Penteado on Toal (2016)


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Catherine Toal’s persuasive study of modern French and American literatures and philosophies explores the shift in the concept of cruelty from what could be very loosely generalized as bloody violence—its “original philological connection with blood and flayed flesh” (13)—to that of the contemporary philosopher Richard Rorty’s famous assertion in Contingency, Irony, Solidarity (1989) that cruelty neglects to take others’ suffering into account. Toal takes issue with this contention, arguing that it fails to envisage cruelty “as an effect of institutional and structural injustice” (115). Her sophisticated and cogently written book is a comparative tour de force that traces how cruelty makes it to form, or more precisely, how cruelty extrapolates a thematic concern and becomes a formal (en)trap(ment), thus shaping both America’s and France’s literary modernities (through Edgar Allan Poe and the Marquis de Sade). Committing to compelling close readings of modern, post-Enlightenment thinking of cruelty, Toal carefully traces and sketches “two divergent pathways” that nevertheless “intertwine at key points and develop in tandem” (14): in America, cruelty is disavowed (as originating in and a remnant of colonial rule) on a formal level; in France, it is (aesthetically) celebrated and ends up disturbing “the revolutionary promise of civic equality” (13). In what follows I will attend to the French aspects of her argumentation.

Toal argues that Sadean cruelty develops as “the reduction of others to a condition of equivalence,” a move from which an “accrual of artificial power” stems (34); Sadean cruelty also relies on the “soliciting and securing [of] complicity in the acts from the victims” (33). By viewing cruelty as a natural “monstrous propensity” (13), Sade crafts a narrative device in which victims contribute to their own downfall “through promises of survival through the betrayal of a loved one” (14). What this complicity entails is the annihilation of “bonds of love or affection and the unique significance that individual persons can thereby be assumed to have for one another” (14), leading to Toal’s assertion that the Sadean libertine, “a godlike orchestrating agent” in the manipulation of his victims (15), displaces the concept of cruelty from its etymological meaning to the question of equality: cruelty “becomes a travesty performed on the promise of the ‘rights of man,’ reiterating and reinforcing the subject’s needless relegation to the status of indifferent and disposable matter” (15). Drawing from Sade’s definitions of cruelty found in La Philosophie dans le boudoir (“l’énergie de l’homme que la civilisation n’a point encore corrompue”) and Juliette (“une des branches de la sensibilité”), Toal argues that they “confirm and consolidate libertine power” (37) insofar as victims become entrapped in a structure in which they are led to participate in their own demise (102).

This trap in which victims are manipulated into self-destruction inaugurates a type of literary treatment of cruelty in the nineteenth century. Baudelaire will engage in a “rewriting of the Sadean tableau of torture” (33) via the adoption of Poe’s “perversion,” a formal trick in which there is an “actualization of what should not be […]—going against the teleology of the productive, the healthful, the norm” (19). This formal scheme of the “perversion” accounts for the creation of “murderous violence for which narratives disavow or alienate responsibility” (21), which, in American literature, would encapsulate the disavowal of responsibility for the colonial enterprise (the decimation of Native American populations) and the scandal of slavery. For Toal, it is in the Petits poèmes en prose that Charles Baudelaire formalizes the “ambiguities and duplicities of the American perversion” (21), crafting poems that trouble “initial impressions of where responsibility, sympathy, and suffering lie” (34), and creating a sense of complicity in the reader (34). Baudelaire’s achievement would thus consist of combining Poe’s perversity with a revision of Sadean cruelty (34). Exemplifying her claim in a close reading of “Une mort héroïque,” in which Baudelaire borrows from Poe’s “Hop-Frog” (35), Toal suggests that Fancioulle’s performance “mocks (literally or figuratively) the fatality framing it” (35); in this sense, Baudelaire’s text explores “the outer limit of aesthetic sensation” and “the limits of political authority,” maneuvers that eventually oppose Sade’s understanding of cruelty as a necessary “aggrandizement and inoculation against vulnerability” (36).

Identifying both Poe and Baudelaire as “forebears” of the Comte de Lautréamont (36), Toal proposes that Maldoror, in its revision of Sadean cruelty, “pushes to a more extreme point the ambiguous status of injurious acts” in the prose poems (38). What she calls a “confluence” of Sade and Baudelaire in Maldoror is in fact a result of Poe’s perversity, the latter marked by an “incongruity between statement and happening” (38) or appreciation/interpretation and factuality. Toal goes so far as to consider that there is an “obfuscation between statement and act” at play in Lautréamont’s prose poem, culminating in the radicalization of Baudelaire’s “exploration” of aesthetics and cruelty, that is, “the relationship between the effectiveness of art and the spectacle of murder” (41). In this discussion, cruelty would then be locatable in the tradition of writings in which violence is both “ignored, disavowed” and at once “primary to the fabrication of narrative” (41).
Toal’s writing is dense and at times purposefully opaque, which is not meant as a criticism; it both does justice to and underlines the complexity of her subject matter, nuancing an approach that would otherwise be rather literal and would interpret cruelty only thematically. As I mentioned before, for Toal cruelty is mainly a formal concern, and her argumentation is convincing throughout, particularly in the (cruelly) ingenious close readings that permeate her monograph. The book is a feast for comparatists doing research on the interconnections of French and American literatures (chapter two is concerned with Herman Melville, and chapter three reads Henry James’s response to nineteenth-century French literary cruelty); a more general audience would find interest in her critiques of the concept of cruelty in philosophical writings from twentieth-century France (Antonin Artaud, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Lacan in chapter four) and America (Rorty and Judith Butler in chapter five).

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