

Michael Hamburger

THE
TRUTH
of
POETRY

Tensions in modern poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s

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MICHAEL HAMBURGER

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PREFACE

WHAT makes 'modern poetry' modern? What makes it more difficult than any other poetry, if indeed it is more difficult than the poetry of Pindar, say, or Dante, or Shakespeare, or Donne, or Góngora, or Blake? Could it be that lyrical poetry after Baudelaire has tended to become different *in kind* from any that preceded it? And, if so, does this change mean that the poets in question were no longer trying to make the same *kinds* of statement as their predecessors?

These are some of the questions that worried me when I started preparing this book, well over ten years ago. What was clear to me even then was that an answer to them called for much more knowledge not of poetry, but of poets and poems, than I was ever likely to acquire. Despite all the distinct traditions and national peculiarities that have continued to affect the practice of poets, the 'modernity' of 'modern poetry' is an international phenomenon. I had read English, American, German, French and Italian poets in their own languages. I had not read the Spanish, Portuguese, Spanish-American, Portuguese-American, Russian, Polish, Yugoslav, Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, Greek, Dutch or Scandinavian poets – to mention only some of the nationalities that ought to have been included in a comprehensive study. Though I have tried hard to extend my reading to poets accessible to me only in or through translations, I found that more often than not such reading did not sink in. My book, in any case, was never intended to be a

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survey of all the major poets who have written 'modern' poems. Even within the languages that I know I have omitted poets who may be at least as good as those who are mentioned or dealt with at some length. At the same time I have tried to do justice to the diversity of poetry after Baudelaire. Instead of confining my enquiry to a single line of development defined in advance as 'modern,' I have concentrated on the tensions and conflicts apparent in the work – or behind the work – of every major poet of the period, beginning with the work of Baudelaire himself.

If too much emphasis falls on what poets have said about their poetry rather than on their poems themselves, the reason is that the more strictly critical procedure would have demanded minute analyses of hundreds of poems, many of them in foreign languages. Poems, not poetry or theories about poetry, were my starting-point; but very rigid limits had to be set to a book whose subject, in both time and space, is very nearly limitless. Whatever 'modern poetry' may be, its inception can easily be traced back beyond Baudelaire and beyond such poets as Edgar Allan Poe to whom Baudelaire and his successors have traced their literary ancestry. The antecedents had to be left out; but some awareness of them, I hope, will be implicit in my remarks on the poetry dealt with in this book, no less than an awareness of many poems and poets that could not be quoted or mentioned.

An international anthology like Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *museum der modernen poesie* (Frankfurt, 1960), with translations of all the texts, would help to make up for these necessary omissions, but no comparable anthology has yet been compiled for English-speaking readers. One extremely useful companion to my book is *The Poem Itself*, edited by Stanley Burnshaw and published in 1960 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York. This volume contains analyses of poems by French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian poets, as well as the texts and literal English renderings. Another is the anthology *Modern European Poetry*, edited by Willis Barnstone and others, published by Bantam Books, New York, in 1966. Many other anthologies and critical studies, such as those by C. M. Bowra, could be listed here; but the nature of my study prohibited much reference to secondary material. Even the sketchiest of biblio-

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ographies, too, would have overburdened a study that ranges as widely and freely as this one.

Lastly, I should like to emphasize again that this book is not a history of modern poetry, but an attempt to understand its nature, assumptions and functions. This accounts for many obvious and not so obvious omissions. Others arose from a reluctance to repeat what I have written elsewhere or what critical opinion generally has already established. Since the present decade is touched upon, a history would have degenerated into a survey. My only hope was to stick to what I felt to be the crucial issues.

M.H.

London, 1968

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PUERILE UTOPIA AND BRUTAL MIRAGE

I IN 1951 Professor Henri Peyre undertook a brief survey of what he regarded as the more outstanding contributions to the study of Baudelaire. Even at that time, before the centenary of the publication of *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1957 and the centenary of Baudelaire's death in 1967, Professor Peyre felt called upon to deal with some 350 books and articles. The importance of Baudelaire, then, can be taken for granted here, both as the father of modern poetry – 'le premier voyant, roi des poètes, un vrai Dieu'^{1*} to cite Rimbaud's deification – and as the prototype of the modern poet whose vision is at once sharpened and limited by a high degree of critical self-awareness. 'With Baudelaire,' Paul Valéry wrote, 'French poetry has at last transcended national frontiers. It has found readers everywhere; it has established itself as the very poetry of modern times.'²

Baudelaire was also the author of the last book of poems to become an international best-seller.³ That this success was posthumous is as relevant to the history of literature as to Baudelaire's life, its extreme wretchedness and its peculiar heroism. A childless man with little interest in the future, Baudelaire derived no comfort from the anticipation of his post-dated success. To write for those unborn was like writing for the dead. Baudelaire's heroism, which at one time he connected with his cult of the dandy – 'the man who never comes out of himself' – was one of deliberate self-containment. With complete

*'The first of seers, king of poets, a true God.'

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sincerity, Baudelaire could say that he 'would be content to write only for the dead'.⁴

The vast body of critical and biographical literature about Baudelaire points to another development that is very much part of the situation of poets later than he; I mean the disproportion between the demand for poetry itself and the demand for literature about poetry. Very few, if any, serious poets since Baudelaire have been able to make a living out of their work; but thousands of people, including poets themselves, have made a living by writing or talking about poetry. This anomaly – paralleled in many ways, as it is, by economic developments conducive to a proliferation of middle-men in all trades and industries – has not only produced conscious or unconscious reactions apparent in the political commitments of several outstanding modern poets, but has also affected the very substance of their work. Ezra Pound's economic theories, and long passages of his *Cantos*, are one obvious instance; Bertolt Brecht's Communism, and his attempts to produce a functional poetry for the man in the street, are another. In this regard, too, Baudelaire was the prototype; not least because he wavered between the aristocratic and the revolutionary positions, sure only about his bitter rejection of the bourgeois and capitalist order that had no place for him. More than any other poet of his time Baudelaire was aware of living in a civilization in which commodities had taken over from things, prices from values; and whenever later poets have turned their attention to economics their thinking has tended to revolve around a theory of values. This is as true of Pound as of Brecht, of T.S. Eliot as of William Carlos Williams.

Even Baudelaire's dilemma has been examined and probed from almost every possible angle – aesthetic, social, psychological, existential, political and theological. Of all the contradictory judgements of his work – beginning with Victor Hugo's attribution to Baudelaire of his own creed of 'Art for the sake of progress,' Sainte-Beuve's advice to him to 'cultivate his angel' and to 'let himself go,' Barbey d'Aurevilly's description of Baudelaire as 'un de ces matérialistes raffinés et ambitieux' incapable of envisaging any kind of perfection other than a material one, followed by the inconsequential warning that 'after *Les Fleurs du mal* only two choices remain to the poet who

made them bloom: either to blow out his brains or to become a Christian' – very few need to be considered here. Almost from the beginning Baudelaire was seen as progressive and reactionary, original and banal, classical and modern, a Christian, a Satanist and a materialist, a consummate craftsman and a bad writer, a rigorous moralist and a man incapable of sincerity.⁵ Most of the fundamental disagreements about Baudelaire's attitudes and intentions are due to his own self-contradictions; and he was conscious enough of these self-contradictions to make a general plea for 'a right in which everyone is interested – the right to contradict oneself.' The truth embodied in Baudelaire's work cannot be extracted from this or that confession, this or that apodictic line of verse, but only from the tensions to which his self-contradictions are the surest clue.

2 One reason why Baudelaire remains so fascinating a phenomenon, despite a great deal in his work that has lost its power to give us the 'frisson nouveau' experienced by Victor Hugo in reading *Les Fleurs du mal*, is that Baudelaire bequeathed not only his poetry, but also his dilemma, to generations of later poets and critics. Jean-Paul Sartre's 'existential psycho-analysis' of Baudelaire,⁶ which uses what is known about this poet's life to demonstrate that 'men always have the kind of lives they deserve,' is one of several studies of Baudelaire that concentrate on his dilemma rather than on his work. In it Baudelaire's 'negative capability' assumes an exemplary significance, not least because Baudelaire's extreme self-awareness induced him to document his own failings and his own suspicion that he might be 'inferior to those whom he despised.' Baudelaire, in fact, came so close to Sartre's conviction that 'man is never anything but an imposture' that he did not mind leaving the kind of evidence that Sartre could bring against him. Baudelaire's existential dilemma was an acute one, and some of its implications – such as his doubts as to his identity both as a man and as a poet – will be taken up in later chapters of this book. What concerns me at this point are Baudelaire's uncertainties about the function of poetry.

In studying any recent movement in European poetry, or the work of any individual poet later than Baudelaire who has made

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some striking innovation, we are almost sure to be faced with problems which may not be intrinsic to the poetry itself, but which determine the nature of our approach to it and divide the judgements of its critics. The private reader can avoid them; the critic or teacher of modern literature cannot. These problems can be traced back considerably further still, but Baudelaire was the poet who lingered at the crossroads of modernity. His critical works show the same momentous hesitations as his poetry; momentous, because he knew the allurements of every direction which later poets were to take, not excluding headlong retreat; and so does the life of this Romantic-Classical-Symbolist poet, conservative pariah, dandy and spokesman of the underworld, solitary and 'man of crowds,' blasphemer and Christian apologist. Both his theory and his practice reveal a conflict between two radically different, if not incompatible, conceptions of the nature and functions of poetry. This conflict corresponds to a crisis which is not confined to literature or the arts; to a greater or lesser extent it has come to affect every activity that involves public or cultural values. Basically it may be the old question of ends and means; but at a time when few people agree as to what are the ultimate ends of human activity, every art, science and craft that was once considered a means tends to assume the character and importance of an ultimate end.

Baudelaire was one of the earlier exponents of the doctrine that the writing of poetry is an autonomous and autotelic activity. 'La poésie,' he wrote in 1859, 'ne peut pas, sous peine de mort ou de déchéance, s'assimiler à la science ou à la morale; elle n'a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n'a qu'Elle-même.'^{7*} It might be objected that this statement occurs in an essay on Gautier, the originator of the French school of 'art for art's sake,' and that Baudelaire was the kind of sympathetic and empathetic critic who tends to assume the point of view of his subject, especially where that subject is also a personal friend. But Baudelaire made similar claims in other essays. That on Barbier (1861), a Socialist poet whose artistically undistinguished verse had some influence on Baudelaire, precisely because of the truth

*'Death or deposition would be the penalty if poetry were to become assimilated to science or morality; the object of poetry is not Truth, the object of poetry is Poetry itself.'

which it conveys, contains the aphorism: 'La poésie se suffit à elle-même.'*

Baudelaire, however, was also an extreme opponent of the same view. 'Le temps n'est pas loin,' he had written in 1852, 'où l'on comprendra que toute littérature qui se refuse à marcher fraternellement entre la science et la philosophie est une littérature homicide et suicide.'† And again in the same year: 'La puerile utopie de l'école de l'art pour l'art, en excluant la morale, et souvent même la passion, était nécessairement stérile.'‡ Lastly, a passage that reads less like a critical judgement than like an intimate confession, akin to Baudelaire's remark that 'art is prostitution' and that 'all books are immoral':⁸ 'Le goût immodéré de la forme pousse à des désordres monstrueux et inconnus. . . . La passion frénétique de l'art est un chancre qui dévore le reste; et comme l'absence nette du juste et du vrai dans l'art équivaut à l'absence d'art, l'homme entier s'évanouit; la spécialisation excessive d'une faculté aboutit au néant.'⁹§

A great number of other passages could be adduced from Baudelaire's writings for either side of the argument; to do full justice to Baudelaire, they would have to be related to his practice as a poet and to his development as a man. Nor would Baudelaire be the great poet and critic that he is if he had made no attempt to reconcile these conflicting views of poetry. In practice he did so by the allegorical use of urban imagery to act as a link between the actual and the timeless, the phenomenon and the Idea; by combining a new realism with his search for the archetypes.|| How far he remained from a consistent symbolism, how deeply rooted in the rhetorical and didactic

*'Poetry is sufficient to itself.'

†'The time is not distant when it will be understood that all literature which refuses to march fraternally between science and philosophy is a homicidal and suicidal literature.'

‡'The puerile utopia of art for art's sake, by excluding morality and often even passion, was inevitably sterile.'

§'The immoderate love of form produces monstrous and unprecedented disorders . . . The frantic passion for art is a canker that devours all the rest; and since the complete absence of the right and the true in art amounts to a lack of art, the entire man perishes; the excessive specialization of any one faculty ends in complete annihilation.'

||A good example is the 'gibet symbolique' of *Un Voyage à Cithère* which is also the actual gibbet seen by Gérard de Nerval on the (then British) island of Cerigo, as recorded in his *Voyage en Orient. Les Femmes du Caire* (1882).

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tradition of French verse, can only be exemplified here by a single poem of his maturity, *Causerie*. In consecutive lines of this sonnet he likens his heart to something which the beasts have eaten:

Ne cherchez plus mon coeur; les bêtes l'ont mangé

and to a palace befouled by the mob:

Mon coeur est un palais flétri par la cohue.

The clash between these disparate analogies, which the remaining five lines of the sestet vainly try to resolve, is so disturbing just because Baudelaire was not a Symbolist, but an allegorical poet. If *Causerie* remains a successful poem it is because Baudelaire's allegories do their work even within the bounds of a single line; and they do so because of the compressed rhetoric he had learnt from the classical poets, both French and Latin.

On the level of theory, several attempts to reconcile the two views occur in his last essays. 'Le beau,' he wrote in 1863, 'est fait d'un élément éternel, invariable, dont la qualité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d'un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l'on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l'époque, la mode, la morale, la passion.'¹⁰* In the same year Baudelaire wrote his ill-fated letter to Swinburne to thank him for his laudatory article on *Les Fleurs du mal*; Baudelaire continues: 'Permettez-moi, cependant, de vous dire que vous avez poussé un peu loin ma défense. Je ne suis pas aussi moraliste que vous feignez obligeamment de le croire. Je crois simplement "comme vous sans doute" que tout poème, tout objet d'art bien fait suggère naturellement une morale. C'est l'affaire du lecteur. J'ai même une haine très décidée contre toute intention morale exclusive dans un poème.'¹¹†

The morality of a poem, then, should be implicit, and there is a relation between this implicit morality and the artistic merit

*'Beauty consists of a timeless, invariable element, whose character is exceedingly difficult to define, and of a relative, circumstantial element which we can attribute to the period, the fashion, morality or passion, each in turn or all at once.'

†'Allow me, however, to tell you that you've gone a little too far in defending me. I am not so much of a moralist as you obligingly pretend to believe. I simply believe "like you no doubt" that every poem, every work of art that is well made naturally and necessarily suggests a certain morality. That's the reader's business. I even feel a decided loathing for any exclusively moral intention in a poem.'

of a poem. But Baudelaire does not claim, as later critics have claimed, that the reader has no business to enquire into these moral implications. And of course there is also the very different tone of a later letter, one of Baudelaire's last, in which he confessed that he put his whole heart, his most tender feelings, all his religion – in a disguised form – and all his hatred into that 'terrible book.'¹² It is also worth noting that, despite his partial allegiance to the 'art for art's sake' school, Baudelaire at no time found it necessary to evolve a kind of literary criticism that would concentrate on the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of a poem. His critical essays are brilliant examples of the synthetic, as distinct from the analytical, approach, and they are the work of a man concerned with the public function of the arts as much as with their inner laws. As a critic Baudelaire had more in common with Matthew Arnold than with his acknowledged master, Poe, or his acknowledged disciple, Mallarmé.

But it was Baudelaire the aesthete, the dandy and the Satanist who was acclaimed in the decades that followed his death. Admirers of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam could easily identify themselves with the perpetrator of squibs like this one: 'If a poet demanded of the State the right to keep a couple of bourgeois in his stable, people would be very much astonished; but if a bourgeois asked for some roast poet, people would think it quite natural.' This epigram had all the ingredients required by the *fin de siècle* aesthetes: the anti-humanism, the fine insolence, the tacit equation of the artist with the aristocrat. Even the moralists were taken in by Baudelaire's various masks. Henry James summed up one view of Baudelaire's poetry when he wrote: 'Our impatience is of the same order as that which we should feel if a poet, pretending to pluck the Flowers of Good, should come and present us, as specimens, a rhapsody on plumcake and eau de Cologne.'¹³

3

In 1866, shortly before Baudelaire's death, Mallarmé underwent the crisis known as 'les nuits de Tournon,' during which he lost his religious faith. The outcome of this crisis was his essay *Le Livre, instrument spirituel*, and the sudden discovery that 'everything, in the world, exists in order to culminate in a book.'¹⁴ What Baudelaire had described as a 'puérile utopie'

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was established in all seriousness; and Baudelaire, together with Poe, was worshipped as its founder. One would be inclined to ascribe Mallarmé's statement to his youth or to the momentary thrill of having found a substitute for religious faith; but throughout his mature life he expounded an aesthetic doctrine which had its origin in this early crisis. As late as 1894, in his Oxford lecture *La Musique et les lettres*, he made this astonishing statement (though he himself described it as an exaggeration): 'Yes, indeed, Literature exists, and if you like, Literature alone exists, to the exclusion of everything else.' Though this new cult of literature and art derived from the poets, critics and metaphysicians of German Romanticism, in Mallarmé's case it was combined with Platonic or neo-Platonic influences. The same lecture makes this clear, or as clear as Mallarmé's truly jewelled, hard but many-faceted prose style can be said to make anything clear: 'At my risk aesthetically, I set down this conclusion . . . that Music and Letters are the alternate face, here enlarged towards darkness, there sparkling, with certainty, of a phenomenon, the only one, I have called it the Idea.'¹⁵ Art, according to Mallarmé, 'simplifies the world,' because by virtue of an inward state the artist reduces external phenomena to their single parent Idea.

What Schiller called the 'aesthetic education of man' most certainly derives from Plato; but it was also Plato who had his doubts as to the fitness of poets to conduct it. The very reason why literature now 'aspired towards the condition of music' was the uncomfortable awareness that the written word, after all, is a medium that resists the purification required of it. The significance of Mallarmé's 'simplification' was that the external world, which already to Delacroix and Baudelaire had been only a 'dictionary,' a 'store of images' or a 'forest of symbols' from which the artist selects his material, has now become no more than 'a brutal mirage.'¹⁶ Whereas Baudelaire's allegories served to link the phenomenon to the Idea – or else served the purely artistic purpose of appealing to more than one sense at a time, by the use of synaesthesia – Mallarmé's withdrawal to a wholly subjective symbolism of the inward state severed all connection between the poet and that 'relative circumstantial' sphere in which extra-artistic values apply. In the most literal sense of the word, art had become a religion, with its own dogma, its artist-

saints, and even its own asceticism, summed up by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axel* in the aphorism much admired by Mallarmé: 'Vivre? Les serviteurs feront cela pour nous!'^{*} It is no wonder, then, that outside the field of aesthetics Mallarmé's thinking was indeed 'puerile' and inept. What could be more so than his prophecy, from the same lecture: 'If in the future, in France, there is a rebirth of religion, it will be the amplification into a thousand joys of the celestial instinct [instinct de ciel] in each man?' Baudelaire would have laughed at such a *niaiserie*.

Rimbaud's reaction was even more extreme. Although he criticized Baudelaire for 'living in too artistic a milieu' and for failing to invent new forms, he also deified the master in words already cited. Yet while Mallarmé withdrew into the sanctum of Art, Rimbaud prepared to take the next step, to re-create the world by the power of his imagination. Whereas Mallarmé merely disparaged 'le mirage brutal, la cité, ses gouvernements, le code,'[†] and could therefore devote himself to the refinement of his medium, Rimbaud was in active rebellion against society, morality and even God. It followed that art could be only a means to this end, a weapon of revolt; and when Rimbaud recognized his spiritual defeat in this greater struggle, the mere weapon became a worthless thing. On the rough draft of the work that recorded his struggle and defeat, *Une Saison en enfer*, he scribbled these words: 'Maintenant je puis dire que l'art est une sottise.'[‡]

Together with Lautréamont, whose *Chants de Maldoror* was almost contemporary with *Une Saison en enfer*, Rimbaud became the precursor of Surrealism and other experimental movements of this century. It is worth remembering, therefore, that Rimbaud and Lautréamont regarded their own experiments as failures; not on artistic grounds, but because the wheel had come full circle: as Baudelaire predicted, the hypertrophy of art must inevitably lead to its atrophy. Rimbaud's recantation took the form of silence; his rebellion had been too wholehearted and too extreme to permit such a conciliatory half-measure as Verlaine's *Sagesse*. Rimbaud's renunciation of literature was as complete as his former faith in the power of the written word –

^{*}'As for living, our servants can do that for us.'

[†]'... that brutal mirage, the city, its governments, the law.'

[‡]'I can say now that art is an imbecility.'