
H-France Review Vol. 16 (July 2016), No. 133

Maya Hadeh, *La Mythologie dans l'œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire*. Oxford, Bern, Berlin, Bruxelles, Frankfurt am Main, New York, Wien: Peter Lang, 2015 x + 286 pp. Bibliography + Index. \$92.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4331-2725-0.

Review by Caroline Ardrey, The University of Sheffield.

Baudelaire's oeuvre brings together a diverse cast of mythical characters, uniting figures from Hellenistic mythology, such as Pyrrhus and Andromache, and legendary creatures like the Hippogriff, who embodies Devotion in "Les Petites Vieilles," with Judeo-Christian characters including Abel and Cain, and Saint Peter. The characters who participate in the poetic universe of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris* are often displaced from their normal historical and symbolic context, and their stories are frequently subverted. As well as drawing on well-known mythological personae and places in his poetry, Baudelaire creates modern myths by his presentation of familiar spaces such as the city and the domestic sphere. So it is that the poetic settings of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*—places of noise and debauchery, places of fleeting opportunity and imagined majesty, places banal and exotic—all become part of the tapestry of the symbolic universe of his oeuvre. The mythologisation of everyday people and locations in Baudelaire's poetry can be seen, for example, in "À Une Passante," where the cityscape provides the scene of a rebirth of the lyric voice, through a fleeting encounter with female beauty, and in "Spleen (J'ai plus de souvenirs...)," in which memory is presented through the enclosed spatial metaphor of a "vieux boudoir plein de roses fanées," and situated within a mythological context by its comparison with a "vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux, / Oublié sur la carte..." [1]

The role played by mythology in the French literary tradition and, in particular, in nineteenth-century literature, has been the subject of a number of influential critical studies by scholars such as Pierre Albouy, Marc Eigeldinger, Mircea Eliade and Nicole Ferrier-Caverivière—Maya Hadeh acknowledges the contributions of all of these scholars and draws heavily on their foundational work as she lays out her methodological approach in the introduction to *La Mythologie dans l'œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire*. The monograph sets out to examine Baudelaire's poetic oeuvre from three different angles: firstly it considers the way myth operates in the text; secondly it examines the different manifestations of myth and mythology in Baudelaire's poetry; and thirdly, it seeks to analyse the way the poetic text "reacts" to the emergence of myth within its own structure, through the appropriation and transformation of mythological characters and events as symbolic devices. The three strands to Hadeh's line of enquiry parallel the tripartite structure of the monograph: the first part has a structural focus, bringing together the chapters on time and space, while part two deals with questions of self and other, and with deviations from accepted norms of human existence, manifested through hybridity, deformity and the interrelation of moral and physical corruption. In part three, the focus shifts again, to examine metaphysical mythologies, looking at the themes of sin and punishment in chapter five, before ending, in chapter six, with a study of the role of death within the mythological structure of Baudelairean poetics.

In the introduction to *La Mythologie dans l'œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire* Hadeh argues that the structure and construction of Baudelaire's poetic universe links to his notion of "correspondances," the

mode by which the symbolic dimension of the world is experienced, enabling the perception of “les rapports intimes et secrets des choses, les correspondances et les analogies.”[2] In order to establish a definition of mythology as it appears within the context of Baudelaire’s oeuvre, Hadeh cites the poet’s own assertion that “la mythologie est un dictionnaire d’hiéroglyphes vivants, hiéroglyphes connus de tout le monde.”[3] Though Hadeh glosses over this important quotation, Baudelaire’s understanding of mythology as a living dictionary of hieroglyphs emphasises the symbolic value of legendary tales, characters and spaces in the poet’s eyes; this particular passage from his 1861 essay on Théodore de Banville is crucial in supporting the view that myth and mythology act as a fundamental structuring device within Baudelaire’s poetic universe, which is the central tenet of Hadeh’s methodological approach.

The first chapter of *La Mythologie dans l’œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire*, entitled “Mythologie de l’espace,” is by far the most substantial, dealing eloquently with the concept of space and its representation through myth and mythologisation in Baudelaire’s poetic oeuvre. It is here that Hadeh sets out her understanding of the overarching “géographie mythique” (p. 11), which serves as a filter for the thematic readings she undertakes not only in this chapter but throughout the monograph. *La Mythologie dans l’œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire* is characterised by a dualistic understanding of space in Baudelaire’s poetry, established in the opening lines of chapter one: “dans *Les Fleurs du Mal* et *Les Petits Poèmes en Prose*, le poète évolue dans un espace vectorisé. Deux axes se croisent : l’un, vertical, mène vers le Ciel ou les Enfers et l’autre, horizontal, a le foyer, l’île et l’infini maritime comme pôles” (p. 12). The established dichotomy of the horizontal and vertical axes of human experience and the offsetting of the ideal and the abyss map onto the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, which Hadeh sees as the central dualism, encompassing all other dualisms in Baudelaire’s oeuvre; this, in turn, establishes a network of oppositions which, within Hadeh’s mythocritical reading of Baudelaire’s poetics, governs the symbolic architecture of both *Les Fleurs du Mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris*.

The offsetting of the vertical and horizontal planes of symbolism in Baudelaire’s poetics parallels the offsetting of two opposing temporal modes feeding into the overarching distinction between the sacred and the profane. The human experience of chronological time is part of the profane side of the Baudelairean aesthetic and Hadeh argues that, repeatedly in his oeuvre, we see the poet seek refuge in an “*Illud tempus* mythique” (p. 75), founded upon metaphor and memory, in a quest to escape the destructive effects of time and to re-awaken a “paradis perdu” (p. 78). The shift from chronological to mythological time is considered largely through an analysis of diurnal rhythms, focussing particularly on the ambiguous status of the night in Baudelaire’s poetics. Hadeh situates the presentation of the night in relation to the Romantic trope of nighttime as a “lieu privilégié et sacré de la méditation et de la spiritualité” (p. 78), characterising it, in Baudelaire’s oeuvre, as a mythological sphere, a “union idéale et fusion mystique” (p. 86) with the power to transform itself, and those under its shadow.

The third chapter examines the mythological status of the lyric subject from two angles: first, Hadeh considers the poetic voice as being imbued with the characteristics of mythical personae, speaking at once as self and other; she then goes on to examine the status of mythical figures as emblematic of exile and marginalisation, standing as a symbol of the poet’s status on the fringes of society. In the first part of this chapter Hadeh argues that, contrary to the poetic tradition that sees the poet as an Orphic figure, Baudelaire presents the lyric subject as a feminine presence, inspired by Sappho and the ancient Muses. Through a focus on the presentation of Sappho, which is concerned not so much with sexuality, nor with sapphism as a sort of sexual deviance, but rather with the identity of the lyric voice and surrounding questions of gender, Hadeh undertakes a fruitful close reading of “Lesbos”; she concludes, convincingly, that Baudelaire’s presentation of Sappho in this poem can be read as a poetic redemption of the character, which brings her “vers Lesbos, qui pardonne.”[4] The final section of this chapter turns to consider the figure of the solitary poet, linking the nineteenth-century “myth” of the dandy to the exiled character of Andromache in “Le Cygne,” who becomes a poetic alter-ego, and to the albatross,

who takes on mythical status within Baudelaire's poetics as an emblem of the marginalisation of the poet.

In chapter four Hadeh develops her analysis of the ways in which Baudelaire appropriates mythological characters; she contends that, within Baudelaire's poetics, characters who deviate from accepted physical and cultural norms--through bestiality, teratology, moral corruption and deformity--are subject to a process of poetic demythologisation, which reflects the poet's experience of *ennui*. To support this argument, she cites several reversals of mythological structures in Baudelaire's oeuvre, including "La Muse malade," in which the legendary figure of the muse is afflicted by threatening visions, becoming subject to the sickness and corruption of earthly life, and the Sphinx who, while celebrated in "Les Chats," is robbed of his majesty in "Spleen (J'ai plus de souvenirs...)." There is a particular emphasis, here, on Baudelaire's presentation of women, who Hadeh sees as becoming aligned with the lyric subject through a process of poetic degradation which strips them of their sexual, maternal or aesthetic qualities by affording them deformities and grotesque characteristics, like the "monstres disloqués [qui] furent jadis des femmes" in "Les Petites Vieilles."^[5]

Chapter five begins the final section of *La Mythologie dans l'œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire*, moving from a study of the physical mythology of women and beasts to consider metaphysical mythologies in the poet's oeuvre, through an examination of the mechanisms of sin, retribution and mortality. Returning once again to the overarching dualistic structure of Baudelaire's poetic universe, Hadeh argues that the expression of sin and moral deviance in *Les Fleurs du Mal* and in *Le Spleen de Paris* can be seen as operating according to a dialectic of hubris and revolt, played out through references to various mythical characters from the Bible and from Classical antiquity. For Hadeh, hubris is a reflection of the poet's desire to enter into a forbidden space--the inaccessible poetic ideal--expressed through references to Sisyphus (in "Le Guignon") and to the figure of Icarus (in "Les Plaintes d'un Icare" and, indirectly in both "Le Voyage" and "Le Châtiment de l'orgueil") who, like the poet himself, experiences a "fin ambiguë de l'aventure [où] d'une part, le héros est châtié de sa démesure et de l'autre il acquiert un prestige glorieux."^[6] While Sisyphus and Icarus are initially presented in a negative and cautionary light, as befits their status in mythological tradition, Hadeh argues that these two characters are redeemed within the structure of Baudelairean poetics, as Sisyphus becomes an "emblème du courage et de détermination" (p. 219), while Icarus is subjected to the eternal torment of the poet, who cannot find his rest in death, instead receiving the dubious "honneur sublime / De donner mon nom à l'abîme / Qui me servira de tombeau."^[7]

The question of mortality is the subject of the closing chapter of *La Mythologie dans l'œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire*, and Hadeh's mythological methodology offers great scope for innovative readings of the much-studied theme of death in Baudelaire's poetics. Her approach here hinges upon a dual understanding of the human condition as being, on the one hand, infernal and on the other, apocalyptic--that is to say that it embodies the diabolical choice between the *ennui* of life and the escape offered by death. Returning to the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, the first section of this chapter examines subversions of the Christian theory of the Immaculate Conception in Baudelaire's poetics, which render the idea of the crucifixion and resurrection a "myth" in the fallacious sense. Although the treatment of the mythology of death in the first part of the chapter, based mainly upon a close reading of "Bénédiction," is original, it is somewhat difficult to follow the development of Hadeh's argument. The lack of clarity in this section of the monograph is due, largely, to the peculiar brevity of the final chapter and to the fact that her detailed assessment of the theme of the "mère terrible" in "Bénédiction" seems to stray quite a long way from the question of death; this is not a weakness in itself, though there is a sense that the title of this chapter is too broad and relates only obliquely to the focus of its content.

The thorough and clear line of argument developed in the initial chapters is still lacking in the final section of chapter six, in which Hadeh turns to the theme of death as an Odyssey, linking this to the myth of Circe--the daughter of the sun god Helios, and exiled sorceress, who appears in "Le Voyage"--

and to the Homeric figures of the lotus-eaters, referred to both in “Le Voyage” and in the prose poem “Le Joueur généreux.” Hadeh’s reading of these two poems presents death in Baudelaire’s oeuvre as a process of regeneration, enabling a shift from the “monotone et petit” world of human experience to the infinite mythologised space which awaits the speaker, where “nos Pylades là-bas tendent leurs bras vers nous.”[8] As the study comes to a close, it is clear that death represents both an end and a beginning within Hadeh’s assessment of Baudelaire’s poetics, meaning that poetry itself is, by extension, a sacrificial act, as implied by the bitterness of the figure of the Poet’s mother in “Bénédiction”; this dichotomy of mortality and regeneration brings the study neatly back to the horizontal and vertical axes of the tangible world and the imaginary or oneiric sphere, established in the opening chapter, with death serving as a gateway between these two poles.

La Mythologie dans l’œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire is, for the most part, a highly readable study, which is rich in textual and contextual detail and draws together the various strands of mythology running through Baudelaire’s oeuvre in an eloquent and comprehensive manner. The book is appended by an extensive bibliography, reflecting the meticulous research which Hadeh brings to the close, thematically-inspired readings in this monograph, though the erudition of the study is slightly undermined by typographical errors and inconsistencies, such as a citation of the final two lines of “Recueillement” on page 81, which is labelled as “Sed non satiata,” and two different spellings of the name of Herbert S. Gochberg in the space of four lines in the footnotes on page 48. Nevertheless, throughout the book, Hadeh’s engagement with relevant literature—most notably with studies of allegory in Baudelaire’s oeuvre by scholars including Patrick Labarthe and Antoine Compagnon—is thorough, though it is, on occasion, unclear how some of the many citations from secondary sources further her own argument. Although much of the material in this monograph will be familiar to specialists working in the field of nineteenth-century French poetry—and certainly to those who have consulted the works of Patrick Labarthe, Pierre Brunel, Antoine Compagnon and Nicolae Babuts—Hadeh’s thorough treatment of the subject, abundant dialogue with secondary sources, and engaging written style makes *La Mythologie dans l’œuvre poétique de Charles Baudelaire* a useful reference point for students and scholars looking to gain a comprehensive overview of the rich mythological and mythologised world constructed by Baudelaire in his poetic oeuvre.

NOTES

[1] Charles Baudelaire, “Spleen (J’ai plus de souvenirs...),” in *Œuvres complètes* (Vol I), ed. Claude Pichois, (Paris : Gallimard, 1975), p. 73.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, “Études sur Poe,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Vol II), ed. Claude Pichois, (Paris : Gallimard, 1976), p. 329.

[3] Charles Baudelaire, “Sur mes contemporains : Théodore de Banville,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Vol II), p. 165.

[4] Charles Baudelaire, “Lesbos,” in *Œuvres complètes*, (Vol I), p. 151.

[5] Charles Baudelaire, “Les Petites Vieilles,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Vol I), p. 89.

[6] Marc Eigeldinger, *Lumières du mythe* (Paris : Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), p. 93.

[7] “Les Plaintes d’un Icare,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Vol I), p. 143.

[8] “Le Voyage,” in *Œuvres complètes* (Vol I), p. 133-134.

Caroline
The c.ardrey@sheffield.ac.uk University A. of Ardrey
Sheffield

Copyright © 2016 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172