

Armianu on Powers (2016)

Powers, Scott M. *Confronting Evil: The Psychology of Secularization in Modern French Literature*. Purdue UP, 2016, pp. 264, ISBN 978-1-55753-741-6

Irina Armianu, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

Contradictions abounded in religious thought at a time when secularization preoccupied many brilliant nineteenth- and twentieth-century French writers. Scott Powers hypothesizes the existence of a “subconscious wish fulfillment for a hidden universal order” (7) in works by Charles Baudelaire, Émile Zola, J.-K. Huysmans, and Ferdinand Céline. Influenced by Jacques Lacan’s commentary on Nietzsche’s unconscious God, Powers theorizes that religion survived in these texts in spite of the often anti-religious tendencies of their authors.

Each of his five chapters begins with an introduction of concepts related to philosophy and poetics, thus providing context for a time when increased freedom of the press encouraged a wider range of social and political expression. Powers’s account of movements led by conservative Catholics, social Catholics, Social Democrats, Socialists, and Romantics allow readers to grasp the breadth of debates about good and evil. Conservatives, for example, judged society in black and white, associating tradition to good and rebellion to evil while Socialists considered established values as evil and revolutionary initiatives as good. Powers draws from a wide range of thinkers who engaged with issues of secularization, including Auguste Comte, Émile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, and Carl Jung, while referring to Rudolf Otto, Paul Tillich, and Peter Berger to set up the framework for literary secularization as the sacred sublimated. Powers also refers to Jean Baudrillard’s and Gilles Deleuze’s writings on consumption and ideology.

In chapters one and two, which focus on Baudelaire, Powers engages with the notion of yearning for a mystical life, as inspired by Sigmund Freud’s theory on mourning and by Julia Kristeva’s approach on sublimation. Baudelaire’s investment in mystical values are read less as mourning for God than as an investment in the sacred manifested through lyricism. The poet’s irony toward religion becomes a coping mechanism for the loss of the Romantic ideal of God, the human misery expressed in his poems deeply rooted in the Catholic understanding of suffering as cathartic. Baudelaire’s fascination with religious symbolism suggests that the poetic imagination and ornamentation of his childhood Catholicism profoundly influenced his artistic identity; it was transmuted into the religious imaginary of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. This tension explains the ambivalent symbolism of evil in *Les Fleurs du Mal*: “the inconsistencies in his poetic imagery reflected the contemporary destabilization of discourse on religion and politics, due to society’s own experimentation in new ideologies and forms of government” (57). Powers also relates his conclusions to Edward Kaplan’s view on Baudelaire (*Baudelaire’s Prose Poems*, 1990) and Richard Burton’s *Baudelaire and the Second Republic* (1991).

Suggestively titled “Sublimation and Conversion in Zola and Huysmans,” chapter three focuses on the literary details of Naturalist writing. Like Baudelaire, Zola and Huysmans struggle with mystical elements by using irony. Zola in particular attempts to replace religious thought with physiological explanations in his novel *Lourdes*. Powers underlines religion as a theme of universal justice in Zola’s approach, thus moving toward the aesthetics of the sublime that occupy him in the last two chapters: “The Staging of Doubt: Zola and Huysmans” and “Religious and Secular Conversions: Transformations in Céline’s Medical Perspective on Evil.”

In Céline’s case (chapter five), the approach changes slightly because of his anti-Semitism, compared to the fever of Catholic conversion in Huysmans’s *Lourdes* (chapter four). These opposite tendencies are symptomatic of strong religious feelings latent in seemingly secular prose. Furthermore, Céline’s approach to evil becomes the only possible response to the absurdity of existence in the midst of war, colonialism, poverty, prostitution, and sickness, thus returning to and reprising earlier discussion of Baudelaire’s repeated disbelief in an elusive God.

While focused on literature, Powers strikes a delicate balance between aesthetic and ideological detail. Irony, for example, is analyzed as a figure of speech in Baudelaire’s *Les Tentations* and *Le Joueur généreux*. The concept of “secularization as ironic” constitutes the most powerful overarching theme of the book, often deployed as a psychological mechanism to mourn the loss of faith and to shift between metaphysical and material thinking.

Volume: 47.1–2

Year:

- 2018