

BAUDELAIRE AS SEEN THROUGH LES FLEURS DU MAL

By

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Modern psychology emphasizes the similarity of the dream to works of art, especially poetry. The dreamer or the poet works through symbols, which express his inner self, a self largely unknown to the conscious mind.¹ There can be no "différence irréductible entre le 'moi' subjectif and le 'je' créateur,"² because some part of a person's subjective reality will appear in his work. In *Les Fleurs du Mal* Baudelaire suggests the conflicts of his unconscious mind, the introversive and regressive tendencies caused by his passionate attachment to his mother.

One recognizes at once Baudelaire's feeling of isolation from his fellow man. His apartness, both as a poet and as a person, is a central theme of the first two poems, "Bénédiction" and "L'Albatros." The author's part in the "Tableaux parisiens" is that of a detached observer. His descriptions of Paris, whether given with sympathy or criticism, show a certain remoteness, an inability to feel completely *en rapport* with the activities of the people. To one as tormented with self-dissatisfaction as was Baudelaire, introversion could bring only unhappiness and increased dislike of himself:

--Mon âme est un tombeau que, mauvais cénobite,
Depuis l'éternité je parcours et j'habite;
Rien n'embellit les murs de ce cloître odieux.³

My soul is a tomb which, wicked cenobite,
I wander in and inhabit since eternity;
Nothing embellishes the walls of this odious cloister.

Introversion reflects a desire to avoid reality. Unhappy with the inner world to which he had retreated as well as with the world outside, Baudelaire needed other means of escape. He

¹ Charles Baudouin, *Psychoanalysis and Aesthetics*, Translated by Eden and Cedar Paul (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1924), 15.

² J. D. Hubert, *L'Esthétique des "Fleurs du Mal": Essai sur l'ambiguïté poétique* (Geneva: Cailler, 1953), 32.

³ *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 15.

forgot his torments smoking hashish or enjoying wine's "baumes pénétrants," source of "l'espoir, la jeunesse et la vie" (CVII). Dreams were another opiate for his despair. In "Le vin des amants" he speaks of "le paradis de mes rêves," very likely a sensual, exotic paradise like that described in the first part of "Rêve parisien." Hashish, wine, and reverie were weak nourishment for happiness; only death could provide a lasting escape from his *cloître odieux*:

C'est la Mort qui console, hélas! et qui fait vivre;
C'est le but de la vie, et c'est le seul espoir. . . [CXXII]

It is Death who consoles, alas! and who makes one live;
It is the end of life and the only hope

Enid Starkie believes that physical love was another form of escape for the poet. Perhaps so. It seems more likely that Baudelaire's love-making was a curious form of ascetic self-punishment, punishment for an unconscious passion for his mother. Baudelaire was certainly an Oedipian. One need not understand from this term "incestuous love" of the mother and "mortal hatred" of the father. Rather it denotes in Baudelaire an exclusive love for Madame Aupick and great jealousy, unrealized at first, of General Aupick, his rival for her possession.

Frequently the male introvert suffers from an intense love of the mother. Unconsciously he longs to return to the days of childhood, for mother and child a time of mutual caresses. Through the exotic images of "La vie antérieure" Baudelaire tells us of the contentment of his childhood. The only care to disturb him, "le secret douloureux," was one of which he would never be fully aware. The mother's womb is the "passé lumineux" of "Harmonie du soir" and the true destination of the travelers of "L'Invitation au voyage." Reading "L'Irréparable" one feels that Baudelaire may have had some realization of his problem. The sorceress is the mother, he is l'irrémissible because of his desire for her:

Adorable sorcière, aimes-tu les damnés?
Dis, connais-tu l'irrémissible?
Connais-tu le Remords, aux traits empoisonnés,
A qui notre coeur sert de cible?

Adorable sorceress, do you love the damned?
 Say, do you know the unpardonable one?
 Do you know Remorse, with his poisoned darts,
 Whom our hearts serve as a target?

The tiny child is much impressed by the size of his parents and his own smallness in comparison. Even after he has grown up they may be conjured up in his dreams as gigantic beings. The image of *la géante* springs from the child's view of the mother:

J'eusse aimé vivre auprès d'une jeune géante,
 Comme aux pieds d'une reine un chat voluptueux.

J'eusse aimé voir son corps fleurir avec son âme
 Et grandir librement dans ses terribles jeux;
 Deviner si son coeur couve une sombre flamme
 Aux humides brouillards qui nagent dans ses yeux; (XIX)

I would have loved to live near a young giantess
 Like a voluptuous cat at the feet of a queen.

I would have loved to see her body flow with her soul
 And freely spread out in its terrible games;
 To guess if her heart cloaked a somber flame
 Whose humid mists swim in her eyes.

"Ses terribles jeux" would seem to refer to the mother's relations with the father, the following two lines to a subconscious hope that she might correspond to her son's *secret douloureux*. The actions described in the third and fourth strophes of the poem are the normal activities of an infant with its mother.

The woman in mourning dress appeals to Baudelaire because she evokes memories of the happiest time of his life. This was the period after the death of his father when he lived alone with his mother and was the only object of her attentions. In "La fin de la journée" night, the bearer of repose, symbolizes the mother calming the worries of her child. The last lines of "La Béatrice" were consciously inspired perhaps by his mulatto mistress Jeanne Duval, unconsciously by his mother:

La reine de mon coeur au regard nonpareil
 Qui riait avec eux de ma sombre détresse.
 Et leur versait parfois quelque sale caresse.

The queen of my heart with her peerless look
Who laughed with them at my dark distress
And at times paid them a lewd caress.

Baudelaire frequently thought that his mother sympathized too much with the critical attitude of his stepfather, the object of her "sleaze caresse." Fierce resentment of her affection for another provokes the bitter outburst of "Bénédiction."

Baudelaire suffered other torments as a result of his unnatural passion. A normal love affair was impossible since his ideal, his mother, was unattainable. Other women seemed imperfect, or cruel and monstrous when he was resentful of his mother, and through her of all womanhood. Though unaware of his passion Baudelaire feels a sense of guilt at the thought of sexual love.⁴ This explains the many poems picturing coitus as a horrible, sinful act. From this one can also understand his relations with prostitutes and women like Jeanne Duval. Only with them was his sense of guilt lessened. Though the sex act left him obsessed with guilt, Baudelaire sought more as an unconscious means of self-punishment. He gives recognition to this ascetic side of his nature in "L'Héautontimorouménos" and "Un voyage à Cythère." In the latter poem psychological castration is turned into actual physical castration, symbolic of the poet's latent homosexuality, another consequence of his Oedipus complex.

⁴ Arthur E. Kraetzer, translator and commentator of *The Flowers of Evil* (New York: R. R. Smith, 1950), 22-23. Also his introduction and comments on various other poems.