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Baudelaire: Le Cygne

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By ten, it was too hot to go on with our walk. We were out on the scree of Tilos, at that stage of the 1970s still one of the least visited of the Dodecanese. It isn't that far from the Turkish mainland, but the only means of getting there had been in a small fishing-boat, two hours of rocking and rolling from Symi, the nearest island.

The three of us had breakfasted on yoghurt and honey and set off before eight. We intended to keep going until midday, then find a cove and spend the afternoon swimming. A dangerous misjudgement, what with the sun already on fire directly above us.

We found a stone barn and sat down in such shade as it offered. There was the sound of bells approaching, hollow and light, then the goats appeared, then a man with a face like used wrapping-paper. He and S, who has ancient as well as modern Greek, exchanged greetings and fervent wishes for each other's health and prosperity, and the bells moved on.

'That old boy,' S told us, 'has just used a phrase I thought had disappeared with Homer. I've only come across it in *The Iliad*.'

'Well,' said A, 'Troy isn't a million miles up the coast. Or was.'

'Andromaque,' I chipped in, remembering Baudelaire remembering, 'je pense à vous!'

I was quoting, of course, the start of 'Le Cygne'. That same sun above us had blazed down on poor Andromache's husband Hector as he lay dying, slain by Achilles, just as later in the poem it's failing to comfort the tubercular black woman yearning for the coconut-palms of her native Africa as she negotiates the muck of a building-site in Paris.

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I first read 'Le Cygne' as an undergraduate when my tutor gave me a tricky essay title and no guidance except to suggest I avail myself of the Baudelaire lectures Enid Starkie was giving in this,

more or less, the final year of her career. I went. Of those occasions, I recall nothing except Dr Enid's notorious dress-sense. She put me in mind of a Morris dancer; I half-expected bells to jingle on her toes when she quit the podium. Anyway, I knuckled down and read in sequence every one of *Les Fleurs du mal* in the plain-covered Blackwell edition, concentrating line by line on what the words meant, literally, not how the poetry spoke. No one poem struck me more than another, except perhaps 'Une Charogne', for its sensationalism, and 'À une passante', for the erotic encounter missed. I knew that 'Correspondances' really mattered, but I couldn't get that enthused. I understood that 'Le Voyage' was important, but it was too occupied with death to hit home. (At nineteen, I was still at the immortal stage.) As for 'Le Cygne', I'm not sure it registered.

A decade or so later, I was giving lectures and tutorials of my own. I'd recently embarked on a university career and an early requirement was that I give a course on the nineteenth-century poets to first-year undergraduates. I decided that the best way in would not be via the Romantics. Our French master at school had tried them out on us; we'd wandered along Lamartine's lakeshore, knelt at the graveside of Hugo's drowned daughter. We affected indifference; as the sixth-formers we'd now become, we had to act cool. So I didn't fancy Lamartine's or Hugo's chances with 'freshers' hiding behind *their* show of worldliness.

Instead, I started with dark, tormented Baudelaire. Guided by Marcel Raymond's and especially D. J. Mossop's studies, I charted the *journey* (the descriptive term we now use to elevate any muddling through life) which the 'poet-hero' of *Les Fleurs du mal* undertakes. We soared with him towards *l'Idéal*, we plunged with him into the abyss. I laced my lectures with quotations from the most helpful poems. I ended with the near-despair of 'Le Voyage' – and its unextinguished hope.

'Le Cygne', however, I reserved for close attention in my tutorial hours. I wondered if in the more relaxed atmosphere of my room – which, with its good chairs, the rug on the floor, the desk lamp, was more a study than an office – my students might begin to yield to poetry. My memory is that by and large they did. I think it was theme of exile in 'Le Cygne' that particularly

got to them: widowed Andromache forced to re-marry and live far from Troy; Ovid banished to a miserable hole on the Black Sea; the African woman grown thin and ill in Paris; the swan of the poem's title, parched with thirst, padding open-beaked by a dried-up ditch; shipwrecked sailors forgotten on some island; prisoners languishing in cells; those on the losing side in war; and *bien d'autres encore*. The list could have included, I thought, my students sitting there, suddenly homesick and aching to return to the families they'd left for the first time in their lives. I too, in my first undergraduate year, had had a case of 'fourth-week blues'.

*

Back on Tilos that broiling morning, my mention of Baudelaire's *Andromaque* started a game of allusions. S conjured up Missolonghi, over there on the far side of the Aegean, where Byron lay dying. A, who later that day would be shivering with sunstroke, invoked Valéry's date-palm in the stillness of the Mediterranean heat, using every atom of silence to ripen its fruit. That palm-tree took me further into 'Le Cygne', to the stranded swan and the exiled African woman down where the Carrousel had been before Haussmann rebuilt Paris, and I declaimed what I recalled of the quatrain which contains that sublime third line for which I've yet to find a right translation, because I don't think there is one:

Je pense à la négresse, amaigrie et phthisique,
Piétinant dans la boue, et cherchant, l'oeil hagard,
Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique
Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard.