“Terror and Desire in 19th century Britain”

Après-midi d'étude organisée par Virginie Thomas, Professeure CPGE, membre associée d’ILCEA4

Lieu : lycée Champollion, le mardi 21 mai de 13h à 16h

Programme :

“Terror, desire, and female sexuality in the Victorian period”, Véronique Molinari, Professeur en civilisation britannique, Laboratoire ILCEA4, Université Grenoble Alpes

“In men, in general, the sexual desire is inherent and spontaneous... In the other sex, the desire is dormant, if not non-existent... If the passions of women were ready, strong and spontaneous, in a degree even approaching the form they assume in the coarser sex, there can be little doubt that sexual irregularities would reach a height, of which, at present, we have happily no conception”.[1]

While the eighteenth century has often been pictured, in the words of Paul-Gabriel Boucé, as “a libertine age of free and easy sexual antics in the boudoirs and the haystacks,” the Victorian era, which spanned from 1837 to 1901, is by contrast often remembered for its strict moral codes, social conservatism, and sexual repression, particularly as far as women’s sexuality is concerned. In line with the dichotomy between the public sphere and the private sphere which structured the work of many historians in the second half of the twentieth century, gender roles in this period have been presented as strictly defined, with women being expected to adhere to ideals of femininity which included qualities such as modesty, chastity, and submissiveness. In this context, any expression of female desire was bound to be not only frowned upon, but considered as deviant.

While keeping a wary eye on differences between ideology and reality, prescription and behaviour, public adherence to a discourse and private conduct, this paper will explore the interplay of emotions, desires, and fears which characterized attitudes to female sexuality. W.R. Greg’s expression of middle-class fear at the thought of unregulated female sexuality will thus be traced to the “double standards” of morality that prevailed throughout the century before examining the link that might have existed between sexuality and agency in the figure of prostitutes, adulteresses but also, towards the end of the century, the New Woman. Reactions of fear towards what was seen as manifestations of female desire, such as nymphomania, hysteria or masturbation will also be appraised through the medical discourse and practices that emerged at the crossroads of gynaecology, surgery and alienism. Finally, beyond the strict societal norms and moral codes of the time, the lack of efficient means of birth control meant that sexual desire was a feeling that might be feared by the women themselves.

“ ‘Parental tyranny, filial disobedience’ ? The Desire for Descendency against the Terror of Ascendency as Expressing Intertextual Relationships in *Northanger Abbey* and its

[1] W.R. Greg, « Prostitution », *The Westminster Review*, vol. 53, 1850, pp. 456-7.

Adaptations », Cyril Besson, Maître de conférences en littératures anglophones, Laboratoire ILCEA4, Université Grenoble Alpes

If there is one novel by Austen that deals with problematic filiation, it is undoubtedly *Northanger Abbey* (1818), the last sentence of which is illuminating on the question:

"… I leave it to be settled by whomsoever it may concern, whether the tendency of this work be altogether to recommend parental tyranny, or reward filial disobedience."

The novelist of reconciliation, or at least of the tenable compromise, as attested by the epilogues of her later fiction, Austen reminds us in this, her first finished novel (though it was published posthumously) that before said compromise, the context is necessarily one of crisis. What is at stake, here as in the rest of her work, is the representation of antagonistic powers that give reality its shape, as truth is ultimately the product of a choice resulting from the confrontation of conflicting views. The choice may appear collective intradiegetically but is only apparently so, as it is extradiegetically expressed by the narrator; there occurs, then, the imposition of a perception of reality as conventional, although "actuality" is rewritten according to arrangements leaving the social fabric more or less intact. The gothic in *Northanger Abbey* is thus sacrificed as an early form of the Bovary syndrome, as Catherine Morland's perceptions and perspectives are a little too systematically reframed.

Why, then, should the last sentence conclude the novel on such indeterminacy? Behind this open-ended choice, the ambivalent alternative is still presented as untenable for the readers, be they implied or actual; the challenge to resolve the question outside the text, is not unlike a curse onto future generations. This evasion leaves the impression that the first-person narrator shirks her duties, and the reader, as never before, is invited all-too-directly to become the co-author, so as to bring the novel to an end (although the "work" is only "half-open" in this instance).

It probably should not come as a surprise, then, that among the now quite full body of « Austen flicks », the all-too-few adaptations of *Northanger Abbey* have not quite been able to pick up the gauntlet, and each was forced to make choices imposing the protagonist, more than the narrative, a removal of ambiguity that amounts to interpretive ossification. At the crossroads of the « rediscovery » of Austen's work by popular culture from the 1980's onwards and the « maternal irresponsibility » professed in 1818 (not coincidentally, Austen set the novel aside while publication was imminent), these *heritage films* are caught in a balancing act perfectly illustrating the precariousness of literary adaptation, the *unnatural* daughter of a no less perverted parentage.

"From the Desire of Terror in 18th century British art to the Terror of Desire in Victorian visual arts", Virginie Thomas, professeure en khâgne au lycée Champollion, chercheuse associée du Laboratoire ILCEA4, et Agathe Viffray, étudiante en M2 Histoire de l'Art à Paris 1

During the 18th century, a vigorous interest for gloomy atmospheres, obscure themes, and mystical subjects was developed in British society. It appeared through literature with the

Gothic Revival, but also in architecture in which medieval forms were reinvested. Even paintings were subjected to the trend of the awful, trying to produce a feeling between fascination and profound terror. To reach this aim, several artists used the theory of the Sublime. The well-known essay by Edmund Burke, *A philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* published in 1757, is the first to explain how the Sublime works and what causes the Sublime effect. Even though, according to Burke, visual media are not able to create the Sublime, British painters regularly tried to prove him wrong[2]. Indeed, Burke's ideas were somehow translated by painters through landscapes, usually in large formats, in which small human figures were represented in state of distress facing the huge spectacle of nature's grandeur. The main representatives of this kind of paintings were Philip James de Loutherbourg, John Martin and Joseph Mallord Turner. The alliance of admiration and fear could also be found in other scenes than natural ones. Human deeds or at least Biblical and mythical accounts of human acts of great bravery against incarnations of evil were the sources of aesthetical and moral rapture. Philip James de Loutherbourg and Richard Wilson proposed captivating representations of these sorts of conducts. Finally, and quite obviously, the female body was a favoured motif to express at the same time desire and fear. Indeed, the female body embodied both perfection and, paradoxically, the source of all sins. It was heaven and hell, good and evil, all that should be desired or avoided. Henry Fuseli and Theodor von Holst elaborated their own interpretations of the female body's duplicity.

This shift in the representation of terror from natural to more intimate, bodily landscapes paved the way for the Victorian focus on the painting of desire as it was illustrated in the art of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Indeed, female but also, indirectly, male desire came to the foreground with the representation of the figure of the prostitute, be it in a realistic British context or, more frequently, in an er(x)oticized recreation of the Harem in the Oriental present or ancient times.

Resorting to mythological figures was another subterfuge used by Pre-Raphaelite painters to tackle this sulphurous subject thanks to the representation of desiring male characters, such as Pygmalion, or female heroines ranging from a pure, chaste embodiment of desire - with the Lady of Shalott who inspired so many artists of the Victorian period - to a more overtly erotic incarnation with Biblical or mythological temptresses.

These representations were a way for the artists to project onto the canvas their sublimated desire for their muses who could lead them to frantic periods of creation or despondency. One may quote, for instance, the tumultuous relationship between Edward Burne-Jones and Maria Zambaco, William Morris, and his wife Jane who was also Dante Gabriel Rossetti 's lover... Pre-Raphaelite paintings often staged men who were confronted to a stifling, even "strangling", representation of woman's desire. Is it to be interpreted as the projection of the artist's intimate reading of his own relationship with his muse(s) who could be viewed as inspiring or castrating figures ? Or does it have to read more largely as the projection of the whole Victorian society's *Zeitgeist* which smothered desire through its stifling sexual mores ?

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[2] IBATA, Hélène, *The Challenge of the Sublime. From Burke's* Philosophical Enquiry *to British Romantic Art*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018.