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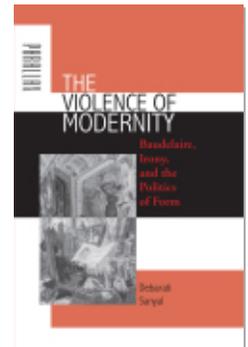
The Violence of Modernity

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Matter's Revenge on Form

Bad Girls Talk Back

Ce livre n'est pas fait pour mes femmes, mes filles ou mes soeurs.

Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*

Baudelaire's readers are men. It is men who have made him famous; it is them he has redeemed.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

[W]e had some brilliant writers in the 19th century, brilliant intellects, especially about sex and love. Flaubert, Baudelaire, then Bataille, Genet. If I hadn't read French authors like this before, I don't think I'd have written Baise-Moi.

Virginie Despentes

This chapter examines two women writers who revisit Baudelaire and the canon of high literature he has come to represent. Their combative rewritings attest to the vitality of Baudelaire's legacy of counterviolence and its power to stimulate ethical and political critique in the most unlikely places (the work of an until recently marginalized decadent author, and that of a contemporary anarchist punk writer). My choice of these works, and of *Baise-moi* in particular, may raise skeptical brows. Yet an underlying impetus in this book is to open the canon to alternate readings. The following discussions of texts that may be considered "unliterary" or unworthy of scholarly interpretation is also motivated by a reconsideration of high literature and its fetishism of style and form. The preceding chapters have argued that even in Baudelaire, aesthetic form is subjected to scrutiny for its complicity with other regimes of power. Thus, while occupying the canonical position of *l'art pour l'art*, Baudelaire opens up a critical modernity that makes room for authors such as Rachilde and Despentes as points of relay in an ongoing meditation on art and violence.¹

Rachilde and Virginie Despentes are women writers, that is to say, readers explicitly excluded from Baudelaire's intended readership. Their works both acknowledge and contest the cultural legacy traditionally associated with the

poet: matter's redemption by form, the violence of allegorical inscription, the gendering of poet and muse, the supremacy of poetry over history. From their respective and very different historical vantage points, Rachilde and Despentès turn the tables on Baudelaire's legacy through counterviolent dialogues with its dominant topoi: the dandy, the flâneur, intoxication, *ailleurs*, and the woman as prostitute, beast, or vehicle for literary transports.² These counter-violent reappropriations enact what I call "matter's revenge on form."

Mlle Baudelaire: The Dandy and Prostitute Resignified in Rachilde's L'Animale and Monsieur Vénus

Rachilde was born Marguerite Eymery to a middle-class military family in 1860. In a bold and eccentric legitimation of her desire to write, she adopted her pen name from a dead Swedish man for whom she claimed to serve as a "medium" during occult séances. In the 1880s, she moved to Paris with her mother and was introduced to avant-garde literary circles. She contributed to Anatole Baju's magazine *Le Décadent* and was catapulted into notoriety with the publication of *Monsieur Vénus* (1884), a novel banned as pornographic in Belgium. Married to Alfred Valette, editor of *Mercur de France*, Rachilde remained active in literary circles until the 1930s as a prolific writer and reviewer. Her best-known novels include *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), *Madame Adonis* (1880), *La Tour d'amour* (1899), and *La Jongleuse* (1899).³

Rachilde's oeuvre continues to solicit controversial readings. Her resolutely anti-feminist stance, her decadent elitism, and general hostility to progressive social or political agendas, make it difficult to assign an emancipatory politics to her fiction. She was heralded as the "queen of decadents" by her peers, who included such figures as Jean Lorrain, Catulle Mendés, and Villiers de l'Isle Adam, and her works seem to embrace the apolitical tendencies of the decadent movement, with its radicalization of *l'art pour l'art* and its disdainful retreat from the democratic principles of the Third Republic. Rachilde rehearses the dominant motifs of decadence—the *femme fatale*, the dandy, the beauty of evil, the cult of artifice, the fascinated horror with organic decay, the aristocratic disdain for the masses.⁴ Still, in recent decades, her work has become a point of reference for feminist readers who argue that the inversion of such motifs carves out a space for rethinking sexual difference. As critics such as Janet Beizer, Diana Holmes, Rita Felski, and others have argued, in the volatile sexual politics of the Third Republic, as feminist movements proliferated and a growing number of women gained access to education and joined the work-

force, the fields of medicine, psychology, and the natural sciences coalesced in attempts to locate sexual difference in the body.⁵ In the fin de siècle cultural imagination, the Commune's *pétroleuses* or Charcot's hysterics displace the prostitute as figures for the association of femininity with savagery and irrationality.⁶ When read against this horizon, Rachilde's ludic inversions of gender roles challenge the givenness of sexual difference and open up a carnivalesque play that rubs against the grain of the regulatory norms for gender and sexuality. Her celebration of the semiotic, theatrical dimension of identity and desire even foreshadows such contemporary theoretical lenses as performativity, gender, and identity as masquerade. The fluid, textual nature of selfhood and desire are epitomized by the protean heroine of *La Jongleuse*, whose masterful juggling becomes a metaphor for the emergence of identity through performance and masquerade. Yet even when read through the critical apparatus of performativity and gender, the negativity of Rachilde's dystopias may prove disappointing to readers seeking a celebration of alternate forms of selfhood and desire. While her characters explore transgressive modalities of identification and desire in fantasies that celebrate the plastic, semiotic quality of the human body, these *femmes fatales* and their destructive agency often seem merely to reverse the existing relations of force in the erotic scenarios of decadent literature. Rarely does Rachilde present a utopian space of "free play" where alternate bodies and desires may be imagined and lived out.⁷

Rachilde's oeuvre poses a familiar critical bind to readings seeking to recuperate a progressive political agenda from an ostensibly reactionary text. She fails both in the realm of praxis and in the space of textuality, neither offering an explicit critique of women's oppression nor envisioning an imaginary *ailleurs*. Her negative dystopias offer little by way of consolation or critique. Yet this eminently Baudelairean negativity is precisely where we may maneuver to recover the critical force of her intervention in the decadent legacy. Like Baudelaire's, Rachilde's choreographed perversity enacts invisible social structures of power and makes legible underlying relations of force that crisscross the aesthetic, erotic, and social domains. The private dramas of the Third Republic's upper echelons are portrayed as a vicious battle between sexes and classes, waged between men and women, but also between the military, the bourgeoisie, the aristocracy, and a disempowered proletariat represented by passive ephebes. With Baudelaire, but also with other fin de siècle contemporaries, Rachilde envisions the social arena as a sacrificial space: the family and social order are a shifting network of victims and executioners, love and sexual desire are a battle in which sovereignty is maintained by inscribing one's will

on the body of another and the price of one's life is the death of another.⁸ As we shall see, Rachilde's engagement with the decadent legacy can be read as a vector of an ongoing critique of modernity that illuminates the cultural conditions that allow certain subjects to emerge by repressing others.

In his preface to the 1889 edition of *Monsieur Vénus*, Maurice Barrès famously baptized Rachilde as "Mlle Baudelaire." Professing his admiration for the refined perversity of the nineteen-year-old author, he cast her as the latest representative of literary lineage that included such figures as Sainte-Beuve and Baudelaire: "Ramenant gentiment ses jupons entre ses jambes, cette fillette se laissa gentiment rouler sur la pente de l'énerivation qui va de Joseph Delorme aux *Fleurs du mal*" (13). Rachilde's literary production is pathologized as the physiological record of an ambient *mal du siècle*, and legitimated in its ventriloquism of established precursors.⁹ Barrès illustrates the contradictory treatment of woman as both "naturelle" and "fatalement suggestive" that we have seen in Balzac, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé. Declaring that "la petite fille qui rédigeait ce merveilleux Monsieur Vénus n'avait pas toute cette esthétique en tête. . . . Simplement, elle avait de mauvais instincts" (13), he reads the novel as an expression of the body's instinct *and* as a textual point of relay for the decadent legacy. Once again the literary text is reduced to a symptomatic inscription of the cultural contradictions from which it issues.

In some sense, Barrès's disparaging assessment of Rachilde's debt to Baudelaire hit the nail right on the head. Yet Rachilde's engagement with such masculine precursors is irreducible to the docile mimicry suggested by the preface. Her incursions into the French literary heritage are counterviolences that appropriate and resignify some of its key topoi. In *La Marquise de Sade* (1887), which traces the descent of its young protagonist into sexual depravity, Rachilde not only provides a female counterpart to Sade's libertine but also rewrites a founding scene of French allegorical tradition: the plucking of the rose in *Le Roman de la rose*.¹⁰ In the medieval romance, the pilgrim who represents masculine quest violently possesses the feminine virginal flower in the love garden of Déduit. In Rachilde's version, the naughty little marquise de Sade—Mary Barbe—frolics in a dreamy fin de siècle erotic garden with the young Sirocco. They come upon garden's most precious blossom, a perfect rose called *l'émotion*. Compared to a maid poised on the first blush of sensual awakening, the exquisite rose mirrors the pale and virginal, though not so innocent, Mary Barbe. The traditional allegorization of femininity as a rose to be ravished by the pilgrim, however, is overturned. Instead, it is the maid who plucks the rose and eats it: "Mary ne se lassait pas de respirer la rose. . . .

Soudain, elle y mit les dents et, dans un raffinement de plaisir, elle la mangea” (97). Mary devours the virginal rose to become instead an unruly *fleur du mal*. This moment of cannibalistic *jouissance* captures an essential feature of Rachilde’s appropriation of her literary heritage. Her defiant intrusion into the rhetorical blossoms of predecessor texts do not merely reproduce their topoi through a simplistic inversion of gender that leaves the process of allegorization intact. Instead, Rachilde’s curious reinscription of the rose discloses something about the sexual politics of allegory itself. It alerts us to the violence of a creative process in which a masculine subject inscribes its will upon a feminine matter, mistress, and muse.¹¹

Rachilde engages in dialogue with dominant topoi from the literary tradition, as well as with more contemporary writings by Baudelaire, Huysmans, Villiers de l’Isle Adam, Barbey d’Aurevilly, and others. Characters such as Mary Barbe are female incarnations of the Baudelairean dandy. Androgynous, opposed to reproduction and maternity, plagued with ennui and disgusted at the tepid mediocrity of their times, Rachilde’s female protagonists are aesthetes whose cruel and refined sexual practices extract *la beauté du mal*. Yet Barrès’s theory of passive and ventriloquized influence is belied by Rachilde’s often comical counterviolent treatment of her literary predecessors. In *La Jongleuse*, Baudelaire himself is unceremoniously dispatched as a decadent cliché. Indeed, the mysterious Eliante Donalger initially appears to be a typical Baudelairean female idol. Her body is seamlessly encased in black dresses, and her alabaster face is permanently painted into artifice. Léon, a medical student, thwarted in his attempts to seduce her, muses as she dances past him: “un tourbillon passait en rêve. Une valseuse noire dont les jupons s’envolaient comme de sombres feuilles d’acanthé autour du beau fruit défendu, d’un corps lisse et souple, que l’on rêvait plus blanc, plus lisse et plus souple parce qu’il était voilé de deuil. Deuil de qui ? Deuil de quoi ? Un affreux deuil prémédité avant la lettre, pour aguicher les pierrots dont l’imagination aigrie de bonne heure avait picoré le fumier de Baudelaire, les jours de pluie. Nom d’un chien !” (*Jongleuse*, 63). Through Léon’s caustic eyes, Eliante momentarily embodies Baudelaire’s marmoreal *passante*, her flying skirts recalls the woman mourning who walks by, “soulevant, balançant le feston et l’ourlet” (*OC*, 1: 92). Yet this intertextual incarnation is dismissed as a bit of clichéd rubbish lying in the Baudelairean dungheap. Baudelaire’s *passante* is caricatured as “passing fashion” and trashed; the poet who would turn mud into gold is turned back into mud, his legacy mocked as an obsolete *charogne* curdling the imagination. Rachilde turns Baudelaire’s polarized images of women (as material decay and

as marmoreal ideal) against the poet himself. The character of Eliante both rehearses and eludes these images of femininity. The passing object of the poet's fascination in "À une passante" becomes, in *La Jongleuse*, a performing subject in her own right, one who deliberately cultivates her semiotic possibilities.¹²

"Mlle Baudelaire" is at her most Baudelairean in such contestatory rewritings of her precursor. Her dialogue with Baudelaire takes up the challenge of "Assomons les pauvres !" and its invitation to reading as counterviolence. This combative play with precursor texts also opens a meditation on the body's plasticity before the other's erotic and aesthetic gaze. Indeed, Rachilde rewrites the traditional opposition between female materiality and masculine form, between *femme sauvage* and dandy, in sexual scenarios that show the violence through which a body is turned into a meaningful semiotic object. In dislocating the gender positions associated with the creative process, she reveals how allegory itself is "engendered" through violence. As in Baudelaire, who serves as an intertextual thread in the following readings of *L'Animale* and *Monsieur Vénus*, violence and counterviolence are textual modalities that convey the vulnerability of the human body and the painful—as well as pleasurable—conditions under which certain bodies emerge, are empowered, or are cast into abjection.

*"La femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable":
Rachilde's L'Animale*

As its title suggests, Rachilde's *L'Animale* ambiguously rehearses the decadent topos of the bestial woman. Whether *l'animale* of the title is the heroine or the feline pet that finally kills her is left ambiguous, but Laure Lordes is a parody of the Baudelairean *femme sauvage*. There is more than a hint of *charogne* to her loveliness even as a child. Born to parents who performed gastronomical experiments worthy of Huysmans's *des Esseintes* to increase their fertility, she is a hothouse plant, a *fleur du mal* whose beauty is on the verge of organic decay: "L'enfant n'était pas seulement avancée, elle était pourrie, d'une jolie pourriture de champignon blanc et brodé. Elle se montrait *naturellement* décomposée, comme les bulles qui s'arrondissent sur les ondes stagnantes, sur les mares où l'on a mis des chanvres à rouir, lesquelles bulles, très jolies, s'irisent de toutes les couleurs de l'arc en ciel et n'en sont pas moins montées de l'infection. . . . Nulle innocence ne pouvait, du reste, égaler la sienne, puisqu'elle était née avec le germe du mal."¹³ Rachilde's portrait of Laure Lordes's corrupt femininity rehearses a host of conventional Baudelairean motifs. The italicized

reference to her “natural” decay echoes Baudelaire’s view of woman as “naturelle . . . abominable”; the venom flowing in her veins recalls the venereal imagery of “À celle qui est trop gaie”; her long, fragrant tresses—a metonymic sign of her bestial disposition—invoke the musky sexuality of his exotic women.¹⁴ Laure’s bestiality will find its perverse expression in her passionate intimacy with a cat called Lion. This too seems a wink at Baudelaire, since it is well known that cats became the poet’s signature, such that the black cat in Manet’s scandalous *Olympia* served both as a metonym for the prostitute’s genitals and as a bawdy homage to the poet.¹⁵

Rachilde’s protagonist is thus a caricature of the cultural logic that produces “woman” as “la sauvagerie dans la civilisation,” a logic illustrated in the century’s obsession with the prostitute’s contagious sexuality (as we saw earlier). Laure Lordes’s precocious, unbridled instincts and ennui drive her to corrupt the boys in her village. She then seduces her father’s notary, the repulsive, one-eyed Lucien Séchard.¹⁶ Her next victim is a young priest, whose religious fervor conceals an incestuous obsession with his sister. As the priest finally succumbs to Laure’s advances, he mouths the opening lines of Baudelaire’s “L’Invitation au voyage”: “Oui mon enfant . . . ou mieux, ma soeur” (A, 101). Their fleeting communion is filtered through the ecstatic transports of Baudelaire’s love lyric. Laure’s tresses billow around him in a hot fragrant haze reminiscent of “la langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique” slumbering in the aromatic forest of “La Chevelure”:

Ils demeurèrent une seconde enlacés ; Laure se fondait tout entière sur sa bouche, comme un fruit s’écrasant. Des odeurs de roses dans les cheveux . . . des bras nus, une forêt de bras nus, se nouaient à son cou ; il était caressé par une tresse de cheveux noirs flottants qui prenait la dimension d’une fumée d’incendie, et il ne pourrait plus s’échapper, car une mutine voix d’enfant lui criait

— Porte moi, mon frère, porte-moi, emporte-moi ! (A, 103)

Given this parody of the love lyric’s conventional scenario, it is perhaps not an accident that Rachilde called her heroine Laure Lordes. The echoing of “Laure” recalls Petrarch’s Laura, the quintessential mistress and muse of the Renaissance love lyric. The protagonist’s name is perhaps an ironic gesture toward a literary tradition that has constructed femininity as a passive erotic and aesthetic object and as the vehicle to an ideal destination. But Rachilde reverses the direction of poetic transportation, for in this passage and throughout the novel, it is Laure who turns her male beloved into a muse and vehicle to an ideal *ailleurs* (“Porte moi, mon frère, porte-moi, emporte-moi !”).

Unlikely Contestations

This *ailleurs* however is systematically banalized and co-opted by the bourgeoisie. Instead of a land of “luxe, calme et volupté,” the paradise promised by her fraternal priest turns out to be the confining platitude of a bourgeois marriage. Indeed, to ensure Laure’s salvation (from his own desire and the consequences of her affair with her father’s notary), the priest arranges her marriage to Henri Alban, a tepid bourgeois Parisian. The jilted and jealous notary tells the would-be groom of his affair with Laure before committing suicide. Laure is disowned by her family, abandoned by her fiancé, and cast out of the village. She flees to Paris, where she joins Henri and offers to serve as his *petite-maîtresse* instead of his legitimate wife, an arrangement that he accepts with orderly aplomb.

Henri Alban’s mean and calculating spirit epitomizes the deadening conformism of an American-style status quo based on the reign of profit. Described as a “chef d’oeuvre de sa fin-de-siècle . . . apothéose du genre américain francisé . . . fier de la France, que la raison et un bel équilibre social momifiait honnêtement” (A, 169), he represents a cold, masculine, bureaucratic bourgeoisie invested in a purely transactional model of human relations. Sapped of vital force and nobility, worshipping at the altar of commerce, and incapable of any emotion that has not been scripted in advance for profit, he is a comic sample of Baudelaire’s civilized man.¹⁷ Henri’s deadening—and deadly—conformism drives Laure into the madness and abjection he believes is intrinsic to her. Neglected by her lover, who wants to sell her off to one of his friends, treated like a lunatic, kept in solitary confinement like a harem girl, with only her cat for company, Laure slowly mutates into a feline creature.

Laure thus comes to embody the lunacy, bestiality, and prostitution that the social order (her family, the church, her village, and her fiancé) attributes to her essential nature. Embracing her social construction as abject and bestial, as the vital, feminized irrational principle repressed by the bourgeois life-world, Laure moves beyond the symbolic order and becomes a phantasmagorical nocturnal prowler who crawls around the rooftops of Paris, peering through windows in an indiscriminate quest for communion with men and beasts. After a brief affair with a young working-class boy, she is abandoned by Henri and sinks into a coma. When she recovers, she is a pauper, and she decides to prostitute herself in order to survive. On her first nocturnal excursion in search of clients, she meets an older man, who vows to take her away to Africa. Yet once again, the promise of the *ailleurs* or an escape route from dependency and abjection proves a mirage. Her beloved cat, Lion, who escaped during her illness, returns in a state of rage, starvation, and jealousy to attack

his owner. Laure's spectacular combat with the feline monster is reminiscent of Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, only the relations of power are reversed.¹⁸ She is ripped to shreds by the animal she has kept, rather than by a pantherish "keeper" like Balzac's marquise. Yet no executioner is needed to kill Laure. She is, Rachilde ostentatiously points out, slaughtered by her own inner beast. At the end, a glimpse into the mirror will reveal "un félin diabolique, un monstre inconnu, effroyable. . . . À travers son voile de sang, Laure s'était vu dans la glace" (A, 268). Laure's metamorphosis into a beast is complete: her animal nature, materialized in Lion, devours her. The novel closes on woman and cat, locked in a grotesque embrace, hurtling from the roofs into the void below.

L'Animale opens with a meditation on the implicit violence of bourgeois masculine rationality, contrasting it to the instinctual, nervous, melancholic disposition of women. Laure's nocturnal bestiality is quite explicitly described as the repressed other of enlightenment rationality. As she contemplates Henri's oblivious slumber, she muses: "Si le jour, elle devenait raisonnable, est-ce que cela prouvait que la nuit, elle était toquée ? Du reste, la raison représentait une chose fabriquée par plusieurs générations d'hommes. Les gens savants avaient faits des philosophies à leur taille, tandis que surgissaient des femmes, spontanément, des instincts qui devaient être les naïves formules de la vérité" (A, 17). From the outset, rationality is presented as a masculine construction tailored to the diminutive size of men and their contingent frameworks for knowledge. Women are defined antithetically, as nocturnal visionaries, filled with melancholy spleen and attuned to the life of the body.

Rachilde's mimicry of conventional discourses on gender difference paradoxically makes legible the construction of female nature through the naturalist discourse of heredity whereby atavistic instincts determine one's destiny. In *L'Animale*, we discern the systemic social discourses that produce the protagonist's "essential" bestial disposition. As in Baudelaire's "La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse," Rachilde presents a woman locked between two impossible incarnations: the docile, socially scripted *petite-maîtresse* whom Henri initially keeps under his thumb and the regressive corporeality of the savage beast he reviles and abandons. Laure's own body, like the performing savage of Baudelaire's poem, remains undecidable. She is perfectly capable of exploiting pathological stereotypes of femininity to her own ends, as when she feigns hysteria in order to seduce her priest, or as she reasons through her construction as either *toquée* or *animale*. In these instances, she performs the derogatory scripts assigned to her—as hysterical female—much the way Rachilde, as a writer, "performs" her stereotype as a precociously perverse female whose pen is gov-

erned by her instincts. Yet these performances do not lead to resignification. Rachilde closes off all escape routes to her protagonist and grants her no alternate scripts. Laure Lordes is condemned to play out her “nature” in terms of the abjection, madness, and animality ascribed to her.

Rachilde’s representation of femininity as the repressed “animal” nature contained and scapegoated by the instrumental rationality of modern society closes off all utopian paths to the resignification of gender. Aside from her fleeting nocturnal trysts on the rooftops of Paris, there exists no *ailleurs* for Laure’s desire. In the absence of utopian spaces for alternative identities and desires, the body itself becomes a crucial site for resistance to the dominant modes of production and reproduction. In other works by Rachilde, the female dandy (as opposed to the female animal embodied by Laure) is a key figure for imagining such an opposition. Yet, before examining how Rachilde rewrites the figure of the dandy to exploit its oppositional possibilities, let us briefly return to Baudelaire’s remarks on the dandy as the quintessential “modern” hero.

Dandyism Revisited: Monsieur Vénus, Shame, and the Embodied Experience of Violence.

For Baudelaire, the dandy is an exemplary rebel against the rising tide of bourgeois capitalist modernity. This rebellion takes the body as a site for opposition and agency. In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, the dandy transforms his body into a semiotic surface whose codes for legibility remain purely internal and voluntaristic. His aesthetic self-fashioning is a *culte de soi-même* that signals his resistance to the status quo. The dandy harbors a latent fire within that refuses to spark action in the world or to burn outright, producing nothing beyond a punctual performance of his originality.¹⁹ This autonomous creation of body, dress, and lifestyle defies the dominant bourgeois ideology of productivity, instrumentality, and conformity.

In a rarely discussed passage, Michel Foucault pays tribute to the oppositional force of the Baudelairean dandy. Unlike Sartre, Foucault does not dismiss dandyism as an abdication of freedom; rather, he sees it as a literary activation of modernity’s spirit of permanent critique.²⁰ Dandyism, as part of “la modernité Baudelairienne,” is perceived as a complex, ascetic labor upon the self, as “un exercice où l’extrême attention au réel est confrontée à la pratique d’une liberté qui tout à la fois respecte le réel et le viole” (Foucault, “Qu’est-ce que les Lumières ?” 570). Far from being a reactionary provocateur, then,

Baudelaire's dandy offers a kernel of resistance to the cultural and economic strategies that produce the bourgeois humanist subject as a natural interior to be discovered: "l'ascétisme du dandy, qui fait de son corps, de son comportement, de ses sentiments et passions, de son existence, une oeuvre d'art," calls into question the nature and ground of this subject (*ibid.*, 571). Instead, the dandy elaborates a set of practices—technologies of the self—through which a certain set of identities and lifestyles are endorsed with a measure of choice and agency. Foucault's formulations foreground the dandy's body, affect, and sensation as sites for crafting one's opposition to the subjectivizing forces of the power-knowledge network. The dandy is defined by his capacity to exercise a degree of control over the material givenness of the body. This control is precisely what opposes dandyism to femininity in the decadent tradition. The distinction between dandy and woman rehearses an opposition between form and content, wherein the latter falls prey to the natural demands of reproduction, organicity and the deterioration of time.

Rachilde reworks the Baudelairean figure of the dandy in three important ways. She too opposes the hyperreflexivity of the dandy to the regressively materiality of the *femme sauvage* or the prostitute, but she dislocates the gendered underpinnings of this opposition. The sexual politics governing the opposition itself are shown to depend on highly unstable conceptions of nature and artifice (an instability found in Baudelaire's own works, as we saw in Chapter 3). Secondly, Rachilde suggests that the very opposition to corporeality on which dandyism depends is a violent fiction. Her female dandies are sadistic despots whose reflexive powers turn *other* bodies into tablets on which their fantasies are enacted. In her inversion of the decadent sexual scenario, the male body becomes a plastic form that bears the imprint of female desire. The violence of allegorical desire is given literal form. Finally, Rachilde's reworking of the dandy illuminates the relations of force that oppose the "form" of the dandy to the "materiality" of the body. By refusing to envision a textual space of free play in which a body is liberated from its material, sexual, and gendered determinations, her narratives nuance theoretical formulations that turn to the body as a site for agency and resistance. They focus instead the body's vulnerability, experienced as shame or painful recalcitrance to fashioning by oneself and another. This emphasis on the body's abjection points out the underlying violence of allegorical and cultural processes by which matter is redeemed into form.

Rachilde's most famous novel, *Monsieur Vénus*, is often read as denaturalizing the very category of gender and opening a space of play with material, sex-

ual, and gendered determinations of identity.²¹ In this reading, however, I shall focus on how the novel portrays—and at some points even gives voice to—the body’s vulnerable recalcitrance before another’s erotic, aesthetic, and social desire. Jacques Silvert, a lower-class ephebe, falls under the spell of the androgynous and wealthy Raoule de Venerande. Lulled into a hashish-induced stupor, kept like a mistress in a harem, Jacques is a mobile text shaped and reshaped by Raoule’s desire. He frolicks about his apartment, “se jouant la comédie vis-à-vis de lui-même, se prenant à être une femme pour le plaisir de l’art” (109). Jacques’s performance of femininity is matched by Raoule’s masculine dandyism. Raoule explicitly likens herself to a modern Faustian figure of masculine quest. Complaining to her friend the baron de Raittolbe about her past experience with men, she declares that she will henceforth script her own body and rewrite the book of love:

Il est certain, monsieur, reprit Raoule en haussant ses épaules, que j’ai eu des amants. Des amants dans ma vie comme j’ai des livres dans ma bibliothèque, pour savoir, pour étudier . . . Mais je n’ai pas eu de passion, je n’ai pas écrit mon livre, moi ! Je me suis toujours trouvée seule, alors que j’étais deux. On n’est pas faible, quand on reste maître de soi au sein des voluptés les plus abrutissantes. . . . À présent, mon coeur, ce fier savant, veut faire son petit Faust . . . il a envie de rajeunir, non pas son sang, mais cette vieille chose qu’on appelle l’amour ! (84)

A Baudelairean dandy in matters of sex, Raoule retains her sovereign mastery even in the convulsions of lovemaking. Yet, while her mysterious sexual practices appear to put her in a masculine position, the narrative resists the intelligibility of a sexual regime of mere inversion: the opposition between men and women, as well as that between hetero- and homosexuality, is systematically undone. Raoule confides to the perplexed Raittolbe: “Je suis *amoureux* d’un homme et non pas d’une femme !” (88); “Je veux qu’*elle soit* heureuse comme *le filleul* d’un roi !” (91). The alternation of gender pronouns for the object of her desire (as “elle” and then as “le filleul”) point to the instability of Jacques’s body. The italics underscore the mutability of “his” gender, disrupt the binary classification on which sexual regimes rest, and cause some confusion: “Un homme semblable peut-il exister ? balbutia le baron abasourdi, entraîné dans une région inconnue où l’inversion semblait être le seul régime admis” (89). The baron comically begs his “ami” Raoule to limit the havoc caused by her ambiguous use of pronouns: “Tachons de nous entendre ! Si je suis le confident en titre, mon cher ami, adoptons il ou elle afin que je ne perde pas le peu de bon sens qui me reste” (90). Jacques’s plasticity, his fluid incorporation of

masculine and feminine attributes, is thus matched by Raoule's many inversions. The final image of Raoule alternately dressed as a man and a woman, making love to a human turned into an automaton by a German scientist, illustrates this volatile fusion of nature and artifice, masculinity and femininity, heterosexual and homosexual desire.

Jacques's mutable and ultimately textual nature is addressed as a pathological threat to the Third Republic's social structure and its determinations of gender, sexuality, and class. Like Zola's *Nana*, the *mouche dorée* whose sexuality spreads like a plague among the upper circles of the Second Empire and emasculates the most powerful representatives of the régime, Jacques's plastic mobility disrupts the hierarchies of both sex and class in Raoule's social circles. His presence causes a ripple of undefined desire in Raoule's salon; it is a contamination that both Raoule and Raittolbe will attempt to contain. Initially turned into a harem girl by Raoule, Jacques is then trained by Raittolbe to perform the functions of aristocratic masculinity when Raoule decides to marry him. Raittolbe teaches Jacques how to ride a horse, wield arms, and regain his lost virility at brothels. Yet taming Jacques's body proves a vain task. The aristocratic, masculine Raittolbe will indeed lose his mind, or "le peu de bon sens qui me reste" over the young man's enticing ambiguity. He ends up having an affair with Jacques's sister, a prostitute whose proletarian vulgarity serves as a reminder that Jacques's circulating body disrupts class—as well as gender—distinctions.²² Later, bewildered by his own homoerotic desire for Jacques, Raittolbe savagely beats him up. The logic of scapegoating (whereby Jacques's sexual and social hybridity is both desired and reviled) is taken to its logical conclusion when Raoule has Jacques killed by Raittolbe in a duel and makes a wax replica of his body, thus fixing into meaning a text that—when alive—eluded established sexual and social scripts.

Rachilde reworks the myth of Pygmalion to expose the violence by which a pliable human body becomes the incarnation of another's desire. Raoule reads Jacques's very nudity as an awe-inspiring poem to be rewritten throughout the narrative. A failed artist, Jacques knows that his body is a work of art more eloquent than his own words could be. Instead of writing to Raoule after Raittolbe's attack, he waits for her to read the marks left on his body: "Jacques, dont le corps était un poème, savait que ce poème serait toujours lu avec plus d'attention que la lettre d'un vulgaire écrivain comme lui" (139). Raoule contemplates his scars, "reads between the lines," and discerns the homoerotic desire that led to the baron's attack. In her rage, she reopens Jacques's wounds, and re-marks him as her own. The young boy's body becomes a

palimpsest, bearing witness to the various desires he provokes and yet cannot control.²³ His final incarnation as a wax mannequin on which human hair and nails have been grafted parodies Pygmalion's statue come to life. It is also an ironic gesture to the marmoreal Parnassian ideal of feminine beauty ("belle comme un rêve de pierre") and its modern, technological incarnations such as Villiers de l'Isle Adam's *L'Ève future*, published two years later.²⁴

However, in a striking departure from her decadent precursors and contemporaries such as Baudelaire, Barbey d'Aureville, or Huysmans (for whom the object of violent desire retains her silent opacity), *Monsieur Vénus* offers fragmentary glimpses into the forms of subjectivity that emerge out of the experience of corporeal dispossession. Jacques's pliant emasculation and lack of agency in his body's performance are repeatedly perceived by himself and by others as vile, abject, and shameful. Jacques obscurely perceives how deeply others' desires have shaped the most intimate recesses of his being. He intuits this objectification with a mix of pleasure and disquiet. In a rare flash of lucidity, he observes that "On l'avait fait si *fille* dans les endroits les plus secrets de son être, que la folie du vice prenait les proportions du tétanos !" (220). At critical junctures in the narrative, this lucidity erupts as shame. As Raoule watches him bathe, for instance, Jacques is "troublé subitement par la honte de lui devoir aussi la propreté de son corps" (54). Conscious of his passivity, "navré, tout pale de honte" (57), he surrenders to Raoule's gaze and lets the bathrobe slip off his body. His pallor and then flush before Raoule's gaze signals his sense of corporeal dispossession. When Jacques then bursts into tears of shame, a voice that could be his, his spying sister's or the narrator's explains that "Jacques était le fils d'un ivrogne et d'une catin. Son honneur ne savait que pleurer" (58). This unlocated voice of social opprobrium and its naturalist allusion to heredity interrupts and contains the emergence of Jacques's subjectivity, much like the previous allusion to vice as a *tétanos*. In such moments, the narrative voice briefly evokes Jacques's subjective experience of shame but then returns to a more citational mode that relies on the pathologizing *doxa* of heredity, class, and morality.

What might these flashes of shame convey about a subject's experience of violence? Shame is often addressed as an affect that signals subjectivity's sense of dispossession from itself. It is the response to a rupture in the circuit of communication with another, to the refusal or breakdown of an interpersonal contact through which we position ourselves in the world.²⁵ As our sense of being bounded and intact slips away before the gaze (or the averted eyes) of another, we awaken to a sense of inner otherness in which we are at once sub-

ject and object, oneself and another.²⁶ This may be why shame is also described as a form of hyperreflexivity that makes us see ourselves as fragile and changeable, exposed to the violence of a world that does not recognize our contours. The experience of shame is akin to having the intimate lining of one's being turned inside out and exposed, while sensing that the forces outside of us are imprinted into our core. Understood in this light, shame is an affective state that stands at the polar opposite of the self-possession of the dandy, whose cultivation of surface and contour forms a protective glaze that parries the shocks of the external world. Shame erupts when that protective glaze is pierced by forces that both escape us and yet inflect our very sense of ourselves as other, dispossessed, or permeable. The emergence of subjectivity *through* the experience of shame, as it is registered by the body, will be the subject of the following pages. For now let us simply note that the repeated shaping and laceration of Jacques's body throughout the text enacts this double movement of subjectification and desubjectification. Jacques feels his innermost self to be at once intimate and alien. The forces shaping him are perceived as an exteriority that reaches into "les endroits les plus secrets de son être" and yet remains quite literally in another's hands.

Monsieur Vénus delivers in fragments an intuitive experience of shame as vulnerability to another's random violence. At the novel's conclusion, Jacques's duel with Raittolbe (arranged by Raoule) is recounted—exceptionally—from Jacques's point of view. His innocent musings drift in and out of the depiction of the duel's preparations. Obscurely aware—and ashamed—of having betrayed Raoule by visiting Raittolbe in drag with the vague intent to seduce him, Jacques nevertheless trusts Raoule's assurance that the duel is a performance from which he will emerge unscathed. Yet his body signals the danger that awaits him. His neck retains the memory of Raittolbe's hands, and his childlike refrain "Pourtant cet homme lui avait fait bien mal au cou" (221) conveys a hazy, somatic awareness of his vulnerability to impending violence. This vulnerability and dispossession take center stage at the novel's close, when Jacques's flesh yields like a newborn's to the point of Raittolbe's sword and his dead body is stripped of its hair and nails so that they may be grafted onto a wax replica.

Rachilde's text conveys something of the subjective experience of violence as it is registered in the body. Her allusions to Jacques's intuitive experience illuminate the embodied sense of vulnerability that I have addressed here as shame. Shame may be understood as an affective state that emerges through an experience of self-dispossession. It occurs when we feel alien at our most intimate core and experience that strangeness as a vulnerability to the violence

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of the world around us. Rachilde deploys the motif of the body as matter and figure that we previously examined in Baudelaire's definition of femininity as both blind materiality and pure, disembodied metaphoricity. Her swerves from precursor texts expose the "engendered" nature of representation, through overdetermined citation in *L'Animale* and the inversion of gender in *Monsieur Vénus*. Yet her analysis exceeds the framework of identity politics, in that her portrayal of subjection crosses the lines of gender. It also resists a purely performative reading of gender and desire by reminding us of the vulnerability of the human body to the violence of another. As such, Rachilde offers a bracing corrective to contemporary celebrations of the body's utopian textuality. Her intervention in the legacy of decadence is most compelling at points that disclose the fragile materiality of the human body. This vulnerability emerges paradoxically, through the enactment of violence upon a desired or reviled body.

I have read Rachilde as a point of resistance to the narrative of modernism as the evacuation of content by form. The previous chapters on Baudelaire showed how violence becomes a textual modality that both critiques existing material and symbolic violences and, in doing so, signals the vulnerability of bodies scripted by a nexus of cultural investments. An author such as Rachilde—and, as I shall suggest, Virginie Despentes—intervenes in a symbolic legacy that opposes empirical matter to the transformative power of form. Their textual counterviolences exploit and explode the systemic violence of idealization itself. Over a century after Baudelaire, a generation of women writers and directors continue their combative engagement with a cultural imaginary that persistently redeems recalcitrant bodies through the idealization of form. Through intertextual dialogues with Baudelaire, among other established cultural icons, their representations enact what could be called the revenge of matter on form. Their rehearsal of symbolic violence opens up spaces for the representation of affects such as shame and abjection, affects that characterize a subjectivity's emergence through its vulnerability to bodily violence.

Accursed Poets, Damned Women, and Bad Girls: Trashing Baudelaire in Virginie Despentes's Baise-moi

Baise-moi, a novel written by Virginie Despentes in 1994, was transposed to film by Despentes with her co-director, the former porn star Coralie Trinh Thi, in 2001. Censored by the Conseil d'état in France after the right-wing association Promouvoir intervened and claimed it was pornographic, the film re-

ceived an X rating and had its *visa d'exploitation* temporarily withdrawn, leading to protests led by several filmmakers, such as Catherine Breillat in France and Atom Egoyan in Canada. "Il est temps pour les femmes de devenir des bourreaux, y compris par la plus extrême violence," Despentès has proclaimed,²⁷ and the film's brutal depiction of rape, sex, and murder provoked violent, even traumatic, responses in spectators. During a screening of the movie in Montreal, for instance, one viewer broke into the projection room and ripped the film out of the projector. Critics have dismissed *Baise-moi* as amateurish, sensationalist, gratuitously violent, vulgar, and pornographic. Yet, as a novelist, Despentès belongs to a significant wave of contemporary writers such as Michel Houellebecq, Maurice G. Dantec, Marie Darrieussecq, and Vincent Ravalec, whose dystopic or apocalyptic visions of contemporary French society are often rendered in shocking, hypernaturalist prose.²⁸ The bleak negativity of their portrait of France (its rising unemployment, racism, crime, and sexual violence) has branded them as nihilists who betray the progressive mission of literature. Nourished by Stephen King, trash and "gore" genres, B movies, and other such popular cultural references, these writers are cast as rebels making a definitive breach with traditional modes of representation and ushering in a new modernity. Marion Mazauric, literary director of *J'ai lu* until 2000 and publisher of Despentès's works, describes the novelty of this emerging generation in the following terms:

Nous sommes en face d'une réappropriation critique du réel par ceux qui ne reconnaissent ni les modes de représentation ni les modèles antérieurs comme pertinents pour représenter, comprendre, changer ou simplement survivre dans le monde d'aujourd'hui. Et nous voyons aujourd'hui dans le même mouvement, renaître le roman de classes moyennes nées dans la crise générale des valeurs d'un système qui les abandonne. Dans ce grand brassage des formes se redéfinit ainsi une modernité des langages littéraires, musicaux, cinématographiques. Modernité: réappropriation et subversion des grandes figures symboliques fondatrices de notre civilisation.

Despentès's rebellious blending, or *brassage*, of literary and linguistic forms has branded her as an *écrivain rock*, or as a representative of punk art's anarchistic rebellion.²⁹ Yet despite claims that this generation of writers emerged out of a complete repudiation of preceding modes of representation, Despentès herself has no qualms inscribing her fiction in a canonical tradition of "moderns" that includes such prestigious classics as Baudelaire and Flaubert. She thus claims as her own the French classical canon and acknowledges its ongoing resonance in contemporary life and literature. In her prose, references to established lit-

erary figures such as Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Breton provocatively jostle alongside the language of American rap, French punk, heavy metal, and *banlieue* slang. This strategy does more than simply “trash” the canon and level out distinctions between high and low culture. It recovers the critical energy and relevance of classics by recasting them in the contemporary urban slum belt, the *zone*. Yet, as in Rachilde’s resignification of decadent topoi, Desportes’s ludic allusions to the canon also challenge a cultural tradition that has cast women as aesthetic and erotic objects of desire in its celebration of form over matter. Unlike Rachilde, however, Desportes focuses on the predicament of women in the urban underclass and claims as her territory the abjection and vulnerability glimpsed in Rachilde’s *Monsieur Vénus*. Hers is an ironic, postmodern brand of decadence, *version trash*.

Desportes’s *Baise-moi* conducts an unruly dialogue with the repertoire of motifs traditionally associated with Baudelaire. This is not to say that Desportes had Baudelaire in mind as her novel’s implied reader, but that she intervenes polemically in a cultural legacy that has been partially—and often paradoxically—shaped by the Baudelairean aesthetic imaginary. Her urban underworld of pimps, prostitutes, and gangsters is a postmodern incarnation of Baudelaire’s nocturnal Paris and its vagrant population of raggickers, prostitutes, and criminals. The losers who people her literary imagination are those left behind by modernity’s narrative of consumerism and progress. Desportes also invokes familiar Baudelairean and decadent topoi: the evil woman, the *femme sauvage*, the poet, the dandy, the vengeful poor, and the lesbian. But she dislocates them from the canon of high literature and relocates them in the grim realities of the urban slum. As in Rachilde, such reinscriptions illuminate the iterability of these figures, their openness to unceremonious resignification. Most relevant to the following discussion, however, is her broader affiliation to the tradition of irony, counterviolence, and critique I have traced thus far. Desportes’s sensationalist depictions of violence mimic existing violence in what Stéphane Spoiden has described as “une répétition désespérée, hard et destroy.”³⁰ Her scenes of sex, rape, and murder, crystallize a violence endemic to contemporary urban life: economic marginalization, alienation from the labor force, racial violence, police brutality, and sexual exploitation. They are phantasmic stages on which victims and executioners act out the structural violences shaping their daily life.

These darkly comic reenactments of quotidian traumas offer neither consolation nor critique. Like Baudelaire and Rachilde, Desportes portrays the social world of her protagonists as a perpetual war between victims and execu-

tioners, as an inextricable web that knows no outside or *ailleurs* and offers no alternate positions beyond those of predator and prey, executioner and victim. Her characters replicate the violence that has victimized them in brutal scenarios of revenge that are part and parcel of Despentès's punk aesthetic. Yet, as we have seen in the case of Baudelaire and Rachilde, the "hard et destroy" tactics of counterviolence can have a critical function. *Baise-moi*'s trashy scenarios of revenge expose the underlying logics of systemic oppression—by race, class, and sex—through what can be call a process of corporealization. Like Rachilde, albeit in a completely different literary and historical register, Despentès challenges an aesthetic tradition that derealizes matter and fixes it into form by probing into the layers of aggression, shame, and abjection that condition a woman's emergence into being.

In an interview with Catherine Breillat in 2000, Virginie Despentès herself suggested that it is through the deployment of violence that the dignity of abject bodies may be reclaimed:

CATHERINE BREILLAT : Le carcan des lois a placé les femmes en état d'ignorance, les a vouées à être le ventre destiné à procréer. Elles n'ont pas eu de conscience, on ne peut pas le leur reprocher . . . *on commence à être la proie de l'homme dès que physiquement il apparaît qu'on devient une femme* [emphasis added].

VIRGINIE DESPENTES : Il faudra bien qu'elles deviennent plus fortes. J'ai le sentiment d'avoir une mission à remplir, j'allais dire une mission de vengeance, mais ce n'est pas tout à fait ça. Il faut faire éclater les choses, rendre de la dignité, de l'humanité.³¹

As was the case with Rachilde's oeuvre, the vengeful negativity of *Baise-moi* vexes feminist readings of book or film as an intelligible statement "about" the pervasion of sexual violence in contemporary society.³² Yet this rejection of consolation or critique is part of its power to "faire éclater les choses." It is this *éclatement* that the next few pages pursue through the Baudelairean *éclats* of *Baise-moi* and its meditation on the body's vulnerable and destructive materiality, as well as its social sexing through shame, negativity, and abjection.

"*Ailleurs, moi j'y crois pas*"

In his "Salon de 1846," Baudelaire celebrated the *héroïsme de la vie moderne* captured by Balzac's representation of the city's underbelly and defended the lyrical potential of contemporary Parisian life, where "[l]e merveilleux nous

enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l'atmosphère ; mais nous ne le voyons pas" (*OC*, 2: 496). His own Parisian tableaux in "Les Sept vieillards" and "Les Petites Vieilles" mapped the "fourmillante cite" and the "plis sinueux des vieilles capitales" teeming with drunks, prostitutes, criminals, the elderly, and the insane. In *Baise-moi*, Virginie Despentes paints what could be read as a hyper-naturalist contemporary version of the *tableau parisien*, one that incorporates the *banlieue* and its underclass. But her bleak world of prostitutes, drug dealers, small-time crooks, killers, and aimless marginals attests to what she calls "un héroïsme dans la déchéance" (*BM*, 62). Her underclass is poor, uneducated, crude, and jobless. Its constant struggle to survive abject material conditions is bereft of "illumination" or the "merveilleux." The very concept of an *ailleurs*, an alternate space outside or beyond the degradation of everyday life is a mirage. Her protagonists seem fully resigned to the realities of police brutality, racism, sexual violence, drug dealing, and gang warfare. They are explicitly described as defeated, permeable entities in osmosis with the ambient violence of their surroundings.

The intractable violence of this social world is conveyed in the opening pages of the novel, when Manu, a working-class porn actress, hears about the death of her best friend Camel, who was probably the victim of racist police brutality. The adolescent who brings her the bad news is an idealistic lefty student who wants to spur Manu into sharing his indignant protest of this injustice. Manu, however, dismisses his verbiage as hypocritical posturing: "Il reproduit ce qu'il dénonce avec une inquiétante tranquillité d'esprit. Petit-fils de missionnaire, il entreprend de convertir les indigènes du quartier à son mode de pensée" (*BM*, 17). Any denunciation of injustice is dismissed as a replication of the very violence that is contested. Numbed by drugs and alcohol, Manu is reconciled to the idea that she belongs to history's losers: "D'ici peu de temps, elle sera trop déchirée pour que cette histoire l'affecte. Elle finit toujours par bien se faire à l'idée qu'il y a une partie de la population sacrifiée ; et dommage pour elle, elle est tombée pile dedans" (*BM*, 16).

If this vision of the sacrificial underpinnings of the status quo is reminiscent of Baudelaire, Manu's apathy is a far cry from the poet's revolt. Despentes debunks all basis for such heroism in her characters. The disheveled, vulgar Manu is a parody of the purely appetitive Baudelairean female. A gleeful illustration of Baudelaire's "La femme a faim et elle veut manger. Soif et elle veut boire. Elle est en rut et elle veut être foutue. Le beau mérite !" (*OC*, 1: 677), Manu speaks in barks and grunts, gorging on candy, alcohol, and sex throughout the novel.³³ Despentes's portrait of Manu echoes the famous poem

“Enivrez-vous,” in which Baudelaire invokes intoxication as a flight from the burden of time, the body, and materiality (“enivrez-vous sans cesse ! De vin, de poésie ou de vertu, à votre guise”): “Il n’y a strictement rien de grandiose en elle. À part cette inétanchable soif. De foutre, de bière ou de whisky, n’importe quoi pourvu qu’on la soulage . . . elle est en relative osmose avec le monde” (*BM*, 14). The intoxication that wrests the poet out of the body and into idealization here becomes just another way of stuffing the body with matter.

This state of perpetual osmosis with the ambient violence of one’s surroundings is also reminiscent of Baudelaire’s poet-prostitute, whose subjectivity empties itself out into the world: “Ivresse religieuse des grandes villes. . . . Moi, c’est tous ; Tous, c’est moi. Tourbillon” (*OC*, 1: 651). Yet for Baudelaire, the poet retains some sort of agency throughout this process. The motion of self-vaporization is followed by a recuperative moment of self-crystallization: “De la vaporisation et de la cristallisation du *Moi*. Tout est là” (*OC*, 1: 676). Even when the Baudelairean poet submits to the jolts of modern life, cleaving through the city and parrying its shocks, “roidissant mes nerfs comme un héros” (*OC*, 1: 87), he never fully surrenders his contours or agency. In “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” the glaze that seals the contours of the poet also characterizes the female body, redeemed as art through the veneer of fashion and cosmetics.

Despentes opens her book with a clear message that such buffers and resistances to external shocks are irrelevant to her female protagonists. The violence of their surroundings registers at the very core of their being. Far from releasing them from the body’s limitations, their *paradis artificiels* only exacerbate their unquenchable thirst and enhance the permeability of their psychic and physical boundaries. Throughout their flight across France, Manu and her partner in crime Nadine gorge on junk food, guzzle down bottles of Four Roses and Jack Daniels, and find fleeting satiation in random sexual encounters. A far cry from Rachilde’s refined dandy heroines and their exquisite palette of food, drink, and sexual perversion, evasion in this text is not the enhancement of experience or a gateway into the aesthetic. The *ailleurs* promised by intoxicants is declared a chimera from the outset, since we enter into a social space that has no boundaries separating “ici” from “là-bas,” no place within the interlocking structure of economic and sexual violence from which an “elsewhere” or an “outside” is imaginable. As Nadine puts it, “Ailleurs, moi j’y crois pas” (*BM*, 184).

In Despentes’s narrative, the body is denied any transcendence. Its vulnerable or gross materiality always wins out. This point is brutally made in the

instants preceding Manu's rape, when she drink a six-pack with her friend Karla on the banks of the Seine. The intoxicated, expansive Manu urges Karla to widen her horizons, to think about the spirit rather than the body: "Faut te dilater l'esprit, faut voir grand, Karla, sérieux . . . Faut s'écarter les idées" (*BM*, 51). At that precise moment, some men approach. "Nous, les filles, c'est pas les idées qu'on vous ferait bien écarter," one says, and they rape the two women. Manu's brief and drunken flight into her "idées larges" is precisely when she is hurled back into her body as the site of violation.

Baise-moi depicts the female body as an abject, vulnerable thing that harbors the scars of social violence at its very core. Manu's sense of osmosis translates a fractured, permeable subjectivity that emerges through violation (an embodied awareness of vulnerability conveyed as shame in *Monsieur Vénus*). This constitutive dispossession of one's own body is blatant in the gruesome depiction of the rape. Dehumanized, treated like trash, her genitals likened to a garbage disposal, Manu dissociates from her body altogether. It is precisely her obstinate refusal to acknowledge the pain and humiliation inflicted upon her personhood that thwarts her rapists' desire: "Elle a même pas pleuré celle-là, regarde-là. Putain, c'est même pas une femme, ça" (*BM*, 55). Her absence from a body that is being so forcibly expropriated ("ça"), and her refusal to show signs of distress are precisely what make her rapists claim that she is not a woman. This explicit linking of "real femininity" with tears or cries is reminiscent of Baudelaire's "La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse," where the savage woman's shrieks under her husband's blows guarantee the authenticity of her femininity ("Avez-vous entendu résonner la chair malgré le poil postiche? Les yeux lui sortent de la tête, elle hurle plus *naturellement*" [*OC*, I: 290]). Despentès makes visible what remains implicit in Baudelaire's poem: the unspoken premise that a woman's very "nature" is something to be produced through physical violation (in one case, howls, in the other, tears).

Manu's impassivity during her rape is defended in a memorable response: "Je peux dire ça parce-que j'en ai rien à foutre de leur pauvres bites de branleurs et que j'en a pris d'autres dans le ventre et que je les emmerde. C'est comme une voiture que tu gares dans une cité, tu laisses pas des trucs de valeur à l'intérieur parce-que tu peux pas empêcher qu'elle soit forcée. Ma chatte, je peux pas empêcher les connards d'y entrer et j'y ai rien laissé de précieux . . . On n'est jamais que des filles" (*BM*, 57). Manu's portrayal of her body as a vehicle parked in the projects, and from which all valuables have been removed, conveys the expropriation that Despentès suggests to be constitutive of her sense of being in the world. *Baise-moi* depicts women's bodies not as com-

modities but rather as a materiality already turned into a waste product or debris. Manu's conclusion, "On n'est jamais que des filles," illustrates the extent to which sexual violence shapes the emergence into "femininity."

Manu's crassly eloquent declaration raises a central and provocative question: what does it mean to survive and circulate in the world as an embodied subject who feels fundamentally expropriated from herself, and indeed, defines herself as a "fille" through this expropriation? What forms of subjectivity emerge—or are foreclosed—in a social environment where rape is experienced as the life-threatening eruption of an ongoing, systemic condition, as just another "coup de queue" equivalent to the "coup de poing" Manu receives with equal equanimity from a boyfriend? Her response suggests that no psychic cohesion or corporeal integrity existed prior to her sexual violation. Her dissociation during the incident turns out to be a constitutive condition of her existence as a woman in the systemic violence of her milieu.³⁴

Despentes's portrait of the rape scene as continuous with the layers of sexual and economic violence characterizing Manu's underground, underprivileged *banlieusard* environment illustrates what feminist psychologists now call "insidious trauma."³⁵ Insidious trauma has emerged as a category in recent years in order to redress the gender bias of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual's* definition of posttraumatic stress disorder as the response to "an event that lies outside the range of human experience." As Laura Brown and others have argued, since the nineteenth century, "trauma" has designated public, visible events such as war, genocide, natural disasters, and other crises that have taken as their normative point of reference the experience of educated white middle-class men. Such a definition ignores a host of private forms of violence such as rape, battery, incest, and other kinds of interpersonal violence. Insidious trauma recognizes the everyday experiences of (often sexual or sexist) violence and forges connections between punctual traumas such as rape and more systemic forms of oppression and violence. The sense of dispossession Manu feels toward her own body illustrates the erosion of selfhood in an environment of constant sexual, racial, and economic abuse. "[E]n relative osmose avec le monde," the violence of her everyday experience registers at the deepest levels of her somatic and sensory being.³⁶

From the outset, then, Despentes forges links between punctual acts of brutality such as rape and murder and the everyday, lived reality of social violence. Yet, oddly enough, her narrative rejects the psychological register we might expect from a murderous rampage that opens with a rape scene. No further allusion is made to this rape, as if to withhold its status as an explanatory

force for the carnage that follows. Manu herself becomes an automaton, whose gestures take over and lead her through a series of unpremeditated killings, as if her body were a passive vehicle carrying out a predetermined script of violence. Immediately after her rape, Manu finds out that her Arab friend Radouan has been beaten up and disfigured in a drug dealers' squabble. She steals a gun to shoot the gangster who beat up Radouan and executes the policeman responsible for the death of her other Arab friend, Camel. It is interesting to note that insofar as a revenge narrative exists in this text, the initial targets of revenge are not the rapists themselves but other perpetrators who brutalize the "population sacrifiée" to which Manu avers allegiance. Manu's unthinking revenge makes explicit the implicit links between economic marginalization, gang warfare, racist police brutality, and sexual violence.

Despentès's rejection of psychology is implicit in her refusal to make Manu's rape the governing or explanatory course for the remainder of the plot. The revenge narrative explodes into a random sequence of automatisms that fold the characters into an ever-expanding web of violence. The protagonists' drive to kill is not addressed in psychological terms but manifests itself as a corporeal automatism. After their first joint premeditated murder of a middle-aged woman retrieving cash from the bank machine, for instance, a bemused Nadine reflects on the spontaneous efficiency of their killing: "Jusqu'à ce moment, elle n'a pas réfléchi, les gestes sont venus, automatiques. De drôles de gestes, d'une effarante efficacité. Automatiques" (*BM*, 117). "(E)n osmose avec le monde, " the protagonists' bodies take over and become conduits for the forces around them.

Despentès portrays a world in which the response to one's violation is an automatic replication of violence. Her heroines become executioners whose gestures repeat the physical and material expropriation that victimized them in a dizzying cycle that ends with their capture and death. Unlike Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise*, to which *Baise-moi* is often compared, the two protagonists have no agency over their demise. Thelma and Louise manage to flee an oppressively patriarchal world, symbolized by a fleet of police cars, by grasping each other's hands and defiantly driving off a cliff. In *Baise-moi*, there are no cliffs or exits to the cycle the protagonists are born into and mechanically perpetuate. While they plan their suicide throughout the novel, Manu is shot in a gas station, and Nadine is captured by the police just as she is about to pull the trigger on herself. Like Rachilde, Despentès forecloses any escape routes for the heroines, any *ailleurs* or any alternative response to their milieu beyond a replication of its violence.

Literature Recycled, and the Body Reclaimed as Waste

Despentès opens her heroines' murderous flight across France with a gesture to Baudelaire. She thus acknowledges a filiation with the canonical poet and the transgressive figures associated with his literary heritage: the outlaw, the lesbian, the savage woman, the damned poet(ess), and the dandy. Nadine's meeting with Manu is introduced by an excerpt from Baudelaire's poem "Femmes damnées : Delphine et Hippolyte," one of the six poems banned in 1857, for portraying the sapphic loves of Delphine and Hippolyte. Despentès's choice of this poem makes sense, given her admiration for Baudelaire and Flaubert, figures who, like herself, faced judicial pursuits for their transgressive representations. In fact, she mentions them both when discussing the banning of her film in France.³⁷ Yet her selective quotation of "Femmes damnées," like Rachilde's intertextual interventions, open up Baudelaire's literary legacy to re-signification. Here I have bracketed verses from the original poem left out or altered by Despentès:

Ombres folles, courez au but de vos désirs;
Jamais vous ne pourrez assouvir votre rage,
[Et votre châtement naîtra de vos plaisirs.]

[Jamais un rayon frais n'éclaira vos cavernes;
Par les fentes des murs des miasmes fiévreux
Filtrent en s'enflammant ainsi que des lanternes
Et pénètrent vos corps de leurs parfums affreux.]

[L'âpre stérilité de votre jouissance
Altère votre soif et roidit votre peau,
Et le vent furibond de la concupiscence
Fait claquer votre chair ainsi qu'un vieux drapeau.]

Loin des peuples vivants, errantes, condamnées,
À travers les déserts courez comme des loups
Faites votre destin, âmes désespérées [désordonnées]
Et fuyez l'infini que vous portez en vous. (OC, I: 155)

Despentès alludes to Baudelaire's infernal vision of lesbian love and rebellion throughout her novel but subjects his vision to significant swerves. Her citation of "Femmes damnées" excises the dank, pestilential imagery of the lesbians' lovemaking and ignores their "châtement." Despentès's heroines may be *condamnées*, but they are not *damnées*. Avatars of the *héautontimorouménos*, Baudelaire's lesbians are at once "la plaie et le couteau, la victime et le bour-

reau” of their infinite and unnatural desire. Although they heroically forge their own destiny, their conscience condemns them to despair. Despentès’s epigraph misquotes Baudelaire and substitutes “âmes désordonnées” for “âmes désespérées” (“Faites votre destin, âmes désespérées”), replacing despair with disorder. She thus dismisses the psychological register of internalized opprobrium that reigns in Baudelaire’s poem. The fierce exhilaration of her heroines on their killing spree is a sharp contrast to the desperate flight of their Baudelairean counterparts. Instead of portraying heroines racked by inner conflict, Despentès externalizes the dialectic between predator and prey, or victim and executioner. Whereas Delphine and Hippolyte are cast as exiled wolves running through the desert (“À travers le désert courez comme des loups”), Manu and Nadine joke about “catching wolf,” or men, for sex. Their road trip turns predatory men/wolves into objects of sexual, murderous, and even artistic satisfaction. This latter point is illustrated in their slaughter of a literate architect, who quotes Baudelaire’s very same poem in an unsuccessful attempt to disarm them: “Vous devez avoir beaucoup souffert pour en venir à ces extrémités, à ces ruptures. *Je ne sais quel désert vous avez traversé, je ne sais ce qui me pousse à avoir confiance en vous*” (*BM*, 222; emphasis added).

As the novel progresses, Nadine and Manu come to embody the idealized fusion described in Baudelaire’s poem, where Delphine calls out to her lover:

Hippolyte, ô ma soeur ! tourne donc ton visage,
Toi, mon âme et mon coeur, mon tout et ma moitié.

So perfectly do Nadine and Manu come to mirror each other that they are described as “une bête à deux têtes, séduisante au bout du compte” (*BM*, 189). Yet the absence of lesbian sexuality in *Baise-moi* curiously departs from Baudelaire’s poem. While the two women remain in close proximity, watching each other during their lovemaking with other partners, and even pleasuring themselves as they do so, they never sexually engage with one another. Despentès’s foreclosure of same-sex desire is reminiscent of Rachilde’s and has led to accusations of homophobia or, at the very least, an incapacity to imagine sex outside of the heteronormative order. This is surprising, given her gesture toward Baudelaire’s poem, and the importance of the lesbian as a figure of rebellion in the poet’s oeuvre.³⁸ For Baudelaire, the lesbian’s heroism is her refusal of the “natural” drive of organic life. Like the poet and dandy, the lesbian cultivates artificial pleasures and crafts her destiny in exile. The amoral abyss of her desire is akin to the poet’s thirst for the infinite. The poem “Lesbos,” for instance, celebrates “la mâle Sappho, l’amante et le poète,” linking lesbianism,

masculinity, and creativity in terms that transcend the specificity of the female body. We could entertain the hypothesis that Desportes wants nothing to do with such a masculinist dismissal of the female body and its organic specificity. But her foreclosure of lesbianism is perhaps better explained as a refusal to entertain alternate forms of desire that would give her heroines a way out. Insofar as Desportes ascribes a cause for her protagonists' rebellious carnage, it is a resolutely heteronormative environment of sexual trauma, in which rape and prostitution are the extreme manifestations of the underlying violence of the "natural" order of social sexing.³⁹ Desportes's narrative suggests that it is only by banning sex from their connection that the idealized fusion between her protagonists occurs. As one of the characters observes, the absence of sex between Manu and Nadine is precisely "ce qu'elles ont trouvé de mieux pour se dire qu'elles sont soeurs" (*BM*, 191). When Desportes's "femmes damnées" touch each other—and this in spite of the brutality of their contact with others—it is with fleeting tenderness, such as when Nadine gently dyes Manu's hair, or at the end, bears her corpse out into the forest.

Yet *Baise-moi* does not foreclose lesbian desire altogether. Instead, desire between women passes through channels usually reserved for male heterosexual consumption. Nadine's obsession with pornographic images of women is a case in point. Much like Rachilde's marquise de Sade, who eats the rose symbolizing a virginity destined to be deflowered by a man, Nadine consumes images destined for heterosexual male viewers. She gazes at photos of a blonde porn model whose bejeweled genitals and provocative stances recall Baudelaire's "Les Bijoux," another banned poem that may have caught Desportes's interest. "Les Bijoux" portrays the poet's beloved and muse naked save for her jewels, which shimmer and tinkle as she assumes provocative poses for his pleasure:

La très chère était nue, et, connaissant mon coeur,
Elle n'avait gardé que ses bijoux sonores,
Dont le riche attirail lui donnait l'air vainqueur
Qu'ont dans leurs jours heureux les esclaves des Mores. (*OC*, 1: 158)

Nadine contemplates a contemporary and most prosaic version of Baudelaire's "slave to love." Unlike received ideas about pornography as the degradation of female agency, the woman in the photo appears in full control of her body's display. As Nadine observes her genitals glittering like the entrance sign to a bordello, she thinks: "Transgression. Elle fait ce qui ne se fait pas avec un plaisir évident. Le trouble vient en grande partie de l'assurance tranquille avec

laquelle elle se dévoile. Nadine la contemple longuement, impressionnée et respectueuse comme devant une icône” (*BM*, 139). The model’s assured display of her “entrejambe scintillante” is a sharp contrast to the Baudelairean exhibitions examined in the previous chapter. “Une Martyre,” and its caricature of commodification, for instance, portrays a decapitated woman sprawled on the bed, with her garter flashing a “regard diamanté” while her actual head stares sightlessly from the nightstand. In Despentés’s pornographic image, however, the woman’s gaze accompanies the sparkle of her jewels and elicits a desiring and even worshipful response from a female viewer. *Baise-moi* wrests the erotic and pornographic image away from its usual connotation and destination. No longer the sign of the female body’s degradation, pornography provides an index of its power, one that is respectfully acknowledged by a woman who evolves in a milieu where the dispossession of one’s sex is the norm, both in the most literal sense of rape and in the more figural guises of commodification.⁴⁰

Despentés’s heroines are entrenched in physiology, in the organic experience of the body and its appetites. As women who have come to an experience of their body—its pleasure and pain—though shame, violence, and humiliation, her protagonists celebrate the abjection of their experience *as* beauty. Nadine’s back is scarred with whiplashes sought out in masochistic encounters over the *minitel*. Although one of her clients demands that she lower her prices because she is damaged goods, the narrative revalorizes what the client depreciated with unusual lyricism: “Des traînées sombres lui éclaboussent tout le dos, comme une fresque rageusement raturée. Inquiétants hiéroglyphes déchaînés dans la chair” (*BM*, 98). In a similar revalorization of what is socially deemed shameful, Manu drips menstrual blood in their hotel room, leaving behind a blood-spattered scene reminiscent of an entire tradition of aesthetic tableaux depicting the beauty of the dead female body. In these passages, the shameful or disgusting materiality of the female body is redeemed as art.

In an interview with Virginie Despentés and Coralie Thrin Thi, Catherine Breillat explains why writers and directors such as herself and Despentés focus on the organic experience of the body: “Il faut changer les codes esthétiques. On peut se mettre à aimer et trouver beau le coulant, le suintant. Le dégoût moral est d’ordre esthétique. Il faut affronter le fait que l’organique effraie” (“Trois femmes s’emparent du sexe”). Despentés’s heroines may be read as rebellious artists who stage the victory of organic content over aesthetic form, thereby rejecting the disembodied formalism associated with masculine models of creativity. In this sense, Despentés can be seen as changing aesthetic codes like her precursor Baudelaire, whose “Une Charogne” presented his con-

temporaries with an equally shocking aesthetic celebration of organic decay, or “le coulant, le suintant.”

However, Despentès's protagonists displace the traditional figure of the *poète maudit* with a trash and “bad girl” version of the *femme damnée*. Significantly enough, the novel opens with a male *poète maudit* figure. Nadine's friend Francis is a drug-addicted, penniless marginal poet and small-time crook on the run: “Il est poète, au sens très mâle du terme. À l'étroit dans son époque, incapable de se résoudre à l'ennui et au tiède. Insupportable” (*BM*, 34). Nadine serves him with unflinching devotion as his friend, muse, and scribe, forging prescriptions for the drugs that “inspire” him. Despentès unceremoniously dispatches this Baudelairean poet-figure early on in the novel, when he is shot, fittingly enough, buying his dose of artificial paradise at a pharmacy with a prescription forged by Nadine.

Nadine's encounter with Manu—which opens with Baudelaire's epigraph—displaces the figure of the *poète maudit* with that of the *femme damnée*. Their killing spree is self-consciously treated as performance art that follows André Breton's famous dictum: “L'acte surréaliste le plus simple consiste, révolvers au poings, à descendre dans la rue et à tirer au hasard, tant qu'on peut, dans la foule” (Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme*, 74). The gun-toting heroines quote and trash the vocabulary of high art. “L'art pour l'art” becomes “le mauvais goût pour le mauvais goût” (*BM*, 186); Manu refers to their slaughters as “du grand spectacle” (*BM*, 112) and “choréographies de rêve” (*BM*, 136–37). Annoyed at the discrepancy between the form and content of their killings, she complains: “Faudrait que dialogues soient à la hauteur. Moi, tu vois, je crois pas au fond sans la forme” (*BM*, 121). Expounding their commitment to a Kantian exercise of disinterested violence, Nadine explains to one of her victims: “Je trouve ça effroyablement vulgaire, avoir un mobile pour tuer. C'est une question d'éthique. J'y tiens. J'y tiens énormément. La beauté du geste, j'accorde beaucoup d'importance à la beauté du geste. Qu'il reste désintéressé” (*BM*, 219).

This darkly comic self-reflexivity, along with Despentès's unbeautiful brand of hypernaturalism, rejects the hypocrisy of aesthetic conventions that soar above or sterilize the messiness of the real. The gross, “trash” scenes of violence parody the vocabulary of high art and its irrealization of what violence does to real bodies. *Baise-moi* enacts a revenge of content over form: it refuses the aesthetic comforts of distance and embeds the narrative in the concrete realities of the body's vulnerability, desire, and death.

The final slaughter both parodies and destroys aesthetic celebrations of *la*

beauté du mal. To enter the home of an architect they plan to rob and kill, Manu and Nadine pretend to conduct a survey of “consommation des ménages en matière de culture” (*BM*, 214), a bourgeois enterprise par excellence. Their entry into the architect’s home confronts the “high culture” of the intellectual bourgeoisie with the trash culture of the proletarian *femme sauvage*. With grim irony, this scene stages the transformation of “culture” into “matière” and classifiable consumption into waste. The architect is a modern-day dandy *embourgeoisé*; he is fastidious, literate, and unflappable, even with a gun pointed at him: “Il fait exception à la plupart des règles, il jongle au-dessus de la mêlée. Désinvolte et précieux” (*BM*, 215). He exemplifies the cool self-possession of the Baudelairean dandy, who must live and breathe before a mirror and surprise without ever succumbing to surprise (*OC*, 2: 710). The architect wields the symbolic arsenal of high culture, with art on the walls, the complete works of Sade, Dostoyevsky, and doubtless Baudelaire in his library. As Manu tartly observes, he is a literary flâneur, a bourgeois consumer of sensationalist prose who classifies decadence in alphabetical order: “Ça vit enterré dans des bouquins, ça croule sous les disques et les cassettes vidéo. C’est sordide. Ça aime les auteurs déjantés et les putes dégénérées . . . Ça apprécie la décadence classée par ordre alphabétique. Bon spectateur, en bonne santé. Ça sait apprécier le génie chez les autres, de loin quoi. Avec modération, surtout” (*BM*, 232).

The architect’s *frisson* upon discovering that Manu and Nadine are killers is a purely aesthetic thrill. As Nadine holds a gun to his head, she imagines that he sees her as art come to life rather than a threat to his life: “Fantasque et délicieusement violent, tellement littéraire justement” (*BM*, 219). Confident in his mastery over the literary script of this encounter, the architect approaches the killers with an aesthete’s delight in *la beauté du mal*:

Je n’ai jamais rencontré de femme qui vous ressemble. Vous ne ressemblez sans doute à personne. Ce que vous faites est . . . terriblement violent. Vous devez avoir beaucoup souffert pour en arriver à ces extrémités, à ces ruptures. Je ne sais quel désert vous avez traversé, je ne sais ce qui me pousse à avoir confiance en vous. Comme vous dites, le marché est simple, et je vous fais confiance, aveuglément. Je vous vois si belle, jusqu’au plus profond de vous.

Il a un petit éclat de rire terriblement raffiné, et secouant la tête:

— Vous êtes un tel personnage. Nous nous sommes à peine croisés, mais il s’agit là d’une rencontre. Je ne peux m’empêcher d’être . . . terriblement fasciné. Il est d’autres pactes que je passerais volontiers avec vous. (*BM*, 222).

The architect rehearses the entire repertoire of decadent tropes, many of which are virtual citations of Baudelaire: the Faustian poet's pact with satanic beauty, the celebration of violence as pure rupture and excess, the admiration of the evil woman and her absolute singularity, the *femme damnée* as a wolf running in the desert, and finally, the explicit allusion to Nadine as a literary character ("vous êtes un tel personnage"), as a Baudelairean *passante* whose eyes contain "la douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue" ("À une passante"). The architect is the smug recipient of a literary tradition that he believes ensures interpretive mastery. In this sense, he exemplifies the delusion of a cultural legacy that separates life from art by giving its readers the comforts of form over content, the spectacle of perversity without the embodied experience of violence.

The architect and Nadine compete for mastery over an incongruously literary *badinage*. Nadine casts herself as the mad intellectual and Manu as the unthinking beast, while the architect plays seductive host to both. As Nadine peruses the architect's library, she peppers her speech with subjunctives and precious turns of phrases. Despite her verbal mastery of the script, ensured by the physical power of her gun, however, Nadine is disarmed by her victim's elegant poise. As she realizes her physical attraction to him, she is hurled back into a shameful awareness of her own body and its social marking as gross and undesirable: "Elle aurait honte de son corps contre ce corps-là. Sous les caresses dispensées par un amant de cet acabit, sa peau deviendra grasse et pleine de poils comme des cafards, rugueuse et rouge. Écoeurante" (*BM*, 223). Nadine's queasy desire for the architect's recognition briefly reverses the hierarchy between gun-toting executioner and helpless victim to unveil a more familiar scenario in which "woman" embodies shameful materiality before masculine self-possession (Baudelaire's "La femme est naturelle. . . . La femme est le contraire du dandy"). As we saw in Rachilde, shame erupts when the hostility of the world registers within the body as vulnerability to another's (mis)recognition. Nadine imagines that her body will mutate into an alien and disgusting thing under the caress of privilege. The shame of social difference thus registers within her body as a sense of intimate dispossession.

Yet as in Desportes's revision of "Femmes damnées" in which the psychological register is dismissed in favor of action, here again internalized shame erupts as violence. Nadine interrupts the comedy of manners and her desire for the architect's recognition by beating him into terrified acknowledgement of his own physical vulnerability. This return to brute physiology culminates in the depiction of the victim's body after he has been shot: "Le corps se secoue puis s'apaise complètement. Il se répand comme un sac à ordures

malencontreusement déchiré qui laisserait échapper des ordures rouges et brillantes” (*BM*, 226). The designation of the body as a garbage bag recalls the incident of Manu’s rape, when her genitals are likened to a garbage disposal. It also resonates with other moments in the narrative where the two women are treated (and treat themselves) as human waste. In a final defilement of this symbol of male economic and cultural power, Manu urinates on the dead body chanting, “Toi, on va t’apprendre ce que perdre veut dire” (*BM*, 224). “Ce que perdre veut dire,” in this context, is to be reduced to abject fear and helplessness before the arbitrary violence of another. The architect, whose profession it is to organize space and matter into form, is reduced to brute matter. His dehumanization is a ritualistic enactment of Manu’s quotidian reality, where one’s body becomes a vulnerable materiality divested of any value, a species of human waste.

The architect’s execution is inspired by a tradition of ritualistic executions of the bourgeoisie, from Genet’s *Les Bonnes* to Claude Chabrol’s film *La Cérémonie*. It uncovers the relations of force that maintain the economic and sexual status quo. As Despentès has indicated, the intersection of sex and class struggle is central to her work: “Dans *Baise-moi*, on ne s’est pas donné de limites. Les héroïnes appartiennent à un milieu social précis, une bonne prol’ et une fille de classe moyenne blanche. A partir de là, tout est rapport de force. Et comme ce sont des femmes, ça se cumule. Elles éprouvent une colère contre tout ce qui est dominant, qui écrase, asphyxie. L’homme et son sexe, mais aussi son poids économique” (“Trois femmes s’emparent du sexe”).

The confrontation between these Baudelairean *femmes sauvages* and the dandy-architect recalls Baudelaire’s “Assomons les pauvres !” As we saw, Baudelaire stages the ongoing reality of class warfare in a seemingly pacified society as an embodied combat between a bourgeois intellectual and an old pauper. Yet Despentès’s scene departs from Baudelaire in a significant way: Baudelaire’s poet initiates the violence that will awaken the pauper to his fundamental human worth, an awakening that occurs, paradoxically, by reducing the pauper to abject materiality. The poet grabs a branch and beats the pauper “avec l’énergie obstinée des cuisiniers qui veulent attendrir un beefsteack” (*OC*, 1: 359). It is only when the poet-intellectual has reduced the pauper to meat that his victim retaliates by seizing the very same branch and reducing the poet to pure matter: “le malandrin décrépît se jeta sur moi . . . et avec la même branche d’arbre, me battit dru comme plâtre.” The mutual recognition of equality takes place through the reciprocal treatment of the other as matter, as meat or as plaster. One’s physical vulnerability to another’s random violence (a

phenomenon I have addressed as shame) is the negative ground for this recognition of humanity. Yet while "Assommons les pauvres !" discloses the underlying physical vulnerability of poet and pauper alike, Baudelaire nevertheless maintains the superiority of the poet-intellectual—who, after all, enacts his theory on the pauper's back.

In "Assommons les pauvres !" and *Baise-moi*, the hypocrisy and dangerous irrelevance of high literature and theory are disclosed by returning to humanity's lowest common denominator, that is to say, the vulnerable materiality of the body itself. Only in Desportes, the architect-dandy and the high literature he consumes are fully co-opted by the bourgeoisie. Literature and theory have deteriorated into classified consumption, hence the irony of the killers' fake survey on the "consommation de ménages en matière de culture," which lets them into the dandy's abode. Desportes's protagonists mock the futility of the architect's library and its books on the psychology of the serial killer. The ensuing carnage makes clear that neither psychological nor literary perspectives on *la beauté du mal* have any bearing on the brute reality of class and sex warfare. Instead, the struggle between intellectual and female proletariat is one for an acknowledgement of "ce que perdre veut dire," that is to say, the raw violence of physical—as well as material and symbolic—dispossession.⁴¹ In Baudelaire, the body (turned to meat or plaster) is momentarily freed of its class determinations; it becomes the site for a recognition of essential parity and agency. In *Baise-moi*, the body (turned to waste) becomes a site for the mutual recognition of inhumanity. The conventional celebration of *la beauté du mal*—its fetishism of form over content and its evacuation of quotidian violence—is repudiated; the body—in its vulnerable abjection—emerges as the only place from which an aesthetics and a politics can begin to be imagined. *Baise-moi* stages an infinite repetition of violence with no exit. The novel neither provides a therapeutic narrative of psychic or social integration nor gives a consistent critique of oppression by gender, race, or class. Its denunciation lies in its "hard et destroy" replication of violence, and in its mise-en-scène of abject bodies whose agency is exercised *as* matter's revenge on form.

In her interview with Breillat, Desportes argued that *Baise-moi* was censored because cinema, unlike books, is a medium available to the masses: "On peut aller plus loin en littérature, car le livre appartient à la classe bourgeoise, alors que le cinéma est accessible à tous : la peur est là. Je suis censée prendre des précautions avec l'image, alors qu'on rend les gens complètement ignorants, qu'on les laisse dans la misère."⁴² Desportes points out the hypocrisy of confusing social violence with its filmic representation. For her, the scandal-

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ized response to *Baise-moi* was but another way of masking the class interests that maintain the bourgeoisie's economic and cultural privilege. This argument against the conflation of representation with violence is also made in terms of sex in her novel's tacit refusal to condemn pornography itself as the source of women's sexual degradation. Despentès thus reminds us that what is at stake in her phantasmic representations and their apparently gratuitous sensationalism is an ongoing, yet often invisible, reality of social and sexual warfare.

Baudelaire, Rachilde, and Despentès were censored for their transgressive representations of sex and violence. They were considered outrageous to public mores because of the "gratuitous" or "excessive" quality of their representations. Yet as I hope to have shown, it is the very excess of their violence that taps into a repressed nexus of institutional forces producing sexual, economic, and artistic subjects at the cost of abject others. Their hyperbolic scenes of perversity make legible the implicit and systemic violence of the bourgeois status quo. All three turn to literature not as a space of imaginative emancipation but as a privileged site for the sustained examination of the role of representation itself in the production of historical violence. The negativity of their critique and their resistance to clear political readings challenge straightforward ideological recuperations of their works. Yet this very resistance opens up new horizons for thinking about the body's fragility and resistance in literature, theory, and history.

I have attempted to demonstrate the value of irony as a strategy that radically "depositions" the reading subject by forcing her to listen to the reverberations of violence in texts, and to recover a level of ideological critique that refuses the comforts of identification or vicarious victimization. Rachilde's and Despentès's portraits of bodies in all of their unruly and vulnerable materiality participate in the alternate modernism I have attempted to trace from Balzac to Mallarmé. Their carnivalesque play with the figures of the dandy and the *femme sauvage* dislocate the conventional gender assigned to these figures. Yet such dislocations do more than recuperate high culture from a woman's perspective. Their enactment of "matter's revenge on form" pursues Baudelaire's meditation on the underlying violence of the human body's inscription in art and history, a meditation that takes one of its most compelling forms in the works of Albert Camus.