BAUDELAIRE CHARLES,
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THE LIFE AND INTIMATE MEMOIRS OF CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

BY THÉOPHILE GAUTIER

I

The first time that we met Baudelaire was towards the middle of the year 1849, at the Hôtel Pimodan, where we occupied, near Fernand Boissard, a strange apartment which communicated with his by a private staircase hidden in the thickness of the wall, and which was haunted by the spirits of beautiful women loved long since by Lauzun. The superb Maryx was to be found there who, in her youth, had posed for "La Mignon" of Scheffer, and later, for "La Gloire distribuant des couronnes" of Paul Delaroche; and that other beauty, then in all her splendour, from whom Clesinger modelled "La Femme au serpent," that statue where grief resembles a paroxysm of pleasure, and which throbs with an intensity of life that the chisel has never before attained and which can never be surpassed.

Charles Baudelaire was then an almost unknown genius, preparing himself in the shadow for the light to come, with that tenacity of purpose which, in him, doubled inspiration; but his name was already becoming known amongst poets and artists, who heard it with a quivering of expectation, the younger generation almost venerating him. In the mysterious upper chamber where the reputations of the future are in the making he passed as the strongest. We had often heard him spoken of, but none of his works were known to us.

His appearance was striking: he had closely shaved hair of a

rich black, which fell over a forehead of extraordinary whiteness, giving his head the appearance of a Saracen helmet. His eyes, coloured like tobacco of Spain, had great depth and spirituality about them, and a certain penetration which was, perhaps, a little too insistent. As to the mouth, in which the teeth were white and perfect, it was seen under a slight and silky moustache which screened its contours. The mobile curves, voluptuous and ironical as the lips in a face painted by Leonardo da Vinci, the nose, fine and delicate, somewhat curved, with quivering nostrils, seemed ever to be scenting vague perfumes. A large dimple accentuated the chin, like the finishing touch of a sculptor's chisel on a statue; the cheeks, carefully shaved, with vermilion tints on the cheek-bones; the neck, of almost feminine elegance and whiteness, showed plainly, as the collar of his shirt was turned down with a Madras cravat.

His clothing consisted of a paletot of shining black cloth, nut-coloured trousers, white stockings, and patent leather shoes; the whole fastidiously correct, with a stamp of almost English simplicity, intentionally adopted to distinguish himself from the artistic folk with the soft felt hats, the velvet waistcoats, red jackets, and strong, dishevelled beards. Nothing was too new or elaborate about him. Charles Baudelaire indulged in a certain dandyism, but he would do anything to take from his things the "Sunday clothes" appearance so dear and important to the Philistine, but so disagreeable to the true gentleman.

Later, he shaved off his moustache, finding that it was the

remains of an old picturesqueness which it was both childish and bourgeois to retain. Thus, relieved of all superfluous down, his head recalled that of Lawrence Sterne; a resemblance that was augmented by Baudelaire's habit of leaning his temple against his first finger, which is, as every one knows, the attitude of the English humorist in the portrait placed at the beginning of his books.

Such was the physical impression made on us after our first meeting with the future author of "The Flowers of Evil."

We find in the "Nouveaux Camées parisiens" of Théodore de Banville, one of the poet's best and most constant friends whose loss we deplore, a portrait of Baudelaire in his youth. We are permitted to transcribe the lines here, prose equal in perfection to the most beautiful verse. It portrays Baudelaire as he is very little known, and as he was only at that particular time.

"In a portrait painted by Émile Deroy, one of the rarest works of art by modern painters, we see Charles Baudelaire at twenty years of age, at a time when, rich, happy, well-loved, already becoming celebrated, he wrote his first verses which were applauded by Paris, the literary leader of the whole world! O rare example of a divine face, uniting all graces, power, and most irresistible seductiveness! The eyebrow well-marked and curved like a bow, the eyelid warm and softly coloured; the eye, large, black, deep and of unequalled fire, caressing and imperious, embraces, interrogates and reflects all that surrounds it; the nose, beautifully chiselled, slightly curved, makes us dream

of the celebrated phrase of the poet:

'Mon âme voltige sur les parfums, comme l'âme des autres hommes voltige sur la musique!' The mouth is arched and refined by the mind, and at the moment is of the delicate tint that reminds one of the royal beauty of freshly plucked fruit. The chin is rounded, but nevertheless haughty and powerful as that of Balzac. The whole face is of a warm pallor, under which the rose tints of beautiful rich blood appear. A newly grown beard, like that of a young god, decorates it. The forehead, high and broad, magnificently drawn, is ornamented by black, thick hair, naturally wavy and curly like that of Paganini, which falls over a throat worthy of Achilles or Antinous."

One must not take this portrait too literally. It is seen through the medium of painting and poetry, and embellished by a certain idealisation. Still, it is no less sincere and faithful of Baudelaire as he appeared at that time. Charles Baudelaire had his hour of supreme beauty and perfect expansion, and we relate it after this faithful witness. It is rare that a poet, an artist, is known in the spring-time of his charm.

Reputation generally comes later, when the fatigue of study, the struggles of life, and the torture of passion have taken away youthfulness, leaving only the mask, faded and altered, on which each sorrow has made her impress. It is this last picture, which also has beauty, that one remembers. With his evasive singularity was mingled a certain exotic odour like the distant perfume of a country well loved of the sun. It is said that Baudelaire travelled

for some time in India, and this fact explains much.

Contrary to the somewhat loose manners of artists generally, Baudelaire prided himself upon observing the most rigid *convenances*; his courtesy was often excessive to the point of affectation. He measured his phrases, using only the most carefully selected terms, and pronounced certain words in a particular manner, as though he wished to underline them and give them a mysterious signification. Italics and capital letters seemed to be marked in his voice.

Exaggeration, much in honour at Pimodan's, he disdained as theatrical and coarse, though he allowed himself the use of paradox. With a very simple, natural, and perfectly detached air, as though retailing, *à la* Prudhomme, a newspaper paragraph on the state of the weather, he would advance monstrous axioms, or uphold with perfect sang-froid some theory of mathematical extravagance; for he had method in the development of his follies. His spirit was neither in words nor traits; he saw things from a particular point of view which changed their outlines, as objects seen in a bird's-eye view are changed from when seen at their own elevation; he perceived analogies, inappreciable to others, the fantastic logic of which was very striking.

His gestures were slow, sober, and rare; for he held southern gesticulation in horror. Neither did he like volubility of speech, and British reserve appealed to his sense of good form. One might describe him as a dandy strayed into Bohemia; but preserving there his rank, and that cult of self which characterises

a man imbued with the principles of Brummel.

Such was our impression of Baudelaire at our first meeting, the memory of which is as vivid as though it had occurred yesterday.

We were in the big salon, decorated in the style of Louis XIV, the wainscot enriched and set off with dull gold of a perfect tone, projecting cornices, on which some pupil of Lesueur or of Poussin, having studied at the Hôtel Lambert, had painted nymphs chased by satyrs through reed-grass, according to the mythological taste of the period. On the great marble chimney, veined with vermilion and white, was placed, in the guise of a clock, a golden elephant, harnessed like the elephant of Porus in the battle of Lebrun, supporting on its back a tower with an inscribed dial-plate. The chairs and settees were old and covered with faded tapestry, representing subjects of the chase by Oudry and Desportes.

It was in this salon, also, that the séances of the club of hashish-eaters took place, a club to which we belonged, the ecstasies, dreams, hallucinations of which, followed by the deepest dejection, we have described.

As was said above, the owner of this apartment was Fernand Boissard, whose short, curly, fair hair, white and vermilion complexion, grey eyes scintillating with light and *esprit*, red lips and pearly teeth, seemed to witness to the health and exuberance of a Rubens, and to promise a life more than usually long. But, alas, who is able to foresee the fate of another? Boissard, to

whom none of the conditions of happiness were lacking, fell a victim to a malady much the same as that which caused the death of Baudelaire.

No one was better equipped than Boissard. He had the most open-minded intelligence; he understood painting, poetry, and music equally well; but, in him, the dilettante was stronger than the artist. Admiration took up too much of his time; he exhausted himself in his enthusiasms. There is no doubt that, had necessity with her iron hand compelled him, he would have been an excellent painter. The success that was obtained by the "Episode de la retraite de Russie" would have been his sure guarantee. But, without abandoning painting, he allowed himself to be diverted by other arts. He played the violin, organised quartettes, studied Bach, Beethoven, Meyerbeer, and Mendelssohn, learnt languages, wrote criticisms, and composed some charming sonnets.

He was a voluptuary in Art, and no one enjoyed real masterpieces with more refinement, passion, and sensuousness than he did. From force of admiring, he forgot to express beauty, and what he felt so deeply he came to believe he had created. His conversation was charming, full of gaiety and originality. He had a rare gift of inventing words and phrases, and all sorts of bizarre expressions, that linger in the mind.

Like Baudelaire, amorous of new and rare sensations, even when they were dangerous, he wished to know those artificial paradises, which, later, made him pay so dearly for their

transient ecstasies. It was the abuse of hashish that, undoubtedly, undermined his constitution, formerly so robust and strong.

This souvenir of a friend of our youth, with whom we lived under the same roof, of a romantic to whom fame did not come because he loved too much the work of others to dream of his own, will not be out of place here, in this introduction destined to serve as a preface to the complete works of a departed friend of us both.

On the day of our visit Jean Feuchères, the sculptor, was there. Besides his talent in statuary, Feuchères had a remarkable power of imitation, such as no actor was able to compass. He was the inventor of the comic dialogues between Sergeant Bridais and gunner Pitou, which even to-day provoke irresistible laughter. Feuchères died first, and, of the four artists assembled on that day at the Hôtel Pimodan, we only survive.

On the sofa, half recumbent, her elbow resting on a cushion, with an immobility of pose she often assumed, Maryx listened dreamily to Baudelaire's paradoxes. No surprise was manifested on her almost Oriental countenance. She wore a white robe, oddly ornamented with red spots like tiny drops of blood, and while Baudelaire talked she lazily passed the rings from one hand to another – hands as perfect as was her figure.

Near the window, the "Femme au serpent" (it is not permitted to give her name) having thrown back her lace wrap and delicate little green hood, such as never adorned Lucy Hocquet or Madame Baurand, over an arm-chair, shook out her beautiful

fawn-brown hair, for she had come from the Swimming Baths, and, her person all draped in muslin, exhaled, like a naiad, the fragrant perfume of the bath. With her eyes and smile she encouraged this tilt of words, and threw in, now and again, her own remarks, sometimes mocking, sometimes appreciative.

They have passed, those charming leisure hours, when poets, artists, and beautiful women were gathered together to talk of Art, literature, and love, as the century of Boccaccio has passed. Time, Death, the imperious necessities of life, have dispersed this mutually sympathetic group; but the memory is dear to all those who had the good fortune to be admitted to it. It is not without an involuntary sigh that these lines are penned.

Shortly after this first meeting Baudelaire came to see us and brought a volume of his verses. He himself relates this visit in a literary article which he wrote about us in terms of such admiration that we dare not transcribe them.

From that moment a friendship was formed between us, in which Baudelaire always wished to conserve the attitude of favourite disciple to a sympathetic master, although he owed his success only to himself and his own originality. Never in our greatest familiarity did he relax that deference of manner which to us seemed excessive and with which we would gladly have dispensed. He acknowledged it *à vive voix*, and the dedication of the "Flowers of Evil" which is addressed to us, consecrates in its lapidary form the absolute expression of his loving and poetical devotion.

If we insist on these details, it is not for their actual worth, but solely because they portray an unrecognised side of Baudelaire's character.

This poet, whom people try to describe as of so satanic a nature, smitten with evil and depravity (literary, be it well understood), knew love and admiration in the highest degree.

But the distinguishing feature of Satan is that he is incapable of admiration or love. The light wounds him, glory is a sight insupportable to him, and makes him want to veil his eyes with his bat-like wings. No one, even at the time of fervour for romanticism, had more respect and adoration for the great masters than Baudelaire. He was always ready to pay his legitimate tribute of praise to those who merited it, and that without the servility of a disciple, without fanaticism; for he himself was a master, having his realm, his subjects, and his coinage of gold.

It would perhaps be fitting, after having portrayed Baudelaire in all the freshness of his youth and in the fulness of his power, to present him as he was during the later years of his life, before Death stretched out his hand towards him, and sealed the lips which will no longer speak here below. His face was thin and spiritualised; the eyes seemed larger, the nose thinner; the lips were closed mysteriously, and seemed to guard ironical secrets. The vermilion tints of the past had given place to a swarthy, tired yellow. As to the forehead, it had gained in grandeur and solidity – so to speak; one would have said that it was carved in some

particularly durable marble. The fine hair, silky and long, nearly white, falling round a face which was young and old at the same time, gave him an almost sacerdotal appearance.

Charles Baudelaire was born in Paris on April 21st, 1821, in an old turreted house, in the Rue Hautefeuille. He was the son of M. Baudelaire, the old friend of Condorcet and of Cabanis, a distinguished and well-educated man who retained the polished manners of the eighteenth century, which the pretentious tastes of the Republican era had not so entirely effaced as is sometimes thought. This characteristic was strong in the poet, who always retained the outward forms of courtesy.

In his young days Baudelaire was in no way out of the ordinary, and neither did he gain many laurels at his college prize distributions. He even found the B.A. examination a great difficulty, and his degree was honorary. Troubled by abstract questions, this boy, so fine of spirit and keen of intelligence, appeared almost like an idiot. We have no intention of declaring this inaptitude as a sign of cleverness; but, under the eye of the pedagogue, often distrait and idle, or rather preoccupied, the real man is formed little by little, unperceived by masters or parents.

M. Baudelaire died, and his wife, Charles's mother, married General Aupick, who became Ambassador to Constantinople. Dissension soon arose in the family à propos of young Baudelaire's desire for a literary career. We think it wrong to reproach parents with the fears they manifest when the gift of poetry develops in their offspring. Alas! They are right. To what

sad, precarious, and miserable existence does he vow himself – he who takes up a literary career? From that day he must consider himself cut off from human beings, active life; he no longer lives – he is the spectator of life. All sensation comes to him as motif for analysis. Involuntarily he develops two distinct personalities, and, lacking other subjects, one becomes the spy on the other. If he lack a corpse, he stretches himself on the slab of black marble and buries the scalpel deep in his own heart. And what desperate struggles must he endure with the Idea, that elusive Proteus, who takes all manner of forms to escape captivity, and who will only deliver his oracle when he has been forced to show himself in his true aspect! This Idea, when one holds it, frightened, trembling, vanquished, one must nourish, clothe, fold round in that robe so difficult to weave, to colour and to arrange in graceful curves. During this long-drawn-out task the nerves become irritable, the brain on fire, the sensibilities quickened, and then nervous disorder comes with all its odd anxieties, its unconscious hallucinations, its indefinable sufferings, its morbid capriciousness, its fantastic depravity, its infatuations and motiveless dislikes, its mad energy and nervous prostration, its searches for excitement and its disgust for all healthy nourishment.

We do not exaggerate the picture; but we have before us only the talented poets, crowned with glory, who have, at the last, succumbed on the breast of their ideal. What would it be if we went down into the Limbo where the shades of still-born children

are wailing, like those abortive endeavours and larvæ of thought which can achieve neither wing nor form? Yes! Desire is not power, nor is Love possession!

Faith is not enough. Another gift is necessary.

In literature, as in religion, work without grace is futile.

Although they do not suspect this region of anguish, for, to know it really, it is necessary to go down oneself, not under the guidance of a Vergil or a Dante, but under that of a Lousteau, of a Lucien de Rubempré, parents instinctively display the perils and suffering of the artistic life in the endeavour to dissuade the children they love, and for for whom they desire one more happy and ordinarily human.

Once only since the earth has revolved round the sun have parents ardently wished to have a son's life dedicated to poetry. The child received the most brilliant literary education, and, with the irony of Fate, became Chapelain, the author of "La Pucelle"! and this, one might even say, was to play with sinister fortune!

To turn his stubborn ideas into another course, Baudelaire was made to travel. He was sent a great distance, embarking on a vessel, the captain of which took him to the Indian seas. He visited the Isles of Mauritius, Bourbon, Madagascar, Ceylon perhaps, and some parts of the "Isle of the Ganges"; but he would not, for all that, give up his intention of becoming a man of letters. They tried vainly to interest him in commerce, but a trade in cattle to feed Anglo-Indians on beefsteak had no attractions for him. All he retained of this voyage was a memory of great

splendour which remained with him all his life. He gloried in a sky where brilliant constellations, unknown in Europe, were to be found; the magnificent vegetation with the exotic perfumes, the elegantly odd pagodas, the brown faces and the soft white draperies – all that in Nature was so warm, powerful, and full of colour.

In his verses he was frequently led from the mists and mud of Paris to the countries of light, azure, and perfume. Between the lines of the most sombre of his poems, a window is opened through which can be seen, instead of the black chimneys and smoky roofs, the blue Indian seas, or a beach of golden sand on which the slender figure of a Malabaraise, half naked, carrying an amphora on the head, is running. Without penetrating too deeply into the private life of the poet, one can imagine that it was during this voyage that Baudelaire fell in love with the "Venus noire," of whom he was a worshipper all his life.

When he returned from his distant travels he had just attained his majority; there was no longer any reason – not even financial, for he was rich for some time at least – to oppose Baudelaire's choice of a vocation; it was only strengthened by meeting with obstacles, and nothing would deter him.

Lodged in a little apartment under the roof of the same Hôtel Pimodan where later we met him, as has been related earlier in this introduction, he commenced that life of work, interrupted and resumed, of varied studies, of fruitful idleness, which is that of each man of letters seeking his particular field

of labour. Baudelaire soon found his. He conceived something beyond romanticism – a land unexplored, a sort of rough and wild Kamtschatka; and it was at the extreme verge that he built for himself, as Sainte-Beuve, who thoroughly appreciated him, said, a kiosque of bizarre architecture.

Several of the poems which are to be found amongst the "Flowers of Evil" were already composed. Baudelaire, like all born poets, from the start possessed a form and style of which he was master; it was more accentuated and polished later, but still the same. Baudelaire has often been accused of studied bizarrerie, of affected and laboured originality, and especially of mannerisms. This is a point at which it is necessary to pause before going further. There are people who have naturally an affected manner. In them simplicity would be pure affectation, a sort of inverted mannerism. Long practice is necessary to be naturally simple. The circumvolutions of the brain twist themselves in such a manner that the ideas get entangled and confused and go up in spirals instead of following straight lines. The most complicated, subtle, and intense thoughts are those which present themselves first. They see things from a peculiar angle which alters the aspect and perspective. All fancies, the most odd, unusual, and fantastically distant from the subject treated of, strike them chiefly, and they know how to draw them into their woof by mysterious threads.

Baudelaire had a brain like this, and where the critic has tried to see labour, effort, excess, there is only the free and

easy manifestation of individuality. These poems, of a savour so exquisitely strange, cost him no more than any badly rhymed commonplace.

Baudelaire, always possessed of great admiration for the old masters, never felt it incumbent upon him to take them for models; they had had the good fortune to arrive in the early days of the world, at the dawn, so to speak, of humanity, when nothing had been expressed yet, and each form, each image, each sentiment, had the charm of virginal novelty. The great commonplaces which form the foundation of human thought were then in all their glory and sufficed for simple geniuses, speaking to simple people.

But, from force of repetition, these general subjects of verse were used up like money which, from continual circulation, has lost its imprint; and, besides, Life had become more complex, fuller of originality, and could no longer be represented in the artificial spirit of another age.

As true innocence charms, so the trickery of pretended innocence disgusts and displeases. The quality of the nineteenth century is not precisely naïveté, and it needs, to render its thoughts and dreams explicit, idiom a little more composite than that employed in the classics. Literature is like a day; it has its morning, noon, evening, and night. Without vain expatiation as to whether one should prefer dawn or twilight, one ought to paint the hour which is at hand, and with a palette of all the colours necessary to give it its full effect. Has not sunset its beauty as

well as dawn? The copper-reds, the bronze-golds, the turquoise melting to sapphire, all the tints which blend and pass away in the great final conflagration, the light-pierced clouds which seem to take the form of a falling aerial Babel – have they not as much to offer to the poet as the rosy-fingered Dawn? But the time when the Hours preceded the Chariot of Day is long since fled.

The poet of the "Flowers of Evil" loved what is unwisely known as the style of the decadence, and which is no other thing than Art arrived at that point of extreme maturity that determines civilisations which have grown old; ingenious, complicated, clever, full of delicate tints and refinements, gathering all the delicacies of speech, borrowing from technical vocabularies, taking colour from every palette, tones from all musical instruments, forcing itself to the expression of the most elusive thoughts, contours vague and fleeting, listening to translate subtle confidences, confessions of depraved passions and the odd hallucinations of a fixed idea turning to madness.

This style of the decadence is the "dernier mot" of Verbe, summoned to express all and to venture to the very extremes. One can recall, à propos of him, language already veined with the greenness of decomposition, savouring of the Lower Roman Empire and the complicated refinements of the Byzantine School, the last form of Greek Art fallen into deliquescence; but such is the necessary and fatal idiom of peoples and civilisations where an artificial life has replaced a natural one and developed in a man who does not know his own needs. It is not easy,

moreover, this style condemned by pedants, for it expresses new ideas in new forms and words that have never been heard of before. Contrary to the classical style, it admits of backgrounds where the spectres of superstition, the haggard phantoms of dreams, the terrors of night, remorse which leaps out and falls back noiselessly, obscure fantasies that astonish the day, and all that the soul in its deepest depths and innermost caverns conceals of darkness, deformity, and horror, move together confusedly. One can well imagine that the fourteen hundred words of the dialect of Racine do not suffice an author who is given the difficult task of rendering modern ideas and things in all their infinite complexity and their diversity of colour.

Thus Baudelaire, who, despite his ill success at his baccalaureate examination, was a good Latinist, preferred undoubtedly, to Vergil and to Cicero, Apuleius, Juvenal, Saint Augustine, and Tertullian, whose style has the black radiance of ebony. He went even to the Latin of the Church, to hymns and chants in which the rhyme represents the old forgotten rhythm, and he has addressed, under the title of "Franciscæ meæ Laudes," "To an erudite and devotee," such are the terms of the dedication, a Latin poem rhymed in the form that Brizeux called ternary, which is composed of three rhymes following one another, instead e of alternating as in the tiercet of Dante. To this odd piece of work is joined a note no less singular. We transcribe it here, for it explains and corroborates what has just been said about the idioms of the decadence:

"Does it not seem to the reader, as to me, that the language of the last Latin decadence – the supreme sigh of the strong man already transformed and prepared for the spiritual life – is singularly adequate to express the passion that is comprised in, and felt by, the modern world? Mysticism is the opposite pole on the compass of Catullus and his followers, purely cynical and superficial poets, who have only known the pole of sensuality. In this marvellous language, solecism and barbarism seem to me to express the negligences of a passion forgetful of itself and regardless of conventionality. The words, taken in a new acceptation, reveal the charming maladroitness of a northern barbarian kneeling before a Roman beauty. The pun itself, when it crosses pedantism, has it not the saving grace and irregularity of infancy?"

It is unnecessary to push this point further. Baudelaire, when he had not to express some curious deviation, some unknown side of the soul, employed pure, clear language, so correct and exact that even the most difficult to please would find nothing to complain of. This is especially noticeable in his prose writings, when he treats of more general and less abstruse subjects than in his verse.

With regard to his philosophical and literary tenets, they were those of Edgar Allan Poe, whom he had not then translated but whom he greatly admired. One can apply to him the phrases that he himself wrote of the American author in the preface to the "Extraordinary Histories ": – "He considered progress,

the great modern idea, as the ecstasy of fools, and he called the perfectionings of human habitations, scars and rectangular abominations. He believed only in the Immutable, the Eternal, the self-same, and he was in the possession of – cruel privilege! in a society amorous only of itself – the great good sense of a Machiavelli who marches before the wise as a column of light across the desert of history." Baudelaire had a perfect horror of philanthropists, progressionists, utilitarians, humanitarians, Utopians, and of all those who pretend to reform things, contrary to nature and the universal laws of society. He desired neither the suppression of hell nor of the guillotine for the disposal of sinners and assassins. He did not believe that men were born good, and he admitted original perversity as an element to be found in the depths of the purest souls – perversity, that evil counsellor who leads a man on to do what is fatal to himself, precisely because it is fatal and for the pleasure of acting contrary to law, without other attraction than disobedience, outside of sensuality, profit, or charm. This perversity he believes to be in others as in himself; therefore, when he finds a servant in fault he refrains from scolding him, for he regards it as an irremediable curse. It is, then, very wrong of short-sighted critics to have accused Baudelaire of immorality, an easy form of evil-speaking for the mediocre and the jealous, and always well taken up by the Pharisees and J. Prudhommes. No one has professed greater disgust for baseness of mind or unseemliness of subject.

He hated evil as a mathematical deviation, and, in his quality

of a perfect gentleman, he scorned it as unseemly, ridiculous, bourgeois and squalid. If he has often treated of hideous, repugnant, and unhealthy subjects, it is from that horror and fascination which makes the magnetised bird go down into the unclean mouth of the serpent; but more than once, with a vigorous flap of his wings, he breaks the charm and flies upwards to bluer and more spiritual regions. He should have engraved on his seal as a device the words "Spleen et Idéal," which form the title of the first part of his book of verse.

If his bouquet is composed of strange flowers, of metallic colourings and exotic perfumes, the calyx of which, instead of joy contains bitter tears and drops of aqua-tofana, he can reply that he planted but a few into the black soil, saturating them in putrefaction, as the soil of a cemetery dissolves the corpses of preceding centuries among mephitic miasmas. Undoubtedly roses, marguerites, violets, are the more agreeable spring flowers; but he thinks little of them in the black mud with which the pavements of the town are covered. And, moreover, Baudelaire, if he understands the great tropical landscapes where, as in dreams, trees burst forth in strange and gigantic elegance, is only little touched by the small rural sites on the outskirts; and it is not he who will frolic like the Philistines of Heinrich Heine before the romantic efflorescence of spring and faint away at the song of the sparrows. He likes to follow the pale, shrivelled, contorted man, convulsed by passions, and actual modern ennui, through the sinuosities of that great madrepore of Paris – to

surprise him in his difficulties, agonies, miseries, prostrations, and excitements, his nervousness and despair.

He watches the budding of evil instincts, the ignoble habits idly acquired in degradation. And, from this sight which attracts and repels him, he becomes incurably melancholy; for he thinks himself no better than others, and allows the pure arc of the heavens and the brilliancy of the stars to be veiled by impure mists.

With these ideas one can well understand that Baudelaire believed in the absolute self-government of Art, and that he would not admit that poetry should have any end outside itself, or any mission to fulfil other than that of exciting in the soul of the reader the sensation of supreme beauty – beauty in the absolute sense of the term. To this sensation he liked to add a certain effect of surprise, astonishment, and rarity. As much as possible he banished from poetry a too realistic imitation of eloquence, passion, and a too exact truth. As in statuary one does not mould forms directly after Nature, so he wished that, before entering the sphere of Art, each object should be subjected to a metamorphosis that would adapt it to this subtle medium, idealising it and abstracting it from trivial reality.

Such principles are apt to astonish us, when we read certain of the poems of Baudelaire in which horror seems to be sought like pleasure; but that we should not be deceived, this horror is always transfigured by character and effect, by a ray of Rembrandt, or a trait of Velasquez, who portrayed the race under sordid

deformity. In stirring up in his cauldron all sorts of fantastically odd and enormous ingredients, Baudelaire can say, with the witches of Macbeth, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." This sort of intentional ugliness is not, then, in contradiction to the supreme aim of Art; and the poems, such as the "Sept Vieillards" and the "Petits Vieilles," have snatched from the poetical Saint John who dreams in Patmos this phrase, which characterises so well the author of the "Flowers of Evil": "You have endowed the sky of Art with one knows not what macabre ray; you have created a new *frisson*."

But it is, so to speak, only the shadow of the talent of Baudelaire, a shadow ardently fiery or coldly blue, which allows him to give the essential and luminous touch. There is a serenity in his nervous, febrile, and tormenting talent. On the highest summits he is tranquil: *pacem summa tenent*.

But, instead of writing of the poet's ideas, it would be infinitely better to allow him to speak for himself: "Poetry, little as one wishes to penetrate one's self, to question one's soul, to recall the memories of past enthusiasm, has no other end than itself; it cannot have any other, and no poem will be so great, so noble, so truly worthy of the name of poem, as that which is written purely from the pleasure of writing.

"I do not say that poetry does not ennoble tastes – be it well understood – that its final result is not to raise men above vulgar interests. This would be an obvious absurdity. I say that, if the poet has followed a moral aim, he has diminished his poetical

power, and it would not be imprudent to lay a wager that his work will be bad. Poetry is unable, under pain of death or decay, to assimilate itself to morals or science.

"It has not Truth as an object; it has Itself. The demonstration of Truth is elsewhere.

"Truth has only to do with songs; all that gives charm and grace to a song will give to Truth its authority and power. Coldness, calmness, impassivity, drive back the diamonds and flowers of the Muse; they are absolutely in opposition to poetical humour.

"The Pure Intellect aspires to Truth, Taste informs us of Beauty, and Moral Sense teaches us Duty. It is true that the middle sense is intimately connected with the other two, and is only separated from the Moral Sense by very slight divergences, so that Aristotle has not hesitated to place some of its operations among the virtues themselves. Also, that which especially exasperates the man of Taste in the sight of Vice is its deformity and disproportion. Vice outrages justice and truth, revolts the Intellect and Conscience; but, like an outrage in harmony – a dissonance – it wounds more particularly certain poetical natures, and I do not believe it would be scandalous to consider all infraction of moral, the beautiful moral, as a fault against rhythm and universal prosody.

"It is this admirable, this immortal instinct of Beauty which makes us consider the earth and all its manifold forms, sounds, odours, sentiments, as a hint of, and correspondence to, Heaven.

The insatiable thirst for that which is beyond and which veils life, is the most lively proof of our immortality. It is at once by and through poetry, by and through music, that the soul gets a glimpse of the splendours beyond the tomb. And, when an exquisite poem brings tears to the eyes, these tears are not the proof of an excess of joy, they are the witness rather of an excited melancholy, an intercession of the nerves, of a nature exiled in imperfection wishing to possess itself, even on this earth, of a revealed paradise.

"Thus, the principle of poetry is, strictly and simply, the Human Aspiration towards Supreme Beauty; and the manifestation of this principle is in the enthusiasm, the awakening of the soul, enthusiasm quite independent of that passion, which is the intoxication of the heart, and of that Truth, which is the Food of Reason. For passion is a natural thing, too natural even not to introduce a wounding note, discordant in the domain of un-sullied Beauty; too familiar and too violent not to degrade pure Desires, gracious Melancholies and noble Despairs, which inhabit the supernatural regions of Poetry."

Although few poets have a more spontaneously sparkling inspiration and originality than Baudelaire – doubtless through distaste for the false poetic style which affects to believe in the descent of a tongue of fire on the writer painfully rhyming a strophe – he pretended that the true author provoked, directed, and modified at will this mysterious power of literary production; and we find in a very curious piece which precedes the translation

of Edgar Poe's celebrated poem "The Raven," the following lines, half ironical, half serious, in which Baudelaire's own opinion is set down under the guise of an analysis of the famous American author:

"The poetic principle, which makes the rules of poetry, is formulated, it is said, and modelled after the poems. Here is a poet who pretends that his poems have been composed according to technique or principle. He had certainly great genius and more inspiration than is general, if by inspiration one understands energy, intellectual enthusiasm, and the power of keeping all his faculties on the alert. He loved work more than anything else; he liked to repeat, he, the finished original, that originality is something needing apprenticeship, which does not necessarily mean to say that it is a thing to be transmitted by instruction. Chance and incomprehensibility were his two great enemies. Has he willingly diminished that faculty which was in him to take the most beautiful part? I should be inclined to think so; however, one must not forget that his genius, so ardent and agile, was passionately fond of analysis, combination, and calculation. One of his favourite axioms was the following: 'Everything in a poem as in a novel, everything in a sonnet as in a novelette, ought to contribute to the *dénouement*. A good writer has the last line already in his mind when he writes the first.'

"Owing to this admirable method the writer was able to begin even at the end, and work, when it pleased him, at whatever part he liked. Amateurs will perhaps sneer at these cynical maxims,

but each can learn from them what he wishes. It would be useless to show them what Art has gained from deliberation, and to make clear to the world what exacting labour this object of luxury known as poetry really is. After all, a little charlatanry is permitted to genius. It is like the paint on the cheeks of a naturally beautiful woman, a new condition of the mind."

This last phrase is characteristic and betrays the individual taste of the poet for artificiality. He, moreover, does not hide this predilection. He takes pleasure in this kind of composite beauty, and now and then a little artificiality that elaborates advanced and unsound civilisations. Let us say, to take a concrete example, that he would prefer to a simple young girl who used no other cosmetic than water, a more mature woman employing all the resources of the accomplished coquette, in front of a dressing-table covered with bottles of essences, *de lait virginal*, ivory brushes, and curling-tongs. The sweet perfume of skin macerated in aromatics, like that of Esther, who was steeped in oil of palms for six months and six months in cinnamon, before presentation to King Ahasuerus, had on him a powerful effect. A light touch of rose or hortensia on a fresh cheek, beauty-spots carefully and provocatively placed at the corner of the mouth or of the eye, eye-lashes burnished with kohl, hair tinted with russet-brown and powdered with gold-dust, neck and shoulders whitened with rice-powder, lips and the tips of the fingers brightened with carmine, did not in any way revolt him.

He liked these touches of Art upon Nature, the high lights, the

strong lights placed by a clever hand to augment grace, charm and the character of the face. It is not he who would write virtuous tirades against painting, rougeing, and the crinoline. All that removed a man, and especially a woman, from the natural state found favour in his eyes. These tastes explain themselves and ought to be understandable in a poet of the decadence, and the author of the "Flowers of Evil."

We shall astonish no one if we add that he preferred, to the simple perfume of the rose or violet, that of benzoin, amber, and even musk, so little appreciated in our days, and also the penetrating aroma of certain exotic flowers the perfume of which is too strong for our moderate climate. Baudelaire had, in the matter of perfumes, a strangely subtle sensuality which is rarely to be met with except amongst Orientals. He sought it always, and the phrase cited by Banville and at the commencement of this article may very justly be said of him: "Mon âme voltige sur les parfums comme l'âme des autres hommes voltige sur la musique."

He loved also toilets of a bizarre elegance, a capricious richness, striking fantasy, in which something of the comedian and courtesan was mingled, although he himself was severely conventional in dress; but this taste, excessive, singular, anti-natural, nearly always opposed to classical beauty, was for him the sign of the human will correcting, to its taste, the forms and colours furnished by matter.

Where the philosopher could only find a text for declamation

he found a proof of grandeur. Depravity – that is to say, a step aside from the normal type – is impossible to the stupid. It is for the same reason that inspired poets, not having the control and direction of their works, caused him a sort of aversion, and why he wished to introduce art and technique even into originality.

So much for the metaphysical; but Baudelaire was of a subtle, complicated, reasoning, and paradoxical nature, and had more philosophy than is general amongst poets. The æsthetics of his art occupied him much; he abounded in systems which he tried to realise, and all that he did was first planned out. According to him, literature ought to be *intentional*, and the *accidental* restrained as much as possible. This, however, did not prevent him, in true poetical fashion, from profiting by the happy chances of executing those beauties which burst forth suddenly without premeditation, like the little flowers accidentally mixed with the grain chosen by the sower. Every artist is somewhat like Lope de Vega, who, at the moment of the composition of his comedies, locked up his precepts under six keys —*con seis claves*. In the ardour of his work, voluntarily or not, he forgot systems and paradoxes.

II

Baudelaire's reputation, which during some years had not extended beyond the limits of the little circle who rallied round the new poet, widened suddenly when he presented himself to the public holding in his hand the bouquet of the "Flowers of Evil," a bouquet which in no way resembled the innocent posy of the débutante. Some of the poems were so subtly suggestive, yet so abstruse and enveloped with the forms and veils of Art, that the authorities demanded that they should be withdrawn and replaced by others of less dangerous eccentricity, before the book could be comprised in libraries. Ordinarily, there is no great excitement about a book of verses; they are born, live, and die in silence; for two or three poets suffice for our intellectual consummation.

In the excitement, rumour, and allayed scandal which surrounded Baudelaire, it was recognised that he had given the public, which is a rare occurrence, original work of a peculiar savour. To create in the public a new sensation is the greatest joy that can happen to a writer, and especially to a poet.

"Flowers of Evil" was one of those happy titles that are more difficult to find than is generally imagined. He summed up in a brief and poetical form the general idea of the book and indicated its tendencies. Although it was evidently romantic in intention and composition, it was impossible, by even ever so frail a thread,

to connect Baudelaire with any one of the great masters of that particular school. His verses, refined and subtle in structure, encasing the subjects dealt with so closely as to resemble armour rather than clothing, at first appeared difficult and obscure. This feeling was caused, not through any fault of the author, but from the novelty of the things he expressed – things that had not before been made vocal. It was part of Baudelaire's doctrine that, to attain his end, a poet must invent language and rhythm for himself. But he could not prevent surprise on the part of the reader when confronted with verse so different from any he had read before. In painting the evils which horrified him, Baudelaire knew how to find the morbidly rich tints of decomposition, the tones of mother-of-pearl which freeze stagnant waters, the roses of consumption, the pallor of chlorosis, the hateful bilious yellows, the leaden grey of pestilential fogs, the poisoned and metallic greens smelling of sulphide of arsenic, the blackness of smoke diluted by the rain on plaster walls, the bitumens baked and browned in the depths of hell; and all that gamut of intensified colours, correspondent to autumn, to the setting of the sun, to over-ripe fruit, and the last hours of civilisation.

The book is opened by a poem to the reader, whom the poet does not attempt to cajole, as is usual, and to whom he tells the absolute truth. He accuses him, in spite of all his hypocrisy, of having the vices for which he blames others, and of nourishing in his own heart that great modern monster, Ennui, who, with his bourgeois cowardice, dreams of the ferocity and debauches of

the Romans, of bureaucrat Nero, and shop-keeper Heliogabalus.

One other poem, of great beauty, and entitled, undoubtedly by an ironical antiphrasis, "Benediction," depicts the coming of the poet to the world, an object of astonishment and aversion to his mother as a shameful offspring. We see him pursued by stupidity, envy, and sarcasm, a prey to the perfidious cruelty of some Delilah, happy in delivering him up to the Philistines, naked, disarmed, after having expended on him all the refinements of a ferocious coquetry. Then there is his arrival, after insults, miseries, tortures, purified in the crucible of sorrow, to eternal glory, to the crown of light destined for the heads of the martyrs who have suffered for Truth and Beauty.

One little poem which follows later, and which is entitled "Soleil," closes with a sort of tacit justification of the poet in his vagrant courses. A bright ray shines on the muddy town; the author is going out and runs through the unclean streets, the by-ways where the closed shutters hide indications of secret luxuries; all the black, damp, dirty labyrinths of old streets to the houses of the blind and leprous, where the light shines here and there on some window, on a pot of flowers, or on the head of a young girl. Is not the poet like the sun which alone enters everywhere, in the hospital as in the palace, in the hovel as in the church, always divine, letting his golden radiance fall on the carrion or on the rose?

"Élévation" shows us the poet floating in the sky, beyond the starry spheres; in the luminous ether; on the confines of

our universe; disappearing into the depths of infinity like a tiny cloud; intoxicating himself with that rare and salubrious air where there are none of the miasmas pertaining to the earth and only the pure ether breathed by the angels. We must not forget that Baudelaire, although he has often been accused of materialism, and reproached for expending his talent upon doubtful subjects, is, on the contrary, endowed in a large degree with the great gift of spirituality, as Swedenborg said. He also possesses the power of correspondence, to employ a mystical idiom; that is to say, he knows how to discover by secret intuition the unexpressed feelings of others, and how to approach them, by those unexpected analogies that only the far-sighted are able to seize upon. Each poet has this power more or less developed, which is the very essence of his art.

Undoubtedly Baudelaire, in this book dedicated to the painting of depravity and modern perversity, has framed repugnant pictures, where vice is laid bare to wallow in all the ugliness of its shame; but the poet, with supreme contempt, scornful indignation, and a constant recurrence towards the ideal which is so often lacking in satirical writers, stigmatises and marks with an indelible red iron the unhealthy flesh, plastered with unguents and white lead.

In no part is the thirst for pure air, the immaculate whiteness of the Himalayan snows, the azure without blot, the unfading light, more strong and ardent than in the poems that have been termed *immoral*, as if the flagellation of vice was vice itself,

and as if one is a poisoner for having written of the poisonous pharmacy of the Borgia. This method is by no means new, but it thrives always, and certain people pretend to believe that one cannot read the "Flowers of Evil" except with a glass mask, such as Exili wore when he worked at the famous powder of succession.

We have read Baudelaire's poems often, and we are not struck dead with convulsed face and blackened body, as though we had supped with Vanozza in a vineyard of Pope Alexander VI. All such foolishness – unfortunately detrimental, for all the fools enthusiastically adopt that attitude – would make any artist worthy of the name but shrug his shoulders when told that blue is moral and scarlet immoral. It is rather as if one said: "The potato is virtuous, henbane is criminal."

A charming poem on perfumes classifies them, rousing ideas, sensations, and memories. Some are fresh, like the flesh of an infant, green like the fields in spring, recalling the blush of dawn and carrying with them the thoughts of innocence. Others, like musk, amber, benzoin, nard, and incense, are superb, triumphant, worldly, and provoke coquetry, love, luxury, festivities, and splendours. If one transposed them into the sphere of colours, they would represent gold and purple. The poet often recurs to this idea of the significance of perfumes. Surrounding a tawny beauty from the Cape, who seemed to have a mission for sleeping off home sickness, he spoke of this mixed odour "of musk and havana" which transported her soul to the well-

loved lands of the Sun, where the leaves of the palm-trees make fans in the blue and tepid air, where the masts of the ships sway harmoniously to the roll of the sea, while the silent slaves try to distract their young master from his languishing melancholy. Further on, wondering what will remain of his work, he compares himself to an old flagon, forgotten amongst the spider-webs, at the bottom of some cupboard in a deserted house.

From the open cupboard comes the mustiness of the past, feeble perfumes of robes, laces, powder-boxes, which revive memories of old loves and antiquated elegance; and, if by chance one uncorks a rancid and sticky phial, an acrid smell of English salts and vinegar escapes, a powerful antidote to the modern pestilence.

In many à passage this preoccupation with aroma appears, surrounding with a subtle cloud all persons and things. In very few of the poets do we find this care. Generally they are content with putting light, colour, and music in their verses; but it is rare that they pour in that drop of pure essence with which Baudelaire's muse never failed to moisten the sponge or the cambric of his handkerchief.

Since we are recounting the individual likings and minor passions of the poet, let us say that he adored cats – like him, amorous of perfumes, and who are thrown into a sort of epileptical ecstasy by the scent of valerian. He loved these charming, tranquil, mysterious, gentle animals, with their electrical shudders, whose favourite attitude is the recumbent

pose of the Sphinx, which seems to have passed on to them its secret. They ramble round the house with their velvet footfalls as the genius of the place —*genius loci*– or come and seat themselves on the table near the writer, keeping company with his thoughts and watching him from the depths of their sanded golden eyes with intelligent tenderness and magical penetration.

It is said that cats divine the thoughts which the brain transmits to the pen, and that, stretching out their paws, they wish to seize the written passage. They are happy in silence, order, and quietude, and no place suits them better than the study of a literary man. They wait patiently until his task is done, all the time purring gently and rhythmically in a sort of *sotto voce* accompaniment. Sometimes they gloss over with their tongue some disordered fur; for they are clean, careful, coquettish, and will not allow of any irregularity in their toilet, but all is done quietly and discreetly as though they feared to distract or hinder. Their caresses are tender, delicate, silent, *feminine*, having nothing in common with the clamorous, clumsy petulance that is found in dogs, to whom all the sympathy of the vulgar is given.

All these merits were appreciated by Baudelaire, who has more than once addressed beautiful poems to cats – the "Flowers of Evil" contain three – where he celebrates their physical and moral virtues, and often he makes them pass through his compositions as a sort of additional characteristic. Cats abound in Baudelaire's verse, as dogs in the pictures of Paul Veronese,

and form there a kind of signature.

It also must be added that in these sweet animals there is a nocturnal side, mysterious and cabalistic, which was very attractive to the poet. The cat, with his phosphoric eyes, which are like lanterns and stars to him, fearlessly haunts the darkness, where he meets wandering phantoms, sorcerers, alchemists, necromancers, resurrectionists, lovers, pickpockets, assassins, grey patrols, and all the obscene spectres of the night. He has the appearance of knowing the latest sabbatical chronicle, and he will willingly rub himself against the lame leg of Mephistopheles. His nocturnal serenades, his loves on the tiles, accompanied by cries like those of a child being murdered, give him a certain satanical air which justifies up to a certain point the repugnance of diurnal and practical minds, for whom the mysteries of Erebus have not the slightest attraction. But a doctor Faustus, in his cell littered with books and instruments of alchemy, would love always to have a cat for a companion.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.