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A Prose Reverie for Charles Baudelaire

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As a child of popular culture, it seems fitting that my long-delayed appreciation of Charles Baudelaire began in front of a television screen. Every Halloween since childhood, I ritualistically set myself before the TV to re-watch the first ‘Treehouse of Horror’ episode of *The Simpsons*, which offers an affectionate parody of Edgar Allan Poe’s sombre poem ‘The Raven’ (1845). Electronic images of the cartoon raven, relentlessly repeating the eerie word ‘Nevermore’, ingrained themselves on my young mind, which was completely oblivious to the show’s overt satire. Astride the bust of Pallas, the raven’s cartoon utterances seemed both strange and beguiling, containing an unsettling symbolism I couldn’t understand. After continual nagging, my parents finally relented and bought me a collection of Poe’s works containing this mysterious narrative. That small, mass-produced edition of Poe’s stories and poems, bound in cheap red cloth, its pages tipped with artificial gold, still sits on my shelf, gathering dust until the darker months, when I routinely re-read my favourites: ‘Ligeia’ (1838), ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (1839), ‘The Masque of the Red Death’ (1842), ‘The Oval Portrait’ (1842), and, of course, ‘The Raven’.

A childhood fascination with Poe encouraged a lifelong fascination with the Gothic, and, unknown to me in my youth, with the decadent. With adolescence came a searching for Poe’s literary kin, and, as Poe’s French translator, Baudelaire’s name quickly rose to the top of my list. Excitedly purchasing an English translation of *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) at age fifteen, I rushed home prepared to be astounded by Poe’s spiritual scion. But Baudelaire’s poetry was not the rapturous revelation I had intended for it to be. The verse seemed hollow and cynical – cruel, even – and I regrettably shrugged it off as pompous and moved on to Walter Pater’s impressionistic meditations on art, and to the incantatory odes of Algernon Charles Swinburne. Yet, Baudelaire’s writing began to subtly work on me throughout my late teens and early twenties. I grew to adore his arrogance

and glamour, and his hieratic assertions on art, beauty, literature and artifice corrupted my vision of the world.

Alongside Oscar Wilde, Baudelaire became my intellectual mentor. Rejecting utility in art, I began to assert the beauty of the world at the expense of the ethical – a troubling notion when shifted from theory to reality. But it is Baudelaire's veneration of the artificial that has had the longest, and the most profound, effect on my thinking. In Baudelaire, nature, red in tooth and claw, is symptomatic of humanity's barbarism, and must constantly be refined through the aesthete's cultivated gaze. Thus, Baudelaire's poetic landscape creates a paradise of beauty and artifice in which the natural is profane. Artifice, Baudelaire writes in 'La Peinture de la vie moderne' (1863), is a 'sublime distortion of nature'.¹ As such, the dandies and the aesthetes that populate Baudelaire's corpus, with their elegant narcissism and 'aristocratic superiority of the mind', are granted noble status. Dandyism, Baudelaire writes, is a 'cult of the ego' whose vocation is elegance and 'distinction', the dandy the 'last flicker of heroism' in a decadent age.² Putting practice into action, Baudelaire created an artificial personality and became it, importing an icy, elegant style into modern culture, art merging with life.

Re-reading Baudelaire on the bicentenary of his birth, I find myself enthralled, mystified and aghast by his vision of nineteenth-century Paris, a Dantean landscape run by vice and gold, and of his transformation of everyday existence into a panoramic spectacle of the world. In 'Les Chats', a feline's cold, agate stare transports us back onto the burning sands of Ancient Egypt, where we reverently bow, entranced, before the Great Sphinx. In 'L'Âme du vin', a bottle of red re-invigorates the dying embers of the working-man's soul. And, in 'Parfum exotique', ribbons of scent thrust us backwards into the undulating oceans of memory, where the past and present merge in sensual overload. Yet Baudelaire is not solely a documentarian of the ephemeral. In 'Un Voyage à Cythère', for instance, we find the tragedy of the human condition laid out bare before us: From a ship, the poet sees his double hanging in the gallows, buzzard-pecked and torn at by wild dogs. Having set foot on the black isle of Cythera, the home of the Goddess Venus, the double passes

from innocence to experience and is forced to yield to his inevitable death. Despite his hostility to the natural world, Baudelaire violently dramatizes humanity's passivity towards a voracious nature which he displays with all of its barbarities.

Aestheticizing the grotesque, and luxuriating in the sensual, Baudelaire radiates a modern ennui, a cultural melancholy and apathy. However, Baudelaire's poetry is no mere decadent dead-end. Just as he lavishly praises the artistic genius of Leonardo, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Goya, and Delacroix as torches of beauty and truth in the roiling seas of history, so, too, does Baudelaire act as a beacon whose fire, once ignited, illuminates others. It is through Baudelaire that I discovered the ornate, Orientalist luxuriance of Théophile Gautier; the decadent connoisseurship of Des Esseintes, the aesthete *par excellence* of Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884); and the seductive, mechanical monstrosities of Raoule de Vénérande, the crossdressing libertine of Rachilde's *Monsieur Vénus* (1884). So, too, can Baudelaire's aesthetic lineage be traced through to my favourite modern authors: Jean Genet, Angela Carter, and Michel Houellebecq, all of whom revive and revise Baudelaire's imperious *femmes fatales*, his graceful androgynes, and his sophisticated aesthetes for the modern audience.

And thus it is that a child's Halloween tradition developed into and helped cultivate a vision in which art is exalted, and the artificial revered.

¹ Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', in *Selected Writings on Art and Artists* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1972), pp. 390-436 (p. 426).

² Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life', pp. 420-21.