

BAUDELAIRE CHARLES, STURM
FRANK PEARCE

**BAUDELAIRE: HIS
PROSE AND
POETRY**

Frank Sturms

Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry

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Charles Baudelaire

Baudelaire: His Prose and Poetry

FLOWERS OF EVIL

AVE ATQUE VALE

In Memory of Charles Baudelaire

By ALGERNON CHARLES SWINBURNE

Nous devrions pourtant lui porter quelques fleurs;
Les morts, les pauvres morts, ont de grandes douleurs,
Et quand Octobre souffle, émondeur des vieux arbres,
Son vent mélancolique a l'entour de leurs marbres,
Certe, ils doivent trouver les vivants bien ingrats.

Les Fleurs du Mal

I

Shall I strew on thee rose or rue or laurel,
Brother, on this that was the veil of thee?
Or quiet sea-flower moulded by the sea,
Or simplest growth of meadow-sweet or sorrel,
Such as the summer-sleepy Dryads weave,
Waked up by snow-soft sudden rains at eve?
Or wilt thou rather, as on earth before,
Half-faded fiery blossoms, pale with heat
And full of bitter summer, but more sweet
To thee than gleanings of a northern shore
Trod by no tropic feet?

II

For always thee the fervid languid glories
Allured of heavier suns in mightier skies;
Thine ears knew all the wandering watery sighs
Where the sea sobs round Lesbian promontories,
The barren kiss of piteous wave to wave
That knows not where is that Leucadian grave
Which hides too deep the supreme head of song.
Ah, salt and sterile as her kisses were,
The wild sea winds her and the green gulfs bear

Hither and thither, and vex and work her wrong,
Blind gods that cannot spare.

III

Thou sawest, in thine old singing season, brother,
Secrets and sorrows unbeheld of us:
Fierce loves, and lovely leaf-buds poisonous,
Bare to thy subtler eye, but for none other
Blowing by night in some unbreathed-in clime;
The hidden harvest of luxurious time,
Sin without shape, and pleasure without speech;
And where strange dreams in a tumultuous sleep
Make the shut eyes of stricken spirits weep;
And with each face thou sawest the shadow on each,
Seeing as men sow men reap.

IV

O sleepless heart and sombre soul unsleeping,
That were athirst for sleep and no more life
And no more love, for peace and no more strife!
Now the dim gods of death have in their keeping
Spirit and body and all the springs of song,
Is it well now where love can do not wrong,
Where stingless pleasure has no foam or fang
Behind the unopening closure of her lips?
It is not well where soul from body slips
And flesh from bone divides without a pang
As dew from flower-bell drips.

V

It is enough; the end and the beginning
Are one thing to thee, who are past the end.
O hand unclasped of unbeholden friend,
For thee no fruits to pluck, no palms for winning,
No triumph and no labor and no lust,
Only dead yew-leaves and a little dust.
O quiet eyes wherein the light saith nought,
Whereto the day is dumb, nor any night
With obscure finger silences your sight,

Nor in your speech the sudden soul speaks thought,
Sleep, and have sleep for light.

VI

Now all strange hours and all strange loves are over,
Dreams and desires and sombre songs and sweet,
Hast thou found place at the great knees and feet
Of some pale Titan-woman like a lover,
Such as thy vision here solicited,
Under the shadow of her fair vast head,
The deep division of prodigious breasts,
The solemn slope of mighty limbs asleep,
The weight of awful tresses that still keep
The savor and shade of old-world pine-forests
Where the wet hill-winds weep?

VII

Hast thou found any likeness for thy vision?
O gardener of strange flowers, what bud, what bloom,
Hast thou found sown, what gathered in the gloom?
What of despair, of rapture, of derision,
What of life is there, what of ill or good?
Are the fruits gray like dust or bright like blood?
Does the dim ground grow any seed of ours,
The faint fields quicken any terrene root,
In low lands where the sun and moon are mute
And all the stars keep silence? Are there flowers
At all, or any fruit?

VIII

Alas, but though my flying song flies after,
O sweet strange elder singer, thy more fleet
Singing, and footprints of thy fleeter feet,
Some dim derision of mysterious laughter
From the blind tongueless warders of the dead,
Some gainless glimpse of Proserpine's veiled head,
Some little sound of unregarded tears
Wept by effaced unprofitable eyes,
And from pale mouths some cadence of dead sighs —

These only, these the hearkening spirit hears,
Sees only such things rise.

IX

Thou art far too far for wings of words to follow,
Far too far off for thought or any prayer.
What ails us with thee, who art wind and air?
What ails us gazing where all seen is hollow?
Yet with some fancy, yet with some desire,
Dreams pursue death as winds a flying fire,
Our dreams pursue our dead and do not find.
Still, and more swift than they, the thin flame flies,
The low light fails us in elusive skies,
Still the foiled earnest ear is deaf, and blind
Are still the eluded eyes.

X

Not thee, O never thee, in all time's changes,
Not thee, but this the sound of thy sad soul,
The shadow of thy swift spirit, this shut scroll
I lay my hand on, and not death estranges
My spirit from communion of thy song —
These memories and these melodies that throng
Veiled porches of a Muse funereal —
These I salute, these touch, these clasp and fold
As though a hand were in my hand to hold,
Or through mine ears a mourning musical
Of many mourners rolled.

XI

I among these, I also, in such station
As when the pyre was charred, and piled the sods,
And offering to the dead made, and their gods,
The old mourners had, standing to make libation,
I stand, and to the gods and to the dead
Do reverence without prayer or praise, and shed
Offering to these unknown, the gods of gloom,
And what of honey and spice my seedlands bear,
And what I may of fruits in this chilled air,

And lay, Orestes-like, across the tomb
A curl of severed hair.

XII

But by no hand nor any treason stricken,
Not like the low-lying head of Him, the King,
The flame that made of Troy a ruinous thing,
Thou liest and on this dust no tears could quicken
There fall no tears like theirs that all men hear
Fall tear by sweet imperishable tear
Down the opening leaves of holy poet's pages.
Thee not Orestes, not Electra mourns;
But bending us-ward with memorial urns
The most high Muses that fulfil all ages
Weep, and our God's heart yearns.

XIII

For, sparing of his sacred strength, not often
Among us darkling here the lord of light
Makes manifest his music and his might
In hearts that open and in lips that soften
With the soft flame and heat of songs that shine.
Thy lips indeed he touched with bitter wine,
And nourished them indeed with bitter bread;
Yet surely from his hand thy soul's food came,
The fire that scarred thy spirit at his flame
Was lighted, and thine hungering heart he fed
Who feeds our hearts with fame.

XIV

Therefore he too now at thy soul's sunseting,
God of all suns and songs, he too bends down
To mix his laurel with thy cypress crown
And save thy dust from blame and from forgetting.
Therefore he too, seeing all thou wert and art,
Compassionate, with sad and sacred heart,
Mourns thee of many his children the last dead,
And hallows with strange tears and alien sighs
Thine unmelodious mouth and sunless eyes,

And over thine irrevocable head
Sheds light from the under skies.

XV

And one weeps with him in the ways Lethean,
And stains with tears her changing bosom chill;
That obscure Venus of the hollow hill,
That thing transformed which was the Cytherean,
With lips that lost their Grecian laugh divine
Long since, and face no more called Erycine
A ghost, a bitter and luxurious god.
Thee also with fair flesh and singing spell
Did she, a sad and second prey, compel
Into the footless places once more trod,
And shadows hot from hell.

XVI

And now no sacred staff shall break in blossom,
No choral salutation lure to light
A spirit with perfume and sweet night
And love's tired eyes and hands and barren bosom.
There is no help for these things; none to mend,
And none to mar; not all our songs, O friend,
Will make death clear or make life durable.
Howbeit with rose and ivy and wild vine
And with wild notes about this dust of thine
At least I fill the place where white dreams dwell
And wreath an unseen shrine.

XVII

Sleep; and if life was bitter to thee, pardon,
If sweet, give thanks; thou hast no more to live
And to give thanks is good, and to forgive.
Out of the mystic and the mournful garden
Where all day through thine hands in barren braid
Wove the sick flowers of secrecy and shade,
Green buds of sorrow and sin, and remnants gray,
Sweet-smelling, pale with poison, sanguine-hearted,
Passions that sprang from sleep and thoughts that started,

Shall death not bring us all as thee one day
Among the days departed?

XVIII

For thee, O now a silent soul, my brother,
Take at my hands this garland, and farewell.
Thin is the leaf, and chill the wintry smell,
And chill the solemn earth, a fatal mother,
With sadder than the Niobeian womb,
And in the hollow of her breasts a tomb.
Content thee, howsoever, whose days are done:
There lies not any troublous thing before,
Nor sight nor sound to war against thee more,
For whom all winds are quiet as the sun,
All waters as the shore.

[From inside-leaf: Charles Pierre Baudelaire was born in Paris, France, on April 9, 1821, and died there on August 31, 1867. *Flowers of Evil* was published in 1857 by Baudelaire's friend Auguste Poulet Malassis, who had inherited a printing business at Alençon. Some of them had already appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*. The poet, the publisher, and the printer were found guilty of having offended against public morals.]

PREFACE

In presenting to the American public this collection in English of perhaps the most influential French poet of the last seventy years, I consider it essential to explain the conditions under which the work has been done.

Baudelaire has written poems that will, in all likelihood, live while poetry is used as a medium of expression, and the great influence that he has exercised on English and continental literature is mainly due to the particular quality of his style, his way of feeling or his method of thought. He is a master of analytical power, and in his highest ecstasy of emotional expression, this power can readily be recognized. In his own quotation he gave forth his philosophy on this point:

"The more art would aim at being philosophically clear, the more will it degrade itself and return to the childish hieroglyphic: on the other hand, the more art detaches itself from teaching, the more will it attain to pure disinterested beauty... Poetry, under pain of death or decay, cannot assimilate Herself to science or ethics. She has not Truth for object, she has only Herself." What appears at first glance in the preceding phrases to be a contradiction is really a confirmation of Baudelaire's conception of the highest understanding of æsthetic principle. Baudelaire's ideal beauty is tempered with mystery and sadness, the real too, but never the commonplace.

No poet has brought so many new ideas in sensation into a literary style. Intellectually he is all sensation, though he seldom degenerates into abstract sentimentality. This sum totality of the power of absorbing external sensation is Baudelaire. From the effect of his objectivity his art expresses itself as if solely subjective. This condition of mind and art makes him most difficult to translate into another language, in particular, English.

This collection of his verse and prose is gathered from those experiments in translation which I think will most effectively convey to the English reader those qualities that made Baudelaire what he is. There are numerous translations from Baudelaire in English but most of them may be dismissed as being seldom successful. Mr. Arthur Symons' translation of some of the prose poems is a most beautiful adventure in psychological sensations, effective though not always accurate in interpretation. Mr. F. P. Sturm's effort with the *Flowers of Evil* and the *Prose Poems* is always accurate, sometimes inspired, and often a tour de force of translation. Mr. W. J. Robertson's translations from the *Flowers of Evil* is the most successful of all. He maintains with amazing facility all the subtlety, beauty and one might also say the perfume of Baudelaire's verse. Mr. Shipley does a most meritorious work in his translations from the prose poems, and the reader will be everlastingly grateful to him for his fine painstaking translation of the *Intimate Papers* from Baudelaire's unpublished novels.

There are few interesting or valuable essays on the mind and art of Baudelaire in English, but the reader will find the following critical appreciations to be of inestimable use in the study of the poet:

"The Influence of Baudelaire": G. Turquet-Milnes (Constable: 1913); "The Baudelaire Legend": James Huneker (*Egoists*: Scribner's: 1909); and Théophile Gautier's essay on Baudelaire, of which an excellent English translation has been made by Prof. Sumichrast.

I think that this anthology will give the reader an intelligent understanding of the mind and art of a very great French poet.

T. R. SMITH.

June, 1919.

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE: A STUDY BY F. P. STURM

I

Charles Baudelaire was one of those who take the downward path which leads to salvation. There are men born to be the martyrs of the world and of their own time; men whose imagination carries them beyond all that we know or have learned to think of as law and order; who are so intoxicated with a vision of a beauty beyond the world that the world's beauty seems to them but a little paint above the face of the dead; who love God with a so consuming fire that they must praise evil for God's glory, and blaspheme His name that all sects and creeds may be melted away; who see beneath all there is of mortal loveliness, the invisible worm, feeding upon hopes and desires no less than upon the fair and perishable flesh; who are good and evil at the same time; and because the good and evil in their souls finds a so perfect instrument in the refined and tortured body of modern times, desire keener pleasure and more intolerable anguish than the world contains, and become materialists because the tortured heart cries out in denial of the soul that tortures it. Charles Baudelaire was one of these men; his art is the expression of his decadence; a study of his art is the understanding of that complex movement, that "inquietude of the Veil in the temple," as Mallarmé called it, that has changed the literature of the world; and, especially, made of poetry the subtle and delicate instrument of emotional expression it has become in our own day.

We used to hear a deal about Decadence in the arts, and now we hear as much about Symbolism, which is a flower sprung from the old corruption – but Baudelaire is decadence; his art is not a mere literary affectation, a mask of sorrow to be thrown aside when the curtain falls, but the voice of an imagination plunged into the contemplation of all the perverse and fallen loveliness of the world; that finds beauty most beautiful at the moment of its passing away, and regrets its perishing with a so poignant grief that it must needs follow it even into the narrow grave where those "dark comrades the worms, without ears, without eyes," whisper their secrets of terror and tell of yet another pang —

"Pour ce vieux corps sans âme et mort parmi les morts."

All his life Baudelaire was a victim to an unutterable weariness, that terrible malady of the soul born out of old times to prey upon civilisations that have reached their zenith – weariness, not of life, but of living, of continuing to labour and suffer in a world that has exhausted all its emotions and has no new thing to offer. Being an artist, therefore, he took his revenge upon life by a glorification of all the sorrowful things that it is life's continual desire to forget. His poems speak sweetly of decay and death, and whisper their graveyard secrets into the ears of beauty. His men are men whom the moon has touched with her own phantasy: who love the immense ungovernable sea, the unformed and multitudinous waters; the place where they are not; the woman they will never know; and all his women are enigmatic courtesans whose beauty is a transfiguration of sin; who hide the ugliness of the soul beneath the perfection of the body. He loves them and does not love; they are cruel and indolent and full of strange perversions; they are perfumed with exotic perfumes; they sleep to the sound of viols, or fan themselves languidly in the shadow, and only he sees that it is the shadow of death.

An art like this, rooted in a so tortured perception of the beauty and ugliness of a world where the spirit is mingled indistinguishably with the flesh, almost inevitably concerns itself with material things, with all the subtle raptures the soul feels, not by abstract contemplation, for that would mean content, but through the gateway of the senses; the lust of the flesh, the delight of the eye. Sound, colour, odour, form: to him these are not the symbols that lead the soul towards the infinite: they

are the soul; they are the infinite. He writes, always with a weary and laborious grace, about the abstruser and more enigmatic things of the flesh, colours and odours particularly; but, unlike those later writers who have been called realists, he apprehends, to borrow a phrase from Pater, "all those finer conditions wherein material things rise to that subtlety of operation which constitutes them spiritual, where only the finer nerve and the keener touch can follow."

In one of his sonnets he says:

"Je hais la passion et l'esprit me fait mal!"

and, indeed, he is a poet in whom the spirit, as modern thought understands the word, had little or no part. We feel, reading his terrible poems, that the body is indeed acutely conscious of the soul, distressfully and even angrily conscious, but its motions are not yet subdued by the soul's prophetic voice. It was to forget this voice, with its eternal *Esto memor*, that Baudelaire wrote imperishably of perishable things and their fading glory.

II

Charles Baudelaire was born at Paris, April 21st, 1821, in an old turreted house in the Rue Hautefeuille. His father, a distinguished gentleman of the eighteenth-century school, seems to have passed his old-world manners on to his son, for we learn from Baudelaire's friend and biographer, Théophile Gautier, that the poet "always preserved the forms of an extreme urbanity."

At school, during his childhood, he gained many distinctions, and passed for a kind of infant prodigy; but later on, when he sat for his examination as *bachelier ès lettres*, his extreme nervousness made him appear almost an idiot. Failing miserably, he made no second attempt. Then his father died, and his mother married General Aupick, afterwards ambassador to Constantinople, an excellent man in every respect, but quite incapable of sympathising with or even of understanding the love for literature that now began to manifest itself in the mind of his stepson. All possible means were tried to turn him from literature to some more lucrative and more respectable profession. Family quarrels arose over this all-important question, and young Baudelaire, who seems to have given some real cause for offence to the step-father whose aspirations and profession he despised, was at length sent away upon a long voyage, in the hopes that the sight of strange lands and new faces would perhaps cause him to forget the ambitions his relatives could but consider as foolish and idealistic. He sailed the Indian Seas; visited the islands of Mauritius, Bourbon, Madagascar, and Ceylon; saw the yellow waters of the sacred Ganges; stored up the memory of tropical sounds and colours and odours for use later on; and returned to Paris shortly after his twenty-first birthday, more than ever determined to be a man of letters.

His parents were in despair; no doubt quite rightly so from their point of view. Théophile Gautier, perhaps remembering the many disappointments and martyrdoms of his own sad life, defends the attitude of General Aupick in a passage where he poignantly describes the hopelessness of the profession of letters. The future author of *The Flowers of Evil*, however, was now his own master and in a position, so far as monetary matters were concerned, to follow out his own whim. He took apartments in the Hôtel Pimodan, a kind of literary lodging-house where all Bohemia met; and where Gautier and Boissard were also at that period installed. Then began that life of uninterrupted labour and meditation that has given to France her most characteristic literature, for these poems of Baudelaire's are not only original in themselves but have been the cause of originality in others; they are the root of modern French literature and much of the best English literature; they were the origin of that new method in poetry that gave Mallarmé and Verlaine to France; Yeats and some others to England. It was in the Hôtel Pimodan that Baudelaire and Gautier first met and formed one of those unfading friendships not so rare among men of letters as among men of the world; there also the "Hashish-Eaters" held the *séances* that have since become famous in the history of literature. Hashish and opium, indeed, contribute not a little to the odour of the strange *Flowers of Evil*; as also, perhaps, they contributed to Baudelaire's death from the terrible malady known as general paralysis, for he was a man who could not resist a so easy path into the world of *macabre* visions. I shall return to this question again; there is internal evidence in his writings that shows he made good literary use of these opiate-born dreams which in the end dragged him into their own abyss.

It was in 1849, when Baudelaire was twenty-eight years of age, that he made the acquaintance of the already famous Théophile Gautier, from whose admirable essay I shall presently translate a passage giving us an excellent pen-sketch of the famous poet and cynic – for Baudelaire was a cynic: he had not in the least degree the rapt expression and vague personality usually supposed to be characteristic of the poetic mood. "He recalls," wrote M. Dulamon, who knew him well, "one of those beautiful Abbés of the eighteenth century, so correct in their doctrine, so indulgent in their commerce with life – the Abbé de Bernis, for example. At the same time, he writes better verse, and would not have demanded at Rome the destruction of the Order of Jesuits."

That was Baudelaire exactly, suave and polished, filled with sceptical faith, cynical with the terrible cynicism of the scholar who is acutely conscious of all the morbid and gloomy secrets hidden beneath the fair exteriors of the world. Gautier, in the passage I have already mentioned, emphasises both his reserve and his cynicism: "Contrary to the somewhat loose manners of artists generally, Baudelaire prided himself upon observing the most rigid *convenances*; his courtesy, indeed, was excessive to the point of seeming affected. He measured his sentences, using only the most carefully chosen terms, and pronounced certain words in a particular manner, as though he wished to underline them and give them a mysterious importance. He had italics and capital letters in his voice. Exaggeration, much in honour at Pimodan's, he disdained as being theatrical and gross; though he himself affected paradox and excess. With a very simple, very natural, and perfectly detached air, as though retailing, *à la Prudhomme*, a newspaper paragraph about the mildness or rigour of the weather, he would advance some satanically monstrous axiom, or uphold with the coolness of ice some theory of a mathematical extravagance; for he always followed a rigorous plan in the development of his follies. His spirit was neither in words nor traits; he saw things from a particular point of view, so that their outlines were changed, as objects when one gets a bird's-eye view of them; he perceived analogies inappreciable to others, and you were struck by their fantastic logic. His rare gestures were slow and sober; he never threw his arms about, for he held southern gesticulation in horror; British coolness seemed to him to be good taste. One might describe him as a dandy who had strayed into Bohemia; though still preserving his rank, and that cult of self which characterises a man imbued with the principles of Brummel." At this time Baudelaire was practically unknown outside his own circle of friends, writers themselves; and it was not until eight years later, in 1857, when he published his *Flowers of Evil*, that he became famous. Infamous would perhaps be a better word to describe the kind of fame he at first obtained, for every Philistine in France joined in the cry against a poet who dared to remind his readers that the grave awaits even the rich; who dared to choose the materials of his art from among the objects of death and decay; who exposed the mouldering secrecies of the grave, and painted, in the phosphorescent colours of corruption, frescoes of death and horror; who desecrated love in the sonnet entitled "Causerie":

"You are a sky of autumn, pale and rose!
But all the sea of sadness in my blood
Surges, and ebbing, leaves my lip morose
Salt with the memory of the bitter flood.

In vain your hand glides my faint bosom o'er;
That which you seek, beloved, is desecrate
By woman's tooth and talon: ah! no more
Seek in me for a heart which those dogs ate!

It is a ruin where the jackals rest,
And rend and tear and glut themselves and slay!
– A perfume swims about your naked breast,
Beauty, hard scourge of spirits, have your way!
With flame-like eyes that at bright feasts have flared
Burn up these tatters that the beasts have spared!"

We can recall nothing like it in the literary history of our own country; the sensation caused by the appearance of the first series of Mr. Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads* was mild in comparison; just as Mr. Swinburne's poems were but wan derivatives from Baudelaire – at least as far as ideas are concerned; I say nothing about their beauty of expression or almost absolute mastery of technique –

for it is quite obvious that the English poet was indebted to Baudelaire for all the bizarre and Satanic elements in his work; as Baudelaire was indebted to Poe. Mr. Swinburne, however, is wild where Baudelaire is grave; and where Baudelaire compresses some perverse and morbid image into a single unforgettable line, Mr. Swinburne beats it into a froth of many musical lovely words, until we forget the deep sea in the shining foam.

If we call to mind the reception at first given to the black-and-white work of Aubrey Beardsley, it will give some idea of the consternation caused in France by the appearance of the *Flowers of Evil*. Beardsley, indeed, resembles Baudelaire in many ways, for he achieved in art what the other achieved in literature: the apotheosis of the horrible and grotesque, the perfecting of symbols to shadow forth intellectual sin, the tearing away of the decent veil of forgetfulness that hides our own corruption from our eyes, and his one prose romance, *Under the Hill*, unhappily incomplete at his death at the age of twenty-four, beats Baudelaire on his own ground. The four or five chapters which alone remain of this incomplete romance stand alone in literature. They are the absolute attainment of what Baudelaire more or less successfully attempted – a testament of sin. Not the sin of the flesh, the gross faults of the body that are vulgarly known as sin; but sin which is a metaphysical corruption, a depravity of pure intellect, the sin of the fallen angels in hell who cover their anguish with the sound of harps and sweet odours; who are incapable of bodily impurity, and for whom spiritual purity is the only terror. And since mortality, which is the shadow of the immortal, can comprehend spiritual and abstract things only by the analogies and correspondences which exist between them and the far reflections of them that we call reality, both Baudelaire and Beardsley, as indeed all artists who speak with tongues of spiritual truth, choose more or less actual human beings to be the shadows of the divine or satanic beings they would invoke, and make them sin delicate sins of the refined bodily sense that we may get a far-off glimpse of the Evil that is not mortal but immortal, the Spiritual Evil that has set up its black throne beside the throne of Spiritual Good, and has equal share in the shaping of the world and man.

I am not sure that Baudelaire, when he wrote this sinister poetry, had any clear idea that it was his vocation to be a prophet either of good or evil. Certainly he had no thought of founding a school of poetry, and if he made any conscious effort to bring a new method into literature, it was merely because he desired to be one of the famous writers of his country. An inspired thinker, however, whether his inspiration be mighty or small, receives his thought from a profounder source than his own physical reason, and writes to the dictation of beings outside of and greater than himself. The famous Eliphas Levi, like all the mystics who came before and after him, from Basilides the Gnostic to Blake the English visionary, taught that the poet and dreamer are the mediums of the Divine Word, and sole instruments through which the gods energise in the world of material things. The writing of a great book is the casting of a pebble into the pool of human thought; it gives rise to ever-widening circles that will reach we know not whither, and begins a chain of circumstances that may end in the destruction of kingdoms and religions and the awakening of new gods. The change wrought, directly or indirectly, by *The Flowers of Evil* alone is almost too great to be properly understood. There is perhaps not a man in Europe to-day whose outlook on life would not have been different had *The Flowers of Evil* never been written. The first thing that happens after the publication of such a book is the theft of its ideas and the imitation of its style by the lesser writers who labour for the multitude, and so its teaching goes from book to book, from the greater to the lesser, as the divine hierarchies emanate from Divinity, until ideas that were once paradoxical, or even blasphemous and unholy, have become mere newspaper commonplaces adopted by the numberless thousands who do not think for themselves, and the world's thought is changed completely, though by infinite slow degrees. The immediate result of Baudelaire's work was the Decadent School in French literature. Then the influence spread across the Channel, and the English *Æsthetes* arose to preach the gospel of imagination to the unimaginative. Both Decadence and *Æstheticism*, as intellectual movements, have fallen into the nadir of oblivion, and the dust lies heavy upon them, but they left a little leaven to lighten the heavy inertness of correct and academic literature; and now Symbolism, a greater movement than

either, is in the ascendant, giving another turn to the wheel, and to all who think deeply about such matters it seems as though Symbolist literature is to be the literature of the future. The Decadents and *Æsthetes* were weak because they had no banner to fight beneath, no authority to appeal to in defence of their views, no definite gospel to preach. They were by turns morbid, hysterical, foolishly blasphemous, or weakly disgusting, but never anything for long, their one desire being to produce a thrill at any cost. If the hospital failed they went to the brothel, and when even obscenity failed to stimulate the jaded palates of their generation there was still the graveyard left. A more or less successful imitation of Baudelaire's awful verses entitled "The Corpse" has been the beginning of more than one French poet's corrupt flight across the sky of literature. That Baudelaire himself was one of their company is not an accusation, for he had genius, which his imitators, English or French, have not; and his book, even apart from the fact that it made straight the way for better things, must be admitted to be a great and subtly-wrought work of art by whosoever reads it with understanding. And, moreover, his morbidness is not at all an affectation; his poems inevitably prove the writer to have been quite sincere in his perversion and in his decadence.

The Symbolist writers of to-day, though they are sprung from him, are greater than he because they are the prophets of a faith who believe in what they preach. They find their defence in the writings of the mystics, and their doctrines are at the root of every religion. They were held by the Gnostics and are in the books of the Kabbalists and the Magi. Blake preached them and Eliphas Levi taught them to his disciples in France, who in turn have misunderstood and perverted them, and formed strange religions and sects of Devil-worshippers. These doctrines hold that the visible world is the world of illusion, not of reality. Colour and sound and perfume and all material and sensible things are but the symbols and far-off reflections of the things that are alone real. Reality is hidden away from us by the five senses and the gates of death; and Reason, the blind and laborious servant of the physical brain, deludes us into believing that we can know anything of truth through the medium of the senses. It is through the imagination alone that man can obtain spiritual revelation, for imagination is the one window in the prison-house of the flesh through which the soul can see the proud images of eternity. And Blake, who is the authority of all English Symbolist writers, long since formulated their creed in words that have been quoted again and again, and must still be quoted by all who write in defence of modern art: — "*The world of imagination is the world of Eternity. It is the divine bosom into which we shall all go after the death of the vegetated body. This world of imagination is infinite and eternal, whereat the world of generation, or vegetation, is finite and temporal. There exist in that eternal world the permanent realities of everything which we see reflected in this vegetable glass of nature!*"

In spite of the cry against *Flowers of Evil*, Baudelaire did not lack defenders among literary men themselves; and many enthusiastic articles were written in praise of his book. Thierry not unjustly compared him to Dante, to which Barbey d'Aurevilly replied, "Baudelaire comes from hell, Dante only went there"; adding at the finish of his article: "After the *Flowers of Evil* there are only two possible ways for the poet who made them blossom: either to blow out his brains or become a Christian." Baudelaire did neither. And Victor Hugo, after reading the two poems, "The Seven Old Men" and "The Little Old Women," wrote to Baudelaire. "You have dowered the heaven of art with one knows not what deathly gleam," he said in his letter; "you have created a new shudder." The phrase became famous, and for many years after this the creation of a new shudder was the ambition of every young French writer worth his salt.

When the first great wave of public astonishment had broken and ebbed, Baudelaire's work began to be appreciated by others than merely literary men, by all in fact who cared for careful art and subtle thinking, and before long he was admitted to be the greatest after Hugo who had written French verse. He was famous and he was unhappy. Neither glory, nor love, nor friendship – and he knew them all – could minister to the disease of that fierce mind, seeking it knew not what and never finding it; seeking it, unhappily, in the strangest excesses. He took opium to quieten his nerves when they trembled, for something to do when they did not, and made immoderate use of hashish to produce

visions and heighten his phantasy. His life was a haunted weariness. Thomas de Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* seems to have fascinated him to a great extent, for besides imitating the vices of the author, he wrote, in imitation of his book, *The Artificial Paradises*, a monograph on the effects of opium and hashish, partly original, partly a mere translation from the *Confessions*.

He remembered his visions and sensations as an eater of drugs and made literary use of them. At the end of this book, among the "Poems in Prose," will be found one entitled "The Double Chamber," almost certainly written under the influence of opium, and the last verse of "The Temptation" —

"O mystic metamorphosis!
My senses into one sense flow —
Her voice makes perfume when she speaks,
Her breath is music faint and low!"

as well as the last six lines of that profound sonnet "Correspondences" —

"Some perfumes are as fragrant as a child,
Sweet as the sound of hautboys, meadow-green;
Others, corrupted, rich, exultant, wild,
Have all the expansion of things infinite:
As amber, incense, musk, and benzoin,
Which sing the sense's and the soul's delight,"

are certainly memories of a sensation he experienced under the influence of hashish, as recorded in *The Artificial Paradises*, where he has this curious passage: — "The senses become extraordinarily acute and fine. The eyes pierce Infinity. The ear seizes the most unseizable sounds in the midst of the shrillest noises. Hallucinations commence... External objects take on monstrous appearances and show themselves under forms hitherto unknown... The most singular equivocations, the most inexplicable transposition of ideas, take place. *Sounds are perceived to have a colour, and colour becomes musical.*" Baudelaire need not have gone to hashish to discover this. The mystics of all times have taught that sounds in gross matter produce colour in subtle matter; and all who are subject to any visionary condition know that when in trance colours will produce words of a language whose meaning is forgotten as soon as one awakes to normal life; but I do not think Baudelaire was a visionary. His work shows too precise a method, and a too ordered appreciation of the artificial in beauty. There again he is comparable to Aubrey Beardsley, for I have read somewhere that when Beardsley was asked if ever he saw visions, he replied, "I do not permit myself to see them, except upon paper." The whole question of the colour of sound is one of supreme interest to the poet, but it is too difficult and abstract a question to be written of here. A famous sonnet by Rimbaud on the colour of the vowels has founded a school of symbolists in France. I will content myself with quoting that — in the original, since it loses too much, by translation:

"A noir, E blanc, I rouge, U vert, O bleu, voyelles,
Je dirai quelque jour vos naissances latentes,
A, noir corset velu des mouches éclatantes
Qui bourdonnent autour des puanteurs cruelles,

Golfes d'ombres; E, candeurs des vapeurs et des tentes,
Lances des glaciers fiers, rois blancs, frissons d'ombrelles;
I, pourpres, sang craché, rire des lèvres belles
Dans la colère ou les ivresses pénitentes;

U, cycles, vibrations divins des mers virides,
Paix des pâtis semés d'animaux, paix des rides
Que l'alchimie imprime aux grands fronts studieux.

O, suprême clairon, plein de stridements étranges,
Silences traversés des mondes et des anges.
– O l'Oméga, rayon violet de ses yeux."

It is to be hoped that opium and hashish rendered Baudelaire somewhat less unhappy during his life, for they certainly contributed to hasten his death. Always of an extremely neurotic temperament, he began to break down beneath his excesses, and shortly after the publication of *The Artificial Paradises*, which shows a considerable deterioration in his style, he removed from Paris to Brussels in the hope of building up his health by the change. At Brussels he grew worse. His speech began to fail; he was unable to pronounce certain words and stumbled over others. Hallucinations commenced, no longer the hallucinations of hashish; and his disease, rapidly establishing itself, was recognised as "general paralysis of the insane." Gautier tells how the news of his death came to Paris while he yet lived. It was false news, but prematurely true. Baudelaire lingered on for another three months; motionless and inert, his eyes the only part of him alive; unable to speak or even to write, and so died.

He left, besides *The Flowers of Evil* and *Little Poems in Prose* (his masterpieces), several volumes of critical essays, published under the titles of *Æsthetic Curiosities* and *Romantic Art*; *The Artificial Paradises*, and his translations of the works of Edgar Allan Poe – admirable pieces of work by which Poe actually gains.

III

Baudelaire's love of the artificial has been insisted upon by all who have studied his work, but to my mind never sufficiently insisted upon, for it was the foundation of his method. He wrote many arguments in favour of the artificial, and elaborated them into a kind of paradoxical philosophy of art. His hatred of nature and purely natural things was but a perverted form of the religious ecstasy that made the old monk pull his cowl about his eyes when he left his cell in the month of May, lest he should see the blossoming trees, and his mind be turned towards the beautiful delusions of the world. The Egyptians and the earliest of the Christians looked upon nature not as the work of the good and benevolent spirit who is the father of our souls, but as the work of the rebellious "gods of generation," who fashion beautiful things to capture the heart of man and bind his Soul to earth. Blake, whom I have already quoted, hated nature in the same fashion, and held death to be the one way of escape from "the delusions of goddess Nature and her laws." Baudelaire's revolt against external things was more a revolt of the intellect than of the imagination; and he expresses it, not by desiring that the things of nature should be swept away to make room for the things of the spirit, but that they should be so changed by art that they cease to be natural. As he was of all poets the most intensely modern, holding that "modernity is one-half of art," the other half being something "eternal and immutable," he preferred, unlike Blake and his modern followers, to express himself in quite modern terms, and so wrote his famous and much misunderstood *Éloge du Maquillage* to defend his views. As was usual with him, he pushed his ideas to their extreme logical sequence, and the casual reader who picks up that extraordinary essay is in consequence quite misled as to the writer's intention.

It seems scarcely necessary at this time of day to assert that the *Éloge du Maquillage* is something more than a mere *Praise of Cosmetics*, written by a man who wished to shock his readers. It is the part expression of a theory of art, and if it is paradoxical and far-fetched it is because Baudelaire wrote at a time when French literature, in the words of M. Asselineau, "was dying of correctness," and needed very vigorous treatment indeed. If the *Éloge du Maquillage* had been more restrained in manner, if it had not been something so entirely contrary to all accepted ideas of the well-regulated citizen who never thinks a thought that somebody else has not put into his head, it might have been passed over without notice. It was written to initiate the profane; to make them think, at least; and not to raise a smile among the initiated. And moreover, it was in a manner a defence of his own work that had met with so much hatred and opposition.

He begins by attempting to prove that Nature is innately and fundamentally wrong and wicked. "The greater number of errors relative to the beautiful date from the eighteenth century's false conceptions of morality. Nature was regarded in those times as the base, source, and type of all possible good and beauty... If, however, we consent to refer simply to the visible facts... we see that Nature teaches nothing, or almost nothing. That is to say, she *forces* man to sleep, to drink, to eat, and to protect himself, well or ill, against the hostilities of the atmosphere. It is she also who moves him to kill and eat or imprison and torture his kind; for, as soon as we leave the region of necessities and needs to enter into that of luxuries and pleasures, we see that Nature is no better than a counsellor to crime... Religion commands us to nourish our poor and infirm parents; Nature (the voice of our own interest) commands us to do away with them. Pass in review, analyse all that is natural, all the actions and desires of the natural man, and you will find nothing but what is horrible. All beautiful and noble things are the result of calculation. Crime, the taste for which the human animal absorbs before birth, is originally natural. Virtue, on the contrary, is *artificial*, supernatural, since there has been a necessity in all ages and among all nations for gods and prophets to preach virtue to humanity; since man alone would have been unable to discover it. Evil is done without effort, *naturally* and by fatality; good is always the product of an art."

So far the argument is straightforward and expresses what many must have thought, but Baudelaire, remembering that exaggeration is the best way of impressing one's ideas upon the unimaginative, immediately carries his argument from the moral order to the order of the beautiful, and applies it there. The result is strange enough. "I am thus led to regard personal adornment as one of the signs of the primitive nobility of the human soul. The races that our confused and perverted civilisation, with a fatuity and pride entirely laughable, treats as savages, understand as does the child the high spirituality of the toilet. The savage and the child, by their naïve love of all brilliant things, of glittering plumage and shining stuffs, and the superlative majesty of artificial forms, bear witness to their distaste for reality, and so prove, unknown to themselves, the immateriality of their souls."

Thus, with some appearance of logic, he carries his argument a step farther, and this immediately brings him to the bizarre conclusion that the more beautiful a woman naturally is, the more she should hide her natural beauty beneath the artificial charm of rouge and powder. "She performs a duty in attempting to appear magical and supernatural. She is an idol who must adorn herself to be adored." Powder and rouge and kohl, all the little artifices that shock respectability, have for their end "the creation of an abstract unity in the grain and colour of the skin." This unity brings the human being nearer to the condition of a statue – that is to say, "a divine and superior being." Red and black are the symbols of "an excessive and supernatural life." A touch of kohl "lends to the eye a more decided appearance of a window opened upon infinity"; and rouge augments the brilliance of the eye, "and adds to a beautiful feminine face the mysterious passion of the priestess." But artifice cannot make ugliness any the less ugly, nor help age to rival youth. "Who dare assign to art the sterile function of imitating nature?" Deception, if it is to have any charm, must be obvious and unashamed; it must be displayed "if not with affectation, at least with a kind of candour."

Such theories as these, if they are sincerely held, necessarily lead the theorist into the strangest bypaths of literature. Baudelaire, like many another writer whose business is with verse, pondered so long upon the musical and rhythmical value of words that at times words became meaningless to him. He thought his own language too simple to express the complexities of poetic reverie, and dreamed of writing his poems in Latin. Not, however, in the Latin of classical times; that was too robust, too natural, too "brutal and purely epidermic," to use an expression of his own; but in the corrupt Latin of the Byzantine decadence, which he considered as "the supreme sigh of a strong being already transformed and prepared for the spiritual life."

One of these Latin poems has appeared in all editions of *The Flowers of Evil*. Though dozens as good are to be found in the Breviary of the Roman Church, "Franciscæ Meæ Laudes" has been included in this selection for the benefit of those curious in such matters. It is one of Baudelaire's many successful steps in the wrong direction.

IV

In almost every line of *The Flowers of Evil* one can trace the influence of Edgar Poe, and in the many places where Baudelaire has attained a pure imaginative beauty as in "The Sadness of the Moon" or "Music" or "The Death of Lovers," it is a beauty that would have pleased the author of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Another kind of beauty, the beauty of death – for in Baudelaire's crucible everything is melted into loveliness – is even more directly traceable to Poe. In spite of the sonnet "Correspondences," and in spite of his Symbolist followers of the present day, Baudelaire himself made but an imperfect use of such symbols as he had; and these he found ready to his hand in the works of the American poet. The Tomb, the symbol of death or of an intellectual darkness inhabited by the Worm, who is remorse; the Abyss, which is the despair into which the mortal part of man's mind plunges when brought into contact with dead and perishing substances; all these are borrowed from Poe. The Worm, who "devours with a kiss," occasionally becomes Time devouring life, or the Demon, "the obscure Enemy who gnaws the heart"; and when it is none of these it is the Serpent, as in that sombre poem "To a Madonna" – the Serpent beneath the feet of conquering purity. Baudelaire's imagination, however, which continually ran upon *macabre* images, loved remorse more than peace, and loved the Serpent more than the purity that would slay it, so he destroys purity with "Seven Knives" which are "the Seven Deadly Sins," that the Serpent may live to prey upon a heart that finds no beauty in peace. Even Love is evil, for his "ancient arrows" are "crime, horror, folly," and the god Eros becomes a demon lying in wait:

"Let us love gently. Love, from his retreat
Ambushed and shadowy, bends his fatal bow,
And I too well his ancient arrows know:
Crime, Horror, Folly..."

Gautier pretends that the poet preserved his ideal under the form of "the adorable phantom of La Beatrix, the ideal ever desired, never attained, the divine and superior beauty incarnated in an ethereal woman, spiritualised, made of light and flame and perfume, a vapour, a dream, a reflection of the seraphical world"; but when Baudelaire has a vision of this same Beatrice he sees her as one of a crowd of "cruel and curious demons" who mock at his sorrow, and she, too, mocks him, and caresses the demons who are his spiritual foes.

Baudelaire was too deeply in love with the artificial to care overmuch for the symbols he could have found among natural objects. Only once in *The Flowers of Evil* does he look upon the Moon with the eyes of a mystic; and that is when he remembers that all people of imagination are under the Moon's influence, and makes his poet hide her iridescent tear in his heart, "far from the eyes of the Sun," for the Sun is lord of material labours and therefore hostile to the dreams and reveries that are the activity of the poet. He sought more for bizarre analogies and striking metaphors than for true symbols or correspondences. He is happiest when comparing the vault of the heaven to "the lighted ceiling of a music hall," or "the black lid of the mighty pot where the human generations boil"; and when he thinks of the unfortunate and unhappy folk of the world, he does not see any hope for them in any future state; he sees, simply, "God's awful claw" stretched out to tear them. He offers pity, but no comfort.

Sometimes he has a vision of a beauty unmingled with any malevolence; but it is always evoked by sensuous and material things; perfume or music; and always it is a sorrowful loveliness he mourns or praises. Perhaps of all his poems "The Balcony" is most full of that tender and reverential melancholy we look for in a poem of love; but even it tells of a passion that has faded out of heart and mind and become beautiful only with its passing away, and not of an existing love. The other love poems – if

indeed such a name can be given to "A Madrigal of Sorrow," "The Eyes of Beauty," "The Remorse of the Dead," and the like – are nothing but terrible confessions of satiety, or cruelty, or terror. I have translated "The Corpse," his most famous and most infamous poem, partly because it shows him at his worst as the others in the volume at his best, partly because it is something of the nature of a literary curiosity. A poem like "The Corpse," which is simply an example of what may happen if any writer pushes his theories to the extreme, does not at all detract, be it said, from Baudelaire's delicate genius; for though he may not be quite worthy of a place by Dante, he has written poems that Dante might have been proud to write, and he is worthy to be set among the very greatest of the moderns, alongside Hugo and Verlaine. Read the sonnet entitled "Beauty" and you will see how he has invoked in fourteen lines the image of a goddess, mysterious and immortal; as fair as that Aphrodite who cast the shadow of her loveliness upon the Golden Age; as terrible as Pallas, "the warrior maid invincible." And as Minerva loved mortality in the person of Ulysses, so Baudelaire's personification of Beauty loves the poets who pray before her and gaze into her eternal eyes, watching the rising and setting of their visionary Star in those placid mirrors.

The explanation of most of Baudelaire's morbid imaginings is this, that he was a man haunted by terrible dream-like memories; chief among them the memory that the loveliness he had adored in woman – the curve of a perfect cheek, the lifting of a perfect arm in some gesture of imperial indolence, the fall of a curl across, a pale brow, all the minute and unforgettable things that give immortality to some movement of existence – all these, and the woman and her lover, must pass away from Time and Space; and he, unhappily, knew nothing of the philosophy that teaches us how all objects and events, even the most trivial – a woman's gesture, a rose, a sigh, a fading flame, the sound that trembles on a lute-string – find a place in Eternity when they pass from the recognition of our senses. If he believed in the deathlessness of man's personality he gained no comfort from his belief. He mourned the body's decay; he was not concerned with the soul; and no heaven less palpable than Mohammed's could have had any reality in his imagination.

His prose is as distinguished in its manner as his verse. I think it was Professor Saintsbury who first brought *The Little Poems in Prose*, a selection from which is included in this volume, before the notice of English readers in an essay written many years ago. I am writing this in France, far from the possibility of consulting any English books, but if my memory serves me rightly he considered the prose of these prose poems to be as perfect as literature can be. I think he said, "they go as far as prose can go." They need no other introduction than themselves, for they are perfect of their kind, and not different in thought from the more elaborately wrought poems of *The Flowers of Evil*. Some of them, as for instance "Every Man His Chimæra," are as classical and as universally true as the myths and symbolisms of the Old Testament; and all of them, I think, are worthy of a place in that book the Archangel of the Presence will consult when all is weighed in the balance – the book written by man himself, the record of his deep and shallow imaginings. Baudelaire wrote them, he said, because he had dreamed, "in his days of ambition," "of a miracle of poetical prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme." His attitude of mind was always so natural to him that he never thought it necessary to make any excuse for the spirit of his art or the drear philosophy he preached; unless a short notice printed in the first edition of his poems, but withdrawn from the second edition, explaining that "faithful to his dolorous programme, the author of *The Flowers of Evil*, as a perfect comedian, has had to mould his spirit to all sophisms as to all corruptions," can be considered as an excuse. From whatever point of view we regard him: whether we praise his art and blame his philosophy, or blame his art and praise his philosophy, he is as difficult to analyse as he is difficult to give a place to, for we have none with whom to compare him, or very few, too few to be of service to the critic. His art is like the pearl, a beautiful product of disease, and to blame it is like blaming the pearl.

He looked upon life very much as Poe, whom he so admired, looked upon it: with the eye of a sensitive spectator in some gloomy vault of the Spanish Inquisition, where beauty was upon the rack; he was horrified, but unable to turn from a sight that fascinated him by its very terror. His moments of

inspiration are haunted by the consciousness that evil beings, clothed with horror as with a shroud, are ever lingering about the temple of life and awaiting an opportunity to enter. He was like a man who awakens trembling from a nightmare, afraid of the darkness, and unable to believe the dawn may be less hopeless than the midnight. Perhaps he was haunted, as many artists and all mystics, by a fear of madness and of the unseen world of evil shapes that sanity hides from us and madness reveals. Is there a man, is there a writer, especially, who has not at times been conscious of a vague and terrible fear that the whole world of visible nature is but a comfortable illusion that may fade away in a moment and leave him face to face with the horror that has visited him in dreams? The old occult writers held that the evil thoughts of others beget phantoms in the air that can make themselves, bodies out of our fear, and haunt even our waking moments. These were the shapes of terror that haunted Baudelaire. Shelley, too, writes of them with as profound a knowledge as the magical writer of the Middle Ages. They come to haunt his Prometheus.

"Blackening the birth of day with countless wings,
And hollow underneath, like death."

They are the elemental beings who dwell beside the soul of the dreamer and the poet, "like a vain loud multitude"; turning life into death and all beautiful thoughts into poems like *The Flowers of Evil*, or into tales like the satanic reveries of Edgar Poe.

"We are the ministers of pain, and fear,
And disappointment, and mistrust, and hate,
And clinging crime; and as lean dogs pursue
Through wood and lake some struck and sobbing fawn,
We track all things that weep, and bleed, and live,
When the great King betrays them to our will."

And every man gives them of the substance of his imagination to clothe them in prophetic shapes that are the images of his destiny:

"From our victim's destined agony
The shade which is our form invests us round,
Else we are shapeless as our mother Night."

The greatest of all poets conquer their dreams; others, who are great, but not of the greatest, are conquered by them, and Baudelaire was one of these. There is a passage in the works of Edgar Poe that Baudelaire may well have pondered as he laboured at his translation, for it reveals the secret of his life: "There are moments when, even to the sober eye of reason, the world of our sad humanity may assume the semblance of a hell; but the imagination of man is no Carathis to explore with impunity its every cavern. Alas! the grim legion of sepulchral terrors cannot be regarded as altogether fanciful; but, like the demons in whose company Afrasiab made his voyage down the Oxus, they must sleep or they will devour us – they must be suffered to slumber or we perish."

POEMS IN PROSE

Translated by Arthur Symons

NOTE

The "Petits Poèmes en Prose" are experiments, and they are also confessions. "Who of us," says Baudelaire in his dedicatory preface, "has not dreamed, in moments of ambition, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhyme, subtle and staccato enough to follow the lyric motions of the soul, the wavering outlines of meditation, the sudden starts of the conscience?" This miracle he has achieved in these *bagatelles laborieuses*, to use his own words, these astonishing trifles, in which the art is not more novel, precise and perfect than the quality of thought and of emotion. In translating into English a few of these little masterpieces, which have given me so much delight for so many years, I have tried to be absolutely faithful to the sense, the words, and the rhythm of the original. A. S.

I THE FAVOURS OF THE MOON

The Moon, who is caprice itself, looked in through the window when you lay asleep in your cradle, and said inwardly: "This is a child after my own soul."

And she came softly down the staircase of the clouds, and passed noiselessly through the window-pane. Then she laid herself upon you with, the supple tenderness of a mother, and she left her colours upon your face. That is why your eyes are green and your cheeks extraordinarily pale. It was when you looked at her, that your pupils widened so strangely; and she clasped her arms so tenderly about your throat that ever since you have had the longing for tears.

Nevertheless, in the flood of her joy, the Moon filled the room like a phosphoric atmosphere, like a luminous poison; and all this living light thought and said: "My kiss shall be upon you for ever. You shall be beautiful as I am beautiful. You shall love that which I love and that by which I am loved: water and clouds, night and silence; the vast green sea; the formless and multiform water; the place where you shall never be; the lover whom you shall never know; unnatural flowers; odours which make men drunk; the cats that languish upon pianos and sob like women, with hoarse sweet voices!

"And you shall be loved by my lovers, courted by my courtiers. You shall be the queen of men who have green eyes, and whose throats I have clasped by night in my caresses; of those that love the sea, the vast tumultuous green sea, formless and multiform water, the place where they are not, the woman whom they know not, the ominous flowers that are like the censers of an unknown rite, the odours that trouble the will, and the savage and voluptuous beasts that are the emblems of their folly."

And that is why, accursed dear spoilt child, I lie now at your feet, seeking to find in you the image of the fearful goddess, the fateful god-mother, the poisonous nurse of all the moonstruck of the world.

II WHICH IS TRUE?

I knew one Benedicta who filled earth and air with the ideal; and from whose eyes men learnt the desire of greatness, of beauty, of glory, and of all whereby we believe in immortality.

But this miraculous child was too beautiful to live long; and she died only a few days after I had come, to know her, and I buried her with my own hands, one day when Spring shook out her censer in the graveyards. I buried her with my own hands, shut down into a coffin of wood, perfumed and incorruptible like Indian caskets.

And as I still gazed at the place where I had laid away my treasure, I saw all at once a little person singularly like the deceased, who trampled on the fresh soil with a strange and hysterical violence, and said, shrieking with laughter: "Look at me! I am the real Benedicta! a pretty sort of baggage I am! And to punish you for your blindness and folly you shall love me just as I am!"

But I was furious, and I answered: "No! no! no!" And to add more emphasis to my refusal I stamped on the ground so violently with my foot that my leg sank up to the knee in the earth of the new grave; and now, like a wolf caught in a trap, I remain fastened, perhaps for ever, to the grave of the ideal.

III

"L'INVITATION AU VOYAGE"

There is a wonderful country, a country of Cockaigne, they say, which I dreamed of visiting with an old friend. It is a strange country, lost in the mists of our North, and one might call it the East of the West, the China of Europe, so freely does a warm and capricious fancy flourish there, and so patiently and persistently has that fancy illustrated it with a learned and delicate vegetation.

A real country of Cockaigne, where everything is beautiful, rich, quiet, honest; where order is the likeness and the mirror of luxury; where life is fat, and sweet to breathe; where disorder, tumult, and the unexpected are shut out; where happiness is wedded to silence; where even cooking is poetic, rich and highly flavoured at once; where all, dear love, is made in your image.

You know that feverish sickness which comes over us in our cold miseries, that nostalgia of unknown lands, that anguish of curiosity? There is a country made in your image, where all is beautiful, rich, quiet and honest; where fancy has built and decorated a western China, where life is sweet to breathe, where happiness is wedded to silence. It is there that we should live, it is there that we should die!

Yes, it is there that we should breathe, dream, and lengthen out the hours by the infinity of sensations. A musician has written an "Invitation à la Valse": who will compose the "Invitation au Voyage" that we can offer to the beloved, to the chosen sister?

Yes, it is in this atmosphere that it would be good to live; far off, where slower hours contain more thoughts where clocks strike happiness with a deeper and more significant solemnity.

On shining panels, or on gilded leather of a dark richness, slumbers the discreet life of pictures, deep, calm, and devout as the souls of the pointers who created it. The sunsets which colour so richly the walls of dining-room and drawing-room, are sifted through beautiful hangings or through tall wrought windows leaded into many panes. The pieces of furniture are large, curious, and fantastic, armed with locks and secrets like refined souls. Mirrors, metals, hangings, goldsmith's work and pottery, play for the eyes a mute and mysterious symphony; and from all things, from every corner, from the cracks of drawers and from the folds of hangings, exhales a singular odour, a "forget-me-not" of Sumatra, which is, as it were, the soul of the abode.

A real country of Cockaigne, I assure you, where all is beautiful, clean, and shining, like a clear conscience, like a bright array of kitchen crockery, like splendid jewellery of gold, like many-coloured jewellery of silver! All the treasures of the world have found their way there, as to the house of a hard-working man who has put the whole world in his debt. Singular country, excelling others as Art excels Nature, where Nature is refashioned by dreams, where Nature is corrected, embellished, remoulded.

Let the alchemists of horticulture seek and seek again, let them set ever further and further back the limits to their happiness! Let them offer prizes of sixty and of a hundred thousand florins to whoever will solve their ambitious problems! For me, I have found my "black tulip" and my "blue dahlia!"

Incomparable flower, recaptured tulip, allegoric dahlia, it is there, is it not, in that beautiful country, so calm and so full of dreams, that you live and flourish? There, would you not be framed within your own analogy, and would you not see yourself again, reflected, as the mystics say, in your own "correspondence"?

Dreams, dreams ever! and the more delicate and ambitious the soul, the further do dreams estrange it from possible things. Every man carries within himself his natural dose of opium, ceaselessly secreted and renewed, and, from birth to death, how many hours can we reckon of positive pleasure, of successful and decided action? Shall we ever live in, shall we ever pass into, that picture which my mind has painted, that picture made in your image?

These treasures, this furniture, this luxury, this order, these odours, these miraculous flowers, are you. You too are the great rivers and the quiet canals. The vast ships that drift down them, laden with riches, from whose decks comes the sound of the monotonous songs of labouring sailors, are my thoughts which slumber or rise and fall on your breast. You lead them softly towards the sea, which is the infinite, mirroring the depths of the sky in the crystal clearness of your soul; and when, weary of the surge and heavy with the spoils of the East, they return to the port of their birth, it is still my thoughts that come back enriched out of the infinite to you.

IV THE EYES OF THE POOR

Ah! you want to know why I hate you to-day. It will probably be less easy for you to understand than for me to explain it to you; for you are, I think, the most perfect example of feminine impenetrability that could possibly be found.

We had spent a long day together, and it had seemed to me short. We had promised one another that we would think the same thoughts and that our two souls should become one soul; a dream which is not original, after all, except that, dreamed by all men, it has been realised by none.

In the evening you were a little tired, and you sat down outside a new café at the corner of a new boulevard, still littered with plaster and already displaying proudly its unfinished splendours. The café glittered. The very gas put on all the fervency of a fresh start, and lighted up with its full force the blinding whiteness of the walls, the dazzling sheets of glass in the mirrors, the gilt of cornices and mouldings, the chubby-cheeked pages straining back from hounds in leash, the ladies laughing at the falcons on their wrists, the nymphs and goddesses carrying fruits and pies and game on their heads, the Hebes and Ganymedes holding out at arm's-length little jars of syrups or parti-coloured obelisks of ices; the whole of history and of mythology brought together to make a paradise for gluttons. Exactly opposite to us, in the roadway, stood a man of about forty years of age, with a weary face and a greyish beard, holding a little boy by one hand and carrying on the other arm a little fellow too weak to walk. He was taking the nurse-maid's place, and had brought his children out for a walk in the evening. All were in rags. The three faces were extraordinarily serious, and the six eyes stared fixedly at the new café with an equal admiration, differentiated in each according to age.

The father's eyes said: "How beautiful it is! how beautiful it is! One would think that all the gold of the poor world had found its way to these walls." The boy's eyes said: "How beautiful it is! how beautiful it is! But that is a house which only people who are not like us can enter." As for the little one's eyes, they were too fascinated to express anything but stupid and utter joy.

Song-writers say that pleasure ennobles the soul and softens the heart. The song was right that evening, so far as I was concerned. Not only was I touched by this family of eyes, but I felt rather ashamed of our glasses and decanters, so much too much for our thirst. I turned to look at you, dear love, that I might read my own thought in you; I gazed deep into your eyes, so beautiful and so strangely sweet, your green eyes that are the home of caprice and under the sovereignty of the Moon; and you said to me: "Those people are insupportable to me with their staring saucer-eyes! Couldn't you tell the head waiter to send them away?"

So hard is it to understand one another, dearest, and so incommunicable is thought, even between people who are in love!

V WINDOWS

He who looks in through an open window never sees so many things as he who looks at a shut window. There is nothing more profound, more mysterious, more fertile, more gloomy, or more dazzling, than a window lighted by a candle. What we can see in the sunlight is always less interesting than what goes on behind the panes of a window. In that dark or luminous hollow, life lives, life dreams, life suffers.

Across the waves of roofs, I can see a woman of middle age, wrinkled, poor, who is always leaning over something, and who never goes out. Out of her face, out of her dress, out of her attitude, out of nothing almost, I have made up the woman's story, and sometimes I say it over to myself with tears.

If it had been a poor old man, I could have made up his just as easily.

And I go to bed, proud of having lived and suffered in others.

Perhaps you will say to me: "Are you sure that it is the real story?" What does it matter, what does any reality outside of myself matter, if it has helped me to live, to feel that I am, and what I am?

VI CROWDS

It is not given to every man to take a bath of multitude: to play upon crowds is an art; and he alone can plunge, at the expense of humankind, into a debauch of vitality, to whom a fairy has bequeathed in his cradle the love of masks and disguises, the hate of home and the passion of travel.

Multitude, solitude: equal terms mutually convertible by the active and begetting poet. He who does not know how to people his solitude, does not know either how to be alone in a busy crowd.

The poet enjoys this incomparable privilege, to be at once himself and others. Like those wandering souls that go about seeking bodies, he enters at will the personality of every man. For him alone, every place is vacant; and if certain places seem to be closed against him, that is because in his eyes they are not worth the trouble of visiting.

The solitary and thoughtful walker derives a singular intoxication from this universal communion. He who mates easily with the crowd knows feverish joys that must be for ever unknown to the egoist, shut up like a coffer, and to the sluggard, imprisoned like a shell-fish. He adopts for his own all the occupations, all the joys and all the sorrows that circumstance sets before him.

What men call love is small indeed, narrow and weak indeed, compared with this ineffable orgie, this sacred prostitution of the soul which gives itself up wholly (poetry and charity!) to the unexpected which happens, to the stranger as he passes.

It is good sometimes that the happy of this world should learn, were it only to humble their foolish pride for an instant, that there are higher, wider, and rarer joys than theirs. The founders of colonies, the shepherds of nations, the missionary priests, exiled to the ends of the earth, doubtless know something of these mysterious intoxications; and, in the midst of the vast family that their genius has raised about them, they must sometimes laugh at the thought of those who pity them for their chaste lives and troubled fortunes.

VII THE CAKE

I was travelling. The landscape in the midst of which I was seated was of an irresistible grandeur and sublimity. Something no doubt at that moment passed from it into my soul. My thoughts fluttered with a lightness like that of the atmosphere; vulgar passions, such as hate and profane love, seemed to me now as far away as the clouds that floated in the gulfs beneath my feet; my soul seemed to me as vast and pure as the dome of the sky that enveloped me; the remembrance of earthly things came as faintly to my heart as the thin tinkle of the bells of unseen herds, browsing far, far away, on the slope of another mountain. Across the little motionless lake, black with the darkness of its immense depth, there passed from time to time the shadow of a cloud, like the shadow of an airy giant's cloak, flying through heaven. And I remember that this rare and solemn sensation, caused by a vast and perfectly silent movement, filled me with mingled joy and fear. In a word, thanks to the enrapturing beauty about me, I felt that I was at perfect peace with myself and with the universe; I even believe that, in my complete forgetfulness of all earthly evil, I had come to think the newspapers are right after all, and man was born good; when, incorrigible matter renewing its exigencies, I sought to refresh the fatigue and satisfy the appetite caused by so lengthy a climb. I took from my pocket a large piece of bread, a leathern cup, and a small bottle of a certain elixir which the chemists at that time sold to tourists, to be mixed, on occasion, with liquid snow.

I was quietly cutting my bread when a slight noise made me look up. I saw in front of me a little ragged urchin, dark and dishevelled, whose hollow eyes, wild and supplicating, devoured the piece of bread. And I heard him gasp, in a low, hoarse voice, the word: "Cake!" I could not help laughing at the appellation with which he thought fit to honour my nearly white bread, and I cut off a big slice and offered it to him. Slowly he came up to me, not taking his eyes from the coveted object; then, snatching it out of my hand, he stepped quickly back, as if he feared that my offer was not sincere, or that I had already repented of it.

But at the same instant he was knocked over by another little savage, who had sprung from I know not where, and who was so precisely like the first that one might have taken them for twin brothers. They rolled over on the ground together, struggling for the possession of the precious booty, neither willing to share it with his brother. The first, exasperated, clutched the second by the hair; and the second seized one of the ears of the first between his teeth, and spat out a little bleeding morsel with a fine oath in dialect. The legitimate proprietor of the cake tried to hook his little claws into the usurper's eyes; the latter did his best to throttle his adversary with one hand, while with the other he endeavoured to slip the prize of war into his pocket. But, heartened by despair, the loser pulled himself together, and sent the victor sprawling with a blow of the head in his stomach. Why describe a hideous fight which indeed lasted longer than their childish strength seemed to promise? The cake travelled from hand to hand, and changed from pocket to pocket, at every moment; but, alas, it changed also in size; and when at length, exhausted, panting and bleeding, they stopped from the sheer impossibility of going on, there was no longer any cause of feud; the slice of bread had disappeared, and lay scattered in crumbs like the grains of sand with which it was mingled.

The sight had darkened the landscape for me, and dispelled the joyous calm in which my soul had lain basking; I remained saddened for quite a long time, saying over and over to myself: "There is then a wonderful country in which bread is called cake, and is so rare a delicacy that it is enough in itself to give rise to a war literally fratricidal!"

VIII EVENING TWILIGHT

The day is over. A great restfulness descends into poor minds that the day's work has wearied; and thoughts take on the tender and dim colours of twilight.

Nevertheless from the mountain peak there comes to my balcony, through the transparent clouds of evening, a great clamour, made up of a crowd of discordant cries, dulled by distance into a mournful harmony, like that of the rising tide or of a storm brewing.

Who are the hapless ones to whom evening brings no calm; to whom, as to the owls, the coming of night is the signal for a witches' sabbat? The sinister ululation comes to me from the hospital on the mountain; and, in the evening, as I smoke, and look down on the quiet of the immense valley, bristling with houses, each of whose windows seems to say, "Here is peace, here is domestic happiness!" I can, when the wind blows from the heights, lull my astonished thought with this imitation of the harmonies of hell.

Twilight excites madmen. I remember I had two friends whom twilight made quite ill. One of them lost all sense of social and friendly amenities, and flew at the first-comer like a savage. I have seen him throw at the waiter's head an excellent chicken, in which he imagined he had discovered some insulting hieroglyph. Evening, harbinger of profound delights, spoilt for him the most succulent things.

The other, a prey to disappointed ambition, turned gradually, as the daylight dwindled, sourer, more gloomy, more nettlesome. Indulgent and sociable during the day, he was pitiless in the evening; and it was not only on others, but on himself, that he vented the rage of his twilight mania.

The former died mad, unable to recognise his wife and child; the latter still keeps the restlessness of a perpetual disquietude; and, if all the honours that republics and princes can confer were heaped upon him, I believe that the twilight would still quicken in him the burning envy of imaginary distinctions. Night, which put its own darkness into their minds, brings light to mine; and, though it is by no means rare for the same cause to bring about opposite results, I am always as it were perplexed and alarmed by it.

O night! O refreshing dark! for me you are the summons to an inner feast, you are the deliverer from anguish! In the solitude of the plains, in the stony labyrinths of a city, scintillation of stars, outburst of gaslamps, you are the fireworks of the goddess Liberty!

Twilight, how gentle you are and how tender! The rosy lights that still linger on the horizon, like the last agony of day under the conquering might of its night; the flaring candle-flames that stain with dull red the last glories of the sunset; the heavy draperies that an invisible hand draws out of the depths of the East, mimic all those complex feelings that war on one another in the heart of man at the solemn moments of life.

Would you not say that it was one of those strange costumes worn by dancers, in which the tempered splendours of a shining skirt show through a dark and transparent gauze, as, through the darkness of the present, pierces the delicious past? And the wavering stars of gold and silver with which it is shot, are they not those fires of fancy which take light never so well as under the deep mourning of the night?

IX

"ANYWHERE OUT OF THE WORLD"

Life is a hospital, in which every patient is possessed by the desire of changing his bed. One would prefer to suffer near the fire, and another is certain that he would get well if he were by the window. It seems to me that I should always be happy if I were somewhere else, and this question of moving house is one that I am continually talking over with my soul.

"Tell me, my soul, poor chilly soul, what do you say to living in Lisbon? It must be very warm there, and you would bask merrily, like a lizard. It is by the sea; they say that it is built of marble, and that the people have such a horror of vegetation that they tear up all the trees. There is a country after your own soul; a country made up of light and mineral, and with liquid to reflect them."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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