

Krueger on Chambers (2015)

Chambers, Ross. *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise*. New York: Fordham, 2015. Pp. xiii + 187. ISBN: 978-0-823265-84-8

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Ross Chambers's elegant and empathetic study, *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise*, situates the reader at the precarious crossroads of poetic ideals and violent urban transformation. The atmosphere in question, a subliminal awareness of strangeness in otherwise familiar things (1), derives from violent social upheavals and the din of urban streets, the relentless soundtrack of Baudelaire's daily experience and poetic creation. Yet this is not a cultural study of sound in the post-1848 metropolis. Nor is it an application of communication theory, though the notion of noise's potential readability is central to Chambers's approach. Instead, *Atmospherics* shows how encounters with the historic chaos of the moving street, articulated in the inevitable noise of (poetic) communication, express an evolving poetics of weathering time and destruction in Baudelaire's verse and prose poetry. According to Chambers, the urban racket may be deafening (as suggested by "la rue assourdissante" of "À une passante"), in that its ubiquity renders it unheard. Baudelaire revives dulled senses (his own, the reader's) through his poetics of audible and metaphorical noise.

The book is divided into three parts, each composed of two chapters: Part I, "Fetish and the Everyday"; Part II, "Allegory, History, and the Weather of Time"; Part III, "Ironic Atmospherics and the Urban Diary." A brief appendix provides complete citations, in both French and English, of two verse poems analyzed in depth ("Le Cygne" and "Les Sept Vieillards"). The section titles mark touchstones in what Chambers sees as Baudelaire's lifelong, multidirectional aesthetic trajectory. Through his analysis of selected verse (from the "Tableaux parisiens" portion of *Les Fleurs du Mal*) and prose poems (from *Le Spleen de Paris*), Chambers maps the development of Baudelaire's poetics of noise as a "painful evolution" (6), a melancholic reaction, and an aesthetic adaptation to change reverberating just outside the window.

Chapter one, "From the Sublime to the Subliminal: Fetish Aesthetics," theorizes a connection between allegory and fetish, whose common denominator is an otherness revealed in the process of making the now familiar once again, but differently, noticeable. Chapter two, "The Magic Windowpane," reveals Baudelaire's confrontation with noise as the poetic other (25) through an interplay of denied spatial and temporal proximity leading ultimately to the renunciation of idealized art. In Chapter three, "Fetishism Becomes Allegory," Chambers articulates a dynamic shift in Baudelaire's aesthetics, a move from fetish to allegory, from disillusionment to a disalienation rising from consciousness of the human inability to know (55). Chapter four, "Daylight Specters: Allegory and the Weather of Time," tracks the everyday ghosts who haunt "À une passante" and "Les Sept Vieillards."

The selected verse poems featured in the first four chapters present *le temps qu'il fait* as an atmospheric manifestation of *le temps qui passe*. Chambers argues that when allegorical atmospherics eventually prove insufficient as a response to increasingly sinister manifestations of spatial and temporal change, the prose poems emerge with a newly ironic energy (Chapter five, "Ironic Encounter: The Poetics of Anonymity," 124). Chapter six, "'La forme d'une ville': The Urban Diary," shows the prose poem itself to be a noisy and uncertain genre, a *chantier* in a constant state of *bricolage*. Its heterogeneity and fragmentation liken *Le Spleen de Paris* to a more personal, and manifestly melancholic version of the *New York Times* "Metropolitan Diary."

"To become aware of an atmosphere—and one of Baudelaire's most important understandings of poetry is as an agent of such a becoming aware—is to become bafflingly conscious of something that one had been already aware of, somehow, without knowing it" (2). If Baudelaire's poetics of noise stirs dulled senses, Chambers similarly awakens the reader to Baudelairean tropes and textual strategies that may have once seemed all too familiar: the window, the swan, chiasmus, allegory, irony, modern beauty.

Atmospherics manages to frame the tightly focused analysis of interrelated poems within a much larger phenomenon of *croisement* (to use a word important to the study), thereby linking historical context and textual analysis. The characteristically delicate and dynamic nature of Chambers's style—a sort of perpetual, self-refining theory in motion—guides the reader through variations in analytical rhythm, taking time to linger now and then on the individual poems that gently steer the argument forward. Scholars who have followed Chambers's work will recognize the beauty of his style, the brilliance of his close reading, and his uncanny ability to make Baudelaire's most familiar poems newly readable.

Volume: 44.1-2

Year:

- 2015