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Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Tuer le mort. Le désir révolutionnaire*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2015. 267 pp. Index. 22€ (pb). ISBN 978-2-13-063507-9.

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The French Revolution has been subjected to many interpretations. Sociological approaches, economic analyses, anthropological and cultural perspectives, the comparative models of political science, even the domains of engineering and the natural sciences—all have been brought to bear on the events that transpired in France between 1789 and 1799.[1] Psychoanalysis, however, has had little impact on revolutionary historiography. In 1992 Lynn Hunt published *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, where she drew on Freudian concepts to analyze the demise of the old regime.[2] But other than that, the ego and the Id, denial and transference, the pleasure principle and the Oedipus complex, have yet to illuminate the rights of man and the Reign of Terror. The French Revolution, in short, has not yet been put on the couch.

Until now, that is. Paul-Laurent Assoun, a prolific author and psychoanalyst, argues in his new book that the unconscious is indispensable for understanding the French Revolution. The case under consideration is the exhumation of the bodies of the royal families of France from the Basilica of Saint-Denis. Beginning in August 1793, with the bulk of the exhumations taking place over ten days in October, the cadavers of the kings, queens, princes and princesses of France, which had been buried in Saint-Denis since the middle ages, were removed from their tombs one by one. Most of the corpses were mutilated and reburied in unmarked mass graves, and there was considerable destruction of the gravesites. Most of the statues that adorned the royal tombs were smashed. Some were saved and would later be displayed at the *Musée des monuments français*. All told, some 170 bodies were exhumed, of which forty six were kings, thirty-two were queens, and the rest other members of the French royal households.

How should we account for this strange event? Why were the dead kings exhumed and, in a sense, killed again? Why carry out a collective, post-mortem regicide several months after the actual regicide of Louis XVI? What kind of hate pushes people to pursue their enemies beyond the grave? Historians have not been oblivious to the desecration at Saint-Denis, yet according to Assoun, they only charted its contours, not penetrated its real meaning.[3] There were military reasons for the exhumations. The revolutionary armies needed the metals and other materials for their cannons. There was an economic logic of expropriation at play. There was, clearly, political logic in erasing the monarchy from the republican landscape. But there was also excess, an emotionally charged residue that hints at motivations that were not, and perhaps could not have been understood by the actors. The profanation at Saint-Denis thus becomes for Assoun a prism into the revolutionary unconscious, and in this book he draws on the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to interpret it.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part reconstructs the exhumation in detail.

The National Convention decreed the exhumation in the summer of 1793. This was a moment of crisis: war, civil war, and, in July, the assassination of Jean-Paul Marat. The decision to dig up the dead kings of France must be seen in the context of this buildup toward the Terror. The first body to be exhumed was that of Pepin the Short, the medieval Frankish King. The work at the Basilica then stopped, but resumed in October, when the bulk of the exhumations took place. Relying on eye witness accounts such as the one written by dom Germain Poirier, a Benedictine monk who was the archivist of the Abbey at Saint-Denis and a member of the revolutionary *Commission des monuments*, Assoun pays close attention to the order and manner of the extraction, and to the specific language used by those writing about it. The exhumations in October began with the body of Henri IV, founder of the Bourbon dynasty. Louis XIII and Louis XIV were dug up the next day. Louis XV was exhumed on October 16, the day of Marie Antoinette's execution. The last to be exhumed was Louise de France, the recently deceased daughter of Louis XV.

The bodies were subjected to different treatments. Some, such as the cadaver of Turenne, marshal of France under Henri IV, were treated with respect. Others, such as Louis XIV were taken apart, disemboweled, and disfigured. The people carrying out the excavations clearly passed their own judgments on these historical figures. A soldier present at the exhumation of Henri IV, *le bon roi Henri*, jumped into the tomb, cut off a piece of the king's mustache and, while placing it above his upper lip, called out, "Here! I too am a French soldier... Now I am sure to defeat the enemies of France" (quoted p. 65). Moments like this, traversing the somber and the carnivalesque, indicate for Assoun the profound ambivalence around the exhumations. Like the citizens who rushed to dip their handkerchief in the blood of Louis XVI after his execution, the people who were involved in the destruction of Saint-Denis approached the project with deeply ambivalent attitudes. On the one hand they were hostile toward the dead Kings, whom they wished to humiliate even beyond the grave. On the other hand, they retained belief in the powerful, even magical qualities that the royal bodies possessed.

The second part of the book focuses on revolutionary desire. A basic premise in psychoanalysis, especially of the Lacanian bent, is that people are motivated by unconscious desires. That means that most of the time, people have no access to what brings them to act in certain ways, and thus, no real understanding of themselves. The goal of the psychoanalytic process is to name this desire, to make it knowable to the patient. Applied to the case under consideration here, this means that in exhuming the bodies of the kings from Saint-Denis, the revolutionaries knew not what they were doing. Assoun approaches the revolutionary unconscious in the collective mode. The argument is very complex, but can be summed up as follows: The killing of the dead kings was motivated by a desire to appropriate their potency (*puissance*.) This potency, to be distinguished from royal power (*pouvoir*) was associated with the name and the body of royalty. Thus, it was not enough to execute Louis XVI. The revolutionaries had to take apart the *locus* of royal potency in order to make it their own, and thus emerge as autonomous, modern subjects. This was an act of liberation, even of creation. But since the king was a father figure, a deep sense of mourning and melancholy followed this post-mortem murder. The crucial insight here is that, in a sense, the revolutionaries were killing that which they loved in the crypt of Saint-Denis. "The King is dead! Long live the 'P. This is the maniacal form of mourning in its triumphal inversion. A *danse macabre* of its kind, but also a celebration of the self... at the gate of the deserted cemetery" (p. 164).

The third part of the book analyzes the aftermath of the exhumations. The sepulchral statues that were saved from destruction by Alexandre Lenoire were exhibited in his *Musée des monuments français*, which opened its doors in 1795. Napoleon Bonaparte began restoring the Basilica in 1805, with the hope of being buried there one day. Under Louis XVIII there was a search for the royal remains. The authorities relied on testimonies of those who took part in the exhumations in order to locate the remains that were dispersed in mass graves. In 1815, the bodies of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were exhumed from their grave in the Madeleine and reburied, following a royal procession, in the crypt of Saint-Denis. The Restoration emerges from Assoun's treatment as both a political and an

architectural moment: the return of the Bourbons to the throne, but also the attempt to restore a dilapidated structure to its former grandeur.

Echoing Alfred de Musset's famous diagnosis of a *mal du siècle*, Assoun describes the early nineteenth century as a period of profound melancholy.[4] The generation of the 1820s is for him wracked with guilt over the murder of the king-father. He finds evidence for this generational remorse in the romantic fascination with ruins and relics, and in literary works such as Pierre-Simon Ballanche's 1820 tale, *L'homme sans nom*, that tells of a former *régicide*, now living alone and nameless in the remote Alps, tormented by guilt. That the former *conventionnel* is nameless is all the more meaningful because the name, and especially the Name of the Father, is a central concept in Lacanian psychoanalysis. *Le nom du Père*, which Lacan also referred to as *Le non du Père*, marks the prohibitive and legislative authority that guarantees the symbolic order in which we exist. Assoun argues that it is this Name of the Father that the revolutionaries sought to extract, literally, from the royal tombs in Saint-Denis. Assoun thus describes the Revolution as a rupture in the symbolic order. The modern society that emerged from this rupture owed its creation to what Freud would later call primordial murder, that is, the killing of a father by his sons. But it also found itself fatherless, mired in temporal and affective disorientation, lost between a past that could not be admitted and a future that could not be envisioned.

How is a historian to evaluate this book? Assoun's analysis of the exhumations at Saint-Denis is not a historiographical intervention in the traditional sense. There are virtually no references to current or recent studies of the Revolution. There is also no reference to works in English, even when such works have made points relevant to the ones raised by Assoun.[5] There is little recognition of the fact that most of Assoun's sources were written from a royalist perspective. There is little consideration of the broad historical context of the period. For example, Assoun discusses an alleged proposal to carve up the body of Louis XVI into eighty three pieces and send these pieces to the *départements* of France, where they would be used to fertilize liberty trees, yet fails to note the evident similarity between this idea, allegedly voiced by the *conventionnel* Legendre, and Thomas Jefferson's famous statement from 1787, "the tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." [6] The disregard for the historical gaze leads to some glaring omissions. One would expect Assoun, for example, to discuss the actual execution of Louis XVI, but apart from a few comments, there is little mention of it. The arguments in the book could also have benefitted from a comparative perspective. After all, exhumations and reburials featured in many moments of radical political change, so what sets the case of Saint-Denis apart? [7] Moreover, the psychoanalytic framework raises difficulties for readers not versed in the field. The book presupposes a certain familiarity with psychoanalytic concepts. American readers in particular might be averse to Assoun's perspective. Psychoanalysis does not figure much in the curricula of American colleges at present, except perhaps in departments of literature. [8] In truth, most historians are simply uncomfortable with categories of analysis that transcend the specific contexts of time and place, such as the unconscious or the ego ideal.

Yet Assoun's book does present a new and, to my mind, stimulating perspective on the French Revolution. One crucial insight has to do with the complex attitude of the revolutionaries toward the monarchy. I have always suspected that the revolutionary attitude toward the old regime was much more ambivalent than the impression created by the sources at the time. As Assoun puts it in one of the many startling propositions in this book, the Revolution actually created "royal sacredness," precisely as an effect of its "ferocious antagonism" toward the monarchy (p. 106). Without a psychoanalytic perspective, it is difficult to explain how the Republicans of the year I could strive to destroy the monarchy so completely, only to be haunted by what they had done. Another insight has to do with the erotic nature of the revolutionary experience. Overturning an established order, "sticking it to the man" as it were, is not only politically exciting. It is also, on some level, libidinal. If Emile Durkheim's sociology of religion gave us the concept of collective effervescence as a way of naming the amorphous yet very real sense of energy that is generated by revolutionary transformations, Assoun's analysis introduces the idea of collective *jouissance*. [9]

This brings to mind an offhand comment in Michel Houellebecq's recent novel, *Submission*. The protagonist in the story is a middle-aged academic whose sex drive is on the wane. He turns to pornographic websites in an effort to rekindle it. Describing the typical fare one finds in such websites, he notes the usual scenario: one man, two women, organs and tongues "crossing paths like restless packs of swallows... the man, utterly destroyed at the moment of his assumption, would utter a few weak words, appallingly weak in the French films (*"Oh putain! Oh putain je jouis!"* More or less what you'd expect from a nation of regicides.)"[10] The killing of kings, sexual desire, an abounding sense of guilt, and the emergence of the modern subject: a heady mixture, to be sure, but one that Assoun's book illuminates with gusto.

NOTES

[1] For an example of a sociological perspective, see John Markoff, *The Abolition of Feudalism: Peasants, Lords, and Legislators in the French Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006); for an economic perspective, see Florin Aftalion, *The French Revolution: an Economic Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); for an interpretation informed by cultural anthropology, see Roger Chartier, *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); for a comparative analysis, see Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: a Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and for an interpretation informed by the sciences, see Charles C. Gillispie, *Science and Polity in France: the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Years* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

[2] Lynn Hunt, *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[3] Historians have written about the exhumations in Saint-Denis mainly in the context of vandalism, a neologism coined by the abbe Grégoire in year II. See Bronislaw Baczko, "Vandalism," in *A Critical Dictionary of the French Revolution*, edited by François Furet and Mona Ozouf (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 860-868; and Emmet Kennedy, *A Cultural History of the French Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

[4] The phrase *Mal du siècle* was coined by Chateaubriand, but it was Alfred de Musset who popularized it as a term of reference for the 1820s generation.

[5] A few examples come to mind here, such as Michael Walzer, *Regicide and Revolution: Speeches at the Trial of Louis XVI* (Columbia, N.Y.: Columbia University Press, 1993); Peter Fritzsche, *Stranded in the Present: Modern Time and the Melancholy of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Victoria Thompson, "The Creation, Destruction, and Recreation of Henri IV: Seeing Popular Sovereignty in the Statue of a King," *History & Memory* 24, no. 2 (2012): 5-40.

[6] "Extract from Thomas Jefferson to William Stephens Smith," November 1787, *Monticello*, at <http://tjrs.monticello.org/letter/100> (accessed July 20 2016) Legendre's alleged proposal may have been a fabrication concocted by Brissot's faction. I am grateful to Jean-Clément Martin for calling my attention to this possibility.

[7] See Bruce Lincoln, "Revolutionary Exhumations in Spain, July 1936," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 27, no. 2 (1985): 241-260; and Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[8] See Nathan G. Hale, *The Rise and Crisis of Psychoanalysis in the United States: Freud and the Americans, 1917-1985* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

[9] See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995).

[10] Michel Houellebecq, *Submission* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), p. 15.

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