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Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du mal*

Greg Kerr

University of Glasgow

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Abstract

In his collection *Les Fleurs du mal* [*The Flowers of Evil*], French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67) offers one of the most enduring attempts to bear witness to the human drama of the modern metropolis to be found in any culture. The poems of *Les Fleurs du mal* are part of Baudelaire's long engagement with the ways of knowing and being that are possible in the modern city. Presenting his poetic innovations as a response to the changing built environment Paris of the 1850s and 1860s, the article focusses primarily on a series of poems from *Les Fleurs du mal*, notably from the section "Tableaux parisiens" ["Parisian scenes"]. Offering an overview of some of the most celebrated poems in this sequence, it considers Baudelaire's investment in the figure of the *flâneur* (or urban wanderer), as well as his interest in the metaphor of prostitution and in those marginal figures (of the elderly or ragpickers) whom he encounters amid the teeming crowds of the city. For Baudelaire, both the objects and people we glimpse and the mental links we make in the urban environment are often unsolicited. They occur by chance and are only fleeting in their duration; however, it is the task of poet to elicit their more durable, even eternal, significance.

In the closing scenes of Matthieu Kassowitz's gritty drama *La Haine* of 1995, the film's three young protagonists find themselves in the car park of a suburban train station after an eventful overnight trip to the city centre of Paris. The location is overlooked by a mural of the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-67), one based on an 1863 photographic portrait of the

poet by Étienne Carjat. Such is the tension and precipitate violence of *La Haine*'s final sequence that the viewer's gaze may not linger long on the image of the famous nineteenth-century poet. One way to read the placing of the mural in this scene is as an expression of the disconnect in France between the literary heritage promoted in publicly funded art and marginalised suburban youth who face police brutality on a daily basis and whose interest lie in hip hop and Hollywood cinema. Yet when one considers that he gazes eerily towards the protagonists and the camera in the film's climactic final moments, it is perhaps altogether fitting that the film should reach its shuddering conclusion under the watch of Baudelaire. This is because through his work, represented notably by the verse collection *Les Fleurs du mal* [*The Flowers of Evil*] of 1857, Baudelaire offers one of the most searing attempts to bear witness to the human drama of the modern metropolis to be found in any culture.

A post-theological, post-Romantic aesthetics

The Baudelaire of *Les Fleurs du mal* can be understood not only as one of the greatest representatives of modern poetry, but also as a prophet of the alienated urban subject, of extreme experiences and self-conscious sexuality, and of the pursuit of art as the antidote to *ennui*. As Damian Catani writes, *ennui*, for Baudelaire, is the essence of the modern condition, "a condition that far outweighs in importance the more clearly defined and established categories of sin and suffering" (Catani, 2013: 39). Thus, in the liminal poem that leads into the collection, "Au lecteur" ["To the reader"], the traditional theological idea of evil as an external force (through the concept of sin or an image of the Devil as puppet master) is superseded by *ennui*, a debilitating state of mental and moral lethargy that Baudelaire sees as intrinsic to human psychology in the modern age. This post-theological understanding of evil is crucial to the poetics of *Les Fleurs du mal*. Moreover, although he was influenced by poets such as Alphonse de Lamartine and Victor Hugo, Baudelaire dispensed with the Romantic cult of nature by celebrating everything that the Romantics considered *unnatural*. Pushing beyond the aesthetic canons of Romanticism, he turned instead to the artificial, to the immoral, to that which corrupts; for Baudelaire, beauty is to be found in the city, in physical decay, in moral vice. It is in this way that we can understand the title of his most famous collection of poetry, about which he wrote the following in a planned preface: "Il m'a paru plaisant, et d'autant plus agréable que la tâche était plus difficile,

d'extraire la beauté du Mal" ["I have found it amusing, and the more pleasant because the task was more difficult, to extract beauty from Evil"] (Baudelaire, 1975: I, 181).

Notoriously the subject of a trial for outrage to public decency on its first publication due to its subject matter, the collection was republished in 1861, this time with the addition of a new section, "Tableaux parisiens" ["Parisian Scenes"], centred around eight poems that had figured in the "Spleen et idéal" ["Spleen and Ideal"] section of the 1857 edition. The "Tableaux parisiens" are one of six sections that include "Spleen et Idéal", "Le Vin" ["Wine"], "Les Fleurs du mal", "Révolte" ["Revolt"] and "La Mort" ["Death"], offering the reader pathways through themes such as art, love and sexuality, despair, intoxicants, life in the city and death. The poems of "Tableaux parisiens" are part of the poet's long engagement with the ways of knowing and being that are possible in the modern city, with its fractured rhythms and perspectives, the changing quality of its light, and its new orderings of subjectivity: this is reflected elsewhere in Baudelaire's prose poem collection *Spleen de Paris: Petits Poèmes en prose* [*Paris Spleen: Little Poems in Prose*] (which appeared posthumously in 1869) as well as in his art criticism.

Hausmann's Paris

The most dramatic physical transformation of the city of Paris in the modern period took place under the direction of the Prefect Baron Hausmann during the Second Empire of the 1850s and 1860s. For Baudelaire, this political context was cause for disillusionment: the egalitarian promise of France's Republican upheavals of the 1830s and 1840s had been dispelled by Napoleon III's 1851 coup d'état, ushering in a censorious Imperial regime that promoted the values and interests of the bourgeoisie. In place of the old Paris came a city of flowing traffic, urban arteries and broad thoroughfares. The radial form of the wide boulevards was intended to aid the circulation of traffic and pedestrians, while an emphasis on the visibility of movement and consumer activity – through glass-fronted shop exteriors, street lighting and covered arcades – spurred the development of commodity culture. Outwardly, the city became an arena for display, to such a degree that the critic Walter Benjamin saw it as a particularly significant birthplace of modern capitalism: the "capital of the nineteenth century" (Benjamin, 1999: 3). Meanwhile, many of the tangled streets of Paris's medieval centre were demolished, given their association with poverty, crime and

disease, and the city's impoverished working classes were displaced to its eastern suburbs. Perhaps no writer more than Baudelaire was aware of the stakes of such a radical drive by the architects of Haussmannisation to re-order the capital city. With an occasionally uncomfortable combination of cruelty and empathy, Baudelaire's poems bear witness to the plight of those most exposed to the traumatic shocks of this coming modernity: beggars, widows, the elderly, sex workers. Moreover, the poet himself was aware of the increasing marginality of his own calling in a world where the aristocratic institution of patronage had been superseded by the law of the market and the materialist values of the bourgeoisie.

While the "Tableaux parisiens" came to confirm Baudelaire's pre-eminence as a poet of Paris, it is worth noting that urban motifs are also present elsewhere in *Les Fleurs du mal*. "Le Vin des chiffonniers" ["The Ragpickers' Wine"], for instance, offers a meditation on alcoholism, social marginalisation and the figure of the ragpicker, who made a living by sorting through the detritus of the city and collecting and selling the rags they found. As Walter Benjamin wrote, the ragpicker's activity offers a parallel with Baudelaire's modern urban poet: "Poets find the refuse of society on their street and derive their heroic subject from this very refuse. [...] Ragpicker or poet — the refuse concerns both" (Benjamin, 2006: 108). In "Chant d'automne" ["Autumn Song"], the sound of wood being piled in the courtyard of an apartment building at the approach of winter brings on those feelings of intense despair, dissatisfaction and melancholy that Baudelaire called "spleen". Similarly, the poem "Spleen: Pluviôse, irrité contre la ville entière" ["Spleen: The Month of Rains, irritated with the whole city"] captures the garret-room ruminations of a solitary poet in a rain-drenched city.

"Tableaux parisiens"

However, it is the selection contained in "Tableaux parisiens" that most singularly characterises Baudelaire's poetic response to the modern city. Whereas the poets of the Romantic movement in France such as Alfred de Vigny or Aphonse de Lamartine had extolled pastoral existences or celebrated immersion in nature, from Baudelaire onwards, the poet became an urban wanderer. By way of further contrast with the Romantics, the Baudelairian poet rarely achieves the sense of fusion with his surroundings peculiar to his Romantic forebears. Such are the violent contrasts a city produces, its changes of mood and

pace, and its impact on his mind and memory that the poet is led to question whether he is simply an observer or a participant in the urban scene. It is the abiding sense that he is destined to occupy both of these roles that informs Baudelaire's imaginative investment in the *flâneur*, a figure he wrote about in an essay dedicated to the sketch artist Constantin Guys, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* [*The Painter of Modern Life*]. Freed from any social obligation, the *flâneur* wandered the streets as a detached observer of the urban spectacle, deciphering the city's many signs and symbols, loitering on the edge of its teeming crowds, and registering their ebb and flow. "L'amoureux de la vie universelle" ["The one who loves universal life"] wrote Baudelaire in this essay, "entre dans la foule comme dans un immense réservoir d'électricité" ["enters the crowd as if it were an immense reservoir of electricity"] (Baudelaire, 1976, II: 692): electricity, that is, with its capacity to rouse and galvanize, but also to shock and stupefy.

In the poem "Le Soleil" ["The Sun"], we see the fruits of the *flâneur*'s urban wanderings: here, the built environment's angular surfaces engender shocks and accidents that in turn suggest fortuitous new directions in poetic form and language:

Je vais m'exercer seul à ma fantasque escrime,
Flairant dans tous les coins les hasards de la rime,
Trébuchant sur les mots comme sur les pavés
Heurtant parfois des vers depuis longtemps rêvés. (Baudelaire, 1975: I, 83)

[Along I go, absorbed in my fantastic fencing,
Scenting in every corner the chance of a rhyme,
Tripping over words as on paving stones
Sometimes bumping into lines of verse I had long dreamed to meet]

The motif of urban wandering is taken up also in "Le Cygne" ["The Swan"], a poem prompted by a strange, unsettling sight that the poet (or rather the lyric subject, that is, the figure who is the voice of the poem) encounters one morning as he crosses the Place du Carrousel in central Paris: that of a swan which had escaped from a zoo into a dusty building site. Separated from its natural environment, the swan brings to mind the legendary Greek figure of Andromache, a widow of the Trojan war who was forced into exile, and it seems to link also to the figure of a black woman from Africa whom the poet glimpses later. The swan, then, (and readers of the text in French can meditate on the homophony between "cygne"

["swan"] and "signe" ["sign"]) triggers a series of fleeting mental associations that may not at first seem linked, and yet, which, when taken together, seem to point to a deeper underlying meaning concerning the centrality of displacement or exile in the modern world. A simple morning walk through the city has thus become a melancholic experience inflected by loss ("Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville / Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel)" ["Old Paris is no more (the form of a city / Changes faster, alas, than a human heart)"] (Baudelaire, 1975: I, 85), and yet "Le Cygne" ends on a note of distinct empathy, as the poet considers the losses suffered by manifold others far removed from him: sailors shipwrecked on distant islands, captives, defeated armies, and others similarly forlorn. The poem's hybridization of classical, modern and exotic elements is distinctively Baudelairean: this quality is seen in brief allusions to the exoticism of tropical climates (which Baudelaire had experienced on a long sea voyage at the age of twenty) and to Greek myth, alongside the tawdry modernity of huts, puddles and scaffolding. In a valuable meditation on the significance of noise in Baudelaire's urban poetry, Ross Chambers shows how this poem, which is so replete with "elisions, gaps, incoherences, afterthoughts, changes of mind and allusiveness" constitutes a fragmentary record of the poet's lived time amid the confusion and disarray of the city around him (Chambers, 2015: 155). As Chambers argues, one of the things that is so remarkable about this poem is how it links these mental digressions and twitches to the poet's passage through the city, thus allowing us to trace the emergence of a distinctively modern urban consciousness in literature.

Humanity, immorality and empathy

The curiosity for humanity that animates a poem such as "le Cygne" can be seen also in "Les Sept Vieillards" ["The Seven Old Men"] and "Les Petites Vieilles" ["The Little Old Ladies"], two poems devoted to forlorn, elderly figures encountered in the margins of the metropolis, and dedicated to the acknowledged grand master of nineteenth-century French poetry, Victor Hugo. "Les Sept Vieillards" begins with a stirring declaration of the mysterious, spectral qualities of the teeming metropolis: on a gloomy street one misty morning, the poet encounters an old man. What follows is a creepily vivid portrayal of this decrepit figure, coupled with rhythmically jarring metrical enjambments that give a sense of those jolts to consciousness that Baudelaire associates with movement through urban space. To his dismay, the poet discovers that this grotesque, shuffling figure is followed by no less than six other

identical-looking old men, leading him to be troubled by this perplexing memory. Like in “Le Crépuscule du soir” [“Evening Crepuscule”], “Les Sept Vieillards” thus concludes as the poet attempts to negotiate his own conflicting response to what he has observed or experienced, even long afterwards when he has returned to the privacy of his room. In “Les Petites Vieilles”, the female elderly are portrayed in a similar fashion: the poem alternates between modes of distancing and identification: from a distance, the women are objectified as monsters, puppets, and “débris d’humanité” [“debris of humanity”] and yet when the poet meets their gaze, a more empathetic tone is adopted as he observes that they possess “les yeux divins de la petite fille / Qui s’étonne et qui rit à tout ce qui reluit” [“the divine eyes of the little girl / Who is astonished and laughs at everything that gleams”] (Baudelaire, 1975: I, 89).

Two poems offer a canvas of the city at particular times of day. “Le Crépuscule du matin” [“Morning Crepuscule”] captures a slumbering Paris in that in-between hour before dawn. Meanwhile, its counterpart “Le Crépuscule du soir” charts the transformation of the respectable, bourgeois face of the diurnal city as night falls and Parisians turn to immoral pursuits: gambling, crime and prostitution. Baudelaire’s sometimes uncomfortable fascination with the sex worker is in evidence here: prostitutes are compared to ants burrowing tunnels in the soil and to worms writhing in the mud, stealing humanity’s food, and thus, in a more extended economic and social sense, prostitution suggests a capacity to interrupt the “natural” cycle of consumption. As the lyric subject returns to his room in the closing lines, there is a sense that he has had to wrest himself away from the spectacle of the night-time city and its pleasures. In these lines, the subject stages itself as a figure who shuts out the sensory overload of the city in order to attain a more contemplative and compassionate state – in order to feel something no one else can.

The poet’s curiosity is not limited to the immoral, or the sickly or decrepit. “À une passante” [“To a passerby”] is a melancholic sonnet in which the lyric subject is walking along a deafening street. As he moves, he is suddenly struck by the sight of an attractive woman dressed in mourning. The woman seems to embody, by her dress and statuesque gait, and by the fleeting nature of her presence, that union of the eternal and the fleeting that for Baudelaire was the very definition of beauty. In *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, he declares:

“La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable” [“Modernity, is the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent, the one half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the immutable”] (Baudelaire, 1976, II: 695). The eyes of the subject meet those of the woman in mutual recognition, albeit only momentarily; the woman is gone as suddenly as she appeared, leaving the subject to ponder what might have been: “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!” [“Fleeting beauty / In whose glance I was suddenly reborn, / Will I see you no more before eternity? / Elsewhere, far, far from here! too late! never perhaps!”] (Baudelaire, 1975: I, 92). The poem captures the commonplace of a chance amorous encounter that might have been, but also discloses a distinctively modern understanding of our experience of time and the workings of memory: as Françoise Meltzer argues, “À une passante” presents us with a conflicted, faltering “double vision” in that it registers a loss that “is recorded even as the image is preserved in the visual memory” (Meltzer, 2011: 92).

Throughout these poems, the significance of Baudelaire’s choice of title for his collection *Les Fleurs du Mal* is clear: the poet’s aim is to convert mud to gold, to transform the commonplace experiences or tawdry details of modern urban existence into matter for poetic reflection: “Tu m’as donné ta boue et j’en ai fait de l’or” [“You gave me your mud and I made it into gold”] (Baudelaire, 1975: I, 192). In deliberately exposing himself to the forces of contingency, to chance and uncertainty, the poet is able to extract a fragile kind of beauty from the jolts and accidents of the street.

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