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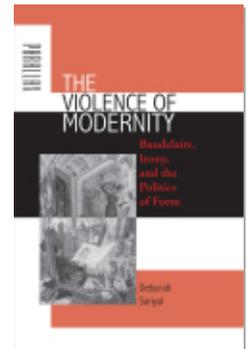
The Violence of Modernity

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Introduction

We live in an era of trauma and terror, when experience is increasingly viewed through the categories of shock, wounding, and victimization. As global information networks virtually bring home the course of history, we find ourselves in disturbing proximity to distant eruptions of violence and are alerted to its menace in our daily lives. In what critics call our contemporary “wound culture,” the affective registers of trauma, melancholy, and mourning provide tempting alternatives to more active engagements with history.¹ We are beckoned to submit to historical processes as spectators, witnesses, or even victims, rather than as agents with implicit ties to the violence that is represented. The rhetoric of trauma and terror fosters a sense of vulnerability and crisis that often obscures the complexity of our own historical embedding.

This turn to historical experience through affective and therapeutic models is reflected in contemporary critical discourse. In the aftermath of poststructuralism’s dismantling of stable values, “trauma,” “testimony,” and “crisis” have emerged as dominant terms in the humanities for examining the relations between literature and history. Yet this focus on trauma is by no means a new phenomenon. Following Walter Benjamin, among others, shock and modernity have come to be seen as interlocking categories. Trauma itself emerges as a “structure of feeling” under the material conditions of nineteenth-century urban modernity, and Charles Baudelaire is often cited as its exemplary bard.² Baudelaire’s poetry serves as an essential point of reference in theories that define modernity as a trauma inaugurating a “crisis of representation.” The poet’s notoriously vexed relationship to reference, his disarticulation of self, mean-

ing, and history, captures our sense of the “modern” as a breach with all preceding frameworks for interpreting consciousness and experience, as a moment when “all that is solid melts into air.” Baudelaire’s position in the modern literary and theoretical canon has shaped and continues to inflect our understanding of historical experience and its literary representations through models of shock, crisis, indeterminacy, and trauma.

This book argues for Baudelaire’s value in thinking about the contestatory possibilities of literary experience at this particular historical juncture, when the very concept of critique is muted by the dominance of trauma and terror, terms that reinforce our status as victims rather than as agents of resistance and change. In a cultural climate that privileges crisis over critique, affect over analysis, it seems all the more urgent to attend to the critical and contestatory powers of literary representation and to return to basic questions such as: What does literature have to teach us about the violence of history? How does the representation of violence differ from its exercise in real life? Can literature offer a space for a critique of violence? And what is the place of violence in critique? These are some of the broader questions addressed here through the example of Baudelaire in the hope of opening up alternative readings of modernism and modernity that acknowledge the role of irony, contestation, and critique in challenging the imbricated violences of modern experience.

As one of the first poets to represent the aesthetic and political characteristics of urban modernity, Baudelaire grasped the central place of representation in the practice and legitimation of power. By exploiting the complicity between poetry and other discursive régimes, his work probes the overlapping symbolic relations that create and sustain aesthetic production and social formations. Baudelaire envisioned violence, not as a monolithic force wielded by identifiable perpetrators, but as a complex and dynamic operation that takes place at multiple sites and through diverse media, including poetry itself. This complex and differential view of violence is particularly timely today, when trauma and terror are packaged by the media for consumption by citizens interpellated as passive spectators of history’s course. Although recent theory has led to sophisticated accounts of the decentralized and ungraspable quality of power, its dissemination in academic circles and in general public culture has tended to foster melancholy resignation or even cynicism rather than a sense of possibility, resistance, or agency.³ For Baudelaire, the individual’s abdication before the forces of history was one of the most terrifying faces of capitalist modernity. His ironic denunciations of power’s deployment—through new postrevolutionary political and economic configurations—retain their critical relevance today.

As any overview of this century's theory and criticism reveals, Baudelaire has always been an exemplary figure for thinking about the various articulations between history and literature. Since his canonization as representative of *l'art pour l'art* (by Paul Valéry among others), his poetry has been successively claimed by the most eminent theoretical schools: structuralist poetics, Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, phenomenology, deconstruction, new historicism, cultural studies, and postmodern theories of trauma.⁴ But if Baudelaire is fertile ground for the production of theory, theory rarely contains the contradictory force of his poetry. This is hardly surprising, given the poet's vociferous objections to the closure of systems, described by him as "a sort of damnation that pushes us into perpetual abjurations."⁵ Perpetual abjurations seem the norm when approaching Baudelaire's corpus. There is an explosive vitality to his poetry—conveyed by Benjamin's image of the poet as conspirator and terrorist—that exceeds theoretical frames and forces readers to redefine their critical horizons.

This book seeks to bring this volatile force to bear on the cultural preoccupations of Baudelaire's historical moment—the formation in the aftermath of 1848 of a postrevolutionary bourgeois majority, and its ideologies of consumerism, progress, and conquest. But it also aims to recover the critical power of Baudelaire's legacy for our current theoretical and political concerns. Reading Baudelaire as an engaged ironist whose poetry actively challenges the violence of modernity foregrounds the ethical and political force of irony for crucial historical junctures, including our own.

The opening chapters argue that Baudelaire's central status for a conception of modernity (as a historical rupture or trauma) and a view of modernism (as literature's drift away from history and commitment) need to be rethought simultaneously to recover the relevance of his oeuvre today.⁶ To this end, the book offers three (re)contextualizations of Baudelaire. The first is theoretical, and traces the definition of modernity *through* the models of rupture, shock, and trauma, a definition that owes much to a particular reading of Walter Benjamin by deconstruction and psychoanalysis. One of the most important theoretical paradigms to emerge in recent decades, "trauma" is by now a deeply entrenched but rarely interrogated category for reading history and literature. In literary studies, the turn to trauma often relies on a reading of Baudelaire's "poetics of shock" and belongs to a broader meditation on the Holocaust as modernity's defining "crisis of representation." Yet trauma is a paradigm that operates both inside and outside the academy, informing broader readings of cultural production *and* of historical events (as the surge of "trauma literature" around 9/11 attests).⁷

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What are some of the consequences of this canonization of Baudelaire—and of the modernity he represents—as a witness to the trauma of history? As a theoretical formulation, what are the ideological limits of approaching literature as a “testimony” to historical crisis? What kinds of mediation between literature, history, and ethical-political agency does such a model occlude?⁸ One of the many problems that arise in the overwhelming focus on literature as the testimony of a “crisis of representation” is that it privileges a highly textual view of modernity in which the particularity of history as an empirical force experienced by bodies and subjects evaporates into abstraction. As I argue in Chapter 1, the treatment of modernity itself as a structure of trauma also tends to conflate very different historical crises by way of structural analogies, such that the shocks of the nineteenth-century metropolis are incorporated into a narrative of historical trauma culminating in the collective violences of the twentieth century. The accepted view of modernity as a “crisis of representation” runs the risk of treating history as a “contentless form” voided of its particular violences, both symbolic and real. Further, as a way of reading the conjunction between history and literature, models of shock and trauma overlook how texts—and people—actively contest the particular violences of a given historical moment (rather than simply “bearing witness” to them). Given how deeply Baudelaire has shaped our sense of historical experience, steering the course of his scholarship away from models of trauma and toward questions of agency, contestation, and commitment has implications that reach beyond the limits of literary analysis into the realm of contemporary cultural politics.

If Baudelaire’s legacy retains its critical energy, it is because his poetry teaches us how to *read* and *resist* historical violence, particularly in periods of crisis that aim to co-opt or short-circuit more direct forms of dissent. Irony—one of modernity’s dominant modes of self-understanding—is thus examined here as a powerful tool for critique in Baudelaire’s poetry and, more generally, in the modernist project he has come to represent. Irony is traditionally defined as a rhetorical figure that creates two or more disparate meanings in a text. This ambiguity has a contestatory purpose in a context of shared values. Its postmodern identifications with contingency, indeterminacy, and relativism, however, have dulled irony’s oppositional edge. This book is an effort to invigorate irony’s contestatory impetus by recovering the ideological valences of modernism’s retreat into form, in the hopes of reenergizing literature’s spirit of critique vis-à-vis historical violence.

The question of “modernism” also brings me to a second (re)contextualiza-

tion of Baudelaire, this time in terms of the literary tradition. My readings return to the established canonization of Baudelaire—and of the European tradition of high modernism he represents—in terms of *l'art pour l'art*, seeking to bridge the traditional rift between literary form and ethical-political commitment. From Théophile Gautier's defense of "art for art's sake" to Jean-Paul Sartre's dismissal of poetry for the purposes of *engagement* a century later, formal experimentation has repeatedly been divorced from ethical and political commitment. In a sense, our current turn to trauma and testimony as lenses for reading Baudelaire rehearses the more familiar story of modernism as inaugurating literature's retreat from history, materiality, and praxis. Indeed, it may be worth considering what recent formulations of the trauma and unrepresentability of history owe to normative views of modernism as an anti-representational aesthetic. The theorizations of modernity as a trauma and of modernism as a "crisis of representation" need to be reconsidered together for the emergence of a more nuanced picture of what the literary interrogation of reference can *do* at particular historical junctures.⁹

This study charts a reading of the modernist turn that attends to the constatory power of literary form. I address the literary phenomenon of modernism—its interrogation of reference and withdrawal into form—as an active critique of historical modernity. Baudelaire incorporates ethical and political preoccupations into the self-consciousness and formalism that define the modernist experiment. My readings examine how the hallmarks of modernism (irony, self-reflexivity, intertextuality, and the bid for aesthetic autonomy) illuminate and challenge the violence of history. Formal reflexivity, textual opacity, intertextuality, and irony—devices traditionally thought to remove literature from ethical and political concerns—are precisely what spark a critical encounter between the literary and historical domains.

Baudelaire's use of aesthetic form as the site of cultural critique is taken up and revitalized by later writers whose diversity defies the straightforward periodization associated with the poet (late romanticism, symbolism, decadence, modernism, and even postmodernism). My third (re)contextualization turns to a number of post-Baudelairean authors whose reflections on form and commitment open up a critical engagement with historical violence. These readings bring into relief a number of Baudelairean "committed ironists" from the center and the margins of the canon, including such figures as Rachilde (the nom de plume of Marguerite Vallette-Eymery), Albert Camus and, most recently, contemporary women authors such as Virginie Despentes. My selection of these particular authors has been motivated by their explicit or implicit

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dialogues with Baudelaire, but also because their attention to the dynamics of textual production, to the links between representation and violence, and to the fate of the body in literature and history, affiliate them to the nineteenth-century poet's legacy of irony as counterviolence. In their works, irony, self-reflexivity, and textual violence become tools for a critical testimony that mirrors the violence of history from a spectrum of positions. Violence is subjected to analysis, critique, and denunciation not from above but from within the symbolic operations of a given historical moment. My hope is that such discussions will begin to map an account of modernism that attends to one of its neglected currents. A current charged with irony, it engages in a self-conscious critique that resists assimilation into scripted ideological positions while refusing the melancholy abdications of postmodern approaches to history.

This contestatory legacy takes its cue from Baudelaire himself, who challenges the notion of the modern writing subject as a victim of history's course when he declares: "Non seulement, je serais heureux d'être victime, mais je ne haïrais pas d'être bourreau—pour sentir la Révolution de deux manières !" (*OC*, 2: 961). The poet's willingness to be at once victim *and* executioner, in order to have the revolution "both ways," beckons us to consider how poetry responds to historical processes through active forms of resistance and critique. Baudelaire's attunement to the *violence* of modernity—and to his own contradictory position within this violence—exposes the often hidden structural relations of force that govern art, history, and everyday life. His poetry maps out the underlying conditions that enable a subject's emergence or destruction in literature and history, offering a differentiated genealogy of how persons are produced, diminished, or extinguished on the textual stage *and* on the historical scene.

Following Baudelaire's own claim that he wished to be at once victim and executioner of history's revolutionary course, then, this book reads his poetry, not as a witness to the trauma of modernity, but as a self-conscious critique of its violence. A focus on critique rather than crisis, on irony rather than trauma, affords a more complex understanding of a person and a text's positioning in history by underscoring the intimate links between the trauma of modernity and the enactment of its violence. By recovering a range of positions occupied by persons, texts, and readers, irony opens up a more nuanced theoretical passage into the historical scene of modernity.

The relations between literary form, historical violence, and commitment are thus a central preoccupation of this book. My discussions of Baudelaire—and of later works in dialogue with his legacy—pay attention to the ideologi-

cal valences of literary operations. They integrate the practice of close reading into historical concerns generally addressed under the rubric of “cultural studies.” The methodological value of close reading is particularly vital today, when the specificity of literary discourse is imperiled by approaches that view the literary text as yet another cultural artifact “reflecting” its historical context. This “referential” approach to reading flattens out the texture, distinction, and energy of literary expression. Of course, close readings continue to be practiced in the classroom and in specific strands of literary and cultural criticism. In the aftermath of New Criticism and its focus on a work’s textuality, deconstructive and psychoanalytic approaches popular in the 1980s and 1990s continue to foreground the rhetorical features of literary works. The current convergence of deconstruction and psychoanalysis in trauma theory uses close reading to identify the blind spots, contradictions, or “aporias” in a text’s rhetorical system as signs of the force of history.¹⁰ This strand of literary criticism thus differs from the cultural studies model by working outward to historical concerns from within the text itself.

Yet despite their methodological differences, both the historicist impetus of cultural studies and the rhetorical focus of trauma studies tend to turn the literary text into a *symptom* rather than an active critique of its historical moment. While my book builds upon both historicist and textualist approaches to Baudelaire, it seeks to develop a theory of reading *out* of specific literary texts in order to account for the agency of a text’s engagement with its context.¹¹ The close readings of Baudelaire, Balzac, Mallarmé, Rachilde, Camus, and Desportes attempt to reenergize the relations between literary form and ideological critique. They attend to the dialectical relations—the mutual reinforcement, but also the gaps and differences—between Baudelaire, his surrounding ideological terrain, and his successive readerships. It is through the deployment of poetic form and specific rhetorical strategies that Baudelaire and his readers expose and challenge the representational systems of a given historical moment. Close readings that attend to specific literary operations such as allegory, irony, and intertextuality are thus central to recovering the reciprocal and critical relations among a text, its historical horizon, and the modalities of its reception.

To better elucidate the stakes of defending poetic form as a vehicle for critique, I now turn to an influential formulation of the split between form and commitment: the famous divorce between poetry and prose found in the opening pages of Sartre’s *Qu’est-ce que la littérature ?* and challenged by Adorno in his essay “Commitment.” Sartre envisioned prose as a collective sig-

nifying practice in which reading and writing constitute a dialectical exchange of mutually enforcing freedom between writer and reader. Freedom is ideally at once represented in the committed work of art and enacted in its reading. By contrast, poetry's cultivation of linguistic ambiguity necessarily bars the genre from commitment, since the very process of figuration fetishizes words and alienates them from a collective semiotic economy.¹² Sartre's first step toward developing a model of writing as communicative praxis, then, was to establish a division between genres that ascribed to poetry those literary features that obscure linguistic transparency. Prose emerged purified from "literary" language and its viscous accretions of meaning to become a transparent designative instrument for political actions.¹³

Given Sartre's analysis, what might the figural operations of poetry offer to theories of *engagement*?¹⁴ How can poetry's reflection on its forms, and indeed, upon the very concept *of* form, in turn open up alternate forms of commitment? This, of course, is not a new question. Indeed, one of the most famous challenges to the Sartrean divorce between aesthetic form and *engagement* is found in Theodor Adorno's considerations of form itself as a privileged site for political critique and ethical reflection. For Adorno, poetic thought articulates a subjective resistance to the reification and social antagonisms of the modern world. Lyric poetry constitutes "a sphere of expression whose very essence lies in defying the power of social organization—either by refusing to see it, or in overcoming it through the pathos of distance, as in Baudelaire or Nietzsche" (*Adorno Reader*, 213). The later experimentations of the aesthetic avant garde, for Adorno, continued to challenge the violence of a bourgeois, technocratic, and bureaucratic society through the shock of aesthetic form. Their dissonant negativity unveiled the aporias of modern society in a performative transmission of alienation far more powerful than any direct, thematic denunciation. By "zeroing in on the dregs of the administered world," authors such as Kafka "laid bare the inhumanity of a repressive social totality" (*ibid.*, 247). Their experimentation with form was precisely what enabled them simultaneously to witness and to denounce the violence of history.¹⁵ For Adorno, then, the Sartrean view of commitment as transparent action upon the world failed to recognize "the effects produced by works whose own formal laws pay no heed to coherent effects," and therefore missed "what the shock of the unintelligible can communicate" (Adorno, "Commitment," 303). Literary form is a privileged vehicle for the transmission of human fear, alienation, or suffering under the inhuman conditions of the modern bureaucratic world of instrumental reason.

In order to assess the ongoing influence of this opposition in current critical debates, it is useful to map the divergence between Sartre and Adorno as one between, on the one hand, commitment or a vision of language as action upon the world, and, on the other, testimony or an approach to language as witness to the world's resistance to signification. Whereas the Sartrean view of commitment preserves a certain "aboutness" and specificity in the representation of experience, Adorno suggests that literature's testimonial value resides in a performative enactment of its shock. Mapping these binaries—between content and form, commitment and testimony, or "writing history" and "writing trauma"—helps us see more clearly what is at stake in the recent turn to literature as a site of trauma and testimony.¹⁶

The escalating violence of modern historical experience has led to theories of representation that address powerful questions. How do we understand, represent, and transmit events that, because of their unthinkable atrocity, were not fully assimilated and understood even by those who experienced them? Can literature bear witness to the irreducible singularity of these events by putting pressure on established frameworks and fostering a recognition of the violence of their explanatory frames? How do we attest to the victims of history and the ongoing, untheorizable fact of suffering without falling into the treacherous consolations of aesthetic—and ideological—redemption?

Adorno's famous dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (*Prisms*, 34) is a classic articulation of art's dilemma before the tangible fact of violence. While figural representations convey something of the lived particularity of historical violence, their figurality is bound to betray the singularity of a victim's experience. Adorno's declaration is often misread as a ban on representations of the Holocaust, as an indictment of literary figuration itself for betraying the victims' suffering, and as an exhortation to silence.¹⁷ Yet its paradoxical formulation captures a living tension that exists in all art responding to unthinkable and unjustifiable forms of violence. For while the artistic rendering of suffering risks diminishing and betraying the singularity of a victim's experience, it is nevertheless in art alone that "suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it" ("Commitment," 312). Art's power lies in its performative transmission of another's suffering, through the disruptive power of form. The recent dominance of testimony and trauma as modes of literary access to history thus serve to heal the breach opened up by Sartrean accounts between the figural processes of literature and the historical demands of commitment.¹⁸ Approaching a literary text as testimony of a "crisis of representation" allows readers to forge connec-

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tions between form, content, and context, seeing ambiguity and resistance as signs of what Cathy Caruth has termed “unclaimed experience,” forms of historicity that simultaneously demand and defy our witness. The literary text’s aporias thus “bear witness” to the unthinkable and unjustifiable terror of history.

Yet subsequent accounts of literature as testimony tend to eclipse Adorno’s own highly dialectical understanding of literary form as the site for an enactment and critique of historical violence, as well as Sartre’s view of the writing subject’s agency, situatedness, and responsibility in history. Indeed, in recent formulations of literature’s testimonial function, the critical and denunciatory dimensions so central to Adorno are muted, if not displaced, by affective registers of melancholy and mourning that convey the disempowered trauma of a subject crushed by historical forces. This can only give us an incomplete reading of historical violence that makes absolute the experience of the “victim,” thereby foreclosing further inquiry into the complexity of a historical moment and a subject’s place in its ethico-political weave.¹⁹ Violence is, after all, an operation that takes place in all aspects of lived experience. We can alternately—and sometimes even simultaneously—take on the roles of victim, executioner, witness, proxy witness, accomplice or collaborator, or unsuspecting enforcer of violence we perceive as external to us. Our current focus on “victim” and “witness” as subject positions occupied by texts views literature as a primarily reactive testimony to the violence of historical processes. This dulls the critical and oppositional edge of literature’s relationship to power by turning the text into a symptomatic inscription of historical crises. It fails to address how literature might engage with specific forms of power through dynamic relations of complicity or resistance, or give its readers a genealogy of the production of violence from a range of contestatory and complicit—as well as testimonial—positions. The ambiguities and ironies of literary experience enable us to hold thought and counterthought, violence and counter-violence, in the same dialectical hand and against a differentiated history. A variegated approach to the representation of violence captures the complexity of a subject’s (and a text’s) relations to power in different histories and sites, while retaining categories of agency, responsibility, and critique.

The following discussion of Baudelaire’s contestatory legacy seeks to mediate between the content of Sartre’s commitment and the form of Adorno’s testimony.²⁰ Albert Camus, the subject of my closing chapter, plays an important historical and conceptual role in this attempt to navigate the rift between commitment and testimony through irony and counterviolence. In his acceptance

speech for the Nobel Prize, Camus made a powerful call for literature's allegiance to the *victims* of history: "Par définition, il [l'écrivain] ne peut se mettre aujourd'hui au service de ceux qui font l'histoire: il est au service de ceux qui la subissent" (*E*, 1072). This conception of history as an external force that unfolds outside the sphere of human agency was derided by Sartre as proof of Camus's naïve disregard for the writer's inevitable situatedness in history. In the aftermath of World War II, the break between these two intellectuals and fellow *résistants* was but another example of the accepted rift between literary form and ethico-political commitment. Sartre had already condemned Baudelaire, and the trajectory of French literature associated with him, for withdrawing from history, and Camus was now also relegated to Sartre's *capharnaïm* of Baudelairean *littérateurs* who shun the demands of praxis.

Yet Camus, like Baudelaire, is an exemplary ironist whose dialectical understanding of the relations between aesthetics and ideology is manifest throughout his works. From *Caligula* to *La Chute*, Camus's oeuvre bears witness to forms of terror shared by the literary and aesthetic imaginations. Like Baudelaire and the other authors considered here, Camus suggests that there are many ways of "bearing witness" to the violence of history. Irony emerges in his works as one of the most committed forms of testimony. In contrast to Sartre's view of commitment, which as Denis Hollier has argued, is a "politics of prose," the authors examined in this book fashion what I call a "poetics of violence," an ironic mode of critique that performs the links between literary representation and historical terror.

My reading of Baudelaire's poetics of irony, counterviolence, and critique thus hopes to make visible a strand of committed ironists that remains active today. Theirs is a self-reflexive literary practice attuned to the ethical implications of their representational procedures. They accept the betrayal endemic to representation itself, and yet refuse the melancholy defeat of a purely testimonial relationship to history. Rather than exploiting affective relations with the reader (who would be urged to take the place of the victim of textual and historical violence), they interrupt such intimate modes of identification, beckoning instead to what I call a proximate yet implicated relation to the histories that they represent. The gaps opened up by their ironic registers enable a more differentiated reading of textual and historical violence. Their irony navigates between the interventionist claims of commitment and the commemorative function of testimony, producing a disenchanting but corrosive critique that contests the structural violences of historical experience from within.

The Organization of the Book

This book is divided into two parts. Part I, “Violence and Representation in Baudelaire,” pursues the inquiry detailed above specifically in terms of Baudelaire’s poetry and prose. Part 2, “Unlikely Contestations: Baudelaire’s Legacy Revisited,” examines a number of later writings in dialogue with his legacy of irony as counterviolence.

Chapter 1, “Baudelaire’s Victims and Executioners: From Symptoms of Trauma to a Critique of Violence,” provides an overview of Baudelaire’s canonization as the poet of trauma to argue that violence offers a more powerful hermeneutic for a historical inquiry into Baudelaire’s modernity. I begin by examining how deconstruction and trauma theory have used a de Manian reading of irony and a partial reading of Benjamin’s shock to theorize modernity itself as a “crisis of representation.” The chapter sets up an alternative paradigm for considering the relationship between poetry, history, and ethics through violence, counterviolence, and irony. I read two key Baudelairean texts on irony, the poem “L’Héautontimorouménos” and the essay “De l’essence du rire,” which open up a different view of irony, not as an epistemological crisis or trauma, but as an exemplary mode of contestation.

While the first chapter addresses theorizations of modernity through Baudelaire, Chapter 2, Passages from Form to Politics: Baudelaire’s *Le Spleen de Paris*, repositions Baudelaire in established accounts of modernism as a retreat from content into form. By putting the models of irony, counterviolence, and critique to work in detailed analyses of *Le Spleen de Paris*, I show that Baudelaire’s “modernism” establishes a direct connection between poetic forms and postrevolutionary social formations. I examine several poems that develop “counterviolences” to existing violences in the Second Empire’s body politic: the repressive regime of Napoleon III, the bankruptcy of republican idealism, the collapse of an oppositional political culture, and the violence of commerce, consumerism, and the media. My readings focus on one particular site for the exercise of violence: the human body. Baudelaire’s representation of the body as the ground and vehicle for aesthetic *and* ideological representation opens a passage between poetry and history that challenges accounts of modernism as a retreat from reference, materiality, and history. The following chapters thus focus on the body and its aesthetic, sexual, and cultural determinations through Baudelaire and his legacy.

Chapter 3, “Bodies in Motion, Texts on Stage: Baudelaire’s Women and the Forms of Modernity,” pursues this inquiry into the poetic and social fashion-

ing of bodies by opening Baudelaire's poetry up to questions of gender. The chapter is framed by readings of Balzac and Mallarmé and traces the articulation of nineteenth-century conceptions of "modernity" through competing representations of the female body (as regressive materiality, as commodity, as art, and as racialized "other"). For Baudelaire, "woman" is a site of contested meaning at the crossroads of aesthetic modernism and the material conditions of capitalist, urban modernity. His representations of women map the violence of a body's inscription into form within an increasingly market-oriented imperial and colonial culture. This preoccupation with the body's "production" through forms of sexual, economic, and racial violence is tied into a critique of poetry's performative force, that is to say, of poetry's explicit and often violent production of the bodies it designates. In presenting women's bodies as exhibition pieces, Baudelaire calls into question the nature and ground of these bodies, pointing out instead the ideological investments that produce and make them signify. This demystification of the body's "nature" is conducted *through* the self-reflexivity and formalism that we generally associate with modernism. Modernism's often-observed crisis of representation might be reconsidered as putting bodies in motion and texts on stage, thus exposing the conditions of a subject's emergence in the broader cultural field.

Part II, "Unlikely Contestations: Baudelaire's Legacy Revisited," traces the legacy of Baudelairean irony and counterviolence in a number of unlikely French authors from decadence to postmodernism. While the writers I consider lack obvious or canonical relationships to Baudelaire, their intertextual dialogue with the poet's legacy illustrates the claims established in the book's first three chapters. Rachilde, Camus, and Desportes address modern experience through a critique of violence rather than a testimony to trauma, their use of *form* as a passage between literature and history revises accepted accounts of modernism, and their self-reflexive operations explore the human body's status as a vulnerable materiality shaped by aesthetic and historical violence.

Chapter 4, "Matter's Revenge on Form: Bad Girls Talk Back," addresses two women writers in dialogue with Baudelaire's poetry: the decadent author Rachilde (playfully dubbed "Mlle Baudelaire" by her contemporaries) and the contemporary "punk" writer Virginie Desportes, both of whom faced censorship for their transgressive representations of sex and violence. Their work acknowledges and contests the cultural legacy of modernism and high literature generally associated with Baudelaire: the victory of form over matter, the violence of allegorical inscription, and the gendering of poet and muse. From

their very different historical vantage points, Rachilde and Desportes resignify central Baudelairean motifs such as the dandy, the flâneur, and the woman as prostitute, beast, or vehicle for literary transports, enacting what I call a “revenge of matter over form.” As such, they prove to be exemplary readers of Baudelaire, for their combative engagements with his aesthetic legacy perform the act of reading itself as a “counterviolence.” Their use of violence, the negativity of their critique, and their rejection of political agendas challenge straightforward feminist recuperations of their works. But I contend that this negativity opens up important insights into the sexual politics of “high literature” and into shame and abjection as modes of resistance to the body’s aesthetic and social inscription. Their writings stage the proximity of violence in everyday life, and invoke the body’s fragility and resistance before it.

Chapter 5 is entitled “Broken Engagements: Albert Camus and the Poetics of Terror.” In the aftermath of World War II, as intellectuals confronted emergent as well as ongoing forms of terror, Camus’s critique of ideology, or what he termed “les religions horizontales de notre temps,” offers a compelling, albeit neglected, alternative to Sartrean models of engagement. I begin with an overview of Camus’s *L’Homme révolté* and its meditation on the links between aesthetics, ideology, and terror. Camus’s analysis of the overlapping violence of art, politics and everyday life develops a “poetics of terror” that is distinct from Sartre’s “politics of prose.” It is also attuned to the intellectual’s capacity to collaborate with historical violence. I situate Camus’s “poetics of terror” within the legacy of committed ironists issuing from Baudelaire. Camus’s vexed relationship to *engagement* belongs to a long-standing preoccupation with literature’s complicity with other regimes of power, a preoccupation I have traced in works by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Rachilde, and Desportes. Camus puts this “poetics of terror” into practice in *La Chute*, a novel whose important Baudelairean intertext also illustrates the links between art, rebellion, and violence theorized in *L’Homme révolté*. Using Baudelaire as an intertextual thread, my reading seeks to draw out the resonances between Camus’s “poetics of terror,” the strategies of irony and counterviolence explored thus far, and our contemporary historical horizon. As an engaged intellectual wrestling with the dilemmas of postwar French politics, Camus provides a powerful elucidation of irony’s value in an ethical and political critique of violence.

This book highlights an inquiry into violence that is embedded in French modernism and yet exceeds any one periodization. My reading of Baudelaire’s poetry and its intertextual reworkings map one vector of this inquiry through a hermeneutic of irony and counterviolence, in the hope of contributing to a

more nuanced reading of violence and its representations. The ironists considered in this study offer a bracing corrective to our contemporary “wound culture.” In an age of escalating terror, their strategies of counterviolence disclose the relations of force that structure a given historical moment from a range of identifications, reminding us that violence is not an immutable condition, or a weapon wielded by readily identified perpetrators, but a dynamic and differential operation. History situates us in contradictory relations to the causes, deployments and effects of violence—as witnesses and victims, to be sure, but also as accomplices, bystanders, and executioners. The mobility of these ironists’ identifications nevertheless attune us to the differences between experiences of violence in distinct histories and places, differences often eclipsed by established systems of representation, including those of literature and criticism.

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