Hugh Roberts, 'A Passing Appreciation'

À une passante

La rue assourdissante autour de moi hurlait.
Longue, mince, en grand deuil, douleur majestueuse,
Une femme passa, d'une main fastueuse
Soulevant, balançant le feston et l'ourlet;

Agile et noble, avec sa jambe de statue.
Moi, je buvais, crispé comme un extravagant,
Dans son œil, ciel livide où germe l'ouragan,
La douceur qui fascine et le plaisir qui tue.

Un éclair... puis la nuit! — Fugitive beauté
Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître,
Ne te verrai-je plus que dans l'éternité?

Ailleurs, bien loin d'ici! trop tard! jamais peut-être!
Car j'ignore où tu fuis, tu ne sais où je vais,
Ô toi que j'eusse aimée, ô toi qui le savais! [1]

This appreciation of Baudelaire is shamefully non-decadent. During French language classes, students sometimes encounter the pluperfect subjunctive as an instance of the *conditionnel passé deuxième forme*, which may give rise to understandable consternation on everyone's part. In full awareness that the poet's primary intention was doubtless to exemplify this feature of French modality, as a language tutor this is my cue to share a personal favourite example of this verb form, namely the conclusion of Baudelaire's celebrated sonnet, 'À une passante', 'Ô toi que *j'eusse aimée*' (v. 14; my italics). Even a fleeting encounter with the poem would suggest that its meaning is past conditional as a kind of imagined memory of the future: 'Oh you who *I would have loved*'. With that point duly resolved to everyone's satisfaction, we can return to the excitement of the translation passage we were supposed to be working on.

Turning to Baudelaire to illustrate a grammar point is perhaps no less absurd than a good many educational encounters with him. As an undergraduate, I did not so much appreciate the poet as turn to him to learn how to count syllables, in other words a prosodic accountancy course

[1] *Les Fleurs du mal* (1861), XCIII.

of which even Baudelaire's mother, who regretted her son never got a proper job, might have seen some employability potential. Very late in the day, I now live in hope that students may be more appreciative than their tutor and realize that there is more to poetry than arithmetic and more to the French language than is dreamed of in Glanville Price's *A Comprehensive French Grammar*.[2] Hence their fleeting encounter with 'À une passante', which I think of as a bird flying into, or perhaps Zoom-bombing, their language class.

Before reciting the poem to the captive student audience, I suggest they should listen to and ideally engage with it instinctively as if to a piece of music, without fretting about the meaning of unfamiliar words or getting that sinking feeling when faced with poetry to analyse in front of the class. Following my own advice, and taking advantage of being neither a *dix-neuviémiste* nor a modernist, let alone a Baudelaire specialist, I note the opening line cries out to be read out loud, to get the full force of how this particular 'tableau parisien' is also, first of all, a soundscape. Coincidentally, and by way of comparison, I recently encountered something similar in the futurist Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky. He discusses how his poem 'To Sergey Esenin' (1926) came to him only after his return to Moscow following a long period trying, without success, to work on it away from the city:

> Myasnitsky was packed with people; after the silence of the provinces, there was the cheerful hubbub of buses, cars and trams […] I walk along, waving my arms and mumbling almost wordlessly […] So the rhythm is established and takes shape […] Gradually you ease individual words free of this dull roar.[3]

[2] Sixth edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).
[3] 'How Are Verses Made?' (1926), trans. by George Hyde, in Vladimir Maykovsky, *Volodya: Selected Works*, ed. by Rosy Carrick (London: Enitharmon Press, 2015), pp. 245-46.

Urban poets like Baudelaire and Mayakovsky obviously take not only their subject matter and imagery, but also their sounds and rhythms, from the streets. Both give renewed meaning to the clichés of poetry in motion – the rhythm of the widow's gait for the former (vv. 3-4), of course – and of the poet as an inspired or deranged 'extravagant'.

For a sonnet that seems so obviously concerned with sight, I am struck by how Baudelaire invokes hearing, followed by touch (the widow's 'main fastueuse', v. 3) and taste ('Moi, je buvais', v. 6), with the visual sense only made explicit in the 'œil' of line 7. The sheer sensuality makes this a sonnet to live and recreate, whether in memory, imagination or even reality. In other words, Baudelaire has condensed the raw material of endless poems, songs and novels into fourteen lines. By virtue of invoking a moment of desire and stirring the imagination, the sonnet's encounter suggests eternity precisely because it is of the moment and therefore potentially available at any moment (v. 11). Hence its appeal as a deviation from standard procedure in a language class and much else besides.

Perhaps the most obvious, if extreme, example of taking up Baudelaire's invitation to turn a desirable passer-by into the stuff of novels, and indeed the mind's *romanesque* or even decadent tendencies, is in another work currently on my bedside table, namely Proust's *La Prisonnière* (1923). The novel in some ways tells of what would happen if the poet had taken the *passante* home and kept her there. Famously, the narrator's first encounter with Albertine happens when she passes him at the Balbec seafront as one of a group of girls in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* (1919). In *La Prisonnière*, however, the narrator observes that 'c'était une chose curieuse comme, à travers les murs de sa prison, le destin, qui transforme les êtres, avait pu passer, la changer dans son essence même, et de la jeune fille de Balbec faire une ennuyeuse et docile captive'.[4] Moreover, looking back at that earlier incarnation, Albertine was a Baudelairian 'Fugitive beauté' (v. 9), an 'être fuyant' who

[4] *À la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Yves Tadié, III (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 873. With thanks to Adam Watt for these Proustian intertexts.

was constantly 'en fuite sur sa bicyclette'.[5] In an earlier passage concerning women he sees passing by, the narrator notes that 'Nous sommes des sculpteurs. Nous voulons obtenir d'une femme une statue entièrement différente de celle qu'elle nous a présentée'.[6] This excerpt neatly performs the reworking it discusses and that the novel contains, since it turns the 'jambe de statue' (v. 5) of Baudelaire's widow into something to be possessed, controlled and reshaped. While such sadistic sculpting is implicit in the sonnet, the poet also suggests the opposite, as the *passante*'s look has recreated him (v. 10). They are as complicit in creativity as they are in desire.

In contrast, for Proust's narrator desire is a trap. Returning home at night and seeing the lit window he realizes its bars are of his own prison; moreover, if Albertine were not there he would have sought pleasure from 'des femmes inconnues, dont j'eusse essayé de pénétrer la vie'.[7] This desire brings us back to the beginning, namely the ending of Baudelaire's sonnet, including the pluperfect subjunctive and its conditional meaning. Desire for a passer-by is inescapably conditional and the wish intimately to know such *inconnues* is self-defeating. Yet as the passer-by inevitably passes on we can still see that although desire may be in the conditional, the creativity it induces is emphatically indicative. As the man himself puts it in answer to the imagined reader's question about the truth of the stories he imagines of those he sees through windows: 'Qu'importe ce que peut être la réalité placée hors de moi, si elle m'a aidé à vivre, à sentir que je suis et ce que je suis?'.[8]

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[5] *Ibid.*; with thanks to Adam Watt for these Proustian intertexts.
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 648; for another likely intertextual allusion to Baudelaire, at least to this non-expert reader's eye, see the earlier image of the passer-by as 'comme une déesse dans la nue que fait trembler la foudre' (p. 646), which recalls Baudelaire's v. 9.
[7] *Ibid.*, p. 834.
[8] 'Les fenêtres', *Le Spleen de Paris* (1869), XXXV.