

Cropper on Eisenzweig (2018)

Eisenzweig, Uri. *Le Duel introuvable: la fascination du duel dans la littérature du XIXe siècle*. PU de Vincennes, 2018, pp. 180, ISBN 978-2-84292-580-2

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Uri Eisenzweig's thesis can be summarized as follows: despite the duel's charged narrative potential, given its highly codified nature, authors obfuscate and minimize its fictional representation. This book provides a fun and lively read, as Eisenzweig, much like a *flâneur*, walks through the different modalities of the duel in French literature (visiting the likes of Honoré de Balzac, Stendhal, Théophile Gautier, Émile Zola, Jules Vallès, and Guy de Maupassant), in Russian literature (exploring Alexander Pushkin, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Anton Chekhov, and Ivan Turgenev, among others), and in a sampling of texts by English language authors (Wilkie Collins, Edgar Allan Poe, and Joseph Conrad).

After outlining the duel's rules, codified by the comte de Chatauvillard in 1836, Eisenzweig establishes a taxonomy of methods of narrative dissimulation. Duels are recounted fugitively after the fact or elliptically at an extreme narrative distance. Descriptions can be brief since, to quote Mathilde from *Le Rouge et le Noir*, "Le duel n'est plus qu'une cérémonie. Tout est su d'avance, même ce que l'on doit dire en tombant." In works by Maupassant and Flaubert, duels are frequently the subject of ridicule as duelists accidentally shoot passing livestock or pass out from fear before even drawing their swords. In other texts, as the time of the duel approaches, protagonists are drawn into nostalgic reverie or internal monologues and the duel itself is described only parenthetically. Still other narratives largely ignore the duel and focus instead on the similarities between the adversaries, a tactic Eisenzweig explores in a chapter titled, "Le duelliste et son ombre."

But these readings, although well crafted, do not seem to lead anywhere compelling or to any significant new understanding of the texts. They do support the initial thesis—duels are not described in the same level of detail or verisimilitude as other events in the Realist novels of the mid and late nineteenth century—but, to pursue the *flâneur* analogy, they feel somewhat aimless and raise more questions than they resolve. Are obfuscation, indirect narration, and internal monologues not simply part and parcel of nineteenth-century fiction in general? What level of detail when describing the duel itself would be considered sufficient? How is the duel different from other codified and ritualized acts, like dining, attending the theater, or sex? In nineteenth-century fiction, sex, for example, is rarely described in detail, it is often obfuscated, occasionally mocked, and frequently hidden behind the silence of telling ellipses. In short, what was unique to the duel in literature? When was it most popular and why? What motivated authors to include the duel so often in their fictional works?

To answer these questions, I recommend skipping ahead to the chapter titled "Entre textes et terrains." This chapter, the book's penultimate, lays out why the previous chapters are important and establishes the stakes of Eisenzweig's entire argument. It gives structure to the work and, in my opinion, should have been its first chapter. Eisenzweig spells out the various theories for the duel's importance in nineteenth-century France: it represents a vehicle for social climbing, nostalgia for the Ancien Régime, or a dose of chance in a world increasingly regulated by positivist logic. He then points out that the underlying uncertainty in the historical record prevents any definitive conclusions about the supposed increase in frequency of duels in the nineteenth century, instead suggesting that the number of duels likely decreased, thereby undermining historians' explanations for the duel's popularity in nineteenth-century France. The duel, he concludes, remains above all a literary phenomenon.

Eisenzweig's study comes alive at the end of this chapter as he provides the *real* (and more compelling) thesis, namely, "qu'au siècle du récit le duel soit un objet littéraire privilégié parce que du récit il thématise les limites" (134). In other words, like the duel, nineteenth-century prose is a highly codified ritual; writing about the duel functions as a sort of *mise en abîme* of the narrative process and exposes the impossibility of the Realist project, the limits of literature as mimesis. Eisenzweig reformulates this idea as follows: "C'est l'incompatibilité formelle entre le duel et le véhicule désormais privilégié du réel et du vrai, au XIXe siècle, c'est-à-dire le récit [...] C'est l'idée du duel tel qu'il se définit à partir de l'Essai de Chatauvillard, c'est cette idée qui passionne, qui captive—précisément en ce qu'elle ne s'accommode pas aisément des productions narratives se voulant réalistes" (134). Though it comes late in the study, this hypothesis makes the entire analysis worth reading and causes a complete rethinking not only of the earlier chapters but also of the many literary works that feature duels. It points to an anxiety that is at the heart of much of the fiction we study in the pages of this journal and it underscores what is unique and significant about the duel in both French literature and the French imaginary in the nineteenth century.

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