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Joseph Acquisto, Adrianna M. Paliyenko and Catherine Witt, ed. *Poets as Readers in Nineteenth-Century France: Critical Reflections*. London: imlr books (Institute of Modern Languages Research), 2015. 272 pp. & index. £25.00 (cl). ISBN 978 0 85457 246 5.

Review by Stamos Metzidakis, Washington University in Saint Louis.

This is a thought-provoking, wide-ranging collection of essays about different types of relationships between poets as individual artists and as readers of themselves and/or other poets in the nineteenth century, especially after 1830. It examines such relationships not just between the usual, predominately male, suspects in France (like Hugo, Nerval, Gautier, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Mallarmé), but also between less studied ones, like François Coppée (who was much more appreciated in his own time) as well as between them and oftentimes less acknowledged women of true genius. Many of the contributors direct their attention beyond the borders of the Hexagon, however, and identify crucial affinities between these writers and their counterparts elsewhere. In the process, they open new avenues of research for ever-increasingly vibrant French historical and cultural studies.

Each of them deserves credit for thinking through the implications of his/her punctual studies to a world "beyond" that of mere poetry. Yet, one of the key conclusions drawn by a number of them is precisely that what poets accomplish when they read themselves or others is to show how tenuous such a separation felt by the second half of the nineteenth century at the dawn of modernity. The contributors thus help *their* readers, i.e. us, better understand how difficult a task serious students of this period have when attempting to separate some supposedly fixed Reality from an equally real Rhetoric or Textuality. If the years 1830-1900 appear of especial interest here, therefore, it is because as the co-editors stress, this period was characterized "by profound transformations in French print culture, readership, and reading practices, affecting almost all areas of cultural production" (p. 9). The big fear among writers was that (true) literature was selling out to industry and becoming trivial due in large part to the proliferation of newsprint.

Two major essays by Sainte-Beuve and Proust bookending the period are highlighted in the "Introduction" to show that changing reading and writing practices made it necessary to reconfigure reading "in terms both subservient to, and defiant of, those dictated by liberal capitalism" (p. 12). So, instead of considering the *act* of reading as being passive or active, accessible or difficult, private or public, moral or immoral, as was sometimes thought and reinforced by certain institutions and quarters of society, the contributors to this volume set out to resituate this suddenly problematic act *within* such theoretical and value-judgment laden dichotomies. Readings were thereby qualified not so much as being either "x adjective"/or "y adjective," but instead, neither x/nor y, or sometimes just both. In that sense, this book underscores the essential *fluidity* of modern reading and of our reading of modernity.
With her characteristic lucidity, Rosemary Lloyd opens the volume by demonstrating how Mallarmé always read "*as* a poet, always responding to technical experimentation or achievement in preference to subject matter" (p. 25). She shows that the great Symbolist, perhaps the quintessential *poeta faber* in a Gallic line running from Malherbe to Ponge, wants his readers, whoever they are (including himself), to

appreciate a poem for its capacity to trigger "long and profound reveries not just as regards theme and organization but also the choice of words....The aim of poetry is not love (or indeed any other theme) but the creation of poetic beauty" (pp. 28-29). Lloyd finishes by examining Mallarmé's remarks about a few of Zola's novels and states that his reading was always comprised "both of an intellectual understanding of the plot and how it is constructed, and of a more emotional response to the language" (p. 33). We might infer from this remark that formalism and structuralism thus appeared destined to spring out of at least one side of his pensive head.

Aimée Boutin follows with an intriguing comparative analysis of key male and female figures of English and French Romanticism, concentrating on Amable Tastu, the dedicatee of one of Desbordes-Valmore's texts. Comparing the term "poet" and the typically more derogatory "poetess" Boutin proposes alternatives to what she rightly calls the latter's supposed anti-intellectualism. By contrasting the "sentimental tradition of the woman poet with the well-read poetess" (p. 36) she also deconstructs a historically significant cliché opposing male and female poets. In the process she demonstrates that as with more canonically recognized men, reader response in Mme Tastu in fact "circulates through the mind rather than just the heart" (p. 39). I will have more to say about this "reader response" later.

Elsewhere in the collection, Adrianna Paliyenko makes an analogous point she develops further in a wonderful forthcoming book about "genius [vs. penis] envy." Citing Malvina Blanchecotte and Louise Ackerman, she argues that the former *qua* poet inhabits a kind of *in-between* and positions her voice "between realities and dreams as well as between sentiment and thought…" (p. 193). In this way she deflects the biographical literalism, i.e. her femaleness, "through which conservative critics typically filter poetry by women" (p. 193). In addition, while dazzled to a certain extent by Shelley's treatment of invisible laws of nature (refracted by the Cloud in his eponymous poem), Ackermann ultimately turns away from Romantic idealism to expose, "via the sense that nature withholds its mystery from science, the limits of positivist inquiry" (p. 205).

Timothy Raser examines three different poetic versions of the same topic: the island of Cythera during the 1850s. Composed by Nerval, Baudelaire, and Hugo, each of these texts contains references to the types of positive or negative reaction to actual places and things felt by many other Western writers travelling in unfamiliar lands. From Gautier's treatment of Spain to Flaubert's field work in Egypt with Nadar to Renan's prayer on the Acropolis, mid- to late-nineteenth-century voyagers were of course especially interested in the so-called "Orient," which Edward Said has now definitively rendered problematic as a purported geo-cultural unity. Yet upon arriving "there"—whether in person or else via their imagination and readings of other contemporary accounts—many authors felt disenchanted, disabused. Raser shows us how texts by these three poets in particular relate their disappointment when discovering a real, modern island "where a myth or legend had been expected" (p. 73). He also reminds those working in the "literary" field of what historiographers have believed for a long time. To wit, that an idea, say, a myth like that of the Goddess of Love Venus's sacred island of Cythera, can be transferred, like a possession, from one reader to another; that it can be altered in radical ways. And in this manner, it came to signify nostalgia for Nerval, guilt for Baudelaire, and progress for Hugo.
Raser then takes his own reading of Hugo's "Cérigo" a step higher, as it were, and proposes a brilliant visual explanation for the initials VH and JD found in a well-known drawing by Hugo himself. Superimposed on each other in the sky where the planet Venus usually appears, these initials repeat pictorially the merging of the Romantic poet's general theme of aging love with his belief in a more enduring, eternal love between him and his longtime, if now less beautiful, mistress, Juliette Drouot. In what seems, too, like an apt meta-textual remark about this entire collection of essays, Raser opines that the image of Cythera passes from "poet to poet much as a digital document might, displaying mark-ups, deletions, and additions" (p. 87). As do so many other time-honored images, tropes and topoi, we might add. For, as he then concludes: the common elements to each of these three versions "take on an independent existence, showing up not necessarily in the first reading, but later, as an after-effect, a

belated stirring that tells us there is life there, in the play between the poems" (p. 87). Is this play not the same or at least similar to that play intrinsic to the very concepts of intertextuality and *différance*?

On that note, E.S. Burt's impressive analysis of "reckless reading" in Nerval's *Les Nuits d'Octobre* commences with a quotation from Barthes about the process of reading. One which conceives it as a deconstructing/deconstructive tool that can collapse stable formal and thematic structures which less exigent critics sometimes extrapolate or extract from texts when reading them. Burt rereads the French translation of "The Key of the Street" by George Salas (falsely attributed to Charles Dickens) that serves as a presumably adaptable guide to Parisian streets for the narrator in Nerval's text. She then demonstrates that while Salas's English realism is concerned with social anxieties, the latter's actually dealt more with anxieties about legal codes. The question of legality is of course *key* around this time of Napoleon III who, in Burt's words, tried to "pass off the Empire as Republican and himself as an elected and hereditary ruler" (p. 72). Playing on various repeated grapho-phonemic elements of Nerval's text, however, she convincingly shows that the public poster imagined by Nerval instead substitutes something which is in fact linguistic for something natural. Something which, in other words, "demands a reading practice prepared to go outside the lines of prevailing codes, including that of realism … [as] a means for disrupting ideological claims that nature precedes politics" (p. 72).

In similar De Manian fashion, Kevin Newmark characterizes reading as a "desperate practice." He hones in on the triad of Baudelaire-Mallarmé-Valéry, derived from the last poet's essay on "La Situation de Baudelaire." Given the volume's front cover reproduction of Manet's "La Chaise" (reproduced in Mallarmé's translation of Poe's "Le Corbeau" as well), it is no doubt fitting that Newmark's essay appears in the volume's last spot, completing the symbolic circle. For Valéry's place in the line of symbolist and post-symbolist French readers reading Poe is incontestably clear. He was, after all, perhaps the first great poet-theorist of the twentieth century who articulated so many elements of what we now understand as modern literary criticism. Whatever the case, with the support of Benjamin's work on translation, Newmark then suggests that Baudelaire's poetry in particular may be considered "original" only because of its successive dissemination in and translation by other poets in other works. He proposes that the modernity of *Les Fleurs du mal* derives not, as Valéry seemed to say, from its capacity to engender in its wake newer poetic movements, in some linear, genealogical manner. But rather, from its actual interruption of history as a sequence of discrete acts by means of "'translating' it into a linguistic mode of deferred recognizability; from [then] on, only that which can be read in order to be re-written otherwise can be retained as an 'origin'" (p. 236). Quoting Benjamin, he explains that Baudelaire's poetry is historical then in that it begins where "ordinary experience is interrupted" (p. 245); and stresses that the end of subjective experience "coincides with a writing discontinuous with any proper meaning…." I take "proper" here to mean a fixed, stable signification. Newmark finishes by stating that we remain faithful to writing only insofar as we acknowledge and repeat "the gratuitous gesture of forgetting everything but its unspoken demand for a response to the blankness it carries within it …" (p. 247). The question we might ask is whether such "desperate reading" might not be equally applicable, theoretically speaking, to poets from several other times and places.

In her erudite piece, Catherine Witt studies the role of satire and judgment in "Au lecteur," the liminary text in Baudelaire's major collection. Identifying recurrent stylistic features in different editions and prefaces of *Les Fleurs du mal* as diverse as its quasi-archaic typography, baroque imagery, updated *tableau* forms, and ostensibly realist(ic) evocations of the body, Witt proves that from the very start the poet's aim is to "expose the vices and follies of modern society, calling attention to its deep moral failings by subverting its aesthetic norms" (p. 99). By underscoring the idea of *sottise* developed in "Au lecteur," she then indicates why subjective assessments of literary works are always open to critique. Truly intelligent readers of that and subsequent poems thus inevitably share with the narrator knowledge of the "innumerability of aesthetic judgement" (p. 106) So, if the reader is asked to learn a strange new rhetoric to understand the collection's message(s) properly, that is because its counter-discourse refers to a diabolical poetic order, "a counter-symbolic order or *satyrranie*" (p. 111).

Joseph Acquisto reflects on Gautier's assessment of Baudelaire's work and compares the former's remarks on Hawthorne's short story, *Rappaccini's Daughter*, to those he made about his French friend's work. His provocative argument is that despite repeatedly asserting the harmlessness of such "sickly flowers," the older poet unwittingly draws a close reader's attention to legitimate dangers, not just imagined or wrongly attributed ones like those put forward by the prosecutor Pinard at the obscenity trial of 1857. Tracing the semantic slippage from metaphors of contamination and poison to that of a remedy, Acquisto wisely concludes that beyond Gautier's claims about these writers, the continual evocation of the American's short story forces us to look beyond superficial differences towards a more complete exploration of a text's power that "cannot be neutralized except at the price of poetry itself" (p. 129). For her part, Helen Abbott offers an analogous conclusion about the reading process depicted in *Les Épaves*, which constantly invites us into a semantic field full of uncertainty. One in which any act of reading always implies mis-reading, always implies "displacing yourself, so that you can approach the text from a different place" (p. 137). Her description also recalls some of the reflections Baudelaire makes in his *Salons* about not just the nature of sculpture but the nature of our perception of it, versus our perception of painting. In an interesting analysis of *Les Yeux des pauvres*, she further shows how this particular prose poem indicates how listening to, and enjoying popular song can also fundamentally alter one's perspective: "it can transpose you as a reader of others" (p. 139).

Robert St. Clair and Nicolas Valazza focus their eyes on the involvement of Rimbaud and Verlaine with the *Cercle zutique* and on the connections between that subversive group and some more conservative Parnassians. Thanks to a pun on the Horatian dictum, (Z)*ut pictura poesis*, St. Clair advances the sound idea that Zutistes scoffed at such a pat classical formula about what they saw as their own more modern poetics. Yet, if the works of those lovers announce, as is often thought, poetry of the future—as Rimbaud's *Voyelles* surely does, given its evocation of the Apocalypse, along with the scandalous, collaborative "Sonnet du trou du cul" highlighted in this essay—the oddly dismissive pose (or "corporeal *zut*") they assume vis-à-vis their contemporaries in the painting *Coin de table* by Fantin-Latour "reminds the viewer that all texts, even those of 'individual genius' are [still] part of a larger group or collective" (p. 158). With respect to the editorial controversies surrounding the dual authorship of that homo-erotic sonnet, St. Clair also makes a fascinating, Deleuzian comment in a footnote, where he wonders whether the poem might actually invite us "to reconsider our current regimes of ontology, authorship, (intellectual) property, and authority, and imagine what they might be like if the One were always also its own negation, always entwined in relations to the multiple" (p. 163, n. 40). For his part, Valazza sets out to determine the extent to which Verlaine was able to shape a "poète maudit" identity out of his own reactions against François Coppée's popular success. The favored parodic target of the Zutistes, Coppée was an established, best-selling author. Verlaine, on the other hand, struggled to publish his books. But it was not so much socio-political ideas—spawned in part by the experience of the Commune—which he and the other Zutistes found most attractive to parody. Rather, it was what Valazza calls Coppée's simplicity, prudishness and platitude. The real problem, then, was not that Zutistes simply opposed Parnassians. What the former poets denounced instead was the prosaic nature of much of the poetry published at the start of the 1870s. In the meantime, true poetry was "reduced to being published in confidential journals, or relegated to a clandestine existence" (p. 185).

David Evans considers the implications of reading poetry aloud. Noting that the silent solitary practice of reading was very popular at the time, he argues that poets continued to conceive of their art in terms of "oral performance, in line with a tradition that may be traced back several centuries" (p. 207). The parallel existence of written and oral poetic modes in the post-Romantic era appears to offer some explanation, however, for how the "division between high and low art was constructed" (p. 210). Banville's popular *Odes funambulesques*, for instance, present the poet as a street performer declaiming humorous, simple verse most anyone could learn to impress particularly sentimental listeners. One thinks here, too, of Verlaine's "Chanson d'automne." Yet, oral elements that usually did not figure into print, such as the rhythmic interpretation and tone of a poet's voice, often still had an effect on the

success or failure of a text. Gautier, for example, admired Baudelaire for his ability "to articulate the typographical effects of the printed page" (p. 213). Evans then moves on to Mallarmé for whom he states the meaning of a work is transferred from the author/speaker to the audience, especially in his conception of how to read his imagined Oeuvre. Such a complete work (*Gesamtkunstwerk*?) may thus never be fully apprehended in a single session or performance. Rather, "the work is fragmented, open, always in process" (p. 225). In this way, Mallarmé eventually reduces poetry to pure silence and envisages the text, speaker and audience as participants in an "absolute ritual, the purpose of which is neither entertainment, moral edification, or political persuasion" (p. 227). Evans correctly insists, though, that for all its theorization, Mallarmean poetry sounds exquisite when read aloud.

Yet, what remains a bit surprising in this very fine volume is a lack of reference to reader-response theory. Given its emphasis on the dynamics between readers and writers, one might have expected to find more acknowledgement of previous work in this general domain by critics like Iser, Fish, Leenhardt, Holland, Bleich, Riffaterre and even, Moretti. And while Jauss and Gadamer are briefly cited, it is precisely for the former's "Literary History as a *Challenge* to Literary Theory" (my emphasis) and the latter's reading of Paul Celan alone, more than for their over-arching theories about the process of reading. Let me be clear, however. In saying this, I merely wish to ask whether more direct engagement with that other body of scholarship might not help yield even more new methods and results for future readers of the vast corpus of nineteenth-century French poetry. Whatever the answer, the present collection constitutes an exciting and extremely useful place from which to start re-reading that paradigm-shifting era.

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