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Michael Dorsch, *French Sculpture following the Franco-Prussian War, 1870-80. Realist Allegories and the Commemoration of Defeat*. Farnham and Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2010. 206 pp. Illustrations. \$109.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4094-0352-4.

Review by Neil McWilliam, Duke University.

The Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871 marks an important turning point for the history of commemorative sculpture in Europe. Both victor and vanquished incorporated the conflict within national memory through the production of figurative monuments dedicated to the foot soldiers who had given their lives on the field of battle. Though not unprecedented—both the Crimean War and the American Civil War inspired a similar response—the memorialization of Prussia’s victory over the Second Empire is remarkable for the quantity and geographical distribution of the statuary produced and for the longevity of the commemorative impulse, which was interrupted only with the resumption of hostilities in 1914. Michael Dorsch’s monograph sets out to examine the foundational moment of this phenomenon in France by exploring monuments produced in the decade following the humiliating armistice agreed at Versailles in February 1871, which saw payment of a substantial indemnity and the ceding of French territories in Alsace and Lorraine to the new German Empire.

Yet, as his rather cumbersome title indicates, the sculpture Dorsch discusses is not restricted to war memorials as such: two chapters, focusing on Alexandre Falguière’s *La Résistance*, originally modeled in snow during the siege of Paris in December 1870, and on Auguste Rodin’s *L’Age d’airain* (a work originally entitled *Le Vaincu*) of 1877, are more elliptically related to the commemorative impulse, which is explored in chapters devoted to Antonin Mercié’s *Gloria Victis* (1873) and Louis-Ernest Barrias’s *La Défense de Paris* (1879-1883). Dorsch’s brief survey is rounded out with a chapter on the portrayal in caricature of the dissipation of the pre-war Imperial court and of the degeneracy of the Communards who briefly controlled Paris following the provisional government’s capitulation to Prussia in the spring of 1871. Taken together, these individual case studies are developed by the author to advance two arguments concerning the history of France and the history of French sculpture. On the one hand, Dorsch relates the prevalence of an iconographic motif in Franco-Prussian war memorials that he describes as that of “the strong woman, fallen man” to a contemporary “crisis of masculinity” in the early Third Republic. On the other, he traces the breakdown of traditional languages of sculptural allegory epitomized in the works he surveys and argues that stylistic features incipient in Barrias’ work and more fully realized by Rodin point the way towards abstraction that would dominate the medium during the twentieth century.

Neither of these arguments is particularly new and each of the sculptures that Dorsch analyzes has been subject to more or less detailed analysis by historians in recent years. Rodin’s work, of course, has generated an extensive literature, to which the present study adds little of real significance,<sup>[1]</sup> and outstanding research by historians such as Hollis Clayton, June Hargrove, and Daniel Imbert seems to offer Dorsch little room for maneuver in either documenting or interpreting the other sculpture that he

discusses.[2] In the end, evaluation of Dorsch's achievement must rest primarily on the strength of the arguments that structure his work and the historical rigor with which he pursues them.

Dorsch's opening chapter concerns an object that survives largely as legend. *La Résistance's* ephemeral existence on the 85th Bastion established during the siege of Paris is attested today only through written description, a contemporary magazine illustration, and reduced variants in plaster and bronze produced by the sculptor later in his career. Featuring an assertively muscular female nude, seated defiantly on a cannon, arms crossed and gaze pitched firmly against the enemy, *La Résistance* is presented by Dorsch as a paradigmatic "strong woman." Indeed, he goes so far to evoke the psychoanalytic concept of the "phallic woman," without really probing the theoretical connotations of the term, because of the weapon on which she is seated. Dorsch argues that this strong, confident figure, perched upon a "detumescent" blasted cannon (p. 31) represents a "hermaphroditic [...] combination of a female body with the posturing of male potency" (p. 32). The work's allegorical meaning, he asserts, is conveyed in realist visual form. Surveying the artist's subsequent production, he suggests that Falguière acquired a reputation for his female nudes "that viewers recognized as distinctly modern in their idiom" (p. 35). This modernity, Dorsch contends, relates to the works' perceived realism, a theme that he equates with the sculptor's ability to capture naturalistic physiological detail and which he parallels rather unconvincingly (in one of a series of digressions that punctuate his book) with Emmanuel Frémiet's *Jeanne d'Arc* (1874) in the Place des Pyramides. This emphasis on the signifying power of detail, perhaps germane to Falguière's later production, has little place in any assessment of *La Résistance*. Both the bronze sketch and the larger plaster variant are notably cursory, and the lost original was produced in a medium—impacted snow—that is scarcely conducive to anything but the most rudimentary forms. Here, as elsewhere in his text, Dorsch seems to follow an argument that confuses his central thesis rather than clarifying it.

A further case in point occurs during his second chapter on the portrayal of social degeneracy. Dorsch is again on relatively familiar ground—art historians have frequently explored the popular imagery of the 1860s and 1870s to demonstrate caricaturists' mockery of the dissipated Emperor and his entourage, as well as conservative portrayals of the Communards as vicious and sub-human.[3] Here, Dorsch focuses in particular on caricatures by Bertall from the series *Les Communeux* (a title the author misconstrues as meaning "The Communists", rather than "The Communards"). In common with previous commentators, Dorsch points to the tendency for cartoonists such as Bertall to portray working women associated with the uprising as masculinized savages; by transgressing established boundaries of gender and class, they enter a domain (as had their forebears in the 1790s) in which they relinquish their feminine nature to become "unsexed through the assumption of masculine traits" (p. 70). Conversely, he argues, again on the basis of Bertall's collection, male Communards acquire effete feminized traits. In the eyes of their critics, the insurrectionaries embody (literally and metaphorically) a corruption that saps their physical virility and moral virtue. Drawing on the work of Daniel Pick and Robert Nye,[4] Dorsch points to contemporary commentators' fear that France had been undermined by a pervasive degeneracy, instilled by the moral laxity of the Second Empire and exacerbated by proletarian dissent which had exerted its toll on the battlefield and in the streets of *Paris rouge* and whose long-term effects were sapping the national stock. Here, and in subsequent chapters, Dorsch brings together these several strands to diagnose the "strong woman, fallen man" theme found in sculptures such as *Gloria Victis* and *La Défense de Paris* as evidencing a "crisis of masculinity" that haunted the early Third Republic and its attempts to come to terms with military defeat. Referring to the theoretical insights of writers such as Tania Modleski and Abigail Solomon-Godeau,[5] Dorsch sums up his argument thus: "Muscle-bound female allegorical figures, 'masculinized' in their erect stance and self-confident deportment, are juxtaposed against realistically depicted wounded or dead soldiers—following the Franco-Prussian war the French state chose to bestow its official sanction on this particular trope. These bizarre hybrids can be

understood according to Modleski's terms as manifestations of the weakened patriarchy's attempt to shore up its diminished agency following an all-too-vivid demonstration of France's diminished militaristic might" (p. 78).

Such an assertion raises a number of problems. Most immediately, given Dorsch's insistence on the feminized nature of the male figures in many of the memorials produced in the decades following the war, one is left wondering how such monuments shore up patriarchy by so insistently drawing attention to male vulnerability, rather than celebrating masculine resistance and strength. Furthermore, Dorsch's discussion of social degeneracy, apparently offered as a means of corroborating his interpretation of monuments such as those by Mercié and Barrias, does nothing of the kind. The exhausted or dying soldiers that he styles "fallen men" have nothing to do with the caricaturally preening Communard officials portrayed by Bertall, used here to establish the theme of degeneracy that resonates through subsequent chapters. Rather, a figure such as the fatally wounded soldier on Barrias' monument is presented as heroically refusing to yield despite hopeless circumstances. In it, Barrias portrays the much-fêted painter Henri Régnauld, slain in battle at Buzenval, who reaches for a *dernière cartouche* to load in his rifle despite his fatal wounds. If Régnauld is shown as a vulnerable figure, this is because of the desperate straits in which he and the nation find themselves. Buzenval was a last, despairing attempt by the Parisian National Guard to prevent the city from being starved into submission. The outcome of the battle left the nation with no choice but to yield—a situation vividly conveyed by the mixture of defiance and exhaustion radiating from the supine fighter. Rather than establishing an inoperative link with anti-Communard caricature, Dorsch could have made a more convincing case by looking at military painters such as Edouard Detaille and Alphonse de Neuville, whose work similarly harps on vulnerability and defeat as a means of celebrating the single-minded heroism of an army betrayed by the inadequacy of its leaders and overwhelmed by the ruthlessness of its opponents.[6]

By the same token, the masculinized harridan haunting anti-Communard caricature is the very antithesis of the female allegories found in monuments such as *Gloria Victis* and *La Défense de Paris*. The stoic resolve of the personification of the city in the latter work, in particular, offers a positive model of the *femme du peuple* as signifying patriotic determination quite at odds with the hysterical destructiveness fantasized by artists such as Bertall. Indeed, Barrias' allegory is essentially meant to erase the nightmarish vision of the *pétroleuse* by evoking the solidarity and resoluteness of a city under siege. The steadfast figure, sword in one hand and flag in the other, stands square with the soldiery who sacrifice themselves in their effort to free the city from its encirclement by Prussian forces. As with the imputed genealogy of the "fallen man," Dorsch might have done better to look more broadly into an iconographic tradition far closer to his league of "strong women" than the satirical distortions of Bertall and his ilk. Allegorical representations of Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, and, above all, the Republic, extending back via the 1848 revolution to the First Republic, offer more relevant antecedents. Indeed, Barrias' monument is not too far removed from the contemporaneous figure of the Republic commissioned from the Morice brothers in 1879 for the Place de la République. Even closer to *La Défense de Paris*, and unmentioned by Dorsch, is Doublemard's monument to Maréchal Moncey and the Défense de Clichy, inaugurated in the place de Clichy in 1870, which incorporates a dying soldier at the feet of a resolute (though classically draped) female personification of Paris. Maurice Agulhon's magisterial history of the representation of Marianne, together with copiously illustrated works such as Michel Vovelle's *La Révolution française: images et récits 1789-1799* or J.-M. Renault's *Les Fées de la République*, provide a wealth of iconographic material that Dorsch would have done well to ponder in order to place his chosen monuments in a richer and more subtle representational history.[7]

At the same time as pursuing his argument about the ideological significance of the "strong woman, fallen man" theme, Dorsch tells a parallel story about the evolution, and eventual redundancy, of

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allegory as a sculptural idiom. Though he is at pains to deny it, underlining the “non-teleological” character of his narrative, the sequence Dorsch presents is built round an all-too-familiar teleology (p. 134). In this case, it is the “sentimental and hackneyed” allegory of Mercié’s *Gloria Victis*, with its winged figure of Victory enfolding the limp body of a naked youth killed in battle, that provides a symbolic starting point, with Rodin’s *L’Age d’airain* as the point of resolution, beyond which we can look confidently forward to the sculptural vanguard of the following century (p. 97). In between, in a moment characterized as “one of the early catalysts in the progression towards abstraction that comes to define the sculptural avant-garde of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries” stands—somewhat surprisingly—Barrias’s *Défense de Paris*, though the naturalistic greatcoat worn by the figure of Paris and the soldier’s bandaged foot extending beyond the plinth seem an unconvincing basis for such grand claims (p. 112).

Rodin, of course, is much more familiarly situated in the transitional role that Dorsch accords to him here. *L’Age d’airain*, he argues, dispenses with allegory and in the process vastly opens up the potential meaning of the work. Faced by the finely-wrought musculature and ambiguous pose of the svelte young man who stands naked and unaware before him, the spectator is confronted, perhaps rather too predictably, by the free-play of meaning: “Not illustrative or allegorical, *The Age of Bronze* placed viewers on unfamiliar terrain, an ambiguous realm where traditional signification meant little and allusiveness offered more in the way of denoting meaning than the history of traditional bodily poses and accessories” (p. 153). Rather, Rodin’s figure is ostensibly an exercise in pure form, “characterized by the play of light over surfaces” (p. 152), surfaces that are, by implication, far more compelling and aesthetically rewarding than anything that the likes of Mercié could come up with, and which point towards the modernist canon, towards which Dorsch finally gestures with almost palpable relief: “And here, in the reduction of sculpture to an elemental syntax of the body, a stark geometry of forms, resides the origins of sculptural abstraction as it would be developed in the work of such twentieth-century sculptors as Matisse, Brancusi, and, to push the limits of this trend even further to its extremes, minimalist sculptors such as Robert Morris, Anne Truitt, and John McCracken” (p. 160).

There is, of course, nothing particularly new in isolating Rodin as a formalist launch-pad for twentieth-century vanguardism, but such claims do demand the exclusion of precisely the sort of sculpture that Dorsch features elsewhere in his book. If Mercié, Barrias and Falguière flourished in the fin-de-siècle as artists essentially rooted in a nineteenth-century representational culture that valued verisimilitude and was willing to regard allegory (and even aesthetic idealism) as perfectly viable sculptural options, artists of their ilk were scarcely rendered extinct by the emergent avant-garde. Indeed, had Dorsch looked at the sort of memorials produced in the wake of the Great War, he would have found a vast legion of sculptors still perfectly at home with the aesthetic values that Rodin supposedly renders obsolete.[8] There is, precisely, no teleology, since it is only by the most brutal elimination of stylistic pedigrees that deviate from a narrow modernist line that it is possible to envisage a neat genealogy extending down from Auguste Rodin to John McCracken.

Dorsch’s book relies too heavily on the presentation of a small number of case studies to formulate an argument that essentially works through juxtaposition rather than through the logical presentation of art-historical examples and historical evidence. One cannot simply offer four individual sculptures (with a limited number of ancillary examples) to stand for a succession of themes (female strength, male weakness, idealized allegory, realist allegory, pure form), largely isolated from the visual confusion and thematic interference that a more inclusive examination of French sculpture following the Franco-Prussian War, 1870–80 might reasonably involve. Taken in its own terms, and despite the familiarity of some its central arguments, Dorsch’s thesis is thus unconvincing—all the more so because of the substantial numbers of factual errors or examples of stylistic carelessness that litter the text. Charlotte

Corday, for instance, is said to have been “unsexed by her revolutionary fervor” (p. 68), the term “statuomania” is attributed to the historian Maurice Agulhon (p. 168) though it was coined as the title of a pamphlet published by Gustave Pessard in 1912, and *La Défense de Paris* is presented as the “first large-scale, publicly-funded sculptural commission offered by the government of the Third Republic” (p. 110), some six years after Frémiet’s *Jeanne d’Arc* was commissioned by the state. Taken with mentions of soldiers’ “marital regalia” (p. 112), references to the poet “Shelly” (p. 39), to La Paiva’s *hôtel particulaire*, and numerous errors in the transcription of French terms and texts (*Ecole supérieur, pensionnier*, et cetera), the reader is left perplexed by a text so deeply compromised by its conceptual and presentational shortcomings.

## NOTES

[1] Amongst a vast literature, see most recently Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, Claude Judrin and I. Vassalo, *Vers l’âge d’airain. Rodin en Belgique* (Paris: Musée Rodin, 1997).

[2] See Hollis Clayson, *Paris in Despair. Art and Everyday Life under Siege (1870-1871)* (Chicago, Ill.: Chicago University Press, 2005); June Hargrove, “*Qui Vive? France! War Monuments from the Defense to the Révanche*,” in June Hargrove and Neil McWilliam, eds., *Nationalism and French Visual Culture* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2005), pp. 55–81; and Daniel Imbert, “Le Monument de la défense de Paris,” in Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, *Quand Paris dansait avec Marianne* (Paris: Paris Musées, 1989), pp.86-103.

[3] See, for example, Adrian Rifkin, “Cultural Movement and the Paris Commune,” *Art History* 2/2(June 1979): 201-220; Gay Gullickson, *The Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); and Bertrand Tillier, *La Commune de Paris, révolution sans images? politique et représentation dans la France républicaine (1871-1914)* (Paris: Champ Vallon, 2004).

[4] Daniel Pick, *Faces of Degeneration. A European Disorder c.1848 – c.1918* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Robert Nye, *Masculinity and Male Codes of Honor in Modern France* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness, and Politics in Modern France. The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[5] Tania Modleski, “Postmortem on Postfeminism,” in Tania Modleski, ed., *Feminism without Women. Culture and Criticism in a ‘Postfeminist’ Age* (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 3-22; and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Male Trouble: A Crisis in Representation* (London & New York: Thames & Hudson, 1997).

[6] See, for example, François Robichon, *La Peinture militaire en France de 1871 à 1914* (Paris: Association des Amis d’Edouard Detaille, 1999).

[7] Notably Maurice Agulhon, *Marianne into Battle: Republican Imagery and Symbolism in France, 1789-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) and *Marianne au pouvoir: l’imagerie et la symbolique républicaines de 1880 à 1914* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989). See also Michel Vovelle, *La Révolution française: images et récits 1789-1799* (Paris: Livre Club Diderot/Messidor, 1986) and J.-M. Renault, *Les Fées de la République. L’Histoire de la République à travers les yeux de Marianne* (Montpellier: Les Créations du Pélican, 2003).

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[8] For a particularly rich iconographic source, see Philippe Rivé, Annette Becker, Olivier Pelletier, Dominique Renoux, Christophe Thomas, eds., *Monuments de mémoire: les monuments aux morts de la Première guerre mondiale* (Paris: MPCIH, 1991).

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