



PATRICK GREANEY

*Untimely Beggar*

POVERTY AND POWER FROM BAUDELAIRE TO BENJAMIN

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Patrick Greaney



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*For my parents*

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# Introduction

## THE BEGGAR AND THE PROMISED LAND OF CANNIBALISM

### Poverty and Power

At a lively street fair, the narrator of Charles Baudelaire's 1855 prose poem "An Old Acrobat" spots a "poor acrobat, stooped, obsolete, decrepit, a human ruin" whose "absolute misery" so disturbs him that he is momentarily blinded by tears and stops breathing. When he recovers, he only has time to ask himself "What to do?" before he is pushed along by the crowd.<sup>1</sup>

About eighty years later, in notes found among his papers, Walter Benjamin imagines a ship resolutely pushing off from Europe's shores, manned by Paul Klee, Bertolt Brecht, Adolf Loos, and others. These artists, architects, and writers turn their backs on millennia of culture, leaving behind "temples full of images of man, solemnly bedecked with sacrificial offerings." They are headed for "the promised land of cannibalism," where man will consume himself and become something else. Benjamin christens the vessel *Poverty*.<sup>2</sup>

These scenes confront us with two quintessentially modern topoi: urban *misère* and the dream of a posthumanist future. Poverty names socioeconomic destitution as well as the abandonment of cultural traditions, and in both texts, the experience of poverty opens up onto something else: the remedy sought in the question "What to do?" and the flight into the promised land. A cursory glance at other key modern texts in French and German reveals that poverty's range is even wider: forms of voluntary poverty are the exemplary virtues in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and in Brecht's early poetry; for Stéphane Mallarmé, "the true state of the literary man is poverty";<sup>3</sup>

Robert Musil describes the utopian telos of *The Man without Qualities* as “an impoverishing ecstasy”;<sup>4</sup> and Martin Heidegger closes his “Letter on Humanism” with the dictum, “Thinking is descending into the poverty of its provisional essence.”<sup>5</sup> Such a broad semantic scope leads, at first, to a doubt—that we are dealing here with a watered-down, metaphorical understanding of poverty—and to a number of questions: What is it about poverty that allows it to assume such a broad range of meanings in authors from Mallarmé to Brecht, from Marx to Nietzsche, from Baudelaire to Heidegger? How can it unite such ideologically and historically disparate figures? How can it denote both the pitiable state of a street performer and the messianic goal of Benjamin’s crew? And what does urban poverty have to do with Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* and Zarathustra?

This doubt can be allayed and the questions answered by a simple, well-known fact: in the nineteenth century, the poor were associated with power. They were destitute, but they also embodied productive and destructive forces. Their labor power and revolutionary potential situated them in the center of any wider consideration of Europe’s political and economic reality as well as any reflection upon its future. The link between the poor and power also made them a focal point for the modernist aesthetic concern with the representation of potential and virtuality. If the treatment of the poor in literary and philosophical texts was to be faithful to their “powerful” constitution, they had to be represented not only in their actual state but also in relation to their potential. This challenge aligned the theorization and representation of poverty with the more general modern project of orienting literary language and philosophical thought according to forces and possibilities, a task that is evident in a wide range of figures and concepts, from Nietzsche’s overman to Mallarmé’s absent flower.

*Untimely Beggar* investigates the coincidence of these two modern literary and philosophical interests: representing the poor and representing potential. In readings of texts from the period between the publication of Baudelaire’s poems in the 1850s and the composition of Benjamin’s texts of the 1930s, this book pursues several lines of inquiry: it analyzes theories and representations of poverty and power; it reexamines relations to the poor by submitting to critique notions such as

identification and community; it explores the concurrent emergence of modern modes of writing, a fascination with ascetic traditions, and an intense philosophical and literary interest in socioeconomic poverty; and it argues for the importance of the encounter with poverty for philosophical and aesthetic notions such as Mallarmé's virtuality, Nietzsche's overman, and Benjamin's aura.

Although the authors will be treated here in the context of a general, modern interest in poverty, *Untimely Beggar* does not offer a survey of the treatment of poverty in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature and philosophy. Instead, the seven chapters that follow this introduction focus on the effects of the encounter with poverty on a number of major French and German authors, who were selected because of their prominence in literary history, the importance of poverty to their writing, and the close relation of poverty to their other, better-known notions or figures. Based on the readings of these authors, I will argue that poverty, far from being one modern theme among others, occupies a central position in the development, in France and German-speaking Europe, of key concepts and modes of writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

*Untimely Beggar* identifies and analyzes what might be called a minor tradition of writing about poverty within the larger traditions of modernism and the history of the representation of poverty in Europe. The tradition begins with the theoretical and literary confrontation with urban poverty and industrial capitalism in Marx, Baudelaire, and Mallarmé; it continues in Rainer Maria Rilke's development of nineteenth-century conceptions of poverty, power, and community, which draws on Nietzsche's thinking about asceticism; and it closes with a consideration of poverty in Brecht and Benjamin, who refer to all of these writers and work on the threshold of an era characterized by new forms of impoverishment, production, and destruction. This study ends before the genocide of European Jewry during the Nazi era, which radically changed the way that European writers and thinkers understood power and weakness. After 1945, artists, writers, and thinkers once again explicitly claimed the rubric of poverty for themselves; the best-known examples are Jerzy Grotowski's poor theater and the Italian artists grouped under the term *arte povera*.<sup>6</sup> A continuation of this study might

show how, in different contexts and with other intentions, they reactivated parts of the tradition of representing and conceptualizing poverty that will be investigated here.

I will return in the first and last chapters to the scenes of poverty in Baudelaire and Benjamin sketched out above, but, for now, they can serve as a double emblem for the book's object of study: the specifically modern concurrence of misery and promise in texts about poverty.

### Hannah Arendt and the Language of Compassion

Poverty was not a novum for literature in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and authors from the period self-consciously draw on a millennial corpus of writing about poverty that includes the Franciscans, Meister Eckhart, and Rhenish mysticism, as well as carnivalesque and picaresque writing. Baudelaire and Mallarmé's poems on beggars depend on and depart from their predecessors in French poetry, from François Villon to Victor Hugo; Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal emerges from a confrontation with the history of Christian thought and morality; Rilke's *Book of Hours* reinterprets Franciscan poverty; and Benjamin and Brecht come at the end of this new, modern canon of writing on poverty in which they participate while also referring back to figures such as St. Francis and John Gay.<sup>7</sup>

Against the backdrop of these traditions of thinking about and representing poverty, nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers respond in historically specific ways to the new forms of poverty that emerge in the wake of the economic and political changes brought about by industrialization and the accumulation of capital. In the nineteenth century, the poor appear to be inherently powerful, and this intimate tie to power means that poverty resists being isolated as an object or phenomenon, and not only in literature and literary criticism. The historian Louis Chevalier shows in his *Laboring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris during the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* how the term "poverty" (*misère*) does not designate the condition of distinct "unfortunate classes, but the far more complex relationship between those classes and other classes."<sup>8</sup> For Chevalier and for many scholars of the nineteenth century, poverty is not a condition "but the passage

from one [condition] to the other . . . , an intermediary and fluctuating situation rather than a status.”<sup>9</sup> Even in this brief citation, we can see how poverty is always more than a theme or topic, because, as a “passage” and an “intermediary and fluctuating situation,” it cannot be isolated as a thing or topos and thereby forces a reflection on the limits and possibilities of literary language.

The representational challenge posed by the poor is at the center of Hannah Arendt’s *On Revolution*, in which the analysis of the poor focuses on the “discovery,” during the French Revolution, of the political power of the poor—the new belief that the poor were “la puissance de la terre.” The chapter “The Social Question” begins with this definition of poverty:

Poverty is more than deprivation; it is a state of constant want and acute misery whose ignominy consists in its dehumanizing force; poverty is abject because it puts men under the absolute dictates of their bodies, that is, under the absolute dictate of necessity as men know it from their most intimate experience and outside all speculations. It was under the rule of this necessity that the multitude rushed to the assistance of the French Revolution.<sup>10</sup>

The poor have been stripped of their humanity and subjected to the “dictate of necessity,” which they eventually come to represent politically. Arendt credits Marx with the elaboration of this Revolutionary insight “that poverty can be a political force of the first order.”<sup>11</sup>

The new understanding of the poor brings about a new relation to them: compassion, which previously operated “outside the political realm” but then became “the one force which could and must unite the different classes of society into one nation.”<sup>12</sup> The language of compassion aims “to lend its voice to suffering itself,” whose demand is simple: “bread!” Arendt describes a figural operation whereby others speak for the poor—or, more precisely, whereby others speak for the suffering of the poor. This operation cannot be described as “giving voice to the voiceless” but, instead, as giving voice to a dehumanizing force that could never speak and for which the term “voiceless” would therefore be improper, because such a designation would presuppose the possibility that this force actually could have a voice.

Compassion for Arendt brings about a transformation of political

life whose effects can best be seen in the change in political language: “Passion and compassion are not speechless, but their language consists in gestures and expressions of countenance rather than in words.”<sup>13</sup> The language of compassion reveals an

incapacity (or unwillingness) for all kinds of predicative or argumentative speech, in which someone talks to somebody about something. . . . [I]t will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for actions with the means of violence.<sup>14</sup>

For Arendt, the invasion of politics by the “social question” is a catastrophe, because it marks the end of a political culture of debate and discussion. The poor, submitted to the dictates of necessity, become necessity’s dictators. But it is possible to understand this change in political discourse differently.

### Impoverished Language

The appropriate rhetorical term for the kind of speech described by Arendt is *prosopopeia*, the figure that bestows the ability to speak upon absent persons or inanimate objects. The poor often appear in literary and political discourses as the object of this figural operation that presents them as silent, addresses them, and postulates their ability to respond. In this way, language orients itself according to silence, the absence of the beggar’s voice, and becomes impoverished, stripped of an actual interlocutor and centered on a lacuna. But this absence cannot be understood merely negatively, as we can see in Paul de Man’s description of *prosopopeia* as “the fiction of an apostrophe to an absent, deceased, or voiceless entity, which posits the *possibility* of the latter’s reply and confers upon it the *power* of speech.”<sup>15</sup> Reading Arendt’s discussion of the language of compassion together with de Man’s definition, it is possible to conclude that the suffering of the poor is endowed with a power that, however, remains abeyant. Suffering appears as a possible, inhuman speaker.

Arendt’s “language of compassion” thematizes poverty, but it also belongs to a process in which language itself is reduced. Its “predicative



and argumentative” aspects are stripped away, and in this fashion language becomes poor. The poor embody labor power, and the language that speaks for their suffering reduces itself to a mere potential so as to approximate their power. The similarity of socioeconomic poverty and linguistic poverty lies not just in the phenomenon of reduction but also in their shared relation to power. Language becomes poor in a way that is not metaphorical, because it reduces itself to potential when faced with the poor, and, in this way, it attempts to become similar to the very power that it represents. The phrase “impoverished language” could not be replaced by phrases such as “reduced language” and “minimalist language,” because they would miss the essential relation to power in texts about poverty.

When considering this approximation of thematic and linguistic potential, it is tempting to go one step beyond the establishment of a mere similarity based on a relation to power and to claim that language does what it says, but this would ignore impoverished language’s highlighting of what Arendt calls a linguistic “incapacity.” When language is truly impoverished, it suspends communication and the kinds of discursive speech that would allow for language to present themes, including the theme of poverty. In the example of prosopopeia, the power of language appears in the positing of an unrealized ability to speak. Since an impoverished, potential language cannot thematize socioeconomic poverty or anything else, there can be, strictly speaking, no simultaneity or identity of thematic and linguistic poverty. Adequation cannot be the measure for an operation that is centered on forces. In the place of communicative speech that would relate the concerns of an already existing group of poor people, something else emerges that is powerful without conveying the voices of the poor or any other constituted group.

This is why the representation of the actual conditions of poverty as a theme does not do justice to the reality of poverty in capitalist societies, in which the poor exist not only as their misery but also as a power. In the texts I read in the following chapters, the appearance of poverty is doubled. The thematic representation of the poor as an actual individual or group characterized by socioeconomic misery alternates with nonrepresentative moments in which literary language interrupts its presentation of what is and reduces itself to the potential for representation.



Literary language acknowledges in moments when it becomes poor that poverty creates not an identity but a capacity, even if it appears in privative form as an incapacity.

### The Poor and the Worker

The linkage here of the term “poverty” with the labor power that is usually associated with a specific group of the productive working class anticipates chapter 1’s analysis of Marx’s understanding of the relations among different groups of the poor. Marx argues that capitalist societies reach a stage at which they require a “reserve army” and “relative overpopulation” of potential workers just as much as they need an active population of actual workers. Those who do not work and even those who cannot work are essential to the process of production in the stage of the accumulation of capital that coincides with the period in which some of this study’s texts by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Nietzsche were written. To belong to the working class does not require employment or active, direct participation in production, but, instead, a relation, no matter how estranged or latent, to the process of production.

In my discussion of Marx, I focus on recent readers of Marx who have emphasized how, in his texts, the proletariat is not a fixed group joined by the activity of work or by an identity or set of characteristics. They are united only in their usability, which Marx famously calls their “freedom” to sell their labor power.<sup>16</sup> Marx attempts to establish a rigorous categorization of the diverse population of the relative overpopulation into groups that are more or less removed from the process of production: the urban unemployed who are searching for work; the rural population on the verge of moving to the city; and the old and infirm who can no longer work. I argue that Marx’s characterization of these groups fails to distinguish “pauperism,” the unproductive, obstinate, and disabled poor, from the groups of the working class that are actually or potentially productive. For this reason it is possible to say not only that, in *Capital*, every worker is poor but also that the poor are all workers. A similar line of reasoning leads Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri to insist, in *Multitude*, “There is no qualitative difference that divides the poor from the classes of employed workers.”<sup>17</sup>

The terminological overlap between the poor and the working class is a result of the nature of the fluctuating reserve population that Marx tries to classify. There appear to be idle, unproductive social groups, but the process of production is able to accommodate them and even needs them for its proper functioning. The following passage from *Capital* formulates this in the form of a “law” that relates the working poor to the unemployed reserve army and the most destitute groups of the poor:

The greater the social wealth, the functioning capital, the extent and energy of its growth, and therefore also the greater the absolute mass of the proletariat and the productive power of its labor [*die Produktivkraft seiner Arbeit*], the greater is the industrial reserve army. The same causes which develop the expansive power of capital [*Expansivkraft des Kapitals*], also develop the labour power [*Arbeitskraft*] at its disposal. The relative mass of the industrial reserve army thus increases with the potential of its wealth [*Potenzen des Reichtums*]. But the greater this reserve army in proportion to the active labour-army, the greater is the mass of a consolidated surplus population, whose misery is in inverse ratio to the amount of torture it has to undergo in the form of labour. The more extensive, finally, the pauperized sections of the working class and the industrial reserve army, the greater is official pauperism. *This is the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation.*<sup>18</sup>

The general law of capitalist accumulation posits the interdependence of capitalism’s power of expansion, the intensification of the proletariat’s power, and the growth of a part of the working class that no longer can or no longer wants to sell its labor power: those who are grouped under the rubric of pauperism. A few sentences later, Marx reformulates this law: “Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery.”<sup>19</sup> The poor and even the most destitute appear here in a complex network of forms of power—productive power, labor power, the expansive power of capital, power in reserve—that determines their presentation in Marx and the other authors in this study. Instead of an identity or an attribute, poverty names a changing position constituted by relations among forms of power.<sup>20</sup>

### Relating to the Poor

Conceiving of poverty’s appearance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary texts in terms of power means that relations with the poor can

no longer be thought of primarily as relations between subjects (author/beggar or almsgiver/beggar) or as a purely economic relation between bearers of already established attributes (the rich/the poor). These relations are still at play in encounters with the poor, but they are secondary with respect to the relations determined by power. The conceptual shortcomings of such intersubjective conceptions of relations are apparent in the ease with which they can be reversed in interpretations that show that, actually, the poor are rich and the author, too, is a kind of beggar. Such reversals empty the terms of all specificity: the poor are truly rich only if one thinks of their incapacity as a kind of plentitude that they own, and the authors to be studied here are poor only if one understands poverty in a metaphorical way that strips it of its incapacity and socioeconomic destitution.

Such intersubjective conceptions of the relation to the poor also betray their vacuity by the facility with which they can be conceived of in terms of identification: the rich authors or narrators, in this view, identify with the poor souls they see on the street. None of the texts under discussion in this study can be summarized in this way, because the relation to the poor is far too disturbing to be conceived of solely in terms of identity. The poor seduce, threaten, stupefy, paralyze, beat, blind, and persecute the narrators who present them, and to think of these relations solely in terms of identification would be to simplify and pacify relations that are best conceived of as an intimate antagonism or even violence that threatens every form of identity and that forces the writers in question to develop new understandings of relation and community. Our encounters with the urban poor in the twenty-first century continue to bear signs of this disturbance that found its first modern articulation in the texts of the mid-nineteenth century.

### **The Untimely Beggar**

In many of the texts to be analyzed in this book, it is the beggar who marks the place of this nonidentitarian aspect of poverty. But the appearance of the beggar as the figure par excellence of poverty is surprising, because historical analyses of poverty in the nineteenth century show how the figure of the beggar surrenders its exemplary status to more

modern, timely figures of poverty such as the worker.<sup>21</sup> Beggars are untimely figures, left over from political, religious, and literary discourses that saw them as representatives of poverty. But this unhistorical aspect of literary beggars bears witness to something more essential than a mere clinging to tradition. They appear both as a remnant of the past and as an omen for a possible future, and their untimeliness aligns them with the disruptive temporality of revolt and revolution.<sup>22</sup>

The figure of the beggar undergoes far-reaching transformations in the nineteenth century. For the modern poet, beggars are no longer what they once were. The beggar invited in to tell his story in Victor Hugo's "The Beggar" ("Le mendiant") and the poor street musician followed home to his garret and paid to relate his biography in Franz Grillparzer's "The Poor Musician" ("Der arme Spielmann") evolve, in the mid-nineteenth century, into Baudelaire's speechless, uncanny *pauvres* viewed either from a distance or in a violent, barely linguistic proximity in the section of *The Flowers of Evil* titled "Parisian Scenes" and in his collection of prose poems, *Le spleen de Paris*.<sup>23</sup> From Baudelaire on, the beggar appears as an emblem of the power of the poor and only secondarily, if at all, as the bearer of an identity or history. This understanding of the poor belongs to a more general shift in the nineteenth century described by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* as the invention of "a depth in which what matters is no longer identities, distinctive characters, permanent tables with all their possible paths and routes, but great hidden forces."<sup>24</sup> The poor were essentially related to these forces, and so, according to Foucault, was literature, which appeared in the nineteenth century to lead "language back from grammar to the naked power of speech" that had been banned in the constitution of language as the object of new forms of scientific knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

### A New Kind of Power

Literature and poverty thus meet not only as representation and its object but also as two forms of power, and the elaboration of this relation of forces is the task of this book. By emphasizing the place of power in its investigation of the relation of socioeconomic poverty and forms of linguistic poverty, this book sets itself apart from recent studies of

poverty in nineteenth-century poetry and impoverished subjectivity and writing.<sup>26</sup>

Although removed historically and thematically from *Untimely Beggar*, Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit's *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* is close to the present study's interpretation of the relation of poverty and power. These authors show how Samuel Beckett, Mark Rothko, and Alain Resnais share an interest in actualizing, within their respective art forms, those forms' origins, and, in this way, I would argue, they continue the investigation of the power of literature and art whose origins can be found in texts about the poor by Baudelaire and Mallarmé. Beckett's writing imagines the "originating of a speech it cannot remember ever not having"; Rothko's art "renders concrete a coming-to-appear" and the advent of differentiation; and Resnais's films "[lead] us to reenact what might be called our extensive identity," which distances us from our claim to mastery of the world and ourselves by assigning us to "shifting positions within an untraceable network of forms in communication."<sup>27</sup> Bersani and Dutoit identify in these artists the attempt to confront us with forms of origination and becoming that threaten and "impoverish" our notion of subjectivity and community. Their works offer us very little or nothing except this reduction, and, as Bersani and Dutoit write, "If there is nothing to appropriate within the work, we can no longer be, in our relation to the work, appreciatively appropriating subjects."<sup>28</sup> This nonappropriating relation to the work of art "trains us in new modes of mobility" that *Arts of Impoverishment* tentatively proposes as a model for a form of "political and cultural resistance" for an "unlocatable" self that would be "impoverished and dispersed."<sup>29</sup>

Bersani and Dutoit leave unexplored the relation of socioeconomic poverty to the forms of impoverishment that they find in the three artists named in the title. I argue in my final chapter that the forms of linguistic impoverishment that first emerge in the encounter with the poor eventually strain to separate themselves from this thematic link to the point of becoming indicative of modern writing in general, and *Arts of Impoverishment* serves as evidence that there are definite historical boundaries to the validity of my claim for the linkage of socioeconomic and linguistic poverty.

Bersani and Dutoit are closest to the present book's interests in the final sentences of their introduction, when they suggest that the impoverished self may give birth to "a new kind of power."<sup>30</sup> Their notion of a text "training" us to cultivate a power makes explicit the relation of their reflections to ascetic traditions (*askēsis*, "training").<sup>31</sup> Asceticism is to be understood in the sense Nietzsche gives to it in his undoing of the ascetic ideal and in Foucault's understanding of ascetic methods as "the arts of existence . . . by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves."<sup>32</sup> For Bersani and Dutoit, literature becomes a training ground for the development of impoverished selves, selves who discover and cultivate a new kind of power that is not mastery.

This impoverished relation to power has significant consequences. In the final pages of the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault offers an abbreviated formulation of the objective of political struggles that can no longer be understood in terms of sovereignty. In emerging biopolitical societies, no longer did one await or demand "the coming of the emperor of the poor, or the kingdom of the latter days, or even the restoration of our imagined ancestral rights."<sup>33</sup> In these regimes, "what was demanded and what served as an objective was life, understood as basic needs, man's concrete essence, the realization of his potential [*accomplissement de ses virtualités*], a plenitude of the possible."<sup>34</sup> Foucault restates this objective as the newly articulated "'right' to discover [*retrouver*], beyond all the forms of oppression and alienation, what one is and all that one can be."<sup>35</sup> Biopolitics constitutes its subjects as the bearers of potential, their "own" potential that they have a right and duty to explore and realize. The concept of impoverished writing claims a similar goal, but with a slight difference. It calls into question the biopolitical hold on potential by depriving the subject of the relation of mastery and authority: yes, there is potential, but no, it is not mine. Impoverished writing simultaneously focuses attention on power and releases it from its dependence on an appropriating subject.

For the modern writers I read here, it is poverty that brings them to an experience of virtuality and potential and that leads them to develop forms of impoverished writing. The beggar's silent gaze and incoherent cry interpellate nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers and thinkers,



forcing them to attempt to formulate notions of language and subjectivity that respond to the scenes of poverty that they witness and the modern forms of impersonal power in which they are implicated.

### A Modern Tradition

I begin my reading of poverty and impoverished writing by offering, in chapters 1 and 2, a theoretical and literary framework for understanding modern concepts of poverty and power. Chapter 1 examines Heidegger's reading of power in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and shows how Marx and Foucault develop this notion of power in their discussion of the poor. Chapter 2 then explores, in readings of Foucault and Baudelaire, forms of power in literary texts about the poor. Drawing on chapter 2's conclusions about language and power in Foucault and Baudelaire, chapter 3 analyzes the privative concepts that determine Mallarmé's formulation of a virtual and impoverished literary language.

Chapter 4 broadens the scope of investigation by discussing Nietzsche's engagement with the ascetic tradition of voluntary poverty. Although Nietzsche does not explicitly link voluntary poverty with socioeconomic conditions, his texts play a key role in twentieth-century representations of poverty in German literature and philosophy. The reading of Nietzsche begins with a presentation of his critique of Christian understandings of language, difference, and asceticism and then considers the two capital forms of poverty in Nietzsche's works: "the gift-giving virtue" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and the "poverty of the richest" in his cycle of poems titled *Dionysus Dithyrambs*.

Chapters 5 and 6 constitute an in-depth study of Rilke's treatment of the poor in texts written between 1903 and 1910. The two chapters synthesize the results of the previous chapters, which offer interpretations of ascetic and socioeconomic poverty in nineteenth-century writers who remain central to literary and philosophical developments in the twentieth century. Chapters 5 and 6 show how Rilke, an avid reader of French poetry and Nietzsche, explicitly reworks nineteenth-century understandings of poverty and poetics to offer new concepts of identity and community. Chapter 5's reading of his cycle of poems titled "The Book of Poverty and Death" offers a critique of the notion of aestheticization

that has been crucial to the reception of texts about poverty and to many readings of Rilke and other authors of the fin de siècle. Chapter 6 demonstrates how Rilke's continued confrontation with urban poverty led him to rethink his relation to the poor by presenting a community without identity in his only novel, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. Drawing on Heidegger's notion of "being-with," and its elaboration in texts about community by Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Giorgio Agamben, chapter 6 shows how Brigge's loss of every form of identity (his home, his name, his family, his class standing, his self-understanding as a writer) coincides with his awareness of a new kind of community with the urban poor whom he encounters on the streets of Paris.

Chapter 7 presents Benjamin's notion of the "poverty of experience" as the conclusion to a modern tradition of writing about the poor that begins with Baudelaire. It reveals this concept's importance for Benjamin's writing in the 1930s, in which it emerges along with other, better-known Benjaminian notions such as reproducibility, quotability, and the aura. In the book's final instance of impoverished writing, the impersonal, citing "I" of Brecht's early poetry presents as exemplary its abjuration of every possession and every relation that might bind it to its language or identity. For Brecht and Benjamin, the linguistic and conceptual traits that once were associated with the themes of poverty and the beggar become part of a modern, urban "attitude." In his essay "Experience and Poverty," Benjamin explicitly distances his articulation of the poverty of experience from the tradition that bestowed poverty with the beggar's face and voice, thereby presenting the poverty of experience as the end of one epoch in the understanding of poverty and the beginning of another.

In the notes that describe the ship named *Poverty*, Benjamin eventually strikes the sentence that christens the ship. The ship's name bears witness to the hope invested in poverty, and its erasure corresponds to the impoverishment of the figure of poverty in Brecht and Benjamin. Poverty is reduced to its potential aspect, stripped of its traditional attributes, its explicit relation to socioeconomic conditions, and even its own name. Chapter 7 concludes the book by arguing that this move is made in accordance with a logic inherent to figures of the poor, whose silenced voices and hidden faces betray the approach of their future disappearance.