
The plethora of recent studies, colloquia, and essay collections examining relations between history and literature or between history and memory in literature has overwhelmingly focused on contemporary wars. This volume is no exception, spanning from World War I to Rwanda. It treats ‘conventional’ wars, insurgent revolutions, and genocides, not to erase fundamental distinctions among them but, on the contrary, to better delineate what sets the three contexts apart. Moreover, in a century that condemned wars of aggression and thus privileged victims’ perspectives, these scholars take the opposite tack by peering into dark and troubling works which represent “la violence guerrière du point de vue de celui qui l’inflige” (9).

In the first section of the volume, a short piece by Monique Canto-Sperber and a substantial survey by Schoentjes seek to sketch out theoretical frames—esthetic and ethical—for broaching such literary (and on occasion here, cinematic) undertakings. The second section features articles on World War I by Lévy-Bertherat (discussing Blaise Cendrars and Mikhail Bulgakov) and Corinne François-Denève (examining Aziz Chouaki’s play, Les coloniaux [Mille et une nuits, 2006]). The third contains works on World War II: Yan Hamel on Sartre’s La mort dans l’âme (Gallimard, 1949), Alain Kleinberger on American war films, and Vicky Colin on Jonathan Littell’s Les bienveillantes (Gallimard, 2006). The fourth section turns its attention to Algeria and Vietnam as examples of wars for independence (studies by Laurent Véréy, Philip Dine, and Catherine Milkovich-Riou), followed by a section addressing Rwanda’s civil war strife (Anneleen Spiessens on Jean Hatzfeld and Gilbert Gatore; Jean-Pierre Karegeye on fictional portraits of executioners; and Catherine Coquio on Gatore’s Le passé devant soi [Phébus, 2008]). The collection concludes with the transcription of a roundtable discussion among documentary producer François Bernard, renowned combat photographer Patrick Chauvel, playwright Gatore, and noted author Laurent Mauvignier (whose recent novel on the Algerian War—Des hommes [Minuit, 2009]—is especially relevant here).

Among the most noteworthy studies, Milkovich-Riou devises a compelling interdisciplinary approach to these themes. As a point of departure for her reflections on the Algerian War, she contrasts historical testimony provided by perpetrators well after the events (collected in Patrick Rotman, L’ennemi intime [Seuil, 2005]) with fictional accounts. In successfully teasing out the psychological dynamics germane to such ‘confessions,’ she is able to contextualize the choices confronting authors such as Assia Djebar and Mohammed Dib who on rare occasions attempt to project their imagination into the world of assassins and torturers. The study is nuanced in its theoretical moves. Moreover, one would be interested to see how her analysis would approach Henri Alleg’s La question (Minuit, 1958)—
the first significant historical account from a victim tortured by the French army—banned immediately in France upon publication. Colin’s discussion of Les bienveillantes eschews Milkovich-Riou’s psychoanalytic angle and opts instead for a framework inspired by clinical psychology. After an at times awkward prologue needed to establish her conceptual battery, Colin very ably negotiates a discussion of the protagonist Max Aue (played off of remarks made by Littell in interviews) that highlights an attention to symptomology and the metaphorical registers used to evoke said signs of trauma.

This volume does not make contributions as substantial as those in the compelling special issue of Le Débat 165 (May-August 2011) titled L’histoire saisie par la fiction. The individual studies of “J’ai tué” come across as somewhat scattered; more contributions to the theoretical section would no doubt have served to deploy a broader hermeneutic umbrella. However, the majority constitutes serious scholarly discussions of frequently non-canonical figures and at its best—as in the instance of Milkovich-Riou and Colin—it can indicate avenues for analyzing important recent novels like Littell’s or Mathias Enard’s Zone (Actes Sud, 2008).

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