Baudelaire Squared: Beauty on the Poet’s own Terms

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Between 1857 and 1861, the years of Charles Baudelaire’s first two editions of The Flowers of Evil, the poet was nearly as busy at work in prose as he was in verse. In this fertile period, one essay printed and another conceived would change the face of art and literature, ushering in the modernist credo: Philosophic art (1858-60) and The Painter of Modern Life (published, eventually, in 1863). The essays condemned painters’ reliance on antique ideas and forms, calling for the new artist to integrate an immediate, sensory, subjective aesthetic into his attempts at visual beauty. But Baudelaire’s words were not for painters alone. In his 1857 poem “Beauty,” Baudelaire himself had been guilty of portraying the beautiful only for its Platonic, eternal half. In 1861, readied by his new essays for a correction, he wrote “Hymne à la beauté,” a dark, conflicted piece that made the synthesis of permanent and transient his own. This essay maps that transition, showing how the words of the critic became the words of the poet.

With all of their incarnations, factions, and inter-reactions, the modernist and avant-garde poetry movements of the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries shared at least one common trait: a desire to be understood on their own terms. More than any of the movements before them, the -isms of the modern era are inseparable from their manifestos, lectures, speeches, pamphlets, posters, and (in some memorable cases) even their own reference notes. As much as these artists wanted their creations to be self-sufficient, their audiences would often be lost without these explicit explanations. If Charles Baudelaire is to be called a father of European modernism, then there should be some suggestion that, as with his progeny, his criticism adds meaning to his poetry. Baudelaire wrote little about his own specific medium, but he does make sweeping remarks on art as a whole in his discussions of painting and drawing. By finding common subject matter between his art criticism and his own writing, one can determine whether Baudelaire believed in a personal ut pictura poesis. If he did, then his philosophy on mimesis and poiesis should unfold in the process. Baudelaire’s writings on beauty, memorable in both his essays and his verse, provide a perfect case study. The portrayal of Beauty develops from “La Beauté” (Les Fleurs du Mal², 1857) to “Hymne à la beauté” (Les Fleurs du Mal, 1861) to reflect more accurately Baudelaire’s later critical theories, themselves questioning the imitation of beauty and its philosophic rendering in art. Where “La Beauté” paints Beauty with an incomplete and didactic ethereality, “Hymne à la beauté”⁴ arrives at the conclusions of Baudelaire’s later essays by adorning the subject with its transitory nature.

The best standard against which to hold up the two “Beauté” poems is Baudelaire’s own, his depiction of the artistic ideal on the same subject, as pronounced in Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne⁵ (1863). In the very first chapter of the essay, in the midst of a discussion of fashion, Baudelaire writes,

This is in fact an excellent opportunity to establish a rational and historical theory of beauty, in contrast to the academic theory of an unique and absolute beauty; to show that beauty is always and inevitably of a double composition, although the impression that it produces is single—for the fact that it is difficult to discern the variable elements of beauty within the unity of the impression invalidates in no way the necessity of variety in its composition. Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element, whose quantity will be, if you like, whether severally or all at once, the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions. Without this second element, which might be described as the amusing, enticing, appetizing icing on the divine cake, the first element would be beyond our powers of digestion or appreciation, neither adapted nor suitable to human nature. I defy anyone to point to a single scrap of beauty which does not contain these two elements. (Baudelaire, 3)

Although this essay was published in 1863, two years after his second and final poem on beauty, Baudelaire leads the reader to believe that he had arrived at the

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idea some time earlier. Presenting the argument first in the context of “an excellent opportunity” implies that the theory is nothing new for Baudelaire; it only needed a convenient home in which to be written out. As such, it could easily have influenced Baudelaire’s own artistic approach back in 1861, or even in 1857. The poet’s new rational and historical theory, in summary, is that beauty is composed of two parts, the eternal and the circumstantial. While the first may be the more important, the variable qualities of the moment must be present to decorate beauty and make its eternal elements appreciable. As a symbolist, Baudelaire certainly used particular, perceived details to speak to deeper truths in his poetry in general, but such a synthesis in his poems on beauty is far from apparent. Is this a flaw? Even if Baudelaire did have some belief in the correspondence of critical standards between painting and poetry, nothing in this essay’s proclamation requires him to infuse his verse with the eternal and the circumstantial. Nothing, in short, requires his poetry on beauty to be itself beautiful. However, if Baudelaire genuinely believed in bipartite beauty, then his representation of the character Beauty should bear that duality.

What one finds though, upon close inspection, is that “La Beauté,” for one, does not. Instead, Baudelaire depicts Beauty as solely ethereal and eternal. Baudelaire constructs the poem as a barely modified sonnet, a form that already carries centuries of wear. Beauty describes herself as unearthly and unattainable: as a dream (1), a queen in the sky (5), and an incomprehensible sphinx (5). The language she uses to illustrate her interactions with poets similarly distances her from their world, as the poets’ love for her and vision through her are not instantaneous or particular or circumstantial, but “éternel” (4, 14). The distance is not merely temporal, though. The phrase “Je trône dans l’azur” (5) creates a multi-dimensional separation, with “trône” serving the double-purpose of creating a spatial and hierarchical rift.

The quality of constancy in Beauty’s essence translates into her character. While poets may bruise themselves on her breast, Beauty’s heart remains as white as a swan (2, 7). She is not attached to their welfare. The narrative’s only action and sentiment—those qualities meant to adorn eternal verses with digestible, sensory images—belong not to Beauty, but to the poets. Beauty herself hates movement and betrays no emotion (7-8). She is stable and stoic: her “grandes attitudes” (9) are not those of a human monarch, but of the proudest monuments (10). Finally, notice that she does not tame her lovers with attractive motion or even with her appearance; her snare lies in her mirroring eyes (14). Baudelaire has, in fact, stripped Beauty of almost any agency in the poets’ enchantment. Beauty may be fair (1), but her allure comes less from her features than from her ability to placidly and passively reflect. She is untouchable and she will not reach out. She will only ever be the removed study of her lovers’ “austères etudes” (9).

While Baudelaire’s choice of “miroirs” (10) for the final image is problematic for the interpretation of “La Beauté” as a purely metaphysical poem, his actual use of the symbol shows that he is far from committed to a circumstantial Beauty. Baudelaire could establish some relationship between Beauty and the world if he were to expand the mirror’s picture to specific places and times, but he does something quite different. Beauty’s eyes are not filled with worldly objects or feelings; they consist of “clartés éternelles” (11) (14). While the poets may see beautiful versions of their own worlds, the reader sees only another emblem of spirituality. Within the poem, then, Baudelaire’s presentation is consistent; the last impression he leaves is the one he creates throughout. Beauty remains an eternal light.

Of course, while Baudelaire seems to avoid as much as possible the connections between Beauty and the physical world in “La Beauté,” he inevitably falls into those similes and metaphors in other verses. However, even these more circumstantial images manage only to lend a greater sense of distance and permanence to the character of Beauty herself. The first of these instances appears in the opening line: “Je suis belle, ô mortels! comme un rêve de pierre” (1, emphasis added). The simile has two functions in Baudelaire’s portrayal of ethereal beauty. First, in and of itself, its components put together the qualities of Beauty that will endure for the whole poem: “rêve” grants her spirituality, and “pierre” eternal life. Any possible physical connotation of “pierre” is undermined by the syntactic manner in which Baudelaire makes stone part of the dream: “rêve de pierre.” Second, the simile describes Beauty’s fairness in terms foreign to the beauty of human experience: although the first sentence connotes a divine, feminine beauty, the
end of the line—like a dream of stone—defies the expectation of an idealized female description. The second line of the poem does the same: Beauty’s breast is introduced not by its allure, but by its violence (2). Because that violence might imply a worldly, transitory quality, Baudelaire uses a reflexive verb to turn the responsibility away from Beauty: the breast may inspire the poet’s love and perilous hurling, but those motions are the lover’s, not the beloved’s. Similarly, the remaining images that Baudelaire conjures may add the variable element of beauty to his verse, but they only entrench the unilateral nature of his character Beauty. The sphinx is used for its mystery, the swan for its purity, and the monuments for their pride—hardly the “amusing, enticing, appetizing icing on the divine cake” that Baudelaire uses to describe transitory qualities in Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne.

“Hymne à la beauté,” on the other hand, deliberately takes on the task of combining the essay’s two facets of Beauty, beginning with the poem’s central question. The opening stanza, seeking Beauty’s astral origins, would appear to recognize only her metaphysical quality, but it soon shows how even these sources relate her to the sensory world. The poem begins, “Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l’abime, / O Beauté?” (1-2). This line grants Beauty a celestial birthplace, but it also implies that Beauty has come from one of those foreign worlds to inhabit the Earth’s. In fact, each time that Baudelaire returns to the poem’s main question, he includes this added sense of arrival: “Sors-tu du gouffre ou descends-tu des astres?” (9), “Que tu viennes du ciel ou de l’enfer,” (21), “De Satan ou de Dieu!” (25) (emphases added). Whenever the question of Beauty’s spiritual nature returns, so does Baudelaire’s reminder that she has traveled away from its sphere. This journey never appears in “La Beauté.”

The question’s resolution in “Hymne” also creates a combination:

*Ange ou Sirène,*
*Qu’importe, si tu rends,—fée aux yeux de velours,*
*Rythme, parfums, lueur, ô mon unique reine!—*
*L’univers moins hideux et les instants moins lourds?*

Beauty’s identity may be unearthly—she is, after all, compared to an angel, a siren, and a fairy—but her effect is sensory. The poet is overwhelmed, at the end, not by the idea of Beauty, but by the sensations of Beauty: the touch of a velvet gaze, the sound of her rhythm, the smell of perfumes, and the sight of her glow. She makes the eternal universe less horrifying at the same time as she makes lighter the transitory instants of life; she touches the two types of time. Baudelaire ends his poem on a very explicit note: this Beauty consists of both elements of the beautiful.

“Hymne” also uses physical imagery to portray the transitory nature that the goddess of “La Beauté” lacked. The first comparison that Baudelaire uses in the poem is that between Beauty’s effect on the human world—“le bienfait et le crime” (3)—and wine’s (4). As Baudelaire further describes in the next stanza, Beauty is first and foremost a drug. Even within that metaphor lie further clues to uncover her variable side: she eyes contain sunsets and sunrises (5), her perfumes are like a single stormy night (6), and her draughts create virtues and vices where they do not belong (7-8). These descriptions paint a Beauty who can flood the veins in an instant, but also one that can die down the next. Baudelaire makes his appeal to Beauty’s transitory nature even more explicit in the fifth stanza, when he uses the metaphor of the candle: “L’éphémère ébloui vole vers toi, chandelle, / Crépité, flambé et dit: Bénissons ce flambeau!” (17-18). Baudelaire does not stop at the metaphor between Beauty and the flame, an ephemeral symbol. He shows Beauty consuming ephemerality itself.

However, this is not to say that “Hymne à la beauté” denies Beauty’s duality by abandoning her eternal, invariable element. The conception of the poem as a hymn and the debate that opens and closes it make clear that Beauty is at least in part, if not at her very core, a divinity. Her dominion over capital-letter concepts, such as “Le Destin” (10), “l’Horreur” (14), and “le Meurtre,” even exalts her as a queen above a panoply of gods. Baudelaire goes even further when he suggests briefly that, in fact, she governs everything (12). Finally, Baudelaire’s penultimate conclusion on her nature reveals that, while her effects on worldly fortunes may be largely transitory, she can also provide a window into eternity, just like her counterpart in “La Beauté”: “ton oeil, ton souris, ton pied, m’ouvrent la porte / D’un Infini que j’aime et n’ai jamais connu” (23-24). This second poem’s Beauty may have traveled from another world to ours, but she is still a lens through which to watch all of time and space. “Hymne” here sings its own version of “clartés éternelles.” There can
be no question, then, that the eternal element, the first part of beauty in Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne, remains present in from “La Beauté” to “Hymne.”

While the significant difference between the Beauty of “La Beauté” and that of “Hymne à la beauté” becomes fairly clear under the essay’s criteria, the shift’s cause is less apparent. Even if Baudelaire had developed the concept of bipartite beauty some years before Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne, there is no evidence to prove that the idea took hold specifically between the 1857 and 1861 editions of Les Fleurs du Mal—as much as the contrast between the two poems might so suggest. Recourse can be sought, though, in a piece of Baudelaire’s art criticism that was written in those interstitial years: L’art philosophique (1858-1860).

In the essay, Baudelaire makes two relevant claims about the duties of art. He begins, “What is pure art according to the modern idea? It is the creation of an evocative image, containing at once the object and the subject, the world external to the artist and the artist himself” (Baudelaire, 205). On this count, both poems are about even: “La Beauté” describes the fate of the poet at the hands of the other-worldly Beauty, and “Hymne” describes the personal pangs, reliefs, and epiphanies of the speaker in the midst of a discourse on Beauty’s world governance. The essay goes on, however, to create a greater schism between the poems by declaring against the pursuit and promotion of philosophy through art. According to Baudelaire, “every art ought to be self-sufficient” (Baudelaire, 211), and, as such, Philosophic Artists are heretics (Baudelaire, 212).

The reason that this tenet poses a problem for Baudelaire’s own poetry is that “La Beauté,” by failing to recognize the progressive bipartite theory of beauty, must, according to the rules of Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne, be in concord with the other, more philosophic definition: “the academic theory of an unique and absolute beauty.” This academic theory is certainly not from any recent academy; the French lumières, revolutionaries, and Romantics were generally skeptics as far as absolutes were concerned. Instead, the eternal, invariable Beauty is more likely Plato’s. The Form of Beauty is one of Socrates’ favorite examples; it appears throughout the Platonic dialogues, including Phaedo, Phaedrus, Symposium, and Republic. Whether Baudelaire was conscious of it or not, the Form also pervades “La Beauté,” and thereby renders Baudelaire guilty of, in his own words, “the error of Philosophic Art” (Baudelaire, 206).

By framing the beginning and end of “La Beauté,” the Formal quality of Beauty adds weight to her ethereal and eternal nature. The poem seems to open with a redundancy, or at least with unnecessary obviousness, in the line, “Je suis belle, ô mortels!” (1), but more likely this exclamation serves to introduce Baudelaire’s philosophical stance. Beauty is beautiful by Platonic definition; she is the concept “beautiful.” By labeling her audience “mortels,” she also asserts her own immortality by contrast. Defined from the outset by the purest semantic description of her nature and by her eternality, Beauty establishes her identity in relation to the Forms. To further this association, Baudelaire writes that she sits as a mysterious sphinx (a classical image on its own) in her throne in the sky (5), as if waiting to be decoded by the austere studies of poets (11). In Baudelaire’s image, the poets have become Plato’s philosopher kings, consumed (11) in study of Beauty’s Form. Notice that Baudelaire even uses the same word, “austère,” that he uses in his poetry’s only allusion to the Greek philosopher: “Laisse du vieux Platon se froncer l’œil austère” (“Lesbos,” Les Fleurs du Mal).

“L’œil” also happens to be the most Platonic piece of “La Beauté,” as it leaves the final impression of her metaphysical nature. Beauty has “De purs miroirs qui font toutes choses plus belles: / Mes yeux, mes larges yeux aux clartés éternelles!” (13-14). The first line would be a contradiction but for a classical interpretation: the only way the mirror could be pure and still project a more beautiful picture is in the idea of the Form, the pure truth of Beauty through which the philosopher sees the fullest earthly beauty. The Beauty of “La Beauté” is the poet’s passage out of the cave (Republic, 513e-518b), into the light of “clartés éternelles.” In terms of L’art Philosophique, then, Baudelaire is not only guilty of creating a philosophic object, the Form of Beauty, but a philosophic subject, the poet.

Compare the frame of “La Beauté” to that of “Hymne à la beauté.” “La Beauté” opens by exclaiming a definite, definitional, eternal identity. The only relation the beginning of “Hymne à la beauté” has to Plato is its aporia: the new speaker, the poet, cannot tell what Beauty is. The pursuit of Beauty in “La Beauté” is a study (11), an act of the highest part of the Platonic...
soul, reason (Republic, 401b-d, 441e). If Baudelaire meant for Beauty to be similarly Formal in “Hymne,” he would not have attributed her power to the lowest part of the soul, to the drugs, perfumes, and eros of the appetite (4, 6, 7, 19, 27). The philosophic contrast lasts through the conclusion of both poems. In the last lines of “La Beauté,” Beauty describes her mirror-eyes as open on eternal enlightenment. In the last lines of “Hymne,” Beauty can only temper the horror and depression of life. Only the first of these represents the philosophic pleasure of communion with the Good from Plato’s dialogues.

The tone of the last line of “Hymne” speaks to a greater overall difference, one that thoroughly removes its Beauty from the Platonic ideal: unlike “La Beauté,” “Hymne” is overwhelmingly negative. Beauty’s 1857 incarnation is, at worst, mysterious. She may be distant, but she bears a snow-white heart (6) and renders the universe beautiful—in short, again, she has the relationship with the Good that Plato ascribes to the Forms. Even in the most violent line of the poem, “Et mon sein, où chacun s’est meurtur tour à tour,”26 the poet displaces blame onto her lovers: according to the reflexive verb, they are the ones who are at fault for bruising themselves. “Hymne à la beauté,” on the other hand, does not shy away from Beauty’s destruction. In fact, even though it proposes Beauty’s angelic and demonic origins as equally probable (1-3), only a few lines portray her benevolent aspect (8, 24, 26-8). On the other side, her gaze and her kisses are intoxicating (4-8), she tramples and mocks the dead (13), her jewels include Horror and Murder (14-15), and her attraction is that of a deadly flame (16-17), a tomb (20), and a monster (22). She may, as in “La Beauté,” open the door to the Infinite (24), but at what price? Her beneficent qualities are overshadowed by her terrible power.

Between 1857 and 1861, Baudelaire seems, then, to have taken his own artistic advice to heart. In re-examining his depiction of beauty, he did more than render the second, transitory element to his character in anticipation of Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne; he expunged Beauty’s philosophical strain to write a poem consistent with the current L’art Philosophe. While the eternal aspect had to remain, due to Baudelaire’s binary theory of artistic beauty, the depiction in “Hymne,” through new sensory detail, human voice, and a sinister tone, does everything possible to create a Beauty who is at least subjective and original (not in the least bit Platonic). Out with Form, in with moral ambiguity. “Hymne à la beauté” then becomes not only more consistent with Baudelaire’s art criticism, but also with his other poetry. The hymn provides yet another exploration of the poet’s depression and unease, the genuine sentiments of Les Fleurs du Mal. By contrast, in a collection including “Au Lecteur” and “Spleen,” the holy aura of “La Beauté” rings false.

If “Hymne à la beauté” can then be read, in part, as a correction, what do we learn about Baudelaire’s creative process? While modern poetry, according to L’art Philosophique, may not call for the ancients’ philosophy, Baudelaire’s does not abandon philosophic significance altogether. Just as modernism as a whole re-asserts the poet’s subjective perception and subjective aesthetic, Baudelaire’s poetry promotes subjective philosophy. “Hymne à la Beauté” is not devoid of message; it questions the nature and the effect of Beauty just as it questions her portrayal. However, the philosophical foundation is no longer a set of classical tenets adopted by Baudelaire; the foundation is Baudelaire’s own. Baudelaire’s mimesis is a thorough imitation that derives truth from personal experience—thorough, by means of the eternal and the circumstantial; experienced, by means of the spiritual and the sensory. His poiesis, then, is a synthesis of his unique understanding of the world and his unique interaction with the world. To put the craft in a few of his own terms, his creation combines the poet’s invariable perception of the eternal and his relative perception of the circumstantial. The sum produces poetic beauty—with or without a capital B.

References and Notes
1. The Flowers of Evil
2. “Beauty”
3. “Hymn to Beauty”
4. The Painter of Modern Life
6. eternal
7. I’m enthroned in the sky
8. grand bearing
9. austere studies
10. mirrors
11. eternal clarities
12. I am beautiful, O mortals! like a dream of stone
13. Do you come from sky or leave the abyss,
/ O Beauty
14. Do you leave the gulf or descend from the stars?
15. That you come from the sky or from hell
16. From Satan or from God
17. Angel or Siren, / No matter, if you render—fairy of
   velvet eyes, / Rhythm, perfume, glow, O my only
   queen!— / The Universe less hideous and instants
   less heavy
18. the good deed and the crime
19. The moth flies toward you, candle, / Crackles,
   burns and says: Bless this flame!
20. Destiny, Horror, Murder
21. your eye, your smile, your foot, open for me the
   door / Of an Infinity I love and have never known
22. Philosophic Art
   and Other Essays. 205-13.
24. Let old Plato frown the austere eye
25. Pure mirrors that make all things more beautiful: /
   My eyes, my large eyes of eternal clarities
26. And my breast, where each has bruised himself in
   turn

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