
H-France Review Vol. 15 (April 2015), No. 62

Damian Catani, *Evil: A History in Modern French Literature and Thought*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2013. 222 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4725-8251-5.

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The sheer pervasiveness of evil in modern French thought renders accounts of the concept's historical development a formidable task. It requires both in-depth knowledge of the worldviews undergirding an array of literary and philosophical works, as well as a comprehensive understanding of the moral discourses that define successive time periods. What's more, the analyst must also demonstrate a heightened sensitivity in discussing literary treatments of unsettling world events such as the slave trade, the Holocaust, and September 11. In these regards, Damian Catani presents a laudable study of what arguably amounts to the underlying objective of philosophy and literature: the confrontation of evil itself in response to human suffering.

In 2002, the publication of Susan Neiman's *Evil in Modern Thought* rightfully showcased evil as the primary concern of Western philosophy by delineating the on-going debate of theodicy in key Western European texts. As valuable and far-reaching as Neiman's study has proven to be, Catani's *Evil: A History in Modern French Literature and Thought* aims to be more interdisciplinary in nature by considering multiple approaches to evil in philosophical, political, scientific, and literary thought. His balanced and inclusive study makes critical comparisons between influential French thinkers, thereby affording valuable insight into modern understandings of wickedness and human suffering. Catani's study ultimately uncovers a dominant trend that moves away from unproductive literary aestheticizations of evil, the attribution of evil to the "Other," and the mere commemoration of victims' suffering, and toward an ethics of sameness that urges us to recognize the potential for evil in all of us, as well as a pragmatic, interventionist approach that revives the individual as a moral agent of good.

In a highly concise first chapter labeled "Approaches to Evil," Catani offers various springboards to the book's subsequent sections by framing crucial debates on the nature of evil in philosophy, politics, gender, science, and literature. Catani places in dialogue with one another an array of French and non-French thinkers whose contributions to the study of evil anticipate his inquiries into French literary and philosophical texts. In each discipline, the author highlights important breakthroughs in the development of thought on evil, as well as significant setbacks. In consistent fashion, Catani identifies the shortcomings of perspectives that minimize the role of human agency, prove unnecessarily abstract by neglecting to account for the immediacy of human suffering, or fail to spur an ethical response. In philosophy, Catani closely follows Kant and Paul Ricœur, who dislodge evil from a tradition anchored in speculation on origins (e.g., the devil, the Other) by linking it to questions of moral agency, and assesses the optimism of Hegel's and Leibniz's writings as incompatible with evil's pervasiveness. But Catani warns that considerations of evil actions as inherently human run the risk of normalizing them to the point that they appear less threatening or morally apprehensive. He therefore also places value in Susan Neiman's revitalization of Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil," for it incites us to remain self-vigilant by reminding us of the unsettling reality that in extreme circumstances, anyone could commit horrendous acts of violence.

Neiman's ensuing proposal of the "banality of good" proves pragmatic in its aim to inspire acts of kindness by focusing on good deeds performed by ordinary people. Alain Badiou proffers a similar approach by regarding man as an agent of good, and evil as a hindrance to the truth of one's

situation, although the solutions that he proposes remain fuzzy. In political discourse, Catani lauds Judith Butler's attempts to understand the causes of 9/11 while assessing Alain Finkielkraut's unequivocal defense of America as a failure to think critically about evil. In turn, Sade's politically charged philosophy grounded in man's innate pursuit of pleasure and self-interest is presented as a more constructive response to the Terror of 1793 than Žižek's theory of "emancipatory terror" that would be at pains to extricate the term "terror" from the specific context of the West's fight against radical Islam. In questions of gender, Sarah Ferber's study of demonic possession and exorcism in early modern France continues the work of Simone de Beauvoir by unmasking the endeavor underlying the patriarchal order to attribute evil to a feminine "Other," and by reasserting woman's moral autonomy, which lies at the foundation of female mysticism. In science, Catani gives conditional praise to the efforts made by thinkers such as Marc D. Hauser and Richard Dawkins who integrate moral agency into the discussion of human evolution, but not sufficiently enough to address the metaphysical dimensions of religious morality. Finally, in literature Octave Mirbeau and Georges Bataille prove pivotal in transposing treatments of evil from esthetic to ethical concerns. But in subordinating the concept to the notion of transgression, Bataille ignores evil's non-transgressive aspects that late twentieth-century literary and philosophical texts were to locate at the heart of the State's homogenizing institutions of power. Catani appositely concludes his highly nuanced valuation of important contributions to thought on evil by carving out a space for his own study. As he notes, literary analysis has not (until now) yielded a comprehensive analysis of the concept's evolution, or employed an interdisciplinary methodology to account for the multifaceted nature of evil.

In chapter two, Catani brings to light associations between evil and modernity underlying Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes* and Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*. He appropriately presents the two writers as sharing a post-theological, post-Romantic outlook that modernizes literary representations of evil by situating human vice in the readers' "day-to-day gritty experiences" of the modern city (p. 37). Through a series of close readings, the author uncovers a "productive two-way relationship between modernity and evil" in which the study of one leads to a re-evaluation of the other. Balzac dramatizes the inadequacies of poeticizing depictions of evil by casting Lucien de Rubempré as the representative of obsolete Romantic discourse. Indeed, the character fails to recognize the pragmatic, Machiavellian nature of Vautrin's criminal activity and to connect it to the modern city in which he operates. The villain's decision to become chief of police, based entirely on necessity, exposes good and evil in the modern city not as polarizing opposites but as blurred or interchangeable categories. Similarly, Baudelaire's "Au lecteur" presents evil as mainly an urban phenomenon by replacing theological concepts with the psychological notion of ennui responsible for an array of human vices that fester in the modern city. The author also likens the limitations of Lucien's understanding of morality and misperception of Vautrin in *Splendeurs et misères* to the narrator's failure in Baudelaire's "Mademoiselle Bistouri" to make sense of his encounter with the eponymous urban prostitute. Catani presents a fresh interpretation of the prose poem by reading the interaction between narrator and prostitute as a recuperation of female subjectivity and an outright rejection of traditional portrayals of woman as "Other."

Chapter three investigates the legacy of Darwin's *Origin of the Species* in late nineteenth-century France. Evil continues to be perceived as predetermined, although no longer by the Catholic notion of Original Sin, but by biological instinct. And yet, as scholars have repeatedly noted, even the writers who most enthusiastically espoused Scientific Positivism continued to infuse their literary representations of the human condition with religious symbolism. Catani explores the curious mixture of Darwinism and theology in Zola and Lautréamont to make the bold and convincing argument that Lautréamont's vision of evil is more multifaceted and a greater catalyst for moral speculation. In Zola's novels, criminal behavior surpasses human consciousness in depictions of "a radical loss of self-control and moral autonomy" that accords no place to free will (p. 66). Any self-awareness imparted to the reader is utterly unconstructive as vicious biological drives prove inevitable. In fact, by secularizing the Biblical figure of the seductive Eve, Zola's feminine characters regress to the status of the evil Other. In his harsh evaluation of Zola, Catani goes so far as to suggest the novelist's own irresponsibility in advocating "a notion of evil which denies the individual use of his moral consciousness" (p. 83). Lautréamont's more nuanced and beneficial interpretation of

evil stems from his preservation of man's moral agency all the while portraying him as a biological organism. In his analysis of *Les Chants de Maldoror*, Catani shows that physiology remains subordinate to free will, and that horrendous acts of violence actually hone the character's moral consciousness. The arguably irreverent use of Christian symbolism and portrayal of God himself as a character governed by animal instinct offer a thought-provoking moral lesson on "the questionable justice of God in a cruel world" and man's responsibility to curb his own destructive drives (p. 73). Whereas both Zola and Lautréamont seemingly contradict their antitheist messages through recourse to theology, Catani makes the brilliant distinction between the unresolved tension among religion and science in Zola that suggests the author's lack of self-awareness, and strategic parody in Lautréamont that awakens the reader's moral consciousness.

In chapter four, Catani presents Gide's and Proust's treatment of morality as an extension of Lautréamont's efforts to revitalize the notion of free will in an age that overvalues the anti-subjective methodology of science. To begin, the author provides an important philosophical backdrop by summarizing Nietzsche's "noble type" that determines his own moral values, and Bergson's notions of pure duration and "élan vital" that tap into an authentic deep self, and that merge biology and morality by lending living organisms a creative impulse that imposes its will on matter. But Catani identifies drawbacks in the "uncompromising elitism" of Nietzsche's Social Darwinism, which risks sacrificing the happiness of the majority, and the utopian nature of Bergson's system of thought, which does not give serious consideration to combating human suffering. He therefore turns to Gide and Proust for a more comprehensive and ethically responsible theorization of the individual's moral responsibilities. An illuminating reading of *Les Caves du Vatican* presents Gide as undercutting both science and theology by giving primacy to moral conscience. In anti-Nietzschean fashion, the character Lafcadio becomes painfully aware that "self-determined, transgressive actions have serious moral repercussions, for which the individual must accept full responsibility" (p. 98). In similar fashion, Julius's moral conscience is dramatically portrayed when he becomes overwhelmed with guilt in considering the grave moral repercussions of a motiveless crime. The reader is left to draw the conclusion that the characters' initial position of "objectivity" constitutes a veritable hindrance to moral action.

Catani contends that by placing the mind in stark opposition to matters of the flesh, the Proustian text leads us to the same conclusions. The Baron Charlus's moral descent into debauchery and madness, through the physical excesses associated with an underworld of brothels and sado-masochism, sacrifices the sense of responsibility and is tantamount to self-destruction. In essence, Proust's characterization of the Baron serves as a warning of matter's egotistical nature and potential for self-destruction. As an antidote to moral corruption, Proust proposes a conception of time that liberates the mind from our material beings, and ultimately endows it with the ability to capture "the sheer richness and complexity of human moral psychology" (p. 115).

Chapter five provides a series of brilliant rapprochements between two writers who are often considered to hold diametrically opposed visions of evil: Céline the vehement unbeliever and Bernanos the fervent Catholic. To uncover common ground that reveals an overarching shift in thought on evil, Catani situates the two writers within the turbulent historical context of the inter-war years, characterized by self-doubt, disillusionment, and anxiety. In the wake of the Great War and the economic Depression, both novelists understandably place into question the notion of the individual as an autonomous moral agent. Evil becomes an elusive entity independent of human subjectivity, "an unknowable, all-pervasive force that [catches] the subject unawares" (p. 117).

In *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, the superficial ideal of patriotic heroism masks a formidable but elusive evil that ensnares the self into bloody combat with his fellow man. Catani identifies in both novels an attempt to forge a new language that would capture the complex, elusive nature of evil through the use of the signifiers "hatred" and "ennui." In *Voyage*, evil manifests as "an explosion of hatred" that stems from "destructive impulses of the human psyche" (p. 127) in violent reaction to a sense of the abject (the Kristevan notion that designates anything—including criminal behavior—that disturbs our sense of identity and order). Although not articulated by Catani as such, it would seem that the surfacing of hatred itself is spurred by evil. Since in each example

provided the “evil doer” is first a victim (of the brutal dehumanization of American capitalism, of scapegoating, of physical degradation and disease), perhaps more could be said to flesh out the complex web in *Voyage* (and of course in Céline’s subsequent anti-Semitic tracts) of evil perpetuating more evil.

In the case of Bernanos, ennui denotes man’s experience of emptiness that constitutes both a psychological and physical destructiveness. Evil is that which “overwhelms and erodes the very fabric of moral agency” (p. 131). Likened to a fungus that eats away at the skin, ennui erodes the will until the self is reduced to a dangerous state of moral apathy. As with Céline, Bernanos’s evil has no entity but is constantly defined by absence or the void. Readers familiar with the Catholic writer might be disappointed that Catani does not take into account the priest’s encounter with a human incarnation of Satan himself in *Sous le soleil de Satan*. Could this prominent passage highlight inconsistencies in Bernanos’s thought on evil, or offer rather a poignant reaffirmation of evil’s non-ontological status through the use of paradox? Catani ends the chapter by identifying love, in both writers, as a possible antidote to evil. In *Voyage*, Robinson’s incapacity to love incites his girlfriend Madelon to kill him, whereas in the *Journal* the eponymous priest’s success in restoring the Countess’s capacity to love her daughter expels evil from her soul. It is however unclear whether Catani regards this reaffirmation in Bernanos of man’s capacity to love as a harbinger of the agent of good that he identifies in more recent literature.

In chapter six, Catani turns to Sartre and Foucault in order to identify a shift in thought on evil from a focus on unjust suffering in the wake of the Holocaust to an “institutional problem of social repression” (p. 139). For both thinkers, evil is no longer blatantly manifest in horrendous crimes of a totalitarian regime, but rather it is committed surreptitiously by respected legal and judicial institutions of the democratic State. Whereas Sartre’s Marxist literary biography of Jean Genet blames the bourgeois class for “offloading all responsibility for evil onto a criminal underclass from which the bourgeoisie seeks to distance itself,” in *Surveiller et punir* Foucault theorizes power to be neither intentional nor conscious, but formidable nonetheless in exerting control of body and mind that extends far beyond the prison to all social institutions (p. 143). For Sartre, conformist society has largely ignored the criminal mind by categorizing crimes for the sake of generating undifferentiated statistics. This has inspired Genet to find ways through literature to reaffirm the subject position of evil doer. But in presenting crimes in a way that lures “the reader into moral empathy” with the criminal and thereby enticing us into acknowledging our own fascination with evil, Genet undermines the rigid moral hierarchy between underclass criminals and the law-abiding bourgeoisie (p. 156).

Conversely, Foucault perceives judicial authority as overdetermining the criminal by projecting onto him a “prefabricated generic identity” that has little to do with the nature of the crime committed, and whose function is to perniciously manipulate citizens in largely imperceptible ways (p. 151). Whereas Foucault identifies literature as complicit in society’s disciplinary mechanisms by neutralizing criminal deeds in identifiable and predictable genres that meet reader expectations, in compelling fashion Catani recuperates the power and legitimacy of literature by insisting on the transgressive nature of Genet’s unclassifiable and unsettling novels that combat institutional representations of good and evil.

In chapter seven, Catani considers ways in which politically charged discourses on evil discourage critical thinking on human behavior through an analysis of French and Francophone novels that challenge normative ideological assumptions about historical tragedies. More specifically, Catani explores ways in which the literary contributions of Sylvie Germain and Jonathan Littell on the Holocaust, Raphaël Confiant on the slave trade, Victor Hugo on “La Terreur,” and Maurice Dantec on 9/11 undermine the common identification of evil with the “Other,” the collective attempt by nations to minimize or even deny a shameful legacy, and the exclusive focus on evil’s victims that precludes an understanding of the psychological causes of malicious acts.

By elaborating on the psychology of characters responsible for horrendous evil acts, Germain and Littell follow in the tradition of Hannah Arendt in attributing evil to ordinary humans. What

underlies these texts is a veritable “ethics of sameness and selfhood [that] considers *all* human beings as united in their potential to commit unspeakable acts” (p. 171). As Catani shows, the texts cultivate in readers a heightened level of moral self-recognition that alerts them to their own potential for evil, and makes the important remark that works of fiction often prove more authentic than historical testimonies in probing the psychological complexities of evil motives. Catani identifies in Confiand’s *L’Archet du colonel* and Hugo’s *Quatre-vingt-treize* the common objective of rejecting discourse that casts national enemies as evil through their self-critiques of French Republican ideology. A “moral problematization of the French Revolutionary legacy” in these texts lays bare the nation’s morally compromised responses to slavery and “La Terreur” (p.184).

And finally, in *Artefact* Dantec renders problematic the common distinctions made in discourse on terrorism between the American victim and the evil Muslim radical. Although the novelist portrays evil not as an act perpetrated by an individual moral agent, but rather as the regrettable outcome of the global phenomena of capitalism and technologization, he attributes to the self the potential to intervene in pursuing good. Similarly to Badiou, Dantec moves beyond an often paralyzing ethics of victimhood that merely observes and commemorates, and toward an ethics of humane interventionism that recasts man as a potential agent of good.

Evil: A History in Modern French Literature and Thought offers a rich study of French thought on evil in its development over almost two centuries. Catani succeeds in the ambitious task of placing in dialogue with one another upwards of forty key thinkers in order to establish a series of significant shifts in understanding evil that will greatly benefit scholars of intellectual history. As can be expected from the decidedly broad scope of this book, readers may find that Catani’s focus on select passages from usually just one literary text by each author yields an incomplete or simplified assessment of what other scholars have presented as individual thinkers’ highly complex and often self-contradictory or evolving positions on evil. But then again, a study that allows itself to get bogged down in the vagaries of each writer will lose sight of the bigger picture that Catani offers of a fundamental transformation in French perspectives on evil and human wickedness.

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ISSN 1553-9172