

INDEBTED BODIES

Debt and Decadence in the Nineteenth-Century Novel

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Abstract

Title: Indebted Bodies: Debt and Decadence in the Nineteenth-Century Novel. **Author:** Signe Leth Gammelgaard. **Language:** English. **Department:** Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Box 200, SE 405 30 Göteborg. **Series:** Dissertations presented at the Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, no. 62. **ISBN:** 978-91-8009-094-0 (print), 978-91-8009-095-7 (pdf).

This dissertation investigates the relationship between linguistic and stylistic innovation in nineteenth-century literature on the one hand and shifts in the dynamics of the economic sign system on the other. It draws on prior work on parallels between language and money and argues specifically that developments in the nineteenth-century novel can be understood in terms of the contemporaneous economic history, and that the two sign systems of language and money display structural similarities in this period. The central focus is the shift away from realism and towards the proto-modernist forms of the *fin de siècle*, in particular the decadent works. The dissertation thus argues that the period displays issues of representation not only as semiotic gaps between sign and thing or signified and signifier but as a downright loss of meaning, a loss of the signified in the constitution of the sign.

The present work examines novels by six French and British authors through the lens of debt as a literary motif in order to portray the economic developments of the period. This focus allows for comparative points between the various works and shows how the money plots in these novels parallel their take on linguistic representation. A central concern is the relationship between debt and the human body in each work, which displays a development from withering bodies, over tortured and torn ones, to decomposing, decaying, and ravaged flesh. The focus on the human body also works as a segue into larger questions on the way these novels negotiate the relationship between art, language, and material reality. The dissertation contributes on the one hand by supplying a reading of the nineteenth-century novel with a stronger and more structural take on the influences of money and economic dynamics than what previous scholarship has offered. On the other hand, it reveals problems of meaning in a period where production to an ever-larger degree gives way to financialization, and where the economy exhibits what Giovanni Arrighi has termed “signs of autumn” of a specific cycle of capitalist development.

Keywords: New Economic Criticism, debt, Balzac, Trollope, Zola, Huysmans, Wilde, Mirbeau, money, nineteenth-century novel, economy and literature, materialism, Marxist literary theory, semiotics, Saussure, the human body in literature.