

SOCIAL AND CULTURAL INTERSECTIONS

How to Read (Women in) Baudelaire's Prose Poems

Maria Scott

Baudelaire's prose poems present particular challenges to their female readers. Where women are not associated in *Le Spleen de Paris* with inaccessible ideals, they tend to be presented as disappointing travesties of that ideal. In the eyes of the unreliable authorial spokesperson, women often reveal themselves as grotesque in their selfishness, narcissism, and vulgarity. I outline here an approach to teaching the prose poems that complicates their overt meaning and, specifically, their apparent misogyny.

Reading Baudelaire's Prose Poems

For some years I taught a final-year undergraduate course, Reading Baudelaire's Prose Poems, that tackled the question of how to read these multilayered texts. The course stressed that even the most easily accessible forms of poetry demand a different kind of reading from that required by other types of writing. The course was aimed at students of French language and culture and, despite its English-language title, was conducted in French. Classes looked at how the meaning of a given prose poem can seem very straightforward—even offensively direct—upon first reading but can become richer and more complex upon closer examination or when read alongside other texts. On the one hand, the module emphasized the importance of close critical analysis, or the advantages of slow over hasty reading. On the other hand, it challenged the traditional notion that literary texts are self-contained units by reading the prose poems within a larger context (textual and, to a lesser extent, historical). Assessment was designed to reward students who engaged in the close reading of individual texts as well as those who had read and reflected on a wide range of Baudelaire's prose poems from the perspective of the themes and techniques discussed in class. The classes incorporated as much group discussion as could be managed, to emphasize the plurality of ways in which Baudelaire's prose poems can be consumed.

As I have argued in *Baudelaire's Le Spleen de Paris: Shifting Perspectives*, the prose poems systematically offer themselves to be read from incompatible viewpoints. This argument encourages discussion in class, and it also has the advantage of fostering a

watchful or slow approach to even the most apparently unpoetic forms of poetry. I encourage students to consider each prose poem from a number of different angles, notably by reflecting on its overt message, its structural development, its poetic elements (such as phonetic and verbal repetitions, rhythmic effects, images), any resistance it poses to the reader's acceptance, and its intratextual dimension. The course uses some of the tools of traditional critical analysis but also disturbs the supposition of unity that underpins conventional analysis by emphasizing the importance of reading the prose poems alongside one another and alongside other texts. Small-group teaching for this course focuses on the close reading of individual texts, while lectures place their focus on historical, cultural, and textual contexts.

Baudelaire's prose poems often operate to seduce the reader into acquiescence. An approach to these texts that emphasizes context has the particular advantage of offering a means of opening up a critical distance from individual prose poems. This approach also encourages students to read the entire collection of prose poems and introduces students to Baudelaire's larger body of work as well as to the wider historical, cultural, and intellectual contexts of his time. Grouping the prose poems around selected themes makes it feasible to study them in dialogue with one another, with other texts in verse and prose where Baudelaire handles similar themes, and with a selection of pertinent works by other authors or artists. While such an approach inevitably produces oriented readings of the prose poems, it also has the merit of at least suggesting the possibility of multiple orientations.

Reading Women in Baudelaire's Prose Poems

The problem of how to read Baudelaire's prose poems is approached, in my course, through a few recurrent themes that repeatedly emerge from the pages of *Le Spleen de Paris*. One of these is the disappointing female love object. Women are frequently represented in the prose poems as unworthy mates who fall short of male expectations in some crucial way. In "Les Yeux des pauvres" ("The Eyes of the Poor"), for example, while drinking outside a sparkling new Haussmann-era café, the narrator's female companion inspires his hatred by failing to mirror his own response to the poverty-stricken family who stand beside them, gazing instead at the riches on display within. The excessively demanding mistress of "La Femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse" ("The Wild Woman and the Affected Coquette") is virtually identified by the narrator with a caged,

brutalized, savage woman and threatened with defenestration. The four men of “Portraits de maîtresses” (“Portraits of Mistresses”) complain alternately about the excessive appetites—whether carnal or intellectual—or the oppressive desirelessness of their chosen partners; the fourth man all but admits to having murdered his too perfectly acquiescent mistress, while his interlocutors are represented as tacitly sympathetic. It is probably impossible, as educated citizens of the new millennium, not to be repelled by the blatant misogyny of some of the prose poems. If students are going to be persuaded that these texts are worth reading, then they may need to be convinced that there is more to the overtly woman-hating prose poems than meets the eye. There are several ways of suggesting this.

Intratextual Reading

A straightforwardly misogynistic reading of individual prose poems is complicated by the fact that, in a number of texts from *Le Spleen de Paris*, women are treated with something approaching sympathy and even worshipful respect. Frequently, women who are broken in some way—the enigmatic central figure of “Mademoiselle Bistouri” (“Miss Scalpel”); the poor, housebound woman of “Les Fenêtres” (“Windows”); the old lady of “Le Désespoir de la vieille” (“The Old Woman’s Despair”); the servile woman described in “Un cheval de race” (“A Thoroughbred”); the solitary women of “Les Veuves” (“Widows”); or the prostitute figure of “La Belle Dorothee” (“Beautiful Dorothy”)—are written about with something resembling compassion. Similarly, inaccessible female figures, such as the lunatic mistress-muse of “Les Bienfaits de la lune” (“The Moon’s Benefits”) or the statue of “Le Fou et la Vénus” (“The Fool and the Venus”), do not come under explicit attack in the prose poems. Yet even in these more apparently respectful representations of women there is an implied violence and will to domination: the interrogation of Mademoiselle Bistouri, the approving representation of a mature woman as an utterly spent and docile racehorse, the interest in solitary women, and the idealization of the female are never as innocuous as they might initially seem.

Close Reading

Another way of problematizing the explicit messages of the woman-hating texts is by examining their internal logic. As twenty-first-century readers of the prose poems, we are

much more likely than our predecessors to be suspicious of their overt messages; not only are we better trained to recognize and contest the misogyny of the male speaker(s), we are also better equipped to read texts against their grain. As it turns out, the texts themselves frequently undermine the legitimacy of the position adopted by the central male figures, whether the latter take the form of third-person characters, first-person narrators, or characters whose speech is reported in the first person.

The man of “Les Yeux des pauvres” thinks himself an expert reader of the eyes of others, but his initial misreading of his mistress’s eyes casts doubt not only on his bizarrely aestheticized reading of the eyes of the poor family but also on the final judgment he passes on his female companion. The narrator’s sketch of an African woman’s beauty, vanity, and vacuity in “La Belle Dorothée” is problematized by the final revelation that the woman is using her charms to try to buy her sister out of slavery. The male speaker of “La Femme sauvage” implicitly identifies with a savage, highly aggressive male, while the casual misogyny of “Portraits de maîtresses” reveals an act of murder that would be legally indefensible even in a jurisdiction that was notoriously sympathetic to homicidal husbands.

The narrator in “L’Horloge” (“The Clock”) gives a lyrical description of his lover’s eyes, which he invests with immortal, eternal qualities, that is deflated by his conclusion, which retrospectively debases the spiritual to the level of the *spirituel* (“witty”): “N’est-ce pas, madame, que voici un madrigal vraiment méritoire, et aussi emphatique que vous-même? En vérité, j’ai eu tant de plaisir à broder cette prétentieuse galanterie, que je ne vous demanderai rien en échange” ‘Now is this not, Madam, a truly praiseworthy madrigal, and as exaggerated as yourself? I took such delight in elaborating this pretentious romance, that I will ask nothing of you in exchange’ (*Spleen* [Pichois] 300; *Parisian Prowler* 34). By concluding the text with the word “échange” (“exchange”), Baudelaire underscores the self-centered nature of the narrator’s lyrical gambit: his flattery demands a reward, whether it takes the form of the lady’s favors or, as here, the pleasure of invention and self-admiration.

The disingenuousness of the central male figure is also a feature of “Le Galant Tireur” (“The Gallant Marksman”). The first paragraph introduces the “mystérieuse femme” ‘mysterious woman’ to whom the marksman owes “tant de plaisirs, tant de douleurs, et peut-être aussi une grande partie de son génie” ‘so many pleasures, so many woes, and perhaps also a large part of his genius’ (349; 109). The marksman-poet fails at his art until, spurred on by his companion’s mockery, he takes aim at a doll that he

designates as her simulacrum: “*je me figure que c’est vous*” ‘[I] imagine that it is you’ (350; 109). The marksman promptly decapitates the simulacrum and then turns back to his companion:

Alors s’inclinant vers sa chère, sa délicieuse, son exécrationnelle femme, son inévitable et impitoyable Muse, et lui baisant respectueusement la main, il ajouta: “Ah! mon cher ange, combien je vous remercie de mon adresse!”

Then bowing to his dear, his delectable, his execrable wife, his inescapable and ruthless Muse, and respectfully kissing her hand, he added, “Ah my dear angel! How I thank you for my aim!”

Although the marksman acknowledges that he owes the mastery of his art to his female companion, it is apparent that she was no help to him until he put in place a false image of her. And just as the abstracted replica is made to stand in for the mocking woman, the latter, instead of her abstraction, is thanked for being the marksman’s ideal or muse. The supposedly “inévitable” ‘inevitable,’ unavoidable muse has been brought to life only thanks to a clever sidestepping or avoidance of the woman’s reality. The poet-marksman thus perfects his art by subjecting the woman to a metaphorical transformation, effectively splitting her into two interchangeable parts, one worthy of adoration, the other of assassination. The repeated description of the woman as both “délicieuse” ‘delectable’ and “exécrationnelle” ‘execrable’ also suggests this doubling. This antithesis would seem to capture Baudelaire’s own ambivalence toward women and arguably his society’s contradictory attitude toward half its members.

The very consistency with which the texts reveal the untrustworthiness of their male interlocutors serves, however, as a warning that we must not confuse their voices with that of Baudelaire, even and perhaps especially where the identification seems most obvious. Baudelaire’s prose poems can, then, be read as explicitly misogynistic, but they can also be interpreted as implicitly (though not necessarily self-consciously) critical of woman-hating men.

Intertextual or Contextual Reading

A third way of suggesting that the misogyny of *Le Spleen de Paris* is more complex than it first appears is by surveying some broadly contemporaneous academic or *art pompier* images of woman as goddess. In my lectures I use the birth of Venus paintings by Alexandre Cabanel (1863) and William Bouguereau (1879). I also show students some

very different images of women, dating from around the same time: Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863), Gustave Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* (1866; "The Origin of the World"), and Paul Cézanne's *L'Éternel Féminin* (1875–77; "The Eternal Feminine"). Similarly divergent verbal contexts could be offered, alternatively or in addition, in the form of selected passages from Jules Michelet's apparently idealizing *La Femme* (1860; "Woman") or Pierre-Joseph Proudhon's overtly misogynistic *La Pornocratie* (posthumously published 1875; "Pornocracy"). I ask students to reflect on the differences between idealized and anti-idealizing representations of women and to try to situate Baudelaire's presentation of women in the prose poems in relation to these other representations.

I go on to show how the poet's larger body of writing both idealizes women and deflates such idealizations, often as a function of the chosen mode of discourse: his intentionally artless autobiographical writing can present women as little more than beasts, while his love poems and letters can be reverential in the extreme. In fact, some of his texts simultaneously exalt and disparage women. In "Le Peintre de la vie moderne" ("The Painter of Modern Life"), for example, Baudelaire notes that, for artists, woman is "une espèce d'idole, stupide peut-être, mais éblouissante" 'a kind of idol, stupid maybe, but dazzling' (*Œuvres complètes* 2: 713).

The complicated relationship in Baudelaire's work between the divinization of the female and her debasement can be illustrated by reference to *Les Fleurs du Mal*. In a number of the verse poems, the lyric subject presents himself as singing the praises of a desired female, in the tradition of courtly or troubadour poetry, which began in southern France in the late eleventh century and which was developed and transformed by Petrarch in the fourteenth century. Petrarchist motifs, such as the attribution of divine or angelic qualities to the woman's person or gaze, are recurrent in Baudelaire's love poems, where the gaze of the woman is often represented as illuminating or reviving the lyric subject and ultimately as offering him spiritual salvation. Even in poems such as "À une Madone" ("To a Madonna") and "Une charogne" ("A Carcass"), where courtly and Petrarchist tropes are cruelly subverted, the female continues to be idealized, however sadistically she is nailed to her pedestal and however grotesquely she is made to perch there.

The reason for Baudelaire's preservation of the figure of the idealized female in his lyric poetry is often suggested within the verse itself, but it is perhaps most explicitly stated in the poet's letter of 8 May 1854 to Apollonie Sabatier, the courtesan who inspired

his most reverential love poems. He tells her that his anonymous adoration of her enables him to exploit the artistic boons of unfulfilled desire: “De cette rêverie excitante et purifiante naît généralement un accident heureux” ‘From this exciting and purifying daydream a happy accident is generally born’ (*Correspondance* 1: 276). The frankness of Baudelaire’s acknowledgment that his admiration is artistically rather than sexually interested is startling: “Je suis un égoïste, je me sers de vous” ‘I am a selfish man, I make use of you.’ Madame Sabatier, as it happened, refused to play the poet’s game; it is clear from a letter sent some time later that their relationship had recently ceased to be platonic, a fact that occasioned both a change of register and a rejection on Baudelaire’s part: “il y a quelques jours, tu étais une divinité, ce qui est si commode, ce qui est si beau, si inviolable. Te voilà femme maintenant” ‘a few days ago you were a divinity, which is so convenient, so beautiful, so inviolable. Now you are a woman’ (1: 425; 31 Aug. 1857).

Students are encouraged to reflect on the self-servingly deluded and ultimately bogus nature of idealization in Baudelaire’s prose poems and on the strange compatibility between the idealization and denigration of women in the texts.

The following prose poems lend themselves particularly well to an exploration of the ironic treatment of the dynamics of idealization in Baudelaire’s prose poems.

“Le Fou et la Vénus”

In *Le Spleen de Paris*, the most obvious figure of the woman as a divinity is the statue evoked in “Le Fou et la Vénus.” A clown-lover sits in adoration, in the middle of a huge park, at the feet of his idol. The terms used to depict the scene are overtly sexual: “Le vaste parc se pâme sous l’oeil brûlant du soleil” ‘The vast park swoons under the sun’s blazing eye’; “L’extase universelle des choses” ‘The universal ecstasy of things’; “c’est ici une orgie silencieuse” ‘here is a silent orgy’; “les fleurs excitées brûlent [de] désir” ‘Aroused flowers burn with . . . desire’; “cette jouissance universelle” ‘this universal rapture’ (*Spleen* [Pichois] 283; *Parisian Prowler* 11). The repeated evocations of expansive energy in the third paragraph, along with the vigorous, anaphoric rhythm of the French text, create an impression of sexual ardour and potency:

On dirait qu’une lumière toujours croissante fait de plus en plus étinceler les objets; que les fleurs excitées brûlent du désir de rivaliser avec l’azur du ciel par l’énergie de leurs couleurs, et que la chaleur, rendant visibles les parfums, les fait monter vers l’astre comme des fumes.

An ever-increasing light seems to make objects increasingly sparkle. Aroused flowers burn with the desire to outdo the sky's azure by the energy of their colors, and the heat, turning scents visible, seems to make them rise to the stars like smoke.

By contrast with the active verbs in the above sentence, the repeated adjectival use of the passive verbal form in the portrait of the clown indicates that he is acted upon rather than acting:

Cependant, dans cette jouissance universelle, j'ai aperçu un être *affligé*.

Aux pieds d'une colossale Vénus, un de ces fous artificiels, un de ces bouffons volontaires *chargés* de faire rire les rois quand le Remords ou l'Ennui les obsède, *affublé* d'un costume éclatant et ridicule, *coiffé* de cornes et de sonnettes, tout *ramassé* contre le piédestal, lève des yeux pleins de larmes vers l'immortelle Déesse. (283–84; my emphasis)

However, amidst this universal rapture, I noticed an *afflicted* creature.

At the feet of a colossal Venus, one of those artificial fools, one of those voluntary buffoons *assigned* to make kings laugh when pursued by Remorse or Ennui, *rigged out* in a flashy and ridiculous costume, *capped* in horns and bells, all *heaped* against the pedestal, raises his tear-filled eyes toward the immortal Goddess. (11; my emphasis)

In the courtly tradition, the passivity of the lover is actually a triumph over his desire, as his very inaction means that he can maintain his desire for the love object instead of risking its loss upon satisfaction. Through inaction, the idealistic lover could avoid the problem of Baudelairean ennui, described by Suzanne Guerlac as “a listless disinterest, an absence of desire” (96). From this perspective, the apparent hopelessness of the court(ly) jester of “Le Fou et la Vénus” converts into a form of superiority; the kings mentioned in the text, whose desires are rarely frustrated, pay clowns to relieve them of their ennui, but the clown depicted here is master of his own desire. As immutable as the stone of the statue at whose foot he worships, his passion recalls the love of poets as described in the verse poem “La Beauté” (“Beauty”): “Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière” ‘Eternal, and silent as matter is timeless’ (*Fleurs* [Pichois] 21; TK).

Indeed, the buffoon's attachment to the object is a source of pride for him:

Et ses yeux disent: “Je suis le dernier et le plus solitaire des humains, privé d'amour et d'amitié, et bien inférieur en cela au plus imparfait des animaux.

Cependant je suis fait, moi aussi, pour comprendre et sentir l'immortelle Beauté!
 Ah! Déesse! ayez pitié de ma tristesse et de mon délire!" (*Spleen* [Pichois] 284)
 And his eyes say, "I am the lowest and the most lonely of humans, deprived of
 love and of friendship, and for that reason quite inferior to the most incomplete
 animals. However I am made, I as well, to understand and to feel immortal
 Beauty! Oh Goddess! take pity on my sorrow and my madness!" (*Parisian
 Prowler* 11)

Despite the reference to the clown's sorrow, the "cependant" 'however' in the above passage echoes, and implicitly overturns, the "cependant" that earlier introduced him as "un être affligé" 'an afflicted creature.' The **apparent** inferiority of the clown is called into question by his appreciation of beauty. His choice of an inappropriate object of love may not be as asinine, therefore, as it first seems. Like the swan of Baudelaire's "Le Cygne" ("The Swan"), the buffoon is presented as "ridicule et sublime, / Et rongé d'un désir sans trêve!" 'both ridiculous and sublime, / Gnawed by his endless longing!' (*Fleurs* [Pichois] 86; TK). The unresponsive female love object is necessary to the sustenance of the clown-artist's passion.

"Le Désir de peindre"

The prose poem "Le Désir de peindre" ("The Desire to Paint") further testifies to the role of unfulfilled desire in Baudelaire's poetics. As in the verse poem "Je t'adore à l'égal de la voûte nocturne . . ." ("I love you as I love . . ."), the poet-persona's passion seems to be intensified by the woman's elusiveness. The text presents a description of a female figure who has appeared to the speaker only rarely and fleetingly and whom he aches to paint. That the narrator's nonpossession of the woman is voluntary is suggested by the opening two sentences of the text:

Malheureux peut-être l'homme, mais heureux l'artiste que le désir déchire!
 Je brûle de peindre celle qui m'est apparue si rarement et qui a fui si vite,
 comme une belle chose regrettable derrière le voyageur emporté dans la nuit.
 (*Spleen* [Pichois] 340)

Unhappy perhaps the man, but happy the artist shattered by desire!

I burn to paint her who appeared to me so rarely and who fled so quickly,
 like a beautiful lamented thing left by the traveler swept into the night. (*Parisian*

Prowler 94)

The female figure has, apparently, fled, but she is also represented as having been left behind by the narrator-traveler. The latter's unhappiness is therefore at least partly self-inflicted. The first sentence of the text makes it very clear that what interests the narrator is the artistic recompense offered by unfulfilled desire and therefore by the conversion of the real, physical, sexual woman into a fantasized woman.

“Laquelle est la vraie?”

The self-interestedness of idealization is a central theme of “*Laquelle est la vraie?*” (“Which Is the True One?”), a version of which was posthumously published under the title “*L’Idéal et le Réel*” (“The Ideal and the Real”). The first-person narrator of this text eulogizes “une certaine Bénédicta, qui remplissait l’atmosphère d’idéal, et dont les yeux répandaient le désir de la grandeur, de la beauté, de la gloire et de tout ce qui fait croire à l’immortalité” ‘a certain Benedicta, who filled the atmosphere with the ideal, and whose eyes spread the desire for grandeur, beauty, fame, and everything which makes us believe in immortality’ (342; TK). A few days after the narrator meets her, the “*filie miraculeuse*” ‘miraculous girl’ dies, a detail that he somewhat flippantly attributes to her being “*trop belle pour vivre longtemps*” ‘too beautiful to live a long time.’ It is telling that the narrator compares Bénédicta’s coffin to a well-sealed Indian chest and describes her grave as the site of his buried treasure; and it is equally revealing that his eyes are described as “*fichés*” ‘fastened’ to the burial site, as if they were nailing the woman into her grave. The woman’s death, it is implied, has been to the narrator’s advantage. His repetition of the fact that it was he who buried Bénédicta suggests that he may even have been instrumental in her death: “*c’est moi-même qui l’ai enterrée,*” “*C’est moi qui l’ai enterrée*” ‘It is I myself who buried her,’ ‘It is I who buried her.’ The implication that it is the narrator’s idealization of the woman that has killed her recalls the symbolic murder evoked in the verse poem “*À une Madone.*”

If the soul of the dead Laura had a tendency to visit Petrarch in dreams, in “*Laquelle est la vraie?*” the poet receives a visitation from a somewhat earthier incarnation of the divinized love object: “*une petite personne*” ‘a little person’ appears who, stamping and laughing on the grave, declares herself to be “*la vraie Bénédicta*” ‘the true Benedicta.’ The apparition accuses the narrator of self-delusion (“*ta folie*” ‘your madness,’ “*ton aveuglement*” ‘your blindness’), a charge corroborated by the concluding

image of his self-entrapment in “la fosse de l’idéal” ‘the grave of the ideal.’ This final image, by associating the narrator’s ideals with a grave, may highlight the dubiousness of his idealizations of Bénédicta. It may also, or alternatively, express the plight of the idealistic poet as evoked in the verse poem “L’Albatros” (“The Albatross”): the king of the aerial world is enslaved and grotesque at ground level. “Laquelle est la vraie?” can thus be interpreted as a mockery of the narrator’s bogus art or as a celebration of the artist’s ability to preserve his ideals despite the destructive forces that threaten to undermine them. In support of the latter reading, the poet claims, in the draft epilogue to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the ability to extract “l’or” ‘gold’ from “[l]a boue” ‘mud’ ([Pichois] 192; TK). Whether the idealization of the female in “Laquelle est la vraie?” is interpreted by the reader as phoney or heroic, it is presented here—as in “Le Fou et la Vénus,” “Le Désir de peindre,” “Le Galant Tireur,” and “L’Horloge”—as the product of willful self-delusion.

{#}

In “Laquelle est la vraie?,” the idealized woman is in danger of being replaced by the real woman. The pressure of the real is evoked even more directly in the novella *La Fanfarlo* (*The Fanfarlo*), wherein Samuel Cramer expounds as follows on the fragility of idealistic love:

“Ce qu’il y a de plus désolant,” dit-il, “c’est que tout amour fait toujours une mauvaise fin, d’autant plus mauvaise qu’il était plus divin, plus ailé à son commencement. Il n’est pas de rêve, quelque idéal qu’il soit, qu’on ne retrouve avec un poupard glouton suspendu au sein. . . .” (*Œuvres complètes* 1: 561)

“What is most distressing,” he said, “is that love always turns out badly, all the more so when it is divine and angelic at its beginning. There is no dream, however ideal, that does not end up with a greedy baby hanging from its breast. . . .” (TK)

Baudelaire’s prose poems highlight the tensions but also the continuities between two versions of femininity that were current in his day: the idealized, deified woman, on the one hand, and the excessively physical, sexual woman, on the other. The conjunction of apparently opposed attitudes toward women in the prose poems may be interpreted in a variety of ways—as illustrative of the dissonance and hybridity characteristic of prose poetry, as symptomatic of the poet’s cynicism, as indicative of the extent to which Baudelaire typified his age, as suggestive of his ironic awareness of his own contradictions or those of his age. In class, I try to avoid privileging any one

interpretation of the textual facts and generally encourage students to approach the prose poems with suspicion and, importantly, with the sense that everything has yet to be said about these texts.

What seems undeniable, however, is that the texts of *Le Spleen de Paris* repeatedly stage a willful misreading of the female love object, a forceful suppression—or sudden emergence—of her apparently unpalatable reality. By dramatizing acts of misreading other people, including women, the prose poems place the problem of reading at their center. An approach to teaching *Le Spleen de Paris* that gives central importance to the question of how to read has the merit of recognizing, if not actually avoiding, the danger of producing dubious interpretations of the kind that the texts both invite and stage. By tackling the prose poems as both self-contained units and interlinked products of a particular cultural context, idealizing and banalizing impulses can operate to keep each other in check, much as *Le Spleen de Paris* itself repeatedly confronts these impulses, not least in its representation of the female love object.