

## Counter on Roulin and Saminadayar-Perrin, editors (2017)

Roulin, Jean-Marie and Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin, editors. *Fictions de la Révolution, 1789–1912*. PU de Rennes, 2017, pp. 357, ISBN 978-2-7535-6518-0

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“Le siècle des révolutions,” writes Corinne Saminadayar-Perrin in her conclusion to this exceptionally wide-ranging volume, “pense et fabrique la Révolution par la fiction” (319). The central role of fiction as a domain of thought (meaning, in particular, as a mode of historiographical and philosophical discourse, albeit one with its own somewhat anarchic internal laws and conventions), and fiction’s power to give their very “thinkability” to events as necessarily inchoate and indeterminate as “the Revolution,” form the object of this collection of essays. Embracing in its entirety “le siècle des révolutions,” a long nineteenth-century running from the outbreak of revolution in 1789 until 1912 (the later limit set by the publication of Anatole France’s anti-Terror novel *Les Dieux ont soif*), the volume gives the measure of a century haunted by the Revolution—although, as Roulin and Saminadayar-Perrin point out in their introduction (7), “haunted” would wrongly imply that the thing was dead. Yet at issue in all of the essays is, precisely, the intractable aliveness of the Revolution for subsequent French generations, an aliveness that the century’s profusion of “fictions of the Revolution” at once bears witness to and creates. From a purely literary point of view, the book considers the seemingly irresistible attraction of the Revolution as a narrative problem and a source of narrative potential energy (a “machine à fictions,” as the introduction puts it), and the changing shape of that attraction as it was inflected by the century’s own political revolutions and literary evolutions. At a political level, we learn much here about the century’s unshakeable sense that the advent of the Terror had marked an epoch in human history, heralding a sacralization of politics that made it at once the expression of humanity’s highest ideals, and a force whose all-consuming energy most threatened those same ideals.

With twenty individual essays from some extremely eminent French *dix-neuviémistes*, plus introduction and conclusion, this is a bumper volume, and difficult to summarize usefully. The volume is effectively a companion piece to another collection, *Romans de la Révolution, 1790–1912*, published in 2014 by Armand Colin, and edited by Aude Déruelle and, again, Jean-Marie Roulin. There, the focus was exclusively on the novel as a genre; here, the notion of “fiction” is expanded to incorporate different narrative forms and genres. The primary benefit of this is the inclusion of theatrical treatments of the Revolution—for, as all historicist literary critics secretly know yet pretend not to, the theatre as the democratic medium *par excellence* is exactly where we need to look if our purpose is to say something about how “nineteenth-century people” felt about the Revolution, or indeed about anything else. Chapters on the theatre, from the Revolution to the fin de siècle, by Maurizio Melai, Paola Perazzolo, Claude Millet, and Sophie Lucet, are thus of compelling interest. Short fiction is represented here by Christelle Bahier-Porte’s informative synoptic essay on the *conte* at the time of the Revolution itself. The inclusion of chapters covering not only vocationally narrative verse (Lamartine’s *Jocelyn*, sensitively treated by Roulin) but also verse which, while not strictly narrative, aspires to a kind of historical overview (meaning, of course, Hugo’s, read as an ensemble by Franck Laurent) might be thought to stretch even a term as capacious as “fiction” to breaking-point, though their presence does lend the volume a convincingly globalizing, in-the-round quality that many readers will appreciate. Methodologically, moreover, the editors have struck a good balance in their commissions: the collection juxtaposes synoptic chapters encompassing entire subgenres with others proposing focused close readings of individual texts.

While singling out individual essays in a collection for special comment can seem invidious, it scarcely seems avoidable that, in approaching a volume as variegated and broad as this one, individual readers will engage more readily with some essays than with others. For my part, Stéphanie Genand’s and Paule Petitier’s synoptic chapters, on the theme of “l’âme sauvage” and love narratives of the revolutionary era respectively, offer together a fascinating and timely literary-historical *mise au point*. Genand’s lucid exploration of the revolutionary novel’s “infléchissement pathologique,” its preoccupation with the passions and with “[l]’égarement intérieur” (71), precisely complements Petitier’s analysis of the love narrative as a political metaphor which, far from facilely opposing the hurly-burly of politics with the *locus amoenus* of the sentimental idyll, tended on the contrary to depict the Revolution as “un moment d’investissement amoureux dans la politique” (83). On the close-reading side, Xavier Bourdenet’s re-interpretation of Balzac’s *Les Chouans* persuasively situates that work as a revealing case study for understanding both the extent and the limits of the novel’s capacity to “stage” or make “visible” the historical process—not to mention as one of the lynchpins of Balzac’s own totalizing novelistic project. (Vincent Bierce’s thoughtful chapter on Balzac’s counterrevolutionary fictions—or fantasies—provides a neat counterpoint to Bourdenet’s approach, which one might call more “Hugolian” in its tendency to see Balzac as in the broadest sense “revolutionary” *qu’il le veuille ou non*...). Finally, Sophie Lucet’s analysis of historical theatre at the fin de siècle, with its perceptive reading of Zola’s *Le Naturalisme au théâtre* and the various historical dramas to which it responded, vividly recreates the intensely polemical

climate of the early Third Republic, and the uniquely vexed positions of theatre as a medium and the Revolution as a subject at that anxious political moment. Indeed, “anxiety” is perhaps the primary mood that emerges from the multitude of works analyzed here, across the century; and by the look of his soon-to-be death mask, David’s Marat, who adorns the cover, quill and paper still in his grasp for this last second before death, is perhaps the only truly tranquil mind among the many writers this volume evokes.

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