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Charles Baudelaire, *Paris Spleen: Little Poems in Prose*. Trans., Keith Waldrop. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2009. xiii + 99 pp. \$22.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8195-6909-7.

Review by William Olmsted, Valparaiso University.

Despite the difficulty of translating lyric poetry, Charles Baudelaire's poems exist in dozens of English versions whereas his prose poems have been translated much less frequently. The difference stems in part from the lyric poetry's incomparable intensity and the decisive way it rearranges the literary landscape, an intervention negatively acknowledged by the trial of *Les Fleurs du mal* for obscenity and blasphemy. Nothing quite so radical inhabits the fifty prose poems, despite their scholarly reputation as the source of a new literary form. The prose poems, furthermore, inhabit their era to a larger degree than does the lyric poetry. Keith Waldrop's introduction to his translation shrewdly calls attention to Baudelaire's "raillery" and "snarl of satire" (p. viii). There is in fact a great deal of comedy in the prose poems—comedy of both the absolute and signifying forms that Baudelaire identified in his essay on laughter, the former related to the profound or primitive and the latter to the comedy of manners.^[1] Here, however, the translator faces an insuperable problem: how to convey the raillery aimed at Baudelaire's original readers without disrupting the flow of his language by means of notes and commentary.

Waldrop elects to place his confidence in the language alone, almost entirely without recourse to marginalia. He provides a mere sixteen footnotes for the whole volume. By contrast, Edward K. Kaplan, in his 1989 translation of the prose poems, offers six pages of explanatory endnotes.^[2] But in both cases, what must elude the twenty-first-century reader is Baudelaire's *comique significatif*, the mordant edge of mockery that targeted contemporary practices and beliefs. When Baudelaire's narrator in the prose poem translated by Waldrop as "Knock Down the Poor!" refers to books he had been reading "sixteen or seventeen years ago" (p. 94), non-specialist readers have no way of knowing that the narrative occurs in the revolutionary year of 1848. One might argue that such details hardly affect the general thrust of the poem, with its absurdly funny role reversals—man beats beggar, beggar beats man—and apparent repudiation of charity. Yet the lack of a specific historical anchor, one that Baudelaire's contemporaries would have instantly recognized, tends to float the comic satire into an indefinite and merely idiosyncratic realm of meanings, a space of legendary urban encounters.

Perhaps this is not an altogether bad effect, given Baudelaire's attraction to the *comique absolu* that he admired in artists such as Goya. As Baudelaire remarked in the letter to Arsène Houssaye that customarily serves as a preface to the prose poems, "Which of us has not, in his ambitious days, dreamt the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm or rhyme, supple enough and striking enough to suit lyrical movements of the soul, undulations of reverie, and the flip-flops of consciousness" (p. 3). Waldrop often succeeds in capturing this musicality, as in his lovely rendering of lines from "A Hemisphere in a Head of Hair": "At the blazing hearth of your hair I breathe the odor of tobacco mixed with opium and sugar; in the night of your hair, I see glittering the infinite tropical azure; on downy beaches of your hair the combined odors of tar, musk, and oil of coconut send me" (p. 32). As this example suggests, Waldrop's strength as a translator resides in his feeling for flow and rhythm. He stumbles occasionally when confronted with Baudelaire's odd amalgamations of slang with elevated diction. The conclusion to "Solitude" contrasts Pascal's "cell of meditation" to "all the fools [*affolés*] searching for happiness in movement and in a prostitution I would call *fraternalistic* [*fraternitaire*], if I

wanted to speak in my century's uppity tone [*belle langue*]” (p. 46). First, *affolés* would be better translated, despite the homonymic temptation of the f-sound, as “crazed” or “agitated”; second, the neologism *fraternitaire* calls for a word that captures the implicit contrast with *solitaire* [3]; third, “uppity tone” gets near the meaning but loses the irony of the phrase *belle langue*. Also, Waldrop sometimes swerves away from certain choices in order to stress a less obvious (and not necessarily most appropriate) meaning. The use of “Be Drunk” (p. 71) as the title for “Enivrez-vous” does render the imperative but doesn't seem preferable, to my mind, to the more colloquial “Get Drunk” or postmodern “Get High.” Admittedly, it is challenging to follow Baudelaire's mix of registers and tones, his abrupt shifts from vulgar lingo to Racinian formality.

For the most part, however, Waldrop wagers on equivalents that pay off handsomely. Nothing disrupts the well-orchestrated narrative of “The Eyes of the Poor,” including the trap for the translator that occurs when the narrator's lady friend describes the impoverished gapers outside their café as having eyes “ouverts comme des portes cochères!” Adroitly sidestepping a too-literal rendering such as “covered entrances,” Waldrop comes up with “eyes wide as barn doors” (p. 52). Even more appropriate is his decision to retain the precise medical allusion in the title of “Mademoiselle Bistoury” instead of rendering *Bistouri* as “Scalpel.” Although a footnote might have helped here, the double-edged surgical knife (as distinct from the single-edged scalpel on which all previous translators have insisted) suggests the deep ambiguities Baudelaire develops in this prose poem.

Readers with no knowledge of the French originals will find themselves well served by Waldrop's translation. Despite one or two lapses into Franglais syntax as a result of following word order too scrupulously,[4] Waldrop does a superb job of conveying the sinuosity and pulsation of Baudelaire's “serpentine fantasy” (p. 3). The concision and edginess of the prose poems come through clearly, allowing the French-less reader to understand why a philosopher like Derrida could make “The False Coin” (pp. 57-58) the basis of a lengthy meditation on the ambiguities of the gift.[5] Scholarly and expert readers will also find themselves pleased as they encounter English versions that succeed in preserving not just Baudelaire's “snarl of satire” but the very burst of lyricism he attributed to Franz Liszt, “cantor of Voluptuousness and Anguish” (p. 70).

NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), vol. 2, p. 535.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, *The Parisian Prowler: Le Spleen de Paris, Petits Poèmes en prose*, trans. Edward K. Kaplan (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1989), pp. 131-36.

[3] Kaplan ingeniously provides his own neologism: “*fraternitary*” (p. 53).

[4] Thus the speaker in “Mistresses Portrayed” is described as “a calm and sedate looking fellow, physiognomy almost clerical” (p. 83), and while this accurately follows “un homme...d'une physionomie presque cléricale,” it might have been better to have it read “with an almost clerical physiognomy.”

[5] Jacques Derrida, *Donner le temps: la fausse monnaie* (Paris: Galilée, 1991).

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