

Allar on Krueger, ed. (2017)

Cheryl Krueger, editor. *Approaches to Teaching Baudelaire's Prose Poems*. The Modern Language Association, 2017, *Approaches to Teaching World Literature* 142, pp. 212, ISBN 978-1-60329-272-6

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In a field where students have varying competencies in French language and varying commitments to the study of literature, Charles Baudelaire's *Petits Poèmes en prose* appear a godsend: they can occupy a single week on the syllabus, or they can be the object of an entire course or, indeed, series of courses. The book is defined by its nonlinearity, its fragmentation, and its constantly shifting pathways of intra- and intertextual connection—hence its comparison, in Baudelaire's letter to Arsène Houssaye, to a snake “qui n'a ni queue ni tête,” that will stay alive, perhaps even gain life, when it is cut into “tronçons.” Flexible, slippery, self-rejuvenating, and yet for the most part linguistically accessible to language learners, the prose poems offer a particular opportunity to practice the close reading of modern poetry in the original language. They tantalize students with their subversion of traditional forms, and they provide insights into a nineteenth-century urban and global life at once terribly strange and deeply familiar to today's students.

When teaching a book that invites its reader to cut indiscriminately, the question becomes where to begin and where (if anywhere) to end. *Approaches to Teaching Baudelaire's Prose Poems* proposes a number of solutions that will prove handy to instructors offering courses at different levels of university, and to a certain extent secondary, education. Each contributor shares how she or he brings a different aim to the teaching of the prose poems, be it the relationship between ethics and pleasure in poems like “La Fausse Monnaie” or “Assommons les pauvres!”; the status of the other, from the ironic othering of the lyric “I” to reflections on colonial power, gender politics, and economic inequality in the Second Empire; the relationship between Baudelaire's central trope, allegory, and the search for meaning in modernity; the importance of translation, broadly conceived, in the prose poems and in Baudelaire's writing practice generally; and the network of media that inform the texts, from their original place in the lower section of Parisian newspapers to their resonance with today's digital culture in the form of *cyberflânerie*.

The approaches are numerous, but a few texts hold a particularly prominent place in the contributors' classes. “Le Mauvais Vitrier” finds its way into most of the assignment sequences and syllabi described in the volume. Claire Chi-ah Lyu narrates a conversation in which she guides students from their almost universal shock at how selfish and “mean” the speaker-narrator is to the glazier beneath his window (after dropping a flower pot on him and causing him to fall and break his windowpanes, he celebrates his *jouissance* from the eruption of glass) to a careful philosophical reflection on the status of evil across the verse and prose poems. “Le Mauvais Vitrier” produces a strong reaction in students, allowing the instructor to, quite literally, play the devil's advocate and to prompt them, as in Edward Kaplan's contribution, to challenge their own ethical judgments of writers and literary personae. Aimée Boutin, furthermore, recounts a lesson in which she and her students compare the poem to Arsène Houssaye's earlier prose poem “La Chanson du vitrier,” with particular attention to the poems' different soundscapes; her approach gives students a sensory experience of nineteenth-century Paris and also sensitizes them to Baudelaire's break from Romantic harmony.

This volume provides a number of insights that will be valuable even to those not planning to teach the *Petits Poèmes en prose* anytime soon. It gives a contextualized view into a variety of classroom practices, from guiding students through digital archives of the poems to in-class and take-home creative assignments inspired by Baudelaire. Heather Willis Allen and Kate Paesani remind us that studying the prose poems can simultaneously improve students' language competency and their skills as readers of literature. They provide a detailed account of a “multiliteracies” approach to teaching the verse and prose versions of “L'Invitation au voyage”—a cultural- and language-based sequence that culminates in students producing literature of their own.

A volume aimed at pedagogy also prompts its contributors to speak in a different register, and this proves productive on a scholarly level, if not for offering new research into Baudelaire, then for synthesizing various ways of reading his work and for remaining open to the uncertainties that it inspires. One of the pleasures of reading the volume is the great number of questions the essays ask, many of them left unanswered, prompting further reflection, reading, and discussion. There are exhilarating paragraphs that, with a directness and clarity that come with having to explain things to students, remind us why Walter Benjamin, Barbara Johnson, or Ross Chambers's writings on Baudelaire remain essential to any discussion of his work and, moreover, why we and our students need to read Baudelaire's prose poems now as much as ever.

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