

Mining and Writing in the Work of Joe Corrie, Constant Malva and Jules Mousseron

Abstract

In 1933, **Henry Poulaille** launched *Prolétariat*, a monthly anthology of international **proletarian literature**. The first issue was devoted to **mining**. Among the **miner-writers** included were the Scot **Joe Corrie**, the Frenchman **Jules Mousseron**, and the Belgian **Constant Malva**. For Poulaille, they gave authentic voice to the subterranean hell of the mine while eschewing political dogma. This article aims to examine and nuance Poulaille's assessment, by following the evolution of Corrie, Malva and Mousseron across a century. We compare their representations of mining, attitudes to **class struggle** and politics, and relationships to the broader cultural and linguistic fields.¹

In July 1933, Henry Poulaille (1896-1980), carpenter's son, prodigious author and publisher, launched *Prolétariat*, a monthly anthology of international proletarian literature. The first issue was devoted to mining, which, in Poulaille's view, was the most difficult, most dangerous, and least known of professions. Granted, great works of literature and cinema had been devoted to the world of the mine, notably Emile Zola's novel *Germinal* (1885) and G.W. Pabst's film *Kameradschaft* (1931), but Poulaille wanted to give voice to those he described as sentenced to hard labour in a subterranean hell.² Thanks to anthologies like *Prolétariat*, Poulaille claimed,

¹ Research for this article was done with the help of a Royal Society of Edinburgh Arts and Humanities Grant (ID: 69683).

² *Prolétariat*, 1, July 1933, p. 3

miner-writers rose from the bowels of the black earth. Poulaille then presented his readers with work by three figures: the French poet Jules Mousseron (1868-1943), whose verse in the northern *rouchi* patois had an accent that Zola could not render; the Scottish poet, playwright and fiction writer Joe Corrie (1894-1968), who gave a full idea of what proletarian literature was capable of; and the Belgian Constant Malva (1903-1969), whose gradually constructed work was the very voice of the mine. For Poulaille, the work of these miner-writers offered a third way between the ‘populist’ literature produced by bourgeois parasites and ‘la littérature de mots d’ordre’ demanded by the communist movement.³ This was, he believed, an authentic literature, written by self-taught proletarians, which, in line with Poulaille’s own libertarian outlook, resisted political interference. Rosemary Chapman has summarized this position as follows: ‘Poulaille’s particular conception of proletarian literature is that of a literature written by the proletariat rather than *about* the proletariat or *for* (in the political interests of) the proletariat’.⁴ With its refusal of any party line on proletarian literature, *Prolétariat* was in direct opposition to another review, *Commune*, launched in the same month by the communist-oriented Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires, and inevitably attracted violent criticism from the communist press.⁵

Poulaille’s claims about the work of Corrie, Malva and Mousseron, whose lives and work span a century, unfold in three countries and coalfields, and are expressed in five languages and patois (English, Scots, French, *rouchi* and *borain*), deserve to be nuanced, through examination of the similarities and differences between these miner-writers and of the evolution of their œuvre. To this end, I will look at the writers’ representations of mining and,

³ Ibid.

⁴ Rosemary Chapman, *Henry Poulaille and Proletarian Literature, 1920-1939* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1992), p. 150.

⁵ See Karl-Anders Arvidsson, *Henry Poulaille et la littérature prolétarienne française des années 1930* (Gothenburg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 1988), pp. 95-96; René Garguilo (ed.), *Henry Poulaille et la littérature prolétarienne en France de 1920 à 1940* (Paris: Lettres modernes Minard, 1989), pp. 43-47.

with that, their relationships to community, class struggle and politics. I will then examine how the language and style of their work express such relationships. These miner-writers, I argue, through their desire to communicate and to fulfil their artistic ambitions, often blur or transgress the frontiers between ‘proletarian literature’ and wider, more ‘mainstream’, literary, cultural and social fields, creating a tension between the ‘specific’ and the ‘universal’. Finally, I will look at how the development, decline and disappearance of mining impacted on their work and its remembrance.

Du pic à la plume

These writers went down the pit at a traditionally young age, and with a sense of inevitability. In 1881, at the age of thirteen, Jules Mousseron followed his father, a *pupille de la nation* relocated from Paris, down the *fosse* Renard at Denain, in the Valenciennois coalfield. His father passed away two years later. Mousseron was working underground when Emile Zola visited to take notes for *Germinal*, although they never met. Mousseron started as a *galibot*, or miner’s boy, then became a qualified miner at the coal face before, as he got older and his health deteriorated, becoming a carpenter. He would retire in 1926, after forty-five years of continual service to his employer, the mighty Compagnie des Mines d’Anzin.

Joe Corrie was originally from Slamannan in Stirlingshire, but, when he was still an infant, his family moved to Cardenden in West Fife. In 1908, at the age of fourteen, Corrie followed his father down the pit at Bowhill. His father died soon afterwards, leaving Corrie the only breadwinner. Fragile in health, he did not last long underground and was moved to work above ground. In 1923, Corrie obtained a pedlar’s licence and definitively turned his back on mineworking, though not on his mining community, which was a key inspiration for his literary work.

Constant Malva (born Alphonse Bourlard) was slightly older when he became a miner, mainly due to the disruption caused by the First World War. In 1919, aged sixteen, Malva took the path of his forebears, working in the pits of the Borinage, part of the immense coalfield of Hainault straddling the Franco-Belgian frontier. He started out as an unskilled *sclauneur*, transporting coal, but became a *bouveleur*, skilled in digging galleries. Increasingly ill from the dust created by work at the coal face, Malva left work in 1940, months before he was eligible for a full pension.

All three miner-writers had only a rudimentary school education. However, there were local opportunities for young men with a passion for literature. Mousseron attended night classes in Denain, thanks to which he discovered the classics. He also took part in the considerable cultural life of his region. *Soirées récréatives* gave him the opportunity to write and perform his poetry and songs. Mousseron also made the crucial acquaintance of a local intellectual, Jules Renard, alias André Jurénil, who persuaded him to abandon his imitation of standard French verse and write in *rouchi*, the local patois. It was Jurénil who launched this miner-writer on a stellar career, with his preface to Mousseron's first collection, *Fleurs d'en bas* (1897).⁶

Joe Corrie experienced the obstacles that grinding poverty raised when it came to education. At primary school, his teacher meted out corporal punishment because Corrie and his family could not afford textbooks. That said, once he had begun work at the colliery, Corrie benefited from the workers' education movement. Corrie later recalled: 'we had an excellent library and reading room and literature was discussed a good deal as we walked the country roads in groups'.⁷ After the First World War, Corrie began to write prolifically in various genres. His burgeoning talent was spotted by *The Miner*, the organ of the Fife miners' Reform

⁶ Jules Mousseron, *Fleurs d'en bas. Poésies et chansons patoises* (Denain: Librairie populaire, 1897).

⁷ Joe Corrie, *Plays, Poems and Theatre Writings* (Edinburgh: 7:84, 1985), p. 20.

Union, and *Forward*, the paper of the Independent Labour Party, which hired him as a propagandist. The modest income from these contributions allowed Corrie to keep away from the pithead and rapidly develop his writing in the course of the 1920s.

Constant Malva's education was stunted by both poverty and war. However, he remembered the crucial influence of a teacher he encountered during wartime exile in France, who introduced him to various writers, often in the form of anthologies, whose vignettes would later influence his style. Other influences were a *bouquiniste* in Rouen, and an uncle Fernand who inculcated in him a passion for the arts. Back in the Borinage, the local *Maison du peuple*, set up at the turn of the century by the burgeoning socialist movement to bring culture to the workers, was also of crucial help in his education. But it would be in the late twenties, after hearing his mother's miserable life story, that Malva seriously began to write. *Histoire de ma mère et de mon oncle Fernand* arrived at a time when 'proletarian literature' was hotly debated in left-wing circles. Malva addressed his manuscript to Romain Rolland, one of France's most prominent left intellectuals, who passed it to Henry Poulaille. Despite private reservations about the literary qualities of Malva's opus, Poulaille decided to publish it, with a preface by Henri Barbusse, author of *Le Feu* and leading communist intellectual.⁸

A Subterranean Hell?

As Poulaille wrote in *Prolétariat*, these miner-writers had first-hand knowledge of the difficulties and dangers of their profession. Soon after becoming a *galibot*, Mousseron was lucky to survive both a cave-in and an explosion caused by one of the miners' everyday enemies, *le grisou* (firedamp). He was also confronted with repeated pit disasters, most notably that at Courrières, in 1906, which killed over a thousand miners, and which prompted charitable

⁸ Constant Malva, *Histoire de ma mère et de mon oncle Fernand* (Paris: Librairie Valois 'Cahiers bleus', 1932).

acts and writing by the poet. One of Joe Corrie's earliest memories was going with his father to the scene of the Donibristle mine disaster of 1901. Malva also counted among his most important childhood memories the funeral for victims of the Sans-Calotte catastrophe in 1908.

But, returning to Poulaille's claim in *Prolétariat*, to what extent does these miner-writers' work give voice to men sentenced to a subterranean hell? It is certainly the case in the verse of Joe Corrie. In 'The Image o' God', he writes: 'Crawlin' aboot like a snail in the mud,/Covered wi' clammy blae,/ME, made after the image o' God –/Jings! But it's laughable, tae'.⁹ The infernal reference is explicit in another poem, 'Miners at morning': 'Then suddenly the hooter sounds its blatant blast,/Tearing the air and the silence to shreds./Our masters' day has begun./Loud and long it screams,/Like some fiend from the guts of Hell'.¹⁰ In Corrie's plays, the pit and the pit village are prisons that Corrie's characters long to escape. Thus, in *The Darkness*, John Gordon, a miner blinded by a misfire, places hope in his son Jimmy signing as a professional footballer: 'there would be a chance o' us getting' awa' frae here, awa' frae the sound o' thae engines'.¹¹ But the play ends with another explosion and fire that consume Jimmy and his fellow miners. In *The Dreamer*, miner's daughter Mary Smith tells her sweetheart Peter: 'Weel you ken, that as long as you are chained to the pits, the sun will never shine again'.¹² A possible way out for women and girls could be offered by education. Mary's sister Lizzie is top of her class and wants to become a schoolteacher, but her dreams are dashed by her conservative and fatalistic parents: 'You ken fine she'll need to go to the pitheid; there's naething else about here for a lassie'.¹³ In *Hewers of Coal*, a cave-in leads the trapped miners to give up selfishness and rank, but they are entombed forever.

⁹ Corrie, *The Image o' God and other poems* (Edinburgh: Porpoise Press, 1937), p. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

¹¹ Corrie, *The Darkness* (Glasgow: Brown, son and Ferguson, 1932), p. 2.

¹² Corrie, *The Dreamer* (publisher unknown, 1936), p. 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Alphonse Bourlard's choice of pseudonym indicates his deep pessimism and fatalism. In *Un ouvrier qui s'ennuie* (1940), written just before he left mining, he writes: 'Tout va constamment mal avec moi'.¹⁴ In *Borins*, Malva's description of the miners' descent echoes Zola's *Le Voreux*: 'par son gosier démesuré, la bure les a ingurgités jusqu'au dernier'.¹⁵ *Ma nuit au jour le jour* (1954) has echoes of another literary influence, Louis-Ferdinand Céline: 'nous avons marché jusqu'au bout de notre nuit'.¹⁶ Autobiographical works such as *Borins* and *Ma nuit au jour le jour* convey the monotony of work underground, where miners try to satisfy the employers' relentless demand for more coal while negotiating the dangers of flooding, fire and the inhalation of dust caused by the generalized use of the *marteau-piqueur* (jackhammer).

The poetry of Jules Mousseron also describes the effects of poverty and work on people in his community. 'L'Vieux mineur' (1897) is a veteran of struggles underground: 'Il a tell'mint des blessures/ Qu'in n'sarot pus les compter./ Il est couvert ed coutures/ Pir' qu'un ancien guernadier'.¹⁷ In 'Brod'quin-sans-talons, l'cacheuse [chercheuse] à gaillettes' (1897), Mousseron evokes the fate of a girl foraging for coal on slag heaps to support a family of twelve. She has prematurely aged: 'Incor jonn', ch'est l'pus vielle, et fill' du terri d'terre./ Ses traits tout arsaqués [retirés] li donn'nt l'air d'eun' grand'mère'.¹⁸ Her prospects in life are decidedly bleak: 'Probable qué, comme et' mère, t'attrap'ras dé l'famille./ héreux si t'in homm' n'est point un ivrogne imbécile'.¹⁹ His verse vividly conveys the horror of the disaster at Courrières: 'Anéantis pa l'flamme et l'soufre,/ Tous ces innochints sont brûlés,/ Collés dins les poussière's du gouffre,/ S'étreignant par group's affolés./ Oh! l'z rescapés dins les ténèbres!/'

¹⁴ Constant Malva, *Paroles de mineurs* (Paris: Omnibus, 2007), p. 698.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 609.

¹⁷ Jules Mousseron, *A l'fosse. La mine et les mineurs* (Famar: Jean Dauby, 1975), p. 106.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

Poursuivis par l'affreux grisou,/ Piétinant des débris funèbres,/ In hurlant d'douleur comm' des fous'.²⁰

All three writers evoke with compassion and indignation the fate of pit ponies, whose wordless suffering seems to embody the furthest extremes of exploitation underground. In 'Wee Danny', Joe Corrie writes of the relief finally found in death: 'Danny, you ha'e nae mair the curse, nor feel the pain/ O' savage strength. A martyr ye lie slain/ To Freedom's cause. A Christ o' different cast'.²¹ In 'L'quévau [cheval] du fond' (1897), Mousseron expresses his sympathy for a pit pony worked to death: 'Va, m' pauv' pétit Bicot, tâch' d'indurer t'misère;/ Car si t'armon' in haut, ch'sera pour rintrer dins terre.../ L'abattoir I t'attind: ch'est in nouviau cass'-cou'.²² Malva attracted his management's ire when he protested in the press against the treatment of horses underground. In *Un de la mine*, he contrasts his own working existence with that of his equine 'brothers', notably one Napoléon: 'Ce soir, pour quelques heures, je vais m'évader des ténèbres vers la lumière. Lui devra rester à la tâche sous les coups d'un autre maître, puis ce sera encore un autre, et toujours ainsi, jusqu'à la mort, sa délivrance'.²³ This subterranean bestiary also includes 'L'souris du fond' (1899), one of Mousseron's best-known poems, which, as Charles N. Micarelli points out, bears comparison with Robert Burns's 'To a Mouse'.²⁴ Here the miner feels empathy for his timorous companion, and shares food with it: 'Approch' souris, m'bonn' pétiot' biête./ N'euch' point craint': jé n' té férai rien./ Té vos: j'vas esquette [secouer] em maillette/ Pour mi t' donner des miettes de pain'.²⁵

The dangers and difficulties of work at the pit lead to a negative view of mining, far from the heroism and courage celebrated by both employers and the labour movement,

²⁰ Ibid., p. 174.

²¹ Corrie, *The Image o' God*, p. 13.

²² Mousseron, *A l'fosse*, p. 143.

²³ Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 327.

²⁴ Charles N. Micarelli, 'Jules Mousseron, Miner and Poet', *The French Review*, Vol. 34, No. 6 (May 1961), p. 551.

²⁵ Mousseron, *A l'fosse*, p. 210.

notoriously expressed by French communist party (PCF) leader and (very briefly) former miner, Maurice Thorez, during *la bataille du charbon* launched after the Liberation to fuel the economic reconstruction of France: ‘Un métier terrible, des gars magnifiques. Oui, un beau métier. Il traduit le vieil effort de l’homme pour se rendre maître de la nature’.²⁶ Joe Corrie prefers to be a ‘lazy lout’ than a hard worker: ‘Give me a summer day/ And a chestnut tree/ To shield the naked rays/ Of the sun from me’.²⁷ He envies the ploughman, the pedlar and the fiddler. He also longs to leave the pit village for the nearby countryside, in a form of proletarian pastoral: ‘home, I will wash me clean,/ And over the hill,/ To the glen of the fair primrose/ And the daffodil;/ And there I will sing of my Love/ With a tenderness/ That only a god can feel –/ Lord God, what a mess!’.²⁸

Although a skilled *bouveleur*, earning more than the average *manoeuvre*, Malva aims to demystify and, sometimes, denigrate his profession. In *Un mineur vous parle*, he writes: ‘Non, le mineur n’aime pas son métier. En tout cas, s’il l’a peut-être aimé, maintenant, il ne l’aime plus. On le lui a fait détester à tel point qu’il n’est pas près d’y reprendre goût’.²⁹ In *Un propr’ à rien* (1936), Malva creates his own version of a ‘lazy lout’ whose attitudes to the mine and miners chime with his. Pierre Camée is happy to remain an unskilled *manoeuvre*, reads travel literature and quotes from Théophile Gautier, criticizes the political parties and trade unions, refuses to suck up to management, and, on his inevitable dismissal from the mine, mocks his colleagues as they go underground: ‘Dépêchez-vous, bande d’endormis!’³⁰ In *Ma nuit au jour le jour*, Malva exclaims: ‘qu’il est doux de paresser!’³¹

²⁶ Quoted by Bruno Mattéi, ‘Constant Malva (1903-1969) ou le portrait du mineur comme anti-héros’, in Malva, *Ma nuit au jour le jour* (Paris: François Maspéro, 1978), pp. 7-25 (p. 23).

²⁷ Corrie, *The Image o’ God*, p. 61.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

²⁹ Malva, *Paroles des mineurs*, p. 95.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 658.

With this dominantly critical, even disdainful, view of mining, Corrie and Malva contrast quite clearly with Mousseron. The latter sings the praises of the miners' work, their *othieux* (tools) – pick, axe, shovel, etc. – and the progress made in safety and the technology of extraction – Davy lamp, cage, Fontaine parachute, ventilator, etc. Mousseron's work also adds light to the darkness evoked by Zola in his imaginative version of *la fosse* Renard. His poems and songs, often commissioned by local associations, notably musical, literary, sporting and charitable, celebrate the small pleasures of life in the mining community as well as its rich cultural life: beer-drinking, pipe-smoking, sports like archery, *crosses* and racing pigeons, choirs, literary groups, and the various festivals and carnivals. The contrast with Zola, as well as Malva and, to a lesser extent, Corrie, is most clearly seen in Mousseron's comic creation Zeph Cafougnette, a hapless anti-hero who finds himself in a series of humorous situations, starting with 'Cafougnette à Paris'.³²

Mousseron sings the praises of the women and girls of his community, whose beauty may be suppressed by their daily toil but can equal or be superior to that of metropolitan women. Thus, Mousseron celebrates 'Eune brave fille' (1897), Cath'rine: 'In dit au'les cocott's, à Paris,/ Abusant d'trop dé l'poudr' dé riz,/ Muchent [cachent] l' traç du vic' sous l'pourette! Ichi, Caht'rin', ch'est aussi bon,/ Sans même y pinser, l' douch' pauvrette,/ All' much' ses vertus sous l'carbon!'.³³ 'Blanc et noir' evokes a 'biau cafu [pit brow lass] qui passe', eating her *briquet* [piece]: 'et ses dogts noirs, su s' blanqu' tartine,/ Font qu'à chaqu' fos in s'imagine/ Vir el clavier d'un piano'.³⁴ This aesthetic form of local or class pride finds an echo in the poetry of Joe Corrie. In 'Lovers', she 'is not apple-cheeked, nor cherry-lipped,/ Nor is her brow like snow; nor are her eyes/ Deep wells of mystery', but 'we will wed some reckless

³² Mousseron, *Cafougnette à Paris. Monologue en Patois* (Anzin: Imprimerie A. Vandnameele, 1899).

³³ Mousseron, *A l'fosse*, p. 83.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 191.

New Year's eve,/ When drunken men shake hands and wish good luck'.³⁵ Malva gives a darker twist to local feminine beauty in *Un de la mine*, where he encounters a young artificial flower seller, who is 'jeune, belle, mais sale'. Unable to sell anything, weary and in despair, '[elle] se remit en marche'.³⁶

In the case of Malva, his dark view of mining should be nuanced. He describes in detail work underground, often using footnotes to explain technical terms. There are also moments when he admits that mining can be an attractive profession, for example in *Ma nuit au jour le jour* (1954): 'Notre travail, quoique dur et malsain, a un certain attrait. Il demande un peu de science. Parfois nous réussissons une belle excavation: nous jubilons'.³⁷ That said, this praise of mining is often expressed in a nostalgic register. Post-war rationalization and mechanization have deskilled the profession, while the arrival of the *marteau-piqueur* has brought with it a new disease, silicosis, which will eventually kill Malva. In *Un de la mine*, he writes: 'Avant l'autre guerre, l'ouvrier aimait sa fosse comme le croyant aime Dieu qui le châtie. C'est qu'alors le métier de mineur était réellement un métier et non un travail de manœuvre. Il fallait se servir de ses outils'.³⁸ This is echoed in Corrie's novel *Black Earth* (1939), where 'Old Bob Moore' 'used to sigh and wish again for the good old days when a miner had to be a worker of great skill, and enjoyed getting out of bed an hour before the time. He was the last of the line, the last of a great army of men'.³⁹

Both Corrie and Malva wish to escape the workplace that is the source of their literary work. Unlike Mousseron, they will eventually break free. But given the intimacy of their links to mining, this escape is not without risk. In 'Sonnet', Corrie expresses a kind of proletarian 'survivor's guilt' when thinking of the men he has left underground: 'where's the peace I

³⁵ Corrie, *The Image o' God*, p. 17.

³⁶ Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 317.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 630.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 335.

³⁹ Corrie, *Black Earth* (London: Routledge, 1939), p. 73.

soucht? Hungry, on strike,/ Battlin' for life – The memory to me clings,/ And haunts me night and day. And in the pit/My auld mates lie and slave and battle yet'.⁴⁰ Malva, too, is nervous about the consequences of the final break-up: 'j'ai peur de regretter mon divorce avec la mine, j'ai peur que ce divorce ne soit un arrachement'.⁴¹ As Laurent Marty points out, there is reason to nuance the otherwise dominant opposition between a Mousseron in 'fusion' with mining and a Malva hateful of his work and expressing his difference.⁴²

Class struggle and its limits

Such attitudes find expression in the writers' political positions, or absence thereof. An apparently happy miner, benefitting from his paternalist employers, Mousseron is not a poet of the class struggle. Despite living in Denain, scene of repeated, often violent, strikes, and a socialist then communist stronghold, the author does not convey this social drama. His homage to the victims of Courrières makes no mention of the violent strike action, put down by Georges Clemenceau in May 1906, which followed revelations of management negligence. Instead, as we have seen, the poet concentrates on the mortal danger posed by *le grisou*: this is a struggle between man and nature rather than a social one. Strike action is virtually absent from his considerable body of work, and, in its rare appearances, is a cause for regret. In 'L'Souris du fond', he tells the mouse: 'J'sais aussi qu' dins les momints d' grève,/ Quand té n' vos pus les carbonniers,/ Qué l' pain i t' manqu', mêm' qué t'in crèves ,/ Ti qu' té veux vivr' si volontiers!'⁴³ Another poem, 'Souv'nir ed grève' (1946), which was only published posthumously, expresses a striker's regret at stealing bread from a *galibot* forced by hunger to

⁴⁰ Corrie, *The Image o' God*, p. 22.

⁴¹ Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 631.

⁴² Laurent Marty, 'Mousseron, Malva, deux écrivains de la mine, deux littératures', *Nord*, vol. 4 (1984): 79-93.

⁴³ Mousseron, *A l'Fosse*, p. 210.

return to work: ‘Galibot, t’vis cor, j’espère./ Au souv’nir dé ç’ vol ed pain,/ Pardonn’, parc’ qué j’ sus grand-père,/ Pardonne, car j’avos si faim!’⁴⁴ In 1907, Mousseron wrote a long poem to mark the 150th anniversary of the Compagnie d’Anzin and the distribution of a commemorative medal to all employees. Here, he praises the company’s achievements, which are due to the union of aristocracy and bourgeoisie as well as cooperation between employers and employed, and recounts the technological innovations which will, no doubt, continue into the future: ‘Anzin est toudis [toujours] en avant’.⁴⁵

A survey of the contemporary press shows how much this poet was a reassuring figure. At a time of social unrest, Mousseron seemed a happy family man, working hard with both pick and pen. In October 1902, during another miners’ strike, the monarchist daily *Le Soleil* sent a correspondent to Denain to visit ‘l’Orphée de la Mine’. Instead of talking about the strike, Mousseron showed him gifts from numerous artist friends. The correspondent concluded:

Il vous conduit ainsi dans les souterrains les plus sombres, il vous initie aux moindres détails, toujours vous éclairant avec le flambeau de l’idéal. Le contraste avec *Germinal* est tout à fait consolant. Comme il est consolant, au cœur de cette désolante grève, de rencontrer un homme qui reste bon et fort, animé d’esprit de solidarité, fouillant la terre, extrayant la houille et ne se livrant jamais au découragement, ne subissant pas les mauvaises suggestions de la haine.⁴⁶

That same month, an *envoyé special* of the equally conservative *Petit journal* also garnered consoling words from ‘la Muse noire’: ‘Je ne m’occupe pas du tout de politique, dit-il, et je

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 159.

⁴⁵ Fonds Mousseron, Médiathèque Simone Veil, Valenciennes.

⁴⁶ Furetières, ‘Un poète de la mine’, *Le Soleil*, 19 October 1902.

suis bien avec tout le monde'.⁴⁷ Indeed, the only explicitly political poem Mousseron wrote was in favour of women's suffrage, for a rally by the Union nationale pour le vote des femmes in 1934: "“La femm' doit suivre son mari”./ Ch'n'est point mi qui l'invinte à m'mote;/ Ch'est la Loi qui l'ordonne – Ainsi,/ Pourquoi l'femm' n'suit point s'n' homm au vot e?"⁴⁸

In his lifetime, the left-wing press rarely attempted to appropriate this proletarian poetic phenomenon. However, in 1935, reflecting its new, more inclusive, Popular Front line, the communist daily *L'Humanité* chose to reprint Mousseron's homage to Emile Zola, written on the occasion of the 33rd anniversary of the author's death. For *L'Humanité*, Mousseron 'connaît bien cette vie dure du mineur que Zola a décrite si magistralement dans *Germinal*'.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the text itself does not give an explicitly political message: 'T'nous as fait vir les chos's. Ch't-à nous, lecteurs sensibles,/ D'in tirer l'inseigne'mint. L'Progrès proprémint dit/ Doit êtr' suivi d' progrès d'Bonté. Si ch't impossible/ Su Terre, eh bin, vraimint, que l'Progrès soit maudit!'⁵⁰ The emphasis, as elsewhere in Mousseron's œuvre, is on kindness, compassion and charity. Mousseron would have been reassured by Henry Poulaille's invitation to contribute to *Le Nouvel âge*: 'ce n'est pas une revue politique'.⁵¹ In his prefatory text for *Le Nouvel âge*, Léon Bocquet writes that, in Mousseron's verse, the miner's soul 'atteint souvent à une façon de grandeur tragique et à une véritable noblesse morale dans sa sagesse, un peu courte peut-être, mais qu'un fier stoïcisme hausse au-dessus des traces et qu'une effective solidarité rend si pitoyable au malheur, si débordante de rude tendresse'.⁵² The historian André Le Bon rightly observes that to insist too much on the absence of *engagement* in Mousseron's work would be to misunderstand his function: 'pour ses contemporains, l'ami Jules était

⁴⁷ 'La Muse noire', *Le Petit journal*, October 1902.

⁴⁸ 'Avec les suffragettes', *Le Réveil du Nord*, December 1934.

⁴⁹ 'Le mineur Mousseron parle de l'auteur de *Germinal*', *L'Humanité*, October 1935.

⁵⁰ Mousseron, *Dans nos mines de charbon* (1946), p. 66.

⁵¹ Fonds Mousseron, correspondance, letter 78: Henry Poulaille to Jules Mousseron, 3 January 1931.

⁵² Léon Bocquet, 'Mon ami Mousseron', *Le Nouvel âge*, No. 6, June 1931, p. 543.

essentiellement un amuseur. On attendait qu'il décrive les situations plaisantes et baroques de sa société'.⁵³

We can therefore find clear differences between Mousseron, on the one hand, and Corrie and Malva, on the other, when it comes to class struggle and politics. Joe Corrie wrote for *The Miner*, newspaper of the Fife Miners' Reform Union, and *Forward*, which was close to the Independent Labour Party. One of his poetry collections, *The Road the Fiddler Went* (1928), was prefaced by Labour leader Ramsay Macdonald. During the National Lockout of May-November 1926, Corrie formed the Bowhill Players, who performed his one-act plays, including *The Shillin'-a-Week Man* (1926), at concerts held to raise money for soup kitchens and keep up the spirits of the strikers and their families. The hardships and tensions created during strike action were dramatized most notably in *In Time o' Strife* (1926).

In the course of the twenties, Corrie built up a national and international reputation as a committed proletarian writer. *In Time o' Strife* was first performed in pit villages around Cardenden, then toured around music-hall theatres in Scotland, but also in England, notably at the Newcastle Empire. In 1930, Corrie visited Leipzig to see the Collective of Proletarian Actors' production of the play. Corrie's poetry and drama would be translated into French by Raoul Leclercq and published in Barbusse's *Monde* as well as Poulaille's *Nouvel âge* and *Proletariat*.⁵⁴ Corrie also attracted the attention of Soviet intellectuals. His book, *The Last Day and Other Stories*, was translated into Russian (1930) and Yiddish (1932).⁵⁵ Already, in late 1929, the author had visited the USSR. His photograph adorned the front page of *Literaturnaya*

⁵³ André Le Bon, *Le pays minier au temps de Mousseron (1868-1943)* (Lille: La Voix du Nord, 1999), p. 24.

⁵⁴ See *Monde*, 71, 12 October 1929 and *Nouvel âge*, 8, August 1931.

⁵⁵ Corrie, *Poslednii den'*, translated by Mark Volosov (Moscow-Leningrad: Zemlia i Fabrika, 1930) and unknown translated title, translated by S. Persov (Kiev: Ukrains'ke derzhavne vydanytsvo, 1932). See Jesse Gardiner, 'Theatre "Down the Pits": Scottish and Soviet Intercultural Exchanges under Stalin', paper presentation, 21 June 2019, *Configuring 'World Theatre': Gaining Global Perspectives on Transnational and Intercultural Drama and Performance*, Edinburgh, UK.

Gazeta. On his return, in an interview with *The Daily Record*, Corrie expressed his admiration for a new society that was bringing high culture to the workers and where a university professor ‘was contented with the lot which gave preference in respect of quarters and food to the manual worker over the professional’.⁵⁶

In Time o’ Strife and other plays were meant to be translated and performed in the USSR. However, Corrie’s work disappeared from view in the thirties. This may be because of the new socialist realist doctrine that was imposed over the course of that decade. However much Corrie may have sympathised with the miners, his work did not offer up the positive heroes worthy of revolutionary romanticism. The male characters of *In Time o’ Strife* waste precious money on drink and gambling, while their passivity and cowardice are berated by the women. Protests demanding parish council relief fail, while a militant miner, Tam Anderson, finds himself sentenced to three years imprisonment rather than the expected three months. In *Black Earth*, the communist ‘Red Three’ seem to have finally roused the Brandon miners from their slumber, but the strike action collapses after just one day. As Malcolm Petrie observes, in *In Time o’ Strife*, as well as *Black Earth*, industrial action is portrayed as a burden, ‘essential but doomed to fail’.⁵⁷ Corrie’s work becomes much less political in the thirties and, after the *Prolétariat* anthology of 1933, is detached from the international proletarian literature movement. He and his family moved to Mauchline, a mining village in Ayrshire that is closely associated with Robert Burns. This inspired a series of rural ‘Scots Comedies’, notably *Tullycairn* (1934). The cause that still moved Corrie the most was pacifism, illustrated notably in the satirical *And So to War* (1936). Corrie’s passionate pacifism led him to controversially oppose the war effort: in 1943, his play *Dawn* was banned by the Lord Chamberlain.

⁵⁶ ‘My experiences in Russia’, *Daily Record and Mail*, 2 December 1929.

⁵⁷ Malcolm Petrie, ‘The Political Context of Joe Corrie’s *In Time o’ Strife*’. No date. <https://arts.st-andrews.ac.uk/joe-corrie/conferencepapers/the-political-context-of-joe-corries-in-time-o-strife/> [accessed 10 February 2022].

Malva also followed an eccentric political trajectory. Soon after starting work as a miner, he did not join the socialist Parti ouvrier belge (POB), which was dominant in the Borinage, but the fledgling communist party. In 1927, he was expelled for Trotskyism and joined the Parti socialiste révolutionnaire, before rallying to Walter Dauge's Borinage breakaway from the POB, Groupe d'action socialiste révolutionnaire. His work shows acute awareness of and opposition to capitalist exploitation: 'vivement la révolution!', he exclaims in *Borins*.⁵⁸ On the other hand, Malva's fundamental pessimism overwhelms revolutionary hope. He despairs at the passivity of the miners: 'les grands responsables de ma misère [...] sont mes frères de classe'.⁵⁹ Invited by his comrades to a May Day rally in 1938, he notes in *Ma nuit au jour le jour*: 'il y a quelque chose de rompu en moi: je n'ai plus la foi'.⁶⁰ Just before he quits mining, he observes: 'Je suis ici en pays étranger. Je n'ai rien de commun avec les indigènes'.⁶¹ In the course of the thirties, there is indeed what Bruno Mattéi has called 'un certain flottement idéologique, une pensée du désarroi', a process of disillusionment with and distancing from the labour movement which anticipates Malva's collaboration during the German occupation.⁶² Like his fellow Borain proletarian writer, Pierre Hubermont, pacifism and the search for a new post-communist political direction led Malva to support former socialist leader Henri de Man's corporatist Union des travailleurs manuels et intellectuels and to make a meagre living from writing for the collaborationist press. This phase of intellectual collaboration was undertaken in the hope of long-sought literary recognition. Symbolically, at the end of one of his short stories for prominent collaborator Paul Colin's review *Cassandre*, the narrator, after a week's imprisonment for failing to pay a fine, '[s]'achemine vers la maison

⁵⁸ Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 243.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 671.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 653.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 742.

⁶² Mattéi, p. 19.

d'un ami écrivain'.⁶³ It is the literary world, rather than his mining community, that has priority. But literary collaboration turned out to be a grave error. Although, unlike Paul Colin, Malva narrowly escaped an assassination attempt by the Resistance, he was stripped of his civil rights after the Liberation before benefitting from a general amnesty for collaborators at the end of the decade. This brief, but very public, flirtation with Belgian fascism also damaged, without destroying, relations with Henry Poulaille.

Giving voice to the mine

Political differences aside, these miner-writers all strive to give authentic voice to communities on the social and cultural margins. In that sense, they create the proletarian literature that Henry Poulaille wished for, while also asserting a local identity that cannot be reduced to class. At the same time, in a further break with Poulaille's rather dogmatic insistence on a literature by the proletariat alone, they seek to communicate their work more broadly. For Corrie and Malva especially, success in the wider literary field, outside the confines of class and community, offers escape from subterranean hell. Their attempts to achieve these objectives are reflected in the language and style of their work.

From the outset, Jules Mousseron cultivated the persona of the miner-writer: he would hold both *pic* and *plume* until retirement and never leave what he called his *Ville feumière*. He performed 'one man shows' dressed in his work clothes, including *barrette* (leather helmet) and Davy lamp. As we have seen, under the influence of André Jurénil, his poems about the mining community were written in the local patois, *rouchi*. However, as *rouchi* and Mousseron specialist Jean Dauby has pointed out, his poetic language is creolized. The *rouchi* vocabulary is limited and coexists with words from standard French: 'il aura tendance à écrire une langue

⁶³ Malva, 'Cellule 81', *Cassandre*, 2 November 1941.

qui ne soit pas trop chargée en termes picards, une langue qui reste compréhensible pour des auditeurs ignorant notre patois'.⁶⁴ Mousseron's linguistic choices can be partly explained by the constraints of prosody. They can also be explained, as Dauby indicates, by the need to communicate to a wider audience. Significantly, the titles of all his collections are in standard French (*Fleurs d'en bas*, *Fougères noires*, etc.), while each contains a glossary at the back to facilitate comprehension. The *souscription* lists held in the Fonds Mousseron are dominated by the educated middle class, from schoolteachers to mine management and other local worthies.

Thanks to this combination of the specific and the universal, Mousseron's fame spread beyond the confines of the Valenciennois coalfield, with him performing in nearby cities such as Lille, Lens and Brussels. His greatest moment of glory was perhaps his appearance at the Opéra-Comique, in 1901, organised by La Betterave, a cultural organisation representing the 'Enfants du Nord et du Pas-de-Calais' in Paris. Mousseron was championed not only as that curiosity, a poet from underground, but also as a source of regional pride. In anticipation of this appearance before a packed audience, the *Progrès du Nord* declared: 'Dimanche, l'Homme du pays noir, des ténèbres souterraines triomphera dans la Ville-Lumière'.⁶⁵ Mousseron's consecration by various prizes and honours, culminating in the Légion d'honneur (1936), was also seen as a triumph for his community. According to Manoel Gahisto, in Mousseron's conversion to patois, 'on pressentit la mode de décentraliser les lettres et d'invoquer les gloires régionales'.⁶⁶

In the case of Joe Corrie, the desire for authentic expression is also shown in his use of Scots. To an extent, the use of this medium was an expression of class struggle. In his one-act comedy *The Undermanager*, the socially ambitious Gladys McCulloch tells her husband, John:

⁶⁴ *Le Pays noir vu par Emile Zola et Jules Mousseron* (Lille: CNDP, 1980), p. 45.

⁶⁵ Maurice Savary, 'Nos mineurs à l'Opéra-Comique', *Progrès du Nord*, 8 December 1901.

⁶⁶ Manoel Gahisto, *La Vie de Jules Mousseron. Le Poète de la Mine* (Valenciennes-Denain, 1907), p. 17.

‘you will never find any refined person speaking Scots’.⁶⁷ The undermanager’s mother protests against such a betrayal of proletarian origins: ‘you’re no’ makin’ a Jessie o’ oor Jock’.⁶⁸ In the end, ‘Jock’ renounces self-improvement, continues to use Scots, and tears off his collar and tie. This linguistic choice was also continuing the tradition of Scots poetry most famously represented by Corrie’s hero, Robert Burns. But, as with Burns, there is the desire to storm the citadel of mainstream culture. This path is dramatized in Corrie’s play about the ploughman poet, where the latter’s previously doubting mother declares: ‘what a change for the laddie – from Mossiel here to the mansion houses of Edinburgh – mixing with lords and ladies’.⁶⁹ The desire to communicate with a wider audience leads to linguistic variation. When plays like *In Time o’ Strife* or *Hewers of Coal* went on tour, Corrie instructed the producer to alter underground names and expressions to suit his particular audience. When *In Time o’ Strife* triumphed at the Newcastle Empire, Corrie had eliminated Scots terms to facilitate comprehension by his Geordie hosts. Corrie’s poetry contains both Scots and standard English: his song lyrics, redolent of Burns, are mainly in Scots, but other poems, often those addressing, even confronting, another audience, are in English. For example, in ‘Venus in Hell’, he challenges an artist to portray the physical degradation by poverty of a female ‘model’, Mary: ‘We will not appreciate beauty/ Until we are sick of ugliness./ Can you make us vomit with your art?’⁷⁰ His short fiction contains vernacular in dialogues, but, like his journalism, is written in the standard language. *Black Earth*, published by Routledge in 1939, is completely shorn of Scots. In onomastic terms, the novel seeks to create an archetypally British mining community, with the pit towns of Brandon and Murtworth, and characters called Barrie, Marshall and

⁶⁷ Corrie, *Three One-Act Plays* (Glasgow: Labour Bookshop, 1930), p. 35.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶⁹ Corrie, *Robert Burns* (Glasgow: Brown, Son and Ferguson, 1979), p. 79.

⁷⁰ Corrie, *The Image o’ God*, p. 27.

Williams; the novel's intrigue centres around a household by the name of Smith. Thus Corrie navigates between the specific and the universal.

Malva wanted to communicate the truth about mining to his fellow workers: 'c'est surtout à mes camarades mineurs que je m'adresse'.⁷¹ That said, just as his fellow miners extinguished hopes of revolutionary change, there is little indication in Malva's work that this audience was reached. Instead, Malva also seeks to communicate his truths beyond the Borinage. Malva constantly craved recognition as a writer. This is illustrated by his approaches to Rolland and Poulaille, his adherence to circles of proletarian writers in Belgium and France, his wartime collaboration, and his ill-fated post-war quest to have *Ma nuit au jour le jour* published by Gallimard. Trips to Paris and Brussels, and visits by fellow writers, are moments of illumination in Malva's night. Because of this, the miner-writer has a split identity: 'j'écrivais, j'avais une double vie. J'avais d'autres relations que le commun des mineurs. J'avais des amis d'un milieu plus élevé que le mien et dans d'autres régions [...] Il y avait une évasion intellectuelle, tandis que mes camarades ne pouvaient que remâcher leurs soucis, leurs chagrins'.⁷² But this intellectual escape has its limits, as Paul Aron observes: 'la reconnaissance littéraire acquise par Malva peu avant la guerre ne déboucha pas sur une consécration effective'.⁷³ Thierry Maricourt, Henry Poulaille's biographer, evokes a hostile post-war literary context: 'La littérature prolétarienne disparaît inexorablement des librairies. Le "nouveau roman" et l'existentialisme accaparent l'attention des critiques, qui y voient une sorte d'"art pour l'art" et une littérature "désengagée"'.⁷⁴

The quest to penetrate a wider literary field can partly explain Malva's avoidance of patois in much of his fiction. If local terms are used, they, like the technical ones, are explained

⁷¹ Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 597.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁷³ Paul Aron, *La littérature prolétarienne en Belgique francophone depuis 1900* (Brussels: Espace Nord, 2006), p. 184.

⁷⁴ Thierry Maricourt, *Henry Poulaille*, (Levallois-Perret: Manya, 1992), p. 224.

in the body of the text or as footnotes. Malva's crusade for 'la sainte Vérité'⁷⁵ also influences his literary style. He does not seek to emulate the epic dimension of Zola's *Germinal*. There will be no dramatic pit disasters or long, bitter strike actions. Instead, as Barbusse points out in his preface to *Histoire de ma mère et de mon oncle Fernand*, Malva adopts a documentary style to capture 'mille et un jours mornes de la terre'.⁷⁶ Malva explicitly seeks to disappoint readers in search of mining sensationalism. *Ma nuit au jour le jour* begins at an arbitrary date and ends exactly a year later. There is no grand narrative arc, just an account of Malva and his fellow miners' day-to-day, generally monotonous existence, occasionally punctuated by accidents and technical failures. Whole weeks are missing from Malva's journal, as if nothing of note has happened. In her reading of *Borins*, Maria Chiara Gnocchi concludes that 'en morcelant son récit, Malva suggère un manque de sens, une non-valeur du travail des ouvriers'.⁷⁷ In the preface to *Un ouvrier qui s'ennuie*, Malva admits: 'j'ai peine à faire œuvre d'imagination'.⁷⁸

In his preface to Constant Malva's collected work, *Paroles de mineurs*, Michel Ragon suggests that the author would not have appreciated the persona of Jules Mousseron: 'il est possible (probable) que l'aspect folklorique du personnage lui ait répugné'.⁷⁹ Surprisingly, there is no mention of Mousseron in Malva's considerable correspondence. He would certainly have heard of the miner-poet from Denain, and no doubt read some of his verse: after all, Poulaille published both of them in *Le Nouvel âge* and *Prolétariat*. It is very probable that Malva would have looked unkindly on a poet who played the role of the happy miner, preferred charity to class struggle, and benefited from the paternalist support of the Compagnie des Mines d'Anzin.

⁷⁵ Aron, p. 162.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 757.

⁷⁷ Maria Chiara Gnocchi, 'Constant Malva et ses modèles. Une lecture de *Borins*', *Textyles*, 54 (2019), p. 139.

⁷⁸ Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 774.

⁷⁹ Michel Ragon, 'Préface', in Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, pp. i-xiii (p. iii).

That said, in the course of Malva's work, there is an increasing emphasis on local colour and, with that, local language. In *Borins* and *Un de la mine*, Malva offers not only vignettes of life in his mining community. He also offers the reader information on the history and customs of the Borinage, as well as various words and proverbs specific to the region. This *folklorique* dimension is further developed after the Second World War, in *Le Jambot* (1952). Here, Malva evokes various aspects of the morals, customs and sports of his community, and infuses dialogue with the local language, starting with the phrase exchanged by the novel's two lovers: 'je vous vois volontiers' [je vous aime].⁸⁰ This growing emphasis on the local is linked to awareness that his mining community is being changed beyond recognition. Malva declares that the composition of the workforce is being radically modified by immigration: 'il y a des Italiens, des Allemands, des Baltes, des Slaves, des Arabes, bientôt des Asiatiques, paraît-il'.⁸¹ What's more, modern methods and demands of coal production are literally killing him and his fellow workers: 'on a tué les ouvriers borains en ne les protégeant pas suffisamment des méfaits du machinisme. Ils sont morts de la silicose ou sont sur le point de l'être'.⁸² The lapidary account of the decline and death of 'Le Jambot' (Borain term for 'gamin de la mine'), who had once excelled at all sports and broken the hearts of the local women, could be seen as symbolizing the brutal death of an industry and a way of life. In his one collection of poetry, *Mensuaires* (1954), Malva pays elegiac homage to his region: 'Borinage morne, Borinage laid,/ Borinage qui pourtant plaît;/ Borinage de tous les âges,/ Borinage industriel et agreste,/ Borinage aux cent visages,/ Ai-je bien révélé ton âme en cette fresque?'⁸³

From 'Hell' to Heritage

⁸⁰ Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 405

⁸¹ Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 96.

⁸² Malva, *Paroles de mineurs*, p. 203.

⁸³ Malva, *Mensuaires* (Brussels: Editions du 'Coq qui Pond', 1954), p. 44.

Generational differences can be seen between Mousseron, on the one hand, and Corrie and Malva, on the other. Mousseron became a miner in the glory days of expansion of the mining industry and his home town. In the words of Jean Dauby, he is ‘le chantre d’une région prospère et confiante en son avenir’.⁸⁴ He was generally spared the mechanization, rationalization and industrial decline that Malva bemoans. At the same time, his posthumous poems, written in the 1930s, show an acute awareness of changes and stresses in the mining industry. In ‘Dins nos mines ed carbon hier et aujourd’hui’ (1946), he concludes with the arrival of the *marteau-piqueur*, with all the dust and deafening noise it brings: ‘C’t othieu magique’ buque [frappe] et rambuque/ Comm’ pou s’moquer du pic ancien’.⁸⁵ In ‘Et not’ carbon?’, he criticises demands to deport immigrant miners: ‘I f’ront parti’ d’ not’ existence,/ Comm’ les Saletzki, Katorski,/ Dont in n’fait aucun’ différence/ Intre nos bons frèr’s d’aujord’hui!’.⁸⁶

Jules Mousseron remained a consensual figure. When he died in November 1943, the occupying Nazi authorities exceptionally authorized a public funeral, in an area which, only two years earlier, had been paralysed by a communist-led strike. Mousseron’s hearse passed in front of a large crowd, preceded by the Harmonie des Mineurs de Denain, flanked by two rows of miners in full working uniform, and followed by his last *galibot*, carrying the miner-poet’s *barrette* and lamp. Among those paying their respects were the appointed mayor, Henri Doisy, the management of the Compagnie des Mines d’Anzin, the local abbé, and André Jurénil. In its homage, *Le Réveil du Nord* observed: ‘Tous ceux qui sont absents de leur Pays noir, civils et soldats, ont toujours apprécié avec tendresse les poèmes de Mousseron, qui ont été si souvent pour eux, un sujet de réconfort et de consolation’.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Dauby, ‘Jules Mousseron, poète-mineur (1868-1943)’, *Nord*, volume 4 (1984), pp. 61-69 (p. 61).

⁸⁵ Mousseron, *A l’fosse*, p. 222.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁸⁷ ‘Mort du poète mineur Jules Mousseron’, *Le Réveil du Nord*, 26 November 1943.

After the war, Mousseron's memory was kept alive in the Nord, and especially Denain. His work was preserved and promoted thanks to the efforts of Jean Dauby and Mousseron's daughters. There were commemorative events, the erection of a statue, and the naming of a lycée after him. There were also attempts by the communist party, now political masters of Denain, to claim him. In 1972, in their daily newspaper, *Liberté*, it was argued that the pity expressed in Mousseron's verse 'n'est pas contemplative et gratuite, elle est agissante', motivating support for miners and families in distress. The article also conveyed, like Malva, a certain nostalgia for old working practices: 'Sur les chantiers d'alors, il y avait [...] moins de bruit, moins de poussières mortelles. Le travail conservait un caractère plus humain avec tout ce que cela comporte de chaleur, de pensée, de rêve même'.⁸⁸ But with the decline and closure of the nationalised Charbonnages de France (the *fosse* Renard had already closed in 1948), Mousseron was now part of *le patrimoine*: his study was reconstructed as part of Denain's municipal museum, where visitors can listen to a 'juke box' of selected poems performed by the hologram of an actor dressed as the poet. The effigy of Cafougnette remains a fixture at the local Ducasse, a popular annual festival.⁸⁹ Alongside *le parcours Emile Zola*, Mousseron gives a literary dimension to a coalfield now designated as world heritage by UNESCO.

Malva was alive to see the precipitous post-war decline of mining in the Borinage. Faithful to his fatalistic outlook, his last major prose work, *Ramentevoir* (a dialect word for 'to remember'), written in 1956 but published posthumously in 1989, sees the main character, Alfred Rousseau, returning to the area after an absence of twelve years. Staying with his sister and brother-in-law, Rousseau studiously avoids those who would bring up his collaborationist past, and furtively walks down memory lane. On taking the train back to Brussels, he says to

⁸⁸ Author unknown, 'La vie et l'œuvre du poète patoisant Jules Mousseron', *Liberté*, 25 août 1972.

⁸⁹ See Olivier Kourchid and Hélène Melin, 'Mobilisations et mémoire du travail dans une grande région: le Nord-Pas-de-Calais et son patrimoine industriel', *Le Mouvement social*, No. 199 (April-June 2002), pp. 37-59.

himself: ‘Le Borinage est un énorme cimetière. Une bonne partie de ma vie y est enterrée’.⁹⁰

Lonely, embittered and alcoholic, his literary ambitions unfulfilled, Malva died in 1969 in obscurity, from silicosis. According to Jacques Cordier, Malva’s final years were

une vie sans histoires, éclairée par des visites parfois inattendues qui faisaient plaisir à l’écrivain prolétarien qu’il avait été. Un étudiant, un enseignant, retrouvait sa trace. Il les recevait curieusement juché sur une chaise, les pieds ramenés sous lui à la manière d’un yogi. En fait, la position de repos du mineur au fond des tailles’.⁹¹

He was forever trapped in what Michel Gheude has called an ‘insoluble contradiction’: ‘Malva n’est écrivain que parce qu’il est mineur. Ecrire pour quitter la mine, mais rester dans la mine pour écrire’.⁹²

However, not long after Malva’s death, his wish for recognition as conveyor of the ‘truth’ of the mine became reality, in a changed situation. In 1978, the leftist publisher François Maspéro brought out a new edition of *Ma nuit au jour le jour*. In his preface, Bruno Mattéi praised Malva for demystifying the heroic image of the miner promoted, not only by employers, but also by the mainstream labour movement, especially the communists. For Mattéi, ‘il n’est pas sans intérêt [...] que ce récit ait été écrit au moment du Front Populaire en France, et quelques années avant la fameuse “bataille du charbon”, juste au sortir de la guerre: le rouleau compresseur de l’idéologie du travail et du mineur héros s’est remis en route’.⁹³ Mattéi relates this historical context to the very recent past: in 1974, the PCF and the trade union under its control, the CGT, had relaunched a new *bataille du charbon* to defend the French mining industry against the threats posed by the Common Market and global economic

⁹⁰ Malva, *Ramentevoir. Récit* (Cuesmes/Mons: Editions du Cerisier, 1989), p. 162.

⁹¹ Jacques Cordier, *Constant Malva, mineur et écrivain*, (Brussels: *Plein Chant*, 1980), p. 75.

⁹² Michel Gheude, ‘En sortant de la mine’, *Rue des usines*, 2/3 (1979), p. 6. See also Jean-Luc Martinet, ‘La malédiction de l’écrivain prolétarien: Constant Malva’, *Textyles*, 53 (2018): 57-76.

⁹³ Mattéi, p. 9.

forces. Mattéi contrasts this with the difficult truth conveyed by Malva: ‘confisqués de paroles, interdits d’émotions, sans doute était-il difficile d’être soi-même quand pourtant le discours et la propagande vous ont montré à l’œuvre et à l’aise. Mineurs: des “héros” qui furent surtout victimes’.⁹⁴

In the decades that followed, Malva’s work was rediscovered and published in almost its entirety, appreciated as powerful literary testimony to a key industry that was now defunct, at least in western Europe. In his introduction to the new edition of *Un ouvrier qui s’ennuie*, Michel Ragon wrote: ‘La mort du Borinage, si liée à son œuvre, accentuait son amertume. Mais en même temps il avait la certitude que les générations futures, s’interrogeant sur le prolétariat de la mine, ne pourraient pas ne pas faire appel à son œuvre. L’avenir, un peu tard, lui a donné raison’.⁹⁵

After the Second World War, mining was not a source of artistic inspiration for Joe Corrie. His only major theatre work, *The Colour Bar* (1954), dealt with racism among the English working class, while, in Scotland, it was *Tullycairn* that was revived to acclaim in 1956. However, Corrie did write articles about the state and future of the newly-nationalized coal industry. He continued to express a constant concern: the need to bring culture and beauty to the miners. In 1947, he wrote: ‘Things that could place mining towns at the tip of artistic endeavour of the mind could only be directed towards the arts. [...] The miners are too fine a race to be doomed to a life of hard toil, dreariness and apathy. And the bookie mustn’t always win’.⁹⁶ This belief in improvement through education and the arts explains Corrie’s joy at his daughter graduating with a degree in modern languages from the University of Glasgow. He told the *Evening News*: ‘I was determined that my daughter, if she showed promise, would

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

⁹⁵ Michel Ragon, ‘Présentation’, in Malva, *Un ouvrier qui s’ennuie. Mon homme de coupe* (Geneva-Paris: Slatkine, 1981), pp. i-viii (p. viii).

⁹⁶ Joe Corrie Papers, National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh: MS 26555, ‘Culture is the Key to Coal’, 26 August 1947, publication unknown.

receive a university education, not that she might qualify for a good job in one of the professions, but that she would be able to appreciate so many things which I couldn't because of my lack of knowledge'.⁹⁷ In a series of articles for the *Evening Citizen* on the state of Scottish mining in the 1950s, Corrie gave an optimistic prediction for fifty years hence: 'Coal mining will be much easier, for the machine will do most of the work. The miner will become more of a mechanic. The bad old days and the bad old ways will be forgotten. The old grudges will have gone'.⁹⁸ In fact, the last deep coal mine in West Fife, Longannet, closed in 2002. But if Corrie died in relative obscurity in 1968, interest in his work was rekindled thanks to the 'old grudges' expressed during the miners' strike of 1984-1985. *In Time o' Strife* was performed by the radical 7:84 theatre company and published alongside other works.⁹⁹ His poetry and song are currently promoted by a revived Bowhill Players group, while the cultural centre in Cardenden was named after him in 1985. In 2013, under the direction of Graham McLaren, an adaptation of *In Time o' Strife* was performed by the National Theatre of Scotland, posthumous revenge for a playwright rejected by the Scottish National Players for being too political and naturalist.

Conclusion

In 'Down the Mine' (1937), George Orwell concludes: 'it is only because miners sweat their guts out that superior persons can remain superior. You and I and the editor of the *Times Lit. Supp.*, and the Nancy poets and the Archbishop of Canterbury and Comrade X, author of

⁹⁷ Joe Corrie Papers, MS 26555, 'Graduation Day', *Evening News* (undated). By a striking coincidence, all of Corrie, Malva and Mousseron's children were daughters, ending in each case the mining family line.

⁹⁸ Joe Corrie Papers: MS 26560, *Evening Citizen* (undated).

⁹⁹ Linda Mackenney (ed.), *Joe Corrie: Plays, Poems and Theatre Writings* (Edinburgh: 7:84, 1984).

Marxism for Infants'.¹⁰⁰ Orwell rightly points out how mining is both fundamental and invisible. The miner-writers discussed above represent attempts to bridge the gap between mining below and intellectual life above. They gave voice to the mine and thus were welcomed by Henry Poulaille as representatives of the proletarian literature he championed. Mining and writing in three different countries, they seemed to answer what Rosemary Chapman describes as Poulaille's 'plea for internationalism in art and for the expression of experiences the significance of which lies in the fact that they are experiences common to working men and women world-wide'.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, the variety of their work shows the limits of Poulaille's categorization of 'proletarian literature'. There are considerable differences between Corrie, Malva and Mousseron, notably on class struggle, political commitment and their relationship to miners and mining. To some extent, this gives support to Tristan Rémy's criticism of his erstwhile ally Poulaille in 1937: 'son erreur initiale – et sa faiblesse – fut qu'il admit comme postulat, en dépit de toute réalité, que les origines prolétariens d'un écrivain suffisait à lui indiquer le chemin du cœur et de la sensibilité populaire'.¹⁰² In addition to this lack of a clear programme or ideological outlook in Poulaille's conception of proletarian literature, there is the question of these miner-writers' relationship both to 'proletariat' and 'literature'. If the role of politically-unengaged 'proletarian writer' is played comfortably by Mousseron throughout, Corrie and Malva's desire for escape and recognition make it problematic for them to inhabit this role. All three, however, are united in expressing a local, not strictly proletarian, identity, often in the local language, while reaching out to a broader public, with varying degrees of success. At the same time, all three miner-writers are ultimately tied to the destiny of their industry, from the boom years that Mousseron celebrated to the crises and closures that Malva and, to a lesser extent, Corrie were witness to, then the transformation

¹⁰⁰ George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 2020), p. 31.

¹⁰¹ Chapman, *Henry Poulaille*, p. 155.

¹⁰² Tristan Rémy, 'L'écrivain et les écoles', *L'Humanité*, 20 November 1937.

of mining into a heritage of which they are a cultural part. Considerable artistic merits aside, their writing is testimony to a crucial moment of the Anthropocene now considered more with regret than nostalgia.

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