
Forum

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Baudelaire and Autonomous Art

To the Editor:

Judith Ryan's rearguard defense of modernism in "More Seductive Than Phryne: Baudelaire, G r me, Rilke, and the Problem of Autonomous Art" (108 [1993]: 1128–41) misrepresents Baudelaire as an unambiguous opponent of autonomous art. Ryan does acknowledge Peter B rger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and the objection prompted by B rger to the frequent failure to distinguish avant-garde radicalism from modernist aestheticism. But Ryan proceeds to dodge the matter by delving into "specific textual analysis" (1129), with minimal gestures toward the issue presumably at hand. If B rger's polemic is overgeneralized, Ryan's response is merely evasive, especially given her untroubled incorporation of the assumption, long since laid bare by B rger (and Benjamin, Brecht, Breton, Debord, Luk cs, etc.), that formal innovation alone—in Baudelaire's case, the prose poem—is tantamount to "an act of opposition against the repressive culture in which [the] poetry is embedded." It is difficult to see how Ryan's terms do not essentially reproduce the formative efforts in modernism's canonization, like Richard Chase's well-known 1957 essay "The Fate of the Avant-Garde," which equates aesthetic experiment with social protest (as do Adorno, Kristeva, etc., with variations). *Les fleurs du mal* hardly strikes every critic as formally "destabilizing," either (1128); Tony Pinkney, in introducing Raymond Williams's *The Politics of Modernism* (Verso, 1989), points out that Baudelaire's collection retains "the tight rhyming quatrains of the traditional lyric poem" (12), which Ryan conveniently translates into prose form not only to buttress her opening claim but also to concentrate, in fact, on the airy content.

Ryan concludes that Baudelaire "never suggests that poetry is not essentially linked to its social and political context" (1138). It is hard to object to this, simply because of the ambiguity and self-contradictions of Baudelaire's politics, developed with considerable subtlety by T. J. Clark in *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France 1848–51* (Princeton UP, 1982). But the other basis Ryan briefly notes for her claim that Baudelaire opposed the concept of autonomous art, his criticism of the *l'art pour l'art* movement, is not necessarily advocacy of a social context for art, though his critique appears in an essay on Pierre Dupont, a poet who wrote popular political songs. Ryan's own source on this matter, Hans Robert

Jauss (citing Gerhard Hess), finds that Baudelaire objects to “art for art’s sake” because of its scorn for the material, without which there could be no “transitory beautiful” (“The Literary Process of Modernism from Rousseau to Adorno,” *Cultural Critique* 11 [1988–89]: 48)—or no proper, hard-won access to the *spiritual*. As Baudelaire puts it in “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863), social life supplies art with an essential but also ephemeral link to the eternal.

In citing a treatise from 1863, I should note Baudelaire’s own dating of his disgust with politics, which he sets at Louis-Napoléon’s coup d’état at the end of 1851, or shortly after the Dupont essay (not published until 1857) was written. It is tempting to say that there are two Baudelaire’s, the one on the barricades in 1848 and 1851—the Baudelaire Ryan emphasizes, in citing the rejection of *l’art pour l’art*—and the pessimistic aesthete after the demise of the Second Republic. But Clark, though stressing the lifelong complexity of Baudelaire’s stances on art and politics, also observes that “all the dogmas were there” early in Baudelaire’s career (142). In 1846 he denounced the “bourgeois artist” for “stand[ing] between the public and the genius” (qtd. in Clark 161), a view that easily transmutes, in “The Painter of Modern Life,” into the desire of the “dandy,” or artistic aristocrat, to escape democracy altogether, to “remain hidden” (or autonomous) from *both* inferior elements in the earlier hierarchy of genius, bourgeois artist, and public (see Williams 55). The context in which Mallarmé, in “Art for All” (1862), understands Baudelaire’s criticism of other aesthetes indicates that repudiating the *l’art pour l’art* movement is not synonymous with repudiating autonomous art. Mallarmé cites Baudelaire’s observation that “[t]o insult the mob is to degrade oneself” as an admonition against engagement not just with the masses but especially with the bourgeois philistine irritated like the genius “with the widespread stupidity of the mob.” That bourgeois would find in express elitism an opportunity to cling to poets by claiming sympathy with them, “thus swell[ing] the army of false admirers.” Baudelaire’s earlier condemnation of the *l’art pour l’art* movement could well be considered consistent with this effort to distance the genuine artistic aristocrat from lesser hangers-on, as Jauss’s reading suggests.

Ryan’s reductive reference to this matter obliterates, more generally, the elitist positions that have led both approving and disapproving critics to describe Baudelaire as the originary point for modernism. One of the earliest of the disapproving critics, Edmund Wilson, caustically recounts in *Axel’s Castle* (1930)

how Baudelaire’s concept of poetry’s spiritual “silent music,” derived from Poe, subsequently licensed symbolism’s celebration of the vagueness achieved through detached metaphors. The resulting inaccessibility passed as lofty opposition to the commercial, facile, “journalistic” culture of everyday life. All the worst tenets of modernist aesthetics can be found in Baudelaire, or in the post-1851 version at least: besides holding mystified notions of poetic language, he is antipathetic to urban crowds, which make him hysterical (see *Paris Spleen*), to any “didactic,” let alone political, effect in art (“Théophile Gautier”), and to popular culture (“The Old Clown,” in *Paris Spleen*). A well-known example of the last position, the response to photography in “The Salon of 1859,” set the course of modernist contempt for mass culture, decrying mechanically reproduced forms that offer the “mob” both access to art and the ability to create it. The misrepresentation of Walter Benjamin, by Ryan and many others, in order to cast Baudelaire in a favorable light is particularly lamentable in this regard; Benjamin’s comments on “The Salon of 1859” in the essay “A Small History of Photography,” for instance, clearly indicate that he hardly considered Baudelaire an exemplary radical “critic of modernity” (Ryan 1128). Ryan’s misleading presentation of Baudelaire as an opponent of autonomous art seems like an effort to salvage modernism and subsequent hermetic aestheticism.

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Reply:

A misreading of a phrase at the beginning of my essay seems to have set Neil Nehring on a false track. I do not claim, as he states, that Benjamin regarded Baudelaire as “an exemplary radical ‘critic of modernity’”; instead, I write of “Benjamin’s radical contextualization of Baudelaire as a critic of modernity” (1128). My reference to *Benjamin’s* striking departure from the critical practices of his time becomes in Nehring’s account of my article an allusion to *Baudelaire’s* brief period as a political revolutionary.

Nehring’s misreading of this phrase is only one of several misunderstandings that surface in his letter. There is no need to dwell on his curious notion that I give prose translations of the poems I cite in order surreptitiously to turn them into prose poems. But neither do I claim that the prose poem in and of itself