

## Kaplan on Acquisto (2015)

Acquisto, Joseph. *The Fall Out of Redemption: Writing and Thinking Beyond Salvation in Baudelaire, Cioran, Fondane, Agamben, and Nancy*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. Pp. 218. ISBN: 9781628926545

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This is an exciting, elegant, and important book, bringing new light to the wide range of Baudelaire interpretations and, more broadly, to basic existential questions of meaning versus despair, faith (and doubt) versus secularization. Evoking thinkers such as Christopher Watkins, Alain Badiou, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben (and others), Acquisto explains quite plainly: “My contention is that Charles Baudelaire is a key figure in the reimagining of theological discourse in a way that divorces it from a recognizable Catholicism yet retains the force of theological language as it seeks to recast the relationship between the metaphysical and esthetic questions at play in literary creation” (3). The germinal insight is that Baudelaire provides a model of the modern thinker who has rejected the possibility of redemption, Christianity’s foundational claim (hence the book’s title). The fall is irremediable, part of what it means to be human. From that grim hypothesis we follow Acquisto’s sophisticated focus on Baudelaire and Cioran, whose apparent pessimism does not preclude an ethics of human solidarity.

Among his major contributions is his retrieval of Benjamin Fondane’s existential analysis in *Baudelaire et l’expérience du gouffre* (published in 1947 after his murder in Auschwitz–Birkenau), dislodging Jean-Paul Sartre’s more influential essay of the same year. Acquisto also highlights the metaphysical concerns of Walter Benjamin’s early writings, more relevant than the Marxist *doxa* that tends still to dominate academic interpretations of Baudelaire’s modernity. One might even claim that he effects a tectonic shift from predictable binaries, on the one hand, and radically skeptical (or dogmatic) deconstruction on the other, to a nuanced approach to stylistic context and issues of faith, despair, and literary modernity.

On a personal note, Acquisto’s analysis of Baudelaire’s major prose poem, “Mademoiselle Bistouri,” provided the most convincing critique of my (perhaps polemical) emphasis on what I call the “ethical irony” and the overall redemptive structure of *Le Spleen de Paris* and *Les Fleurs du Mal*: “To raise the question of the possibility of ethical ‘progression’ throughout the collection of prose poems is to cede to the desire to conclude, a teleological orientation which [. . .] is common to both philosophy and poetry [. . .] The fact that the sense of a conclusion is weakened by the poetry’s tendency to circle back upon itself, suggests the extent to which Baudelaire refuses the linear, teleological progression that comes with a philosophical and esthetic model based on the logic of redemption” (192).

The final chapter, “Asoteriological Ethics: Baudelaire and Nancy” (171–201), exemplifies Acquisto’s unique blend of literary, philosophical and, above all, ethical and metaphysical perspectives. He thus prepares us to “think and write beyond redemption” (193). This book is a model of theoretical clarity and sensitive textual interpretation. Both ambitious and respectful, the author takes great care to guide the reader to new, and supremely teachable, critical insights.

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