

BAUDELAIRE'S PARIS, OR WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THE LYRIC POET GETS LOST IN THE CITY

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L'homme aime tant l'homme
que quand il fuit la ville, c'est encore
pour chercher la foule, c'est-à-dire
pour refaire la ville à la campagne.

Baudelaire, *Mon cœur mis à nu*

Paris and the lyric poet's encounter with a modern city were, no doubt, central to Baudelaire's elaboration of a modern aesthetics. But if the city and its crowds are somehow "central," it is also true, as Ross Chambers has shown, that of the *tableaux parisiens*, "relatively few of the poems are specifically set in Paris" (97). Rather than discuss Baudelaire as "inaugural poet of high modernism" (Jameson 247), then, I want to explore problems suggested by Chambers' title: "Are Baudelaire's 'Tableaux Parisiens' About Paris?" To rephrase my own title, I ask, what happens when the poet loses himself in crowds? The answer, as ambiguous as the question, lies in a new understanding of *correspondances* because the same tension between transcendence and immanence exists between the poet and the crowd and other relations of self to other that will interest me in this paper.

Essential to these questions will be the role of the *flâneur*, who is at once a participant and observer of the crowd, that is, both swept up in the movement of the crowd and detached from, even aloof and disdainful of, the masses. One of the opening poems of *Les fleurs du mal*, "L'albatros" offers a good example of this disdain:

Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées
Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer,
Exilé sur le sol au milieu des huées,
Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher. (10)

This vision of the poet's life as an exile from the heavens recalls the romantic theme of the misunderstood author-genius. The traditional form of the poem (four quatrains of alexandrines with regular *césures*, and alternating masculine and feminine rhymes) does nothing to distinguish it as modern. On the other hand, if this text seems to cultivate the privileged status of the poet, it may be too late, for a different contract between reader and writer had already been forged a few pages earlier in the poem "To the Reader," with its famous last line, "Hypocrite lecteur,--mon semblable,--mon frère!" (6). As a

kind of preface, this text should entice the reader, or as Genette has written about prefaces in general, it should say, "This is *why* and this is *how* you should read this book" (183). At the mercy of the market, the author invites the loathed bourgeois reader to escape boredom and to join in his *flânerie*, for both the poet and his audience look for something *new* to escape their *ennui*. In this context, it makes sense that the last word of the last poem of *Les Fleurs du mal*, "Le voyage," should be *nouveau*, in italics, no less:

Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe ?
Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau*!

The crowd offers such new sensations to the *flâneur* and reader. But like the changing relation between writer and reader, a paradox results from the interaction between the *flâneur* and the crowd: just as his activity combines immersion in and detachment from the crowd, the latter represents at once a subject for the poet *and* a customer for his art. As Graeme Gilloch notes, in his book on the city and Walter Benjamin, "The *flâneur* goes to the market in the guise of a curious onlooker, but in reality is there to sell his goods. Benjamin states 'As *flâneurs*, the intelligentsia came into the marketplace. As they thought, to observe it--but in reality it was already to find a buyer" (Gilloch 155). Benjamin puts this perhaps most succinctly in his essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire": "The crowd--no subject was more entitled to the attention of nineteenth-century writers. . . . It became a customer; it wished to find itself portrayed in the contemporary novel" (166). To be sure, there was no shortage of writers to accommodate this desire, and Benjamin cites as examples the work of Victor Hugo and Eugène Sue, best-selling authors of the period.

These analyses characterize the changing relations between the public and the poet, but the question of how Baudelaire integrated the crowd into his work, in a manner that is altogether different from a Hugo or Sue, remains to be explored. Several, maybe all, of the *Fleurs du mal* lend themselves to such questions, but I will concentrate first on one of the *tableaux parisiens*, "À une passante".

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
Soulevant, 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,
 O toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais !

This poem demonstrates well why Baudelaire can be called the last romantic and first modern poet. The form is quite traditional: a sonnet written in twelve syllable alexandrines. The content, however, blends the past with the modern. It recalls a traditional theme of lyric poetry: the glance of a woman evoked as loss. But the scene seems to take place in the hustle and bustle of a busy crowd, that offers the chance encounter with the woman only to take her back. As Benjamin writes of this poem,

In a widow's veil, mysteriously and mutely borne along by the crowd, an unknown woman comes into the poet's field of vision... [T]his very crowd brings to the city dweller the figure that fascinates. The delight of the urban poet is love--not at first sight, but at last sight. It is a farewell forever which coincides in the poem with the moment of enchantment. Thus the sonnet supplies the figure of shock, indeed of catastrophe. (169)

This shock is important in Benjamin's scheme, for it structures a shift in experience that arrived with modernity and first transcribed by Baudelaire. The appraisals of *Les fleurs du mal* as a rupture between traditional and modern poetics often depends on this idea, yet it fails to underline an important aspect of Baudelaire's work that also informs the poet's relation to the crowd: narcissism. It is true that the dandy and *flâneur* have received attention from this angle, and rightly so, but in reading "À une passante" as the experience of modern man in the city, one forgets that it also stages a long-standing theme of lyric poetry, the reification of woman as an object of male/readerly fantasy.

In a brief essay on Lamartine, Barbara Johnson unveils this issue as "the equivalence always implicit in lyric poetry between the beloved and the dead, between beauty and death." She cites some stunning examples to show how "dead women seem repeatedly to be inseparable from moments of poetic renewal. . . . This apparent necrophilia can be read as a form of poetic self-

reflexiveness: woman equals beauty equals the poem itself, which is killed into art. This reading, however, neutralizes the underlying misogyny of such a topos" (629).

The affinity between death and woman in "À une passante" shows up first in the "grand deuil, douleur majestueuse." One feels no sympathy for the mourner, and we are drawn instead to gaze at her skirt and then her leg: "Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue." The woman has become a statue, symbolizing both beauty itself and cold stone, like the marble of a tombstone, and it is no coincidence that the rhyme with statue is "qui tue." Although it is the poet who is threatened by this death--and he has been frozen ("crispé comme un extravagant") by her penetrating gaze--it is she who exists only as an object of art (the statue), an object of his desire and stare, and finally as the object of his poem. Indeed, so inanimate is she, so devoid of subjectivity, that one must wonder if she ever existed at all, a hypothesis supported by the use of a subjunctive in the last line ("O toi que j'eusse aimée"). In this fantasy, the referent may never have crossed the poet's path in the streets of Paris. Perhaps, in the end, this poem has much less to do with life in the big city than it does with Petrarch's Laura, Scève's Délic, or Ronsard's lovers, none of whom matter as real people. (Johnson comments incisively on the case of Laura's identity: "Better dead and idealized than real and pregnant" 629.)

The poem "La beauté" reinforces this reading:

Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre,
Et mon sein, où chacun s'est meurtri tour à tour,
Est fait pour inspirer au poète un amour
Éternel et muet ainsi que la matière.

Je trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx incompris;
J'unis un coeur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;
Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,
Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.

Les poètes, devant mes grandes attitudes,
Que j'ai l'air d'emprunter aux plus fiers monuments,
Consommeront leurs jours en d'austères études;

Car j'ai, pour fasciner ces dociles amants,
De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles:
Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!

This poem combines the theme of beauty as a (dead) woman with images of stones: "un rêve de pierre," the hard bruising breast, the muleness of "la matière," the sphinx and other monuments. At the end, the last metaphor shows the real relationship between poet and object: to gaze into her eyes is to look for a reflection of himself, rendered even more beautiful by these mirrors. This not only negates any castrating power attributed to the eyes of woman, it shows how the relation between self and other, between the poet and his object, is between the self and his own image.

This allegory of beauty seems far removed from the crowded city, yet the prose poem "Les Foules" displays a similar logic. Multitude is like solitude and vice versa because it involves projecting the self and its fantasies onto a mirror-like and objectified body that promises pleasure:

Il n'est pas donné à chacun de prendre un bain de multitude: jouir de la foule est un art. . . . Multitude, solitude: termes égaux et convertibles pour le poète actif et fécond. Qui ne sait peupler sa solitude, ne sait pas non plus être seul dans une foule affairée. Le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège, qu'il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui. . . il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun. . . . Le promeneur solitaire et pensif tire une singulière ivresse de cette universelle communion. Celui-là qui épouse facilement la foule connaît des jouissances fiévreuses. . . Ce que les hommes nomment amour est bien petit. . . comparé à cette ineffable orgie, à cette sainte prostitution de l'âme qui se donne tout entière, poésie et charité, . . . à l'inconnu qui passe. (243-44)

No longer does the poet soar above the crowd and its *luées* as in "L'albatros;" here we find a "universal communion," that is, community. But what is the nature of this community, of the poet's getting lost in the crowd? The use of the masculine "inconnu qui passe" instead of a feminine passerby does not hide what the overtly sexual vocabulary reveals: that the crowd, like the women in "La beauté" and "À une passante," provides a blank and nameless canvas, or mirror, for the poet's fantasies.

It is significant that Baudelaire used the idea of a "universal analogy," an echo of this universal communion, to express the idea of correspondences. How must we change our understanding of correspondences, then, in light of the poet's narcissistic relationship to the crowd in "Les foules"?

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisser parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles

Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

One could claim that "Nature," the first word of the poem, has become simply the city and its crowds. This would make sense insofar as nature, for the romantics, often reflected their state of mind; one thinks again of Lamartine's apostrophe, "Ô lac," among countless others. But it is one thing to personify nature and another to naturalize the city. Perhaps the city, which constantly offers something new to the poet, ultimately fails precisely because the new is always the same.

The "forest of symbols who observe [man] with familiar looks" are familiar because they are reflections of the *flâneur's* own image and fantasies. And for that matter, they may literally be his reflections, seen in the shop windows in the never-ending hunt for the new and different. Correspondences, therefore, like the passerby, the crowd, and beauty itself, promise transcendence just as the commodity promises something new. But in the end, because the fantasy never corresponds to reality, the crowd will, as in "L'albatros," be a site of exile. The passerby in mourning remains indifferent; and art itself becomes a commodity the author must sell, like a street vendor, to the *hypocrite lecteur*. Fortunately for readers, even as it can provide a mirror for a narcissistic gaze, Baudelaire's poetry also offers itself as a city--a labyrinth where the reader is invited to get lost, and create, from her own *flânerie*, a new map.

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