

Buenos Tiempos, Int.

Lisa Robertson, “Proverbs of a She-Dandy”, 2017
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(The figure of the menopausal dandy revealed herself to me when I was writing on the margins of the Situationist tract The Poverty of Student Life. ‘The menopause of the mind’ was the derisive and banal phrase that was deployed by the Situationist International, in reference to the university’s organised ignorance. It was the year of my menopause. My reaction was swift. I typed into the Google doc at 4 am, ‘menopause turns females into dandies. Some of our organs become purely self-referential. They have no further potential for family or spectacle or state: they’re outside every economy. So now their meaning is confected in relation to convivial and autonomous pleasure only. Now they can be in the present fully. I’m assuming the mind is an organ or a kind of wandering gland in this description. The hormones the ovaries used to make are now made by all the parts of the body, so that every tissue, every limb and fold continuously invents its own mode of transformation. The entire body becomes a fungible thinking whose purpose it is only to express its own communicability, for the pleasure, the intensity, the integrity of it...’

I discovered the most interesting coincidence when I later began to research – Charles Baudelaire was born in 1821, the same year the word ‘menopause’ was coined by the Parisian doctor Charles de Gardanne, in his book De la Menopause, ou de l’age critique des femmes. It was also in 1821 that the English word ‘dandy’ first entered literary use in France, with Charles-Louis Lesur in his Annuaire historique universel, an annual collation of administrative, financial, meteorological and diplomatic documents, with a chronicle of events and notes contributing to the history of arts and letters. Stendhal was to help to popularise the term, in his 1822 book, De l’Amour. But even in English the term was new, its first recorded use, in 1816, coinciding with the ur-dandy Beau Brummel’s debtor’s exile in France. The word’s

origin is obscure – perhaps it’s from the border-region term ‘jack-a dandy’, perhaps it’s from the Hindi word for ‘boatman’. Thomas Carlyle, in his 1835 tract on the philosophy of the dandy, Sartor Resartus, defines it like this:

A dandy is a Clotheswearing Man, a Man whose trade, office, and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely; so as others dress to live, he lives to dress.

Baudelaire’s own dandiacal tendencies ran to the wearing of rose-coloured gloves – alone, this accessory detail was simply very stylish for a young man of the time, but Baudelaire, according to his friend the photographer Nadar, was to be seen strolling in his neighbourhood wearing his rose gloves with a blue workman’s smock, a blood red cravat and a magenta chenille boa, of the sort that the minor actresses of the city apparently affected.

And what does the menopausal woman wear? In the Fleurs du Mal poem ‘Les Petites Vieilles’, her petticoat shredded and her dress threadbare, she clutches to her side nonetheless a small purse or reticule embroidered with flowers, or with rebuses, allegorical images that represented gallant sayings or phrases. This touchingly outmoded and elegant detail of her otherwise impecunious dress had been extracted by the poet from his collection of historical fashion illustrations, to which he referred for his Figaro essay ‘The Painter of Modern Life’. Given Baudelaire’s penchant for fanciful accessorisation in his own dress, it appears that the old women he was known to follow in the streets of Paris, out of an empathetic curiosity, a familial allegiance in temperament, as he put it in ‘Les Petites Vieilles’, influenced his own sartorial choices. But here I want to say that Baudelaire’s appropriation and redefinition of the term ‘dandy’ differed in its essentials from the standard meaning. Beyond the elegant foppery of Beau Brummel, beyond even the vestal allegory of Carlyle, Baudelaire’s dandy subtly emanated a spiritual reserve, an inner aristocracy – that same reserve he described in ‘Les Veuves’ as the stoical pride of the old woman: ‘like an old bachelor, the masculine character of her manners added a mysterious spice to their austerity’. In Baudelaire the menopausal flaneur and the dandy share a descriptive

vocabulary. It is her mysterious austerity that is the instructive trait for the new dandy that emerges from the Baudelairean text.

In celebration of these correspondences I lay in the bath all morning, reading excerpts from 'The Painter of Modern Life'. This is the text where, in a long exploration of the work of draftsman and journalistic engraver of everyday life Constantin Guys, the poet presents the core of his transformed theory of dandyism. Independence of character, leisure, absolute simplicity, an inner, spiritual aristocracy, an 'ardent need to make of himself something original' – all of these self-fashioning gestures were nonetheless contained within the external limits of social propriety. A dandy was not a rebel, not punk. He pertained to the spiritual aestheticisation of limits. In a sense Baudelairean dandyism could be seen as a constraint-based practice on the self.

The distinctive stance of the Baudelairean dandy is the subtraction of all utility and all ambition from everyday life. Although he may be rich, money is never the dandy's goal, nor is political or social power of any kind; leisure is the key dandiacal element. Love is permitted, but not typically in its conjugal, domestic form. The dandy recoils from all use value, all production, all reproduction, and indeed from the very notion of productivity. The dandiacal code, Baudelaire says, is very ancient; the dandy is stoical.

From time to time as I read I added more hot water to the already deep bath, swirling it in with my left hand, while my right hand held the brittle paperback out of danger. It became more and more certain, as I skimmed and relaxed, that in Baudelaire's work, the poems' descriptions of old women closely share a rhetoric with the description of the dandy in 'The Painter of Modern Life'. These two drifting beings systematically submitted their rigorous autonomy to the passive construction of an improductive agency that seized the city's spatialisation of an image of leisure as its material support.

Menopause, Gardanne said in 1821, is the loss of the signs of female reproductive ability. 'Huge dangers', he warned, 'precede, accompany, follow the cessation of this function'. The illustration on the cover of his book shows a broken ceramic pitcher.

Gardanne was at the forefront of what now would be called the 'medicalisation of menopause', which is to say, its treatment as an ailment, both physical and psychosomatic, of the female body. In this medical model, a woman's most important value being reproductive, menopause marks the end of that value, functionally and almost more importantly, aesthetically; medicine then provides temporary placebos for that perceived loss, recuperating the aging woman back into the predominant sexual aesthetics for a time. Baudelaire himself described this melancholic condition in the second text of Paris Spleen, 'An Old Woman's Despair'. 'She went and wept in a corner, saying to herself, "Ah, for the likes of us miserable old hags, the day is gone when we could please... we even terrify the children we long to love."' The banality and extreme familiarity of this ideology of abject embodiment doesn't diminish its ongoing psychological and cultural force. Gardanne knew nothing of hormones – they were not 'discovered' until the early twentieth century, with the isolation of insulin, Oestrogen was not isolated until 1943, in time for the return of soldiers to their families, and the post-war return of women to domestic roles. In the nineteenth century the medical approaches to menopausal experience pertained to a theory of unblocking, as if the woman in question were suffering a kind of inner stagnation – George Sand, for example, was systematically lanced and bled by her doctor, to rid her of a persistent suffocating sensation, she told her sister in a letter. Windy climates could be advised, or light labour, to unblock the humours – gardening, wood sawing, walks and housework. It was suggested also that overheated salons should be avoided. So the menopausal condition was a blocked condition, rather than one of substantive lack. Now we consider that the menopausal body lacks oestrogen and accordingly pharmaceutical horse urine 'replaces' it; in the nineteenth century this female body lacked inner movement. Looking at the inverse of these historical assessments of female aging can provide a negative picture of what a woman is in a given era: currently a woman is a body containing oestrogen; in the nineteenth century a woman was a body containing inner flows and movements – the residual imagination perhaps, of the ancient idea of the migrant uterus. In the late eighteenth century, some menopausal definitions and therapies had been more cultural, having to do with a reassessment of the social and intellectual roles of women. After menopause the female was manlike, so could take on masculine practices. In 1803 the historian of medicine Moreau de la Sarthes proposed that:

If, for the Scythians, to whom historians have attributed wisdom, men who lost their virility were obligated to take on the clothing and habits of women, why shouldn't women, when the ability to conceive is finished, join the class of men in some ways, and so enjoy the same privileges, apply themselves to the liberal professions and to literary work, which often would give them a means of livelihood and consolation?

So the historical movement of the concept of femininity, from social and cultural roles, to inner mobility and flux, to the possession of oestrogen, can be mapped on to a history of the treatments for the end of that femininity, in the menopausal body.

The nineteenth-century invention of menopause as a deficit of femininity, treatable by medical means, must be seen in the more general context of the post-revolutionary privatisation and enclosure of women's lives and roles within the family, a condition that accompanied the generalisation of industrial capitalism. If in the bourgeois ideology the female body was constrained to represent reproductive value, indeed, functioning as a kind of money (that other value in flux), once freed of this signifying role as she entered 'l'age critique', which was the then-common term, more familiar than the new medical appellation, her ruinous social presence problematised the very necessity of productivity. In this sense, in the nineteenth century capitalist city the image of the menopausal female enacts an urban destabilisation along with that of the prostitute or courtesan, and these are two differently sexualised female guises that Baudelaire used to activate a sublime femininity in his symbolic vocabulary. Actresses and widows are similarly invoked in the poems as figures whose mysterious autonomy not only excites the poet's empathy, but whose marginal existences outside the economy of domestic enclosure crucially animate the urban landscape, inciting an aesthetic of sensual decadence, ruinousness. These variously feminised bodies share with the dandy the sublime trait of a spiritualised and stoical superiority. The elderly woman sitting on a park bench listening to a military band is 'still erect, proud', 'her eye opening from time to time like the eye of an old eagle; / her marble brow seemingly made for laurel...' She is among those who, like the dandy, pertaining to more ancient codes of conduct, are stoic, without complaint.

Those gallant phrases symbolised on the old lady's embroidered purse in 'La Petite Vieille' – what did they say? Here then, in the luxury of my bath, permitting the Baudelairean correspondences between dandy and old woman to drift beyond the propriety of his poems and essays, I will activate the figure of menopause as the new dandiacal body.)

PROVERBS OF A SHE-DANDY

SHE WILL CONSIDER THE CONCEPT OF MENOPAUSE AND ITS PATHOLOGICAL CODE AS ONE OF THE COVERT PRODUCTS OF MODERNITY.

GERMS, CHANCE, PASSION, TIME, FAT, OBSCURITY, OUTDATED GARMENTS, HORMONES, WORRY, FRAYED CLOTH, SILENCE AND POLITICS ASSIST IN HER IDEAL DEREGULATION OF THE HYPOSTATIC MYSTICISMS OF GENDER.

SUCH DREARINESS, SUCH OBLIGATION, SUCH MOOT DIGNITY, SUCH BAD MYTHOLOGY IN THE HYPOSTASIS!

SO, BEING AN IDEALIST, SHE HAS CAUSED HER MENOPAUSE, SURGICALLY, PSYCHICALLY, CHEMICALLY, OR BY PATIENTLY WAITING. IT IS HER OWN. THE STATE HAS NO MENOPAUSE, ONLY PRODUCTIVITY AND LOSS.

SHE HAS ENTERED AN UNDOCUMENTED CORPORALITY. EXCELLENT. NOW THE SCINTILLATING RESEARCH CAN BEGIN.

IF SHE IS AN IMAGE, SHE IS THE IMAGE OF EVERYTHING THE STATE EVADES. IF SHE IS MELANCHOLIC, IT IS THE MELANCHOLY OF A HIGHLY DISCIPLINED CONSTITUTIONAL INTERIORITY.

HER HUMOUR IS INK.

THE EROTOLOGY OF HER IMAGE BEGINS WITH THE TRANSFIGURATION OF VALUE – OR RATHER, VALUE’S DERELICTION. SHE DOESN’T NEED ANYTHING YOU HAVE TO OFFER. IN THIS SENSE, SHE IS ALREADY BAUDELAIREAN. HER CLERICAL-STYLE TUNIC WAS COMMISSIONED AS ARE HER TEXTS. *SARTOR RESARTUS* IS HER PILLOWBOOK.

SHE DEMONSTRATES WITH HER STANCE, HER SKEWED ACCESSORIES, HER SPIRITUAL FORTITUDE, HER OCCUPATION OF THE PARK BENCH, THAT THE ONLY REAL WORTHINESS IS IN THE THEATRICAL AUGMENTATION OF THE IGNORED HUMAN FRAGILITY.

THAT SHE EXISTS AND MOVES IN THE CITY IS AN AFFRONT TO THE WILL OF CAPITAL. COUNTLESS CLINICS ARE DEDICATED TO PREVENTING HER APPEARANCE.

SHE IS THE DANDIACAL AVANT-GARDE. OBSOLESCENCE IS EMBROIDERED ON HER PURSE. SHE EMBODIES THE AESTHETIC LAW OF CONSTRAINT.

WHAT WALTER BENJAMIN SAID OF BAUDELAIRE SHE WILL CLAIM AS HER SLOGAN ALSO: ‘PERHAPS THIS IS BAUDELAIRE’S GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT, AND CERTAINLY IT IS ONE OF WHICH HE IS CONSCIOUS: TO HAVE BECOME SO QUICKLY OBSOLETE, WHILE REMAINING SO DURABLE’.

HER OBSOLESCENCE IS INDISPENSIBLE TO HER WORK WITH RESISTANCE. SHE WILL HAVE BECOME THE PHILOSOPHER OF HER OWN RUIN, WHICH IS ALSO THE RUINOUSNESS OF CAPITAL. BY ENTERING THE THEATRE OF THE STREET EACH DAY AND DISPLAYING THE DIGNITY OF HER IRRELEVANCE, SHE ALTERS THE INTERPRETATION OF NECESSITY.

SHE IS THE MASTERPIECE OF THE ANCIENT SUPERIORITY OF THE IMPRODUCTIVE. SHE NEITHER BEGETS NOR WORKS, BUT DRIFTS.

THE DANDY ASPIRES TO BE SUBLIME, CONTINUOUSLY; BUT LIKE A WEST-MOVING SUN, SHE HAS EFFORTLESSLY ENTERED INTO THE MENOPAUSAL SUBLIME, SETTING A PERENNIAL EXAMPLE FOR THE DANDIACAL CODE, WHATEVER IT IS YET TO BECOME.

GREGARIOUSLY SHE EMBODIES THE BASIC INTENT OF BAUDELAIREANISM: 'THE EXPLORATION OF THE LAST REALM OF INVENTIVENESS IN THE REALM OF FEELING'.

UNLIKE ALMOST ANY OTHER ADULT HUMAN BODY, HERS NOW POSSESSES EXTRA ORGANS, ORGANS THAT HAVE ECLIPSED ALL USE VALUE. SHE WILL DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH HER INNER WEALTH, WHICH IS ENTIRELY AUTONOMOUS.

THESE INNER DECORATIONS ARE FOR HER OWN PLEASURE. BY REMAINING VISIBLE IN THE CITY SHE DEMONSTRATES FOR THOSE WHO WISH TO PERCEIVE THAT IN TRUTH, WEALTH PERTAINS TO LYRIC EXPENDITURE.

WEALTH IS THE AUTONOMOUS EXPERIENCE OF ONE'S OWN PLEASURE, A FLAWED PLEASURE INNATE TO EMBODIMENT. MOVING EXTREMELY SLOWLY ON THE BOULEVARD, IN THE PARK, AT THE NEWS STAND, IN THE BOOKSHOP, SHE DISPLAYS HER RESISTANCE TO ALL APPROPRIATION SAVE THE POEM'S.

AS SHE DRIFTS, SHE HUMS A LITTLE TUNE. WHAT IS THAT TUNE.

This text was first presented on 20 January 2017 at the Edinburgh College of Art as part of the School of Art Friday Lecture Series, at the invitation of Maria Fusco. Poet LR's most recent book is "3 Summers", from Coach House Books, in Toronto. BookThug published her 2012 collection of essays, "Nilling".