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Laurence Giavarini, ed. *Construire l'exemplarité: pratiques littéraires et discours historiens (XVI-XVIII siècles)*. Dijon: Éditions Universitaires de Dijon, 2008. 250 pp. Bibliography. 20 € (pb). ISBN 978-2-915552-87-4.

Review by Natania Meeker, University of Southern California.

This wide-ranging yet focused collection of essays, the result of a 2006 conference held in Dijon, explores the problem of exemplarity as a means of staging an encounter between literature and history. As Laurence Giavarini suggests in her elegant and subtle introduction to the volume, the example can function as a space where historical narrative confronts its own rhetorical attachments, and where new forms of normativity may be forged from within old ones. She writes of “exemplarisation” as “un moment décisif dans la production d’une histoire, moment où celle-ci rend manifeste son détour par une procédure littéraire” (p. 23). Yet the example is also, as both Giavarini and the other contributors to the volume make clear, a site of even more unexpected—albeit never haphazard—detours, where the model collides with the inimitable, the ideal with the monstrous, and where forms of readerly reception become modes of intervention in public spaces.

This volume demonstrates repeatedly the extraordinary richness of “exemplarity” as a problem. As François Cornilliat reminds us in his essay on “La rhétorique de l'exemplarité dans *Le Panegyric du Chevallier sans reproche* de Jean Bouchet,” we can find operating within the discourse of the example both the *exemplum*, an illustration of an established line of reasoning, and the *exemplar*, a model to be imitated or, indeed, rejected, since the “good” example, as Cornilliat suggests, comes into being by way of contrast with that which it is not (a tear within the very fabric of exemplarity that the novel, among other genres, will famously go on to exploit). Where the *exemplum* can be known, the *exemplar* may be followed—or, to use a more modern idiom, felt, by those who receive it. Constructing exemplarity, then, means (among other things) navigating the gaps between readers and the examples that are to guide them. To be effective, an example is never simply authoritative: it must negotiate the conditions of its own reception. The early modern reflection on exemplarity is thus also a reflection on the ways in which texts come to persuade and to move, on the potential reproducibility of error as well as of goodness in social contexts.

Of course, thinking the example means also thinking the exception: the *cas* or case. “As genre,” Lauren Berlant has written, “the case hovers about the singular, the general, and the normative.”<sup>[1]</sup> But if the case is in many ways a privileged explanatory category of modernity, the example is no less fruitful, no less supple a device, in the early modern context. The notion of a “crisis” of exemplarity, one in which Montaigne plays a crucial role, has come to define the dominant literary historical meta-narratives of this period.<sup>[2]</sup> This crisis can be read both as epistemologically productive—leading the way toward a more skeptical modern age—or as destructive, the end of a fabled moment when the example seemed to operate with a certain exemplary effectiveness. In *Construire l'exemplarité*, though, Giavarini resists the temptation to define the volume’s critical ambitions in response to preexisting accounts of early modernity as the moment of the example’s undoing. As she points out, in fact, the case can be shown to

be already at work from within *any* example, so that a single text can constitute both exception and rule, as it is read and re-read from within various disciplinary frameworks. The volume's emphasis then, is on the way in which exemplarity is *made*, "à ce qui se fabrique avec l'écriture tout autant qu'à ce qui se dit par l'écriture," and on "l'écrit" rather than the literary source *contra* the historical archive (p. 11). Reading exemplarity in the spirit of the case, as Giavarini suggests that we may do, here allows us to see anew the methodological fruitfulness of the example as both a rhetorical mode and a technique of description. Taken together, the multiple critical approaches of the essays collected in the volume become instances of the example's continued analytical potency, rather than a testament to its lost potential.

The volume is divided into three parts, the first focusing on the rhetoric of exemplarity (and its internal tensions); the second (itself divided into two parts) taking up the problem of monstrosity and the question of the "bad" example; and the third oriented around the social functions of the textual example, both as the latter is received by readers and as it defines social groups. The essays in the volume sometimes presume a highly specialized knowledge of individual authors, particularly in the second section. Yet collectively they demonstrate the extent to which the work of making "the example" not only cuts across literary and historical writing, but resonates through natural philosophy as well, as Mathieu Brunet shows in his provocative piece on monstrosity in the work of Denis Diderot and of the Lyonnais author Jean-Marie Chassignon.

The articles in the first section are uniformly strong and reveal the process of constructing exemplarity as both fraught and dynamic. As François Cornilliat suggests in his thoughtful discussion of Jean Bouchet's *Panegyric* (1527) in praise of his patron Louis II de La Trémoille, "la valeur même de l'exemple, sa valeur éthique réside, à ses yeux, dans une certaine *limitation* de sa puissance persuasive" (p. 45). Good examples do not simply reproduce themselves; here, the "énergie particulière" (p. 45) of the example of La Trémoille derives, instead, from the distance that this example must traverse in order to reach the reader (or listener), within the context of "un monde qui n'est pas toujours préparé à le recevoir" (pp. 44-45). Christian Jouhaud's essay, "Politique et religion au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle: note sur le passage par l'*exemplaire*," explores what might be termed the "excessive" exemplarity of Jean-Louis Guez de Balzac's praise of Louis XIII, in *Le Prince* (1631). Jouhaud's rich and nuanced reading of Balzac is set in the framework of the shifting relationship of politics to theology following the wars of religion in France. He explores how the hyperbolic perfection of the king, as portrayed in *Le Prince*, undermines from within not only the exemplarity of the monarch himself—so that the slightest sign of human weakness on the part of the king tends to call into question the entire edifice of his goodness—but the very legitimacy of absolute sovereignty in general, based as it is here on the miraculous virtue of one exemplary man. This excess of exemplarity destabilizes its own conditions of possibility even as it appears to shore up Balzac's claims for the king's godlike virtue.

Jouhaud's analysis, informed by the work of Michel de Certeau on René d'Argenson and Charles Borromée, interrogates the construction of exemplarity on three levels: as a product of historiographical writing itself, as a narrative technique, and as a cognitive process that knits together theology and politics. Jouhaud shows how, in Balzac's text, the extraordinary piety of the example seems ineluctably to become a caricature of itself. The final article in the section, Anne Duprat's suggestive essay "Pestes et incendies: l'exemplarité du récit de témoin aux XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles," illuminates how a proto-scientific "culture du fait"—what might also be called the modern exemplarity of the singular event—emerges out of a confrontation with the canonical, learned example, designed to take its place within a fixed and preexisting series. In the histories of disaster that Duprat examines, "La restitution de l'expérience collective, qui est l'ambition affichée de tous ces récits, ne se donne pas comme un encodage savant au cours duquel le fait serait éclairé par le rapprochement avec ce qui serait son modèle dans le passé, mais comme un processus qui fait de l'événement lui-même le modèle de ses éventuelles occurrences futures" (p. 74).

The first section is both methodologically diverse and analytically consistent; it represents a particularly fine introduction to the problematic of exemplarity. The second section is the most capacious of the volume, and perhaps the least cohesive of the three parts, as its focus moves from monstrosity to criminality, from the inimitable example to the metaphysics of evil. Where Marie-Pierre Gavino examines the monstrousness of the example in the *Logique* of Scipion Duplex, Christine Noille-Clauzade studies the affection of the classical period for monstrosity, for “le monde où la voix des très mauvais exemples devient audible” (p. 112). Mathieu Brunet, in an analysis that extends from aesthetics to the natural sciences, shows how the figure of the monster—the exception to the rule—takes up a place at the center (rather than the margins) of natural history in the eighteenth century. This *new* nature is one whose norms are always under construction, constantly subject to revision—the site of a “basculement épistémologique” that radicalizes the classical fascination with the monster as a kind of limit-case (p. 121). This “pensée par cas” migrates with difficulty to the domain of literature and art, since, Brunet suggests, even a writer like Diderot, who is willing to embrace the monster in the context of natural history, is unable to make a similar move in the context of his aesthetic theory (even though it could be argued that, in practice, his novels perform, rather than explicitly articulate, this very transfer). Brunet concludes with a brief but compelling reading of *Cataractes de l’imagination* (1779), a four-volume work by the little-known author Jean-Marie Chassignon. Here, Brunet claims, the “reconfiguration théorique” that Diderot was unable to accomplish is carried out in full: Chassignon produces an aesthetics grounded in a monstrous singularity. Yet he does so at the price of writing a work that is, according to Brunet, “parfaitement désordonné, informe, systématiquement contradictoire, parfaitement illisible” (p. 125). In this sense, Chassignon’s monster-text appears strangely sterile, even as it gestures toward a future in which the “unreadable” work will itself become exemplary (as in the canonization of the novels of Sade). If the classical example can seem too easily reproducible—an assumption that the articles of the first section effectively call into question—the modern monster seems here deprived of generative power. Can we imagine a monstrous poetics? How do monsters get made? These are questions that are left for modernity to answer.

The final two essays of this section both take up a specific text: the *Histoires tragiques* of François Rosset, first published in the early seventeenth century. Jean-Luc Martine’s thought-provoking essay explores Rosset’s work as a vexed attempt to give earthly substance and consistency to that which, to the extent that it is understood as a metaphysical principle, must be something other than singular: *le mal*. Martine explores how in rendering evil material Rosset’s narratives “construisent pour cela une série de fictions qui dissimulent leur caractère mimétique. Le tragique ne s’y donne pas comme le produit d’une construction, d’une *poétique*, mais comme une donnée du monde, comme une *praxis*” (p. 144). In attempting to give shape to pure negation—the will to do wrong—Rosset succeeds in amplifying evil’s effects. Éric Méchoulan’s particularly fine reading of Rosset, grounded in an intimate knowledge of the period’s literary history, proceeds in a different direction. Méchoulan contrasts Rosset’s “tragic history” of the duel between the chevalier de Guise and the baron de Luz (ending in the death of the baron) with contemporaneous accounts of the conflict written by a series of memorialists. He does this not to emphasize the “constructedness” of Rosset’s tale—which works to exonerate the chevalier de Guise for what could otherwise be read as an act of political assassination—but to show the way in which Rosset’s literary account participates in the very struggles that it narrates—struggles for political authority in which exemplarity plays a crucial role. As Méchoulan claims, “Rosset fait de ce petit événement politique un destin exemplairement moral: il le fait changer de plan et passer des jeux de pouvoir à l’autorité de Dieu” (p. 161). But this move, as Méchoulan convincingly shows, produces its own political consequences. Literature, here, acts on history even as it represents it.

The final section of the volume looks at the political and social effects of the example in a variety of distinct contexts. Xenia von Tippelskirch contributes a meticulously researched study of the *Vita* of Marie of Portugal, an exemplar of virtuous femininity, and of the *Vita*’s reception by readers. As Tippelskirch writes, “en examinant les actions d’écriture entreprises autour de [ce texte], nous pouvons assister de près à la fabrication de l’exemplaire” (p. 178).<sup>[3]</sup> Robert Descimon produces a fascinating

comparison between the *Historiettes* of Tallement des Réaux and archival accounts of the actual events upon which the *Historiettes* are based. Like Méchoulan, Descimon's goal is not to measure the veracity of the literary text, but to study the way in which Tallement des Réaux's narratives operate within a particular social context. He finds in Tallement des Réaux's work a deeply negative assessment of a social order that catches individuals—and perhaps women in particular—in untenable contradictions. Laurence Rauline looks at the proto-individualism of seventeenth-century libertine writing as a careful subversion of classical forms of exemplarity. Of all the articles in the collection, Rauline's works most explicitly within the historiographical framework of the classical crisis of exemplarity, a crisis in which she reads libertine authors as participating.

Finally, the articles of Tatiana Debbagi Baranova and Dinah Ribard pose the question of the relationship of exemplarity to social class. Baranova explores a series of dialogues written during the wars of religion, and including bourgeois interlocutors. Ribard's article, on the priest Jean Antoine Vachet's narrative of the life of the seventeenth-century cobbler Henry Buch, carefully reveals the ideological and discursive complexity of this account of an exemplary artisan. As Ribard demonstrates, Vachet's *L'Artisan chrétien* actively participates in the formation of a community of Christian workers that its author describes as having already taken place. Ribard's essay shows the rewards of a close attention to the local conditions of production—material and institutional—of a particular work. The volume concludes with a brief but helpful interdisciplinary bibliography.

The example is a classical device that, as this collection shows, can nonetheless function as an extraordinarily fruitful source of new lines of inquiry for modern scholars. *Constituer l'exemplarité* might seem to speak most directly and immediately to historians, given the extent to which debates around “the cas” (and its relation to the example) have come to permeate the historiography of the early modern period (and beyond). In contrast to social history, contemporary literary scholarship has been more visibly marked by the intensity of its engagement with singularity as both an aesthetic and a methodological principle.[4] Yet, as much as literature in its modern modes may be forged in a resistance to rather than an embrace of generalization, this volume suggests that a return to the example can generate provocative new connections, among disciplines as well as among series of texts. Where Giavarini exhorts us to think the example by means of—and through—the case, the collection as a whole also encourages us to remain attentive to the extent to which each case emerges from within particular histories (and narratives) of exemplarity—many of which remain to be written.

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## NOTES

[1] Lauren Berlant, “On the Case,” *Critical Inquiry* 33 (Summer 2007): 663-672, p. 664. Berlant’s article appears in a special issue of *Critical Inquiry* entitled “Making the Case.” As Giavarini discusses, the subject of the case is a crucial one for social history, as well as, following Berlant, for psychoanalysis, law, medicine, business, and modern literary studies. See in particular Jacques Revel and Jean-Claude Passeron, eds. *Penser par cas* (Paris: Éditions de l’EHESS, 2005).

[2] The famous phrase of Montaigne from “De l’expérience” in the *Essais*—“tout exemple cloche”—reappears at intervals throughout the volume and serves as a kind of touchstone for the collection’s depiction of exemplarity as an often uneasy process of fabrication.

[3] As Giavarini, Jouhaud, Tippelskirch, and Dinah Ribard make clear, the volume’s emphasis on the “making” (“fabrication”) of the example—and indeed on the text as acting in and on its social context—owes much to the work of Michel de Certeau.

[4] For an exemplary instance of this exploration, see Derek Attridge’s *The Singularity of Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

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