

Bernard on Desormeaux (2014)

Desormeaux, Daniel. *Alexandre Dumas, fabrique d'immortalité*. Paris: Garnier, Études romantiques et dix-neuviémistes, 2014. Pp. 347. ISBN: 978-2-8124-3000-8

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Daniel Desormeaux's most recent book, *Alexandre Dumas, fabrique d'immortalité*, makes an original and compelling contribution to the now abundant bibliography devoted to Dumas père (Claude Schopp, Raymond Bellour, Charles Grivel, Vittorio Frigerio, et al.), and to the analysis of issues such as memory, history, death, and *écriture*. Desormeaux shows how an author immensely popular in his time, yet often dismissed as a polygraph, an adept of "industrial literature" and an exploiter of hack writers, carefully prepared his artistic afterlife even before being subjected to three funerals (a temporary interment upon his death in 1870, an official funeral in his hometown of Villers-Cotterêts in 1872, and a "pantheonization" in 2002). The essay's oxymoronic title underlines a tension between a quest for the sublime (immortality, genius), and down-to-earth strategies which Eugène de Mirecourt denounced in his pamphlet *Fabrique de romans, maison Alexandre Dumas et compagnie*. To investigate this *fabrique d'immortalité*, Desormeaux makes many references to Dumas's famous novels, but focuses his attention on a rewarding, although largely neglected, corpus, comprising *Les Mille et un fantômes*, *Mes Mémoires*, and the *Grand Dictionnaire de cuisine*. In addition, he reinserts the author in a dynasty of three "Alexandre Dumas" (his father, the general; himself; and his son, the playwright and *Académicien*), as well as in a literary genealogy (dominated by Charles Nodier).

In the first part of the book, Desormeaux examines how Dumas's oeuvre, composed by multiple hands, and given to plagiarism, lacks a stable origin, deriving (like the man himself) from a "bastard" stem; following the example of Nodier, a master of eccentric narratives and literary mystifications, Dumas practices *supposition d'auteur*, or better yet, he cultivates the myth of a collective creation, cleverly represented *en abyme* in *La Femme au collier de velours*. His books borrow from many genres, his *Memoirs* themselves appearing like a collage, part autobiography and part chronicle.

In Dumas's literary reconstructions, or "tanatographies," Desormeaux ponders the heuristic emblem of the fossil—an image central to a generation intrigued by paleontology, influenced by Georges Cuvier, rather than by Charles Darwin, and fascinated by Adam Mickiewicz's exhumation of Slavic folklore—and traces the recycling and revitalization of various "fossils" in Dumas's travelogues, as well as in his *Mille et un fantômes*. Since Dumas was no less attracted by spatial than by temporal incursions, and relished the figure of Ulysses, Desormeaux then follows, parallel to the perambulations of Monte-Cristo, Salvatore (from *Mohicans de Paris*) or Olifus (from *Mille et un fantômes*), the writer's anecdotic and logorrheic *dérive*, a technique fostered by the format of the *feuilleton*. Desormeaux furthermore comments on Dumas's compulsive narrative intrusions into his fiction, and on his play with his proper name—a way to insure his "proper" re-noun, at the risk (or benefit) of blurring the diegetic levels and bluffing the reader.

Characters like d'Artagnan, Gilbert, Salvatore, Cagliostro the necromancer, Dantès, unjustly "interred" in a dungeon and "resuscitated," all cultivate memory, which serves their appetite for revenge and/or conquest. Similarly, as the second part of Desormeaux's essay demonstrates, Dumas employs his *Mémoires* as an instrument for rehabilitation as well as glorification. The rehabilitation is primarily that of his father, Saint-Domingue mulatto General Alexandre Dumas, construed as a figure symmetric with, and superior to Bonaparte, whom Dumas-Hamlet verbosely avenges, before developing his own first person Bildungsroman, under a new literary regime in which the sword is gradually replaced by the pen.

In the third part of his book, Desormeaux tackles the vexing question of literature's "immorality," or at best its "demoralization" of the masses, an accusation frequently brandished against Alexandre Dumas, *père* and *fil*s. Desormeaux carefully documents the legal cases brought against both of them, and shows how the author of *Antony* and the *feuilletoniste* used the label of immorality, a good source of publicity, as a first step towards immortality.

Finally, Desormeaux presents a captivating reading of the *Grand Dictionnaire de cuisine*, which he compares with Larousse's *Grand Dictionnaire universel*. He analyzes how the aging gourmet and cook hunts for lost recipes and new pleasures, digests many authors, and exploits the political, magical, evocative power of *mets* as *mots*, in a last attempt to combat death. In conclusion, he approaches the question of Dumas père's material legacy to his biological heirs, and literary legacy to posterity. In its solid scholarship, critical sophistication and lively style, Desormeaux's insightful book will certainly serve to consolidate Dumas's *immortalité*.

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