Charles Baudelaire ‘’The Painter of Modern Life’’

Charles Baudelaire begins his essay with a descriptive character formation of a self-taught artist he refers to as M.G., by drawing out the characteristics of the artist's nature and actions. These include: originality, modesty, a lack of need for approval, a desire to be anonymous, a lack of ulterior motives, and an obsession with a world of images. M.G. does not sign his pieces with his name. The author claims that the artist's nature is clearly readable in his works and even without the signature you can tell it was created by M.G. because “all his works are signed with his dazzling soul.” M.G.'s knowledge of materials and capability of art making are referred to as being a gift. This leads to Baudelaire's distinction between what constitutes artist versus man of the world, because he calls M.G. a man of the world, rather than just an artist.

He defines artist(s) as a slave, “a specialist…skilled brutes, mere manual laborers, village pub-talkers with the minds of country bumpkins,” discussing in narrow dialogs. The man of the world, on the other hand, is something higher, better, and more than the artist—“a man who understands the world and the mysterious and legitimate reasons behind all its customs.” Baudelaire calls him a “spiritual citizen of the universe” and describes his immense yearning for knowledge and understanding. The author suggests that this initial attitude of yearning within an individual is what may lead to becoming a man of genius.

At first, the reader assumes M.G. is a specific person, but Baudelaire becomes more abstract in his character formation, which makes M.G. out to be more of an overall ideal—a way of being. The author vividly describes the mindset of a convalescent to highlight an attitude of curiosity inherent in M.G. He goes on to say that the experience of curiosity, interest, and passion, at these extremes, is relatable to being a child—one distracted by the wonder of every single element as being new and exciting. Basically, Baudelaire is depicting the idea of artist as super sensory sensitive. However, M.G. does not have the mentality of a child. He is a hybrid of childlike naivety mixed with a mature sensibility, making him man of a genius.

So far, M.G. holds an elitist position as man of the world, but Baudelaire also notes the downside to this position concerning the artist's capacity of feeling. Just as M.G. can be taken to ecstasy through observation, he can also feel the worst of all pains. Baudelaire's example is a quote by M.G. himself: “‘any man who is not weighed down with a sorrow so searching as to

touch all his faculties, and who is bored in the midst of the crowd, is a fool! A fool! and I despise him!’” Here, the author uses the theme of melancholia belonging to the genius; his gift is both a positive and negative bestowment received by Fate.

Baudelaire closes by maintaining the myth and the need of the artist in culture. He describes the magical creation process as an activity that produces objects inevitably carrying the essence and soul of their creator. He celebrates a mature naivety towards the present, and condemns borrowing too much from the past. Baudelaire is proposing an idea of man and a way of reacting to the world that will eventually lead to some progression—a man forever in search of modernity.

In his essay The Painter of Modern Life, Charles Baudelaire defines modernity by examining the nature of beauty, fashion, and the modern lifestyle through the eyes of an artist. He sees beauty and modernity as intertwined, defining beauty as "made up of an eternal, invariable element…and of a relative circumstantial element." Modernity is this inconstant element the "ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is eternal and immutable." Baudelaire believes that an artist can learn technical skills from old masters, but to make art beautiful, an artist must understand the nature of "present-day beauty." The beauty of the present day, the beauty of modernity, comes from "its essential quality of being present," in other words, its inconsistency, its variableness in each moment. The ability to capture the beauty of the present day, Baudelaire claims, will ultimately make art "worthy of antiquity." He suggests that artists to break away from the academic style of painting classical scenes in classical clothes, that the reason why antiquity resonates with us today is that it was able to capture the beauty of its time, and that late 19th century artists cannot secure their place in history by painting someone else's present.

This sort of painting, a contemporary woman in classical dress, is what Baudelaire is criticizing in his essay. Jacques-Louis David (1748 - 1825), Portrait of Madame Récamier, 1800, Louvre Museum, Paris.

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In looking for modern-day subjects, Baudelaire says that an artist must be "the spiritual citizen of the universe" with an intense curiosity and interest in crowds. He uses the example of an anonymous "Monsieur G." (the painter Constantine Guys) whom he claims possesses all of the necessary qualities of a modern artist.

A constant spectator, the modern artist should always be "keenly interesting himself in things, be they apparently of the most trivial." Baudelaire equates the curiosity of the modern artist to that of a child, claiming that artistic "genius is nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will," and that the artist must see everything, like a child, "in a state of newness." With their mind open to the world, the modern artist can then choose from a variety of subjects to paint. Baudelaire speaks mostly on the subject of the modern woman, in all classes of society: fashionable young women, elegant families, ballerinas, actresses, courtesans, and prostitutes. With a return to the idea of beauty in inconsistency, Baudelaire notes that the "variety, not only in manners and gestures, but even in the actual form of the face" makes these women appropriate subjects for the modern painter.

Baudelaire also emphasizes to paint women in "whatever luxurious trappings the subjects may be decked." Once only ever portrayed in the nude, the modern woman should not dare be portrayed "separate from her costume" and that a woman and her clothes are "an indivisible unity." This sentiment is perhaps a reaction to Victorian-era ideas of "buttoning up," where women's bodies were to be hidden by their clothes, but also a recognition that clothes are a symbol of identity in modern society, a "permanent and repeated attempt at [Nature's] reformation." We cannot replace our bodies to suit our identities, but we can alter them through fashion and cosmetics (and today, tattoos.)

Moving from women to men, Baudelaire claims that the male "Dandy's" obsession with fashion is an effort to look like one's "ideal self," or what they see as their true identity. Dandies attempt to "distill the eternal from the transitory," combining modern fashion with that

"invariable element" that results in Baudelaire's definition of beauty. Fashion, though, does not stop at clothing, but is a "living 'style,'" encompassing gestures, glances, smiles, and generally how one carries oneself through the world. The Dandy's preoccupation with distinguishing their identity through fashion comes from a "burning need to create for oneself a personal originality" within the crowds of people that fill the modern city. Growing anonymity due to "the rising tide of democracy" is fought by these Dandies through their use of fashion to reclaim their individuality.

I agree with Baudelaire that the modern painter should observe "particular beauty, the beauty of circumstance and the sketch of manners" as is expressed in the work of one of my favorite artists, Edgar Degas.

It is these everyday gestures, the capture of "slow time" in a sketch of a ballerina adjusting her slipper, that cause viewers to pause and take note of the beauty in little moments so often overshadowed by the speed of modern life. To see these moments, an artist should always be looking, and as Baudelaire says "a genius for which no aspect of life has become stale."However, I disagree that the sentiment of modern works is "generally solemn and dark" as Baudelaire claims. The "moral fecundity" which gives modern art its "special beauty" is, in my view, not a warning about the danger of losing the smaller moments in life, but recognizing and celebrating them as essential to the human character; that how we gesture is as much of an aspect of our identity as how we dress. The modern artist should be a "lover of universal life," and if he truly is, he will recognize that the modern world is not always "weird, violent and excessive," but instead filled with small, beautiful occasions.

The Painter of Modern Life

Like many writers before and after him, Baudelaire wrote without specific commission, on “spec” as it were. This essay on Constantin Guys, an illustrator for the Illustrated London News, was actually written in 1860 and would not be published until 1863 in installment form in Figaro. The publication of the article coincided with the infamous Salon des Réfusés and the

debut of Édouard Manet as an artist of scandal. Suddenly, what had been a nebulous concern, about content and technique in art making, became urgent and topical. Manet had presented a courtesan as a modern "Venus," a prostitute as a modern "Nude," and had quoted Renaissance artists, Raphael and Titian to do so. In addition, the painter had eschewed "good" drawing and approved "finish" for a causal and notational manner of transcribing. The Painter of Modern Life made sense of what Manet had done to art—made painting "modern."

There is a real question as to whether or not the "painter" of whom Baudelaire wrote was less important than the essay itself. While it is certainly true that any writer uses others as vehicles for his or her views, the selection of Constantin Guys was crucial to the main point of the essay. Guys, who, according to Baudelaire, refused to be named in the essay, was an old soldier who had served in that most romantic of conflicts, the freedom of Greece. As widely traveled as the poet was provincial, Guys had spent years as a reporter and an war correspondence for the Illustrated London News during the Crimean War. The artist informed the English audience of the details of an unpopular war at a time where his pen was much quicker than the camera. Born in 1802, Guys was far older than Baudelaire when he returned to live in Paris, and he lived much longer than the poet who suffered from syphilis and drug addiction. Guys died in a tragic traffic accident in 1892.

Baudelaire saw Guys as a bohemian hero, an outsider, the "observer, philosopher, flâneur" and as "the painter of the passing moment and of all the suggestions of eternity it contains." Like Baudelaire, he, a "man of the crowd," was a journalist who was trained to watch and look carefully, especially at the details, or what the poet described as, "particular beauty, the beauty of circumstances and the sketch of manners." But Baudelaire drew a distinction between the dandy—Guys "has a horror of blasé people…" (like the dandy)—and the flâneur , or the "passionate spectator." Baudelaire made the point, over and over, that the flâneur was someone who is traveling "incognito" or, in other words, the flâneur fades into the crowd, unnoticed. "…the crowd is his element," Baudelaire said, "…the lover of universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electric energy." "Monsieur Guys," due to the necessary haste to record what he saw "drew like a barbarian, or a child," producing "primitive scribbles," was declared by Baudelaire to be "not precisely an artist, but rather a man of the world." "…the mainspring of his genius is curiosity." The working methods of the artist were traditional in that he looked, he saw, he scribbled and then, using his memory, completed his thought later in a sketch-like record.

Baudelaire stressed the "rights and privileges offered by circumstances…for almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations." Reaching back to Friedrich Schiller, perhaps, Baudelaire compares the artistic condition of Guys to be that of childhood, suggesting that the illustrator was an instinctive artist, from whom images simply flow, without hierarchy and without restraint. Under the direction of no one, Guys simply sketched what he saw. "But genius is nothing more not less than childhood recovered at will..," Baudelaire stated. So, it is implied, that only the "childlike artist," who was Schiller's "naïve artist," is equipped to see and record the new world. Baudelaire stated,

By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable…This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with. By neglecting it, you cannot fail to tumble into the abyss of an abstract and indeterminate beauty, like that of the time the first woman before the fall of man."

This is the founding definition of modernity, coined by a poet and evidenced by an illustrator of the "crowd."

The salient quality of The Painter of Modern Life is what and whom Guys, the grown man, found interesting. "Modern Life," for Baudelaire, appeared to be located among la bohème, which, in itself, was a creation of the modern world. First, there is the dandy. The dandy is one of Baudelaire's heroes and makes many appearances in the urban scenes captured by Guys. "Dandyism," the poet said, "borders upon the spiritual and stoical…Dandyism is the last spark of heroism amid decadence…Dandyism is a sunset; like the declining daystar, it is glorious, without heat and full of melancholy. But alas, the rising tide of democracy, which invades and levels everything, is daily overwhelming these last representatives of human pride and pouring floods of oblivion upon the footprints of these stupendous warriors…" This man has "an air of coldness…a latent fire…(which) chooses not to burst into flames," he concluded, alluding to the resigned cynicism of an endangered species in the face of unstoppable changes.

The female, in contrast to the male, is described, not in terms of character or psychology, but as a spectacle: "She is a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching." But far from dismissing the female, Baudelaire continues for pages, focusing on cosmetics and fashion. For

Modernism, fashion is the leading indicator or the "ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent," for nothing is more changeable than fashion. Fashion stands for the new consumerism, showcased in the arcades, where commodities were protected in passages of iron and glass. Positioned between the major avenues, the arcades were the domain of the flâneur, both male and female, and the precursors to the department stores. Consumer capitalism needs to create desire to tempt the buyer to purchase, which meant the creation of products that, by their very nature, needed to be renewed. Not food or another necessity, but an artificial desire for a non-necessity drove the economy. The woman becomes the carrier of artificiality.

Baudelaire, a city dweller, is no nature lover: "I ask you to review an scrutinize whatever is natural—all the actions and desires of the purely natural man: you will find nothing but frightfulness. Everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation." And cosmetics. "Fashion should thus be considered as a symptom of the taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all the crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-à-brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain: as a sublime subordination of Nature, or rather a permanent and repeated attempt at her redemption." There is a slippage in Baudelaire's writings from "women" to "prostitutes," as if, for the poet there is no divide. It is known that his only relationship was with a prostitute, but that kind of connection was not uncommon, in an age where marriage was often a financial alliance. Baudelaire seemed to have no interest in the so-called respectable woman, who reflected her husband's position and the values of the bourgeois society. The prostitute is a free and liberated woman, from the poet's perspective and thus wears modernity as cosmetics and fashion, proclaiming the artificial. Indeed, the poet compares the application of make up to the creation of a work of art: "Maquillage has no need to hide itself or to shrink from being suspected. On the contrary, let it display itself, at least if it does so with frankness and honesty."

Gradually, as the essay draws to a conclusion, Guys, the "painter of modern life," has become less important that the social conditions he observed and recorded. Modern life, fueled by commodities and their artificial manufacture of artificial desires, is defined by a new and bewildering urban environment, populated by new kinds of people, the demimonde. Nothing is real and everything changes and, above all, nothing is natural. Baudelaire understands that art is not a copy of nature. Art is inherently and definitionally artificial, as artificial as fashion, as ephemeral as a fad. The role of the artist is not to re-imagine the "eternal" or the antique but to seize upon the passing fancy, that salient detail that captures the mood of the moment.

The Painter of Modern Life predicts the paintings of Manet, such as The Street Singer of the same year—-a grisette (low level prostitute), or street entertainer, strides past the flâneur. She is eating cherries and glances briefly at the spectator and is caught in a brief instant of time, and quickly moves on, her wide skirts embellished in the latest fashionable embellishments. The idea of the passive observer who merely records, the demand that that watcher react quickly to what the photographer, Henri Cartier-Bresson, would call “the decisive moment,” looks forward to the Impressionist artists who were much less cynical and sophisticated than the art writer. Baudelaire did not live long enough to see a group of painters embrace the sketch-like approach of “the painter of modern life,” but his essay became foundational in its description of modernity: all that is “transitory” and “fugitive.” It has been a hundred and fifty years since The Painter of Modern Life was published and with the benefit of hindsight one can only marvel at how much our world resembles that of the poet.