H-France Review Vol. 11 (March 2011), No. 80

Miranda Gill, *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris.* Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. Notes, bibliography, and index. £60.80 (hb). ISBN 978-0-19-954328-1.

Review by Melissa Wittmeier, Northwestern University.

In *Eccentricity and the Cultural Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Paris*, Miranda Gill puts marginality squarely in the center of her argument, which is at times intentionally circular, but rarely, if ever, problematic. The depth and richness of this interdisciplinary study is remarkable. The flawlessness of the prose and the erudition of the vocabulary make the book a pleasure, and occasionally a challenge, to read. To complete her study, Gill left no stone unturned. She is thorough in her inclusion of sources, both historic and recent. The thoughtfulness of her exposition testifies to the tremendous depth of her research. Rare is the reader who will finish a chapter without having learned a great deal about the public and private perception of eccentricity in nineteenth-century Paris.

The overall organization of the book, which is extraordinary, is outlined in systematic detail in an introduction wherein the author describes the structure and approach she has adopted for her work. Gill leads the reader by the hand, as it were, through her analysis. Each section begins with its stated purpose. "This study asks..." (p. 1), begins the first chapter, which ends, "This chapter has questioned..." (p. 38). Chapter two ends similarly with "This chapter has examined..." (p. 69); chapters three and seven conclude, "In conclusion..." (100, 237); chapters four and eight, "In summary..." (pp. 127, 273); and so on. Such phrases provide easy-to-follow road signs for the reader to navigate Gill's erudite exposition and are indeed helpful. If the copiousness of the footnotes might at times distract the reader, they provide the radii extending from the nucleus which will allow the curiously minded to enlarge his or her circle of knowledge on any offshoot of the subject. Gill provides an incredibly rich bibliography within a very carefully organized framework.

Gill divides her topic into four parts. In part one, "Causes and Contexts," she provides the background to the rise of eccentricity in the French culture. Parts two, three and four she devotes to thematic explorations into eccentricity following a loosely outlined chronological pattern. Part two of the book, "Fashionable Society," demonstrates the dawn of the daring in the higher spheres of the Parisian public, from dandies to the lioness during the July Monarchy. In part three, "The Underworld," Gill invites the more mysterious elements of society subsequent to the 1848 Revolution to join the analysis, from fairground exhibitors and exhibited to Bohemian artists. Part four, "Science," demonstrates the effects of the medicalization of eccentricity and other states of near madness during the latter part of the century. Gill concludes the work with an epilogue to contextualize the turn of perceptions in a larger European scope.

To determine satisfactory limits to the period of study in the context of any historical research project is a nearly impossible task. Gill, however, overcomes this difficulty by clearly documenting the origins of the term eccentricity. In part one, she traces the use of the word with a precision that makes for a fascinating read. "The noun 'excentricité' was first used in 1817 in a text by Germaine de Staël" (p. 35). The author likewise acknowledges that the concept of eccentricity, expressed by terms such as 'originality', did in fact bear on Parisian society in centuries prior. There remain, however, moments in the work that seem, perhaps, to underestimate the influence and heritage of the cultural past.

In her initial discussion of good manners, Gill analyses nineteenth-century etiquette manuals, which relied on numerous assorted codes of conduct from centuries prior to conclude that eccentricity was not seen as a positive quality during the period. True as this is, it is not surprising, since the prescriptive nature of an etiquette manual would necessarily advocate normative behavior. The purpose of good manners being to make others comfortable, a significant deviation from acceptable norms in this context would not only be eccentric, it would also be impolite.

The use of etiquette manuals in the discussion of eccentricity is undoubtedly necessary to understand what constituted the norm, but caution is paramount when interpreting meanings of the codes outlined therein. Gill argues, for example, that "(w)hen the author of one manual writes that 'the prerequisite of *savoir-vivre* is self-forgetfulness', he implies that not being conscious of one's body constitutes good breeding" (p. 46, n. 13 "Chapus 1877: 203".) Such an implication is not self-evident and, indeed, would be difficult to prove. It seems more likely that by self-forgetfulness, the author of the manual meant only that it is polite to think of others rather than of oneself. Etiquette manuals write against the cultivation of eccentricity because such would imply a concentration on the self that is contrary to good manners. There is, moreover, a difference between cultivated and natural or sincere eccentricity, the latter of which escapes the judgment of etiquette manuals as long as the rules of polite society remain intact and he (or she) who is eccentric thinks first and foremost of others.

High society, Gill remarks, "rejected the *ancien régime* ethos of ostentatious excess and appropriated instead the middle-class ethos of virtuous austerity" (p. 46). Recent research has been devoted to refining our understanding of aristocratic ostentation during the *ancien régime* to limit it to a particular segment of the aristocracy and, moreover, to a rather limited time frame. The code of virtuous conduct outlined in etiquette manuals and elsewhere was not invented by the middle class. Rather, it was developed over the centuries by the aristocracy. Though abused by the nobility of the court in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in particular, virtue and an austere moral code were nonetheless an important part of the ethos of the provincial aristocracy, and remained characteristics valued by nearly all nobles. To state that the Parisian aristocracy adopted a middle-class ethos is, therefore, somewhat misleading since it was precisely the aristocracy who had bequeathed such a virtue to the middle class in the first place.

In the second part of the work, Gill discusses fashion in the nineteenth century. "Fashion disseminated the latest eccentric styles until they became the new norm, were no longer eccentric, and had to be replaced by some fresh novelty. By abolishing aristocratic costume, the Revolution had, as in many other spheres, highlighted the arbitrary nature of social conventions, in this case undermining belief in timeless models of beauty and elegance. Several outrageous fashions came into vogue ...which symbolized the capricious eclecticism of fashion" (p. 59). Although this passage describes a post-revolutionary phenomenon, it is reminiscent of Montesquieu's Persians as they hit the Parisian scene in 1712.[1] It also brings to mind the excessive collars, called ruffs, which were popular from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth centuries, and of the impressive height of the wigs and shoes of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.[2] "Women..." writes Gill, "were considered eccentric in relation to the female norm, and termed 'homasse' ('mannish'), when they manifested coldness or self-control" (p. 89). One need only remember the marquise de Merteuil in Choderlos de Laclos' *Liaisons Dangereuses* (written in 1782) to wonder how the *lionne* of the nineteenth century differed from her predecessor.[3]

A weakness of linkage to previous centuries does not prohibit Gill from drawing strong conclusions from the analysis she conducts. The difficulty surrounding social codes of conduct in the nineteenth century which prescribed both conformity and individuality, thereby mandating both centricity and eccentricity, could, in fact, be overcome. One needed only to adopt a certain amount of understated originality in one's dress while otherwise maintaining the strictest regularity in one's behavior. The paradoxical circularity of eccentricity whereby the eccentric tends to become the norm leads the narrative into a discussion of those iconic members of society who invent tomorrow's stereotypes through today's singularities.

Gill enhances her description of this paradox in part three of the book, wherein freakish beings and Bohemians are added to the list of eccentrics who make up the cultural fodder of the French capital. Gill implies that the role that these members of society played on the cultural scene in Paris was an important one. Her description of the fraud involved in fairground freak shows and her attribution of the rise of freakishness to the rise of capitalism demonstrate that an effort to make eccentricity centric was economically warranted and therefore socially sponsored. Monsters, the epitome of the marginalized, were brought front and center only to be ogled and ostracized by the mainstream. Gill's analysis in the case of each type of eccentric leads to the same conclusion: toward the end of the nineteenth century, the irregular was no longer the exception. The eccentric either tended naturally or was drawn toward the center. In fact, Gill contends that eccentricity had become so centric to Parisian culture that it no longer attracted attention. On the contrary, one could not permit oneself to look at the eccentric for fear of appearing uncultured.

At the same time that it became unfavorable for the public to take an apparent interest in the eccentric, science adopted the unusual as a subject of investigation, "as the new discipline of teratology sought to understand the causes of physical deformity. The remit of teratology was subsequently extended..." (p. 207). The banalization of eccentricity led to its institutionalization. Realists toward the end of the century believed that the grotesque offered a privileged access to reality. Madness and genius were seen as inseparable. To legitimize monsters took on a political significance and was seen as the heroic gesture of listening to those marginalized by the society. The final part of the book offers the reader a fascinating and brilliant historical odyssey of eccentricity wherein the connections between eccentricity, political radicalism and mysticism are explored as responses to the failure of the revolution of 1848.

Throughout these chapters, as indeed throughout the book, Gill relates her exposition to contemporary literature. Chateaubriand, Balzac, Hugo, Baudelaire and Nerval are included in the analysis, as are Grandville, Champfleury, Claude Bernard and literally hundreds of other authors who contributed to the literary scene of the nineteenth century. The line between doctor, artist or author, and the eccentric in his (or, less often, her) midst was frequently blurred as eccentricity came to be viewed as a contagion when, post 1848, it moved from the literary and social domains to the medical one. The moral and social components of eccentricity were replaced by organic and biological components and, in particular, by the concept of degeneration. Attempts to remove moral judgment from the diagnosis of eccentricity resulted in the removal of the binary opposites between health and illness, pathology and normality. As such, eccentricity became the lot of all human beings, simply to a greater or lesser degree. Similarly, eccentricity belonged to the public (fairgrounds), the social (salons), and to all types of literature (fiction, poetry, journalism, court documents, medical records, personal correspondence, for example) and art. By the 1880s, monomania abounded. "Eccentricity could no longer be contained and controlled. The interpenetration of cultural, religious and medical imagery encouraged the widespread slippage of categories" (p. 260). At the same time, eccentricity came to be viewed as a necessary and even, at times, a positive component of society without which change would be difficult if not impossible. Darwin gave a further positive lift to eccentricity which nonetheless fell from scientific discourse for its over-elasticity. Because of the term's ability to represent so much, it came to mean very little.

Gill uses the epilogue to her book, in which she contextualizes her study of nineteenth-century eccentricity geographically by comparing the French perception of the term and the concept it represents to the coincident English and Russian interpretations, as a springboard to launch her conclusions right into the twenty-first century. If the method invites question, the results are absolutely on target. The final two-page sub-section of the epilogue, "Eccentricity, ambivalence, and postmodernity," underlines the importance of the entire preceding exposition and analysis to contemporary society wherein the "dynamic interplay of norm and transgression, or of the closely related conceptual dyad of constraint and freedom, creates many paradoxes and puzzles.... Thus the same cultural currents which promote decentred subjectivity can simultaneously foster anxiety at the political consequences of relinquishing autonomy and agency, and the figure of the nonconformist individual continues to be imbued with redemptive power" (pp. 289-290).

Gill indeed provides a strong finish to a fascinating in-depth scholarly study which makes a most valuable contribution to the humanities at large. Linguists, historians, literary critics, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, and anyone else even vaguely interested in human nature will find a trove of pertinent information, well analyzed and interpreted in this exquisitely written book.

NOTES

[1] Montesquieu wrote the *Persian Letters* in 1721, but letter 24, written by Rica to Ibben, is dated 1712 and is the first to be sent from Paris. Charles Secondat de Montesquieu, *Lettres Persanes* (Paris: Garnier Flammarian, 1964.)

[2] The ruff was the elaborately ruffled collar worn by men, women and children. A cartwheel ruff, the extreme of this fashion, could measure more than a foot in width and required wire frames to support it.

[3] Pierre Coderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* (Paris: Flammarion, 1964.)

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ISSN 1553-9172