

Nineteenth-Century French Studies

A scholarly journal devoted to the study of French literature and related fields

For articles: ncfsarticles@gmail.com

For reviews: ncfsreviews@gmail.com

www.ncfs-journal.org

Sipe, Daniel. *Text, Image and the Problem of Perfection in Nineteenth-Century France: Utopia and its Afterlives*. Surrey: Ashgate, 2013. Pp. 228. ISBN: 978-1-4094-4776-4

Valérie Narayana, Mount Allison University

Daniel Sipe's recent work is a well-constructed discussion of how *Utopia and its Afterlives* evolve in post-revolutionary France. The italicized fragment refers, of course, to the work's secondary designation, which unfortunately cedes to a long and fairly general title: *Text, Image and the Problem of Perfection in Nineteenth-Century France*. The latter—while perhaps hoping to capitalize on current “Text and image” trends—does not quite capture the book's content, which only devotes two chapters to images. Nor does it highlight the most suggestive element of Sipe's study: that of a utopian “afterlife.” This notion convincingly refers to the haunting quality that trails failed nineteenth-century (literary and/or socio-programmatic) utopias. The term is then used to show how this lingering *malaise* permeates ulterior projects, making them “fragile and ghostly” (29), “reject[ing] the excesses of the utopian imagination,” while “delight[ing] in exploring the critical-conceptual possibilities it unfolds” (18).

Sipe asserts that existing theoretical apparatus cannot fully honor the equivocal nature and historical specificity of this “afterlife” (18-19). In support of his claim, he cites various existing frameworks (Anthony Stephens's utopia/dystopia model and Lyman Tower Sargent's notion of anti-utopia, among others). In Sipe's view, these theorizations—relying heavily on reader reception or aiming squarely at the foibles of utopia—do not quite fit the bill. This is true to an extent; yet one could reply that quantitative rather than qualitative differences separate Sipe's conceptualization from previous ones. Anti-utopia is not averse to borderline cases (hovering between utopia and its negation), just as reception models necessarily (though discretely) imply the presence of author and text, both of which can foster amphiboly.

A more relevant measure of the pertinence of Sipe's work is to argue—as the author fleetingly does—the case for considering certain nineteenth-century utopias as a sort of “*forme crépusculaire*” (one *avant la lettre* in the case of mid-century utopias). There is indeed a self-conscious aesthetic quality to the works considered here—one not limited to them; and it is true that, in claiming such creations, their authors often adopt ironic and/or diffident stances. The novelty of Sipe's work, then, might best be appraised, less through an appeal for new theorizations, than by signaling how a nuanced use of existing models can now take aim at a class of quaint, historically situated discomforts.

The works privileged by Sipe illustrate this point. The two first chapters address history's uneasy relationship to aesthetics in the first half of the century. Chateaubriand's *Atala* and Hugo's “Fonction du poète” are examined, in chapter one, in this perspective. This discussion paves the way for an original and discerning reading of Étienne Cabet's *Voyage en Icarie* in chapter two. A third chapter considers J. J. Granville's and Delord's *Un autre monde* as a parodic critique, not only of social utopias but of the artist's own cultural production. Sipe argues that while reveling in the creative kinship between Fourier's imagination and his own, Grandville seems to question the possibility of transcending mass culture. Chapter four tracks Baudelaire and Courbet's failed attempts at defining the work of the artist in a Proudhonian discursive economy that both elevates and commodifies aesthetic creation. The fifth and last chapter describes the female automatons in Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *L'Ève future* and Charles Barbara's “Le Major Whittington.” Here, Sipe identifies a hollowed-out utopian impulse laying bare the limits of a mechanized libidinal economy by relying on an artificial citizenry.

This last chapter crowns the multiplicity of approaches used by Sipe in his study. Throughout, several frameworks are invoked, from Bloch's to Benjamin's, via Haraway's, Habermas's and Freud's. The author acknowledges, early on, the methodological challenge facing scholars broaching a topic where "there seem to be as many utopias as there are utopians" (2). For this reason, the monograph would be a lively tool to put in the hands of MA or early PhD students. This is in no way a criticism of the content, which is rich and varied (and showcases Sipe's undeniable ability to couch abstractions in prose). Rather, such a context might provoke debates on the compatibility of diverse approaches, a question never far from scholars' minds when dealing with utopias. For if one trait distinguishes nineteenth-century utopian studies scholars from colleagues broaching broader issues (such as the emergence of high modernity), it is probably a mild ideological concern. Combining modern libidinal theories (which reduce agency, collective or individual) with talk of social justice (which posits agency) is a balancing act; sensitivity to this point can bolster an allegiance to utopian studies rather than to other optics.

To be fair, Sipe resolutely claims a reflection on aesthetics; in this regard, his interest in "pleasurable ordering" (6) is justified. Yet, utopian writing is also a writing of human suffering (*en creux*)—a fact that no doubt partially explains Baudelaire's bristling *dandyisme* in the face of potential hunger. Sipe's closing comments on empathy (194) belie an awareness of those darker realities. These continue, in our time, to dislodge well-naturalized vestiges of utopian thought, such as minimum wage and weekends. Sipe's work, while retaining its valid trajectory, might have insisted a tad more on distributive logic and its relationship to hope (without tumbling, of course, into the over-determined semiotics of a Marxist *pamphlétaire*). It would have helped the reader to stare down a threat faced by all cultural critique: that of "promot[ing] a toothless, diffuse sense of creativity over the kind of politicized forms of radical social transformation that were the essence (and downfall) of nineteenth-century social utopianism" (195). Likewise, rather than ending on musings dedicated to the Arab Spring, it might have been mordant to throw a few quips at debates raging around Obamacare...