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Rosemary Lloyd, *Charles Baudelaire*. London: Reaktion Books, 2008. 192 pp. References, Further Reading. \$16.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-781861-893635.

Review by Maria Scott, National University of Ireland, Galway.

Charles Baudelaire is a figure who looms hyperbolically large in our understanding of French cultural modernity. His writings (verse, prose poetry, art criticism, literary criticism, thematic essays, translations, correspondence and private notes) reflect a nostalgia for the past but also an enthusiasm for the distinctive beauty of the modern, or what the poet called the “heroism of modern life”. Baudelaire’s work expresses both the profound cruelties and the more evanescent pleasures of life as he experienced it, and notably of life in the city that would later be described as the capital of the nineteenth century by Walter Benjamin, the thinker most responsible for placing Baudelaire in the foreground of our thinking about that place and that time.

Baudelaire has been such a central figure, too, in Rosemary Lloyd’s long and distinguished academic career, that it is hard to think of any scholar better placed to fulfil the remit of the editors of Reaktion Books’ Critical Lives series, namely that of concisely presenting the work of an important cultural figure in the context of his or her biography. While Lloyd has published books and articles on a range of authors and themes, Baudelaire’s is the a recurrent name among her numerous titles, with three monographs—*Baudelaire et Hoffmann: affinités et influences* (1979), *Baudelaire’s literary criticism* (1981) and *Baudelaire’s World* (2002)—as well as a translated edition of selected letters (1986), a translation of the prose poems and *La Fanfarlo* (1991) and the edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Baudelaire* (2005). This impressive background is mentioned here less to stress Lloyd’s scholarly authority than to underline the long and multi-faceted engagement that makes this book so continuously rich in its perceptions. That new and surprising perceptions are still possible, in view of the massive, even oppressive, backdrop of scholarship on Baudelaire, is testament to the author’s erudition, certainly, but above all to her sensitivity as an interpreter of words and images.

As well as the numerous French biographies of the poet, there are a number of English-language studies in circulation, as well as Graham Robb’s shortened translation of the Claude Pichois and Jean Ziegler biography (1989).<sup>[1]</sup> Lloyd’s study is surely the most undergraduate-friendly of these works, because of its relatively short length, its light touch and its wealth of black and white illustrations. It is also perhaps the most teacher-friendly, thanks to its demonstration of how biographical data and images can illuminate the poet’s works and because of its constant attention to writing contexts. *Charles Baudelaire* contains thirty-six images, many of which are portraits of Baudelaire and key figures in his life. It wears its scholarship lightly, with only thirty-five footnotes across its five chapters, no index, and a very helpful, though far from exhaustive, list of suggestions for further reading at the end. While quotations are not given in French, Lloyd’s own translated versions are accompanied by clear references to the French sources. The book is chronologically structured around five chapters: “Childhood and Youth”, “Revolt”, “Second Empire Paris”, “The Results of the Trial” and “The Final Years”.

The first chapter gives us glimpses of the early Baudelaire, whether visiting the spectacular apartment of the “Toy Fairy”, as later recounted in the essay “The Moral of the Toy”, defying his teachers with

impertinent sniggers at the Lycée Louis-le-Grand, or travelling to Mauritius and Reunion in 1841. In these and other incidents, Lloyd reveals the seeds of the poet's later obsessions (such as the relation between the bizarre and the beautiful, the origins of laughter, the exotic), while also showing that the adult Baudelaire himself attributed great formative significance to the youthful experiences of writers and artists. Following the same logic, Lloyd cleverly identifies elements from Baudelaire's childhood environment that resurface in his later work, such as a plaster Venus mentioned in the inventory of his childhood home as well as in the untitled poem number 99 from *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The chapter begins with a reflection on a medallion portrait of Baudelaire as a schoolboy, going on intriguingly to ask why François Baudelaire, an amateur painter, did not leave any sketch of his son before he died, when the boy was six. Lloyd goes on to detect traces of the father's lasting influence in the poem "Le Voyage." The more obvious importance of the poet's early relationship with his mother in forming his sensibility is suggested largely through the quotation of various passages from his later writings. Lloyd suggests that Baudelaire's step-father, General Aupick, was only belatedly perceived by him as a tyrannical figure, when it became psychologically necessary for the poet to identify a figure (other than his beloved mother) to rage against.

Lloyd identifies rage as a crucial impetus to creativity for Baudelaire, and consequently treats May 1844, when his family decided to hand over control of his funds to a lawyer, as a turning-point in the poet's career. The second chapter, "Revolt", begins in 1842, when Baudelaire was exempted from military service, came into the inheritance that he began eagerly to squander, and met the mistress and muse, Jeanne Duval, who would leave a profound mark on his life and work. Lloyd examines in some detail the latter's poetry and art criticism from this period, including most notably the 1845 and 1846 salon essays. She also gives particular prominence to the role of Baudelaire's friends as creative rivals, influences and collaborators, some of whom would leave interesting pen portraits of the poet, often cited by the author of this study. The chapter finishes by exploring possible reasons for Baudelaire's enthusiasm for the revolution of 1848 and for his subsequent political disenchantment, which reached its zenith in 1851 with Louis Napoleon's *coup d'état*.

The third chapter, "Second Empire Paris", takes us from the 1850s to the conclusion of the trial of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. Offering glimpses of a changing capital city as well as of the publishing opportunities and restrictions that Louis Napoléon's regime brought with it, this section argues that Baudelaire's literary criticism of the time, as well as his essays on intoxicants, permitted him to hone his own aesthetic. Bringing the two strategies together, Lloyd finds embedded self-portraits in his work on the famously alcoholic Edgar Allan Poe. This chapter also discusses the originality of the ideas contained in Baudelaire's writings on laughter and caricature and in his essay on the international exhibition of 1855. The main themes and features of the eighteen poems published in the *Revue des deux mondes*, just two years prior to the appearance of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, are discussed in a manner that sets the scene for the scandalized *Le Figaro* review in response to the publication of the 1857 volume, which led to its subsequent condemnation for offence against public morality.

The suggestion that the public prosecutor had actually done Baudelaire a great favour in provoking his rage introduces the fourth chapter, "The Results of the Trial", which sees him entering upon what Lloyd calls "the most productive period of his life" (p. 116). During the specific period dealt with in this chapter, Baudelaire augmented his original volume of verse with twenty-six new poems, among which were some of his most important achievements in the form. He also produced some powerful literary; art and even music criticism, translations and adaptations of Poe and De Quincey, and many of his fascinating and influential prose poems. Baudelaire's pleading, defensive letters to his mother are cited frequently in this study, and while they certainly make for uncomfortable reading Lloyd quotes a little known document recently sold at auction that shows that Mme Aupick was considerably more appreciative of her son's work than is commonly believed: the letter of 1858 to Alphonse, Baudelaire's step-brother, richly praises her younger son's literary abilities, stating for example that he "possesses to an eminent degree the art of writing" (p. 116). Lloyd infers from this letter, and from evidence of the

poet's relative happiness in this period, that Mme Aupick and her beautifully situated Honfleur home exerted a favorable influence on the poet's state of mind around this time. This chapter concludes with an overview of the new friends and acquaintances encountered by Baudelaire in these years, including one, the poet Alfred de Vigny, who revealed his great admiration even while sagely advising against the poet's misguided bid for admittance to the French Academy; this by contrast with an old "friend", Charles-Augustin Sainte-Beuve, who supported his candidature by offering only the faintest and most equivocal of praise.

The chapter entitled "The Final Years" begins with some brief pen sketches of the poet as frequenter of cafés and publishing offices at the beginning of the 1860s. These were years of declining health and, as so often before, desperate financial worries. They were also the years, however, when the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* was published. Lloyd discusses Baudelaire's foiled intentions for the *danse macabre* frontispiece, the changes to the new edition, as well as the verse poems that he continued to write and that would be published in the posthumous edition of 1868. This chapter gives particular attention to the 1863 essay "The Painter of Modern Life" and another written after Eugène Delacroix's death the same year, both of which are used by Lloyd to elucidate some of the intentions governing the influential prose poems also produced during these years. Discussed here too, again with reference to the prose poems, is Baudelaire's unsuccessful but lengthy trip to Brussels and the "collection of epigrams" (p. 171) known as *Pauvre Belgique!* The stroke that put an end to the poet's two-year stay in Belgium also effectively put an end to his life, so that his actual death just over a year later, in August 1867, was surely not unwelcome when it came. The study finishes as it opened, with a reflection on a portrait of Baudelaire, this time from the end rather than the beginning of his life.

Throughout this study, contexts of different sorts play a very prominent role. Baudelaire's writings, including his "impartial" art criticism, are frequently illuminated by reference to relationships and agendas that might otherwise remain hidden. Lloyd shows, for example, how the 1859 essay on Théophile Gautier implicitly rejects Sainte-Beuve's approach as a literary critic, how the laudatory tone of the piece seems designed to compensate for any undesirable afterglow from Baudelaire's dedication of *Les Fleurs du Mal* to the poet, and how the essay indirectly defends aspects of its author's own art, such as its apparent immorality. Lloyd is remarkably sensitive to connections between different works by Baudelaire, and significance is sometimes even drawn from pieces accompanying his poems when these are published in collective works and periodicals. Lloyd's critical biography makes regular reference to the social and historical context of the poet's life and work. Occasionally, the constant interweaving of texts and contexts can be dizzying, as in the paragraph that places Baudelaire's apparent suicide attempt against the background of the publication of his 1845 salon essay before invoking the later analysis of this event by an erstwhile friend and then discussing the literary review that precipitated their estrangement. To watch the author so nimbly threading Baudelaire's life and work together might be daunting, but the study is easily readable and succinct enough to ward off any potential for serious disorientation.

Overall, this compact but masterful critical biography offers an excellent study and teaching tool with a wealth of original insights. It has much to offer anyone interested in the birth of Modernism in art or literature and more generally anyone with an interest in French cultural history in the nineteenth century.

## NOTES

[1] Claude Pichois, *Baudelaire*, trans. Graham Robb, with additional research by Jean Ziegler (New York: Viking Penguin/ London: H. Hamilton, 1989).

Maria C. Scott  
National University of Ireland, Galway  
Maria.Scott@nuigalway.ie

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