

Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson *Paris as Revolution: Writing the 19th-Century City*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994. 257 pp. Hardcover, ISBN 0-520-08642-2

EIGHTEEN YEARS after its publication, Priscilla Ferguson's *Paris as Revolution* remains a crucial contribution to our understanding of the connection between the French Revolution as a historical event and the revolution as literary practice throughout the nineteenth century. Ferguson explores the way that writers continually revised what both revolution and Paris meant depending on the current political climate and topographical changes. Her work comprises both analyses of the texts produced during the nineteenth century in Paris and readings of Paris itself as a text of revolution and modernity.

Power, Ferguson tells us, can be read in nomination practices. Street names, when employed at all, were first derived from popular description; however, Henry IV relocated the authority to name streets to the central government. After the French Revolution, the impulse was to rewrite the power structures of Paris through renomination. Thus began a period in which proposals for such nomination stemmed from a desire to rationalize and systematize Paris's nomination; in particular, the clean grid of such American cities as Philadelphia were admired for their logical lettering and numbering of streets. However, Ferguson argues, any system of nomination inevitably encounters resistance when it runs up against popular practices which lead to further nomination reform. The result is modernity "rooted in... the perpetually unfinished, always provisional nature of the present and the imminence of change" (35).

Given the slippery nature of names, it was only natural that Parisians would need a guide to move around their constantly changing city. The execution of the king prompted a "crisis of authority that necessitated redefinition of the city" (36). Paris became the head of state, and writers stepped in to offer their own authority as guides to Paris as text. Nowhere is this more evident than in the rhetorical strategies of guidebooks of the time. Ferguson traces the lineage of nineteenth-century guidebooks back to Mercier's *Tableau de Paris* of 1781, in which he balances descriptions of the city with descriptions of her inhabitants. That Mercier used his own figure as the central point of his guide was only possible because he was representing a cohesive, pre-revolutionary Paris; nineteenth-century guidebooks, on the other hand, reflect the fragmentary nature of the city through their collective authorships. It is in these guidebooks that metonymy becomes the primary way of representing Paris. Ferguson's reading of these guides culminates with a contrast between Victor Hugo's introduction to *Paris-Guide* (1867) and Jules Vallès's *Tableau de Paris*. Where Hugo attempts to render the city whole through "his assimilation of Paris with the Revolution" as idea, Vallès writes his "revolutionary aesthetics" in the streets with the poor and overlooked (73,78). Ferguson argues that while Hugo is more closely associated with Paris as revolution, Vallès has the stronger voice because he is more frustrated by the actual revolutionary events.

In one of her most compelling chapters, "The Flâneur: The City and Its Discontents," Priscilla Ferguson traces the changing figure of the flâneur through the nineteenth century as he becomes increasingly productive. In literature, the flâneur acts as a vehicle through which the writer can observe the city and comment on the dramatically changing landscape. This figure is both literally in

the midst of the street and intellectually above the seductions of city, a double position which gives the flâneur's criticisms credibility (80). The literary tradition of the flâneur extends throughout nineteenth-century Paris, but his stock as a character type rises to a peak mid-century, before falling by the end of the century.

Ferguson notes that discourse surrounding the flâneur at the beginning of the century was almost entirely negative. The first images of the flâneur as a disengaged Parisian appeared in pamphlets during the first two decades of the nineteenth century. He moves through the streets as a pure observer, much like the personas present in literary guidebooks of the time. Ferguson explains, "This flâneur is clearly Other and manifestly bourgeois, a distant cousin of Réne, whose insufferable idleness offends and importunes the lower-class speaker" (82). Perhaps what was so troubling about this figure to these early decades is this unproductive apathy. From the standpoint of the lower class, the inactivity of flânerie was deemed an insult when placed in contrast to the lives of those trying to scrape together an existence. From the bourgeois perspective, the otherness of the flâneur stems from his lack of participation in the bourgeois system that rewards work. Though the flâneur may be bourgeois in terms of class, he is something else in terms of values. Perhaps the most threatening aspect of the flâneur is that "unlike the dandy whose flamboyant dress sets him apart, the flâneur remains anonymous, devoid of personality, unremarkable in the crowd" (88). *Lurking* may be a better description of this early flâneur, for his actual individuality is cloaked in the exterior trappings of the bourgeoisie. The negative valuation of the flâneur in the early nineteenth century suggests a Parisian society unwilling or unable to allow space for such individuality and threatened by the presence of values other than its own.

What began as a figure of indolence at the beginning of the century is reinterpreted by such writers as Balzac and rewritten to be a figure possessing the qualities necessary for artistic genius. Thus, Ferguson argues, Balzac recuperates flânerie for Parisian society by reconfiguring the flâneur as an artist. The artist-flâneur "does not look, he observes, he studies, he analyzes" (88). This critical approach to the environment gives the artist-flâneur material for his art and justifies his unique position within society. The artist-flâneur's movement through the city exists as a "mode of comprehension, a moving perspective that tallies with the complexity of a situation that defies stasis" (91). Writers used the figure of the flâneur to attempt to understand, though representation, what Paris means, which implies the belief that what appears unknowable about Paris is actually available only to the artist-flâneur and subtends his creativity. Through Balzac, flânerie became a method of intellectualizing the environment and thereby controlling it, in terms that were explicitly gendered.

That the artist-flâneur would come to have a more ambivalent relationship with the city mid-century is not particularly surprising given the transformation of the political and physical environment following Louis-Napoleon's rise to power and the subsequent haussmannization of Paris. Ferguson argues that in this period, writers such as Baudelaire, Flaubert, and Benjamin, complicate the role of the flâneur and his ability to *know* the city. While Ferguson notes that Flaubert does not directly identify his characters as flâneurs, their distance from their environment and aimless wanderings suggest a version of the figure that has been revalued within the newly modern sphere. Baudelaire draws the flâneur as an

“anguished poet, for whom exploration of the city is a pretext for exploration of the self” (94). Instead of the flâneur functioning as a critical observer of the environment, Baudelaire’s figure collapses the space between environment and self. Flaubert’s flâneur is utterly unproductive and come to symbolize “estrangement, alienation, and anomie,” because he is unable to find a stable position within the sudden and extreme modernization of Haussmann’s Paris (95). She argues that Flaubert inverts Balzac, for the former reverses Balzac’s trope of the flâneur processing the city, and demonstrates how this new flâneur is ultimately powerless (99). The mid-century flâneur is almost returned to his original negative position in society, but whereas the first flâneurs were lazy from the outset, this later flâneur makes attempts at creativity but is stymied by the environment that he can no longer control.

Indeed, by positioning the flâneur as alienated, these later writers articulate the sociological position that “the most intimate of emotions is also and at the same time the most social” (100). Ferguson identifies two primary conditions of the later flâneur – anomie (as well as its counterpart: egoism) and alienation – and connects these themes to their respective theorists. Durkheim theorizes egoism as a condition that results from the disconnection of the individual from society as previously normative social bonds erode. Anomie is the corollary condition of “unregulated passion” that results in “disillusionment...because the most boundless passion inevitably comes up short against the real world” (103). Marx posits that social bonds dissolve because of “the division of property and the class society” (104). In particular, the artist is alienated from society because of the commodification of art. Social fragmentation forms the basis for the flâneur’s complicated relationship to Paris. Finally, looking back on this time, Walter Benjamin “elaborated a vision of a city of revolution, but a revolution that somewhere, somehow went wrong” (107). The failure of the revolution is the same paralyzing failure of Flaubert’s flâneur. Because commodification results in a system of values that idealizes a fundamentally illusory object, Benjamin describes modernity as obsessed with “phantasmagoria” (108). The anxiety of the flâneur is an anxiety of a loss of individuality within a crowd. The flâneur’s anxiety is a direct inversion of his earliest form; whereas the first figures were viewed anxiously because they did not conform to society, these latter figures have internalized the anxiety that they may be unable to resist the commodifying values of society, which renders them innocuous from society’s perspective. Unable to find a place in society that would have any value, the flâneur is returned to his original axiological position where his disengagement is seen as indolence rather than creative perception, but his indolence is rendered impotent. From this analysis of the representative figure of the revolutionary Parisian, Ferguson turns her attention back to the topography of the city, in particular the changes wrought by haussmannization. She notes that the dominant discourse of the literature of the Second Empire is displacement; this revolution in cityscape required a revolution in representation. She finds such revolution in Zola’s *La Curée* (1872), for the text primarily represents an ambivalence: “Zola simultaneously celebrates the new Paris, the beautiful city that serves as backdrop for the corrupt society he denounces” (125). This ambivalence leads to what Ferguson terms “the aesthetics of modernization,” which reflects the tension between the past and the present.

In considering two texts from "The Terrible Year" of 1871, Ferguson returns to the contracts between Hugo and Vallès. Hugo is nearly synonymous with Paris; his writing places Paris as the central point of all civilization and his own persona reflects a "politics of performance" (158). Ferguson argues that Hugo's *Quatrevingt-treize* is premised on a conflict not of competing political systems, but of good and evil, which erases the historicity of Paris and rewrites it as legend. Vallès, on the other hand, rejects such grandiosity and instead embraces an "aesthetic of the street" which "produces a politics of the street" (184). Vallès's Paris is grounded in his commitment to the quotidian struggles of regular Parisians. Ferguson suggests that not only do these two figures contest each other, but also French literary culture remains divided as to the proper status of each writer.

Ferguson's final chapter is devoted to persuasive readings of Zola's *La Débâcle* and *Paris*. She argues that in these texts the revolutionary impulse moves from the public to the private, and the French Revolution shifts from the literary present to the past. At the end of the nineteenth century, after the conflicts between France and Paris, the city ceased to be an effective synecdoche for the country; where once had been metonymy, Ferguson now finds metaphor. The figure of the flâneur, too, is changed into the figure of the intellectual, and the debates that proceed in the wake of the Dreyfus affair center on the credentialing of the intellectual. Finally, Ferguson argues that at the end of the century, the ahistoricity of the Eiffel Tower makes it the appropriate emblem for a political program intent on de-revolutionizing the Revolution.

Ultimately, Ferguson's insightful work reads Paris as a text of Revolution and traces the political impulses of writers who represent Paris as a profoundly modern space and practice. This work provides the reader with a new historical hermeneutic for understanding texts from nineteenth-century Paris and for understanding Paris as a nineteenth-century text.

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