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**The Poet and the Chimæra:
Duality in Baudelaire's "La Mort"**

"...la critique touche à chaque instant à la métaphysique."¹

At the beginning of his foreword to *La Comédie humaine*, Balzac speaks of the chimæra that was the seed and figure of this work. He saw it as a smiling image, a woman's face that visited him briefly before vanishing into thin air. But, he continues, "la chimère, comme beaucoup de chimères, ... a ses commandements et sa tyrannie auxquels il faut céder."² He found it to be his principle of unity—"la belle loi du 'soi pour soi' "³—that could not be gainsaid for it opened up all things in their details and ramifications like a universal key. The ardent reader of *La Comédie humaine* who was Baudelaire could not but praise what he called the individual "perspective de l'ensemble" which the novelist had drawn—"une méthode qui lui permette de revêtir à coup sûr de lumière et de pourpre la pure trivialité."⁴ Light and shade convulse the characters, impose the vision. If for some contemporaries such a practice was Balzac's major failing, Baudelaire meets the criticism head on: "Pour mieux parler, c'est justement là ses qualités... Qui peut faire cela? Or, qui ne fait pas cela, pour dire la vérité, ne fait pas grand chose."⁵ The excesses are a necessary part of the novels and, indeed, inseparable from them, in the way that similar excesses are the mark of all great works which obey an underlying system.

Can we infer that Baudelaire had devised a system of his own which he applied in the manner of Balzac? The reader will hardly doubt it. Evidence may be gathered from one end of this work to the other of a will to order that corresponds to a totalizing scheme—"un système unitaire et définitif."⁶ The nub is the law of contrasts which became his instrument of analysis and construction. "La loi des

contrastes... gouverne l'ordre moral et l'ordre physique," he wrote in 1846:⁷ and much later, in 1860, in a letter to Poulet-Malassis: "D'abord, ne saisissez-vous pas, par l'imagination, que quelles que soient les transformations des races humaines, quelque rapide que soit la destruction, la nécessité de l'antagonisme doit subsister, et que les rapports, avec des couleurs ou des formes différentes, restent les mêmes. C'est, si vous consentez à accepter cette formule, l'harmonie éternelle par la lutte éternelle."⁸ So it is, I think, that the exactness of antagonistic lines of force instills Baudelaire's writings—creative, critical, intimate—which reach to a truth that is the complex sum of their tensions. This perception allows us to read *Les Fleurs du mal* in terms quite different from those of a self-confession. The book presents an alternation of themes in which the poems struggle with each other like thesis and antithesis, ideal and spleen, supernaturalism and irony. A measure is established which sets the pattern of development. Baudelaire could speak of "ce misérable dictionnaire de mélancolie et de crime,"⁹ declare in all rigorousness: "A un blasphème j'opposerai des élancements vers le Ciel, à une obscénité, des fleurs platoniques,"¹⁰ define his subject as "l'agitation de l'esprit dans le mal," that is—as I would wish to gloss—a movement from one pole to another in accordance with the application of the principle of contradiction.

I take these factors to be of prime significance for the reading of any part of the book. We may choose the example of the last sequence "La Mort" which in the first (1857) edition comprised three sonnets and in the second (1861) edition a total of six poems or two hundred fourteen lines, more than five times as long. Some critics have held that the additions were made because they served to express the mature poet whose thought was dark and whose pessimism was profound. Such an interpretation was put nearly half a century ago by Albert Feuillerat: "Baudelaire n'affirme plus que la mort lui ouvre les portes du ciel... La certitude radieuse s'est changée en une sorte de fatalisme que confie le désespéré aux imprévisibles secrets de l'Inconnu."¹¹ The reading is plausible—but only, it seems to me, if we choose to ignore certain important details. It implies a poet much less conditional than the one we encounter since it adopts a univocal reading of the first version (the lovers, the poor, the artists conceive a single figure of death: "une accueillante hôtesse qui comblera tous les vœux et leur donnera une seconde jeunesse"),¹² whereas, I take it, the poems treat separate registers that involve a radical qualification or destabilization each of each. Above all, it neglects the presence of the architectural values that preside over the "livre composé" of 1861 and command its argument. "La loi des contrastes" implies a cogent economy of

thought and feeling that is postulated and realized by the philosopher-poet. Seen in this light, "La Mort" is the end-point of an analysis. The matter is articulated in the complementary halves of a scrupulous duality.



"La Mort des amants," "La Mort des pauvres," "La Mort des artistes"

The three initial sonnets treat death in divergent terms of hope. Each uses the key word *mystique*—"Un jour fait de rose et de bleu mystique," "C'est la gloire des Dieux, c'est le grenier mystique," "pour piquer dans le but, de mystique nature" - designating the supernatural vision they trope: two lovers dream of idyllic joy - "...un Ange entr'ouvrant les portes"—that will be achieved by death ("La Mort des amants"); the poor celebrate death as somber comforter — "C'est le but de la vie, et c'est le seul espoir" — which allows them to continue to survive and struggle ("La Mort des pauvres"); still more poignantly, the artists sing of their special hope — "un espoir étrange et sombre Capitole" — that by death their art will blossom ("La Mort des artistes").

"La Mort des amants" holds to a comforting promise. Baudelaire makes use of the decasyllable but, instead of the conventional break after the fourth or sixth syllable, places the cæsura in the middle of the line which divides into two impairs. Metrical lightness is pointed by cæsural assonance, repetitions, phonetic chains, alliteration. Against the horror of death, the constant iteration of balanced rhymes, echoes, images, writes an urgent code of exorcism.

Nous aurons des lits pleins d'odeurs légères,
Des divans profonds comme des tombeaux,
Et d'étranges fleurs sur des étagères,
Ecluses pour nous sous des cieux plus beaux.

The movement is buoyant, the metaphors being those of perfumed rest and grave spaciousness recognized by the heart. Love does not die but is translated: hearts become torches that mirror each other in endless reflection; lovers bring passion

to a flashpoint ("un éclair unique"). But such action gives way to passivity in the second tercet as a final recompense is named:

Et plus tard un Ange entr'ouvrant les portes
Viendra ranimer, fidèles et joyeux,
Les miroirs ternis et les feuilles mortes.

The angel of faithful love opens the tomb just as the flowers ("fleurs écloses") of the first lines hold a parallel image of opening and fulfillment.

The mood is less exultant in "La Mort des pauvres" which comprises a single sentence of four rhymes (abab abab ccd ccd) and an anaphoric development. Death, the poor man's consolation, is inscribed in an innocent mode.

C'est la Mort qui nous console, hélas! et qui fait vivre;
C'est le but de la vie, et c'est le seul espoir
Qui, comme un élixir, nous monte et nous enivre
Et nous donne le coeur de marcher jusqu'au soir...

"Hélas!" shows the indigence of this comfort; at the same time the series of statements adopts the parataxis of unreasoned credo. The language is that of the poor in manner and substance, which establishes an ingenuous consolation: clear light pierces the darkness, an inn offers good cheer, an Angel grants happy dreams and fresh beds. The many-levelled imaginings are naively discontinuous:

C'est la gloire des Dieux, c'est le grenier mystique,
C'est la bourse du pauvre et sa patrie antique,
C'est le portique ouvert sur les Cieux inconnus!

Amplifying the register of impoverished hope, the poem finds compassion by the most pathetic of dictions.

The dream of happiness having been followed by pathos, pathos is followed by self-mockery:

Combien faut-il de fois secouer mes grelots
 Et baiser ton front bas, morne caricature?
 Pour piquer dans le but de mystique nature,
 Combien, ô mon carquois, perdre de javelots?

The theme of hope now appears in the figure of clownish humiliation and vain effort. The intensity of closed, open and nasal **o**, the phonetic and syntactic parallelisms of lines 1 and 4 and 2 and 3, the two questions, set the shrill tone of a dramatic monologue. Creative effort involves wastage, destruction, infernal desire; what, then, is this god to which artists aspire? The tercets break with the closed patterns of the quatrains by a sudden dynamism.

Il en est qui jamais n'ont connu leur Idole,
 Et ces sculpteurs damnés et marqués d'un affront,
 Qui vont se martelant la poitrine et le front,

N'ont qu'un espoir, étrange et sombre Capitole!
 C'est que la Mort, planant comme un soleil nouveau,
 Fera s'épanouir les fleurs de leur cerveau!

The single sentence achieves a tragic paradox: The desired idol who justifies suffering, damnation, self-immolation, whose sun emerges from night, whose radiance may one day crown men's works, is the adversary death. As the hope that must be seen and named, it is both dark end and - perhaps - glorious beginning for those who give their all to art. The group of poems concludes on the ironies of this ambiguous victory-in-defeat and defeat-in-victory.



"La Fin de la journée," "Le Rêve d'un curieux," "Le Voyage"

In diametrical contrast, the last three poems reject transcendence to turn to imminent death: death as night - "la nuit voluptueuse" ("La Fin de la journée), bizarre pleasure - "la douleur savoureuse" ("Le Rêve d'un curieux"), supreme

adventure that answers mankind's lust for knowledge - "avec le coeur joyeux d'un jeune passager" (*Le Voyage*). The epithets, with their parallel forms, point to a long-sought object of desire. At the same time the titles avoid the use of the word "mort", not to hide its reality behind an euphemism, but to reduce it to its proper proportions. Baudelaire breaks with past ingenuousness.

Thus, in "La Fin de la journée," the attitude is clear-eyed. The curious syntactical imbalance of the sonnet - the first sentence comprises three lines, the second eleven - plays against conventional structures. The tension between inward and outward forms corresponds to the drama of conscious choice.

Sous une lumière blafarde
 Court, danse et se tord sans raison
 La Vie, impudente et criarde.
 Aussi, sitôt qu'à l'horizon

La nuit voluptueuse monte,
 Apaisant tout, même la faim,
 Effaçant tout, même la honte,
 Le poète se dit: "Enfin!..."

Life appears in the allegorical figure of a loud woman, whereas deathly night is comforting; cry is placed alongside rest like shame alongside oblivion.

Je vais me coucher sur le dos
 Et me rouler dans vos rideaux,
 O rafraîchissantes ténèbres!

The only hope of happiness lies in the pleasure of unthinking sleep.

A sonnet without the baroque note of the previous poem, "Le Rêve d'un curieux", has the casual movement of a narrative ballad.

Connais-tu comme moi, la douleur savoureuse,
 Et de toi, fais-tu dire: "Oh! L'homme singulier!"
 J'allais mourir, c'était dans mon âme amoureuse,
 Désir mêlé d'horreur, un mal particulier.

The present tense changes to imperfect, detachment to expectancy. A series of paradoxes evokes death in terms of a theatrical spectacle in respect of which the self is as impatient as a child. But the curtain rises on an anti-climax:

J'étais mort sans surprise, et la terrible aurore
M'enveloppait. —Eh quoi! n'était-ce donc que cela?
La toile était levée et j'attendais encore.

Death is banal and its mystery a sham; the supposed high drama can be treated in an offhand manner and ironic mode. There is no refuge for him who experiences, or dreams he experiences, an unfinal end.

Each of these poems thus undercuts the language of mystical hope, the former in voluptuous, the latter in trivial, terms. To follow them, the poet might well have chosen to introduce pieces such as those he was to publish in 1861 outside the frame of *Les Fleurs du mal* — "Recueillement," for instance, or "Le Gouffre." But the second section concludes with "Le Voyage," and one could not wish it otherwise. For Baudelaire writes the moral and architectural climax of his collection.

"Un long poème qui est à faire frémir la nature et surtout les amateurs du progrès."¹³ the words well describe *Les Fleurs du mal* as a whole in its unremitting play of desire and irony. "Le Voyage" resumes the apparent futility of travels — those of artists no less than of all — yet the need is irrepressible to continue to undertake such action in the face of sobering knowledge. Although it has been said that "misanthropy and nihilism combine to supersede all previous attitudes to Nature - whether pious or impious, admiring or disdainful, humane or inhumane,"¹⁴ the end is no doubt less misanthropic or nihilistic than heroic in these lines where self-awareness becomes the source of new courage.

"Le Voyage" follows the repeated pattern of departure, disillusion, departure across its twenty-six quatrains. Far from the simplicity of "La Fin de la journée" and "Le Rêve d'un curieux," the ballad rhythms weave the multiple antagonisms of hope and dejection. If the lesson of experience is galling—

Pour l'enfant, amoureux de cartes et d'estampes,
L'univers est égal à son vaste appétit.

Ah! que le monde est grand à la clarté des lampes!
Aux yeux du souvenir que le monde est petit!

regret is answered by joy in the ebb and flow of desire. Playing against the pattern of repeated failure, the rhythms pulse with an emotional commitment that at last, by the internal dynamics of the form, like those of the entire collection, comes to an austere resolution. First, however, the tale must be told in its fury: "Un matin nous partons, le cerveau plein de flamme..." The narrative is not that of a self resigned to failure; the sensibility is shaped in the likeness of a Baudelairean poem that follows a classical measure but seeks to go beyond all measure.

Et nous allons, suivant le rythme de la lame,
Berçant notre infini sur le fini des mers.

The vigour echoes that of the carefree child who, in "Benediction," sets out on his pilgrimage amidst wind and cloud and the promise of an intoxicating future - "gai comme un oiseau des bois." But whatever the motive for departure — country, family, mistress, dream of change — mankind does no more than follow an inevitable course like a child's top, or a ball, or a mad vertigo that appears to be written in the stars ("Comme un Ange cruel qui fouette des soleils"). The quest for the promised land in an uncentered world can be ironic only inasmuch as happiness is a mirage.

Tel le vieux vagabond, piétinant dans la boue,
Rêve, le nez en l'air, de brillants paradis...

The long middle section tropes the ironies of exoticism, the aporias of desire. Romantic nostalgia leads to the ineluctable: "Le spectacle ennuyeux de l'immortel péché." Men and women live out their anguished enslavement, curse their fate, turn to drugged consciousness like the dandy of "Au lecteur."

Et les moins sots, hardis amants de la Démence,
Fuyant le grand troupeau parqué par le destin,

Et se réfugiant dans l'opium immense!
—Tel est du globe entier l'éternel bulletin.

Such easy comfort is no answer for the poet of *Les Fleurs du mal* who has not gone to the limits of the self merely to escape into unconsciousness. He will hear again the siren-calls of art, love, city, intoxication, sexuality, blasphemy in his symphonic finale. The pronouns vary from the "on" that speaks for all ("Amer savoir, celui qu'on tire du voyage"), to the "tu" addressed to us by the fraternal poet ("si tu peux rester, reste; Pars, s'il le faut ...") or by the temptress ("Pour rafraîchir ton coeur nage vers ton Electre!"), to the "vous" that would lead mankind astray by enchanted song ("Par ici! vous qui voulez manger le Lotus parfumé!"), to the third person, both frenzied self ("L'un court, et l'autre se tapit...") and relentless destiny ("Lorsqu'enfin il mettra le pied sur notre échine..."): the multiple pronouns convey the polarities of a sensibility that plumbs the spleen of existence ("Une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui") and forever finds the image of failure. Yet an insistent "nous" cuts across these pronouns to become the ground swell of hope.

De même qu'autrefois nous partions pour la Chine
Les yeux fixés au large et les cheveux au vent...

The dreams of the past, the enthusiasms of youth are reborn in a new Ulysses who sets out one last time to answer the heart's call. The poem concludes on a series of ironies as the refound taste for exotic travel, self-indulgence, love — "celle dont nous baisons autrefois les genoux" — deludes consciousness as to its real vocation. All this stirs desire even if the lesson is already known. Yet the final two stanzas go beyond illusion and knowledge to action. We think of the Latin epigraph that Baudelaire at one time planned to use for "La Mort": *morte liberati providerunt* - "It is by death that they achieved their freedom."¹⁵ The ship's captain is death, and the imperatives "levons" and "appareillons" speak for him as for the poet.

O Mort, vieux capitaine, il est temps! levons l'ancre!
Ce pays nous ennuie, ô Mort! Appareillons!
Si le ciel et la mer sont noirs comme de l'encre,
Nos coeurs que tu connais sont remplis de rayons!

Verse-nous ton poison pour qu'il nous réconforte!
 Nous voulons, tant ce feu nous brûle le cerveau,
 Plonger au fond du gouffre, Enfer ou Ciel, qu'importe?
 Au fond de l'Inconnu pour trouver du *nouveau!*

Sky and sea, darkness and light, heaven and hell, height and depth, fire and abyss build a feverish chain of sound and meaning. The reader thinks of stanza 6, at the close of the first section, which describes those who conceive unknown pleasures ("De vastes voluptés, changeantes, inconnues"); but here though the impulse is similar, an altogether graver mood puts the soul in jeopardy.

It has been said that the lines are nihilistic, or at the very least morbid; that they show Baudelaire as a "moraliste à rebours," a "sophiste tragique;"¹⁶ that "C'est malgré son message que Baudelaire est un grand poète."¹⁷ But do they not rather apprehend retrospectively, in a final illumination, the itinerary of *Les Fleurs du mal* and, in doing so, subsume its contradictions in a surge of spiritual energy? The restless need for truth is recognized to be instinctive excess - "le trop-plein de cette passion débordante,"¹⁸ "l'excès dans le désir, et dans l'énergie, l'ambition indomptable, immodérée"¹⁹ — for it is such excess in its contradictory manifestations that for the traveller is of supreme value. Action will be at last, as the poet of "Le Reniement de Saint Pierre" had wished, "the sister of dream."



Baudelaire's genius for composition brings together the six poems of "La Mort" in two symmetrical clusters. Death first appears as lyrical harmony in the likeness of perfect love ("La Mort des amants"), then religious hope and faith ("La Mort des pauvres"), then pathetic redemption ("La Mort des artistes"): the movement pricks the bubble of confidence while maintaining the image of a possible post mortem consolation. On the other hand, in the last three poems, an antithetical attitude is taken as death appears in the form of a voluptuous mistress ("La Fin d'une journée"), an empty stage ("Le Rêve d'un curieux"), an ocean-crossing ("Le Voyage"). The second group responds to the first by a progression that entails erotic pleasure, thwarted desire, metaphysical passion as the poet, like a canonist, discriminates one attitude from another. The use of two groups, however, breaks the spell that would allow a single penchant to impose itself since thought assumes its extremes.

"Le Voyage" is the poem of spiritual responsibility that wages a relentless struggle, yet discovers its courage in the force of these contradictions.

We recall that Baudelaire described his alter ego, Samuel Cramer, in the following way: "Il possédait la logique de tous les bons sentiments et la science de toutes les roueries, et néanmoins n'a jamais réussi à rien, parce qu'il croyait trop à l'impossible."²⁰ Fifteen years later the second edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* poses the dilemma of the man who strives for an ultimate meaning and justification. Baudelaire finds a mystical, then a non-mystical expression in the final section, struggles with feelings both elevated ("tous les bons sentiments") and ironic ("toutes les roueries"). Yet the absence of success expressed in *La Fanfarlo* no longer holds, for Baudelaire's dialectic reveals the chimæra: the twin faces of transcendence and immanence tell of desire unquenchable. The collection becomes the *mise en forme* of a duality traced in the sequence of its tragic conflicts with unwavering purpose.²¹

Notes

¹"Salon de 1846." In *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois (2 vols., 1975, 1976). Vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1976), 419. I have discussed aspects of the structure of *Les Fleurs du mal* in "The Order of 'Tableaux parisiens,'" *Romantic/Review* (June 1985), 287-306.

²"Avant-propos." In *La Comédie humaine* (26 vols., 1965-1970). Vol. 1 (Paris: Les Bibliophiles de l'Originale, 1965), 8.

³*Ibid.*, 9. "Soi pour soi" is an expression borrowed by Balzac from Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire. For Saint-Hilaire it designates the tendency of similar organs to unite; for Balzac it is "la loi ...sur laquelle repose l'unité de composition."

⁴"Theophile Gautier." In *Oeuvres complètes*, 2, 120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶"Présentation de *Révélation magnétique*." In *Oeuvres complètes*, 2, 248.

⁷"Conseils aux jeunes littérateurs." In *Oeuvres complètes*, 2, 19.

⁸Letter to Auguste Poulet-Malassis, August 1860. In *Correspondance*, ed. Claude Pichois (2 vols., 1972, 1973). Vol. 2 (Paris: Gallimard, Pléiade, 1973), 86.

⁹"Dossier des *Fleurs du mal*." In *Oeuvres complètes*, 1.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 195.

¹¹"L'Architecture des *Fleurs du mal*." *Studies by the Members of the French Department of Yale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942), 318.

¹²*Ibid.*, 285.

¹³Letter to Charles Asselineau, 20 February 1859. In *Correspondance* (Vol. 1, 1972), 553.

¹⁴F. W. Leakey, *Baudelaire and Nature* (Manchester: the University Press, 1969), 310.

¹⁵Letter to Auguste Poulet-Malassis, July 1861. In *Correspondance* (Vol. 11, 1973), 1979.

¹⁶G. T. Clapton, *Baudelaire and De Quincey*. Quoted by Lloyd James Austin, *L'Univers poétique de Baudelaire* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1956), 338.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 338.

¹⁸"Le Poème du hachisch." In *Oeuvres complètes*, 1, 402.

¹⁹"Richard Wagner et *Tannhauser* à Paris." In *Oeuvres complètes*, 2, 796.

²⁰*La Fanfarlo*. In *Oeuvres complètes*, 1, 555.

²¹The extent of Baudelaire's achievement can be gauged when we consider this recent comment by a Baudelaire scholar of the first order, who roundly rejects the notion of an architectural project in *Les Fleurs du mal*: "...Baudelaire...totally lacked the novelist's or the epic poet's gift for the large-scale development and organization of a single theme;" again: "To me, it seems inconceivable that the writer whose creative life was so fragmentary and disordered, and who devoted so much attention to the endless revision and retrospective organization of individual poems, should in his mid-thirties have suddenly conceived and secretly nursed and realized a highly integrated poetic scheme of quite epic proportions, for which nothing he had previously achieved in any way prepares us" (F. W. Leakey, *Baudelaire*; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, 68). I would wish to suggest that the idea of the law of contrasts as an organizing principle dates from Baudelaire's mid-twenties and that it did indeed serve him well and truly over the next two decades of poetic creation.