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H-France Review Vol. 21 (March 2021), No. 46

Ève Morisi. *Capital Letters: Hugo, Baudelaire, Camus and the Death Penalty*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2020. xiv + 265 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. ISBN 9780810141520 (hb), \$99.95; ISBN 9780810141513 (pb), \$34.95.

Review by Timothy Raser, University of Georgia.

The death penalty is intimately related to fiction: fictions justify it, fictions attack it, and fictions enable us to understand what little we understand about it. To date, there are no verified first-person discussions of the suffering or lack thereof entailed by execution.[1] When the “machine to decapitate” was first discussed in the Assemblée Constituante, fictions helped the bill to pass. Death was swift: “La mécanique tombe comme la foudre, la tête vole, le sang jaillit, l’homme n’est plus.” Death also was painless: “on croirait n’avoir senti sur le cou qu’une légère fraîcheur.”[2] Others, like Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s “Secret de l’échafaud” tell of life continuing in the seconds following “décollation”, suggesting that the Assemblée had been a bit too eager to accept the good Dr. Guillotin’s proposal.[3] Such fictions seem inescapable.

But with Mitterrand’s election in 1981, with the establishment of the European Union in 1993, with the extension of the latter as new members joined, it seemed that the death penalty was waning worldwide. Many warned, however, that such progress in abolishing the death penalty was not to be taken for granted: deep within Western reason reside forces that require the state to take lives.[4] To this day, with a handful of other nations, the United States seems determined to prevent the penalty’s disappearance; whether this is to safeguard western reason remains to be seen.

Throughout this struggle, there have been calls on the part of writers to abolish the death penalty, and in France that struggle brought some of her greatest talents to discuss its abolition, so much so that even after abolition writings on this subject are still of currency. Two of its most famous abolitionists were Victor Hugo and Albert Camus, both of whom wrote specifically on the subject; among those who favored using the death penalty was Charles Baudelaire, whose endorsement stands among other provocative conservative choices he made.

Ève Morisi has now published a book devoted to the writings of Hugo, Baudelaire, and Camus on the death penalty: *Capital Letters: Hugo, Baudelaire, Camus, and the Death Penalty*, in University of California at Irvine’s Flashpoint Series, published by Northwestern University Press. Her subject is its literary representation: how the penalty has fared when discussed in literature, and how it has inflected the literature where it has found representation. It is, of course, best known in its nineteenth-century implementation, where the guillotine appears before prisons for early

morning executions, and here Hugo's book addresses the subject directly.[5] Baudelaire, defining himself in opposition to Hugo, makes use of Joseph de Maistre's theses on the matter and seems to derive pleasure from lurid depictions of executions and other instances of corporal violence.

In her first part, Morisi reads Hugo's *Dernier Jour d'un condamné*, establishing its relation to the later "Claude Gueux" (1834) and passages from *Les Misérables* (1862). Her chief aim, however, is to tease out the implications of the 1829 novel for the ideologies that made it necessary. In her second part, she reads an assortment of writings by Baudelaire--his poetry, his *écrits intimes* and his criticism--searching for arguments and ideologemes that have been put up in favor of the death penalty. She then moves on to Camus and his fiction: *L'Étranger*, *La Peste*, and the unfinished novel *Le Premier Homme*. In all three, she reads accounts of execution against the interpersonal relations of the novel's characters in order to discover how the author posed the ethical problems raised by capital punishment.

There have been several critical comparisons of Hugo and Baudelaire; there are likewise several works on Hugo's and Camus's opposition to the death penalty. What Morisi has brought to the subject are considerations of two philosophers--Jacques Rancière and Giorgio Agamben--whose writings have to do directly with it. Rancière's contribution is his concept of the "sentence-image" (p. 38), a label for the peculiar force Hugo's and Camus's texts acquired by disregarding conventional rules of literary decorum. Agamben's thinking has a closer relation to the death penalty, as he has explored for a number of years the concept of the "exception" in modern political thought (p. 51), and the lethal violence that the state brings to bear with capital punishment is a prime example of such exceptions.

Morisi approaches the unesthetic--"ni simple, ni clair"[6]--writing of *Le Dernier Jour* by way of Rancière, who postulates a trade-off between conventional good writing and intensity: the asyndetons, the ellipses, the overall discontinuity of the novel are not failings but manifestations of a new mode of writing which does not signal integration into a literary school as much as the production of an effect on its readers. By the same token, the paradoxical status of the condemned man--how can he be free to write when he is about to die?--instantiates a key moment in Agamben's theory of the exception: the implementation of "bio-politics" (p. 64) requires in its first stages a body both inside and outside of the juridical realm, a "bare life" onto which a chosen political significance can be projected (p. 53). There is no better example of Agamben's concept than Hugo's *condamné*, simultaneously the focus of the collective efforts of the carceral system, the population of Paris, and the King himself, while remaining out of reach of sympathy or human contact. The same paradox applies to Meursault in Camus's *Étranger*, treated with courtesy by the very people who are demanding his death. This reader feels that Morisi's recourse to *homo sacer* goes further to explain the *condamné*--whether Hugo's or Camus's--than the subject/object dichotomy of Cartesian theory or the *pour-soi/en soi* opposition proposed by Sartre. Better yet, recourse to Hugo and Camus helps to instantiate Agamben's argument, which certainly could use more extensive exemplification. Finally, whether in the service of Rancière and Agamben or not, Morisi's readings of Hugo and Camus go into greater detail and display greater sensitivity to the text than others short of Meschonnic's, finally treating the writing as writing, not as vehicle for ethical propositions.[7]

As is always the case, with Baudelaire matters become more complicated: here, Morisi reads the poet with Hugo and Joseph de Maistre. In the case of the latter, she notes Baudelaire's use of de

Maistre's "réversibilité" and "compensation,"[8] showing that, although shocking, Baudelaire's images and theses were not as blood-thirsty as those of his unpalatable model. In the case of Hugo, she points out the Œdipal resentment Baudelaire felt for the older poet, an antagonism that seemed only to grow when he was himself exiled in Belgium amidst the "côterie Hugo" who had not made it all the way to Guernsey.[9] Whether in letters to his mother, in notes made in view of his never-published "Mon cœur mis à nu," or even in poems that celebrate violence, Baudelaire staked out a field that has been labeled "sadistic." [10] Adopting de Maistre's scorched-earth arguments, the poet asserts that opposition to the death penalty is nothing more than an admission of guilt on the part of the opponent, for we are all guilty of Original Sin.

Walter Benjamin proposed "shock" as a fundamental trope in Baudelaire's experience: it explains the poet's syntax and imagery as well as his effect on his readers.[11] Rancière's "sentence-image" helps one go deeper in this direction, explaining how the disjointed syntax of Baudelaire's later works (exclamations, changes of voice) bring images and allegories to the fore while syntax and sequence are left behind. What results is a poetry where moments of intensity take the place of propositional meaning. This thrust is especially evident in Morisi's study of "Un voyage à Cythère" where she insists on the reactions of disappointment and despair experienced by the narrator on seeing the legendary island of Kythera.

Comparison with Hugo is imperative, but regrettably Morisi accepts the terms dictated by Hugo: whether art is for art's sake or whether it is for progress. This recourse to personal intentions does not go far, especially when things do not go as intended. The comments exchanged between the two poets in 1859 and 1860 thus amount to a "dialogue de sourds" (much like the one parodied by Hugo himself in *Notre-Dame de Paris*[12]) where Hugo tells Baudelaire that all poetry aims at human betterment, that Baudelaire is a poet, ergo.... In fact Hugo had listened to Baudelaire, but only in 1855 when the latter published his "Voyage à Cythère," responding that there was more to love than pleasure followed by regret: this he wrote in "Cérigo," where he imposed a synchronic structure on Baudelaire's narrative of guilt.[13] Surely different conceptions of time map different responses to capital punishment.

Morisi chooses three texts by Camus to subject to extended analysis: all three are narrative, all are relatively early, and not one of them is the famous essay composed for the volume with Arthur Koestler protesting the death penalty, "Réflexions sur la guillotine." [14] She thus isolates fictions on the subject of execution from the essay's direct address, the better to draw out the subject's literary resonances. She also explains--like Camus's characters--how the author's feelings towards capital punishment reversed: after all, Camus had favored the death penalty during the "épuration."

Key among her analyses is a passage from the early *Premier Homme* where the narrator witnesses his father's reaction to an execution: having attended in order to see justice done and a debt paid, as he perceives it, he returns nauseated and vomiting to take to his bed. The reaction is thus visceral, as in the case of Tarrou in *La Peste*, who leaves home once he understands what his father's *réquisitoires* demand. Here Morisi takes up the dream of a plain language voiced by Hugo and Camus alike: the first step in abolition must be the adoption of a language whose job is to show--not hide--the reality of the penalty. What is of course strange here is that of the three authors, it is the one who favored the penalty--Baudelaire--whose descriptions are precise, even clinical.

Morisi concludes that discussions of the death penalty, even literary ones, are condemned to a circular logic. Before the euphemisms and abstractions employed by its advocates, literature demands a plain, non-poetic language: the penalty requires literature to cease being literary, that is, to cease being. Its only choice is to become precise and medical: but here, it ceases to be about the death penalty.

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of the death penalty: it touches the founding concepts of government; it allows (and requires) one to objectify others; it requires the invention of a language to disguise it; above all, it relies on fictions to explain it. The “what,” the “how,” the “why,” and the “to what end” of the death penalty require the fictions that literature claims as its own. Morisi’s excellent account of capital punishment in the writings of three authors whose work revolves around it demonstrates just how central it is to modern thought, despite our best efforts to rid ourselves of it.

## NOTES

[1] The only one to have returned from the dead after execution was remarkably silent regarding the experience in the weeks following His resurrection.

[2] Daniel Arasse, *La Guillotine et l’imaginaire de la Terreur* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), p. 26.

[3] Auguste de Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, *Le Secret de l’échafaud* (Paris: Marpon & Flammarion, 1888), p. 40.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Séminaire: La Peine de Mort, Volume I (1999-2000)* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 2012), pp. 34-35.

[5] Ivan Turgenev, “The Execution of Tropmann,” trans. David Magarshack, in Phillip Lopate, ed., *The Art of the Personal Essay* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), pp. 305-24; see also Georges Grison, *The Heads that Fell in Paris*, trans. Freeman Henry (Tarzana, Calif.: Hollywood Comics, 2016).

[6] Victor Hugo, « Une Comédie à propos d’une tragédie » in *Le Dernier Jour d’un condamné*, in *Roman I*, ed. Jacques Seebacher (Montreal: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1985), p. 425.

[7] Henri Meschonnic, “Vers le roman-poème” in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Jean Massin (“Édition Chronologique”) (Paris: Le Club Français du livre, 1967), 3: pp. i-xx. Henri Meschonnic, *Pour la poésie, IV: Écrire Hugo*, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

[8] Joseph de Maistre, *Œuvres*, ed. Pierre Glaudes (Paris: Éditions Robert Laffont, 2007), pp. 218, 708.

[9] Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, ed. Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard « Pléiade », 1973), 2: p. 399.

[10] George Blin, *Le Sadisme de Baudelaire* (Paris: José Corti, 1948).

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[11] Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, ed. Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 176-80.

[12] See Victor Hugo, "Coup d'œil impartial sur l'ancienne magistrature" in *Notre-Dame de Paris*, in *Roman I*, ed. Jacques Seebacher (Montreal: Éditions Robert Laffont, 1985), pp. 629-636.

[13] See "Cérigo," in Victor Hugo, *Les Contemplations*, ed. Pierre Albouy (Paris: Gallimard Poésie, 1973), pp. 277-79.

[14] In *Réflexions sur la peine capitale*, ed. Albert Camus and Arthur Koestler (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1957).

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ISSN 1553-9172