

Damian Catani. *Evil: A History in Modern French Literature and Thought*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 222 pp.

Evil: A History in Modern French Literature and Thought is an in-depth, politically salient reaction to the need for “greater interdisciplinarity with respect to evil” in literary studies (2). Designed to move beyond a tendency to aestheticize or compartmentalize historical traumas, Catani’s model successfully establishes a more inclusive approach. Overall, he applies the concept of evil as a critical prism, through which he elucidates the evolution of sociopolitical anxieties in the history of modern France, with a special emphasis on the 19th and 20th centuries.

The study is organized chronologically and thematically. The first chapter, which functions as an introductory anthology, provides a succinct yet constructive synthesis of major philosophical and critical approaches to evil. It illustrates Catani’s excellent grasp of the western intellectual tradition, while introducing the conceptual tools that ease the readers into his argument. Catani examines evil through the proposed themes of philosophy, politics, science, and gender in the subsequent chapters; however, the latter remains less explored, with only a brief mention of the “evil feminine” in Baudelaire’s reading of Miss Scalpel. Gender discourse could have received more attention to parallel the meticulousness of his other arguments. As a study promoting self-critical awareness and moral agency, Catani is particularly interested in the interaction between free will and social factors, as well as their effect on individual subjectivity. Chapters 2-6 utilize a dual-prism technique, contrasting the positions of two different thinkers from a similar time period: Balzac and Baudelaire, Lautréamont and Zola, Gide and Proust, Bernanos and Céline, Sartre and Foucault. Each pair of authors provide snapshots of a constantly evolving society, whose internal dynamism is highlighted through the authors’ opposing views.

In chapter 2, Catani persuasively links Baudelaire’s and Balzac’s representation of evil to the gritty urbanism of Paris, condemning its Romantic metaphysical equivalent as an “anachronistic danger” (40). The rapport between urban modernity and down-to-earth vice (‘la conscience dans le mal’) is symbiotic in its mutual definition. Through a close reading of “Au lecteur” and “Le jeu” from *The Flowers of Evil*, Catani elegantly derives the new evil “from untapped experiences that lie dormant within the rich storehouse of the modern city itself, awaiting to unleash their potential to neutralize the ennui and moral passivity in which society would otherwise continue to languish” (40). Though both Balzac and Baudelaire favored identifiable evil over abstraction, Catani is mindful of the subtleties in his comparative analysis. His attentive reading of Balzac’s *A Harlot High and Low* demonstrates the conservative nature of Balzac’s modernism. His nostalgic reaffirmation of the pre-Revolutionary noble lineage and a tendency to depict the criminal underworld from a safe distance constitutes a “controlled engagement with the vice of modernity” (49). In contrast, Baudelaire directly implicates himself in the world of vice as one of its marginalized members, seeking self-destructive pleasure.

In chapter 3, Catani’s comparative examination of Zola and Lautréamont is read against the biological paradigms of Darwin and Lombroso. To emphasize the significance of moral agency, he problematizes Zola’s adaptation of atavism to explain societal corruption. Catani argues that Zola fails to escape theological determinism because of his predisposition to justify unsanctioned behavior through external forces. In the end, whether it is the original sin or an animal instinct, the driving motive remains beyond the characters’ control. Catani argues that Lantier’s lack of moral free will is what makes Zola’s scientific interpretation of evil unsettling, inconsistent, and “far less conducive to moral reflection” (73). Alternatively, Lautréamont’s hybrid combination of science and theology results in a character that is able to fulfill his moral agenda while remaining aware of the committed evil, albeit in unusually cruel ways. Catani interprets Maldoror’s seemingly gratuitous acts of violence as a self-aware struggle against human and divine violence.

In chapter 4, Catani traces the displacement of evil between public and private spheres in Gide's *The Vatican Cellars* and Proust's *Finding Time Again*. The author introduces nietzschean 'genealogy of morals' – an ethical obligation to reconstruct the meaning of evil within each era's official discourse; a premise that he skillfully performs in his own project. Catani dissociates truth from morality, emphasizing the subjective nature of both. Foreshadowing the institutionalization of evil in the 20th century, he demonstrates how this concept is alienated from intrinsic morality, and how the meaning of evil metamorphoses based on historical demands. Through Gide, Catani offers an insightful nietzschean reconsideration. He rejects dangerous 'master morality,' separates individuality from egoism, and embraces moral responsibility. Catani convincingly argues that Gide's Julius is the author's alter ego who remains responsible for the representation of evil, regardless of its hypothetical status. Julius' horrified reaction to a gratuitous murder mirrors Gide's resolution to assume responsibility for depicted evil. Catani's carefully chosen vocabulary contributes to the argument by referring to an imagined crime not as a representation, but as "evil committed to the page" (103). Nevertheless, his reading of Proust through Bergson's prism of 'real' time is less convincing; the readers would have benefited from a more precise explanation of its link to the notion of evil.

In his study on Céline and Bernanos, Catani delineates a reversal from the individual negotiation of evil to an externally independent, invasive, and elusive force. Among the many strengths of the book is the author's vigilance to create strong connections with previous chapters, accentuating his awareness of the ever-evolving rapport between society and the individual. The comparative aspect extends beyond the discrete chapter-bound analysis, delving into a more interdisciplinary network of connections between authors and eras. Thus, Catani juxtaposes Proust's and Gide's resistance to the power of public authorities with the complete lack of a moral framework in the works of Céline and Bernanos. Both authors, he argues, create a bleak world of stagnation, detrimental to the body and subjectivity. Nonetheless, Bernanos remains optimistic due to his hope for spiritual salvation. Céline, on the other hand, falls into utter desperation and pessimism, offering no chance of moral revival. For the latter, the traumas and the instabilities of war have invaded civilian life, revealing "a disturbing analogy between the morally sanctioned killing of the war and the latent, more gradual killing that contaminates civilian life, but is hidden beneath a fragile veneer of respectability" (128).

In chapter 6, Catani steps away from literary figures to unravel Foucault's and Sartre's take on the politicized nature of evil. Viewed as a tacit form of repression, it is masked behind the facade of a modern, benevolent state. In Catani's argument, this is a turning point towards contemporary issues, and moral agency of real people in real situations. Foucault and Sartre both agree on identifying the institutionalization of evil as a major threat to individual subjectivity. Catani shares their belief that an ostensibly sharp distinction between law-abiding citizens and the criminal Other is, in fact, more problematic than we would like to acknowledge. In the end, he places them on the opposing ends of a spectrum, claiming that for Sartre, consciousness is 'dangerously undetermined,' whereas for Foucault, it is 'overdetermined' (149). Like Baudelaire who subtly lures the readers into a gritty world of vice, Sartre also reminds us of the thin barrier between lawless and innocent minds, "making the average Frenchman, the non-criminal, aware that evil also lies dormant within his *own* consciousness, and is not something from which he can conveniently disassociate himself by projecting it exclusively onto a criminal 'Other'" (148).

The final chapter is the heart of Catani's argument. He definitively dismantles the notion of the criminal Other as a source of evil and convincingly argues in favor of self-recognition in the acts of evil. The corpus includes problematic legacies of the Holocaust, transatlantic slavery, the Terror, and the American tragedy of 9/11. In his analysis of la Shoah, Catani moves away from the established representation of suffering in order to focus on a controversial alternative of giving a

voice to a perpetrator. Owing a heavy debt to Arendt's banality of evil, he aims to elucidate how we are all capable of the unspeakable acts of evil, which are sometimes reduced to an 'efficient bureaucratic mentality' and 'social ambition' (169). Disrupting the comforting belief in a natural predisposition towards evil, Catani fuses the innocent self with the criminal Other. Whether it is to favor the voices of the victims (Holocaust) or to silence them (slavery), he does a remarkable job illustrating the manipulations of politicized historiographical discourses that favor national ideology.

It is noteworthy that Catani applies his rigorous analysis not only to content, but also to the authors' lexical innovations and queries for a new language to express the evolving meaning of evil. He thus comments on Balzac's pragmatic vocabulary and criminal slang, reflecting its 'earthy' modernity. He also views Lautréamont's twofold model of 'theologized' biology and 'biologized' religion as a new genre of 'scientific prose poetry' (64). Likewise, Catani emphasizes Céline's deliberate anti-literary language as a linguistic reflection of a banal, post-war existence. Finally, he attributes the difficulty of ascribing Sartre's Genet to a particular literary genre as an act of resistance against becoming a mere criminal statistic.

To conclude, Catani remains true to his originally stated goal of designing an interdisciplinary, ethically responsible analysis of historical evil. His closing reading of Sauvaire's film *Johnny Mad Dog* leaves us with a new moral dilemma of representing evil, committed by children. He connects a seemingly discreet example of children soldiers in an anonymous African country to the disenfranchised youth in the inner cities in Europe - the evils of our contemporary reality: "If we cannot clean up the mess to which we have contributed in the developing world, then we can certainly start by getting our own house in order" (194). Direct, sober, and urgent, Catani abandons the poetic language of his previous chapters. Similarly to Céline, he searches for a new way of communicating modern evil. He incites contemporary society to engage in the proposed paradigm shift: "witnessing and commemorating evil is not enough: we have to act upon it and prevent it, by pursuing what is good" (188). The conclusion cleverly performs its premise by inspiring the readers to take an active position when facing modern evil, and to be conscious of our equal capacity for the 'banality of good' (17). Overall, Damian Catani's study is a beautifully written product of rigorous research, addressing ethical and political questions with strong implications that extend beyond literature.

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