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Jonathan A. Ribner, *Loss in French Romantic Art, Literature, and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 2023. xvi + 261 pp. 32 color and 57 black-and-white illustrations. \$170.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-032-02703-6; \$52.95 (pb). ISBN 978-1-032-02704-3; doi.org/10.4324/9781003184737 (open access). ISBN 978-1-003-18473-7.

Review by Katie Hornstein, Dartmouth College.

When does a mood take on national significance capable of shaping the look and meaning of art? What does malaise look like in the field of cultural production? And how might a reckoning with defeat and even boredom become an engine for artistic innovation? In *Loss in French Romantic Art, Literature, and Politics*, Jonathan Ribner examines the thematic of loss as a key to understanding literary and artistic production during the first half of the nineteenth century. Ribner's analysis makes use of a wide array of sources, including poetry, literature, religious tracts, painting, and printmaking to explore what he calls a "pattern of disenchantment" that occurred over the course of the French revolutionary era and up through the Second Empire (p. 2). The central argument of the book holds that the experience of revolution, war, defeat, and exile constituted an underrecognized generative force for cultural production at large. Loss is therefore a mode of historical experience and a figure of representation across different kinds of expressive forms. *Loss in French Romantic Art, Literature, and Politics* partakes of what Ribner describes as "the tradition of inductive, contextual art history" (p. 3). Loss appears as an inescapable, perhaps occasionally totalizing, historical force.

Ribner's analysis is focused squarely on France and the cultural activities of European (mostly French) artists, writers, and religious thinkers. In order to posit loss as a dominant context for understanding the period, Ribner makes use of a stunning array of primary sources in conjunction with a broad interdisciplinary secondary literature consisting of art history and cultural history. In addition to well-known canonical works of art that exemplify the feeling and experience of loss, Ribner also turns his attention to a vast, understudied corpus of religious paintings; many of these works are illustrated in luscious color images throughout the book. The book's concentration on religious works in three of the five chapters, as well as a set of related primary texts that attend to questions about the status of Catholicism and its related image culture, offer a valuable contribution to the study of nineteenth-century European art history.

Chapter one deals with the French state's contentious relationship with Catholicism in the immediate aftermath of the French Revolution and during the Bourbon Restoration, when Catholicism once again became the official state religion, and through the July Monarchy. Ribner walks readers through the history of Catholicism during the period, starting with Napoleon Bonaparte's negotiations for the Concordat "motivated by politics rather than piety" (p. 23).

Chateaubriand's experience of wandering, poverty, and exile feature prominently. He also introduces Félicité Robert de Lamennais and the celebrity cleric Henri-Dominique Lacordaire, who believed that "painting should serve as piety" (p. 41), and who together led a liberal Catholic movement during the July Monarchy. In the chapter, Ribner gathers a corpus of religious works of art that circulated in a climate of rising post-revolutionary secularism and embodied a resistant strand of what he calls "Catholic fervor" (p. 35). He detects a tendency in post-revolutionary Christian painting where the invitation to worship is held slightly (and sometimes overtly) at bay. Readers are introduced to works that are little-known, even to specialists of the period, such as François-Joseph Navez's *St. Veronica of Milan* (1816) and works by the "pious cohort" (p. 42) of Lyonnais painters, such as André-Jacques-Victor Orsel. Ribner invokes Robert Rosenblum's concept of "spectator Christianity," where religious works solicit "curiosity" rather than devotion, and empathy with the faith of fictive characters "whose otherness is often signaled" (p. 30).<sup>[1]</sup>

Chapter two, "Agony in the Garden," also focuses on religious painting. Here, Ribner observes a tension that runs deep in Christian art of the first half of the nineteenth century, namely the often antithetical relationship between the personal, expressive drive of the artist and the devotional, didactic function of religious imagery. The chapter opens with a trenchant analysis of Eugène Delacroix's *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1824–26), which deals with the disparity between Delacroix's devotion to religious subjects and his "resolutely secular devotion to his art" (p. 58). Ribner explores why the artist produced such a large number of paintings with Christian subjects despite the fact that he was not a believer; he suggests that Delacroix's "timely spiritual hunger" and his "vital imagination sustained his devotion to the religion of art" (p. 75). The chapter then shifts away from Delacroix and explores a community of painters who lived in Lyon, "home to a tradition of arcane mysticism" (p. 75), and whose works remain under the art historical radar. Of note in this chapter is the magnum opus of the fiercely devout Louis Janmot, *The Poem of the Soul*, which consists of eighteen large-scale paintings, sixteen drawings, and 2,814 lines of verse. Ribner understands Janmot's work to embody "a hazardous tension between devotional intent and private content" (p. 77) to the point where the series was criticized by the Catholic press for its failure to be sufficiently devotional. *The Poem of the Soul* did, however, elicit praise from Eugène Delacroix, Théophile Gautier, and Charles Baudelaire, who saw in them "an immense charm that is difficult to describe" (p. 87). If the series failed as a set of didactic, Christian images, it succeeded as a personal, enigmatic work of art. Ribner uses this fascinating example to point to the difficulty of producing Christian art "amid the debris of our temples," as Chateaubriand famously put it.<sup>[2]</sup>

Chapter three examines the issue of exile through a series of works, some familiar, some less well-known. As with the thematics in the book's other chapters, Ribner takes a long-range approach and attempts to understand its broad implications over the course of the first half of the nineteenth century and through a variety of works across multiple visual media. In addition to neoclassical history paintings by Pierre-Narcisse Guérin and François Gérard, Ribner includes the famous French exiles Madame de Staël and Victor Hugo. The chapter also examines the fates of Polish émigrés who fled Russian imperialism in their homeland and ended up in Paris in the 1820s and 30s, including the Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz and the ballad writer Julian Ursyn Niemcewicz. Ribner then veers back into more well-trod territory with Delacroix's relationship with another Polish immigrant, Frédéric Chopin, who it must be said did not endure the same kind of loss experienced by Mickiewicz and Niemcewicz. Chopin left Poland prior to the November 1830 insurrection against Russian rule and as Ribner notes, "distanced himself from the popular rage on behalf of his homeland" (p. 112). Ribner reads figures of loss and exile into

Delacroix's *Ovid among the Scythians* (1859) through the biography of Ovid, as well as Delacroix's own repeated failed attempts to become a professor at the Académie des Beaux-Arts. Ribner then turns his attention to Romantic works that represent the biblical story of Cain, whose example incited "Romantic empathy with rebellion" (p. 124). Sculptures by Georges Jacquot and Antoine Etex close the chapter, along with a section on Victor Hugo. As a whole, the chapter is rich in examples and many understudied works, but Ribner moves through so many different kinds of displacement that the concept gets stretched out well beyond political dispossession to become somewhat diluted.

Chapters four ("He's Not Dead!") and five ("Heroism Lost") deal with overlapping losses associated with the death of Napoleon Bonaparte and the climate of post-Napoleonic military defeat, respectively. Chapter four attends to the displacement of Napoleonic veterans and the associated body of visual imagery made by artists such as Horace Vernet, which circulated within a climate of disaffection toward the reigning Bourbons. Ribner summarizes the historiography of the legend of the Emperor, including the *Mémorial de Sainte-Hélène* and the fanfare around the 1840 return of Napoleon's remains, and presents an overview of several well-known literary and political figures who coalesced around the memory of Emperor Bonaparte, including Honoré de Balzac, Edgar Quinet, and Victor Hugo. Chapter five deals with the "tedium of life under a constitutional monarchy devoted to moderation and monetary gain" (p.178) and offers a sweeping diagnosis of the climate of "boredom" that came under attack by cultural critics during the July Monarchy. Here as in other parts of the book, Ribner offers a rich chapter that makes use of literary sources in a deep way, including Alfred de Musset's *The Confession of a Child of the Century*. The chapter's most scintillating section deals with the memory of the doomed Russian Campaign during the July Monarchy through a profusion of visual material, including some well-known works by Théodore Géricault and Nicolas-Toussaint Charlet, and other less well-known works by Joseph-Fernand Boissard de Boisdenier and Édouard-Alexandre Odier. The majority of the chapter is devoted to what Ribner describes as the "anti-heroic mode" in the work of Théodore Chassériau (p. 189). Ribner describes his rationale for concentrating on Chassériau: "So great was the appeal, in the 1830s and 1840s, of self-absorbed torpor, that this aspect of the anti-heroic mode could bleed into moody imaginings of sensuous, exotic bodies in works that, devoid of reference to modern history, offered escape from the discouraging banality of life under Louis-Philippe" (p. 190).

The book excels when it focuses on little-known artists and their works long buried in provincial French museums. The book is less illuminating when it focuses on canonical works that are already understood through the lens of loss, such as Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819) and *Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field of Battle* (1814). It must also be said that Ribner's dazzling survey mostly implicates European men and their attendant feelings and experiences of loss. The only woman whose *oeuvre* is addressed in depth in the book is Madame de Staël. If the aftermath of Napoleonic military defeat looms large as a concern in the last two chapters, Ribner is less interested in the specter of French imperialism for those who were caught up in the crush of its war machine. The thematic choices sometimes make it appear as though the absence of war produces "loss" and the resulting climate of "boredom" that the author associates with artists and writers during the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy. In terms of the post-1830 moment, the French colonization of Algeria makes only a cursory appearance as a context for Chassériau, or for Horace Vernet's biblical paintings.

Despite these questions, Ribner's book makes a valuable contribution to scholarship in its ability to synthesize complex historical problems into highly readable and informative chapters. Ribner's cultural history partakes of visual art, poetry, and literature; more than most art histories, the text treats literature and poetry as important sources. The result is a highly informative text, rich in primary source material. The chapters are the perfect length for assigning to undergraduate students and are synthetic in their scope so that they do an excellent job distilling complex issues from the period for students and scholars alike.

#### NOTES

[1] Spectator Christianity is discussed in Robert Rosenblum, *Paintings in the Musée d'Orsay*, forward, edited by Françoise Cachin (New York: Stewart, Tabori & Chang, 1989), 31; and in Rosenblum, *Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1967, reprint, 1985), 100–3.

[2] François René de Chateaubriand, *Essai sur les révolutions, Génie du christianisme*, edited by Maurice Regard (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 459.

Katie Hornstein  
Dartmouth College  
katherine.s.hornstein@dartmouth.edu

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