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Margery A. Evans

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This new reading of Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris* is a response to Baudelaire's own challenge to read his text as one in which 'everything... is head and tail, alternately and reciprocally'. Margery Evans proposes that *Le Spleen de Paris* serves to question the conventions of prose forms such as the novel and the moral fable, problematising such conventions as the unitary narrator, the extended plot and the artifice of beginnings and endings, and making use of intertextual parody and ironic inversion.

Baudelaire's text probes the relationship between individuality and conformity to pre-existing codes, both in literature and in the world, explicitly re-writing a traditional philosophical topos which contrasts mankind's reclusive and sociable impulses. The giant metropolis provides a symbol of that drama.

Dr Evans explores the interconnections between the prose poems which make up *Le Spleen de Paris* and their intertextual relations with other, mostly prose, works, and shows how this anomalous, hybrid work raises far-reaching questions of general relevance to narratology.

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# BAUDELAIRE AND INTERTEXTUALITY

*Poetry at the crossroads*

MARGERY A. EVANS

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*For Michael, Helen and Laura*

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## *Illustrations*

(between pages 94 and 95)

From Goya's *Los Caprichos*, engravings presented to the Col-gratia Nacional, Madrid, October 1803.

- 1 *Capricho 43*: 'The sleep of reason produces monsters'
- 2 *Capricho 37*: 'Might not the pupil know more?'
- 3 *Capricho 38*: 'Bravo!'
- 4 *Capricho 40*: 'Of what ill will he die?'
- 5 *Capricho 41*: 'Neither more nor less'
- 6 *Capricho 42*: 'Thou who canst not'
- 7 *Capricho 63*: 'Look how solemn they are!'



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## Preface

*Le Spleen de Paris* has enjoyed increasing popularity both inside and outside France over a number of years now, to the extent that it has come to rival, even to eclipse, the success of *Les Fleurs du mal*. But it is a text which has always presented its audience with a major problem of reading strategy. This does not apply just to the French, who Claude Pichois engagingly suggests are handicapped by their Cartesian love of definitions and classifications.<sup>1</sup>

The problem arises partly from the difficulty of finding a reference point by which to situate a work which is so resolutely *hors série*. In his dedication Baudelaire cites Aloysius Bertrand's *Gaspard de la nuit* as a source of inspiration, but, traditionally, critics have not found this statement very fruitful and have shied away from a comparison which they suspect is couched in perplexing layers of irony. In any case, it is argued, Baudelaire states plainly that he has done something singularly different from Bertrand. This is clearly true, although some studies of Bertrand's use of parody and cliché suggest that he may have afforded Baudelaire some important examples of the *poème-lecture*.<sup>2</sup>

Baudelaire's comments on prose poetry in his 1859 *Salon* imply that he saw the genre as being in some respects closer to the novel than to verse poetry ('la fantaisie est d'autant plus dangereuse qu'elle est plus facile et plus ouverte; dangereuse comme la poésie en prose, comme le roman').<sup>3</sup> *Le Spleen de Paris* invites comparison with other specifically Parisian prose works such as Diderot's equally *excentric*, non-conformist *Neveu de Rameau*, with Hugo's *Notre-Dame de Paris* or with Balzac's vast,

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interconnected Parisian novels. Also, the invocation of Sterne as a possible muse in 'Les Bons Chiens' provokes comparisons with *Tristram Shandy*, another rhapsodic or *fantaisiste* production. In this book I shall look at aspects of the intertext of the prose poems and these and other prose works alluded to in *Le Spleen de Paris*.

Despite Baudelaire's own admiration for 'la gravité, la beauté et le côté infini' of the novelist's art, and despite Michel Butor's talk of the 'roman inconnu' inherent in *Le Spleen de Paris*, the collection of prose poems is generically distinct from the novel and indeed from almost all the many earlier prose texts to which it refers.<sup>4</sup> Since it has always been difficult to find analogous prose works, one line of approach to the *Petits Poèmes en prose* has been to explore their degree of divergence from the norms of traditional lyric poetry. Here Barbara Johnson's lively study of the prose poems as a *remise en question* of Baudelaire's verse poetry offers a useful means of access.<sup>5</sup> However, I hope to show how *Le Spleen de Paris*, a self-consciously 'monstrous' or hybrid work, also sets itself up for comparison with the novel and with classic texts by the great moralists, calling into question the codes governing those genres, just as it calls into question the conventions of lyric poetry.

Whether one situates the prose poems in terms of their difference from traditional lyric poetry or of their relationship with a certain prose tradition, one is first inevitably drawn into deciding which basic reading approach to adopt towards the *Petits Poèmes en prose* as a collection. Do we read them as discrete entities, loosely grouped together within the 'album' of *Le Spleen de Paris*, or do they invite reading as an inter-related whole? The two ways of reading which Roland Barthes describes in his approach to La Rochefoucauld,<sup>6</sup> and which are on offer with most collections of maxims and reflections, are also available in this instance: one can read the short units (maxims, reflections, or here prose poems) individually *in isolation* or one can read them all together. The difference between *Le Spleen de Paris* and many of the edifying texts to which it alludes, either directly or indirectly, is that with the prose poems the reader is presented with 'une œuvre ouverte' and with the collections of maxims,

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moral tales or portraits, in most cases ‘le discours cassé reste un discours enfermé’ (Barthes).<sup>7</sup>

Baudelaire describes *Le Spleen de Paris* in the Dedication to Arsène Houssaye as a ‘tortueuse fantaisie’ and reinforces this suggestion of a sinuous, or convoluted, continuum when he goes on to describe the collection as a snake. It is true that he writes that each of the fragments which make up this serpentine structure *can* exist separately, but this is not to say that we are encouraged to read the poems as autonomous pieces; indeed the insistence that ‘tout y est à la fois tête et queue’ seems to imply the reverse. Is it possible that Baudelaire’s emphasis on the *singularité* of the collection (‘singulièrement différent’ from *Gaspard de la nuit*, more ‘singulier’ than *Les Fleurs de mal*) signals not only their exceptional status but also the potential oneness concealed behind an apparent plurality? How does the collection reveal itself as one in which ‘tout est à la fois tête et queue’? How can we interpret the poet’s comparisons of his work with music and with great cities (‘le croisement de leurs innombrables rapports’)?<sup>8</sup> These are some of the questions which must form the starting point for our study of *Le Spleen de Paris* as a collection.

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