

Question 3: “Multitude, solitude: identical terms, and interchangeable by the active and fertile poet. The man who is unable to people his solitude is equally unable to be alone in a bustling crowd” (Baudelaire, “Crowds,” Selections from *Flowers of Evil* 20).

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In *The Flowers of Evil* and “The Painter of Modern Life,” Charles Baudelaire privileges the artist alone with the fluidity of self necessary to inhabit other’s lives, locating their creative prowess in this capacity. As such, I understand and define this imaginative capacity to inhabit other’s lives as essentially synonymous with creative and artistic activity throughout my paper. With this understanding in mind, Virginia Woolf complicates Baudelaire’s conception of creativity: her “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” illuminates the radical imaginative capacities latent in the ordinary soul, and suggests that artistic creation is an ongoing and universal activity. For Woolf, this kind of creation is almost compulsive, arising from a natural impulse that she is forced to continually curb and check. While both writers appreciate the urban crowd as an immense reservoir of creative fecundity, they differ fundamentally in their understanding of creative activity’s universality and facility.

Baudelaire’s poet enjoys powers that distinguish him from the layman. Foremost among these is the ability “to be himself or some one else, as he chooses. Like those wandering souls who go looking for a body, he enters as he likes into each man’s personality” (Baudelaire, *The Flowers of Evil* 20). This fluidity of soul, Baudelaire emphasizes:

is not given to every man [...]; enjoying a crowd is an art, and only he can relish a debauch of vitality at the expense of the human species, on whom, in his cradle, a fairy has bestowed the love of masks and masquerading, the hate of home, and the passion for roaming. (20)

By locating this capacity exclusively in those on whom it was “bestowed” from without, Baudelaire implicitly negates its existence in the ordinary human being; rather, creative fluidity is the poet’s “incomparable privilege” enjoyed by “him alone” (20). This artistic elitism shines

forth in Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life," an impassioned celebration of a single artist, "a man of so powerful and so decided an originality," "a prince" "touched with aristocratic reserve" and occupied with "reasons of policy and caste" ("The Painter of Modern Life" 494; 496). Baudelaire's diction is drenched with hierarchical resonances: it savours of distinction, exalting the privileged individual at the expense of ordinariness. By locating creative fluidity in a unique individual, Baudelaire denies the multitude such a capacity to artistically inhabit other lives.

Woolf's "Street Haunting" entirely subverts this structure. From the beginning, Woolf neglects to clarify of whom she is writing: her use of the pronouns "one" and "we" is inclusive, all-encompassing (Woolf, "Street Haunting" 4; 3); as a result, the text is classless, egalitarian. Importantly, the pretext of the pencil is suggestively gendered; Woolf frames her narrative around this "excuse [to] indulge safely in the greatest pleasure of town life in the winter—rambling the streets of London" (3). This orients her narrative around every woman. That Woolf only gestures at this distinction, however, ensures the text's radical universality: its gendered basis does not preclude male readers from entering into and identifying with her imaginative explorations. As such, the powerful creative currents in "Street Haunting" remain omni-pertinent and universally accessible.

This universalism represents the fundamental difference between Woolf's conception of creative activity and Baudelaire's. Contra Baudelaire, Woolf posits a kind of creative egalitarianism: with "Street Haunting," she essentially universalizes the creative propensities that Baudelaire ascribes exclusively to gifted individuals. Baudelaire's "hate of home [and] passion for roaming," for instance, are the unique, distinguishing attributes of such an individual

(Baudelaire, *Flowers* 20). Woolf, however, characterizes this vagrant thirst as a common compulsion (Woolf 3-4): it drives ordinary people out of their homes, in search of “the champagne brightness of the air and the sociability of the streets” (3). For Baudelaire’s “active and fertile poet,” “[m]ultitude [and] solitude [are] identical terms, and interchangeable” (Baudelaire 20). This fluidity of self, so cherished by Baudelaire as the unique capacity of the artistically gifted individual, Woolf regards as universal: “Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others” (Woolf 8). Woolf also universalizes the radical receptivity and perceptiveness inherent to this sense of urban oneness. Where Baudelaire likens his individual artist “to a mirror as vast as the crowd itself” (Baudelaire, “Painter” 497), Woolf argues that, as a result of our sojourn:

The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left [...] a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye. (Woolf 4)

Baudelaire’s artist is a vast mirror; Woolf’s layman is an enormous eye. Both suggest the oblivion of the self within the crowd. This disintegration of self also corresponds to Baudelaire’s characterization of the true artist as “an ‘I’ with an insatiable appetite for the ‘non-I,’” “the mainspring of [whose] genius is *curiosity*” and a penchant for “rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life” (Baudelaire 497; 495). Woolf’s ordinary civilian is gripped by this same enraptured curiosity. They are drawn equally to “that vast republican army of anonymous trampers” and “a world of old women laid on doorsteps, of blind men, of hobbling dwarfs” (Woolf 4; 5). They fixate on details: “an old Italian organ-grinder in a corduroy jacket,”

“carpets so softened with age that their carnations have almost vanished in a pale green sea,” “an owl hooting, and far away the rattle of a train in the valley” (7; 5; 4). They also construct narratives based on fragments of fleeting conversation, and find themselves imaginatively inhabiting the lives of those they pass on the street and glimpse in lighted windows (7; 4). In other words, Baudelaire’s “solitary, gifted with an active imagination,” Woolf identifies as every human being (Baudelaire 497). Importantly, this activity is fluid, almost unconscious: the mind constructs elaborate worlds “in the twinkling of an eye” (Woolf 6), and the narrator repeatedly catches herself in the midst of these expansive reveries; they seem to happen of their own accord (4; 6). Woolf’s “eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream; resting, pausing, the brain sleeps perhaps as it looks” (4); this “eye is sportive and generous; it creates; it adorns; it enhances” (5). For Woolf, creativity is effortless; the ordinary person experiences it as a kind of unwitting daydream. This conception of creativity as passive contrasts with Baudelaire’s understanding of the poet as essentially “active” (Baudelaire, *Flowers* 20). Left unchecked, this kind of creativity effloresces into a radical loss of self entirely akin to that of Baudelaire’s poet, culminating with such existential questions as: “Am I here, or am I there?” (Woolf 6). These creative desires are “nature’s folly, not ours”; in other words, they are ingrained (6). Woolf articulates a conception of creativity that is essential and omnipresent; in a word, it belongs to the human being to creatively imagine.

For Woolf, imaginative creativity is essential, universal; only social prerogatives dictate its suppression. She understands that “[t]he good citizen when he opens his door in the evening must be banker, [...] husband, father; not a nomad wandering in the desert, a mystic staring at the sky, a debauchee in the slums of San Francisco” (6). In other words, only owing to cultural

necessity does this universal creative impulse fail to flower universally. In this context, Baudelaire's use of the word "privilege" acquires an ironic veracity (Baudelaire 20): his poet does indeed enjoy the privilege of "ceaselessly journeying across the great human desert," insofar as he is free from these social imperatives ("Painter" 497). This illuminates the moments of sudden creative self-restraint on the part of Woolf's narrator: "But here we must stop peremptorily. We are in danger of digging deeper than the eye approves" (Woolf 4). In such moments, she asks rhetorically: "But what could be more absurd?" (6). Woolf underscores the ways in which cultural notions of propriety compel individuals to self-restrict their natural creative propensities. With this in mind, the pretext of the pencil acquires newfound significance: it is a license to "indulge" in creative activity otherwise foreclosed for reasons of custom, social etiquette, necessity, and so forth—particularly with regards to women confined to the domestic sphere (6). As she writes: "One must, one always must, do something or other; it is not allowed one simply to enjoy oneself" (7). Woolf's narrative suggests that cultural and social barriers stand in the way of an otherwise wholly natural and universal impulse to create—especially when these rob a person of the sense of independence necessary to freely do so.

Baudelaire and Woolf each exalt the urban, exulting in the immersive ecstasies engendered by self-loss amidst crowds in the city. These two muses of concrete differ, however, in their understanding of the availability of this kind of ecstatic self-forgetting: Baudelaire considers it the exclusive prerogative of the artist, whereas Woolf's narrative locates and instantiates these poetic sensibilities within every human being universally. In a word, these represent aristocratic and democratic understandings of creative capacity in their turn. This difference has important implications: in Woolf's case, it suggests that endemic cultural

repression is ultimately responsible for the eminent dearth of universal artistic activity. Insofar as this activity enables the individual to experience meaningful self-loss and imaginatively inhabit the lives of others, Woolf's narrative emerges as an implicit indictment of systematic societal self-suppression as singularly responsible for a dearth of creative meaning in a solitary age.

Works Cited

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