

TEACHING BAUDELAIRE



Jardin des Plantes, 2003, © Peter Coles

À une passante

Charles Baudelaire

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
Slevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair ... puis la nuit! — Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! trop tard! *jamais* peut-être!
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!

Joseph Acquisto

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I had heard that *Les Fleurs du mal* was one of the most important and influential works of poetry in the last two hundred years, that it was a foundational text of modernity, that it was scandalous, that it was powerful. And so as a sophomore French major in college I eagerly checked it out of the university library, having read only a small handful of poems from it before, the usual ones that often serve as someone's first inroad to his poetry: 'Correspondances' with its vertical and horizontal worlds that seem profound when you're sixteen, 'L'Albatross' and its seemingly transparent lesson about how the world mistreats its poets, also a lesson that teenagers are likely to find appealing. And so, once I had read through all the poems of the collection, my first thought was 'Really? This?' Never would I have guessed, if I hadn't read and been told, that *this* was the foundational text of modernity. It was not that I just wanted to move on from it, though. While I can't quite recall exactly how it happened, I was led to find out more, pursued an independent study that my professor wanted to make about the entire history of French poetry but which I convinced him to divide in three equal parts: pre-Baudelaire, Baudelaire, post-Baudelaire. ('An interesting way of dividing up literary history', said another professor.) And then, when it came time to choose an undergraduate honours thesis topic, I was a full-on Baudelairean.

I enjoy asking students to guess where the only Baudelaire Studies Center in the world is and seeing their surprise when they learn it is in Nashville, Tennessee, not far from Music Row. I was lucky to be able to travel there to do thesis research and to sense a human connection to him as I leafed carefully through one of the original editions of *Les Fleurs du mal*, with the condemned poems ripped right out of the book (along with the first part of whatever poem happened to be printed on the same leaf) and a postcard where he asks advice on a translation from English that he was working on. Soon I came to know him better than I know any living human being, having read every word he ever published and all his letters with their sad story of constant financial trouble and inability to work as he wanted to. I found Jean-Paul Sartre cruel for enumerating all

the misery that Baudelaire didn't deserve and then asking: 'Et s'il l'avait mérité?' I was well on my way toward discovering what one critic called *cet iceberg*.¹

Now that I've written a book on him as well as many book chapters and articles, and as I'm setting to work on a second book, I find myself more apprehensive, not less, when I first try to introduce him to an undergraduate class. I feel like every entry point I could choose would inevitably give the wrong impression, even though I'm not sure what the 'right' impression would be. Should I tell the anecdote of the poet who tried to shock his friends by implying that he eats children's brains? Should I present him as the *poète maudit* who wrote about horse carcasses and was put on trial for obscenity and then officially pardoned by the French government in 1949? As the first major poet of the modern city? As the last poet of Romanticism? The experimenter with alcohol and other drugs? I usually put these lines from 'L'Héautontimorouménos' on the board:

Ne suis-je pas un faux accord
Dans la divine symphonie
Grâce à la vorace Ironie
Qui me secoue et qui me mord?

And then I'm honest about not really knowing how best to introduce someone I've known so intimately for so long by now and who I hope my students will come to know and like too. I usually fall back on the idea of the *homo duplex* and I try to give the students an idea of the way it can be said that everyone has his or her own Baudelaire: the Catholic, the Satanist, the modernist, the antimodernist, the Romantic, the decadent, the revolutionary, the reactionary. He is interesting precisely because all of those labels both do and do not apply. And that is part of what has kept me coming back, time and again, to Baudelaire: the interest of his writings is magnified tenfold by the broad span of his reception history, which I find so stimulating to engage with and, in some small way, participate in via my own writing. If the full impact of his poetry was not immediately obvious to me when first I read it, that's part of the point: Baudelaire's world is one that unfolds slowly, that repays constant return and infinite questioning in the textual company of others who have engaged with his work over the years.

It is Baudelaire's ability always to elude our grasp somehow that makes him so compelling to me; it gives me a sense of undertaking each new reading of *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris* and all his critical writings with a new sense of discovery and also a feeling that whatever I end up saying about him this time will never be definitive for me, nor would I want it to be. It is an ever-renewed *invitation au voyage* of reading, a search for the new *au fond de l'Inconnu*, and at the same time a return, a collapse of the 150 years that separate us as well as an occasional reminder of that vast temporal distance, a putting into question linear time that Baudelaire would no doubt endorse. Baudelaire, *cet iceberg*, an inexhaustible literary stimulation and my own door to the world of modern French literature that has come to mean so much to me. I still need him, in ways that Serge Reggiani sang about back in the year I first discovered *Les Fleurs du mal* in a song I discovered on a cassette tape in the language lab:

S'il vous plaît, Monsieur Baudelaire
Un peu de fantaisie
Entre nous, pour la rime...

¹ Claude Pichois, 'Baudelaire, cet iceberg...', in *Scritti in onore di G. Macchia*, ed. by Arnoldo Mondadori, I (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1983), pp. 497-504.

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J'ai rencontré Baudelaire en quatrième année de lycée, en Italie : ces « Correspondances » déjà merveilleuses, et l'analyse de mon enseignante d'italien. Peu de temps après, est venu tout le reste : les poèmes moins connus, les poèmes bien trop connus et infiniment interprétés, les vers et la prose, les projets de préface, les journaux intimes, les critiques, les lettres à sa mère et à ses éditeurs, les élans de brutale misogynie et xénophobie et les prières à Dieu pour apprendre à s'aimer soi-même. C'est à travers ce prisme vertigineux de facettes superposées que Baudelaire est avec moi depuis ma première année de master.

Je l'ai lu en étant étudiante, aux prises avec mes premières recherches en littérature comparée. Je l'ai lu en tant qu'enseignante du secondaire, réfléchissant à des stratégies pédagogiques pour faire *sentir* à mes élèves de seconde en quoi ce qu'on leur avait présenté comme un chef-d'œuvre pouvait vraiment l'être, et comment génie et scandale pouvaient parfois aller de pair (et du coup, il a fallu que je justifie ma conviction que l'on avait bien le droit de lire « Les Bijoux » et les « Litanies de Satan » pendant le ramadan). Je l'ai lu en tant qu'enseignante dans le supérieur, cherchant à mobiliser les connaissances des étudiants de licence pour étudier ensemble en quoi « Au lecteur » pouvait tout de même être porteur d'une certaine pensée philosophique. Et je le lis en tant que doctorante, pour étudier sa posture poético-philosophique à l'égard de la nature humaine à la lumière de son rapprochement comparatif avec d'autres poètes.

Je ne me demande pas, ni ici ni ailleurs, de combien de façons l'on peut lire Baudelaire, de combien d'enjeux il peut être porteur, évocateur ou prétexte, dans combien de contextes il peut être enseigné. Ce serait un questionnement immense, et sans doute, par là, d'utilité douteuse.

J'aimerais me demander, en revanche, comment et pourquoi je continue à l'aimer. Évidemment, l'on ne termine jamais d'approfondir sa connaissance d'un auteur, d'une œuvre, d'une pensée ; bien entendu, l'on peut toujours aimer un auteur canonique, dont tout le monde

parle depuis des siècles ; et, absolument, l'on peut continuer à l'aimer tout en l'exploitant et en le décortiquant. Mais est-ce possible de l'aimer encore *naïvement* ? Quelles manières, quelles formes peut assumer un rapport toujours *naïf* avec Baudelaire ?

Pour Baudelaire poète et critique d'art, la naïveté était la niaiserie du public moderne face à la photographie,¹ mais également l'aspiration vers le brillant et vers le style joujou propre à l'enfance,² la passion que l'artiste de génie unit au romantisme,³ l'abri impeccable du poète-philosophe et la bizarrerie inconsciente du Beau qui fait l'assaisonnement de l'art.⁴ C'est de cette manière – ou mieux : c'est de toutes ces formes et manières – de la naïveté qu'est nourri mon rapport avec Baudelaire. Ces sens – contemporains et baudelairiens – de *naïf* me semblent avoir quelque chose en commun : l'évocation d'un élan spontané, réel puisque individuel, d'un charme profond et enthousiaste, qui n'oublie jamais, ensuite, de revenir sur soi dans une perspective réflexive et autocritique. Je crois que c'est ainsi que je continue d'aimer Baudelaire, aujourd'hui : *naïvement*.

Juste à côté du Baudelaire étudié – et en même temps que celui-ci –, se situe le Baudelaire aimé naïvement et intériorisé. C'est ainsi que je caractériserais mon rapport avec l'œuvre baudelairienne : une proximité quotidienne constituée d'un dialogue perpétuellement tissé entre ma vie et son œuvre. Cette définition paraîtrait peut-être moins ambitieuse, si j'empruntais à Sergio Solmi les mots avec lesquels il témoignait à Paul Valéry de son estime : en rappelant au poète une de ses réflexions sur la figure de l'auteur, l'intellectuel italien évoquait l'« enviable gloire silencieuse de certains écrivains, sans cesse appelés à témoin », « pérennes interlocuteurs dans le dialogue intérieur muet d'un lecteur ». Baudelaire est alors un de mes « génies familiers », ces écrivains qui sont « plus à nous que nous-mêmes » :⁵ il a su chanter ma condition d'être humain, mes limites cognitives, linguistiques et sensibles, et ma lâcheté devant ces facettes si horribles à concevoir.

Valéry l'explique bien mieux que moi : « Pas d'autorité de l'auteur. Quoi qu'il ait *voulu dire*, il a écrit ce qu'il a écrit. Une fois publié, un texte est comme un appareil dont chacun peut se servir à sa guise et selon ses moyens ».⁶ Je sais bien, par contre, que mes moyens ne sont ni les seuls, ni

les plus pertinents : la naïveté se doit d'être constamment accompagnée d'une certaine conscience de soi. Et c'est exactement ici que se situe la leçon que Baudelaire m'apprend : à aimer son œuvre comme à aimer l'être humain, avec la profonde conscience de leurs limites et des miennes.

¹ « Lettre à M. le Directeur de la *Revue française* sur le Salon de 1859 », *Revue française*, 10 juin 1859.

² « Le Peintre de la vie moderne », *Le Figaro*, 26 novembre, 29 novembre, 3 décembre 1863. « La Morale du joujou », *Le Monde littéraire*, 17 avril 1853.

³ *Baudelaire Dufays. Salon de 1846* (Paris, Michel Lévy frères, 1846).

⁴ « Exposition universelle – 1855 – Beaux-arts », *Le Pays*, 26 mai 1855 et *Le Portefeuille*, 12 août 1855.

⁵ [« Invidiabile silenziosa gloria di certi scrittori, chiamati continuamente a testimoni » ; « interlocutori perenni nel muto dialogo interno di un lettore » ; « geni familiari, più nostri di noi stessi »]. Lettre datée 19 février 1931 : fonds Valéry, BNF Mf 2804. C'est moi qui traduis.

⁶ Paul Valéry, « Au sujet du Cimetière marin », *Variété III* (Paris, Gallimard, 1936).

Enseigner *L'Étranger* de Baudelaire ou initier l'étudiant à la quête de l'identité

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Si nous souhaitons lire une poésie distinguée par une langue à la fois incomparable et rigoureuse, nous ne retrouvons pas mieux que celle de Charles Baudelaire. Ce poète célèbre du XIX^e siècle nous a tant inspiré. En effet, la lecture de son recueil *Les Fleurs du mal* qui favorise le contact de l'âme et l'esprit à travers l'expression d'un monde spirituel original crée par un homme tiraillé entre une écriture idéale mais mystique, valorise notre appréciation de ce poète. Cette lecture nous a permis d'étudier, avec un certain enthousiasme, différents poèmes tels que « L'albatros » et « Correspondances », en tant qu'étudiante de langue et de littérature françaises. Par la suite, la richesse du langage baudelairien nous a incitée, en tant qu'enseignante, à choisir son texte comme un support d'un cours d'histoire littéraire adressé aux étudiants de deuxième année Licence d'Education et d'Enseignement. Dans l'intention de définir le XIX^e siècle ainsi que ses différents mouvements littéraires, nous avons opté pour l'étude du poème « L'étranger »¹ de Baudelaire afin de traiter la question du vers libre qui annonce en même temps l'étude de la poésie moderne du XX^e siècle. Alors, par quoi se distingue l'enseignement de la poésie de Baudelaire ?

Le choix de « L'étranger » et les premières impressions

Le choix de l'étude de « L'étranger », extrait du recueil *Le Spleen de Paris* de Baudelaire spécialement, émane d'un désir personnel de partage. En effet, ce poème permet à l'étudiant de lire un texte qui semble facile à comprendre avec son vocabulaire simple. Cependant, nous nous sommes heurtés aux problèmes du déchiffrement du sens du poème. Nous avons commencé par une lecture linéaire qui a abouti à une impression collective se résumant dans l'appréciation. Les étudiants ont apprécié d'abord, la forme du poème en prose qui ne demande pas un travail difficile sur la versification comme est le cas pour un poème de forme fixe. Ensuite, la particularité de la

typographie du poème a interpellé les étudiants qui ont remarqué la récurrence des phrases interrogatives et la présence des tirets. Nous avons traité donc, l'aspect du discours qui caractérise ce poème et qui semble mystérieux puisqu'il parle d' « un homme énigmatique ». C'est ce qui a attiré le plus les étudiants, qui sont jeunes et ambitieux mais qui manquent encore d'expérience et qui n'aiment pas l'autorité. Ils ont aimé plutôt les réponses plus que les questions de l'interrogatoire existant dans le poème. En effet, nos jeunes sont en quête d'une identité, ils sont encore hésitants. Ils ont eu l'impression que les vers de Baudelaire parlaient de leurs réalités puisqu'ils signent le dévoilement de l'autre. D'ailleurs, nous avons même parlé d'un poème « écho » de la voix des étudiants. De surcroît, les vers « - Tes amis ? - Vous vous servez là d'une parole dont le sens m'est resté jusqu'à ce jour inconnu. » ont sollicité les étudiants qui s'amuse à discuter à propos de l'amitié en général et qui nous permettent d'identifier en particulier, la signification de ces deux vers qui renforcent l'idée de la solitude, dégagée d'ailleurs dans le deuxième vers caractérisé par la négation « - Je n'ai ni père, ni mère, ni sœur, ni frère. » qui rend compte du refus du poète de la notion de la famille et l'impossibilité d'une intégration sociale.

Nous avons constaté ensemble également, l'intérêt du verbe « j'ignore » qui traduit la révolte d'un poète maudit contre toute forme de patriotisme. Ainsi, l'expression « sous quelle attitude » a été interprétée comme une phrase ironique justifiant la remise en question d'un monde gouverné par la norme. C'est ce qui renvoie au désir du poète qui souhaite quitter son univers réel. Cet appel à la solitude et à l'oubli des autres a provoqué chez les étudiants un certain sens de ressemblance avec « l'homme énigmatique ». Alors, les vers qui traitent le problème d'une vie solitaire ont touché les étudiants qui n'ont pas hésité à exprimer la même attitude que le poète dans une époque où tous les principes et la morale sont remis en cause.

« L'étranger » et l'énigme de l'identité

Bien que le poème soit court, nous avons pu parler de la complexité de l'état de « l'homme énigmatique » qui refuse toute intégration sociale. Face à cette déduction, les étudiants réagissent

avec aisance et ils ont continué à déchiffrer le projet du poète qui met en opposition « la beauté » et « l'or ». En effet, les étudiants se trouvent un peu étonnés face à ces deux termes et ils se demandent quel lien existe-t-il entre ces mots. Nous avons essayé d'expliquer leur connotation qui reflète les principes de l'écriture baudelairienne dans la mesure où il est difficile d'accéder à un univers idéal bien que le poète affirme : « Je l'aimerais volontiers ».

La question du refus hante encore le poète et elle incite les étudiants à poser des questions de type : « quel est le sens de la comparaison évoquée au vers 'Je le hais comme vous laissez Dieu' ? » Afin de simplifier la compréhension du poème, nous avons relié ce vers à la perte et au déchirement d'ordre psychologique du poète, entre la possession et la dépossession. Cette hésitation du poète débouche finalement sur le thème du rêve et de l'imagination qui sont présents au dernier vers « J'aime les nuages... les nuages qui passent... là-bas... là-bas... les merveilleux nuages ! » En effet, la fin du poème a marqué la satisfaction des étudiants puisque la quête de « l'homme énigmatique » a commencé par un certain pessimisme mais elle s'est bien terminée, car ils ont besoin d'un certain espoir dans leurs vies. Nous avons de même relevé l'effet des points de suspension qui appellent au rêve et à l'affection en remarquant une allégorie qui souligne un goût esthétique et langagier chez Baudelaire. Les étudiants ont apprécié l'adjectif antéposé « extraordinaire étranger » qui marque le succès de cette quête identitaire dans la mesure où la solitude baudelairienne devient une source d'inspiration qui s'ouvre sur l'imagination et l'onirisme qui sont nécessaires pour avoir des étudiants créatifs.

Conclusion

L'expérience de l'enseignement de « L'étranger » de Baudelaire montre que l'étudiant de nos jours apprécie encore ce poète. Cette expérience nous a été d'un grand intérêt puisqu'elle nous a aidé à traiter les caractéristiques de la littérature du XIX^e siècle à travers un exemple « type » qui peut résumer différents mouvements littéraires comme ce poème ne manque pas de traces de romantisme, de Parnasse et de symbolisme. Il s'agit d'un poème prometteur qui a sollicité

l'imagination des étudiants, les a provoqués, mais les a surtout touchés de plus près car il porte la voix intérieure d'un déchirement social permanent. Les étudiants ont eu du plaisir à lire et à interpréter « L'étranger » et nous avons partagé avec eux toutes les sensations hétérogènes de Baudelaire qui a réussi à nous enseigner et expliquer ses propres réflexions si modernes à propos de l'homme et son désir grâce à un souci didactique indéniable de sa part.

¹ Tous les vers cités sont extraits du recueil *Le Spleen de Paris*. Charles Baudelaire, *L'étranger, Le Spleen de Paris* (Paris: Classiques français, 1997), p. 11.

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.

‘À une passante’: A Passing Appreciation

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This appreciation of Baudelaire is shamefully non-decadent. During French language classes, students sometimes encounter the pluperfect subjunctive as an instance of the *conditionnel passé deuxième forme*, which may give rise to understandable consternation on everyone’s part. In full awareness that the poet’s primary intention was doubtless to exemplify this feature of French modality, as a language tutor this is my cue to share a personal favourite example of this verb form, namely the conclusion of Baudelaire’s celebrated sonnet, ‘À une passante’, ‘Ô toi que *j’eusse aimée*’. Even a fleeting encounter with the poem would suggest that its meaning is past conditional as a kind of imagined memory of the future: ‘Oh you who *I would have loved*’. With that point duly resolved to everyone’s satisfaction, we can return to the excitement of the translation passage we were supposed to be working on.

Turning to Baudelaire to illustrate a grammar point is perhaps no less absurd than a good many educational encounters with him. As an undergraduate, I did not so much appreciate the poet as turn to him to learn how to count syllables, in other words a prosodic accountancy course of which even Baudelaire’s mother, who regretted her son never got a proper job, might have seen some employability potential. Very late in the day, I now live in hope that students may be more appreciative than their tutor and realize that there is more to poetry than arithmetic and more to the French language than is dreamed of in Glanville Price’s *A Comprehensive French Grammar*. Hence their fleeting encounter with ‘À une passante’, which I think of as a bird flying into, or perhaps Zoom-bombing, their language class.

Before reciting the poem to the captive student audience, I suggest they should listen to and ideally engage with it instinctively as if to a piece of music, without fretting about the meaning of unfamiliar words or getting that sinking feeling when faced with poetry to analyse in front of

the class. Following my own advice, and taking advantage of being neither a *dix-neuviémiste* nor a modernist, let alone a Baudelaire specialist, I note the opening line cries out to be read out loud, to get the full force of how this particular ‘tableau parisien’ is also, first of all, a soundscape. Coincidentally, and by way of comparison, I recently encountered something similar in the futurist Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. He discusses how his poem ‘To Sergey Esenin’ (1926) came to him only after his return to Moscow following a long period trying, without success, to work on it away from the city:

Myasnitsky was packed with people; after the silence of the provinces, there was the cheerful hubbub of buses, cars and trams [...] I walk along, waving my arms and mumbling almost wordlessly [...]. So the rhythm is established and takes shape [...]. Gradually you ease individual words free of this dull roar.¹

Urban poets like Baudelaire and Mayakovsky obviously take not only their subject matter and imagery, but also their sounds and rhythms, from the streets. Both give renewed meaning to the clichés of poetry in motion – the rhythm of the widow’s gait for the former, of course – and of the poet as an inspired or deranged ‘extravagant’.

For a sonnet that seems so obviously concerned with sight, I am struck by how Baudelaire invokes hearing in ‘À une passante’, followed by touch (the widow’s ‘main fastueuse’) and taste (‘Moi, je buvais’), with the visual sense only made explicit in the ‘œil’ of line seven. The sheer sensuality makes this a sonnet to live and recreate, whether in memory, imagination, or even reality. In other words, Baudelaire has condensed the raw material of endless poems, songs, and novels into fourteen lines. By virtue of invoking a moment of desire and stirring the imagination, the sonnet’s encounter suggests eternity precisely because it is of the moment and therefore potentially available at any moment. Hence its appeal as a deviation from standard procedure in a language class and much else besides.

Perhaps the most obvious, if extreme, example of taking up Baudelaire’s invitation to turn a desirable passer-by into the stuff of novels, and indeed the mind’s *romanesque* or even decadent tendencies, is in another work currently on my bedside table, namely Marcel Proust’s *La Prisonnière*

(1923). The novel in some ways tells of what would happen if the poet had taken the *passante* home and kept her there. Famously, the narrator's first encounter with Albertine happens when she passes him at the Balbec seafront as one of a group of girls in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1919). In *La Prisonnière*, however, the narrator observes that 'c'était une chose curieuse comme, à travers les murs de sa prison, le destin, qui transforme les êtres, avait pu passer, la changer dans son essence même, et de la jeune fille de Balbec faire une ennuyeuse et docile captive'. Moreover, looking back at that earlier incarnation, Albertine was a Baudelairean 'Fugitive beauté', an 'être fuyant' who was constantly 'en fuite sur sa bicyclette'.² In an earlier passage concerning women he sees passing by, the narrator notes that 'Nous sommes des sculpteurs. Nous voulons obtenir d'une femme une statue entièrement différente de celle qu'elle nous a présentée'.³ This excerpt neatly performs the reworking it discusses, and that the novel contains, since it turns the 'jambe de statue' of Baudelaire's widow into something to be possessed, controlled, and reshaped. While such sadistic sculpting is implicit in the sonnet, the poet also suggests the opposite, as the *passante*'s look has recreated him. They are as complicit in creativity as they are in desire.

In contrast, for Proust's narrator desire is a trap. Returning home at night and seeing the lit window he realizes its bars are of his own prison; moreover, if Albertine were not there he would have sought pleasure from 'des femmes inconnues, dont j'eusse essayé de pénétrer la vie'.⁴ This desire brings us back to the beginning, namely the ending of Baudelaire's sonnet, including the pluperfect subjunctive and its conditional meaning. Desire for a passer-by is inescapably conditional and the wish intimately to know such *inconnues* is self-defeating. Yet as the passer-by inevitably passes on we can still see that although desire may be in the conditional, the creativity it induces is emphatically indicative. As the man himself puts it in answer to the imagined reader's question about the truth of the stories he imagines of those he sees through windows: 'Qu'importe ce que peut être la réalité placée hors de moi, si elle m'a aidé à vivre, à sentir que je suis et ce que je suis?'.⁵

¹ 'How Are Verses Made?' (1926), trans. by George Hyde, in Vladimir Maykovsky, *Volodya: Selected Works*, ed. by Rosy Carrick (London: Enitharmon Press, 2015), pp. 245-46.

² Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, III (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 873. With thanks to Adam Watt for these Proustian intertexts.

³ Proust, p. 648; for another likely intertextual allusion to Baudelaire, at least to this non-expert reader's eye, see the earlier image of the passer-by as 'comme une déesse dans la nue que fait trembler la foudre' (p. 646), which recalls line nine of 'À une passante'.

⁴ Proust, p. 834.

⁵ Charles Baudelaire, 'Les fenêtres', *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), XXXV.

Baudelaire: Le Cygne

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By ten, it was too hot to go on with our walk. We were out on the scree of Tilos, at that stage of the 1970s still one of the least visited of the Dodecanese. It isn't that far from the Turkish mainland, but the only means of getting there had been in a small fishing-boat, two hours of rocking and rolling from Symi, the nearest island.

The three of us had breakfasted on yoghurt and honey and set off before eight. We intended to keep going until midday, then find a cove and spend the afternoon swimming. A dangerous misjudgement, what with the sun already on fire directly above us.

We found a stone barn and sat down in such shade as it offered. There was the sound of bells approaching, hollow and light, then the goats appeared, then a man with a face like used wrapping-paper. He and S, who has ancient as well as modern Greek, exchanged greetings and fervent wishes for each other's health and prosperity, and the bells moved on.

'That old boy,' S told us, 'has just used a phrase I thought had disappeared with Homer. I've only come across it in *The Iliad*.'

'Well,' said A, 'Troy isn't a million miles up the coast. Or was.'

'Andromaque,' I chipped in, remembering Baudelaire remembering, 'je pense à vous!'

I was quoting, of course, the start of 'Le Cygne'. That same sun above us had blazed down on poor Andromache's husband Hector as he lay dying, slain by Achilles, just as later in the poem it's failing to comfort the tubercular black woman yearning for the coconut-palms of her native Africa as she negotiates the muck of a building-site in Paris.

*

I first read 'Le Cygne' as an undergraduate when my tutor gave me a tricky essay title and no guidance except to suggest I avail myself of the Baudelaire lectures Enid Starkie was giving in this,

more or less, the final year of her career. I went. Of those occasions, I recall nothing except Dr Enid's notorious dress-sense. She put me in mind of a Morris dancer; I half-expected bells to jingle on her toes when she quit the podium. Anyway, I knuckled down and read in sequence every one of *Les Fleurs du mal* in the plain-covered Blackwell edition, concentrating line by line on what the words meant, literally, not how the poetry spoke. No one poem struck me more than another, except perhaps 'Une Charogne', for its sensationalism, and 'À une passante', for the erotic encounter missed. I knew that 'Correspondances' really mattered, but I couldn't get that enthused. I understood that 'Le Voyage' was important, but it was too occupied with death to hit home. (At nineteen, I was still at the immortal stage.) As for 'Le Cygne', I'm not sure it registered.

A decade or so later, I was giving lectures and tutorials of my own. I'd recently embarked on a university career and an early requirement was that I give a course on the nineteenth-century poets to first-year undergraduates. I decided that the best way in would not be via the Romantics. Our French master at school had tried them out on us; we'd wandered along Lamartine's lakeshore, knelt at the graveside of Hugo's drowned daughter. We affected indifference; as the sixth-formers we'd now become, we had to act cool. So I didn't fancy Lamartine's or Hugo's chances with 'freshers' hiding behind *their* show of worldliness.

Instead, I started with dark, tormented Baudelaire. Guided by Marcel Raymond's and especially D. J. Mossop's studies, I charted the *journey* (the descriptive term we now use to elevate any muddling through life) which the 'poet-hero' of *Les Fleurs du mal* undertakes. We soared with him towards *l'Idéal*, we plunged with him into the abyss. I laced my lectures with quotations from the most helpful poems. I ended with the near-despair of 'Le Voyage' – and its unextinguished hope.

'Le Cygne', however, I reserved for close attention in my tutorial hours. I wondered if in the more relaxed atmosphere of my room – which, with its good chairs, the rug on the floor, the desk lamp, was more a study than an office – my students might begin to yield to poetry. My memory is that by and large they did. I think it was theme of exile in 'Le Cygne' that particularly

got to them: widowed Andromache forced to re-marry and live far from Troy; Ovid banished to a miserable hole on the Black Sea; the African woman grown thin and ill in Paris; the swan of the poem's title, parched with thirst, padding open-beaked by a dried-up ditch; shipwrecked sailors forgotten on some island; prisoners languishing in cells; those on the losing side in war; and *bien d'autres encore*. The list could have included, I thought, my students sitting there, suddenly homesick and aching to return to the families they'd left for the first time in their lives. I too, in my first undergraduate year, had had a case of 'fourth-week blues'.

*

Back on Tilos that broiling morning, my mention of Baudelaire's *Andromaque* started a game of allusions. S conjured up Missolonghi, over there on the far side of the Aegean, where Byron lay dying. A, who later that day would be shivering with sunstroke, invoked Valéry's date-palm in the stillness of the Mediterranean heat, using every atom of silence to ripen its fruit. That palm-tree took me further into 'Le Cygne', to the stranded swan and the exiled African woman down where the Carrousel had been before Haussmann rebuilt Paris, and I declaimed what I recalled of the quatrain which contains that sublime third line for which I've yet to find a right translation, because I don't think there is one:

Je pense à la négresse, amaigrie et phthisique,
Piétinant dans la boue, et cherchant, l'oeil hagard,
Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique
Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard.

So you want to write on *Les Fleurs du mal*...
Some notes on (teaching reading) Baudelaire in the era of Covid

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I.

It never fails, making each time we arrive at that point in a term where Baudelaire appears on the syllabus a slightly uncanny pedagogical experience, one not entirely unlike that of reading the poems themselves anew. Each time one notices the same, different thing, or the same thing, differently: if there is a poet that the average undergraduate student in a French literature course *appreciates*, even if for reasons for which they, too, like me, often fumble to find the right frame or articulation or understanding, it is Baudelaire. Whatever the explanation may be, next to *Les Fleurs du mal*, *Les Contemplations* generally doesn't run much chance of ending up among the stack of end-of-term papers (perhaps thereby proving one of Benjamin's opening points from the *Motifs* essay: whatever 'the lyric' was – its epideictic function or role, perhaps – has undergone an irrevocable cultural change). 'Why do you want to work on Baudelaire?', I find myself asking, perhaps somewhat convinced that the earnestness of the question is at least partly due to the fact that, each time, I both am and am not really asking it of them but of myself.

II.

Perhaps it was some Art History course two terms or two years ago in which that name appeared in the course of a unit on Haussmannization and the painting of the city. The heroism of modern life is all around us, if only we had eyes to see and grasp it, having the aphoristic feel of truth to it which makes confronting the problem of modernity in Baudelaire both easier ('see, there it is, it's always *life now* that Baudelaire is on about') and more elusive. (How, though, is one to make sense of the echoes linking that closing section of the *Salon de 1846* to both the radical, well-nigh

provocative espousal of revolutionary history and politics in the *Salon's* companion piece of the same year, *Le Musée Classique*, as well as to the much later *Peintre de la vie moderne*, which often finds itself reduced to a few apothegmatic fragments about the eternal and the ephemeral from chapter four, thereby entirely bypassing the problem of violence which is at the geographical heart of that essay?) Perhaps what they're trying to say, then, is that that name is the site of a kind of metonymic drift, one giving name to a desire that both does and doesn't have much to do with poetry, modern or otherwise: Baudelaire's irreducible, quasi-paronymic association with the glitzy, sexy, strange, sad, dangerous, haunting capital of modernity as a way of giving a form or figure to their own desire to escape wherever they find themselves in the Spring of 2021, a name allowing them to appreciate, in the sense of appraise or take stock of (*appréhender*), the scope of a problem. (And from this virtual side of the pedagogical limbo that has been the past year of *enseignement en distanciel*, can one truly tut-tut them for being more hasty than normal heuristic caution typically allows in identifying with – or reading as univocal – the lyric subject of at least certain poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*? The ones in which, especially, the tone comes close to desperation: what wouldn't one do to escape the grinding melancholic void of a present with, as the punks used to say, *no future*; sheer deadlock governed by monstrous despots and world-pulverizing cruelty? Who wouldn't want to get 'anywhere' else? Some place where things are *otherwise*, where dreams might still be 'akin' to action.)

III.

Baudelaire's name, then, at least for some, works as another name. A name for the way in which we recognize that this story – the one about 'modernity' and, as Fredric Jameson might put it, 'what hurts', *ce qui fait mal* – is an ongoing one. One that concerns us still. A name, too, for desire: simultaneously acknowledging and, more fundamentally, seeking to annul the catastrophes of (at least) the past year as well as those which are surely yet to come. A name for a sorrow, perhaps, that it is harder to give name to because its experience is undialectic. Lost experiences, in the rather

more *Erfahrung* acceptance of the term (say, travelling to Paris in your third year at the University); lost desires, communities, relationships and futurities; lost time; lost lives. In the past term, for the first time in my years teaching the poem, students needed no prompting at all when it came to discerning the detail – a *punctum* in the Barthesian sense – that sets off that great, first love poem, that odd *innamoramento* of modernity, ‘À une passante’. What catches the poet’s eye is death (*en grand deuil*), as unknowable as it is certain, as undecidable as it is meaningful. Elissa Marder’s reading of this poem from *Flat Death* is a (characteristically) masterful, brilliant one, echoing and engaging with Ross Chambers’ similarly *incontournable*, ‘The Storm in the Eye of the Poem’: the problem we encounter in this sonnet saturated with nearly every verbal signature available to the French language is one having to do with the temporality of human finitude in an era of the ‘platitude of death’ (Barthes).¹ What do we do with death when, to gloss Marder, we are living through/in the era of the death of God, in ‘modernity’? What do we do with death when to the question, *where do we go when we disappear?*, there is at once the sense of a potential answer lurking at the level of the sonnet’s intricate semiotic structure (if you have a free moment, try to identify the sheer number of chiasma you encounter in this sonnet: they are there at the level of prosody, rhythm, grammar, rhymes, and the phonemic) and, at the level of language *qua* syntagmatic structure, nothing but the flat affirmation of absences and questions about the great beyond that do not read as rhetorical ones (*Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?*). In the era of *Covid*, it is tempting – whatever the risk of exposing oneself to *post hoc* fallacies – to say that such students are unusually attentive to the problem swirling just under the surface of what the critic Jean Starobinski once mapped out as Baudelaire’s *rimes en -vide*.²

IV.

Perhaps that title – as the poet himself acknowledged, it was designed less to catch the eye than to blow up in your face (*J’aime les titres [...] pétards*) – is simply doing what it was meant to do from the moment in 1855 when, having published nearly a fifth of the volume in the *Revue des deux*

mondes, Baudelaire finally settled on *Les Fleurs du mal* and abandoned the others he had been toying with for nearly a decade (*Les Lesbiennes* and, after 1848, *Les Limbes*, a title which rightly struck some readers as smacking more of dangerous utopianism than of Catholic dogma). As the saying goes, the Devil has the best tunes. But perhaps, in the same way they can grasp that whatever modernity names involves us, they (we) are all slightly anxious that the ‘evil’ announced by the title is less metaphysical than it sounds, which is to say more difficult to simply put out of mind once one puts the volume down. *Le Mal* in question may, as indeed the volume’s opening poison-pill of a poem, addressed *au[x] lecteur[s]*, pointedly suggests, very much involve *us* and *our* world, neither of which really stand prior to or outside ‘Au Lecteur’ as a kind of alterity with respect to the world of the poems contained within *Les Fleurs du mal*, but which constitute their inner structure and disavowed problematic. Under the metaphysical mask of ‘Evil’ one is always encountering things much more *mundane* in the strictest sense of the term (whence the importance of the rhyme linking the world to awfulness and abjection in ‘Au Lecteur’, ‘monde/immonde’): history as a catalogue of hateful acts of violence; in the menagerie of vice at the outset of the poem we find a group portrait staring back out at us. The best bards are indeed in Hell, which is not, as Benjamin (again!) reminds us, something that awaits us in the afterlife but rather the ongoing state of emergency within everyday life right now, down here. And if the past year has taught us much of anything, it is that that place has no bottom to it.

V.

Of course, there is no singular account for what Baudelaire is allowing us to put a name or figure on. Some small part of the enigma doubtless has to do with the weirdly improbable, almost hyperbolic literary posterity when compared to the life and comparatively meagre output of a poet who, measured by the standards of nineteenth-century bourgeois propriety and seriousness (cf., *Monsieur Prudhomme*), looks like a bit of a ‘loser’.³ Which is to say, something that that world, the world of endlessly linear, triumphant progress and prosperity in the course of human history,

brought about by that handmaid of civilization, order and the stock-market, *la bourgeoisie* – found deeply suspicious, if not intolerable. And for more than a few, the ones who, in my experience, not only read but *lisent bien* Baudelaire, often but not exclusively humanities majors, at least some part of the inexplicable appreciation for Baudelaire resides therein: his work and his life stand out as a kind of example of the incalculable contingencies of history, of the invaluable, incalculable merit of that which looks broken, or like it serves no useful, instrumental point or function such as leading to an internship with a bank in New York or something during the summer holidays. We want to read Baudelaire’s poems because the world we live in is still one in which we are told this is the only one possible, that it is absolute and that to imagine or desire it otherwise is to court catastrophe. But Baudelaire’s poems, down to their last syllable, are a species of odes to remaining unreconciled to that world no matter how many failures or setbacks one encounters in it; odes to what the poet once called, in an aching line from the *Salon de 1846*, our collective *pauvre ligne brisée*.

¹ Elissa Marder, *Flat Death: Temporal Disorders in the Wake of Modernity (Baudelaire and Flaubert)* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 68-88; Ross Chambers, “The Storm in the Eye of the Poem: Baudelaire’s “À une passante””, in *Textual Analysis: Some Readers Reading*, ed. by Mary Ann Caws (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1986), pp. 156-66.

² Starobinski’s landmark reading (of the sonnet ‘Horreur sympathique’) first appeared in 1975, but was included in the late critic’s collected writings on melancholia, *L’Encre de la mélancolie* (Paris: Seuil, 2012), pp. 465-71.

³ In this respect, our students are not so far from at least part of Valéry’s 1924 appreciation of Baudelaire as *the only* canonical figure of a lyric *Weltliteratur*. Paul Valéry, *Situation de Baudelaire* (Paris: Marcelle Lesage).