

## Poetry on Stage

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## Poetry on Stage: Baudelaire's theater voices

Helen Abbott

**Abstract** Taking Barthes' concept of a Baudelairean 'pre-theater' as its starting point, this article sets out to interrogate where Baudelaire's theater voices may be located, both in theory and in practice. It examines two specific examples of performed/staged readings of Baudelaire's poetry by two French actors (Pierre Blanchar and Fabrice Luchini). Through detailed analyses of 'La Géante' and 'Au Lecteur', it sets out to explore Baudelaire's voices at variance and proxy voices which seem, perversely, to promote a work's longevity beyond the published page. It concludes by suggesting that Baudelaire embeds diverging, conflicting, and contaminating theater voices into his poetic language, and that this is what enables them to move beyond a private stage and onto a public one.

**Keywords** Baudelaire, poetry on stage, theater voice, peri-theater, Barthes, Blanchar, Luchini, *La Géante*, *Au Lecteur*

In 1954 Barthes wrote a short but significant article about Baudelaire: "Le Théâtre de Baudelaire". In this essay, which predates much of Barthes' critique of transcribing the corporeality of the human voice, Barthes muses on how Baudelaire did not publish any theatrical works and yet generated a form of "théâtralité" within his writing. According to Barthes, Baudelaire "[a] imaginé un théâtre sans cependant l'écrire" (40). This imagined theatre, according to Barthes, sees Baudelaire exploring theatrical elements during the composition phase rather than requiring theatrical performance for his texts: "c'est le théâtre moins le texte [...], une donnée de création, non de réalisation." (40–41). Baudelaire's unwritten theater gets transposed into dimly-sensed theatrical elements ("une épaisseur de signes et de sensations", 40) which suffuse his poetry as much as they do his *Paradis artificiels*: "Tout se passe comme si Baudelaire avait mis son théâtre partout" (42). The implication of Barthes' view of Baudelaire's pervasive theatricality is that it remains

immaterial and unheard, purely imagined as part of the conceptualization of the work, rather than actualized on the page or in (theatrical) performance. In this sense, Barthes' view of Baudelaire's theater is paradoxical: The design is theatrical but its realization is (apparently) not. Yet Barthes suggests that we can discern Baudelaire's theatrical essence because it is somehow also embodied in Baudelaire's writing. Barthes uses the term "pré-théâtre" (44) to describe Baudelaire's theatricality, because it emerges as an impulse prior to the written work. However, Barthes' emphasis on the deeply but dimly felt theatricality throughout Baudelaire's writing means that it might more accurately be termed a "péri-théâtre" since, as Barthes himself suggests, Baudelaire's theater is not just imagined prior to the work, but also completely envelops it. If Baudelaire's poetry is in fact pre-theatrical in its design, and peri-theatrical in its realization, what might be the implications of this for a theatrical staging or performed reading of his works? This article examines staged performances of Baudelaire's poetic texts. Such staged readings bring with them additional layers of complexity which invite us to deepen our interrogation of Barthes' "pré-théâtre" in relation to a "péri-théâtre", to examine prior design in relation to encompassing practice. Baudelaire's paradoxically unwritten-yet-embodied theater resists straightforward resolution, and this suggests that we should anticipate conflictual interpretations as performers negotiate the subtle but manifold theater voices of Baudelaire's writing.<sup>1</sup>

Recognizing that Baudelaire is a poet who radically explored the implications of irony and the irretrievably fractured subjectivity of the human voice in both written and performed language, my aim in the analysis which follows is to bring the concept of a Baudelairean "peri-theater" into contact with recent theorizations of voice which promote the embodied and actualized, rather than the disembodied and imagined (such as might be the case in a "pre-theater"). As Steven Connor has recently suggested "there is no disembodied voice—no voice that does not have somebody, something of somebody's body, in it" (17). My

contention is that Baudelaire's theater voices suffuse his writing such that they repeatedly emerge through proxy voices in the reading of his work. In this sense, my aim is not to look at Baudelaire's publications as texts which present "dried-up" or silenced voices, according to the way in which Martin J. Daughtry perceives the printed page: "books are powerful oral filtration devices, eliminating their authors' stutters, drying up their spittle, smoothing out the rough edges of their inner voices, abstracting their smelly, noisy bodies into ethereal authorial spectres" (164). Instead, I seek to examine the realities of the theater voices which mediate Baudelaire's poetic works by acknowledging, as Brandon LaBelle does, the corporeal implications of a theatrical vocality: "to theorize the performativity of the spoken is to confront the tongue, the teeth, the lips, and the throat; it is to feel the mouth as a fleshy, wet lining around each syllable" (1). By interrogating the 'liveness' of the peri-theater of voices inscribed within Baudelaire's poetry, a different understanding of Baudelaire's "théâtralité" emerges: Baudelaire becomes the poet who stages disagreement in the textual environment, so as to invite a re-examination of the role of poetry in the world. As Baudelaire's theater voices are brought to life in performance contexts, I suggest, each proxy voice signals its own divergence from Baudelaire at the very moment in which the proxy inhabits his various voices. The vocal disarray which emerges ultimately, and perhaps paradoxically, secures a positive outcome for Baudelaire's poetry long-term.

The act of voicing poems in performance gives rise to challenges relating to the viability of pinpointing the source or stability of different poetic voices. Voice in poetry is multi-layered, not always heard or hearable, such that attempts to read or perform a poem can mean closing off or stifling some aspects of these multi-layered voices, while giving prominence to other aspects which may not even be present in the text itself. By turning poetry into theater, by putting it on stage, performers have no option but to decide what to do with their own voices as they take on and inhabit those of the written text (this is less the case

with silent reading of poetry, which can maintain different options simultaneously in the poetic imaginary). As scholars in the burgeoning field of Sound Studies have proposed, the distance between the performed voice of the actor and those of the listeners in a theater auditorium plays a significant role, to the point that the performed voice always runs the risk of not being heard. This phenomenon is bound up with what Daniel Deshays has called “la curieuse volonté, partagée par tous, de faire ‘mieux’ entendre les paroles prononcées par les acteurs.” (261). Deshays goes on to explain how this is at odds with the fact that “le fondement du théâtre nécessite de se placer précisément presque à l’inverse, c’est-à-dire au lieu même de l’incertitude et de la fragilité, incertitude d’émettre pour l’acteur, incertitude pour le spectateur de parvenir à percevoir une parole fragile, tenue à la limite de se laisser saisir.” (261). In the case of Baudelaire, the fragility of the performed voice is also shaped by the need to decide which aspects to voice out loud. Making a performance decision can open up new ways of understanding the text, and cast particular fresh light on the inherent vocal valence of Baudelaire’s written language. As Rosemary Lloyd has shown, “Baudelaire’s poetry, both verse and prose, often includes voices at variance, heard or implied” (24–25). Lloyd goes on to suggest that these “voices at variance” hold significant implications for performers or readers of Baudelaire’s poetry: “Replicating these voices through spoken or sung performances, or just within the confines of our own minds, poses challenges that are often moments of insight that illuminate the poems” (25). Lloyd’s focus on “replication” is intriguing. On the one hand it implies a desire to get inside Baudelaire’s mind (and therefore his voice), to get closer to an understanding of the poetic text (in Lloyd’s terms, an “insight”). In suggesting there may be a meeting of minds as a result of spoken or sung performances (even internalized ones) Lloyd seems to privilege the idea of a close relationship between the words on the page and the responses that emanate from them, and that if we approach Baudelaire’s poetry with care, we can spark resonant and meaningful exchanges. However,

this is only true up to a point, as Baudelaire himself acknowledged. Identifying with the poet by replicating his voices does not equate to a straightforward connection.

In the wake of his 1857 trial, Baudelaire drafted a number of responses to critics which suggested that only careful and adept readers of his poetry would be able to “get” him, proscribing certain readers from engaging with his poetry. He claimed, for example, that “Ce n’est pas pour mes femmes, mes filles ou mes sœurs que ce livre a été écrit” (181). Marie Maclean foregrounds how “The tactic of the excluded audience works in many ways, filtering, distancing, justifying, tantalizing. I could write here ‘Please do not read further if you object to the use of verbal crudity.’ You would read on, but would be aware of the ploy involved” (236). The connection between the poet and his audience becomes less direct, requiring a deeper commitment from his audiences to find ways to negotiate his texts. Maclean’s analysis suggests that readings are performances, in which the reader is more or less complicit with, but not always in straightforward agreement with, the poet. Maclean also takes this argument one step further, suggesting that “in *Les Fleurs du mal* [Baudelaire] frequently set up private stages on which the self observed itself as performer” (234). Baudelaire’s private stages are a means to explore the poet-self as both performer and non-performer, with two sides of the poet being brought into contact with one another and not always agreeing with one another. In Maclean’s analysis, however, Baudelaire’s “private stages” privilege the visual, rather than the vocal or aural, tallying with the etymology of “theater” as a place for seeing, rather than as a place for speaking or hearing, as a place for spectacle rather than for voice. Just as the personae involved in Baudelaire’s theater may be at variance with one another, so too is the makeup of the text, in which the visual and the vocal remain at variance with one other. This lack of agreement, between visual/vocal, between self/other, and between performer/non-performer, between poet/reader is persistently built in to Baudelaire’s writing, but not so as to stifle exchange. Baudelaire prefers the idea of

misunderstanding rather than consensus. In his personal journal, *Mon cœur mis à nu*, he writes: “Le monde ne marche que par le Malentendu. — C’est par le Malentendu universel que tout le monde s’accorde. — Car si, par malheur, on se comprenait, on ne pourrait jamais s’accorder.” (704). For Baudelaire, there is a pleasure to be found in vocal sparring, in finding oneself at variance with another. That pleasure which resides in the vocal disjuncture extends to become something productive—it is what makes the world turn. As Elissa Marder has put it: “*malentendu* operates as a principle of mediation, or translation, that establishes links between incompatible individual parties or social elements that would have otherwise been unable to relate to one another” (74–75). If discrepancies and conflicts (“le malentendu”, “voices at variance”) make relating to one another possible rather than impossible, then Baudelaire’s peri-theater is the space in which poetry is made possible, because it offers a heightened aesthetic experience in which to handle conflicting polyvocality. The peri-theater which suffuses Baudelaire’s writing thus invites multiple and divergent proxy voices to engage with his own self-conflictual ones.

### **Baudelaire on stage**

In order to interrogate the inherent discrepancies of Baudelaire’s peri-theater, I shall examine two instances of Baudelaire’s poetry performed on stage in front of large audiences, for which filmed recordings still exist today. The selection has been made based on two criteria: (1) performers working in their native tongue; (2) the availability of the materials in both visual and aural format (many other recordings exist for which only the audio is available, and a larger study would be able to incorporate this wider resource). The purpose here is not to examine all the possible factors (such as recording quality, lighting/staging, or other non-vocal auditory features), but to acknowledge that the analysis is based on intermedial artefacts derived from live performances of Baudelaire’s poetry. The recordings mean that we have access to most, but not all, of the theatrical experience, since the fine

detail of the liveness is mediated by the recording medium. The recordings analyzed here are thus situated between two extremes outlined by Michel Chion in his *Essais d'acoulogie* collected together in *Le Promeneur écoutant*, in which he draws attention to the different spatial positioning of the voice in a theater auditorium compared to a recorded soundtrack:

acoustiquement parlant, le théâtre [...] est toujours associé à une impression de pas de comédiens qui résonnent et d'éléments de décor qu'on traîne, et au milieu de cela, prise dans ce contexte vivant, une parole humaine, lointaine. Alors qu'au cinéma, la voix est toujours beaucoup plus proche de l'oreille, et généralement plus isolée de son contexte sonore d'ambiance et de bruits (Chion 46).

For Chion, in a live theater context, the voice remains distant as other sounds dominate, whereas in film, the voice is most prominent in the soundscape. The filmed recordings of live voices under analysis here are situated somewhere in between the close cinematic voices and the distant theater voices; the recording means that we are not able to obtain the full theatrical experience from recordings of a live staging but we get (perhaps) better access to the voice(s) on stage because of the placement of the microphones in the filmed recording. By making both visible and audible the fractious tension between “real” and “imagined” voices, these recordings allow us to explore Baudelaire's theater voices as they reveal their status as always already at variance with themselves.

### ***I. Pierre Blanchar—La Géante***

The variety show format, which has its origins in nineteenth-century theater, transferred to a televised platform, gaining popularity in the 1950s as a result of eclectic mixes of largely ‘family friendly’ materials of theater, song, literature, and cinema. A key example of the televised musical/cultural variety show is *Discorama* produced by the *Office national de radiodiffusion télévision française* (ORTF) from 1959 to 1975. On its second outing, on 11 Feb. 1959, the renowned French actor Pierre Blanchar performed a reading of



Baudelaire's sonnet "La Géante". Blanchar appears on screen in jacket and tie, holding a copy of a book (likely *Les Fleurs du mal* or a poetry anthology containing a copy of the poem, although the title is not visible), puts on his reading glasses and begins his *débit* of Baudelaire's sonnet. The staging is sparse, with the actor framed simply by the blank wall of the studio behind him. He reads the text without looking up, except for fleeting glances at the ends of stanzas or line-ends. The reading lasts little more than a minute, with the end of the performance signaled by a glance from the actor as he looks up from the text, smiles at the camera, and turns his head towards the part of the studio from which the next item on the show will come. With no link from the show's host, the camera simply pans to another man who has his back to the audience as he prepares to put a disc on a record player. The visibility of the behind-the-scenes action, and the sparseness of the studio means that the performance by Blanchar hardly seems theatrical. Yet the overt framing of Blanchar's performance as part of a variety show stages his work in a way which highlights the tensions at stake: between the visual and the oral/aural, and between the family-friendly and the less family-friendly aspects of Baudelaire's verse. Just three years after his appearance on *Discorama*, Blanchar released an LP recording of his readings of Baudelaire poems on the Hachette–Encyclopédie sonore label as part of their series *Les Pages qu'il faut connaître*.<sup>2</sup> Both the *Discorama* performance and the LP form part of the vogue for an improving educational initiative via the use of new media technologies for which Baudelaire enjoys the status of a poet whose works "must be read" but whose texts need to be carefully triaged for such contexts. "La Géante" is therefore an interesting choice of poem for a staged performance for such an audience.

"La Géante" offers a subversive view of Mother Nature. The sonnet begins with fairy-tale-like imagery as the male protagonist wistfully imagines a childhood in which he might have lived under the protection of a young giantess. The seemingly friendly female monster, a fairy godmother writ large, morphs into something more sinister ("ses terribles jeux" l. 6)

which carries erotic overtones (“Dormir nonchalamment à l’ombre de ses seins” l. 13). There is no direct address to the giantess, suggesting that the poem focuses more on her image than her potential to speak. A “je” persona dominates as the only speaking voice, although it is not clear whether the words are an internalized voice of the poet inscribed on the page or if they are a transcription of words spoken aloud. Epitomizing, perhaps, the notion of complicated or impossible exchanges in Baudelaire’s imagined peri-theater, and especially the conflicting tensions of the visual over the vocal, the poetic voice here communicates what he sees rather than what he hears: the act of seeing is presented as an important element in the poem’s narrative, particularly in the second quatrain (“voir”, l. 5, “ses yeux”, l. 8).

However, in a sonnet whose voices are muted in favour of communicating the visual, the staged performance by Blanchar seems to do the opposite; the presence of a sixty-year old man on the television studio floor becomes much less the dominant form of communication as his voice takes precedence, communicating with the audience via extended sonorities which are more measured than the rhythms of everyday spoken French. Blanchar thus uses his trained actor’s voice in the traditional reading style of French poetry declamation which privileges the weight of each syllable. The text is intoned in quasi-sung fashion, and Blanchar lengthens vowel durations on open vowels such as “âme” (l. 5), “formes” (l. 9), “énormes” (l. 10), and “Lasse” (l. 12). He consistently marks the line-end by a longer pause, but signals enjambement by maintaining a higher voice pitch for ll. 1–2 and ll. 7–8 such that the line is not closed by a vocal cadence. As a staged reading, it is highly mannered, offering clear spaces for breathing meaning that the clarity of the text prevails, but he does not read the poem with a regular or fixed pulse, allowing the short internal pauses within the lines to flex and the length of the syllables to vary. For example, in negotiating Baudelaire’s prosody in relation to the alexandrine, Blanchar reads line 3 as one phrase which incorporates the whole alexandrine so as to avoid breaking the sense unit at the internal line break or caesura (|

signals syllable count, // signals caesura or major pause, and syllable count and potential divisions are signaled at the end in brackets):

J'eu|sse | ai|mé | vivre | au|près | d'un|e | jeun|e gé|ante (12)

This line is an alexandrine for which pausing at the traditional point of the caesura would split the sense unit across a prepositional phrase (*auprès de*):

J'eu|sse | ai|mé | vivre | au|près // d'un|e | jeun|e gé|ante (12 --> 6+6)

The line could be split with a pause earlier in the line, but this creates an unusual metrical balance for a poem that is otherwise 6+6:

J'eu|sse | ai|mé | vivre // au|près d'un|e | jeun|e gé|ante (12 --> 4+8)

Blanchar's decision to run the line together privileges the communication of sense rather than attempting to retain any strict metrical balance of the poetic line. This same approach of privileging sense over metrics is adopted in line twelve, for which Blanchar pauses after the opening two-syllable keyword 'Lasse', marking the comma which then sets up a ten-syllable run for the rest of the line:

La|sse, // la | font | s'é|tendre | à |tra|vers | la | cam|pagne (12 --> 2+10)

However, the adjective 'lasse' here is not directly connected to the previous sense unit (the sub-clause "quand les soleils malsains" l. 11); it is a dislocated adjectival qualifier for which the referent is found in the object pronoun 'la' which immediately follows it in the line. The 'lasse' is also a qualifier for the much clearer locution earlier on in the poem ("une jeune géante" l. 3), which is difficult to locate without access to the text. The positioning of 'lasse' at the start of the line by Baudelaire disrupts the syntactical flow and makes the reader/listener work harder to establish the word's significance in terms of its start-of-line position (for both rhythmical emphasis and for semantic prominence). By separating out the word "lasse" in his *débit*, Blanchar foregrounds a particular aspect of the communication of verbal sense-making, highlighting the word as part of a wider semantic network in the sonnet

focusing on leisurely resting, triggered by the term “à loisir” (l. 9) a few lines earlier. More overtly, “lasse” is then reinforced in the lines which follow it with the terms “Dormir nonchalamment” (l. 13), and the word “paisible” (l. 14).

Baudelaire’s textual fabric also makes segments of the text repeatedly audible, notably through the anaphoric use of the simile marker ‘Comme’ at the start of lines 4 and 14, for which he also includes the spatial adverb ‘au pied de’, albeit via a different word order:

**Comme aux pieds d**’une reine un chat voluptueux. (l. 4)

**Comme** un hameau paisible **au pied d**’une montagne. (l. 14)

Similarly, the hypothetical literary pluperfect subjunctive “J’eusse aimé” is repeated twice in the poem, opening lines 3 and 5 respectively, as a formula which enables a long list of infinitive verbs to function in the poem (*vivre, voir, grandir, deviner, parcourir, ramper, dormir*), dispersed more widely across the text, but typically as the first word of the metrical line which, in Blanchar’s reading, is always made clear as a result of the line-end pauses. The ‘I would have liked...’ formula also invites imaginative mental connections to be made, allowing the listener to get a sense of the semantic word-play: the term ‘au pied de’, for example, can be interpreted literally (“at the foot of”) or figuratively. The more figurative interpretations are encouraged by the fact that Baudelaire has couched the use of the adverbial phrase within a simile: “au pied de” thus suggests a quiet nestling or resting place (confirming the lexis of “lasse”, “dormir”, and “paisible” made prominent in Blanchar’s reading by the pause and slow tempo delivery of the keyword “lasse”), but it can also invite resonances with the idiom “au pied de la lettre” (“reading literally”), and with the term for syllabic weighting in poetry, the verse “pied” or foot (“metrical accent”).

As these aspects start to emerge from a reading of the sonnet, Blanchar’s emphasis on the two syllables of “Lasse”, coupled with the wry smile with which he finishes his performance invites the listener/viewer to consider the giantess under a different light. The

sonnet may not simply be a fairy-tale allegory about a child and (monstrous) fairy godmother, but emerges also as an allegory of the experience of writing poetry. The diction of poetic composition is present in the poem, but it is masked: poetic form (“ses magnifiques formes”, l. 9) and poetic verse meter (“pied”, l. 4 and l. 14, but also perhaps “versant”, l. 10 as a homophone derived from “vers”) figure alongside vocabulary which resonates with Baudelaire’s compositional approach to poetry: a release from verse strictures (“librement” l. 6) and a release from literary *bienséance* (“des enfants monstrueux” l. 2, “son corps fleurir avec son âme” l. 5). Baudelaire’s invitation to read freely and nonchalantly (“librement” l. 6, “nonchalamment” l. 13) allows his readers and listeners to gain access to his private peri-theater, to the internal stage on which he figures his poetry which has the charade of the visual but embodies multiple vocal effects (such as the anaphora and choice of vowel sounds). Blanchar’s performance serves as a proxy, standing in for the poet who is unable to voice the text himself. By serving as Baudelaire’s proxy, Blanchar does not simply replicate Baudelaire’s voice, but allows the distant peri-theatrical voice of Baudelaire’s text to become more proximate. The immediacy of Blanchar’s voice in performance means that the audience has ready access to his voice as he is filmed face-on and his lips are clearly visible throughout, made all the more accessible by the way in which his reading is staged on a plain set (the blank walls of a television studio) for which visual elements are not of primary importance. His embodied voice is therefore given prominence by this staging. Yet Blanchar’s voice, even as it works as a proxy for Baudelaire’s peri-theatrical voice, remains at variance with it; Blanchar cannot, and does not, present anything other than one voice with his own specific choices regarding breathing, tempo, intonation, and overall interpretation of the text. “La Géante” can be read and understood on a number of levels, whether as a children’s fairy-tale (the sense implied by the context of Blanchar’s staged reading), or indeed interpreted through a psychoanalytic lens examining the erotic features of the text, or

analyzed as a meta-sonnet reflecting on the private stage of the poet's internal compositional process, amongst others. The fact that such varied ways of reading the text exist means that at any given moment, such as Blanchar's staged interpretation, it is also misunderstood and misheard ("malentendu") because these other interpretations cannot also hold court.

## ***II. Fabrice Luchini—Au Lecteur***

The prominence given to the actor's voice in Blanchar's staged performance of Baudelaire is mirrored in a more recent production by another renowned French actor. Fabrice Luchini has put on a number of sell-out shows in which he performs poems by famous French poets such as La Fontaine and Baudelaire.<sup>3</sup> Luchini stages his readings of Baudelaire in theaters which have relatively large audience capacities (between 180-seater and 500-seater theaters such as Maison de la Poésie, Théâtre de la Gaîté-Montparnasse, and Théâtre de l'Atelier). While both Blanchar and Luchini give prominence to their use of voice in their staged readings of Baudelaire, Luchini's performance style is particularly known for its lively corporeal qualities in direct contrast to Blanchar's calm and mannered delivery; Luchini's *débit* is notoriously fast in places such that it becomes difficult to understand the words. This suggests that Luchini privileges drama over verbal intelligibility, but this does not mean that Luchini's theater is more visual than vocal, because the drama comes from his use of voice as he inhabits Baudelaire's as his proxy. Luchini's staged performances of Baudelaire highlight the uncomfortable nature of the text's voices and the challenges of direct address contained within them, giving prominence to the peri-theatrical voices as Luchini viscerally negotiates the discrepancies that are latent within the texts he selects for performance.

For example, Luchini opts to read Baudelaire's "Au Lecteur", a poem which is predicated on an extended yet complicated direct address, at his 2011 shows at the Théâtre de l'Atelier. His performance shows him apparently grappling with deep, inward emotions (his

own private stage) on a very public stage in front of a 500-strong crowd. Like Blanchar, he holds a copy of *Les Fleurs du mal* but the book is not a pristine hardback (as Blanchar's was) but a worn paperback. Luchini holds the book in one hand with the cover folded back, using it more as a prop than a prompt as he recites the text off by heart, using his other hand as a gestural indicator of the pitch, tone, and tempo of his reading, as if he were a conductor directing his own musicalized performance. After about a minute of performing the text, as he gets to the words "C'est le Diable qui tient les fils qui nous remuent!" l. 15, Luchini places the book down on a small table and starts to use both hands in his performance, reinforcing the relationship between voice and gesture, and giving prominence to the liveness of the poem over its textuality. Wearing a black jacket with an open-necked white shirt, against a fully black backdrop, the staging is sparse and dimly-lit, placing strong emphasis on the source of the voice on stage (Luchini) rather than on theatrical apparatus (the book, the table, the set). He introduces the poem with a preamble: "Le plus grand poème de Baudelaire! sur notre condition intrinsèque, c'est-à-dire le premier poème qui ouvre *Les Fleurs du mal*." Although it comes as Variation 20 of a series which starts with fifteen poems by La Fontaine, and presents four other Baudelaire poems first including "Spleen" (*J'ai plus de souvenirs...*) and "Chant d'automne", Luchini's pronouncement that the 'Au Lecteur' is Baudelaire's "greatest" poem is significant. He chooses not to read poems from *Les Fleurs du mal* in the order that they appear in the book. To place the one poem that should open Baudelaire's verse collection at the end of a performance rather than at the start suggests that Luchini is fully engaged with Baudelaire's predilection for irony and hypocrisy, bringing the rallying cry of the closing lines of the poem into sharper focus: "Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat, / — Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!" (ll. 39–40). Of the ten quatrains of alexandrines, these two lines are the only clear instance of direct address in the whole poem, while it is clear from the title that the whole poem is directed at the

audience/reader. Luchini’s own performance oscillates between addressing the audience and speaking the text only to himself. In a delivery which feels fast, particularly in the sections where he rattles off the lists of nouns in stanzas seven and eight, Luchini ignores stanza breaks, snatching breaths in unexpected places, giving the poem a precarious and unsteady feel rather than containing it within the boundaries of its verse lines. For example, his rendering of lines 28–30 refashions the verse shape ([//] signals an ignored stanza break, [/] signals an ignored line break, | signals a snatched breath):

C’est que notre âme, hélas! n’est pas assez hardie. [//] Mais parmi les chacals, | les  
panthères, les lices, [/] Les singes, les scorpions, les vautours, | les serpents, [...]  
(ll. 28–30)

As the tension increases, Luchini half-shouts, half-sings each new segment of the poem, capturing the violence of the text in such a way as to almost spit it out at such a precipitous pace that the audience can hardly grasp what he is saying. Lines 21–23 push his voice to the extremities of pitch—in this case the words “fourmillant” (l. 21) and “Mort” (l. 23) are exclaimed at the highest possible pitch before he would have to resort to falsetto. This extreme use of the boundaries of his voice enables him to deploy a vocal illustration technique to reinforce the word “Descend” (l. 24) by dropping the pitch back down to a normal tessitura, thereby illustrating the word quasi-onomatopoeically. This technique of using the extremities of his vocal range enables Luchini to single out a few key words for the audience rather than exposing them to the detailed and complicated fabric of the poetic text. The clarity of the text, then, becomes subservient to the overall “feel” of the poem and its key messages. Death is privileged by heightened pitch and a strained voice; Violence is overwhelmingly dramatized so that the reader is little aware of the specific lexis of violence in the text (e.g. “le viol, le poison, le poignard, l’incendie” l. 25); and Boredom is showcased by a sudden slow-down and ensuing silence (“C’est l’Ennui!” l. 37 is pronounced at a much



slower pace, and is followed by a three-second pause). By the time Luchini reaches the closing lines of the poem—the only moment of direct address—his audience has been so bombarded with sound that the sudden silence catches their attention:

C'est l'Ennui! L'œil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,  
Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.  
Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,  
— Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère! (ll. 37–40).

To make his point, Luchini repeats the direct address to them. In fact, the last stanza gets heard three times but at each repetition, Luchini decreases the length of the repeated section. The first repeat starts with “L'œil chargé d'un pleur involontaire” (l. 37), while the second starts with “Tu le connais, lecteur” (l. 39). This diminishing repetition means that only the closing line “— Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère!” is heard a full three times in total, serving as a final clarion call upon which the audience are invited to reflect.

However, the address to the “lecteur”, staged in a theatrical setting, remains highly problematic. The audience to whom Luchini reiterates the address are not, in fact, reading Baudelaire, but are seeing and hearing him performed, by proxy, in Luchini's dominant theater voice. Luchini's *débit* is so highly corporeal that the audience hears all the creaking of his voice, the strained pitches, the guttural sounds of the consonants, and can see the spit coming out of the actors' mouth. This experience of the human voice in Luchini's staged performance reverses what Daughtry outlined as a process of “eliminating, drying up, smoothing out, abstracting” the corporeality of the human voice that takes place when words are written down in a book (164). The highly bodily performance that Luchini offers, however, is not a straightforwardly assertive theatrical presence. On the one hand, he is unavoidably present in the way he interacts with his audience—his shouting, his spitting, the stark lighting serve to throw his body into sharp relief against an otherwise black backdrop.

On the other hand, he so fully inhabits his own body and vocal apparatus that he also retreats from engaging in an exchange with his audience.

A review of an earlier staged poetry show by Luchini from his 1996 residence at the 180-seater auditorium of the Maison de la Poésie housed in the old Théâtre Molière captures the paradox of Luchini's proximate-yet-distant theater voice. Jean-Baptiste Morain, a journalist writing for *Les Inrocks*, describes Luchini's performance style as offering a potent "jouissance textuelle" such that you cannot help but be captivated by it. Morain describes how this is reinforced by the *mise en scène* prepared by the director Benoît Jacquot which uses "décor et costume minimaux, livres de poche écornés et jaunis [...], un bureau et une chaise inconfortable, trois lampes pour éclairer le tout" (Morain). This *mise en scène* has also been retained for Luchini's later literary stagings. In the 1996 shows, Luchini performed Baudelaire, Hugo, La Fontaine and Nietzsche, mixing prose and verse works, and creating an imbricated intertextual stage work. Yet for all its apparent openness to other literary texts and contexts, Morain describes Luchini's approach as both immersive and introspective, fully focused on an internalized version of the texts:

Quand il dit, Luchini ouvre ses ailes. Son corps disparaît, il ferme les yeux, va chercher loin en lui, puis ça sort comme un train d'un tunnel, à toute vitesse ou au ralenti, ça se bouscule, ça se ânonne, et son corps redisparaît encore pour ne plus montrer que ses mains, ses yeux, ses dents et sa langue. (Morain)

Morain sees Luchini shutting out his audience as he disappears inside himself. This plays out the difficulty of negotiating between the private stage of Baudelaire's theater voices, and the public actualization that bringing his texts to the stage entails. The way in which Luchini draws our attention to those aspects of the voice which are not conveying words and their meanings (particularly tempo and pitch) seems to privilege vocal drama over the detail of the language it uses; Luchini does not diminish the distance between us and Baudelaire, but

stands in as a more devious proxy voice, who temporarily occupies Baudelaire's voice for the purposes of a staged performance so overwhelming in vocal force that we are taken in by it even as it becomes more distant from us.

If we are to agree that these actors (Blanchar, Luchini) offer different kinds of temporary proxy voices for Baudelaire's theater voices, as the analysis thus far seems to suggest, this implies that the lone voice of a male actor is apparently sufficient to capture the complex layers of voice in the poetic text. This hardly seems plausible, given what we know about the complexity of Baudelaire's vocal fabric in which male and female voices, animal and inanimate voices, confident and hesitant voices sit constantly alongside each other (Lloyd 24–25). Yet it also confirms that Baudelaire's theater voices—both in theory and in practice—are conflictual and problematic. When Barthes suggested in his 1954 essay that “Tout se passe comme si Baudelaire avait mis son théâtre partout” (42), he was right to draw attention to an often overlooked aspect of Baudelaire's text as it relates to the possibility of poetry on stage, but he engaged only with theorizing Baudelaire's theater, rather than examining the implications of his pervasive “théatralité” when his voices are deployed in practice. My examination of two examples of staged performances reveals that there is more yet to be uncovered from a study of Baudelaire's problematically embedded theater voices because of the ways in which they pervade his work peri-theatrically. The analysis does not overtly compare the readings by Blanchar and Luchini either to each other, or in contrast to their theatrical reading of another poet's work, but it does open up ways in which we could begin to understand those comparisons.<sup>4</sup>

As a poet who was acutely attuned to the possibilities of voices at variance with others and with themselves, and to the potential of using proxy voices to promote a work's longevity beyond the published page, Baudelaire's theatricality is fully embedded into his poetic language as a series of diverging, conflicting, and contaminating theater voices. In this

respect, Baudelaire's theatricality meshes closely with his preferences for the bittersweet effects aroused by caricature and parody, as explicated by Alain Vaillant in his study *Baudelaire, poète comique* (2007). The poetic and the performing subject is always split into various vocal personae because irony is always at play in that famously Baudelairean 'centralisation' and 'vaporisation du Moi' (Baudelaire 676). If Baudelaire was concerned with impossible or difficult exchanges, if he privileged the *malentendu* as both the misunderstood and the misheard, that is because he perceived it as fundamental to mediating between different people, readers, and audiences. As my analysis of staged performances of his poetry has sought to demonstrate, it is possible to understand how Baudelaire's voices conceptualized as a pre-theater are embedded in the text as a peri-theater, opening up different pathways and access routes towards various live performances which secure a life for the text beyond the printed page. Baudelaire's ability to suffuse his poetry with such a polyvocal dimension thereby invites interrogation about the manner in which it begs to be performed.<sup>5</sup> As his works are performed on stage, the full potential of his peri-theater is realized as it moves beyond the private stage of internalized readings and onto the public platform in which proxy voices tackle head on the challenges of his voices at variance. The problematic proxy voices ultimately epitomize Baudelaire's theater voices and secure the long-standing viability of his work, precisely because of their status as always at variance with Baudelaire's own voices.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> The Bibliothèque nationale de France re-issued the LP on Mp3 download in 2014, with extracts available via <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k88169639>, and full audio available for purchase via a number of sources including <http://www.amazon.fr/pages-Baudelaire-quil-faut-conna%C3%AEtre/dp/B00KLYULFY/>.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, the CD-DVD box set of his *Variations* show issued in 2012 by Because music BEC5161271 (distributed by Wea / Warner Music Group France).

<sup>4</sup> See also a recent Europeana data visualization project *Visualising Voice* which offers ways to compare specific traits of spoken performance, including Blanchar’s readings of poems by Baudelaire, Verlaine, and Rimbaud: <https://visualisingvoice.eu/>.

<sup>5</sup> See also provocative performances of Baudelaire which refuse to voice the text, such as the recent theater piece *The Last Songs of Lucan* by GoodDog theatre co. which uses mime to stage ‘Une Mort héroïque’: <http://www.gooddogtheatre.com/the-last-songs-of-lucan.html>.

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