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Ironies of the Modern

Perhaps the real paradox of Baudelaire's 'To a Red-haired Beggar Girl' is that it suggests that irony is a necessary defence against modernity, even as it seems to assume that to be distinctively modern the poet must be ironic. In this chapter, I shall try to unpick this complicated response to 'modernity' and to trace its ambiguous relation to ideas of the social in the work of Baudelaire and some of his contemporaries, writers such as Gustave Flaubert, Herman Melville and Fyodor Dostoyevsky.

We can begin with an essay by Baudelaire which opened the debate about modernity in a highly suggestive way. Called 'The Painter of Modern Life' (1859–60), the essay is nominally about the painter Constantin Guys, but Baudelaire uses Guys's work as an occasion for a series of connected meditations on the theme of modernity. Part of his purpose here is to overcome the neo-classical fetish of the antique and to argue the case for the modern as legitimate artistic subject matter. 'The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present', he claims, 'is due, not only to the beauty it can be clothed in, but also to its essential quality of being the present' (*BSW*, 391). The neo-classical ideal of unchanging beauty is complicated here by a vivid sense of the flux and movement of life in the present. Bringing together the metaphysical and the temporal, Baudelaire invents a poetics of sudden 'correspondences', of moments when the rapid passage of forms which characterises contemporary experience is suddenly illuminated by an intuition of the atemporal or the spiritual. 'Modernity', he concludes, 'is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and immutable' (*BSW*, 403). The element of idealism here is, however, to be dissociated from the neo-classical 'theory of a unique and absolute beauty' (*BSW*, 392), since it derives from the process of 'deliberate idealization' which is art (*BSW*, 402):

> the ideal is not that vague thing, that boring and intangible dream floating on the ceilings of academies; an ideal is the

individual modified by the individual, rebuilt and restored by brush or chisel to the dazzling truth of its own essential harmony.   (*BSW*, 78)

The sense of the 'fleeting' and 'contingent' is perhaps the definitive mark of the early grasp of the modern. In America, for example, Ralph Waldo Emerson had already commented enthusiastically on the momentum of social change in the new era:

> The new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet; the new races fed out of the decomposition of the foregoing. New arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts, made useless by hydraulics; fortifications, by gunpowder; roads and canals, by railways; sails, by steam; steam, by electricity.[1]

Celebrating the rapid expansion of Jacksonian capitalism, Emerson could find in technological progress an affirmation of the evolutionary principle of nature ('There are no fixtures in nature'[2]).

Several years after Emerson, Marx and Engels also wrote of the 'constant revolutionising of production' as the definitive action of an emergent bourgeoisie. Like Emerson and Baudelaire, the writers of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) stressed the impulse towards innovation and diversification which marked the age, but at the same time they revealed a darker paradox at the heart of modernity: for while change was everywhere apparent and seemed to herald the appearance of a new and more humane world, the process of modernisation actually entailed the continuous reproduction of the same relations, the relations which govern capitalist production.[3]

For Marx, as, in a different way, for Baudelaire, this paradox had become painfully clear with the failure of revolutionary hopes after 1848. Indeed, the period that began with Louis Napoléon's *coup d'état* in December 1851 and the inauguration of his intolerant, commercialist regime did much to define the shape of the later avant-garde. It was not simply that the promise of radical change had suddenly evaporated but that state institutions and the political life circulating around them now seemed degraded and farcical. Marx caught the tone of this perfectly in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* (1852), where he depicted Louis Napoléon's imperial regime as a grotesquely theatrical simulation of the original Napoleonic state. Grandiose repetition could not conceal the one-dimensional character of a new bourgeois society marked by

passions without truth, truth without passions; heroes without deeds of heroism, history without events; a course of development only driven forward by the calendar, and made wearisome by the constant repetition of the same tension and relaxations. . . . If any section of history has been painted grey on grey, it is this.[4]

Modernity, it seemed, was the time of the copy, an insight expressed with equal pungency in Victor Hugo's *Little Napoleon* (1852) and Gustave Flaubert's *Sentimental Education* (1869).

This 'grey' period, which would last until 1870, combined rapid material progress with political intolerance; writers could hardly help seeing a connection between capitalistic values and a government hostility to creative work at a time when tough new censorship laws brought well-known figures like Baudelaire, Flaubert and the Goncourt brothers into the dock. Not surprisingly, the surge of economic growth and the popular gospel of progress were often equated with philistinism and cultural stagnation. Baudelaire, for example, described society after 1848 as 'wholly worn-out – worse than worn-out – brutalised and greedy, wholly repelled by fiction, adoring only material possession' (*BSW*, 248). What, then, of his equally forceful arguments for modernity as subject matter of the new arts? Here a cleavage begins to open between bourgeois modernity, on the one hand, and aesthetic modernity, on the other.[5] The later claims of the various modernisms to create the authentically new can be traced back to this early sense of a 'false' modernity, whose surface momentum conceals its inner sameness, its unceasing reproduction of the safe limits of the bourgeois world. Here too the particular modernist preoccupation with *time* begins, for as Baudelaire's comment suggests, the conjunction of greed, and inertia implies that the market has somehow frozen the movement of history, installing in its place a procession of ever 'new' commodities (as Walter Benjamin neatly remarks, 'Fashion is the eternal recurrence of the new'[6]).

If everyday life is now felt to be oppressive it is partly because time is experienced as endless repetition. This is the condition of Baudelaire's *ennui*, when subjective time becomes mechanical, the passing moments palpable, like 'snow flakes'.[7] We might define that 'great modern monster', *ennui*,[8] as a kind of primal melancholy, a combination of apathy and boredom which, in rendering the subject claustrophobically inactive, also brings painful hypersensitivity and nervousness (the poet Paul Verlaine, for example, would later write of 'modern man with his sharpened and vibrating senses,

his painfully subtle sensibility'[9]). Modern man is 'nerve-ridden', in Baudelaire's phrase (*BSW*, 186), dominated by a 'psychology of nerves' and increasingly unpredictable, caught between a cult of 'multiplied sensation', on the one hand, and an impasse of inaction and impotence, on the other. Afflicted by this typically 'modern' vacillation, the axis of the self seems precarious, barely sustainable, as it is buffeted by dizzying excesses of emotion which veer from disgust to inexplicable exaltation. Modern life is thus an experience of extremes, as the narrator of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground* (1864) observes:

> And what softening effect has civilization had on us? Civilization develops in man only a many-sided sensitivity to sensations, and . . . definitely nothing more. And through the development of that many-sidedness man may perhaps progress to the point where he finds pleasure in blood.[10]

At once vulnerable because of hypersensitivity and dangerous because of his desire for ever greater intensity of sensation, the authentically modern subject thus seems to slip the social moorings of the rational bourgeois self and its 'counting-house morality' (*BSW*, 197).

This new form of subjectivity is accompanied by a rejection of art's traditional role as an arbiter of moral truths. Following the argument of Poe's 'The Poetic Principle', Baudelaire declares that 'Poetry cannot, except at the price of death or decay, assume the mantle of science or morality; the pursuit of truth is not its aim, it has nothing outside itself' (*BSW*, 204). Yet here another paradox looms into view, for this emancipation of art from the sphere of science and morality has been brought about by art's absorption into that very world of commodities and commercial values which the modern artist so contemptuously rejects. Emancipation is thus something of a mixed blessing, especially as the new autonomy of the art-work can lead, on the one hand, to its being manoeuvred into irrelevance, and, on the other, to its being made to function as the ideological legitimation of capitalist society, the values exiled in the aesthetic now seeming to enshrine the truths to which the social order is committed at the level of ideology.[11]

For the writer who, like Baudelaire, had only contempt for the culture of his day, it was thus crucial that art be in no sense 'useful'. Théophile Gautier, one of his mentors and an early proponent of

the 'art for art's sake' doctrine, had already provided the essential
formulation in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835):

> Nothing beautiful is indispensable to life. . . . Nothing is really
> beautiful unless it is useless; everything useful is ugly, for it
> expresses a need, and the needs of man are ignoble and disgust-
> ing, like his poor weak nature. The most useful place in a house is
> the lavatory.[12]

Developing Gautier's aversion to utility into an attack on both
French intellectual tradition and contemporary bourgeois ideology,
Baudelaire now characterises France as 'the home of clear thought
and demonstration, where art aims naturally and directly at utility'
(*BSW*, 154). 'Utility' here denotes forms of ideological usefulness:
bourgeois art is expected to conceal and in that way naturalise the
damaging effects of 'progress', rationalising change by making it
somehow continuous with a familiar, academic culture. The neo-
classical revival in the French theatre of the 1840s is one example of
the official culture's appeal to tradition and imitation. On a larger
scale, recourse to cultural pastiche and repetition to conceal the
disruptive effects of the new might be seen in the architecture of
19th-century railway stations in European cities such as Milan,
Cologne and London.[13]

For Baudelaire, cultural manifestations of this sort simply illumi-
nate the principal affectation of bourgeois culture – its 'naturalness'.
The Romantic aura attaching to 'nature' here disappears as Baude-
laire redefines it as 'nothing but the inner voice of self-interest' (*BSW*,
425). He now goes on to appropriate the bourgeois legitimation of
egoism in order to turn it inside out. 'Modern art', he declares, 'has
an essentially demonic tendency', a statement which scandalously
inverts Christian values at the same time as it claims as the funda-
mental subject-matter of art the very negativity which is repressed in
the bourgeois doctrine of 'universal progress' (or 'universal ruin' – 'it
matters little what name it is given'[14]). The egoism and self-seeking
which underpin the ideal of the free market are testimony to 'the
infernal part of man'. So, in Baudelaire's poems, the everyday life
of commercial society is forced to reveal its darker, nocturnal side,
as the self is unravelled through tropes of intoxication, violence and
perversity.

Baudelaire was not alone in his way of construing modernity, and
we find the same fascination with the 'evil' underside of bourgeois

human nature in the work of writers such as Hawthorne, Melville and Dostoyevsky. Each in his own way twisted the doctrine of nature against itself so that evil became the very principle of the natural. As Baudelaire put it, 'Evil is done without effort, *naturally*, it is the working of fate; good is always the product of an art' (*BSW*, 425). In that formulation, we see how a moral principle (rooted, in Baudelaire's case, in the doctrine of original sin) is smoothly transposed into the aesthetic domain; and we can also begin to see how devious and perverse the artistic principle might become, since it must now always articulate what does *not* come naturally.

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In rejecting 'nature', Baudelaire and his avant-garde contemporaries were not simply rejecting a poetic taste for trees and rivers; more fundamentally, they were denying the connection between poetic vision and social transformation which had underpinned the political optimism of an earlier Romanticism. As Baudelaire put it:

> Most wrong ideas about beauty derive from the false notion the eighteenth century had about ethics. In those days, Nature was taken as a basis, source and prototype of all possible forms of good and beauty. The rejection of original sin is in no small measure responsible for the general blindness of those days.   (*BSW*, 425)

In the wake of 1848, a disillusioned avant-garde tended to conceive of humanity as neither perfectible nor evolutionary but as flawed and corrupt, a shift in perspective which was bound up with a thoroughgoing loss of faith in any kind of political action. Again, Baudelaire's case is exemplary. It seems likely that he fought at the barricades in 1848, but by 1852 he had renounced all forms of political activity.[15] As Jean-Paul Sartre observes, 'The treason of the petty bourgeois in 1848 discredited *politics* in the eyes of the exploited – all politics was bourgeois, even when practised by politicians who claimed to be socialists.'[16]

Louis Napoléon's *coup d'état* thus produced a failure of political representation which required a fundamental redefinition of individual agency. As one critic puts it, capital began to 'break free from certain specific political – and in this sense, representational – relations and structures that were the condition of its initial autonomy and, thereby, to take on the attributes of a superordinate social agency

with no fixed political or cultural subjectivity'.[17] It was Baudelaire's generation which took the first step towards a substitution of the aesthetic for 'the lost terrain of social representation'. This is not to suggest that writers suddenly ceased to be oppositional but rather that the ground of opposition shifted from political rhetoric and polemic to literary 'style'. The redefinition of the artist's role which would accomplish this is most clearly seen in another section of Baudelaire's 'The Painter of Modern Life', where he sketches his ideal of the dandy:

> Dandyism appears especially in those periods of transition when democracy has not yet become all-powerful, and when aristocracy is only partially weakened and discredited. In the confusion of such times, a certain number of men, disenchanted and leisured 'outsiders', but all of them richly endowed with native energy, may conceive the idea of establishing a new kind of aristocracy, all the more difficult to break down because established on the most precious, the most indestructible faculties, on the divine gifts that neither work nor money can give. Dandyism is the last flicker of heroism in decadent ages. . . .   (*BSW*, 421)

Characteristically, Baudelaire regards the present as a time of dramatic transition; it is because the future relations of aristocracy and bourgeoisie have not yet crystallised that the intelligentsia can make its own bid for power. This particular kind of 'power' is possible because the present is also a 'decadent' age. We shall return to this complex and loaded word in Chapter 3, but in the context of Baudelaire's essay, it refers primarily to the absence of a class capable of combining the exercise of political power with cultural appreciation. The dandy, disdaining politics as such, will accordingly assert his absolute authority in the cultural realm. It is, however, an authority which is not without its own particular pathos, for this 'last flicker' of taste and refinement represents a heroic, because doomed, resistance to what Baudelaire goes on to call 'the rising tide of democracy, which spreads everywhere and reduces everything to the same level'.

   The implication of Baudelaire's essay is that the public sphere and 'culture' have become two separate and opposed domains, and, furthermore, that 'culture' itself has split into 'high' and 'low' forms. As an arbiter of 'style', of course, the dandy is 'leisured', and his aloofness from life's practical necessities allows him to remain

uncompromised either by the ideological imperatives of academic culture or by what had become known (after the critic Sainte-Beuve) as 'industrial literature' – journalism, that is, and popular episodic fiction, that 'trade of literature' which Alexis de Tocqueville had projected as a significant feature of the new democratic societies.[18] The contempt for forms of popular culture which would determine some of the avant-garde positions of the later modernism has its roots in these 19th-century responses to the growth of the literary market. It is rare indeed to find a writer at this time arguing, as did Emile Zola in a piece called 'Money and Literature', that the decline of literary patronage would promote new authorial freedoms.[19] For the most part the rise of so-called literary 'factories' and the new practice of paying by the line seemed, to most serious writers, the very embodiment of modern philistinism. The figure of the leisured dandy thus aligned 'style' with the refusal to compromise (Baudelaire's ironic advice to young writers was to produce a lot and work fast[20]).

If politics was now thoroughly tainted by the commercialism of the Second Empire, the only way forward for art seemed, to some, to lie in the deliberate cultivation of an anti-social stance. So, in a slightly later essay, Baudelaire contrasts 'misanthropic republicanism' (which, he says, can be both literary and political) with 'the democratic and bourgeois passion which has lately so cruelly oppressed us'. The former, he claims, is to be preferred, since it is driven by 'a limitless aristocratic hatred, without pity or bounds, for monarchs and bourgeois, and by a broad sympathy for everything in art which is excessive in colour and form, everything which is intense, pessimistic and Byronic'.[21] We may note how an artistic intensity which 'exceeds' the limits of the bourgeois world is also cruel, inhuman even, because it comes into being as a negation of social bonds. The creative act, so Baudelaire implies, is opposed to 'slavish imitation' (*BSW*, 77), 'excessive in colour and form' and destructive of the ties of social identification which bind the artist to a particular class. As he explains in his account of the dandy, such men become disenchanted 'outsiders' – the French word is *déclassés* – whose willed estrangement exemplifies a new sense of the incompatibility between artistic vocation and social obligation. As the two pull further apart, a modern aesthetic comes to imply a sort of triumph over social origins; 'Perhaps the future will belong to men of no class [*déclassés*]', muses Baudelaire.[22]

This celebration of artistic independence had already been a notable feature of Romanticism, where it had emerged in two main

forms: either the writer's genius apparently separated him from the crowd and gave a special authority to his words, or he was condemned to isolation and disregard because the new 'democratic' audience lacked the ability to understand him. In France, Victor Hugo might provide a good example of the first kind of writer, while Alfred de Vigny (in, say, the 'Preface' to his *Chatterton* [1835]) might exemplify the second. In each case, though, the Romantic writers, for all their attempts to work free of the fetters of academic convention, still operated within a horizon of recognisable rhetorical objectives. After 1848, writers began to adopt a kind of self-imposed exile as a necessary condition of creativity and with that gesture went a new conception of poetic language as something quite distinct from a shared language of communication. This is the implication behind Gérard de Nerval's famous declaration that, in a rampantly materialistic age, 'The only refuge left to us was the poet's ivory tower, which we climbed, ever higher, to isolate ourselves from the mob.'[23] The image would be a favourite one as the century went on; Flaubert, for example, remarked in characteristically acerbic tone that 'I have always tried to live in an ivory tower, but a tide of shit is beating at its walls to undermine it.'[24]

The image of the ivory tower memorably expresses the desire to evade the pressure in a modern democratic society to conform and identify with others. Writers and artists at this time were increasingly aware of a mimetic principle at work in bourgeois modernity, in its fondness for representational art, in its parasitic dependence on 'tradition', and in the psychology of emulation underpinning a culture in which moral continuity was ensured by institutionalised habits of imitation. Bourgeois culture thus seemed to ground itself in the awkward paradox that we become truly ourselves only by copying others. The tone of sharp irony and duplicity which is variously present in the work of Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky and Melville responds to this contradiction, that our words, our actions, our most intimate desires always seem to bear the trace of an other who was first on the scene and whom we unwittingly copy.

The quarrel with mimesis which is often taken to define a pivotal moment of modernism's inception had, then, implications beyond the purely formal or stylistic. Indeed, as René Girard has shown, the practice of imitation and its attendant psychology of 'imitative desire' lay at the heart of that restructuring of social relations which would ultimately generate the aesthetics of modernism. In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Girard describes what he calls the 'triangulation

of desire', a relation structured around subject, model, and object. It is the great discovery of the 19th-century novel, he argues, that desire is thus mediated by and copied from a third party whose function as a model turns out to be more important than the actual object of desire. According to Girard, the transition to modernity can be mapped by the shift from 'external' to 'internal' mediation: where, under the *ancien régime*, the model to be copied had been transcendent to the subject ('beyond the universe of the hero'[25]), 'internal mediation triumphs in a universe where the differences between men are gradually erased' (14), and the model becomes increasingly like the subject. All desire is in this sense 'Desire according to the Other' (5), and internal mediation is fraught with hatred and rivalry, since the model functions as both the origin of the subject's desire and as the obstacle to any realisation of it. Desire thus becomes 'metaphysical', detached from pragmatic considerations and the pursuit of any 'tangible advantage' (86). This, argues Girard, is the world of Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky and Proust, whose works expose the romantic myth of spontaneous desire and explore the violence on which social relations are founded.

Identification with others was now something to be feared and resisted, and this perhaps accounts for Baudelaire's appeal to dandyism as a way of redefining class divisions along a cultural axis (the term 'bourgeois' was coming to signify not simply the middle class but that sector of it which seemed wilfully lacking in cultural values). The concept of a 'new aristocracy' was actually rooted in contradiction, since the whole thrust of its artistic endeavour was to be directed against the very class to which its members themselves belonged – the class which, to twist the paradox a little more, provided the only real audience it could expect to have. As Renato Poggioli puts it in his study of the modernist avant-garde, 'the genuine art of a bourgeois society can only be anti-bourgeois'.[26] The artist-as-dandy acknowledges his potentially compromised position in the intensity of his refusal of alliances with others, a gesture which we see duplicated at the technical level of Baudelaire's writing by his rejection of any political rhetoric of identification. Not that he is blind to class tensions in contemporary life; to the contrary, many of his most powerful works record the sufferings of a disenfranchised urban proletariat. It is rather that he distrusts the rhetorical appeal to a shared human nature – a rhetoric associated, of course, with Victor Hugo, of whom Paul Valéry would later remark that 'He flirted with the crowd, he exchanged dialogues with God.'[27] Hence,

also, Baudelaire's loathing for George Sand, which was motivated not only by his characteristic misogyny but also by contempt for 'Her love of the working-class' and her 'wish to abolish Hell': 'It was the Devil who persuaded her to rely on her "good heart" and her "good sense", so that she might persuade all the other ponderous animals to rely upon *their* good heart and good sense.'[28]

This is the gospel of social identification, and Baudelaire pits against it an individualism which requires a radical, and often violent, demarcation of limits and boundaries. Perhaps the most extreme example is the prose poem 'Bash the Poor!', where the narrator responds to the entreaties of a beggar with an onslaught of violence. Much to his delight, the beggar retaliates – 'Thus, by means of the vigorous treatment I subjected him to, I had restored to him his self-esteem and zest for life.'[29] The beggar is now 'an equal' and the narrator gladly shares his purse with him. Individuality, we conclude, is won through an assertion of difference, and the violent struggle in this story is just one example of the way in which Baudelaire assumes that a sense of self has somehow to be acquired at the expense of the other.

The greatest fear is now provoked by the spectre of the Double, by the appearance of an other who somehow mirrors oneself, for in this confrontation, as we find it staged in the work of Poe, Baudelaire and Dostoyevsky, the self is drawn back into that social body from which art had seemed to offer a privileged liberation. The threat of this specular relation can be overcome only by fully *objectifying* the other, and typically (as we saw in the case of 'To a Red-haired Beggar Girl') the problem seems most pressing when Woman is involved:

> In love, as in almost all human affairs, sympathy is the result of a misunderstanding. This misunderstanding is the physical pleasure. . . . the two imbeciles are convinced that they are thinking in harmony. The unbridgeable gulf which prevents communication remains unbridged.[30]

Not only does the man of genius accept this gulf, he depends upon it to create his 'personal form of originality' (*BSW*, 420). Hence his 'revengeful indifference' (*BSW*, 163), for he 'wants to be *one* – that is, *solitary*'.[31] So much for his desire, but 'Who amongst us is not a *homo duplex*? I speak of those whose mind since childhood has been *touched with pensiveness*; always double, action and intention, dream and reality; always one hindering the other, one usurping the place

of the other.'[32] The solitary, then, is in fact always 'double': he reacts violently to aspects of himself glimpsed in others, only to find in the same moment that it is he himself who is the target of his own violence; he is both victim and executioner, as Baudelaire so memorably puts it,[33] a doubling of role which associates a certain desire for self-wounding and mutilation with a mechanising of the self in defiance of bodily needs and social dependencies. Viewed in this light, Baudelaire's dandy and Melville's Ahab may appear in unexpected proximity.

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For Baudelaire, then, this tortured disunity was the tragic condition of the modern poet, but it was also, in a curious way, his strength. The very nature of metropolitan life offered the opportunity to exploit this doubleness of the self, to make duplicity a sort of defence against the modern. For while the 18th-century city had seemed the very model of social order, the rapidly expanding metropolis of the new era appeared increasingly unintelligible and contradictory. London epitomised the almost infernal effects of urban over-crowding during this period, as we can see from the shocked responses to its conditions by writers like Dickens, Engels, Dostoyevsky and Melville.[34] The experience was unsettling in the extreme; Engels observed, for example, that people 'crowd by one another as though they had nothing in common, nothing to do with one another, and their only agreement is the tacit one, that each keep to his own side of the pavement, so as not to delay the opposing streams of the crowd'.[35] This was collective experience but without any sense of communal relationship; using an increasingly popular metaphor, the English art-critic John Ruskin noted that 'every creature is only one atom in a drift of human dust, and current of interchanging particles'.[36] And it was not always just a matter of 'drift', for the new pace of life in the city made the streets, as we have seen in 'Bash the Poor!', a setting for violent collisions and confrontations. The metropolis could become a theatre of vendettas, surveillance and bitter psychological conflict; when, for example, the narrator of *Notes from Underground* is swept aside by an impatient officer, the trivial and unthinking act seems to condense a lifetime's fears of contact with and oppression by other people. These new social relations seemed characterised by the random and accidental, and the modern sensibility was increasingly compelled to look to its own defence in a world in which even

class lines no longer seemed secure ('since the invention of the public bus,' observed Flaubert, 'the bourgeoisie is dead; they sit there in the bus alongside the "lower classes", and not only think like them and look like them but even dress like them'[37]).

The city, then, was both dangerous and exhilarating. Writers could either retreat from it into pastoral fantasy, withdrawing into the safer, more remote worlds of Arthurian legend or Trecento Italy; or they could plunge into the urban chaos, moving into the crowd 'as though into an enormous reservoir of electricity' (*BSW*, 400). The second option, to be variously encoded within the later modernisms, was the one grasped by Baudelaire (the first characterised much of the work of British poets like Tennyson and Rossetti). Once again, the conditions of modernity seemed to foster a certain duplicity in the writer, allowing him to 'see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world'. The crowded thoroughfares of the city now provided a setting for a private drama in which the artist as stroller (or *flâneur*) could shift at will between postures of aloofness and surrender.

A wager of a kind was involved in this exhilarating experience, for in so far as the abrupt movements of the city were incorporated into the artist's internal life, so the self began to lose its boundaries, becoming instead a flux of sensation and contradictory states of mind. Baudelaire depicts this as an almost erotic experience:

> The poet enjoys the incomparable privilege of being, at will, both himself and other people. Like a wandering soul seeking a body, he can enter, whenever he wishes, into anybody's personality.[38]

The poet's ego may thus be 'dispersed' at one moment and 'centralised' at another,[39] and this constant oscillation in the crowd saves him from the passive identification with others which is the lot of the tailor and the hairdresser in 'The Painter of Modern Life':

> Neither of these two beings has a thought in his head. Can one even be sure they are looking at anything – unless, like Narcissuses of fat-headedness, they are contemplating the crowd, as though it were a river, offering them their own image. In reality they exist much more for the joy of the observer than for their own. (*BSW*, 429)

It took a special kind of sensibility to accept such a wager, a distinctively modern one, of course, whose specialness derived from its volatile disunity. Again, we have to do with a legacy of the Romantic period, with its investment in personal uniqueness. Baudelaire, for example, would write to his mother that 'I am not made like other men'; Flaubert sees himself as having 'the infirmity of being born with a special language, to which I alone have the key'; and Dostoyevsky's anti-hero in *Notes from Underground*, explains that 'There was one other circumstance that tormented me at that time, namely that nobody else was like me, and I wasn't like anybody else. "I am one person, and they are everybody," I would think.'[40]

The sense of personal difference, coupled with that of speaking 'a special language', now complicated the Romantic concept of uniqueness by locating the trauma of division and separation within subjectivity rather than in the external relation of self to other. As writers abandoned the communicative spaces of the public sphere, so they were increasingly haunted by the spectre of the double – the other, we might say, was now 'inside', as we see from Poe's 'William Wilson' (1839) and Dostoyevsky's *The Double* (1846). This inward turn set language at odds with normal discourse, pressuring it to articulate an ever more intense self-consciousness (here, in germ, was the cultivation of linguistic *difficulty* which would become a trademark of the later modernism). The writer focused a cruelly analytic eye upon himself, making alien and objective what hitherto had been inward and personal. That tactic was partly indebted to the Baudelairean distrust of 'natural' emotion and the desire for aesthetic detachment (the hero of his early novel *La Fanfarlo* [1847] goes to the mirror to watch himself weep; and Sartre describes Baudelaire himself as a man 'bending over his own reflection like Narcissus'[41]). The habit of self-analysis could easily degenerate into mannerism, but beyond the gesture lay a deeper recognition of some fissure in the self, which Freud would later formulate in terms of the conscious and unconscious. It was Baudelaire's belief in original sin that led his thought in this direction, prompting the speculation that 'Every well-ordered brain has within it two postulations, toward heaven and hell; and in any image of one of these it suddenly recognises the half of itself' (*BSW*, 342).

That sense of splitting and of contradictory impulses at war within the self underlay Baudelaire's concept of the perverse, which he developed from Poe. Why do we persist in actions which run counter to our own best interests? Partly, said Poe, because we are always

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drawn towards the idea of self-destruction, like the hero of his story 'The Imp of the Perverse' who, having committed the perfect murder, cannot refrain from confessing it. Dostoyevsky defines it as that mood in which a man will 'consciously and purposely desire for himself what is positively harmful and stupid',[42] while Baudelaire finds its effects in 'man's being constantly, and at one and the same time, homicidal and suicidal, murderer and executioner' (*BSW*, 192). Humanity's aspiration to metaphysical values collapses into egoistic desires and interests (a point soon to be hammered home by Nietzsche and Max Stirner[43]), with social relations and psychological stability equally torn by a 'primaeval' violence (*BSW*, 192).

Perversity thus spells the ruin of bourgeois rationalism, and if Baudelaire was in some sense the secret agent of his class's discontent with itself (the suggestion is Walter Benjamin's), it is not surprising that he should exploit Poe's principle to the full. And what, after all, could be more perverse than writing, a pursuit of the ineffable which constantly hurls the writer back into the abyss of failure? Writing, too, is the very embodiment of something monstrous, a mutilation of the 'natural' self by its transformation into style; so Baudelaire led the way in discarding the earlier Romantic view of poetry as the product of lyrical inspiration (the expression of the poet's nature) and, following Poe, replaced it with an ideal of technical skill and craftsmanship. Discredited is Alphonse de Lamartine's lofty verdict that 'To create is beautiful, but to correct, to alter, to spoil, is poor and tedious. It is the work of masons, not of artists'[44]; in its place is Baudelaire's new view that 'Inspiration is definitely the sister of journalism.'[45] Rather be a mason than a banker, then, for the true work of aesthetic modernity depends on the assiduous cultivation of style, on that 'atrocious labour' of which Flaubert was to become an exemplary practitioner ('Last week I spent *5 days writing one page*'[46]).

This work is both 'unnatural' and self-defining; style becomes, in Flaubert's words, 'an absolute manner of seeing things',[47] and the objective might now be 'a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external'.[48] The artist is 'a monstrosity, something outside nature',[49] partly because of the 'fanatical' dedication to style but also because the rejection of the purely mimetic to which this is pledged produces a 'scientific' detachment which can appear 'inhuman'. So Flaubert remarked with satisfaction of his *Madame Bovary* (1857) that 'This will be the first time, I think, that a book makes fun of its leading lady and its leading man', and Matthew Arnold, understandably

missing the point, lamented that Flaubert 'is cruel, with the cruelty of petrified feeling, to his poor heroine; he pursues her without pity or pause, as with malignity; he is harder upon her himself than any reader even, I think, will be inclined to be'.[50] Flaubert's 'hardness' is recognisably modernist in its way of pitting style against debased forms of cultural imitation. Indeed, this is the principal theme of his novel, for while Emma Bovary's career is the very embodiment of a second-hand desire derived from romantic fiction, Flaubert's countervailing model of verbal precision – the novel itself – tacitly proposes a 'genuine' aesthetic as a ground of critical distance. A literary style thus steeped in self-reflexivity at once reveals the illusion of spontaneous desire *and* presents itself as an alternative model to be copied. That 'copying', however, is a process grounded in self-irony, since the fundamental presupposition of 'style' is that desire is always mediated by textuality and thus has to be grasped, as it were, from the outside, from the standpoint of 'writing' rather than by an act of imaginative identification. This move sums up most of what has been said above, for now perfection of style is intimately bound up with a certain cruelty and lack of human sympathy.

Suddenly it seems that the writer is less concerned with the problems of representing other people than with the 'atrocious' psychic drama which the act of writing itself sets in motion. Regarded as 'labour', writing is set apart from pragmatic bourgeois employments partly because it promises beauty and transcendence, but also because in doing so it presents a mirror to the corrupt and 'unnatural' self. It is as if writing gives us access to the innermost mechanisms of the psyche, revealing a violent disunity within the subject. Baudelaire offers a vivid account of this view of writing in the prose poem called 'The Double Room', where the fantasy of 'a really *spiritual* room' in which the 'pure dream' centres around a beautiful woman ('the sovereign of dreams') suddenly yields to a claustrophobic room in which 'time has reappeared'. Death and the Law invade this space, which we suddenly learn is the writer's room, strewn with 'manuscripts crossed out or not completed'. The incompleteness of this writing seems to make it the very medium of a temporality, in which language can never do more than remind us of things already lost. So the 'dream' of perfection embodied in the symbolic presence of the Woman yields to the purely allegorical procession of 'Memories and Regrets, Fits, Fears, Anguishes, Nightmares, Angers and Neuroses.'[51]

To define this descent into allegory, we might say that language is of its nature inherently allegorical since each sign inevitably refers to one which precedes it, thus opening a sense of time and anteriority which parallels the gap between 'levels' in a conventional allegory. Baudelaire's great desire is, in this respect, to secure moments of plenitude which transcend the leaden seriality of time, freeing us into a world of unmediated experience. Walter Benjamin observes that Baudelaire thus summons up 'not historical data, but data of pre-history',[52] a distinction which is particularly helpful when we observe that, in *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), the liberating force of an aesthetic modernity freed from imitation can be felt only as a quasi-Platonic recollection. It is in *memory* that we may secure that moment of full presence which the actual present never seems to yield. 'History', in contrast, appears as an unrelieved temporality which frustrates any metaphysical connection between visible and invisible. And where the symbolic medium of language should reaffirm a primordial bonding of word and meaning, writers like Baudelaire are increasingly aware of the inaccessibility of truth and the consequences of that for fantasies of harmony between mind and nature. Metaphysics now comes to denote the remoteness of truth, and we find in Baudelaire's poems that the modern is constantly experienced as loss and aporia. In 'The Swan', for example, the absence of stable meaning in the contemporary world is linked to the poet's recollection of 'the Paris of old', which turns the modern scene into a complex of signs pointing to things now disappeared: 'Paris is changing, but naught in my melancholy/Has moved. These new palaces and scaffoldings, blocks of stone,/Old suburbs – everything for me is turned to allegory,/And my memories are heavier than rocks'.[53])

It is not, then, that allegory fails to recognise a realm of 'truth' but rather that in according it some sort of transcendent origin it also acknowledges its absence. In thus pointing up the distance between fiction and meaning, allegory also displays a strong hierarchical tendency, valuing meaning only to degrade its material embodiment. The social world is drained of life in order to submit difference to the rule of typicality, producing in this way a mass of signs each of which could be exchanged for another. Modern allegories lack the systematic motivation of earlier forms, and they thus function not to provide metaphysical reassurance but to reveal the metaphysical itself as willed and constructed. Allegory, we might conclude, presents a 'history' in which human purpose and intention are no

longer legible; hence Baudelaire's nightmare evocations of unendingly empty Time and the related sense of language as a body of inert and reified signs from which the human guarantee of meaning has fled along with the divine.

Faced with the barren perspectives of allegory, the writer's irony comes to seem a legitimate rejoinder to an irony buried in the very frame of things. Nature, once more, is the prime deceiver; as Ishmael learns in Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), 'all deified Nature absolutely paints like the harlot, whose allurements cover nothing but the charnel-house within'.[54] In Ahab's pursuit of Moby-Dick, the meaning to be uncovered is inextricably bound up with death itself, and the final wreckage embodies the collapse of Romantic vision in a world which has room only for the harsher solvents of allegory. For dreams of cosmic unity, of an identification of self and non-self, are dangerously deceptive, as Ishmael discovers when he almost falls from the masthead during a pantheistic revery. Melville's novel constantly pits the individualism of Ahab's metaphysical quest for meaning against a social ideal of interdependency ('Nothing exists in itself' [148]), showing the two to be not only disjunct but separated by a void in which human meanings expire. For Melville, as in a different way for Nietzsche, humanity is committed in advance to a restless quest for 'truth', but because that truth is situated beyond the human, the outer limit of the quest must always be the point at which the bonds of sociality are finally destroyed. Metaphysics means the death of the world – Ahab must destroy Moby-Dick in order to prove the correctness of his own interpretation of nature – just as the ideological 'truths' of Manifest Destiny must be purchased through genocide.

This perhaps explains why the conclusion of the novel seems in some way unresolved – does it imply the salvation or wreckage of the ship of state through expansionism and slavery? – for the wealth of allegorical allusion to the politics of the time fails to yield a key to the narrative as a whole.[55] The text gestures instead to a politics which has become frozen as allegory, sealed by an inflated, often biblical rhetoric into a timeless recurrence of the typical and abstract. In his work after *Moby-Dick*, Melville would discern even fewer signs of human connection, imprisoning his characters in a world like Bartleby's, where confinement is relieved only by the sight of a blank wall. Such images of a failed sociality are intended, like the claustrophobic tableaux of Baudelaire and the stone walls of *Notes from Underground*, as ever-present reminders of the *limits* of

modernity. This world is hollowed-out, devoid of any transfiguring human presence, yet even as it compels the writer to adopt violent postures of recoil and 'revengeful indifference' (*BSW*, 163), it somehow retains the inscription of the social – a sign, but one now barely legible.

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