



In Baudelaire's time, thinkers were obliged to commit an 'infinite sin'. . . : to interpret infinitely, without a primum and without an end, in unceasing, sudden, shattered, and recursive motion.\" This infinite interpretation, he argues, was the new Parisian atmosphere—and it was Baudelaire's personal territory: \"The real modernity that takes shape in Baudelaire is this hunt for images, without beginning or end, goaded by the 'demon of analogy.' \"

The art critic straddled the divide between waning Romanticism and emerging Realism, watching the painter Eugène Delacroix after his creative peak but not living long enough to see Édouard Manet reach his full artistic potential. While there may never have been an artist who coincided with the poet's desire to describe *modernité*, Baudelaire addressed the unfolding of a new way of life in a dense urban environment of the \"crowd\" and noted the impact of industrial technology upon society and art. By the 1840s, not only was Romanticism over but the art being produced by the salon system was also becoming increasingly irrelevant. The excuse for academic art was that it portrayed the \"heroic\" life of the ancient world, but, for Baudelaire, it was necessary that artists to be of their own time. But what did that \"their time\" mean? The industrial revolution came slow and late to France, not in small part because many of the technological changes had been developed in the homeland of their hated enemy, England. While England was already adjusting to industry, France, by mid-century, was just beginning to cope with the transition from an agricultural society to an urban and industrial one. It is possible to see the process of artistic adjustment to these changes in the paintings of Jean-François Millet and Gustave Courbet. Millet presented the countryside as frozen in time while Courbet showed the class tensions even in small villages. Meanwhile, the mainstream salon artists chose to ignore the present in favor of the historical past. In Baudelaire's time, few artists had the ability to see their age in all its uniqueness. To be fair, the cultural changes caused by the Industrial Revolution were so extensive and far-reaching that it was easier to look away. The problems for the artists during this long transition period were, first, content of art—contemporary or traditional? and second, what new artistic techniques would be appropriate for the new age?

More than anyone, Baudelaire articulated both the new content and the new way of expressing the new content. In doing so, he impacted many of his contemporaries and influenced later generations of writers and poets who would be known as Symbolists. As an art critic who had to work the salon beat, it was his job to discern a trend or a concern with each annual exhibition. Begun as a topic in his essay on the Salon of 1845, one of his most important salon statements was penned in 1846. In this early essay published as a section of \"*The Salon of 1846*\": \"*On the Heroism of Modern Life*,\" Baudelaire argued that modern life was as heroic as ancient life and that men in frock coats were as brave in their own time as the Roman gladiators were in the arena:

It is true that this great tradition has been lost, and that the new one is not yet established. But what was this great tradition, if not a habitual everyday idealization of ancient life—a robust and material form of life, a state of readiness on the part of each individual...? Before trying to distinguish the epic side of modern life, and before bringing examples to prove that our age is no less fertile in sublime themes than past ages, we may assert that since all centuries and all peoples have had their own form of beauty, so inevitably we have ours. That is the order of things...But to return to our principle and essential problem, which is to discover whether we possess a specific beauty, intrinsic to our new emotions...The pageant of fashionable life and the thousands of floating existences—criminals and kept women—which drift about in the underworld of the great city; the *Gazette des Tribunaux* and the *Moniteur* all prove to us that we have only to open our eyes to recognize our heroism. For the heroes of the Iliad are but pigmies compared to you—who dared not publically declaim your sorrows in the funeral and tortured frock coat which we all wear today!—you the most heroic, the most extraordinary, the most romantic and the most poetic of all the characters that you have produced from your womb!

The "hero" is male but not just any male. The poet's hero is not the contented businessman who had prospered under the Citizen King, Louis Philippe, but the hero of *la bohème*, a cultivated and well-educated man who was also an outsider: the dandy. "...a dandy can never be a vulgar man," Baudelaire said. The dandy wears the new uniform, the *habit noir*, the black suit, with distinction, proclaiming his proud middle class status. And yet the dandy keeps himself apart from the *bourgeoisie*, the newly rich and powerful class, by moving with the "crowd," where classes mixed and mingled, without ever being part of the crowd. Being a dandy, meticulously well-dressed, standing aside and watching the stream of life flow past, is a strategy of self-defense in an urban landscape. Although he moves in cadence with the ebb and flow of pedestrians, all of whom have destinations and purpose, a dandy, par excellence, is also a man who is able to walk the city, free of ties and responsibilities. Baudelaire is the new man, the *flâneur*, the detached man who strolls the side streets, peruses the new arcades and watches the ostentatious carriages pass down the wide boulevards, made for spectacle. At the same time the arcades were ushering in a new form of looking, the art and craft of window-shopping, a new nocturnal Paris sprang into being with the introduction of gaslight in the 1820s. Here, in the darkness, is where we find the poet's world of marginal people who live a "floating existence," and it is here where we find the female counterpart to the dandy, the prostitute, the only kind of woman allowed to go abroad at night. Modernism and its heroes is not for the respectable nor for the faint-hearted.

Baudelaire's modernity necessitates that the artist be a "man of the world.... the spiritual citizen of the universe" (7) who inhales direct experience and synthesizes it in his work, not someone who ignores the power of transitory moments and the eternal beauty contained in immediate, everyday experiences. Monsieur G. embodies this "passionate spectator" (9), the eternal "convalescent" (7), the "man-child" (8), the "pure pictorial moralist" (9)—the ardent "observer of life"—that Baudelaire considers essential for an artist in modernity. Baudelaire appreciates what he considers Monsieur G.'s ceaseless fascination with life, as evidenced by the two-part "intense effort of memory" and "intoxication of the pencil" (17) that characterize his artistic ventures. His frenzied, "barbarous" (15) manner, borne of the dread of forgetting—the "fear of not going fast enough, of letting the phantom escape before the synthesis" (17)—represents his commitment to translate his impressions—not necessarily always concrete—of lived experience onto the canvas before his instincts give way; his method exemplifies Baudelaire's exhortation for immediacy, context and excitement in artistic endeavors. Baudelaire expatiates on Monsieur G.'s depictions of the Crimean War and the "pomp" and "pageantry" (22) of official Turkish functions (along with his portrayal of soldiers, dandies, women and carriages) and argues that they illustrate an acute awareness and appreciation of the fleeting moments that constitute the lived experience of the time. To further his argument about Monsieur G.'s capturing of what he refers to as the "idiomatic beauty" (25) that is unique to each century/age/era, he points specifically to the characteristic solemnity, boldness and "martial nonchalance" (29) that soldiers in Monsieur G.'s drawings embody; the "historical personality" that his dandies personify, their "unshakeable determination not to be moved" promptly apparent (29); the "immediately obvious" (35) distinctions of social status that his depictions of women represent; and the "physical attitudes of the rich" (39) that are apparent in Monsieur G.'s detailed depiction of carriages and his portrayal of the demeanor of slaves.

Baudelaire makes a forceful entreaty to reconsider the notion of natural beauty, which stems from his argument that we need to "review and scrutinize whatever is natural" (32) because according to him, beauty and nobility stem from rational calculation—"Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art" (32); to view the decorative impulses in human beings as "effort[s] in the direction of Beauty" (33); and to refrain from hiding the cosmetic enhancements which fashion affords. After all, according to him, "all [fashions] were once justifiably charming," (33), an assertion which speaks directly to their use as conducive to the expression of idiomatic beauty. What renders his argument problematic is that it rests also on the notion that a woman is "obliged to adorn herself in order to be adorned" and that she needs to "make divine" her "fragile beauty" (33).

Baudelaire understands modernity as that which is in the eternally changing and present, the 'ephemeral,' and always in transition (13). Following this conception, and due to this time-sensitive nature of modernity, Baudelaire asserts that every great master has his own modernity in accordance with his particular epic (13). Monsieur G. is important for Baudelaire's concept of modernity because he serves the as the backdrop upon which Baudelaire exemplifies his take on modernity through the analysis of his artistic production.

In this piece, Baudelaire discusses at great length Monsieur G.'s obsessive quest to capture the present (12), through sketching actions in the moment, as well as his deep 'child-like' curiosity not merely for art, but rather for the world at large (7). When composing his drawings, Monsieur G. attempts to capture the movement of the scene in which he has integrated himself, a fitting example of the fleeting and ephemeral definition of modernism to which Baudelaire adheres.

Beyond movement, Monsieur G. attempts to emphasize the specific lighting of the moment in which he views the object (15). Instead of composing from a model, which is by nature a static, motionless object, Monsieur G. relies instead upon his memory of the moment in which it was captured, in order to remain faithful to the entire experience, movement and context (16). Monsieur G. departs from traditional classical aesthetics, which uphold and epitomize the beauty of Nature, focusing instead on inclusive social representation, the urban space, and the momentum of the now. Monsieur G.'s artistic strategies are all connected by their attempt to capture that which is present, fluid, and fleeting, allowing Baudelaire to fluidly illustrate his understanding of modernity.

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Baudelaire deliberately chooses themes depicted by Monsieur G. which emphasize the cultural and historical aspects germane to his understanding of modernity, while striving to capture the *Zeitgeist* of artist's era. Themes such as the Eastern War (18-19) and the pomp and circumstance encountered in Turkey including the military men, prostitutes, and women dressed in elaborate garb, all allow Monsieur G. to artistically appropriate that which was relevant to his era and artistic experience. Exposing the historical and cultural elements depicted by Monsieur G.'s work is an effective tool for Baudelaire as it allows him to illustrate the function of the vital time-sensitivity of modernism.

Baudelaire argues that both fashion and cosmetics are not to be despised as fleeting and frivolous attempts at approximating beauty, but rather as possessing an aesthetic value in their own right. Both are expressions and signs of the time, and should be understood and appreciated as such. With regard to social types and forms and in order to illustrate the changing conditions of modernity, Baudelaire highlights Monsieur G.'s portrayal of the prostitute and the dandy, two figures who live in the moment, existing for the day, rather than for deep social reflection. Monsieur G. mentions that dandyism is a dying craft as France's democracy solidifies, noting that dandies are most prevalent in periods of political transition, which is also indicative of a perceived social change. What is essential in this new form of cultural representation is the new assessment of beauty, which transitions from the often-static space of classical models and natural landscapes, to socially varied and inclusive subjects, and the constantly moving, chaotic and multi-layered space of the everyday, opened up by modernity.

Baudelaire elaborates modernity through the figure of "Monsieur G." and his artwork. Modernity, as described by Baudelaire, is the representation of the present, and Monsieur G. does this by capturing "the fugitive, fleeting beauty of present-day life" (Baudelaire 40). Baudelaire emphasizes the difference between *general* and *particular* beauty, describing the former as that which "is expressed by classical poets and artists," while the latter is "the beauty of circumstance" (1). Particular beauty, that is beauty which has the "essential quality of being [of the] present" (1), contains within it the "moral and aesthetic feeling of [its] time" (2). Modernity captures what is temporally present and philosophically relevant to the culture and society within which art is being produced. However, these snapshots of "reality," in their effort to be present as modernity, are unavoidably historically contextualized. While Monsieur G.'s artwork is beautiful as it reflects the age's aesthetic sense, it also simultaneously needs to be eternally beautiful, and as such is embedded in a temporality that acknowledges both antiquity and the present's inevitable ascendance to antiquity.

Amongst the many reasons Baudelaire utilizes the figure of Monsieur G. to illustrate modernity, the latter's technique in drawing best captures modernity's temporally impossible goal of representing the present. Baudelaire argues that Monsieur G. draws "with such a degree of exaggeration which aids the human memory... [and give it] so forceful a prompting" that the spectator is able to clearly translate Monsieur G.'s impression of the world into his

own imagination (15). For Baudelaire, Monsieur G. seeks to capture the present with such speed and intensity, and so is able to transcend the temporal and subjective challenges that representation creates. Baudelaire cites Monsieur G.'s drawings from Spain, Bulgaria, and Crimea of soldiers and battles as containing "therein the deeds and doings of [the] soldiers" in such a way to accurately represent them (21).

Even the figures of the courtesan and the common prostitute, as members of the particular present of the artist, can be represented with beauty, because "quite apart from natural, and even artificial, beauty, each human being bears the distinctive stamp of his trade, a characteristic which can be translated into physical ugliness, but also into a sort of 'professional' beauty" (37). Here it is important to distinguish between beauty and aesthetics. Baudelaire explains earlier that Monsieur G. captures particular beauty because he "is able to express at once the attitude and the gesture of living beings, whether solemn or grotesque" (18). For Baudelaire, the cosmetic element of reality coupled with the accurate representation of reality allows for low culture, and not just aristocratic society and manners, to be encapsulated by modernity.

Baudelaire, a child of the Enlightenment, praises cosmetics as an embellishment of nature, because "Nature teaching us nothing, or practically nothing" (31). For Baudelaire and his contemporaries, nature, as the progenitor of crime, cannibalism, and patricide, must be tempered with "reason and calculation" (32). Man's reasoned thoughts on philosophy and good beliefs in religion are the source of beauty. Baudelaire then argues that similar to how "Nature [is] a bad counselor in moral matters... [and] Reason [is] true redeemer and reformer," nature can be made more beautiful by external finery (32). Through cosmetics, women can "surpass Nature" and can appear as something "superior and divine" (33). In the same way, modernity does not intend to capture the natural reality, but rather the constructed reality, which, in its very definition, surpasses the natural, for Baudelaire.

This improvement of nature further problematizes Baudelaire's conception of modernity: if Monsieur G.'s artwork is beautiful because it captures the improvement of nature through human reason, it is also recognizing in its "snapshot" of the present the historical process by which nature was improved.

Baudelaire writes when a moment in history has become shorter; that is to say, he is aware that the ages he mentions, those of which he writes that "each has had [its] own modernity," (12) are passing quickly, everchanging. His awareness is doubtless heightened if not simply caused by the rapid evolution of industry around him, moves to constantly increase speed and efficiency changing both the moments of life around him, and swiftness with which those changes come. Hence his appreciation for such a man as Monsieur G., observer and subsequent expresser of life, is easily understood though Baudelaire's concept of his changed age. In a new Paris and, as his descriptions of Turkish festivals and the Crimean war suggest, a new world, "there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist" (4). Monsieur G.'s furious, "violent" sketching in the late hours of the evening, (11) his seemingly manic behaviour in an attempt to swiftly recreate what has swiftly and already happened, to re-create the moment already created, well mirrors in an attempt to keep up with the frantic march in industry. The effect, though, is to create beautiful objects (moments? paintings not painted but sketched?), beautiful for their union of what Baudelaire sees as two crucial components of beauty: the eternal, "abstract and indeterminate beauty," (13) and the component he names "modernity". This second piece he defines "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent," (12), the very unique and fleeting beauty of the moment of life in which the abstract eternal beauty resides, but without which that eternal component cannot be grasped.

Baudelaire's described interplay between eternal and ephemeral beauty may be used to understand his description of artists such as Monsieur G. as painters "of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity that it contains" (5). Though such a phrase might initially strike as contradictory, the idea that the abstract beauty of the eternal found throughout life impregnates every moment, every modernity, allows us to understand that those "suggestions of eternity" are simply the notes of abstract beauty that play across life, those which the painter of modernity must draw out from the moment in order to re-create the full beauty of the created moment. For such a task Monsieur G.'s technique is, as described, very well suited. Briefly put, his method boils down to this: he paints a moment in but a moment. Working with incredible intensity and speed, almost as if he might forget the moment he tries to restore, he in fact draws closer to it by taking almost only so long to portray it as the actual moment itself did. Additionally, by focusing in on the memory of that moment, instead of trying to portray the image in all its detail, potentially getting bogged down and losing the fleeting moment itself and thus the access to beauty eternal, he manages to imbue his characters with "astonishing vitality," (18) despite the simple and swift composition, or, as discussed above, likely because of it. We see in Baudelaire's description of G.'s sketches of the soldier an excellent example of the eternal beauty drawn out of the ephemeral, exemplified by the "those glittering costumes in which every government is pleased to dress its troops" (24). These which have changed again and again, uniquely modern in every age, and in our present modernity in fact lack all of the glitter he describes, instead a mottled mixture of browns and tans. Yet his description of the infantry officer remains true to his modernity.

Baudelaire distracts us with Monsieur G., but doing so demonstrates even the transience of the subject, as the subject of his prose is subjugated by the prose itself, and its revelation of its author as the potentially true subject. In

a world rapidly changing, when the physical dissipation of proletariat life and confidence in history, culture, politics, and spirituality are increasingly obvious, creating tension that produces no release, modernity appears to be an uncontainable, indefinable, and always re-presenting representation of a world remembering that it wants its memory erased.

Baudelaire, like many inhabitants of the changing city, felt the stresses of the transition. The city he had been born in was vanishing before his very eyes, crumbling under the determination of urban renewal and bending to the will of Georges Haussmann. Former inhabitants were being pushed out and a new group of aspiring writers, poets and artists moved into slums, scratching out a living before Haussmannization eliminated the buildings. According to one of Baudelaire's greatest biographers, the German writer, Walter Benjamin, Baudelaire was part of Bohemia, *la bohème*, the new *avant-garde*, the alienated, the aspiring artists in waiting. A Marxist writer, Benjamin linked Baudelaire to the territory of the dispossessed by quoting Marx on the precarious position of this social class: **...Their uncertain existence, which in specific cases depended more upon chance than on their activities, their irregular life whose only fixed stations were the taverns of the wine dealers—the gathering places of the conspirators—and their inevitable acquaintanceship with all sorts of dubious people place them in that sphere of life which in Paris is called *la bohème*....the whole indeterminate, disintegrated, fluctuating mass which the French call *la bohème*....**

By the time of the Second Empire, the chasm between rich and poor had stranded a number of middle class people on the wrong side of prosperity. **"It is bourgeois society that Baudelaire holds guilty of the suffering of the post-aristocratic period, and not the least that art has gone to rack and ruin, that poets and artists like himself now belong to the *déclassés*,"** John E. Jackson remarked in 2005. Baudelaire actually came from a well-to-do family, but he was terminally unable to manage his finances. His family put him on a budget with an allowance, which he always overspent—usually on clothes—causing him to go into debt. Being reduced to a child was highly irritating to the poet, who was always at pains to remove himself from the class that fed him. Thus Baudelaire wrote as an outsider, not an insider, taking advantage of an unprecedented expansion of the press. But the press, while expanded, was not free or uncensored, as he learned with the publication of *Les fleurs du mal* in 1857, a scandalizing collection of poems (some of which were withheld from the public) for which Baudelaire was prosecuted. Over the past two decades of the early nineteenth century, new opportunities had emerged for writers, such as Baudelaire, who was able to find his unique voice as a poet and to carve out a position as an observer and witness, a stance that appeared in his essays and in his art criticism, where he mixed art and social observations. This poet was a character composed of unabashed contradictions who had no problem in proclaiming, **"Any newspaper, from the first to the last is nothing but a web of horrors..."** As a writer (who wrote for newspapers) he tried to defend traditional art making against the onslaught of technology, mainly photography, while, at the same time, rushing out to be photographed many times.

Baudelaire, by the famous photographer [Nadar](#) (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon) (1855-8)

In "The Salon of 1859," there was a section, "The Modern Public and Photography," where Baudelaire complained about the clash between art and photography:

Poetry and progress are like two ambitious men who hate one another with an instinctive hatred, and when they meet upon the same road, one of them has to give place. If photography is allowed to supplement art in some of its functions, it will soon have supplanted or corrupted it altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the multitude, which is its natural ally.

For Baudelaire, modernity encapsulates the "ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent half of art" which serves to elucidate the "eternal and the immutable" (12); it entails observing and engaging the transient to gauge, understand and appreciate the perpetual. Because he believes in the "fantastic reality of life" (15) and the power of originality borne of immediate experience, Baudelaire argues against the imposition of historical detail to contemporary art, and claims that such inclusion and representation is indicative of an artist's "laziness" (12). He does, however, concede that a study of the antique for "pure art, logic and general method" (14) is acceptable (though he does not clarify what "pure art" represents, and what its study entails). Consequently, he deems it essential for art to "distill" the "phantasmagoria" from nature (11), for the artist to study the moment—to become "an observer of life" (15)—and attempt to extrapolate its essence through his medium.

"And perhaps never as in Baudelaire, in the graphs of his nervous reactions, was that situation so manifest." This, concludes Calasso, is the secret of Baudelaire's continuing shock value: "It is not something that concerns the power or the perfection of form. It concerns sensibility."

Baudelaire was the original dharma beatnik. "Prior to all thought, what is metaphysical in Baudelaire is the sensation, the pure comprehension of the moment."

His work guided the symbolist movement, which became the dominant school of modernist poetry, and inspired the Decadent and Aesthetic movements.

Baudelaire's literary criticism provides useful insight into the precarious nature of the mid-nineteenth-century literary world, showing us 'reputations being made or unmade' ([Lloyd 2006: 174](#)). Baudelaire writes, for example, of how Pierre Dupont 'a été une grande gloire' (was a huge celebrity) in the wake of the 1848 revolutions, but how, by 1861 the poet-chansonnier 'est négligé plus qu'il ne convient' (is more overlooked than he ought to be) (1975–6: 169; vol. 2). In his commentary on Victor Hugo, meanwhile, Baudelaire reflects with some suspicion on the extent of Hugo's literary celebrity. In claiming that Hugo's genius is 'vraiment prodigieux' (truly prodigious), he draws attention to the overblown techniques used by the author: 'L'excessif, l'immense, sont le domaine naturel de Victor Hugo' (The excessive, the immense, are the natural domain of Victor Hugo) (1975–6: 137; vol. 2).

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Baudelaire's critique is not levelled at these critics' overall judgement of Banville, but rather at how the ebullient literary marketplace was prompting collective opinion-makers to make a judgement so early on in a career.

Yet Baudelaire's poems remind us that the association between artist and individual becomes ever more protean during the French nineteenth century, with the emergence of a 'preponderance of blurred identities' ([Finch-Race and Gosetti 2018: 56](#)). Nicolas Valazza has also demonstrated how in Baudelaire's later verse in particular 'la collaboration y assum[e] une fonction primordiale' (collaboration takes on an essential function) ([Valazza 2018: 96](#)), as the poet worked collaboratively with his publisher Auguste Poulet-Malassis and the engraver Félicien Rops. For Daniel Finch-Race and Valentina Gosetti, mid-nineteenth-century French poetic writing is marked by a shift towards a 'heterogeneous collective' which calls into question the integrity of individualised identities ([Finch-Race and Gosetti 2018: 56–7](#)). This shift towards the heterogeneous collective enables the de-essentialising of markers of identity that include, for example, gender, class, or wealth ([Chatterjee 2015: 17–18](#)). This means that to evoke the collective enterprise of a creative team in building a new work of art derived from a pre-existing literary source is also to talk about the inherent difference that marks each individual involved, the author included. Where Finch-Race and Gosetti call this a 'heterogeneous collective', Ronjaunee Chatterjee, after Rosemary Lloyd ([2002: 94](#)), alludes to the distinctive individual who cannot be understood within a generalised group ([Chatterjee 2015: 20](#)). This is an important conceptualisation of the collective as understood through Baudelaire's writings, chiming with the view of poetry's receptivity 'to identifications with others' which, as Gretchen Schultz has argued, enables male poets of this era to cut through the bias of Romantic lyric poetry that had long operated on 'the opposition of male subjectivity and female objectification' ([Schultz 2008: 93](#)). The collective becomes necessarily individuated rather than subsumed into a standardised subjective position or a unified collaborative vision.

The shift from a small-scale collaboration between Buchen and Schoen to a larger collective project also marked a shift in working with Baudelaire's poetry, to encompass a wider network of contributors. This creates a set of contrasting responses to Baudelaire, which are encapsulated in the group's own statement about why they chose to set Baudelaire to music in this project:

Because he would be so irritated. Because he might be charmed. Because the synesthetic imagery of his poems lend themselves so singularly to the conjoined media of scrolled paintings unfurling to music. *Live* music, it is important to add. There is a touch of vaudeville and cabaret in Baudelaire. He tended to go big or go home. Home to his mother.

Because he invented the term ‘modernity’ and even now no one quite knows what it means. Because he wrote a poetry of immersion perfectly suited to the transience and Now-ness of song and of the Ever-Moving scroll. Because we never had a proper goth phase. Sex and death! For all these reasons, and for the true one that remains just out of our grasp.¹⁰

The *Baudelaire in a Box* creative team adopt a playful interpretation of Baudelaire which does not resolve into one coherent vision. This refusal to create a singular vision is mirrored in the form that the song-and-moving-image episodes take. Theater Oobleck produce something that combines elements of musical theatre and live music gig but resists the label of either art form. They build a series of shows that use different configurations of musicians at different points in time (typically between one and eight performers on stage at a given moment), shaped by different responses to Baudelaire in each particular song. Songwriters and translators collaborate with the singers and instrumentalists, in line with Theater Oobleck’s mission: ‘All our works are created and developed by members of the Oobleck ensemble, working in concert to create a collaborative vision without an overseeing director.’¹¹ Theater Oobleck’s ‘collaborative vision’ does not, however, resolve into a unified response to Baudelaire’s poetry. The vision is upheld, instead, through the loosely constructed shared performance aesthetic, with porous boundaries between what is on- and off-stage, giving audiences access to the creative team ‘working in concert’. Staging is simple and sets are minimal, typically comprising a plain black or white backdrop, with spotlights on the musicians and the accompanying crankies. Buchen himself hand cranks the scrolls during the performances in a deliberately visible, crunkingly audible, and overtly low-tech fashion. While the vocalists typically use a microphone and some of the instruments are amped, the music is otherwise raw and unfiltered. The musicians play a range of instruments such as accordion, bass, clarinet, guitar, piano, saxophone, trombone, and ukulele, using combinations designed to fit each specific song. There is no consistent musical style for each of the 165 songs, with the group drawing inspiration from folk and country to klezmer and metal, shaped by each particular poem text. Common threads running through the *Baudelaire in a Box* episodes therefore remain minimal in a project that has been dubbed ‘an act of extravagant artistic idiosyncrasy’ ([Adler 2011](#)).

Baudelaire in a Box is presented through performances which repeatedly challenge conventions of artistic production while never seeming to quite break with convention altogether. The songs are clattery and noisy and messy and imperfect, turning away from the norms of pop music or musical theatre but not doing away with those norms altogether. At the heart of *Baudelaire in a Box* is a kind of honest everydayness, felt and heard through the recordings as much as through the live performances which are neither polished nor over-engineered. Because the project is so multifaceted, yet contained within a collective performance aesthetic that makes the principle of ‘working in concert’ as visible and audible as possible, the team are able to develop highly inventive interpretations of Baudelaire.

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A clear example of one of Theater Oobleck’s unconventional takes on Baudelaire’s poetry is their setting of ‘L’Avertisseur’ (The Warner), a poem first published in the *Revue européenne* in 1861 and reused by Baudelaire as one of his *Nouvelles Fleurs du mal* in *Le Parnasse contemporain* of 1866 ([Baudelaire 1975–6: 140](#); vol. 1). An unusual sonnet, the octosyllabic poem places the tercets in the middle, enclosed by the quatrains. The English translation prepared by playwright and actor Mickle Maher for *Baudelaire in a Box* adopts a new title (‘The Drag’), ignores the sonnet form, and turns it into a twelve-line text which draws on Baudelaire’s imagery but does not repeat it exactly.¹⁴ The second stanza is mostly suppressed, producing a song which, in the words of the *Chicago Reader* reviewer, offers a ‘slangy, comic treatment of “L’Avertisseur”’ ([Adler 2016](#)):

If your heart is not a total fake
Inside it sits a yellow snake
Saying all you do is a MISTAKE
Just try and make some sexy time
With some stone fox, yeah, NEVER MIND
The Snake says CHECK YOUR PRIVILEGE, MAN
Go on make babies, plant some trees
Hammer out your poetry
The Snake says MEH, WHATEVER, MAN
Do what you can
Until your final sucking gasp

There's no let-up from that FUCKING ASP. [15](#)

Decadent literature from this period typically features lavish descriptions and florid language, along with a shameless disregard for the literary and artistic conventions of the time.

Baudelaire emphasized above all the disassociated character of modern experience: the sense that alienation is an inevitable part of our modern world. In his prose, this complexity is expressed via harshness and shifts of mood.

The constant emphasis on beauty and innocence, even alongside the seamier aspects of humanity, reinforce an existentialist ideal that rejects morality and embraces transgression. Objects, sensations, and experiences often clash, implicitly rejecting personal experiences and memories; only operations of consciousness (e.g., revulsion and self-criticism) are valued and even exalted. Indeed, for Baudelaire, the shock of experiencing is the act of living.

Baudelaire's talent for poetry aside, his genius was to jolt the reader into this mindset, to feel what he wanted to feel and experience what he wanted to experience.

From the struggles of a poor writer and the presentation of how society views the writer (poems like "Benediction" "The Albatross"), the Hausmann Parisian restoration ("The Swan"), the description of erotic love ("The Balcony") to the poems where one indulges in addictive substances, the scandalous praise to all the rebels ("The Litanies of Satan" "Cain and Abel") and death as the final destination of life ("The voyage") – Baudelaire touches almost every topic. Finally, I present one of my favorite poems from the collection (along with "Correspondences"):

The Balcony

*Mother of memories, queen of paramours,
Yourself are all my pleasure, all my duty;
You will recall caresses that were yours
And fireside evenings in their warmth and beauty.
Mother of memories, queen of paramours.*

*On eyes illumined by the light of coal,
The balcony beneath a rose-veiled sky,
Your breast how soft! Your heart how good and whole!
We spoke eternal things that cannot die —
On eyes illumined by the light of coal!*

*How splendid sets the sun of a warm evening!
How deep is space! the heart how full of power!
When, queen of the adored, towards you leaning,
I breathed the perfume of your blood in flower.
How splendid sets the sun of a warm evening!*

*The evening like an alcove seemed to thicken,
And as my eyes astrologised your own,
Drinking your breath, I felt sweet poisons quicken,
And in my hands your feet slept still as stone.
The evening like an alcove seemed to thicken.*

*I know how to resuscitate dead minutes.
I see my past, its face hid in your knees.
How can I seek your languorous charm save in its
Own source, your heart and body formed to please.
I know how to resuscitate dead minutes.*

*These vows, these perfumes, and these countless kisses,
Reborn from gulfs that we could never sound,
Will they, like suns, once bathed in those abysses,
Rejuvenated from the deep, rebound —*

These vows, these perfumes, and these countless kisses?

— Roy Campbell, *Poems of Baudelaire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1952)

Hymn to Beauty

O Beauty! dost thou generate from Heaven or from Hell?
Within thy glance, so diabolic and divine,
Confusedly both wickedness and goodness dwell,
And hence one might compare thee unto sparkling wine.

Thy look containeth both the dawn and sunset stars,
Thy perfumes, as upon a sultry night exhale,
Thy kiss a philter, and thy mouth a Grecian vase,
That renders heroes cowardly and infants hale.

Yea, art thou from the planets, or the fiery womb?
The demon follows in thy train, with magic fraught,
Thou scatter'st seeds haphazardly of joy and doom,
Thou govern'st everything, but answer'st unto nought.

O Loveliness! thou spurnest corpses with delight,
Among thy jewels, Horror hath such charms for thee,
And Murder 'mid thy mostly cherished trinkets bright,
Upon thy massive bosom dances amorously.

The blinded, fluttering moth towards the candle flies,
Then frizzles, falls, and falters—"Blessings unto thee"—
The panting swain that o'er his beauteous mistress sighs,
Seems like the Sick, that stroke their gravestones lovingly.

What matter, if thou comest from the Heavens or Hell,
O Beauty, frightful ghoul, ingenuous and obscure!
So long thine eyes, thy smile, to me the way can tell
Towards that Infinite I love, but never saw.

From God or Satan? Angel, Mermaid, Proserpine?
What matter if thou makest—blithe, voluptuous sprite—
With rhythms, perfumes, visions—O mine only queen!—
The universe less hideous and the hours less trite.

Flowers of Evil was an entirely serendipitous impulse check-out from my local library. I can only imagine that what caught my eye was the title - *Flowers of Evil* - who could resist? So I pulled it from the shelf, opened it up at random, read a few verses, and said to myself "This isn't bad."

Not only was it "not bad" but it was extraordinarily good; good enough that Baudelaire has joined the list of authors I'll pay money for.

It's random events like finding authors whose work "speaks to me" in some way (Maugham, Le Guin, Chekhov, etc.) that keep me from being an out-and-out atheist. After all, it's strongly suggestive that there's at least a guardian spirit of *some kind* looking out for me. At the risk of offending or titilating some, Baudelaire's passions and obsessions mirror my own. I'm particularly taken with his ability to combine carnality with spirituality, often in the same poem. A short example that springs to mind is "Correspondences" (this and later translations are from the Oxford World Classic's edition, James McGowan, translator):

Nature is a temple, where the living
Columns sometimes breathe confusing speech;

Man walks within these groves of symbols each
Of which regards him as a kindred thing.

As the long echoes, shadowy, profound,
Heard from afar, blend in a unity,
Vast as the night, as sunlight's clarity,
So perfumes, colours, sounds may correspond.

Odours there are, fresh as a baby's skin,
Mellow as oboes, green as meadow grass,
- Others corrupted, rich, triumphant, full,

Having dimensions infinitely vast,
Frankincense, musk, ambergris, benjamin,
Singing the senses' rapture and the soul's.

Or there's \"Conversation\":

You are a pink and lovely autumn sky!
But sadness in me rises like the sea,
And leaves in ebbing only bitter clay
On my sad lip, the smart of memory.

Your hand slides up my fainting breast at will;
But, love, it only finds a ravaged pit
Pillaged by a woman's savage tooth and nail.
My heart is lost; the beasts have eaten it.

It is a palace sullied by the rout;
They drink, they pull each other's hair, they kill!
- A perfume swims around your naked throat!...

O Beauty, scourge of souls, you want it still!
You with hot eyes that flash in fiery feasts,
Burn up these meagre scraps spared by the beasts!

And any man (or woman) who writes poems to his cats is going to be on my A List by default. From section II of \"The Cat\" comes these verses which describe my young friend Oberon to a T (not to be confused with an earlier poem of the same name that begins, \"Come, my fine cat, to my amorous heart\"):

From his soft fur, golden and brown,
Goes out so sweet a scent, one night
I might have been embalmed in it
By giving him one little pet.

He is my household's guardian soul;
He judges, he presides, inspires
All matters in his royal realm;
Might he be fairy? or a god?

When my eyes, to this cat I love
Drawn as by a magnet's force,
Turn tamely back upon that appeal,
And when I look within myself,

I notice with astonishment
The fire of his opal eyes,

Clear beacons glowing, living jewels,
Taking my measure, steadily.