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Generic Baggage: Encountering Other People in “À une passante” and “Les Veuves”

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Un œil expérimenté ne s’y trompe jamais. Dans ces traits rigides ou abattus, dans ces yeux caves et ternes, ou brillants des derniers éclairs de la lutte, dans ces rides profondes et nombreuses, dans ces démarches si lentes ou si saccadées, il déchiffre tout de suite les innombrables légendes de l’amour trompé, du dévouement méconnu, des efforts non récompensés, de la faim et du froid humblement, silencieusement supportés. (OC 1:292)

Like the poets and philosophers described by the narrator of “Les Veuves” (OC 1:292-94), Baudelaire’s readers make judgments about the other people in his texts. While we hope to avoid the naivety of the physiognomist—and critics have noted the dangers of taking Baudelaire’s texts at face value¹—we rely on textual clues to interpret Baudelaire’s descriptions of individuals and social types, his direct addresses to others, his evocations of allegorical, fictional, and mythological figures, and the references in his texts to the work of other artists or writers. One way in which a writer may influence readers’ perceptions of the people in his texts is by manipulating the generic context. Barbara Johnson has shown the ways in which the early prose “doublets”² of poems from *Les Fleurs du Mal* seem to question the lyrical assumptions of their verse counterparts, altering fundamentally the tenor of the relationship between the speaker and the woman he addresses in texts such as “L’Invitation au voyage.”³ But Baudelaire’s experimentation with genre went far beyond an investigation of the broad categories of verse and prose in poetry. He drew extensively on existing forms, such as the sonnet, the nouvelle, and the essay, while simultaneously modifying some of their most

basic characteristics, and, in *Le Spleen de Paris*, creating hybrid texts participating in multiple prose subgenres. Due to the social and historical factors involved in the development of ideas of genre, generic choices involve complex interactions among the writer, the work of his predecessors and contemporaries, and the society in which he lived. Thus, Baudelaire's texts carry 'generic baggage,' whether they seem to comply with or challenge 'generic norms.' What questions does Baudelaire's engagement with this slippery generic heritage raise about the possibility of 'reading' the other people in his writings? In this paper, I will explore these issues in relation to two short texts: "À une passante"⁴—a sonnet that conjures up one of the most celebrated Baudelairean encounters—and "Les Veuves,"⁵ a *poème en prose* in which the speaker observes rather than engages with two widows.

"À une passante" (OC 1:92-93) involves many concepts central to Baudelaire's writings about other people: the gaze of the *flâneur*, the experience of being in a crowd, the transformations of Paris in the nineteenth century. At the heart of the poem, however, is the solitary speaker's transfixion by a woman dressed in mourning who passes him on a busy street. The speaker makes eye contact with the woman, but she disappears, leaving him wondering if he will ever see her again. He is certain that he would have loved her and even suggests that she knew this. Readers' interpretations of this not-quite-meeting point to several areas of ambiguity. Walter Benjamin emphasizes the elusiveness of the connection between the speaker and the woman when he labels the scene "love at last sight" and states that the *jamais* "marks the high point of the encounter."⁶ Donald Aynesworth notes the "strange liberty which the narrator takes with the mind of the woman" but he adds that this "epitomizes the freedom and familiarity of human exchange at an urban intersection."⁷ In contrast, while emphasizing the "disorder at the formal center of the poem," Ross Chambers sees in this meeting a "dramatically successful act of communication," arguing that one of the "communicational axioms on which the poem rests" is that "human beings have empathetic understanding for each other."⁸ There

is also some uncertainty among readers about the identity of the *passante*. Some critics⁹ label her a widow, although, in fact, women did not only wear *grand deuil*—the strictest form of mourning costume—after the death of a husband, but also after the deaths of parents, siblings, and even grandparents, albeit for a shorter time.¹⁰

Baudelaire's Parnassian contemporaries would have seen "*À une passante*," with its abba cddc efe fgg scheme, as infringing the rules of the sonnet form. Théodore de Banville argues, in his *Petit Traité de poésie française*, that the rhyme scheme abba abba ccd ede is the only acceptable arrangement for the 'regular' French sonnet.¹¹ Théophile Gautier would have considered "*À une passante*" a *sonnet libertin*¹² because it contains four rhymes rather than two in the quatrains. But the sonnet form has never been absolutely fixed; the idea that the sonnet must adhere strictly to a specific rhyme scheme only really gained currency after Boileau.¹³ The majority of Baudelaire's sonnets contain four rhymes in the quatrains. Although modern-day critics, such as Jérôme Thélot, have noted "*les brisures du sonnet*" (492), I would argue that the sonnet form is essential to "*À une passante*," in spite—and perhaps because—of the ways in which Baudelaire stretches it. The poet exploits the bipartite nature of the sonnet, which has been central to the Italian (and French) sonnet since its origins in the 1230s in the court of Frederick II of Sicily. There is a clear thematic and formal division between the octave—in which the apparition of the woman immobilizes the speaker—and the sestet, in which she disappears and the implications of the encounter are explored. The *volta*, or turn, indicating the shift from octave to sestet in line nine, is particularly striking here: "Un éclair... puis la nuit!—Fugitive beauté." Since it constitutes an aspect of the scene, the description of the *passante*'s disappearance would traditionally belong in the quatrains. However, the image of the flash followed by darkness at the beginning of line nine reinforces the shock of the *passante*'s departure and sets up an opposition between the woman's presence in the quatrains and her sudden absence in the tercets. Baudelaire's sonnet could almost be considered a model example

in relation to Banville's advice that "le dernier vers du Sonnet doit contenir un trait—exquis, ou surprenant, ou excitant l'admiration par sa justesse et par sa force [...] le dernier vers du Sonnet doit contenir la pensée du Sonnet tout entier" (177). It is in this final line that we learn of the speaker's conviction that the passante knows that he would have loved her—that she can read his mind, and, by implication, that he can read hers: "Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais!" The impact of the line is magnified by the fact that Baudelaire saves the rhyming couplet that traditionally begins the tercets of the French sonnet for the end of the poem. Baudelaire's use and modification of the sonnet form, therefore, are central to the apparition and disappearance of the passante and to the emergence of the idea of a psychic connection between the speaker and the woman.

Does Baudelaire's sonnet technique contribute to the ambiguity around the figure of the passante and her interaction with the narrator? According to Claude Pichois, "ce quatorzain est créé selon le système (comme dirait Baudelaire), selon l'esthétique de l'ébauche, de l'instantané, que le poète élabore au contact des aquarelles de Constantin Guys."¹⁴ Although there are obvious differences in the processes of making a sketch and composing a sonnet, the quatrains of "À une passante" evoke some of the immediacy and the initial broad strokes of the sketch. Baudelaire's reaction to the watercolours of Constantin Guys—who painted scenes of contemporary Parisian life—in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* includes a description of the painter's technique:

M. G. commence par de légères indications au crayon, qui ne marquent guère que la place que les objets doivent tenir dans l'espace. Les plans principaux sont indiqués ensuite par des teintes au lavis, des masses vaguement, légèrement colorées d'abord, mais reprises plus tard et chargées successivement de couleurs plus intenses. Au dernier moment, le contour des objets est définitivement cerné par de l'encre. À moins de les

avoir vus, on ne se douterait pas des effets surprenants qu'il peut obtenir par cette méthode si simple et presque élémentaire. (OC 2:699-700)

It is certainly possible to see parallels between Guys's gradual intensification and outlining of the shapes of his watercolours, and the way in which the tercets of "À une passante" develop and reinterpret the material presented in the quatrains, although the passante is never "définitivement cernée." The brevity of the sonnet precludes clarifications, meaning that the evocation of the passante is reminiscent of a sketch in which the essential elements are suggested, but where the viewer must fill in the details. The sketch-like quality of "À une passante" may explain why many readers have assumed that the passante is a widow. The information that she is wearing grand deuil immediately connects her with death and indicates a close attachment to another person, though it also marks the beginning of the end of this bond. According to the customs around the wearing of mourning clothes, the death of a husband was the most serious kind of bereavement, requiring at least six months and three weeks of wearing grand deuil followed by the same length of time in demi-deuil.¹⁵ Defining the woman in relation to her dead husband therefore provides an apparently logical frame for her new encounter with the male speaker. However, Baudelaire's decision to define the woman primarily in terms of her transitory state as a passante privileges the connection with the speaker over her past relationships, and allows him to exploit the woman's mourning clothes as an intriguing aspect of her appearance, without attributing to her a definitive social category. Mourning costumes followed fashion trends throughout the nineteenth century and could be purchased from specialized maisons de deuil,¹⁶ and the text exploits the richness of the passante's clothes: "Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse/Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet." The sonnet form allows the mourning clothes to suggest both suffering and

seductiveness, without labouring the implications of either association. The *passante* emerges as a figure rooted in, yet distinct from, the urban bustle that surrounds her.

The first line of “Les Veuves” evokes a text called “Sur les misères cachées” by Vauvenargues, an eighteenth-century moralist who enjoyed a renewed popularity in the nineteenth century.¹⁷ Vauvenargues wrote fifty-five *Réflexions sur divers sujets*, varying in length from one paragraph to three pages. For example: “Sur la politesse,” “Sur l’incapacité des lecteurs,” “Sur l’impuissance du mérite,” “Sur les gens de lettres,” and “Du bonheur.” “Sur les misères cachées” is a reflection on the way in which misfortunate people use the secluded areas of public gardens to retreat from those who are more successful. In his *avertissement*, Vauvenargues states the aim of the *réflexions*: “Elles tendent, comme le reste, à former l’esprit et les mœurs; l’auteur n’a jamais réfléchi ni écrit dans une autre vue.”¹⁸ Despite this didactic mission, the speaker of “Sur les misères cachées” seems conflicted about the moral message of the text: “mon âme s’afflige et se trouble à la vue de ces infortunés, mais, en même temps, se plaît dans leur compagnie séditeuse.”¹⁹ Baudelaire’s “Les Veuves” begins with a reprisal of Vauvenargues’s arguments. While Vauvenargues lists a few categories of unfortunates who lurk in public gardens—elderly people hiding the shame of their poverty, young people deluded by dreams of glory, prostitutes condemned by the law, people hatching plans to improve their luck—Baudelaire homes in on widows, who are not mentioned specifically by Vauvenargues, and appears—on the surface—to use them as an example to illustrate Vauvenargue’s thesis.

Unlike the *passante*, the two women evoked in “Les Veuves” are clearly labelled by their social category. They are first identified as belonging to the broader group of “*éclopés de la vie*,” then as “*des veuves pauvres*,” before finally being described as individuals. The speaker has such confidence in his categorizing abilities that he asserts that he can recognize widows even if they are not wearing mourning: “Qu’elles soient en deuil ou non, il est facile de les reconnaître.” He addresses his questions to the reader rather than to the women: “Avez-vous

quelquefois aperçu des veuves sur ces bancs solitaires, des veuves pauvres?” While “Les Veuves” draws on the moralizing tone of Vauvenargues’s reflections, the speaker’s focus on the widows as a group is reminiscent of the *physiologie*. These thin, inexpensive booklets describing a social type (e.g. *Physiologie du flâneur*, *Physiologie de l’étudiant*, *Physiologie de la lorette* etc.) became popular in the 1840s. With their roots in the attempt to apply the prestige of medical science to sociological and psychological questions, ‘serious’ *physiologies* were common in the early part of the nineteenth century (e.g. Alibert’s *Physiologie des passions*, 1825).²⁰ However, Balzac’s *Physiologie du mariage* (1829) already involved a critical dimension,²¹ and there was a shift towards a caricatural or satirical treatment of the subjects of *physiologies* after the 1830 revolution. Balzac’s description of these booklets in his *Monographie de la Presse parisienne* emphasizes their humorous character: “Aujourd’hui, la *Physiologie* est l’art de parler et d’écrire incorrectement de n’importe quoi sous la forme d’un petit livre bleu ou jaune qui soutire vingt sous au passant sous prétexte de faire rire et qui lui décroche les mâchoires...” (cited in Lhéritier 380). The narrator’s assumption that he can ‘read’ the widows based on their outward characteristics—the way in which he takes seriously the assumptions of a prose subgenre that had become a joke long before “Les Veuves” was published—raises questions about his judgment. Indeed, readers have been quick to remark on the foolishness of this speaker; Margery Evans labels him a “stooge narrator.”²²

At the beginning of “Les Veuves,” the poet and the philosopher are presented as equally guilty of looking for “une pâture certaine” in other people’s troubles. The text alternates between a kind of generalizing moralistic discourse and the sentimental presentation of individual cases and their effects on the speaker. Like Vauvenargues, who resorts to philosophical dictums to justify his failure to engage with the people he sees in the parks (“le plaisir et la société n’ont plus de charmes pour ceux que l’illusion de la gloire asservit”),²³ the speaker in “Les Veuves” uses maxim-like observations that distance him from the suffering he

describes: “D’ailleurs il y a toujours dans le deuil du pauvre quelque chose qui manque, une absence d’harmonie qui le rend plus navrant. Il est contraint de lésiner sur sa douleur.” The speaker is initially more concerned with drawing abstract conclusions than with empathising with the widows. But whereas Vauvenargues does not discuss individuals, Baudelaire’s speaker moves on to focus on two women in particular. Although he appears to criticize the “vides conjectures” that poets and philosophers make about the “éclopés de la vie,” the speaker does not have any doubts about his own ability to read the widows’ “misères cachées.” He assumes that the first (older) widow has a particularly miserable life: “la consolation bien gagnée d’une de ces lourdes journées sans ami, sans causerie, sans joie, sans confident, que Dieu laissait tomber sur elle, depuis bien des ans peut-être!”

Susan Blood notes that that the vocabulary used to describe the second widow in “Les Veuves” is similar to that used to describe the passante: “grande,” “majestueuse,” “noble,” wearing grand deuil.²⁴ Although she is beautiful and makes an impression on the speaker—“je n’ai pas souvenir d’avoir vu sa pareille dans les collections des aristocratiques beautés”—the effect is in no way comparable to that described in “À une passante.” This woman’s individual qualities only emerge after she has been introduced as a type. The speaker is not transfixed; he is wondering about the possible reasons for her behaviour. He is so caught up in trying to deduce her motivations from her appearance that he does not even notice that she is accompanied by a child until the last moment: “« À coup sûr, me dis-je, cette pauvreté-là, si pauvreté il y a, ne doit pas admettre l’économie sordide; un si noble visage m’en répond. Pourquoi donc reste-t-elle volontairement dans un milieu où elle fait une tache si éclatante? » Mais en passant curieusement auprès d’elle, je crus en deviner la raison.” We have heard enough from him by the time she is introduced to doubt his understanding of her circumstances. Our exposure to the combination of moralistic and sentimental discourses in his account has primed us to question his conclusions. Unlike the tercets of “À une passante,” which leave open

various different future scenarios, the speaker of “Les Veuves” has mapped out a definitive vision of the woman’s continued solitude, including a generalization about children: “Et elle sera rentrée à pied, méditant et rêvant, seule, toujours seule; car l’enfant est turbulent, égoïste, sans douceur et sans patience; et il ne peut même pas, comme le pur animal, comme le chien et le chat, servir de confident aux douleurs solitaires.”

In “Les Foules” (OC 1:291-92), the text that precedes “Les Veuves” in *Le Spleen de Paris*, the role of the poet is described as follows: “Le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège, qu’il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui. Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun.” Maria Scott argues that the poet described in that text does not succeed in being both himself and other people at the same time, because the boundary between the self and the other is eliminated. His gaze is narcissistic: “The poet of ‘Les Foules’ takes other people as empty receptacles for his self-projections” (Scott 171). In “Les Veuves,” the speaker fails to see the widows’ individual circumstances because he is carried away by what he imagines to be their plight. Although the women’s eyes are mentioned (“avec des yeux actifs,” “avec un œil profond”), they do not meet the speaker’s gaze. Ross Chambers argues that many of the encounters in *Le Spleen de Paris* could more accurately be described as *croisements*, “an encounter without meeting or without contact” (*An Atmospherics of the City* 126). This certainly seems to be the case in “Les Veuves,” despite the narrator’s lack of awareness of the fact. Moving from considering the widows as a social category to fantasizing about their experiences as individuals—between almost comic detachment and insincere involvement—the speaker seems to take on the worst excesses of both the philosopher/moralist and the poet.

Both “À une passante” and “Les Veuves” raise questions about how we read other people in Baudelaire and in literature more generally. While the fissures in the figuration of the women and their encounters with the speaker are perhaps more easily identifiable in “Les Veuves,”

similar issues arise in relation to “À une passante.” As in “Les Veuves,” the speaker constitutes our only source of information on the passante; we see her through his eyes. And even though their eyes meet, we learn no more about the passante than we do about the women in “Les Veuves.” It could be argued that the passante is little more than a vehicle for the speaker’s fantasies; he insists on their mutual understanding, despite the fact that their encounter was brief, entirely non-verbal, and that whatever communication was established between the two figures was lost when the passante disappeared. Indeed, the very fact that the speaker addresses the sonnet directly to the absent passante may indicate the insufficiency of their connection. The formal ‘irregularities’ of the poem bear witness to this fragility, but, ultimately, Baudelaire harnesses the resources of the sonnet to hold its ambiguities together in a state of near equilibrium. As a form whose brevity favours suggestion rather than discursive explanation, the sonnet does not encourage the reader to question the authority of the speaker’s voice or his conviction that he can ‘read’ the passante. While the undermining of the speaker in “Les Veuves” seems to caution against making assumptions based on social status and appearance, “À une passante” suggests that even apparently genuine attempts to isolate a person’s uniqueness and establish a ‘true’ connection are precarious.

Even the most careful readers have little choice but to view Baudelaire’s texts through the prism of genre. However outdated we may consider such notions to be, it is impossible to shrug off centuries of ‘generic baggage’ entirely. In his experimentations in verse and in prose, Baudelaire simultaneously exploits and challenges existing ideas of what different types of text should look and sound like. As we have seen, his approach has implications for readers’ interpretations of the many encounters with other people evoked in his work. Perhaps more importantly, generic indicators are an essential element of readers’ first impressions in their encounters with a text. We draw on heuristic assumptions to understand how the costumes of genre may signal authorial intent; these assumptions can be as hard to

shake as those we bring to our everyday encounters with other people. We sometimes suppose – perhaps because the alternative is frightening – that we can ‘know’ our fellow humans by decoding dress, bearing, facial expressions, and other visible cues. Yet, just as generic indicators can become mutable, other people’s ‘signs’ may bear no relation at all to their interior lives – which, to us, may remain incomprehensible. From this perspective, both the author and the other ultimately are elusive. Baudelaire’s stretching and disruption of generic conventions, therefore, constitute a warning to his readers to be on their guard: un œil expérimenté peut se tromper.

¹ Barbara Johnson, *Défigurations du Langage poétique: La seconde révolution baudelairienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979); Scott Carpenter, *Acts of Fiction: Resistance and Resolution from Sade to Baudelaire* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996); Sonya Stephens, *Baudelaire’s Prose Poems: The Practice and Politics of Irony* (Oxford University Press, 1999); Steve Murphy, *Logiques du dernier Baudelaire* (Paris: Champion, 2003); Maria C. Scott, *Baudelaire’s Le Spleen de Paris: Shifting Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005).

² Barbara Johnson, *Défigurations du Langage poétique: La seconde révolution baudelairienne* (Paris: Flammarion, 1979), 31.

³ Johnson, 110-120.

⁴ Originally published in *L’Artiste* in 1860, ‘À une passante’ is one of three sonnets in *Tableaux parisiens*, a section added to *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1861.

⁵ Originally published in Catulle Mendès’s *Revue fantaisiste* on Nov. 1, 1861, it also featured in *La Presse* on Aug. 27, 1862.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn (London, New York: Verso Books, 1997), 45-46.

⁷ Donald Aynesworth, “A Face in the Crowd: A Baudelairean Vision of the Eternal Feminine,” *Stanford French Review* 5 (1981): 327-39.

⁸ Ross Chambers, “The Storm in the Eye of the Poem: Baudelaire’s ‘À une passante,’” in *Textual Analysis: Some Readers Reading*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1986).

⁹ Benjamin 125; Ross Chambers, “Heightening the Lowly (Baudelaire: ‘Je n’ai pas oublié...’ and ‘À une passante’),” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 37 (Fall-Winter 2008): 42-51; Ross Chambers, *An Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 14, 103; Jérôme Thélot, *Baudelaire: Violence et Poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), 489.

¹⁰ See also, for example: Comtesse de Boissieux, *Le Vrai Manuel du savoir-vivre: Conseils sur la politesse et les usages du monde* (Paris: Gauguier, 1877), 67. Available at: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5677678k/> (accessed Mar. 19, 2017). According to the Comtesse de Boissieux, grand deuil was not usually worn on the death of a son or daughter.

¹¹ Théodore de Banville, *Petit Traité de poésie française* (Paris: Bibliothèque de l’écho de la Sorbonne, 1870), 171-74.

¹² Libertine sonnets were, for Gautier, “non orthodoxes et s’affranchissant volontiers de la règle de la quadruple rime.” Théophile Gautier, “Baudelaire,” in *Souvenirs romantiques* (Paris: Garnier, 1920), 313.

¹³ Graham Robb, *La Poésie de Baudelaire et la poésie française (1838-1852)* (Paris: Aubier, 1993).

¹⁴ Claude Pichois, “Notices, notes et variants,” OC 1:1022.

¹⁵ Comtesse de Boissieux, 67.

¹⁶ Jean-Paul Barrière, “Le paraître de la Veuve,” in *Paraître et Apparences en Europe occidentale du Moyen Âge à nos jours*, ed. Isabelle Paresys (Villeneuve d’Ascq: Presses universitaires de Septentrion, 2008), 79.

¹⁷ This text is reproduced in the Pléiade notes to “Les Veuves” (OC 1:1316-17).

¹⁸ Vauvenargues, *Œuvres Morales de Vauvenargues*, vol. 1 (Paris: Plon et Cie, 1874), 98. Available at: <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k65296425> Accessed: Dec. 12, 2017.

¹⁹ Vauvenargues, 149.

²⁰ André Lhéritier, “Les Physiologies,” in *Histoire générale de la presse française*, vol. 2 (De 1815 à 1871), ed. C. Bellanger and others (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1985).

²¹ Richard Terdiman, *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 164.

²² Margery Evans, *Baudelaire and Intertextuality: Poetry at the Crossroads* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 50.

²³ Vauvenargues, 149.

²⁴ Susan Blood, “The Sonnet as Snapshot: Seizing the Instant in Baudelaire’s ‘À une passante,’” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 36, no. 3-4 (Spring-Summer 2008): 255-69.