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Melvin Zimmerman, *Baudelaire & Co.: Intertexts: Pascal, Franklin, Rousseau, Laclos, Stendhal, Poe, Marx, and Others*. Toronto: Editions du GREF, 2009. xii + 160 pp. Illustrations, foreword, and index. \$27.56 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-897018-32-3.

Review by Beryl Schlossman, University of California, Irvine.

Melvin Zimmerman's engaging and passionate book seeks to begin the ambitious task of breaking down the wall of critical and theoretical myths that surround the life and work of Charles Baudelaire, self-styled romantic dinosaur, and author of a range of works that transformed poetry, poetics, and criticism. Some of the intertexts—Baudelaire's virtual interlocutors—shape the vision of Baudelaire's literary world that *Baudelaire & Co.* seeks to explore across the disciplines of literature, philosophy, theology, religion, and political thought. The result is a subtle and wide-ranging work of criticism that explores the impact of Baudelaire's reading on his poetic writing. The chapters explore topics and readings that produce figures of solitude and crowds, self and other, love and sexual violence, ideal beauty and nature. These figures and contrasts that emerge across texts and genres continue to elate and trouble readers with their sense of history—with the immediacy of the experiences of modern life that Baudelaire portrayed as if they belonged to him, or he to them. [1]

Among Baudelaire's most important works, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), is considered to be the single most famous book of nineteenth-century poetry, a work that simultaneously launched modernism and brought a long poetic tradition to an end. Twentieth-century approaches and contemporary criticism continue to underscore the impact of Baudelaire's verse collection and also emphasize *Le Spleen de Paris* (*Paris Spleen*), Baudelaire's pioneer work of prose poetry. Baudelaire's translations, memoirs, art criticism, and literary criticism have found an enduring audience and have confirmed and expanded the poet's transformation of literary and aesthetic culture beyond the wildest imagination of any of Baudelaire's contemporaries. His writings on art and culture place him at the source of the discipline of modern art history and theory. His translations of Edgar Allan Poe and Thomas de Quincy in particular dramatically reshaped the reception and literary destiny of those writers.

Interpretations of the beginnings of modernity and modernist literature come face to face with Baudelaire's enigmatic self-portrayals and their contradictions. The poet's inalterable sense of himself as an old romantic and as an admiring reader of the eighteenth century orients the task of *Baudelaire & Co.* Zimmerman's point of departure is that while critical myths, as he calls them, make it impossible to fly past the nets of idealized romanticism (and other ideological problems that continue to affect the interpretation of the most compelling of modern poets), Baudelaire's constructions of thought and image in poetry and criticism rely on a complex set of intertextual connections linking his work, across time, to writings by a range of writers and philosophers.

The company that Baudelaire keeps—within his work—affects the power of his own work as poet, critic, and writer. From Pascal to Rousseau, described by some critics as an anti-Pascal, the claims made for Baudelaire's allegiances, opinions, and rejections have shaped the responses of many critics. In his view of Baudelaire's perspective on Pascal's Jansenism, Zimmerman admits the poet's complexity and his

contradictory positions. Zimmerman explores Pascal's impact on the poet but aptly judges the limitations of this approach to Baudelaire's thought. He leads us to understand the clearly secular aspects of Baudelaire's modernity—his aestheticism and his emphasis on the senses—as the other side of the poet's sympathetic reading of Pascal. It would be worth noting, however, that Baudelaire felt at home in the larger contexts of French classical thought that Walter Benjamin (rather than the Catholic French writers of the early twentieth century) explored in his interdisciplinary writings on Baudelaire and his work on allegory, with its emphases on classical antiquity, the Baroque, and the nineteenth century. [2]

In a Beckettian play on words that discreetly haunts the title, Zimmerman proposes to explore the commonplaces of Baudelaire's textual "company," and particularly two sets of alternatives that occupy the critic in the task of confronting Baudelaire's nineteenth-century modernity and his extraordinary sensibility to specific works of literature and philosophy of the classical and enlightenment periods. First, Zimmerman's reading of Baudelaire between Pascal and Rousseau is shaped by his study of Baudelaire, the reader and critic, as well as by the substantial work of several theorists and critics, especially Jean Starobinski and Marc Eigeldinger. [3] The works of these two distinguished critics on Baudelaire and the eighteenth century, and especially on Baudelaire and Rousseau, engage Zimmerman's project in the study of Baudelaire's thought and the consequences, interpretive and critical, of Baudelaire's study of French culture of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The critic demonstrates that, if previous critics of Baudelaire choose between Pascal and Rousseau, Baudelaire himself is a more nuanced reader. Second, the author seeks to explore how Baudelaire's complex readings of Rousseau might be articulated with a set of responses to libertine writings. In an interesting echo of Jacques Lacan's introduction of the Marquis de Sade within the framework of Immanuel Kant, Zimmerman proposes Rousseau with Sade, and Sade with Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, a writer who is often overlooked in nineteenth-century studies but whose importance for Baudelaire is striking. [4] These connections make it possible to raise the question of how Rousseau fits Baudelaire's agenda and why Rousseau is important to a Parisian nineteenth-century poet passionately interested in nature, art, and love but also, ineluctably, in the theology of evil and original sin.

Rousseau's perspectives on isolation and society, goodness and evil, and memory, emotion, and the arts enter his writings across several genres, including autobiography (*The Confessions*) and the novel (*La Nouvelle Héloïse* in particular) that Zimmerman explores in readings of Baudelaire's poems and prose poems on the poet's situation, solitude, crowds, wandering, and walking in the mountains. The themes and chapters move from a consideration of Robinson Crusoe at the beginning of the book through politics, morals, the invitation to travel, idealization, memory, pleasure, death and suicide, and beauty. Rousseau's voice is the major one that accompanies Baudelaire in Zimmerman's exploration. Baudelaire's violent response to Rousseau's claim for innate human goodness leads the poet toward Sade and Laclos, while other aspects of Rousseau's writings and his formative influence on the romantics indicate a broader impact on the poet. [5]

In the contexts of art and sensuality that Zimmerman sees as a link between Rousseau and Baudelaire and a limitation of the poet's enthusiasm for the Jansenist Pascal, it is equally striking to observe the impact of the visual image that adds another layer of artistry and aesthetic pleasure to the book. Courbet's 1847 portrait of his friend, the still youthful Charles Defayis Baudelaire (who sometimes signed with one version or another of his mother's maiden name), is reproduced on the cover of *Baudelaire & Co.*, beneath the title. A white plume in a black inkwell and a sheaf of paper are on the left side of a table or desk, and a red sofa with red cushions is on the right. In between, the poet is profiled smoking a pipe and absorbed in reading a large volume. The painter accentuates the forehead, the dark birdlike shape of the poet's dark hair, and the points of light that hold the viewer's attention and draw the poet deep into his reading; his left hand spreads and holds our concentration against a dark ground while the plume anchors our gaze in the passionate attitude of the poet as reader, leaning in toward the book. Our gaze involuntarily follows this path.

He wears the familiar white shirt and loosely knotted pink scarf; his right hand is hidden. The light hits his feather-pen, his white forehead with the stark widow's peak, and the bright linen of his collar. Then the reader of *Baudelaire & Co.* opens the book, and finds as frontispiece one of Nadar's lovely, searing photographs of Baudelaire. The poet gazes deep into the viewer's eyes. His hair is long, and his expression is indecipherable--tragic but formal, suffering yet self-possessed and dignified. But this enigmatic picture, like the other photographs of the poet by Nadar and Carjat, is clear about one thing: Baudelaire's youth has vanished without a trace. It will not reappear in this volume except indirectly, perhaps, in the final illustration that announces Zimmerman's chapter titled "Jeanne Duval and La Belle Dorothee--demythification and decolonization in Baudelaire studies."

This final essay or postface (a term that seems to indicate its importance for the scope and project of the book as its author conceives it) concludes *Baudelaire & Co.* with a courageous and thoughtful examination of racism in Baudelaire's time, in commentaries by his contemporaries including friends, and--hardly surprising but at least as painful reading as the excursions into nineteenth-century racist judgments on ethnicity and "bestiality"--in some commentaries by twentieth-century literary scholars. Zimmerman suggests that personal commentary on race (and a certain tone reserved for some aspects of the poet's sexual life) is out of place in literary scholarship. The same question might be raised about editorial judgments to the effect that some of the women in Baudelaire's life are classifiable as "others"--prostitutes or actresses, black women or Jewish women--presumably because they are not respectable according to bourgeois-colonial criteria of race, class, sexuality, and ethnicity. In this context, it is hardly surprising that some scholars have responded by placing the question of race at the heart of Baudelaire's aesthetic.

Zimmerman is sympathetic to this scholarly protest, and he would like to see scholarship move beyond the myths that have preserved a critical complicity with racist forms of violence, harassment, and expulsion, as well as with an untenable set of clichés. He addresses the questionable use of biographical elements, e.g., the "legend" of Jeanne, in the context of several symptomatic commentaries exposed in this essay.

I would add that the colonial aspect of Baudelaire studies requires an historical understanding of otherness, including race and ethnicity, sexuality, eroticism, and aesthetics in the poet's work. This would be another way of taking up Zimmerman's call for a new Baudelaire studies. As the critic Richard Burton notes on the topic of nineteenth-century Orientalism, Baudelaire's tendency to subversion and ambiguity make it difficult to pin down his allegiances (quoted in Zimmerman, p. 148).

Zimmerman's illustrations of problematic critical discourse confirm the link between critical fantasies of race and the same critical fantasies about eroticism. Certainly the question of otherness in Baudelaire deserves a more subtle treatment, and the often-quoted distinction between black and white or natural and ideal in the poet's writings on women echoes colonial mythology on the one hand, but also literary critical clichés and commonplaces on the other. For example, few readers question the legitimacy of the cycles linking groups of poems to specific women supposed to have inspired them, even though much of the dubious commentary about Jeanne and the poet's sexual relationships takes the reality of those cycles as its springboard. This is strange for two reasons. First, Baudelaire essentially invents the anonymity of the figure of the Poet wandering among unnamed objects of desire, and second, because as a lyric poet seen to be writing from the heart and directly from life (again, according to the conventions of dinosaur romanticism), he is supposed exempt of imagination, the faculty that he most prized. A way out of this untenable position is to conceive of Baudelaire's poetry as trans-romantic, not romantic. Baudelaire revisits the familiar terrain of romanticism but turns it into something new.[6]

Before the postface, Zimmerman includes one last illustration in black and white that looks back from the poet's memory at the beautiful and seductive figure of Jeanne Duval. Baudelaire's ink drawing reveals Jeanne as he once knew her, before the illness that he knew he had given to her, before the fights,

betrayals, and pawnshops, before the bitterness of being her charitable guardian, as he claimed to his mother, and after the illusions and pleasures of love had ended. Baudelaire added a caption, “quaerens quem devoret.” Poulet-Malassis, Baudelaire’s devoted editor, supplied the poet’s name and the date. Jeanne drawn by her lover is shown turning toward the viewer, looking for the one who devours. Is it she who devoured him, or he who devoured her, or both? Unlike the image of the poet absorbed in reading a book, as portrayed by his friend and fellow allegorist Courbet, Baudelaire’s image of his mistress shows her gaze reaching outside the paper, beyond the drawing. If there are clichés in the way he shows her, or if the intimacy of the portrayal seems ill at ease in the pages of a book, the poet does not hold back. They were meant to devour each other.

Love and betrayal, literary survivorship and colonial history meet uneasily in Baudelaire’s portrait of the only woman with whom he lived for any length of time, a woman of mixed race whose mother had left Santo Domingo for Paris. Her gaze reaches us through his gaze, looking moodily and unhappily at his photographers, and occasionally at himself, in the mirror of his own caricatures. Without a second thought, Baudelaire writes about exile and loss, eroticism and slavery. Marooned in the suffocating Second Empire, he writes without the fanfare of some of his peers.

In an assessment of *Baudelaire & Co.* quoted on the back cover of the book, Ross Chambers anchors the book’s remarkable interpretive readings in the conviction, potentially shared with Melvin Zimmerman and others, including this writer, that Baudelaire’s powerful and intrinsically modern sense of writing derives from his depersonalized auto-construction of the writer as subject rather than as the persona of the Author. Chambers alludes to Roland Barthes’s theoretical distinction between author (or Author) and subject, and thus the connection arises between the author under consideration, Baudelaire, and the author as construction.

It is perhaps relevant to note here that Barthes wrote briefly of Baudelaire, but extensively of Proust, whose filial connection to the Parisian poet resonates throughout his long and magnificent novel, *A La Recherche du temps perdu*, as well as in his critical writings.[7] In *The Orient of Style*, I pursue this filiation in the context of an essential aspect of Baudelaire’s style, his modernity, and his invention of anonymity, namely, an early modernist taboo on direct self-expression. Lamartine, Vigny, Musset, and even Banville, Gautier, or Hugo have no reservations about speaking in the first person in their verse; Nerval and Baudelaire go in a different direction. Their first-person voices resonate in a different space, like actors in a theater; those roles and characters are not obviously linked to the personae of their authors. In this sense, the question of the subject rather than the Author, to which Chambers alludes (and which also occupies a substantial role in his rich body of work on the nineteenth century) is essential, and motivates the intertextual approach of Zimmerman’s readings.

This taboo is crucial to help us understand how writers who saw themselves as French Romantics could nevertheless invent modernism by breaking down a wall of conventionality, authorial identification, and literary status quo. The new subject of writing, then, who overcomes the sense of an authorial ego with the intertextual powers of writing, changes forever what might be at stake in the act of reading and the practice of writing. We enter the sphere of that poetic subject, and especially its eighteenth-century resonances, through Melvin Zimmerman’s interpretive study of Baudelaire’s vision.

NOTES

[1] All of Baudelaire’s poetry is in the first volume of Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975 and 1976).

[2] See my review essay on Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire*, in *H-France Review* Vol. 8 (August 2008), p. 87.

<http://www.hfrance.net/vol8reviews/vol8no87schlossman.pdf>

[3] On Rousseau, see Jean Starobinski, *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: La Transparence et l'obstacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), Zimmerman's major reference to Starobinski's many important works on philosophy and literature, and "Sur Rousseau et Baudelaire," *Le Lieu et la formule* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1978), pp. 47-59. On Baudelaire, see Jean Starobinski, "Sur quelques répons allégoriques du poète," *Revue d'Histoire Littéraire de la France* 67(1967): 402-412; and by the same author, *La Mélancolie au miroir* (Paris: Julliard, 1989). On Baudelaire, see Marc Eigeldinger, *Le Platonisme de Baudelaire* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1952), Zimmerman's principal reference among this critic's many books on philosophy, literature, and mythology.

[4] Jacques Lacan, "Kant avec Sade," *Critique* 191(1963): 191-213. This essay, available in the first volume of *Écrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966, 1971), was intended as an introduction to a volume of Sade's works.

[5] On Baudelaire's Rousseauism as discussed by Zimmerman, see Timothy Raser, "Visions du monde: Baudelaire et Cie, by Melvin Zimmerman," *Rivista di Letterature moderne et comparate*, 47/3(July-September, 1994): 308-310. On Baudelaire's citation of Rousseau's thesis of man's goodness, discussed throughout Zimmerman's work, see my essay, "Baudelaire: Liberté, Libertinage and Modernity," *Substance* 22(1993): 67-80, reprinted in *The Gale Group in Nineteenth-Century Literary Criticism* (NCLC-155), 2005.

[6] Beryl Schlossman, *The Orient of Style* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1991).

[7] Marcel Proust (Jean-Yves Tadié, ed.), *A La Recherche du temps perdu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1987-1989).

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