

Baudelaire's "Tableaux Parisiens": Metropolis Multitude, and Modernity

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Abstract

The section titled 'Tableaux Parisiens,' in the second edition of Charles Baudelaire's The Flowers of Evil highlights a remarkable transition from the poet's initial romantic preoccupation to an outstandingly different kind of poetry which shocked the contemporary readers and led the later critics and poets alike to regard him as the first modern poet. Modern poetry, as this paper aims to show, has been the product of the lone poet's painful effort to adapt himself to the unpredictable city and his subsequent failure, alienation and ennui. This failure is the fate of everyman, and the failed self, the fallen self with all its secrets, finds in the city a market and incarnates at times as a prostitute looking for customers to sell herself and at other times as a poet in search of a publisher to sell himself. Baudelaire, unlike his predecessors, does not shun this lost tribe of people from his poetry but makes them and their city the very subject therein. Thus, a study of the city, which supplied the poet the inspiration and the materials for his work, would be a key to Baudelaire's modernity. With this perception this paper seeks to make a critical reading of 'Tableaux Parisiens' and show that Baudelaire's modernity was born in the metropolis with his discovery of isolation in the multitude.

"Do the dregs of society supply the heroes of the big city? Or is the hero the poet who fashions his work from such material?"¹

Although a number of critical approaches to literature aspires to viewing literary products as something aloof from their producers, at times it is impossible to bring out the meaning of an art if it is separated from the artist. Great works of art possess an almost organic relationship with the artists and each plays a crucial role in the formation of the other. The solidarity between art and artist, between poet and poetry especially, is often nothing but the product of the poet's painful struggle with himself and his surroundings. In this regard Charles Baudelaire's position is not exceptional—most of his beautiful poems are the fruits of his cracked relationship with Paris and her people. Unlike the Romantics Baudelaire does not retreat to nature for inspiration or solace rather he embraces whatever Paris offers and then transforms them into flowers: we first encounter the modern city in Baudelaire's poetry, and the obsessions of modern life (despair, excess, boredom, the search for meaning) shape his poetic concerns. Be it his thoughts of exoticism, eroticism, death or revolt, Baudelaire was a poet of Paris as Paris was a city of the poet, each belonging to each, and each having an irrevocable impact on the future of the other. Thus, if one hopes to achieve a better understanding of Baudelaire's poetry, one cannot bypass a study of the city from which he drew much of

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the inspiration for his work. Herein, I hope to provide a reading of 'Tableaux Parisiens' and demonstrate that as the real painter Baudelaire captures 'the epic aspect of modern life, and makes us see' and recognize the true hero of modernity.

Baudelaire's only book of verse *Les Fleurs du Mal* was a somewhat abstract work in its first edition with the presentation of the lapse into insanity as the fate of Everyman. The focus is greatly altered in the second edition, which narrows the context of the work by inserting immediately after 'Spleen et Ideal' the section entitled "Tableaux Parisiens". This situates the account of spiritual degradation in a specific location: Benjamin's capital of the nineteenth century. Composed of short texts the poems under the "Tableaux Parisiens" section give fragmentary views of the common life of Paris, especially of those aspects of it which have not yet been objects of literary description. There is no aspect of the city that could not become the subject of a *tableau*. Striking the last nails into Romanticism's coffin Baudelaire becomes the first of poets to incorporate everything that a modern man encounters in a city. Observing this unique feature of Baudelairean poetics, T S Eliot acknowledges his indebtedness to Baudelaire:

"I think that from Baudelaire I learned first, a precedent for the poetical possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis, of the possibility of fusion between the sordidly realistic and the phantasmagoric, and the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic. From him, as from Laforgue, I learned that the sort of material that I had, the sort of experience that an adolescent had had, in an industrial city of America, could be the material for poetry; and that the source of new poetry might be found in what had been regarded hitherto as the impossible, the sterile, the intractably unpoetic"²

Baudelaire speaks about Paris, not about its edifices, its temples, monuments, curiosities, etc.- others have already treated all this. He rather speaks of public and private morals, of the reigning ideas, of the current situation of minds, of everything that impresses and disgusts him in that bizarre crowd of customs foolish and wise but always changing. Moreover, observing everything in the urban topography he does not despise the objects which are remotest from opulence in order to show by these oppositions the moral physiognomy of this gigantic capital. What the poet portrays are conditions, social roles, situations, perceived by an observer whose attention is not restricted by any convention and who tries to decipher the moral and political physiognomy of the city without prejudice. Hence, we observe the poet strolling the streets for rhymes and lines:

Through the streets where at windows of old houses
the Persian blinds hide secret luxuries,
when the cruel sun strikes with redoubled fury

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 1989) pp. 80.

on the roofs and fields, the meadows and city,
I go alone in my crazy sword-play
scenting a chance rhyme on every road-way,
stumbling on words and over the pavement
finding verses I often dreamed might be sent.

(“The Sun” translated by A. S. Kline)

In fact, Baudelaire paints a picture of city life which proposes it as the cause of man’s despairing attempt to escape into intensity. The opening poem of ‘Tableaux Parisiens’ (Parisian Pictures) sets the tone in which the city will be treated. It is a source of negative inspiration, its ‘landscape’ being ironic. The poem is described as eclogue, but it is an eclogue of city, a townscape of steeples and factory chimneys. The landscape is essentially a wintry scene from which the poet seeks to escape into the warmth and springtime of his imagination. The landscape is ironic because at the “Dawn of Day” the poet observes

From chimneys here and there smoke curled above.
The harlots, with mascara round their eyes,
Slept open-mouthed, in silly sluggishness;
The bagger-women, dragging scraggy breasts,
Blew on their coals and hands, against the frost.

(‘Dawn of Day’ translated by Joanna Richardson)

Following this the series of portraits that come next presents an urban phantasmagoria and together they form a whole paradigm of urban misery. These powerful evocations of urban dereliction, of the pariahs of civilization, combine savagery and pathos. The poet spares neither subject nor reader in his presentation of the horrors of old age, curse of prostitution and pain of loneliness. Sordid reality is described not because it is sordid, but because it is exotic and absurd. The city is clothed in an atmosphere of myth and hallucination which brings the poet to the edge of vertigo. It is characteristic of the convention that it blends horrors with pathos as we observe in ‘The Old Woman’:

In the winding folds of ancient capitals,
Where all things have enchantment, even fear,
I wait, obeying humours whimsical,
To see frail creatures sweet and singular

“The city Baudelaire wrote in was the expanding Paris of the Second Empire, Hussmann’s splendid city, proliferating monumental neoclassical façades ... The poet belonged literally and symbolically to the garrets and attics that lurked behind the huge facades”³. With the grand boulevards and imperial facades the city, as Hyde opines,

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978) 126.

becomes 'a metaphor' through which the poet highlights 'problems of relationship in a society which offers only a false and hypocritical account of how its parts interrelate'. "The physical remodeling of the city topography ... [is] only the most visible [manifestation] of a more profound transformation of urban society," states Priscilla Ferguson in her book *Paris as Revolution* and she argues that Haussmann's Paris is "revolutionary because it is modern ... with individuals crossing geographical and social boundaries and with the boundaries themselves shifting"¹². Paris changes and with it the people change also but not the poet, because

Paris changes! But nothing, in my melancholy,
moves. New hotels, scaffolding, stone blocks,
old suburbs, everything, becomes allegory,
to me: my memories are heavier than rocks.

(“The Swan”, translated by- A. S. Kline)

It is interesting to trace this altering City in Baudelaire's poetry as it develops through time. In the early poems, for example in “Landscape”, the City is an enchanted world, above which a further enchanted world lies, inhabited by the poet separated from the Crowd, its workshops full of song and light. The belfries and towers are masts of voyaging ships, or vessels in a vast harbour, and the solitary poet can conjure an Idyll in imagination that transcends the City. Similarly in “The Sun”, the City is a place of possibilities where the lone poet can wander receiving inspiration, while the same poetic sun that warms his spirit enters and warms the City. In both poems the Crowd is absent, temporarily stilled, barred from access, abandoned below, or rendered invisible:

From my high garret, chin in hands, I'll see
The workshops sing and chatter eagerly,
Chimneys and spires, masts of the capital,
And skies which make one dream of heaven and hell.

(‘Landscape’ translated by- Joanna Richardson)

By the time of Evening and Morning Twilight, the City is a populated ant-heap with recognisable characters that arouse empathy, in “Moesta Et Errabunda” (Grieving and Wandering) it has become a sordid city, a city of slime and remorse. As Baudelaire lives beyond his close relationships with women, and becomes more isolated, so the darkened image of the City and the Crowd of the damned intensifies, and from this infernal city the poet wishes an escape:

Take me away, carriage! Carry me off, frigate!
Far, far away! Here the mud is made with our tears!

¹² Hyde, G. M. “The Poetry of the City”. (Ed) Bradbury, Malcolm and James McFarlane. *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890 – 1930*. London: Penguin. 1976

¹³ Ferguson, Priscilla. *Paris as Revolution*. (133)

— Is it true that sometimes the sad heart of Agatha
Says: Far from crimes, from remorse, from sorrow,
Take me away, carriage, carry me off, frigate?

(“Grieving and Wandering” trans William Aggeler)

With “To The Reader” and “The Game”, we are among the crowd of obsessed, sinful spirits, images of ourselves, of the average human being, locked in the stasis of Hell. “The Seven Old Men” shows us a terrifying vision of monstrous repetition and multiplication, of exile and spiritual desolation, where the only image Baudelaire can find for his own soul is a ‘mastless barge’ on a ‘monstrous sea’, perfect symbol of the defeated vessel of the Individual, adrift on the storm-tossed ocean of the City.

‘Formidable city, city full of dreams
where the passer-by, at dawn, meets the spectre!
Mysteries everywhere run like sap that streams
through the narrow veins of this great ogre.

(‘The Seven Old Men’)

If existence is fallen, if relationship with Deity, or the mother, or the Ideal, has failed, if we are exiled from the external paradise we seek, then it is natural to position ourselves in an analogue of the traditional Hell, whose ruler is the traditional Satan, the Angel who sinned through Pride. The analogue for Dante’s City of Dis, where Satan rules, is the modern City of Paris with its crowded streets and arcades, its multiplicity of beings and locations, its many levels and gradations of existence. Satan will be a kind of hero, a mask of the poet, a Prince of Exile as we see in “The Litanies of Satan”:

O you, the most knowing, and loveliest of Angels,
a god fate betrayed, deprived of praises,
O Satan, take pity on my long misery!
O, Prince of exile to whom wrong has been done,
who, vanquished, always recovers more strongly,
O Satan, take pity on my long misery!
You who know everything, king of the underworld,
the familiar healer of human distress,
O Satan, take pity on my long misery!

(translated by- Joanna Richardson)

Unlike Dante’s public sins of violence, evil against others, the sins of the modern Satanist are not the sins of heresy, public corruption, or public betrayal of others: they are rather the obsessions and frailties of the modern Self. Those who go looking for the world of a De Sade in Baudelaire are soon disappointed. Despite his often colourful mock-Satanic poses, he is essentially a moral man, adrift in modernity’s maze, a man of great tenderness ravaged by existential loss. Satan, the poet’s image, is the eternally

frustrated one, the buried rebel, the dethroned prince of longing. His disciples are the tormented ones, those seeking escape or forgetfulness, solace or oblivion. When they are strong and invigorated, they are proud rebels, seeking, as Baudelaire claims the dandy, the flâneur, as in *The Painter of Modern Life*, to 'combat and destroy the trivial'. When they are weak and damaged they will be the lost tribe of Cain, the wanderers in pain and torment, the driven gamblers of "The Game", and the sad images of ourselves in "To The Reader", the strange tribe of "Seven Old Men", exiled Wandering Jews, or the sufferers and labourers of the "Evening Twilight" and "Morning Twilight", the damned lesbian women, and the inhabitants of the ladder of sins in the "Voyage", in "Calm". They are our selves: exiles, crooks, whores, gamblers, drinkers, flawed by deadly sins of pride and lust, avarice and envy, by stupidity and meanness, by deceitfulness and cruelty. Dante's Hell is in some sense contained within Baudelaire's, as the public is somehow concealed in the private, but it is the private self, the inner self, the fallen self, that Baudelaire is primarily concerned with.

In spite of its multitude the City for Baudelaire is another ocean of isolation, another place where relationship fails. Though he is essentially an apolitical writer, barely non-conformist, his age penetrates his thought and writing, merely because of the tenacity of the changes happening around him. Paris reveals all the facets of the modern Capitalist citadel. There, Baudelaire explained in an early poem, the prostitute sells her soul to buy shoes, and he too sells his thought, wanting to be an author. "Exigencies of the market" Hyde states

"demand that the poet move to the city, like any artisan; and competitive pressures dictate that he shall precariously exist in a state of war with his society and all other entertainers squabbling for the surplus cash of the rising *bourgeoisie* who alone can guarantee the material basis of art: they are its consumers".

Hyde further tells that in this circumstance "the poet turns inward with a desperate inwardness different from Romantic subjectivity ... that gives him a private sense of belonging and a sense that order exist, however personal"⁵. The City is a marketplace where the individual is commoditised, and that is a key aspect of Baudelaire's Hell, that the individual, so prominent a feature of Dante's Hell, even among the crowds there, is here submerged in the ant-heap:

Exasperated, a drunk that sees things doubled,
I stumbled home, slammed the door, terrified,
sick, depressed, mind feverish and troubled,
wounded by mystery, the absurd, outside!

("The Seven Old Men", translated by- Carol Clark)

¹⁴ Hyde, G. M. "The Poetry of the City". (Ed) Bradbury, Malcolm and James McFarlane.. *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890 – 1930*. London: Penguin. 1976. P 341

For the individual who fails in relationship the City is a haven, full of interest, human interest, but divorced from self, complex, requiring no engagement, yet inviting it. In the City individuals as Sartre noted, fulfill roles, submerge themselves. So the gambler, the drinker, the seeker of anonymous sex, the thief, the beggar, the whore, the dandy, the voyeur, can move in secret, though wholly visible, so long as they play their parts well. It is theatre. It is Vanity Fair. Yet human beings become numbers, their output becomes a commodity: their identity becomes the trail of their public transactions, and according to Baudelaire, works of a modern artist must reflect these.

Baudelaire finds his paradigm of the modern artist in Edgar Allan Poe's tale of the "Man in the Crowd." It is interesting to see how Baudelaire insists that this tale should be what it was not meant to be, namely, a tableau: "Do you remember a tableau (it really is a tableau) traced by the most powerful pen of this epoch which is entitled 'The Man in the Crowd?'" The "circumstantial," then, out of which the modern artist as a flaneur has to extract his works of art, is the trivial life of the city and of the moving crowd. "The crowd is his domain like the air is that of the bird, like the water is that of the fish. His passion and his profession is to melt into the crowd. For the perfect flaneur, for the passionate observer, there is an immense delight in taking residence in the sphere of numbers, of the fluctuation, of movement, of the fugitive and the infinite."⁶

The sensitive person who longs for intimate relationship is both enthralled and appalled by the seething of the crowd, seduced by its anonymity and sense of protection, its glitter and enchantment, its confusion of classes and tasks, contrasted with its distinctions of levels and gradations, yet also annihilated by its emptiness and indifference, its ruthless commoditization which the poet abhors:

I hate you, Ocean! My mind, in your tumultuous main,
sees itself: I hear the vast laughter of your seas,
the bitter laughter of defeated men,
filled with the sound of sobs and blasphemies.
How you would please me without your stars, O Night!
I know the language that their light employs!
Since I search for darkness, nakedness, the Void!
But the shadows themselves seem, to my sight
canvases, where thousands of lost beings, alive,
and with a familiar gaze, leap from my eyes.

(“Obsession” translated by- William Aggeler)

However, Baudelaire captures the quality of urban experience once and for all in “To a Passer-by” very much like the work of the painter of modern life. It transmutes a causal incident into the definitive icon of urban experience. It describes a fleeting exchange of

¹⁵ Karlheinz, Stierle. “Baudelaire and the Tradition of the Tableau de Paris”. *New Literary History*, Vol. 11, No. 2, Literature/History/Social Action. (Winter, 1980), pp.345-361.

glances with a woman dressed in mourning, as the poet passes her in the crowd: a momentary flare of understanding which can never be pursued. This brief encounter is the perfect example of joyless anonymity and isolation of the city, although it occurs in the crowd.

A lightening flash . . . then night! Love passing by,
Whose sudden glance bestowed new life on me,
Shall I not see you till eternity?

(“To a Passer-by”, translated- Joanna Richardson)

Finally in the “Draft Epilogue” and “Epilogue”, and in “Calm”, the City is once more a backcloth for the exhausted spirit, for the weary alchemist who has ‘turned mud into gold’, whose heart is quiet, who at last finds calm. It is a tribute to Baudelaire’s monumental construction of his poetic work, his slow, tenacious building of an almost Classical oeuvre, that we can see these steady changes in his perception of the City and the Crowd as his life changes, and he becomes increasingly sensitive to failed relationship, lost ideals, and the ambivalence of the City that provided him with an ever-changing background:

So, in front of the Louvre, an image oppresses me.
I think of my great swan, with its mad movements,
ridiculous, sublime, as exiles seem,
gnawed by endless longing! And then,
of you, Andromache⁷, fallen from the embrace
of the great hero, vile chattel in the hands of proud
Pyrrhus, in front of an open tomb, in grief’s ecstatic grace,
Hector’s widow, alas, and wife of Helenus!

(“The Swan”, translated by- A. S. Kline)

The swan of the poem’s title is one of Baudelaire’s urban outcast, suffering firstly because it has escaped its cage and the pavement is hard, but more because it is estranged from its society as the poet is estranged from his city.

¹⁶ Andromache was Hector’s wife who mourned his death in the Trojan War. The Simois and the Scamander (Xanthus) were the two rivers of the Trojan Plain. Pyrrhus is Neoptolemus, son of Achilles. Andromache fell to him as a spoil after the fall of Troy. Helenus was a son of Priam and brother of Hector. Baudelaire follows Virgil, *The Aeneid* III 289, where Aeneas reaches Epirus and Chaonia, and finds Helenus and Andromache. Helenus has succeeded to the throne of Pyrrhus and married Andromache. Aeneas finds Andromache sacrificing to Hector’s ashes in a wood near the city (Buthrotum) by a river named after the Simois. This is Baudelaire’s false Simois. Andromache explains that Pyrrhus has left her for Hermione, and passed her on to Helenus, who has been accepted as a Greek prince. Helenus has built a second little Troy in Chaonia. Andromache is a symbol of fallen exile. The Carrousel is a bridge over the Seine in Paris, recent at the time of the poem. The Ovid reference is (arguably) to Cynus, son of Sthenelus, changed to a swan, grieving for Phaethon (*Metamorphoses* II 367 and also Virgil, *Aeneid* X 187). The Louvre Palace is now a Museum and Art Gallery, on the right bank of the Seine, in Paris.

This City, however, is not the city of the Revolution in that it brought nothing to the masses but a new kind of slavery. It is the City of Modernity, of the future, where Revolution is defused by wealth and urbanisation, by mechanisation and acceptance. Baudelaire is no revolutionary; he is a witness as he himself tells:

“The painter, the real painter will be the one who will manage to catch the epic aspect of modern life, and make us see and understand . . . how noble and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent leather boots.”⁸

With this magnificent sentence Baudelaire defines the function of the modern artist. He required him to express the spirit of his age through his creative art, to shape its mythology. He only arrived at his complete formulations of this view of the artist’s function relatively late in life, in his essay on Constantin Guys, *The Painter of Modern Life*.

The City itself is a commoditised space, a theatre for the Crowd, with which the true Individual cannot identify. Here there is no Catullus, or Horace. Paris is not Classical Rome, and the poet is in exile from the social nexus, wherever that may be located. How completely Baudelaire in his poetry cuts himself off from the society of his time, from his own class, his peers! Whatever his situation in life, his situation in the poetry is carefully determined and subtly penned. He identifies with the outcasts, the pariahs, the obsessed, the defeated, but not with the successful, the wealthy, the powerful, and yet he is never a rebel as such, and in the end is like Dante ‘a party of one’, a spiritual onlooker, for whom the City is symbol but never an entity with which he has a true relation.

And Baudelaire is ultimately not a poet of the City or the Crowd, as Hugo was, or Dickens. He is not in profound relation. He identifies and draws back, he empathises and scorns. He is no lover of the people, no democrat, no Walt Whitman. Baudelaire is too full of disgust with and protest against this terrible human condition, too full of self-disgust to champion a humanity he has lost faith in. Hence, du Bos says:

His [Baudelaire’s] originality took the dreadful form of a hatred for life that extended far beyond any of its contingencies, the bare spirit’s absolute and incompatible hatred⁹.

And this hatred is transformed into a sentiment in “The Little Old Women”

So you go on stoic, without complaints,
Amid the turmoil of the living town,
Mothers with blending heart, street-walkers, saints,
Whose names were on the lips of every one

¹⁷ Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris, 1963 edition, P. 886.

¹⁸ Charles du Bos. “Meditations on the Life of Baudelaire” in *Baudelaire: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. Henri Peyre. Prentice-Hall, Inc., New Jersey. 1962

However, his city dwellers are not the respectable citizens, who hardly appear, they are those whose lives depend on transience, on chance, on the repetition of the valueless instant, they are opportunistic thieves, gamblers whose fate depends on the next moment, on randomness: they are prostitutes seeking the next encounter, the repetition of previous encounters: they are beggars and rag-pickers searching the mire. They are not creative workers, builders, artists, but the flotsam and jetsam of the mindless ocean, the recipients of the fruits of anonymity, those who have fallen out of relationship, and whose public lives do not require relationship except with the ephemeral. The prostitute is the archetypal symbol of this commercialised, commoditised society, one who is the physical commodity and the seller, the shop-window and the store, the product and the service combined. Relationship with a prostitute, such as Jeanne Duval almost certainly was, exists in that overlap between the fixed social world of work and home, and the fluid world of the ephemeral City.

Baudelaire emerges as the pioneer of the modern poets and "modernist literature was born in the city and with Baudelaire – especially with his discovery that crowds mean loneliness and that the terms 'multitude' and solitude' are interchangeable for a poet with an active and fertile imagination".¹⁰ Although labeled both romantic and classical, Baudelaire transcends this dichotomy through his organic relation with his verses: he was dissatisfied with surroundings and this dissatisfaction was not replaced with some daffodils or a boat journey. Baudelaire puts this dissatisfaction as another feather to his crown and it constitutes the core of his poetry. Even as a Romantic, if indeed he was, he is different from his contemporaries; as Rimbaud tells:

The second Romantics are very much seers: Théophile Gautier, Leconte de Lisle, Théodore de Banville. But since inspecting the invisible and hearing the unheard of is different from recovering the spirit of dead things; Baudelaire is the first seer, king of poets, *a real god!*¹¹

(Letter to Paul Demeny, 15 May 1871)

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¹⁹ Charles du Bos. "Meditation on the Life of Baudelaire" in *Baudelaire: A Collection of Critical Essays*.

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²¹ Wallace Fowlie. *Rimbaud: Complete Works, Selected Letters*. (University of Chicago Press: Chicago & London) 1966