Nathan Brown. *Baudelaire's Shadow: On Poetic Determination*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2026. Pp. 204.

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Nathan Brown's study is an evocative examination of the play of determination and indetermination in Charles Baudelaire, taking a philosophical angle on questions of poetic composition and intertextuality. The book was written in the space of five weeks in 2020, according to the dates given at the end, and was first published by MaMa Press in 2021. Aside from a brief indication of the central argument on the back cover, the book offers little in the way of the systematic enumeration of an argument. It provides a short preface (a reading of Gustave Courbet's portrait of Baudelaire as a portrait of determination) in lieu of an introduction and a poetic "envoi" in lieu of a conclusion. The study's quasi-poetic tone, though, is part of the point about the way poetry's determination means that those who would write about it are always fated to say both more and less than what the words of the poems say. Brown's study convincingly illustrates the convergence of the metaphysical and the poetic in Baudelaire's verse poetry. Quotations from Baudelaire are given both in the original French and in translation.

Chapter 1, "Poe's 'Shadow—A Parable,'" reads that tale by means of Edgar Allan Poe's being doubled by his narrator, which results in a "dilation of the interval between writing and reading" (14). Brown introduces the plurivalent notion of *ténèbres*, a word which figures in Baudelaire's poem "Obsession," a frequent touchstone throughout the book. Brown underscores that *ténèbres* encompasses

> a phenomenal state of darkness or shadow, of obscurity and faint light that is also a condition of the soul, of imagination, and of meditations—a condition of doubt and uncertainty that links the spirit and the heavens through neither affirmation nor negation, but rather a kind of groping in the dark[.] (16)

The chapter develops an intertextual reading of Poe's tale and Baudelaire's poem "Les Sept vieillards," which Brown reads as a "strange double" of "Shadow—A Parable". For Brown, Baudelaire's poem inverts the setting of Poe's tale "from closed chamber to city streets, from darkness to daylight" (25), while at the same

time the two texts "share a fraternal shiver at the advent of [the] multitude" (27), such that "Poe's writing is the mime of Baudelaire's reading of Poe" and "Baudelaire's reading of Poe is the retrospective recognition of his own writing" (28). Numerological considerations then enter the equation via a consideration of numerical determination, the one and the many as they figure in the two texts, and of whether and how the number seven is meaningful in this context. In this chapter, as in the book more generally, there is a certain contingency to the topics considered, marked by transitions such as "Here we might consider […]" (41) which do not delineate the inherent relationship between one topic and the next, especially in the absence of an introductory or concluding chapter that would tie the strands of the analysis together explicitly. So, the excursion through numerological considerations leads back to further reflection on "still more tenebrous indeterminacies" whereby "one being, already wounded by an encounter with the multiplicity he is, may listen fearfully to the tones of a multitude of beings, those he will become" (52).

Chapter 2, "Knowledge of Nothing," begins on more explicitly philosophical ground with a consideration of Immanuel Kant's analysis in the *Critique of Pure Reason* of the knowledge of nothing through the categories and the problem of thinking the nothing in itself. Brown links these considerations to the "aspiration to think the Void" via Baudelaire's desired "absolutization of emptiness" in "Obsession" (62). A problem or paradox arises here because "to think the Void as an absolute one would have to think the extinction of every Soul, the annihilation of the World, and the death of God. The price of the pleasure of the Void would be the cancellation of all capacity for pleasure" (61). This realization of what we might call the nonidentity of the nothing with itself allows for a revised understanding of Spleen and Ideal not as a simple opposition but as the mark of a "disharmony *within* the Ideal" whereby "the void is malicious: it infects the Ideal. There is Spleen because of this infection, but the infection is endemic to the Ideal itself" (65). This metaphysical problem becomes a literary one on account of the fact that "the poetic problem with the pursuit of the void is that it has to be *figured*" (69): "If the void cannot be thought without eliminating the thinker, it cannot be figured without eliminating the void" (70). These metaphysical considerations are then wedded to a brief consideration of black and blackness in an analysis that links the blackness of the void to the role of the creole women in Baidelaire's lyrics, figures that Brown argues we should see not only as exoticization but also

"in terms of a metaphysical and representational problem to which [they] provide a vexed solution" (79). The commentary on the poems is offered in service of the larger argument that "the pursuit of the void in *Les Fleurs du Mal* is a rational pursuit, stemming from the relation of reason to the concept of nothing, which has to be thought in excess of the logical function of negation" (103). This chapter is the richest conceptually and the most original in the book, balancing the philosophical consideration of Kant with analysis of a constellation of poems including "L'idéal," "L'irrémédiable," "La destruction," "Les bijoux," "Le goût du néant," and, in a discussion of ekphrasis which concludes the chapter, "Une gravure fantastique."

Chapter 3, "To Look without Loathing," extends the claims of the second chapter and continues to develop the notion that "Baudelaire's intellectual orientation is not rigorously philosophical, but it is conceptually exacting" (104). Brown reads against interpreters such as Emile Benveniste who highlight the role of harmony in Baudelaire as it seems to be exemplified in some of his best known poems such as "Correspondances." Rather, for Brown, harmony includes horror and ennui. Read in the context of Baudelairean irony, *Les Fleurs du Mal* is "far too at odds with itself and with the world, far too excoriating in its irony to satisfy itself with any doctrine whatsoever" (120). This ironic duality means that, in Baudelaire, "poetry enchants as it disenchants" (133), as Brown demonstrates through readings of "Une charogne," "Un voyage à Cythère," and "Les petites vieilles." As the book's focus shifts to irony, Brown is on more well trodden territory in terms of Baudelaire scholarship, and the relative dearth of reference to the vast secondary literature on Baudelaire throughout the book makes itself especially apparent here.

As the focus of the book shifts from the speculative philosophical context which constitutes the interest and originality of the first chapters, and in the continued absence of chapter introductions and conclusions to unify the argument, the connection of one thematic area to the next within the chapters sometimes seems more contingent than necessary. We read that "these reflections [on irony] lead us toward the encounter of lyric idealization with the irrevocable materiality of the body" (128), but there is no indication of exactly how we get from one concern to the next. A notable absence in this chapter's discussion of contradiction in its last few pages is any engagement with dialectical philosophy, either via Hegel or

dialectically inflected critical theory of the twentieth century. The analysis draws out some of the consequences of irreconcilable contradiction as the motor of Baudelaire's poetry as it manifests itself in irony, but it does so via implication rather than, as had been the case in earlier chapters, explicit dialogue with the philosophers whose conceptual orientations ground many of Brown's readings.

Chapter 4, "The Existence of the Poem," circles back to "Obsession" to read the undecidability of the word *toiles*, meaning "canvases" or "webs," in an attempt "to hear the silence" which the word "articulates through what it says, and to see in its inscription the existence of the poem, made manifest: the stubborn tautology of its facticity, restored to the reticence of its being-there" (173). The play of determination and indetermination is revealed in such moments of semantic overdetermination: "We know exactly where 'des êtres disparus' live—*toiles*—but we cannot convert that signifier into a single referent, and thus we cannot secure the metaphysical sense of just what *les ténèbres* are said to be" (185). And thus "Baudelaire's poetry arrives at its most complex determinations when it resists the linguistic optimism of seamless analogy, when its figurative levels resist the synthesis of imagination, and when […] the poem disarticulates the evocative sorcery of metaphor just where it insists on it" (195).

The book provides many moments of insight and many ways to consider the philosophical stakes of Baudelaire's poetry in relation to the metaphysics that it presupposes but also forges in the materiality of the process of verbal creation. The book would have benefited from more careful copyediting, with numerous spelling errors in quotations in French plaguing it throughout, occasionally distracting from what is a richly textured argument attentive to the newness and strangeness of Baudelaire's ironic poetic vision and the way it reshapes poetry's relation to the somethingness of the world and of nothingness itself.