



INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF DECADENCE STUDIES

Volume 4, Issue 1

Summer 2021

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ISSN: 2515-0073

Date of Acceptance: 1 June 2021

Date of Publication: 21 June 2021

Citation: Joseph Acquisto, 'Baudelaire: The Iceberg', *Volupté: Interdisciplinary Journal of Decadence Studies*, 4.1 (2021), 108–10.

DOI: 10.25602/GOLD.v.v4i1.1515.g1628

volupte.gold.ac.uk



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Baudelaire: The Iceberg

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I had heard that *Les Fleurs du mal* was one of the most important and influential works of poetry in the last two hundred years, that it was a foundational text of modernity, that it was scandalous, that it was powerful. And so as a sophomore French major in college I eagerly checked it out of the university library, having read only a small handful of poems from it before, the usual ones that often serve as someone's first inroad to his poetry: 'Correspondances' with its vertical and horizontal worlds that seem profound when you're sixteen, 'L'Albatross' and its seemingly transparent lesson about how the world mistreats its poets, also a lesson that teenagers are likely to find appealing. And so, once I had read through all the poems of the collection, my first thought was 'Really? This?' Never would I have guessed, if I hadn't read and been told, that *this* was the foundational text of modernity. It was not that I just wanted to move on from it, though. While I can't quite recall exactly how it happened, I was led to find out more, pursued an independent study that my professor wanted to make about the entire history of French poetry but which I convinced him to divide in three equal parts: pre-Baudelaire, Baudelaire, post-Baudelaire. ('An interesting way of dividing up literary history', said another professor.) And then, when it came time to choose an undergraduate honours thesis topic, I was a full-on Baudelairean.

I enjoy asking students to guess where the only Baudelaire Studies Center in the world is and seeing their surprise when they learn it is in Nashville, Tennessee, not far from Music Row. I was lucky to be able to travel there to do thesis research and to sense a human connection to him as I leafed carefully through one of the original editions of *Les Fleurs du mal*, with the condemned poems ripped right out of the book (along with the first part of whatever poem happened to be printed on the same leaf) and a postcard where he asks advice on a translation from English that he was working on. Soon I came to know him better than I know any living human being, having read every word he ever published and all his letters with their sad story of constant financial trouble and inability to work as he wanted to. I found Jean-Paul Sartre cruel for enumerating all

the misery that Baudelaire didn't deserve and then asking: 'Et s'il l'avait mérité?' I was well on my way toward discovering what one critic called *cet iceberg*.¹

Now that I've written a book on him as well as many book chapters and articles, and as I'm setting to work on a second book, I find myself more apprehensive, not less, when I first try to introduce him to an undergraduate class. I feel like every entry point I could choose would inevitably give the wrong impression, even though I'm not sure what the 'right' impression would be. Should I tell the anecdote of the poet who tried to shock his friends by implying that he eats children's brains? Should I present him as the *poète maudit* who wrote about horse carcasses and was put on trial for obscenity and then officially pardoned by the French government in 1949? As the first major poet of the modern city? As the last poet of Romanticism? The experimenter with alcohol and other drugs? I usually put these lines from 'L'Héautontimorouménos' on the board:

Ne suis-je pas un faux accord
Dans la divine symphonie
Grâce à la vorace Ironie
Qui me secoue et qui me mord?

And then I'm honest about not really knowing how best to introduce someone I've known so intimately for so long by now and who I hope my students will come to know and like too. I usually fall back on the idea of the *homo duplex* and I try to give the students an idea of the way it can be said that everyone has his or her own Baudelaire: the Catholic, the Satanist, the modernist, the antimodernist, the Romantic, the decadent, the revolutionary, the reactionary. He is interesting precisely because all of those labels both do and do not apply. And that is part of what has kept me coming back, time and again, to Baudelaire: the interest of his writings is magnified tenfold by the broad span of his reception history, which I find so stimulating to engage with and, in some small way, participate in via my own writing. If the full impact of his poetry was not immediately obvious to me when first I read it, that's part of the point: Baudelaire's world is one that unfolds slowly, that repays constant return and infinite questioning in the textual company of others who have engaged with his work over the years.

It is Baudelaire's ability always to elude our grasp somehow that makes him so compelling to me; it gives me a sense of undertaking each new reading of *Les Fleurs du mal* and *Le Spleen de Paris* and all his critical writings with a new sense of discovery and also a feeling that whatever I end up saying about him this time will never be definitive for me, nor would I want it to be. It is an ever-renewed *invitation au voyage* of reading, a search for the new *au fond de l'Inconnu*, and at the same time a return, a collapse of the 150 years that separate us as well as an occasional reminder of that vast temporal distance, a putting into question linear time that Baudelaire would no doubt endorse. Baudelaire, *cet iceberg*, an inexhaustible literary stimulation and my own door to the world of modern French literature that has come to mean so much to me. I still need him, in ways that Serge Reggiani sang about back in the year I first discovered *Les Fleurs du mal* in a song I discovered on a cassette tape in the language lab:

S'il vous plaît, Monsieur Baudelaire
Un peu de fantaisie
Entre nous, pour la rime...

¹ Claude Pichois, 'Baudelaire, cet iceberg...', in *Scritti in onore di G. Macchia*, ed. by Arnoldo Mondadori, I (Milan: A. Mondadori, 1983), pp. 497-504.