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Le Flâneur Contemporain: The Wanderer in the 21st Century

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Le Flâneur Contemporain:
The Wanderer in the 21st Century

Zachary Kocanda

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College
at Bowling Green State University in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with

UNIVERSITY HONORS

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Theresa Williams, English

Dr. Deborah Schocket, Romance and Classical Studies

LE FLÂNEUR
CONTEMPORAIN

Cinquante petits poèmes en prose

Zachary Kocanda

Pour ma mère et mon père

Quand on me demande « Qu'est-ce que tu vas faire après la remise des diplômes ? » je dis :

I.

I try to download a ride-sharing app on my phone once, twice. So much for *la modernité*. A taxi pulls up to me, and the driver says, “Hop in.” I stop downloading the app, hop in the taxi, and the driver asks where I’m going. Home. Forty-five minutes out of Chicago, or an hour if there’s traffic. I say, “I don’t know.” I ask where he’s going and he says, “Where you’re going. That’s how a taxi works.” I read his name on his I.D., my late grandfather’s name, my mother’s father’s name. I should text her so she knows where I am. I say to drive.

II.

Charles Baudelaire, nineteenth century poet, the *flâneur*, enters the taxi in the other door. Even one who walks can only walk so much. He's well-dressed, a *vrai* "dandy," and I understand why the biographies I read of Baudelaire are sure to have more than one paragraph about his debts. Baudelaire, asks to go to *Nouvelle France*, Louisiana, named for the French king, the land sold by his country more than two hundred years ago. He has not yet walked there, has not taken his *flanerie* to another country. With nowhere to go, I say yes, and with a ten-hour fare, Henry says yes, too.

III.

I joke with Baudelaire, ask, “How are you going to pay for the taxi? It’s such a long drive to New Orleans.” He says he’s writing his mother now for more money. Baudelaire says I should write to my mother, too, and asks, “*Est-ce que tu veux écrire à ta mère?*” and gives me paper, a pen. I say thank you, but say I do not have to write to her. I say, “I have a phone,” take it out to show him, but he’s writing, *trop occupé pour me demander*, “*Qu’est-ce que c’est?*” only looking up from his letter to look out the window.

IV.

Two hours and we're in the heart of Illinois, far from *la modernité* of Chicago, or "the Second City," a name I like because I, like many, like Baudelaire, know how it is to be second. I read criticism of Baudelaire, "a poet who had achieved a certain reputation without having published a verse," so said the critic Prarond in *De quelques écrivains nouveaux*. And I say, "Me too," to Baudelaire, but to no one, really. But as *flâneurs*, these cities matter not to us, cities in the real Land of Lincoln, the midst of the Midwest, not first, or second, or even one *hundredth*, these cities of not even thousands of people, cities driven through, not walked through, and we turn our backs.

V.

“I don’t know how to finish Baudelaire’s portrait,” said Gustave Courbet, of the portrait he painted in 1848 and 1849. “His face changes every day.” I understand Courbet now. When I look at Baudelaire, he is many ages, twenty-one, in debt, and writing to his mother, or thirty-six, in debt, and writing to his mother. He is a holographic trading card, changing as I move back and forth. I move to ask Henry a question and Baudelaire is in his early forties, like a photograph I have seen of him, post-*Fleurs du mal*, but unhappy, his hair thinning and his mouth a straight line, emotionless. I have not yet seen a Baudelaire near-death, from the last two years of his life, after his stroke, unable to move, and I hope I do not have to.

VI.

Charles Baudelaire (April 9, 1821–August 31, 1867) has a Wikipedia page. Henry and I do not have Wikipedia pages. Not yet.^[citation needed] At two o'clock in the morning once, I read a random Wikipedia article: “[His] later life is not known,” the two-paragraph article says, but in 1830, *The Times* cited the man as having debts, like Baudelaire’s, but the poet’s page ends not with his debts, but his influence, as a *flâneur*, moving in and out of *les rues de Paris*, out of his debts, a poet. But who is to say the man, random as he may be, is not a poet, too? *The Times*? I read a page for a move in chess I did not know, *en passant*, where a pawn is taken after passing an opponent’s pawn. Who is the *flâneur* but a pawn who hopes his opponent knows not the *en passant*, whose Wikipedia page ends not with his debts, but his unusual examples, his influence, the way one can say, yes, his later life is not known, but he put words to the page, and that is what is important.

VII.

I ask Baudelaire about my feelings post-graduation, nothing to do. “*C’est le mal du siècle,*” says Baudelaire, a letter to his mother and a pen in his hands. “The worst part about the *mal du siècle,*” says Henry, “is that the *siècle* just started. *La fin du mal du siècle est la fin du siècle.*” I ask Henry, “You know French?” And he wasn’t there for the end or the beginning of any century, born in the nineteen thirties and dying in the nineteen nineties. “*Oui,*” he says, “*je parle français. J’ai parlé français à ta mère.* How do you think you know it?” My mother doesn’t know French, knows the word for grandmother, says she used to say “*grand-mère*” to her grandmother, her father’s mother, Henry’s mother, but her pronunciation was *mauvaise*, “*grand-mère*” coming out like the English word “grammar,” the word for rules. Is this my grandfather? Are there rules for the dead? For now, my grandfather drives the taxi. For now, my mother knows French.

VIII.

One of Baudelaire's letters to his mother starts, "I'm no doubt going to make you rather unhappy." And then he asks for money, says he's not being published. He was probably eating and drinking too much, too. And his mother gave him the money. Because she always did. Every time he asked, Baudelaire said sorry. We don't want to disappoint our mothers, not just Baudelaire and me, but everybody. We don't want to disappoint our supporters, even if they have to be our supporters because they love us and love what we do, even if there are bad words in our poems. We can say, "This is all for you," cut out all the four-letter words with our pens.

IX.

Baudelaire asks if I've been to France. I say no. He asks why. "If I studied abroad," I say, "my friends would have forgotten about me." "*Où sont tes amis?*" asks Baudelaire. I say I can text them whenever I want to. I can text them now. "It's not like writing a letter," I say. "Why be there when I can be here?" I ask. I say that where you walk is not about where you are, but who you are. Baudelaire says, "*Pourquoi être ici quand tu peux être là?*" Even miles from his mother, he asks her for money, *grâce à la modernité*, like the development of the city, *les rues de Paris et les rues de la correspondance*, and he points to my phone with a pen says, "*Qu'est-ce que cet objet peut faire que le mien ne peut pas?*" I think, and I say, "*Euh, les jeux?*"

X.

"*Non, non,*" Baudelaire says. "*Je ne peux pas écrire comme ça.*" We've been in the taxi for two hours now. "I don't know if there are any mailboxes on the highway," I say to Baudelaire. "So you don't have to write your mother now, *maintenant.*" "*Ma mère ne sait pas où je suis,*" says Baudelaire. "*Aux Etats-Unis?*" he says. "*La Nouvelle France? Je ne sais pas où je suis.*" I should text my mother. I take out my phone. I ask Henry, "Do you have anything to say to your daughter?" He says no.

XI.

I start to text my mother, who does not know where I am, not in Chicago, not back in northwest suburbs, but states away now. Baudelaire throws my phone out the open window, gives me a pen and paper. *Toutes les choses sont contre moi. Le taxi. Ma compréhension de la langue française. Quand j'étais jeune, j'ai essayé de lire dans la voiture, mais j'ai rendu tout. Et maintenant, je rendrai tout à la page, mais dans cette voiture, les mots sont les miens.*

XII.

Bonjour, Maman. Je suis en train d'aller au sud des États-Unis, avec mes amis. Peut-être en Louisiane. Tu y es allé, n'est-ce pas ? Papa et toi sont allés à la Nouvelle-Orléans, tu m'as dit, et tu as dit qu'il fait chaud dans le sud, mais après l'hiver, après le froid, j'ai besoin de chaleur. Papa et toi, vous y êtes allés pour votre voyage de noces, un voyage pour fonder un état de grâce pour vous-même, pour votre famille. Peut-être que je trouverai un peu de grâce, moi-même.

XIII.

Il y a une année, pour le jour de l'Indépendance des États-Unis, je suis allé à la plage à Chicago avec mes amis. Je ne sais pas où sont mes amis maintenant, mais en juillet, nous avons regardé les feux d'artifice ensemble. Après le spectacle, j'ai pris le métro, tout seul, mais en achetant un ticket, j'ai parlé français avec une étrangère, nous deux en état d'ivresse, ensemble dans la poésie de la langue.

XIV.

I share my story with Baudelaire, who asks if the woman was a prostitute, and Henry, who asks about my last stop on the train. I say my last stop was home. Henry says even a *flâneur* has a home. Baudelaire says there's nothing wrong with being a prostitute.

XV.

Bonjour, Maman. Nous sommes arrivés à la Nouvelle-Orléans, ou La Nouvelle France, au début du dix-neuvième siècle. Papa et toi, vous avez payé mon éducation, alors je voudrais vous montrer que j'ai appris quelque chose. Les rues ne sont pas les rues où Papa et toi avez fait des promenades il y a vingt-cinq ans. Oui, peut-être que les noms sont les mêmes, mais les âmes des rues, les ombres qui se promènent tard dans la nuit, le phénomène de découvrir le cœur de la ville, pour moi, c'est une nouvelle expérience. J'ai dit au revoir à mes amis, et maintenant, je me plierai aux caprices de moi-même.

Les traductions en anglais

XI.

Everything is against me. The taxi. My understanding of the French language. When I was young, I tried to read in the car, but I threw up. And now, I'm throwing up on the page, but in this car, the words are mine.

XII.

Hello, Mother. I'm on my way to the South with my parents. Maybe Louisiana. You went there, right? You and Dad went to New Orleans, you said to me, and you said it was hot, but after winter, after the cold, I need the warmth. You and Dad, you went there for your honeymoon, to find grace for yourself and your family. Maybe I will find some grace for myself.

XIII.

A year ago, on the fourth of July, I went to the beach in Chicago with my friends. I don't know where my friends are now, but back in July, we watched the fireworks together. After the celebration, I bought a ticket for the train, alone, but while buying the ticket, I spoke French with a stranger, the two of us drunk, together in the poetry of the language.

XV.

Hello, Mother. We have arrived in New Orleans, or New France, as they called it, until the nineteenth century. You and Dad, you paid for my education, so I want to show you that I've learned something. The streets are not the streets that you and Dad walked on twenty-five years ago. Yes, maybe the names are the same, but the souls of the streets, the shadows that walk them late at night, the discovery of the heart of the city, it's, for me, a new experience. I have said good-bye to my friends, and now, I will be taken away by my whims.

EPILOGUE

My honors project is a love letter to walking, poetry, and the French language. This relationship is not a *ménage à trois*, but the project *is* a “household for three,” to use the literal translation of the phrase, an interdisciplinary study of how my influences as a creative writer and *francophone* have all taken up rooms in the same house.

Early in my experience at the university, walking and poetry were one in the same. During my second year, I had a poetry class that required us to memorize a poem. I could not recite poetry to myself in my room at midnight because I had a roommate. So I started in my *flanerie*, my wandering, although at the time, I had no word for it.

By the end of the year, I had memorized my poem, aced the class, and had worn out my Adidas Sambas. My walking continued, and my late-night recollections were channeled in letters to my dorm-given pen pal and mix CDs with lots of slow acoustic music.

I had taken French classes since high school and always planned to minor in the language. I had read critical and creative work in French—fiction, nonfiction, and poetry—but only for classes, and I had not written any of my own French creative work.

I read the poetry of Charles Baudelaire in a French literature class my third year at the university. I don't know, now, what the poems were, because we read so many poems by so many French writers. But a seed had been planted.

And the seed grew into my reading of *Les Fleurs du mal*, a volume of Baudelaire's poetry, at the beginning of my senior year. I had taken a modern poetry class, reading oeuvres of poets who wrote from the mid-nineteenth century to the twentieth century. Again, because I read so many poets and had so many essays to write, I could not appreciate the modernity of the writing, *avant-garde*, the way modern poets "made it new," à la Ezra Pound. So I traveled back to the nineteenth century, before all the poets in my modern poetry class, and gave modernism another chance, this time under the title of *la modernité*.

I researched Baudelaire, his poetry and his life, at the library, and checked out six books. I read a volume of Baudelaire's letters, mostly to his mother, but also to Victor Hugo, and many others. Baudelaire asked his mother for money and, in true Baudelaire fashion, I contacted my mother—via text, however, not a pen and paper letter—and apologized for owing money to the university. I had not returned the six books to the library by their due date, and owed ten dollars. (My mother paid the money.)

Studying Baudelaire renewed my interest in letters and epistolary writing, a form that I had studied in my first year at the university in my imaginative writing class, my introduction to the creative writing program.

My professor for imaginative writing was Theresa Williams, and until the spring semester of my senior year, I had been unable to take another class with her. But meeting with her in her office, she introduced me to the *flâneur*, helped with the early development of my project, and introduced me to many writers, including Richard Brautigan.

Richard Brautigan wrote short, funny stories and poems, including “The Galilee Hitch-Hiker,” a nine-part poem published in 1958, when Brautigan was twenty-three. The poem imagines Charles Baudelaire hitch-hiking with Jesus, and from there, Brautigan explores the poet’s interactions with many people, from a wino in San Francisco, to Jeanne Duval, one of Baudelaire’s real-life lovers.

My ideas, of *flanerie*, of poetry, of the French language, all developed into this project, an examination of the contemporary wanderer, and of myself.