

Smart on Astbury (2012)

Astbury, Katherine. *Narrative Responses to the Trauma of the French Revolution*. London: Legenda Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2012. Pp. 200. ISBN: 978-1907975424

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How can we explain the fact that the Revolutionary decade (1789-99) produced no great novel about the Revolution? The Revolution's amazing characters and dramatic events are absent from much of the fiction that was produced—pastoral idylls, gothic tales, and sentimental novels. In *Narrative Responses*, Katherine Astbury explores this disconnect. She argues that these “apparently non-political novels” reveal an attempt to come to terms with the events of the French Revolution. *Narrative Responses* gathers an impressive array of primary sources that span a variety of genres, from Marmontel's *Nouveaux Contes moraux* (1790-93) to sentimental and chivalric novels such as Genlis' *Les Chevaliers du cygne* (1795) and émigré narratives such as Rosny's *Les Infortunes de Mr. de la Galetierre* (1797). Astbury re-inserts these texts in their historical context to tease out how each narrative responds to the Revolution. The final chapters examine post-Thermidorean fiction through the lens of trauma studies.

Astbury's study builds on previous scholarship, notably Denby's *Sentimental Narratives* and Jensen's *Trauma and its Representations*, and expands in a new direction. In her introduction Astbury draws on the works of current trauma theorists such as Dori Laub, Judith Herman, Kai Erikson, and Cathy Caruth who propose a model of stages of reaction to a traumatic event (10-11). Astbury quickly notes the limits to this approach, however, by recognizing that the fiction produced before the Terror does not always conform to the model's stages.

The first chapters therefore are more grounded in close readings than in trauma theory. In chapter one, Astbury examines the pastoral, which dominated literary production in the early years of the Revolution. Whereas tales set in ancient Greece—for example Fournier de Tony's *Les Nymphes de Dycyme* (1790)—appear to represent a pure escape from Revolutionary reality, Astbury shows how these idylls promote the Revolutionary values of virtue and national unity. Astbury performs a similar symptomatic reading of absences in chapter two, by pulling out the theme of “regeneration of the nation” from Florian's best-selling chivalric novel set in fifteenth-century Spain, *Gonzalve de Cordoue* (1791). The bulk of the narratives analyzed reflect a positive rather than a “traumatic” response, although Astbury adroitly maps the changes in Marmontel's later “Contes” to his disappointment with an increasingly violent Revolution.

By 1793 France was at war with England; nevertheless, English novels translated into French were extremely popular. In chapter three, Astbury investigates the reception of these novels, showing the resonance between English sentimental novels and Revolutionary ideals. The end of chapter three establishes the gothic as a traumatic response to the Terror, and the following two chapters—both very strong—apply trauma studies to novels that were published after the execution of Maximilien Robespierre and his followers (July 28-29, 1794). In chapter four, Astbury reads novels such as Le Bastier's *Dorbeuil et Céliane de Valran* (An III), with its overt references to the Terror and negative portrayals of Jacobin characters, as providing a “space for shared trauma and a new imagined community” (106). In the final chapter, Astbury demonstrates how émigré novels provide a “means of assimilating the trauma of the Terror” (136).

Narrative Responses is ambitious in its scope. It is a daunting task to present a wide variety of fiction, and tie each work to a specific moment of a phenomenon as complex as the French Revolution. Many of the narratives are unfamiliar and their baroque plots are difficult to summarize. *Narrative Responses* does a fine job presenting these texts that will certainly be of interest to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars. Sade's fiction is a notable absence, although there is reference to his ideas on fiction in *Les Crimes de l'amour*. Astbury's use of trauma studies can be a bit uneven. As Astbury points out in her introduction, no theoretical approach encompasses the entirety of the Revolutionary experience. However, given the title of the study one does expect more extensive engagement with trauma studies in the first few chapters. But these quibbles should not detract from this thought-provoking study. Astbury's clear, elegant prose engages the reader and Astbury convincingly shows how the fiction of the Revolutionary decade, while perhaps not overtly political, nonetheless responded to Revolutionary events—whether through portrayals of moral regeneration in 1791 or through tales of exile in 1797.

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