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David Baguley, *Napoleon III and His Regime: An Extravaganza*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000. ix + 425 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$49.95 US (cl). ISBN 0-8071-2624-1.

Review by Steven D. Kale, Washington State University.

David Baguley holds the Chair of French at the University of Durham and is the author of six books on Émile Zola and naturalism. The present work is neither a biography nor an empirical study based on new archival research. Instead, Baguley uses a wide variety of texts and images to examine how Napoleon III and his regime were represented, interpreted, dismantled, and reinvented by contemporaries and subsequent commentators. He eschews traditional chronology in favor of generic categories--histories, biography, romance, parody, fiction, tragedy--to underscore the now familiar argument that histories are literary texts that conventionally employ generic patterns in a way that calls into question "the bounds between purportedly objective accounts and literary creations" (p. 329). The author embraces Hayden White's point regarding the discursive aspects of historical narrative and extends it by insisting that historians "frequently employ literary categories...in their interpretations" (p. 5). [1]

The broad range of scholars in the humanities who accept the main lines of an epistemological critique of the historical discipline routinely characterize the latter in the most conventional terms and attribute to historians motives, objectives, and practices that most today would view as anachronistic. Many, like Baguley, think that the typical historical work is a "concise narrative of events" that claims authority on the basis of an "assumption of impartiality" (p. 18). As such, the discipline is indelibly marked by a number of ideological heresies: historical truth can be attained; history is a story of progress; historical change is explicable; causality is embedded in human free will. This historiographic original sin necessarily entails reductive and selective expedients that lead historians, at best, to ignore "the full complexity of the Real" and, at worst, to actively suppress such complexity with partisan intent (pp. 5-6, 83). The only true history is a chronicle of historical facts, particular historical details that constitute the primitive fragments of the historical account; any attempt to fill in the gaps, to move beyond the elementary components of the unprocessed historical record, make distinctions in emphasis, or engage in historical interpretations, involves epistemological errors that must invite the suspicion of the modern reader.

In order to underscore the distinction between history as chronicle and history as discourse, Baguley includes an extensive chronology at the beginning of the book, insisting that those concerned with historical reality must content themselves with the "snippets of history" (p. 5). By resisting the recuperation of a coherent discourse of historical interpretation, literature joins a deconstructive reading of the past as a significant form of historical writing, one whose oblique perception, focalized, fragmentary, and necessarily incomplete vision accords (in an ironically coherent fashion) with "the fundamental unnarratability and incomprehensibility of history" (p. 23). Thus situated, the literary scholar can argue that he or she is better equipped than the historian to write about the past from a position that permits a multiplicity of readings because it resists the foreclosure of interpretation.

This sort of disciplinary territorialism is not new to French historians, who have been known to play the same game. It is reminiscent of François Simiand's suggestion in 1903 that historians should dig up facts for sociologists to interpret.<sup>[2]</sup> It is, however, a bid for disciplinary hegemony with far less justification: the historical discipline Simiand attacked was still much like the one Baguley describes, whereas the latter's critique is based on a caricature that ignores or simply dismisses as ideological the attention historians pay to rules of evidence, empirical data drawn from social science research, the careful search for appropriate analytical categories, and the quest for convincing modes of explanation.

Baguley suggests that negative standard accounts of Napoleon III and the Second Empire by such historians as Alfred Cobban and John B. Wolf drew inspiration from the writings of Victor Hugo, which painted Napoleon III in the blackest hues and attached eternal censure to his regime for the crime of December 2. Although written with a serious historical purpose, *Napoléon le Petit* and especially *L'Histoire d'un crime* were actually attempts to extirpate the bad conscience of a man who saw in his nemesis an authoritarian conservative who reminded him of "the dark side" of his own self and past. As a result, Hugo's work was motivated by personal demons; it used insults and invective to produce an obsessive, overstated, and overwrought leftist polemic. "Hugo doth protest too much," writes Baguley, who defines Hugolianism (or the Hugo syndrome) as an indulgence in excess combined with the use of inherited generic modes to package neatly the agitations and uncertainties of history. It is a mode of writing most inappropriate to the representation of Napoleon III, who resisted realistic portrayals and was "too elusive a figure to portray at all convincingly without lapsing into polemics or propaganda" (pp. 45, 331). Hugo's crime was to have used the historical mode to represent a figure who lent himself perfectly to the literary imagination. Consequently, his work was bad literature that exemplified the worst of history: it used literary flourishes for strictly partisan ends, and it positioned itself close to "pure" history by adopting monological strategies that squelched critical perspective and smoothed out the complexities and indeterminacies of historical events (p. 50).

Baguley offers two strategies for avoiding the pitfalls of using the historical mode of discourse for interpreting historical evidence. One is to arrive at "a more balanced view" by taking advantage of "the modern tendency" to debunk the reputations of heroes and redeem the villains (pp. 396-97). He approaches the arguments of the supporters and opponents of the coup d'état in this spirit, treating both as equally suspect, rejecting the former on grounds that they depended on speculation regarding disorders that might have taken place if the coup had not occurred and discounting the latter because radical republicans were critical of the status quo they were defending, as if one's opposition to a certain legal order invalidates one's defense of legality.

The other strategy, much more prevalent in this book, is to write history in a literary mode, exploring the deconstructive possibilities suggested in the use of generic categories by novelists and historians who have written about the Second Empire. Since literature can imitate the events of life and illuminate their significance, it can explain historical events better than other forms of historical interpretation. Literature supplements and completes history, which is incapable of doing justice to the complexity of the past. Literature creates, perpetuates, and determines our representations of historical figures as much as history does, so it must "leap in to fill the void" when history confronts the quandaries of interpretation (pp. 30, 369, 389). Baguley thinks that the Second Empire, with its conspiratorial origins, its rising and dramatically falling action, its intrigues, scandals, and its tragic denouement, was "made for writers and artists." The regime was more illusion than reality; it was given to facades and appearances in order to conceal the gap between what it preached and what it practiced. Its ideology, although consistent, was contradictory or incompatible with the times. The Emperor himself was a sphinx, an elusive and inscrutable "floating signifier," alternatively a visionary, a pragmatist, and an opportunist, for whom dissimulation was a natural state (p. 136). Consequently, the best historians of the regime were novelists and satirists: Flaubert, whose irony suited the regime's indeterminacy; Daumier, whose caricatures unmasked its pompous discourse and opulent style; and the Marx of *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, who, as a literary polemicist rather than a political historian, thought of Louis-Napoleon in

generic terms (tragedy and farce) and turned metaphor into fact by predicting the toppling of the Vendôme column. Each of these authors, moreover, exemplify elements of Baguley's own posture towards the regime, which is generally one of suspicion and disdain.

The Second Empire had its farcical qualities; its fall unfolded as tragedy. As Baguley points out, commentators and historians could not resist viewing the last years of the regime in a tragic mode. The exploration of generic categories is most successful when events have a "literary correlative," but literary configurations cannot fruitfully be applied to illuminate every aspect of the regime (p. 369). The author uses an impressive amount of evidence on a wide range of topics (genealogy, romance, fashion, politics, social policy) to make a few consistent points about the Emperor's character or his questionable constitutional legitimacy. All details point toward the same essential nature: Napoleon III was an insubstantial and inscrutable mystery who presided over a regime that used extravagance and excess to cover up the realities of its origins and the limits of its achievements. Generic logic replaces historical reasoning and dictates what the author deems important, yielding a number of lengthy and entertaining chapters that either exhibit thinking that is profoundly ahistorical or are overburdened with trivia and gossip. Baguley's treatment of the Franco-Prussian War strongly suggests that Louis-Napoleon was tragically fated to become what the story of his life demanded: the "parody of the Napoleonic leader, reduced to a state of impotence, a hollow figure, a travesty of a Bonaparte, a phantom warrior" trailing after General MacMahon at the road to Metz (p. 379). In an extensive chapter exploring the legends surrounding the Emperor's sexual exploits, Baguley speculates that Napoleon III became impotent in the 1860s in order cleverly to underscore once again the theme that the Second Empire was an illusion that never "measured up to" the original: "It is impossible, of course, and of no particular significance, to have an accurate idea of the number of women with whom the emperor made love. [F]or our purposes, their identities...are less important than the combined effect, the seriality of the affairs and amorous adventures in which they took part, that bring us out of the uncertainties of history and back into legend and myth, once again in the mode of excess and extravagance" (pp. 241-46).

Baguley wants to argue that history and fiction are not as incompatible as is often assumed, but there are important differences between the literary and historical imaginations. Suspicious of coherence, indifferent to problems of causality, and careless with regard to standards of evidence, Baguley is unable to determine what matters in a historical account of the past. Lacking the discernment offered by well-defined analytical categories, he can only offer "some vivid impressions, some well-chosen anecdotes, brief assessments, verbal snapshots, light sketches, along with some revealingly incautious generalities and reductive views" which strain to command the serious reader's attention—one ought not mistake extravagance for complexity (p. 119). Baguley believes both historians and writers of fiction have "the right to choose" the version of events that best serve aesthetic ends when matters of historical detail are in doubt (p. 380). But he is wrong about this. Historians do not (or should not) make things up to crown the glory of their enterprise.

Baguley has many interesting things to say about the literary responses to Napoleon III and the Second Empire; he does a good job underscoring the vaudevillian aspects of the regime and offers a number of new ways to think about the ambiguities of the Emperor's character, behavior, and ideology. But his interpretations are no less debatable for being informed by literary-mindedness, and his positions are no less partisan for being suspicious of all sides. At the same time, he seeks explanations and makes judgments on a whole range of issues, from the Emperor's personal behavior to his foreign policy, while insisting on history's unresolvability. On the one hand, he makes important claims, especially about the state of public opinion, without presenting evidence or pointing to the relevant historical literature. He repeats the largely groundless assertion that the Second Republic could have survived after the coup in order to claim that Louis Napoleon might have been a more progressive leader, as if it is neither partisan nor historically questionable to assume that the Republic would have been more progressive than the Empire. On the other hand, he uses conventional historical narration to cover a good deal of the Second Empire's political history, freely employing the language of conventional historical judgment

and analysis--necessity, inevitability, evidence, success, failure, causes, factors, and even the Marxist sounding "fundamental socio-political factors"--to explain outcomes and results (p. 313). In the end, his major conclusions about the history of France between 1848 and 1870 turn on the character, motives, and actions of a deeply flawed individual whose name destined him to follow the wrong path. Baguley, in short, condemns the inadequacies of the historical discipline while repeating all the sins it has so carefully worked to banish over the last century.

What about the book's substantive arguments? Baguley's epistemological stance and his thesis regarding the illusory nature of the regime make it hard for him to speak convincingly about successes, failures, and accomplishments. He wants to drive home the point that the Second Empire was a dazzling edifice, a facade masking an empty shell, more theater than reality. But the achievements of the regime were real, even if they did not warrant the exaggerations of official propaganda. During the years Napoleon III was on the throne, France experienced unprecedented economic growth: its export industries expanded, its banking system was modernized, and its rail network was extended to promote the integration of internal markets. Moreover, the regime reformed education, undertook public works, and contributed in the long run to the establishment of a durable parliamentary democracy.

Baguley never wonders about the possible relationship between what the regime did, or hoped to achieve, and what it said about itself because his theoretical orientation allows him to focus on texts and images that have no necessary connection to realities. He calls the Emperor's social policies utopian and insincere and insists that the regime was engaging in propagandistic self-promotion when it granted limited associational rights, encouraged developers to build workers' housing, promoted the establishment of mutual aid societies, set up soup kitchens, and funded convalescent homes. None of these amounted to the "fundamental measures of reform" that Baguley seems to have expected, but which of the opposition parties besides the socialists and social Catholics advocated a more extensive social policy favoring the aspirations of Italian nationalism (p. 189)? He argues that the reconstruction of Paris succeeded in helping to reconcile the Emperor's Caesarism and his humanitarianism, but he ignores the fact that public spending associated with Parisian development projects was a source of great irritation on the right, in the provinces, and among legitimist landowners and rural tax payers whose support Napoleon III had courted in the 1850s. He writes that Catholics were upset by his Italian initiatives because they contradicted the conservative image he had previously cultivated, but it is probably better to say that they were upset by a concrete shift in imperial policy. He assures us that the "true scandal of the regime was less the abject poverty that its policies perpetuated" than "the blatant contrast between the utopian discourse and the reality that they publicly denied," as if a discursive crime is worse than a social one (p. 205).

This emphasis on effect over cause leads Baguley to miss the historical or sociological dimensions of many of the issues about which he would like to draw conclusions: for example, was the satire to which the Second Empire exposed itself related to its especially ridiculous nature or was it a continuation of a well-established tradition reaching back to the 1830s; was crinoline symbolic of the regime's "mode of excess" or was it "traditionally a mode of dress that was essentially aristocratic and...a requirement for those who aspired to that status" (p. 310)? In the absence of the data necessary to ground his assertions, Baguley is left with his own ideological bias. Consequently, he offers no foundation other than his own preferences on which to base his expectation that the regime ought to have offered "fundamental measures of reform" instead of grand gestures in matters of social policy, and no grounds for his characterization of the regime as a universal cover up other than his assumption of its criminal nature, ignoring the fact that many people, however regrettably, supported it because it used force to impose order, promoted capitalist exploitation, sought glory overseas, and engaged in colonial expansion. In the end, Baguley is less interested in drawing conclusions than in pointing to a good plot line or an ironic twist: the mystery surrounding Louis-Napoleon's conception is the stuff from which novels are born; it is deliciously ironic that the Universal Exposition was taking place as the last French troops left Mexico

and Maximilian surrendered. At the same time, it's hard to measure the contribution to historical scholarship of a book which argues that the Second Empire was an extravagant farce.

The author's principal historical argument is that Louis Napoleon was compelled by dynastic ambition and by the pressures and expectations of ambitious imperialists to restore the Empire and undertake a careless foreign policy. Contained within this argument are three others: that it was the reestablishment of the Empire in 1852 and not the coup d'état of 1851 that was the "true Rubicon"; that dubious legitimacy made it essential for the regime to use extravagance and theatricality in order to mask its origins; and that the need to imitate and live up to the reputation of Napoleon I led the nephew to pursue "epic ventures" that brought about the downfall of his regime: "[T]he entry into the politics of illusion to which the new emperor committed himself, with its public displays, fanfares, and fantasies, must also be seen as a far more significant step than a mere matter of course or a decorative supplement of pomp and ceremony to the power previously acquired, as more than icing on the cake. The renewal of the dynasty brought with it certain obligations, notably the need for an empress, for an heir, for a sumptuous court, for resplendent spectacles, for epic achievements, for monumental accomplishments, for the constant obligation to 'match'...the feats of the previous Empire. All of this would ultimately bring down the regime, for Louis Napoléon, on the day that he became emperor of the French, entered into the dynamics of dominance and downfall inherent in the dynastic enterprise" (p. 95). "[T]he very act of reinstating the Empire," writes Baguley, "necessitated extravagant measures and led the regime into the mode of excess," so that even before embarking on military adventures Napoleon III had begun to follow "the plot of a well-turned pathetic drama" (p. 159-59, 180).

This aesthetically pleasing and deterministic argument bristles with inconsistencies and unsubstantiated presuppositions. In order to sustain the idea that the restoration of the Empire was the most decisive event of Louis Napoleon's career, Baguley has to weaken the link between the coup d'état of 1851 and the events of 1852 and assert that the overthrow of the Second Republic was neither necessary nor inevitable:<sup>[3]</sup> "[T]here was nothing in Louis Napoléon's avowed mission, in proposed reforms for regenerating France in a new age, in his Napoleonic idea(s), that required the re-establishment of the Empire." Conviction rather than a question of timing caused the Prince President to hesitate to make the transition from Republic to Empire in the intervening year (pp. 90-91). Having called Louis Napoleon's dynastic ambitions into question, Baguley is able to speculate that a ten-year term as president of an authoritarian Republic would have been a viable option for the Emperor, who would thereby not have needed the elaborate and excessive apparatus of state, which made him vulnerable to criticism at home, and an intemperate foreign policy, which led to his ignominious downfall (pp. 386, 396). Baguley goes on to suggest strongly that Louis Napoleon's doubts about the "crucial move" were erased only by the blandishments of his entourage and by a massive show of popular support for the Empire, largely orchestrated by Persigny in the summer and fall of 1852 (pp. 91-93). In the final analysis, however, Baguley can't decide whether Louis Napoleon had a long-devised plan to accede to the imperial crown or whether he was submitting to the pressures of advisors. Moreover, he undermines his central argument by stating that Louis Napoleon was imbued at a very early age with the sense that "he was born to fulfill an epic mission," by insisting that his term as president anticipated the practices and policies of the Empire, and by quoting the Emperor himself to the effect that stability "necessitated the creation of a hereditary family" and that republics are always utopian (pp. 10-11, 91, 189).

To muddy the waters even further, Baguley asserts simultaneously that the problem of legitimacy stemming from the coup d'état made the Empire dependent on extravagant ostentation, that the reinstatement of the Empire necessitated extravagant measures, and that imperial pomp was necessary for purposes of legitimization, which would seem to suggest that the seizure of dictatorial power in 1851 was more decisive than the restoration because it created a permanent crisis of legitimacy that necessitated the re-establishment of the Empire (pp. 158-59, 162, 255). Finally, it is puzzling that Baguley would declare that his aim "is not to enter on one side or the other of the lasting debate about the legitimacy" of the Second Empire when his central argument (as far as it can be clearly discerned)

depends on the assumption of the regime's illegitimacy (p. 3). This suggests a level of confusion that might encourage literary scholars to be less skeptical about the quaint fondness historians continue to have for coherence.

The irony in all this is that the case for calling the restoration of the Empire "the true Rubicon" owes virtually nothing to insights that can be derived from exploring generic categories. In order to support his thesis, Baguley tries to draw up a conventional historical brief, proceeding chronologically, citing evidence, weighing the evidence, and drawing proximate conclusions. At the same time he fails to apply the same formal rigor to the central problem posed by his work: was there a particularly Napoleonic penchant for spectacle or was the *fête impériale* a continuation and elaboration of *Parisian mondanité*?<sup>[4]</sup> Baguley makes a fairly strong case for the centrality of ceremony and image making in the Second Empire, but he also acknowledges that this aspect of the regime was modeled on the great dynasties of the past. It would have been helpful to show how the particular problems of authority, restoration, and legitimation made the ceremonial politics of the Second Empire different from that of previous regimes. He also raises a number of interesting questions about the utopian aspects of Bonapartism, the lack of nostalgia for imperial traditions after 1871, and the subsequent contemporary "rehabilitation" of Napoleon III by Philippe Séguin and Alain Minc, but he does not fully pursue them.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### NOTES

[1] Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

[2] See François Dosse, *New History in France: The Triumph of the Annales*, trans. Peter V. Conroy, Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994): 13-14.

[3] Baguley posits this "virtual scenario" on grounds that there is a "contemporary fashion for virtual history, for counterfactuals, and for the conviction that there is nothing inevitable in the events of the past" (p. 395) I am unaware that this is a significant "fashion," although Baguley cites Niall Ferguson's *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London, Picador, 1977) as offering important theories and examples. Nor am I familiar with the work of Joanna Richardson, which he cites as exemplary in this regard. See Joanna Richardson, *La vie parisienne* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971).

[4] See Anne Martin-Fugier, *La vie élégante, ou la formation de Tout-Paris, 1815-1848* (Paris: Fayard, 1990).

[5] Philippe Séguin, *Louis Napoléon le Grand* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1900); and Alain Minc, *Louis Napoléon revisité* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

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