnadins furtifs (Fénéon 1970 1, 41).

Evoking the exacting nature of Fénéon's prose in an essay which he devoted to the author in 1959, Jean Paulhan writes that Fénéon: "nous rappelle qu'il n'est pas naturel, ni commode, de voir un tableau" (59). And it would seem that the passage just cited signals an apparent

difficulty of viewing, or at least of offering one's viewing as verbal account. Accompanying the stylistic features already mentioned are demonstrative pronouns and deictics; "ce", "ces", or the indeterminate "là-bas" where violet shades into greens speckled with white. Deriving their reference from the particular circumstances of their enunciation, they sit uneasily within a conventional descriptive language, and suggest turbulent immersion within (rather than contemplative remove from) the spectatorial encounter.

In addition to these features of his art critical writing, Fénéon's attraction to compressed clauses in *Les Nouvelles en trois lignes* and to a gesture which seems to both designate and obfuscate can be appreciated further by analogy with the pictorial techniques adapted in the graphic work of his contemporary artist and fellow Félix, Félix Vallotton. Both display a distaste for institutionalised authority (Vallotton was likewise an anarchist sympathiser) and enter into dialogue with the norms of an evolving journalistic culture, and the subjects it considered "newsworthy"; throughout Vallotton's charcoal drawings and woodcuts, there are murders, anarchist bombs, fatal car crashes, domestic violence, police charges and protests. Though Fénéon wrote scarcely a few lines of art criticism on his contemporary, Vallotton painted a famous portrait of the critic working at his lamplit desk in the *Revue blanche* and Fénéon's piece "L'Incendie" is illustrated by a Vallotton woodcut in the *Badauderies parisiennes* volume.¹⁰ Despite, the obvious thematic continuity between Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes* and Vallotton's woodcuts, both also convey the sense that they are produced, to borrow Jacques Rancière's term, within a particular regime of visibility,¹¹ which conditions the relation between what is seeable – what might be aligned in journalistic terms with *la chose vue* – and speech. Mindful of this, both text and image advertise their fundamental shared estrangement from (and forceful intervention in) conventional representational logics; in Vallotton's case, for instance, we can find this in his technique of foreshortening which has its origins in Japanese printmaking and which eschews

the habitual delineation of perspective¹², allowing him to achieve effects comparable to Fénéon's minimal definition of action, object and agent at the level of the sentence. And just as Fénéon seems to emphasise violence as a decentered phenomenon, in the simple gust of wind captured by Vallotton's *Le Coup de Vent*, "the forces are offstage, billowing in from the right, affecting and even invading the forms of the crowd" (Field 65). In works such as *La Foule* and *La Manifestation*, the artist likewise situates just outside the borders of the frame the source of social pressures which come to bear on serried or stampeding crowds.

With their rising perspectives often void of horizon, these and other works by Vallotton feature compressed, claustrophobic planes where figure and ground become difficult to distinguish as part of their own wry commentary on the *fait divers* and the entangled nature of social relations. *L'Âge du papier*, for instance, which appeared in *Le Cri de Paris* on 23rd January 1898, alludes pointedly to the publication in *L'Aurore* ten days previously of Émile Zola's famous letter "J'accuse...!" Across a pictorial surface crammed with the figures of street hawkers and newspaper readers at a café front, the artist adroitly takes the measure of the public appetite for scandals such as the Dreyfus Affair, and the ensuing media saturation. In this image, the oblivious, non-communicating gazes of the bourgeois readers, screened as they are from each other by expanses of broadsheet, convey a paradoxical blocking or inhibition of vision and discernment. In "Salut d'abord, c'est l'auto", which appeared in *L'Assiette au beurre* on 1 May 1902, a police officer prevents his colleague from intervening to prevent a road accident before they first salute their superior officers; here, the pictorial foreground seems to buckle and distort with the force of the arrival of the police car bearing down on the body of a young girl in the road. The brutal advance of armed police on a crowd is the immediate focus of the 1893 work *La Charge*; however, a more subtly unsettling effect is achieved in this work through the portrayal of the recumbent wounded left in their wake by the police. These figures have been forced back, not

merely into the margins of the scene, but in such a manner that they no longer seem to inhere in the same space as their counterparts in the foreground, and to the extent that they almost have the appearance of floating above it. Since space no longer seems to occupy a benign function of integration, visibility and the act of looking are in turn themselves politicized.

The mutual engagement of Fénéon and Vallotton with *la presse* would appear to draw them towards a *compression* of spatial parameters and of visual and textual matter, exposing and radicalizing those vectors of erasure and restraint that sanction or otherwise the presence of bodies within public space. Analogous obstructive visual strategies in the work of Vallotton thus bring into greater relief Fénéon's problematization of the immediacy of *actualité* and *la chose vue*. In signalling that the parameters of syntax just as much as those of the perspectival plane are available to critical decomposition, they signal the potency of inter-medial reflection to disrupt established ways of seeing and knowing and thereby to articulate competing versions of reality within and across verbal and visual forms of expression. The (counter-)violence enacted both verbally and visually by Fénéon and Vallotton in this way underscores a compulsion to intervene in the mediatization of reality and puncture the *doxa* which supports it; but whether authority is sanctioned or contested, violence is a persistent presence. In the *Nouvelles*, such counter-violence even seem to find usurpatory echoes in the misdeeds of faceless criminals who sabotage the communications infrastructure itself: 'Entre Paris et Arpajon, des personnalités sans mandat ont coupé dix kilomètres trois quarts de fils téléphoniques'' (126).

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, Fénéon's *Nouvelles en trois lignes* partake in *Le Matin*'s mediatization of the quotidian. Yet as this article has shown, this is a mediatization pointedly eschewing the

pretension to objectivity or assertions of the self-evident nature of the happenings it documents. As an earlier citation indicates, *Le Matin*'s editorial policy was to assume a certain primacy of the eyewitness account (*la chose vue*) over the *chronique* or commentary;¹³ yet the various strategies adopted by Fénéon mark a piercing intervention in the distribution of seeing and saying, and the deceptively volatile attribution of positions implied by both of these acts.¹⁴ In a journalistic culture which has shifted in emphasis from *opinion* to *information*, and thus transitioned from "le plaisir de bavarder à la nécessité de voir" (Thérenty 63), an underlying intention of these micronarratives seems evident. Fénéon's aim, it would appear, is to undermine subtly the empirical reconstruction of the reported event as the summary aggregate of its actors and accessory details, and thereby, to corrode the pretension to objectivity which motivates the ethics of *reportage* and the paramount value which the latter places on *la chose vue*. It is in this way that the full semantic range of the title of the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* becomes apparent; while it of course evokes published reports of noteworthy events and the criterion of immediacy which assures an event's newsworthiness, it also alludes to the literary genre of the novella, and to the domain of the imaginary. It is a title which attests remarkably concisely to the complexity of the attitude adopted by Fénéon, since it bespeaks a kind of writing which neither relinquishes its commitment to the operations of fiction (and to features such as self-reflexivity and indeterminacy), nor to its role in the construction of social fact.

This notional alternation, between imaginary and informational propositions, suggests points of comparison with today's agitated debates about "fake news", the politicization of information and the veracity of the assertions made by the news media. Commenting on these debates, David Joselit has recently argued for the critical potential of art "to track the *plasticity* of information (the shapes it assumes through circulation, shifts in scale and saturation, and its velocities and frictions)" (17). Joselit's assertion of art's potential to grasp

and interrogate the circulation of such data flows is one which resonates with our argument, since it affirms the unique position of aesthetic modes of understanding in modernity to deflect back critically on the news media both with regard to the content it produces and the forms it adopts. A distinctive feature, then, of the inter-medial space opened up by Fénéon (and Vallotton) is that it is one where competing accounts of reality can be articulated.

In a manner that is in keeping with his performance under questioning during the Procès des trente, throughout his writing, the Fénéon of the *Nouvelles en trois lignes* stages a persistent shattering of the assumed “middle ground” of social experience. Though the concern of the *Nouvelles* is with the misadventures of countless everymen, they in fact function to fracture that space in which individuals and their domestic, economic, moral and social concerns are assumed to inhere equally. The *Nouvelles en trois lignes* might thus be thought of in terms of a form of mediatization from which a certain logic of *mediation* (with all the latter term’s connotations of social facilitation and compliance) has been evacuated, for it is one which artfully disrupts the ways in which meaning is constructed and assigned by an emergent *journalisme d’information*.

¹ As Julian Barnes remarks in this connection, “[the *Nouvelles en trois lignes*] would not have been identifiable from the general mass of faits divers had not Fénéon’s mistress, Camille Plateel, dutifully cut out his contributions – all 1220 of them – and stuck them in an album (his wife apparently did the same). Jean Paulhan then discovered and published them” (2007).

² In this connection, see: Granier and Joan Ungersma Halperin (1988).

³ “Chaque fois que l’on veut voir fonctionner à nu la causalité du fait divers, c’est une causalité légèrement aberrante que l’on rencontre. Autrement dit, les cas purs (et exemplaires) sont constitués par les troubles de la causalité, comme si le spectacle (la « notabilité », devrait-on dire) commençait là où la causalité, sans cesser d’être affirmée, contient déjà un germe de dégradation, comme si la causalité ne pouvait se consommer que lorsqu’elle commence à pourrir, à se défaire” (191).

⁴ The reportorial drive to situate the action would moreover seem to be ironized by Fénéon, through giving it the appearance of an inconsequential afterthought: “Ciseaux à la main, Marie Le Goeffic se balançait sur une escarpolette. Aussi, tombant, se creva-t-elle le ventre. A Bretonneau” (80).

⁵ “Sur Bécu, 28 ans, qui arrivait à Beaujon troué d’une balle, on compta 28 cicatrices. Son nom dans le monde qui rôde: La Cible” (94).

⁶ “Une Européenne de Tunisie a été enlevée, à Medjez, par deux Arabes paillards. Elle put fuir, encore intacte, mais déjà demi-nue” (60).

⁷ “Pajoux, qui habite à Aubervilliers, le lieudit “Le Coin du Crime”, a été arrêté en train de tirer des balles sur les gens”, *Ntl*, 100. As Kalifa notes, “la progressive migration des

populations ouvrières du centre de la capitale vers les quartiers périphériques dessine [...] le cadre d'un nouvel espace criminel" (115).

⁸ In an article in *L'En Dehors* from 2 October 1892, the critic had also alluded to such pleasures: 'Nos édifices ne sont beaux que lorsque l'incendie les a un peu travaillés. Ou bien lorsqu'ils sont quadrillés d'échafaudages: ils ont alors comme un air indécis d'esquisses, - et une esquisse est toujours propice au rêve de formes jolies. Hélas, dans deux mois les réparations de la fontaine Saint-Michel seront terminées, et de nouveau elle étalera sa hideur niaise' (1970 2, 904).

⁹ The party of gawkers in 'L'Incendie' may be seen as typical of what Gregory Shaya has characterised, in a study of *belle époque* mass culture, as a 'community forged in the spectacle of suffering and outrage' (76).

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Morel also emphasises their link through the art dealer Jacques Rodrigues-Henriques (Fénéon and Rodrigues-Henriques 7-10).

¹¹ 'Un régime de visibilité des arts, c'est à la fois ce qui autonomise des arts mais aussi ce qui articule cette autonomie à un ordre général des manières de faire et des occupations' (30).

¹² On a corresponding Japanese influence on Fénéon's prose, see: Walsh Hokenson 195.

¹³ Though Fénéon appears highly alert to this shift of emphasis, Guillaume Pinson and Marie-Ève Thérénty argue that it is Jules Vallès who was 'le premier à prendre conscience d'une nouvelle pratique journalistique, à l'isoler et à en faire très tôt le principe même d'un renouvellement poétique majeur dans l'histoire du journalisme: remplacer la chose dite et même bien dite par la chose vue, et rompre avec un journalisme de chroniqueurs' (8).

¹⁴ 'Dans un grand quotidien d'information comme *Le Matin* où le discours tend à s'effacer devant l'événement, Fénéon cherche plutôt à problématiser l'événement par ces pièces stylistiquement ciselées qui en rendent compte' (Pinson 61).

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