

Love to hate the modern world: Benjamin on Baudelaire and modernity

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'A young American called Eliot called me this p.m. I think he has some sense...'

'He has actually trained himself and modernized himself on his own. The rest of the promising young have done one or the other but never both (most of the swine have done neither). It is such a comfort to meet a man and not have to tell him to wash his face, wipe his feet, and remember the date (1914) on the calendar.'

[Ezra Pound to Harriet Monroe, 22 and 30 September 1914]¹

Something seems to have changed. Half a century after Baudelaire died syphilitic and paralyzed, the Great War breaks loose, and the two key figures of modern English poetry meet. One is a neat and shy young man writing a philosophy thesis, the other an avant-garde extravagant with a grand aristocratic aspect. To be up with the times, by then, has been an imperative for so long that it has devaluated; like everything under capitalism, the avant-garde has become cheap and messy. To be modern, for Pound, is a matter of decency: to be *trained* and *modernized* go together. Civilization has become scarce, and must be kept up. The portrait is telling: there is hardly anything about the face that is not imperative.



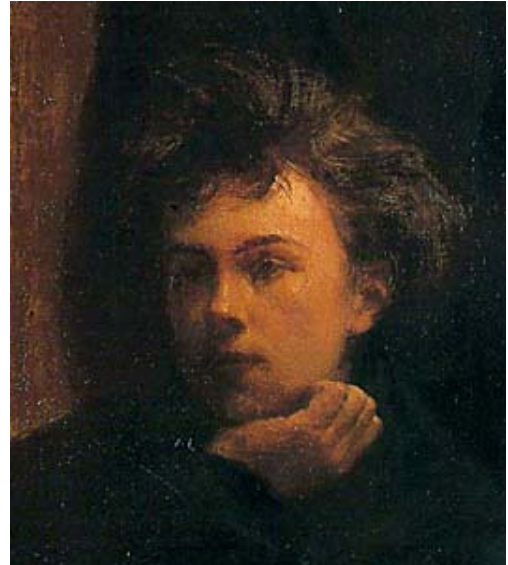
It is hard not to think of Rimbaud, with his greasy messed up hair and lazy arrogance, saying goodbye to all that, and adding *Il faut être absolument moderne*. Be modern: don't wash. Ignore convention, live on the fringes, fear comfort, and make yourself a seer. This is certainly not the kind of man Pound is describing. And indeed, something has changed. Rimbaud's poetic visions, and the ego cult behind it, have gone out of fashion by 1914; instead, we have Eliot's impersonal contemplations, Pound's fragments and economics, and the continuous awareness of tradition. Pound and Rimbaud seem to define two opposite sides of the modern world, the civilization and its margins, say, the bourgeois and the vagabond. At the same time, they are also posing in roles from the past, say, the knight and the saint, two *portraits historiées*. Both roles have something heroic about them, and on both sides it is a hard thing to be an artist. Yet on closer inspection, Eliot, Pound, and Rimbaud are not all that different. They all respond to their condition by adopting some kind of *ascetic model*, medieval in outlines, but still *cut to fit* modern times like a Victorian suit.

All of them knew the seamy side of modern life intimately. They had all lived in Paris and London. Rimbaud writes *Une Saison en Enfer*, Eliot describes the crowd in *The Waste Land* with a quote from

Inferno. We have Rimbaud screaming out, ‘A vendre ce que les Juifs n’ont pas vendu, ce que noblesse ni crime n’ont goûté, ce qu’ignorent l’amour maudit et la probité infernale des masses; ce que le temps ni la science n’ont pas à reconnaître... A vendre l’anarchie pour les masses; la satisfaction irrépressible pour les amateurs supérieurs; la mort atroce pour les fidèles et amants!’² Pound: ‘We see *tò kalòn* decreed in the market place.’³

Rimbaud and Pound write their goodbyes, after the Paris Commune and the First World War, cursing the Gauls and Queen Victoria. All that, we can say, is founded in the same set of negative experiences: anonymity in the crowd, all things becoming marketable commodities, filth, slums, alcohol, prostitution, people being killed. As Benjamin notes, ‘um die Moderne zu leben, bedarf es einen heroischen Verfassung’.⁴ Part of the heroism, then, is in keeping your feet among that all.

But they also *went* for the modern metropolis. If they all hated the modern world, they sure *loved* to hate it.



All this is just to make an introduction. Benjamin’s book on Baudelaire, written again a generation later, is concerned with what is precisely *modern* about this experience, what about it is particular to life in the modern metropolis. There is a phrase in *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, in Benjamin’s own italics, that seems to outline the project:

*Innerhalb großer geschichtlicher Zeiträume verändert sich mit der gesamten Daseinsweise der menschlichen Kollektiva auch die Art und Weise ihrer Sinneswahrnehmung*⁵.

Baudelaire, in Benjamin’s analysis, is the first truly modern artist in that he responds to this change. There is some irony in the title – *Baudelaire. Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus* – but it also defines a challenge of heroic proportions. Heroism and mock heroism, in its argument, go together.

Benjamin himself, for that matter, knew all the disgusting facts intimately as well: he had seen the first third of the century in Germany, militarism, collapse, inflation, and crisis; studied what was wrong with society at the Frankfurt School; then fled for the Nazi’s, enjoyed seven years of poverty in Paris; finally killed himself on the Spanish border when he could not flee again. He knew the Berlin of the Expressionists, smoked hashish, and ended *Das Kunstwerk* with some very grim reflections on the ‘Ästhetisierung der Politik’. All this is important because it shows how Benjamin’s analysis was based on personal experience: what he found typically modern in Baudelaire is to a large extent what he shared with him. The analogy can be extended further. Benjamin had written a dissertation on the concept of *Kunstkritik* in German Romanticism, along with work on Goethe and the origins of German drama, long before he went to Paris; but this is not what university students read nowadays. The work

that he is famous for is essentially incomplete and eclectic, consists of essays and fragments, observation and anecdote. It is, in a very Humean sense, *empirical*, and adapted to the changes in sense perception.

(The jump is not all that large. Benjamin, like Baudelaire, is not nostalgic with regards to the romantic tradition. Like a good follower of Schlegel, he *links himself organically* to the artist in writing literary history and critique; this means living through the birth of the modern world.)

Now what did Baudelaire see that others didn't? Poor people had been around before, and people had hated their world before the industrial revolution. But 19th century Paris had something new to show. It was the first city to have gas light – and all that comes with it: activity after dark, shops open till ten, nightlife, *flânerie* in the arcades by gas light, but also a shadow zone where the light did not come. There were hashish, and tramways. High capitalism brought shop windows and all kinds of exotic stuff to fill them, everything to see and for sale; you could be a cosmopolitan living in Paris. But at some cost: there was hardly anything you did not have to pay for (including love), and most of the people you met would be strangers. There is something exciting about this, but it also strains your nerves to meet strange eyes all the time and not have anything to say – you don't talk to strangers in the modern world. There were outbreaks of cholera, and venereal disease withered. With the new modes of production the power balance changed, and there was fighting on the barricades every two decades or so to determine it anew. Baudelaire himself was probably on those barricades in 1848, showing his hands smelling of gunpowder and shouting *Il faut fusiller le général Aupick!* (Who was his stepfather; T.J. Clark translates it 'Up against the wall motherfucker'.)⁶

The city of Baudelaire was in constant change. It could not last: the alleys and arcades that he strolled were not fit for fast transport, ambulances, fire wagons, police patrols; the streets could not be cleaned adequately. After 1848, Benjamin quotes Du Camp, Paris began to get uninhabitable; a decade later, Baron Haussmann began the most rigorous urban reconstruction in human history, razing one-fifth of the city to make it up with the times. Most of *Les Fleurs du Mal* had been written by then (although it was revised) and Baudelaire did not live to see Paris shelled by the Prussian army – but he was certainly aware that he walked along fated streets. (Haussmannization, says Benjamin, killed the flâneur: the pace at the Grand Boulevard was much higher, and the crowd much more dense.) There was something about the sight of it that reminded of ancient times – and particularly of ancient ruins. Hence the double face of the artist in *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, who must extract some eternal beauty from the passing and fugitive human life, 'pour que toute *modernité* soit digne de devenir antiquité'.⁷ Hence also this antique model of the hero for the modern artist, and Baudelaire's list of 'historical dandies' including Caesar, Catalina, and Alcibiades.

'Baudelaire hat sein Bild vom Künstler einem Bilde vom Helden angeformt', writes Benjamin.⁸ But this is not a word Baudelaire himself uses. The language in which he describes Guys and Delacroix is martial: Delacroix is 'valorous' and 'brave', and Guys paints like a fencer, 'querelleur quoique seul, et se bouscalant lui-même'.⁹ But it does not yet describe a hero of our time. The heroic image that

Benjamin attributes to Baudelaire has more to do with his thoughts on the dandy – and as such, it is effectively Baudelaire’s self-portrait.

According to Benjamin, dandies emerged from the English merchant class, which had to deal with ever more frequent and unpredictable changes and disruptions as its trade network grew. The merchant had to keep up appearances on the Stock Exchange; the dandy, as a side product of mercantilism, practiced the art of keeping up appearances for its own sake. This analysis, of course, fits that of a ‘changed mode of perception’ under capitalism, of which the London Stock Traders were the forerunners. Dealing with shocks, for Benjamin, is essential to survive in the urban jungle, and the dandy and the modern artist have it in common that they find something sublime in it. But it leaves its traces: there is always something contorted or twitched about the dandy.



Look at the picture by Nadar. It is easy enough to imagine this man jotting down in his notebook things like ‘Le dandy doit aspirer à être sublime sans interruption; il doit vivre et dormir devant un miroir’¹⁰ - or like ‘Être un homme utile m’a semblé toujours quelque chose de bien hideux.’¹¹ But look closer: the dandy is badly in need of a hair cut. The coat is the same he wears on other pictures. Why? Because it is his only. He is under custody and high up in debt; he may already have contracted syphilis. In short, he is somewhere in between Pound and Rimbaud, bourgeois and vagabond. Now the point is that this does not quite diminish his heroic stance. Chased by creditors, it is hard to keep up appearances; but for Baudelaire, dandyism is not an immoderate taste for toilet and material elegance. ‘Ces choses ne sont pour le parfait dandy qu’un

symbole de la supériorité aristocratique de son esprit.’¹² For Baudelaire, dandyism is an ascetic religion, more despotic than the most severe monastic code. It is an *eternal* ideal; but what is modern about is in the aspiration for the sublime in the here and now. The dandy is not a hermit. Its historical model is the noble, and it is linked to the artist’s ‘brave’ and ‘valorous’ quest for an *artificial paradise*. As a dandy, then, Baudelaire is pretending to be a knight and a saint at the same time.

Now this is something Benjamin is most sceptical about. ‘Seine Liebe zur Dandyismus war keine glückliche’, he judges. ‘Er besaß die Gabe nicht, zu gefallen, welche ein so wichtiges Element in der Kunst des Dandys, nicht zu gefallen, ist. Was von Natur aus ihm befremden mußte zur Manier erhebend, geriet er so, da mit seiner wachsenden Isolierung seine Unzugänglichkeit größer wurde, in die tiefste Verlassenheit.’¹³ Still there is some sympathy in this judgement, even admiration. But Benjamin does not allow much for the cult: keeping up appearances, after all, is what we all do, it is part of the modern condition that people don’t *know* where you stand. As for the ‘sublime’, it is very

bourgeois to make a myth about artistic creation, since part of capitalism is in detaching the product from the production process. If there is something heroic about the artist's sufferings, so there is about the workers and the poor. The 'artist as hero', then, is a role among others: 'Denn der moderne Heros ist nicht Held – er ist Heldendarsteller. Die heroische Moderne erweist sich als ein Trauerspiel, in dem die Heldenrolle verfügbar ist.'¹⁴ Behind that role, there is only the isolated consciousness.

Still, Baudelaire was not merely 'keeping up appearances'. Benjamin would not have spent two hundred pages on *that*. He is, indeed, the first to form a consistent body of lyric poetry from the urban reality. In order to catch something 'sublime' in that, he had to develop a whole new set of images and figures. He writes poems on ragpickers, alcoholism, prostitutes, worn-out old workers, passers-by, and a blind. But all this doesn't lead him to realism, or solidarity. The beauty that he sees in it is grotesque: it goes together with poems on Satanism, exotic perfumes and pleasures, the exalted damnation of lesbian love, dancing with a skeleton, fucking a negro woman. (His own mistress, for that matter, was a half-blood.) There is nothing like redemption or nostalgia in these poems: Baudelaire's poetic does not allow for any paradise lost, or kingdom come. The sublime is artificial. The only paradise we can hope for is an artificial one, and it is only there for the sensitive few. For the wretched of the earth, in the shadows, there is only wine and suicide.

Killing yourself, after all, is not such a strange idea. Benjamin did it; Baudelaire attempted to; Proudhon, for that matter, started from a prize essay on the ballooning suicide rate. For the workers, reduced to the darkness of the factory, it was the only somewhat 'individual' mode of expression left. Now Baudelaire *was* an enthusiast of Proudhon, in the 1848 days; but he did not write poetry for the working class. What he took from Proudhon was the love of anarchy, and the idea that God is evil; but he was too deeply infected with the Catholic disease to believe in Man reconciled with Nature, or happiness in this world. Proudhon is only one side of Baudelaire's anti-politics. The other, darker side is Joseph de Maistre, the voice of catholic reaction: 'De Maistre et Edgar Poe m'ont appris à raisonner.'¹⁵ Pain is good; misogyny; original sin as a *necessary condition of thought*; the supremacy of the irrational – all that he 'learned' from De Maistre. *But* with a difference: there is no redemption. God who made this world is base and mean. With such a cosmology, obviously, you must be either numb or ascetic to live through the agony of it all. It takes a heroic effort, then, some kind of Nietzschean *amor fati*, to 'aspire for the sublime'.

There is more than one way of seeing 'two sides of the modern world'. The fringes are not only dirt and crime; those are problems for society to deal with. What is really at the margin – we may liberally read this into Benjamin – is the isolated consciousness. Now this is something that Baudelaire shares with Rimbaud, and Eliot, and Pound – and indeed, as far as Benjamin is concerned, with Modern Man in general. Baudelaire, it seems, embraces this condition passionately. He loves to hate the modern world; he is not too eager to change it. After all, he does not hate civilization; he hates *nature*.

Benjamin did not hate civilization either. But it had turned to the bad, it was rotten at the core; like a

good Marxist (Marx opens the book on Baudelaire) he wants to see the isolated consciousness freed, civilization and nature reconciled, alienation redeemed. In this scheme of events, Baudelaire unwittingly becomes a conspirator: he is smuggling grim reality into the sublime realm of poetry, breaking the wall between colloquial and lyrical words. ‘Baudelaire konspiriert mit der Sprache selbst’.¹⁶ In T.J. Clark’s analysis, ‘modernism’ means *the unsettling of meaning*;¹⁷ in a changing world, from an isolated consciousness, we have to determine what things mean for ourselves, against convention. (This is from Clark’s analysis of Manet’s *Olympia*, but it goes for Baudelaire all the same.) This seems closer to the spirit of Adorno; but it fits well to Benjamin’s strategy for unsettling society. Baudelaire, in the rhetoric of *Ein Lyriker im Zeitalter des Hochkapitalismus*, is not a leader in the front guard, he is a spy sent ahead of the troops, noticing all the weak spots in the capitalist arrangement, undermining foundations.

If this is a case for Art preparing a better world, it is a far more exiting one than ‘aesthetic education’. Ezra Pound writes in capitals: MAKE IT NEW. But Benjamin sees a far more intricate and covert scheme. In preparing ground for modern art, Baudelaire unites the noble arts of Bildung and conspiracy.

Baudelaire’s own scheme is somewhat different. There is nothing like a historical teleology behind his motives; but he *does* come up with an answer to the social question, long after he has abjured his ‘ivresse de 1848’. It is in a prose poem from *Le Spleen de Paris*, initially rejected as ‘unpublishable’ by the editor, titled *Assomons les Pauvres!*¹⁸ After a fortnight of reading during the 1848 days, his head buzzing with theories, his younger self chances upon a beggar, ‘ce sexagénaire affaibli’, holding out his hat – and has a sudden flash of insight:

“Celui-là seul est l’égal d’un autre, qui le prouve, et celui-là seul est digne de la liberté, qui sait le conquérir.”

So he leaps upon the aged ruin, hits and kicks him, bashes his head against a wall, beats him with a branch. The effect is marvellous:

Tout à coup – ô miracle! Ô jouissance du philosophe qui vérifie l’excellence de sa théorie – je vis cette antique carcasse se retourner, se redresser avec une énergie que je n’aurais jamais soupçonnée dans une machine si singulièrement détraquée, et, avec un regard de haine qui me parut de *bon augure*, le malandrin décrépît se jeta sur moi, me pocha les deux yeux, me cassa quatre dents [it is fiction, mind you!], et avec la même branche d’arbre me battit dru comme plâtre. – Par mon énergique médication, je lui avais donc rendu l’orgueil et la vie.

Alors, je lui fis force signes pour lui faire comprendre que je considérais la discussion comme finie, et me relevant avec la satisfaction d’un sophiste du Portique, je lui dis: “Monsieur, *vous êtes mon égal!* veuillez me faire l’honneur de partager avec moi ma bourse; et souvenez-vous, si vous êtes réellement philanthrope, qu’il faut appliquer à tous vos confrères, quand ils vous demanderont l’aumône, la théorie que j’ai eu la *douleur* d’essayer sur votre dos.”

Il m’a bien juré qu’il avait compris ma théorie, et qu’il obéirait à mes conseils.

There is a last line to it that Baudelaire himself erased: 'Qu'en dis-tu, Citoyen Proudhon?'

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Notes

¹ Taken from: Hugh Kenner, *The Invisible Poet: T.S. Eliot*, W.H. Allen, London 1960, p. 63. It recurs in: Hugh Kenner, *Notes towards an anatomy of 'modernism'*, in: E.L. Epstein (ed.), *A Starchamber Quiry. A James Joyce Centennial Volume, 1882-1982*, Methuen, London 1982, pp. 3-42

² *Les Illuminations*, 'Solde'.

³ *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, III.

⁴ *Gesammelte Schriften I.2*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1974, p.577

⁵ *idem*, p. 478

⁶ T.J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851*, Thames & Hudson, London 1973, p.171

⁷ *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, IV.

⁸ *GS I.2*, p. 570

⁹ *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, III.

¹⁰ *Mon Coeur mis à nu*, 5.

¹¹ *idem*, 9.

¹² *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne*, IX.

¹³ *GS I.2*, p. 600

¹⁴ *idem*.

¹⁵ *Fusées*, 7. Strange pair too.

¹⁶ *GS I.2*, p. 601

¹⁷ This is paraphrase, not a quote; but see *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his followers*, Thames & Hudson, London 1985, pp. 12, 79-80, 100

¹⁸ *Le Spleen de Paris*, XLIX; for notes see *Oeuvres complètes*, I, red. Claude Pichois, Gallimard (Bibliothèque de la Pléiade), Paris 1975, p. 1349. I have taken the example from Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois*.

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