

“Half Art”: Baudelaire’s *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*

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but he is readily and intentionally identifiable. The “action,” as Baudelaire calls it, of his subject’s “incognito” is essential to the elevation of a form of art that, in conventional terms, is not proper art at all. This “painter of modern life” is pointedly not a singular, named genius whose work conforms to classical conventions and is confined for tasteful inspection within the precincts of a museum. Artists, in the usual sense, are debunked as “village minds [*des intelligences de village*],” or, just to make the point quite plain, as “hamlet heads [*des cervelles de hameau*]”³; whereas M. G. is “cosmopolitan,” a “man of the world,” someone who spends his time in “the capital cities of the modern world” (, 558).

Guys makes his appearance in the essay not exactly in his own right, but in the role of illustration or elaboration of a manifesto. Starting on aesthetic and art-historical, as opposed to urban or modern grounds, Baudelaire rejects art’s confinement to established, and would-be permanent, media and modes of display:

This is a reflection on the, of
established and historical
beauty, in opposition of
artistic and absolute beauty; of
historical beauty, necessity of a
double comparison, even though the
impression is undeniable... The
beauty of the eternal, in a
element, of an individual
difference, of a delicate
element, of a delicate, in
all of these, the fact, the
action... I challenge anyone
to say that beauty does not
contain the element. (, 549-550)

The scene is set far from the natural variations of seasons, landscapes, or living things; nature is neither an image of stability against the confusions of social change, nor in itself a model of constant growth and change. Unlike either of these,

Half art *par excellence*, they were part of the present reality that the art of the modern should represent.⁷

But still, there is a sense in which Baudelaire's radical add-on to the paradigm of art can be seen as a device for having it both ways. The second, new half of art is supposed to differ from the first by its transitoriness of both subject matter and artistic medium. The art of modern life is characterized by its impermanence, valued as such. And yet a wish for continuance is present, too, from the start. The present is present, says Baudelaire, in all art, not just the art which is avowedly the art of the everyday, ephemeral in its subjects and its media. But the present thereby hitches a ride to eternity, which has the effect of downgrading its own opposite value— as fleeting, as passing— that the essay is promoting. Guys is differentiated from an ordinary *flâneur* because he is not interested only in “the fleeting pleasure of circumstance,” of what's around. Rather, Baudelaire goes on, “it is a matter of disengaging from fashion the poetical in the historical that it may contain, of pulling out [*tirer*] the eternal from the transitory” (, 553). In this and other formulations, the value of the transitory lies in its having an extractable element of the other half, the eternal, which continues to predominate or to be the ultimate form or matter of art.

It is interesting, with regard to the representation of the transitory, that Baudelaire was not interested in the artistic and representational possibilities of the then new medium of photography; in fact, he loved to hate it, describing what he called

or new understandings of past times, in such a way that the art of the past would be constantly made to matter in new ways by being reinterpreted or re-presented in relation to altered norms or possibilities of engagement. Yet Baudelaire's essay itself, like any enduring work of art or criticism, has continued to be retranslated or transplanted into new contexts and idioms. Such retranslation, it could be argued, is the very condition of the survival or perpetual renaissance of any work of art or criticism; it is how, if not why, art comes or continues to matter.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ An earlier version of this essay, written originally for a one-day conference on the subject of "Why Art Matters," in honor of Malcolm Bowie, was published in the journal *Pa gap h* 34 (1) (March 2011): 1–11; used here by permission of Edinburgh University Press.
- ² The weekly *Illustrated London News* had a circulation of 300,000 in 1863; the figure for the (daily) *Time*, which was the dominant serious British newspaper, was just 70,000.
- ³ Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la mode moderne* (1863), in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Marcel A. Ruff (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), ch. 1, 551. All further chapter and page citations are to this edition, and will be noted parenthetically in the main text; translations are mine.
- ⁴ There is a related complaint against a false historicism in art in Henry Fielding's 1749 novel *Tom Jones*: "Vanbrugh and Congreve copied nature; but they who copy them draw as unlike the present age as Hogarth would do if he was to paint a rout or a drum in the dresses of Titian and of Vandyke. In short, imitation here will not do the business. The picture must be after nature herself. A true knowledge of the world is gained only by conversation, and the manners of every rank must be seen in order to be known"; quoted from John Bender and Simon Stern's edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 648–649. Unlike Baudelaire, however, Fielding's primary target is not those who consider the present an unaltered subject

There is also in Stendhal, as in Baudelaire, an appeal to the speed of change— which Stendhal specifically associates with recent history: “In historical memory, no people has ever experienced a more rapid or total change in its customs and its pleasures than the change from 1780 to 1823; and they want to give us still the same literature!” (302).

- ⁵ The first edition of Darwin’s book was published in 1859. Its running evolutionary argument is directed against the idea of natural history proceeding by means of sudden leaps or shifts or obliterations, and in favor of a countermodel of constant, infinitesimal change, without a clear teleology of development— what Darwin calls “a slowly changing drama.” Without large or decisive events, this drama is anti-tragic: “The old notion of all the inhabitants of the earth having been swept away at successive periods by catastrophes is very generally given up. . . . On the contrary, we have every reason to believe . . . that species and groups of species gradually disappear, one after another, first from one spot, then from another, and finally from the world.” See Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 254, 256.
- ⁶ Another reference to Lazarus’s resurrection occurs in Baudelaire’s poem “Le Flacon.” In his moment of reemergence into life, Lazarus appears with the stench of a corpse several days old: “Lazare odorant déchirant son suaire.” In this poem concentrated on a power of smell that is stronger than either matter or death, the odorous Lazarus comes over very differently from the Lazarus of *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. The reawakening of “Lazare, lève-toi” is clean by comparison; it is aural and visual, to do with response and recognition. (In the analogy, the dead man hears the words; the figure who rises again can be seen to be the image of Lazarus.)
- ⁷ At the time of Baudelaire’s writing, posters were far more prominent on city streets than they are now: this was their heyday, before the regulation that kept and keeps them off many external surfaces. In Paris, the words “Défense d’Afficher: Loi du 29 juillet 1881” (“No Bill Posting: Law of 29 July 1881”) may still be read, inscribed into the walls of many buildings around the city: as though ephemeral images and writing could only be prevented by permanent writing in the very place from which they have been prohibited.
- ⁸ Baudelaire, “Le Public moderne et la photographie” (from “Salon de 1859”), in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Ruff, 395– 396.
- ⁹ See *The Notion of Anamorphosis and Cinematography*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 792– 802.