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# 'Les Plaintes d'un Icare': An Appreciation

Niall McDevitt

Of the many indisputably great poems Charles Baudelaire gifted to French and world poetry, there is one I carry in my memory at all times, learnt in the original language. It belongs to the small group of additional poems that were published in the first posthumous edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* of 1868. This group includes such wonderful mature lyrics as 'L'Examen de minuit', 'Recueillement', and 'Le Gouffre'. But the one I love is distinguished by its literary – if not literal – wings: 'Les Plaintes d'un Icare'.

There are two reasons why I admire this poem so much. Firstly, I see it as a key to Baudelaire's tragedy, arguably the closest there is to a true epitaph. Secondly, I find the rhythm and music spellbinding, even electrifying. Baudelaire rebukes his admirer T. S. Eliot in advance. He is not hollow; he is not stuffed. He demonstrates that a poem of suffering is one that correctly predicts the poet's downfall, not one that fails to predict the poet's salvation.

'Les Plaintes d'un Icare' is supposed to have been written in 1862. Interestingly, one of his French biographers, Claude Pichois, claims 'by 1863, Baudelaire was no longer at his peak'.[1] If this is correct, then 'Icare' is peak Baudelaire. Then again, Pichois also claims that Baudelaire in 1861 'had reached the limits of verse poetry'.[2] Whether or not 'Icare' makes the Pichois cut, it's what's happening to Baudelaire the man, and what he says about himself, that's most important here. In a famous passage from *Mon coeur mis à nu* he reflects:

> Mentally as well as physically, I have always been conscious of the abyss… Now I have vertigo all the time and today, January 23, 1862, I suffered a strange warning. I felt pass over me the wind of imbecility's wing.[3]

While we in today's world are discussing a 'third wave' of Covid-19, Baudelaire was at this time beginning to experience a third wave of syphilis, or thought he was:

> when I was very young I contracted a venereal disease, which I thought later was completely cured. It broke out again in Dijon after 1848, and it was once more checked!

> Now it has returned in a new form – discolouration of the skin and weariness in all the joints. You can believe me for I know what I'm talking about![4]

Baudelaire may have had syphilis, or gonorrhoea, or both, or neither. He may have been suffering from the same hereditary symptoms that killed his father, half-brother, and mother in various ways. However, as the above passage from an 1861 letter to his mother shows, he is certain that his condition is venereal. At this moment of crisis, where physical disease is intensifying and there is a preliminary onset of mental illness ('imbecility's wing'), a poem is born.

The tone of the opening stanza is vintage Baudelaire. He shocks the reader to attention. Some of those readers may have been, like him, 'amants' of sex-workers, but what self-respecting 'hypocrite lecteur' would say so? It is one of the strangest metaphysical conceits to compare brothel-goers in general to Icarus in particular. While the former enjoy professional embraces, the latter suffers RSI from caressing cloud formations. The poetic logic that links the eerie juxtaposition conceals a scientific logic of cause and effect. Baudelaire is rehashing the vignette from the letter to his mother, contrasting himself as a young man-about-town to the ailing middle-aged man he is now.

The fleeting vista of Paris bordellos fades. Realism departs. We join the narrator in a cosmic realm of clouds, stars, sky, space. He is not even Icarus, but is merely – as the title admits – 'an Icarus'. The rest of the poem brilliantly co-opts the original Greek mythology for the decadent era. As the ambition to fly is thwarted, suffering ensues. His eyes are burnt-out, consumed, seeing only solar memories. The broken arms of the first stanza become the breaking wings of the third stanza, reminding us of the aforementioned 'weariness in all the joints'. Though he bemoans his fate, he accepts it with defiant irony. He is still capable of praising what is noble, the 'nonpareil', the 'sublime', and this capability is one of Baudelaire's essential personality traits. The poem ends with the poet crashing into the abyss he has written about in so many other poems.

The form of the poem embodies what Blake calls 'the Spiritual Fourfold';[5] (one thing Blake and Baudelaire have in common is Swedenborg). The poem is in four quatrains. Its mostly tetrameter lines have four beats (a few lines can be recited as trimeters, but the syllable count would still measure tetrameter). The title has four words. It is masterfully excecuted. It is not just that every word counts, but every beat, every sound. When the 'se casse' chimes in at the end of the third quatrain, you hear the cracking of the pinions. Baudelaire self-mythologizes in a cabaret chanson.

One wonders if a certain Dublin self-mythologizer, James Joyce – aka Stephen Dedalus – liked this poem. Another Irishman, W. B. Yeats, might well have liked it. (Yeats said: 'Sex and death are the only things that can interest a serious mind.') I regard this poem as so well-wrought as to be impossible to translate into English well. Roy Campbell, Lewis Piaget Shanks, and Jacques LeClercq offer valiant but 'vain' attempts. A poem is translated not only into a different sound, but into a different combination of sounds. 'Icare' pales *en anglais*. There is, however, a poem by Yeats that does the job. His magnificent 'An Irish Airman Forsees His Death' amazingly combines a very similar theme and form. The narrator is a WW1 pilot who, realizing his plane is about to go down, meditates upon his fate in noble cadences. Its four quatrains and thumping tetrameters rhyme ABAB rather than ABBA – but the pathos is comparable. I'd have suspected a connection between the poems if it wasn't for the fact that Yeats's French was non-existent. Yeats was a friend to the decadents, but not a decadent per se. 'Airman' is an Irish Icarus, but it lacks the malaise of 'Icare'.

The sonnet 'Le Gouffre' must be seen as a companion piece to 'Les Plaintes d'un Icare'. Its phrase 'je sens passer le vent' seems to be versifying the self-diagnosis from *Mon coeur mis à nu*. The 'wing' is saved for Icarus in the following poem in the sequence. Baudelaire uses it to tell us the truth about himself.

[1] Claude Pichois, *Baudelaire*, trans. by Graham Robb (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989), p. 285.
[2] Ibid., p. 287.
[3] Ibid., p. 289.
[4] Enid Starkie, *Baudelaire* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 482.
[5] William Blake, *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, ed. by Morton Paley (London: Tate, 1991), pl. 53, l. 18.