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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 (*appretiare*), 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* acceptation 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*.

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[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] Starobinksi'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).