

h-france review

Volume 8

2008

H-France Review Vol. 8 (January 2008), No. 6

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ISSN 1553-9172

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David Gascoigne, Ed., *Violent Histories: Violence, Culture and Identity in France from Surrealism to the Néo-Polar*. Bern: Peter Lang, Cultural Identity Series, 2007. 212 pp. \$55.95 U.S. / €43.00 ISBN 978-3-03910-317-1.

Review by Debarati Sanyal, University of California, Berkeley.

Violent Histories: Violence, Culture and Identity in France from Surrealism to the Néo-Polar edited by David Gascoigne presents a heterogeneous collection of essays on French literary responses to the violent histories of the twentieth century. The individual essays are clustered around the national traumas of World War One, the Occupation and decolonization, offering close and nuanced readings of lesser-known works by canonical figures such as Genet, Malraux, Sartre and Camus alongside more recent writers of the *roman noir* such as Daeninckx, Jonquet and Amila.

In his introduction to the volume, David Gascoigne notes the difficulty of defining violence, a notoriously multi-directional, relative and “polyphonic” term. He nevertheless identifies three levels of violence at stake in the various essays that follow: physical aggression, psychological intimidation and cultural oppression. The volume’s salient themes include questions of memory, witness and reflection; violence in its relation to institutional forces and as an agent of cultural renewal; violence and language. The introduction also situates the historical parameters of the volume in light of the reception of Nietzsche by figures such as Gide and Malraux, and Georges Sorel’s transformation of Nietzsche’s heroic individualism into collective revolutionary violence. Readers will note that the introduction does not provide an overview of recent theoretical accounts of violence, but rather, offers local and concrete remarks that are primarily mediated by the authors addressed in the volume’s essays. Since the essays are organized in chronological sequence rather than in thematic or conceptual categories, they will be addressed briefly in order of appearance.

Peter Read launches the collection with an intriguing examination of Surrealism’s reputed nihilism as it emerged in 1932 and 2001. In the aftermath of September 11, Jean Clair had denounced Surrealists as anti-Western armchair terrorists and precursors of Al-Qaeda, citing as evidence statements such as this one made by Aragon in 1925, “May far-off America collapse from its tall, white buildings” (p. 31). A number of French intellectuals came to the defense of Breton, Aragon and the Surrealist project in the pages of *Le Monde*. Read reconstructs this debate and compares it to the scandal provoked by Aragon’s poem “Front Rouge,” which resulted in Aragon being prosecuted in 1932 for incitement to mutiny and murder. In his own defense of Surrealism and its “life-affirming legacy” (p. 43), Read reminds us that the movement’s rhetoric of destruction arose from the experience of World War One as well as its opposition to colonial violence. Further, the Surrealist investment in terror was not anti-Western but in fact the product of France’s revolutionary mythology and national identity. Read’s suggestive essay touches on a

number of themes that recur in the volume: historical violence and cultural "counterviolence", art and terror, violence and cultural identity, language and *praxis*. Yet the parallel Clair proposed between Surrealists and Al-Qaeda, however misguided, does raise provocative questions on the imbrication of violence and art that might have been pursued further. For instance, it would have been interesting to mention Stockhausen's comment that the destruction of the World Trade Center was "the greatest work of art that is possible in the whole cosmos" in the discussion of Surrealism's associations with nihilistic aesthetic depictions of violence.[1]

The ensuing cluster of essays on Malraux, Sartre, Camus and Genet maps major transitions in these canonical authors' intellectual trajectories through close readings of lesser-known texts. David Gascoigne takes his readers on a "tour of selected sites in Malraux's densely suggestive topography" (p. 58) from *Le Royaume-farfelu* to *Les Noyers de l'Altenburg* through careful readings of architectural motifs that record shifts in Malraux's vision of art and politics. Kirsteen Anderson examines Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive* in light of the philosopher's unconscious, violent and obsessive identification with Jews and their antisemitic cultural portrayal in the 1940s. Anderson brings the psychological framework of *Les Mots* to bear on the earlier essay and argues that the later Sartre developed a more unified conception of himself while gaining a deeper appreciation of diasporic, non-violent models of Jewish identity. This psychobiographical account will provide an interesting counterpoint to the historical approaches in the special issue of *October* devoted to *Réflexions sur la question juive*. [2] Indeed, one might wish Anderson had engaged with this collection, since several essays on Sartre's shifting investments in Jewishness are pertinent to her analysis.

In one of the rare essays to conceptualize violence as a category, Toby Garfitt turns to René Girard's work on scapegoating and mimetic desire and carefully traces Camus' ethical trajectory from the post-Nietzschean individualism of *l'Étranger* to the spirit of sacrifice and community in the enigmatic short story "L'Hôte." Mairéad Hanrahan examines Genet's conception of writing as a hostile, self-contestatory "counterviolence" directed against the violence of French cultural imperialism or *l'universel don français* (p. 100). Ingenious, nuanced readings of *Un Captif amoureux* (a posthumous novel on Palestinian resistance) and an essay on the construction of the Chartres cathedral suggest that Genet's violent irony dismantles France's aspirations to universality and exposes the relationship between economic exploitation and cultural supremacy.

The second half of the volume provides a more cohesive and sustained meditation on violence, since the last four essays address the traumatic legacy of World War Two in France's cultural memory with a focus on the genre of the *polar*. These approaches also conduct a valuable *décloisonnement de la mémoire* by stressing continuities and points of intersection between distinct histories and legacies of violence. Dervila Cooke's overview of Patrick Modiano's recent work notes his ever-present preoccupation with the memory of the Holocaust. David Platten's eloquent account of Jean Amila's *oeuvre* ponders the significance of the *noir* writer's palimpsest representation of history (such as the layering of Verdun, Cambodia, Auschwitz and Rwanda in *Le Boucher des Hurlus*).

In his lucid and compelling essay on the cultural legacy of the dark years, Alan Morris discusses the emergence of a palimpsest conception of history in the *polar* and *néopolar* from *la mode rétro* to today. These genres function as "a cultural narrative of our times" (p. 153); they provide a historical archive and counter

memory to the myths and repressions of official history. In a series of keen readings, Morris suggests that authors such as Daeninckx and Jonquet portray a historical gaze that travels both backward and forward, thus probing the past's reverberations in the present and the relationship between personal memory and official history. Their works also reveal points of connection and overlap between distinct histories and identities. The allusion to Maurice Papon in Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire*, for instance, points to the Occupation's violent afterlife in postwar France by exposing continuities in personnel and ideology between Collaboration and the massacre of Algerians on October 17, 1961.

The inscription of plural histories in recent French and Francophone fiction has fostered a more textured, multiperspectival conception of collective memory. Yet this plurality raises the question of how to address the relationship between distinct histories and cultural identities without establishing hierarchies of suffering. In another essay on memory and the transmission of historical trauma, Margaret-Anne Hutton also turns to the intersection of World War Two and Algeria to inquire into ethical uses of the past. For Hutton, the double history invoked in Daeninckx's *Meurtres pour mémoire* ends up privileging the Vichy era over the Algerian crisis. Conversely, while Leïla Sebbar's *La Seine était rouge* presents a more deliberate "working through" of the past, its mosaic of testimonies about the 1961 police massacres foregrounds questions of Algerian identity rather than Jewish deportation under Vichy (even though the parallels between these histories of exclusion are noted). In both novels, "the exploration of past conflict is represented primarily as a means to shore up a post-conflict generation's sense of personal identity" (p. 172). For Hutton, it is Canadian-born Nancy Huston's *L'Empreinte de l'ange* that provides an exemplary meditation on the uses of memory. Huston's novel invokes the traumas of wartime Germany, the Holocaust and the struggle for Algerian independence in order to open up a collective engagement with the political demands of the present and to point towards an ethical future.

Violent Histories is a thought-provoking volume that opens intriguing pathways into key junctures of French cultural history. The strongest essays offer rich close readings of individual texts and place them into dynamic histories of production and reception. Some readers may wish for a more sustained theoretical investigation of violence with reference to the work of Foucault, Bourdieu, Derrida and others on relevant topics such as the relationship between violence and force, symbolic violence, structural violence, discursive violence and so forth.[3] In some essays the term "violence" occasionally loses its specificity, becoming a placeholder for a number of other categories such as history, trauma, language or loss. The collection's strength thus lies more in the diversity of its individual essays than in the overall coherence of its treatment of violence (a diversity that is perhaps due to the fact that the essays were initially written as papers for a conference on "Violence, Culture and Identity"). Along with some excellent close readings of works by canonical authors addressing France's national traumas, the volume also persuasively establishes the *polar* and the *néopolar* as important vehicles of historical memory.

LIST OF ESSAYS

- David Gascoigne, "Introduction: France's Violent Histories"
- Peter Read, "French Surrealism and *la démoralisation de l'Occident* in 1932 and 2001"

- Kirsteen Anderson, "Sartre and Jewishness: From Identificatory Violence to Ethical Reparation"
- Toby Garfitt, "Camus between Malraux and Grenier: Violence, Ethics and Art"
- Mairéad Hanrahan, "Genet and the Cultural Imperialism of Chartres Cathedral"
- Dervila Cooke, "Violence and the Prison of the Past in Recent Works by Patrick Modiano: *Des Inconnues*, *La Petite Bijou*, 'Ephéméride', and *Accident Nocturne*"
- Alan Morris, "*Roman noir, années noires*: The French *Néopolar* and the Occupation's Legacy of Violence"
- Margaret-Anne Hutton, "From the Dark Years to 17 October 1961: Personal and National Identity in Works by Didier Daeninckx, Leïla Sebbar and Nancy Huston"
- Daved Platten, "Violence and the Saint: Political Commitment in the Fiction of Jean Amila"

NOTES

[1] Frank Lentricchia and Jody Mcauliffe, "Groundzeroland," in Stanley Hauerwas and Frank Lentricchia, eds., *Dissent from the Homeland: Essays After September 11* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2003), p.97.

[2] Denis Hollier, ed., "Jean-Paul Sartre's Anti-Semite and Jew: A Special Issue," *October* no.87 (1999).

[3] See for instance Beatrice Hanssen, *Critique of Violence: Between Post-Structuralism and Critical Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

Debarati Sanyal
University of California, Berkeley
sanyal@berkeley.edu