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Monomania: The Flight from Everyday Life in Literature and Art (review)

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sexual warfare which were typical of decadent writing. The fifth and final chapter, "The Right to Pleasure: Sex and the Sentimental Novel," considers four novels—Anna de Noailles's *Le Visage Emerveillé*, Gyp's *Autour du mariage*, Colette's *L'Ingénue libertine*, and Odette Dulac's *Le Droit au plaisir*—in which the quest for female pleasure is presented as a path to female knowledge. The novels thus create what Mesch terms a "countersexology" (22) that shapes the relation between female mind and body as a direct challenge to the prevailing ideas of female sexuality.

The Hysteric's Revenge successfully combines cultural history with literary criticism. Meticulously researched and historically grounded, Mesch's analysis crosses generic boundaries to interpret a wide array of medical texts and works of moral *hygiène*, which she reads alongside writings by nineteenth-century literary critics. Moreover, readers will be indebted to Mesch for excellent close readings of several novels by women writers that previously received little critical attention. The book also contains fascinating biographical information about the writers she discusses, including their often vexed relationships with contemporary women's movements. In *The Hysteric's Revenge*, Rachel Mesch relates a heretofore unwritten chapter not only in the history of women's writing, but in the history of French literature and French cultural history as a whole.

Masha Belenky

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Marina van Zuylen. *Monomania: The Flight from Everyday Life in Literature and Art*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005. 238 pp.

Monomania is a rich and compelling study of an often misunderstood condition. First named in early nineteenth-century psychiatric research, monomania was described as an unhealthy obsession that threw an otherwise healthy mind into disarray. Accounts of patients' strange devotion to an *idée fixe* sparked the popular imagination, which led to the emergence of numerous farfetched strains of the affliction, van Zuylen notes, including the "homicidal monomania" cited in a murder defense.

However, van Zuylen wishes neither to unearth monomania as an odd historical phenomenon, nor to debunk its implausible manifestations. Her interest lies in analyzing monomania as an all too common yearning for absolutes that transcends the nineteenth century and permeates literature, art, and life even today. Her book offers a fascinating philosophical and psychological consideration of the desire to organize one's existence around a stable ideal, and the corresponding anxiety that life is otherwise meaningless or empty. Drawing on various sources—case studies, letters, and biographies in addition to fiction, philosophy, and art—van Zuylen illuminates monomania's role in a range of practices and predilections. Myriad *idées fixes* coalesce around the drive to establish the coherence that life lived freely fails to provide. This desire unites the artist fleeing reality for abstraction, the nineteenth-century housewife seeking a master in her mate, the hypochondriac focusing ever inward on his or her body, and even the academic obsessed with productivity (those of us who have difficulty adhering to a strict schedule can take heart in van Zuylen's references to the latter).

The book is divided into nine chapters, organized chronologically and interweaving various strands of monomania throughout. The introduction covers monomania's evolution from a serious psychiatric diagnosis to an indiscriminately applied label. Chapter 1 develops the psychiatric history with an account of Dr. Pierre Janet's research. Janet emphasizes quotidian reality as a source of stress for female patients, who chafe at a lack of structure, fall prey to unhappy ruminations, and seek authority outside themselves (religious, matrimonial, etc.) to drown out their preoccupations. The negative effects of this authority matter little, so long as order is established. Janet's findings thus underscore a fundamental aspect of monomania for van Zuylen: the wish to curtail one's own freedom in order to achieve a sense of tranquility.

Chapters 2 and 3 focus on Flaubert and Charles Nodier. Citing Nietzsche's observations on the threat of unstructured time, which allows for potentially depressing introspection, van Zuylen considers Flaubert's famously structured writing life. His devotion insulates him from reality, as he forges his primary relationships with paper and quill, and not with his far less predictable fellow human beings. Nodier, on the other hand, manages the assault of everyday reality

with a strategy he terms “monomanie réflexive.” Yielding to inner reflection dictated by obsession, he finds shelter from a progress-driven society.

Chapters 4 and 5 examine Baudelaire’s “Mademoiselle Bistouri” and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. The use of obsession as a weapon against the positivistic nineteenth century again comes to the fore in Baudelaire’s prose poem, which van Zuylen reads via Kant and Hegel’s differing notions of madness. The mad prostitute’s faith in her delusions, van Zuylen notes, cures the apparently reasonable doctor, not only fulfilling his nostalgia for a bygone era of total faith, but also highlighting his own compulsions. Monomania’s less salubrious effects emerge in Eliot’s *Middlemarch*, read in part through Worringer’s theories on abstraction and empathy. Marriage to a rigid scholar promises to free the protagonist, Dorothea, from introspection and the sense of ego fragmentation that empathy arouses. However, Dorothea’s attempt to isolate herself in a realm of pure thought does not bring contentment.

Chapter 6 examines hypochondria as a form of monomania. Analyzing Thomas Mann’s *Magic Mountain*, van Zuylen highlights the meaningful existence the sanitarium grants its inhabitants, who turn their bodies into a studied, regulated universe deemed safer than the world outside. The ordered world of the library is the focus of chapter 7, which considers Kantian duty and distance from lived experience in Elias Canetti’s *Auto-da-Fé*, whose protagonist wishes to remain cloistered in his book collection.

In the final chapters, van Zuylen returns to questions of creativity and monomania first raised in relation to Flaubert and Nodier. Her chapter 8 reading of Nina Bouraoui’s *Voyeuse interdite* shows how “creative pain” allows the protagonist to form a stable identity around years of abuse she obsessively recalls, and to transform recollections into writing. Chapter 9 takes up the contemporary artist Sophie Calle, who finds artistic use for the choices and surprises life presents by developing strict creative procedures. Whether refusing to open birthday gifts and displaying them instead as monuments to that day, or dutifully telephoning every number in a stranger’s address book found by chance, Calle makes order and art through the contingent.

The conclusion mentions another possible title for this book: *Uses and Misuses of Obsession*. Indeed, readers cannot fail to see mono-

mania's appeal. The compulsion to organize reality around an absolute springs from an understandable desire to manage the demands inherent in freedom, and may even be necessary to sustained creative efforts. However, as van Zuylen emphasizes, the misuses of obsession lead to numerous ills, including the current monomania for work. Nodding to Nietzsche's observations on society's derision of enjoyment for its own sake, van Zuylen underscores the fear of leisure underlying the common compulsion to stay busy and use every minute purposefully. Even if activity succeeds initially in defending against introspection and depression, it eventually provokes exhaustion and the very sense of emptiness it was intended to keep at bay.

Every form of monomania that van Zuylen examines proves a double-edged sword. It promises to confer meaning on our lives, but reduces them to a set of repeated gestures; it promises to anchor our sense of self, but only if that self exists in isolation; it promises coherence, but destroys everything that falls outside its plan. That is the unsettling upshot of our longing for absolutes that van Zuylen so wisely takes to task in her elegant, insightful, and eminently rewarding book.

Laura Spagnoli

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Dominique Viart et Bruno Vercier. *La littérature française au présent. Héritage, modernité, mutations*. Paris: Bordas, 2005. 512 pp.

Tôt ou tard, il fallait que Bordas tirât un trait sur l'histoire littéraire à l'ancienne, discours scolaire où se mêlaient extraits de lecture, renseignements biographiques et force chronologies. Si le présent ouvrage est issu, comme les Lagarde et Michard d'antan, d'un travail en tandem, il n'a rien d'un manuel: s'y affirme en permanence la volonté de parier sur le contemporain et de transmettre, plutôt qu'un savoir tout fait, le goût de la lecture.

Prétendre embrasser vingt-cinq ans de littérature, toutes catégories confondues, relèverait de l'impossible: or, n'intéressera les auteurs que la seule *littérature déconcertante*. Selon Viart, trois tendances se partagent le monde de l'édition: d'abord, une littérature *consen-*