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Françoise Meltzer, *Seeing Double: Baudelaire's Modernity*. Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2011. 264 pp. Notes, index, table of contents. \$45.00 (cloth), \$7 to \$36 (e-book). ISBN 978-0-226-51988-3.

Review by Laurence M. Porter, Michigan State University emeritus.

Meltzer's witty, paradoxical title prepares her characterization of Baudelaire, not as a harbinger of modernity, but as one of its belated victims. The promise that 1848 would usher in a new era of social justice and expanded rights of citizenship—the rights to participate in and shape society—ebbed after a few months. French chattel slavery was finally abolished in 1848, to be sure, but an imperialistic dictatorship replaced the Second French Republic and endured until after the poet's death. Urban renewal destroyed low-cost housing on the Right Bank of Paris, in the area of the *grands boulevards*, tearing apart the social networks of the poor as well. The Paris Commune of 1870, in which the urban poor suffered more casualties than the victims of the Reign of Terror, was only the most spectacular aftershock of these cataclysms. Meanwhile, the wealthier tiers of the bourgeoisie triumphed as commerce and industry dominated increasingly, reducing the old landed aristocracy to relative financial insignificance. Authors had to learn to serve new masters—not aristocratic patrons, but profit-seeking publishers. In brief, Meltzer implies that Baudelaire's poetry was not so much a social barometer that predicted change as a seismometer that recorded it after the fact. But he also became a scapegoat for the forces of law and order in the new imperium. The blasphemy, sadism, and lesbianism in some of his poems, however chaste and muted its expression appears today, led to his arrest, trial, and condemnation in 1857, after which seven of *Les Fleurs du Mal* were censored.

Meltzer knows Baudelaire's broad and diverse corpus of writings thoroughly. She structures her beautifully-written book as a series of four richly contextualized readings of individual poems: "Assommons les pauvres!" (prose), "À une passante" (verse), "La Chambre double" (prose), and "Harmonie du soir" (verse). She associates these works, respectively, with "Beliefs," "Seeing," "Money," and "Time." Her introduction clearly situates Baudelaire in relation to these fundamental topics.

Chapter one, "Beliefs," convincingly traces Baudelaire's awkward transition from being a disciple of the radical socialist Proudhon (up until 1852, according to Richard Burton) to a disciple of the arch-conservative, ultramontane Catholic Joseph de Maistre, who was far more conservative than Saint Augustine (note that the on-line, annotated translation of Maistre's complete works, edited by the Canadian scholar Richard Lebrun, appeared recently with InteLex). Meltzer lucidly explains how Baudelaire came to find Proudhon intellectually inadequate (pp. 48-60). She also analyzes Maistre's heretical rigorism well (pp. 31-35), but she exaggerates its influence on Baudelaire by seeing only one side of the notion of reversibility in Catholic doctrine. It involves the suffering of the righteous in order to redeem fallen humanity, but also, the joyful brotherhood of the righteous who cheerfully share part of their superabundance of spiritual merit with repentant sinners. Whereas Maistre emphasizes the essential role of blood sacrifice—such as that of Christ—in making any human salvation possible, and moves from there to glorifying the sacred role of the executioner. Maistre

claimed that the Terror, according to God's will, forced evil to cleanse and purge itself with its own hands.

On the contrary, Baudelaire (see his verse poem "Réversibilité"; and contrast Meltzer, p. 181) emphasizes the doctrine of the Communion of Saints: the supererogatory merit of the Saved, accrued in a measure beyond that necessary for their own salvation, can be transferred to assist in the salvation of less morally perfect humans. This notion appears again in Baudelaire's intimate journals, when he appeals to the late Mariette, "la servante au grand cœur," and to Poe [sic] to appeal to God on his behalf. Again, Meltzer would have enriched the theological and psychological dimension of her analysis of "the joy of descent" (p. 42) as involving a form of masochism, if she had developed the notion of Abjection (see Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 1982 [1980]). But she convincingly fulfils her major aim of tracing the notion of a fundamental human depravity through Baudelaire's work, with half a dozen original readings of the prose poems. A few more examples from the verse would have reinforced her argument.

"Seeing" in chapter two presents Meltzer's most original argument. In the memorable medical metaphor that organizes her book, she says that Baudelaire suffered from strabismus (pp. 14, 71-72, 95, and 97): he was a "cross-eyed" poet, whose vision was split between a hopeless nostalgia for times past, and the future shock of the emerging present. His modernism uses the transitory to open a vision of the immutable (p. 83). I disagree, however, with Meltzer's understanding of *déjà vu*. She says: "The afterimage [of the encounter in "À une passante"] awakens a *déjà vu* that closes off the possibility of seeing again" (p. 101). This is *déjà vu* backward, where the initial encounter is clearly remembered, while the second, later one is only a faint, unreal possibility in the narrative future. In true *déjà vu*, it is the initial encounter, in the narrative past, which is vague and mysterious. Its meaning has been lost, but the second encounter bears the possibility of recuperation. Meltzer nevertheless articulates a major insight: "Baudelaire's crisis is a search for an apodictic [a guiding moral imperative], one that does not sacrifice antinomy on the altar of logic" (p. 113). She characterizes his desperation well (p. 117). As a social being, when not distracted by privileged moments, the artist is *persona non grata*. Rootless, drifting idly in an anonymous city, he becomes an irritant, owing to his indiscreet, inquisitive gaze. His poetry reveals things his contemporaries couldn't see—dreams, drug-induced visions, the vanished past—and things they didn't wish to see: a rotting carcass on the sidewalk, widows, orphans, cripples, beggars, the frail elderly, social discrimination, the underclass, crime, and the fatuous self-satisfaction of the privileged. A psychoanalytic interpretation could see Baudelaire as schizotypal: withdrawn, superstitious, eccentric, and blurting out uncomfortable truths at inappropriate moments. A bit of *lagniappe* at the end of the chapter offers a fresh, detailed explanation for why Baudelaire did not really appreciate Manet; art historians should consult it (pp. 126-136).

The blending of detailed, informative biographical information and persuasive psychological speculation concerning Baudelaire's frustrated sense of entitlement makes chapter three on "Money" valuable by saying at greater length what has not yet been said enough. Baudelaire's scorn for money enslaved him to it. The chapter ends with an insightful analysis of the poet's alienation from the increasingly predominant commercialism of his time (pp. 182-195).

I find it otiose to debate whether "La Chambre double" is really one room or two rooms—it is two ways of being, either oblivious or harassed. It seems mistaken to hypostatize the lyric self's subjectivity here. It would be more enlightening to synthesize by saying that the lyric self's persistent financial debts are the material counterpart of his unforgivable moral debt to God, owing to Original Sin. Ambivalently accepting these condemnations, the lyric self cannot help resenting that the deficient love he has received—from his family, and from God—has left him in a desperate situation. The two worlds of the ideal and the real are always connected in Baudelaire, through the dynamic of decay that continually accompanies and undermines human aspirations to ascension.

Even in the ecstatic “Harmonie du soir” (as so often elsewhere), joy deteriorates into memory. The trajectory of *Les Fleurs du Mal* as a whole moves from a failed or inaccessible esthetic ideal to a failed or inaccessible ideal love to the attempted self-detachment of the spectator, the *flâneur* of the *Tableaux parisiens*. *Grosso modo*, this figure then effaces itself in third-person reports of desperate human attempts at mind-altering evasions: intoxication, lesbianism, sadism, masochism, blasphemy, and death. The final frame poem, “Le Voyage,” replaces the steady moral descent of the representative individual of “Au lecteur” with restless horizontal movements that everywhere confront the reader with the spectacle of human corruption. In the prose poems, the *flâneur*’s detachment itself breaks down, leaving only the allegorical *Étranger* as an unattainable model, the only person whose *Chimère* is not a burden.

Chapter four, “Time,” begins with an original, persuasive discussion of how the inscriptions on the family gravestone glorify Baudelaire’s stepfather and literally crowd out the poet. Surviving friends and admirers of Baudelaire’s poetry finally arranged for a cenotaph in a distant corner of the Montparnasse Cemetery. There a somber thinker, apparently representing the spiritual and eternal aspect of the poet, contemplates Baudelaire’s inert body (pp. 198-201). But when Meltzer segues into discussion of “L’Horloge,” she overlooks that the clock’s minatory prosopopoeia also includes a Latin translation of the message (the topos *memento mori*), and the triumphant claim “Mon gosier de métal parle toutes les langues.” In other words, the clock, like Jesus’ disciples after Pentecost, possesses the gift of tongues; it is one of God’s agents. Although its allegorical character makes passing time appear more remote, its prosopopoeia makes it overwhelmingly present. Although the poet’s many appeals, his apostrophes, remain unanswered in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a prosopopoeia, in contrast, is a form of prepotent communication, an irresistible sonic intrusion like a police siren or a ringing phone or doorbell. It overrides all concurrent messages. And by forgetting the importance of the collection’s frame, Meltzer underestimates the intensity of the threat of passing time in Baudelaire, which includes not only death, but also damnation.

In analyzing the poem “Harmonie du soir,” the keystone of this chapter and, perhaps, the most hopeful poem of the collection, the technical discussion of how it is a pantoum that is not a pantoum is pointless (pp. 229-230). In her interpretive discussion, Meltzer misses both the poem’s temporal sequences and its setting (p. 231). The key rhyming series “encensoir--reposito--ostensoir” reveals the details of both. At High Mass a censer, filled with smoldering incense, is carried through the sanctuary (in this instance, through Nature) to drive away evil spirits and purify the site before the ritual occurs. A “reposito” is a portable altar, carried in processions and used to celebrate the Mass outdoors. The monstrance (ostensoir), a metal container representing the sun and its rays, reveals the consecrated host or a holy relic. In static, commemorative form, it represents the priest’s gesture of elevating the host at the climax of the mass, just before the faithful come forward to receive communion. In the natural setting, the sunset corresponds to the blood sacrifice of Christ on the cross, and “ton souvenir” that rises at the conclusion obviously corresponds to the pale rising disk of the full moon, like the Host in shape and color. Meltzer could have reinforced her thesis of Baudelaire’s discrepant, simultaneous double visions by glossing the ambiguous “ton”: it could refer either to Christ or to a loved person whose memory comforts the lyric self. Baudelaire was not a devout, practicing Catholic, but at times his intense religiosity strived to sacralize and help redeem the fallen, materialistic society in which he lived, and whose shortcomings Meltzer has suggested so memorably. She also characterizes well the intensity of Baudelaire’s privileged moments in the present, contrasting *Erlebnis* with *Ehrfahrung* (pp. 210-212).

As Meltzer points out, Baudelaire’s keen social consciousness gives the lie to Sartre’s pompous generalization: “Baudelaire wanted to be two people, in order ... to realize in this couple the final possession of the Self by the Self” (p. 8). Instead of engaging in a willful, narcissistic project to identify the world with himself, Baudelaire struggled in vain to understand that world: “the period during which Baudelaire was writing corresponds to so many changes in daily life that he does not

actually *understand* what he is seeing, even as he records it" (p. 5; emphasis in original). His poetic journal would not reflect insights superior to those of other writers, but greater confusion. Meltzer considers him as probably the greatest poet of his century because his poetry gives us a clear picture of that confusion. But her strabismus metaphor raises the interpretive problem of causality. Taken literally, strabismus is involuntary; it results from a constitutional weakness.

If the historical period in which Baudelaire wrote was too complex for him to understand because of its rapid, manifold changes, does that mean that he was more emotionally vulnerable than other writers of his time, who presumably were less affected by the same confusions? Like the proverbial canary in the mine shaft, he would be an outlier in terms of sensibility. But the more Meltzer elaborates intricate interpretations of his poems, the more she risks undermining her analysis by emphasizing Baudelaire's artfulness. At the same time, her broad, deep view of the culture of his times—which will certainly, here and there, be of interest to cultural historians—does not jibe with her close-up view of his art, a view oblivious to the supersegmental structures of *Les Fleurs du Mal* as a collection, as well as its implicit but sustained dialogue with Baudelaire's *Petits Poèmes en prose*.

To mention only the two most obvious of these structures, the syllepsis of the title *Les Fleurs du Mal* itself militantly distinguishes esthetic (formal) beauty, understood as artificial, from moral beauty (edifying content). To the extent that the title may refer by extension to lesbians, it emphasizes the poems' analogous independence from conventional moral codes. Within this static set of oppositions, a feverish dynamic of rising and falling animates Baudelaire's poetic universe. Considered as movements to which the lyric selves passively submit, descent (as in "Au lecteur") always corresponds to moral abjection. Ascension, in contrast, may correspond either to amoral esthetic exaltation, to spiritual elevation, or to both—or remain morally ambiguous ("Hymne à la Beauté"). Descent, however, may correspond either to a positive affirmation of moral independence ("Le Reniement de saint Pierre") or to a failed attempt at self-abasement ("Les Litanies de Satan").

I find three major points of disagreement with Meltzer's book. All of them have to do with the need to make finer distinctions. First, she consistently takes the attitudes of his lyric selves too seriously. The "bleak irony" she identifies (pp. 42, 44) is certainly present. This would be cosmic irony, a worldview according to which the cosmos is not designed to gratify our hopes or desires; no human efforts can alter our fate; and no justification or explanation of our suffering ever will be proffered. But the "astonishing travelers" of the final poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, "Le Voyage," deliberately trivialize that suffering in their summation of what they have seen everywhere: "Tel est du monde entier l'éternel bulletin" [such is the unvarying (and, by implication, tedious) news report from the entire world]. These travelers, like the quasi-preacher in "Au lecteur," the other outer edge of the lyric collection's frame, deploy rhetorical irony, a figure of thought that dramatizes the opposition between the insight of an experienced speaker and the blindness of a novice or dupe. Meltzer further diminishes Baudelaire by not taking account of his Romantic irony, which makes him akin to Byron, Heine, Musset, or Stendhal. This trope appears frequently in the playful, rueful self-disparagement of the prose poems vis-à-vis their verse doubles. Meltzer brilliantly analyzes many instances where "[Baudelaire's] writing can produce two images that do not communicate with each other" (p. 6), but these are only part of the picture, instances of a disempowered double consciousness that sometimes overwhelms but never definitively obliterates the empowered double consciousnesses of irony.

Second, she proposes an image of an exaggeratedly helpless Baudelaire: "the period during which Baudelaire was writing corresponds to so many changes in daily life that he does not actually *understand* what he is seeing, even as he records it" (p. 5). This characterization seems to reflect the phenomenological, Geneva-school views of Georges Poulet. It was exhilarating to read Poulet's brilliant, original essays on his authors' cognitive Gestalten, but these took examples from all periods of an author's career, and from all the modes of an author's writing, without discrimination.

This method obscured both an author's intentions and an author's development. You may rightly object: "How can we speak of an author's 'intentions'? Even when a text announces them, a text has no One True Meaning that a master critic can unearth, like a buried treasure, from beneath the surface. There are as many meanings as there are critical minds that have perceived a work." True, but one cannot absolutely privilege the idea of authorial helplessness over other ideas, despite much countervailing evidence. Meltzer, like Poulet, blurs the identity of the lyric self with that of the implied author.

These two identities overlap, of course. Where do they diverge? The implied author appears alone in the supersegmental heterodiegetic elements of a text that are not subject to pre-established conventions (unlike prosody, triplication, formulaic diction, thematic composition, topoi, and so forth). Examples appear in framing and in the manipulations that transform story (the raw events of a narrative in "natural" chronological sequence) into plot. More broadly, the implied author appears in the metacognitive elements of a text, in organizing principles some of which are chosen from among many available conventions, and others that are newly invented or, more likely, inflected. For instance, *Les Fleurs du Mal* combines a quest narrative with a lyric autobiography, as does the other greatest lyric collection of nineteenth-century France, Hugo's *Les Contemplations*. Taking Meltzer's memorable characterization of the confusions, disruptions, and incoherence of mid-century France as a starting point, one could argue that both Baudelaire and Hugo choose the form of a life story that allows them to impose at least a personal meaning on experience. Both record their spiritual quests; both quests remain unresolved, as did the political situation in France. Many fine critics have written about the "architecture" of these collections. Subjecting those critics to a *damnatio memoriae* in favor of a phenomenological approach anterior to theirs is retrograde.

Third, Meltzer oversimplifies the Symbolists' relationships to language, lumping them together with facile phrases such as "Baudelairean motifs were to reappear in Mallarmé, but self-consciously, posing the incapacity of language to represent" (p. 248). As I explained at length in *The Crisis of French Symbolism* (Cornell, 1990), the French Symbolist movement is not characterized by an exceptionally dense use of symbols, or by a lack of confidence in the ability of language to signify, but by a sense of a breakdown in communication. Each major poet emphasizes a different problem concerning the process of communication. Combining classical rhetoric with Roman Jakobson's model of the communicative act, we have: Inspiration (*inventio*, mistrust of which characterizes Mallarmé); Code (the ability of the language system to signify, mistrust of which characterizes Verlaine); Contact (the ability of a message to attract the attention of its intended recipient, mistrust of which characterizes Baudelaire, as in "De profundis clamavi"); and Receiver (fraught with artistic self-consciousness, Rimbaud imagines an attentive but disapproving audience, which listens to his message only in order to reject and attack it). All these modes of conceiving the poetic vocation represent a turn away from history to an individualist and, at times, solipsistic mode of creativity, in contrast to the narrative emphasis of the Romantics. Baudelaire's abiding interest in social problems, greater than that of the later Symbolists, makes him an appropriate focus for a study of the historical import of the lyric.

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