
H-France Review Vol. 10 (July 2010), No. 95

Scott Carpenter, *Aesthetics of Fraudulence in Nineteenth-Century France: Frauds, Hoaxes and Counterfeits*. Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2009. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. xiii + 190 pp. \$99.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-7546-6807-7.

Review by Robin Walz, University of Alaska Southeast.

Scott Carpenter's book, an erudite analysis of literary "frauds, hoaxes and counterfeits" as entertaining as its subject matter suggests, is highly recommended reading for cultural historians of nineteenth-century France. Considering an admixture of writings by canonical literary figures such as Balzac, Sand, and Baudelaire, as well publications by less esteemed scribblers, including the histories of Prosper Mérimée, the memoirs of Vidocq, and press coverage of Louis XVI's interment in the basilica at Saint-Denis, Carpenter reveals a variegated "aesthetics of fraudulence" that runs through them. The deceptions, mystifications, and counterfeits revealed by these writings yield a culturally produced a version of reality, he argues, that characterize nineteenth-century France as much as Romanticism, realism, or positivist science. What cultural historians have to gain from reading this book is a greater appreciation for how techniques of literary analysis can help to define a historical period, rather than falling back on our more standard historical approach of regarding a work of literature as expressive or representative of its age. In return, what historians have to offer Carpenter is greater knowledge of the cultural field he cultivates.

Carpenter's introduction bears the warning, *caveat lector!* The literary use of artifice, ruse, concealment, and word slippage as techniques of falsity to persuade readers about "real" events, he reminds us, spans the whole of written history from *The Odyssey* to Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Yet in the aftermath of an Enlightenment insistence upon transparency, and with a new Romantic emphasis upon sincerity, he asserts that the problem of using literary mystification to make truth claims took on critical significance in the early nineteenth century. To qualify as fraudulent writing, Carpenter posits, an author must intentionally strive to deceive readers and may employ many multiple layers of falsification to achieve that aim (pp. 4-5). Rather than considering such fraudulent writings "the pariah of literary history," Carpenter instead suggests examining them as "an aesthetic practice that plays off, undermines, or interrogates other major practices of the day" (p. 16). Acknowledging that the sundry writings analyzed in his subsequent chapters do not constitute a representative field, still he asserts that they embody the critical activity of the fraudulent in nineteenth-century literature: "This synecdoche of the culture landscape suggests the generality of the phenomenon: it appears everywhere in order to challenge the urgency of the authentic" (p. 18). That is, these fraudulent writings are more properly viewed as challenging the truth claims of the age, rather than being dismissed as false or historically inaccurate.

The subjects of Carpenter's literary analyses are indeed diverse. The first two chapters focus on writings by Prosper Mérimée, principally *La guzla* (1827), a fabricated Slavic collection of bloody ballads and horror stories about vampires, and *Les faux Démétrius* (1852), an invented history about a pretender to the throne of the Russian Emperor Ivan the Terrible. Beyond the evident readership issues of credulity in the former case and irony in the latter (as an allusion to (Louis Napoléon's coup), Carpenter skillfully shows how literary techniques of hoax and caricature employed by Mérimée

reinforced the subject matter of his violent and politically oppositional texts. The next chapter examines the 1815 exhumation and entombment of the remains of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in the Basilica at Saint Denis, an event proliferated in such a variety of incongruous texts and images that doubts about whose remains were being interred befuddled the authenticity of the commemoration.

The following chapter focuses on Balzac's short story "Pierre Grassou" (1839), about a second-rate painter whose renown is achieved through his diligence at winning salon exhibition prizes by means of pastiche and plagiarism, rather than as a consequence of his artistic originality. While there is an evident critique of success gained by imitation and ruse directed against the story's title character, Carpenter argues that Balzac's own literary use "skillful disguise" in the *Comédie humaine* promoted the use of such techniques so long as they remained undetected. Turning to the *Mémoires* of Vidocq (1828-1829), Carpenter shows how counterfeiting, forgery, disguise, and criminal *argot* are not only the subject matter of the criminal-turned-detective's life, but constitute the literary means used by his ghostwriters to fabricate his "authentic" memoirs. On the theme of transvestism in nineteenth-century novels and plays, Carpenter explores the use of gender-crossing in *Gabriel* by George Sand (1840), not as a standard literary device of denouement, but as the starting point for Sand's sustained literary exploration of issues of individual, social, and sexual identity. The final two chapters concern uses of counterfeits in Baudelaire's poems and essays, focusing on his unfinished book, *Pauvre Belgique!* A diverse collection of "insults, lamentations, and defamations" (p. 157) gathered from Baudelaire's dismal sojourn to Belgium in 1865, the literary collage criticizes Belgian emulation of French language, manners, and culture, while at the same time constituting a kind of effigy of the French themselves.

The great virtue of *Aesthetics of Fraudulence* for cultural historians rests in Carpenter's demonstration that "while fraudulence may be, as Nodier showed, implied in the *production* of literature, it can also be the *subject* of literary and cultural phenomena" (p. 173). This accords well with Lynn Hunt's admonition a little over a decade ago that cultural historians should explore the "convergence between certain kinds of history and certain kinds of fiction," beyond the more typical response of historians to treat novels either as a source of direct evidence or as a reflection of historical reality.[1] Particularly when dealing with literature, our historian's toolkit benefits the inclusion of literary modes of analysis and interpretation. Understanding how texts communicate, beyond a naïve reading of what is easily understood, is invaluable for any cultural historian working with literary sources. In this regard, Carpenter is a splendid guide to literary techniques of deception, counterfeiting, and mystification.

In a reciprocal manner, Carpenter's insights into fraudulence as nineteenth-century literary and cultural phenomena might benefit from a broader historical understanding of his subject. While he has shown us how to tease fraudulence out of this particular collection of texts, it is useful to keep in mind that nineteenth-century readers were all too familiar with these techniques, and their uses. The use of confabulation by authors to play upon readers' suspension of disbelief in order to sell "authentic" stories, for example, had been common features of *Bibliothèque bleue* chapbooks and *canard* broadsides for more than two centuries, and these early modern publications continued to be a staple of popular reading in France well into the 1850s. Given this long familiarity with printed fraudulence, I doubt whether readers of "Conveyance of the human remains of King Louis XVI and Queen Marie-Antoinette to Saint-Denis, January 21, 1815," a *canard* reproduced by Carpenter (Figure 4.6, 81), ever considered the engraved block print an authentic depiction of the event. More likely, their enjoyment of the publication was derived from the lively songs printed beneath the image, recounting the death and execution of the king, set to familiar tunes. Insolent entertainment, more than interrogating authenticity, may have been the collective goal.

Further, fraudulence in literary publications was all too well known to the literary elite, publishers, and politicians of the nineteenth century.[2] While Carpenter identifies Mérimée as a looming figure of early nineteenth-century literary fraudulence, surely his contemporaries would have identified Alexandre Dumas for that honor. Not only was Dumas the most celebrated literary fraud of his era,

celebrated and vilified in nearly equal measure, more recent controversies over his 2002 exhumation and interment in the Panthéon, one of France's celebrated *lieux de mémoire*, suggest that the conflation of fraudulence and authenticity has long been set into play in securing French national identity. For while Carpenter, and by extension we historians, may strive to disentangle confabulation from truth, it is not necessarily the case that such a distinction has always been important to the French. The nineteenth century was, after all, the age of Michelet's histories, virtuoso performances, spiritism, and a "taste for the real" consumed as newspaper *fait-divers*, dioramas, wax museums, and early cinema.[3] In all of these realms, cultural artifacts that might be considered "frauds, hoaxes, and counterfeits" were confabulated by their nineteenth-century contemporaries into the truth.

To credit Carpenter, he is a literary critic and not a historian. Accordingly, these considerations may speak more to our concerns than his. He presents us with a marvelous array of less well known literary texts, and he does a superb job of leading us through their analyses. At the same time, his goal of rigorously examining the place of fraudulence in nineteenth-century literature might be more fully realized by situating *Aesthetics of Fraudulence* in relation to this wider field of cultural and historical scholarship.

NOTES

[1] Lynn Hunt, "No Longer an Evenly Flowing River': Time, History, and the Novel," *American Historical Review* 103, no. 5 (December 1998): 1517-1521.

[2] See Lise Dumasy, ed., *La querelle du roman-feuilleton: Littérature, presse et politique, un débat précurseur (1836-1848)* (Grenoble: ELLUG, 1999), and Christine Haynes, *Lost Illusions: The Politics of Publishing in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[3] Vivian Koger, *The "I" of History: Self-Fashioning and National Consciousness in Jules Michelet* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Paul Metzner, *Crescendo of the Virtuoso: Spectacle, Skill, and Self-Promotion in Paris during the Age of Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2008); Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

Robin Walz
University of Alaska Southeast
rwalz@uas.alaska.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor republication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.