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The Violence of Modernity

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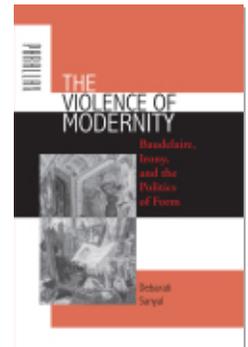
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Baudelaire's Victims and Executioners

From the Symptoms of Trauma to a Critique of Violence

J'oserai pousser plus loin ; j'affirme que l'inspiration a quelque rapport avec la congestion, et que toute pensée sublime est accompagnée d'une secousse nerveuse, plus ou moins forte, qui retentit jusque dans le cervelet.

Baudelaire, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne"

Que faites-vous ? Vous marchez. Vous allez en avant. Vous dotez le ciel de l'art d'on ne sait quel rayon macabre. Vous créez un frisson nouveau.

Victor Hugo, letter to Baudelaire, October 6, 1859

It has become something of a commonplace to canonize Baudelaire as the quintessential poet of the modern experience and to envision this modernity as inaugurating a "crisis of representation." What Victor Hugo called a "frisson nouveau" invented by the younger poet is increasingly described as a shock that dissolves language's ability to refer, and in doing so, captures the essentially traumatic nature of modern experience. The myriad theoretical articulations of modernity through the example of Baudelaire, however distinct in their approach and methodology, all converge on one point: the abiding sense that his poetry is unique, indeed, unprecedented, for capturing a psychological, historical, and ethical condition that exceeds all previous frames of reference.¹

Readings of Baudelaire as the inaugural poet of the modern experience, particularly since Walter Benjamin, often describe "modernity" itself in terms of rupture, crisis, and trauma. But what exactly makes modernity traumatic? And is it possible to historicize modernity and modernism through a paradigm such as trauma? Trauma designates an experience that, due to its shattering nature, is unavailable to conscious recollection and understanding. The

traumatic event is often described as a “missed experience,” since its occurrence was so explosive that its victim was unable to assign it a place and a meaning in his or her consciousness. Instead, its impact is belatedly recorded and rehearsed by the psyche—and the literary text—in complex and displaced form, such that the origins or causes of a trauma elude representation.

Given the precariousness of its location in time and space, how do we establish whether the trauma associated with “modernity” is a historical phenomenon, a transhistorical condition of language, or even a structural feature of the psyche itself? Baudelaire scholarship since Benjamin and Paul de Man has wrestled with this question when addressing the referential and contextual instabilities of poetic discourse. Some readers of Baudelaire locate “trauma” temporally, as a rupture with traditional patterns characteristic of the postrevolutionary modern metropolis. For Benjamin, Baudelaire’s poetry bodies forth the shocks and contradictions of urban life under the alienating conditions of high capitalism. With the advent of industrial modernity, Benjamin argues, the human subject undergoes a radical alteration of experience in which pre-capitalist modes of receiving and transmitting experience (through story and ritual) no longer obtain. Baudelaire’s poetry is truly “modern” in its witness to this fundamental alteration of experience, to the emergence of consciousness out of the alienating jostle of the city. Benjamin’s reading locates the trauma of modernity in a set of historical conditions particular to the postrevolutionary industrial metropolis—although, as we shall see, his account opens up an ambiguous relationship between the psychic and material origins of this trauma.

Benjamin’s canonization of Baudelaire as the bard of modernity’s trauma has made a lasting imprint. Yet subsequent readers inspired by this portrait of the poet as “traumatophile,” particularly those working within a deconstructive and psychoanalytic framework, argue that the shift in experience and consciousness conveyed by Baudelaire’s poetry resists straightforward historical location. It is a trauma inherent in the human psyche or endemic to the iterable nature of language itself. Paul de Man’s by now canonical readings set the stage for such accounts by suggesting that Baudelaire’s poetry enacts the trauma of a self emerging differentially in language and time.² Similarly, Barbara Johnson’s readings of *Le Spleen de Paris* demonstrate how the prose poems deconstruct poetic codes to interrogate the very functioning of language and representation. In the aftermath of deconstruction, several influential critics have returned to Benjamin’s theory of shock through a de Manian reflection on language and temporality, but also by way of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.³ Their readings have mobilized Baudelaire’s poetry to define

modernity *as* a trauma. Yet, in keeping with deconstruction's focus on rhetoric, these readers have tended to introject the historical dimension of Benjamin's analysis into the psychic and linguistic registers of Baudelaire's poetry. Trauma is redefined as a structural condition of the psyche, as an internal wound that unravels the very workings of consciousness and memory, and thus fundamentally eludes historical determination.

Approaches to Baudelaire's modernity through the notion of a "crisis of representation" tend to either locate this crisis in historical terms, invoking political and material conditions such as the revolution of 1848, Louis-Napoléon's coup d'état, and the shock of industrial urban modernity.⁴ Or they conceptualize it in psychic and linguistic terms, suggesting that the structural traumas to which Baudelaire bears witness resist historical embedding. Baudelaire's emblematic modernity, then, is alternately located in (1) the shocks of the modern metropolis and the postrevolutionary body politic; (2) the eddies of a self emerging differentially in language and time; and (3) a psychic shattering constitutive of identity itself. Whether the crisis is addressed in historical, textual, or psychic terms—or in the complex interplay between them—trauma has been a central category for some of the most influential readings of Baudelaire and of the modernity he is said to inaugurate.

The Introduction addressed some of the broader consequences of trauma's deployment as a model for reading history. As a model for reading literature, three further problems beset its current use: an overwhelming focus on the impossibility of representation; a view of literature as a symptomatic "acting out" or rehearsal of shock; and a positioning of the text as a witness and victim to historical and psychic forces. I propose in this chapter that violence, rather than trauma, provides a more fruitful point of entry into Baudelaire's poetry and the dynamism of its modernity. For whereas trauma designates an internal dislocation of which the psyche is victim, violence is an operation that involves agents and recipients, executioners as well as victims. A consideration of "modernity" in light of its imbricated violences allows an ethical inquiry into the relationship between poetry and history, rather than a purely epistemological reflection on the possibility of knowledge and representation. Shifting the paradigm from trauma to violence also opens up a range of positional options within the text, between the text and its contexts, and between the text and its readership.

My aim is not to substitute violence for trauma as the master trope of modernity, but rather to tease out alternative approaches to the question of reference and ethics in discussions of modernity as a crisis of representation. A

Violence and Representation in Baudelaire

related aim is to soften the implicit dichotomies—in trauma theory and more generally in poststructuralist thought—between a shattered self emerging from an originary trauma, on the one hand, and, on the other, a fully constituted self that may contemplate trauma from an external vantage point. This dichotomy engenders further theoretical dualities: between the violent mastery of full representation and the unrepresentability of experiences that fall outside the frame of conceivable thought, between perceptions of history as a fully owned event that can be plotted in a linear fashion or as a shadowy memory that contains the remnants of other histories.⁵ To soften these polarities also entails prying loose some of the links established by recent criticism between referentiality, violence, closure, and totality. For only then can we account for the ways in which literature deploys irony and self-irony as forms of critique, and representational violence as a form of counterviolence to history. But before turning to the possible relationships between poetry, violence, and critique, let us return to Benjamin's portrait of Baudelaire as "traumatophile" to assess the consequences of this canonization for established accounts of modernism.

Representation in Crisis: Baudelaire as "Traumatophile"

For Walter Benjamin, Baudelaire's modernity lay in his paradoxical predicament as a lyric poet writing in the era of high capitalism, an era in which the very experience of the lyric—the self-contained fullness of lyric subjectivity, the authority of bardic speech, and the aura of cultic art—is on the brink of obsolescence. Depicting the social space of the Second Empire as a force field of conflicting energies, Benjamin shows how the overwhelming jostle of the urban metropolis, the jarring rhythms of industrial production, the increasingly commodified quality of experience, and the alienation felt in a world ruled by the marketplace all made their mark upon Baudelaire's poetry.⁶ As "Le Soleil" famously describes it, poetic creation is a "fantasque escrime," a wayward duel in which the poet hurtles though the city, parrying its shocks, and stumbles upon images and rhymes. It is within the crucible of modernity's disruptive forces, within the sense of radical rupture with the patterns of the past, that Baudelaire forms his poetry. In Benjamin's memorable formulation, Baudelaire attests to "the disintegration of aura in the lived experience of shock."⁷

Despite the apparent historical grounding of modernity's trauma, Benjamin's account opens up a fundamental instability in its referential frame, an

instability endemic to the psychoanalytic definition of trauma. When discussing Baudelaire's representation of the shock experience in the city, Benjamin turns to Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and its separation of consciousness from memory. For Freud, consciousness and memory belong to separate systems of experience: excitatory processes leave behind traces that found the basis of memory without necessarily having entered into consciousness.⁸ Consciousness protects the organism from the overwhelming stimuli or "shocks" of external reality by "parrying" or defending itself against them. Once parried, the shock is given the weight and temporal position of a lived experience and thus incorporated—in "sterilized" and mastered form—as a conscious "souvenir."⁹ The subjectivity that emerges out of the shocks of urban modernity, then, is peculiarly fractured, since its very memory is constituted by shocks that may not have been consciously lived out as such. Modernity thus marks the traumatic dispossession of the individual, in terms not only of the past (in the form of collective traditions, rites, and patterns) but of memory itself.¹⁰ As Kevin Newmark elucidates, for Benjamin, "modernity names the moment when the thinking subject can no longer be said to be completely in control or conscious of the actual events that necessarily comprise 'his' own past" ("Traumatic Poetry," 238).

Benjamin is faithful to Freud's own view of trauma as a borderline experience between event and psyche. Trauma cannot be located since the experience was missed in its occurrence and only emerges through its delayed, symptomatic replay in the psyche. The *Nachträglichkeit* quality—or afterwordness—of the trauma's manifestation thus foils attempts at locating its origins.¹¹ As Margaret Cohen remarks, for Benjamin, modern subjectivity is "constituted by a traumatic shock that is both psychic and material in origin" (*Profane Illumination*, 214). This oscillation between psychic and material conditions may be discerned in Benjamin's famous reading of "À une passante," where the shattering nature of the poet's experience as he gazes upon a passing woman is produced by the intersection of a general psychic trauma—"the kind of sexual shock that can beset a lonely man"—and the external, material conditions shaping the modern urban experience of love—"the stigmata that life in the metropolis inflicts upon love" ("On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," 169). Historical trauma and structural trauma converge in Benjamin's reading to point out the precarious location of such an experience in space and time.

A further consequence of Benjamin's poetics of shock—one central to later formulations of trauma—is its valorization of what is absent from the text itself. Indeed, in his reading of "À une passante," Benjamin argues that the ur-

ban masses at the heart of the shock experience are so profoundly internalized by the poetic consciousness that they are not represented in his poetry: “The masses had become so much a part of Baudelaire that it is rare to find a description of them in his works. His most important subjects are hardly ever encountered in descriptive form.”¹² By suggesting that crowds were so central to Baudelaire’s experience as to be incorporated into the poetic psyche, Benjamin echoes Baudelaire’s own reflection on the intoxicating pantheism of urban subjectivity: “Ivresse religieuse des grandes villes. — Panthéisme. Moi, c’est tous ; Tous, c’est moi. Tourbillon” [*OC*, I: 651]). But his translation of Baudelaire’s ontological rapture into a practice of representation also suggests that the most crucial elements of subjectivity’s encounter with history elide description. The privilege granted to what is erased or absent from the text’s frame of reference will culminate in recent claims that the historical insights of Baudelaire’s poems emerge through their resistance to reference. Benjamin’s portrait thus opens up a number of instabilities that inform later approaches to the poet as “traumatophile”: the precarious location of the traumatic experience and the evaporation of the descriptive, representational axis of his poetry. Such instabilities allow Benjamin to position Baudelaire both as a witness to the contemporary sociopolitical forms of industrial modernity and as a visionary who offers a prophetic glimpse into the unparalleled violence of the twentieth century, witnessed by Benjamin less than a hundred years later.¹³

Benjamin’s consecration of Baudelaire as a witness to the trauma of modernity has made a lasting imprint. Yet critical readings informed by—and in dialogue with—Baudelaire’s “traumatophilic” dimension have privileged the psychoanalytic aspect of Benjamin’s interpretation (by referring primarily to “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”) at the expense of the historical, cultural and material contextualizations proposed in, for example, *The Arcades Project*.¹⁴ These psychoanalytic readings displace the historical resonances of Benjamin’s analysis into textual processes, such that “history” itself is viewed as a series of blind spots that resist representation. As we have seen, this view of history as a point of resistance in the literary text is endemic to the very definition of trauma—a *missed* encounter with the reality of an event and its symptomatic replay in the text or psyche. According to some readers, it is precisely this rupture with “history” that—paradoxically—assigns Baudelaire’s historical place as our first modern poet.

The displacement of poetry’s historical elements onto psychic and linguistic registers of poems has contributed to the emergence of a “textual history”

that attempts to rupture established views of history as a developmental narrative and to illuminate its inescapably figural basis. As de Man famously expressed it, “the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions” (“Literary History and Literary Modernity,” 165). If an ethico-political insight is to be gleaned from textual undecidability, for de Man this insight cannot be applied to the world of bodies, things, and relations, in history. In readings influenced by Benjamin’s notion of shock and de Man’s analysis of undecidability, the literary work is perceived as rehearsing the trauma of history in an endless repetition that always misses its mark. Readers must renounce the illusion—and violence—of recovering stable historical knowledge from its undecidabilities.¹⁵

The theorization of history as trauma seeks to disclose the *force* of historical representation, the violence of ideologies’ inscription of events along narrative and tropological models. Deconstructive approaches to the literary work thus tend to read the modalities of the text’s resistance to representation as signs of its historicity. Baudelaire’s rupture with the grand narratives of “History” is precisely what accounts for his historical status as our first “modern” poet. Indeed, the notion that Baudelaire’s exceptionality lies in his poetry’s stubborn refusal to integrate itself into a larger pattern of duration has been central to de Man’s representation of the poet as the “emblem of tragic isolation of postromantic literature” (“Allegory and Irony,” 119), cut adrift from his predecessors, and of Benjamin’s vision of his poetry as shining “in the sky of the Second Empire as a ‘star without an atmosphere.’”¹⁶

This view of Baudelaire—as a poet who undoes the narrativity of history—remains entrenched in current criticism. It has been revitalized in the past decade by the dominance of “trauma” and “testimony” in Holocaust studies. For example, in a recent study, Ulrich Baer has argued that Baudelaire and Celan “indisputably bookend the modern tradition” (*Remnants of Song*, 7). Celan’s confrontation with the unprecedented event of the Holocaust returns him to Baudelaire’s articulation of an experience that challenges all preceding frameworks, “Yet it is a return to ‘a dark zone,’ to an impenetrable obscurity and blindness bearing the name of ‘Baudelaire’ in which the tradition originates. Such a return means to write poems in a language that derives its authority and historical thrust from experience that is unassimilated and, as we will see, properly ahistorical rather than fully integrated into consciousness” (*ibid.*, 6). Baer thus reads the oeuvre of Baudelaire and Celan as records of “missed experience,” forms of knowledge that lie outside memory or history

but are nevertheless “constitutive of the self” (ibid.). Such traumatic knowledge is “ahistorical,” in that it cannot find incorporation in historical narratives. But this is precisely what assigns Baudelaire his historical place at the origins of a modern tradition culminating in Celan’s testimony to the Shoah.

Implicit in this argument is an important—if problematic—claim for a post-Shoah literary ethics founded on the impossibility of representing historical trauma. This traumatic split between poetry and history, articulated as a rupture between the psyche and the world affords a glimpse for Baer into uncharted forms of knowledge that both demand and defy our witness. A poem’s blind spots, aporias, flare-ups, and indeterminacies function like a flash “which is reflected in the puddles that gather where history’s *grands récits* are cracked” (Baer, *Remnants of Song*, 151). Presenting “L’Étranger” as one of three exemplary and inaugural poems, for instance, Baer argues that it is only when the text relinquishes all claims to readable, applicable, and intersubjective notions of morality, and when it demonstrates the impossibility of pinning down the functioning of its rhetorical mode, that it becomes “ultra ethical.” Like the clouds that float above the stranger’s head, experience that is unclaimed, unremembered, and free of organizing schemes gives a flash of understanding into “unclaimed experience.”¹⁷

I have traced a critical arc that starts with Benjamin’s theory of the shock experience, runs through de Man’s formulations on history as a tropological structure, and continues to dominate in reflections on the relationship between literature and history today. In these accounts, the force of history splinters into indeterminacies in the poetic text. Complications in the poem’s rhetorical mode are symptomatic of an encounter with what Georges Perec described as “l’Histoire avec sa grande hache” (Perec, *W*, 13). They are blind spots sparking insight into a trauma both constitutive of the psyche and produced by the force of an unrepresentable history. The literary text emerges as a witness that, insofar as it may gesture to what lies outside its margins, does so as a victim bodying forth the shocks and contradictions of history. The ethical moment in poetry, then, emerges through the association of unrepresentability, witnessing, trauma, and victimization.

As I argued earlier, the view of history as a tropological structure privileges figure over content, representation over events, and perilously overlooks the particularity of “history” as empirical forces experienced by bodies and subjects in a particular social content. This can lead to a conflation of historically distinct traumas by way of structural analogies, such that the shocks of life in the modern city are seen as analogous to the trauma of the Holocaust, insofar

as both events induce a “crisis of representation.” It also encourages reading the literary canon of modernity backwards from its “limit event,” such that the Holocaust and its defining crisis of representation become the measures by which other historical crises and their literary representations are reread. This has the paradoxical effect of inscribing the irreducible singularity of historical events along a narrative teleology in a retroactive periodization. Modernism’s interrogation of reference is seen to prefigure the epistemological and ethical impossibility of representing the Holocaust.¹⁸ In the name of its radical singularity, the Holocaust itself is reduced to a transhistorical figure; it serves as an allegory for history’s resistance to figuration, a resistance that both founds and frames modernity as a “crisis of representation.”¹⁹

What sorts of mediations between history and literature does this model of trauma and testimony occlude? As a mode of reading literature, such a symptomatic view short-circuits any sustained consideration of how the Baudelairean text actively engages with historical forces through irony, violence, counterviolence, and critique. Instead, the recent displacement of historicity into a text’s symptomatic gaps, silences, and aporias positions literature as victimized witness to a history whose force exceeds representation. Poetry becomes a purely reactive stage for “acting out” trauma, for the compulsive rehearsal of the shocks and contradictions of its historical moment. It is approached as a pathological system scarred by unreadable lesions that attest to the violence of an unrepresentable history.

Yet “history” is not a monolithic force that works through passive texts and psyches. History locates violence in specific sites; it positions subjects in specific ways, not only as victims, but also as agents, subjects, objects, witnesses, executioners, readers, and writers. Literature is a privileged terrain for the inscription of history’s multidirectional force. Baudelaire’s poems are a case in point, for their own complex deployment of violence rehearses and locates the violence of history itself in multiple sites, operations, and positionalities. This rehearsal of violence, its multidirectional deployment, is what gives the relationship between poetry and history in Baudelaire’s work its ongoing critical energy.

Baudelaire himself vigorously objects to such a positioning of the writer as a passive witness to the violence of history. Indeed, toward the end of his life, during his self-imposed exile in Belgium, Baudelaire 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). In a statement that can be read as a key to the poet’s entire corpus and its manifold contra-

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dictions, Baudelaire opens his work out to historical processes, not—as one might expect—from the standpoint of traumatized victim or witness, but as executioner and agent in history. How might this arresting declaration help us to recover the dialectical force of Baudelaire's engagement with the violence of modernity?

The Representation of Violence and the Violence of Representation

Violence is an ever-expanding category in our contemporary critical climate. “Stretched beyond its former clearly demarcated boundaries, meaning ‘the use of physical force’ (a characterization still to be found in standard English dictionary definitions), violence now includes such phenomenologically elusive categories as psychological, symbolic, structural, epistemic, hermeneutical and aesthetic violence,” Beatrice Hanssen writes.²⁰ Rather than attempt to provide an exhaustive definition, I shall for now maneuver around one important distinction between trauma and violence: whereas the psychoanalytic, literary view of trauma posits the subject as the site and victim of an epistemological violence, the term “violence” generally designates a relation *between* subjects, indicating a more encompassing, energetic and relational structure involving intersubjective relations and multiple positionalities. As a category for literary analysis, violence enables a consideration of the relationship between poetry, history, and critique by exploring how a text both occupies and opens up for the reader a range of positions toward the violence that is represented, including those of executioner, accomplice, and bystander.²¹

To be sure, one can argue that trauma theory also locates violence as a circulating force endemic to the very project of representation. Representation betrays its object by arresting an infinitely particularizing discourse that might do justice to the singularity of an experience or a person. Yet a sweeping account of representation *as* violence flattens out the specificity of different historical experience and erases necessary distinctions between victims, executioners, accomplices, witnesses, and spectators. The category of violence captures the circulation of power in particular historical events, while maintaining the distinctions between these subject positions. When describing *Le Spleen de Paris*, Baudelaire suggestively remarks that this literary corpus has “ni queue ni tête, puisque tout, au contraire, y est à la fois tête et queue, alternativement et réciproquement” (*OC*, 1: 275). It is this sense of simultaneity, multidirectionality and mobile particularity that I hope to convey in the following readings of violence and representation.

A discussion of the role of violence in Baudelaire's poetics necessarily entails examining what the representation of violence has to say about real violence, and how "real" violence is itself enmeshed in representational violence. To argue for a connection between violence and representation assumes what Teresa de Lauretis has called the "semiotic relation of the social to the discursive" ("The Violence of Rhetoric," 240). Yet to what extent can we talk about violence as a symbolic operation while still doing justice to the *reality* of a violent act, encounter or practice? And how might the connection between the representation of violence and the violence of representation be used to serve critical, and even ethical, ends by literature and its criticism? Can the deployment of violence in poetry illuminate or even contest the violences—in representation and practice—of a particular historical moment?

While it has traditionally designated eruptions of force or breakdowns in the social fabric, violence, as recent theory teaches us, can characterize a certain pattern of dominance just as easily as it does breakdowns in this pattern. Violence in the sphere of the law, for example, as shown by the work of Foucault, Derrida, and Butler, among others, operates at structural, linguistic levels that performatively shape the daily reality of our social practices.²² Following such poststructuralist dismantlings of normative ethico-political positions, "counterviolence" has become an important figure for a critique of the underlying structural violences of the social sphere. As Hanssen suggests, "the use of a symbolic, figurative, discursive force, wielded as a counterprinciple" has been theorized as a strategy for illuminating—as well as contesting—the hidden relations of force in a given sociopolitical structure:

Indeed, one "figure" of violence whose persistence and recurrent circulation in contemporary post-structuralist thought the book pursues is that of a counterforce or counterviolence (*Gegengewalt*) that takes the form of what Foucault and Derrida respectively have called "antidogmatic" or "antimetaphysical" violence. Thus, the use of a symbolic, figurative, discursive force, wielded as a counterprinciple, is meant to undo metaphysical, institutional sedimentations of force, especially the violence exercised by instrumental reason, with its logic *and* practices of exclusion. (Hanssen, 14)

The concepts of "violence" and "counterviolence" are useful for unraveling the contestatory potential of poetic discourse. Indeed, one of the central claims in this book is that the literary representation of violence illuminates the violence of historical representation by imbricating aesthetic self-consciousness within ideological critique. In the texts I examine, irony functions as a textual violence and a historical counterviolence. Baudelairean irony—the hallmark of his

“modernity”—conducts an ethico-political critique at the level of poetic form and of language itself. Poetic strategies of representation are embedded in the larger tropological systems of his historical moment. By explicitly staging the violence of poetic representation (rather than symptomatically parrying the trauma of history), Baudelaire offers a genealogy of violence and thereby opens up a critical relationship between a text and its contexts.²³ The force of irony in Baudelaire’s oeuvre functions as a counterviolence that teases out imbricated social, economic, and representational violences embedded in the postrevolutionary social body. The recurrent linking of violence and representation throughout his work exploits literature’s performative force and uncovers zones of complicity between poetic discourse and other regimes of power. This rehearsal of violence opens up a space for the critique and resignification of accepted cultural practices through irony, performativity, intertextuality, and citationality.²⁴

Let us for a moment imagine Baudelaire’s poems as a kind of “theater of cruelty” in which existing violences are staged and contested, in turn, through textual violence. This rehearsal gives a genealogy of the production of violence both on the textual stage and on the historical scene. By violence, then, I refer to the empirical violence “out there” in the world, the violence exercised through words upon things in the world, and the imbrication of these violences in Lauretis’s “semiotic relation of the social to the discursive.” In other words, I consider violence in its material, social, psychic, epistemological, aesthetic, and ethical contexts. In its most inclusive definition, “violence” will designate a particular mode of conceptualizing a represented object that diminishes, reifies, or violates that object in a way that resonates against underlying sets of cultural assumptions. For Baudelaire, violence is a vehicle that inscribes competing fields (aesthetic, economic, ideological, and so forth) within the poem itself. It serves as a figure for representational tensions existing both within and between these fields. The myriad structures of “victim” and of “bourreau” in his scenes of violence trace complex correspondences within and between the poetic and social text, thus offering a powerful yet nuanced critique of the violence of modernity.²⁵

This next section turns to Baudelaire’s “L’Héautontimorouménos,” a poem that will serve as a leitmotif throughout this book, to illustrate how Baudelaire’s notorious self-reflexivity operates a shift from the epistemological realm—in which the poet and ironist is both subject and object of reflection—into a historicized realm of victims and executioners. From a rehearsal of irony’s trauma, the poetic text is redefined, through irony and citationality, as an encounter between text and intertext and between self and other.

The Poet as Ironist and as Héautontimorouménos

“L’Héautontimorouménos” is a key poem and figure for Baudelaire’s poetics. Initially conceived as a “projet d’épilogue” for *Les Fleurs du Mal*, its portrait of consciousness as both “plaie et couteau,” “victime et bourreau,” has made it emblematic of Baudelairean—and modernist—self-reflexivity. Sartre, for instance, viewed the *héautontimorouménos* (in Greek, “self-punisher” or “self-tormentor”) as a figure exemplary of the poet’s bad faith, that is to say, his desire to simultaneously become reflexive and reflected consciousness, the eye that perceives and the “I” perceived. Yet the poem itself stages the failure of this attempted self-coincidence. Instead, by showing the emergence of consciousness *as* a wound, it gives us what first appears to be a case study of trauma:

Je te frapperai sans colère
Et sans haine, comme un boucher,
Comme Moïse le rocher !
Et je ferai de ta paupière,

Pour abreuver mon Sahara,
Jaillir les eaux de la souffrance.
Mon désir gonflé d’espérance
Sur tes pleurs salés nagera

Comme un vaisseau qui prend le large,
Et dans mon coeur qu’ils souleront
Tes chers sanglots retentiront
Comme un tambour qui bat la charge !

Ne suis-je pas un faux accord
Dans la divine symphonie,
Grâce à la vorace Ironie
Qui me secoue et qui me mord ?

Elle est dans ma voix, la criarde !
C’est tout mon sang, ce poison noir !
Je suis le sinistre miroir
Où la mégère se regarde !

Je suis la plaie et le couteau !
Je suis le soufflet et la joue !
Je suis les membres et la roue,
Et la victime et le bourreau !

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Je suis de mon coeur le vampire
— Un de ces grands abandonnés
Au rire éternel condamnés,
Et qui ne peuvent plus sourire ! (*OC*, I: 78–79)

In this parodic rewriting of the lyric address, the I-thou relationship mutates into a relentless, rhythmical beating that is virtually enacted by the regularity of the octosyllabic lines, the caesuras and exclamations. The poem projects into the future a ritual punishment voided of cause, motivation, or affect. The executioner, figured as a Sahara, a deserty place of nothingness, turns to the victim to sate its ontological hunger. As we may surmise from the repetition “sans colère et sans haine” and the homonymy of *sans* and *sang*, the very substance of this “Je,” is nothing more than its projected act of violence. The poetic subject will wound the surface of the other to create an ontological location and depth. The delicate plane of the beloved’s eyelid releases a fountain of tears on whose watery surface the poet’s desire will glide (“Mon désir gonflé d’espérance / Sur tes pleurs salés nagera”); her sobs will ring out like the taut skin of a drum that is struck (“Tes chers sanglots retentiront / Comme un tambour qui bat la charge !”).

The poem thus stages a sacrificial scenario in which a singular yet vacuous “je” (“mon Sahara”; “mon désir”) turns to the diffuse liquefaction of a “tu” (figured as “eaux de la souffrance” and “pleurs salés”), who in a literalization of metaphor itself (as *metaphorein*), promises to transport this “je” into a promised *ailleurs* (“Comme un vaisseau qui prend le large”).²⁶ Yet the metaphors themselves dissolve the precarious distinction between self and other, or victim-executioner, for the victim’s sobs—produced by the executioner’s blows—themselves ring out like the blows of a military drum.

Thus, in the central stanza, the victim-thou position has washed away and Irony reveals itself as constituting the very identity of the lyric “I”:

Ne suis-je pas un faux accord
Dans la divine symphonie
Grâce à la vorace Ironie
Qui me secoue et qui me mord ?

Irony, personified as an aberrant and external feminine principle, a muse turned shrew (“la criarde”; “la mégère”), appropriates the “je” and usurps its poetic voice. Yet the otherness of irony proves to be part and parcel of the poet’s substance: “C’est tout mon sang, ce poison noir.” The interiorization of both victim and irony reveals an otherness constitutive of the self, which

appears to seal the poetic subjectivity—and the poem itself—into the infinite regress of ironic reflexivity: “Je suis le sinistre miroir / Où la mégère se regarde.”

Let us for a moment consider this interiorization of an external figure as an “other within the self” through the optic of trauma.²⁷ The *héautontimorouménos* initially attempts to relocate its selfhood through the fragmentation and the reappropriation of its victim. Yet its sadistic ritual shades into self-mutilation with the realization that the dialectic between subject and object, self and other, executioner and victim, takes place entirely within a self fractured by irony's trauma. The subject, agent and executioner is revealed as constituted by its object, other and victim (figured here as irony):

Je suis la plaie et le couteau !
Je suis le soufflet et la joue !
Je suis les membres et la roue,
Et la victime et le bourreau !

If we read the poem as a case study of trauma, the poem “acts out” a process of interiorization, wherein an incompatibility between self and world reveals incompatible registers within the self. Executioner and victim, striker and struck, are forces at war within a self-different subjectivity (“C'est tout mon sang, ce poison noir”).

When read in this perspective, “L'Héautontimorouménos” bears striking resemblances to Cathy Caruth's analysis of Torquado Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, a text she views as the paradigmatic literary study of trauma. Tasso recounts how Tancred unwittingly slays his beloved Clorinda on the battlefield. After her burial, he enters a magic forest and slashes a tree, only to realize, belatedly, that the tree contains his beloved's soul. Caruth presents Tancred as a parable for the “unarticulated implications of the theory of trauma,” for his double killing is an unwitting and unwilled reenactment typical of the repetition compulsion of traumatic neurosis (*Unclaimed Experience*, 3). More significant for our analysis of Baudelaire, however, is Caruth's point that Tasso's traumatic scenario turns both Clorinda and Tancred into victims of trauma (defined here as the fatality of an injury twice inflicted and received), as figures for a divided self. Tancred is the dissociated subject of a traumatic neurosis, and Clorinda—his victim—is his “other within the self,” an internal witness to Tancred's own injury, for she remembers what Tancred can never fully know. Similarly, Baudelaire's “L'Héautontimorouménos” begins with a sacrificial scenario (with an obvious difference: Baudelaire's poetic subject inflicts

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pain with ritualistic deliberation) yet the victimized “tu,” like Clorinda, is revealed as an “other within the self.”

The comparison between Baudelaire and Tasso is illuminating, for Tancred’s example (as read by Caruth) reveals a problem endemic to theorizing subjectivity through trauma. Indeed, when approached through trauma, the infliction of violence becomes but another instance of self-shattering. The relations of force that actually exist between victim and executioner (Tancred has, after all, killed Clorinda twice) are overlooked in favor of an analysis that takes place exclusively within a subject victimized by trauma. Further, such a reading would assume that the literary text serves as a mirror for the compulsive repetition of trauma. In this light, Baudelaire’s poem would mirror the poetic subjectivity’s rehearsal or “acting out” of a split subject. Yet we should note that in “L’Héautontimorouménos,” the self is not merely constituted by an alterity it once perceived as external, for the poetic subject does not directly identify with the victim turned executioner or the muse turned shrew. Rather, the poetic subject becomes the mirror in which irony contemplates *itself*.

Je suis le sinistre miroir
Où la mégère se regarde !

The “I” is a location, a place in the structure of reflexivity, one that mirrors back difference and irony.²⁸ This shift in the representation of the self from substance (blood, poison) to location and form (“le . . . miroir / Où”) suggests that the “Je” becomes the site of reflexivity rather than the subject-object of trauma. What is at stake in this distinction between text as mirror and text as site or stage for trauma, is a view of the poetic text not as pathological symptom—or reflection—of traumatic neurosis, but instead, as a *mise-en-scène* for an oscillation that is both within the self and between selves and others. The restaging of trauma as a form of ironic reflexivity introduces an analytical distance from the experience. It also situates this trauma within a dialogical and intersubjective context. For even in this most relentlessly solipsistic of poems, the final verse opens out in a gesture of address, signaled by the caesura:

— Un de ces grands abandonnés
Au rire éternel condamnés,
Et qui ne peuvent pas sourire.

The caesura introducing “un de ces grands abandonnés,” and the break out of the singular form into the plural, initiate a recognition of commonality with

other victims of irony's lucid madness. It gestures toward a community of displaced, spectral souls akin to the wandering exiles commemorated in "Le Cygne," with whom the fragments of authorial subjectivity identify ("Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île / Aux captifs, aux vaincus ! . . . à bien d'autres encor !"). In "L'Heautontimorouménos," the authorial subject does not exclusively attest to the specularity of trauma, to the recurrent yet missed encounter with an "other within the self." Instead, it stages a collective existential fall into irony. The break out of pure solipsism also occurs intertextually, across linguistic and cultural difference. Indeed, the concluding allusion to the Melmothian figure who laughs but cries no more is a translated fragment straight out of Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher." Baudelaire's poem is thus in dialogue with Poe's poem "The Haunted Palace," embedded in the short story:

While, like a rapid ghastly river
Through the pale door
A hideous throng rush out forever
And laugh—but smile no more.²⁹

The ghostly traces of Poe's "Haunted Palace" in turn haunt Baudelaire's poem, rewriting irony in the context of a shared *mal du siècle* that, significantly, is transmitted through literature.³⁰ Baudelaire's text thus fulfils the promise of the inaugural poem, "Au lecteur." The reader, as "Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère," becomes the contaminated accomplice to a fall into irony. Ironic lucidity is transmitted by a contagious text. The critical energies unleashed by irony circulate within and between these texts, coercing the reader into relations of recognition, identification and complicity.³¹ This is not to say that Baudelaire's poem beckons an immediate identification (or transference) in which the reader submits to a pathological state of textual trauma. On the contrary, the text's escalating ironies keep such identifications at bay by introducing a critical distance from the trauma it depicts. The Poe intertext reframes the solipsism of the individual trauma into a collective *ethical* predicament: the recognition of evil, or *la conscience dans le mal*.

"L'Heautontimorouménos" appears to record a crisis of representation (of the self, the text, and the collective), and as such could be read as an illustration of the trauma of modern consciousness as it emerges without any normative point of reference beyond itself. Yet it offers an embryonic response to this predicament. For it maps a trauma that is constitutive of the poetic subjectivity first as an epistemological state—expressed through irony—and as an

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ethical condition shared by “ces grands abandonnés.” And this is where I turn to a second reason for resisting the temptation to read poetic violence through trauma. Indeed, the paradigm of the “other within the self” (or of Cathy Caruth’s reading of Clorinda as a figure for Tancred’s “self-difference”) at the basis of trauma obliterates the distinction between victim and executioner by making both the agent and the recipient of violence avatars for a divided self. Such a slippage, as Ruth Leys has observed, is ethically fraught, since it erases the necessary distinctions between the subject and object of violence.³² Baudelaire, however, maintains this tension between subject and object, victim and executioner, even as his poems stage these as ambiguous, circulating positions. This tension is sustained by the distance the poem displays toward its own rhetorical mode—through strategies such as intertextuality, irony, and interpellation.

At stake in the distinction I make between the self-referentiality of trauma and the self-reflexivity of irony is the possibility that a self-reflexive poem (one that complicates its mode of representation) retains its demystifying, critical force. Baudelairean irony conducts its critique from within the pathology it denounces. In the context of “L’Héautontimorouménos,” the violence of irony is rehearsed with an acute attunement to how differences in power, for instance, between a masculine subject/executioner and a feminine object/victim, constantly shape even the most “autonomous” acts of creation. Irony—a rhetorical figure for disparate meanings—is continually reframed in a context disclosing the underlying violence of acts of knowing the self and the other.

Irony as Counterviolence

How does Baudelairean irony retain its critical powers despite its notoriously self-undermining structure? And how might the deconstruction of a rhetorical mode open up—rather than foreclose—the passage between text and world? A brief history of irony’s vexed relationship to critique will be useful here in order to elucidate how the deconstructive impetus of Baudelairean irony engages ethical and political concerns.

Traditionally defined as a rhetorical figure that intentionally creates two or more disparate meanings in a text, a dissemblance having a critical function in a context of shared beliefs, irony’s more recent identification with contingency, undecidability, and aporia has made it one of modernity’s most pervasive modes of self-understanding.³³ Paradoxically, the expansion of irony’s relevance to political and philosophical thought on identity is met with skepti-

cism about the viability of its insights for experiences existing outside the literary text. Particularly in the wake of deconstruction and its radicalization of irony as a constitutive indeterminacy of meaning, the contestatory function of irony (as satire) is threatened with irrelevance. Not only does the ironist fail to offer alternatives to the conceptions that are demystified; the ironist's vigilance toward the authority of his or her own claims seems to enclose the ironic position into the infinite downward spiral staged in Baudelaire's "L'Héautontimorouménos." Contemporary definitions of irony thus tend to relegate it to the private realm of individual self-reflection or to the aesthetic realm of formal self-consciousness, and as fundamentally irrelevant to the articulation and analysis of shared values.

The gap between irony's insights and a historically defined reality reaches back to the romantics and their redefinition of irony as a mode of apprehending the self and world. German romantics such as Friedrich Schlegel viewed irony as a property of the creative consciousness itself and saw the literary text as emerging out of a dialectic of authorial self-creation and self-destruction, or parabasis. Irony is proof of the imagination's unfettered sovereignty, for the poet may create and revoke the fictional world at will, soaring "on the wings of poetic reflection, and can raise that reflection again and again to a higher power, can multiply it in an endless succession of mirrors."³⁴ Romantic irony thus celebrated the supremacy of the creative spirit over the constraints of empirical phenomena. As Vladimir Jankélévitch observed, romantic irony responds to the Fichtean promise of "Comment être *causa sui*—ce sujet qui est l'objet, cet agent qui est son propre patient, ce rieur qui est le risible ?" (Jankélévitch, *Ironie*, 25). Such a predicament, as we saw, forms the paradoxical core of Baudelaire's *héautontimoroumenos* and its exalted despair at being both subject and object, cause and effect, victim and executioner of its own laughter and reflection.

By celebrating the unrealizing powers of the imagination, romantic irony played off the gap between literary reflection and the empirical constraints of history. Such a hypostatized view of aesthetic autonomy is precisely what drew criticism: for Søren Kierkegaard, the ironic position was one in which "the subject is continually retreating, talking every phenomenon out of its reality in order to save itself—that is, in order to preserve itself in negative independence of everything"; it suspended the work of art "outside and above morality and ethics."³⁵ Similarly, Hegel denounced romantic irony as a form of absolute and infinite negativity. Irony invested the ego with the capricious freedom to create and revoke "everything genuinely independent and real" at

will; in doing so, it voided the artistic work of content or of connection to historical actuality.³⁶ The reception of romantic irony thus viewed self-reflexivity—that is to say, literature’s reflection upon its procedures of presentation—as a rejection of the real for the autonomy and moral indifference of private self-creation.

Romantic irony invests the creative imagination with absolute power, since it posits a subjectivity that has become its origin and effect, both a free, creating consciousness and the object it creates. Yet, as the example of “L’Héautontimorouménos” shows us, it also inaugurates a fractured subjectivity that is evacuated of content and emerging only *through* parabasis, or discontinuous reflections. Baudelaire’s most powerfully self-reflexive poems capture this oscillation between Fichtean absolutism and anxious self-division. We are now in a position to assess what a poststructuralist theory of irony such as de Man’s (as a structure of radical discontinuity) and of trauma (as repetition and negativity) owe to these romantic articulations. If for Schlegel, irony’s parabasis mirrors the infinite play of the universe, the poststructuralist view of irony as trauma situates this parabasis in language and identity itself. For de Man, whose theory of irony builds on Schlegel’s Athenäum fragments, irony alerts us to our linguistic nature, to our emergence through the iterability of the sign and its temporality. In this account, irony signals an epistemological crisis that unravels the identity of the self and the text; a crisis that has no communicative content beyond the repetition of its blindness: “Irony is no longer a trope but the undoing of the deconstructive allegory of all tropological cognition, the systematic undoing, in other words, of understanding. As such, far from closing off the tropological system, irony enforces the repetition of its aberration.”³⁷

De Man uses Baudelaire as a central figure for this articulation of irony *as* trauma, as a crisis of representation undoing the identity of the self and the text. His influential essay “The Rhetoric of Temporality” turns to Baudelaire’s “De l’essence du rire” to theorize irony as a “lucid madness” and as the trauma of a repetitive blindness. Several readers have since approached Baudelaire’s essay on laughter as a map for the fault lines of a subject emerging discontinuously in language and in time. Laughter’s aporetic quality is addressed as a trauma enclosing the text in a series of divided reflections. Yet the terms of this constellation—laughter, irony, and trauma—need to be separated out to allow for a more particularized reading of Baudelaire’s irony. Otherwise, we risk remaining locked in an interpretive cycle in which laughter, irony, and trauma slide into each other and are ultimately subsumed under a horizon of

undecidability. My reading of "De l'essence du rire" is indebted to accounts of laughter's aporetic quality in Baudelaire, but it argues that laughter does more than signal incommensurable registers within the self or in language itself. In Baudelaire's "De l'essence du rire," as in "L'Héautontimorouménos," the trauma of irony expressed by laughter is a shared epistemological condition that activates relations of power within and between a text and its contexts.³⁸ Rather than approaching the essay as the symptomatic enactment of a pathology without cure, I shall examine how its deconstruction of healthy, normative, or pure states existing "beyond" or "outside" the disruptive force of laughter is essential to developing a theory of irony as a form of critical counterviolence.³⁹

Trauma, Irony, and Critique in "De l'essence du rire"

"De l'essence du rire" is more than a defense of caricature as a viable artistic genre; it articulates conceptual oppositions that are central to Baudelaire's writing as a whole: grace and fall, metaphysics and history, the pure and the impure, the metatextual and the intertextual, symbol and allegory, art for art's sake and art for progress. The alleged purpose of the essay, the author confides, is the release of a quasi-physiological obsession, which will be exorcised once presented in an orderly fashion and digested by the reader: "Ces réflexions étaient devenues pour moi une espèce d'obsession ; j'ai voulu me soulager. J'ai fait, du reste, tous mes efforts pour y mettre un certain ordre et en rendre ainsi la digestion plus facile" (*OC*, 2: 525). The phenomenon of laughter is examined through several lenses: theology, physiology, psychology, metaphysics, popular culture, and finally, comic traditions at home and abroad. Yet, the experience of laughter in these meticulously expository sections remains irreducible to conceptual digestion. The structure of laughter is double, its effect is an unrepresentable convulsion; it is a symptom or a hieroglyph, yet its roots, its referent, its very "essence" remain unspoken, if not unspeakable: "Le rire n'est qu'une expression, un symptôme, un diagnostic. Symptôme de quoi ? Voilà la question" (*OC*, 2: 534).

To elucidate this question, Baudelaire sets up a series of antitheses between a primordial, metaphysical state of purity and a fallen, historical condition defined by laughter: "le rire humain est intimement lié à l'accident d'une chute ancienne, d'une dégradation physique et morale" (*OC*, 2: 527–28). Laughter, then, denotes a fall into reflexivity, historical time, and irony. The theological manifestations of a state of grace prior to and beyond laughter are prelapsar-

ian innocence or divine omnipotence; its literary manifestation is *poésie pure*; its historical incarnations are primitive societies in which skepticism has not taken root or projected socialist utopias. Yet, the essay very deliberately sabotages all references to such ideal states of purity, showing each to be “always already” fractured by laughter, difference, and fallenness. Laughter thus contaminates every heuristic ideal—literary, political, or metaphysical—evoked in opposition to it. For instance, Baudelaire’s opening maxim, “Le sage ne rit qu’en tremblant” (*OC*, 2: 526)—the crux of his distinction between the sacred and the fallen—invokes the transgression of laughter as temporally prior to a state of purity. The dichotomy between purity and laughter is only constructed in hindsight, for the sage does indeed laugh first, even if it is in fear and trembling. The source of this enigmatic maxim (Ecclesiasticus, quoted by Bossuet) is also erased, and the author-analyst wonders aloud as to whether he read it in a text by Joseph de Maistre or Bourdaloue.⁴⁰ Further, the entire description of a “paradis terrestre” prior to mankind’s fall into laughter is plagiarized from the unpublished *Contes normands* by Jean de la Falaise, alias Philippe de Chennevières.⁴¹ These citations, caught in a dense relay of sources, unmistakably convey that the primordial, edenic state is but a derivative construct.

The realm of art itself is similarly polluted by laughter. While Baudelaire invokes *poésie pure* initially as a redemptive way out of the fallenness and decrepitude of the human condition and into a suitably “poetic” state of elevation, his formulation presents us with a conceptual conundrum. “[S]i dans ces mêmes nations ultracivilisées, une intelligence poussée par une ambition supérieure, veut franchir les limites de l’orgueil humain et s’élancer hardiment vers la poésie pure, dans cette poésie, limpide et profonde comme la nature, le rire fera défaut comme dans l’âme du Sage,” our analyst declares (*OC*, 2: 532–33). Yet the roots of this spirit, or “intelligence,” lie in the proud desire to transcend the realm of pride. The state of *poésie pure* is itself created out of those very conditions (the conviction of superiority, which is both the cause and the consequence of laughter) that *define* the fall into laughter and historical time. The essay thus repeatedly gestures toward a lost condition of grace yet voids these redemptions of credibility with masterful deconstructive strokes. Although described as an aberration, laughter ultimately becomes the norm that arises from the breakdown of every ideal that would exclude it.

The figure of Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Virginie haunts this essay and encapsulates its paradoxes. Baudelaire imagines the fall of this paragon of innocence upon encountering a caricature on the streets of Paris:

Essayons, puisque le comique est un élément damnable et d'origine diabolique, de mettre en face une âme absolument primitive et sortant, pour ainsi dire, des mains de la nature. Prenons pour exemple la grande et typique figure de Virginie, qui symbolise parfaitement la pureté et la naïveté absolues. Virginie arrive à Paris encore toute trempée des brumes de la mer et dorée par le soleil des tropiques, les yeux pleins des grandes images primitives des vagues, des montagnes et des forêts. Elle tombe ici en pleine civilisation turbulente et méphitique, elle, toute imprégnée des pures et riches senteurs de l'Inde. . . . Or, un jour, Virginie rencontre par hasard, innocemment, au Palais-Royal, aux carreaux d'un vitrier, sur une table, dans un lieu public, une caricature ! une caricature bien appétissante pour nous, grosse de fiel et de rancune, comme sait les faire une civilisation perspicace et ennuyée" (*OC*, 2: 528–29).

Emblematic of a lost correspondence between the natural world and the human spirit, seamlessly connected to her land and family, Virginie embodies a metaphoricity that forms the core of romantic theories of imagination and of Baudelaire's own conception of *correspondances*. She is a symbol of the very process of symbolization: a *typique figure*, brimming with images, or symbols, of her native tropical landscape. Virginie's fictional encounter with the Parisian caricature constitutes a fall into self-reflexivity, one illustrating a shift from primitive grace to modern fallenness, and in terms of literary history, a shift from the unifying properties of the symbol to the division of allegory and irony. Yet we may wonder why—in attempting to illustrate the shocking encounter between absolute innocence and civilized corruption—our analyst would resort to a preexisting fictional character such as Virginie. For while she convincingly embodies the immediacy and purity of a natural state preceding laughter, we are nevertheless reminded of her mediated origins. Virginie's emergence out of nature's very hands is itself caricatured by the emphasis on the metaphoricity of her natural origins ("sortant, *pour ainsi dire*, des mains de la nature"; emphasis added). After all, the "nature" from which she emerges is not some primordial Eden: Virginie is a Creole from the île Bourbon (Réunion) and carries upon her unsuspecting shoulders the burden of colonial history. Even more amusing is the allusion to stock figures Virginie might encounter in these hypothetical caricatures, such as Marie-Antoinette, designated as "la proverbiale Autrichienne" (*ibid.*). Virginie may have emerged from nature's hands in Saint-Pierre's novel (published in 1787), but by Baudelaire's time, like Marie-Antoinette, she too is a stock figure represented, circulated, and quite literally "handled" in countless miniatures, illustrations, and no doubt caricatures.

Virginie's virginal status is thus compromisingly handled and manipulated by the essay. Her *flânerie* through the metropolis leads her to stumble upon the scandal of caricature. The fall from her original unity into a self-differentiating reflexivity is triggered by the duplicity of caricature: "La caricature est double : le dessin et l'idée : le dessin violent, l'idée mordante et voilée ; complications d'éléments pénibles pour un esprit naïf" (*OC*, 2: 529). Virginie's speculated encounter with caricature will mark her awakening into the collective dissonance of the age, into the contingency and ambiguity of historical existence. The subversion of laughter, its contamination as it ripples from text to context, desacralizes even this paragon of innocence: from her incarnation as the symbolic, she falls into the doubleness of allegory, and plays out, *en abyme*, the reader's own position in the text. Indeed, her stance before the complexity of caricature at the Palais-Royal prefigures the reader's own position before textual undecidability. Her laughter is the point of entry into a shared predicament, a solidarity with the "nous" repeatedly addressed in the essay.

Virginie may stand in for the reader's encounter with—and violation by—the scandal of textual duplicity. But the collective "nous" sharing the cosmopolitan artifacts of a particular historical moment are also positioned as voyeuristic accomplices to Virginie's fall. Breathlessly anticipating her corruption, the analyst titillates the reader with the scandalous possibilities of the image in question: "une caricature bien appétissante pour nous, grosse de fiel et de rancune, comme sait les faire une civilisation perspicace et ennuyée" (*OC*, 2: 529). The reader, as a fellow "analyste et critique," is incited to witness the defilement of Virginie's immaculate innocence and her birth into the worldly realm of knowledge and laughter. The essay's initial project of exorcising the trauma of laughter becomes a coercion into complicity prefigured by Virginie's own defilement. Laughter inscribes the reader into the text, just as Virginie's fall rewrites her into an alternative literary history, inaugurated, as it were, by the promise of her own laughter and survival: "Sans doute, que Virginie reste à Paris et que la science lui vienne, le rire lui viendra" (*OC*, 2: 529).

If laughter signals the breakdown of selfhood and its symbolic representations, the fall from transcendence into an existence composed of discontinuous historical moments, why would the author seek to exonerate works of art that arise from this painful self-division? What value may lie in the spectacle of human disfigurement and mystification beyond the masochistic repetition of the fall rehearsed by the *héautontimorouménos*? The primal scene of Virginie's encounter with caricature suggests a possible response. At a critical moment of her fall into self-reflection, Baudelaire notes: "Virginie a vu ; maintenant, elle

regarde. Pourquoi ? Elle regarde l'inconnu" (529). Virginia's encounter with duplicity not only marks her birth into shared historical experience. It also signals her awakening into agency. Laughter catalyzes the shift from the passivity of seeing to the activity and analysis of "looking."

Laughter emerges in this essay as an escalating mode of experiencing both the self and the world in a fallen context, and paradoxically, as a valuable instrument of knowledge and agency. Laughter induces both trauma and lucidity; it is at once the pathology and its analysis. As Baudelaire notes, the experience of laughter banishes customary boundaries between analyst and analyzed. In an ironic gesture toward the essay's claim to disclose the essence of laughter, he wonders if physiologists of laughter are not themselves engulfed by the phenomenon they claim to study: "Je ne serais pas étonné que devant cette découverte le physiologiste se fût mis à rire en pensant à sa propre supériorité" (*OC*, 2: 530). Knowledge can only perpetuate the fall into mystified superiority, and the author is all too aware of the fragile position of the analyst and critic claiming to stand securely at the edge of the abyss. Laughter persistently eludes the classification promised by this essay, mutating into a perverse textual *fou rire* that contaminates the very method by which the author would exorcise its madness. Yet it serves mankind's "puissance intellectuelle," for laughter bears within it the seeds of an empowering agency.⁴² In *De l'essence du rire*, we are immersed in a historical and reflexive moment that is fractured at its very core, Laughter signals a lucidity purchased at the cost of faith in all representations of absolute authority—theological, political, and textual. The comic, by virtue of transgressing and exceeding conventional horizons, opens a space for the critique and rearticulation of norms established and sustained by these horizons.⁴³

"Ce n'est point l'homme qui tombe qui rit de sa propre chute, à moins qu'il ne soit un philosophe, un homme qui ait acquis, par habitude, la force de se dédoubler rapidement et d'assister comme spectateur désintéressé aux phénomènes de son *moi*" (*OC*, 2: 532), asserts the author when elucidating the catalysts for laughter in everyday life: the (mystified) sense of superiority that one harbors vis-à-vis another's mystification. Here, mystification is figured as the illusion of bodily control, the moment of lucidity as tripping over cobblestones and falling. However, the superiority of the laughing subject over the person who falls, or the empirical predicament that triggers the laughter, is a mystification that is always susceptible to reversal. One who claims, as does Baudelaire's snide spectator, that "*moi je ne tombe pas, moi je marche droit*" (531) is blind to his or her fragility, be it physical, or, as is ultimately the point,

epistemological, and will indeed fall. The essence of the comic, Baudelaire suggests, lies precisely in this continuous reversal of power relations.

The comic artist's task is to reenact the scenario of laughter from the standpoint of subject (the one who laughs) and object (the one who falls) so that the reader in turn may experience the delights of superiority, but also recognize the mystification upon which this superiority rests. In this portrait of the artist as an *esprit-philosophe*, Baudelaire proposes that the aesthetic work *stages* the division of the subject into self and other so that readers and spectators undergo a similar division. Artists, then, are professionals who "ont fait métier de développer en eux le sentiment du comique et de le tirer d'eux-mêmes pour le divertissement de leurs semblables, lequel phénomène rentre dans la classe de tous les phénomènes artistiques qui dénotent dans l'être humain l'existence d'une dualité permanente, *la puissance d'être à la fois soi et un autre*" (*OC*, 2: 543; emphasis added). A written text functioning according to these principles incorporates the other, inciting a virtual reenactment of the author's reflexive process, for the ability to be self and other, as Baudelaire repeats throughout his essay, is a shared, human predicament, as well as the founding principle of art.⁴⁴ The artist-philosopher's task is thus identical to that of the poetic subject in "L'Héautontimourouménos": both figures rehearse a duality that lies at the core both of the artistic phenomenon and the readerly condition to which it appeals.

The self-division of Baudelaire's laughing philosopher has particular resonance for theories of irony formed in the crucible of romanticism. The comic as a "textual practice" recreates a dynamic of self-creation and self-destruction (figured as the fall and acknowledgement of frailty), which Friedrich Schlegel attributed to irony.⁴⁵ Yet, while Schlegel's conception of irony tended toward an ultimate synthesis of contradictions, Baudelaire describes laughter as an infinite and unrecuperable disruption. The dialectic between autocreation and autodestruction is thus structurally identical to ironic parabasis, but in a theologically fallen context that forecloses an ultimate reconciliation.⁴⁶ The comic-ironic text, then, performatively transmits the trauma of laughter, for it induces the reader to fall into reflexivity and complicity.

Given the apparent aporias of Baudelairean laughter, its kinship with disruptive forms of knowledge, it is not surprising that Paul de Man should turn to "De l'essence du rire" in his formulation of irony as a traumatic structure of repetitive blindness. In his seminal essay "The Rhetoric of Temporality," de Man envisions irony as a species of trauma, as a lucid madness that interrupts all connection between the literary text and its context of production or re-

ception. If Baudelairean laughter expresses the awareness of a division that exists within the self as it takes itself as an object of reflection, it further encloses consciousness within its reflexive eddies. For de Man, irony illuminates a relationship between the subject and the object of perception, only this relationship is between a self that emerges *in* language and an empirical self out there in the world. The figure of the artist as writer is a case in point: "The ironic, twofold self that the writer or philosopher constitutes by his language seems able to come into being only at the expense of his empirical self, falling (or rising) from a state of mystified adjustment into the knowledge of his mystification. The ironic language splits the subject into an empirical self that exists in a state of inauthenticity and a self that exists only in the form of a language that asserts the knowledge of this inauthenticity. This does not, however, make it into an authentic language, for to know inauthenticity is not the same as to be authentic."⁴⁷

The splitting, or *dédoublement*, is triggered by a fall from a mystified sense of superiority over nature and by the attitude of detached laughter adopted by the new self-aware subject toward the prior self. The ironic subject therefore only comes to know itself through an increasing differentiation from what it is not but thought that it was. For de Man, then, ironic demystification can only occur at the expense of the empirical self. The temptation to use irony's insight in an intersubjective relationship that would assist the empirical self in the "actual world" is to be resisted, since the authentic experience of temporality that irony reveals is only apparent from the fictional perspective of a difference constituted *in* language: "Irony divides the flow of temporal experience into a past that is pure mystification and a future that remains harassed forever by a relapse within the inauthentic. It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world" ("Rhetoric of Temporality," 222). The temptation to lapse into renewed blindness can only be resisted by at once ironizing this very predicament, that is, by constantly renewing the rupture between the empirical and the ironic selves in a process of infinite specularly: "Far from being a return to the world, the irony to the second power, or 'irony of irony' that all true irony at once has to engender asserts and maintains its fictional character by stating the continued impossibility of reconciling the world of fiction with the actual world" (*ibid.*, 218). De Man's account of irony thus postulates a radical split between self and self, self and text, self and other, self and world. Absolute irony is a traumatic unraveling of self,

text, and meaning: “absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself” (ibid., 216).

Yet de Man’s theory of irony as a vertiginous madness is derived from an incomplete reading of Baudelaire’s own essay. It relies exclusively on the category of the “absolute comic” in “De l’essence du rire” to develop a model of irony as a purely self-reflexive, pathological vertigo that can only retain its authenticity in its perpetuation. Baudelaire, however, clearly sets out two forms of laughter induced by comic art, one owing to the magic of the *comique absolu*, the other, to the more analytical trigger of the *comique significatif*. *Le comique absolu* (also termed “grotesque”) represents a realm of absolute otherness, “les créations fabuleuses, les êtres dont la raison, la légitimation ne peut pas être tirée du code du sens commun” (OC, 2: 535). The absolute comic is an irreducibly singular artistic expression that is apprehended in its totality and sensuous immediacy. It induces a rapturous vertigo in the spectator and must be grasped intuitively, from within its own economy. Baudelaire’s celebration of the *comique absolu* echoes that of *poésie pure* and its magical fusion of subject and object through the alchemy of the sovereign imagination, “la reine des facultés.” *Le comique significatif*, however, is an altogether different species. It is analytical, requiring reflection and judgment in its reception, and because of its ultimate legibility, it is readily grasped by the unschooled. Focusing on intersubjective relations of power, *le comique significatif* is contextual and relates to ordinary life situations. Baudelaire mentions Molière’s “comique des mœurs” as an example of this comic form. Whereas the *comique absolu* recreates man’s superiority over nature, the *comique significatif* pivots upon man’s superiority over man. Baudelaire opposes the latter’s derivative, imitative status to the former’s autonomous, visionary nature. This distinction links up to a broader tension between art for art’s sake and utilitarian or committed art, an opposition privileging the purity of autonomous art over the contamination of a contextually bound production: “Il y a, entre ces deux rires, abstraction faite sur la question d’utilité, la même différence qu’entre l’école littéraire intéressée et l’école de l’art pour l’art. Ainsi le grotesque domine le comique d’une hauteur proportionnelle” (OC, 2: 535).

In spite of these distinctions, however, Baudelaire’s opposition between absolute and signifying forms of comic art swiftly unravels. Having established that the grotesque is a creation, whereas the comic is but an imitation, the author proceeds to define the comic as “une imitation mêlée d’une certaine faculté créatrice, c’est à dire d’une idéalité artistique” and the grotesque as “une

création mêlée d'une certaine faculté imitatrice d'éléments préexistants dans la nature" (OC, 2: 535). The stark opposition between these categories is softened into a subtle ratio between creation and imitation. Since the opposition between these art forms cannot be grounded in terms of intrinsic properties, the author turns to the responses they provoke in the viewer, underscoring thus the importance of the *reader* in his theory of laughter. The absolute comic is grasped intuitively and as a whole (like the symbol in romantic aesthetic theory), the other is characterized by doubleness ("l'art et l'idée morale") and deferral ("le rire après coup"), and hence shares the same structure as allegory or caricature. Yet, the author concludes, the difference between them is not of essence but in their reception ("c'est une question de rapidité d'analyse"). The hierarchical opposition between these comic forms is anything but stable in Baudelaire's essay. The entanglement of absolute and signifying forms of the comic and their final determination by the reader describe an open-ended aesthetic practice informed by its context of production *and* of reception.⁴⁸

De Man's translation of the *comique absolu* into a paradigm for irony as epistemological trauma—at the expense of the *comique significatif*—is questionable. For it is the *comique significatif* and its structure of discontinuity and deferral, its horizontal axis of intersubjective relations, that functions according to the doubleness and play of difference de Man attributes to absolute comic and irony.⁴⁹ At stake in de Man's privileging of the *comique absolu* and its basis in a relationship between nonidentical entities is his investment in the necessary self-difference or discontinuity of a subject emerging in language, or "the *distance* constitutive of all acts of reflection," and the "discontinuity and a plurality of levels within a subject that comes to know itself by an increasing differentiation from what it is not" ("Rhetoric of Temporality," 213). For de Man, Baudelaire's essay establishes a clear hierarchy between the absolute comic (its reliance on a relationship to a nonself, or to an "other within the self") and the *comique significatif*. The absolute comic is true, "absolute" irony. The signifying comic is merely humor. It is an intersubjective practice, "and thus exists on the necessarily empirical level of interpersonal relationships," and stages the "superiority of one subject over another, with all the implications of will to power, of violence, and possession which come into play when a person is laughing at someone else—including the will to educate and to improve" (ibid., 212). It is, therefore, a representational practice that fails to perpetuate the gap between fiction and actuality that de Man sees as the only "authentic" experience of irony.

De Man's exclusive reliance on the absolute comic as a relation to the non-

self eclipses the communicative axis of Baudelairean irony, as well as the inter-subjective, contextual, and demystifying elements that situate the *comique significatif* in an empirical realm of material realities and interpersonal relations. Yet Baudelaire's essay repeatedly gestures toward the comic work's relationship to reception, analysis, and critique. It also incites a vigilant reading of its own categories, first by emphasizing that the *comique absolu*, like edenic nature itself (or pure art, for that matter), is a heuristic concept, since the comic can only be absolute relative to our fallen condition. Thus, both theologically and aesthetically, Baudelaire situates his reflections in an impure, fallen, and relative context. His refusal to delineate clearly between the absolute and the significant incarnations of the comic is obvious in the two concrete examples of the comic he gives: E. T. A Hoffmann's *Daucus Carotta* and *La Princesse Brambilla*. These tales combine the *comique absolu* and its creation of alien horizons, with the *comique significatif* and its reliance on the discontinuity between utterance and meaning, as well as its demystification of intersubjective social structures. Hoffmann interweaves elements of *comique profond* and *railleurie significative*, unrepresentable vertigo, and the crafting of a science and ethics that stretch common frames of understanding and, in so doing, exemplify the fluidity of Baudelaire's categories.⁵⁰ This combination of textual address with creative *ivresse*, of science with poetics, of aesthetics with morality and ethics, forms the core of Baudelaire's own practice in the essay. Both an analysis and an implied performance of laughter, both inside and outside its madness, the author's voice skillfully weaves the reflections of the "médecin-moraliste" into the pathological experience itself.

We are now in a better position to assess the consequences of de Man's exclusive reliance on the *comique absolu* for theorizing irony as abyssal reflexivity. This theory of irony establishes rigid dichotomies between fiction and actuality, authenticity and inauthenticity, disjunction and conciliation, aesthetics and praxis, irony and critique. In declaring that there is no cure for the madness of irony, de Man sets the stage for later readings of textual undecidability through trauma. Both trauma and absolute irony postulate a radical separation of spheres between the real and the fictional, the empirical and the linguistic.⁵¹ Irony, in de Man's account, locks the text into an infinitely reiterated trauma with no exit.

Kevin Newmark addresses this issue in his essay "Traumatic Poetry: Charles Baudelaire and the Shock of Laughter," a critique of de Man's split between consciousness and reality as one that would suggest that the ironic consciousness, "however 'mad', could nonetheless remain wholly enclosed within itself

and therefore devoid of any substantial contact with material, historical reality" (249). Newmark notes that this self-enclosure is not evidenced in Baudelaire's own text, which looks at laughter from a historical vantage point.⁵² He suggests, rather, that Baudelaire's essay represents a trauma whose destructive effects are to be mastered through philosophical analysis. Baudelaire attempts to provide a cure for the traumatic disjunction of laughter by dividing its experience into a phase of falling and a phase of reflection, such that the pathology of trauma opens up the possibility of a cure through analysis. Yet Newmark observes that there is no remedial "outside" from which a therapeutic intervention can be conducted. This is not only because of the conspicuous absence of an extrahistorical realm untainted by the shock of laughter, but because trauma is located at a level that is deeper than history. It inheres in the iterability of language itself, its inability fully to signify or ever to attain the plenitude of pure thought and being: "Laughter occurs as shock because it occurs semiotically as language, and as language, laughter is traumatic because it always refers to its inability to occur as anything other than a compulsively repeated reference that is never allowed to come to rest in the fullness of final meaning" (251).

For Newmark, then, Baudelaire's essay transmits the shock of laughter, it "laughs traumatically whenever it is read" and confronts the transparency of philosophical analysis with the opacity of language, its iterability and evasion of the determinations of source and fixed meaning—figured here as the obsessive maxim "le sage ne rit qu'en tremblant," whose author and origin remain unknown. The two levels of Baudelaire's text, then, as a "blindly compulsive" enactment of a trauma that is a condition of language itself and as a detached attempt to fix and understand the phenomenon of laughter, constitute the essay's central, unresolvable aporia.⁵³

Yet the displacement of trauma into language itself opens up the same kinds of slippages I discussed in the more general context of trauma theory. The assimilation of trauma as a condition of language itself makes distinct historical traumas lose their specificity. In the case of Baudelaire's essay, this historical specificity, although never a stable ground, is nevertheless suggested, since laughter erupts only in fallen civilizations whose mystifications are intimately linked to urban modernity's symbolic and material upheavals. The comic experience (both in its absolute and signifying forms) always emerges within a shared representational context or *habitus*. When Baudelaire rewrites Virginia's fall, survival, and laughter in the modern metropolis, he underlines that the caricatures she could encounter are familiar to the reader and belong

to a common reservoir of representations. Indeed, caricature is based upon a social reality as well as a shared representational economy. Baudelaire's interpellations of the reader are constant reminders of this shared, fallen currency.⁵⁴

Even more significant is Baudelaire's resistance to a binary opposition between "acting out" and "working through," between writing as reenacting trauma and writing as healing the traumatic breach through the closure and transparency of analysis. Baudelaire's deconstructions of such binaries suggest the aesthetic work to be a complex interplay of shock and analysis, of blindness and insight.⁵⁵ Rehearsing both the trauma and the analysis elicited by laughter, Baudelaire suggests that the truly philosophical text serves as a stage for reflexivity, for the capacity to be *soi et autrui*. As we saw earlier, this vision of the text is illustrated in "L'Héautontimorouménos," which posits the subject as a *site* for the self-reflexive operations of irony: "Je suis le sinistre miroir / Où la mégère [l'ironie] se regarde." It is also crucial to bear in mind the *ternary* structure of laughter (rather than remain at the level of self-duplication). Indeed, Baudelaire's inclusion of the reader as a spectator of another's fall (such as Virginia's) inscribes this reader as the third position in a textual scenario dramatizing the fall into reflexivity and lucidity. The many figurations of the reading process foreground a text-reader-context relationship at odds with the autonomous demystification that de Man views as essential to the authenticity of irony's insight. Rather, it is the very separation of spheres that is demystified in Baudelaire's references to a shared context of reflection and contamination.⁵⁶

This shared condition is not only a site of epistemological trauma, as de Man would have it. It is woven out of intersubjective relations of power, pedagogy, and critique, elements that Baudelaire attributes to the social register of the *comique significatif*. As the deployment of cultural frames in the essay suggests, then, irony's reflexivity does not merely posit the self *as* other. It rehearses the opposition between self and other as one between superiority and inferiority, between *bourreau* and *victime*, and thus wrestles with the relations of force that laughter both causes and reveals. The comic reveals the violence of representation, its ability to reshape the reading subject by inducing a fall into reflexivity and laughter, from the passivity of "voir" to the agency of "regarder." This violence is not only represented but also performed: the essay does violence to literary history, to its sources and its intertexts, and most important of all, to the reader, who is coerced into occupying the fallen position of an "Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère."

One figure vividly encapsulates the poetics of Baudelairean laughter: the

Pierrot of English pantomime. Baudelaire's portrait of Pierrot's sublime and self-conscious violence resonates with his own writing practice as an epistemological doubling into subject and object, one that also becomes an ethical doubling into executioner and victim. The English Pierrot is noted for the violence of his comic mode, or irony: "je fus excessivement frappé de cette manière de comprendre le comique" (*OC*, 2: 538). He incarnates the *ivresse terrible et irresistible* of the absolute comic and yet solicits the analytical distance of the signifying comic. While the spectator is swept up by the "vertige de l'hyperbole" incarnated by Pierrot, the latter is also a spectacularly artificial figure. His mask is grafted upon his face "sans gradation, sans transition"; and his painted grimace practically splits his face into two, as if to remind the viewer of his hyperbolic theatricality. Baudelaire describes a scene in which Pierrot's compulsive kleptomania leads him to the guillotine. Once decapitated, his head rolls on stage, "montrant le disque saignant du cou, la vertèbre scindée, et tous les détails d'une viande de boucherie récemment taillée pour l'étalage" (*OC*, 2: 539). The monstrous is transformed into a "réalité singulièrement saisissante," hurling the beholder into a visionary—or traumatic—experience of otherness in which common hermeneutic codes have no relevance. Yet, as the display of the butchered head suggests, Pierrot's dismemberment is a dramatic *mise en spectacle* of his persona. The layers constituting his staged body are exposed as constructed pieces for display, as potentially infinite levels of artifice. The visceral impact of the scene, which requires the intuitive grasp of the *comique absolu*, is thus mediated by the exposure of the artificial layers that compose this figure on stage. Pierrot survives the guillotine, and in the madness of pantomime, he even keeps his head, if not on his shoulders, at least stuffed into his pocket: "Mais voilà que, subitement, le torse raccourci, mû par la monomanie irresistible du vol, se dressait, escamotait victorieusement sa propre tête et . . . la fourrait dans sa poche" (*OC*, 2: 539). Pierrot's refusal to relinquish his head transmits the shock of otherness as well as its demystification, trauma and its analysis, and that sparks points of contact between the fantastic and the real.⁵⁷

"Pourquoi la guillotine au lieu de pendaison en pays anglais?" Baudelaire conspicuously asks in his report of this scene. The nationalization of Pierrot's death—through the guillotine rather than the gallows—not unlike Virginie's imagined encounter with caricatures of the monarchy's dissolute mores, are ludic gestures toward a revolutionary history that, even after 1851, Baudelaire will continue to evoke in negative, ironical terms.⁵⁸ It is also a gesture of complicity with the audience that recasts the atemporal *féerie* of pantomime into a

shared historical postrevolutionary context. The frenetic, mute Pierrot, guillotined and resurrected, brandishing his own head, can be read as a figure for the symbolic mutilation of a poetry that renounces its power to transfigure the world through language and instead ironically recollects the symbolic vestiges of past revolutions, from the standpoint of “victime et bourreau.”

Like the vertiginous capers of the English pantomime, the text of laughter transmits the trauma of the *comique absolu* yet filters and contextualizes it through the strategies of the *comique significatif*, that is to say, through irony, parabasis, intertextuality and interpellation. The trauma of otherness is thus put into dialogue with familiar frames of reference that spur the recognition of a collective predicament. The reader is incited to occupy both the traumatized position of one who has cognitively “missed” the textual experience and yet been contaminated by its shock, and that of the accomplice to the imposer of textual meaning, to the corruptive violence of the authorial persona (as shown in the example of Virginie’s defilement). This alternation between victim and executioner dislodges any stable notion of the subject, to be sure. But the shock of Baudelaire’s irony does far more than dispossess this subject of its plenitude. It discloses language’s power to shape a reality that is both semiotic and singularly material. For the “réalité singulièrement saisissante” of the performance before which the narrator’s pen “trembles,” like the laughter that erupts from the philosopher’s unsteady lips, or Virginie’s shock before the offending caricature, alert us to the power of language as a praxis, to the force of signification. Such moments awaken the reader from the passivity of seeing to the agency of looking and point one’s gaze to the often violent relations that constitute—and represent—a historical moment.