

Online Reviews

Katsaros, Laure. *New York-Paris: Whitman, Baudelaire, and the Hybrid City*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. Pp. 146. ISBN: 978-0-472-11849-6

Karen F. Quandt, University of Delaware

A full-length study that seeks to establish “crossing echoes” between Walt Whitman’s electric bravura in *Leaves of Grass* and Baudelaire’s bleak vignettes in *Le Spleen de Paris* seems quite a stretch. Yet, after conceding as much, Laure Katsaros allays the reader’s initial puzzlement with an evocative point of departure and a competent synopsis of nineteenth-century urban and visual culture on both sides of the Atlantic.

Katsaros cleverly begins by imagining a stereoscopic image that produces a coherent, if uncanny, composite portrait of Whitman and Baudelaire. Using Walter Benjamin’s well-known writings on Baudelaire for support, she justifies this merger by citing both poets’ incorporation of the “real life” of the city into lyric form. Although she does little to unpack the fraught label “realism,” simply defining it as “the incorporation of details taken from real life into art” (8) and quickly deducing that both Baudelaire and Whitman fell under its aegis (9), Katsaros hinges her argument on their paradoxical transformation of the prosaic metropolis into a “poetic world” (9) that transcends actual time and place and thus allows for a conversation between poets who never knew each other or each others’ works. Her overarching reading of Whitman as a poet who strives to make New York “the Paris of the New World,” and of Baudelaire as imagining Paris “as a copy of the American metropolis” (12), contributes an original analysis by illustrating both poets’ collusion with the ethereal visual spectacles of photographs, pageants, P. T. Barnum shows, pantomimes, and dioramas.

By mapping Benjamin’s readings of Baudelaire onto Whitman in her first two chapters, Katsaros deconstructs the familiar image of the jaunty American poet who celebrates everything in his path. The accretion of city elements in *Leaves of Grass* instead allows the poet’s voice “to become overwhelmed,” and Whitman’s New York is thus a “necropolis” (48) akin to the ghostly daguerreotype, the disorienting panorama, or the fleeting pageant. The poem “Mannahatta,” for example, whose reference to native language only serves to underscore that the “Algonquin past has been so thoroughly annihilated” (23), is a side show whose allegorical function hides the grim realities spurred by European settlement and rapid urban transformation.

In chapter three, Katsaros argues that Baudelaire’s appropriation of the “liberated” form of the prose poem in *Le Spleen de Paris* resulted from his “gamble” that fortuitous encounters in the city might serve as a source of poetic inspiration. This unnuanced framing leads to a tacitly reproachful distinction evidently marked by Jean-Paul Sartre’s (in)famous essay on the poet: “Baudelaire’s prose poems,” Katsaros remarks, “have none of the richness or complexity of Balzac’s Parisian stories” (62). Illustrating how the “dream” (which seems to be a murky designator for the poet’s imagination) has been usurped by a faceless crowd which haunts an abstracted and thus empty city, Katsaros fashions a portrait of an almost glibly impotent poet, even reducing Baudelaire’s prose poems to cartoons “scrawled on the wall” (64). Yet, Baudelaire’s points of reference for urban poetry were draftsmen and etchers (Guys, Méryon, Hugo) who captured what he described as “une puissante agglomération d’hommes et de monuments” with “aprêté,” “finesse” and “certitude” (*Salon de 1859*; chap. vii). Katsaros asserts that Baudelaire “brings the dream into waking life” (79), but it would seem that this

dream—whether hallucination, imagination, or rêverie—surrenders to the poet’s acute sense of consciousness and intense refinement of form.

Katsaros proceeds in chapter four to screen Baudelaire’s works through visual apparatuses or spectacles, and here her connection to Jean-Gaspard-Baptiste Deburau’s pantomimes nicely captures the prose poems blurring of the boundary between representation and artistic staging. Her viewing of certain poems as temporal and ever-shifting dioramas “à double effet” (a diorama that captured atmospheric effects) is especially convincing. Katsaros, however, does not suggest that Baudelaire simply mimicked these modes of representation; instead, his poems each project unique “cubist dioramas” (she recognizes the anachronism) that evoke Parisian scenes from the perspective of a perpetually de-centered subject (93). Again, her aligning of the prose poems to the medium of photography and subsequent characterization of them as “no act of creation” (95) overlooks the deep layers of Baudelaire’s irony—quoting Whitman’s compatriot Ralph Waldo Emerson, Baudelaire despaired in his journal of the “evil” of dissipation and directed himself to maintain a “grand style” even in prose—but her concluding observations that both Whitman and Baudelaire evoke a non-representational city because they seek to capture instead “the lineaments of transformation” (99) effectively close her running argument.

New York-Paris offers a compelling and well-researched new line of inquiry by connecting Baudelaire and Whitman to a plethora of technological modes of art, but the richness of their poems is somewhat stifled by this taut alliance. When discussing Baudelaire’s “Une mort héroïque,” which features a mime’s dance of death, Katsaros again highlights how the creative process succumbs to the thrill of the spectacle and, by extension, to modern urban development that demotes the poet to a “minor acolyte of a city planner à la Haussmann” (109); yet the narrator compares the buffoon to the indelible allure of an antique sculpture. Tellingly, and with equally splendid irony, the “rough” Whitman also points to the mute but eternal eloquence of poetry in “Song of Myself”:

Writing and talk do not prove me,
I carry the plenum of proof and every thing else in my face,
With the hush of my lips I confound the topmost skeptic. (581-83; *Leaves of Grass*,
1855 ed.)

Thus, perhaps the stereoscopic image of Whitman and Baudelaire would appear even more charged if their poems were read, not only as dissolving inevitably into the transitory form of visual spectacles, but also as pointedly resisting these short-lived ecstasies through immutable sounds of silence.

Nineteenth-Century French Studies 42, Nos. 3 & 4 Spring-Summer 2014
http://ncfs.unl.edu/reviews_online.php

© 2014 University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Questions & Comments, write to: <ncfsreviews@gmail.com>