This new study of Baudelaire’s writings is the first book to apply the principles of schizoanalysis to literary history and cultural studies. By resituating psychoanalysis in its socioeconomic and cultural context, this framework provides a new and illuminating approach to the poetry and art criticism of the foremost French modernist. Professor Holland’s book draws upon and transforms virtually the entire spectrum of recent Baudelaire scholarship, and demonstrates the impact of the capitalist market and Second Empire authoritarianism (as well as Baudelaire’s much-discussed family circumstances) on the psychology and poetics of the writer, who abandoned his romantic idealism in favour of a modernist cynicism that has characterized modern culture ever since.
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BAUDELAIRE AND SCHIZOANALYSIS

The Sociopoetics of Modernism

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To the memory of my father
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A Klee painting named “Angelus Novus” shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing... and has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.

Walter Benjamin¹

Perdu dans ce vilain monde, couduyé par les foules, je suis comme un homme lassé dont l’oeil ne voit en arrière, dans les années profondes, que désabusement et amertume, et devant lui qu’un orage où rien de neuf n’est contenu, ni enseignement, ni douleur.

Lost in a wasteland, jostled by the crowds, I am like a weary man who sees in the depths of the past behind him nothing but disappointment and bitterness, and before him a storm that contains nothing new, neither insight, nor grief.

Charles Baudelaire²

Charles Baudelaire, c’est moi! For I, too, feel like someone who sees little but bitter disappointment in the past, like someone being blown irresistibly backwards into the future, who can

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only look aghast at the mounting piles of toxic waste and the growing numbers of homeless children that “progress” hurls at his feet. I, too, am someone who has witnessed authoritarian capitalism in the Reagan/Bush/Thatcher era crush the utopian promise of a more democratic society under its boot-heel, just as Napoleon III destroyed the democratic ideals Baudelaire shared in the 1840s, and Hitler those Benjamin shared in the 1930s. This recurring nightmare is no historical accident: within the cyclical, boom-and-bust rhythm of capital accumulation, it recurs at the moment that democratic potential once again succumbs to the authoritarian realities of capitalism. Benjamin speaks of “wish[ing] to retain that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to a man singled out by history at a moment of danger”; for him, as for me, the figure of Baudelaire provides such an image: Charles Baudelaire, c’est nous!

Baudelaire’s historical “moment of danger,” as this study will show, revolved around Napoleon’s coup d’état of December 1851: the romantic-socialist hopes fueling the Revolution of 1848 seemed on the verge of becoming reality in the Second Republic, only to be dashed by the founding of the Second Empire and the authoritarian reign of Napoleon III. Our own “moment of danger” did not arrive so punctually. Its corresponding dates might be 1968, the height of the anti-authoritarian counter-cultural “revolution”; and 1981, the culmination of the oil crisis begun in 1974. World War II had generated a tremendous concentration of highly productive capital which the outbreak of peace risked leaving idle. So a period of liberal largesse followed, sponsoring waves of social innovation in the civil rights, anti-war, and counter-culture movements while bankrolling “consumer society” in order to keep the wheels of industry turning. But this liberalizing phase of “capital dis-accumulation” was soon reversed in the subsequent, authoritarian phase of “capital re-accumulation,” triggered by the oil crises of 1974–81: funding for social, cultural, and political innovation was ruthlessly cut off in order to be reinvested in instruments of capital’s self-expansion, including the high-tech military-industrial complex, more aggressive state action against labor, curtailment of women’s
and civil rights, and so on. Though the transformation itself was not as dramatic as the coup d’état of Baudelaire’s day, the contrast between the two phases is strikingly similar, and equally dispiriting, in the two cases. That similarity made this schizoanalytic study of Baudelaire possible.  

Schizoanalysis insists on restoring the full range of social and historical factors to psychoanalytic explanations of psychic structure and proclivities. From this perspective, the claim that “Charles Baudelaire, c’est moi” is not a statement of identification with Baudelaire as an individual (with whom I personally have very little in common: I did not lose my father at the age of five, but at twenty-seven; I am not a destitute poète maudit, but a professional cultural historian; not a melancholic bachelor, but a happily married husband and father, and so on). Rather than a statement of personal identification, it is a recognition of our shared socio-historical situation and the resulting psychological configuration (here designated as “borderline narcissism”) – a configuration that is epitomized in his works, but which is more or less characteristic of everyone living in market society. Hence Baudelaire’s lasting acclaim as the “lyric poet in the era of high capitalism” (as Benjamin put it). For he was among the first to diagnose the conditions of existence typical of modernity, and to suffer the emergence of a specifically capitalist form of authoritarianism. That those conditions still exist and capitalist authoritarianism has not ceased recurring enables us, in Benjamin’s words, to “grasp the constellation which [our] own era has formed with a specific earlier one,” Baudelaire’s own.

At the same time, schizoanalysis insists on including psycho-dynamic factors in historical materialist explanations of social structure and cultural change. This inclusion is possible largely because of a certain notion of temporality that is shared by Marx – for whom “the anatomy of the human is the key to the anatomy of the ape” – and by Freud – for whom there exist not memories from childhood, but only memories of childhood. This is the form of temporality emphasized by Lacan in the notion of “deferred action” (Freud’s Nachträglichkeit), and by Benjamin in his critique of historicism:
Historicism contents itself with establishing a causal connection between the various moments in history. But no fact that is a cause is for that reason alone historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. An historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a specific earlier one.  

This form of temporality is crucial to schizoanalysis, as well, although the present study explores its psychodynamic more than its socio-historical implications. In focusing on Baudelaire, I have been unable to do justice here to all the complexities of schizoanalysis; that is the aim of my next book. Let me say in passing that the point of schizoanalysis is not to enter (much less settle) disputes among competing schools of psychoanalytic therapy or doctrine, but to extract what is useful for the purposes of historical analysis and social change. The Lacanian school is a special case: schizoanalysis draws heavily on Lacan, yet insists that even a stance conducive to profoundly radical (not to say revolutionary) therapy nonetheless risks appearing profoundly and “tragically” reactionary if transported into the domain of historical study unchanged. In focusing on Baudelaire alone, I have also, against my best intentions, unavoidably made him appear to be more of a special case historically speaking than he really is, however canonical he has become: it will take yet another book to show why the cultural masochism he shared with Masoch himself was not exceptional, but part of a larger pattern in late nineteenth-century history; and to show indeed that masochism, sadism, and narcissism are all fundamentally historical and cultural phenomena, before being treated as psychological ones.

What a schizoanalytic study focusing on Baudelaire is able to demonstrate, nonetheless, is that authoritarianism recurs in modernity, and that it does so not merely because of “man’s eternal inhumanity to man,” but because of historical dynamics specific to capitalism. Historical recurrence never amounts to sheer repetition, however: it always entails repetition with a difference. Merely to draw parallels between 1848/51 and
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1968/81 would be no better than noting similarities in myth criticism or establishing causal connections in historicism. The point of doing schizoanalysis is not just to interpret history, but to change it. Hence the explicitly narrative cast of my reading of Baudelaire and his modernist repudiation of narrative. However out of favor it may be in some circles of high modernist criticism today, and however complex our understanding of it has become (thanks in part to that very criticism), narrative remains a fundamental form of human thought, one that is simply indispensable for thinking through historical change: things looked a certain way before; how do they look after such-and-such occurs? How, then, does the modernity we still share with Baudelaire look after modernism?

At the very emergence of market society in France, Baudelaire formulated his distinctive modernism in repudiation of romanticism; after more than a century of market rule, we are now struggling to repudiate modernism in the name of something called the “postmodern.” In repudiating romanticism, Baudelaire rejected the romantic commitment to nature and woman in favor of misogyny and urban artifice; inasmuch as modernism has roots in Baudelaire, any postmodernism worthy of more than the mere name will have to be feminist and environmentalist, or amount to nothing at all.8 Repudiating modernism is not easy; real postmodernism will not occur by fiat, for most of the institutions reflecting and supporting modernism are still very much in force today, having had more than a century since Baudelaire’s time to consolidate themselves. Within the academy, for example, modern(ist) disciplines are still organized to produce knowledge of literature for literature’s sake, of art for art’s sake, of history for history’s sake, and so on. As a postmodern intervention, this schizoanalytic study aims instead to produce a resolutely anti-historicist, anti-aestheticist reading of Baudelaire, one that in the face of historical contingency willingly assumes the risk of appearing “partial” or “dated.” This is not to say that I do not appreciate the lasting beauty of Baudelaire’s poetry, for personally I do. But I am someone who feels that in moments of danger, there are
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more important things to talk about – and I am convinced that Baudelaire was, too.

Some may consider that, intending to talk about Baudelaire, I have succeeded only in talking about myself. It would certainly mean more to say that it is Baudelaire who was talking about me. He is talking about you.

Michel Butor
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