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Modern Transitions in 19th Century Paris: Baudelaire and Renoir¹

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*Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville change plus vite,
hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel)²*

Charles Baudelaire
"Le Cygne"

Charles Baudelaire constructed his poetry through the eye of an observer on the streets of Paris during the mid-19th century, seeking the inherent beauty amongst the transitional urban spaces. The industrialization of urban Paris served as the theater for Baudelaire's enchanting and controversial verse, redefining poetry in a modern context. Baudelaire depicted images of contemporary Parisian life with a sense of urgency and constant renewal, striving to communicate a feeling of change and ephemerality. This subject would later be treated by the Impressionist painters who would employ the same concepts underlining transitional and modern urban spaces in the fixed media of painting. In this paper I compare the poem, "A une passante" from Baudelaire's "Tableaux parisiens" from *Les fleurs du mal* (1857) with *Les parapluies*, a painting by Auguste Renoir, (1881-1886) in order to discover the parallel emergence of modernity in Paris through the textual and later the visual. Within the framework of Baudelaire's definition of modernity in his essay, "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," and in terms of the industrial landscape and the contrasts of exteriority and interiority, I analyze these works of fixed art forms to explore the dichotomy between conceptions of modernity and its representation.

"A Une Passante"

A new facade of Paris was the result of sweeping architectural changes: the landscape had become modern. Baron Hauss-

mann was hired by Napoleon III to reconstruct Paris between 1850 and 1860 with the aim of opening up the streets by eliminating many smaller neighborhoods to make way for large boulevards. He doubled the size of Paris, providing a new city better equipped for industry and transportation. However, 350,000 workers were removed from their homes in the city center, resulting in an even greater distancing from the middle class; but ironically these new open spaces served to better conceal the existence of the different classes. In *The Painting of Modern Life*, T.J. Clark explains: "Class exists, but Haussmann's spaces allow it to be overlooked" (75). The new Paris was a representation of modern life, founded upon the anonymity of industry and deeper separation of the classes.

Baudelaire would observe this newly transformed Paris from afar, contemplating the effects of modern industrialization. In "A Une Passante" the poet mourns the loss of pre-industrial Paris while equally appreciating its new modern identity. In his definition of modernity in "Le Peintre de la vie moderne," Baudelaire explains that art consists of two forms: the eternal and immutable, and the ephemeral, fugitive and contingent: "La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l'art, dont l'autre moitié est l'éternel et l'immuable." Thus, when the poet or artist contemplates this new modern landscape, he sees the Old Paris and the New Paris together; a combination of the myth of an eternal Paris and the changing landscape of a modern Paris that together form a unique tableau. Baudelaire paints this industrial cityscape by finding beauty in uncommon places: whether on a horizon full of railroads and gray skies or inside a bustling crowd in Haussmann's newly reconstructed streets of Paris.

Not only did Baudelaire observe the new urban landscape of Paris from afar as a horizon of industrialization, he equally explored the city streets as a *flâneur* to gain an up-close perspective from within the crowds. The 19th century *flâneur* would wander the streets of Paris, absorbing the spectacle of the city. With Haussmannization, Paris took on a new modern form, a shape that was visible and tangible. The opening up of the city created the pos-

sibility to easily observe other pedestrians; the arches and the boulevards offered perfect scenes for a spectator seeking entertainment in the throngs of city dwellers. Strolling became a fashionable pastime; one could easily get lost in the bustling streets, however Baudelaire and other *flâneurs* were able to maintain their sense of self through artistic voyeurism. They were a part of the crowds, yet they conserved their individuality by focusing on the specific, concrete moments that separated them from the anonymity of the masses of people. In the poem, “A Une Passante,” Baudelaire describes one of these fleeting moments like a photograph—a new invention at the time. This brevity again points to Baudelaire’s definition of modernity: the ephemeral feeling of the present, a manifestation that can vanish in an instant.

This poem depicts a brief moment witnessed across a deafening street, a “rue assourdissante,” in Paris. The narrator is strolling in a screaming crowd of people who “hurlait,” but his *flâneur* gaze is drawn to one woman, a face that emerges from the anonymous crowd. She is somber in appearance, “en grand deuil” with a “douleur majestueuse,” contrasting with the din of the street. Here we encounter a moment of tranquility, a break in the racket that guides us to the mournful silence of this woman. The liveliness of the shrieking crowd in the street opposes the associated death mourned by this woman. The narrator appreciates her subtle movements: “d’une main fastueuse/ Soulevant, balançant le feston et l’ourlet.” The words “soulevant” and “balançant” have a dynamic and rapid rhythm, but they flow readily with the “l” sound separating the syllables. This sonority as well as the flowing sensation of these words echoes the word “agile,” used to describe the woman’s movement. She gingerly lifts her skirt, allowing a peek at her statue-like leg. She is a work of art that becomes animated, or rather a statue transformed into a woman as in Ovid’s myth of Pygmalion. With this simple allusion the poet creates an entire story from a mere fleeting moment caught in the constant and impersonal movement of the streets of Paris.

The last two verses of the second stanza change in tone,

creating a new level of contrasts and reversals: “Dans son oeil, ciel livide où germe l’ouragan,/ La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.” Here we rediscover the dichotomy between the exterior and the interior: the difference between observing modern Paris from the outside and experiencing the crowd from within. The woman’s exterior—her appearance and movement—has already been noted. Now the poet allows us to see into her interior, “dans son oeil.” The similar sonority between the words “deuil” from the first stanza and “oeil” of the second underlines this contrast: “deuil” refers to the woman’s exterior while “oeil” refers to her interior. Gazing into her eyes, the narrator can distinguish another world far from the crowd on the deafening street: a blend of emotions that will soon erupt like a storm, “l’ouragan.” Yet, from another perspective, “deuil” could also refer to the internal emotional suffering of the woman while “oeil” relates equally to the physical external instrument of viewing, giving this linguistic relationship multiple interpretations.

The narrator, who describes himself as “buvais, crispé comme un extravagant” finally brings us to the direct object of his action: “la douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.” He is reduced to a paralyzed spectator, dumbfounded, and tense: he thus switches roles with the woman and becomes the statue himself. The action of drinking implies consumption—he arrests the sweetness and pleasure of this woman’s interior. He ingests it for his own gain to the point where the joy and pleasure are realized and then extinguished, leaving only the empty aftermath of fleeting love. The poet thus creates the metaphor of an intense sexual experience, analogizing the feeling of emptiness after the “plaisir qui tue” as if this love were akin to a random intimate moment in a crowd of people. By imagining an intense manifestation of love in the context of this brief encounter, the poet contrasts the agitation of the anonymous crowd with the intimate instant of meaningful eye contact.

Baudelaire exits this contemplative moment of “le coup de foudre” with several breaks and exclamations in the third stanza. “Un éclair” is followed by an ellipsis, “puis la nuit” by a question mark, and then a dash. This verse revisits the moment of encounter,

but in metaphorical terms: the flash of this vision in the street is cut immediately by the crowd. As the lightning is followed directly by the dark night, this vision, barely caught, disappears just as quickly. This ephemeral moment brings us back to the idea of the rapidly changing landscape of Paris of which its past is already forgotten. This “fugitive beauté” of Paris has fled, represented by this somber woman mourning the loss of her past. Continuing with the variation of punctuation, the poet ends the stanza with a question: “Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l’éternité?” This form of second person address indicates a level of familiarity felt by the narrator for this woman. With this question he clings to the apparition, he does not want to see this moment end. Patrizia Lombardo further explains this moment in her book, *The Three Paradoxes of Roland Barthes*: “Baudelaire’s *passante* is the powerful, concrete image of the ephemeral and the eternal as being constantly connected. She is the unknown, impersonal, ‘fugitive beauty’ to which the poet addresses his everlasting question” (134). He cannot but hope to find her again in the future, knowing that he will never relive this unique moment.

This punctuation variation continues into the fourth stanza with three exclamations. These exclamation points from verse 12 echo the grammatical ruptures in verse 9. The word “ailleurs” and the three breaks indicated with the exclamation points show a distancing, also exhibited by the words “bien loin d’ici!” This verse, apart from its multiple exclamations, has various tones of futility (“trop tard!”), frustration (“jamais”), and uncertainty (“peut-être”), agitated by multiple exclamations. These ideas can equally be found in the following verse: “Car j’ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais.” It is a mutual ignorance; she flees, he departs, and neither will follow the other. The stanza ends with an apostrophe: “O toi que j’eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!” indicating the narrator’s regret of a possible love that was lost. He is frustrated that he missed his one chance to know “le grand amour.” On one hand, this moment has left him and he is powerless to bring it back. On the other hand, the city, like the “passante,” will no longer exist for him so it will be of little consequence: “le vieux Paris n’est plus (la forme d’une ville /

change plus vite, hélas! Que le coeur d'un mortel).” This verse from Baudelaire’s poem, “Le cygne,” also of the section entitled “Tableaux parisiens,” refers to the same sensation of ephemerality: the old city has gone, escaping its denizens. T.J. Clark explains: “Ever since 1830... men and women had believed that their Paris was disappearing and a new one springing up complete upon its ruins” (66). Just as the poet has experienced a break from this fleeting moment of intimacy with the “passante” in the street, he equally experiences a break from his past, from the city he once knew.

Parapluiies

An interpretation of Pierre Auguste Renoir’s painting, *Parapluiies* (1881-86), reveals the same themes of exteriority and interiority and crowd dynamics in the context of modernity as discussed in the analysis of “A Une Passante.” Renoir represents a scene of a crowded street in the rain, with two figures looking directly at the spectator: a girl on the right, holding the hand of her mother, and a “grisette”—a young working class woman—on the left, who seems alone in the crowd while fixing her eyes on the viewer.

We can see a similar contrast between the exterior and the interior of this painting that was explored in “A Une Passante.” In this painting, the crowd is covered with umbrellas, protecting its exterior from the rain and other external influences. But several faces are revealed at the interior of this painting, the “grisette” and the little girl on the right. These are the only figures of the painting to interact with the spectator; they do not hide themselves behind umbrellas. The exterior, represented by the word “deuil” in Baudelaire’s poem, and which ties itself to the word “oeil” indicating the interior, are present again in this painting. Renoir uses bright colors throughout the work, but he paints the principle figure, the “grisette,” with somber colors: shades of gray and black that represent mourning. “L’oeil” also appears in the young woman’s face, revealing a melancholic expression with a hint of pain in her eyes. Like the woman in “A Une Passante,” the “grisette” allows us to discover her interior emotions by fixing her eyes on the spectator.

This young woman again brings to mind the agile and noble statue from the poem. To begin, she seems tranquil and calm, with a light quality of movement, much like the subtle movements of the “Passante”: “soulevant, balançant.” The “grisettes” swings through the crowd with her large basket as she lifts her skirt. However, unlike the “Passante,” we do not enjoy a glimpse of her statue-like leg. Her almost imperceptible movement contrasts with the great agitation of the crowd; the artist has captured her in a fleeting moment, a snapshot in time. This calm and somber figure offers a chance for the spectator to detach from the bustling crowd where one can only discern layers of pedestrians indicated by umbrellas, hands, and heads.

This idea of detachment brings us to the dynamic of the crowd. The “grisettes” separates the viewer from the crowd, yet none of the figures that make up this crowd are interacting with each other. The mother is the only figure to acknowledge another person in this scene, besides the little girl and the “grisettes” who engage with the spectator. Here we discover a sense of anonymity among the people in Paris: the paradox of the individual who is alone yet surrounded by other people. Related to this idea of detachment is the rupture discussed in verses 9 and 12 of “A Une Passante.” There is a similar agitation in the crowd marked by visual breaks, or ruptures. First of all, the figures are cut off as they would be in a photograph; for example, the girl on the right has no face and her back is truncated by the edge of the canvas. The spectator must imagine that her body extends beyond the frame of the painting: the scene is thus enlarged, another new concept introduced by the Realists of the 19th century. In her book, *Realism*, Linda Nochlin underlines this idea:

Sudden diminution of scale and radical cropping are equally characteristic of photography and of advanced pictorial representations of city streets... [this] adds to the sense of completely literal confrontation of contemporary reality. (168)

The umbrellas also interrupt the spectator’s view in addition to the

figures in the crowd that overlap each other. For example we can see neither the hand nor the face of the man behind the “grisette.” These breaks in the painting do not allow the spectator to clearly view all of the figures, a characteristic of modern urban scenes. T.J. Clark states: “Places where people are hard to make out, their gestures and expressions unconvincing, their purposes obscure...it is hereabouts that the city can be seen most sharply” (48). Baudelaire and Renoir were conscious of the structure of the crowd: in order to recreate the sensation of existing in the masses it was necessary to include the many disruptions and overlapping layers in order to portray an overall sense of agitation.

Conclusion

In their poetry and art, Baudelaire and Renoir employ new concepts surrounding the modern city of Paris including the anonymity of the crowd, the fleeting moment, the many breaks and disruptions of a modern urban scene, and the dichotomy of observing from an exterior perspective and gaining access to a view from the interior. This movement from the exterior to the interior reveals a self-consciousness of the work, providing a transition that explicitly reveals the work’s production. The poet and the artist absorb the exterior world and in turn recreate it with their own perspectives. How does this self-consciousness of the work apply to its material form? The act of writing a text leads to an immutable product, which thus remains eternally in its fixed form. This paradox of subject and material is also relevant in the fixed media of painting. Baudelaire acknowledges this “eternal and immutable” side of art in “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” yet how do we reconcile the problem of expressing modernity in a form that opposes its very definition of mutable transitions and ephemerality? Once a poet has chosen his words, they are fixed in printed form on the page. Once a painter has finished his painting, the brushstrokes remain unmovable on the canvas. In order to come to terms with the ostensibly static material form of a text or a painting and its philosophically opposing “modern” subject matter we must acknowledge the way these works are

appreciated by the reader and the viewer. By nature, the *consumption* of poems and paintings is ephemeral: poems are generally short texts, able to be read in a brief moment; one can analogously absorb a painting in an instant. And each reading and viewing of the works is unique: whether the reader or spectator is experiencing the text or the painting for the first time or for the hundredth time, a new perspective is born. It is the fresh and changing experience of the consumer of the text and the painting that allows these works to embody the definitive concepts of modernity espoused by Baudelaire's definition. The eternal and immutable aspect is found in the materiality of the work, while the ephemeral and contingent is found in its appreciation by the reader or spectator. Yet, conversely, this definition of modernity is not self-conscious: this definition is not transitional, fugitive, or contingent. These ideas of Baudelaire have endured in our conceptions of modernity since the 19th century. According to his own definition, Baudelaire's theory cannot itself be "modern" since his ideas have escaped the transitional, ephemeral and contingent conditions that define modernity.

Notes

¹ Original paper entitled "Transitions modernes: La poésie et l'art de Paris chez Baudelaire, Monet et Renoir," includes comparative analyses of Baudelaire's poem, "Paysage," with Monet's paintings, *Le Boulevard des Capucines* and *Impression: soleil levant*.

² Charles Baudelaire. *Les fleurs du mal*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1961.

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