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John Culbert, *Paralyses: Literature, Travel, and Ethnography in French Modernity*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2011. x + 444 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$65.00 U.S., £45 (cl). ISBN 0-8032-2991-4.

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Toward the end of the lengthy introduction to this ambitious, finely wrought, but somewhat frustrating book John Culbert makes clear that readers should not expect “a comprehensive cultural history” (p. 49) of the phenomena set out in the keywords of his title. The travel that most concerns Culbert involves interior journeys within the subjects’ psyches. Indeed, he uses the word “transports” in the sense of rapture or ecstasy rather than of conveyances. Ethnography interests him as an encounter with the other, and as a distinctive form of writing, but only in passing as a key method of anthropology as a discipline. Modernity serves largely as background, with familiar characteristics such as speed, the emergence of mass culture, and technological change. Its own constitution as a concept, and its relation to the broad historical period covered (from the mid-nineteenth century to the early twenty-first) is not at issue. This is, above all, a book about literature. One of its central claims is that “literary journeys are particularly important...for they tend to undermine the ideological claims other travelers take for granted” (p. 317). In some ways the central figures are less the writers who name most of the chapters than the theorists to whom the author repeatedly returns: Jacques Derrida, Jacques Lacan, the psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche.

The first word of the book’s title, finally, has a dual meaning. “Paralysis,” Culbert writes, “is not only the object of these studies but the name of their critical approach” (p. 21). He borrows the term *paralyse* (in French a neologism as a noun) from Derrida, who briefly used it to describe a digressive form of reading that questions traditional notions of movement, transport, and borders, including those associated with death and desire. If the book as a whole seeks to “sketch the salient features of a modern French resistance to travel in literature” (p. 8), the method of *paralyse* aims to show how paralyses as objects of study—that is, as significant moments of resistance, stasis, or self-analysis in texts—“undo the certainties of knowledge, presenting alternatives to the normative codings of travel, transport, and narrative” (p. 13).

Culbert applies this form of reading to selected texts by four major figures: Michel Leiris, a leading twentieth-century ethnographer and memoirist; the nineteenth-century painter and writer Eugène Fromentin; the twentieth-century essayist Jean Paulhan; and the theorist and critic Roland Barthes. Leiris is the focus of two chapters: chapter one on *Scraps*, the second volume of his autobiography, which becomes the basis for a genealogy of a figure of arrested travel, set in Pompeii, that reaches back through Freud and Wilhelm Jensen to Nerval; and chapter four on his ethnographic writings, principally *L’Afrique fantôme*. Fromentin, Paulhan, and Barthes occupy one chapter each (two, three, and five respectively), with the sixth and final chapter devoted to the writing of post-colonial immigrants, notably the Trinidadian-born Sam Selvon and the Algerian Rachid Boudjedra. As the fractured treatment of Leiris suggests, what animates this organization is less the unique personality of an author, the Barthesian “death” of which Culbert takes (in passing) as a given, still less any chronological development, than specific tropes of paralysis in each writer that instantiate different kinds of stymied journeys. “The muse of paralysis” (the title of chapter one) traceable through *Scraps* to Jensen’s *Gradiva*

(1901) and Nerval's "Octavia" (1854) offers a way of turning the quest for origins that motivates all autobiographical writing into a form of self-criticism. In Fromentin's inability to embrace fully the forward movement of the French conquest of Algeria lies a more profound sense of the limits of both the colonial enterprise and attempts to represent it. Paulhan's early work on opaque Malagasy proverbs leads to his reflections on the pervasiveness of linguistic error, of which sexuality becomes the privileged locus. The false starts, aimlessness, and perpetually deferred exotic in Leiris's account of the famous Mission Dakar-Djibouti of 1933-1934 finally, through autobiographical reflection and fieldwork on spirit possession in Ethiopia, finally open into an ethical unsettling of relations between self and other. Barthes' writerly tactics of drift and stasis enable him to move from the ideological critique of *Mythologies* into an intractability and indecision that together challenge the discursive order.

The foregoing summary can in no way convey the subtleties, the density, the twists and turns of Culbert's argument, replete with intertextual references. Yet over and above the textual singularities he discusses, Culbert proffers several thematic continuities, and it is on these that the book's argument ultimately rests. Three themes stand out, in three different registers: linguistic, psychoanalytic, and, for lack of a better term, historico-cultural. The linguistic and psychoanalytic strands work well together, but in a way that tends to undercut the reader's appreciation of the distinctness of the different texts. At the level of language, Culbert is constantly seeking--and finding--aporia, a term he uses in the poststructuralist sense of an impasse, an insurmountable obstacle, in which the writer admits the failure of whatever quest he (and in this book, apart from Assia Djebar, Jamaica Kincaid, and Leïla Sebbar, the writer is almost always a man) has undertaken. Fromentin, Leiris, Paulhan, and Barthes do not simply experience moments of aporia, these moments crucially inflect their and their interpreters' insights into the problematics of modern travel. The psychoanalytic strand is complex, but could best be described in terms of an unwilling yet decisive confrontation, as a result of some form of paralyzed journey, of a primal scene of desire, often associated with castration. To his credit, Culbert's method in these passages is exemplary--he does not simply read his writers in terms of Lacan or Laplanche but uses them to question and rewrite their schemas--but for a reader lacking the author's command of this literature, the subtleties may be lost, with the apparent result that all the frustrated quests lead back to similar primal scenes.

For readers schooled in more historical approaches, the remaining thematic strand, that of colonialism, offers the most promise, but it ultimately proves less than fully persuasive. France's colonial enterprise appears in a number of guises in *Paralyses*: as a condition of possibility and object of study, notably for the travel accounts of Fromentin and Leiris, but also for ethnography itself; as a source of doubt and hesitation about travel, but also of insight into various linguistic impasses, in Barthes as well as Paulhan; and as a haunting, repressed past that postcolonial immigrant writers, considered in the last chapter, seek to bring to life. With a number of colonial set-pieces and texts--the first chapter begins with the different experiences of Claude Lévi-Strauss and André Breton in Martinique in 1941; the chapter on Barthes discusses a novel by Pierre Loti to which Barthes devoted an essay--the book creates a kind of mosaic of different imbrications of literature, travel, and "the colonial." Yet the mosaic's tesserae always loom larger than its overall pattern, leaving colonialism less central to the book than Culbert claims. Leiris's transformation from, in the thirties, at least a passive enabler of colonial ethnography to, in the 1950 essay "L'Ethnographe devant le colonialisme," its formidable critic, is by now quite well-known. Culbert's version of this story, with its emphasis, however justifiable, on Leiris's personal torments, frustrated desires, and interrupted psychoanalysis, adds little to our understanding of anthropology's implication in colonialism. [1] The claim that "Fromentin's encounter with Algeria subtly undoes the discourse of colonial mastery, and this subversion of colonial authority makes Fromentin's work a valuable counterpoint to...popular imperial discourse" (p. 101) would be more persuasive if the book presented any examples of such discourse, and if Culbert confronted Fromentin's work as a painter, and the inherently static nature of painting as a medium, in a less summary way. Although it might be true that "Madagascar holds a defining place . . . in the work of Paulhan" (p. 159), what Paulhan works through after his brief, three-year stay on the island is a "development from

exoticism to self-estrangement" (p. 178). This "development" ultimately leads to an "impersonality" that reflects "the highly cathected site of a traumatic eclipsing of the subject" (p. 192)—Paulhan, that is, not the Malagasy people, whose language seems to have troubled him much more than their subjugation. Exoticism, moreover, a recurrent temptation for Barthes as well (one played out in countries France never colonized, Japan and China), bears a complex relation to colonialism, neither coterminous nor necessarily contiguous; Culbert tends simply to elide the two.

The last chapter, which has the feel of an epilogue though it is not so designated, uses the work of writers like Boudjedra, Djébar, and Sebbar to ground a set of reflections on the current situation of immigrants in France. Culbert takes as exemplary the scholar and novelist Azouz Begag, whose book *Ethnicity and Equality* he carefully demolishes and whose tenure as Minister for Equal Opportunity from 2005–2007 he sees as epitomizing the failure of French "hospitality" (a term borrowed from Tahar Ben Jalloun) to its postcolonial subjects. But like Culbert's earlier treatment of colonial ethnography, or his somewhat torturous defense of Paulhan's political disengagement during the French–Algerian War, his unremittingly negative picture of recent French society as dominated by the 2006 riots, Nicolas Sarkozy, and repressed trauma will likely strike some readers as simplistic. Other politicians besides Begag and Sarkozy, the only ones named, have had a voice in France's relations with its immigrant communities; so have associations like SOS Racisme and other groups founded by immigrants. More to the point, the historian Patrick Weil, an ardent critic of anti-immigrant rhetoric, has shown in his scholarly work that such rhetoric has almost always been more extreme than state policies and their implementation.^[2] Other filmmakers besides the Austrian Michael Haneke, whose powerful and disturbing *Caché* is the only film cited, have confronted the repressed trauma of France's colonial past as well as its troubled attempts at multi-culturalism. To omit any mention of films by French directors conveys a misleading impression of the imbrication of French culture with the issues under discussion.^[3] At a more symbolic level, does not the election of Assia Djébar to the Académie française, a process in which the novelist participated, count as a gesture of "hospitality," however small, and deserve mention alongside her cry of mourning in a Paris street? Although most readers are likely to agree with the tenor of Culbert's moral judgment here, given his reluctance to engage in such judgment earlier in the book, they have the right to expect a more nuanced picture as a basis for his pronouncements at its conclusion.

Ultimately *Paralyes* is intended for specialists, and not primarily for historians. On one level an exercise in advanced literary theory, it also falls comfortably within the parameters of a literary study of canonical texts. Even if some of the writers studied are on the eccentric edges of the canon, none is wholly outside it, and Culbert claims for their work something like artistic autonomy. "Art," he writes, "is never fully reducible to the conditions of its production and consumption; while necessarily informed by and informing social and cultural norms, art provides for the deconstruction of those cultural norms and forms" (p. 212). Even for those more interested in these "conditions," *Paralyes* nonetheless has much to offer. Historians ignore the kind of close reading Culbert performs so expertly at their peril. Yet only readers who already possess a deep familiarity with the book's theoretical touchstones, especially Derrida and Lacan, will want to read it cover to cover. The book ends on a revealing note, adding to the *droit de cité*, a right to citizenship that has become a keyword to claims for human dignity in the Francophone world, a call for a *droit de citer*, "a right to citation, provided, however, that citation is understood...as a subversive resignification of the original" (p. 354). This is a right Culbert, like any good critic, exercises continuously throughout his book. It is unclear how it could improve the situation of immigrants in France or anywhere else.

NOTES

[1] Culbert's discussion of the transformation of the old Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in to the Musée de l'Homme in the 1930s is taken almost entirely from James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture:*

Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). On the relationship between anthropology and colonialism he also draws on Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1973) and Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Objects* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). More recent or more focused essays on these topics include Jean Jamin, "Le musée d'Ethnographie en 1930: L'ethnologie comme science et comme politique," in *La muséologie selon Georges-Henri Rivière: Cours de muséologie, Textes et témoignages* (Paris: Dunod, 1989), pp. 110-121; Alice L. Conklin, "Civil Society, Science and Empire in Late Republican France: The Foundation of Paris=s Museum of Man," *Osiris* 17 (2002): 255-290; and Daniel J. Sherman, "'Peoples Ethnographic': Objects, Museums, and the Colonial Inheritance of French Ethnography," *French Historical Studies* 27:3(Summer 2004): 669-703.

[2] See, for example, Patrick Weil, *La France et ses étrangers: L'aventure d'une politique de l'immigration de 1938 à nos jours*, rev. ed., (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); Weil, *La République et sa diversité: Immigration, intégration, discriminations* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).

[3] For a good survey of such films up to the mid-1990s, see Carrie Tarr, "French Cinema and Post-Colonial Minorities," in Alec G. Hargreaves and Mark McKinney, eds., *Post-Colonial Cultures in France* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 59-83; for a survey extending from 1962 to 2006, see Caroline Eades, *Le cinéma post-colonial français* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 2006). Any discussion of subsequent films would have to include Abdellatif Kechiche's *L'Esquive* (2003) and *La graine et le mulet* (2007), Rachid Bouchareb's *Indigènes* (2006) and *Hors-la-loi* (2010), and Jacques Audiard's *Un prophète* (2009), to cite only those best known in the United States.

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