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Julien Zanetta. *L'Hôpital de la peinture: Baudelaire, la critique d'art et son lexique*. Paris: Éditions Rue d'Ulm, 2022. 216 pp. Notes, bibliography, illustrations, and index. €25.00 (pb). ISBN 9782728807895.

Review by Timothy Raser, University of Georgia.

The condemnations declared by Baudelaire in his art criticism often act on his readers like black holes: their attraction is irresistible; they alter the geometry of their surroundings; they emit no light. These judgments elicit wonder for their accuracy, as though prediction of or conformity to current taste were some sort of accomplishment. Whether because of their effect on his prose, or because of their effect on other critics, they are avoided. Resisting this gravitational influence, Baudelaire's treatment of certain artists—Delacroix, Guys, Boudin, Meryon, for example—has been extensively discussed, passages of his where praise is often followed by explanations or articulations, others frequently qualified as prose poems, some that stand investigation independently of the works described. Further, because readers are more interested in what constitutes beauty than in what does not do so, the failings of the artists who don't meet his standards have not often elicited analysis. Baudelaire relegated those works that failed to excite him to “l'hôpital de la peinture.”[1]

The plight of these works has induced Julien Zanetta to write *L'Hôpital de la peinture: Baudelaire, la critique d'art et son lexique*: “on peut avancer que ce qui est moqué, ce qui est tourné en dérision ‘à la manière des petits journaux,’ tout ce qui se trouve relégué dans ‘l'hôpital de la peinture,’ offre une diversité bien plus riche que l'appréciation, si complexe fût-elle, d'un idéal propre au critique” (p. 12). This orientation resists Baudelaire's judgments and proposes to delimit points of opposition against which to consider the poet's praise and to formulate the problems that his theories attempt to overcome: a profoundly innovative undertaking. It is thus necessary to conceive of the poet as an antithetical writer (even if he criticized antithesis vehemently): “on ne peut penser la bonne peinture qu'au miroir de la mauvaise” (p. 12). To accomplish this, Zanetta grants a privileged status to the painterly vocabulary of the artists themselves, arguing that Baudelaire's use of that jargon was accurate and that it designates features of painting that were of critical importance at that time. The choice of disregarded works and the technical vocabulary that indicates their failings brings Baudelaire into closer contact with other Salon critics of the nineteenth century and permits comparison with them. Further, Zanetta's twenty-eight color illustrations are invaluable references in discussions of Baudelaire, whose preference for colorist over linear painting defines almost all his most celebrated descriptions.

Concentrating then on how studio signifieds are transmitted, Zanetta is of course analyzing signifiers: both the battery of painterly techniques employed by painters and the lexicon of terms used to describe those techniques. Thus, what Zanetta offers—beyond a new appreciation for Baudelaire’s descriptions—is a rhetoric of mid-nineteenth-century Salon writing in France. Having convincingly shown that Baudelaire’s use of the studio’s lexicon is neither opportunistic nor terroristic, he organizes his study by those terms: *poncif*, *gribouillage*, *bruit*, *papillotage*, *peinture municipale*, *doute*, *décrépitude*. Several of these words figured in titles of the chapters of the *Salon de 1846*, showing how closely Zanetta hews to Baudelaire’s early thinking, but implicitly admitting that this lexically defined approach was discarded in the poet’s later art-writing.

Each term is explained, synchronically and diachronically. *Poncif*, for example, comes from the stencil patterns where pumice (*pierre ponce*) was used to transfer a drawing from a paper pattern to a wall where a fresco was to be painted. By the time Baudelaire used it, however, *poncif* had come to mean any ready-made or pre-conceived pattern used to fill in parts of a painting, and *poncifs* thus found extensive use among practitioners of linear paintings whose drawings needed transferring.

Such terms are initially descriptive rather than evaluative, even when used by writers like Baudelaire, who can hardly be accused of neutrality: *papillotage* explains why he thinks Diaz de la Peña’s color is inferior; *poncif* shows why Glaize’s composition is unoriginal. What occurs though is that the name of the technique comes to designate a flaw, since it can be recognized and what can be recognized can’t be beautiful. *Poncif* thus underwent a transformation: from the stencil used to transfer a line drawing to a wall, it came to mean a ready-made idea, a step down if originality was what the critic sought to find. But these reversals keep on occurring, so much so that, when he wrote his *Fusées*, Baudelaire himself stated that the creation (rather than the use) of a *poncif* was an achievement: “Créer un poncif: c’est le génie.”[2]

It is with respect to *poncifs* that Zanetta turns to Théophile Sylvestre and the Goncourt brothers, whose assessments of Ingres (and implicitly, Raphaël) use the term to condemn individual paintings and entire schools. In these cases, *poncif* becomes synonymous with what is already known, and discovering *poncifs* in painting serves to discredit any claim to originality or innovation. Here, use of the lexicon discourages inspection of paintings: once a pattern is recognized, judgment falls and looking ceases. This is especially evident in the pages devoted to the Goncourts, where description is replaced by ridicule.

The fate of *poncifs* is that of terminology more generally: used initially to describe accurately and to engage other critics, terms rapidly become pure signifiers of value. In the case of *poncif*, it no longer means “outline,” but “cliché.” In the case of other terms, they are no longer descriptors but vehicles of judgment. Their story is that of dead metaphors that signify once again if their earlier state can be glimpsed.

Zanetta’s approach, more so than that of any other reader of Baudelaire’s art criticism, shows just how well the poet read the paintings he found at the Salon, even those he disparaged. His descriptions were not simply poetic, but also precise and in dialogue with other critics of his time. Further, they show that he considered less well-known figures, not just the heroes that we know of. This is an exemplary reading and a contribution to the field.

The undertaking runs its course by the eighth chapter, where Zanetta shifts to a different strain of studio talk: terms like *éclectique*, *indifférent*, *tempérament*. Here, what is at stake is no longer a painterly signifier but the commitment of an artist to a single ideology, where Baudelaire admired those artists who had made a definitive choice, who possessed what he called *tempérament*. Here too, the terms do the work of esthetic judgment's binary thinking: the painter either has or does not have a temperament; he has either made a commitment or he has not.

In the penultimate chapter, Zanetta addresses Baudelaire's famous claim that "le meilleur compte rendu d'un tableau pourrait être un sonnet ou une élégie."^[3] Looking at those verses that appeared in Baudelaire's *Salons*, he determines that "c'est à la vertu suppléante de la poésie qui ne craint ni la rivalité, ni la redondance avec l'objet de son commentaire, qu'il est fait appel" (p. 163). Poetry does not add a layer of interpretation to the description of a painting or sculpture but is a confirmation in verse that the work merits inspection.

It is with his last chapter, "De la décrépitude comme catégorie esthétique," that Zanetta steps into the gravitational field mentioned earlier: the famous mistake in judgment in Baudelaire's letter to Édouard Manet from 11 May 1865, the one that reads "vous n'êtes que le premier dans la décrépitude de votre art."^[4] Here it is difficult to see the bright side of relegation, or any antithetical structure at all: the judgment appears peremptory. That a famous poet should make such an apparently dismissive remark to a soon-to-become famous painter—who was also his friend—has elicited commentary from a long list of scholars including Paul Valéry, Pierre-Georges Castex, Anne Coffin Hanson, and Antoine Compagnon, all of whom try to square Baudelaire's prescience, Manet's greatness, and this comment.

The poet's remark occurs in isolation, and Zanetta forgoes any attempt to inscribe it in a dialectic. An obvious choice would be to oppose Manet and Constantin Guys, but this would place Baudelaire outside of the current consensus regarding the former's greatness. Better then to leave both out of consideration: "Si Delacroix est un artiste fait, entier, complet, Manet ou Guys ont encore de la marge, ce sont deux artiste *in statu nascendi*" (p. 172).

Zanetta's analysis of studio rhetoric promises to enable us to understand how Baudelaire engages with works on the walls of the Salons. When, however, that lexicon occurs outside of the antithetical constructions that surround its early uses, it turns away from the works described and its usefulness declines: a fault has been found, a word has been uttered, and a swipe has been made, leftward. Zanetta acknowledges as much when he describes the discomfort felt on recognizing the failures of the poet's last judgments: "Manet agite, suscite une sourde panique chez les critiques: soit on s'emporte facilement, comme Théophile Silvestre; soit on parle de saisissement, mais du bout des lèvres et très prudemment, comme Thoré; soit on prend fait et cause pour le paria, faisant que le scandale retienne aussi bien le nom du peintre que celui du critique, comme le jeune Zola à partir de 1866" (p. 174).

I take Baudelaire's description of his own critical stance as a recommendation for readers of his works—his poetry for certain, but his criticism too: "je me suis contenté de sentir; je suis revenu chercher un asile dans l'impeccable naïveté."^[5] That pleasure in feeling, that "naïveté" before the work is to be found especially in those works Baudelaire likes, the ones where condemnation and its recognitions, faults found, and explanations have been resisted in order to allow enjoyment to occur. This means succumbing to his esthetic choices and removing recognition from esthetics.

That said, Zanetta's consideration of the works that filled the wards of painting's hospital reveals Baudelaire to be a much more deliberate critic than he himself claimed to be and to have had analytic abilities that he does not admit to possessing. These are revelations, for they show the poet's art criticism to be every bit as contradictory as his sonnets and elegies.

NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, "Salom mde 1846," in *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1975-1976), II: 415-496; II: 472.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I: 662.

[3] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, I: 428.

[4] Charles Baudelaire, *Correspondance*, ed. Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), II: 497.

[5] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, II: 578.

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