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Dorothy Kelly, *The Living Death of Modernity: Balzac, Baudelaire, Zola*. Cambridge: Legenda, 2021. x + 172 pp. Bibliography and index. £80.00 (hb). ISBN 9781781886502.

Reviewed by Joseph Acquisto, University of Vermont.

Dorothy Kelly is careful to indicate at the start of this study that its object is not paranormal phenomena such as ghosts or vampires, “but rather the recurring theme or trope of living death used for believable, realistic characters and situations in nineteenth-century works” (p. 1). Within the more restricted domain of characters in the novels of Honoré de Balzac and Emile Zola and the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Kelly takes a broad view of the many potential meanings of “living death,” providing a sort of implicit typology or catalogue of the many ways such a figurative expression can be understood in the wake of nascent modernity as seen in nineteenth-century French literature. The trope of living death thus serves, throughout a series of close readings, as a lens or point of entry into a set of more general thematic areas in the works she examines. In what follows I hope to give an idea of the multifaceted uses that Kelly makes of the idea throughout the book.

Living death could above all be said to bridge the personal and social, as these are intertwined in history during a time of instability in terms of the relation to a past that has not been truly surpassed or reckoned with: “The return of the past in images of the living dead capture what seemed to be the impossibility of moving beyond a past that refused to die and continued to return. The trope of living death provides the means of representing a history, personal or societal, that cannot be repressed or destroyed” (p. 2).

Chapter one, on Balzac, considers him as an “early witness to the social and economic transformations that occurred in his century” (p. 6). Kelly surveys a number of Balzac’s novels as portraying a society that “represses the past and thereby projects an incomplete, false, and artificial image of the present” (p. 17), with consequences for both personal and social identity as seen in the eponymous hero of *Le Colonel Chabert*, who “exists in a symbolic state of living death because he rejects his identity” (p. 15). While some characters, such as Raphaël in *La Peau de chagrin*, are described as living dead by the narrator, Kelly extends the metaphorical valency of the term to describe, for instance, the culture of shopping as “a phantasmagorical spectacle where humans and things, ready for sale, meld in a condition of living death” (p. 25) that Kelly assimilates to “Balzac’s nascent modernity” more generally (p. 27). Once characters’ identity or integrity is lost, nonliving items associated with them, such as clothing, “reveal the death of human integrity that becomes lost in selling oneself and in surface artifice. What is left are the remains of a living person whose identity has ‘died’” (p. 35). Kelly underscores the metaphorical

nature of her conception of living death by frequently qualifying what she describes in the novels as living death “in a sense.” Such is the case in *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes*, where the characters “in a sense...must try to ‘kill’ their former selves and emerge into a new identity and a new life” (p. 35). Similarly, Esther must “in a sense” commit “a kind of social ‘suicide’ in order to be reborn in a new identity” (p. 35), and Vautrin’s successive transformations can also be read as a series of formerly alive and now dead identities.

Chapter two, on Baudelaire, provides close readings of poems such as “Le Flaçon,” “Une Charogne,” and “Une Martyre” as well as the essay “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” and continues to use the guiding concept of living death as a lens through which to view a larger set of thematic concerns in the texts, notably women, love, and Haussmann’s transformation of Paris into a “space of living death, to which the poet responds with his establishment of a community of the living-dead” (p. 7). While poems such as “Le Flaçon” perform a “collapse of antithetical categories, in particular those of life and death” (p. 53), inviting a more fluid reading of traditionally opposed concepts, many of Baudelaire’s poems feature the rebirth of a “love that is already decayed” (p. 56), as we see in “Une Charogne,” which features both a carcass and a future dead body, which then “lives on’ through other forms” (p. 60). The chapter pivots on its reading of “Une Martyre,” where Kelly focuses on the concept of phantasmagoria in order to “combin[e] our theme of the living dead with the concept of the fetish (in its meanings of assurance against, as well as memorial to loss) and to our second domain, the poems on Paris and commodity fetishism in modernity” (p. 68). Kelly’s readings of the Paris poems cover some often-explored ground in Baudelaire via the work of Walter Benjamin, whose main lines of analysis are filtered through the overarching lens of living death as trope. Thus the river in “Le Cygne” “exists in the living presence of Andromache’s life; but because it is only a resembling form and not the original it is also ‘dead’ in a certain sense” (pp. 73-74), and the deteriorating buildings before they disappeared “were already in a state of decrepitude, of living death” (p. 75). The historically situated urban poetics find their echo in a more generalized state of living death in poems such as “Le Squelette laboureur,” where Baudelaire “imagines that death does not, in fact, end things, and that we will have to continue our life of hard labor ‘sempiternally’” (p. 80). This kind of living death preserves the physicality of the body in ways that ghosts or phantoms do not, and “this physicality expresses the intrusive nature of the past that exists not simply as an image in the mind but rather has a real, concrete effect on the present moment” (p. 83).

Chapter three, on Zola, reads several novels of the Rougon-Macquart cycle (along with *Thérèse Raquin*) through a series of variations on the trope of living death, beginning with the cycle’s first novel, *La Fortune des Rougon*, with the “living dead matriarch” Tante Dide at the base of the family tree, whose living death finds echoes in the trees fed by the dead in the cemetery and the “poisoned tree of liberty that died a slow death” (p. 96). In Zola, heredity is a variation on living death in that hereditary traits of ancestors are reproduced in children so that “the dead are reproduced in their offspring” (p. 101). Kelly likewise introduces a number of new subvariants of the idea of living death as Zola portrays it, including “the eternal return of dead political regimes that Zola emphasizes in the socio-political milieu of his characters” (p. 103), and “the mechanization of human existence” (as evidenced in novels such as *La Bête humaine*) which “represents an absence of agency, a kind of symbolic living death of humans who do not act with will or choice” (p. 110). Kelly presents an extended analysis of Renée in *La Curée*, whose living death is characterized by a “loss of the capacity to think” (p. 120), which leads to her being “in a sense, denuded of her interior, as all that is left is her identity as a surface glamour and as body available to others” (p. 122). Likewise, the new configurations of space and the culture of

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commerce transform those who move within them in ways that deprive the characters of the human faculty of will, as evidenced by Denise in *Au Bonheur des Dames*.

In a brief conclusion, Kelly revisits some of the novels and poems she has considered throughout the study, this time in light of Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life," which she assimilates to the concept of living death in light of the characters' "shared relation to loss and to the living death of their ongoing life" (p. 147). The connection is compelling and raises questions about whether the notion of living death could have been situated at the outset, rather than in the conclusion, with Agamben's influential concept; the affinity is identified but a strict delineation between the two is not fully articulated. Theoretically inclined readers may find themselves wanting a more robust articulation of the way Kelly's multifaceted conception of living death in its relation to modernity (which encompasses the influence on human subjects of transformations of the urban landscape, commodity culture, and shifting notions of human will and personal identity) aligns with, but also distinguishes itself, from Agamben's bare life, if indeed they are not synonymous. All in all, this study provides a convincing demonstration that forms of living death, quite apart from the many supernatural portrayals that were also prominent in the nineteenth century, are pervasive in the fiction and verse of the emergent modern period.

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