REVISITING BAUDELAIRE

La Tour Montparnasse, 2002, © Peter Coles

Le cygne

Charles Baudelaire

À Victor Hugo

I

Andromaque, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve,
Pauvre et triste miroir où jadis resplendit
L'immense majesté de vos douleurs de veuve,
Ce Simoïs menteur qui par vos pleurs grandit,

A fécondé soudain ma mémoire fertile,
Comme je traversais le nouveau Carrousel.
Le vieux Paris n'est plus (la forme d'une ville
Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d'un mortel);

Je ne vois qu'en esprit tout ce camp de baraques,
Ces tas de chapiteaux ébauchés et de fûts,
Les herbes, les gros blocs verdis par l'eau des flaques,
Et, brillant aux carreaux, le bric-à-brac confus.

Là s'étalait jadis une ménagerie;
Là je vis, un matin, à l'heure où sous les cieux
Froids et clairs le Travail s'éveille, où la voirie
Pousse un sombre ouragan dans l'air silencieux,

Un cygne qui s'était évadé de sa cage,
Et, de ses pieds palmés frottant le pavé sec,
Sur le sol raboteux traînait son blanc plumage.
Près d'un ruisseau sans eau la bête ouvrant le bec

Baignait nerveusement ses ailes dans la poudre,
Et disait, le coeur plein de son beau lac natal:
'Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu, foudre?'
Je vois ce malheureux, mythe étrange et fatal,

Vers le ciel quelquefois, comme l'homme d'Ovide,
Vers le ciel ironique et cruellement bleu,
Sur son cou convulsif tendant sa tête avide
Comme s'il adressait des reproches à Dieu!

II

Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs.

Aussi devant ce Louvre une image m'opprime:
Je pense à mon grand cygne, avec ses gestes fous,
Comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime
Et rongé d'un désir sans trêve! et puis à vous,

Andromaque, des bras d'un grand époux tombée,
Vil bétail, sous la main du superbe Pyrrhus,
Auprès d'un tombeau vide en extase courbée
Veuve d'Hector, hélas! et femme d'Hélénus!

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

À quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve
Jamais, jamais! à ceux qui s'abreuvent de pleurs
Et tètent la Douleur comme une bonne louve!
Aux maigres orphelins séchant comme des fleurs!

Ainsi dans la forêt où mon esprit s'exile
Un vieux Souvenir sonne à plein souffle du cor!
Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île,
Aux captifs, aux vaincus! … à bien d'autres encor!

Baudelaire and Transparency

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In an unpublished text on *La Fanfarlo* in 2011, I analysed the decadence of the paratheatrical spaces central to the novel, namely the boudoirs. Published in 1847, the novel followed others of the July Monarchy which broke with traditional representations of the backstage, thereafter centralizing society's opaque mechanics – including class mobility – within hidden and 'overexploited', theatrical environments.[1] In *La Fanfarlo*, a writer operates a calculated press campaign which eventually permits him access to the title character. The reversal of both protagonists' opinions occurs in paratheatrical spaces: while La Fanfarlo breaks into tears immediately upon sight of her worst critic in a dressing room, an enthralled Cramer spends several evenings watching her performance 'like a Turk on opium'[2] in his theatre box.

Albeit offstage, the spectacle of their mutual attraction requires both a *mise en scène* and an audience – La Fanfarlo's bedroom is littered with theatre props. Illuminated by contrived, theatrical lighting, the boudoir is described as a narrow, 'soft', and 'perfumed' aperture. It is a humid 'greenhouse' that 'invites one to waste and perish' (pp. 65-66) – a faintly guarded allusion to the physiognomy of the actress – whose decor features portraits with dark backgrounds, as if the faces of former lovers were spectators emerging from the walls.

The boudoir represents a liminal space where two real people intermingle with the contrived constructions of the stage. Baudelaire's characters present correlated ambiguities – Cramer's family history is complex and his banter indecipherable. The difficulty in understanding him is grasping 'where the acting begins' (p. 61).[3] The protagonists' gender differences also escape binary comprehension. While Cramer uses a female pen name and is described as 'hermaphroditic' (p. 39), La Fanfarlo's body, notably her legs and neck, are firmer than a woman's, large and strong, 'like a gorilla' (p. 61).

Certain analyses have asserted that Baudelaire employed androgyny to enhance the 'gender-fluid' characters; their indiscernibility opened the door to 'vast new possibilities for poetic sensation [and] increased affective and cognitive experience.'[4] Walter Benjamin's interpretation of Baudelaire's characters likens them to the author's own construction of a persona, ultimately aiming to obstruct, 'hide', and thereby 'preserve' his internal ego.[5] Jean-Paul Sartre adds that Baudelaire 'disguised' everything – 'performing rather than experiencing', he manifested a distaste for anything 'natural'.[6] All three observations depict an accentuated artistic agency through designed yet quotidian performance similar to Cramer's intertwining of theatre and intimacy, calling for make-up – a facial disguise – at the height of the couple's physical experience.

The fusion between veracity and fantasy in the boudoir concludes with another marriage, that of the two artists. The 'horror' of the union unravels rapidly as perhaps a revenge for Baudelaire's own experience with actresses, whose marriages he deemed offensive.[7] The relationship was 'terrible, pitiful, shameful […] unhealthy' (p. 69). The denouement epitomizes nineteenth-century artistic denunciations of the bourgeois model: they have twins, La Fanfarlo parades as a respectable, reformed thespian, as Cramer turns to journalism and politics. Similarly, Sartre posits that Baudelaire's career crests with the novella's publication, specifically the cry for *rouge*, before slumping into a mediocre and 'canonized' role as a reticent representative of *L'art pour l'art* movement.[8]

In 2011, my conclusion focused on how the performance moves from stage to the dressing-room and then to the boudoir, burrowing deeper into backstage space as a symbolic and literal climax only achieved through privileged access to paratheatrical secrets, a specific voyeurism especially enticing to contemporary readers. Ten years later, in 2021, when looking back at the original text, an additional reading surfaces which enhances scholarship on the 'textual staging of society'.[9] The investigation into that which lies behind the curtains presents but another example of publications claiming an accurate or scientific observation of society's veiled transactions, and such texts incorporated multiple disciplines during the July Monarchy, including literature.[10]

Baudelaire's novella shares a trait with many of these exposés, namely the impact on the popular imaginary. In illuminating the underbelly of the theatre, *La Fanfarlo* joins a host of other fictions of 'the wings' depicting and decrypting paratheatrical spaces. The novella therefore not only uncovers the *coulisses* of La Fanfarlo, it also reinforces a conception of the backstage as holding dissimulated operations, invisible power, and concealed societal truths: *paratheatrum mundi*.[11]

Although establishing a household, Cramer's fate is nonetheless depicted as catastrophic. The theme reappears in a plethora of backstage novels: *Nana*, *Marthe, La Faustin, La Fauve,* or *Sarrasine*, for example, not to mention *La Duchesse bleue*, or France's *Histoire comique*. The shared storyline accentuates the horrific nature of what actually occurs behind the curtains. Beyond elucidating the mysteries of society then, the novels seek to warn against the dangers and monsters of a new era lurking in the wings.

Baudelaire's monster is of course a social climber who has ascended from the theatre to the bourgeoisie. However, the elite artist Baudelaire champions actually relied upon such demonization of the bourgeoisie so as to render their superiority comprehensible.[12] Primarily criticized was the bourgeois' implication in commercial or financial matters; as contemporary artist Couture bemoaned, 'the bourgeois attributes a mercantile value to everything'.[13] The bourgeoisie subsequently purchases all of the qualities they do not truly possess, living in 'disguises' and 'lies', or in other terms, as actors.[14] Furthermore, a crafted artistic persona requires labour. Sartre underlines Baudelaire's attempts to disguise this 'menial' aspect of his art.[15] Another critic speculates that if Baudelaire wrote so few novellas like *La Fanfarlo*, it was because prose came to be associated too closely with market concerns such as journalism or the *feuilleton*, and because more pragmatic and descriptive language risked stumbling into banality.[16]

Yet looking more closely at the opposition to the bourgeoisie germane to *La Fanfarlo*, ideological questions come to the fore, namely a divergence in political opinions, and issues of class more broadly. In the case of the bourgeoisie, they may be criticized for having sprung from the people, whom they then fail to recognize and even come to fear. Couture's text concludes, 'if

I compare the bourgeoisie to the people from a moral perspective, I attest to the true inferiority of the former'.[17] The analysis of Couture's text cites Jules Michelet as having been a profound inspiration to the artist, notably *Le Peuple*.[18] Michelet asserts the true roots of French civilization as the Barbarians in his study.[19] Other authors of the July Monarchy utilized the concept, notably Eugène Sue, who depicted the enslaved Gauls as the true heirs to a pure French bloodline.[20] While Couture's text on the bourgeoisie attacks their lack of recognition and admiration for the people from which they sprouted, he anchored those opinions in the work of a historian asserting legitimacy in regard to national heritage, both hallmarks of a populist culture that we mistakenly take for granted as a tactical, twentieth-century political mainstay.[21]

If Baudelaire's novella on the perils of bourgeoisification provides a glimpse of such populist arguments, it is through the presence of amnesia. The one character truly of the people, La Fanfarlo, does not acknowledge, nor reminisce about, her former kin. Rather, she awaits her husband's death to further her social climbing. Contrastingly, Cramer represents the artistic elite but fails to distinctly recall the previous events culminating in his demise. Both characters firmly stabilize their condition as bourgeois, omitting previous class affiliations, and stumbling into monetary and political concerns. Even the narrator forgets the titles of Cramer's noteworthy books despite their possessing 'verve, energy, and curiosities' (p. 70), further divorcing the protagonist from any claim to artistry. As in Couture's populist critique then, the protagonists are refused access to both the morally superior popular classes and an artistic elite, thereby offending the former and justifying the supremacy of the latter, inviting new, political readings of Baudelaire's prose.

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[1] Jean-Claude Yon, 'La critique au crayon: L'exemple de *La Vie Parisienne*,' in *Le miel et le fiel,* ed. by Mariane Bury and Hélène Laplace-Claverie (Paris: PUPS, 2008), pp. 73-74. All translations are my own.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, *La Fanfarlo* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987), pp. 59-63. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

[3] Commentary on the hermaphroditic nature of the female dancer or circus-artist in the nineteenth century was apparently commonplace. See Jennifer Forrest, 'Aerial Mistresses and Spectating Messieurs: The Paradox of the

Lady Acrobat in the French Fin de Siècle', in *Peripheries of Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, ed. by Timothy Raser (Newark: Delaware University Press, 2002), pp. 143-44.
[4] Nathaniel Wing, 'Androgyny, Hysteria, and the Poet in Baudelaire's Novella *La Fanfarlo*', *Romance Quarterly*, 45.3 (1998), 143-53 (p. 150).
[5] Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire* (Paris: Payot, 2002), pp. 142, 250.
[6] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), pp. 24, 103.
[7] See, for example, Charles Baudelaire, *Mystères galans des théâtres de Paris* (Paris: Cazel, 1844), p. 8; and Jean-Baptiste Baronien, *Baudelaire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), p. 77.
[8] Debarati Sanyal, *The Violence of Modernity: Baudelaire, Irony, and the Politics of Form* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), p. 3; Sartre, pp. 152, 155-57.
[9] Judith Lyon-Caen, 'Le romancier, lecteur du social dans la France de la Monarchie de Juillet', *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, 24 (2005), 15-32 (pp. 18, 20-21).
[10] Judith Lyon-Caen, 'Saisir, décrire, déchiffrer: les mises en texte du social sous la Monarchie de Juillet', *Revue historique*, 2.630 (2004) 303-31 (pp. 328, 330).
[11] For more information on this concept, see Erik Anspach, 'Scarron et les coulisses du château en scène', in *Châteaux et spectacles*, ed. by Anne-Marie Cocula and Michel Combet (Pessac: Ausonius, 2018), pp. 47-48.
[12] Pierre Vaisse, 'Thomas Couture, ou le bourgeois malgré lui', *Romantisme*, 17-18 (1997), 103-21 (p. 105).
[13] Vaisse, p. 107.
[14] Vaisse, p. 115.
[15] Sartre, pp. 134-35.
[16] Nathalie Buchet Rogers, 'La Fanfarlo: La prostituée rend au poète la monnaie de sa pièce', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, 32.3-4 (2004), 244-48.
[17] Vaisse, pp. 107-08.
[18] Vaisse, p. 111.
[19] Jules Michelet, *Le Peuple* (Paris: Flammarion, 1974), pp. 8-11.
[20] Eugène Sue, *Les Mystères du peuple* (Paris: Laffont, 2003), pp. xxiv-xxvi.
[21] Pierre Birnbaum, *Genèse du populisme: le peuple et les gros* (Paris: Pluriel, 2010), pp. 50-51.

A Baudelairean Girl

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It started with a song about Wilhelm Reich and UFOs, Patti Smith on the tape deck of my dad's beat-up Pontiac.

I have an assignment for you, Dad said. I need you to help me understand this really weird song. Is she singing about being taken up into a big black ship? Yes, I said. Can you get the rest of the lyrics? I could, almost. I listened obsessively. I read what I could find. I looked up every poet Patti Smith had ever referenced and read until my brain was exploding from it. I was eleven.

In middle school French, we learned only that the young girls wearing hats were going to the swimming pool or perhaps, at the very most, to the beach. At no time did it occur to me to connect these girls and the language that failed them with the poems I read late at night. I read the poems in English, it never occurred to me to do otherwise.

In high school French, some poems about owls and cats showed up in our textbook but seemed unrelated to the Baudelaire in my head. My French teacher married the football coach and taught us to match verbs to their appropriate auxiliaries by means of the name Vandertramp. I wrote poems in composition books and stayed up all night reading. I made friends with the night watchman and bummed cigarettes from him and snuck into the school chapel to blow smoke on the crucifix. This felt much closer.

I found a little Laurel library paperback of *French Poetry from Baudelaire to the Present* tucked away on one of my parents' bookshelves. The poems were in French with prose translations running along the bottom of the pages. The pages were already yellowing when I found it, the cover half torn off. It's still here on the shelves by my bed, encased in pink plastic to keep the crumbling pages in one place, well-travelled, unreadable, talismanic.

I moved to New York City with the express purpose of becoming Patti Smith. This didn't happen. I did work in a bookstore. I went to college. I studied poetry and languages and philosophy. I read Benjamin on Baudelaire. Walking city streets alone became my favourite pastime. I moved to Prague, then London. I read a generation of Czech poets who turned against nationalism and German by turning to Baudelaire. It worked for them. I moved back to Prague. I no longer needed translation but carried my battered Laurel book with me everywhere.

At no point did I ever identify with any of the women in Baudelaire's poems.

I moved to New Jersey, which has a different ring to it. In seminars we read Paul de Man on Baudelaire and on weekends my father-in-law ranted about Paul de Man and politics and talked about Baudelaire and classics and gave me books. I had now read every word Baudelaire had ever written.

Sometimes I summarize my graduate school career as the process of failing to understand Spleen II in increasingly complex ways. This is the most accurate summary.

I spent a summer in Paris looking at all the paintings Baudelaire had ever mentioned and researching his journalism in the National Library. I spent days arguing that I needed to look at journalism and fashion magazines and poetry at the same time. I would need to bring materials together in rooms and on seats that had been marked for different and mutually exclusive purposes. I would need to make reservations precluded by the operating system. In the end, I would require a manual override and an escort to bring journalism to the poetry. It was a violation that made the workers there uncomfortable. It also performed the main argument of my thesis, which I explained to my escort in a way that amused him.

I talked my way into every art museum by explaining that since Comparative Literature included art history, I was essentially an art history student and should be admitted for free. French was not a very living language to me, and so I sounded like a cross between the nineteenth century and Belgium, a perplexing and unappealing mixture. And yet, I paid very little for my museum visits.

I went to Baudelaire's grave and imagined how he would have despised the poems and watercolour paintings piled over his long-decayed corpse and been deeply gratified by them at the same time. A drunk woman urinated on the sidewalk as I passed and I thought Baudelaire might have despised and been gratified by that, too. And me, of course. This seemed clear.

At some point, I had noticed that the women in the poems were not as I would imagine myself, and that even if I tried, I could not see myself in them. I had noticed that Baudelaire loved and hated them in interesting, compelling ways that I felt more connected to, which distressed me. I found that how Baudelaire loved and hated women was equally repellent and fascinating to me and responsible for many excellent poems as well as some real duds. I found I did not wish to explain it away. I found I had developed a terrible personal fondness for him over the course of twenty years that I knew would not have survived five minutes in his actual company.

Not for the first or last time, I was grateful to work only on the dead.

Once, I was in labour for over twenty-four hours, unmedicated and hallucinating. When my daughter finally made her way to join us, she picked up her head and looked around, which is impossible. She looked old, which is common. I thought, *j'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans.* This remains my favourite failure to understand 'Spleen II'. And if I imagine Baudelaire would feel vaguely ill at the prospect, I only like it better.

I recently learned that Patti Smith meant to dress like Baudelaire on the cover of *Horses*, the album that had been my adolescent obsession and set much of my trajectory for the next quarter century. I like to think she would be pleased with this legacy, and that Baudelaire would despise and be gratified by us both.

Baudelaire's Celestial Vision of Jeanne Duval

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My first experience of Charles Baudelaire's work resulted from reading Angela Carter's short story, 'Black Venus' (1985), which is interspersed with allusions to his poetry, including an excerpt from '*Sed non satiata*'.[1] The title refers to the so-called 'Black Venus' cycle of poems inspired by Jeanne Duval, Baudelaire's Haitian partner. In 'Black Venus', Carter reconfigures Duval and Baudelaire's relationship from Duval's perspective, and presents us with a woman who is in turn vivacious, jaded, provocative, shrewd, and who lights cigarettes with Baudelaire's discarded sonnets. Carter's daring depiction inspired me to seek out the source-material – Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), translated by James McGowan for Oxford University Press (1998). On reading 'Exotic Perfume', 'A Phantom', and 'The Cat', I became fascinated by Baudelaire's extraordinary linguistic dexterity, and how tantalizing glimpses of Duval were scattered like jewels throughout each poem. Even two hundred years after Baudelaire's birth, his desire for Duval lingers on to trouble and entice the reader. As the title '*Sed non satiata*' suggests, satisfaction remains ever-thwarted, engulfing the subject of the poet's desire and the poetic self: 'Like a cook with ghoulish appetite |I boil and devour my own heart', the speaker mourns in 'A Phantom', while his incorporeal lover glows with incandescence, a 'splendid ghost'.[2]

Baudelaire's 'Black Venus' cycle of poems set out to both negotiate and perpetuate Duval's ghostly presence. For Baudelaire, language becomes as supple as the sinuous, undulating movements of the woman described in poems such as 'The Dancing Serpent'. Language continually turns back in on itself to refigure and reassess an elusive, shimmering, and phantasmic woman who dances just out of the poet's reach. Within the 'Black Venus' cycle, the subject's body is repeatedly compared to the awe- and fear-inducing sublimity of natural wonders. In 'The way her silky garments…' the speaker's body equals 'desert sands and skies' and 'the ocean's swells |

Unfolding with insensibility.'[3] This imagery abstracts the beloved's body which becomes a primordial force. In '*Sed non satiata*', the poem fractures into a *cri de coeur* which enunciates an impossible tension between defiance and control, domination and freedom:

> […] I can not
> To break your nerve and bring you to your knees,
> In your bed's hell become Persephone!'[4]

In suggesting that the muse herself has become gender-neutral – both a 'wizard of the dusk' and an 'ebony sorceress' capable of moulding him into an impotent Persephone – Baudelaire presents a striking and unforgettable evolution of the poet/muse dynamic.[5] By straddling both these identities, the speaker's idol becomes a version of Pygmalion, capable of sculpting an identity that extends beyond the poet's imagination to live on in the imagination of later writers such as Carter.

Poetic fragmentation becomes a means of escape. We see this in the final stanza of 'The Dancing Serpent'. After several attempts to catalogue and compare the addressee's dancing movements to an increasingly surreal series of creatures and objects – the titular snake, an elephant, a ship, a glacier – the speaker self-consciously surrenders to the indecipherability that the addressee brings him:

> I know I drink a gypsy wine
> Bitter, subduing, tart
> A liquid sky that strews and spangles
> Stars across my heart![6]

The speaker allows the addressee to elevate him – and the reader – into the 'liquid sky', a celestial space of euphoric desire, freedom, and transcendence which renders all previous attempts at definition redundant. In a pseudo-divine transmutation, the addressee escapes all bodily confines and is transformed into innumerable glorious constellations that embed themselves in the poet's exposed, and therefore vulnerable, heart. In lifting the reader into the space of the imagination, he enables us to witness his 'singular goddess' shine beyond words.

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[1] Angela Carter, 'Black Venus', in *Burning your Boats: Collected Short Stories* (London: Vintage, 1996), pp. 231-44.

[2] Charles Baudelaire, 'A Phantom', in *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. by James McGowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 76-81 (p. 77).
[3] Baudelaire, 'The way her silky garments…', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 54-57 (p. 57).
[4] Baudelaire, '*Sed non satiata*', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 54-55 (p. 55).
[5] Baudelaire, '*Sed non satiata*', p. 55.
[6] Baudelaire, 'The Dancing Serpent', in *The Flowers of Evil*, pp. 56-59 (p. 59).

'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.

Baudelaire's Swan

Jamie McKendrick

To read T. S. Eliot's 1930 essay 'Baudelaire', that introduces a translation of *Intimate Journals*, is to be thrown back into a very different literary era, especially now when the whole idea of introductions seems to have fallen out of favour with major publishers. (Some notion perhaps that they interfere with the pure and unmediated response of readers?) Beyond that, what's striking is the assured, authoritative tone and the poet's depth of knowledge of a foreign language and culture. It was written the year Eliot published 'Ash Wednesday', and is the work of a poet in full and confident maturity, after a long and searching familiarity with an œuvre that had signally influenced his own development.

Eliot's conversion to an Anglicanism with a distinctly Catholic tinge occurred three years earlier, and much of the essay is concerned to establish the great French forebear as a kind of Christian poet whose wilful deviations from orthodoxy and doctrine – 'he has the excesses of a Tertullian' – only serve to express his centrality to that tradition; his *ennui* shades into '*acedia*, arising from an unsuccessful struggle towards the spiritual life'. In brief, he has a Christian soul in a thwarted earlier stage of development, but his rebellion against God reveals his adherence to the faith – and, put crudely, you can't sincerely blaspheme against something you don't believe in. It's a line of argument, already nascent in Baudelaire's trial for obscenity and well-developed in France by 1917 when Alfred Poizat wrote in *Le Correspondant*: 'There was not a poet of the C19th who had a mind as deeply Catholic as that of Baudelaire, nor one who was more of a believer than him' (my translation). Eliot's criticisms of Baudelaire are largely respectful: 'His apparatus, by which I do not mean his command of words and rhythms, but his stock of imagery (and every poet's stock of imagery is circumscribed somewhere), is not wholly perdurable or adequate.' This striking thought – that every poet has a finite range of imagery – is slipped in deftly to suggest, by way of a courteous negative, that this is a predicament even Baudelaire shares with other lesser poets. (It's reminiscent

of Baudelaire's own remark that every poet must carry around in his head a dictionary of rhymes.) The casual, jarring word 'stock' with all of its commercial and utilitarian connotations serves to demystify the poet's craft.

Eliot goes on to sharpen the criticism in the next sentence by instancing those elements in Baudelaire's work that the passage of time has not been kind to: 'His prostitutes, mulattoes, Jewesses, serpents, cats, corpses form a machinery that has not worn well'. By demoting, at least in the first three examples, the human to the level of imagistic machinery, I believe Eliot is seriously undervaluing the importance to the poet of all three, though the reader might concede that not all the *poète maudit* paraphernalia has weathered well. Baudelaire may be vulnerable to a critique that would see these images as mere projections of aspects of his own soul, and yet they figure prominently and purposefully in his work. Eliot's urbane view that this imagery has become a kind of 'outmoded detritus' reveals its own limitations. The centrality of the 'négresse' in 'Le Cygne' would be a good place to start in examining Eliot's claim and approaching the French poet's actual use of such images. It might also show something evidently 'perdurable' about his imagery as well as the persisting relevance of his poems.

'Le Cygne' is a vast panorama, geographic and historic, as well as an interior landscape of memory. In the course of its thirteen quatrains, it moves from ancient Troy to modern Paris and back again, from Andromaque, Hector's widow who became a slave and concubine of Achilles' son Pyrrhus, to an unnamed 'négresse' seeking a lost Africa, and to other images of orphans, stranded sailors as well as the swan itself. It proceeds like a roll call of loss, and yet is rich in minutely observed details such as the convulsive movement of the swan's neck or the contours of the Louvre environs in reconstruction.

The poem has its source in Virgil, rather than Homer, Euripides, or indeed Racine. When it was first published in a journal (*La Causerie*), the dedication to the exiled Victor Hugo was followed by the epigraph 'Falsi Simoentis ad undam' – beside the false Simois – from *Aenead* III. 302, with reference to Andromaque's exile and servitude in Phthia, where to console herself, she

imagines the river of Troy. So much for the epigraph, but I'd like to dwell further on the dedication. It's not the only poem by Baudelaire to be dedicated to Hugo – 'Les Sept vieillards', the one that follows in most editions of *Les Fleurs du mal* (though it was published in *Le Nouveau revue* four months earlier in September 1859), shares the same dedication. Neither are random, or mere tributes to a senior, admired poet. It signifies, and has an important bearing on the poem, as well as shedding some light on Eliot's more general comment.

The opening of Baudelaire's essay 'Victor Hugo: *Les Misérables'* is an illuminating argument as to why Hugo as a poet 'est moralisé sans le vouloir, *par abondance et plénitude de nature*' (Baudelaire's italics). The argument is crucial also for our understanding of the poem. He presents Hugo, in a dialectic, as being drawn, because of his vigorous temperament, by an equal love 'pour ce qui est très-fort comme pour ce qui est très-faible'. He shows himself as the friend – '*l'ami attendri de tout ce qui est faible, solitaire, contristé; de tout ce qui est orphelin*' (Baudelaire's italics). Note also that last word which recurs in the poem. If this is true of Hugo, it is at least equally so of Baudelaire whose poems are populated by the downtrodden and outcast, *les marginaux*, including 'the prostitutes, the mulattoes and Jewesses' to quote Eliot once more. It is ironic that Eliot in weighing up Baudelaire's credentials as a Christian poet, his doctrinal non-conformism and so on, should see as time-worn and trite these very elements that could arguably most qualify him as a Christian poet, at least in his sympathies. He praises Hugo, in a subtle argument, for his 'charité' (the paramount Christian or Pauline virtue) which has nothing programmatic or didactic about it, and so distinguishes the poet from any kind of 'pédanterie', or what we might now call virtue-signalling. It's an intriguing essay that touches on the point that Hazlitt makes about poetry being drawn to power, but offers a deeper, more dialectical relation, that it is, or should be, equally attracted to the disempowered. Eliot seems to me oblivious to this crucial element in Baudelaire's work.

'Le Cygne' embodies those temperamental traits which he praises in Hugo – chez Baudelaire, likewise, manifest in a way that may be 'moralizing' without aiming to be so. In the poem, the titular swan has escaped its 'cage' – an odd detail but it's odder still that the bird speaks.

The weather too is peculiar; there's a storm but the air is silent, the stream is dry. It is psychic weather, psychic geography and history. And yet the detail of the

> […] négresse, amaigrie et phtisique
> Piétant dans la boue, et cherchant, l'oeil hagard,
> Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique
> Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard;

is arguably the central image of the poem, the counter-image to the swan's white feathers. Swan and woman share the same fate of displacement and exile, the same state of Andromaque at the poem's opening. While the image of the African coconut trees may sound merely exotic, they evoke a luxuriance in contrast to the arid urban landscape as the wall of fog that obscures them evokes a whole other weather system, and the effect is far from suggestive of a tired prop, especially with the detail of the black woman's haggard, consumptive state. In a time such as ours of thousands of refugees arriving in Europe from Africa and the Middle East, forced to survive in makeshift tents, this picture hasn't shed any of its force or relevance.

The reader has to decide whether the poet's identification with another person's suffering is appropriative or empathetic. Perhaps both at once. Here, again, the issue of what Eliot calls the 'perdurable' obtrudes. What lasts and what fades. My own sense of the dated attaches rather more to a phrase such as 'toute pour moi devient allégorie', the constant transformation of the world into symbol, and yet without it Baudelaire would lose his framework. While 'Le Cygne' abounds in symbols for Baudelaire's inner state, I suspect that a modern sensibility is more drawn to the moments in the poem where actuality *transcends* the symbolic, 'le bric-à-brac confus' of the construction work, for example, and most tellingly the figure of the black woman who appears towards the end.

The exclamatory address of the poem from its opening 'Andromaque, je pense à vous!' to its 'Je pense à mon grand cygne', to its final lines: 'Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île, |Aux captifs, aux vaincus!… à bien d'autres encor!' is the sustained monologue of the poet wandering over a changeable but familiar terrain, *piétant lui-même*, arrested by images, and memories of the

streets he is passing through – 'la forme d'une ville | Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel' […] 'Paris change!'. Thirteen exclamation marks (unevenly distributed through the thirteen stanzas) indicate the jagged progress of this inner promenade, the jolts of consciousness, of an exasperated awareness. The vertical punctuation clatters down like hailstones on the stately though fractured alexandrines. Even the poem's first line is interrupted by two cesurae ('Andromaque, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve'), an effect mirrored by the final line's gaping caesura and aposiopesis 'Aux captifs, aux vaincus!… à bien d'autres encor!'.

This organizing axis of the poem – 'Je pense à…' – isn't a Cartesian assertion but rather a thinking about something or someone who in turn is thinking about something that has been taken away, that no longer is. The word 'absent' hovers over this poem that is haunted by what has disappeared or been replaced – architecture, nature, weather. Given the repetition of the phrase the poem is also about a repeated, ever more ingrained state. The prominent 'I' of the poem includes and overarches widows, orphans, the black woman, sailors, and 'bien d'autres choses'.

Eliot's demurral with regard to the 'prostitutes, mulattoes, and Jewesses' seems less than ever accurate about 'Le Cygne'. On the contrary, it seems as if the French poet had a more prescient notion of the future than Eliot did. Baudelaire's prolonged, often agonized relationship with Jeanne Duval in itself might encourage a more serious engagement with the imagery of 'Le Cygne', though that biographical prompt alone neither implicates nor exculpates the poet. It is worth noting, however, that as Enid Starkie tells, in his very last days of illness, Baudelaire's principal anxiety and concern was that Duval be given what money he had, and that she be provided against the poverty and ill-health from which she was suffering. This would suggest, as does the whole orchestral movement of 'Le Cygne', one of his longest and most intricate poems, that Baudelaire was not merely employing 'stock' imagery but touching a crucial and emotionally charged part of his vision which reveals much about his own era and connects intimately with ours.

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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.

Abdellatif Laâbi's *Casablanca Spleen*

André Naffis-Sahely

In January 1972, the thirty-year old Moroccan poet Abdellatif Laâbi was arrested by his country's security services and brutally tortured. Student demonstrations in his support ensued, which eventually forced the authorities to release him, only to re-arrest him a month later, when he was sent to Casablanca's Moulay Cherif Detention Centre. Originally detained without being charged, Laâbi took part in a series of hunger strikes alongside other prisoners before finally being granted a trial in August 1973, at which point he was condemned to an eight and half year sentence at the infamous Kénitra penitentiary. His crime? Distributing political pamphlets. During his stay in Kénitra as prisoner number 18611, Laâbi would produce a body of work that would later be recognized as some of the twentieth century's finest political poetry, alongside that of Pablo Neruda and Nâzım Hikmet.

Le Spleen de Casablanca / Casablanca Spleen (1996), a long poem composed in 1995 during one of Laâbi's trips back to Morocco following his self-imposed exile in France, is a riposte of sorts to Charles Baudelaire's 'Le Spleen de Paris' (1869). In Laâbi's poem, the author uneasily walks the streets of Casablanca, the city in which he had once been imprisoned for so long, and examines a country he no longer recognizes, prophetically singling out the issues that would later lead to the demonstrations of the Arab Spring almost twenty years before they occurred. Here are two selections from my translation of *Casablanca Spleen*, featuring the original text below.

Abdellatif Laâbi
Casablanca Spleen

Option 1:

Amid the noise of a soulless city
I learn the hard work of returning
Inside my torn pocket
in a summer as cold as the winter
only your hand
keeps mine warm
Tell me, where has the country
of our younger years gone?

*

O how all countries look alike
how exiles resemble one another
Your footprints aren't the sort of footprints
that leave any trace on the sand
you pass by without really passing by

*

Face after face
the years die

I search for a glimmer in everyone's eyes
for a flower to bloom from their words
And I'm scared, truly scared
of losing another old friend

*

This grey morning is honest
I'm grateful for the spleen it unleashes
how it's such a fine connoisseur
of the pain it collects
and the bouquet of doubts it has offered me

*

If I went out
where would I go?
The pavements are raw and rutted
The trees look pitiful
Skyscrapers obstruct the sky
Cars rule as absolutely
as any old tyrant
Cafés are open only to men
Women, quite rightly
are scared of being stared at
And besides
there is nobody
to visit

*

I will always feel lost
no matter how old

*

I'm not the kind of nomad
who goes looking for wells
dug by static dwellers
I drink very little
and steer clear
of the caravan

*

Soon this century will end
or so they say
And this leaves me cold
Although the next one
doesn't fill me with confidence

*

In the city of salt and cement
my cave's made of paper
I have a good stockpile of pens
and the means to brew coffee
My ideas cast no shadows
nor emanate any odours
My body has disappeared
and inside that paper cave
there is only my head

Option 2:

Nations
are finally equal
now
in their ferocity

*

God
how I feel like a stranger
However much I wanted to throw
myself into the world's fray
I'm sidelined in my own corner of it
Am I punishing myself
or is it the world?

*

After vain actions
vain words
make one nostalgic for actions

*

The books that bear my name
and which I dare not open
out of fear
that they'll crumble into dust
between my fingers

*

Rub shoulders with monsters
and your skin
will smell like monsters

*

Wake up
rebel
The world is collapsing
beneath the weight of appearances
It will die
out of resignation

*

When I was cold
and hungry
(believe it or not
I have experienced both)
life was almost sweet to me
and my bouts of insomnia fruitful
Every night I thought about other people
(meaning the marginalized
believe it or not)
and each morning
a fraternal sun
came to visit me
and left two
or three sugar cubes
by my bedside

*

I need a break
the time you might give me
to open a window
on a time I haven't yet visited
an island of princely flesh
that will offer itself up to me in earnest
I'll push that blue window open
and hurry before it shuts again
I won't tell you what I'll see
Whatever I will have proven or experienced
will go rejoin the great mystery
If only you'd give me a little respite
I'm certain I'd make you
fond of conundrums

*

The poet invents a rose
but doesn't know which colour it should be
What is the colour of secrets?
A familiar warmth in one's ear
A father's beaming face

carried off by sweet death
A burgeoning wrinkle in your beloved's visage?
None of this may be defined by colours
Our poet's invention will therefore
remain incomplete

(Translated by André Naffis-Sahely)

Abdellatif Laâbi
Le Spleen de Casablanca

Option 1:

Dans le bruit d'une ville sans âme
j'apprends le dur métier du retour
Dans ma poche crevée
je n'ai que ta main
pour réchauffer la mienne
tant l'été se confond avec l'hiver
Où s'en est allé, dis-moi
le pays de notre jeunesse?

*

Ô comme les pays se ressemblent
et se ressemblent les exils
Tes pas ne sont pas de ces pas
qui laissent des traces sur le sable
Tu passes sans passer

*

Visage après visage
meurent les ans
Je cherche dans les yeux une lueur
un bourgeon dans les paroles
Et j'ai peur, très peur
de perdre encore un vieil ami

*

Ce gris matin est loyal
Je lui ais gré du spleen qu'il répand
de la douleur qu'il recueille
de la gerbe des doutes qu'il m'offre
en bon connaisseur

*

Si je sors
où irai-je?
Les trottoirs sont défoncés
Les arbres font pitié
Les immeubles cachent le ciel
Les voitures règnent
comme n'importe quel tyran
Les cafés sont réservés aux hommes
Les femmes, à raison
ont peur qu'on les regarde
Et puis
je n'ai de rendez-vous
avec personne

*

Je me sentirai perdu
à tout âge

*

Je ne suis pas ce nomade
qui cherche le puits
que le sédentaire a creusé
Je bois peu d'eau
et marche
à l'écart de la caravane

*

Le siècle prend fin
dit-on
Et cela me laisse indifférent
Quoique le suivant
ne me dise rien qui vaille

*

Dans la cité de ciment et de sel
ma grotte est en papier
J'ai une bonne provision de plumes
et de quoi faire du café
Mes idées n'ont pas d'ombre
pas plus d'odeur
Mon corps a disparu
Il n'y a plus que ma tête
dans cette grotte en papier

Option 2:

Les pays
maintenant
se valent
en férocité

*

Mon dieu
comme je me sens étranger
J'ai beau vouloir me mêler
à l'agitation du monde
je me retrouve à l'écart dans mon coin
Est-ce moi qui me punis
ou est-ce le monde?

*

Après les actes vains
les paroles vaines
donnant la nostalgie des actes

*

Les livres qui portent mon nom
et que je n'ose ouvrir
de peur
qu'ils ne tombent en poussière
entre mes doigts

*

À force de côtoyer le monstre
l'odeur du monstre
te colle à la peau

*

Réveille-toi
rebelle
Le monde croule
sous les apparences
Il va crever
de résignation

*

Quand j'avais froid
et faim
(j'ai connu cela

ne vous en déplaise)
la vie m'était presque douce
et fécondes mes insomnies
Je pensais chaque nuit aux autres
(aux laissés-pour-compte
ne vous en déplaise)
et chaque matin
un soleil fraternel
venait me rendre visite
et déposait à mon chevet
deux ou trois
morceaux de sucre

*

J'ai besoin d'un répit
le temps que vous voudrez bien m'accorder
pour ouvrir une fenêtre
sur un temps que je n'ai pas encore visité
une île de chair princière
qui s'offrira à moi pour de bon
Je pousserai cette fenêtre bleue
et je ferai vite avant qu'elle ne se referme
Je ne dirai pas ce que j'aurai vu
Ce que j'aurai éprouvé
ira rejoindre le mystère
Si seulement vous m'accordiez ce répit
M'est avis que je vous rendrais
friands d'énigmes

*

Le poète invente une rose
mais ne sait quelle couleur lui donner
Comment est-ce la couleur du secret?
Tiédeur reconnaissable au creux de l'oreille
Visage rayonnant du père
emporté par la mort douce
Ride naissante au flanc de l'aimée?
Rien de cela ne définit une couleur
L'invention de notre poète
restera donc incomplète

Baudelaire ou le secret de l'art

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> « Malheureux peut-être l'homme, mais heureux l'artiste que le désir déchire ! »
> (« Le désir de peindre », en *Petits poèmes en prose*)

« L'invitation au voyage », c'est ainsi que Baudelaire intitule l'un de ses petits poèmes en prose, une sorte de *clin d'œil* qu'il fait à l'un des musiciens allemands connus du XIX[e] siècle, Carl Maria Friedrich Ernest Von Weber, qui a composé *L'invitation à la valse*. Il répond à l'un de ses désirs qu'il exprime ouvertement dans son poème :

> Un musicien a écrit l'invitation à la valse; quel est celui qui composera l'invitation au voyage, qu'on puisse offrir à la femme aimée, à la sœur d'élection?

A-t-il voulu faire une sorte de « compte rendu » pour montrer tout l'intérêt qu'il a porté à cette musique ? Rappelons que pour Baudelaire « la meilleure critique » que l'on puisse faire d'une œuvre d'art est celle qui est, comme il le dit lui-même, « poétique et amusante ». Nous nous référons ici à l'un de ses célèbres essais : « A quoi bon la critique ? » dans lequel il explique ce que doit être le vrai travail du critique et dans lequel il défend l'une de ses idées phares : défendre l'art pour l'art. Ainsi, il ne s'empêche pas de déclarer que « le meilleur compte rendu d'un tableau pourra être un sonnet ou une élégie. »

Ne serait-ce pas poétique que d'écrire un poème pour exprimer son opinion sur une « musique romantique » ? En effet, dans « L'invitation au voyage », c'est un vrai voyage que Baudelaire nous propose de faire dans un pays de Cocagne, un pays où tout est permis, où on peut vivre heureux et faire honneur à un sentiment aussi précieux que celui de l'amour. Nous sommes invités, donc, avec Baudelaire, à découvrir le secret de ce pays qui n'existe pas mais qui est pourtant présent en toute personne qui désire fuir et quitter le monde dans lequel nous vivons ne serait-ce

que pour un moment. Un moment certes de solitude mais une solitude qui nous permet de « peupler » un monde nouveau comme nous le souhaitons et dans lequel nous y mettons tout ce à quoi nous aspirons, il s'agit bien de cette « contrée […] où tout est beau, riche, tranquille et honnête ». C'est un monde imaginaire dont rêve tout un chacun, un monde sans défauts et qui n'a pas de place pour la sottise, pour le mensonge ou pour tout ce qui peut nuire à votre esprit ou à votre humeur.

Pourquoi chercher à séparer ce qui est à la base inséparable, pourquoi séparer la musique de la poésie ? la peinture de la littérature ? ou encore la sculpture du théâtre ? Désormais, tous les arts se confondent du moment où ils puisent tous à la même source : l'imaginaire. L'art est fait pour être vécu par celui qui veut chercher à se ressourcer, il est fait pour être goûté par le passionné, celui qui est à la recherche de la nouveauté, de tout ce qui pourrait le déranger dans sa tranquillité et de tout ce qui viendrait troubler ses sens. Il ne s'agit pas de chercher le beau mais de chercher le vrai ou l'authentique, c'est-à-dire cet *idéal* qui nous échappe sans cesse mais qui est pourtant là dans notre esprit et qui nous ronge de l'intérieur. Mais pourquoi aller à la recherche de ce qui n'existe pas puisque nous savons que la partie est perdue d'avance ? La question peut être posée mais elle ne peut pas empêcher notre cœur de ressentir les choses telles qu'elles sont et de pousser le rêve jusqu'à l'extrême ou, comme l'entend Baudelaire dans son poème, jusqu'à l'impossible : « Des rêves ! Toujours des rêves ! et plus l'âme est ambitieuse et délicate, plus les rêves l'éloignent du possible. »

Baudelaire a peut-être été parmi ces « poètes maudits », connu pour décrire dans ses poèmes le monde dans sa réalité amère, cruelle, décadente, cette réalité que nous ne voulons pas percevoir car elle est révélatrice d'un quelque chose en nous que nous voulons dissimuler. L'homme est connu pour refuser d'admettre ses défauts et surtout ce défaut qui le caractérise essentiellement : l'égoïsme. Mais Baudelaire est aussi parmi ces écrivains qui ont voulu décrire la beauté de l'âme, de cette âme sincère qui veut tout simplement profiter des *petits plaisirs de la vie*, et surtout de cette âme « artiste » qui a un pouvoir que nul ne peut lui ôter : celui de créer. Le pays de

Cocagne est comparé par le poète avec l'art, il est, dit-il, « supérieur aux autres, comme l'Art l'est à la nature, où celle-ci est réformée par le rêve, où elle est corrigée, embellie, refondue. » Telle est la « beauté » de l'art si on doit lui en reconnaître une. En effet, l'art, le vrai, est celui qui permet à son artiste de transformer les choses qui l'entourent comme il le veut, jusqu'à rendre ce qui est laid, beau, de faire en sorte que le lointain devienne proche, d'aller vers l'inconnu jusqu'à s'y perdre pour ensuite s'y retrouver, etc. Et pourquoi pas faire d'un texte, un tableau de peinture, comme nous pouvons le voir dans ce petit poème en prose qu'est « L'invitation au voyage » et dans lequel le poète s'écrie : « Vivrons-nous jamais, passerons-nous jamais dans ce tableau qu'a peint mon esprit […] ? » Tel est le secret de l'art, de cet art qui ne connaît aucune limite et qui *s'enivre* de ce qui lui revient de droit : la liberté.

Les *Fleurs du mal* ou la prosodie du mystère

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La plus belle réussite de Baudelaire est assurément d'avoir réussi, dans ses compositions, à illustrer cette « prosodie mystérieuse et méconnue » qu'il trouvait dans la langue française, comme il le rappelait dans son second projet de préface aux *Fleurs du mal*. À cet égard, son recueil constitue encore aujourd'hui la référence *ad libitum* de toute bibliographie poétique, aussi partielle soit-elle, l'idole cultuelle des étudiants en lettres, ou l'immarcescible « rêve de pierre » de tout poète en devenir.

L'unicité d'une telle prépondérance interroge nécessairement : Hugo a la voix naïve et forte des blessures profondes, Lamartine écrit par la délicatesse du lyrisme dompté ; Mallarmé a la virtuosité du terme et une syntaxe pour le moins unique ; Rimbaud a l'adolescente et musicale audace de sa métrique, Verlaine la provocation irrévérencieuse de son impaire. Baudelaire n'a rien de tout cela. C'est sans doute ce profil insaisissable qui esquisse le mieux son génie. Si les premiers peuvent être – fort injustement et fort schématiquement – écrasés par des étiquettes réductrices, Baudelaire, lui, échappe bien plus insolemment à cet inepte processus : son unicité réside-t-elle dans une saillie esthétique ou formelle reconnaissable entre mille ? D'aucuns[1] ont déjà souligné la paradoxale pauvreté lexicale et le fréquent traditionalisme métrique des *Fleurs du mal*. Et pourtant le génie demeure, vif et intemporellement moderne, laissant une trace indélébile à tout lecteur, qui garde en sa mémoire une strophe choisie, un vers chéri, ou peut-être, sans même le vouloir, un simple groupe nominal ; l'alchimiste qu'est Baudelaire a assurément su forger des vers plus durables que l'airain, et si la formule ne saurait s'y réduire, la puissance de la signifiance lexicale et rythmique qu'il déploie y joue un rôle majeur. Cette puissance du signifiant, qui prend corps sous sa plume de latiniste averti, tient autant dans l'exploitation du sens premier ou dans la polysémie que dans l'agencement sonore du vers, l'un servant l'autre. De nombreux articles y ont été consacrés ; de

nombreux ouvrages ont tenté et tentent de percer les mystères de cette « prosodie mystérieuse et méconnue », et avec succès ; les réactions d'élèves, quant à elles, confirment l'attractivité et la modernité de ce mystère.

Nombreux seront sans doute les enseignants à s'accorder avec ce constat fait d'expérience : rares sont les cas où nous jalousons intellectuellement nos élèves. Ouvrir les *Fleurs du Mal* pour la première fois fait indubitablement partie de ces exceptions ; l'impression avoisine, pour l'amateur, l'initiation aux mystères orphiques, tant le toucher initiale mêle l'excitation avide et la curiosité farouche.

Se voir expliquer l'un des poèmes s'en rapproche grandement, tant qu'il ne s'agit pas de commencer par la traditionnelle étude sémantique de l'« albatros ». Baudelaire semble avoir trouvé, comme le confirmeront sans doute des générations d'élèves ou d'étudiants, le juste équilibre entre prosaïsme rédhibitoire et hermétisme repoussant. La lecture est mystérieuse, attirante, enchanteresse, mais le sens ne se projette pas immédiatement à l'esprit ; quel plaisir y aurait-il ? Le *carmen* des sirènes est plus doux sans la pâle limpidité de la connaissance offerte. Confronter un esprit neuf au principe de synesthésie relève de la même logique : briser la linéarité habituelle du langage pour révéler un sens latent comme nouvelle voie intellectuelle et émotionnelle. L'équivocité, plutôt que d'édifier un obstacle dans la compréhension, devient un pont qu'il est nécessaire d'emprunter ; quand la compréhension devient un risque, elle est d'autant plus attrayante.

Accompagner la lecture de « Sed non satiata », par exemple, sans apparat critique, illustre cette tension du sens en perpétuelle fuite et pourtant prosodiquement palpable : les élèves ou étudiants ne savent ce qu'est un « obi » et n'ont pas les références œnologiques nécessaires – qui les en blâmerait ? - pour comprendre la référence au *Constance* ou au *Nuits-Saint-Georges*. On les voit donc s'interroger sur ces mystères apparents : « au constance » plutôt qu'« à la constance », « au nuits » sans « x » ? Pour certains, la mention du Styx n'évoque rien ; pour d'autres c'est celle de Faust. Ici, dans le sanctuaire des *Fleurs du mal*, la lacune n'est pas crispation ; elle se fait tentation. La musique même du nom signifie autant que la référence, et la grandiloquence solennel du rythme

et de l'articulation prosodique fait pour eux davantage sens que l'éventuelle note en bas de page qui éloigne en tentant d'éclaircir. On les voit insensément saisir, dans ce flot mélodique à la logique parfois nébuleuse, la complexité du sentiment amoureux aliénant à travers la seule suavité sonore, susurrante ou amère, du verbe.

Expliquer Baudelaire, c'est savourer le plaisir du traducteur, celui de la résolution victorieuse et pourtant incertaine ; c'est vivre et permettre l'élucidation jouissive du mystère du verbe ; c'est illustrer le symbole comme essence de l'art.

Se heurter à l'obscurité mystérieuse et séductrice des *Fleurs du mal*, c'est être Dante dans l'Enfer ; tenter de l'éclaircir avec ses élèves, c'est devenir Virgile, auquel il rend honneur : « Ô soleil qui guéris la vue troublée, tu me rends si content quand tu résous mes doutes, que le doute m'est doux autant que le savoir ». [2]

Lire Baudelaire, c'est apprendre à aimer l'inconnu. Lire Baudelaire, c'est accepter l'obscurité comme une touche de poésie.

Cela peut être vrai de tous les textes poétiques ; pour une raison qui m'échappe encore, cela est d'autant plus vrai avec Baudelaire.

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[1] Albert Cassagne (*Versification et métrique de Charles Baudelaire)* peut en être un exemple.
[2] Dante, *L'Enfer*, XI, trad. Jacqueline Risset (Paris : GF, Flammarion), p. 111.

My Baudelaire

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Recently I was seeking an epigraph for a suite of poems entitled *Âpretés 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 Confiteor 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 atribilaire', 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!