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Suzanne M. Singletary, *James McNeill Whistler and France: A Dialogue in Paint, Poetry, and Music*. London and New York: Routledge, 2017. xv + 204 pp. Figures, plates, notes, bibliography, and index. \$150.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-4200-0.

Review by Lee Glazer, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

American-born, London-based, but with enduring personal and professional ties to Paris, the expatriate painter and etcher James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) has been difficult to place in canonical histories of artistic modernism. His *Symphony in White, No. 1: The White Girl*, rejected by the Royal Academy and the Salon, became, with Edouard Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, the most talked-about painting at the Salon des Refusés in 1863. At that moment, both artists, part of what art historian Michael Fried has dubbed "the generation of 1863," seemed poised to carry Parisian painting into the future.[1] The following year, Whistler and Manet posed with other leading avant-garde artists and writers for Henri Fantin-Latour's *Hommage à Delacroix*. Whistler occupied the literal center of the picture, but his connections to that creative community came to be marginalized in twentieth-century scholarship. Whistler himself was partly to blame: in the 1860s and 1870s, when he aspired to conventional success, he placed his faith in the expanding British art market, ostentatiously renouncing his association with Courbet and "ce damné Réalisme" and, fatefully, turning down an invitation to exhibit with the Société anonyme coopérative des artistes peintres, sculpteurs et graveurs—the Impressionists—in 1874.[2] Later, embittered by a falling out with his patron Frederick Leyland over the Peacock Room and by the dire financial consequences of his libel suit against critic John Ruskin, he adopted a combative stance not only toward the public, but toward other painters, as well, fashioning himself as "a dreamer apart," his world "completely severed," as he put it in the *Ten O'Clock* lecture, from that of his "fellow-creatures." [3] It was during this latter period that he sought to expand his market reach in Europe and the United States.

Whistler's supposed alienation and cosmopolitan rootlessness enhanced his reputation in the years immediately before and after his death. Memorial retrospectives were staged in Boston, London, and Paris, the multiple locations a tribute to his peripatetic life and transatlantic affiliations. "Trois grandes nations s'en disputent la gloire," observed Léonce Bénédite, director of the Musée du Luxembourg, "l'Amérique où il est né, l'Angleterre où il a longtemps vécu et où il est mort, et la France, où il s'est fixé, où il avait toutes ses amitiés et où il a été jugé de suite à son mérite." [4] When histories of artistic modernism came to be written in the years following the First World War, however, a French-centered teleological paradigm superseded more complicated stories of transnational interchange and influence. Because he lived and worked mostly in London, Whistler studies became largely the province of British scholars, who interpreted his work as a revolt against the specifically Victorian penchant for descriptive naturalism and moralizing narrative.

Suzanne Singletary's *James McNeill Whistler in France: A Dialogue in Paint, Poetry, and Music* seeks to reposition Whistler as central figure in the Paris-based modernist pantheon. By pairing him with five canonical French painters—Courbet, Manet, Degas, Monet, and Seurat—and interpreting select works

within their respective oeuvres through a resolutely aestheticist reading of Baudelaire, Singletary argues that “Whistler enjoyed a rich reciprocity with French artists, poets, and critics that not only impacted his work and those of his comrades but also affected the formulation and trajectory of modernism” (p. 178). It is true that Whistler’s relationship to advanced French painters has been understudied (though not quite to the extent the author maintains), and this book represents an effort to fill that gap in the scholarship.

*Whistler and France* is an expanded version of the author’s 2007 dissertation; adding Courbet and Monet into the mix of artists considered allows Singletary to argue for Whistler’s ongoing and uninterrupted engagement with Parisian painting from mid-century Realism to fin-de-siècle Post-Impressionism. In the introduction, she describes Whistler scholarship as having been dominated by connoisseurship, on the one hand, and biography, on the other, though she neglects to reference Daniel Sutherland’s 2014 *Whistler: A Life for Art’s Sake*. Her account of the state of the field is somewhat dated. Even if scholars of French art have been reluctant to incorporate Whistler into their work, Whistler studies as such have enjoyed a remarkable efflorescence since the last big retrospective of his work in 1995. The availability of Whistler’s complete correspondence online and the digitization of related archival materials and historic newspapers and periodicals have done more than make fundamental sources universally accessible. They have allowed scholars to focus on analysis, interpretation, and questions of context with greater rigor than ever before. Those resources are not brought to bear on this study in a significant way. And, despite a lengthy bibliography, *Whistler in France* overlooks some of the best recent work by art historians such as Linda Merrill, John Siewert, Aileen Tsui, Caroline Arscott, and Anna Gruetzner Robins, whose work has broken down rigid national boundaries and stylistic categories, effectively putting to rest the idea that Whistler was an eccentric isolate.[5]

It is in this expanded field, then, that *Whistler and France* takes its place, though less to challenge the very notion of an authoritative and singular narrative of modernism than to insist that Whistler is a crucial part of that story. The author describes her approach as interdisciplinary, a combination of intellectual history (“a reconstruction of the intellectual scaffolding” supporting the artistic innovations of Whistler and his coevals); textual explication (“a thorough analysis of key critical texts” by Baudelaire, Gautier, Poe, Mallarmé, Wagner, Duret, and others); formal analysis (a consideration of how “the persistent themes and debates that were threaded throughout nineteenth-century thought” are manifested in a variety of expressive mediums); and an assessment of subject matter (an exploration of shared “iconographic concerns” across disciplines that reflects “social and cultural changes” of the Second Empire and Third Republic) (pp. 10-11). It is Singletary’s hardly novel contention that Whistler and his French confreres were responding to the alienating and positivistic aspects of modernity by pursuing artistic expression that was subjective, interiorized, and self-referential. Formal, thematic, and iconographic similarities in the works considered are, indeed, among the most compelling evidence for Singletary’s argument. It is unfortunate, then, that the illustrations, mostly poor-quality black-and-white images plus one color signature, don’t do justice to the works’ subtleties. Also, given Singletary’s insistence on defining modernism as a radically heightened appreciation for subjectivity, her central argument would have been strengthened by a greater attention to contemporary critical reception and a more rigorous analysis of her literary sources. Quantifying, qualifying and contextualizing the period meanings of such frequently invoked terms as “harmony,” “charm,” “originality,” “*correspondances*,” and so forth would have given greater weight to her argument by demonstrating that her twenty-first-century understanding of the artists’ concerns also aligns with how they were understood at the time.

Chapter one, “Crossing Thresholds,” begins with an examination of Baudelaire’s essay on Wagner, into which he inserted the opening stanzas of “Correspondances” from *Les Fleurs du Mal* and made Wagner’s argument for the synthesis of poetry, music, and their affective power his own. Singletary focuses on Baudelaire’s notion of the musicality of aesthetic experience, noting that for him and the artists he influenced, music becomes “a template for a totalizing, absorptive experience that immerses the listener, reader, or viewer within limitless, interior spaces” (p. 13). This allows her to read Whistler’s Nocturnes, as well as his forays into interior decoration and exhibition design, as evidence of “his intention to wrap

the viewer in a musical atmosphere...[,] not simply to alter perceptions of physical space, but to touch a spiritual chord as well” (p. 24). As this passage makes clear, Singletary is less interested in the urban atmospherics and veiled geographical specificity of the Nocturnes than she is in offering them up as “amorphous” tone poems that must be decoded “little by little and part to part” (p. 18) through concentrated attention over time that parallels the experience of listening to music. She applies a similarly synaesthetic reading to Whistler’s painted and actual interiors, giving particular attention to the Peacock Room, whose primary title, *Harmony in Blue and Gold*, she mistakenly renders as *Harmony in Green and Blue* and, later, as *Harmony in Blue and Green* (pp. 6, 20). Errors related to Whistler’s life and art occur throughout the book: the White House on Tite Street was not the artist’s “ultimate” residence (p. 23); the *Little White Girl* features one vase, not several (p. 82); Whistler did not paint his Nocturnes *sur le motif* (p. 89). These small errors inevitably raise questions about the author’s mastery of her subject. More problematic still is the general lack of rigor and nuance. This opening chapter, for instance, elides the complex webs of translation and transmission of Baudelaire’s work back and forth across the Channel. Whistler likely knew *Les Fleurs du Mal*—though not its author—before it was translated into English by Charles Algernon Swinburne. But, as Linda Merrill has noted, it was Swinburne who “provided the philosophical underpinnings” for Whistler’s emergent aestheticism, which first surfaced not in Paris, but in Chelsea, among the Pre-Raphaelites who gathered at Whistler’s house in Cheyne Walk to admire his Chinese porcelains and enjoy his American mother’s cooking.[6] Whistler’s art worlds were many, and their boundaries were permeable, a fact that somehow goes missing in this study.

The Baudelairean “musical thematics” (p. 37) proposed in chapter one govern the artist pairings that follow. In chapter two, “The Artist’s Studio,” Singletary argues that despite Whistler’s well-known anxiety of influence regarding his relationship with Courbet, their artistic practices and personae, embodied in seemingly oppositional self-portraits in the studio, testify to a shared interest in “concretizing a personal vision” (p. 66). This vague conceit carries over to the next chapter, “*Voyages*,” where Baudelaire is invoked as a “formative and enduring influence” (p. 76) on Manet and Whistler and the key to understanding the desire to transcend objective reality manifested in the anti-narrative, somewhat abstracted marines and images of women in white that occupied both artists in the 1860s. In chapter four, the focus is on Whistler and Degas’s enthusiasm for seventeenth-century Dutch painting mediated by the writings of Gautier, Poe, Baudelaire, the Goncourts, and others. Paintings of women in domestic spaces such as Whistler’s *At the Piano* and Degas’s *The Bellelli Family* are described as representations of “psychic interiority” (p. 102)—the subject’s, the artist’s, and, eventually, the beholder’s. An aesthetics of reiteration as a trope of subjectivity is explored again in chapter five, where Mallarmé’s Symbolist poetics becomes a pivot point in a three-way dialogue between Mallarmé, Whistler, and Monet. This would have been another opportune moment to underscore just how complicated these dialogues could be by resorting to a basic exposition of the facts: Mallarmé had been in London in 1863 to learn English in order to read Poe; this was the same year that Swinburne got a personalized copy of *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* from Baudelaire and the same year that Whistler commenced his aesthetic reinvention through the study of blue-and-white porcelain and ukiyo-e prints. Whistler would not meet Mallarmé until later, but it was surely Mallarmé’s familiarity with contemporary British art and Aesthetic poetry as much as his affiliation with Monet that made him an ideal French translator of Whistler’s 1885 manifesto, the *Ten O’Clock* lecture.

The penultimate chapter, “Seurat’s Butterfly,” brings Whistler into the Post-Impressionist moment of the late 1880s, a period when the artist was more invested in the Parisian art world than at any point since the 1850s. French Symbolist critics played a major role in reassessing Whistler’s art, emphasizing for the new generation its elusive, poetic qualities and precipitating a “*culte du Nocturne*,” thanks to writers such as Huysmans, Geffroy, Blanche, and Proust and composers such as Debussy. It is surprising, then, that Singletary chooses to focus on Seurat as Whistler’s most revelatory Parisian interlocutor. She discusses their mutual interest in what Whistler termed “the science” of art and does a little old-fashioned source hunting, examining two instances in *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte*—a butterfly and a girl jumping rope—where Seurat appears to be quoting Whistler and thereby

highlighting the artificiality of a modern excursion to the park. Though there is an acknowledgement that Whistlerian terms like “harmony” carried utopian political meaning in the radical anarchist circles to which Seurat belonged, Singletary wants us to read his work through the lens of Baudelaire, Wagner, and Schopenhauer (p. 167). Thus, *Whistler in France* ends back where we began, underscoring the circular nature of its argument.

The international turn in art history in the last generation has not only expanded parameters for understanding individual artists, it has also underscored that no single narrative can account for the complexities of nineteenth-century artistic production and its relationship to cultural modernity. So, even though Singletary’s argument for enlarging “the contextual parameters in which Whistler has been perceived” (p. 10) is legitimate and welcome, her study ultimately falls short, both as an analysis of Whistler’s work and as a revisionist account of artistic modernism. In its attempt to “insert...Whistler into the dynamics of the French avant-garde” (p. 11), *Whistler and France* flattens out differences among its principals and, in the end, oversimplifies both nineteenth-century French culture and aesthetic discourse and the complex, transnational networks in which Whistler operated.

#### NOTES

[1] Michael Fried, *Manet’s Modernism: Or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

[2] Whistler to Henri Fantin-Latour, September 1867, in Margaret F. MacDonald, Patricia de Montfort and Nigel Thorp, eds., *The Correspondence of James McNeill Whistler, 1855–1903*; including *The Correspondence of Anna McNeill Whistler, 1855–1880*, ed. Georgia Toutziari, University of Glasgow, <http://www.whistler.arts.gla.ac.uk/correspondence/>, accessed January 11, 2018.

[3] James McNeill Whistler, *Mr. Whistler’s “Ten O’Clock,”* Delivered 1885 (London: Chatto and Windus, 1888. Reprint, London: Pallas Athene, 2011), pp. 11, 9.

[4] Léonce Bénédite, *Exposition internationale de 1900 à Paris*, Rapport du Jury international: Deuxième partie: Beaux-Arts (Paris, 1904), p. 590.

[5] See, for instance, Linda Merrill, ed. *After Whistler: The Artist and His Influence on American Painting* (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2003); John Siewert, “Art, Music and the Aesthetics of Place in Whistler’s Nocturnes,” in Katharine Lochnan, ed., *Turner, Whistler, Monet* (London: Tate Publishing in association with the Art Gallery of Ontario, 2004), pp. 141–157 and “Interior Motives: Whistler’s Studio and Symbolist Mythmaking,” in Lee Glazer and Linda Merrill, eds., *Palaces of Art: Whistler and the Art Worlds of Aestheticism* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2013), pp. 81–92; Aileen Tsui, “The Phantasm of Aesthetic Autonomy in Whistler’s Work: Titling the White Girl,” *Art History* 29.3(2006):444–75; Caroline Arscott, “Subject and Object in Whistler: The Context of Physiological Aesthetics,” in *Palaces of Art*, pp. 55–66; and Anna Gruetzner Robins, *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and His Impressionist Followers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

[6] Linda Merrill, *The Peacock Room: A Cultural Biography* (Washington, D.C., New Haven and London: Freer Gallery of Art and Yale University Press, 1998), p. 51.

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