

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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Kerr, Greg. *Dream Cities: Utopia and Prose by Poets in Nineteenth-Century France*. London: Legenda, 2013. Pp. x + 250. ISBN: 9781907975530

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Greg Kerr's *Dream Cities* proposes to examine three distinct but interrelated phenomena of nineteenth-century life: utopianism, the prose poem, and urban space. The author sets his sights on discovering how authors, artists, and architects who produced representations and theories of the metropolis—its dynamic forces, its forms of spatial and aesthetic organization—may have influenced the development of the prose poem as a genre that arose out of urbanization and industrialization. As the author suggests, examining these “utopian” forms promises to reveal how they might be “compatible with a visionary exploration of new poetic potentialities and lyrical responses to the modern city, and which anticipates the prose poetry of Baudelaire and Rimbaud” (28).

It is with this project in mind that Kerr embarks on a series of strong readings, aimed initially at the relationship between various formalistic aspects of Saint-Simonian discourse and its encounter with urban space. This line of inquiry serves as a springboard for the examination of lesser-known social-aesthetic experiments of the disciples who assembled around Prosper Enfantin in the 1820s. Here, Kerr sets the tone as he guides us through a dizzyingly wide range of phenomena—from new forms of spectatorship implied by the Panorama, to utopian architecture, and to the popular iconography of public festivities. This itinerary ultimately leads to the pioneering literary experiments conducted in 1832 at the group's “cultish retreat” in the Ménilmontant neighborhood of Paris where Enfantin owned a home (41). The Saint-Simoniens imagined that their *Livre nouveau* would constitute a repository for all human knowledge, one whose innovative prosodic structure would serve as guide to the profound transformation of French society. From this vast, unfinished project, Kerr plucks out the exceptionally rich contributions of Michel Chevalier and Charles Duveyrier, whose linguistic and formal innovations deserve the attention they receive in this study, but, as the author seems to conclude, whose specific contributions to the development of the prose poem remain unclear.

In the second chapter, Kerr takes on Théophile Gautier's ambiguous relationship with prose writing, which he claims presents a more accommodating approach to modernity and material culture than his strongly worded aesthetic positions might imply. Kerr considers journalistic pieces in which Gautier investigates the many sites of modernity, such as the palace housing the Universal Exhibition of 1862, a new harbor in Cherbourg, a railway, or a day spent on the streets of London. In these portraits of modern life, Kerr identifies an aesthetic that is marked by “heterogeneity and mobility” (87), “visual fragmentation” (90), and the “panoramic gaze” (93) of “multiple fragmentary glimpses” (94). All of these features, he argues, are antithetical to the constrained modes of visual perception that characterize Gautier's poetic production. The question of utopianism comes into play as Kerr considers Gautier's endorsement of civic projects such as Paul Chenavard's proposal for the decoration of the Panthéon and Louis-Auguste Boileau's plans for a *Cathédrale synthétique*. For the author, the influence of these projects can be found in Gautier's evolving prose style. This foray into Gautier's journalistic writing seems destined to add nuance and texture to the climate out of which arose the prose poetry of Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Rimbaud.

Accordingly, the last two chapters of *Dream Cities* are dedicated to the prose writings of these writers. In chapter three, Kerr succinctly frames Baudelaire's poetic prose within the context of a nearly simultaneous rejection of politics and the utopian philosophies that had influenced the poet in the decade preceding the 1848 revolution. The strength of this chapter lies in Kerr's fascinating analysis of the Baudelairean concept of *rhapsodie* as a radical experience of “the

fragmentary and disparate assemblage” (128). When linked to the Baudelarian practice of *flânerie*, *rhapsodie* becomes a means of apprehending the poet’s approach to the urban environment, and, by extension, to the “logic of textual disorganization” that typifies *Le Spleen de Paris* (134). As concerns Rimbaud, Kerr examines his utopian engagements through the prism of the discourses of modernity and progress. Focusing primarily on *Illuminations* and *Une Saison en enfer*, Kerr’s reading of the Rimbaudian subject places this idealized self at the locus of an economy of desire, where “tensions and energies [...] coalesce momentarily around dynamic collective movements” (165). This account shows how Rimbaud’s reprisal of the utopian rhetorics of fraternity and transformation that had flourished under the Saint-Simonians is often “re-affirmed in perverse, fragmented form” (194). If Rimbaud’s challenging engagement with utopia provides a fitting end to *Dream Cities*, it is because the poet’s work contributes to a broader parodic turn. In this context, the fragmented, dispersed quality of Rimbaudian prose becomes an example of the many ironic statements that sought to undermine or refute the programmatic discourses of change that dominated France’s social imagination for the better part of five decades. As such, Greg Kerr’s *Dream Cities* makes a significant contribution to our understanding of the ways that utopian and journalistic writing can be juxtaposed alongside the prose poem and other visual and architectural projections of urban futurity. Kerr convincingly shows how this set of disparate phenomena collectively reflects the dynamic, uncertain, and ultimately unfulfilled desires of a society *en quête de forme*.