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Joseph Acquisto, *Reading Baudelaire with Adorno: Dissonance, Subjectivity, Transcendence*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 192 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$110.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9798765103005; \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9798765103012; \$79.20 U.S. (epub and mobi). ISBN 9798765103029; \$79.20 (pdf). ISBN 9798765103036.

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When examining distant galaxies, it is sometimes useful to employ the mass of intervening objects to bend the light passing from those galaxies to our eyes, magnifying their image to the point where they become perceptible to earthbound instruments. The effect is called gravitational lensing; its magnification is often accompanied by distortion, but for the most remote objects, it produces images we otherwise could not see at all. In literary criticism, the thoughts of nearer, strong thinkers enable us to discover features hidden in the writings of older poets, features that have been worn into platitudes by years of reading. The thoughts of the more recent thinker cause smooth surfaces to snap once more into relief, permitting us to read them afresh. One might say that Baudelaire is not so distant from us, but when it comes to aesthetics, his thinking is light-years away from ours. Joseph Acquisto has chosen to use such lensing to read Baudelaire, and has written *Reading Baudelaire with Adorno*, where the gravitational mass is Theodor Adorno's. The gambit is extraordinarily successful. Rarely have I found readings that cut so close to the anxieties, the uncertainties and aporias that make up a certain poetics practiced by Baudelaire.

For four decades, Baudelaire studies have benefited from the belated discovery of Walter Benjamin's writings on the poet. Acquisto's choice of Adorno is thus surprising, for Adorno was critical of Benjamin's dialectics, and following the former's path takes Acquisto away from recent studies that privilege shock, aura, and *flâneurs*. For the most part, Acquisto leaves behind "the poems of urban modernity that form the core of Benjamin's analysis" (p. 1). His interest "is not to supplant a Benjaminian reading of Baudelaire with an Adornian reading, nor to add fuel to Adorno's arguments against Benjamin...but, rather, to suggest a different sort of productive engagement with Baudelaire that emerges in other aspects of Adorno's work" (p. 4). What he proposes, then, is not to "map concepts of the latter onto works of the former...[but] to read them together, to establish points of mutual illumination between them" (p. 8).

To "work out the consequences of the renewed subjectivity it enacts" (p. 169). Acquisto asks us to read Baudelaire's poetry subjected to the gravitational influence of terms refined by Adorno: "My guiding concepts of dissonance, subjectivity, and transcendence are ideas he [Adorno] develops in contexts that are not related to, or even centrally anchored in, his literary criticism but belong instead to his work in philosophy and writings on music" (p. 4). Baudelaire himself

wrote (albeit speaking of painting) that “la critique doit être partielle, passionnée, politique.”[1] Acquisto’s work shows how the poet’s imperative anticipated the evolution of critical discourse and assures his ability to be read almost two centuries after writing those words.

Dissonance is the first of the terms to exert its pull: in Adorno’s usage, dissonance is an essential element of harmony. Where there is no dissonance, there can be no harmony, and harmony evolves closely on the heels of dissonance: “the Western system of harmony depends on the tension that is provided by dissonance, without which there would be none of the resolution on which the harmonic system depends” (p. 30). Berg’s dissonances in *Wozzeck* become less dissonant, but not simply because of the passage of time: they open unheard harmonies to us.

Acquisto uses this concept to discuss the role of irony in Baudelaire’s poetry, initially that of “L’Héautontimorouménos,” but then more generally. There the poet writes “Ne suis-je pas un faux accord / Dans la divine symphonie”.[3] “Faux accord” implies formal considerations: musicality, mathematical relations, and so on, but under Acquisto’s inspection, the term is far more corrosive and extends to the notion of subjectivity itself, for poetic subject and the poet’s subjectivity become interchangeable, and when the poem is the subject, what becomes of the poet?

Dissonance does not just express an aesthetic reaction to a combination of sounds: because it is constantly redefining itself, it puts the poetic subject itself in question and with it, the very possibility of univocal meaning. In “Le Flacon,” this meaning is figured by Lazarus, an image impeded by dissonance from achieving the plenitude the poem seemed first to promise: “The unity of a fully coherent whole thus stands in contrast to the dissonance of the other imagery, the unruly associations unleashed by the scent that refuses to be contained” (p. 65). As a result, the very genre of the poem (love poem? descriptive poem? complaint?) falls into question: “The genre of the poem thus likewise also both decomposes and allows for a framework by which to shift the poem away from hackneyed considerations of romantic love and toward questions of the possibility of subjectivity in relation to objects” (pp. 68-69).

Under the pressure of this (negative) dialectical reading, subjectivity opens unsuspected perspectives. We saw that the poet as “faux accord” imperiled the unity of the “divine symphonie”: returning to “L’Héautontimorouménos,” Acquisto traces how the “je” of the poetic subject becomes unstable and how the “tu” of the “je/tu” dialogue takes on new meanings. Here Baudelaire announces Rimbaud and “*Je est un autre*”:[2] “By doing violence to the lyric poem’s typical representation of subjectivity, the speaking subject lends objectivity to the poem; at the same time, in reconfiguring grammatical subjects and objects, the language of the poem acts, in its turn, on the lyric subject who is now reconceived through the linguistic configuration of the poem that produces the lyric subjectivity” (p. 90). But even then, the subject’s disintegration has not reached its end: “In this poem of doubling, Irony itself is multiple, performing, like the subject himself, a role in the poem without being defined, or, rather, defined precisely by that lack of definition” (p. 91).

One would expect, were Acquisto’s readings conventionally dialectical, that a synthesis or recuperation would follow oppositions of harmony and dissonance, subjectivity, and objectivity. This is not the case: he seeks out instances of apparent transcendence in the poet’s work and

shows how no promise is extended, much less fulfilled, to rise above the contradictions that permeate the world described. This he brings to his excellent reading of “Je t’adore à l’égal de la voûte nocturne...”, which “accomplishes a new kind of transcendence by refusing to represent mimetically a simple realm beyond the materiality of bodies in the world.... Rather, the poem performs a voluntary disruption of notions of higher and lower by establishing the equivalence between body and sky and the metaphorical connotations of both” (p. 137). Refusing to decide whether the poem is addressed to a woman or the sky, he allows the ambiguity--and the discomfort that results from it--to persist.

Acquisto turns to “Le Goût du néant,” the poem Adorno chose as emblematic of the modern condition, for his conclusion. “The ideal of blackness with regard to content,” Adorno writes, “is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction.... That the world, which, as, Baudelaire wrote, has lost its fragrance and since then its color, could have them restored by art strikes only the artless as possible.”[4] Acquisto plunges into the darkness of this blackest of poems, where no possibility of passive reading is allowed (or, indeed, in any of the poems he has so expertly analyzed), and argues that instead, the reader is pushed into a never-ending engagement: “Any desire on the reader’s part to be “swept away” by the poem as the subject wishes to be swept away by the avalanche is thwarted by the imperative to contemplation inscribed in the poem and also activated by the way the poem, by the very way in which it constructs the desire for nothingness, raises questions that require a turn toward the conceptual. The process is without synthesis, without end, as the conceptual soon shows its limits and returns us to the experience of the artwork which necessarily surpasses conceptual attempts to grasp it” (p. 162). Instead of an image or concept that sums up the poem and pushes us along, we remain in the weeds, finding our way: a predicament that recalls patterns from Baudelaire’s life, but Acquisto has already shown that this poetry is far more rewarding and multifaceted than any biographical allusion. Instead, it is an announcement of poetry to come: “Such a view of the new potential in art as it reveals itself in Baudelaire and characterized by Adorno is in no way an attempt at redeeming art; rather, it insists on this new potential for art being actualized because art can never be redemptive in the usual sense” (p. 163).

“Partial, passionné, politique.” The complexity and thoroughness of Acquisto’s readings is something we find only rarely and can spring only from a deep conviction both in the value of poetry and the possibility of bringing that value to light: something that was already difficult in Baudelaire’s lifetime and that has only become more difficult since his death. This filtering of Baudelaire through Adorno is especially productive when he considers poems that have fallen out of favor in recent years: “Élévation,” “Le Flacon,” “L’Héautontimorouménos,” “Je t’adore à l’égal de la voûte nocturne...”, “Le Goût du néant.” Reduced to psychological terms, these poems tend to represent a torn or divided consciousness, a state of mind that might elicit pity or compassion. Acquisto, however, ensures that such sympathetic interpretations are only one of the many levels at which the poems can be understood.

It’s also when Acquisto is explaining “Le Goût du néant,” that the stake of his argument becomes clear: these careful readings open onto ever-more general abstractions, allowing interpretations at psychological, rhetorical, sociological, and philosophical levels, among others, interpretations that interact with each other, producing dynamic relations. Acquisto emphatically does not want to present one poem or one detail as exemplary; he is not one to take the part for

the whole. And here, his insistence on Adorno's methods finds its own antithesis: "In a series of lectures on dialectics in 1958, Adorno returned to his debate with Benjamin on Baudelaire, and while he admits that when he returned to them..., he is still ultimately critical of Benjamin, now chiefly because of his privileging the part at the expense of the whole (p. 165)." Acquisto reads whole poems; he takes works from all the *Fleurs du mal*, from *Le Spleen de Paris*; for Adorno, he reads *Aesthetic Theory*, *Notes to Literature*, and *Critical Methods*; he discusses Adorno on music, on literature, on ideology. His engagement with current scholars is extensive. He is no *homo unius libri*.

Where Benjamin found generalities in the detail, Adorno uses names in place of entire arguments or movements, a kind of proper-noun shorthand that carries him as though on stilts over the entanglements of syntax and lexicon. What results though is that explications fall by the wayside, because they are either known to the reader or can be done by the reader, producing the same conclusion. To those of us who are fascinated by close reading, Adorno appears stand-offish, unwilling to take up the challenge of textual analysis, and losing the benefits exemplification would add to his arguments. By doing the work of attending to Baudelaire so closely, Acquisto provides two valuable services: he provides the close readings so often lacking from Adorno's texts, and he reveals depths of a dialectic in Baudelaire's thought, a dialectic that the poet himself (wrongly) invited his readers to qualify as mere contradiction.

NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 2 vols., ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975-76), 2:418.

[2] Letter by Arthur Rimbaud to Georges Izambard, 15 May 1871, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Archives et Manuscrits, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10021498f/f59.item>.

[3] Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, 1:78.

[4] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. and ed. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

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