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Parapluies and Petticoat tails: Baudelaire's 'À une passante', a *Couturière's* Delight

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She passed me by

Mid deafening clamour of traffic and street sound,
A woman passed by, tall, slender, majestic,
A vision in mourning, jewelled hand mesmeric,
Swinging scalloped petticoat trim up from the ground.

A queenly silhouette, graceful too, limbs shapely,
Her dark eyes held wild promise of hurricane skies,
That sweetness, those pleasures, for which one would gladly die,
Like an addict, I imbibed her, nerves edgy.

A bolt from the blue! Then... nothing – Elusive
Beauty, one glance from nowhere has turned me around,
Will we chance to meet before the next life?

Or in some distant land? *Belle Dame*, you'll never be found!
Since I know not where you went, nor you where I go,
You might have been the one, and this, I think you know.

My translation of Charles Baudelaire's 'À une passante'

The early 1990s were a time of heightened unrest in Belfast. The *hurlements* and city sounds in that place were of a different kind to those described in Baudelaire's Parisian street scenes. At that time, I was a Modern Languages undergraduate at Queen's University Belfast studying, among other great works, Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*. The title intrigued me because finding illumination was something we had to do for ourselves during *les temps sombres*.

'À une passante', one of eighteen poems which make up the 'Tableaux parisiens', was read aloud in our French lecture hall by Professor Peter Broome. Listening to his animated voice, as he defined vocabulary and provided instruction for annotation, we followed the decadent nineteenth-century lexicon, beguiled by the dazzle of a jewelled hand, the rustle of a dress. The poetry worked its effect on each of us.

In what seemed like a Proustian experience, I felt myself transported to Anderson and McAuley's, a department store dating from the late nineteenth century, situated in the often-bombed city centre. My epiphany was not, however, engendered by a shell-shaped *Petite Madeleine* softened by 'une cuillerée du thé' [a spoonful of tea].¹ It was, rather, a *coup de force* inspired by Baudelaire's evocation of the cut of a black gown and the scallop-edged elegance of a petticoat.

It was my practical mother who introduced her three daughters to the art of dressmaking. She was born at the start of WW2, in frugal Make Do and Mend times, where dressmaking was an indispensable skill. We would regularly make our way to Anderson and McAuley's with plans to create different kinds of dresses from the luxurious rolls of velvets, damasks, voiles, lawns, and lace, all in an exotic array of colours. Entering the hush of the grand shop and walking up the

carpeted steps, with what Irish poet Ciaran Carson calls ‘a squint of the imagination’, one could summon up an earlier era, where the *fin de siècle* ladies of the city visited the haberdashery department to be kitted out in finest attire.²

My mother reminded us that before any consideration of ‘notions’, the accurate *structuring* of a garment, in terms of judicious cuts, tucks and seams, determines its flow.³ Baudelaire also knew this to be the case in his writing. He constructed his poem as a traditional French sonnet, before edging his first two quatrains with *rimes embrassées* (abba) followed by *rimes croisées* (abab). Adding an impassioned air of drama, he emphasized ‘the stigmata which life in a metropolis inflicts upon love’, by finishing the last two lines of the final tercet with *rimes plates* (a rhyming couplet).⁴ Imposing the Alexandrine verse form maintained a degree of order, while allowing luxury and decadence to permeate via exotic vocabulary and imagery.

A dressmaker knows that how the garment drapes and how the figure is accentuated are important considerations, so the movement of the poem also captured the attention of my *couturière* heart. Baudelaire’s liberal use of sibilants (‘*assourdissante*’, ‘*majestueuse*’, ‘*passa*’, ‘*fastueuse*’, ‘*soulevant*’, ‘*balançant*’, ‘*feston*’) firstly suggests the hissing street sounds, then the exquisite swish of the woman’s movements along the Parisian thoroughfare. Baudelaire’s illustration of the preoccupied, confident yet elusive *femme fatale* as she swings her petticoats in a demolishing gesture, is further reflected in her enigmatic eyes.

A few years later, in the National Gallery in London, standing opposite Renoir’s famous painting *Les Parapluies*, I felt that I had encountered Baudelaire’s ‘fugitive beauté’. The scene from this painting, developed in two stages in the 1880s, is reminiscent of Baudelaire’s poetic vignette. It is documented that Renoir had originally dressed *his* passer-by with lace collar, cuffs, and hem.⁵ However, a few years later, applying his own tailoring skills, and perhaps observing English nineteenth-century poet Robert Browning’s advice in ‘Andrea del Sarto’, ‘less is more, Lucrezia’, he painted over the frilled ‘notions’ to create a simpler silhouette.

I stepped out of the crowds of Belfast city and into Professor Broome’s office, this time for a seminar group and deeper discussions on Baudelaire. I wore an ankle-length dress of Liberty lawn fabric, cinched at the waist, carefully tucked and darted at the bodice, and neatly hemmed. The grim and the brutal were a stone’s throw away, but I wanted to gather some flowers, to learn of a decadent affair of the heart gone wrong, in what Walter Benjamin called love ‘at last sight’.⁶

¹ Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1988), p. 44. All translations are my own.

² Ciaran Carson, ‘Introduction’, in *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri* (London: Granta Books, 2004), pp. xi–xxi (p. xi). Carson has translated several of Baudelaire’s poems from *Les Fleurs du mal* in his book-length work of French translations. See Carson, *The Alexandrine Plan* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 1998).

³ ‘Accessories such as trims, tapes, and fasteners that are attached to the sewing project for function or decoration are categorized as sewing notions’. See <<https://sewingmachinelife.com/beginner-info/what-are-sewing-notions/>> [accessed 11 March 2021].

⁴ Walter Benjamin, ‘On some Motifs in Baudelaire’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Mariner Books, 2019), p. 120.

⁵ A. Roy, R. Billinge and C. Riopelle, ‘Renoir’s “Umbrellas” Unfurled Again’, *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, 33 (2012), 73–81 (p. 75) <http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/technical-bulletin/roy_bilinge_riopelle2012> [accessed 8 March 2021].

⁶ Benjamin, p. 119.