Paris: Reflections of a Modern City

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Recommended Citation
Schultz, Brian J., "Paris: Reflections of a Modern City" (2012). History Theses. 9.
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Paris: Reflections of a Modern City

A Thesis in
History

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts
August 2012

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“It is true that the great tradition is lost and the new one is yet unfound. What was the great tradition if not the ordinary and customary process of idealizing life in antiquity: a robust and warlike kind of life with every man to defend himself, a state that gave him the habit of deliberation in his movements, of noble or violent attitudes? . . . Before trying to isolate the epic quality of modern life, and to show, by giving examples, that our age is no less rich than ancient times in sublime themes, it may be asserted that since every age and every people have had their on form of beauty, we inevitably have ours. That is in the order of things . . . But to come to the main and essential question, which is to examine whether we have a specific kind of beauty, inherit in new forms of passion . . . Scenes of high life and of thousands of uprooted lives that haunt the underworld of a great city, criminals and prostitutes, the Gazette des Tribunaux and the Moniteur all there to show us that we have only to open our eyes to see and know the heroism of our day. For the heroes of the Iliad do not so much as reach your ankles, oh! . . . that has not dared to tell the public thy sorrows, clad in the funeral and ragged tail-coat we all put on today; and you, oh! You the most heroic and the most remarkable, the most romantic and the most poetical of all the characters you have drawn from your heart!”

--Charles Baudelaire, “The Salon of 1846”

INTRODUCTION

During the nineteenth-century, Paris was experiencing a period of enormous change: the July Revolution and the reign of Louis Philippe, the Revolution of 1848, the Second Republic, the restored Empire of Napoleon III, the Franco-Prussian War, the rise and fall of the Commune, and the establishment of the Third Republic. Under the Second Empire, Napoleon III and his prefect of the Seine, Baron Georges-Eugéne Haussmann, initiated a massive reconfiguration of Paris from an aging infrastructure to the first modern metropolis. Haussmann created the Grande Boulevards, enchanting streetlamps, and trellised apartment buildings out of the chaotic medieval city that had existed prior to the Second Empire. Haussmann also provided sanitation, clean water, and uprooted the labyrinthine streets that permeated the Paris of old—the very streets that protected the insurgents during the Revolution of 1848. Amidst these massive changes, a new way of viewing society in regard to its relation with urbanism, consumerism, and

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capitalism emerged.

Every era needs its observers and chroniclers. These select individuals need to be a combination of reporter, poet and philosopher to adequately describe the reality of modern life. Two nineteenth-century artists, who are widely regarded as pioneers in the field of aesthetic modernism, achieved such a task in their lifetime: Charles Baudelaire and Edouard Manet. Baudelaire (1821 – 1867) was a poet, essayist, and art critic renowned for his originality and his pioneering of a new form of poetic expression with harrowing imagery, innovative techniques (prose poetry), and dark views on life and death in the modern city. With this philosophy, Baudelaire shifted the attention of emerging and future artists to focus on the darker side of life, inspiring among them to new levels of urban awareness in regards to the modern urban experience.

Edouard Manet (1832 – 1883), widely regarded as “the first modern painter,” broke the rules of academic painting by taking the act of painting out of the studio and into the real world. For Manet, the only way to capture the momentary and transient world was to paint in the open, depicting realistic scenes of modern society as he viewed them. Manet’s work was defined by his ability to paint a classical composition and place it in a contemporary setting—something unheard of in his era. Manet biographer Michael Fried writes:

> The appreciation of Manet’s revolutionary achievement—the appreciation, and perhaps also the constitution, of it as revolutionary—took place in reverse order, under the sign of Impressionism and the transformation of painting and the seeing of painting that brought it about.  

Although Manet was not an Impressionist himself, he can be seen as a powerful inspiration for that movement, from which he would always remain distant.

According to renowned art critic Clement Greenberg, “What can safely be called

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Modernism emerged in the middle of the last century. And rather locally, in France, with Baudelaire in literature and Manet in painting. Throughout their respective careers, both Baudelaire and Manet demonstrated the effects of living in the modern city. Living in a society undergoing rapid transformation, Baudelaire and Manet accurately captured the essence of the modern, alienating, capitalistic metropolis. Both men were radical thinkers who lived on the fringes of a nascent consumer society and were able to capture artistically the new phenomenon of the modern, urban-industrial society. This thesis poses two main questions: Why is it that Baudelaire and Manet’s work is often seen as the beginning of aesthetic modernism, and how does their work capture artistically the experience of life in the world’s first modern metropolis? However, before examining the life and times of our subjects and what they might tell us about the experience of modern urban life, we must first investigate what actually constitutes modernity, aesthetic modernism, and modernization while examining the way in which these terms have been defined throughout history.

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CHAPTER ONE: AESTHETIC MODERNISM, MODERNITY, AND MODERNIZATION

Although there is no simple definition of aesthetic modernism, it is generally seen as a movement, rather than a style. What encompasses this movement is its unique ability to find ways to represent contemporary society. For the sake of clarity, aesthetic modernism will be defined by certain trends in art and writing that have had a powerful influence on the development and experience of mid-nineteenth-century Paris. While its relation to a specific historical epoch frequently defines aesthetic modernism, it is best understood as a means of interpreting an era as opposed to being an era. Literary historian Elissa Mardner writes, “Although modernism produces the notion of historical periodization as one of its defining systems, it cannot be confined to that historical period (the nineteenth century) from which it presumably arose.”

For Mardner, both Baudelaire and Manet redefined their respective fields by demonstrating how the modern metropolis transformed the lived experience by showcasing its “mechanisms and . . . effects.”

Modernity, on the other hand, is slightly more difficult to define, as the term remains widely debated. Nonetheless, following the standard convention of historians who use the term in this way, modernity will be defined as the culmination of a radical change in attitude, sense of historical awareness, social conditions, and technological breakthroughs that occurred during the Renaissance. Therefore, when discussing the concept of modernity, we are essentially dealing with the social, cultural, historical, and political progression of the last 500 years. It is, however, imperative to use the word “progress” carefully, as it may infer to a sense of betterment, which, as we shall later examine, may not exactly be the case.

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5 Ibid., 5.
Lastly, modernization will refer to the infrastructural modernization of Paris through Haussmann. Modernization can be seen as the transformation of Paris from being pre-modern, to emerging as the first modern, urbanized metropolis. For renowned geographer and urban studies scholar, David Harvey, “The Second Empire revolution in space relations . . . may have had roots in earlier phases, but there is no question that there was an order of difference between the pace of change [and] spatial scale . . . to that which had prevailed before.” Modernization, therefore, encompasses all aspects of urban planning, including cosmetic and sociopolitical motives.

The effects of Haussmann’s modernization not only changed the architecture of Paris, but also had a profound impact on art and literature. What aesthetic modernism provided was a unique and vital energy: it was a spirit that possessed an urgency that identified with the rapidly developing world of mid-nineteenth-century Paris. According to the cultural historian Marshall Berman, there is a dialectical abstraction of modernity that simultaneously unites and divides humanity. Berman writes: “It pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal.” With this vivid imagery, Berman envisions a cyclical effect driven by new technologies and changes in industrialization, and by the evolution of the capitalist society. The definitive vision of modernity and portrayal of this “state of perpetual becoming” is referenced in the title of the book, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, taken from *The Communist Manifesto*:

> All fixed, fast frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real condition of life, and his relations with his kind.

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8 Ibid., 16.
Berman singles out the beginning stages of the Industrial Revolution as a transitional period when society was aware of the radical changes in the private and civic spheres, but could also remember a pre-modern existence. According to Berman, it is within these polarizing relations that the very concept of modernity comes to fruition. Modern society, however, lacks this coherent view as “we find ourselves today in the midst of a modern age that has lost touch with the roots of its own modernity.”\textsuperscript{10}

It has been stated numerous times that a modern life is something of a paradox—the capitalistic, bureaucratic organizations that dominate society make things such. In \textit{Five Paradoxes of Modernity}, Antoine Compagnon characterizes the “modern tradition” as one “made up wholly of unresolved contradictions.”\textsuperscript{11} According to Compagnon, “What is traditional has long stood in contrast to what is modern, not to mention modernity or modernism: the modern broke from tradition and tradition resisted modernization.”\textsuperscript{12} The very features of modernity, thus, thrive on the cultivation of the new, or novelty, an undertaking that ultimately leads to the constant recycling of cultural tropes. Compagnon writes:

\begin{quote}
In France . . . where Baudelaire and Nietzsche are the most prominent moderns, modernity includes nihilism and a distrust of history and progress. This modernity reacts against modernization and is mainly artistic; it is positive only from an aesthetic point of view.\textsuperscript{13}
\end{quote}

In this interpretation, Baudelaire stands as the primary example of the modern man: his acknowledgement of the contradictory nature of Parisian life is—especially for Berman and Compagnon—paramount to understanding existence in the modern urban society. For Compagnon, Baudelaire accurately depicted “the negative balance sheet of modern times, which he identified with decadence and linked with the insoluble contradiction between history and modernity.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Berman, \textit{All That is Solid Melts Into Air}, 17.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., xiii.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., x.
\textsuperscript{14}
In *The Five Faces of Modernity*, Matei Calinescu claims that aesthetic modernism should be seen as “a crisis concept involved in a . . . dialectical opposition to tradition,” to the “modernity of bourgeois civilization (with its ideals of rationality, utility, progress),” and “to itself, insofar as it perceives itself as a new tradition or form of authority.”¹⁵ This paradigmatic change focuses solely on the now, seething with an insatiable desire for a sense of “progress.” For Calinescu, these facets, combined with its own self-consciousness, serve as the very basis of modernity.

For Calinescu, the arrival of modernity began with the Renaissance. With the emergence of secularism and humanism, modernity was a means to attach new values to man’s living in the present. Calinescu writes: “The opposition “modern/ancient” took on particularly dramatic aspects in the consciousness of the Renaissance with its sharply contradictory awareness of time in both historical and psychological terms.”¹⁶ For Calinescu, the Renaissance sought to promote a revisionist attitude toward the past, while still honoring its habits and customs; however, around the late-seventeenth-century and increasingly thereafter, the idea of tradition came to be felt as an oppressive institution. According to Calinescu, the West has undergone a “major cultural shift from a time-honored aesthetics of permanence, based on a belief in an unchanging and transcendent ideal of beauty, to an aesthetics of transitory and immanence, whose central values are change and novelty.”¹⁷ In this regard, modernity contradicts itself as it “rejects the past (i.e., “tradition”) in the name of a Utopian future.”¹⁸

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¹⁴ Ibid., 131.
¹⁶ Ibid., 19.
¹⁷ Ibid., 3.
¹⁸ Ibid., 10.
David Harvey and T.J. Clark

Modernity is widely considered to have reached a qualitatively new stage of development in the nineteenth-century with the mass migration of populations moving from the country to urban manufacturing centers. With this in mind, aesthetic modernism can also be seen as a representative of struggling masses within the modern metropolitan. Paris is often regarded as the first modern city, defined by Haussmann’s architecture that captured “the ethos of modernity emphasizing mechanically inspired design.” Although Haussmann’s aesthetic makeover was originally met with disdain, as a result, Paris would eventually morph into a dynamic city full of glittering lights, exuberant café life, and various new forms of leisure and spectacle.

In *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, David Harvey provides a comprehensive overview of Paris in the era of Haussmannization. Throughout this study, Harvey suggests that the transformation of Paris created the very basis for the gradual evolution of modernity everywhere. For Harvey, however, in order to truly comprehend the full implications of Haussmann’s modernization it must be examined within the context of “Parisian political economy, life and culture.” Exploring these factors, Harvey demonstrates how the needs of Parisian society in 1848 were at odds with the existing "ancient urban infrastructure.”

Highlighting the processes of urban transformation engineered by Baron Haussmann during the Second Empire, Harvey proposes, "No social order can achieve changes that are not already latent within its existing condition.” According to Harvey, each successive era inherits the practices, traditions and beliefs of previous generations while expanding on them. Thus, the notion of modernity cannot be seen as a way of severing all ties with the past, and is therefore, a

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21 Ibid., 92.
22 Ibid., 1.
myth. For Harvey, the myth of modernity began with the self-mythologizing Mémoires of Haussmann, which are, according to Harvey, "full of dissimulation." While Haussmann describes himself as the genius behind of Paris’ revitalization, in actuality, Haussmann's predecessor, Berger, had already begun to diligently carry out Napoleon III’s tasks as early as 1848. It is important to note, however, that the legend that has arisen around Haussmann needed to contain a mythic air of radicalism in order "to show that what went before was irrelevant." In this regard, Haussmann's self-aggrandizing “created a founding myth (essential to any new regime) and helped secure the idea that there was no alternative to the benevolent authoritarianism of Empire.” In this regard, the socialist opposition to the Empire was marginalized and unworthy of consideration. Harvey stresses that the success of the plan depended on the authority of Empire, and argues that Haussmann and Napoleon III utilized the modernization of Paris as a means of controlling the populace.

In The Painting of Modern Life, T.J. Clark, a prominent art historian, argues that modern art of the twentieth century evolved from the art produced by Manet and the Impressionists during, and immediately after Haussmann’s period of great change in Paris. Similar to Harvey, Clark claims, “The argument I go on to make in this book is . . . I wish to show the circumstances of modernism were not modern, and only become so by being given the forms called ‘spectacle.’” For Clark, Haussmann's Grande Boulevards relocated working-class districts to the outskirts of the city while reshaping their previous locations into sectors of entertainment and commerce. Music halls, or cafés, seemed to arrive with the boulevards, giving birth to new forms of recreation and spectacle. For Clark, the spectacle can be defined as “an

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23 Ibid., 9.
24 Ibid., 10.
25 Ibid.
attempt . . . to bring into theoretical order a diverse set of symptoms which are normally treated . . by bourgeois . . . as anecdotal trappings affixed somewhat lightly to the old economic order: ‘consumerism,’ for instance, or ‘the society of leisure.’” Clark further states that “Paris was in some sense being put to death, and the ground prepared for the ‘consumer society.’” Spectacle, thus, symbolizes the commercialization of leisure that was once separate from capitalism.

According to Clark, in the modern capitalist society, life amounts to an amalgam of meaningless spectacle that leads to alienation. The spectacle, therefore, can be seen as the source of everyday misery because they do not fulfill their promise to fulfill individual desires. Clark claims that Paris “was the sign of capital: it was there one saw the commodity take on flesh—take up and eviscerate the varieties of social practice, and give them back with ventriloqual precision.” Similar to Harvey, Clark saw Haussmann’s broad boulevards as a form of state surveillance, while the rise of the spectacle gave way to a means of control where “the bored stay bored.”

Like Harvey, T.J. Clark emphasizes the importance of class throughout The Painting of Modern Life. Despite this similarity and their Marxist backgrounds, however, Harvey and Clark do not always agree with one another. Unlike Harvey, Clark states that Haussmann’s sweeping transformation of Paris hinged on a capitalistic visualization of what the city was, and the limits of what it could be. Harvey, however, claims that:

> It was, we might infer, the idea of the city as a body politic that got smashed in 1848 and then interred in the commercial world of commodification and spectacle in Second Empire Paris. This, presumably, is what Clark had in mind. But he is not quite right, however, to imply that the idea of the city as a body politic got entirely lost through the advent of Empire and Haussmannization.

Although Clark emphasizes the emergence of the spectacle and the rise of consumerism in

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27 Ibid., 9.
28 Ibid., 69.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., 227.
31 Harvey, Paris, Capital of Modernity, 88.
Haussmann’s Paris, Harvey states that he ignores the fragmentation of the Paris of old that became displaced.

Walter Benjamin

Through Haussmann’s propaganda and revitalization, Paris was subtly undergoing a massive psychological change—a false belief led by optimism for a better, improved future. The experience of “modernity entailed increased urbanization, industrialization, and technological change linked to industrial capitalism and supported by an ideological faith in these changes as being integral to progress.”

However, for renowned philosopher and historian, Walter Benjamin, this very notion of “progress” is, in actuality, counter-productive and destructive.

For Walter Benjamin, the violent and rapid pace of modernization threatened to erase our very connection with the customs of the past, replacing them with the morally ambivalent practices of commerce and capitalism. Describing the debilitating effects of Parisian city life, Benjamin conjoins the modern urban existence with poetic and revolutionary imagery. In this manner, Benjamin's Paris is deeply indebted to Baudelaire's vision of the "religious intoxication of great cities,” or the lure of a consumerist society facilitated by shopping malls and department stores. In addition to his sense that the Paris of old is gone, Benjamin shared Baudelaire's ambivalent feelings about the modern city. Playing off themes found in Baudelaire, Benjamin emphasizes the way the consumerist city creates a sort of urban spectacle that places a premium on display. Through these new institutions, consumers increasingly fell under the spell of commodity. In describing the department store, Benjamin writes: “The customers perceive themselves as a mass; they are confronted with an assortment of commodities; they take in all the

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floors at a glance; they pay fixed prices; they can make exchanges.”

According to Baudelaire, living in Paris was the equivalent of being imprisoned; similarly, Benjamin writes:

[Baudelaire] might have said that he was the first to speak also of the opiate that was available to give relief to men so condemned, and only to them. The crowd is not only the newest asylum of outlaws; it is also the latest narcotic for those abandoned. The flâneur is someone abandoned in the crowd. In this he shares the situation of the commodity. He is not aware of this special situation, but this does not diminish its effect on him and it permeates him blissfully like a narcotic that can compensate him for many humiliations. The intoxication to which the flâneur surrenders is the intoxication of the commodity around which surges the stream of customers.

For Benjamin, the shops and arcades were indicative of capitalism. They represented both potential and disappointment: a simultaneous promise of abundance and nothingness.

Exploring the relationship between modernity and the Paris arcades was the great passion of Walter Benjamin; a passion that he methodically worked on throughout the final decades of his life. Through this detailed examination of the arcades and the society that frequented them, Benjamin’s study investigates the composition of the age of Industrial Capitalism. For Benjamin, the arcades served as a platform that exemplified the facets of a modern experience. The facets covered ran into the hundreds and included such items as advertising, boredom, the idea of progress, prostitution, over-stimulation, poetry, and photography—subject matter also reflected on in the writings of Baudelaire.

Constructed in the first half of the nineteenth-century, the Paris arcades were the precursors to the modern shopping mall. Intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morss writes:

The Paris Passages built in the early nineteenth century were the origin of the modern commercial arcade. Surely these earliest, ur-shopping malls would seem a pitifully mundane site for philosophical inspiration. But it was precisely Benjamin’s point to bridge the gap between everyday experience and traditional academic concerns, actually to achieve the phenomenological hermeneutics of the profane world.

With an abundance of window displays, the arcades were “the original temple of commodity

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34 Ibid., 60.
By the time of Haussmannization, however, the arcade resembled more of a subterranean passage compared to the extravagance of the modern department stores. The arcade, therefore, stood as a temporal portal between the old and the city. During its prime, the arcade functioned as both an ultramodern shopping center and—for window-shopping flâneurs—a source of endless inspiration “that evoked the wonder of the masses.” For Buck-Morss, however, the arcades diminished due to the “the rapid half-life of the utopian elements in commodities and the relentless repetition of their form of betrayal.”

With the development of Haussmannization and the opening of department stores on the boulevards, the arcades—once the very personification of industrial ingenuity—became slowly obsolete. With the rapid pace of the modern industrial city, the arcades quickly came to be seen as strange and anachronistic. Out of this experience, Walter Benjamin developed a new way of viewing history, which simultaneously refuted the myth of continual historical progress and attempted to harness the revolutionary potential of the past. Buck-Morss writes:

> If after a century the original arcades appear prehistoric, it is because of the extremely rapid changes which industrial technology has wrought upon the urban landscape. But the experience of time brought about by this rapid change has been precisely the opposite: hellish repetition.

Indeed, in a capitalist economy, markets need to continuously grow and consumption needs to be chronically stimulated by the constant introduction of new, "innovative" products that quickly become outdated. In many ways, the gradual obsolescence of the arcades serves as an important lesson in understanding the ruinous nature of modernity. For Benjamin, the modern society is defined by material "progress," while important issues such as social reform and historical breakthroughs are sidelined. According to Marshall Berman, however, modernity can be viewed as an epoch of "a variety of visions and ideas that . . . give [men and women the] power to

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37 Ibid., 83.
38 Ibid., 87.
39 Ibid., 293.
40 Ibid., 108.
change the world that is changing them, to make their way through the maelstrom and make it
their own.” For Berman, there is a creative potential within modern society. This optimistic
view, therefore, contradicts Harvey and Benjamin’s pessimistic and cynical view that modernity
is built on the suppression of historical possibilities to create a more humane society.

Berman also states that, Benjamin, like Baudelaire, was a man of contradictions. Although
Benjamin sought to distance himself from the perils of the urbanized metropolis, he
subconsciously engaged in them. In analyzing the Marxist tendencies of Benjamin, Berman
writes:

[Benjamin’s] heart and his sensibility draw him irresistibly towards the city’s bright lights,
beautiful women, fashion, luxury, its play of dazzling surfaces and radiant scenes; meanwhile his
Marxist conscience wrenches him insistently away from these temptations, instructs him that this
whole glittering world is decadent, hollow, vicious, spiritually empty, oppressive to the proletariat,
condemned by history. He makes repeated ideological resolutions to forsake the Parisian
temptation—but he cannot resist one last look down the boulevard or under the arcade. These
inner contradictions, acted out on page after page give Benjamin’s work a luminous energy.42

According to Berman, Benjamin may sympathize with the left, but there is also a part of him that
seeks to willingly partake in the modern, urban society. Resembling the contradictory nature of
the flâneur, Benjamin examined the pre-modern city while existing entirely in the present,
coloring the landscape with his own beliefs in “a remarkable dramatic fashion.”43 Despite this,
Berman still regards Benjamin as “brilliant . . . in spite of [himself].”44

For Benjamin, the Arcades Project was designed to illustrate the debilitating effects of the
consumerist culture that arose in Paris during the late nineteenth-century, with a hope of
shocking the present to awake from its catatonia. For Benjamin, the arcades form what he
referred to as the “collective architecture of the nineteenth century,” which “provides housing for

41 Berman, All That is Solid Melts Into Air, 16.
42 Ibid., 146.
43 Ibid., 147.
44 Ibid., 22.
the dreaming collective.” With this imagery, Benjamin evokes the melancholic aura of the arcades and how they continue to represent the collective dreams of an evanescent past. Echoing themes later found in Harvey, Benjamin felt the arcades offered a means of remembering the utopian optimism of early industrialism.

Baudelaire, witnessing the vanquishing of his city before his very eyes, felt the anxiety of this transition. For Benjamin, Baudelaire belonged to the fluctuating mass known as *la bohème*. Thus, Baudelaire wrote as an outsider, utilizing the unprecedented expansion of the press that was taking place. Taking advantage of these opportunities, Baudelaire was able to find his voice and transcribe it to print. With the condemning and outright banning of *The Flowers of Evil*, however, Baudelaire would turn on Parisian society. Benjamin writes:

> Having been betrayed by these last allies of it, Baudelaire battled the crowd—with the impotent rage of someone fighting the rain or wind. This is the nature of something lived through . . . to which Baudelaire has given the weight of an experience . . . He indicated the price for which the sensation of the modern age may be had: the disintegration of the aura in the experience of shock. He paid dearly for consenting to this disintegration—but it is the law of his poetry, which shines in the sky of the Second Empire.46

By embracing modernity and all its pitfalls, Baudelaire, thus, involuntarily contributed to a broader picture of the cultural imagination of aesthetic modernism.

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CHAPTER TWO: CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

Charles Baudelaire is a figure that looms large over the study of aesthetic modernism. Baudelaire’s writings (verse, prose poetry, art criticism, literary criticism, thematic essays, translations, correspondence and private notes) demonstrate not only nostalgia for the past, but also an enthusiasm for the inherent beauty of the modern, or what the poet referred to as the “heroism of modern life.” A central theme found in Baudelaire’s work is the expression of both the profound cruelties and the more ephemeral pleasures of life as he experienced it, notably in Paris, the city that would later be described as the capital of the nineteenth-century by Walter Benjamin.

Origins

Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris on April 21, 1821; the street still exists, but the house itself, ironically, was demolished under Haussmann’s renovations to make way for the modern Boulevard Saint-Germain. Baudelaire was born to an elderly former priest turned civil servant, François Baudelaire, who “at the grand age of sixty, married the orphan he had known since she was a little girl, Caroline Dufaÿs.” The death of François—when Charles was only six—fostered a close relationship between Baudelaire and his mother. Baudelaire writes:

In my childhood I went through a stage when I loved you passionately. Listen and read without fear. I’ve never told you anything about it. I remember an outing in a coach. You’d just come out of a clinic you’d been sent to, and to prove that you’d given some thought to your son, you showed me some pencil sketches you’d done for me. Can you believe what a tremendous memory I have? Later, the square of Saint-André-des-Arcs and Neuilly. Long walks, constant acts of tenderness. I remember the quais, which were so melancholy at evening. Oh, for me that was the good age of maternal tenderness. I beg your pardon for describing as “a good age” one that for you was doubtless a bad one. But I lived constantly through you, you were mine alone.

Indeed, Baudelaire’s close relationship with his mother was of enduring significance, for much

48 Ibid., 13.
of what is known of his later life derives from his extended correspondence with her.

After the death of Françoise however, Caroline would remain a widow for less than two years. Baudelaire’s new stepfather, Major Jacques Aupick, was a career soldier who sought to provide a proper education for the young Baudelaire by sending him to boarding school. Although Baudelaire would remain on good terms with his new father for many years, by the late 1830s, they started to have difficulties. According to Baudelaire biographer Claude Pichois, this rift served as a crucial moment in Baudelaire’s development, considering that he no longer viewed himself as the sole focus of his mother’s affection, which left him with emotional trauma that led to the excesses later apparent in his life. In this regard, it is understandable that Baudelaire would be jealous of his mother’s new husband, as he was deeply attached to her both materially and emotionally. Loneliness and isolation suffered during his educational exile are reflected in the adolescent Baudelaire’s correspondence with his parents. Baudelaire writes, “In spite of my family—and particularly among my classmates—I had the feeling my destiny was to remain eternally alone. Yet I had a very pronounced taste for life and pleasure.”

Similar feelings of emotional seclusion would reemerge later in the dark imagery of Baudelaire’s poetry.

In 1839, Baudelaire studied law at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris, a popular course for those not yet decided on any particular career. It was during this period, however, that Baudelaire began to devote his attention to the literary, bohemian circles. It was also during this period that Baudelaire began to accrue heavy debt by frequenting prostitutes and purchasing expensive garments. After receiving his degree, Baudelaire would eventually come “into his inheritance of 18,055 francs, some shares of farmland, and four pieces of property in Paris.”

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51 F.W.J. Hemmings, _Baudelaire the Damned: A Biography_ (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1982), 17.
52 Pichois, _Baudelaire_, 85.
The inheritance provided the means for a comfortable existence, and Baudelaire began to live the life of a dandy. Pichois writes:

Under the July Monarchy, the aesthete was also the dandy, the elegant, disdainful and sophisticated man frequently depicted by Balzac. In the days of Louis XIV one could demonstrate one’s inherent superiority and flout the established order by going into commerce just as well as by writing a book; but under Louis-Philippe, who governed France in the name of the bourgeoisie, to be a dandy was to stand apart from the world of money, to refuse to take things seriously. Since by vocation and temperament he belonged to the fringe, Baudelaire had joined for a time the ranks of Balzac’s resourceful and cynical dandies.53

This life of freedom and extravagance was expensive, however, and nearly exhausted Baudelaire’s inheritance. Eventually, his family would deny him control of his own finances, when in 1844 they assigned a conseil judiciare (legal adviser) to watch over his estate and provide him with an annual allowance.54

Intellectual Influences

By the late 1840s, Baudelaire became heavily involved in politics. It was during this tumultuous period that socialist thinker, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, would call attention to the social injustices of the day, while grabbing the attention of the young Baudelaire. Proudhon, among others, was seeking means of reform while rallying the masses in an attempt to minimalize the role of the state. Though substantially less involved in the social struggle than many of his contemporaries, Baudelaire was by no means alien to the reform movement. Baudelaire was indeed trying to find himself in 1847, and his concern for social, economic, and political reform culminated in 1848, when he took his place on the barricades during the February Revolution of 1848. Also, in that same year, Baudelaire also co-founded the revolutionary journal, Le Salut Public.55 Through frequent correspondence, Baudelaire would remain associated with Proudhon for many years, particularly during the coup of Louis-

53 Ibid., 105.
54 Hemmings, Baudelaire the Damned, 196.
55 Ibid., 197.
Napoleon Bonaparte in December 1851.

After the success of Louis-Napoleon Bonaparte’s *coup d’état* in 1851, a major shift occurred in Baudelaire’s political career. In *Seeing Double: Baudelaire’s Modernity*, Francoise Meltzer writes:

Critics generally concur that until around 1852, Baudelaire was primarily influenced by Proudhon, the socialist theoretician called the father of anarchism and the writer whom Marx briefly considered to be the brightest hope for French communism. And most critics agree that after ’52, Baudelaire was under the sway of Joseph de Maistre, that sociologist of original sin, as he was dubbed by many.56

Despite both Proudhon and De Maistre’s negative view of human nature, the two could not be farther apart in political ideology: Proudhon to the left, and De Maistre to the right. The sudden conversion from being a radical socialist to an acolyte of a conservative Catholic may seem unconventional, but whether theology or socialism, Baudelaire as an intellectual appreciated the great philosophical ideologies. According to Meltzer, the contradictory influences of two such thinkers formed the basis for Baudelaire’s “double vision.” Meltzer writes, “we are witness to a theological and political strabismus as if the poet were remembering Proudhon’s social theories with one eye and reading Maistre on original sin with the other.”57 In many ways, Baudelaire was a poet whose vision was split between a hopeless nostalgia for times past, and the future shock of the emerging present. Meltzer’s argument casts these ambivalences as “symptoms of the larger issue, which has to do with the birth of modernity.”58

Meltzer further analyzes the ramifications of Baudelaire’s opposing influences by demonstrating how Baudelaire’s commitment to the doctrine of original sin interferes with his socialist tendencies. Peculiarly, Proudhon “had his own ‘hypothesis for the existence of God,’ and [scandalously] announces that ‘God is evil,’ —by which he means that a reliance on

57 Ibid., 17.
58 Ibid., 70.
predetermination and the status quo will not solve the ills of poverty, disease, and social inequality.”

In this regard, Baudelaire retains some of Proudhon’s ideological beliefs while further demonstrating the conflicting view typified in his writings. Meltzer writes:

Whereas Baudelaire is typically thought of having been on the left until shortly after the revolution of 1848, and then on the right upon reading de Maistre soon thereafter, “Assommons les pauvres” retains a number of Proudhon’s ideas about God, even as Baudelaire becomes the fairly devout disciple of de Maistre. Baudelaire thus carries with him, and expresses in his texts, a double [and contradictory] vision that has insufficiently recognized in numerous depictions of him (beginning with Benjamin) as the founder of modernity.

Baudelaire’s belief that humanity is inherently sinful is unquestionably confirmed in The Flowers of Evil, where he thoroughly explores the evils and decadence of the modern, capitalist, industrial city.

The Flowers of Evil

After struggling with debt, in 1857, Baudelaire published what is now considered his poetic masterpiece, the collection of poems titled The Flowers of Evil. Upon the release of the first edition, The Flowers of Evil generated enormous controversy. The government, which increasingly sought to regulate perceived immorality in the arts, deemed the book “a clear outrage to public morality.” According to Pichois:

The trial of Les Fleurs du Mal—the scandal that was to be ‘the start of [his] fame and fortune’—was not entirely the fault of other people . . . Even if it was only the result of an unconscious desire, he [Baudelaire] brought the trial upon himself. He did so partly because of the reputation it would bring him, but also because prosecution satisfied those masochistic tendencies which allowed him to feel different from other men and which were therefore one of the marks of the dandy.

In the end, Baudelaire was fined, but not imprisoned. Six of the poems, however, were omitted, but would later be included after Baudelaire’s death in 1867.

Baudelaire’s writings in The Flowers of Evil reflect nostalgia for the past, but also an

59 Ibid., 15.
60 Ibid.
61 Pichois, Baudelaire, 225.
62 Ibid., 240.
enthusiasm for the distinctive beauty of the modern. For Baudelaire, modernity was “A constant, unchangeable element . . . and a relative, limited element cooperates to produce beauty . . . The latter element is supplied by the epoch, by fashion, by morality, and the passions. Without this second element . . . the first would not be assimilable.”  

In the first poem of The Flowers of Evil, “To the Reader,” Baudelaire encourages the reader to identify with the beggars and prostitutes he describes. According to Baudelaire, humanity should willingly engage in all of life’s secret, ephemeral pleasures:

Like some rake, sunk to slobbering, gumming the brutalized tit of a superannuated whore, we grasp in passing a clandestine pleasure to squeeze hard, as an overripe orange.

For Baudelaire, what separates the general populace from the rapists and murderers of the world is a lack of courage: humanity’s cowardice and repression thus serves as a means of our natural instincts. Baudelaire writes: “Rape, poison, the knife, fire—if these have not yet embroidered with absurd design the banal story of our sorry destiny, it’s merely that our soul is, alas! Not bold enough.” According to Baudelaire, however, it is not solely the works of Satan that entices us, but also the most typical of modern vices, boredom:

But among jackals, panthers, bitch hounds, apes, scorpions, vultures, serpents—monsters yapping, howling, grumbling, crawling—in the foul menagerie of our vices there is one still uglier, meaner, filthier! Who without grand gesture, without a yawp, would gladly shiver the earth, swallow up the world, in a yawn.

Who? Ennui! Eye brimming with involuntary tears, dreaming of gallows while puffing on his hookah. You know him, reader, this dainty monster—hypocrite reader,—my fellow,—my fellow,—brother?

Although boredom can be viewed as a perennial trait of human nature, its inherent connection to

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65 Ibid.
66 Ibid., 6.
ways of experiencing time and the repetitions of living in the present make it distinctly modern. In the modern industrial city, the notion of regimented linear time and the repetitiveness of life directly induce man’s ennui. Combined with the overwhelming barrage of stimuli, the modern man is oppressed by his own alienation and the apathy that follows. In essence, boredom is the quintessential experience of life in the modern city. For Baudelaire, boredom represents the worst of human miseries, as it instinctively leads to greater sin. Mirroring Proudhon and De Maistre’s pessimistic view of humanity, Baudelaire claims humans are nothing more than instruments of death, “uglier, meaner, and filthier”67 than any monster or demon.

Throughout *The Flowers of Evil*, Baudelaire concentrates on the seductive quality of evil; thus, attempting to extract beauty from evil. Rejecting the romantic tendency to focus on the simplistically or naturally pretty, Baudelaire instead fueled his language with horror, sin, and the macabre. Baudelaire focuses on the suffering of modern Parisian life, which he found beautiful and mysterious. People such as prostitutes, beggars, and criminals represent the poverty and decay he saw in the city, which he in turn saw as sources of inspiration. Baudelaire, however, aimed not at a sociological analysis of the city, but at developing a verse that could convey the modern experience of the city-dweller, the flâneur.

**The Flâneur and the Modern Urban Society**

In *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the High Era of Capitalism*, Walter Benjamin examines the works of Baudelaire to chart the rise and fall of the flâneur’s role in nineteenth-century Parisian culture. By evaluating the flâneur, Benjamin attempts to catalog the historically specific conditions of spectatorship in the consumerist Paris of the mid-nineteenth-century Paris. Mirroring Baudelaire, historian Eduard Fuchs described the flâneur as:

67 Ibid., 5.
Baudelaire understood the flâneur as someone who exemplified urban spectatorship. The flâneur delighted in the sight of the city and its tumultuous crowd, while allegedly remaining detached from it. Mirroring Baudelaire, Benjamin regarded the flâneur as a habitual stroller who goes “botanizing the asphalt.” In this manner, Benjamin envisioned the arcade as the flâneur’s home before Haussmannization made the boulevards a more suitable dwelling for an observer of city life. Indeed, Benjamin felt Baudelaire himself was a flâneur who affixed images with lyrics as he observed and wandered the modern streets of Paris.

For Benjamin, Baudelaire was the very embodiment of the modern artist forced to commodify his literary production: “Baudelaire knew that the true situation of the man of letters was: he goes to the marketplace as a flâneur, supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality to find a buyer.” In Popular Bohemia, cultural historian Mary Gluck expounds on Benjamin’s sentiment, by proclaiming that:

Benjamin . . . has explored, through the exemplary figure of Baudelaire, the intimate links between the artist of modernity and the disorderly urban milieu of the bohème. As Benjamin made apparent, Baudelaire was not simply a physical inhabitant of the bohème of mid-nineteenth-century Paris, but a fully spiritual citizen as well, sharing and incorporating in his work the ambiguous style of the political conspirator, the commercial values of the mass circulation newspaper, and the sensational outlook of the popular novel.

In this regard, Baudelaire’s dependence on commercial relationships may have hindered his ambition, but his ability to recognize the paradoxes and contradictions of his condition—and to use irony and parody to give expression to it—led to his brilliant depictions of modern life.

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69 Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, 36.
70 Ibid., 34.
Gluck, however, notes that in his readings of Baudelaire, Benjamin failed to “map out . . . the points of conjuncture between the aesthetic practice of modernism and the cultural phenomenon of bohemia.” According to Gluck, Baudelaire was a major component of “popular bohemia,” a movement that consisted of bohemians with satirical and ironic sensibilities more than those with realist or sentimental ones. Gluck maintains that the very foundations of modernism emerge from the practices of “ironic bohemia,” not “sentimental bohemia.” For Baudelaire, an artist who laughs becomes a walking contradiction, “because he expressed simultaneously his debased status within modern culture as well as his superiority over it.”

According to Gluck, there is a startling distinction between sentimental bohemians and ironic bohemians, such as Baudelaire. Ironic bohemia emerged out of a continuous parodic dialogue with popular culture, “which rescued the culture of everyday modernity and transformed it into enduring aesthetic forms that have come to define modernist culture.”

In the poem, “To a Woman Passing By,” Baudelaire typifies the modern urban experience of viewing the world as if through the window of a shop. The poet laments that he will never again see a beautiful woman pass him by in the street: “As where you went I don’t know; so you don’t know where I go. You whom I would have loved. You who knew it!”

According to Benjamin, the shock encounter in the poem “describes eyes that could be said to have lost the ability to look.” The moment demonstrates the rapid and shocking experience through which the “the sensation of modernity could be had.” Through Benjamin’s dialectical image, the flâneur not only demonstrates contrasting places and times, but also a way of

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72 Ibid.
73 Ibid., 106.
74 Ibid., 21.
75 Baudelaire, Flowers of Evil, 123.
77 Ibid.
acknowledging the blindness and fractures that such encounters produce. Similarly, Gluck claims: “Modernity had ceased to be a social text, that waited to be deciphered by the urban writer . . . and became an aesthetic construct, that needed to be freshly created through the artist’s imaginative act.”\(^7\) In this regard, Baudelaire was paradoxically both a part of the modern world and in opposition to it, as he viewed the modern streets of Paris as fragmented and abstract.

For Benjamin, one of the more intriguing aspects of Baudelaire’s writing was his use of allegory. In “Walter Benjamin’s Theory of Allegory,” Bainard Cowan writes:

> In Benjamin’s analysis, allegory is pre-eminently a kind of experience. A paraphrase of his exposition might begin by stating that allegory arises from an apprehension of the world as no longer permanent, as passing out of being: a sense of its transitoriness, an intimation of mortality, or a conviction . . . Allegory would then be the expression of this sudden intuition. But allegory is more than an outward form of expression; it is also the intuition, the inner experience itself. The form such an experience of the world takes is fragmentary and enigmatic; in it the world ceases to be purely physical and becomes an aggregation of signs.\(^7\)

For Baudelaire, the grandeur of the modern urban city was not only fragmented, but also vacuous and destructive. Combined with a sense of melancholy, these negative aspects increasingly played a role in Baudelaire’s poetry. In “The Swan,” Baudelaire writes: “Paris changes! But nothing of my melancholy has lifted. New palaces, scaffoldings, blocks, old outer districts: for me everything becomes allegory and my cherished memories weigh like rocks.”\(^8\) According to Benjamin, throughout the The Flowers of Evil, Baudelaire “took up a profusion of allegories and altered their character fundamentally by virtue of the linguistic environment in which he placed them. The Fleurs du mal is the first book that used in poetry not only words of ordinary provenance but words of urban origin as well.”\(^8\) In this regard, the importance of allegory in The Flowers of Evil lies in Baudelaire’s ability to decipher the historical and cultural changes that encompassed the city life that surrounded him.

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\(^7\) Gluck, Popular Bohemia, 103.
\(^8\) Baudelaire, The Flowers of Evil, 116.
\(^8\) Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, 100.
For Baudelaire, France had evolved into a consumer society defined by values such as envy and avarice. Remaining detached from said consumerism, Baudelaire judged the values of such a society to be amoral. According to Hemmings in *Baudelaire the Damned*, Baudelaire viewed consumerist Paris as cold and insensitive, due to “the egoism and callousness which he saw as peculiar to his age and native country.”

In the fable, “A Wag,” Baudelaire writes:

> Pandemonium of New Year’s Eve: chaos of snow and mud churned up by a thousand carriages glittering with toys and bonbons, swarming with cupidity and despair; official frenzy of a big city designed to trouble the mind of the most impervious solitary.

> In the midst of this deafening hubbub, a donkey was trotting briskly along, belabored by a low fellow armed with a whip.

> Just as the donkey was about to turn a corner, a resplendent gentlemen, all groomed, gloved, cruelly cravated and imprisoned in brand new cloths, made a ceremonious bow to the humble beast, saying as he took off his hat: ‘A very happy and prosperous New Year to you!’ Then he turned with a fatuous air toward some vague companions, as though to beg them to make his satisfaction complete by their applause.

> The donkey paid no attention to this elegant wag, and continued to trot zealously along where duty called.

> As for me, I was suddenly seized by an incomprehensible rage against this bedizened imbecile, for it seemed to me that in him was concentrated all the wit of France.

The above story not only demonstrates Baudelaire’s ability to evoke a vision of the many facets of urban existence, but also suggests a new type of modern writing, the prose poem.

*Paris Spleen: Past, Present, and Alienation*

Between 1855 and his death in 1867, Baudelaire composed an imaginative collection of prose poems known as *Paris Spleen*. *Paris Spleen* was intended to be the prose companion to the verse of Baudelaire’s opus, *The Flowers of Evil*. Indeed, a number of the short stories contained within *Spleen* are reworkings of poems found in *The Flowers of Evil*. In the introduction to his translation of *Paris Spleen*, Keith Waldrop describes how, calling upon the largest section of *Flowers*, “Spleen and Ideal,” Baudelaire “seems to emphasize the melancholic

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spleen by dismissing the blissful Ideal.” Clearly, the tone that permeates *Paris Spleen* is not cheery and optimistic, but rather intelligent and shrewd. Brilliant and provocative, these fifty prose poems vividly describe Paris of the mid-nineteenth-century by analyzing brightly lit cafés and the slums that surrounded them, while uncovering a metropolis on the verge of massive change. Therefore, the focus of *Paris Spleen* is the city of Paris itself, portrayed as a sentient and complex organism, as elusive as contradictory as man himself.

Combining intentional fragmentation and bridging of the prosaic and poetic, *Paris Spleen* can be regarded as one of the earliest and most successful examples of urban writing. Similarly, Walter Benjamin commended both Baudelaire’s prose and traditional poetry as a force that was able to convey the intensity of the experience of modernity. In particular, Baudelaire’s poetry allowed him to accurately describe the link between the temporality and the modern on the demise of subjectivity, and the consequent fact that it “takes a heroic constitution to live in the modern.” In the poem “Correspondences,” Baudelaire’s discovered a method that reflectively incorporated the anachronism of the lyric into the greater body of his work. Benjamin writes:

> What Baudelaire meant by correspondences may be described as an experience which seeks to establish itself in crisis-proof form. This is only possible within the realm of the ritual. If it transcends the realm, it presents itself as the beautiful. In the beautiful the ritual value of art appears.87

Benjamin chose to describe the history of urbanism through the poetry of Baudelaire because his poetry bears the traces of the poet’s struggle against the shocks of city life. Baudelaire asks, “What are dangers of the forest and the prairie compared with the daily shocks and conflicts of civilization?” Thus, for Benjamin, Baudelaire is not just the writer responsible for the advent of

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86 Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 74.
87 Ibid., 140.
the theory of aesthetic modernism, but the one whose work embodied and prophesized it.

In analyzing Baudelaire’s reasoning for gradually moving from verse to prose, Waldrop claims that Baudelaire sought to challenge the notion that “prose poems were less ‘genuine,’ or easier to write than a poem in verse.” According to Waldrop, “the notion of simply walking away from such tiresome over-regulation, moving into a medium still free of managers, was appealing.” Quoting Baudelaire, Waldrop gives a glimpse into the poet’s mindset: “Which of us has not dreamt the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm or rhyme?”

While writing Paris Spleen, Baudelaire was very particular in regard to his relationship with his audience. As seen in the preface to the collection, Baudelaire was attempting to create a work that was readily accessible, yet seamlessly blended prose and poetry:

My dear friend, I send you here a little work of which no one could say that it has neither head nor tail, because, on the contrary, everything in it is both head and tail, alternately and reciprocally. Please consider what fine advantages this combination offers to all of us, to you, to me, and to the reader. We can cut whatever we like—me, my reverie, you, the manuscript, and the reader, his reading; for I don’t tie the impatient reader up in the endless thread of a superfluous plot. Pull out one of the vertebrae, and the two halves of this tortuous fantasy will rejoin themselves painlessly. Chop it up into numerous fragments, and you’ll find that each one can live on its own. In the hopes that some of these stumps will be lively enough to please and amuse you, I dedicate the entire serpent to you.

In this regard, Baudelaire demonstrates his rupture with a linear narrative approach: one of the hallmarks of modernist literature. In Paris Spleen, the words composed the form rather than the content. Also important for Baudelaire was the possibility of the reader to set down the book and pick it up later—especially considering his notorious opinions of his readers. In a manner, this approach was more appropriate for the “distracted” sensibilities of his modern, urban readers.

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89 Waldrop, introduction, x.
90 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Baudelaire, Paris Spleen, 3.
93 Hemmings, Baudelaire the Damned, 187.
In the short story, “The Dog and the Scent-Bottle,” Baudelaire’s exemplifies his feelings of superiority over his audience by recounting a story of a man who offers his dog a vial of perfume to smell. The dog, curious at first, saunters over to the vial, only to be appalled by the odor, instead wishing to sniff excrement. The story concludes with the outrage of the owner as he proclaims: “In this you resemble the public, which should never be offered delicate perfumes that infuriate them, but only carefully selected garbage.” In this regard, the story represents the polarity that existed between Baudelaire and his readers; although he depended on their interest, he frequently deprecated them, regarding them as simpleminded and incapable of appreciating his brilliance.

For Baudelaire, he and the reader completed an overall view of humanity: One side (the reader) represents fantasy and falsehood, while the other (the writer) exposes the boredom of modern life. In this regard, Baudelaire’s true modernity lies in the reluctant, unwitting aspects of his dualities and contradictions. In *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman claims “to be modern is to live a life of paradox and contradiction.” Referring to Baudelaire or not, Berman’s description accurately captures the poet. For François Meltzer, the duality found in Baudelaire’s work was not a matter of choice, but of obligation. In *Seeing Double*, Meltzer examines Baudelaire’s fraught relationship with the nineteenth-century world by examining the ways in which he viewed the increasing dominance of modern life. Meltzer asserts that the duplicitous nature of Baudelaire’s work is the result of his inability to unify his vision of the Ancien Régime with the Paris of the nineteenth-century. This dichotomous vision of contradictions is particularly exemplified in Baudelaire’s preface to *La Double Vie*:

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‘Who among us . . . is not a homo duplex? I am referring to those whose mind has been touched with pensiveness . . . always double, action and intention, dream and reality; one always harming the other, one usurping the other’s share.’

According to Meltzer, the obsession with duality in Baudelaire is personified by a famous comment in his journal: “There are in every man two simultaneous postulations, one toward God, the other toward Satan.” The very title of Baudelaire’s poetic masterpiece, *The Flowers of Evil*, encompasses this very thought: the juxtaposition of the aesthetic beauty of flowers intertwined with the abstract of evil—the very essence of duality. Baudelaire, therefore, felt that one extreme could not exist without the other. In this regard, Baudelaire’s obsession with duality is firmly demonstrated.

Baudelaire’s tumultuous efforts to reconcile the past with the present are also apparent in the prose poem, “The Old Clown,” in which Paris is portrayed as a vast theater. Baudelaire writes, “Everywhere joy, moneymaking, debauchery; everywhere the assurance of tomorrow’s daily bread; everywhere frenetic outbursts of vitality.” While the Second Empire is depicted as thriving, Baudelaire also notes among the joy “a pitiful old clown, bent, decrepit, the ruin of man.” The very representation of his condition is “made all the more horrible by being tricked out in comic rags . . . [he] was mute and motionless. He had given up, he had abdicated. His fate was sealed.” For Baudelaire, the clown can be seen as anachronistic, a relic of a bygone era that is no longer needed. The clown was “the prototype of the old writer who has been the brilliant entertainer of the generation he had outlived, the old poet without friends, without . . .

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99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
family, without children, degraded by poverty and the ingratitude of the public, and to whose booth the fickle world no longer cares to come.”101 In this story, Baudelaire demonstrates the rapid pace at which society was evolving during Haussmann’s changes. Similar to Baudelaire, Harvey and Benjamin also felt this hurried desire to replace the old with the new was potentially ruinous. David Harvey writes:

> Tradition has to be overthrown, violently if necessary, in order to grapple with the present and create the future. But the loss of tradition wrenches away the sheet anchors of our understanding and leaves us drifting, powerless . . . [and] all that rushes leaves behind a great deal of human wreckage.  

102 According to Harvey, Baudelaire’s increasingly reactionary attitude towards society emerged after the Revolution of 1848, as did his aloofness from politics for the rest of his life.

Baudelaire has always been viewed as a man of contradiction, torn between the rejection of his society and the uncertainty of what the future held. In examining the duplicity of Baudelaire, François Meltzer focuses on Baudelaire’s emphasis on the role of memory in the creation of art. Baudelaire, according to Meltzer, imagines a work of art (or poetry) as “twice removed” from the event or experience it portrays. “Twice removed,” because a painting or a poem is “the attempt to force the representation of the moment’s intensity into the very fabric of poetic expression . . . into memory.”103 Meltzer’s observations regarding Baudelaire’s fascination with certain optical devices—particularly the kaleidoscope—provides an interesting approach to reading Baudelaire’s writings. Meltzer writes:

> Optical illusions are not cultivated by Baudelaire the poet merely as a form of relief from the dangers of seeing; in his day they were widely regarded as phenomena that turn the spectator’s eye onto him—or herself, providing the individual with fantasy and thus helping to repress the fragmentation that seems everywhere evident—turning such fragmentation into visual play. Spectatorship, in other words, also turns inward. Indeed, the kaleidoscope literalizes fragmentation, as Baudelaire makes clear (the lover of life, it will be recalled, is himself a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness, whose every moment echoes the multiplicity of city life). For Baudelaire, contemplation is so confused by the city, so disturbed by its splintered noise

101 Ibid., 27.
102 Harvey, Paris, Capital of Modernity, 15.
103 Meltzer, Seeing Double, 212.
and sights, that confusion becomes a necessary gloss on life itself, and inner fragmentation the subject’s promise of hidden intellectual and poetic riches.¹⁰⁴

Here, Meltzer illustrates how the destabilizing experience of the modern urban landscape magnified the gaze of the artist or poet. This enhanced gaze, thus, allowed Baudelaire to focus on the suffering of modern Parisian life, including things his contemporaries wished to ignore: a rotting carcass on the sidewalk, prostitutes, and social discrimination. Baudelaire, then, can be clearly seen as modern poet struggling with the forces of capitalism and urbanism that emerged in Paris.

Developing rapidly during Baudelaire’s lifetime, modernism gradually challenged old notions of what constituted aesthetic expression. For example, the arts were especially threatened by photography’s ability to instantaneously capture reality. Peculiarly, although Baudelaire was fond of many optical devices, he notoriously shunned the use of photography as a form of art. Baudelaire writes:

Modern fatuity may roar to its heart’s content, eruct all the borborygmi of its pot-bellied person, vomit all the indigestible sophistries stuffed down its greedy gullet by recent philosophy; it is simple common-sense that, when industry erupts into the sphere of art, it becomes the latter’s mortal enemy . . . If photography is allowed to deputize for art in some of art’s activities, it will not be long before it has supplanted or corrupted art altogether, thanks to the stupidity of the masses, its natural ally.¹⁰⁵

Baudelaire was appalled by the public’s affection towards photography and felt that it would only further enable realism in lieu of artistic truth. Baudelaire “never defined the medium past arguing that it was of a completely industrial nature, and thus devoid of influence from the human imagination, a deficiency excluding it from the realm of fine art.”¹⁰⁶ Struggling with this modern development, Baudelaire proclaimed that artistic truth and fine art could only be

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 117.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 83.
accessed through the human phenomenon of imagination and fantasy.

*The Painter of Modern Life* and Edouard Manet

Although Baudelaire is primarily known as a poet, his preoccupations with literature, music, and especially painting constitute a very substantial portion of his oeuvre. As discussed, Baudelaire’s writings not only reflect nostalgia for the past, but also an enthusiasm for the distinctive beauty of the modern, or what the poet would refer to as the “heroism of modern life.”

In the introduction to *The Painter of Modern Life*, Jonathan Mayne writes:

> Starting with [Baudelaire’s] definition of Romanticism as intimacy, spirituality and the rest, and feeling . . . that modern life was presenting a challenge and an obligation to the creative artist which few of his contemporaries seemed willing to meet, Baudelaire concluded his *Salon of 1845* with an impassioned appeal . . . This was an appeal for a painter who could interpret the age to itself, with a complete imaginative grasp of its occasional and paradoxical acts of a protesting heroism amid a setting of a moral and spiritual desolation.\(^\text{107}\)

Indeed, in *The Painter of Modern Life*, a critical essay Baudelaire wrote in 1863, the poet utilizes the draftsmen Constantin Guys to deliver a prophetic statement encompassing the main tenets of the Impressionist school of thought a full decade before its actual emergence.

According to Baudelaire, Guys was a man of the crowd who was gifted with the ability to observe and report. For Baudelaire, Guys was a true flâneur who saw “particular beauty, the beauty of circumstances and the sketch of manners.”\(^\text{108}\) Baudelaire, however, made sure to draw a distinction here between the dandy and the flâneur: the dandy was “blasé, or affects to be, as a matter of policy and class attitude,” while the flâneur was a “passionate spectator.”\(^\text{109}\)

Reaffirming this belief, Gluck writes:

> ‘The painter of modern life,’ as Baudelaire called this resurrected flâneur, reaffirmed the idea of modernity as epic experience anchored in a hidden unity at the core of a fragmented civilization. Yet [this] avant-garde flâneur could no longer fully identify his sense of modernity with the actual empirical city of Paris, nor could he celebrate it in the social types and everyday life he observed


\(^\text{109}\) Ibid., 9.
in the urban landscape. He stood in silent opposition to Haussmann’s monumental urban renewal project, which was transforming Paris into a rational, predictable, visually coherent, but emotionally alienating urban landscape.\textsuperscript{110}

In other words, Baudelaire’s painter of modern life had to be someone who not only comprehended the forces of modern capitalism, but who could also withstand their debilitating effects.

Throughout \textit{The Painter of Modern Life}, Baudelaire describes the flâneur as someone who is traveling incognito, or assimilating into a crowd unnoticed. Baudelaire writes, “the crowd is his element . . . the lover of the universal life enters into the crowd as though it were an immense reservoir of electric energy.”\textsuperscript{111} In other words, the flâneur is able to draw shock and inspiration from the masses. The flâneur is continuously jostled by the teeming urban masses while being assaulted by a plethora of stimuli that cannot be completely absorbed. Accordingly, the flâneur must remain alert and vigilante, lest he lose his coherence. Due to the necessary haste to record what he witnessed, Baudelaire claimed “Monsieur Guys drew like a barbarian or a child . . . [producing] primitive scribbles;” however, Baudelaire also felt Guys was “not precisely an artist, but rather a man of the world.”\textsuperscript{112} In this regard, Baudelaire attributed Guys’ genius to his curiosity.

Examining Baudelaire’s writing, one can see him defining the artist as someone who can focus his vision on the typical subjects of the modern urban life, while understanding its fleeting qualities, and yet extracting from that brief moment all the suggestions of eternity it encompasses. For Baudelaire, the successful modern artist was one who could find the universal and the eternal, to “concentrate the acid or heady bouquet of the wine of life,” from the ephemeral “fleeting beauty of present-day life.”\textsuperscript{113} Baudelaire viewed the modern artist as one

\begin{footnotesize}
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  \item \textsuperscript{110} Gluck, \textit{Popular Bohemia}, 100.
  \item \textsuperscript{111} Baudelaire, \textit{Painter of Modern Life}, 10.
  \item \textsuperscript{112} Ibid., 6.
  \item \textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 41.
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who abstained from realism in the visual arts. Baudelaire writes:

It is this infallible nature Mother Nature who has created patricide and cannibalism, and a thousand other abominations that both shame and modesty prevent us from naming. On the other hand it is philosophy (I speak of good philosophy) and religion which command us to look after our parents when they are poor and infirm. Nature, being none other than the voice of our own self-interest, would have us slaughter them. I ask you to review and 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. Crime, of which the human animal has learned the taste in his mother’s womb, is natural by origin. Virtue, on the other hand, is artificial, supernatural, since at all times and in all places gods and prophets have been needed to teach it to animalized humanity, man being powerless to discover it himself. Evil happens without effort, naturally, fatally; Good is always the product of some art.\textsuperscript{114}

Thus, Baudelaire disdained the popular definition of fine art as the accurate representation of the natural world. For Baudelaire, artistic truth was not a mirror of the physical world, but an expression of the human mental world of imagination and dreams. According to Walter Benjamin, this thought is a culmination of Baudelaire’s theory of modern art in a “nutshell.”\textsuperscript{115}

Throughout \textit{The Painter of Modern Life}, Baudelaire stresses the “rights and privileges offered by circumstances . . . for almost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations.”\textsuperscript{116} Rejecting classicism and its faith in timeless artistic forms, Baudelaire posits another crucial aspect of aesthetic modernism, namely, its emphasis on its own temporally bound and finite character. Baudelaire writes:

\begin{quote}
The aim for him [the artist] is to extract from fashion the poetry that resides in its historical envelope, to distil the eternal from the transitory. .... Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable. There was a form of modernity for every painter of the past; .... every age has its own carriage, its expression, its gestures.... If a painter, patient and scrupulous but with only inferior imaginative power, were commissioned to paint a courtesan of today, and for this purpose, were to get his inspiration (to use the hallowed term) from a courtesan by Titian or Raphael, the odds are that his work would be fraudulent, ambiguous, and difficult to understand. The study of a masterpiece of that date and of that kind will not teach him the carriage, the gaze, the come-hitherishness, or the living representation of one of these creatures.\textsuperscript{117}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 32.\textsuperscript{115} Benjamin, \textit{Charles Baudelaire}, 81.\textsuperscript{116} Baudelaire, \textit{Painter of Modern Life}, 14.\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 1.
Baudelaire compares the artistic condition of Guys to that of childhood, suggesting that the illustrator was a natural artist, for whom images simply appeared, without order and without restraint. Baudelaire regarded most artists as technicians who spent majority of their days working indoor, unaware of the fact that their work carried little significance beyond the confines of the studio. Furthermore, this inhibited the artist from becoming a “man of the world:”

When at last I ran him to earth, I saw at once that it was not precisely an artist but rather a man of the world with whom I had to do. I ask you to understand the word artist in a very restricted sense and man of the world in a very broad one. By the second I mean a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses; by the first, a specialist, a man wedded to his palette like the serf to the soil.¹¹⁸

For Baudelaire, Guys represents more than a mere artist, as he attempts to understand the world in its chaotic entirety.

As influential as The Painter of Modern Life would later become, the use of Constantin Guys as the exemplar of the modern artist still remains a curiosity. According to Gluck, “Puzzling is the status of Constantin Guys, the rather obscure lithographer and foreign correspondent, as the exemplary artist of modernity, especially when compared with seemingly more appropriate figures such as Manet.”¹¹⁹ For a long time Manet has proved a problem for students of Baudelaire: Why is it that despite a close friendship, Baudelaire remained so aloof to Manet’s work? Baudelaire was clearly fond of Manet and his work, writing in 1865:

So I must talk to you about yourself again. I must set myself to show you your own worth. What you demand is really crazy. People tease you; their jokes irritate you; no one knows your real worth. Do you think you’re the only man in that position? Do you have more genius than Chateaubriand and Wagner? But they were jeered at, weren’t they?¹²⁰

Although there is no concrete evidence to explain why Baudelaire did not choose Manet, many feel it was simply a matter of the poet already being firmly acquainted with the work of Guys; thus, Guys beat Manet to it. According to Baudelaire biographer, Claude Pichois: “No artist did

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 7.
¹¹⁹ Gluck, Popular Bohemia, 101-102.
more than Manet to please Baudelaire, or give form to the ideals expressed in *The Painter of Modern Life*; but Baudelaire himself never publicly recognized Manet’s originality.”

Despite this peculiarity, it was Manet who would eventually best fulfill the role of Baudelaire’s “Painter of Modern Life.” In the end, it would be Baudelaire’s friendship that gave Manet the impetus to locate and depict the modern. In the final paragraph of his 1845 *Salon*, Baudelaire writes:

> The painter, the true painter for whom we are looking, will be who can snatch its epic quality from the life of today and can make us see and understand, with brush or with pencil, how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent leather boots.

Although Baudelaire was oblivious to it, this notion is exactly what Manet would accomplish.

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CHAPTER THREE: EDOUARD MANET

Of all the artists who would eventually heed Baudelaire’s call to become a “painter of modern life,” it would be Edouard Manet who best personified it. Although perfectly sociable in his everyday affairs, Manet kept his personal life notoriously secluded from the eyes of the public. Therefore, despite the copious amounts of literature dedicated to Manet and his peers, the artist left few personal writings, and “nothing remains but some letters of little interest and a few anecdotes told and retold.”123 Due to this lack of sources, it is difficult to penetrate the artist’s innermost thoughts. It is, however, easy to see that even without letters or journals, Manet revolutionized art without ever letting down the façade of his upper-class propriety. Having popularized alla prima painting (rather than building up colors, hues are immediately laid down to match the desired effect), Manet utilized this technique to the immediacy of capturing light and the ever-changing hustle of modern life. Like Baudelaire, however, Manet cannot be seen as uniquely modern, as he also looked to the past for inspiration and perspective. In fact, Manet’s double interest in the old masters and contemporary art gave him the crucial foundation for forming his revolutionary technique.

Origins and Influences

Edouard Manet was born into the haute bourgeoisie as it flourished under the rule of Louise-Phillipe. Manet’s father, a judge, expected his son to continue the family tradition and work in the judiciary. Edouard’s mother, Eugenie-Désirée Fournier, was an accomplished musician and came from a family of diplomats. According to Manet Biographer Beth Archer Brombert, “There is little doubt that Edouard’s artistic temperament and charm came from Fournier genes. But the Manet side gave him a sense of worth, a capacity . . . and a dedication to

123 Anne Coffin Hanson, Manet and the Modern Tradition (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 44.
achievement even in adversity.”¹²⁴ For many years, Manet’s father rejected the idea that his son would become a painter, so he ushered the young Manet into a career in the navy; however, a knack for caricature led him to continue his painting privately. Beth Archer Brombert writes:

> By the time he [Manet] returned to France on June 13, 1849, Edouard had assembled a portfolio of drawings and had learned a number of things, not all of them nautical: first, that a life at sea was not for him, and second, more determining, that his first inclination, art, was in fact his true vocation. After the excitement of his homecoming had abated, he announced his decision to study painting.¹²⁵

Indeed, upon his return from overseas, Manet eventually convinced his father to allow him an apprenticeship with the acclaimed history painter, Thomas Couture. During this period, Manet spent his days either at Couture’s studio or studying the works of the old masters at the Louvre. Although Couture was an academic painter, he encouraged Manet to explore his own artistic expression, rather than directly conform to the aesthetic ideals of the present. Manet trained under Couture for six years; however, the majority of these years were miserable for Manet, as he and Couture constantly clashed. According to Manet’s schoolmate, Antonin Proust, Manet claimed: “I don’t know what I’m doing here . . . The light is false, the shadows are false. When I come into the studio it seems to me I’m entering a tomb.”¹²⁶ Here, it is interesting that Manet emphasizes the falseness of the “light” and “shadow,” as these terms would later play a major role in the themes of his paintings.

Manet’s time spent at Couture’s studio also developed his ability or desire to depict the modern. While painting a model one day, Proust recounted, Manet threw his hands up in the air and yelled: “Can’t you be natural! Is that how you stand when you buy radishes at your grocer’s?”¹²⁷ For Manet, the mannerist poses for which models have been utilizing for centuries

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¹²⁵ Ibid., 32.
¹²⁷ Ibid.
were not only outdated, but also unnatural. According to Proust, on another occasion, Manet convinced a model to not only pose in an everyday manner, but also to keep some of her clothing on. Couture, upon finding out, proclaimed: “Are you paying the model not to undress? Come now my boy, you will never be any more than the Daumier of your time.”\textsuperscript{128} For Manet, being compared to the caricaturist was an absolute insult, as Daumier was not meet with high regard during his—or Manet’s—lifetime. Occurrences like this highlighted the ideological rifts between the teacher and pupil. According to Brombert, unlike Manet, Couture felt “‘realism’ in art, art that did not seek to ennoble the subject but represented the ordinary as ordinary, was intolerable.”\textsuperscript{129} Finally, in 1856, the strained relationship came to a head when Couture stood in front of Manet’s easel and said, “When will you decide to paint what you see?” To which, according to Proust, Manet replied, “I paint what I \textit{see} and not what it pleases others to see; I paint what is there and not what is not.”\textsuperscript{130} With this response, Manet maintained his own subjectivity while emphasizing the significance of artistic vision compared to the conventional norms. Realizing the creative difference between himself and Couture, Manet left Couture’s service in 1856 and started his own studio.

While attending classes at Couture’s studio, Manet began a romantic fling with Dutch-born Suzanne Leenhoff. Manet’s father, Auguste, initially had employed Leenhoff to give Manet and his younger brother piano lessons. Although never proven, a popular theory amongst historians is that Suzanne may have been Auguste’s [Manet’s father] mistress. This affair resulted in a child (Leon) who was passed off to Suzanne’s family and—to avoid scandal—was introduced to society as Suzanne’s younger brother and Manet’s godson. According to Brombert,

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 46.
\textsuperscript{129} Brombert, \textit{Edouard Manet}, 46.
\textsuperscript{130} Antonin Proust, \textit{Edouard Manet, Souvenirs}, 18, quoted in Brombert, \textit{Edouard Manet}, 49.
“Suzanne and Leon constitute a critical psychological factor in the development of Edouard’s personality and in the evolution of his art, both of which can be seen as a series of contradictions and camouflages.”¹³¹ Years after Leenhoff gave birth, Manet married her, and while his decision was an honorable one, his reluctance to be seen in public with her showed his determination to shelter his private life.

Manet and Haussmann

Growing up as part of a rich upper class family, it seemed only natural Manet would eventually lead the life of the flâneur. The Parisian flâneur was the role in which Baudelaire and Manet cast themselves, as did many of the artists and writers of nineteenth-century Paris. Although Manet dressed the part of the bourgeoisie, his passion for the aesthetic and elegant, rather than the doldrums of capitalistic endeavors, set him apart from them. Manet, as a flâneur, viewed the reality of the modern metropolis through theme, atmosphere, and subject matter—something Haussmann would give the painter an abundance of.

According to Esther Leslie in “Ruin and Rubble in the Arcades,” Haussmann’s renovations schemed “to move the working classes and the poor out of the city centre to the east and to remodel the west for the bourgeoisie. The objective was to flush out the hidden haunts of low-life where Bohemia—including flâneurs—had once gathered and in which they had barricaded themselves.”¹³² While Haussmannization was criticized, Paris would soon be transformed into a city of bright lights, lively cafés, and various forms of entertainment. According to T.J. Clark, however, Haussmann’s plans had some unintended consequences, as “It went without saying that modernity was made of dandies and cocottes, especially the latter.”¹³³

131 Brombert, Edouard Manet, 53.
133 Clark, The Painting of Modern Life, 12.
Indeed, Manet would later rigorously demonstrate these two particular aspects of Haussmann’s modernization.

For Brombert, Haussmann’s Paris was “a monument to wealth, progress, and security of the bourgeoisie—a ruling class that had come into its own after the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, that . . . made products with machines, ate in restaurants, chatted in cafés, and made money with money.”

This was Manet’s adoptive Paris, a city in which he—along with many other privileged painters—had the status and means to fully explore. Indeed, Manet’s ability to set up his own studio was primarily due to his family’s wealth, which also equipped him with the ability to live and create art as he saw fit. Manet’s transformation into a flâneur, thus, came naturally to him, as did his unrivaled ability to translate the complexities of Parisian life onto canvas.

In *The Painting of Modern Life*, T.J. Clark argues that although Haussmannization created an air of grandeur by modernizing the very infrastructure of the city while creating all sorts of new visual stimuli, it was largely ignored by the painters of that era. Clark demonstrates that throughout his career, Manet depicted none of Haussmann’s boulevards, choosing instead to focus on the narrow side streets or zones of the urban periphery—the no-man’s land between manufacturing plants and the surrounding areas. Clark writes:

> It was not unusual . . . for a painter to choose a subject like this . . . there was a notion in the nineteenth century that the city divulged its secrets in such places, and that the curious ground between town and country—the banlieue . . . had its own poetry and sharpened the dreaming onlooker’s sense of what it meant to be bourgeois or campagnard.

For Clark, riverbanks, city squares, and spectacles became the setting for the emergence of a new bourgeois identity. Amidst the “Haussmannized” settings of Paris and its surroundings, Manet—in such paintings as *Argentuil, les canotiers* and *Claude Monet et sa femme dans son bateau-*

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atelier—recorded not only new forms of leisure, but also the ambiguity of class identity and the
comics and goings of clerks, barmaids, and prostitutes who now filled the city. Neither
proletariat, nor bourgeois, this aspiring mass became the “alter egos of the avante-garde.”\textsuperscript{136} In
fact, much of the art of Manet reflects the developments surrounding Paris during the 1860s.
Clark, therefore, links modern art to the emergence of a lower-middle class with an appetite and
means to engage in the leisurely spectacles that were once denied to them. Clark writes:

The perfect heroes and heroines of this myth of modernity were the petite bourgeoisie. They
appeared in many ways to have no class to speak of, to be excluded from the bourgeoisie and the
proletariat and yet to thrive on their lack of belonging. They were the shifters of class society, the
connoisseurs of its edges and wastelands. And thus they became for a time the alter egos of the
avante-garde—ironically treated, of course, laughed at and condescended to, but depended on for a
point of insertion into modern life.\textsuperscript{137}

For Clark, “it is tempting to see a connection of the modernization of Paris put through by
Napoleon III and his henchmen—in particular by his prefect of the Seine, Baron Haussmann—
and the new paintings of the time.”\textsuperscript{138} By remodeling Paris, Haussmann unwittingly supplied the
emerging art form with subject matter, as Manet and his peers would depict all facets of their
emerging modern city—particularly its flaws.

\textbf{Past and Present: Themes and Technique}

During the period of 1858-59, Manet produced many works, yet it wasn’t until the debut of
the \emph{Absinthe Drinker} that Manet broke from Couture’s teachings and began to express his own
unique style. The painting, presumed to be based on the poem “Le Vin des chiffoniers” by
Baudelaire, caused quite the controversy upon its debut in 1859.\textsuperscript{139} The Baudelaian subject
matter of life in the slums (the modern, unheroic drunk); combined with the enhanced size that
was usually designated for the grandeur of Salon, not only endowed the painting with

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{139} Brombert, \emph{Edouard Manet}, 71.
significance, but also outraged the public. Brombert writes:

What makes *The Absinthe Drinker* so important is that it already incorporates the essence of Manet’s originality, that extraordinary blend of timeliness (the modern city, urban figures, contemporary problems, in this case absinthe itself, a serious menace to the health of the nation), timelessness (the evocation of old master art and literature), and the subjective reference through an objective subject.\(^{140}\)

The depiction of an alcoholic, slum inhabitant, thus, could be correlated to the contradictory effects of Haussmann’s urbanism. Although erected to glamorize the Empire, Haussmannization highlighted the extreme destitution of many areas, as well as their inhabitants, whom Napoleon III sought to ignore. For Harvey, Haussmann’s actions relegated the impoverished masses and the proletariat to the outskirts of the city, while attempting to create a utopia centered on speed and consumerism in the very heart of Paris. Essentially denying the worker and the poor access to his modern metropolis, Haussmann’s Paris created a vacuum of “all manner of negative effects—such as increasing displacement and segregation.”\(^{141}\) The sense of loss, the sense of dispossession, was apparent for many ordinary poorer Parisians. These Baudelarian themes would permeate Manet’s art for the rest of his life.

Being close friends with Charles Baudelaire and other contemporary artists of his day, Manet moved in a circle comprised of other progressive intellectuals who believed that art should represent life, not history. This radical aesthetic shift set Manet squarely against the traditionalism of the conservative Salon. From the very beginning of his career, Manet’s work was at odds with the Parisian art establishment. Reigning academics criticized his loose brushwork, controversial themes, and the extremity of his contrasts between light and shadow. What these traditionalist arbiters failed to realize, however, was that Manet was simply following in the footsteps of the old masters, particularly Velazquez and Goya. According to David Harvey, “Many of Manet’s paintings of the Second Empire period, for example, portray modern

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\(^{140}\) Ibid., 73.

life through the overt re-creation of classical themes . . . while . . . answering Baudelaire’s plea for an art that represented the heroism of modern life.”

According to Michael Fried, Manet’s concern with past artists was also partly nationalistic, a concern with “Frenchness,” which Manet associated with “probity . . . truthfulness” and which compelled him “to establish connections of different degrees of explicitness between his paintings and the work of those painters of the past.” In this regard, Manet’s allusions to earlier art make sense as emblems of conservatism, as a way to bridge the continuum between the old and old. Extremely important for Fried, however, is “That no such programmatic involvement with earlier art was shared by the still younger group of painters who became the Impressionists is a basic difference between Manet’s generation and theirs.” In this manner, Manet’s artistic identity can be viewed as separate from the generation of painters that followed him. Uniquely different about Manet was that he “constantly reiterated his position in relation to the Salon and the European tradition by retaining the figure as the dominant theme of his large canvases.” Nonetheless, the critics and general public were unable to view his work in relation to that tradition. George Hamilton notes in Manet and His Critics, Manet’s “desire to interpret modern life in terms of the great pictorial tradition of European art, all the while reinforcing it by a respect for visual truth as complete and coherent as any possessed by the masters of the past, was paradoxically too . . . subtle for the public.” Manet’s connection with the past only further served to ostracize his art; critics denounced his quotation of historical paintings as lacking originality, while others saw him as a rebel clashing with the outdated

142 Ibid., 259.
143 Ibid., 85.
144 Ibid., 12.
145 Ibid., 18-19.
146 Ibid., 44.
aesthetic of the Salon.

According to Brombert, although Manet brought to painting a bravura style, focusing on a lightened palette, primacy of color over line, and the act of painting out of the studio and into the modern world, he “was neither a social nor a cultural revolutionary. He was rooted in classical culture, and when he quoted from his illustrious predecessors it was not to be irreverent.”147 Similarly, in Paris, Capital of Modernity, David Harvey argues that modernity is not a sharp break with the past: legacies, practices, and beliefs from earlier times must not be ignored. “One of the myths of modernity,” Harvey writes, “is that it constitutes a radical break with the past.”148 Harvey, therefore, demonstrates that modern Paris was created by neither violent historical shifts, but rather by a slow process of urbanization and modernization. Thus, Manet’s work echoes the same sentiment: his modernity truly lied in his ability to update older genres of painting by injecting new content or by altering the conventional elements. Similar to Baudelaire, Manet accomplished this by combining an acute awareness of historical tradition and contemporary reality. Consequentially, this blending of genres was undoubtedly the cause of the scandals he endured.

Although it is widely agreed that Edouard Manet was the first modern painter, it is highly unlikely that Second Empire Paris would have selected Manet to be its interpreter; however, in the end, it was Manet’s unique vision that would leave a lasting mark on the Parisian collective conscious. Although Napoleon III knew less about the visual arts than his predecessor, he followed in his uncle’s rigorous attempt to harness them for the benefit of the Empire. Entry into the Salon, however, was restricted both in number of works allowed and in subject matter. Hamilton writes:

147 Brombert, Edouard Manet, xvii.
148 Harvey, Paris, Capital of Modernity, 1.
With the curtailment of its ancient privilege of electing associate, nonvoting members, the Academy’s intellectual initiative was restricted to the interests of its regular members. From among the fourteen painters and eight sculptors in the Academy were usually chosen the artists who represented the government on Salon juries. Since they were also the principal professors at the Ecole, the circle was closed to all but the most docile and respectable talents.\(^{149}\)

In this regard, Napoleon III forced artists to concentrate on the ancient past, and if the artist wanted to partake in contemporary topics, these offerings had to add to the glory of France. For Manet, the major obstacle of his career would be attempting to overcome the stale rules of the salon system and the relentless enmity of the jurors that comprised them.

**Struggle for Recognition and *Olympia***

In his constant struggle for artistic recognition, Manet kept up his attempts to breach the Paris Salon, making his presence felt to the conservative judges who had so often rejected his work in the past. In *Manet and the Modern Tradition*, Anne Coffin Hanson writes, “The picture of Manet which the literature repeatedly thrusts on us is of a man crushed by constant rejection, sensitive to a point of painful vulnerability, yet doggedly (stupidly?) repeating again and again the very sins which the critics scorned.”\(^{150}\) For Hanson, Manet was far from a naïve glutton for punishment. In actuality, Manet was well aware that acceptance into the Salon was great way to bring “his works before the public in a traditionally accepted way.”\(^{151}\) Reflecting his upper-middle class background, Manet certainly did not wish to avoid the Salon, but rather to change the system of exclusion through which it operated. Deep down, Manet wished to be successful in the Salon, but only on his terms, not theirs. Although Manet was rejected from four exhibitions, he succeeded in getting his work into many others; thus, encouraging him to not only try again, but to continue to develop his gradually accepted method.\(^{152}\) However, acceptance into a Salon exhibition was one thing, critical recognition was another.

\(^{150}\) Coffin Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition*, 45.
\(^{151}\) Ibid.
\(^{152}\) Ibid.
By 1865, however, Manet would achieve notoriety—if not acclaim—by exhibiting at the Paris Salon. There, Manet’s painting, *Olympia*, depicting a reclining nude woman gazing mysteriously at the viewer, accompanied by a servant and a black cat, would cause a whirlwind of commotion. Based on Titian’s *The Venus of Urbino*, *Olympia* was a means to get noticed, while the blatant allusion to historical paintings showed his devotion to Spanish and Italian masters of past times. During the debut of *Olympia*, Manet reportedly claimed: “an artist has got to move with the times and paint what he sees.”

Unfortunately for the artist, the public did not agree with his modern conventions. *Olympia* only provoked the existing opinions about a reclining nude woman as subject matter: a goddess was perfectly acceptable, but a modern prostitute was certainly not. The scandal that permeated the art world after *Olympia*’s debut would grant Manet recognition, but the technique of quoting classical traditions in a contemporary setting would quickly pave the way for his evolving aesthetic modernism.

The controversy surrounding *Olympia* was not solely based on the fact she was nude, but also the composition and techniques utilized in its creation. For many critics, *Olympia* resembled a rudimentary sketch, similar to a Japanese print. Structurally, Manet imbued *Olympia* with black outlines that “clearly contrasted areas of color, applied with a loaded brush in the manner of an oil sketch.” These techniques combined with the fact that she was a prostitute—an increasingly taboo topic for the haughty upper class of nineteenth-century Paris—caused an enormous controversy. By blending prostitution with a classical nude, Manet crossed the line of what was socially acceptable. T.J. Clark writes:

> That in depicting a prostitute in 1865, Manet dealt with modernity in one of its most poignant and familiar, but also difficult aspects: difficult because it had already become a commonplace in the

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1860s that women of this kind, formerly confined to the edges of society, had more and more usurped the centre of things and seemed to be making the city over in their image. Thus the features defining the “prostitute” were losing whatever clarity they had once possessed, as the difference between the middle and the margin of the social order became blurred; and Manet’s picture was suspected of reveling in the state of affairs, marked as it was by shifting, inconsequential circuit of signs—all of them apparently clues to its subject’s identity, sexual and social, but too few of them adding up. This peculiar freedom with the usual forms of representation was later held to be the essence of *Olympia* . . . and made it the founding monument of modern art.\textsuperscript{155}

For Parisians, *Olympia* trampled upon the tradition of the age-old nude: “it was subjected to a kind of simian imitation, in which the nude was stripped of its last feminine qualities, its fleshiness, its very humanity.”\textsuperscript{156} Manet not only took an individual at the fringe of society and represented her in a time-honored manner, but by employing new artistic methods of form—such as absence of modeling—he made a social statement. Whereas the classic nude was considered one of the highest forms of art, the nakedness of *Olympia* was seen as “dangerous.”\textsuperscript{157} In this manner, *Olympia* represented a “transgression of normal class divisions—a curious exposure of the self to someone inferior, someone lamentable.”\textsuperscript{158} The scandal of *Olympia* was her latent modernity: an apathetic and unapologetic prostitute, rather than a romanticized view of femininity. For Clark, *Olympia* “altered and played with identities the culture wished to keep still.”\textsuperscript{159} In this regard, Manet’s painting of *Olympia* is an aspect of modern life that was commonplace at the time, although not many people would have wanted to admit it.

For the Paris audience in the 1860s, any work alien in subject or style would appear puzzling. As George Hamilton observes, *Olympia* was “obviously naked rather than conventionally nude,” and “her wide eyes, imperturbable expression, and impertinent attitude seemed . . . to force the spectator to assume he was in the same room with her.”\textsuperscript{160} Describing her

\textsuperscript{155} Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, 79.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 95.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 144.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{160} Hamilton, *Manet and His Critics*, 67-68.
gaze, Clark writes:

A look was thus constructed which seemed direct and reserved, in a way which was close to the classic face of the nude. It was close, but so is parody. This is not a look which is generalized or abstract or evidently ‘feminine.’ It appears to be blatant and particular, but is also unreadable, perhaps deliberately so. It is candid, but guarded, poised between address and resistance—so precisely . . . that it comes to be read as a production of the depicted person herself . . . It is not just looking, that is the point: it is not the simple, embodied gaze of the nude. Olympia . . . looks out at the viewer in a way which this look might make sense and include him—a fabric of offers, places, payments, particular powers, and status which is still open to negotiation. If all of that could be held in the mind, the viewer might have access to Olympia; but clearly it would no longer be access to a nude.\footnote{Clark, \textit{The Painting of Modern Life}, 133.}

With a gaze that almost seems impertinent, Manet sought to depict \textit{Olympia} as the first nude to represent modern society: she not only exemplified the customs of everyday Parisian life, but also represented an entire class. The unsentimental detachment of \textit{Olympia} was not only indicative of the despondent effects of contemporary society, but also Manet’s growth as a social commentator.

Aside from content, Manet’s technique utilized in \textit{Olympia} also drew ire from critics. Rejecting traditional art training, Manet infused his painting with bold brush strokes, implied shapes, and simplified forms. The flatness of Manet’s painting was also controversial, because flatness suggested the artifice of painting, or the viewing of a painting as a painting, rather than the realist approach. For many, \textit{Olympia} was painted in an almost childlike, unskilled manner. According to Michel Foucault in \textit{Manet and the Object of Painting}, Manet’s modern use of light is what indiscreetly offended the sensibilities of the public. Foucault writes:

This light is certainly not a soft and discreet lateral light, it is a very violent light which strikes her here, full shot. A light which comes from in front, a light which comes from the space found in front of the canvas . . . That is to say, there are not three elements—nudity, lighting, and we who surprise the game of nudity and lighting, there is [rather] nudity and us, we who are in the very place of lighting; in other words, it is our gaze which, in opening itself upon the nudity of \textit{Olympia}, illuminates her . . . Look at a picture and the lighting, it is no more than one and the same thing in a canvas like this one and that is why we are . . . necessarily implicated in this nudity and we are to a certain extent responsible. You see how an aesthetic transformation can, in a case such as this, provoke a moral scandal.\footnote{Michel Foucault, \textit{Manet and the Object of Painting}, trans. Matthew Barr (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2009), 66.}
Indeed, the critic’s hostile reaction to it can possibly be attributed to the pictorial effects of the painting, such as the black outlines and color oppositions that seem to enhance the blatant, unapologetic nudity of the subject in question. But above all, “Olympia’s tones are concentrated at the extremes of the scale, with relatively few in the intermediate range, giving it the harshness and startling immediacy of a flash-lit photograph.”\textsuperscript{163} In this regard, Manet’s Olympia presented viewers with something they’ve never seen, something wholly modern. In every which way, Manet’s Olympia seemed to shock its audience.

\textit{A Bar at the Folies-Bergère}

Edouard Manet painted \textit{A Bar at the Folies-Bergère}—his last great and ambitious painting—in 1881 while he was gravely ill.\textsuperscript{164} During the following year, Manet showed \textit{Folies-Bergère} at the Salon with the fleeting hope that he would at last reach his true audience. Putting all his energy into one last work, Manet took a conventional scene from everyday Parisian life and created a subtle comment on society. In \textit{Folies-Bergère}, a blond barmaid stands behind a counter filled with flowers, fruit, and an assortment of liquor. Directly behind her, a mirror reflects a top-hatted gentleman, chandeliers, and fellow customers. Instead of showing people talking or being served at the bar, the viewer is involved in the painting directly as though the barmaid is serving him. The barmaid looks at the viewer as if to ask what he wants to order. In a fashion, \textit{The Folies-Bergère} is a culmination of what Manet had been trying to achieve his entire life: an unquestionably unique depiction of modern, everyday life. In fact, “Manet selected the characters and the place in the Bar for the very reason that they represented a complex of values

\textsuperscript{163} Reff, \textit{Art in Context, Manet: Olympia}, 81.
and perceptions which he considered essential to his identity as a man of his own time." By depicting such a modern scene, Manet clearly broke from the past tradition of historical paintings and legends, while creating something quintessentially modern.

Utilizing techniques previously established in *The Absinthe Drinker* and *Olympia*, Manet instilled *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* with a combination of surface effects and depth of composition. Anne Coffin Hanson writes:

> It is clear that Manet learned from Couture his remarkable ability to apply the paste-like paint with a surety of touch . . . Manet’s application of the upper paint layers depended on different principles. His method seems more simple and direct. He could be charged with impatience in not being willing to take the time to work up separate paint layers, were it not for repeated evidence that he worked very slowly, taking considerable time to come to the point when he considered a work appropriately finished.  

Rejecting transparent layers in favor of a more stark effect, Manet’s *Bar* is interesting in the way the barmaid is static with black outlines, whereas the contour of her reflection is blurred, suggesting movement. One wonders, then, why Manet would choose to depict a mirror that was factually deceiving, or even botched? For Anne Coffin Hanson, “Both subject and style suggest . . . that he [Manet] attempted to capture the . . . vivid reality of his own society, and that he made the first real step toward recording the spirit of modern life.” For Hanson, the mirror symbolizes the ambiguities and uncertainties of the modern urban life.

The Haussmannization of Paris not only altered the infrastructure of Paris, it also gave birth to new forms of leisure, particularly the burgeoning life of the café concerts. For Manet, these cafés essentially served as a social anthropology of Paris. In *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, the obscured consistency of the mirror can be seen as a metaphor for the shocking contact of several classes in one location. Manet's painting depicts the petite bourgeoisie’s restricted participation in the spectacle while granting them a small dose of identity; visitors to cafes-

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165 Ibid., 2.  
166 Hanson, *Manet and the Modern Tradition*, 160.  
167 Ibid., 162.
concert felt themselves a part of the show. Clark writes:

That is why they are placed in a mirror and only half attached to the figure in front of it. For if the barmaid were in the mirror—part of the glamour of lights and performances, directly addressed by the man with the cane—she would be given back the actual social circumstances which are precisely what she does not have . . . for there is a definite set of class relations here to which the barmaid belongs.\(^{168}\)

Hence, the spectacle can be viewed as the sum of all recreational opportunities available to the petite bourgeois Parisian that gave them an imagined sense of social mobility. The barmaid’s choice of dress and hair prevent her from being identified as middle or lower class; instead, she is seen as “the face of fashion,” which is “a good and necessary disguise.” Clark further elaborates, “For if one could not be bourgeois, then at least one could prevent oneself from being anything else . . . The look which results is a special one: public, outward . . . impassive . . . for to express oneself would be to have one’s class be legible.”\(^{169}\) As illuminating as Clark’s study is, the painting also seems to address more universal themes than class.

The barmaid is a representative of the urban working girl, keenly self-aware, gazing directly into the viewer’s own world. Although still distant, the melancholy girl’s gaze is more personal than the one found in *Olympia*, almost evoking a profound sympathy for her. There is an elusive and inaccessible quality about the girl resulting in a “drama of invitation and denial.”\(^{170}\) Her alienation “is felt as a kind of fierceness and flawlessness with which she seals herself from her surroundings. She is detached.”\(^{171}\) Indeed, one is reminded of what Benjamin finds in Baudelaire’s poetry, namely “eyes that could be said to have lost the ability to look.”\(^{172}\) Manet’s paintings, like Baudelaire’s poetry, both portray modernity by conjuring a “mirrorlike

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\(^{169}\) Ibid., 253.
According to Benjamin, “Glances may be all the more compelling, the more complete the viewer’s absence that is overcome in them. In eyes that look at us with mirrorlike blankness, the remoteness remains complete. It is precisely for this reason that such eyes know nothing of distance.” In the barmaid we find the anonymity and alienation inherent in the random encounters of modern life. Thus, Manet’s *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is a parallel of society, a commentary on the ambiguity of gazes in the modern city, alienation, and the expansion of consumerism.

Throughout *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, the bright lights and entertainment presented in the mirror reflect a mirage, a falsity that serves to further enhance the barmaid’s alienation. The mirror can be seen as a representative of modernity, the “transient, the fleeting, the contingent,” while the stoic heroism of the barmaid represents eternal beauty, supplied “by fashion, by morality, and the passions.” The girl exemplifies Baudelaire’s “To a Woman Passing By:” “Tall, slender, in deep mourning, majestically sad . . . lithe, noble, legs statuesque . . . Fugitive beauty, in whose glance I was suddenly reborn.” Manet’s painting, thus, effectively demonstrates the dichotomous relationship of Baudelaire’s modernity:

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 first woman before the fall of man.

This is the founding definition of aesthetic modernity, coined by Baudelaire and visually represented by Manet.

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173 Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 150.
174 Ibid.
176 Baudelaire, *Flowers of Evil*, 123.
CONCLUSION

By interpreting the artistic works of Charles Baudelaire and Edouard Manet, we can begin to formulate the historical experience of aesthetic modernism in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. After all, it was Baudelaire’s poetry that Walter Benjamin utilized in an effort to locate the transformation of modern experience. In this, the works of Baudelaire and Manet have continuously played a pivotal role in the history of aesthetic modernity. From the time of their debut to the present day, *The Flowers of Evil* and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* continue to not only inspire, but draw debate. Manet’s works, in particular, not only became some of the first modernist pictures, but also gave birth to an entire movement in Impressionism. Although both Baudelaire and Manet expressed contempt for the culture of their day, their works continue to play an ongoing, active role in defining the very epoch they attempted to distance themselves from.

Although undeniably modern, Baudelaire and Manet are unique in the way they seamlessly assimilated the past with the present. In a sense, the two men where inexplicably haunted by the past in the present. To Walter Benjamin, Baudelaire represented this contradiction in his very essence. Benjamin was captivated by Baudelaire’s ability to blend the “immemorial” with the modern. Benjamin writes, “The [things] that have gone out of fashion have become inexhaustible containers of memories.” Indeed, the past is very much alive in the works of Baudelaire and Manet. For Benjamin, “It is very important that the modern, with Baudelaire, appear not only as a signature of an epoch but as an energy by which this epoch immediately transforms and appropriates antiquity. Among all the relationships into which modernity enters, its relation to

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antiquity is crucial.” Like Baudelaire, Manet saw in the art of yesteryear a vast treasure, particularly useful in rethinking the relationship of the past to the present. With this in mind, both men would develop a style that would be regarded as something truly modern.

During Baudelaire and Manet’s lifetime, Haussmann’s renovation of Paris transformed the city from a post-medieval infrastructure to an international symbol of urban elegance. As exemplified in the works of Baudelaire and Manet, the traumatic shock of the modern city left individuals vulnerable and lacking the necessary experience to comprehend and come to terms with the rapid pace of modern urban existence. For Baudelaire, the concept of modernity did not solely revolve around trends and changing fashions, although those were emblematic of a modern lifestyle. Baudelaire claimed that modernity was an experience that was always in flux and did not remain still. Thus, the very nature of modernity makes it impossible to define, since, by nature, it is constantly subject to renewal. In this regard, Baudelaire and Manet are still speaking to us today, as their works prove to be remarkably accurate in articulating aspects of our own modern experiences.

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179 Ibid., 236.
Edouard Manet: The Absinthe Drinker
Edouard Manet: *Olympia*
Edouard Manet: *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*
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