

## Celebrating the New: Baudelaire and His Times

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In 1845, Baudelaire, who had just turned twenty-four, concluded his account of the annual art exhibition with a rousing call to his contemporaries to look to the world in which they lived to find the subject matter for their works of art. It is this attitude of mind that makes his writing, whether creative or critical, speak so directly to today's readers. While many writers and artists of his time were harking back to a far-off past, either in antiquity or in an adventurous image of Richelieu's seventeenth century, or evoking tranquil, timeless pastoral paradises, this was not the stuff of which he believed great modern art should be made. "Au vent qui soufflera demain nul ne tend l'oreille; et pourtant l'héroïsme *de la vie moderne* nous entoure et nous presse" (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 407), he insists, exhorting the painters and, by implication, the writers and musicians of his time to find novel ways of depicting this new heroism. Since our age, he continues, has no lack of subjects for a modern epic, what the true artist needs to do is reveal the heroic side of everyday, contemporary existence, and reveal, as he puts it, "combien nous sommes grands et poétiques dans nos cravates et nos bottes vernies." No costume dramas for Baudelaire, no lyres and togas, but rather a longing for "cette joie singulière de célébrer l'avènement du *neuf!*" (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 407). Though Baudelaire could also value and evoke the intense power of nostalgia, this longing for the new would stay with him throughout his life, as his 1859 poem "Le Voyage" suggests, with its final cry: "Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe / Au fond de l'inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*" (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 1: 134).

To appreciate the fervor with which Baudelaire upholds an art that is modern, and to understand what aspects of modernity he seeks to promote, we need to understand the historical and artistic context in which he is writing. There are two main aspects of that context to

bear in mind here: the cultural and the political. They are, of course, closely intertwined. The world around him was in flux, physically and politically, as the monarchy gave way to a short-lived republic in 1848, and then, after Louis Napoléon's *coup d'état* in 1851, to the Second Empire. Both socially and physically, Paris, as Honoré de Balzac's novels make abundantly clear, had already started to change well before the 1850s, with the industrial revolution bringing large numbers of people from the provinces to the capital, but the city's transformation intensified as Louis Napoléon, now the Emperor Napoléon III, through his minister the Baron Haussmann, set about converting the city into a physical representation of his own power. Working-class dwellings in the city center were removed to make way for residences for the middle classes, with the proletariat being exiled to the city's fringes. The narrow streets, which had been so easy to barricade, thus hamstringing the forces of order, were razed and replaced by wide boulevards and open vistas. These wider streets in turn made it possible for vehicles to move more quickly, intensifying the impression of speed and noise that Baudelaire identifies as characteristic of a modern city. From the 1840s, the cathedral-like railway stations began to appear, the great boulevards were illuminated by gas from 1857, and the growing numbers of cafés and bars made it possible for the city-dweller to transform the street and its population into a constantly changing spectacle, by night as well as by day. Hardly surprising then, that as Baudelaire reveals in his essay on the artist Constantin Guys, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," modernity for him is closely linked to the fleeting, the transient, the briefly glimpsed and the rapidly noted. It involved not just new ways of experiencing the world, but also innovative ways of depicting it.

What Baudelaire seeks in the true artist of modernity is the ability to convey the sense of movement. Where classical art seeks to promote timeless values through perfectly finished works of art, great modern artists, for him, reveal that the sketch may be just as great a work of art because it manages to convey more intensely the essence of a fleeting glimpse, a short-lived, but powerful, experience. This is also what Baudelaire attempts to do in some of his most

powerful poems and prose poems. In sending his poem “Le Cygne” to Victor Hugo, for instance, he insists: “Ce qui était important pour moi, c’était de dire vite tout ce qu’un accident, une image, peut contenir de suggestions, et comment la vue d’un animal souffrant pousse l’esprit vers tous les êtres que nous aimons, qui sont absents et qui souffrent, vers tous ceux qui sont privés de quelque chose d’irretrouvable” (Baudelaire, *Correspondances* I 623).

The impassioned observation, combined with the ability to capture fleeting moments that Baudelaire admires in novelists like Balzac and such painters as Constantin Guys is also a hallmark of his own approach to the modern world. Strolling through the main thoroughfares, or sitting in an outdoor café, he drinks in the rapidly changing cityscape, together with the intellectual suggestions it inspires and transforms them into a work of art. “Mon rêve”, he wrote to his mother in 1860, “est de fondre des *qualités littéraires* avec la *mise en scène tumultueuse* du boulevard” (Baudelaire, *Correspondances* II 98). This is what he does most obviously, perhaps, in his poem “A une passante,” where the poet persona sits at an outdoor café, “crispé comme un extravagant,” while the street howls all around him (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 1: 93). Watching a woman pass by, he imagines an intense love affair with her, in a vision all the more exciting, as he knows it to be unrealizable. The responsibilities and disillusionments of a sustained relationship are avoided by the multiplicity of possibilities offered by a world dominated by rapidly growing populations and ephemeral encounters.

Responding enthusiastically to the spectacle of the city is one thing: reacting to a political situation may be quite different. Although the 1851 *coup d’état* filled him with disgust after his elation during the 1848 revolution, when the monarchy was finally overthrown and replaced with a short-lived republic, Baudelaire found he could not entirely turn away from politics, like certain of his contemporaries, notably the poets Charles René Leconte de Lisle and Théophile Gautier. In March 1852, he could proclaim: “le 2 décembre [that is, the *coup d’état*] m’a physiquement dépolitiqué” (Baudelaire, *Correspondances* I 188), and yet, writing to his friend

Nadar in 1859, he confesses : “je me suis vingt fois persuadé que je ne m’intéressais plus à la politique, et à chaque question grave, je suis repris de curiosité et de passion” (Baudelaire, *Correspondances* I 578). While specific political questions rarely enter into his creative writing, those “grave” general questions—of material versus spiritual or cultural values, of the relationship between rich and poor, of the criteria by which governments and individuals are to be judged—are frequently reflected in his writing, and are part of the modernism he demands of others, too. Scientific inventions, part of this rapidly developing new world, can be brought in to illuminate these basic questions. Thus, new developments in the production of glass, enabling larger shop or café windows, together with increased use of gas lighting, inspired him, in his prose poem “Les Yeux des pauvres” for example, to show the poor family gazing in on the rich family eating in a café, spending more in a single sitting than the poor could earn in a week.

On the cultural side, moreover, many of his contemporaries seemed unaware of the artistic capital that could be made from the many changes going on all around them. Like the majority of men of his social class, Baudelaire had been steeped in the classics throughout his school years. Both the 1789 Revolution and even more so the Emperor Napoléon I had drawn much of their imagery of governance from the Romans, and for many artists and writers of the mid-nineteenth century, Greek and Roman antiquity was still the period to which they most often turned for inspiration. Yet many were finding that their classical education stood them in poor stead for the needs of an increasingly industrial world.<sup>1</sup> Others, like Baudelaire, saw the ridiculous side of a world undergoing intensely rapid social and physical change, but still harking back for its models to a civilization that had flourished nearly two thousand years ago. Honoré Daumier, in a hilarious series of caricatures titled *Histoire ancienne* (1841–1843), and Jacques Offenbach, in his parodic operetta, *Orphée aux enfers* (1858), for instance, reduced the noble heroes and gods of antiquity to their modern-day, bourgeois equivalents, complete with balding heads, beer guts, night caps, and

all.<sup>2</sup> In an angry and comic outburst in his refutation of what he terms the Pagan School, Baudelaire exclaims:

Est-ce que le dieu Crépitus qui vous fera de la tisane le lendemain de vos stupides cérémonies? Est-ce Vénus Aphrodite ou Vénus Mercenaire qui soulagera les maux qu'elle vous aura causés? Toutes ces statues de marbre seront-elles des femmes dévouées au jour de l'agonie, au jour du remords, au jour de l'impuissance? Buvez-vous des bouillons d'ambrosie? mangez-vous des côtelettes de Paros? Combien prête-t-on sur une lyre au Mont-de Piété? (*Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 46).

For Baudelaire, unlike many of his contemporaries, it was clear that the old traditions were no longer valid and that new ones had yet to be formed, a situation both exhilarating and bewildering. (Elsewhere he insists, more ferociously, that France is currently going through a phase of vulgarity, and that Paris is the center of universal stupidity [*Œuvres Complètes*, 1: 182], necessitating more than merely enabling the formation of something better.) But he contends that, like all civilizations, the current one has its own inherent poetry, that it is just a question of finding it, based on the certainty that all kinds of beauty contain both the eternal and the transitory. “La vie parisienne,” he exhorts his fellow artists and writers, “est féconde en sujets poétiques et merveilleux. Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l’atmosphère; mais nous ne le voyons pas” (*Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 496). And to prove his point, he turns to Balzac, a contemporary writer whose novels are firmly based in the France of his own lifetime. The heroes of Homer’s *Iliad* don’t even come up to the ankles of Balzac’s protagonists, Baudelaire affirms. Although Balzac had initially wanted to emulate the highly popular historical novelist Walter Scott, he had rapidly realized that his true gifts lay in depicting the world of his own time, a world inhabited by bankers and businessmen, journalists and poets, doctors and soldiers, farmers and courtesans, a world driven not by Olympian gods and goddesses, but by the twin forces of money and pleasure.<sup>3</sup> In creating his human comedy, Balzac had become, in Baudelaire’s

eyes, more heroic and poetic than any of his characters, setting others an example of what truly modern writing could be.

For Baudelaire, according to his account of the art salon of 1846, it was the Romantic Movement that best responded to modernity: “Pour moi,” he affirms, “le romantisme est l’expression la plus récente, la plus actuelle du beau” (*Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 420). And he goes on to offer this resounding definition: “Qui dit romantisme dit art moderne—c’est-à-dire intimité, spiritualité, couleur, aspiration vers l’infini, exprimées par tous les moyens que contiennent les arts” (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 421). The finest example of this new art in Baudelaire’s eyes is provided by Eugène Delacroix, an artist he would continue to admire throughout his life. What he emphasizes in exploring Delacroix’s work is the ability to draw on the lessons and traditions of the past, while adding to that foundation a consummate mastery in the depiction of “la douleur, la passion, le geste” (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 441), aspects vital to Baudelaire’s own creative art. He illustrates this contention later in the same essay when he describes another artist’s painting of the traditional clown, Pierrot, criticizing it for not radically transforming and modernizing this conventional image by basing it on the work of the contemporary actor Debureau, who, he asserts, is “le vrai pierrot actuel, le pierrot de l’histoire moderne” (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 451). Modernism, in other words, is not so much a rejection of the past as a transformation of tradition into the images of the present. As this suggests, modernism is also closely connected to Baudelaire’s insistence on the right to contradict himself, the fascination with exploring both sides of a question. “Je n’ai jamais eu la prétention de ne pas me contredire”, he wrote to a young critic, Armand Fraisse, on August 12, 1860. He goes on to write:

Le seul orgueil que je me permette, c’est de m’appliquer à exprimer avec beauté n’importe quoi. Une âme très sincèrement éprise de vérité, mais très sensible, peut être ballottée du catholicisme au mysticisme, du manichéisme au magisme, sans que le public, si sa pâture d’amusement lui est servie, ait le droit de s’en préoccuper! (Baudelaire, *Nouvelles Lettres* 67).

In his own writing, Baudelaire does not reject out of hand the rich trove of ancient myths and legends, but rather uses it as a spring board into the creation of contemporary images and metaphors. To give an example: Andromaque, the grieving widow living out a life of exile far from her native Troy, serves in “Le Cygne” as a template suggesting a wide range of exiles, including, for example, Africans now living in Europe, or those around whom the city was changing so fast that they felt in exile even at home, or those who were society’s outcasts, the ragpickers and prostitutes who inhabit the streets without inhabiting the society.

As he explains in a much later essay, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, which was first published in 1863:

Le passé est intéressant non seulement par la beauté qu’ont su en extraire les artistes pour qui il était le présent, mais aussi comme passé, pour sa valeur historique. Il en est de même du présent. Le plaisir que nous retirons de la représentation du présent tient non seulement à la beauté dont il peut être revêtu, mais aussi à sa qualité essentielle du présent (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 684).

As with so many of his aesthetic statements, Baudelaire insists, therefore, on the duality of beauty, the way in which the pleasure it gives derives both from an element that is permanent and unchanging and from a component that is fleeting, valid only for the particular moment it represents. “Le beau”, he insists, “est fait d’un élément éternel, invariable, dont la qualité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d’un élément relatif, circonstanciel” (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 685). Only by bearing this truth in mind can the artist or writer transform the world in which he or she lives into great art, revealing the multiple levels of metaphor the modern city reveals. That recent innovation, prose poetry, he maintains in a letter to his friend, the writer Arsène Houssaye, is born from “la fréquentation des villes énormes,” from the “croisement de leurs innombrables rapports” (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 1: 276). Modernism thus demands an art form capable of revealing those countless links, across time and space, as well as between concepts. Only then will it be truly representative of its time, inspired by

the great modern cities and, at the same time, reflecting them in its themes and in its formal structures. This is why, in his Salon of 1859, he calls on contemporary artists to focus on:

un genre que j'appellerais volontiers le paysage des grandes villes, c'est-à-dire la collection des beautés et grandeurs qui résultent d'une puissante agglomération d'hommes et de monuments, le charme profond et compliqué d'une capital âgée et vieillie dans les gloires et les tribulations de la vie (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 666).

What is important here is that it is not just the most recent developments that are interesting for the artist or poet, but the modern city seen across time, as a product and a representation of the passage of time.

This question of the ways in which the contemporary world was to be transformed into art is crucial to Baudelaire's thinking throughout his adult life and shapes much of his criticism, as well as his creative writing. Fanciouille, in the prose poem "Une mort héroïque", provides an image of the artist as hero, continuing to produce perfect art under the threat of execution, but to show this, Baudelaire places him in a world that seems remote in both time and space to that of Baudelaire himself. His letters, as well as his literary and art criticism, show him confronting the question of how this heroism is to be depicted in forms of creative writing that will construct a world immediately familiar to the contemporary reader.

In doing so, he does not simply accept as valid all that is modern. Of course, there is much that Baudelaire detests in the modern world, attitudes of mind or even linguistic tics that he delights in excoriating. In a letter to his publisher, Auguste Poulet-Malassis, for instance, he says of Victor Hugo's latest publication, *La Légende des siècles*, that it "a décidément un meilleur air de livre que *Les Contemplations*, sauf encore quelques petites folies modernes" (*Correspondances* I 605). The most obvious of those modern follies would have been the belief in human progress expressed in Hugo's anthology, a belief Baudelaire derided. "Quoi de plus absurde que le Progrès"? he asks in *Fusées*, adding ferociously: "l'homme, comme cela est prouvé par le fait journalier, est toujours semblable et égal à



l'homme, c'est-à-dire toujours à l'état sauvage" (Baudelaire *Œuvres Complètes*, 1: 663). Just as disturbing to him was the conviction that his contemporaries were rejecting art in favor of basely utilitarian values: in a letter to Hugo, he spoke of the age as "un temps où le monde s'éloigne de l'art avec [...] horreur, où les hommes se laissent abrutir par l'idée exclusive d'utilité" (*Correspondances* I 597).

Language, too, was changing and not always in ways that pleased him. Thus we find him fulminating against the word "chic," which he describes as a "mot affreux et bizarre et de moderne fabrique, dont j'ignore même l'orthographe, mais que je suis obligé d'employer, parce qu'il est consacré par les artistes pour exprimer une monstruosité moderne" (*Œuvres Complètes*, 2: 468). Equally, he despises the adjective *littéraire*, describing it as belonging to the awful slang of his age (Baudelaire, *Correspondances*, 1: 298). He himself, however, makes use of new words when it suits him: *modernité* itself is listed by the great dictionary compiler Emile Littré as a neologism. Théophile Gautier, the poet to whom Baudelaire dedicated his collection of poems, *Les Fleurs du mal*, used it a few years before *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* in newspaper articles which he subsequently collected in his volume *Les Beaux-Arts en Europe* published in 1855. Modernism, in other words, is not just a mindless acceptance of what is thought, written and done now, but a constantly questioning analysis of the contemporary, and Baudelaire makes use of it when it suits him, picking through modern concepts and slang as a rag picker might examine a city's trash to find potential treasure.

Central to his image of what is worth treasuring in the modern world is the sense that, for earlier ages, the primary aim of art, poetry and music had been to "enchanter l'esprit en lui présentant des tableaux de béatitude" (Baudelaire, *Œuvres Complètes* II 168), images in sharp contrast with the life of contention and struggle in which we actually live. Modern art, according to Baudelaire, seeks, on the contrary, to acknowledge and represent the reality of evil and suffering. Beethoven in music, Maturin in the novel, Poe in poetry and prose, and Byron in poetry have all shown the way, he insists, by using their different forms of art to project "des rayons