

---

The Deaths of Louis XVI. Regicide and the French Political Imagination by Susan Dunn

Review by: Bettina L. Knapp

*Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3/4 (Spring—Summer 1995), pp. 555-556

Published by: [University of Nebraska Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23537124>

Accessed: 19/06/2014 10:32

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



University of Nebraska Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Kete's book presents an interesting, amusing, and original aspect of bourgeois life—petkeeping—thereby giving an added dimension to one's understanding of the bourgeoisie. We see how petkeeping, especially the dog, was an attempt to allay the fears and sense of insecurity that afflicted the class that was on the ascendancy. We also see how petkeeping mirrors an age filled with contradictions—an attempt to be modern and scientific, but also wary of this very modernity. Kete's use of Renoir's painting of Mme Georges Charpentier and her children with dog and cat, and her own words: "The bourgeois home as cozy retreat, the dog as whimsical signifier of family life, the echo of nature uneasily subdued . . ." (115) complement each other and summarize the book eloquently. Her notes and bibliography are impressive and informative.

San Diego State University

Hilda Nelson

Dunn, Susan. *The Deaths of Louis XVI. Regicide and the French Political Imagination*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994. Pp. 178. \$29.95. ISBN 0-691-03429-X.

When Conor Cruise O'Brien writes in his foreword that "Susan Dunn's study of *The Death of Louis XVI* will be read with intense interest by scholars concerned with history and literature, among whom Professor Dunn herself occupies a distinguished place that will be notably enhanced by the publication of the present study," he mirrors my sentiments as well. Hers is a splendid work, extraordinarily well documented, and written with excitement and verve.

The execution of Louis XVI that took place on today's Place de la Concorde was not only followed by shouts of "Vive la république," but the event was to conclude a whole way of life. Unlike the politically-motivated regicide of Charles I of England, which elicited little reaction in the hearts and minds of the people, the guillotining of the French king, Dunn explains, had profound theological, ideological, political, and moral consequences. For the royalists, the killing of a monarch who ruled by "divine right" equated deicide: the king, like Christ, had sacrificed his life "for the redemption of France" (5). Republicans and liberals were also stunned by the act that they considered "morally troubling," but even more importantly, they found themselves in an embarrassingly difficult position. Were they to have conveyed their outrage at the guillotining per se, they would have run the risk of undermining the very notion of Revolution. In the years to come they had to find a rational way of explaining the cohabitation of viciousness, as evidenced during the Terror, with the ideals promulgated by the idealists of 1789. Dunn fleshes out notions involving cruelty, justice, and idealism as adumbrated by liberal, pro-royalist, and republican writers. Most specifically are the views and values of Michelet, Lamartine, Quinet, Hugo, and Camus subsumed, with discussions revolving around such concepts as progress, compassion, and ethics.

The first of Dunn's two-part volume, entitled "Political Myths," is divided into three chapters. "Louis XVI and the Cult of Human Sacrifice" that opens her study stresses the mythical factors involved in regicide. Robespierre, for example, viewed it as a death (monarchy) rebirth (republic) ritual. Revolution in this regard presupposes several stages: since the goal is to destroy the status quo, understandably does the onset of such an abrupt change presuppose a period of violence. The revolution's second phase is, as of necessity, more meditative and ideological in emphasis since it consists of a building process. Ballanche, Lamartine, and Michelet as a young man, likened the king's death to a sacrifice, thus equating the event with Christ's crucifixion—the price paid for progress. Cogent discussions centering around the reactions of such men as Condorcet, Saint-Just, Quinet, de Maistre, and Tocqueville, to the revolution follow. In her second chapter, "Louis XVI and Joan of Arc," Dunn aptly probes the reasons behind Michelet's revival and sanctification of this medieval "democratic" martyred heroine, attempting in so doing, to "subvert the royalist myth of the martyred king by placing sanctity and martyrdom on the side of the Revolution" (39). The third, equally fascinating chapter, "Michelet and Lamartine: Regicide, Passion, and Compassion," explicates ethical questions of postrevolutionary France: the idea of sacrifice leading to pity and then on to compassion. The expertise Dunn demonstrates in her discussion of the ideas of Michelet and such Romantic humanitarians as Lamartine and Hugo is noteworthy.

Part 2, "Literary Myths" begins with a chapter on "Louis XVI and his Executioners." Here, Dunn devotes her insights not to historians per se, but to writers of fiction who relied

on their imaginations for the most part and were not always bound to honor historical evidence: Chateaubriand, Ballanche, Balzac, Hugo. Some of the pro-royalist writers, although looking back longingly to the Old Regime, to kingship, and to a world that was, rationalized regicide as a positive actuality that paved the way for the birth of a constitutional monarchy. Via expert mental gymnastics, the executioner once a villain, is now transformed, Dunn writes, into a "mediator between Revolution and Restoration." This individual, heretofore the representative of "revolutionary terror," bears a new *persona*, and "will surprisingly become the advocate for a progressive, charitable, and nonviolent social agenda for the restored monarchy" (95). Dunn's excellent explications of de Maistre's excessively reactionary and theocratic views—a thinker much-applauded by Baudelaire for his admiration of violence, blood, and sacrifice—revolves around revolution and Christianity. Although Chateaubriand, Ballanche, Hugo, Balzac, and Guizot were Catholics, monarchists, and anti-revolutionaries, liberal thought did nevertheless filter through their thinking apparatus. The last two chapters, "Victor Hugo, Kingship, and Louis XVI" and "Camus and Louis XVI," fascinating in scope and original in thought as were her previous ones, demonstrate both Dunn's mastership of her subject and the deftness and sensitivity of her arguments.

A word to the wise concludes Dunn's volume: "But since our world, like theirs, has been shaped not only by the Enlightenment but also by Christianity, monarchism, revolution, and Romantic humanitarianism, we might try to confront the irrational or antidemocratic elements in our own political mythology" (169).

*The Deaths of Louis XVI*, recommended most particularly to students of history, political science, and literature, should be read by *all* thinking people concerned about the direction our country is now pursuing—as well as the paths taken by other nations on this planet.

Hunter College and the Graduate Center CUNY

Bettina L. Knapp

Nash, Suzanne, ed. *Home and Its Dislocations in Nineteenth-Century France*. Albany: SUNY UP, 1993. Pp. 345. \$21.95. ISBN 0-7914-1549-X.

It is fitting that the edited volume of essays, *Home and Its Dislocations in Nineteenth-Century France*, explores a series of historical moments when home and its sphere were both rapidly changing and relentlessly analyzed. As Suzanne Nash, the volume's editor, states in her introduction, the Revolution, the June days of 1848, and the urban renewal of Paris during the Second Empire represent intense periods of social restructuring that are fruitfully considered in relation to simultaneously changing artistic form.

Because we currently situate the cultural *topoi* of home and homelessness largely within the purview of cultural studies, we are compelled to consider this volume's focus on the interrelation between literary and historical study. The problem of history is particularly compelling; the editorial strategy of this volume sets out historical perspectives as entirely necessary without their being the all-in-all of the analyses of texts and contexts of home and homelessness. Following LaCapra (1985), the commitment to view everything and everyone as a "*mentalité* case" is roundly refused. While acknowledging that deconstructionism has debunked the privileges of both literature and history as discourses, Nash evaluates the ways in which this critique has been too hastily dismissive of the possible roles of history in cultural analyses. For these reasons, the current volume imagines something different by revealing "both the temptation and the anxiety implicit in such a pessimistic view of human expression" (4). Nash states that the volume elaborates the "rich cultural history" of the "metaphors" of theorists of modernity—"ruins, debris, rooflessness, *bricolage*, nomadism, and *habitus*" (1). Postmodern pessimism gets a rematch to wrestle with the referent this time cast as less than solid, more fully cultural stuff.

Whether home means a literal house, a sense of private space for socializing and nurturing, one's native region or a nation, nineteenth-century representations of home are often rendered in a semantics of displacement and dislocation meant to forestall still more significant loss of the cherished mythic value called home. In his *The Conscience of the Eye: The Design and Social Life of Cities* (New York: Knopf, 1990), the urban scholar Richard Sennett establishes the dominance of displacement in considerations of home. He claims that the roots of Judeo-Christian culture are experiences of spiritual dislocation and homelessness and shows how these have influenced urban life, particularly as a magnification of the separation of private and public spheres echoing an older distinction between