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Baudelaire and Transparency

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In an unpublished text on *La Fanfarlo* in 2011, I analysed the decadence of the paratheatrical spaces central to the novel, namely the boudoirs. Published in 1847, the novel followed others of the July Monarchy which broke with traditional representations of the backstage, thereafter centralizing society's opaque mechanics – including class mobility – within hidden and 'overexploited', theatrical environments.¹ In *La Fanfarlo*, a writer operates a calculated press campaign which eventually permits him access to the title character. The reversal of both protagonists' opinions occurs in paratheatrical spaces: while La Fanfarlo breaks into tears immediately upon sight of her worst critic in a dressing room, an enthralled Cramer spends several evenings watching her performance 'like a Turk on opium'² in his theatre box.

Albeit offstage, the spectacle of their mutual attraction requires both a *mise en scène* and an audience – La Fanfarlo's bedroom is littered with theatre props. Illuminated by contrived, theatrical lighting, the boudoir is described as a narrow, 'soft', and 'perfumed' aperture. It is a humid 'greenhouse' that 'invites one to waste and perish' (pp. 65-66) – a faintly guarded allusion to the physiognomy of the actress – whose decor features portraits with dark backgrounds, as if the faces of former lovers were spectators emerging from the walls.

The boudoir represents a liminal space where two real people intermingle with the contrived constructions of the stage. Baudelaire's characters present correlated ambiguities – Cramer's family history is complex and his banter indecipherable. The difficulty in understanding him is grasping 'where the acting begins' (p. 61).³ The protagonists' gender differences also escape binary comprehension. While Cramer uses a female pen name and is described as 'hermaphroditic' (p. 39), La Fanfarlo's body, notably her legs and neck, are firmer than a woman's, large and strong, 'like a gorilla' (p. 61).

Certain analyses have asserted that Baudelaire employed androgyny to enhance the ‘gender-fluid’ characters; their indiscernibility opened the door to ‘vast new possibilities for poetic sensation [and] increased affective and cognitive experience.’⁴ Walter Benjamin’s interpretation of Baudelaire’s characters likens them to the author’s own construction of a persona, ultimately aiming to obstruct, ‘hide’, and thereby ‘preserve’ his internal ego.⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre adds that Baudelaire ‘disguised’ everything – ‘performing rather than experiencing’, he manifested a distaste for anything ‘natural’.⁶ All three observations depict an accentuated artistic agency through designed yet quotidian performance similar to Cramer’s intertwining of theatre and intimacy, calling for make-up – a facial disguise – at the height of the couple’s physical experience.

The fusion between veracity and fantasy in the boudoir concludes with another marriage, that of the two artists. The ‘horror’ of the union unravels rapidly as perhaps a revenge for Baudelaire’s own experience with actresses, whose marriages he deemed offensive.⁷ The relationship was ‘terrible, pitiful, shameful [...] unhealthy’ (p. 69). The denouement epitomizes nineteenth-century artistic denunciations of the bourgeois model: they have twins, La Fanfarlo parades as a respectable, reformed thespian, as Cramer turns to journalism and politics. Similarly, Sartre posits that Baudelaire’s career crests with the novella’s publication, specifically the cry for *rouge*, before slumping into a mediocre and ‘canonized’ role as a reticent representative of *L’art pour l’art* movement.⁸

In 2011, my conclusion focused on how the performance moves from stage to the dressing-room and then to the boudoir, burrowing deeper into backstage space as a symbolic and literal climax only achieved through privileged access to paratheatrical secrets, a specific voyeurism especially enticing to contemporary readers. Ten years later, in 2021, when looking back at the original text, an additional reading surfaces which enhances scholarship on the ‘textual staging of society’.⁹ The investigation into that which lies behind the curtains presents but another example of publications claiming an accurate or scientific observation of society’s veiled transactions, and such texts incorporated multiple disciplines during the July Monarchy, including literature.¹⁰

Baudelaire's novella shares a trait with many of these exposés, namely the impact on the popular imaginary. In illuminating the underbelly of the theatre, *La Fanfarlo* joins a host of other fictions of 'the wings' depicting and decrypting paratheatrical spaces. The novella therefore not only uncovers the *couliasses* of *La Fanfarlo*, it also reinforces a conception of the backstage as holding dissimulated operations, invisible power, and concealed societal truths: *paratheatrum mundi*.¹¹

Although establishing a household, Cramer's fate is nonetheless depicted as catastrophic. The theme reappears in a plethora of backstage novels: *Nana*, *Marthe*, *La Faustin*, *La Fauve*, or *Sarrasine*, for example, not to mention *La Duchesse bleue*, or France's *Histoire comique*. The shared storyline accentuates the horrific nature of what actually occurs behind the curtains. Beyond elucidating the mysteries of society then, the novels seek to warn against the dangers and monsters of a new era lurking in the wings.

Baudelaire's monster is of course a social climber who has ascended from the theatre to the bourgeoisie. However, the elite artist Baudelaire champions actually relied upon such demonization of the bourgeoisie so as to render their superiority comprehensible.¹² Primarily criticized was the bourgeois' implication in commercial or financial matters; as contemporary artist Couture bemoaned, 'the bourgeois attributes a mercantile value to everything'.¹³ The bourgeoisie subsequently purchases all of the qualities they do not truly possess, living in 'disguises' and 'lies', or in other terms, as actors.¹⁴ Furthermore, a crafted artistic persona requires labour. Sartre underlines Baudelaire's attempts to disguise this 'menial' aspect of his art.¹⁵ Another critic speculates that if Baudelaire wrote so few novellas like *La Fanfarlo*, it was because prose came to be associated too closely with market concerns such as journalism or the *feuilleton*, and because more pragmatic and descriptive language risked stumbling into banality.¹⁶

Yet looking more closely at the opposition to the bourgeoisie germane to *La Fanfarlo*, ideological questions come to the fore, namely a divergence in political opinions, and issues of class more broadly. In the case of the bourgeoisie, they may be criticized for having sprung from the people, whom they then fail to recognize and even come to fear. Couture's text concludes, 'if

I compare the bourgeoisie to the people from a moral perspective, I attest to the true inferiority of the former'.¹⁷ The analysis of Couture's text cites Jules Michelet as having been a profound inspiration to the artist, notably *Le Peuple*.¹⁸ Michelet asserts the true roots of French civilization as the Barbarians in his study.¹⁹ Other authors of the July Monarchy utilized the concept, notably Eugène Sue, who depicted the enslaved Gauls as the true heirs to a pure French bloodline.²⁰ While Couture's text on the bourgeoisie attacks their lack of recognition and admiration for the people from which they sprouted, he anchored those opinions in the work of a historian asserting legitimacy in regard to national heritage, both hallmarks of a populist culture that we mistakenly take for granted as a tactical, twentieth-century political mainstay.²¹

If Baudelaire's novella on the perils of bourgeoisification provides a glimpse of such populist arguments, it is through the presence of amnesia. The one character truly of the people, La Fanfarlo, does not acknowledge, nor reminisce about, her former kin. Rather, she awaits her husband's death to further her social climbing. Contrastingly, Cramer represents the artistic elite but fails to distinctly recall the previous events culminating in his demise. Both characters firmly stabilize their condition as bourgeois, omitting previous class affiliations, and stumbling into monetary and political concerns. Even the narrator forgets the titles of Cramer's noteworthy books despite their possessing 'verve, energy, and curiosities' (p. 70), further divorcing the protagonist from any claim to artistry. As in Couture's populist critique then, the protagonists are refused access to both the morally superior popular classes and an artistic elite, thereby offending the former and justifying the supremacy of the latter, inviting new, political readings of Baudelaire's prose.

¹ Jean-Claude Yon, 'La critique au crayon: L'exemple de *La Vie Parisienne*,' in *Le miel et le fiel*, ed. by Mariane Bury and Hélène Laplace-Claverie (Paris: PUPS, 2008), pp. 73-74. All translations are my own.

² Charles Baudelaire, *La Fanfarlo* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), pp. 59-63. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

³ Commentary on the hermaphroditic nature of the female dancer or circus-artist in the nineteenth century was apparently commonplace. See Jennifer Forrest, 'Aerial Mistresses and Spectating Messieurs: The Paradox of the

- Lady Acrobat in the French Fin de Siècle', in *Peripheries of Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, ed. by Timothy Raser (Newark: Delaware University Press, 2002), pp. 143-44.
- ⁴ Nathaniel Wing, 'Androgyny, Hysteria, and the Poet in Baudelaire's Novella *La Fanfarlo*', *Romance Quarterly*, 45.3 (1998), 143-53 (p. 150).
- ⁵ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Payot, 2002), pp. 142, 250.
- ⁶ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 24, 103.
- ⁷ See, for example, Charles Baudelaire, *Mystères galans des théâtres de Paris* (Paris: Cazet, 1844), p. 8; and Jean-Baptiste Baronien, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 77.
- ⁸ Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 3; Sartre, pp. 152, 155-57.
- ⁹ Judith Lyon-Caen, 'Le romancier, lecteur du social dans la France de la Monarchie de Juillet', *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, 24 (2005), 15-32 (pp. 18, 20-21).
- ¹⁰ Judith Lyon-Caen, 'Saisir, décrire, déchiffrer: les mises en texte du social sous la Monarchie de Juillet', *Revue historique*, 2.630 (2004) 303-31 (pp. 328, 330).
- ¹¹ For more information on this concept, see Erik Anspach, 'Scarron et les coulisses du château en scène', in *Châteaux et spectacles*, ed. by Anne-Marie Cocula and Michel Combet (Pessac: Ausonius, 2018), pp. 47-48.
- ¹² Pierre Vaisse, 'Thomas Couture, ou le bourgeois malgré lui', *Romantisme*, 17-18 (1997), 103-21 (p. 105).
- ¹³ Vaisse, p. 107.
- ¹⁴ Vaisse, p. 115.
- ¹⁵ Sartre, pp. 134-35.
- ¹⁶ Nathalie Buchet Rogers, 'La Fanfarlo: La prostituée rend au poète la monnaie de sa pièce', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 32.3-4 (2004), 244-48.
- ¹⁷ Vaisse, pp. 107-08.
- ¹⁸ Vaisse, p. 111.
- ¹⁹ Jules Michelet, *Le Peuple* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), pp. 8-11.
- ²⁰ Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères du peuple* (Paris: Laffont, 2003), pp. xxiv-xxvi.
- ²¹ Pierre Birnbaum, *Genèse du populisme: le peuple et les gros* (Paris: Pluriel, 2010), pp. 50-51.