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Alexis Clark

book review of

James McNeill Whistler and France: A Dialogue in Paint, Poetry, and Music by Suzanne M. Singletary

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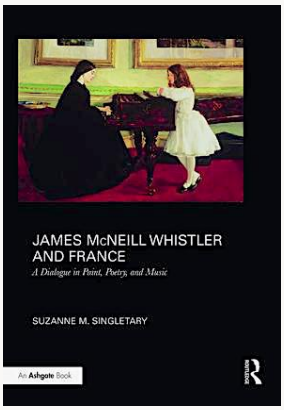

Suzanne Singletary,
James McNeill Whistler and France: A Dialogue in Paint, Poetry, and Music.
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James McNeill Whistler looms large in the art historical imaginary. Biographers past and present paint various pictures of Whistler as a well dressed, well traveled cosmopolitan; as a fop with a lily tucked into his lapel in the style of his erstwhile associate Oscar Wilde; as a litigious and querulous contrarian who sued his enemies in court and came to fisticuffs in the streets of Paris and London; or as an eccentric parvenu with a brusque wit. For Suzanne Singletary, Whistler plays the part of an American expatriate artist among the bohemians of mid-nineteenth century Paris. Singletary's Paris is a city that hummed with the melodies of Richard Wagner and Franz Liszt, echoed with the poetry of Charles Baudelaire, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Edgar Allan Poe, and scintillated in the paintings of the Impressionists. "Though Whistler continually shuttled between London and Paris and his artistic life straddled both cultures," she asserts that this early experience of the French capital had lasting effects on his art and his professional and personal connections: "the influences exerted during his early Parisian years lay the groundwork for his entire career" (1). Still, the locations explored by Singletary extend far beyond Paris' streets to other physical and metaphysical places, which, in turn, help to locate Whistler as a critical link between Realists and Impressionists in the mid-century and Symbolists in the late century.

Claiming that public flamboyance has thwarted earlier efforts to position Whistler in this way, Singletary's introduction to *James McNeill Whistler and France* admonishes histories of the artist as still constrained by the theatrical characterizations (or parodic caricatures) listed above (1).[1] Rather than repeat that discourse, Singletary proposes that Whistler be cast as a serious interlocutor between aesthetic, theoretical, and literary discourses in France. To fulfill this aim, she duly describes mid-century Paris as cloaked in "an atmosphere of camaraderie and competition, [where] artists and writers shared thoughts and absorbed ideas, together with their peers, that were then reconstituted differently by each, according to each one's respective medium, temperament and taste" (2). Her study of "camaraderie and competition" is organized straightforwardly with six chapters that examine the

correspondences and connections between Whistler and Paris-based artists or poets (Charles Baudelaire, Gustave Courbet, Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Claude Monet, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Georges Seurat). As she traces these correspondences, she does not so much explore how poetics came to be translated into paint, but smoothly explicates the dialogue between practitioners of different arts and their medium-specific properties and qualities (the painterliness of painting, the musicality of music, or the poetics of poetry) that took place in cafes, artist studios, art exhibitions, and the homes of artists and critics.

Starting from an analysis of Baudelaire's poems, Singletary's first chapter, "Crossing Thresholds: Baudelaire and Whistler" thoughtfully explains that the writer evokes not merely images, but images of space and spatial transcendence from the earthly realm to the ethereal plane. Baudelaire, she mellifluously details, "pictures music as an architectural soundscape, constructed of tones, chords, harmonies, and dissonances that wrap and envelop the listener" (13). More, Baudelaire, who put pen to paper to compose an 1861 essay on music, *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris*, understood the immensity and expansiveness of mid-century music as opening a new space and so creating a new relationship between reader and poem or viewer and painting. The unfolding of time and space in poetry and music—media which demand to be appreciated part by part—here acts as an analogue for Whistler's paintings of indeterminate spaces. These works require viewers to repeatedly contemplate the images and then use their imagination to compose the space, complete the inchoate scene painted by Whistler, and participate in the act of production. To Singletary, this unfolding time and space may especially be experienced in relation to Whistler's musically titled works (Nocturnes, Harmonies, or Arrangements) that parallel poetry and music in their reliance on indeterminacy, ineffability, and "de-familiarize[d] space and de-materialize[d] concrete objects" (17). A note: the e-book edition of *James McNeill Whistler and France* could be usefully supplemented by recordings of Wagner's *Tännhauser* or recordings of Baudelaire's poetry. Because both the poetry and music described by Singletary "immerse[d] the listener, reader or viewer within limitless, interior spaces," Routledge would do well to foster that immersion through downloadable and supplementary content (13). Singletary further studies Whistler's connection to Baudelaire vis-à-vis the repetition-driven rhythms of Edgar Allan Poe's poetry, which the artist adored and the French poet translated. Richly layering this discussion of the spatial poetics and musicality with literary descriptions of domestic space by the novelists Edmond de Goncourt and Joris-Karl Huysmans, Singletary turns to the influence of music on the sumptuous interiors painted by Whistler, including *Harmony in Blue and Green: The Peacock Room*; Whistler's depictions of interior spaces, such as *At the Piano*; and the color-coordinated semi-public, semi-private studio-gallery-houses occupied by the artist.

It was in his studio-gallery-houses that the artist, like a Baudelairean "dandy [who] focuses upon the self, re-creating and re-constituting his image into a work of art to maintain timeless, aristocratic standards," constructed his immediate reality in a way meant to achieve eternal transcendence (26). In an extended comparison of Whistler's *Artist in His Studio* (1865) with Courbet's *The Painter's Studio: A Real Allegory of Seven Years of My Artistic Life* (1855), Singletary uses these two pictures to unpack differences in their artistic personae and the public presentation of those personae. Her second chapter, "The Artist's Studio: Courbet and Whistler," thus contends that each artist's studio-portrait acted as a declaration of self-definition and a proclamation of aesthetic allegiances. Occupied by the "translucent apparitions" of Albert Moore and Henri Fantin-Latour, as well as the spectral presence of

Symphony in White #1: The White Girl and *La Princesse du pays de la porcelain*, Whistler "constructs and promotes his incipient aesthetic identity" in a painting that records his studio at No. 7 Lindsey Row in Chelsea as a "dreamlike, abstract and enigmatic" space (37). Whereas Singletary sees Courbet's *Painter's Studio* as reifying his self-constructed identity as a lowbrow, beer-swilling provincial boor with roots sunk deep in rural France, Whistler presented and marketed himself as an urbane sophisticate, masking his earnest dedication to diligent work in a self-authored mythology in which he presented himself as an idle fop. Despite these differences, both studio portraits may be read as interior Wagnerian *gesamkunstwerks* (total works of art, in which one art form touches another but remains discrete) due to their incorporation of multiple arts—an idea pursued by Singletary as she traces connections between Baudelaire, Wagner, Courbet, and Whistler (56).

Singletary's third chapter, "Voyage: Manet and Whistler," turns to the friendly interchange between Manet and Whistler. Each artist expressed an interest in modernity and its representation through his subject, style and complicated relation to time, memory, and dreams. Singletary here elucidates further connections between Baudelaire's poetry (especially "La Mort," the final chapter in *Les Fleurs du Mal*) and Whistler's imagery via physical, metaphysical, and psychological *voyages* brought about not so much by alcohol, narcotics, and sexual ecstasy, but touchingly, by loss, death, and memory. Echoing the poetry cited throughout *James McNeill Whistler and France*, with its musical and rhythmic repetitions, Singletary nicely circles back to Whistler's *At the Piano*. Extending her analysis of the painting from the first chapter, this third chapter shifts to the painting's ethereal resonance. *At the Piano* may be read/seen/heard as a type of family portrait that posthumously includes Whistler's father in the form of the piano. The piano on which Whistler's sister Deborah lovingly plays a tune, while her daughter Annie listens intently, had been shipped to London from St. Petersburg by Whistler's mother. As children, James and Deborah had listened to their father play the piano, and Deborah and her father had practiced duets. This scene thus recalls those memories. Singletary has further placed *At the Piano* into conversation with another portrait of domestic harmony: Manet's paintings of his former piano instructor, who later became his wife, seated before the instrument. It is the author's argument that in the era before sound recordings, musical performances such as these held in the domestic sphere were ephemeral and modern. Whether ephemerality makes all musical performances modern seems questionable. An at-home performance of Debussy seems necessarily more modern than one dedicated to the music of Haydn or Beethoven, for instance. Still, in this way, Singletary effectively makes domestic spaces as modern as the fleeting sights, sounds, and experiences of Paris' streets.

The fourth chapter, "Holland and the Modern Interior: Degas and Whistler," and the fifth, "Alliteration and Ellipses: Monet, Mallarmé, and Whistler," interrogate Whistler's ties to the Impressionists Degas and Monet and the poet Mallarmé, all of whom shared an interest in the representation of space and time. Degas and Whistler were also specifically interested in Dutch interiors, leading Singletary to return to *At the Piano*, which, in this instance, is compared with the former's *The Belleli Family*. Dedicated to his own brother-in-law Seymour Haden (married to Deborah), Whistler's etched *French Set* further reveals his familiarity with Dutch depictions of street scenes and domestic space. Elaborating on themes raised in her second and third chapters, Singletary notes that the seclusion of the domestic sphere "doubles as a domain for psychic interiority, a metonymic substitution that fuses subject and object—as well as artist and viewer—sundering the division between

objectively rendered architecture and subjectively experienced space" (102). In making the physical interior a metonym for psychological interiority, Singletary takes up the tempo from her third chapter to here explain that the Parisian streets were conflated with public life and so modern life; the domestic realm operated as an intimate sanctuary separate from the public sphere, and therefore distanced from modernity. Public and private spaces were thus coded with distinct temporalities. Inspired by Dutch paintings and works on paper depicting the ordinary and the everyday, Whistler, in a rhythmic repetition of his own oeuvre, made etchings such as *The Music Room* and *Reading by Lamplight* that each echo the room portrayed in *At the Piano*.

From there, Singletary connects Whistler to Monet and Mallarmé, all of whom embraced seriality and mystery in their respective work. Like the ties between Whistler and Baudelaire, Whistler and Mallarmé appreciated the poetry of Poe and insisted that art should not be reduced to utilitarian function, but aspire to the beautiful (*l'art pour l'art*). Whistler and Mallarmé further shared an interest in work that remained "intrinsically disjunctive and anti-narrative, denying fixed meaning or clear closure" (133). Mallarmé, Singletary effusively writes,

> penned poetic vibrations [that] ricochet between and among other words in the surrounding text, creating a ripple effect of proliferating currents and cross-currents that shape an intricate structural pattern. Rhythm and rhyme, alliteration and assonance, coupled with suggestive allusions and complex syntax, link one part of the poem to another in a forward and backward arabesque, whereby the reader navigates the signs to construct meaning, accrued through visceral as well as intellectual responses. Such rapid oscillations in space, as well as fluid movement between past, present, and future time, can be compared to a dance with language (133–34).

It was in fact Monet who introduced Whistler to Mallarmé. As has often been shown, the former artist's working process underwent a shift in the 1880s and especially 1890s as he started to explore how to translate the experience and sensation of instantaneity through *plein air* sessions that were then modified through intense work in his studio. Monet increasingly understood his art as an "index of experience, tempered through the mnemonic layering of past, present and projected future time," and, like Mallarmé and Whistler, he looked to record the *enveloppe* (the momentary effect of light and air which combine to cloak the image in haze, mist, or meteorological mystery) in his 1890s series paintings (142). Singletary rounds out this chapter by connecting Monet's series to Whistler's *Nocturnes* with their reference to the nighttime atmosphere and to Mallarmé's *blancs* (white spaces) that similarly produced and dematerialized form.

Whereas Singletary's first five chapters steadily connect artists across media via their mutual interest in time, space, and memory—points of connection recited elsewhere in art historical discourse—her sixth chapter misses the mark. In "Seurat's Butterfly: Seurat and Whistler" she identifies the insect in the center of Seurat's *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte* as a dedication to Whistler, who signed his paintings with a butterfly monogram. Singletary compares Seurat's depiction of a skipping blonde *fille* (girl) and butterfly to English caricatures, cabaret posters, and Whistler's portrait of a child-star. While relying on these formal comparisons as well as the artists' explorations into the science of color and connections to Symbolist Wagnerianism—all points of real synchrony between the two—

Singletary omits detailed discussion of the extensive research on Seurat and Neo-Impressionism's anarchist undercurrents.[2] One would expect her interest in connections between Whistler and literary circles to lead to a discussion of the political statements by the artist's former friend, Oscar Wilde, who had penned "The Soul of Man Under Socialism" (1891) as a scathing attack on charity.[3] How Whistler responded to that tract would be interesting to know. Yet she eschews political dissonance between Whistler and Seurat. That Seurat, Félix Fénéon, and their Neo-Impressionist colleagues endorsed *l'art social*—the theory that art should act as a blueprint for the betterment of mankind—would seem to contradict Whistler's *l'art pour l'art*. Though she attempts to resolve those differences, it's difficult to see these as overlapping positions, especially when looking at the artists' output, politics, and affiliations. For instance, Seurat's "drawings from 1880–84 render industrial sites, locomotives, factory workers, women in domestic settings, and common laborers, including stone breakers—subjects obviously indebted to Courbet, Millet and the Barbizon painters" (162). In contrast, Whistler's portraits of the elite do not express any such commitment. And while Seurat started the Salon des Indépendants, which, in a purposeful ideological and political break with the official Salon des Artistes Français, abandoned selection committees, honors, and awards to model a more egalitarian artists' society, Whistler did not shirk official exhibitions. (The latter participated in both avant-garde and official exhibitions across Europe.) By insisting that "Seurat and his neo-Impressionist colleagues avoided direct political action," Singletary sidesteps the substantial research into Neo-Impressionism's dialogue with anarchism (167).[4]

Since the start of the new millennium, Whistlerian studies have wonderfully expanded *pace* the substantial contributions of Anna Gruetzner Robins, David Peters Corbett, Grischka Petri, and still others whose research has thoroughly explicated Whistler's connections to French, British, and even Australian artists as seen in the National Gallery's recent exhibition, *Australia's Impressionists*.[5] Perhaps it is due to her focus on Whistler's French connections and context—a focus that certainly complements these studies and their interest in transnationalism—that Singletary does not reference more recent studies but somewhat mistakenly surveys the state of the field as still limited to "the eccentricities of his personality and the sensationalism of the Whistler–Ruskin trial, or . . . a 'life and work' approach that has stressed formal analysis and viewed Whistler as a step in the modernist march towards abstraction in the tradition of Clement Greenberg" (3). For a study so interested in dialogue, it seems unfortunate, then, that *James McNeill Whistler and France* does not make more explicit connections to current discourse around Whistler and current approaches to his connections to artists worldwide. The truly pertinent and compelling issues presented by Singletary around time and space (physical and metaphysical) and the correspondences between artistic media chime with interests shared by many in the field. Bibliographic omissions aside, Singletary has composed a beautifully written text (her prose at times rises to level of Mallarmé's and Baudelaire's) that may complement recent work into Whistler's international connections.

Alexis Clark
Washington University in St. Louis
a.m.clark[at]email.wustl.edu

Notes

[1] This topic has been thoroughly explored by Sarah Burns. See: *Inventing the Modern Artist: Art and Culture in Gilded Age in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996).

[2] Singletary is not the first to make this connection between Seurat's painted butterfly and Whistler's monogram. She readily acknowledges that her research builds on that undertaken by Paul Smith. See Paul Smith, *Seurat and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).

[3] Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man Under Socialism," *The Fortnightly Review* (February 1891).

[4] Anne Dymond, "A Politicized Pastoral: Signac and the Cultural Geography of Mediterranean France," *The Art Bulletin* 85, no. 2 (June 2003): 353–70; Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-siècle France: Painting, Politics, and Landscape* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2007); Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-Impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). These authors are not cited in Singletary's footnotes or bibliography.

[5] Interestingly, Singletary has kept better pace with the scholarship on those artists and issues here connected to Whistler: the bibliography on Courbet, Mallarmé, and Seurat as well as that on domestic interiors seems more up-to-date. See Anna Gruetzner Robins, *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and His Impressionist Followers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008). David Peters Corbett, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004). Note that these are only some of the more recent studies on Whistler to be published in the last fifteen years. See also the exhibition review of *Australia's Impressionists* in this issue of *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*.