

FRENCH LITERATURE OF THE 19TH CENTURY CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

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1. Late 19th Century Poetic Movements , Predominant In France

Romanticism, Realism, and Naturalism were the leading literary movements of the nineteenth century. As the century advanced, national boundaries began to be less confining as movements found adherents all over Europe. -Together with tills Cosmopolitan trend there is another tendency. It becomes increasingly difficult, as we progress towards and into the twentieth century, to identify authors with the same certainty with which we can call Wordsworth a Romantic and Zola a Naturalist. Writers like Ibsen defy absolute departmentalization; they wrote sometimes in one school, sometimes in another. In many cases one must be content to observe the tendency of individual works without aligning the writer with one school or another. New schools did, nonetheless, continue to appear; of these the most important were the *Parnassian movement and the Symbolist movement*. [3]

The Parnassian movement of the nineteenth century was to a degree the offspring of French Romantic poet Theophile Gautier's insistence on doctrine of "art for art's sake," and his stress on form as of paramount importance in literature. One thing can certainly be said about the Parnassians: They were writing in strong reaction against the effusiveness of Romanticism. They were also in reaction against the values of a middle-class society absorbed in industrial advancement.

The name "Parnassian" was meant to signify that these writers abandoning the subjectivism and storminess of the Romantic movement were as objective and as calm in their reflections as the Olympian gods. These poets were indeed sometimes called "les impassibles" ("the poets who cannot be moved"),

It would also be fair to say that the Parnassian movement also owes something to the rise of Realism. Realism being unsuited to their poetic visions, the Parnassians' objection to Romantic excess took the shape of a new classical enthusiasm for form and objective observation. [1]

Stephane Mallarme and Paul Verlaine dissociated themselves from the Parnassian movement and became the leaders of the Symbolist movement - and were, moreover, in complete disagreement with each other. The Symbolist movement was a Romantic reaction against the Parnassian movement. To the newer poets the Parnassians were too unfeelingly objective and placed too much emphasis on form. They accused Leconte de Lisle, Gautier, and Heredia of being materialistic; for the same reason they objected to the Realist novel. They charged Parnassians with exiling thought by emphasizing the perfection of their chiseled lines.

Above all, the Symbolists wished their lines to suggest, rather than to state, a meaning. They were interested in what the poem could evoke, not in what it could expressly state. They were highly subjective and sought to evoke mystery and magic by the music of their verse and its imagery. Their chief

predecessor was Baudelaire because of his innovations in exploring varied sensations. The meaning of their poems is always to be found between, not in, the lines.

The Symbolists claimed affinities to the art of music, and indeed were enthusiastic Wagnerians. They often remind us of their contemporaries, the English Pre-Raphaelites. As a matter of fact, the whole tendency of the Symbolist movement is more akin to the traditions of English poetry, in which the power to suggest associated ideas is not uncommon.

At the beginning their movement was stigmatized with the appellation Decadent, a term they were willing enough to accept, and by which they are often still designated.

The Symbolist poetic movement originated with a group of French poets in the late 19th century. It spread to painting and the theater, and influenced Russian, European, and American literature of the 20th century to varying degrees. The movement reached its peak around 1890, and its popularity declined at the beginning of the next century. The influence of Symbolism on later movements however is, vast. The experimental techniques devised by these poets enriched the

technical repertoire of modernism, particularly the works of W.B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens. Free verse, the creation of the symbolists, is now the dominant form of contemporary poetry.

They believed that words cannot adequately express reality, thus, the artist must recreate reality through symbols to express what is seen or felt. These symbols were not made to be entirely cohesive, the focus was more on the pattern which the words together created. Till's construction of ideas not only described the world through, new eyes, but also uncovered the complex layers of darkness and light in everyday life. The technique known as synesthesia was a technique used by the Symbolist poets as a way to uncover these complex layers. Through synesthesia, the poet describes a single stimulus through multiple sense responses, i.e. a bell of pink fire and cool blue note,.

These Symbolists retained thematic commonalities in their work which included: life as an artist, questioning authority, life in Paris, primal lust, darkness, Vampirism and blood, death, urban life, poet as a painter or musician, and the view that language is flawed, but a necessary poetic device in recreating "reality" and communication

Thus, symbolist artists sought to express the immediate sensations of human experience and the inner life, through the subtle and suggestive use of highly metaphorical language, in the form of symbols. The underlying philosophy of the symbolists was a conviction that the transient objective world is not true reality, but a reflection of the invisible Absolute. The movement was a revolt against the realistic and naturalistic poetic styles of the day, which were designed to capture the transient.

The symbolists believed that the inner eternal reality could only be suggested: "to name is to destroy, to suggest is to create" (Mallarmé). The resulting poetry of this philosophy was intense and complex, full of condensed syntax and symbolic imagery. Their poetry also emphasized the importance of the sound of the verse, creating Music through words.

Because of their interest in the bizarre and the artificial and in themes of decay and ruin, many of the Symbolist poets were identified with the Decadent movement of the same period.

The Symbolist manifesto, published by Moreas, appeared in *Le Figaro* on September 18, 1886. Mallarmé's *Divagation* (1897) remains the most valuable statement of the movement's aesthetics. [1]

2. Charles-Pierre Baudelaire 1821 - 1867

Charles Baudelaire was a 19th century French poet, translator, and literary and art critic whose reputation rests primarily on *The Flowers of Evil* (1857), which was perhaps the most important and influential poetry collection published in Europe in the 19th century. Similarly, his "Little Prose Poems" (1868) was the most successful and innovative early experiment in prose poetry of the time.

Known for his highly controversial, and often dark poetry, as well as his translation of the tales of Edgar Allan Poe, Baudelaire's life was filled with drama and strife, from financial disaster to being prosecuted for obscenity and blasphemy. Long after his death many look upon his name as representing depravity and vice: Others see him as being the poet of modern civilization, seeming to speak directly to the 20th century.

In his often introspective poetry, Baudelaire revealed himself as a seeker of God without religious beliefs, searching in every manifestation of life for its true significance, be it in the leaves of a tree or a prostitute's frown. His refusal to admit restriction in the poet's choice of theme and his assertion of the poetic power of symbols makes Baudelaire appealing to modern man, as a poet and a critic. [8]

2.1. Biography

Baudelaire was an only child of François Baudelaire and his younger second wife, whom he had married in 1819, Caroline Defayis. François had begun a career as a priest, but left the holy orders in 1793 to become a prosperous middle-ranking civil servant. Being a modestly talented poet and painter, he instilled an appreciation for the arts in his son. The Younger Baudelaire would later refer to as "the cult of images."

Baudelaire's father died in February of 1827. Baudelaire and his mother lived together on the outskirts of Paris from this point. In writing to her in 1861, referring to this time, he wrote "I was forever alive in you; you were solely and completely mine." This time together ended when Caroline married a career soldier named Jacques Aupick, who rose to the position of General and later served as French ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and Spain before becoming a senator under the Second Empire.

Baudelaire began his education at the Collège Royal in Lyons when Aupick was posted there, transferring to the prestigious Louis-le-grand when the family returned to Paris in 1836. It was during this time that Baudelaire began to show promise as a student and a writer- He began to write poems, which were not well received by his masters; who felt that was an example of precocious depravity, adopting affections that they deemed unsuited to his age. Moods of intense melancholy also developed and Baudelaire began to see himself as being solitary by nature. In April 1839 he was expelled from school due to his consistent acts of indiscipline.

Eventually Baudelaire became a nominal student of law at the École de Droit. In reality, he was actually living a "free life" in the Latin Quarter. Here he

made his first contacts in the literary world, and also contracted the venereal disease that eventually took his life.

In an attempt to draw his stepson away from the company he was keeping, Aupick sent him on a voyage to India in June of 1841. Baudelaire jumped ship in Mauritius and eventually made his way back to France in February of 1842. The voyage and his exploits after jumping ship enriched his imagination, and brought a rich mixture of exotic images to his work.

Baudelaire received his inheritance in April 1842 and rapidly proceeded to dissipate it on the lifestyle of a dandified man of letters, spending freely on clothes, books, paintings, expensive food and wines, and, not least, hashish and opium, which, he first experimented with in his Paris apartment at the Hotel Pimodan (now the Hotel Lauzun) on the Ole Saint-Louis between 1843 and 1845. It was shortly after returning, from the South Seas that Baudelaire met the mulatto woman known as Jeanne Duval, who, first as his mistress and then, after the mid-1850s, as his financial charge, was to dominate his life for the next 20 years. Jeanne would inspire Baudelaire's most anguished and sensual love poetry, her perfume and, above all, her masterpieces flowing black hair provoking such masterpieces of the exotic-erotic imagination as "La Chevelure" ("The Head of Hair").

Baudelaire's continuing extravagance exhausted half his fortune in two years, and he also fell prey to cheats and moneylenders, thus laying the foundation for an accumulation of debt that would cripple him for the rest of his life. In September 1844 his family imposed on him a legal arrangement that restricted his access to his inheritance and effectively made of him a legal minor. The modest annual allowance henceforth granted him was insufficient to clear his debts, and the resulting state of permanently straitened finances led him to still greater, emotional and financial dependence on his mother and also exacerbated his growing detestation of his stepfather. The agonizing moods of isolation and despair that Baudelaire had known in adolescence, and which he called his moods of "spleen," returned and became more frequent. [5]

2.2. Early Writings

Baudelaire had returned from the South Seas in 1842 determined as never before to become a poet. From then until 1846 he probably composed the bulk of the poems that make up the first edition (1857) of "The Flowers of Evil". He refrained from publishing them as separate texts, however, which suggests that from the outset he had in mind a coherent collection governed by a tight thematic architecture rather than a simple sequence of self-contained poems. In October 1845 he announced the imminent appearance of a collection entitled *Les Lesbiennes* ("The Lesbians"), followed, at intervals after 1848, by *Les Limbes* ("Limbo"), the stated goal of which was to "represent the agitations and melancholies of modern youth. Neither collection ever appeared in book form, however, and Baudelaire first established himself in the Parisian cultural milieu not as a poet but as an art critic with his reviews of the Salons of 1845 and 1846. Inspired by the example of the Romantic painter Eugene Delacroix, he elaborated in his Salons a wide-ranging theory of modern painting, with painters being urged to celebrate and express the "heroism of modern life." In January 1847 Baudelaire published a novella entitled *La Fanfarlo* whose hero, or antihero, Samuel Cramer, is widely, if simplistically, seen as a self-portrait of the author as he agonizedly

oscillates between desire for the maternal and respectable Madame de Cosmelly and the erotic actress-dancer of the title

There after little is heard of Baudelaire until February 1848, when he is widely reported to have participated in the riots that overthrew King Louis-Philippe and installed the Second Republic; one uncorroborated account has him brandishing a gun and urging the insurgents to shoot General Aupick, who was then director of Ecole Polytechnique. Such stories have led some to dismiss Baudelaire's involvement in the revolutionary events of 1848-51 as mere rebelliousness on the part of a disaffected (and still unpublished) bourgeois poet. More recent studies suggest he had a serious commitment to a radical political viewpoint that probably resembled that of the socialist-anarchist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. Baudelaire is reliably reported to have taken part both in the working-class uprising of June 1848 and in the resistance to the Bonapartist military coup of December 1851; the latter, he claimed shortly afterwards, ended his active interest in politics. Hence fourth ill's Focus would he exclusively oil his writing.[4]

2.3. Maturity And Decline

In 1847 Baudelaire had discovered the work of Edgar Allan Poe. Overwhelmed by what he saw as the almost preternatural similarities between the American writer's thought and temperament and his own, he embarked upon the task of translation that was to provide him with his most regular occupation and income for the rest of his life. His translation of Poe's *Mesmeric Revelation* appeared as early as July 1848, and thereafter translations appeared regularly in reviews before being collected in book form in *Histoires extraordinaires* (1856; "Extraordinary Tales") and *Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires* (1857; "Extraordinary Tales"), each preceded by an important critical introduction by Baudelaire. These were followed by *Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym* (1857), *Eureka* (1864), and *Histoires grotesques et sérieuses* (1865; "Grotesque and Serious Tales"). As translations these works are, at their best, classics of French prose, and Poe's example gave Baudelaire greater confidence in his own aesthetic theories and ideals of poetry. Baudelaire also began studying the work of the conservative theorist Joseph de Maistre, who, together with Poe, impelled his thought in an increasingly antinaturalist and antihumanist direction. From the mid-1850s Baudelaire would regard himself as a Roman Catholic, though his obsession with original sin and the Devil remained unaccompanied by faith in God's forgiveness and love, and his Christology was impoverished to the point of nonexistence.

Between 1852 and 1854 Baudelaire addressed a number of poems to Apollonie Sabatier, celebrating her, despite her reputation as a high-class courtesan, as his madonna and muse, and in 1854 he had a brief liaison with the actress Marie Daubrun. In the meantime Baudelaire's growing reputation as Poe's translator and as an art critic at last enabled him to publish some of his poems. In June 1855 the *Revue des Deux Mondes* published a sequence of 18 of his poems under the general title of *Les Fleurs du mal* (The Flowers of Evil). The poems, which Baudelaire had chosen for their original style and startling, brought him notoriety. The following year Baudelaire signed a contract with the publisher Toulet-Maillassis for a full-length poetry collection to appear with that title.

When the first edition of "The Flowers of Evil" was published in June 1857, 13 of its 100 poems were immediately arraigned for offences to religion or

public morality. After a one-day trial on August 20, 1857, six of the poems were ordered to be removed from the book on tile grounds of obscenity, with Baudelaire incurring a fine of 300 (later reduced to 50) francs. The six poems were first republished in Belgium in 1866 in the collection *Les Epaves* ("Wreckage"), and the official ban on them would not be revoked until 1949. Owing largely to these circumstances, "The Flowers of Evil" became a byword for depravity, morbidity, and obscenity, and the legend of Baudelaire as the doomed dissident and pornographic poet was born. [2]

2.4. The Flowers Of Evil

Baudelaire's poetic masterpiece, the 1861 edition of "The Flowers of Evil", consists of 126 poems arranged in six sections of varying length. Baudelaire always insisted that the collection was not a "simple album" but had "a beginning and an end," each poem revealing its full meaning only when read in relation to the others within the "singular framework" in which it is placed. In the prefatory poem makes it clear that Baudelaire's concern is with the general human predicament of which his own is representative. The collection may best be read in the light of the concluding poem, "Le Voyage," as a journey through self and society in search of some impossible satisfaction that forever eludes the traveler.

The first section, entitled "Spleen et idéal," opens with a series of poems that dramatize contrasting views of art, beauty, and the artist, who is depicted alternately as martyr, visionary, performer, pariah, and fool. The locus then shifts to sexual and romantic love, with the first-person narrator of the poems oscillating between extremes of ecstasy ("idéal") and anguish ("spleen") as he attempts to find fulfillment through a succession of women whom it is possible, if simplistic, to identify with Jeanne Duval, Apollonie Sabatier, and Marie Daubrun. Each set of love poems describes an erotic cycle that leads from intoxication through conflict and revulsion to an eventual ambivalent tranquility born of memory and the transmutation of suffering into art. Yet the attempt to find plenitude through love comes in the end to nothing, and "Spleen et idéal" ends with a sequence of anguished poems, several of them entitled "Spleen," in which the self is shown imprisoned within itself, with only the certainty of suffering and death before it.

The second section, "Tableaux Parisiens," was added to the 1861 edition and describes a 24-hour cycle in the life of the city through which the Baudelairean traveler, now metamorphosed into a flâneur (man-about-town), moves in quest of deliverance from the miseries of life only to find at every turn images of suffering and isolation that remind him all too pertinently of his own. The section includes some of Baudelaire's greatest poems, most notably "Le Cygne," where the memory of a swan stranded in total dereliction near the Louvre becomes a symbol of an existential condition of loss and exile transcending time and space. Having gone through the city forever meeting himself, the traveler turns, in the in much shorter sections that follow, successive) to drink ("Le Vin"), sexual depravity ("Fleurs du mal"), and satanism ("Revolt") in quest of the elusive ideal. His quest is predictably to no avail for, as the final section, entitled "La Mort," reveals, his journey is an everlasting, open-ended odyssey that, continuing beyond death, will take him into the depths of the unknown, always in pursuit of the new, which, by definition, must forever elude him. [5]

2.5. Prose Poems

Baudelaire's Prose Poems were published posthumously in 1869 and was later, as intended by the author, entitled *Le Spleen de Paris*. He did not live long enough to bring these poems together in a single volume, but it is clear from his correspondence that the work he envisaged was both a continuation of, and a radical departure from, "The Flowers of Evil".

Some of the texts may be regarded as authentic poems in prose, while others are closer to miniature prose narratives. Again the setting is primarily urban, with the focus on crowds and the suffering lives they contain: a broken-down street acrobat ("Le Vieux Saltimbanque"), a hapless street trader ("Le Mauvais Vitrier"), the poor staring at the wealthy in their opulent cafes ("Le Yeux des pavés"), the deranged ("Mademoiselle Bistouri") and the tile derelict ("Assommoir les pauvres"), and, in the final text ("Les 1300 Chiens"), the pariah dogs that scurry and scavenge through the streets of Brussels.

Not only is the subject matter of the prose poems essentially urban, but the form itself, "musical but without rhythm and rhyme, both supple and staccato," is said to derive from "frequent contact with enormous cities, from the junction of their innumerable connections." In its deliberate fragmentation, in its merging of the lyrical with the sardonic, "Le Spleen de Paris" may be regarded as one of the earliest and most successful examples of a specifically urban writing, the textual equivalent of the city scenes of the Impressionists, embodying in its poetics of sudden and disorienting encounter that ambiguous "heroism of modern life" that Baudelaire celebrated in his art criticism. [9]

2.6. Influence And Assessment

As both poet and critic, Baudelaire stands in relation to French and European poetry as Gustave Flaubert and Edouard Manet do to, fiction and painting, respectively: as a crucial link between Romanticism and modernism and as a supreme example, in both his life and his work, of what it means to be a modern artist. His catalytic influence was recognized in the 19th century by Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, and Swinburne and, in the 20th century, by Valéry, Rilke, and T.S. Eliot. In his pursuit of an "evocative magic" of images and sounds, his blending of intellect and feeling, irony and lyricism, and his deliberate eschewal of rhetorical utterance, Baudelaire moved decisively away from the Romantic poetry of statement and emotion to the modern poetry of symbol and suggestion. He was, said his disciple, Jules Laforgue, the first poet to write of Paris as one condemned to live day to day in the city, his greatest originality being, as Verlaine wrote as early as 1865, to "represent powerfully and essentially modern man" in all its physical, psychically, and moral complexity. He is a pivotal figure in European literature and thought, and his influence on modern poetry has been immense. [9]

One of the best biographies is said to be Claude Lichis and Jean Ziegler's, *Baudelaire* (1989; originally published in French, 1987). An older work by Enid Starkie, *Baudelaire* (1933, reissued 1988), is still worth consulting.

Stimulating and controversial studies of Baudelaire's personality and thought are to be found in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Baudelaire* (1949, reissued 1967; originally published in French, 1947); and Michel Butor, *Histoire Extraordinaire: Essay on a Dream of Baudelaire's* (1969; originally published in French, 1961). Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (1973, reissued 1983; originally published in German, 1969), is the starting point for any discussion of Baudelaire and modernity. Leo Bersani, *Baudelaire*

and Freud (1977), perceptively discusses the love poetry. F.W. Leakey, Baudelaire and

Nature (1969), offers an important chronological study of the evolution of his thought. Richard D.E. Burton, Baudelaire in 1859 (1988), discusses Baudelaire's most creative year, and Baudelaire and the Second Republic (1991), examines his shifting political positions. The most stimulating short discussion of the prose poems is contained in Christopher Prendergast, Paris and the Nineteenth Century (1992), [10]

5. Conclusion

Baudelaire died unrecognized, with many of his writings still unpublished and most of those that had been published were out of print. Among poets, however, opinion soon began to change: the future leaders of the Symbolist movement who were at his funeral were already describing themselves as his followers. By the 20th century he had become widely recognized as one of the great French poets of the 19th century. His admirers even claimed that he revolutionized the sensibility and way of thinking and writing throughout western Europe, and that the formulation of his aesthetic theory marks a turning point in the history of poetry and, indeed, in the history of art. For it was in this theory that the Symbolist movement found Excerpts from "Artificial Paradises" on hashish and wine as expanding individuality by Charles Baudelaire. [2]

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