

White on Le Blanc (2016)

Le Blanc, Alissa. *(Re)dire: Jules Laforgue et le poncif*. Honoré Champion, 2016, pp. 756, ISBN: 978-2-7453-3048-2

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“Il s’agit de n’être pas médiocre. Il faut être un nouveau,” wrote Jules Laforgue in his posthumously published *Critique d’art* (*Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, 2000, p. 360). Such imperatives are scattered through his notes and correspondence; and critics, not least in the wake of Daniel Grojnowski’s landmark study, *Jules Laforgue et “l’originalité”* (1988), have been concerned with exploring the writer’s profoundly experimental style. Alissa Le Blanc addresses the guiding question of Grojnowski’s book from the opposite starting point, taking up the figure of the “poncif” as a key to understanding Laforgue’s aesthetics. That the term is derived from the decorative arts—originally a paper or card template through which a drawing could be reproduced—allows Le Blanc to approach certain much-discussed questions about cliché, repetition, and redundancy in Laforgue’s works precisely through the latter’s reflections on visual culture (part one), including kitsch and techniques of mechanical reproduction. The result is a fresh and exceptionally wide-ranging appraisal of Laforgue’s negotiations with stereotype and banality, which connects effectively all dimensions of his writing from art criticism and correspondence to verse collections and prose. Le Blanc sets out to provide a vision of Laforgue’s response to the inescapability of cliché—one which oscillated between humor and despair.

Unsurprisingly, then, the Laforgue that Le Blanc describes bears a spiritual affinity with the author of the *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*; Gustave Flaubert returns throughout the book as a touchstone for the poet’s reflections. What emerges from Le Blanc’s readings of Laforgue’s verse too, however, is an important kinship with novelists—not only Flaubert, but also Émile Zola and other Naturalist writers—that has rarely been acknowledged. The particular mimetic imperatives at work in Laforgue’s poetry involve an accumulation of banal and prosaic expression, commonplaces, and popular street parlance, which are not easily dissociated from “[le] discours ‘poétiquement correct’” (337). Indeed, Laforgue’s integration into his verse of colloquialisms, inane conversation fillers, and phatic interjections betrays, in one sense, a distinctly Naturalist spirit of inclusivity, albeit one which comes up against an opposing, self-parodic strain of esotericism. Perhaps what Le Blanc calls “le discours acéphale du *on flaubertien*” (134) is staged most elaborately in Laforgue’s “Grande plainte de la ville de Paris.” In the manner of Flaubert’s compendia, this polyphonic poem refers to itself as a pitiful “Bilan”; crisscrossed by the shrill language of advertising and capitalist commerce, it contains nothing but the anonymous and disorinated discourses of the doxa.

One of the significant contributions of this study is its reappraisal of Laforgue’s first (and abandoned) collection of verse, *Le Sanglot de la Terre*, discussed at length in part two. Often ignored by critics on account of its aesthetic weaknesses, Le Blanc identifies in the *Sanglot* a rhetoric of self-conscious recapitulation and indebtedness, which renders it a touchstone for Laforgue’s subsequent writing. The first chapter of part three is devoted to exploring the writer’s experimental aesthetic, which operates, Le Blanc argues, through a kind of “jonglerie verbale” (457). A case in point is the Laforguian “mot-valise,” which the poet described, in a famous letter to Gustave Kahn, as “cet accouplement de mots qui n’ont qu’une harmonie de rêve mais font dans la réalité des couples impossibles” (420). More broadly, Le Blanc explores how similar effects are achieved through the insertion of incongruous or discordant terms, the cross-fertilization of set phrases or clichés, the intermixing of registers, and the improbable association of words through purely sonorous combinations. The familiar or stereotypical is thereby redeployed, adulterated, and made strange, but not negated; overlaid with further associations, it nevertheless persists in, as Le Blanc argues, an almost palimpsestic way. Such maneuvers are clearly playful, but not gratuitous: they are placed in the service of Laforgue’s “quête d’un langage de rêve, fantasmagorique et bigarré” (457). Faced with the impasse of the *déjà-dit*, the poet can only hope to recombine, misappropriate or divert, making his work “une véritable chambre d’échos” (460), or perhaps, a collision chamber. Hence, as the last chapter of the book shows, Laforgue’s endless rehashing, and emphatically iconoclastic reworking, of the most hackneyed of poetic tropes: autumnal scenes; setting suns; a pervasive obsession with the moon, which gradually acquires “l’image d’une terre promise” (529).

In such respects, Le Blanc’s account of Laforgue’s aesthetics is Barthesian in spirit, for the poet of her minutely detailed analysis seeks not to “tricher la langue” (313), but rather “tricher avec la langue,” as Barthes put it in his *Leçon* (Seuil, 1978, p. 16). Hence the paradox to which Le Blanc returns: it is the most ossified of linguistic tropes that allow the poet to initiate “un véritable renouvellement du verbe” (40). It is a reading of Laforgue—and indeed, to differing extents, of other writers of the period—that is relatively uncontroversial. Although, at times, some might find the study’s account of Laforgue’s (increasing) linguistic playfulness a little too neat, or indeed optimistic: caught up in a *perpetuum mobile*, “l’œuvre laforguienne profite de

manière jubilatoire du *jeu* qui ne cesse de s'agrandir dans l'édifice poétique et romanesque" (645). For this "play" is also a Sisyphean destiny, just as it always risks turning (back) into the very fixed forms it sets out to subvert.

This qualification aside, Le Blanc's study provides a set of rigorous, entirely comprehensive, and probing insights into Laforgue's aesthetic concerns, which together make a compelling case for his special place in a wider history of literary modernism. It is a shame therefore that this otherwise admirable book loses momentum somewhat in the latter stages, particularly in the final chapter, which is some 220 pages long. Indeed, the entire study would have benefited from streamlining and closer editing. As it is, the book still bears the hallmarks of a hefty, albeit accomplished, doctoral thesis: exhaustive detail, excessive recapitulation and exemplification, as well as a certain timidity or deference in the articulation of its arguments. One clear benefit of this broader canvas, however, is the inclusion of an extensive bibliography, which represents a most valuable resource for Laforgue scholars. The addition of three indices does go some way toward mitigating the navigational issues associated with the book's length.

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