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The Deaths of Louis XVI: Regicide and the French Political Imagination by Susan Dunn

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sponsabilité exigée par le lecteur dans l'unification de la théorie de Rousseau" (32). The demonstration of this thesis, however, is at times obfuscated by the author's constant preoccupation with recent theory and criticism and determination to explain Rousseau's highly idiosyncratic vision in terms of twentieth-century ideological and literary constructs. This is probably why this reader found the chapter on *La Nouvelle Héloïse* the most satisfying, precisely because it relies more consistently than the others on a close, attentive reading of Rousseau's own text.

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DUNN, SUSAN. *The Deaths of Louis XVI: Regicide and the French Political Imagination*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. ISBN 0-691-03429-X. Pp. xiii + 178.

This is a landmark study which brilliantly bridges the gap between history and literature by focusing on the French Revolution and the myths it generated, especially that produced by the beheading of Louis XVI. That this public regicide deeply affected the collective memory and psyche of the French for the next two centuries, and even amounted to a traumatic, self-inflicted wound, is made abundantly and convincingly clear through a close and illuminating analysis of reactions to this extraordinary event on the part of historians and men of letters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Susan Dunn gives the lion's share to Michelet, Lamartine, Hugo, and Camus, but does not overlook authors such as Joseph de Maistre, Chateaubriand, Balzac, Ballanche, and Guizot. She also remains keenly aware that while historians were constrained by archival evidence, writers felt no such restrictions and could, therefore, give free rein to their subjective and imaginative interpretations of the regicide.

Quite insignificant and ineffective during his lifetime, Louis XVI acquired potent symbolic meaning following his death. In a thought-provoking Foreword to the book, Conor Cruise O'Brien agrees with the author that the beheading of Charles I, a century and a half before that of Louis XVI, was an important landmark in English history, yet it did not have a significant impact on the English national psyche and troubled few English consciences (x). Susan Dunn gives a very plausible explanation for this difference: "In England regicide was a political act, whereas in France it was the object of elaborate theological and ideological explanations" (4).

For the royalists Louis XVI became an innocent victim raised to sainthood, indeed to Christ-like martyrdom, whereas for the Jacobins his execution signaled the irrevocable severing of all ties with the past, the triumph of the Revolution, and the advent of a new social order. But it was precisely this radical act that "left a troubling vacuum," soon to be "filled with new dogmas, based, like the old ones, on superstition and magical thinking" (36). The execution of Louis XVI marked a watershed and the beginning of the descent of the Revolution into the excesses of the Terror. As both Michelet and Lamartine acknowledged, the regicide testified to the fact that the generous ideals of 1789 had degenerated into an ideology deprived of such spiritual and moral values as pity and compassion. For Michelet, Joan of Arc, a people's saint, would displace Louis XVI as the symbol of national regeneration and redemption.

Throughout his long life, Hugo perceived the execution of Louis XVI as one of the most disturbing events of the Revolution. In the problematic relation of the individual to the state Hugo consistently placed the integrity of the self above the

demands of the collectivity: "Hugo seemed aware of the terrible threat to morality and civilization posed by the sacrifice of the individual's conscience for new political faiths in Progress and History or for the new God, the 'people,' and its corollary, nationalism" (139).

The case of Camus is a particularly interesting one, for in *L'Homme révolté* he deals with the death of Louis XVI in nearly pro-royalist terms. As Susan Dunn puts it: "Camus belonged to a generation of antitotalitarian writers, such as Jacob Talmon, Karl Popper, Raymond Aron, Arthur Koestler, and Hannah Arendt, who traced a straight path from Rousseau's *Social Contract* to the regicide and the Terror, then to nineteenth-century ideologies of historical necessity, and finally to twentieth-century totalitarianism" (141). How Camus evolved from a stern pro-Jacobin stance to one more inclined to mercy and compassion has a great deal to do with his post-World War II experience of purges and trials of collaborators. His own conclusion was, in Susan Dunn's words, that "charity, not punishment, should be the order of the day" (146).

*The Death of Louis XVI* constitutes a major contribution to a fuller and richer understanding of the crucial role the execution of Louis XVI played in the shaping of modern French identity and nationhood.

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*Balzac, une poétique du roman*. Ed. Stéphane Vachon. Groupe International de Recherches Balzaciennes. Montreal: XYZ, [1996]. ISBN 2-910381-86-2. Pp. 13 + 441 + 7. 160 F.

Despite (or perhaps because of) its ambitious title, *Balzac, une poétique du roman* is disappointing. Granted, the contributors strive valiantly to conform their pedantic and painstaking analyses to the book's procrustean format. But the results are uneven and—in the final analysis—inconclusive. In trying to define balzacian "poetics" as the writer's own conception of his art, Stéphane Vachon has recourse to Roland Barthes: "Balzac, c'est le roman fait homme, c'est le roman tendu jusqu'à l'extrême de son possible, de sa vocation" (180).

In her prefatory material, the editor suggests that following Balzac from his youthful novels and journalistic experiments to his mature works means studying the development of a hybrid and analyzing the valorization of a form; in fact, there is no chronological cohesion in the ensuing studies. Divided into six "parts," each with an introductory overview and a half-dozen or more essays purportedly dealing with the topical material, the book displays no internal logic or progression. For instance, "Commencer, déplier, finir" (part I) arbitrarily studies the beginning, middle and endings of selected novels. Andrea del Lungo traces the development of Balzac's opening passages to coincide with the writer's concept of his *Comédie humaine*; in trying to pinpoint the "geometrical axis" bisecting specific novels, Raymond Mahieu utilizes an artificial device based on arbitrary postulates; Martine Léonard negates the closure of any balzacian narrative, including the *Comédie humaine* itself. Instead of the magisterial syntheses of the past, Graham Falconer tells us that present-day criticism favors partial studies—precisely the trouble with the present offerings. They are so minutely focused, so microscopically detailed, that we examine the bark on the tree without ever glimpsing the forest.

A number of contributors (like Pugh, Morisot, Juliette Froelich, and Nichole