Hannah Thompson examines how a series of literary texts from the French nineteenth century undertake to speak the unspeakable about the human body. She surveys different aspects of the human body which, for one reason or another, could not find explicit expression, narrowing down on “the intersection of the speakable and the unspeakable [where] the taboo resides” (143). The bodies and their behaviors that dwell at this intersection are many and various, and Thompson shows the liberatory power that can be unleashed by rooting them out in a series of works that span the century.

In a first chapter, she discusses the metaphors, generally medical, that express and disseminate female sexual desire in texts by George Sand and Rachilde, asserting—with little explanation—that such desire “destabilizes the male superiority upon which patriarchy depends” (19). Both of these authors disguise female sexuality—frustrated or satisfied—as forms of illness. Thompson inverts this argument in the second chapter, where she uses discussions of Zola’s novels to show how sickness fell under its own interdiction. The heroines’ bodies in Lourdes and Nana “are evidence [...] that the taboo subject of illness can be represented most successfully when it is given metaphorical or allegorical meaning beyond itself” (58). The following chapter returns to Zola—and to Maupassant and others—but now to examine characteristically male infirmities, whether war wounds or debilitating illnesses, such as dysentery. In La Débâcle, these conditions point to the unspeakable idea that gender identity might be constructed (rather than natural) and are “used to evoke a more unspeakable subject, namely the pressing state of France” (68). This is a slightly puzzling argument, since Thompson cites a passage from a story by Henry Céard that with “joyful detail” represents the artifices of what Joan Riviere termed feminine masquerade (74). More curious is the way that medical discourses haunt these first three chapters without being addressed as such. We might legitimately wonder why literary and medical discourses functioned so differently and how it was that doctors could speak freely about sexuality and disability when others could not. What does it mean when sexuality becomes medicalized rather than literary?

The fourth chapter describes violence as “another area in which we encounter a tension between the speakable and the unspeakable” (86), but here the meaning of the unspeakable shifts toward the structural limits of language to express certain experiences, such as pain. Through readings of Mirbeau’s Le Jardin des supplices and short stories by Barbey d’Aurevilly, Thompson asserts that bodily reactions to others’ pain can themselves be described, so that the author “transforms pain from the unrepresentable into something that can, at last, be represented” (93). More convincing is Thompson’s argument that authors can use narrative technique, such as withholding information, to create and frustrate readers’ desire, thereby “inflicting a pain analogous to (though not on the same scale) as that experienced by the protagonist” (102).

Thompson then turns, in her fifth and richest chapter, to monstrous bodies in Hugo’s novels. Here, she finds a close and telling affinity between the monster and the disabled, both of “whose disfigured or imperfect bodies separate them from their fellow human beings because of their noticeable deviation from accepted norms of appearance” (105). In Hugo’s aesthetics of the grotesque—expressed through characters in Notre-Dame de Paris, Les Misérables, L’Homme qui rit, and in the preface to Cromwell—Thompson discovers a nascent recognition of the disabled in their own terms and specificity. “Hugo’s combination of the grotesque and the sublime rescues the monstrous from the realm of the abject,” she writes, “and reclaims the disabled body from the realm of the abnormal” (112). Similarly, in L’Homme qui rit, “the narrator’s almost constant adoption of Gwynplaine’s point of view emphasizes his humanity rather than his deformity” (120).

The final chapter addresses the issue of traumatic violence, focusing on the murder and rape of a child in Zola’s Vérité. Here, Thompson is particularly troubled by the ethical implications of “an act of erasure which refuses to acknowledge the visceral horror of paedophiliac rape” by disguising it through indirection and metaphor. Still, she concedes that through such non-explicit expression, “the literary text offers a privileged means of articulating the taboo which helps to mitigate the traumatic effects of its repression” (138).

Thompson’s book is particularly remarkable for its ethical engagement, its will to find in literature a potential for changing attitudes, notably toward marginalized, silenced, or abjected groups and individuals. Thompson articulates her analyses around a distinction between metaphorical and “overt” (73, 125) or “explicit” (136) representation, which leads her to argue for the importance of demetaphorizing the “deviant” body (145). While literary language—its oblique expressions—allows authors to speak the otherwise unspeakable, it also, by the same token, tends to transform its subjects into something else, or something
more general, like a symbol.

It is at this point that the book’s focus on literature and the body becomes more understandable: the power that is produced when the deviant or disabled body is used figuratively rarely redounds to the person so embodied but rather to the author or society that uses that body as a figure. In this way, and despite its occasional nods to the expressive power of literature (as at the end of the chapter on Zola’s *La Vérité*), Thompson’s book is a strike against literary language and a call to treat deviant bodies not as symbols but as individuals. But what if literary language is a catachresis, as a quotation from Naomi Schor suggests (121–22)? What if there are certain bodies that exist only in language, such as Quasimodo’s? What if language—and particularly literary language—were a means to create realities that otherwise do not or do not yet exist?

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