

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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This fine new collection of essays brings together contributions by some of our most careful readers of modern French poetry, as well as many impressive newer ones. Each one of them identifies, then demonstrates in thought-provoking ways the enormous semiotic potential of this particular corpus to generate ever-fresher analyses and critical interrogations. It would seem silly perhaps to say that this volume therefore makes one *think*. Yet, in fact, it does precisely accomplish that goal, by inviting us to interrupt our ways of looking at poetry, and by making us discard, just like many of the poets examined in the volume, “overly habitual thoughts in order to provide the new, whether through syntactical structures, or, more frequently, the power inherent in metaphor of encouraging us to see connections we had never thought to seek before” (5).

Acquisto’s goal in putting this stimulating volume together is not to see how philosophy and poetry fight each other for control of “similar [textual] territory,” but rather to study how “each makes and remakes the other, serves as the other’s interruption, and allows us to call into question that which we never thought to question.” It forces us therefore to contemplate, more extensively than we often do, the being or, better still, the *becoming* of what several of the contributors rightly call the infinitely varied language events occasioned by poetry. To this end, Acquisto organizes these original essays into four groups concerned with: 1) pre-twentieth-century philosophical perspectives; 2) questions of alterity and ethics; 3) metaphysical implications inherent in and created by the poetic practice of Mallarmé; and 4) questions of subjectivity and politics as they relate to poetry.

Edward Kaplan begins by focusing on the affinities between the thinking of Kierkegaard and that of Baudelaire. He points out that the former “uplifts readers by demanding that we become spirit, though we endure suffering along the way [...whereas] Baudelaire, whom such faith eludes, concentrates on anxiety as a source of insights.” I suppose that this is one reason why the poet whom Rimbaud will later call a “true god” spoke so much about “ennui” and “spleen.” Catherine Witt next tries to connect the numerous dots separating German idealists and a contemporary French philosopher such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. She makes these connections by rereading the celebrated Baudelairean poem, “À une passante,” in tandem with excerpts from the earlier moralists, Montaigne and Rousseau. She then effectively puts them into conversation with one another, thanks to the recurrence in their writings of the *nescio* trope.

In the next group, Bradley Stephens argues that a lyric poet like Victor Hugo helped to reconfigure and reconstruct our subjectivity, making us more complex and less machine-like in Descartes’s sense. This reading is facilitated by his recourse to the notion of radical otherness as articulated by Emmanuel Lévinas. For his part, Alain Toumayan provides a fascinating investigation into the potential aesthetic “benefits” of drug use, as constructed or represented in the works of Baudelaire and one of his favorite English-speaking poets, Thomas De Quincey. The primary benefit of such activity lies in its search for some form of genuine otherness. Both poets directly or indirectly advanced the idea that the subject can change radically under such influence, not unlike what Baudelaire finds when experiencing and describing other such “artificial paradises.” As we are reminded by his prose poem “Enivrez-vous”: one can get

equally drunk with wine, music, or poetry. But one should also be aware of the inevitable down-sides of some such experiences, as evidenced by the tremendous emotional let-down felt by the drugged-out narrator in another well-known prose poem, “La Chambre double.”

John McKeane aims to explore some of the conceptual links between the absolute and the fragment, the Book (in which the whole world was famously said to be destined to end up, according to Mallarmé) or the absence thereof. Claire Chi-ah Lyu then engages in the kind of sylleptic reading Riffaterre might have done of the term *salut*, showing how the latter can be read simultaneously as salvation and greeting. (Derrida of course also reveled in such lexical instability or “undecidability.”) Indeed, that was the whole lesson behind his discussion of Plato’s uses of the word “pharmakon.”) Émile Fromet de Rosnay also digs deeply into the term *salut* as Mallarmé employs it, while David Nowell Smith attempts to convince a formalistically inclined critic like Henri Meschonnic that philosophy will always matter to a fuller appreciation of a work of art.

Alison James moves the volume away from metaphysical concerns to socio-political ones. She discusses ideas about how best to fashion ideal systems of community and communication voiced by Jacques Roubaud—an Oulipian quite well versed in every poetic form, from the alexandrine on—and philosopher-critic, Jacques Rancière. Acquisto’s own essay takes its cues from Alain Badiou’s theory of the event, then rereads Baudelaire’s quasi-sadomasochistic, poetic apology “L’Héautontimorouménos,” underscoring the all-important point that poems can never be reduced and put away once and for all as/into abstract thoughts. They are instead shown to be infinitely extendable meaning producers. And finally, Hugues Azérad stresses a similarly expandable notion of signification or identity and finds it in the poetry of Rimbaud and Mallarmé, as well as in Édouard Glissant’s study of poetics, *L’Intention poétique*. There the Caribbean author speaks of just such an open “poetics of relation, peripheral, and boundless.”

Knowing that many nineteenth-century French poets took seriously their dual role as critics and authors, this is all as it should be. For what Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and so many others exhibited during that period of time was an increased awareness of the “revolution in poetic language” (to borrow Kristeva’s expression) in which they were engaged. This revolution had to do not only with the innovative thematics and prosodic practices of those writing in the second half of the nineteenth-century, but also with the effects such original poetry had on readers. The growing fusion of speculative thought and poetic discourse studied by this volume’s contributors might thereby come to re-characterize that entire revolution, thanks in part to its catchy title. Indeed, such poetry simultaneously obliges writers to *think* that much harder about what and how to say things and to create works that in many ways also seem to *think* by themselves, that is, to indicate an awareness about their own reasons or conditions for being. When seen from this angle, Acquisto’s very useful collection helps us better appreciate the precedents behind a form of analysis that gave rise to what structuralists and poststructuralists called “reader-response” criticism. Such criticism invites, indeed forces, readers of modern poems, including their authors, to think long and hard both about what they express as well as what they *do*.