

H-France Review Vol. 7 (September 2007), No. 107

Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form*. Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. ix + 276 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (hb), ISBN 0-8018-8308-3.

Review by Susan Blood, SUNY Albany.

Debarati Sanyal's ambitious and thought-provoking book will inspire discussion well beyond what one can say in a brief review. Her consideration of the many facets of modernity in the light of the concept of violence should appeal to scholars with an interest in history, political science, and ethics as well as to specialists in literature and critical theory. Sanyal begins with a deft analysis of Baudelaire's central place in theories of literary modernity, and then makes a powerful case that this nineteenth-century poet can still speak to a twenty-first-century audience confronted with its own manifold experience of violence. Her work is consistently stimulating, questioning received opinion on a variety of fronts, while remaining generous and receptive both to the literary texts she reads with insight and to the eclectic critical currents she manages to bring into dialogue with one another.

In an eloquent introduction, Sanyal alludes to the violence of contemporary global culture—defined by terror, trauma, and hypermediatization—and argues that the explosive critical energy of Baudelaire's writing can be brought to bear upon our current situation. She especially sees Baudelaire as an antidote to American "wound culture," [1] the passive, self-pitying condition of a nation that has seen itself attacked on TV and remains blind to its own agency: "We are beckoned to submit to historical processes as spectators, witnesses, or even victims, rather than as agents with implicit ties to the violence that is represented" (p. 1). The well-known lines of Baudelaire's poem "L'Héautontimorouménos" ("Je suis la plaie et le couteau! / Je suis le soufflet et la joue! / Je suis les membres et la roue, / Et la victime et le bourreau!" ["I am the wound and the knife! / I am the slap in the face and the cheek / I am the limbs and the torturer's rack, / I am the victim and the executioner!"]) serve as a leitmotif for the overall analysis. Baudelaire's ironic self-consciousness, identifying with both the wound and the knife, the victim and the executioner, gives evidence of an ethical lucidity that is lacking in much contemporary discourse.

Baudelairean irony has been a topic of interest for deconstructive critics since the 1970s. Paul de Man's seminal reading of "De l'essence du rire" in "The Rhetoric of Temporality" translated Baudelaire's theory of laughter into a theory of irony, which posited the disjunction between language and the world. Baudelaire's example of the philosopher who laughs at himself as he trips became the emblem of the ironist whose knowledge of the world is acquired "only at the expense of his empirical self." [2] Sanyal's thesis is that irony can be understood differently, not as a form of disengagement, but as a form of engagement with empirical realities. She demonstrates how "trauma theory" (developed in recent years, largely since de Man's death) links the problem of irony and ironic self-doubling to real-world violence. [3] In an intriguing reading of "De l'essence du rire," Sanyal turns to the figure of Pierrot, an English mime whose performance is discussed by Baudelaire as an instance of "le comique absolu." Pierrot is a thief who is guillotined and unrepentantly steals his own head, thereby illustrating Baudelaire's contention that the characteristic of this type of comedy is violence. Sanyal argues that the violence in question is not some free-floating, atemporal phenomenon, but the violence of revolution as it was experienced in a nineteenth-century context. Pierrot's decapitation is an aesthetic performance that is "embedded" in historical experience.

Trauma theory may take the study of irony into the real world, but according to Sanyal, it does not go far enough. Irony, she argues, engages literature in an active critique of violence that can have political implications. Literature's role in trauma theory is more passive, testifying to violence rather than contesting it: "as a way of reading the conjunction between history and literature, models of shock and trauma overlook how texts--and people--actively contest the particular violences of a given historical moment" (p. 4). To demonstrate this thesis, Sanyal undertakes readings of two prose poems--"Une mort héroïque" and "La Corde"--in which another mime is executed by a despotic prince, and a child who has posed as an artist's model hangs himself. The poems contest respectively the violence of Napoléon III's regime and that of nascent high capitalism, revealing the artist's complicity with both. Sanyal's treatment of the prose poem follows Richard Terdiman's analysis in *Discourse/Counter-Discourse*, which attributes a contentious role to the best of nineteenth-century literature.[4] Terdiman notes the tendency of counter-discourse to be contaminated by the discursive regimes it seeks to contest, and Sanyal claims that such contamination itself has a critical potential: "What if, rather than claiming a distinction between discourse and counter-discourse, Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* explored the critical possibilities opened up by the *lack* of distinction between them?" (p. 61). The concept of contamination is crucial to Sanyal's case for literature's engagement with the world.

Pursuing her investigation, Sanyal takes up the topic of women in Baudelaire. In a chapter titled "Bodies in Motion, Texts on Stage," she seeks to "situate Baudelaire within broader nineteenth-century discourses on gender and modernity." She argues that "woman' becomes a site of contested meaning at the crossroads of aesthetic modernism and the material conditions of capitalist urban modernity" (p. 97). Her readings in this chapter focus on the Marxist concept of reification as it intersects with gender. She begins with a study of prostitution in Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or* and then turns to Baudelaire in a range of texts--"Une Martyre," "La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse," "L'Exposition universelle de 1855," and "La Belle Dorothée." The readings here are particularly powerful, linking in a compelling way textual detail to larger arguments. Sanyal explores the question she asks in her introduction--"How does the representation of violence differ from its exercise in real life?" (p. 4)--by casting Baudelaire's portrayal of women as a "counterviolence" that contests the violence it performs. The case is particularly convincing in her analysis of "La Belle Dorothée," a prose poem devoted to the representation of a black woman in her native habitat. Judith Butler's work on performative discourse in *Bodies that Matter* and *Excitable Speech* [5] becomes a key critical reference--the performance of violence supplying the active contestation that Sanyal associates with ironic critique.

The second part of *The Violence of Modernity* is devoted to Baudelaire's legacy as Sanyal discovers it in unlikely places. Baudelaire quickly became a cult figure, and the chapter "Matter's Revenge on Form: Bad Girls Talk Back" describes how two women writers--the decadent novelist Rachilde and contemporary "punk" author Virginie Despentes--incorporated his myth. A final chapter, "Broken Engagements: Albert Camus and the Poetics of Terror," examines irony and engagement in Camus's *L'Homme révolté* and *La Chute*. In both chapters, the idea of the body as "vulnerable materiality" takes on increasing importance: the resistance of the suffering body to aesthetic *and* political idealization becomes the critical fulcrum of the readings. The violent performance of gender that Sanyal discerned in Baudelaire resurfaces in Rachilde as a parodic rewriting of literary tradition. In *M. Venus* and *La Marquise de Sade*, gender relations are inverted along the lines of Baudelaire's victims and executioners. Despentes's *Baise-moi* takes Baudelaire's representation of the Parisian underground to graphic lengths in a contemporary context. As for Camus, Sanyal argues that this philosopher of engagement treads (ironically) in Baudelaire's footsteps as he contests the political violence of his own period. Camus's contention that revolutionary ideals have been complicitous with totalitarianism and state-sponsored terror is particularly close to Baudelaire's reflections on revolution and the modern state.

These closing chapters are suggestive, and Sanyal makes a forceful case for a Baudelairean intertext behind Camus's writings. In fact, one of Sanyal's gifts is for intertextual analysis, whether it involves bringing Baudelaire's own texts into striking juxtapositions, or reading them against other authors,

including Poe and Mallarmé. Occasionally, however, some of the general drift of the polemic needs clarification, especially in the last chapters. As she reads Baudelaire's legatees, Sanyal seems to reverse herself on a number of theoretical points. In "Bodies in Motion," she had argued for the position that the female body in Baudelaire is produced by violence, that its "nature" is always already commodified or mediated by representation. In her discussion of Desportes, however, the female body takes its "revenge" on form by *resisting* idealization or mediation. The body apparently is no longer "performed" in a *mise-en-scène* that mediates between nature and culture or between matter and form. This is significant since much of Sanyal's preceding argument is devoted to critiquing "art for art's sake" and its claim to separate aesthetic form from empirical reality. As the space for mediation is reduced, the status of counterviolence comes into question—what criteria enable counterviolence to be distinguished from violence in a world where the victim is so "contaminated" by violence that her only recourse is to engage in violence? In a note, Sanyal paraphrases Desportes's claim "that the representation of violence through a medium such as cinema can serve as a critique of social life" (p. 251). How this works remains unclear, however, in a conceptual frame where "contamination" has served as the key to ethical insight.

A related shift in position occurs in the chapter on Camus. What might be called the ethics of contamination that Sanyal has associated with Baudelaire, the understanding that one can be both victim and executioner, takes on a different shape. According to Sanyal this ethics of contamination becomes for the narrator of *La Chute* a "theology of guilt": "Clamence's theology of guilt has concrete historical precedents in the totalitarian police state. His rhetoric of culpability replicates what Camus understood to be one of the most terrifying features of modern terror. The obliteration of innocence both lamented by Clamence and yet reinstated in his theory of absolute culpability was, according to Camus, a central aim of Nazi Germany, and more generally, of totalitarian ideology" (p. 190). Sanyal intriguingly associates Clamence's theology of guilt with the following passage from *L'Homme révolté*: "Celui qui tue ou torture ne connaît qu'une ombre à sa victoire: il ne peut pas se sentir innocent. Il faut donc *créer la culpabilité chez la victime* elle-même pour que, dans un monde sans direction, la culpabilité générale ne légitime plus que l'exercice de la force, ne consacre plus que le succès" ("The one who kills or tortures knows only the shadow of victory: he cannot feel innocent. He must therefore *make his victim culpable* so that, in a world out of control, universal culpability no longer legitimates anything but the exercise of might, no longer sanctions anything but success" [p. 190], Sanyal's emphasis). The critical space for oppositional thinking no longer requires recognizing guilt but requires refusing it. If this is the case, how must we understand the stakes of reading Baudelaire in the belated context of twentieth-century totalitarianism?

In her criticism of trauma theory and its obsession with the Holocaust, Sanyal repeatedly insists that violence changes from one era to the next. A shift in the nature of oppositional thinking should therefore be anticipated, along with Baudelaire's resurfacing on the side of the executioners. This may all be nothing more than an ironic twist, prefigured in the consciousness of "L'Héautontimorouménos." But perhaps it also indicates a kind of limit to irony. When the victim resists changing places with the executioner, when the innocent refuse to become guilty, then the intersubjective exchanges that Sanyal associates with irony stop. The violence of the Holocaust has, of course, been notoriously associated with the collapse of language and the threat of silence: Sanyal discusses in her introduction Adorno's adage that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (p. 9). But perhaps one could put the word "irony" in the place of "poetry" and question whether the ironic discourse of the dandy, so telling in the context of the Second Empire, can retain its oppositional edge in the face of Auschwitz. Or perhaps irony at Auschwitz has its own characteristics which cannot be explained simply in terms of intersubjective exchange.

Sanyal's work raises such fundamental questions that it cannot be reproached for not answering all of them definitively. *The Violence of Modernity* is an important, enlightening book that could serve as a useful introduction to contemporary critical debates as well as a source for stimulating, insightful readings of Baudelaire and the diverse group of writers who have been influenced by him.

NOTES

[1] Sanyal takes the term “wound culture” from Mark Selzer’s *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America’s Wound Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998). Other key texts for her discussion are Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late-Modernity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995); Geoffrey Hartman’s *Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2004); and Jacques Rancière’s *Malaise dans l’esthétique* (Paris: Galilée, 2004). The experience of 9/11 is central to the discussion of the later texts, extending the significance of the earlier analysis.

[2] Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1977), p. 214.

[3] Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) is the seminal work in trauma theory. For general books in the field, see Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) and Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001). For trauma theory in its application to Baudelaire, see Kevin Newmark, “Traumatic Poetry: Charles Baudelaire and the Shock of Laughter,” in Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), pp. 236-55; and Ulrich Baer, *Remnants of Song: Trauma and the Experience of Modernity in Charles Baudelaire and Paul Celan* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000). On trauma theory and de Man’s legacy, see Sanyal, “A Soccer Match in Auschwitz: Passing Culpability in Holocaust Criticism,” *Representations*, 79 (2002): 1-27.

[4] Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[5] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

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H-France Review Vol. 7 (September 2007), No. 107

ISSN 1553-9172