

## I

JOHN E. JACKSON

## Charles Baudelaire, a life in writing

Paradox is a way of being, at times a painful one: no poet's life illustrates this point more than Baudelaire's. Born with the richest constitution, endowed with the highest possible talent for writing, lucid to the point of near infallibility, this poet was at the same time not only a master of self-delusion, but also the craftsman of his mostly miserable existence. Reading his correspondence is an ordeal, so clear is the self-destructive leaning driving him again and again to place himself in impossible (financial) situations, which, in turn, bear heavily on his literary work. Such is the obsessive regularity with which Baudelaire creates for himself circumstances which he then vainly craves to escape from, that one comes finally to ask oneself if the need to despair doesn't belong to the very essence of his creative drive.

Sartre's 1947 essay<sup>1</sup> on Baudelaire, accusing the poet of 'mauvaise foi' (bad faith), recognises the paradox, but utterly fails to explain it. If Baudelaire's literary existence is to be described in terms of 'choice', surely it must be an unconscious one. Rather, if one wishes to apply Sartrean categories to Baudelaire, the notion of 'objective neurosis', as developed in the monumental biography of Flaubert, would be appropriate: it implies a parallel between the class contradictions in which, following Marxist analysis, a bourgeois would find himself and the personal constellation to which he owes his identity.<sup>2</sup>

Charles-Pierre Baudelaire was born in Paris on 9 April 1821, the son of François Baudelaire, a former priest who had left the Church to work for the State, and of his wife Caroline Archenbaut Defayis, his junior by thirty-four years. The dominant fact of the poet's youth was his father's death in February 1827. It had at least a double consequence for his son: it lifted or lowered the barrier which any child must experience in his desire for independence and increased his possessiveness of his mother. As he wrote to her more than thirty years later:

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JOHN E. JACKSON

In my childhood I went through a stage when I loved you passionately. Listen and read without fear. I've never told you anything about it. I remember an outing in a coach. You'd just come out of a clinic you'd been sent to, and to prove that you'd given some thought to your son, you showed me some pencil sketches you'd done for me. Can you believe what a tremendous memory I have? Later, the square of Saint-André-des-Arts and Neuilly. Long walks, constant acts of tenderness. I remember the quays which were so melancholy at evening. Oh, for me that was the good age of maternal tenderness. I beg your pardon for describing as 'a good age' one that for you was doubtless a bad one. But I lived constantly through you, you were mine alone.

[Il y a eu dans mon enfance une époque d'amour passionné pour toi; écoute et lis sans peur. Je ne t'en ai jamais tant dit. Je me souviens d'une promenade en fiacre; tu sortais d'une maison de santé où tu avais été reléguée, et tu me montras, pour me prouver que tu avais pensé à ton fils, des dessins à la plume que tu avais faits pour moi. Crois-tu que j'aie une mémoire terrible? Plus tard, la place Saint-André-des-Arts et Neuilly. De longues promenades, des tendresses perpétuelles! Je me souviens des quais, qui étaient si tristes le soir. Ah! C'a été pour moi le bon temps des tendresses maternelles. Je te demande d'appeler *bon temps* celui qui a été sans doute mauvais pour toi. Mais j'étais toujours vivant en toi; tu étais uniquement à moi. (C II 153)]

There can be no doubt about the intensity with which Charles relished that period which is recalled in the beautiful untitled poem number XCIC, as another letter confirms (C I 445). All the more grievous must have been for him the 'treason' he felt eighteen months later when his mother elected to remarry (she wed lieutenant-colonel Jacques Aupick, a career soldier who died a general in 1857). The effects of this Hamlet-like situation are far-reaching. Charles' eighteen months alone with his mother had probably intensified both his fantasy that she belonged exclusively to him and the feeling of guilt which must have inevitably accompanied this oedipal transgression. The rage with which he discovered the truth about her real inclinations,<sup>3</sup> and which he still felt in later years long after the break-up with his stepfather which was so incisive as to force him to meet his mother in such places as the rose Salon of the Louvre,<sup>4</sup> testifies to the blow her second wedding dealt to his self-image. We can reconstruct the importance of this reaction through at least two decisive episodes of his later life. Having gone through the classical education of a future holder of the Baccalauréat, first in Lyon and then at the collège Louis-le-Grand in Paris, Baudelaire embarked on the carefree life of contemporary *bohème*, mingling with fellow young poets, artists and prostitutes, thereby also contracting a venereal disease from which he never properly recovered. During his twentieth year, his stepfather convinced the family council (Charles, being still a minor at the time, was

Charles Baudelaire, a life in writing

legally subject to this council of which Aupick was co-guardian) that travelling might help redress the young man's tendency to a dissipated life and bring him back on to the right path. Thus in June 1840 Charles boarded the *Paquebot-des-Mers-du Sud* bound for Calcutta but which he disembarked from at Saint-Denis de la Réunion. The seven-month trip left lasting memories. These can be perceived in the persistent exotic images which animate his poems, especially those written with his later mistress Jeanne Duval in mind:

When, eyes closed, on a pleasant autumn night,  
 I breathe the warm scent of your breast, I see  
 Inviting shorelines spreading out for me  
 Where steady sunlight dazzles in my sight.

An idle isle, where friendly nature brings  
 Singular trees, fruit that is savoury . . .

(FM 49)

[Quand les deux yeux fermés, en un soir chaud d'automne,  
 Je respire l'odeur de ton sein chaleureux,  
 Je vois se dérouler des rivages heureux  
 Qu'éblouissent les feux d'un soleil monotone;

Une île paresseuse où la nature donne  
 Des arbres singuliers et des fruits savoureux . . .

(OC I 25)]

In spite of his assertion that he had 'pocketed wisdom' ('avec la sagesse en poche') on his return on coming of age in April 1842 he claimed his paternal inheritance and within the next eighteen months managed to dissipate 44,500 of the 100,000 *francs-or* he had received. At his stepfather's suggestion, his mother initiated a legal procedure to halt her son's profligacy, ending in the imposition of a *conseil judiciaire* which prevented him from having direct access to the money he had inherited from his father, forcing him to go through the intermediary of a lawyer. From 21 September 1844 and for the rest of his life, Charles only received the returns of the invested remains of his inheritance, as overseen by Narcisse-Désiré Ancelle, a notary of Neuilly. Baudelaire's enduring fury at this imposition is very revealing. Not only did he persistently complain that the *conseil* marked the beginning of his financial downfall (although in truth it probably saved him from the worst), but the very reasoning he later used against its usefulness shows how self-deluding he remained. Baudelaire's main argument against the *conseil* was that, had he been left to dissipate his inheritance completely, he would then have had no other choice than to start an (economically) sound life (as if he could not have done that anyway). Clearly, his intolerance regarding the imposition

JOHN E. JACKSON

of the *conseil judiciaire* stems from the fact that it repeated and renewed the frustration experienced by the fact of having a stepfather imposed upon him at the very time he believed to have his mother to himself. Baudelaire's reluctance to accept any other authority than that of his mother doubtless has its root in this stark contrast between the indulgence of an elderly father and the military discipline his stepfather attempted to enforce. (Albeit at a very different level, his reaction to the legal condemnation of six poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1857 will confirm this point, as we shall see.)

There is more yet. While reining in the child's oedipal fantasy, the mother's remarriage also unleashed more destructive tendencies. Aggression is a natural component of any child's ambivalent relation to his or her mother. The fact that this mother was perceived to have 'betrayed' the child's confidence can only have increased his malevolence. In the case of Baudelaire, this was to have a lasting effect on his relation to women. Even where the poetic stance seems at first to be one of idealisation, there is an undercurrent of obsessive destructiveness: no reader of his poems can escape the impression of what an acclaimed essay by Georges Blin rightly called his sadism.<sup>5</sup> The last stanza of 'A une Madone' is a perfect example. Having feigned to humiliate himself before the revered aloofness of the beloved, he concludes the poem as follows:

At last, so you're my Mary perfectly,  
 And mixing love with pagan cruelty,  
 Full of a dark, remorseful joy, I'll take  
 The seven deadly sins, and of them make  
 Seven bright Daggers; with a juggler's lore  
 Target your love within its deepest core,  
 And plant them all within your panting Heart,  
 Within your sobbing Heart, your streaming Heart!  
 (FM 121)

[Enfin, pour compléter ton rôle de Marie,<sup>6</sup>  
 Et pour mêler l'amour avec la barbarie,  
 Volupté noire! des sept Péchés capitaux,  
 Bourreau plein de remords, je ferai sept Couteaux  
 Bien affilés, et, comme un jongleur insensible,  
 Prenant le plus profond de ton amour pour cible,  
 Je les planterai tous dans ton Cœur pantelant,  
 Dans ton Cœur sanglotant, dans ton Cœur ruisselant!  
 (OC 159)]

The very sadistic pleasure taken in the murder of this Madonna can be felt in the final triple present participle whose trisyllabic regularity rhythmically mimics a male orgasm. There is no doubt that Baudelaire's greatness as a

Charles Baudelaire, a life in writing

poet is directly related to his capacity to blend such dark sides – usually so difficult to admit – with more conventional feelings. This in turn seems less the result of a ‘choice’ than of some form of permanent exasperation which dates from his early years. Whether in his relation to his mother or to Jeanne Duval, the mulatto actress he met in 1842 and who was to remain his mistress over the following twenty years, this exasperation seems to have played a major role. This, for instance, is what he writes about her to his mother on 27 March 1851:

TO LIVE WITH A PERSON who shows no gratitude for your efforts, who impedes them through clumsiness or permanent meanness, who considers you as a mere servant, as her property, someone with whom it is impossible to exchange a word about politics or literature, a creature who is *unwilling to learn a single thing*, although you’ve offered to teach her yourself, a creature who HAS NO ADMIRATION FOR ME, and who is not even interested in one’s studies, who would throw one’s manuscripts in the fire if that brought in more money than publishing them, who drives away one’s cat, the sole source of amusement in one’s lodgings, and who brings in dogs, *because* the sight of dogs sickens me, who does not know or cannot understand *that by being tight-fisted, just for ONE month* I could, thanks to that brief respite, conclude a big book – is all this possible? Is it possible? My eyes are full of tears of fury and shame as I write this . . .

[VIVRE AVEC UN ETRE qui ne vous sait aucun gré de vos efforts, qui les contrarie par une maladresse ou une méchanceté permanente, qui ne vous considère que comme son domestique et sa propriété, avec qui il est impossible d’échanger une parole politique ou littéraire, une créature qui ne *veut rien apprendre*, quoique vous lui ayez proposé de lui donner vous-même des leçons, une créature QUI NE M’ADMIRE PAS, et qui ne s’intéresse même pas à mes études, qui jetterait mes manuscrits au feu si cela lui rapportait plus d’argent que de les laisser publier, qui renvoie mon chat qui était ma seule distraction au logis, et qui introduit des chiens, *parce que* la vue des chiens me fait mal, qui ne sait pas, ou ne veut pas comprendre *qu’être très avare, pendant UN mois seulement*, me permettrait, grâce à ce repos momentané, de finir un gros livre, – enfin est-ce possible cela? Est-ce possible? J’ai des larmes de honte et de rage dans les yeux en t’écrivant ceci . . . (C I 193)]

A year later however, commenting on a temporary separation from her, he adds:

She caused me a lot of pain, didn’t she? How many times – and to you quite recently, just a year ago – have I complained about it? But faced with a collapse of such proportions, with a melancholy as deep as hers, my eyes fill with tears, and to tell the truth my heart is full of reproaches. Twice, I’ve devoured her jewels and her furniture, I’ve made her incur debts on my behalf, sign IOUs,

JOHN E. JACKSON

I've beaten her, and finally, instead of showing her how a man of my stamp behaves, I've constantly given her the example of debauchery and instability. She suffers – and is silent. Isn't there a cause for remorse in that? Am I not as guilty in this regard as in all the other matters?

[Elle m'a bien fait souffrir, n'est-ce pas? – Combien de fois – et à toi récemment encore, – il y a un an, – combien ne me suis-je pas plaint! – Mais en face d'une pareille ruine, d'une mélancolie si profonde, je me sens les yeux pleins de larmes, – et pour tout dire, le cœur plein de reproches. – Je lui ai mangé deux fois ses bijoux et ses meubles, je lui ai fait faire des dettes pour moi, souscrire des billets, je l'ai assommée, et finalement, au lieu de lui montrer comment se conduit un homme comme moi, je lui ai toujours donné l'exemple de la débauche et de la vie errante. Elle souffre – et elle est muette. – N'y a-t-il pas là matière à remords? Et ne suis-je pas coupable de ce côté comme de tous les côtés? (C I 213–14)]

The mere juxtaposition of these two letters is revealing. The major complaint in the first is that Jeanne Duval doesn't *admire* him. In the second, that he feels *remorse* towards her. It is a feature of Baudelaire's psyche that narcissism and guilt belong together. Narcissism, though, is an ambivalent notion which includes what Rousseau once rightly distinguished as *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*. In Baudelaire's work, it refers both to fragilised self-esteem and to the ability to *identify* with others: 'The poet benefits from an incomparable privilege which allows him to be, at will, himself and others. Like those wandering souls in search of a body, he enters, when he so desires, into the character of each individual. For him alone, everything is vacant' (PP 44). ['Le poète jouit de cet incomparable privilège, qu'il peut à sa guise être lui-même et autrui. Comme ces âmes errantes qui cherchent un corps, il entre, quand il veut, dans le personnage de chacun. Pour lui seul, tout est vacant' (OC I 291)]. There is something haughty in the way Baudelaire at times elevates himself or allegorical figures of himself to the level of a quasi demiurgic height, as for instance in the case of the poem 'L'Albatros' in which he equates the poet to 'le prince des nuées' (prince of the clouds) whose 'ailes de géant' (giant's wings) prevent him from walking on the ground. This haughtiness is often accompanied by a streak of cruelty which modulates the poet's *distance* from his objects, letting the objects of his attention appear without illusion. Nowhere is this more true than in the first part of 'Les Petites Vieilles':

They creep, lashed by the merciless north wind,  
 Quake from the riot of an omnibus,  
 Clasp by their sides like relics of a saint  
 Embroidered bags of flowery design;

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Charles Baudelaire, a life in writing

They toddle, every bit like marionettes,  
 Or drag themselves like wounded animals,  
 Or dance against their will, poor little bells  
 That a remorseless demon rings!

(FM 181–3)

[Ils rampent, flagellés par les bises iniques,  
 Frémillant au fracas roulant des omnibus,  
 Et serrant sur leur flanc, ainsi que des reliques,  
 Un petit sac brodé de fleurs ou de rébus;

Ils trottent, tout pareils à des marionnettes;  
 Se traînent, comme font les animaux blessés,  
 Ou dansent, sans vouloir danser, pauvres sonnettes  
 Où se pend un Démon sans pitié! (OC 1 89)]

At the same time, the very reflection on this distance tends to colour it with  
 a tenderness which is the very reverse of cruelty:

So you trudge on, stoic, without complaint,  
 Through the chaotic city's teeming waste,  
 Saints, courtesans, mothers of bleeding hearts,  
 Whose names, in times past, everyone had known.

You glorious ones, you who were full of grace,  
 Not one remembers you! some rowdy drunk  
 Insults you on the street with crude remarks;  
 A taunting child cuts capers at your heels.

O you ashamed of living, shrunken shades,  
 Fearful, with backs bent, how you hug the walls;  
 And no one greets you, strange and fated souls!  
 Debris of man, ripe for eternity! (FM 185–7)

[Telles vous cheminez, stoïques et sans plaintes,  
 A travers le chaos des vivantes cités,  
 Mères au cœur saignant, courtisanes ou saintes,  
 Dont autrefois les noms par tous étaient cités.

Vous qui fûtes la grâce ou qui fûtes la gloire,  
 Nul ne vous reconnaît! un ivrogne incivil  
 Vous insulte en passant d'un amour dérisoire;  
 Sur vos talons gambade un enfant lâche et vil.

Honteuses d'exister, ombres ratatinées,  
 Peureuses, le dos bas, vous côtoyez les murs;  
 Et nul ne vous salue, étranges destinées!  
 Débris d'humanité pour l'éternité mûrs!

(OC 1 91)]

JOHN E. JACKSON

In other cases, tenderness springs not from a reflection upon the poet's own position, but from the feeling of guilt his very superiority induces towards those he dominates, such as in the beautiful 'La Servante au grand cœur', where the remembrance of Mariette, his long-deceased nanny, ends in an attitude of pious devotion devoid of any negative tone. It is not difficult to understand that the deep ambivalence which marks Baudelaire's relation to the other, although based on narcissistic ground, is at the same time the condition of his unique understanding of this other.

Following the decree of the *conseil judiciaire* (1844), Baudelaire's day-to-day life became a financial quagmire. The mechanism of this situation, which can be followed in his correspondence, is a very simple one. Unable to match his needs to his revenue, Baudelaire kept borrowing money from publishers, magazine directors, friends or, more frequently, his mother. The borrowed amount corresponded to the sum he believed his current writing would secure him when published. What happened nine times out of ten was either that the projected publication was delayed, or brought in a lower than expected fee, or that in the meantime he had incurred new debts. This led to new borrowing meant both for his sustenance and to allow him to repay the previous loans. The need to provide for Jeanne obviously complicated the matter further (all the more so since we can surmise that she had little education in household economy), as did the fact that the art-lover in Baudelaire periodically found it very difficult to resist purchasing paintings or etchings offered to him by several art-dealers he happened to know. So dire were the financial straits he found himself in at times that he could write to Mme Aupick:

moreover, I have grown so accustomed to physical suffering, I know so well how to adjust two shirts under a torn pair of trousers that the wind cuts through; I am so skilful at fitting straw or even paper soles into shoes gaping with holes, that it's really almost only moral suffering that causes me pain. – Yet, I have to confess that I have reached the point where I dare not make any more abrupt movements or even walk too much for fear of tearing myself even more.

[d'ailleurs je suis tellement accoutumé aux souffrances physiques, je sais si bien ajuster deux chemises sous un pantalon et un habit déchirés que le vent traverse; je sais si adroitement adapter des semelles de paille ou même de papier dans des souliers troués, que je ne sens presque que les douleurs morales. – Cependant, il faut avouer, j'en suis venu au point que je n'ose plus faire de mouvements brusques ni même trop marcher de peur de me déchirer davantage. (C I 242)]

He had often to change lodgings because he had not paid the rent or to disappear from a place to which his creditors might track him down – Baudelaire had more than seventy addresses after leaving his parents' home. He often



Charles Baudelaire, a life in writing

took refuge in cheap hotels, but this increased the cost of his day-to-day expenses. All this bore heavily on his creative activity, as he rightly pointed out to his mother in innumerable letters. Why then didn't he change his lifestyle? The question is all the more natural as – at least after 1857, the date of General Aupick's death – he very clearly saw a way out: to leave Paris and join his mother in Honfleur, a small Normandy seaport to which she had retired. Indeed, the few weeks he spent there testify to the incredible creativity he could foster while living a sedate life. Even if one takes into account the reasons he invokes to himself or to Mme Aupick – the need to be in Paris to secure talks and contracts with his potential publishers – there is little doubt that the reasons for continuing such a stressful existence are to be found not on any conscious level, but on an unconscious one. Both in money matters and in the careless way he treated his venereal disease, Baudelaire was probably punishing himself. It may seem far-fetched at first to surmise an oedipal origin to be at the basis of one's dealings with one's fortune or with one's health, but guilt seems the only plausible reason for such an irrational way of living. This feeling of guilt probably stems, as we have seen, from the disappearance of his father at a time when boys do harbour such death-wishes against their genitor. The fact that its effect on Charles remained so powerful all his life bears witness both to the intensity with which he experienced that episode and to the relation between his literary vein and his darker sides.

Published in June 1857, *Les Fleurs du Mal* was condemned in August for its 'délit d'outrage à la morale publique' (offence against public morals), and its author was fined 300 francs and ordered to suppress six poems from the collection. Although this condemnation is evidence of the narrow-mindedness of the cultural policy that dominated the Second Empire (the reign of Napoleon III from 1852 to 1871) – Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* had just escaped a similar condemnation earlier that year – there is yet reason to wonder both at the way it was prepared and at Baudelaire's reaction.

As we have seen, one of Baudelaire's fundamental intuitions concerns the destructiveness he experienced first in himself. This experience – of which sadism is only one of several extreme forms – explains at least in part why he so unremittingly adhered to the doctrine of original sin which he stubbornly opposed to all the ideologies of Progress that were flowering in his time: sin was the term which theologians used for the destructive streak he felt only too well in himself. Thus if sin – or, as he would have preferred to say, Evil – is the basic fact of human life, it follows that if one is to continue being a Christian, it can only be in the severe form of Augustinian or even Jansenist Catholicism (it is perhaps not by chance that the most understanding contemporary reaction to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, that of Jules Barbey d'Aureville, came

JOHN E. JACKSON

precisely from a similarly orientated mind). At the same time, Christianity was the official religion of the society which Baudelaire abhorred. Hence, he could neither be a Christian nor not be one (inasmuch as he shared its central belief). Baudelaire's solution was Satanism. Satanism was for him the inevitable but logical way to maintain both his creed and hope for salvation. By imploring Satan – as he does for instance in 'Les Litanies de Satan' – he was trying to short-circuit the all too comfortable beliefs of all the *hypocrites lecteurs* he expected and at the same time to reaffirm the need for a redemption he felt that the traditional figure of Christ could not provide because it was too compromised by contemporary society. One can only guess if this theological radicalism had a political counterpart. The matter of his views in that respect is a complex one. True, he wrote to Narcisse Ancelle in March 1852 that Louis Napoléon's 2 December *coup d'état* had left him *physiquement dépolitiqué*. But on the other hand he was keen to name Joseph de Maistre as one of his two *maîtres à penser* and wrote with 'Assommons les pauvres!', a prose poem of *Le Spleen de Paris*, a meaningful political allegory. If not a revolutionary (at least not in the socialist sense of the word), Baudelaire was nevertheless a rebel who might well have thought that the harshness of social inequality could lead to a social insurgency.

In much the same way as his dandyism, Baudelaire's Satanism was a mask. This in turns helps explain some of the dominant traits of his personality: the more repulsive he tried to show himself, the more he was protecting a moral integrity which he felt normal behaviour only too often corrupted. Hence also his incredulity at the indictment of his book. Far from being immoral, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, in his mind, was on the contrary of the highest morality precisely because of its subversion of conventional – and thus hypocritical – morals. As he complained several years later to Ancelle, his long-time nemesis whom he had nevertheless come to respect:

Must I tell you, you who failed to guess it just as much as the others, that in that *atrocious* book I placed all my *heart*, all my *tenderness*, all my *religion* (disguised), all my *hatred*? It is true that I will write the opposite, that I will swear on all the gods that this is a book of *pure art*, of *pretence*, of *hypocrisy*. And I'll lie like a puller of teeth.

[Faut-il vous dire, à vous qui ne l'avez pas plus deviné que les autres, que dans ce livre *atroce*, j'ai mis tout mon *cœur*, toute ma *tendresse*, toute ma *religion* (travestie), toute ma *haine*? Il est vrai que j'écrirai le contraire, que je jurerai mes grands Dieux que c'est un livre d'*art pur*, de *singerie*, de *jonglerie*; et je mentirai comme un arracheur de dents. (C II 610)]

With Baudelaire, travesty comes close to being a (religious) art. There were however also other reasons for his fury at the censorship of his poems. By