

**THE BAUDELAIRE FRACTAL**

LISA ROBERTSON

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*The Baudelaire Fractal's*  
inside covers feature its  
author's 1985 self-portrait,  
rephotographed by  
Steel Stillman © 2020

One spring morning in 2016, Hazel Brown, the first-person narrator of poet and essayist Lisa Robertson's first novel, awakens in a Vancouver hotel room to find herself the author of all of Baudelaire's works. The transmission has occurred gently, but it nonetheless stuns Hazel Brown, who finds in its concussive impact an echo of a prior awakening, albeit of a different kind, when she discovered, back in 1984, at the age of twenty-two, that she herself was a poet. These awakenings and their implications frame *The Baudelaire Fractal*, preoccupying its doubly monikered heroine. The novel unfolds over the course of a dozen chapters, whose titles—Foreign; The Port; Windows; Anywhere Out of the World; and the rest—are adapted from

Baudelaire's posthumously published prose poem, *The Spleen of Paris*. But that nineteenth-century author's works are more foil than fodder for Robertson, who reimagines the Baudelairian flâneur as a frisky, introspective girl-dandy who lights out via London for Paris. There, beginning on the West Bank at the seedy Hôtel Avenir (Future Hotel), and thence in a succession of cheap, top-floor former maid's rooms, Hazel Brown, sustained by menial jobs, educates herself by reading, visiting museums, and dallying near fountains with boys, whom she often follows to their own attic rooms. All this she records in her diary.

*The Baudelaire Fractal* is a bildungsroman of the highest order, a 206-page synoptic *In Search of Lost Time* for the twenty-first century. This is not hyperbole. Just as the adult Marcel, in that novel's final volume, *Time Regained*, reflects on his youthful desires and misunderstandings, prompted by reminders of earlier experiences, and from these formulates a theory of art and life, so Hazel Brown, writing her "story backwards, from a shack in middle age," leads us through a montage of reflections: from girlhood to womanhood, from awkward incidents to essayistic meditations on fashion, sex, class, and art, to a hard-won poetics for our time.

The fact that Robertson's heroine is female is everything. As is the circumstance that Hazel Brown, in taking her bearings from literary and art historical works made by men, acutely appraises their representations of women and examines herself in what she sees. Besides Baudelaire, and among many others, she pores over texts by Theodor de Banville, Rousseau, and Pater, photographs by Sander and Steichen, and paintings by Courbet, Bonnard, and Baudelaire's friend and one-time portraitist Émile Deroy. Late one afternoon in the Louvre, she happens upon Deroy's *La Petite Mendiante Rousse* (The Little Beggar Girl) and recognizes herself in the girl's complexion. Then, history detective and sympathetic poet that she is, Hazel Brown informs us that Baudelaire himself had written a poem about the girl, *To a Red-haired Beggar-girl*, and reveals that the girl was not a beggar at all, but a street singer, in an era when street songs were "political and social commentaries, an unofficial form of broadcasting." She continues:

*In all likelihood this girl was fetishized for her colouring. Red-haired prostitutes were highly valued then; the Goncourt brothers, in their diaries,*

*delighted in describing the skin tone of red-haired women's sexes. Oh men. Our red-haired twats and our torn skirts, you must claim them. We sing anyways.*

Refining her critique, Hazel Brown shows how Baudelaire's claim on the street singer becomes a kind of appropriation. She notes that in 1844, the year he wrote the poem, which describes the girl sporting a "golden poniard" in her garter, Baudelaire, penniless, "half-seriously attempted suicide, stabbing himself in the heart with a little dagger at a cabaret." In case we'd missed it, there's a whiff of revenge in Hazel Brown's assumption of the Baudelairian authorship, and the original injury may reside in an epigraph to the novel, a line from a letter Baudelaire wrote to his mother: "I have insupportable nervous troubles, exactly like women."

If reading and looking at art provide opportunities for self-knowledge, becoming an artist or poet is to leap into the unknown of making. To do so, Hazel Brown suggests, requires "struggling towards a pronoun," becoming "the I-speaker without abandoning the wilderness of sensing." It's a process that takes time: "First, I knew nothing, then I believed anything, now I doubt everything. Therefore I can invent." She tells us of an early work, "the most beautiful poem I ever wrote," a menstrual stain she once left on a restaurant chair whose shape resembled a map of Parisian arrondissements, "a crooked reddish-pink spiral bisected by the serpentine slash that was the Seine."

*Part loss, part object, the stain with its irregular, permeable border, its ingressions and turbulences, its fragmentary, metonymic nature, its abundance of nested contours, limitless saturation, elisions of propriety, its regime of discontinuity and contamination, was an operating force at once fractal, mystic and obscene.*

Hazel Brown proceeds by zooming in and out, describing the fractal-like events of her life in her diary, her "smudged receiver," accumulating an archive that, distilled and supplemented by later observations, will become the book we are reading. An author, she decides, is an augments, "one who inserts extra folds into the woven substance of language." She writes about the miscellany of her wardrobe: a teal-green suit, for example, "an eighties vision of the forties, I think, by way of cheap Thierry Mugler or Claude Montana knock-offs," or what she calls her Baudelaire jacket,

“a tailored black mid-nineteenth-century gentleman’s jacket,” found at a Bastille flea market. That Baudelaire would of necessity sometimes pawn his jackets (Marx apparently did the same, while writing *Das Kapital*) fires Hazel Brown’s imagination: might hers have been his? She also writes of places, of the haute-bourgeois apartment where she babysat and folded laundry: “Those tight rooms first exposed me to the domesticity and décor of wealth and the erasures and contradictions it masked.” And she writes with vividness of her sexual adventures, including “a long afternoon kiss” on a “narrow cot in the maid’s room on rue du Cherche-Midi.”

*The boy wore a necklace, it was silver, I was naked, the room was cool and so was his amulet. He kissed me slowly up and down. [...] The hospitality of the moving pause between the kiss and the necklace, pause where nothing happened other than the activation of my skin, the event of that caesura, the caesura that made of the afternoon kiss an augmentation that I’ve carried continuously within me, as if on a fine continuous chain with no clasp...*

I won’t say how it happens, but by the end of *The Baudelaire Fractal*, Hazel Brown has shed her “virus-like” Baudelaire “infection.” The year is 2019 and she is absorbed instead in *Baudelaire’s Mistress, Reclining*, Manet’s 1862 portrait of Jeanne Duval, an actress and dancer of French and African descent, lying back on a wide settee wearing an equally wide, white crinoline dress. Imagining her own girlhood through the eyes of that nineteenth-century figure, Hazel Brown says,

*I recognize the future girl in her refusal, her gravitas. She is irreducible to the visible, and she is irreducible to the invisible. She is relaxed in her displeasure. She is totally modern. I’ll never know her and she doesn’t care.*

The past, for Hazel Brown, is the future. It is analogy, mirror, and springboard. Her greatest guide proves not to be Baudelaire, but the French linguist and semiotician Émile Benveniste, whose theories of rhythm had led her to Baudelaire in the first place. As she puts it, “rhythm, an expression of form, [is] time” and “the passing shapeliness we inhabit.” Rhythm and time are what Robertson’s novel ultimately embodies, in the wonder of its shaped experience.

That Hazel Brown's story closely tracks Lisa Robertson's is no secret; indeed Robertson's 1985 photographic self-portrait adorns *The Baudelaire Fractal's* inside covers, and the first words of the book are: "These things happened, but not as described." As the artist Nancy Shaver observed to me recently—we both know Robertson—Hazel Brown's path from girlhood to middle age shows her wrestling with forms of invisibility that continue to plague girls and women in our culture. The fact that the Robertson/Brown persona, who, like Robertson, holds no academic degrees, can engineer an end run around The Academy by transmuting in and out of one of its most canonical authors (a former outsider himself) is a triumph of radical self-making. •

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