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Jonathan Strauss. *Human Remains: Medicine, Death, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Paris.* Forms of Living Series. New York: Fordham University Press, 2012. xiv + 394 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8232-3379-3; $30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8232-3380-9.

Reviewed by Peter S. Soppelsa (University of Oklahoma)
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A Parisian Erotics of Disgust

I recommend reading this book by dim light–from candles or gas if possible. But don't let this enjoyable horror tale's lithe prose fool you. Serious theoretical work connects the cholera, corpses, miasmas, necrophiliacs, prostitutes, rag pickers, sewage, and other forms of "abjection" explicated in this volume. Following landmark works by Sigmund Freud (*Civilization and Its Discontents* [1930]), Mary Douglas (*Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* [1984]), and Norbert Elias (*The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* [1978]), "disgust" has become a keyword in recent cultural studies of nineteenth-century Paris and the Victorian era more generally.[1] Jonathan Strauss adds to this dialog by unearthing the *erotics* of disgust, the hygienist's repressed (and returning) desire for "the filth that had to be excluded from Paris" (p. 166). Strauss opens up little new empirical territory in nineteenth-century Paris, but he produces striking new readings of well-known literary figures like Charles Baudelaire, Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Gustave Flaubert, and Émile Zola, and prominent scientists like Marie François Xavier Bichat, Claude Bernard, and Louis Pasteur, based on their own writings about how abjection haunted the civilized, modernized city.

Any tourist visiting Paris's catacombs today confronts thousands of bones interred there between the 1780s and 1840s. Revolutionary, Napoleonic, and monarchic authorities removed all cemeteries within Paris's city limits, and moved the bones to the catacombs or the countryside. Strauss's memorable study plumbs the meaning of this historical shift: the sudden banishment of death from a city that had lived with its ancestors' graves–*piously*–for centuries. Thus, he notes, the Catholic Church became the greatest opponent of this Enlightenment campaign to eradicate death from the city.

Strauss works from a thick skein of textual and visual representations of death, desire, and their haunting relationships. By suturing medical and scientific texts to legal texts, periodicals, poetry, and prose, he constructs a coherent and fascinating object of study, which he calls "the toxic imagination" and "the medical, especially hygienic, imagination" (p. 230). This imagination functioned psychologically to manage the slippery threshold between life and death. Strauss's sources tremble, ambivalent, as they obsessively retrace this all-too-thin line.

Strauss thus offers a historical-textual psychoanalysis of death as a "master category" in nineteenth-century Paris (p. 5). In this analysis, death consistently returns as a repressed object of desire, revealing an attraction to the abject. Zola called it "a sort of fearful desire"–a yearning for something so socially inadmissible that it becomes fearsome (p. 173). Strauss documents attempts to "cross over" into death, through practices like spiritualist séances, public corpse viewing at the morgue, and even necrophilia, which he finds surprisingly often in the press, novels, and trial records (see index, p. 391). In sum, he unpacks the morbid imagination of nineteenth-century Paris and suggestively connects it with medicine's rise to social power.

Human Remains speaks to urban studies as an unconventional take on urban representations, which scholars have called "urban imaginaries" and the "word city."[2] As Strauss explains, "this is not, then, a history of any *real* nineteenth century, but rather an account of an *unreal* one, of a fantasy that exercised itself on the shape and meaning of the city as it was structured by medicine and hygiene" (pp. 7-8, emphasis original). Though Strauss often returns to the city's material and spatial forms, the "rise of the modern, hygienic city" remains an effect or outcome here rather than an object of study (p. 221). And

yet Paris is massively important for Strauss: "The story of death in the nineteenth century is also, therefore, the story of Paris" (p. 280)–we should add: *modern* Paris, after the Enlightenment and the Revolution. Strauss's high-flying analysis stays tethered to Parisian spaces, ways of life, and contingencies. The local context behind his psychoanalytic ghost story is the oft-noted meteoric rise, social and political power, and broad cultural resonance, of medicine in nineteenth-century Paris.[3]

Paris also anchors the author intellectually, as a home for the methodological threads that he gathers here: dialectics, existentialism, and psychoanalysis; history and philosophy of science and medicine; and finally a whiff of surrealism and the transgressive. It is fitting that *Human Remains* joins the Forms of Living series, which already includes two translations of works by Georges Canguilhem. Strauss's intellectual guest list is notably Parisian, including Antonin Artaud, Gaston Bachelard, Walter Benjamin, Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Bourdieu, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva. These final two theorists anchor Strauss's conclusion, which tends toward the intersection of psychoanalysis and structural or poststructural linguistics. This reader was a bit surprised that Georges Bataille makes only a brief appearance at this funeral party.

This is an intricately interdisciplinary work, which would nevertheless speak fluently with older approaches from intellectual history and the history of ideas. Informed broadly by the wide arc of continental theory–including phenomenology and hermeneutics, dialectics, existentialism, post/structuralism, and above all psychoanalysis–Strauss also incorporates notable elements of visual studies, comparative literature, and recent interest in "literature and science." He smoothly blends literary history, criticism, and theory with political history, criticism, and theory. The book is nothing like conventional history, but it is deeply historically informed. Strauss's study of the shifting boundaries between life and death, as well as between animate and inanimate has broad intellectual interest for research on nonhuman agents or the limits of humanity, for example, in geography, environmental studies, animal studies, actor-network theory, and post-humanism. Strauss also taps into the recent undead fad in popular culture (which is already garnering academic attention), and this may further broaden his audience.[4] This book's public and cross-disciplinary interest is among its greatest strengths. It deserves a broad audience.

Chapter 1, "Medicine and Authority," examines the medical press to show how doctors carved out a sphere of social and political influence independent of the church and the courts. Chapter 2, "The Medical Uses of Nonsense," pursues this discussion through more psychiatric sources, showing how the unintelligibility of their objects of study (madness and death) helped legitimate medical discourse as a new and distinctive language that alone could unlock these mysterious, irrational objects. Doctors semi-magically communed with "a space outside of society that was nonetheless crucial to the definition of society" (p. 10). Strauss illustrates this argument with a striking anecdote: French doctors coined the term "semiotic" in the eighteenth century to name their distinctive skill of reading the signs of sickness and especially death. Doctors maintained authority and autonomy by constructing psychologically and linguistically charged objects of study, and claiming that, like trade secrets, only they could understand them. They maintained their distinctive and independent social status through such metaphysical and epistemological wrangling over unknowns like madness and death.

In chapter 3, "A Hostile Environment," Strauss reads medical, scientific, and reformist sources on urban hygiene and sanitation. Hygienists constructed filth, disease, and death as miasma-like "clouds" of danger and abjection, material and mobile beings, and urban marauders. Chapter 4, "Death Comes Alive," continues this discussion by showing how hygienists treated death as a material state or even an object, whose apparent essence lay in putrefaction (decomposition/degeneration) and fermentation (recomposition/regeneration). Many contemporaries could not shake the creepy concept that death could be animate, sentient, perhaps even conscious.

Chapter 5, "Pleasure in Revolt," is the heart of the book's erotics of disgust, arguing that hygienic discourse was "saturated by unspoken and displaced erotic longings" (p. 133). Strauss deftly marshals the oral-anal dimension of desire and the return of the repressed in his discussion here. Pierre Leroux and Hugo anchor the dynamic section on utopian dreams of recycling feces to fertilize food crops, followed by an equally brisk section on prostitution anchored by hygienist Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet and reformer Alphonse Esquiros. Strauss shrewdly leaves Baudelaire's iconic phrase "flowers of evil" for later, but one can already read it between the lines of this discussion of the creative, even procreative powers of rotting matter (soil) and waste (fertilizer) (p. 171).

In the following chapter, "Monsters and Artists," Strauss focuses on lithographs by Odilon Redon and death scenes by Balzac and Flaubert to examine the aesthetics of death in what he calls "medicalized art" and later "the darkest, unloveliest corners of nineteenth century art and literature" (pp. 169, 280). These works show a "diacritical" (attraction-revulsion) relationship with contemporary science. This chapter showcases Strauss's forays into visual studies and into literature and science. The chapter also identifies a broad popular culture of death: "morbid sentimentalism and its piously eroticized cult of the deceased," which he traces through the practice of public corpse viewing at the morgue and necrophilic passages from Théophile Gautier and Zola (p. 171). The extended reading of Redon is among the book's finest sections, and not simply for the images. It moves gracefully from biographical notes on Redon's study of science and medicine, through a dual material and semiotic reading of his haunting lithographs, and into the spooky metaphysical notions embodied in them by his hands-on technique. Finally, Strauss juxtaposes Redon's work with evolutionary and physiological texts by Bernard, Charles Darwin, and Ernst Haeckel. The chapter is rounded out by readings of death scenes in Balzac and Flaubert.

Chapter 7, "Abstracting Desire," takes a more theoretically oriented direction, building toward to the book's conclusion. It takes on two tasks. The first is articulating some high-level connections between death and language–namely, that by representing the past, language conjures up the dead, allowing them to (if only indirectly) speak again. Representation is a kind of resurrection. For this reviewer, speaking as a historian, this offers a powerful reminder of how we commune with the dead through historical texts. This discussion bears theoretical fruit in Strauss's clearest definitions of "filth" ("anything that cannot be assimilated into the social order" [p. 231]) and the "abject" ("that peculiar, impure status between subject and object" [p. 238]). The chapter's second task is to theorize the "modern, hygienic city" as a "fantasm" constructed in opposition to the filth, disease, and death excluded by the hygienic imagination. Here the specifically urban dimension of Strauss's work returns, and continues into the eighth and final chapter, "What Abjection Means." Finally revealing the substance of his clever title, Strauss concludes that human remains *remain.* The things we leave behind (words, feces, corpses) return to haunt us.

Strauss concludes that "the mythical city of the fantasm was … an axiomatic space," one marshaled to manage the stubborn fact that filth, disease, and death just would not go away. And so, "the city was an instrument … for representing, grasping, and potentially resolving questions about time, memory, death, meaning, and interpersonal difference," or "an instrument to control abjection" (pp. 258, 259). Thus, the hygienic image of the city was built by excluding the abject. Abjection played a central–and mostly negative–role in defining the urban in nineteenth-century Paris. Cities could be clean, healthy, meaningful, and orderly, but only by banishing cholera, criminals, corpses, and the like. This exclusion was neither fully possible nor (strictly speaking) *desirable*, in many senses of the word. Strauss here agrees with several other recent studies that hygienic thinking played a constitutive role in defining the nineteenth-century city, especially Paris, but elsewhere as well.[5]

In this sense, Strauss misses a real theoretical opportunity by not working more with Elias and that French keyword "civilization." This reader would have liked to hear more explicitly from the author how his work contributes to the ongoing dialog on the consequences of Enlightenment rationality and of modernity. Empirically speaking, he misses the chance to dialog with the broad existing literature on the national neurosis over France's birthrate, and the contemporary medical and popular discourses on degeneration.[6] But these are small complaints about a book that already does so much.

H-Urban readers seeking the book's urban components will have to work to unravel them from other, differently oriented threads. *Human Remains* is interdisciplinary enough to lose some readerships. But pigeonhole this book and miss its point. It is fantastically interesting, dense with striking reinterpretations of familiar sources and limber theoretical exercises, because Strauss tracks linguistic and psychological patterns wherever they roam. The result is a brisk plunge into interdisciplinary historical-textual psychoanalysis. As I said, read it by low light, maybe with a stiff (or warm) drink. The book may make your skin crawl a bit, but it will also get under it. Highly recommended, but not for prudes or weak stomachs.

Notes

[1]. See also William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, eds., *Filth: Dirt, Disgust and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

[2]. Peter Fritzsche, *Reading Berlin 1900* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Alev Çinar and Thomas Bender, eds., *Urban Imaginaries: Locating the Modern City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[3]. Sven Dierig, Jens Lachmund, and J. Andrew Mendelsohn, eds., *Science and the City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Ann Elizabeth Fowler La Berge and Caroline Hannaway, eds., *Constructing Paris Medicine* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998); and Ann Elizabeth Fowler La Berge and Mordechai Feingold, eds., *French Medical Culture in the Nineteenth Century* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

[4]. See Deborah Christie and Sarah Juliet Lauro, eds., *Better Off Dead: The Evolution of the Zombie as Post-Human* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011); and the popular novels by Seth Grahame-Smith.

[5]. See my previous review of *Le Paris moderne: Histoire des politiques d'hygiène, 1855-1898*, by Fabienne Chevallier, H-Urban, H-Net Reviews (February 2012), http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?-id=33461; and Cohen and Johnson, eds., *Filth*.

[6]. For example, see Joshua Cole, *The Power of Large Numbers: Population, Politics, and Gender in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Bertrand Taithe, *Defeated Flesh*: *Medicine, Welfare, and Warfare in the Making of Modern France* (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield, 1999); and Robert Nye, *Crime, Madness, & Politics in Modern France*: *The Medical Concept of National Decline* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

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