

Online Reviews

**Strauss, Jonathan. *Human Remains: Medicine, Death, and Desire in Nineteenth-Century Paris*.
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Hannah Thompson, Royal Holloway, University of London

Human Remains is a complex, pluridisciplinary, and ambitious study of how French society's understanding of death evolved during the nineteenth century, and of how this evolution affected and was reflected in the changing nature of Paris. Strauss's central argument, which he develops in several different directions, is that medical and scientific attitudes to death are always influenced by irrational impulses which have hitherto been neither identified nor explained.

Importantly, Strauss is primarily concerned with myths of death, with death as a literary event. As he makes clear, "this is not, then, a history of any *real* nineteenth century, but rather an account of an *unreal* one, of a fantasy that exercised the shape and meaning of the city as it was structured by medicine and hygiene" (7-8). Strauss is being slightly disingenuous in this comment. The opening chapter of the book is full of historical detail, and the very full footnotes and bibliography will give historians much interesting material, especially regarding the changing relationship between law and medicine in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

After a thoughtful analysis of press reactions to an infamous case of necrophilia, Strauss goes on to show how the irrational manifests itself in medicine, through an extensive analysis of the key medical theorists of death which circulated in the nineteenth century. As the book develops, Strauss increasingly attempts to offer an explanation for this "inadmissible desire for the abject" (7) which, he argues, can be found in both psychoanalysis's various explanations of the "fantasm" and in twentieth-century theory's fascination with the structures of language. The second chapter continues this focus on the history of medicine, but here Strauss moves toward the fantasy spaces which medicine creates outside society for the unknown and unknowable, in this case madness and death. Chapter three investigates the effect these fantasy spaces have on the real and imaginary geographies of the city of Paris, while chapter four looks at how the various theories of death circulating during the nineteenth century created the myths of death which went on to influence writers, artists, and philosophers in the nineteenth century and beyond.

What becomes clear as the study progresses is that responses to death are deeply ambiguous in nature. Thus far, Strauss has concentrated on negative reactions to death, but in the particularly intriguing fifth chapter, he examines the nineteenth century's fascination with the positive by-products of death, particularly as they relate to theories of both agricultural and aesthetic (re)production. The transformative potential of death examined in this chapter is aligned with its powerful erotic attraction, and Strauss goes on to consider why death and its associated detritus exert such a powerful hold over the nineteenth-century erotic imaginary. It is at this point in the book that it becomes clear that for all his rigorous scientific and historical research, Strauss is indeed more interested in fictions of death. His detailed and erudite analysis in the remaining chapters convincingly weaves elements of history, medicine, literature, art, philosophy, and linguistics together in an attempt to name the unnamable essence of death, the essence whose very unspeakability attracts and repels in equal measure.

Chapter six offers intriguing new readings of well-known works by Redon, Balzac, Flaubert, and Zola among others. Despite some contextual errors (Frédéric Moreau is leaving Paris at the

beginning of *L'Éducation sentimentale* not arriving), these readings, which revel in their interpretations of textual detail, represent compelling and convincing attempts to explain the often neglected obsession with death that haunts nineteenth-century literature and art.

The final two chapters move away from the nineteenth century in order to offer some explanation for the responses to death which have been depicted in the preceding chapters. Chapter seven is a dense and difficult meditation on the ability of psychoanalytic theories of the “fantasm” to explain death’s duality. Fans of psychoanalysis will find much of value in this chapter, and it is a crucial step towards the final points made in chapter eight, which argues that the very structures of language, particularly what they tell us about subjectivity and meaning, are crucial to our understanding of our relationship with death. The complexity of the arguments presented in this book, together with Strauss’s sometimes dizzying movement between very different fields, can occasionally make this work a struggle to read, but it is a struggle well worth overcoming.

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