

Online Reviews

Heathcote, Owen. *Balzac and Violence: Representing History, Space, Sexuality, and Death in La Comédie humaine*. Bern: Peter Lang, 2009. Pp. 288. ISBN: 3-03910-551-9

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“Balzac has secured the mythic constitution of the world with precise topographic contours,” Walter Benjamin famously said in the *Arcades Project*. In *Balzac and Violence*, Owen Heathcote traces this Promethean, mythic dimension through the concept of violence. He approaches the narrative topography of *La Comédie humaine* as a “wide range of human and geographical crossroads that all embody either past, present, or future violence” (51). Heathcote’s definition of violence encompasses the pain of literary labor, the traumas inflicted by history, the sufferings portrayed in the narrative, the formal violence of philosophical discourse, and the violence of writing itself. In this account, Balzac’s representation of violence allows for a critique of it through the work of memory and form, yet this exposure and literary mediation of violence also runs the risk of banalization and complicity. There is no exit to violence, for “the violence *in* literature is also the violence *of* literature” (225) in a contamination of form and content, although the conclusion suggests that literature may also contain “homeopathic” and redemptive possibilities.

The book is divided into five parts addressing Form, History, Space, Sexuality, and Death, although these categories are intertwined in the readings themselves. The author portrays Balzac’s history as a palimpsest of violence, in which the Wars of Religion, the Revolution, Terror, and the Napoleonic wars echo one another. *Une ténébreuse affaire* is explicated in light of Lynn Hunt’s classic account of the “family romance of the revolution,” where the erosion of paternity turns characters into the locus and witness of a violence that is “fatally emplotted into history, space, and sexuality” (123). The chapters return to gender and sexuality as sites of violence, and a key theme is the feminization of space. Narratives such as *Sténie* and *Le Lys dans la vallée* yield landscapes in which “violence is both origin/womb and trajectory/tomb: the womb/tomb that is Touraine is itself structured with gendered violence” (145).

As the author states, these readings were developed over a number of years at various scholarly meetings, which may explain the recursive quality of some formulations. The chapters are in dialogue with Balzac scholars from France and the United Kingdom, and their commentaries on particular texts. Yet the book rarely engages with broader arguments on postrevolutionary violence and its representation. In an allusion to Balzac as a precursor to Derridean *différance* and Butler’s performativity, for instance, Heathcote makes the surprising suggestion that “relatively little work has been done on the subject of gendered violence in Balzac” (128). Yet there is a vibrant bibliography on gender, sexuality, and violence on Balzac and his nineteenth century. A more substantive engagement with the past decade of scholarship on postrevolutionary

trauma, the gendering of violence, the social forms of sexuality, or prostitution and performativity, would have broadened the scope and significance of the book. This said, *Balzac and Violence* is a valuable study whose topography of violence and its crossroads in Balzac's monumental *oeuvre* considers sites beyond Paris such as Touraine and Besançon. Its corpus is wide-ranging, and includes canonical works such as *Le Lys dans la vallée*, but also lesser-known ones such as *Z. Marcas* or *Albert Savarus*. Its readings will be of interest to Balzac scholars and those interested in investigating the links between violence and narrative in nineteenth-century French studies.

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