
H-France Review Vol. 14 (June 2014), No. 101

Hannah Thompson, *Taboo: Corporeal Secrets in Nineteenth-Century France*. Oxford: Legenda, 2013. ix + 157 pp. \$89.50 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-907975-55-4.

Review by Holly Christine Woodson, Seattle University.

Hannah Thompson's provocative latest book, *Taboo: Corporeal Secrets in Nineteenth-Century France*, considers nineteenth-century realist and naturalist representations of the body—sexual, ill, effeminate, wounded, monstrous, disabled, or traumatized—using what Julia Kristeva elsewhere has called a “split speech act,” in which the reader and the author are “simultaneously subject and addressee of discourse.”[1] Thompson's reading adopts a definition of “taboo” as located simply in the unsayable, as opposed to the atavistic sexual dynamic theorized in Sigmund Freud's well-known *Totem and Taboo*. Naturalism and realism then turn out to be fertile grounds for exploration of the taboo body since that body is the most resistant to narrative representation, and therefore is, ironically, “its most articulate” (p. 4).

Thompson's theoretical basis is varied and admittedly eclectic, engaging, among others, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Judith Butler, Susan Sontag, and Cathy Caruth. Thompson focuses on their interests in the tension between the speakable and unspeakable. Moreover, she confronts renowned critics, including Jean Borie and Elaine Scarry, arguing for a more nuanced understanding of the paradoxical silence she identifies in narratives of illness and pain.[2]

Thompson's critiques of *idées reçues* are typically spot-on, challenging us to return to the novels. Moreover, Thompson's critical apparatus (introduction, chapter endnotes, bibliography, and index) is well-suited to her dense, slim volume. I found her chapter notes (averaging around forty per chapter) to be useful, demonstrating the depth of her expertise. She interpolates, for instance, Bram Dijkstra (*Idols of Perversity*); Gilles Deleuze, (*Présentation de Sacher-Masoch: le froid et le cruel*); and Hollis Clayson, (*Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*), without letting their voices become overbearing or distracting from her unique undertaking.

Thompson divides *Taboo* into two parts: the first, “The Body,” offers a close reading of the taboo body in novels by George Sand, Rachilde, and Emile Zola. The second, “The Reader,” is more theoretically challenging, exploring the reader's response and indeed implication in realist depictions of cruelty, torture, sadism, and deformity. Thompson argues that the reader, when confronted with the taboo in realist and naturalist texts, is drawn into the act of representation in a unique and, at times, disturbing way. I think it would have been useful for Thompson to separate her final chapter, “The Truth Will Out: National and Personal Trauma in Zola's *Vérité*,” into a coda, which could have been called “The Writer,” since the stakes in this chapter are much different, focusing on the *writer's* act of processing personal trauma through narrative.

With such an array of taboo subjects, it struck me that it would have been hard to know where to begin, but one of the things I like best about this book is its craftsmanship. The sequence of the book's chapters implicitly concedes the historicity of the taboo, especially in language, even as Thompson's carefully delineated scope adds precision to her analysis. Thompson's study then aptly illustrates not only how

language serves as the gatekeeper of propriety, but also, that a meaningful investigation of taboo as the unsayable must be located with historical and sociocultural precision.

At the same time, Thompson's understanding of the taboo in nineteenth-century France is balanced by a sensitivity to what remains more or less sayable for her twenty-first-century reader. Her first chapter, "Secrets and Suggestions: The Silenced Sexuality of Sand and Rachilde," analyzes what is arguably her least taboo subject by today's standards, feminine non-procreative sexuality post-*Code Napoléon*.^[3] Thompson articulates how Sand, through the "presence of illness" in *Indiana* and *Lélia* and Rachilde, through the "aestheticization of female pleasure" in *Monsieur Vénus*, *La Marquise de Sade*, and *La Jongleuse* veil taboo female sexuality even as they simultaneously seek to expose it (pp. 25, 30). Thompson proceeds to her insightful reading of feminine illness as a placeholder for desire. In chapter two, "Diagnosing the Female Body: Illness and the Imaginary in Zola's *Lourdes*," Thompson reaches beyond a potentially reductive diagnosis of hysteria for the sick female characters and instead shows how Zola maps female sexual transgression onto the miraculous cures sought by pilgrims in Lourdes. According to Thompson, Zola favors silence over scientific precision at critical moments in the text, since "[t]aboo subjects like illness and sexuality can, indeed sometimes should, remain unspoken" (p. 59). Part one closes with Thompson's analysis of the intersection of personal and national emasculation in representations of the Franco-Prussian war.

Chapter three, "Being a Man in the Nineteenth Century," contains Thompson's remarkable reading of an iconic, yet fairly obscure scene in Zola's *La Débâcle*, in which Zola describes French soldiers, seen from a distance, having a party on the lawn. As Zola's cinematic portrayal, akin to a wide-angle panoramic shot, narrows, however, the reader, along with the approaching group of French soldiers, realizes the macabre truth: the *tableau vivant* is in fact a *tableau mort*, composed of mangled bodies carefully arranged to depict what seems from afar a pastoral, if somewhat oddly homosocial, *fête galante*. "The gruesome *mise-en-scène* orchestrated by the victorious Prussians represents a horrific usurpation of the French soldiers' bodily autonomy. Once the body of the soldier has been robbed of its manliness by death, it loses its place in the signifying system, or, more precisely, it comes to signify something other than itself. The bodies of the French soldiers, where maleness and masculinity once co-existed, have become nothing more than dolls or mannequins which the conquering Prussians are free to manipulate. The Prussian hold on the French nation is evoked in microcosm in this scene as the Prussians use their manipulation of the demasculinized body of the French soldier to assert their control over the signifying system and therefore over power" (p. 73).

Thompson argues that Zola partially recuperates French masculinity through the "queer" relationship between Jean and Maurice, which helps both soldiers to survive the war: "Now this 'unmanning,' and the resulting separation of 'sex' and 'gender,' can be read as a positive move, an exciting way of demonstrating that gender binaries are an artificial and unnecessary construction which can hinder rather than enable conceptions of national and individual identity" (p. 81).

In part two, Thompson examines how realist and naturalist texts implicate the reader in their narrative construct. Chapter four, "Savage Poetry: Cruelty, Torture, and Sadism," identifies a particular dynamic unique to realist/naturalist representations of the taboo body, whereby the reader is positioned at once as sadist, "enjoying the suffering he or she is forced to witness," and as masochist, "taking pleasure in the author's manipulations of him or her" (p. 11). Thompson convincingly redeems the realist/naturalist representations of the tortured body from mere instances of shock value. Her perceptive readings of Octave Mirbeau's *Le Jardin des supplices* and Barbey d'Aurevilly's *L'Enfermée* and *Les Diaboliques* challenge the predictable reader-as-voyeur paradigm. She explains instead how the act of confronting the tortured body in the realist text creates an aesthetic: "textual violence can be fully comprehended only when it is read in relation to the bodies of both protagonists and reader" (p. 93).

In chapter five, “Metaphors of the Monstrous, The Case of Victor Hugo,” Thompson reads Hugo’s “modern sublime,” in *Notre Dame de Paris* as a valorization of the monster, Quasimodo, who becomes an “essential part of the [modern] ideal” (p. 112). Thompson articulates how the “aesthetics of the monstrous,” following Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of the grotesque, recuperates deformity to allow for a more fluid, perhaps one could even say humane understanding of nineteenth-century beauty (pp. 111). Thompson argues that Hugo’s depiction of the monstrous body in *L’Homme qui rit* anticipates modern-day disability studies, since the grotesquely deformed face of the protagonist, Gwynplaine, earns him a living as a public performer: “As Mitchell and Synder point out in a different context, ‘the power of transgression always originates at the moment where the derided object embraces its deviance as value’” (p. 119).

In this chapter, as well as in chapter three related to war, I would have liked to know how Thompson differentiates between the taboo body deformed by “nature” and the body violently deformed by human cruelty, such as Gwynplaine’s. How do these two bodies function differently in realist narratives? Does the knowledge of the body’s former wholeness play an important role for the spectator/reader? Thompson’s historical discussion of freak shows dovetails with my question. Freak shows, Thompson argues, create a reader-author dynamic similar to the one found in chapter four on torture: the freak show, like the act of torture, and, metaphorically, the realist text, becomes meaningless without the participation, and hence complicity, of the spectator/reader. I believe Thompson’s analysis of taboo at the intersection of aesthetics and identity politics in Hugo will inspire stimulating discussions among scholars and students of nineteenth-century literature.

Before discussing chapter six, I will note that, throughout her book, Thompson characterizes fellow literary critics as heretofore hesitant to engage with taboo subjects. Her assumption, I find, is overly general. For instance, she writes: “critics are reluctant to discuss taboo subjects such as sado-masochism for fear that they will be assumed to share the desires they are commenting on” (p. 108). Speaking as someone who once gave a talk on infanticide while eight-months pregnant, I have trouble accepting Thompson’s peer review. However, overall, Thompson’s work proves sophisticated and convincing.

In chapter six, Thompson applies current psychological thinking about victims of trauma to Zola’s last novel, *Vérité*, claiming: “literature can be seen as a *mise-en-abyme* of the mechanisms of and for understanding trauma” (p. 127).^[4] The “truth” in the novel’s title does not just concern the facts surrounding the mystery of the rape and murder of Zola’s fictional character, the young Zéphérin, then, but also, the secrets of the author, who, it is thought, was sexually violated as a boy. According to Thompson, the novel therefore serves the purpose of what Suzette Henke elsewhere has called “scriptotherapy” (p. 127). Thompson writes: “For me, the act of stuffing papers into Zéphérin’s mouth as a means of silencing him symbolically enacts Zola’s own silent inability to articulate the horror of this particular crime. The similarities between Zola’s childhood trauma and Zéphérin’s experience compel us to read Zéphérin as a fictionalized version of the author” (p.137).

While some critics may balk at Thompson’s willingness to draw parallels between Zola’s biography and his work, I found her close reading here, as elsewhere, compelling. Thompson goes further to suggest that writing the novel similarly permits Zola to tell the truth about the trauma he experienced during his prominent role in the Dreyfus Affair. Thus *Vérité*, in some ways, functions to heal its author. Still, Thompson argues, Zola is not able to name the details of paedophilic rape. Instead, silence, or what, from a derridean viewpoint, we might consider “absence of presence,” narratively marks the traumatic event: “The fact that Zola’s novel appears to contradict the novelist’s own naturalist beliefs again suggests that the taboo cannot be articulated precisely because of its status as traumatic experience” (p. 135). While I do not have Thompson’s theoretical background on trauma, I wonder how Zola’s silence or loquacity relates to the composition of the novel as a whole? For it is indeed a work of art which Zola produces, and not the stream-of-consciousness one could imagine flowing from a scriptotherapy session. Does ordering words in an aesthetic way serve Zola’s psyche differently than, say, writing in a diary?

Finally, Thompson begins to address the question of aesthetics with her attention to the author's silence. It perhaps would be interesting to consider to what extent the taboo destabilizes the realist genre, whether it contributes to the breakdown of realist-naturalist representation, and what role it plays in the advent of modernism? I think scholars and students will find much to discuss in *Taboo*.

NOTES

[1] Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980). Kristeva writes: "the scene of the carnival introduces the split speech act: the actor and the crowd are each in turn simultaneously subject and addressee of discourse" (p. 46).

[2] Thompson writes: "Rather than claiming, as Borie does, that illness *is* sexual...illness *represents* the sexual, as it becomes a more acceptable way of articulating the even more unspeakable taboo of female sexuality which is problematic due to either an excess or lack thereof" (p. 56). In the same vein, Thompson argues that, "pain, which Elaine Scarry has described as unrepresentable, can be represented in language when the reader is implicated in its expression" (p. 11).

[3] See Nicholas White, *French Divorce Fiction From the Revolution to the First World War* (Legenda: Oxford, 2013).

[4] I wondered if Thompson therefore would categorize the taboo in *Vérité* as similar to what Roland Barthes has called "the extra dimension" in Zola: "beneath the sociological superstructure flow fierce, primitive undercurrents, like an age-old torrent thundering below a solidly constructed utilitarian modern bridge" (p. 99). Roland Barthes, "The Man Eater," in David Baguley, ed., *Critical Essays on Emile Zola* (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986): 90-93.

Holly Christine Woodson
Seattle University
waddellh@seattleu.edu

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172