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The Violence of Modernity

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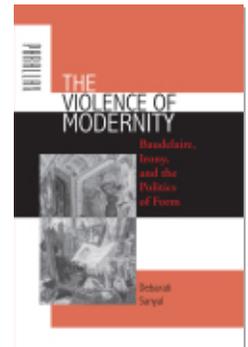
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Bodies in Motion, Texts on Stage

Baudelaire's Women and the Forms of Modernity

La femme a faim et elle veut manger. Soif, et elle veut boire.

Elle est en rut et elle veut être foutue.

Le beau mérite !

La femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable.

Baudelaire, "Mon coeur mis à nu"

Baudelaire is notorious for the violence of his representations of women. The unabashed misogyny of his declarations on female nature seems to require little commentary. Yet let us begin with this most damning of statements, "La femme est *naturelle*, c'est-à-dire, abominable," to consider the "nature" of this femininity in Baudelaire's poetry. The notion of woman as a regressive, instinctual organism, as many critics have shown, participates in a broader cultural disquiet about the female body, a fascinated repugnance for the unthinking materiality that this body represents. For Baudelaire, a woman who has not been transfigured through artifice—through fashion or cosmetics—appears to be the very incarnation of unredeemed materiality. But her aesthetic reincarnation is proof of art's power to redeem matter. In artistic terms, then, "woman" may function as a material body, a substance to be alchemically transformed by the creative process. Or, like the traditional muse, she may serve as a figure for poetry itself. In the *dédicace* of *Les Paradis artificiels*, Baudelaire declares that "La femme est fatalement suggestive ; elle vit d'une autre vie que la sienne propre ; elle vit spirituellement dans les imaginations qu'elle hante et qu'elle féconde" (*OC*, 1: 399). The category of "woman" is delivered here from its material content and redefined as pure metaphor, as a figure for figuration itself. Such conflicting definitions of woman—as "naturelle" and as "fatalement suggestive"—contradictorily posit the female body as both matter and figure, both resistance to and catalyst for aesthetic production.

Baudelaire is certainly not alone in harboring this ambivalence about the female body, as a plethora of late nineteenth-century writings attests. A

woman's body is "*naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable*" in Zola's *Nana* and her contagious sexuality or "fatalement suggestive" in Mallarmé's ballerina, whose body generates a series of signs (*glaiive, coupe, fleurs*) that detach themselves from the swirl of her limbs and gauzes. In these representations, femininity stands in both for a regressive materiality upon which social and artistic processes are inscribed and as the figure for an open-ended semiotic drift.

This contradictory mapping of gender—as nature and as sign—opens a consideration of "woman" as the placeholder for aesthetic modernism's vexed relationship to reference. As Fredric Jameson has observed, the distinction between modernism and postmodernism is usually conceptualized in terms of a "dissolution of reference." High modernist art still retains the vestiges of faith in categories such as nature, being, depth, and authenticity, even if such concepts are on the brink of disappearance. Under the conditions of postmodernism, however, melancholy alienation cedes to a poker-faced celebration of glossy surfaces and artifice. For Jameson, Baudelaire is at the threshold between modernism and postmodernism. His poetry voices the eclipse of poetry's expressivist and referential vectors, ushering in the heterogeneous disjunction and textual free play of consumer society and its simulacra: "The whole drama of modernism will lie here indeed, in the way in which its own peculiar life and logic depend on the reduction of reference to an absolute minimum and on the elaboration, in the former place of reference, of complex symbolic and often mythical frameworks and scaffolding; yet the latter depend on preserving a final tension between text and referent, on keeping alive one last shrunken point of reference, like a dwarf sun still glowing feebly on the horizon of the modernist text."¹

Jameson's reading of Baudelaire is attuned to the multiplicity of potential histories dormant in his poetry and actualized in its readings. It nuances Baudelaire's canonization (discussed in Chapter 1) as a melancholy witness of modernity by suggesting how the poet's scenarios of reification resonate with our postmodern culture of commodities.² In this chapter, I want to take this analysis one step further by exploring how the drama of modernism might have less to do with a vanishing point of reference than with staging the aesthetic and material conditions that produce the illusion of reference in the first place. As the preceding chapters suggest, the "crisis of representation" that continues to define historical modernity and aesthetic modernism opens a reflection on the production of reference itself. The human body is a key locus in the self-reflexive turn of French modernism. Its explicitly figural production in literary texts illuminates some of the material conditions of the body's in-

scription into form by social and cultural representations. The representation of bodies *through* this reflection on reference invites a reading of the ideological as well as aesthetic processes that make bodies “matter” (the processes that materialize the body and invest it with meaning and value).³ Baudelaire’s writing illuminates the cultural conditions that produce a body and invest it with value in the ideological map of the Second Empire. The body—as a site for the enactment of historical violences that are mirrored and critiqued by literary counterviolence—will also be the locus of my subsequent investigation of post-Baudelairean committed ironists.

My reading of the body through notions of performativity and violence does not strive to make Baudelaire our postmodern feminist contemporary. Rather, I suggest that Baudelaire belongs to a continuum of writers (including Gautier and Balzac) whose apparent retreat into textuality in fact explores the human body’s contradictory status as vulnerable materiality and as cultural sign. Their representation of the body converges with the representation of writing to show how materiality itself is defined by cultural assumptions about the body’s nature, ground, place, and performance. The horizon for this reading of Baudelaire’s female bodies could thus extend to later representatives of literature’s “disembodiment” such as Mallarmé (to whom I turn in the coda to this chapter), Valéry, Rachilde (discussed in Chapter 5), Colette, and other early and high modernists who map the poetic, economic, and cultural inscription of material bodies into form, thereby putting bodies in motion *and* texts on stage.⁴

As we have seen, Baudelaire’s strategies of poetic counterviolence bring into relief the human body’s fate as it circulates in the poetic and social field. In “La Corde,” the violence of aesthetic production virtually “executes” the “fait réel,” or facticity, of the child model’s body. This allegorical violence is in turn embedded in larger social structures that reify, dislocate, and circulate bodies for aesthetic, economic, and symbolic profit. Baudelaire thus discloses the price of aesthetic representation and embeds the violence of allegory into the structural violence of a life-world dominated by commerce. Violence becomes a vehicle for the inscription of competing aesthetic, economic, and ideological contexts within the poem itself.

The following pages situate Baudelaire within broader nineteenth-century discourses on gender and modernity. I argue that “woman” becomes a site of contested meaning at the crossroads of aesthetic modernism and the material conditions of capitalist urban modernity. Since the prostitute is so central to this contradictory mapping of woman as matter, sign, and commodity object,

my discussion will take us through a reading of prostitution in the nineteenth-century literary imagination, starting with Balzac (to whom Baudelaire pays tribute throughout his oeuvre) to consider Baudelaire's transformation of prostitution into a metaphor for the inscription of bodies into meaning in his prose poem "Les Foulés." I then turn to a series of poems that put bodies in motion *and* poetry on stage, thereby disclosing the violence of signifying practices that constitute the very "nature" of femininity. The chapter concludes with a brief reading of Mallarmé in this vein, to consider how modernism's apparent "disembodiment" might offer a critical genealogy of the body's production in modernity.

The Prostitute as Body and Figure: Balzac's La Fille aux yeux d'or

For Baudelaire, woman is at once a regressive organic corporeality and a mobile, semiotic entity. As the latter, she is linked both to the creation of art and to commodity fetishism. In the famous pages of *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, Baudelaire describes woman as one "pour qui, mais surtout *par qui* les artistes et les poètes composent leurs plus délicats bijoux" (OC, 2: 713), that is to say, as a vehicle for poetic transportation. Yet she is herself a *thing* of beauty, an object circulating in the marketplace of erotic, aesthetic, and consumer desire. Decked out in jewels and fabrics that billow from their limbs, "faisant ainsi des deux, de la femme et de la robe, une totalité indivisible" (OC, 2: 714), beautiful women harmoniously blend together flesh and fashion, matter and figure, nature and art. The clothes and ornamentation grafted onto the female body, like the idealizing impact of poetry itself, are "comme une déformation sublimée de la nature, ou plutôt comme un essai permanent et successif de réformation de la nature" (OC, 2: 716).

The prostitute is a key figure for woman's cultural mapping as resistant matter and meaningful sign. As a body reduced to meat for sale, the prostitute incarnates a pathological animality. Yet she is also a performer transformed by fashion and cosmetics into a desirable commodity. She is thus at once "naturelle," "abominable," and "fatalement suggestive." As many cultural historians have argued, the nineteenth-century artistic fascination with prostitutes shared by Balzac, Baudelaire, the Goncourts, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Flaubert, Zola, and many others rehearses typically "modernist" anxieties about corporeality, organic matter, and temporal decay. For Charles Bernheimer, the artistic solutions to such a feminized understanding of organic life—artifice, self-reflexivity, autonomy—spell the very birth of modernism: "Confronted by this patho-

logical erosion, the writer must construct art against nature, against woman, against the organic. Such constructions of artifice and reflexivity signal the birth of modernism, which . . . is inscribed on the prostitute's wounded body."⁵ Yet the prostitute is also a symbol of money itself. Her mobility and semiotic expertise enact the circulation of commodities in economic modernity. While the obsession with the prostitute is obviously linked to her associations with the body as a diseased and decaying materiality, this anxiety is also profoundly *semiotic* and responds to a crisis of legibility within the social body. If women could circulate and cash in on their bodies as commodities in the public sphere, prostitutes were the incontrovertible evidence of the permeability of class and gender boundaries in the anonymous, market-driven context of the city.⁶ The prostitute is figured as the "embodiment" of bourgeois capitalist modernity.

The prostitute and the kinds of femininity she represents become a powerful site of contest for the claims of gender, class, and art. At once "*naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable*" and "fatalement suggestive," she represents a conflict between the aesthetic imagination and its matter, between "form" and its "contents." She also articulates the tension between atavistic nature and urban modernity. An embodiment of what Baudelaire calls "*la sauvagerie dans la civilisation*," she is a point of resistance to narratives of historical progress and, as such, illustrates what Naomi Schor has described as an accepted "divorce between women and modernity" (*Breaking the Chain*, 145). Yet the venal female body enacts the very workings of capitalist modernity. To further tease out the points of conjunction that the prostitute allows us to discern between the female body, aesthetic modernism, and urban modernity, let us turn to Balzac's *La Fille aux yeux d'or*, a novella that Baudelaire recalls in *La Fanfarlo* (1847) and that plays out a series of cultural assumptions on women's "place" in modernity.⁷

In Balzac's tale, the body of the golden-eyed girl becomes the site of a struggle between the archaic, oriental way of life, and the circulation of commodities under modern industrial capitalism. Balzac's opening chapter, titled "Physiologies parisiennes," describes the multiple currencies of gold and pleasure that circulate within and between the city's layered socioeconomic spheres. In this introductory panorama, Paris is a hierarchical pyramid that, from its toiling workers to its corrupt bankers and lawyers, pulses to the uniform beat of *or et plaisir*. At the summit of this pyramid, we find the luxurious chambers of the aristocracy, where women live like rare flowers that blossom far from the city's tumult: "il se rencontre, dans le monde féminin, de petites peuplades

heureuses qui vivent à l'orientale . . . elles demeurent cachées, comme des plantes rares qui ne déploient leurs pétales qu'à certaines heures, et qui constituent de véritables exceptions exotiques" (*Histoire des Treize*, 225). While these women are the final recipients of the upward surge of wealth in the city, they appear untainted by the capitalist machinery's cycle of labor, production, and expenditure. Aristocratic women live in a premodern, static, and "oriental" state that lies outside the Parisian economy of gold and pleasure, even though their exotic and oriental chambers are its final destination.

Balzac situates his girl with golden eyes at the heart of this paradox. Amidst the urban swirl of money and pleasure lies the timeless oriental interior in which Paquita is kept like a rare blossom by her jealous mistress, the marquise de San Réal. Baptized as "la fille aux yeux d'or" by her admirers, designated as "fille"—prostitute as well as girl—her association with the public circulation of money is stressed throughout the tale. A feeling and thinking embodiment of gold itself, her eyes are portrayed as commodities seeking a buyer and as metonyms for the living gold driving modern Paris: "deux yeux jaune comme ceux des tigres ; un jaune d'or qui brille, de l'or vivant, de l'or qui pense, de l'or qui aime et veut absolument venir dans votre gousset" (*Histoire des Treize*, 236). Yet, along with her incarnation as commodity fetish circulating in the modern metropolis, she is also emblematic of a static, preindustrial, "oriental" lifestyle, an exotic harem girl out of a Delacroix painting. Paquita is thus an overdetermined site of cultural inscription: as nature, art, oriental slave, and Parisian commodity fetish.

Balzac dedicated *La Fille aux yeux d'or* to Delacroix, after seeing the painter's luminous orientalist interior *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* in 1834. His gestures to Delacroix in this ekphrastic novella explore art's relationship to a new urban economy of gold and pleasure. Paquita's body is explicitly described as a work of art. She is "un chef d'oeuvre de la nature" and also "l'original de la délirante peinture, appelée *la femme caressant sa chimère*" (*Histoire des Treize*, 237).⁸ Her bloody end accomplishes her destiny as art. Ripped to shreds by her jealous keeper, the marquise de San Réal (who turns out to be the half-sister of Paquita's lover, Henri de Marsay), her death is a spectacular tableau that rivals Delacroix's *Death of Sardanapalus*. Her struggle to escape her keeper's fury is visible in the bloody imprint of her hands and feet on the walls and divan of her boudoir, imprints coldly described by de Marsay as so many traces of the marquise's *fantaisie*. The sensuous violence of these hieroglyphs attests to an orientalist aesthetic that situates itself above and beyond social law.

La Fille aux yeux d'or shores up an archaic figure of oriental despotism (the marquise as Sardanapalus) against the more disquieting flux of a postrevolutionary, market-driven society in which bodies anonymously circulate through economic transactions. The final chapter, titled "La Force du sang," reiterates the biological ties of blood over the circulating relationships of the market. This is conveyed in the image of the brother and sister's incestuous embrace over the bloody corpse of a mistress unwittingly shared. While Paquita is repeatedly embedded in a Parisian economy of bodies bought and sold, the conclusion displaces this reification onto the Orient. "Elle est d'un pays où les femmes ne sont pas des êtres, mais des choses dont on fait ce qu'on veut, que l'on vend, que l'on achète, que l'on tue, enfin dont on se sert pour ses caprices, comme vous vous servez ici de vos meubles" (*Histoire des Treize*, 289), the marquise declares, assuaging de Marsay's concern that Paquita's mother will denounce the murder. Paquita's incarnation as art, as she dies in a pool of blood, is explicitly tied to her status as a commodity sold by her mother. She is a decorative piece of furniture whose erasure from circulation will escape notice. Whereas the denaturalization of filial ties by economic transactions is initially established as a Parisian predicament, it is displaced into another place at the novel's conclusion. *La Fille aux yeux d'or*'s punishment, then, is an aesthetic redemption of social and sexual mobility. It relegates the disruption of filial ties characteristic of a market-driven society onto the Orient. By reversing the attributes traditionally opposing the archaic Orient to modern civilization, Balzac's narrative can be read as providing a symbolic solution of sorts to anxieties about capitalist bourgeois modernity.⁹

Naomi Schor has argued that whereas Flaubert's narratives operate a partial denaturalization of gender, in which the attributes of gender are considered as both anatomical and cultural accounts of the difference between men and women, Balzac's "univocal narrative voice . . . serves to naturalize, that is to feminize passivity."¹⁰ Yet, as Schor notes, many of Balzac's most celebrated texts (*Seraphîta*, *Sarrasine*, *La Peau de chagrin*) attest to the instability of such natural determinations of gender. *La Fille aux yeux d'or* plays out the tension between Balzac's naturalization of the social (in Paquita's portrait as the essence of presocial, anti-modern femininity) and a partial denaturalization of the body (in her overdetermined representation as oriental art work and as commodity fetish).¹¹ The complex maneuvers in the narrative produce Paquita as both a regressive materiality and a crafted object upon which erotic, economic and allegorical desire are violently enacted.

Baudelaire and the Prostitution of Poetry

Qu'est-ce que l'art ? Prostitution.

Baudelaire, "Fusées"

"[E]lle darde son regard sous son chapeau, comme un portrait dans son cadre. Elle représente bien la sauvagerie dans la civilisation," Baudelaire says of a courtesan's drawing by Constantin Guys. "Elle porte le regard à l'horizon, comme la bête de proie" (*OC*, 2: 720). The courtesan is a predatory beast pacing through the urban jungle; she is Juvenal's *foemina simplex*, reduced to aggressive biological facticity. Yet the flash of her eyes from beneath the rim of her hat is likened to a portrait in its frame, destabilizing the opposition between matter and figure, between the body and art, and between savagery and civilization. Baudelaire here rehearses the conflicting accounts of femininity observed thus far (as nature, art, commodity fetish, savagery, and civilization). Yet elsewhere in his work, "prostitution" is redefined as a dynamic metaphor for poetry, and more specifically, for the circulation of bodies and things in the poetic and social texts. In contrast to the contemporary discourse of containment found in texts such as Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet's *De la prostitution dans la ville de Paris* (1836) and exemplified in the creation of the *maisons de tolérance*, Baudelaire uses "prostitution" to denote an explosion of psychic boundaries and a free circulation of subjectivities.¹² Poetic prostitution releases the body from its gendered and class determinations, thus calling into question the cultural processes of naturalization found in accounts of the venal body by authors such as Balzac, Zola, or Barbey d'Aurevilly. Baudelaire's "disembodiment" of the prostitute into a metaphor for semiotic exchange, however, is more than a symptom of some misogynist rejection of the female body.¹³ Rather, in his work, poetic prostitution becomes a metaphor for the semiotic exchanges of allegory and commodity production, a heuristic tool for investigating the tension between body and form within interlocking processes of representation.

In the prose poem "Les Foules," the poet is figured as a prostitute driven by "le goût du travestissement et du masque" to plunge into the electric force field of the urban experience. This abdication of poetic sovereignty is extolled as "cette ineffable orgie . . . cette sainte prostitution de l'âme qui se donne tout entière, poésie et charité, à l'imprévu qui se montre, à l'inconnu qui passe" (*OC*, 1: 291). Yet Baudelaire's celebration of poetry as charity is sabotaged from the outset: the universal communion with the urban crowds is not an experi-

ence available to all; it takes place “au dépens du genre humain.” The poet is an *âme errante* who possesses bodies in their unthinking materiality. This non-reciprocity dismantles the very idea of communion: “Multitude, solitude : terms égaux et convertibles pour le poète actif et fécond. Qui ne sait pas peupler sa solitude, ne sait pas non plus être seul dans une foule affairée” (ibid.). Multitude and solitude are indeed equal and convertible terms, not because of the poet’s “conversion” to the collectivity, but because of the “convertibility” of otherness into sameness, of human material into poetic matter.

Walter Benjamin suggests that Baudelaire’s poet-as-prostitute discovers the reification characterizing relations between people and things in a market economy. Inspired by Marx’s definition of the commodity fetish as a “definite social relation between men that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (*Marx-Engels Reader*, 321), Benjamin examines the kinship between the poet-narrator of “Les Foules” and the commodity caught in the bustle of the urban *clientèle*. The poet-prostitute’s fascinated identification with dead matter, his sterile and imaginary empathy for strangers, situates Baudelaire within the class of mystified petit bourgeois that had yet to fully grasp its reification by the forces of the market.¹⁴

Yet Benjamin’s account of “Les Foules” as an example of ideological mystification misses the irony of the poem’s conclusion, in which the underlying inter-subjective relations of domination that produce the commodity fetish-relations *do* surface: “Il est bon d’apprendre quelquefois aux heureux de ce monde, ne fût-ce que pour humilier un instant leur sot orgueil, qu’il est des bonheurs supérieurs au leur, plus vastes et plus raffinés. Les fondateurs de colonies, les pasteurs de peuples, les prêtres missionnaires exilés au bout du monde, connaissent sans doute quelque chose de ces mystérieuses ivresses ; et, au sein de la vaste famille que leur génie s’est faite, ils doivent rire quelquefois de ceux qui les plaignent pour leur fortune si agitée et leur vie si chaste” (*OC*, 1: 291–92).

Baudelaire’s poet-narrator links the aesthetics of prostitution—and its arbitrary assignment of value to others as empty sites—to the mystical foundations of ideological formations. In that sense, the poet-prostitute is kindred to shepherds of peoples, missionaries, and founders of colonies, all of whom taste the joy of generating communities from within and over which they reign with unquestioned authority. Like the artistic despot of “Une Mort héroïque,” the founders of colonies, of religious orders, or of imaginary worlds reign “au sein de la vaste famille que leur génie s’est faite” (emphasis added). The reflexive form underlines the solipsism of these “imagined communities.”

The conclusion of “Les Foules” takes the figure of the poet–prostitute–

commodity fetish out of the urban marketplace and locates its kindred spirits outside the dominant bourgeois order, in “premodern” social structures based on the sovereignty of the missionary, the colonizer, or the spiritual leader. The *convertibility* of things, established by their exchange value, is redeemed into their *conversion* by the authoritarian despot. In this regard, the final lines of “Les Foules” echo Balzac’s *La Fille aux yeux d’or*, which also concludes on the oriental despot’s will over Paquita’s circulation as an object on the marketplace of aesthetic and erotic desire. Yet in an unexpected dialectical turn, the commodity’s subjection and the subject’s sovereignty are figured in “Les Foules” from the stances of both *victime* and *bourreau*. Baudelaire’s poet-prostitute not only occupies the position of the commodity caught in the turbulence of a free market (as Benjamin describes it), he also embodies the despotism of rulers who found and legitimate communities by transforming their subjects into empty sites or dead matter to which value and meaning may be assigned. The poet-prostitute becomes both subject and object, victim and executioner—as well as symptom and critic—of prostitution’s logic. Baudelaire thus releases prostitution from its gendered determination, transforming it instead into a dynamic principle of force that operates in aesthetic, sexual, economic, and, as I shall show, colonial systems. Prostitution enacts the violence of allegorical desire as it transforms bodies and things into poetic and cultural meaning.¹⁵

The preceding discussion of prostitution has traced a number of contradictory topoi structuring accounts of femininity in the nineteenth-century literary imagination. “Woman” is posited both as regressive materiality and as meaningful sign, as savagery and civilization. She is at once archaic or exotic nature, modern commodity object, and work of art. These contradictory determinations invite an inquiry into the female body as a site for competing symbolic violences in the Second Empire’s vision of modernity. Baudelaire’s rehearsal of these overdetermined accounts denaturalizes the very category of gender. This denaturalization opens up an analysis of “woman” as a key category for *l’art pour l’art*, that is to say, as a resistance to and catalyst for the de-realizing tendencies of aesthetic modernism. It also enables a consideration of “woman” as a placeholder *and* token for conflicting accounts of modernity in the nineteenth century.¹⁶

The poems examined in the remainder of this chapter trace the conditions for a gendered body’s emergence in the poetic and the broader sociocultural and colonial field. All three texts define woman as either “naturelle” or as “fatalement suggestive,” and posit the female body as simultaneously matter and figure, as resistance to and catalyst for productions that are not only poetic,

but also sexual, socioeconomic, racial, and colonial. These textual exhibitions of the female body are fully attuned to the Second Empire's spectacular displays of commodity culture (*expositions universelles*, department stores, panoramas, fairs, public morgues, and arcades).¹⁷ Baudelaire's "Une Martyre" is an ornate, poetic *fait divers* that transforms the domestic interior into a spectacular crime scene; "La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse" unfolds in a carnival fair, casting the poet as a sort of sideshow barker; and "La Belle Dorothée" takes on the glossy promise of an *invitation au voyage*, a cruise to tropical bliss that puts the "native" body of a colonial subject on display. In all three texts, a female body is exhibited as either allegorical or natural, and in each case, violence is ironically deployed to reveal the hidden violences of Baudelaire's nineteenth century, the price exacted by urban, imperial, and colonial modernity.

Losing One's Head to Things: "Une Martyre"

La femme est fatalement suggestive ; elle vit d'une autre vie que la sienne propre ; elle vit spirituellement dans les imaginations qu'elle hante et qu'elle féconde.

Baudelaire, *Les Paradis artificiels*, "Préface"

Balzac's evocation of Paquita's opulent boudoir, filtered through the colors and lights of Delacroix's orientalist paintings, set the stage for Baudelaire's "Une Martyre."¹⁸ A poem that mysteriously escaped censorship in 1857 despite its extraordinary sexual violence and necrophilic overtones, "Une Martyre" is inspired by an anonymous masterpiece depicting a decapitated woman in an opulent apartment. It provides a vivid *mise-en-scène* of Baudelaire's conception of the female body as an aesthetic figure delivered from all material content, and as catalyst and muse for poetry itself. Yet in doing so, it also grasps the violence of this allegorical inscription of gender, for here the woman is "fatalement suggestive" in the most literal sense of the expression. It is only insofar as her body is dead and virtually in pieces that the process of allegorization and the parallel activities of detection, circulation, and consumption, can take place. As in "La Corde," where the violence of allegory is embedded in the structural violence of the postrevolutionary body politic and its ethos of commerce, "Une Martyre" links the allegorization of female bodies to their circulation as commodities in the modern city. Like the poems examined in the previous chapter, the self-reflexive features of aesthetic modernism open up a critique of the material conditions of urban modernity.

“Une Martyre” hovers at the margins of many passages in Walter Benjamin’s essays on Baudelaire, even if explicit references to the poem are rare and no reading on the scale of “À une passante” is elaborated.¹⁹ As the first chapter of this book proposed, Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire as a witness to the trauma of modernity has often been privileged at the expense of the more historical and materialist readings offered in earlier versions of his “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” These earlier readings “embedded” Baudelaire into the broader cultural landscape of the nineteenth century by situating poetry within a spectrum of cultural artifacts (such as arcades, fashion, and photography) that, when scrutinized, reveal the mystifications of high capitalism and the phantasmagoria of the bourgeoisie. Yet, as my previous discussions have suggested, Benjamin’s ambiguous positioning of poetry primarily as *witness* to the ideological contradictions of its historical moment and as a symptomatic inscription of historical trauma tends to eclipse the more active, contestatory, and political dimensions of Baudelaire’s poetics.²⁰ The following reading of “Une Martyre” explores Benjamin’s comments on the structural similarities between allegory and commodity fetishism. I take three Benjaminian motifs as guiding threads: the bourgeois interior, the poet as flâneur and prostitute, and the detective novel. All three motifs for Benjamin serve as *defensive* responses to the disappearance of the individual in the jostle of the modern city. My dialogue with these motifs strives to open up spaces for an account of the critical dimension of Baudelaire’s engagement with the shocks of modernity *through* the category of gender. By applying pressure on a Benjaminian reading of “Une Martyre,” I suggest that Baudelaire’s allegory both mirrors and critiques the female body’s reified circulation as a commodity.

From the reign of Louis-Philippe to the Second Empire, the bourgeoisie’s growing investment in private spaces is a form of compensation for the erasure of the individual by the masses of the metropolis. Benjamin describes how the opulent apartment in the “Makart” style, for instance, was designed to faithfully reflect its owner’s individuality and furnished a kind of membrane protecting this reified imprint from public view.²¹ The spectacular interior of Baudelaire’s “Une Martyre” is a fossil that retains the imprint of the victim’s history. In this ostentatious décor, “nature” is represented as a “second nature”; it is fully commodified and transformed into so many luxury items. Dresses, jewels, bottles, paintings, pillows, furniture, and garter belts indiscriminately pile up, collapsing the distinction between the organic and the inorganic (hair mingles with jewelry), the organic and the synthetic (a flesh-colored stocking clings to the victim’s leg), and between the vegetal and the human (the victim’s

head is a “renoncule”). Nature is figured as a river of blood quenching a textured field:

Un cadavre sans tête épanche comme un fleuve,
Sur l'oreiller désaltéré
Un sang rouge et vivant, dont la toile s'abreuve
Avec l'avidité d'un pré.

By the time the decapitated body is discovered by the reader in the third stanza, it has become a decorative centerpiece displayed for public consumption, a “renoncule” fated to join the dying flowers in their vases, a poetic *fleur du mal*.

While the human body is presented as an inert and petrified thing, inanimate objects are invested with human characteristics.²² The objects on display brim with significance and furtive vitality: flowers exhale in their vases, the pillowcase (a “toile,” or a canvas) thirstily drinks the victim’s blood, a jeweled garter casts a glimmering look. The victim’s own gaze, however, is blank just as her head, significantly, is “vide de pensers.”²³ In this scenario, it is the rustle of objects, the glint of a garter—that “ainsi qu’un oeil secret qui flambe / Darde un regard diamanté”—that seduce, and even chain the spectator’s eyes to the dreadful spectacle. Objects are anthropomorphized as consumers, agents, and witnesses to the crime. The mutilated body is both another “thing” in the apartment’s landscape and the necessary agent of transfer between nature, commodity, and art.

“Une Martyre” stages the logic of commodity fetishism. The animation of its objects illustrates the consumer’s delirious identification with dead matter in the marketplace. The anthropomorphic nature of correspondences yields to a dense network of relations between dead—yet animate—things.²⁴ We have entered a world in which objects are both allegorical and commodified: they stand in for some “natural” counterpart and yet destroy the illusion of a real, organic nature. For Benjamin, allegory and the commodity form were structurally similar modes of representation. Just as the commodity on the market is a sign invested with an arbitrary value, similarly allegory posits an arbitrary relationship between a sign and its meaning. Allegory and commodity are representational currencies whose origins are masked, erased, or forgotten. They are processes that rip an object from its context of production, hollow it out, and reify it in its circulation.²⁵ How, then, might Baudelaire’s allegory of the commodity form in “Une Martyre” also function as an allegory of allegory itself? How might the convergence of aesthetic, sexual, and urban economies perform a critique of their overlapping violence?

Violence and Representation in Baudelaire

“Une Martyre” enacts the poetics of prostitution of “Les Foules.” The poet is a voyeur who, like the flâneur and poet-prostitute discussed above, wanders the streets of Paris (and its museums) in search of bodies, homes, and things to enter (along with anonymous masterpieces). The poet-voyeur slips into the painting/crime’s framed interior and appropriates its objects through a process of identification. He turns the female body and the private interior inside out, displaying both for public viewing. The apartment or protective membrane containing its owner’s consciousness is ripped aside and exposed. The victim’s body bears a synecdochal relationship to this exposed interior, its decapitation figures, *en abyme*, the violation of the domestic space. Shamelessly splayed on the bed, she exposes the secret splendor of her “natural” endowments:

Sur le lit, le tronc nu sans scrupule étale
Dans le plus complet abandon
La secrète splendeur et la beauté fatale
Dont la nature lui fit don.

The body’s commodification is conveyed in the verb *étaler*: to spread out one’s wares at the marketplace or on the *étalage* of a *grand magasin*. Both the apartment and the body are private containers brutally opened by the poet-flâneur-voyeur and exhibited as objects on display. The human body’s mutilation, and its parceling out into illegible pieces form the conditions of poetic identification, aesthetic representation, and, ultimately, public consumption.

Curiously, in the eleventh stanza, the poet-spectator wonders if the martyr’s physical senses may have *opened themselves up* to, and welcomed in, pressing crowds of unspeakable desires:

Et ses sens par l’ennui mordus
S’étaient-ils entr’ouverts à la meute altérée
Des désirs errants et perdus ?

The allusion to a thirsty mob of stray desires conjures an image of the body’s penetration and possession by the *city’s* wandering and aimless crowds, a suggestion that is reinforced in the penultimate stanza’s allusions to the “monde railleur,” “foule impure” and “magistrats curieux.” Not a portion of this body, embedded and framed as it may be within the walls of a private apartment, has remained immune to or unclaimed by the public domain.

The body and the apartment are thus the sites of multiple violations: by the lover–assassin–suspected necrophiliac, by the crowds consuming the representations of the crime, by the poet-spectator of the “dessin d’un maître inconnu,” and by the reader of the poem. This violence characterizes each interpretive

gesture made by the poet-viewer, such that the attempt to decipher the crime scene becomes indissociable from a prurient reenactment of the crime itself. As aesthetic object and desirable commodity, the body is no “given” matter; rather, it is explicitly produced by the violence done to it.

For Benjamin, just as the opulent apartment serves as a defense against an impersonal urban chaos, the rise of the detective novel can be explained by the illusion it gives that an individual’s trajectory leaves recoverable traces in the teeming metropolis.²⁶ The intrigue of “Une Martyre” reproduces key elements of the detective plot: the discovery of the body, the careful record of the crime scene, the cataloguing of forensic evidence, the reconstruction of the victim’s moral history and of the possible motives for the murder, up to the fanatical courtroom interrogation before the gaze of the “foule impure” and “magistrats curieux.” The poet-spectator is thus also a detective who reconstructs the crime with whatever clues the anonymous *dessin* gives him. Strangely enough, a painting *within* the drawing offers a key to the poetic investigation:

Le singulier aspect de cette solitude
Et d’un grand portrait langoureux
Aux yeux provocateurs comme son attitude
Révèle un amour ténébreux,

Une coupable joie et des fêtes étranges
Pleines de baisers infernaux,
Dont se réjouissent l’essaim des mauvais anges
Nageant dans les plis des rideaux;

The victim’s history is injected into an object (a *portrait langoureux*), which—like the other objects in the room—is humanized and invested with the ability to look and to seduce. The painting contains, *en abyme*, elements of the poetic tableau itself, such as the teeming crowds of rejoicing witnesses (the “essaim des mauvais anges”) repeated in the “meute altérée / Des désirs errants et perdus” conjured up by the poet in the eleventh stanza, and in the penultimate stanza’s allusion to the “monde railleur,” “foule impure” and “magistrats curieux.” All of these framed representations and their crowds of witnesses—the portrait, the anonymous drawing, the poetic tableau, and the poet’s own imaginary reconstructions—are competing testimonies that promise to unlock the mystery of the body’s history, only to be set into a dizzying regress of failed embeddings. This failure to detect and consume the criminal scenario as one would a *fait divers* or a macabre *estampe érotique* is a curious volte-face after the graphic sensationalism of stanzas describing mutilation, orgies, and necrophilia. What

Violence and Representation in Baudelaire

is the significance of the poem's abortive gestures toward the detective genre's typical structure of disclosure?

In a discussion of the *roman policier*, Benjamin makes explicit reference to "Une Martyre" and provides a fascinating comment on the poet's failure to sustain the basic structure of the detective plot.

The detective story, the most momentous among Poe's technical achievements, was part of a literature that satisfied Baudelaire's postulate. Its analysis constitutes part of the analysis of Baudelaire's own work, despite the fact that Baudelaire wrote no stories of this type. The *Fleurs du mal* have three of its decisive elements as *disjecta membra*: the victim and the scene of the crime ("Une Martyre"), the murderer ("Le Vin de l'assassin"), the masses ("Le Crépuscule du soir"). The fourth element is lacking—the one that permits the intellect to break through this emotion-laden atmosphere. Baudelaire wrote no detective story because, given the nature of his instincts, it was impossible for him to identify with the detective. In him, the calculating, constructive element was on the side of the asocial and had become an integral part of cruelty. Baudelaire was too good a reader of the marquis de Sade to be able to compete with Poe. (Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 43).

While Baudelaire clearly shows a disposition for the genre, his psychological makeup and its fundamental asociality, according to Benjamin, forbid the identification with the detective necessary for a successful criminal scenario. Yet what beyond an *instinctual* disposition toward the criminal, the sadist, and other such figures of abjection who resist the social order and its representative *magistrats* could account for the complex interplay of identification and resistance staged in this poem? The oscillating identifications with the commodities, the dismembered body on the scene, and the criminal himself suggest that we are witnessing a typically Baudelairean *mise-en-scène* of the shifting relationships between *victime* and *bourreau*, one that refuses any stable identificatory recuperation and that fully participates in the cruelty that is represented. It is only through a rehearsal of the representational logics of allegory, commodity, and detection, from the standpoint of both *victime* and *bourreau*, that the violent underpinnings of such logics may be disclosed.

The convergence of the detective genre with the allegory of commodification ultimately unveils an allegory of the reading process itself, one that performs the link between violence and representation. This violence is recorded in the poetic form, with its incongruously deliberate, classical diction and its syntactical reenactment of the decapitation in the enjambment between the fourth and fifth stanzas ("La tête . . . / Repose.") The poet-witness, a "hyp-

ocrite lecteur” in his own right, enlists the reader’s participation and complicity in the voyeuristic reading of the crime scene: as detective, as empathic dandy and aesthete, as prurient voyeur and avid *faits divers* reader, as moralist and finally, as both courtroom prosecutor *and* criminal lover. This delirium of identifications culminates with the apostrophes that imagine the assassin’s necrophilic violation of the corpse:

L’homme vindicatif que tu n’as pu, vivante,
Malgré tant d’amour, assouvir,
Combla-t-il sur ta chair inerte et complaisante
L’immensité de son désir ?

Réponds, cadavre impur ! et par tes tresses roides
Te soulevant d’un bras fiévreux,
Dis-moi, tête effrayante, a-t-il sur tes dents froides
Collé les suprêmes adieux ?

The poem’s abrupt suspension of these identifications comes as a shock, if not a betrayal to the reader (as detective, consumer, and necrophiliac accomplice). In the penultimate stanza, the caesura marks a sudden rupture with these sensationist readings and a retreat before the body’s irreducible otherness:

— Loin du monde railleur, loin de la foule impure,
Loin des magistrats curieux,
Dors en paix, dors en paix, étrange créature
Dans ton tombeau mystérieux;

The poetic investigation thwarts its will to representation and, in a protective—if belated—gesture, cordons the corpse from the public gaze, turning from the registers of detection and consumption to that of an epitaph’s inscription.

“Une Martyre” discloses the concealed violence of each act of reading—a violence that binds the detective to the criminal, the executioner to his victim and the poet to the reader. It is only by being “an integral part of cruelty,” as Benjamin puts it, that the poetic persona may disclose the overlap of sexual, aesthetic, economic, and readerly desire. Baudelaire’s hyperbolic performance of cruelty explodes, from within, the appropriative motion of reading as consumption. The allegory of commodification and detection in the poem disrupts its own procedure by exposing this logic and showing its failure to assign a value to the body beyond its irreducible materiality. This poetic exercise in cruelty forces its readership, its “hypocrite lecteur,” to falter in its consumption of the body in/of the poem.

Violence and Representation in Baudelaire

“Une Martyre” displays a female body that has been produced through the interwoven violence of allegorization, prostitution, commodity production, and textual—as well as visual—consumption.²⁷ It stages femininity as “fatalement suggestive,” as a figure for the process of figuration itself. Baudelaire’s poem relinquishes the notion of a preexisting nature. It presents us with a world of glassy surfaces, a “new” or “second” nature that encases the mutilated human body as but another commodity for the reader as consumer. In that sense, “Une Martyre” gives a prescient illustration of what Jameson defines as the postmodern turn: “In modernism . . . some residual zones of ‘nature’ or ‘being,’ of the old, the older and the archaic still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that ‘referent.’ Postmodernism is what you have when that modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good. It is a more fully human world than the older one, but one in which ‘culture’ has become a veritable ‘second nature.’” (Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix).

Baudelaire’s poem deploys a critique of this “second nature,” but not from a vantage point that retains an authentic nature or that rescues a relationship to the human body beyond the violence of reification. The demystifying moment emerges instead from the very cycle of commodity production and consumption, a cycle that fully implicates the writing and reading of poetry itself. We are now in a better position to examine the opposite pole of Baudelaire’s conception of femininity—as natural, that is to say, abominable—in order to further explore how the conspicuous absence of a primary “nature” in such exhibitions of the body intervenes in the Second Empire’s ideological narratives of sexual, racial, and colonial domination.

Whipped into Shape: “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse”

Baudelaire’s prose poem “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” describes a poet who, exasperated by his mistress’s languid complaints and affected femininity, decides to teach her the meaning of “real” suffering by taking her to a street fair, where, for a couple of sous, spectators watch a savage woman in a cage as she tears into live animals and is beaten by her husband-keeper.²⁸ After a cursory meditation on the sorry state of conjugal mores, the poet turns to his mistress and reiterates his disgust for her “précieuses pleurnicheries,” threatening to either beat her up like the savage woman or to throw her out the window like an empty bottle.

The poem initially appears as a straightforward sadistic pedagogical exper-

iment designed to teach the poet's mistress of her good fortune in the hands of her generous keeper by showing the difference between real and simulated suffering, between the working-class fair and the comfortable bourgeois interior. Yet, this *mise-en-scène* of class difference is complicated by a reflection on the very nature of "femininity," raising questions of a different order altogether: what do these scenarios have in common? What corporeal reality underlies these performances of savagery and femininity, conducted, respectively, in the working-class fair and the opulent apartment? In other words, what is the "nature" of woman? And this question inevitably leads to another: how is the emergence of her "nature" conditioned by certain sanctioned forms of violence that are at once physical, rhetorical, and institutional? For as we shall see, both the physical brutality of the savage woman's treatment and the discursive beating to which the little mistress is subjected in fact *constitute* the so-called "natural" bodies put on display on the public scene and on the textual stage.

The alleged aim of the poem is to confront nature in all of its degraded animality ("la femme sauvage") with its simulation ("la petite-maîtresse"). But nature and its simulation coalesce so perfectly in the savage woman's performance that it becomes impossible to distinguish between them: "Voyez avec quelle voracité (non simulée peut-être !) elle déchire des lapins vivants et des volailles piaillantes." Either the savage woman is a consummate performer of savagery or her natural instincts have been unleashed by the performance itself.

What binds these two women together is not their female nature so much as their status as performers. Both of them are, after all, engaged in parallel—if contrasting—productions (of nature and its savagery, of culture and its affectation). These performances are not only parallel but continuous: the woman at the carnival apes the savagery of wild animals, her artificially bestial form vaguely imitates the mistress's own body, and the mistress herself mimics conventional attributes of femininity learned from novels ("toutes ces affectations apprises dans les livres"). So to ask that the mistress act more "natural" by showing her the woeful fate of her savage counterpart is bound to fail, since the performance itself sends any stable notion of nature into a kind of imitative regress.

In both scenarios, the "natural" bodies of the women in question are ultimately constructed through an exercise of violence over which they do not have control. In both, a violent process of figuration produces—or attempts to produce—the natural state that is supposed to exist prior to figuration. The poet-figure unveils this paradoxical mechanism with great relish: "Allons ! un

bon coup de bâton pour la calmer ! car elle darde des yeux terribles de convoitise sur la nourriture enlevée. Grand Dieu ! Le bâton n'est pas un bâton de comédie, avez-vous entendu résonner la chair, malgré le poil postiche ? Aussi, les yeux lui sortent maintenant de la tête, elle hurle *plus naturellement*. Dans sa rage, elle étincelle toute entière comme le fer qu'on bat."

In this passage, the material body and its figuration—nature and its performance—are implicated in an extraordinarily complicated way, for it is *through* the theatrical blows inflicted by a real stick (masquerading as a fake one) that the woman's naturalness, and her authenticating howls, are produced. In other words, it is through a hyperbolically artificial performance of brutality that the category of "the natural" comes into italicized being: "elle hurle *plus naturellement*." But we have yet another turn of the screw, for the return to nature signaled by the woman's howls of pain is immediately followed by her resurrection as art: "avez-vous entendu résonner la chair . . . ?"; "elle étincelle toute entière comme le fer qu'on bat." The sheer violence of the blows, in producing the natural body in all of its eloquence, also unleashes its aesthetic potential, its "resonance" and "scintillation."

The significance of this aestheticized image raises some questions, especially since it is only one in a poem that, after all, involves four artistic figures: two performers, a "metteur en scène," and a poet. How might the violence exercised on the savage woman's body be akin to the violence of aesthetic production, an act that extracts *la beauté du mal*? More specifically, how does the aberrant figuration of femininity at the fair suggest a parallel disfiguration in poetry? The spectacular fate of the *femme sauvage* stages the effects through which her nature is materialized as savage: the husband-showman's blows have quite literally generated the "naturalness" of the body and its howls on stage. This ability to bring (or beat) a body into existence through the suspension of that body's referential status (is the wild woman a woman? is the little mistress a beast?) is not unlike poetry's own suspension of reference. Its systematic confusion of literal and metaphoric registers is staged as the confusion between the body proper and its figurative guises. The very principle of "surnaturalisme" on which Baudelaire founds the ideal of *poésie pure* is repeatedly described in his art criticism as the despotic enhancement of natural phenomena through a penetrating and almost alchemical alteration, one that releases these materials from their natural state and into their hyperbolic, "surnaturel," and properly poetic incarnation. The blows that transform the savage woman's body into shimmering metal resonate with the very terms that Baudelaire, along with his Parnassien contemporaries, such as Gautier, associate with po-

etic craft. Poetry is an *alchimie verbale* that sculpts and chisels resistant metals and minerals, forging a verbal artifact that is “belle come un rêve de pierre.”²⁹ The ideal of beauty as a shimmering, metallic body forged and polished by poetry is invoked in an unpublished fragment as “cette beauté, sombre comme le fer / Est de celles que forge et que polit l’Enfer” (*OC*, I: 189). The poet’s task is precisely this alchemical transfiguration, which changes mud into gold (“J’ai pétri de la boue et j’en ai fait de l’or” [*OC*, I: 188]). The savage female body undergoes just such a transfiguration: she is fashioned and struck to embody a hyperbolic naturalness, a “surnaturalisme” that turns her into a species of art.

“La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” proposes that the aesthetic process and the fairground performance are analogous in their violence toward the bodies they allegedly “represent.” The act of poetic figuration—its transformation of bodies and materials—is parodically literalized as the beating of flesh into art. The homology between poetry and the public domain of mass entertainment is established from the outset in a series of ironic *correspondances* between the poet’s domestic drama and the fairground’s spectacle: the poet-*entreteneur* is as much a keeper and a showman as is his monstrous counterpart—the husband; the physical abuse of the savage woman doubles the poet’s discursive abuse of his mistress; both explicitly male subjects put commodified bodies on display, and both produce—or attempt to produce—an ideal of nature through the exercise of violence.

The sequence of threats upon which the poem concludes flesh out the affinities between poetic violence, and the physical brutality of the fairground scene: “Si vous méprisez le soliveau (ce que je suis maintenant, comme vous savez bien), gare à la grue *qui vous croquera, vous gobera et vous tuera à son plaisir!* . . . et si vous me fatiguez trop souvent de vos *précieuses* pleurnicheries, je vous traiterai en *femme sauvage*, ou je vous jetterai par la fenêtre, comme une bouteille vide.”

The mistress must be beaten out of her figurations of femininity to better embody a natural condition. Yet this “nature” exists neither in the books she reads nor in the “real world” of working-class spectacles. So she will be beaten, not until she can embody herself more naturally, but until she suffers with greater conviction and howls “*plus naturellement.*” Or if she is not beaten, she will be eaten like La Fontaine’s frogs (who foolishly demanded a despot instead of a gentle sovereign). Failing that, she will be cast out the window, out of the very frame of representation. In this final threat, on which the poem closes, “ou je vous jetterai par la fenêtre comme une bouteille vide,” the little mistress occupies all three contradictory and mutually reinforcing positions in

which the poem places women. She stands in for an unintelligible body (“naturelle donc abominable”). She also figures as the impotent muse incapable of metamorphic mutation, unable to inspire the poet with meaningful signs (not “fatalement suggestive”). Finally, like the body of “Une Martyre,” she becomes a prostituted commodity object that, once consumed, may be discarded.

The poet’s struggle with his recalcitrant mistress-muse is but one of several sites for the production of gender. Others are the domestic sphere of the “petite-maîtresse” and its literary culture (the books that fail to teach her how to perform her nature adequately), the public domain of working-class fairs, and—as the poem points out—a much more vast administrative and juridical sphere. As the poet stresses with more than a touch of sadistic irony, the beating is legally sanctioned, since the savage woman’s keeper is her husband: “Il a enchaîné sa femme *légitime* comme une bête, et il la montre dans les faubourgs, les jours de foire, avec permission des magistrats, *cela va sans dire*” (emphasis added). The savagery of this scenario is a parodic literalization of the institution of marriage—an institution that, with the promulgation of the Napoleonic Code, turned women into their husbands’ property by according them the legal status of minors and the insane (and this would be another reason why the mistress is the more fortunate of the two by far). Baudelaire’s text thus unveils the ideological underpinnings of the “*cela va sans dire*,” that is to say, the unspoken consensus that legitimates the display, diminishment, and punishment of women by their brutal husbands and keepers.³⁰

This vast network of mutually reinforcing determinations of gender and nature, however, still fails to fully domesticate the wild body on display. The poet’s ostentatious effort to name this body is a case in point: “Ce *monstre* est un de ces *animaux* qu’on appelle généralement « mon *ange* ! » c’est-à-dire *une femme*” (emphasis added). The location of a natural female body is foiled by the very complexity of its production. The attempt to “raisonner la chair,” to reason the body (and not simply make it resonate) through the allegory of “la femme sauvage” spins out of control, since the body fashioned for private or public consumption is so volatile and riddled with artifice that the very categories that define and control it as a gendered, natural entity break down. Neither the carnival scene nor the poet’s ironic admonition contain the “monstre” within the confines of the “démonstration.”

In disclosing the unstable ground of gender, the poem also sweeps away a host of related differences. The distinction between femininity and masculinity reveals a common monstrosity; the natural and artificial—and savagery and art—are put into an uneasy and reversible relationship; the private apartment

collapses into the “faubourg”; the poetic struggle with the muse becomes a public beating to amuse. This corrosion also unravels the closure of traditional literary forms, forms that fail to contain the body’s contradictory productions. The citations (or “sages paroles”) that saturate the text—allusions to Marivaux’s *Le Petit Maître corrigé*, maxims such as “Il ne faut pas manger tout son bien en un jour” (as the husband tells savage woman as she devours a live chicken) and La Fontaine’s fable “Les Grenouilles demandent un roi”—are parodic references that underline the bankruptcy of these classical forms and proverbs and the irrelevance of their appeal to communicable notions of “morale,” “mesure,” or “nature.”³¹ It is hardly surprising, then, that Baudelaire gave up his initial plan to compose “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” in verse. As we saw in Chapter 2, no genre could be further from the closure of classical forms than the prose poem, which emerges from the intersections of urban modernity and its jostling bodies and discourses.

Situating the female body at the crossroads of poetic figuration and other cultural sites for its production, then, “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” and “Une Martyre” give a complex view of how poetic objects and social subjects are constituted and interpellated. Textual stage and social scene both violently produce the “nature” of bodies on display. Poetry’s production of the bodies and beings that it names is tied into a critique of the competing régimes that violently constitute the category—or figure—of gender. The metapoetic reflection lays bare the violence of accepted cultural practices that make possible the equation between femininity and a materiality that is alternately malleable and regressively savage.

*Baudelaire and the Exposition universelle of 1855:
Ethnographic Spectacle, Imperial Display, and Visual Consumption*

The demystification of the body’s nature and ground in “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” returns us to our opening discussion of “woman” as a key token in nineteenth-century narratives of modernism and modernity. Baudelaire’s exhibition of the *femme sauvage* resonates against broader cultural pre-occupations with the female body’s place in the historical continuum between “sauvagerie” and “civilisation,” one increasingly mapped along evolutionary and racial axes. What are some of the cultural investments in conceptualizing femininity as regressive materiality within the Second Empire’s colonial imaginary? And how does Baudelaire’s denaturalization of *la femme sauvage* intervene in contemporary narratives of savagery, modernity, progress, and imperial

conquest? To tease out the ideological valences of Baudelaire's demystification of the savage body, let us return briefly to his initial portrait of the *femme sauvage*: "Considérons bien, je vous prie, cette solide cage de fer derrière laquelle s'agite, hurlant comme un damné, secouant les barreaux comme un orang-outang . . . imitant, dans la perfection, tantôt les bonds circulaires des tigres, tantôt les dandinements stupides de l'ours blanc, ce monstre poilu dont la forme imite assez vaguement la votre."

The zoological register of this description, and specifically the allusion to orangutans, recalls similar cultural displays of the female body in all of its spectacular otherness, such as the exhibition of the so-called Hottentot Venuses or female Khoisanids at fairs and salons in Paris and London earlier in the century. Georges Cuvier dissected the most famous of these, Saartjie Bartman, whom he described as a member of the "lowest human species" and likened to the most evolved of apes, the orangutan, in a presentation at the Académie de médecine in 1817. Her brain and genitalia were preserved in formaldehyde as specimens of primitive sexuality.³² Another Khoisanid was exhibited nude in the drawing room of the duchesse du Barry as late as 1829. These exhibitions of the African body, as Sander Gilman and others have argued, confirmed racist agendas by exhibiting the difference between the savage dark bodies on display and those of their civilized, white—and clothed—spectators, between primitive abjection and civilized subjecthood.

As the converging iconography of the prostitute and the "Hottentot" suggest, pseudo-scientific representations of "unbridled" female sexuality later in the century became increasingly inflected and pathologized by racial categories. The Khoisanid is but one example of this equation of degenerate female sexuality with blackness. One thinks of Manet's *Nana*, whose protruding buttocks suggest the steatopygia for which Khoisanids were famed, or Zola's *Nana*, whose *fameux coup de hanche* catapults her into fame at the *théâtre des variétés*, or even Manet's *Olympia*, derisively called "that Hottentot Venus with a black cat," whose sexuality is underscored by the black maidservant behind her.³³ Baudelaire's own parallel between the *petite maîtresse* draped in fine silks and the raging creature in the cage captures this contamination of the civilized woman by her dark, savage sister ("ce monstre poilu, dont la forme imite assez vaguement la votre"). To read *la femme sauvage* along with such contemporary racializations of female sexuality is not so fanciful when we recall Baudelaire's long-standing relationship with his Creole mistress Jeanne Duval, the ostensible biographical source of his "Black Venus" poems and allegedly the inspiration for *Olympia's* black maidservant. Duval remained associated

with a dark, exotic, and even pathological sexuality in the minds of Baudelaire's contemporaries. At the poet's death, for instance, the journalist Victor Noir evoked a purely imaginary trip to "Madras," where the poet "se lia avec une Indienne qu'à Paris on appelait : Le Monstre noir," and a few years later, Lautréamont would refer to Baudelaire as "l'amant morbide de la Vénus Hottentote."³⁴

The joint reification of race and sexuality evident in the fascination with the "black Venus" is inseparable from the imperial enterprise of displaying the body of the "other" in a context of accelerating colonial expansion. The human zoos, or ethnographic spectacles of the Jardin d'acclimatation, for instance, displayed the bodies of various indigenous peoples amidst their "native" flora and fauna. Baudelaire's zoological depiction of the savage woman in a cage seems an uncanny foreshadowing of this phenomenon. After its inaugural exhibition of Nubians and Eskimos in 1877, the Jardin staged thirty such displays of "natives" from various parts of the world until World War I. These exhibits established the genre of the native villages that proliferated over the next half-century in *expositions universelles* and, later, colonial exhibitions. Such spectacular displays of indigenous bodies in their so-called native habitat helped to show the spoils of the empire, to figure and thereby domesticate—if not simply invent—the colonial subject and its place in the imperial design.³⁵

Although the exhibition of "natives" as *tableaux vivants* in these human zoos did not begin until the 1867 Exposition universelle (the year of Baudelaire's death), representatives of most nations of the British Empire were present at the Crystal Palace as early as 1851, forming an imperial *tableau vivant* of sorts.³⁶ As Ann McClintock has observed, the Crystal Palace set the stage for subsequent world fairs and their phantasmagoria of historical progress as global conquest. It mapped a unified world time geographically, placing Western colonial power at the head of the evolutionary hierarchy: "The Crystal Palace housed the first consumer dreams of a unified world time. As a monument to industrial progress, the Great Exhibition embodied the hope that all the world's cultures could be gathered under one roof—the global progress of history represented as the commodity progress of the Family of Man. At the same time, the Exhibition heralded a new mode of marketing history: the mass consumption of time as a commodity spectacle" (McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 57).

We can perhaps imagine what Baudelaire's reaction would have been had he strolled past the human displays of the later exhibitions and their phantasmagoria of industrial progress and imperial conquest. During his own time,

the Paris exhibition and its heterogeneous display of merchandise and commodities from around the world already presented history as a geopolitical progress narrative of imperial expansion. The Paris Exposition universelle of 1855 boasted the first separate “Imperial Pavilion”—paid for by the government—to stage the gains of the empire, a pavilion that set the vogue for the colonial palaces of future world fairs. The emperor had initially envisioned it as an exhibition of industrial products, a veritable hymn to progress, but then decided to include a section on the *beaux-arts*. As Timothy Raser shows, citing from the imperial “Rapport sur l’exposition de 1855,” the French exhibition sought to distinguish itself from the English model by integrating spiritual as well as material accomplishments: “il appartient spécialement à la France, dont l’industrie doit tant aux beaux arts, de leur assigner, dans la prochaine Exposition Universelle, la place qu’ils méritent.”³⁷ This union of art and industry was to reflect the Exposition’s universalist aims, and it accordingly included a two-floor Palace of Fine Arts in which works by French artists (such as Ingres and Delacroix) were prominently displayed. Prussia was well represented, and the galleries contained paintings from about thirty other nations. In keeping with the presentation of the Exposition as a modern consumer event, the metal and glass pavilion also contained a restaurant and an air-conditioning system. With its array of international merchandise and entry fee structure, the Exposition truly presented itself as a global stage for the display of the world’s commodities.³⁸

Baudelaire’s writings on the Arts Pavilion of the 1855 Paris Exposition universelle famously reject “progress” as a natural principle guiding civilizations to their assigned state of supremacy.³⁹ His critique thus questions the Exposition’s very basis, its propagandistic display of national progress and global conquest, as well as its transformation of history into a commodity spectacle available for mass consumption. Baudelaire explicitly denounced this narrative as an ideological sham designed to lull its bourgeois public into a fatuous stupor that announced France’s imminent decline. Such faith in a historically determined collective evolution was fiction that stripped individuals of their agency and lucidity: “Cette idée grotesque, qui a fleuri sur le terrain pourri de la fatuité moderne, a déchargé chacun de son devoir, délivré toute âme de sa responsabilité, . . . et les races amoindries, si cette navrante folie dure longtemps, s’endormiront sur l’oreiller de la fatalité dans le sommeil radoteur de la décrépitude.”⁴⁰

These vitriolic denunciations of progress are usually read within a Catholic or de Maistrean framework of original sin and providentialism, in light of the

poet's many proclamations that the civilizing process does not reside in technological or industrial progress but in the diminishment of the traces of mankind's fall ("Théorie de la vraie civilisation. Elle n'est pas dans le gaz, ni dans la vapeur, ni dans les tables tournantes, elle est dans la diminution des traces du péché originel" [OC, 1: 697]). Yet it is important to remember that Baudelaire's anti-progressivist stance consistently dislocates the Western civilizing mission to assert the value, dignity, and energy of preindustrial peoples and nations against the apparent supremacy of Western nations and their modes of production. The fragment on original sin in "Mon coeur mis à nu," for instance, concludes with the declaration that "[p]euples nomades, pasteurs, chasseurs, agricoles, et mêmes anthropophages, tous peuvent être supérieurs, par l'énergie, par la dignité personnelles, à nos races d'Occident" (OC, 1: 697). Baudelaire's celebration of the survival of dandies and of heroism among so-called "savage populations" such as Amerindians or African Americans are not simply sentimental gestures imbued with Rousseauist nostalgia but, rather, integral to his critique of capitalist modernity and its repressed savagery.⁴¹

Baudelaire's introduction to the Arts Pavilion in 1855 thus challenged the capitalist and colonialist ideology of progress at the heart of the Exposition universelle and discerned a central premise of the world fairs' ideology: that human evolution and historical progress are one and the same; that an identical teleology regulates the development of the species and that of a civilization:

Demandez à tout bon Français qui lit tous les jours son journal dans son estaminet, ce qu'il entend par progrès, il répondra que c'est la vapeur, l'électricité et l'éclairage au gaz, miracles inconnus aux Romains, et que ces découvertes témoignent pleinement de notre supériorité sur les anciens ; tant il s'est fait de ténèbres dans ce malheureux cerveau et tant les choses de l'ordre matériel et de l'ordre spirituel s'y sont si bizarrement confondues ! Le pauvre homme est tellement américanisé par ses philosophes zoocrates et industriels, qu'il a perdu la notion des différences qui caractérisent les phénomènes du monde physique et du monde moral, du naturel et du surnaturel. (OC, 2: 580)

Far from being a bout of conservative rhetoric—as it may at first appear—Baudelaire here pinpoints the conflation of industrial progress with innate national superiority that guided evolutionary teleologies legitimating a hierarchy of nations.⁴² He shows how this temporal narrative of progress (the moderns' superiority to the ancients) is mapped geographically to justify the supremacy of Western civilized nations. In his account, France cannot complacently count on a "natural" teleology of progress to stake out its imperial and artistic

territory. France's centrality is but a temporary mirage that will be dissolved by the winds of time and by the emergence of other nations: "La prospérité actuelle n'est garantie que pour un temps, hélas ! bien court. L'aurore fut jadis à l'orient, la lumière a marché vers le sud, et maintenant elle jaillit de l'occident. . . . la vitalité se déplace, elle va visiter d'autres territoires et d'autres races" (*OC*, 2: 581–82). Baudelaire thus rejects the conflation of evolutionary accounts of the human species with historical narratives of progress, a conflation that formed the ideological crux of the *expositions universelles* as well as that of later colonial expositions, with their native villages displaying primitive bodies in natural habitats en route to modernization. His essay offers a prescient understanding of the ideological phantasmagoria embodied in these exhibitions.

The foreign products at the Exposition universelle were not simply showcased as curiosities, but as material evidence of the empire's expanding boundaries, as forms of the exotic literally "in-corporated" into the display of a growing imperial body. Baudelaire's opening remarks on the exhibition, however, reverse this process of incorporation and destabilize the armature holding these commodities in place. His essay does not open with a work of art or even with a French object but instead with an unspecified Chinese product that invites a new aesthetics of reception. Opposing the tyranny of neo-classicists, Baudelaire wonders what a modern Winckelmann would do if faced with an exotic object completely alien to his sensibilities:

[Q]ue dirait-il en face d'un produit chinois, produit étrange, bizarre, contourné dans sa forme, intense par sa couleur, et quelquefois délicat jusqu'à l'évanouissement ? Cependant, c'est un échantillon de la beauté universelle ; mais il faut, pour qu'ils soit compris, que le critique, le spectateur, opère *en lui-même* une transformation qui tient du mystère, et que, par un phénomène de la volonté agissant par l'imagination, *il apprenne de lui-même à participer au milieu qui a donné naissance à cette floraison insolite*. (*OC*, 2: 576; emphasis added)

Far from passively occupying their assigned place and yielding to French viewers' consumption, for Baudelaire, the foreign objects on display actively reframed the terms and conditions of their viewing. In his account, it is the domestic subject who is transformed, if not reconstituted, by his encounter with the foreign object. The spectator's submission to its alchemical alteration reverses the habitual hierarchy of viewing subject and viewed object. We witness a dislocation of the familiar—and of Frenchness—under the despotic power of the foreign product, which now generates its context as well as the

criteria by which it will be judged.⁴³ The French encounter with foreignness is described as a profound physiological and spiritual penetration that resists the assumed conversion and convertibility of a conquered nation “penetrated” by the colonial presence.⁴⁴ Thus, three main points emerge out of Baudelaire’s interrogation of the ideology of the Exposition universelle: a critique of the concept of Western civilization’s natural and inevitable progress, which is implicitly yoked to a critique of the regressive savagery of modern capitalism; a reversal of visual power in the exhibition of foreign merchandise; and a scrutiny of Frenchness as the universal model for aesthetic judgment.

Now just as Baudelaire is notorious for his general misogyny, some of his most celebrated poems exemplify the exoticism that we find both in imperial *expositions universelles* and in ethnographic spectacles and reproductions of native villages a decade or so later. The latter’s reification of dark bodies, tropical landscapes, and oriental behaviors recall Baudelaire’s own hymns to “la langoureuse Asie et la brûlante Afrique.” But in what follows, I wish to complicate this take on Baudelaire’s exoticist misogyny by reading his prose poem “La Belle Dorothée” against the concerns outlined above—against a context of imperial display in which exotic products, foreign habitats, and later, indigenous bodies were exhibited as commodities offered up for France’s consumption. How might the demystification of the body’s “nature” that we have observed thus far in “Une Martyre” and “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” help us to reread such fictions of the racial and colonial body? How might Baudelaire’s poetic displays destabilize the ethnographic and colonial gaze and, in doing so, open up a critical perspective on what Christopher Miller has called the “state-sponsored hallucination” of the French Empire?⁴⁵

Exhibiting Black Venus: “La Belle Dorothée”

In 1841, Baudelaire spent a few weeks on the islands of Bourbon (now Réunion) and Mauritius on his way to India—a journey that his stepfather, General Aupick, deemed necessary to cure him of his excesses in matters of sex and money and to steer him back on track. Baudelaire did not make it beyond the Mascarene Islands of the Indian Ocean before turning back, but his brief sojourn there inspired poems such as “À une Malabaraise,” “À une dame Créole,” and “La Belle Dorothée,” a prose poem written twenty years later (which he refers to as a “souvenir de l’île Bourbon”). “La Belle Dorothée” (like “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse,” published that same year) was initially intended to be in verse. It also has its verse counterpart, “Bien loin d’ici,” a

steamy sonnet referring to a prostitute called Dorothée and rehearsing a gamut of exoticist tropes through which Baudelaire hoped to show “l’idéal de la beauté noire” or “l’idéal de la nature tropicale.”⁴⁶ The prose poem, however, aimed to represent the geographical and racial specificity of this ideal tropical black body, as we can gather from Baudelaire’s response to Charpentier, the editor of *La Revue nationale et étrangère*, who balked at the provocative anatomical description of Dorothée. Baudelaire protests the editor’s censorious intervention thus: “Croyez-vous réellement que « *les formes de son corps* », ce soit là une expression équivalente à « *son dos creux et sa gorge pointue* » ?—Surtout quand il est question de la race noire des côtes orientales ?” (*OC*, 1: 1333). Christopher Miller reads this statement, and the poem more generally, as evidence of Baudelaire’s ethnological, colonial gaze, and of his conflation of orientalism and Africanism in the creation of an imaginary exotic geography.⁴⁷ And to be sure, this desire to pin down the physical characteristics of a typical Creole female from the Mascarene Islands—with her combination of African and Asian features—seems to place Baudelaire squarely in the exoticist, ethnographic camp that represented an eroticized colonial “other” as a domesticated object of visual consumption. Yet my reading will take issue with the view that Baudelaire’s exoticism perpetuates an imperialist tropology. I contend that “La Belle Dorothée” and its picturesque representation of a desirable exotic body exemplifies the ironic maneuvers I have been tracing thus far, maneuvers that disclose violence of allegorization in both aesthetic and colonial production and that unmask the price of putting the colonial body on display.

In “La Belle Dorothée,” Baudelaire creates a visual masterpiece that we might be tempted to enjoy simply as a vital sample of the poet’s celebrated “culte des images” (*OC*, 1: 701). As Yves Bonnefoy remarks, we are invited to experience the poem as “a painting that sticks to what the eyes see, without ever undertaking the deciphering of the figures that would make them significant,” that is to say, as pure form and color, void of any allegorical dimension (Bonnefoy, “‘La Belle Dorothée’ or Poetry and Painting,” 89). Yet it is this visual dimension, the purely formal properties of the poem’s exhibition, that subtly indicates its allegorical dimension. The poem depicts an emblematic “black Venus” evolving in her natural habitat and describes her indolent progress toward an unknown destination in the stupefying heat of a tropical noon. A splendid specimen, exposed through violent contrasts of form and color, Dorothée is figured as a moving black stain against a glittering backdrop of sea, sun, and sand. The violence of this figure’s composition sharply contrasts with the serene languor of her gait and immediately conveys an uneasy rapport

between form and meaning, between the body and its allegorical inscription. The pink dress slashing against her dark body (“Sa robe de soie collante, d’un ton clair et rose, *tranche vivement* sur les ténèbres de sa peau” [OC, 1: 316; emphasis added]), for instance, is an image of disquieting erotic force. The expanse of Dorothée’s flesh is visually cut up by her dress, itself suggested to have “flesh-colored” tones. And rather than protecting her from the sun’s onslaught, the parasol she carries casts a bloody hue on her face. The explicitly corporeal resonances of the poem’s color schemes (pink flesh, red blood, black skin) fully disclose the erotic violence of its mode of figuration.

The color scheme in “La Belle Dorothée” echoes the saucy quatrain that Baudelaire had written that same year under Manet’s portrait of the part-Creole Spanish dancer Lola de Valence: “Mais on voit scintiller en Lola de Valence / Le charme inattendu d’un bijou rose et noir” (OC, 1: 168). Dorothée is completely eroticized throughout, with her protruding buttocks, glistening teeth, and serpentine gait. In a virtual peepshow, the breeze intermittently lifts up her skirt to reveal a glistening leg, exposing a foot so perfect, we are told, that it is equal to the white feet of the gods of classical statuary displayed in Europe’s museums: “De temps en temps la brise de mer soulève par le coin sa jupe flottante et montre sa jambe luisante et superbe ; et son pied, pareil aux pieds des déesses de marbre que l’Europe enferme dans ses musées, imprime fidèlement sa forme sur le sable fin.” The parallel between museum figures and Dorothée is perhaps not fortuitous, for as she unfolds poetically before our eyes, she is already something of a *tableau vivant*, the living embodiment of a primitive golden age that mirrors the classical era enshrined in Europe’s museums. We thus see the spectacle of a body in motion, one that is as embedded in its natural habitat as her foot is faithfully—if briefly—imprinted on her native soil.

The lingering description of a black woman walking in the tropical heat, her head pulled back by the weight of her “enormous hair” (*énorme chevelure*) echoes other Baudelairean portraits of exotic bodies in motion, such as “Le Serpent qui danse”:

A te voir marcher en cadence
Belle d’abandon
On dirait un serpent qui danse
Au bout d’un bâton
Sous le fardeau de ta paresse
Ta tête d’enfant
Se balance avec la mollesse
D’un jeune éléphant, (OC, 1: 30)

This fascination with the alien gate of the exotic body is an uncanny foreshadowing of Felix-Louis Regnault's chronophotographic study of a West African woman walking with a weight on her head. Regnault's subjects were the Wolof performers at the 1895 Exposition ethnologique. His studies of African bodies in motion (jumping, running, walking) as Fatimah Tobing Rony has shown, functioned as a sort of evolutionary record comparing the African's "natural," primitive and authentic movements ("la marche primitive de l'humanité") to the stiffness of the constrictively civilized European body (Rony, *Third Eye*, 49). Contemplating Dorothée's discursive unfolding in Baudelaire's poem (as a striking black stain moving across a white, mineralized landscape) along with Regnault's chronophotographic studies captures some of the implicit violence of our positions as readers as we visually consume the poetic ethnography of this specimen of "la race noire des côtes orientales" (*OC*, 1: 1333).

Dorothée is a parody of the luminous Baudelairean ideal of "correspondances," so seamlessly embedded in her habitat (the elements, her little hut by the sea) as to be virtually enshrined in her own analogy: "Elle s'avance ainsi, harmonieusement, heureuse de vivre et souriant d'un blanc sourire, comme si elle apercevait au loin dans l'espace un miroir reflétant sa démarche et sa beauté."⁴⁸ "L'Invitation au voyage" (prose) describes its utopic destination in identical terms, as a land where the beloved would be framed in her own analogy and reflected in her own correspondence ("Ne serais-tu pas encadrée dans ton analogie, et ne pourrais-tu pas te mirer, pour parler comme les mystiques, dans ta propre *correspondance* ?" [*OC*, 1: 303]) Yet, as this echo from the 1857 poem suggests, Dorothée is not so much framed by her landscape as she is by verbal shards, intertexts from the ideal poems of *Les Fleurs du mal*. The poem is an "invitation au voyage" in time and space, taking us to a "vie antérieure," where the native, wearing her "bijoux sonores" is fanned or languidly smokes in her idyllic hut by the sea, combing her heavy tresses as a stew of crabs sends its "parfum exotique" her way.⁴⁹

Dorothée is not only an overly figured erotic and aesthetic body. Hers is also an ideal geographic body, an organism fully attuned to its milieu, much in the sense in which Baudelaire—in a declaration tinged with irony—describes nations as "vastes animaux dont l'organisme est adéquat à leur milieu" (*OC*, 2: 575). Just as Bernardin de Saint-Pierre's Virginie is described in "De l'essence du rire" as emerging out of nature's very hands, drenched with the winds and waters of her native île Bourbon, Dorothée's reflection in the surrounding elements suggest that she is not only the inhabitant but also the

symbolic recapitulation of an idealized geography whose literary cartographers at the time of Baudelaire's trip included Bernardin de Saint-Pierre and George Sand, and would be followed by Alexandre Dumas (*Georges*, 1843) and Leconte de Lisle (*Poèmes barbares*, 1862).

However, the subtle irony imbuing this picture-perfect scene gives way to a Baudelairean fall into the historical conditions underlying this ideal racial and geographic body. Admired and cherished by all, Dorothée would be perfectly happy if it were not for the fact that she must labor and save to buy back her eleven-year-old sister, already pubescent and too lovely to remain safely in her master's house. We may recall that Baudelaire called this poem a "souvenir de l'île Bourbon," and that at the time of the poet's visit in 1841, it was still a slave-owning plantation culture that produced tobacco and coffee. Seven years later, it implemented abolition (with great resistance on the part of the French and *métis* plantation owners) only to import indentured laborers from India, Indochina, and South Africa. Indolent, naïve, vain Dorothée must laboriously pile "piastre sur piastre" to buy her sister's freedom, and thereby save her from the prostitution that Dorothée herself—with all the freedom of her status as "affranchie"—is compelled to embrace. Baudelaire thus offers us a luminous ideal only to reveal its basis in an interlocking system of sexual and colonial violence.

Dorothée's progress in the stupefying heat of a tropical noon, decked out in silks and jewels, needs to be reread not as a beatific communion with nature, but more prosaically, as a walk to the marketplace, where her tryst with the French officer will hopefully yield more than simply reports of Paris's beautiful women and nightlife ("Infailliblement elle le priera, la simple créature, de lui décrire le bal de l'Opéra, et lui demandera si on peut y aller pieds nus"). Where "La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse" poses the question of a woman's productivity along with the production of gender (the savage woman as her husband's capital, the mistress as the poet's luxury), "La Belle Dorothée" complicates these matters by putting the body in the embedded economies of sexual *and* colonial labor. The poem's final allusions to money and its various currencies ("piastres," "écus," and, as it turns out, "beauté") unveil what actually animates both Dorothée and the island: that is to say, Dorothée's progression in the sun and Bourbon's progressive yield of products. If by the end of the poem, "la belle Dorothée" is converted to "la bonne Dorothée" and the narrator predicts the success of her mission ("elle réussira, la bonne Dorothée"), this is not because of the goodness of her natural state (the *simple créature* as a *bon sauvage*). Rather, as the poem hints wryly, her success will be thanks to a

“conversion” operated by the colonial system itself, a system that expertly converts not only souls but also—and most profitably—bodies. The golden age offered up for our visual pleasure is always already an age of gold. And exile, it would seem, is the very condition of the native.

Baudelaire conjures up a tropicalist stereotype of native indolence, a world of noontime siestas from which all signs of labor are banished, except for Dorothée “working it” in the sun, only to sabotage this solar utopia.⁵⁰ As I suggested earlier, “La Belle Dorothée” and its luminous celebration of indolence is a Mascarene version of the “pays de cocagne,” the luxurious utopia described in “L’Invitation au voyage,” a utopia whose colonial underpinnings Baudelaire made quite explicit in the prose version: “Les trésors du monde y affluent, comme dans la maison d’un homme laborieux et qui a bien mérité du monde entier” (*OC*, I: 302). In “La Belle Dorothée,” the question of labor, and of the female colonial subject’s labor in particular, is completely elided. But as the French officer’s speculated reports on the beautiful balls of the Paris Opera might suggest, the flow of treasures will travel across the ocean and into the chests of the French capital.

“La Belle Dorothée” and its oscillation between idealization and kitsch, between *ekphrasis* and tourist brochure, tells us something about how a foreign body—its racial, cultural, and geopolitical alterity—is familiarized and consumed as a visual spectacle. Where “Une Martyre” and “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” demystify the violent production of femininity as matter and figure, or as beast, art, and commodity, “La Belle Dorothée” discloses the violence of representing the black body as at once primordial nature and exotic commodity.⁵¹

It is standard to read Baudelaire as an exemplary voice for the nineteenth century’s exoticist literary imagination and its symbolic collaboration with colonial conquest. His biographical position as a white male poet of the metropole celebrating the dark female body makes such an ideological assimilation all too easy.⁵² My readings attempt to demonstrate that his poetry’s ironic texture resists full cooptation by such critical scripts, and explore alternate possibilities opened up by its self-demystifying tropological constructions. Françoise Lionnet has also challenged readings of Baudelaire’s masculine imperial gaze upon dark others of an exotic femininity. In a carefully contextualized reading of “La Belle Dorothée,” she proposes that the poet’s inclusion of the word *cafrine*—a specifically Creole word designating black women—reveals his attunement to the specificity of the Mascarene Islands and their actual historical subjects. She sees Baudelaire’s poetry “as one of the first places

for the emergence of the native Creole woman's voice."⁵³ While I agree with Lionnet that the complexity of Baudelaire's rhetorical structures resists the ideological erasure of such historical subjects, I am less certain that his poetry gives these subjects a voice. In "La Pipe," for instance (a mock-orientalist sonnet) *cafrine* describes the color of the talking pipe as it puffs tobacco, which may well have been harvested by a *cafrine* from Bourbon's plantations, but whose smoke conjures up the image of a cozy countryside cottage.⁵⁴ The migration of the word *cafrine*—from the designation of a Creole subject to the description of a circulating object whose final destination is rural France—exemplifies how the exotic is reified, circulated, and consumed in the homeland. It may be too hopeful to turn to Baudelaire for the "voice" of the other. I have attended instead to the construction of corporeal alterity in his poetry, rather than seeking signs of these bodies' subjectivity or voice. Yet, as I hope to have shown, his poetry discloses with unparalleled force the contours of an other's reification and the imbricated violences that make such "other" bodies matter, produce, and signify.

Violence embeds competing ideological contexts within the poem, all of which are in tense dialogue with one another and with the process of making, reading, and contextualizing poetry. It is precisely the collusion and the collision between different terms, such as "nature," "race," "the body," "commodity," "femininity," "figuration," and so forth—their *correspondance* and *dissonance*—that enable the poem to engage and challenge the competing ideological investments of its historical moment.

From Baudelaire to Mallarmé: Poetry's Diminishing Body

Mallarmé's symbolism is often read as a culmination of Baudelaire's *poésie pure*, its evacuation of reference and its autonomy from contextual determinations. His famous declarations on poetry's power to dissolve bodies and things into language are usually perceived as part of an idealist program that banishes all signs of the body, materiality, and history from the poem, inaugurating what we might call a "poetics of disembodiment." Yet Mallarmé's fascination with bodies, and with performing bodies in particular, is amply documented in his writings on ballet, pantomime, and fashion (*Crayonné au théâtre, La Dernière Mode*). It is true that these bodies are so intricately crafted, so "textual" in fact, that they could be read as simply perpetuating Baudelaire's legacy of representing femininity as pure figuration ("la femme est fatalement suggestive"). This view of femininity is particularly visible in Mallarmé's writings

on dance, where the body of the dancer is transformed into a purely semiotic surface. Indeed, for Mallarmé, dance was a form of corporeal writing, an expression that—like the poem—constituted its own reality and *embodied* what it signified. In these texts, performers such as La Cornalba, Rosita Mauri, and Loie Fuller are treated not as bodies on stage but as instances of thought in motion. It follows that for Mallarmé, the dancer is not a woman but a sign. She does not dance, she produces poetry, and this poetry is located not in her body but in the viewer's imagination: "À savoir que la danseuse *n'est pas une femme qui danse*, pour ces motifs juxtaposés qu'elle *n'est pas une femme*, mais une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur, etc., et *qu'elle ne danse pas*, suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis ou d'élangs, avec une écriture corporelle ce qu'il faudrait des paragraphes en prose dialoguée autant que descriptive, pour exprimer, dans la rédaction : poème dégagé de tout appareil du scribe."⁵⁵

We might assume that Mallarmé is interested in such bodies only insofar as they can be dematerialized and recast as vehicles for semiotic play in the viewer's imagination (a stance that is not free of misogyny, since the ballerina would be an infinitely suggestive *petite-maitresse*). But let us follow up on the previous readings of Baudelaire and tease out another possible perspective on this vision of the human body as a series of productions rather than as an object of representation. When Mallarmé presents dance as a phenomenon that unfolds in the viewer's imagination, he suggests that what matters in dance or writing is not the representation of an object but rather, the representation of this object's effect. This shift from the theater on stage or page to the theater of the mind is famously put in his letter to Cazalis regarding *Hérodiade*: "j'invente une langue qui doit nécessairement jaillir d'une poétique très nouvelle, que je pourrais définir en ces deux mots : Peindre non la chose, mais l'effet qu'elle produit" (*Oeuvres*, 479). Are we to understand this shift from the visual to the virtual, from what is displayed to what is experienced by the viewer, as a ploy to abolish the represented body, to dissolve it into language in order to resurrect it as pure ideal? Or could we instead perform a Baudelairean reading of this shift as conveying something about the actual historical conditions of a body's construction (through desire, language, and spectatorship)? And how might this in turn challenge the thoughtless consumption of the body in a culture of exhibition?

Mallarmé's prose poem "Le Phénomène futur" gestures in this direction. Significantly, this poem—steeped in Baudelairean imagery—is also the only piece by Mallarmé that Baudelaire is known to have commented on. Although

not published until 1875, “Le Phénomène futur” was composed much earlier and circulated in literary circles. Baudelaire summarized the poetic plot thus: “Un jeune écrivain a eu récemment une conception ingénieuse mais non absolument juste. Le monde va finir. L’humanité est décrépète. Un Barnum de l’avenir montre aux hommes dégradés de son temps une belle femme des anciens âges artificiellement conservée. ‘Eh ! quoi ! disent-ils, l’humanité a pu être aussi belle que cela ?’” Always the pessimist, Baudelaire then reproaches Mallarmé’s faith in mankind’s ability to recognize and mourn beauty: “L’homme dégradé s’admirerait et appellerait la beauté laideur” (*OC*, 2: 831).

Mallarmé’s poem is set in a bleached out, crepuscular Baudelairean landscape sometime in the future. A Shower of Things Past (*Montreur de choses passées*) claims to have in his tent a body that defies all description, a “femme d’autrefois,” a glorious Venus emerged from the primordial sea with salt still clinging to her limbs. The living specimen of a bygone era of beauty, she has been preserved from the beginning of time by the miracle of science. As in Baudelaire’s “La Femme sauvage et la petite-maîtresse” and “La Belle Dorothée,” an archaic, anachronistic female body is displayed—or rather, advertised—as a vestige of primeval nature. She is no less than the original matrix of an evolutionary chain that ends in collective decay. Significantly, this state of decay is not embodied by the men in the crowd but by their wives, described as decrepit, bald women, whose diseased wombs carry the rotten fruits by which the world will perish. Once again the feminine is inscribed as the collective body’s origin and end, its redemptive norm and pathological aberration. The blonde counterpart to Baudelaire’s Black Venus, an *Eve future avant la lettre*, Mallarmé’s female phenomenon is reified as a pure object of visual consumption. Like Baudelaire’s *martyre*, whose sight is displaced onto the decorative belt of her garter, the primordial woman’s gaze is located not in her jewel-like eyes, but as an emanation from her very flesh (the tips of her breasts): “et les yeux, semblables aux pierres rares ! Ne valent pas ce regard qui sort de sa chaire heureuse : des seins levés comme s’ils étaient pleins d’un lait éternel, la pointe vers le ciel.” This is, at least, what the barker’s titillating sales pitch, his “boniment,” would have us believe.

Yet, just as the spectators crowd around the tent and the poem promises to deliver its splendid body—a *phénomène* is, after all, a thing to be seen—we encounter a blank space, an elision of the body (the famous Mallarméan *blanc*) and a description, instead, of its effect on the viewers. Our expectation of visual pleasure is thwarted as image is displaced by rhythm: “Quand tous auront contemplé la noble créature . . . les uns indifférents . . . mais d’autres navrés . . . les

poètes de ce temps, sentant se rallumer leurs yeux éteints, s'achemineront vers leur lampe, le cerveau ivre un instant d'une gloire confuse, hantés du Rythme et dans l'oubli d'exister à une époque qui survit à la beauté." Between anticipation and remembrance, between the sales pitch and the review, then, the body is suppressed, its exhibition sealed off in the unlocatable time of the futur anterior. Like Mallarmé's suppression of the dance in *Hérodiade* (which he was beginning at the time), what is represented here is not the thing—or the body—but the effect it produces on its viewers. As in Baudelaire's "Une Martyre," what the reader witnesses is, not a body displayed in its "originary" state, but rather its verbal production as an exhibition piece saturated with economic, scientific, and cultural value: the myth of a vestigial Eve conserved by science for profitable sideshows and to which only poets can attest.

Mallarmé, like Baudelaire, makes explicit the body's verbal construction as a commodity on display, as a repository for conflicting cultural inscriptions. This attention to the semiotic fashioning of bodies (be it through language, electricity, or clothing) is hardly surprising from an author who single-handedly wrote twelve issues of a women's magazine called *La Dernière Mode*. Rather than dissolving the body into the autotelic language of poetry, then, Mallarmé shows us what the "nature" of this body owes to such languages. In texts such as "Le Phénomène futur," Mallarmé is not so much engaged in obliterating or abolishing the body and reference as in reframing this reference and body within a broader field of cultural productions.

Of course, Mallarmé and Baudelaire cannot be conflated in their attitudes toward the bodies staged in their poems. Where Baudelaire conducts a hyperbolic rehearsal of the cultural processes through which bodies emerge, Mallarmé proceeds by ellipsis and elision; his irony is far more gentle. His meticulous attention to the body's semiotic potential does not seem invested in the level of ideological critique that Baudelaire's works conduct. One formulation of the difference between them might be that whereas Mallarmé's primary objective is to "peindre non la chose mais l'effet qu'elle produit," Baudelaire's objective is to "peindre non la chose mais l'effet qui l'a produite," to paint not the thing but the effect—or nexus of effects—that have produced it.

In presenting women's bodies as exhibition pieces, Baudelaire and the modernist tradition he exemplifies call into question the very nature and ground of these bodies, pointing out instead the ideological investments that produce the feminine as "naturelle" and as "fatalement suggestive." Significantly, this demystification of the body's emergence is conducted by literary figures usually said to remove poetry from social and historical concerns and to inaugurate

the aesthetic of self-reflexivity and autonomy that we generally associate with high modernism. As I have tried to show in the preceding chapters, the self-reflexivity that supposedly banishes history from Baudelaire's poetry is exactly what lets history back in.⁵⁶ The poems read in this chapter all capture the violence of an allegorical process at work in aesthetic *and* cultural productions. They expose the conditions of a subject's emergence in the broader cultural field, and this at a time when a body's performance—its value, productivity, visibility, and yield—were increasingly at stake. Their representations of women as corpse and ornament, as primitive savagery, as civilized artifice and as exotic commodity, disclose what Gordon Teskey describes as “capture,” or the “point of contact between allegory and violence” (Teskey, *Allegory and Violence*, 6).

Teskey presents allegory as a rhetorical mode that “oscillates between a project of reference and a project of capture,” one that exercises a figural violence upon the heterogeneous materiality of the world (ibid., 8). Allegory's imposition of meaning upon matter is disclosed in the moment of capture, which is “not so much a literary figure as it is a moment of revelation in which the origin of figures may be seen” (30). In all allegorical processes, there exists a point of disclosure that reveals as it conceals the violence done to the mobile heterogeneity of a world of bodies and things. Teskey's discussion of allegory and violence provides an eloquent commentary on Baudelaire's poetic practice: “It is more broadly characteristic of allegory—though by no means more true of it—for violence such as this to be concealed so that the female will appear to embody, with her whole body, the meaning that is imprinted on her. When this occurs, we have personification. But the violence inside personification is exposed when that figure is, by an act I shall refer to as capture, turned inside out. What the act of capture exhibits is the truth over which allegory is always drawing its veil: the fundamental disorder out of which the illusion of order is raised.”⁵⁷

I have addressed this capture as the moment of metapoetic reflection that, in Baudelaire, becomes a point of contact between the poem and a referential world of bodies and things. Baudelaire's degraded muses—the female bodies struck, dismembered, and displayed—spectacularly unveil the violence of a literary tradition and a contemporary set of cultural practices that converge to define “woman” as a substance either inviting or resisting the imprint of masculinized form.⁵⁸ In “La Femme sauvage et la petite maîtresse,” the parodic beating of the mistress and muse generates the nature and substance—the *physis*—of a body that is then made to signify as regressively savage or as un-

intelligibly performative (“Et que peuvent signifier pour moi ces soupirs. . . ?”). In “Une Martyre,” the body is an ornament that circulates in pieces. “La Belle Dorothée” turns the figure of the Black Venus inside out to disclose the violence of the colonial allegory (a violence that is visually discharged in the pink dress slashing across Dorothée’s dark body). It is through the mutilation of such figures that Baudelaire unveils—from within—the forgotten and often violent transactions that produce poetic objects and cultural subjects.⁵⁹

Let us return to Walter Benjamin’s declaration (discussed in Chapter 2) that he aimed to show how Baudelaire lay embedded in the nineteenth century. For Benjamin, the imprint left behind would stand out clear and intact, like that of a stone. Yet, as his own writings on the poet attest, Baudelaire is as recalcitrant to historical embedding as his bodies are to allegorical closure. His imprint upon—and by—the nineteenth century, while certainly more lasting than the imprint of Dorothée’s bare foot on her native soil, shares its volatility and critical charge. This is in part because his poetry imbricates so many different contexts at once, an imbrication that resists any one embedding and, in fact, questions the very ground of context. But it is precisely this imbrication that weaves poetry into a broader field of cultural practices, allowing us to read and reread Baudelaire’s poems neither as hieratic expressions of pure poetry nor as symptomatic imprints of the shocks of modernity, but rather as contestatory and self-contestatory pieces that unveil some of the hidden violences of his historical moment. Just as Baudelaire continually invites and resists new theoretical and historical embedding, his poetry also solicits a constant reevaluation—and recontamination—of our own critical practice.