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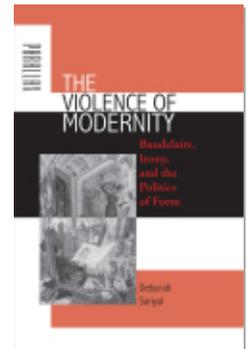
## The Violence of Modernity

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P A R T   T W O

*Unlikely Contestations*

Baudelaire's Legacy Revisited



The preceding chapters situated Baudelaire within a reading of French modernism that attends to the ideological valences of literary form, and to irony as a mode of historical contestation. The representation of the body—and of womens' bodies in particular—emerges as a key locus for the converging violence of aesthetic modernism and historical modernity. Baudelaire's representations of the human body make visible the multiple symbolic forces that shape a subject's emergence into being. They offer a genealogy of the overlapping violence of poetry and ideology at a particular historical juncture. The body of the martyr, the conspirator, the sovereign, the artist, the dandy, the prostitute, the beggar, and the savage are sites of contest that reveal central—and often contradictory—cultural assumptions about the meaning of “modernity” itself. The fate of these bodies as they circulate in the poetic text and its cultural contexts opens up a critique of the Second Empire's ideologies of pacified class struggle, urban development, modern progress, and colonial conquest. “Woman”—in the writings of Baudelaire and others—functions as the site for an inquiry into the cultural processes that make an embodied subject matter and signify in economic, political, sexual, and aesthetic terms. The spectacle of bodies marked by competing values give insight into the consolidation of a postrevolutionary bourgeois capitalist and colonial modernity. The explicit production of “femininity” through the violence of allegory, spectacle, and commodity fetishism participates in a broader critique of the conditions that inscribe matter into form—and bodies into subjects—on the poetic scene and the historical stage.

My readings of Baudelaire strive to account for the volatile critical energy of his poetry in terms that make room for dialogic, differential, and even combative relations between text, reader, and historical horizon. Baudelaire's ironic counterviolences open up a range of positions for the reader—as victim, executioner, accomplice, and witness—toward the cultural logics rehearsed in the poems. The act of reading itself becomes a form of counterviolence, in which the reader is coerced into collusion with and resistance to the text's interpellations and exclusions. It makes sense, then, that Baudelaire's legacy continues to be revitalized in intertextual rereadings of his poetry, and that some of the most vital and compelling “counterviolent” readings are by those who are excluded by his intended readership, that is, women authors and committed intellectuals.

In “Assommons les pauvres !” Baudelaire gives us an allegory of reading itself as counterviolence, as a practice of violence not only against another but against oneself, as well as against past literature. Before turning from Baudelaire to some of his most unexpectedly provocative readers, it may be useful to return briefly to this poem. As we saw in Chapter 2, the poet-intellectual of “Assommons les pauvres !” suffers from an overdose of indigestible literature from his idealist past. He rushes outside and beats up a random beggar on the streets, until his victim finally retaliates and in turn beats him up. The reason for the blows remains mysterious but they have something to do with the nature of the literature the poet has swallowed—utopian theories that advise all paupers to turn themselves into slaves or persuade them that they are “tous des rois détronés.” The impotence of these texts before the material conditions of history is likened to the beggar's own impotent gaze, one of those unforgettable gazes that would topple thrones if only mind could move matter. What is at stake, then, is the idealist belief in the transformative power not only of theory but also of literature itself. Indeed, what is perhaps also at stake is poetry's power to “move matter” and to produce social change. Such alchemical transformations have woefully failed: the poet's ingestion of revolutionary thought was earnest but stupefying, the beggar's gaze is soulful but impotent. In the words of Marx, “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living” (*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *Marx-Engels Reader*, 595). Yet the act of reading does rouse the poet from his torpor and into action. Ejected from his ivory tower, he tumbles into the city streets and confronts the beggar's solicitation. The ongoing impact of past writing is rehearsed as a collision between bodies that unfolds across historical time, for the poet's beating responds to texts written some sixteen odd

years before. The shift from theory (or reading) to practice (or beating) is staged as a violent encounter between self and other in a particular historical moment that is woven out of unacknowledged relations of inequity and force. The poem thus gestures to the constant renewal of literature's energy as it is transferred from one subject to another: through reading, through blows, through retaliations and counterblows.

Baudelaire's allegory materializes the legacy of literature over time, insofar as the struggle between poet and beggar is a corporeal reenactment that tests the historical relevance of past theory (the republican promise of freedom and equality) through irony. As we have seen, Baudelaire's ironic violence actualizes latent relations of force that continue to structure postrevolutionary society. In "Assommons les pauvres !" as in the other poems studied thus far, these relations of force are restaged as a physical encounter between embodied subjects who inflict, suffer, and witness pain. In a characteristically dialectical maneuver, for Baudelaire, the discovery of agency is accompanied by the recognition of one's own fragility. Our philosopher-poet is himself turned into a body vulnerable to the beggar's multiplied blows. Theory is rehearsed through pain ("la théorie que j'ai eu la douleur d'essayer sur votre dos"). What emerges out of this parodic exchange of *douleurs*, leading to the *partage de la bourse*, is nothing less than a mutual recognition of one's vulnerability to the violence of history, whether this history is textual, figural, and symbolic, or empirical, corporeal, and material.

The politics of the poet-philosopher's intervention are, of course, open to conflicting interpretations. The exchange of blows has been persuasively read by different critics as a Nietzschean initiation into anarchist revolt, as a prefiguration of totalitarian power, and even a parody of Proudhon's theory of mutualism.<sup>1</sup> Yet, as a broader allegory of reading, Baudelaire describes the vital, often dolorous exchange that occurs between a text and its readers, which is irreducible to an ideologically determined agenda. Marie Maclean's reading of this poem eloquently captures this openness to combative resignification: "However, one fine day it may all become too much. The passive receiver may suddenly pick himself up and, with a look of hate, realize that two can play at the text game. The realization comes in two stages: first the transgressive reading of the authoritarian text and then the production of a new text, either mentally as an active reader or eventually as a reader turned writer. Beat certain readers over the head long enough and, to the consternation of many, they will produce *A Season in Hell, Ulysses*. . . ."<sup>2</sup>

The last two chapters of this book pursue this legacy of literary blows and

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counterblows in three French authors whose combative rereadings of Baudelaire illustrate the value and relevance of his poetics of irony for crucial historical junctures, including our own. I trace this intertextual dialogue in the work of the decadent woman writer Rachilde, in the contemporary writer–film director Virginie Despentes, and in Albert Camus’s intervention in the postwar debate on literary commitment. These readings are not proposed as a history or genealogy of Baudelaire’s influence on subsequent literary production but, rather, as beacons, or “phares ironiques,” that illuminate his legacy of counterviolence in diverse cultural sites. In this regard, my selection of authors has not been motivated by a readily discernable or canonized relationship to Baudelaire but by the vectors of analysis their counterblows enable. Indeed, the very heterogeneity of these writers—decadent Rachilde, absurdist Camus, punk Despentes—is meant to suggest that productive engagements with Baudelaire are to be found in rather unlikely places. Given Baudelaire’s centrality to modern literature, there are, to be sure, any number of other figures who might have been included here. My choice of these writers has been prompted by their continued—albeit easily overlooked—meditation on a constellation of Baudelairean themes. The experimental flights taken up in these pages pursue the lines of inquiry opened by the previous chapters: literary form as a site for ideological critique, writing as combative intertextual exchange, irony as a vehicle of aesthetic counterviolence to historical violence, and the body as locus for the claims of reference.