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Baudelaire, 'La modernité mélancolique' (Bibliothèque nationale de France, 3 November 2021 – 13 February 2022), Galerie 1, Site François-Mitterrand

Baudelaire, la modernité mélancolique, sous la direction de Jean-Marc Chatelain, BnF Éditions, 2021. ISBN 9782717728620

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The title of the latest exhibition devoted to Charles Baudelaire at the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) may leave one unsatisfied – the emphasis on melancholy has more of a tinge of our conflict-ridden contemporary times than of the bustling and somewhat optimistic nineteenth century. Title aside, however, this is a well-conceived, richly illustrated exhibition, replete with material such as manuscripts, newspapers, and magazines where Baudelaire's poems first appeared, various editions of his works, and visual material such as paintings, lithographs, engravings, drawings, photographs, and daguerreotypes.

Like a tragic play, the exhibition consists of five acts: a prologue, three parts ('L'exil et l'errance', 'Les fantômes de la vie antérieure', and 'La déchirure mélancolique du moi'), and an epilogue centring around photographic portraits of Baudelaire by distinguished photographers of the mid-nineteenth century. Arguably the misunderstanding about melancholy, if any such misunderstanding exists, arises from the first room where the visitor is greeted by Eugène Delacroix's *Hamlet: treize sujets dessinés par Eugène Delacroix* (1843), a series of lithographs which Baudelaire owned and displayed in one of his rooms on the Île Saint-Louis. 'Cette ombre d'Hamlet', as the exhibition's prologue is titled, also displays *Portrait de Charles Baudelaire* (1844) by his friend Émile Deroy. In the painting, Baudelaire looks ironically at the viewer. At the time of composition Baudelaire was living at the Hôtel Pimodan, squandering his father's legacy by spending lavishly on art, friends, and beautiful lodgings. Soon the young spendthrift was sent abroad by his stepfather General Aupick in the hope that he might embrace a more sober lifestyle. The rest, as they say, is history, and the exhibition is attentive to Baudelaire's personal history

which it proposes to read as the story of his feelings of exile and separation. In the first part of the exhibition, exile and separation are envisaged as the foundational themes of his poetic destiny, well before Baudelaire was sent overseas. Exile appears initially as a sense of separation from his beloved mother, before turning into an exile from politics after the defeat of the Second Republic in 1848, which left him bitterly disappointed with the unjust, absurd world depicted in his essay 'Morale du joujou'. Published in *Le Monde littéraire* on 17 April 1853, the original displayed here along with the manuscript of 'L'Ivresse du chiffonnier' (1852) later published as the more explicit 'Le Vin des chiffonniers' in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857).

Baudelaire is one of those *Bohémiens en voyage*; an embodiment of Alphonse Legros' *Le Mendiant*, (1861), which he owned and bequeathed to his publisher Poulet-Malassis. Exhibited here, Legros' unsentimental artwork complements Odilon Redon's eerie series of engravings for the 1890 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, published in Brussels by E. Deman. Baudelaire's love of both real and imaginary travels is further illustrated by Thomas de Quincey's 1853 edition of *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* next to Baudelaire's *Autoportrait sous l'influence du haschisch* (c. 1842-1845) and the handwritten table of contents for *Les Paradis artificiels* (1860).

In this especially rich exhibition, the *pièce de résistance* is of course *Les Fleurs du mal*. The genesis of the 1857 volume is carefully displayed with the first appearance in print of *Les Limbes* (Baudelaire's initial title from 1848 to 1852) in *Le Messager de l'Assemblée* on 9 April 1851, including eleven of the future *Fleurs du mal* pieces. Since the manuscript has not been traced and only four of the first proofs have survived, Baudelaire's corrected proofs are the only remaining documents of the near-final state of his most famous volume. These final proofs display Baudelaire's corrections, queries, and remarks to the publisher and printer, emphasizing his meticulous attention to detail as well as the exasperation of Poulet-Malassis, who nevertheless printed over 1,000 copies of the fateful book. 'Ceci et cela, IV', Gustave Bourdin's philippic in *Le Figaro* on 5 July 1857, labels Baudelaire's poetry infamous and putrid. On 11 July, Baudelaire wrote to Poulet-Malassis, imploring him to hide all copies ('Vite, cachez, mais *cachez bien* toute l'édition') as he

feared the book would be seized after a report from the Ministry of Interior excoriated it as an actionable challenge to both religion and morality. 'Voilà ce que c'est que d'envoyer *des exemplaires* au *Figaro*!!!!', Baudelaire wrote reproachingly to his unfortunate publisher. Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* had escaped censorship in February of the same year, but Baudelaire was heavily fined and seven poems were censored.

Illustrating the *Fleurs*, with its pervasive sense of death, proved another trial. Engraver Félix Bracquemond designed a frontispiece for the 1861 second edition, and the proofs of the second and third states are displayed. Baudelaire scathingly commented on the artist's errors:

> Voici l'horreur de Bracquemond. Je lui ai dit que c'était bien. Je ne savais que dire, tant j'étais étonné. Ce squelette *marche* et il est appuyé sur un *éventail* de rameaux qui *partent des côtes* au lieu de *partir des bras*. À quoi a servi le dessin décalqué d'après Langlois?

The second edition was eventually deprived of a frontispiece but featured an engraved portrait of Baudelaire after a photograph by Nadar.

Entitled 'Les fantômes de la vie antérieure', the second part of the exhibition illustrates Baudelaire's sense of exile and his experience of separation. The poet travelled abroad (though not as far as he later pretended he had), but he also traversed Paris, and the numerous lodgings he occupied are displayed on a large map of the city. Baudelaire was a staunch Parisian at a time when Baron Haussmann's transformation left the city in a defamiliarized state. Impressive prints by Charles Meryon from *Eaux-fortes sur Paris* (1854), such as *La Morgue*, testify to the experience and resonance of urban living in the early days of the Second Empire. Meryon's and Baudelaire's joint book project never saw the light of day as Meryon refused to continue with the work, but his nineteen engravings seem to echo Baudelaire's infamous 'Le Cygne' in lamenting the transformation of the capital. Changing as it was, the city still echoed revolutionary times as graphically described by Louis-Sébastien Mercier in *Le Nouveau Paris* (1797), which provided Baudelaire with the visual term 'tableau' as the title of a section in the second edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*.

In contrast to his depiction of the city, Baudelaire's exoticism is partly imaginary, and partly predicated on genuine travels to places as far afield as the Mascarene Islands. The walls in this part of the exhibition are decorated with lavish illustrations from Jacques-Gérard Milbert's *Voyage pittoresque à l'Île-de-France, au cap de Bonne-Espérance et à l'Île de Ténériffe: atlas* (1812). Most famously, Baudelaire's exoticism is embodied by his mistress, the beautiful Jeanne Duval. However, his first tribute to a woman of colour was 'À une créole', celebrating the beauty of Emmelina Autard de Bragard and commissioned by her husband. Published in *L'Artiste* on 25 May 1845, the sonnet was signed with Baudelaire's name for the first time: 'Baudelaire Dufays'. It was later published as 'À une dame créole' in *Les Fleurs du mal*.

In the third part of the exhibition, 'La déchirure mélancolique du moi', Baudelaire's melancholy is shown to arise from an intimate experience of paradox – his attraction to both God and Satan, the spiritual and the animalistic. Such duality translates as 'spleen', an inner rift that neither love, poetry, opium, nor Satan himself, can heal, and that exerts a tyranny upon man as shown for instance in 'L'Horloge' (1860), a poem inspired by Théophile Gautier which later became the conclusion to the *Spleen et Idéal* section of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Baudelaire found another source of melancholy in the work of his beloved writers such as Honoré de Balzac, Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, Pétrus Borel, Victor Hugo, and François-René de Chateaubriand, the founding figure of what Baudelaire called 'la grande école de la mélancolie'. Baudelaire's attraction to death is also illustrated by Rodolphe Bresdin's dramatic engraving *La Comédie de la Mort* (1854), which was later described by Des Esseintes in J.-K. Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884), and by his translations of Poe which he divided into *Histoires extraordinaires, Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires*, and *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses*. The first short story, 'Révélation magnétique', appeared in *La Liberté de penser: revue philosophique et littéraire* on 15 January 1848, a few weeks before the 1848 Revolution. Poe would occupy a special place for Baudelaire from 1851 onwards: out of the American's sixty seven short stories, he translated forty three. Contemplating a new edition of *Histoires extraordinaires* and *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires*, Poulet-Malassis commissioned

Alphonse Legros to create engravings. The project was never completed but Legros, whom Baudelaire praised as a painter and as an engraver, produced six uncanny engravings highlighting the eeriness of *Le Scarabée d'or*, *La Vérité sur le cas de M. Valdemar*, *Le Chat noir*, *Bérénice*, *Le Puits et le Pendule*, and *Ombre*.

How Baudelaire's dandyism and heroization of modern life qualify as melancholic remains questionable; however, it is always interesting to see the 1845 copy of Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Du dandysme et de G. Brummell* which Baudelaire requested from its author, along with some 1838 prints of 'Costumes parisiens' from the *Journal des dames et des modes* featuring lean, masculine silhouettes. Baudelaire commented upon dandies in the third part of *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (another journalistic contribution to *Le Figaro*, on 3 December 1863). This seminal text for art criticism was the result of his admiration for Constantin Guys, the reporter, artist, flâneur, and watercolourist, whose *Promenade aux Champs-Élysées, voitures et promeneurs* (1852-1860) illustrates the variety of modern life. Baudelaire's attempt to capture urban evanescence suggests the problematic nature of identity and a fixation on the self, preoccupations that inaugurate his volume of prose poems *Le Spleen de Paris*. This is exemplified on a more intimate level through the display of an autographed manuscript of *Mon cœur mis à nu* (1859-1866), Baudelaire's famous diary recording his hatred of the century but also betraying his ambivalence, a sentiment echoed in an 1863 letter to his mother about the composition of *Mon cœur mis à nu*. This work remained unfinished and exists only as a series of fragmentary notes, the order of which was devised by Poulet-Malassis, their final recipient.

The final part of the exhibition, 'Baudelaire en son miroir', is devoted to the poet's portraits and self-portraits. Baudelaire consistently sketched his own portrait and was repeatedly photographed by the most creative photographers of the times such as Nadar and Étienne Carjat. Their photographs underline how the artist took an active part in the construction of his image. Nadar photographed him on three occasions in his studio in 1855, 1860, and 1862. These photographs share a striking feature: the jet-black eyes of the poet which challenge the viewer.

Two were made in 1855; in 1860, three more were added including a blurred photograph of the poet (the current hypothesis is that he intentionally moved to obtain that effect). Quite different are the last two portraits showing how Baudelaire perfectly adapted to the early art of photography and how Nadar helped him to adopt a more natural attitude sharply contrasting with the constrained unnatural pose of the 1860s bourgeoisie. Carjat's small daguerreotype reminds viewers that the technique produces small works of uncanny precision. The last portrait is perhaps the most moving as it demonstrates that an ailing Baudelaire still maintained his desire for self-representation. This epilogue is perhaps the most melancholy part of the exhibition. Viewers leave the large comfortable rooms of the BnF with a finer understanding of Baudelaire's life: the manuscripts, images, printed materials, and delicate objects succeed in delineating the life of the poet, art critic, and translator, and all lead to that last, terribly melancholic portrait in which Baudelaire's eyes convey an expression of jadedness, misery, despair, but also of final and ineradicable irony.