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Walter Benjamin states in *The Writer of Modern Life* that the key success of Charles Baudelaire's poetry is found in his desire to find beauty in the "previously untouched strings of the instrument whose sound has never been heard before."¹ Celebrated for his innovative style and often shocking subject matter, Baudelaire is renowned for his various interactions with the dregs of city life. These inhabitants of the city, no matter how base, degraded, or corrupted, are a neglected source of poetic inspiration. To the average Parisian pedestrian, these inhabitants represent an unpleasantness that is to be ignored or repressed; never would they seek the beauty in, or comprehend the value of, these subjects. In his "Salon de 1846," Baudelaire remarks of the abundance of inspiration that is present in his city, making the claim, "*La vie parisienne est féconde en sujets poétiques et merveilleux. Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l'atmosphère; mais nous ne le voyons pas.*"² The common inability to perceive and appreciate the value of these subjects stems from the tendency to ignore and suppress many of the darker or more sinister aspects of city life. Urban women of poverty, corruption, indulgence, and other representations of degeneracy and degradation are all included under Baudelaire's banner of the "*merveilleux*." Baudelaire's individual

¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, (Boston: Harvard U, 2006) 145.

² Charles Baudelaire, "Salon de 1846," *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, (London: Penguin, 1972) 107.

"Parisian life is rich in poetic and wonderful subjects. The marvelous envelops and saturates us like the atmosphere; but we fail to see it."

connections with these assorted female figures provide the grounds for his exploration of the city and its innumerable crowds. Feminine representations become important points of isolation from the deafening multitudes of the city, and Baudelaire determines an essential aesthetic and creative value in these representations of the feminine.

The appreciation of these figures exemplifies Baudelaire's larger, overarching aesthetic—an original aesthetic “born out of opposition to [an] idealist system,”³ according to Michael Brix. Baudelaire's dissatisfaction with the prevailing perception of beauty only found in “the beautiful, the true, and the good” moves him to pursue an aesthetic that encompasses the antithesis of “[this] triad of pure ideas.”⁴ The aesthetic is grounded in Baudelaire's celebration and illumination of the more perverse aspects of humanity, reveling in the product and correlation of *all* things – depravities and entrancements weighing in equal importance. The city becomes the location for his aesthetic to take form, and as a poet Baudelaire becomes saturated and immersed in the marvelous and symbolic environment of the urban. Lois Boe Hyslop writes that Baudelaire's poetry attempts to “lay bare not only *a* soul in a large city, but also *the* soul of a large city—”⁵ a soul with an indispensably material form. His ultimate quest is to subsume a broad array of stimulations into an aesthetic that is rooted in the correspondence of all facets of humanity and the city. The degenerative feminine figure, a dominant motif in Baudelaire's poetry, demonstrates itself as a key component in the culmination and attainment of this aesthetic. While debased and impure in both their essence and representation, the women inspire the poet to explore and determine the

³ Michael Brix, “Modern Beauty versus Platonist Beauty,” *Baudelaire and the Poetics of Modernity*, Ed. Patricia A. Ward, (Nashville: Vanderbilt U, 2001) 8.

⁴ Brix, “Modern Beauty,” 5.

stimulations that comprise his uniquely modern aesthetic. They are able to generate a revolutionary concept of beauty in their degradation and degenerative state.

The Symbolic City

The abstract entity of the city is the symbol that encompasses and houses all the major aspects of Baudelaire's aesthetic. Its urban landscape is the domain of prostitutes, beggars, hags, and displaced women. As William Sharpe states, they are "the disintegratory forces of urban life"⁶ that Baudelaire utilizes as points of interaction with the cacophonous metropolis. The poet's focus is on the sensual stimulations of the urban environment and the corruption and decay that it both contains and yet eschews. The feminine is positioned as a vital component and a protest to this resistance of the wicked, perverse, and sinister. Baudelaire is the vessel, processing the visions, sensations, and stimulations that the city provides. In "Salon de 1846" Baudelaire declares that there is immense beauty in "*Le spectacle de la vie élégante et des milliers d'existences flottantes qui circulent dans les souterrains d'une grande ville, – [en] criminels et filles entretenues.*"⁷ This view of beauty in the sinister and perverse "criminals and prostitutes" is a distinctive quality that the urban environment of a city possesses. It could be any "great city," in size or repute, where base individuals walk the street, where extreme wealth and extreme poverty exist beside one another, where the strange and the familiar battle for prominence.

⁵ Lois Boe Hyslop, *Charles Baudelaire Revisited*, (New York: Twayne, 1992) 84.

⁶ William Sharpe, *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Williams*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U, 1990) 40.

⁷ Baudelaire, "Salon de 1846," 106.

"The spectacle of elegant life and of the thousands of floating existences which circulate in the underworld of a great city – [in] criminals and prostitutes."

The symbol of the city is fundamentally linked with Baudelaire's aesthetic, and his poetry thrives in the grimy demimonde of nineteenth century Paris. As William Franke writes, "In aesthetics the idea of the symbol has tended to imply an intrinsic affinity with what is symbolized (to the point of *being* it, at least in part) and often the fundamental unity of all things – all things being reflected in the symbol as in a monad."⁸ The city then serves as microcosm of Baudelaire's larger aesthetic, a place where the tension of binaries gives rise to a terrible but undeniable beauty – a beauty that exemplifies his aesthetic and his poetic goal to *épater la bourgeoisie*.⁹ The tension of binaries "brings to the fore the oppositions that urban life and writing render most intense: self and Other, male and female, the known and the unknown, order and chaos, individual and crowd."¹⁰ A common home to these elements and sensations, the city breeds, harbors, and fosters the kind of inspiration upon which Baudelaire thrives; spleen fractures ideal in the urban environment and it is most evident in his interactions with the feminine. It is the changing nature of the city and the static tendency of its physical and moral decay that allows this aesthetic to propagate.

Baudelaire and the *Artiste Démolisseur*

While mid-nineteenth century Paris stands as a city in the midst of transition and structural evolution, historical background can only provide a limited context for the larger ideas that Baudelaire illuminates through his body of work. Although the extensive work orchestrated by Baron Georges-Eugène Haussmann during his tenure as a civic

⁸ William Franke, "The Linguistic Turning of the Symbol: Baudelaire and His French Symbolist Heirs," *Baudelaire and the Poetics of Modernity*, Ed. Patricia A. Ward, (Nashville: Vanderbilt U, 2001) 15-16.

⁹ "shock the bourgeoisie".

¹⁰ Sharpe, *Unreal Cities*, 12.

planner between 1852 and 1870 did see, as Donald Olsen writes, “the fundamental character of the city utterly [transform],”¹¹ Baudelaire’s work is not bound by these structural and historical confines. As a Parisian poet who exists and composes his definitive works (most notably *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1857 and *Le Spleen de Paris* in 1869) during this period of rapid destruction and reconstruction of the physical city, Baudelaire is indeed subject to the influence of such urban destabilization and displacement. Photographer Charles Marville was commissioned by Haussmann to capture visual documentation of “old Paris” before and during its reconstruction. His images depict the narrow lanes, crumbling buildings, and cramped streets that Baudelaire mourns (particularly in “Le Cygne”). A photograph such as “Rue Tirechappe”¹² denotes a decaying and deteriorating Parisian lane that is slated for demolition; connotatively, the image suggests a corresponding physical danger or moral degradation—it is the type of place where Baudelaire’s prostitutes, courtesans, and morally corrupt women would dwell. The wide, tree-lined boulevards that come to replace “Rue Tirechappe” offer no dark, shadowed corners. For Baudelaire, the role of the city extends beyond this notion of simply a Paris in physical transition. It is not about the “evolution” of Paris (since evolution implies historical advancement or betterment), but rather the organic tendency of an entity, physical body, or even of a city, to fall into decay. Haussmann’s efforts sought to counter this decay with his massive reconstruction and modernization of Paris, yet Baudelaire finds a productive and artistic dissonance in this struggle against the inevitability of degeneration.

Benjamin writes that at his peak of power and influence, Haussmann declared himself “*artiste démolisseur*”¹³ as he toiled to drag Paris up from the narrow streets and

¹¹ Donald Olsen, *The City as a Work of Art: London, Paris, Vienna*, (New Haven: Yale, 1986) 44.

¹² Charles Marville, “Rue Tirechappe,” photograph, 1860-70, getty.edu.

¹³ Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 43.

shadows of antiquity into the light of modern day. The artistry of Baudelaire's connection to Paris transcends the influence of this *artiste démolisseur* and ultimately seeks to display the reaction of poetry from the vision of the whole – the entirety of the urban landscape in what Hyslop calls the “fearful, grotesque, sinister, or farcical” beauty that can be found in a “great city [containing] living monstrosities.”¹⁴ Baudelaire absorbs the stimulations that the city harbors by reveling in the human rubble of this changing city. While Haussmann may call himself *artiste démolisseur*, his work, for Baudelaire, is partial: Baudelaire is at once *artiste démolisseur* and the creator and renewer of the city. Baudelaire finds the true presence of beauty through the feminine figures that must exist in this transitory environment; he is *artiste de la démolition*.¹⁵

“Le Cygne” and the City of Change and Immobility

An appropriate poetic response to the flux of the city is the poem, “Le Cygne”, from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The poem captures the destabilized voice of a poet who is positioned between two feminine figures and the escaped swan that yearns for the waters it once knew. Four figures are present in the poem, with the poet finding himself represented in the swan who “*sur le sol raboteux traînait son blanc plumage*.”¹⁶ The swan, a creature revered and respected for its graceful movements in water, is removed from its domain and forced to walk inelegantly on the dirty city streets, “*baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre*.”¹⁷ The process of decay and regeneration is evident in the dust that stains

“demolition artist”

¹⁴ Hyslop, *Charles Baudelaire Revisited*, 85.

¹⁵ artist of the demolished.

¹⁶ “dragged his white plumage over the cobblestones” (I, 19)

¹⁷ “bathing his wings in the sifting city dust” (I, 21)

the white plumage of the swan and in the absence of a “*lac natal*,”¹⁸ the purity of the plumage is corrupted by the city’s tinge, and the swan must wear it as a mark of the susceptibility to corrode in this fusion of dirt and ether. Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel writes that, as well as embodying the alienation of the poet to a poetic release, the swan also serves as “the symbol, not only of a dead city, but of chaotic Paris, both beautiful and grotesque.”¹⁹ The physical city does not stand as a static entity, and the dust, debris, and “*bric-à-brac*”²⁰ that surround the poet and taint the swan reflect the urban environment as a place of decay.

Two feminine figures serve as the point of juxtaposition with the poet and his swan. Andromache, wife of the slain Hector in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, is the first evocation of the feminine and the initial spark of contemplation that prompts further consideration: “*Andromaque, je pense à vous!*”²¹ Baudelaire remarks how the widow had once cried tears that filled a river, resembling the Simios in her native Troy; the tears have since subsided, and the unnamed body of water is now merely a stream – a “*triste miroir*”²² of its former self. Andromache is contrasted with a distinctly modern representation of the degenerative feminine body in Baudelaire’s image of the sickly, consumptive *négresse*. Enjuto-Rangel also makes the claim that Andromache and the negress present the painful and eternal flux of the city, since “modernity is constantly reinventing itself, [and] is always marked by the past and what it evades. With the evocation of Andromache, Baudelaire seems to be signaling the antiquity of modernity.”²³ The negress is a contemporary representation of an outsider, a displaced figure much like Andromache in

¹⁸ “home lake” (I, 22)

¹⁹ Cecilia Enjuto-Rangel, “Broken Presents: The Modern City in Ruins in Baudelaire, Cernuda, and Paz,” *Comparative Literature* 59.2 (2007): 143.

²⁰ (I, 12)

²¹ “Andromache, I think of you!” (I, 1)

²² “sad mirror” (I, 2)

²³ Enjuto-Rangel, “Broken Presents,” 142.

Troy, the swan walking on the street and the poet who states, “*Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville/Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel)*”;²⁴

Benjamin writes of “Le Cygne” in *The Arcades Project* that the poem “has the movement of a cradle rocking back and forth between modernity and antiquity.”²⁵ Indeed, this motion and the depiction of Andromache and the negress suggest that the realm of beauty is not a domain of romance, but one of pain and suffering. The condition of the negress is sickly, and this woman, adrift in the dirty city, yearns for her exotic homeland:

Je pense à la négresse, amaigrie et phtisique
Piétinant dans la boue, et cherchant, l'oeil hagard,
Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique
Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard;
*À quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve*²⁶

While her body has degenerated and fallen into an emaciated state, she aids artistic productivity in the creation of this poem. In her yearning is an ache for an *idéal that is fractured by a fall back to the muddy streets of urban environment – the fall allows Baudelaire to appreciate the tension of longing*. The pain of displacement and the tension of change are represented in the poet, the swan, and their juxtaposition against the feminine figures. In the decay and recreation of the urban there is a transcendence of both time and geography that positions Baudelaire’s aesthetic in the “change and

²⁴ “Old Paris is gone! (The form of a city/Changes more quickly, alas! Than the human heart);” (I, 7-8)

²⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Boston: Harvard U, 1999) 356.

²⁶ “I think of the negress, emaciated and consumptive,/Trudging through muddy streets, seeking with a fixed gaze/The absent coco-palms of splendid Africa/Behind the immense wall of mist;/Of whoever has lost that which is never found” (II, 41-45)

immobility²⁷ of both the city and the feminine. The symbolic nature of the city allows Baudelaire to indulge in the negative and tragic aspects of his aesthetic. Enjuto-Rangel claims that the speaker “hints that the city has its own mortality, its own capacity to disappear,”²⁸ yet this notion comes forth as a testament to the poet’s ability to subsume the tension of these sensations into a poetic response to the changing city with its perpetual propagation of pain.

Establishment of “Urban Nature”

For Baudelaire, the symbolic city assumes a new form, that of urban nature. When a poem such as “Paysage”²⁹ positions the poet “in an attic overlooking the city, [in] which he describes a series of realistic and impressionistic images,”³⁰ Hyslop determines the scope of this vantage point. The poem initiates a macroscopic vision of the city that is defined as the replacement of the pastoral landscape. René Galand writes that this rejection of “the ideal models presented by classical antiquity”³¹ situates the urban as the center of focus and defies the romantic tendency to invest importance in the beauty of rural scenery. The city is established as the essential landscape – a landscape that “[represents] another nature more constant with the spirit and temper of the artist.”³² “Paysage” sees Baudelaire blend the vision of clock towers, lamplight, marble fountains, and threads of smoke with the cyclical change of the passing of seasons as he initiates this substitution of the pastoral with the urban. The organic qualities of decay, regeneration,

²⁷ Victor Brombert, “Baudelaire: City Image and the ‘Dream of Stone,’” *Yale French Studies* 32 (1964): 103.

²⁸ Enjuto-Rangel, “Broken Presents,” 143.

²⁹ “A Landscape”

³⁰ Hyslop, *Charles Baudelaire Revisited*, 72.

³¹ René Galand, “Baudelaire, Theoretician of Modern Art,” *French Faculty Scholarship* (1999): 2)

³² Galand, “Baudelaire, Theoretician of Modern Art,” 3.

and cyclical momentum expressed through the changing of the seasons are emulated in the city: “*Je verrai les printemps, les étés, les automnes;/Et quand viendra l’hiver aux neiges monotones,/Je fermerai partout portières et volets.*”³³ The urban environment is prone to the same cycle of seasons as the pastoral landscape, yet the allure of the city is in its protests and impositions on this romantic form of nature. Baudelaire’s aesthetic relies on the emphasis of the city over the pastoral; the urban eclogue situates the city in the position of focus.

“Paysage,” though apparently a departure from Baudelaire’s usual bold and confrontational style of composition, foregrounds beauty in the elevation of the poet above his city as he, in William Sharpe’s words, “rejects the Wordsworthian belief in the countryside as the source of true [beauty], moving instead directly from the city to a psychologically induced pastoral vision.”³⁴ “Salon de 1846” presents the importance of this action, as Baudelaire writes, “*la première affaire d’un artiste est de substituer l’homme à la nature et de protester contre elle.*”³⁵ The city is itself a substitute and an imposition on the natural landscape, and it provides the severe “protest” that Baudelaire seeks to capture through his aesthetic. “Paysage,” though dissimilar to more shocking pieces that better exemplify Baudelaire’s poetic catalog, achieves the goal of reestablishing nature as a form that is humanly shaped. The “*elle*” that Baudelaire references is a feminine personification of nature, with the masculine imposition represented in “*Les tuyaux, les clochers, ces mâts de la cite*”³⁶ in “Paysage.” For Baudelaire, the artist is a masculine figure and his correspondence is the feminine. In

³³ “I shall see the springtimes, the summers, the autumns;/And when winter comes with its monotonous snow/I shall close all the doors and shutters” (13-15).

³⁴ William Sharpe, *Unreal Cities: Urban Figuration in Wordsworth, Baudelaire, Whitman, Eliot, and Williams*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U, 1990) 41.

³⁵ Baudelaire, “Salon de 1846,” 95.

“The first business of an artist is to substitute man for nature, and to protest against her.”

³⁶ “The clock-towers like spars against the sky” (7).

depicting the phallic force of the towers and their contrast against the sky, Baudelaire asserts a value in the importance of gender investment in this process of replacement.

Victor Brombert argues that the urban environment must be Baudelaire's poetic landscape because "the city combines change and immobility. The landscape of stone, made by man, stands as though in defiance of the 'natural' landscape."³⁷ The role of materiality stresses the importance of the city as Baudelaire's de-romanticized poetic landscape. The structures that rise and fall with the passage of time are transitory, yet the essence of a city in all its degradation is fixed. Aesthetically, the action of shifting from pastoral to urban moves the poet toward the vision of urban nature in all its corruption and decay, its change and immobility. The man-made city in a broad view stands as a replacement of feminine nature, yet the de-romanticized female figure that inhabits this city is able to physically interact with the poet. "Paysage" identifies the role of the city as a "protest," but the wider catalog of his poetry depicts Baudelaire's aesthetic success in urban immersion through the poet's interactions with the feminine.

Descent to the "Old Mistress"

"Epilogue" from *Le Spleen de Paris* is the only non-prose poem in the volume that is also known by an alternate title, *Petits Poèmes en Prose*. It serves as the coda of Baudelaire's views on the city following the variety of poetic vignettes and musings that he delivers artistically in prose. Considered in terms of a development from the foundation Baudelaire establishes in "Paysage," "Epilogue" depicts the value of the city and the poet's dependence on its degenerative, feminine aspect from a similar vista: "*Le cœur content, je suis monté sur la montagne/D'où l'on peut contempler la ville en son*

³⁷ Brombert, "Baudelaire: City Images," 103-4.

ampleur.”³⁸ The distanced but encompassing outlook introduced in “Paysage” is once again employed to consider the city as vista. In contrast to “Paysage,” however, the reflective poet now speaks of descending into the darkness and corruption personified in the degenerative feminine:

*Tu sais bien, ô Satan, patron de ma détresse,
Que je n'allais pas là pour répandre un vain pleur ;*

*Mais comme un vieux paillard d'une vieille maîtresse,
Je voulais m'enivrer de l'énorme catin
Dont le charme infernal me rajeunit sans cesse.*³⁹

The poet's plunge from the heights of a distant gaze leads him directly to the corrupted woman, dedicating himself to her. William Sharpe states that as an inhabitant of the city, the poet defines himself “not as a repentant sinner but an old lecher enamored of his sluttish mistress.”⁴⁰ Baudelaire as the poet is sustained and inspired by this connection with the “hellish charm” of the degenerative feminine. His descent from the hill where he was able to view the city “in its enormity” offers the poet the opportunity to become immersed in the urban degeneracy that he had viewed and admired from afar.

The idea that the poem begins with a motion of ascent that is reversed in the third stanza represents the aesthetic quality of the macroscopic and microscopic interactions of the poet with the city. Baudelaire, in his attempts to subsume the variety of sensual experiences and stimulations that are offered by the urban landscape, becomes

³⁸ “Happy of heart I climbed the hill/To contemplate the town in its enormity” (1-2).

³⁹ “You know well, O Satan, patron of my distress,/That I was not going there to shed a vain tear;//But like an old lecher to old mistress goes,/Seeking but rapture, I sought out this trull/Immense, whose hellish charm resuscitates” (5-9).

⁴⁰ Sharpe, *Unreal Cities*, 67.

lecherously enveloped in their charms. Poetically, he is intoxicated and captivated by the degeneracy of the corrupt feminine figure, and he acknowledges the esoteric ability to comprehend the beauty in such individuals. Baudelaire declares, “*Je t’aime, ô capitale infâme! Courtisanes/Et bandits, tels souvent vous offrez des plaisirs/Que ne comprennent pas les vulgaires profanes,*”⁴¹ and with this affirmation comes a clear reminder of his aesthetic goal. The love that Baudelaire possesses for the city is embedded in its perversity and degeneracy, with the poet further declaring the abstruse nature of this beauty. To reiterate the poet’s unique connection to the underworld of the city, the claim that “*Que ne comprennent pas les vulgaires profanes*”⁴² echoes his sentiment from “Salon de 1846:” “*Le merveilleux nous enveloppe et nous abreuve comme l’atmosphère; mais nous ne le voyons pas.*”⁴³

Where the two statements differ is in Baudelaire’s role as their composer. “Epilogue” invests an authority in the poet to illuminate the beauty in these degenerative subjects, while the excerpt from “Salon de 1846” has not yet separated the poet from the crowd; “*nous ne le voyons pas*”⁴⁴ includes him in this category of the blind. Baudelaire’s descent from the heights of the hill positions him in the midst of this city of wicked and sinister characters and sensations. Like the old lecher to his old mistress, Baudelaire’s connections and interactions with a variety of degenerative feminine figures allow him to become emancipated from the unknowing crowd as he walks the streets. In writing as a poet instead of a critic, Baudelaire determines that he has both the authority and the capability to illuminate the beauty in these figures. Aesthetically, their presence provides the necessary deviation from the idealistic beauty of the pure and uncorrupted female.

⁴¹ “Infamous City, I adore you! Courtesans/And bandits, you offer me such joys,/The common herd can never understand.” (13-15)

⁴² “The common herd can never understand,” (15)

⁴³ Baudelaire, “Salon de 1846,” 107.

“The marvelous envelops and saturates us like the atmosphere; but we fail to see it”

⁴⁴ “we fail to see it”

The (De)generative Woman

For Baudelaire, exploration of the city after the downward journey into its depths allows him to harvest the stimulations that give his aesthetic definition and form. As a dominant motif in his writing, Baudelaire's depictions of the feminine and his various interactions with these figures allow the poet to express and explore his aesthetic. The purpose of poetry for Baudelaire is not truth, morality, or legislation of taste; his immersion in the base, degraded, grotesque feminine illuminates instead the correspondence and connection of the multiple facets of beauty. Since there is an assumed masculine identity for the poet as a creative force, the correlative of this is found in the feminine and the corrupted essence of their interaction. As Erich Auerbach writes, this feminine figure "is sick and no longer young, more often she is a kind of bestial idol, soulless, barren, and morally indifferent;"⁴⁵ whatever the representation of her degeneration, she always rouses the poet's sensibilities, invites immersion, and displays a corrupt form of beauty.

While ambitious in creating this feminine symbology, Baudelaire deduces and interprets the interconnectivity of the many facets of human existence. He surfaces the feminine in the dynamism of the creative and corrupt; she is the embodiment of the brand of corruption that spurs creation. For Baudelaire, the female figure possesses a vital quality that embodies the corrupt, the sinister, and the displaced; at the same time is ultimately intended, as Étienne Gilson states, "to serve the ends of his art."⁴⁶ In Baudelaire's aesthetic, the product of everything corresponds and consequently he seeks and delights in the presence of the corrupt. Aspects of the displaced and degenerative feminine serve as rich points of interaction with the metropolis, and Baudelaire is keenly

⁴⁵ Erich Auerbach, "The Aesthetic Dignity of the *Fleurs du Mal*," *Baudelaire: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Henri Peyre, (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962) 158.

⁴⁶ Étienne Gilson, "Baudelaire and the Muse," *Baudelaire: A Collection of Critical Essays*, Ed. Henri Peyre (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962) 85.

aware that the urban environment is their realm. As a poet, he “could find them by no other path,” and Gilson further clarifies their aesthetic significance by including the statement, ““Woman is inevitably suggestive, she lives with a life that is not her own, she lives spiritually in the imaginations haunted and fertilized by her.””⁴⁷ The acute degradation of the feminine figures proves itself fecund poetic ground.

“Une Charogne” and Decay of Feminine Flesh

A notable example of the notion of the (de)generative feminine is found in the shocking poem “Une Charogne.”⁴⁸ Its jarring depiction of the decomposing corpse of a woman is a clear representation of a female body in the ultimate state of degeneration. The decay of the physical body inspires the poet to contrast this rotting carrion with the young female companion who stands at his side. “Une Charogne” calls for the recollection of an event. It evokes tradition and conventionality in bringing to mind a nostalgic moment between two lovers on a sweet summer morning:

Rappelez-vous l’objet que vous vîmes, mon âme,

Ce beau matin d’été si doux :

Au détour d’un sentier une charogne infâme

Sur un lit semé de cailloux,⁴⁹

At the introduction of the carcass the shift in the poem is almost instant. The sentimental tone generated from the wistful remembrance of the mysterious object is banished when

⁴⁷ Gilson, “Baudelaire and the Muse,” 84.

⁴⁸ “A Carcass”

⁴⁹ Remember the object we saw, my love,/That beautiful summer morning so sweet:/At the bend in a path a foul carcass/On a gravel-strewn bed, (1-4)

the “*charogne infâme*” is revealed. The poet becomes explicit in his description of the rotting decay of the body, recalling that the living woman looked upon this sight with shock and disgust. The imposition of the carcass “*au détour d’un sentier*”⁵⁰ causes the couple to stop in their tracks, and prompts the poet to unravel the beauty in this unexpected source.

Vitality, it is a *female* corpse that the poet recalls, and Baudelaire describes its rotting disintegration in a decidedly sexual manner. The legs of the body are “*en l’air, comme une femme lubrique*,”⁵¹ and the dynamism is rampant as it stirs the senses of sight, sound, and smell. The stimulations come forth in a manner that overpowers the poet and his mistress. The *charogne* is a natural object, not an object of hideousness. Though the mistress feels as though she might faint from the “*puanteur [...] si forte*,”⁵² the poet sees the body “*comme une fleur s’épanouir*.”⁵³ The gases that swell the stomach and the maggots “*qui [coulent] comme un épais liquide/Le long de ces vivants haillons*”⁵⁴ propagate vitality in the “dead” body. In death, her remains have given back “*au centuple à la grande Nature/Tout ce qu’ensemble elle avait joint*.”⁵⁵ The repayment is in the vigor of the decaying body, in the “*vivants haillons*” of its very flesh. As the poet and his companion observe the corpse, it brings to the fore a juxtaposition of the feminine body in two distinctly different stages of “life.” While the poet’s mistress wilts and sickens at the sight of the *charogne*, the corpse itself is positively brimming with life. The corpse possesses aesthetic significance because of its rejection of the cult of female beauty. It stands in defiance of an aesthetic that ignores the importance of such a poetic encounter;

⁵⁰ “at the bend in a path”

⁵¹ “in the air, like a lustful woman” (5)

⁵² “stench [...] so strong” (15)

⁵³ “blossom like a flower” (16)

⁵⁴ “that [run] as a thick liquid/Along those living tatters” (19-20)

⁵⁵ “hundredfold to great Nature/Everything she had joined together” (11-12)

like the city, this body is an entity fraught with decay, yet possesses vital exuberance in this state.

As Françoise Meltzer states, the sensory stimulation in “Une Charogne” contains “materiality [that] intensifies the poem”⁵⁶ (218). Meltzer also acknowledges Baudelaire’s deviation from traditional forms of beauty in creating an aesthetic that encompasses the repugnant carcass. Like Sharpe, Meltzer also finds Baudelaire in defiance of the Wordsworthian aesthetic. Meltzer remarks that the intensity of Baudelaire’s poetry, particularly “Une Charogne,” stems from a notion that physical and sensual immersion is vital: “the world is indeed too much with Baudelaire, as his depictions of the city and its figures attest.”⁵⁷ The carcass is thrilling and stimulating to the senses, presenting what Kerry Weinberg refers to as “the quintessence of the material world;”⁵⁸ it is a rich point of interaction with an urban, feminine figure positioned between the poet and mistress.

Following the immersion in the sensory stimulations of the corpse comes the poet’s shift to the mind of the artist. This change is demonstrated when the extensive and explicit description of the decaying body comes to a close. Baudelaire cites the inevitability of the corpse’s fate for his breathing mistress – she will one day be like the *charogne*:

– *Et pourtant vous serez semblable á cette ordure,*

A cette horrible infection,

Étoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,

Vous, mon ange et ma passion !

⁵⁶ Françoise Meltzer, *Seeing Double: Baudelaire’s Modernity*, (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2011) 218.

⁵⁷ Meltzer, *Seeing Double*, 218.

⁵⁸ Kerry Weinberg, “The Women of Eliot and Baudelaire: The Boredom, the Horror, and the Glory,” *Modern Language Studies* 14.3 (1984) 32.

Oui ! telle que vous serez, ô la reine des grâces,

Après les derniers sacrements,

Quand vous irez, sous l'herbe et les floraisons grasses,

*Moisir parmi les ossements.*⁵⁹

It is not simply a call for the woman to “*carpe diem*” that Baudelaire highlights the inevitability of this fate for his living female companion. The invocation of physical decay as the *infection* that spreads, proliferates, and envelops the human body is an extension of his aesthetic as it captures the correspondence of all aspects of humanity. Baudelaire determines the connection between the two feminine figures as an inexorable relationship, bringing the reminiscence of the *charogne* to its end and giving substance to his overarching aesthetic.

Addictive Woman: “Sed Non Siata,” “La Chevelure,” “Le Vampire”

Baudelaire determines an addictive allure in the urban feminine. Immersion in the feminine is akin to an indulgence in other intense sensory stimulations such as drugs or alcohol. It is as a poet, not necessarily as a man, that Baudelaire is drawn to the addictive qualities of the feminine. The city is a location that fosters all aspects of excess and allows the poet such indulgences; a place of licentious decadence, it invites and harbors

⁵⁹ – And yet you will be like this corruption,/This horrible infection,/Star of my eyes, sun of my nature,/You, my angel and my passion !//Yes! Thus you will be, O queen of graces,/After the last sacraments,/When you go beneath grass and luxuriant flowers,/To molder among the bones (37-44).

immersion. “Sed Non Satiata”⁶⁰ from *Les Fleurs du Mal* demonstrates this notion by explicitly juxtaposing stimulation by substance with that of femininity:

*Je préfère au constance, à l'opium, au nuits,
L'élixir de ta bouche où l'amour se pavane;
Quand vers toi mes désirs partent en caravane,
Tes yeux sont la citerne où boivent mes ennuis.*⁶¹

The preference for the poet between the two lies in the interaction with the feminine. Kerry Weinberg writes that in the poem she is “to be used as a stimulus,” yet her “psychedelic effect is far more potent than that of wine or narcotics.”⁶² As an artist, Baudelaire is an addict for the experience of immersion in the feminine; this experience represents “man’s bondage to matter, thus epitomizing a potential danger to annihilate the poet.”⁶³ Material matter, like the rotting corpse in “Une Charogne,” is in a perpetual and unavoidable state of degeneration. Yet Baudelaire celebrates and exposes this process, reveling in the fruitful poetic tension that it provides toward his aesthetic. Moral and physical decline occur abreast of one another, and the poet must acknowledge the importance of both by immersing himself in their charms.

Weinberg further elaborates on the necessity of this compulsion, claiming, “[t]o Baudelaire, desire is the mainspring of existence [...] lacking this driving force is the worst of all tortures.”⁶⁴ Addiction is an essential representation of desire, and Baudelaire

⁶⁰ “But Not Satisfied”.

⁶¹ “Rather than *constance*, *le nuits*, opium,/The elixir of your mouth where love paves;/Your eyes are wells where my desires come/And my ennui drink in thirsty caravans” (5-8).

⁶² Weinberg, “The Women of Eliot and Baudelaire,” 32.

⁶³ *Ibid*, 32.

⁶⁴ *Ibid*, 35.

succumbs to this temptation at every opportunity. “La Chevelure”⁶⁵ captures Baudelaire’s immersion in the feminine as he describes the poet’s fundamental dependence on this physical trait. The woman’s tresses are characterized by their perfumed darkness, a place where “*l’homme, pleins de sève,/Se pâment longuement sous l’ardeur des climats.*”⁶⁶ The admirer finds necessary captivation in the hair that seems to roll like a black sea; it is a dynamic and lively entity. The poet exclaims, “*Je m’enivre ardemment des senteurs confondues,*”⁶⁷ indicating the enthusiasm he possesses for this brand of intoxication. If, as Weinberg claims, to be without the addictive desire is truly the worst of all tortures, then the poetic release that comes with immersion is essential. As “La Chevelure” concludes, the poet finalizes the process of addictive desire by plunging his hand into the black tresses of his enigmatic mistress:

Longtemps! toujours! ma main dans ta crinière lourde

Sèmera le rubis, la perle et le saphir,

Afin qu’à mon désir tu ne sois jamais sourde!

N’es-tu pas l’oasis où je rêve, et la gourde

*Où je hume à longs traits le vin du souvenir?*⁶⁸

This breach sees the poet immerse an appendage of his physical being into the alluring “*crinière*”⁶⁹ of the woman. This act bears a distinctly sexual allusion, yet the preceding emphasis of the poem is on the specifically intoxicating aspect of this female figure. The

⁶⁵ “Head of Hair”

⁶⁶ “men, full of vigor/Are plunged in a deep swoon by the heat of the climate” (11-12)

⁶⁷ “I eagerly get drunk with the mingled odors” (29)

⁶⁸ A long time! Always! My hand in your heavy mane/Will scatter sapphires, rubies, pearls,/So that you will never be deaf to my desire!/Aren’t you the oasis of which I dream, the gourd/From which I drink deeply, the wine of memory? (31-35)

⁶⁹ “mane”

allure is essential, and the poet is simultaneously consuming and being consumed by the feminine.

A staple of urban legend and lore, the vampire is a monstrosity that is fundamentally linked to the city. It is an undead predator, a being that hunts in the streets and avenues of a city for its unsuspecting prey. In Baudelaire's poem, "Le Vampire," the creature is represented as a decidedly female aberration; the femininity of the vampire is ingrained in her effect on the poet. She enters his heart "*forte comme un troupeau / De demons*"⁷⁰ and captivates the poet, making him a slave to her; he is trapped by his desire, and she feeds from his devotion. In contrast with the previous poems that depict the addictive qualities of the feminine, "Le Vampire" finds the poet maddened and enraged by his obsession and enslavement:

–Infâme à qui je suis lié

Comme le forçat à la chaîne,

Comme au jeu le joueur têtu,

Comme à la bouteille l'ivrogne,

Comme aux vermines la charogne

*–Maudite, maudite sois-tu!*⁷¹

In citing an assortment of dependent representations, Baudelaire draws together the qualities that he illustrates in "Une Charogne," "Sed Non Satiata," and "La Chevelure."

⁷⁰ "strong as a herd/Of demons" (3-4)

⁷¹ –Infamous woman to whom I'm bound/Like the convict to his chain,//Like the stubborn gambler to the game,/Like the drunkard to his wine,/Like the maggots to the carcass, (7-12)
–Cursed, cursed be you!

The addictive vices of wine and gambling are positioned between the shackled prisoner and the maggot-ridden carcass; the poet finds himself bound to his vampire love. His passionate curse is reflexive because his torture is a fundamental compulsion. As Weinberg claims, desire is the root of existence and to be without it is unthinkable; the masculine speaker of “Le Vampire” finds this to be true. Even to destroy her with “*poison [ou] le glaive*”⁷² would yield nothing. Baudelaire writes that these weapons cannot liberate the poet:

Imbécile! — de son empire

Si nos efforts te délivraient,

Tes baisers ressusciteraient

*Le cadavre de ton vampire!*⁷³

The poet is forever bound to his vampire, should she be conquered, he would always revive her to revel in the perverse nature of their connection. Though she is a corrupt and degenerative aberration of femininity, she prompts the artistic addiction that is necessary for Baudelaire to generate his aesthetic. The representation of the feminine vampire links the symbology of women to the city. Baudelaire’s aesthetic is defined in the intoxicating aspect of the two elements, and their combination displays the poet’s desire for this brand of immersion.

⁷² “poison [or] the knife” (17)

⁷³ Fool! – if from her domination/Our efforts could deliver you,/Your kisses would resuscitate/The cadaver of your vampire! (21-24)

Prostitution: An “Allégorie”

The image of the prostitute is one that epitomizes Baudelaire’s aesthetic. She embodies the physical and moral corruption of the urban environment with her sexual invitation; like the addictive woman, she is a representation of a type of sensual immersion. Peggy Kamuf defines the metaphor: “The allegory in the poem ‘Allégorie’ names one thing by the other, prostitution by ‘*une femme belle*.’”⁷⁴ The decadent poem presents an image of this feminine figure as one who possesses incredible beauty, yet exists outside of the threat of damnation; Baudelaire asserts that the woman transcends this type of judgment.

The role of the prostitute in the city demonstrates the link between the urban environment and carnal sexual compulsion. As Benjamin remarks, “[m]odernity is always citing primal history,” and the prostitute as “seller and sold in one”⁷⁵ constitutes this notion. Her profession is made from the base desire of sexual gratification, and while her vocation is one of the oldest, the urban environment is the hub of modernity. Sharpe contributes the idea that “an unconstrained sexuality remains a constant feature of the poetic apprehension of the city”⁷⁶ in Baudelaire’s poetry. Indeed, the feminine figure of “Allégorie” is unconstrained and unaffected by the threat of judgment as, “*Elle rit à la Mort et nargue la Débauche*.”⁷⁷ Like the raven-haired woman of “La Chevelure,” the allegorical woman also possesses tresses that bear an intoxicating quality:

C'est une femme belle et de riche encolure,

Qui laisse dans son vin traîner sa chevelure.

⁷⁴ Peggy Kamuf, “Baudelaire’s Modern Woman,” *Qui Parle* 4.2 (1991): 2.

⁷⁵ Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life*, 41.

⁷⁶ Sharpe, *Unreal Cities*, 67.

⁷⁷ “She laughs at Death and taunts Debauch” (5).

Les griffes de l'amour, les poisons du tripot,

*Tout glisse et tout s'émousse au granit de sa peau.*⁷⁸

The capillary action of her hair falling into the wine binds the beauty of the feminine with the stimulation of the substance. This stimulation is juxtaposed against the impervious fortification of her skin – she is the inverse of transcendental beauty. Her resilience is solid and the poet notes, “*Que la beauté du corps est un sublime don/Qui de toute infamie arrache le pardon.*”⁷⁹ Indulgence in this beautiful body cannot be a crime, and forgiveness will always be hers.

While Baudelaire writes that the woman is “*ignore l'Enfer comme le Purgatoire,*”⁸⁰ he reinforces this element by further situating her outside of the Christian realm of afterlife. The feminine figure is represented as one who invests a faith in pleasure. Erich Auerbach claims that deviations from “traditional echoes of the feminine,” such as the Madonna, are essential to Baudelaire’s aesthetic; if presented by the poet, “they ring false; sometimes they sound ironic and are always strangely disfigured.”⁸¹ In “Allégorie,” the feminine figure is not the Madonna or even aware of Christian forms of judgment. Alternatively, she is “*paynim,*” a pagan/Muslim figure; she is one who eludes the damnation of hell and can meet her fate without fear: “*Et quand l'heure viendra d'entrer dans la Nuit noire/Elle regardera la face de la Mort,/Ainsi qu'un nouveau-né, — sans haine et sans remords.*”⁸² In figuring sex as a ritual or a sacrament, Baudelaire rejects the corrupt feminine and positions her outside of condemnation. Death

⁷⁸ “She’s a beautiful woman with an opulent neck/Who lets her hair trail in her wine./The claws of love, poisons of dives,/All slide and are blunted on her granite skin” (1-4).

⁷⁹ “That the beauty of the body is a sublime gift/That brings pardon for any crime” (15-16).

⁸⁰ “unaware of Hell and Purgatory” (17).

⁸¹ Auerbach, “The Aesthetic Dignity of the *Fleurs du Mal*,” 158.

⁸² “And when the time comes for her to enter the black Night/She will look into the face of Death,/As a new-born child, – without hatred and without remorse” (18-20)

will still meet her, Baudelaire acknowledges this, but she will meet death as a virgin, an immaculate “*nouveau-né*.”⁸³

The significance of this irreproachable prostitute is fundamentally bound to Baudelaire’s aesthetic. As a feminine figure, she is the antithesis of purity in flesh, vocation, and morality. Her degeneration is rooted in the corruption of her trade, and Baudelaire liberates her from condemnation in “Allégorie.” Kamuf writes, “the most one can assert with confidence is [...] the link between poetry and prostitution;”⁸⁴ Baudelaire recognizes and explores this notion in the poem. A symbol of prostitution, the poem is by extension an allegory for art and the poet’s capacity to draw an essential representation of beauty from such a corrupted source.

Conclusion: The Feminine, Urban Aesthetic

The development of Baudelaire’s aesthetic is grounded in the corrupt landscape of the urban environment. No other location provides the poet with such fecund ground to define his distinct and innovative vision of beauty. The representations of degenerative feminine figures span the gamut of the urban landscape, and Baudelaire finds an unusual form of artistic sustenance in the relationship between the poet and the women. Their corruption represents the very essence of his aesthetic goals; the senses that they are able to stimulate draw the poet into a willing and inescapable state of artistic addiction. The degenerative feminine invites immersion and allows the poet to attain his aesthetic goal.

Since the urban landscape is their domain, Baudelaire can find these women by no other means; he must become enveloped in the “*merveilleux*” and generate his

⁸³ “new-born” (20).

⁸⁴ Kamuf, “Baudelaire’s Modern Woman,” 3.

aesthetic from the stimulation that the feminine figures provide. The modern metropolis of the urban landscape stands as a place of constant flux and transformation, yet its capacity for corruption and its movement toward decay is unchanging. As Baudelaire expresses in “Epilogue,” the poet must descend to the city to these sources of inspiration, drowning himself in their influence and charms. Like “*un vieux paillard d’une vieille maîtresse*,”⁸⁵ Baudelaire is keenly aware of where he must journey to obtain the artistic nourishment that provides his aesthetic with definition and form.

⁸⁵ “an old lecher to his old mistress” (7)

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First Response

This energetic and involving chapter takes on not only Baudelaire's representation of degenerative femininity, but also *Fleurs du Mal* itself in all its suggestive spatial formulations. Ranging from the trope of the vampire to key themes such as prostitution and allegory, the chapter argues that it was no accident, rather a fundamental necessity, for Baudelaire to experience the urban environment of mid-nineteenth century Paris in this way. Through endless recycling of the female form as both praxis and aesthetic, we are treated to several close readings of the poems themselves, and also to the hovering presence of Walter Benjamin, whose seminal thinking in *The Writer of Modern Life* opens the piece. Such 'sensual immersion' provides this text with a remarkably stable position from which to set out and links us to the kind of dynamism and disintegration which will ultimately pitch the reader into the full blown *fin de siècle* and early Modernist inscription. Yes, in parts we are referred to Gilson and Auerbach and it remains to be questioned whether there is much new going on here, but on the whole a strong case is made for viewing Baudelaire from this edgy perspective, and, provocatively, it is the kind of *recherché* thematic research which seems to lie in wait for a post-feminist critique. *Hypocrite lecteur?* I should think so...