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It's hard to like Baudelaire

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‘It’s hard to like Baudelaire.’ We were looking at an exhibition. In glass cases, there were copies of *Les Fleurs du mal* in all the languages the curator – no doubt pressed for time – had been able to track down. The books were pinned at an angle, like butterflies, but in no obvious order, slumbering in the heat of an Athens afternoon... the titles: some you could easily recognize, others you might guess at, others, dustier than all the rest, were lost in the outer regions of unknown languages, unknown scripts that could have disguised anything. *Las flores del mal, I fiori del male, As Flores do Mal, Ta Anthi tou Kakou...*

The covers suggested that a vague unpleasantness might lie beneath it all – apart from a few pretty covers with pastel flowers, which looked irrelevant in their innocence. There were corpses, women in poses that might once have been erotic, now displaced by the earnest pornography of the early twenty-first century; sinister-looking trees and plants, all entangled; lots of generalized nakedness; abstract line-drawings, suggesting fates you could never escape; then the inevitable lover covers, with people doing the limited things lovers do, sometimes man and woman in profile, darkling kissing, sometimes woman and woman openly, with an eye on posterity; occasional pictures of Charles Baudelaire, mostly the photograph by Carjat that is always called ‘brooding’, with the tight lips and those less than poetical eyes that threaten to ruin your day. Baudelaire said that photography was ‘the refuge of every would-be painter, every painter too ill-endowed or too lazy to complete his studies’. One of the things that’s hard to like is that he seems to have an answer for everything, an opinion on everything, those eyes that keep boring into you, eternally threatening you with your only conceivable role in his life, *hypocrite lecteur*.

There were few people about in the afternoon. Outside, on Panepistimiou Street, the traffic roared a little less as siesta set in. In the shade were lines of Albanian women, refugees, each with

a child, worn hands, children's hands, each extended in the generic pose. They were there this morning. After a few days they become familiar.

'There's no compassion in Baudelaire', my friend said. I think of the *négresse*, emaciated and phthisical, stranded in mid-century Parisian mud. The very word *phthisique* suggests our distance from her, a world we can never know, nor she ours. Graham Greene said there is always a 'splinter of ice in the heart of a writer'. How could it be otherwise? How else to extract the quintessence? And then compassion is a limited virtue, if indeed it is virtue at all. Of all the positive-sounding qualities to which we may lay claim, it is perhaps the one that is easiest to put on and to shake off. Tears come to the eye, then evaporate over lamb *kleftiko*.

It's interesting that Baudelaire teaches such an obvious lesson; but one of his strengths is his relentlessness. That is why we find him so hard to like. It's easier to hear a truth once. The more it may *be* a truth, the less easy it is to hear it repeated. Baudelaire knows this intuitively and takes a grotesque pleasure in knowing it. It's strange that he who, in his correspondence, is so ready to whinge and whine, to creep and crawl, seems not to care that his readers won't like him. But his truths have, for him, a religious potency that thrives on resistance and requires our distaste, for otherwise the verse has nothing to overcome, no measure of its enduring power.

Back inside the overheated hall, I wondered why curators put books in cases and who, in Athens, would come to visit. 'Because the books are valuable and people always love to look at what is valuable.' Late in 2019, a copy of *Les Fleurs*, containing a previously unknown extra verse for *Les Bijoux*, went on sale in Paris, a moment that prompted an article in the London *Guardian*. The asking price was up to 80,000 euros. The extra verse wasn't exactly unknown, and it said nothing new, anyway, just the usual language of *Vérité*, *Génie*, *Beauté*, and *Dieu* – but it came from a poem that had once been banned. So *Les Fleurs* remains an unhealthy, sickly commodity. But also refreshingly uncontaminated. Because it's hard to see how anything might contaminate it. What depths, what monstrosities does it not already touch? Under its covers, or under ours.

‘So liking him is neither here nor there.’ Though it’s good to like a writer you admire, isn’t it? The fall of Neruda still hurts. Baudelaire could never fall in that way, because he never promised. If our image is, in the marvellous words of ‘Le Voyage’, ‘Une oasis d’horreur dans un désert d’ennui’, it pays a tribute we never asked for to the endlessness of which we are capable. Perhaps Baudelaire got some of it from Byron. The Giaour’s girlfriend is loaded into a sack by a jealous master and drowned at sea; the Giaour kills him and retires from the world. But there’s no moral:

I’d rather be the thing that crawls
Most noxious o’er a dungeon’s walls,
Than pass my dull, unvarying days,
Condemn’d to meditate and gaze...

The necessary horror, the threat of what will become of us without it, both still confuse. Byron escaped into the comedy of *Don Juan*. But there is no escape in Baudelaire. There is, it seems, no built-in obsolescence to *Les Fleurs*, because we have not yet found a way of going beyond it, and perhaps there is no way. ‘Can one be a saint without God?’ is outvoiced by ‘Can one be damned without Him?’ ‘Everything’s terrible, *cara* – in the heart of man’, as the Prince says in the most urbane of James’ novels.

‘And then, the sense of an ending: for that, surely?’ Yes, for that you could almost forgive anyone anything. The last four lines of ‘Le Voyage’ still take us by the throat, with the intellectual and emotional challenge: how to retain the initiative, up to and beyond the final moment. As the gulf closes over and the imagination is faced with its own erasure, Baudelaire plays with an extraordinary invitation.

We walked down into Syntagma Square, in the heat that rose as evening fell. It’s hard to like Baudelaire. Time for a break.