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## My Baudelaire

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Recently I was seeking an epigraph for a suite of poems entitled *Après pour après* in preparation for a collection of my work in French; I finally fixed on ‘Cependant je laisserai ces pages...’, which may appear elliptical, but a devotee of Baudelaire will recognize the phrase that follows, ‘parce que je veux dater ma colère.’ This is the concluding sentence of that great page of rant printed at the end of *Fusées*, the one beginning ‘Le monde va finir. La seule raison pour laquelle il pourrait durer, c’est qu’il existe.’ There is a telling variant, some editions have *tristesse* as opposed to *colère*. Both emotions are present in the passage, but it is notably the articulate anger which proves to be so nakedly prophetic:

La mécanique nous aura tellement américanisés, le progrès aura si bien atrophié en nous la partie spirituelle, que rien parmi les rêveries sanguinaires, sacrilèges ou anti-naturelles des utopistes ne pourra être comparé à ses résultats positifs.

One might well ask, Baudelaire where art thou now? as America continues to foist its toxic, divisive and undeliverable utopianism upon the rest of us; more virulently than ever indeed, from both wings, so that no field of human endeavour is left untouched or unsuspected of the worst of crimes – of ‘thought crime’, or indeed of ‘feeling crime’. But, enough! This is no place for a personal gripe about the culture wars, though there are a few traces of it in the poems I was looking to preface. My point is simply that Baudelaire, as for so much else, would seem to be the go-to poet for searingly clear-sighted spiritual prophecy. At its finest, his *saeva indignatio* reads as though the ink were still wet on the page.

Possibly it is age, and grumpiness – *hélas!* – which these days incites me to seek out the prophetic Baudelaire – or maybe just the grumpy Baudelaire. You find an earlier version in the prose piece included in *Le Spleen de Paris*, ‘A une heure du matin’, that Confitior so beloved of Rilke that he quotes it in his Baudelaire-steeped narrative *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*:

‘Horrible vie! Horrible ville: Récapitulons la journée: avoir vu plusieurs hommes de lettres, dont l’un m’a demandé si l’on pouvait aller en Russie par voie de terre (il prenait sans doute la Russie pour une île) ...’ and so on and so forth; it’s all terrific fun. The satire is always spot-on; there is a late letter in which he takes time to skewer *le style coulant*, the fluent style of journalists and *petits-littérateurs*, favoured by the Bourgeois. By the same token he lists his ‘tastes’, and his selection of writers that he would save from oblivion have pretty much without exception all stood the test of time (though George Sand has survived, despite Baudelaire’s contempt).

In the Pichois edition of the *Pléiade* (following on from the seventy or so penitential pages of *Carnet* in which the poet lists his debts and debtors and his excruciating attempts to create a kind of financial miracle of the loaves), is an obscure page called ‘Lettres d’un atrabilaire’, letters from a ‘bilious person’ worth reading as a kind of digest of *scènes de la sottise parisienne*, with as particular bête noir the journal *Le siècle* and its main writer Girardin:

Girardin. Girardin et la vérité. Les escargots. La lune. Les ballons. Abolition de la guerre. Ptolémée. [...] Le latin et le grec de Girardin. Pecudesque locutae (plague locusts). Le style fleuri des marchands d’orviétan (The flowery style of a quack).

Again, in the Pichois edition, after *Fusées*, we find those poignant memos to self under the general titles *Hygiène. Conduite. Morale.* followed by the slightly different – *Hygiène. Conduite. Méthode.* – clearly a Baudelairean version of CBT; an attempt, by writing, to put into practice objurgations like ‘Fais tous les jours, ce que veulent le devoir et la prudence’. Ever since I started reading Baudelaire I have been drawn to, and terribly moved, by these notes. *Pace* the name of this journal, this really is Baudelaire the anti-decadent – we are as far as it is possible to be from the hothouse *cabinet de lecture* belonging to Des Esseintes. That particular luxury of feeling or of scorn is no longer available. This is Baudelaire on the edge of breakdown.

I must perforce be brief, and obviously the side of Baudelaire I have foregrounded above is not the heart of the matter, even if it is immensely engaging. Were I required to encapsulate Baudelaire’s greatness, and what he means to me, I would use a phrase that Eliot used in a different context: Baudelaire is the ‘restorer of the real’. I would not venture to try and define the word ‘real’

in this case, because it is useful, precisely, as an umbrella term, one under which a horde of readers and writers shelter. It is perhaps best defined negatively as the place one is glad to return to, after a foray, say, into the ardent visionary work of Rimbaud or the intensely cerebral poetry of Mallarmé; or, equally, after a hair-raising ride into decadence or surrealism. It is not for nothing that Yves Bonnefoy, who started his career as a surrealist, and who has written more extensively about Rimbaud and Mallarmé than any other poets, entitled his last major critical volume, as if returning home, *Sous le signe de Baudelaire*. And by ‘real’ I don’t simply mean the *Tableaux parisiens* or the Painter of Modern Life, I mean the apprehension of profound spiritual realities, including the death wish, in poems like ‘L’Ennemi’, ‘La Vie antérieure’, ‘Chants d’automne’, ‘À une passante’, ‘Brumes et pluies’, ‘La fin de la journée’, ‘La rançon’, ‘Le voyage’, ‘Le Cygne’... et à bien d’autres encor!