

H-France Review Vol. 9 (December 2009), No. 157

Patrick Greaney, *Untimely Beggar: Poetry and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. xxiii + 227 pp. Index. \$75.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8166-4951-8; \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8166-4950-1.

Review by Michal Peled Ginsburg, Northwestern University.

Patrick Greaney's book, *Untimely Beggar: Poetry and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin*, deals with the relation between power, poverty and literature (not exclusively poetry, as the sub-title suggests) in a number of French and German authors. Following an introduction where he analyzes the key terms of the discussion and a first chapter dealing with "impoverished power," especially in the writings of Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger, the book proceeds as a series of readings of texts by Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke, and Walter Benjamin. These authors 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" (p. xi). Since the first two criteria would have dictated the choice of other figures (Victor Hugo comes immediately to mind), it seems as if it is the third feature--the relation of poverty to other "better known notions or figures"--that has determined the choice. Thus part of the burden of the book is to demonstrate the relation of poverty to "notions such as Mallarmé's virtuality, Nietzsche's overman, and Benjamin's aura" (p. xi).

From the start, Greaney alerts us to the broad semantic scope of the term "poverty" in the texts under consideration; the "poverty" discussed in this book will not be simply (or even primarily) socioeconomic destitution, treated literally and thematically. What brings together the various uses of the figure of poverty in the texts under consideration is, according to the author, the "well known fact [that] in the nineteenth century, the poor were associated with power" (p. x); or, put differently, both poverty and power were understood as potentiality. Language, when faced with the poor, becomes itself poor--reduces itself to potential; it thus "attempts to become similar to the very power that it represents" (p. xv). Because the poor exist "not only in their misery but also as a power" and because "impoverished language" cannot thematize poverty (or anything else for that matter), we are faced with the seemingly paradoxical situation whereby "the representation of the actual conditions of poverty as a theme does not do justice to the reality of poverty in capitalist societies" (p. xv). The movement of the book as a whole is thus marked by "a retreat of the thematic face of poverty: from Baudelaire's beggars to Mallarmé's, from Mallarmé's to Rilke's and within the Rilkean corpus, from the urban poor of 'The Book of Poverty and Death' to the outcast and the Prodigal Son in *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*" (p. 144).

The encounter with the poor that calls for impoverished language is often presented in the texts under discussion as an encounter with a beggar. Greaney argues that the choice of the beggar as the figure of poverty is anachronistic, compared to the figure of the worker, but that it is precisely this "untimeliness" that allows modern writers to treat the beggar not as a person with a specific identity and history but as the figure for the power of the poor: the beggar appears not as himself but "both as a remnant of the past and as omen for a possible future" (p. xix).

The focus of the book is thus on the relation between language (literature and philosophy) and poverty, both understood as forms of power, as potentiality. It is the insertion of the term “power” into the relation between poverty and literature that, according to the author, gives the book its specificity and distinguishes it from “recent studies of poverty in nineteenth-century poetry and impoverished subjectivity and writing” (pp. xix-xx). For studies of “impoverished subjectivity and writing,” Greaney cites Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit’s *Arts of Impoverishment*, which he discusses at some length. Bersani’s and Dutoit’s study does not concern itself with poverty and Greaney takes this as (somewhat tenuous) evidence for the (very reasonable) assertion “that there are definite historical boundaries to the validity of [the] claim for the linkage of socio-economical and linguistic poverty” (p. xx). But Greaney also argues that it is his emphasis on the place of power in the relation between poverty and language that sets his book apart from that of Bersani and Dutoit while at the same time asserting that the two authors come closest to his own concerns when they suggest “that the impoverished self may give birth to ‘a new kind of power’” (p. xxi), which is presumably different from the notion of power that is central to his own book. This is far from clear and does not explain why Greaney even brings up *Arts of Impoverishment*. For “recent studies of poverty in nineteenth-century poetry,” Greaney footnotes Anne Berger’s *Scènes d’aumône: Misère et poésie au XIXe siècle*. Though he refers several times to Berger’s analyses (mainly in footnotes), Greaney does not engage with the book in any substantive way except for saying that “her theoretical approach is determined by the discourse of the gift in Marcel Mauss and the related vocabulary of giving and economy in Heidegger, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Derrida” (p. 175 n26). Given that both books center on the relation between poverty and literature and that some of the same texts are discussed in both, it would have been profitable had Greaney taken the time to explain what difference their divergent theoretical approaches makes for the reading of these texts as well as for the understanding of and relation between poetry and poverty.

The first chapter, “Impoverished Power,” deals with Heidegger (his 1931 lecture course on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*), Marx (his discussion of pauperism in *Capital*), and various texts by Michel Foucault. The common thread Greaney establishes among these texts is that of privative power: “Biopower and pauperism,” he concludes, “emerge in the texts of Foucault and Marx as markers of the central place of impotence and nonenactment identified by Heidegger in the structure of power” (p. 23). The readings of literary texts that follow show the poor to be the locus of this power.

Chapter two, “Let’s Get Beat Up by the Poor,” analyzes the encounter with the poor in some Baudelaire lyric poems and prose poems. Greaney argues that the poor in Baudelaire are associated with latent energy. Through a detailed close reading of the prose poem, “Let’s Beat Up the Poor,” he shows how the encounter of the poet with the beggar consists in the actualization of this energy: the beggar needs the poet’s provocation in order to reveal his potential energy but this “incitement” also awakens some force within the poet (or the poem’s narrator). The narrator also attempts to contain this awakened force but Greaney argues that this attempt fails. Following Heidegger’s claim “that enactment cannot be the measure for the actuality of force” Greaney concludes that in Baudelaire’s text, “The beggar’s force is there when he does not act, and its full actuality remains distanced and deferred even when it is enacted” (p. 43).

In the following chapter, dedicated to “Poetic Rebellion in Mallarmé,” only some of the texts analyzed deal with poverty or stage the figure of the beggar. Following Paul Valéry, Greaney takes Mallarmé’s poetry to be ascetic, which he glosses as “concerned with what could be and not with what is” (p. 47). The “impoverished language” that Greaney analyzes in Mallarmé is a language that suspends the representative function. According to Mallarmé, “Literature can never only represent an object, because it always also could do something other than communication. It may also allude to something virtual or possible within communication that exceeds it and that only appears privatively” (p. 55). In the analysis of the poem “Alms” and the prose poem “Poor Pale Child,” Greaney aims to establish a link between this kind of language and the theme of poverty but he also claims that the relation between impoverished

language and power can be found in other texts, where poverty is not thematized. Accordingly, the chapter ends with a discussion of “Crisis of Verse” and “Ballet.”

The discussion of Nietzsche in the following chapter on “The Transvaluation of Poverty” is intended to provide a bridge between the tradition of French poetry on poverty and Rilke. Nietzsche’s interest is not in the problem of socioeconomic poverty but rather with poverty as one of the main components of the ascetic ideal he is trying to “transvaluate.” Through readings of parts of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and of the ninth *Dionysus Dithyramb*, “On the Poverty of the Richest,” Greaney argues that in Nietzsche’s writings, “the new virtue of poverty would not depend on identity that must be assumed before being surrendered; instead, it would be the virtue that allows for everything, including truth, to be ‘taken,’ in every sense of the word, and transformed” (p. 94).

The next two chapters are devoted to Rilke. The first, “Rilke and the Aestheticization of Poverty,” treats Rilke’s relation to Nietzsche and Mallarmé and deals with “The Book of Poverty and Death,” the final cycle of poems in *The Book of Hours*; the second, entitled “An Outcast Community,” deals with Rilke’s relation to Baudelaire and centers on *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. In his discussion of *The Book of Hours*, Greaney rejects the charge that Rilke aestheticizes socioeconomic poverty and argues that Rilke’s language in these poems constitutes “a complex treatment of the difficulty of representing poverty at all” (p. 115). The poor are represented neither as beautiful nor (following in the ascetic tradition) as rich; rather, the poems show them to be without attributes while the particular language the poems use (especially their use of similes) effects this process of impoverishment. In the *Notebooks*, it is Malte himself who is impoverished, “estranged from his attributes” (p. 123). In his relation to the outcasts, Malte is “infected by their decomposition of identity, by a becoming poor that is experienced as threatening and promising” (p. 128).

The final chapter, “Exposed Interiors and the Poverty of Experience,” centers around Benjamin. This is not by chance since for Greaney, Benjamin’s notion of “the poverty of experience” stands as a conclusion to the modern tradition of dealing with poverty he has traced: “Benjamin’s attempt to fashion a new face for poverty aims to make the beggar’s exit definitive, because he seems to have exhausted his role as a figure for the coincidence of potential and impotence that modern literature finds in poverty” (p. 170). Greaney links “poverty of experience” to more well-known Benjaminian terms such as reproducibility and loss of aura; he thus studies, besides the text on poverty of experience, other Benjamin texts, including his essays on Bertolt Brecht and Karl Kraus.

This is a rich and complex book that combines theoretical speculation with close readings of important texts. It will be useful for scholars working on nineteenth-century French and German literature as well as for critics interested in readings of literature inspired by Foucault. The subtitle “Poverty and Power from Baudelaire to Benjamin” might however mislead some readers into thinking that the book has a somewhat different emphasis than it actually does.

Michal Peled Ginsburg
Northwestern University
m-ginsburg@northwestern.edu

Copyright © 2009 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for non-profit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of

more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172