

Poetry

CRITICISM

VOLUME

106

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Preface

Poetry Criticism (PC) presents significant criticism of the world's greatest poets and provides supplementary biographical and bibliographical material to guide the interested reader to a greater understanding of the genre and its creators. Although major poets and literary movements are covered in such Gale Literary Criticism series as *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)*, *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism (TCLC)*, *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism (NCLC)*, *Literature Criticism from 1400 to 1800 (LC)*, and *Classical and Medieval Literature Criticism (CMLC)*, PC offers more focused attention on poetry than is possible in the broader, survey-oriented entries on writers in these Gale series. Students, teachers, librarians, and researchers will find that the generous excerpts and supplementary material provided by PC supply them with the vital information needed to write a term paper on poetic technique, to examine a poet's most prominent themes, or to lead a poetry discussion group.

Scope of the Series

PC is designed to serve as an introduction to major poets of all eras and nationalities. Since these authors have inspired a great deal of relevant critical material, PC is necessarily selective, and the editors have chosen the most important published criticism to aid readers and students in their research. Each author entry presents a historical survey of the critical response to that author's work. The length of an entry is intended to reflect the amount of critical attention the author has received from critics writing in English and from foreign critics in translation. Every attempt has been made to identify and include the most significant essays on each author's work. In order to provide these important critical pieces, the editors sometimes reprint essays that have appeared elsewhere in Gale's Literary Criticism Series. Such duplication, however, never exceeds twenty percent of a PC volume.

Organization of the Book

Each PC entry consists of the following elements:

- The **Author Heading** cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, followed by birth and death dates. Also located here are any name variations under which an author wrote, including transliterated forms for authors whose native languages use nonroman alphabets. If the author wrote consistently under a pseudonym, the pseudonym will be listed in the author heading and the author's actual name given in parenthesis on the first line of the biographical and critical introduction. Uncertain birth or death dates are indicated by question marks. Single-work entries are preceded by the title of the work and its date of publication.
- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author and the critical debates surrounding his or her work.
- The list of **Principal Works** is ordered chronologically by date of first publication and lists the most important works by the author. The first section comprises poetry collections and book-length poems. The second section gives information on other major works by the author. For foreign authors, the editors have provided original foreign-language publication information and have selected what are considered the best and most complete English-language editions of their works.
- Reprinted **Criticism** is arranged chronologically in each entry to provide a useful perspective on changes in critical evaluation over time. All individual titles of poems and poetry collections by the author featured in the entry are printed in boldface type. The critic's name and the date of composition or publication of the critical work are given at the beginning of each piece of criticism. Unsigned criticism is preceded by the title of the source in which it appeared. Footnotes are reprinted at the end of each essay or excerpt. In the case of excerpted criticism, only those footnotes that pertain to the excerpted texts are included.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.

- A complete **Bibliographical Citation** of the original essay or book precedes each piece of criticism.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. Boxed material following the further reading list provides references to other biographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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Glen, Heather. "Blake's Criticism of Moral Thinking in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*." In *Interpreting Blake*, edited by Michael Phillips, 32-69. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978. Reprinted in *Poetry Criticism*. Vol. 63, edited by Michelle Lee, 34-51. Detroit: Thomson Gale, 2005.

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Les Fleurs du Mal

Charles Baudelaire

French poetry collection, 1857.

For additional information on Baudelaire's life and career, see *PC*, Volume 1.

INTRODUCTION

Les Fleurs du Mal (1857; *The Flowers of Evil*) is the most famous work of French poet Charles Baudelaire, and his reputation as one of the most important lyric poets in literary history rests almost entirely on this one volume. Its shocking treatment of madness, perversity, and corruption, which attracted the attention of the French censors, made the work tremendously unpopular with both readers and critics. The work was, however, highly influential on the poetry of the twentieth century, and scholars today consider *Les Fleurs du Mal* the first true work of literary modernism.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Baudelaire was born April 9, 1821, into a well-to-do Parisian family. His father died when Baudelaire was a small child and his mother remarried a man the young boy despised. Baudelaire was, however, very close to his mother and remained so throughout his lifetime. Baudelaire was a rebellious young man, defying his stepfather by choosing a career in literature and leading a life of extravagance and profligacy, immediately spending every installment of his inheritance as he received it and then going into debt while waiting for the next installment to arrive. He was a regular customer of the taverns and brothels of Paris where he contracted both syphilis and gonorrhea and experimented with various drugs. He was, according to his own description, a "dandy," which he defined as one who follows "a cult of the self." It was while living in this dissipated manner that Baudelaire began writing critical essays as well as the poetry that would later appear in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

TEXTUAL HISTORY

The first edition of the collection appeared in 1857 to a public shocked by its explicitly erotic content. The proofs were confiscated by the French censors, who

excised six of the most offensive poems, which were later published in a Belgian edition as *Les épaves* (1866). Baudelaire, along with his publisher, was fined by the censors, and the ban remained in place until 1949 when it was officially reversed. In 1861, he published a second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, excluding the censored poems and adding new ones; he was working on a third edition when he died on August 31, 1867.

MAJOR THEMES

Les Fleurs du Mal is comprised of six sections organized according to themes, entitled "Spleen et Idéal" ("Spleen and the Ideal"); "Tableaux Parisiens" ("Parisian Scenes"); "Le Vin" ("Wine"); "Fleurs du mal" ("Flowers of Evil"); "Révolte" ("Revolt"); and "La Mort" ("Death"). The work's preface is the poem "Au Lecteur," ("To the Reader"), which invites the reader into a world of ennui and corruption and suggests that by accepting the invitation, the reader will be implicated in that corruption along with the author. The poem ends with the oft-quoted lines "Hypocrite lecteur, mon semblable, mon frère" ("Hypocritical reader, my mirror image, my brother"). General themes that inform the book as a whole are sex and death, but individual poems cover such themes as loss of innocence, lesbianism, sadism, vampirism, and urban corruption. Many critics see the work as a conventional opposition between good and evil, or in more religious terms, between God and Satan, with man being simultaneously drawn to each of them. The poet's attitude towards women, as revealed in the love poems, suggest a similar conflict, with the poet/narrator appearing to both adore and despise women. The book ends with the poem "Le Voyage," an ambivalent conclusion that critics have alternately considered optimistic in that the poetic persona is prepared to strike out in a new direction after confronting the abyss, or pessimistic in that the inevitable conclusion is death.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Les Fleurs du Mal was considered a failure among both readers and critics at the time of its publication. Although it had a small number of admirers, the work

was generally received with shock and outrage by Baudelaire's contemporaries. T. S. Eliot praised it as the work that ushered in modernism, but Henry James was extremely negative in his review of the work, suggesting that Baudelaire had vastly overestimated himself in claiming to have confronted Evil. "You do yourself too much honor," was James's response to the poet, "This is not Evil; it is not the wrong, it is simply the nasty!" He contends that Baudelaire did not pick the flowers of evil, but rather "plucked the evil-smelling weeds . . . and he has often taken up mere cupfuls of mud and bog-water."

The censorship of six poems from the first edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* continues to interest literary scholars, perhaps especially since the ban was not rescinded until 1949. E. S. Burt questions the decision to censor it in the first place, contending that lyric poetry's "subject matter and formalism remove it . . . from the experience of most readers" which would seem to make it "naturally exempt from state intervention, by virtue of a deliberate retreat from risky political subjects." Burt finds such censorship comforting though since, if the state is threatened in some way by the content of Baudelaire's poems, "it vindicates literary activity, which turns out not to be pointless after all, but instead invested with urgency and relevancy."

Edward K. Kaplan analyzes the poems of the "Fleurs du Mal" section of the volume, which deals primarily with sexuality and reveals the poet/narrator's complex attitude toward women, as he alternately sympathizes with women as victims and reviles them as "instruments of his destruction." This is further complicated by "ethical irony," which Kaplan describes as "a feigned promotion of crime and perversion meant to engage readers in dialogue"—a potential relationship between poet/narrator and reader that was introduced in the prefatory poem, "Au lecteur." Kaplan reports, however, that most contemporary readers "simply felt terrorized," missing Baudelaire's ironic stance and confusing the author with the poetic persona he assumed in the collection—a confusion that applied to the government's position as well. William Olmsted also discusses the complex and ironic misogyny of Baudelaire's poetry, in particular the poem "Une Charogne" ("A Carcass"), in which a woman is addressed as the poet/narrator's sun and then suddenly changes into a decaying animal who becomes "the object of his contempt and loathing." As Olmsted puts it, "clearly the poem not only deploys a novel style of misogynistic rhetoric but exposes in critical fashion the presence of misogyny in the very cultural and poetic traditions it deconstructs." Charles Minahen, in his discussion of "À celle qui est trop gaie," contends that the violence in the poem "is directed not just against the particular lady but also, at least implicitly, against the traditional conception of female beauty, extending back at least to the Renaissance." John Mc-

Cann, however, in his analysis of the same poem, maintains that while it is "technically brilliant," its representation of the woman has a negative edge because "the speaker finds her joy overpowering, he feels threatened by it." The woman is, according to McCann, "dismembered" by the metonymic references to her throughout the poem. Minahen, though, believes that Baudelaire was deliberately subverting the conventions of *le blazon de la femme*, a traditional form of homage to a woman wherein "the parts of the body were one by one extolled, but also, as we have seen, metonymically dismembered." McCann interprets it differently, concluding that in the poem "violence against women is inherent in the way they are thought about"; he believes that "unless we accept the villainy of the speaker along with the heroism, we will continue our complicity in the violence against *celle qui est trop gaie* which is violence against us all."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Poetry

Salon de 1845 1845

Les fleurs du mal 1857; revised enlarged edition, 1861

Les paradis artificiels: Opium et haschisch (autobiography and poetry) 1860

Les épaves 1866

Petits poems en prose: Le spleen de Paris (prose poems) 1869

Other Major Works

La fanfarlo (novel) 1847

Histoires extraordinaires [translator; from the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe] (short stories) 1856

Nouvelles histoires extraordinaires [translator; from the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe] (short stories) 1857

Aventures d'Arthur Pym [translator; from the novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* by Edgar Allan Poe] (novel) 1858

Curiosités esthétiques (criticism) 1868

L'art romantique (criticism) 1869

Journaux intimes (diaries) 1887

Lettres: 1841-1866 (letters) 1905

Oeuvres complètes de Charles Baudelaire. 19 vols. (poetry, criticism, essays, novel, letters, journals, autobiography, and translations) 1922-53

The Letters of Charles Baudelaire (letters) 1927

Baudelaire on Poe; Critical Papers (criticism) 1952

The Mirror of Art, Critical Studies (criticism) 1955

Baudelaire as a Literary Critic (criticism) 1964

Art in Paris, 1845-1862, Salons and Other Exhibitions
 Reviewed by Charles Baudelaire (criticism) 1965
Correspondance (letters) 1973
Selected Writings on Art and Artists (criticism) 1986

CRITICISM

Henry James (essay date winter 1876)

SOURCE: James, Henry. "Charles Baudelaire." *New England Review* 21, no. 1 (winter 2000): 194-98.

[In the following negative review, originally published in 1876, James counts Baudelaire as a lesser genius than Edgar Allan Poe, Théophile Gautier, and possibly James himself. James asserts that Baudelaire overestimates the scope of his project in believing that he has confronted Evil or even great wrongs in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.]

As a brief discussion was lately carried on (there had been an exchange of letters on the subject in an American journal,) touching the merits of the writer whose name we have prefixed to these lines, it may not be amiss to introduce him to some of those readers who must have observed the contest with littler more than a vague sense of the strangeness of its subject. Charles Baudelaire is not a novelty in literature; his principal work dates from 1857, and his career terminated a few years later. But his admirers have made a classic of him and elevated him to the rank of one of those subjects which are always in order. Even if we differ with them on this point, such attention as Baudelaire demands will not lead us very much astray. He is not, in quantity (whatever he may have been in quality), a formidable writer; having died young, he was not prolific, and the most noticeable of his original productions are contained in two small volumes.

His celebrity began with the publication of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a collection of verses of which some had already appeared in periodicals. The "Revue des Deux Mondes" had taken the responsibility of introducing a few of them to the world—or rather, though it held them at the baptismal font of public opinion, it had declined to stand godfather. An accompanying note in the "Revue" disclaimed all editorial approval of their morality. This of course procured them a good many readers; and when, on its appearance, the volume we have mentioned was overhauled by the police a still greater number of persons desired to possess it. Yet in spite of the service rendered him by the censorship, Baudelaire has never become in any degree popular; the

lapse of twenty years has seen but five editions of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The foremost feeling of the reader of the present day will be one of surprise, and even amusement, at Baudelaire's audacities having provoked this degree of scandal. The world has traveled fast since then, and the French censorship must have been, in the year 1857, in a very prudish mood. There is little in *Les Fleurs du Mal* to make the reader of either French or English prose and verse of the present day even open his eyes. We have passed through the fiery furnace and profited by experience. We are happier than Racine's heroine [*Phèdre*, in act III, scene 3], who had not

Su se faire un front qui ne rougit jamais.

[Known how to assume a countenance that never blushes]

Baudelaire's verses do not strike us as being dictated by a spirit of bravado—though we have heard that, in talk, it was his habit, to an even tiresome degree, to cultivate the quietly outrageous—to pile up monstrosities and blasphemies without winking and with the air of uttering proper commonplaces.

Les Fleurs du Mal is evidently a sincere book—so far as anything for a man of Baudelaire's temper and culture could be sincere. Sincerity seems to us to belong to a range of qualities with which Baudelaire and his friends were but scantily concerned. His great quality was an inordinate cultivation of the sense of the picturesque, and his care was for how things looked, and whether some kind of imaginative amusement was not to be got out of them, much more than for what they meant and whither they led and what was their use in human life at large. The later editions of *Les Fleurs du Mal* (with some of the interdicted pieces still omitted and others, we believe, restored) contain a long preface by Théophile Gautier, which throws a curious side light upon what the Spiritualist newspapers would call Baudelaire's "mentality." Of course Baudelaire is not to be held accountable for what Gautier says of him, but we cannot help judging a man in some degree by the company he keeps. To admire Gautier is certainly excellent taste, but to be admired by Gautier we cannot but regard as rather compromising. He gives a magnificently picturesque account of the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in which, indeed, the question of pure exactitude is evidently so very subordinate that it seems grossly ill-natured for us to appeal to such a standard. While we are reading him, however, we find ourselves wishing that Baudelaire's analogy with the author himself were either greater or less. Gautier was perfectly sincere, because he dealt only with the picturesque and pretended to care only for appearances. But Baudelaire (who, to our mind, was an altogether inferior genius to Gautier) applied the same process of interpretation to things as regards which it was altogether inadequate; so that one is constantly tempted to suppose he cares more

for his process—for making grotesquely-pictorial verse—than for the things themselves. On the whole, as we have said, this inference would be unfair. Baudelaire had a certain groping sense of the moral complexities of life, and if the best that he succeeds in doing is to drag them down into the very turbid element in which he himself plashes and flounders, and there present them to us much besmirched and bespattered, this was not a want of goodwill in him, but rather a dulness and permanent immaturity of vision. For American readers, furthermore, Baudelaire is compromised by his having made himself the apostle of our own Edgar Poe. He translated, very carefully, and exactly, all of Poe's prose writings, and, we believe, some of his very superficial verses. With all due respect to the very original genius of the author of the "Tales of Mystery," it seems to us that to take him with more than a certain degree of seriousness is to lack seriousness one's self. An enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection. Baudelaire thought him a profound philosopher, the neglect of whose golden utterances stamped his native land with infamy. Nevertheless, Poe was much the greater charlatan of the two, as well as the greater genius.

Les Fleurs du Mal was a very happy title for Baudelaire's verses, but it is not altogether a just one. Scattered flowers incontestably do bloom in the quaking swamps of evil, and the poet who does not mind encountering bad odors in his pursuit of sweet ones is quite at liberty to go in search of them. But Baudelaire has, as a general thing, not plucked the flowers—he has plucked the evil-smelling weeds (we take it that he did not use the word flowers in a purely ironical sense) and he has often taken up mere cupfuls of mud and bog-water. He had said to himself that it was a great shame that the realm of evil and unclean things should be fenced off from the domain of poetry; that it was full of subjects, of chances and effects; that it had its light and shade, its logic and its mystery; and that there was the making of some capital verses in it. So he leaped the barrier and was soon immersed in it up to his neck. Baudelaire's imagination was of a melancholy and sinister kind, and, to a considerable extent, this plunging into darkness and dirt was doubtless very spontaneous and disinterested. But he strikes us on the whole as passionless, and this, in view of the unquestionable pluck and acuteness of his fancy, is a great pity. He knew evil not by experience, not as something within himself, but by contemplation and curiosity, as something outside of himself, by which his own intellectual agility was not in the least discomposed, rather, indeed (as we say his fancy was of a dusky cast) agreeably flattered and stimulated. In the former case, Baudelaire, with his other gifts, might have been a great poet. But, as it is, evil for him begins outside and not inside, and consists primarily of a great deal of lurid landscape and unclean furniture. This is an almost ludicrously puerile

view of the matter. Evil is represented as an affair of blood and carrion and physical sickness—there must be stinking corpses and starving prostitutes and empty laudanum bottles in order that the poet shall be effectively inspired.

A good way to embrace Baudelaire at a glance is to say that he was, in his treatment of evil, exactly what Hawthorne was not—Hawthorne, who felt the thing at its source, deep in the human consciousness. Baudelaire's infinitely slighter volume of genius apart, he was a sort of Hawthorne reversed. It is the absence of this metaphysical quality in his treatment of his favorite subjects (Poe was his metaphysician, and his devotion sustained him through a translation of "Eureka!") that exposes him to the class of accusations of which M. Edmond Schérer's accusation of feeding upon *pourriture* [putrescence] is an example; and, in fact, in his pages we never know with what we are dealing. We encounter an inextricable confusion of sad emotions and vile things, and we are at a loss to know whether the subject pretends to appeal to our conscience or—we were going to say—to our olfactories. "Le Mal?" we exclaim; "you do yourself too much honor. This is not Evil; it is not the wrong; it is simply the nasty!" 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*. Independently of the question of his subjects, the charm of Baudelaire's verse is often of a very high order. He belongs to the class of geniuses in whom we ourselves find but a limited pleasure—the laborious, deliberate, economical writers, those who fumble a long time in their pockets before they bring out their hand with a coin in the palm. But the coin, when Baudelaire at last produced it, was often of a high value. He had an extraordinary verbal instinct and an exquisite felicity of epithet. We cannot help wondering, however, at Gautier's extreme admiration for his endowment in this direction; it is the admiration of the writer who gushes for the writer who trickles. In one point Baudelaire is extremely remarkable—in his talent for suggesting associations. His epithets seem to have come out of old cupboards and pockets; they have had a kind of magical mustiness. Moreover, his natural sense of the superficial picturesqueness of the miserable and the unclean was extremely acute; there may be a difference of opinion as to the advantage of possessing such a sense; but whatever it is worth Baudelaire had it in a high degree. One of his poems—"To a Red haired Beggar Girl"—is a masterpiece in the way of graceful expression of this high relish of what is shameful.

*Pour moi, poète, chétif,
Ton jeune corps maladif,
Plein de taches de rousseur,
A sa douceur.*

[For me, a pitiful poet / Your sickly young body / Full
of freckles / Has its sweetness.]

Baudelaire repudiated with indignation the charge that he was what is called a realist, and he was doubtless right in doing so. He had too much fancy to adhere strictly to the real; he always embroiders and elaborates—endeavors to impart that touch of strangeness and mystery which is the very *raison d'être* of poetry. Baudelaire was a poet, and for a poet to be a realist is of course nonsense. The idea that Baudelaire imported into his theme was, as a general thing, an intensification of its repulsiveness, but it was at any rate ingenious. When he makes an invocation [in “**The Two Good Sisters**”] to “*la Débauche aux bras immondes*” [Debauchery, with her filthy embrace] one may be sure he means more by it than is evident to the vulgar—he means, that is, an intense perversity. Occasionally he treats agreeable subjects, and his least sympathetic critics must make a point of admitting that his most successful poem is also his least morbid, and most touching; we allude to “**Les Petites Vieilles**” [“**The Little Old Women**”]—a really masterly production. But if it represents the author’s maximum, it is a note that he is very rarely struck.

Baudelaire, of course, is a capital text for a discussion of the question as to the importance of the morality—or of the subject-matter in general—of a work of art; for he offers a rare combination of technical zeal and patience and of vicious sentiment. But even if we had space to enter upon such a discussion, we should spare our words; for argument on this point wears to our sense a really ridiculous aspect. To deny the relevancy of subject-matter and the importance of the moral quality of a work of art strikes us as, in two words, very childish. We do not know what the great moralists would say about the matter—they would probably treat it very good-humoredly; but that is not the question. There is very little doubt what the great artists would say. People of that temper feel that the whole thinking man is one, and that to count out the moral element in one’s appreciation of an artistic total is exactly as sane as it would be (if the total were a poem) to eliminate all the words in three syllables, or to consider only such portions of it as had been written by candle-light. The crudity of sentiment of the advocates of “art for art” is often a striking example of the fact that a great deal of what is called culture may fail to dissipate a well-seated provincialism of spirit. They talk of morality as Miss [Maria] Edgeworth’s infantine heroes and heroines talk of “physic”—they allude to its being put into and kept out of a work of art, put into and kept out of one’s appreciation of the same, as if it were a colored fluid kept in a big-labeled bottle in some mysterious intellectual closet. It is in reality simply a part of the essential richness of inspiration—it has nothing to do with the artistic process and it has everything to do with the artistic effect. The more a work of art feels it at its source, the richer it is; the less it feels it, the poorer it is. People of a large taste prefer rich works to poor ones and they are

not inclined to assent to the assumption that the process is the whole work. We are safe in believing that all this is comfortably clear to most of those who have, in any degree, been initiated into art by production. For them the subject is as much a part of their work as their hunger is a part of their dinner. Baudelaire was not so far from being of this way of thinking as some of his admirers would persuade us; yet we may say on the whole that he was the victim of a grotesque illusion. He tried to make fine verses on ignoble subjects, and in our opinion he signally failed. He gives, as a poet, a perpetual impression of discomfort and pain. He went in search of corruption, and the ill-conditioned jade proved a thankless muse. The thinking reader, feeling himself, as a critic, all one, as we have said, finds the beauty perverted by the ugliness. What the poet wished, doubtless, was to seem to be always in the poetic attitude; what the reader sees is a gentleman in a painful-looking posture, staring very hard at a mass of things from which, more intelligently, we avert our heads.

Note

Literal translations in brackets by the Editor, who wishes to thank John Bertolini for his assistance in locating the source of the quotation from Racine.

Dorothy M. Betz (essay date winter 1991)

SOURCE: Betz, Dorothy M. “Baudelaire’s ‘Bénédiction.’” *Explicator* 49, no. 2 (winter 1991): 92-4.

[In the following essay, Betz analyzes the figure of the angel in the “Bénédiction” of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.]

Even within the poem itself, the “Ange” of Baudelaire’s “Bénédiction” plays an ambiguous role. In this opening poem of the autobiographical “Spleen et Idéal” section of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, the young poet, rejected by his mother, seems to find an alternate source of protection in the form of a guardian angel.

Pourtant, sous la tutelle invisible d'un Ange,
L'Enfant déshérité s'enivre de soleil,
Et dans tout ce qu'il voit et dans tout ce qu'il mange
Retrouve l'ambroisie et le nectar vermeil.

Il joue avec le vent, cause avec le nuage,
Et s'enivre en chantant du chemin de la croix;
Et l'Esprit qui le suit dans son pèlerinage
Pleure de le voir gai comme un oiseau des bois.¹

The “tutelle invisible” (line 21) suggests that the angel has taken up the role that the mother has abandoned, that of caring for the child. But “tutelle,” with its further implication of education, shows the angel to be guiding the child, whether toward a good or unfortunate end.

This ambivalence, together with the angel's tears, introduces ambiguity. Why should the angel cry upon seeing the child happy? Does this merely indicate that the angel foresees a corresponding unhappiness to come? Or does the angel share the animosity of other figures in the poem toward the child?

The ambiguity is strengthened by Baudelaire's repeated use of "s'enivre" (22 and 26). The concept of drunkenness for Baudelaire clearly transcends the physical phenomenon, as he states pointedly in his prose poem "Enivrez-vous": "Enivrez-vous sans cesse! De vin, de poésie ou de vertu, à votre guise" (p. 33). The exaltation inherent in this state does not necessarily contradict the religious element introduced by the "chemin de la croix" (line 26). But because drunkenness characterizes the poet while he is under the angel's guidance, its specific nature should help define the angel's influence.

The symbolic complexity of Baudelaire's images in *Les Fleurs du Mal* derives from a carefully structured process of redefinition, through which images gain additional nuance during their repetition in successive poems. Thus the recurring combination of the motifs of the angel and of drunkenness may serve to clarify Baudelaire's use of them here. Robert Cargo's concordance to *Les Fleurs du Mal* lists forty-six uses of *ange(s)* in the work.² Of these, only six occur in poems also referring to some form of "ivresse" or "enivrer." Of these six poems, three, "**Le Flacon**," "**Danse macabre**," and "**La Mort des Pauvres**," do not relate the angel directly to the poet. In the first, the flask contains a "poison préparé par les anges" (27), and the other two references are to the angel of death. The angel of death, however, cannot be discounted as not related to the poet. When the angel represents a woman ("Vous, mon ange et ma passion!" "**Une Charogne**," [40]), or her seductive charms ("plus câlins que les Anges du mal," "**Les Bijoux**," [21]), we recall that the woman has caused Baudelaire's spiritual death by distracting him from his ideal.

However, two additional poems linking the angel with drunkenness furnish analogies especially useful to the reading of "**Bénédiction**"—"Un Voyage à Cythère" and "**Le Voyage**." In the latter poem, with which Baudelaire ended *Les Fleurs du Mal* in the second edition, the poet concludes the voyage of his life, during which he has sought various forms of escape. He describes travelers, threatened by the figure of Circe, who echo the earlier experience of the child: "Pour n'être pas changés en bêtes, ils s'enivrent / D'espace et de lumière et de cieux embrasés" (13-14). Immediately afterward, the angel reappears, but this time as a clearly negative persona: "Comme un Ange cruel qui fouette des soleils" (28). Not only is this angel cruel and aggressive, but the references to the sun (or suns, reflecting the duration of the voyage) link this passage to the source of drunkenness in "**Bénédiction**."

The other poem to combine these motifs, "**Un Voyage à Cythère**," provides a transition. The ship on which the poet travels evokes an angel no longer as passive as the spectator-angel of "**Bénédiction**," but not yet as aggressive as the figure of "**Le Voyage**": "Le navire roulait sous un ciel sans nuages, / Comme un ange enivré d'un soleil radieux" (3-4). This time the angel, not the poet, becomes drunk. But the drunkenness, still produced by the sun, still represents a more generalized abandoning of mental faculties than that produced by alcohol. Both angel and poet in turn lose control to external influences. The angel, seen as analogous to the ship rolling in the waves, is externally directed, just as the travelers in "**Le Voyage**" flee dangers, represented by Circe, rather than determining their own course.

In the context of these other references, both the tears and the apparent ambiguity of the angel of "**Bénédiction**" make sense. The angel perceives the loss of control inherent in the young poet's drunkenness and foresees that it will leave the child at the mercy of others, most notably of the woman, also represented as an angel, to whose perfidy the other angels of the work may be linked. In a sense the angel may see his own role in the poet's destruction, for by the final poem, the angel himself, the "Ange cruel," will have joined with those who inflict suffering.

As the angel evolves toward a figure of cruelty, the angel as persona is more active. In "**Bénédiction**," the action is that of the child, who becomes drunk, drinks, eats, plays, and chats. The angel's "tutelle invisible" remains passive. With action limited to "suit" and "pleure" (27 and 28), the angel reacts to the child but does not initiate an exchange with him. Further, Baudelaire also refers to the angel at this stage as "l'Esprit" (27), a term that he more frequently uses to describe himself. Soon after "**Bénédiction**," he will describe "mon esprit" flying free in "**Elévation**" (5), suggesting a link between "ange," "esprit," and poet.

By "**Un Voyage à Cythère**," however, it is the angel who is "enivré" (4), and in "**Le Voyage**," the "ange cruel" becomes active with "qui fouette" (28). As a once-ethereal figure becomes active, the actions are perverse. The danger implicit in defining the angel's role parallels another suggestion of the poet's fall at the end of "**Bénédiction**." Just after describing his vision of the celestial crown "de pure lumière" (73), Baudelaire compares it with a more concrete object, "les yeux mortels" (75), the same eyes that will deceive him through the hypnotic gaze of a woman.

Thus the images of "**Bénédiction**" seem, on the surface, in harmony with the poem's title. But just as the title has an ironic dimension when the poet is cursed, figures such as the angel hide sinister meanings to be revealed in subsequent texts. Baudelaire's cluster of themes—the

angel, drunkenness, and the sun—in “*Bénédiction*” typify his use of images—at first ambiguous, and growing through repetition into nuanced, composite symbols. The initial ambiguity serves to alert the reader to seek the true meaning in subsequent poems.

Notes

1. However, under the invisible guidance of an Angel,
The disinherited Child becomes drunk on sunlight,
And in all that he sees and all that he eats
He finds ambrosia and scarlet nectar.

He plays with the wind and chats with the cloud,
And becomes drunk with singing the way of the cross;
And the Spirit following him on his pilgrimage
Cries upon seeing him gay as a bird in the woods.

(lines 21-28)

Charles Baudelaire. *Oeuvres complètes*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) 1; 7-8. All subsequent quotations from Baudelaire are from this edition. Translation is the author's.

2. Robert T. Cargo, ed., *A Concordance to Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1965) 15.

Karen A. Harrington (essay date fall-winter 1991-92)

SOURCE: Harrington, Karen A. “Fragmentation and Irony in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.” *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 20, nos. 1 and 2 (fall-winter 1991-92): 177-86.

[In the following essay, Harrington discusses the fragmentation of the self and the ironic uses to which Baudelaire put this fragmentation in *Les Fleurs du Mal*.]

Fragmentation commands special significance in *Les Fleurs du Mal* and stresses an often contradictory split occurring at many levels such as the structural opposition between spleen and ideal. Thematic polarities of love and hate, time and space, good and evil, God and Satan abound in Baudelaire's work. Of greater importance, perhaps, is the position of the fragmented self that shapes the core or nucleus upon which other forms of fragmentation acquire meaning. It finds expression in various ways: the self identifies with others, thereby engaging in an interplay of its own absence and presence. The divided self also calls attention to the distancing of the poetic voice from the poem's movement, while at other times a self-conscious split alienates the self from its own identity.

Baudelaire touches upon this concept in *Les Paradis artificiels*, explaining how differentiation between object and subject is abolished as the self voluntarily renounces

its own identity in favor of the object or “other.” His crucial quotation in *Mon Coeur Mis à Nu*, “de la vaporisation et de la centralisation du *Moi*. Tout est là,” (1: 676) is also indicative of the role fragmentation plays. In such poems as “*La Chevelure*,” centralization or concentration of the self is accompanied by its dispersal, its capacity to permeate other objects, or to appropriate characteristics of “others.” Dispersal precedes concentration as the self loses and subsequently regains its identity, but it is now infused with the richness of the experience of the other. In this respect, the loss or absence of the self creates a positive extension of the poetic act, a result of the harmonious transference between vaporization and centralization.

At other times, this interaction points to an impasse. In “*Obsession*” vaporization is hinted at with a potential diffusion of the self into ocean waves. However, vaporization and centralization remain polarized because the position of the poetic voice is too anchored in a self-reflective stance to allow such dispersal. In place of unification, fragmentation intensifies the separation between subject and object.

The paradoxically disruptive and harmonious nature of the divided self in Baudelaire's poetry can perhaps be best understood by exploring to what extent the relation between language and the self determines the ambivalence associated with fragmentation. In *De l'Essence du rire* (2: 535) we find a paradigm that conveys how language alludes to divergent and often opposing expressions of fragmentation. Baudelaire refers to both smiling and joy as “le comique significatif” and argues that they are distinguished by their totality and sense of wholeness. To the contrary, laughter, or “le comique absolu,” is associated with an irreconcilable split that denotes its ambiguous and irresolute nature.

“Le comique significatif” corresponds to a model in which the self's relation to the poem is framed by a clear and unequivocal notion of unity and closure. Fragmentation of this kind occurs with the partial or total abandonment of narrative control as the poetic persona assumes a chameleon-like stance to identify with “others.” Jean Prévost terms this “le mimétisme de Baudelaire,” a quality characteristic of many of the poet's love poems.

“*Le Poison*” illustrates this affinity, with the self consumed by the woman's presence. She serves as a guide to an illusory world, a means of transcending reality through the act of forgetting. Though dangerously linked to poison, her eyes are the embodiment of “oubli” and become the focal point through which the poetic self strives to revel in the much sought after oblivion. Other forms of possible transcendence (wine and opium) cannot compare to the woman's fascinating powers, which lure the poet to her:

Tout cela ne vaut pas le poison qui découle
 De tes yeux, de tes yeux verts,
 Lacs où mon âme tremble et se voit à l'envers . . .
 Mes songes viennent en foule
 Pour se désaltérer à ces gouffres amers.

Tout cela ne vaut pas le terrible prodige
 De ta salive qui mord,
 Qui plonge dans l'oubli mon âme sans remords
 Et, charriant le vertige,
 La roule défaillante aux rives de la mort!

(1: 48)

Drawn to her green eyes and bitter saliva, he hopes to surpass the limits of time and space. But her association with a poisonous lake that quenches one's thirst points to her presence as not only enticing but also foreboding. The poet seeks and fears both the poison dwelling within the woman's eyes and the taste of her bitter saliva yet is cognizant of their imminent threat, projected in the "gouffres amers" and "rives de la mort."

This paradoxical influence marks the potential fulfillment of the poet's daydreams, but at the price of death. Though the woman epitomizes the oblivion that the poet is seeking, this ideal world is itself an illusion and, similar to wine and opium, she does not lead him beyond the ephemeral. Yet, chameleon fragmentation or mimetic association nonetheless offers a momentary escape, a temporary means of shutting out the world. Thus, loss of narrative control can be viewed as a desire to orchestrate and make sense of one's world.

When mimetic association is more closely related to sensory perceptions, as in "**Parfum exotique**" and "**L'Invitation au voyage**," poetic reverie frequently suggests a more favorable outcome. Through a process of synesthetic transfer, the poetic voice relinquishes control to the sensory perceptions, thus showing the self's appropriation by others as a means of experiencing and yielding to the influence of the imagery.

"**Parfum exotique**" opens with the association between the olfactory sensory perception and the portrayal of a tropical setting, brought about by the woman's presence. As the sensory perceptions increasingly become the focus of the poem, narrative control weakens with the self relegated to the role of participant. In the last two stanzas the sensory perceptions transform the poet's vision into an imaginary setting:

Guidé par ton odeur vers de charmants climats,
 Je vois un port rempli de voiles et de mâts
 Encor tout fatigués par la vague marine,

Pendant que le parfum des verts tamariniers
 Qui circule dans l'air et m'enfle la narine,
 Se mêle dans mon âme au chant des mariniers.

(1: 25)

The woman's presence is soon consumed by her fragrance, transformed into the aroma of green tamarind trees. Circulating in the air, the olfactory sensory perception reveals its expansion as it becomes the subject of the poem. It also claims narrative control by exerting its far-reaching influence over and through the poetic self.

Sensory perceptions efface distinction between self and others, a position that Baudelaire justifies in *Les Paradis artificiels* by illustrating how the effects of various intoxicants lead the self to identify with the object of observation:

Il arrive quelquefois que la personnalité disparaît et que l'objectivité, qui est le propre des poètes panthéistes, se développe en vous si anormalement, que la contemplation des objets extérieurs vous fait oublier votre propre existence, et que vous vous confondez bientôt avec eux.

(1: 419)

In "**Parfum exotique**" the intoxicants are replaced by the woman's presence and the synesthetic associations it produces on the poet, through whom the expansive transformation occurs. The sensory perceptions link the real and the imaginary: the woman's fragrance is an indicator of the poet's real world, but its subsequent dispersal and consumption find expression in the realm of the imaginary ("Je vois un port rempli de voiles et de mâts / Encor tout fatigués par la vague marine"). Mimetic interaction in "**Parfum exotique**" thus prompts a timeless and inspiring movement that counteracts the cold-heartedness of reality.

While other poems show the mimetic stance as an intensification of harsh realities ("**Le Vampire**"), they all call attention to a self-contained world. There is a sense that, however pleasant or unpleasant the poem's outcome, it concludes on a decisive note and that the self's position, though fragmented, is not questioned. Mimetic association accordingly presents a straightforward view of the self in the world and corresponds to the autonomous vision associated with "le comique significatif."

By contrast, the laughter characteristic of "le comique absolu," symbolizes the duality of human nature, of man's fall from grace. In Baudelaire's estimation, "le comique absolu" is superior to "le comique significatif" yet is defined by its own negativity. Many of his poems show the fragmented self mirroring this negativity. Aware of its own duality, the self is unable to reconcile it, thus emphasizing an ambivalent and often self-deprecating position, which is essentially ironic. For Paul de Man the pervasive and obstructive influence of irony calls into play the paradoxical split of the self as both participant and detached observer of the poetic

act.³ The mimetic association of the aforementioned poems is replaced by ironic distancing, which differs from the former in terms of how language functions in the poem. The ironic stance highlights the self's failure to appropriate others to its own identity and magnifies the gulf between self and poem. Irony's relation to the divided self also denotes a separation owing primarily to an endless self-reflective questioning, symbolized by its lack of closure. These two perspectives are exposed either through the ironic severance of the self from the poem or through the status of the ironic self-consciousness and correspond roughly to Leo Bersani's distinction between the self as doomed artist and the prince-dandy figure.⁴

The ironic stance of the doomed artist implicates the self by relegating it to an alien world through various allegoric or metaphoric associations. Bersani alludes to this when discussing Lacanian theory and how the self moves from the Imaginary to the order of the Symbolic: "The self is still an appropriated self, but what is appropriated is language as the other, and not an ideal but alienated *image* of an individual self."⁵ Thus appropriation is evidence of alienation in the form of language. Attaining its fullest potential through irony, language underscores distancing by means of dissimulation. As such, alienation of the fragmented self may be defined by its detachment from the object, thing, or person that it encounters.

Baudelaire's *Spleen* poems point to the technique of ironic distancing. In "*Pluviôse, irrité contre la ville entière*" the self's involvement in the various images depicted is diminished with its eventual separation from the poem's movement. Michael Riffaterre refers to the essence of this movement as a series of structural permutations through which the matrix of the "home" as "hearth" is subsequently transformed "into a code of the moral and physical discomfort a home is supposed to protect us against."⁶ The poem thus operates on an interplay of words and their opposite in which "structural permutation . . . converts a mimesis of intimacy into a code negating intimacy and its attendant happiness."⁷

We can apply Riffaterre's insightful remarks to the fragmented self in the poem. The vision it portrays is progressively reduced to a single spot (a deck of cards), which engulfs the presence of the self. Here, fragmentation can be defined as the doubling of the poetic persona through an absent-present structure. Though responsible for the poem's articulation, narrative voice is enunciated only once ("Mon chat"). Its identity is never fully expressed and remains a floating or rather empty construct.

This problematic position occurs with the self stringing together the seemingly unrelated imagery as it is simultaneously being detached from the unfurling of

the narrative. A disconcerting rift ensues between the language and the self, a division that transforms the house matrix into its negation while stressing the almost incidental and fortuitous role of the self.

As Riffaterre points out, the deck of cards and other objects as well reflect a scene of intimacy.⁸ The reductive world of the Queen of Spades and Jack of Hearts almost assumes magnified proportions, depicting a true metonymic representation of the house system. The fact that the two cards converse grimly about their past loves creates the illusion of a coherent world. Yet, exclusion of the poetic voice from this self-contained universe gives rise to a gap in which language undermines the role of the self. It severs the poetic voice from the narrative, revealing a discord as the interplay of the self's absence and presence assists in refuting the house matrix. But ironic distancing not only joins forces with the house system, it also orients the reader's understanding of the poem's title, "**Spleen**," laying bare the doomed poetic voice consumed by linguistic alienation.

Similar to Baudelaire's *Spleen* poem, "**La Béatrice**" paints the poet as doomed artist but at the same time, the ironic stance alludes to a "dédoublément" of the self with the poet adopting the pose of the prince or dandy. Ironic distancing emphasizes the self as a Hamlet-figure, a histrionic artist who is mercilessly berated by impish demons. Their attack aims at the heart of his artistic endeavors and becomes more poignant at the end when the beloved joins in the ridicule. Though overhearing their conversation, the narrator remains isolated from the demons since they do not suspect that he is listening. Even the poem's structure adds to the separation between subject and object: set apart by a direct quotation of the demons' conversation, the second stanza is disconnected from the first and last stanzas, which present the narrator's subjective perspective.

The reference to "**La Béatrice**" calls further attention to the poem's ironic and dual stance. Commenting upon the relation between self-consciousness and critical distancing, Claude Pichois stresses that "*La Béatrice du poète n'est évidemment pas celle de Dante: elle est mêlée à la 'troupe obscène' des démons et parfois leur fait 'quelque sale caresse' . . . Le génie de Baudelaire est ici d'instaurer cette confrontation entre Shakespeare et Dante.*"⁹ Questioning artistic enterprise, the irony of this confrontation pits a transformed Beatrice against Shakespeare's Hamlet-figure, which leads to the degradation of self. Yet the irony is twofold: owing to his self-awareness, the narrator also surpasses his ill-fated circumstances.

Another expression of the ironic stance, critical self-awareness also helps to frame the problematic nature between language and fragmentation. Approximating Leo Bersani's references to the prince or dandy in