# Edith Thomas: A Passion for Resistance (review)

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les modalités du regard impliquent un certain « effet idéologie » dans le roman qui assimile indubitablement l'institution du restaurant à un « spectacle de la rue ». Dès lors, le commensal ne peut échapper ni à son propre jugement ni aux jugements des autres qui le croisent, ce qui amène à une sorte de verdict totalement pessimiste. Au fond, les personnages qui se restaurent et qui se jugent constituent un corps d'évaluateurs du restaurant même. Ils jugent ce qu'ils mangent, le décor des lieux et la convivialité, enfin l'institution elle-même. Idéologiquement, ils démolissent les apparences, la solennité du service et la facticité des besoins mondains qui confortent le prestige du restaurant. Et démystifient le restaurant en tant qu'ultime lieu de plaisirs et d'aisances gustatives en faisant en sorte que la convivialité apparaisse comme une institution inéluctablement condamnée, comme le dit Bonnin-Ponnier, par la « présence obsédante des taches » (572).

Dans le dernier grand chapitre du livre (« La Parole de restaurant »), on assiste au verdict du naturalisme sur l'aliénation de la vie de restaurant. C'est à travers un tel verdict qu'il faut désormais ressaisir le sens caché du savoir-vivre des commensaux. Aucun plaisir au restaurant n'est donc possible, durable, naturel, à plus forte raison garanti, devant le jugement d'autrui. L'apologie des scènes de table même les plus exquises n'est jamais à long terme ce qu'ambitionne le romancier naturaliste ; il y a toujours en soubassement de leur description une nécessité idéologique de dissoudre dans la platitude du récit toute velléité gastronomique d'une existence préoccupée par d'autres appétits psychologiques, depuis les plus banals jusqu'aux plus exemplaires. Le geste d'évaluation du restaurant au XIX$^{e}$ siècle consiste à montrer que la quête du plaisir, en passant par un rituel gastronomique codifié, n'aboutira jamais à rehausser les fastes révolus de l'Ancien Régime (le grand apparat, la grâce sublime, le raffinement des manières, l'intelligence et la conversation brillante). Cette quête tombe toujours fatalement sous la fausseté des manières de table, de la convivialité et du décor, c'est-à-dire « sous le signe du plaqué […] et du plat » (570). Ainsi dévoilé, le restaurant équivaut à une sorte de leurre anthropologique. Bonnin-Ponnier montre que l'absence de toute forme de convivialité triomphante était prévisible dans la narration, dans la mesure où les jouissances de l'usager du restaurant sont forcément des réalités antinomiques du pessimisme historique et social, doublé d'une sorte de nihilisme philosophique propre au naturalisme. Le regard évaluatif réduit l'image triomphante des pactes gastronomiques et donne à ces scènes « sans intérêt » l'impression de la vacuité morale de la clientèle bourgeoise.

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Dorothy Kaufmann. *Édith Thomas: A Passion for Resistance*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. Pp. x + 240.

Dorothy Kaufmann's excellent study of the novelist, journalist and historian Édith Thomas presents a fascinating portrait of a writer whose career as an engaged "feminist" intellectual spanned the crucial period from the Popular Front through the Occupation and throughout the postwar period. Thomas is primarily remembered—as Kaufmann's subtitle implies—for her role in the Resistance during the Nazi Occupation. She was, as Claude Morgan described her, the linchpin of the *Comité National des Écrivains*, hosting its clandestine meetings in her apartment at considerable danger to herself. She also contributed pro-Resistance writings to the underground press, and was actively involved in the creation of the *Éditions de Minuit*. But as Kaufmann demonstrates, Thomas's political *engagements* both preceded and followed the Dark Years, and lasted up to her death in 1970. During the early 1930s Thomas visited Algeria, where she was horrified by the colonists' inhumane treatment of the native Algerians. Later, as a reporter for Louis Aragon's *Ce soir,* she denounced the poverty and squalid conditions of the Marais, then a working class district. Later, on assignment in Spain, she praised the courage of the Spanish

Republican fighters in her articles. After being fired by Aragon following her first visit to Spain, she returned as a correspondent for *Regards,* in whose pages she continued to praise the courage of the increasingly desperate Spanish Republicans.

One of the most interesting aspects of Kaufmann's study is her account of Thomas's complicated and often troubled relations with Communism, the PCF, and the political opportunism and cynicism of the Soviet Union. Like Paul Nizan, Thomas was horrified by the Nazi Soviet pact of August 1939 and believed that it would hasten and not prevent war. During the Occupation her faith in Communism was restored due to the latter's role in the Resistance. By the time of the Liberation, she had joined the Party and was asked to edit a new Communist women's journal, *Femmes françaises*, an assignment she accepted. Shortly, however, she was disillusioned with the PCF's sexism and dismissive attitude towards women, and resigned the editorship. She remained in the Party, however, visiting Moscow and Leningrad with a women's delegation in 1946. Moreover, despite her reservations about Communism and its Marxist underpinnings, she championed Marxism and used it in part as the basis of her attacks on Sartrean existentialism and Camus's philosophy of the absurd. For her, both reflected a nihilistic subjectivism, and Sartrean existentialism, in her view, was inextricably linked to and tainted by its debt to Heideggerian existentialism and the latter's links to Nazism. Such was the violence of Thomas's attacks that Camus, who had known her since the days of the CNE, broke with her in a eloquent letter Kaufmann cites in full.

Thomas remained in the Communist Party until 1949, when she broke publicly with it following the Soviet Union's condemnation of Tito, Party attacks on Richard Wright, and persecution of dissidents in Eastern Europe. Until the early fifties, she remained an admirer of Yugoslavian Communism and took several trips to the country, where she befriended the writer Milovan Djilas. But Tito's crackdown on intellectual dissidents, including Djilas, shattered her final illusions concerning the Communist experiment. In despair she confided to a friend: "Communism doesn't work anywhere, not even in Yugoslavia" (159).

Kaufmann's outstanding study also examines Thomas's accomplishments as a novelist and her work as a historian while also addressing crucial details of the writer's personal life with tact and discretion. Kaufman notes, for example, that while Thomas considered herself a heterosexual, the most passionate sexual affair of her life was with Dominique Aury, the author of *The Story of O* and an editor at Gallimard who eventually left Thomas to become Jean Paulhan's mistress. The two women remained friends throughout their lives, however, and Kaufmann acknowledges that it was through Aury that she learned a great deal about her subject and also came into possession of valuable unpublished manuscripts that provided considerable insight into the writer and her work as well as her political choices, dilemmas, and disappointments. Kaufmann also stresses Thomas's affection and admiration for her brother, Gérard, a lawyer and committed activist who greatly influenced Édith's politics. To a very real extent, Édith's affection for Gérard was such that, especially after his death, all other men who had been in her life came to seem almost inconsequential by comparison.

Thomas wrote several novels, and although space does not allow for their discussion here, Kaufmann does a fine job of revealing the sources of their inspiration and their connections with the writer's life. For the most part, these works were written before the war and during the Occupation. They deal fictionally with the problems faced by Thomas in her own life—serious illnesses, romantic entanglements, political dilemmas and the like. In a broader context, they also explore problems encountered by educated women in French society and culture of the time.

In the post-war years, Thomas wrote primarily histories, and her subjects included fascinating and controversial figures like Louise Michel and especially Colonel Louis-Nathaniel Rossel, an army officer who joined the Paris Commune as a military leader and then left that position out of frustration over the *communards*' fatal inefficiency in fighting their enemies. Considered a traitor by both sides, Rossel was eventually arrested and executed at the age of twenty-seven. According to Kaufmann, Rossel was for Thomas an admirable if failed de Gaulle *avant la lettre*,

and much more: "In Rossel she [Thomas] found the ideal lover, child, and brother she could imaginatively have to herself" (210).

There is a great deal more fascinating detail concerning Édith Thomas provided in this elegant, clearly written, thoroughly researched and well-organized study. Dorothy Kaufmann has paid Édith Thomas the highest of compliments: she has admirably summed up the writer's life and accomplishments and, in the process, made a strong case for Thomas's considerable importance in the history of French letters and intellectual life.

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Jean H. Duffy. *Signs and Designs: Art and Architecture in the Work of Michel Butor*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003. Pp. 302, 21 illustrations.

Having explored Claude Simon's artistic intertexts in *Reading Between the Lines* (1998), Jean Duffy now turns her erudite attentions to another author obsessed with the visual/textual relation: Michel Butor. The result is a must-read resource for all Butor scholars, for it provides not only sustained analyses of the author's major works, but also a thorough overview of relevent criticism from the 1960s to today. Indeed, the book's introduction serves as a critical guide to Butor scholarship, with succinct "mini-reviews" detailing general trends as well as particular critics's theses. The introduction becomes an essential reference when paired with the book's careful and thorough bibliography. Butor's prolific production spans half a century and includes not only books, but over 200 collaborative works with such artists as Baltazar, Joly, and Masurovsky, all of which Duffy has meticulously catalogued. The synthetic skill and pedagogical generosity of such work should not be overlooked.

But of course it is the book's central (and clearly-stated) aim to study Butor's many textual references to architecture and the visual or plastic arts. Though other critics have mentioned Gaudì's role in *L'Emploi du temps* or the Roman trio (Cavallini/Pannini/Bernini) in *La Modification*, none has gone as "broad and deep" as does Duffy here. Broad, in that she extends intertextual analyses to the less-studied Butor corpus (including *Boomerang*, *Les Mots dans la peinture*, and *Le Génie du lieu*). And deep, in that she brings extensive art history and criticism to bear on her analyses. When relating the novel *Degrés,* for example, to Massys's 1514 *The Money-Lender and his Wife*, Duffy invokes the genre painting's iconographic symbolism as a moral gloss that underwrites Butor's broader critique of capitalist imperialism. She similarly goes beyond the mere enumeration of common themes between Butor's *Passage de Milan* and Duchamp's glass installation *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (*Le Grand Verre*). Yes, Duchamp's work acts as "narrative generator," providing Butor with the motifs of bride and bachelors, sexual desire and untimely death. But it also must be understood as part of a larger meditation—and Duffy invokes Duchamp's own notes on the project's "sex cylinders," "spangles," and "malic moulds" to re-cast it as a "symbolic meditation on [...] non-fulfilment, failure, abortive communication, sterility, and [...] the mechanistic dimension of modern man." She thus gives due to the discursivity of art and art criticism, rather than relegate pictures to the status of inert muse for the cultured writer.

*Signs and Designs* is organized into 5 central chapters, the first four focussing on Butor's better-known works. The sustained Duchamp/*Passage de Milan* chapter ends with a reading of De Vere's artistic project as a *mise en abyme* of the novel's own spatial composition. The next chapter, on "high and low culture" in *L'Emploi du temps*, similarly emphasizes Butor's compositional strategies—this time as mirrored in novelistic references to cathedral architecture, museum images, and tapestry series. Here, Duffy begins to build one of her book's larger arguments about Butor's ambivalence toward the cultural endeavors of human civilization: the Old Cathedral