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Dorothy Kaufmann, *Édith Thomas: A Passion for Resistance*. Ithaca, N.Y. and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. 240 pp. Photos, notes, and index. \$27.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8014-4223-0.

Review by Donald Reid, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Édith Thomas (1909-1970) wrote a number of well-received novels and short stories before and during the war. She was active in the Resistance as the “linchpin” of the Comité national des écrivains (CNE) (p. 90) and contributed to *Les Lettres françaises*. Following Liberation, Thomas briefly served as editor of the Communist-led Union des femmes françaises’ *Femmes françaises*. In the postwar era, she emerged as a public intellectual who wrote a number of important political essays and biographies of historical figures. There is no one better qualified than Dorothy Kaufmann to write the biography of Thomas. History, Thomas wrote, was the confluence of the historian’s subjective desires and needs, and the available documentation, but “the historian has many other *servitudes* than the novelist” and must always submit to the documentation.[1] In the course of her research, Kaufmann met Dominique Aury, prominent editor, author of *Histoire d’O*, and, after the war, Thomas’ lover for nine months in what was apparently the most sustained and reciprocated love relationship of Thomas’ life. Aury gave Kaufmann a shopping bag of Thomas’ correspondence and unpublished manuscripts to consult, and Kaufmann went on to edit and publish Thomas’ wartime diary and her postwar memoir.[2] Kaufmann makes good use of these materials and the remainder of Thomas’ extensive diary in writing her biography.

The normative narrative of revolt in an early twentieth-century French bourgeois household was for the (male) adolescent to reject Catholicism. However, Thomas grew up with agnostic parents. When she decided to become a Protestant as a teenager, her freethinking father brought her to a minister who baptized her. Thomas sought not the lapsed Catholic’s rebellion, but the community of resistance with which she associated Protestantism. Thomas was afflicted with tuberculosis of the bone as a young woman. Her self-consciousness about her body after the illness made “the alien role of the feminine” an issue for her; “she began to see herself as an object of male judgment” and “her verdict on herself was always damning.” (pp. 39-40) Thomas suffered from self-castigation resulting from what she experienced as denial of access to a feminine corporeal ideal. However, after the liberating experiences of participation in the Resistance and her love affair with Aury, she would redirect her criticism to the political and cultural construction of the feminine that denied women rights and full access to the public sphere.

Thomas’ entry into politics involved the dialogue with her bourgeois origins and status at the heart of the French experience of becoming an intellectual. Paul Nizan wrote of her novel *Le Refus* in 1937: “They don’t want to go from the people to the bourgeoisie any longer, but from the bourgeoisie to the people. That is the whole subject of Édith Thomas’ book.”[3] But Thomas had a more complex relation to her social class than Nizan suggested. After the riots of February 6, 1934, she attended a meeting of the Association des écrivains et des artistes révolutionnaires (AEAR), an anti-fascist group of intellectuals close to the Communist party. Thomas took the opportunity to introduce herself to Louis Aragon, saying that she was a bourgeois who wanted to stand with the proletariat. She spoke at a meeting organized by the AEAR, explaining that individualism was at the heart of the bourgeois intellectual experience, that the participation or at least the neutrality of some of these bourgeois would be necessary for the success of the revolution in France, and that the key to winning them over was not to attack their individualism but to make them see that it was illusory in a society based on class exploitation. “Therefore it is in basing myself on my individualism that I am led to turn myself against

it.” The point was not to deny individualism, but to allow it to escape the isolation in which it kept bourgeois thinkers, to realize it in a “new humanism.”[4] Thomas would later reconfigure this argument to negotiate the relation between the feminine, individualism and “feminine humanism.”

Thomas was politically active in the Popular Front intellectual world, but she felt alienated in late Third Republic France, an alienation that she evoked in the isolation of individuals in her novels. She found a treasured “coherence” of thought and action in the *other* world of the Resistance and joined the French Communist Party in 1942. Thomas’ *Journal intime de Monsieur Célestin Costedet*, her fictional diary of a Pétainist written and dated in 1940-1941, is one of the extraordinary works of self and social exploration produced during the first year after the defeat, including Jean Moulin’s *Le Premier combat* and Marc Bloch’s *L’Étrange défaite*, through which French men and women wrote themselves into resistance.[5] Thomas’ work with intellectuals in the Resistance gave her “the impression of living a unique moment, the miracle of which would never happen again.”[6] She characterized their meetings in terms of “the act of common faith of the primitive church: ‘If two or three meet in my name, I will be among them.’”[7] Thomas is representative of those who, because they found what made them whole in the Resistance, would resist the postwar restoration. She broke with the co-founder of the CNE, the editor and resister Jean Paulhan, not because Aury left her for him, but because she interpreted his *Lettre aux directeurs de la Résistance* (1952) as an attack on the Resistance. Paulhan criticized the Resistance for collaboration with the Soviet Union; despite the fact that Thomas had recently broken with the Communist Party, she refused to tolerate Paulhan’s disrespecting the Resistance. At the end of her life, although she welcomed the events of May 1968, she was typical of resisters who could not refrain from labeling it a “psychodrama”, something she would have never said of the Resistance.[8]

“My relations with the Communist Party,” wrote Thomas, “resemble those of a lost love.”[9] Kaufmann pursues a comparison of the anti-Communist Aury’s *Histoire d’O*, in which “O’s terrifying desire to be sexually degraded and destroyed by the lover to whom she ascribes absolute power is inseparable from her yearning to be freed from herself and given over completely to the transcendent being she adores,” and evidence from Thomas’ dairies and memoir, *Le Témoin compromis*, that Thomas “was periodically tempted by the fantasy of ecstatic submission to the revolution, an impulse that found no place in her critical thinking about revolutionary politics” (pp. 134-135). In 1949 Thomas made a painful departure from the party, whose demands that she betray her rational and ethical self she could no longer bear. Thomas had written as an “engaged witness” of the liberation of Paris [10], but in *Le Témoin compromis*, written in 1952, she both witnessed against party falsehoods—a genre to which we have grown accustomed—but also witnessed in her own defense, testimony to the wrenching experience of questioning the party.

In a series of books published after the war, Thomas contended that historians had either slighted women or evoked their actions as a means of denigrating or confining them. Thomas’ first work of history, *Jeanne d’Arc* (1947) begins with an examination of Jeanne d’Arc to capture “her style”[11], “the spirit” for which Enlightenment rationalists had no place [12], that had been obscured by the efforts of contemporaries and later generations to categorize and explain her. The book culminates in an exploration of how the portrayal of Jeanne d’Arc reveals the contested history in “this Gallic, therefore misogynist, country” [13] of “feminine humanism,” which Thomas argued well antedated feminism, though it is often known only through the reactions it provoked.[14] Thomas undertook a “demythification”[15] of Jeanne d’Arc because the myths of Jeanne d’Arc that spoke to others did not speak to her; it was “her person” that did.[16]

One of Thomas’ few postwar works of fiction—and one of her best—is *Éve et les autres*, a set of tales which endow female Biblical characters with psychological attributes—desires—which they lack in the Bible. And just as *Éve et les autres* opens up the societies of the Bible, Thomas’ biographical and historical

works after *Jeanne d'Arc* illuminated figures like Pauline Roland, Louise Michel, the women of the Paris Commune, and Louis-Nathaniel Rossel to open up the history of nineteenth-century France. But Thomas' biographies differ from her tales of Biblical figures. The Bible gave the historical narrative; Thomas' tales provide female actors with a psychological component. In the case of her biographies, however, Thomas chose poorly known figures like Rossel or incompletely known ones like Michel and used her research skills and literary talents to suggest alternative historical narratives. Thomas draws as much as possible from her subjects' words and deeds because she sees them--primarily radical women--as having been subject to appropriation by contemporaries and later chroniclers with their own ideological agendas, agendas against which she fought as well.

Although someone like Louise Michel is a good candidate for psychological analysis, Thomas focuses on her political activities. The psychological resonance in Thomas' biography of Michel is in Thomas' sustained critique, coupled with the occasional emergence of a covetous admiration, of Michel for her unwavering political stance. Thomas wrote on women in the revolution of 1848 and the Paris Commune, and herself had lived the experience of the Resistance. What she at once envied and criticized as unreal was Michel's unquestioning, blind assertion decades after the Commune of the radical essence she had displayed in 1871. Kaufmann is correct that the biographical subject to whom Thomas was perhaps closest (and about whom she wrote her best and most psychological biography) was Rossel, a Protestant military officer whose principled resignations first from Thiers' Versailles army in March 1871 and two months later from the army of the Commune echo Thomas' rejection of Vichy and her subsequent embrace and rejection of the Communist party. Thomas' *Jeanne d'Arc* showed that all French worked to fashion a Jeanne d'Arc to fit their views, but she concluded *Rossel* with the reflection that the French did not know how to remember a man of conscience like Rossel.

Like Thomas in *Jeanne d'Arc*, Kaufmann too can be said to take revealing "her style" as her goal in presenting Thomas, although Kaufmann is more comfortable developing a psychological portrait of her subject (which only the diaries and letters which Aury unexpectedly provided her made possible) than is Thomas in her biographies: there are no evocations in Thomas' biographies like that Kaufmann makes of "the contradictory impulses between autonomy and obsessive love that dominated [Thomas'] emotional life." (p. 38) Kaufmann perceptively argues that Thomas condemned existentialism for what she saw as its nihilism inherent in introspection--Thomas referred to the experience of a period of depression after the war as a "crisis of existentialism" (p. 148). Thomas embraced postwar Marxism for its optimism, because it allowed her to "attribute the frequent bouts of despair she suffered to her singular temperament, a condition that was irrelevant in the general scheme of things" (p. 145). Kaufmann's success is in allowing us to understand the importance of Thomas' psychological torments and her responses to them. With her disillusionment and departure from the party, Thomas turned to the history of radical women whose experience as women was not central to Marxism, but whose very existence gave hope to Thomas.

Thomas was a graduate of the École des Chartes who worked before the war at the Bibliothèque nationale and went on to have a successful career at the Archives nationales. Although Kaufmann recognizes the significance of Thomas' work on Huguenot archives during the war and on the papers of Fourier after the war, she misses the opportunity to examine how Thomas' day job as an archivist provides insight into Thomas' psyche. Of the Popular Front years, Thomas wrote, "Nothing is more depressing than the work of an intellectual laborer they require of librarians and archivists. It makes you an idiot, if you weren't when you began..." [17] But a little while later, fed up with political journalism, she came to "miss the slips of the Bibliothèque nationale." [18] In 1941, Thomas originally planned to work on an edition of French Revolution texts: "For me it's a position of strategic withdrawal that allows me to keep from compromising myself." [19] But later that year she was hired as an "unemployed intellectual" by the Archives nationales "in the name of that which is least valuable in

me--my title of archivist-paleographer.”[20] When she started at the Archives nationales, she was pleased that her work in “documents that hadn’t been of value for centuries” could only be useful in the preparation of “ridiculous studies.” During the Occupation, “the essential thing was to do nothing that could be useful to that society.”[21] But after the war, Thomas was appointed to the Comité pour l’étude d’histoire de la Deuxième Guerre Mondiale and was asked to go see Communist party officials to ask for their cooperation in collecting individuals’ accounts of their Resistance activities. Curiously, she took this opportunity to tell Jacques Duclos that she was thinking of quitting the party, and, not surprisingly, the party withheld its participation, doubting that “bourgeois” historians would give the party the place it deserved in the history of the Resistance.[22] When Thomas left the party, the Archives nationales became “a sort of haven, at the ends of the earth, in the deepness of solitude and silence.... It seemed to me that I had definitively broken with my times. I didn’t want to see it any longer except with the detachment that I had before a document that hadn’t been of value for centuries.”[23] Archives and the history they made possible were crucial to Thomas’ efforts to reconcile strong political imperatives and psychological needs.

The break Thomas experienced through participation in the Resistance and in entering and leaving the Communist party transformed her. Through her historical biographies, Thomas replaced the prewar fictional characters of despair with figures who live their resistance to forces of exploitation and repression. In a passage to which Kaufmann draws our attention, Thomas defended her biography of the Saint-Simonian Pauline Roland by explaining that Roland was important precisely because her story lay in the space between the standard genres of accounts of celebrated figures and accounts of major historical developments. (p. 178) Kaufmann’s excellent biography of Thomas has similar virtues. What Kaufmann provides us is not simply the first biography of Édith Thomas, but more importantly, access to an individual, the very exceptionality of whose lived experience and psychology provide important insights into the complicated, multifaceted experience of the Resistance and engagement in the Communist party, and living with the void each left.

NOTES

[1] Édith Thomas, *Pauline Roland* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1956), pp. 7-8. [2] Édith Thomas, *Pages de Journal, 1939-1944, suivies de Journal intime de Monsieur Célestin Costedet*, ed. Dorothy Kaufmann (Paris: Éditions Viviane Hamy, 1995); Édith Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis, mémoires*, ed. Dorothy Kaufmann (Paris: Éditions Viviane Hamy, 1995).

[3] Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis*, p. 63n1.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 46-53.

[5] See Donald Reid, “The Narrative of Resistance in Marc Bloch’s *L’Étrange défaite*,” *Modern & Contemporary France* 11 (2003): 443-452.

[6] Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis*, p. 107.

[7] Thomas, *Pages de Journal*, p. 198.

[8] Édith Thomas, *Louise Michel ou la vellédo de l’anarchie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), p. 453.

[9] Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis*, p. 55.

[10] Édith Thomas, *La Libération de Paris* (Paris: Mellottée., 1945), p. 8.

[11] Édith Thomas, *Jeanne d'Arc* (Paris: Éditions Hier et Aujourd'hui, 1947), p. 8.

[12] Ibid., pp. 237-238.

[13] Ibid., p. 231.

[14] Édith Thomas, *Les Femmes en 1848* (Paris: P.U.F., 1948), p. 5.

[15] Thomas, *Jeanne d'Arc*, p. 267.

[16] Ibid., p. 8.

[17] Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis*, pp. 58-59.

[18] Ibid., p. 65.

[19] Thomas, *Pages de journal*, p. 134.

[20] Ibid., p. 155

[21] Thomas, *Le Témoin compromis*, pp. 101-102.

[22] Ibid., pp. 204-209.

[23] Ibid., pp. 218-219.

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