"Half Art": Baudelaire's *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*

Rachel Bowlby

In this piece, I look at an essay that I have probably read too often not to find in it the key to all matters aesthetic, historical, philosophical, and more. The essay is Charles Baudelaire's *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (*The Painter of Modern Life*), first published in 1863 and written, most probably, around 1859 to 1860. Baudelaire's exhilarating innovation is to downplay the significance of eternal value in art, in favor of what he designates as its other half, the fleeting presentness that is modernity. My essay is unapologetically an appreciation – for the most part – of a text that, in focusing on another artist, itself appears to be just that.[1] For Baudelaire develops his arguments through a mock-anonymous celebration of the artist Constantin Guys, referred to as M. G. (Monsieur G.). Guys's prolific sketches, done at speed, for rapid journal publication, chart the smallest of day-by-day changes and typical scenes in contemporary life. Guys's pictures – the art of modernity – give to the day a second life, and "translate" into a different medium – from sight to (mental) impression to its "rebirth" as a sketch – that which would otherwise be lost with its passing.

At one level, then, *The Painter of Modern Life* is a celebration of the work (and the lifestyle) of Guys, whose subjects ranged from fashion to war, and whose images were reproduced in widely circulated magazines such as the *Illustrated London News*.[2] Guys is not named directly by Baudelaire; there is a coy pretense of secrecy, on the grounds that this is what the mysterious M. G. himself would prefer,

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

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

> This is a perfect opportunity, in truth, to establish a rational and historical theory of the beautiful, in opposition to the theory of a unique and absolute beautiful; to show that the beautiful is always, necessarily of a double composition, even though the impression it produces is unified. . . . The beautiful is made of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity is excessively difficult to determine, and of a relative, circumstantial element that will be, if we want, in turn or all together, the period, fashion, morality, passion. . . . I challenge anyone to discover some sample of beauty that does not contain these two elements. (I, 549 – 550)

Later on, this grand theory is stated from the other direction, starting from the historical rather than from the eternal, in what may well be the most famous sentence of Baudelaire's essay:

> Modernity is the transitory, the fleeting [*le fugitif*], the contingent, *half of art* [*la moitié de l'art*], the other half of which is the eternal and the unchangeable. (IV, 553; emphasis added)

At a stroke, or a couple of strokes, Baudelaire transforms, or claims to, both the likely subject matter and the evaluative criteria for art. The whole field of contemporary life and manners is opened up as worth representing, worth making into art – as having its own beauty. But Baudelaire is not simply making a claim for a new art that will do justice to the beauties of the present – the mid-nineteenth-century present in particular. He is also affirming that all art, always, has "contain[ed] these two elements"; and that there is a pleasure in the art of the present *as such*. The art of past times can be seen, in this light, to have been representing its own present; one polemical thrust of the essay is Baudelaire's contempt for artists who insist on draping their subjects in "historical" costumes, rather than showing them in the fashions of their own moment: "The pleasure we take from the representation of the present derives not only from the beauty that may clothe it, but also from its essential quality of presentness [*sa qualité essentielle de présent*]" (I, 547).[4]

"The pleasure we take" draws everyone into an appreciation of a world out there now that is already and always half art, awaiting its completion or visibility in the form of the artist's representation. It is also perpetually changing, with the observer or artist enjoying and noting what Baudelaire calls, in a lovely phrase, *la metamorphose journalière des choses extérieures*, "the daily metamorphosis of external things" (II, 550) – a formulation that seems to be poised halfway, mythically and historically, between Ovidian transformations and the tiny but perpetual changes of *The Origin of Species*, which is exactly contemporary.[5]

The scene is set far from the natural variations of seasons, landscapes, or living things; nature is neither an image of stability against the confusions of social change, nor in itself a model of constant growth and change. Unlike either of these, though, Baudelaire's changing world is proudly urban and man-made – and woman-made: his paradigm of daily change and proto-art is fashion. Woman may be the first spectacle, inseparable, says Baudelaire, from her costume, her *toilette*; she is also, by implication, the primary artist, who knows that nature stands in need of embellishment.

The chapter entitled "Eloge du maquillage" ("In Praise of Makeup") draws Baudelaire's most scathing remarks against the idealization of nature in both an aesthetic and a moral sense. This leads him to yoke together two seemingly quite disparate halves. Fashion and makeup, emblematized by the woman, are joined to the civilizing necessity of collective morality that has to be added on. Just as nature is to be improved, or beautified, by makeup and dress, so morality is founded not on following but in departing from a nature which, if left to itself, would be violent: "Crime is originally natural; the human animal drank in the taste for it in its mother's womb. Virtue, in contrast, is *artificial*, supernatural, because in all times and for all nations there have had to be gods and prophets to teach it to animalized humanity and because *on his own*, man would have been powerless to discover it" (XI, 562; emphasis in original). This is how Baudelaire slips an ethical half in alongside his theory of art: morality is like art, in that both of them seek to improve on a nature that is originally flawed.

Baudelaire's half-and-half theory of art is not itself presented as belonging to any particular time. Implicitly, it is transhistorical or even quasi-eternal. For any given work of art – and the earliest example he offers is pretty early: primitive religious art – there is and was a circumstantial, cultural present, discernible in retrospect as distinctive and often now as ancient. Some past presents, though, are evidently more worthwhile than others. Baudelaire has little time for what he sees as the falsely historicizing or pseudo-simple self-representations of the eighteenth century – just as early-twentieth-century modernists would routinely debunk the benighted aesthetics and values of the nineteenth century. But it might also seem that the idea Baudelaire is promoting about both the significance and the perpetual change of the present could only have come up in the modern period in which he was writing: in other words, in a world conscious in a new way of change, rapid change, as the normal condition of life. This does not invalidate the theory; but it might suggest that only in the modern period, the period in which both the constancy and the rapidity of visible change are taken for granted, could artistic images come to be viewed in this way: as the remains of modernities past.

In this connection, we might also wonder about the almost arithmetical division of art into two halves – with nothing apparently in between these mutually defining, separate-but-united extremes of historical time, the eternal and the momentary. It makes for a neat dialectic and for a perhaps too easy complementarity of form and content: "Without this second element" – that is, the second element of the present age – "which is like the amusing, titillating, apéritif envelope of the divine gateau, the first element would be indigestible, unappreciable, unadapted and not appropriate to human nature" (I, 550). For the consumer of art, this sounds like a way of having your cake and eating it – of doubling, not halving, a pleasure which, in perfectly Baudelairean fashion, is both digestive and divine.

Guys, as the exemplary observer and reporter of daily changes, appears in various guises, all of them associated with a post-Romantic protean self. He is said to be like a child: curious, and seeking and finding everywhere evidence of novelty. Or, like a convalescent, he is an adult whose childish curiosity is revived, so that he always sees the world as new. Here Baudelaire appeals to Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" (1840), but omits the tyrannous fascination exercised by the figure whom the narrator cannot help but pursue. In this Baudelairean world are no mysteries, no threats or unreadable signs; the pleasure is all in a visible image that is its own present, given to the curious eye. Following this line, Guys is also a casual *flâneur*, one quite unthreatened by any imagined enemy or alien figure within the crowd. On the contrary, he plunges into it, becoming a "mirror" or a "kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness" (III, 552); he is even a self who can't get enough of non-self – a "*moi* insatiable du *non-moi*" (III, 552; emphasis in original).

Alongside this immersion a countermovement makes M. G. the artist into a restless, tireless worker whose job is never done. Things are changing all the time, new sights coming into view, and M. G.'s task, by definition impossible and endless, is to get them all down, all represented, before it is too late. But first, his day job is to see – when he wakes in the morning he rushes off in regret that he's already missed so many hours of the light and of "*lit-up* things I could have seen and I haven't seen!" (III, 552; emphasis in original). Baudelaire's highlights of Guys's typical day show him swooping down from the panoramic "landscapes of the big city," all the way to the details of a minutely modified way of buckling a belt or tying a bonnet. "All this enters into him, jumbled up; and in a few minutes, the poem that results from it will be virtually composed" (III, 553). Until finally: "But evening has come!" Everyone else is in bed, the gaslights are out, but M. G. is at his work, "fighting it out with his pencil, his pen, his paintbrush, making the water spurt up from the glass to the ceiling, wiping his pen dry on his shirt, in a hurry, violent, active, as if he was afraid of the images escaping him. . . . And the things are reborn on the paper, natural and more than natural, beautiful and more than beautiful" (III, 553). There is real work here, part of an idiosyncratic daily pattern, involving excesses of energy and haste – there is no time to lose but somehow, from the material mess of the workshop, the magical rebirth occurs. The fleeting present, temporarily stored as mental images, must and can be saved, re-presented, rematerialized, to give it a second life.

The notion of rebirth is crucial here: "And the things are reborn [*renaissent*] on the paper." Phrases like "the representation of the present" or "the memory of the present" highlight the disjunction inherent in this present that is always moving past, that is separated from itself the second it is seen and registered as such. But the painter can bring about a miracle of resurrection, through what Baudelaire calls "a memory that says to each thing, 'Lazarus, arise!'" which is all the time contending with "a fire, a pencil-drunkenness, almost like a madness. It is the fear of not going fast enough, of letting the phantom escape before the synthesis has been extracted and seized" (V, 555).[6] The stress is not on something that must be lost in the change of form, the movement away from reality, but on the energy and passion that brings about a new life. And the life belongs not to the subject, the artist-observer, but to the things themselves. This is not, in other words, an elegiac version of *carpe diem*, mourning the predicament of a subject condemned to make the most of his

transitory existence before it is too late *for him*; rather, it is the external, contingent things of the world that must be grasped and revived in a form in which they can begin and continue to matter.

Baudelaire more than once uses the image of fencing, the "duel" that is set up between "the will to see everything, to forget nothing, and the faculty of memory," which takes in the general contours of what is seen (V, 555). But he also has another metaphor for Guys's working practice: translation. For the most part, Baudelaire insists, Guys does not and should not draw from nature; he gains or takes *impressions*, which are then, in a subsequent stage, set down. In all there are three image-stages: the image first seen, then the image in the memory, and finally the image that is actually drawn on the paper. Baudelaire calls what Guys does "translating his own impressions," the impressions – much more plainly a printing term in French – being the image in the mind of the image out there; spelling it out a few sentences later, he says: "The spectator is here the translator of a translation" (V, 555). In the choice of this word, we can glimpse the first hints of some other kinds of translation that may be taking place, more or less surreptitiously, throughout the essay. Any art criticism must, by definition, put pictures into words, must represent the image in a different, verbal medium. Baudelaire takes this process right back to the artist's own practice, so that a visual representation of what is seen is already being conceptualized in the destination medium of its present representation in words – as a series of translations.

In other ways, too, Baudelaire's transposition of Guys's art into the terms of his own theory of modernity clinches or subtly affirms its own argument. At various points, Guys's work is actually described as a "poem" – as in, "the poem that results from it will be virtually composed" (III, 553). The effect is to make it seem as if Guys's art was from the outset awaiting this final translation in and into words; his consecration is granted by, and also entirely dependent on the words of the critic. Baudelaire emphasizes, and praises, the provisional, half-art condition of Guys's works. His method "has this incomparable advantage, that at any point in its progress, every drawing looks finished enough; you may call that a sketch [*ébauche*] if you like, but a perfect sketch" (V, 555). Baudelaire admires Guys's casual, dispersed and dispersing, attitude. He works on several pictures at once; now and then he goes through them and picks out a few to touch up a bit more; he is always giving them away or throwing them out. In its very practice, Guys's work illustrates the perpetually ongoing external changes that are the ephemeral side of art's subject. But it needs the writer to finish off the image of Guys himself as the artist of modern life. So Guys himself is brought alive or reborn in a new, Baudelairean way: raised up to embody that role.

Over the years, critics of Baudelaire have often speculated about alternative artists who might have been chosen instead to take Guys's exalted place. Why this minor figure, little known at the time – and today, ironically, known best as the artist who figures in Baudelaire's *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*? But I think this misses the point of the essay, which positively requires a half-artist to exemplify the uneternal, uncanonical half of art that is said to be excluded by traditional aesthetic values. Guys's type of art is not to be found in museums, or not primarily; instead it is scattered in modern media that are themselves both actual – of today – and ephemeral. Guys was not a poster artist, but that would have been an equally pertinent choice, since posters at the time were themselves a ubiquitous feature of the always changing street views of big cities.

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

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

It is interesting, with regard to the representation of the transitory, that Baudelaire was not interested in the artistic and representational possibilities of the then new medium of photography; in fact, he loved to hate it, describing what he called "the photographic industry" as "the refuge of all the would-be painters too little gifted or too lazy to finish their studies." The incompleteness of the sketch is not a virtue here, nor does photography appear as a means of capturing the momentary or infinitesimal modifications of the day that are his focus in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*.[8] And yet, in speaking of Guys's visual dispatches from the Crimea, Baudelaire singles out one image to which the artist has added (in English) the phrase "Taken on the spot" (VI, 556). What could be more of an advertisement for photography as a mode of eyewitness reporting? Present at the Crimean War of the mid-1850s were not only artists such as Guys but also a photographer, Roger Fenton.

In one way, it is ironic that this essay about the importance of the ephemeral should have acquired an extended history and thus a kind of proto-immortality. In one of its recent reincarnations, it finds a place in the monumental *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*.[9] Several brief extracts are distilled as the portions fit for a place in the canons of criticism; the longest are the chapters on modernity and makeup ("Eloge du maquillage," here translated as "In Praise of Cosmetics"). From all the passages chosen, but the one on makeup in particular, Baudelaire's essay emerges as a manifesto for the postmodern – as celebrating the images and surfaces of everyday fashions and beauties without the backing of a substantive, foundational authenticity, and as insisting on the necessity but also the contingency of ethics. It is a selection and slanting that is designed to highlight Baudelaire's continuing modernity – and to show him as a precursor of contemporary philosophical theories. In its new digest, Baudelaire's essay on modern life and art is brought back to life for new readers – half, or less than half, chosen to represent the whole of it in the terms of a primarily playful and pleasurable postmodernity.

In this connection, it is interesting that while the essay on Guys stresses the historicity of both art and daily life, it is not concerned with how future cultural changes might bring about new versions

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

ENDNOTES

1 An earlier version of this essay, written originally for a one-day conference on the subject of "Why Art Matters," in honor of Malcolm Bowie, was published in the journal *Paragraph* 34 (1) (March 2011): 1–11; used here by permission of Edinburgh University Press.

2 The weekly *Illustrated London News* had a circulation of 300,000 in 1863; the figure for the (daily) *Times*, which was the dominant serious British newspaper, was just 70,000.

3 Charles Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Marcel A. Ruff (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1968), ch. III, 551. All further chapter and page citations are to this edition, and will be noted parenthetically in the main text; translations are mine.

4 There is a related complaint against a false historicism in art in Henry Fielding's 1749 novel *Tom Jones*: "Vanbrugh and Congreve copied nature; but they who copy them draw as unlike the present age as Hogarth would do if he was to paint a rout or a drum in the dresses of Titian and of Vandyke. In short, imitation here will not do the business. The picture must be after nature herself. A true knowledge of the world is gained only by conversation, and the manners of every rank must be seen in order to be known"; quoted from John Bender and Simon Stern's edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 648–649. Unlike Baudelaire, however, Fielding's primary target is not those who consider the present an unfit subject for art, but those who write about the upper classes without having any personal familiarity with them; from this he makes the analogy with a hypothetical picture of a fashionable contemporary social event in the costume of a previous age. That art should be open to the authentic representation of present-day scenes, à la Hogarth, is here taken for granted; it is not the subject of special advocacy.

More directly in the French literary line as a precursor to Baudelaire is Stendhal's argument for a literature suited to its own time in *Racine et Shakespeare* (1823). Shakespeare, for Stendhal, stands for a responsiveness to contemporary culture that is absent from the French persistence in following literary models and rules that have long ceased to have any vitality in the present. One style may be the right one for the time it emerges, but dated and quite inappropriate for a later period or society. Stendhal uses the terms *classicism* and *romanticism* to differentiate between the two attitudes to literary production:

> Sophocles and Euripides were eminently romantic; they gave the Greeks assembled in the theatre at Athens the tragedies which were bound to procure the greatest possible pleasure for this people, based on their moral habits, their religion, and their prejudices.
>
> To imitate Sophocles and Euripides today, and to make out that these imitations will not produce yawns in a nineteenth-century French person, is classicism.

See Stendhal, "Racine et Shakespeare," in *Racine et Shakespeare (1818–1825) et autres texets de théorie romantique*, ed. Michel Crouzet (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2006), 295; my translation.

Whereas Baudelaire insists that the eternal and the present are two sides or halves of the same artistic coin, Stendhal makes a much clearer demarcation such that works will fall into one or the other category, unequivocally. But the binary mode of manifesto argument is the same, as is the emphasis on the value of presently relevant artistic practice (and the mocking dismissal of the perpetuation, in contemporary work, of modes of writing whose time has long since passed).

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

5 The first edition of Darwin's book was published in 1859. Its running evolutionary argument is directed against the idea of natural history proceeding by means of sudden leaps or shifts or obliterations, and in favor of a countermodel of constant, infinitesimal change, without a clear teleology of development – what Darwin calls "a slowly changing drama." Without large or decisive events, this drama is anti-tragic: "The old notion of all the inhabitants of the earth having been swept away at successive periods by catastrophes is very generally given up. . . . On the contrary, we have every reason to believe . . . that species and groups of species gradually disappear, one after another, first from one spot, then from another, and finally from the world." See Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, ed. Gillian Beer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 254, 256.

6 Another reference to Lazarus's resurrection occurs in Baudelaire's poem "Le Flacon." In his moment of reemergence into life, Lazarus appears with the stench of a corpse several days old: "Lazare odorant déchirant son suaire." In this poem concentrated on a power of smell that is stronger than either matter or death, the odorous Lazarus comes over very differently from the Lazarus of *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. The reawakening of "Lazare, lève-toi" is clean by comparison; it is aural and visual, to do with response and recognition. (In the analogy, the dead man hears the words; the figure who rises again can be seen to be the image of Lazarus.)

7 At the time of Baudelaire's writing, posters were far more prominent on city streets than they are now: this was their heyday, before the regulation that kept and keeps them off many external surfaces. In Paris, the words "Défense d'Afficher: Loi du 29 juillet 1881" ("No Bill Posting: Law of 29 July 1881") may still be read, inscribed into the walls of many buildings around the city: as though ephemeral images and writing could only be prevented by permanent writing in the very place from which they have been prohibited.

8 Baudelaire, "Le Public moderne et la photographie" (from "Salon de 1859"), in *Oeuvres completes*, ed. Ruff, 395 – 396.

9 See *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 792 – 802.