



Katsaros, Laure. Whitman, Baudelaire, and the Hybrid City. [review]

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REVIEWS

LAURE KATSAROS. New York-Paris: *Whitman, Baudelaire, and the Hybrid City*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012. 176pp.

Connecting, comparing, and contrasting Whitman and Baudelaire is a frequent enough practice in Comparative Literature studies. One recurring feature of such analyses (as in Marshall Berman's recent chapter in *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman* [2010]) is their propensity to center on the amount of space devoted to the city by these poets, despite the fact that much of Whitman's imagination—starting with the title of his *magnum opus*—relies greatly on natural environments. Examining both poets together may appear the logical thing to do. After all, 1855 saw the publication both of Whitman's first sustained attempt at free verse and of eighteen poems by Baudelaire, which were to be included two years later in the earlier edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*). It is a well-known fact (thanks, in part, to Betsy Erkkila's *Walt Whitman Among the French: Poet and Myth* [1980]) that the Good Gray Poet's perception of his French counterpart—mentioned only once in his writings, in his article "Poetry of the Future" [1881]—was as limited as it was inaccurate. To make things equally frustrating, there is no written record suggesting that the celebrated translator of Poe's stories and poems was even remotely aware of his American contemporary. The first-ever French review of Whitman's poetry, however, Louis Étienne's infamous "Walt Whitman, philosophe et 'rowdy,'" appeared in the November, 1861, issue of *La Revue européenne*, which also featured one poem by Baudelaire—"Recueillement" ("Recollection"). Laure Katsaros, commenting on this happy coincidence, concludes that the French poet "went to extraordinary lengths to make sure that each of his published poems appeared exactly as he wanted them," and therefore could not have *not* cast at least a cursory glance at the remainder of the periodical, and, as a consequence, must have perused Étienne's scathing diatribe. Katsaros concludes that the "impression of Walt Whitman he would have received is a distinctly repugnant one." What ultimately links these poets, she notes, is that "[b]oth Whitman and Baudelaire, in the eyes of their more conventional contemporaries, degraded artistic and moral ideals by speaking of outcasts and ordinary people in a language more direct than poetry had ever used before."

Katsaros, trained in France, is now an associate professor of French and European Studies at Amherst College. The book contains an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. Its central thesis is that both poets wrote at a time when their home cities—Paris for Baudelaire, New York for Whitman—were going through irreversible changes. This, the reader is led to infer, is probably what is meant by the "hybrid city" in the book's subtitle, a city in which traces of the past were being relentlessly smoothed over and the future was being aggressively actuated. For Katsaros, indeed, both the ruthless and much-needed

remodelling of Paris by Baron Haussmann and New York's dizzying territorial and population expansion "encapsulated the political, cultural, and aesthetic uncertainties" out of which the poets perfected their own style and language. Katsaros focuses on both poets' rewriting of traditional poetry, which leads her to attend to Baudelaire's city-themed prose poems rather than his more lyrical and more influential rhymed poems.

One thing that this book does not do, however, is offer a systematic examination of the two poets side by side. After the thoroughly-researched general introduction, which adroitly puts both poets into perspective, they each go their separate ways, with Baudelaire making a brief reappearance at the end of the two chapters devoted to Whitman, while the latter is hardly ever mentioned in those focusing on Baudelaire. Reading the book cover to cover, readers might, because of this distance kept between the two poets, find its title somewhat deceptive. Not meaning in any way to disparage its author, this reader is left with the impression that Katsaros seems more conversant with French than with American literature. This may account for a highly idiosyncratic way of reading Whitman, with which many American scholars might be uncomfortable, but which this reader finds fairly convincing in quite a few places. Since Whitman's poetry is not being examined in strict and systematic relation to Baudelaire's, the general impression one gets through the pages devoted to the author of *Leaves of Grass* is that his poetry is ultimately read *through* that of his French counterpart. This method results in the evocation of a darker, more precarious, and less assertive Whitman than we have become accustomed to in most Whitman scholarship. This approach yields very intriguing results, as when Katsaros writes about Whitman's "I"—the book's best pages—that it "is no more a center than any of the multiple and fleeting voices surrounding it." She offers food for thought—and courts controversy—when she casts over the sheer exhilaration of Whitman's enjoyment of the city a Poesque and, at least to this reader, slightly incongruous pall, as when she writes that "[s]tripped of his will, of his words, and of his body, he let himself become one of the 'little plentiful manikins slipping around' on Broadway, in 'Song of Myself'—a ghost endlessly circulating through the streets and avenues—an echo chamber reverberating with the inhuman sounds of the city." It is not so certain, furthermore, that most Whitman scholars would agree with Katsaros when she writes that "[b]y turning their attention to the city, Baudelaire and Whitman must re-create, in words, the shock of thousands of bodies, faces, and eyes—the terror of endless multiplication." It may rightly be argued that *terror* is not an emotion one readily associates with Whitman's mostly rapturous experience of the city. Her reading of the impact of the latter on Whitman's style, however, is as accurate as her thesis on narrative in *Leaves of Grass*: "We are presented," she writes, "with a radically simplified form of perception, in which sheer enumeration takes the place of imaginative syntax."

It must be noted, on a more technical note, that some rare philological details escape Katsaros' otherwise meticulous attention. Her anachronistic equation of *ennui* with *boredom*—which is the meaning the word has come to take in contemporary French but which, for Baudelaire and for many other nineteenth-century writers, Flaubert included, still carried much of its darker and loftier classical flavour—makes it well-nigh synonymous with the French

poet's beloved *spleen*, a meaning which, literatures moving in mysterious ways across the Atlantic as they do, may have led Whitman specifically to seize on this word in its adjectival form (i.e., *ennuyé*). Not enough information is provided to substantiate the startling claim that “[i]n *Leaves of Grass*, Whitman reinvents New York in the likeness of a European capital.” Such a statement might even be perceived to run counter to Katsaros’ analysis of Whitman’s borrowings from Native American languages. More careful editing would also at times have been welcome. On page 15, for example, a casual reader might be forgiven for thinking that the author is implying that Stendhal and Whitman were exact contemporaries, because the situation of the Italian opera in New York such as Whitman knew and enjoyed it was indeed much different and more varied in the 1850s and 1860s than in the 1820s, which is the period targeted by Stendhal’s cruel joke in *The Chartreuse de Parme* (first published in 1839). On page 109, the evocative assumption that “[t]he avenues of Haussmann’s city do not exist for the flaneur, but for the automobiles that yet do not exist, but are conjured by them” is strangely oblivious to the fact that, for all of Baron Haussmann’s well-meaning desire to rationalize and sanitize Paris, one of the functions of the large thoroughfares carved out by Napoleon III’s urban planners was to make 1848-style barricades more difficult to erect and to facilitate the movements of troops through the city. Paris was very soon to have more than its share of armies, French and foreign, parading down its boulevards and avenues. Katsaros’ explanation of the Parisian *faubourg* as both a suburb and a street seems surprisingly to lack the awareness that those streets, although gradually absorbed within the city’s limits, used to be located outside the walls running around Paris, and therefore were once technically suburban too.

For all its unavoidable occasional lapses, however, and despite not being the much-awaited definitive comparative study of Whitman and Baudelaire, *New-York Paris*, because of its uncommonly darker portrait of the author of *Leaves of Grass*, should be required reading for all scholars unafraid to proceed “[i]n untrodd’n paths.”