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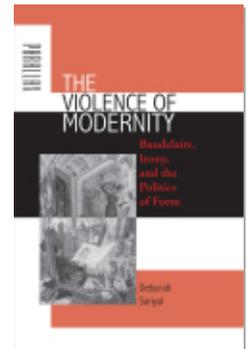
## The Violence of Modernity

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## Afterword

My readings in French modernism through irony and counterviolence have been an effort to understand “modernity” by means of a critique of its violence rather than a testimony to its trauma. The violence harbored in the self-reflexive forms of the modern aesthetic experiment attunes us to the dynamic force of representation, and to the complexity of our historical embedding. The strategies of counterviolence this book has pursued in Baudelaire and some of his unlikely heirs forge important connections between the affective modes of trauma and the political possibilities of rebellion. Such textual interventions continue to invigorate the spirit of contestation before the fact of violence.

Camus’s meditation on terror in our age of ideologies, or *les religions horizontales de notre temps* (E, 601), returns me to this book’s opening concerns. The dominance of trauma and crisis as models for reading experience tends to mute or otherwise diminish the contestatory dynamism of representations, with considerable costs for our readings of the past and the present. The critical fate of *La Chute* has been exemplary in this regard. In the past decade, Camus’s novel has been consecrated as an exemplary narrative for modern times, as the traumatized testimony to an ever-present crisis of representation inaugurated by the Holocaust. Shoshana Felman’s influential reading, for instance, has argued that Camus’s novel attests to a new ethical imperative for all narrative written “after Auschwitz”:

In bearing witness to the witness’s inability to witness . . . *The Fall* inscribes the Holocaust as the impossible narrative of an event without a witness, an event eliminating its own witness. Narrative has become the very writing of

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the impossibility of writing history . . . I would suggest, now, that the cryptic forms of modern narrative and modern art always—whether consciously or not—partake of that historical impossibility of writing a historical narration of the Holocaust, by bearing testimony, through their very cryptic form, to the *radical historical crisis in witnessing* the Holocaust has opened up. (Felman and Laub, *Testimony*, 201)

Felman contributes to a broader meditation on the Holocaust as modernity's limit-event and defining crisis of representation. In this view, the Holocaust forces us to rearticulate the relationship between language, narrative, and history and to attend to what Cathy Caruth has called "unclaimed experience," experience that remains unrecorded by the dominant narratives of modernity. Felman's reading of *La Chute* suggests that Jean-Baptiste Clamence's failure to save the drowning woman figures the historical betrayal of such "unclaimed experience." Clamence's missed encounter with the drowned is an allegory of the Allies' blindness to the Nazi concentration camps, as well as to Sartre's blindness to Stalin's Gulag. Yet in this account, the historical specificity of Clamence's "betrayal" evaporates into a universal ontological condition of trauma: since the Holocaust collapses the very possibility of witnessing, any attempt to understand and transmit the event will fall short of—and betray—the experience. "Betrayal" thus functions as a historical fact (the failure to "see" the camps), an epistemological proposition (the impossibility of "seeing" or understanding the camps even for those who experienced them), *and* an ethical imperative to bear witness to the impossibility of bearing witness to the camps. Adorno's pronouncement on the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz now encompasses narrative, which, in the aftermath of the Shoah, "has thus become the very writing of the impossibility of writing history."

Our current emphasis on historical experience as crisis of representation, however, runs the risk of treating history itself as a "contentless form." Indeed, the discursive construction of the Holocaust as modernity's exemplary trauma positions it as both a catastrophic, singular event *and* a recurrent condition that continues to unfold and to uniformly affect the generations that emerge in its wake. This erases the historical specificity of the Holocaust by conflating the event and its aftermath, survival and spectatorship, while also blurring distinct experiences of the event itself by victims, perpetrators, accomplices, witnesses, survivors, writers, and readers.<sup>1</sup> In the name of its irreducible singularity, the Holocaust is transformed into a transhistorical symbol for the violence of history *and* the trauma of modernity.

As I argued in the introductory chapters of this book, the hermeneutic of

trauma can be deployed uniformly in an analysis of the shocks of the nineteenth-century metropolis, the Holocaust, or our contemporary climate of terror. The dislocation of a traumatic event's particularity and of a subject's distinct position in relation to it fosters a catastrophic vision of history that may become a cultural master narrative in its own right. As an interpretive paradigm, trauma tends to conflate different sites of symbolic, historical, and geopolitical violence, contributing to a melancholy, disempowered and ultimately aesthetic view of history *as* terror.

Authors such as Baudelaire and Camus have been central to formulations of modernity as an epochal crisis that banishes "history" to the limits of representation. Yet, as I have argued, an exclusive focus on trauma in readings of cultural production yields a symptomatic view of the subject and the text as passive sites on which the violences of history are enacted. This short-circuits the contestatory powers of representation before historical violence. I hope to have shown what is missed in reading modern literature exclusively as testimony to unspeakable trauma. In the case of *La Chute*, it is the novel's own reflection on the ideology of its narrative mode, its critique of the conditions that make certain forms of speech heard and others not, certain bodies worthy of testimony and others not. I have proposed more generally that Camus's ironic performance of terror belongs to a model for *engagement* that performs the ideological valences of its representation. By exploiting literature's collaboration with other régimes of power, Baudelaire and Camus open up a dynamic and differentiated approach to history that speaks back to their belated canonization as traumatized witness. Camus's ironic portrayal of traumatic complicity as a melancholy abdication before historical violence illuminates the costs of a critical methodology that places such a high price on victimization. A figure such as Clamence, with his haunting but suspect mixture of *douleur*, *terreur*, and *mauvaise foi*, points to the violence inherent in the notion that we are all victims of a traumatic history.

My critique of our current propensity for "trauma" as a framework for investigating cultural representations in no way questions the reality of traumatic experience itself, of the terrible pain it inflicts on the body and the psyche. Pain is, in some fundamental sense, language-defying, and trauma may strain, and even shatter, the boundaries of representation.<sup>2</sup> Yet it is also our obligation to understand the interlocking systems of representation that make certain forms of pain visible and others not. Instead of an unwavering paradigm of victimization, we need nuanced and dynamic paths of inquiry into the distinct lived realities of trauma endured under different historical times

and in particular geopolitical sites. As historical agents rather than mere witnesses, we also need different languages that clarify our own knowing or unknowing participation in the unequal, often unseen, distribution of vulnerability within the violence of history.

The literary experience opens a space for the critique of historical violence through dynamic relations of complicity and resistance. I have attempted to map such a critique through a strand of modern literature that explores the links between violence, representation, and human vulnerability. The authors I have considered teach us how to read violence at multiple levels: symbolic, material, structural, and corporeal. They remind us that violence is not an abstract or monolithic force, but an operation that implicates us in different ways. Their representations connect historical eruptions of violence to systemic forms of terror in art, politics, and everyday life. Such interventions constitute a critical, and even ethical, engagement with violence that acknowledges how we can alternately, and even simultaneously (or as Baudelaire puts it, “alternativement et réciproquement” [*OC*, 1: 275]) take the position of victim, executioner, witness, bystander, accomplice, and rebel in a given historical moment.

The committed ironists examined in this study show an attunement to the performative operations of representation in the private and public arenas. They open up a tropological analysis of power that speaks to us with renewed relevance today. As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, Baudelaire’s writings identified new networks of power and representation that enable the seizure, legitimation, and expansion of the logic of empire. His indictment of Napoléon III—*le premier venu*—whose market-oriented authoritarian regime retained the fiction of legitimacy through media such as the telegraph and the national printing house, resonates with our own era of embedded journalism and manufactured consent.<sup>3</sup> The disruption of established systems of representation in his poetry (through irony, citationality, and intertextuality) attempts to reinvigorate discursive forms of opposition to collectively sanctioned despotism.

Baudelaire’s manipulations of the nineteenth century’s rhetorical legacy might inspire us to reclaim a language for critique from within our existing vocabulary. As we witness the muting of dissent in the American public arena, the increased pressure to align our language and politics along manichean axes of good and evil, civilized and barbarian, freedom and terror, it is all the more necessary to pry open these binaries, to resituate them within their distinct contexts, and to point out the gaps between their theoretical deployments and strategic uses. An ironic, situated, and differential understanding of the poli-

tics and poetics of language—as performative, mediated by competing ideological investments, susceptible to the challenge of multiple resignifications—opens up the possibility of an energized critique that does not immediately fall into ready-made ideological scripts.

As Walter Benjamin famously observed, Baudelaire is the poet of high capitalism. The self-conscious production of violence in his poetry invites an ever-actual inquiry into the hidden structures of sacrifice in capitalist, imperial modernity. In a prescient diagnosis of commerce as an order of terror, maintained by methods that would make humanity shudder (“par des moyens qui feraient frissonner notre humanité actuelle”), Baudelaire attests to nascent structures of domination in a life-world governed by commercial investments and the quest for new markets. His poems offer a fractured but legible genealogy of reification. They perform the logic of commodification in shifting arenas, moving from the private spaces of the bourgeois interior into the urban and even global display of commodities.

Baudelaire’s preoccupation with the tangible fact of violence—occluded by structural dispositions of power, and by the derealization of allegorical processes—glimmers throughout his scenes of modern life. His spectacle of bodies that are mutilated, reified, circulated, and consumed captures the dehumanizing impact of commerce on human relations at home and abroad. Even his most cool, ironic portrayals of reification afford glimpses into the cost of real suffering exacted by such symbolic mediations. They afford a recognition of what is damaged or extinguished in the name of revolution, progress, and conquest. Throughout his poetry, we are reminded of the *violence* of such teleologies, their sacrifice of a vital, differentiated, and vulnerable human reality to an ideal aesthetic and political end. Baudelaire’s appraisal of modern historical experience finds an amplified echo a century later in Camus’s indictment of ideological systems that sacrifice human lives on the altar of history. The “horizontal religions of our times” continue to reap their cost in human life and dignity. I have ended this book with a discussion of the affinities between Baudelaire and Camus in the hopes of bringing their insights on terror to bear on our own historical horizon. The escalating conflicts we currently witness between irreconcilable visions of progress, freedom, and civilization require a self-reflexive genealogy of terror that remains attuned to its distinct eruptions, its systemic operations, *and* to its visible and invisible costs in human suffering.

When represented in literature and theorized in scholarly discourse, the tangible costs of violence itself risk evaporating into abstraction. Discussions

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of structural or systemic force, or of the derealizing violence of allegory, perform their own species of *terreur*.<sup>4</sup> It becomes easy to forget that, in a fundamental sense, violence is about a dangerous touch that exposes the vulnerability of bodily life itself.<sup>5</sup> It designates an encounter with the other that, despite multiple mediations, yields an uncontrolled relationality that confronts us with our power *and* our fragility before proximate and distant others. We are never beyond or outside violence, but are historically situated in volatile, contradictory relations to its causes, deployments, and effects. We are therefore always connected to the power and vulnerability of others in history, by virtue of “being there,” but also by our resistance, complicity, blindness, insight, denunciation, surrender, or engagement.

The embodied experience of violence as a touch that dispossesses, expropriates, and extinguishes human beings, our universal and unforeseen vulnerability to this violence, our participation in it, and, most important, the relationality of violence itself, bind us to proximate and distant others through actions and effects that ideology, aesthetics, and institutional structures can render invisible. This book has been an effort to pursue one aspect of such a meditation on violence and its vexed relations to representation. The self-reflexive legacy of counterviolence conveys the ways in which representation engenders and perpetuates injury to bodies and to selves. The ironic interventions of Baudelaire, Rachilde, Camus, and Desportes make legible occulted, naturalized, and structural dispositions of power that turn the human body into a site of inscription—or extinction—in the name of “modernity,” “culture,” and “progress.” Their works offer no utopian moment of resolution, no thematic reconciliation of injury with reparation, no imagined “elsewhere” in which bodies and subjects are released from their bondage to another’s immediate or mediated violence. Yet, to rephrase Adorno, even their most stark depictions of violence harbor a hidden “it should be otherwise” that “points to a practice from which they abstain: the creation of a just life.”<sup>6</sup> There is a labor of reflexive critique that disrupts established systems of representation and gives rise to a sense of the human body’s fragility to another’s touch when that touch is dangerously mediated by institutions, currencies, and symbolic systems.